THE GOLDEN AGE OF SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME XIII

HALCYON CLASSICS

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AN ANTHOLOGY OF 50 SHORT STORIES

Revised Edition

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ONCE UPON A PLANET
By J. J. Allerton

The mighty King Miotis came down to Earth to recapture his lost desire for war. But what he saw on this planet, caused him to feel differently.

Once upon a planet there was a mighty warlord. The warlord's name was Miotis. Some might think it an odd name, but then it is entirely probable that the people of this planet would think the name of Smith or Jenkovitz odd. Be that as it may, however, the important thing is that Miotis was the name of this warlord, whatever one may feel about his name.

Now, Miotis was not just a mighty warrior, he was the mightiest warrior on the planet. As such, he controlled the life of every person there. For isn't it a truism that war bends men's destiny in the strangest fashions? So Miotis, with his entire life devoted to the art of destruction, was able to direct the lives of his subjects.

But one day, to his consternation and amazement, he found that the peoples of his planet had wearied of the sport of war. In the middle of his last campaign, his men as well as his enemies had laid down their arms and had refused to carry on as was their wont. And no amount of threat or punishment could make them change.

On this particular day when our story starts, Miotis was in his palace, his massive head leaning against a muscular palm, and his gaze intent on the face of his vizier, Kannot. It was not the sort of face Miotis was especially fond of seeing, for it was old, wrinkled, full of cunning and wisdom.

The vizier was, as always, full of words, and as he spoke one blunt finger tapped the side of his rather bulbous nose: "So you think it strange, mighty Miotis, to find that life is boring?"

"I do not find that life is boring," Miotis replied. "Life is never boring. It is I who am bored. That is the reason I called you here. I could have called any one of my nine hundred concubines for enjoyment, or had my warders drag forth some of my prisoners and found sport in torturing them. Yet, I did not, and I wonder why. In the past, these diversions made pleasant the passing of time. Now, I feel an ennui too great to even want to bother to summon one of these which used to give me so much pleasurable excitement.

"Tell me, vizier, have I become so full of war that I cannot live without it?"

Kannot clasped his hands behind him and rocked back and forth for several seconds, the while he bent a thoughtful and appraising eye upon his King. For Kannot knew the vagaries of the man before him and knew that a single word, a single gesture which would displease the great Miotis, would make fewer Kannot's days. Therefore, when he spoke again, it was with care, weighing his words so that he could give his opinion and yet not endanger his life.

"Methinks, oh greatest and wisest of Kings," Kannot said, "that since war has but a single end, something phenomenal in the universe must have occurred to make that end seem less reasonable."

He lowered his eyes, yet made sure he could peer beneath the hooded lids to see how his words were affecting Miotis. There was no sign on the other's face to show how he felt.

"Tell me, vizier, have I become so full of war that I cannot live without it?"

Kannot continued, "By that, I mean death may have become less attractive as a means of immortality. Is it not true, also, that you, the greatest and most noble of warriors, has yourself felt this same reluctance recently to even plan a war?"

The warlord's head nodded slightly in agreement.

"Therefore, I have come to the conclusion that some force of which we have no knowledge has made its presence felt--"

"Now you have presented the problem," Miotis interrupted. "But it is not enough. I want a solution. Already I am weary of this do-nothing life, though it is but a week since we have laid down arms."

Kannot made a sign of obeisance.
"Now go," Miotis said, "and seek out the cause and the solution. One week, vizier, I give you. No more! Your head shall roll, otherwise...."

* * * * *

The trumpets announced the arrival of the vizier, and at the sound the players stopped their tune and the dancers their dance. Miotis, looking as though he hadn't stirred from the position Kannot had left him in the week before, lifted his eyes to the bent figure making its way across the immense length of the hall.

"Mighty Miotis," Kannot began, his head bent and his eyes lowered in the correct attitude of court procedure.

"I bid you speak," Miotis said.

"My Lord, the words I have to say are for your ears alone," Kannot continued.

The warlord waved a hand, and as if by magic the court was emptied but for the guards who never left their posts.

"Speak, old one," Miotis commanded.

"I have found the cause, mighty one," Kannot said. "A surprising one, however, and perhaps an unbelievable one...."

The vizier did not look up, and his face betrayed nothing of what he felt. Yet, his aged heart was beating as if it wanted to escape the flesh in which it was imprisoned. The next words he would utter could spell his doom.

"I sent couriers in every direction, to all the courts of all the lands, to our friends as well as to our enemies. And on their return I discovered one fact in common: Not a single nation was interested in war. Something happened to each--"

"Old one," Miotis broke in, "you weary me with these boresome details. Come to the point! I know we are all tired dealing death. Why?"

"Because anger has fled from our minds and hearts," Kannot said, and his head lifted. He had spoken the words which had lain in him, the terrible words which could mean his death. And now the die was cast. The proof of his assertion would soon be shown.

An oddly bitter smile broke on the face of the man on the throne. It was the smile of a man who had learned the taste of utter defeat.

"So you have told me that which I knew in my heart," Miotis said. "Strange, that I, who loved nothing better than the sound of a sword's blow against armor, should even find the touch of steel repugnant now. Yet, it is so. I cannot carry a knife without having my flesh crawl, even though a scabbard protects me against its touch. Shall we all become a nation of shepherds? Shall we never again know the glory of battle? Tell me, vizier. Perhaps age has lent you an inner wisdom?"

"Wisdom's words are for the historian," Kannot replied. "I, Kannot, have no time for talk. The planning of deeds is my way. And I have a plan.

"Anger must be found again!" Kannot's voice rose shrilly. "It is our only salvation. But, mighty Miotis, we must look elsewhere than on this planet. There is a planet called Earth...."

* * * * *

Miotis' brow knit in thought. A planet called Earth, he thought. H'mm! But how were they to get to it? And having got there, did Kannot want them to invade? No, that couldn't be it. Already, the very thought of invading for purposes of conquest went against him.

"... On that planet," Kannot continued, "wars and death by violence are commonplace. There is never a day or week that does not pass but that somewhere men fight men. What better goal do we need?"

"You have done well," Miotis said. "I could ask for no more. Yet a question persists in my mind. How can you arrange for anger to come to the breasts of us here from the planet beyond the grey mists of outer space? We have no space ships, nor for that matter, the means of making them."

"I speak not of space ships or of men using them," Kannot responded, "for in that matter we have no choice. My thought was in another direction and using another means. I have discovered the way to make a soul-transfer. To put it into words you will better understand, I can do what death does, hold a soul in suspense."

"Which is supposed to have what meaning to me?" Miotis asked.

"Simply this," Kannot said, "I can make a single soul fly through the vast boundaries of space and into another human body which will be waiting for it. There is but a single man I know who can serve as vehicle--you, mighty Chiefain."

For the first time, Miotis' features showed change from the set expression he wore as a sign of his Kingship. Amazement made him blink, and the hand holding his chin fell to the side of the throne, the fingers tapping against the rich cloth. But after a minute, his face cleared and he looked with brighter interest at his vizier.

"Of course," he said. "Who else should go? And already I have a plan of action. Now tell me what must be done and how soon...."
Bly Stanton rolled over and groaned aloud. His hand shook as he lifted it to feel a throbbing temple. His fingers felt a sticky wetness, and memory returned to him—the raiding party of Himlo men, his discovery of them, and the alarm he had sounded, the fight, and then the blow which had felled him.

He rolled onto his stomach, shoved his hands under him and heaved himself erect. A sigh of relief escaped his lips. Except for the buzzing in his brain, he felt all right.

Stanton looked down at his dust-covered clothes, and his fingers brushed at the dirt and mud, but when they came to his shirt they halted. There was a hole in his shirt, high up, near the heart. It was not a hole exactly, but rather a slit which could have been made either with a knife or sword. There was a dried welt of blood surrounding the skin. A shudder passed through his tall, strong frame, as he realized that it was a miracle he was alive. For whatever had done the damage had penetrated deep into the flesh.

The moon was full, and after a few seconds had passed, Stanton bent and searched for his weapon which, he was sure, would be close at hand. But as he found and picked up the long, double-edged sword, a shudder of distaste went through him, and he dropped his weapon and let it lay there.

Once more his fingers brushed at the wetness on his temple. He wondered why the blood was still coming from his head wound, while the cut in his chest had dried up.

He peered around to see if his attackers were anywhere in the vicinity, and decided that his immediate location was clear of danger. Another instant of orientation, and Bly Stanton bent low and scurried from one patch of cover to another until he reached his goal, the tunnel mouth. Here he would be safe for the present. The Himlo would not dare to follow him here.

His eyes, long accustomed to the sight of the broken arch, passed over the inscription worn deeply and almost illegibly on the green-with-age metal—Chicago Greater Subway, 2107 A.D. He was interested only in knowing whether or not danger lurked in the shadows. Again he sniffed. A small smile stole across his mouth. Then the lips tightened in their wonted thin slit, and he started forward at a long lope into the darkness.

Here and there were offshoots, darker passages which disappeared into the Stygian gloom. But his path led straight ahead. Then he was before a barricade of rocks, the barrier which his men had placed against the coming of their enemies.

"Ho, John!" Stanton shouted.

The walls echoed the sound, which was followed by a dying whimper of a voice. "Hi ... Hi! Who goes ...?"

"'Tis I, Bly Stanton," Stanton yelled.

There was a short interval of silence, then a concerted roar of glee, and a dozen men clambered over the rock pile. They shouted his name as they all tried to touch him at once, and there was adoration in their welcome as they pulled and hauled at him.

At length he managed to free himself of their embraces, and as he stood apart, he asked: "What happened? Did I manage to warn enough of our men?"

"Warn us and knock their ambush into a cocked hat. They fell to pieces and ran like scared rabbits when we hit them from all sides. But Mark Smith saw you fall, and he said that the sword which was thrust into you went all the way in to the hilt," one of them said.

"I guess Mark was looking from the wrong angle," Stanton explained. "For sure I'm all in one piece. Got a bloody knock on the head, though. Well, let's get back to quarters. I've got a piece I want to talk over with you all."

A hundred torches made a smoky light of the pitch which otherwise would have been in the vast cavern-like room. Three hundred and ten men stood about in various attitudes of attention, all listening to the tall man perched on a flat piece of concrete, facing them.

"I cannot explain why I feel this way," Bly Stanton was saying. "But this I know, and for sure! No more killing for me. No more hiding in stinking places like this, waiting for the sun to go down so a man can venture out and be a man. No, sirs! Bly Stanton is going out, and in broad daylight. Bly Stanton is going out and bloody well away from this place, out to where the sun hits hills and trees and open spaces. And Bly Stanton is going alone if he has to...."

It was an ultimatum, they knew.

Mark Smith, a short, swarthy-faced man in breeches clipped short at the knees and a leather jerkin for a shirt, stepped forward and waved a casual hand to get his leader's attention.

"I take it, Bly," he said, "that you are bound to leave. Well, that part may be all right. Surely you have a right to leave if you want to. But by the same token you must grant us the right to ask why. We have been together too long for so abrupt a leave-taking."

"And right you are, Mark," Bly replied. "I owe that and more to each and every one of you. Three hundred odd
of us, all who are left of millions. And against us, as they have been for a hundred years, the Himlo. And how many of them are left, would you say? A thousand? Not many more, surely. Think, men, some thirteen hundred men, perhaps a few more. No children, no women, just men.

"I don't have to tell you what happened three hundred years ago. History has no meaning to us any more. For are we not eternal? Death can only come to us by violence. Well, not any more for me. Bly Stanton has come to life. That is how I felt when I came to back there in the ruins, that a new life had been granted me. Well, I intend to live it fully, at peace. I tell you, Mark, and you, John, and Abel and all the rest of you, when I picked up the weapon which I had dropped to the ground, it was as if I had picked up a live coal. I could not wear it, the brand of murder. For we are all murderers, we and the Himlo----"

"Again," Mark Smith interrupted, "I agree with you. We and our enemies are murderers. Thirteen hundred and some odd murderers. And before we are done, there will be less. But that is how we have lived for too many years. So many, we can no longer change our ways. Peace is a lost word with us."

"With you!" Stanton said sharply. "But not with me! I have found it again. And I do not intend losing it quickly. I say I leave these scenes and these ways. Tonight. Who will leave with me?"

He looked about with expectant eyes, but the light in them died as his gaze swept the cavernous depths and looked into face after face and saw not a single one which agreed with him. It was not so much a sign of revolt, but an acceptance of a fact three hundred years old.

"Then I go alone," he said with finality. "This has become a bitter world, a world without woman or child, but it is the only world we will ever know. And I am going to live peacefully in it. Good-bye."

They opened their ranks to let him pass. Until the last of them was reached, Bly Stanton thought there would be no answer to his farewell. Then a tall, thin man stepped in front of him. He was Grant Hays, one of the four with Smith, John and Abel, who formed the inner leaders under Stanton. Grant and Bly had always been the closest of friends.

"Bly," Hays said, his eyes steadfast and warm. "Wait. Before you go.... There is more than man to meet out there. The Himlo are one thing, nature another. You must take weapons."

* * * * *

Stanton shook his head hard. "No!" his voice thundered, and sent echoes answering from the walls. "No! I will never draw a blade against even a rat. The old races had their sayings--one I remember well--'Live and let live.'"

"Good-bye, then, Bly Stanton," Hays said. "And good luck."

Bly Stanton did not turn as he clambered over the rock ramparts. And after a while the night hid him in its sable fold.

The man climbed the last ridge of the giant sand dune and looked down at a setting moon sending a long slanting fan of silver over an immense lake. He had seen the lake many years before, had almost forgotten its existence so long ago had it been.

He turned and looked at the ruins, rising pyramid-like from the tree line to the north. Chicago had been the name of a vast city which had existed here. There had been other cities as large, and some larger. From the deepest recesses of his mind, Stanton remembered an almost forgotten fact. There had been more than three billion people on the Earth at one time. Then, on an afternoon long gone, a bomb was dropped on one of the cities. It had been called an atom bomb. The name of the destroyed city was soon forgotten, as were the other cities which were soon wiped off the face of the Earth. For man had discovered in the atom bomb a weapon which proved to be the agency of his destruction. It led to bigger bombs, better bombs, more efficient bombs, and at the last a bomb which by chain reaction killed almost all the people on Earth. And those whom it did not kill it made sterile.

That was the beginning of the end. For in the new way of life, the force of creation died. Men thought of nothing but hatred of other men. So they fought, first with weapons of complex design. Then, as the creative desire was stifled, the weapons became more simple, until at the last man went back to a sword and a knife blade for his murderous tasks.

But it was in the death of woman that man suffered his worst loss. With sterility, woman felt their reason for existence was no longer justified. And so they died, one by one, until now there was no record of any.

* * * * *

These were the thoughts of Bly Stanton as he plodded over the ridge of another dune. Then, all thoughts were wiped from his mind. He dropped to his knees at the sight of the blaze in the hollow between two dunes directly below.

Their proximity to the fire and the light of the moon combined to make their features readily discernible. There was no mistaking the Mongoloid features of Himlo men. And if that was not enough, two of them were dressed in garments of fur which would have identified them immediately. The wind was coming from their direction, so Bly was safe for the moment. They had keen senses of smell, and had the wind been otherwise, Bly would have been
discovered.

He retreated like some huge beetle, on all fours, backward, as if he had been suddenly confronted by a larger beetle. When he had traveled some few yards and saw only the serrated ridge of sand interposed between him and the sky, he rose, turned, and started for the edge of the water.

Though he felt no fear of these men, Bly found it the better part of discretion to move swiftly from their path. He ran at a trot, a long lope which covered ground with a minimum of effort. The whole of the night went by, and still Bly Stanton moved in the easy pace he had set himself. The dawn found his lean figure bounding along the edge of the sand.

Hunger forced him to pause, then, and seek food. There was wild fruit on trees a half mile inland. He ate some apples, and washed down the meager meal with water from a spring. Then he found shelter and lay down to sleep. Travel by night, he reasoned, was the best way.

The sound of voices awakened him. They were voices the timbre of which he had never heard before. He parted the brush under which he had lain through the day, and peered out cautiously. His eyes widened at the sight they saw. Strange creatures, a tribe of which he knew nothing, squatted in the sand a hundred feet from the water. They wore tight-fitting garments which hugged their bodies so tightly that every curve was clearly outlined. And they had figures which were not familiar to Stanton.

It was not strange, for these were women.

* * * * *

Had Bly Stanton been less interested in what he was seeing and more alert to what was closer at hand, he would perhaps have escaped the noose which suddenly slipped over his shoulders and pinioned his arms neatly to his side. Bodies encased in metal jackets leaped upon him and made useless his struggles. He was jerked to his feet, and voices shouted to others below to come forward. He understood the words, for they were speaking in the same tongue that was his.

There was a Naila, a Valis, another called simply She, and a tall strong woman, older than the rest, called Mary. Mary seemed to be the leader, or at least the one with the most authority. It was to her Bly was brought.

"Mary," one of the guards said, "the first of what we hoped to find."

The woman looked at the man appraisingly. He was the first she had ever seen. He seemed of good stock. She was quick to note he wore no weapons. It surprised her, for even if he had no enemies, there would be wild animals about.

"Yes," Mary said softly, "the first. Then the book was true. There are men in this world." She made a sound of laughter deep in her throat, stopped, then said to Bly, "We have come a long way. Do you talk? Can you tell me whether there are others like you?"

"Like me and different," Bly replied.

The women exchanged glances.

Mary spoke again: "How do you mean?"

It did not take long for Bly Stanton to tell the history of the three hundred men of his group, and that of the Mongoloid Himlo men, the last of the invaders who were the remnants of those who came across from Asia. All the while he spoke, his senses were full of these women. There was a long silence when he finished his tale.

"The books did not lie then," the one called Naila said. "And what about children...?" her voice faded.

"The last of the great bombs did irreparable damage," Mary said. "But we will talk of that later. You have told us that there is a battle to the death between you and these Himlos. Then why are you unarmed? Where are your weapons?"

It was the first time Bly had been asked the question directly. And it was the first time he had to think about it. He let his mind assemble the facts in their proper order, and after a while he spoke:

"I do not know why, except that I no longer want to know either the touch or feel of a sword or knife. I do not want to harm anyone. Nor can I explain why I feel this way."

Suddenly one of the women made a sound of horror. They turned to her and saw she was staring in fascination at the torn part of Stanton's shirt where the sword blade had entered. Mary and several others gathered closer, and Mary parted the fabric to see the wound better.

"Look!" she exclaimed in wonder. "How deep it is."

For the first time, then, Bly Stanton saw the wound for what it was, a death wound. He wondered--had he become immortal?--not in the sense he knew, but in actuality, where death even by violence was not the end.

He put out his hand and said: "Let me have a blade."

Without hesitation, Mary handed him the blade which hung at her right side. Placing the point against the flesh, he put both hands about the hilt and plunged it deep into him with all his strength, until only the hilt was to be seen.
Miraculously, he felt no pain. The blade when Stanton withdrew the steel showed virgin as it had entered, and not a drop of crimson dyed the entrance it had made in the flesh.

One of the women put into words what they all felt: "This is magic. Death is gone forever now."

It was in that very instant that the soul of Miotis entered into the body of Bly Stanton.

* * * * *

Stanton felt a sudden elation. More, a consciousness of vast powers. He was immune to death. But were his companions? He looked Mary full in the eyes as he said: "It seems that nothing can kill me now, even violence. What of you?"

She knew what he meant. And with as little hesitation as he had shown, did what he did with the blade in her fingers. Her face in an instant became a grotesque mask of pain and horror. A fountain of blood poured from the self-inflicted wound. She tried to say something as she sank to her knees, but nothing came out.

"Only he is immortal," Naila said, awed. "For look! Mary is already gone. Hail immortal...."

It was the acknowledgement of his supremacy.

He took advantage of it on the instant. "Good. I can use you all. We must first rid ourselves of these men, my enemies. Come, call the others of your tribe and I will lead you to them."

He knew without being told that there were many more of these women. For surely not so few would have come, armed as they were, into a strange land. At his words, several of them sped around a headland which hid the cove beyond. Naila took his arm and led him forward. His eyes widened when he saw the four sailing ships in the large bay beyond the headland.

There were five hundred women all armed and all ready and willing, when they heard the situation, to do his bidding. Nor did he take long to give his commands.

Daylight was breaking when they came to the tunnel which was the headquarters for the tribe from which Bly Stanton had come. He deployed his forces with the greatest of care, making sure the surprise would be complete when he came out. Then he entered. He knew at this hour that his men would be asleep. He was right. There were two hundred of the women with him, and these he placed all along the tunnel length, telling them to hide in the recesses along the walls.

* * * * *

His voice awakened his men. They crowded round him when he clambered over the barricade, and at the sight of the sword in the place where he usually carried it smiles broke on their lips.

"Bly! We have you with us again," Mark exclaimed.

"But of course," Bly said. "It must have been the knock on the head I got in the fight with the Himlos. But now it's clear. And I have news for you. We can get rid of our enemies in one fell swoop. They are as foolish as we. They too sleep in the daytime. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Are you sure?" Mark asked.

"Certain. I have seen them."

"Then let us wait no longer. By the time they come to their senses, it will be too late."

And it was. Only not as Mark had thought. For the immortal Stanton had become battle-crazed, and whether loyal comrade or enemy, he knew only to kill violently. It was Stanton himself who delivered the death blow to his good friend. The rest of his group fell easy prey to the women, who were even more savage than Stanton. It wasn't until it was all over that Bly noticed what his women companions had done. Each and every one of them carried a trophy hung in her belt, a horrible thing which leaked blood. They had cut the heads from those they killed.

All that day and the next and until the last of the Mongoloids had been eliminated, they hunted. They were no longer five hundred women when they were finished. But there were no more men, either. Each of the women carried a single head on her belt when they went back to the ships which had brought them. And Bly, also, carried one.

Bly Stanton was no longer the same man as the one whom they had discovered. The blood bath he had been in had done something to him. His nose had become pinched, and his whole face had changed, so that his eyes were narrowed now and his forehead, for some reason, lower. He no longer walked erect, but stooped and shambled oddly as he moved. His jaw jutted forward, and his teeth showed because of it. Little by little, he had found it more comfortable to be without clothes, until by the time they returned to the ships, the only article of clothing he wore was the belt on which hung his sword and knife.

Naila had taken Mary's place in the scheme of things. Still, she found she had to call Bly her superior. During the long days of slaughter, there had been little need of talk. Muttered directions had done for them.

But as they stood at the edge of the gangplank leading aboard, she said: "Come immortal! There is nothing left for you here."

"Nothing?" he asked, somewhat blankly. "Nothing...?"
"Of course not," she said. "In all of this world not another like you is left alive."

Through the brain of Bly Stanton shot a thought that was like an arrow—he, alone, of all the males in the world. What sort of world could it be? What was he to do in this world where there was nothing but woman, and man had no place? He peered at these women and saw them for what they were—beasts, cruel and vicious, shaped as humans. There was no compromising with nature. If one did not serve the purpose for which one was intended, then one served another purpose. He looked at these women who were the rulers of this planet and knew they had an empty rule, and a losing fight. For immortality, in the sense in which he had achieved it, was lost to them.

He shook his head from side to side, and slowly turning, started off without a word of farewell.

But Naila was not as Mary. There was a cunning in her which the other had never possessed. Before Stanton had taken more than ten steps, she was at his side. Her sword flashed in a blinding arc as it sped toward the man. There was a sickening sound as the steel met the flesh of the throat. And a bloody geyser bloomed where the head had been. A vicious grin leaped to her lips as she stooped and lifted the head.

But the grin changed to a howl of fear as the eyes suddenly opened and the lips parted and words came from them: "You forgot, Naila. Death comes not to me. Remember?"

She dropped the head and sped for the ship. The others, witness to what happened, followed as quickly as possible. What they did not see, of course, was that the eyes and lips had closed forever on the instant of their departure.

For it was then that the soul of Miotis left the body of Bly Stanton.

Kannot removed the mask from Miotis' face. The soul-globe lay to one side. Slowly the eyelids of the warlord raised. For a few seconds his eyes were blank. Then reason came to them.

"Did you..." Kannot began, and wet his suddenly dry lips. "Did you get to where I sent you?" he finished.

The eyes of the man on the table blinked as though in signal. The lips moved but feebly.

"Can you talk?" Kannot asked.

"Later," Miotis whispered.

Kannot nodded in understanding. He had an idea of the ordeal his King had been through. The telling of what had happened to him could wait for a while.

Hours went by, and the man on the table slowly gained strength. But it was a long time later before he could talk.

"You sent my soul into the body of a mighty warrior," Miotis said. "Aye. A mighty warrior. I saw and learned many strange things. But of all the things I saw, only one stood out...."

"And what was that?" Kannot asked.

"War must die!" Miotis said.

"But war is already dead," Kannot said. "Remember, sire, it is the reason why you allowed the experiment—to seek ways of bringing war back to life."

"No! I saw what war can do to a planet, to man and to woman. It must never come back. From this day forward, the sinews of war will be removed. Look closely at me, Kannot. What do you see?"

It was then Kannot understood. He had transferred the souls of Miotis and of Bly Stanton. But the unforeseen had taken place. He had not merely transferred the two souls. He had done so permanently. And Bly Stanton, in the body of Miotis, had come to do what he realized now too late should have been done on the Earth long ago—abolish war forever.

THE END
billion four hundred and ninety-six million votes for Wong, against one billion, four hundred million for Thompson, one billion one hundred million for Miccio, and nine hundred million for Kau. These results, added to the almost complete returns from Earth and the first fragmentary reports from Mars, clearly indicate a landslide vote for Wong as the next President of the Solar Union. The two billion votes from Ganymede and Callisto, which will be received early tomorrow morning, cannot appreciably affect the results. The battle for the twenty-five Vice-Presidents is less clear. It is certain that Thompson, Miccio, Kau, Singh, and DuLavier will all be among those elected, but in what order is not yet...."

Wong leaned over and snapped the video off. His shoulders sagged. He leaned against the console as though too tired to move, a slight, narrow-shouldered man with a very high forehead and thin receding black hair. His large, sad, almond-shaped eyes and yellow-tinted skin indicated that there was a good deal of Asiatic in the mixed blood that flowed through his veins.

"I'm sorry, truly sorry," Michael Thompson said sympathetically, placing a friendly arm across the narrow shoulders of the successful candidate. They were alone in the living room of the hotel suite in New Geneva, which they had shared for the campaign. "The people chose well. After the wonderful job you did in organizing the colonization of Io and Europa, you were the logical man. And then you do have the fantastic Responsibility Quotient of 9.6 out of 10. Anyway," he added with a weary shrug, "don't feel too bad--it looks as though I'll be First Vice-President."

A brief ghost of a smile crossed George Wong's face. "We who are about to die salute you," he said, lifting his glass in a bitter toast to the blank video screen.

Thompson, the man who was to be First Vice-President, silently joined him.

"At least," Wong sighed, putting his empty glass down on the video, "I don't have a family. Look at poor Kau. At Miccio. With wives and children, how they must have suffered when they learned they had been drafted by the conventions.... Well, I guess there's nothing else to do but to go to bed and wait until they come for me in the morning. Good night, Michael."

"Good night, George," Michael Thompson said. He turned toward his own room. "I am sorry," he said again.

* * * * *

Wong had already eaten breakfast and was dressed in an inconspicuous tweed suit for the inauguration when the chimes sounded, telling him that they were at the door. Slowly, he walked to the door and opened it.

"Good morning, Mr. President," the man outside said cheerily, flashing his famous grin. George Wong immediately recognized Al Grimm, the man who had been personal secretary to sixty-three Presidents. He was one of the vast army of civil servants who kept the wheels of government turning smoothly until Presidents were able to make the decisions that would create policy.

"Good morning, Al," George Wong said. "I am afraid I'll have to place myself completely in your hands for these first few days. Do we go to the Executive Mansion for the inauguration now?"

"Yes, sir. Then, after your inauguration, to the office. Messages of condolence have been pouring in all night, but I don't think you want to bother with them. However, I am afraid we will have to bring up some of the problems that have arisen in the two weeks since President Reynolds left office."

"How is he?" Wong asked. "I knew him, you know. He taught at Venus University at the same time I did. He was a fine man."

"I'm afraid he's no better," Al said, shaking his head. "We're doing all we can for him, but he won't even speak to his wife. You know how difficult it is."

"Yes, I know," Wong said.

They rode downstairs in silence and walked to the Presidential Copter parked in the street in front of the house. A few guards loitered in the vicinity, but there were no crowds. They entered the plush copter, which rose smoothly under its whirling blades and carried them over the city, landing finally on the lawn of the Executive Mansion.

Chief Justice Herz met them, dressed in a blue business suit, and after they shook hands he administered the oath.

"Do you, George Wong," he asked, "swear to make every decision you are asked to make as President of the Solar Union for the benefit of the people of the Union and in accord with what you believe to be fair and just, fully cognizant of the fact that the welfare of seventy-five billion citizens of the Union is dependent on you?"

"I do," George Wong said, through a painfully dry throat that would barely permit the words to come out.

* * * * *

They all shook hands again. Then Al Grimm led the President across the grassy lawn, into the mansion, and up to the office that had served over a thousand Presidents. Wong entered it nervously. It was a large plain room, severely decorated. Tentatively, he slid into the chair behind the huge steel desk, and began opening the drawers. He found them fully stocked with tapes, a recorder, all the other necessities. The desk and everything else in the room..."
was brand new. There was no trace anywhere of his predecessors, and he was relieved to find it so. The Psychology Department at work, he thought.

"While we are moving your effects into the living quarters, Mr. President," Al said from the doorway, "I wonder if we could start discussing the problem of the Gnii ... their Ambassadors have presented an ultimatum, and they demand an answer today."

* * * * *

So soon, President Wong thought. Couldn't he have just a few hours to get used to his office, to wander through the building, to explore the green garden that he could see from his barred window stretching out behind the mansion?

For a second, he almost rebelled; but even as he thought of answering no, he realized that he never would. The Psych Agents had measured his Responsibility Quotient at 9.6, and they didn't make mistakes.

"Of course," he answered with forced enthusiasm. "Who do you suggest I discuss the matter with? For that matter, who are the Gnii?"

"I have the Manager of Defense, the Manager of Trade, and the Manager of Foreign Affairs waiting in the anteroom. With your permission, I'll call them in and they'll explain the problem. But first, if you would sign this order ... it has already been approved by President Reynolds and by all of the Managers concerned."

President Wong took the paper. It was an order sending a space platoon, 5,000 warships and 500,000 men, to the system of Altair A, to place themselves under the command of the Grasvian fleet for an attack against the system of Altair D.

The President frowned. "What's the story behind this?"

"As you know," Al explained patiently, "there is an unwritten agreement throughout the Galaxy that if any system conquers too many other systems, an intersystem police force is formed to cut the conqueror down. Since for all practical purposes, there is an infinity of systems in the Galaxy, and as each conqueror borders on more and more of them as he grows larger in three-dimensional expansion, unlike the one-dimensional conquests that used to occur on the surface of planets, conquest of the Galaxy is an obvious impossibility. However, the inhabitants of Altair D seem to have embarked on a policy of reckless expansion that could reach us in time."

"I see," President Wong said. "How far away are they?"

"It will take the platoon sixteen years to get to the rendezvous. They will remain for ten years, then return. Because of the distance, we are not expected to send more than this token force."

* * * * *

President Wong looked at the order. It had already been signed by President Reynolds, by the Managers of Defense and of Foreign Affairs. After all, even though forty-two years was a long period of time to chop out of a man's life, only 500,000 men were involved, and it was the duty of every citizen to give his life for his planet if required.

With an impatient motion, he rolled his thumbprint in the soft plastic signature space, and held it for a second as it hardened. Then he threw the order into a basket labeled OUTGOING CORRESPONDENCE.

His first official duty completed, he should have felt exhilarated; but instead, nagging thoughts of guilt tugged at his brain.

Who were the inhabitants of Altair D, anyway? How did he know that the police action was just? Shouldn't he get out the whole file and go over it?

But that would take days ... and there was the matter of the Gnii, whoever they were.

The three managers entered. President Wong stood up and shook hands with them. They didn't waste time on other preliminaries, but rushed straight into business.

"The Gnii," the Manager of Trade, a large, red-faced man said, "demand that we remove our trading planetoid from their system. They allege that the planetoid is a security risk, in that it could be used for remote-control bombing of any of their planets. They threaten that if we don't remove it voluntarily, they will attack it, and their Ambassadors are here in person to take our reply to their ultimatum."

There was nothing unusual in that, President Wong knew. Since both spaceships and any other known means of communication traveled at the speed of light, it was now more common to send Ambassadors on important missions than to send messages.

"What do you think we should do?" President Wong asked the Manager of Trade.

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"I think we should tell them to go to hell," the Manager of Trade replied, his heavy face turning redder. "After all, we have a million trading planetoids out in the Galaxy--if we retreat here, we set a dangerous precedent."

"I see," Wong said, frowning. "I don't recall any alien trading planetoids in our system."

"Of course not, Mr. President," said the Manager Of Foreign Affairs, a tall, lean, distinguished-looking
A gentleman with blue eyes and iron-gray hair. "We don't permit them, for much the same reason that the Gnii want them removed from their system. Trading planetoids are usually only tolerated in backward systems. Apparently the Gnii no longer desire to be considered backward. I, for one, think that we would be making a mistake not to accede to their request."

"Oh, that's very fine, decent, sporting and all that," the Manager of Trade said irritatedly. "But I have to worry about feeding this overpopulated system of ours, which would starve if it weren't for intersystem trade--a significant part of which is carried on through the planetoids."

"Can we protect the threatened planetoid?" President Wong asked the Manager of Defense, a short, slim black man with flaming red hair.

The Manager of Defense considered his reply carefully. "Not if they are willing to pay a terrific price to destroy it," he said finally. "After all, it's thirty-three years away. While we can send out a fleet immediately that would get there at the same time as the Ambassadors, and before they could mount an attack, we hardly could send reinforcements and replacements once the battle is joined. But from the best information available, I think that a small force of twenty or twenty-five thousand troops should be able to frighten the Gnii out of doing anything foolish. They aren't very far advanced."

"Thirty-three years," President Wong said frowning. "That means a mixed crew with facilities for children. I am told that things often go wrong on that type of mission."

The Manager of Defense nodded. "They do," he agreed shortly. "However, I have analyzed that problem in detail in my report."

President Wong sighed. "If you gentlemen will leave your reports with me, I will make my decision by tomorrow morning."

Each of the Managers gave him several rolls of tape. Those of the Manager of Trade felt by far the heaviest. President Wong slipped them into the racks in his upper left-hand desk drawer.

"Ask the Gnii to come in," he said to Al.

* * * * *

Al pushed a button on the arm of his chair, and the door swung open. Four large spidery creatures entered the room, followed by a small bald man. Their round bodies were encased in plastic globes, in which a whitish translucent gas swirled. They walked over to the President's desk, and the leader extended a hairy leg.

With an effort, President Wong forced himself to take the leg with his hand and pump it up and down. He noticed that the creature withdrew the leg as soon as it was decently possible, and smiled a bit as he concluded that their aversion was mutual.

The Gnii stepped back and began waving his two front legs.

"He is asking for your reply to his ultimatum," the small bald man interpreted.

"Tell him I'll give him a definite decision tomorrow," President Wong said. "Apologize for my not being able to reply today, and point out that since it will take him thirty-three years to get home, one day will not make much difference."

[ILLUSTRATION]

The bald interpreter waved his hands. The four Gnii went into a small huddle, waving their spidery legs at each other. Then the leader turned to the interpreter again and "spoke."

"They say that they agree," the interpreter said. "But they want to emphasize that it is not because they fear the power of the Solar System."

The Gnii leader hesitated a moment, then extended his leg again. President Wong pumped it once. The Gnii dropped his hand and turned and left the room, with the three others and the interpreter filing after him.

"If you don't need me any more," the Manager of Trade said, glancing at his watch, "I'll go back to the Trade Bureau. I have a meeting with a number of the department heads."

President Wong nodded tiredly. "I have the tapes. I'll study all your positions tonight."

* * * * *

The Manager of Trade and the Manager of Foreign Affairs rose and left the room. The Manager of Defense stayed in his seat.

"If you feel up to it," Al said, "the Manager of Defense would appreciate it if you would present a Presidential citation to the remains of the Third Company. They were involved in a police action in the system of Veganea, and their morale is shattered. As you know, the award is traditional, as is the speech. Here's the text--all you need do is read it."

"All right," President Wong said, taking the paper from Al's hand and scanning it. There was only one paragraph.

The door opened and four old men entered, followed by an honor guard of eight husky privates. They
approached the desk and stood at attention. President Wong looked up from the speech and felt a wave of sudden nausea. For a second, he was afraid that he actually was going to be sick. None of their old lined faces was complete. The worst wounded had less than half a face, and that discolored by purple blotches of radiation scar-tissue. He was blind, and the others maneuvered him into position before the desk.

"For the heroic parts which you played in the Police Action against Veganea--" Wong stumbled over the name, then continued hastily--"I, the President of the Solar Union, hereby...."

"Rot," said the blind one, through toothless gums in a voice that was only a hoarse whisper. "Tell me, do you know where Veganea is? Does anyone on Earth know where Veganea is, or care? How many men, Mr. President, how many men, young and healthy, left for that police action? Do you know?" His hoarse voice rose. "Four came back ... but can any of you gentlemen tell me how many left?"

"That's enough," the Manager of Defense said. At his signal, two of the honor guards gently took hold of the veteran's arms and walked him out of the room along with the others.

"I order that he not be punished," Wong said sharply.

"He won't be," the Manager of Defense said. "Do you take me for a barbarian? I had hoped, though, that your interest might change their attitude. As you can imagine, it's raising hell with the morale of the recruits."

"By the way," the President asked, "where is Veganea, and how many men did we send there?"

"It's about twenty-four years away, near Vega. The action started before my time and I don't know how many men were involved--probably not more than a few million. The Police Action ended successfully, but our ships were in the first wave and were wiped out."

* * * * *

The President sat down wearily. His hand strayed over to the order he had signed that morning for a police action, then drifted aimlessly away.

"What's next?" he asked Al. He slipped a few energy pills into his mouth as Al consulted his book.

"There's the matter of the conversion bomb," Al said. "The Manager of Scientific Research and the Manager of Defense would like you to make a decision about it."

"The conversion bomb?" President Wong said, puzzled. "I've never heard of it."

"It is highest level top secret," the Manager of Defense explained. "Instead of breaking down atoms and releasing some energy as in the standard fission weapons, it converts matter entirely into energy. Given the matter-energy equation, the energy released by a small amount of matter is fantastic."

Al had risen and gone to the door. He returned with an old, gray-haired, stoop-shouldered man. The President recognized the famous Manager of Research.

The Manager launched immediately into his argument without preliminaries. "Mr. President, while my department has finally found a way to convert matter directly into energy, I believe that any use of this process would be disastrous. First, there is absolutely no safeguard that could prevent a matter-conversion powered machine, used for peaceful purposes, from being changed into a lethal weapon by the simplest of alterations. And as a weapon, the conversion bomb, unlike atomic bombs, could not only destroy planets but stars with their entire systems. We all know that the law of the Galaxy is to prevent its domination by any one system--and given the distances and populations involved, that domination is obviously impossible. But if we began to construct conversion bombs, and if word of it got out, the whole Galaxy would rise against us, all the way to the Edge."

"But, Mr. President," the Manager of Defense said calmly. "We are not a unique people. If we do not produce the conversion bomb, you may rest assured that someone else will. Maybe even our friends, the Gnni. No system has ever saved itself by refusing to manufacture the best weapons available to it. As for the Galaxy rising against us--if we have the conversion bomb, let them! We will be able to defend ourselves against any or all of them and blast their suns into novae."

"Until they have the bomb," the Manager of Scientific Research interrupted. "As you say, we are not a unique people."

"Gentlemen," the President said, standing up suddenly. "I feel tired and dizzy. The idea of a bomb that can wipe out systems is new to me. If you will leave your tapes, I will study your arguments tonight, and we can resume this discussion tomorrow."

* * * * *

The two Managers rose immediately, shook hands with the President, and left. They did not speak to each other as they went through the door.

"Mr. President," Al said, "it's seven o'clock. Will you join me for dinner, sir?"

President Wong slumped back into his seat and stared dully at Al, only half noticing his friendly grin. "What would you do about the Gnni, Al, if you were in my place?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, sir," Al said, "but I really don't know. Better come along for some dinner. You've had a hard day,
and you have a harder one ahead of you tomorrow. We saved a number of difficult problems that we didn't want to throw at you on your first day in office."

A ghost of a smile crept over the President's face, then disappeared quickly. "It's all right, Al. Go ahead and eat. I think I'll just stay here and go over these tapes."

As Al left, President Wong saw the order for the police action on his desk. He picked it up to call Al to take it with him, but his eyes caught the words 500,000 men ... sixteen years, and a picture of the terribly wounded veterans flashed before his eyes. Really, he would have to go through the files and find out if the expedition was necessary....

He opened the left-hand desk drawer and stared at the Gnii tapes, but he didn't take any of them out. It seemed like too much of an effort.

And then, the conversion bomb was so much more important.

He closed the first drawer and opened the one with the conversion bomb tapes.

But the Gnii had to be answered tomorrow--the bomb could wait. He slammed the drawer shut.

"Gnii," he muttered to himself, and opened the other drawer.

Then he noticed that he had put the police action order back into his OUTGOING basket. He slammed the drawer with the Gnii tapes shut again and opened the drawer below it and pushed the order inside, so that it wouldn't be picked up by mistake before he could check on it.

"Five hundred thousand men in here," he said as he closed the drawer. "Going to--"

Where were they supposed to go? He couldn't remember. He opened the drawer again and looked at the order.
To Altair D. The name had no meaning for him.

Now, let's see ... oh, yes, the conversion bomb tape.

He opened the drawer to take out the tapes, and remembered that the Gnii ultimatum had to be answered by tomorrow.

"Gnii, Gnu, Gnuts," he said, opening a drawer. It was the wrong one, and the tapes weren't there. Which tapes?
The door opened, and President Wong looked up to see Al's smiling face peering in.

"I was passing by, sir," Al said, "and I wondered if I couldn't talk you into supper--"

"Get out!" the President shouted.
The door closed softly.

Now where was he?... Oh, yes, the conversion bomb. Conversion, conversion, conversation, bomb, bomb, boom, BOOM. But that wasn't it either--it was the Gnii, they had to be answered by tomorrow.... Gnii, Gnii, Gnu, Gnuts, now in what drawer had he put the gnats? And why order a police action against Gnats? Just convert every one of them into spiders....

* * * * *

Al walked slowly down the hall, his grin gone, his face looking washed out. He turned into his own little office and snapped on the communications video.

"First Vice-President Michael Thompson," he said to the operator.

In a moment Thompson appeared on the screen.

"Mr. First Vice-President," Al said in a tired voice, "may I suggest that you remain in the Capital for the next few weeks?"

Even though he knew that it was not polite, Al snapped off the set without waiting for a reply--but not before he caught the white and frightened look on Thompson's face.
Until then he was in danger from the males of Tur's tribe. Tur the coward, Karn thought. Tur the bully. Tur the leader of the tribe. Tur had never liked Karn. He had liked him even less as he grew into magnificent Cro-Magnon manhood. Karn represented the challenge that must come to every leader sooner or later.

Then the wind shifted and Karn slowed. They'd give him up now. He was certain of that. But what to do next? He was all alone, an outcast from his tribe. For a full-grown man to find another tribe was impossible.

Still, he wasn't sorry about the fight. It had been a good one. Tur was still in his prime. He'd used his teeth and his feet and every trick he knew. He wasn't quite as strong as Karn, nor as fast, but he'd had the advantage of experience.

Only one thing Tur lacked, in common with the other members of the tribe, and it was that which had lost him the fight. He had almost no inventiveness. For Karn's questing mind Tur hated him. He could not understand a man who found interest in new situations. And what Tur could not understand he hated.

So they had fought. For a while Tur held the upper hand. He had met every rush of Karn's and repulsed it. But Karn had noticed that every attack from Tur's left was met by a singular twist of the chief's body.

Once Tur twisted. Twice; a third time; and a fourth time he swung around. The fifth time Karn was not there. He'd stopped himself in mid-stride, reversed himself and caught Tur off balance. Then steel fingers had fastened on Tur's throat in unshakable tenacity.

That was when the other males had charged to his rescue. Tur, they hated. But Karn they hated more. Karn made up his mind quickly. Glat alone he could have torn limb from limb. Waan alone would have fared no better. But they and the others together represented for him a quick and certain death.

* * * * *

Then it had been run, run, run. Run with all of them after him. Run into the forest in the night. Only the giant wolf and the saber-tooth there. But they were not half so deadly as his own blood relatives.

Now the chase was over. Karn paused, his chest heaving. In a few minutes his breathing was back to normal. It didn't take this man long to recover. Karn grinned into the darkness. It would take Tur longer. He'd wear those welts on his throat for a while.

Karn shrugged and sniffed the night air. Better move ahead. No smell of the big cats. But there was a nest of wolves off to his right. They slept now, but soon they'd be awake. Up ahead there was a strange scent, one he didn't recognize.

Should he go on or turn aside? Ahead there was a glade where a spring bubbled. Small animals came to drink there in the morning. That meant food and water to a man who needed both. Karn moved ahead, but warily.

The rising sun found him only a short distance from his objective. Now there were mingled sounds as the forest came awake. Early-opening flowers filled the air with fresh sweetness. It was good to be alive.

Then, through a thin screen of trees, Karn saw the great ball. It almost filled the glade, reached nearly to the height of the trees. Gleaming gray-green it was, like the eyes of the wolf. The association made Karn pause. He drifted off to one side, picked a likely tree and hauled himself up into its lower branches.

Patience Karn had. He sat immobile, watchful. From inside this strange orb came sounds that were not too faint for Karn's keen hearing. An hour passed; two hours. Nothing happened. Still he crouched, waiting.

His patience was rewarded. An opening appeared in the ball. There was a puff of air being released from pressure. A figure stepped through the opening and onto the earth. Another figure followed. What were they?

They were men! Clad in strange garments that covered them tightly, they walked upright on two legs. But what puny men!

Half Karn's size they were, and hairless. Through their skin-tight garments the bones of their narrow chests were visible. Their delicate fingers hovered at their waists over small sticks. The scent of fear was on them.

Karn's nose wrinkled in disgust. No danger here. Then a third figure stepped out into the light and Karn's flagging interest reawakened. This scent he recognized. This was a woman!

* * * * *

She was taller than the men and her garment clung tight to a rounded figure that brought a gleam to Karn's eyes. This one had hair, thicker than Karn's own. Her features were more delicate than those of the women he had known, but somehow more pleasing.

He realized that the three were speaking. Their mouths did not move, there was no sound. Yet they spoke. Karn could hear the voices inside his head. Somehow he understood.

"What a place to land," the woman said.
"Couldn't be helped," one of the men replied. "At least it has air. Once the tanks are full we'll be on our way again. In a minute or two I'll test that liquid to see if we can drink it."
"Must you test everything? It looks all right. And why must we stand so close to the ship?"
"Because we don't know what sort of place we've landed in," the second man said.
"There's only one way to find out," she told him. "By moving around."

Her tone was openly contemptuous. Karn found himself agreeing with her. These men were spineless. They must be so to let a woman talk to them like this. Listen to the way they bickered. Like three women over a piece of meat that had fallen from the cave fire.

Karn's nose twitched. What was wrong with these people? While they argued senselessly among themselves their lives hung in the balance. Couldn't they smell the gray wolf that was creeping toward them?

The three stood almost below Karn and jabbered back and forth. And not twenty feet away gray-green eyes watched them intently. Karn saw the wolf's haunches lower. In a moment three hundred and fifty pounds of carnivore would launch itself upon them.

Claws would rip their flesh, flashing fangs rend and tear them. Karn was quite objective as he thought about it. They didn't have a chance.

A roar split the air. Karn had known it was coming. But the three below were taken completely by surprise. Fear rooted them and froze them into immobility. Crouching, Karn watched death come hurtling toward them.

But after all, they were his own kind.

* * * * *

Karn met the wolf in mid-leap. No tiger could have made the leap more surely than he. His plummeting weight landed squarely athwart the beast's back, breaking short the trajectory of its bound.

Together they crashed to earth. Karn's legs encircled the wolf's middle with the strength of a python. Steel fingers found its throat.

Claws raked at Karn's thighs, slavering fangs sought his hands. He retaliated in kind. His own teeth were at the wolf's jugular. The animal rolled, taking Karn along with him, but the man would not lose his grip.

Bestial growls rumbled from two chests. Dust-covered and splattered with gore, they fought across the glade. Karn's legs tightened inexorably and the wolf's growl became an anguished squeal.

It could not shake the thing that clung to its back. Slowly, surely its ribs were forced inward until they cracked. Then jagged ends dug at its lungs, its heart. There was a gush of blood from its nostrils. It lay still.

Karn spat out the salt sweat that ran into his mouth and wiped it from his eyes. Slowly he rose and shook the tension from his leg muscles. Blood dripped from a shallow gash in his thigh but that concerned him little. He had suffered worse in the past.

For the duration of the fight he had forgotten completely the two men and the woman. Now, turning, he saw them watching him. Fear clouded the eyes of the men, but in the woman's gaze he read awed admiration.

Karn gestured, a motion meant to show peaceful intentions. His move was misinterpreted, and as he came toward the three the men reached for the little sticks that hung at their waists. Frantically they waved them at him.

Were they trying to frighten him with those things? Anger flushed Karn's face and a low growl issued from his throat. One blow from each of his hands and these puny men would be dead. The woman he liked.

But the sticks had stopped waving. They were pointing directly at him. He was caught suddenly in the grip of a force that held him helpless. Muscles stood out on his neck like tree roots but he could not move.

Inside his head Karn heard the woman arguing again with her two companions.

"A fine way to treat someone who's just saved our lives!"

"But he might be dangerous. You saw what he did to that beast. Look at the size of him. One twist of those hands and he'd tear our heads off our shoulders."

"He is a powerful brute, isn't he?" But there was no fear in her voice. Only admiration.

"Worse than a Green One," agreed the second of the hairless ones. "We'd better get back into the ship."

They were a little slow about that. Karn thought. In the underbrush close by he had heard the movements of a heavy body. A saber-tooth had no need for stealth. And it was coming their way.

"He's trying to tell us something," the woman was saying. "He may be trying to warn us. Turn off those rays."

The men hesitated. Then their fingers moved slightly and Karn was free to move.

* * * * *

But now there was no time for warnings. Karn gestured over his shoulder and started for the opening in the huge ball. He sensed that safety lay inside. Behind him a huge cat snarled.

The hairless ones hesitated no longer. Leaving the woman to her own devices they dashed for the ship. She turned to run, tripped and fell. Karn scooped her up as he ran.

Almost together, the four reached the ship. The smell of the saber-tooth was strong in Karn's nostrils; he could almost feel its breath on his neck as he dashed up a ramp.

One of the men was fumbling with a lever. The ramp swung up; the opening in the ship's side vanished. Against the gray-green wall the tiger's body thudded.

That danger now behind them, the two men were pointing their sticks at Karn again. But this time the woman
halted them before they could paralyze him.

"That's twice he's saved our lives. How much more proof do we need that he's friendly?" She smiled at Karn.

"Who are you?"

"Karn, of the tribe of Tur."

"I am Andra, and these men are Harus and Ven. We are of Mahlo. We thank you for saving our lives."

Hurus was the smaller of the two men. His face was thin, pinched with perpetual fear. Ven too seemed always frightened. They stared at Karn doubtfully.

"What are we going to do with him?" Harus asked.

"Maybe we could take him back to his tribe," Andra suggested. "If it's very far we could save him a long trip."

Her eyes questioned Karn. He shook his head.

"No. They would kill me."

"Somewhere else, then?"

Karn shrugged. A full-grown male was no welcome guest in any tribe. Andra read his thoughts and was sympathetic.

"You're really up against it, aren't you? From what we've seen of your world so far I would guess it was no place for a man without friends."

"I will go with you to your people; to Mahlo, wherever that is."

"What a notion," Harus snorted. "Picture this uncouth thing in his wolf skin on Mahlo! Besides" and the disdain went out of his voice, "we'd be doing him no favor."

Karn grunted. They didn't think much of him. But there was more of it than that. The three of them had fallen to arguing again. There was talk of Mahlo and the Green Ones, whoever they were. The argument droned on endlessly.

"Too much talk," Karn said abruptly.

The talk stopped. Andra was looking at Karn, a slow smile spreading across her face. Her breasts rose and fell with a change in her breathing and Karn felt a warm flush rise within him.

"I think Karn is right," she said. "Too much talk."

* * * * *

Somewhere in the bowels of the ship a great beast purred. I should not have let them strap me down, Karn thought. The purring grew louder, the ship lifted.

His back pressed against the seat and there was a crushing weight on his chest. His insides tied themselves in knots. What was happening to him. What invisible monster held him in its clutch?

"Afraid?" Andra asked.

Karn was aware that the weight was off his chest. The purring was muffled. They had the beast penned. Then Andra unfastened the thongs that bound Karn.

"Why should Karn be afraid?" he smiled scornfully.

"Perhaps now you would rather remain in your own world. There may be danger on Mahlo."

This woman was a fool. Naturally; she was a woman. What was danger to Karn? What was danger to a man who had lived his life with Tur and the bull males of the tribe, who roamed the same jungle with the saber-tooth and the great wolf?

Yet she was a woman, and one who attracted him. Karn reached out and drew her to him. Let her feel the might of his arms. She was doing something strange with her lips, pressing them against his.

"Now let me go," she said. Then, sharply, "Let me go!"

Bewildered, Karn released his grip. He was confused by this creature of moods. One moment she smiled and the next moment she seemed angry. He wanted to please her. But how?

"Well, we're all right," Ven said. He came from some other chamber in the great ship. "We're running free now. At the next force field we'll cut into Mahlo's orbit."

There was more strange talk which Karn did not understand. More debate, too. It seemed that these men spent half their time arguing with the woman.

Apparently the men held the supremacy, but a very shaky one. The woman seemed not to know too much about this ship. But she had a good deal to say nevertheless.

Then Harus' voice came out of nowhere. "Better strap in again. We've hit Mahlo's orbit."

Again there was the awful pressure, the crushing weight. Violent forces shook the ship. Andra moaned softly. Strange words issued from her lips. Then they were out of the clutch of the awful force.

"Landing at Nobla," Ven said. Panels slid away and Karn could see through the walls of the ship.

Below them was a city. They dropped toward it and its gargoyle-topped towers reached up to meet them. Strange birds winged across an azure sky. They came down over the city and landed gently in a meadow next to the mouth of a great cavern.
"Nobody around," Ven said. "I don't understand it."

"They weren't expecting us to land at Nobla," Andra said. "You're always worrying about something. Come on, let's get out."

The ramp came down and the four descended, Harus leading the way. Karn wondered why they moved so warily. This was their own land. What were they afraid of?

To one side the mouth of the cavern yawned dark and forbidding as they went toward it. Andra explained to Karn that it was the mouth of a tunnel which led to the city proper. There were walls about the city which were never opened.

They were almost to the tunnel when the green things came at them. Slimy beings, as tall as Harus and Ven, covered with green scales and four-armed, more lizards than men, they poured from the tunnel.

 Emitting bird-like cries they swarmed forward, long spears pointing ahead at waist level. With a scream of fear, Ven spun around and ran. Andra and Harus stood petrified.

Their reactions were typical, apparently, for the Green Ones came on as though used to encountering little resistance. Even the sight of Karn, huge of frame and heavy-thewed, draped in his wolfskin, failed to register. It was a fatal mistake.

As the first of the Green Ones reached him Karn side-stepped nimbly, sweeping the spear aside and tearing it from its bearer's grasp. Karn's other hand shot out and connected with a snout. The man-lizard dropped, its face turned to green and oozing pulp.

In Karn's hands the spear became a club. The Green Ones turned toward him in a body, trying to fend off this unexpected attack. They were met by a whirling staff that crushed whatever it hit. Karn's power was overwhelming. His rush cut a swath of death through the green ranks, forcing them back.

He heard Andra calling and looked back over his shoulder. She was standing at the opening in the ship, screaming to him. In their blind fear, Harus and Ven were prepared to take off and leave him behind.

No saber-tooth could have altered the direction of his charge more quickly than Karn. Before the Green Ones could even attempt to block his retreat, Karn was through them and past them.

Harus and Ven sprawled in their flight chairs, panting as though it were they who had done the fighting. Only Karn seemed relaxed as the ship rose and hovered above the Green Ones.

"Well," Andra said bitterly, "Nobla is gone. There's only Luma now. And soon the Green Ones will have that."

"Nobla was yours?" Karn asked.

"All of Mahlo was ours," Andra told him. "But that was only until the Green Ones got started. Now we have only one city left, and not many Mahloans to defend that."

Scorn flashed from her eyes at Harus and Ven. "And you saw how brave they are," she said to Karn.

"Where is this Luma?" Karn asked, disregarding her thrust at the two Mahloans.

"Not far. After we have a look at what the Green Ones have done to Nobla we'll go there."

The great ball skimmed over the meadow, lifted above the walls of Nobla and rose to the height of the tallest towers of the city. For a while it hovered alongside a great stone gargoyle that peered down into the street below.

Bodies were strewn along the streets, Karn saw. They were all male.

"The women escaped," he observed. He heard Andra suck in a sharp breath and turned to her.

She was pointing to a nearby roof. From a doorway there a woman of her kind had emerged and was running across the roof toward the parapet. Behind her came three of the Green Ones.

Only shreds of the woman's clothes remained. Her face was clearly visible to Karn. It was the face of a woman crazed by fear and shock. She reached the parapet, paused, and saw that the Green Ones were almost on her. Without hesitation she jumped. Karn watched her fall until she hit the street.

"This would happen to you too?" he asked Andra.

"If the Green Ones caught me. And eventually they will."
"Don't make me laugh," Andra said. "You've seen our men when they were in danger."

The ship had lifted and was leaving Nobla behind. Watching the horizon ahead, Karn saw another city come into view within a short time. It looked exactly like Nobla. They must be a great people who could build cities like these, who could make ships that flew through the air.

But they could hardly be called men. What sort of man was it who did not have even the instinct for self preservation? What sort was it who would not defend his woman? Andra read Karn's thoughts.

"What kind of men?" she said. "I'll tell you. They never built the cities of Mahlo. Those have stood for thousands of generations, erected by some forgotten ancestors.

"The men of Mahlo have never had to fight. There was no danger here. So they spent their time in idle chatter, in philosophy, in the invention of luxuries. But they retained control of the government. When the Green Ones came out of the forests of the south and began their conquering march, our men decreed that we must retreat before them.

"When only Nobla and Luma remained to us, the men decreed that we must retreat from Mahlo to a world without dangers. Unfortunately there is no such place."

Karn thought for a moment. "What about the Green Ones?"

"They are more reptile than human, as you saw. But they do have a rudimentary intelligence. Added to their instinct for aggression it is sufficient to destroy us. Wait until you see our Council in session. You won't wonder then."

* * * * *

Luma had turned out en masse to welcome Andra and her two companions. Karn had been the center of attraction and interest for a few minutes. But it was the report of the three Mahloans which mattered most.

Andra gave it to them straight. There was no hope elsewhere. The Green Ones were only minor terrors among the blood-lusting creatures the Universe had spawned. Unless the men of Mahlo fought back they were doomed.

Yet Karn saw no sign that a fight was even imaginable. Shoulders sagged, heads dropped in resignation, but that was all. As he and his three companions walked with the throng to the Council forum, Karn saw brows knit in contemplation, none in anger.

There were as many women as men in the great hall of assembly. They cast no votes, but they had plenty to say.

"We might consider retreating to the northern deserts," Ven said after he had called the meeting to order.

The women shouted him down. What it was that the women wanted, Karn could not guess. But the men quailed before them and became confused. The most important assembly in Mahlo's history was going to break up with nothing done.

"We can only wait, then," Ven said regretfully. A chorus of assent rose like a dirge.

It was all Karn could take. For himself death was nothing. All his life had been lived in its shadow. But that Andra should fall into the hands of the Green Ones was another thing. And that these men should allow their women to meet similar fates filled him with contempt.

"You can do something!" he shouted, coming to his feet. "You can fight!"

Beside him Andra pulled at his arm.

"But we don't know how. No Mahloan has ever lifted his hand in anger. Don't you see?"

The rest of the women were shrilling the same sentiments, drowning out the men. Listening to them, Karn began to understand a great deal. But it was not time for that now.

"Be silent!" he roared. "I see only that you are all going to die. At least die like men!"

The women's voices shrilled in his ears but he shouted them down. By sheer lung power he silenced them, and the sight of his giant figure awed them and kept them silent.

"I am going to pick one hundred of the men," Karn told them. "With nothing but pointed sticks and clubs they are going to follow me. And they are going to fight! Do you hear? They are going to fight!"

* * * * *

Darkness held no terrors for Karn. His eyes were sharp, his hearing as acute as a bird's, his sense of smell infallible. Beyond Nobla's wall he caught the scent of the Green Ones, foul and slightly acrid.

He had to move fast. The men of Mahlo were not as well equipped as he. They had to have light to find their way around. And in an hour the sun would be up.

Karn moved away from the gates, edged along the high wall until he found a rough section. His fingers sought crevices. Then, with the agility of a monkey, he made his way upward. At the top of the wall he waited, listening to the sounds of deep breathing on his right and below.

The Green Ones slept. Their guards were at the gate as a matter of course. But they slept secure in the belief that there could be no attack. Karn grinned into the darkness as he dropped.

Peering ahead, he saw vague figures and moved toward them on soundless feet. Only three or four of them
here. It would not take long. His hands reached out and closed on a throat.

It was ridiculous that the Mahloans should be afraid of these creatures. But they were afraid of their own
women, so it might have been expected. Yet they were more afraid of Karn than of either.

He had bunched his muscles and scowled at them. And they had quailed. They were afraid to follow him. But
they were more afraid not to follow. Karn thought that when the sun rose he would find his men waiting outside the
gates of Nobla.

Four of the Green Ones lay dead at his feet as he sought for the bolts that held the gate shut. Very slowly he
drew those bolts. All it would take to open the gates would be the slightest push.

But it was taking him longer than he had expected. Already the sky was purpling. Running now, Karn sped
down the broad avenue toward a tall, gargoyle-topped building.

He found ledges, plenty of hand-holds, but it was a long climb. The rising sun caught him still twenty feet from
the roof. Below, the city stirred and came awake.

Green Ones were in the street. Karn prayed that they would not look up. His prayer proved futile. He moved
faster as bird-like cries came up to him. He had been discovered.

Climbing desperately now, he got a hand over the parapet just as a green snout poked its way over. Karn struck
out and the snout vanished. Then he was over.

More of the Green Ones came at him as he gained the roof. Snatching up a fallen spear, Karn drove them back.
By sheer ferocity of his attack he forced them back through the doorway from which they had emerged. The door
slammed between them.

They thought he was going to follow. He could hear them chattering among themselves on the other side of the
doors. They were trying to decide what to do. Their discussion gave Karn exactly the time he needed.

His eyes roved the roof, trying to find something that would be heavy enough to hold the door against those on
the other side. He had to protect his back. But the roof seemed blank.

But there was something Karn could use. The gargoyles. Great architectural excrescenses, they had never
served any purpose. They could serve a purpose now.

Each was the size of a small boulder, weighing close to six hundred pounds. Karn lifted one easily, carried it to
the door, and set it down. One more trip and he was safe.

From the edge of the roof he could see beyond the wall. His hundred were there, puny indeed from this height.
His yell brought them around.

They could see him, but they were still afraid. Indecision held them motionless for an instant. Then they began
to move. And they moved forward.

The Green Ones had not seen them yet. Their own eyes were turned up at this shouting giant on the roof. Then
the gates of the city swung open and Karn's men were in the broad street.

Swarms of the Green Ones poured from the buildings. They paused to form a line of attack, their spears poised
in readiness. That was when Karn went into action.

He ripped a gargoyle loose from the mortar that held it and dropped it over the parapet. Before it landed he had
started another on its way down.

On the Green Ones they fell with devastating suddenness, each one crushing dozens. Another of the great
missiles fell, and another. A half dozen of them there had been in all, and when the last one landed the street was a
shambles.

Karn's men fell on the disorganized remnants of the Green Ones. Hairless the Mahloans were, and puny. But
there was a trace of manhood still in them. Spears darted and clubs flailed, and the Green Ones fell.

Karn had known that only the taste of blood was needed. And he had been right. Now his men knew that they
too could fight, and that the Green Ones were not irresistible.

By the time Karn reached the ground again the Green Ones were in full flight. As long as they had held the
upper hand they had been brave enough. In the face of resistance they were cowardly.

Like Tur, Kara thought. Or like any other bully.

Then he looked up. A shadow crossed his path and he saw the great ball skim over the city. Tur was forgotten
now. As he went toward the landing field with his men, Karn knew that he would never return to Earth. As long as
Andra was on Mahlo he wanted to be there too.

"You beat them!" she cried as she came from the ship.

"Yes. And we will drive them from every city on Mahlo and back to the forests from which they came."

"But that won't be necessary. There's no reason for you to risk your life. That's the trouble with--"

"There is only one trouble," Karn interrupted. "The women of Mahlo have turned their men into women too."
"You can't talk to me like that!" Andra flared.
Karn found his men watching him. He had led them to victory over the Green Ones. But with women it was another story. Could he stand up to Andra? They were watching Karn, ready to follow him again. But which way would he go?

"Woman," Karn said, "hold your tongue!"
Her face reddened with anger, then turned white as Karn took a threatening step forward. Her head dropped in submission.

It was victory, complete and final. Before Karn's eyes the men of Mahlo seemed to grow inches taller. Their shoulders straightened. For the first time they were out of bondage. They were men. And it was this man from another world, Karn, who made them so.

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Contents

PET FARM
By Roger D. Aycock

The next worst thing to hell is being shanghaied into the Paradise of an alien planet!

They had fled almost to the sheer ambient face of the crater wall when the Falakian girl touched Farrell's arm and pointed back through the scented, pearly mists.

"Someone," she said. Her voice stumbled over the almost forgotten Terran word, but its sound was music.

"No matter," Farrell answered. "They're too late now."
He pushed on, happily certain in his warm euphoric glow of mounting expectancy that what he had done to the ship made him--and his new-found paradise with him--secure.

He had almost forgotten who they were; the pale half-memories that drifted through his mind touched his consciousness lightly and without urgency, arousing neither alarm nor interest.

The dusk grew steadily deeper, but the dimming of vision did not matter.

Nothing mattered but the fulfillment to come.

Far above him, the lacy network of bridging, at one time so baffling, arched and vanished in airy grace into the colored mists. To right and left, other arms of the aerial maze reached out, throwing vague traceries from cliff to cliff across the valley floor. Behind him on the plain he could hear the eternally young people playing about their little blue lake, flitting like gay shadows through the tamarisks and calling to each other in clear elfin voices while they frolicked after the fluttering swarms of great, bright-hued moths.

The crater wall halted him and he stood with the Falakian girl beside him, looking back through the mists and savoring the sweet, quiet mystery of the valley. Motion stirred there; the pair of them laughed like anticipant children when two wide-winged moths swam into sight and floated toward them, eyes glowing like veiled emeralds.

Footsteps followed, disembodied in the dusk.

"It is only Xavier," a voice said. Its mellow uninflection evoked a briefly disturbing memory of a slight gray figure, jointed yet curiously flexible, and a featureless oval of face.

It came out of the mists and halted a dozen yards away, and he saw that it spoke into a metallic box slung over one shoulder.

"He is unharmed," it said. "Directions?"

Xavier? Directions? From whom?

Another voice answered from the shoulder-box, bringing a second mental picture of a face--square and brown, black-browed and taciturnly humorless--that he had known and forgotten.

Whose, and where?

"Hold him there, Xav," it said. "Stryker and I are going to try to reach the ship now."
The moths floated nearer, humming gently.

"You're too late," Farrell called. "Go away. Let me wait in peace."

"If you knew what you're waiting for," a third voice said, "you'd go screaming mad." It was familiar, recalling vaguely a fat, good-natured face and ponderous, laughter-shaken paunch. "If you could see the place as you saw it when we first landed...."

The disturbing implications of the words forced him reluctantly to remember a little of that first sight of Falak.

... The memory was sacrilege, soiling and cheapening the ecstasy of his anticipation.
But it had been different.

* * * * *

His first day on Falak had left Farrell sick with disgust.

He had known from the beginning that the planet was small and arid, non-rotating, with a period of revolution about its primary roughly equal to ten Earth years. The Marco Four's initial sweep of reconnaissance, spiraling from pole to pole, had supplied further information without preparing him at all for what the three-man Reclamations team was to find later.

The weed-choked fields and crumbled desolation of Terran slave barracks had been depressing enough. The inevitable scattering of empty domes abandoned a hundred years before by the Hymenop conquerors had completed a familiar and unpromising pattern, a workaday blueprint that differed from previous experience only in one significant detail: There was no shaggy, disoriented remnant of descendants from the original colonists.

The valley, a mile-wide crater sunk between thousand-foot cliffs, floored with straggling bramble thickets and grass flats pocked with stagnant pools and quaking slime-bogs, had been infinitely worse. The cryptic three-dimensional maze of bridges spanning the pit had made landing there a ticklish undertaking. Stryker and Farrell and Gibson, after a conference, had risked the descent only because the valley offered a last possible refuge for survivors.

Their first real hint of what lay ahead of them came when Xavier, the ship's mechanical, opened the personnel port against the heat and humid stink of the place.

"Another damned tropical pesthole," Farrell said, shucking off his comfortable shorts and donning booted coveralls for the preliminary survey. "The sooner we count heads--assuming there are any left to count--and get out of here, the better. The long-term Reorientation boys can have this one and welcome."

Stryker, characteristically, had laughed at his navigator's prompt disgust. Gibson, equally predictable in his way, had gathered his gear with precise efficiency, saying nothing.

"It's a routine soon finished," Stryker said. "There can't be more than a handful of survivors here, and in any case we're not required to do more than gather data from full-scale recolonization. Our main job is to prepare Reorientation if we can for whatever sort of slave-conditioning deviltry the Hymenops practiced on this particular world."

Farrell grunted sourly. "You love these repulsive little puzzles, don't you?"

* * * * *

Stryker grinned at him with good-natured malice. "Why not, Arthur? You can play the accordion and sketch for entertainment, and Gib has his star-maps and his chess sessions with Xavier. But for a fat old man, rejuvenated four times and nearing his fifth and final, what else is left except curiosity?"

He clipped a heat-gun and audicom pack to the belt of his bulging coveralls and clumped to the port to look outside. Roiling gray fog hovered there, diffusing the hot magenta point of Falak's sun to a liverish glare half-eclipsed by the crater's southern rim. Against the light, the spidery metal maze of foot-bridging stood out dimly, tracing a random criss-cross pattern that dwindled to invisibility in the mists.

"That network is a Hymenop experiment of some sort," Stryker said, peering. "It's not only a sample of alien engineering--and a thundering big one at that--but an object lesson on the weird workings of alien logic. If we could figure out what possessed the Bees to build such a maze here--"

"Then we'd be the first to solve the problem of alien psychology," Farrell finished acidly, aping the older man's ponderous enthusiasm. "Lee, you know we'd have to follow those hive-building fiends all the way to 70 Ophiuchi to find out what makes them tick. And twenty thousand light-years is a hell of a way to go out of curiosity, not to mention a dangerous one."

"But we'll go there some day," Stryker said positively. "We'll have to go because we can't ever be sure they won't try to repeat their invasion of two hundred years ago."

He tugged at the owlish tufts of hair over his ears, wrinkling his bald brow up at the enigmatic maze.

"We'll never feel safe again until the Bees are wiped out. I wonder if they know that. They never understood us, you know, just as we never understood them--they always seemed more interested in experimenting with slave ecology than in conquest for itself, and they never killed off their captive cultures when they pulled out for home. I wonder if their system of logic can postulate the idea of a society like ours, which must rule or die."

"We'd better get on with our survey," Gibson put in mildly, "unless we mean to finish by floodlight. We've only about forty-eight hours left before dark."

* * * * *

He moved past Stryker through the port, leaving Farrell to stare blankly after him.

"This is a non-rotating world," Farrell said. "How the devil can it get dark, Lee?"

Stryker chuckled. "I wondered if you'd see that. It can't, except when the planet's axial tilt rolls this latitude into
its winter season and sends the sun south of the crater rim. It probably gets dark as pitch here in the valley, since the fog would trap even diffused light." To the patiently waiting mechanical, he said, "The ship is yours, Xav. Call us if anything turns up."

Farrell followed him reluctantly outside into a miasmic desolation more depressing than he could have imagined.

A stunted jungle of thorny brambles and tough, waist-high grasses hampered their passage at first, ripping at coveralls and tangling the feet until they had beaten their way through it to lower ground. There they found a dreary expanse of bogland where scummy pools of stagnant water and festering slime heaved sluggishly with oily bubbles of marsh gas that burst audibly in the hanging silence. The liverish blaze of Falakian sun bore down mercilessly from the crater's rim.

They moved on to skirt a small lead-colored lake in the center of the valley, a stagnant seepage-basin half obscured by floating scum. Its steaming mudflats were littered with rotting yellowed bones and supported the first life they had seen, an unpleasant scurrying of small multipedal crustaceans and water-lizards.

"There can't be any survivors here," Farrell said, appalled by the thought of his kind perpetuating itself in a place like this. "God, think what the mortality rate would be! They'd die like flies."

"There are bound to be a few," Stryker stated, "even after a hundred years of slavery and another hundred of abandonment. The human animal, Arthur, is the most fantastically adaptable--"

He broke off short when they rounded a clump of reeds and stumbled upon their first Falakian proof of that fantastic adaptability.

* * * * *

The young woman squatting on the mudflat at their feet stared back at them with vacuous light eyes half hidden behind a wild tangle of matted blonde hair. She was gaunt and filthy, plastered with slime from head to foot, and in her hands she held the half-eaten body of a larger crustacean that obviously had died of natural causes and not too recently, at that.

Farrell turned away, swallowing his disgust. Gibson, unmoved, said with an aptness bordering--for him--on irony: "Too damned adaptable, Lee. Sometimes our kind survives when it really shouldn't."

A male child of perhaps four came out of the reeds and stared at them. He was as gaunt and filthy as the woman, but less vapid of face. Farrell, watching the slow spark of curiosity bloom in his eyes, wondered sickly how many years--or how few--must pass before the boy was reduced to the same stupid bovinity as the mother.

Gibson was right, he thought. The compulsion to survive at any cost could be a curse instead of an asset. The degeneracy of these poor devils was a perpetual affront to the race that had put them there.

He was about to say as much when the woman rose and plodded away through the mud, the child at her heels. It startled him momentarily, when he followed their course with his eyes, to see that perhaps a hundred others had gathered to wait incuriously for them in the near distance. All were as filthy as the first two, but with a grotesque uniformity of appearance that left him frowning in uneasy speculation until he found words to identify that similarity.

"They're all young," he said. "The oldest can't be more than twenty--twenty-five at most!"

Stryker scowled, puzzled without sharing Farrell's unease. "You're right. Where are the older ones?"

"Another of your precious little puzzles," Farrell said sourly. "I hope you enjoy unraveling it."

"Oh, we'll get to the bottom of it," Stryker said with assurance. "We'll have to, before we can leave them here."

They made a slow circuit of the lake, and the closer inspection offered a possible solution to the problem Stryker had posed. Chipped and weathered as the bones littering the mudflats were, their grisly shapings were unmistakable.

"I'd say that these are the bones of the older people," Stryker hazarded, "and that they represent the end result of another of these religio-economic control compulsions the Hymenops like to condition into their slaves. Men will go to any lengths to observe a tradition, especially when its origin is forgotten. If these people were once conditioned to look on old age as intolerable--"

"If you're trying to say that they kill each other off at maturity," Farrell interrupted, "the inference is ridiculous. In a hundred years they'd have outgrown a custom so hard to enforce. The balance of power would have rested with the adults, not with the children, and adults are generally fond of living."

Stryker looked to Gibson for support, received none, and found himself saddled with his own contention. "Economic necessity, then, since the valley can support only a limited number. Some of the old North American Indians followed a similar custom, the oldest son throttling the father when he grew too old to hunt."

"But even there infanticide was more popular than patricide," Farrell pointed out. "No group would practice decimation from the top down. It's too difficult to enforce."
Stryker answered him with a quotation from the Colonial Reclamations Handbook, maliciously taking the pontifical classmaster's tone best calculated to irritate Farrell.

"Chapter Four, Subsection One, Paragraph Nineteen: Any custom, fixation or compulsion accepted as the norm by one group of human beings can be understood and evaluated by any other group not influenced by the same ideology, since the basic perceptive abilities of both are necessarily the same through identical heredity. Evaluation of alien motivations, conversely--"

"Oh, hell," Farrell cut in wearily. "Let's get back to the ship, shall we? We'll all feel more like--"

His right foot gave way beneath him without warning, crushing through the soft ground and throwing him heavily. He sat up at once, and swore in incredulous anger when he found the ankle swelling rapidly inside his boot.

"Sprained! Damn it all!"

Gibson and Stryker, on their knees beside the broken crust of soil, ignored him. Gibson took up a broken length of stick and prodded intently in the cavity, prying out after a moment a glistening two-foot ellipsoid that struggled feebly on the ground.

"A chrysalid," Stryker said, bending to gauge the damage Farrell's heavy boot had done. "In a very close pre-emergence stage. Look, the protective sheathing has begun to split already."

The thing lay twitching aimlessly, prisoned legs pushing against its shining transparent integument in an instinctive attempt at premature freedom. The movement was purely reflexive; its head, huge-eyed and as large as a man's clenched fist, had been thoroughly crushed under Farrell's heel.

Oddly, its injury touched Farrell even through the pain of his injured foot.

"It's the first passably handsome thing we've seen in this pesthole," he said, "and I've maimed it. Finish it off, will you?"

Stryker grunted, feeling the texture of the imprisoning sheath with curious fingers. "What would it have been in imago, Gib? A giant butterfly?"

"A moth," Gibson said tersely. "Lepidoptera, anyway."

He stood up and ended the chrysalid's strugglings with a bolt from his heat-gun before extending a hand to help Farrell up. "I'd like to examine it closer, but there'll be others. Let's get Arthur out of here."

* * * * *

They went back to the ship by slow stages, pausing now and then while Gibson gathered a small packet of bone fragments from the mudflats and underbrush.

"Some of these are older than others," he explained when Stryker remarked on his selection. "But none are recent. It should help to know their exact age."

An hour later, they were bathed and dressed, sealed off comfortably in the ship against the humid heat and stink of the swamp. Farrell lay on a chart room acceleration couch, resting, while Stryker taped his swollen ankle. Gibson and Xavier, the one disdaining rest and the other needing none, used the time to run a test analysis on the bones brought in from the lakeside.

The results of that analysis were more astonishing than illuminating.

A majority of the fragments had been exposed to climatic action for some ten years. A smaller lot averaged twenty years; and a few odd chips, preserved by long burial under alluvial silt, thirty.

"The older natives died at ten-year intervals, then," Stryker said. "And in considerable numbers; the tribe must have been cut to half strength each time. But why?" He frowned unhappily, fishing for opinion. "Gib, can it really be a perversion of religious custom dreamed up by the Hymenops to keep their slaves under control? A sort of festival of sacrifice every decade, climaxing in tribal decimation?"

"Maybe they combine godliness with gluttony," Farrell put in, unasked. "Maybe their orgy runs more to long pig than to piety."

He stood up, wincing at the pain, and was hobbling toward his sleeping cubicle when Gibson's answer to Stryker's question stopped him with a cold prickle along his spine.

"We'll know within twenty-four hours," Gibson said. "Since both the decimations and the winter darkness periods seem to follow the same cycle, I'd say there's a definite relationship."

* * * * *

For once Farrell's cubicle, soundproofed and comfortable, brought him only a fitful imitation of sleep, an intermittent dozing that wavered endlessly between nightmare and wakefulness. When he crawled out again, hours later, he found Xavier waiting for him alone with a thermo-bulb of hot coffee. Stryker and Gibson, the mechanical said blandly, had seen no need of waking him, and had gone out alone on a more extensive tour of investigation.

The hours dragged interminably. Farrell uncased his beloved accordion, but could not bear the sound of it; he tried his sketch-book, and could summon to mind no better subjects than drab miasmic bogs and steaming mudflats. He discarded the idea of chess with Xavier without even weighing it--he would not have lasted past the fourth move,
and both he and the mechanical knew it.

He was reduced finally to limping about the ship on his bandaged foot, searching for some routine task left undone and finding nothing. He even went so far as to make a below-decks check on the ship's matter-synthesizer, an indispensable unit designed for the conversion of waste to any chemical compound, and gave it up in annoyance when he found that all such operational details were filed with infallible exactness in Xavier's plastoid head.

The return of Stryker and Gibson only aggravated his impatience. He had expected them to discover concealed approaches to the maze of bridging overhead, tunnelings in the cliff-face to hidden caverns complete with bloodstained altars and caches of sacrificial weapons, or at least some ominous sign of preparation among the natives. But there was nothing.

"No more than yesterday," Stryker said. Failure had cost him a share of his congenital good-humor, leaving him restless and uneasy. "There's nothing to find, Arthur. We've seen it all."

Surprisingly, Gibson disagreed.

"We'll know what we're after when darkness falls," he said. "But that's a good twelve hours away. In the meantime, there's a possibility that our missing key is outside the crater, rather than here inside it."

* * * * *

They turned on him together, both baffled and apprehensive.

"What do you mean, outside?" Farrell demanded. "There's nothing there but grassland. We made sure of that at planetfall."

"We mapped four Hymenop domes on reconnaissance," Gibson reminded him. "But we only examined three to satisfy ourselves that they were empty. The fourth one--"

Farrell interrupted derisively. "That ancient bogey again? Gib, the domes are always empty. The Bees pulled out a hundred years ago."

Gibson said nothing, but his black-browed regard made Farrell flush uncomfortably.

"Gib is right," Stryker intervened. "You're too young in Colonial Reclamations to appreciate the difficulty of recognizing an alien logic, Arthur, let alone the impossibility of outguessing it. I've knocked about these ecological madhouses for the better part of a century, and the more I see of Hymenop work, the more convinced I am that we'll never equate human and Hymenop ideologies. It's like trying to add quantities of dissimilar objects and expressing the result in a single symbol; it can't be done, because there's no possible common denominator for reducing the disparate elements to similarity."

* * * * *

When Farrell kept silent, he went on, "Our own reactions, and consequently our motivations, are based on broad attributes of love, hate, fear, greed and curiosity. We might empathize with another species that reacts as we do to those same stimuli—but what if that other species recognizes only one or two of them, or none at all? What if their motivations stem from a set of responses entirely different from any we know?"

"There aren't any," Farrell said promptly. "What do you think they would be?"

"There you have it," Stryker said triumphantly. He chuckled, his good-nature restored. "We can't imagine what those emotions would be like because we aren't equipped to understand. Could a race depending entirely on extrasensory perception appreciate a Mozart quintet or a Botticelli altar piece or a performance of Hamlet? You know it couldn't—the esthetic nuances that make those works great would escape it completely, because the motives that inspired their creation are based on a set of values entirely foreign to its comprehension.

"There's a digger wasp on Earth whose female singles out a particular species of tarantula to feed her larvae—and the spider stands patiently by, held by some compulsion whose nature we can't even guess, while the wasp digs a grave, paralyzes the spider and shoves it into the hole with an egg attached. The spider could kill the wasp, and will kill one of any other species, but it submits to that particular kind without a flicker of protest. And if we can't understand the mechanics of such a relationship between reflexive species, then what chance have we of understanding the logic of an intelligent race of aliens? The results of its activities can be assessed, but not the motivations behind those activities."

"All right," Farrell conceded. "You and Gib are right, as usual, and I'm wrong. We'll check that fourth dome."

"You'll stay here with Xav," Stryker said firmly, "while Gib and I check. You'd only punish yourself, using that foot."

* * * * *

After another eight-hour period of waiting, Farrell was nearing the end of his patience. He tried to rationalize his uneasiness and came finally to the conclusion that his failing hinged on a matter of conditioning. He was too accustomed to the stable unity of their team to feel comfortable without Gibson and Stryker. Isolated from their perpetual bickering and the pleasant unspoken warmth of their regard, he was lonesome and tense.

It would have been different, he knew, if either of the others had been left behind. Stryker had his beloved
Reclamations texts and his microfilm albums of problems solved on other worlds; Gibson had his complicated galactic charts and his interminable chess bouts with Xavier....

Farrell gave it up and limped outside, to stand scowling unhappily at the dreary expanse of swampland. Far down under the reasoning levels of his consciousness a primal uneasiness nagged at him, whispering in wordless warning that there was more to his mounting restlessness than simple impatience. Something inside him was changing, burgeoning in strange and disturbing growth.

A pale suggestion of movement, wavering and uncertain in the eddying fog, caught his eye. A moment of puzzled watching told him that it was the bedraggled young woman they had seen earlier by the lake, and that she was approaching the ship timorously and under cover.

"But why?" he wondered aloud, recalling her bovine lack of curiosity. "What the devil can she want here?"

A shadow fell across the valley. Farrell, startled, looked up sharply to see the last of the Falakian sun's magenta glare vanishing below the crater's southern rim. A dusky forerunner of darkness settled like a tangible cloud, softening the drab outlines of bramble thickets and slime pools. The change that followed was not seen but felt, a swelling rush of glad arousal like the joy of a child opening its eyes from sleep.

To Farrell, the valley seemed to stir, waking in sympathy to his own restlessness and banishing his unease.

* * * * *

The girl ran to him through the dusk on quick, light feet, timidity forgotten, and he saw with a pleasant shock of astonishment that she was no longer the filthy creature he had first seen by the lakeside. She was pretty and nubile, eyes and soft mouth smiling together in a childlike eagerness that made her at once infinitely desirable and untouchably innocent.

"Who are you?" he asked shakily.

Illustration

Her hesitant voice was music, rousing in Farrell a warm and expectant euphoria that glowed like old wine in his veins.

"Koaele," she said. "Look--"

Behind her, the valley lay wrapped like a minor paradise in soft pearly mists and luminous shadows, murmurous with the far sound of running water and the faint chiming of voices that drifted up from the little blue lake to whisper back in cadenced echo from the fairy maze of bridging overhead. Over it all, like a deep, sustained cello note, rose the muted humming of great flame-winged moths dipping and swaying over bright tropical flowers.

"Moths?" he thought. And then, "Of course."

The chrysalids under the sod, their eclosion time completed, were coming into their own--bringing perfection with them. Born in gorgeous iridescent imago, they were beautiful in a way that hurt with the yearning pain of perfection, the sorrow that imperfection existed at all--the joy of finally experiencing flawlessness.

An imperative buzzing from the ship behind him made a rude intrusion. A familiar voice, polite but without inflection, called from an open port: "Captain Stryker in the scoutboat, requesting answer."

Farrell hesitated. To the girl, who followed him with puzzled, eager eyes, he begged, "Don't run away, please. I'll be back."

In the ship, Stryker's moon-face peered wryly at him from the main control screen.

"Drew another blank," it said. "You were right after all, Arthur--the fourth dome was empty. Gib and I are coming in now. We can't risk staying out longer if we're going to be on hand when the curtain rises on our little mystery."

"Mystery?" Farrell echoed blankly. Earlier discussions came back slowly, posing a forgotten problem so ridiculous that he laughed. "We were wrong about all that. It's wonderful here."

* * * * *

Stryker's face on the screen went long with astonishment. "Arthur, have you lost your mind? What's wrong there?"

"Nothing is wrong," Farrell said. "It's right." Memory prodded him again, distressingly. "Wait--I remember now what it was we came here for. But we're not going through with it."

He thought of the festival to come, of the young men and girls running lithe in the dusk, splashing in the lake and calling joyously to each other across the pale sands. The joyous innocence of their play brought an appalling realization of what would happen if the fat outsider on the screen should have his way:

The quiet paradise would be shattered and refashioned in smoky facsimile of Earth, the happy people herded together and set to work in dusty fields and whirring factories, multiplying tensions and frustrations as they multiplied their numbers.

For what? For whom?

"You've got no right to go back and report all this," Farrell said plaintively. "You'd ruin everything."
The alternative came to him and with it resolution. "But you won't go back. I'll see to that."
He left the screen and turned on the control panel with fingers that remembered from long habit the settings required. Stryker's voice bellowed frantically after him, unheeded, while he fed into the ship's autopilot a command that would send her plunging skyward bare minutes later.

Then, ignoring the waiting mechanical's passive stare, he went outside.

The valley beckoned. The elfin laughter of the people by the lake touched a fey, responsive chord in him that blurred his eyes with ecstatic tears and sent him running down the slope, the Falakian girl keeping pace beside him.

Before he reached the lake, he had dismissed from his mind the ship and the men who had brought it there.

* * * * *

But they would not let him forget. The little gray jointed one followed him through the dancing and the laughter and cornered him finally against the sheer cliffside. With the chase over, it held him there, waiting with metal patience in the growing dusk.

The audicom box slung over its shoulder boomed out in Gibson's voice, the sound a noisy desecration of the scented quiet.
"Don't let him get away, Xav," it said. "We're going to try for the ship now."

The light dimmed, the soft shadows deepened. The two great-winged moths floated nearer, humming gently, their eyes glowing luminous and intent in the near-darkness. Mist currents from their approach brushed Farrell's face, and he held out his arms in an ecstasy of anticipation that was a consummation of all human longing.
"Now," he whispered.
The moths dipped nearer.

The mechanical sent out a searing beam of orange light that tore the gloom, blinding him briefly. The humming ceased; when he could see again, the moths lay scorched and blackened at his feet. Their dead eyes looked up at him dully, charred and empty; their bright gauzy wings smoked in ruins of ugly, whiplike ribs.

He flinched when the girl touched his shoulder, pointing. A moth dipped toward them out of the mists, eyes glowing like round emerald lanterns. Another followed.
The mechanical flicked out its orange beam and cut them down.

A roar like sustained thunder rose across the valley, shaking the ground underfoot. A column of white-hot fire tore the night.
"The ship," Farrell said aloud, remembering.
He had a briefly troubled vision of the sleek metal shell lancing up toward a black void of space powdered with cold star-points whose names he had forgotten, marooning them all in Paradise.
The audicom boomed in Gibson's voice, though oddly shaken and strained. "Made it. Is he still safe, Xav?"
"Safe," the mechanical answered tersely. "The natives, too, so far."
"No thanks to him," Gibson said. "If you hadn't canceled the blastoff order he fed into the autopilot...." But after a moment of ragged silence: "No, that's hardly fair. Those damned moths beat down Lee's resistance in the few minutes it took us to reach the ship, and nearly got me as well. Arthur was exposed to their influence from the moment they started coming out."

Stryker's voice cut in, sounding more shaken than Gibson's. "Stand fast down there. I'm setting off the first flare now."

* * * * *

A silent explosion of light, searing and unendurable, blasted the night. Farrell cried out and shielded his eyes with his hands, his ecstasy of anticipation draining out of him like heady wine from a broken urn. Full memory returned numbingly.

When he opened his eyes again, the Falakian girl had run away. Under the merciless glare of light, the valley was as he had first seen it—a nauseous charnel place of bogs and brambles and mudflats littered with yellowed bones.

In the near distance, a haggard mob of natives cowered like gaping, witless caricatures of humanity, faces turned from the descending blaze of the parachute flare. There was no more music or laughter. The great moths fluttered in silent frenzy, stunned by the flood of light.
"So that's it," Farrell thought dully. "They come out with the winter darkness to breed and lay their eggs, and they hold over men the same sort of compulsion that Terran wasps hold over their host tarantulas. But they're nocturnal. They lose their control in the light."

Incredulously, he recalled the expectant euphoria that had blinded him, and he wondered sickly: "Is that what the spider feels while it watches its grave being dug?"

A second flare bloomed far up in the fog, outlining the criss-cross network of bridging in stark, alien clarity. A smooth minnow-shape dipped past and below it, weaving skillfully through the maze. The mechanical's voice box
spoke again.

"Give us a guide beam, Xav. We're bringing the Marco down."

The ship settled a dozen yards away, its port open. Farrell, with Xavier at his heels, went inside hastily, not looking back.

Gibson crouched motionless over his control panel, too intent on his readings to look up. Beside him, Stryker said urgently: "Hang on. We've got to get up and set another flare, quickly."

The ship surged upward.

* * * * *

Hours later, they watched the last of the flares glare below in a steaming geyser of mud and scum. The ship hovered motionless, its only sound a busy droning from the engine room where her mass-synthesizer discharged a deadly cloud of insecticide into the crater.

"There'll be some nasty coughing among the natives for a few days after this," Gibson said. "But it's better than being food for larvae... Reorientation will pull them out of that pesthole in a couple of months, and another decade will see them raising cattle and wheat again outside. The young adapt fast."

"The young, yes," Stryker agreed uncomfortably. "Personally, I'm getting too old and fat for this business."

He shuddered, his paunch quaking. Farrell guessed that he was thinking of what would have happened to them if Gibson had been as susceptible as they to the overpowering fascination of the moths. A few more chrysalids to open in the spring, an extra litter of bones to puzzle the next Reclamations crew....

"That should do it," Gibson said. He shut off the flow of insecticide and the mass-converter grew silent in the engine room below. "Exit another Hymenop experiment in bastard synecology."

"I can understand how they might find, or breed, a nocturnal moth with breeding-season control over human beings," Farrell said. "And how they'd balance the relationship to a time-cycle that kept the host species alive, yet never let it reach maturity. But what sort of principle would give an instinctive species compulsive control over an intelligent one, Gib? And what did the Bees get out of the arrangement in the first place?"

Gibson shrugged. "We'll understand the principle when--or if--we learn how the wasp holds its spider helpless. Until then, we can only guess. As for identifying the motive that prompted the Hymenops to set up such a balance, I doubt that we ever will. Could a termite understand why men build theaters?"

"There's a possible parallel in that," Stryker suggested. "Maybe this was the Hymenop idea of entertainment. They might have built the bridge as balconies, where they could see the show."

"It could have been a business venture," Farrell suggested. "Maybe they raised the moth larvae or pupae for the same reason we raise poultry. A sort of insectile chicken ranch."

"Or a kennel," Gibson said dryly. "Maybe they bred moths for pets, as we breed dogs."

Farrell grimaced sickly, revolted by the thought. "A pet farm? God, what a diet to feed them!"

* * * * *

Xavier came up from the galley, carrying a tray with three steaming coffee-bulbs. Farrell, still pondering the problem of balance between dominant and dominated species, found himself wondering for the thousandth time what went on in the alert positronic brain behind the mechanical's featureless face.

"What do you think, Xav?" he demanded. "What sort of motive would you say prompted the Hymenops to set up such a balance?"

"Evaluation of alien motivations, conversely," the mechanical said, finishing the Reclamations Handbook quotation which Stryker had begun much earlier, "is essentially impossible because there can be no common ground of comprehension."

It centered the tray neatly on the charting table and stood back in polite but unmenial deference while they sucked at their coffee-bulbs.

"A greater mystery to me," Xavier went on, "is the congenital restlessness that drives men from their own comfortable worlds to such dangers as you have met with here. How can I understand the motivations of an alien people? I do not even understand those of the race that built me."

The three men looked at each other blankly, disconcerted by the ancient problem so unexpectedly posed.

It was Stryker who sheepishly answered it.

"That's nothing for you to worry about, Xav," he said wryly. "Neither do we."

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Contents
THE PLOTTERS
By Alexander Blade

He came from a far planet to find some of the Earth's secrets. But Marko found other things, too--like his love for beautiful Beth.

It seemed to be the same tree that kept getting in my way. I tried to go around it but it moved with me and I ran right into it. I found myself sprawled on my back and my nose was bleeding where I had hit it against the tree. Then I got up and ran again.

I had to keep running. I didn't know why; I just had to. There was a puddle of water and I splashed through it and then slipped and fell into a thorny bush. When I got up there were scratches on my hands and face and chest.

As yet I felt no pain. That wouldn't come for a while, after I had done a lot more running. But at the moment I couldn't feel a thing.

In my conscious mind there was only a sort of grayness. I didn't know where I was, or who I was, or why I was running. I didn't know that if I ran long enough and bumped into enough trees and scratched myself often enough I would eventually feel pain. Or that out of the exertion and the pain would come awareness.

All that must have been there, but buried so deep it didn't come through. It was only instinct which kept me going.

The same tree was in my way again and this time I didn't even try to go around it. My breath was knocked out of me. After a few gasps it came back, and then I was off again.

I went up a rise and down into a hollow and tripped over roots. That time I didn't fall. I went up the other side of the hollow with the wind whistling in my ears. A few drops of rain fell. There were flashes of lightning in the sky.

Wet leaves whipped against my face and there was a crack of thunder so close that it shook me. I ran away from the thunder and up another rise and down into another hollow.

The wind was stronger now. It came in long blasts. Sometimes I ran with it and sometimes against it. When I ran against it I didn't make much headway, but my legs kept pumping. There was tall grass to slow me down and there were roots to trip me. There was the wind and the thunder and the lightning. And there were always trees.

And then there was a terrible flash and above me a crack that was not of thunder. Something came crashing down. It was the limb of a tree. It crashed against my chest and smashed me flat on my back and pinned me there.

One of my ribs felt broken. It jabbed into me as I fought to raise this weight from my chest, and this was a pain I could feel.

This was something that hurt as nothing had ever hurt me before. This was excruciating. But it was the pain that cut through the grayness of my mind, and because of that I welcomed it.

With the pain would come knowledge. I would know who I was and why I was running. Already there were figures racing across the blankness. There were faces and there were names: Ristal, Kresh, Marko, Copperd, Beth.

I was Marko. I knew that much already. Beth was the golden girl. Somehow I knew that too. But who were the others?

It wasn't coming fast enough. I couldn't find the connections. There was only one way to bring it back, to bridge the gaps. I had to start somewhere, with what I knew. I had to start with myself and then bridge the gap to Beth. That was the beginning.

* * * * *

I checked with the mirror for the last time and decided that I would pass muster. As far as I could see, I looked like almost any college student.

There wasn't anything I could do about my hair. It hadn't grown at all. It was a mass of short, black ringlets that fit my head like a tight cap. But there was no use worrying about that.

Mrs. Mara came down the hall just as I was locking the door. She looked hurt when she saw me turn the key.

"You don't have to do that in my house," she said. "There's nobody would think of going into your room."

"Of course not," I said. "It's just force of habit, you know."

I smiled and hoped she would pass it off as lightly as I seemed to. The last thing in the world I wanted was to have her get suspicious and go prowling about my room. I felt easier when she smiled back at me.

"Sure. And where are you off to, now?"

"Swimming," I said. "That is, if I can get into the college pool."

"Just act like you own the place and nobody will ask you any questions," she said, and winked at me.

That was exactly the way I had figured it, but it was good to have reassurance. Theoretically, no one was supposed to use the pool who was not a member of the faculty or student body. Enforcement, however, was lax, and the chances were that nobody would ask to see my card.

Mrs. Mara and I were right. The day was hot, and the men who were supposed to be watching the entrance
were sitting in the shade of the stands and quenching their thirst with soft drinks. I walked right in, looking straight ahead.

It was a large pool, used for skating in winter, and there were stands built on three sides. Instead of going down to the locker rooms, I merely slipped out of my shirt and trousers, rolled them into a ball and dropped them beside the pool. A good many others had also worn their swim suits underneath.

Then I looked around for the girl.

* * * * *

She was down near the other end of the pool, talking to some people. As I came toward them she left the group and climbed up on the diving board.

Against her white bathing suit, her small trim figure showed golden. Her hair was almost the same color. She looked like the bathing suit models I had seen in store windows. The golden model came to life as she left the board in a high, arching dive. She hit the water with hardly a splash.

"Nice stuff, Beth," one of the men said as she swam toward them.

"Was it really, Ken?" the girl asked.

He nodded as he said it was. They began to talk about diving and swimming. The man called Ken did most of the talking. He said he wanted to show her a few things about her swimming stroke.

He jumped off the edge of the pool and swam across and then turned around and swam back. Everybody stopped what they were doing and watched him. When he clambered out he smiled in a very superior way.

"See what I mean? You've got to use your legs more."

"You splash too much," I said.

It was the only way I could think of at the moment to get into the conversation. But it got me in. Everybody was looking at me as though I were out of my mind. Ken sneered.

"Oh, I do?"

"Don't take it offensively," I said. "But you really do. Also your arm motion is not good."

* * * * *

He was so angry that it was almost funny. Now I was sorry I had spoken, because the girl might be a close friend of his and she might take offense.

"Maybe you would like to show me how it's done," Ken said hotly. "I could make it worth your while. Suppose we race two lengths. For ten dollars."

"That's not fair, Ken," the girl said.

I could see that she didn't like the way he was taking it, so that was all right. But I hesitated. I didn't have ten dollars. On the other hand, I had been watching these people swim.

It was an easy way to make ten dollars, since I had no other means of getting money. There was the hundred dollars which I had taken from a man on the road the day I came into town, but that money was gone.

"Come on," I said, and started walking to the end of the pool.

When I got there I bent and dipped one foot into the water. It was colder than the water I had been used to, and not quite as heavy, somehow. I pulled my foot out quickly and everybody laughed, except the girl.

"This isn't right," she said. She turned to me. "You don't know who Ken is, apparently."

"You are very kind," I said. I smiled at her and she smiled back. She had blue eyes.

By that time the pool had been cleared. Everybody was out of the water and standing at the edge. Ken said, "Whenever you're ready."

"I am ready now," I said. And immediately one of his friends gave the signal, "Go!"

Ken jumped in first. Then I dived in. Once in the water it did not feel so cold nor so light. I swam down to the other end and turned around and swam back. When I climbed out, Ken was just making his turn at the far end. Everyone was looking at me very strangely. Ken came out rubbing his shoulder.

"Must have pulled a muscle," he muttered.

"In that case I wouldn't think of taking your money," I told him.

"I don't believe I've seen you around before," he said. "You've got to have a card to swim here, you know."

"Well, I don't have one. So I suppose I had better go."

"Of all the cheap tricks," the girl said. "I think I'll go too. Wait for me."

I waited for her while she went to get dressed. I put on my trousers over my swimming trunks, put on my shirt and shoes and sat on a bench and waited. When she came out we started for the exit. Ken came hurrying toward us.

"I thought I was taking you home," he said, his face red with anger.

She didn't bother to reply and he put his hand on her arm. I told him to let go and he let go. Then he swung around and hit me on the jaw with all his might. I grabbed his arm with one hand and his throat with the other and threw him into the middle of the pool.
Things were going better than I expected. As we walked along, she seemed quite interested in me. I told her my name and she told me that she was Beth Copperd, the daughter of a professor at the university. I pretended that I had not known those things.

When we got to her home, which was on a tree lined street, we paused for a moment. Across the street there was a car with a man sitting in it, pretending to read a newspaper.

I knew all about that man. I knew there was another man who was watching the back of the house. If not for that I would not have had to go through this lengthy affair with Beth Copperd.

"I regret very much this trouble with your friend," I said.

"You needn't. He's had it coming for a long time." She stared at me thoughtfully. "You know, Marko, I'm a little afraid of you."

"Of me? But why?"

"Well," she hesitated, "it's hard to say. But when a man jumps into a pool and swims so much faster than one of our country's best swimmers, and then picks up that swimmer and throws him fifty feet without the slightest effort... well, that man is slightly unusual, to say the least."

"Oh, the swimming...."

I hadn't thought that what was quite ordinary for me might seem exactly the opposite to these people. I had blundered. So I tried to shrug it off, as though such things were common among my people. Which they were. But that line only dragged me deeper. This girl was no fool.

"That's what I meant, Marko. You aren't being modest. You're acting as though you're used to such feats, and take them as a matter of course. And there's your accent. I can't quite place it."

"Some day I'll tell you all about it," I said lightly. "When we know each other better."

"That's going pretty fast, isn't it?"

"Some of us have found that we don't have all the time we should like. We must go fast, or not at all."

It was a platitude, slightly jumbled, but none the less true. Beth was looking up at me. There were things she might have noticed; that my skin was uncommonly smooth, and that I hadn't even the faintest trace of whiskers.

She didn't notice those things. She was looking into my eyes. I found myself enjoying this experience.

"Will you come in for a while?" she asked slowly.

I relaxed. Everything was all right, for the present. She was taking me at face value. She liked me and I liked her. The operation was proceeding smoothly.

We walked into a large room, pleasantly furnished. On a couch opposite the doorway three men sat talking. Two others stood before them. The moment we entered, the conversation stopped abruptly.

"Beth?" said a tall, graying man. He was already stuffing papers into a bag. "Back so soon?"

He wasn't really listening for a reply and Beth didn't make one. When he had the papers in the bag he locked it, then snapped it around his wrist and put the key in his pocket.

"We'll continue this at the lab," he said to the men. "I'll be along in just a few minutes." Then he came up to us.

"I see you've replaced your blond young man," he smiled.

I knew all about this man who stood before me, with his stooped shoulders and keen eyes. Eldeth Copperd would have been surprised at the extent of my knowledge. I even knew why his government considered it wise to have several of its security agents near him at all times.

"Can't you stay a minute and get acquainted with Marko?" Beth was saying. "He's really a remarkable fellow. He can swim faster than you or I could run."

"Literally? That would be quite fast."

"Literally."

He looked at me with sudden interest and I was sorry the conversation had taken that turn. I didn't want those keen eyes examining me too closely. They might note the absence of skin porosity.

Copperd didn't notice, but I made a mental note to watch my step. And another not to go swimming again. Beth would be watching me, and if she were close enough she might see the webbing pop out between my fingers and toes when I got into the water.

"That's my father," Beth said after he and I had shaken hands and he had left. "Demands exactness. He's a scientist, you know. A physicist."

"Oh?" I said. As if I hadn't known. "Is he always this busy?"

"Busier. If he isn't working at the lab till all hours, he's working at home in his study. Or having conferences. The only time I have him alone and to myself is Sunday evening."

That was the information I had been hoping for.
Beth and I sat on the couch her father had vacated. We talked. I watched my words carefully; there were a good
many commonplace things I knew nothing about. And I didn't want any more questions about myself. Fortunately,
conversation between a young man and a young woman is much the same everywhere. I didn't have to pretend I was
interested in Beth. She was unusually attractive. And she seemed to find me so.

We talked a bit, laughed a good deal, and when I got up to leave I knew that I had done well in the initial stage.
But there was still a good deal to be done.

"May I see you tonight?" I asked. "Just a 'coke date'."

That was an expression I'd heard and had taken the trouble to make certain I understood. It seemed to be just
the thing in the present case.

"I'd like that," Beth said. "Pick me up about nine."

Her choice of time could not have been more suitable. I was out of money. There was Mrs. Mara to be paid,
and now the cost of the evening's entertainment.

Until darkness fell I could do nothing about that. So I went back to my room and read old newspapers I had
collected. I had discovered on my first day that those were the best sources of information. Those and the moving
pictures.

For one who must learn a great deal about a people in a short time there is one infallible way: watch them in
their favorite sports and relaxations. The moving pictures and the comic strips had been invaluable. In another few
weeks I could have passed anywhere.

At eight o'clock it was growing dark. I changed my shirt, put on a sport coat and left the room. Five minutes
later I was walking down a quiet street that was lined with fashionable homes.

After that it was merely a question of time. I went around the block, found that it was still too light, and went
around again, this time slowly.

There was only one man on the street on my next time around. I sized him up quickly and decided that he was
prosperous. He came on toward me. I managed to be looking the other way.

We bumped into each other and he fell. I said, "Sorry" and bent to help him up. My fingers touched his throat
in the proper places and he went limp.

Within a matter of seconds I had his wallet out of his pocket and extracted several bills. When his eyes
flickered again I was just raising him to his feet.

"All my fault," I said contritely. "Are you all right?"

"Seem to be." He was gruff, but that was all. He didn't know that for a matter of seconds he had been
unconscious.

At nine o'clock I came up the walk to the Copperd home. This time the security agent was leaning against a
tree, lighting a cigarette. I made certain that he saw my face clearly.

One upstairs window showed a light, and the faint murmur of voices drifted down. That had to be Copperd's
room. Then a porch light flashed on and Beth came out of the door. She was wearing a white dress and the overhead
light seemed to create a golden halo above her head.

I momentarily forgot about her father.

* * * * *

How much can a man learn in a few weeks? I had to be so very careful. Historical matters had to be avoided at
all costs. Contemporary affairs were fine. Philosophy was best.

Philosophy is always the best. Good and evil are present everywhere. They can be discussed in the vaguest
terms. We discussed many things in vague terms.

And yet there was a sense of intimacy which grew between us. It was hard for me to define, and after a while I
gave up trying to discover what it was. I merely enjoyed it.

When I took her home I knew that it was not fear of the dark that made her walk so close to me. The movies
had taught me a great deal about this matter of love play. Although some of it was highly exaggerated, it showed
clearly enough the drives of these people, and some of their methods of acting them out.

We were standing on the porch when I kissed Beth. It was the first time I had ever pressed my lips to those of
anyone else. My technique was good. I felt Beth respond, pressing harder against me.

My mission was on its way to completion. I felt a moment of triumph. And then suddenly, crazily, my mission
was gone from my mind. I felt only a strange exhilaration that swept over me and made my heart pound and my
head grow hot.

"What's the matter, Marko?" Beth asked as I pulled away.

I didn't know what was wrong. I didn't try to figure it out. I had to get out of there and try to regain my
equilibrium. On a mission like mine I had to keep my head.

"Shall I see you tomorrow?" I said.
"All the tomorrow's you want," Beth answered.

There was eagerness, and yet a note of regret. It was as though she instinctively knew that something was wrong. But my work had been well done; she was in too far, and I had cut her emotional line of retreat.

I saw Beth the next afternoon, and the next evening. My presence on the porch and in her home became such a common thing that the security agent hardly gave me a glance now.

Those few days passed by swiftly, and yet each hour in those days was long. I was very cautious; Beth and I kissed many times but I never allowed myself to be moved as on that first time.

Sunday loomed larger and larger, closer and closer. I was a constant and ever present guest. It was an elementary matter to get Beth to invite me for Sunday dinner. The invitation came on Saturday night, and that night when I came back to my room I called Ristal for the first time since we had arrived.

"Tomorrow," I said into the besnal. "Early evening."

"Good."

That was all we said, but it was enough. Our frequency was too high to be picked up. Still, we were taking no chances. Ristal knew precisely what I meant and he would be ready.

I had the feeling that comes when a mission is about to be completed. There was a feeling of tension, and yet for the first time in my career I had a lowering of spirits that I could not explain.

The feeling persisted until late Sunday afternoon. Then I pushed it from my mind. I dressed carefully, slipped the besnal into my inner pocket, and put my del gun in my coat pocket.

"Take your coat off," Beth said when I came in. "You ought to know there's no formality here."

"I'm really quite comfortable," I told her. "Am I late?"

"No. Just on time. Dad will be down in a moment."

He came down the stairs from his study while we were talking. He greeted me warmly, and yet I felt that this time he was scrutinizing me. All during the dinner his eyes were on me, weighing me. I felt what was coming, and as we rose from the table it came.

"I hope you won't be offended, Marko," Copperd said. "But there are some strange things about you. Do you ever shave?"

"No," I said. I looked out the window and saw it was growing darker.

"That's odd. And about your hair ... have you ever realized that every strand of it grows in a different direction? You could never comb it. Your skin is of an unusually fine texture. And when you reached for something at the table I observed strange folds of skin between your fingers. You are somehow not like the rest of us."

"Naturally," I said. It didn't matter now. It was dark enough.

"Why naturally?"

"Because," I told him, "I am a Venusian."

* * * * *

My tone was matter of fact. Yet they knew that I was not joking. Beth was staring at me, a growing fear and horror in her eyes. Her father seemed dazed by the revelation. I took the del gun from my pocket and showed it to them.

"This is a weapon strange to you. But it is effective at this range. Please don't make me use it."

"But what do you want?" Copperd asked.

"I want you to take a ride with me. In your car."

I let them put on their coats and then we walked out onto the porch and down the stairs. Across the street the security agent barely glanced at us. Then we got into Copperd's car, Beth and he in the front seat and I in the back. I told him in which direction to go.

At the outskirts of town we lost the car that was following us. I had planned this part of it perfectly. We pulled into a side road and turned off our lights. The agent went right past us.

"What is it you want of me?" Copperd said as we started up again.

"We want to have a long discussion with you about some matters on which you are an authority."

"And that's what this whole affair with me was for? So that you could get to my father!" Beth said accusingly. I saw her shoulders shake.

"Yes. Now turn off here."

We turned off the main road and followed a rutted trail onto an old farm.

The farmhouse was a wreck, but the barn still good. Our ship was in there.

The door opened as we walked toward the barn. Ristal's tall figure was framed in the doorway, and behind him stood Kresh, broad and ungainly. The others crowded up behind them.

"Good work, Marko," Ristal said. We went into the ship, which filled the whole interior of the barn.

"This is Commander Ristal, of the Venusian Intelligence," I told Copperd and Beth.
"What's your official title?" Beth asked bitterly.

"I am a special agent and language expert," I told her. Then I explained why I had brought them here.

"Our civilization is in some way far in advance of yours. As you see, we have mastered interplanetary travel. But it is essentially a peaceful civilization. Our weapons, such as we have, are of limited range and power.

"When it became known that Earth was developing monstrous weapons of aggression we realized that we must be prepared for the worst. There was only one way to discover what you already had and what you were working on. Once we arrived here we found that a man named Copperd was the prime figure in his country's atomic weapons research. It became our duty to seek him out."

"I see," Copperd grunted. "And now you expect me to reveal secrets which I am bound by oath to protect with my very life?"

"You will reveal them," Ristal told him.

I didn't like the way Ristal said that. There was a tinge of cruelty in his tone and in the sudden tightening of his lips. I hadn't ever worked with him before, or with Kresh, who was Ristal's second in command, but I didn't like the methods their manner implied. Copperd looked worried.

"I told you we were a peaceful people," I put in.

"Let me handle this," Ristal said. He pointed to a machine which stood in a corner.

"That," he explained to Copperd, "is a device which we ordinarily use in surgery and diagnosis. It has the faculty of making the nerves infinitely more sensitive to stimuli. Also to pain. Do you understand?"

"You can't use that on him!" I said. Ristal looked at me strangely.

"Of course not. But on his daughter, yes. No father likes to see his daughter suffer."

"That's out," I said flatly. "You know what our orders are."

"I know what they were. This is my own idea, Marko. Please remember that I am commander here."

I was duty bound to obey him, and I thought that I was going to obey. But as Kresh stepped toward Beth I found myself between them.

"I think that those higher up may have something to say about this," I told Ristal.

"With the information this man can give me I shall be in a position to ignore those higher up," Ristal grinned.

Kresh reached for Beth and I hit him. I knew now what Ristal had in mind. With atomic weapons he could make himself master of Venus, and of Earth. But even more important than that was the thought that he must not harm Beth.

Kresh was coming back at me. I hit him again and he went down. Then the others came piling in. There were four of them, too many for me. I fought like a madman but they overwhelmed me and held me helpless.

"Give him a shot of bental," Ristal ordered. "That ought to quiet him. Then dump him in a cabin. We'll dispose of him later."

Then Kresh was coming at me with the hypodermic needle. I felt it stab into my arm. He gave me a dose that might have killed an ordinary man.

I knew how bental worked. It was a drug that would throw me into a stupor, that would render my mind blank. Already it was taking effect. I pretended to be unconscious. Two men lifted me and carried me to a cabin, dropped me on the bunk and went out. The last thing I saw from beneath my lids was Beth being dragged toward that diabolical machine.

My senses were leaving me. I knew that I had to overcome the effects of the drug. I knew that I had to get out of that cabin. Somehow I dragged myself out of the bunk and got a porthole open. I crawled through it and dropped to the floor of the barn.

There were some loose boards and I pried them further apart and crawled out into the open. I no longer knew what I was doing; I no longer remembered Beth. I only knew that I had to run and keep on running.

My broken rib was stabbing into me like a knife. Across my chest the limb of the tree was a dead weight that crushed me. But now I knew who I was and what I was doing.

Despite the agony I managed to get my hands under the limb. I pushed up and felt it move. The pressure on my chest was gone. Inch by inch I slid out from beneath the huge branch. I staggered to my feet.

How much time had elapsed I didn't know. I was running again, but now I was running toward the dark barn. It wouldn't have taken Ristal long to get started. Maybe by now Beth was... I shut the thought from my mind.

I was a few hundred yards away when the first scream came. Through the wind and the pelting rain it came, and it chilled me more than they had done.

My chest was afame with every panting breath I took. But I ran as I had never run before. I had to get there before she screamed again. I had to stop them from doing this to her.
The barn door was locked. I got my fingers under the edge and ripped the wood away from the lock and went on through and into the ship.

None of them saw me coming. Copperd was tied in a chair, his face contorted and tears streaming down his face. Three of the men held Beth while Ristal and Kresh worked over her. The rest were watching.

They hadn't taken my del gun from me. But I couldn't use it for fear of hitting Beth. I had it out of my pocket and in my hand as I charged across the room.

* * * * *

My rush brought me into point-blank range on a line parallel with Beth's prostrate figure. At the same time her torturers wheeled about to face me, trapped for an instant in the paralysis of complete surprise. Ristal was the first to recover.

"Drop the gun, Marko," he said.

In my weakened condition, habit governed my reflexes. I almost obeyed the order. Then Ristal took a single step forward and I swung the muzzle of the gun upward again.

"You almost had me," I said. "But you are no longer in command. You and Kresh will return as prisoners, to face trial."

I hoped that he would accept the inevitable. Our crew could plead that they had done nothing except follow the orders of their commanding officer. But for Kresh and Ristal there could be no mitigating circumstances.

They would stand trial and they would receive the harshest of punishments, exile. It was a bleak outlook for them, and the bleakness was reflected in their faces. Ristal's hand flicked to his gun.

[Illustration: I pulled the trigger and a sizzling bolt of energy leaped forth]

I fired once and there was the smell of searing flesh.

"Kresh?" I asked. He looked down at the faceless figure on the floor and shook his head.

He raised his elbows, leaving his holster exposed. I nodded to one of the crewmen and he stepped forward and removed Kresh's del gun.

"Drop it on the floor," I said. "Then tear off his insignia and lock him in the forward cabin."

It was the end of the mutiny. But I felt no joy at that. My chest pained intolerably, my shoulders sagged in exhaustion. And I had failed in my mission.

Beth was all right. I went to her and tore the electrodes from her wrists and ankles and helped her to her feet. She refused to look at me, even allowing me to untie her father by myself.

"I regret that it turned out this way," I said. "Then tear off his insignia and lock him in the forward cabin."

"How could it turn out any other way?" Beth demanded suddenly. "Do you think we'd trust you now?"

Off in the night a siren wailed. I listened while another siren joined the first.

"They're already looking for you," I said. "Which shows how little chance I would have had of getting to you openly. You'd better be going now."

But as I led them to the door I knew I had to make one more attempt.

"Professor Copperd, do you think there might still be hope? We of Venus can offer much to Earth."

"Maybe there is hope," he said, and he looked brighter than I had ever seen him look. "I was reaching the point where I had no faith in the future. But now, knowing that you have solved the problems which we face.... Perhaps, if the proper arrangements were made.... But you would be risking a great deal to return. And I can assure you that for a long time Venus will be safe. So you have no reason--"

"I have a good reason for coming back," I interrupted. Taking Beth by the shoulders, I swung her about to face me.

"I love you," I said. "I started out to trick you and ended by loving you."

Then her arms were about me and her lips were on mine. I felt my face wet with her tears, and I knew that my love was returned. There were still problems to face, dangers to overcome, but they didn't matter.

"It may be a year," I said. "Perhaps two years."

"I'll be waiting. I'll be standing here, waiting for you."

Now the sirens were very close and there were searchlights sweeping the fields and the woods. I watched Beth and her father walking away and then I closed the door. I should have felt sad, but I didn't. A year or two weren't much. On this planet far from my own, I was leaving my heart, and I would return one day to redeem it.
By Irving E. Cox, Jr.

Everything was aimed at satisfying the whims of women. The popular cliches, the pretty romances, the catchwords of advertising became realities; and the compound kept the men enslaved. George knew what he had to do....

The duty bell rang and obediently George clattered down the steps from his confinement cubicle over the garage. His mother's chartreuse-colored Cadillac convertible purred to a stop in the drive.

"It's so sweet of you to come, Georgie," his mother said when George opened the door for her.

"Whenever you need me, Mummy." It was no effort at all to keep the sneer out of his voice. Deception had become a part of his character.

His mother squeezed his arm. "I can always count on my little boy to do the right thing."

"Yes, Mummy." They were mouthing a formula of words. They were both very much aware that if George hadn't snapped to attention as soon as the duty bell rang, he risked being sentenced, at least temporarily, to the national hero's corps.

Still in the customary, martyr's whisper, George's mother said, "This has been such a tiring day. A man can never understand what a woman has to endure, Georgie; my life is such an ordeal." Her tone turned at once coldly practical. "I've two packages in the trunk; carry them to the house for me."

George picked up the cardboard boxes and followed her along the brick walk in the direction of the white, Colonial mansion where his mother and her two daughters and her current husband lived. George, being a boy, was allowed in the house only when his mother invited him, or when he was being shown off to a prospective bride. George was nineteen, the most acceptable marriage age; because he had a magnificent build and the reputation for being a good boy, his mother was rumored to be asking twenty thousand shares for him.

As they passed the rose arbor, his mother dropped on the wooden seat and drew George down beside her. "I've a surprise for you, George--a new bidder. Mrs. Harper is thinking about you for her daughter."

"Jenny Harper?" Suddenly his throat was dust dry with excitement.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Georgie?"

"Whatever arrangement you make, Mummy." Jenny Harper was one of the few outsiders George had occasionally seen as he grew up. She was approximately his age, a stunning, dark-eyed brunette.

"Jenny and her mother are coming to dinner to talk over a marriage settlement." Speculatively she ran her hand over the tanned, muscle-hard curve of his upper arm. "You're anxious to have your own woman, aren't you, George?"

"So I can begin to work for her, Mummy." That, at least, was the correct answer, if not an honest one.

"And begin taking the compound every day." His mother smiled. "Oh, I know you wicked boys! Put on your dress trunks tonight. We want Jenny to see you at your best."

She got up and strode toward the house again. George followed respectfully two paces behind her. As they passed beyond the garden hedge, she saw the old business coupe parked in the delivery court. Her body stiffened in anger. "Why is your father home so early, may I ask?" It was an accusation, rather than a question.

"I don't know, Mother. I heard my sisters talking in the yard; I think he was taken sick at work."

"Sick! Some men never stop pampering themselves."

"They said it was a heart attack or--"

"Ridiculous; he isn't dead, is he? Georgie, this is the last straw. I intend to trade your father in today on a younger man." She snatched the two packages from him and stormed into the house.

Since his mother hadn't asked him in, George returned to his confinement cubicle in the garage. He felt sorry, in an impersonal way, for the husband his mother was about to dispose of, but otherwise the fate of the old man was quite normal. He had outlived his economic usefulness; George had seen it happen before. His real father had died a natural death--from strain and overwork--when George was four. His mother had since then bought four other husbands; but, because boys were brought up in rigid isolation, George had known none of them well. For the same reason, he had no personal friends.

He climbed the narrow stairway to his cubicle. It was already late afternoon, almost time for dinner. He showered and oiled his body carefully, before he put on his dress trunks, briefs made of black silk studded with seed pearls and small diamonds. He was permitted to wear the jewels because his mother's stockholdings were large enough to make her an Associate Director. His family status gave George a high marriage value and his Adonis physique kicked the asking price still higher. At nineteen he stood more than six feet tall, even without his formal, high-heeled boots. He weighed one hundred and eighty-five, not an ounce of it superfluous fat. His skin was deeply bronzed by the sunlamps in the gym; his eyes were sapphire blue; his crewcut was a platinum blond--thanks to the
peroxide wash his mother made him use.

Observing himself critically in the full-length mirror, George knew his mother was justified in asking twenty thousand shares for him. Marriage was an essential part of his own plans; without it revenge was out of his reach. He desperately hoped the deal would be made with Jenny Harper. A young woman would be far less difficult for him to handle.

When the oil on his skin was dry, he lay down on his bunk to catch up on his required viewing until the duty bell called him to the house. The automatic circuit snapped on the television screen above his bunk; wearily George fixed his eyes on the unreeling love story.

For as long as he could remember, television had been a fundamental part of his education. A federal law required every male to watch the TV romances three hours a day. Failure to do so—and that was determined by monthly form tests mailed out by the Directorate—meant a three month sentence to the national hero's corps. If the statistics periodically published by the Directorate were true, George was a relatively rare case, having survived adolescence without serving a single tour of duty as a national hero. For that he indirectly thanked his immunity to the compound. Fear and guilt kept him so much on his toes, he grew up an amazingly well-disciplined child.

George was aware that the television romances were designed to shape his attitudes and his emotional reactions. The stories endlessly repeated his mother's philosophy. All men were pictured as beasts crudely dominated by lust. Women, on the other hand, were always sensitive, delicate, modest, and intelligent; their martyrdom to the men in their lives was called love. To pay for their animal lusts, men were expected to slave away their lives earning things—kitchen gadgets, household appliances, fancy cars, luxuries and stockholdings—for their patient, long-suffering wives.

And it's all a fake! George thought. He had seen his Mother drive two men to their graves and trade off two others because they hadn't produced luxuries as fast as she demanded. His mother and his pinch-faced sisters were pampered, selfish, rock-hard Amazons; by no conceivable twist of imagination could they be called martyrs to anything.

That seemed self-evident, but George had no way of knowing if any other man had ever reasoned out the same conclusion. Maybe he was unique because of his immunity to the compound. He was sure that very few men—possibly none—had reached marriage age with their immunity still undiscovered.

George was lucky, in a way: he knew the truth about himself when he was seven, and he had time to adjust to it—to plan the role he had been acting for the past twelve years. His early childhood had been a livid nightmare, primarily because of the precocious cruelty of his two sisters. Shortly before his seventh birthday they forced him to take part in a game they called cocktail party. The game involved only one activity: the two little girls filled a glass with an unidentified liquid, and ordered George to drink. Afterward, dancing up and down in girlish glee, they said they had given him the compound.

George had seen the love stories on television; he knew how he was expected to act. He gave a good performance—better than his sisters realized, for inside his mind George was in turmoil. They had given him the compound (true, years before he should have taken it), and nothing had happened. He had felt absolutely nothing; he was immune! If anyone had ever found out, George would have been given a life sentence to the national hero's corps; or, more probably, the Morals Squad would have disposed of him altogether.

From that day on, George lived with guilt and fear. As the years passed, he several times stole capsules of the compound from his mother's love-cabinet and gulped them down. Sometimes he felt a little giddy, and once he was sick. But he experienced no reaction which could possibly be defined as love. Not that he had any idea what that reaction should have been, but he knew he was supposed to feel very wicked and he never did.

Each failure increased the agony of guilt; George drove himself to be far better behaved than he was required to be. He dreaded making one mistake. If his mother or a Director examined it too closely, they might find out his real secret.

George's basic education began when he was assigned to his confinement room above the garage after his tenth birthday. Thereafter his time was thoroughly regulated by law. Three hours a day he watched television; three hours he spent in his gym, building a magnificent—and salable—body; for four hours he listened to the educational tapes. Arithmetic, economics, salesmanship, business techniques, accounting, mechanics, practical science: the things he had to know in order to earn a satisfactory living for the woman who bought him in marriage.

He learned nothing else and as he grew older he became very conscious of the gaps in his education. For instance, what of the past? Had the world always been this sham he lived in? That question he had the good sense not to ask.

But George had learned enough from his lessons in practical science to guess what the compound really was, what it had to be: a mixture of aphrodisiacs and a habit-forming drug. The compound was calculated to stir up a
man's desire to the point where he would give up anything in order to satisfy it. Boys were given increased doses
during their adolescence; by the time they married, they were addicts, unable to leave the compound alone.

George couldn't prove his conclusion. He had no idea how many other men had followed the same line of
reasoning and come up with the same answer. But why was George immune? There was only one way he could
figure it: it must have happened because his sisters gave him the first draft when he was seven. But logically that
didn't make much sense.

Bachelors were another sort of enemy: men who shirked their duty and deserted their wives. It seemed
unreasonable to believe a man could desert his wife, when first he had to break himself of addiction to the
compound. George had always supposed that bachelor was a boogy word contrived to frighten growing children.

As a consequence, he was very surprised when the house next door was raided. Through the window of his
confinement cubicle, he actually saw the five gray-haired men who were rounded up by the Morals Squad. The
Squad—which had six-foot Amazons—tried to question their captives. They used injections of a truth serum.
Two of the old men died at once. The others went berserk, frothing at the mouth and screaming animal profanity
until the Squad captain ordered them shot.

George overheard one of the women say, "It's always like this. They take something so our serum can't be
effective."

Later that afternoon George found a scrap of paper in his mother's garden. It had blown out of the bonfire
which the Morals Squad made of the papers they took out of the house next door. The burned page had apparently
been part of an informational bulletin, compiled by the bachelors for distribution among themselves.

"... data compiled from old publications," the fragment began, "and interpreted by our most reliable
authorities." At that point a part of the page was burned away. "... and perhaps less than ninety years ago men and
women lived in equality. The evidence on that point is entirely conclusive. The present matriarchy evolved by
accident, not design. Ninety years ago entertainment and advertising were exclusively directed at satisfying a
woman's whim. No product was sold without some sort of tie-in with women. Fiction, drama, television, motion
pictures—all glorified a romantic thing called love. In that same period business was in the process of taking over
government from statesmen and politicians. Women, of course, were the stockholders who owned big business,
although the directors and managers at that time were still men—operating under the illusion that they were the
executives who represented ownership. In effect, however, women owned the country and women governed it;
this is the matriarchy. There is no evidence that it was imposed; there is no suggestion of civil strife or...."

More words burned away. "However, the women were not unwilling to consolidate their gains. Consequently the
popular cliches, the pretty romances, and the catchwords of advertising became a substitute for reality. As for the
compound...."

There the fragment ended. Much of it George did not understand. But it gave him a great deal of courage
simply to know the bachelors actually existed. He began to plan his own escape to a bachelor hideout. He would
have no opportunity, no freedom of any sort, until he married. Every boy was rigidly isolated in his confinement
cubicle, under the watchful eye of his mother's spy-cameras, until he was bought in his first marriage.

Then, as he thought more about it, George realized there was a better way for him to use his immunity. He
couldn't be sure of finding a bachelor hideout before the Morals Squad tracked him down. But George could force
his bride to tell him where the compound was made, since he was not an addict and she could not use the compound
to enslave him. Once he knew the location of the factory, he would destroy it. How, he wasn't sure; he didn't plan
that far ahead. If the supply of the drug could be interrupted, many hundreds of men might be goaded into making a
break for the hills.

* * * * *

The duty bell rang. George snapped to attention on the edge of his bunk. He saw his mother waving from the
back door of her house.

"I'll be down right away, Mummy."

His mother was waiting for him in the pantry. Under the glaring overhead light he stopped for her last minute
inspection. She used a pocket-stick to touch up a spot on his chest where the oil gleam had faded a little. And she
gave him a glass of the compound to drink.

"Jenny really wants to marry you, George," she confided. "I know the symptoms; half our battle's won for us.
And my former husband won't be around to worry us with his aches and pains. I made the trade this afternoon."

He followed her into the dining room where the cocktails were being served. Aside from the Harpers, George's
mother had rented two handsome, muscular escorts for his sisters. In the confusion, George saw Jenny Harper's
mother stealthily lace his water glass with a dose of the compound. He suppressed a grin. Apparently she was
anxious to complete the deal, too.

George found it almost impossible to hold back hilarious laughter when Jenny herself shyly pressed a capsule
of the compound into his hand and asked him to use it. Three full-size slugs of the drug! George wondered what would have happened if he hadn't been immune. Fortunately, he knew how to act the lusty, eager, drooling male which each of the women expected.

The negotiations moved along without a hitch. George's mother held out for twenty-eight thousand shares, and got it. The only problem left was the date for the wedding, and Jenny settled that very quickly. "I want my man, Mom," she said, "and I want him now."

Jenny always got what she wanted.

When she and her mother left that evening, she held George's hand in hers and whispered earnestly, "So they were married and lived happily ever after. That's the way it's going to be with us, isn't it, George?"

"It's up to you, Jenny; for as long as you want me."

That was the conventional answer which he was expected to make, but he saw unmasked disappointment in her face. She wanted something more genuine, with more of himself in it. He felt suddenly sorry for her, for the way he was going to use her. She was a pretty girl, even sweet and innocent--if those words still had any real meaning left after what his mother's world had done to them. Under other circumstances, George would have looked forward with keen pleasure to marrying Jenny. As it was, Jenny Harper was first a symbol of the fakery he intended to destroy, and after that a woman.

* * * * *

Five days later they were married. In spite of the short engagement, Mrs. Harper and George's mother managed to put on a splendid show in the church. George received a business sedan from his mother, the traditional gift given every bridegroom; and from Mrs. Harper he received a good job in a company where she was the majority stockholder. And so, in the customary pageantry and ceremony, George became Mr. Harper.

"Think of it--Mr. Harper," Jenny sighed, clinging to his arm. "Now you're really mine, George."

On the church steps the newlyweds posed for photographs--George in the plain, white trunks which symbolized a first marriage; Jenny in a dazzling cloud of fluff, suggestively nearly transparent. Then Mrs. Harper drew Jenny aside and whispered in her daughter's ear: the traditional telling of the secret. Now Jenny knew where the compound was manufactured; and for George revenge was within his grasp.

George's mother had arranged for their honeymoon at Memory Lodge, a resort not far from the Directorate capital in Hollywood. It was the national capital as well, though everyone conscientiously maintained the pretense that Washington, with an all-male Congress, still governed the country. George considered himself lucky that his mother had chosen Memory Lodge. He had already planned to desert Jenny in the mountains.

George knew how to drive; his mother had wanted him to do a great deal of chauffeuring for her. But he had never driven beyond town, and he had never driven anywhere alone. His mother gave him a map on which his route to the lodge was indicated in bright red. In the foothills George left the marked highway on a paved side road.

He gambled that Jenny wouldn't immediately realize what he had done, and the gamble paid off. Still wearing her nearly transparent wedding gown, she pressed close to him and ran her hands constantly over his naked chest, thoroughly satisfied with the man she had bought. In the church George had been given a tall glass of the compound; he acted the part Jenny expected.

But it was far less a role he played than George wanted to admit. His body sang with excitement. He found it very difficult to hold the excitement in check. If he had been addicted to the compound, it would have been out of the question. More than ever before he sympathized with the men who were enslaved by love. In spite of his own immunity, he nearly yielded to the sensuous appeal of her caress. He held the wheel so hard his knuckles went white; he clenched his teeth until his jaw ached.

All afternoon George drove aimless mountain roads, moving deeper into the uninhabited canyons. Carefully judging his distances with an eye on the map, he saw to it that he remained relatively close to the city; after he forced Jenny to give him the information he wanted, he wanted to be able to get out fast.

By dusk the roads he drove were no longer paved. Ruts carved deep by spring rains suggested long disuse. The swaying of the car and the constant grinding of gears eventually jolted Jenny out of her romantic dreams. She moved away from George and sat looking at the pines which met above the road.

"We're lost, aren't we?" she asked.

"What's that?" he shouted to be heard above the roar of the motor.

"Lost!"

For a minute or two longer he continued to drive until he saw an open space under the trees. He pulled the car into the clearing and snapped off the ignition. Then he looked Jenny full in the face and answered her. "No, Jenny, we aren't lost; I know exactly what I'm doing."

"Oh." He was sure she had understood him, but she said, "We can spend the night here and find the lodge in the morning. It's a pity we didn't bring something to eat." She smiled ingenuously. "But I brought the compound; and we
They got out of the car. Jenny looked up at the sunset, dull red above the trees, and shivered; she asked George to build a fire. He tucked the ignition key into the band of his white trunks and began to gather dry boughs and pine needles from the floor of the forest. He found several large branches and carried them back to the clearing. There was enough wood to last until morning--whether he stayed that long or not. Jenny had lugged the seats and a blanket out of the car and improvised a lean-to close to the fire.

He piled on two of the larger branches and the bright glow of flame lit their faces. She beckoned to him and gave him a bottle of the compound, watching bright-eyed as he emptied it.

With her lips parted, she waited. He did nothing. Slowly the light died in her eyes. Like a savage she flung herself into his arms. He steeled himself to show absolutely no reaction and finally she drew away. Trembling and with tears in her eyes, she whispered, "The compound doesn't--" The look of pain in her eyes turned to terror. "You're immune!"

"Now you know."
"But who told you--" She searched his face, shaking her head. "You don't know, do you--not really?"
"Know what?"

Instead of replying, she asked, "You brought me here deliberately, didn't you?"
"So we wouldn't be interrupted. You see, Jenny, you're going to tell me where the compound's made."
"It wouldn't do you any good. Don't you see--" He closed his hands on her wrists and jerked her rudely to her feet. He saw her face go white. And no wonder: that magnificent, granite hard body, which she had bought in good faith for her own pleasure, was suddenly out of her control. He grinned. He crushed her mouth against his and kissed her. Limp in his arms, she clung to him and said in a choked, husky whisper, "I love you, George."

"And you'll make any sacrifice for love," he replied, mocking the dialogue of the television love stories.
"Yes, anything!"
"Then tell me where the compound's manufactured."
"Hold me close, George; never let me go."

How many times had he heard that particular line! It sickened him, hearing it now from Jenny; he had expected something better of her. He pushed her from him. By accident his fist raked her face. She fell back blood trickling from her mouth. In her eyes he saw shock and a vague sense of pain; but both were overridden by adoration. She was like a whipped puppy, ready to lick his hand.

"I'll tell you, George," she whispered. "But don't leave me." She pulled herself to her feet and stood beside him, reaching for his hand. "We make it in Hollywood, in the Directorate Building, the part that used to be a sound stage."

"Thanks, Jenny." He picked up one of the car seats and walked back to the sedan. She stood motionless watching him. He fitted the seat in place and put the key in the lock. The starter ground away, but the motor did not turn over.

He glanced back at Jenny. She was smiling inscrutably, "You see, George, you have to stay with me."

He got out of the car and moved toward her.

"I was afraid you were planning to desert me," she went on, "so I took out the distributor cap while you were getting the firewood."

He stood in front of her. Coldly he demanded, "Where did you put it, Jenny?"

She tilted her lips toward his. "Kiss and tell--maybe."

"I haven't time for games. Where is it?"

His fist shot out. Jenny sprawled on the ground at his feet. Again he saw the pain and the adoration in her face. But that couldn't be right. She would hate him by this time.

He yanked her to her feet. Her lips were still bleeding and blood came now from a wound in her cheek. Yet she managed to smile again.

"I don't want to hurt you, Jenny," he told her. "But I have to have--"

"I love you, George. I never thought I'd want to give myself to a man. All the buying doesn't make any difference, does it? Not really. And I never knew that before!"

With an unconscious movement, she kicked her train aside and he saw the distributor cap lying beneath it. He picked it up. She flung herself at him screaming. He felt the hammer beat of her heart; her fingers dug into his back like cat claws. Now it didn't matter. He had the secret; he could go whenever he wanted to. Nonetheless he pushed her away--tenderly, and with regret. To surrender like this was no better than a capitulation to the compound. It was instinctively important to make her understand that. He knew that much, but his emotions were churned too close to fever pitch for him to reason out what else that implied.

He clipped her neatly on the jaw and put her unconscious body on the ground by the fire. He left the map with...
her so she could find her way out in the morning; he knew it was really a very short hike to a highway, where she
would be picked up by a passing car or truck.

* * * * *

He drove out the way he had come in—at least he tried to remember. Four times he took a wrong turn and had
to backtrack. It was, therefore, dawn before he reached the outskirts of Hollywood. In any other city he would not
have been conspicuous—simply a man on his way to work; only women slept late. However, Hollywood was off-
limits to every male. The city was not only the seat of the Directorate, but the manufacturing center for the cosmetics
industry. And since that gave women her charm, it was a business no man worked at.

George had to have a disguise. He stopped on a residential street, where the people were still likely to be in
their beds. He read names on mail boxes until he found a house where an unmarried woman lived. He had no way of
knowing if she had a husband on approval with her, but the box was marked "Miss." With any luck he might have
got what he wanted without disturbing her, but the woman was a light sleeper and she caught him as he was putting
on the dress. He was sorry he had to slug her, but she gave him no resistance. A spark of hope, a spark of long-
forgotten youth glowed in her eyes; before she slid into unconsciousness.

Wearing the stolen dress, which fit him like a tent, and an enormous hat to hide his face, George parked his
sedan near the Directorate and entered the building when it opened at eight. In room after room automatons
demonstrated how to dress correctly; robot faces displayed the uses of cosmetics. There were displays of kitchen
gadgets, appliances, and other heavy machinery for the home; recorded lectures on stock management and market
control. Here women came from every part of the country for advice, help and guidance. Here the Top Directors met
to plan business policy, to govern the nation, and to supervise the production of the compound. For only the Top
Directors—less than a dozen women—actually knew the formula. Like their stockholdings, the secret was hereditary,
passed from mother to daughter.

George searched every floor of the building, but found nothing except exhibit rooms. Time passed, and still he
did not find what he had come for. More and more women crowded in to see the exhibits. Several times he found
new-comers examining him oddly; he found he had to avoid the crowds.

Eventually he went down steps into the basement, though a door marked "Keep Out." The door was neither
locked nor guarded, but there was a remote chance it might lead to the production center for the compound. In the
basement George found a mechanical operation underway; at first he took it for another cosmetic exhibit. Conveyor
belts delivered barrels of flavoring syrup, alcohol and a widely advertised liquid vitamin compound. Machines sliced
open the containers, dumping the contents into huge vats, from which pipes emptied the mixture into passing rows
of bottles.

The bottles: suddenly George recognized them and the truth dawned on him, sickeningly. Here was the
manufacturing center for the compound—but it might just as well have been a barn in Connecticut or a store window
in Manhattan. No man was enslaved by the compound, for the compound did not exist. He was imprisoned by his
own sense of guilt, his own fear of being different. George remembered his own fear and guilt: he knew how much a
man could be driven to make himself conform to what he thought other men were like.

His revenge was as foolish as the sham he wanted to destroy. He should have reasoned that out long ago; he
should have realized it was impossible to have immunity to an addictive drug. But, no, George believed what he saw
on the television programs. He was victimized as much as any man had ever been.

He turned blindly toward the stairway, and from the shadows in the hall the Morals Squad closed in around
him. With a final gesture of defiance, he ripped off the stolen dress and the absurd hat, and stood waiting for the
blast from their guns. An old woman, wearing the shoulder insignia of a Top Director, pushed through the squad and
faced him, a revolver in her hand. She was neither angry nor disturbed. Her voice, when she spoke, was filled with
pity. Pity! That was the final indignity.

"Now you know the truth," she said. "A few men always have to try it; and we usually let them see this room
and find out for themselves before—before we close the case."

Tensely he demanded, "Just how much longer do you think—"

"We can get away with this? As long as men are human beings. It's easier to make yourself believe a lie if you
think everyone else believes it, than to believe a truth you've found out on your own. All of us want more than
anything else to be like other people. Women have created a world for you with television programs; you grow up
observing nothing else; you make yourself fit into the pattern. Only a few independent-minded characters have the
courage to accept their own immunity; most of them end up here, trying to do something noble for the rest of
mankind. But you have one satisfaction, for what it's worth: you've been true to yourself."

True to yourself. George found a strange comfort in the words, and his fear was gone. He squared his shoulders
and faced the mouth of her gun. True to yourself: that was something worth dying for.

He saw a flicker of emotion in the old woman's eyes. Admiration? He couldn't be sure. For at the moment a
shot rang out from the end of the corridor; and the Top Director fell back, nursing a hand suddenly bright with blood.

"Let him go." It was Jenny's voice. She was sheltered by a partly open door at the foot of the stairway.

"Don't be a fool," the old woman replied. "He's seen too much."

"It doesn't matter. Who would believe him?"

"You're upset. You don't realize--"

"He's mine and I want him."

"The Directorate will give you a refund of the purchase price."

"You didn't understand me. I don't want one of your pretty automatons; anybody can buy them for a few shares of stock. I want a man--a real man; I want to belong to him."

"He belongs to you; you bought him."

"And that's what's wrong. We really belong to each other."

The old woman glanced at George and he saw the same flicker of feeling in her eyes. And tears, tears of regret.

Why? "We have you outnumbered," the old woman said quietly to Jenny.

"I don't care. I have a gun; I'll use it as long as I'm able."

The Morals Squad raised their weapons. The Director shook her head imperiously and they snapped to attention again. "If you take him from us," she called out to Jenny, "you'll be outlawed. We'll hunt you down, if we can."

"I want him," Jenny persisted. "I don't care about the rest of it."

The old woman nodded to George. He couldn't believe that she meant it. The Director was on her home ground, in her headquarters building, backed by an armed squad of stone-faced Amazons. She had no reason to let him go.

She walked beside him as he moved down the hall. When they were twenty feet from the guard, she closed her thin hand on his arm; her eyes swam with tears and she whispered, "There truly is a love potion. Not this nonsense we bottle here, but something real and very worthwhile. You and this girl have found it. I know that, from the way she talks. She doesn't say anything about ownership, and that's as it should be. As it has to be, for any of us to be happy. Hold tight to that all the rest of your life. Don't ever believe in words; don't fall for any more love stories; believe what you feel deep inside--what you know yourself to be true.

"You men who learn how to break away are our only hope, too. Most of us don't see that yet. I do; I know what it used to be like. Someday there may be enough men with the stamina to take back the place of dominance that we stole from them. We thought we wanted it; for decades before we had been screaming about women's rights." Her thin lips twisted in a sneer and she spat her disgust. "Finally we took what we wanted, and it turned to ashes in our hands. We made our men playthings; we made them slaves. And after that they weren't men any more. But what we stole isn't the sort of thing you can hand back on a silver platter; you men have to get enough courage to take it away from us."

Her grip tightened on his arm. "There's a fire door at the end of the hall; if you push the emergency button, you'll close it. That will give you a five or ten minute start. I can't help you any more..."

They were abreast of Jenny. She seized Jenny's hand and thrust it into his. "Beat it, kids; there's a bachelor camp on the north ridge. You can make it."

"And from here on in, what he says goes," the old woman added. "Don't forget that."

"She won't," George answered, supremely self-assured.

He took Jenny's arm and, turning abruptly, they made their break for freedom. The Director managed to remain standing in the middle of the corridor, making a dangerous target of herself so that none of the Morals Squad could risk a shot at the fugitives. As the fire door clanged shut George looked back. He saw the old woman's lips moving in silent prayer.
THE TRAP
By Betsy Curtis

She had her mind made up--the one way they'd make her young again was over her dead body!

Old Miss Barbara Noble twitched aside the edge of the white scrim curtain to get a better look at the young man coming down the street. He might be the one.

The young man bent a little under the weight of the battered black suitcase as he crossed Maple and started up Prospect on Miss Noble's side. She could see him set the case down on the wide porch of the Raney house and wipe his forehead with a handkerchief. Then she lost sight of him as he advanced to the door. He could be a visitor to the Raney's, but they were out of town on vacation. He could be a salesman.

Miss Barbara shifted her rocker to the other side of the window where she could watch without having to disturb the curtain. This second-floor sitting room made an excellent lookout. She quickly scanned the street in the other direction, but there was no sign of movement in the hot sunlight. She settled down to watch the black suitcase sitting uncommunicatively at the edge of the porch.

It must have been all of two minutes before the young man appeared from under the over-hanging roof and picked up the case. A persistent fellow. He went down to the sidewalk and approached her own house, came up on her own front doorstep, tried to set the case down on the narrow stoop, couldn't, straightened up and rang the bell. A raucous buzz filled the sitting room.

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Barbara Noble leaned toward the window, pulled back the curtain a scant inch, and studied his back as he looked at the windows on the other side of the front door. Limp yellow hair and a big perspiration stain in the middle of a dark sport shirt were her chief impressions. He could be a bona fide salesman working hard at it. She wouldn't let him in, of course; but she felt a little sorry for him lugging that big case around in this weather. Then he turned and looked straight at the window behind which she was hiding, and she let the curtain go suddenly. Had he seen it move? The buzzer sounded again, imperiously.

Miss Barbara got up stiffly, moved to the big vizer screen in the nearest corner, and switched it on. The man might have something interesting and she couldn't get out to shop the way she used to. She smoothed her lilac housedress and left the room to descend the stairs to the front door.

In the tiny front hall she hesitated, then opened the door inward about eight inches. Deftly the man stuck the broad brown toe of his shoe into the opening and looked down at her. She grinned as she saw his expression of shock.

She was old, really old. Her sparse white hair was pulled so tightly into a knob on top of her head that the plentiful wrinkles on her forehead and around her eyes seemed to run vertically, giving her an oriental look. The hand she rested on the door jamb was a waxy-white claw, a blue vein standing up prominently under the skin tight-drawn over gnarly finger joints. He had probably never seen a woman much past middle age.

"Well?" Her croak was high and rough.

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The young man recovered himself and began his spiel. "Madame, I represent one of the best-known and most reputable firms in the country. Our products have received three international medals for purity and effective performance. They...."

"What are you selling, young man?"

"I have the privilege of being a field representative for Taffeta Beauty Aids. Please accept this generous ten-ounce bottle of our Diamond Dew Refreshes Lotion...." He reached into his side pocket and brought it out, offered it with the most appreciative smile, his 'you hardly need this' smile.

Her hand did not reach out. "I don't want any. Goodbye!" The door tightened against his foot.

"But madame," his foot did not budge and his smile became both engaging and pleading, "all I ask is a chance to show you our line. Our products sell themselves. Besides, I'm paid on a demonstration basis--so much for every potential customer who receives our free sample and so much for every home demonstration. You wouldn't want me to lose two-fifty when it would take only six and a third minutes of your time exactly to look over one of the most amazing displays ever...."

"Well, I don't know...."

"I know you'll enjoy watching our Tissue Cleanser in action and seeing the new simplicity of our Home Re-
...." (oops, he'd almost said it) "... Hair Relustrification Kit. I promise you that your few minutes won't be wasted."

"Yours would be, young man. I don't buy that stuff."

"You may be one of the lucky few women who don't need our products, but I don't think you can say that before you've seen them."

"I never did see such persistence, honest to goodness!" Her face assumed a crabbed smile. "Come along then."

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She moved back from the door into the darkness of the house; and the salesman shifted his case back to his left hand, pushed the front door wide and took a quick long step inside. He was just in time to hear the slight click of the closing of a second door in front of him. He reached for the knob, turned it; but the door was locked. The outside door still stood open, caught by the end of the sample case.

The July daylight from outside showed him that he was in a tiny entrance hall not more than forty inches each way. He pulled the case in and by squeezing against the inner door allowed the front door to close. Anyhow, he was inside the house. He rapped sharply on the inner door.

The latch on the front door snapped to and instantly the hall was flooded with light from a tremendous bulb in the ceiling, which, surprisingly, was twenty feet above him.

A harsh voice, tinny with tremendous amplification but unmistakably that of the old woman, filled the hall, "ALL RIGHT, YOUNG MAN. I HAVE THE VIZER TURNED ON YOU. LET'S SEE THE DEMONSTRATION. I BELIEVE YOU SAID SIX MINUTES. GET ON WITH IT."

Screening his eyes with his fingers, the salesman scanned the walls and ceiling for the vizer lens, found it beside the five-hundred watt bulb pouring blindingly down on him, on the other side of a speaker grille.

"C-certainly, madame." What a layout. As he automatically laid his case on the floor and opened back the top against the front door, his eyes searched the walls for indications of openings which might mean unexpected defenses such as anesthetic tanks. The only breaks in the two smooth white plaster surfaces which he could see as he squatted before the case were a horizontal row of glass bosses on each side at about the height of his knees.

"Now, since my face," he closed his eyes and flashed a toothy smile, like a video actor, up at the vizer lens, "is subjected to the daily care of Taffeta Products," he turned his face down to the case and gritted his teeth, "I must smear facial muscle softener into the left half to show the action and appearance of muscles which have lost their tonus." He whipped the cover off a small ivorine jar and rubbed his cheek vigorously with a brownish salve. "You will note that this softener also contains a percentage of grime which lodges in the pores."

He heard a gasp from the speaker grille when he displayed a face whose left cheek and brow were sagged, wrinkled and hideously brown speckled. From somewhere behind the gasp, he heard a continuous tinkle of tiny bells.

His hands moved among the bottles and jars, raised a round silver box which he held up. "The delicately perfumed applicator pads for all applications of Taffeta Preparations are pre-saturated with Firmol Tone Charger. I dip the pad into this solution of Enhancing Hyssop," he did so, "and work it gently into the pores. The results are instantaneous!" He turned up his original video star appearance.

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While bending his body forward to reach the articles strapped to the top of the case, he noticed that the tone of the distant bells was raised. Screwing a circular hairbrush to the thread of a collapsible tube, he sank back on his haunches. The bell tones were lower. He placed a hand on one of the glass bosses nearest the inner door, apparently to steady himself. An even lower tone was added to the bell notes. Obviously electric eyes with a set of bell signals in the old woman's present location. He smiled down at the floor--to himself.

[Illustration]

"Now I want you to notice closely this object which I will show you." He held up the brush with the tube screwed on its back and turned it about. "Do you know what this is?"

There was no answer from the speaker but its own hum and the tinkle of the bells. "What does it look like?" He spoke rapidly, pleasantly. There was still no answer.

He rose quickly and tried the knob of the inner door again. He could hear the bell notes lower in pitch as he pressed against the door.

"LET ME SEE THE THING AGAIN, YOUNG MAN. HONEST TO GOODNESS, WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE WHETHER OR NOT I KNOW WHAT IT IS? IT LOOKS LIKE A HAIRBRUSH WITH SOME DO-JIGGER ON THE TOP."

He jumped back to the center of the hall. "This brush is the essential feature of our sensational Hair Relustrifier Kit. The tube screwed to the top feeds the specially developed Brilliancette directly through each hollow bristle to reach every part of the hair." He ran or rather scrubbed the brush through the right side of his long fair pompadour with small rotary motions. When he removed the brush, that side of his head was covered with crisp yellow ringlets.
which shone under the light like sculptured gold.

"THAT'S SOME SORT OF A TRICK! DO IT ON THE OTHER...." Her voice was interrupted by a syncopated clicking. A telephone signal. "JUST A MOMENT, YOUNG MAN." The hum of the speaker cut off and the sudden silence seemed full of the echoes of the bells.

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Instantly the man dropped the gadget into the case and grabbed a handful of cleansing tissues from a box in it. He snapped down the top of the case and whipped the straps through the buckles. Then he shoved the case against one of the side walls and sat on it to flip off his shoes and socks. Shoving his back tightly against the wall, he bent his knees up and pushed his bare feet flat against the other. After placing the wad of tissues in his lap, he put his hands against the wall below his buttocks and, like an experienced mountain climber, inched his way rapidly up the 'chimney' of the hall. When his head touched the ceiling, he braced himself firmly with his left hand and reached with his right for the tissues in his lap. Protecting his hand with several of the white papers, he felt above him for the base of the light bulb, unscrewed it, and dropped it gently onto the rest of the tissues still in his lap. The sudden blackness was smothering.

Heat seeped through the tissues more rapidly than he had expected; and the effort to keep his knees from contracting and spilling him in the utter darkness to the floor fifteen feet below was agony.

When he finally reached the floor, he placed the bulb on it beside the sample case. Then he opened the front door and closed it again, leaving the door caught open a fraction of an inch by the latch against the frame. Taking an anesthetic cartridge out of his pants pocket, he broke the seal, taking care not to trigger it, and returned to his crevice-climbing posture. He lifted himself again above the row of electric eyes and waited, cartridge in hand, leg muscles cramping painfully.

* * * * *

After Miss Noble had turned off the speakphone, she pulled herself away from the fascinating view of golden curls and scuttled over to a stiff ladder-back chair beside the telephone stand. She lifted the antique cradle phone (none of these modern invasions of privacy like the vizerphone) and spoke warily into the mouthpiece.

"Who is it? What do you want?"

"Barbara?" A man's voice was urgent.

"This is Miss Noble speaking," she replied haughtily.

The voice was savage. "Well, this is Doctor Harris, then. Have you looked at the mail today? I got my directors' meeting notice this morning."

"Yes, I got one. The fifth of August," she said impatiently.

"And this seems to be our year. There's been a girl here already this morning with some story about my having advertised for a housekeeper. She told it to the doorphone and wouldn't leave when I said I didn't want anybody--but it only took one drop of skunk oil in the hallway to send her packing."

"Blonde or brunette?"

"Blonde--and really young, not a damn rejuvenee!"

"Rod Harris! You actually went and peeked at her, you old goat!"

"Only through the one-way."

"Well, since the company knows that a pretty girl is still good bait for an old ninny, you're as good as a goner. They'll have you rejuvenated before long."

"They won't get a chance! And I'm going to get old enough so I can't even lift a hand to thumb my nose at the company. Then I'm going to go and die and the Juvine Perpetual Youth Corporation will scream in agony as it disbands and makes public property of its hallowed formulas as per the original articles of incorporation ... and you will probably get a new set of false teeth and take the treatment again since you could get it real cheap when the monopoly's finished and not have to disturb your millions salted away in the sugar bowl."

This mixture of facetiousness and downright sarcasm was only surpassed by Miss Noble, who snapped back, "Don't you sneer at me, Doctor Roland Harris, when you know perfectly well that the only reason I have to go on living this long is to make sure that you are really dead first. You didn't invent rejuvenation all by yourself without the aid of Barbara Noble, Ph.D., and the company has the sole right to the process until we're both dead. And, if you start peeking at plump blonde wenches at this point, I suppose I'll have to live till Los Alamos freezes over!"

All right, all right. But she wasn't plump. She wasn't any bigger than you are. Besides, you know I'd rather have dinner with you. My man Marko could give us roast beef with all the fixings and afterward I want you to hear my latest discovery. It's the best damn extempore-singer you've ever heard, Jeery Wade--fellow in his first late fifties, no fluff-brain of a juvenee--a blood and thunder baritone that'll lift that knob of hair clean off your scalp. Let's say you get here about six-thirty and I'll phone him we'll be over at his place for a session of hollering about
Miss Noble's scorn needed no vizer to carry it over the wire in full force. "I'm not going to budge out of this house until after the director's meeting and then only if the shops stop all delivery service. This time I'm not taking any chances. Life is too much of a bore to have to put up with it for another eighty years even for your marvelous singer who would probably go and get rejuvenated just as I got to enjoy him. And nothing could induce me to listen to an evening of your stories for the nine hundredth time. If there's one thing I'm thankful for in this scatter-brained age, it's the marriage dissolution law that's got me free from your anecdotes after three separate terms of fifty years each."

"Now, Barbara, was it that bad?" Roland Harris sounded distressed.

"Do you really think I could be honestly grateful to the Corporation for a hundred and fifty years of listening to that disgraceful old thing about the Martian, the Venusian, and the robot?"

"Well, if you feel that way about it, I'll keep my discoveries to myself. I hope your fancy hallway keeps you safe till you rot."

"It's doing all right," replied the old woman smugly. "I have a young pup down there right now cooling his number thirteens and waiting to pretend to interest me in some new face paint and hair gik. My electric eye set and vizer are less repulsive than your skunk oil and twice as effective."

"They're not going to stop me from having a good time while I last, anyhow. I think they're through with me for today; and I'm going to hear Jeery Wade, anyhow. He'll make up a hooting good song about all this when I tell him."

"Take care of yourself, Rod ... goodbye," said Miss Noble, almost concernedly.

She dropped the phone into its cradle, rose, and went back to the vizer screen, switching on the speaker as she sat down. Only then did she notice that the screen was entirely dark except for a vague sliver of gray.

"Are you still there, young man?" she asked the microphone.

There was silence from the speaker. The hammer on each bar of the long metal xylophone of the electric eye signal hung motionless.

"He's gone ... and left the front door unlatched too. And I thought he was persistent." She was disappointed. "He owes me four more minutes of fun."

She got up slowly and started for the door. "That curly hair stuff is new since my last sixties, too. I wonder if it would work on white hair ... I'd better go down and close the door. Can't have just anybody coming into one's house."

She descended the stairs, opened the door from the front room, then took one step forward into the hall. Before she could interpret the soft bump of the salesman's bare feet as they struck the floor, she was encircled by his strong arm; and the hiss of the anesthetic gun was loud in the small area of the hall. Limply she sagged against his arm.

The hissing of the gun stopped. The young man slipped it into his pocket and, turning, thrust the inner door wide open with his now free hand. Entering the tidy front room, he kicked the door shut behind him and gulped in the good air before he headed for the back of the house, cradling the small body easily in his arms. Failing to find there what he was looking for, he went up the narrow white-railed stairway to the second floor. Across the landing, the gleam of porcelain showed through a half-open door.

He laid his burden carefully on the vari-colored braided rug by the tub and began to draw a warm bath, testing the temperature frequently with his hand. When water reached the overflow outlet, he turned off the tap and sprinted downstairs for his sample case. The hall was still chokingly full of gas; and after grabbing out the case, he slammed the door again. He brought the case up to the bathroom, where he opened it on the floor beside the form of the old woman. He lifted out the tray, revealing masses of silvery tubing and a number of flasks of iridescent solutions nestling among loops of rubber insulated wiring. One flask he emptied into the bath, making the water seethe and turn a cloudy green.

Then, dashing down the stairs again, he began looking for the telephone. His search became more and more hurried, as he opened cupboards and drawers in front room and kitchen with no success. Returning upstairs, he almost missed the instrument in the sitting-room because he was expecting the familiar sight of a round vizer screen. He stood over the phone and dialed.

"Hey, Alice!"

"What luck, Riggy?"

"I'm in. The old lady's out cold on the bathroom floor. Primer solution's in the bath at five above tepid. I'm shoving her in now--with all her clothes on, of course--and I've wasted a lot of time already looking for this hypoblastic phone, so beat it on over here with Margy and get to work."

"Are you ordering me around, Rigel O'Maffey?"
"You know I never did this job on a woman. And don't forget, honey, we'll get enough out of this to get a new copter together. C'mon now." He put the phone back in, the cradle before she could answer.

Back in the bathroom, he drew a long thermometer from the case, took a careful reading on the water, ran in a little more hot from the faucet and left it running the slightest dribble.

Carefully lifting the small body of Barbara Noble, Ph.D., he slid it gently into the water feet first over the end, smoothing down with one hand the percale houseredress which ballooned as she went into the water. Finally he knelt beside the tub, holding her head out of the water in the crook of his elbow.

A banging on the inner door downstairs some fifteen minutes later reminded him of the force with which he had slammed it in his hurry to reach the uncontaminated air of the front room. He looked longingly across the bathroom at the racks of towels on the other side, but finally, as the banging stopped and a feminine voice began yelling, "Hey, Riggy! Let us in!" he grabbed up the bright rug and wadded it under the scrawny neck.

The girls scolded him all the way up the stairs for not leaving the door unlocked, while he tried to explain, at the same time, that he had to hold up the woman's head.

"Screepers, Riggy, what do you think the perfectly good pair of water-wings in your case is for?"

Humbled, he departed as the girls took over the beginning of the complicated, fortnight-long process of the rejuvenation of Barbara Noble.

The receptionist behind the ebony desk, whose gold plate proclaimed it as the headquarters of the Juvine Perpetual Youth Corporation, crammed shut the drawer before her. A metallic clink from within was the fall of a mirror with which she had been assisting the application of scarlet which now fluoresced gently on her full lips.

Tossing her head (which showed the crop of glistening black curls to the fullest advantage) in a preoccupied manner, she addressed the man who stood before her desk. "How can the Juvine Perpetual Youth Corporation serve you?" Her hastily assumed look of efficient importance was replaced by melting eagerness as she took in the chiselled perfection of features and the broad shoulders of the young man in knife-creased bronze spunlon.

"I'm Harris. For the directors' meeting." His voice was curt.

"You're Doctor Harris? The Director? Oh, do come in." She rose from the desk and went around the end of it to open the high wrought-gold gate and hold it wide for him. "You're a little early. I'll take you down to the Board Room." Eager willingness to help was apparent in her every gesture.

"Thanks, I know the way," he informed her, brushing past.

She followed him, however, across the patio-like reception room, with its exotically gardened borders and splashing fountain, down the long corridor past glowing murals of men and women swimming, dancing and playing tennis, past tapestry shielded doorways to the great bright arch at the end. Before he went through, she caught his sleeve.

"I should be pleased to steno for you today, if you need me."

He turned and looked at her as if he had not known she was behind him. "Thanks, but I sha'n't need one. It'll be a short meeting." He smiled down and patted her cheek. "But if I'm not entirely satisfied with the proceedings, maybe I can dictate a little afterward."

She laughed as if that were a special joke between them and retreated rapidly down the corridor before he had time to turn and miss the splendor of her graceful carriage.

His eyebrows were still raised and the corners of his mouth curved in appreciation when he passed through the arch and into the vast room under the clear bubble of a tremendous skydome.

A girl was sitting there, her back to him, looking out over the simmering city streets to the cool rise of mountains beyond. He recognized at once the slight figure, the sheen of the long curling auburn bob, the poise of her head and slim hand resting on the arm of the chair.

"Babs!"

She turned half around. "Hello, Rod."

He grinned and sank down in the next chair. "Here we are again."

"Knocked out by your own skunk oil?" she asked pointedly.

"No. Company copter man got me leaving Jeery Wade's. What happened to you? I thought you were walled up neatly for the declining years."

"The cosmetic man ambushed me in the hall. But I've got another fifty years to figure out something better ... if I still need it."

"What do you mean if you still need it? Are you changing your mind about rejuvenation?"

She smiled. "Well, you know it's always fun at first. But I'm having my lawyer come to this meeting. I've got an
idea we can change the articles of agreement so that the process can finally become public property at the end of another fifty years instead of only after our deaths. Then if we want to go on and die, nobody" (she waved her hand around the great room at the little group of athletic men and glamorous, expensively gowned women moving in through the arch) "nobody will have any financial interest in rejuvenating us. Then, too, our own fat incomes will lapse; and since that's the reason we set up the articles the way they are--so we'd never be in danger of starving, that is--we'd have the more interesting choice of whether to die off or get young again and go back to work. Would you sign a fifty-year termination, Rod?"

"Would you marry me for the fifty years, Babs?" His voice was gentle, pleading.

"Honest to goodness, now, aren't you really pretty tired of me?" she asked earnestly, turning to face him.

"No, I can't say I am. You're pretty special, doctor, and you're special pretty." It was a ritual.

"You know you're the only man. I'll marry you. Will you sign?"

"Of course I'll sign. I would have anyhow when I knew you wanted me to. And Babs--maybe we could get some sort of jobs now--sort of to get in practice. I'll bet we could rent a lab somewhere and do commercial analyses for a while until we got hit by another idea for research."

"Rod, that's the best idea you've had in the last hundred and fifty years. But we could have a honeymoon first, couldn't we?"

"That's your best suggestion in the last seventy years. And maybe we could get Jeery Wade and his wife to rejuvenate and go with us. After the first couple of weeks, that is."

* * * * *

They left the meeting arm in arm, somewhat ahead of the rather disgruntled group of directors, who stayed behind to lament the end of a good thing. In the garden room, Barbara stopped to choose an orchid.

Rod Harris wandered on to the receptionist's desk, where the girl of the black curls waited, smiling.

He looked back at Barbara, then smiled down at the girl. "Just like I said ... a short meeting. No need for any dictating. Lucky you."

"Oh, I don't know," she countered coyly.

"Say, I heard a story the other day you might like. Do you like stories?"

"What kind of story?"

"You'd have to be the judge of that."

Suddenly Barbara was with them, pinning on a bronze and green blossom. "C'mon along, dear. We've got a good many things to do before we leave."

He opened the golden wicket for her and followed her out. Turning back toward the desk, he called to the girl, "I may be back in a few weeks to see about a job. Remind me then to tell you the one about the Martian, the Venusian and the robot."

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Contents

A veteran veterinarian might have vamoosed--but Watts had to help any sick animal....
the nearest possible approach to realizing his ambition) solely because the veterinary college in Tampa was near enough to Landsdale for commuting and because his later practice could be carried on under the guiding aegis of his personal matriarchy. The virtuous, and vapid, Orella Simms became his fiancee by the same tactics and for the same reasons.

Oliver had considered rebellion, of course, but common sense discouraged the idea. He had no intimates outside his family nor any experience with the world beyond Landsdale and Tampa, and his fledgling self-confidence invariably bogged down in a welter of introspective apprehensions when he thought of running away. Where would he go, and to whom could he turn in emergency?

Such was the character and condition of Oliver Watts when his newly undertaken practice of veterinary medicine threw him into the company of "Mr. Thomas Furnay" and of a girl whose name, as nearly as it can be rendered into English, was Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above. Their advent brought Oliver face to face for the first time in his sedentary life with High Adventure--with adventure so high, as a matter of fact, that it took him literally and bodily out of this humdrum world.

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The initial step was taken when Mr. Furnay, known to Landsdale as a wealthy and eccentric old recluse who had recently leased a walled property on Federal Route 27 that had once been the winter retreat of a Prohibition-era gangster, was driven by emergency to call upon Oliver for professional service. Mr. Furnay usually kept very much to himself behind his iron-grilled gates and his miles of stuccoed wall; but it happened that in pursuit of his business (whose true nature would have confounded Landsdale to its insular core) he had just bought up the entire menagerie of an expiring circus billed as Skadarian Brothers, and it was the sudden illness of one of his newly acquired animals that forced him to breach his isolation.

Mr. Furnay called at the Watts place in his town car, driven by a small, dark and taciturn chauffeur named Bivins. He found Oliver at work in his neatly ordered clinic at the rear of the big house, busily spooning cod-liver oil into a trussed and thoroughly outraged chow named Champ.

"I have a sick animal," Mr. Furnay stated tersely. He was a slight man with a moderately long and wrinkled face, a Panama hat two sizes too large and a voice that had, in spite of its excellent diction, a jarring timbre and definitely foreign flavor.

Oliver blinked, surprised and a little dismayed that Fate should have sent him so early in his career a known and patently captious millionaire. Bivins, waiting in visored and putteed impassivity to reopen the door for his master, was silently impressive; the town car, parked on the crushed shell driveway outside, glittered splendidly in the late afternoon sunshine.

"I'll be happy to call later in the day," Oliver said. He removed the padded block that had held Champ's jaws apart, and narrowly missed losing a finger as the infuriated chow snapped at his hand. "My aunt and sister are bringing my fiancee down from Tampa for dinner this evening, and I can't leave the clinic until they get here. Someone might call for his pet."

Mr. Furnay protested his extremity of need. "The animal suffers periodic convulsions," he said. "It may be dangerously ill!"

Oliver unstrapped Champ from his detention frame and dodged with practiced skill when the chow tried to bite him on the thigh. He had taken it for granted--having heard none of the gossip concerning Mr. Furnay's recent purchase of the Skadarian Brothers' menagerie--that the sick animal in question was a dog or cat or perhaps a saddle horse, and the bald description of its symptoms startled him more than Champ's predictable bid for revenge.

"Convulsions? What sort of animal is it, Mr. Furnay?"

"A polar bear," said Mr. Furnay.

"Polar bear!" echoed Oliver, and in his shock of surprise he dropped a detaining strap and let Champ loose.

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The dog sprang across the room--without a breath of warning, as chows will--and bit Bivins on the leg just above his putte. The chauffeur screamed in a high and peculiarly raucous voice and jerked away, jabbering in a vowelless and totally unfamiliar foreign tongue. Mr. Furnay said something sharply in the same grating language; Bivins whipped out a handkerchief, pressed it over the tear in his whipcords and went quickly out to the car.

Oliver collared the snarling Champ and returned him to his cage, where the dog pressed bristling against the bars and stared at Mr. Furnay hungrily with wicked, muddy eyes.

Mr. Furnay's shocked voice said, behind Oliver, "What a ghastly world, where even the pets...."

He broke off sharply as Oliver turned from the cage.

"I'm truly sorry, Mr. Furnay," Oliver apologized. "If there's anything I can do ... a dressing for Bivins' leg--"

Mr. Furnay gathered himself with an effort. "It is nothing, a scratch that will heal quickly. But my bear--you will come to see him at once?"
At another time, the thought of absenting himself without due notice to his Aunt Katisha and Glenna would have prompted Oliver to refuse; but the present moment called more for diplomacy than for convention. Better to suffer matriarchal displeasure, he thought, than to risk a damage suit by a millionaire.

"I'll come at once," Oliver said. "I owe you that, I think, after the fright Champ gave you."

And, belatedly, the realization that he might handle a bear—a great, live, lumbering bear!—surged up inside him to titillate his old boyhood yearning. Perhaps it was as well that his aunt and sister were away; this chance to exercise his natural skill at dealing with animals was too precious to decline.

"Of course I won't guarantee a cure," Oliver said, qualifying his promise, "because I've never diagnosed such a case. But I think I can help your bear."

Oddly enough, he was almost sure that he could. Oliver, in his younger days, had read a great deal on the care and treatment of circus animals, and the symptoms in this instance had a familiar sound. Mr. Furnay's bear, he thought, in all probability had worms.

The Furnay town car purred away, leaving Oliver to marvel at his own daring while he collected the instruments and medicines he might need.

[Illustration]

In leaving the clinic he noted that Mr. Furnay's chauffeur had dropped his handkerchief at the doorway in his hurry to be gone—but Oliver by this time was in too great a hurry to stop and retrieve it.

His Aunt Katisha might spoil the whole adventure on the instant with a telephone call from Tampa. Bivins could wait.

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The drive, after a day spent in the antiseptic confines of his clinic, was like a holiday jaunt.

The late June sun was hot and bright, the rows of suburban houses trim and clean as scrubbed children sunning themselves among color-splashed crotons and hibiscus and flaming poincianas. Oliver whistled gaily as he turned his little white-paneled call truck off the highway and drove between twin ranks of shedding cabbage palms toward the iron gates of the Furnay estate.

A uniformed gateman who might have been a twin to Bivins admitted him, pointing out a rambling white building that lay behind the stuccoed mansion, and shut the gate. Oliver parked his truck before the menagerie building—it had been a stable in the heyday of the Prohibition-era gangster, when it had held horses or cases of contraband as occasion demanded—and found Bivins waiting for him.

Bivins, looking upset and sullen in immaculate new whipcords, opened the sliding doors without a word.

The vast inside of the remodeled stable was adequately lighted by roof-windows and fluorescent bulbs, but seemed dark for the moment after the glare of sun outside; there was a smell, familiar to every circus-goer, of damp straw and animal dung, and a restless background stir of purring and growling and pacing.

Oliver gaped when his eyes dilated enough to show him the real extent of Mr. Furnay's menagerie holdings. At the north end of the building two towering Indian elephants swayed on picket, munching hay and shuffling monotonously on padded, ponderous feet. A roped-off enclosure held half a dozen giraffes which nibbled in aristocratic deprecation at feed-bins bracketed high on the walls; and beyond them three disdainful camels lay on untidily folded legs, sneering glassily at the world and at each other.

The east and west sides of the building were lined with rank after rank of cages holding a staggering miscellany of predators: great-maned lions with their sleek green-eyed mistresses; restless tigers undulating their stripes back and forth and grinning in sly, tusky boredom; chattering monkeys and chimpanzees; leopards and cheetahs and a pair of surly black jaguars whose claw-scored hides indicated either a recent difference of opinion or a burst of conjugal affection.

The south end of the vast room had been recently partitioned off, with a single heavy door breaking the new wall at its center. On either side of this door the bears held sway: shaggy grizzlies, black bears, cinnamon and brown; spectacled Andeans and sleek white polars padding silently on tufted feet.

The sick bear sulked in a cage to himself, humped in an oddly doglike pose with his great head hanging disconsolately.

Oliver sized up the situation, casting back to past reading for the proper procedure.

"I'll need a squeeze-cage and a couple of cage boys to help immobilize the brute," he said. "Will you--"

He was startled, in turning, to find that Bivins had not accompanied him into the building. He was not alone, however. The door at the center of the partitioning wall had opened while he spoke, and a slender blonde girl in the briefest of white sunsuits was looking at him.

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Apparently she had not expected Oliver, for there was open interest in her clear green eyes. She said something in a clear and musical—but completely unintelligible—voice that ranged, with a remarkably operatic effect, through
two full octaves.
  Oliver stared. "I'm here to doctor the sick bear," he said.
  "Oh, a native," the girl said in English.
  Obviously she was trying to keep her voice within the tonal range of his own, but in spite of the effort it trilled
distractingly up and down the scale in a fashion that left Oliver smitten with a sudden and unfamiliar weakness of
the knees.
  "May I help?" she said.
  She might, Oliver replied. She could have had as readily, he might have added, a pint of his blood.
  Many times while they worked, finding a suitable squeeze-cage and dragging it against the bear's larger cage so
that the two doors coincided, Oliver found the prim and reproachful image of Miss Orella Simms rising to remind
him of his obligations; but for the first time in his life an experience was surprisingly easy to dismiss. His assistant's
lively conversation, which was largely uninformative though fascinatingly musical, bemused him even to the point
of shrugging off his Aunt Katisha's certain disapproval.
  The young lady, it seemed, came from a foreign country whose name was utterly unpronounceable; Oliver
gathered that she had not been long with Mr. Furnay, who was of another nationality, and that she was homesick for
her native land—for its "saffron sun on turquoise hills and umber sea," which could only be poetic exaggeration or
simple unfamiliarity with color terms of a newly learned language—and that she was as a consequence very lonely.
  She was, incredibly, a trainer of animals.
  "Not of such snarling fierce ones as yours," she said, with a little shiver for the polar bear watching them
sullenly through the bars, "but of my own gentle beasts, who are friends."
  Her name was a startling combination of soprano sounds that might have been written as Perrl-high-C-trill-and-
A-above, but which Oliver was completely unable to manage.
  "Would you mind," he asked, greatly daring, "if I called you Pearl instead?"
  She would not. But apparently Mr. Furnay would.

* * * * *

The millionaire, who had entered the menagerie unheard, spoke sternly to the girl in his own raucous tongue
and pointed a peremptory finger toward the door through which she had come. The girl murmured "Ai docssain,
Tsammai," in a disappointed tone, gave Oliver a smile that would have stunned a harem guard, and disappeared
again into her own territory.
  Oliver, being neither Chesterfield nor eunuch, was left with the giddy sensation of a man struggling to regain
his balance after a sudden earth temblor.
  His client reoriented him brusquely, "Treat my bear," Mr. Furnay said.
  "I've been waiting for help," Oliver said defensively. "If you'll send around your menagerie manager and a cage
boy or two—"
  "I have none," Mr. Furnay said shortly. "There are only the four of us here, and not one will approach within
touching distance of a brute so vicious."
  Oliver stared at him in astonishment.... Four of them meant only Bivins, the gateman, the lovely blonde
creature who called herself Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above and Mr. Furnay himself.
  "But four inexperienced people can't possibly look after a menagerie of this size!" Oliver protested. "Circus
animals aren't house pets, Mr. Furnay—they're restless and temperamental, and they need expert care. They bite and
claw each other—"
  "There will be more of us later," Mr. Furnay said morosely, "but I doubt that numbers will help. We had not
anticipated a ferocity so appalling, and I fear that my error may have proved the ruin of an expensive project. The
native beasts were never so fierce on other—"
  He broke off. "I am sorry. You will have to manage as best you can alone."
  And he left the menagerie without looking back.
  To deal tersely with subsequent detail, Oliver did manage alone—after a fashion and up to a point. It was a
simple matter, once he found a four-foot length of conveniently loose board, to prod the unhappy bear from his
larger prison to the smaller. The process of immobilizing the brute by winching the squeeze-cage tight was
elementary.
  But in his casting-back Oliver had overlooked two vitally important precautions: he'd forgotten to secure the
gear fastenings, and he'd neglected to rope the smaller cage to the larger.
  The bear, startled by the prick of the needle when Oliver gave him a sizable injection of nembutal, reacted with
a frantic struggling that reversed the action of the unsecured winch and forced the two cages apart. The door burst
open, sprung by the sudden pressure.
  The bear stood free.
A considerable amount of legitimate excitement could be injected into such a moment by reporting that the bear, at last in a position to revenge itself for past indignities, leaped upon its tormentor with a blood-freezing roar and that Oliver, a fragile pygmy before that near-ton of slavering fury, escaped only by a hair or was annihilated on the spot.

Neither circumstance developed, however, for the reason that the bear was already feeling the effects of the anesthetic given it and wanted nothing so much as a cool dark place where it might collapse in privacy. And Oliver, caught completely off guard, was too stunned by the suddenness of catastrophe to realize his own possible danger.

What did happen was that Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above chose that particular moment to open her door again and look out.

Her fortuitous timing altered the situation on the instant; the bear, bent only on escape and seeing comparative gloom beyond the door, charged not at Oliver but through the opening. And Oliver, still too confused to think past the necessity of retrieving his error, ran after it, brandishing his length of board and shouting wildly.

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The smaller area beyond the partition was dimly lighted, but to judge by its straw-covered floor and faint animal smell was evidently a special division of Mr. Furnay's menagerie. The light was too dim and the emergency too great to permit Oliver more than a brief and incredulous glimpse of the improbable beast placidly munching hay in a corner; his whole attention was centered first on the fleeing bear and then upon the prostrate form of Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above, who had been violently bowled over by the bear's rush.

"Pearl!" yelled Oliver, petrified with horror.

The bear stood swaying upright over her, threshing its tufted forepaws for balance and showing yellow tusks in a grimace that stemmed from drugged weakness but which passed quite creditably for a snarl of demoniac fury.

Obviously something had to be done. Oliver, galvanized by the realization, came to the rescue with a promptness that amounted to reflex action.

"Down, boy!" he said, and dealt the bear a sharp blow across the muzzle with his board.

The bear dealt Oliver a roundhouse clout in return that stretched him half-conscious beside Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above. Then, at precisely that moment of greatest dramatic impact, it shook its head dizzily and passed out cold.

The girl scrambled up and knelt beside Oliver to listen to his heartbeat, found that he was alive and raised her voice in an urgent arpeggio that held in spite of its operatic timbre a distinct note of command.

In answer to her call the great beast in the corner--built something on the order of a hippopotamus but with unorthodox variations in that it boasted six legs to either side and was covered with close-curling, bright blue wool--trotted out of the shadows and scooped up the unconscious bear in its four powerful anterior arms.

A word from Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above sent it into the main menagerie quarters, where it stuffed the limp bear into its old cage and trotted back to its mistress with a look of adoring deference on its round face.

The girl gave the creature a random trill of commendation and, displaying surprising strength for one so slight, herself dragged the reviving Oliver back to the scene of his unfinished diagnosis. The order given her earlier by Mr. Furnay was not forgotten, however, for she did not linger.

"Not handsome, no," she murmured, locking the partition door behind her this time. "But O Personal Deity of Unmarried Maidens, such headlong bravery!"

* * * * *

Oliver roused ten minutes later to find himself alone with a memory of nightmare and a sleeping bear that offered no resistance whatever when he funneled a quantity of tetrachlorethylene down its throat.

He was still alone an hour later--and still trying dizzyly to separate fact from fancy, having tried the partition door and found it locked--when the bear returned to semi-consciousness and submitted groggily to a follow-up dosage of purgative.

Oliver would have liked to stay long enough to learn the results of his diagnosis and to see Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above if she should reappear, but a glance at his watch electrified him with the realization that he had been away from his clinic for more than two hours and that his Aunt Katisha and Glenna might by now have the state police beating the palmetto flats for his body. Accordingly he left the Furnay estate in a great hurry, pausing at the gate only long enough to leave word for Mr. Furnay that he would ring later in the evening to check his patient's progress.

It was not until he had returned home and found his Aunt Katisha still out that his overworked nerves, punished outrageously by shock, violence and confusion, composed themselves enough to permit him a reasonable guess as to what actually had happened--and by that time his conclusions had taken a turn so fantastically improbable that he was lost again in a hopeless muddle of surmise.

He poured himself a glass of milk in the kitchen (he preferred coffee, but his Aunt Katisha frowned on the
habit) and took his grisly suspicions down to the clinic, where he felt more at ease than in the antimacassared austerity of the house. There he mulled them over again, and time was able to weave into the pattern the disjointed impressions carried over from his period of semi-consciousness and dismissed until now as nightmare figments from the delirium of shock. Their alignment with other evidence increased his conviction:

Mr. Furnay and Ménage, Oliver concluded with a cold thrill of horror, were not human beings at all but monsters.

* * * * *

The pattern became even more disturbing when he considered various stories of local saucer-sightings and fireballs, which linked themselves with chilling Germanity to the events of the day.

First there had been Champ's instant distrust of Mr. Furnay and Bivins, and his attempt to rout them for the aliens they were. There had been Bivins' anomalous scream when bitten—a raucous sound certainly not human—and Mr. Furnay's gritty inconsonant order, spoken in no identifiable earthly tongue. The isolation of the Furnay estate took on a sinister and significant logic, as did its understaffed condition; there was the evident but baffling reluctance of Mr. Furnay and his myrmidons (with the notable exception of the golden-voiced Pearl) to approach even safely caged beasts, and the greater mystery of why a man so terrified of wild animals should have bought a menagerie in the first place.

Considering the part played by Pearl-high-C-trill-and-A-above in a scheme of things so fantastic left Oliver more disturbed than ever, but for a different reason. That she was unarguably as alien as the others made her equally mysterious, but connoted no share in whatever devious plot occupied the Furnay faction; a reexamination of Mr. Furnay's harshly dictatorial attitude toward her, coupled with Oliver's own uncertain memory of the moment when the girl had come to his rescue, convinced him that she was not ipso facto a member of the extraterrestrial cabal but was its prisoner instead.

Visualizing the probable fate of a beautiful girl held captive by aliens—and forced by them to train outlandish, half-remembered brutes like the one behind the partition—rather strained Oliver's talent for surmise, but at the same time moved him to the uneasy conviction that it was his duty to rescue her in turn.

The thought that he might already be too late appalled him. The slender blonde beauty of Pearl-high-C-trill-and-A-above was distracting fresh in his mind, the eager arpeggiation of her voice an indelible memory. Recalling the smile she had given him in parting stirred an internal warmth unguessed at before, an emotional ignition certainly never kindled by his fiancee or family.

* * * * *

Orella Simms, Glenna, his Aunt Katisha!

Thought of his obligations brought him back to reality with a jar; the appalling gulf between fact and fancy made clear to him the nonentity's role that had been played, and must be played, all his life by Oliver Watts.

He was the perennial romantic introvert, dreaming impossible dreams compounded of escape reading and frustration, grasping timorously at any thread of adventure that might lead him to forget for the moment the drab monotone of his existence. His mouth twisted wryly. There was, of course, no fantastic alien plot incubating on the Furnay estate, no sunsuited damsel in distress awaiting rescue at his inept hands. He'd imagined the romantic aspects of the episode—the "unearthly" tongue, the improbable beast. No one required, or ever would require, anything of Oliver Watts except his Aunt Katisha and Glenna, who demanded obedience, and Orella Simms, who expected conformity.

As if on cue, the Watts family car swung off the highway and rolled down the crushed shell driveway past the clinic. Oliver's Aunt Katisha got out, leaving Glenna and Orella Simms to wait, and strode into the clinic office.

"I see you've managed to spoil another one," she said acidly, pausing long enough to retrieve the handkerchief Mr. Furnay's chauffeur had lost earlier. "Moreover, I called twice this afternoon and found you gone. Where?"

Oliver, as usual, weathered the storm in silence. Somewhere near the end he managed to squeeze in the information that he had treated a sick animal at the Furnay place—a saddle horse, he said, lying automatically as the lesser of two evils.

His aunt Katisha, her inquisitorial duty discharged, dropped the discolored handkerchief pointedly on Oliver's desk and rejoined Glenna and Orella Simms. The car drove away. Oliver, left alone in the growing dusk of evening to his miserable introspection, found his wandering attention returning unaccountably to the crumpled handkerchief, and drew it closer for a better look.

It was only a harmless square of linen, smudged with dust and spotted with blood from Bivins' chow-bitten leg—but with his closer look Oliver's world sprang up and exploded with a shattering bang in his startled face.

The dust was quite ordinary, but Bivins' blood was not.

It was green.
He was never quite sure, later, just what happened next. He retained a vague memory of roaring away in his Aunt Katisha's car through a reckless showering of crushed shell; sometimes he could recall the cool onrush of wind whipping his face and the frantic dodging of approaching headlamps on the highway. But in the main, his descent upon the Furnay estate was a blank.

Only one fact stood out with freezing clarity, excluding any thought of his Aunt Katisha's certain wrath or of Orella's maidenly reproaches: Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above was in Deadly Danger, and there was none but Oliver Watts to rescue her.

There was a brief instant of lucidity as he approached the Furnay gates through the cabbage palms and was forced to choose a course of action.

The attendant certainly would not admit him without orders from Mr. Furnay, who as certainly would not give them; the walls were much too high and sheer for climbing; and to make the need for haste even more critical, it was only too obvious that the Furnay gang was about to depart.

A tremendous saucer-shaped ship had landed by the menagerie building, where it sat with circular peripheral ports aglow and lines of bold enigmatic hieroglyphs fluorescing greenly on its smooth undersurface. Jointed metal figures scurried here and there, chivvying the last of Mr. Furnay's herbivores up a ramp into the belly of the ship; the predators, in cages drawn by other sleek robot stevedores, followed in orderly procession.

Oliver solved his problem of entry by driving headlong through the iron grillwork.

There was a raucous yelling from the gateman, a monstrous rending of metal and jangling of broken glass. Aunt Katisha's car slewed erratically down the Furnay drive, turned over twice and pitched Oliver out, stunned for the second time that day, into the greenish glow shed by the saucer-ship's lights.

* * * * *

He struggled back to awareness to find his head pillowed on something soft and wonderfully comfortable. A circle of startled faces, most of them dark facsimiles of the putteed Bivins', stared uncertainly down at him. In the near foreground stood Mr. Furnay, wringing his hands and muttering grittily to himself in his own dissonant tongue. Mr. Furnay, seen now for the first time without his too-large Panama, exhibited instead of hair a crest of downy blue feathers and pronged antennae that vibrated softly in the evening breeze.

"Where is she?" Oliver demanded. He scrambled dizzily to his feet, and the circle of faces melted backward hastily. "What have you done with Pearl, you monsters?"

Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above, on whose lap Oliver's head had been pillowed, stood up to move between Oliver and the patently apprehensive Mr. Furnay. She wore a light maroon cape over her sunsuit against the mild chill of evening, and could not possibly have looked less like a damsel in distress. She seemed, as a matter of fact, quite happy.

"I hoped you would come to see me again before blastoff," she said. Her voice skipped, tinkling with pleasure, from octave to octave. "But so suddenly--so dashing, so impetuous!"

"You're going away willingly?" Oliver said dumbly. "Then they're not forcing--you're not a prisoner after all?"

Her laugh was an arpeggiando blending of surprise and amusement. "A prisoner of these Tsammai? No. I am a performer in their company, hired by Xtll--Mr. Furnay--to train and exhibit animals native to my own world."

"But I heard Furnay threaten you in the menagerie building this afternoon! His tone--"

"The Tsammai tongue sounds dreadful because it is all consonants and not based on pitch and nuance as mine is," she said. "But the Tsammai themselves are only tradesmen, and are very gentle. Xtll--Mr. Furnay--only feared that I might say too much to you then, when it was important that the natives should not suspect our identity."

"It is true," Mr. Furnay nodded, sounding relieved. "We must avoid notice on such worlds as yours, which are too backward to appreciate the marvels of our show. We stop here only to scout for new and novel exhibits."

"Show!" Oliver echoed, "You mean all this is--is--"

"What else?" asked Mr. Furnay. He pointed with his antennae to the fluorescent hieroglyphs on the undersurface of the saucer-ship. "See, in our lingua galactica it reads: SKRRFF BROTHERS' INTERSTELLAR CIRCUS, THE GALAXY'S GREATEST. It is the best on the circuit."

He indicated the circle of identical Bivinses. "These are the Skrrff brothers, our owners. I, sir, am business manager."

"But not always a good one," one of the brothers said pointedly. "This time he has bought an entire menagerie of such fierceness that our trainers cannot exhibit it. It will have to be sold to some frontier-planet zoo, and our loss will be staggering."

It was left for Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above to deal with the problem, which she did with universal feminine practicality.

"Oliver made your bear well," she pointed out. "And he is afraid of nothing--nothing! Could he not train his own fierce beasts as well as I train my gentle ones?"
Oliver said, "Huh?"
The Skrff brothers, of course, implored Oliver on the spot to join them at any salary.
Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above said demurely, in three octaves and for all the world to hear: "And I'm lonely, Oliver!"
Oliver never had a chance.

* * * * *

Life in Landsdale goes quietly on, the ripples made by Oliver's departure long since smoothed away by the years.

Miss Orella Simms has married the Methodist minister who was to have married her to Oliver. Aunt Katisha and Glenna have resigned themselves to Oliver's escape and have taken over the job of assisting Orella to superintend her husband's career, an occupation eminently satisfactory to all because the placid cleric never dreams troublesome dreams of adventure, as Oliver did, to try their matriarchal patience.

... But life is never dull for Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Watts, whose breathtaking performances currently electrify the thrill-hungry cultures of a thousand worlds. They have traveled from Sirius to Sagittarius, and at this writing have two children: a golden-haired daughter of four named Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-sharp-above, and a tow-headed boy of two who has a cowlick like his father's and whose name is Butch.

They are very happy and there has been no talk between them, though they are wealthy enough in galactic credits by now to have bought half a planet for a home, of settling down to the quiet life. They are quite satisfied to leave such consequential decisions to those who like change for the sake of change or who, unlike Oliver, never know when they are well off.

One clean break to a lifetime, Oliver maintains, is enough.
He fixed things--clocks, refrigerators, vidsenders and destinies. But he had no business in the future, where the
calculators could not handle him. He was Earth's only hope--and its sure failure!

Security Commissioner Reinhart rapidly climbed the front steps and entered the Council building. Council
guards stepped quickly aside and he entered the familiar place of great whirring machines. His thin face rapt, eyes
alight with emotion, Reinhart gazed intently up at the central SRB computer, studying its reading.
"Straight gain for the last quarter," observed Kaplan, the lab organizer. He grinned proudly, as if personally
responsible. "Not bad, Commissioner."
"We're catching up to them," Reinhart retorted. "But too damn slowly. We must finally go over--and soon."
Kaplan was in a talkative mood. "We design new offensive weapons, they counter with improved defenses.
And nothing is actually made! Continual improvement, but neither we nor Centaurus can stop designing long
enough to stabilize for production."
"It will end," Reinhart stated coldly, "as soon as Terra turns out a weapon for which Centaurus can build no
defense."
"Every weapon has a defense. Design and discord. Immediate obsolescence. Nothing lasts long enough to--"
"What we count on is the lag," Reinhart broke in, annoyed. His hard gray eyes bored into the lab organizer and
Kaplan slunk back. "The time lag between our offensive design and their counter development. The lag varies." He
waved impatiently toward the massed banks of SRB machines. "As you well know."

At this moment, 9:30 AM, May 7, 2136, the statistical ratio on the SRB machines stood at 21-17 on the
Centauran side of the ledger. All facts considered, the odds favored a successful repulsion by Proxima Centaurus of
a Terran military attack. The ratio was based on the total information known to the SRB machines, on a gestalt of
the vast flow of data that poured in endlessly from all sectors of the Sol and Centaurus systems.

21-17 on the Centauran side. But a month ago it had been 24-18 in the enemy's favor. Things were improving,
slowly but steadily. Centaurus, older and less virile than Terra, was unable to match Terra's rate of technocratic
advance. Terra was pulling ahead.

"If we went to war now," Reinhart said thoughtfully, "we would lose. We're not far enough along to risk an
overt attack." A harsh, ruthless glow twisted across his handsome features, distorting them into a stern mask. "But
the odds are moving in our favor. Our offensive designs are gradually gaining on their defenses."
"Let's hope the war comes soon," Kaplan agreed. "We're all on edge. This damn waiting...."

The war would come soon. Reinhart knew it intuitively. The air was full of tension, the elan. He left the SRB
rooms and hurried down the corridor to his own elaborately guarded office in the Security wing. It wouldn't be long.
He could practically feel the hot breath of destiny on his neck--for him a pleasant feeling. His thin lips set in a
humerless smile, showing an even line of white teeth against his tanned skin. It made him feel good, all right. He'd
been working at it a long time.

First contact, a hundred years earlier, had ignited instant conflict between Proxima Centauran outposts and
exploring Terran raiders. Flash fights, sudden eruptions of fire and energy beams.
And then the long, dreary years of inaction between enemies where contact required years of travel, even at
nearly the speed of light. The two systems were evenly matched. Screen against screen. Warship against power
station. The Centauran Empire surrounded Terra, an iron ring that couldn't be broken, rusty and corroded as it was.
Radical new weapons had to be conceived, if Terra was to break out.
Through the windows of his office, Reinhart could see endless buildings and streets, Terrans hurrying back and
forth. Bright specks that were commute ships, little eggs that carried businessmen and white-collar workers around.
The huge transport tubes that shot masses of workmen to factories and labor camps from their housing units. All
these people, waiting to break out. Waiting for the day.
Reinhart snapped on his vidscreen, the confidential channel. "Give me Military Designs," he ordered sharply.

He sat tense, his wiry body taut, as the vidscreen warmed into life. Abruptly he was facing the hulking image of
Peter Sherikov, director of the vast network of labs under the Ural Mountains.
Sherikov's great bearded features hardened as he recognized Reinhart. His bushy black eyebrows pulled up in a
sullen line. "What do you want? You know I'm busy. We have too much work to do, as it is. Without being bothered
by politicians."

"I'm dropping over your way," Reinhart answered lazily. He adjusted the cuff of his immaculate gray cloak. "I want a full description of your work and whatever progress you've made."

"You'll find a regular departmental report plate filed in the usual way, around your office someplace. If you'll refer to that you'll know exactly what we--"

"I'm not interested in that. I want to see what you're doing. And I expect you to be prepared to describe your work fully. I'll be there shortly. Half an hour."

* * * * *

Reinhart cut the circuit. Sherikov's heavy features dwindled and faded. Reinhart relaxed, letting his breath out. Too bad he had to work with Sherikov. He had never liked the man. The big Polish scientist was an individualist, refusing to integrate himself with society. Independent, atomistic in outlook. He held concepts of the individual as an end, diametrically contrary to the accepted organic state Weltansicht.

But Sherikov was the leading research scientist, in charge of the Military Designs Department. And on Designs the whole future of Terra depended. Victory over Centaurus—or more waiting, bottled up in the Sol System, surrounded by a rotting, hostile Empire, now sinking into ruin and decay, yet still strong.

Reinhart got quickly to his feet and left the office. He hurried down the hall and out of the Council building. A few minutes later he was heading across the mid-morning sky in his highspeed cruiser, toward the Asiatic land-mass, the vast Ural mountain range. Toward the Military Designs labs.

Sherikov met him at the entrance. "Look here, Reinhart. Don't think you're going to order me around. I'm not going to--"

"Take it easy." Reinhart fell into step beside the bigger man. They passed through the check and into the auxiliary labs. "No immediate coercion will be exerted over you or your staff. You're free to continue your work as you see fit—for the present. Let's get this straight. My concern is to integrate your work with our total social needs. As long as your work is sufficiently productive—"

Reinhart stopped in his tracks.
"Pretty, isn't he?" Sherikov said ironically.
"What the hell is it?"
"Icarus, we call him. Remember the Greek myth? The legend of Icarus. Icarus flew.... This Icarus is going to fly, one of these days." Sherikov shrugged. "You can examine him, if you want. I suppose this is what you came here to see."

Reinhart advanced slowly. "This is the weapon you've been working on?"
"How does he look?"

Rising up in the center of the chamber was a squat metal cylinder, a great ugly cone of dark gray. Technicians circled around it, wiring up the exposed relay banks. Reinhart caught a glimpse of endless tubes and filaments, a maze of wires and terminals and parts criss-crossing each other, layer on layer.

"What is it?" Reinhart perched on the edge of a workbench, leaning his big shoulders against the wall. "An idea of Jamison Hedge—the same man who developed our instantaneous interstellar vidcasts forty years ago. He was trying to find a method of faster than light travel when he was killed, destroyed along with most of his work. After that ftl research was abandoned. It looked as if there were no future in it."

"Wasn't it shown that nothing could travel faster than light?"

"The interstellar vidcasts do! No, Hedge developed a valid ftl drive. He managed to propel an object at fifty times the speed of light. But as the object gained speed, its length began to diminish and its mass increased. This was in line with familiar twentieth-century concepts of mass-energy transformation. We conjectured that as Hedge's object gained velocity it would continue to lose length and gain mass until its length became nil and its mass infinite. Nobody can imagine such an object."

"Go on."

"But what actually occurred is this. Hedge's object continued to lose length and gain mass until it reached the theoretical limit of velocity, the speed of light. At that point the object, still gaining speed, simply ceased to exist. Having no length, it ceased to occupy space. It disappeared. However, the object had not been destroyed. It continued on its way, gaining momentum each moment, moving in an arc across the galaxy, away from the Sol system. Hedge's object entered some other realm of being, beyond our powers of conception. The next phase of Hedge's experiment consisted in a search for some way to slow the ftl object down, back to a sub-ftl speed, hence back into our universe. This counterprinciple was eventually worked out."

"With what result?"

"The death of Hedge and destruction of most of his equipment. His experimental object, in re-entering the space-time universe, came into being in space already occupied by matter. Possessing an incredible mass, just below
infinity level, Hedge's object exploded in a titanic cataclysm. It was obvious that no space travel was possible with such a drive. Virtually all space contains some matter. To re-enter space would bring automatic destruction. Hedge had found his ftl drive and his counterprinciple, but no one before this has been able to put them to any use."

Reinhart walked over toward the great metal cylinder. Sherikov jumped down and followed him. "I don't get it," Reinhart said. "You said the principle is no good for space travel."

"That's right."

"What's this for, then? If the ship explodes as soon as it returns to our universe--"

"This is not a ship." Sherikov grinned slyly. "Icarus is the first practical application of Hedge's principles. Icarus is a bomb."

"So this is our weapon," Reinhart said. "A bomb. An immense bomb."

"A bomb, moving at a velocity greater than light. A bomb which will not exist in our universe. The Centaurans won't be able to detect or stop it. How could they? As soon as it passes the speed of light it will cease to exist--beyond all detection."

"But--"

"Icarus will be launched outside the lab, on the surface. He will align himself with Proxima Centaurus, gaining speed rapidly. By the time he reaches his destination he will be traveling at ftl-100. Icarus will be brought back to this universe within Centaurus itself. The explosion should destroy the star and wash away most of its planets--including their central hub-planet, Armun. There is no way they can halt Icarus, once he has been launched. No defense is possible. Nothing can stop him. It is a real fact."

"When will he be ready?"

Sherikov's eyes flickered. "Soon."

"Exactly how soon?"

The big Pole hesitated. "As a matter of fact, there's only one thing holding us back."

Sherikov led Reinhart around to the other side of the lab. He pushed a lab guard out of the way.

"See this?" He tapped a round globe, open at one end, the size of a grapefruit. "This is holding us up."

"What is it?"

"The central control turret. This thing brings Icarus back to sub-ftl flight at the correct moment. It must be absolutely accurate. Icarus will be within the star only a matter of a microsecond. If the turret does not function exactly, Icarus will pass out the other side and shoot beyond the Centauran system."

"How near completed is this turret?"

Sherikov hedged uncertainly, spreading out his big hands. "Who can say? It must be wired with infinitely minute equipment--microscope grapples and wires invisible to the naked eye."

"Can you name any completion date?"

Sherikov reached into his coat and brought out a manila folder. "I've drawn up the data for the SRB machines, giving a date of completion. You can go ahead and feed it. I entered ten days as the maximum period. The machines can work from that."

Reinhart accepted the folder cautiously. "You're sure about the date? I'm not convinced I can trust you, Sherikov."

Sherikov's features darkened. "You'll have to take a chance, Commissioner. I don't trust you any more than you trust me. I know how much you'd like an excuse to get me out of here and one of your puppets in."

Reinhart studied the huge scientist thoughtfully. Sherikov was going to be a hard nut to crack. Designs was responsible to Security, not the Council. Sherikov was losing ground--but he was still a potential danger. Stubborn, individualistic, refusing to subordinate his welfare to the general good.

"All right." Reinhart put the folder slowly away in his coat. "I'll feed it. But you better be able to come through. There can't be any slip-ups. Too much hangs on the next few days."

"If the odds change in our favor are you going to give the mobilization order?"

"Yes," Reinhart stated. "I'll give the order the moment I see the odds change."

Standing in front of the machines, Reinhart waited nervously for the results. It was two o'clock in the afternoon. The day was warm, a pleasant May afternoon. Outside the building the daily life of the planet went on as usual.

As usual? Not exactly. The feeling was in the air, an expanding excitement growing every day. Terra had waited a long time. The attack on Proxima Centaurus had to come--and the sooner the better. The ancient Centauran Empire hemmed in Terra, bottled the human race up in its one system. A vast, suffocating net draped across the heavens, cutting Terra off from the bright diamonds beyond.... And it had to end.

The SRB machines whirred, the visible combination disappearing. For a time no ratio showed. Reinhart tensed, his body rigid. He waited.
The new ratio appeared. Reinhart gasped. 7-6. Toward Terra!

Within five minutes the emergency mobilization alert had been flashed to all Government departments. The Council and President Duffe had been called to immediate session. Everything was happening fast.

But there was no doubt. 7-6. In Terra's favor. Reinhart hurried frantically to get his papers in order, in time for the Council session.

At histo-research the message plate was quickly pulled from the confidential slot and rushed across the central lab to the chief official.

"Look at this!" Fredman dropped the plate on his superior's desk. "Look at it!"

Harper picked up the plate, scanning it rapidly. "Sounds like the real thing. I didn't think we'd live to see it."

Fredman left the room, hurrying down the hall. He entered the time bubble office. "Where's the bubble?" he demanded, looking around.

One of the technicians looked slowly up. "Back about two hundred years. We're coming up with interesting data on the War of 1914. According to material the bubble has already brought up--"

"Cut it. We're through with routine work. Get the bubble back to the present. From now on all equipment has to be free for Military work."

"But--the bubble is regulated automatically."

"You can bring it back manually."

"It's risky." The technician hedged. "If the emergency requires it, I suppose we could take a chance and cut the automatic."

"The emergency requires everything," Fredman said feelingly.

"But the odds might change back," Margaret Duffe, President of the Council, said nervously. "Any minute they can revert."

"This is our chance!" Reinhart snapped, his temper rising. "What the hell's the matter with you? We've waited years for this."

The Council buzzed with excitement. Margaret Duffe hesitated uncertainly, her blue eyes clouded with worry. "I realize the opportunity is here. At least, statistically. But the new odds have just appeared. How do we know they'll last? They stand on the basis of a single weapon."

"You're wrong. You don't grasp the situation." Reinhart held himself in check with great effort. "Sherikov's weapon tipped the ratio in our favor. But the odds have been moving in our direction for months. It was only a question of time. The new balance was inevitable, sooner or later. It's not just Sherikov. He's only one factor in this. It's all nine planets of the Sol System--not a single man."

One of the Councilmen stood up. "The President must be aware the entire planet is eager to end this waiting. All our activities for the past eighty years have been directed toward--"

Reinhart moved close to the slender President of the Council. "If you don't approve the war, there probably will be mass rioting. Public reaction will be strong. Damn strong. And you know it."

Margaret Duffe shot him a cold glance. "You sent out the emergency order to force my hand. You were fully aware of what you were doing. You knew once the order was out there'd be no stopping things."

A murmur rushed through the Council, gaining volume. "We have to approve the war!... We're committed!... It's too late to turn back!"

Shouts, angry voices, insistent waves of sound lapped around Margaret Duffe. "I'm as much for the war as anybody," she said sharply. "I'm only urging moderation. An inter-system war is a big thing. We're going to war because a machine says we have a statistical chance of winning."

"There's no use starting the war unless we can win it," Reinhart said. "The SRB machines tell us whether we can win."

"They tell us our chance of winning. They don't guarantee anything."

"What more can we ask, beside a good chance of winning?"

Margaret Duffe clamped her jaw together tightly. "All right. I hear all the clamor. I won't stand in the way of Council approval. The vote can go ahead." Her cold, alert eyes appraised Reinhart. "Especially since the emergency order has already been sent out to all Government departments."

"Good." Reinhart stepped away with relief. "Then it's settled. We can finally go ahead with full mobilization."

Mobilization proceeded rapidly. The next forty-eight hours were alive with activity.

Reinhart attended a policy-level Military briefing in the Council rooms, conducted by Fleet Commander Carleton.

"You can see our strategy," Carleton said. He traced a diagram on the blackboard with a wave of his hand. "Sherikov states it'll take eight more days to complete the ftl bomb. During that time the fleet we have near the
Centauran system will take up positions. As the bomb goes off the fleet will begin operations against the remaining Centauran ships. Many will no doubt survive the blast, but with Armun gone we should be able to handle them."

Reinhart took Commander Carleton's place. "I can report on the economic situation. Every factory on Terra is converted to arms production. With Armun out of the way we should be able to promote mass insurrection among the Centauran colonies. An inter-system Empire is hard to maintain, even with ships that approach light speed. Local war-lords should pop up all over the place. We want to have weapons available for them and ships starting now to reach them in time. Eventually we hope to provide a unifying principle around which the colonies can all collect. Our interest is more economic than political. They can have any kind of government they want, as long as they act as supply areas for us. As our eight system planets act now."

Carleton resumed his report. "Once the Centauran fleet has been scattered we can begin the crucial stage of the war. The landing of men and supplies from the ships we have waiting in all key areas throughout the Centauran system. In this stage--"

Reinhart moved away. It was hard to believe only two days had passed since the mobilization order had been sent out. The whole system was alive, functioning with feverish activity. Countless problems were being solved--but much remained.

He entered the lift and ascended to the SRB room, curious to see if there had been any change in the machines' reading. He found it the same. So far so good. Did the Centaurans know about Icarus? No doubt; but there wasn't anything they could do about it. At least, not in eight days.

Kaplan came over to Reinhart, sorting a new batch of data that had come in. The lab organizer searched through his data. "An amusing item came in. It might interest you." He handed a message plate to Reinhart.

It was from histo-research:

May 9, 2136

This is to report that in bringing the research time bubble up to the present the manual return was used for the first time. Therefore a clean break was not made, and a quantity of material from the past was brought forward. This material included an individual from the early twentieth century who escaped from the lab immediately. He has not yet been taken into protective custody. Histo-research regrets this incident, but attributes it to the emergency.

E. Fredman

Reinhart handed the plate back to Kaplan. "Interesting. A man from the past--hauled into the middle of the biggest war the universe has seen."

"Strange things happen. I wonder what the machines will think."

"Hard to say. Probably nothing." Reinhart left the room and hurried along the corridor to his own office.

As soon as he was inside he called Sherikov on the vidscreen, using the confidential line.

The Pole's heavy features appeared. "Good day, Commissioner. How's the war effort?"

"Fine. How's the turret wiring proceeding?"

A faint frown flickered across Sherikov's face. "As a matter of fact, Commissioner--"

"What's the matter?" Reinhart said sharply.

Sherikov floundered. "You know how these things are. I've taken my crew off it and tried robot workers. They have greater dexterity, but they can't make decisions. This calls for more than mere dexterity. This calls for--" He searched for the word. "--for an artist."

Reinhart's face hardened. "Listen, Sherikov. You have eight days left to complete the bomb. The data given to the SRB machines contained that information. The 7-6 ratio is based on that estimate. If you don't come through--"

Sherikov twisted in embarrassment. "Don't get excited, Commissioner. We'll complete it."

"I hope so. Call me as soon as it's done." Reinhart snapped off the connection. If Sherikov let them down he'd have him taken out and shot. The whole war depended on the ftl bomb.

The vidscreen glowed again. Reinhart snapped it on. Kaplan's face formed on it. The lab organizer's face was pale and frozen. "Commissioner, you better come up to the SRB office. Something's happened."

"What is it?"

"I'll show you."

Alarmed, Reinhart hurried out of his office and down the corridor. He found Kaplan standing in front of the SRB machines. "What's the story?" Reinhart demanded. He glanced down at the reading. It was unchanged.

Kaplan held up a message plate nervously. "A moment ago I fed this into the machines. After I saw the results I quickly removed it. It's that item I showed you. From histo-research. About the man from the past."

"What happened when you fed it?"

Kaplan swallowed unhappily. "I'll show you. I'll do it again. Exactly as before." He fed the plate into a moving intake belt. "Watch the visible figures," Kaplan muttered.

Reinhart watched, tense and rigid. For a moment nothing happened. 7-6 continued to show. Then--

Nothing at all. No figures. Only a blank.

"What's it mean?" Reinhart muttered, dazed.

"It's fantastic. We didn't think this could--"

"What's happened?"

"The machines aren't able to handle the item. No reading can come. It's data they can't integrate. They can't use it for prediction material, and it throws off all their other figures."

"Why?"

"It's--it's a variable." Kaplan was shaking, white-lipped and pale. "Something from which no inference can be made. The man from the past. The machines can't deal with him. The variable man!"

II

Thomas Cole was sharpening a knife with his whetstone when the tornado hit.

The knife belonged to the lady in the big green house. Every time Cole came by with his Fixit cart the lady had something to be sharpened. Once in awhile she gave him a cup of coffee, hot black coffee from an old bent pot. He liked that fine; he enjoyed good coffee.

The day was drizzly and overcast. Business had been bad. An automobile had scared his two horses. On bad days less people were outside and he had to get down from the cart and go to ring doorbells.

But the man in the yellow house had given him a dollar for fixing his electric refrigerator. Nobody else had been able to fix it, not even the factory man. The dollar would go a long way. A dollar was a lot.

He knew it was a tornado even before it hit him. Everything was silent. He was bent over his whetstone, the reins between his knees, absorbed in his work.

He had done a good job on the knife; he was almost finished. He spat on the blade and was holding it up to see--and then the tornado came.

All at once it was there, completely around him. Nothing but grayness. He and the cart and horses seemed to be in a calm spot in the center of the tornado. They were moving in a great silence, gray mist everywhere.

And while he was wondering what to do, and how to get the lady's knife back to her, all at once there was a bump and the tornado tipped him over, sprawled out on the ground. The horses screamed in fear, struggling to pick themselves up. Cole got quickly to his feet.

Where was he?

The grayness was gone. White walls stuck up on all sides. A deep light gleamed down, not daylight but something like it. The team was pulling the cart on its side, dragging it along, tools and equipment falling out. Cole righted the cart, leaping up onto the seat.

And for the first time saw the people.

Men, with astonished white faces, in some sort of uniforms. Shouts, noise and confusion. And a feeling of danger!

Cole headed the team toward the door. Hoofs thundered steel against steel as they pounded through the doorway, scattering the astonished men in all directions. He was out in a wide hall. A building, like a hospital.

The hall divided. More men were coming, spilling from all sides.

Shouting and milling in excitement, like white ants. Something cut past him, a beam of dark violet. It seared off a corner of the cart, leaving the wood smoking.

Cole felt fear. He kicked at the terrified horses. They reached a big door, crashing wildly against it. The door gave--and they were outside, bright sunlight blinking down on them. For a sickening second the cart tilted, almost turning over. Then the horses gained speed, racing across an open field, toward a distant line of green, Cole holding tightly to the reins.

Behind him the little white-faced men had come out and were standing in a group, gesturing frantically. He could hear their faint shrill shouts.

But he had got away. He was safe. He slowed the horses down and began to breathe again.

The woods were artificial. Some kind of park. But the park was wild and overgrown. A dense jungle of twisted plants. Everything growing in confusion.

The park was empty. No one was there. By the position of the sun he could tell it was either early morning or late afternoon. The smell of the flowers and grass, the dampness of the leaves, indicated morning. It had been late afternoon when the tornado had picked him up. And the sky had been overcast and cloudy.

Cole considered. Clearly, he had been carried a long way. The hospital, the men with white faces, the odd lighting, the accented words he had caught--everything indicated he was no longer in Nebraska--maybe not even in
the United States.

Some of his tools had fallen out and gotten lost along the way. Cole collected everything that remained, sorting them, running his fingers over each tool with affection. Some of the little chisels and wood gouges were gone. The bit box had opened, and most of the smaller bits had been lost. He gathered up those that remained and replaced them tenderly in the box. He took a key-hole saw down, and with an oil rag wiped it carefully and replaced it.

Above the cart the sun rose slowly in the sky. Cole peered up, his horny hand over his eyes. A big man, stoop-shouldered, his chin gray and stubbled. His clothes wrinkled and dirty. But his eyes were clear, a pale blue, and his hands were finely made.

He could not stay in the park. They had seen him ride that way; they would be looking for him.

Far above something shot rapidly across the sky. A tiny black dot moving with incredible haste. A second dot followed. The two dots were gone almost before he saw them. They were utterly silent.

Cole frowned, perturbed. The dots made him uneasy. He would have to keep moving—and looking for food. His stomach was already beginning to rumble and groan.

Work. There was plenty he could do: gardening, sharpening, grinding, repair work on machines and clocks, fixing all kinds of household things. Even painting and odd jobs and carpentry and chores.

He could do anything. Anything people wanted done. For a meal and pocket money.

Thomas Cole urged the team into life, moving forward. He sat hunched over in the seat, watching intently, as the Fixit cart rolled slowly across the tangled grass, through the jungle of trees and flowers.

Reinhart hurried, racing his cruiser at top speed, followed by a second ship, a military escort. The ground sped by below him, a blur of gray and green.

The remains of New York lay spread out, a twisted, blunted ruin overgrown with weeds and grass. The great atomic wars of the twentieth century had turned virtually the whole seaboard area into an endless waste of slag.

Slag and weeds below him. And then the sudden tangle that had been Central Park.

Histo-research came into sight. Reinhart swooped down, bringing his cruiser to rest at the small supply field behind the main buildings.

Harper, the chief official of the department, came quickly over as soon as Reinhart's ship landed.

"Frankly, we don't understand why you consider this matter important," Harper said uneasily.

Reinhart shot him a cold glance. "I'll be the judge of what's important. Are you the one who gave the order to bring the bubble back manually?"

"Fredman gave the actual order. In line with your directive to have all facilities ready for—"

Reinhart headed toward the entrance of the research building. "Where is Fredman?"

"Inside."

"I want to see him. Let's go."

Fredman met them inside. He greeted Reinhart calmly, showing no emotion. "Sorry to cause you trouble, Commissioner. We were trying to get the station in order for the war. We wanted the bubble back as quickly as possible." He eyed Reinhart curiously. "No doubt the man and his cart will soon be picked up by your police."

"I want to know everything that happened, in exact detail."

Fredman shifted uncomfortably. "There's not much to tell. I gave the order to have the automatic setting canceled and the bubble brought back manually. At the moment the signal reached it, the bubble was passing through the spring of 1913. As it broke loose, it tore off a piece of ground on which this person and his cart were located. The person naturally was brought up to the present, inside the bubble."

"Didn't any of your instruments tell you the bubble was loaded?"

"We were too excited to take any readings. Half an hour after the manual control was thrown, the bubble materialized in the observation room. It was de-energized before anyone noticed what was inside. We tried to stop him but he drove the cart out into the hall, bowling us out of the way. The horses were in a panic."

"What kind of cart was it?"

"There was some kind of sign on it. Painted in black letters on both sides. No one saw what it was."

"Go ahead. What happened then?"

"Somebody fired a Slem-ray after him, but it missed. The horses carried him out of the building and onto the grounds. By the time we reached the exit the cart was half way to the park."

Reinhart reflected. "If he's still in the park we should have him shortly. But we must be careful." He was already starting back toward his ship, leaving Fredman behind. Harper fell in beside him.

Reinhart halted by his ship. He beckoned some Government guards over. "Put the executive staff of this department under arrest. I'll have them tried on a treason count, later on." He smiled ironically as Harper's face blanched sickly pale. "There's a war going on. You'll be lucky if you get off alive."
Reinhart entered his ship and left the surface, rising rapidly into the sky. A second ship followed after him, a military escort. Reinhart flew high above the sea of gray slag, the unrecovered waste area. He passed over a sudden square of green set in the ocean of gray. Reinhart gazed back at it until it was gone.

Central Park. He could see police ships racing through the sky, ships and transports loaded with troops, heading toward the square of green. On the ground some heavy guns and surface cars rumbled along, lines of black approaching the park from all sides. They would have the man soon. But meanwhile, the SRB machines were blank. And on the SRB machines' readings the whole war depended.

About noon the cart reached the edge of the park. Cole rested for a moment, allowing the horses time to crop at the thick grass. The silent expanse of slag amazed him. What had happened? Nothing stirred. No buildings, no sign of life. Grass and weeds poked up occasionally through it, breaking the flat surface here and there, but even so, the sight gave him an uneasy chill.

Cole drove the cart slowly out onto the slag, studying the sky above him. There was nothing to hide him, now that he was out of the park. The slag was bare and uniform, like the ocean. If he were spotted--

A horde of tiny black dots raced across the sky, coming rapidly closer. Presently they veered to the right and disappeared. More planes, wingless metal planes. He watched them go, driving slowly on.

Half an hour later something appeared ahead. Cole slowed the cart down, peering to see. The slag came to an end. He had reached its limits. Ground appeared, dark soil and grass. Weeds grew everywhere. Ahead of him, beyond the end of the slag, was a line of buildings, houses of some sort. Or sheds.

Houses, probably. But not like any he had ever seen.

The houses were uniform, all exactly the same. Like little green shells, rows of them, several hundred. There was a little lawn in front of each. Lawn, a path, a front porch, bushes in a meager row around each house. But the houses were all alike and very small.

Little green shells in precise, even rows. He urged the cart cautiously forward, toward the houses.

No one seemed to be around. He entered a street between two rows of houses, the hoofs of his two horses sounding loudly in the silence. He was in some kind of town. But there were no dogs or children. Everything was neat and silent. Like a model. An exhibit. It made him uncomfortable.

A young man walking along the pavement gaped at him in wonder. An oddly-dressed youth, in a toga-like cloak that hung down to his knees. A single piece of fabric. And sandals.

Or what looked like sandals. Both the cloak and the sandals were of some strange half-luminous material. It glowed faintly in the sunlight. Metallic, rather than cloth.

A woman was watering flowers at the edge of a lawn. She straightened up as his team of horses came near. Her eyes widened in astonishment--and then fear. Her mouth fell open in a soundless O and her sprinkling can slipped from her fingers and rolled silently onto the lawn.

Cole blushed and turned his head quickly away. The woman was scarcely dressed! He flicked the reins and urged the horses to hurry.

Behind him, the woman still stood. He stole a brief, hasty look back--and then shouted hoarsely to his team, ears scarlet. He had seen right. She wore only a pair of translucent shorts. Nothing else. A mere fragment of the same half-luminous material that glazed and sparkled. The rest of her small body was utterly naked.

He slowed the team down. She had been pretty. Brown hair and eyes, deep red lips. Quite a good figure. Slender waist, downy legs, bare and supple, full breasts--. He clamped the thought furiously off. He had to get to work. Business.

Cole halted the Fixit cart and leaped down onto the pavement. He selected a house at random and approached it cautiously. The house was attractive. It had a certain simple beauty. But it looked frail--and exactly like the others.

He stepped up on the porch. There was no bell. He searched for it, running his hand uneasily over the surface of the door. All at once there was a click, a sharp snap on a level with his eyes. Cole glanced up, startled. A lens was vanishing as the door section slid over it. He had been photographed.

While he was wondering what it meant, the door swung suddenly open. A man filled up the entrance, a big man in a tan uniform, blocking the way ominously.

"What do you want?" the man demanded.


"Apply to the Placement Department of the Federal Activities Control Board," the man said crisply. "You know all occupational therapy is handled through them." He eyed Cole curiously. "Why have you got on those ancient clothes?"

"Ancient? Why, I--"
The man gazed past him at the Fixit cart and the two dozing horses. "What's that? What are those two animals? Horses?" The man rubbed his jaw, studying Cole intently. "That's strange," he said.

"Strange?" Cole murmured uneasily. "Why?"

"There haven't been any horses for over a century. All the horses were wiped out during the Fifth Atomic War. That's why it's strange."

Cole tensed, suddenly alert. There was something in the man's eyes, a hardness, a piercing look. Cole moved back off the porch, onto the path. He had to be careful. Something was wrong.

"I'll be going," he murmured.

"There haven't been any horses for over a hundred years." The man came toward Cole. "Who are you? Why are you dressed up like that? Where did you get that vehicle and pair of horses?"

"I'll be going," Cole repeated, moving away.

The man whipped something from his belt, a thin metal tube. He stuck it toward Cole.

It was a rolled-up paper, a thin sheet of metal in the form of a tube. Words, some kind of script. He could not make any of them out. The man's picture, rows of numbers, figures--

"I'm Director Winslow," the man said. "Federal Stockpile Conservation. You better talk fast, or there'll be a Security car here in five minutes."

Cole moved--fast. He raced, head down, back along the path to the cart, toward the street.

Something hit him. A wall of force, throwing him down on his face. He sprawled in a heap, numb and dazed. His body ached, vibrating wildly, out of control. Waves of shock rolled over him, gradually diminishing.

He got shakily to his feet. His head spun. He was weak, shattered, trembling violently. The man was coming down the walk after him. Cole pulled himself onto the cart, gasping and retching. The horses jumped into life. Cole rolled over against the seat, sick with the motion of the swaying cart.

He caught hold of the reins and managed to drag himself up in a sitting position. The cart gained speed, turning a corner. Houses flew past. Cole urged the team weakly, drawing great shuddering breaths. Houses and streets, a blur of motion, as the cart flew faster and faster along.

Then he was leaving the town, leaving the neat little houses behind. He was on some sort of highway. Big buildings, factories, on both sides of the highway. Figures, men watching in astonishment.

After awhile the factories fell behind. Cole slowed the team down. What had the man meant? Fifth Atomic War. Horses destroyed. It didn't make sense. And they had things he knew nothing about. Force fields. Planes without wings--soundless.

Cole reached around in his pockets. He found the identification tube the man had handed him. In the excitement he had carried it off. He unrolled the tube slowly and began to study it. The writing was strange to him.

For a long time he studied the tube. Then, gradually, he became aware of something. Something in the top right-hand corner.

A date. October 6, 2128.

Cole's vision blurred. Everything spun and wavered around him. October, 2128. Could it be?

But he held the paper in his hand. Thin, metal paper. Like foil. And it had to be. It said so, right in the corner, printed on the paper itself.

Cole rolled the tube up slowly, numbed with shock. Two hundred years. It didn't seem possible. But things were beginning to make sense. He was in the future, two hundred years in the future.

While he was mulling this over, the swift black Security ship appeared overhead, diving rapidly toward the horse-drawn cart, as it moved slowly along the road.

Reinhart's vidscreen buzzed. He snapped it quickly on. "Yes?"

"Report from Security."

"Put it through." Reinhart waited tensely as the lines locked in place. The screen re-lit.

"This is Dixon. Western Regional Command." The officer cleared his throat, shuffling his message plates. "The man from the past has been reported, moving away from the New York area."

"Which side of your net?"

"Outside. He evaded the net around Central Park by entering one of the small towns at the rim of the slag area."

"Evaded?"

"We assumed he would avoid the towns. Naturally the net failed to encompass any of the towns."

Reinhart's jaw stiffened. "Go on."

"He entered the town of Petersville a few minutes before the net closed around the park. We burned the park level, but naturally found nothing. He had already gone. An hour later we received a report from a resident in Petersville, an official of the Stockpile Conservation Department. The man from the past had come to his door, looking for work. Winslow, the official, engaged him in conversation, trying to hold onto him, but he escaped,
driving his cart off. Winslow called Security right away, but by then it was too late."

"Report to me as soon as anything more comes in. We must have him--and damn soon." Reinhart snapped the screen off. It died quickly.

He sat back in his chair, waiting.

Cole saw the shadow of the Security ship. He reacted at once. A second after the shadow passed over him, Cole was out of the cart, running and falling. He rolled, twisting and turning, pulling his body as far away from the cart as possible.

There was a blinding roar and flash of white light. A hot wind rolled over Cole, picking him up and tossing him like a leaf. He shut his eyes, letting his body relax. He bounced, falling and striking the ground. Gravel and stones tore into his face, his knees, the palms of his hands.

Cole cried out, shrieking in pain. His body was on fire. He was being consumed, incinerated by the blinding white orb of fire. The orb expanded, growing in size, swelling like some monstrous sun, twisted and bloated. The end had come. There was no hope. He gritted his teeth--

The greedy orb faded, dying down. It sputtered and winked out, blackening into ash. The air reeked, a bitter acrid smell. His clothes were burning and smoking. The ground under him was hot, baked dry, seared by the blast. But he was alive. At least, for awhile.

Cole opened his eyes slowly. The cart was gone. A great hole gaped where it had been, a shattered sore in the center of the highway. An ugly cloud hung above the hole, black and ominous. Far above, the wingless plane circled, watching for any signs of life.

Cole lay, breathing shallowly, slowly. Time passed. The sun moved across the sky with agonizing slowness. It was perhaps four in the afternoon. Cole calculated mentally. In three hours it would be dark. If he could stay alive until then--

Had the plane seen him leap from the cart?
He lay without moving. The late afternoon sun beat down on him. He felt sick, nauseated and feverish. His mouth was dry.

Some ants ran over his outstretched hand. Gradually, the immense black cloud was beginning to drift away, dispersing into a formless blob.

The cart was gone. The thought lashed against him, pounding at his brain, mixing with his labored pulse-beat. Gone. Destroyed. Nothing but ashes and debris remained. The realization dazed him.

Finally the plane finished its circling, winging its way toward the horizon. At last it vanished. The sky was clear.

Cole got unsteadily to his feet. He wiped his face shakily. His body ached and trembled. He spat a couple times, trying to clear his mouth. The plane would probably send in a report. People would be coming to look for him. Where could he go?

To his right a line of hills rose up, a distant green mass. Maybe he could reach them. He began to walk slowly. He had to be very careful. They were looking for him--and they had weapons. Incredible weapons.

He would be lucky to still be alive when the sun set. His team and Fixit cart were gone--and all his tools. Cole reached into his pockets, searching through them hopefully. He brought out some small screwdrivers, a little pair of cutting pliers, some wire, some solder, the whetstone, and finally the lady's knife.

Only a few small tools remained. He had lost everything else. But without the cart he was safer, harder to spot. They would have more trouble finding him, on foot.

Cole hurried along, crossing the level fields toward the distant range of hills.

The call came through to Reinhart almost at once. Dixon's features formed on the vidscreen. "I have a further report, Commissioner." Dixon scanned the plate. "Good news. The man from the past was sighted moving away from Petersville, along highway 13, at about ten miles an hour, on his horse-drawn cart. Our ship bombed him immediately."

"Did--did you get him?"
"The pilot reports no sign of life after the blast."

Reinhart's pulse almost stopped. He sank back in his chair. "Then he's dead!"

"Actually, we won't know for certain until we can examine the debris. A surface car is speeding toward the spot. We should have the complete report in a short time. We'll notify you as soon as the information comes in."

Reinhart reached out and cut the screen. It faded into darkness. Had they got the man from the past? Or had he escaped again? Weren't they ever going to get him? Couldn't he be captured? And meanwhile, the SRB machines were silent, showing nothing at all.

Reinhart sat brooding, waiting impatiently for the report of the surface car to come in.

* * * * *
It was evening.

"Come on!" Steven shouted, running frantically after his brother. "Come on back!"

"Catch me." Earl ran and ran, down the side of the hill, over behind a military storage depot, along a neotex fence, jumping finally down into Mrs. Norris' back yard.

Steven hurried after his brother, sobbing for breath, shouting and gasping as he ran. "Come back! You come back with that!"

"What's he got?" Sally Tate demanded, stepping out suddenly to block Steven's way.

Steven halted, his chest rising and falling. "He's got my intersystem vidsender." His small face twisted with rage and misery. "He better give it back!"

Earl came circling around from the right. In the warm gloom of evening he was almost invisible. "Here I am," he announced. "What you going to do?"

Steven glared at him hotly. His eyes made out the square box in Earl's hands. "You give that back! Or--or I'll tell Dad."

Earl laughed. "Make me."

"Dad'll make you."

"You better give it to him," Sally said.

"Catch me." Earl started off. Steven pushed Sally out of the way, lashing wildly at his brother. He collided with him, throwing him sprawling. The box fell from Earl's hands. It skidded to the pavement, crashing into the side of a guide-light post.

Earl and Steven picked themselves up slowly. They gazed down at the broken box.

"See?" Steven shrilled, tears filling his eyes. "See what you did?"

"You did it. You pushed into me."

"You did it!" Steven bent down and picked up the box. He carried it over to the guide-light, sitting down on the curb to examine it.

Earl came slowly over. "If you hadn't pushed me it wouldn't have got broken."

Night was descending rapidly. The line of hills rising above the town were already lost in darkness. A few lights had come on here and there. The evening was warm. A surface car slammed its doors, some place off in the distance. In the sky ships droned back and forth, weary commuters coming home from work in the big underground factory units.

Thomas Cole came slowly toward the three children grouped around the guide-light. He moved with difficulty, his body sore and bent with fatigue. Night had come, but he was not safe yet.

He was tired, exhausted and hungry. He had walked a long way. And he had to have something to eat--soon.

A few feet from the children Cole stopped. They were all intent and absorbed by the box on Steven's knees.

Suddenly a hush fell over the children. Earl looked up slowly.

In the dim light the big stooped figure of Thomas Cole seemed extra menacing. His long arms hung down loosely at his sides. His face was lost in shadow. His body was shapeless, indistinct. A big unformed statue, standing silently a few feet away, unmoving in the half-darkness.

"Who are you?" Earl demanded, his voice low.

"What do you want?" Sally said. The children edged away nervously. "Get away."

Cole came toward them. He bent down a little. The beam from the guide-light crossed his features. Lean, prominent nose, beak-like, faded blue eyes--

Steven scrambled to his feet, clutching the vidsender box. "You get out of here!"

"Wait." Cole smiled crookedly at them. His voice was dry and raspy. "What do you have there?" He pointed with his long, slender fingers. "The box you're holding."

The children were silent. Finally Steven stirred. "It's my inter-system vidsender."

"Only it doesn't work," Sally said.

"Earl broke it." Steven glared at his brother bitterly. "Earl threw it down and broke it."

Cole smiled a little. He sank down wearily on the edge of the curb, sighing with relief. He had been walking too long. His body ached with fatigue. He was hungry, and tired. For a long time he sat, wiping perspiration from his neck and face, too exhausted to speak.

"Who are you?" Sally demanded, at last. "Why do you have on those funny clothes? Where did you come from?"

"Where?" Cole looked around at the children. "From a long way off. A long way." He shook his head slowly from side to side, trying to clear it.

"What's your therapy?" Earl said.
"My therapy?"
"What do you do? Where do you work?"
Cole took a deep breath and let it out again slowly. "I fix things. All kinds of things. Any kind."
Earl sneered. "Nobody fixes things. When they break you throw them away."
Cole didn't hear him. Sudden need had roused him, getting him suddenly to his feet. "You know any work I can find?" he demanded. "Things I could do? I can fix anything. Clocks, type-writers, refrigerators, pots and pans. Leaks in the roof. I can fix anything there is."
Steven held out his inter-system vidsender. "Fix this."
There was silence. Slowly, Cole's eyes focussed on the box. "That?"
"My sender. Earl broke it."
Cole took the box slowly. He turned it over, holding it up to the light. He frowned, concentrating on it. His long, slender fingers moved carefully over the surface, exploring it.
"He'll steal it!" Earl said suddenly.
"No." Cole shook his head vaguely. "I'm reliable." His sensitive fingers found the studs that held the box together. He depressed the studs, pushing them expertly in. The box opened, revealing its complex interior.
"He got it open," Sally whispered.
"Give it back!" Steven demanded, a little frightened. He held out his hand. "I want it back."
The three children watched Cole apprehensively. Cole fumbled in his pocket. Slowly he brought out his tiny screwdrivers and pliers. He laid them in a row beside him. He made no move to return the box.
"I want it back," Steven said feebly.
Cole looked up. His faded blue eyes took in the sight of the three children standing before him in the gloom. "I'll fix it for you. You said you wanted it fixed."
"I want it back." Steven stood on one foot, then the other, torn by doubt and indecision. "Can you really fix it? Can you make it work again?"
"Yes."
"All right. Fix it for me, then."
A sly smile flickered across Cole's tired face. "Now, wait a minute. If I fix it, will you bring me something to eat? I'm not fixing it for nothing."
"Something to eat?"
"Food. I need hot food. Maybe some coffee."
Steven nodded. "Yes. I'll get it for you."
Cole relaxed. "Fine. That's fine." He turned his attention back to the box resting between his knees. "Then I'll fix it for you. I'll fix it for you good."
His fingers flew, working and twisting, tracing down wires and relays, exploring and examining. Finding out about the inter-system vidsender. Discovering how it worked.
Steven slipped into the house through the emergency door. He made his way to the kitchen with great care, walking on tip-toe. He punched the kitchen controls at random, his heart beating excitedly. The stove began to whirl, purring into life. Meter readings came on, crossing toward the completion marks.
Presently the stove opened, sliding out a tray of steaming dishes. The mechanism clicked off, dying into silence. Steven grabbed up the contents of the tray, filling his arms. He carried everything down the hall, out the emergency door and into the yard. The yard was dark. Steven felt his way carefully along.
He managed to reach the guide-light without dropping anything at all.
Thomas Cole got slowly to his feet as Steven came into view. "Here," Steven said. He dumped the food onto the curb, gasping for breath. "Here's the food. Is it finished?"
Cole held out the inter-system vidsender. "It's finished. It was pretty badly smashed."
Earl and Sally gazed up, wide-eyed. "Does it work?" Sally asked.
"Of course not," Earl stated. "How could it work? He couldn't--"
"Turn it on!" Sally nudged Steven eagerly. "See if it works."
Steven was holding the box under the light, examining the switches. He clicked the main switch on. The indicator light gleamed. "It lights up," Steven said.
"Say something into it."
Steven spoke into the box. "Hello! Hello! This is operator 6-Z75 calling. Can you hear me? This is operator 6-Z75. Can you hear me?"
In the darkness, away from the beam of the guide-light, Thomas Cole sat crouched over the food. He ate gratefully, silently. It was good food, well cooked and seasoned. He drank a container of orange juice and then a sweet drink he didn't recognize. Most of the food was strange to him, but he didn't care. He had walked a long way
and he was plenty hungry. And he still had a long way to go, before morning. He had to be deep in the hills before
the sun came up. Instinct told him that he would be safe among the trees and tangled growth--at least, as safe as he
could hope for.

He ate rapidly intent on the food. He did not look up until he was finished. Then he got slowly to his feet,
wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

The three children were standing around in a circle, operating the inter-system vidsender. He watched them for
a few minutes. None of them looked up from the small box. They were intent, absorbed in what they were doing.

"Well?" Cole said, at last. "Does it work all right?"

After a moment Steven looked up at him. There was a strange expression on his face. He nodded slowly. "Yes.
Yes, it works. It works fine."

Cole grunted. "All right." He turned and moved away from the light. "That's fine."

The children watched silently until the figure of Thomas Cole had completely disappeared. Slowly, they turned
and looked at each other. Then down at the box in Steven's hands. They gazed at the box in growing awe. Awe
mixed with dawning fear.

Steven turned and edged toward his house. "I've got to show it to my Dad," he murmured, dazed. "He's got to
know. Somebody's got to know!"

III

Eric Reinhart examined the vidsender box carefully, turning it around and around.

"Then he did escape from the blast," Dixon admitted reluctantly. "He must have leaped from the cart just before
the concussion."

Reinhart nodded. "He escaped. He got away from you--twice." He pushed the vidsender box away and leaned
abruptly toward the man standing uneasily in front of his desk. "What's your name again?"

"Elliot. Richard Elliot."

"And your son's name?"

"Steven."

"It was last night this happened?"

"About eight o'clock."

"Go on."

"Steven came into the house. He acted queerly. He was carrying his inter-system vidsender." Elliot pointed at
the box on Reinhart's desk. "That. He was nervous and excited. I asked what was wrong. For awhile he couldn't tell
me. He was quite upset. Then he showed me the vidsender." Elliot hesitated. "Commissioner, it had been changed. A lot of the wiring was
different. Moved around. Relays connected differently. Some parts were missing. New parts had been jury rigged
out of old. Then I discovered the thing that made me call Security. The vidsender--it really worked."

"Worked?"

"You see, it never was anything more than a toy. With a range of a few city blocks. So the kids could call back
and forth from their rooms. Like a sort of portable vidscreen. Commissioner, I tried out the vidsender, pushing the
call button and speaking into the microphone. I--I got a ship of the line. A battleship, operating beyond Proxima
Centaurus--over eight light years away. As far out as the actual vidsenders operate. Then I called Security. Right
away."

For a time Reinhart was silent. Finally he tapped the box lying on the desk. "You got a ship of the line--with
this?"

"That's right."

"How big are the regular vidsenders?"

Dixon supplied the information. "As big as a twenty-ton safe."

"That's what I thought." Reinhart waved his hand impatiently. "All right, Elliot. Thanks for turning the
information over to us. That's all."

Security police led Elliot outside the office.

Reinhart and Dixon looked at each other. "This is bad," Reinhart said harshly. "He has some ability, some kind
of mechanical ability. Genius, perhaps, to do a thing like this. Look at the period he came from, Dixon. The early
part of the twentieth century. Before the wars began. That was a unique period. There was a certain vitality, a certain
Inventions and machines. People had an uncanny ability with machines. A kind of intuition about machines--which
we don't have."

"You mean--"
"I mean a person like this coming into our own time is bad in itself, war or no war. He's too different. He's oriented along different lines. He has abilities we lack. This fixing skill of his. It throws us off, out of kilter. And with the war....

"Now I'm beginning to understand why the SRB machines couldn't factor him. It's impossible for us to understand this kind of person. Winslow says he asked for work, any kind of work. The man said he could do anything, fix anything. Do you understand what that means?"

"No," Dixon said. "What does it mean?"

"Can any of us fix anything? No. None of us can do that. We're specialized. Each of us has his own line, his own work. I understand my work, you understand yours. The tendency in evolution is toward greater and greater specialization. Man's society is an ecology that forces adaptation to it. Continual complexity makes it impossible for any of us to know anything outside our own personal field--I can't follow the work of the man sitting at the next desk over from me. Too much knowledge has piled up in each field. And there's too many fields.

"This man is different. He can fix anything, do anything. He doesn't work with knowledge, with science--the classified accumulation of facts. He knows nothing. It's not in his head, a form of learning. He works by intuition--his power is in his hands, not his head. Jack-of-all-trades. His hands! Like a painter, an artist. In his hands--and he cuts across our lives like a knife-blade."

"And the other problem?"

"The other problem is that this man, this variable man, has escaped into the Albertine Mountain range. Now we'll have one hell of a time finding him. He's clever--in a strange kind of way. Like some sort of animal. He's going to be hard to catch."

Reinhart sent Dixon out. After a moment he gathered up the handful of reports on his desk and carried them up to the SRB room. The SRB room was closed up, sealed off by a ring of armed Security police. Standing angrily before the ring of police was Peter Sherikov, his beard waggling angrily, his immense hands on his hips.

"What's going on?" Sherikov demanded. "Why can't I go in and peep at the odds?"

"Sorry." Reinhart cleared the police aside. "Come inside with me. I'll explain." The doors opened for them and they entered. Behind them the doors shut and the ring of police formed outside. "What brings you away from your lab?" Reinhart asked.

Sherikov shrugged. "Several things. I wanted to see you. I called you on the vidphone and they said you weren't available. I thought maybe something had happened. What's up?"

"I'll tell you in a few minutes." Reinhart called Kaplan over. "Here are some new items. Feed them in right away. I want to see if the machines can total them."

"Certainly, Commissioner." Kaplan took the message plates and placed them on an intake belt. The machines hummed into life.

"We'll know soon," Reinhart said, half aloud.

Sherikov shot him a keen glance. "We'll know what? Let me in on it. What's taking place?"

"We're in trouble. For twenty-four hours the machines haven't given any reading at all. Nothing but a blank. A total blank."

Sherikov's features registered disbelief. "But that isn't possible. Some odds exist at all times."

"The odds exist, but the machines aren't able to calculate them."

"Why not?"

"Because a variable factor has been introduced. A factor which the machines can't handle. They can't make any predictions from it."

"Can't they reject it?" Sherikov said slyly. "Can't they just--just ignore it?"

"No. It exists, as real data. Therefore it affects the balance of the material, the sum total of all other available data. To reject it would be to give a false reading. The machines can't reject any data that's known to be true."

Sherikov pulled moodily at his black beard. "I would be interested in knowing what sort of factor the machines can't handle. I thought they could take in all data pertaining to contemporary reality."

"They can. This factor has nothing to do with contemporary reality. That's the trouble. Histo-research in bringing its time bubble back from the past got overzealous and cut the circuit too quickly. The bubble came back loaded--with a man from the twentieth century. A man from the past."

"I see. A man from two centuries ago." The big Pole frowned. "And with a radically different Weltanschauung. No connection with our present society. Not integrated along our lines at all. Therefore the SRB machines are perplexed."

Reinhart grinned. "Perplexed? I suppose so. In any case, they can't do anything with the data about this man. The variable man. No statistics at all have been thrown up--no predictions have been made. And it knocks everything else out of phase. We're dependent on the constant showing of these odds. The whole war effort is geared
around them."
"The horse-shoe nail. Remember the old poem? For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of the shoe the horse was lost. For want of the horse the rider was lost. For want--"
"Exactly. A single factor coming along like this, one single individual, can throw everything off. It doesn't seem possible that one person could knock an entire society out of balance--but apparently it is."
"What are you doing about this man?"
"The Security police are organized in a mass search for him."
"Results?"
"He escaped into the Albertine Mountain Range last night. It'll be hard to find him. We must expect him to be loose for another forty-eight hours. It'll take that long for us to arrange the annihilation of the range area. Perhaps a trifle longer. And meanwhile--"
The SRB machines had finished factoring the new data. Reinhart and Sherikov hurried to take their places before the view windows.
For a moment nothing happened. Then odds were put up, locking in place.
Sherikov gasped. 99-2. In favor of Terra. "That's wonderful! Now we--"
The odds vanished. A rapid series of odds shot across the screen, a violent stream of numbers, changing almost instantly. At last the machines became silent.
Nothing showed. No odds. No totals at all. The view windows were blank.
"You see?" Reinhart murmured. "The same damn thing!"
Sherikov pondered. "Reinhart, you're too Anglo-Saxon, too impulsive. Be more Slavic. This man will be captured and destroyed within two days. You said so yourself. Meanwhile, we're all working night and day on the war effort. The warfleet is waiting near Proxima, taking up positions for the attack on the Centaurs. All our war plants are going full blast. By the time the attack date comes we'll have a full-sized invasion army ready to take off for the long trip to the Centauran colonies. The whole Terran population has been mobilized. The eight supply planets are pouring in material. All this is going on day and night, even without odds showing. Long before the attack comes this man will certainly be dead, and the machines will be able to show odds again."
Reinhart considered. "But it worries me, a man like that out in the open. Loose. A man who can't be predicted. It goes against science. We've been making statistical reports on society for two centuries. We have immense files of data. The machines are able to predict what each person and group will do at a given time, in a given situation. But this man is beyond all prediction. He's a variable. It's contrary to science."
"The indeterminate particle."
"What's that?"
"The particle that moves in such a way that we can't predict what position it will occupy at a given second. Random. The random particle."
"Exactly. It's--it's unnatural."
Sherikov laughed sarcastically. "Don't worry about it, Commissioner. The man will be captured and things will return to their natural state. You'll be able to predict people again, like laboratory rats in a maze. By the way--why is this room guarded?"
"I don't want anyone to know the machines show no totals. It's dangerous to the war effort."
"Margaret Duffe, for example?"
Reinhart nodded reluctantly. "They're too timid, these parliamentarians. If they discover we have no SRB odds they'll want to shut down the war planning and go back to waiting."
"Too slow for you, Commissioner? Laws, debates, council meetings, discussions.... Saves a lot of time if one man has all the power. One man to tell people what to do, think for them, lead them around."
Reinhart eyed the big Pole critically. "That reminds me. How is Icarus coming? Have you continued to make progress on the control turret?"
A scowl crossed Sherikov's broad features. "The control turret?" He waved his big hand vaguely. "I would say it's coming along all right. We'll catch up in time."
Instantly Reinhart became alert. "Catch up? You mean you're still behind?"
"Somewhat. A little. But we'll catch up." Sherikov retreated toward the door. "Let's go down to the cafeteria and have a cup of coffee. You worry too much, Commissioner. Take things more in your stride."
"I suppose you're right." The two men walked out into the hall. "I'm on edge. This variable man. I can't get him out of my mind."
"Has he done anything yet?"
"Nothing important. Rewired a child's toy. A toy vidsender."
"Oh?" Sherikov showed interest. "What do you mean? What did he do?"
"I'll show you." Reinhart led Sherikov down the hall to his office. They entered and Reinhart locked the door.

He handed Sherikov the toy and roughed in what Cole had done. A strange look crossed Sherikov's face. He found the studs on the box and depressed them. The box opened. The big Pole sat down at the desk and began to study the interior of the box. "You're sure it was the man from the past who rewired this?"

"Of course. On the spot. The boy damaged it playing. The variable man came along and the boy asked him to fix it. He fixed it, all right."

"Incredible." Sherikov's eyes were only an inch from the wiring. "Such tiny relays. How could he--" "What?"

"Nothing." Sherikov got abruptly to his feet, closing the box carefully. "Can I take this along? To my lab? I'd like to analyze it more fully."

"Of course. But why?"

"No special reason. Let's go get our coffee." Sherikov headed toward the door. "You say you expect to capture this man in a day or so?"

"Kill him, not capture him. We've got to eliminate him as a piece of data. We're assembling the attack formations right now. No slip-ups, this time. We're in the process of setting up a cross-bombing pattern to level the entire Albertine range. He must be destroyed, within the next forty-eight hours."

Sherikov nodded absently. "Of course," he murmured. A preoccupied expression still remained on his broad features. "I understand perfectly."

* * * * *

Thomas Cole crouched over the fire he had built, warming his hands. It was almost morning. The sky was turning violet gray. The mountain air was crisp and chill. Cole shivered and pulled himself closer to the fire.

The heat felt good against his hands. His hands. He gazed down at them, glowing yellow-red in the firelight. The nails were black and chipped. Warts and endless calluses on each finger, and the palms. But they were good hands; the fingers were long and tapered. He respected them, although in some ways he didn't understand them.

Cole was deep in thought, meditating over his situation. He had been in the mountains two nights and a day. The first night had been the worst. Stumbling and falling, making his way uncertainly up the steep slopes, through the tangled brush and undergrowth--

But when the sun came up he was safe, deep in the mountains, between two great peaks. And by the time the sun had set again he had fixed himself up a shelter and a means of making a fire. Now he had a neat little box trap, operated by a plaited grass rope and pit, a notched stake. One rabbit already hung by his hind legs and the trap was waiting for another.

The sky turned from violet gray to a deep cold gray, a metallic color. The mountains were silent and empty. Far off some place a bird sang, its voice echoing across the vast slopes and ravines. Other birds began to sing. Off to his right something crashed through the brush, an animal pushing its way along.

Day was coming. His second day. Cole got to his feet and began to unfasten the rabbit. Time to eat. And then? After that he had no plans. He knew instinctively that he could keep himself alive indefinitely with the tools he had retained, and the genius of his hands. He could kill game and skin it. Eventually he could build himself a permanent shelter, even make clothes but of hides. In winter--

But he was not thinking that far ahead. Cole stood by the fire, staring up at the sky, his hands on his hips. He squinted, suddenly tense. Something was moving. Something in the sky, drifting slowly through the grayness. A black dot.

He stamped out the fire quickly. What was it? He strained, trying to see. A bird?

A second dot joined the first. Two dots. Then three. Four. Five. A fleet of them, moving rapidly across the early morning sky. Toward the mountains.

Toward him.

Cole hurried away from the fire. He snatched up the rabbit and carried it along with him, into the tangled shelter he had built. He was invisible, inside the shelter. No one could find him. But if they had seen the fire--

He crouched in the shelter, watching the dots grow larger. They were planes, all right. Black wingless planes, coming closer each moment. Now he could hear them, a faint dull buzz, increasing until the ground shook under him.

The first plane dived. It dropped like a stone, swelling into a great black shape. Cole gasped, sinking down. The plane roared in an arc, swooping low over the ground. Suddenly bundles tumbled out, white bundles falling and scattering like seeds.
The bundles drifted rapidly to the ground. They landed. They were men. Men in uniform.

Now the second plane was diving. It roared overhead, releasing its load. More bundles tumbled out, filling the sky. The third plane dived, then the fourth. The air was thick with drifting bundles of white, a blanket of descending weed spores, settling to earth.

On the ground the soldiers were forming into groups. Their shouts carried to Cole, crouched in his shelter. Fear leaped through him. They were landing on all sides of him. He was cut off. The last two planes had dropped men behind him.

He got to his feet, pushing out of the shelter. Some of the soldiers had found the fire, the ashes and coals. One dropped down, feeling the coals with his hand. He waved to the others. They were circling all around, shouting and gesturing. One of them began to set up some kind of gun. Others were unrolling coils of tubing, locking a collection of strange pipes and machinery in place.

Cole ran. He rolled down a slope, sliding and falling. At the bottom he leaped to his feet and plunged into the brush. Vines and leaves tore at his face, slashing and cutting him. He fell again, tangled in a mass of twisted shrubbery. He fought desperately, trying to free himself. If he could reach the knife in his pocket--

Voices. Footsteps. Men were behind him, running down the slope. Cole struggled frantically, gasping and twisting, trying to pull loose. He strained, breaking the vines, clawing at them with his hands.

A soldier dropped to his knee, leveling his gun. More soldiers arrived, bringing up their rifles and aiming. Cole cried out. He closed his eyes, his body suddenly limp. He waited, his teeth locked together, sweat dripping down his neck, into his shirt, sagging against the mesh of vines and branches coiled around him.

Silence.

Cole opened his eyes slowly. The soldiers had regrouped. A huge man was striding down the slope toward them, barking orders as he came.

"Don't let go of him." The huge man came over, his black beard jutting out. "Hold on."

Cole gasped for breath. He was caught. There was nothing he could do. More soldiers were pouring down into the gulley, surrounding him on all sides. They studied him curiously murmuring together. Cole shook his head wearily and said nothing.

The huge man with the beard stood directly in front of him, his hands on his hips, looking him up and down. "Don't try to get away," the man said. "You can't get away. Do you understand?"

Cole nodded.


"Where--where are you taking me?"

Peter Sherikov studied the variable man for a moment before he answered. "Where? I'm taking you to my labs. Under the Urals." He glanced suddenly up at the sky. "We better hurry. The Security police will be starting their demolition attack in a few hours. We want to be a long way from here when that begins."

Sherikov settled down in his comfortable reinforced chair with a sigh. "It's good to be back." He signalled to one of his guards. "All right. You can unfasten him."

The metal clamps were removed from Cole's arms and legs. He sagged, sinking down in a heap. Sherikov watched him silently.

Cole sat on the floor, rubbing his wrists and legs, saying nothing.

"What do you want?" Sherikov demanded. "Food? Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Medicine? Are you sick? Injured?"

"No."

Sherikov wrinkled his nose. "A bath wouldn't hurt you any. We'll arrange that later." He lit a cigar, blowing a cloud of gray smoke around him. At the door of the room two lab guards stood with guns ready. No one else was in the room beside Sherikov and Cole.

Thomas Cole sat huddled in a heap on the floor, his head sunk down against his chest. He did not stir. His bent body seemed more elongated and stooped than ever, his hair tousled and unkempt, his chin and jowls a rough stubbled gray. His clothes were dirty and torn from crawling through the brush. His skin was cut and scratched; open sores dotted his neck and cheeks and forehead. He said nothing. His chest rose and fell. His faded blue eyes were almost closed. He looked quite old, a withered, dried-up old man.

Sherikov waved one of the guards over. "Have a doctor brought up here. I want this man checked over. He may
need intravenous injections. He may not have had anything to eat for awhile."

The guard departed.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," Sherikov said. "Before we go on I'll have you checked over. And
deloused at the same time."

Cole said nothing.

Sherikov laughed. "Buck up! You have no reason to feel bad." He leaned toward Cole, jabbing an immense
finger at him. "Another two hours and you'd have been dead, out there in the mountains. You know that?"

Cole nodded.

"You don't believe me. Look." Sherikov leaned over and snapped on the vidscreen mounted in the wall.
"Watch, this. The operation should still be going on."

The screen lit up. A scene gained form.

"This is a confidential Security channel. I had it tapped several years ago--for my own protection. What we're
seeing now is being piped in to Eric Reinhart." Sherikov grinned. "Reinhart arranged what you're seeing on the
screen. Pay close attention. You were there, two hours ago."

Cole turned toward the screen. At first he could not make out what was happening. The screen showed a vast
foaming cloud, a vortex of motion. From the speaker came a low rumble, a deep-throated roar. After a time the
screen shifted, showing a slightly different view. Suddenly Cole stiffened.

He was seeing the destruction of a whole mountain range.

The picture was coming from a ship, flying above what had once been the Albertine Mountain Range. Now
there was nothing but swirling clouds of gray and columns of particles and debris, a surging tide of restless material
gradually sweeping off and dissipating in all directions.

The Albertine Mountains had been disintegrated. Nothing remained but these vast clouds of debris. Below, on
the ground, a ragged plain stretched out, swept by fire and ruin. Gaping wounds yawned, immense holes without
bottom, craters side by side as far as the eye could see. Craters and debris. Like the blasted, pitted surface of the
moon. Two hours ago it had been rolling peaks and gulleys, brush and green bushes and trees.

Cole turned away.

"You see?" Sherikov snapped the screen off. "You were down there, not so long ago. All that noise and smoke-
-all for you. All for you, Mr. Variable Man from the past. Reinhart arranged that, to finish you off. I want you to
understand that. It's very important that you realize that."

Cole said nothing.

Sherikov reached into a drawer of the table before him. He carefully brought out a small square box and held it
out to Cole. "You wired this, didn't you?"

Cole took the box in his hands and held it. For a time his tired mind failed to focus. What did he have? He
concentrated on it. The box was the children's toy. The inter-system vidsender, they had called it.

"Yes. I fixed this." He passed it back to Sherikov. "I repaired that. It was broken."

Sherikov gazed down at him intently, his large eyes bright. He nodded, his black beard and cigar rising and
falling. "Good. That's all I wanted to know." He got suddenly to his feet, pushing his chair back. "I see the doctor's
here. He'll fix you up. Everything you need. Later on I'll talk to you again."

Unprotesting, Cole got to his feet, allowing the doctor to take hold of his arm and help him up.

After Cole had been released by the medical department, Sherikov joined him in his private dining room, a
floor above the actual laboratory.

The Pole gulped down a hasty meal, talking as he ate. Cole sat silently across from him, not eating or speaking.
His old clothing had been taken away and new clothing given him. He was shaved and rubbed down. His sores and
cuts were healed, his body and hair washed. He looked much healthier and younger, now. But he was still stooped
and tired, his blue eyes worn and faded. He listened to Sherikov's account of the world of 2136 AD without
comment.

"You can see," Sherikov said finally, waving a chicken leg, "that your appearance here has been very upsetting
to our program. Now that you know more about us you can see why Commissioner Reinhart was so interested in
destroying you."

Cole nodded.

"Reinhart, you realize, believes that the failure of the SRB machines is the chief danger to the war effort. But
that is nothing!" Sherikov pushed his plate away noisily, draining his coffee mug. "After all, wars can be fought
without statistical forecasts. The SRB machines only describe. They're nothing more than mechanical onlookers. In
themselves, they don't affect the course of the war. We make the war. They only analyze."

Cole nodded.

"More coffee?" Sherikov asked. He pushed the plastic container toward Cole. "Have some."
Cole accepted another cupful. "Thank you."

"You can see that our real problem is another thing entirely. The machines only do figuring for us in a few minutes that eventually we could do for our own selves. They're our servants, tools. Not some sort of gods in a temple which we go and pray to. Not oracles who can see into the future for us. They don't see into the future. They only make statistical predictions—not prophecies. There's a big difference there, but Reinhart doesn't understand it. Reinhart and his kind have made such things as the SRB machines into gods. But I have no gods. At least, not any I can see."

Cole nodded, sipping his coffee.

"I'm telling you all these things because you must understand what we're up against. Terra is hemmed in on all sides by the ancient Centauran Empire. It's been out there for centuries, thousands of years. No one knows how long. It's old—crumbling and rotting. Corrupt and venal. But it holds most of the galaxy around us, and we can't break out of the Sol system. I told you about Icarus, and Hedge's work in ftl flight. We must win the war against Centaurus. We've waited and worked a long time for this, the moment when we can break out and get room among the stars for ourselves. Icarus is the deciding weapon. The data on Icarus tipped the SRB odds in our favor—for the first time in history. Success in the war against Centaurus will depend on Icarus, not on the SRB machines. You see?"

Cole nodded.

"However, there is a problem. The data on Icarus which I turned over to the machines specified that Icarus would be completed in ten days. More than half that time has already passed. Yet, we are no closer to wiring up the control turret than we were then. The turret baffles us." Sherikov grinned ironically. "Even I have tried my hand at the wiring, but with no success. It's intricate—and small. Too many technical bugs not worked out. We are building only one, you understand. If we had many experimental models worked out before—"

"But this is the experimental model," Cole said.

"And built from the designs of a man dead four years—who isn't here to correct us. We've made Icarus with our own hands, down here in the labs. And he's giving us plenty of trouble." All at once Sherikov got to his feet. "Let's go down to the lab and look at him."

They descended to the floor below, Sherikov leading the way. Cole stopped short at the lab door.

"Quite a sight," Sherikov agreed. "We keep him down here at the bottom for safety's sake. He's well protected. Come on in. We have work to do."

In the center of the lab Icarus rose up, the gray squat cylinder that someday would flash through space at a speed of thousands of times that of light, toward the heart of Proxima Centaurus, over four light years away. Around the cylinder groups of men in uniform were laboring feverishly to finish the remaining work.

"Over here. The turret." Sherikov led Cole over to one side of the room. "It's guarded. Centauran spies are swarming everywhere on Terra. They see into everything. But so do we. That's how we get information for the SRB machines. Spies in both systems."

The translucent globe that was the control turret reposed in the center of a metal stand, an armed guard standing at each side. They lowered their guns as Sherikov approached.

"We don't want anything to happen to this," Sherikov said. "Everything depends on it." He put out his hand for the globe. Half way to it his hand stopped, striking against an invisible presence in the air.


One of the guards pressed a stud at his wrist. Around the globe the air shimmered and faded.

"Now." Sherikov's hand closed over the globe. He lifted it carefully from its mount and brought it out for Cole to see. "This is the control turret for our enormous friend here. This is what will slow him down when he's inside Centaurus. He slows down and re-enters this universe. Right in the heart of the star. Then—no more Centaurus."

Sherikov beamed. "And no more Armun."

But Cole was not listening. He had taken the globe from Sherikov and was turning it over and over, running his hands over it, his face close to its surface. He peered down into its interior, his face rapt and intent.

"You can't see the wiring. Not without lenses." Sherikov signalled for a pair of micro-lenses to be brought. He fitted them on Cole's nose, hooking them behind his ears. "Now try it. You can control the magnification. It's set for 1000X right now. You can increase or decrease it."

Cole gasped, swaying back and forth. Sherikov caught hold of him. Cole gazed down into the globe, moving his head slightly, focussing the glasses.

"It takes practice. But you can do a lot with them. Permits you to do microscopic wiring. There are tools to go along, you understand." Sherikov paused, licking his lip. "We can't get it done correctly. Only a few men can wire circuits using the micro-lenses and the little tools. We've tried robots, but there are too many decisions to be made. Robots can't make decisions. They just react."

Cole said nothing. He continued to gaze into the interior of the globe, his lips tight, his body taut and rigid. It
made Sherikov feel strangely uneasy.

"You look like one of those old fortune tellers," Sherikov said jokingly, but a cold shiver crawled up his spine. "Better hand it back to me." He held out his hand.

Slowly, Cole returned the globe. After a time he removed the micro-lenses, still deep in thought.

"Well?" Sherikov demanded. "You know what I want. I want you to wire this damn thing up." Sherikov came close to Cole, his big face hard. "You can do it, I think. I could tell by the way you held it--and the job you did on the children's toy, of course. You could wire it up right, and in five days. Nobody else can. And if it's not wired up Centaurus will keep on running the galaxy and Terra will have to sweat it out here in the Sol system. One tiny mediocre sun, one dust mote out of a whole galaxy."

Cole did not answer.

Sherikov became impatient. "Well? What do you say?"

"What happens if I don't wire this control for you? I mean, what happens to me?"

"Then I turn you over to Reinhart. Reinhart will kill you instantly. He thinks you're dead, killed when the Albertine Range was annihilated. If he had any idea I had saved you--"

"I see."

"I brought you down here for one thing. If you wire it up I'll have you sent back to your own time continuum. If you don't--"

Cole considered, his face dark and brooding.

"What do you have to lose? You'd already be dead, if we hadn't pulled you out of those hills."

"Can you really return me to my own time?"

"Of course!"

"Reinhart won't interfere?"

Sherikov laughed. "What can he do? How can he stop me? I have my own men. You saw them. They landed all around you. You'll be returned."

"Yes. I saw your men."

"Then you agree?"

"I agree," Thomas Cole said. "I'll wire it for you. I'll complete the control turret--within the next five days."

IV

Three days later Joseph Dixon slid a closed-circuit message plate across the desk to his boss.

"Here. You might be interested in this."

Reinhart picked the plate up slowly. "What is it? You came all the way here to show me this?"

"That's right."

"Why didn't you vidscreen it?"

Dixon smiled grimly. "You'll understand when you decode it. It's from Proxima Centaurus."

"Centaurus!"

"Our counter-intelligence service. They sent it direct to me. Here, I'll decode it for you. Save you the trouble."

Dixon came around behind Reinhart's desk. He leaned over the Commissioner's shoulder, taking hold of the plate and breaking the seal with his thumb nail.

"Hang on," Dixon said. "This is going to hit you hard. According to our agents on Armun, the Centauran High Council has called an emergency session to deal with the problem of Terra's impending attack. Centauran relay couriers have reported to the High Council that the Terran bomb Icarus is virtually complete. Work on the bomb has been rushed through final stages in the underground laboratories under the Ural Range, directed by the Terran physicist Peter Sherikov."

"So I understand from Sherikov himself. Are you surprised the Centaurans know about the bomb? They have spies swarming over Terra. That's no news."

"There's more." Dixon traced the message plate grimly, with an unsteady finger. "The Centauran relay couriers reported that Peter Sherikov brought an expert mechanic out of a previous time continuum to complete the wiring of the turret!"

Reinhart staggered, holding on tight to the desk. He closed his eyes, gasping.

"The variable man is still alive," Dixon murmured. "I don't know how. Or why. There's nothing left of the Albertines. And how the hell did the man get half way around the world?"

Reinhart opened his eyes slowly, his face twisting. "Sherikov! He must have removed him before the attack. I told Sherikov the attack was forthcoming. I gave him the exact hour. He had to get help--from the variable man. He couldn't meet his promise otherwise."

Reinhart leaped up and began to pace back and forth. "I've already informed the SRB machines that the variable man has been destroyed. The machines now show the original 7-6 ratio in our favor. But the ratio is based
on false information."

"Then you'll have to withdraw the false data and restore the original situation."

"No." Reinhart shook his head. "I can't do that. The machines must be kept functioning. We can't allow them to jam again. It's too dangerous. If Duffe should become aware that--"

"What are you going to do, then?" Dixon picked up the message plate. "You can't leave the machines with false data. That's treason."

"The data can't be withdrawn! Not unless equivalent data exists to take its place." Reinhart paced angrily back and forth. "Damn it, I was certain the man was dead. This is an incredible situation. He must be eliminated--at any cost."

Suddenly Reinhart stopped pacing. "The turret. It's probably finished by this time. Correct?"

Dixon nodded slowly in agreement. "With the variable man helping, Sherikov has undoubtedly completed work well ahead of schedule."

Reinhart's gray eyes flickered. "Then he's no longer of any use--even to Sherikov. We could take a chance.... Even if there were active opposition...."

"What's this?" Dixon demanded. "What are you thinking about?"

"How many units are ready for immediate action? How large a force can we raise without notice?"

"Because of the war we're mobilized on a twenty-four hour basis. There are seventy air units and about two hundred surface units. The balance of the Security forces have been transferred to the line, under military control."

"Men?"

"We have about five thousand men ready to go, still on Terra. Most of them in the process of being transferred to military transports. I can hold it up at any time."

"Missiles?"

"Fortunately, the launching tubes have not yet been disassembled. They're still here on Terra. In another few days they'll be moving out for the Colonial fracas."

"Then they're available for immediate use?"

"Yes."

"Good." Reinhart locked his hands, knotting his fingers harshly together in sudden decision. "That will do exactly. Unless I am completely wrong, Sherikov has only a half-dozen air units and no surface cars. And only about two hundred men. Some defense shields, of course--"

"What are you planning?"

Reinhart's face was gray and hard, like stone. "Send out orders for all available Security units to be unified under your immediate command. Have them ready to move by four o'clock this afternoon. We're going to pay a visit," Reinhart stated grimly. "A surprise visit. On Peter Sherikov."

* * * * *

"Stop here," Reinhart ordered.

The surface car slowed to a halt. Reinhart peered cautiously out, studying the horizon ahead.

On all sides a desert of scrub grass and sand stretched out. Nothing moved or stirred. To the right the grass and sand rose up to form immense peaks, a range of mountains without end, disappearing finally into the distance. The Urals.

"Over there," Reinhart said to Dixon, pointing. "See?"

"No."

"Look hard. It's difficult to spot unless you know what to look for. Vertical pipes. Some kind of vent. Or periscopes."

Dixon saw them finally. "I would have driven past without noticing."

"It's well concealed. The main labs are a mile down. Under the range itself. It's virtually impregnable. Sherikov had it built years ago, to withstand any attack. From the air, by surface cars, bombs, missiles--"

"He must feel safe down there."

"No doubt." Reinhart gazed up at the sky. A few faint black dots could be seen, moving lazily about, in broad circles. "Those aren't ours, are they? I gave orders--"

"No. They're not ours. All our units are out of sight. Those belong to Sherikov. His patrol."

Reinhart relaxed. "Good." He reached over and flicked on the vidscreen over the board of the car. "This screen is shielded? It can't be traced?"

"There's no way they can spot it back to us. It's non-directional."

The screen glowed into life. Reinhart punched the combination keys and sat back to wait.

After a time an image formed on the screen. A heavy face, bushy black beard and large eyes.

Peter Sherikov gazed at Reinhart with surprised curiosity. "Commissioner! Where are you calling from? What--
"How's the work progressing?" Reinhart broke in coldly. "Is Icarus almost complete?"
Sherikov beamed with expansive pride. "He's done, Commissioner. Two days ahead of time. Icarus is ready to be launched into space. I tried to call your office, but they told me--"
"I'm not at my office." Reinhart leaned toward the screen. "Open your entrance tunnel at the surface. You're about to receive visitors."
Sherikov blinked. "Visitors?"
"I'm coming down to see you. About Icarus. Have the tunnel opened for me at once."
"Exactly where are you, Commissioner?"
"On the surface."
Sherikov's eyes flickered. "Oh? But--"
"Open up!" Reinhart snapped. He glanced at his wristwatch. "I'll be at the entrance in five minutes. I expect to find it ready for me."
"Of course." Sherikov nodded in bewilderment. "I'm always glad to see you, Commissioner. But I--"
"Five minutes, then." Reinhart cut the circuit. The screen died. He turned quickly to Dixon. "You stay up here, as we arranged. I'll go down with one company of police. You understand the necessity of exact timing on this?"
"We won't slip up. Everything's ready. All units are in their places."
"Good." Reinhart pushed the tunnel open for him. "You join your directional staff. I'll proceed toward the tunnel entrance."
"Good luck." Dixon leaped out of the car, onto the sandy ground. A gust of dry air swirled into the car around Reinhart. "I'll see you later."
Reinhart slammed the door. He turned to the group of police crouched in the rear of the car, their guns held tightly. "Here we go," Reinhart murmured. "Hold on."
The car raced across the sandy ground, toward the tunnel entrance to Sherikov's underground fortress.
Sherikov met Reinhart at the bottom end of the tunnel, where the tunnel opened up onto the main floor of the lab.
The big Pole approached, his hand out, beaming with pride and satisfaction. "It's a pleasure to see you, Commissioner. This is an historic moment."
Reinhart got out of the car, with his group of armed Security police. "Calls for a celebration, doesn't it?" he said.
"That's a good idea! We're two days ahead, Commissioner. The SRB machines will be interested. The odds should change abruptly at the news."
"Let's go down to the lab. I want to see the control turret myself."
A shadow crossed Sherikov's face. "I'd rather not bother the workmen right now, Commissioner. They've been under a great load, trying to complete the turret in time. I believe they're putting a few last finishes on it at this moment."
"We can view them by vidscreen. I'm curious to see them at work. It must be difficult to wire such minute relays."
Sherikov shook his head. "Sorry, Commissioner. No vidscreen on them. I won't allow it. This is too important. Our whole future depends on it."
Reinhart snapped a signal to his company of police. "Put this man under arrest."
Sherikov blanched. His mouth fell open. The police moved quickly around him, their gun tubes up, jabbing into him. He was searched rapidly, efficiently. His gun belt and concealed energy screen were yanked off.
"What's going on?" Sherikov demanded, some color returning to his face. "What are you doing?"
"You're under arrest for the duration of the war. You're relieved of all authority. From now on one of my men will operate Designs. When the war is over you'll be tried before the Council and President Duffe."
Sherikov shook his head, dazed. "I don't understand. What's this all about? Explain it to me, Commissioner. What's happened?"
Reinhart signalled to his police. "Get ready. We're going into the lab. We may have to shoot our way in. The variable man should be in the area of the bomb, working on the control turret."
Instantly Sherikov's face hardened. His black eyes glittered, alert and hostile.
Reinhart laughed harshly. "We received a counter-intelligence report from Centaurus. I'm surprised at you, Sherikov. You know the Centaurans are everywhere with their relay couriers. You should have known--"
Sherikov moved. Fast. All at once he broke away from the police, throwing his massive body against them. They fell, scattering. Sherikov ran--directly at the wall. The police fired wildly. Reinhart fumbled frantically for his gun tube, pulling it up.
Sherikov reached the wall, running head down, energy beams flashing around him. He struck against the wall--and vanished.

"Down!" Reinhart shouted. He dropped to his hands and knees. All around him his police dived for the floor. They had to get out, and right away. Sherikov had escaped. A false wall, an energy barrier set to respond to his pressure. He had dashed through it to safety. He--

From all sides an inferno burst, a flaming roar of death surging over them, around them, on every side. The room was alive with blazing masses of destruction, bouncing from wall to wall. They were caught between four banks of power, all of them open to full discharge. A trap--a death trap.

Reinhart reached the hall gasping for breath. He leaped to his feet. A few Security police followed him. Behind them, in the flaming room, the rest of the company screamed and struggled, blasted out of existence by the leaping bursts of power.

Reinhart assembled his remaining men. Already, Sherikov's guards were forming. At one end of the corridor a snub-barreled robot gun was maneuvering into position. A siren wailed. Guards were running on all sides, hurrying to battle stations.

The robot gun opened fire. Part of the corridor exploded, bursting into fragments. Clouds of choking debris and particles swept around them. Reinhart and his police retreated, moving back along the corridor.

They reached a junction. A second robot gun was rumbling toward them, hurrying to get within range. Reinhart fired carefully, aiming at its delicate control. Abruptly the gun spun convulsively. It lashed against the wall, smashing itself into the unyielding metal. Then it collapsed in a heap, gears still whining and spinning.

"Come on." Reinhart moved away, crouching and running. He glanced at his watch. Almost time. A few more minutes. A group of lab guards appeared ahead of them. Reinhart fired. Behind him his police fired past him, violet shafts of energy catching the group of guards as they entered the corridor. The guards spilled apart, falling and twisting. Part of them settled into dust, drifting down the corridor. Reinhart made his way toward the lab, crouching and leaping, pushing past heaps of debris and remains, followed by his men. "Come on! Don't stop!"

Suddenly from around them the booming, enlarged voice of Sherikov thundered, magnified by rows of wall speakers along the corridor. Reinhart halted, glancing around.

"Reinhart! You haven't got a chance. You'll never get back to the surface. Throw down your guns and give up. You're surrounded on all sides. You're a mile, under the surface."

"Are you sure, Sherikov?" he grunted.

Sherikov laughed, his harsh, metallic peals rolling in waves against Reinhart's eardrums. "I don't want to have to kill you, Commissioner. You're vital to the war: I'm sorry you found out about the variable man. I admit we overlooked the Centauran espionage as a factor in this. But now that you know about him--"

Suddenly Sherikov's voice broke off. A deep rumble had shaken the floor, a lapping vibration that shuddered through the corridor.

Reinhart sagged with relief. He peered through the clouds of debris, making out the figures on his watch. Right on time. Not a second late.

The first of the hydrogen missiles, launched from the Council buildings on the other side of the world, were beginning to arrive. At exactly six o'clock Joseph Dixon, standing on the surface four miles from the entrance tunnel, gave the sign to the waiting units.

The first job was to break down Sherikov's defense screens. The missiles had to penetrate without interference. At Dixon's signal a fleet of thirty Security ships dived from a height of ten miles, swooping above the mountains, directly over the underground laboratories. Within five minutes the defense screens had been smashed, and all the tower projectors leveled flat. Now the mountains were virtually unprotected.

"So far so good," Dixon murmured, as he watched from his secure position. The fleet of Security ships roared back, their work done. Across the face of the desert the police surface cars were crawling rapidly toward the entrance tunnel, snaking from side to side.

Meanwhile, Sherikov's counter-attack had begun to go into operation.

Guns mounted among the hills opened fire. Vast columns of flame burst up in the path of the advancing cars. The cars hesitated and retreated, as the plain was churned up by a howling vortex, a thundering chaos of explosions. Here and there a car vanished in a cloud of particles. A group of cars moving away suddenly scattered, caught up by a giant wind that lashed across them and swept them up into the air.

Dixon gave orders to have the cannon silenced. The police air arm again swept overhead, a sullen roar of jets
that shook the ground below. The police ships divided expertly and hurtled down on the cannon protecting the hills.

The cannon forgot the surface cars and lifted their snouts to meet the attack. Again and again the airships came, rocking the mountains with titanic blasts.

The guns became silent. Their echoing boom diminished, died away reluctantly, as bombs took critical toll of them.

Dixon watched with satisfaction as the bombing came to an end. The airships rose in a thick swarm, black gnats shooting up in triumph from a dead carcass. They hurried back as emergency anti-aircraft robot guns swung into position and saturated the sky with blazing puffs of energy.

Dixon checked his wristwatch. The missiles were already on the way from North America. Only a few minutes remained.

The surface cars, freed by the successful bombing, began to regroup for a new frontal attack. Again they crawled forward, across the burning plain, bearing down cautiously on the battered wall of mountains, heading toward the twisted wrecks that had been the ring of defense guns. Toward the entrance tunnel.

An occasional cannon fired feebly at them. The cars came grimly on. Now, in the hollows of the hills, Sherikov's troops were hurrying to the surface to meet the attack. The first car reached the shadow of the mountains....

A deafening hail of fire burst loose. Small robot guns appeared everywhere, needle barrels emerging from behind hidden screens, trees and shrubs, rocks, stones. The police cars were caught in a withering cross-fire, trapped at the base of the hills.

Down the slopes Sherikov's guards raced, toward the stalled cars. Clouds of heat rose up and boiled across the plain as the cars fired up at the running men. A robot gun dropped like a slug onto the plain and screamed toward the cars, firing as it came.

Dixon twisted nervously. Only a few minutes. Any time, now. He shaded his eyes and peered up at the sky. No sign of them yet. He wondered about Reinhart. No signal had come up from below. Clearly, Reinhart had run into trouble. No doubt there was desperate fighting going on in the maze of underground tunnels, the intricate web of passages that honeycombed the earth below the mountains.

In the air, Sherikov's few defense ships were taking on the police raiders. Outnumbered, the defense ships darted rapidly, wildly, putting up a futile fight.

Sherikov's guards streamed out onto the plain. Crouching and running, they advanced toward the stalled cars.

The police airships screeched down at them, guns thundering.

Dixon held his breath. When the missiles arrived--

The first missile struck. A section of the mountain vanished, turned to smoke and foaming gasses. The wave of heat slapped Dixon across the face, spinning him around. Quickly he re-entered his ship and took off, shooting rapidly away from the scene. He glanced back. A second and third missile had arrived. Great gaping pits yawned among the mountains, vast sections missing like broken teeth. Now the missiles could penetrate to the underground laboratories below.

On the ground, the surface cars halted beyond the danger area, waiting for the missile attack to finish. When the eighth missile had struck, the cars again moved forward. No more missiles fell.

Dixon swung his ship around, heading back toward the scene. The laboratory was exposed. The top sections of it had been ripped open. The laboratory lay like a tin can, torn apart by mighty explosions, its first floors visible from the air. Men and cars were pouring down into it, fighting with the guards swarming to the surface.

* * * * *

Dixon watched intently. Sherikov's men were bringing up heavy guns, big robot artillery. But the police ships were diving again. Sherikov's defensive patrols had been cleaned from the sky. The police ships whined down, arcing over the exposed laboratory. Small bombs fell, whistling down, pin-pointing the artillery rising to the surface on the remaining lift stages.

Abruptly Dixon's vidscreen clicked. Dixon turned toward it.

Reinhart's features formed. "Call off the attack." His uniform was torn. A deep bloody gash crossed his cheek. He grinned sourly at Dixon, pushing his tangled hair back out of his face. "Quite a fight."

"Sherikov--"

"He's called off his guards. We've agreed to a truce. It's all over. No more needed." Reinhart gasped for breath, wiping grime and sweat from his neck. "Land your ship and come down here at once."

"The variable man?"

"That comes next," Reinhart said grimly. He adjusted his gun tube. "I want you down here, for that part. I want you to be in on the kill."

Reinhart turned away from the vidscreen. In the corner of the room Sherikov stood silently, saying frothing.
"Well?" Reinhart barked. "Where is he? Where will I find him?"

Sherikov licked his lips nervously, glancing up at Reinhart. "Commissioner, are you sure--"

"The attack has been called off. Your labs are safe. So is your life. Now it's your turn to come through."

Reinhart gripped his gun, moving toward Sherikov. "Where is he?"

For a moment Sherikov hesitated. Then slowly his huge body sagged, defeated. He shook his head wearily.

"All right. I'll show you where he is." His voice was hardly audible, a dry whisper. "Down this way. Come on."

Reinhart followed Sherikov out of the room, into the corridor. Police and guards were working rapidly, clearing the debris and ruins away, putting out the hydrogen fires that burned everywhere. "No tricks, Sherikov."

"No tricks." Sherikov nodded resignedly. "Thomas Cole is by himself. In a wing lab off the main rooms."

"Cole?"

"The variable man. That's his name." The Pole turned his massive head a little. "He has a name."

Reinhart waved his gun. "Hurry up. I don't want anything to go wrong. This is the part I came for."

"You must remember something, Commissioner."

"What is it?"

Sherikov stopped walking. "Commissioner, nothing must happen to the globe. The control turret. Everything depends on it, the war, our whole--"

"I know. Nothing will happen to the damn thing. Let's go."

"If it should get damaged--"

"I'm not after the globe. I'm interested only in--in Thomas Cole."

They came to the end of the corridor and stopped before a metal door. Sherikov nodded at the door. "In there."

Reinhart moved back. "Open the door."

"Open it yourself. I don't want to have anything to do with it."

Reinhart shrugged. He stepped up to the door. Holding his gun level he raised his hand, passing it in front of the eye circuit. Nothing happened.

Reinhart frowned. He pushed the door with his hand. The door slid open. Reinhart was looking into a small laboratory. He glimpsed a workbench, tools, heaps of equipment, measuring devices, and in the center of the bench the transparent globe, the control turret.

"Cole?" Reinhart advanced quickly into the room. He glanced around him, suddenly alarmed. "Where--"

The room was empty. Thomas Cole was gone.

When the first missile struck, Cole stopped work and sat listening.

Far off, a distant rumble rolled through the earth, shaking the floor under him. On the bench, tools and equipment danced up and down. A pair of pliers fell crashing to the floor. A box of screws tipped over, spilling its minute contents out.

Cole listened for a time. Presently he lifted the transparent globe from the bench. With carefully controlled hands he held the globe up, running his fingers gently over the surface, his faded blue eyes thoughtful. Then, after a time, he placed the globe back on the bench, in its mount.

The globe was finished. A faint glow of pride moved through the variable man. The globe was the finest job he had ever done.

The deep rumblings ceased. Cole became instantly alert. He jumped down from his stool, hurrying across the room to the door. For a moment he stood by the door listening intently. He could hear noise on the other side, shouts, guards rushing past, dragging heavy equipment, working frantically.

A rolling crash echoed down the corridor and lapped against his door. The concussion spun him around. Again a tide of energy shook the walls and floor and sent him down on his knees.

The lights flickered and winked out.

Cole fumbled in the dark until he found a flashlight. Power failure. He could hear crackling flames. Abruptly the lights came on again, an ugly yellow, then faded back out. Cole bent down and examined the door with his flashlight. A magnetic lock. Dependent on an externally induced electric flux. He grabbed a screwdriver and pried at the door. For a moment it held. Then it fell open.

Cole stepped warily out into the corridor. Everything was in shambles. Guards wandered everywhere, burned and half-blinded. Two lay groaning under a pile of wrecked equipment. Fused guns, reeking metal. The air was heavy with the smell of burning wiring and plastic. A thick cloud that choked him and made him bend double as he advanced.

"Halt," a guard gasped feebly, struggling to rise. Cole pushed past him and down the corridor. Two small robot guns, still functioning, glided past him hurriedly toward the drumming chaos of battle. He followed.

At a major intersection the fight was in full swing. Sherikov's guards fought Security police, crouched behind pillars and barricades, firing wildly, desperately. Again the whole structure shuddered as a great booming blast...
ignited some place above. Bombs? Shells?

Cole threw himself down as a violet beam cut past his ear and disintegrated the wall behind him. A Security policeman, wild-eyed, firing erratically. One of Sherikov's guards winged him and his gun skidded to the floor.

A robot cannon turned toward him as he made his way past the intersection. He began to run. The cannon rolled along behind him, aiming itself uncertainly. Cole hunched over as he shambled rapidly along, gasping for breath. In the flickering yellow light he saw a handful of Security police advancing, firing expertly, intent on a line of defense Sherikov's guards had hastily set up.

The robot cannon altered its course to take them on, and Cole escaped around a corner.

He was in the main lab, the big chamber where Icarus himself rose, the vast squat column.

Icarus! A solid wall of guards surrounded him, grim-faced, hugging guns and protection shields. But the Security police were leaving Icarus alone. Nobody wanted to damage him. Cole evaded a lone guard tracking him and reached the far side of the lab.

It took him only a few seconds to find the force field generator. There was no switch. For a moment that puzzled him—and then he remembered. The guard had controlled it from his wrist.

Too late to worry about that. With his screwdriver he unfastened the plate over the generator and ripped out the wiring in handfuls. The generator came loose and he dragged it away from the wall. The screen was off, thank God. He managed to carry the generator into a side corridor.

Crouched in a heap, Cole bent over the generator, deft fingers flying. He pulled the wiring to him and laid it out on the floor, tracing the circuits with feverish haste.

The adaptation was easier than he had expected. The screen flowed at right angles to the wiring, for a distance of six feet. Each lead was shielded on one side; the field radiated outward, leaving a hollow cone in the center. He ran the wiring through his belt, down his trouser legs, under his shirt, all the way to his wrists and ankles.

He was just snapping up the heavy generator when two Security police appeared. They raised their blasters and fired point-blank.

Cole clicked on the screen. A vibration leaped through him that snapped his jaw and danced up his body. He staggered away, half-stupefied by the surging force that radiated out from him. The violet rays struck the field and deflected harmlessly.

He was safe.

He hurried down the corridor, past a ruined gun and sprawled bodies still clutching blasters. Great drifting clouds of radioactive particles billowed around him. He edged by one cloud nervously. Guards lay everywhere, dying and dead, partly destroyed, eaten and corroded by the hot metallic salts in the air. He had to get out—and fast.

At the end of the corridor a whole section of the fortress was in ruins. Towering flames leaped on all sides. One of the missiles had penetrated below ground level.

Cole found a lift that still functioned. A load of wounded guards was being raised to the surface. None of them paid any attention to him. Flames surged around the lift, licking at the wounded. Workmen were desperately trying to get the lift into action. Cole leaped onto the lift. A moment later it began to rise, leaving the shouts and the flames behind.

The lift emerged on the surface and Cole jumped off. A guard spotted him and gave chase. Crouching, Cole dodged into a tangled mass of twisted metal, still white-hot and smoking. He ran for a distance, leaping from the side of a ruined defense-screen tower, onto the fused ground and down the side of a hill. The ground was hot underfoot. He hurried as fast as he could, gasping for breath. He came to a long slope and scrambled up the side.

The guard who had followed was gone, lost behind in the rolling clouds of ash that drifted from the ruins of Sherikov's underground fortress.

Cole reached the top of the hill. For a brief moment he halted to get his breath and figure where he was. It was almost evening. The sun was beginning to set. In the darkening sky a few dots still twisted and rolled, black specks that abruptly burst into flame and fused out again.

Cole stood up cautiously, peering around him. Ruins stretched out below, on all sides, the furnace from which he had escaped. A chaos of incandescent metal and debris, gutted and wrecked beyond repair. Miles of tangled rubbish and half-vaporized equipment.

He considered. Everyone was busy putting out the fires and pulling the wounded to safety. It would be awhile before he was missed. But as soon as they realized he was gone they'd be after him. Most of the laboratory had been destroyed. Nothing lay back that way.

Beyond the ruins lay the great Ural peaks, the endless mountains, stretching out as far as the eye could see.

Mountains and green forests. A wilderness. They'd never find him there.

Cole started along the side of the hill, walking slowly and carefully, his screen generator under his arm. Probably in the confusion he could find enough food and equipment to last him indefinitely. He could wait until
A great hum sounded in his ears. It swelled to a deafening roar. Startled, Cole whirled around. A vast shape filled the sky behind him, growing each moment. Cole stood frozen, utterly transfixed. The shape thundered over him, above his head, as he stood stupidly, rooted to the spot.

Then, awkwardly, uncertainly, he began to run. He stumbled and fell and rolled a short distance down the side of the hill. Desperately, he struggled to hold onto the ground. His hands dug wildly, futilely, into the soft soil, trying to keep the generator under his arm at the same time.

A flash, and a blinding spark of light around him.

The spark picked him up and tossed him like a dry leaf. He grunted in agony as searing fire crackled about him, a blazing inferno that gnawed and ate hungrily through his screen. He spun dizzily and fell through the cloud of fire, down into a pit of darkness, a vast gulf between two hills. His wiring ripped off. The generator tore out of his grip and was lost behind. Abruptly, his force field ceased.

Cole lay in the darkness at the bottom of the hill. His whole body shrieked in agony as the unholy fire played over him. He was a blazing cinder, a half-consumed ash flaming in a universe of darkness. The pain made him twist and crawl like an insect, trying to burrow into the ground. He screamed and shrieked and struggled to escape, to get away from the hideous fire. To reach the curtain of darkness beyond, where it was cool and silent, where the flames couldn't crackle and eat at him.

He reached imploringly out, into the darkness, groping feebly toward it, trying to pull himself into it. Gradually, the glowing orb that was his own body faded. The impenetrable chaos of night descended. He allowed the tide to sweep over him, to extinguish the searing fire.

Dixon landed his ship expertly, bringing it to a halt in front of an overturned defense tower. He leaped out and hurried across the smoking ground.

From a lift Reinhart appeared, surrounded by his Security police. "He got away from us! He escaped!"

"He didn't escape," Dixon answered. "I got him myself."

Reinhart quivered violently. "What do you mean?"

"Come along with me. Over in this direction." He and Reinhart climbed the side of a demolished hill, both of them panting for breath. "I was landing. I saw a figure emerge from a lift and run toward the mountains, like some sort of animal. When he came out in the open I dived on him and released a phosphorus bomb."

"Then he's--dead?"

"I don't see how anyone could have lived through a phosphorus bomb." They reached the top of the hill. Dixon halted, then pointed excitedly down into the pit beyond the hill. "There!"

They descended cautiously. The ground was singed and burned clean. Clouds of smoke hung heavily in the air. Occasional fires still flickered here and there. Reinhart coughed and bent over to see. Dixon flashed on a pocket flare and set it beside the body.

The body was charred, half destroyed by the burning phosphorus. It lay motionless, one arm over its face, mouth open, legs sprawled grotesquely. Like some abandoned rag doll, tossed in an incinerator and consumed almost beyond recognition.

"He's alive!" Dixon muttered. He felt around curiously. "Must have had some kind of protection screen. Amazing that a man could--"

"It's him? It's really him?"

"Fits the description." Dixon tore away a handful of burned clothing. "This is the variable man. What's left of him, at least."

Reinhart sagged with relief. "Then we've finally got him. The data is accurate. He's no longer a factor."

Dixon got out his blaster and released the safety catch thoughtfully. "If you want, I can finish the job right now."

At that moment Sherikov appeared, accompanied by two armed Security police. He strode grimly down the hillside, black eyes snapping. "Did Cole--" He broke off. "Good God."

"Dixon got him with a phosphorus bomb," Reinhart said noncommittally. "He had reached the surface and was trying to get into the mountains."

Sherikov turned wearily away. "He was an amazing person. During the attack he managed to force the lock on his door and escape. The guards fired at him, but nothing happened. He had rigged up some kind of force field around him. Something he adapted."

"Anyhow, it's over with," Reinhart answered. "Did you have SRB plates made up on him?"

Sherikov reached slowly into his coat. He drew out a manila envelope. "Here's all the information I collected about him, while he was with me."
"Is it complete? Everything previous has been merely fragmentary."

"As near complete as I could make it. It includes photographs and diagrams of the interior of the globe. The turret wiring he did for me. I haven't had a chance even to look at them." Sherikov fingered the envelope. "What are you going to do with Cole?"

"Have him loaded up, taken back to the city--and officially put to sleep by the Euthanasia Ministry."

"Legal murder?" Sherikov's lips twisted. "Why don't you simply do it right here and get it over with?"

Reinhart grabbed the envelope and stuck it in his pocket. "I'll turn this right over to the machines." He motioned to Dixon. "Let's go. Now we can notify the fleet to prepare for the attack on Centaurus." He turned briefly back to Sherikov. "When can Icarus be launched?"

"In an hour or so, I suppose. They're locking the control turret in place. Assuming it functions correctly, that's all that's needed."

"Good. I'll notify Duffe to send out the signal to the warfleet." Reinhart nodded to the police to take Sherikov to the waiting Security ship. Sherikov moved off dully, his face gray and haggard. Cole's inert body was picked up and tossed onto a freight cart. The cart rumbled into the hold of the Security ship and the lock slid shut after it.

"It'll be interesting to see how the machines respond to the additional data," Dixon said.

"It should make quite an improvement in the odds," Reinhart agreed. He patted the envelope, bulging in his inside pocket. "We're two days ahead of time."

* * * * *

Margaret Duffe got up slowly from her desk. She pushed her chair automatically back. "Let me get all this straight. You mean the bomb is finished? Ready to go?"

Reinhart nodded impatiently. "That's what I said. The Technicians are checking the turret locks to make sure it's properly attached. The launching will take place in half an hour."

"Thirty minutes! Then--"

"Then the attack can begin at once. I assume the fleet is ready for action."

"Of course. It's been ready for several days. But I can't believe the bomb is ready so soon." Margaret Duffe moved numbly toward the door of her office. "This is a great day, Commissioner. An old era lies behind us. This time tomorrow Centaurus will be gone. And eventually the colonies will be ours."

"It's been a long climb," Reinhart murmured.

"One thing. Your charge against Sherikov. It seems incredible that a person of his caliber could ever--"

"We'll discuss that later," Reinhart interrupted coldly. He pulled the manila envelope from his coat. "I haven't had an opportunity to feed the additional data to the SRB machines. If you'll excuse me, I'll do that now."

* * * * *

For a moment Margaret Duffe stood at the door. The two of them faced each other silently, neither speaking, a faint smile on Reinhart's thin lips, hostility in the woman's blue eyes.

"Reinhart, sometimes I think perhaps you'll go too far. And sometimes I think you've already gone too far...."

"I'll inform you of any change in the odds showing." Reinhart strode past her, out of the office and down the hall. He headed toward the SRB room, an intense thalamic excitement rising up inside him.

A few moments later he entered the SRB room. He made his way to the machines. The odds 7-6 showed in the view windows. Reinhart smiled a little. 7-6. False odds, based on incorrect information. Now they could be removed.

Kaplan hurried over. Reinhart handed him the envelope, and moved over to the window, gazing down at the scene below. Men and cars scurried frantically everywhere. Officials coming and going like ants, hurrying in all directions.

The war was on. The signal had been sent out to the warfleet that had waited so long near Proxima Centaurus. A feeling of triumph raced through Reinhart. He had won. He had destroyed the man from the past and broken Peter Sherikov. The war had begun as planned. Terra was breaking out. Reinhart smiled thinly. He had been completely successful.

"Commissioner."

Reinhart turned slowly. "All right."

Kaplan was standing in front of the machines, gazing down at the reading. "Commissioner--"

Sudden alarm plucked at Reinhart. There was something in Kaplan's voice. He hurried quickly over. "What is it?"

Kaplan looked up at him, his face white, his eyes wide with terror. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came.

"What is it?" Reinhart demanded, chilled. He bent toward the machines, studying the reading. And sickened with horror.
100-1. Against Terra!
He could not tear his gaze away from the figures. He was numb, shocked with disbelief. 100-1. What had happened? What had gone wrong? The turret was finished, Icarus was ready, the fleet had been notified--
There was a sudden deep buzz from outside the building. Shouts drifted up from below. Reinhart turned his head slowly toward the window, his heart frozen with fear.

Across the evening sky a trail moved, rising each moment. A thin line of white. Something climbed, gaining speed each moment. On the ground, all eyes were turned toward it, awed faces peering up.

The object gained speed. Faster and faster. Then it vanished. Icarus was on his way. The attack had begun; it was too late to stop, now.

And on the machines the odds read a hundred to one--for failure.

At eight o'clock in the evening of May 15, 2136, Icarus was launched toward the star Centaurus. A day later, while all Terra waited, Icarus entered the star, traveling at thousands of times the speed of light.

Nothing happened. Icarus disappeared into the star. There was no explosion. The bomb failed to go off.

At the same time the Terran warfleet engaged the Centauran outer fleet, sweeping down in a concentrated attack. Twenty major ships were seized. A good part of the Centauran fleet was destroyed. Many of the captive systems began to revolt, in the hope of throwing off the Imperial bonds.

Two hours later the massed Centauran warfleet from Armun abruptly appeared and joined battle. The great struggle illuminated half the Centauran system. Ship after ship flashed briefly and then faded to ash. For a whole day the two fleets fought, strung out over millions of miles of space. Innumerable fighting men died--on both sides.

At last the remains of the battered Terran fleet turned and limped toward Armun--defeated. Little of the once impressive armada remained. A few blackened hulls, making their way uncertainly toward captivity.

Icarus had not functioned. Centaurus had not exploded. The attack was a failure.

The war was over.
"We've lost the war," Margaret Duffe said in a small voice, wondering and awed. "It's over. Finished."
The Council members sat in their places around the conference table, gray-haired elderly men, none of them speaking or moving. All gazed up mutely at the great stellar maps that covered two walls of the chamber.

"I have already empowered negotiators to arrange a truce," Margaret Duffe murmured. "Orders have been sent out to Vice-Commander Jessup to give up the battle. There's no hope. Fleet Commander Carleton destroyed himself and his flagship a few minutes ago. The Centauran High Council has agreed to end the fighting. Their whole Empire is rotten to the core. Ready to topple of its own weight."

Reinhart was slumped over at the table, his head in his hands. "I don't understand.... Why? Why didn't the bomb explode?" He mopped his forehead shakily. All his poise was gone. He was trembling and broken. "What went wrong?"

Gray-faced, Dixon mumbled an answer. "The variable man must have sabotaged the turret. The SRB machines knew.... They analyzed the data. They knew! But it was too late."
Reinhart's eyes were bleak with despair as he raised his head a little. "I knew he'd destroy us. We're finished. A century of work and planning." His body knotted in a spasm of furious agony. "All because of Sherikov!"

Margaret Duffe eyed Reinhart coldly. "Why because of Sherikov?"
"He kept Cole alive! I wanted him killed from the start." Suddenly Reinhart jumped from his chair. His hand clutched convulsively at his gun. "And he's still alive! Even if we've lost I'm going to have the pleasure of putting a blast beam through Cole's chest!"
"Sit down!" Margaret Duffe ordered.
Reinhart was half way to the door. "He's still at the Euthanasia Ministry, waiting for the official--"
"No, he's not," Margaret Duffe said.
Reinhart froze. He turned slowly, as if unable to believe his senses. "What?"
"Cole isn't at the Ministry. I ordered him transferred and your instructions cancelled."
"Where--where is he?"
There was unusual hardness in Margaret Duffe's voice as she answered. "With Peter Sherikov. In the Urals. I had Sherikov's full authority restored. I then had Cole transferred there, put in Sherikov's safe keeping. I want to make sure Cole recovers, so we can keep our promise to him--our promise to return him to his own time."
Reinhart's mouth opened and closed. All the color had drained from his face. His cheek muscles twitched spasmodically. At last he managed to speak. "You've gone insane! The traitor responsible for Earth's greatest defeat--"

"We have lost the war," Margaret Duffe stated quietly. "But this is not a day of defeat. It is a day of victory. The most incredible victory Terra has ever had."
Reinhart and Dixon were dumbfounded. "What--" Reinhart gasped. "What do you--" The whole room was in an uproar. All the Council members were on their feet. Reinhart's words were drowned out.

"Sherikov will explain when he gets here," Margaret Duffe's calm voice came. "He's the one who discovered it." She looked around the chamber at the incredulous Council members. "Everyone stay in his seat. You are all to remain here until Sherikov arrives. It's vital you hear what he has to say. His news transforms this whole situation."

* * * * *

Peter Sherikov accepted the briefcase of papers from his armed technician. "Thanks." He pushed his chair back and glanced thoughtfully around the Council chamber. "Is everybody ready to hear what I have to say?"

"We're ready," Margaret Duffe answered. The Council members sat alertly around the table. At the far end, Reinhart and Dixon watched uneasily as the big Pole removed papers from his briefcase and carefully examined them.

"To begin, I recall to you the original work behind the ftl bomb. Jamison Hedge was the first human to propel an object at a speed greater than light. As you know, that object diminished in length and gained in mass as it moved toward light speed. When it reached that speed it vanished. It ceased to exist in our terms. Having no length it could not occupy space. It rose to a different order of existence.

"When Hedge tried to bring the object back, an explosion occurred Hedge was killed, and all his equipment was destroyed. The force of the blast was beyond calculation. Hedge had placed his observation ship many millions of miles away. It was not far enough, however. Originally, he had hoped his drive might be used for space travel. But after his death the principle was abandoned.

"That is--until Icarus. I saw the possibilities of a bomb, an incredibly powerful bomb to destroy Centaurus and all the Empire's forces. The reappearance of Icarus would mean the annihilation of their System. As Hedge had shown, the object would re-enter space already occupied by matter, and the cataclysm would be beyond belief."

"But Icarus never came back," Reinhart cried. "Cole altered the wiring so the bomb kept on going. It's probably still going."


Reinhart reacted violently. "You mean--"

"The bomb came back, dropping below the ftl speed as soon as it entered the star Proxima. But it did not explode. There was no cataclysm. It reappeared and was absorbed by the sun, turned into gas at once."

"Why didn't it explode?" Dixon demanded.

"Because Thomas Cole solved Hedge's problem. He found a way to bring the ftl object back into this universe without collision. Without an explosion. The variable man found what Hedge was after...."

The whole Council was on its feet. A growing murmur filled the chamber, a rising pandemonium breaking out on all sides.

"I don't believe it!" Reinhart gasped. "It isn't possible. If Cole solved Hedge's problem that would mean--" He broke off, staggered.

"Faster than light drive can now be used for space travel," Sherikov continued, waving the noise down. "As Hedge intended. My men have studied the photographs of the control turret. They don't know how or why, yet. But we have complete records of the turret. We can duplicate the wiring, as soon as the laboratories have been repaired."

Comprehension was gradually beginning to settle over the room. "Then it'll be possible to build ftl ships," Margaret Duffe murmured, dazed. "And if we can do that--"

"When I showed him the control turret, Cole understood its purpose. Not my purpose, but the original purpose Hedge had been working toward. Cole realized Icarus was actually an incomplete spaceship, not a bomb at all. He saw what Hedge had seen, an ftl space drive. He set out to make Icarus work."

"We can go beyond Centaurus," Dixon muttered. His lips twisted. "Then the war was trivial. We can leave the Empire completely behind. We can go on to explore the galaxy."

"The whole universe is open to us," Sherikov agreed. "Instead of taking over an antiquated Empire, we have the entire cosmos to map and explore, God's total creation."

Margaret Duffe got to her feet and moved slowly toward the great stellar maps that towered above them at the far end of the chamber. She stood for a long time, gazing up at the myriad suns, the legions of systems, awed by what she saw.

"Do you suppose he realized all this?" she asked suddenly. "What we can see, here on these maps?"

"Thomas Cole is a strange person," Sherikov said, half to himself. "Apparently he has a kind of intuition about machines, the way things are supposed to work. An intuition more in his hands than in his head. A kind of genius, such as a painter or a pianist has. Not a scientist. He has no verbal knowledge about things, no semantic references. He deals with the things themselves. Directly."

"I doubt very much if Thomas Cole understood what would come about. He looked into the globe, the control
turret. He saw unfinished wiring and relays. He saw a job half done. An incomplete machine."

"Something to be fixed," Margaret Duffe put in.

"Something to be fixed. Like an artist, he saw his work ahead of him. He was interested in only one thing: turning out the best job he could, with the skill he possessed. For us, that skill has opened up a whole universe, endless galaxies and systems to explore. Worlds without end. Unlimited, untouched worlds."

Reinhart got unsteadily to his feet. "We better get to work. Start organizing construction teams. Exploration crews. We'll have to reconvert from war production to ship designing. Begin the manufacture of mining and scientific instruments for survey work."

"That's right," Margaret Duffe said. She looked reflectively up at him. "But you're not going to have anything to do with it."

Reinhart saw the expression on her face. His hand flew to his gun and he backed quickly toward the door. Dixon leaped up and joined him. "Get back!" Reinhart shouted.

Margaret Duffe signalled and a phalanx of Government troops closed in around the two men. Grim-faced, efficient soldiers with magnetic grapples ready.

Reinhart's blaster wavered--toward the Council members sitting shocked in their seats, and toward Margaret Duffe, straight at her blue eyes. Reinhart's features were distorted with insane fear. "Get back! Don't anybody come near me or she'll be the first to get it!"

Peter Sherikov slid from the table and with one great stride swept his immense bulk in front of Reinhart. His huge black-furred fist rose in a smashing arc. Reinhart sailed against the wall, struck with ringing force and then slid slowly to the floor.

The Government troops threw their grapples quickly around him and jerked him to his feet. His body was frozen rigid. Blood dripped from his mouth. He spat bits of tooth, his eyes glazed over. Dixon stood dazed, mouth open, uncomprehending, as the grapples closed around his arms and legs.

Reinhart's gun skidded to the floor as he was yanked toward the door. One of the elderly Council members picked the gun up and examined it curiously. He laid it carefully on the table. "Fully loaded," he murmured. "Ready to fire."

Reinhart's battered face was dark with hate. "I should have killed all of you. All of you!" An ugly sneer twisted across his shredded lips. "If I could get my hands loose--"

"You won't," Margaret Duffe said. "You might as well not even bother to think about it." She signalled to the troops and they pulled Reinhart and Dixon roughly out of the room, two dazed figures, snarling and resentful.

For a moment the room was silent. Then the Council members shuffled nervously in their seats, beginning to breathe again.

Sherikov came over and put his big paw on Margaret Duffe's shoulder. "Are you all right, Margaret?"

She smiled faintly. "I'm fine. Thanks...."

Sherikov touched her soft hair briefly. Then he broke away and began to pack up his briefcase busily. "I have to go. I'll get in touch with you later."

"Where are you going?" she asked hesitantly. "Can't you stay and--"

"I have to get back to the Urals." Sherikov grinned at her over his bushy black beard as he headed out of the room. "Some very important business to attend to."

* * * * *

Thomas Cole was sitting up in bed when Sherikov came to the door. Most of his awkward, hunched-over body was sealed in a thin envelope of transparent airproof plastic. Two robot attendants whirred ceaselessly at his side, their leads contacting his pulse, blood-pressure, respiration, body temperature.

Cole turned a little as the huge Pole tossed down his briefcase and seated himself on the window ledge. "How are you feeling?" Sherikov asked him.

"Better."

"You see we've quite advanced therapy. Your burns should be healed in a few months."

"How is the war coming?"

"The war is over."

Cole's lips moved. "Icarus--"

"Icarus went as expected. As you expected." Sherikov leaned toward the bed. "Cole, I promised you something. I mean to keep my promise--as soon as you're well enough."

"To return me to my own time?"

"That's right. It's a relatively simple matter, now that Reinhart has been removed from power. You'll be back home again, back in your own time, your own world. We can supply you with some discs of platinum or something of the kind to finance your business. You'll need a new Fixit truck. Tools. And clothes. A few thousand dollars
ought to do it."
Cole was silent.
"I've already contacted histo-research," Sherikov continued. "The time bubble is ready as soon as you are. We're somewhat beholden to you, as you probably realize. You've made it possible for us to actualize our greatest dream. The whole planet is seething with excitement. We're changing our economy over from war to--"
"They don't resent what happened? The dud must have made an awful lot of people feel downright bad."
"At first. But they got over it--as soon as they understood what was ahead. Too bad you won't be here to see it, Cole. A whole world breaking loose. Bursting out into the universe. They want me to have an ftl ship ready by the end of the week! Thousands of applications are already on file, men and women wanting to get in on the initial flight."
Cole smiled a little, "There won't be any band, there. No parade or welcoming committee waiting for them."
"Maybe not. Maybe the first ship will wind up on some dead world, nothing but sand and dried salt. But everybody wants to go. It's almost like a holiday. People running around and shouting and throwing things in the streets.
"Afraid I must get back to the labs. Lots of reconstruction work being started." Sherikov dug into his bulging briefcase. "By the way.... One little thing. While you're recovering here, you might like to look at these." He tossed a handful of schematics on the bed.
Cole picked them up slowly. "What's this?"
"Just a little thing I designed." Sherikov arose and lumbered toward the door. "We're realigning our political structure to eliminate any recurrence of the Reinhart affair. This will block any more one-man power grabs." He jabbed a thick finger at the schematics. "It'll turn power over to all of us, not to just a limited number one person could dominate--the way Reinhart dominated the Council.
"This gimmick makes it possible for citizens to raise and decide issues directly. They won't have to wait for the Council to verbalize a measure. Any citizen can transmit his will with one of these, make his needs register on a central control that automatically responds. When a large enough segment of the population wants a certain thing done, these little gadgets set up an active field that touches all the others. An issue won't have to go through a formal Council. The citizens can express their will long before any bunch of gray-haired old men could get around to it."

* * * * *
Sherikov broke off, frowning.
"Of course," he continued slowly, "there's one little detail...."
"What's that?"
"I haven't been able to get a model to function. A few bugs.... Such intricate work never was in my line." He paused at the door. "Well, I hope I'll see you again before you go. Maybe if you feel well enough later on we could get together for one last talk. Maybe have dinner together sometime. Eh?"
But Thomas Cole wasn't listening. He was bent over the schematics, an intense frown on his weathered face. His long fingers moved restlessly over the schematics, tracing wiring and terminals. His lips moved as he calculated.
Sherikov waited a moment. Then he stepped out into the hall and softly closed the door after him.
He whistled merrily as he strode off down the corridor.
Contents

UNIFORM OF A MAN
By Dave Dryfoos

After rescue, revenge was uppermost in Chet Barfield's mind; the hideous, bestial Agvars had to be taught a lesson they'd never forget. His rescuers seemed to disagree, however—until Chet learned his lesson too!

In the village clearing, under the diffuse red sun of Hedlot, Chet Barfield listened intently. Mostly he heard the villagers, the Agvars, noisy with the disregard for sound that comes of defective hearing. But above their clamor was another note. No ... Yes! There it was again—the swish-roar-scream of a spaceship! Chet's heart lifted to the altitude of that ship. Rescue! Rescue was at hand for him, after three years as a prisoner.

Thought of it momentarily overcame the passivity that years of starvation had made his habit. He even forgot himself enough to walk erect a few steps, staring skyward—heavenward!—within cupped hands. But the dense hardwood chain on his ankle brought him up short. When it tightened, he remembered, and slouched to all fours again, moving with the gorilla-like gait of the Agvars toward the unshaded post he was chained to.

He'd been observed. Pawfulls of dirt stung his bent and whip-scarred back, and a treble chorus stung his ears and nerves. The village boys were chanting derisively. Chet had never been able to learn the language, but the tone of voice was unmistakable.

He huddled against the post, knees to chin, hands clasped around his matted hair, awaiting the inevitable sticks and slops. He heard the children's voices fade as they scattered throughout the village of haphazard lean-tos in search of especially sickening things to throw. For a few minutes, then, he'd have a breather. But not for long—they wouldn't forget....

No. But the fellows hadn't forgotten him, either. He could stand this for a day or two more. A week or a month, even. It didn't matter. This would end—soon.

His turn would come! He'd make these devils suffer as he had suffered. He swore it!

He was glad he'd stayed alive for this. It had been a fight to live, a struggle he'd often thought futile while he made it. Learning to eat whatever he could get, training himself to breathe the local atmosphere in the special rhythm its composition required, accepting degradations too cruel for a captive animal, avoiding the resistance that would have brought merciful murder.... All that, yet it felt strange, now, to be so glad he was alive.

He heard the children returning, and crouched lower. A few clots of garbage spattered against the post—teasers, to make him angry, so he'd turn to howl his rage, and offer his face as a target.

Good memories, these little beasts had. It was almost a year since he'd last done that....

Well, he had a memory, too. And while they pelted him—from fairly close range, now, with sharp rocks among the wads of filth—he could take refuge in the memory of those last glorious days on Earth.

* * * * *

Remembrance was itself a change brought by the roaring ship; usually he moped in a vegetative daze. But now he recalled how he'd looked in the tight white uniform: six feet of well-fed muscle accentuated by the garment's lines, the blue stars on each lapel just matching his eyes, the peak of his cap harmonizing with the straight line of his jaw.

He remembered how he'd sounded, speaking words of nonchalant and unfelt modesty in the soft Southern voice the girls had liked so well. He could have had his pick of girls. He'd been a picked man himself.

Highly selected—that was the phrase. He was highly selected, Chet reminded himself, shrinking as the children came closer and their missiles began to really hurt.

He'd been highly selected since his eighteenth year. At 25 he'd had seven years of pre-flight training—seven years of indoctrination specifically designed to give him self-confidence enough to face the void itself without flinching.

Now he flinched from children.... Still, the schooling had worked, he acknowledged—so well that when their ship crashed into this planet Hedlot's salty sea, his first reaction had been indignation at the elements.

His second thought had been for his comrades. But they went down with the ship; he alone had been hurled clear. Learning that, he'd swum resolutely in the direction he knew the shore to be, and made it.

Exhausted, all right—shocked, naked, half-dead really. But quite ready to point out his rank and identity to the first passer-by.
Lucky for him, Chet mused, that he'd had no chance to express his callow arrogance. Shock saved his life--sank him into a stupor, so when the Agvars found him, he was helpless. He knew it was only because it had seemed perfectly safe that they'd tied him up and brought him to the village, instead of killing him then and there.

By the time he'd recovered somewhat from the initial shock and exhaustion, they were used to him, convinced he was harmless if well chained-up. And they played it safe by giving him nothing but a little water--no clothing, no shelter, no food....

They let him live, amused by the thirst that drove him to lap up each morning's drenching dew, fascinated by his ravenous appetite for the garbage they flung at him.

The Agvars--furry, savage half-men, with something of the dog and something of the ape and little of the man about them--the Agvars let him live, Chet realized, for exactly one reason: he made them feel superior.

They'd learn now! Even though the children had stopped shrieking and gone away, disgusted at his passivity, no villager's insensitive ears could yet hear the ship.

In their boastfulness, the Agvars had invited other tribes to come and look at him and poke at him and laugh at him. His presence was known over the whole planet. He'd be found, no matter where on Hedlot the spaceship landed.

And then would come the showdown!

* * * * *

But the showdown came earlier than he expected, speeded because the ship landed close by. Chet told himself he should have counted on that kind of accuracy, but he'd underestimated his fellow pilots.

He had himself signalled Earthside, just before the crash, that his ship was about to land. He'd given his position--described sea and shoreline. They'd find him, if he stayed chained to the post.

But he didn't. Taken unaware by the Agvars who loosed him, Chet was docile, happy even--certain they wouldn't hurt him now, but would try to minimize their former cruelty as they turned him over to the spacemen.

When they put new chains on him, around neck and waist, he thought it was only to make sure he didn't run away before they could deliver him ostentatiously to the ship.

A dozen adult males had gathered in the clearing, but that was hardly an unusual event. Even when they all started out, on a winding trail that didn't head in the direction of the ship's recent landing-sounds, Chet was convinced they were just circling some geographic obstacle.

He was interested in the forest of 20-foot mosses and 50-foot evergreen hardwoods pressing densely on each side of the trail. Unconscious when they'd carried him from the beach, he'd never been out of the village since, had never inspected these woods. And he thought his mates from Earth would want to know about them.

Chet could easily have outdistanced the clumsy Agvars if not forced to imitate their crouching walk. But he knew from experience that to show off his erect stance and 18-inch height advantage would make them find some unpleasant way to put him in his place.

They'd shown him that quite often. He'd show them--but later, not just yet. And after showing them, he'd put these Agvars behind him--them, their filthy planet, and their scorching sun.

It had often tortured him, that gauzy, amorphous solar blaze, but never more than now. For the sun of Hedlot, when he glanced at it vengefully, proved from its position that he was not being taken to the ship, but away from it.

* * * * *

Disappointment didn't rouse Chet to a fighting pitch--it caused him to become crafty. Slyness and deceit, the indirect weapons of the powerless, were not attributes schooled into a student space-pilot. But he'd learned them tied naked to a sunbaked post. That, too, is an effective school.

He hung back, faking fatigue. Malingering brought him pokes and jerks, made the Agvars choke him and beat him and harangue him in their sullen mutter of clicks and growls and glottal catches. But some sense of urgency drove them to give up their fruitless sadism after a while, and drag him through the trail's blue mud by brute strength, two on the neck-chain, two hauling at his waist.

He let them. Not that he was inured to pain--he just was stubborn.

He wondered, once when they all stopped at a spring for a drink and some rest, whether their haranguing showed the Agvars were sorry they hadn't taught him their language. Probably not, he decided; probably they didn't want to think he could have learned it.

He'd tried, in the absence of lessons, by repeating what he heard around him. He'd learned a few words, of course. And for a while, a couple of villagers had seemed to enjoy and encourage his parrot-like attempts to recite whole sentences they voiced for him. But after a few beatings, Chet gathered that he'd only been mouthing obscenities. And that experience, plus inertia, had made him give up the attempt.

Just as well, he now decided. If they'd known of his technical skills, if they'd let him raise their standards, the Agvars might be carrying bows and arrows, instead of mere slings and sticks.
Their hard luck! What they didn't know, they'd never learn from him! The mere presence of a spaceship on the same planet gave him a buoyant feeling of contempt.

But though contempt helped him endure that journey through the tall mosses and taller trees, it couldn't ward off exhaustion. When the party stopped at the foot of a sheer rock spire that rose four or five hundred feet above the tallest growth, he collapsed and slept.

* * * * *

They woke him in the pre-dawn twilight and another group of Agvars took over. These--there were only three--looked older than the familiar villagers. And they'd smeared their faces with bands of red and yellow mud. He wondered....

He stopped wondering when they passed a pile of bones at the base of the spire. Among the grisly relics were skulls--brow-ridged, pointed, unmistakably Agvar. Sacrifices!

He was to be killed, then, to propitiate his own rescuers. His three guides--or guards--must be witch-doctors! He let them drag him along while he thought about it.

They'd give him no breakfast, not even water. If they'd eaten themselves, it was while he still slept. The scraps, if any, hadn't been flung in his face, and there'd been no smooth post to lick the dew from.

Hunger and thirst were nothing new, but neither was the resulting lethargy. Realizing his danger, Chet could only hang back.

Today though that was an old stall; the witch-doctors seemed to expect it. They broke branches from the trees and beat him till he bled. And when the climb up the rocks began, they put one of their number behind him to push, set the other two in front to pull, and tried by main strength to haul him up the five hundred foot rock-face.

Hazily, not hastily, Chet tried to think of a way out. His starved brain could come up with nothing. That, he finally decided, was only natural; it was not thinking that was needed, but action.

Still, he wasn't precipitate. Caution reinforced his habitual lassitude while trying to dispell it. Half a dozen times he tensed for combat, only to relax hopelessly. But finally he found a place--and the will--to make a stand.

He passed up a wide shelf, and let them tug him along a narrow ledge without much objection. He chose a near-vertical pitch about a hundred feet from the bottom--a mere crack that slanted upward to the right, offering the shallowest of hand- and foot-holds.

He could only hope that he wasn't in sight from the trail--or else that the villagers had left. He couldn't see through the treetops to make sure. But he hadn't the strength to worry.

He froze to the rock, pulling as if in fright. The two witch-doctors in single file above him jerked on the chains they held. But they needed a hand apiece to hold on with, and couldn't lift him.

The one below, standing on a six-inch ledge, tried to push. When that didn't work, he broke off a chunk of rock and beat Chet's left foot with it.

Spurred by the sudden pain, Chet kicked the witch-doctor in the face. The Agvar fell, screaming--until he crashed through the treetops and was still.

* * * * *

To Chet, forgetful of his hearing superiority, it seemed as if that outcry would be heard on Earth itself. Certainly he expected it to alarm the countryside. Still, unless the swift foot-thrust had been seen, no one would be sure the witch-doctor's fall was not an accident....

Chet had tasted victory for the first time in three years! He'd had a little revenge, and he wanted more. He could take the other two witch-doctors with him to death!

He put all his weight on the chains they held. But they chose not to die--let go, instead, to save themselves. The chain-ends rattled past, dislodging a small avalanche of dust and gravel and bruising stones--dislodging him when the full weights jerked at neck and waist.

Prepared, he didn't let himself be pulled away from the cliff's face. He slid down it to the ledge from which the Agvar below him had fallen. There he teetered a moment, balancing precariously on toes scraped raw in his slide. Clawing fingers found a crack to the right, a knob to the left--safety! He clung there breathless.

No time for resting! Rattling stones warned of pursuit. He looked quickly around, found a route, and after a short traverse let himself slide to a long talus-slope. Down it he ran barefoot through sharp debris into concealing mosses.

The silence alarmed him. But it freed him from the need for craft; he didn't know what to avoid nor where it might be lurking, so he set out for the spaceship by what he hoped was the shortest way.

In the village, he'd located the landing-place by sound, fixed it by sun. The sun would guide him now. Not accurately, but well enough.

The ship would have landed in a clearing. Standing on its tail, it should loom high over the woods. And its men would scatter--he ought to run into one.
Run he did, trotting under thirty pounds of hardwood chain on reserves of strength dredged from a deep pit of desperation, through a forest overgrown with menace, full of life he could always sense but seldom see--of noises whose origin he couldn't guess.

The Agvars, for all their inferior hearing, could at least interpret what they heard. Chet couldn't. Every whispered cry, wild grunt and muttered growl was completely unfamiliar. He didn't know which sound signalled danger. He feared them all.

But more than sounds he feared the silence that chinked the logs of time between each nerve-wracking noise. Often he had to stop and rest, and silence threatened him then like the ominous quiet of bated breath. When he'd force himself to go on, each tree seemed like a porchful of malicious old women, pretending to disregard him as he passed, certain to make trouble when he'd gone. The buzz of small life-forms was a deprecatory murmur, ready at any second to burst into condemnation and terror....

What was that sound? And that? Noises that seemed out of place in their familiarity pinned him to the forest floor.

It was only the village. Satisfied, he worked up courage to skirt the place and walk on toward the ship.

But he was near collapse. When he heard human voices he could only yell incoherently once or twice, sob, and pass out.

* * * * *

Dimly through succeeding days Chet was aware of the ship's sickbay, of the enlisted attendants, the hovering doctor, the silent commander. Later he realized he'd been kept under opiates so his body could recover while his mind rested. At the time, he felt only the dimness.

It wore off abruptly. He was in a civilized cot, stretching luxuriously, aware of warmth and comfort and a cheerful voice that seemed familiar.

He opened his eyes. A fat young corpsman had been watching.

"How do you feel, sir?" the boy said. "Ready for coffee?"

"Sure," Chet answered. And grinned lazily as he sat up to sip the proffered cup. "You've taken good care of me."

"Used to be a barber in civilian life," the boy said smugly. And Chet found with an exploratory hand that he'd been shaven and shorn, bathed, bandaged where necessary--even, he saw, clad in a pair of fancy red broadcloth pajamas.

"You've got me cleaned up, all right," he said. "Whose p.j.'s have I got on?"

"Dr. Pine's, sir. You'll see him in a couple of minutes--he and the Old Man been waiting to question you. There's a robe and slippers, if you want me to help you get up...."

"I'm not helpless," Chet said, boasting in his turn. He proved it by climbing-- gingerly--out of the cot. The boy helped him into the robe, found the slippers, pushed the small room's one chair an inch closer to the open porthole, and left, closing the door behind him.

* * * * *

Vaguely Chet found he knew the two men who soon entered the room--they'd been there before. But this was his first fully conscious look at them. Commander Seymour, the C.O., looked surprisingly young for his job. He was young, Chet decided--not over thirty-five--and his short slight figure made him seem younger still.

He had few words. "You're looking fine, Barfield," he said, and sat on the edge of the cot, thin face impassive, gray eyes alert.

Dr. Pine--tall, balding, affable--was associated in Chet's mind with hypodermic needles, bitter medicines, restrictions. Today, the doctor gave him a firm and friendly handshake, but yesterday, Chet felt, that same hand had inflicted pain.

"Glad to see you looking so well," the doctor said, taking a stance against the wall by the porthole. He sounded sincere enough, but Chet, resuming his chair, wondered how much of the gladness was based on the doctor's pride in professional handiwork.

There was an awkward pause. Chet remembered to murmur polite replies to the men who were so obviously sizing him up. Then he asked, "When do you think I'll be ready for duty?"

His visitors exchanged a glance. "Later," Commander Seymour said. "Take it easy while you can, Barfield." He smiled unconvincingly at what must have been meant as a joke.

[ Illustration ]

Talk again lapsed, and Chet became uncomfortable. "The corpsman said you wanted to ask me some things," he said. And added, "You've already questioned me, haven't you?"

"Only a little," Dr. Pine said, flexing his long fingers and looking down at them. "We--ah--we had to find out about your shipmates. Commander Seymour wanted to look for them, naturally...."
"Are we going to leave here now, sir?" Chet asked the commander.
"Not yet," he said. "Dr. Pine has a job to do."
"What's that, Doctor?"
"I'm going to study your Agvar friends, Mr. Barfield. Want to help?"
"Sure," Chet said. "There's nothing I'd rather do than bring you a few corpses to dissect."
"That--ah--that isn't the idea," Dr. Pine said, bending his fingers and rocking from toes to heels. "I--ah--I want to do a little anthropology--study them in the life...."
"Why?" Chet demanded. "I can tell you all about them. I can tell you what they did to me, too! They don't deserve to live! And this planet won't be safe for spacemen till they're dead. Why waste time studying them? It isn't as if you were a professional anthropologist, sir--didn't you give me medical care?"
"Yes.... But I do anthropology, too. Medical help--ah--gains the confidence of the people...."
"You mean--?" Chet was at first incredulous, then outraged. "You mean you're not going to punish them?"
"That's right," Dr. Pine said, smiling.
"That's wrong!" Chet contradicted. Cheeks burning, he turned to Commander Seymour. "How about you, sir? Do you want your men chained to a post if they get captured? Do you want me to dismiss three years of torture as a mistake, or something? Do you want--"
"Here, here!" Commander Seymour said. He didn't raise his voice. But as he rose from the cot, Chet rose with him, and found himself at attention. They eyed each other.
"Relax," Dr. Pine suggested. "Please sit down--both of you."
Commander Seymour obeyed his subordinate. But Chet, still standing, still angry, turned hotly on the doctor. "I can't just sit and let you talk about rewarding the Agvars for torturing me!" he cried. "We don't have to appease them--they can't fight. You don't have to be afraid--"
"That'll do, Barfield!" Commander Seymour was on his feet again, and his tone was sharp. It quieted Chet instantly.

In silence he watched Commander Seymour motion Dr. Pine to follow him out the door. Someone locked it after them.

 Alternately tossing on the cot and pacing the floor, Chet seethed for hours. His first interview with the new C.O., and two bawlings-out in five minutes! Because of Pine--Pine, who kept him confined in this room, seeing no one but the attendants, having his meals alone....

When a day passed, and then two, and he felt his strength returning, Chet was sure that Dr. Pine kept him out of the wardroom and away from the other officers only as punishment. Three years a prisoner--and a prisoner still! By the time Commander Seymour came to see him again, Chet had spent hours plotting revenge.

"Barfield," the commander said, "Dr. Pine is going--alone--to the village you escaped from. He'll pretend he's you, or someone like you--whichever he can get away with. So here's your chance for a little fresh air--you can guide us to the village."
"Does that mean I go on active duty, sir?"
"Not quite. Dr. Pine hasn't released you from sickbay."

Pine again! Pine found him good enough to imitate, it seemed, but not good enough to put on duty. Suddenly Chet saw the possibilities. So Pine was going to impersonate him? Then Pine would be taken for an escaped sacrifice, a prisoner who'd killed a witch-doctor!

Tell him? Huh. Let him find out the hard way! Then even he, yellow as he was, would want revenge on the Agvars. If he survived their welcome....

"I'll be glad to go, sir," Chet said.

They brought him fatigues, not a dress uniform. But fatigues and shoes--even tight ones--were clothing, at least. And clothing would change his appearance. The Agvars had never seen him dressed, nor, since his first days, with a haircut and shave. Whether Pine's impersonation worked or not, Chet saw no danger for himself in approaching the village. But he wondered how it was to be managed.

He was told the plan when Commander Seymour and Dr. Pine met him outside by the ship's tail. The commander, who was armed, and the doctor, already naked except for a pair of slippers and a sunlamp tan, would go with him by the shortest route direct to the village. But only Dr. Pine would enter it.

Commander Seymour explained Chet's part--and his own. "Barfield," he said, "I want you to find and point out some kind of game animal they use for food. I count on killing something after we come under the Agvars' observation. That should show off our weapon-superiority--and pave the way for a feast."
"No medical stuff?" Chet asked sarcastically. "I thought Dr. Pine was supposed to cure all their ills, not give them indigestion."

"He has to get their confidence before he can treat them," Commander Seymour explained seriously. "And on a strange planet like this, he's taking quite a chance to try treatment at any time: if it fails, they're apt to accuse him of murder!"

Chet said nothing. But he felt as if he'd drawn a wild card in a poker game.

* * * * *

They'd entered the woods. Even before that, Dr. Pine had lagged because his slippers kept falling off, and now he brought up the rear. Chet, in the lead, took a last long look at the ship before the trees and mosses cut off his view.

He went on slowed by vague reluctance. He didn't like this forest. The trees dwarfed and oppressed him. Old fears began to stir and gnaw, but at new places.

Perhaps the two men he guided would stand together against him. If so, revenge on one would cut him off from both as sharply as the forest cut him off from the ship....

Well, it was worth it! They hadn't put him on duty, hadn't accepted him as one of themselves.... He couldn't be cut off much more than he was already!

And Seymour might listen to reason. After all, he was a practical man, a leader. And Pine was yellow!

"What's Pine after, sir?" Chet asked over his shoulder. "Why take these risks you've mentioned?"

"Well, partly for safety: if we kill any Agvars, we're likely to have to kill them all, or have the survivors to contend with indefinitely. That might cost us some casualties.... And of course there's the research angle, but that's out of my line."

"What's the matter with punishment, sir--discipline? You use discipline on your crew--why not on their enemies?"

"Because the men understand the rules and the penalties. The Agvars don't."

"Kill them, sir! That they'll understand!"

"No!" Commander Seymour spoke sharply. "If they don't fight back, that's cold-blooded slaughter. If they do, it's war. I don't hold with butchery, Barfield, and I certainly won't risk casualties just to give you a cheap feeling of satisfaction!"

He couldn't escape. Commander Seymour, looking from over Chet's shoulder like a walking sneer, stuck close. But he gave the impression of following a man who smelled bad.

Was he? Chet wondered.

Wondering, he unconsciously hung his head, slowed--stopped. Dr. Pine caught up. He and Commander Seymour, faintly breathless from the trying need to regulate their respiration consciously, looked at Chet questioningly.

Again they were sizing him up. Suddenly Chet wished he could go back to that first interview in the sickbay, and change all the things he'd said.

"We can't go on!" he blurted. "You don't know what you're getting into, Doctor!"

"Oh?" said Dr. Pine agreeably. "I know more than you think, young feller." He smiled encouragingly.

"That--that I've killed a witch-doctor? That you may be taken for a murderer?"

"Sure! You--ah--you talked about it under drugs. We ... weren't spying, Chet. We just wanted you to tell your story without reliving all the agony. It wasn't intended as--ah--a trap...." He massaged his fingers apologetically.

"No...." Chet agreed. "But-I-was-trying-to-lead-you-into-one!"

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Had he said that aloud? Chet couldn't be sure.

He listened for his own voice. The woods were quiet. His breathing seemed strangely loud. He held it--and heard the Agvars moving in the woods. Rustling, scraping, crackling--grunting their guttural dialog. Crashing! Threatening them!

"Let's go back!" he urged, trying to sound casual. But his trail was blocked.

"Stick around," Dr. Pine suggested easily. "You--ah--you haven't said anything we didn't know. We're going right ahead."

"But why?" Once more Chet was hotly incredulous. 'To risk your life for a few stray facts? Become a casualty while trying to avoid casualties? It doesn't make sense!'

Dr. Pine stared at his own hands as if to hide his shyness in them. "As to the fact-seeking," he said slowly, "well ... it's a matter of opinion. I've lost a few classmates.... Risks in research are commonplace--and accepted as worthwhile by most people...."

"And--ah--peace.... You once called it appeasement, but it isn't, always. Well, look. If we fought those Agvars,
somebody'd have to take a patrol into their village and capture prisoners for our Intelligence, right?"

Chet nodded dumbly.

"Well, in a way, I--ah--am the peaceful equivalent of that patrol. The--ah--risk I run is less than if we had a war and a patrol skirmish as part of it, though. And why in the world not take for peace a risk we'd routinely accept in war?"

Why not? But why not minimize it, just the same. The Agvars, invisible but noisy, were all around them, now. At any moment the woods might rain spears.

"It would be safer with two of us," Chet said musingly. "Your knowledge of anthropology and medicine--mine of the people--"

"Barfield, you're still on the sicklist," Commander Seymour pointed out. He watched Chet's face for a long moment before adding, "Still--if you're over your sick-minded need for revenge--it's possible Dr. Pine may find you fit. It's up to him."

Chet was afraid to ask directly. He pleaded with his eyes.

Dr. Pine grinned broadly at the both. "He's ready for duty, sir," he said.

Commander Seymour stepped back and scowled. "All right, Mr. Barfield," he barked, "I'll give you just three minutes to change to the uniform of the day!"

Chet's jaw dropped. His vision, also downcast, noted the fatigues he wore, the muddy shoes. Then he looked up, saw the twinkle in his C.O.'s eyes, and understood.

In exactly three minutes he made the required change. He would enter the village as he'd left it--in the undress uniform of a Man....
delude himself that he had any real choice, but he had learned in the past fifteen years that it kept up his courage to preserve at least the forms of independence. He allowed a decent thirty seconds to ponder the coded lights, then blanked the board and looked up with an easy smile.

"Dr. Wong's compliments to Leader Marley, and he will be honored to attend a conference on Wednesday at ten."

Nodding his head, Dr. Lanza glanced briefly around the office. "Queer, old-fashioned place you have here."

"Yes. It was built many years ago by a slippery old politician who wanted to be safe from his enemies. Makes a good place for Research, don't you think?"

Lanza did not answer. He strode to the door, then paused to look back.

"You understand, Dr. Wong, that I shall have to report the locked door? I have no choice."

"Has anyone?"

Officer Blagun followed his superior, leaving the door wide open behind them. Wong remained rigid in his chair until the clack of heels on marble floor had become a mere echo in his brain, then stretched out his hand to the intercom. He observed with pride that his hand did not tremble as he pressed the dial.

"Get me Dr. Karl Haslam ... Karl? Can you meet me in the lab right away? I've thought of a new approach that might help us crack the White Martian problem. Yes, I know we planned on conferring tomorrow, but it's getting later than you think."

Again he pressed the dial. "Get me Leah Hachovnik. Leah? I've got some new stuff to dictate. Be a good girl and come along right away."

Breaking the connection, he drew out his notebook and opened it.

David Wong was a big man, tall, well-muscled, compact, and he might have been handsome but for a vague something in his appearance. His lean face and upcurving mouth were those of a young man; his hair was a glossy black, too thick to be disciplined into neatness; and he was well-dressed, except for the unfashionable bulging of his jacket pocket, where he carried a bulky leather case of everfeed pens and notebooks. But it was his eyes that were disconcerting—an intense blue, brilliant and direct, they had a wisdom and a comprehension that seemed incongruous in so young a face.

A worried frown creased his forehead as he turned back to one of the first pages, studying the symbols he had recorded there, but he looked up without expression on hearing the tapping of slender heels.

"Quick work, Leah. How are you this morning?"

"As if anybody cared!" Leah Hachovnik settled down before the compact stenograph machine, her shoulders slumped, her thin mouth drooping at the corners.

"Feel like working?" said David.

"As much as I ever do, I guess. Sometimes I wonder if the traitors in the granite quarries have it any worse than I do. Sometimes I wish I'd been born into some other Category. Other people have all the luck. I don't know what it is, Dr. Wong, but I just don't seem to have the pep I used to have. Do you think it could be the climate here in New York?"

"People do grow older, Leah," he reminded her gently.

"I know. But Tanya--you remember my twin sister Tanya, the one that got so sick that time, ten years ago, when you did that experiment with Blue Martian Fever, and she had to be sent out to Arizona? Of course I haven't ever seen her since then--people in Office Category never get permission for that kind of travel--but she writes me that ever since she got well again she feels just like a kid, and works as hard as she ever did, and she still seems to enjoy life. Why, she's had three proposals of marriage this past year alone, she says, and yet she's thirty-five, just the same age as I am--being twins, you know?--and nobody's proposed to me in ages. Well, I'm certainly going to try to find out what her method is. She's coming back tomorrow."

"She's what?"

"Coming back. BureauMed is sending her back here to the Institute to take up her old job in Intercom. Funny they haven't told you, her being an old employee and all."

Dr. Wong was gripping his notebook in stiff fingers, but he replied easily, "Oh, well, BureauMed is a complex organization. With all they have to do, it's not surprising they get things mixed up sometimes."

"Don't I know!" she sighed, and droned on in a dreary monotone. "This one institute alone would turn your hair gray before your time. I don't know how some people seem to keep so young. I was just thinking to myself this morning when I watched you walking through the office, 'Why, Dr. Wong doesn't seem to age a bit! He looks just as young as he ever did, and look at me!'"

Looking at her, David admitted to himself, was not the pleasure it had once been. Ten years ago, she and her twin sister Tanya had been plump, delectable, kittenish girls, their mental equipment no more than standard for Office Category, of course, but their physical appearance had been outstanding, almost beautiful enough for Theater
Creamy ivory skin, gray eyes, and soft red hair dramatized by a freakish streak of white that shot abruptly back from the center of the forehead, Tanya’s swirling to the left, and Leah’s to the right, one girl the mirror image of the other.

But the Leah sitting before him now was thin and tired-looking, her sallow skin was lined, and her soft voice had become vinegary with disappointments. Her red hair had faded to a commonplace brown, and the white streak in the center was yellowed. An unwanted, souring old maid. But there was only one response to make.

"You look fine to me, Leah," he said. "What time did you say your sister is coming?"

"Tomorrow evenings' Playground Jet. Why?"

"We'll have to think of a way to celebrate. But right now, I'd like to get started on my new paper. I've got to meet Dr. Haslam before long."

"I know." She raised her faded gray eyes. "That was a funny thing you said to him just now over the intercom. You said to him it was getting late. But it isn't late. It's only eleven o'clock in the morning."

David stared. "Do you mean to say you were listening to our conversation? Why did you do that?"

She fidgeted and turned away from him. "Oh, I just happened to be at Comdesk and I guess the circuit wasn't closed. Does it matter? But it seemed a funny thing for you to say."

"People in Office Category are not supposed to understand Research," he said severely. "If they were capable of Research, Leader Marley's planners would have placed them there. As for its being late, it is, as far as White Martian Fever is concerned. Which is the subject of my paper. Prepare to take dictation."

Shrugging her shoulders, she poised her bony fingers over the keys of the little machine.

"Paper for delivery at the Summer Seminar," he began.

"But, Dr. Wong, that doesn't have to be ready for three months yet!"

"Miss Hachovnik! Please remember Leader Marley's Maxim: Individuals born into Office Category are the bone and muscle of the State; Nature has designed them to act, not to think."

"Yes, Dr. Wong. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry, Leah. We're old friends, so I won't report you. All set?"

He took a pencil from his leather case and tapped it against his notebook as he ruffled the pages, wondering how to begin. It was hard to think logically when a part of his mind was in such confusion. Had Leah been listening in to all of his phone conversations? If so, it was fortunate that he had long ago devised an emergency code. Was it only idle curiosity that had prompted her or was she acting under orders? Was anyone else watching him, he wondered, listening to his talk, perhaps even checking the routine of his experimental work? There was Lanza this morning--why had he come unannounced, in person, when a Communications call would have served the purpose equally well?

Leah's voice broke in. "I'm ready, Dr. Wong."

He cleared his throat. ". . . the Summer Seminar. Title: The Propogation of White Martian virus. Paragraph. It will be remembered that the early attempts to establish Earth colonies on Mars were frustrated by the extreme susceptibility of our people to two viruses native to the foreign planet, viruses which we designate as Blue Martian and White Martian, according to the two distinct types of fever which they cause. Blue Martian Fever in the early days caused a mortality among our colonists of nearly eighty-five per cent, and made the establishment of permanent colonies a virtual impossibility.

"Under the inspired leadership of Leader Marley and with the advice of his deputy Dr. Lanza, this laboratory in Research worked out a method of growing the virus and producing an immunizing agent which is effective in nearly all human beings. Only the cooperation of several Categories made possible such a feat. It will not be forgotten that even the humblest helpers in the Institute had their share in the project, that some of them acted as human volunteers in the experiments, well knowing the risks they ran, and were afterward rewarded by a Free Choice.

"One person in Office Category, for instance, was given the privilege of learning to play the flute, although nobody in his family had ever belonged to Music, and another person in Menial Category was permitted a month's study of elementary algebra, a nearly unheard of indulgence for a person in his position. But as Leader Marley so graciously remarked in conferring the awards: To the individual who risks much, the State gives much."

"Like me and Tanya?" the girl asked, stopping her typing.

"Yes, like you and Tanya. You were allowed to act a part in an amateur Theater group, I remember, and since Tanya was made too ill to be able to use a Free Choice, she was sent west to the Playground, just as though she had belonged to Ruler Category. Now where was I?"

"The State gives much."

"Oh, yes. Paragraph. Since the discovery of the immunizing mechanism to Blue Martian, permanent colonies have been established on Mars. But there remains the more elusive problem of White Martian Fever, which, though its mortality is only thirty per cent, is still so crippling to those victims who survive that the Martian colonies cannot
begin to expand, and the resources of the planet cannot be fully developed, until an immunizing agent is found.

"For the past eight years this laboratory has been working at the problem, among others, and we are now in a position to report a small degree of progress. Since it proved to be impossible to grow the virus in the usual media, it occurred to me—"

The intercom buzzed, and Dr. Wong turned away to open the dial.

"David? What's happened to you? I've been waiting here in the lab a quarter of an hour."

"Sorry, Karl. I thought I had more time. Be right down."

He reached for his white lab coat and shoved his long arms into the starched sleeves. "That's all we have time for now, Leah. Can you get an early lunch and be back here this afternoon at two?"

But she was not listening. She was leaning over to look at the desk, staring avidly at the open pages of Dr. Wong's notebook. Without comment he picked up the book, closed it, put it in the top drawer and locked the drawer. She watched him with curious eyes.

"What funny marks those were, Dr. Wong! Do you keep your notes in a private system of shorthand?"

"No. I write them in Coptic. For the sake of privacy."

"What's Coptic?"

"A dead language, spoken by the ancient Egyptians thirty or forty centuries ago."

"But you're Research, not Linguistics! It's against the law for you to know other languages. Are you a traitor?"

"My dear Leah," he said, "I'm far too sensible a man to go in for bootleg study, to learn anything without permission. I have no wish to end up with a pick-ax in my hands. But you shouldn't tax your little mind with thinking. It's not your job. You're not equipped for it, and it's dangerous."

* * * * *

David passed the watchguard stationed in the basement corridor, walked through the open door of the laboratory, past the bench where a row of pretty technicians sat making serial dilutions of bacterial and virus suspensions, through the glow of the sterilizing room, and on into the small inner lab where flasks of culture media and developing hens' eggs sat in a transparent incubator, and petri dishes flecked with spots of color awaited his inspection.

Dr. Karl Haslam was standing at the work bench, with a pair of silver forceps which held a small egg under the psi light. Gently he lowered the egg into its warm observation chamber, covered the container, and sat down.

"Well, here I am. What's gone wrong? Explain yourself, my boy."

"Just a minute." Grinning maliciously, David took down a bottle from the shelf of chemicals, poured a colorless liquid into a beaker, and walked casually toward the doorway as he agitated the mixture of hydrogen sulphide and mercaptans. He held his breath, then coughed, when the fumes of putrescence filled the room and drifted out the door. He looked into the technician's room.

"Sorry for the aroma, girls, but this is a vital experiment."

"Can't you at least shut the door?" one called pleadingly.

"Explain to the watchguard out there, will you?" Closing the door, he turned on the ventilator and sat down beside Dr. Haslam.

"Why all the melodrama?" Karl asked, baffled. "First you call me by emergency code, then you hole in like a conspirator. I'm beginning to think you're a great loss to Theater. What's happened? Why is it later than I think?"

"Do you take everything as a joke, Karl?"

"Certainly, until I'm forced to do otherwise. What's worrying you?"

"I'm afraid of being arrested for treason. Don't laugh! This morning I received a message, delivered in person by our old schoolmate Lanza, to report to Leader Marley on Wednesday, and Marley hasn't paid any attention to me since he last inspected our lab, years ago. For another thing, Leah Hachovnik is making a nuisance of herself with her curiosity about my affairs. If she weren't so clumsy about her prying, I'd almost believe she was under orders to spy on me."

Karl moved impatiently. "I hope you're not turning psychotic. You have a clean record of continuous production and you've never mixed in politics. You've never expressed what you may really think of our Leader even to me, although we've been friends since we were in Medschool, and I hope you never will. And you're making progress with White Martian. Why, my boy, you're all set! What's treasonable about that?"

Someone knocked at the door. Hastily David uncovered the fragrant beaker and waved it about as he called, "Come in!"

The watchguard looked in for an instant, wrinkled his nose, and quickly shut the door. Laughing, David covered the beaker, and began walking about with long nervous strides, snapping his fingers as he tried to explain.

"I'm in trouble, Karl. I've run into something I don't know how to deal with, and I need help, I need advice, I need cooperation. I've lived alone with this thing for ten long years, hoping month after month that something would
turn up so I could evade the issue. But nothing has. And now there's going to be a showdown."
"That's it!" shouted David.
"What's what?"
"That's what I'm trying to tell you. Why do you always call me your 'dear boy'? You know I'm a year older than you are."
"It's just habit, I suppose. You look so young--your hair is black, while mine is nearly white. You're full of vigor, while I begin to creak with middle age. I didn't realize that I irritated you with my little phrase. I should think you'd be pleased that you have somehow managed to sip at the fountain of youth."
David sank down on a stool. "I'm not pleased. I'm terrified."
"What do you mean?"
"I mean that's exactly what's happened. I have sipped at the fountain of youth. I've discovered how to keep people from growing old. I myself have not aged a bit in the last ten years."
There was a long silence. Karl sat unmoving, his face like stone.
"I don't believe you," he said at last.
"It's no longer a question of belief. In a few days everybody will know, the proof will stare you in the face. And what will happen then?"
"Evidence?" Karl asked. "I can't accept a statement as a fact."
"Would you like to see my mice? Come with me."
David Wong hurried into the small animal room and paused before a stack of wire cages in which furry creatures darted and squeaked.
"You remember when we were working on Blue Martian, those peculiar mutants we found in our mice, and how I used six of them in trying to make antibodies to the virus?"
"I remember," said Karl. "They were spotted with tufts of white hair on the right forelegs."
David took down a cage, thrust in his hand, and brought out two of the tiny black mice which crawled over his trembling hand. Their right forelegs bore tufts of long white hair.
"These," he said, "are the same mice."
[Illustration]
"Their descendants, you mean. Mice don't live that long."
"These mice do. And they'll go on living. For years I've lived in fear that someone would notice and suspect the truth. Just as for years, every time someone has laughed and told me I never seemed to age a day, I've been terrified that he might guess the truth. I'm not aging."
Karl looked dazed. "Well, my boy, you've got a bear by the tail. How did you find the elixir or whatever it is?"
"You remember the early work with radioactive tracers, a couple of hundred years ago, that proved that all our body cells are in a continuous state of flux? There's a dynamic equilibrium between the disintegration and the resynthesis of the essential factors such as proteins, fats and amino groups, but the cell directs all the incoming material into the right chemical structures, under the influence of some organizing power which resides in the cell.
"Foreign influences like viruses may disrupt this order and cause cancer. The cells are continually in a state of change, but always replace their characteristic molecules, and it is only as they grow older that they gradually become 'worn out.' Then the body grows old, becomes less resistant to infection, and eventually succumbs to one disease or another. And you know, of course, that viruses also have this self-duplicating ability.
"I reasoned that at birth a man had a definite, finite amount of this essential self-duplicating entity--SDE--in his body cells, a kind of directing factor which reproduces itself, but more slowly than do the body cells. In that case, with the normal multiplication of the cells, the amount of SDE per cell would slowly but surely grow smaller with the years. Eventually the time would come when the percentage would be below the critical level--the cells would be less resistant, would function with less efficiency, and the man would 'grow old.'"
Karl nodded soberly. "Reasonable hypothesis."
"But one day, by pure chance, I isolated a component which I recognized as being the factor essential to the normal functioning of body cells. It hit me like a toothache. I found that I could synthesize the SDE in the lab, and the only problem then was to get it into a man's cells. If I could do that, keep the SDE level up to that of youth, a man would stop aging! Since viruses penetrate our cells when they infect us, it was no trick at all to effect a chemical coupling of the SDE to the virus. I used Martian Blue, since it was handy, and its effects are usually brief.
"Presto! Old age is held at bay for another twenty or thirty years--I really don't know how long. These mice were my first experiment, and as you see, they're still alive. Next, I tried it on myself."
David put the mice back in their cage, locked it, and returned to the lab.
"Tomorrow, the whole thing is bound to come out because Tanya Hachovnik is coming back. You know her
sister Leah—gray, dried-up, soured on life. Well, I've had ways of checking, and when Tanya Hachovnik walks into the Institute, everyone will see her as the same luscious redhead of twenty-five we knew ten years ago. I realize that what I did was a criminal act. I didn't think the thing through or I wouldn't have been such a fool. But when I made those final experiments, I used the Hachovnik twins for a controlled pair."

"You must have been crazy!"

"Perhaps I was. I'd tried it on myself, of course, with no bad effects except a few days' fever, but I realized that without a control I never could be sure the SDE was actually working. It might be just that my particular genetic constitution caused me to age more slowly than the average. So I chose the twins. To Leah I gave the attenuated Martian Blue, but to Tanya I gave the simple Blue coupled with SDE. The experiment worked. Identical twins—one grows old like other people, the other remains young. I know now, Karl, how to prolong youth indefinitely. But what in the name of Leader Marley shall I do with my knowledge?"

Karl Haslam absently twisted his white hair and spoke slowly, as though he found trouble in choosing his words.

"You realize, of course, that it is your duty to acquaint Leader Marley with all the details of your discovery?"

"Is it? Can you imagine what this will do to our society? What about the generations of children coming into a world where no places have been vacated for them by death? What about the struggles for power? Who will decide, and on what basis, whether to confer or to withhold this gift? There'll be riots, civil wars. I know that I'm only a scientist; all I ever wanted from life was to be left alone, in a peaceful laboratory, and let other people worry about the world and its troubles. But now—don't you see that by the mere fact that I made this discovery, I've lost the right to sit by quietly and let other people make the decisions?"

"But, David, you and I aren't able to handle such a problem! We're only Research!"

"I know. We're inadequate, yet we have the responsibility. The men who created atomic power probably felt inadequate, too, but could they have made as bad a mess of handling it as others did? Suppose I did turn this over to Marley—he'd use it to become the most absolute tyrant in the history of the race."

Karl ran his fingers through his hair and smiled crookedly. "Well, you could always start a revolution, I suppose, and start by assassinating the Leader."

"With what kind of weapon? Men like you and me are not allowed to own so much as an old-fashioned pistol. Except for the Military, Marley's the only man allowed to wear a Needler. And, besides, I'm a Research, not a Military. I hate violence and I'm naturally conditioned against killing."

"Then you shouldn't have got into this mess. It would have been far better never to have discovered this SDE. I presume your notes are safely locked up, by the way?"

David grinned. "Don't worry about my notes; they're written in Coptic. You remember when I was still in Medschool and made my first important discovery, how to prevent the development of hereditary baldness by the injection of certain parahormones? Leader Marley rewarded me with a Free Choice, and I chose to learn a dead language. Not half a dozen men in the world could read my notes."

"If your notes are safe, why don't you just destroy your mice and get rid of your proof that way?"

"And the Hachovnik twins?"

"You could at least keep Tanya out of sight."

"Don't be a fool. That would only be a temporary measure and has nothing to do with the real problem. Lanza and Marley may suspect the truth right now, for all I know; they keep such close watch on my work. Anyway, the secret is bound to come out sooner or later."

Dr. Haslam clasped his hands and stared at them for a long while. His lined face looked grayer than ever.

He looked up at last with a faint smile. "Well, my boy, I never asked you to discover this stuff, but since you have--I hereby burn my bridges! You're right, we can't give it to Marley. But you can't handle it alone. What we need is time, and we haven't got it. We shall both be liquidated before this is over, there's no doubt of that, but we must do what we can. When is Tanya arriving?"

"Tomorrow night, on the Playground Jet."

"And you see Leader Marley when?"

"Next Wednesday."

"Five days yet. Then this is what we'll do. Too bad Lanza is in the other camp, but there's you and me, and I think Hudson and Fauré from Serology will come in with us. We'll need others--sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists—the most promising material from all Categories if we're to create a new society based on the prospect of immortality. But I'll see the first two and bring them to your apartment tomorrow night for Tanya's welcome-home party. I leave it to you to muzzle Leah."

"That won't do," said David. "I don't have a current Free Choice."

"But I have. Two, as a matter of fact, a reward for curing the insomnia of Leader Marley's wife. I choose to
give a party, I choose tomorrow night, and I choose your apartment."

A knock rattled the door, and the watchguard thrust in his head. "How much longer is this here experiment
going to take? Do you guys want to be reported?"

"Just finishing, Officer," called Karl. "You can leave the door open now."

"What a stink!" said the guard. "Thank God I'm in Military!"

* * * * *

It hardly seemed like a party, David thought. His guests were ill at ease, and their conversation labored, then stopped altogether when the Menial came into the library with a tray of glasses and niblets.

"Put them on the liquor cabinet, James," said David. "And that will be all. Enjoy yourself tonight."

The Menial put down the tray and then stooped to fumble with the lock.

"Let that alone! I've told you a thousand times not to monkey with my liquor cabinet!"

"Don't you want me to get out the ice cubes, Doctor?"

"I'll do it. You can go now."

"But are you sure you won't want me later in the evening, Doctor? Who's to serve the supper? Who's going to
clear up afterward?"

"We'll manage. Don't worry about us."

James shuffled out of the room.

"I suppose that means I'll manage," said Leah, with a self-pitying sigh. "I've noticed that whenever people
decide to rough it and do without a Menial, they take it for granted the women will do the work, never the men--
unless the women are still young and pretty. Well, at any rate, I'll have Tanya to help me. I still don't see why you
wouldn't let me go to the Port to meet her, Dr. Wong."

"I just thought it would be more of a celebration if we had a surprise party all waiting for her to walk into. Dr.
Haslam will bring her here directly from the Port, and here we all are, her old friends from the Institute, waiting to
welcome her home."

"I'd hardly say all," said Leah. "I'm the only person from Office that's here. And why have a party in your
Library, Dr. Wong? Nothing here but books, books, books."

"Because I keep my liquor here, in the only room I have a right to lock up. My Menial is a good man, but he
can't resist an opened bottle."

"Well, it's still a gloomy party."

David turned appealingly to his other guests, Hudson and Fauré, but they only looked uncomfortable.

"Perhaps we need a drink." David unlocked the cupboard and picked up a bottle which he set down hastily
when he heard voices in the hall. He hurried to the outer door and opened it a few inches to reveal the sturdy
shoulders of the watchguard of the floor and, beyond him, Karl Haslam.

"Everything in order, Officer?" asked Karl.

"Your permit is in order, Dr. Haslam. A private party. Let me just check--yes, three guests have arrived, and
you two make five. That all? You have until midnight. But it beats me why you people in Research prefer a party
without a watchguard, or why Leader Marley ever gives permission. Why, in all my years in Military, I've never
been to an unwatched party, and I must say it never held us down any."

Karl laughed a little too forcedly. "I'll bet it didn't! But all Research people are a little peculiar. You must have
noticed that yourself."

"Well--"

"And you know how generous Leader Marley is, and how kind he is to loyal citizens. He wants us to be happy,
so he pampers us now and then."

"I guess he knows what he's doing, all right. Well, I'll check you out at twelve, then."

"Go on in, Tanya," said Karl.

They stepped into the apartment and David quietly closed the door.

"Hi, Sis," drawled Leah. "You made us wait long enough!" She walked toward the girl, hand outstretched, then
stopped with a gasp of disbelief.

Tanya's red hair was still brilliant and gleaming, her creamy skin unlined, and her full red lips curved up into a
friendly smile as she leaned forward for a sisterly kiss. But Leah jerked away and glared with anger.

A puzzled frown creased Tanya's lovely white forehead.

"What's the matter, Leah? Aren't you glad to see me? You look so strange, as though you'd been terribly ill!"

Leah shook her head, tears of rage gathering in her pale eyes. "I'm okay," she whispered. "It's you. You haven't
changed. I have. You're still young, you're pretty, you're just the way I used to be!" She whirled to face David, her
voice choking.

"What have you done to her, Dr. Wong?"
The four men in the room were all staring at the sisters, scarcely believing what they saw, although they had all been prepared for the contrast. The twin sisters were no longer twins. One had retained her youth; the other was faded, aging.

"This is awful," Haslam muttered. "Absolutely ghastly." He put a comforting hand on Leah's shoulder, and with a deep sob she hid her face against him and cried.

Hudson and Fauré could not take their eyes from Tanya, and David leaned against the wall to stop his trembling.

"Sit down, all of you," he said. "First we'll have a drink. I'm sure we all need it. Then we'll face--what has to be faced."

An hour later, they had achieved a calmness, of sorts. They had given up some of their normal sobriety to achieve the calm, but they were grateful to the drug for cushioning the shock.

David paced the floor, glass in hand, talking rapidly as he finished his long explanation.

"So you see what happened," he said. "When I began the experiment, I had no idea how staggering the results might be. That is, I knew in my mind, but I never imagined the realness of what would happen. I thought of it as just an experiment."

Leah sniffed, her resentment somewhat dulled by drink. "So I was just an experiment! Don't you ever think about people's feelings? I know I'm not as good as you are; I'm only Office, but I'm human."

Karl patted her hand. "Of course you are, Leah. But that is one of the defects of people in Research--they forget about human emotions." He looked up sternly at David. "They go ahead with their experiments, and hang the consequences. If Dr. Wong had had any sense, he would never have kept this a secret for ten years, and we might have had ten years to prepare ourselves for such a responsibility. Instead, we have only a few days or, at most, weeks. Hudson! Fauré! How do you feel about this thing now? Are you still game?"

Both men seemed a little dazed, but Fauré pulled himself together, speaking slowly, like a man in a dream.

"We're with you. It's still hard to believe: we've got immortality!"

"I'd hardly call it immortality," said Hudson drily, "since, as I understand it, SDE does not kill disease entities, nor ward off bullets or the disintegrating nuclear shaft of the needler--as we will very likely find out before very long. But what do we do now? When people see these two girls together, it won't be an hour before Marley hears about it."

David spoke up with a new authority. "He must not hear about it. I know how poorly equipped I am to handle this situation, but since I created it, I must assume responsibility, and I have made my plans."

"First, you, Tanya. Try to realize that if the Leader finds out that I have this secret of keeping youth, he will want it for himself. Nobody in Menial, nobody in Office, nobody in Research--almost nobody at all--will be allowed to benefit from it. Marley will use it as a special reward for certain Rulers, and he will try to keep its very existence a secret so that people in general will not be envious or rebellious. That means that he will have to get rid of you."

"Get rid of me? But I haven't done any harm!"

"Just by existing and letting people look at your unchanging youth, you will be a threat to him, for you will give away his secret. How he'll deal with you, I don't know. Concentration camp, exile, or more probably, simple execution on grounds of treason, such as unauthorized choices of activity or study. It doesn't matter, he'll find a way. The only safety for you is in keeping hidden. You must stay quietly in Leah's apartment until we can find a refuge for you. Do you see that?"

She looked around in bewilderment. "Is that right, Dr. Haslam? And what will they think at the Institute? I'm supposed to go back to my job in Intercom."

"Dr. Wong is right," he said kindly. "Please believe us. It's hard for you to understand that we are asking you to do something secret, but just try to remember that you are, after all, an Office Category and are not equipped by training or constitution to think out problems like this. We'll tell you what is the right thing to do. You just do as we tell you, and you'll be perfectly safe."

Leah snickered. "Oh, she'll be safe enough, being as pretty as she is! What are you going to do about me? Don't I count?"

"We'll come to that in a few minutes. Right now, we need food. Leah, you and Tanya be good girls and go out to the kitchen and heat up some supper for us. After we've eaten, we'll talk about you."

As soon as the girls were out of the room, the four men drew together at the table.

"No use burdening them with too much knowledge," Karl remarked. "Even as it is, they are a great danger to us, and the less they know the better. David, will you proceed?"

"I have little to add to the plans we made last night at the lab. The thing we need most is time; and next to that,
a hiding place. We may very soon be classed as traitors, with every watchguard on the continent hunting for us. We will take care that they don't find us. Now, you said last night that each one of you has accumulated a Free Choice during the past year, which hasn't yet been used."

"That's right," said Fauré. "I intended to use mine next winter to live among the Australian aborigines for a week. I've been wanting that for years, but the planners always refused me; it was a project without practical purpose."

"And I intended to use mine to attempt a water-color painting," added Hudson. "In my boyhood I hoped to be put in Arts Category, but the Planners laughed at me. I suppose it's wrong, yet I still have the yen."

"You have my sympathy," said Karl. "I was going to take an Aimless Tramp. Just shed my identity and wander on foot through the great north area of woods and lakes."

David sighed. "Well, if we are successful in hiding and in changing the world as we'd like, you can all three be free to do as you like without asking permission. But at present that's only the wildest of dreams. And, first, we must find our refuge. Today is Saturday. Tomorrow morning, each of you will go to BureauMed and claim your Free Choice. And each of you will choose an Aimless Tramp."

"But I don't like hiking," objected Hudson.

"You won't be hiking. You'll take off in your roboplanes and then disappear. You will be without supervision. You will then proceed, disguised as you think suitable, to find a place for our new colony--somewhere in South America--and make preliminary arrangements to receive us. You must be back by Tuesday afternoon at the latest. On Tuesday, as soon as you have reported back to BureauMed, get to the Institute as fast as you can."

"Why the deadline?"

"Because by Tuesday afternoon, sometime before evening, probably, I expect all three of you to be suffering from an attack of Blue Martian Fever, and I want you to get expert hospital care. You will be the nucleus of the new regime."

Karl laughed. "I wish you could have picked a base for your SDE that was less unpleasant than Blue Martian."

"Who's got Blue Martian?" asked Tanya, as the girls came in from the kitchen with their trays of food. "I'll never forget how sick it made me."

"You should worry," said Leah. "It kept you young and beautiful, didn't it?"

"You won't have to envy her, Leah," said David going to the liquor cabinet. "I'm going to give you and the others a shot of the SDE-Martian Blue. Sometime Tuesday afternoon you should feel the first symptoms. But after forty-eight hours in the hospital, you'll be good as new. And you will all stop growing older."

They watched, fascinated, as he opened the cooling compartment of the liquor cupboard.

"I always like plenty of ice in my drinks," he remarked, drawing out a tray of cubes and opening a small door behind the tray. He removed several small bottles filled with a milky liquid, and a copper box of sterile needles and syringes.

[Illustration]

"Who'll be first?"

There was a knock at the door, and David stopped.

"What is it?" he called.

"Me," came the watchguard's voice. "Just thought I'd do you a favor and tell you it's only ten minutes till checkout time. Time to get yourselves decent!"

They could hear the rumble of his laugh as he moved on down the hall. Trembling, David picked up a bottle, poured alcohol onto the rubber cap, and deftly filled the sterile syringe. He reached for a piece of cotton, dipped it in iodine, and looked up, waiting. Karl Haslam had already bared his left arm. David swabbed the spot on the upper deltoid.

Karl laughed. "Here I come, Methuselah!"

"All set?" asked David.

He plunged the needle home.

* * * * *

David ran up the steps of the Institute, two at a time, and hurried toward his office through the echoing corridors, where the usual watchguard sauntered on patrol.

"Morning, Jones."

"Good morning, Doctor. Pretty early, aren't you?"

"Wednesday's my busy day." He settled at his desk, miserably conscious of the open door and curious eyes behind him, opened his briefcase, then glanced at his wristwatch. More than an hour before his interview with Leader Marley.

Spreading some data sheets before him, he looked at them blankly as he tried to order his thoughts. His eyes
were ringed with dark depressions, for he had had no sleep. There had been so many things to plan for, so many arrangements to make.

It was possible, of course, that this morning's talk would turn out to be mere routine. There might remain several weeks of freedom--but there might be only a few hours. He shrank from the complexity of the problem before him; he was a Research man, devoted to his test tubes and his culture growths, and would have been happy never to face any problem beyond them.

He had a moment's revulsion at the unfairness of the fact that a simple experiment in the lab, an addition to man's knowledge of the Universe, should have plunged him against his will into a situation far beyond his ability to handle. There had been, as Karl pointed out, the alternative of turning the SDE over to the Leader. That would have absolved him of all responsibility. But that was the trouble, he thought. Responsibility could not be confined to squiggles in his notebook, when those squiggles might affect the whole of society.

"Dr. Wong!"
He jumped and turned around hastily.
"Leah! What in the world?"
She stood in the doorway, glaring at him, breathing heavily as though she were trying to hold back sobs. Slowly she tottered to the desk and sank down into her chair by the stenograph.
"You doublecrosser!" she whispered.
He looked quickly at the doorway, but the guard had not come back. Leaning forward, he questioned her fiercely.
"What are you doing here? They told me yesterday that several people had come down with attacks of Blue Martian. Why aren't you in the hospital with the others?"
"Because I wasn't sick!"
"But I gave you--"
"Imagine how I felt," she raced on, "watching Dr. Haslam start having a chill, hearing Dr. Fauré complain about his awful headache, and listening to Dr. Hudson dial Intercom and call for a doctor. And all that time I was waiting, waiting for something to happen to me. And nothing did! What have you got against me, Dr. Wong, that you infect all the others and only pretend to do it to me? I don't want to grow old any more than they do!"
"But I wasn't pretending. Quiet, now, and let me think."
He waited until the watchguard had passed by the door, then raised his head.
"Look here, Leah. Evidently the infection didn't take. This is what must have happened. That treatment I gave you ten years ago must have made you permanently immune to Blue Martian, and the antibodies it formed in your cells simply protected you against this new invasion of the virus. It never occurred to me that the immunity would last so long. But don't worry, I'll find a way."
She looked suspicious. "What do you mean?"
"I mean that there's no reason why Blue Martian should be the only vehicle for giving you the SDE. There must be other viruses that will work equally well. It's only a question of finding one."
"And how long will that take you?"
"How long does anything take in Research? Maybe a week, maybe a year."
"And maybe ten! I can't wait, Dr. Wong. I'm thirty-five now; I'm growing older. What good will a long life do me, if it only preserves me as the middle-aged woman I'll be by then? And all those years that I'll be getting older and older, there'll be Tanya, lively and pretty, to remind me that I was once like that, too. I can't face it!"
"The watchguard will hear you!" Haggard-faced, he watched her shaking shoulders, hearing her muffled sobs.
"You're a criminal, Dr. Wong! It was a crime, what you did to Tanya and me."
"I didn't realize in the beginning or I'd never have touched the thing. I know it now, even better than you do, but what can I do?"
She looked up and wiped her eyes, her mouth set hard. "I know what I can do. I can report you to the Leader."
"What good will that do? You know how terrible you feel now about being left out--though I swear I never meant it to be like this. But just try to imagine. If you report me so that Leader Marley gets the secret of SDE, then thousands of people will be put in just the same situation you are in. You're only one person suffering. But then there'd be hundreds of thousands, millions! Surely you wouldn't want to have that on your conscience?"
"Do you think I'd care?"
"You would when you felt calmer. You're wrought up, ill. Let me send you home. Promise me you'll go home quietly, talk it over with Tanya, and not say anything to anyone else. I'll think of a way out for you. Just be patient."
"Patient!"
He thought of calling Karl Haslam. Karl would know best how to deal with her, how to bring her back to reason. He reached toward the intercom, then dropped his hand in despair. Karl was in the hospital, with Fauré and
Hudson, shivering with the cold of Blue Martian fever. But he had to get her away.

He pressed the intercom dial. "Dr. Wong speaking. Miss Hachovnik is ill and is being sent home. Please send an aircab for her at once."

He helped Leah to her feet, and spoke pleadingly.
"Promise you'll be good, Leah?"

The fury in her eyes nearly knocked him down. Without a word, without a gesture, she walked out.

* * * * *

David felt as though he'd been put through a wringer as he followed Officer Magnun into the Leader's suite at State House. Several nights of sleeplessness, the worries of planning for a refuge, and the scene with Leah had left him limp and spiritless. The girl was a danger, he knew, but she was only one of many.

He nodded at Dr. Lanza, who was busy reading reports from BureauMed, and saluted Leader Marley, who was talking with a watchdog.

Marley looked up briefly. "Sit down, Wong."

David folded himself into a chair, grateful for a few moments in which to collect himself, while Marley gave the last of his orders.

"Put them in the Vermont granite quarries, and keep them at work for the next year."

"As you say, Leader. With the usual secrecy, of course?"

"No, you blockhead! These are a bunch of nobodies. Use all the publicity you can get. Keep a punishment a secret and how can it have any effect on other people? No, I want full radio and news coverage and telecast showings as they swing the first pick at the first rocks. People have got to realize that the Leader knows best, that treason doesn't pay. No matter how clever they think they are, they'll always get caught. Understand?"

"As you say, Leader."

"Then get going." As the guard left the room, Leader Marley turned to David. "What fools people are!"

He ran his beefy hands through a shock of black hair, blinked his eyes, and wrinkled the heavy black brows that met over his nose. Wonderingly, he shook his massive head as he drew his gleaming needler from his breast pocket and played with it, tossing it from hand to hand while he talked.

"I'm probably the most generous Leader the State has had since the Atomic Wars, Wong, and I never withhold a privilege from someone who has deserved it. But people mistake me when they think that I am weak and will overlook treason."

"Your generosity is a byword, Leader Marley," said Wong. "But some people are incapable of acting for their best interests even when you have defined it for them. Who are these latest traitors?"

"Oh, nobody really important, of course, except as they waste time which they owe to the State. Just attempts at illegal study. An Office Category who had found a basement room in a deserted building and was spending all his evening hours there practicing the violin. A Theater man who was illegally trying to learn carpentry. And a teacher of mathematics who had forged a key to the Linguistics library, and had been getting in every night to study a dead language—Cuneiform, Latin, something like that, utterly without practical value. This last one is an old man, too, and ought to have known better. People must be made to realize that if they want the privilege of useless study, they will have to earn it. And I am very broadminded in such cases."

"Nobody has better reason to know that than I, Leader Marley, and I am always grateful to you."

Marley coughed and straightened the jacket over his bearlike chest as he put back his needler.

"Now to business. Where's that memorandum, Lanza?"

Dr. Lanza handed him the paper, then sat down beside the Leader.

"First. When Dr. Lanza called on you last week, he found the door to your office locked. What explanation do you have?"

David smiled and spread his hands. "My explanation is the generosity of Leader Marley. You have so many affairs to occupy your attention that it is not surprising that you do not remember rewarding me with a Free Choice some years ago, for my work on Martian Blue. I chose, as I am sure you remember now, an occasional hour of Privacy."

The Leader blinked. "That's right. I had forgotten. Well, the Leader never goes back on his word. Though why in the name of Marley you fellows want a crazy thing like that is beyond me. What do you do, behind a locked door, that you don't want anyone to see?"

"Do you doubt my loyalty, Leader Marley?"

"I doubt everything. What do you want with Privacy?"

Lanza broke in amiably. "I'm afraid we just have to accept such wishes as one of the harmless abnormalities of the Research mind, Leader. Since I grew up in that Category, I understand it to some extent."

"You're right in calling it abnormal. I think perhaps I'd better remove that from the possible Choices in the
future. It could easily be misused, and it never did make any sense to me.

"Well, second. It's been more than three years since you reported any progress with the problem of White Martian Fever, Wong. What is your explanation?"

"Research is not always swift, Leader."

"But I distinctly ordered you to find an immunizing agent within three years. Our colonies on Mars cannot wait forever. I've been patient with you, but you've had more than enough time."

"I am very sorry, Leader Marley. I have done my best and so have my colleagues. But the problem is complex. If I may explain, we had to find a suitable culture medium for growing the virus, and then we had to work at the problem of coupling it with suitable haptoens--"

Impatiently, Marley waved his hand. "You know I don't understand your jargon. That's not my business, what troubles you've had. I want results. You got results on Blue Martian quickly enough."

"We were fortunate. But when we storm the citadel of knowledge, Leader Marley, no one can predict how long it will take for the citadel to fall."

"Nonsense! I'm warning you, Wong, you're failing in your duty to the State, and you can't escape the consequences with poetic doubletalk. I allow special privileges to you people in Research and I expect a proper appreciation in return. When I order you to produce a protection for White Martian, I want results!"

"But you can't get a thing like that just by asking for it. Such things are simply not under your control."

"Watch yourself, Wong! Your remarks are dangerously close to treason!"

"Is it treason to tell you a plain fact?"

Stony-faced, David stared defiantly at Marley, trying to control the trembling of his body. If he had had a needle at that instant, he realized incredulously, he would have shot the Leader and thought his own life a small price to pay for such a pleasure.

Lanza coughed. "I'm afraid Dr. Wong is not well, Leader. Worrying over the slowness of his work has distorted his reactions. But I am sure that you will understand, as you always do, and be indulgent."

"I'll overlook your remarks, Wong," said Marley, relaxing. "But you'd better change your attitude. You Research people cause me more trouble than any other three Categories put together. Sometimes I wonder if a spell in the granite quarries mightn't--"

A light flashed on his desk. He watched the blinking code for a second, then rose abruptly and left the room.

The two men sat in silence. David glanced at Lanza, and Lanza shifted in his chair.

"Thanks for the good word," said David wearily. "How do you like being a Ruler, by the way? When we were at Medschool together, I thought you were a man with ideas."

"And you think you do now?"

A slow flush crept over Lanza's face. "Look here, Wong! Each man has to make his own terms with himself. Don't act so smug! You shut yourself away inside the nice white walls of your laboratory and ignore all the conflicts of life. You shut your ears and your eyes, live in perfect harmony with your test tubes, and let the world go hang. Well, that isn't my way."

"Your way, apparently, is to worm yourself into the confidence of that steel-hearted imbecile who rules our lives and our thoughts, and spend twenty-four hours a day saying, 'Yes, Yes,' and waiting for him to die so you can step into his shoes!"

"We're alone," said Lanza. "I won't report you. But I have no intention of justifying myself. Have you any idea why you've been let alone for so long? You haven't produced anything tangible in several years. Haven't you ever wondered why no one put on the pressure? Haven't--"

He broke off as Marley lumbered back into the room and fell into a chair. The Leader's manner had altered. He stared at David with grim inquiry, the beady eyes traveling slowly over him, taking in his rumpled hair, his strained face, the rigid set of his shoulders.

At last Marley spoke, his voice soft with menace.

"You're looking well, Dr. Wong. Remarkably well. In fact, it occurs to me that you don't seem to have aged a bit since my last visit to your laboratory. Tell me, how do you keep your youth?"

* * * * *

David could feel the rush of blood through his body, feel the thud of his racing heart. He kept his voice low so that it would not tremble.

"Thank you, Leader Marley, for your kindness in noticing my appearance. I suppose I chose my parents well. They both lived to be over ninety, you know."

"This is no joking matter. I've just had a report. An epidemic of Blue Martian fever has broken out among the people of your Institute. Why have you not mentioned it?"
"If you will forgive me, Leader Marley, I've had no chance. I reported it in the usual manner to the health authorities, and have here in my briefcase a memorandum which I hoped to bring to your attention, among several other matters, when you had finished giving your instructions to me."

Marley continued implacably, "And how did this epidemic begin? It was my understanding that no insect existed here on Earth that could transmit the virus. Yet several people from your lab came down with the disease on the same day. What is your explanation?"

"It's very simple. To prepare the vaccine, as I am sure you will remember from your last visit to us, we have to keep in the lab a limited number of the Fafli, the Martian insects which act as hosts at one stage of the virus's life. Last week a Menial carelessly knocked over one of the cages and several Fafli escaped. The Menial was discharged, of course, and put in Punishment, but the damage had already been done."

"You have a very ready explanation."

"Would you rather I had none at all, Leader Marley?"

"Well, let that go." Marley drummed his plump fingers on the desk as he continued. "There was another report for me just now. A report so wild, so incredible, so staggering that I can scarcely bring myself to take it seriously. From an Office Category at the Institute."

David's heart beat wildly, but he forced a smile to his lips. "Oh, yes. You must mean Miss Hachovnik. I've been worried about that poor girl for some time."

"What do you mean, 'poor girl'?"

"It's very distressing to me, because she has been a good and loyal worker for many years. But she is becoming unstable. She has a tendency to burst into tears over nothing, is sometimes hysterical, seems to have secret grievances, and is extremely jealous of all women whom she considers more attractive. She was never too bright, to be sure, but until recently she has done her work well, so I've hated to take any action. Just this morning I had to send her home because she was ill."

"Do you mean to say," asked Marley, "that none of her story is true?"

"I don't know. What is her story?"

"She reports that you have been working on a private project of your own, instead of on White Martian. That you have discovered a way to make people immortal, by infecting them with Blue Martian. What is your explanation?"

David only stared, his mind so blurred with panic that he could not speak. His stunned silence was broken by a laugh. It was Dr. Lanza, leaning backward in his chair, holding himself over the stomach as he shook his head.

"These hysterical women!" His laughter trailed off to a commiserating chuckle. "You're too forbearing, Wong. You shouldn't keep a worker who's so far gone. Take a leaf from Leader Marley's book and remember: Kindness is often weakness; when it is necessary for the good of the State, be harsh!"

"I hardly know what to say," said David. "I had no idea she'd gone so far."

"Then there's no truth in it?" Marley persisted. "What she says is impossible?"

"Well," said David judiciously, "we people in Research have learned not to call anything impossible, but this dream of immortality is as old as the human race. We have a thousand legends about it, including the story of the Phoenix, that fabulous bird which, when consumed by fire, rose triumphant from its own ashes to begin life anew. A pretty story, of course. But I need only put it to a mind as logical as yours, Leader Marley. Throughout all the millennia of man's existence, the Sun has always risen each morning in the east, and thus we know that it always will. That is the order of nature. Likewise, from the earliest generations of man, no individual has ever lived longer than a hundred and some years, and thus we know that he never will. That is the order of Nature and we can't alter it to the best of my knowledge."

Leader Marley was thoughtful. He touched the intercom.

"Send in Officer Magnus."

David held his breath.

"Magnus, Office Category Hachovnik is to be taken from her home at once and put in indefinite Psychodetention."

Marley stood up. "Very well, Dr. Wong. You may go. But I shall suspend your privilege of Privacy, at least until after you have devised a protection against White Martian. It is not wise to disregard the wishes of the Leader. Lanza, show him out."

At the street door, they paused. Lanza looked at David speculatively.

"You do keep your youth well, David."

"Some people do."

"I remember that legend of the Phoenix. What do you suppose the Phoenix did with his new life, once he'd risen from the ashes of his old self?"
"I'm no philosopher."

"Neither am I. But you and I both know that the principle of induction was exploded centuries ago. It's true that the Sun has always risen in the east. But is there anything to keep it, someday, from rising in the west?"

* * * * *

That night David sat late at his desk. Through the open door behind him, he could hear the watchguard slowly pacing the dimly lit corridor. He could feel time pressing at his back. He was reprieved, he knew, but for how long?

He got up, at one point, when the corridor behind him was quiet, and went to the bookcase. He pressed the brass handle, saw the shelves silently swing away from the wall, then set it back again. The mechanism, installed a century ago by a cautious politician, was still in good order.

Back at his desk, he thought of Leah and her lost youth, lost because of his own impersonal attitude. He felt sorry for her, but there was nothing he could do for her now. It was a relief to know that Tanya, at least, remained hidden and secure in her sister's apartment.

It was after midnight before he closed his notebook and locked it away in the top drawer. His plans were completed. There would not be time given him, he knew, to finish his work on White Martian. That would have to be dropped, and resumed at some more favorable time in the future—if there was a future for him. But he would begin at once to produce in quantity a supply of the SDE-Blue Martian, for he was sure that the untrained guards who watched his movements would never realize that he had shifted to another project.

With a brief good night to the guard, he left the building to walk home. His shoulders were straight, his stride confident, and he disdained looking behind him to see if anyone was following. He had made his terms with himself, and only death, which he would certainly try to prevent, could alter his plans.

Going into his apartment he wearily turned on the light. Then he froze, feeling as though he had been clubbed. Leah Hachovnik was huddled at one end of the sofa, her face dripping tears.

"I thought you'd never come," she whispered.

He slumped down beside her. "How did you get here, Leah? I thought you were--"

"I hid in your hallway until the watchguard was at the other end. When his back was turned, I just took off my shoes and slipped in. I've been waiting for hours." Her voice was almost inaudible, spent beyond emotion.

"They got Tanya," she said dully. "They took her away."

"What happened? Quick!"

"After I reported to BureauMed—I'm sorry I did that, Dr. Wong, but I just couldn't help myself. I didn't tell them about Tanya and the others, just about you. Then I walked around for hours, hating you, hating Tanya, hating everybody. Finally I got so tired that I went home. Just as I got into the hall, I heard a loud knock and I saw Officer Magnun at my door. When Tanya opened it, he simply said, 'Office Category Hachovnik?' When she nodded her head, he said, 'You're under detention.' She screamed and she fought, but he took her away. Since then, I've been hiding. I'm afraid."

David tried to think. He remembered that he had said only "Miss Hachovnik" in his talk with the Leader. Had Marley never known that there was more than one? But Lanza surely knew. Or had he merely assumed that Magnun would ask for Leah? Would they realize, at Psycho-detention, that they had the wrong woman? Probably not, for she would be hysterical with terror, and her very youth and beauty taken in connection with the "jealousy and envy of younger women" which was noted in her commitment order, would seem to confirm her madness. He was still safe, for a while—if he could keep Leah away from the Institute.

"I'm afraid," she whimpered. "Don't let them put me away."

"Then you'll have to do exactly as I tell you. Can you follow orders exactly?"

"Yes, yes!"

"I'll have to hide you here. We can fix up my library as a room for you. It's the only room I can keep locked, and which my Menial never enters in my absence. Whatever happens, Leah—no matter what happens—keep yourself hidden. More than your life depends on that."

* * * * *

When the three convalescents returned from the hospital, pale and shaky, David summoned them to his office. At the door, Watchguard Jones looked them over.

"Say, that Blue Martian fever sure does take it out of you. You fellows look like you've been plenty sick!"

"They have been," said David. "Let them by so they can sit down and rest."

Jones moved aside, but he lounged in the doorway, listening.

David ignored him. "Glad to see you back, gentlemen. I'll make this brief. You have been the victims of a laboratory accident just as much as if you'd been contaminated with radiation. Our Leader Marley, who understands the problems of all Categories, has very generously consented to grant you a two weeks' convalescence, in addition to a Free Choice. Take a few minutes to think over your decision."
He strolled over to the window and looked out at the green of the trees just bursting into leaf. Then, as if on impulse, he turned back.

"While you're thinking it over, will you look at these protocols? We discussed them before you got sick, you remember--a plan to prevent an epidemic of Blue Martian. Do you approve of the final form? I'd like to carry on, and after all," he added with an ironic smile, "it's getting later than we might think."

He handed each man a sheet of paper whose contents were identical. They studied them. Karl Haslam was the first to speak.

"You think, then, that other cases of Blue Martian may develop?"

"It is certainly probable. Those Fafli insects were never caught."

Karl looked back at his paper. It contained a list of names, some of which were well known to all the country, some of them obscure. Thoughtfully, he nodded as he ran down the list.

Hudson glanced up, frowning, his finger pointed at one name.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "that this particular experiment would prove useful. Surely the Lanza method has not proved to be as effective as we once hoped."

"You may be right. But there's the bare possibility that the modified Lanza method might be of enormous benefit to us."

"It is uncertain. Too much of a risk. That's my opinion."

"Then I'll reconsider. The rest has your approval? Very well. And now what choice have you made for your holiday?"

"I think we are all agreed," said Karl soberly. "We'll have an Aimless Tramp."

"An excellent idea," approved David. "Oh, Jones, will you get an aircab to take the doctors to BureauMed, and then arrange for their Roboplanes to be serviced and ready in an hour?"

"I don't know as I ought to leave my post," said Jones.

"You'd rather stay with us and perhaps be exposed to the Fever?"

"Okay, okay!"

When his footsteps had died away, David leaned forward.

"We've done our best. Another month or so and we should be completely ready for our retirement act."

"If we have a month," said Fauré.

David grinned. "Well, if our time runs out, at least we'll go down fighting. You know all your lines, your props are ready, the plot is worked out, and we can slip into our makeup in an instant--provided the audience shows up."

"You're getting to be quite a joker, David," said Karl. "What if the audience comes around to the stage door?"

"Then we'll try to receive him properly. Our Leader is a man of iron, but I doubt that he's immortal."

They heard the approaching guard.

"I'm sure you'll benefit from your holiday," David went on. "That last checkup showed an antibody titer entirely too high for safety."

"In other words, it's time for us to get going?" asked Karl, smiling.

"That's right. Only the next time the antibody curve rises, it will be for keeps."

* * * * *

Four days later it was reported that Judge Brinton, the well-known champion of Category rights, was ill with Blue Martian fever. Three little-known nuclear physicists living in the same apartment in Oak Ridge developed symptoms on the same day. Sporadic cases of Blue Martian flared up all over the continent. Occasionally a whole family was affected--husband, wife, and all the children. There was a mild epidemic at MIT, a more serious one at the School of Social Structure, and at Harvard Medical School nearly a third of the senior class, and they the most brilliant, were hospitalized at the same time.

Rumors blanketed the country like a fog, and people everywhere became uneasy. There were no deaths from the illness, but the very idea that an infectious disease could flare up unpredictably all over the nation, out of control, was frightening. It was said that the disease had been beamed to Earth by alien enemies from space; that all its victims became sterile; or that their minds were permanently damaged.

It was also said, though people laughed even as they repeated the rumor, that if you once had Blue Martian Fever you'd become immortal. This particular theory had been clearly traced to the ravings of a red-haired madwoman who was confined to Psycho-detention, but still it was too ridiculous not to repeat. For a week, comedians rang a hundred changes on the basic joke:

Wife: Drop dead!
Husband: I can't. I've had Blue Martian.

The unrest became so great that Leader Marley himself appeared on the telecaster to reassure the nation.

He was an impressive figure on the lighted screen, resting solid and at ease in a leather chair, raising his
massive black head, lifting his big hand to gesture as his rich voice rolled out.

"You have nothing to fear," he said. "Under your beneficent Leaders, infectious disease has been wiped out many years ago. BureauMed informs me that these scattered cases of Blue Martian fever have been caused by the escape of a few Fafli insects, which have, since then, been isolated and destroyed. The illness has no serious after-effects. And as for the rumors that it confers immortality--"

He allowed his face to break into a pitying smile as he slowly shook his head, looking regretful and yet somehow amused.

"Those who continue to spread gossip about the fever will only reveal themselves as either psychotics or traitors. Whichever they are, they will be isolated for the good of our society."

The effect of his words was somewhat diminished by the brief glimpse people had of Dr. Lanza, who reached a hand to help the Leader rise. For Dr. Lanza wore an anxious frown, and his face was thin with worry.

In spite of numerous arrests, the rumors continued. For two weeks sporadic outbreaks of the fever occurred, and then, abruptly, they ceased.

* * * * *

It was more than a week after the last case had been reported that David sat in his basement laboratory beside the opened mouse cage, watching with wry affection as the furry creatures crawled over his hand. These were historic mice, he reflected, whose reactions to SDE had opened up a new world, a world which he must somehow help to make better than the present one.

His three colleagues had returned a few days ago from their holiday. They had calmly come back to work, and apparently nobody had thought to put two and two together, and thus connect the epidemic with the vacationers. It had been unfortunate that Tanya should have been put under arrest; it was difficult trying to find amusement for Leah so that she would keep out of sight, but still, on the whole, their luck had been good.

But it was time for David to go back to work in his office. Gently he detached the mice from his hand, dropped them into their cage, and closed the wire trap. He took his leather pencil case and the keys to his desk from the pocket of his lab coat and laid them on the desk, below the nail on which his wristwatch hung. Carelessly he dropped his lab coat onto the desk and reached for his jacket, then paused, listening.

The chatter in the technicians' room suddenly died. In the unnatural quiet sounded a steady march of feet.

David turned to meet the probing black eyes of Leader Marley. Just behind him were Dr. Lanza and Officer Magnun.

There was no time to conceal his mice, David realized. Shrugging into his jacket, he strode forward without hesitation, a smile on his face, and stretched out his hand.

"Leader Marley! This is indeed an honor. If you had only notified us of your visit, we should have been prepared."

"Young as ever, I see, Wong."

"Thank you, Leader." There was no banter in Marley's eyes, he noted, but he continued amiably. "It has been some years since you have honored us by a visit in person. I'm afraid a laboratory is not a very exciting place, but I'd be honored to show you anything that may be of interest to you."

A faint contempt curled Marley's mouth as he glanced around the room. "Nothing to see that I haven't seen before, is there? A lot of test tubes, a bunch of flasks, a mess of apparatus you'd think had been dreamed up by an idiot, and a bad smell. You still keep animals, I notice."

He sauntered over to the bench, picked up the cage and looked at the scurrying rodents.

David scarcely breathed.

Marley only nodded. "Well, mice are mice." He put down the cage and turned away. "These look just like the ones I saw when I was here eight or ten years ago. Same white patch on the forelimbs. I never knew mice could live that long."

"But--" began Lanza, bending over to study the mice.

"What an amazing memory you have, Leader," said David. "Just as you guessed, these mice are the direct descendants of the ones you saw on your former visit, a special mutant strain. The chief difference is that these are marked with white patches on the right forelimbs, while, as I am sure you recall, the original specimens were marked on the left forelimbs. Odd how these marks run in families, isn't it?"

Lanza put down the cage and strolled toward the door as Marley took a last bored look around.

"Nothing new here that I ought to see, Lanza?"

"No. Nothing new."

"Well, I've no time to waste. I've come here for two reasons, Dr. Wong. We both want a booster shot for Blue Martian. Ten years is a long time, and there's been this epidemic."

"Which is now under control."
"That may be, but I still want a booster. You Research people don't always know as much as you think you do.
When that's done, I want a detailed report of your progress on White Martian."

"I shall be happy to give it," said David. "If you will go directly to my office, I'll pick up the vaccine and
syringes, and be with you in a few minutes."

Marley and Officer Magnun marched to the door, and David followed, standing aside to let Lanza precede him.
Lanza hesitated there, staring at the floor. Then he smiled and looked directly at David.

"Beautiful spring weather we are having. I'm wondering about the marvelous order of nature. Did you happen
to notice, this morning, whether the Sun did actually rise in the east?"

David stared at the retreating back. There was no longer any doubt in his mind. Lanza knew. What was he
going to do?

"Hurry up, Doctor," said Officer Magnun from the doorway.

"Right away." He opened the refrigerator and inspected the two groups of red-capped vials sitting on the shelf.
He had no time to think, no time to weigh pros and cons; he could only act. Choosing two vials, he added them to
the sterile kit from the autoclave, and took a last look around.

He noticed his watch still hanging on the wall, and the lab coat which covered his leather pencil case. He
started to take them, then slowly dropped his hand and touched the intercom.

"Get me Dr. Karl Haslam."

"You're keeping the Leader waiting," said Magnun, but David paid no attention.

"Dr. Haslam? Dr. Wong speaking. I may be a little late getting up to see those precipitates of yours. But you
keep them simmering, just in case. It's very probable that the antibody curve will rise.... Yes, I'll let you know if I
can."

Magnun followed him to the office, then strolled away for a chat with Watchguard Jones.

David put his things on his desk and made his preparations in businesslike fashion while Marley and Lanza
glanced curiously around the office. He watched apprehensively as Marley inspected the bookcase, then turned
away.

"I never could understand why Research needs so many books," he remarked.

"Please roll up your sleeve, Leader Marley. I'm ready for you now."

Deftly he assembled the syringe, filled it to the two centimeter mark, and scrubbed the arm presented to him.

"Ready?" He inserted the needle and slowly expelled the fluid. Then, taking a fresh syringe, he repeated the
operation, filling from the second vial.

"Why do those bottles have different numbers?" asked Marley. "Aren't we getting the same thing?"

"Certainly. Just lab routine, so we can keep track of how many units have been used from our stock. There, that
does it, Lanza. Both of you will be perfectly safe for a good many years to come."

He was washing his hands at the sink when he heard a struggle at the door. Turning, he saw Leah, thin, gaunt
and terrified, held fast in the grip of Officer Magnun, who forced her inside and slammed the door behind them.

"What's the meaning of this intrusion?" demanded Marley.

"There's some funny business going on, Leader," said Magnun. "I caught this woman trying to sneak in here.
She says she's Miss Hachovnik and she works here. Only she ain't. I arrested Miss Hachovnik myself, and I
remember well enough what she looked like. She was a cute chick, not a bit like this dame."

Marley was staring at the sobbing girl, eyes blinking as he thought, looked back, remembered. Slowly his eyes
shifted to David, and David felt like a man impaled.

"You may leave, Magnun," said the Leader.

"You don't want me to arrest this woman?"

"Let go of her! I said you may leave!"

"As you say, Leader."

When the door closed, the room throbbed to Leah's sobs.

"I couldn't help it, Dr. Wong," she cried. "I got so bored, sitting and looking at those books, day after day, with
nothing to do! I thought I'd just slip down here for an hour and say hello to people, and--"

"Quiet, Hachovnik!" roared Marley. He quieted his voice. "I understand now, Wong. I remember. There were
two girls. Twins. The one in Psycho-detention, according to Officer Magnun, is still beautiful and young. It's no use,
Wong. You do know the secret of immortality. And you told me the Phoenix was only a fairy tale!"

David felt entirely calm. Whatever might happen now, at least the suspense was over. He had done all he could,
and it was a relief to have things in the open. He thought fleetingly of his colleagues, alerted by his message,
frantically putting their plans into operation, but he leaned back against the sink with every appearance of ease.

"You're not quite right, Leader Marley. I cannot confer immortality. All I am able to do is stave off the aging
"That will do me nicely. And it's connected somehow with the Blue Martian virus?"

"Yes. The disease serves as the vehicle."

With a brisk motion, Marley drew his needler from his breast pocket and aimed it steadily at David. "Give it to me!"

"You're rather ambiguous," said David. How were his friends getting along? Were they ready yet? Had Karl visited the basement lab? "Do you mean you want me to give you the injection to prolong your life, or the secret of how to do it, or what?"

"Don't quibble! First you'll give me the injection to make me immortal. Then you'll turn over to me all your notes on procedure. Then my friend here will needle you with a shaft of electrons and end your interest in the problem."

"Surely you won't keep such a good thing all for yourself," said David. "What about Dr. Lanza? He's your right-hand man. Don't you want him to live forever, too? What about Officer Magnun? He's a faithful servant."

"You're stalling, Wong. Do you want me to kill you now?"

"It won't be wise to needle me yet, Leader Marley. The secret would be lost forever."

"I'll have your notes!"

"Yes? Try to read them. They're written in Coptic, a dead language that you consider it a waste of time to learn, because such knowledge is impractical. There aren't half a dozen men on Earth who could make head or tail of my notebook."

"Then I'll find that half-dozen! I want the injection." He gestured with the gleaming weapon.

"This is once when I have no Free Choice," said David. "Very well." He started toward the door, but halted at the roar of command.

"Stop! Do you think I'm fool enough to let you out of my sight?"

"But I have to get the inoculant."

"Use the intercom. Send for it."

David slumped into the chair and opened the intercom. He could almost feel the electronic shaft of the needler ripping into his body. His heart beat wildly, and the tension of adrenalin ran through his body. His lips felt cold, but he held them steady as he spoke into the dial.

"Get me Dr. Haslam.... Karl? David Wong speaking. Will you send someone up with a vial of phoenix special? The precipitates? I should say the antibody titer has reached the danger point. Don't delay treatment any longer."

Silently they waited. Marley's grim face did not relax; his eyes were alight. Leah lay back in her chair with closed eyes, and Lanza stared intently at the floor.

A soft knock came at the door, and a female technician hurried in, carrying a tray.

"I'm sorry to be so slow, Dr. Wong. Dr. Haslam had a little trouble locating the right vial. Oh, and he said to tell you not to worry about those precipitates. They're taken care of."

"Just a minute," said David. "Leader Marley, Miss Hachovnik here is very ill. Won't you let this girl help her to the rest room? She'll be safe there until you're ready for her."

Marley looked at the half-fainting woman. "All right. You take her there, Lanza, and this girl too. Lock them in. And she's not to talk. Do you understand? She's not to talk!"

"As you say, Leader Marley," the technician whispered. She helped Leah to her feet, and Lanza followed them from the room.

Marley closed the door and locked it. "Now, then, Wong, give me that shot, and heaven help you if you try any tricks!"

"Will you bare your arm while I prepare the syringe?"

Awkwardly hanging onto the needler, Marley tugged at his sleeve while David calmly picked up a bottle of colorless liquid and filled his syringe. He turned to the Leader, swabbed his arm, then picked up the syringe.

"There you are," said David.

Jerkig the syringe upward, he forced a thin jet of pure alcohol into the man's eyes. Marley screamed. Agonizing pain blinded him, and as he clutched at his eyes, David snatched the needler from the writhing fingers, and flashed the electronic dagger straight to the heart.

He stared at the twitching body for only an instant. People were pounding on the door, shouting. He tugged at the desk drawer to get his notebook, then remembered sickly that he had left his keys in the lab. He would have to leave his notes.

[Illustration]

The shouts were growing louder, people were battering the door. Swiftly he moved to the bookcase, swung it away from the wall, and dropped into darkness.
He brought the bookcase back, then turned and ran along the black passageway.

Leader Lanza sat in his suite at State House, conferring with his subordinates.

"It hardly seems possible, Magnun, that so many people could have slipped through your fingers without help from the Military. You say both the Hachovnik twins have disappeared?"

"Yes, Leader."

"And how many people from the Institute?"

"Six, Leader. But it didn't do them any good. We got them, all right."

"But you found no bodies!"

"They wouldn't have bodies after we got through with them, Leader."

"You're quite certain, Officer Magnun, that all the fugitives were destroyed?"

Lanza looked tired, and his officers noticed in him a lack of firmness, an indecision, to which they were not accustomed in a Leader.

"Say, those babies never had a chance, Leader. We picked up their roboplanes somewhere over Kansas, and we shot them out of the air like ducks. They didn't even fire back. Why, we even picked up the remains of Doc Wong's wristwatch and that old beat-up pencil case of his." He flung them on the desk.

Lanza fingered the charred and molten relics.

"That will do, Magnun. I'll call you when I need you."

"Say, ain't you feeling well, Leader? You look kind of green."

"That will be all, Magnun!"

"As you say, Leader."

Lanza shoved aside the charred remnants and spread out the papers waiting for him, the unimportant, miscellaneous notes accumulated over the years by Hudson, Fauré, and Haslam. And the unreadable notebook of David Wong. He sighed and looked up as his secretary entered.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Leader. You look tired."

"The funeral this morning was quite an ordeal, and so much has happened the last three days!"

"Well, I thought you ought to know that strange reports are coming in. Some of our most prominent citizens have disappeared. We're trying to trace them, of course, but--"

"Anything more?"

"Those rumors about Blue Martian are cropping up again."

"Yes? And--?"

"That old man you asked me to bring from the Vermont quarries, the one who was detained for illegal study of the Coptic language? Well, I guess the excitement of his release was too much for him. He died of a heart attack when he was being taken to the plane."

Lanza sighed. "Very well, that will be all."

Alone at last, he looked sadly through the pages of David's notebook, at the tantalizing curls and angles of the Coptic letters, cryptic symbols of a discovery which prevented a man from growing old. Well, no one could read them now. That secret was dead, along with its discoverer, because, in this world, no study was permitted without a practical end in view. And perhaps it was just as well. Could any man be trusted, he wondered, to deal wisely with a power so great?

After closing the notebook, he dropped his head into his hands.

How his head ached! He felt cold, suddenly, and his whole body began to shake with a hard chill. He lifted his head, his vision blurred, and suddenly he knew.

He had Blue Martian fever!

Teeth chattering, he paced wildly about the room, puzzling things out, trying to remember. That booster shot! And then he realized the amazing truth: David Wong had given him a chance! He had inoculated him with the seeds of immortality, giving him a chance to help right the wrongs of this Categorized world. And now he was left alone in a world of mortals. David and the others had been annihilated, and he was left to live on and on, alone.

He staggered toward his private apartments, then sank into his chair as his secretary once again ran into the room. With a supreme effort he controlled his trembling.

"Yes?"

"Leader Lanza. Another report."

"Just a minute," said Lanza, trying to bring his eyes into focus on the excited girl. "I am in need of a rest. As soon as you have gone, I shall retire into seclusion for a few days. There are to be no interruptions. Is that clear? Now, proceed."
"There's a new epidemic of Martian Fever reported where one never was before."

He stirred tiredly. "Where now?"

"South America. Somewhere in the Andes."

"I think we'll have just one Category after this," said Lanza dreamily. "Category Phoenix."

"What did you say, Leader?"

His thoughts wandered. No wonder Magnun's men found no bodies. The planes they shot down were roboplanes, after all, and it was easy to plant in an empty seat a man's wristwatch and his bulky leather pencil case. David and the others were safe now. They were free and had enough time to plan for the new free world.

"What did you say, Leader?" the girl repeated, bewildered.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter." He frowned painfully, and then shrugged. "On second thought, I may be away longer than a week. If anyone asks for me, say I'm on an Aimless Tramp. I've always hoped that some day I might earn the right to a Free Choice."

"But you're the Leader," the girl said in astonishment. "You're entitled to all the Free Choices you want!"

He lifted his twitching head, smiling wanly. "It would seem that way, wouldn't it? Well, whether I am or not, I think I've really earned a Free Choice. I wonder," he said in a wistful voice, "whether the climate in the Andes is hospitable."

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**SKIN GAME**

By Charles E. Fritch

"People are basically alike," Harding said democratically. He sat idly against the strawlike matting of the hut wall and reached for a native fruit in a nearby bowl. "They're all suckers, even the smartest of them; in fact, the ones who think they're the smartest generally wind up to be the dumbest." Carefully, he bit into the fruit which resembled an orange and, mouth full, nodded approvingly. "Say, these aren't bad. Try one."

Sheckly shook his head, determined to avoid as many aspects of this culture as he could. "But these aren't people," he reminded, not happy with the thought. "They're lizards."

Harding shrugged and settled back, his grinning features ruddy in the flaring torchlight. "Humanoids have no monopoly on suckerhood. When it comes to that, we're all brothers under the skin, no matter what color or how hard the skin may be." He sighed, contemplating the harvest-to-be. "No, Sheckly, it'll be like taking candy from a baby. We'll be out of here with our pockets bulging before the Space Patrol can bat an eyelash in this direction."

Unconvinced, Sheckly stared glumly through the open doorway of the hut into the warm humid night, where a fire flared in the darkness and long shadows danced and slithered around it.

"It's not the Space Patrol I'm worried about," he said, after a while. "I don't mind fleecing humanoids--" he shivered, grimacing--"but lizards!"

Harding laughed. "Their riches are as good as anybody else's. The trouble with you, Sheckly, you're too chicken-hearted. If it weren't for me, you'd still be small-timing back on Earth. It takes imagination to get along these days."

Sheckly grunted, for he had no ready answer to deny this truth. While he didn't like the reference to his inability to get along in the world without Harding's help, the man was right about other things. It did take imagination, all right, mixed with a generous supply of plain ordinary guts; that, plus an eye focused unfalteringly on the good old credit sign.

He certainly could not get along without Harding's timing. The man knew just when Patrol Ships would be at certain spots, knew their schedules for visiting these small otherworlds, and always he was several steps ahead of them. They went into a planet, their rocket ship loaded with gambling devices--cards, dice, roulette wheels, and other cultural refinements--and set up shop which could be folded at a moment's notice if necessary. Natives seemed almost eager to be skinned of their riches, and he and Harding happily obliged them.

"Listen to them out there," Harding marveled, leaning forward to hear the sharp scrapings that represented music. "They must be having some kind of ceremony."

Sheckly nodded, shivering slightly, though the air was hot and humid. He wished again, as he often had in the past, he could have some of Harding's assurance, some of that unrelenting optimism that insisted everything would turn out favorably. But he didn't like these strange primitive worlds, he didn't trust them or their inhabitants. The lizard-people had seemed friendly enough, but by looking at a strange reptile you couldn't tell how far it would
jump. When the Earth ship landed, the creatures had come slithering to them with all but a brass band, welcoming
the Earthlings with the hissings that composed their language. One of them—the official interpreter, he proclaimed
himself—knew a peculiarly good brand of English, and welcomed them in a more satisfactory manner, but still
Sheckly didn't like it. Harding had called him chicken-hearted, and he felt a certain amount of justified indignation at
the description. Cautious would be a better word, he decided.

* * * * *

These people appeared friendly to the Earthlings, but so did the Earthlings give the appearance of friendliness
to the natives; that was proof in itself that you couldn't trust actions to indicate purpose. But even more than that,
their basic alienness troubled Sheckly more than he dared admit aloud. Differences in skin color and modified body
shapes were one thing, but when a race was on a completely different evolutionary track it was a time for caution.
These were a different people, on a different planet under a different star. Their customs were strange, how strange
he could yet only guess, though he preferred not to. This ceremony now, for example, what did it mean? A rite for
some serpent god perhaps. A dance in honor of the Earthmen's arrival. Or it might just as easily be a preliminary to a
feast at which the visitors would be the main course.

"I just wish we knew more about the creatures," he complained, trying to shove that last thought from his mind.

Harding looked annoyed, as he drew his attention from the alien music which had fascinated him. "Stop
worrying, will you? They're probably among the friendliest creatures in the universe, even if they do look like
serpents out of Eden. And the friendly ones rate A-1 on my sucker-list."

Sheckly shuddered and cast an annoyed glance into the night. "How can anybody concentrate with that infernal
racket going on out there? Don't they ever sleep?"

"Patience," Harding advised calmly, "is a noble virtue. Ah, here comes our interpreter."

Sheckly started involuntarily, as a scaley head thrust itself into the hut. The serpentman had a long sharp knife
gleaming in one hand. "Pardon, sirs," the head said slurringly, as a forked tongue sorted over the unfamiliar
syllables. "The leader wishes to know will you join us?"

"No, thanks," Sheckly said, staring at the knife.

Harding said, "We should join them. We don't want to offend these creatures, and if we're real friendly we
might make out better."

"You go out then. I'm going to see if I can get some sleep."

Harding shrugged, his glance making it plain he knew Sheckly lacked nerve more than he dared admit. To the
serpentman he said, "Tell your leader my companion is tired from our long journey and would rest now. However, I
will be happy to join you."

"Yesss," the serpent head hissed and withdrew.

"Boy, will I be glad to get out of here," Sheckly muttered.

"Sometimes I wonder why I ever teamed up with a pansy like you, Sheckly," Harding said harshly, a disgusted
look on his face. "There are times when I regret it." He turned and walked from the hut.

Sheckly stared bitterly after him. He felt no anger at the denunciation, only a plaguing irritableness, an
annoyance with both Harding and himself. He should have gone out there with Harding, if only to show the man that
he was not afraid, that he was no coward. And yet, as he sat there listening to the strange sounds creeping across the
warm dampness, he made no move to rise, and he knew he would not.

Grunting disgustedly, Sheckly stretched out on the floor matting and contemplated putting it out, but the sounds from the outside drifted in upon him and
changed his mind. After a while, he closed his eyes and dozed.

* * * * *

He woke suddenly and sat upright, a cold sweat making him tremble. What had wakened him? he wondered.
He had the vague notion that someone had screamed, yet he wasn't sure. In the faltering torchlight, he could see
Harding had not returned. He listened intently to the noises outside, the scraping, the hissing, the slithering. No
screams came.

[Illustration]

I'm not going to stay here, he told himself. I'll leave tomorrow, I don't care what Harding says. I'll go crazy if I
have to spend another night like this. Exhausted, he fell asleep.

Morning came, and the alien sun slanted orange rays through the cabin doorway. Sheckly opened his eyes and
stared at the thatched roof. The torch had burned out, but it was no longer needed for light. Thank goodness for
morning, he thought. Morning brought a temporary sanity to this world, and after the madness of the night it was a
reprieve he welcomed gladly. He had not opposed Harding till now, but desperation was a strong incentive to
rebellion. When Harding returned-- Startled, he considered the thought. When Harding returned?

He sat up and stared around him. Harding was not in sight. Panic came, and he leaped up, blood racing, as
though to defend himself against invisible enemies. Perhaps he'd gotten up early, Sheckly thought. But suppose he hadn't returned? Suppose--

He jumped, as the interpreter entered the hut behind him. "The Leader wishes you to join him for eating," the serpentman said.

"No," Sheckly said hastily. They weren't going to make a meal out of him. "No, thanks. Look, I've got to leave your planet. Leave, understand? Right away."

"The leader wishes you to join him," the creature repeated. This time the sword crept into his hands.

Sheckly stared at the sword, and his heart leaped. He thought there was a tinge of red on the blade's edge. Mentally, he shook his head. No, it was his imagination again. Just imagination. Still, the drawn sword clearly indicated that the invitation was not to be refused.

"All right," he said weakly. "All right, in a few minutes."

"Now," the other said.

"Okay, now," the Earthling agreed listlessly. "Where is my companion?"

"You will see him," the creature promised.

Sheckly breathed a sigh of relief at that. Harding was probably all right then. It made him feel better, though it would make the task of leaving much harder.

* * * * *

They had arrived at twilight the previous day, so they hadn't the opportunity to see the village in its entirety. They hadn't missed much, Sheckly realized as he walked along, for the grouped huts were unimpressive, looking somewhat like a primitive African village back on Earth. But the Earthling would have preferred the most primitive Earth native to these serpents. In the distance, the slim nose of the rocket ship pointed the way to freedom, and Sheckly looked longingly at it.

At one end of the village was a small mountain of what appeared to be plastic clothing, milkily translucent—which was strange, since these creatures wore no clothing. The Earthling wondered at this but did not ask about it. Other thoughts more important troubled him.

"In here," the interpreter told him, stopping before the largest hut.

Hesitating briefly, Sheckly entered and the creature followed him in. Seated on the floor were the leader and his mate and several smaller reptiles that evidently were the children. Between them lay several bowls of food. Sheckly grimaced and turned hastily away as he saw small crawling insects in one bowl.

"Sit down," the interpreter directed.

Harding was not in evidence. "Where is my companion?" he asked.

The interpreter conferred briefly with the leader, then told Sheckly, "He could not come. Sit down--eat."

Sheckly sat down, but he didn't feel like eating. He wondered why Harding could not come. At a sudden thought, he said, "I have rations on my ship--"

"Eat," the interpreter said, gripping his sword.

Sheckly nodded weakly and reached out for the bowl of fruit, taking one that resembled that which Harding had eaten the previous night. It wasn't bad. The leader stuffed a fistful of squirming insects in his mouth and offered the bowl to Sheckly, who shook his head as politely as he could and indicated the fruit in his hand.

Fortunately, the serpentman did not insist on his taking anything other than fruit, so the meal passed without physical discomfort.

When they were through, the leader hissed several syllables to the interpreter, who said, "The leader wishes to see your games. You will set them up now."

Sheckly ran his tongue over dry lips. "They're in the ship," he said, and eagerness crept into his voice. "I'll have to get them." Once inside the ship, he'd never come back. He'd slam the airlock door and bolt it and then blast off as fast as he could get the motors going, Harding or no Harding. He got up.

"We will help you," the interpreter said.

"No. I can do it myself."

"We will help you," the interpreter insisted firmly. His eyes bored into the Earthling, as though daring him to refuse again.

Sheckly's mouth felt dry once more. "Where's Harding?" he demanded. "Where's the other Earth man? What have you done with him?"

The interpreter looked at the leader, who nodded. The interpreter said gravely, "It is too bad. It is the season for the shedding of skins. At the shedding feast last night--"

"The shedding of skins!" Sheckly said, remembering the pile he'd seen at one corner of the village; "those translucent things were your cast-off skins." He recalled that some reptiles back on Earth had regular seasons of shedding. That intelligent creatures should do it made him feel slightly sick.
"Your friend joined us last night," the serpentman went on. "But he could not shed properly, so--"
Sheckly felt his blood turn to ice.
"--so we helped him."
"You what?"
"We helped him out of his skin," the serpentman went on calmly. "We try to help those who are friends with us. Your friend had trouble getting his skin off, but with our help--"
"No!" the Earthling cried, trying to reject the thought.
The full realization of what had happened struck him at once. Despite himself, he could picture Harding struggling, trying to convince these creatures that Earthlings don't shed their skins. His struggles must have convinced them only that he was having trouble shedding, so they "helped him." They had come to skin the natives, but the reverse was happening--only literally.
"Where--where is he?" he asked finally, though he knew it didn't really matter.
"We will take you to him," the interpreter said.
"No," Sheckly cried. "No, I--I'd rather not."
The serpentman nodded. "As you wish. He does not look pretty. I hope that tonight you do not have as much trouble."
Sheckly's eyes went wide. "What do you mean?"
"In your shedding," the serpentman explained. "We will try to help you all we can, of course."
"Of course," the Earthling agreed weakly, licking cottony lips. He wondered how he could just stand there so apparently calm, instead of letting out a shriek and running as fast as he could for the rocket ship. He decided it was some sort of paralysis, the shock of finding himself in the middle of something so alien his mind told him it couldn't possibly be.

* * * * *
Knees wobbling, Sheckly went to the door and out into the morning. That he had gotten that far surprised him pleasantly. The tall rocket ship was in a clearing several yards beyond the edge of the village. He headed for it. He thought of running, but his legs felt like rubber, his blood like ice. He walked past the pile of drying skins on the ground without looking at them, and he was followed by the interpreter and several others whom the serpentman had motioned to join them. Except for their swords, they had no weapons, he noticed. Poor Harding, he thought, and wondered if the Earthling's skin were somewhere in the pile; he felt sick, thinking about it.
"You'd better stay outside the ship," he suggested testily. "I'll lower the equipment to you."
"I will go aboard with you," the serpentman said.
"But--"
"I will go aboard with you."
Sheckly shrugged, but he hardly felt complacent. He felt as though a giant icy hand held onto his spine with a firm paralyzing grip. He trembled visibly. Got to think, he told himself desperately, got to plan this out. But fear jumbled his thoughts, and he could only think of Harding back in the village minus his skin, and of what was going to happen that night if all went as these creatures planned.
The second thought was the more terrifying, and when they were within a hundred feet of the rocket ship, Sheckly broke into a frantic run.
"Stop," the interpreter cried.
Sheckly had no intentions of stopping. His glands told him to run, and he ran. He ran as fast as he could and didn't look back. He imagined the serpentman was on his heels, knife poised, and he ran even faster. He reached the rocket ship and went up the ladder, scrambling, missing his foothold, pulling himself up with clutching hands. He threw himself through the airlock and slammed the massive door behind him.
He ran through the metal corridors to the control room. They must be on the ladder, he thought, prying at the airlock with their metal swords. He pressed switches, slammed down on the throttle, and the sweet music of the rockets came and pressed him into his seat.
He looked down at the planet dwindling into space below him and he laughed hysterically, thinking of the narrow escape he'd had. No more planets for him, no more trying to skin anyone.

* * * * *
"There it goes," the Space Patrolman said, watching the rocket rise.
Harding trembled with helpless rage. "That blasted fool Sheckly'll lead you right to the money, too," he complained.
"That's the way we planned it," the Patrolman smiled. "I must compliment our native friends on their fine acting. Your pal took off like a scared rabbit."
"Yeah," Harding grimaced, clenching his fists as though wishing he had someone's neck in them.
"Don't blame your friend too much," the Patrolman advised. "Whether you realize it or not, the fact that you
were consciously avoiding our schedules caused you to follow a pattern in your visits to these outerspace planets;
we just figured a bit ahead of you and posted hidden patrols on all the inhabited planets in this sector, knowing that
sooner or later you'd land on one of them. We spotted your ship last night and hurried over by 'copter so we wouldn't
be seen."

"Forget the synopsis," Harding growled. "You walked in when these blasted lizards were making believe they
were going to skin me alive. They didn't have to act so realistic about it."

"You're wrong about one thing," the Patrolman said. "The act didn't start until after we arrived to direct it."

Harding looked at him, puzzled. "What do you mean by that?"

"We arrived, as the books say, just in time," the Patrolman told him. "They weren't making believe." He offered
a bowl of fruit to his prisoner. "We'll be here for another hour yet. Eat something."

Weakly, Harding shook his head no. He sat down, suddenly pale at what the officer had said.
He didn't feel very hungry.

THE END
LET THERE BE LIGHT
By Horace B. Fyfe

No matter what the future, one factor must always be reckoned with—the ingenuity of the human animal.

The two men attacked the thick tree trunk with a weary savagery. In the bright sunlight, glistening spatters of sweat flew from them as the old axes bit alternately into the wood.

Blackie stood nearby, on the gravel shoulder of the highway, rubbing his short beard as he considered the depth of the white notch. Turning his broad, tanned face to glance along the patched and cracked concrete to where squat Vito kept watch, he caught the latter's eye and beckoned.

"Okay, Sid--Mike. We'll take it a while."

The rhythm of the axe-strokes ceased. Red Mike swept the back of a forearm across the semi-shaven stubble that set him as something of a dandy. Wordlessly, big Sid ambled up the road to replace Vito.

"Pretty soon, now," boasted Mike, eyeing the cut with satisfaction. "Think it'll bring them?"

"Sure," replied Blackie, spitting on his hands and lifting one of the worn tools. "That's what they're for."

"Funny," mused Mike, "how some keep going an' others bust. These musta been workin' since I was a little kid-since before the last blitz."

"Aw, they don't hafta do much. 'Cept in winter when they come out to clear snow, all they do is put in a patch now an' then."

Mike stared moodily at the weathered surface of the highway and edged back to avoid the reflected heat.

"It beats me how they know a spot has cracked."

"I guess there's machines to run the machines," sighed Blackie. "I dunno; I was too young. Okay, Vito?"

The relieving pair fell to. Mike stepped out of range of the flying chips to sit at the edge of the soft grass which was attempting another invasion of the gravel shoulder. Propelled by the strength of Vito's powerful torso, a single chip spun through the air to his feet. He picked it up and held it to his nose. It had a good, clean smell.

When at length the tree crashed down across the road, Blackie led them to the ambush he had chosen that morning. It was fifty yards up the road toward the ruined city—off to the side where a clump of trees and bushes provided shade and concealment.

"Wish we brought something to eat," Vito said.

" Didn't know it would take so long to creep up on 'em this morning," said Blackie. "The women'll have somethin' when we get back."

"They better," said Mike.

He measured a slender branch with his eye. After a moment, he pulled out a hunting knife, worn thin by years of sharpening, and cut off a straight section of the branch. He began whittling.

"You damn' fool!" Sid objected. "You want the busted spot on the tree to show?"

"Aw, they ain't got the brains to notice."

"The hell they ain't! It stands out like one o' them old street signs. D'ya think they can tell, Blackie?"

"I dunno. Maybe." Blackie rose cautiously to peer over a bed of blackberry bushes. "Guess I'll skin up a tree an' see if anything's in sight."

He hitched up his pants, looking for an easy place to climb. His blue denims had been stoutly made, but weakened by many rips and patches, and he did not want to rip them on a snag. It was becoming difficult to find good, unrotted clothing in the old ruins.

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Choosing a branch slightly over his head, he sprang for it, pulled, kicked against the trunk, and flowed up into the foliage with no apparent effort. The others waited below. Sid glanced up occasionally, Vito idly kicked at one of the clubs made from an old two-by-four.

The other lay beneath the piled jackets; but enough of the end protruded to show that they had been chopped from the same timber, gray-painted on one side, stained and gouged on the other where boards had once been nailed. A coil of rope lay beside the axes.

High in the upper branches, Blackie braced himself with negligent confidence and stared along the concrete ribbon.

From here, he thought, you'd almost think the place was still alive, instead of crumbling around our ears.

The windows of the distant houses were dark, unglassed holes, but the sunlight made the masonry clean and
shining. To Blackie, the ragged tops of most of the buildings were as natural as the tattered look of the few people he knew. Beyond, toward the center of the city, was real evidence of his race's bygone might—a vast jumble of shattered stone and fused metal. Queer weeds and mosses infected the area, but it would be centuries before they could mask the desolation.

Better covered, were the heaps along the road, seemingly shoved just beyond the gravel shoulders—mouldering mounds which legend said were once machines to ride in along the pavement.

Something glinted at the bend of the highway. Blackie peered closer.

He swarmed down the tree from branch to branch, so lithely that the trio below hardly had the warning of the vibrating leaves before he dropped, cat-footed, among them.

"They're comin'!"

He shrugged quickly into his stained jacket, emulated in silent haste by the others. Vito rubbed his hands down the hairy chest left revealed by his open jacket and hefted one of the clubs. In his broad paws, it seemed light.

They were quiet, watching Sid peer out through narrowly parted brush of the undergrowth. Blackie fidgeted behind him. Finally, he reached out as if to pull the other aside, but at that moment Sid released the bushes and crouched.

The others, catching his warning glance, fell prone, peering through shrubbery and around tree trunks with savage eyes.

The distant squawk of a jay became suddenly very clear, as did the sighing of a faint breeze through the leaves overhead. Then a new, clanking, humming sound intruded.

A procession of three vehicles rolled along the highway at an unvarying pace which took no account of patches or worn spots. They jounced in turn across a patch laid over a previous, unsuccessful patch, and halted before the felled tree. Two were bulldozers; the third was a light truck with compartments for tools. No human figures were visible.

A moment later, the working force appeared—a column of eight robots. These deployed as they reached the obstacle, and explored like colossal ants along its length.

"What're they after?" asked Mike, whispering although he lay fifty yards away.

"They're lookin' over the job for whatever sends them out," Blackie whispered back. "See those little lights stickin' out the tops o' their heads? I heard tell, once, that's how they're run."

Some of the robots took saws from the truck and began to cut through the tree trunk. Others produced cables and huge hooks to attach the obstacle to the bulldozers.

"Look at 'em go!" sighed Sid, hunching his stiff shoulders jealously. "Took us hours, an' they're half done already."

They watched as the robots precisely severed the part of the tree that blocked the highway, going not one inch beyond the gravel shoulder, and helped the bulldozers to tug it aside. On the opposite side of the concrete, the shoulder tapered off into a six-foot drop. The log was jockeyed around parallel to this ditch and rolled into it, amid a thrashing of branches and a spurtling of small pebbles.

"Glad we're on the high side," whispered Mike. "That thing 'ud squash a guy's guts right out!"

"Keep listenin' to me," Blackie said, "an' you'll keep on bein' in the right place at the right time."

Mike raised his eyebrows at Vito, who thrust out his lower lip and nodded sagely. Sid grinned, but no one contradicted the boast.

"They're linin' up," Blackie warned tensely. "You guys ready? Where's that rope?"

Someone thrust it into his hands. Still squinting at the scene on the highway, he fumbled for the ends and held one out to Mike. The others gripped their clubs.

"Now, remember!" ordered Blackie. "Me an' Mike will trip up the last one in line. You two get in there quick an' wallop him over the head—but good!"

"Don't go away while we're doin' it," said big Sid. "They won't chase ya, but they look out fer themselves. I don't wanna get tossed twenty feet again!"

The eyes of the others flicked toward the jagged white scar running down behind Sid's right ear and under the collar of his jacket. Then they swung back to the road.

"Good!" breathed Blackie. "The rollin' stuff's goin' first."

The truck and bulldozers set out toward the city, with the column of robots marching a fair distance behind. The latter approached the ambush—drew abreast—began to pass.

Blackie raised himself to a crouch with just the tips of his fingers steadying him.

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As the last robot plodded by, he surged out of the brush, joined to Red Mike by their grips on the twenty feet of rope. They ran up behind the marching machine, trailed by the others.
In his right hand, Blackie twirled the part of the rope hanging between him and Mike. On the second swing, he got it over the head of the robot. He saw Mike brace himself.

The robot staggered. It pivoted clumsily to its left, groping vaguely for the hindrance. Mike and Blackie tugged again, and the machine wound up facing them in its efforts to maintain balance. Its companions marched steadily along the road.

"Switch ends!" barked Blackie.

Alert, Mike tossed him the other end of the rope and caught Blackie's. They ran past the robot on either side, looping it in. Blackie kept going until he was above the ditch. He wound a turn of rope about his forearm and plunged down the bank.

[Illustration: With skill of long practice, they brought the robot down.]

A shower of gravel spattered after him as Mike jammed his heels into the shoulder of the highway to anchor the other end. Then he heard the booming sound of the robot's fall.

Blackie clawed his way up the bank. Vito and Sid were smashing furiously at the floundering machine. Mike danced about the melee with bared teeth, charging in once as if to leap upon the quarry with both feet. Frustrated by the peril of the whirling two-by-fours, he swept up handfuls of gravel to hurl.

Blackie turned to run for one of the axes. Just then, Sid struck home to the head of the robot.

Sparks spat out amid a tinkle of glass. The machine ceased all motion.

"All right!" panted Blackie. "All right! That's enough!"

They stepped back, snarls fading. A handful of gravel trickled through Mike's fingers and pattered loudly on the concrete. Gradually, the men began to straighten up, seeing the robot as an inert heap of metal rather than as a weird beast in its death throes.

"We better load up an' get," said Blackie. "We wanna be over on the trail if they send somethin' up the road to look for this."

Vito dragged the robot off the highway by the head, and they began the task of lashing it to the two-by-fours.

It was about two hours later when they plodded around a street corner among the ruins and stopped before a fairly intact building. By that time, they had picked up an escort of dirty, half-clad children who ran ahead to spread the news.

Two other men and a handful of women gathered around with eager exclamations. The hunters dropped their catch.

"Better get to work on him," said Blackie, glancing at the sky. "Be dark soon."

The men who had remained as guards ran inside the entrance of polished granite and brought out tools: hammers, crowbars, hatchets. Behind them hurried women with basins and large cans. The original four, weary from the weight of the robot despite frequent pauses on the trail, stepped back.

"Where first, Blackie?" asked one of the men, waiting for the women to untangle the rope and timbers.

"Try all the joints. After that, we'll crack him open down the middle for the main supply tank."

He watched the metal give way under the blows. As the robot was dismembered, the fluid that had lubricated the complex mechanism flowed from its wounds and was poured by the women into a five-gallon can.

"Bring a cupful, Judy," Blackie told his woman, a wiry blond girl. "I wanna see if it's as good as the last."

He lit a stick at the fire as they crossed the littered, once-ornate lobby, and she followed him down a dim hall. He pulled aside the skins that covered their doorway, then stumbled his way to the table. The window was still uncovered against the night chill, but it looked out on a courtyard shadowed by towering walls. To eyes adjusted to the sunny street, the room was dark.

Judy poured the oil into the makeshift lamp, waited for the rag wick to soak, and held it out to Blackie. He lit the wick from his stick.

"It burns real good, Blackie," the girl said, wrinkling her nose against the first oily smoke. "Gee, you're smart to catch one the first day out."

"Tell them other dames to watch how they use it!" he warned. "This oughta last a month or more when we get him all emptied."

He blew out the dying flame on the stick and dropped the charred wood thoughtfully to the floor.

"Naw, I ain't so smart," he admitted, "or I'd figure a way to make one of them work the garden for us. Maybe someday—but this kind won't do nothin' but fix that goddam road, an' what good's that to anybody?"

His woman moved the burning lamp carefully to the center of the table.

"Anyway, it's gonna be better'n last winter," she said. "We'll have lights now."
OVERTURE--ADAGIO MISTERIOSO
The neurosurgeon peeled the thin surgical gloves from his hands as the nurse blotted the perspiration from his forehead for the last time after the long, grueling hours.
"They're waiting outside for you, Doctor," she said quietly.
The neurosurgeon nodded wordlessly. Behind him, three assistants were still finishing up the operation, attending to the little finishing touches that did not require the brilliant hand of the specialist. Such things as suturing up a scalp, and applying bandages.
The nurse took the sterile mask--no longer sterile now--while the doctor washed and dried his hands.
"Where are they?" he asked finally. "Out in the hall, I suppose?"

[Ilustration]
She nodded. "You'll probably have to push them out of the way to get out of Surgery."
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Her prediction was almost perfect. The group of men in conservative business suits, wearing conservative ties, and holding conservative, soft, felt hats in their hands were standing just outside the door. Dr. Mallon glanced at the five of them, letting his eyes stop on the face of the tallest. "He may live," the doctor said briefly.
"You don't sound very optimistic, Dr. Mallon," said the FBI man.
Mallon shook his head. "Frankly, I'm not. He was shot laterally, just above the right temple, with what looks to me like a .357 magnum pistol slug. It's in there--" He gestured back toward the room he had just left. "--you can have it, if you want. It passed completely through the brain, lodging on the other side of the head, just inside the skull. What kept him alive, I'll never know, but I can guarantee that he might as well be dead; it was a rather nasty way to lobotomize a man, but it was effective, I can assure you."
The Federal agent frowned puzzledly. "Lobotomized? Like those operations they do on psychotics?"
"Similar," said Mallon. "But no psychotic was ever butchered up like this; and what I had to do to him to save his life didn't help anything."
The men looked at each other, then the big one said: "I'm sure you did the best you could, Dr. Mallon."
The neurosurgeon rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead and looked steadily into the eyes of the big man.
"You wanted him alive," he said slowly, "and I have a duty to save life. But frankly, I think we'll all eventually wish we had the common human decency to let Paul Wendell die. Excuse me, gentlemen; I don't feel well." He turned abruptly and strode off down the hall.
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One of the men in the conservative suits said: "Louis Pasteur lived through most of his life with only half a brain and he never even knew it, Frank; maybe--"
"Yeah. Maybe," said the big man. "But I don't know whether to hope he does or hope he doesn't." He used his right thumbnail to pick a bit of microscopic dust from beneath his left index finger, studying the operation without actually seeing it. "Meanwhile, we've got to decide what to do about the rest of those screwballs. Wendell was the only sane one, and therefore the most dangerous--but the rest of them aren't what you'd call safe, either."
The others nodded in a chorus of silent agreement.
NOCTURNE--TEMPO DI VALSE
"Now what the hell's the matter with me?" thought Paul Wendell. He could feel nothing. Absolutely nothing: No taste, no sight, no hearing, no anything. "Am I breathing?" He couldn't feel any breathing. Nor, for that matter, could he feel heat, nor cold, nor pain.
"Am I dead? No. At least, I don't feel dead. Who am I? What am I?" No answer. Cogito, ergo sum. What did that mean? There was something quite definitely wrong, but he couldn't quite tell what it was. Ideas seemed to come from nowhere; fragments of concepts that seemed to have no referents. What did that mean? What is a referent? A concept? He felt he knew intuitively what they meant, but what use they were he didn't know.
There was something wrong, and he had to find out what it was. And he had to find out through the only method of investigation left open to him.
So he thought about it.
SONATA--ALLEGRO CON BRIO
The President of the United States finished reading the sheaf of papers before him, laid them neatly to one side, and looked up at the big man seated across the desk from him.

"Is this everything, Frank?" he asked.

"That's everything, Mr. President; everything we know. We've got eight men locked up in St. Elizabeth's, all of them absolutely psychotic, and one human vegetable named Paul Wendell. We can't get anything out of them."

The President leaned back in his chair. "I really can't quite understand it. Extra-sensory perception--why should it drive men insane? Wendell's papers don't say enough. He claims it can be mathematically worked out--that he did work it out--but we don't have any proof of that."

The man named Frank scowled. "Wasn't that demonstration of his proof enough?"

A small, graying, intelligent-faced man who had been sitting silently, listening to the conversation, spoke at last. "Mr. President, I'm afraid I still don't completely understand the problem. If we could go over it, and get it straightened out--" He left the sentence hanging expectantly.

"Certainly. This Paul Wendell is a--well, he called himself a psionic mathematician. Actually, he had quite a respectable reputation in the mathematical field. He did very important work in cybernetic theory, but he dropped it several years ago--said that the human mind couldn't be worked at from a mechanistic angle. He studied various branches of psychology, and eventually dropped them all. He built several of those queer psionic machines--gold detectors, and something he called a hexer. He's done a lot of different things, evidently."

"Sounds like he was unable to make up his mind," said the small man.

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The President shook his head firmly. "Not at all. He did new, creative work in every one of the fields he touched. He was considered something of a mystic, but not a crackpot, or a screwball.

"But, anyhow, the point is that he evidently found what he'd been looking for for years. He asked for an appointment with me; I okayed the request because of his reputation. He would only tell me that he'd stumbled across something that was vital to national defense and the future of mankind; but I felt that, in view of the work he had done, he was entitled to a hearing."

"And he proved to you, beyond any doubt, that he had this power?" the small man asked.

Frank shifted his big body uneasily in his chair. "He certainly did, Mr. Secretary."

The President nodded. "I know it might not sound too impressive when heard second-hand, but Paul Wendell could tell me more of what was going on in the world than our Central Intelligence agents have been able to dig up in twenty years. And he claimed he could teach the trick to anyone."

"I told him I'd think it over. Naturally, my first step was to make sure that he was followed twenty-four hours a day. A man with information like that simply could not be allowed to fall into enemy hands." The President scowled, as though angry with himself. "I'm sorry to say that I didn't realize the full potentialities of what he had said for several days--not until I got Frank's first report."

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"You could hardly be expected to, Mr. President," Frank said. "After all, something like that is pretty heady stuff."

"I think I follow you," said the Secretary. "You found he was already teaching this trick to others."

The President glanced at the FBI man. Frank said: "That's right; he was holding meetings--classes, I suppose you'd call them--twice a week. There were eight men who came regularly."

"That's when I gave the order to have them all picked up. Can you imagine what would happen if everybody could be taught to use this ability? Or even a small minority?"

"They'd rule the world," said the Secretary softly.

The President shrugged that off. "That's a small item, really. The point is that nothing would be hidden from anyone.

"The way we play the Game of Life today is similar to playing poker. We keep a straight face and play the cards tight to our chest. But what would happen if everyone could see everyone else's cards? It would cease to be a game of strategy, and become a game of pure chance.

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"We'd have to start playing Life another way. It would be like chess, where you can see the opponent's every move. But in all human history there has never been a social analogue for chess. That's why Paul Wendell and his group had to be stopped--for a while at least."

"But what could you have done with them?" asked the Secretary. "Imprison them summarily? Have them shot? What would you have done?"

The President's face became graver than ever. "I had not yet made that decision. Thank Heaven, it has been taken out of my hands."
"One of his own men shot him?"

"That's right," said the big FBI man. "We went into his apartment an instant too late. We found eight madmen and a near-corpses. We're not sure what happened, and we're not sure we want to know. Anything that can drive eight reasonably stable men off the deep end in less than an hour is nothing to meddle around with."

"I wonder what went wrong?" asked the Secretary of no one in particular.

SCHERZO--PRESTO
Paul Wendell, too, was wondering what went wrong.

Slowly, over a period of immeasurable time, memory seeped back into him. Bits of memory, here and there, crept in from nowhere, sometimes to be lost again, sometimes to remain. Once he found himself mentally humming an odd, rather funeral tune:

Now, though you'd have said that the head was dead, For its owner dead was he, It stood on its neck with a smile well-bred, And bowed three times to me. It was none of your impudent, off-hand nods....

Wendell stopped and wondered what the devil seemed so important about the song.

Slowly, slowly, memory returned.

When he suddenly realized, with crashing finality, where he was and what had happened to him, Paul Wendell went violently insane. Or he would have, if he could have become violent.

MARCHE FUNEBRE--LENTO
"Open your mouth, Paul," said the pretty nurse. The hulking mass of not-quite-human gazed at her with vacuous eyes and opened its mouth. Dexterously, she spooned a mouthful of baby food into it. "Now swallow it, Paul. That's it. Now another."

"In pretty bad shape, isn't he?"

Nurse Peters turned to look at the man who had walked up behind her. It was Dr. Benwick, the new interne.

"He's worthless to himself and anyone else," she said. "It's a shame, too; he'd rather nice looking if there were any personality behind that face." She shoveled another spoonful of mashed asparagus into the gaping mouth.

"Now swallow it, Paul."

"How long has he been here?"

Benwick asked, eyeing the scars that showed through the dark hair on the patient's head.

"Nearly six years," Miss Peters said.

"Hmmh! But they outlawed lobotomies back in the sixties."

"Open your mouth, Paul." Then, to Benwick: "This was an accident. Bullet in the head. You can see the scar on the other side of his head."

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The doctor moved around to look at the left temple. "Doesn't leave much of a human being, does it?"

"It doesn't even leave much of an animal," Miss Peters said. "He's alive, but that's the best you can say for him. (Now swallow, Paul. That's it.) Even an ameba can find food for itself."

"Yeah. Even a single cell is better off than he is. Chop out a man's forebrain and he's nothing. It's a case of the whole being less than the sum of its parts."

"I'm glad they outlawed the operation on mental patients," Miss Peters said, with a note of disgust in her voice.

"But it was a matter of electro-encephalographic records. They showed that there was electrical activity in the prefrontal lobes even after the nerves had been severed, which could mean a lot of things; but the A-L supporters said that it indicated that the forebrain was still capable of thinking."

Miss Peters looked a little ill. "Why--that's horrible! I wish you'd never told me." She looked at the lump of vegetalized human sitting placidly at the table. "Do you suppose he's actually thinking, somewhere, deep inside?"

"Oh, I doubt it," Benwick said hastily. "There's probably no real self-awareness, none at all. There couldn't be."

"I suppose not," Miss Peters said, "but it's not pleasant to think of."

"That's why they outlawed it," said Benwick.

RONDO--ANDANTE MA NON POCO

Insanity is a retreat from reality, an escape within the mind from the reality outside the mind. But what if there is no detectable reality outside the mind? What is there to escape from? Suicide--death in any form--is an escape from life. But if death does not come, and can not be self-inflicted, what then?

And when the pressure of nothingness becomes too great to bear, it becomes necessary to escape; a man under great enough pressure will take the easy way out. But if there is no easy way? Why, then a man must take the hard way.
For Paul Wendell, there was no escape from his dark, senseless Gehenna by way of death, and even insanity offered no retreat; insanity in itself is senseless, and senselessness was what he was trying to flee. The only insanity possible was the psychosis of regression, a fleeing into the past, into the crystallized, unchanging world of memory.

So Paul Wendell explored his past, every year, every hour, every second of it, searching to recall and savor every bit of sensation he had ever experienced. He tasted and smelled and touched and heard and analyzed each of them minutely. He searched through his own subjective thought processes, analyzing, checking and correlating them.

Know thyself. Time and time again, Wendell retreated from his own memories in confusion, or shame, or fear. But there was no retreat from himself, and eventually he had to go back and look again.

He had plenty of time--all the time in the world. How can subjective time be measured when there is no objective reality?

Eventually, there came the time when there was nothing left to look at; nothing left to see; nothing to check and remember; nothing that he had not gone over in every detail. Again, boredom began to creep in. It was not the boredom of nothingness, but the boredom of the familiar. Imagination? What could he imagine, except combinations and permutations of his own memories? He didn't know--perhaps there might be more to it than that.

So he exercised his imagination. With a wealth of material to draw upon, he would build himself worlds where he could move around, walk, talk, and make love, eat, drink and feel the caress of sunshine and wind.

It was while he was engaged in this project that he touched another mind. He touched it, fused for a blinding second, and bounced away. He ran gibbering up and down the corridors of his own memory, mentally reeling from the shock of--identification!

Who was he? Paul Wendell? Yes, he knew with incontrovertible certainty that he was Paul Wendell. But he also knew, with almost equal certainty, that he was Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton. He was living--had lived--in the latter half of the nineteenth century. But he knew nothing of the Captain other than the certainty of identity; nothing else of that blinding mind-touch remained.

Again he scoured his memory--Paul Wendell's memory--checking and rechecking the area just before that semi-fatal bullet had crashed through his brain.

And finally, at long last, he knew with certainty where his calculations had gone astray. He knew positively why eight men had gone insane.

Then he went again in search of other minds, and this time he knew he would not bounce.

An old man sat quietly in his lawnchair, puffing contentedly on an expensive briar pipe and making corrections with a fountain pen on a thick sheaf of typewritten manuscript. Around him stretched an expanse of green lawn, dotted here and there with squat cycads that looked like overgrown pineapples; in the distance, screening the big house from the road, stood a row of stately palms, their fronds stirring lightly in the faint, warm California breeze.

The old man raised his head as a car pulled into the curving driveway. The warm hum of the turboelectric engine stopped, and a man climbed out of the vehicle. He walked with easy strides across the grass to where the elderly gentleman sat. He was lithe, of indeterminate age, but with a look of great determination. There was something in his face that made the old man vaguely uneasy--not with fear but with a sense of deep respect.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"I have some news for you, Mr. President," the younger one said.

The old man smiled wryly. "I haven't been President for fourteen years. Most people call me 'Senator' or just plain 'Mister'."

"You sound ominous, Mr. Camberton. I hope you'll remember that I've been retired from the political field for nearly five years. What is this shattering news?"

"Paul Wendell's body was buried yesterday."

The Senator looked blank for a second, then recognition came into his face. "Wendell, eh? After all this time. Poor chap; he'd have been better off if he'd died twenty years ago." Then he paused and looked up. "But just who are you, Mr. Camberton? And what makes you think I would be particularly interested in Paul Wendell?"

"Mr. Wendell wants to tell you that he is very grateful to you for having saved his life, Senator. If it hadn't been for your orders, he would have been left to die."

The Senator felt strangely calm, although he knew he should feel shock. "That's ridiculous, sir! Mr. Wendell's
brain was hopelessly damaged; he never recovered his sanity or control of his body. I know; I used to drop over to see him occasionally, until I finally realized that I was only making myself feel worse and doing him no good."

"Yes, sir. And Mr. Wendell wants you to know how much he appreciated those visits."

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The Senator grew red. "What the devil are you talking about? I just said that Wendell couldn't talk. How could he have said anything to you? What do you know about this?"

"I never said he spoke to me, Senator; he didn't. And as to what I know of this affair, evidently you don't remember my name. James Camberton."

The Senator frowned. "The name is familiar, but--" Then his eyes went wide. "Camberton! You were one of the eight men who--Why, you're the man who shot Wendell!"

Camberton pulled up an empty lawnchair and sat down. "That's right, Senator; but there's nothing to be afraid of. Would you like to hear about it?"

"I suppose I must." The old man's voice was so low that it was scarcely audible. "Tell me--were the other seven released, too? Have--have you all regained your sanity? Do you remember--" He stopped.

"Do we remember the extra-sensory perception formula? Yes, we do; all eight of us remember it well. It was based on faulty premises, and incomplete, of course; but in its own way it was workable enough. We have something much better now."

The old man shook his head slowly. "I failed, then. Such an idea is as fatal to society as we know it as a virus plague. I tried to keep you men quarantined, but I failed. After all those years of insanity, now the chess game begins; the poker game is over."

"It's worse than that," Camberton said, chuckling softly. "Or, actually, it's much better."

"I don't understand; explain it to me. I'm an old man, and I may not live to see my world collapse. I hope I don't."

Camberton said: "I'll try to explain in words, Senator. They're inadequate, but a fuller explanation will come later."

And he launched into the story of the two-decade search of Paul Wendell.

CODA--ANDANTINO

"Telepathy? Time travel?" After three hours of listening, the ex-President was still not sure he understood.

"Think of it this way," Camberton said. "Think of the mind at any given instant as being surrounded by a shield--a shield of privacy--a shield which you, yourself have erected, though unconsciously. It's a perfect insulator against telepathic prying by others. You feel you have to have it in order to retain your privacy--your sense of identity, even. But here's the kicker: even though no one else can get in, you can't get out!"

"You can call this shield 'self-consciousness'--perhaps shame is a better word. Everyone has it, to some degree; no telepathic thought can break through it. Occasionally, some people will relax it for a fraction of a second, but the instant they receive something, the barrier goes up again."

"Then how is telepathy possible? How can you go through it?" The Senator looked puzzled as he thoughtfully tamped tobacco into his briar.

"You don't go through it; you go around it."

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"Now wait a minute; that sounds like some of those fourth dimension stories I've read. I recall that when I was younger, I read a murder mystery--something about a morgue, I think. At any rate, the murder was committed inside a locked room; no one could possibly have gotten in or out. One of the characters suggested that the murderer traveled through the fourth dimension in order to get at the victim. He didn't go through the walls; he went around them." The Senator puffed a match flame into the bowl of his pipe, his eyes on the younger man. "Is that what you're driving at?"

"Exactly," agreed Camberton. "The fourth dimension. Time. You must go back in time to an instant when that wall did not exist. An infant has no shame, no modesty, no shield against the world. You must travel back down your own four-dimensional tube of memory in order to get outside it, and to do that, you have to know your own mind completely, and you must be sure you know it.

"For only if you know your own mind can you communicate with another mind. Because, at the 'instant' of contact, you become that person; you must enter his own memory at the beginning and go up the hyper-tube. You will have all his memories, his hopes, his fears, his sense of identity. Unless you know--beyond any trace of doubt--who you are, the result is insanity."

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The Senator puffed his pipe for a moment, then shook his head. "It sounds like Oriental mysticism to me. If you
can travel in time, you'd be able to change the past."

"Not at all," Camberton said; "that's like saying that if you read a book, the author's words will change.

"Time isn't like that. Look, suppose you had a long trough filled with supercooled water. At one end, you drop
in a piece of ice. Immediately the water begins to freeze; the crystallization front moves toward the other end of the
trough. Behind that front, there is ice--frozen, immovable, unchangeable. Ahead of it there is water--fluid, mobile,
changeable.

"The instant we call 'the present' is like that crystallization front. The past is unchangeable; the future is
flexible. But they both exist."

"I see--at least, I think I do. And you can do all this?"

"Not yet," said Camberton; "not completely. My mind isn't as strong as Wendell's, nor as capable. I'm not the--
shall we say--the superman he is; perhaps I never will be. But I'm learning--I'm learning. After all, it took Paul
twenty years to do the trick under the most favorable circumstances imaginable."

"I see." The Senator smoked his pipe in silence for a long time. Camberton lit a cigaret and said nothing. After
a time, the Senator took the briar from his mouth and began to tap the bowl gently on the heel of his palm. "Mr.
Camberton, why do you tell me all this? I still have influence with the Senate; the present President is a protégé of
mine. It wouldn't be too difficult to get you men--ah--put away again. I have no desire to see our society ruined, our
world destroyed. Why do you tell me?"

* * * * *

Camberton smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid you might find it a little difficult to put us away again, sir; but
that's not the point. You see, we need you. We have no desire to destroy our present culture until we have designed a
better one to replace it.

"You are one of the greatest living statesmen, Senator; you have a wealth of knowledge and ability that can
never be replaced; knowledge and ability that will help us to design a culture and a civilization that will be as far
above this one as this one is above the wolf pack. We want you to come in with us, help us; we want you to be one
of us."

"I? I'm an old man, Mr. Camberton. I will be dead before this civilization falls; how can I help build a new one?
And how could I, at my age, be expected to learn this technique?"

"Paul Wendell says you can. He says you have one of the strongest minds now existing."

The Senator put his pipe in his jacket pocket. "You know, Camberton, you keep referring to Wendell in the
present tense. I thought you said he was dead."

Again Camberton gave him the odd smile. "I didn't say that, Senator; I said they buried his body. That's quite a
different thing. You see, before the poor, useless hulk that held his blasted brain died, Paul gave the eight of us his
memories; he gave us himself. The mind is not the brain, Senator; we don't know what it is yet, but we do know
what it isn't. Paul's poor, damaged brain is dead, but his memories, his thought processes, the very essence of all that
was Paul Wendell is still very much with us.

"Do you begin to see now why we want you to come in with us? There are nine of us now, but we need the
tenth--you. Will you come?"

"I--I'll have to think it over," the old statesman said in a voice that had a faint quaver. "I'll have to think it over."

But they both knew what his answer would be.
Pendray clenched his teeth and kept going. But as he moved down the side passage, he went more slowly, so that the friction of his palm against the wall could be used as a brake.

He wasn't used to maneuvering without gravity; he'd been taught it in Cadets, of course, but that was years ago and parsecs away. When the pseudograv generators had gone out, he'd retched all over the place, but now his stomach was empty, and the nausea had gone.

He had automatically oriented himself in the corridors so that the doors of the various compartments were to his left and right, with the ceiling "above" and the deck "below." Otherwise, he might have lost his sense of direction completely in the complex maze of the interstellar battleship.

Or, he corrected himself, what's left of a battleship.

And what was left? Just Al Pendray and less than half of the once-mighty Shane.

The door to the lifeboat hold loomed ahead in the beam of the flashlight, and Pendray braked himself to a stop. He just looked at the dogged port for a few seconds.

Let there be a boat in there, he thought. Just a boat, that's all I ask. And air, he added as an afterthought. Then his hand went out to the dog handle and turned.

The door cracked easily. There was air on the other side. Pendray breathed a sigh of relief, braced his good foot against the wall, and pulled the door open.

The little lifeboat was there, nestled tightly in her cradle. For the first time since the Shane had been hit, Pendray's face broke into a broad smile. The fear that had been within him faded a little, and the darkness of the crippled ship seemed to be lessened.

Then the beam of his torch caught the little red tag on the air lock of the lifeboat. Repair Work Under Way--Do Not Remove This Tag Without Proper Authority.

That explained why the lifeboat hadn't been used by the other crewmen.

Pendray's mind was numb as he opened the air lock of the small craft. He didn't even attempt to think. All he wanted was to see exactly how the vessel had been disabled by the repair crew. He went inside.

The lights were working in the lifeboat. That showed that its power was still functioning. He glanced over the instrument-and-control panels. No red tags on them, at least. Just to make sure, he opened them up, one by one, and looked inside. Nothing wrong, apparently.

Maybe it had just been some minor repair--a broken lighting switch or something. But he didn't dare hope yet.

He went through the door in the tiny cabin that led to the engine compartment, and he saw what the trouble was.

The shielding had been removed from the atomic motors.

He just hung there in the air, not moving. His lean, dark face remained expressionless, but tears welled up in his eyes and spilled over, spreading their dampness over his lids.

The motors would run, all right. The ship could take him to Earth. But the radiation leakage from those motors would kill him long before he made it home. It would take ten days to make it back to base, and twenty-four hours of exposure to the deadly radiation from those engines would be enough to insure his death from radiation sickness.

His eyes were blurring from the film of tears that covered them; without gravity to move the liquid, it just pooled there, distorting his vision. He blinked the tears away, then wiped his face with his free hand.

Now what?

He was the only man left alive on the Shane, and none of the lifeboats had escaped. The Rat cruisers had seen to that.

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They weren't really rats, those people. Not literally. They looked humanoid enough to enable plastic surgeons
to disguise a human being as one of them, although it meant sacrificing the little fingers and little toes to imitate the four-digit Rats. The Rats were at a disadvantage there; they couldn't add any fingers. But the Rats had other advantages--they bred and fought like, well, like rats.

Not that human beings couldn't equal them or even surpass them in ferocity, if necessary. But the Rats had nearly a thousand years of progress over Earth. Their Industrial Revolution had occurred while the Angles and the Saxons and the Jutes were pushing the Britons into Wales. They had put their first artificial satellites into orbit while King Alfred the Great was fighting off the Danes.

They hadn't developed as rapidly as Man had. It took them roughly twice as long to go from one step to the next, so that their actual superiority was only a matter of five hundred years, and Man was catching up rapidly. Unfortunately, Man hadn't caught up yet.

The first meeting of the two races had taken place in interstellar space, and had seemed friendly enough. Two ships had come within detector distance of each other, and had circled warily. It was almost a perfect example of the Leinster Hypothesis; neither knew where the other's home world was located, and neither could go back home for
fear that the other would be able to follow. But the Leinster Hypothesis couldn't be followed to the end. Leinster's solution had been to have the parties trade ships and go home, but that only works when the two civilizations are fairly close in technological development. The Rats certainly weren't going to trade their ship for the inferior craft of the Earthmen.

The Rats, conscious of their superiority, had a simpler solution. They were certain, after a while, that Earth posed no threat to them, so they invited the Earth ship to follow them home.

The Earthmen had been taken on a carefully conducted tour of the Rats' home planet, and the captain of the Earth ship—who had gone down in history as "Sucker" Johnston—was convinced that the Rats meant no harm, and agreed to lead a Rat ship back to Earth. If the Rats had struck then, there would never have been a Rat-Human War. It would have been over before it started.

But the Rats were too proud of their superiority. Earth was too far away to bother them for the moment; it wasn't in their line of conquest just yet. In another fifty years, the planet would be ready for picking off.

Earth had no idea that the Rats were so widespread. They had taken and colonized over thirty planets, completely destroying the indigenous intelligent races that had existed on five of them.

It wasn't just pride that had made the Rats decide to wait before hitting Earth; there was a certain amount of prudence, too. None of the other races they had met had developed space travel; the Earthmen might be a little tougher to beat. Not that there was any doubt of the outcome, as far as they were concerned— but why take chances?

But, while the Rats had fooled "Sucker" Johnston and some of his officers, the majority of the crew knew better. Rat crewmen were little short of slaves, and the Rats made the mistake of assuming that the Earth crewmen were the same. They hadn't tried to impress the crewmen as they had the officers. When the interrogation officers on Earth questioned the crew of the Earth ship, they, too, became suspicious. Johnston's optimistic attitude just didn't jibe with the facts.

So, while the Rat officers were having the red carpet rolled out for them, Earth Intelligence went to work. Several presumably awe-stricken men were allowed to take a conducted tour of the Rat ship. After all, why not? The Twentieth Century Russians probably wouldn't have minded showing their rocket plants to an American of Captain John Smith's time, either.

But there's a difference. Earth's government knew Earth was being threatened, and they knew they had to get as many facts as they could. They were also aware of the fact that if you know a thing can be done, then you will eventually find a way to do it.

During the next fifty years, Earth learned more than it had during the previous hundred. The race expanded, secretly, moving out to other planets in that sector of the galaxy. And they worked to catch up with the Rats.

They didn't make it, of course. When, after fifty years of presumably peaceful—but highly limited—contact, the Rats hit Earth, they found out one thing. That the mass and energy of a planet armed with the proper weapons can not be out-classed by any conceivable concentration of spaceships.

Throwing rocks at an army armed with machine guns may seem futile, but if you hit them with an avalanche, they'll go under. The Rats lost three-quarters of their fleet to planet-based guns and had to go home to bandage their wounds.

The only trouble was that Earth couldn't counterattack. Their ships were still out-classed by those of the Rats. And the Rats, their racial pride badly stung, were determined to wipe out Man, to erase the stain on their honor wherever Man could be found. Somehow, some way, they must destroy Earth.

And now, Al Pendray thought bitterly, they would do it.

* * * * *

The Shane had sneaked in past Rat patrols to pick up a spy on one of the outlying Rat planets, a man who'd spent five years playing the part of a Rat slave, trying to get information on their activities there. And he had had one vital bit of knowledge. He'd found it and held on to it for over three years, until the time came for the rendezvous.

The rendezvous had almost come too late. The Rats had developed a device that could make a star temporarily unstable, and they were ready to use it on Sol.

The Shane had managed to get off-planet with the spy, but they'd been spotted in spite of the detector nullifiers that Earth had developed. They'd been jumped by Rat cruisers and blasted by the superior Rat weapons. The lifeboats had been picked out of space, one by one, as the crew tried to get away.

In a way, Alfred Pendray was lucky. He'd been in the sick bay with a sprained ankle when the Rats hit, sitting in the X-ray room. The shot that had knocked out the port engine had knocked him unconscious, but the shielded walls of the X-ray room had saved him from the blast of radiation that had cut down the crew in the rear of the ship. He'd come to in time to see the Rat cruisers cut up the lifeboats before they could get away from the ship. They'd taken a couple of parting shots at the dead hulk, and then left it to drift in space—and leaving one man alive.
In the small section near the rear of the ship, there were still compartments that were airtight. At least, Pendray decided, there was enough air to keep him alive for a while. If only he could get a little power into the ship, he could get the rear air purifiers to working.

He left the lifeboat and closed the door behind him. There was no point in worrying about a boat he couldn't use.

He made his way back toward the engine room. Maybe there was something salvageable there. Swimming through the corridors was becoming easier with practice; his Cadet training was coming back to him.

Then he got a shock that almost made him faint. The beam of his light had fallen full on the face of a Rat. It took him several seconds to realize that the Rat was dead, and several more to realize that it wasn't a Rat at all. It was the spy they had been sent to pick up. He'd been in the sick bay for treatments of the ulcers on his back gained from five years of frequent lashings as a Rat slave.

Pendray went closer and looked him over. He was still wearing the clothing he'd had on when the Shane picked him up.

Poor guy, Pendray thought. All that hell--for nothing.

Then he went around the corpse and continued toward the engine room.

The place was still hot, but it was thermal heat, not radioactivity. A dead atomic engine doesn't leave any residual effects.

Five out of the six engines were utterly ruined, but the sixth seemed to be in working condition. Even the shielding was intact. Again, hope rose in Alfred Pendray's mind. If only there were tools!

A half hour's search killed that idea. There were no tools aboard capable of cutting through the hard shielding. He couldn't use it to shield the engine on the lifeboat. And the shielding that been on the other five engines had melted and run; it was worthless.

Then another idea hit him. Would the remaining engine work at all? Could it be fixed? It was the only hope he had left.

Apparently, the only thing wrong with it was the exciter circuit leads, which had been sheared off by a bit of flying metal. The engine had simply stopped instead of exploding. That ought to be fixable. He could try; it was something to do, anyway.

It took him the better part of two days, according to his watch. There were plenty of smaller tools around for the job, although many of them were scattered and some had been ruined by the explosions. Replacement parts were harder to find, but he managed to pirate some of them from the ruined engines.

He ate and slept as he felt the need. There was plenty of food in the sick bay kitchen, and there is no need for a bed under gravity-less conditions.

After the engine was repaired, he set about getting the rest of the ship ready to move--if it would move. The hull was still solid, so the infraspace field should function. The air purifiers had to be reconnected and repaired in a couple of places. The lights ditto. The biggest job was checking all the broken leads to make sure there weren't any short circuits anywhere.

The pseudogravity circuits were hopeless. He'd have to do without gravity.

On the third day, he decided he'd better clean the place up. There were several corpses floating around, and they were beginning to be noticeable. He had to tow them, one by one, to the rear starboard air lock and seal them between the inner and outer doors. He couldn't dump them, since the outer door was partially melted and welded shut.

He took the personal effects from the men. If he ever got back to Earth, their next-of-kin might want the stuff. On the body of the imitation Rat, he found a belt-pouch full of microfilm. The report on the Rats' new weapon? Possibly. He'd have to look at it over later.

On the "morning" of the fourth day, he started the single remaining engine. The infraspace field came on, and the ship began moving at multiples of the speed of light. Pendray grinned. Half gone, will travel, he thought gleefully.

If Pendray had had any liquor aboard, he would have gotten mildly drunk. Instead, he sat down and read the spools of microfilm, using the projector in the sick bay.

He was not a scientist in the strict sense of the word. He was a navigator and a fairly good engineer. So it didn't surprise him any that he couldn't understand a lot of the report. The mechanics of making a semi-nova out of a normal star were more than a little bit over his head. He'd read a little and then go out and take a look at the stars, checking their movement so that he could make an estimate of his speed. He'd jury-rigged a kind of control on the hull field, so he could aim the hulk easily enough. He'd only have to get within signaling range, anyway. An Earth ship would pick him up.
If there was any Earth left by the time he got there.

He forced his mind away from thinking about that.

It was not until he reached the last spool of microfilm that his situation was forcibly brought to focus in his mind. Thus far, he had thought only about saving himself. But the note at the end of the spool made him realize that there were others to save.

The note said: These reports must reach Earth before 22 June 2287. After that, it will be too late.

22 June!

That was--let's see....

This is the eighteenth of September, he thought, June of next year is--nine months away. Surely I can make it in that time. I've got to.

The only question was, how fast was the hulk of the Shane moving?

It took him three days to get the answer accurately. He knew the strength of the field around the ship, and he knew the approximate thrust of the single engine by that time. He had also measured the motions of some of the nearer stars. Thank heaven he was a navigator and not a mechanic or something! At least he knew the direction and distance to Earth, and he knew the distance of the brighter stars from where the ship was.

He had two checks to use, then. Star motion against engine thrust and field strength. He checked them. And rechecked them. And hated the answer.

He would arrive in the vicinity of Sol some time in late July--a full month too late.

What could he do? Increase the output of the engine? No. It was doing the best it could now. Even shutting off the lights wouldn't help anything; they were a microscopic drain on that engine.

He tried to think, tried to reason out a solution, but nothing would come. He found time to curse the fool who had decided the shielding on the lifeboat would have to be removed and repaired. That little craft, with its lighter mass and more powerful field concentration, could make the trip in ten days.

The only trouble was that ten days in that radiation hell would be impossible. He'd be a very well-preserved corpse in half that time, and there'd be no one aboard to guide her.

Maybe he could get one of the other engines going! Sure. He must be able to get one more going, somehow.

Anything to cut down on that time!

He went back to the engines again, looking them over carefully. He went over them again. Not a single one could be repaired at all.

Then he rechecked his velocity figures, hoping against hope that he'd made a mistake somewhere, dropped a decimal point or forgotten to divide by two. Anything. Anything!

But there was nothing. His figures had been accurate the first time.

For a while, he just gave up. All he could think of was the terrible blaze of heat that would wipe out Earth when the Rats set off the sun. Man might survive. There were colonies that the Rats didn't know about. But they'd find them eventually. Without Earth, the race would be set back five hundred--maybe five thousand--years. The Rats would have plenty of time to hunt them out and destroy them.

And then he forced his mind away from that train of thought. There had to be a way to get there on time. Something in the back of his mind told him that there was a way.

He had to think. Really think.

* * * * *

On 7 June 2287, a signal officer on the Earth destroyer Muldoon picked up a faint signal coming from the general direction of the constellation of Sagittarius. It was the standard emergency signal for distress. The broadcaster only had a very short range, so the source couldn't be too far away.

He made his report to the ship's captain. "We're within easy range of her, sir," he finished. "Shall we pick her up?"

"Might be a Rat trick," said the captain. "But we'll have to take the chance. Beam a call to Earth, and let's go out there dead slow. If the detectors show anything funny, we turn tail and run. We're in no position to fight a Rat ship."

"You think this might be a Rat trap, sir?"

The captain grinned. "If you are referring to the Muldoon as a rat trap, Mr. Blake, you're both disrespectful and correct. That's why we're going to run if we see anything funny. This ship is already obsolete by our standards; you can imagine what it is by theirs." He paused. "Get that call in to Earth. Tell 'em this ship is using a distress signal that was obsolete six months ago. And tell 'em we're going out."

"Yes, sir," said the signal officer.

It wasn't a trap. As the Muldoon approached the source of the signal, their detectors picked up the ship itself. It was a standard lifeboat from a battleship of the Shannon class.
"You don't suppose that's from the Shane, do you?" the captain said softly as he looked at the plate. "She's the only ship of that class that's missing. But if that's a Shane lifeboat, what took her so long to get here?"
"She's cut her engines, sir!" said the observer. "She evidently knows we're coming."
"All right. Pull her in as soon as we're close enough. Put her in Number Two lifeboat rack; it's empty."
* * * * *
When the door of the lifeboat opened, the captain of the Muldoon was waiting outside the lifeboat rack. He didn't know exactly what he had expected to see, but it somehow seemed fitting that a lean, bearded man in a badly worn uniform and a haggard look about him should step out.

The specter saluted. "Lieutenant Alfred Pendray, of the Shane," he said, in a voice that had almost no strength. He held up a pouch. "Microfilm," he said. "Must get to Earth immediately. No delay. Hurry."
"Catch him!" the captain shouted. "He's falling!" But one of the men nearby had already caught him.

In the sick bay, Pendray came to again. The captain's questioning gradually got the story out of Pendray.
"... So I didn't know what to do then," he said, his voice a breathy whisper. "I knew I had to get that stuff home. Somehow."
"Go on," said the captain, frowning.
"Simple matter," said Pendray. "Nothing to it. Two equations. Little ship goes thirty times as fast as big ship--big hulk. Had to get here before 22 June. Had to. Only way out, y'unnerstand."

"Anyway. Two equations. Simple. Work 'em in your head. Big ship takes ten months, little one takes ten days. But can't stay in a little ship ten days. No shielding. Be dead before you got here. See?"
"I see," said the captain patiently.

"But--and here's a 'mportant point: If you stay on the big ship for eight an' a half months, then y' only got to be in the little ship for a day an' a half to get here. Man can live that long, even under that radiation. See?" And with that, he closed his eyes.

"Do you mean you exposed yourself to the full leakage radiation from a lifeboat engine for thirty-six hours?"

But there was no answer.

"Let him sleep," said the ship's doctor. "If he wakes up again, I'll let you know. But he might not be very lucid from here on in."

"Is there anything you can do?" the captain asked.

"No. Not after a radiation dosage like that." He looked down at Pendray. "His problem was easy, mathematically. But not psychologically. That took real guts to solve."

"Yeah," said the captain gently. "All he had to do was get here alive. The problem said nothing about his staying that way."

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**Contents**

THE SPHERE OF SLEEP
By Chester S. Geier

*Brad Nelson had a perfect way to kill Big Tim without any danger of being accused. Then his foot slipped and he was hurled into an unknown world.*

"I've got to kill you, Big Tim. I've just got to kill you! I want Laura--and you're standing in my way...."

The thought beat urgently and continuously in Brad Nellon's mind. He was absorbed in it to the extent that the terrible Titanian gale which roared beyond the shelter of his thermalloy suit was forgotten.

Beside him, the object of his deadly thoughts strode unknowing. His large, brown face crinkled in a grin of boyish enjoyment, Tim Austin was fighting his way through the fierce drive of wind and snow. That grin was always there. It was as much a part of him as his thick, tow hair, his gentle brown eyes and giant's frame. He was big and carefree, and life ran rich and full in his veins.

On Brad Nellon's face there was no enjoyment in the battle against the storm. There was not even his usual resentment of the bitter cold and the thick, white snow. His grey eyes were covered with a heavy film of thought. He walked in a world where there was no storm save that of his emotions, no reality outside of the imagery constructed by his brain. His stocky, powerful form plodded along mechanically.

They moved in a world of snow and ice and screaming wind. Great pinnacles and ridges, worn into fantastic shapes by the gale, towered on every side. The curtain of snow occasionally lifted to reveal white hills marching...
upon white hills, huge, glittering ice sheets, yawning chasms. And sometimes, farther in the distance, there would be awesome alien vistas.

The dark thread of Brad Nellon's thoughts was broken abruptly by the sudden hum of his helmet earphones. He looked up with guilty quickness. Awareness of his companion, of the frigid hell of his Titanian surroundings, rushed back in a flood.

"On the watch, guy," the voice of Big Tim Austin cautioned. "We're almost near Tower Point."

Nellon moved his head in a jerky nod of understanding. His eyes probed momentarily into those of the other, then dropped quickly back to the snow. His earphones hummed again.

"Say, Brad, anything wrong?"

Nellon's face tautened in sudden panic. Again his eyes flashed to Austin. But he did not find in them the suspicion which he expected. There was only solicitous wonder.

"I'm all right," Nellon answered. "Just a bit tired, that's all." He realized that his voice sounded hoarse and unnatural. With masked gaze, he tried to learn its effect upon Austin.

* * * * *

But it was the content of his voice, not its tone which had registered upon Big Tim. Nellon was startled by the unexpected flood of vehemence which poured in through his earphones.

"That's the result of short rations, damn it! I knew it would get us sooner or later. We should've been on our way home long ago. The whole expedition has been a mess from beginning to end.

"You shouldn't have come with me, Brad, when I volunteered to go after old Ryska's stuff. But I thought it would be all right, because we're the only real he men among all those runty scientists. They're good for nothing but theory-spinning. They've thrown the expedition off schedule with their mental butterfly chasing, and got the rest of us down on short rations. And now, just as we're ready to leave at last, one of them has to remember that he left a pile of valuable equipment lying around somewhere in the snow."

Austin was silent a while. When he spoke again, the old laughter-lights were back twinkling in his eyes.

"Oh, hell, Brad. I guess I'm just sore because I'm being kept away from Laura every second the brain-gang holds us back. I can't wait to see her again."

"Yes, I know how it is," Nellon muttered.

"Swell kid, isn't she?"

"Yes." Nellon forced out the answer with difficulty.

"Well, keep your eyes peeled for Tower Point up there. As soon as we've got old Ryska's junk, we'll all be heading for home."

Nellon felt a weary sort of satisfaction. No, Big Tim didn't suspect. Big Tim didn't know that he was never going home again. Nellon had accompanied him on this final little trip to make sure of that.

They were nearing the lower end of a long ravine. Here, the invisible trail which they followed rose steeply and entered a narrow cleft between two huge slabs of ice. Then it dipped around the base of a great pinnacle, which thrust like an undaunted finger into the rage of the storm. This was the unique landmark which the expedition members had christened Tower Point.

Tower Point served as a great, white warning signal. For the trail skirting it gave way abruptly from powdery snow to ice of mirror slickness and slanted down sharply to a frozen lake which, unsheltered from the terrible wind, was polished constantly. One end of the lake had once been a falls, for here it ended, dropping down as sheerly as a precipice for hundreds of feet.

The way around Tower Point was one of the chief dangers, for there was no telling where the snow ended and the ice began. A sudden slip meant a swift slide down and onto the frozen surface of the lake. There, where the wind swept in all its unbroken force, one would be blown helplessly over the icy edge of the falls and dashed to death on the jagged ice teeth far below. Dick Fulsom, metallurgist, had already lost his life that way.

And that was the way Nellon had planned Big Tim Austin would die. Tower Point would mark the scene of another tragedy. Just the merest of shoves on that deadly borderline between ice and snow, and Big Tim would go flashing down to the lake and over the falls.

* * * * *

It was as simple as that. Nellon knew that nothing could ever be proved against him. Nor would the faintest thought of suspicion ever enter the minds of the others. For to them he and Big Tim had always been pals in the truest, deepest sense of the word.

No, he had nothing to fear. The only reckoning would be with his conscience, but he did not allow that to trouble him now, for all he wanted to think of was Laura. Laura would be his. He knew that with a grim, satisfying certainty.

Now they were starting up the difficult rise which led to Tower Point. Nellon slipped gradually behind, until he
walked in Austin's rear. His eyes settled and fixed to the metal back of the other's suit.

Very soon, now, it would be over. And then he would be on his way back home to Earth. Laura would be there on Earth, waiting. Laura.

Laura had silky chestnut hair that glinted with deep, red lights and fell in thick curls to her shoulders. Her eyes were very brown and level and filled with dancing motes of laughter. Her nose was short and pert, and he remembered the tiny mole which lay like a speck of soot just near the left nostril. Her lips were a little too wide, but they were firm and full and could quirk up in a smile that was rich and warming. Her body was small and sweet in the gentle swelling of its curves.

But it was her smile which Nellon thought of now. A bitter pain shot through him as he recalled it. Though in his thoughts it was all for him, he knew that its actual warmth was shed upon Tim Austin. Big Tim, who was so large and happy and tousled that he looked like an overgrown boy.

It was together that they had met Laura. And it was together that they had dated her. But as the three-sided friendship deepened, the inevitable change had occurred.

Strangely enough, it had been Nellon himself who brought it about. It had happened the evening he had had Laura with him alone for the first time. The spell of her charm had been concentrated upon him alone, and he had lost his head to such an extent that he proposed.

Laura had said no, and things had never been the same between them again. Though Big Tim may have wondered at times, he hadn't been sensitive enough to realize the change. Nellon had, in fact, concealed his pain and desire so effectively that Big Tim had never awakened to the truth.

* * * * *

Nellon remembered almost the exact words Laura used that evening. Even now the tones of her voice rang in his ears, gentle and sad.

"I'm sorry, Brad," she had said. "Please try to understand. I really do like you--an awful lot. You're like a rock, solid and strong, something to cling to. But Tim is like a big, clumsy playful dog--so terribly lovable. I can't help it. Really, Brad, if it wasn't for Tim, I'd never hesitate to marry you."

For two and a half years her words had drummed in his mind. "If it wasn't for Tim--"

At first he had tried to ignore the early thoughts of murder which had crept insidiously into his brain. But they persisted, grew stronger, and before long he had been making actual plans. Several times the cold hand of death had reached for Tim Austin, but each time Nellon's instincts had revolted and the thing had remained undone.

But now the members of the expedition were preparing to return home to Earth. Nellon knew that if Big Tim reached Earth alive the Laura he remembered and wanted would be lost to him forever. If Big Tim was to die, it would have to be done before the ship left, for once sealed within its confines, the risks would be too overwhelmingly large.

It had been old Sigmund Ryska who had presented Nellon with what he had realized was his final and only chance. Old Ryska had left several pieces of valuable scientific equipment lying in a small hut which he had set up for some experiments. He had remembered them at the last moment. Someone had to fetch them before leaving, and Big Tim Austin had volunteered. Nellon, because of the purpose which motivated him, had gone along.

He had made up his mind at last. This time he would allow no scruples to stay his hand. This time Big Tim would die.

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They had reached Tower Point. Nellon's breathing had quickened, and a fine perspiration had broken out upon his face. Fine lines were etched around his eyes and mouth.

Nellon and Austin stood side by side a moment upon the summit which was crowned by the great pinnacle of Tower Point. Down below glittered the surface of the frozen lake. White and desolate, the frozen wastes of Titan tumbled and leaped on every side. Snow swirled about them, whipped into angry life by the gale.

Austin turned.

"Well, down we go. Watch it, guy." For a second his eyes locked with Nellon's. A frown of perplexity and concern narrowed them.

"Brad--anything wrong? You don't look right, somehow."

Nellon felt himself go icy cold. Words of hoarse denial tumbled to his lips.

"No--it's nothing. I--I'm all right."

But Big Tim was not assured.

"Listen, Brad, Ryska's hut isn't much further, now. You'd better wait here, and I'll go on ahead and get the stuff. It's hard and dangerous going, and if you aren't well--"

"I tell you I'm all right!" Nellon blurted. He was hot now with a feverish warmth that made the perspiration which covered his body feel clammy cold. The old fear of murder was gone. Nellon knew only a burning desire to
get the thing done, a wild alarm that his opportunity would vanish before he got the chance.

Big Tim shrugged.

"Come on, then. But watch it, guy, and sing out if you need me." With a last troubled glance at Nellon, he turned to the downward sloping trail and began the descent. He moved slowly and carefully, testing each foot of the way with a ponderous, insulated boot for the sudden slickness that would announce the dangerous ice.

Nellon was swept with relief. His blood rushed through his veins in a sudden fierce singing. Now, now! The broad, metal back of Big Tim's suit spread before him. Far down below the gleaming ice waited.

Nellon took swift steps forward, his arms coming up. The rushing in his ears leaped to a high pitch. He sucked in a breath, held it. Then--

Nellon slipped. It must have been a small patch of ice undetected by Austin. But Nellon slipped, lost balance, crashed into the other. Together they went whizzing down the trail toward the frozen lake. It was a long slide, but incredibly swift, and confusion and surprise made it seem all the shorter. What happened took place too quickly for thought to follow or prevent.

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They caromed onto the ice of the lake. With a gleeful, demoniac howl, the terrible wind swooped down upon them, swept them with increased speed toward the edge of the falls. Though still half stunned by the sudden catastrophe, they reacted with the instinct of long conditioning, tried frantically to retard their swift flight over the ice. But it was futile. Their gouging metal fingers could find no purchase in the glassy smoothness over which they sped. And before friction could slow them even the merest of trifles, they were swept over the edge of the falls.

They went over, but not down upon the jagged ice teeth bared hungrily below. Nellon's attempted shove had given them both an added impetus, and they had shot over the ice at an angle which landed them upon the snow banked on the farther side of the gorge.

In that far distant day when the heat of Saturn had been great enough to cloak its satellites in warmth, the gnawing of the falls had worn steep sides in the gorge. And though the snow upon which the two men had fallen was thick and soft, it was not enough to hold them, and they went rolling end over end, in great clouds of powdery white, to stop only when they had reached the bottom.

[Illustration: Helplessly the two men hurtled down the snowy slope]

For long moments they lay still. A thick pall of settling snow hung on the frigid air. The wind seized portions of this and sent them whirling and twisting in fantastic gyrations.

The thermalloy suits were essentially compact, mobile shelters, and had been designed more for protection against inimical extra-terrestrial elements rather than for comfort. Brad Nellon had been bruised and shaken until it seemed that his body was one throbbing ache. His senses whirled giddily in a black mist shot through with flames of pulsing red.

Of a sudden the pain leaped to intolerable heights. His battered muscles screamed an anguished protest along his nerves. Then the pain was gone, and momentarily the blackness closed in again. But something like a fresh wind sprang up, and sent the engulfing fog thinning away. Nellon's brain cleared. He opened his eyes.

He looked into Big Tim's face. Big Tim was bending over him, worried and anxious. Nellon began to understand.

Big Tim had recovered first from the plunge. He had propped Nellon up, then turned the valve which increased the flow of oxygen inside his suit. They were alive. Nellon felt a dull wonder at it.

"Brad--all right?" It was Big Tim, his voice strained and hoarse. Nellon nodded mechanically.

"All right."

"What happened, Brad?"

Nellon looked away. He looked up the gorge, at the tip of Tower Point. He licked his lips.

"I--I don't know. Didn't feel well--slipped on a patch of ice."

Big Tim shook his head.

"I told you to stay up there, didn't I? I knew you were in no condition to make the descent, but you were just stubborn enough to do so. It's lucky we didn't get our necks broken." He looked down and across to where, directly under the falls, the ice fangs jutted, cruel and gleaming.

* * * * *

Nellon was fully recovered now. He followed the direction of Austin's gaze, and though his eyes saw the same thing, his mind pictured it in a different way.

Those ice teeth should have meant Big Tim's death. He, Nellon, had failed, had narrowly escaped losing his own life because of his blunder. Intent upon the shove which was to have sent Tim Austin hurtling to his death, he had forgotten the snow-concealed ice in the trail, as lethal with hidden treachery as a patch of quick-sand.
But he was still alive. They hadn't, as yet, even reached Ryska's hut, and Nellon knew another chance would present itself. He considered this with a curious mixture of impatience and reluctance.

"If it wasn't for Big Tim--" Nellon was hearing Laura say the words again, and once again the realms of unutterable bliss he read into them strengthened his resolve. One more chance--and this time he would not fail or waver.

"Brad--look!"

Vibrant with surprise and urgency, the words ripped aside the veil of Nellon's thoughts. His head jerked up.

Big Tim was on his feet. He was pointing up at the steep bank of the gorge down which they had tumbled. Most of the disturbed snow had settled and the wind had carried away the rest. Nellon could see quite clearly.

There up on the bank, a small snow slide had taken place. And now, against the unbroken monotony of white, something gleamed in vivid contrast.

Nellon squinted. Gradually he began to make out details. The strange surface revealed by the slide seemed to have the mellow hue of bronze, but Nellon could not be sure, since it was queerly dappled and flecked with tones of gold and red. He thought it must be from the strain on his eyes, and closed them momentarily. But when he looked again the colors were as weird as he had last seen them. This time, however, he made out a detail which he had missed previously. The surface seemed to be crossed by a black line or stripe.

"Now what in the world can that be?" Tim Austin's voice was wondering, vaguely troubled. "It's like no sample of rock or soil we've taken. Metal--that's what it is!" he exclaimed of a sudden. "It's an exposed vein of some metal. Come on, Brad, let's have a look at it."

Nellon got to his feet, his eyes fixed upon that uncanny patch of something which stood out against the surrounding whiteness like a smear of blood.

Big Tim was already started up the bank. Nellon sucked in a breath and followed after him.

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The climb was a hard and difficult one, and their recent physical jarring caused by the fall made it all the harder. But curiosity pulled them on like a vast magnet. In the exertion they forgot their aches and bruises. Slipping and sliding, clutching for handholds, floundering in loose drifts which filled pockets of hardened crust, they made their way slowly but surely up the bank.

Finally they stood before that strangely mottled patch of red and brown and gold. The mood of awed wonder which gripped them at once heightened and deepened.

"It is metal!" Tim Austin breathed. "But--but, Brad, it's not a vein. It's--"

"It's a door!" Nellon finished hoarsely.

It was a door, a metal door in the snow covered bank of a falls that had, in some long, long ago, solidified to ice. A door to what? Where did it lead? What would be on the other side of it? What could be on the other side of a metal door on a world where it was doubtful that living beings had ever existed at all?

There was a rasp in Nellon's earphones. And then Big Tim Austin's voice followed it.

"Brad--I'm going in. This--why, this is the biggest find of the whole expedition!"

"It might be dangerous," Nellon pointed out, before he could become aware of the wealth of irony which lay behind the words. "We don't know what sort of life--"

"But this door has been hidden under snow for the Lord only knows how many years, Brad. Look where the crust had split here. It's thick, thick. Nothing has gone in or out for a hell of a long time. If there were beings, they're either gone or dead."

And, as if having satisfied himself on this last account, Big Tim stepped directly up to the door. He was a tall man, yet he seemed dwarfed beside it. And it was obviously very massive, for it was partly open and the width of the edge revealed could not have been spanned by the long, flexible metal fingers of their protecting gloves. The opening was a mere crack, as if someone had once made it so for a cautious glimpse of the world outside and never closed it again.

Big Tim placed his gloves against the projecting edge.

"Give me a hand, Brad. We'll see if we can open it further."

Together, they shoved. They drew upon ebbing reserves of strength, but what energy they managed to summon they threw into a brief, terrific effort to move the portal. But it did not move. Their combined strength seemed pitifully small against the weight they sought to budge.

They were about to relax their efforts in despair when, suddenly, transmitted from the metal of the door to that of their gloved hands, they felt what seemed to be a coughing whir. The sound smoothed out, deepened, and became a steady hum.

Startled, they leaped away. Their faces took on an intent, incredulous expression.

The door was opening. Slowly, majestically, it was swinging wide.
No force that they could see was behind it. The door seemed to move of its own volition. They stood as still as a pair of weird, metal statues, watching. Every sense, keyed to its highest, was directed at the widening gap.

At last all movement ceased, and the door hung wide. The humming note which had accompanied its opening dwindled to a whisper and died away. Revealed was a tunnel of utter blackness.

Tim Austin released his breath. The sound roused Nellon from the trance which gripped him.

"It's probably controlled by an automatic mechanism. When we shoved against it, we must have set that mechanism in motion."

"I'm going in, Brad," Big Tim said suddenly. "I'm going to see what's inside." He strode impulsively to the door. But at the threshold he stopped and turned and looked at Nellon.

Nellon smiled faintly and nodded. He strode after Big Tim. Together they entered the doorway.

Lights, built into the helmets of their suits, but up to this time unused, were turned on to illuminate the way. The tunnel, they saw, was a rectangular corridor or passageway. It was lined with the same metal as that of the door.

At two intervals down the corridor they found it necessary to squeeze through half-opened doorways. The doors here were of the slide type and seemed to be controlled by machinery as was the one which they had opened to gain entrance to the corridor. But these could not be moved, nor did their efforts awaken any hum of machinery.

"You know," Big Tim remarked, "this arrangement of doors sort of reminds me of an airlock."

"I've noticed the same thing," Nellon responded. "But an airlock--" He shook his head, for this was one of the many things he couldn't understand.

Soon the corridor came to an end. Nellon and Austin found themselves in a small, square room, each side of which was lined with small glass cubicles or cabinets. In each reposed a transparent sphere with various inexplicable attachments and a compactly folded mass of some strange material.

"Helmets!" Big Tim Breathed. "Brad, those are helmets. And unless I'm mistaken the other stuff must be suits of some kind. What have we stumbled onto, anyway?"

Nellon passed a slow, almost-knowing glance about the room, his helmet lights glinting on the glass of the cabinets.

"I've got a crazy idea," he said. "But let that wait until we see more. There's another doorway over there. Let's go on."

They went on. There were more corridors, but this time there were rooms opening from them. Each was uniformly alike, filled with the same articles and furnishings. Nothing with which they were familiar had any counterpart here. Everything, from strange, rounded furniture to bizarre clothing, was weirdly alien.

But of the beings who had once inhabited these rooms they found no trace. There were only the garments they had once worn, the chairs in which they had sat. About these clung the ghosts of their presences. Over all was an air of desertion and long neglect.

They entered another section. Here there were rooms as large as halls, spread with queer tables and chairs. One they found to be a library, for on shelves they found large, tablet-like books whose stiff pages were covered with glowing hieroglyphs.

Then they found their first stairway, a succession of small ramps leading to some floor above. They ascended slowly, with the feelings of men entering some new portion of strange and utterly alien world.

Here they found but one, huge room, and this their lights revealed to be perfectly circular. In the center, glowing greenly, was what appeared to be an immensely thick column, rising from floor to ceiling. About this banks of strange instruments and machinery were grouped.

"Brad," Big Tim whispered. "This place--What on earth could it have been for?"

Nellon made small, slow shakes of his head.

"That's what bothers me. I can't imagine any possible use. They knew utility, the beings who built these rooms. There was a good purpose for this room, I'm sure. Yet I can't imagine what it could have been. None of the activities which we normally carry on in life would seem to fit in with these surroundings."

"Brad--that's it! This room was for no normal use. It was for something--oh, I don't know. But it must have been something tremendously important to them. I feel--" Big Tim did not finish. His strained, low voice died away, and he moistened his lips. The reverie heavy upon his face showed clearly how oblivious he was of the act.

"Let's take a closer look at that column, or whatever it is," Nellon suggested. "We might find a clue."

The column was big. Just how big they had never realized. It was only when halfway to it, and still approaching, that awareness of its size began to dawn upon them.

The vastness of the room had dwarfed it somewhat, but now, almost upon it and with their own sizes as
standards of comparison, they were amazed and awed at its cyclopean girth. Slow understanding of the heroic dimensions of the place in its mysterious entirety began to dawn upon them.

And then Nellon became conscious of something else besides size. With closer and closer approach to the column, a strange comfort and well-being was growing within him. The stiff soreness of his bruises was easing. The sense of restless confinement which he always associated with the wearing of his thermalloy suit was dimming. The first pangs of rising hunger of which he had earlier become aware were now dulling, as though he were in the midst of a bountiful and delicious meal. He experienced a rising tide of physical and mental satisfaction, as if every want of these two components were being realized and generously administered to.

Momentarily, he thought of Laura and, because it had grown to be synonymous with her, the murder of Big Tim. His mental picture of the girl had never been more beautiful, desirable, or appealing. Every quality which she had ever possessed, real in actuality or imaginary as a result of his idealizations, was now transcended beyond all mortal planes. She became the very embodiment of every human aspiration and desire.

Surely, he found himself reasoning with that curious pleasure and contentment which had come over him, the murder of Big Tim for so glorious and wonderful a girl could be no base act. And the scruples which had forever risen to bar him mockingly from the actual deed, were now so smoothed away that he would never have known he had had them. Big Tim would die, of course. And he would take great pleasure in killing him. There would be no regrets, no self-accusations, no torturing pangs of conscience. There would only be complete satisfaction, comfort, and happiness. And Laura would be his. There was no doubt about that. There was no doubt anywhere in his mind. There was only complete gratification of every whimsical and vagrant thought or desire.

Then a sudden jar shook him. For a moment he had the sensation of struggling up from warm, drowsy depths. And then, suddenly, he was looking into Big Tim Austin's puzzled and incredulous face, and that eerie mental surcease was gone.

"Brad--did you feel it, too?"

Nellon nodded wordlessly. He was a little frightened of the weird force that had held them both in thrall. A glance at the column looming gigantically before him showed that he and Big Tim had walked a good distance without any conscious knowledge of having done so. It was the chance collision which had aroused them both from their sleep-walking state.

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Nellon could feel the force yet, brushing at the fringes of his mind with warm, soothing fingers. But he soon found that, with active resistance, there was no fear of it overcoming him again. One thing persisted, however, and that was the curiously refreshed and stimulated condition of his body. Nor was he anxious that this should go away.

They were within yards of the great column, now, and at an ever shortening range their eyes began to make out certain details which they had missed during their progress under that inexplicable half-trance.

It was not actually a column, they realized, for it was hollow and they could dimly make out the shapes of objects within. It was a vast, room-like enclosure, with walls of transparent green. In the center, and midway between floor and ceiling, there hung what seemed to be a ball of vivid green fire.

Upon reaching the cylinder, they pressed closely to its hard surface and peered intently within. But at first the great, flaming ball obscured such early details as they could discern. It was like looking upward through water at the blinding disc of the sun. Then, as their eyes grew accustomed to the emerald brilliance, they found themselves gazing at an unbelievable scene.

High above floated the fiery, green ball. Directly below it glittered the complex mass of a great machine. This was spread upon a huge base and narrowed as it rose. Circling the apex were a multitude of rod-like projections, the ends of which terminated in large crystal cones. The bases of these were pointed upward, and from each a pale, almost invisible, beam shot up and into the green ball, as though at once nourishing and supporting it.

But it was not this which held the incredulous fixity of their gaze. For arranged in concentric circles about the machine were hundreds of tables or low platforms and upon each a still figure lay. The nearest table was some distance from the wall through which Nellon and Austin peered, and this, added to the weird, green light of the globe, made a clear delineation of physical characteristics impossible. Yet they were able to make out enough to become convinced, that, as their earlier examination of the clothing in the rooms had suggested, the figures were hauntingly human.

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For a long moment they stood there. Then Big Tim turned, and Nellon, looking around in response to the action, was amazed at the bright and feverish gleam in the other's eyes. Words tumbled from Big Tim's lips in a hoarse rush.

"Brad, this is going to make interplanetary history. It's the biggest thing since the discovery of the first dead city on Mars. We've got to go back to the ship and bring the others. They've got to see this. But, Brad, before they
do, I'm going in there. I want to be the first to see what these people looked like. There must be a door somewhere--"

And before Nellon could voice the protest which rose to his lips, Big Tim had started away on an eager circuit of the green wall. Nellon stood looking after him in indecision, torn between conflicting impulses. Then he tightened his lips and followed in the direction which Big Tim had taken. But before Nellon could reach him, the other's excited voice crashed in his earphones.

"I've found it, Brad! There is a door here."

Nellon jerked into a run. He found Big Tim standing upon a short ramp before a section of the wall which was different from the rest. It was a dark area, rectangular in shape. At one side, seen dimly through the strange green substance, was an arrangement of rods and gears which was obviously an operating mechanism. Protruding from a slot in the wall, and clearly connected with the mechanism, was a short lever.

Big Tim's blue eyes glittered with daring. His tow hair awry, he looked more than ever the picture of an overgrown, impulsive boy.

"Good heavens, guy, you surely don't intend to go in there!" Nellon exclaimed. "We don't know what sort of--"

Big Tim gave a short, excited laugh. "Look--there's nothing to be afraid of. There's just that green light up there and the people, and they are dead. Everything in this place is dead. Brad, this is the chance of a lifetime. We'll be the first to look upon the faces of an extra-terrestrial race since the Martians."

Big Tim pulled the opening lever. There was a moment of appalled and complete quiet. Then hidden motors hummed into alien life, and slowly the door before them slid aside. Undimmed now by its confining walls, the green radiance poured through the opening in a blinding flood.

"Come on," Big Tim urged. And without any hesitation on his own part, he stepped through, to be bathed instantly in the emerald glow.

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Nellon moved to the open doorway. The emerald rays from the globe fell upon him with an almost sensible warmth. Again that weird peace and comfort was upon him, but more overpoweringly now. He felt a rising tide of drowsiness. In some strange way, he knew it would be good to allow himself to succumb to the softly-blanketing darkness which was filling his mind. It would be a blessed surcease from all the troubles and cares of his present world. But something held him back.

And though a great, calm voice seemed to give him every assurance of safety, a stubborn, small one screamed him its warning. In a turmoil, he watched Big Tim stride toward the nearest of the platforms.

It became evident to Nellon almost immediately that Big Tim was never going to reach his goal. For shortly after the first several steps, the blonde giant's purposeful walk slowed to a bemused shamble. And, watching with a curiously disembodied attention, Nellon saw him waver, stop, and then collapse upon the floor, as though he had suddenly become very, very tired.

The warning voice was shrieking now. Nellon felt a swift rush of terror that ripped him free of the force which enclosed him in its lulling folds. He shot a wide-eyed glance from the gleaming, inert shape of Big Tim's suit to the globe flaming high above. He wanted suddenly to run.

He struggled in panic against the invisible bonds of peace and comfort which were so reluctant to let him go. His determination to be free was the fierce and frenzied one of utter fear. Flailing his arms as if against some material foe, he managed to stumble down from the ramp, to one side of the doorway where the green light would not reach him.

Exhausted from the herculean struggle, he slumped to the floor. A soft, warm blackness was settling over him, and he was powerless to fend it off. But he knew that he was safe, and the satisfaction which he felt was increased by the radiation which he had absorbed, so that when he finally swooped into unconsciousness, it was amidst a thunderous, victorious singing.

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Nellon's next sensations were curious ones. He seemed to awaken in another realm. It was a vast and formless place with no distinguishable feature or color, but it was curiously sentient, pulsing with awesome possibilities.

Now, as though stirred by his reflection upon it, the nebulous stuff began to write. And then, taking shape from the formless jumble of thoughts in his subconscious, a dream-world began to grow. Bits were added here, others discarded there, but every compartment in the storehouse of his mind contributed something. And all assembled in accordance with the pattern Nellon had fashioned in two and a half years of brooding. Finally his dream paradise was complete to the last detail of his hopes and imaginings.

It was the world which he had built around Laura taken on an immaterial, but to him nonetheless real, life. There was Laura and there was himself. And there was the complete bliss for which he had planned Big Tim's murder to achieve.

He became aware of a change. The outlines of his world were dimming, dissolving, fading. Even Laura,
radiantly lovely, was beginning to blur before his eyes.

In horror he sought to clutch the evaporating structure to him and stabilize it once again. But it slipped through his fingers like an impalpable mist. Before he was fully alive to it, his dream Eden was gone, and he was back in that formless void in which he had found himself. And even that was thinning.

Nellon awoke. He looked around for Laura and that idyllic dream land in which they had loved. But only the great, green cylinder with its flaming globe and the vast room beyond met his gaze.

Nellon climbed to his feet. With the action, he became aware that he felt wonderfully refreshed and stimulated. He looked around for Big Tim, then he remembered. Avoiding the open doorway through which the rays still poured, he peered through the green wall. Big Tim was lying there on the floor within. He was very still in his thermalloy suit.

Nellon began a chain of reasoning. As it progressed, there went with it a rising tide of exultation.

As long as Big Tim remained there under the influence of the globe, he would remain unconscious, living, perhaps, a dream as real and vivid as his own had been. It would be just as though Big Tim were dead. None of the expedition members knew of the doorway through which he and Big Tim had entered. With the almost continuous storms which raged on Titan, the door would soon become covered again. Ages might pass before a chance accident revealed it once more.

He, Nellon, could go back to the ship with a tale of how he had lost Big Tim in the bitter storm. The men might search, but he knew it would be futile.

Laura would grieve, of course, when he returned and told her the news. But he would be there to comfort her, and she would get over it. And he knew that she would marry him, with Big Tim out of the way. He could look forward to a happiness more satisfying than that of the dream.

Nellon saw his course clear. He knew just what he had to do.

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First he released the lever, and the door slid shut, entombing Big Tim within the great cylinder. Then he retraced his way down to the lower level and through the maze of rooms and corridors. It was not long before the snow of Titan once more keened against his suit.

He threw his weight against the great door. Only the impulse was necessary to close it, for the operating mechanism hummed into vibrant life and it swung shut where it had not been shut before—and locked! Nor would it open again.

Even if he had wanted to re-enter, that was impossible.

Nellon started back to the ship. With the curious vigor he felt, the dangers and difficulties of the return trip hardly registered upon him at all. Gone was his sullen dislike of the ever-raging storm. He plowed through it with a careless smile, fighting his way over the wild and tumbled terrain. And it was with no feeling of exhaustion at all that he finally sighted the great, toothed ice ridge which marked the site of the camp.

As Nellon shouldered through the narrow cleft which led into the protected, tiny valley, he remembered to remove the smile of eager triumph upon his face. It would not go with the story he was to tell.

But it was hardly necessary for him to make the effort. For at the sight that met his eyes, an involuntary grimace of appalled amazement flashed over his features.

Where the ship had rested there now was nothing at all, save a smooth surface of snow. And to his incredulously searching gaze, there was no indication that anything had ever been here. The little valley was virgin of any sign of human habitation. Only the bitter wind existed here, as always it had, keening along glittering ice surfaces, sporting with the snow.

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Nellon felt the sudden nausea and weakness of a terrible fear. But a bit of flotsam presented itself out of the turbulence of his thoughts, and he clutched at it with the eagerness of despair.

He must, he told himself, have accidentally encountered a site similar to the one in which the ship had lain. He had but to find the correct ridge and everything would be all right.

Nursing this hope, he started on a tour of the vicinity. Soon he realized, however, that there was no other ridge, and he had to face the fact that he had originally been at the real site. The only difference was that the ship was gone.

But Nellon felt that he had to make certain. Returning to the valley over which the ridge rose like a sheltering wall, he searched about in the deep snow. One of the first objects he discovered was a large, metal box. On one side were stenciled words which burned into his brain:

The Harton-Finston Institute.

He knew now beyond any lingering doubt that he was in the right place and that the ship was gone, for it was the Institute which had sponsored the expedition. And he had seen other boxes like that piled compactly in the holds of the ship.
Nellon was stunned, crushed. But out of his despair a slow wonder rose. How long had he been unconscious there beside the great green cylinder? The degree to which the snow had blotted out the litter of the camp suggested that it must have been many months. For a moment it seemed incredible that his momentary exposure to the emerald rays of the globe could have produced such a result. Then he remembered the beings, circular row upon circular row of them, lying beneath it, and an awesome knowledge flooded over him.

Those beings were not dead. Exposed constantly to the rays of the globe, they were merely held in a state of slumber, dreaming dreams, undoubtedly, just as curiously real and poignant as his own had been. They were sleeping and dreaming, and the green globe brooded over them like some vast guardian, soothing, nourishing.

And Big Tim slept with them. When they awoke, Big Tim would wake and live again. But he, Nellon, would not live again. Suddenly his fear and hate of the storm returned in full and terrible force. Because when his batteries were exhausted, his suit would cool--and the storm would kill him. Slowly, inexorably, death would come to him. And death was a sleep from which there was no awakening....
A THOUGHT FOR TOMORROW
By Robert E. Gilbert

Lord Potts frowned at the rusty guard of his saber, and the metal immediately became gold-plated. Potts reined his capricious black stallion closer to the first sergeant.

"Report!" the first sergeant bellowed.
"Fourth Hussars, all present!"
"Eighth Hussars, all present!"
"Eleventh Hussars, all present!"
"Thirteenth Hussars, all present!"
"Seventeenth Lancers, all present!"

The first sergeant's arm flashed in a vibrating salute. "Sir," he said, "the brigade is formed."

Potts concentrated on the sergeant; but, aside from blue eyes, a black mustache, and luminous chevrons, the man's appearance remained vague. His uniform had no definite color, except for moments when it blushed a brilliant red, and his headgear expanded and contracted so rapidly that Potts could not be certain whether he wore a shako or a tam.

"Take your post," Potts said. "Men!" he shouted. "We're going to charge at those guns!"

"Oh, Oi say!" wailed a small private with scarcely any features but a mouth. "Them Russians'll murder us!"

"Yours not to reason why," Potts said. "Draw sabers! Charge!"

The ground quaked under the beat of twenty-four hundred hoofs. As the first puffs of smoke billowed from the entrenchments half a league away, Potts remembered that he had forgotten to give orders to the lancers. Should he tell them to couch lances, or lower lances, or aim lances, or--

* * * * *

"P. T. boys, let's go. Out to the door," a bored voice called.

Potts opened his eyes. He sighed. Again he had failed. The dayroom had hardly changed. The chairs were all pushed together in the center of the floor, and two patients with brooms swept little ridges of dirt and cigarette butts toward the door. Potts sat slouched in one of the chairs and raised his feet as the sweepers passed.

"Orville Potts, out to the door," the bored voice said.

Potts gave Wilhart a killing look when the big attendant, immaculate in white duck trousers and short-sleeved linen shirt, passed through to the porch. Potts wondered why so many of the attendants resembled clean-shaven gorillas.

He arose leisurely from the chair, shuffled around the sweepers, and entered the hall. A pair of huge, gray, faded cotton pants draped his spindling legs in wrinkled folds, and an equally faded khaki shirt hung from his stooped shoulders. Potts had not combed his hair in three days. He pushed the tangled brown mass out of his eyes and threaded between the groups of men that jammed the hall, smoking and waiting to go to the shoe shop, or the paint detail, or psychodrama, or merely waiting.

At the locked door to the stairs, Potts stopped and glared at the six patients already assembled.

"Hello, Orville Potts," said another long-armed, barrel-chested attendant. This one wore a black necktie, and, so far as Potts knew, had no name but Joe. Potts ignored Joe.

The attendant pulled a ring of keys attached to a long heavy chain from his pocket and unlocked the door, when Wilhart brought the rest of the P. T. boys.

"Downstairs, when I call your name," Joe said, and read from the charts attached to his clip-board.

When his name was called, Potts stepped through to the landing and descended the top stairs. Joe locked the door.

Potts looked up at Danny Harris, who stood motionless on the landing. While Joe weaved down the crowded steps, Wilhart took Harris by the arm and pushed him.

"Let's go," he said. "Here, Orville Potts, take Danny Harris downstairs with you."

Potts said, "Do your own dragging."

"Well!" Wilhart gasped. "Hear that, Joe? Orville Potts is talking this morning!"

Joe turned up a red, grim face. "He'll talk a lot before I'm through with him," he promised.

The sixteen patients from Ward J descended the stairs, were counted through another door, and formed a ragged column of twos on the concrete walk outside. With Joe leading and Wilhart guarding the rear, the little formation moved across the great grassy quadrangle enclosed by the buildings and connecting roofed corridors of
the hospital.

Potts tried to close his ears to Wilhart's incessant urging of Danny Harris. Harris would do little of his own volition, but Potts was tired of acting as his escort.

The blue morning sky supported but a few brilliant clouds. Potts wished he were up there, or anywhere except going to P. T. He hated P. T. It terrified him. Potts closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Major Orville Potts stood in the soft grass and rested a gloved hand on the upper wing of his flying machine.

"Sir," he said, "with my invention, the Confederacy will soon put the Yankees to rout."

The general stroked his gray goatee and pursed his lips. Potts felt pleased that every detail of the general's uniform stood out in bold clarity. The slouch hat, gray coat, red sash, and black jackboots were more real than life. Of course the surrounding landscape was a green blur, but increased concentration would clear that.

The general said, "Ah'm doubtful, Majah. Balloons, Ah undahstand. Hot aiah natuahlly rises, but this contraption seems too heavy to fly."

"No heavier, in proportion, than a kite, sir," Potts explained.

The crude mountaineer captain, standing slightly behind the general, snickered.

"Hit won't work nohow," he predicted. "Jist like that there Williams repeatin' cannon at Seven Pines. Ain't even got no steam engine fur as I kin see."

Potts said, "This is a new type engine. It operates on a formula of my own, which I have named gasoline. Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I shall proceed with the demonstration."

Potts climbed into the cockpit. A touch of the starter set the 1,000 h.p. radial engine roaring. He waved to the gaping officers and opened the throttle. The bi-plane whisked down the field and rocketed into the blue morning sky.

Too late, Potts saw the buzzard soaring dead ahead. He shoved the stick forward, but the black bird rushed toward his face in frightening magnification.

* * * * *

Potts opened his eyes. He had walked into a wall.

"What's the matter, Orville Potts?" Joe asked. "You sleep-walking? Get in there! I'll wake you up."

Joe shoved Potts through the door marked PHYSICAL THERAPY and into the dressing room. With sixteen patients in the process of disrobing, the small room presented a scene of wild, indecent activity. Potts squirmed through the thrashing tangle to a bench against the wall. He sat down and removed a shoe.

Potts almost felt the currents surging through the neurons of his brain and sensed a throbbing on the inside of his skull. Twice this morning, he had tried to break through the physical barrier and had failed. Even with a minimum of thought, the reasons for failure became obvious.

Lack of intimate detail seemed the principle cause. In his attempt to reach the Crimean War and lead the Charge of the Light Brigade, he had been hampered by his ignorance of correct uniforms and commands. He did not know at what time of day the charge had taken place, the weather conditions, the appearance of the terrain, or even the exact date. He believed it was about 1855, but he wouldn't risk a dime bet on his guess. Perhaps an attempt to return to the past was certain to fail. Surely the past had happened, was settled, inviolate. Someone named Lord Cardigan, not Orville, Lord Potts, had led the charge.

Inventing an airplane during the Civil War also had no chance of success. No such thing actually happened, and, if it had, the plane would have been more crude than the Wright brothers' machine. Furthermore, Potts was no aviator. Success, if any, lay in the future. The future was yet to come, and Potts could mold events to his liking. Or perhaps he could move his body in space, instead of time. He could think himself out of the hospital.

"Orville Potts, get those clothes off!" Wilhart ordered. Potts slowly removed his faded garments. He took his place at the end of the line of naked men leading to the needle shower.

Joe stood in all his glory at what Potts called the P. T. machine. The apparatus was a marble box with rows of knobs and gauges and a pair of rubber hoses on the top. Potts felt sure that Joe took a sadistic delight in his work. As the line moved forward, he glanced at the attendant's florid face, tight smiling lips and squinted eyes. Potts shuddered.

No member of the hospital staff had ever condescended to explain to Potts the exact purpose of the P. T. bath, other than that it would make him feel good. It only frightened Potts. The correct procedure was that the patient stepped between the pipes of the needle shower and washed himself. Then the attendant turned off the shower and sluiced the patient with powerful streams of water from the hoses.

The routine seemed senseless and innocent enough, but Potts had heard whispered conversations in the night that filled him with horror. The P. T. machine, rumor said, was actually an instrument of torture and death. The water pressure could be increased to two thousand pounds, enough to push out a man's eyes or break his bones.
Instead of water, the hoses could spit fire like a flamethrower. Acid could spray from the shower. Potts had even heard that Joe had killed seven men in the P. T. bath. How much of this was true, Potts did not know. When he saw bodies turn suddenly red under a rain of hot water, or writhe and tremble as if being whipped, he could believe all of it.

The line advanced slowly, like a gang of criminals going to the gas chamber. Potts grimly determined to think himself out of the hospital at once, for who knew when fire instead of water would spout from the hoses? If he recalled some place outside, in exact detail, Potts knew he could become all mind and project himself there. He must recall everything, scents, temperature, the ground beneath his feet, precise colors. Potts concentrated.

He tried to remember the home he had not seen for three months. He received a dim impression of a tiny crowded apartment and a wife growing increasingly indifferent. He could not even remember the color of her eyes, or whether the living room contained one easy chair or two. He would have to project himself to another place, one that did not seem like a vague dream.

Potts saw that his bath would come next. Danny Harris stood in the spray and stared stupidly at the tile floor. Potts looked at Joe. A wide smile that revealed two gold teeth creased the burly attendant's face. Hairy hands turned off the needle shower, twisted two more knobs, and picked up the twin hoses. Joe stood like the villain in a Western movie, blazing away with two guns, and shot thin powerful streams of water against Harris's spine. Harris shrieked, though he rarely uttered a sound outside the P. T. bath. As the icy water raked him from head to heels, he yelled and danced.

"Turn around," Joe commanded.

Harris pivoted and wailed, and Joe basted him on all sides with water. Potts watched fascinated as the thin body turned alternately blue with cold and red under the stinging water. He would not endure that again this morning. He knew now one place he could sense and visualize in complete detail.

"All right," said Joe, laying down his hoses. "Let's go, Orville Potts!"

Harris reeled, like a man rescued from drowning, into the dressing room, and Potts took his place between the four vertical pipes of the needle shower. From innumerable holes in the pipes, powerful jets of water spouted against his body. He stood with his back turned to the machine and made no attempt to wash. He never did--he saw no point in bathing without soap.

Potts thought of the Ward J dayroom, the room in which he had spent much of his time for the past three months. He visualized the maroon chairs with metal arms and legs, the green cretonne curtains, the cream walls, the black-and-red inlaid linoleum floor glinting with spots of old wax. He sensed a stale odor of tobacco smoke, furniture polish, and perspiration. He heard the talk of patients engaged in perpetual games of rook. He felt his thighs, hips, and back pressing against one of the chairs, and his feet on the smooth floor.

"Now, Orville Potts," Joe jeered, "let's hear you sing like Danny Harris!"

But Potts wasn't there.

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Potts opened his eyes. He had always wondered how it would feel, but he had felt nothing. In the same instant, he stood tensed, waiting for the water, and he sat in a chair in the Ward J dayroom. Directly in front of him, a nurse played rook with three of the patients grouped around a square table. Not many patients were in the room at this hour, and no attendant stood guard. The nurse turned her head slightly. She gasped, shoved back her chair and ran to the porch. Nasen, the ward attendant, charged through the door she had used.

"Orville Potts!" he cried. "Where's your clothes?"

Potts then noticed that he was completely naked and wet.

Nasen dragged Potts from the chair, applied a light hammerlock, and marched his captive from the room. "Did you come over here from P. T. like that?" he asked. "How'd you get out?"

Potts went along willingly enough, but without answering.

Nasen unlocked the door to the shower room and thrust Potts within. "Stay right there," he said. As he was locked in, Potts heard the attendant call, "Frank, go tell Dr. Bean that Orville Potts slipped out of P. T. with no clothes on. I don't know how. He must have stolen a key."

Potts took a towel from the shelf, sat on the bench, and rubbed his hair with the towel. He hoped they all went batty trying to learn how he had escaped. He thought most of the attendants should be patients anyhow.

Clutching a pile of clothing and a pair of slippers, Nasen returned. "Put these on," he said. "Orville Potts, you're in trouble now. What did you do with the key?"

Potts struggled into a tight blue shirt minus most of the buttons. "I didn't have a key."

"You're talking?"

"I can talk when I want to," Potts admitted. "I just never want to."
Nasen said, "That's more words than I've heard from you all at one time. Why did you come back stark naked like that?"

"I thought my way out," Potts explained, pulling on the trousers that had evidently been tailored for a giant.

"Oh, you thought your way out. Put those slippers on."

Joe and Wilhart, flushed and panting, charged into the shower room.

"There he is! Grab him!" Joe yelled. He seized Potts' arms and pulled them behind in a brutal double hammerlock.

"He's not giving any trouble," Nasen said. "What happened, Joe?"

"Damn if I know. He was in the shower, and I turned my head for a second. Next thing I knew, he was gone. What'd you find on him--a key or a lock-pick or something like that?"

Nasen grinned. "He didn't have even that much on when I first saw him. He came into the day room and sat down, and Miss Davis like to threw a fit."

Wilhart tossed a bundle on the floor. "There's nothing in his own clothes but a pack of cigarettes."

"Where's the key, Orville Potts?" Joe grated, squeezing Potts's arms. "You know what's going to happen to you? You'll get the pack room, or maybe Ward D. How would you like Ward D, Orville Potts?"

Nasen said, "If he had a key, he--"

"You better run along, Nasen," Joe said. "I think Dr. Bean wants to talk to you."

"Well, I--uh--" Looking worried, Nasen left the shower room.

Wilhart handed Joe a towel.

"Leave me alone!" Potts yelled.

Joe wrapped the towel around Potts's neck. "Where's the key, Orville Potts?"

"Help!" Potts cried. The towel tightened.

With rapidly dimming vision, he saw Wilhart assume a stance. A huge fist thudded against his shrunken stomach. He tried to scream, but the towel cut off all air and sound. Again and again, the fist struck.

Potts found himself sitting on the floor, gulping air into starved lungs. For a moment, he hoped he had managed another transportation, but the two white-clad human gorillas leering down at him proved he had not left the shower room.

"Get up," Joe said.

They dragged Potts to his feet. Nasen opened the door, clamped his teeth, and then opened his mouth to say, "Dr. Bean wants Orville Potts. I'll--"

"I'll take him," Joe said.

Potts winced as spatulate fingers almost met through his biceps. His feet barely touched the floor of the corridor when Joe marched him to the office of Dr. Lawrence D. Bean.

* * * * *

Dr. Bean, a thin bald man, sat behind a maple desk and peered at Potts over spectacles attached to a black ribbon. Joe shut the door and leaned against it.

"I've been hearing things about you, Orville," Dr. Bean said. "We'll have a little examination. Now, hold your right arm out straight, close your eyes, and touch the end of your nose with your index finger."

"Can't we do without the foolishness?" Potts asked. He sank into the chair beside the doctor's desk and gently rubbed his bruised arm.

The doctor looked slightly startled, but said, "I'm pleased to hear you speaking again, Orville. If you continue to talk to people, take an interest in your surroundings, write home, you'll be out of here very shortly."

"He choked me," Potts said, pointing a thumb at Joe. "He choked me with a towel, and the other one, that Wilhart, hit me in the stomach."

Dr. Bean's spectacles jumped from his nose and dangled by the ribbon. He focused a pair of bleary eyes on Potts and said, "You know they didn't, Orville. The attendants are here for your benefit. They would never subject a patient to physical violence."

Potts laughed for the first time since he was hospitalized. He said, "Why don't you ask me what I did with the key?"

"What did you do with the key, Orville?"

"Talk about monomaniacs!" Potts snickered. "You all have one-track minds. You can't think of any way I could have escaped without stealing a key. Is any key actually missing? Did anyone see me crossing the grass or coming through the halls? I'll tell you how I did it. Exactly how. You already think I'm nuts, so it won't matter."

Again, Potts pointed at Joe. "Laughing boy here can bear me out. He was about to whip me with his ice water, and I vanished. I vanished from the shower and materialized in the dayroom."

Dr. Bean replaced his glasses and grabbed a pad and pencil.
"That's right, Doc," Potts approved. "Write it down. I'm giving you a better break than you ever gave me. I've been in this hospital four times, and no doctor ever sat down and explained what was wrong with me, or tried to learn why. There was something about combat fatigue, whatever that is, over in Italy. Otherwise, I don't know anything. If I so much as raise my voice or break a dish at home, my wife has me shipped back here as dangerously psychotic, or psycho-neurotic, or something. Which makes it nice for her.

"And what do you do when I come back? You give me electric shock treatments and have your sadists whip me with P. T. baths, as if torture could cure a sick mind! Maybe there's nothing wrong with my brain. Maybe it's just different from yours, or this jerk's, if he has a brain."

"Never mind, Joe," Dr. Bean cautioned in a theatrical aside. "Just stand by."

Potts smiled and said, "Take it all down. Then you can check your notes and decide if it's schizophrenia, or catatonia, or psychasthenia, or what not. I know a little about mental diseases from reading, and I'll explain my theory the best I can."

* * * * *

Potts tapped his forehead with a forefinger and asked, "What is a brain? You'll say it's an organ occupying the skull and forming the center of the nervous system, and the seat of intellect, or some such thing. I don't think so. It generates electricity. You know that. A nerve impulse is a wave of electricity started and conducted by a nerve cell. You can test it. You've made brain-wave patterns of some of the boys in the ward.

"The brain transforms energy into thought, or thought into energy. I'm sitting here thinking and not moving my body at all. My brain is transforming electric energy into thought. You're writing, and your thoughts guide the movement of your hand. Thought into energy."

Dr. Bean turned a page and continued to scribble rapidly. Potts heard Joe move and felt the big attendant's presence behind his chair.

Potts said, "The ability to think improves with use, like a muscle growing stronger with use. The first time you memorize a poem, it's a hard job. If you keep on memorizing, it becomes easier, until you read a poem a couple of times and you have it. The same goes for remembering. I'll bet you can't even remember how your breakfast tasted and smelled this morning. Probably not even what you ate.

"I practice remembering with all the senses. How things look and taste and smell. Exact colors, shadows, size, impressions. Think of an airplane, and you probably think of a little silver thing in the sky. Actually, an airplane is much bigger than that, so your mental picture of an airplane is all wrong. An airplane gives me a certain impression. I have it only when looking at one. Maybe it's an unrecognized sense. I have an entirely different impression when I'm looking at a horse."

Dr. Bean threw down his pencil, caught his falling glasses, drew a handkerchief from his breast pocket, and polished them.

"Too deep for you, Doc?" Potts inquired. "Well, just assume that my brain is a more powerful generator and transformer than any you ever saw. I've developed it by memorizing, remembering, visualizing, working problems in my head, and so on. I've been trying to make my brain take complete control of my body. The body is composed of atoms, and the atoms are electrical charges, protons and electrons. Therefore, you're nothing but electricity in the shape of a man.

"By changing myself to pure thought, or pure electricity, I believed that I could escape to the past. Get away from this age where a man is suspected of insanity if he so much as mislays his checkbook or kicks his dog. People didn't use to be crazy unless they went around hacking their relatives with an ax.

"I tried to meet Columbus when he rowed ashore from the Santa Maria. I tried to watch the Battle of Bunker Hill. I tried to lead the Charge of the Light Brigade. I tried to invent an airplane during the Civil War. I always failed, because I didn't have enough sensory knowledge of the period, and I couldn't change the past.

"I succeeded in P. T. because I transported myself through space instead of time. I knew every detail of the day room, so it worked. My brain reduced my body to its elemental charges in the P. T. bath and reassembled it in the dayroom. Something like radio, with the brain acting as sending set and receiver. Maybe we should call it philosophy, Doc. What is reality? If I sit here in your office but imagine I'm sitting in the dayroom, until the chair in the dayroom becomes more real than this, where am I actually sitting?"

Dr. Bean stood up, adjusted his glasses, and said, "Orville, I am going to do as you asked. I am going to tell you exactly what is wrong with you. You are suffering from distorted perception—illusions and hallucinations, disorientation. You are also becoming an exhibitionist and are developing a persecution complex. I thought, when you first came in, that you had improved. But if you don't pull yourself together and try to get well, you'll be in here a long time."

Potts's chair overturned as he thrust himself up. He placed his thin hands on the desk and said, "You psychiatrists can't see an inch in front of your nose! All you can do is quote a textbook. If anybody mentions mental
telepathy, or predicting the future, or a sense of perception, you classify them as insane. You think you've reduced the mind to a set of rules, but you're still in kindergarten! I'll prove every word I said! I'll vanish into the future! I can't change the past, but the future hasn't happened yet! I can imagine my own!"

Joe grabbed the fist that Potts shook under the doctor's nose and pinned the patient's arms behind his back.
"Take him upstairs to Ward K, Joe," Dr. Bean said. "To the pack room. That should calm him."
"So long, moron!" Potts called.
"Let's go, Orville Potts," Joe said. "We're going to fix you up just like an ice cream soda."
"You won't pack me in ice," Potts promised. His thin body twisted in pain.
He closed his eyes tight and concentrated.
Joe's great hands clamped into fists when Potts disappeared.

* * * * *

Potts opened his eyes. He lay face down on a padded acceleration couch with broad straps across his brawny back and legs. Before his face, a second hand swept around a clock toward a red zero. Potts twisted his head slightly in the harness and looked at the beautiful young woman strapped to the couch on his right. A shrieking warning siren blared through the spaceship.
The woman smiled.
"Hia, ked," she said in strange new accents. "Secure your dentures. Next stop, Alpha Centaurus!"

Contents

BOOMERANG BULLETS
By James A. Goldthwaite

IT wasn't death itself that Drill Morgan feared. No one had a better reputation of being able to take care of himself in a jam where automatics cracked spitefully in the dark and streaks of flame leaped swiftly from unexpected places. In the open, hand-to-hand or gun-to-gun, Drill had the savage, icy-nerved scorn of danger of a fighting rat.

It was another sort of death that Drill Morgan feared. A death in a small gray room with its one furnishing a heavy wooden-chair--hung with straps and wires.

And it was this fear that had gripped him and fastened and grown on him till he told the district attorney that he would testify, testify to anything, against anybody, even his own mother, to save his life. So they gave him a nominal sentence of five years and turned him loose on a pardon at the end of the first year. At midnight, on the very day of Morgan's release, Jim Morrison, after twelve months of fruitless appeals and delays, was to go to the chair for the murder of McCracken's butler.

Slumped down in his seat in the train, Drill let his mind run back to the scene in the courtroom when he had given his testimony against Jim.

It was he, Drill, who should have gone to the chair by rights. He had shot the butler, himself, while Jim was outside on the lookout.

But Jim would be the one to pay for the job; there wasn't any doubt about that. Drill's evidence had clinched that. He would be led into that room, and when he came out, they would put him into a cart and carry him away like a piece of meat.

Drill Morgan jumped in his chair, and his hands gripped the wooden rail till the knuckles cracked. A voice from over his shoulder had broken into his thoughts. But all it said was:
"Dinner is now served in the dining car. Dining car is in the rear."

Drill straightened himself up in his chair. He laughed and cursed himself for a fool. That was all over now, all over and past, he told himself for the hundredth time. The fear of the chair was out of his life, out of it forever. Only, he had stood sweating and trembling under its shadow for so long, it was a habit almost.

In the washroom, Drill brushed his natty gray suit of clothes that he had ordered in prison at his own expense, sleeved back his black hair, polished his neat oxfords with a brush, and came out whistling, his chin up.

He made his way back through the train to the dining car and selected a seat at a vacant table. After consulting the menu and giving his order to a waiter, he leaned back in his chair and let his gaze drift negligently and comfortably around the car.

His ease of mind lasted only a few seconds. Almost the first thing his eyes rested on was a newspaper in the hands of a man at the next table in front. In four-inch headlines slapped clear across the page, the screamer
announced that all appeals in behalf of Jim Morrison had failed, and that he must die at midnight. Prominently
displayed in the middle of the page was a photograph of the electric chair, bordered in black, with an imaginary
drawing of Morrison strapped into it.

Drill Morgan shuddered. Furtively he mopped beads of sweat from his forehead. With the jolting of the train, it
seemed to him that the picture of the man on the hot spot looked more like him than it did like Morrison....

He muttered another oath and jerked his eyes off the tabloid. He wasn't afraid. There wasn't a thing in the world
to fear now.

All at once, he realized that somebody was standing in the aisle, looking down at him.

This newcomer was an undersized, stoop-shouldered little man, with a thin, wrinkled face, pasty-white from
indoor life, and brown eyes, sly and shifty as a pair of glass beads. He was dressed in a suit of sleazy prison clothes
and he wore a derby hat at least two sizes too large for him.

Drill recognized the man, now that he came to look at him. Off and on, for months back in stir, he remembered
he had been catching glimpses of the comical little figure in the baggy uniform shuffling around in the long, gray
queues of prisoners. Moreover, the little fellow had been waiting in the warden's office only a couple of hours before
when he, Drill, had passed through on his way to the outside. Waiting for his discharge at the end of his term--

SEEING that Morgan was looking at him, the little man sidled over to the table and slid into the chair opposite
Drill. Seated, his head and shoulders hardly came above the table top. But his beady brown eyes gripped Morgan's
like a ferret's over the white cloth and silverware.

"Hello. You're Drill Morgan, ain't you?" wheezed the little man.

Morgan stiffened. His big, cruelly handsome lips curled in disdain. He looked around for the waiter to tell him
to have the shabby little intruder kicked out, and then thought better of it. He was in no position, even though legally
clear of the bulls, to stir up a scene.

"Well, suppose I am. What of it?" he replied curtly. The little man did not answer for a second.

He sat leaning forward toward Drill, mouth half open, and an expression of awed wonder on his face that
reminded Drill of a dog watching its master.

"I thought so. I'm Ollie Meekers--Rabbit Meekers, you know," the little man finally wheezed back. "I've seen
you around, up--up there--lots of times. I used to watch you. But I don't suppose a big shot like you would even
bother to notice a runt like me."

Meekers pulled one hand up from under the tablecloth and pushed it timidly over the cloth toward Drill.

"Maybe I'm all wet to think of it, but I'd like to--do you suppose--would you shake hands, Mr. Morgan?" he
blurted out.

Drill Morgan scowled with surprise. He hesitated, started to growl out a refusal, and then stuck out his hand.

The people across the aisle, he saw out of the corner of his eyes, were getting interested.

The hand that Rabbit Meekers slid into Drill's big white digits was just what Morgan had expected it would be.
Long and slender and thin-fingered, wonderfully flexible and soft. The kind of a hand that can move in and out of a
pocket, or back and forth over a deck of cards, faster than the eye can follow it.

The waiter came with the soup, and Morgan started to eat it.

"Now suppose you spill me something," he growled to Meekers after a moment. "What's the big idea? Why all
the stuff about who I am and shaking hands. Rabbit? Ain't runnin' for Congress or something, are you, cull?"

Meekers hugged himself with both his skinny, pipestem little arms. He sucked in his flabby blue lips in a
chuckling grin.

"You're the man that pulled the McCracken job and got away with it," he breathed. "We knew all about that, up
at college. Even the ones that was up there before it happened. I just finished two this time--"

"What's your line, Rabbit?" Morgan interrupted.

Meekers flushed sheepishly and dropped his eyes.

"Me? Oh, I ain't nothing compared to you. Drill," he muttered. "I'm just a pocket-dipper--a gold watch here, a
piece of coin somewhere else. I tried to do a couple of box jobs, but I fell down. Someway, I can't seem to get the
hang of it. The last time they nabbed me on the way in--that's how good I am." He laughed cacklingly.

"Guess I'm too dumb to be anything but honest. And I don't even know how to be that."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the rhythmical click of the car wheels. "That was why I wanted
to speak to you. Drill," the little man went on wistfully, at last. "Me, I ain't never done nothin' all my life but bum
around and get pinched. I always wanted to meet up with one reg'lar guy. If I couldn't never pull off a decent job
myself, anyhow I wanted to shake hands with a high-toned worker, and see how it felt. Gee, yuh couldn't never
guess what a kick I'm gettin' outa this!" Drill Morgan sat staring at the comically earnest, wrinkled little face in front
of him for a moment, then burst out laughing. "Say, you're handin' me the first good laugh I've had in a year, no
kidding," he guffawed. "I didn't know they let 'em loose with as few brains as what you've got. Have something to
RELAXING from the tension of the last weeks, Morgan amused himself during the next half hour by relating to the little man some of the less serious exploits of his career, and listening with a certain contemptuous amusement to the pickpocket's awed exclamations of wonder. Finishing their meal, the pair left the dining car together and went into the smoker, which happened to be empty except for themselves. There, Morgan went on with his anecdotes.

"Gee, you're wonderful!" Meekers sighed admiringly at last. "What you goin' to do when you get back to the big town, Drill? Got anything lined up to turn over?"

Drill's cigar halted halfway to his lips. He froze motionless as a statue, his blue-ice eyes drilling the Rabbit like a butterfly under a pin.

"You're askin' me?" he said slowly. "I been away more than a year, don't forget. And exactly what difference does it make to you, anyway, punk?"

Rabbit glanced up, flushed and fidgeted in his chair.

"Not a thing in the world, Drill," he stammered hastily. "Only, I was just thinkin'. I suppose you're figurein' to go up to Rosy the fence's some night pretty soon and pick up the twenty grand that mug owes you on the McCracken emeralds, ain't you? You could live on that dough quite a while without doin' any work. If you could get it--"

Drill Morgan did nothing to attract the attention of the two men who had just paused in the doorway of the smoking car. His big white hand fell on Rabbit's skinny forearm as it rested between them and vised over it with a clutch that brought tears to the little man's eyes.

"What do you know about Rosy and the junk--supposing there ever was any?" he snarled. "What do you mean, 'if I can get it'? What are you trying to do, muscle in on me, you shrimp? Come clean and come fast."

"Cripes, Drill, don't go gettin' me wrong," Rabbit whined. "Leggo my arm. You're killin' me. Me muscle in on you? Say, do I look that goofy--honest, do I, now?"

"I'll find out how goofy you are after you talk," Morgan grunted, a little mollified in spite of himself. "Go ahead, cull. Shoot the works."

"There ain't no use you tryin' to stall me that you didn't knock off old man McCracken's emeralds that night that y-o-u--I mean Jim Morrison--smoked the butler," Meekers said. "And you went and soaked the junk with Rosy--didn't you, Drill?"

Drill Morgan laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh to hear, so smooth, yet withal so rasping. Like the unsheathing of a jagged-edged knife from a satin scabbard.

"Who says so? If you know something, let's hear it. But don't go shoving no cross-examination at me, Rabbit," he purred.

"Who says so?" Meekers leaned closer to Drill, laughing knowingly under his breath. "Spike Haggerty said so. And Spike's in the know, what I mean. He got up here--up there at the house, I mean--about six months after you did. I guess maybe you never happened to pipe off who he was. Somebuddy must have spilled the works to him--I don't know who. Spike said that you left the stuff with Rosy for safe keeping. He swore to keep dark that he had it. If you got a long stretch up river, he promised to keep it in his safe till you came and got it, if it was ten years. Didn't he?"

Drill Morgan's breath had started to come thickly and fast. His face grew white, hard and cruel as chiseled stone.

"What are you driving at, you boob?" he gritted between his teeth. "Are you trying to tell me that Rosy--"

Rabbit Meekers shrank back from the killing fury in Morgan's face.

"He sold you out, Drill," he muttered. "Old McCracken put up twenty grand reward for the return of the stuff and no questions asked. Rosy packed it up and some wise mouthpiece of his took it back to McCracken and collected the dough. So--"

His face white and twitching. Drill plunged out of his seat and started to pace the floor. "The double-crossing skunk!" he raged, hoarsely. "I'll cut his heart out for this--"

"Curse you, if you're lying to me--if this yarn of yours is some plant--" He stooped and gripped the little man by the shoulder. His fingers burned through the thin cloth of the coat like steel hooks.

"What's your racket, anyhow, you rat?" he hissed. "What's the idea, musclin' into the know with me, and then unloadin' all this? What business is it of yours, anyhow?"

"For the lovamike, Drill, what d'yu keep gettin' me wrong for?" Meekers whimpered. "Listen, will yuh? Yuh had the rocks once, and when yuh gave 'em to Rosy, yuh was goin' to have the dough instead of 'em. Wasn't yuh? Now you're sore because yuh think you've lost 'em--rocks and kale, both." Meekers dropped his voice. "Well, how'd yuh like it if yuh could get 'em back again? Not just the dough. The dough and the rocks, both?"

"Inch by inch it seemed, so slowly did he move, Drill sank back into his chair again. "What d'yu mean, cull? What are yuh drivin' at?" he growled.
clamped in Meekers' slender white fingers. In his pocket, the Rabbit would still have some of Rosy's cash--enough when the cops found him. And the steel messenger in the fence's heart would be out of the rod they would find another bullet for Meekers' brain.

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The servants have gone with 'em. There won't be a soul in the place," he muttered. "For a show like that, up in the woods, the missis won't lug her big junk. It would be a wide-open lay, only for one thing. It's a cinch McCracken has switched the combination of that wall safe since the job I done on it last year. I knew the combination that time. It took the old lady's French maid six months to pipe it off for me. But now--" Drill Morgan shoved a cigar viciously into his mouth and jabbed a match across the sole of his boot. "Cripes, what a lay! And I got to pass it up!"

"There's another way to get into a safe, Drill, without knowing the c-combination." Rabbit's voice was stuttering with excitement. "D-did you ever hear of an acetylene blow pipe? C-cuts through a foot of steel in half an hour--"

"Did I ever hear of my left leg?" Drill grunted disgustedly. "You poor fish, where am I going to grab off a gas gun outfit in three-hours after I hit town, after bein' away from the mob more than a year. Huh?"

"I can get you a gas outfit in t-two hours, or less, Drill," Meekers chattered. "That is, unless the p-party I'm thinking of has got pinched while I been away. We'll be in and out again at McCracken's by one o'clock, and then we'll go down to Rosy's. You needn't say anything to Rosy that you've got the rocks in your pocket. You can just stick your gun in his stomach and tell him you know how he double-crossed you, and to come across with the twenty grand, or you'll b-blow him to hell. He'll shell out, all right. He's y-yellower than what I am." Rabbit chuckled. "And then we--" Drill Morgan's steel fingers gripped again over the Rabbit's arm. His flat, cruel eyes glowed green as a cat's. "Hold on a minute. Where do you get that 'we' stuff?" he growled. "We'll do this--we'll do that. When did I ever tell you you was mobbin' in with me on anything, cull?"

Rabbit's little red eyes blinked rapidly. His bony Adam's apple fluttered up and down in his skinny throat. "I guess I forgot myself, D-Drill," he stuttered. "I was just thinkin'--like as if me and you was together on the job. I kep' thinkin' and thinkin' about it so much back at stir--you know, imaginin' that we was pals--wantin' to work with you so bad--it sorta seemed like it had come true."

He leaned suddenly toward Morgan, his seamed, monkeylike little face fairly twitching with eagerness.

"Gee, Drill, if you only would!" he breathed. Think of it! Me, dumb-bell Rabbit Meekers, in with Drill Morgan on a job! Gosh, I'd never forget it. I'd learn more in that one night than I ever knew in all my life before. And, at that, Drill, haven't I got a little something coming to me?" Rabbit went on after a pause. "I'm gettin' the gas gun outfit for you, don't forget. And I showed you the lay in the paper, didn't I?"

Drill Morgan did not say anything for a moment. A crafty look narrowed his flat green eyes.

It had been on the tip of his tongue to tell Meekers where he got off. But suddenly he realized that the very fact that the little pickpocket was a blundering nitwit dazzled out of what few senses he had by his awe of a big-time crook really made him all the more valuable. Priceless, in fact.

Swiftly the details of the plan clicked into place in Drill's brain. The second robbery of the McCracken emeralds, coming the very day of his release from stir, would send the dicks hotfoot on his trail. The first needful thing was a water-tight alibi. Drill knew a dozen places in the city where a ten-minute call before he went to work would line up a dozen witnesses who would swear he had been in the place all night.

The Rabbit would cinch the rest of it. The Rabbit's fingerprints on the gas gun left at McCracken's, and on the safe. Of his own, not a sign to be found.... Then with the Rabbit to Rosy, the fence's squalid hole. Not only the twenty grand he had collected from McCracken, but every last dollar he had in the place, Drill would wring out of the shivering little Jew at the point of his gun. When he had cleaned him, a bullet through the heart. And then another bullet for Meekers' brain.

But it would be the gun in Rosy's hand whose barrel-scratches would match the bullet that had killed Rabbit, when the cops found him. And the steel messenger in the fence's heart would be out of the rod they would find clamped in Meekers' slender white fingers. In his pocket, the Rabbit would still have some of Rosy's cash--enough

For reply, the Rabbit reached into his pocket and drew out a newspaper. He folded it to the headlines of an article in the society section and passed it wordlessly to Morgan.

**PROVIDENT PERSPECTIVE PEOPLE TO ATTEND HOUSEWARMING**

Members of several of New York's most prominent families have accepted invitations to assist at the housewarming festivities to be held tonight by Mr. and Mrs. John Henry McCracken on the occasion of the opening of their new hunting lodge in the Adirondacks. Mr. and Mrs. McCracken left the city yesterday forenoon with a staff of domestics from their New York residence, arriving at Cedarcrest in the late afternoon for the purpose of completing last minute preparations for the reception of several autoloads of friends who followed them early this morning. Mr. and Mrs. McCracken will remain at their palatial "camp" only two days on this occasion, returning to the city tomorrow for the purpose of attending the international polo matches, in which their son, Mr. Jerrold McCracken, will participate as a member of the American team.

**DRILL MORGAN** let the paper drop into his lap and sat staring at Meekers.

"The servants have gone with 'em. There won't be a soul in the place," he muttered. "For a show like that, up in the woods, the missis won't lug her big junk. It would be a wide-open lay, only for one thing. It's a cinch McCracken has switched the combination of that wall safe since the job I done on it last year. I knew the combination that time. It took the old lady's French maid six months to pipe it off for me. But now--" Drill Morgan shoved a cigar viciously into his mouth and jabbed a match across the sole of his boot. "Cripes, what a lay! And I got to pass it up!"

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to look plausible.

A picture that needed no title, the silent pair would tell. At the worst, he, Drill, with time to park his junk in a
safe place, would get off with a pinch on suspicion and a sweating at headquarters. But they couldn't hold him. They
wouldn't have a thing on him--not a thing.

Drill turned to the Rabbit with a grin. He held out his hand.

"I was all wet, what I said about your being empty above the ears, Rabbit," he said. "You've got it, kid. We go
and pull those two jobs tonight, just like you said. And you don't go just to learn how, either. We split fifty-fifty on
the clean-up."

Tears of joy stood in the Rabbit's eyes as he gripped Drill Morgan's hand.

"Gee, Drill, that's sure swell of you!" he cried. "Me on a job with Drill Morgan! And a fifty-fifty split, too!
Gosh. I can't believe it!"

Could the little pickpocket have read behind the stony mask of the big man's enigmatic smile, he would have
shuddered with chill terror.

DUSK was thickening around the shoulders of the skyscrapers as Drill and Rabbit Meekers stepped out onto
Forty-Second Street. At the corner of Fifth Avenue, Rabbit flagged a taxi. The two men got in. Meekers gave an
address several miles down town.

Leaving the car a quarter of an hour later, the Rabbit plunged into the maze of curving, crisscrossing streets to
the south and west of Washington Square. After some ten minutes of dodging and twisting back and forth, he turned
into a narrow, half-lighted alley. He felt his way down this for some hundred yards or so, and then stopped in front
of a wooden door leading into a fenced-in back yard.

"Here's where Tim used to be," he muttered to Drill. "If some double-crossing stool pigeon hasn't turned him
up, he's here now. Tim will do anything for me."

Drill fell back a couple of steps behind Rabbit as they scuffled across the yard to the rear door of the frowsy-
looking tenement house. Meekers knocked.

After a few seconds, the door opened a crack and a section of face appeared. There was a moment of silence as
the person inside scrutinized the Rabbit through the slit.

Then the door flew open and a big, slatternly woman with eagle-keen eyes under a mop of gray-streaked hair
seized Meekers' hand.

"Well, if it ain't the little old Rabbit, himself, back home again!" she exclaimed, pumping the little man's hand
up and down. "Say, it's been years. How are yuh, kid? When d'yu hit town?" "Hello, Annie--just came down from
my country estate this afternoon," the Rabbit grinned. "Meet my friend--Mr. Drill Morgan, Annie Hope. Annie is
Tim's wife." he explained to Drill, as Morgan stepped forward out of the shadow. "She'll do anything for me."

"You bet I will," the red-haired woman exclaimed as she held out her hand to Drill "And that goes for you too,
Mr. Morgan. Any friend of Eddie's is a friend of mine. Haven't I heard of you somewheres before, big boy? A big
job up on the Avenue?"

"Drill pulled the McCracken job a year ago," Meekers said importantly. "You know--his pal, Morrison, is the
one they're putting away tonight. Drill just got out. I and him are going to turn over a little one tonight. We want a
room for a few hours, an' something to eat. And I wanta see Tim about a couple of gats and--something else--before
we start."

"Sure--come right upstairs," Annie Hope exclaimed. "Tim's away till tomorrow, but I'll fix yuh up for
everything."

Drill Morgan followed the other two into the house. He had never seen nor heard of Annie Hope before, but he
knew her type. Those shifty, yet gimlet-keen, knowing eyes, the hallmark marks of hard-boiled astuteness stamped on her
heavy, deeply lined face were enough to prove what she was--a woman of the underworld and the keeper of a
crook's lodging house.

In the small, comfortable room where she took the two men, they had supper. After the meal, Rabbit excused
himself for a few minutes.

"I got to see Annie 'bout our--supplies--for tonight," he grinned to Drill. "She's got the rods right here, but it
may take her a couple of hours to get hold of the gas gun. I'll be right back."

Drill glanced up from the hand of solitaire he was playing and nodded without speaking. Rabbit returned in
about ten minutes. "Everything's jake," he said as he shut the door behind him. "She'll have the stuff here at ten-
thirty."

"Okay, cull," he grunted. "We pull outa here about eleven. You be down there at that back door at a quarter of,
sharp, and let me back in again, see?"

Why, w-where you goin', Drill?" Rabbit exclaimed.
"Just to call on a couple of old friends," Drill said, offhandedly. "Nothing to do with our job. Don't go to sleep and forget to let me back in again, that's all!"

Rabbit did not say anything. He stood looking worriedly out of his funny wrinkled face and roving red eyes while Drill slammed his hat on his head and went out.

Drill's business took him on a round of certain restaurants and speak-easies, ending with the last hour spent at a night club whose festivities were just beginning to get under way as he arrived.

There, Drill circulated among the waiters, shaking hands and chatting jovially. He finished off his call with a ten-minute interview in private with the owner of the place. Upon leaving, Drill knew that wherever he might actually be during the next three hours, he could prove by overwhelming testimony in any court in the land that he had spent them talking and dancing with the alluring hostesses at the Lotus Club.

Rabbit was at the back door to let him in on the dot of ten forty-five. He led the way back to the room without asking any questions as to where Drill had been.

He stepped over to the bed and tossed back a blanket covering a humped shape. He picked up one of the two automatics lying on the spread and handed it to Drill.

Without a word. Drill pushed back the catch of his gun, shelled the six grease-nosed, ugly-looking cartridges out into his palm, grunted, reloaded the gun, and dropped it into his pocket.

"How's yours?" he asked.

Rabbit nodded. "The same as yours. Loaded, all O.K."

A black suitcase lay on the bed. Rabbit stooped and opened it. Inside were a pair of polished metal cylinders, with a blowpipe nozzle at the end of connecting rubber tubes.

"The works," Rabbit grinned. "That baby there is so hot she'll cut a hole through chrome steel with her little finger. Light, too. And neat-looking. We can shove that under a bull's nose and he'll only think we're rushing out an armful of dirty shirts."

JOHN HENRY McCRACKEN'S mansion stood back some fifty yards from the Drive, on the summit of a knoll overlooking the Hudson. Keeping in the shadow of the clumps of high shrubbery, Drill and the Rabbit made a complete circuit of the house, pausing to listen and peer in through the windows.

Not a light showed from top to bottom of the great brick and cement edifice. Not a window in any of the sleeping rooms above the ground floor was unlocked.


"Here's an iron I got off of Annie," Rabbit whispered. "Let's see how you do it, Drill."

Drill took the ten-inch chisel-like jimmy that Meekers handed him, tucked the thin edge into the crack of the back door and threw his weight sidewise. There was a sharp snapping sound, and the door swung inward.

Drill stepped over the threshold and halted, holding his breath to listen. Rabbit crowded close to his elbow.

It was utterly still. So still that Rabbit could hear the blood pounding in his ears. "S-suppose we're in wrong, Drill? Suppose there's somebody here, after all?" he chattered. "I'm--I'm afraid--" "Shut up!" Drill Morgan's voice growled exasperation. "What the hell is there to be afraid of, you sap? There's nobody here."

"All right, Drill. I'll keep still," whispered Meekers. "Was this the way you come in the--the other time, Drill?"

Drill Morgan muttered an oath.

"I thought you was goin' to can the chatter?" he snarled. "No, it wasn't this way. We made it through a side window that time. Anything else you wanta know, punk?"

"All right, Drill. Don't get sore," twittered the Rabbit. "Where do we go next? Where's the room with the safe?"

Drill Morgan took a step ahead in the dark.

"Down this way--through the kitchen, I guess," he muttered.

Drill in the lead, the two men cat-footed down a short passage, through a door into the kitchen, and out of that into another passage.

"Over there is the dining room," Drill pointed out. "That door there goes into the conservatory."

A few feet farther along, Drill came to still another door. He turned the knob noiselessly, pushed open the door and stood peering and listening without making a sound for a long half-minute. Then, inch by inch, he glided in over the threshold, with the Rabbit hugging his elbow.

They were at one end of a big, high-ceilinged room. Massive pieces of oak furniture stood about, dimly visible in the greenish light of the moon that shone in through a tall, narrow window. Shelf after shelf of books alternated with gold-framed paintings hung against panelings of dark, hand-carved wood that covered the walls. Priceless rugs of Persia and China covered the floor.

Rabbit Meekers muttered an oath and caught his breath. It was like a chamber in some great cathedral--the utter silence, the solemn dignity of furniture and pictures, the haughty, disdainful faces of the ladies and gentlemen that gazed down at them out of the rows of gilded frames.
Meekers glanced up at Drill Morgan. He was standing motionless, his eyes sweeping the room from end to end. A queer expression was on his face.

If anyone had told Drill that shivers of dread would run down his spine when he went back into that room to open McCracken's safe for the second time, he would have told the man he was crazy.

And yet it was true. He was afraid. What of, he did not know. Not of Meekers, not of being caught again, not of the chair.

Maybe it was the picture of McCracken's father, the old wolf of Wall Street, glowering down at him with his blazing blue eyes out of the massive gold frame over the fireplace. Maybe it was the memory of the old butler. Right under the picture was where he had dropped and lain motionless on his back, blood gushing out of the hole between his eyes and flooding down over his white, hair--

Drill Morgan gasped out an oath and jumped backward. Tingles of icy terror congealed his skin in goose pimples.

A loud, jangling uproar had crashed in on his tense nerves—the booming of the grandfather clock out in the hall. Stroke after stroke, till it had counted a dozen, the heavy, measured beats thundered on Morgan's ears and rolled away in throbbing echoes through the house.

As the last of the peals faded out into silence, Drill growled a curse and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Midnight. Twelve o'clock and the chair for Morrison. Right now, they would be leading Jim out of his cell in the death house. What was he afraid of? It was all over. They couldn't burn him now.

He swung around to the Rabbit.

"Let's get to work. The keister is over behind that picture of McCracken. Go unhook it and swing it out--"

Rabbit Meekers stared up at Morgan. His birdlike little brown eyes glittered with excitement.

"Oh, gee--you're goin' to let me do something, Drill?" he exclaimed.

"I'm goin' to let you do everything," Drill grunted back curtly. "This is your lay—you can spring it. Go ahead and get busy."

Rabbit Meekers tiptoed awesomely across the room to the painting of the father of the master of the house. He reached up, felt for the hook that held it in place, pushed it up, and slowly pulled the big painting around on the hinges, like a door. Behind it, the door of a large wall safe gleamed dully in the moonlight.

Rabbit turned back to Drill.

"I can't hardly believe it!" he chattered. "Here I am, workin' with Drill Morgan on a job! How many times I've dreamed of doin' that--an' now it's comin' true. Gee, I'm so nervous I'm all shaky. Do you ever get the nerves, Drill? Were you nervous that--that other night when you smoked the butler?"

Drill Morgan jarred out a gritting laugh.

"Cripes, how you talk! You're worse than a woman to chew the rag!" he flung back at the little man. "Me, nerves? No—I ain't got any nerves. Shut up and get ready to open that box."

"I will. Drill, I will," Meekers gulped. "In just a minute." Awed eagerness gripped the little man's face as he swept his eyes around the room. "We've got lots of time. Tell me about that first time, Drill. Gee, I can't believe it--it was right here. You was cold as ice all through, I bet. If it had been me, I'd have flopped cold. Where was the butler when you popped him—here or out in the hall?"

Drill Morgan muttered another oath. With hands that trembled, he fumbled out a cigarette and lighted it. A minute back, he had boasted to the Rabbit that he had no nerves. But it was a lie. There was no use fighting against it.

Here, in this high-ceilinged, tomb-like old chamber, with the pale green light of the moon making everything look drab and spectral, the terror was gripping his soul again. Terror of nothing definite. Nothing he could name. Terror of ghosts....

Down under the edge of the desk, Drill could see the white-haired old butler with the blood trickling out between his eyes. The great oak armchair over under McCracken's picture was the other chair—from which they were now dragging Morrison's body and carrying it away--

A sudden, irresistible longing surged over Drill Morgan. If he could only talk—if he could just tell it all once, the way it happened, and get it off of his conscience—out of his brain and thoughts—he could forget it. Forget the chair. Forget Morrison. The fear that gripped his heart would be gone.

Drill burst out laughing. Harsh, grunting laughter that brought frowns of troubled bewilderment to Rabbit's face. If he had to talk, the Rabbit was the best one in the world to spill it to. A man may talk in his sleep. But a dead man is always safe....

Drill dropped the gun back into his pocket and took a step toward Meekers.

"So you got a yen to find out what happened here that night, have you, cull?" he said. "Okay, then. I'm goin' to spill you the works. But not till after we burn out the keister. Then we won't have anything to do but get out. Now
open up that bag and get out the stuff."

Rabbit stooped, slipped the catch on the black box and lifted out the contrivance of metal cylinders and rubber tubes. He stood dangling them from his fingers and looking at Morgan.

"My fingerprints, Drill--all over this. I oughta wore gloves," he exclaimed.

"Never mind that now. We'll wipe 'em off afterwards," Drill replied carelessly. "Turn on the gas. The one with A on it first."

Rabbit turned a button. Drill struck a match and held it to the snout of the blowpipe. A threadlike yellow flame flickered into the dark. Rabbit twisted the other lever. The orange pencil spat into a hard blue, almost colorless drill of hissing, sizzling heat.

Drill pulled a chair up under the safe and motioned to Rabbit.

"There you are. Go ahead and open her up," he said. "Cut a circle around the lock. After we get that out, the rest won't be nothing."

HOLDING the blowpipe nozzle in both hands, Rabbit climbed up into the chair. He turned the flame on the safe door and started drawing it in a slow circle around the combination lock.

Time dragged away. For twenty, thirty minutes, neither man spoke. The snarling buzz of the vicious little flame sang in the silence. The flickering yellow glow of the blobs of molten metal spattering out from under the tip threw the two faces into grotesque gargoyles-like masks of light and shadow--the Rabbit's tense, flushed with excitement; Drill Morgan's cold, cynical, gripped in a leer of gloating mockery.

"All right. That's good enough for now." Drill's voice broke the silence at last. "Now get out of the way while I open her up."

Rabbit stepped down from the chair and Drill took his place. Drill had a glittering steel tool in his hand, Rabbit saw. Also he wore black cotton gloves.

For a minute or so, Drill worked with the chisel at the face of the safe. He pulled away the melted-out lock and tossed it down into a cushioned chair. He stuck his hand into the opening and pulled it out again. As he did so, the remains of the safe door swung ajar on its hinges.

Drill jumped down onto the floor.

"There you are. Go get 'em," he said briefly.

His eyes glittering, Rabbit scrambled back into the chair. With a cry of awed excitement, he pushed his hand into the safe and pulled out box after box. His arms full, he jumped down and ran to a table. He dumped down the boxes and a flood of glittering radiance poured out.

Rabbit looked up at Morgan. His breath came fast, his little brown eyes were ablaze.

"Well, there it is. Drill--and I did it!" he exclaimed. "Gee, it's easy when you know how. Now do we divvy up? What's my split for tipping you the lay?"

Drill waved his hand magnanimously.

"Well take it back to the room and split it there," he said. "You carry it all till then."

Meekers hesitated, looked surprised, then swept the heap of blazing stones off the table into his hand, and dropped them into his pocket.

"All right, if you say so," he murmured. "Now tell me about that night--the other time. Drill--"

Drill Morgan laughed. The laugh was jerky, forced. The hand with which he scratched the match to light his cigarette made the little flame dance like a will-o'-the-wisp.

"I'm over there at the box, see?" he began. "I've just got it open, and I'm hauling out the junk. Morrison's out in the hall, listening to see if anyone comes down the stairs."

"The butler sneaks in through another door and hops me before I'm wise that he's within a dozen miles. I let him have it between the eyes. He drops like a log."

"Everybody in the house wakes up and starts yelling. Jim and me, we take it on the lam and slide clear by the skin of our teeth. We hop it back to my room and finish the night there. We lay doggo there for a couple of days. I'm wise that the bulls have got a line on us. We're on the list. Sooner or later, one of us is going to get rapped."

"The afternoon of the second day, while Morrison's taking a nap, I shift guns on him. That night we make a run for it."

"Outside my place, we split. Morrison gets away clean. I'm pinched half an hour after I've soaked the junk with Rosy, the fence."

"I've got a .32 calibre gun on me, the same size as the bullet that's in the butler. I've got a record. They're all set to shove me the works."

"I tell them to go pick up Jim Morrison, look at his gat, notice it's a .32, also--and then compare the scratch markings on the bullets out of it with the one that killed the butler."

"They do. When they fire test cartridges out of Jim's gun and mine, the marks on the bullets prove that the slug
that smoked the butler was shot out of the gat he's carrying, and not out of the one I've got on me.

"So that's all there is to it--Morrison burns, I get five years and then a pardon."

A light of admiring awe glowed in Meekers' button-brown eyes.

"Gee!" he murmured. "As easy as that--and you got away with it!"

"Sure, I got away with it," Morgan laughed. It had been the way he expected. Now that he had talked, confessed, he felt better. His nerve was back again. "When you've got brains and nerve, you can get away with anything, cull," he said meaningly.

Rabbit did not say anything. He shrank back from the diabolical expression on Morgan's lips. His eyes bulged. His weak, purposeless face began to twitch and tremble with sudden terror.

Morgan got up out of the chair he had been sitting in as he talked, and pitched his cigarette into the fireplace.

"Well, now that you know all about it, sap, let's travel," he said. "You go ahead first--and don't try to lose me, see?"

Rabbit started to walk around Morgan, back toward the fireplace.

"That gas gun--my fingerprints are all over it. I wanna wipe 'em off," he explained.

Morgan grinned. His right hand slipped down into his coat pocket. The other hand flicked into Meekers' pocket and came out with the little man's gun.

"You're wipin' off nothing. Get it punk?" he growled.

"Why--why, Drill, what d'yu mean?" Rabbit quavered. His face was white and horrified. "Yuh--yuh don't mean you're goin' to frame me. Drill? Yuh ain't goin' to put me on the spot to take the rap for this--"

"I mean you're goin' to jam your yap and get lammin' outa here--or you won't never go," Morgan growled. He twitched the gat out of his pocket and jabbed the cold snout into Rabbit's ribs. "I smoked one guy here and another man just took the hot rap for it. If you don't wanna be another one, you savvy what's good for you. Get movin', dumb-wit."

Rabbit did not move. A stubborn look--the crazy daring of utter terror--froze his ashy-white lips.

"I ain't goin'! I won't!" he screamed. "You're framnin' me! You're goin' to leave my prints here for me to get caught. I know the rest of it, too. At Rosy's you're goin' to kill us both and then switch the guns, the same as you did on Morrison, so it'll look like we killed each other."

The little pickpocket's shrill voice rasped up into a shriek. "You lousy double-crossing rat, you! Give me my gun--"

Screeching at the top of his lungs in a frenzy of hysterical rage, Rabbit threw himself onto Morgan. He hammered one puny fist into his face while with the other he clutched for his automatic.

Morgan snarled out a curse. His face was livid green in the moonlight. With one smashing blow of his fist, he sent Meekers reeling backward.

"Take it, then, you screechin' idiot," he snarled. "How d'yu like this--"

Six times in half as many seconds, Drill jerked the trigger as he drew bead on Rabbit's heart.

EVEN while he was still firing, a dazed, uncomprehending expression muddled Drill Morgan's face, his jaw dropped. His eyes bulged in bewilderment.

Six times, faint empty clickings instead of the roar of exploding powder popped grim mockery into his ears.

"Those were all fake cartridges in your gun, Morgan."

A cool, far-away voice that Drill dimly recognized as Meekers' cut through the whirling daze that made his head spin. The Rabbit's face, grinning mockingly, swam round and round in front of him.

"We had the bullets drawn, the powder dumped out, and the shells reloaded with salt behind the bullets. It seemed safer under the circumstances."

Drill rubbed his eyes. Lights were blazing up in the room. From hiding places behind the long draperies that fell to the floor on either side of the windows, men in uniform, with guns in their hands, came pouring out.

"Come on, Morgan. The game's up. Throw up your hands and don't make any trouble," the foremost one shouted. "We've got you with the goods."

Directly opposite Drill, a young girl appeared and stood looking at him with scornful triumph gripping her face. Drill snarled a curse. She was the sister of Jim Morrison. Day after day, during the trial, she had sat in court gazing at him, the speechless hatred in her blue eyes lashing him like fiery whips.

The big man in uniform stepped up and snapped the handcuffs around Morgan's wrists.

"Let me introduce you to Eddie Carmichael, the cleverest detective in America." the officer grinned, nodding at the Rabbit. "He spent a dozen years on the stage before he went on the cops. He never does anything by halves. Maybe you realize that now, Morgan. He put in a clean seven months up at the big house just so you would get used to seeing him around and not suspect him for a dick when he finally conned you. Annie Hope is another one of our cops that got her experience in the real game before she went to work for the Secret Service of the United States.
The Government just lent her to us. That house down there we dressed up just for tonight. It's all up with you, Drill. We had six witnesses behind those curtains listening to your confession how you killed the butler--"

Drill Morgan burst into wild, mocking laughter.
"You're tellin' me something? What good will it do you, you saps? They burned Morrison half an hour ago. You can't rap two men for the same job--"

"Oh, no, they didn't burn Morrison. Not even a little bit," Carmichael grinned. With the laying aside of his part of the Rabbit, he seemed taller, straighter. His face had lost its sly, simian linings. His brown eyes were keen as knife blades as they bored into Drill Morgan's apoplectic countenance.

"The Governor granted him a week's reprieve, to give us a chance to try this out on you. But all the papers got the word that he was going to die tonight. McCracken's family are all upstairs, keeping out of the way. That society notice in the papers was another come-on plant--just for you. Cedarcrest Lodge was opened a month ago." The Rabbit--Eddie Carmichael--lit a cigarette, and puffed the smoke in Morgan's face.

"You were a hundred per cent sucker, Drill, all the way through," he grinned. "You bit for everything like a big hay-and-hen man from the sticks. And it was a woman's brain that doped out the plant. Edna Morrison here. She's been to college and studied psychology--if you know what that is.

"She was determined her brother shouldn't die for a job he never did. She knew that when a crook goes back to the scene of his crime, he always has a wild craving to talk about it. It was her idea to get you here at the very hour when Jim was due to go to the chair, and kid this confession out of you."

Drill Morgan did not hear what Carmichael was saying. He was fighting like a wild animal with the burly figures that pinioned him on either side. Fighting and screaming through his foaming lips as they dragged him away toward the shadow of the chair.

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By Edmond Hamilton

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"Who taught our forefathers to open the Door?"
"They Beyond the Door taught them."
"To whom do we bring these sacrifices?"
"We bring them to Those Beyond the Door."
"Shall the Door be opened that They may take them?"
"Let the Door be opened!"

Paul Ennis had listened thus far, his haggard face uncomprehending in expression, but now he interrupted the speaker.
"But what does it all mean, inspector? Why are you repeating this to me?"
"Did you ever hear anyone speak words like that?" asked Inspector Pierce Campbell, leaning tautly forward for the answer.
"Of course not--it just sounds like gibberish to me," Ennis exclaimed. "What connection can it have with my wife?"

He had risen to his feet, a tall, blond young American whose good-looking face was drawn and worn by inward agony, whose crisp yellow hair was brushed back from his forehead in disorder, and whose blue eyes were haunted with an anguished dread.

He kicked back his chair and strode across the gloomy little office, whose single window looked out on the thickening, foggy twilight of London. He bent across the dingy desk, gripping its edges with his hands as he spoke tensely to the man sitting behind it.
"Why are we wasting time talking here?" Ennis cried. "Sitting here talking, when anything may be happening to Ruth!"
"It's been hours since she was kidnapped. They may have taken her anywhere, even outside of London by now. And instead of searching for her, you sit here and talk gibberish about Doors!"

Inspector Campbell seemed unmoved by Ennis' passion. A bulky, almost bald man, he looked up with his
colorless, sagging face, in which his eyes gleamed like two crumbs of bright brown glass.

"You're not helping me much by giving way to your emotions, Mr. Ennis," he said in his flat voice.

"Give way? Who wouldn't give way?" cried Ennis. "Don't you understand, man, it's Ruth that's gone--my wife! Why, we were married only last week in New York. And on our second day here in London, I see her whisked into a limousine and carried away before my eyes! I thought you men at Scotland Yard here would surely act, do something. Instead you talk crazy gibberish to me!"

"Those words are not gibberish," said Pierce Campbell quietly. "And I think they're related to the abduction of your wife."

"What do you mean? How could they be related?"

The inspector's bright little brown eyes held Ennis'. "Did you ever hear of an organization called the Brotherhood of the Door?"

Ennis shook his head, and Campbell continued, "Well, I am certain your wife was kidnapped by members of the Brotherhood."

"What kind of an organization is it?" the young American demanded. "A band of criminals?"

"No, it is no ordinary criminal organization," the detective said. His sagging face set strangely. "Unless I am mistaken, the Brotherhood of the Door is the most unholy and blackly evil organization that has ever existed on this earth. Almost nothing is known of it outside its circle. I myself in twenty years have learned little except its existence and name. That ritual I just repeated to you, I heard from the lips of a dying member of the Brotherhood, who repeated the words in his delirium."

Campbell leaned forward. "But I know that every year about this time the Brotherhood come from all over the world and gather at some secret center here in England. And every year, before that gathering, scores of people are kidnapped and never heard of again. I believe that all those people are kidnapped by this mysterious Brotherhood."

"But what becomes of the people they kidnap?" cried the pale young American. "What do they do with them?"

* * * * *

Inspector Campbell's bright brown eyes showed a hint of hooded horror, yet he shook his head. "I know no more than you. But whatever they do to the victims, they are never heard of again."

"But you must know something more!" Ennis protested. "What is this Door?"

Campbell again shook his head. "That too I don't know, but whatever it is, the Door is utterly sacred to the members of the Brotherhood, and whomever they mean by They Beyond the Door, they dread and venerate to the utmost."

"Where leads the Door? It leads outside our world," repeated Ennis. "What can that mean?"

"It might have a symbolic meaning, referring to some secluded fastness of the order which is away from the rest of the world," the inspector said. "Or it might----"

He stopped. "Or it might what?" pressed Ennis, his pale face thrust forward.

"It might mean, literally, that the Door leads outside our world and universe," finished the inspector. Ennis' haunted eyes stared. "You mean that this Door might somehow lead into another universe? But that's impossible!"

"Perhaps unlikely," Campbell said quietly, "but not impossible. Modern science has taught us that there are other universes than the one we live in, universes congruent and coincident with our own in space and time, yet separated from our own by the impassable barrier of totally different dimensions. It is not entirely impossible that a greater science than ours might find a way to pierce that barrier between our universe and one of those outside ones, that a Door should be opened from ours into one of those others in the infinite outside."

"A door into the infinite outside," repeated Ennis broodingly, looking past the inspector. Then he made a sudden movement of wild impatience, the dread leaping back strong in his eyes again.

"Oh, what good is all this talk about Doors and infinite universes doing in finding Ruth? I want to do something! If you think this mysterious Brotherhood has taken her, you must surely have some idea of how we can get her back from them? You must know something more about them than you've told."

"I don't know anything more certainly, but I've certain suspicions that amount to convictions," Inspector Campbell said. "I've been working on this Brotherhood for many years, and block after block I've narrowed down to the place I think the order's local center, the London headquarters of the Brotherhood of the Door."

"Where is the place?" asked Ennis tensely.

"It is the waterfront café of one Chandra Dass, a Hindoo, down by East India Docks," said the detective officer. "I've been there in disguise more than once, watching the place. This Chandra Dass I've found to be immensely feared by everyone in the quarter, which strengthens my belief that he's one of the high officers of the Brotherhood. He's too exceptional a man to be really running such a place."

"Then if the Brotherhood took Ruth, she may be at that place now!" cried the young American, electrified.
Campbell nodded his bald head. "She may very likely be. Tonight I'm going there again in disguise, and have men ready to raid the place. If Chandra Dass has your wife there, we'll get her before he can get her away. Whatever way it turns out, we'll let you know at once."

"Like hell you will!" exploded the pale young Ennis. "Do you think I'm going to twiddle my thumbs while you're down there? I'm going with you. And if you refuse to let me, by heaven I'll go there myself!"

Inspector Pierce Campbell gave the haggard, fiercely determined face of the young man a long look, and then his own colorless countenance seemed to soften a little.

"All right," he said quietly. "I can disguise you so you'll not be recognized. But you'll have to follow my orders exactly, or death will result for both of us."

That strange, hooded dread flickered again in his eyes, as though he saw through shrouding mists the outline of dim horror.

"It may be," he added slowly, "that something worse even than death awaits those who try to oppose the Brotherhood of the Door--something that would explain the unearthly, superhuman dread that enwraps the secret mysteries of the order. We're taking more than our lives in our hands, I think, in trying to unveil those mysteries, to regain your wife. But we've got to act quickly, at all costs. We've got to find her before the great gathering of the Brotherhood takes place, or we'll never find her."

** * * * * * **

Two hours before midnight found Campbell and Ennis passing along a cobble-paved waterfront street north of the great East India Docks. Big warehouses towered black and silent in the darkness on one side, and on the other were old, rotting docks beyond which Ennis glimpsed the black water and gliding lights of the river.

As they straggled beneath the infrequent lights of the ill-lit street, they were utterly changed in appearance. Inspector Campbell, dressed in a shabby suit and rusty bowler, his dirty white shirt innocent of tie, had acquired a new face, a bright red, oily, eager one, and a high, squeaky voice. Ennis wore a rough blue seaman's jacket and a vizored cap pulled down over his head. His unshaven-looking face and subtly altered features made him seem a half-intoxicated seaman off his ship, as he stumbled unsteadily along. Campbell clung to him in true land-shark fashion, plucking his arm and talking wheedlingly to him.

They came into a more populous section of the evil old waterfront street, and passed fried-fish shops giving off the strong smell of hot fat, and the dirty, lighted windows of a half-dozen waterfront saloons, loud with sordid argument or merriment.

Campbell led past them until they reached one built upon an abandoned, moldering pier, a ramshackle frame structure extending some distance back out on the pier. Its window was curtained, but dull red light glowed through the glass window of the door.

A few shabby men were lounging in front of the place but Campbell paid them no attention, tugging Ennis inside by the arm.

"Carm on in!" he wheedled shrilly. "The night ain't 'alf over yet--we'll 'ave just one more."

"Don't want any more," muttered Ennis drunkenly, swaying on his feet inside. "Get away, you damned old shark."

Yet he suffered himself to be led by Campbell to a table, where he slumped heavily into a chair. His stare swung vacantly.

The café of Chandra Dass was a red-lit, smoke-filled cave with cheap black curtains on the walls and windows, and other curtains cutting off the back part of the building from view. The dim room was jammed with tables crowded with patrons whose babel of tongues made an unceasing din, to which a three-string guitar somewhere added a wailing undertone. The waiters were dark-skinned and tiger-footed Malays, while the patrons seemed drawn from every nation east and west.

Ennis' glazed eyes saw dandified Chinese from Limehouse and Pennyfields, dark little Levantins from Soho, rough-looking Cockneys in shabby caps, a few crazily laughing blacks. From sly white faces, taut brown ones and impassive yellow ones came a dozen different languages. The air was thick with queer food-smells and the acrid smoke.

Campbell had selected a table near the back curtain, and now stridently ordered one of the Malay waiters to bring gin. He leaned forward with an oily smile to the drunken-looking Ennis, and spoke to him in a wheedling undertone.

"Don't look for a minute, but that's Chandra Dass over in the corner, and he's watching us," he said.

Ennis shook his clutching hand away. "Damned old shark!" he muttered again.

He turned his swaying head slowly, letting his eyes rest a moment on the man in the corner. That man was looking straight at him.

Chandra Dass was tall, dressed in spotless white from his shoes to the turban on his head. The white made his
dark, impassive, aquiline face stand out in chiseled relief. His eyes were coal-black, large, coldly searching, as they met Ennis' bleared gaze.

Ennis felt a strange chill as he met those eyes. There was something alien and unhuman, something uncannily disturbing, behind the Hindoo's stare. He turned his gaze vacantly from Chandra Dass to the black curtains at the rear, and then back to his companion.

The silent Malay waiter had brought the liquor, and Campbell pressed a glass toward his companion. "'Ere, matey, take this."

"Don't want it," muttered Ennis, pushing it away. Still in the same mutter, he added, "If Ruth's here, she's somewhere in the back there. I'm going back and find out."

"Don't try it that way, for God's sake!" said Campbell in the wheedling undertone. "Chandra Dass is still watching, and those Malays would be on you in a minute. Wait until I give the word."

"All right, then," Campbell added in a louder, injured tone. "If you don't want it, I'll drink it myself."

He tossed off the glass of gin and set the glass down on the table, looking at his drunken companion with righteous indignation.

"Think I'm tryin' to bilk yer, eh?" he added. "That's a fine way to treat a pal!"

He added in the coaxing lower tone, "All right, I'm going to try it. Be ready to move when I light my cigarette."

He fished a soiled package of Gold Flakes from his pocket and put one in his mouth. Ennis waited, every muscle taut.

The inspector, his red, oily face still injured in expression, struck a match to his cigarette. Almost at once there was a loud oath from one of the shabby loungers outside the front of the building, and the sound of angry voices and blows.

The patrons of Chandra Dass looked toward the door, and one of the Malay waiters went hastily out to quiet the fight. But it grew swiftly, sounded in a moment like a small riot. Crash--someone was pushed through the front window. The excited patrons pressed toward the front. Chandra Dass pushed through them, issuing quick orders to his servants.

For the time being the back of the café was deserted and unnoticed. Campbell sprang to his feet, and with Ennis close behind him, darted through the black curtains. They found themselves in a black corridor at the end of which a red bulb burned dimly. They could still hear the uproar.

Campbell's gun was in his hand, and the American's in his.

"We dare only stay here a few moments," the inspector cried. "Look in those rooms along the corridor here."

Ennis frantically tore open a door and peered into a dark room smelling of drugs. "Ruth!" he cried softly.

"Ruth!"

2. Death Trap

There was no answer. The light in the corridor behind him suddenly went out, plunging him into pitch-black darkness. He jumped back into the dark corridor, and as he did so, heard a sudden scuffle further along it.

"Campbell!" he exclaimed, lunging forward in the black passageway. There was no answer.

He pitched forward through stygian obscurity, his hands searching ahead of him for the inspector. In the dark something whipped smoothly around his throat, tightened there like a slender, contracting tentacle.

Ennis tore frenziedly at the thing, which he felt to be a slender silken cord, but he could not loosen it. It was choking him. He tried to cry out again to Campbell, but his throat could not emit the sounds. He thrashed, twisted helplessly, hearing a loud roaring in his ears, consciousness receding. Then, dimly as though in a dream, Ennis was aware of being lowered to the floor, of being half carried and half dragged along. The constriction around his throat was gone and rapidly his brain began to clear. He opened his eyes.

He found himself lying on the floor of a room illuminated by a great hanging brass lamp of ornate design. The walls of the room were hung with rich, grotesquely worked red silk Indian draperies. His hands and feet were bound behind him, and beside him, tied in the same manner, lay Inspector Campbell. Over them stood Chandra Dass and two of the Malay servants. The faces of the servants were tigerish in their menace, but Chandra Dass' face was one of dark, impassive scorn.

"So you misguided fools thought you could deceive me so easily as that?" he said in a strong, vibrant voice. "Why, we knew hours ago that you, Inspector Campbell, and you, Mr. Ennis, were coming here tonight. We let you get this far only because it was evident that somehow you had learned too much about us, and that it would be best to let you come here and meet your deaths."

"Chandra Dass, I've men outside," rasped Campbell. "If we don't come out, they'll come in after us."

The Hindoo's proud, dark face did not change its scorn. "They will not come in for a little while, inspector. By that time you two will be dead and we shall be gone with our captives. Yes, Mr. Ennis, your wife is one of those captives," he added to the prostrate young American. "It is too bad we cannot take you and the inspector to share her
glorious destiny, but then our accommodations of transport are limited."

"Ruth here?" Ennis' face flamed at the words, and he raised himself a little from the floor on his elbows.

"Then you'll let her go if I pay you? I'll raise any amount, I'll do anything you ask, if you'll set her free."

"No amount of money in the world could buy her from the Brotherhood of the Door," answered Chandra Dass steadily. "For she belongs now, not to us, but to They Beyond the Door. Within a few hours she and many others shall stand before the Door, and They Beyond the Door shall take them."

"What are you going to do to her?" cried Ennis. "What is this damned Door and who are They Beyond it?"

"I do not think that even if I told you, your little mind would be able to accept the mighty truth," Chandra Dass said calmly. His coal-black eyes suddenly flashed with fanatic, frenetic light. "How could your poor, earth-bound little intelligences conceive the true nature of the Door and of those who dwell beyond it? Your puny brains would be stricken senseless by mere apprehension of them, They who are mighty and crafty and dreadful beyond anything on earth."

A cold wind from the alien unknown seemed to sweep the lamplit room with the Hindoo's passionate words. Then that rapt, fanatic exaltation dropped from him as suddenly as it had come, and he spoke in his ordinary vibrant tones.

"But enough of this parley with blind worms of the dust. Bring the weights!"

The last words were addressed to the Malay servants, who sprang to a closet in the corner of the room.

Inspector Campbell said steadily, "If my men find us dead when they come in here, they'll leave none of you living."

Chandra Dass did not even listen to him, but ordered the dark servants sharply, "Attach the weights!"

The Malays had brought from the closet two fifty-pound lead balls, and now they proceeded quickly to tie these to the feet of the two men. Then one of them rolled back the brilliant red Indian rug from the rough pine floor. A square trap-door was disclosed, and at Chandra Dass' order, it was swung upward and open.

Up through the open square came the sound of waves slap-slapping against the piles of the old pier, and the heavy odors of salt water and of rotting wood invaded the room.

"The water under this pier is twenty feet deep," Chandra Dass told the two prisoners. "I regret to give you so easy a death, but there is no opportunity to take you to the fate you deserve."

Ennis, his skin crawling on his flesh, nevertheless spoke rapidly and as steadily as possible to the Hindoo.

"Listen, I don't ask you to let me go, but I'll do anything you want, let you kill me any way you want, if you'll let Ruth----"

Sheer horror cut short his words. The Malay servants had dragged Campbell's bound body to the door in the floor. They shoved him over the edge. Ennis had one glimpse of the inspector's taut, strange face falling out of sight.

Then a dull splash sounded instantly below, and then silence.

He felt hands upon himself, dragging him across the floor. He fought, crazily, hopelessly, twisting his body in its bonds, thrashing his bound limbs wildly.

[Illustration: "A shove sent his body scraping over the edge, and he plunged downward through dank darkness."]

He saw the dark, unmoved face of Chandra Dass, the brass lamp over his head, the red hangings. Then his head dangled over the opening, a shove sent his body scraping over the edge, and he plunged downward through dank darkness. With a splash he hit the icy water and went under. The heavy weight at his ankles dragged him irresistibly downward. Instinctively he held his breath as the water rushed upward around him.

His feet struck oozy bottom. His body swayed there, chained by the lead weight to the bottom. His lungs already were bursting to draw in air, slow fires seeming to creep through his breast as he held his breath.

Ennis knew that in a moment or two more he would inhale the strangling waters and die. The thought-picture of Ruth flashed across his despairing mind, wild with hopeless regret. He could no longer hold his breath, felt his muscles relaxing against his will, tasted the stinging salt water at the back of his nose.

Then it was a bursting confusion of swift sensations, the choking water in his nose and throat, the roaring in his ears. A scroll of flame unrolled slowly in his brain and a voice shouted there, "You're dying!" He felt dimly a plucking at his ankles.

Abruptly Ennis' dimming mind was aware that he now was shooting upward through the water. His head burst into open air and he choked, strangled and gasped, his tortured lungs gulping the damp, heavy air. He opened his eyes, and shook the water from them.

He was floating in the darkness at the surface of the water. Someone was floating beside him, supporting him. Ennis' chin bumped the other's shoulder, and he heard a familiar voice.

"Easy, now," said Inspector Campbell. "Wait till I cut your hands loose."
"Campbell!" Ennis choked. "How did you get loose?"

"Never mind that now," the inspector answered. "Don't make any noise, or they may hear us up there."

Ennis felt a knife-blade slashing the bonds at his wrists. Then, the inspector's arm helping him, he and his companion paddled weakly through the darkness under the rotting pier. They bumped against the slimy, moldering piles, threaded through them toward the side of the pier. The waves of the flooding tide washed them up and down as Campbell led the way.

They passed out from under the old pier into the comparative illumination of the stars. Looking back up, Ennis saw the long, black mass of the house of Chandra Dass, resting on the black pier, ruddy light glowing from window-cracks. He collided with something and found that Campbell had led toward a little floating dock where some skiffs were moored. They scrambled up onto it from the water, and lay panting for a few moments.

Campbell had something in his hand, a thin, razor-edged steel blade several inches long. Its hilt was an ordinary leather shoe-heel.

The inspector turned up one of his feet and Ennis saw that the heel was missing from that shoe. Carefully Campbell slid the steel blade beneath the shoe-sole, the heel-hilt sliding into place and seeming merely the innocent heel of the shoe.

"So that's how you got loose down in the water!" Ennis exclaimed, and the inspector nodded briefly.

"That trick's done me good service before--even with your hands tied behind your back you can get out that knife and use it. It was touch and go, though, whether I could get it out and cut myself loose in the water in time enough to free you."

Ennis gripped the inspector's shoulder. "Campbell, Ruth is in there! By heaven, we've found her and now we can get her out!"

"Right!" said the officer grimly. "We'll go around to the front and in two minutes we'll be in there with my men."

* * * * *

They climbed dripping to their feet, and hastened from the little floating dock up onto the shore, through the darkness to the cobbled street.

The shabbily disguised men of Inspector Campbell were not now in front of Chandra Dass' café, but lurking in the shadows across the street. They came running toward Campbell and Ennis.

"All right, we're going in there," Campbell exclaimed in steely tones. "Get Chandra Dass, whatever you do, but see that his prisoners are not harmed."

He snapped a word and one of the men handed pistols to him and to Ennis. Then they leaped toward the door of the Hindoo's café, from which still streamed ruddy light and the babel of many voices.

A kick from Inspector Campbell sent the door flying inward, and they burst in with guns gleaming wickedly in the ruddy light. Ennis' face was a quivering mask of desperate resolve.

The motley patrons jumped up with yells of alarm at their entrance. The hand of a Malay waiter jerked and a thrown knife thudded into the wall beside them. Ennis yelled as he saw Chandra Dass, his dark face startled, leaping back with his servants through the black curtains.

He and Campbell drove through the squealing patrons toward the back. The Malay who had thrown the knife rushed to bar the way, another dagger uplifted. Campbell's gun coughed and the Malay reeled and stumbled. The inspector and Ennis threw themselves at the black curtains--and were dashed back.

They tore aside the black folds. A dull steel door had been lowered behind them, barring the way to the back rooms. Ennis beat crazily upon it with his pistol-butt, but it remained immovable.

"No use--we can't break that down!" yelled Campbell, over the uproar. "Outside, and around to the other end of the building!"

They burst back out through that mad-house, into the dark of the street. They started along the side of the pier toward the river-end, edging forward on a narrow ledge but inches wide. As they reached the back of the building, Ennis shouted and pointed to dark figures at the end of the pier. There were two of them, lowering shapeless, wrapped forms over the end of the pier.

"There they are!" he cried. "They've got their prisoners out there with them."

Campbell's pistol leveled, but Ennis swiftly struck it up. "No, you might hit Ruth."

He and the inspector bounded forward along the pier. Fire streaked from the dark ahead and bullets thumped the rotting boards around them.

Suddenly the loud roar of an accelerated motor drowned out all other sounds. It came from the river at the pier's end.

Campbell and Ennis reached the end in time to see a long, powerful, gray motor-boat dash out into the black obscurity of the river, and roar eastward with gathering speed.
"There they go--they're getting away!" cried the agonized young American.
Inspector Campbell cupped his hands and shouted out into the darkness, "River police, ahoy! Ahoy there!"
He rasped to Ennis. "The river police were to have a cutter here tonight. We can still catch them."
With swiftly rising roar of speeded motors, a big cutter drove in from the darkness. Its searchlight snapped on,
bathing the two men on the pier in a blinding glare.
"Ahoy, there!" called a stentorian voice over the roar of the motors. "Is that Inspector Campbell?"
"Yes. Come alongside," yelled the inspector, and as the big cutter shot close to the end of the pier, its reversing
propellers churning the dark water to foam, Ennis and Campbell leaped.
They landed amid unseen men in the cockpit, and as he scrambled to his feet the inspector cried, "Follow that
boat that just went down-river. But no shooting!"

* * * * *

With thunderous drumfire from its exhausts, the cutter jerked forward so rapidly that it almost threw them from
their feet again. It shot out onto the bosom of the dark river that flowed like a black sea between the banks of
scattered lights that were London.
The moving lights of yachts and barges coming up-river could be seen gliding in that darkness. The captain of
the cutter barked an order and one of his three men, the one crouched at the searchlight, switched its powerful beam
out over the waters ahead.
In a moment it picked up a distant gray spot racing eastward on the black river, leaving a white trail of foam.
"There she is!" bawled the man at the searchlight. "She's running without lights!"
"Keep her in the searchlight," ordered the captain. "Sound our siren, and give the cutter her head."
Swaying, rocking, the cutter roared on through the darkness on the trail of that distant fleeing speck. As they
raced down Blackwall Reach, the distance between the two craft had already begun to lessen.
"We're overtaking him!" cried Campbell, clutching a stanchion and peering ahead against the rush of wind and
spray. "He must be making for whatever spot it is in England that is the center of the Brotherhood of the Door--but
he'll never reach it."
"He said that within a few hours Ruth would go with the others through the Door!" cried Ennis, clinging beside
him. "Campbell, we mustn't let them get away now!"
Pursuers and pursued flashed on down the dark, broadening river, through mazes of shipping, the cutter
hanging doggedly to the motor-boat's trail. The lights of London had dropped behind and those of Tilbury now
gleamed away on their left.
Bigger, stronger waves now tossed and pounded the cutter as it raced out of the river mouth toward the heaving
black expanse of the sea. The Kent coast was a black blur on their right; the gray motor-boat followed it closely,
grazing almost beneath the Sheerness lights.
"He's heading to round North Foreland and follow the coast south to Ramsgate or Dover," the cutter captain
cried to Campbell. "But we'll catch him before he passes Margate."
The quarry was now but a quarter-mile ahead. Steadily as they roared onward the gap narrowed, until in the
glare of the searchlight they could make out every detail of the powerful gray motor-boat plunging through the
tossing black waves.
They saw Chandra Dass' dark face turn and look back at them, and the cutter captain raised his speaking-
trumpet to his lips and shouted over the roar of motors and dash of waves.
"Stand by or we'll fire at you!"
"He won't obey," muttered Campbell between his teeth. "He knows we daren't fire with the girl in the boat."
"Yes, blast him!" exclaimed the captain. "But we'll have him in a few minutes, anyway."
The thundering chase had brought them into sight of the lights of Margate on the dark coast to their right. Now
only a few hundred feet of black water separated them from the fleeing craft.
Ennis and the inspector, gripping the stanchions of the rushing cutter, saw a white figure suddenly stand erect
in the boat ahead and wave its arms to them. The gray motor-boat slowed.
"It's Chandra Dass and he's signaling that he's giving up!" Ennis cried. "He's stopping!"
"By heavens, he is!" Campbell explained. "Drive alongside him, and we'll soon have the irons on him."
The cutter, its own motors hastily throttled down, shot through the water toward the slowing gray craft. Ennis
saw Chandra Dass standing erect, awaiting their coming, he and the two Malays beside him holding their hands in
the air. He saw a half-dozen or more white-wrapped forms in the bottom of the boat, lying motionless.
"There are their prisoners!" he cried. "Bring the boat closer so we can jump in!"
He and Campbell, their pistols out, hunched to jump as the cutter drove closer to the gray motor-boat. The sides
of the two craft bumped, the motors of both idling noisily. Then before Ennis and Campbell could jump into the
motor-boat, things happened with cinema-like rapidity. Two of the still white forms at the bottom of the motor-boat
leaped up and like suddenly uncoiled springs shot through the air into the cutter. They were two other Malays, their
dark faces flaming with fanatic light, keen daggers glinting in their upraised hands.

"'Ware a trick!" yelled Campbell. His gun barked, but the bullet missed and a dagger slit his sleeve.
The Malays, with wild, screeching yells, were laying about them with their daggers in the cutter, insanely.
"God in heaven, they're running amok!" choked the cutter captain.

His slashed neck spurted blood and his face livid, he fell. One of his men slumped coughing beside him,
another victim of the crazy daggers.

3. Up the Water-Tunnel
The man at the searchlight sprang for the maddened Malays, tugging at his pistol as he jumped. Before he got
the weapon out, a dagger slashed his jugular and he went down gurgling in death. One of the Malays meanwhile had
knocked Inspector Campbell from his feet, his knife-hand swooping down, his eyes blazing.

Ennis' gun roared and the bullet hit the Malay between the eyes. But as he slumped limply, the other fanatic
was upon Ennis from the side. Before Ennis could whirl to meet him, the attacker's knife grazed down past his cheek
like a brand of living fire. He was borne backward by the rush, felt the hot breath of the crazed Malay in his face, the
dagger-point at his throat.

Shots roared quickly, one after another, and with each shot the Malay pressing Ennis back jerked convulsively.
With the light of murderous madness fading from his eyes, he still strove to drive the dagger home into the
American's throat. But a hand jerked him back and he lay prostrate and still.

Ennis scrambled up to find Inspector Campbell, pale and determined, over him. The detective had shot the
attacker from behind.

The captain of the cutter and two of his men lay dead in the cockpit beside the two Malays. The remaining
seaman, the helmsman, held his shoulder and groaned.

Ennis whirled. The motor-boat of Chandra Dass was no longer beside the cutter, and there was no sight of it
anywhere on the black sea ahead. The Hindoo had taken advantage of the fight to make good his escape with his two
other servants and their prisoners.

"Campbell, he's gone!" cried the young American frantically. "He's got away!"
The inspector's eyes were bright with cold flame of anger. "Yes, Chandra Dass sacrificed these two Malays to
hold us up long enough for him to escape."

Campbell whirled to the helmsman. "You're not badly hurt?"
"Only a scratch, but I nearly broke my shoulder when I fell," answered the man.

"Then head on around North Foreland!" Campbell cried. "We may still be able to catch up to them."

"But Captain Wilson and the others are killed," protested the helmsman. "I've got to report----"

"You can report later," rasped the inspector. "Do as I say--I'll be responsible."

"Very well, sir," said the helmsman, and jumped back to the wheel.

In a minute the big cutter was roaring ahead over the heaving black waves, its searchlight clawing the darkness
ahead. There was no sign now of the craft of Chandra Dass ahead. They raced abreast of the lights of Margate,
started rounding the North Foreland, pounded by bigger seas.

Inspector Campbell had dragged the bodies of the dead policemen and their two slayers down into the cabin of
the cutter. He came up and crouched down with Ennis beside Sturt, the helmsman.

"I found these on the two Malays," Campbell shouted to the American, holding out two little objects in his
spray-wet hand.

Each was a flat star of gray metal in which was set a large oval, cabochon-cut jewel. The jewels flashed and
dazzled with deep color, but it was a color wholly unfamiliar and alien to their eyes.

"They're not any color we know on earth," Campbell shouted. "I believe these jewels came from somewhere
beyond the Door, and that these are badges of the Brotherhood of the Door."

Sturt, the helmsman, leaned toward the inspector. "We've rounded North Foreland, sir," he cried. "Head straight
south along the coast," Campbell ordered. "Chandra Dass must have gone this way. No doubt he thinks he's shaken
us off, and is making for the gathering-place of the Brotherhood, wherever that may be."

"The cutter isn't built for seas like this," Sturt said, shaking his head. "But I'll do it."

They were now following the coast southward, the lights of Ramsgate dropping back on their right. The waters
out here in the Channel were wilder, great black waves tossing the cutter to the sky one moment, and then dropping
it sickeningly the next. Frequently its screws raced loudly as they encountered no resistance but air.

Ennis, clinging precariously on the foredeck, turned the searchlight's stabbing white beam back and forth on the
heaving dark sea ahead, but without any sign of their quarry disclosed.

White foam of breaking waves began to show around them like bared teeth, and there was a humming in the
air.
"Storm coming up the Channel," Sturt exclaimed. "It'll do for us if it catches us out here."
"We've got to keep on," Ennis told him desperately. "We must come up with them soon!"
The coast on their right was now one of black, rocky cliffs, towering all along the shore in a jagged, frowning
wall against which the waves dashed foamy white. The cutter crept southward over the wild waters, tossed like a
chip upon the great waves. Sturt was having a hard time holding the craft out from the rocks, and had its prow
pointed obliquely away from them.
The humming in the air changed to a shrill whistling as the outrider winds of the storm came upon them. The
cutter tossed still more wildly and black masses of water smashed in upon them from the darkness, dazing and
drenching them.

Suddenly Ennis yelled, "There's the lights of a boat ahead! There, moving in toward the cliffs!"
He pointed ahead, and Campbell and the helmsman peered through the blinding spray and darkness. A pair of
low lights were moving at high speed on the waters there, straight toward the towering black cliffs. Then they
vanished suddenly from sight.
"There must be a hidden opening or harbor of some kind in the cliffs!" Inspector Campbell exclaimed. "But that
can't be Chandra Dass' boat, for it carried no lights."
"It might be others of the Brotherhood going to the meeting-place!" Ennis exclaimed. "We can follow and see."
* * * * *
Sturt thrust his head through the flying spray and shouted, "There are openings and water-caverns in plenty
along these cliffs, but there's nothing in any of them."
"We'll find out," Campbell said. "Head straight toward the cliffs in there where that boat vanished."
"If we can't find the opening we'll be smashed to flinders on those cliffs," Sturt warned.
"I'm gambling that we'll find the opening," Campbell told him. "Go ahead."
Sturt's face set stolidly and he said, "Yes, sir."
He turned the prow of the cutter toward the cliffs. Instantly they dashed forward toward the rock walls with
greatly increased speed, wild waves bearing them onward like charging stallions of the sea.

Hunched beside the helmsman, the searchlight stabbing the dark wildly as the cutter was flung forward by the
waves, Ennis and the inspector watched as the cliffs loomed closer ahead. The brilliant white beam struck across
the rushing, mountainous waves and showed only the towering barriers of rock, battered and smitten by the raving
waters that frothed white. They could hear the booming thunder of the raging ocean striking the rock.

Like a projectile hurled by a giant hand, the cutter fairly flew now toward the cliffs. They now could see even
the little streams that ran off the rough rock wall as each giant wave broke against it. They were almost upon it.
Sturt's face was deathly. "I don't see any opening!" he yelled. "And we're going to hit in a moment!"
"To your left!" screamed Inspector Campbell over the booming thunder. "There's an arched opening there."
Now Ennis saw it also, a huge arch-like opening in the cliff that had been concealed by an angle of the wall.

Sturt tried frantically to head the cutter toward it, but the wheel was useless as the great waves bore the craft along.
Ennis saw they would strike a little to the side of the opening. The cliff loomed ahead, and he closed his eyes to the
impact.

There was no impact. And as he heard a hoarse cry from Inspector Campbell, he opened his eyes.
The cutter was flying in through the mighty opening, snatched into it by powerful currents. They were whirled
irresistibly forward under the huge rock arch, which loomed forty feet over their heads. Before them stretched a
winding water-tunnel inside the cliff.

And now they were out of the wild uproar of the storming waters outside, and in an almost stupefying silence.
Smoothly, resistlessly, the current bore them on in the tunnel, whose winding turns ahead were lit up by their
searchlight.

"God, that was close!" exclaimed Inspector Campbell.
His eyes flashed. "Ennis, I believe that we have found the gathering-place of the Brotherhood. That boat we
sighted is somewhere ahead in here, and so must be Chandra Dass, and your wife."
Ennis' hand tightened on his gun-butt. "If that's so--if we can just find them-----"
"Blind action won't help if we do," said the inspector swiftly. "There must be all the number of the
Brotherhood's members assembled here, and we can't fight them all."

His eyes suddenly lit and he took the blazing jeweled stars from his pocket. "These badges! With them we can
pose as members of the Brotherhood, perhaps long enough to find your wife."
"But Chandra Dass will be there, and if he sees us-----"
Campbell shrugged. "We'll have to take that chance. It's the only course open to us."

The current of the inflowing tide was still bearing them smoothly onward through the winding water-tunnel,
around bends and angles where they scraped the rock, down long straight stretches. Sturt used the motors to guide
them around the turns. Meanwhile, Inspector Campbell and Ennis quickly ripped from the cutter its police-insignia and covered all evidences of its being a police craft.

Sturt suddenly snicked off the searchlight. "Light ahead there!" he exclaimed.
Around the next turn of the water-tunnel showed a gleam of strange, soft light.
"Careful, now!" cautioned the inspector. "Sturt, whatever we do, you stay in the cutter. And try to have it ready for a quick getaway, if we leave it."
Sturt nodded silently. The helmsman's stolid face had become a little pale, but he showed no sign of losing his courage.

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The cutter sped around the next turn of the tunnel and emerged into a huge, softly lit cavern. Sturt's eyes bulged and Campbell uttered an exclamation of amazement. For in this mighty water-cavern there floated in a great mass, scores of sea-going craft, large and small.

All of them were capable of breasting storm and wind, and some were so large they could barely have entered. There were small yachts, big motor-cruisers, sea-going launches, cutters larger than their own, and among them the gray motor-launch of Chandra Dass.

They were massed together here, those with masts having lowered them to enter, floating and rubbing sides, quite unoccupied. Around the edges of the water-cavern ran a wide rock ledge. But no living person was visible and there was no visible source for the soft, strange white light that filled the astounding place.

"These craft must have come here from all over earth!" Campbell muttered. "The Brotherhood of the Door has assembled here--we've found their gathering-place all right."
"But where are they?" exclaimed Ennis. "I don't see anyone."
"We'll soon find out," the inspector said. "Sturt, run close to the ledge there and we'll get out on it."

Sturt obeyed, and as the cutter bumped the ledge, Campbell and Ennis leaped out onto it. They looked this way and that along it, but no one was in sight. The weirdness of it was unnerving, the strangely lit, mighty cavern, the assembled boats, the utter silence.

"Follow me," Campbell said in a low voice. "They must all be somewhere near."

He and Ennis walked a few steps along the ledge, when the American stopped. "Campbell, listen!" he whispered.

Dimly there whispered to them, as though from a distance and through great walls, a swelling sound of chanting. As they listened, hearts beating rapidly, a square of the rock wall of the cavern abruptly flew open beside them, as though hinged like a door. Inside it was the mouth of a soft-lit, man-high tunnel, and in its opening stood two men. They wore over their clothing shroud-like, loose-hanging robes of gray, asbestos-like material. They wore hoods of the same gray stuff over their heads, pierced with slits at the eyes and mouth. And each wore on his breast the blazing star-badge.

Through the eye-slits the eyes of the two surveyed Campbell and Ennis as they halted, transfixed by the sudden apparition. Then one of the hooded men spoke measuredly in a hissing, Mongolian voice.

"Are you who come here of the Brotherhood of the Door?" he asked, apparently repeating a customary challenge.

Campbell answered, his flat voice tremorless. "We are of the Brotherhood."
"Why do you not wear the badge of the Brotherhood, then?"

For answer, the inspector reached in his pocket for the strange emblem and fastened it to his lapel. Ennis did the same.

"Enter, brothers," said the hissing, hooded shape, standing aside to let them pass.

As they stepped into the tunnel, the hooded guard added in slightly more natural tones, "Brothers, you two are late. You must hurry to get your protective robes, for the ceremony soon begins."

Campbell inclined his head without speaking, and he and Ennis started along the tunnel. Its light, as sourceless as that of the great water-cavern, revealed that it was chiseled from solid rock and that it wound downward.

When they were out of sight of the two hooded guards, Ennis clutched the detective's arm convulsively.
"Campbell," he said, "the ceremony begins soon! We've got to find Ruth first!"

"We'll try," the inspector answered swiftly. "Those hooded robes are apparently issued to all the members to be worn during the ceremony as protection, for some reason, and once we get robes and get them on, Chandra Dass won't be able to spot us."

"Look out!" he added an instant later. "Here's the place where the robes are issued!"

The tunnel had debouched suddenly into a wider space in which were a group of men. Several were wearing the concealing hoods and robes, and one of these hooded figures was handing out, from a large rack of the robes, three of the garments to three dark Easterners who had apparently entered in the boat just ahead of the cutter.
The three dark Orientals, their faces gleaming with strange fanaticism, quickly donned the robes and hoods and passed hurriedly down the tunnel. At once Campbell and Ennis stepped calmly up to the hooded custodians of the robes, and extended their hands.

One of the hooded figures took down two robes and handed them to them. But suddenly one of the other hooded men spoke sharply.

Instantly all the hooded men but the one who had spoken, with loud cries, threw themselves forward on Campbell and Paul Ennis.

Stupefied by the sudden dashing of their hopes, the detective and the young American saw the hooded man who had spoken slowly lift the concealing gray cowl from his face. It was the dark, coldly contemptuous face of Chandra Dass.

4. The Cavern of the Door

Chandra Dass spoke, and his strong, vibrant voice held a scorn that was almost pitying.

"It occurred to me that your enterprise might enable you to escape the daggers of my followers, and that you might trail us here," he said. "That is why I waited here to see if you came.

"Search them," he told the other hooded figures. "Take anything that looks like a weapon from them."

Ennis stared, stupefied, as the gray-hooded men obeyed. He was unable to believe entirely in the abrupt reversal of all their hopes, of their desperate attempt.

The hooded men took their pistols from Ennis and Campbell, and even the small gold knife attached to the chain of the inspector's big, old-fashioned gold watch. Then they stepped back, the pistols of two of them leveled at the hearts of the captives.

Chandra Dass had watched impassively. Ennis, staring dazedly, noted that the Hindoo wore on his breast a different jewel-emblem from the others, a double star instead of a single one.

Ennis' dazed eyes lifted from the blazing badge to the Hindoo's dark face. "Where's Ruth?" he asked a little shrilly, and then his voice cracked and he cried, "You damned fiend, where's my wife?"

"Be comforted, Mr. Ennis," came Chandra Dass' chill voice. "You are going now to join your wife, and to share her fate. You two are going with her and the other sacrifices through the Door when it opens. It is not usual," he added in cold mockery, "for our sacrificial victims to walk directly into our hands. We ordinarily have a more difficult time securing them."

He made a gesture to the two hooded men with pistols, and they ranged themselves close behind Campbell and Ennis.

"We are going to the Cavern of the Door," said the Hindoo. "Inspector Campbell, I know and respect your resourcefulness. Be warned that your slightest attempt to escape means a bullet in your back. You two will march ahead of us," he said, and added mockingly, "Remember, while you live you can cling to the shadow of hope, but if these guns speak, it ends even that shadow."

Ennis and Inspector Campbell, keeping their hands elevated, started at the Hindoo's command down the softly lit rock tunnel. Chandra Dass and the two hooded men with pistols followed.

Ennis saw that the inspector's sagging face was expressionless, and knew that behind that colorless mask, Campbell's brain was racing in an attempt to find a method of escape. For himself, the young American had almost forgotten all else in his eagerness to reach his wife. Whatever happened to Ruth, whatever mysterious horror lay in wait for her and the other victims, he would be there beside her, sharing it!

The tunnel wound a little further downward, then straightened out and ran straight for a considerable length. In this straight section of the rock passage, Ennis and Campbell for the first time perceived that the walls of the tunnel bore crowding, deeply chiseled inscriptions. They had not time to read them in passing, but Ennis saw that they were in many different languages, and that some of the characters were wholly unfamiliar.

"God, some of those inscriptions are in Egyptian hieroglyphics!" muttered Inspector Campbell.

The cool voice of Chandra Dass said, behind them, "There are pre-Egyptian inscriptions on these walls, inspector, could you but recognize them, carven in languages that perished from the face of earth before Egypt was born. Yes, back through time, back through mediaeval and Roman and Egyptian and pre-Egyptian ages, the Brotherhood of the Door has existed and has each year gathered in this place to open the Door and worship with sacrifices They Beyond it."

The fanatic note of unearthly devotion was in his voice now, and Ennis shuddered with a cold not of the tunnel. As they proceeded, they heard a muffled, hoarse booming somewhere over their heads, a dull, rhythmic thunder that echoed along the long passageway. The walls of the tunnel now were damp and glistening in the sourceless soft light, tiny trickles running down them.
"You hear the ocean over us," came Chandra Dass' voice. "The Cavern of the Door lies several hundred yards out from shore, beneath the rock floor of the sea."

They passed the dark mouths of unlit tunnels branching ahead from this illuminated one. Then over the booming of the raging sea above them, there came to Ennis' ears the distant, swelling chant they had heard in the water-cavern above. But now it was louder, nearer. At the sound of it, Chandra Dass quickened their pace.

Suddenly Inspector Campbell stumbled on the slippery rock floor and went down in a heap. Instantly Chandra Dass and his two followers recoiled from them, the two pistols trained on the detective as he scrambled up.

"Do not do that again, inspector," warned the Hindoo in a deadly voice. "All tricks are useless now."

"I couldn't help slipping on this wet floor," complained Inspector Campbell.

"The next time you make a wrong step of any kind, a bullet will smash your spine," Chandra Dass told him.

"Quick--march!"

* * * * *

The tunnel turned sharply, turned again. As they rounded the turns, Ennis saw with a sudden electric thrill of hope that Campbell held clutched in his hand, concealed by his sleeve, the heel-hilted knife from his shoe. He had drawn it when he stumbled.

Campbell edged a little closer to the young American as they were hastening onward, and whispered to him, a word at a time.

"Be--ready--to jump--them----"

"But they'll shoot, your first move------" whispered Ennis agonizedly.

Campbell did not answer. But Ennis sensed the detective's body tautening.

They came to another turn, the strong, swelling chant coming loud from ahead. They started around that turn.

Then Inspector Campbell acted. He whirled as though on a pivot, the heel-knife flashing toward the men behind them.

Shots coughed from the pistols that were pressed almost against his stomach. His body jerked as the bullets struck it, yet he remained erect, his knife stabbing with lightning rapidity.

One of the hooded men slumped down with a pierced throat, and as Campbell sprang at the other, Ennis desperately launched himself at Chandra Dass. He bore the Hindoo from his feet, the heel-hilted knife from his shoe. He had drawn it when he stumbled.

Ennis could not hold him, the Hindoo's body seeming of spring-steel. He rolled over, dashed the young American to the floor, and leaped up, his dark face and great black eyes blazing.

Then, half-way erect, he suddenly crumpled, the fire in his eyes dulling, a call for help smothered on his lips. He fell on his face, and Ennis saw that the heel-knife was stuck in his back. Inspector Campbell jerked it out, and put it back into his shoe. And now Ennis, staggering up, saw that Campbell had knifed the two hooded guards and that they lay in a dead heap.

"Campbell!" cried the American, gripping the detective's arm. "They've wounded you--I saw them shoot you."

Campbell's bruised face grinned briefly. "Nothing of the kind," he said, and tapped the soiled gray vest he wore beneath his coat. "Chandra Dass didn't know this vest is bullet-proof."

He darted an alert glance up and down the lighted tunnel. "We can't stay here or let these bodies lie here. They may be discovered at any moment."

"Listen!" said Ennis, turning.

"Campbell, they're going on with the ceremony now!" Ennis cried. "Ruth!"

The detective's desperate glance fastened on the dark mouth of one of the branching tunnels, a little ahead.

"That side tunnel--we'll pull the bodies in there!" he exclaimed.

"Quick, on with two of these robes," rasped Inspector Campbell. "They'll give us a little better chance."

Hastily Ennis jerked the gray robe and hood from Chandra Dass' dead body and donned it, while Campbell struggled into one of the others. In the robes and concealing hoods, they could not be told from any other two members of the Brotherhood, except that the badge on Ennis' breast was the double star instead of the single one.

Ennis then spun toward the main, lighted tunnel, Campbell close behind him. They recoiled suddenly into the darkness of the branching way, as they heard hurrying steps out in the lighted passage. Flattened in the darkness against the wall, they saw several of the gray-hooded members of the Brotherhood hasten past them from above, hurrying toward the gathering-place.

"The guards and robe-issuers we saw above!" Campbell said quickly when they were passed. "Come on, now."
He and Ennis slipped out into the lighted tunnel and hastened along it after the others. Boom of thundering ocean over their heads and rising and falling of the tremendous chanting ahead filled their ears as they hurried around the last turns of the tunnel. The passage widened, and ahead they saw a massive rock portal through whose opening they glimpsed an immense, lighted space.

Campbell and Ennis, two comparatively tiny gray-hooded figures, hastened through the mighty portal. Then they stopped. Ennis felt frozen with the dazing shock of it. He heard the detective whisper fiercely beside him.

"It's the Cavern, all right--the Cavern of the Door!"

* * * * *

They looked across a colossal rock chamber hollowed out beneath the floor of ocean. It was elliptical in shape, three hundred feet by its longer axis. Its black basalt sides, towering, rough-hewn walls, rose sheer and supported the rock ceiling which was the ocean floor, a hundred feet over their heads.

This mighty cathedral hewn from inside the rock of earth was lit by a soft, white, sourceless light like that in the main tunnel. Upon the floor of the cavern, in regular rows across it, stood hundreds on hundreds of human figures, all gray-robed and gray-hooded, all with their backs to Campbell and Ennis, looking across the cavern to its farther end. At that farther end was a flat dais of black basalt upon which stood five hooded men, four wearing the blazing double-star on their breasts, the fifth, a triple-star. Two of them stood beside a cubical, weird-looking gray metal mechanism from which upreared a spherical web of countless fine wires, unthinkably intricate in their network, many of them pulsing with glowing force. The sourceless light of the cavern and the tunnel seemed to pulse from that weird mechanism.

Up from that machine, if machine it was, soared the black basalt wall of that end of the cavern. But there above the gray mechanism the rough wall had been carved with a great, smooth facet, a giant, gleaming black oval face as smooth as though planed and polished. Only, at the middle of the glistening black oval face, were carven deeply four large and wholly unfamiliar characters. As Ennis and Campbell stared frozenly across the awe-inspiring place, sound swelled from the hundreds of throats. A slow, rising chant, it climbed and climbed until the basalt roof above seemed to quiver to it, crashing out with stupendous effect, a weird litany in an unknown tongue. Then it began to fall.

Ennis clutched the inspector's gray-robed arm. "Where's Ruth?" he whispered frantically. "I don't see any prisoners."

"They must be somewhere here," Campbell said swiftly. "Listen-----"

As the chant died to silence, on the dais at the farther end of the cavern the hooded man who wore the triple-jeweled star stepped forward and spoke. His deep, heavy voice rolled out and echoed across the cavern, flung back and forth from wall to rocky wall.

"Brothers of the Door," he said, "we meet again here in the Cavern of the Door this year, as for ten thousand years past our forefathers have met here to worship They Beyond the Door, and bring them the sacrifices They love."

"A hundred centuries have gone by since since first They Beyond the Door sent their wisdom through the barrier between their universe and ours, a barrier which even They could not open from their side, but which their wisdom taught our fathers how to open."

"Each year since then have we opened the Door which They taught us how to build. Each year we have brought them sacrifices. And in return They have given us of their wisdom and power. They have taught us things that lie hidden from other men, and They have given us powers that other men have not."

"Now again comes the time appointed for the opening of the Door. In their universe on the other side of it, They are waiting now to take the sacrifices which we have procured for them. The hour strikes, so let the sacrifices be brought."

As though at a signal, from a small opening at one side of the cavern a triple file of marchers entered. A file of hooded gray members of the Brotherhood flanked on either side a line of men and women who did not wear the hoods or robes. They were thirty or forty in number. These men and women were of almost all races and classes, but all of them walked stiffly, mechanically, staring ahead with unseeing, distended eyes, like living corpses.

"Drugged!" came Campbell's shaken voice. "They're all drugged, and don't know what is going on."

Ennis' eyes fastened on a small, slender girl with chestnut hair who walked at the end of the line, a girl in a straight tan dress, whose face was white, stiff, like those of the others.

"There's Ruth!" he exclaimed frantically, his cry muffled by his hood. He plunged in that direction, but Campbell held him back.

"No!" rasped the inspector. "You can't help her by simply getting yourself captured!"

"I can at least go with her!" Ennis exclaimed. "Let me go!"

Inspector Campbell's iron grip held him. "Wait, Ennis!" said the detective. "You've no chance that way. That robe of Chandra Dass' you're wearing has a double-star badge like those of the men up there on the dais. That means
that as Chandra Dass you're entitled to be up there with them. Go up there and take your place as though you were
Chandra Dass—with the hood on, they can't tell the difference. I'll slip around to that side door out of which they
brought the prisoners. It must connect with the tunnels, and it's not far from the dais. When I fire my pistol from
there, you grab your wife and try to get to that door with her. If you can do it, we'll have a chance to get up through
the tunnels and escape."

Ennis wrung the inspector's hand. Then, without further reply, he walked boldly with measured steps up the
main aisle of the cavern, through the gray ranks to the dais. He stepped up onto it, his heart racing. The chief priest,
his of the triple-star, gave him only a glance, as of annoyance at his lateness. Ennis saw Campbell's gray figure
slipping round to the side door.

The gray-hooded hundreds before him had paid no attention to either of them. Their attention was utterly,
eagerly, fixed upon the stiff-moving prisoners now being marched up onto the dais. Ennis saw Ruth pass him, her
white face an unfamiliar, staring mask.

The prisoners were ranged at the back of the dais, just beneath the great, gleaming black oval facet. The guards
stepped back from them, and they remained standing stiffly there. Ennis edged a little toward Ruth, who stood at the
end of that line of stiff figures. As he moved imperceptibly closer to her, he saw the two priests beside the gray
mechanism reaching toward knurled knobs of ebonite affixed to its side, beneath the spherical web of pulsing wires.

The chief priest, at the front of the dais, raised his hands. His voice rolled out, heavy, commanding,
reverberating again through all the cavern.

5. The Door Opens

"Where leads the Door?" rolled the chief priest's voice.

Back up to him came the reply of hundreds of voices, muffled by the hoods but loud, echoing to the roof of the
cavern in a thunderous response.

"It leads outside our world!"

The chief priest waited until the echoes died before his deep voice rolled on in the ritual.

"Who taught our forefathers to open the Door?"

Ennis, edging desperately closer and closer to the line of victims, felt the mighty response reverberate about
him.

"They Beyond the Door taught them!"

Now Ennis was apart from the other priests on the dais, within a few yards of the captives, of the small figure
of Ruth.

"To whom do we bring these sacrifices?"

As the high priest uttered the words, and before the booming answer came, a hand grasped Ennis and pulled
him back from the line of victims. He spun round to find that it was one of the other priests who had jerked him
back.

"We bring them to Those Beyond the Door!"

As the colossal response thundered, the priest who had jerked Ennis back whispered urgently to him. "You go
too close to the victims, Chandra Dass! Do you wish to be taken with them?"

The fellow had a tight grip on Ennis' arm. Desperate, tensed, Ennis heard the chief priest roll forth the last of
the ritual.

"Shall the Door be opened that They may take the sacrifices?"

Stunning, mighty, a tremendous shout that mingled in it worshipping awe and superhuman dread, the answer
crashed back.

"Let the Door be opened!"

The chief priest turned and his up-flung arms whirled in a signal. Ennis, tensing to spring toward Ruth, saw the
two priests at the gray mechanism swiftly turn the knurled black knobs. Then Ennis, like all else in the vast cavern,
was held frozen and spellbound by what followed.

The spherical web of wires pulsed up madly with shining force. And up at the center of the gleaming black oval
facet on the wall, there appeared a spark of unearthly green light. It blossomed outward, expanded, an awful
viridescent flower blooming quickly outward farther and farther. And as it expanded, Ennis saw that he could look
through that green light! He looked through into another universe, a universe lying infinitely far across alien
dimensions from our own, yet one that could be reached through this door between dimensions. It was a green
universe, flooded with an awful green light that was somehow more akin to darkness than to light, a throbbing,
baleful luminescence.

Ennis saw dimly through green-lit spaces a city in the near distance, an unholy city of emerald hue whose
unsymmetrical, twisted towers and minarets aspired into heavens of hellish viridity. The towers of that city swayed
to and fro and writhed in the air. And Ennis saw that here and there in the soft green substance of that restless city
were circles of lurid light that were like yellow eyes.

In ghastly, soul-shaking apprehension of the utterly alien, Ennis knew that the yellow circles were eyes—that that hell-spawned city of another universe was living—that its unfamiliar life was single yet multiple, that its lurid eyes looked now through the Door!

Out from the insane living metropolis glided pseudopods of its green substance, glided toward the Door. Ennis saw that in the end of each pseudopod was one of the lurid eyes. He saw those eyed pseudopods come questing through the Door, onto the dais.

The yellow eyes of light seemed fixed on the row of stiff victims, and the pseudopods glided toward them. Through the open door was beating wave on wave of unfamiliar, tingling forces that Ennis felt even through the protective robe.

The hooded multitude bent in awe as the green pseudopods glided toward the victims faster, with avid eagerness. Ennis saw them reaching for the prisoners, for Ruth, and he made a tremendous mental effort to break the spell that froze him. In that moment pistol-shots crashed across the cavern and a stream of bullets smashed the pulsing web of wires!

The Door began instantly to close. Darkness crept back around the edges of the mighty oval. As though alarmed, the lurid-eyed pseudopods of that hell-city recoiled from the victims, back through the dwindling Door. And as the Door dwindled, the light in the cavern was failing.

"Ruth!" yelled Ennis madly, and sprang forward and grasped her, his pistol leaping into his other hand.

"Ennis—quick!" shouted Campbell's voice across the cavern.

The Door dwindled away altogether; the great oval facet was completely black. The light was fast dying too.

The chief priest sprang madly toward Ennis, and as he did so, the hooded hordes of the Brotherhood recovered from their paralysis of horror and surged madly toward the dais.

"The Door is closed! Death to the blasphemers!" cried the chief priest as he plunged forward.

"Death to the blasphemers!" shrieked the crazed horde below.

Ennis' pistol roared and the chief priest went down. The light in the cavern died completely at that moment.

In the dark a torrent of bodies catapulted against Ennis, screaming vengeance. He struck out with his pistol-barrel in the mad mêlée, holding Ruth's stiff form close with his other hand. He heard the other drugged, helpless victims crushed down and trampled under foot by the surging horde of vengeance-mad members.

* * * * *

Clinging to the girl, Ennis fought like a madman through a darkness in which none could distinguish friend or foe, toward the door at the side from which Campbell had fired. He smashed down the pistol-barrel on all before him, as hands sought to grab him in the dark. He knew sickeningly that he was lost in the combat, with no sense of the direction of the door.

Then a voice roared loud across the wild din, "Ennis, this way! This way, Ennis!" yelled Inspector Campbell, again and again.

Ennis plunged through the whirl of unseen bodies in the direction of the detective's shouting voice. He smashed through, half dragging and half carrying the girl, until Campbell's voice was close ahead in the dark. He fumbled at the rock wall, found the door opening, and then Campbell's hands grasped him to pull him inside.

Hands grabbed him from behind, striving to tear Ruth from him, to jerk him back. Voices shrieked for help.

Campbell's pistol blazed in the dark and the hands released their grip. Ennis stumbled with the girl through the door into a dark tunnel. He heard Campbell slam a door shut, and heard a bar fall with a clang.

"Quick, for God's sake!" panted Campbell in the dark. "They'll follow us—we've got to get up through the tunnels to the water-cavern!"

They raced along the pitch-dark tunnel, Campbell now carrying the girl, Ennis reeling drunkenly along.

They heard a mounting roar behind them, and as they burst into the main tunnel, no longer lighted but dark like the others, they looked back and saw a flickering of light coming up the passage.

"They're after us and they've got lights!" Campbell cried. "Hurry!"

It was nightmare, this mad flight on stumbling feet up through the dark tunnels where they could hear the sea booming close overhead, and could hear the wild pursuit behind.

Their feet slipped on the damp floor and they crashed into the walls of the tunnel at the turns. The pursuit was closer behind—as they started climbing the last passages to the water-cavern, the torchlight behind showed them to their pursuers and wild yells came to their ears.

They had before them only the last ascent to the water-cavern when Ennis stumbled and went down. He swayed up a little, yelled to Campbell. "Go on—get Ruth out! I'll try to hold them back a moment!"

"No!" rasped Campbell. "There's another way—one that may mean the end for us too, but our only chance!"

The inspector thrust his hand into his pocket, snatched out his big, old-fashioned gold watch.
He tore it from its chain, turned the stem of it twice around. Then he hurled it back down the tunnel with all his force.

"Quick—out of the tunnels now or we'll die right here!" he yelled.

They lunged forward, Campbell dragging both the girl and the exhausted Ennis, and emerged a moment later into the great water-cavern. It was now lit only by the searchlight of their waiting cutter.

As they emerged into the cavern, they were thrown flat on the rock ledge by a violent movement of it under them. An awful detonation and thunderous crashing of falling rock smote their ears.

Following that first tremendous crash, giant rumbling of collapsing rock shook the water-cavern.

"To the cutter!" Campbell cried. "That watch of mine was filled with the most concentrated high-explosive known, and it's blown up the tunnels. Now it's touched off more collapses and all these caverns and passages will fall in on us at any moment!"

The awful rumbling and crashing of collapsing rock masses was deafening in their ears as they lurched toward the cutter. Great chunks of rock were falling from the cavern roof into the water.

* * * * *

Sturt, white-faced but asking no questions, had the motor of the cutter running, and helped them pull the unconscious girl aboard.

"Out of the tunnel at once!" Campbell ordered. "Full speed!"

They roared down the water-tunnel at crazy velocity, the searchlight beam stabbing ahead. The tide had reached flood and turned, increasing the speed with which they dashed through the tunnel.

Masses of rock fell with loud splashes behind them, and all around them was still the ominous grinding of mighty weights of rock. The walls of the tunnel quivered repeatedly.

Sturt suddenly reversed the propellers, but in spite of his action the cutter smashed a moment later into a solid rock wall. It was a mass of rock forming an unbroken barrier across the water-tunnel, extending beneath the surface of the water.

"We're trapped!" cried Sturt. "A mass of the rock has settled here and blocked the tunnel."

"It can't be completely blocked!" Campbell exclaimed. "See, the tide still runs out beneath it. Our one chance is to swim out under the blocking mass of rock, before the whole cliff gives way!"

"But there's no telling how far the block may extend----" Sturt cried.

Then as Campbell and Ennis stripped off their coats and shoes, he followed their example. The rumble of grinding rock around them was now continuous and nerve-shattering. Campbell helped Ennis lower Ruth's unconscious form into the water.

"Keep your hand over her nose and mouth!" cried the inspector. "Come on, now!"

Sturt went first, his face pale in the searchlight beam as he dived under the rock mass. The tidal current carried him out of sight in a moment.

Then, holding the girl between them, and with Ennis' hand covering her mouth and nostrils, the other two dived. Down through the cold waters they shot, and then the swift current was carrying them forward like a mill-race, their bodies bumping and scraping against the rock mass overhead.

Ennis' lungs began to burn, his brain to reel, as they rushed on in the waters, still holding the girl tightly. They struck solid rock, a wall across their way. The current sucked them downward, to a small opening at the bottom. They wedged in it, struggled fiercely, then tore through it. They rose on the other side of it into pure air. They were in the darkness, floating in the tunnel beyond the block, the current carrying them swiftly onward.

The walls were shaking and roaring frightfully about them as they were borne round the turns of the tunnel. Then they saw ahead of them a circle of dim light, pricked with white stars.

The current bore them out into that starlight, into the open sea. Before them in the water floated Sturt, and they swam with him out from the shaking, grinding cliffs.

The girl stirred a little in Ennis' grasp, and he saw in the starlight that her face was no longer dazed.

"Paul----" she muttered, clinging close to Ennis in the water.

"She's coming back to consciousness--the water must have revived her from that drug!" he cried.

But he was cut short by Campbell's cry. "Look! Look!" cried the inspector, pointing back at the black cliffs.

In the starlight the whole cliff was collapsing, with a prolonged, terrible roar as of grinding planets, its face breaking and buckling. The waters around them boiled furiously, whirling them this way and that.

Then the waters quieted. They found they had been flung near a sandy spit beyond the shattered cliffs, and they swam toward it.

"The whole underground honeycomb of caverns and tunnels gave way and the sea poured in!" Campbell cried. "The Door, and the Brotherhood of the Door, are ended for ever!"
Ten thousand persons in New York looked skyward at the first rumble of sound. The flash caught them that way, seared them to cinder, liquefied their eyeballs, brought their vitals boiling out of the fissures of their bodies. They were the lucky ones. The rest died slowly, their monument the rubble which had once been a city.

Of all that, Case Damon knew nothing. Rocketing up in the self-service elevator to his new cloud-reaching apartment in San Francisco, his thoughts were all on the girl who would be waiting for him.

"She loves me, she loves me not," he said to himself. They were orchid petals, not those of daisies, that drifted to the floor of the car.

"She loves me." The last one touched the floor softly, and Case laughed.

Then the doors were opening and he was racing down the hall. No more lonely nights for him, no more hours wasted thumbing through the pages of his little black book wondering which girl to call. Case Damon, rocket-jockey, space-explorer, was now a married man, married to the most beautiful girl in the world.

He scooped Karin off her feet and hugged her to him. Her lips were red velvet on his, her spun gold hair drifted around his shoulders.

"Box seats for the best show in town, honey," he gloated in her ear.

He fished around in his pockets with one hand while he held her against him with the other. They'd said you couldn't get tickets for that show. But what "they" said never stopped Case Damon, whether it was a matter of theatre tickets, or of opening a new field on a distant airless planet.

"Turn off that telecast," he said. "I'm not interested in Interplan news these days. From now on, Case Damon keeps his feet on terra firma."

And that was the way it was going to be. His interest in the uranium on Trehos alone should keep him and Karin in clover for the rest of their lives. They'd have fun, they'd have kids, they'd live like normal married people. The rest of the universe could go hang.

"If you'd stop raving, I might get a word in edgewise," Karin begged.
"The floor is yours. Also the walls, the building, the whole darned city if you want it," Case laughed.

"That telecast is ticking for you. Washington calling Case Damon. Washington calling Case Damon. Since you left an hour ago it's been calling you."

"Let it call. It's my constitutional right not to answer."

But his mood was changing to match Karin's. His lean, firm-jawed features were turning serious. Tension tightened his powerful body.

"It must be important, Case," Karin said. "They're using your code call. They wouldn't do that unless it was urgent."

He listened to the tick of the machine. Unless you knew, it sounded only like the regular ticking that told the machine was in operation. But there were little breaks here and there. It was for him.

Three long strides took him to the machine. His deft fingers flicked switches, brought a glow to the video tubes.


It was Cranly's face that filled the screen. But a Cranly Case barely recognized. The man had aged ten years in the last three days. His voice was desperate.

"Good grief, man! Where've you been? Get down here fast. But fast!"

"Listen, Cranly. I'm on my honeymoon. Or have you forgotten? Remember three days ago you were best man at a wedding? Well, the fellow at the altar was Case Damon."

That should have gotten a smile out of Cranly. But it didn't. He was even a little angry now.

"This is an order, Case! I'm giving you the honor of being the first non-official person to know about it. Supreme Emergency Mobilization and Evacuation Order. New York was blasted out of existence an hour ago!"

* * * * *

All flights grounded, the skyport in a turmoil, but that little silver card got him and Karin through. Nobody knew yet what was going on. They were readying for something big, but they didn't know what as yet.

Case hurried Karin to his own hangar, bustled her into the small speeder.
"The fishing cabin on the Columbia, honey. Stay there! And don't worry if you don't hear from me."

He didn't even wait to see her take off. Karin would be safe enough. The cabin was a hundred miles from any possible military objective. All he had to do was sit tight until things were straightened out. New York blasted! That could have been an accident. It must have been an accident. The only alternative would be war. And there were no more wars. Somebody at Supreme Council must have lost his head to issue the E.M.E. order.

Sure, that was it. Leave it to the politicos to get excited and jump out of their skins. Below him the glistening towers of Kansas City flashed and faded and were replaced minutes later by the towers of St. Louis. Chicago was batting out a "clear the sky order."

All three of those cities would have been gone by now if there were really a war, Case told himself. But Cranly was no politician. And he wasn't the kind that scared easily.

It was Cranly who met him at Washington skyport. Cranly was scared, all right. He was more frightened than he'd been the time their ship had started to tear loose from their mooring on that moon of Jupiter. His face was gray.

"I'll fill you in as we go," he said. The official car jerked into high speed and Cranly talked. "It was no accident. Get that straight. New York was hit from the outside."

"But how? By what? Under the Unified Council there's no one who'd have anything to gain by war. There isn't even anyone on Earth with the power to make war."

"That's why we wanted you here. It figures to be an enemy from another planet."

"That doesn't make sense." Case swivelled around to face Cranly. "You and I know our system as well as anyone alive. Cut out the guessing and give me the facts."

"All right. Enough people saw the thing from Jersey so that we know what happened. They say there was a rumble like thunder. Out of a clear sky, mind you. Then--get this--the sky seemed to open! There was a blast of light. That's all. New York was gone."

"Atom blast?"

"Hardly. No mushroom cloud. Accident? No, and you'll learn why I'm so sure shortly."

Case Damon had met some of these men before. A few others he recognized from their pictures. The Supreme Council. They were plenty worried. Strogoff was chewing his mustache; Vargas drummed nervously with thick fingers. Cunningham and Osborn were pacing the floor.

"Thank heaven for one thing," Osborn said. Vargas looked up at him quickly, his dark eyes slits in his swarthy face.

"For what?" Vargas asked bitterly.

"That there has been no panic. Urban evacuations are proceeding quietly."

"I still think it could have been some natural phenomenon," Case interrupted. "Even a terrific bolt of lightning."

Cranly's big shoulders lifted as a recorder was wheeled into the room. He indicated where the machine was to be set down.

"We've wasted a little time in letting you make these guesses," he told Case. "All for a reason. We want you to realize fully what sort of weapon we are up against. Now listen to this message that was beamed onto the Council's private line a few minutes after the blast."

He went to the recorder and tripped a lever. The instrument settled to a low whine that soon disappeared as the recording tape entered the converter. The voice might have been in the room with them.

"To the Supreme Council of the Planet Earth: What happened to New York was only a token of what can be done to your entire planet. Our terms are complete and unconditional surrender, to be telecast within one week. To hasten your decision, there will be other tokens at twelve-hour intervals."

"Now you know," Cranly said heavily. "Either give up or be destroyed. And that ultimatum from an enemy which has no compunction about murdering ten million people to prove its power."

A thousand questions jumped to Case Damon's mind. The horror of the thing stilled most of them. He checked over possibilities quickly.

"You say many people outside of New York saw the flash. What about skyports, observatories, the fleet base on the Moon? Did they try to get a triangulation?"

"I can see why Cranly wanted you here," Vargas said, smiling faintly. His own people had been the last to join the Unified Council. He had held out to the last, had demanded and received concessions, but he was considered one of the Council's ablest men.

"Naturally there were attempts at fixing the source of the flash," he continued. "Had those attempts met with success the fleet would already be on its way."

"I don't get it," Case said bluntly. "If they attempted triangulation, they must have got it."

"Precisely," Cranly interjected. "They got it. The source of the flash was an empty space between Mars and
Venus!"

Case was rocked back on his heels by Cranly's disclosure. This was something. An enemy who loosed his blasts out of unoccupied space, who could cut into the Council's own line at will!

"What about a fast moving asteroid? That could have been gone before it was observed."

"Not a chance," Cranly said.

And Cranly should know. So should the rest. Every one of them was in charge of a department of the Earth's services. But there was that emphasis on Mars and Venus. Strogoff interrupted that line of thought.

"I say we might as well give in." Even his thick mustache drooped in despondency. "Why have millions more killed?"

"Never!" Osborn thundered.

"I should hesitate to admit defeat," Vargas shrugged. "But how can we defend ourselves?"

Outside the chambers, in the corridor, Cranly gripped his friend's shoulder hard. "That's been going on for an hour," he said, "this one for, and that one against."

"And meanwhile the fleet can't do a thing," Cranly added.

"Exactly. Whoever blasted New York is doing it from an invisible base. That's my guess. It's an invader from space. My job will be to stay here and keep the Council from giving up. Your job is to find the base."

"Are you sure the attack was from space?"

"Positive."

"Well," Case mused, "I've found uncharted planets, even discovered a city on Mars that the experts said didn't exist. Maybe I can get beyond the thunder, through a hole in the sky."

It was night, and that was a good break. Cranly had been sure he could hold the Council together another twelve hours. Even through a second attack. Fine. For a job like this, Case thought, twelve hours of night were better than twenty of daylight.

He grabbed an aero-cab for the skyport. The pilot looked twice at the silver tab, finally nodded. Case had a few minutes with his thoughts. He'd wanted to talk to Karin, but Cranly had turned thumbs down.

"You can talk to her if and when you get back," he'd said. Fine stuff for a guy who was supposed to be enjoying a honeymoon.

"Hey!" the pilot blurted, cutting into Case's thoughts. He pointed out the window.

Case saw a red streak cut through the sky toward them. A rocket ship, and moving fast. It flashed closer. No mistake about this, it was aiming right for them. They were a couple of dead ducks.

"Look out," Case said.

His big hands flung the pilot out of his seat. Case took over the controls. A whoosh of fire swept past the cabin, missed them as Case sent the ship into a dive.

"Break out the glider chutes," he called back over his shoulder.

Luckily, the pilot didn't try to argue. He was too scared. He snapped a chute around his own shoulders, fought his way forward and got the other one around Case. Another blast cut past the cabin, then another. The rocket ship was using all guns now. They were over the Potomac, then over a wooded area.

"We'll jump at a hundred feet," Case yelled.

A streak of flame caught the cab's right edge, and Case told himself they'd be lucky to jump at all. The little craft was almost out of control. His pretended spin was turning into the real thing. Keeping his eyes glued on the plummeting altimeter, he got his left foot up and kicked out the side window. A flash melted the dial and singed his sleeve. One-fifty.

"Go!" Case barked.

The pilot's heels vanished out the window and Case banked sharply to the right and flung himself out of the seat. Hard earth of a clearing looked like it was going to smash him right in the face.

[Illustration: The chute billowed out as he hit the ground, and he pulled hard at the cords to get his footing]

Then the small chute billowed and pulled out glider wings. Case pulled cords and dropped leftward. The cab hit the ground to his right, the rocket ship on its tail for a final blast. He saw that, and then got his hands in front of him and hit the ground in a rolling fall.

The pilot was a still shape near him in the gloom. Case got out of the chute and ran to him, slid expert hands over the man, and felt the messy pulp that had once been a face. The pilot hadn't known how to fall properly.

Case took a quick look upward. His trick hadn't worked. The rocket was making a tight curve for a landing. Smart operators; they weren't taking any chances. Case cursed them, whoever they were, even as he dug his silver
identification plate out of his pocket and slid it into the dead pilot's flying jacket.

Then he ran. Maybe he'd fool them. Maybe he wouldn't. They'd probably take a few minutes to think it over. He skipped around a bush and heard voices and the pound of running feet behind him.

* * * * *

So Cranly was wrong. This wasn't strictly a space job. There was a tie-up on Earth, and the tie-up had to be on the very inside of the Supreme Council! Nobody else knew Case Damon was in on this deal. He ought to head back and warn Cranly.

No, that wasn't right. He had to trust Cranly to handle his end. Only nine hours now till the next blast, and if he took time out to reach Cranly he wouldn't ever make it. Besides, his stunt might have worked. Why tip them off he was still alive?

Brilliant headlights came up the road and Case stepped out onto the highway. The lights came on at two hundred miles an hour, caught him and made him blink. Then there was the hiss of automatic brakes.

"Hey!" a man yelled "What if those brakes hadn't worked?"

Case jerked the car door open and saw that the man was alone. A young fellow, and plenty frightened at sight of Case's torn clothes and scratched and dirty face.

"Don't take your hands off that wheel," Case said sharply. "Head for Washington skyport and keep your foot on the floor all the way."

The young fellow's hand fell away from the dash compartment. He gulped, nodded, and threw the car into gear.

He got his foot all the way down and kept it there. They took a sweeping curve at full speed.

Washington was a dot of light, then a haze, a glare. All departments working overtime tonight, Case thought. They hurtled toward the city, smack toward Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Slow down," Case said. "I don't want to be picked up."

* * * * *

The young fellow slowed down. He must be thinking he's got a desperate character next to him, Case mused. If he only knew how desperate! The skyport was less than a mile away now.

"Take the side road around to where the hangars are," Case directed.

The young fellow took the side road. They swept past the main gate, along the ten-mile fence, slid without lights now behind the row of hangars. The hangars looked like rows of cigars standing on end, the ships inside them pointing up and ready to go.

"This is where we get out," Case said. He shoved the driver out of the door and followed him. His fist came up in a short arc and cracked against a jaw-bone.

"Sorry," Case told the inert figure. "I just can't take any chances."

He dumped the unconscious man beside the road and then went back to the car. Wheeling it around so it pointed back toward the main gate, he left the motor whirring and stepped out. One hand depressed the accelerator button, the other held the motor release.

When he jumped clear, the car spurted. With lights off in the darkness the automatic brake wouldn't work. A hundred yards down the car slowed, swerved, hit a concrete abutment. Quite a crash, Case thought. That ought to turn a few heads the wrong way for a while.

He was at the high fence in a flash. His fingers searched for and found crevices. Those fingers were strong as steel. They hauled Case Damon upward and over the top. He grinned into the darkness.

Men were running from the hangars toward the site of the crash. With no incoming traffic slated, the control tower had swung all lights that way. Somewhere a crash siren sang its song.

Case dropped completely relaxed. His feet hit first as he fell forward. His hands hit next, then his head was down between his shoulders and he was rolling forward onto the back of his neck and then onto his feet again. He came up running.

* * * * *

It was going to be a slow start without rocket-boosters. But rockets made light and sound. This had to be a silent takeoff.

He knew his way around this tiny ship even in complete blackness. He had designed it himself, and it was completely functional. Case Damon had wanted no comforts; those came at the end of a journey. When there was a race for a newly discovered ore field, it was the man who got there first, not most comfortably, who won out.

A sharp click told Case that the anti-grav was on. He was looking through his forward visalloy plate straight up into a starlit sky. That wasn't too good. Small as the ship was, it still would make a dark blot.

His eyes roved, discovered a few wisps of cloud. He prayed them closer. Now!

This wasn't the first time he'd taken off in darkness, depending on spring power to lift him silently out of the hangar cradle. He'd beaten them all to Trehos only because they'd figured to catch his takeoff by the rocket flashes.
They'd figured to tail him that way, too, only by the time the competition had found out he was gone, he'd been half way there.

Cranly hadn't called him in on this without good reason. Together, he and Cranly had made many a rocket jaunt to distant and dangerous places. They'd been a good team before Cranly had sought election to the Council. Cranly was the cautious kind; but when he knew exactly where he stood, he could move fast enough.

Case slid the ship behind a cloud and felt his speed slacken. He had to risk a short burst of the jets. The odds were against anyone seeing the flash now.

At his present low speed, it would be a while before he was out of range of detection apparatus. He had time to wonder whether he ought to buzz Karin on the telecast. Better not; there was always the chance his call might be picked up.

He was sorry now that he hadn't thought to shoot cross-country to get Karin. Who knew for certain where the next blast would hit? He could have dropped her off at the moon base.

The moon was full in his vision plates now. He was close enough to tune in their local telecast to the moon colonies. The machine was ticking away and Case switched it onto the pitted satellite's local beam.

They had the news all right, and they were making preparations for an attack. The fleet base was assuring all colonists that it would furnish them all possible protection.

A fat lot of good that was going to do! Case had had enough time now to think this over, and he was beginning to see the ramifications of the thing.

Someone on Earth, someone inside the Council, wanted to take over. But with Earth supervision of military manufacture so thorough, he hadn't a chance to get started. So he must have enlisted the aid of some power from outer space.

But how? And what power? And who was the traitor inside the Council?

Case wasn't going at this blindly. That first question, for instance. There had been in the last year several strange disappearances. Two space liners from Mars to Venus had utterly vanished, without a trace. Smaller ships, too, had never reported back. They had last been heard from in that same area.

But space liners just didn't vanish. They had equipment for any emergency, were able to contact Earth at a moment's notice.

A hole in the sky, observers of the flash had said. Between Mars and Venus, Cranly had told him. It was beginning to add up. It was Case Damon's job to figure the total.

* * * * *

Now the moon was far behind. Case looked at his watch and saw that he was making real time. Another couple of hours was all he'd need.

He got out the chart Cranly had given him, set it up alongside his own navigation map, figured the time element and aimed his ship at a blankness in space. He would hit that empty space at exactly the right time.

After that? Case didn't know. But he wasn't the kind to cross bridges before he got to them.

What if Cranly was the traitor within the Council? That was hard to believe, but you could never tell what lust for power might do to a man. Cranly wasn't the type. Yet, there was a planet to be won. They said every man had his price. And Cranly was in charge of Earth's intelligence services.

The ticking of the telecast broke into his thoughts. There were breaks in the steady sounds. His code call.

Case switched on the video and got a blank. What the devil! Automatically he reached for his transmitter switch. And caught himself in the nick of time. It might be a trick to get him to reveal his position. Instead, he turned up the audio.

"Damon," a voice said. "Case Damon." It was not the same voice he had heard in the Council chambers. This was vaguely familiar, but definitely disguised.

"Better turn back, Damon," the voice said. "You almost tricked us. Don't let a small success go to your head. We cannot be defeated. Why sacrifice your life for a lost cause?"

"You know where you can go, brother," Case said aloud.

It had been bad psychology to use on a man who had never feared death anyway. Besides, if they were so omniscient, why bother to try to stop him with words?

The voice had tried to impress him with power. It had only succeeded in disclosing a weakness. They didn't know where Case Damon was, and they were worried.

* * * * *

Hours had become minutes, and the minutes were ticking away with the sweep of the hand on Case's watch. Ten minutes more to go. Using Cranly's figures and chart, he was only a thousand miles from that point in space.

He swung the ship around and cut speed, but held his hand ready at the throttle. There might not be much time to act. And the telecast was using his signal again. He didn't want to turn it up, but he wanted to hear that voice
"Damon," the voice said. "Case Damon. This is your last chance."
"Change your tune," Case snarled at the instrument.
But the voice was going on. "If your own life means nothing, perhaps you value another more. Turn on your video and you will see something of interest to you."
That got him, brought him bolt upright in his seat. The voice could mean only one thing--Karin! Somehow they had got to her!
Maybe this was a trick. Only five minutes or less now. They might be trying to distract him. But he couldn't take the chance. With fingers that were icy cold, Case Damon flicked on the video.
A wall was what he first saw. Only a wall. It was a trick. But wait. That wall was familiar, rough, unpainted. The focus was shifting to a section that showed a mounted fish. Now down the wall and across to a familiar couch. The fishing cabin!
"Karin!" Case blurted.
Then he was mouthing incoherent curses. Her figure had been flung across the screen, on the couch. She had put up a fight. Her face was scratched, her blouse ripped. There was a gag in her mouth and her hands were tied behind her.
"She dies unless you turn back!" the voice said. It meant every word.
Karin had guts. She was shaking her head, imploring him with her eyes not to turn back.
If he only had time to think! What did the rest of the world mean to Case Damon? Nothing, if it was a world without Karin. Yet, she was his own kind, this girl he had married. Were their positions reversed, it would have been Case who shook his head. Better to die than live in a world dominated by a murderous, merciless power.
And yet, she was ... Karin. Without her there was nothing. Already Case's hands were busy, throwing switches that would cut in the retarding jets, swinging the responsive craft about. He had to give in. He didn't have time to think.
"All right," he started to say.
* * * * *
His right hand reached out to turn on his transmitter. His lips framed the words again. But it was too late!
The video was distorting into a mass of wavy lines, the audio brought nothing but a jumble of sound. Interference was scrambling the telecast waves beyond hope of intelligibility. He couldn't get through. The first rumble rose to audibility and made the ship shiver.
"Too late," Case said, and was beyond cursing.
Too late to turn back now. But not too late to go ahead. Air waves were pitching the ship like a cork. He fought to control, and finally swung back on course.
Case took a last quick look at Cranly's chart, and flicked his eyes ahead to the vision plate. Only blackness yet, but the sound was growing and rising in pitch past the point where he could hear it. There was the sense of enormous strain, of the tug of unbelievably powerful and overwhelming contending forces.
And then the blackness split!
First, he could see only a pinpoint of light. It grew larger, widened, spread until it became a cleft in the void. Case flung his ship forward.
The last rumble of thunder was fading. He kept his eyes on that cleft in space, knowing what would come. Yet, when it came, he was almost blinded. A blast of light, a light so intense that it was a tangible, solid thing, roared through the cleft and hurtled Earthward.
Then the bolt was gone and the cleft was closing. The tug of forces was growing less. He had just seconds left to reach that diminishing crack in the blackness.
Like a streak of vengeance itself, Case sent his ship across the void. His lips moved in silent prayer. There were only seconds now. The crack was growing smaller, and that meant his speed was not great enough. To risk more power might blow the ship apart. But he had to get through. He must, he must....
He was through!
* * * * *
Case was through, through the cleft and beyond the thunder. He was hurtling out of blackness into a world of light. Frantically, he cut down his speed, not knowing whether he was going into open space or the side of a mountain, whether in this new world he would be going up or down.
His altimeter had switched on automatically. That was a relief. A quick glance showed the dial at 90,000 feet. The retarding jets were slowing his drop, and Case had time for a look at strange terrain below.
From his present height, it looked like rolling country. There were hills, valleys, a checkerboard of green and tan that might be cultivated ground, a river.
But most important of all, there was a city, a city of towers and pinnacles more impressive than any on Earth. Three of those towers interested Case. They stood apart, the center tower hundreds of feet higher than the two which flanked it, and all three were like fingers pointing directly at the place where the cleft had been.

Case made decisions rapidly. He had to get the ship out of the air before someone saw it. First, though, he'd have to make sure it would be air he stepped into when he got out. He had a space suit in the forward locker, but putting that on would slow him up.

An intake valve hissed away. Soon, there would be something to test. Then the hissing stopped. That was a good sign. Pressure outside the ship was almost the same as inside. There was an atmosphere.

But of what was that atmosphere composed? That was now the big question. Case set the controls and turned to the intake tank. With the turn of a petcock, there came another hiss. Case got out his cigarette lighter and flicked it into flame.

He held his breath as the flame wavered. The air in the ship was being forced away from it. But the flame did not die. Case sighed with relief. If the atmosphere supported combustion, it would support breathing.

With that important question answered, Case turned to others. Where the devil was he? He couldn't answer that, but perhaps he might discover a clue. The telecast was one way.

But the telecast had stopped ticking. Case ran the thing over the entire frequency range and got nothing. If that was a clue, it was a negative one.

He had to think it over even as he swung the ship into a long glide for a hill which looked like it might have a good deal of growth on it. Coming in low, Case saw that vegetation was sparse. But there was not another ship in these strange skies. He had to land soon.

Running his eyes over the landscape below, Case discovered tall vegetation along the base of another hill. It would have to do. He came in low over the green, and swooped in for a landing. Luckily, this ship could land on a handkerchief.

Strange trees, these which encircled the tiny clearing. They were all shades of green, taller and broader than sequoias, and yet more like ferns in the delicacy of their gigantic fronds.

Case stepped through the forward hatch into a warm, humid atmosphere that was quite comfortable. He had thought of waiting for darkness, but there was no way of knowing whether darkness ever came to this strange world which seemed to exist in nowhere.

Too bad his compass was no good here. There seemed to be no magnetic polarity. He'd have to trust to his sense of direction.

The city Case had seen was at least fifty miles away and past a couple of low-lying hills that hid it from sight. That made it a good hike, even for Case Damon's long and muscular legs.

And after he got there, if he got there? Case shrugged. Another bridge to be crossed later. He hitched at his holstered gun and started moving through the ferns.

He'd have to be careful; on closer scrutiny from a low level the land had proved to be cultivated. And that meant people about.

A humming drew his eyes skyward. Huge ships of weird design were crisscrossing the air above, obviously looking for something. Probably himself, Case thought grimly. They must have cleared the air for that blast. Now they're out in force. Still, there was a chance they'd thought him one of their own pilots who'd disobeyed. He'd come in too fast for anyone to have had a good look at his ship, he hoped.

He jumped five feet at an ear-splitting roar, whipped out his gun and had the stud under his fingertip for a quick blast. He felt foolish when the source of the roar turned out to be a purple bird that soared up out of the foliage overhead.

There were other sounds now, from small animals that scooted about on six legs and looked like fur-bearing armadillos. Then the ferns were behind him, and he was out onto a road that came over the hill.

Case got off the road in a hurry. Well tended fields lay on either side of it with spaced rows of grain that was taller than he. He could walk between the rows and be out of sight of the road.

He took a few quick steps, pushed aside a stalk of grain, and tripped. His gasp was involuntary but loud. For a second he lay still, then got to his feet. He had tripped over a root.

"Natsa!" a voice shouted. There was the thump of heavy feet behind him.

Case whirled. Just in time. A big orange-skinned man in a metallic suit came bursting out of the next row of grain. He took one look at Case, and reached for the holstered weapon at his side.

But few men could outdraw and out-shoot Case Damon. A flash of green played about his opponent's head. And then there was no head.
"Natsa to you," Case grunted at the body.

He was used to death in many forms, and it upset him not at all to handle the body. The fellow had been about his own size. At least he would now have a suit that wouldn't attract attention. He decided to keep his own gun rather than trust a strange one, but he exchanged holsters with the corpse.

"Now, if only Natsa doesn't show up, I'll make tracks out of here," Case said to himself.

But the Damon luck was wearing thin. There were shouts from along the road. More than one voice now, and all using a strange language. They must have come over from the field across the way, Case thought.

He flattened himself against the last row of stalks and took a deep breath. With the first sight of somebody coming through the row of grain, he stepped out and onto the road.

There were three of them, all big men, and none were looking his way. By the time their cries of consternation rose at sight of the body, Case was across the road and into the grain on the other side.

He ran until his heart began to hammer, and then he slowed to a fast walk. When the field curved around a bend, he breathed easier.

Along the road there was activity now, and the sound of vehicles moving fast. They were looking for him. Then the field ended, and Case was in a grove of wild fruit. Heavy brush caught at his face, but he stuck close to the road.

Voices drifted in toward him. He had to chance a look. Stretching himself full length, Case parted thick brambles and peered out. More men, all wearing the same metallic suits. This group was walking slowly, munching on the same sort of fruit that grew overhead.

Case thought it over. He didn't have a chance. His own tanned skin would stand out like a sore thumb against the orange brightness of these people.

But he was not without resources. The fruit had given him an idea. It dripped an orange liquid. If the stuff was good enough to eat, it certainly couldn't hurt to smear a little over his face and hands!

* * * * *

When he hit the road again, Case Damon was as orange as any man he'd so far seen in this new world. Maybe he wouldn't get away with it, but he had to try.

Vehicles sped by and nobody gave him a second glance. So far, so good. When he passed the group he had seen from the grove without drawing undue attention, he relaxed.

A long row of chugging trucks rumbled by, apparently loaded with produce for the city. Case looked up and a man on the back of the last one waved and shouted to him. Case waved back and the truck slowed.

He wished now that he hadn't waved. The truck had stopped, and the man in back was waiting to give him a hand up. Too late to back down now. Case took a short run and swung aboard and the truck moved on. The man who'd helped him up said something.

"Hmmm?" Case hummed. If this fellow made a suspicious move he'd have to slug him.

"Kanato?" the man said. It was a question. They came over the brow of a small hill and the man pointed to the city in the distance. He was asking if Case was bound for the city.

Case bobbed his head. He was going to play dumb. He pointed at his mouth and shook his head. His companion nodded understandingly, but wanted to get chummy anyway. Then he looked down and saw Case's holster and changed his mind.

Small cars of a strange sort were buzzing past them, going away from the city. They were filled with orange-skinned men carrying shoulder arms. Probably Kanato police on their way to investigate a very recent killing. Case gave silent thanks he had got this ride.

There was a tense moment at the gate of the city. Heavily armed men swarmed about. But produce trucks seemed to be exempt from close scrutiny.

Case's companion traded jeers and coarse laughter with the gendarmerie, and the truck rolled on down a wide avenue. The old feud between city dweller and rustic, Case guessed. He noticed that the citizens of Kanato wore clothing of high lustre and fine mesh.

They must be a scrappy people. Almost every male citizen carried a gun. His own wouldn't be noticed, then.

Before a huge building, the truck stopped. The end of the journey. Case hopped off, nodded his thanks for the lift and started walking.

* * * * *

Those three towers were at the edge of the city. Case made his way through a crowded square, turned down a fern-lined street and headed for them. From behind him a light breeze came, wafting a familiar aroma to his nostrils.

Cigarette smoke! But until now he had seen nobody smoking. Acting on impulse, Case drifted over to one side of the walk and bent as though to tie his shoe.

Men walked past. Case straightened up, got a look at the backs of their necks, and gasped. White--as white as his own skin. These were no inhabitants of this world, but men of his own kind!
There were three of them. And now, as they finished lighting up, they were talking plain Earth English with as little concern as though they were strolling down the street of any Earth city.

"By the time we get back, there ought to be news," one of the men said.

"Yeah. That last one should have brought them around."

The second voice was another surprise. It stirred memories. Somewhere, Case had heard that coarse tone before. He thought hard.

Sure, now he had it. Pete Engels, hotshot engineer cashiered out of the space fleet and turned adventurer bum. The other two men Case didn't know.

"I'd give plenty for a look at Davisson's face now," Engels was saying. Davisson was commander of the moon base, to which Engels had been attached.

"He's probably running around in circles," one of Engels' companions laughed.

"Yeah. And don't think he ain't number one on my list when we take over."

A sudden humming filled the air as they drew closer to the three towers, and Case stopped listening to the conversation for a moment. The man ahead had paused briefly, but they were now moving on.

Pedestrian traffic had fallen off, Case noticed. He and the three ahead were the only ones heading for the towers. It looked like the towers were out of bounds for most citizens. A moment later he was certain of that, when he saw the number of armed guards around the entrance gate.

But the guards didn't stop Engels and the pair with him. They jerked their heads in a brief greeting and walked right through the cordon. Case paused, let them get inside the building.

* * * * *

Here goes, he thought. Nothing like a bold front in a spot like this. He stepped forward briskly.

But the bold front wasn't working. Hostile eyes swung his way. Fingers came down to rest on triggers that could send death winging.

Case looked up, pretended to be startled. A foolish grin spread over his face. Would they believe he'd been daydreaming? They would. He was turning around and walking back the way he'd come and nobody was stopping him.

He cursed under his breath. Somehow he had to get inside that tower Pete Engels had entered. But how?

An inviting doorway yawned back along the avenue, and Case stepped inside. He looked at his watch. A few hours left until the next blast. He'd have to move fast.

Fighting his way into the tower was absolutely out of the question. He'd never get past the guards. Maybe not, but he was sure going to try. This time the grin on his face was far from foolish.

Case Damon had an idea, and he wasn't one to let time slip by before he acted on it. The idea was simple, so simple it might even work.

An orange dye had gotten him into Kanato. But it would never get him into that tower. Yet, Pete Engels and his pals had walked right in. Maybe that was one place where an Earth complexion would turn the trick.

Case got out his handkerchief, spit on it a few times and started rubbing. It was slow work, but he'd better not leave any telltale streaks.

When he came out of the doorway a few minutes later, he had left behind him a handkerchief and as much of the dye as he could remove. Lucky he'd always been an outdoor man. Whatever was left would be too faint to show against his tan skin.

His walk was not too slow, not too fast. His step was the step of a man who knew he wasn't going to have any trouble. The guards looked up and saw him coming.

Case kept his head down as though in deep thought. They could see his color, but not his face. His right hand swung close to his holster. Now a booted foot came into his line of vision.

The foot moved toward him. Case bobbed his head up and down briefly, much as Engels had done, and kept walking. The guard hesitated, stepped out of his way. He was through the cordon and going up through the entrance.

Then the yelling came from behind him. They had caught on.

* * * * *

One leap took Case through the doorway. Over his head, a pellet burst. They were shooting now. Somewhere in the building, a warning whistle cut loose.

He ran down a long corridor, saw figures pop out of a room ahead. But there was a corridor running crossways. Case skidded, made a fast turn and pounded along that one. Plenty of shouting now. It sounded like he had an army after him.

These halls were too long. He was a dead pigeon if he didn't find a place to hide soon. There were plenty of doors, but he didn't know which one to try. Then a series of the deadly pellets broke around him and made up his mind. The next door was the one.

It opened into a big room filled with electrical equipment. Case barged around something that looked like a big
transformer, and headed for a door at the other end. The door swung toward him, disclosing a mass of men.

His gun was in his hand now and spitting death. But there were too many. Their corpses blocked the doorway. He couldn't get around them.

Something heavy cracked against the base of his skull and knocked him to his knees. Half dazed, he turned and tried to fire and was buried beneath an avalanche of charging men. The gun was knocked out of his hand.

"Hey!" A startled voice came through the roaring in Case Damon's ears. "Hey! This guy is white!"

Rough hands twisted his arms behind Case and other hands hauled him to his feet. He shook his head to clear it and found himself facing Pete Engels. There was instant recognition.

"Case Damon. Well, I'll be! I told Yuna to warn those guards, but I didn't really think you'd make it."

"I didn't, did I?" Case said bitterly.

"What is it?" A voice said from behind Engels. "What is going on?"

That was in Earth English, but with a heavy accent. The voice belonged to an orange skinned man who came through as the guards parted. This was someone of importance, Case realized. His metallic suit gleamed with the lustre of spun gold, and it filled his big body as though it had been moulded to it.

"Meet Case Damon," Engels said with mock ceremony. "Damon, this is Yuna, ruler of Kanato and soon to be half ruler of the Earth."

Haughty yellow eyes flashed at Engels and stilled his tongue. Then the eyes swung back to Case and gave him a thorough scrutiny.

"So this is the one of whom we were warned," Yuna said. "I can see why the Earthlings do not surrender so quickly."

"They'll surrender all right," Engels snarled.

Case saw an opening and lashed out with his foot. The kick caught Engels low in the belly and drew a yell of pain. A fist thudded against Case's jaw.

"You rat," Case said through drawn lips. "You'd sell out your own mother."

"For the right price," Engels admitted, cheerfully. He turned to Yuna. "What'll we do with him?"

"Put him with the rest. We can dispose of them later."

As a cell it was not too bad. But there was a stench that was nauseating. Case adjusted his eyes to the gloom and looked about.

There were bunks along one wall, a few of them occupied. With the shutting of the door behind Case, men stirred. Two thin legs swung over the top of a bunk, followed by an equally thin body.

"Take your gloating elsewhere, Engels," a sharp voice said.

"The name is not Engels. It's Case Damon."

"Huh?"

There were more legs now, four pairs. Men were spluttering excitedly. Thin bodies slid out of bunks and feet came toward Case. There was one man he knew, Burnine, the pilot of the Mars-Venus liner which had vanished.

"Case Damon! I knew sooner or later someone would get through."

"Don't let your hopes run away with you," Case said. "I'm the only one, and it looks like I'll be the last."

Burnine was crying, definitely and without shame. He fought to bring himself under control.

"They're going to get away with it," he said, brokenly. Long imprisonment had broken him down.

"Maybe," Case said. "It all depends on what the chances are of getting out of this cell before the next blast. The Council hasn't given up yet."

"I know. But that humming means they're building up voltage for the next shot. It won't be long."

"How do you know?"

"Engels. He comes down here every couple of days to tell us we're chumps for not coming over to his side. Meanwhile, we've learned what goes on. In a year you can learn a lot if you keep your ears open."

"A year," Case mused. "Since those liners disappeared."

"Yeah. Engels and his pals were on the one I was piloting. They stuck guns in our ribs and took over and brought us here."

"There are a couple of things I've got to know," Case said. "First, what kind of weapon are they using? Second, where are we?"

"I can't quite answer the first. And I don't know exactly where we are, but I know how we got here. Maybe that will help."

"It seems that someone on Earth was experimenting with a new force. He discovered that he could put a crack in the curvature of space. Once he got through that crack and found Yuna, he realized that with this weapon of Yuna's he could take over the Earth. I don't know who this person is, but Engels is working for him. So are a lot of
other people."

"What about these towers?"

"They work automatically. Two of them contain the apparatus for building up energy. The blast is fired from
this one. It's all timed to fit with the machine on Earth. That's why it takes exactly twelve hours."

"Do you know where the main works are?"

"On the level below this one. But what's the difference? We'll never get out of here."

"Maybe not. But we can sure try. Are you game?"

Burnine stared at him, looked around at the other three. Their thin shoulders had lost some of the sag. A spark
had been kindled in their eyes.

"What can we lose?" Burnine said.

* * * * *

They could tell when Engels started down the corridor outside their cell. His feet made a heavy sound. There
were several guards with him.

"What do you guys want?" Engels shouted through the door.

"I've got a message for your boss," Case shouted back.

"Go ahead. I can hear you."

"It's in writing," Case called.

Engels laughed sourly. "This better not be a trick. You're a dead tomato if it is. Back away from the door."

He came through, closely followed by four guards. All of them carried guns in their hands, but when they saw
Case in the middle of the room with the men behind him, they put up the weapons and moved forward.

"Where is it?" Engels asked.

"Here." Case put his hand out and Engels reached.

Too late, Engels and the guards realized that there were only three men behind Case. From behind the open
door, Burnine's frail body hurtled and crashed into the guards, knocking them off balance.

Engels was thrown forward, his chin meeting Case's fist on its way upward. There was the crack of a neck
breaking. Case had put all his strength into that punch.

Burnine kicked at a guard's head, dropped down to one knee and came up with a gun. The other guards didn't
have a chance. Burnine peppered them with pellets that ate away flesh wherever they hit.

"Let's go," Case snapped. "You take the lead. And don't stop to argue if anyone gets in our way."

Then they were racing down the long corridor toward a heavy door at the end. A pair of guards looked up and
saw them coming and died before their hands could reach their guns. Case paused to pick up a heavy weapon that
leaned against a wall.

Another guard stuck his head out of a side room and popped it back in. Within a second, warning whistles
pierced the air. But over the whistles Case could still hear a hum.

"Not much time," Burnine panted. He was completely winded.

A stairway made a dark opening and they plunged downward through it. The sound of motors pounded up
ward them. They were in darkness for long minutes. And then the darkness gave way to light and they were racing
into a vast chamber filled with scurrying men.

Case brought up the heavy gun he was carrying, triggered it and was gratified by the streak of flame that issued
from the muzzle. But other guns were popping steadily. Behind Case, a man went down.

There was a sharpshooter behind a bank of instruments, and Case took steady aim. The sharpshooter dropped.

Meanwhile, Burnine and the other two had not been idle. They had both flanks cleared.

"This is it," Burnine gasped. "Good thing Engels liked to brag. That big panel is the converter."

He reached out a bony hand for a maze of wires, but Case stopped him.

"Wait. We don't want to do just a temporary job. And we don't want to die here either. There's a debt I've got to
settle on Earth. What are our chances of getting a ship?"

"Not much," Burnine told him. "The liner we came in is in a hangar beyond the last tower."

"Close enough," Case snapped. "You four watch the doors. They've got a tank of atomic fuel here, and if I
know my stuff I ought to be able to rig up something that will do a permanent job on this installation."

* * * * *

Only two of them came up out of the lower level--Burnine and Case Damon. Behind them, they left a pile of
corpses. Burnine was kept going by sheer strength of will, lugging a shoulder gun that weighed half as much as he.

The corridor on the main level was packed with armed men, but they cleared it by keeping a blast of fire always
before them. Men melted away into side rooms, slid down intersecting halls. But at the entrance, the big door was
closed.

"Looks like we're stuck," Burnine grunted. "We can't burn our way through that. And if we move, we'll have a
hundred men popping out again behind our backs."
"We'll try one of these rooms back here," Case said. "Always the chance of it having a window."
The first room they tried was a blank. So were the next couple. While Case kept the corridor cleared, Burnine stuck his head inside and investigated.
"This one," he said at his fourth try. "Bars on the window, but maybe we can burn them off. Looks like a council room."
They darted inside, slammed the door behind them. Outside there was the pounding of many feet. While Burnine watched the door, Case turned his fire on the barred windows.
One of the bars turned red, glowed bright and started to melt. But it was going to be a long job. And they hadn't much time now. Case snatched a quick look at his watch and saw there was but an hour left.
"Damon!" That was from the corridor. Yuna's voice. Too calm, Case thought. Yuma had a card up his sleeve.
"Better give up!"
"Make us," Case called.
"There is a telecast machine in the room," came the reply. "Turn it on."
Yuna wasn't just wasting time. He knew something. Case hesitated, looked around and sighted the machine. It was the familiar kind, but with an unfamiliar attachment. He fiddled with it, got it going.
"Damon," said a voice he remembered but could not identify. "Turn up the video."
There was a threat in the words. But Case Damon was beyond being frightened. He had nothing to lose. Only curiosity made him flick the switch.
There was that room again, with its unpainted walls. There was the couch. And there was Karin!
"We decided to save her on the chance you'd get through," said the voice. A moment later, a man walked into view.
* * * * *
It was Vargas. Somehow, Case was not surprised. It all made sense. Vargas had not wanted to join the Council. He'd held out for concessions, and those concessions had included a certain freedom from supervision of his country.
"Listen," Vargas said. "It is possible you have managed to do some harm there. If so, undo it at once."
His hand dipped into his pocket and came out with a gun. He calmly pointed it at Karin's head. With a sinking heart, Case realized that this time there would be no interference, this time Vargas would go through with it.
"All right," Case said. "You win."
He turned away from the video, and swung his gun around at Burnine. He hated to do this, but it had to be done. His eyes avoided Burnine's as he said:
"Open that door."
But before Burnine could comply with the order, there was a shout from the machine. Case whirled, startled. The room in the fishing cabin had erupted into a maelstrom of struggling men. He saw Vargas go down, smothered by blue-jacketed men of Earth Intelligence.
And then there was Cranly, his broad back bent over Karin's figure on the couch. He straightened with a length of rope in his hands. She was free. Cranly turned and his face filled the screen.
"Nice going, Case. I had a hunch Vargas was behind this, but I couldn't move until I had him dead to rights. But it was you who helped me to fight the Council for the time I needed."
"How much time have I got?" Case wanted to know.
"Not much. The Council can't take a chance on having another city blasted. Within fifteen minutes they will destroy the machine Vargas built."
"That's time enough," Case said. "Give me a look at Karin."
He got his look, and then turned to Burnine. Yuna and his men had got the news elsewhere, apparently, for they were hammering at the door. But the lock was holding.
Together now, Case and Burnine turned their guns on the bars of the window. It went faster now. One bar melted away, another, still another. There was room enough for Burnine, then room enough for Case's broad shoulders.
They dropped through and hit the ground, running. With Burnine leading the way and Case keeping him covered from behind, they raced around the edge of the tower, cut down a pair of surprised guards who weren't expecting them here, and skirted the outside tower.
Then the hangars were only yards away and they were sprinting toward them. Now there were no more men to block their way. Only time was the enemy.
And time ticked away on Case's watch as he and Burnine strapped themselves into their seats. Five minutes was all the time they could hope for. With his own ship that would have been enough, but this space liner was not built
feet of clay
By Phillip Hoskins

"The problem," said Cassidy, "would seem to be simple." He thumped his outsized knuckles against the desk. "Almost too simple."

"Why?" The other was a wearer of the black and silver uniform of Extrasol Traders; a short man, made shorter by the beer-barrel shape of his body and the extreme width of his shoulders. His head was capped with close-cropped gray curls.

"Why?" he repeated. "I've been studying it ever since it first cropped up, and I must admit that it's been beyond me."

"I must confess, Dillon," said Cassidy, "I wonder how you ever rose to the managerial ranks of Extrasol. I find it hard to imagine a personnel man stupid enough to put you in charge of even a backwater planet like this Kash. Surely somebody in the home office must know how dumb you are?"

"My dumbness is not the subject of this conversation," said Dillon, grimly. "I didn't like the idea of calling in a trouble-shooter. I liked it even less when I found out it was to be you."

Cassidy grinned. "You mean my wonderful personality hasn't made an impression on you? I'm cut to the quick."

"I put up with you for only one reason. You know aliens, far better than I could ever hope to. You're about the best in the field."

"Only about? Really, Dillon, if you knew of someone better than me, why didn't you get them?"

"All right!" He shouted the words. "You're the best! But you still haven't explained why the problem seems simple to you."

He pulled out a cigarette, and bit down savagely on the end, only to spit out the loose tobacco amidst a sputter of curses.

"The misfortunes of being feeble-minded," sighed Cassidy. "But for your sake, I'll take you by the hand, and try to lead you down the road of intelligence. But first, you better go over the situation once more."

"We are on Kash," said Dillon, visibly controlling his patience. "It's the fourth world of a G-type sun of the periphery, unnamed in the catalogues. For that reason, we have assigned it the native name. Kash is their term for..."
both the star and the planet, and roughly translates as 'home of the Gods'.

"The planet was first contacted during the great galactic expansion of 2317, when the sole native language was taped. The planet is approximately two-thirds the size of Earth, but its density is somewhat less, so the gravity is about half that of Earth. It is moonless, and so far from galactic center that scarcely a hundred stars are visible in the sky. Thus a trained observer can usually pick out the other five planets of the system with no trouble at all." He paused, and took a drink of water.

"Six months ago it was contacted by Unit 317 of Extrasol Traders...."

"Namely you," said Cassidy.

"Me. A month was spent mapping the planet and searching out native villages. I then returned to base and picked up supplies necessary for setting up an outpost. Two months ago I returned.

"And all Hell broke loose...."

Night fell quickly, and with little relief on Kash, for the stars were few and far between, and shed little light. Dillon stepped out of the office that was doing double-duty as living quarters until separate quarters could be set up, and started for the nearby well. He cursed as he realized his flashlight still lay on the desk, but the light pouring from the open door was enough to see by, and he decided against returning.

As he walked, he breathed deeply of the tangy night air, and sighed with satisfaction. This world was infinitely more pleasurable than the last he had posted, and he intended to enjoy his stay.

He let his thoughts ramble as he walked and so almost ran down the waiting alien before he saw him. The native's huge eyes gleamed softly in the spill of light from the office, and the gray down that covered his body and head, except for the face, seemed soft and alive.

"Tarsa, Bila," said the Earthman, using the native greeting.

"Tarsa, starman. May the Gods shine their eternal light on you."

"And on you," Dillon said, observing the ritual. "But what brings you here at night?"

"The night is beautiful, is it not, starman? It shines with a glory all its own. At times it would seem to outdo its brother, the day."

"Indeed," he agreed. "Your world is one of the loveliest I have yet seen, and my travels have led me over as many stars as there are waves on the sea. But surely you did not come to talk merely of the night and its beauty."

"Alas, no," sighed the native. "My task is a most unhappy one, for sorrow hangs heavy over the village. The women and children are weeping, and the men know not what to do in the face of calamity. It seems as though the Gods themselves have turned against my people." He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"What would you with me, Bila?" asked the Earthman. "Surely I cannot be of any assistance?"

"As a man from the sky, surely you have met the Gods in open battle before!" cried the alien. "And just as surely you must have defeated them, else you would not be here this night."

"I am flattered, Bila. It is true that the Gods of the universe and I are not total strangers. Exactly what is wrong?"

"It is Toll, the son of Kylano. He has fallen from a cliff, and the bones of his arm are broken and need curing."

"But isn't that a job for the priest?"

"Aye. But our priest has been on a pilgrimage these past ten days, and is to be gone another thirty or more. There is no one left with the necessary knowledge. You will come?"

"I'll come, Bila. But first I must get a bag from the office. With it I may be able to help the boy."

"Ah, you too have an herb basket like the priest's? Truly you are a friend of the Gods."

"Not quite like the priest's," said Dillon, smiling. "But it serves much the same purpose." He hurried up the path and into the shack, emerging a moment later with the first-aid bag that was standard equipment for all men isolated from the services of a doctor.

"That's where you made your first mistake," said Cassidy. "Regulation 1287-63C, paragraph 119 states 'no man shall give medical aid to alien races unless a team of certified specialists has checked out all such medicines with respect to such race and certified them safe. Penalty for breaking rule: Revocation of any licenses; restriction to home world for three years; and/or five thousand dollars fine.' You really did things up right. You should have left that bag in the safe where it belonged."

"Well, I didn't," said Dillon. "And it's too late now to talk of what I should have done. At any rate...."

"Where is the boy, Bila?" asked Dillon as he came up to the alien again.

"At my village, starman. Come." He slipped down the path and was soon swallowed by the darkness. The Earthman hurried after, afraid of being lost in the almost impenetrable night.
He had forgotten the flashlight again, and he cursed as he stumbled over an unseen obstruction.

"Bila!" he called.

"Yes, starman?" The alien appeared as if from nowhere.

"I'm afraid that I'm not as gifted as you when it comes to traveling at night without light. You had better let me hold onto your shoulder."

"Of course, starman. I am most sorry for causing you trouble."

"It's my own fault. I should have remembered the light. Let's get going again." He placed his hand on the alien's shoulder, and they started off again.

Despite his guide, he twice stumbled over obstructions, and would have fallen but for his grip on the other's shoulder. Bila waited while he steadied himself, and then started off again, keeping up a fast pace.

The village lay three miles from the post, and during the day, Dillon considered it nothing more than a brisk walk. But the blindness that came with the dark wiped out all realization of time and space, and he soon began to think that they must have passed it by, when the alien spoke.

"We are here, starman."

They rounded a bend, and a cluster of huts came into view, lit by the dim light of a few scattered lamps. The alien threaded his way through the narrow lanes between the huts, and stopped outside one of the largest in the group. He held the hangings aside, and Dillon stooped to enter.

The hut was already crowded with natives. The smoke from half a dozen of the sputtering lamps hung like a shroud over the interior, and the Earthman's eyes were soon smarting. He wondered how the natives, with their much larger eyes, could stand it.

The injured boy lay on a pallet in the center of the hut. An animal skin had been thrown over him, with the broken arm exposed. Dillon knelt by him, and felt it over carefully.

"A clean break, thank God," he said, more to himself than his audience.

The boy whimpered, and he reached for the bag, and rummaged around. Finally he pulled out an already prepared hypo, loaded with a sedative. He swabbed the boy's good arm, and pressed the needle home.

The natives moved forward when they saw the needle, and some of them began to mutter. But the boy quickly dropped off into an untroubled sleep, and they settled down.

The Earthman took hold of the broken arm, and marvelled at the frailty of it. The bones had to hold a lighter weight than those of Earthmen, and thus were correspondingly weaker. He felt that he could snap one of them with his hands.

He straightened the arm out, as gently as he could, and then pulled. The broken ends slid together with a satisfying pop, and he quickly bound them with a splint from his bag. He wrapped the bandage tight, and tied it. Then he arose, picking up his bag.

"He should be alright now," he said. "I'll stop by in the morning, when he's awake, and give him a going-over."

"His arm," said Bila. "It is .. fixed?"

"Yes. He's young, and he should heal fast. Three weeks from now he'll be out with the other children, playing games and just as active as ever."

"We thank you, starman," said Bila. "We have not the words to say just how happy we are that you have helped us."

"It's nothing," said Dillon, embarrassed by the show of gratitude. "All Earthmen would do the same."

"Ah, your magic must be even greater than that of the priests. It is most unfortunate that the village priest was away. But the Gods have smiled on us, by sending you instead."

"He'll be back soon, I hope?" said Dillon. "The priest, I mean."

"Alas, not for at least thirty days, and perhaps more. He knew not where his pilgrimage would lead him."

"But if you have more troubles like this?"

"Our misfortunes," said Bila, his face downcast. "If the Gods see fit to abandon us to the miseries of the world, what can mere men say? If some must die, than they shall surely die."

"No!" He regretted the word the moment it was out, but it was too late to recall it. The milk was spilt, and crying would be foolish at this point. "No. If you have troubles, come to me. I will do what I can, although I am not sure that it will be much."

"Ten million thanks, starman!" His eyes glistened with joy. "Our people shall be eternally grateful."

"You'd better save your thanks, until you're sure that I can help you. But right now, I'd appreciate a guide back to the post, and a lamp, so I don't fall anymore."

"Of course. It shall be done immediately." He motioned for one of the men in the hut, who came with a lamp. Bila held the hangings aside, and the two passed outside into the blackness again.

The trip back to the trader's shack passed without mishap and Dillon went to sleep quite pleased.
Ten days passed. They were days of intensified effort for Dillon, as he went about the task of setting up the rest of the post. The warehouse came first, and the living quarters. The office that had been serving double-duty reverted to its primary function.

Occasionally a few natives would drop around to gaze at the work-in-progress, but they would soon grow bored, and drift away to other amusements. He had twice been back to the village to look at the boy, but so far nothing else had come up to require his meagre medical knowledge. He was beginning to think that he might last out until the priest returned. He had been rereading the regulations covering contact, and the penalties were much too harsh for his liking. He began to worry about hiding traces of his one experiment.

The noonday sun was on the wane when he finished wrestling the last of a group of bins into the warehouse. He pulled out his kerchief, and wiped the accumulated sweat from his eyes. The summer season was full on the land, and the heat was as bad as any he had seen on Earth.

He brought his lunch out to the office porch, and sank down in the rocker that he had brought from his last post. There was a slight breeze blowing diagonally across the clearing in front of the building, and he shifted around to receive its full benefit.

The first bite was scarcely in his mouth when Bila came into sight around the bend of the path. He cursed silently, and put down his sandwich. He stood up to welcome the alien.

"Tarsa, Bila," he said. "What brings you here today?"

"Sadness again wearies our people, and we know not what to do. The Gods are indeed angered with us, and our priest is still away."

"Just what is it this time?"

"It is Kylano. He is at death's door, and the messengers of the Gods can be heard waiting to take him beyond."

Two tears broke loose and rolled down his leathery gray cheeks.

"The boy's father?" said Dillon. The alien nodded.

"But what is wrong with him?"

"Alas, we do not know. He was swimming in the lake, when a demon possessed one of the fishes, and bit him on the leg. When he came out of the water, a fever lay heavily over him, and he has become unconscious."

"And you want me to save him." It was a statement, rather than a question, and the native recognized it as such.

"If it be within your power, starman. If you do not come, he must surely die."

"All right, Bila. I'll do whatever I can." He ducked inside the office, and came out again with his bag. They set off down the path.

"Your second major mistake," said Cassidy. "You were lucky with the boy, but you should have come to your senses enough to leave the bag behind on the second call. You were just stepping out into deeper water."

"But the man was sick, and I didn't know what else to do but use the medicines. I couldn't let him die!"

"Why not?"

"Why not? I've got feelings and a conscience. That's why! I couldn't just stand by and do nothing. Especially when the sedative worked on the boy!"

"It would have been far better to let one man die than to have the aliens come to regard you as higher than their own priests."

"It's easy enough for you to say what I should have done here, but I think your own actions would have been far different if you had been in my place."

"I doubt it. I'd never have been made trouble-shooter, if I didn't have the brains to avoid a mess like that. I still think you're just plain stupid."

"My thoughts of you are better left unsaid. At any rate, when we got to the village...."

It was the same hut, and a crowd that may or may not have been present the earlier night. The numbers were the same. The only change was the lack of the overhanging pall of smoke from the lamps.

The man occupied the same pallet as the boy, and the crowd made way for Dillon as he moved to his side. It was readily apparent that he was very ill, and Dillon uttered a silent prayer that he had something in the kit to help him.

The leg wound was nasty and crusted over. He swabbed it clean, blanching when he saw its depth. Steadying himself, he bound it tightly, and sat back on his heels to ponder his next move.

The bandage would prevent any further infection, but the Earthman was afraid the damage had already been done. The fever lay heavily on the native, and he tossed and turned in his coma. The drugs in the bag were all intended for use by Terrans only, and an attempt to aid the slight alien might only result in death. Whereas if he...
were left alone to ride out the fever, he just might come through all right.

Kylano let out a muted sob, and struck out wildly, nearly hitting Dillon in the face. He cursed, and turned to his bag, selecting the most catholic antibiotic it contained. He looked up at the watching crowd, but they just stared back impassively. He cursed again, and swabbed a spot on the native's arm, and thrust home the needle.

He threw the empty hypo back in the bag, and shut it savagely. Then he stood up, and looked around for Bila.

"A drink of water, please," he said, catching the other's eye.

"Certainly, starman," he replied, handing over a gourd.

Dillon drank deeply, then wiped his mouth. He handed back the gourd and picked up his bag. As he pushed his way through the crowd, Bila followed.

"Kylano will be well now?" said the alien.

"I don't know. I just don't know. I hope so."

"Is there anything more you can do?"

"Perhaps. If I knew just what he was sick with, and I had the right drugs to treat it, I could do a lot. As it is...." He left the sentence hanging.

"If the Gods will it, he will live."

"Pray that they will it. In the meantime, you might bathe his forehead every now and then. It'll help to make him more comfortable."

"In any event, we thank you, starman. With our priest gone...."

"Why did your priest leave on such a long journey, Bila? I should think he would be more concerned with the care of his flock."

"The ways of the priesthood are beyond the comprehension of ordinary men. When the Gods speak to them, they obey, no matter how onerous the orders may be. If men must suffer during their absence, it is unfortunate. But it must be."

"Then I'd think that your priests would see to it that someone in the village would know what to do in case of emergency."

"Oh, no!" He seemed horrified at the thought. "Knowledge is for the Gods to give to the chosen ones. Common men would not be worthy of it, for it is certain that they do not have the intelligence to deal with it properly. Only the priests are wise enough to be so honored. Priests and men from the stars," he added, as an afterthought.

"Well, in any event, I hope you don't need me any more...."

* * * * *

"But they did need you," said Cassidy.

"Unfortunately, yes. Four more times in the twenty days before the return of the priest."

"What were the troubles?"

"Once, it was to aid in childbirth--my first adventure as a midwife," he said, remembering the event and his shame at his ignorance in the matter. He had had to take directions from the woman. "Once, a hunter had fallen in an animal trap, and broken both his legs," he continued. "And twice, it was for sickness."

"The same one as this Kylano?"

"I don't know. I couldn't hope to diagnose it, so I just shot them full of antibiotics, and prayed for a miracle."

"You should have prayed for brains instead. But all of your sick ones recovered?"

"Yes. I couldn't seem to do anything wrong, and it wasn't long before the natives were beginning to look on me as the personal representative of their Gods. It was embarrassing, the way they fawned over me."

"Tell me," said Cassidy. "You said you read the regs over. Why in the name of all that's holy didn't you have the sense to follow them?"

"I couldn't stand by and watch them die! I had to help them, Cassidy. Damn it, I had to!"

"Yeah, sure. But go on."

"Well, to shorten matters, the local priest finally got back from his pilgrimage, and took up his old duties. All went well for about a week, and then another alien became ill. The priest heard about it, naturally, and went to his aid. But it seems my percentage of recoveries was better than his at its very best. They wouldn't let him even near the sick one. Instead, they sent for me."

"You went?"

"Of course. I didn't know the priest was back, and what else could I do?"

"I shudder to think. What happened?"

"The native got well, and the tribe practically pitched the priest out on his ear. He went running to his superiors, and they called a council of war. They banned the natives from the post, and threatened to cut off any who were seen with me from all priestly privileges."

"The tribe made an almighty stink. They called their own council, and there was practically civil war. That's
when I called you. Or, rather, the nearest trouble-shooter."

"Ah, me. Why is it that I, Cassius Cassidy, get saddled with all of the real stinkers in the galaxy? I don't mind
shooting other people's troubles for them, but I do resent the fact that the messiest ones get dumped in my lap.
Sometimes I feel like resigning."

"Cassidy, one of these days...."

"Oh, simmer down. I said there was a simple solution to your problem, and I knew what I was talking about.
The natives have been so taken in by your ridiculously lucky flukes that they think you're the next thing to a God.
Right?"

"Right." Each looked as though the other were something unmentionable, left over from the last cleaning of the
cesspool.

"So we just...." He leaned forward and outlined his plan.

* * * * *

Five days passed, peaceably. The natives gave the post a wide margin; not even Bila showed his face. Dillon
began to think that maybe there was a chance things would go back to normal by themselves; and that Cassidy's plan
would not be necessary.

The first four days were merely a continuation of the heat. The two Earthmen sat around the office, speaking
only when it was absolutely unavoidable, and then only in snarls. Dillon sent out a rush request for air conditioning
equipment, omitted, by some mistake, from the supplies.

The fifth day was as sunny as ever, but a stiff west wind sprang up, and the temperature was bearable. Cassidy
smiled for the first time in days, and Dillon tried to be pleasant to him.

The sixth day broke with an unceasing torrent of rain, and the men returned to their surly grumbling.

"I hope the post isn't washed away," said Cassidy. "This storm begins to assume the aspects of the Biblical
flood."

"We're safe enough," said Dillon. "Only...."

"Only what?"

"Nothing. Just a hunch."

"Good or bad?"

"Bad. All bad. I've got a feeling we're due for a visit."

As if on cue, a knock came on the office door. Dillon opened it, and stood aside for the thoroughly bedraggled
alien waiting outside. Bila was a sorry caricature of himself, with his down plastered to his body. Water dripped
from him in a steady stream.

"Tarsa, starman," he said.

"Tarsa, Bila," replied Dillon. "I've been expecting you."

"Oh? Do you then have the powers of foreseeing the future, too?"

"No," he said, laughing. "It's just that it's been several days since you were last here. You were overdue for a
visit."

Cassidy cleared his throat, and Dillon turned to him.

"This is Cassidy, Bila," he said. "He is my brother from the stars, and has come to visit me for a short while."

"Tarsa, Cassidy," the native said, gravely.

"Tarsa, Bila. I have been hoping to meet a member of your people."

"Oh? Has the fame of Kash spread far through the universe then?"

"Indeed, all of the civilized worlds talk of Kash and its gentle folk. It is a common ambition to be able to come
here and see you in person. It is hoped that soon such travel will be most frequent, to the reward of both of our
peoples."

"Indeed," said Bila. "I thank you in the name of my people. Will you yourself be here long?"

"Unfortunately, no. But when I go I will take fond memories as souvenirs."

"What is so important that it brought you out in this storm, Bila?" asked Dillon, breaking into the conversation.

"Your troubles must be pressing."

"Indeed, they are. The Gods frown heavily on our village this day, and I have come once more to seek your
intercession."

"What is the matter?" asked Cassidy.

"Alas, the trouble is in my own household. My wife lies at the door to death, and I fear she is fast slipping
beyond."

"Haven't you had the priest in?" asked Dillon.

"Against your great and wondrous magic, Dillon, what is the priest? He is like a lost little boy, unable to tell
North from East, and helpless in the face of death. Only you have the power to bring her back to the world of the
living, as you did with Kylano and the others."

"I thank you for your trust," said Dillon. "I only hope it is not misplaced."

"You will come?"

"Of course. As soon as I dress for the storm, and get my bag." He turned to do so, then was struck by an afterthought. "By the way, do you mind if Cassidy comes with us? He would appreciate the chance to see your village."

"It will be an honor."

"Good. Get into your togs, Cass."

They were soon ready. Dillon grabbed up his bag, and he followed the native out into the storm. The rain blew straight toward them, and they bent forward, into the wind. The trip to the village was a fight all the way.

The village itself had become isolated; an island in the midst of a shallow lake. They waded across, to the hut that was Bila's. He held the hangings aside, and the Earthmen stepped into the stink of the alien crowd.

The omnipresent lamps were lit, and the smoke hung heavy. Both of the Earthmen were soon wishing they had protection for their smarting eyes.

The natives stopped their keening, and made room for the two men. They both moved forward, and bent over the woman. Dillon could see that she was as sick as the others, but whether or not it was the same disease, he could not say. For the eighth such time, he wished he had taken medical training as a youth, in deference to his family's wishes.

"It's hot in here," said Cassidy. Sweat beaded out on his forehead, and he wiped it away with a shaking hand.

"Small wonder," said Dillon, "with all these people here. They must up the temperature by twenty degrees." He opened his bag, and dug out a swab. After cleaning a spot on her arm, he dug out a needle, and filled it from an ampoule.

"Dillon!"

He whirled around. "Cass! What's the matter?"

"I ... don't know. Woozy. I feel woozy." He staggered, and fell forward, unconscious.

"Cass!" He bent over the man, and turned him over. Cassidy's face was white, and the sweat rolled off in rivulets. Dillon felt for a pulse, and then pulled out a stethoscope. Baring the other's chest, he listened for a beat.

"What is it, Dillon?" asked Bila. "What is wrong?"

"I don't know. He's sick." He looked worried.

"Sick?" The natives stared at each other, unbelieving.

"Yes, sick! Earthmen get sick too, you know!" He bared Cassidy's arm, and swabbed it clean. Then he pressed home the needle he had prepared for the woman.

"He will get well?" asked Bila.

"I don't know." Dillon felt for a pulse again. Disbelief washed over his face, and he sank back on his heels.

"What is it?"

"He's dead."

"Dead?" Amazement took hold of them.

"Dead." The Earthman stood up, shaking his head. "But your wife, Bila. I must attend to her."

"No." The native stepped between the man and woman, and held out his arms.

"No? Why not?"

"The Gods have frowned on you, starman. It is obvious that they are dissatisfied with you, for they took your brother."

"But just because Cassidy died doesn't mean your wife will." He stared at the lesser being, dumfounded. "But she might, if not treated."

"We shall get the priest. We cannot run the risk of offending the Gods by permitting you to touch her."

The Earthman stared from face to face, but the same message was written on all. Hopelessness took the place of question, and he turned, and stumbled from the hut, and into the storm.

"Take the man to the post," said Bila. Several of the men hurried to do his bidding. They carried Cassidy out into the night, without looking back.

* * * * *

"Simple," said Cassidy. "Just like I said." He was hunched over his coffee, his ham-like hands soaking up the warmth from the cup.

"Simple," said Dillon. "I don't get it. Just why did they stop me from treating the woman?"

"We come from the stars, which the natives associate with the home of the Gods. We don't look quite like their legends say Gods should, but they figured we must be close to them, so they credited us with omnipotent powers. The priests claimed the cures they affected were done with the grace of the almighty, and the natives figured your
"I can't figure why they wouldn't even let me touch her," said Dillon. "It doesn't make sense."

"Actually, if you had given her the shot without me on the scene, and she had died, they probably would have accepted it as the will of the Gods. The priests fail once in awhile, and they just claim that the Gods have wanted that particular person to die. But when you were unable to save me, another man from the stars, and therefore presumably a close acquaintance of the Almighty, they could come to only one conclusion: The Gods withdrew their blessings from you. After that they wouldn't have let you touch a sick pig--if they have pigs here." He drained his cup.

A roar sounded down from the sky, building up into a wail that scraped the spines of the hearers. It rose to a crescendo, and then came a jarring shock that shuddered the whole building.

"My chauffeur," said Cassidy. "Hot-rodling, as usual." He rose, and picked up his baggage.

"You know, Dillon," he said, "You're a jerk. I'll tell my grandchildren about you. You're a perfect example of what not to do." He shook his head. "A horrible example."

END
conceive. The very few Earthmen who had been to Rykeman III confirmed the rumors. It was a paradise, according
to their stories. And among other peoples of the galaxies the inhabitants of Rykeman III were acknowledged
supreme in scientific achievement. None challenged them. None even approached them in abilities.

What made the situation so frustrating to Earthmen was the additional report that the Rykes were quite
altruistically sharing their science with a considerable number of other worlds on a fee basis. Earth scientists became
intoxicated at the mere thought of studying at the feet of the exalted Rykes.

Except Dr. Sherman Hockley. From the first he had taken a dim view of the Ryke reports. Considering the
accomplishments of the National Laboratories, he could see no reason for his colleagues' half-shameful disowning
of all their own work in favor of a completely unknown culture several hundred million light years away. They were
bound to contact more advanced cultures in their explorations--and could be thankful they were as altruistic as the
Rykes!--but it was no reason to view themselves as idiot children hoping to be taught by the Rykes.

He had kept his opinions very much to himself in the past, since they were not popular with his associates, who
generally regarded his attitudes as simply old-fashioned. But now, for the first time, a Ryke ship was honoring Earth
with a visit. There was almost hysterical speculation over the possibility that Earth would be offered tutelage by the
mighty Ryke scientists. Hockley wouldn't have said he was unalterably opposed to the idea. He would have
described himself as extremely cautious. What he did oppose wholeheartedly was the enthusiasm that painted the
Rykes with pure and shining light, without a shadowy hue in the whole picture.

Since his arrival, the Ryke envoy had been closeted with members of the Congressional Science Committee.
Not a word had leaked as to his message. Shortly, however, the scientists were to be let in on the secret which might
affect their careers for better or for worse during the rest of their lives, and for many generations to come. The
meeting was going to be--

Hockley jumped to his feet as he glanced at the clock. He hurried through the door to the office of his secretary,
Miss Cardston, who looked meaningfully at him as he passed.

"I'll bet there isn't a Senator on time," he said.

In the corridor he almost collided with Dr. Lester Showalter, who was his Administrative Assistant for Basic

"We've got six minutes yet," said Hockley. He walked rapidly beside Showalter. "Is there any word on what the
envoy's got that's so important?"

"No. I've got the feeling it's something pretty big. Wheeler and Johnson of Budget are there. Somebody said it
might have something to do with the National Lab."

"I don't see the connection between that and a meeting with the Ryke," said Hockley.

Showalter stopped at the door of the conference room. "Maybe they want to sell us something. At any rate,
we're about to find out."

The conference table was surrounded by Senators of the Committee. Layered behind them were scientists
representing the cream of Hockley's organization. Senator Markham, the bulky, red-faced Chairman greeted them.
"Your seats are reserved at the head of the table," he said.

"Sorry about the time," Hockley mumbled. "Clock must be slow."

"Quite all right. We assembled just a trifle early. I want you to meet our visitor, Special Envoy from Rykeman
III, Liacan."

Markham introduced them, and the stick-thin envoy arose with an extended hand. His frail, whistling voice that
was in keeping with his bird-like character spoke in clear tones. "I am happy to know you, Dr. Hockley, Dr.
Showalter."

The two men sat down in good view of the visitor's profile. Hockley had seen the Rykes before, but had always
been repelled by their snobbish approach. Characteristically, the envoy bore roughly anthropomorphic features,
including a short feather covering on his dorsal side. He was dressed in bright clothing that left visible the streak of
feathering that descended from the bright, plumed crown and along the back of his neck. Gravity and air pressure of
Earth were about normal for him. For breathing, however, he was required to wear a small device in one narrow
nostril. This was connected to a compact tank on his shoulder.

Markham called for order and introduced the visitor. There was a round of applause. Liacan bowed with a
short, stiff gesture and let his small black eyes dart over the audience. With an adjustment of his breathing piece he
began speaking.

"It is recognized on Earth," he said, "as it is elsewhere, that my people of Rykeman III possess undisputed
intellectual leadership in the galaxies of the Council. Your research is concerned with things taught only in the
kindergartens of my world. Much that you hold to be true is in error, and your most profound discoveries are self-
evident to the children of my people."

Hockley felt a quick, painful contraction in the region of his diaphragm. So this was it!
"We are regarded with much jealousy, envy, and even hatred by some of our unlearned neighbors in space," said the Ryke. "But it has never been our desire to be selfish with our superior achievements which make us the object of these feelings. We have undertaken a program of scientific leadership in our interstellar neighborhood. This began long before you came into space and many worlds have accepted the plan we offer.

"Obviously, it is impractical to pour out all the knowledge and basic science we have accumulated. Another world would find it impossible to sort out that which was applicable to it. What we do is act as a consultation center upon which others can call at will to obtain data pertaining to any problem at hand. Thus, they are not required to sort through wholly inapplicable information to find what they need.

"For example, if you desire to improve your surface conveyances, we will supply you with data for building an optimum vehicle suitable for conditions on Earth and which is virtually indestructible. You will of course do your own manufacturing, but even there we can supply you with technology that will make the process seem miraculous by your present standards.

"Our services are offered for a fee, payable in suitable items of goods or raw materials. When you contemplate the freedom from monotonous and unending research in fields already explored by us, I am certain you will not consider our fees exorbitant. Our desire is to raise the cultural level of all peoples to the maximum of which they are capable. We know it is not possible or even desirable to bring others to our own high levels, but we do offer assistance to all cultures in accord with their ability to receive. The basic principle is that they shall ask--and whatever is asked for, with intelligence sufficient for its utilization, that shall be granted.

"I am certain I may count on your acceptance of the generous offer of my people."

The envoy sat down with a jiggling of his bright plume, and there was absolute silence in the room. Hockley pictured to himself the dusty, cobweb laboratories of Earth vacated by scientists who ran to the phone to call the Rykes for answers to every problem.

Senator Markham stood up and glanced over the audience. "There is the essence of the program which has been submitted to us," he said. "There is a vast amount of detail which is, of course, obvious to the minds of our friends on Rykeman III, but which must be the subject of much deliberation on the part of us comparatively simple minded Earthmen." He gave a self-conscious chuckle, which got no response.

Hockley felt mentally stunned. Here at last was the thing that had been hoped for by most, anxiously awaited by a few, and opposed by almost no one.

"The major difficulty," said Markham with slow dignity, "is the price. It's high, yes. In monetary terms, approximately twelve and a half billions per year. But certainly no man in his right mind would consider any reasonable figure too high for what we can expect to receive from our friends of Rykeman III.

"We of the Science Committee do not believe, however, that we could get a commitment for this sum to be added to our normal budget. Yet there is a rather obvious solution. The sum required is very close to that which is now expended on the National Standardization and Research Laboratories."

Hockley felt a sudden chill at the back of his neck.

"With the assistance of the Rykes," said Markham, "we shall have no further need of the National Laboratories. We shall require but a small staff to analyze our problems and present them to the Rykes and relay the answers for proper assimilation. Acceptance of the Ryke program provides its own automatic financing!"

He glanced about with a triumphant smile. Hockley felt as if he were looking through a mist upon something that happened a long time ago. The National Lab! Abandon the National Lab!

Around him there were small nods of agreement from his colleagues. Some pursed their lips as if doubtful--but not very much. He waited for someone to rise to his feet in a blast of protest. No one did. For a moment Hockley's own hands tensed on the back of the chair in front of him. Then he slumped back to his seat. Now was not the time.

They had to thrash it out among themselves. He had to show them the magnitude of this bribe. He had to find an argument to beat down the Congressmen's irrational hopes of paradise. He couldn't plead for the Lab on the grounds of sentiment--or that it was sometimes a good idea to work out your own problems. The Senators didn't care for the problems or concerns of the scientists. It appeared that even the scientists themselves had forgotten to care. He had to slug both groups with something very solid.

Markham was going on. "We are convinced this is a bargain which even the most obstinate of our Congressional colleagues will be quick to recognize. It would be folly to compute with building blocks when we can gain access to giant calculators. There should be no real difficulty in getting funds transferred from the National Laboratory.

"At this time we will adjourn. Liacan leaves this evening. Our acceptance of this generous offer will be conveyed to Rykeman III directly upon official sanction by the Congress. I wish to ask this same group to meet again for discussion of the details incident to this transfer of operations. Let us say at ten o'clock in the morning, gentlemen."
Hockley said goodbye to the envoy. Afterwards, he moved through the circle of Senators to his own group. In the corridor they tightened about him and followed along as if he had given an order for them to follow him. He turned and attempted a grin.

"Looks like a bull session is in order, gents. Assembly in five minutes in my office."

As he and Showalter opened the door to Miss Cardston's office and strode in, the secretary looked up with a start. "I thought you were going to meet in the conference room."

"We've met," said Hockley. "This is the aftermeeting. Send out for a couple of cases of beer." He glanced at the number surging through the doorway and fished in his billfold. "Better make it three. This ought to cover it."

With disapproval, Miss Cardston picked up the bills and turned to the phone. Almost simultaneously there was a bellow of protest and an enormous, ham-like hand gripped her slender wrist. She glanced up in momentary fright.

Dr. Forman K. Silvers was holding her wrist with one hand and clapping Hockley on the back with the other. "This is not an occasion for beer, my boy!" he said in an enormous voice. "Make that a case of champagne, Miss Cardston." He released her and drew out his own billfold.

"Get somebody to bring in a couple of dozen chairs," Hockley said.

In his own office he walked to the window behind his desk and stood facing it. The afternoon haze was coming up out of the ocean. Faintly visible were the great buildings of the National Laboratories on the other side of the city. Above the mist the sun caught the tip of the eight story tower where the massive field tunnels of the newly designed gammatron were to be installed.

Or were to have been installed.

The gammatron was expected to make possible the creation of gravitational fields up to five thousand g's. It would probably be a mere toy to the Rykes, but Hockley felt a fierce pride in its creation. Maybe that was childish. Maybe his whole feeling about the Lab was childish. Perhaps the time had come to give up childish things and take upon themselves adulthood.

But looking across the city at the concrete spire of the gammatron, he didn't believe it.

He heard the clank of metal chairs as a couple of clerks began bringing them in. Then there was the clink of glassware. He turned to see Miss Cardston stiffly indicating a spot on the library table for the glasses and the frosty bottles.

Hockley walked slowly to the table and filled one of the glasses. He raised it slowly. "It's been a short life but a merry one, gentlemen." He swallowed the contents of the glass too quickly and returned to his desk.

"You don't sound very happy about the whole thing," said Mortenson, a chemist who wore a neat, silvery mustache.

"Are you overjoyed," said Hockley, "that we are to swap the National Lab for a bottomless encyclopedia?"

"Yes, I think so," said Mortenson. "There are some minor objections, but in the end I'm certain we'll all be satisfied with what we get."

"Satisfied! Happy!" exclaimed the mathematician, Dr. Silvers. "How can you use words so prosaic and restrained in references to these great events which we shall be privileged to witness in our lifetimes?"

He had taken his stand by the library table and was now filling the glasses with the clear, bubbling champagne, sloshing it with ecstatic abandon over the table and the rug.

Hockley glanced toward him. "You don't believe, then, Dr. Silvers, that we should maintain any reserve in regard to the Rykes?"

"None whatever! The gods themselves have stepped down and offered an invitation direct to paradise. Should we question or hold back, or say we are merely happy. The proper response of a man about to enter heaven is beyond words!"

The bombast of the mathematician never failed to enliven any backroom session in which he participated. "I have no doubt," he said, "that within a fortnight we shall be in possession of a solution to the Legrandian Equations. I have sought this for forty years."

"I think it would be a mistake to support the closing of the National Laboratories," said Hockley slowly. As if a switch had been thrown, their expressions changed. There was a sudden carefulness in their stance and movements, as if they were feinting before a deadly opponent.

"I don't feel it's such a bad bargain," said a thin, bespectacled physicist named Judson. He was seated across the room from Hockley. "I'll vote to sacrifice the Lab in exchange for what the Rykes will give us."

"That's the point," said Hockley. "Exactly what are the Rykes going to give us? And we speak very glibly of sharing their science. But shall we actually be in any position to share it? What becomes of the class of scientists on Earth when the Lab is abandoned?"

Wilkins stood abruptly, his hands shoved part way into his pockets and his lower jaw extended tensely. "I don't
believe that's part of this question," he said. "It is not just we scientists who are to share the benefits of the Rykes. It is Mankind. At this time we have no right to consider mere personal concerns. We would betray our whole calling--our very humanity--if we thought for one moment of standing in the way of this development because of our personal concern over economic and professional problems. There has never been a time when a true scientist would not put aside his personal concerns for the good of all."

Hockley waited, half expecting somebody to start clapping. No one did, but there were glances of self-righteous approval in Wilkins' direction. The biologist straightened the sleeves of his coat with a smug gesture and awaited Hockley's rebuttal.

"We are Mankind," Hockley said finally. "You and I are as much a part of humanity as that bus load of punch machine clerks and store managers passing on the street outside. If we betray ourselves we have betrayed humanity.

"This is not a sudden thing. It is the end point of a trend which has gone on for a long time. It began with our first contacts beyond the galaxy, when we realized there were peoples far in advance of us in science and economy. We have been feeding on them ever since. Our own developments have shrunk in direct proportion. For a long time we've been on the verge of becoming intellectual parasites in the Universe. Acceptance of the Ryke offer will be the final step in that direction."

Instantly, almost every other man in the room was talking at once. Hockley smiled faintly until the angry voices subsided. Then Silvers cleared his throat gently. He placed his glass beside the bottles on the table with a precise motion. "I am sure," he said, "that a moment's thought will convince you that you do not mean what you have just said.

"Consider the position of pupil and teacher. One of Man's greatest failings is his predilection for assuming always the position of teacher and eschewing that of pupil. There is also the question of humility, intellectual humility. We scientists have always boasted of our readiness to set aside one so-called truth and accept another with more valid supporting evidence.

"Since our first contact with other galactic civilizations we have had the utmost need to adopt an attitude of humility. We have been fortunate in coming to a community of worlds where war and oppression are not standard rules of procedure. Among our own people we have encountered no such magnanimity as has been extended repeatedly by other worlds, climaxed now by the Ryke's magnificent offer.

"To adopt sincere intellectual humility and the attitude of the pupil is not to function as a parasite, Dr. Hockley."

"Your analogy of teacher and pupil is very faulty in expressing our relation to the Rykes," said Hockley. "Or perhaps I should say it is too hellishly accurate. Would you have us remain the eternal pupils? The closing of the National Laboratories means an irreversible change in our position. Is it worth gaining a universe of knowledge to give up your own personal free inquiry?"

"I am sure none of us considers he is giving up his personal free inquiry," said Silvers almost angrily. "We see unlimited expansion beyond anything we have imagined in our wildest dreams."

On a few faces there were frowns of uncertainty, but no one spoke up to support him. Hockley knew that until this vision of paradise wore off there were none of them on whom he could count.

He smiled broadly and stood up to ease the tension in the room. "Well, it appears you have made your decision. Of course, Congress can accept the Ryke plan whether we approve or not, but it is good to go on record one way or the other. I suppose that on the way out tonight it would be proper to check in at Personnel and file a services available notification."

And then he wished he hadn't said that. Their faces grew a little more set at his unappreciated attempt at humor.

* * * * *

Showalter remained after the others left. He sat across the desk while Hockley turned back to the window. Only the tip of the gammatron tower now caught the late afternoon sunlight.

"Maybe I'm getting old," Hockley said. "Maybe they're right and the Lab isn't worth preserving if it means the difference between getting or not getting tutelage from the Rykes."

"But you don't feel that's true," said Showalter.

"No."

"You're the one who built the Lab into what it is. It has as much worth as it ever had, and you have an obligation to keep it from being destroyed by a group of politicians who could never understand its necessity."

"I didn't build it," said Hockley. "It grew because I was able to find enough people who wanted the institution to exist. But I've been away from research so long--I never was much good at it really. Did you ever know that? I've always thought of myself as a sort of impresario of scientific productions, if I might use such a term. Maybe those closer to the actual work are right. Maybe I'm just trying to hang on to the past. It could be time for a jump to a new kind of progress."
"You don't believe any of that."

Hockley looked steadily in the direction of the Lab buildings. "I don't believe any of it. That isn't just an accumulation of buildings over there, with a name attached to them. It's the advancing terminal of all Man's history of trying to find out about himself and the Universe. It started before Neanderthal climbed into his caves a half million years ago. From then until now there's a steady path of trial and error--of learning. There's exultation and despair, success and failure. Now they want to say it was all for nothing."

"But to be pupils--to let the Rykes teach us--"

"The only trouble with Silvers' argument is that our culture has never understood that teaching, in the accepted sense, is an impossibility. There can be only learning--never teaching. The teacher has to be eliminated from the actual learning process before genuine learning can ever take place. But the Rykes offer to become the Ultimate Teacher."

"And if this is true," said Showalter slowly, "you couldn't teach it to those who disagree, could you? They'd have to learn it for themselves."

Hockley turned. For a moment he continued to stare at his assistant. Then his face broke into a narrow grin. "Of course you're right! There's only one way they'll ever learn it: go through the actual experience of what Ryke tutelage will mean."

Most of the workrooms at Information Central were empty this time of evening. Hockley selected the first one he came to and called for every scrap of data pertaining to Rykeman III. There was a fair amount of information available on the physical characteristics of the world. Hockley scribbled swift, privately intelligible notes as he scanned. The Rykes lived under a gravity one third heavier than Earth's, with a day little more than half as long, and they received only forty percent as much heat from their frail sun as Earthmen were accustomed to.

Cultural characteristics included a trading system that made the entire planet a single economic unit. And the planet had no history whatever of war. The Rykes themselves had contributed almost nothing to the central libraries of the galaxies concerning their own personal makeup and mental functions, however. What little was available came from observers not of their race.

There were indications they were a highly unemotional race, not given to any artistic expression. Hockley found this surprising. The general rule was for highly intellectual attainments to be accompanied by equally high artistic expression.

But all of this provided no data that he could relate to his present problem, no basis for argument beyond what he already had. He returned the films to their silver cans and sat staring at the neat pile of them on the desk. Then he smiled at his own obtuseness. Data on Rykeman III might be lacking, but the Ryke plan had been tried on plenty of other worlds. Data on them should not be so scarce.

He returned the cans and punched out a new request on the call panel. Twenty seconds later he was pleasantly surprised by a score of new tapes in the hopper. That was enough for a full night's work. He wished he'd brought Showalter along to help.

Then his eye caught sight of the label on the topmost can in the pile: Janisson VIII. The name rang a familiar signal somewhere deep in his mind. Then he knew--that was the home world of Waldon Thar, one of his closest friends in the year when he'd gone to school at Galactic Center for advanced study.

Thar had been one of the most brilliant researchers Hockley had ever known. In bull session debate he was instantly beyond the depth of everyone else.

Janisson VIII. Thar could tell him about the Rykes!

Hockley pushed the tape cans aside and went to the phone in the workroom. He dialed for the interstellar operator. "Government priority call to Janisson VIII," he said. "Waldon Thar. He attended Galactic Center Research Institute twenty-three years ago. He came from the city Plar, which was his home at that time. I have no other information, except that he is probably employed as a research scientist."

There was a moment's silence while the operator noted the information. "There will be some delay," she said finally. "At present the inter-galactic beams are full."

"I can use top emergency priority on this," said Hockley. "Can you clear a trunk for me on that?"

"Yes. One moment, please."

He sat by the window for half an hour, turning down the light in the workroom so that he could see the flow of traffic at the port west of the Lab buildings. Two spaceships took off and three came in while he waited. And then the phone rang.

"I'm sorry," the operator said. "Waldon Thar is reported not on Janisson VIII. He went to Rykeman III about two Earth years ago. Do you wish to attempt to locate him there?"

"By all means," said Hockley. "Same priority."

This was better than he had hoped for. Thar could really get him the information he needed on the Rykes.
Twenty minutes later the phone rang again. In the operator’s first words Hockley sensed apology and knew the attempt had failed.

"Our office has learned that Waldon Thar is at present on tour as aide to the Ryke emissary, Liacan. We can perhaps trace--"

"No!" Hockley shouted. "That won't be necessary. I know now--"

He almost laughed aloud to himself. This was an incredible piece of good luck. Waldon Thar was probably out at the space port right now--unless one of those ships taking off had been the Ryke--

He wondered why Thar had not tried to contact him. Of course, it had been a long time, but they had been very close at the center. He dialed the field control tower. "I want to know if the ship from Rykeman III has departed yet," he said.

"They were scheduled for six hours ago, but mechanical difficulty has delayed them. Present estimated take-off is 1100."

Almost two hours to go, Hockley thought. That should be time enough. "Please put me in communication with one of the aides aboard named Waldon Thar. This is Sherman Hockley of Scientific Services. Priority request."

"I'll try, sir." The tower operator manifested a sudden increase of respect. "One moment, please."

Hockley heard the buzz and switch clicks of communication circuits reaching for the ship. Then, in a moment, he heard the somewhat irritated but familiar voice of his old friend.

"Waldon Thar speaking," the voice said. "Who wishes to talk?"

"Listen, you old son of a cyclotron's maiden aunt!" said Hockley. "Who would want to talk on Sol III? Why didn't you give me a buzz when you landed? I just found out you were here."

"Sherm Hockley, of course," the voice said with distant, unperturbed tones. "This is indeed a surprise and a pleasure. To be honest, I had forgotten Earth was your home planet."

"I'll try to think of something to jog your memory next time. How about getting together?"

"Well--I don't have very long," said Thar hesitantly. "If you could come over for a few minutes--"

Hockley had the jolting feeling that Waldon Thar would just as soon pass up the opportunity for their meeting. Some of the enthusiasm went out of his voice. "There's a good all-night inter-planetary eatery and bar on the field there. I'll be along in fifteen minutes."

"Fine," said Thar, "but please try not to be late."

On the way to the field, Hockley wondered about the change that had apparently taken place in Thar. Of course, he had changed, too--perhaps for much the worse. But Thar sounded like a stuffed shirt now, and that is the last thing Hockley would have expected. In school, Thar had been the most irreverent of the whole class of irreverents, denouncing in ecstasy the established and unproven lore, riding the professors of unsubstantiated hypotheses. Now--well, he didn't sound like the Thar Hockley knew.

He took a table and sat down just as Thar entered the dining room. The latter's broad smile momentarily removed Hockley's doubts. The smile hadn't changed. And there was the same expression of devilish disregard for the established order. The same warm friendliness. It baffled Hockley to understand how Thar could have failed to remember Earth was his home.

Thar mentioned it as he came up and took Hockley's hand. "I'm terribly sorry," he said. "It was stupid to forget that Earth meant Sherman Hockley."

"I know how it is. I should have written. I guess I'm the one who owes a letter."

"No, I think not," said Thar.

They sat on opposite sides of a small table near a window and ordered drinks. On the field they could see the vast, shadowy outline of the Ryke vessel.

Thar was of a race genetically close to the Rykes. He lacked the feathery covering, but this was replaced by a layer of thin scales, which had a tendency to stand on edge when he was excited. He also wore a breathing piece, and carried the small shoulder tank with a faint air of superiority.

Hockley watched him with a growing sense of loss. The first impression had been more nearly correct. Thar hadn't wanted to meet him.

"It's been a long time," said Hockley lamely. "I guess there isn't much we did back there that means anything now."

"You shouldn't say that," said Thar as if recognizing he had been too remote. "Every hour of our acquaintance meant a great deal to me. I'll never forgive myself for forgetting--but tell me how you learned I was aboard the Ryke ship."

"The Rykes have made us an offer. I wanted to find out the effects on worlds that had accepted. I learned Janisson VIII was one, so I started looking."

"I'm so very glad you did, Sherm. You want me to confirm, of course, the advisability of accepting the offer
Liacan has made.

"Confirm--or deny it," said Hockley.

Thar spread his clawlike hands. "Deny it? The most glorious opportunity a planet could possibly have?"

Something in Thar's voice gave Hockley a sudden chill. "How has it worked on your own world?"

"Janisson VIII has turned from a slum to a world of mansions. Our economic problems have been solved. Health and long life are routine. There is nothing we want that we cannot have for the asking."

"But are you satisfied with it? Is there nothing which you had to give up that you would like returned?"

Waldon Thar threw back his head and laughed in high pitched tones. "I might have known that would be the question you would ask! Forgive me, friend Sherman, but I had almost forgotten how unventuresome you are.

"Your question is ridiculous. Why should we wish to go back to our economic inequalities, poverty and distress, our ignorant plodding research in science? You can answer your own question."

They were silent for a moment. Hockley thought his friend would have gladly terminated their visit right there and returned to his ship. To forestall this, he leaned across the table and asked, "Your science--what has become of that?"

"Our science! We never had any. We were ignorant children playing with mud and rocks. We knew nothing. We had nothing. Until the Rykes offered to educate us."

"Surely you don't believe that," said Hockley quietly. "The problem you worked on at the Institute--gravity at micro-cosmic levels. That was not a childish thing."

Thar laughed shortly and bitterly. "What disillusionment you have coming, friend Sherman! If you only knew how truly childish it was. Wait until you learn from the Rykes the true conception of gravity, its nature and the part it plays in the structure of matter."

Hockley felt a sick tightening within him. This was not the Waldon Thar, the wild demon who thrust aside all authority and rumor in his own headlong search for knowledge. It couldn't be Thar who was sitting passively by, being told what the nature of the Universe is.

"Your scientists--?" Hockley persisted. "What has become of all your researchers?"

"The answer is the same," said Thar. "We had no science. We had no scientists. Those who once went by that name have become for the first time honest students knowing the pleasure of studying at the feet of masters."

"You have set up laboratories in which your researches are supervised by the Rykes?"

"Laboratories? We have no need of laboratories. We have workshops and study rooms where we try to absorb that which the Rykes discovered long ago. Maybe at some future time we will come to a point where we can reach into the frontier of knowledge with our own minds, but this does not seem likely now."

"So you have given up all original research of your own?"

"How could we do otherwise? The Rykes have all the answers to any question we have intelligence enough to ask. Follow them, Sherman. It is no disgrace to be led by such as the Ryke teachers."

"Don't you ever long," said Hockley, "to take just one short step on your own two feet?"

"Why crawl when you can go by trans-light carrier?"

Thar sipped the last of his drink and glanced toward the wall clock. "I must go. I can understand the direction of your questions and your thinking. You hesitate because you might lose the chance to play in the mud and count the pretty pebbles in the sand. Put away childish things. You will never miss them!"

They shook hands, and a moment later Hockley said goodbye to Thar at the entrance to the field. "I know Earth will accept," said Thar. "And you and I should not have lost contact--but we'll make up for it."

Watching him move toward the dark hulk of the ship, Hockley wondered if Thar actually believed that. In less than an hour they had exhausted all they had to say after twenty years. Hockley had the information he needed about the Ryke plan, but he wished he could have kept his old memories of his student friend. Thar was drunk on the heady stuff being peddled by the Rykes, and if what he said were true, it was strong enough to intoxicate a whole planet.

His blood grew cold at the thought. This was more than a fight for the National Laboratories. It was a struggle to keep all Mankind from becoming what Thar had become.

If he could have put Thar on exhibition in the meeting tomorrow, and shown what he was once like, he would have made his point. But Thar, before and after, was not available for exhibit. He had to find another way to show his colleagues and the Senators what the Rykes would make of them.

He glanced at his watch. They wouldn't like being wakened at this hour, but neither would the scientists put up much resistance to his request for support in Markham's meeting. He went back to the bar and called each of his colleagues who had been in the meeting that day.

* * * * *

Hockley was called first when the assembly convened at ten that morning. He rose slowly from his seat near
Markham and glanced over the somewhat puzzled expressions of the scientists.

"I don't know that I can speak for the entire group of scientists present," he said. "We met yesterday and found some differences of opinion concerning this offer. While it is true there is overwhelming sentiment supporting it, certain questions remain, which we feel require additional data in order to be answered properly.

"While we recognize that official acceptance can be given to the Rykes with no approval whatever from the scientists, it seems only fair that we should have every opportunity to make what we consider a proper study and to express our opinions in the matter.

"To the non-scientist--and perhaps to many of my colleagues--it may seem inconceivable that there could be any questions whatever. But we wonder about the position of students of future generations, we wonder about the details of administration of the program, we wonder about the total effects of the program upon our society as a whole. We wish to ask permission to make further study of the matter in an effort to answer these questions and many others. We request permission to go as a committee to Rykeman III and make a first hand study of what the Rykes propose to do, how they will teach us, and how they will dispense the information they so generously offer.

"I ask that you consider this most seriously, and make an official request of the Rykes to grant us such opportunity for study, that you provide the necessary appropriations for the trip. I consider it most urgent that this be done at once."

There was a stir of concern and disapproval from Congressional members as Hockley sat down. Senators leaned to speak in whispers to their neighbors, but Hockley observed the scientists remained quiet and impassive. He believed he had sold them in his telephone calls during the early morning. They liked the idea of obtaining additional data. Besides, most of them wanted to see Rykeman III for themselves.

Senator Markham finally stood up, obviously disturbed by Hockley's abrupt proposal. "It has seemed to us members of the Committee that there could hardly be any need for more data than is already available to us. The remarkable effects of Ryke science on other backward worlds is common knowledge.

"On the other hand we recognize the qualifications of you gentlemen which make your request appear justified. We will have to discuss this at length, but at the moment I believe I can say I am in sympathy with your request and can encourage my Committee to give it serious consideration."

* * * * *

A great deal more was said on that and subsequent days. News of the Ryke offer was not given to the public, but the landing of the Ryke ship could not be hidden. It became known that Liacan carried his offer to other worlds and speculation was made that he offered it to Earth also. Angry questions were raised as to why the purpose of the visit was not clarified, but government silence was maintained while Hockley's request was considered.

It encountered bitter debate in the closed sessions, but permission was finally given for a junket of ninety scientists and ten senators to Rykeman III.

This could not be hidden, so the facts were modified and a story given out that the party was going to request participation in the Ryke program being offered other worlds, that Liacan's visit had not been conclusive.

In the days preceding the take-off Hockley felt a sense of destiny weighing heavily upon him. He read every word of the stream of opinion that flowed through the press. Every commentator and columnist seemed called upon to make his own specific analysis of the possibilities of the visit to Rykeman III. And the opinions were almost uniform that it would be an approach to Utopia to have the Rykes take over. Hockley was sickened by this mass conversion to the siren call of the Rykes.

It was a tremendous relief when the day finally came and the huge transport ship lifted solemnly into space. Most of the group were in the ship's lounge watching the television port as the Earth drifted away beneath them. Senator Markham seemed nervous and almost frightened, Hockley thought, as if something intangible had escaped him.

"I hope we're not wasting our time," he said. "Not that I don't understand your position," he added hastily to cover the show of antagonism he sensed creeping into his voice.

"We appreciate your support," said Hockley, "and we'll do our best to see the time of the investigation is not wasted."

But afterwards, when the two of them were alone by the screen, Silvers spoke to Hockley soberly. The mathematician had lost some of the wild exuberance he'd had at first. It had been replaced by a deep, intense conviction that nothing must stand in the way of Earth's alliance with the Rykes.

"We all understand why you wanted us to come," he said. "We know you believe this delay will cool our enthusiasm. It's only fair to make clear that it won't. How you intend to change us by taking us to the home of the Rykes has got us all baffled. The reverse will be true, I am very sure. We intend to make it clear to the Rykes that we accept their offer. I hope you have no plan to make a declaration to the contrary."

Hockley kept his eyes on the screen, watching the green sphere of Earth. "I have no intention of making any
statement of any kind. I was perfectly honest when I said our understanding of the Rykes would profit by this visit. You all agreed. I meant nothing more nor less than what I said. I hope no one in the group thinks otherwise."

"We don't know," said Silvers.
"It's just that you've got us wondering how you expect to change our views."
"I have not said that is my intention."
"Can you say it is not?"
"No, I cannot say that. But the question is incomplete. My whole intention is to discover as fully as possible what will be the result of alliance with the Rykes. If you should conclude that it will be unfavorable that will be the result of your own direct observations and computations, not of my arguments."
"You may be sure that is one thing that will not occur," said Silvers.

It took them a month to reach a transfer point where they could change to a commercial vessel using Ryke principles. In the following week they covered a distance several thousand times that which they had already come. And then they were on Rykeman III.

A few of them had visited the planet previously, on vacation trips or routine study expeditions, but most of them were seeing it for the first time. While well out into space the group began crowding the vision screens which brought into range the streets and buildings of the cities. They could see the people walking and riding there.

Hockley caught his breath at the sight, and doubts overwhelmed him, telling him he was an utter and complete fool. The city upon which he looked was a jewel of perfection. Buildings were not indiscriminate masses of masonry and metal and plastic heaped up without regard to the total effect. Rather, the city was a unit created with an eye to esthetic perfection.

Silvers stood beside Hockley. "We've got a chance to make Earth look that way," said the mathematician.
"There's only one thing missing," said Hockley. "The price tag. We still need to know what it's going to cost."

Upon landing, the Earthmen were greeted by a covey of their bird-like hosts who scurried about, introducing themselves in their high whistling voices. In busses, they were moved half way across the city to a building which stood beside an enormous park area.

It was obviously a building designed for the reception of just such delegations as this one, giving Hockley evidence that perhaps his idea was not so original after all. It was a relief to get inside after their brief trip across the city. Gravity, temperature, and air pressure and composition duplicated those of Earth inside, and conditions could be varied to accommodate many different species. Hockley felt confident they could become accustomed to outside conditions after a few days, but it was exhausting now to be out for long.

They were shown to individual quarters and given leisure to unpack and inspect their surroundings. Furniture had been adjusted to their size and needs. The only oversight Hockley could find was a faint odor of chlorine lingering in the closets. He wondered who the last occupant of the room had been.

After a noon meal, served with foods of astonishingly close approximation to their native fare, the group was offered a prelude to the general instruction and indoctrination which would begin the following day. This was in the form of a guided tour through the science museum which, Hockley gathered, was a modernized Ryke parallel to the venerable Smithsonian back home. The tour was entirely optional, as far as the planned program of the Rykes was concerned, but none of the Earthmen turned it down.

Hockley tried to concentrate heavily on the memory of Waldon Thar and keep the image of his friend always before him as he moved through the city and inspected the works of the Rykes. He found it helped suppress the awe and adulation which he had an impulse to share with his companions.

It was possible even, he found, to adopt a kind of truculent cynicism toward the approach the Rykes were making. The visit to the science museum could be an attempt to bowl them over with an eon-long vista of Ryke superiority in the sciences. At least that was most certainly the effect on them. Hockley cursed his own feeling of ignorance and inferiority as the guide led them quietly past the works of the masters, offering but little comment, letting them see for themselves the obvious relationships.

In the massive display showing developments of spaceflight, the atomic vessels, not much different from Earthmen's best efforts, were far down the line, very near to the earliest attempts of the Rykes to rocket their way into space. Beyond that level was an incredible series of developments incomprehensible to most of the Earthmen.

And to all their questions the guide offered the monotonous reply: "That will be explained to you later. We only wish to give you an overall picture of our culture at the present time."

But this was not enough for one of the astronomers, named Moore, who moved ahead of Hockley in the crowd. Hockley saw the back of Moore's neck growing redder by the minute as the guide's evasive answer was repeated.

Finally, Moore forced a discussion regarding the merits of some systems of comparing the brightness of stars, which
the guide briefly showed them. The guide, in great annoyance, burst out with a stream of explanation that completely flattened any opinions Moore might have had. But at the same time the astronomer grinned amiably at the Ryke. "That ought to settle that," he said. "I'll bet it won't take a week to get our system changed back home."

Moore's success loosened the restraint of the others and they besieged the guide mercilessly then with opinions, questions, comparisons—and even mild disapprovals. The guide's exasperation was obvious—and pleasant—to Hockley, who remained a bystander. It was frightening to Markham and some of the other senators who were unable to take part in the discussion. But most of the scientists failed to notice it in their eagerness to learn.

After dinner that night they gathered in the lounge and study of their quarters. Markham stood beside Hockley as they partook cautiously of the cocktails which the Rykes had attempted to duplicate for them. The Senator's awe had returned to overshadow any concern he felt during the events of the afternoon. "A wonderful day!" he said. "Even though this visit delays completion of our arrangements with the Rykes those of us here will be grateful forever that you proposed it. Nothing could have so impressed us all with the desirability of accepting the Ryke's tutelage. It was a stroke of genius, Dr. Hockley. And for a time I thought you were actually opposed to the Rykes!"

He sipped his drink while Hockley said nothing. Then his brow furrowed a bit. "But I wonder why our guide cut short our tour this afternoon. If I recall correctly he said at the beginning there was a great deal more to see than he actually showed us."

Hockley smiled and sipped politely at his drink before he set it down and faced the Senator. "I was wondering if anyone else noticed that," he said.

Hockley slept well that night except for the fact that occasional whiffs of chlorine seemed to drift from various corners of the room even though he turned the air-conditioning system on full blast.

In the morning there began a series of specialized lectures which had been prepared in accordance with the Earthmen's request to acquaint them with what they would be getting upon acceptance of the Ryke offer.

It was obviously no new experience for the Rykes. The lectures were well prepared and anticipated many questions. The only thing new about it, Hockley thought, was the delivery in the language of the Earthmen. Otherwise, he felt this was something prepared a long time ago and given a thousand times or more.

They were divided into smaller groups according to their specialties, electronic men going one way, astronomers and mathematical physicists another, chemists and general physicists in still another direction. Hockley, Showalter and the senators were considered more or less free floating members of the delegation with the privilege of visiting with one group or another according to their pleasure.

Hockley chose to spend the first day with the chemists, since that was his own first love. Dr. Showalter and Senator Markham came along with him. As much as he tried he found it virtually impossible not to sit with the same open-mouthed wonder that his colleagues exhibited. The swift, free-flowing exposition of the Ryke lecturer led them immediately beyond their own realms, but so carefully did he lead them that it seemed that they must have come this way before, and forgotten it.

Hockley felt half angry with himself. He felt he had allowed himself to be hypnotized by the skill of the Ryke, and wondered despairingly if there were any chance at all of combating their approach. He saw nothing to indicate it in the experience of that day or the ones immediately following. But he retained hope that there was much significance in the action of the guide who had cut short their visit to the museum.

In the evenings, in the study lounge of the dormitory, they held interminable bull sessions exchanging and digesting what they had been shown during the day. It was at the end of the third day that Hockley thought he could detect a subtle change in the group. He had some difficulty analyzing it at first. It seemed to be a growing aliveness, a sort of recovery. And then he recognized that the initial stunned reaction to the magnificence of the Rykes was passing off. They had been shocked by the impact of the Rykes, almost as if they had been struck a blow on the head. Temporarily, they had shelved all their own analytical and critical facilities and yielded to the Rykes without question.

Now they were beginning to recover, springing back to a condition considerably nearer normal. Hockley felt a surge of encouragement as he detected a more sharply critical evaluation in the conversations that buzzed around him. The enthusiasm was more measured.

It was the following evening, however, that witnessed the first event of pronounced shifting of anyone's attitude. They had finished dinner and were gathering in the lounge, sparring around, setting up groups for the bull sessions that would go until long after midnight. Most of them had already settled down and were talking part in conversations or were listening quietly when they were suddenly aware of a change in the atmosphere of the room.

For a moment there was a general turning of heads to locate the source of the disturbance. Hockley knew he could never describe just what made him look around, but he was abruptly conscious that Dr. Silvers was walking into the lounge and looking slowly about at those gathered there. Something in his presence was like the sudden
appearance of a thundercloud, his face seemed to reflect the dark turbulence of a summer storm.

He said nothing, however, to anyone but strode over and sat beside Hockley, who was alone at the moment smoking the next to last of his Earthside cigars. Hockley felt the smouldering turmoil inside the mathematician. He extended his final cigar. Silvers brushed it away.

"The last one," said Hockley mildly. "In spite of all their abilities the Ryke imitations are somewhat less than natural."

Silvers turned slowly to face Hockley. "I presented them with the Legrandian Equations today," he said. "I expected to get a straightforward answer to a perfectly legitimate scientific question. That is what we were led to expect, was it not?"

[Illustration]

Hockley nodded. "That's my impression. Did you get something less than a straightforward answer?"

The mathematician exhaled noisily. "The Legrandian Equations will lead to a geometry as revolutionary as Riemann's was in his day. But I was told by the Rykes that I 'should dismiss it from all further consideration. It does not lead to any profitable mathematical development."

Hockley felt that his heart most certainly skipped a beat, but he managed to keep his voice steady, and sympathetic. "That's too bad. I know what high hopes you had. I suppose you will give up work on the Equations now?"

"I will not!" Silvers exclaimed loudly. Nearby groups who had returned hesitantly to their own conversations now stared at him again. But abruptly he changed his tone and looked almost pleadingly at Hockley. "I don't understand it. Why should they say such a thing? It appears to be one of the most profitable avenues of exploration I have encountered in my whole career. And the Rykes brush it aside!"

"What did you say when they told you to give it up?"

"I said I wanted to know where the development would lead. I said it had been indicated that we could have an answer to any scientific problem within the range of their abilities, and certainly this is, from what I've seen."

"The instructor replied that I'd been given an answer to my question, that 'the first lesson you must learn if you wish to acquire our pace in science is to recognize that we have been along the path ahead of you. We know which are the possibilities that are worthwhile to develop. We have gained our speed by learning to bypass every avenue but the main one, and not get lost in tempting side roads."

"He said that we've got to learn to trust them and take their word as to which is the correct and profitable field of research, that 'we will show you where to go, as we agreed to do. If you are not willing to accept our leadership in this respect our agreement means nothing.' Wouldn't that be a magnificent way to make scientific progress!"

The mathematician shifted in his chair as if trying to control an internal fury that would not be capped. He held out his hand abruptly. "I'll take that cigar after all, if you don't mind, Hockley."

With savage energy he chewed the end and ignited the cigar, then blew a mammoth cloud of smoke ceilingward. "I think the trouble must be in our lecturer," he said. "He's crazy. He couldn't possibly represent the conventional attitude of the Rykes. They promised to give answers to our problems--and this is the kind of nonsense I get. I'm going to see somebody higher up and find out why we can't have a lecturer who knows what he's talking about. Or maybe you or Markham would rather take it up--through official channels, as it were?"

"The Ryke was correct," said Hockley. "He did give you an answer."

"He could answer all our questions that way!"

"You're perfectly right," said Hockley soberly. "He could do exactly that."

"They won't of course," said Silvers, defensively. "Even if this particular character isn't just playing the screwball, my question is just a special case. It's just one particular thing they consider to be valueless. Perhaps in the end I'll find they're right--but I'm going to develop a solution to these Equations if it takes the rest of my life!"

"After all, they admit they have no solution, that they have not bothered to go down this particular side path, as they put it. If we don't go down it how can we ever know whether it's worthwhile or not? How can the Rykes know what they may have missed by not doing so?"

"I can't answer that," said Hockley. "For us or for them, I know of no other way to predict the outcome of a specific line of research except to carry it through and find out what lies at the end of the road."

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Hockley didn't sleep very well after he finally went to bed that night. Silvers had presented him with the break he had been expecting and hoping for. The first chink in the armor of sanctity surrounding the Rykes. Now he wondered what would follow, if this would build up to the impassable barrier he wanted, or if it would merely remain a sore obstacle in their way but eventually be bypassed and forgotten.

He did not believe it would be the only incident of its kind. There would be others as the Earthmen's stunned, blind acceptance gave way completely to sound, critical evaluation. And in any case there was one delegate who
would never be the same again. No matter how he eventually rationalized it Dr. Forman K. Silvers would never feel quite the same about the Rykes as he did before they rejected his favorite piece of research.

Hockley arose early, eager but cautious, his senses open for further evidence of disaffection springing up. He joined the group of chemists once more for the morning lecture. The spirit of the group was markedly higher than when he first met with them. They had been inspired by what the Rykes had shown them, but in addition their own sense of judgment had been brought out of suspension.

The Ryke lecturer began inscribing on the board an enormous organic formula, using conventions of Earth chemistry for the benefit of his audience. He explained at some length a number of transformations which it was possible to make in the compound by means of high intensity fields.

Almost at once, one of the younger chemists named Dr. Carmen, was on his feet exclaiming excitedly that one of the transformation compounds was a chemical on which he had conducted an extensive research. He had produced enough to know that it had a multitude of intriguing properties, and now he was exuberant at the revelation of a method of producing it in quantity and also further transforming it.

At his sudden enthusiasm the lecturer's face took on what they had come to recognize as a very dour look. "That series of transformations has no interest for us," he said. "I merely indicated its existence to show one of the possibilities which should be avoided. Over here you see the direction in which we wish to go."

"But you never saw anything with properties like that!" Carmen protested. "It goes through an incredible series of at least three crystalline-liquid phase changes with an increase in pressure alone. But with proper control of heat it can be kept in the crystalline phase regardless of pressure. It is closely related to a drug series with anesthetic properties, and is almost sure to be valuable in--"

The Ryke lecturer cut him off sharply. "I have explained," he said, "the direction of transformation in which we are interested. Your concern is not with anything beyond the boundaries which our study has proven to be the direct path of research and study."

"Then I should abandon research on this series of chemicals?" Carmen asked with a show of outward meekness.

The Ryke nodded with pleasure at Carmen's submissiveness. "That is it precisely. We have been over this ground long ago. We know where the areas of profitable study lie. You will be told what to observe and what to ignore. How could you ever hope to make progress if you stopped to examine every alternate probability and possibility that appeared to you?" He shook his head vigorously and his plume vibrated with emotion.

"You must have a plan," he continued. "A goal. Study of the Universe cannot proceed in any random, erratic fashion. You must know what you want and then find out where to look for it."

Carmen sat down slowly. Hockley was sure the Ryke did not notice the tense bulge of the chemist's jaw muscles. Perhaps he would not have understood the significance if he had noticed.

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Hockley was a trifle late in getting to the dining room at lunch time that day. By the time he did so the place was like a beehive. He was almost repelled by the furor of conversation circulating in the room as he entered.

He passed through slowly, searching for a table of his own. He paused a moment behind Dr. Carmen, who was declaiming in no mild terms his opinions of a system that would pre-select those areas of research which were to be entered and those which were not. He smiled a little as he caught the eye of one of the dozen chemists seated at the table, listening.

Moving on, he observed that Silvers had also cornered a half dozen or so of his colleagues in his own field and was in earnest conversation with them--in a considerably more restrained manner, however, than he had used the previous evening with Hockley, or than Carmen was using at the present time.

The entire room was abuzz with similar groups.

The senators had tried to mingle with the others in past days, always with more or less lack of success because they found themselves out of the conversation almost completely. Today they had no luck whatever. They were seated together at a couple of tables in a corner. None of them seemed to be paying attention to the food before them, but were glancing about, half-apprehensively, at their fellow diners--who were also paying no attention to food.

Hockley caught sight of his political colleagues and sensed their dismay. The field of disquietude seemed almost tangible in the air. The senators seemed half frightened by what they felt but could not understand.

Showalter's wild waving at the far corner of the room finally caught Hockley's eye and he moved toward the small table which the assistant had reserved for them. Showalter was upset, too, by the atmosphere within the room.

"What the devil is up?" he said. "Seems like everybody's on edge this morning. I never saw a bunch of guys so touchy. You'd think they woke up with snakes in their beds."

"Didn't you know?" said Hockley. "Haven't you been to any of the lectures this morning?"
"No. A couple of the senators were getting bored with all the scientific doings so I thought maybe I should try to entertain them. We took in what passes for such here, but it wasn't much better than the lectures as a show. Tell me what's up."

Briefly, Hockley described Silvers' upset of the day before and Carmen's experience that morning. Showalter let his glance rove over his fellow Earthmen, trying to catch snatches of the buzzing conversation at nearby tables.

"You think that's the kind of thing that's got them all going this morning?" he said.

Hockley nodded. "I caught enough of it passing through to know that's what it is. I gather that every group has run into the same kind of thing by now, the fencing off of broad areas where we have already tried to do research.

"After the first cloud of awe wore off, the first thing everyone wanted was an answer to his own pet line of research. Nine times out of ten it was something the Rykes told them to chuck down the drain. That advice doesn't sit so well--as you can plainly see."

Showalter drew back his gaze and stared for a long time at Hockley. "You knew this would happen. That's why you brought us here--"

"I had hopes of it. I was reasonably sure this was the way the Rykes operated."

Showalter remained thoughtful for a long time before he spoke again. "You've won your point, I suppose, as far as this group goes, but you can't hope to convince all of Earth by this. The Rykes will hold their offer open, and others will accept it on behalf of Earth.

"And what if it's we who are wrong, in the end? How can you be sure that this isn't the way the Rykes have made their tremendous speed--by not going down all the blind alleys that we rattle around in."

"I'm sure it is the way they have attained such speed of advancement."

"Then maybe we ought to go along, regardless of our own desires. Maybe we never did know how to do research!"

Hockley smiled across the table at his assistant. "You believe that, of course."

"I'm just talking," said Showalter irritably. "The thing gets more loopy every day. If you think you understand the Rykes I wish you would give out with what the score is. By the looks of most of these guys I would say they are getting ready to throttle the next Ryke they see instead of knuckle under to him."

"I hope you're right," said Hockley fervently. "I certainly hope you're right."

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By evening there was increasing evidence that he was. Hockley passed up the afternoon lecture period and spent the time in the lounge doing some thinking of his own. He knew he couldn't push the group. Above all, he mustn't give way to any temptation to push them or say, "I told you so." Their present frustration was so deep that their antagonism could be turned almost indiscriminately in any direction, and he would be offering himself as a ready target if he were not careful.

On the other hand he had to be ready to take advantage of their disaffection and throw them a decisive challenge when they were ready for it. That might be tonight, or it might be another week. He wished for a sure way of knowing. As things turned out, however, the necessity of choosing the time was taken from him.

After dinner that night, when the group began to drift into the lounge, Silvers and Carmen and three of the other men came over to where Hockley sat. Silvers fumbled with the buttons of his coat as if preparing to make an address.

"We'd like to request," he said, "that is--we think we ought to get together. We'd like you to call a meeting, Hockley. Some of us have a few things we'd like to talk over."

Hockley nodded, his face impassive.

"The matter I mentioned to you the other night," said Silvers. "It's been happening to all the men. We think we ought to talk about it."

"Fine," said Hockley. "I've been thinking it would perhaps be a good idea. Pass the word around and let's get some chairs. We can convene in ten minutes."

The others nodded somberly and moved away with all the enthusiasm of preparing for a funeral. And maybe that's what it would be, Hockley thought--somebody's funeral. He hoped it would be the Rykes.

The room began filling almost at once, as if they had been expecting the call. In little more than five minutes it seemed that every member of the Earth delegation had assembled, leaving time to spare.

The senators still wore their looks of puzzlement and half-frightened anxiety, which had intensified if anything. There was no puzzlement on the faces of the scientists, however, only a set and determined expression that Hockley hardly dared interpret as meaning they had made up their minds. He had to have their verbal confirmation.

Informally, he thrust his hands in his pockets and sauntered to the front of the group.

"I have been asked to call a meeting," he said, "by certain members of the group who have something on their minds. They seem to feel we'd all be interested in what is troubling them. Since I have nothing in particular to say
I'm simply going to turn the floor over to those of you who have. Dr. Silvers first approached me to call this discussion, so I shall ask him to lead off. Will you come to the front, Dr. Silvers?"

The mathematician rose as if wishing someone else would do the talking. He stood at one side of the group, halfway to the rear. "I can do all right from here," he said.

After a pause, as if coming to a momentous decision, he plunged into his complaint. "It appears that nearly all of us have encountered an aspect of the Ryke culture and character which was not anticipated when we first received their offer." Briefly, he related the details of the Ryke rejection of his research on the Legrandian Equations.

"We were told we were going to have all our questions answered, that the Ryke's science included all we could anticipate or hope to accomplish in the next few millennia. I swallowed that. We all did. It appears we were slightly in error. It begins to appear as if we are not going to find the intellectual paradise we anticipated."

He smiled wryly. "I'm sure none of you is more ready than I to admit he has been a fool. It appears that paradise, so-called, consists merely of a few selected gems which the Rykes consider particularly valuable, while the rest of the field goes untouched.

"I want to offer public apologies to Dr. Hockley, who saw and understood the situation as it actually existed, while the rest of us had our heads in the clouds. Exactly how he knew, I'm not sure, but he did, and very brilliantly chose the only way possible to convince us that what he knew was correct.

"I suggest we do our packing tonight, gentlemen. Let us return at once to our laboratories and spend the rest of our lives in some degree of atonement for being such fools as to fall for the line the Rykes tried to sell us."

Hockley's eyes were on the senators. At first there were white faces filled with incredulity as the mathematician proceeded. Then slowly this changed to sheer horror.

When Silvers finished, there was immediate bedlam. There was a clamor of voices from the scientists, most of whom seemed to be trying to affirm Silvers' position. This was offset by explosions of rage from the senatorial members of the group.

Hockley let it go, not even raising his hands for order until finally the racket died of its own accord as the eyes of the delegates came to rest upon him.

And then, before he could speak, Markham was on his feet. "This is absolutely moral treachery," he thundered. "I have never heard a more vicious revocation of a pledged word than I have heard this evening.

"You men are not alone concerned in this matter. For all practical purposes you are not concerned at all! And yet to take it upon yourselves to pass judgment in a matter that is the affair of the entire population of Earth--out of nothing more than sheer spite because the Rykes refuse recognition of your own childish projects! I have never heard a more incredible and infantile performance than you supposedly mature gentlemen of science are expressing this evening."

He glared defiantly at Hockley, who was again the center of attention moving carelessly to the center of the stage. "Anybody want to try to answer the Senator?" he asked casually.

Instantly, a score of men were on their feet, speaking simultaneously. They stopped abruptly, looking deferentially to their neighbors and at Hockley, inviting him to choose one of them to be spokesman.

"Maybe I ought to answer him myself," said Hockley, "since I predicted that this would occur, and that we ought to make a trial run before turning our collective gray matter over to the Rykes."

A chorus of approval and nodding heads gave him the go ahead.

"The Senator is quite right in saying that we few are not alone in our concern in this matter," he said. "But the Senator intends to imply a major difference between us scientists and the rest of mankind. This is his error."

"Every member of Mankind who is concerned about the Universe in which he lives, is a scientist. You need to understand what a scientist is--and you can say no more than that he is a human being trying to solve the problem of understanding his Universe, immediate or remote. He is concerned about the inanimate worlds, his own personality, his fellow men--and the interweaving relationships among all these factors. We professional scientists are no strange species, alien to our race. Our only difference is perhaps that we undertake more problems than does the average of our fellow men, and of a more complex kind. That is all.

"The essence of our science is a relentless personal yearning to know and understand the Universe. And in that, the scientist must not be forbidden to ask whatever question occurs to him. The moment we put any restraint upon our fields of inquiry, or set bounds to the realms of our mental aspirations, our science ceases to exist and becomes a mere opportunist technology."

Markham stood up, his face red with exasperation and rage. "No one is trying to limit you! Why is that so unfathomable to your minds? You are being offered a boundless expanse, and you continue to make inane complaints of limitations. The Rykes have been over all the territory you insist on exploring. They can tell you the number of pretty pebbles and empty shells that lie there. You are like children insistent upon exploring every shadowy corner and peering behind every useless bush on a walk through the forest.
Such is to be expected of a child, but not of an adult, who is capable of taking the word of one who has been there before!

"There are two things wrong with your argument," said Hockley. "First of all, there is no essential difference between the learning of a child who must indeed explore the dark corners and strange growths by which he passes--there is no difference between this and the probing of the scientist, who must explore the Universe with his own senses and with his own instruments, without taking another's word that there is nothing there worth seeing.

"Secondly, the Rykes themselves are badly in error in asserting that they have been along the way ahead of us. They have not. In all their fields of science they have limited themselves badly to one narrow field of probability. They have taken a narrow path stretching between magnificent vistas on either side of them, and have deliberately ignored all that was beyond the path and on the inviting side trails."

"Is there anything wrong with that?" demanded Markham. "If you undertake a journey you don't weave in and out of every possible path that leads in every direction opposed to your destination. You take the direct route. Or at least ordinary people do."

"Scientists do, too," said Hockley, "when they take a journey. Professional science is not a journey, however. It's an exploration.

"There is a great deal wrong with what the Rykes have done. They have assumed, and would have us likewise assume, that there is a certain very specific future toward which we are all moving. This future is built out of the discoveries they have made about the Universe. It is made of the system of mathematics they have developed, which exclude Dr. Silvers' cherished Legrandian Equations. It excludes the world in which exist Dr. Carmen's series of unique compounds.

"The Rykes have built a wonderful, workable world of serenity, beauty, scientific consistency, and economic adjustment. They have eliminated enormous amounts of chaos which Earthmen continue to suffer.

"But we do not want what the Rykes have obtained--if we have to pay their price for it."

"Then you are complete fools," said Markham. "Fortunately, you cannot and will not speak for all of Earth."

Hockley paced back and forth a half dozen steps, his eyes on the floor. "I think we do--and can--speak for all our people," he said. "Remember, I said that all men are scientists in the final analysis. I am very certain that no Earthman who truly understood the situation would want to face the future which the Rykes hold out to us."

"And why not?" demanded Markham.

"Because there are too many possible futures. We refuse to march down a single narrow trail to the golden future. That's what the Rykes would have us do. But they are wrong. It would be like taking a trip through a galaxy at speeds faster than light--and claiming to have seen the galaxy. What the Rykes have obtained is genuine and good, but what they have not obtained is perhaps far better and of greater worth."

"How can you know such an absurd thing?"

"We can't--not for sure," said Hockley. "Not until we go there and see for ourselves, step by step. But we aren't going to be confined to the Rykes' narrow trail. We are going on a broad path to take in as many byways as we can possibly find. We'll explore every probability we come to, and look behind every bush and under every pebble.

"We will move together, the thousands and the millions of us, simultaneously, interacting with one another, exchanging data. Most certainly, many will end up in blind alleys. Some will find data that seems the ultimate truth at one point and pure deception at another. Who can tell ahead of time which of these multiple paths we should take? Certainly not the Rykes, who have bypassed most of them!

"It doesn't matter that many paths lead to failure--not as long as we remain in communication with each other. In the end we will find the best possible future for us. But there is no one future, only a multitude of possible futures. We must have the right to build the one that best fits our own kind."

"Is that more important than achieving immediately a more peaceful, unified, and secure society?" said Markham.

"Infinitely more important!" said Hockley.

"It is fortunate at least, then, that you are in no position to implement these insane beliefs of yours. The Ryke program was offered to Earth, and it shall be accepted on behalf of Earth. You may be sure of a very poor hearing when you try to present these notions back home."

"You jump to conclusions, Senator," said Hockley with mild confidence. "Why do you suppose I proposed this trip if I did not believe I could do something about the situation? I assure you that we did not come just to see the sights."

Markham's jaw slackened and his face became white. "What do you mean? You haven't dared to try to alienate the Rykes--"

"I mean that there is a great deal we can do about the situation. Now that the sentiments of my colleagues parallel my own I'm sure they agree that we must effectively and finally spike any possibility of Earth's becoming
involved in this Ryke nonsense."

"You wouldn't dare!--even if you could--"

"We can, and we dare," said Hockley. "When we return to Earth we shall have to report that the Rykes have refused to admit Earth to their program. We shall report that we made every effort to obtain an agreement with them, but it was in vain. If anyone wishes to verify the report, the Rykes themselves will say that this is quite true: they cannot possibly consider Earth as a participant. If you contend that an offer was once made, you will not find the Rykes offering much support since they will be very busily denying that we are remotely qualified."

"The Rykes are hardly ones to meekly submit to any idiotic plan of that kind."

"They can't help it--if we demonstrate that we are quite unqualified to participate."

"You--you--"

"It will not be difficult," said Hockley. "The Rykes have set up a perfect teacher-pupil situation, with all the false assumptions that go with it. There is at least one absolutely positive way to disintegrate such a situation. The testimony of several thousand years' failure of our various educational systems indicates that there are quite a variety of lesser ways also--"

"Perhaps you are aware of the experiences and techniques commonly employed on Earth by white men in their efforts to educate the aborigine. The first procedure is to do away with the tribal medicine men, ignore their lore and learning. Get them to give up the magic words and their pots of foul smelling liquids, abandon their ritual dances and take up the white man's great wisdom.

"We have done this time after time, only to learn decades later that the natives once knew much of anesthetics and healing drugs, and had genuine powers to communicate in ways the white man can't duplicate.

"But once in a long while a group of aborigines show more spunk than the average. They refuse to give up their medicine men, their magic and their hard earned lore accumulated over generations and centuries. Instead of giving these things up they insist on the white man's learning these mysteries in preference to his nonsensical and ineffective magic. They completely frustrate the situation, and if they persist they finally destroy the white man as an educator. He is forced to conclude that the ignorant savages are unteachable.

"It is an infallible technique--and one that we shall employ. Dr. Silvers will undertake to teach his mathematical lecturer in the approaches to the Legrandian Equations. He will speculate long and noisily on the geometry which potentially lies in this mathematical system. Dr. Carmen will elucidate at great length on the properties of the chain of chemicals he has been advised to abandon.

"Each of us has at least one line of research the Rykes would have us give up. That is the very thing we shall insist on having investigated. We shall teach them these things and prove Earthmen to be an unlearned, unteachable band of aborigines who refuse to pursue the single path to glory and light, but insist on following every devious byway and searching every darkness that lies beside the path.

"It ought to do the trick. I estimate it should not be more than a week before we are on our way back home, labeled by the Rykes as utterly hopeless material for their enlightenment."

The senators seemed momentarily appalled and speechless, but they recovered shortly and had a considerable amount of high flown oratory to distribute on the subject. The scientists, however, were comparatively quiet, but on their faces was a subdued glee that Hockley had to admit was little short of fiendish. It was composed, he thought, of all the gloating anticipations of all the schoolboys who had ever put a thumbtack on the teacher's chair.

Hockley was somewhat off in his prediction. It was actually a mere five days after the beginning of the Earthmen's campaign that the Rykes gave them up and put them firmly aboard a vessel bound for home. The Rykes were apologetic but firm in admitting they had made a sorry mistake, that Earthmen would have to go their own hopeless way while the Rykes led the rest of the Universe toward enlightenment and glory.

Hockley, Showalter, and Silvers watched the planet drop away beneath them. Hockley could not help feeling sympathetic toward the Rykes. "I wonder what will happen," he said slowly, "when they crash headlong into an impassable barrier on that beautiful, straight road of theirs. I wonder if they'll ever have enough guts to turn aside?"

"I doubt it," said Showalter. "They'll probably curl up and call it a day."

Silvers shook his head as if to ward off an oppressive vision. "That shouldn't be allowed to happen," he said. "They've got too much. They've achieved too much, in spite of their limitations. I wonder if there isn't some way we could help them?"
The biggest job in history and it had to be done with complete secrecy. It was--which was just the trouble!

I guess I'm just a stickler, a perfectionist, but if you do a thing, I always say, you might as well do it right. Everything satisfied me about the security measures on our assignment except one--the official Army designation.

Project Hush.

I don't know who thought it up, and I certainly would never ask, but whoever it was, he should have known better. Damn it, when you want a project kept secret, you don't give it a designation like that! You give it something neutral, some name like the Manhattan and Overlord they used in World War II, which won't excite anybody's curiosity.

But we were stuck with Project Hush and we had to take extra measures to ensure secrecy. A couple of times a week, everyone on the project had to report to Psycho for DD & HA--dream detailing and hypnoanalysis--instead of the usual monthly visit. Naturally, the commanding general of the heavily fortified research post to which we were attached could not ask what we were doing, under penalty of court-martial, but he had to be given further instructions to shut off his imagination like a faucet every time he heard an explosion. Some idiot in Washington was actually going to list Project Hush in the military budget by name! It took fast action, I can tell you, to have it entered under Miscellaneous "X" Research.

Well, we'd covered the unforgivable blunder, though not easily, and now we could get down to the real business of the project. You know, of course, about the A-bomb, H-bomb and C-bomb because information that they existed had been declassified. You don't know about the other weapons being devised--and neither did we, reasonably enough, since they weren't our business--but we had been given properly guarded notification that they were in the works. Project Hush was set up to counter the new weapons.

Our goal was not just to reach the Moon. We had done that on 24 June 1967 with an unmanned ship that carried instruments to report back data on soil, temperature, cosmic rays and so on. Unfortunately, it was put out of commission by a rock slide.

An unmanned rocket would be useless against the new weapons. We had to get to the Moon before any other country did and set up a permanent station--an armed one--and do it without anybody else knowing about it.

I guess you see now why we on (damn the name!) Project Hush were so concerned about security. But we felt pretty sure, before we took off, that we had plugged every possible leak.

* * * * *

We landed at the northern tip of Mare Nubium, just off Regiomontanus, and, after planting a flag with appropriate throat-catching ceremony, had swung into the realities of the tasks we had practiced on so many dry runs back on Earth. Major Monroe Gridley prepared the big rocket, with its tiny cubicle of living space, for the return journey to Earth which he alone would make.

Lieutenant-colonel Thomas Hawthorne painstakingly examined our provisions and portable quarters for any damage that might have been incurred in landing.

And I, Colonel Benjamin Rice, first commanding officer of Army Base No. 1 on the Moon, dragged crate after enormous crate out of the ship on my aching academic back, and piled them in the spot two hundred feet away where the plastic dome would be built.

We all finished at just about the same time, as per schedule, and went into Phase Two.

Monroe and I started work on building the dome. It was a simple pre-fab affair, but big enough to require an awful lot of assembling. Then, after it was built, we faced the real problem--getting all the complex internal machinery in place and in operating order.

Meanwhile, Tom Hawthorne took his plump self off in the single-seater rocket which, up to then, had doubled as a lifeboat.

The schedule called for him to make a rough three-hour scouting survey in an ever-widening spiral from our dome. This had been regarded as a probable waste of time, rocket fuel and manpower--but a necessary precaution. He was supposed to watch for such things as bug-eyed monsters out for a stroll on the Lunar landscape. Basically, however, Tom's survey was intended to supply extra geological and astronomical meat for the report which Monroe was to carry back to Army HQ on Earth.
Tom was back in forty minutes. His round face, inside its transparent bubble helmet, was fish-belly white. And so were ours, once he told us what he’d seen.

He had seen another dome.

"The other side of Mare Nubium--in the Riphaen Mountains," he babbled excitedly. "It's a little bigger than ours, and it's a little flatter on top. And it's not translucent, either, with splotches of different colors here and there--it's a dull, dark, heavy gray. But that's all there is to see."

"No markings on the dome?" I asked worriedly. "No signs of anyone--or anything--around it?"

"Neither, Colonel." I noticed he was calling me by my rank for the first time since the trip started, which meant he was saying in effect, "Man, have you got a decision to make!"

"Hey, Tom," Monroe put in. "Couldn't be just a regularly shaped bump in the ground, could it?"

"I'm a geologist, Monroe. I can distinguish artificial from natural topography. Besides--" he looked up--"I just remembered something I left out. There's a brand-new tiny crater near the dome--the kind usually left by a rocket exhaust."

"Rocket exhaust?" I seized on that. "Rockets, eh?"

Tom grinned a little sympathetically. "Spaceship exhaust, I should have said. You can't tell from the crater what kind of propulsive device these characters are using. It's not the same kind of crater our rear-jets leave, if that helps any."

Of course it didn't. So we went into our ship and had a council of war. And I do mean war. Both Tom and Monroe were calling me Colonel in every other sentence. I used their first names every chance I got.

Still, no one but me could reach a decision. About what to do, I mean.

"Look," I said at last, "here are the possibilities. They know we are here--either from watching us land a couple of hours ago or from observing Tom’s scout-ship--or they do not know we are here. They are either humans from Earth--in which case they are in all probability enemy nationals--or they are alien creatures from another planet--in which case they may be friends, enemies or what-have-you. I think common sense and standard military procedure demand that we consider them hostile until we have evidence to the contrary. Meanwhile, we proceed with extreme caution, so as not to precipitate an interplanetary war with potentially friendly Martians, or whatever they are."

"All right. It's vitally important that Army Headquarters be informed of this immediately. But since Moon-to-Earth radio is still on the drawing boards, the only way we can get through is to send Monroe back with the ship. If we do, we run the risk of having our garrison force, Tom and me, captured while he's making the return trip. In that case, their side winds up in possession of important information concerning our personnel and equipment, while our side has only the bare knowledge that somebody or something else has a base on the Moon. So our primary need is more information.

"Therefore, I suggest that I sit in the dome on one end of a telephone hookup with Tom, who will sit in the ship, his hand over the firing button, ready to blast off for Earth the moment he gets the order from me. Monroe will take the single-seater down to the Riphaen Mountains, landing as close to the other dome as he thinks safe. He will then proceed the rest of the way on foot, doing the best scouting job he can in a spacesuit.

"He will not use his radio, except for agreed-upon nonsense syllables to designate landing the single-seater, coming upon the dome by foot, and warning me to tell Tom to take off. If he's captured, remembering that the first purpose of a scout is acquiring and transmitting knowledge of the enemy, he will snap his suit radio on full volume and pass on as much data as time and the enemy's reflexes permit. How does that sound to you?"

They both nodded. As far as they were concerned, the command decision had been made. But I was sitting under two inches of sweat.

"One question," Tom said. "Why did you pick Monroe for the scout?"

"I was afraid you'd ask that," I told him. "We're three extremely unathletic Ph.D.s who have been in the Army since we finished our schooling. There isn't too much choice. But I remembered that Monroe is half Indian--Arapahoe, isn't it, Monroe?--and I'm hoping blood will tell."

"Only trouble, Colonel," Monroe said slowly as he rose, "is that I'm one-fourth Indian and even that.... Didn't I ever tell you that my great-grandfather was the only Arapahoe scout who was with Custer at the Little Big Horn? He'd been positive Sitting Bull was miles away. However, I'll do my best. And if I heroically don't come back, would you please persuade the Security Officer of our section to clear my name for use in the history books? Under the circumstances, I think it's the least he could do."

I promised to do my best, of course.

After he took off, I sat in the dome over the telephone connection to Tom and hated myself for picking Monroe to do the job. But I'd have hated myself just as much for picking Tom. And if anything happened and I had to tell
Tom to blast off, I'd probably be sitting here in the dome all by myself after that, waiting....

"Broz neggle!" came over the radio in Monroe's resonant voice. He had landed the single-seater.

I didn't dare use the telephone to chat with Tom in the ship, for fear I might miss an important word or phrase from our scout. So I sat and sat and strained my ears. After a while, I heard "Mishgashu!" which told me that Monroe was in the neighborhood of the other dome and was creeping toward it under cover of whatever boulders were around.

[illustration]

And then, abruptly, I heard Monroe yell my name and there was a terrific clattering in my headphones. Radio interference! He'd been caught, and whoever had caught him had simultaneously jammed his suit transmitter with a larger transmitter from the alien dome.

Then there was silence.

After a while, I told Tom what had happened. He just said, "Poor Monroe." I had a good idea of what his expression was like.

"Look, Tom," I said, "if you take off now, you still won't have anything important to tell. After capturing Monroe, whatever's in that other dome will come looking for us, I think. I'll let them get close enough for us to learn something of their appearance--at least if they're human or non-human. Any bit of information about them is important. I'll shout it up to you and you'll still be able to take off in plenty of time. All right?"

"You're the boss, Colonel," he said in a mournful voice. "Lots of luck."

And then there was nothing to do but wait. There was no oxygen system in the dome yet, so I had to squeeze up a sandwich from the food compartment in my suit. I sat there, thinking about the expedition. Nine years, and all that careful secrecy, all that expenditure of money and mind-cracking research--and it had come to this. Waiting to be wiped out, in a blast from some unimaginable weapon. I understood Monroe's last request. We often felt we were so secret that our immediate superiors didn't even want us to know what we we were working on. Scientists are people--they wish for recognition, too. I was hoping the whole expedition would be written up in the history books, but it looked unpromising.

* * * * *

Two hours later, the scout ship landed near the dome. The lock opened and, from where I stood in the open door of our dome, I saw Monroe come out and walk toward me.

I alerted Tom and told him to listen carefully. "It may be a trick--he might be drugged...."

He didn't act drugged, though--not exactly. He pushed his way past me and sat down on a box to one side of the dome. He put his booted feet up on another, smaller box.

"How are you, Ben?" he asked. "How's every little thing?"

I grunted. "Well?" I know my voice skittered a bit.

He pretended puzzlement. "Well what? Oh, I see what you mean. The other dome--you want to know who's in it. You have a right to be curious, Ben. Certainly. The leader of a top-secret expedition like this--Project Hush they call us, huh, Ben--finds another dome on the Moon. He thinks he's been the first to land on it, so naturally he wants to--"

"Major Monroe Gridley!" I rapped out. "You will come to attention and deliver your report. Now!" Honestly, I felt my neck swelling up inside my helmet.

Monroe just leaned back against the side of the dome. "That's the Army way of doing things," he commented admiringly. "Like the recruits say, there's a right way, a wrong way and an Army way. Only there are other ways, too." He chuckled. "Lots of other ways."

"He's off," I heard Tom whisper over the telephone. "Ben, Monroe has gone and blown his stack."

"They aren't extraterrestrials in the other dome, Ben," Monroe volunteered in a sudden burst of sanity. "No, they're human, all right, and from Earth. Guess where."

"I'll kill you," I warned him. "I swear I'll kill you, Monroe. Where are they from--Russia, China, Argentina?"

He grimaced. "What's so secret about those places? Go on!--guess again."

I stared at him long and hard. "The only place else--"

"Sure," he said. "You got it, Colonel. The other dome is owned and operated by the Navy. The goddam United States Navy!"
By Tom Leahy

Pettigill was, you might say, in tune with the world. It wouldn't even have been an exaggeration to say the world was in tune with Pettigill. Then somebody struck a sour note....

The little man said, "Why, Mr. Bartle, come in. This is indeed a pleasure." His pinched face was lighted with an enthusiastic smile.

"You know my name, so I suppose you know the Bulletin sent me for a personality interview," the tall man who stood in the doorway said in a monotone as if it were a statement he had made a thousand times--which he had.

"Oh, certainly, Mr. Bartle. I was informed by Section Secretary Andrews this morning. I must say, I am greatly honored by this visit, too. Oh heavens, here I am letting you stand in the doorway. Excuse my discourtesy, sir--come in, come in," the little man said, and bustled the bored Bartle into a great room.

The walls of the room were lined by gray metal boxes that had spools of reproduction tape mounted on their vertical fronts--tape recorders, hundreds of them.

"I have a rather lonely occupation, Mr. Bartle, and sometimes the common courtesies slip my mind. It is a rather grievous fault and I beg you to overlook it. It is a rather distressing to me if Section Secretary Andrews were to hear of it; he has a rather intolerant attitude toward such faux pas. Do you understand what I mean? Not that I'm dissatisfied with my superior--perish the thought, it's just that--"

"Don't worry, I won't breathe a word," the tall man interrupted without looking at the babbling fellow shuffling along at his side. "Mr. Pettigill, I don't want to keep you from your work for too long, so I'll just get a few notes and make up the bulk of the story back at the paper." Bartle searched the room with his eyes. "Don't you have a chair in this place?"

"Oh, my gracious, yes. There goes that old discourtesy again, eh?" the little man, Pettigill, said with a dry laugh. He scurried about the room like a confused squirrel until he spotted a chair behind his desk. "My chair. My chair for you, Mr. Bartle!" Again the dry laugh.

"Thanks, Mr. Pettigill."

"Arthur. Call me Arthur. Formality really isn't necessary among Mid Echelon, do you think? Section Secretary Andrews has often requested I call him Morton, but I just can't seem to bring myself to such informality. After all, he is Sub-Prime Echelon. It makes one uncomfortable, shall we say, to step out of one's class?" He stopped talking and the corners of his mouth dropped quickly as if he had just been given one minute to live. "You--you are only Mid Echelon, aren't you? I mean, if you are Sub-Prime, I shouldn't be--"

"Relax, Mr. Pettigill--'Arthur'--I am Mid Echelon. And I'm only that because my father was a man of far more industry than I; I inherited my classification."

"So? Well, now. Interesting--very. He must have been a great man, a great man, Mr. Bartle."

"So I am told, Arthur. But let's get on with it," Bartle said, taking some scrap paper and a pencil stub from his tunic pocket. "Now, tell me about yourself and the Melopsych Center."

"Well," the little man began with a sigh and blinked his eyes peculiarly as though he were mentally shuffling events and facts like a deck of cards. "Well, I--my life would be of little interest, but the Center is of the utmost importance. That's it--I am no more than a physical extremity that functions in accord with the vital life that courses through the great physique of the Center! No more--I ask no more than to serve the Center and in turn, my fellow citizens, whether they be Prime, Sub-Prime, Mid, or even Sub-Lower!"

He stopped speaking, affecting a martyr-like pose. Bartle covered a smile with his hand.

"Well," the little man began with a sigh and blinked his eyes peculiarly as though he were mentally shuffling events and facts like a deck of cards. "Well, I--my life would be of little interest, but the Center is of the utmost importance. That's it--I am no more than a physical extremity that functions in accord with the vital life that courses through the great physique of the Center! No more--I ask no more than to serve the Center and in turn, my fellow citizens, whether they be Prime, Sub-Prime, Mid, or even Sub-Lower!"

Bartle was straining to follow the train of thought that was lost in the camouflage of Pettigill's flowery phraseology.

"You see all about you these many recorders, Mr. Bartle?"

Bartle nodded.

"On those machines, sir, are spools of tape. Music tapes, all music. My heavens, every kind: classical music, jazz, western, all kinds of music. Some tapes are no more than a single melodious note, sustained for whatever length of time necessary to relax and please the Echelon level home it is being beamed to. Oh, I tell you, Mr. Bartle, when the last tape has expended itself for the day, as our service code suggests, I leave this great edifice with a
feeling of profound pride in the fact that I have so served my fellow man. You share that feeling too, don't you Mr. Bartle?"

Bartle shrugged. Pettigill paused and looked at the watch he carried on a long chain attached to a clasp on his tunic.

"A Benz chronometer, given to me by Section Secretary Andrews on the completion of my twenty-five years of service. It's radio-synchronized with the master timepiece in Greenland. It gives me a feeling of close communion with my superiors, if you understand what I mean."

Bartle did not. He said, "Am I keeping you from your work? If I am, I believe I can fill in on most of this back at the paper; we have files on the Center's operation."

The little man hurriedly put out a hand to restrain Bartle who was easing out of the chair.

"Not yet, Mr. Bartle," he said, suddenly much more sober. Then his incongruous pomposity appeared again. "My gracious, no, you aren't keeping me from my work. I just must start the Mid-Lower Echelon tape. It won't take a moment. Tonight, they receive 'Concerto For Ass's Jawbone.' Sounds rather ridiculous, doesn't it? Be that as it may, there is a certain stimulation in its rhythmic cacophony. Aboriginality--yes, I would say it arouses a primitive exaltation."

He flicked a switch above the recorder, turned a knob, and pressed the starter button on the machine. The tape began winding slowly from one spool to another.

"Is it 'casting'?

'Bartle asked. "I don't hear a thing."

Pettigill laughed. "My stars, no; you can't hear it. See--" He pointed at a needle doing a staccato dance on the meter face of the machine. "That tells me everything is operating properly. Mass Psych advises us never to listen to 'casts. The selections were designed by them for specific social and intellectual levels. It could cause us to experience a rather severe emotional disturbance."

A peculiar look came over Bartle's face. "Is there ever a time when all the machines run at once? That is, when every Echelon home is tuned to the melopsych tapecasts?"

Pettigill registered surprise. "Why, certainly, Mr. Bartle. Don't you know Amendment 34206-B specifically states that all Echelon homes must receive music therapy at 2300 hours every night? Of course, different tapes to different homes."

"That's what I mean."

"Haven't you been abiding by the directive, Mr. Bartle?"

"I told you I owed my classification to my father's industry. I am definitely lax in my duties."

Pettigill laughed--almost wickedly, Bartle thought. "What I'm getting at, is," Bartle continued, "what if the wrong 'casts were channeled into the various homes?"

"I remind you, sir, I am in charge of the Center and have been for thirty years. Not even the slightest mistake of that nature has ever occurred during that time!"

"That, I can believe, Pettigill," Bartle said, his voice edged with sarcasm. "But, hypothetically, if it were to happen, what would the reaction be?"

The little man fidgeted with his watch chain. Then he leaned close to Bartle and said in a barely audible whisper, "This isn't for publication in your article, is it?"

"You don't think the Government would allow that, do you? No, this is to satisfy my own curiosity."

"Well, since we're both Mid Echelon--brothers, so to speak--I suppose we can share a secret. It will be disastrous! I firmly believe it will be disastrous, Mr. Bartle!" He moved closer to the tall man. "I recall a secret administrative directive we received here twenty years ago concerning just that. In essence, it stated that, though music therapy has its great advantages, if the pattern of performance were broken or altered, a definite erratic emotional reaction would develop on the part of the citizens! That was twenty years ago, and I shudder to think what might be the response now; especially if the 'cast were completely foreign to the recipient." He gave a little shudder to emphasize the horror of the occurrence. "It would make psychotics of the entire citizenry! That's what would happen--a nation of psychotics!"

"The fellow who didn't hear the 'miscast' would be top dog, eh, Pettigill? He could call his shots."

* * * * *

Pettigill twirled the watch chain faster between a forefinger and thumb. "No, he'd gain nothing," he said, staring as though hypnotized by the whirring, gold chain. "It would take more than one sane person to control the derelict population. Perhaps--perhaps two," he mumbled. "Yes, I think perhaps two could."

"You and who else, Pettigill?"

Pettigill stepped back and drew himself erect. "What? You actually entertain the idea th--" He laughed dryly. "Oh, you're pulling my leg, eh, Mr. Bartle."

"I suppose I am."
"Well, such a remark gives one a jolt, if you know what I mean. Even though we are speaking of a hypothetical occurrence, we must be cautious about such talk, Mr. Bartle. Although our government is a benevolent organization, it is ill-disposed toward such ideas." He cleared his throat. "Now, is there anything else I can tell you about the Center?"

Bartle arose from the chair, stuffing the scrap paper and unused pencil back in his pocket. "Thanks, no," he said, "I think this'll cover it. Oh yes, the article will appear in this Sunday's edition. Thanks, Pettigill, for giving me your time."

"Oh, I wish to thank you, Mr. Bartle. Being featured in a Bulletin article is the ultimate to a man such as I--a man whose only wishes are to serve his country and his brothers."

"I'm sure you're doing both with great efficiency," Bartle said as he apathetically shook Pettigill's hand and started toward the door.

"A moment, Mr. Bartle--" the little man called.

Bartle stopped and turned.

"I perceive, Mr. Bartle, you are a man of exceptional ability," Pettigill said and cleared his throat. "It seems a shame to waste such talent; it should be directed toward some definite goal. Do you understand what I mean? After all, we're all brothers, you know. It would be for my benefit as well as yours."

"Sure, sure, 'brother'," Bartle snorted and left.

He started for the paper office but decided to let the story go until morning. What the hell, he had a stock format for all such articles. The people were the same: selfless, heroic type, citizens working for the mutual good of all. Only the names were different. And yet, this Pettigill had disturbed him. Perhaps it was something he had said that Bartle could not remember.

* * * * *

He walked into his warm flat and extracted the pre-cooked meal from the electroven. He ate with little relish, abstractly thinking of the foolish little cog in the governmental machine he had talked with that afternoon. Or was Pettigill that foolish little cog? Bartle could not help but feel there was something deep inside him that did not show in that wizened and seemingly open little face. He thought about it the rest of the evening.

He looked at the clock on the night table--2300 hours. "Pettigill's Lullaby Hour," he thought. Bartle chuckled and switched off the bed light. He was asleep before the puffs of air had escaped from under the covers he pulled over himself.

When the phone rang at 0300, Bartle was strangely not surprised, although, consciously, he was expecting no call.

"Hello," he said sleepily.

"Bartle? This is Pettigill." The voice was Pettigill's but the nervous, timid, quality was gone. "I assume you did not hear the 2300 'cast?"

"You assume correctly, Pettigill. What d'you want?"

"Come on over to the Center; we'll split a fifth of former Section Secretary Andrews' Scotch."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Were you serious about that 'therapy revolution' we were talking about this afternoon?"

"I'm always serious. So what?"

"Excellent, excellent," Pettigill laughed. "I've spent thirty years just waiting for such a man as you! No, I'm serious, my cynical friend--what position would you like in the new government?"

"Let's see--why don't you make my descendants real peachy happy and make me, say, Administrator of Civilian Relations. That sounds big and important."

"Fine, fine! Tell me, Bartle--how are your relations with psychotics?"

Bartle leaped to the floor. Instantly he recalled what Pettigill had said that had disturbed him. When they had been discussing the repercussions of a miscast, Pettigill had said, "it will be disastrous" and not "it would be disastrous." The devil had been planning just such a thing for God knows how long!

"How many of 'em, Pettigill?" Bartle asked.

"A lot, Bartle, a lot," the little man answered. "I would say 170 million! I might even say, a nation of psychotics!" He giggled again.

A smile sliced through Bartle's sallow cheeks. "My relations with them would be the best! Keep that Scotch handy, Pettigill. I'll be right over."
It took a fierce battle with the prehistoric Cro-Magnons, and a modern wrestling match with the Russian Bear, before Oogie, the Caveman, finally won beautiful Sala for his woman.
"So don't go soft now!" Grogan said sharply. "It's in the bag, kid...."

* * * * *

Allerdyce leaned back and the chair creaked loudly at the unexpected movement.

"What's the set-up, Sam?" he asked.

"The whole troupe goes; the Bear, the Irishman, the Masked Marvel and all the others. London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow.... Yep, Oog, all eighteen of us on the European circuit.... Hey! What's wrong?"

Grogan had observed the darkening thunderhead of a frown on the wrestler's forehead.

"Sam, this may sound a bit childish because the whole thing is childish, but I don't like Ed Finster.... Now wait! I know we've been packing them in with our act, the Russian Bear and Oogie the Caveman. But Ed's been taking the deal a little more seriously than it warrants. Like tonight. He threw a double hammer on me and really used pressure. Nor was tonight the first time.

"A week ago in Omaha he almost tore my ears off with a headlock...."

Sam Grogan beamed. Allerdyce didn't know it but Sam had been the motivating force behind the grudge which had developed between the two men. Finster had complained one night that the public didn't like him, said that the name he had been given made them mad. Sam had mentioned the name was Oogie's idea. Finster then took personal exception to it and made a personal issue out of it. So the grudge begun in jest developed until it was noticeable to the rest of the troupe.

Grogan chuckled and in a few words made clear how the thing started. But the smile was wiped from his lips at Allerdyce's words:

"Too late now, Sam. I'd just as soon forget it but not Ed. He's got that excuse for a brain thinking the whole thing is real. I'd suggest you get to work on him before it's too late altogether...."

"That bad, huh? Maybe I'd better straighten the yuk out...."

* * * * *

Flight 243 was well out over the Atlantic, thirty thousand feet below. The super-cruiser Orion of the TWP lines held a full complement of passengers among whom was the wrestling circus of Sam Grogan and his partner Algernon Allerdyce, more affectionately known to the wrestling public as Oogie the Caveman.

The hour was for sleep and everyone but two were observing it. These two, Allerdyce and Finster, were in the lounge, playing gin. Finster had challenged Allerdyce to a couple of games to pass the time. But those two games had long been played. Finster played a wild and woolly game, never remembering discards, or trying knocks when they would be to his advantage, but always playing for gin. So it was that Allerdyce had won almost every game. And since they were playing for a cent a point, Finster was out money. That was why they were still playing while the rest had gone to bed.

"... I'll knock with two, Ed," Allerdyce said.

"Now why the hell didn't you give that ten!" Finster yelled. He held up the discard and looked at it with savage eyes. "That would have ginned me...."

Allerdyce shrugged his shoulders and replied:

"That's what I figured. Well, Ed, let's call it quits, huh?"

"Sure! Call it quits when you got me stuck for dough. But that's the way you operate. Why you yellah...."

It was at that instant the horror descended on the Orion. There was a screaming cacophonous whirlwind of sound, a shriek of metal parting, flames suddenly bursting into full bloom, and the thin voices of men and women in mortal fear. Above all there was a whooshing noise, as though a giant hand was gripping them. Finster and Allerdyce felt themselves lifted from the depths of the ship and plunged into a maelstrom of storm in space.

For a full ten seconds Algernon Allerdyce looked into the face of terror beyond words, then unconsciousness descended on him....

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The air was hot and damp and the slight breeze which fanned his cheek was of little solace. Allerdyce turned his head from side to side; a quiver stirred the heavy frame of his body, and awareness came in a rush to him as he opened his eyes. He sat erect and looked about him.

A figure lay sprawled on the ground some ten feet away. It was that of a man and one glance showed Allerdyce that the man was Ed Finster and that he was alive, though not yet conscious. Allerdyce rose to his feet and grunted at the effort. It seemed as if every bone and muscle creaked and groaned in protest. Awe and amazement made his brows lift and his eyes widen as he looked about. The two men had fallen among some ferns in a shallow glade bound about by dense jungle growth. Allerdyce caught a glimpse of hills in the near distance. Then he saw Finster stir and he stepped to the other's side.

"Wha-what happened?" Finster asked while he turned his head from one side to the other.

"I don't know exactly," Allerdyce replied in a low voice. "But I'm going to make a guess, fantastic as it may
sound. I think we fell or were sucked into a space fault. From the looks of this jungle and from the feel of the atmosphere, I'll bet we've landed in a time long before the dawn of men such as we know...."

And as though in corroboration there came to their ears a low, grunting sound. Instantly Finster leaped to his feet and jumped the several feet to the side of the other. The sharp movement brought another coughing grunt, this time from the opposite side. And as they watched, a huge striped shape stepped into the open from the depths of the thick jungle growth. It was fully ten feet long and high as their shoulders, and the head of it was that of a tiger but such as they had never seen, for twin tusks, a foot long protruded down the length of the jowls....

"A saber tooth!" Allerdyce whispered hoarsely.

Ed Finster could only stare in open-mouthed horror at the thing. His muscled jaws began to quiver as the tiger began a sinuous advance toward them, and then, as the animal suddenly crouched in preparation for its leap, Finster screamed.

But the tiger never moved from his crouch. As if by magic a half dozen spears pierced its sides and two found a resting place in the tiger's throat. Then the silence was broken by the hoarse shouts of human voices, and a dozen men leaped into the glade and advanced on the two.

"Cro-Magnons," Allerdyce said aloud.

They were tall, broad-shouldered, deep of chest and long of limb. The skins of wild animals covered their nakedness. Their faces showed intelligence, though it was all too apparent that it was limited. But whatever speculations about their origin was in Allerdyce's mind, were wiped from it by their attitudes. They were definitely hostile. Most of them were armed with spears, as if those they had hurled were just one of a number they carried. Those who bore no spears, held clubs from the heads of which wooden spikes stuck out in vicious fingers of anger.

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Allerdyce acted from instinct. His right hand shot up to the height of his head and stuck out in front of his face. At that the advancing cavemen stopped and looked at each other. There were gutteral sounds of consultation, then the largest most-fearsome stepped forward and moved toward the two until he was at arm's length.

"Who are you?" he asked. "What do you here in the land of Ugg the Mighty? From whence come you?"

Allerdyce's mind worked at lightning speed. The solution to their problem lay in but a single direction, whatever their position. He looked up to the cloudless, sun-scorched sky and said:

"From the Great Spirit we come. For see ... are we not different than you? So we were sent to look into the affairs of the Great Spirit's children...."

The caveman knitted his brows, shook his head in wonder, then, as a child does at an elder's invitation to inspect a doll, he stepped forward and fingered the suiting of the two men. Little clucking sounds came from the lips as he did so. Then whisking, he shouted:

"The Great Spirit has sent them! Let us do them honor...."

At the same time Allerdyce whispered, "Don't act scared," to Finster.

Their leader's words were as a signal for the rest. They came forward in dancing steps, raising their spears and clubs on high and shouting gleefully words of exultation and praise of their leader Ugg. They surrounded the two strangers and after a while became more and more rocky as the upland sweep began. Quite suddenly Ugg stopped, his head tilting to one side in a listening attitude and one hand held in warning.

The others, with the two strangers in their midst, crowded close.

"Sobar!" Ugg grunted hoarsely. "He is after our young and women. Listen...."

They heard it then, shouts and screams from up above. But what was going on was hidden from them. Ahead lay a narrow cleft between two sides of sheer rock some fifty feet high. The way on the right was clear though at a strong angle. Ugg motioned for Allerdyce to follow and the two climbed to the top of the rock where they lay on their bellies and looked slightly downward at the scene. Ahead were some dozen caves and a common compound. Men were struggling here and there but for the most part those were few. The screams came from the caves. In a matter of seconds men appeared, dragging after them the women and some children. When a woman failed to go along too readily or when one of the men lost his patience, the club was used. Ugg nudged Allerdyce and motioned with a silent shake of the head for them to return.

"... It is the tribe of Sobar," Ugg explained to his men. "They must have learned I sent my son, Ugg the Younger, on a hunting expedition with most of the tribe and that we few went on the hunt for the saber-tooth. They are too many for us...."

"But they must come through the cleft in the rock," Allerdyce said. "We can lie in wait for them. Hidden, they
cannot know how many we are and when the spears are thrown they will think they have been ambushed."

"But there are only the few of us," Ugg objected.

"Even a few will be enough."

But Ugg had an even better idea:

"They will not fear us. But the Spirits.... They will run from you after they see how little their weapons do against you...."

Now we're in for it, Allerdyce thought. Right in the middle. If we don't, these boys will let us have it. If we do, the others will. And what is worse we can't ask for weapons.... H'm! Maybe.... An idea had come to him, a silly idea. Yet if it succeeded....

"Come on, Ed," he said, turning to Finster. "Follow my lead, fellah. Otherwise...."

He didn't have to finish. The other understood.

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Allerdyce felt the quiver in his legs and arms as they reached the top of the cleft. One look and he saw the enemy tribe was about to descend. They saw the two men at the same time. For a long moment the modern and the prehistoric stared at each other. It was the modern who made the first move:

"Men of Sobar!" Allerdyce shouted. "Hear me!"

There were a full fifty of them. Three of them stepped forward, spears held ready for the throwing. One of them was a giant of a man, a full seven feet tall and wide as a barn door.

"Who calls Sobar," the giant asked.

"I do," Allerdyce replied. "The messenger of the Great Spirit...." He hoped Sobar knew of this Great Spirit. "He has sent me because Sobar has displeased him...."

For a few seconds silence reigned. Then the giant stepped forward a few more steps, and his brow tight in a scowl of anger, asked:

"I do not believe you. You look like one of the swamp people, face of an ape...."

Allerdyce felt the brittle coldness of a terrible anger sweep through him. He had been called ape before. And always the one who had done the calling had suffered for his temerity. But mixed with his anger was the knowledge that death could be the result of an unwise move or word. Yet time was not on his side, for Sobar was taking the initiative and was stepping even closer and behind him the other two were also coming toward him in imitation of their leader.

"Hold!" Allerdyce suddenly called in a ringing, imperative voice. "You do not believe me, then, eh? A test, Sobar...?"

The other was silent, waiting for the stranger to continue.

"Drop your weapon," Allerdyce said. "You and I, unarmed, to the death...."

Then gone was the scowl, gone the furrowed brow. Here was meat to Sobar's liking. Here was something he was not frightened of. Spirit or man, Sobar was not afraid of combat of arms. Flinging the spear to one side Sobar motioned for the other to come to him.

Allerdyce made a feint to come in low but the other merely waited, arms wide, legs spread, and body shifting from the waist. Once again Allerdyce feinted, and as Sobar's body shifted to the side the other seemed to want to come from, Allerdyce leaped forward and grabbed Sobar by his right wrist and using the hand as a lever pivoted on it until he was behind the giant. Then Allerdyce began to exert pressure in a hammerlock.

All the while he had been moving the giant had been still, as if confused. But as pain came in a rush to his shoulder blade, he moved. Never had Allerdyce felt such strength. For though the wrestler was using all his strength on the grip, Sobar broke it with one gigantic movement of his huge body.

Allerdyce knew then that the rules of fair play were out. This prehistoric baby was dynamite.... Allerdyce staggered away from the other but recovered quickly as the giant came in, both arms outstretched. And once again Allerdyce grasped one of those huge wrists. Only it was in a judo grip this time, a grip where when a man tries to break it, pressure simply multiplies until either the arm breaks or one cries quits. In this case Sobar waited too long.

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Even as his face contorted in pain Allerdyce whipped around to one side and delivered a blow with the side of his palm to the side of Sobar's neck. The crack of the breaking neck was like that of a branch breaking. Sobar pitched to his face and lay still.

Instantly Ugg leaped to Allerdyce's side.

"Your chieftain was bested in fair play!" he shouted to the warriors of Sobar's tribe. "By our laws you have now become our prisoners."

"But not by mine!" a strange voice yelled.

And before Allerdyce could do more than turn, Finster was on him. What made Ed Finster do what he did was
never explained. Perhaps the realization of what had happened came to the man. Perhaps his mind, twisted by
jealousy and hate snapped at that moment. Whatever the reason, he turned on Allerdyce. It was the signal for a
general battle. For of all the cavemen who were present, only one was quick-witted enough to take advantage of the
situation. This one was one of the two who had come forward with Sobar.

He yelled:
"Gomar is now chief. One of the Spirits is on our side.... Kill Ugg and his...."

Had it been one of the cavemen attacking, Allerdyce would have managed to get away for the moment he
needed to recover. But it wasn't. It was a trained wrestler, one who knew all the tricks, who had leaped at him. So
Finster worked his surprise vantage for all it was worth.

But even then Allerdyce might have won out had it not been for Gomar's call to arms. His men forgot the booty
they had taken, the women and children and leaped forward with savage shouts, spears and clubs used
indiscriminately. Allerdyce had broken Finster's first hold, and was turning to get a grip on the other, when a club
thrown by one of the cavemen caught him a blow on the temple and stretched him senseless to the ground.

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Allerdyce's awakening this time was not as pleasant as before. Someone was kicking him in the face. He
opened his eyes, one of them anyway. The other was closed shut. He was in a cave. It was a smelly cave, the walls
blackened from the smoke of many fires. Nor was he alone. He tried to move his arms and discovered he had been
securely bound. Suddenly from behind, a foot came swinging out and pain shot up the side of his jaw as the bare
toes connected with it.

"Enough," a voice called.

"Aah! I've been wanting to do this for a long time," Ed Finster said.

There was disgust in Gomar's voice as he replied:
"The Great Spirit has small men for messengers.... Remove the other's bonds."

"Hey!" Finster yelped in protest.

But no one paid attention. Hands tore the fibre ropes loose from about Allerdyce's figure and helped him to his
feet where he stood swaying like a tree in a high wind.

"The Great Spirit sent two messengers," Gomar said. "But He had a reason. One was sent to conquer Sobar so
that I could become chief. The other was to conquer you. The light is clear.... Take him to the women...."

Only Finster laughed at the edict. He had reason for the laughter. In all the years of their association Allerdyce
had never been known to go for the fillies. And now he was to be thrown to a pack of them. With that puss, Finster
thought, they'd throw him right back.

Spear points pressed against his back, a rope around his wrists, and while the rest walked behind, one man led
Allerdyce from the cave into the open, across a level stretch of ground and into a very large cave. Here his wrists
were unbound and to the jibes and laughter of the warriors who had accompanied him, Allerdyce was shoved into
the cave proper itself.

The cave was immense, and seemed to be filled entirely with women and children. For a second there was
silence. Then as their eyes saw this almost naked stranger, a wild shriek of laughter went up. Hands went out,
pointing to his shorts which seemed to be all the clothing he had, to his face, puffed into a gargoylish mask, and to
his hairy chest, which looked like the stuffing of a mattress.

Allerdyce stared in horror at the women, turned and started for the cave entrance. But the cavemen had
anticipated his move. They stood guard, spears thrust point forward, and after a few hesitant seconds, Allerdyce
turned back.

But now they were no longer scattered about the cave. They came over in a rush, forcing him to the wall, his
hands pawing in futile attempts to prevent them from touching him. For some reason this made them angry. Their
hands clenched and spiteful words came from their lips, and several turned aside and called something to the
children, who after a moment returned, with stones and sticks.

"Hey!" Allerdyce called in alarm. "Take it easy...."

The alarm in his voice was the signal for them to attack. In a moment he was the center of a mob of women all
bent, it seemed, on his destruction. He fought at first as gently as he could. But as some of the stones hit and some of
the clubs struck vulnerable parts of his anatomy, he fought with less gentleness. Finally, he was forced to club one of
the women with his fist. She went flying backward and landed flat on her back.

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Instantly the attack ceased.

He watched them move away from him and wondered why. His question was answered as the woman he had
struck crawled to him and embraced his legs. He tried to withdraw her hands but she held only tighter and said:
"We are mated. You made the choice. I am Sala...."
"You're nuts!" Allerdyce said sharply. He turned to call the guards to help him with the woman when he discovered that they were gone.

"Are customs different in your tribe?" Sala asked. "Do you not mate with a woman in this manner?"

The beginning of a hope came to him in a rush as he realized the consequences of what had happened. He was free now. He tried to put the proper authority in his voice, when he said:

"Go woman! Find me a corner and bring me food...."

Without the slightest hesitation Sala rose and trotted to a far corner of the cave. Allerdyce followed and squatted beside her. He had always been a shy man and had never known many women, especially women with as little clothes as Sala wore. She was beautiful by any standard he thought. But only for a moment. His thoughts for the first time centered on his predicament.

His mind allowed for but a single conclusion. That the plane had run into a time-fault and that he and Ed Finster had been drawn into it. The others must have died in the plane crash. Since the giant ship was over the Atlantic at the time of the crash it was reasonable to assume that time only was involved and not space. Therefore, by the same line of reasoning, he and Ed were to be here for the rest of their lives. That is unless somehow they found the same fault again. But that was not probable, he realized.

For a moment fear lay heavy on him. Then the scientist came uppermost. What an opportunity he had. A man of science among these children. The chance to build a civilization. It could be done with his knowledge. But first he had to get the power over these people.

Sala came back just then with what looked like the leg of a rabbit. It was very underdone but Allerdyce didn't quibble. If he were going to live as they did then he might as well start right there.

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Three days went by and nothing changed. He learned all about his mate. She had been one of Ugg's tribe. Now she was part of the tribe of Gomar. It was that simple. She was a tigress when she thought another woman was even looking at her mate and fought with the savagery of a beast for him. And he had been granted his freedom with his acquisition of a mate. He learned to hunt as the others did, with spear and club. But already he had fashioned his first bow and arrow, and knew it would be a matter of time before he was taught the rest. There was but one fly in the ointment, Ed Finster. As yet he had no mate. And he looked with avaricious eyes on Sala.

It was on the fourth day.

Allerdyce had returned from the hunt. He had killed an animal with his arrow and the tribe looked on him with respect. As he neared his cave he heard shrieks of pain and anger. And as he watched with amazement, Ed Finster appeared, dragging Sala by her hair. His action was instinctive. Rushing forward, he threw his bow to one side and knocked Ed to the ground.

Immediately a circle of warriors were drawn about the two men and Gomar stepped forward.

"It is time," he said. "I have wondered about this. A combat of arms will settle it. Whoever wins will have the woman ... and his freedom."

As they stood facing each other, Finster turned aside as though to say something to Gomar. Allerdyce relaxed naturally. But Finster had done it with that view in mind. Like a flash he whirled on Allerdyce and grabbed a headlock. It would have ended right then had not both men been barefoot. For Allerdyce had not stiffened his neck muscles. But Finster stepped on a thorn and the shock made him loosen his grip for an instant. It was enough for Allerdyce to break free.

There were no more surprises.

Bit by bit Allerdyce wore the other down. At last he straddled Finster, who lay face down on the ground. Then Allerdyce grabbed the other by the shock of black hair, pulled his neck up until he could get his arm under it. Then slowly, using all his strength, Allerdyce pulled back until after a moment there was a sharp crack. Finister would be no more trouble.

Algernon Allerdyce rose and throwing his head back let out a bellow of triumph, and knew then he was no longer Algernon Allerdyce. He was in fact Oogie the Caveman, replete with wife. For Sala had been the first to rush to his side. And as he threw his arms around her he knew love had come to him. She was his and woe betide the one who tried to take her from him.

But when Gomar stepped to his side and asked:

"This sliver of wood you made and the bow of elk thong.... Could you make another for me...?" Oogie the Caveman knew his life had begun in earnest....

THE END
The remarkable thing about Atummyc Afterbath Dusting Powder was that it gave you that lovely, radiant, atomic look—just the way the advertisements said it would. In fact, it also gave you a little something more!

The advertising game is not as cut and dried as many people think. Sometimes you spend a million dollars and get no results, and then some little low-budget campaign will catch the public’s fancy and walk away with merchandising honors of the year.

Let me sound a warning, however. When this happens, watch out! There's always a reason for it, and it isn't always just a matter of bright slogans and semantic genius. Sometimes the product itself does the trick. And when this happens people in the industry lose their heads trying to capitalize on the “freak” good fortune.

This can lead to disaster. May I cite one example?

I was on loan to Elaine Templeton, Inc., the big cosmetics firm, when one of these “prairie fires” took off and, as product engineer from the firm of Bailey Hazlitt & Persons, Advertising Agency, I figured I had struck pure gold. My assay was wrong. It was fool's gold on a pool of quicksand.

Madame "Elaine", herself, had called me in for consultation on a huge lipstick campaign she was planning—you know, NOW AT LAST, A TRULY KISS-PROOF LIPSTICK!—the sort of thing they pull every so often to get the ladies to chuck their old lip-goo and invest in the current dream of non-smearability. It's an old gimmick, and the new product is never actually kiss-proof, but they come closer each year, and the gals tumble for it every time.

Well, they wanted my advice on a lot of details such as optimum shades, a new name, size, shape and design of container. And they were ready to spend a hunk of moolah on the build-up. You see, when they give a product a first-class advertising ride they don't figure on necessarily showing a profit on that particular item. If they break even they figure they are ahead of the game, because the true purpose is to build up the brand name. You get enough women raving over the new Elaine Templeton lipstick, and first thing you know sales start climbing on the whole line of assorted aids to seduction.

Since E. T., Inc., was one of our better accounts, the old man told me to take as long as was needed, so I moved in to my assigned office, in the twelve-story E. T. building, secretary, Scotch supply, ice-bags, ulcer pills and all, and went to work setting up my survey staff. This product engineering is a matter of "cut and try" in some fields. You get some ideas, knock together some samples, try them on the public with a staff of interviewers, tabulate the results, draw your conclusions and hand them over to Production with a prayer. If your ad budget is large enough your prayer is usually answered, because the American Public buys principally on the "we know what we like, and we like what we know" principle. Make them "know it" and they'll buy it. Maybe in love, absence makes the heart grow fonder, but in this business, familiarity breeds nothing but sales.

Madame Elaine had a fair staff of idea boys, herself. In fact, every other department head had some gimmick he was trying to push to get personal recognition. The Old Hag liked this spirit of initiative and made it plain to me I was to give everyone a thorough hearing.

This is one of the crosses you have to bear. Everyone but the janitor was swarming into my office with suggestions, and more than half of them had nothing to do with the lipstick campaign at all. So I dutifully listened to each one, had my girl take impressive notes and then lifted my left or my right eyebrow at her. My left eyebrow meant file them in the wastebasket. This is how the Atummyc Afterbath Dusting Powder got lost in the shuffle, and later I was credited with launching a new item on which I didn't even have a record.

It came about this way:

* * * * *

Just before lunch one day, one of the Old Hag's promotion-minded pixies flounced her fanny into my interview chair, crossed her knees up to her navel and began selling me her pet project. She was a relative of the Madame as well as a department head, so I had to listen.

Her idea was corny—a new dusting powder with "Atummion" added, to be called, "Atummyc Afterbath Dusting Powder"—"Atummyc", of course, being a far-fetched play on the word "atomic". What delighted her especially was that the intimate, meaningful word "tummy" occurred in her coined trade name, and this was supposed to do wonders in stimulating the imaginations of the young females of man-catching-age.

[Illustration]

As I said, the idea was corny. But the little hazel-eyed pixie was not. She was about 24, black-haired, small-
waisted and bubbling with hormones. With her shapely knees and low-cut neckline she was a pleasant change of
scenery from the procession of self-seeking middle-agers I had been interviewing—not that her motive was any
different.

I stalled a little to feast my eyes. "This Atummion Added item," I said, "just what is Atummion?"

"That's my secret," she said, squinching her eyes at me like a fun-loving little cobra. "My brother is assistant
head chemist, and he's worked up a formula of fission products we got from the Atomic Energy Commission for
experimentation."

"Fission products!" I said. "That stuff's dangerous!"

"Not this formula," she assured me, "Bob says there's hardly any radiation to it at all. Perfectly harmless."

"Then what's it supposed to do?" I inquired naively.

She stood up, placed one hand on her stomach and the other behind her head, wiggled and stretched.

"Atummyc Bath Powder will give milady that wonderful, vibrant, atomic feeling," she announced in a voice
dripping with innuendo.

"All right," I said, "that's what it's supposed to do. Now what does it really do?"

"Smells good and makes her slippery-dry, like any other talcum," she admitted quite honestly. "It's the name
and the idea that will put it across."

"And half a million dollars," I reminded her. "I'm afraid the whole thing is a little too far off the track to
consider at this time. I'm here to make a new lipstick go. Maybe later--"

"I appreciate that, but honestly, don't you think it's a terrific idea?"

"I think you're terrific," I told her, raising my left eyebrow at my secretary, "and we'll get around to you one of
these days."

"Oh, Mr. Sanders!" she said, exploding those big eyes at me and shoving a half-folded sheet of paper at me.

"Would you please sign my interview voucher?"

In Madame Elaine's organization you had to have a written "excuse" for absenting yourself from your
department during working hours. I supposed that the paper I signed was no different from the others. Anyway, I
was still blinded by the atomic blast of those hazel eyes.

After she left I got to thinking it was strange that she had me sign the interview receipt. I couldn't remember
having done that for any other department heads.

I didn't tumble to the pixie's gimmick for a whole month, then I picked up the phone one day and the old man
spilled the news. "I thought you were making lipstick over there. What's this call for ad copy on a new bath
powder?"

The incident flashed back in my mind, and rather than admit I had been by-passed I lied, "You know the
Madame. She always gets all she can for her money."

The old man muttered, "I don't see taking funds from the lipstick campaign and splitting them off into little
projects like this," he said. "Twenty-five thousand bucks would get you one nice spread in the Post, but what kind of
a one-shot campaign would that be?"

I mumbled excuses, hung up and screamed for the pixie. My secretary said, "Who?"

"Little sexy-eyes. The Atomic Bath Powder girl."

Without her name it took an hour to dig her up, but she finally popped in, plumped down and began giggling.

"You found out."

"How," I demanded, "did you arrange it?"

"Easy. Madame Elaine's in Paris. She gave you a free hand, didn't she?"

I nodded.

"Well, when you signed your okay on the Atummyc--"

"That was an interview voucher!"

"Not--exactly," she said ducking her head.

The damage was done. You don't get ahead in this game by admitting mistakes, and the production department
was already packaging and labelling samples of Atummyc Bath Powder to send out to the distributors.

I had to carve the $25,000 out of my lipstick budget and keep my mouth shut. When the ad copy came over
from my firm I looked it over, shuddered at the quickie treatment they had given it and turned it loose. Things were
beginning to develop fast in my lipstick department, and I didn't have time to chase the powder thing like I should
have--since it was my name on the whole damned project.

So I wrote off the money and turned to other things.

We were just hitting the market with Madame Elaine Templeton's "Kissmet" when the first smell of smoke
came my way. The pixie came into my office one morning and congratulated me.
"You're a genius!" she said.
"Like the Kissmet campaign, do you?" I said pleased.
"It stinks," she said holding her nose. "But Atummyc Bath Powder will pull you out of the hole."
"Oh, that," I said. "When does it go to market?"
"Done went--a month ago."
"What? Why you haven't had time to get it out of the lab yet. Using a foreign substance, you should have had an exhaustive series of allergy skin tests on a thousand women before--"
"I've been using it for two months myself," she said. "And look at me! See any rashes?"
I focussed my eyes for the first time, and what I saw made me wonder if I were losing my memory. The pixie had been a pretty little French pastry from the first, but now she positively glowed. Her skin even had that "radiant atomic look", right out of our corny, low-budget ad copy.
"What--have you done to yourself, fallen in love?"
"With Atummyc After Bath Powder," she said smugly. "And so have the ladies. The distributors are all reordering."
Well, these drug sundries houses have some sharp salesmen out, and I figured the bath powder must have caught them needing something to promote. It was a break. If we got the $25,000 back it wouldn't hurt my alibi a bit, in case the Kissmet production failed to click.
Three days later the old man called me from the New York branch of our agency. "Big distributor here is hollering about the low budget we've given to this Atummyc Bath Powder thing," he said. "He tells me his men have punched it hard and he thinks it's catching on pretty big. Maybe you better talk the Madame out of a few extra dollars."
"The Old Hag's in Europe," I told him, "and I'm damned if I'll rob the Kissmet Lipstick deal any more. It's mostly spent anyway."
The old man didn't like it. When you get the distributors on your side it pays to back them up, but I was too nervous about the wobbly first returns we were getting on the Kissmet campaign to consider taking away any of the unspent budget and throwing it into the bath powder deal.
The next day I stared at an order from a west coast wholesaler and began to sweat. The pixie fluttered it under my nose. "Two more carloads of Atummyc Bath Powder," she gloated.
"Two more carloads?"
"Certainly. All the orders are reading carloads," she said. "This thing has busted wide open."
And it had. Everybody, like I said earlier, lost their head. The bath-powder plant was running three shifts and had back-orders chin high. The general manager, a joker name of Jennings, got excited, cabled Madame Elaine to get back here pronto, which she did, and then the panic was on.
The miracle ingredient was this Atummion, and if Atummion sold bath powder why wouldn't it sell face-cream, rouge, mud-packs, shampoos, finger-nail polish and eye-shadow?
For that matter, the Old Hag wanted to know, why wouldn't it sell Kissmet Lipstick?
The answer was, of course, that the magic legend "Contains the Exclusive New Beauty Aid, Atummion" did sell these other products. Everything began going out in carload lots as soon as we had the new labels printed, and to be truthful, I breathed a wondrous sigh of relief, because up to that moment my Kissmet campaign had promised to fall flat on its lying, crimson face.
* * * * *
The staggering truth about Atummion seeped in slowly. Item one: Although we put only a pinch of it in a whole barrel of talcun powder, it did give the female users a terrific complexion! Pimples, black-heads, warts, freckles and even minor scars disappeared after a few weeks, and from the very first application users mailed us testimonials swearing to that "atomic feeling of loveliness".
Item two: About one grain of Atummion to the pound of lipstick brought out the natural color of a woman's lips and maintained it there even after the lipstick was removed.
Item three: There never was such a shampoo. For once the ad copywriters failed to exceed the merits of their product. Atummion-tinted hair took on a sparkling look, a soft texture and a natural-appearing wave that set beauty-operators screaming for protection.
These beauticians timed their complaint nicely. It got results on the morning that the whole thing began to fall to pieces.
About ten A. M. Jennings called a meeting of all people concerned in the Atummyc Powder project, and they included me as well as the pixie and her brother, the assistant chemist.
Everyone was too flushed with success to take Jennings' opening remark too seriously. "It looks like we've got a winner that's about to lose us our shirts," he said.
He shuffled some papers and found the one he wanted to hit us with first. "The beauticians claim we are
dispensing a dangerous drug without prescription. They have brought suits to restrain our use."

Madame Elaine in her mannishly tailored suit was standing by a window staring out. She said, "The beauticians
never gave us any break, anyway. Hell with what's next?"

Jennings lifted another paper. "I agree, but they sicked the Pure Food and Drug people on us. They tend to
concur."

"Let them prove it first," the Old Hag said turning to the pixie's brother. "Eh, Bob!"

"It's harmless!" he protested, but I noticed that the pixie herself, for all her radiance, had a troubled look on her
face.

The general manager lifted another paper. "Well, there seems to be enough doubt to have caused trouble. The
Pure Food and Drug labs have by-passed the courts and put in a word to the Atomic Energy Commission. The AEC
has cut off our supply of the fission salts that go into Atummion, pending tests."

That brought us all to our feet. Madame Elaine stalked back to the huge conference table and stared at Bob, the
chemist. "How much of the gunk do we have on hand?"

"About a week's supply at present production rates." He was pale, and he swallowed his adam's apple three
times.

The worst was yet to come. The pixie looked around the table peculiarly unchanged by the news. She had
trouble in her face but it had been there from the start of the conference. "I wasn't going to bring this up just yet," she
said, "but since we're here to have a good cry I might as well let you kick this one around at the same time. Maybe
you won't mind shutting down production after all."

The way she said it froze all of us except the Madame.

The Madame said, "Well, speak up! What is it?"

"I've been to twelve different doctors, including eight specialists. I've thought and thought until I'm half crazy,
and there just isn't any other answer," the pixie said.

She stared at us and clenched her fists and beat on the shiny table. "You've got to believe me! There just isn't
any other answer. Atummion is responsible for my condition, and all twelve doctors agreed on my condition."

Still standing, Madame Elaine Templeton grabbed the back of her chair until her knuckles turned white. "Don't
tell me the stuff brings on hives or something!"

The pixie threw back her head and a near-hysterical laugh throbbed from her lovely throat. "Hives, hell. I'm
pregnant!"

*** ***

Well, we were all very sorry for her, because she was unmarried, and that sort of thing is always clumsy. At
that moment, however, none of us believed the connection between her condition and Atummion.

Being a distant relative of the Madame, she was humored to the extent that we had the lab get some guinea pigs
and douse them with Elaine Templeton's After Bath Powder, and they even professed to make a daily check on
them.

Meanwhile, production ground to a halt on all Atummion-labelled products, which was everything, I think, but
the eyebrow pencils.

With every drug-store and department store in the country screaming to have their orders filled, it was a
delicate matter and took a lot of string-pulling to keep the thing off the front-pages. It wasn't the beautician's open
charges that bothered us, because everyone knew they were just disgruntled. But if it leaked out that the AEC was
disturbed enough to cut off our fission products, every radio, newspaper and TV commentator in the business would
soon make mince-meat of us over the fact that Atummion had not been adequately tested before marketing. And this
was so right!

We took our chances and submitted honest samples to the Bureau of Weights and Measures and the Pure Food
and Drug labs. And held our breath.

The morning the first report came back in our favor there was great rejoicing, but that afternoon our own
testing lab sent up a man to see Jennings, and he called me instantly.

"Sanford, get up here at once. The guinea pigs just threw five litters of babies!"


"You don't understand," he thundered at me. "This was test group F-six, all females, and every one has reached
maturity since we bought and segregated them."

"There must be some mistake," I said.

"There better be," he told me.

I went to his office and together we picked up the Madame from her penthouse suite. She followed us into the
elevator reluctantly. "Absurd, absurd!" was all she could say.
We watched the lab man check the ten adult pigs one by one. Even as inexpert as I am in such matters, it was evident that all ten were females, and the five which had not yet participated in blessed events were but hours from becoming mothers.

We went our separate ways stunned. Back in my office I pulled out a list of our big wholesale accounts where the Atummion products had been shipped by the carloads. The warehouses were distributed in every state of the union.

Then I ran my eye down the list of products which contained the devilish Atummion. There were thirty-eight, in all, including a complete line of men's toiletries, shaving lotion, shampoo, deodorant and body-dusting powder. I thanked God that men didn't have ovaries.

Dolores Donet--that was the pixie's name--opened my door and deposited herself gingerly in a chair opposite me.

I said, "You look radiant."

She said, "Don't rub it in, and I'll have a shot of that." I shared my Haig and Haig with her, and we drank to the newly departed bottom of the world.

* * * * *

My secretary tried to give me a list of people who had phoned and a stack of angry telegrams about back-orders, but I waved her away. "Dolores," I said, "there must have been a boy guinea pig loose in that pen. It's just too fantastic!"

"Are you accusing me of turning one loose just to get off the hook myself?" she snapped.

"What you've got, excuses won't cure," I told her, "but we've got to get facts. My God, if you're right--"

"We've sworn everyone to secrecy," she said. "There's a $10,000 bonus posted for each employee who knows about this. Payable when the statute of limitations runs out on possible litigation."

"You can't swear the public to secrecy," I said.

"Think a minute," she said, coldly. "The married women don't need excuses, and the single girls--wholl believe them? Half of them or better, have guilty consciences anyway. The rest? They're in the same boat I was--without a labful of guinea pigs to back them up."

"But--how did it happen in the first place?"

"Bob has been consulting the biologist we retained. He keeps asking the same question. He says parthenogenesis in higher lifeforms is virtually impossible. Bob keeps pointing at the little pigs, and they're going round and round. They're examining the other eleven test pens now, but there's no question in my mind. I have a personal stake in this experiment, and I was very careful to supervise the segregation of males and females."

My sanity returned in one glorious rush. There was the bugger factor! Dolores, herself.

In her eagerness to clear her own skirts, Dolores had tampered with the integrity of the experiment. Probably, she had arranged for artificial insemination, just to be sure. The tip-off was the hundred percent pregnancy of one whole test-batch. Ten out of ten. Even if one buck had slipped in inadvertently, and someone was covering up the mistake, why you wouldn't expect anything like a 100% "take".

"Dolores," I said, "you are a naughty girl in more ways than one."

She got up and refilled her glass shaking her head. "The ever-suspicious male," she said. "Don't you understand? I'm not trying to dodge my responsibility for my condition. The whole mess is my fault from beginning to end. But what kind of a heel will I be if we get clearance from the AEC and start shipping out Atummyc products again--knowing what I do? What's more, if we let the stuff float around indefinitely, someone is going to run comprehensive tests on it, not just allergy test patches like they're doing at the government labs right now."

"Yeah," I said, "so we all bury the hottest promotion that ever hit the cosmetics industry and live happily ever after."

She hit the deck and threw her whiskey glass at me, which did nothing to convince me that she wasn't telling the tallest tale of the century--to be conservative.

We sat and glared at each other for a few minutes. Finally she said, "You're going to get proof, and damned good proof any minute now."

"How so?" Nothing this experiment revealed would be valid to me, I figured, now that I was convinced she had deliberately fouled it up.

"Bob and the biologist should be up here any minute. I told them I'd wait in your office. I know something you don't, I'm just waiting for them to verify it."

She was much too confident, and I began to get worried again. We waited for ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. I picked up the phone and dialed the lab.

The woman assistant answered and said that the two men were on the way up right now. I asked, "What have they been doing down there?"
She said, “They've been doing Caesarian sections on the animals in test-pen M-four.”

"Caesarian sections?" I repeated. She affirmed it, and Dolores Donet got a tight, little, humorless smile on her face. I hung up and said, "They're on their way up, and what's so funny?"

She said, "You know what I think? I think you've been using Atummyc products on you."

"So what?" I demanded. "I was responsible for this campaign, too. I've been waiting for a rash to develop almost as long as you have."

She said, "When Bob comes in, look at his complexion. All three of us have been guinea pigs, I guess."

"I still don't see what's so damned amusing."

She said, "You still don't tumble, eh? All right, I'll spell it out. Caesarians performed on test batch M-four."

"So?"

"The 'M' stands for male," she said.

She timed it just right. The hall door opened and Bob trailed in with a dazed look. The biologist was half holding him up. His white lab-smock was freshly blood-stained, and his eyes were blank and unseeing.

But for all his distress, he was still a good looking young fellow. His skin had that lovely, radiant, atomic look--just like mine.

THE END

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Contents

BROWN JOHN'S BODY
by Winston Marks

Erd Neff wanted as little to do with his fellow men as possible. So he lived alone in his big cash-vault. Alone, except for John....

Erd Neff dropped a thin bundle of currency into the $100 bill drawer of the flat-top desk and kicked the drawer shut with a dusty boot.

He flicked the drip from his hooked nose, which was chronically irritated by the wheat dust of the warehouse, then he wiped his fingers down the leg of his soiled denims. Across the 12 X 12, windowless room John stirred awake from the noise and began nosing in the debris of his filthy cage.

"Time for supper, John?" Neff tugged at the twine at his belt and examined his $3 watch. He pinched a dozen grains of wheat from a two-pound coffee can and let them sift through the wires of the cage. John pounced on the grain hungrily.

"Wait a minute! What do you say, dammit?" Neff's hand reached for the marshmallow-toasting fork that hung from a hook on the wall. He touched the points, filed needle sharp. "What do you say?" he repeated, twanging the tines like a tuning fork.

John skittered to the far corner, tearing new holes in the old newspaper with frantic claws. Cowering against the wires he spat half-chewed flecks of wheat trying to say the magic words that would spare him from the fork. "Tinkoo! Tinkoo!" he squeaked, straining to make the two syllables distinct.

Neff hung up the fork, and John turned to lick at the old scabs clotted from earlier jabs, taking sullen inventory to be sure there were no new crimson leaks in his louse-infested hide. Until two months ago, he had been just one more gregarious specimen of Mammalia Rodentia Simplicidentata Myomorphia Muridae decumanus. Now he had another name. Like each of his predecessors in the cage, he was a large, brown rat called John--after Erd Neff's despised and deceased father. Neff named all his rats John.

[Illustration]

"Well, don't get fat."

John finished the grain, pawed the air and squeaked, "Mur!"

"More, hey? You talk fine when you're hungry."

"Peef, mur, mur!" John begged. He did well with his vowels, but "I" and "s" sounds were beyond him. He said "f" for "s". "L's" he ignored entirely.

Neff gave him one more wheat head. "Okay, get fat!"

He turned to the door, lifted the inside, mechanical latch, shoved with his foot and snatched his revolver from his hip-holster. The vault door opened ponderously revealing an empty warehouse. Neff peeked through the crack between the hinges to clear the area concealed by the door itself.
One hoodlum hopeful had hidden there. Spotting him through the crack, Neff had simply beefed into the foot-thick slab of fireproof steel. Inertial plus surprise had disposed of that one. Neff hadn't even had to shoot.

* * * * *

Tonight there was no one. Funny. The wheat country was getting tame, or else the tin-horns had learned their lesson. It was no secret that Erd Neff never visited the local bank, yet it had been more than six months since anyone tried to hold him up.

The local bank hated him plenty. He was costing them. His five loan offices in the rich wheat county skimmed the cream of the mortgage loan business. Of course, nowadays most people paid off their loans, and the low interest rates he charged to lure the business barely paid expenses. Yet, he still picked up an occasional foreclosure. Farmers still got drunk, divorced, gambled, broke legs or committed suicide once in awhile, and Neff's loan documents were ruthless about extensions of time.

These foreclosed acreages he traded for grain elevators and warehouses when crops were small and operators were desperate. Then came the bumper years during and after World War II. Wheat on the ground and no place to store it but in Erd Neff's sheds. It wasn't cheap to store with Neff, and he had a virtual monopoly in Ulma County.

Neff swung the great door back into place with its whoosh--thunk that sealed in air, sound and nearly a hundred thousand dollars in currency. He levered the bolts into place and spun the expensive combination lock.

The vault, tucked away in the front, left-hand corner of the old frame warehouse expressed Neff's distrust and contempt for mankind. Concrete and steel. Bed, shower, toilet and desk. In this walk-in cash box he was fireproof, bomb-proof, theft-proof and, most important of all, people-proof. There he consorted unmolested with the one mammal on earth he found interesting--John, the brown rat.

He slid the broadly warehouse door closed behind him with a cacophony of dry screeches and padlocked it. The dusty street was deserted except for a black sedan which two-wheeled the corner a block away and sped toward him.

Neff dropped his pistol back in its holster. "Now, what the hell--?"

He waited on the splintered platform, a huge man, ugly of face, shortlegged and long-bodied with a belly swollen from regular overeating. His shaved head swivelled slowly as the police car leaned into a skid-stop.

Officer Collin Burns got out and stared up at the motionless statue in sweat-dust stained denims. Burns was half Neff's 56 years, tall and thin. He wore gray, a silver star and a big black hat. He said, "I'll take your gun, Erd."

"Now what? I got a permit."
"Not any more. It's revoked."
"For why?"
"There were witnesses this afternoon."
"Witnesses? What in hell are you--oh, no! Not that damned dog?"
"The puppy belonged to a little girl. You can't claim self-defense this time."
"He was coming down here chasing the cats away every day."
"So you shot him, like you did Greeley's collie."
"Cats count for more. You know well as I do, you can't control the rats around a warehouse without cats."
"You've shot five men, too, Erd. Three of them are dead."
"I was cleared, you know damned well! Self-defense."
"You're too handy with that pistol. Anyway, I didn't file this complaint. It was the child's mother, and she made it stick with the chief. Give me the gun, Erd."
"You got a warrant for my arrest?"
"No, but I will have in an hour if you insist."
"I got a perfect right to protect my property."
"Not with a gun. Not any more."
"I just get these punks convinced, and now you want to turn loose on me again. Who put you up to this Collin?"
"You did. When you shot that pup. I'm not here to debate it. You're breaking the law from this minute on if you don't hand over the gun."
"Dammit, Collin, you know how much money I got in there? You know how much I pack around on me sometimes?"
"That's your business. You can use the bank and bonded messengers--they get along with dogs."
"Telling me how to run my business?"
"I'm telling you to give me that gun. You'll get the same police protection as any other citizen."
Neff sneered openly. "I'd a been dead thirty years ago depending on cops."
"I don't doubt that a minute. You're easy to hate, Erd. Are you going to give me that gun?"
"No."
"You like things the hard way, don't you?" Burns got back in the squad car and drove off. Neff spat a crater in
the wheat-littered dust and got into his own car.

* * * * *

Two minutes later he turned up Main Street and stopped before city hall. Inside the tiny police station he dropped his pistol on the counter. Bud Ackenbush looked up from his desk. "You could have saved Collin some trouble."

Neff stalked out without a word and crossed the street to the Palace Cafe. He ordered a double-thick steak, fried potatoes and pie. He liked the way the waitresses scrambled for the chance to wait on him. Women didn't like him. He was ugly and smelled of sweat, and on the street women looked the other way when they met him. All but the waitresses at the Palace. When he came in they showed their teeth and tongues and wiggled their hips. He was a 50-cent tipper.

The important thing was it got him his steak, really double thick and double quick. People could be real efficient. Like brown John. Prod 'em where they live and they'll do anything. Even talk to you.


"I didn't order this damned succotash!"

"It's free with the steak dinner, Erd."

"Put some ice-cream on my pie," Neff said. He looked up at Clarence. "No, I don't want any goddamned peas!"

They brought his pie and left him alone. He finished it and felt in his pocket for the tip. He changed his mind.

To hell with Gloria and her fat leg! The steak was tough.

He paid the check and went out. The sky was pink yet. Later in the week the sunsets would be blood-red, as the great combines increased in number and cruised the rippling ocean of wheat, leaving bristly wakes and a sky-clogging spray of dust.

Neff's busiest season. Damn that dog! Damn Collin Burns!

His hand brushed his leg where the leather holster should be. Damned laws that men made. Laws that acquitted him of homicide and then snatched away his only weapon of self-defense because he shot a yapping dog.

As he got in his car Collin Burns came out of the station. He tossed Neff's gun through the open window onto the seat. "Here's your property. The Marshal came in, and he changed everybody's mind. It's going to cost you a hundred dollars and a new pup for the little girl, probably. Here's the subpoena. Tuesday at ten."

"I don't get it."

"The Marshal said to let you fight your own battles."

Neff started the car and let the clutch out. The Marshal knew his way around. The transient harvesting crews were a wild bunch. If word got out that Neff was unarmed, packing thousands of dollars the length of the county, the enforcement people would have a lot of extra work on their hands.

He parked behind the warehouse, next to the railroad tracks.

He came around front, unlocked the big door, pulled it shut behind him and bolted it. The warehouse was jet black now, but he knew every inch of the place. He could fire his pistol almost as accurately at a sound as at a visible target.

He practiced on rats.

Holding a pocket flash, he worked the combination. As the final tumbler fell silently, a faint, raspy screech came to his ears, like a board tearing its rusty nails loose under the persuasion of a wrecking bar. He listened a minute, then he levered the bolts back, stepped into the vault-room, closed the door and shot the mechanical bolts.

Sure. Someone was out there, but they'd get damned tired before morning. He flicked on the light and touched the other wall switch beside it. The powerful blower and sucker fans cleared out the musty air and rat-stink.
John rustled in the cage, blinking at the sudden light. "Hi, Neff! Meat! Meat! Meat!"

Smart little devil! Neff sometimes brought him a scrap from his dinner, but he hadn't thought to tonight. He sucked at his teeth and pulled out a tiny string of steak. "Here. Bite my finger and I'll poke both your eyes out."

John picked the thread of gristle from Neff's finger with his fore-paws and devoured it, trembling with pleasure. Neff lifted the cage. "Okay, now let's have a few tricks."

At once John made for the can of wheat. "Get outta there!" Neff scooped him up and dropped him on the desk, snapping his tail with a forefinger. John whirled, laid his ears back and opened his mouth. At bay, the brown rat, Neff knew, is the most ferocious rodent of the 2000 species, but Neff held his hand out daring John to bite.

Neff knew all about rats. More than anybody in the world knew about rats. When you live among them for three decades you find out about their cunning wariness, fecundity, secretiveness, boldness, omnivorous and voracious appetites. Fools reviled them as predators and scavengers. Neff appreciated them for what they really are: The most adaptable mammal on earth.

John was smart but no smarter than the rest. Neff had proved this by teaching every rat he captured alive to talk.

Impossible they had told him. Even parrots and parakeets only imitate sounds in their squawking--yes, and pet crows. Animals don't have thinking brains, they said. They react, trial and error, stimulus and response, but they don't think.

Neff didn't know about the others, but he knew about rats.

Keep them hungry and lonely for a mate. Hurt them. Torture them. To hell with this reward business. Rats are like men. Mentally lazy. They'll go for bait, sure, but they'll go faster to escape pain--a thousand times faster.

And rats have lived with man from the first. They have a feeling for language like the human brat. Between partitions, inches from a man's head when he lies in bed talking to his wife, under a man's feet while he's eating, over his head in the warehouse rafters while he's working. Always, just inches or feet away from man, running through sewers, hiding in woodpiles, freight-cars, ships, barns, slaughter-house, skulking down black alleys, listening, hiding, stealing, always listening.

Yes, rats know about man, but rats had never known a man like Erd Neff, a man who hated all mankind. A man who chose a rat for a companion in preference to one of his own kind. Rats named John learned about Neff. They learned that his tones and inflections had specific meaning. They learned very fast under the stabbing prod of the marshmallow fork. With just enough food to keep them alive, their blind ferocity changed into painful attention. They learned to squeak and squawk and form the sounds into a pattern with their motile tongues. In weeks and months, they learned what the human brat learned in years.

"Stand up like a goddamned man!"

John stood up, his tail the third point of the support.

"Say the alphabet."

"Eh--bih--fih--dih--ih--eff--jih--etch--"

Neff lit a cigar and watched the smoke float away from the ceiling blower and vanish into the overhead vent in the far corner. He bobbed one foot in time to the squeaky rhythm of the recitation. He took no exception to John's failure with "I," "s," and "z." The other Johns had been unable to handle them, too.

"Hungrih, Neff. Hungrih!"

The big man picked out three grains of wheat. He noticed the can was almost empty. One by one he handed the kernels to his pet, waiting for John's "Tinkoo!" in between.

"Mur! Mur!"

"Lazy tongue! It's more, not mur!"

John dropped to all fours and retreated. Usually Neff slapped him in the belly when he used that tone. But Neff was bemused tonight. He kept listening for sounds, sounds that he knew could never penetrate the thick walls. They were out there, he was sure. Another damned fool or two, flashing a light around, trying to figure out something. Neff remembered one pair who had even tried nitroglycerin. He saw the burns on the outside of the door the next morning.

Amateurs! Nobody knew for sure just how much money Neff kept in the old desk, and big-time pros wouldn't tackle a job like this without a pretty fair notion of the loot. For all they knew, maybe he mailed it to an out-of-town bank.

"Okay, fetch the pencil."

John jumped from the desk and moved toward the open door of the shower-stall where Neff had thrown the pencil stub. He paused by the wheat can, then scurried on to get the pencil. He climbed Neff's leg and dropped the pencil into the open palm.
"Smart punks up at State College. So you can't teach a rat anything but mazes and how to go nuts from electric shocks, eh? Wouldn't they be surprised to meet you, John?"

"Hungrih!"

"You're always hungry!"

"Meat! Meat!"

"Yeah. You can sound your "e's" real good when you say, 'meat.' Some day I'll cut off your tail and feed it to you." He laughed, grabbed John by the coarse hair of his back and slipped him back under the cage.

Then he undressed down to his underwear, turned out the light and lay on the narrow iron bed. John rustled in his cage for a minute, then there was only the faint hum of the blower and sucker motors in the ventilating system. The incoming and outgoing air was baffled and trapped to kill sounds, and spring-loaded sliding doors poised to jam shut and seal off the room if anyone tampered with the exterior grilles in the roof.

The fans hummed softly and Erd Neff slept.

Sleck-thud, sleek-thud!

* * * * *

He was awake pawing the wall for the light switch, but even as his hand found it, and his eyes discovered the closed ventilator doors, a reddish vapor sank over his body. A single gasp and Neff was clawing his throat. Sharp, brown-tasting, acid-burning, eye-searing, nose-stinging!

He fell to his knees and clawed to the far corner, fighting for air, but the acrid stink stained his throat and nose. His eyes kept burning. The whole room must be full!

The door-lever! No, that's what they wanted. Blind! Gun's no good now. God, for a breath of air! Damned tears! Can't open my eyes! Air! Got to have it!

His throat refused to open. The stink, a little like iodine, a lot like a hospital smell but a million times stronger--raked at the tender tissues of his throat. Icepicks stabbed from his soft palate, up into his brain, his temples. He swayed against the door, caught the lever and heaved convulsively. The door fell away slowly. He stumbled forward, gashing his knee against the sharp jamb.

A light struck redly through his clenched, tear-soaked eye-lids.

"That did it. Get the gun!" The voice was high, almost girlish. A young boy?

"It's a chemical element like chlorine, only it's a liquid. It fumes if you don't keep it covered with water, and the fumes really get you. They used it in gas bombs in the war."

"That was chlorine."

"They used bromine, too. I read it."

"Air!" Neff rasped.

"Help yourself if you call this stinkin' stuff in your warehouse air."

From the vault the deadened voice came. "This must be the switch. The other switch is for the lights."

"Look out! When you turn it on don't get dosed yourself."

"I only dumped a few drops in. There. It'll blow out in a few--phew, let me outta here. That stuff does--God, it's worse than the dose I got in the chem lab!" The voice grew, coughing and cursing. "Better wait a minute or two. How's our big brave dog-killer doing?"

On his hands and knees, Neff was on the verge of passing out, but doggedly he tried to place the voices. Highschool kids? Bromine. Sounded like a chemical they might filch from the highschool laboratory.

A kick in the ribs reminded him he was still helpless. "All right, get back in there." They aimed him through the vault door and kept kicking him until he went. They hauled him up into his chair. He tried to strike out blindly, but his chest was full of licking flames that spread pain out to his shoulders.

Now rope whipped around his feet, hands, chest and neck, jerking his body hard against the castered desk-chair and cramping his head back. "Tie him good. No way to lock him in with this door."

Neff opened his eyes. The boys were wet blurs rummaging through his desk. "Look! Just look at that! We can't carry all that."

Get one of those burlap sacks out there. By the door."

Footsteps went and returned. "Now, just the small bills. Up to twenty. No, Jerry, leave the big stuff alone. Who'd take one from a kid?"

"Okay, let's make tracks."
"Wait!" Neff said desperately. "My legs and hands. You've cut off the circulation!"

* * * * *

Something hard like the barrel of a gun rapped down on the top of his head. "I ought to blow your dirty brains out. Killing my little sister's dog, damn you. Damn you, I think I will kill you. Damn you, damn you!" the voice crested.

"Wait a minute Jerry," the other voice cut in. "I got a better idea. Here. Look at this."

Short silence. "Yeah! Yeah, that's just dandy. Look how thin he is. That's just what the doctor ordered. Okay, the top's loose. Stand by the door and don't let him get by you. Wait. Got your flash? Good! In the dark. That's real good. Which switch is it?"

"Throw them both."

"Okay. Flash it over here. Look out, here I come!"

"Hurry up! Look at that hungry, black-eyed little devil. That ought to fix up the son-of-a--" ...Thunk! The compression rammed heavily into Neff's ears. The bolts shot solidly into place from the outside, and the combination knob rang faintly as it was spun. Silence.

They'd go out the same way they came in and tack the board back in place. How long before anybody would miss him? Twenty-four hours? Hell, no. Nobody would bust a gut worrying that soon. Two days? Some weeks he was gone several days making the rounds of his loan offices.


But a week! They'd cut off the blower when they threw both switches. No ventilation. No air. Neff strained at the ropes. His legs were pulled under the seat so tightly that his feet were turning numb. Hands were tingling, too. Dirty little sadists. Turning John loose thinking--

He had to get loose. Less than one day's air, then--

"John!" Thank God John wasn't an ordinary rat.

"John, come over to me. These ropes. Chew them, John. Come on, John. Come on, boy."

No sound at first, then a faint motion in the old newspapers.

"John, say the alphabet!"

"Eh--bih----"

"That's right. Go on!"

"Fih----jih----" The squeaking stopped.

"Come over to me, John. Come to me, boy."

He held his breath. The beating of his heart was so loud he couldn't be sure that John was moving. The silence was long. Even the rat was blind in this blackness. He must be patient.

Sweat began oozing and trickling down his face, his armpits, his back--even his left leg. No, wait! That wasn't sweat!

* * * * *

The throbbing in his legs was greatest at his left knee. The trickle was blood from the gash. It ran freely, now, the ropes backing up arterial pressure. Never mind that!

"John!"

The coffee can tipped over, and the racket made Neff start against his bonds. The rope sawed his Adam's apple. Crunch!

"Leave that damned wheat alone, John. Come over to me, boy. I'll give you a whole bag full when you chew off these ropes. Hear that, John? And a chicken foot. I'll bring you a whole chicken. A live one. I'll tie her down so she won't peck you. That's what I do, John."

He was breathing heavily now. "Do you get me, John? Would you like a live chicken?"

"Yeef."

The crunching resumed for a minute then stopped. Neff remembered, there had been only a dozen or so grains of wheat left. John would still be hungry. The thought of a chicken should do it. If not, he could threaten him.

Neff waited. Relax! There was all night to work this out.

Finally, he felt something at his ankles. "That's the boy, John. Up here and down my arms. They're behind me. Get the rope off my hands first. Come on boy."

It was John, all right. Neff could feel the little claws coming up his left leg.

"Come on, hurry up, John. Tell you what. I'll bring you a nice, fat female, just like yourself. A live one. You can live in the cage together----John, don't stop there!"

The claws had paused near his knee and were clinging to the blood-soaked cloth.

"No, no, John! Don't! I'll stick you with the fork. I'll stick you--I'll kill you! John, we got to get out of here or we'll both die. Die, do you hear? We'll suffocate! Don't do that. Stop. Stop or I'll--"
Neff's threats beat hard into the rat's brain, and now as the slanting incisors tore at the cloth and chewed the luscious, blood-smothered, hot meat, Neff's screams sent tremors through the skinny, voracious body, and the tail tucked down. The words made John nervous, but it was dark. And there was food, such wonderful food, so much food!

They were harsh words, terrible, screaming words: but words are words and food is food, and after all--

John was only a rat.

THE END

Contents

EARTHSMITH
By Stephen Marlowe

Nobody at the Interstellar Space School had ever heard of Earth so naturally they treated Smith with contempt--or was it an innate fear?...

Someone in the crowd tittered when the big ungainly creature reached the head of the line.

"Name?"

The creature swayed back and forth foolishly, supporting the bulk of his weight first on one extremity and then on the other. His face which had a slight rosy tint anyway got redder.

"Come, come. Planet? Name?" The registrar was only a machine, but the registrar could assume an air of feminine petulance. "We want to keep the line moving, so if you will please--"

The creature drew a deep breath and let the two words come out in a rush. "Earth, Smith," he said. Being nervous, he could not modulate his voice. Unable to modulate his voice, he heard the words come out too deep, too loud.

"Did you hear that voice?" demanded the man who had tittered. "On a cold wet night they say the karami of Caulo boom like that. And look at Earthsmith. Just look at him. I ask you, what can they accept at the school and still call it a school? Hey you, Earthsmith, what courses will you take?"

"I don't know," the creature confessed. "That's what I'm here for. I don't even know what they teach at the school."

"He doesn't know." More tittering.

The registrar took all this in impassively, said: "What planet, Earthsmith?"

The creature was still uncomfortable. "Earth. Only my name is not Earthsmith. Smith--"

The titterer broke into a loud guffaw. "Earthsmith doesn't even know what planet he's from. Good old Earthsmith." He was a small thin man, this titterer, with too-bright eyes, vaguely purple skin, and a well-greased shock of stiff green hair.

Smith squared his wide shoulders and looked into the colored lights of the registrar. "It's a mistake. My name is Smith."

"What planet, Smith?"

"Earth. The planet Earth." Smith had a rosy, glistening bald head and a hairless face. A little bead of sweat rolled into his left eye and made him blink. He rubbed his eye.

"Age?" The machine had a way of asking questions suddenly, and Smith just stared.

"Tell me your age. Age. How old are you?"

Smith wanted to sit down, only there were no chairs. Just the room with its long line of people behind him, and the machine up front. The registrar.

"I'm twenty-seven."

"Twenty-seven what?"

"You asked me my age. I'm twenty-seven years old, and three months."

Except for the clicking of the machine, there was a silence. The voice of the machine, feminine again, seemed confused when it spoke. "I cannot correlate years, Smith of Earth. How old are you?"

It wasn't an ordeal, really, but Smith felt more uncomfortable every moment. Was the machine making fun of him? If it were, then it had an ally in the crowd, because the man who had tittered was laughing again, the green shock of hair on his head bobbing up and down.

"Earthsmith doesn't even know how old he is. Imagine."
The machine, which was more feminine than not, asked Smith how far the planet Earth was from its primary, and what the orbital speed of the planet was. Smith told her, but again the terminology was not capable of correlation.

"Unclassified as to age, Smith. It's not important. I wonder, are you dominant or receptive?"

"I'm a man. Male. Dom--"

"That doesn't matter. Smith, tell me, how long has it been since anyone from the planet Earth has attended the school?"

Smith said he didn't know, but, to his knowledge, no one from Earth had ever been here. "We don't get around much any more. It's not that we can't. We just go and then we don't like it, so we come back to Earth."

"Well, from the looks of you I would say you are a receptive. Very definitely receptive, Smith." Given sufficient data, the registrar could not be wrong. Given sufficient data the registrar could tell you anything you wanted to know, provided the answer could be arrived at from the data itself. "The male and female distinction no longer holds, of course. On some planets the female is dominant, on some she's not. It's generally according to the time of colonization, Smith. When was Earth colonized?"

"It wasn't."

"What do you mean, it wasn't?"

"We were always there. We colonized the rest of the galaxy. Long ago."

The registrar clicked furiously, expressed itself still more femininely this time. "Oh, that planet! You certainly are the first, Smith. The very first here at the school. Room 4027, dominant companion." Neuter voice again. "That's all, Smith of Earth. Next."

The vaguely purple-skinned man stood before the registrar, winked at the flashing lights. "You know, now I can see what they mean when we're told of a missing link in the chain between man and animal. Old Earthsmith...."

"Name?" said the machine.

The man pointed at Smith, shook with silent laughter. The back of Smith's head, which could not properly be called bald because he had never had any hair on it, was very red.

"Name's Jorak."

"Planet?" demanded the fully neuter machine.

* * * * *

There was the red star, a monstrous blotch of crimson swollen and brooding on the horizon and filling a quarter of the sky. There was the fleck of white high up near the top of the red giant, its white-dwarf companion in transit. These were the high jagged crags, falling off suddenly to the sundered, frothy sea with its blood-red sun-track fading to pink and finally to gray far away on either side.

Smith watched the waves break far below him, and he almost stumbled when someone tapped his shoulder. "That was mean of the man named Jorak." She might have been a woman of Earth, except that she was too thin, cast in a too-delicate mould. Yet beautiful.

Smith shrugged, felt the heat rise to his face and knew that he must have looked like a mirror for the red sun.

"Is that really a blush, Smith? Are you blushing?"

He nodded. "I can't help it. I--"

"Don't be foolish. I don't want you to stop. I think it looks nice."

Smith rubbed his pate, watched the hot wind blow the girl's yellow hair about her face. "They tell me my great great grandfather had a little fringe of hair around his head. I've seen pictures."

"How nice--"

"If you're trying to make fun of me, please go away. It wasn't nice, it was ugly. Either you have hair or you don't. The men of Earth used to have it, long ago. The women still do."

She changed the subject. "I'll bet you think this place is ugly, Smith."

Smith shook his head. "No, it's stark. If you like things that way, it isn't really ugly. But Earth is a planet of green rolling hills and soft rains and--you're making fun of me."

"You say that again and I'll take it as an insult." She smiled. "We have our green rolling hills on Bortinot, only it's cold. I like it here because it's warm. And, of course, I have a lot to learn at school."

"Would you think I'm stupid if I ask you what?"

"No. And you were really serious in there when you said you didn't know what they teach."

"How could I know? I'm the first student here from Earth. Every five years--say, twenty times during the course of one lifetime--we get the application. This time the government finally decided someone should go. Me."

"Well, they teach just about everything that could be of value in a transtellar culture."

"What?"

"Things like astrogation and ethics--"
"I caught the school express at a Denebian planet. Someone told me there that the school is decadent."

She smiled up at him. "Deneb is a slothful place, then. It is true that the school never stands still, changing its courses to meet the demands of a changing society. If Deneb cannot keep pace with the changes, that could explain the feeling. Right now they'll be concentrating in dreams and dream-empathy, in some of the newer Garlonian dances, Sarchian cooking for the recepives and Wortan fighting for the dominants. Quite a virile program, Smith, provided one is up to it."

"What happened to your astrogation and ethics?"

"That? Oh, that's just a catch-all phrase. Your courses will depend on such things as your D or R classifications--"

"It makes me laugh a little," Smith admitted. "But they've classified me as a receptive. I guess they know what they're doing. Still--"

"You think you're strong, eh?"

"Well, I didn't see anyone in the registrar's room who would worry me very much in a fight."

"Society is sophisticated, Smith. There's more to strength than mere brawn. What sort of psi-powers have they cultivated on the planet Earth?"

* * * * *

In a general sense, but in a general sense only, Smith knew what she meant. "Well, there's hypnotism, and some people play at telepathy and clairvoyance. Nothing much, really."

"That isn't much, my friend."

"Why? What else is there?" Smith smiled for the first time. "I didn't know--" He shook his head, suddenly, to clear it. He felt tilted. He looked and he saw that everything was straight, but still he felt tilted. He tried to right himself, and down he went. On his stomach he lay, his legs twisted under him a little. Foolishly, he tried to get up. He couldn't.

"There's that." The girl laughed. "Suggestion without the need for hypnotism."

Smith stood up, said, "I see what you mean."

"Think so?"

It began to rain. A brisk wind came up abruptly, and off in the distance Smith heard the roar of thunder. It came closer. Still closer. Like in a straight line. Smith watched the lightnings prance.

"We'd better get back to the school!" he cried. He didn't think she could hear his voice above the thunder. He started to shout again, but lightning crackled before his eyes. Between him and the girl. Something rumbled, and Smith started to fall. They had been blasted off the crag, and now they hurtled down through the sheets of hot rain....

"Feel yourself," the girl told him. The huge crimson sun still sat on the horizon. The air was hot and warm and Smith was dry.

"Suggestion," she smiled again. "Most of us have it to some degree, but we of Bortinot have it still more. Still think you should be a dominant?"

"Well--" The girl's face swam before his eyes. Lovely. Smith took a step forward, reached out and placed his big hands on her shoulders.

"Well what?" She was smiling.

"What's your name?"

"Geria."

His lips were big and hers were little, if full. He quivered as he kissed her. "I love you, Geria."

"I know it," she said.

* * * * *

"The reason I went outside to watch the sea," Smith said, "was because I didn't know how to get to room 4027. I didn't want to ask anyone, not after--"

"That makes sense. I'll take you, Smith. I'm just down the hall from you, anyway."

"Thank you, Geria." Smith wondered how he knew her name was Geria. Nice name. "What happened after I thought there was a storm, Geria?" Smith suppressed a smile.

"Oh, nothing much. I just planted another suggestion in your mind. For now you've forgotten, but you will remember. Shall we go?"

They walked back down the path from the top of the crag, and soon Smith saw other students in groups of two and three. Ahead was the long low school, a dull rectangle of metal perhaps two miles long and half as wide. With Geria, Smith entered through one of the hundreds of doorways and followed her wordlessly up a mechanical staircase.

They flashed past many landings, and after a time Smith followed the girl across one of them and into a long hall.
"Simple," she said. "You have the twenty-seventh room here on the fortieth floor. Mine is room eighteen. Will we be seeing more of each other, Smith?"

"As much as you'd like," he said, but it made him feel foolish. He had merely spoken to the girl for a few minutes, and yet he could not quite fathom his emotions. To some extent she had made him feel the same as had the man Jorak, and yet she liked him. She wanted to see more of him. She said so.

"Smith, you're blushing again. I tell you what: if you can do that every day, then I will see you every day. It's so nice and--unaffected."

Was that the word she really had in mind? Smith remembered once when he was little, a farmer had come to the city and everyone had called him an ancient word which they said came from a still more ancient name. Rube they had called him. Rube. He didn't like it. He had had a fight, Smith recalled, and a big plateglass window was broken. He went to jail for a few weeks on the moon, and after that he didn't come to the city any more. Smith was little at the time, but he had never forgotten the look on the farmer's face when the security officers took him off to the moon rocket.

Had he known it, Jorak would have used the word rube, but what about Geria?

The green number on the white door was painted sharply--4027. "Here's my room," Smith said. He tried an indifferent wave, but it hardly worked, and he began to blush again.

Geria skipped lightly down the hall, and he couldn't see her face to tell if she were smiling. He shrugged, opened the door.

* * * * *

"Earthsmith! Oh, no ... I come half way across the galaxy to get here, so what are the odds against any particular room mate? Huge, that's what. But I got me--hello, Earthsmith."

It was the purple man, Jorak. He had just recently greased his shock of bright green hair, and he had turned away from the mirror when Smith opened the door. Now he turned back to the tinted glass and held his head at various angles.

"Well, can you change rooms if you want to?" Smith asked pleasantly.

"You're not going to chase me out of my own room, Earthsmith. You can change if you'd like. Not me."

"All right if you want me to I'll change."

"If I want you to! Don't pass the blame to me, Earthsmith. I didn't say a thing about changing, not me. Don't you think I'm good enough for you?"

"I don't care one way or the other," Smith said. "I suggested you change because I thought you'd be happier that way. Look, I'll mind my own business and pretend you are not even here. How's that?"

"Pretend I'm not here? Like cepheid you will. If you want to be ornery, Smith, or Earthsmith, or whatever your name is, I'll give you plenty to be ornery about. I'm a dominant, you know, so just watch out."

"I'll change if that will make you happy." Smith didn't want any trouble. He still felt more than a little strange and out of place here, and a fight with Jorak wouldn't help matters. Briefly, he wondered what sort of psi-powers Jorak possessed.

The purple man stood up. "What kind of a slap in the face is that? We haven't even started courses or anything. You think I'd need you to help me with my work or something?"

"No, I'm quite sure you wouldn't. But I'll change my room, anyway. I'll probably get in your way--"

"Well, I wouldn't get into your hair, satellite-head! If you think you're going to leave here and say I started a fight or something.... My father made quite a record for himself here at the school, and I'll have to beat it, of course."

"Of course," Smith agreed, but he did not really know why.

"Are you implying anyone, just anyone, could top my father's record, Earthsmith? Not a man from Gyra ever did it, and intellectually Gyra is top planet in its own sector. Not a woman from Bortinot came close, but then, you probably don't even know where Bortinot is."

Smith said no, he didn't, but he had just met a woman from Bortinot. Perhaps if he changed the subject....

Jorak ran his fingers up along each side of his shock of hair. They came away greasy green. "Exquisite, those women of Bortinot. But then, you probably wouldn't appreciate them, eh, Earthsmith?"

Smith said that he could appreciate them very well indeed, especially since, except for a few minor structural differences, they looked like women of Earth. It was a mistake, and the muscles in Jorak's cheeks began to twitch.

"I say they look exquisite, you say they look like women of Earth. Which is it, Earthsmith? Not both, surely--a contradiction in terms. I believe you're trying to provoke me."

Smith sighed. He wanted no trouble--they had spent a year with him on Earth, indoctrinating that. He was to be a paragon at the school, as Earth's first student there, he had to be a paragon--even if he turned out to be more awkward in this situation than the farmer on Earth everyone had called Rube.

"I think I will go to sleep," Smith said.
"Why, don't you men of Earth ever eat, Smith?"

Smith said yes, they ate, but he wasn't very hungry now. As a matter of fact, he was ravenously hungry, but he did not relish the idea of going to some public eating place either with Jorak or alone. His heart began to beat a little faster when he thought that he might meet Geria if he did, but then he felt the heat rise up his neck and into his cheeks. He'd hardly know what to say to her, and besides, he knew there was something he should remember but couldn't quite. No, he'd skip dinner this first day at the school.

Now he watched Jorak open the door and step into the hallway, and for a moment he heard gay voices and the shuffling of many feet, and Jorak's voice louder than the rest: "Kard of Shilon! How long has it been? I can remember that day near Raginsdild...."

Smith turned to the window, and for a long time he sat watching the fat red sun.

* * * * *

He got up early and he showered, and then he heard a clicking sound. Two cards had been deposited in a tray from a slot in the wall. At the top of one were the words "Jorak of Gyra," and Smith's name and planet were printed on the other. He picked it up and began to read, and then Jorak sat up and took the other card.

"Programs," said Jorak. "Everyone takes transtellar history, of course, and a section or two in the humanities. My electives are Wortan fighting and dream-empathy."

Smith smiled. "Me too--same program. I suppose we'll be in class together, Jorak."

"Rather stupid," the purple man observed. "They've given you a dominant's program. But then, I remember you questioned your receptive classification, and the registrar's known to do this on occasion, just to put you in your place. You'll be in Garlonian dancing in a few days, Earthsmith."

"Well, I sure hope not. I didn't come here to learn how to dance--"

"Hah! So what? If you're an R you'll learn how to dance and like it. Cook, too. There's no such thing as a misfit at the school, not permanently. They'll find you out soon enough, Earthsmith. Hmmm, wait till Kard of Shilon finds out what they've put in Wortan. Kard's top man in his sector, and it's just possible they'll pair you off with him."

"Well, you going to eat this morning? I'd hate to see you in Wortan without a good meal in you. But I suppose it really wouldn't help, anyway. Coming, Earthsmith?"

There weren't any people out in the hall this early, and Smith breathed more easily when they moved in a direction opposite that of Geria's room. Soon they had descended a score of levels, and the moving ramp became more crowded. Smith tried to ignore the eager hum of conversation, but it was all around him. He realized he should be feeling that way too. But you couldn't drum up a student's eager appetite within yourself, not when you didn't feel that way, not when your entire planet waited to see how you made out here and you felt unsure of yourself, even in such simple things as eating.

That part of it at least turned out better than Smith had hoped. There were eggs, and while he was sure he would not recognize the fowl if he saw it, he could at least order his over-light and get something familiar. And there were long strips of fatty meat which almost could have been bacon, except Smith was sure the pig wouldn't be a pig at all.

And Smith was lost in the hordes of white men, green men, purple, orange and brown, and no one paid him too much attention. Jorak busied himself remembering old times with a gruff burly orange man named Kard, whose planet was Shilon, and Smith ate in silence. Once he thought he saw Geria far off at another table, but it could have been his imagination, and when he looked again she was gone.

Home, Smith always had been a quick eater, but now he found himself pawing at his food. Soon the great dining room began to clear. Jorak and Kard leaned back in their chairs, watching Smith.

Jorak yawned. "How long does it take you to breakfast?"

"Different rate of digestion on Earth," Kard suggested.

"Don't be foolish. Earthsmith's in no hurry to attend his first class, so he's loafing. Right, Earthsmith?"

Smith mumbled something about unfamiliar food under his breath, and Jorak said, "Well, no matter. We'll give you another moment or two, Earthsmith. Then we'll have to be going. We all three have transtellar history, you know."

Smith knew it all too well. Gyra and Bortinot and Shilon were so many names to him and he silently cursed Earth's provincial histories. For those here at the school, the three names and a hundred others might be magical stepping stones to the culture, the lore, the history of a galaxy--but all Smith knew now was that Jorak came from Gyra, and so some of Gyra's people at least must be purple, that Geria came from Bortinot where the women were D and the men were R and where the women looked like those of Earth, that Kard, finally, came from a place that bore the name Shilon, where some of the men at least were orange. But Shilon could have been anyplace from the hub to the fringe, Gyra might swim dizzily out near Ophiuchus or it might be the new culture name for one of Earth's near neighbors. And Bortinot--he wished he knew more about Bortinot.
The instructor of transtellar history was a little fat man with a round gold face and green eyes that blinked too much. He wore the tight black uniform of the instructor and his green armband proclaimed his subject to be history. He smiled too much, too vacantly, as if he had been practicing it a long time and now forgot what it really meant.

"Greetings!" he cried jovially, after everyone had been seated on the long low benches around the room. "I bring you history. No one is to talk unless I tell him to. Everyone is to listen unless I tell him not to. Clear?" He smiled.

No one said anything.

"Excellent. History encompasses thousands of years and countless cubic parsecs. Only the big things count. We will forget the little things. Little things belong to little people and we of the school are the elite of a transtellar culture. Questions?"

There were none.

"Good, because I have some. What would you say was the first event of importance? Luog of Panden, talk."

Said green-skinned Luog, a very young Pandenian: "You mean ever?"

"I would have specified had I meant otherwise. Yes, ever. Talk, Luog of Panden."

"Well--"

"Halt a moment, please. Who thinks the question is a relative one which cannot properly be answered? I clair it is Brandog of Hulpin."

An albino woman three seats down from Smith flushed. "I am sorry," she said.

"Who told you to talk now? This is not Hulpin, Brandog. The course is intensive. You must concentrate. Concentrate, concentrate, concentrate. No extraneous thoughts." The instructor smiled. "Luog of Panden, talk."

Smith felt the little beads of sweat forming on his forehead. The instructor could read minds--and how many of these others could? They just sat there as if it were the most natural thing in the world....

Only Brandog of Hulpin seemed ruffled, and it would be many moments before her albino skin looked again like soft alabaster. But no one seemed to notice. Luog was saying, "--exodus from the prehistoric Sirian worlds to the first culture in the Denebian system, the Var one. More than ten thousand Vars ago."

"Satisfactory for a Receptive, Luog of Panden," the instructor smiled. "The Dominants would go back a bit further and talk of the Sirian wars, but that much is a matter of opinion, since the wars are largely mythical, anyway. And so we have set the stage for history. We have--"

Smith wanted to get up indignantly and tell the instructor, tell them all, what the most glorious epochs of history really were. You would find it in the museums of earth, on the plaques and in the statues and on the old old records of Earth. There was a lot Smith wanted to tell them because there was so much only he could tell them, so much they had forgotten.

But he merely sat and stared politely at the black-uniformed instructor. You don't show yourself as a provincial--what was the word?--rube, not when your culture, while temporarily the oldest, is in a lot of ways the most neophite of them all.

You just sat and stared, looking interested.

The instructor's voice cut into his thoughts, "Earth of Smith--"

"Smith of Earth," he said, automatically.

"I did not tell you to talk, Smith of Earth. And if your card says Earth of Smith, how am I to know? A mistake, yes--but an understandable one. I'm a historian, and I have heard of neither planet. Where is this Earth? Talk, Smith!"

He stood up, although it wasn't really necessary, and he could feel his knees trembling slightly. "Earth is a few parsecs from Sirius, and Sirius I think you know."

"I know Sirius. Now talk!"

"What is it you want me to say? I don't feel much like talking--"

"Yet you speak so loud that the room fairly rocks with it. I wanted you to tell us why you did not agree with the answer just now rendered. It is, I feel, a good one. Talk."

"Then I agree, it is a good one." Smith did not want to get involved. He wanted to be a good, quietly efficient student. Nothing more. But he forgot that the instructor could read minds.

"You lie, Smith of Earth. I won't go into it any further, because it is your privilege if you want to lie. But you are not to listen for the remainder of this lecture. Do not listen."

Smith nodded, cursed himself mentally because he had made such a mess of things here at his very first lecture, and headed for the door.

"Smith of Earth! Just where under the red sun do you think you are going?"
"You told me not to listen, so--"
"I didn't say talk. Talk now."
"--so I'm leaving the room."

"No one leaves until the lecture has been concluded. Sit if you will, or stand, but stay here. And do not listen."

Smith nodded, turned back to the row of benches dumbly. He found a place next to Brandog of Hulpin, sat near the albino woman. Down the bench, he saw Jorak grinning broadly. Smith did not know how he was going to sit there without listening, but he decided he'd better not ask that question now.

* * * * *

"This is your course in Wortan fighting," boomed the giant of an instructor. "Dominants only, or such Receptives as question their classification." The instructor's massive face was beefy, the color of new-spilled blood, and the muscles rippled and bulged and seethed under his black uniform.

"Me for this!" confided Kard of Shilon, slapping Smith's back. "Perhaps Jorak has told you that I am not without ability on the Wortan mats."

Smith hardly heard him. Two dozen paces across the room, on the other side of the circle that surrounded the instructor, stood Geria, hands on hips, lips soft-smiling when she saw Smith, silver tunic to her knees, yellow hair hanging free to shoulders.

"Join me, Smith of Earth?" she called, and knees watery again, Smith made his way around the circle.

While Jorak gaped, Geria took Smith's hand when they met half way around the circle, and she smiled up at him. "I wouldn't have believed it, but you're blushing again. Earth trait, Smith?"

"No, not really," he stammered.

The slim girl was about to say something, but the instructor cleared his throat ominously, and the room became silent again. "Now, then," declared the giant, "there's no trick to fighting with psi-powers. Anyone can do that, and the women of Bortinot, as you know, are particularly adept. But the people of Wortan have no such powers, and they must depend on tooth and nail, on sinew and bone and animal cunning. Such is the way the Wortanians do battle--and, purely for sport, such is the way of Wortan fighting. Any questions?"

"Yes," Geria told him, "I have one. Are we not permitted to use any psi-powers?"

"None. They disqualify you."

"Well, then I suppose I must withdraw from the course. I can't be expected to stand up to a man physically. I'm not built that way--and very few women are, Dominant or Receptive."

Smith had not expected this, but now he felt a warm glow in his breast. He almost wanted to put his arm about the woman's shoulders, protectively. How could such a delicate beautiful thing be expected to fight?

The instructor said, "I won't argue with you. I can't remember a woman ever lasting in Wortan fighting, but if they're Dominants they're automatically entered. The rest of you can do like--"

The words came out before Smith could stop them. "In that case, can anyone tell me the difference between a Dominant and a Receptive?"

There was a lot of laughter in the room, and Smith thought it would have been the same had he, as a child, asked the difference between boy and girl. "Ah, old Earthsmith!" he heard Jorak's voice. "Everytime he opens his mouth new wisdom spews forth."

Pale eyes looked out of the instructor's blood-red face. "Obviously, you're joking. I'm here to answer questions, among other things, but you couldn't be serious."

And Smith heard his own dull voice reply:

"No, certainly not. I was only joking."

"Silly, a Dominant has more psi-powers, that's all. But you really didn't know, did you?"

"There are no psi-powers on Earth to speak of," Smith reminded her.

"Hmm, very true. In that case, maybe you're all Receptives--male and female. But don't feel too badly, Smith; Wortan's the same way, and Wortan has a first-rate culture. Look: they even have an instructor here at the school."

The instructor of Wortan fighting was a Wortanian, of course. And here, in Wortan fighting, Smith might feel at home. But he hardly expected to excel at the school by breaking someone's back, or pinning him helplessly to the Wortan mat. Suddenly he found himself thinking of Earth, thinking of the trust that had been put in him as Earth's first student at the school. But his thoughts did not remain there long--his eyes took in the soft yellow of Geria's hair, and Earth faded far away.

"--volunteers," the instructor was saying. "Does anyone want to step on the mat with me for a fall or two?"

"I recommend Earthsmith," came Jorak's voice. "Positively--Earthsmith's your man."

Smith felt his face becoming very red again, but Geria nudged him with an elbow. "Go ahead, Smith--why not? You told me once you didn't fear anyone in the room of the registrar, not in physical combat. Go ahead."

"I know, but--"
"Go ahead, Smith. Show me."
He could do that. Yes, he could show her. But what if he were wrong—they might know a trick or two that
would make him look foolish. And he wouldn't want that, not in front of Geria. "I am tired," he said. "I didn't sleep
well last night."
The instructor rescued him. "I didn't ask you to recommend. I asked for volunteers. But you who spoke, what's
your name?"
"I am Jorak of Gyra," said Jorak, purple face paling.
"You'll do. On the mat, man of Gyra."
Jorak stepped forward, slowly, in no hurry to meet the giant. Smith heard Kard's mocking laugh. "Ho, Jorak--
he'll tear you in half. Now if he had asked for a man of Shilon ... a real man...."
And still laughing, the Shilonian heaved mightily with both his hands and sent Jorak stumbling out onto the
mat. The man of Gyra fell and skidded on his stomach, turned over once and finally came up into a sitting position
at the instructor's feet. Kard was grinning, but Jorak saw nothing funny in what had happened. He stood up slowly,
wheezing, and his gaze raked the circle. It flicked past Kard rapidly, kept going, poised a moment on Geria, then
reached Smith. Jorak shook his fist. "All right, Earthsmith, I'll get you for this."
Geria smiled. "I would say that you have an enemy there."
The instructor bellowed a warning and came for Jorak.
* * * * *
For some reason Smith found he couldn't keep his eyes off the fray, and he found his own breath coming in
ragged gasps. Geria watched with a dispassionate interest. "Poor man of Gyra," she said. "It might be a different
story if he could use some of his psi-powers. The men of Gyra have a little of that, you know."
"Well, why can't he?"
"He'd be disqualified, shamed--and maybe worse. I never knew that psi-powers were not permitted on the
Wortan mat, but I did know that the rules must be adhered to rigidly."
The instructor's massive body stood between them and Jorak, and one of the great arms circled the man of
Gyra's neck. Jorak's purple face glared straight at Smith, and his body thrashed and wriggled furiously, like a snake,
head held fast by a forked stick. Abruptly, the instructor stepped back and let go. Jorak fell and lay writhing on the
mat, legs and arms pounding.
"Brute strength is what we want in Wortan," said the instructor, smoothing his black uniform.
Said Kard of Shilon: "You outweigh Jorak, but I see your point. I wonder how you would do with a man of
Shilon."
The instructor smiled. "Well, we will pair off now. You can select me, if you wish. Those who want to drop out
of the course, step back from the circle. We need room--"
All the women moved away, slowly, reluctantly. They were Dominants, every one, and Smith sensed they
longed to use their psi-powers. Some of them trembled nervously from the exhibition they had seen, some wiped
sweat from white and pink and green brow. One tall albino woman seemed hesitant, stepped back toward the circle,
but she backed away again when a gold man big as Kard of Shilon strode forward eagerly.
Against the wall stood the dozen women, rapt eyes intent on the men as they paired off. And this, Smith
thought bitterly, is culture. This is what Earth had missed by closing its star lanes. Well, Earth....
"Don't sulk, Smith of Earth," Geria told him, and Smith realized, shamefully, that he had slunk off with the
women. "I say there is something glorious about fighting tooth and nail. Not depraved, certainly, unless you insist on
judging it by a hidebound ethic. Go back to the mats, Smith--for me."
He looked long at the woman, saw no guile in her eyes. Who was he to judge? Could he dare pass judgment on
a society that had left Earth behind a score of thousand years ago? The men of Earth hadn't sent him here, half way
across the galaxy to do that.
* * * * *
He turned and walked stiffly to the mats. By now the men had paired off two and two, stood facing each other
in pairs. Kard of Shilon and the thick-thewed instructor, great gold man and chunky red, reed-slender green man and
giant orange, albinos two like alabaster statues.
From the circle came Jorak, hands to bruised neck. He stopped, looked Smith up and down grimly, smiled.
"You have no partner, Earthsmith?"
"I'm looking for one."
"Well, look no more. I am tired and hurt, but I'd like to join you on the mat." He shrugged. "Of course, if you're
afraid--"
Smith still did not feel like fighting. It might as well be Jorak as any other—he certainly had more reason to
fight Jorak. Vaguely, it seemed a needless expenditure of energy. But he had done it again: he had put the shoe on
the wrong foot--he, Smith, stood up for judgment, not the school. "Good enough, Jorak," he said.

In a moment, the instructor signaled them all to begin, and Smith had one brief look at the dozen pairs of men, grappling, heard the instructor shout, "one fall, and one fall only!" And then Jorak was upon him.

Jorak seemed for all the world like a snake, writhing and twisting with a deceptive sinewy strength. But calmly Smith stepped out of his reach, cuffing his ears roundly when he came too close.

"You're afraid, afraid, afraid!" Jorak taunted. "Fight!"

Smith shrugged. If he did not want to fight, he did not want to. But the women hooted, and they were hooting him, all but Geria who remained glumly silent.

"This is getting me nowhere," Jorak hissed. "You're making me look like a fool, Earthsmith." Perspiration bathed the purple face, stained the sides of Jorak's tunic darkly.

And then he smiled. Smith felt giddy, hardly could keep his legs under him, yet hardly had Jorak touched him. Then the man of Gyra was using his psi-powers, despite the sanction. Oddly, Smith felt detached from it all. Let him use his powers then--that would end it. Let him....

"Fight back, Smith!" Geria cried.

Jorak's powers were not like the woman's. He could induce giddiness, yes, but not in any overpowering quantities. Smith swayed foolishly, tipped first to left, then to right, stood for a moment with arms at sides. Jorak rushed upon him and struck out with both fists, and Smith stumbled back half a dozen steps, crashed into a pair of struggling figures, was dimly aware that both fell.

Jorak came on, cocky, confident, and Smith rocked for a moment on the balls of his feet. Once and once only he lashed out with his right arm, smeared Jorak's nose flat against his face. Jorak toppled backward and fell, writhing.

Smith looked around him, panting. The other contestants ceased their struggles, and the instructor said:

"Someone has used psi. I don't know who, but someone--"

Jorak pointed weakly, said, "Earthsmith!"

"Snap judgment," the instructor admitted. "Your word only. Still, you alone were bested, Jorak of Gyra--and, hah, that makes twice, doesn't it?"

"Once with psi," said Jorak.

"You sure?"

"I ought to know what hit me! He held me rigid, I tell you, and then he struck me. What could I do? I ask you, what?"

Smith knew that the instructor could read minds--with limitations. He knew the psi-power had been used, but he did not know who had used it.

* * * * *

Jorak wiped the blood from his face with the back of one hand. "Listen," he confided, "Earthsmith is a savage, really and truly, of the planet Earth. Terribly barbaric. Obviously, he'd have no compunctions against dirty fighting."

"Well--" said the instructor.

"There's only one thing wrong with all this," Smith told him. "Nobody on Earth uses psi-power."

Jorak slapped his hand against the mat. "Then you admit that there are psi-powers on Earth?"

"Yes," Smith said. "There are psi-powers on Earth." Things were happening to Smith. He felt vague stirrings inside of him, and he dampered them.

"There. He admits it," Jorak said. "The men of Earth are not without their psi-powers, and Smith or Earthsmith-I still don't know the barbarian's name--used them on me." He shook his fist. "You just can't trust these barbarians."

The instructor still did not seem sure of himself, but there were angry mutterings in the crowd, and the albino woman who had almost but not quite joined the fighters said, "Let me try a fall with him. Probably I would lose, but we of Nugat can perceive the psi-powers readily."

Smith stormed away from her, felt hot anger rushing through him. "I wouldn't fight with a woman."

Jorak taunted. "He's afraid she'll discover--"

"Nothing! I'm afraid of nothing, Jorak. I just won't fight a woman." He was shouting now, and he couldn't help it. Again, there was the odd feeling that part of his mind at least stood away from all this, observing, shaking its head and telling him to curb his temper.

A hand lay heavily on his shoulder, big gnarled, orange. "Kard of Shilon would like a fall with you, Earthsmith of Earth. Perhaps I am not as subtle as the woman from Nugat, but still I think I could tell."

The instructor nodded, and Kard spun Smith around, kept him spinning with a short chopping blow to his jaw. Smith hardly felt it. But something told him deep inside his whirling brain to fall, fall, fall--and the faintest shadow of a smile flickered across Jorak's lips.

Win or lose--what was the difference? Those who could would feel the psi-powers, and Smith would be their
By crotch and collar he caught the huge man of Shilon, lifted him. Kard's arms and legs flailed air, helplessly. He bellowed as Smith began to whirl, slowly at first, but then faster. Up he raised the great orange hulk, held it aloft on outstretched arms for one moment--hurled it.

Arms and legs still flailing wildly, Kard struck the mat, seemed almost to bounce, landed in a heap atop Jorak.

Geria jumped up and down delightedly, but the woman of Nugat scowled. "Psi," she said. "I felt it."

"As did I," admitted the instructor. "Faintly. Smith of Earth--"

"Don't tell me you didn't see me use my arms then, just my arms?"

"Kard appeared awful helpless--"

"I felt the psi," said the woman of Nugat.

"And I," a man agreed.

"As I said," Jorak declared smugly, "when you bring a barbarian to the school you must expect barbarous behavior. Oh well," he stifled a yawn, "I'll get my nose fixed, of course, but this sort of thing could continue. Unpleasant, is it not?"

The instructor nodded slowly, dismissed class.

* * * * *

"Did you or didn't you, Smith?"

"What do you think, Geria?"

"I'd say no, but I did feel the psi when you threw Kard."

"That was Jorak--and he used it on me."

"Not very strong then, because I remember how readily I--"

"Look, Geria. What's the difference? They've made up their minds, and I can't do a thing about it. I didn't use the psi, I can tell you that and you'll believe me. But it doesn't matter, really. They're convinced. What happens next?"

The woman of Bortinot frowned. "I don't know. They could expel you possibly. You forget I'm new at the school, too. Let's forget all about it. You will, anyway, in dream empathy."

It was easy for her to say that, but Smith couldn't forget. The more he had tried to convince them he had not employed the psi-power, could not employ it, the more they thought that he did. He was of Earth--primitive by their standards, a barbarian. They had said so. Culture had leaped past Earth in all directions, had leaped so far that he could not even recognize it as such, had encompassed the stars and broad new concepts as big as the parsecs of space between the stars. How could he understand--ever?

Or was there anything to understand? If he could take everything at its face value, if he could trust his own judgment, this was not culture at all. But he had forgotten again: his judgment didn't matter. He was being judged, not the school.

"--be strictly a neophyte in dream empathy," Geria was saying, "But not me. I've had my share of it on Bortinot, and they'll be pairing us off, experienced and novice. I'll take you as a partner if you'd like, Smith."

"You bet I'd like it!" He felt genuinely cheerful again, quite suddenly. Geria was the one bright spot at the school, and at least he had that. And yet there was something he could not remember, something pushing against the fringes of consciousness, and it concerned Geria. What actually had happened yesterday on the crags? He could remember, remember--but he couldn't at all, not really, and somehow he knew that the most important item of all remained tantalizingly close, yet just beyond his immediate reach.

He said, "Just what is this dream empathy?"

"Now you are joking."

"No. I don't know a thing about it."

"What do you people of Earth do for entertainment?"

"Well, we talk, or we dance, or we play games, ride horses, take walks in the country, see a show--anything anyone else does, I guess."

"No one else does any of that, because d.e.'s a lot better. You know anything about dreams, Smith?"

"A little. Very little. They've always been something of a mystery on Earth."

"Well, do you read or watch the telios on Earth?"

"Of course. But it's strictly local stuff on Earth. That's why I'm here."

"Well, if it's fiction, why do you read?"

"Excitement I guess. Interest, suspense. I watch the hero, I struggle with him, succeed when he does if the book's a good one--"

"Exactly. You go into empathy with him. Smith--how would you like to do that--with me?"

"Huh?"
"Take a dream. I dream it, not you. It's a good one, under control. A vivid dream, more real than life itself in a lot of ways, emotions highlighted, maintained, increased--and exactly what I want to dream because I know we'll both like it.

"I dream it, not you. But you feel it with me. You grow tired of your own thoughts, so you switch in on someone else's. Control there. Gorgeous dreams, fantastic dreams, even horrible ones, if both would like it. Complete empathy--in a dream world.

"Then later, when you're experienced, you dream and I emp. How does it sound, Smith?"

He smiled. "Not much privacy. But I'd be a liar if I said I wouldn't want to take a peek at your dreams, Geria. It sounds fine."

Geria laughed softly, a lilting feminine sound. "It's a little more private than that, provided I know what I'm doing. There's a control. I can dream what I want, and can restrict it. You'll see."

Smith very much wanted to see. Almost, he forgot about Jorak and the psi-power. But briefly in his mind he saw the black uniformed giant from Wortan, felt again the flailing Kard raised high overhead, saw accusation in the woman of Nugat's eyes....

* * * * *

They lay on two adjacent couches, Smith and the woman of Bortinot. A bare cubicle of a room with just the two couches in it. A door, now closed, led into a room in which they had received their instructions. But Smith hardly had listened. Geria knew the game well enough, and he'd let it go at that. The rasping voice of the female instructor had annoyed him, anyway, but he noticed that she was a woman of Bortinot, not beautiful like Geria, but of her planet nonetheless.

"Psi-powers again," Geria told him. "Hypnotism and telepathy mostly. You'll see...."

Something which looked like a candle-flame seen through a long dark tube flickered from the ceiling. It came closer, steadied, flickered no more. Smith couldn't draw his eyes away from it.

"You're asleep," Geria told him, matter-of-factly.

He was. Not really, because in sleep there was a lack of awareness. But he could not move and everything was dark and he could only think.

He felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. A mind without a body, in complete darkness. The tingle of awareness which you hardly regard as such because it always is with you was gone. Nothing.

And then it returned. He felt his heart beating again. His ear itched and he scratched it. He shifted his left arm which had fallen asleep.

Oddly, the ceiling light had moved. It had been just to the right of center--now it was just to the left, flickering again, retreating. It was gone.

He turned over on his left side, sleepily, contentedly--on the brink of real sleep. Geria knew what she was doing. He'd rest. He looked--at his own sleeping figure!

Madness toyed with the edges of his mind, gained inroads, made him look again. The silent figure to his left--himself. He raised his hands, felt the hair, long, flowing, billowing about his head--looked down, could see the gentle rounded rise of breast.

A voice nibbled at consciousness, repeated itself, became clearer, laughing: "We will go to sleep now, Smith. How does it feel to be here with me? Let's dream. Dream--"

The voice reassured, and Smith-Geria relaxed, slept.

* * * * *

He, Geria of Bortinot--really she, then--stood on a hill. A weathered hill and aged, on a frigid world where winds of winter raged and howled and battered mountains into submissive mounds. Fearful place, grim and almost dead it was--and yet he liked it. Smiling, he stood atop the hill and bade the tempest strike. The winds hurled him headlong and he stumbled, but he felt elated, wild and free, part of the elements that did battle there in that country of the weathered hills. And there were others and they were men. They came up the hill and they tried to take him in their arms, strong men and fair, but he ran laughing with the wind. His identity faded in that wind, was torn to tatters by it--left only was Geria of Bortinot, her feelings, her thoughts, but his awareness.

She stumbled, fell, turned over and over, much too slowly. Winds still howled, but above her here at hill's bottom. Wraiths of fog swirled in eddying gusts, came closer and faded, appeared again and swept away.

She cried a name because the fog brought her an image and the name and the image were one. "Smith of Earth, of Earth, of Earth...." And he came to her, this image, on a charger, an animal much too thick through the shoulders to be a horse, with three pairs of legs. Low out of saddle he leaned, graceful, handsome bald head pink with excitement. He clutched at her, lifted her through the mists, above them. The six-legged horse soared high, above the hills, above the winds, carried her higher and higher. Smith stroked her yellow hair, kissed her. She tingled.... [Illustration]
"Wake up Smith! Up, come on now, the class is over for today."
He stirred. The dream--Gods of Earth, what a dream!
"Well, how'd you like it? See what I mean about dream empathy, Smith? Beats everything, doesn't it?"
Smith hardly heard her. They say dreams fulfill wishes, they say--and what was it Geria had dreamed? Suddenly, it was very important to Smith, terribly important, more important than anything, because he remembered, without knowing how or why, what had happened yesterday on the crags.
"Geria," he said. He tried to make his voice soft, but it boomed loudly, almost startled her.
"What's the matter?"
"Nothing. Why nothing is the matter. You remember yesterday on the crag, Geria?"
She nodded.
"And your dream--Geria?"
Again, the casual nod.
"Geria, I--I love you. I think I want to marry you. I think--"
He stopped. She looked at him for what seemed a long time but really was only a few seconds, and then she grinned. There was nothing malicious about it, Smith knew, just a grin. It spread, and the woman of Bortinot began to laugh. Softly at first, but soon she was laughing very hard and Smith felt foolish. He wanted very much to be out of there, any place but in that room, but he did not know for sure that he knew how to operate the door.
"Oh, Smith, Smith," she said, "if you could see yourself now. But I suppose I deserve it. I planted the suggestion, you fought it, now you're pretending. All right, I admit defeat. But stop now; you should see your face."
Serious. She was serious. She thought he was joking. Post-suggestively you tried to get someone to do something--anything, and it was very very funny if they did. Funnier yet if they didn't, because then they beat you at your own game, made fun of you, laughed at you, but eventually with you. Of course it was like that, let her think it was like that.
He smiled. "All right, I'll--stop."
And together, laughing, they walked out of the room. Smith was surprised to find he had no trouble at all with the door.

Jorak had a friendly smile for Smith when he entered their room. "There's a card for you in the box, Smith. Read it." Jorak, it seemed, had stopped playing with his name.
Smith took the card, read it. "Smith of Earth, report to Registrar at once."
"You know why, don't you?" Jorak asked him. But the smile was no longer friendly.
"How should I know?"
"Trouble, that's what. But you asked for it. Psi and Wortan don't mix, barbarian."
Smith was glad when he hardly felt any impulse to strike the purple man. But he said, mocking Jorak's own tones, "Don't provoke me," and Jorak cowered in a corner.

Smith looked into the banks of the Registrar's lights, spoke into the speaker. "Smith of Earth," he said. This time his voice didn't boom with loudness. And it didn't seem to matter much anymore.
And this time, the Registrar's voice wasn't so femininely petulant. It sounded masculine, authoritative.
"Smith of Earth. Item. Garnot of Jlob feels you are an inferior history student, recommends withdrawal from the school." "Item: Sog-chafka of Wortan announces your wanton use of psi-powers in Wortan fighting, recommends clemency because you are a barbarian."
"Item: Kard of Shilon wants to meet you in Wortan again. Promises to kill you."
"Item: both Jorak of Gyra and Geria of Bortinot have questioned your mentality, want you tested."
Vaguely Smith listened. He felt removed, resigned. And it didn't seem to matter much anymore.
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"Smith of Earth. Item. Garnot of Jlob feels you are an inferior history student, recommends withdrawal from the school."
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"Item: both Jorak of Gyra and Geria of Bortinot have questioned your mentality, want you tested."
Vaguely Smith listened. He felt removed, resigned. But then certain words struck hard....
"... Geria of Bortinot questions your mentality...."
"Smith of Earth. Are you listening?"
"I'm listening," Smith said.
"I feel you have two choices," the Registrar said. "We can request your withdrawal from the school, or we can keep you here under observation and give you an exhaustive battery of tests. The decision is in your hands."
"... Geria of Bortinot questions your mentality...."
"... the decision is in your hands."
Jorak moved, slipped along the wall. His face was sneering and fearful too. The purple mask of his face seemed to swim before Smith's eyes like something seen through watered glass. Smith was pacing. He felt the emotions
beginning to work yeastyly and he longed to take that face and twist it off its snaky neck.

"You had better go back to Earth, Smith," Jorak said. "Wherever it is."

Abruptly, Smith felt the tendons writhing between his hands. He lifted. He held the squirming figure off the floor, held it there and looked into it curiously.

"You'd better use some of your psi-power, my little green friend," Smith said, "While you can."

The green face was turning purple. Words choked off somewhere down in the tubular length of the neck. Smith could feel it now! He could feel it! And he knew. The desperate tendrils of psi-power flailing out. And Smith began to smile.

"I could tell you some things, Jorak. You have some psi-power, but that and anything else you've got, including some very bad features, you got them all from Earth. You got the germs for it all a long time back. And what you have left is just something that's a kind of left-over after a few thousand years. The Earth has forgotten more psi-power, friend, than you'll ever have."

Jorak's eyes popped. Veins were coloring thickly through them.

"You're here to learn something, Jorak. Listen. We developed psi-power on Earth so long ago we don't bother remembering when it was."

Smith felt the power all right. Latent psi-power, dormant and unused and unneeded and uninteresting for aeons. He threw Jorak into the corner. Jorak curled up there, sucking in air and rubbing his bruised neck.

"We had it. We threw it away," Smith said. "We had a defense against it too. But we don't use psi, or the defense anymore. We outgrew it. It had its day and then we forgot about it, Jorak. Why? We lost interest. Individual sanctity was better. Privacy of the human mind was something a lot more to be desired than being able to pry into someone else's brain, or vice versa. But you take a lot of pride, Jorak, in having a little residue floating around."

Smith grinned more widely. It was funny in a way, and sad too. And he didn't particularly care about pushing it any further.

"... the decision is in your hands."

* * * * *

He wished his thoughts would organize, fuse somehow with the stirring, rebelling emotions. Integration right now was vital. You lose, or you're not equal to something. And a really top-notch defense-mechanism will turn the whole thing around and say IT is not equal to YOU. That's a danger. And of that he was afraid.

Could he, should he, pass judgment? On a culture that had left Earth wallowing in the cosmic back-waters? Twice, thrice, he had tried to pass that judgment, but he could not. He should be judged, theoretically, not the school.

So what if their concept of history was primitive, basking in its own importance, ignoring the philosophical precepts upon which the social sciences are based? Surely they had reason, and he shouldn't question....

And if they valued Wortan fighting above all else ... if it made their women look like eager animals waiting to see the blood spill ... how could he question? Why should he dare assume that the whole culture was depraved, simply because he regarded it that way by Earth standards?

And their dream empathy was enjoyable, he had to admit that--but it was too enjoyable. No wonder Earth had dropped that sort of thing long ago. It was a good gimmick to divert attention from important things. It was also regressive, a kind of sick introversion. It was decadence, an invasion of privacy, an offense against the dignity of human privacy of the mind--the individual's last precarious citadel.

He jumped a little when the Registrar barked: "Your decision, Smith of Earth."

He smiled at the bank of lights. He had broad duties. He had a duty to Earth. And an indirect duty to the Galaxy. He should report all this. And Earth should try to do something to bring many worlds out of sloth, decadence, regression and inverted self-importance.

But first of all, a man had a duty to himself, his own psychic health. Maybe the two weren't inseparable either. Maybe Earth would share the humiliation if he, Smith, suffered its scars to remain on him.

He wanted to consider himself as more than a mere projection of Earth, more than a mere symbol. He was of Earth, sure. But first of all he was Smith. Just plain Smith. A guy with a human spirit, with dignity that could be affronted and had been here.

He thought of Geria, of what that dream empathy had suggested. He felt her lips again, the softly curving line of her hips under the silver tunic to her knees, the yellow hair falling free to shoulders....

"Your decision, Smith of Earth," the Registrar's voice was louder.

"I'm not going back to Earth," said Smith softly. "Yet."

He watched Jorak slipping up the side of the wall, then rushing out the exit.

Smith went to the exit too, then into the hall. He started walking down it, and the smile clung to his lips like an old memory.
From the monochromatic light harmonies playing softly from the walls, from the abstract gentleness of music that never stopped filtering through the gardens and over the mists of fountains, from the ever-coruscating and subdued twilight that surrounded the school--from these things, Smith extracted the tone of decadence, the static, hidebound turning of a wheel upon itself.

The women from Bortinot stared oddly at him as his bulk, high and broad passed near. He heard their whispers..."barbarian...savage...."

His smile broadened. The cycle closed. Strange, how the old became decadent, and the young revolted and itself became sophisticated and sick, and the old became young again and the old values turned fresh and clear like a tree blooming out of winter's snow.

The sounds of voices died abruptly as Smith went in. Faces turned...Brandog of Hulpin with the albino skin like alabaster; Luog the young, green-skinned Pandenian...varieties of form and color...the white, pink, orange and green brows. But there was the sameness of inversion and static culture.

Mouths gaped as Smith strode up to the front of the class room in transtellar history and looked curiously at the little man with the round gold face and green eyes that still blinked too much, and who, even now, smiled too much, too vacantly, as if he had been practicing a long time and had forgotten what it meant.

But Garnot of Jlob's smile was slightly strained now and his face had a pale look, under its sheath of gold.
"What a boorish intrusion," the instructor said. His voice got higher. "The entire school knows of course, Earth of Smith...."
"Smith of Earth," Smith said softly.
Whatever it is, the entire school knows that already you have disgraced yourself and your planet--which was to be expected. And that I have recommended your withdrawal from the school as an inferior student."
"And so," Smith said.
Therefore, it should be obvious that you are not particularly welcome as a member of this class. Surely you have not chosen to remain, and even if you have, it should be obvious that you will not be part of any class of mine until you have successfully passed certain tests, and have been kept under observation. Need I add that after you have taken these tests, we will not be expecting you to remain...."
Several students tittered.
"I'm going to talk now, Garnot of Jlob," Smith said. "You asked me questions earlier. Now I'm going to answer them."
"But I did not...."
"They're questions that should be answered, even though I'm not at all sure that there's enough free-thought here to grasp the real meaning of what I'm going to say."
"I did not tell you to talk."
"I'm Smith of Earth, and this is supposedly a free institution. On Earth I wasn't accustomed to being told when I could talk, when I could listen, when I could think. You asked me once where Earth is. I'll tell you."
"But I do not care and...." Earth, interstellarly speaking, is a few parsecs from Sirius. Spaceo-graphically speaking, it isn't very important where it is, not really. Historically, it was at the apex of civilized culture before Jlob ever existed except as a steaming carboniferous swamp peopled largely by a species of amphibian. Socio-psychologically, Earth is a few aeons ahead of the worlds so badly represented here."
"You have not been told to talk!" screamed Garnot of Jlob.
"But you are supposed to listen," Smith insisted. A gasp sounded through the room. "You asked what was the first interstellar event of importance. I'm going to tell you." He turned so that he was looking at the class. "It wasn't the exodus from the prehistoric Sirian worlds to the first culture in the Denebian system. Nor was it the Sirian wars. Those things didn't set the stage for Interstellar history. Interstellar history had already begun and grown old on the planet Earth, half a million years before...."

An intensity boiled up through the wick of Smith's body. "The question itself is shallow, meaningless in an academic sense. It was asked only to be answered in such a way as to reinforce egotistical concepts of culture. The most important event in Interstellar history was when men on the planet Earth developed speech perhaps, or some other event even long before that...and started the scientific process that led finally to the most glorious epoch in history. And what was that? I can remember with pride the engravings of the first proud Earth ships that blasted off for the Centaurian system aeons ago. And other pictures of the early days of the new Centaurian culture, and still others. Of discontent and over-population. And the migration to Sirius.
"Or even earlier, of the stern, thin-lipped face of Matthew Merkle whose tin-can of a spaceship carved a loop in space around the Moon--a satellite of Earth--and returned."
"You think of history in terms of challenge and response, and the earlier challenges were the most significant ones. It was harder to get a spaceship across a mere quarter of a million miles to the Moon then, than it is to send it, translight, to the farthest star today."

Garnot of Jlob was quivering. His face had a deep purplish cast.

Smith turned completely around, his back to the instructor.

"If you want the truth about interstellar history, my friends, come to Earth. That was where it started. That's where anything decent about it has remained. And I'm not at all sure that Earth isn't where it will end ... if it ever really ends."

Half way to the exit, he turned to Garnot of Jlob. "You can stop trying to use psi-power to make me shut up, you pompous phony."

Laughing softly, Smith went out and down the hall. Behind him he heard a loud coughing as though someone was choking.

* * * * *

The word had spread before him to the room where Sog-chafka of Wortan, and Kard of Shilon, and the crowd waited. The two giants were on the mats and around the rows of up-circling benches, were the eager, hungry faces of the women of Bortinot. The Dominants, their lips moist and slightly open and their eyes shiny with anticipation.

Geria stared at him, her body shifting slightly, her lips apart and her teeth shining white, eyes glistening. He remembered how the kiss had been. He smiled at her. She seemed scornful now, a little sad, pitying, as he walked onto the mats.

"Ah, Earthsmith," boomed the instructor. His massive blood-colored face was shiny as he stood there, muscles rippling and seething under the black uniform. Kard of Shilon grinned. The spectators laughed as Smith tripped on the mat and almost sprawled.

Kard of Shilon said, "I'm going to kill you, Earthsmith."

Smith said, "That's an odd way to express your elite tastes, Kard, but I can understand how you feel. Earth knew a lot of killing in its day."

To Sog-chafka, Smith said, "You accused me of using psi-power in Wortan fighting. It was kind of you to recommend clemency. However, I deny the accusation."

"He has psi-power," screamed Jorak of Gyra from the top bench. He shook green fists.

"You said only a few Earthen had psi-power," Sog-chafka said.

"I didn't. I said it's never used on Earth. There's a difference."

"You said you..."

"Didn't use it," Smith said. "What psi-power you have, came from Earth. We of Earth developed it. But it's been a long time since we have bothered with it. But though I'm a little bit rusty now, I'll show you--"

None of them ever knew what a dreadful moment that was for Smith ... who knew his capacity for psi-power, but had never bothered to use it before.

He concentrated.

Twenty Dominant women of Bortinot fell writhing on the mats.

They writhed for a while, then got up and sat down again. Perspiration was heavy on their faces, and they panted heavily, and their eyes were slightly glazed with psychic shock.

Smith's head ached. But he would never show it. He was rusty all right.

Sog-chafka and Kard shifted once and seemed uneasy.

Smith said, "I did that to demonstrate a point, which is that if I want to use psi-power here, I'll not fool around with any puny amount of it such as I was accused of doing earlier. I prefer fighting the Wortan way. Psi-power fighting is pretty unhealthy stuff. Minds getting all wrapped up together in combat. It's finally like beating yourself...."

Smith laughed at the two giants. "Well," he said.

Kard rushed. Smith dropped to hands and knees, pinched Kard's legs, held them perpendicular from the knees down. Kard's rushing weight carried his body on over. His knees popped. He screamed and fell moaning on the mat.

Sog-chafka was already rushing and he tried to duck as Smith lunged upward. The sound in the room was cracking and sharp. Sog-chafka, the instructor in Wortan fighting, stumbled back and his thick arms dug at the air and a laxness showed under the skin-tight black uniform. Blood ran on the mats as Sog-chafka refused to go down any further than his knees. His head hung loosely and he slowly raised his blood-shot eyes.

His massive face twisted. Kard of Shilon lay groaning a little, nursing dislocated knees.

Sog-chafka remained bent, powerful thighs driving as his toes dug into the mat in a pounding, hurtling running dive, head down, hands reaching. It was a ferocious thing to see. Smith could hear the gasps of anticipation as he waited.
Smith chopped down with cupped hands as he stepped aside. He brought his knee up into Sog-chafka's face and he knew that Kard would kill him. "I think, Earthsmith, it only right you should come down here with me!"

Smith put his right hand under Kard's right elbow. He clenched Kard's right wrist with the other hand. He pushed up with his right hand, heaved down with his left. Kard screamed a second time as his elbow popped.

Sog-chafka was on one knee. His face was swelling and blood ran from his chin. He grinned and a broken tooth fell out. He looked up at the row of spectators. "He didn't use any psi on me. I guess you could say it wasn't necessary."

There was no applause from the spectators. There was a kind of bitter ferment working, a wonderment and a suspicion and a dull kind of shock that blanks out facing unpleasant truths.

Smith started past the first row, then stopped and looked down at the woman. He'd miss her, she had seen to that, and she had only been jesting. He'd think of how it might have been, at another time, in another way—but he'd forget in time. You forgot and you grew. Especially, when you had a job to do.

"There's one thing this school has," he said, "that Earth doesn't have ... and never did ... and probably never will. And that is Geria of Bortinot."

When he went out, she was staring after him with an odd expression he couldn't identify. And behind her, Jorak of Gyra danced round and round the mats.
the sky, like a fat old man, getting fatter while his brain rotted away in his skull.

He turned as the door opened. His breath shortened as she came toward him. Smith rubbed his bald pate, and felt the heat rise to his face.

"You made a fool of me, Smith," she whispered. "Now you're blushing ... and that's just an act isn't it? You're still making a fool of me."

"No," he said. "The way I felt about you and the things I said, I meant them. I still do."

"But you let me use that psi-power on you ... and ... and if you'd wanted to ... you could have...." He stared. She was sobbing a little.

He had felt it before, but the feeling was strong enough now to motivate action. He put his arms about her, protectively. He looked out the window at the cragged horizon and the dying red star behind.

"The psi-power," he said. "I didn't realize I had it then. When you used it ... and later, the dream-empathy, it stirred up a lot of old capacities. I wasn't trying to fool anyone. I love you, Geria of Bortinot. And I'm not fooling...."

"Your decision, Smith of Earth...."

Well, he had learned a great deal about Galactic culture, so what should he do? A duty to Earth, to civilization. He had learned:

... That the superior cultures out here among the stars were a myth.
... That something had gone haywire in the startrails, that everyone you met was either psychotic or highly neurotic by Earth standards.
... That the exceptions might be the hope of the Galaxy. But they were very few.
... That Earth had better seek out the reasons for all this, try to eliminate them at their sources if possible, but certainly keep them from contaminating the home planet.

... That Earth had a big job, but if he came back and reported and worked at it, he might convince Earth she was up to it.

That was one way.
"Your decision, Smith of Earth, the battery of tests or...."

She was looking up at him. "Well?"

"What do you think, Geria?"

She put her face against his chest. "Whatever you decide," she whispered. "You're the Dominant...."

He smiled at the banks of lights. "When's the next ship for Deneb?" he asked. "We're going back to Earth."

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**Contents**

WORLD BEYOND PLUTO

A "Johnny Mayhem" Adventure

By Stephen Marlowe

Johnny Mayhem, one of the most popular series characters ever to appear in AMAZING, has been absent too long. So here's good news for Mayhem fans; another great adventure of the Man of Many Bodies.

They loaded the over-age spaceship at night because Triton's one spaceport was too busy with the oreships from Neptune during the day to handle it.

"Symphonies!" Pitchblend Hardesty groaned. Pitchblend Hardesty was the stevedore foreman and he had supervised upwards of a thousand loadings on Triton's crowded blastways, everything from the standard mining equipment to the innards of a new tavern for Triton City's so-called Street of Sin to special anti-riot weapons for the Interstellar Penitentiary not 54 miles from Triton City, but never a symphony orchestra. And most assuredly never, never an all-girl symphony orchestra.

"Symphonies!" Pitchblend Hardesty groaned again as several stevedores came out on the blastway lugging a harp, a base fiddle and a kettle drum.

"Come off it, Pitchblend," one of the stevedores said with a grin. "I didn't see you staying away from the music hall."

That was true enough, Pitchblend Hardesty had to admit. He was a small, wiry man with amazing strength in his slim body and the lore of a solar system which had been bypassed by thirtieth century civilization for the lures of interstellar exploration in his brain. While the symphony--the all-girl symphony--had been playing its engagement at Triton's make-shift music hall, Hardesty had visited the place three times.
"Well, it wasn't the music, sure as heck," he told his critic now. "Who ever saw a hundred girls in one place at one time on Triton?"

The stevedore rolled his eyes and offered Pitchblend a suggestive whistle. Hardesty booted him in the rump, and the stevedore had all he could do to stop from falling into the kettle drum.

* * * * *

Just then a loud bell set up a lonely tolling and Pitchblend Hardesty exclaimed: "Prison break!"

The bell could be heard all over the two-hundred square miles of habitable Triton, under the glassite dome which enclosed the small city, the spaceport, the immigration station for nearby Neptune and the Interstellar Penitentiary. The bell hadn't tolled for ten years; the last time it had tolled, Pitchblend Hardesty had been a newcomer on Neptune's big moon. That wasn't surprising, for Interstellar Penitentiary was as close to escape-proof as a prison could be.

"All right, all right," Pitchblend snapped. "Hurry up and get her loaded."

"What's the rush?" one of the stevedores asked. "The gals ain't even arrived from the hotel yet."

"I'll tell you what the rush is," Pitchblend declared as the bell tolled again. "If you were an escaped prisoner on Triton, just where would you head?"

"Why, I don't know for sure, Pitchblend."

"Then I'll tell you where. You'd head for the spaceport, fast as your legs could carry you. You'd head for an outgoing spaceship, because it would be your only hope. And how many out-going spaceships are there tonight?"

"Why, just two or three."

"Because all our business is in the daytime. So if the convict was smart enough to get out, he'll be smart enough to come here."

"We got no weapons," the stevedore said. "We ain't even got a pea-shooter."

"Weapons on Triton? You kidding? A frontier moon like this, the place would be blasted apart every night. Interstelpen couldn't hold all the disturbers of the peace if we had us some guns."

"But the convict--"

"Yeah," Pitchblend said grimly. "He'll be armed, all right."

Pitchblend rushed back to the manifest shed as the bell tolled a third time. He got on the phone and called the desk of the Hotel Triton.

"Hardesty over at the spaceport," he said. "Loading foreman."

"Loading foreman?" The mild, antiseptic voice at the other end of the connection said it as you would say talking dinosaur.

"Yeah, loading foreman. At night I'm in charge here. Listen, you the manager?"

"The manager--" haughtily--"is asleep. I am the night clerk."

"O.K., then. You tell those hundred girls of yours to hurry. Don't scare them, but have you heard about the prison break?"

"Heard about it? It's all I've been hearing. They--they want to stay and see what happens."

"Don't let 'em!" roared Pitchblend. "Use any excuse you have to. Tell 'em we got centrifugal-upigal and perihelion-peritonitus over here at the spaceport, or any darn thing. Tell 'em if they want to blast off tonight, they'll have to get down here quick. You got it?"

"Yes, but--"

"Then do it." Pitchblend hung up.

The escape bell tolled a fourth time.

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His name was House Bartock, he had killed two guards in his escape, and he was as desperate as a man could be. He had been sentenced to Interstelpen for killing a man on Mars in this enlightened age when capital punishment had been abolished. Recapture thus wouldn't mean death, but the prison authorities at Interstelpen could make their own interpretations of what life-in-prison meant. If House Bartock allowed himself to be retaken, he would probably spend the remaining years of his life in solitary confinement.

He walked quickly now, but he did not run. He had had an impulse to run when the first escape bell had tolled, but that would have been foolish. Already he was on the outskirts of Triton City because they had not discovered his escape for two precious hours. He could hole up in the city, lose himself somewhere. But that would only be temporary.

They would find him eventually.

Or, he could make his way to the spaceport. He had money in his pocket--the dead guard's. He had a guardsman's uniform on, but stripped of its insignia it looked like the jumper and top-boots of any spaceman. He had false identification papers, if needed, which he had worked on for two years in the prison printshop where the prison
newspaper was published. He had....

Suddenly he flattened himself on the ground to one side of the road, hugging the gravel and hardly daring to breathe. He'd heard a vehicle coming from the direction of Interstelpen. It roared up, making the ground vibrate; its lights flashed; it streaked by trailing a jet of fire.

House Bartock didn't move until the afterglow had faded. Then he got up and walked steadily along the road which led from Interstelpen to Triton City.

"Girls! Hurry with your packing! Girls!"

Sighing, Matilda Moriarity subsided. The girls, obviously, were in no hurry. That would have been out of character.

Matilda Moriarity sighed again. She was short, stocky, fifty-two years old and the widow of a fabulously wealthy interstellar investment broker. She had a passion for classical music and, now that her husband had been dead three years, she had decided to exercise that passion. But for Matilda Moriarity, a very out-going fifty-two, exercising it had meant passing it on. The outworlds, Matilda had told her friends, lacked culture. The highest form of culture, for Matilda, was classical music. Very well. She would bring culture to the outworlds.

Triton was her first try and even now sometimes she had to pinch herself so she'd know the initial attempt had been a smashing success. She didn't delude herself completely. It had been a brainstorm selecting only girls—and pretty young things, at that—for the Interstellar Symphony. On a world like Triton, a world which played host to very few women and then usually to the hard types who turned up on any frontier in any century, a symphony of a hundred pretty girls was bound to be a success.

But the music, Matilda Moriarity told herself. They had listened to the music. If they wanted to see the girls in their latest Earth-style evening gowns, they had to listen to the music. And they had listened quietly, earnestly, apparently enjoying it. The symphony had remained on Triton longer than planned, playing every night to a full house. Matilda had had the devil's own time chaperoning her girls, but that was to be expected. It was their first taste of the outworlds; it was the outworlds' first taste of them. The widow Moriarity had had her hands full, all right. But secretly, she had enjoyed every minute of it.

"They say the bell means a prison break!" First Violin squealed excitedly. First Violin was twenty-two, an Earth girl named Jane Cummings and a student at the conservatory on Sirtus Major on Mars, but to the widow Moriarity she was, and would remain, First Violin. That way, calling the girls after their instruments, the widow Moriarity could convince herself that her symphonic music had been of prime importance on Triton, and her lovely young charges of secondary importance.

"How many times do I have to tell you to hurry?"

"But these gowns--"

"Will need a pressing when you return to Mars anyway."

"And a prison break. I never saw a prison break before. It's so exciting."

"You're not going to see it. You're just going to hear about it. Come on, come on, all of you."

At that moment the room phone rang.

"Hello?" the widow Moriarity said.

"This is Jenkins, ma'am, desk. The spaceport called a few minutes ago. I'm not supposed to frighten you, but, well, they were rather worried about the prison break. The escaped convict, they figure, will head for the spaceport. Disguised, he could--"

"Let him try masquerading as a member of my group!" the widow Moriarity said with a smile.

"All the same, if you could hurry--"

"We are hurrying, young man."

"Yes, ma'am."

The widow Moriarity hung up. "Gi-irls!"

The girls squealed and laughed and dawdled.

House Bartock felt like laughing.

He'd just had his first big break, and it might turn out to be the only one he needed. On an impulse, he had decided to strike out directly for the spaceport. He had done so, and now stood on the dark tarmac between the manifest shed and the pilot-barracks. And, not ten minutes after he had reached the spacefield a cordon of guards rushed there from Interstelpen had been stationed around the field. Had Bartock arrived just a few minutes later, he would have been too late, his capture only a matter of time. As it was now, though, he had a very good chance of getting away. Circumstances were in his favor.
He could get so far away that they would never find him.

It was simple. Get off Triton on a spaceship. Go anyplace that had a big spaceport, and manage to tranship out in secret. Then all the police would have to search would be a few quadrillion square miles of space!

But first he had to leave Triton.

From the activity at the port, he could see that three ships were being made ready for blastoff. Two of them were purely cargo-carriers, but the third--Bartock could tell because he saw hand-luggage being loaded--would carry passengers. His instinct for survival must have been working overtime: he knew that the third ship would be his best bet, for if he were discovered and pursued, hostages might make the difference between recapture and freedom.

Bartock waited patiently in the darkness outside the pilot-barracks. The only problem was, how to discover which pilot belonged to which ship?

The cordon of police from Interstelpen had set up several score arc-lights on the perimeter of the field. The spaces between the lights were patrolled by guards armed, as Bartock was, with blasters. Bartock could never have made it through that cordon now. But it wasn't necessary. He was already inside.

The barracks door opened, and a pilot came out. Tensing, ready, Bartock watched him.

The three ships were scattered widely on the field, Venus Bell to the north, Star of Hercules to the south, Mozart's Lady to the east. Venus Bell and Star of Hercules were straight cargo carriers. Mozart's Lady--what a queer name for a spaceship, Bartock couldn't help thinking--had taken in hand luggage. So if the pilot who had just left the barracks headed east, Bartock would take him. The pilot paused outside, lit a cigarette, hummed a tune. The scent of tobacco drifted over to Bartock. He waited.

The pilot walked east toward Mozart's Lady.

* * * * *

"Ready, girls?"
"Ready, Mrs. Moriarity. But couldn't we--well--sort of hang around until we see what happens?"
"You mean the escaped convict?"
"Yes, ma'am." Hopefully.
"They'll catch him. They always catch them."
"But--"
"Come on."
"Aw, gosh, Mrs. Moriarity."
"I said, come on."

Reluctantly, the hundred girls trooped with their chaperone from the hotel.

* * * * *

Bartock struck swiftly and without mercy.

The blaster would make too much noise. He turned it around, held it by the barrel, and broke the pilot's skull with it. In the darkness he changed clothing for the second time that night, quickly, confidently, his hands steady. In the darkness he could barely make out the pilot's manifest. The man's ship was Mozart's Lady, all right. Outbound from Triton City for Mars. Well, Bartock thought, he wouldn't go to Mars. Assuming they learned what ship he had boarded, they would be guarding the inner orbits too closely.

He would take Mozart's Lady daringly outward, beyond Neptune's orbit. Naturally, the ship wouldn't have interstellar drive, but as yet Bartock wasn't going interstellar. You couldn't have everything. You couldn't expect a starship on Triton, could you? So Bartock would take Mozart's Lady outward to Pluto's orbit--and wait. From the amount of hand luggage taken aboard, Mozart's Lady would be carrying quite a number of passengers. If that number were reduced--drastically reduced--the food, water and air aboard would last for many months. Until the fuss died down. Until Bartock could bring Mozart's Lady, long since given up for lost, in for a landing on one of the inner planets....

Now he dragged the dead pilot's body into the complete darkness on the south side of the pilot-barracks, wishing he could hide it better but knowing he didn't have the time or the means.

Then he walked boldly across the tarmac, wearing a pilot's uniform, toward Mozart's Lady.

Fifteen minutes later, House Bartock watched with amazement while a hundred pretty young women boarded the ship. Of all the things that had happened since his escape, this came closest to unnerving him, for it was the totally unexpected. Bartock shrugged, chain-smoked three cigarettes while the women boarded slowly, taking last-minute looks at dark Triton, the spaceport, the cordon of guards, the arc-lights. Bartock cursed impotently. Seconds were precious now. The pilot's body might be found. If it were....

At last the port clanged shut and the ground-crew tromped away. Since even an over-age ship like Mozart's Lady was close to ninety percent automatic, there was no crew. Only the pilot--who was Bartock--and the passengers.
Bartock was about to set the controls for blastoff when he heard footsteps clomp-clomping down the companionway. He toyed with the idea of locking the door, then realized that would arouse suspicion.

A square woman's face over a plump middle-aged figure.
"I'm Mrs. Moriarity, pilot. I have a hundred young girls aboard. We'll have no nonsense."
"No, sir. I mean, no ma'am."
"Well, make sure."
"Yes, ma'am."
"And I want an easy trip, without fuss or incidents. For half of our girls it's the second time in space--the first being when they came out here. You understand?"
"Yes, ma'am."
"What happened to the pilot who took us out?"
"Uh, pressed into service last week on a Mercury run. I'm surprised the control board didn't tell you."
"They didn't. It doesn't matter. You do your job, and that's all."
"Yes, ma'am," House Bartock said. "Just my job."
A few moments later, Mozart's Lady blasted off.

* * * * *
"Stop! Hey, wait!" Pitchblend Hardesty bawled at the top of his voice. But it didn't do any good. The police rushed up behind Pitchblend, not daring to fire.
Moments before, they had found the dead pilot's body. They knew at once what it meant, of course. They had been not more than a minute too late.
"Call Central Control on Neptune," a police officer said. "We'll send a cruiser after them."
"Won't do any good," Pitchblend Hardesty groaned.
"What are you talking about, fellow?"
"Unless the cruiser's brand new."
"On Neptune? Don't be silly. Newest one we've got is ten years old."
"Like I said, won't do any good. I worked that ship over, mister. I know what she's like inside. She may look like an over-age tub on the outside, but don't let that fool you. She's got power, mister. She's probably the fastest thing this side of the Jovian moons, except for those experimental one-man rocket-bombs down at Neptune Station. But chasing a big tub in a one-man space-bound coffin--" here Pitchblend used the vernacular for the tiny one-man experimental ships--"ain't going to do anybody any good. Best thing you can do is track Mozart's Lady by radar and hope she'll head sunward. Then they could intercept her closer in."

But Mozart's Lady did not head sunward. Radar tracking confirmed this moments later. Mozart's Lady was outward bound for Pluto's orbit. And, with Pluto and Neptune currently in conjunction, that could even mean a landing, although, the police decided, that wasn't likely. There were no settlements on Pluto. Pluto was too weird. For the strangest reason in a solar system and a galaxy of wonders, Pluto was quite uninhabitable. More likely, Mozart's Lady would follow Pluto's orbit around, then make a dash sunward....

The radar officer threw up his hands. "I give up," he said. "She's heading for Pluto's orb all right. Call Neptune Station."

"Neptune Station, sir?"
"You bet. This job's too big for me. The brass will want to handle it."
Seconds later, sub-space crackled with energy as the call was put through from Triton City to Neptune Station.

* * * * *
Whatever else history would write about him, it would certainly call Johnny Mayhem the strangest--and literally most death-defying--test-pilot in history. Of course, testing the sleek experimental beauties out of Neptune Station and elsewhere wasn't Mayhem's chief occupation. He was, in a phrase, a trouble-shooter for the Galactic League. Whenever he had a spare few weeks, having completed an assignment ahead of schedule in his latest of bodies, he was likely to turn up at some testing station or other and volunteer for work. He was never turned down, although the Galactic League didn't approve. Mayhem was probably the galaxy's best pilot, with incredible reflexes and an utter indifference toward death.

For the past two weeks, having completed what turned out to be an easier-than-expected assignment on Neptune, he had been piloting the space-bound coffins out of Neptune Station, and with very satisfactory experimental results.
A few minutes ago he had been called into the station director's office, but when he entered he was surprised to see the Galactic League Firstman of Neptune waiting for him.
"Surprised, eh?" the Firstman demanded.
"I'll bet you want me to quit test-flying," Mayhem said with a smile which, clearer than words, told the
Firstman his advice would be rejected.

The Firstman smiled too, "Why, no, Mayhem. As a matter of fact, I want you to take one of the coffins into deep space."

"Maybe something's wrong with my hearing," Mayhem said.

"No. You heard it right. Of course, it's up to you. Everything you do, you volunteer."

"Let's hear it, Firstman."

So the Firstman of Neptune told Johnny Mayhem about Mozart's Lady which, six hours ago, had left Triton for Pluto's orbit with an eccentric wealthy widow, a hundred girls, and a desperate escaped killer.

"The only thing we have out here fast enough to overtake them, Mayhem, is the one-man coffins. The only man we have who can fly them is you. What do you say?"

Mayhem's answer was a question, but the question didn't really require an answer. Mayhem asked: "What are we waiting for?"

The Firstman grinned. He had expected such an answer, of course. The whole galaxy, let alone the solar system, knew the Mayhem legend. Every world which had an Earthman population and a Galactic League post, however small, had a body in cold storage, waiting for Johnny Mayhem if his services were required. But of course no one knew precisely when Mayhem's services might be required. No one knew exactly under what circumstances the Galactic League Council, operating from the hub of the Galaxy, might summon Mayhem. And only a very few people, including those at the Hub and the Galactic League Firstmen on civilized worlds and Observers on primitive worlds, knew the precise mechanics of Mayhem's coming.

Johnny Mayhem, a bodiless sentience. Mayhem--Johnny Marlow, then--who had been chased from Earth, a pariah and a criminal, eight years ago, who had been mortally wounded on a wild planet deep within the Saggitarian Swarm, whose life had been saved--after a fashion--by the white magic of that planet. Mayhem, doomed now to possible immortality as a bodiless sentience, an elan, which could occupy and activate a corpse if it had been frozen properly ... an elan doomed to wander eternally because it could not remain in one body for more than a month without body and elan perishing. Mayhem, who had dedicated his strange, lonely life to the service of the Galactic League because a normal life and normal social relations were not possible for him....

"One thing, Mayhem," the Firstman said, now, on Neptune. "How much longer you have in that body of yours?"

"Five days. Possibly six."

"That doesn't give you much time. If you're caught out there when your month is up--"

"I won't be. We're wasting time talking about it."

"--it would mean your death."

"Then let's get started."

* * * * *

The Firstman stared at him levelly. "You're a brave man, Mayhem."

"Let's say I'm not afraid to die. I've been a living dead man for eight years. Come on."

One of the so-called coffins, a tiny one-man ship barely big enough for a prone man, food concentrates and water, was already waiting at the station spacefield.

Ten minutes after hearing about Mozart's Lady, without fanfare, Mayhem blasted off in pursuit.

* * * * *

Maintaining top speed all the way, House Bartock brought Mozart's Lady across almost two billion miles of space from Neptune's to Pluto's orbit in three days. He was delighted with the speed. It would have taken the average space-tub ten days to two weeks and, since as far as Bartock knew there were nothing but average space-tubs on Neptune, that gave him a considerable head-start.

It was Jane Cummings-First Violin who discovered Bartock's identity. Bartock was studying the star-map at the time and considered himself safe from discovery because he kept the control door of Mozart's Lady locked. However, Jane Cummings had established something of a liaison with the pilot outward bound from Earth and Mars, so she had been given a spare key which she'd kept, secretly, all the time the symphony was on Triton. Now, curious about the new pilot for the same reason that the miners on Triton had been curious about the symphony, Jane made her way forward, inserted her key in the lock, and pushed open the control door.

"Hello there," she said.

House Bartock whirled. The turning of a key in the lock had so unnerved him--it was the last thing he expected--that he forgot to shut off the star-map. Its tell-tale evidence glowed on the wall over his head.

"What do you want?" he managed to ask politely.

"Oh, just to say hello."

"You already said it."
Jane Cummings pouted. "You needn't bite my head off. What's your name? Mine's Jane, and I play the violin. It wouldn't hurt you to be polite."

Bartock nodded, deciding that a little small talk wouldn't hurt if he could keep the girl from becoming suspicious. That was suddenly important. If this girl had a key to the control room, for all he knew there could be others.

"My, you have been hurrying," Jane said. "I could tell by the acceleration. You must be trying to break the speed records or something. I'll bet we're almost to Earth--"

Her voice trailed off and her mouth hung open. At first Bartock didn't know what was the matter. Then he saw where she was staring.

The star-map.

"We're not heading for Earth!" she cried.

Bartock walked toward her. "Give me that key," he said. "You're going to have to stay here with me. Give me that key."

Jane backed away. "You--you couldn't be our pilot. If you were--"

"The key. I don't want to hurt you."

Bartock lunged. Jane turned and ran, slamming the door behind her. It clanged, and echoed. The echo didn't stop. Bartock, on the point of opening the door and sprinting down the companionway after her, stopped.

It wasn't the echo of metal slamming against metal. It was the radar warning.

Either Mozart's Lady was within dangerous proximity of a meteor, or a ship was following them.

Bartock ran to the radar screen.

The pip was unmistakable. A ship was following them.

A ship as fast--or faster--than Mozart's Lady.

Cursing, Bartock did things with the controls. Mozart's Lady, already straining, increased its speed. Acceleration flung Bartock back in the pilot's chair. Pluto loomed dead ahead.

* * * * *
 Johnny Mayhem knew at what precise moment he had been discovered, for suddenly the speed of Mozart's Lady increased. Since this had occurred an hour and a half after Mayhem had first got a clear pip of the bigger ship on his radar, it meant he'd been spotted.

Prone with his hands stretched forward in the coffin-like experimental ship, Mayhem worked the controls, exactly matching speed with Mozart's Lady.

He tried to put himself in the position of the escaped convict. What would he do? His best bet would be to swing in close around Pluto, as close as he dared. Then, on the dark side of the planet, to change his orbit abruptly and come loose of its gravitational field in a new direction. It was a dangerous maneuver, but since the escaped convict now knew for sure that the tiny ship could match the speed of Mozart's Lady, it was his only hope. The danger was grave: even a first-rate pilot would try it only as a last resort, for the gravitational pull of Pluto might upset Mozart's Lady's orbit. If that happened, the best the convict could hope for was an emergency landing. More likely, a death-crash would result.

Seconds later, Mayhem's thinking was confirmed. Mozart's Lady executed a sharp turn in space and disappeared behind the white bulk of Pluto.

"He's trying to kill us all!"

"He doesn't know how to pilot a ship! We're helpless, helpless!"

"Do something, Mrs. Morarity!"

"Now girls, whatever happens, you must keep calm. We can only assume that Jane was right about what she saw, but since none of us can pilot a spaceship, we'll have to bide our time...."

"Bide our time!"

"We're all as good as dead!"

One of the girls began screaming.

Mrs. Morarity slapped her. "I'm sorry, dear. I had to hit you. Your behavior bordered on the hysterical. And if we become hysterical we are lost, lost, do you understand?"

"Yes'm."

"Good. Then we wait and see what happens."

* * * * *

What was happening was an attempt at what test-pilots term planet-swinging. Moving in the direction of Pluto's orbit, Mozart's Lady swung in very close behind the planet. Then, as the rotation of Pluto on its axis hurled it forth again, as a sling-shot hurls a pellet, Mozart's Lady's rockets would alter the expected direction of flight. Unless a
pursuing ship followed exactly the same maneuver, it would be flung off into space at top-speed in the wrong direction. It might be hours before the first ship's trail could be picked up again—if ever.

House Bartock, aware of all this—and one other factor—sat sweating it out at the controls.

The one other factor was closeness to Pluto. For if you got too close, and the difference was only a matter of miles covered in an elapsed time of mili-seconds, Pluto might drag you into a landing orbit. If that happened, traveling at tremendous speed, there'd be the double danger of overheating in the planet's atmosphere and coming down too hard. Either way the results could be fatal.

His hands sweating, Bartock struggled with the controls. Now already he could see Pluto bulking, its night-side black and mysterious, in the viewport. Now he could hear the faint shrill scream of its atmosphere. Now....

Trying to time it perfectly, he slammed on full power.

A fraction of a mili-second too late.

Mozart's Lady stood for an instant on its tail, shuddering as if it were going to come apart and rain meteoric dust over Pluto's surface. That had happened too in such a maneuver, but it didn't happen now.

Instead, Mozart's Lady went into a landing orbit.

But its speed was still terrific and, lowering, it whizzed twice around Pluto's fifteen thousand mile circumference in twenty minutes. Atmosphere screamed, the heat siren shrilled, and a cursing House Bartock applied the braking rockets as fast as he could.

Pluto's surface blurred in the viewport, coming closer at dizzying speed. Bartock stood Mozart's Lady on its tail a second time, this time on purpose.

The ship shuddered, and struck Pluto.

Bartock blacked out.

* * * * *

When Mayhem's radar screen informed him that Mozart's Lady had failed to break free of Pluto's field of gravity, Mayhem immediately went to work. First he allowed the tiny scout-ship to complete its planet-swing successfully, then he slowed down, turned around in deep space, and came back, scanning Pluto with radar scopes and telescope until he located the bigger ship. That might have taken hours or days ordinarily, but having seen Mozart's Lady go in, and having recorded its position via radar, Mayhem had a pretty good idea as to the landing orbit it would follow.

It took him three-quarters of an hour to locate the bigger ship. When he finally had located it, he brought it into close-up with the more powerful of the two telescopes aboard the scout.

Mozart's Lady lay on its side in a snow-tundra. It had been damaged, but not severely. Part of the visible side was caved in, but the ship had not fallen apart. Still, chances were that without extensive repairs it would not be able to leave Pluto.

There was no way, Mayhem knew, of making extensive repairs on Pluto. Mozart's Lady was there to stay.

The safe thing to do would be to inform Neptune and wait in space until the police cruisers came for House Bartock. The alternative was to planetfall near Mozart's Lady, take the convict into custody, and then notify Neptune.

If Bartock were alone the choice would have been an easy one. But Bartock was not alone. He had a hundred girls with him. He was desperate. He might try anything.

Mayhem had to go down after him.

* * * * *

The trouble was, though, that of all the worlds in the galaxy—not merely in Sol System—Pluto was the one most dangerous to Johnny Mayhem. He had been pursuing House Bartock for three days. Which meant he had two days left before it was imperative that he leave his current body. This would mean notifying the hub of the Galaxy by sub-space radio to pull out his elan, but Pluto's heavyside layer was the strongest in the solar system, so strong that sub-space radio couldn't penetrate it.

And that was not the only thing wrong with Pluto. It was, in fact, an incredible anomaly of a world. Almost four billion miles from the sun at its widest swing, it still was not too cold to support life. Apparently radioactive heat in its core kept it warm. It even had an Earth-type atmosphere, although the oxygen-content was somewhat too rich and apt to make you giddy. And it was a slow world.

Time moved slowly on Pluto. Too slowly. When you first landed, according to the few explorers who had attempted it, the native fauna seemed like statues. Their movement was too slow for the eye to register. That was lucky, for the fauna tended to be enormous and deadly. But after a while—how long a while Mayhem didn't know—the fauna, subjectively, seemed to speed up. The animals commenced moving slowly, then a bit faster, then normally. That, Mayhem knew, was entirely subjective. The animals of Pluto were not changing their rate of living: the visitor to Pluto was slowing down to match their laggard pace.
Two days, thought Mayhem. That was all he had. And, hours after he landed, he'd start to slow down. There was absolutely no way of telling how much time elapsed once that happened, for the only clocks that did not go haywire on Pluto were spring-wind clocks, and there hadn't been a spring-wind clock in the solar system for a hundred and fifty years.

Result? On Pluto Mayhem would slow down. Once he reached Pluto's normal time rate it might take him, say, ten minutes to run--top-speed--from point A to point B, fifteen yards apart. Subjectively, a split-second of time would have gone by in that period.

Two days would seem like less than an hour, and Mayhem would have no way of judging how much less.

If he didn't get off Pluto in two days he would die.

If he didn't land, House Bartock, growing desperate and trying to scare him off or trying to keep control of the hundred girls while he made a desperate and probably futile attempt to repair the damaged Mozart's Lady, might become violent.

Mayhem called Neptune, and said: "Bartock crash-landed on Pluto, geographical coordinates north latitude thirty-three degrees four minutes, west longitude eighteen degrees even. I'm going down. That's all."

He didn't wait for an answer.

He brought the space-bound coffin down a scant three miles from Mozart's Lady. Here, though, the tundra of Pluto was buckled and convoluted, so that two low jagged ranges of snow-clad hills separated the ships.

Again Mayhem didn't wait. He went outside, took a breath of near-freezing air, and stalked up the first range of hills. He carried a blaster buckled to his belt.

When he saw the scout-ship come down, Bartock didn't wait either. He might have waited had he known anything about what Pluto did to the time-sense. But he did not know. He only knew, after a quick inspection, that the controls of Mozart's Lady had been so badly damaged that repair was impossible.

He knew too that the scout-ship had reported his whereabouts. He had, on regaining consciousness, been in time to intercept the radio message. True, it would take any other Neptune-stationed ship close to two weeks to reach Pluto, so Bartock had some temporal leeway. But obviously whoever was pursuing him in the one-man ship had not come down just to sit and wait. He was out there in the snow somewhere. Well, Bartock would go out too, would somehow manage to elude his pursuer, to get behind him, reach the scout-ship and blast off in it. And, in the event that anything went wrong, he would have a hostage.

He went area ships to select one.

Went with his desperation shackled by an iron nerve.

And a blaster in his hand.

"... very lucky," Matilda Moriarity was saying, trying to keep the despair from her voice. "We have some cuts and bruises, but no serious casualties. Why, we might have all been killed."

"Lucky, she says! We're marooned here. Marooned--with a killer."

Before the widow Moriarity could defend her choice of words, if she was going to defend them, House Bartock came into the rear lounge, where the entire symphony and its chaperone was located. They would have locked the door, of course; they had locked it ever since they had learned who Bartock was. But the door, buckled and broken, had been one of the casualties of the crash-landing.

"You," Bartock said.

He meant Jane Cummings.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. We're going outside."

"Out--side?"

"That's what I said. Let's get a move on."

Jane Cummings didn't move.

The widow Moriarity came between her and Bartock. "If you must take anyone, take me," she said bravely.

"The girl."

Still the widow Moriarity didn't move.

House Bartock balled his fist and hit her. Three of the girls caught her as she fell. None of them tried to do anything about Bartock, who had levelled his blaster at Jane Cummings.

Trembling, she went down the companionway with him.

A fierce cold wind blew as they opened the airlock door.

It looked like a sea-serpent floundering in the snow.
Only, it was caught in the act of floundering, like an excellent candid shot of a sea-serpent floundering in snow. Its movements were too slow for Mayhem's eyes to register. Which meant, he realized gratefully, that he hadn't begun to slow down yet. He had to be careful, though. If he were Bartock he would make immediately for the scout-ship. It would be his only hope.

Realizing this, Mayhem had gone through deep snow for what he judged to be fifteen minutes, until he had reached a spine of rock protruding from the snow. Then he had doubled back, now leaving no footprints, along the spine. He was waiting in the first low range of hills not four hundred yards from the scout-ship, his blaster ready. When Bartock prowled into view, Mayhem would shout a warning. If Bartock didn't heed it, Mayhem would shoot him dead.

It seemed like an airtight plan.

And it would have been, except for two things. First, Bartock had a hostage. And second, Pluto-time was beginning to act on Mayhem.

He realized this when he looked at the sea-serpent again. The long neck moved with agonizing slowness, the great gray green bulk of the monster, sixty feet long, shifted slowly, barely perceptibly, in the snow. Mountains of powdery snow moved and settled. The spade-shaped head pointed at Mayhem. The tongue protruded slowly, hung suspended, forked and hideous, then slowly withdrew.

The neck moved again, ten feet long, sinuous. And faster. Faster? Not really.

Mayhem was slowing down.

* * * * *

Then he saw Bartock and the girl.

They were close together. Bartock held her arm. Walking toward the scout-ship, they were too far away and too close together for Mayhem to fire. Bartock would know this and wouldn't heed any warning.

[illustration: Mayhem was blocked. The gun was useless.]

So Mayhem didn't give any warning. He left the spine of rock and rushed down through the snow toward the space-bound coffin.

A low rumble of sound broke the absolute stillness.

It was the monster, and now that his own hearing had slowed down, Mayhem was able to hear the slower cycles of sound. How much time had really passed? He didn't know. How much time did he have left before death came swiftly and suddenly because he had been too long in his temporary body? He didn't know that either. He sprinted toward the scout-ship. At least it felt like he was sprinting. He didn't know how fast he was really moving. But the sea-serpent creature was coming up behind him, faster. No place near what would have been its normal apparent speed, but faster. Mayhem, his breath coming raggedly through his mouth, ran as fast as was feasible.

So did Bartock and the girl.

It was Bartock, spotting Mayhem on the run, who fired first. Mayhem fell prone as the raw zing of energy ripped past. The sea-serpent-like-creature behind him bellowed.

And reared. It didn't look like a sea-serpent any longer. It looked like a dinosaur, with huge solid rear limbs, small forelimbs, a great head with an enormous jaw--and speed.

Now it could really move.

Subjectively, time seemed normal to Mayhem. Your only basis was subjective: time always seemed normal. But Mayhem knew, as he got up and ran again, that he was now moving slower than the minute hand on a clock. Slower ... as objective time, as measured in the solar system at large, sped by.

He tripped as the creature came behind him. The only thing he could do was prop up an elbow in the snow and fire. Raw energy ripped off the two tiny forelimbs, but the creature didn't falter. It rushed by Mayhem, almost crushing him with the hind limbs, each of which must have weighed a couple of tons. It lumbered toward Bartock and Jane Cummings.

Turning and starting to get up, Mayhem fired again.

His blaster jammed.

Then the bulk of the monster cut off his view of Bartock, the girl and the scout-ship. He heard the girl scream. He ran toward them.

Jane Cummings had never been so close to death. She wanted to scream. She thought all at once, hysterically, she was a little girl again. If she screamed maybe the terrible apparition would go away. But it did not go away. It reared up high, as high as a very tall tree, and its fangs were hideous.

Bartock, who was also frightened, raised his blaster, fired, and missed.
Then, for an instant, Jane thought she saw someone running behind the monster. He had a blaster too, and he
lifted it. When he fired, there was only a clicking sound. Then he fired again.
Half the monster’s bulk disappeared and it collapsed in the snow.
That was when Bartock shot the other man.
Mayhem felt the stab of raw energy in his shoulder. He spun around and fell down, his senses whirling in a
vortex of pain. Dimly he was aware of Bartock’s boots crunching on the snow.
They fired simultaneously. Bartock missed.
And collapsed with a searing hole in his chest. He was dead before he hit the snow.
The girl went to Mayhem. "Who--who are you?"
"Got to get you back to the ship. No time to talk. Hurry."
"But you can’t walk like that. You’re badly hurt. I’ll bring help."
"... dangerous. I’ll take you."
He’d take her, flirting with death. Because, for all he knew, his time on Pluto, objectively, had already totalled
forty-eight hours. If it did, he would never live to get off Pluto. Once his thirty days were up, he would die. Still,
there might be danger from other animals between the scout-ship and Mozart’s Lady, and he couldn’t let the girl go
back alone. It was almost ludicrous, since she had to help him to his feet.
He staggered along with her, knowing he would never make it to Mozart’s Lady and back in time. But if he left
her, she was probably doomed too. He’d sacrifice his life for hers....
They went a hundred yards, Mayhem gripping the blaster and advancing by sheer effort of will. Then he
smiled, and began to laugh. Jane thought he was hysterical with pain. But he said: "We’re a pair of bright ones. The
scout-ship."
Inside, it was very small. They had to lie very close to each other, but they made it. They reached Mozart’s
Lady.
Mayhem didn’t wait to say good-bye. With all he knew, his time on Pluto, objectively, had already totalled
forty-eight hours. If it did, he would never live to get off Pluto. Once his thirty days were up, he would die. Still,
there might be danger from other animals between the scout-ship and Mozart’s Lady, and he couldn’t let the girl go
back alone. It was almost ludicrous, since she had to help him to his feet.
He saw the girl enter Mozart’s Lady. He blasted off, and when the space-bound coffin pierced Pluto’s heavyside
layer, he called the Hub.
The voice answered him as if it were mere miles away, and not halfway across a galaxy: "Good Lord, man.
You had us worried! You have about ten seconds. Ten seconds more and you would have been dead."
Mayhem was too tired to care. Then he felt a wrenching pain, and all at once his elan floated, serene, peaceful,
in limbo. He had been plucked from the dying body barely in time, to fight mankind’s lone battle against the stars
again, wherever he was needed ... out beyond Pluto.
Forever? It wasn't impossible.
The Rell, a great and ancient Martian race, faced extinction when all moisture was swept from their planet. Then, one day, a lone visitor—a strange, two-legged creature composed mostly of water—landed on Mars...

The dehydration of the planet had taken centuries in all. The Rell had still been a great race when the process started. Construction of the canals was a prodigious feat but not a truly remarkable one. But what use are even canals when there is nothing to fill them?

What cosmic influences might have caused the disaster baffled even the group-mind of the Rell. Through the eons the atmosphere had drifted into space; and with it went the life-giving moisture. Originally a liquid paradise, the planet was now a dry, hostile husk.

The large groups of Rell had been the first to suffer. But in time even the tiny villages containing mere quadrillions of the submicroscopic entities had found too little moisture left to satisfy their thirst and the journey ever southward toward the pole had commenced.

The new life was bitter and difficult and as their resources were depleted so also did their numbers diminish.

Huddled at their last retreat the Rell watched the ever smaller ice cap annually diminish and lived with the knowledge they faced extinction. A mere thousand years more would see even this trifling remainder gone.

Oh, you might say there was hope ... of a sort. There might be Rell in the northern hemisphere. The canals girdled the globe and a similar ice cap could well exist at the opposite pole. Rell perhaps survived there also.

But this was scant comfort. The fate of the Rell in the South was sealed. What hope of any brighter future for those in the North? And if they survived a few hundred thousand years longer ... or if they had perished a similar period earlier, what actual difference did it make?

There was no one more aware of this gloomy future than Raeillo/ee13.

In the old days a single unit of the group-mind of the Rell would have possessed but a single function and exercised this function perhaps a dozen times during his life. But due to the inexorable shrinkage only the most important problems now could command mind-action and each unit had been forced to forsake specialization for multi-purpose endeavors.

Thus Raeillo/ee13 and his mate Raellu//2 were two of the five thousand units whose task was to multiply in any group-mind action involving mathematical prediction. Naturally Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2 did not waste their abilities in mundane problems not involving prediction. Nor did they divide, add, or subtract. That was assigned to other units just as several million of the upper groups had the task of sorting and interpreting their results. Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2 multiplied only. And it must be admitted they did it very well. It is a pity the Rell could not have multiplied physically as easily as Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2 multiplied mentally.

With the exception of an occasional comet or meteor the Rell were seldom diverted by anything of a physical nature. The ice cap was their sole concern.

But one afternoon a rare physical phenomenon was reported by a bank of observer Rell.

"In the sky's northwest portion," an excited injunction came through. "Observe that patch of flaming red!"

More observer Rell were quickly focused on the novel sight and further data was rapidly fed into the interpretive bank.

The Rell were justifiably proud of their interpreters. With the race shrinkage it had proved impossible to properly train new interpreters. So, not without a great deal of sacrifice, the old interpreters, dating back to when the canals still flowed with water, had been kept alive.

They were incredibly ancient but there was no doubt as to their ability. It was a truism among the Rell that the interpretive banks arrived at their conclusions faster than any other group and that these conclusions could be checked to hundreds of decimal places without finding inaccuracy.

So it was no surprise to have the interpretive bank respond almost instantly, "It is quite odd but the flame appears to be of artificial origin."

"Artificial!" came the rough and questing probe of the speculative bank. "But how could Rell possibly be out there?"

"Who mentioned Rell?" was the interpretive bank's smug answer. They were not utterly averse to demonstrating their superior mental abilities on occasion.

The speculative bank replied, "Artificial implies intelligence, and intelligence means Rell..."
"Does it?" the interpretive bank interrupted. The speculative bank waited but the interpretive bank failed to enlarge on the provocative query.

The Rell had found certain disadvantages accrued to abnormal prolongation of life and thus were not unused to the interpretive bank's occasional tendency to talk in riddles.

"Perhaps not," the speculative bank replied after a quick check with the logical formulae held in reserve by the historical bank. "It is theoretically possible that Rell-like individuals might have developed elsewhere, and perhaps even have developed intelligence, although, according to the historical bank, such an idea has never before been subjected to consideration. But what is the flame doing?" they continued, a trifle resentful at having been left to do work properly in the interpretive bank's province.

The observation and interpretive banks once more came into play, studying the situation for several minutes. "The flame appears to be the exhaust of a fairly crude vessel," the interpretive bank finally reported, "propelled by ignition of some gaseous mixture."

"Is it moving?"
"Quite rapidly."
"Where is it going?"

This called into play the prophecy division of the mind and Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2, who had been merely interested onlookers before, hurriedly meshed themselves with the other forty nine hundred odd of their fellows. (It was impossible to say at any given time just how many there were in their computer section, as several births and deaths had occurred among the group since beginning the current observations. These would be suspended for the next several moments, however, as there was a strict prohibition against anyone being born, dying, or otherwise engaging in extraneous activity while their particular bank was either alerted or in action.)

Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2 felt the group discipline take hold much more firmly than the free-and-easy mesh which each unit enjoyed with the complete group-mind during periods of leisure.

With a speed that would have been dizzying and incomprehensible to any individual unit, the observing banks relayed huge masses of extraneous data to the interpretive bank. They strained out the salient facts and in turn passed these to the computing-prediction section. Here they were routed to the groups who would deal with them. Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2 found their own talents pressed into service a dozen or more times in the space of the minute and a half it took the computing-prediction and interpretive banks to arrive at the answer.

"It's aimed here," the interpretive bank reported.
"Here!" a jumble of incoherent and anarchistic thoughts resounded from many shocked and temporarily out-of-mesh units.
"Order!" came a sharp command from the elite corp of three thousand disciplinary units.

As stillness settled back over the group-mind the speculative bank once more came in. "By here ... do you mean right here?"

"Approximately," replied the interpretive bank with what would have sounded suspiciously like a chuckle in a human reply. "According to calculations the craft should land within half a mile of our present location."

"Let's go there then and wait for it!" That thought from the now seldom used reservation of impulse.

The speculative bank murmured, "I wonder if there would be any danger. How hot is that exhaust?"

Calculations were rapidly made and the answer arrived at. The Rell prudently decided to remain where they were for the present.

* * * * *

Captain Leonard Brown, USAF, hunched over the instruments in the cramped control cabin which, being the only available space in the ship, doubled as living quarters. A larger man would have found the arrangement impossible. Brown, being 5' 2" and weighing 105 pounds found it merely intolerable.

At the moment he was temporarily able to forget his discomfort, however. The many tiny dials and indicators told a story all their own to Brown's trained vision.

"Just another half hour," he whispered to himself. "Just thirty more minutes and I'll land. It may be just a dead planet but I'll still be the first."

There really wasn't a great deal for Brown to do. The ship was self-guided. The Air Force had trusted robot mechanisms more than human reactions.

Thus Brown's entire active contribution to the flight consisted in watching the dials (which recorded everything so even watching them was unnecessary) and in pressing the button which would cause the ship to start its return journey.

Of course the scientists could have constructed another mechanism to press the button and made it a completely robot ship. But despite their frailties and imperfections, human beings have certain advantages. Humans can talk. Machines may see and detect far more than their human creators but all they can do is record. They can neither
interpret nor satisfactorily describe.

Brown was present not only to report a human's reactions to the first Mars flight; he was also along to see that which the machines might miss.

"We've never satisfactorily defined life," one of his instructors had told Brown shortly after he started the three grueling years of training which had been necessary, "so we can't very well build a foolproof machine for detecting it. That's why we've left room for 105 pounds of dead weight."

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning you."

"And I'm your foolproof machine for detecting life?"

"Let's say you're the closest we can come to it at present. We're banking everything on this first trip. It'll be at least eighteen months later before we can get a second ship into space. So it's up to you to get everything you can... some evidence of life, preferably animal, if possible. With public support it'll be a hell of a lot easier squeezing appropriations out of Congress for the next ship and to get public support we need the biggest possible play in the newspapers. If anything is newsworthy on Mars it should be evidence of life... even plant life."

So here he was, 105 pounds of concentrated knowledge and anticipation, itching with the desire for action and also from more basic causes having to do with two months confinement in a small space with a minimum of water.

"Life is most probable at the poles," the instructor had said. "You won't be able to stay long so we'll try to set you down right at the South Pole. You won't have room to bring back specimens. So keep your eyes open and absorb everything you see. Don't forget anything. What you bring back in your mind weighs nothing."

"It's just sitting there," the observing banks reported, "and the red flame has gone out."

"Is it safe now?" enquired the speculative bank.

"In what way?"

"Is it safe to go near that thing?"

"It's very huge," ventured the observing banks unasked. There was a stir of activity which encompassed practically all except the most simple units and which lasted for perhaps five minutes while the speculative bank's last question was processed.

Finally the interpretive bank reluctantly admitted, "We can't arrive at a positive answer. Too many unknown elements are present. We don't know for sure what caused the flame, when it might start again, or what, if anything, is inside."

"But you said it was a work of intelligence. Doesn't that mean Rell would be inside?"

"Not necessarily. They could have constructed the thing to operate itself."

It was just then that the observing banks reported, "It's opening."

The speculative bank quickly responded, "This is an emergency. We must be able to observe from close up. We'll have to approach it."

"The entire mind?" enquired the disciplinary corps.

The speculative bank hesitated. "No, we'll need to split up. One-fifth of us will go, the rest remain here. It's a short distance and we'll still be able to continue in complete contact."

Those who were to go were quickly sorted out and Raeillo/ee13 was quite thrilled to find he and Raellu/2 were included in the scouting party.

The group set off briskly toward their objective but had moved hardly one hundred yards when a vertigo seemed to overtake them. Raeillo/ee13 found himself swimming helplessly in a vortex of darkness and isolation, blanked off from not only the group-mind and his bank but also from Raellu/2. Frantically he grasped for some sort of stasis, but dependence on the group-mind was too ingrained and he was unable to stir his long-dormant powers of sight and education.

Then the isolation cleared to be replaced by a brief impression of chaos with perhaps a tinge of alienness. Another instant of vertigo followed and then everything was normal once more as the comfortable familiar mesh took hold.

"What was that?" Even the speculative bank sounded frightened.

"Sorry. The usually silent meshing bank sounded abashed. "We weren't prepared for that. Some sort of thought wave is issuing from the opening and it disrupted the group mesh till we were able to take it into calculation and rebuild the mesh around it."

"Thought wave? Then there are Rell in that thing."

"Do not compute before the mesh is set," the interpretive bank cautioned. "The presence of Rell, while extremely probable, is not yet entirely certain."

Without waiting for a suggestion from elsewhere the disciplinary group ordered the entire mind forward.

Perhaps, in time of stress, dormant qualities tend to emerge, Raeillo/ee13 mused. Certainly everyone, himself
included, appeared to be exercising speculative qualities. Not that specialization isn't a marvelous blessing, he hastily added, in case the disciplinary corps might be scanning his bank. But the disciplinary corps itself was as fascinated by the phenomenon ahead as Raeillo/ee13.

Emerging from the infinitely huge upright thing was a mobile being, also infinitely huge. Not that they were the same size. The mobile one was small enough to fit easily through the opening in the lower portion of the larger. But beyond a certain point words lose meaning and infinitely huge was the closest measurement the tiny Rell could find for either the upright pointed thing or the knobby one which had emerged and was quickly identified as the source of the disrupting thought patterns.

Leonard Brown was enjoying himself thoroughly. The inside of a space suit can scarcely be termed comfortable but at least you can move around in it and Brown was making the most of this sensation after two months cramped in his tiny cell. He was, in fact, comporting himself much as a three-year-old might have done after a similar release.

But before long he settled down to the serious business of observing and mentally recording everything in sight.

There were none of the mysterious 'canals' in view, which was disappointing; one piece of glamour the publicity boys would necessarily forego until the next trip. The ice cap itself, if such it could be called, was almost equally disappointing. On Earth it would have been dismissed as a mere frost patch, if this section was typical. For a radius of many yards the ground was blasted bare by the action of the exhaust and nowhere in sight did there appear to be more than the flimsiest covering of white over the brown sandy soil.

"Not even lichens," muttered Brown in disgust.

But disgust cannot long stand against the magic of a fresh new planet and Brown continued his avid, though barren, search until hunger forced his return to the ship. He had been able to detect no life and was completely unaware of his close proximity to the planet's dominant species. It had been considered neither practical nor particularly desirable to build a microscope into the space suit. Simplicity and the least possible weight had been the watchwords here as with everything designed to go aboard the ship.

In any case, a microscope would have done Brown little good in trying to detect the submicroscopic beings of the Rell.

The Rell, who had somewhat lost their fear of Brown, hastily retreated when they saw him returning to the still awesome ship.

"But are you sure he's completely self-powered?" the speculative bank queried. "No Rell inside him at all?"

"There are many Rell-like beings in various parts of him," replied the interpretive bank. "Some help digest his food, others are predators, and still others their enemies. But most are too big and clumsy to have developed intelligence, and even the small ones appear completely mindless."

"But where do the thought waves come from? We all felt them."

"It's hard to accept but we are almost forced to conclude they are emanating from the mobile unit itself, or rather from the living part within the cocoon."

"You're positive they aren't the product of some of the Rell-beings inside?"

"Almost positive. The mesh insists not. In fact, it claims this is an un-Rell like type of intelligence, though that appears to be a contradiction in terms. The thought pattern is completely outside our experience. In fact, it is so alien we haven't broken it down yet to the meaning behind it."

"But if the Rell inside are too large to have developed intelligence, how could this gigantic monster in which they live have done so?"

"We cannot yet say. Remember, the theory that intelligence cannot develop in creatures above a certain size is unproven, even though never before challenged. We've watched other races die through failure to adapt to change so apparently it is true of Rell-like creatures on this world. But who can say about organisms on another world or of the unprecedented size of this one? Completely different physical laws may apply."

It was later that afternoon after the Rell had spent much time observing Brown while Brown was busy observing the landscape that the interpretive bank made the triumphant announcement, "We have it! We've broken the thought waves down to their meanings and know what he's thinking. What would you like to know first?"

"Check and see if there are any Rell inside the other thing or on his home world. They might have constructed him."

"Apparently there are none, or at least no intelligent Rell, on his world. We can't guide his mind but the memory bank recorded all the thoughts we've received and some time ago he was thinking of something he termed 'vermin'. Apparently these are sometimes Rell-like creatures, although far larger. He regards them as a great nuisance, but mindless. The big thing, by the way, he calls a 'ship' and it is utterly lifeless. We needn't fear the flame..."
until this creature leaves."

"What about him? What is he like?"

"That's the most exciting part! He thought of his bodily needs once and we glimpsed a concept dealing with his physical construction. It's incredible! His body is composed almost entirely of water ... there's enough water in him alone to prolong the life of the Rell many ages. Further, the air in his 'ship' is heavily impregnated with moisture and he even has reserve supplies of water for his needs."

At this, not only Raeillo/ee13, but all except perhaps the most responsible units felt a shiver of primitive longing and perhaps even greed. Not for millennia had there been such a plentitude of water so close!

"Then can't we appropriate at least part of it?" asked the speculative bank.

"Unfortunately both the 'man', as he calls himself, and his 'ship' are sealed so tightly that we could not penetrate either. Worse yet, almost half his time here is already gone. We don't quite understand his purpose here. His thoughts seem to say he is searching for Rell for some unfathomable reason yet he seems to know nothing of the Rell and cannot even detect us."

* * * * *

It was the next day when the time was almost all gone that the two big discoveries were made. During a routine check, the mesh came across a thought of the man's return and a visualization of his home world. It was so startling that the interpretive bank was recalled from its effort to try to devise a means through the spacesuit and set at the new problem.

A hasty check of the man's subconscious thoughts revealed the big news. "Do you know," the interpretive bank announced, "not only does this being's home world have a moist atmosphere like that in his ship but two thirds of the surface of his world is liquid water!"

Even the speculative bank was silent for a full two seconds after this news. Then a hasty impulse was sent to the disciplinary corps and the entire mind called into action. An extreme emergency upon which the fate of the race hinged called for the utmost effort by even the humblest members of the group.

The Rell worked diligently and many blind alleys were explored, but it was not for some time that anyone thought of enquiring of the not-too-bright feeding bank how they were managing to keep the mind operating at considerably more than normal power with no frost within feeding distance.

"We're taking moisture from the air," was the answer.

"Where is the moisture coming from?" the interpretive bank was asked.

The answer didn't take long. Rapid measurements supplied it. "Some of it is vaporized frost but that wouldn't be enough for our needs. The only other possibility is that moisture must be seeping away from either the man or his ship despite his sureness that they were both airtight and our own investigations which confirmed it."

They had maintained a cautious distance from the ship for the most part despite the interpretive bank's assurance of no immediate danger. But now they swarmed over both it and the spacesuit determined to detect the leak.

They found none.

And now the man was returning to his ship.

"This is the last time," the mesh warned. It was now or never.

For a second there was conflict over control of the circuits to the disciplinary corps which carried with it command of the organism during the emergency. The speculative bank customarily assumed this responsibility, but a slight schism had developed between it and the interpretive bank. The latter's greater age and skill came into play and victory was quickly won.

From the disciplinary corps came the order, "Stay close to the 'man'."

The interpretive bank explained, "He breathes the air so he'll have to get to it some way."

The defeated speculative bank maintained a sulky silence.

Thus it was that the entire mind of the Rell rode into the interior of the ship through the airlock while clustered around Brown.

The Rell had grasped that the man lived and traveled inside his ship and the necessity for it to be airtight. But so desperate were the two races' needs that the necessity for an airlock and the consequent slight seepage each time it was used had not occurred to even the interpretive bank.

Inside, many Rell, suddenly intoxicated by the heady moisture-laden air, commenced uniting with each other then splitting away, each such union resulting in another unit of Rell, naturally. The interpretive bank again seized control.

"Stop it! Stop it this instant!" it snapped. "Reproduction must be kept to the former minimum for now. That is a firm order."

Reluctantly the process was halted. The interpretive bank explained, "It would not take long for us to use up the
entire supply of water if we indulged in uncontrolled reproduction. That might endanger the whole trip."

"What do we do now?" the speculative bank finally asked.

"There is no way of knowing positively whether the man uses this same atmosphere until he returns to his world or not. For our own safety it would seem best, since Rell-like creatures already inhabit him, that we join them. If any place is safe it will be his interior. And there is plenty of moisture within to sustain us. But we must be good parasites," the interpretive bank warned. "Remember, no undue reproduction no matter how many quarts of moisture seem to be going to waste inside this 'man'. He may need it himself and if he does not survive the ship might not complete its trip."

Brown was just emerging from his space suit so the Rell chose his closest available body opening and flowed as a group into his mouth and nostrils.

"Ahchoo!" sneezed Brown, violently evicting half the Rell.

They re-entered a bit more cautiously in order not to irritate the sensitive membrane again.

"Dammit," said Brown, "don't tell me I've caught a cold out here on Mars. Hope I didn't pick up any Martian germs."

But he needn't have worried. By the time he reached Earth he was far less germ-ridden, even if considerably more itchy on the exterior, than when he'd left. The Rell were good at self defense and a surprising number of mindless but voracious creatures in Brown's interior had been eliminated.

Brown dreaded having to give the news he carried but he needn't have. He was a conquering hero.

So much fuss was made over the first flight to Mars that Congress promptly voted twice the appropriation for the second ship that the Air Force had requested, despite strong opposition from the Navy and headlines which read:

NO LIFE ON MARS

Actually, as it happened, the headlines were one hundred percent correct, but they neglected to mention, chiefly because the headline writers didn't know it, that there were now two races of intelligent life on Earth.

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Contents

LIFE SENTENCE
By James McConnell

"Happy New Year!" she cried. But how often should one hear it said in a single lifetime?

Outside, bells were ringing. "Happy New Year!"

The mad sound of people crazed for the moment, shouting, echoed the bells.

"Happy New Year!"

A sound of music, waxing, waning, now joined in wild symphony by the voices, now left alone to counterpoint the noise of human celebration....

For a while, Oliver Symmes heard the raucous music of the crowd. It became a part of him, seemed to come from somewhere inside him, gave him life. And then, as always, it passed on, leaving him empty.

Shadows....

The door to his room opened and a young-looking woman, dressed in a pleasant green uniform, came in and turned up the light. On her sleeve she wore the badge of geriatrician, with the motto, "To Care for the Aged."

"Happy New Year, Mr. Symmes," she said, and went over to stand by the window. In the mild light, the sheen of her hair attracted attention away from the slight imperfections of her face.

She watched the crowd outside, wishing she could be a part of it. There seemed so little life inside the prison where the only function of living was the awaiting of death. "To Care for the Aged." That meant to like and love them as well as to take physical care of them. Only, somehow, it seemed so hard to really love them.

She sighed and turned away from the window to look at one of the reasons she could not be with the rest of the world that night.

* * * * *

He sat bunched up in his chair like a vegetable. She could have closed one of her hands around both his arms together. Or his legs. Bones and skin and a few little muscles left, and that was all. Skin tight, drumlike, against the skull. Cheeks shrunk, lips slightly parted by the contraction of the skin. Even the wrinkles he should have had were erased by the shrinkage of the epidermis. Even in a strong light, the faint wrinkle lines were barely visible.

After a moment of looking at him, she put a smile back on her face and repeated her greeting.

"I said, 'Happy New Year,' Mr. Symmes."
He raised his eyes to her for a moment, then slowly lowered them, uncomprehendingly.
"He looks just a little bit like a caricature," she said to herself, feeling a little more tenderness toward him. "A
cute little stick man made of leaves and twigs and old bark and ..."

Shadows. For so long there had been shadows. And for a time the fleeting passage of dreams and past
memories had been a solace. But now the shadows were withered and old, debilitated and desiccated. They had been
sucked dry of interest long ago.
But still they flitted through his mind on crippled wings, flapping about briefly in the now-narrowed shell of his
consciousness, then fading back among the cobwebs. Every once in a while, one of them would return to exercise its
wings.
"Did she say, 'Happy New Year?'" he wondered. "New Year's?"
And, at the thought of it, there came shadows out of the past....

Young Oliver Symmes laughed. The girl laughed, too. She was good to hold in one's arms, soft like a furry
animal, yielding and plush of mouth.
"I love you, Ollie," she said; the warmness of her body close against his.
He laughed again and wrapped her in his arms. He owned her now, owned her smile, her love for him, her mind
and her wonderful body. She belonged to him, and the thrill of ownership was strong and exciting.
"I'll always love you, Ollie. I'll love only you." She ran her fingers in and out of his hair, caressing each strand
as it went through her fingers, "I love the strength of your arms, the firmness of your body."
Again he laughed, surrendering all his consciousness to the warm magic of her spell.
"I love the shading of your hair and eyes, the smooth angularity of your tallness, the red ecstasy of your mind."
Her fingers slipped down the back of his neck, playing little games with his flesh and hair. "I'll always love you,
Ollie."
He kissed her savagely.

During the daytime, there was his work at the anthropological laboratories, the joy of poking among the
cultures of the past. And at night there was the joy of living with her, of sharing the tantalizing stimulations of the
culture of the present, the infinite varieties of love mingling with passions.
For months there was this happiness of the closeness of her. And then she was gone from him, for the moment.
He still owned her, but they were physically apart and there was the hunger of loneliness in him. The months his
work kept them apart seemed like centuries, until, finally, he could return.

He was walking through a happy, shouting crowd, walking back to her. It was the eve of the new year, a time
for beginnings, a time for looking from the pleasures of the past to those waiting in the future. There was a happy
outcry inside him that matched the mood of the crowd.
"Happy New Year!"
Women stopped him on the street, asking for his affection. But he passed them by, for she was waiting for him
and he was hungry for the possessive love of his slave.
He went eagerly into the building where they lived.

The crowd was gone. A door was opening. The voice of his love, sudden, full of naked surprise, bleated at him.
And another voice, that of a man standing behind her, croaked with hasty excuses and fear.
A change of hungers--it seemed no more complex than that.
He put his hand to his side and took out a piece of shaped metal, pointing it at the man. A blast of light and the
man was dead. He put the weapon aside.

Young Oliver Symmes walked toward the girl. She backed away from him, pleading with words, eyes, body.
He noticed for the first time the many small imperfections of her face and figure.
Cornered, she raised her arms to embrace him. He raised his arms to answer the embrace, but his hands stopped
and felt their way around the whiteness of her neck. He pressed his hands together, thumbs tight against each other.
Minutes later, he dropped her to the floor and stood looking at her. He had owned her and then destroyed her
when his ownership was in dispute.
He bent to kiss the lax lips.

Shadows. As a man grows older, the weight and size of his brain decrease, leaving cavities in his mind. The
years that pass are a digger, a giant excavator, scooping the mass of past experience up in the maw of dissipation.
The slow, sure evacuation of the passing decades leaves wing-room in a man's head for stirring memories.
The withered man looked up again. The woman in the green uniform was smiling at him through parted, almost twisted lips.

"I suppose that this time of year is the worst for you, isn't it?" she asked sympathetically. The first requirement of a good geriatrician was sympathy and understanding. She determined to try harder to understand.

The old man made no answer, only staring at her face. But his eyes were blank—seeing, yet blind to all around him. She frowned for a moment as she looked at him. The unnatural hairlessness of his body puzzled her, making it difficult for her to understand him while the thought was in her mind—that and the trouble she had getting through to him.

She stared at him as if to pierce the blankness of his gaze. Behind his eyes lay the emptiness of age, the open wound of stifled years.

"I'll move you over to the window, Mr. Symmes," she told him in soothing tones, her smile reappearing. "Then you can look out and see all the people. Won't that be fun?"

Picking up a box from the table, she adjusted a dial. The chair in which he was sitting rose slightly from the floor and positioned itself in front of the window. The woman walked to the wall beside him and corrected the visual index of the glass to match the weakness of the old man's eyes.

"See, down there? Just look at them moving about."

A rabble of faces swam on the glass in front of him, faces of unfamiliar people, all of them unknown and unknowable to him.

Inside him the whisper of the wings mounted in pitch with a whining, leathery sound. The images of dead faces came flying up, careening across his mind, mingling and merging with the faces of the living. The glass became an anomalous torrent of faces.

Dead faces....

* * * * *

Four walls around him, bare to the point of boredom. Through the barred window, the throbbing throat of the crowd talked to him. His young body took it in, his young mind accepted it, catalogued it and pushed it out of consciousness. And for each individual voice there was an individual face, staring up at his cell from the comparative safety of outside. Young Oliver Symmes could not see the faces from where he sat, waiting, but he could sense them.

There came a feel of hands on his shoulder; his reverie was interrupted. Arms under his raised him to his feet. A face smiled, almost kindly, in understanding.

"They're waiting for you, Mr. Symmes. It's time to go."

More words. Walking from this place to that, mostly with a crowd of people at his shoulders, pressing him in. Then a door ahead of him, ornate in carving, a replica of the doors to the Roman Palace of Justice many centuries before. Again his mind catalogued the impressions.

Then, like the faces of the people outside his cell, the pictures of the bas-relief faded away, melted and merged into a pelagic blackness.

The doors opened and, with part of the crowd still at his side, he went through. The people inside were standing; stick men, it seemed to him, with painted balloons for faces. The sound of the rapping of a gavel caught his ear. The people sat, and the trial began.

"This court will admit to evidence only those events and artifacts which are proved true and relevant to the alleged crime."

An obsequious clearing of throats. A coughing now and then.

"... And did you see the defendant, Oliver Symmes, enter the apartment of the deceased on the night of the Thirty-first of December, two thousand and ..."

"I did. He was wearing a sort of orange tunic ..."

Someone whispered in his ear. Oliver Symmes heard and shook his head.

"... You are personally acquainted with the defendant?"

"I am. We worked for United Anthropological Laboratories before he ..."

"Objection."

"Sustained."

The blackness of the judge's robe puzzled him. A vestige, an anachronism, handed down from centuries before. White was the color of truth, not black.

"You swear that you found the defendant standing over the body of the deceased woman on the night of ..."

"Not standing, sir. He was bending over, kissing ..."

"Your witness."

* * * * *
Days of it, back and forth, testimony and more testimony. Evidence and more evidence and the lack of it. Smiling lawyers, grimacing lawyers, soothing lawyers and cackling lawyers. And witnesses.

"You will please take the stand, Mr. Symmes."

He walked to the chair and sat down. The courtroom leaned forward, the stick men bowed toward him slightly, as in eager applause of the coming most dramatic moment of a spectacle.

"You will please tell the court in your own words ..."

He mouthed the words. The whole story, the New Year's crowd, his hunger for her, his arrival, the other man and his babbling, the woman and how she looked, his feelings, his transfigured passions, and the deaths. He told the story again and again until they seemed satisfied.

"You understand, Mr. Symmes, that you have committed a most heinous crime. You have killed two people in a passion that, while it used to be forgiven by the circumstances, is no longer tolerated by this government. You have killed, Mr. Symmes!"

The face before him was intense. He looked at it, not understanding the reason for the frozen look of malice and hatred.

"She was mine. When she betrayed me, I killed her. Is that wrong?"

The stick men snorted and poked each other in the ribs with derisive elbows.

And then came the silence, a time of sitting and waiting. He sensed the wondering stares of the stick men, wide-eyed in apprehension, suspended from the drabness of their own lives for the moment by the stark visitation of tragedy in his. They gabbled among themselves and wagered on the verdict.

The man next to him leaned over and tapped him on the arm. Everyone stood up and then, curiously, sat down again almost at once. He felt the tension present in the courtroom, but was strangely relaxed himself. It was peculiar that they were all so excited.

"Your Honor, having duly considered the seriousness of the crime and the evidence presented ..."

The balloon faces on the stick men stretched in anticipation.

"... taking full cognizance of the admitted passion on the part of the defendant and the circumstances ..."

The balloons were strained, contorted out of all proportion in their eagerness.

"... we find the defendant guilty of murder, making no recommendation for consideration by the Court."

The balloons exploded!

Deafening and more than deafening, the uproar of the voices was beyond belief. He threw his hands up over his ears to shut out the noise.

The gavel crashed again and again, striking the polished oak in deadly cadence, stifling the voices. Over the stillness, one man spoke. He recognized the black voice of the judge and took his hands from his ears and put them in his lap. He was told to stand and he obeyed.

"Oliver Symmes, there has been no taking of human lives in this nation for many years, until your shockingly primitive crime. We had taken pride in this record. Now you have broken it. We must not only punish you adequately and appropriately, but we must also make of your punishment a warning to anyone who would follow your irrational example.

"Naturally, we no longer have either the apparatus to execute anyone or an executioner. We do not believe that a stupidly unreasoning act should incite us to equally unreasoning reprisal, for we would then be as guilty of irrationality as you.

"We must establish our own precedent, since there is no recent one and the ancient punishments are not acceptable to us. Therefore, because we are humane and reasoning persons, the Court orders that the defendant, Oliver Symmes, be placed in the National Hospital for observation, study and experimentation so that this crime may never again be repeated. He is to be kept there under perpetual care until no possible human skill or resource can further sustain life in his body."

Someone jumped erect beside him, quivering with horror and indignation. It was his lawyer.

"Your Honor, we throw ourselves upon the mercy of the Court. No matter what the crime of the defendant, this is a greater one. For this is a crime not just against my client, but against all men. This sentence robs all men of their most precious freedom--the right to die at their appointed times. Nothing is more damaging to the basic dignity of the human race than this most hideous ..."

"... This Court recognizes only the four freedoms. The freedom of death is not one of these. The sentence stands. The Court is adjourned."

There were tears in the eyes of his lawyer, although young Oliver Symmes did not quite comprehend, as yet,
their meaning. Hands, rougher than before, grasped his arms with strange firmness and led him off into ...

* * * * *

Shadows. They come in cycles, each prompted to activity by the one preceding it. They flutter in unbelievable
clusters, wheel in untranslatable formations through the cerebric wasteland that is the aged mind of Oliver Symmes.
They have no meaning to him, save for a furtive spark of recognition that intrudes upon him once in a while.

The woman in the green uniform, standing to one side of the window, smiled at him again. It was much simpler
to care for him, she thought, if only one conceived of him as being a sort of sweet little worn-out teddy bear. Yes,
that was what he was, a little teddy bear that had gotten most of its stuffing lost and had shriveled and shrunk. And
one can easily love and pamper a teddy bear.

"Can you see the crowd all right, Mr. Symmes? This is a good place to watch from, isn't it?"

Her words fell upon his ears, setting up vibrations and oscillations in the basilar membranes. Nerve cells
triggered impulses that sped along neural pathways to the withered cortex, where they lost themselves in the welter
of atrophy and disintegration. They emerged into his consciousness as part of a gestaltic confusion.

"Isn't it exciting, watching from here?" she asked, showing enthusiasm at the sight of the crowd below. "You
should be enjoying this immensely, you know. Not all the people here have windows to look out of like this." There,
now, that should make him feel a little better.

His eyes, in their wandering, came to rest upon her uniform, so cool and comforting in its greenness. A flicker
of light gleamed from the metallic insignia on her sleeve: "To Care for the Aged." Somewhere inside him an
association clicked, a brief fire of response to a past event kindled into a short-lived flame, lighting the way through
cobwebs for another shadow....

* * * * *

How many years he had been waiting for the opportunity, he did not know. It seemed like decades, although it
might have been only a handful of months. And all the time he had waited, he could feel himself growing older,
could sense the syneresis, the slow solidifying of the life elements within him. He sat quietly and grew old, thinking
the chance would never come.

But it did come, when he had least expected it.

It was a treat--his birthday. Because of it, they had given him actual food for the first time in years: a cake,
conspicuous in its barrenness of candles; a glass of real vegetable juices; a dab of potato; an indescribable green that
might have been anything at all; and a little steak. A succulent, savory-looking piece of genuine meat.

The richness of the food would probably make him sick, so unaccustomed to solid food was his digestive tract
by now, but it would be worth the pain.

And it was then that he saw the knife.

It lay there on the tray, its honed edge glittering in the light of the sun. A sharp knife, capable of cutting steak--
or flesh of any kind.

"Well, how do you like your birthday present, Mr. Symmes?"

He looked up quickly at the woman standing beside the tray. The yellow pallor of her middle-aged skin
matched the color of her uniform. She wore the insignia of a geriatrics supervisor.

He let a little smile flicker across his face. "Why, it's ... it's wonderful. I never expected it at all. It's been so
long, you know. So very long."

How could he get rid of her? If he tried anything with her watching, she would stop him. And then he'd never
get another chance.

"I'm glad you like it, Mr. Symmes. Synthetic foods do get tiresome after a while, don't they?"

He remembered his studies of the middle Japanese culture and the methods of suicide practiced at that time.
The intestines! So many of them to cut and slash at, so much damage that might be done before death set in! Maybe
even the lungs! But he must hurry.
Picking up the knife, he pointed it at his appendix. For a moment he hesitated, and his eyes observed again the little feast laid out before him. He thought briefly about pausing for just a while to taste the little steak, to nibble briefly at the delectable-looking cake. He hated to leave it untouched. It had been such a long time....

The sudden memory of time, and how much of it he had spent hoping for this moment, snapped his attention back to the knife. Steeling his grip on it, he pressed it in hard.

His eyes bulged with the excruciating pain as he wrenched the knife from right to left, twisting it wildly as he went, blindly slashing at his vital organs with the hope that once and for all he could stop the long and eternal waiting.

His mouth filled with the taste of blood. He spat it out through clenched teeth. It gushed down his chin, staining the cleaness of his robe. His lips parted to scream.

And then his eyes closed.

And opened again! He was staring at the ceiling, but the men and women standing around him got in his way. Their lips were moving, their faces unperturbed.

"That was a nasty thing for him to do."
"They all do it, once or twice, until they learn."
"Third time for him, isn't it?"
"Yes, I believe so. First time he tried hanging himself. Second time he was beating his head against the wall when we came and stopped him. Bloody mess that one was."

"Nothing to compare with this, of course."
"Well, naturally."

Oliver Symmes felt sick with fear of frustration.

"Nice technique you showed, Doctor. He'd been dead at least an hour when we started, hadn't he?"
"Thank you. But it wasn't too difficult. Just a little patching here and there."

He felt his legs being shifted for him.

"Be careful there, Nurse. Handle him gently. Fragilitas Ossium, you know. Old bones break very easily."
"Sorry, Doctor."
"Not that we couldn't fix them up immediately if they did."
"Naturally, Doctor."
"I wish they'd try something different for a change."

"The woman in the next room lost an eye last year, trying to reach the prefrontals. Good as new now, of course."

He wanted to vomit at the uselessness of it all.

"By the way, what's he in for? Do you know?"
"No, I'd have to look it up."
"Probably newness."
"Or taxes."
"Or maybe even slander."
"Is that on the prescribed antisocial list now?"
"Oh, yes. It was passed just before the destructive criticism law."
"Think he'll try this messy business again?"
"They all do."
"They do, don't they? Don't they ever learn it's no use?"
"Eventually. Some are just harder to convince than others."

The pain was gone. He closed his eyes and slipped off into darkness again and into ...

Shadows. In slow and ponderous fashion they float across the sea of his mind, like wandering bits of sargasso weed on the brackish water of a dying ocean. Each one dreamed a thousand times too many, each separate strand of memory-weed now nothing but a stereotyped shred of what might have once been a part of life and of living.

With the quietness of deserted ships they drift in procession past his sphere of consciousness. Wait! There's one that seems familiar. He stops the mental parade for a moment, not hearing the voice of his companion, the woman in the green uniform.

"It's getting late, Mr. Symmes." She turned from the window and glanced at the wizenedness, the fragile remainder of the man, the almost empty shell. It was a pity he wasn't able to play games with her like some of the others. That made it so much easier. "Don't you think it's about time you went to bed? Early to bed and early to rise,
you know."

That memory of a needle, pointed and gleaming. What was it?

Oh, yes. Stick it in his arm, push the plunger, pull it out; and wait for him to die. First one disease and then another, to each he happily succumbed, in the interests of science, only to be resuscitated. Each time a willing volunteer, an eager guinea pig, he had hoped for the ease of death, praying that for once they'd wait too long, the germs would prove too virulent, that something would go wrong.

"There, now, you just lie back and get comfortable," she said, walking over to the table. "But it has been fun, hasn't it? Watching the crowds, I mean." She felt he must be much happier now, and the knowledge of it gave her a sense of success. She was living up to her pledge, "To Care for the Aged."

Diabetes, tuberculosis, cancer of the stomach, tumor of the brain. He'd had them all, and many others. They had swarmed to him through the gouged skin-openings made by the gleaming needle. And each had brought the freedom of blackness, of death, sometimes for an hour, sometimes for a whole week. But always life returned again, and the waiting, waiting, waiting.

"I enjoy New Year's myself," the woman said, her hands caressing a dial. Slowly, with gentle undulation, his chair rose from the floor and cradled the aged tiredness that was Oliver Symmes to his bed. With almost tender devotion, his body was mechanically shifted from the portable chair to the freshly made bed.

One of his arms was caught for just a moment under the slight weight of his body. There was a short, snapping sound, but Oliver Symmes took no notice. His face remained impassive. Even pain had lost its meaning.

"It's a pity we couldn't have been outside with the rest of them, celebrating," she said, as she arranged the covers around him, not noticing the arm herself.

This was the part of her job she enjoyed most--tucking the nice little man into bed. He did look sweet there, didn't he?

"Just imagine, Mr. Symmes, another year's gone by, and what have we accomplished?"

Her prattle seeped in and he became aware of it and what she was saying. New Year?

"What--what year--is this?" He spoke with great difficulty, from the long disuse of vocal cords. It was hardly more than a whisper, but she heard and was startled.

"Why, Mr. Symmes, it's been so long since you've talked." She paused, but realized that she had not answered his question.

"'73, of course. Last year was '72, so tonight's the start of '73."

"'73? Had it been fifty years since he came here? Had it been just that long?"

"What--" She leaned closer to him as he struggled for the word. "What--century?"

"Why, Mr. Symmes, it's been so long since you've talked." She paused, but realized that she had not answered his question.

"It's '73, of course. Last year was '72, so tonight's the start of '73."

"What--" She leaned closer to him as he struggled for the word. "What--century?"

Her astonishment was gone. He was teasing her, like the woman on the next level. These old ones were great for that!

"Now, Mr. Symmes, everybody knows what century it is." She smiled at him glancingly, thinking she had caught him at a prank. It was nice, she thought, to have gotten through to him tonight, on the eve of the new year. That meant that she was living up to her motto the way she ought to be.

She'd have to tell the supervisor about it.

Oliver Symmes turned to face the ceiling, his mind full of dusty whispers. What century was it? She hadn't answered. It might have been a hundred and fifty years ago he came here, instead of just fifty. Or possibly two hundred and fifty, or ...

"Now, you be good, and sleep tight, and I'll see you in the morning." Her hand passed over a glowing stud and the room light dimmed to a quiet glow. Lying there in the bed, he did look like a teddy bear, a dear little teddy bear. She was so happy.

"Good night, Mr. Symmes."

She closed the door.

Outside, bells were ringing.

"Happy New Year."

The ceiling stared back at him.

The mad sound of people crazed for the moment, shouting, echoed the bells.

"Happy New Year!"

He turned his head to one side.

"Happy New Year!"

And again ... and again ... and again.
The Ambassador

By Sam Merwin, Jr.

All Earth needed was a good stiff dose of common sense, but its rulers preferred to depend on the highly fallible computers instead. As a consequence, interplanetary diplomatic relations were somewhat strained—until a nimble-witted young man from Mars came up with the answer to the “sixty-four dollar” question.

Zalen Lindsay stood on the rostrum in the huge new United Worlds auditorium on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain and looked out at an ocean of eye-glasses. Individually they ranged in hue from the rose-tinted spectacles of the Americans to the dark brown of the Soviet bloc. Their shapes and adornments were legion: round, harlequin, diamond, rhomboid, octagonal, square, oval; rimless, gem-studded, horn-rimmed, floral-rimmed, rimmed in the cases of some of the lady representatives with immense artificial eyelashes.

The total effect, to Lindsay, was of looking at an immense page of printed matter composed entirely of punctuation marks. Unspectacled, he felt like a man from Mars. He was a man from Mars—first Martian Ambassador Plenipotentiary to the Second United Worlds Congress.

He wished he could see some of the eyes behind the protective goggles, for he knew he was making them blink. He glanced down at the teleprompter in front of him—purely to add effect to a pause, for he had memorized his speech and was delivering it without notes. On it was printed: HEY, BOSS—DON'T FORGET YOU GOT A DINNER DATE WITH THE SEC-GEN TONIGHT.

Lindsay suppressed a smile and said, “In conclusion, I am qualified by the governors of Mars to promise that if we receive another shipment of British hunting boots we shall destroy them immediately upon unloading—and refuse categorically to ship further beryllium to Earth.

"On Mars we raise animals for food, not for sport—we consider human beings as the only fit athletic competition for other humans—and we see small purpose in expending our resources mining beryllium or other metals for payment that is worse than worthless. In short, we will not be a dumping ground for Earth's surplus goods. I thank you."

The faint echo of his words came back to him as he stepped down from the rostrum and walked slowly to his solitary seat in the otherwise empty section allotted to representatives of alien planets. Otherwise there was no sound in the huge assemblage.

He felt a tremendous lift of tension, the joyousness of a man who has satisfied a lifelong yearning to toss a brick through a plate-glass window and knows he will be arrested for it and doesn't care.

There was going to be hell to pay—and Lindsay was honestly looking forward to it. While Secretary General Carlo Bergozza, his dark-green spectacles resembling parenthesis marks on either side of his thin eagle beak, went through the motions of adjourning the Congress for forty-eight hours, Lindsay considered his mission and its purpose.

Earth—a planet whose age-old feuds had been largely vitiated by the increasing rule of computer-judgment—and Mars, the one settled alien planet on which no computer had ever been built, were drifting dangerously apart.

It was, Lindsay thought with a trace of grimness, the same ancient story of the mother country and her overseas colonies, the same basic and seemingly inevitable trend, social and economic, that had led to the revolt of North America against England, three hundred years earlier.

On a far vaster and costlier scale, of course.

Lindsay had been sent to Earth, as his planet's first representative at the new United Worlds Congress, to see that this trend was halted before it led to irrevocable division. And not by allowing Mars to become a mere feeder and dumping ground for the parent planet.

Well, he had tossed a monkey wrench into the machinery of interplanetary sweetness and light, he thought. Making his way slowly out with the rest of the Congress, he felt like the proverbial bull in the china shop. The others, eyeing him inscrutably through their eye-glasses and over their harness humps, drew aside to let him walk through.

But all around him, in countless national tongues, he heard the whispers, the mutterings—"sending a gladiator" ... "looks like a vidar star" ... "too young for such grave responsibility" ... "no understanding of the basic
...sensitivities." Obviously, he had not won a crushing vote of confidence.

To hell with them, all of them, he thought as someone tapped him on a shoulder. He turned to find du Fresne, the North American Minister of Computation, peering up at him through spectacles that resembled twin scoops of strawberry ice-cream mounted in heavy white-metal rims.

"I'd like a word with you," he said, speaking English rather than Esperanto. Lindsay nodded politely, thinking that du Fresne looked rather like a Daumier judge with his fashionable humped back and long official robe of office.

Over a table in the twilight bar du Fresne leaned toward him, nearly upsetting his colafizz with a sleeve of his robe.

"M-mind you," he said, "this is strictly unofficial, Lindsay, but I have your interests at heart. You're following trend X."

"Got me all nicely plotted out on your machine?" said Lindsay.

Du Fresne's sallow face went white at this pleasantry. As Minister of Computation his entire being was wrapped up in the immensely intricate calculators that forecast all decisions for the huge North American republic. Obviously battling anger, he said, "Don't laugh at Elsac, Lindsay. It has never been wrong--it can't be wrong."

"I'm not laughing," said Lindsay quietly. "But no one has ever fed me to a computer. So how can you know...?"

"We have fed it every possible combination of circumstances based upon all the facts of Terro-Martian interhistory," the Minister of Computation stated firmly. His nose wrinkled and seemed to turn visibly pink at the nostril-edges. He said, "Damn! I'm allergic to computer-ridicule." He reached for an evapochief, blew his nose.

"Sorry," said Lindsay, feeling the mild amazement that seemed to accompany all his dealings with Earthfolk. "I wasn't--"

"I doe you weren'd," du Fresne said thickly. "Bud de vurry zweggedeshun of ridicule dudz id." He removed his strawberry spectacles, produced an eye-cup, removed and dried the contact lenses beneath. After he had replaced them his condition seemed improved.

Lindsay offered him a cigarette, which was refused, and selected one for himself. He said, "What happens if I pursue trend X?"

"You'll be assassinated," du Fresne told him nervously. "And the results of such assassination will be disastrous for both planets. Earth will have to go to war."

"Then why not ship us goods we can use?" Lindsay asked quietly.

Du Fresne looked at him as despairingly as his glasses would permit. He said, "You just don't understand. Why didn't your people send someone better attuned to our problems?"

"Perhaps because they felt Mars would be better represented by someone attuned to its own problems," Lindsay told him. "Don't tell me your precious computers recommend murder and war."

"They don't recommend anything," said du Fresne. "They merely advise what will happen under given sets of conditions."

"Perhaps if you used sensible judgment instead of machines to make your decisions you could prevent my assassination," said Lindsay, finishing his scotch on the rocks. "Who knows?" he added. "You might even be able to prevent an interplanetary war!"

When he left, du Fresne's nose was again growing red and the Minister of Computation was fumbling for another evapochief.

Riding the escaramp to his office on the one-twentieth floor of the UW building, Lindsay pondered the strange people of the mother planet among whom his assignment was causing him to live. One inch over six feet, he was not outstandingly tall--but he felt tall among them, with their slump harnesses and disfiguring spectacles and the women so hidden beneath their shapeless coveralls and harmopan makeup.

He was not unprepared for the appearance of Earthfolk, of course, but he had not yet adjusted to seeing them constantly around him in such large numbers. To him their deliberate distortion was as shocking as, he supposed wryly, his own unaltered naturalness was to them.

There was still something illogical about the cult of everyday ugliness that had overtaken the mother planet in the last two generations, under the guise of social harmony. It dated back, of course, to the great Dr. Ludmilla Hartwig, psychiatric synthesizer of the final decades of the twentieth century.

It was she who had correctly interpreted the growing distrust of the handsome and the beautiful among the great bulk of the less favored, the intense feelings of inferiority such comely persons aroused. It was from her computer-psychiatry that the answer employed had come: since everyone cannot be beautiful, let all be ugly.

This slogan had sparked the mass use of unneeded spectacles, the distortion harnesses, the harmopan makeup.
Now, outside of emergencies, it was as socially unacceptable for a man or woman to reveal a face uncovered in public as it had been, centuries earlier, for a Moslem odalisque to appear unveiled in the bazaar.

There were exceptions, of course--aside from those who were naturally ugly to begin with. Vidar-screen actors and actresses were permitted to reveal beauty when their parts demanded it—which was usually only in villains' roles. And among men, professional athletes were expected to show their faces and bodies au naturel as a mark of their profession. Among women the professional courtesans—the "models", not the two-credit whores--displayed their charms on all occasions. Beauty was bad business for lower-caste prostitutes—it made such clients they could promote feel too inferior.

These specialists, the models and gladiators, were something of a race apart, computer-picked in infancy and raised for their professions like Japanese sumo wrestlers. They were scarcely expected to enter the more sensitive realms of the arts, business affairs or government.

It was, Lindsay decided, a hell of a state of affairs.

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Nina Beckwith, Lindsay's Earth-assigned personal secretary, was leaning far back in her tilt-chair with her feet on the desk. Her eyes were squinted behind chartreuse-tinted flat-oval lenses to avoid fumes from a cigarette stuck in a corner of her wide mouth. She had shut off the air-conditioner, opened the picture window and pulled the pants of her coverall far up above her knees to let the warm New Orleans September air wash over her skin.

Lindsay looked at her legs with surprise—it had not occurred to him that Nina owned such a long and shapely pair. He whistled softly through his teeth.

Nina removed her smoke, sighed and made a move to stand up and let her coverall fall back over the exposed limbs. Lindsay said, "Not on my account—please! Those are the first good looking legs I've seen since leaving Mars."

"Watch yourself, boss," said Nina and indulged in a slow half-smile. Then, putting her feet back on the floor, "You certainly lost a lot of friends and disinfluenced a lot of people down there today. If you'd prepared your speech on the machine I'd have fixed it up for you."

"Which is exactly why I prepared it in my hot little head," Lindsay told her. "I wanted to knock some sense into them."

Nina got out of her chair and snuffled out her cigarette in the disposal tray, then sat on the edge of the desk and poked at the untidy dark-blonde hair she wore in a knot on top of her head. She said, "Night soil! You'll never knock any sense into that mob."

Lindsay, who had been thinking wistfully that if Nina would only do something about that hair, the thickness of her middle, and her bilious complexion, she might be fairly good looking, blinked. He said, "Why in hell do you work for them then?"

She shrugged disinterested shoulders, told him, "It's a job." She yawned, unabashed, added irrelevantly. "You know, boss, the trouble with you is you look like a gladiator. They won't take you seriously unless you wear specs and a harness."

"Over my dead body," he told her. "What's wrong with athletes anyway? I play damned good tennis when I get time to practice."

"Athletes are lousy lovers," she said. "Your correspondence is on your desk." She nodded toward it. "Get it signed, will you? I've got a dinner date."

Lindsay restrained an impulse to ask her with what and signed the letters dutifully.

Nina was a spy, of course, or she wouldn't have the job. In view of his own assignment and the delicacy of Terro-Martian relations at the moment, she must be a good one.

He handed her the letters, noted the slight sway of her thick body as she walked toward the dispatch-chute. A pity, he thought, that the rest of her failed to match the long perfect legs she had so unexpectedly put on display.

"Oh, Miss Beckwith," he called after her. "You don't have to list my appointments on the teleprompter when I'm making a speech after this."

She stopped, cast him an oblique glance over one shoulder and said without much interest, "I didn't know whether you'd get back here or not—and it wouldn't do to forget the Secretary General."

"All right," he said in resignation. When she had gone he wondered if he should have told her what du Fresne had said about his possible assassination, decided it was just as well he had kept mum. He went up on the roof for a copter.

* * * * *

The dinner was informal. Lindsay and Fernando Anderson, the flamboyant junior senator from New Mexico, were the only guests. They were four at the charming ante bellum mahogany table of the Secretary General's Natchez mansion. Carlo Bergozza, the Secretary General himself—courteous, with natural as well as harness-stooped
shoulders, a trifle vague--and his daughter and official hostess, Maria--vividly brunette and dynamic despite the twist given her body by her harness and the mask of huge triangular spectacles--made up the rest of the party.

The meal was simple, automatically served, well prepared. It consisted of plankton soup with chives in chilled bowls, noisettes of lamb with yeast-truffles and bamboo-grass and, in deference to Lindsay, a dessert of Martian lichenberries. Conversation consisted of routine gambits and responses until the dessert.

Then Senator Anderson removed his diamond-shaped raspberry glasses and said, "You'll pardon me, but I want to see what our distinguished visitor really looks like. After all, he can see us as we are."

Secretary General Bergozza looked briefly shocked. Then his overpowering courtesy came to his rescue and he laid aside his own dark green spectacles. He said, "You know, Lindsay, you remind me a little of an American ambassador to the Court of Saint James a hundred and fifty years ago--I believe his name was Harvey. He refused to wear knee-britches to his own reception. Other times, other customs."

"I'm sorry if my appearance is bothering people," said Lindsay, noting that Maria, without her glasses, came close to being a truly pretty young woman. "I'm not trying to disturb them--I merely want them to see me as a true representative of my own world."

Maria said impulsively, "It isn't that you bother us--not really. It's just that you're a little too good looking. Almost like a gladiator. People aren't used to it in a statesman."

"Too good looking--with this busted beak of mine?" Lindsay pressed a finger against his nose, which had been broken in youth by a wild pitch.

Senator Anderson said, "The slight irregularity of your nose is just enough to keep you from being too pretty, Lindsay." He smiled and added, "You certainly stirred up a cyclotron with your speech this afternoon. The British are planning a white paper."

"I merely stated facts as I know them," said Lindsay.

"They aren't used to facts--not unless they have been computer-processed," said the senator. He seemed pleased for some reason, added, "You may have broken some real ice, Lindsay. I've been trying for years to work out a way to tell people computers are robbing them of all powers of decision."

"All they have to do is confine them to mathematical problems and let people decide human ones," said Lindsay.

The Secretary General cleared his throat. He said, "Without the computers there would be no United Worlds. There would be no world at all, probably."

It was a rebuke. Carlo Bergozza redonned his spectacles and rose from the table. He said, "If you'll excuse me I have some business to attend to. I'm sure my daughter will see that you are properly entertained." He left the room with slow, old-man steps.

Maria said fondly, "Poor darling, he gets so upset. He'll take a pill and go to sleep. Let's go to the bathroom, shall we?"

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Though outwardly the Secretary General's mansion was hyper-gingerbread steamboat Gothic, inwardly it was entirely modern in plan. There was a living room, of course, for formal receptions, but as in all normal Earth-dwellings of the period the bathroom was the lived-in chamber.

There and there only did people of the 2070's permit themselves to relax. This was a logical development of latter-day plumbing and air conditioning and the crowding of apartment and small-house life. Actual lavatory plumbing was concealed, in this instance, by an etched glass screen. Otherwise the room featured comfortable plastic lounge chairs and sofas around a fifteen-foot sunken tub and a small semicircular bar, fully equipped.

On entering Maria unfastened her harness and overalls and stood before them, a sweet-bodied dark-eyed girl in her early twenties, clad in shorts and halter. "Lord!" she exclaimed, pushing dark hair back from her broad low forehead, "It feels good to relax. Zalen, I want to talk to you."

"Delighted," said Lindsay, mildly surprised at the use of his Martian first name.

"I've got something to tell him first," said Anderson, unhitching his own harness and emerging as a lean medium-sized man in good condition for his forty years. "I got word just before I flew up here tonight that your life may be in danger, Zalen."

Lindsay accepted the arrack-fizz Maria handed him, said "That makes warning number two, Senator. Du Fresne talked to me about it this afternoon."

Maria paled visibly. She said, "It sounds impossible!"

"It backs up the judgment of my own group," said Senator Anderson. "Du Fresne is just about the smartest computerman we have." He eyed Lindsay speculatively, added, "You don't seem much impressed by your danger, Zalen."

* * * * *
"How can I be?" Lindsay countered. "After all, Earth is supposed to be much further advanced than Mars in
civilization. And we have had no political murder on Mars in more than fifty years."

Maria made a despairing gesture. "Oh, dea!" she exclaimed. "You don't understand, Zalen. On Mars you have
both room and time to settle your political conflicts. And you don't have computers."

"We have some pretty sharp rows," Lindsay told her. "But we don't have anyone assassinated." He paused,
looked at them both, added, "Do you have many of them here?"

"Not many," said Anderson. "But there is a growing tendency to go along with computer verdicts, no matter
how extreme."

"And you believe the British computers are giving accurate answers when they recommend the dumping of
millions of pairs of utterly useless hunting boots on Mars? Or those rubber shower curtains they unloaded on us two
years ago?"

The Senator said, "There is, unfortunately, no question as to the accuracy of computer answers. The trouble
seems to lie in some special condition, local to Britain, that affects computers."

"But if the British computers are wrong, why doesn't somebody do something about it?" Lindsay asked.

Anderson said, "If it were that simple, Zalen...." His smile was rueful. "Unfortunately our English friends--or
their rulers at any rate--are determined that socialism is the only government suitable to their country. Actually it is
nothing of the sort--they can thrive only with a mercantile capitalism under a nominal constitutional monarchy."

"In that case I still don't see--" Lindsay began.

"Contrary to what you're thinking, their leaders are not villains," Anderson told him. "They are men and women
obsessed with an ideal that has hampered them for almost two centuries. And they are incapable of accepting any
conclusion counter to their ideals."

"Even to impoverishing an entire planet?" Lindsay asked.

Anderson shrugged. "A penalty of their insularity," he replied. "The reason for this little meeting, Zalen, is to
explain that not all of us are in favor of supporting Britain and its absurd production bungling at the expense of
Mars. A few of us are becoming singularly fed up with the computer neurosis that seems to have this planet in its
grasp."

Maria leaned forward, her dark eyes brilliant in their intensity. She said, "Can't you see, Zalen, that is why we
are so concerned with your possible assassination? We fear the whole of Earth is on the lip of a nervous breakdown.
Unless the grip of the computers is broken anything might happen. And we're counting on you, with your fresh
viewpoint and prestige, to help us."

"I was hoping you might be concerned about me," said Lindsay softly. "After all, I'm the one who is supposed
to be killed." He watched a sudden flush of embarrassment add charming brilliance to the vividness of the Secretary
General's daughter.

"Of course we're concerned," she said defensively. "We're not really monsters, Zalen."

"What Maria means," said Anderson swiftly, "is that if the worst should happen it will go a long way toward
making Earth entirely computer-dependent, if du Fresne's prophecy is fulfilled a lot of people who might go on
fighting will simply give up."

"Just what is your stake in this, Senator?" Lindsay asked.

Anderson said, "I could give you a score of 'good' reasons, Zalen. But my real reason is this--I'm damned if I
want to see professional politicians become rubber-stamps to a computer. When Sylac was first used officially three
decades ago, it looked as if it might be a help. All we had to do was palm off all unpopular decisions on the
machine.

"Elsac, however, has proved to be something else," he went on. "It is making too damned many of our
decisions for us--and thanks to our having set Sylac up as a master-brain god we can't controvert its judgment. When
President Giovannini gets his new Giac computer working we might as well shut up shop. And the announcement
that Giac is in operation may come at any time now."

Lindsay studied him, then said, "Your real complaint then, Fernando, is that the computers deprive you of
patronage and power."

"That's about it," said the senator from New Mexico. "We'll be reduced to the level of the political commissars
of the Soviet nations. The scientists and symbolic logicians who feed and tend the computers will actually be
running the country. And the world."

"And just where do I come into this?" Lindsay asked.

"You, Zalen, are the last representative of the last sizeable and important human organism that is not dependent
upon computer judgment," said Anderson. "That's our side of it. From your own side--if you already distrust
computer decisions, as in the case of the British hunting boots--you surely don't want to see them in full control."
"Hardly," said Lindsay. "But at the same time I have no desire to be assassinated or to be the cause of an Earth-Mars war."

"Think it over, Zalen," said Anderson. "I need hardly tell you that I am not speaking for myself alone." He got up, put down his glass, bade Maria farewell and left the Martian alone with her.

When he had gone Lindsay looked at the girl, who returned his gaze quite openly for a long moment before her eyes fell away. He said, "Somehow the senator and you seem an odd combination."

She made no pretense of misunderstanding but said candidly, "Perhaps I am neurotic in my distrust of computers but I cannot help that. Those of us who have any true sensitivity unblunted by the psycho-mechanistics of the era all share this distrust. It is natural, since we are few and weak, that we should seek what allies we can find among the strong."

"I've always heard that politics makes strange bedfellows," said Lindsay casually.

It was obvious that he had committed a faux pas. Maria's blush returned and her expression froze. Lindsay cursed himself for a fool. With the development of all sorts of pneumatic resting devices the word bed had become not only obsolete but definitely distasteful in well-bred Tellurian circles. Its use was as decried as was that of the word bloody in Victorian England.

She said angrily, "I assure you, Mr. Lindsay, that Senator Anderson and I have never...." Voice and anger faded alike as she apparently realized that Lindsay had not intended insult.

He let her mix a second drink for both of them. Then, standing close to her and noting the smooth perfection of her creamy white skin, "I wonder if your father knows that he is nourishing a subversive in his family."

She said with a trace of impatience, "Oh, poor papa never sees the trees for the forest."

"You're a damned unhappy girl, aren't you?" he asked her. He didn't need an answer, but realized she wanted to talk about it.

She said, her eyes shining suspiciously, "You're right, of course, I'm very unhappy--constricted in behavior by my father's position, unable to say aloud what I really think, how I really feel. Sometimes I think I must be living in some Gothic poet's dream of loneliness."

"Contrary to the beliefs of most psychiatrists," said Lindsay, half-touched, half-appalled by Maria's intensity, "we are all of us alone."

"Somehow I knew you'd understand!" she exclaimed, without taking her dark eyes from his. "I'm not allowed to date gladiators, of course. You're the only man I've ever been with who was not afraid to look as he is."

"You'd better come to Mars," he suggested, shying away a little from the high voltage the Secretary General's daughter seemed to be generating. "I can assure you you've have a chance to reveal the charms nature gave you without shame."

She laughed with a sudden change of spirits. "It's at least a half hour since dinner. Let's take a dip." She tossed back her lustrous dark hair with a shake of her head and her hands went to the clasp of her halter, a moment later to that of her shorts. "Come on," she called, extending her arms to expose her exciting young body before him. "The water will cool us off."

It didn't work out that way, of course. Lindsay was barely in the tub-pool before Maria's arms were about his neck, her body close against his, her lips thrusting upward toward his own. For a moment he felt panic, said, "Hey! What if somebody comes? Your father--"

"Silly! Nobody will," she replied, laughing softly.

His last rational thought for quite awhile was, Oh well--I'm hardly in a position to get the Secretary General's daughter angry.

* * * * *

False dawn was spreading its dim fanlight over the eastern horizon as he copter back to his official quarters in the city. Trying to restore some order to thoughts and emotions thoroughly disrupted by the unexpected events of the evening, he wondered a little just what he had got himself into.

Mars, of course, was scarcely a Puritan planet, populated as it was by the hardiest and most adventurous members of the human race, of all races. But there had been something almost psychopathic about Maria's passion. It had been far too intense to have been generated solely through regard for him.

The girl had made love to him simply to relieve her own inner tensions, he thought wryly. Lacking a man she could love, walled in by the high officialdom of her father's lofty position, she had turned to him in the same way she turned to the anti-computer movement--as a way of feeling less lonely for a while. Still, it had been sweet--if a little frightening in retrospect.

And it had been a little decadent too.

With the copter on autopilot he lit a cigarette and forced his thoughts away from the girl. He wondered if the Governors of Mars were sufficiently in key with the current feelings of Earthfolk to understand fully how deep the
repercussions from his speech might go. He wondered if they had considered fully the possibility of interplanetary war.

True, Mars was undoubtedly better equipped to defend itself against such attack than was Earth. Like the mother planet it had its share of robot rockets capable of launching a counterattack. And thanks to the comparative sparseness and decentralization of its population it was far less vulnerable to attack.

But war between the planets would be destructive of far more than cities and the people that lived in them. It would mean inevitably a breakdown of the entire fabric of civilized humanity--a tenuous fabric, true, but all that existed to maintain man.

And an isolated Mars, even if self-sufficient, would be a sorry substitute for a red planet that was part of the United Worlds. It would mean a setback of generations, perhaps centuries.

He began to feel a new understanding of the importance of his mission. With understanding came something akin to fear lest he should not be able to accomplish it without disaster. It was going to be his job to inaugurate some sort of therapy for Earth's illness. It was, in effect, one man against a planet.

Considering the men and women with whom he had talked that day he was unable to take the assassination threat too seriously. Somehow these neurotics and warped zealots, with their allergies and distortion kits, seemed unlikely to undertake or carry through any such drastic action. Their very inhibitions would forbid it.

Not that Maria had been exactly inhibited. Damn! The girl refused to stay out of his thoughts. He recalled what she had told him of her conspiracy against the computers, of its aims and methods. And again he smiled wryly to himself.

They were like spoiled children, he thought. A little group of over-intense young men and women, neurotic, excitable, unstable, meeting in one another's houses or in expensive cafes, plotting little coups that never quite came off.

From certain unguarded phrases Maria had dropped during the less frenetic periods of their evening together, he gathered that their current aim was actual physical sabotage of Giac, the mightiest of all computers about to be unveiled, before it went into work.

They didn't even realize, he thought, that sabotage would avail them nothing in the long run--or the short either. Destruction of the computers would not cure Earth. It might easily increase the reliance of Earthfolk upon their cybernetic monsters. What was needed to effect a cure was destruction of human confidence in and reliance upon these machines.

And how in hell, he wondered, was he going to manage that?

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To a man from level, water-starved Mars the sight of New Orleans still ablaze with lights at five o'clock in the morning was something of a miracle. Mars had its share of atomic power-plants, of course, but such sources had proved almost prohibitively costly as providers of cheap power.

That was true on Earth too, of course, but Earth had its rivers, its waterfalls, its ocean tides to help out. More important, it averaged some fifty million miles closer to the Sun, thus giving it immense storage supplies of solar heat for power. Without these resources the thousand-square-mile expanse of intricately criss-crossed artificial lighting that was the United Worlds capital would have been impossible.

Lindsay wondered how any people possessed of a planet so rich could be afflicted with such poverty of soul. Or was this very opulence the cause? His own planet was comparatively poor--yet nervous breakdowns were few and far between. There the ugly strove for beauty, instead of the reverse.

He parked the copter on the garage-plat, pressed the button, and watched it sink slowly out of sight to its concealed hangar. Like all Martian natives to leave for Earth, he had been warned about the intense heat and humidity that assailed most of the mother planet, especially in the UW capital. Yet the night breeze felt pleasantly cool against his face and its thickness was like the brush of invisible velvet against his skin. Perhaps, he thought, he was more of an Earthling than three generations of Martian heredity made likely.

He did miss the incredible brilliance of the Martian night skies. Here on Earth the stars shone as puny things through the heavy atmosphere.

But, he thought guiltily, he did not have as severe a pang of homesickness as he ought.

In a state of self-bemusement he rode the elevator down to his suite on the ninety-first story. And was utterly unprepared for the assault which all but bore him to the floor as he stepped out into his own foyer.

Since the attack came from behind and his assailant's first move was to toss a bag over his head, Lindsay had no idea of what the would-be assassin looked like. For a moment he could only struggle blindly to retain his balance, expecting every instant to feel the quick searing heat of a blaster burn through his back.

But no heat came, nor did the chill of a dagger. Instead he felt his attacker's strong hands encircle his neck in a judo grip.
This was something Lindsay understood. He thrust both his own hands up and backward, getting inside the assassin's grip and breaking it. His thumbnails dug into nerve centers and he bent an arm sharply. There was a gasp of agony and he felt a large body crumple under the pressure.

Lindsay's first impulse was to summon the constabulary. His second, after examining the face of his would-be slayer, was to drag the man into the shelter of his apartment, revive him and seek to learn what he could about the attempt.

To his astonishment he discovered that he knew the man. His assigned murderer was long, red-headed Pat O'Ryan rated as a top gladiator, a tennis and squash champion whose reputation was almost as widespread among sporting fans on Mars as on Earth. Lindsay had remodeled his own backhand, just the year before, upon that of the man sent to kill him.

He got some whiskey from the serving bar beside the vidar screen, poured a little of it between the unconscious killer's lips. O'Ryan sputtered and sat up slowly, blinking. He said, "Get me some gin, will you?"

Lindsay returned the whiskey to its place, got the requested liquor, offered some neat to the tennis player in a glass. O'Ryan downed it, shuddered, looked at Lindsay curiously. He said, "What went wrong? You're supposed to be dead."

Lindsay shrugged and said, "I know some judo too. You weren't quite fast enough, Pat."

O'Ryan moaned again, reached for the bottle. Then he said, "I remember now. Thank God you got my right arm--I'm left-handed."

"I know," Lindsay told him laconically.

The would-be assassin looked frightened. He said, "How do you know?"

"I play a little tennis myself," Lindsay told him. "How come they sent a man like you on such a mission?"

"Top gladiator--top assignment," said the athlete. "We're supposed to do something besides play games for our keep."

"That's a wrinkle in the social setup I didn't know about," said Lindsay. "Mind telling me who sent you?"

"Not at all. It was my sponsors, the New Hibernian A.C." He frowned. "According to the computers I was in. There's going to be hell to pay over my muffing it."

"How do you feel about that?" the Martian asked him.

O'Ryan shrugged. "It's okay by me," he said. "They can hardly degrade me for fouling up this kind of a job. I'll simply tell them their information was incomplete. No one knew you knew judo." He eyed the gin, added, "A good thing you didn't feed me whiskey. I'm allergic to all grain products--even in alcohol. Comes from being fed too much McCann's Irish oatmeal when I was a kid."

"Interesting," said Lindsay, wondering how the conversation had taken this turn. "What does whiskey do to you?"

The gladiator shuddered. "It usually hits me about twenty-four hours afterward. Makes my eyes water so I can't see much. I've got a match at the Colosseum tomorrow night. I hope you'll be there."

"So do I," said Lindsay dryly. "You wouldn't know who gave you this little chore on me, would you?"

"Not likely," said the gladiator. "When we report at the club every evening we find our assignments stuck in our boxes. Usually we get orders to meet a dame. This was something different."

"I see what you mean," Lindsay told him.

O'Ryan got up, said, "Well, I might as well be running along. I'll give them hell for fouling up the computer-prophecy. Look me up after the match tomorrow. And thanks for not having me pinched. I might have had to spend the night in a cell. That's bad for conditioning."

"You're quite welcome," said Lindsay, feeling like a character in a semi-nightmare. "Will I be seeing you again--this way?"

"Unlikely," the gladiator told him. "They'll have to run a lot of checks on you after this before they try again. See you tomorrow."

Lindsay looked after his visitor with amazement. Then it occurred to him that computers were substituting not only for human judgment but for human conscience as well. And this, he felt certain, was important.

Turning in on his contour couch, Lindsay recalled that he had given whiskey to the allergic athlete. He decided then and there that he would be in attendance at the match in the Colosseum that evening.

He got to his office about eleven o'clock. His desk was stacked high with messages, written and taped, and all sorts of folk wished to talk with him on the vidarphone. Nina, looking more slovenly than ever, had arranged them neatly, according to their nature and importance in separate little piles.

"Next time you tear up the pea-patch," she informed him resentfully, "I'm going to get in some help." She eyed
him with somber speculation, added, "I hear the Sec-Gen turned in early last night."

"You've got big ears," said Lindsay.

"I get around," she said. "I'm supposed to keep tabs on you, boss."

"Then you must know someone tried to kill me early this morning when I came back from Natchez."

Nina's eyes narrowed alarmingly under the glasses that covered them. She said, "Why didn't you report it?" She sounded like a commander-in-chief questioning a junior aide for faulty judgment.

"I won," Lindsay said simply. "There was no danger."

"Who was it?" she asked. And, when he hesitated, "I'm not going to shout it from the housetops, boss."

"It was Pat O'Ryan."

"You handled Pat?" she asked, apparently astonished. Something in her tone told him Nina knew his would-be assassin.

"Why not?" he countered. "It wasn't much of a brawl."

"But Pat...." she began, and hesitated. Then, all business again, "We'd better get at some of this. You have a date to be psyched by Dr. Craven at two o'clock."

"What for?" he asked, startled.

"Routine," she told him. "Everyone connected with UW has to go through it. But cheer up, boss, it doesn't hurt much."

"Okay," he said resignedly. "Let's get to work."

While he dictated Lindsay found himself wondering just who was paying Nina's real salary. If she were a spy for the same group that had sent O'Ryan to kill him, his position was delicate, to put it mildly. But for some reason he doubted it. There were too many groups working at once to make any such simple solution probable.

When she departed briefly to superintend a minor matter out of the office, he found himself staring at the wastebasket by his tilt-chair. A heart-shaped jewel-box of transparent crystoplastic lay within it. Curious, Lindsay plucked it out. It had evidently held some sort of necklace and bore the mark of Zoffany's, the Capital's costliest jeweler. Within it was a note that read: For Nina, who lost last night--as ever.... The signature was an indecipherable scrawl.

Lindsay stuck the card in his wallet, returned the box to the wastebasket. Who in hell, he wondered, would be sending this sort of gift to his slatternly thick-bodied secretary. The answer seemed obvious. The sender was her real boss, paying her off in a personal way that would obviate suspicion. Lindsay wondered exactly what Nina had lost.

He was not surprised when she said she would come along to the psychiatrist's with him after an office lunch of veal pralines, soya buns and coffee. He suggested she might be tired, might want the day off.

She said, "Night soil, boss! Between the Sec-Gen's daughter and things like Pat O'Ryan I'm going to keep an eye on you."

As if on signal the vidar-screen lit up and Maria's face appeared on it. She had not donned harmopan or glasses and looked quite as lovely as she had the night before. She said, "Zalen, I've got to see you tonight. Something has come up."

Lindsay nodded. He figured out his schedule, suggested, "I'm going to the match in the Colosseum. Why not take it in with me?"

She shook her head, told him, "I'm tangled up at a banquet for the Egypto-Ethiopian delegation. I can meet you afterward though. How about the Pelican?"

"That's not very private," he protested.

"All the more reason," she announced. "This is important!"

"And seeing me in private isn't?" Despite himself a trace of wounded male entered his tone.

Maria laughed softly, her dark eyes dancing. "Perhaps later," she said softly. "You'll understand when I talk to you." She clicked off and the screen was empty.

"Damned cat!" said Nina through a haze of cigarette-smoke. "Watch out for her, boss--she's a cannibal."

"And I'm a bit tough and stringy," he told her.

Nina said, "Night soil!" again under her breath and led the way out of the office. Lindsay wondered if she were jealous.

* * * * *

Dr. Craven received them in a comfortable chamber, the north wall of which was all glass brick, the south wall a solid bank of screens and dials. He was a soft-faced man who wore lozenge-shaped light blue spectacles and seemed afflicted with a slight chin rash. He caught Lindsay's regard, rubbed his chin in mild embarrassment, said, "I've a mild allergy to paranoids."

Lindsay looked at Nina distrustfully but she nodded and said, "Go ahead--he won't break your arm. I'll wait outside."
The psychiatrist closed his office door. After settling him in a comfortable contour couch, Dr. Craven opened up with, "I don't want you to have any worries about this test, Ambassador. If anybody's crazy here it's me. According to very sound current theory all psychiatrists are insane. If we weren't we wouldn't be so concerned with sanity in others."

Lindsay asked, "Why in hell am I being tested anyway?"
Craven replied, "President Giovannini himself came in for a voluntary checkup just last week." As if that were an answer.

Lindsay suppressed a desire to ask if the North American president had all his marbles. He had an idea any levity he displayed would register against him. Dr. Craven asked him a number of apparently routine questions which Lindsay answered via a recorder. How old he was, whether he liked flowers, how often he had fought with his schoolmates as a boy, what sort of food he preferred.

"Good," the doctor said, pushing aside the microphone on his desk and motioning Lindsay to do likewise. He rose, wheeled a device like an old-fashioned beautician's hair-drier close to the couch, adjusted the helmet to Lindsay's head. "Now," he added, "I want you to think as clearly as you can of your mother. Keep your eyes on the screen and give me as clear a picture as you can."

He pressed a button and the whir of a camera, also focussed on the screen, sounded from the wall behind Lindsay. When Dr. Craven nodded, he concentrated and, to his amazement, watched a fuzzy likeness of his maternal parent take form on the screen.

This was something new, he decided, and said so. Dr. Craven replied, "Yes--the psychopic is brand new. But concentrate on the picture, please. You're losing it."

It had faded to almost nothing. Lindsay concentrated again, this time brought his maternal parent into clear focus. He felt a little like a man who has never wielded a brush in his life and has suddenly discovered he could paint a perfect portrait.

Dr. Craven said nothing for a moment. Then, "Will you try to visualize your mother without the blemish at her temple?"

Lindsay tried, and all but lost the picture entirely. He brought it back again, blemish and all, felt a sudden tug of nostalgia for the firm kindly features of the woman who had brought him into the world. A minute or so later Dr. Craven pressed another button and the screen went blank. "That will do very nicely," he said. "You may wait for the psycho-computer verdict outside if you wish."

He found Nina sprawled in an anteroom chair with her long legs stuck out before her, contemplating a flashing diamond-and-emerald necklace. He said, before she looked up and saw him, "Business good, Miss Beckwith?"

To his amazement Nina began to snivel. And when he asked her what he had done to cause it she snapped angrily, "You big pig, you haven't the sensitivity to understand. Don't ever speak of it as business again. Now I'll have to bathe my eyes when I get home or they will be all swollen and horrible."

She removed her glasses and they were swollen. Lindsay had seen too much of allergic reactions since reaching Earth not to know he was looking at another. He was relieved when she put her glasses back on.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to disturb you."
"I know it," she replied, "but you did."
"Perhaps, if you told me--" he began. Dr. Craven chose that moment to emerge from his office.
"If you'll come back inside," he said. "There are just a few more questions I'd like to ask, Ambassador."
"Ask them here," said Lindsay. "I had no desire to go back under the drier."

Dr. Craven hesitated and rubbed his chin, which was bright red again. He said finally, "Mr. Lindsay, you didn't kill your mother before you were seventeen, did you?"

"My mother died last year," said Lindsay, unbelieving.
"Incredible!" muttered the psychiatrist, shaking his head. "According to the computer you must have...." He paused again, then said, "I hope this won't embarrass you but you evidently are a man who prefers men to women. The stigmata is definite and shows--"

"Night soil!" Nina exploded her favorite expression before Lindsay could collect his wits for an answer. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Dr. Craven, but this man's a veritable satyr. I caught him looking at my legs yesterday. Ask Maria Bergozza if you want any further proof."

"But this is impossible!" the psychiatrist exploded. "According to the computer--"
"Your computer's out of whack," Nina said calmly, and led a stunned Lindsay out of the place. She added, "You didn't deserve that, boss. Not after puffing my eyes up."

"Why not just keep your glasses on then?" he countered. They returned to their office in unfriendly silence. Lindsay sent Nina home early and took a copter across the Lake to his own place, there to nap until time for the match at the Colosseum.
He felt more at home in the UW box at the vast arena than at any time since reaching Earth. Since it was a
sporting event, the eye-glasses were serried, at least in the lower, higher-priced tiers, by good looking faces, male
and female, unadorned.

Someone slid into the comfortable contour chair beside him and said, "Evening, Zalen. Enjoying yourself?"
Lindsay looked into Senator Fernando Anderson's diamond-shaped raspberry glasses. He said, "So far--how
about you?"

Anderson made a face. "I had a date with a gorgeous item but she put me off until later. So I thought I'd look in.
Maria arranged a seat in the UW box. Otherwise I'd be watching it on vidar."

Lindsay looked up and around and discovered that the vast stadium was packed to the rafters, judging by the
glowing cigarette tips that resembled an uncountable horde of frozen fireflies.

The court itself was pitch-dark, save for the lines and the net. He had trouble recognizing O'Ryan as his would-
be assassin and opponent walked out. Neither player was clearly visible of feature, though shoes, shorts and racquets
were luminous, as were the balls they began to hit back and forth across the net.

The only other luminous objects, save for the dim exit lights, were the betting boards. Lindsay, who had never
seen one save on a vidar-screen before, asked Anderson how they worked. The senator from New Mexico was glad
to explain.

"Naturally," he said, "since the results of all athletic contests are predicted on the computers, there is no betting
on who will win."

"No upsets?" Lindsay asked.
Anderson laughed, said, "The last time there was an upset--in the British Australian test cricket matches three
years ago--a computer investigation proved bribery and there was a hell of a stink."

"Then how do you manage to bet?" Lindsay asked.
"Simple," said the Senator. "Naturally, in case of accidental injury, all bets are void. But otherwise the betting
is on the percentage of variation between the computer prediction and the actual play of the contest. There--you can
see the computer line on the big board over there. The line of actual play will be red when it comes on. That way
there is plenty of chance for betting on points, games, sets or match."

The man from Mars studied the predictor line for the match. It revealed that Pat O'Ryan, after a fast start, was
due to slump in the second set, recover in the third and polish off his opponent, Yamato-Rau from Indonesia, in the
fourth set with the loss of but one game.

"Looks like a shoo-in for O'Ryan," he said. "Right?"

"It ought to be," the Senator replied. "He's taken Yamato-Rau in six of their seven previous matches. The
second time they played he had a sprained wrist that affected his volleying."

"Care to make a bet?" Lindsay asked his companion.
"Sure--why not?" Anderson countered. "Percentage of variation for game, set or match?"

"I'd like to bet on the Indonesian to win," said Lindsay quietly.

Senator Anderson looked at Lindsay sharply. He said, "You know something."

"Against the computer-prophecy?" Lindsay countered.
Anderson backed down and gave him a hundred to one on a fifty-credit bet. "You can't win, of course," he
murmured, "but if you do it will be worth it."

The match began and the hum of the great crowd's conversation slowly quieted. At first it went according to the
computer prophecy. Serving brilliantly, hitting crisply from either hand and smashing and volleying with deadly
accuracy from all parts of the court, Pat O'Ryan held complete command of the match.

There was something hypnotic about the play--the clean ping of racquet strings on luminous ball, the swift
flight of the ball, a streak of light in the darkness, the flash of another racquet, the long and intricate tactics of each
exchange, broken only occasionally by the flash of a light that betokened an error or an ace and the resulting
alteration of the scoreboard.

The red line crept in zigzag fashion along the computer board as the match progressed, veering above or below
the white line of the prophecy but always returning to cross or even to cover it briefly. Big O'Ryan took the first set
six games to three on a single service break against the Indonesian champion.

"Money in the bank," said Anderson in Lindsay's ear as the players changed courts following the first game of
the second set, which Yamato-Rau had taken at fifteen. "Candy from a baby."

"It's barely begun," said Lindsay with a confidence he was far from feeling. He glanced at the clock above the
scoreboard, saw that it was scarcely ten o'clock. Sickly he recalled that O'Ryan had told him it took twenty-four
hours for his grain allergy to take effect. Lindsay had given him the drink barely seventeen hours before. He began
to wish he had not bet so thoughtlessly.

The second set went to deuce twice before Yamato-Rau broke O'Ryan's service to run it out at eight-six. This was two games more than the computer had calculated and caused considerable uproar in the crowd.

"I hear you had some trouble last night," Anderson told him.

"Nothing serious," said Lindsay, wondering how much the senator knew. Dammit, he thought, he wished he didn't like the power-hungry politician.

He wondered if Anderson were behind the attempt of the morning--and if he were behind it, why? There could, he decided, be all sorts of Machiavellian motives hidden beneath that smiling face. Then the match got under way once more, and Lindsay concentrated on the play.

Once again O'Ryan seemed to be in command--just as the computer had foretold. Games went to five-two in his favor. Then, as the players changed courts once more, the tall Irishman paused to towel off--and paid special attention to rubbing his eyes.

At that his string ran out. Four straight times his swiftest drives hit the top of the net and bounced back into his own court. He blew his service thanks to a pair of double-faults and three minutes later Yamato-Rau had taken the set while the crowd sat in stunned silence.

The fourth set was pitiful. O'Ryan played like a blind man and the Indonesian ran it out with the loss of exactly one point per game. The red line on the computer-board yawed wildly toward the bottom instead of following the white line as it should have.

"Keep your credits," Lindsay told Senator Anderson. "You were right. As it turned out I did know something after all."

"It's impossible!" cried the senator. "But it's cheap at the price--here!" He withdrew his wallet and began pulling out crisp hundred-credit notes.

"Look out!" cried Lindsay. Around them the stands had erupted into violence. While the players were shaking hands at the net, angry--and, Lindsay suspected, frightened--bettors and spectators leaped the low barriers and swarmed out onto the dark court. They hemmed the players in, driving them toward the wall directly under the UW box in which Lindsay and Anderson were sitting.

Someone threw something and Yamato-Rau stumbled and fell to his hands and knees. Swinging his racquet like one of his ancestors' shillalehs, O'Ryan charged to his rescue, pulled him to his feet, covered his retreat to the wall. There Lindsay was able to pull first the Indonesian, then the Irishman, up into the box.

"Damned fool!" said Anderson. "Getting us into a riot." But a moment later Lindsay saw the senator swinging hard at an angry customer with a fist in which his wallet was still clenched. The man made a grab for it as someone else hit Anderson over the head with a plastic bottle. He dropped across a contour-chair, letting his wallet fall from unconscious fingers.

UW police formed a protective wall around them and Pat O'Ryan, recognizing Lindsay, said, "Thanks, Ambassador. I guess I owe you a couple. If my eyes hadn't gone bad on me...."

Lindsay was tempted to admit his guilt in that matter but decided against it. He had no desire to be caught in another riot. He picked up Anderson's wallet, put it back in the still unconscious senator's breast pocket. A white-clad interne was brought through the police cordon, knelt beside Anderson and began to make repairs.

"You'd better leave now, Ambassador," said one of the boss policemen respectfully to Lindsay when the senator had been carted away on a stretcher. Lindsay nodded. Then he noticed a slip of paper lying beneath the chair across which Anderson had fallen. It read: rec. 10,000 cdt. 1 em. & di. neck. It was from Zoffany, the jeweler.

"What the hell!" Lindsay discovered he was speaking aloud. He stuffed the paper in his pocket and followed the officer through a maze of underground passages out of the Colosseum. He still thought, What the hell! What could Nina have reported about him that was worth that sort of money to the senator?

* * * * *

Spy, slattern or not, Nina was efficient, as he realised when a bowing motley-clad waiter captain smilingly ushered him to a secluded table for two in a banquet niche of the Pelican. It was Lindsay's first visit to an Earthly after-dark cafe and he instinctively compared it with certain of its imitations in the comparatively small cities of his native planet.

It was sleeker, better run, far more beautiful. Its general color scheme was darkly opalescent, subtly glowing, flattering to its clients. And, of course, most of them needed flattering, at least to Lindsay's alien eyes. He noted here a pair of scimitar-shaped spectacles whose turquoise-studded rims caught the light like a pair of small lemon pies, there a harmopan-covered female face that glowed pale green in the darkness.

But even more numerous and decorative than at the stadium, the gladiators and courtesans were present, reinforced by a larding of vidar stars visiting or entertaining in the capital. And these, Lindsay admitted to himself with awed reluctance, outshone in sheer beauty and handsomeness any group of Martian humans.
They ought to, he thought. Direct descendants, figuratively if not actually, of the advertising-Hollywood beauty fetish of the previous century, they were selected almost from birth for their callings and trained rigorously from childhood on, the males to become athletes or actors, the females courtesans or actresses.

There was no race among them, for their only standards were beauty and physical fitness, no creed but achievement in their lines of individual entertainment. He caught sight of a lissome Euro-African, the classic exoticism of her flower-petal face illumined by joyous laughter beneath a glossy neo-Watusi hairdo, as she glided gracefully over the dance-floor in the arms of a hunch-harnessed and bespectacled partner.

The gladiators and courtesans alone seemed to find joy in living. Lindsay, who had seldom been unhappy in his active existence, felt his sympathies and heart go out to them. He followed the progress of a tiny Oriental model whose face was alive with good-humor as she swept past his table, her exquisite figure stressed by a glittering jeweled sheathe.

"You really should wear glasses--or else learn not to stare," said Maria, appearing from nowhere and sitting down at the table. She made amends by extending a warm soft hand to grip one of his. Though she wore her glasses and her hair was severely pulled back, he had no difficulty in recalling the fact that, unclothed, she was lovely.

"Why don't you get in on the act?" he suggested, nodding toward a pair of models emerging from the harmopan room. "All you'd have to do would be to remove your specs and harness and let your hair down."  
"You're sweet, Zale," she said, pleased. Then, with a sigh, "But there's a lot more to it than that."
"You do all right that way too," he told her boldly.

"Zale, I didn't ask you to meet me for that. I've got so much to ask you--so much to tell. Did you really find an assassin waiting for you when you got home last night? And did you kill him?"
"Yes and no," said Lindsay. "I did find one and I didn't kill him. In fact we parted good friends."
"You Martians...." She sighed, then said, "And I understand you have already broken two computers--this afternoon at the psychiatrist's and this evening at the Colosseum. It's the most marvelous news, darling. I've got to know how you did it."
"I'm damned if I know how I fouled up Dr. Craven's computer," he told her, "I'm still trying to figure it out."
Her face fell. She said, "I was hoping you had something.... But never mind." Then, brightening, "But you're driving them crazy. They ran Dr. Craven's results through Elsac late this afternoon and got the same answer. The records checked that you didn't kill your mother and I know you're not an invert." She laughed softly.

Spurred by the erotic atmosphere, plus the dizzying speed of recent events and Maria's nearness, he said, "Let's get out of here and go to my place."
Her hand covered his again atop the table. "I wish we could," she said wistfully. "I like you very much, Zale darling. But this is too important. We haven't time. But what about the tennis tonight? There's going to be an investigation, of course. Won't you tell me how you did it?"
"Not until I've figured it out both," he said. "I may be on the track of something or it may be sheer chance. Until I understand what happened at Dr. Craven's I'm simply not sure of my facts."
"But there simply isn't time, darling," Maria told him. "This is really what I must talk to you about. We got word today that President Giovannini is going to unveil Giac any day now."
"Decided against your sabotage plan?" he asked her.
She wrinkled her pert little nose. "What's the use? They'd simply repair it. Besides, it's much too well guarded. Zale, you're our only hope now."
He said "If I'm right, and I'm beginning to hope I am, it won't matter whether Giac is unveiled or not. In fact, it might be more effective if it were."
Maria drummed on the table with nervous knuckles. "But you don't understand, Zale. You don't think for a minute that the Ministry of Computation is taking this lying down. I got word less than half an hour ago that they are preparing to force your recall as an unsuitable plenipotentiary."
"They can try," Lindsay spoke grimly. This was a move he had failed to foresee, though he supposed he should have. Inadvertently he was becoming a major threat to the crockery in the china shop that was Earth.
[Illustration]
"They can do it," Maria said simply. "Zale, these people have become absolutely dependent upon their computers. They aren't going to let their entire creed be wrecked by one Martian."
"What do you want me to do?" he asked simply.
"Come with me--now," she said, once more gripping his hand. "A group of us want to talk to you, to find out how you have done it."
He looked at her, found her adorable in her earnestness. He said, "And if I play guinea pig with your friends, then you and I...?"
"Of course--as soon as there's time," she told him.  
"You are a little bundle of fanaticism, as well as of sex," he told her. "I should think at least, since you seem to have such an inside track, you could manage to get my recall deferred."

"That's just it!" she exclaimed bitterly. "I see everything, I hear everything--yet I can do nothing. Papa thinks I'm merely a foolish female creature and his attitude blocks me at every turn." Lindsay realized again how fundamentally frustrated she was, wondered if she would ever find a completely satisfactory release.

Lindsay decided to play along. "All right," he said. "Shall we go?"

"Thanks, darling," she promised. "We'd better go separately. There will be a blue copter-cab waiting outside when you leave." She leaned across the table to brush his lips briefly with hers, squeezed his hand and glided off.

* * * * *

He wondered, while he waited for the check, just how foolhardily he was being, allowing himself to be summoned to a meeting of palace conspirators. It could very easily be a trap, whether Maria knew it or not. It could be a ruse to add fuel to the fire being lit under him for his recall as a legate persona non grata on Earth.

"You haven't forgotten our date, have you darling?" The voice was throatily reproachful above him and he looked up in surprise at a glittering female figure, who seemed to be clad entirely in blazing brilliants. She was tall and blonde, her hair an ocean helmet of gold, sprinkled with gems. Her face was beautifully boned, with broad cheeks and forehead pierced by a decided widow's peak. Light green eyes slanted upward beneath brows like the wings of some tiny graceful bird. Nose, lips and chin gained fascination from the perfection they skirted but just escaped. Face, arms, upper bosom and shoulders wore the even tawny golden tan that only some blondes can achieve.

Her figure, as shimmer with gems, was lithe of waist, firmly full of breast and pelvis, moved with the enticing grace of an Indonesian temple dancer as she slipped into the seat Maria had so recently vacated.

"Sorry, your highness," he said with a look of honest admiration. "I didn't know we had a date."

"We have now," she stated. She laid a handbag solidly encrusted with diamonds, emeralds and rubies on the table, said to the dwarf waiter, "Bring me the usual, Joe--and give Ambassador Lindsay another of whatever he's drinking."

At any other time, Lindsay thought. He said, "I regret this more than you'll ever know, my dear, but I've got a copter-cab waiting for me outside."

"It will keep." The girl pouted prettily, then leaned toward him and said huskily, "We'll have just one here. Then we can go to my place. It's just outside of Biloxi, almost on the Gulf. We can watch the dawn come up over the water. We can--"

"Stop twisting my arm," said Lindsay, trying to keep his thoughts in focus. Who had sent this girl and why? And what, he wondered, awaited him in Biloxi.

He got up, tossed a twenty-credit note on the table. "This will pay the check," he informed her.

"Not so fast," said the houri, rising with him. Trying to ignore her, he headed toward the door as fast as he could.

She kept after him and his ears burned as he plunged out into the night, saw the blue copter-cab waiting with its door open at the curb. But when he tried to plunge toward it he was halted by an arm whose sharp-faceted jeweled adornments cut his adam's apple. He gasped but the girl got in front of him, waving her bag.

There was a faint popping noise as the door closed and the copter-cab swiftly and silently darted away. Stunned by the swiftness of events, Lindsay was utterly incapable of resistance when his decorative tormentor thrust him into another vehicle. As they took off he said, "I suppose this is the prelude to another assassination try."

"Night soil!" said a familiar voice. "What the hell do you think I just saved you from, boss?"

* * * * *

Lindsay uttered one word--a word which, he thought later, was singularly revealing as to his native flair for diplomacy. He said, briefly and succinctly, "Huh?"

"Listen, my fine unfeathered Martian friend." She sounded like a primary school teacher addressing an overgrown and somewhat backward pupil. "Somebody fired a glass bullet at you from that cab."

"How do you...?" he began helplessly.

"Careful," she warned when he reached for the bag. "It was probably packed with poison." Then, "Can you think of a better shield than diamonds?"

He said, "Ulp!" Unquestionably, now that she had revealed herself, this glittering creature was his slovenly office Nina. Seeking desperately to recover what had at best been a shaky boss-secretary relationship, he said, "Where are you taking me?"
"Out of the city, boss," she informed him. "We really are going to my place in Biloxi. You're much too hot a property to be allowed to wander around loose. Two tries in less than twenty-four hours."

"Then Maria..." he said, wonderingly.

Nina picked his thought up crisply. "We don't know whether your little playmate put the finger on you consciously or not. But she did it. Some of that sweet little crew she pals around with are desperate. They don't believe they can lick the computers and their only hope is to foment incidents that will lead to an interplanetary war. Nice kids!"

"But why pick on me?" he asked. "From what Maria said tonight I'm their one hope of beating the machines."

Nina shook her head at him sadly. "And you're the best brain our Martian cousins could send us. Here it is in words of one syllable. Maria's mob wants war. They believe they can light the powder train by arranging the assassination of a Martian Plenipotentiary.

"Meanwhile your speech yesterday and your fouling up Doc Craven's computer this afternoon, and whatever you did at the tennis tonight, have the Computer crowd screaming for your recall before you upset their little red wagon." She paused, added, "Naturally Maria's crowd wants to have you killed before you become a mere private citizen of Mars. Once you're removed from office you aren't important enough to cause a war."

"Good God!" said Lindsay as the double pattern became apparent. Then, curiously, "And just whom do you represent, Nina?"

She eyed him steadily, mockingly for a moment. Then she said, "Let's just say for now that I represent the Model's Union. We don't want any wartime austerity wrecking our pitch. Will that do?"

"I guess it will have to," he said. Then, plucking a diamond-and-emerald necklace from among the half-dozen about her throat, "You certainly didn't give poor Anderson much for his money."

"Stop it!" she snapped. "Do you want my eyes to swell up again? In a way what happened tonight was all your fault. Fernando and I were going to keep close tabs on you but you fouled me up with your beastly remark about my business at Doc Craven's and then put poor Fernando out of commission by getting mixed up in that riot at the Colosseum. I barely made the Pelican in time."

He thought of giving Nina the receipt from Zoffany's in his pocket, decided not to take the chance. So he said, "Is Fernando working for the Model's Union too?"

"Stop trying to be funny," she told him. "Night soil! You make me so damned mad. Letting that little tramp Maria nail you."

"At the time there wasn't much alternative," he said. Then, eyeing her closely, "How come you're mixed up in UW politics? I thought models were strictly for fun and games."

Nina said matter-of-factly, "I won top model rating when I was seventeen. I still hold it and I'm twenty-six now. A girl can get tired of being and doing the same thing—even in my profession. Besides, I've got brains. So I try to use them."

"How come you decided to be my secretary?"

"We drew lots and I lost," she informed him.

The copter dropped by searchlight to a flagged terrace in front of a dark cottage just off the beach. "Thanks, Bob," said Nina. "Tell the boys to stand by with their guard beams up." Then, to Lindsay, "Come on, boss, let's get out of this heap."

She walked swiftly toward the cottage, pressed something. Soft lights came on, revealing a charming simulated wood dwelling in the fine antique Frank Lloyd Wright tradition. She ushered him into a delightfully gay bathroom looking out on the water, said, "Wait here while I get this armor off."

Lindsay felt a slight qualm as he considered what being a top model at seventeen must mean. And then he thought, Why not? Certainly he had no claim on Nina's morals. He doubted if anyone had a claim of any kind on her.

She emerged, looking unexpectedly like a young girl in simple clout and cup-bra, which exposed most of her gorgeously tanned body. Her hair, innocent of jewels like the rest of her, was clubbed back simply with some sort of clip. She lit a cigarette and said, "Now—how the hell are you fouling up the computers?"

"I'm not," he told her promptly. "At least not in the case of the tennis match. I just happened to know something about Pat O'Ryan the people who fed facts to the computer didn't."

"That goon Pat!" she said. "He's so damned dumb."

"You know him well?" he asked with a trace of jealousy.

"I know him." She dismissed it with a flick of her cigarette. "It's a good thing you knew judo too, boss. But what did you do to him that fouled up the match?"

"While he was out cold I gave him a shot of whiskey to bring him 'round," Lindsay told her. "He didn't know
about it and I didn't tell him when he informed me about his grain-alcohol allergy. So for once the computer didn't get full facts. And I had them.

For the first time Lindsay basked in a smile of approval from Nina. She said, "And then you had to mess me up at Doc Craven's so I couldn't sit in on the match."

"I'm sorry about that," he said sincerely. "You might brief me so I don't do it again."

"Well..." She hesitated. "I don't want to set myself off. It's not uncommon among us--models. You see, we're proud of our careers, not like the two-credit whores who wear glasses and harnesses. And it hurts us when someone refers to our work as business. You see, there's nothing really commercial about it. So when you--"

"But how the devil was I to know you were a model?" he asked her.

"I know," she said illogically. "But it still made me mad." Then, frowning, "But if the computer was wrong because of incomplete knowledge at the Colosseum, what was wrong at Doc Craven's?"

Lindsay said, "I'm damned if I know."

"We've got to know, with the president ready to put Giac to work."

"I meant to tell you about that," said Lindsay.

"Don't worry," Nina informed him. "Your table at the Pelican was wired."

"Why are you against computers?" Lindsay asked her.

She dropped her smoke in a disposal-tray, said, "Never mind why--let's just accept the fact that I am. And not for Fernando Anderson's reason either. He just wants power."

"And what do you want?"

"Me?" Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "Why, I just want to have fun!" She extended her arms and flapped her hands like birds. Then, again reverting to seriousness, "I wish you'd tell me everything that went on at Doc Craven's yesterday. Dammit, his office wasn't wired." Lindsay went through it, as nearly word for word as he could, then did it again when no answer was quickly forthcoming. Nina listened, her perfect forehead marred by a frown. Finally she said, "Let's take a dip. It's almost dawn."

She removed what clothing she wore and Lindsay did likewise. They felt the refreshing caress of the cool Gulf water on their skins--but that was all the caressing there was. Nina, unlike Maria, was all business despite the near-blatant perfection of her charms. Back in the bathroom she said, "The only thing I can think of is that stigmata business. Why should you imagine a mark on your mother's forehead?"

"Because she had one," he told her bluntly. "It was not unattractive--my father used to call it her beauty mark."

Nina ran long slim fingers through her water-dark hair and said incredulously, "You mean blemishes are not removed automatically at birth on Mars?"

"Why, no," said Lindsay, surprised. "It's entirely up to the individual--or the parents."

"And Doc Craven asked no questions that would lead to the truth?" the girl asked, blinking. When Lindsay shook his head she suddenly grabbed him and kissed him and did a little dance of sheer joy. "It's simply too good to be true! Two computers fouled in one day through missing information!"

"You're right, of course," he admitted. "But I'm damned if I see how it does us any good."

"You idiot!" she shook him. "It clears the whole situation. It means that the computers cannot give accurate answers according to the symbolic logic tables unless they get full information. And you have proved two breakdowns in the inescapable human element--the information feeding--just like that!" She snapped her fingers. "It means we've got the whole computer-cult on the hip. I could kiss you again, you big goon." She did so.

"Cut it out," he said. "I'm not made of brass."

She said, "Night soil," amiably. What he might have done he was never to know, for a buzzer sounded and Nina moved quickly to a wall-talkie. She said, "All right, Bob, you say he's clean?" Then, a moment later, "We've got company. Dmitri Alenkoff--met him?"

Lindsay frowned. "You mean the Soviet chargé d'affaires? I met him at the reception last week. Dreadful little lizard."

"Dmitri might surprise you," she said enigmatically.

Lindsay almost said night soil himself in exasperation. Instead and peevishly he asked, "Is there anybody you don't know--intimately?"

She laughed. "Of course," she said, "I don't know many women."

* * * * *

The Soviet diplomat entered the bathroom. He was a languid mincing creature whose decadence glowed around him like phosphorescence around a piece of rotted swampwood. He said, "I hope I am not intruding."

"That depends," Nina told him. "I'd like to know how you traced us here so quickly."

"My sweet," said the Russian in intensely Oxford Esperanto, "you and your friend's"--with another bow toward
Lindsay--"little affair at the Pelican was witnessed this evening. When the two of you departed together, heading eastward, and Ambassador Lindsay could not be reached in his apartment...." He paused delicately.

So this, thought Lindsay, was a descendant of one of the Red Commissars whose fanatic and chill austerity had terrorized the free world of a century ago. Lindsay knew something of modern Soviet history, of course. There had been no real counter-revolution. Instead the gradual emergence of the scientists over their Marxist political rulers had been a slow process of erosion.

Once computer rule was inaugurated in the North American Republic and swept the Western World, the scientists had simply taken over real power. The once-powerful Politburo and its sub-committees became obsolete.

Alenkov was stressing this very point. He said, "So you see, we, the best blood of Russia, are forced by these machines to live the lives of outcast children. Naturally we resent it. And when, after so many long years of waiting, we learn that one man has succeeded in foiling the computers where no man has succeeded before, we want to know his secret. We must have it."

Nina spoke first. She said, "Dmitri, the secret, as you call it, has been right there all along for any of us to see. It just happens that Ambassador Lindsay fell into it head first."

"Thanks for the 'Ambassador' anyway," Lindsay said drily.


Alenkov's brows all but met in the middle of his forehead and his mouth became a little round O under the twin commas of his mustache. He said, "I see."

He left shortly afterward on a note of sadness, rousing himself only to say to Lindsay, "Ambassador, you are a very lucky man." His eyes caressed Nina's near-nude figure.

"That," Lindsay told him, "is what you think."

When he had departed Lindsay suddenly realized he was exhausted. He sank back in a contour chair and let fatigue sweep over him. But Nina paced the bathroom floor like a caged cat. Finally she went to the wall-talkie, gave a number in a low voice.

She pushed some sort of signal button several times, then swore and said, "Better not sleep now, boss. We're cut off."

It brought him to with a start. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Somebody or something is jamming our communicator."

She opened a concealed cabinet, apparently part of the bathroom wall, drew from it a couple of light but deadly looking blasters, and tossed one onto the contour chair in front of him. "You know how to work one of these things?" she asked.

"Better drop the weapons," a quiet voice said from the doorway behind them. "You haven't got a chance."

The speaker wore the light blue tunicall that was the summer uniform of the Army of the Republic of North America. His cap and shoulder-boards were bright with silver lace and he held a singularly ugly little automatic weapon cradled across one forearm.

Nina and Lindsay dropped their weapons. But the girl's back was up. Her slanting eyes crackled green fire as she said, "What right have you bastards got to come busting in here without a warrant?"

"Sorry," said the officer with chilling courtesy. "As it happens we do have a warrant. Remember, Miss Beckwith, this cottage is not United World's soil." He tossed an official looking document which Nina caught, motioned a couple of his men to pick up her weapons.

"All right," she said after scanning the warrant. "What do you want?"

"Ambassador Lindsay," was the reply. "We have been ordered to ensure that no harm comes to him while he is on American soil."

"I can read!" snapped the girl. "There's going to be hell to pay over this." Then, to Lindsay, "We can't stop them now but they can't hold you. I can see to that. Just try to keep your big dumb blundering self out of any extra trouble till we can take steps--will you promise me that, boss?"

"I'll try," said Lindsay.

* * * * *

They took him to Washington--or rather to Sherwood Forest, in Annapolis, where the summer White House sprawled over and beneath its landscaped acres. To a man from Mars it was very green, very lush, very beautiful.

Lindsay's first impression of famed President Giovannini was that the famous elected leader of the North American Republic was composed mostly of secretaries. But at last one of them--the seventh or eighth--said gravely, "If you'll just step this way, please," to Lindsay and motioned for the Army officer to remain where he was. He was admitted to the bathroom of the man who had sent for him so summarily.

The president proved to be unexpectedly like some of the governors of Lindsay's home planet--incisive,
unaffected, easily articulate. Physically he was stocky, of middle height, with a round, firmly fleshed sensitive face. He wore huaraches and bright blue shorts, no glasses or distortion harness.

He waved Lindsay to a contour chair beside his own, said, "Sorry I had to have you hauled here this way. I was afraid you'd get killed if I didn't. Do you have any idea of the uproar you've caused in the past two days, young man?"

Lindsay, somewhat taken aback by the president's abruptness, said, "Well, I knew some small groups were upset but...."

"Take a look," the president told him, waving toward a quartet of vidar screens on the wall. Over one of them was the legend, New Orleans, over another, New York, over a third, Los Angeles, over the fourth, Chicago. "Those are live shots," Giovannini added.

Lindsay was appalled. Each of them showed rioting crowds and defensive police action; the commentaries cried their confusion. However, the Martian got the drift quickly enough. Apparently his recent activities had driven the neurotic Earthlings to violence.

There appeared to be two chief factions. One of them, smashing and swarming and screaming its outrage, was demanding the abolishment of computer government. The other, equally violent and even more numerous, was after a villain named Zalen Lindsay.

Seeing that Lindsay was beginning to understand what was happening, the president pressed a button that turned off all the vidar screens and voices. He said, "I could switch to any of our other cities--to cities in South America, India, Western Europe, England. They're especially bitter toward you in England."

"I'm beginning to accept the fact--if not to understand," said Lindsay.

The president said, "Lindsay, from the point of view of your planet you have done nothing improper. But from the point of view of this planet...." He let silence and a shrug of thick shoulders finish the sentence.

"I had no idea," Lindsay began, "that conditions on Earth...." He let his own voice trail off.

Giovannini finished it for him. "You had no idea people on Earth were so damned neurotic," he said, and sighed. Then, "Lindsay--call me Johnny, will you? All my friends do--Lindsay, for generations now people by and large have been forfeiting confidence in themselves to confidence in computers.

"They have had good reason. Computer judgment has been responsible for the first true age of world peace in history. It may not be healthy but it's a damn sight healthier than war. And it has transformed this republic from an unwieldy group of states into a controlled anarchy that can be run by pushbuttons under ordinary conditions."

He paused while the Martian lit a cigarette, then went on with, "Thanks first to Sylac, then to Elsac, we learned that Vermont was happiest under its Town Meeting method, North Carolina needed its oligarchy, while my native state, California, is much better off divided in two. Texas became happy with its triple legislature--they never are happy unless they have a little more of everything down there. It was the same in other countries--Canada, South America, Spain...."

"And England?" Lindsay said softly.

The president sighed again. "England," he admitted, "is a bit of a problem--out of all proportion to its size and current importance. But the British are stubborn about their institutions. They've hung onto a Royal Family a hundred years longer than anyone else. We can hardly expect them to give up their beloved socialism so soon."

"Just as long as Mars is not expected to pay for this indulgence, it's quite all right with my people," Lindsay told him.

"What's your first name--Zalen?" the president asked. "Well, Zalen, I know it's a problem but we all have to give a little or crowd somebody out. Zalen, people are getting killed on account of you right now."

"I've nearly been killed a couple of times myself."

"I know. Regrettable," said Giovannini. "The UW crowd never has understood security. That's why I had to kidnap you, Zalen. Couldn't have you killed, you know. Not now anyway."

"Glad you feel that way, Johnny." Lindsay told him dryly. "But hasn't it occurred to you that if people here are so easily set off it might be a good idea to knock out this computer business once and for all?"

The president puffed on his cigarette. Then he said, "Zale, twenty years ago, maybe even ten, it could have been done. Now it's too late. Which is why the ninety-billion-dollar investment in Giac. We've got to give them an absolute computer, one that will remove forever the basic distrust of computer judgment that underlies the neuroses you just mentioned."

"Quite possibly," said Lindsay. "But I haven't actually done a damned thing myself to undermine computer judgment. The mistakes have been made by the so-called experts who have fed their machines inadequate information. Those mistakes were infantile. They suggest some sort of neurosis on the part of the feeders. They could be mistake-prone, you know."

President Giovannini chuckled again. "Of course they're mistake-prone, Zalen," he said. "Some of them,
anyway. And it's getting worse. That's the real reason for Giac. Wait'll you see it!"

"You think I'm going to be around that long, Johnny?" Lindsay asked. "I understand I'm to be sent back to Mars--if I live that long."

"No, Lindsay, we need you--I'll explain in a moment. And we aren't going to let you die and become a martyr for generations of anti-computerites. We can't have that now, can we?"

"I'll go along with you on it," said Lindsay, wondering what the president was leading up to.

"Good!" The president beamed at him. "Zalen--I want you to be the first person to put Giac through a public test. That's how much I trust that machine. I want you, the man who has fouled up two computers, including Elsac, to try her out."

* * * * *

And Lindsay could only nod. The governors of Mars might not approve but after the uproar he had caused on this mission they could hardly object. President Giovannini's scheme was fully up to that renowned statesman's reputation for political astuteness. The more Lindsay thought it over the more beautiful was its simplicity.

Mere word that he was to conduct the first public test would quell the rioting. And unless Lindsay could show this mightiest of all symbolic logic computers to be fallible, computer rule would be entrenched on Earth as never before.

But what if, in some way, he succeeded in confounding the computer? Lindsay shuddered as he thought of the rioting he had so recently witnessed on the vidar-screens.

His face must have revealed his distress for the president said, "You're worn out, Zalen. Can't have that, you know. Not with the big test coming tomorrow."

Lindsay barely remembered leaving the president and being led to a sleeping chamber somewhere in the vast mansion. When he woke up it was dark and Nina was perched on the edge of his contour couch, looking unexpectedly demure in a grey bolo with white collar and cuffs.

He said, as articulate as usual when she surprised him, "Hi."

"About time you woke up," she said. "Do you know you snore?"

"I can't help it," he told her. Then, coming fully awake, "How the devil did you get here?"

"I walked," she informed him succinctly. "Better get dressed--your duds are over there." She nodded toward a walldrobe. "I'll wait in the bathroom." She breezed out.

When he looked at the clothing he was to wear he sensed that Nina had selected it for him. It was a little brighter in color, a little more daring in cut, than what he would have picked for himself.

Nina was placing jewels carefully in her hair, which she had released to form a sleek halo around her magnificent head, when he entered the bathroom. A small palisade of glittering jeweled hairpins protruded from her mouth. She had shed her demure bolo and stood revealed in glittering black bodice-bra and evening skirt-clout.

After placing the last jewel in her hair she swung about and said, "There--how do I look?"

"Gorgeous," he told her.

"You look a bit dull," she said. "Here," she said. "Put this on--left side."

"This" proved to be a magnificent sunburst decoration, a glittering diamond-encrusted star. He said, "What is it?"

"Grand Order of the United Worlds--a fine diplomat you are! I picked it up for you this afternoon before flying here. Just stick it on...." She came over, took it from him, pressed it firmly against his bolo till the suction grips caught hold.

He put his arms around her. She let him hold her a moment, then pushed clear in the immemorial gesture of women dressed for a party who do not want to have their grooming mussed. "Not now," she said. "We'll have plenty of time."

"Not for what's worrying me," he said. "Nina, I've got to put Giac through its paces in front of the whole world tomorrow. And I don't know what to ask it. I've got a blind spot where symbolic logic is concerned."

"Don't fret yourself," said the girl calmly. "I'm not worried about you. Not after what you've managed to do to all the other computers you've faced. Come on--we're having dinner with the president."

"Who the hell are you anyway?" he asked her bluntly. "You don't even look the same."

She laughed. "I should hope not," she told him. "After all, I could hardly grace the president's table as a mere UW secretary--or as a New Orleans top model. Come on!"

He went--and got his second shock when President Giovannini greeted Nina with a manner as close to obsequiousness as that professionally free-and-easy politician could muster. He said, "My dear Miss Norstadt-Ramirez, I do hope you'll forgive me for ordering such summary action this morning. If I'd had the slightest idea....."
"I was boiling," Nina told him. "I was just about ready to order Aetnapolitan to pull the props out from under you when the riots started. Then I blessed your shiny little head and came up here."

"I am honored," said the president.

Lindsay, walking through the proceedings in a fog, was even more laconic than a clipped British envoy who, along with a recovered Senator Anderson, was a member of the party.

"Don't take it so hard," Anderson whispered. "Nina is just about the best-kept secret in this hemisphere. If I weren't one of the few who's been in on it all along...." He shrugged eloquently.

Lindsay said nothing. He couldn't. So Nina--his fresh slatternly secretary, the courtesan of the world capital--was also Coranina Norstadt-Ramirez, the heiress who owned almost half of Earth!

He felt like a quadruply-plated idiot. He knew about Norstadt-Ramirez--who didn't, whether on Earth or Mars or the space-stations circling Venus while that planet's atmosphere was being artificially altered to make it fit for human habitation?

She was a fantastic glamorous lady of mystery, the ultimate heiress, the young woman to whom inexorably, thanks to North America's matriarchal era during the twentieth century, the control of most of its mightiest corporations and trust funds had descended.

And she was Lindsay's secretary. No wonder, he thought miserably, she had never sounded quite sincere about calling him boss. Why, she virtually owned his home planet as well. So Nina--his fresh slatternly secretary, the courtesan of the world capital--was also Coranina Norstadt-Ramirez, the heiress who owned almost half of Earth!

He read sympathy in her green eyes. But she merely shrugged and said, "Result of a lifetime of keeping myself under wraps." She sat on a contour chair, patted a place for him alongside.

"There's more to it than that. I've never been to Mars. I should have, but I simply haven't had the time. So I decided the best way to find out about Mars at second hand was to work with you in some capacity that would let you be yourself."

"A filthy, underhanded, thoroughly feminine trick," he said gently and kissed her. Then, frowning into her green eyes, "But why are you so dead set against computer judgment?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked. "I've got a tremendous stake in this world. Kicking around it as I have I've been able to see what is happening. I'm damned if I'm going to have my property managed and run by a bunch of people who make mistakes because they're too neurotic to make decisions. Look at them!" Her voice became edged with disgust.

Lindsay said, "I see. Listen, honey, I'd like to sleep with you tonight."

"How much will it cost me?" he asked her.

She froze--then her eyes began to fill and she sniffled. He said, "You know I didn't mean that. Dammit, I just wanted to show you you're a neurotic yourself."

She slapped him hard enough to tilt him off the contour chair. She rose haughtily, still sniffing. Lindsay stretched out a hand and caught one of her ankles and tripped her up. She tottered, gave vent to a startled, "Awk!", fell backward into the pool-tub.

He dived in after her, caught her when she came up, spluttering, gripped her shoulders hard. Her eyes blazed green fire at him. She said, "How dare you do that to me, you moron!"

He said, "If I hadn't I'd probably never have seen you again."

She collapsed into his arms.
Later--much later--as Nina was about to leave him for her own suite, he asked, "Honeycomb, what did you lose that caused Fernando to give you that necklace?"

"I nearly lost you," she replied from the doorway. "I bet him Maria wouldn't get you that night. And lost. So Fernando sent the necklace as compensation."

"Quite a large compensation," said Lindsay drily.
Nina shrugged. "Not for Fernando," she told him. "After all, I pay him enough. He's my number one political boy. 'Night, darling."

Lindsay was on the verge of a breakdown himself by noon the next day, after Computation Minister du Fresne, looking uglier than ever, had finished conducting President Giovannini's official party through the rooms and passages of Giac. If Nina hadn't been by his side during and after the swift rocket trip to Death Valley, he might have collapsed.

It was she who had removed the glittering star from his breast before breakfast in the Sherwood Forest mansion that morning. "You needed something to wear for show last night," she had told him.

"Then it's not mine?" he had countered absently.

"Of course it is," she had assured him. "But Secretary General Bergozza is going to make the official investiture after the test."

Lindsay had meekly surrendered the bauble, barely noticing. His brain was straining to recall what he could of symbolic logic--a subject that had never particularly interested him. For some reason it kept working back to Lewis Carroll, who, under his real name of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, had been the founder of symbolic logic back in the nineteenth century, along with the renowned Dr. Poole.

About all he could remember was the following problem:
(1) Every one who is sane can do Logic;
(2) No lunatics are fit to serve on a jury;
(3) None of your sons can do Logic.

The Universal was "persons". The symbols were: a--able to do Logic; b--fit to serve on a jury; c--sane; d--your sons.

And the answer, of course, was: None of your sons is fit to serve on a jury.

For some reason this, in turn, made him think of the ancient conundrum that employed confusion to trip its victims: What's the difference between an iron dog in the side yard of a man who wants to give his little daughter music lessons but is afraid he can't afford them next year, and a man who has a whale in a tank and wants to send him for a wedding present and is trying to pin a tag on him, saying how long he is, how much he weighs and where he comes from, but can't because the whale keeps sloshing around in the tank and knocking the tag off?

This time, the answer was: One can't wag his tail, the other can't tag his whale.

"None of your sons is fit to tag a whale--or wag a tail," he said absently.

"What was that?" Nina asked.

"Nothing, nothing at all," he replied. "Merely a man going out of his mind."

"It will never miss you," she replied brightly. But her brightness became a bit strained as the day wore on. The trip, for Lindsay, was sheer nightmare. No sane man can wag his tail, he kept thinking.

Even such fugitive grasping at Logical straws vanished when he saw the immense squat mass of Giac, rising like a steel-and-concrete toad from the wastes of the California desert. It seemed absurd even to think that such an imposing and complex structure should have been reared on the mathematics of the immortal author of Alice in Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass and The Hunting of the Snark.

For Giac was imposing, even to a man biased against computers from birth. Nor did du Fresne's smugness help Lindsay's assurance a bit. He explained how each of the block-large preliminary feeders worked--one for mathematical symbols, one for oral recording, a third for written exposition. Each worked simultaneously and in three different ways--via drum-memory banks, via punched tapes, via the new "ear-tubes" that responded to sound.

Then there were the preliminary synthesizers, each of which unified in vapor-plutonium tubes the findings of its three separate feeders. Next, a towering black-metal giant filling three walls of a cubical room twenty metres in each dimension, came the final synthesizer, which coordinated the findings of the preliminary synthesizers and fed them into Giac itself.

The master machine was the least imposing of all. It stood like an alabaster stele in the center of an immense chamber arranged like a theater-in-the-round. But du Fresne, peering through his strawberry spectacles, said gloatingly, "Don't be deceived by the size, ladies and gentlemen. All but what you see of Giac is underground. It is contained in an all-metal cell one million cubic metres in volume. And it is infallible."

Fortunately Lindsay was given a half hour of final preparation in one of the small offices with which the above-
ground building was honeycombed. Nina came with him--by request.

"I can't do it," he told her abruptly.

"Don't worry, darling, you'll think of something," she said. She tried to embrace him but he was too worried to respond. After awhile she said, "Why not put a direct question. Ask it if it's infallible."

"It could hardly tell a lie on itself," he replied.

"What if such a question involved destruction of part of itself in the answer?" she asked.

"It might--though I presume du Fresne and his boys have prepared it for such jokers. And anyway, what sort of question would do that? Got any ideas?"

"That's your department," she said helpfully. "You're the computer smasher of this team."

"But that was pure luck," he said half-angrily. "One can't wag his tail.... The other can't serve on a jury."

She looked alarmed. "Darling," she said, "you aren't--"

"Not yet, Honeycomb," he said, "but give me time."

"It's got to be something about this Mars-Earth problem," he went on after a long silence. "Listen: how can Mars develop if it's in the spot of the Red Queen--has to run like hell just to stay where it is thanks to Earth's dumping policies?"

* * * * *

The door opened and closed and Maria Bergozza was with them. She said, "Apparently this is necessary." She was holding a glass-pellet gun in her hand, pointing it at Lindsay.

He said, "Why, you--!" and moved toward her. Promptly the Secretary General's daughter pointed the gun at Nina's tanned midriff. He stopped.

Maria said evenly, "It's you that have done this to me, Nina. You've had all the fun while I've had to pour tea for papa at his damned functions. You've fouled up our plans with your meddling down in New Orleans. And now you've taken Zale, as you take everything else you take a fancy to."

"But you tried to kill him," said Nina. "Why should you care?"

"He would have been a martyr--and you wouldn't have had him," said Maria, her gun hand steady. "I know it's going to ruin me to kill you--but my whole life is ruined anyway. And this way at least I can sacrifice it for the cause."

"The cause of interplanetary war?" said Lindsay, in his turn incredulous. Hot rage rose within him, "You third-rate tramp!" He stepped squarely into the line of fire, thrust his left breast in front of the muzzle of her gun. Behind him Nina screamed.

But Maria didn't fire. Instead she sneezed--sneezed and sneezed again. Her gun hand gyrated wildly as she doubled in a paroxysm and Nina moved past Lindsay to pluck the weapon from her.

"Don't call me--krrrrashew!--third-rate," she managed to gasp before the blonde sent her sprawling with a very efficient right cross to the chin.

Nina turned on Lindsay angrily. "You damned fool!" she almost shouted. "You might have been killed."

He looked down, felt his knees turn to water. He said, "Omigod--I thought I was still wearing the star. I remembered how you saved my life in New Orleans with your diamond evening bag!"

He sat down--hard. From the floor Maria whimpered, "What are you going to do to me?"

Nina said, "I ought to kill you, you know, but it would cause too much of a stink. So beat it and let us think. You'll be hearing from me later. What you hear will depend on how you handle yourself from now on. Understand?"

When she had slunk out Lindsay said, "What broke her up?"

Nina dropped the gun into her bag casually, said, "Now I know you're lucky, you thin slob. You happened to stumble right onto her allergy. She can't stand being thought of as a third-rate lover. That's why she's always been jealous of me--because I have top-model rating and she could never make it. She's too damned concerned with pleasing herself to please anyone else. She flunked out at fourteen."

"Then why didn't you pull it?" Lindsay asked her, astonished.

"Because," Nina said thoughtfully, "I'm not conditioned to think that way. It's horribly rude here on Earth to stir up other people's allergies. As you reminded me last night, you rat, we're all people in glass houses."

"But I didn't even know...." muttered Lindsay.

"You hit it though," she reminded him. "And you're going to hit it again out there in exactly five minutes."

* * * * *

Lindsay was extremely conscious of the eyes of the vidar cameras upon him as President Giovannini, having finished his introductory speech, led him to the alabaster stele in the center of Giac's great central chamber and turned him over to du Fresne, whose official robe hung unevenly from the hump of his harness.

Lindsay handed the Minister of Computation the question he had prepared on paper, was brusquely told, "Read it please, Ambassador."
He cleared his throat and began.

"I am asking a question highly pertinent to the welfare and future amity of the United Worlds," he said slowly. "More specifically to the future amity of Earth and Mars. It is a simple question without involved mathematical qualifications--but one that no computer and no man has thus far been able to answer correctly.

"It is this continued failure of computers to come up with a logical answer in the full frame of interplanetary conditions that has done much to make the people of my planet feel that no computer is trustworthy to make decisions involving human beings."

He paused, looked covertly at du Fresne, repressed a smile. The Minister of Computation was already showing signs of distress. He was shaking his head, making little pawing motions toward his glasses.

"Here it is," Lindsay said quickly. "Should the governors of Mars, whose responsibilities lie at least as much in the economic improvement of their own world as in inter-world harmony, permit their planet to receive goods which retard that economic development so that it becomes a race to maintain current unsatisfactory standards, merely because certain computers on Earth are fed false facts to permit continuation of some illogical form of government or social system--or should the governors of Mars permit their planet to suffer because of computer illogic in the name of a highly doubtful status quo on the parent planet?"

He walked slowly back to his place and sat down, almost feeling the silence around him. Nina whispered, "What in hell does it mean?"

Lindsay whispered back, "It's a bit of the iron dog and the whale, a bit of the Red Queen, a bit of the suicide idea--and something else. Let's see if it works."

Lindsay watched du Fresne, whose moment of triumph was marred by his obvious discomfort. The twisted little man was very busy running the question into its various forms for submission to the feeder units, whose mouths gaped like hungry nestlings along part of one side wall.

If du Fresne failed him....

It was a long nervous wait. Lights flickered in meaningless succession on subsidiary instrument boards and du Fresne darted about like a bespectacled buzzard, studying first this set of symbols, then that one.

Lindsay glanced at Maria, who sat huddled beside her father beyond the president. To break the suspense he whispered to Nina, "What about her?"

Nina whispered back, "I've got it taped. I'm going to give her a nice empty job on the moon--one with a big title attached. It will get her out of the way--she can't do any harm there--and make her feel she's doing something. Besides"--a faint malicious pause--"there are still four men to every woman on Luna. And they aren't choosy."

"You're a witch," said Lindsay. He snickered and someone shushed him. Looking up he saw that things were happening.

"In exactly"--du Fresne glanced up at a wall chronometer--"six seconds Giac will give its answer."

They seemed more like six years to Lindsay. Then the alabaster stele in the center of the floor came abruptly to life. A slow spiral of red, composed of a seemingly endless stream of high mathematical symbols, started up from its base, worked rapidly around and around it like an old-fashioned barber-pole's markings, moving ever upward toward its top.

"Effective--very effective," murmured President Giovannini.

Suddenly a voice sounded, a pleasant voice specially geared to resemble the voice of the greatest of twentieth-century troubadors, Bing Crosby. It said, "Interplanetary unity depends upon computer illogic."

There was a gasp--a gasp that seemed to emerge not only from the company present but, in reverse, through the vidarcasters from the entire listening world. President Giovannini, suddenly white, said inelegantly, "Son of a bitch!"

Nina laughed out loud and gripped Lindsay's arm tightly. "You've done it, darling--you've done it!" she cried. "On the contrary," he said quietly, "I haven't done it; du Fresne did it." And as he looked toward the Minister of Computation that little man fainted.

* * * * *

But Giac kept right on. It blanked out briefly, then once more the spiral of red figures began to work its way around and up the stele. And once again the pleasant voice announced, "Interplanetary unity depends upon computer illogic."

It blanked out, began again. And this time, from somewhere in the building, came the thud of a muffled explosion. A spiral of green symbols began to circle the stele, then a spiral of yellow. The red reached the top first and the Bing Crosby voice began again, "Interplanetary unity de--"

The green and yellow spirals reached the top. A few seconds of sheer Jabberwocky emerged from the loudspeaker, ending in a chorus of, "Illogic, illogic, illogic...." with the words overlapping.

Panic began to show itself. The president gasped and Maria suddenly shrieked. Frightened onlookers crowded
toward the door. The president looked from the machine to Lindsay, bewildered.

Lindsay got up and strode toward the microphone by the stele. He shouted into it, "Turn off the computer--turn it off."

And, moments later, while the angry hot glow of the stele faded slowly, he said, "People of Earth, this is Lindsay of Mars. Please be calm while I explain. There is nothing wrong with Giac or any of your computers." He paused, added ruefully, "At least nothing that cannot be repaired in short order where Giac is concerned.

"I am going to ask to look once more at the question I submitted to this machine--and to the language tape fed into it by the Honorable Mr. du Fresne." He waited while they were brought to him, scanned them, smiled, said, "No the fault was not with Giac. Nor was it consciously with Mr. du Fresne. The question was loaded.

"You see, I happen to know that your Minister's belief in computers is such that he suffers an involuntary reaction when he hears them defamed. I defamed computers both in my preliminary address and in my question. And when he had to transfer to tape the phrase '--or, should the Governors of Mars permit their planet to suffer because of computer illogic in the name of a highly doubtful status quo on the parent planet?‐'–when he transferred that sentence to tape he was physically unable to write the phrase 'computer illogic'.

"Involuntarily he changed it to 'computer logic' with the result that the question was utterly meaningless and caused Giac's tubes to short circuit. None of the recent computer failures was the fault of the machines--it was the fault of the men who fed them material to digest.

"So I believe it is safe to say that you may rely upon your computers--as long as they do not deal with problems affecting yourselves and ourselves. For those you need human speculation, human debate, above all human judgment!"

President Giovannini, able politician that he was, had joined Lindsay at the microphone, put an arm across his shoulders, said, "I feel humble--yes, humble--in the great lesson this great envoy from our sister planet had taught us. What they can do on Mars we can do on Earth."

When at last they were clear of the vidar cameras Lindsay grinned and said, "Nice going, Johnny--you'll have more voters than ever come next election."

Giovannini simply stared at him. His eyes began to water, his nose to run and he turned away, groping for an evapochief.

Lindsay looked after him and shook his head. He said to Nina, who had rejoined him, "How about that? Johnny's in tears."

"Of course he is," snapped Nina. "He's allergic to the word 'voters'. Night soil, but you're simple!"

Lindsay felt his own eyes water. He sneezed, violently, for the first time since coming to Earth. Concerned, Nina said, "What's wrong, darling? Have I done something?"

"If you ever say 'night soil' again..." he began. Then, "Krrachoook!" He felt as if the top of his head were missing.

Nina hugged him, grinning like a gamine. "I'll save it for very special occasions," she promised.
Lieutenant Laskell surfaced his one-man submarine fifty miles off the Florida coast where he had been patrolling in search of enemy subs. Darkness had fallen. He tuned his short wave set to the Miami station just in time to hear the eight o'clock news. The grim announcement that he had expected was quick to come:

"In accordance with the provisions of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, Congress today approved the Manlin Bill, declaring a state of total emergency for the nation. President Williston signed it immediately and tendered his resignation to the Congress and the people. The executive, legislative, and judiciary are now in the hands of the Department of Defense. Secretary Garson has issued two decrees, one reminding all citizens that they are no longer free to shirk their duties to the nation, the other calling upon the leaders of the Eurasian Soviet to cease air attacks on the American continent or suffer the consequences.

"In Secretary Garson's ultimatum to the enemy, he stated: 'Heretofore we have refrained from employing certain weapons of warfare in the vain hope that you would recognize the futility of further aggression and desist from it. You have not done so. You have persisted in your blood-thirsty folly, despite this nation's efforts to reach an agreement for armistice. Therefore I am forced to command you, in the Name of Almighty God, to surrender immediately or be destroyed. I shall allow you one day in which to give evidence of submission. If such evidence is not forthcoming, I shall implement this directive by a total attack....'"

Mitch Laskell switched off the short wave set and muttered an oath. He squeezed his way up through the narrow conning tower and sat on the small deck, leaning back against the rocket-launcher and dangling his feet in the calm ocean. The night was windless and warm, with the summer stars eyeing the earth benignly. But despite the warmth, he felt clammy; his hands were shaking a little as he lit a cigarette.

The newscast--it came as no surprise. The world had known for weeks that the Manlin Bill would be passed, and that Garson would be given absolute powers to lead the nation through the war. And his ultimatum to the enemy was no surprise. Garson had long favored an all-out radiological attack, employing every nuclear weapon the country could muster. Heretofore both sides had limited themselves to non-rigged atomic explosives, and had refrained from using bacterial weapons. Garson wanted to take off the boxing-gloves in favor of steel gauntlets. And now it would happen--the all-out attack, the masterpiece of homicidal engineering, the final word in destruction.

* * * * *

Mitch, reclining in loneliness against the rocket-launcher, blew a thoughtful cloud of cigarette smoke toward the bright yellow eye of Arcturus, almost directly overhead, and wondered why the Constellation Boötes suddenly looked like a big club ready to fall on the earth, when it had always reminded him of a fly-swatter about to slap the Corona Borealis. He searched himself for horror, but found only a gloomy uneasiness. It was funny, he thought; five years ago men would have been outraged at the notion of an American absolutism, with one man ruling by decree. But now that it had happened, it was not to hard to accept. He wondered at it.

And he soon decided that almost any fact could be accepted calmly after it had already happened. Men would be just as calm after their cities had been reduced to rubble. The human capacity for calmness was almost unlimited, ex post facto, because the routine of daily living had to go on, despite the big business of governments whose leaders invoked the Deity in the cause of slaughter.

A voice, echoing up out of the conning tower, made him jump. The command set was barking his call letters.

"Unit Sugar William Niner Zero, Mother wants you. I say again: Mother wants you. Acknowledge please. Over."

The message meant: return to base immediately. And it implied an urgency in the use of the code-word Mother. He frowned and started up, then fell back with a low grunt.

All of his resentment against the world's political jackasses suddenly boiled up inside him as a personal resentment. There was something about the metallic rasp of the radio's voice that sparked him to sudden rebelliousness.

"Unit Sugar William Niner Zero, Mother wants you, Mother wants you. Acknowledge immediately. Over."

He had a good idea what it was all about. All subs were probably being called in for rearmament with cobalt-rigged atomic warheads for their guided missiles. The submarine force would probably be used to implement Garson's ultimatum. They would deliver radiological death to Eurasian coastal cities, and cause the Soviets to retaliate.

Why must I participate in the wrecking of mechanical civilization? he thought grimly.
But a counter-thought came to trouble him: I have a duty to obey; The country gave me birth and brought me up, and now it's a war to fight.

He arose and let himself down through the conning tower. He reached for the microphone, but the receiver croaked again.

"Sugar William Niner Zero, you are ordered to answer immediately. Mother's fixing shortening bread. Mother wants you. Over."

Shortening bread—big plans, something special, a radiological death-dish for the world. He hated the voice quietly. His hand touched the microphone but did not lift it.

He stood poised there in the light of a single glow-lamp, feeling his small sub rocking gently in the calm sea, listening to the quiet purr of the atomics beneath him. He had come to love the little sub, despite the loneliness of long weeks at sea. His only companion was the sub's small computer which was used for navigation and for calculations pertaining to the firing of the rocket-missiles. It also handled the probability mathematics of random search, and automatically radioed periodic position reports to the home-base computer.

He glanced suddenly at his watch, it was nearly time for a report. Abruptly he reached out and jerked open the knife-switch in the computer's antenna circuit. Immediately the machine began clicking and clattering and chomping. A bit of paper tape suddenly licked out of its answer-slot. He tore it off and read the neatly printed words: MALFUNCTION, OPEN CIRCUIT, COMMUNICATIONS OUTPUT; INSERT DATA.

Mitch "inserted data" by punching a button labelled NO REPAIR and another labelled RADIO OUT. One bank of tubes immediately lost its filament-glow, and the computer shot out another bit of tape inscribed DATA ROGERED. He patted it affectionately and grinned. The computer was just a machine, but he found it easy to personalize the thing....

The command-set was crackling again. "Sugar William Niner Zero, this is Commsubron Killer. Two messages. Mother wants you. Daddy has a razor strap. Get on the ball out there, boy! Acknowledge. Over."

Mitch whitened and picked up the microphone. He keyed the transmitter's carrier and spoke in a quiet hiss.

"Commsubron Killer from Sugar William Niner Zero. Message for Daddy. Sonnyboy just resigned from the Navy. Go to hell, all of you! Over and out!"

He shut off the receiver just as it started to stutter a shocked reply. He dropped the mike and let it dangle. He stood touching his fingertips to his temples and breathing in shallow gasps. Had he gone completely insane?

He sat down on the floor of the tiny compartment and tried to think. But he could only feel a bitter resentment welling up out of nowhere. Why? He had always gotten along in the Navy. He was the undersea equivalent of a fighter pilot, and he had always liked his job. They had even said that "he had the killer instinct"—or whatever it was that made him grin maliciously when he spotted an enemy sub and streaked in for the kill.

* * * * *

Now suddenly he didn't want to go back. He wanted to quit the whole damn war and run away. Because of Garson maybe? But no, hadn't he anticipated that before it happened? Why should he kick now, when he hadn't kicked before? And who was he to decide whether Garson was right or wrong?

Go back, he thought. There's the microphone. Pick it up and tell Commsubron that you went stir-crazy for a little while. Tell him wilco on his message. They won't do anything to you except send you to a nut doctor. Maybe you need one. Go on back like a sane man.

But he drew his hand back from the microphone. He wiped his face nervously. Mitch had never spent much time worrying about ethics and creeds and political philosophies. He'd had a job to do, and he did it, and he sometimes sneered at people who could wax starry-eyed about patriotism and such. It didn't make sense. The old school spirit was okay for football games, and even for small-time wars, but he had never felt much of it. He hadn't needed it in order to be a good fighter. He fought because it was considered the "thing to do," because he liked the people he had to live with, and because those people wouldn't have a good opinion of him if he didn't fight. People never needed much of a philosophic motive to make them do the socially approved things.

He moistened his lips nervously and stared at the microphone. He was scared. Scared to run away. He had never been afraid of a fight, frightened maybe, but not afraid. Why now? It takes a lot of courage to be a coward, he thought, but the word coward made him wince. He groped blindly for a reasonable explanation of his desire to desert. He wanted to talk to somebody about it, because he was the kind of man who could think best in an argument. But there was no one to talk to except the radio.

The computer's keyboard was almost at his elbow. He stared at it for a moment, then slowly typed:

DATA: WIND OUT OF THE NORTH, WAVE FACTOR 0.50 ROUGHNESS SCALE.
INSTRUCTIONS: SUGGEST ACTION.

The machine chewed on the entry noisily for a few seconds, then answered: INSUFFICIENT DATA.

He nodded thoughtfully. That was his predicament too: insufficient data about his own motives. How could a
man trust himself to judge wisely, when his judgement went completely against that of his society? He typed again.

DATA FOR HYPOTHETICAL PROBLEM: YOU HAVE JUST SOLVED A NAVIGATIONAL PROBLEM WHOSE SOLUTION REQUIRES COURSE DUE WEST. THREE OTHER COMPUTERS SOLVE SAME PROBLEM AND GET COURSE DUE SOUTH. MALFUNCTION NOT EVIDENT IN ANY OF FOUR COMPUTERS.

INSTRUCTIONS: FURNISH A COURSE.

The computer clattered for awhile, then typed: SUGGESTION: MALFUNCTION INDICATORS ARE POSSIBLY MALFUNCTIONING. IS DATA AVAILABLE?

He stared at it, then laughed grimly. His own malfunction-indicator wasn't telling him much either. With masochistic fatalism he touched the keyboard again.

DATA NOT AVAILABLE. FURNISH A COURSE.

The computer replied almost immediately this time: COURSE: DUE WEST.

Mitch stared at it and bit his lip. The machine would follow its own solution, even if the other three contradicted it. Naturally—it would have to follow its own solution, if there was no indication of malfunction. But could a human being make such a decision? Could a man decide, "I am right, and everyone else is wrong?"

No evidence of malfunction, he thought. I am not a coward. Neither am I insane.

His heart cried: "I am disgusted with this purposeless war. I shall quit fighting it."

He sighed deeply, then arose. There was nothing else to do. The atomic engines could go six months without refueling. There were enough undersea rations to last nearly that long.

He switched on the radio again, goosed the engines to full speed, and after a moment's thought, swung around on a northeasterly heading. His first impulse had been to head south, aiming for Yucatan, or the Guianas—but that impulse would also be the first to strike his pursuers who were sure to come.

A new voice was growling on the radio, and he recognized it as Captain Barkley, his usually jovial, slightly cynical commanding officer. "Listen, Mitch—if you can hear me, better answer. What's wrong with you anyhow? I can't hold off much longer. If you don't reply, I'll have to hunt you down. You're ordered to proceed immediately to the nearest base. Over."

Mitch wanted to answer, wanted to argue and fume and curse, hoping that he could explain his behaviour to his own satisfaction. But they might not be certain of his exact location, and if he used the radio, half-a-dozen direction-finders would swing around to aim along his signal, and Barkley would plot the half-a-dozen lines on the map in his office before speaking crisply into his telephone: all right, boys—get him! 29° 10' North, 79° 50' West. Use a P-charge if you can't spot him by radar or sonar.

Mitch left the controls in the hands of the computer and went up to stand in the conning tower with the churning spray washing his face. Surfaced, the sub could make sixty knots, and he meant to stay surfaced until there were hints of pursuit.

* * * * *

A three-quarter moon was rising in gloomy orange majesty out of the quiet sea. It made a river of syrupy light across the water to the east, and it heightened his sense of unreality, his feeling of detachment from danger.

Is it always like this, he wondered? Can a man toss aside his society so easily, become a traitor with so little logical reason? A day ago, he would not have dreamed it possible. A day ago, he would have proclaimed with the cynical Barkley, "A sailor's got no politics. What the hell's it to me if Garson is Big Boss? I'm just a little tooth in a big gear. Uncle pays my keep. I ask no questions."

And now he was running like hell and stealing several million bucks worth of Uncle's Navy, all because Garson's pomposity and a radio operator's voice got under his skin. How could a man be so crazy?

But no, that couldn't be it, he thought. Jeezil! He must have some better reason. Sort of a last straw, maybe. But he had been conscious of no great resentment against the war or the Navy or the government. Historically speaking, wars had never done a great deal of harm—no more harm than industrial or traffic accidents.

Why was this war any different? It promised to be more destructive than the others, but that was drawing a rather narrow line. Who was he to draw his bayonet across the road and say, "Stop here. This is the limit."

Mitch turned his back toward the whipping spray and stared aft along the phosphorescent, moon-swept wake of his mechanical shark. The radio was still barking at him with Barkley's clipped tones.

"Last warning, Laskell! Get on that microphone or suffer the consequences! We know where you are. I'll give you fifteen minutes, then we'll come get you. Over and out."

Thanks for the warning, Mitch thought. In a few minutes, he would have to submerge. His eyes swept the moon-washed heavens for signs of aircraft, and he watched the dark horizon for hints of pursuit.

He meant to keep the northeasterly course for perhaps ten hours, then turn off and cruise southeast, passing below Bermuda and on out into the central Atlantic. Then south—perhaps to Africa or Brazil. A fugitive for the rest
of his days.

"Sugar William Niner Zero," barked the radio. "This is Commsubfleet Jaybird. Over."

Mitch moistened his lips nervously. The voice was no longer Barkley's. Commsubfleet Jaybird was Admiral Harrinore. He chuckled bitterly then, realizing that he was still automatically startled by rank. He remained in the conning tower, listening.

"Sugar William Niner Zero, this is Commsubfleet Jaybird. If you will obey orders immediately, I guarantee that you will be allowed to accept summary discipline. No court martial if you comply. You are to return to base at once. Otherwise, we shall be forced to blast you out of the ocean as a deserter to the enemy. Over."

So that was it, he thought. They were worried about the sub falling into Soviet paws. Some of its equipment was still classified "secret", although the Reds probably already had it.

No, he wasn't deserting to the enemy. Neither side was right in the struggle, although he preferred the West's brand of wrongness to the bloodier wrongness of the Reds. But a man in choosing the lesser of two evils must first decide whether the choice really has to be made, and if there is not a third and more desirable way. Before picking a weapon for self-destruction, it might help to reason whether or not suicide is really necessary.

He smiled sardonically into the gray gloom, knowing that his thinking was running backwards, that he had acted before reasoning why, that he was rationalizing in an attempt to soothe himself and absolve himself. But a lot of human thinking occurred beneath the level of consciousness, down in the darker regions of the mind where it was not allowed to become conscious lest it bring shame to the thinker. And perhaps he had reasoned it all out in that mental half-world where thoughts are inner ghosts, haunting the possessed man with vague stirrings of uneasiness, leading him into inexplicable behaviour.

I am free now, he told himself. I have given them my declaration of independence, and I am an animal struggling to survive. Living in society, a man must submit to its will, but now I am divorced from it, and I shall live apart from it if I live at all, and I shall owe it nothing. The "governed" no longer gives its consent. How many times have men said, "If you don't like the system here, why don't you get out?" Well, he was getting out, and as a freeborn human animal, born as a savage into the world, he had that right, if he had any rights at all.

He grunted moodily and lowered himself down into the belly of the sub. They would be starting the search soon. He sealed the hatches and opened the water intakes after slowing to a crawl. The sub shivered and settled. The indicator crept to ten feet, twenty, thirty. At fifty feet, he jabbed a button on the computer, and the engines growled a harder thrust. He kept the northeasterly heading at maximum underwater speed.

An hour crept by. He listened for code on the sonar equipment, but heard only the weird and nameless sea-sounds. He allowed himself a reading light in the cramped compartment, folded the map-table up from the wall, and studied the coastline of Africa.

He began to feel a frightening loneliness, although scarcely two hours had passed since his rebellious decision, and he was accustomed to long weeks alone at sea. He scoffed at himself. He would get along okay; the sub would take him any place he wanted to go, if he could escape pursuit. Surely there must be some part of the world where men were not concerned with the senseless struggle of the titans. But all such places were primitive, savage, almost unendurable to a man born and tuned to the violin-string pitch of technological culture.

Mitch realized dismally that he loved technological civilization, its giant tools, its roar of mighty engines, its proud structures of concrete and steel. He could sacrifice his love for particular people, for particular places and governments--but it was going to be harder to relinquish mechanical civilization for some stone-age culture lingering in an out-of-the-way place. Changing tribes was easy, for all tribes belonged to Man, but renouncing machinery for jungle tools would be more difficult. A man could change his politics, his friends, his religion, his country, but Man's tools were a part of his body. Having used a high-powered rifle, the man subsumed the weapon, made it a part of himself. Trading it for a stone axe would be like cutting off his arm. Man was a user of tools, a shaper of environments.

That was it, he thought. The reason for his sudden rebellion, the narrow dividing line between tolerable and insufferable wars. A war that killed human beings might be tolerable, if it left most of civilizations' industry intact, or at least restorable, for although men might die, Man lived on, still possessing his precious tools, still capable of producing greater ones. But a war that wrecked industry, left it a tangled jumble of radioactive concrete and steel--that kind of war was insufferable, as this one threatened to be.

The idea shocked him. Kill a few men, and you scratch the hide of Historical Man. But wreck the industry, drive men out of the cities, leave the factories hissing with beta and gamma radiation, and you amputate the hands of Historical Man the Builder. The machinery of civilization was a living body, with organismic Man as its brain. And the brain had not yet learned to use the body for a constructive purpose. It lacked coordination, and the ability to reason its actions analytically.
Was he basing action on analytic reason?

Another hour had passed. And then he heard it. The sound of faint sonar communication. Quickly he nosed upward to twenty feet, throttled back to half speed, and raised the periscope. With his face pressed against the eyepiece, he scanned the moonlit ocean in a slow circle. No lights, no silhouettes against the reflections on the waves.

He started the pumps and prepared to surface. Then the conning tower was snorting through the water like a rolling porpoise. He shut off the engines, leaving the sub in utter silence except for the soft wash of the sea. He adjusted the sonar pickups, turned the amplifier to maximum, and listened intently. Nothing. Had he imagined it?

He jabbed a button, and a motor purred, rolling out the retractable radar antenna. Carefully he scanned the sky and sea, watching the green-mottled screen for blips. Nothing--no ships or aircraft visible. But he was certain: for a moment he had heard the twitter of undersea communicators.

* * * * *

He sat waiting and listening. Perhaps they had heard his engines, although his own equipment had caught none of their drive-noise.

The computer was able to supervise several tasks at once, and he set it to continue sweeping the horizon with the radar, to listen for sonar code and engine purr while he attended to other matters. He readied two torpedoes and raised a rocket into position for launching. He opened the hatch and climbed to stand in the conning tower again, peering grimly around the horizon.

Minutes later, a buzzer sounded beneath him. The computer had something now. He glanced at the parabolic radar antenna, rearing its head a dozen feet above him. It had stopped its aimless scanning and was quivering steadily on the southeast horizon. Southeast?

He lowered himself quickly into the ship and stared at the luminous screen. Blips--three blips--barely visible. While he watched, a fourth appeared.

He clamped on his headsets. There it was! The faint engine-noise of ships. His trained senses told him they were subs. Subs out of the southeast? He had expected interception from the west--first aircraft, then light surface vessels.

There was but one possible answer: the enemy.

He dived for the radio and waited impatiently for the tubes to warm again. He found himself shouting into the mic.

"Commsubron Killer, this is Sugar William Niner Zero. Urgent message. Over."

He was a long way from the station. He repeated the call three times. At last a faintly audible voice came from the set.

"... this is Commsubron Killer. You are ordered to return immediately...."

The voice faded again.


He heard only a brief mutter this time. "... ordered not to proceed toward Washington. Return immediately to--" "Not me! You fool! Listen! Five--enemy--submarines--" He repeated the message as slowly as he could, repeated it four times.


Angry Mitch keyed the carrier wave, screwed the button tightly down, and kicked on the four-hundred cycle modulator. Maybe they could get a directional fix on his signal and home on it.

The blips were gone from the radar scope. The subs had spotted him and submerged. In a moment he would be catching a torpedo, unless he moved. He started the engines quickly, and the surfaced sub lurched ahead. He nosed her toward the enemy craft and opened the throttle. She knifed through the water like a low-running PT boat, throwing a V-shaped fan of spray. When he reached the halfway point between his own former position and the place where the enemy submerged, he began jabbing a release at three second intervals, laying a trail of deadly eggs. He could hear the crash of the exploding depth-charges behind him. He swung around to make another pass.

Then he saw it--the wet metal hulk rearing up like a massive whale dead ahead. They had discovered the insignificance of their lone and pint-sized attacker. They were coming up to take him with deck guns.

Mitch reversed the engines and swung quickly away. The range was too close for a torpedo. The blast would catch them both. He began submerging quickly. A sickening blast shivered his tiny craft, and then another. He dropped to sixty feet, then knifed ahead.

God! Why was he doing this? There was no sense in it, if he meant to run away. But then the thought came: they're returning Old Man Garson's big-winded threat. They're bringing a snootful of radiological hell, and that's the
damned bayonet-line across the road.

* * * * *

Depth charges were crashing around him as he wove a zig-zag course. The computer was buzzing frantically.

Then he saw why. The rocket launcher hadn't retracted; there was still a rocket in it--with a snootful of Uranium 235. The thing was dragging at the water, slowing him down, causing the sub to shudder and lurch.

Apparently all the subs had surfaced, for the charges were falling on all sides. With the launcher dragging at

him, they would get him sooner or later. He tried to nose upward, but the controls refused.

He knew what would happen if he tried to fire the rocket. Hell, he didn't have to fire it. All he had to do was

fuse it. It had a water-pressure fuse, and he was beneath exploding depth.

Don't think about it! Do it!

No, you've got to think. That's what's wrong. Too much do, not enough think. They're going to wreck

mechanical civilization if they keep it up. They're going to wreck Man's tools, cut off his hands, and make him an

ape again!

But what's it to you? What can you do?

Dammit! You can destroy five wrong tools that were built to wreck the right tools.

Mitch, who wanted to quit an all-out war, reached for the fusing switch. This part was his war; destroy the

destroyers, but not the producers. Even if it didn't make good military sense--

A close explosion sent him lurching aside. He grabbed at the wall and pushed himself back. The switch--the
damn double-toggle red switch! He screamed a curse and struck at it with both fists.

There came a beautiful, blinding light.

Contents

OF TIME AND TEXAS
By William F. Nolan

Open the C. Cydwick Ohms Time Door, take but a single step, and--

"In one fell swoop," declared Professor C. Cydwick Ohms, releasing a thin blue ribbon of pipe-smoke and

rocking back on his heels, "--I intend to solve the greatest problem facing mankind today. Colonizing the Polar

Wastes was a messy and fruitless business. And the Enforced Birth Control Program couldn't be enforced.
Overpopulation still remains the thorn in our side. Gentlemen--" He paused to look each of the assembled reporters
in the eye. "--there is but one answer."

"Mass annihilation?" quavered a cub reporter.

"Posh, boy! Certainly not!" The professor bristled. "The answer is--TIME!"

"Time?"

"Exactly," nodded Ohms. With a dramatic flourish he swept aside a red velvet drape--to reveal a tall structure

of gleaming metal. "As witness!"

"Golly, what's that thing?" queried the cub.

"This thing," replied the professor acidly, "--is the C. Cydwick Ohms Time Door."

"Whillikers, a Time Machine!"

"Not so, not so. Please, boy! A Time Machine, in the popular sense, is impossible. Wild fancy! However--" The

professor tapped the dottle from his pipe. "--by a mathematically precise series of infinite calculations, I have

developed the remarkable C. Cydwick Ohms Time Door. Open it, take but a single step--and, presto! The Past!"

"But, where in the past, Prof.?"

Ohms smiled easily down at the tense ring of faces. "Gentlemen, beyond this door lies the sprawling giant of
the Southwest--enough land to absorb Earth's overflow like that!" He snapped his fingers. "I speak, gentlemen, of

Texas, 1957!"

"What if the Texans object?"

"They have no choice. The Time Door is strictly a one-way passage. I saw to that. It will be utterly impossible
for anyone in 1957 to re-enter our world of 2057. And now--the Past awaits!"

He tossed aside his professorial robes. Under them Cydwick Ohms wore an ancient and bizarre costume: black
riding boots, highly polished and trimmed in silver; wool chaps; a wide, jewel-studded belt with an immense buckle;
a brightly checked shirt topped by a blazing red bandana. Briskly, he snapped a tall ten-gallon hat on his head, and
stepped to the Time Door.
Gripping an ebony handle, he tugged upward. The huge metal door oiled slowly back. "Time," said Cydwick Ohms simply, gesturing toward the gray nothingness beyond the door.

The reporters and photographers surged forward, notebooks and cameras at the ready. "What if the door swings shut after you're gone?" one of them asked.

"A groundless fear, boy," assured Ohms. "I have seen to it that the Time Door can never be closed. And now--good-bye, gentlemen. Or, to use the proper colloquialism--so long, hombres!"

Ohms bowed from the waist, gave his ten-gallon hat a final tug, and took a single step forward.

And did not disappear.

He stood, blinking. Then he swore, beat upon the unyielding wall of grayness with clenched fists, and fell back, panting, to his desk.

"I've failed!" he moaned in a lost voice. "The C. Cydwick Ohms Time Door is a botch!" He buried his head in trembling hands.

The reporters and photographers began to file out.

Suddenly the professor raised his head. "Listen!" he warned.

A slow rumbling, muted with distance, emanated from the dense grayness of the Time Door. Faint yips and whoopings were distinct above the rumble. The sounds grew steadily--to a thousand beating drums--to a rolling sea of thunder!

Shrieking, the reporters and photographers scattered for the stairs.

Ah, another knotty problem to be solved, mused Professor Cydwick Ohms, swinging, with some difficulty, onto one of three thousand Texas steers stampeding into the laboratory.

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Contents

THY NAME IS WOMAN

By Kenneth O'Hara

Women of earth had finally attained their objective: a new world all their own and--without men! But was it?

After the Doctor gave him the hypo and left the ship, Bowren lay in absolute darkness wondering when the change would start. There would be pain, the Doctor had said. "Then you won't be aware of anything--anything at all."

That was a devil of a thing, Bowren thought, not to be aware of the greatest adventure any man ever had. He, Eddie Bowren, the first to escape the Earth into space, the first man to Mars!

He was on his back in a small square steel cubicle, a secretly constructed room in the wall of the cargo bin of the big spaceship cradled at the New Chicago Port. He was not without fear. But before the ship blasted he wouldn't care--he would be changed by then. He would start turning any minute now, becoming something else; he didn't know exactly what, but that wouldn't matter. After it was over, he wouldn't remember because the higher brain centers, the cortex, the analytical mind, would be completely cut off, short-circuited, during the alteration.

The cubicle was close, hot, sound-proofed, like a tomb. "You will probably make loud unpleasant noises," the Doctor had said, "but no one will hear you. Don't worry about anything until you get to Mars."

That was right, Bowren thought. My only problem is to observe, compute, and get back into this dungeon without being observed, and back to Earth.

The idea was to keep it from the women. The women wouldn't go for this at all. They would object. The women would be able to bring into effect several laws dealing with spaceflight, among them the one against stowaways, and especially that particular one about aberrated males sneaking into space and committing suicide.

A lot of men had tried it, in the beginning. Some of them had managed it, but they had all died. For a long time, the men's egos hadn't been able to admit that the male organism was incapable of standing the rigors of acceleration. Women had had laws passed, and if the women caught him doing this, the punishment would be extreme for him, personally, and a lot more extreme for Earth civilization in general. If you could call it a civilization. You could call it anything, Bowren groaned--but it didn't make sense. A world without women. A birthrate reduced to zero.

A trickle of sweat slid past Bowren's eyes, loosening a nervous flush along his back that prickled painfully. His throat was tense and his heart pounded loud in the hot dark.

A sharp pain ran up his body and exploded in his head. He tried to swallow, but something gagged in his throat. He was afraid of retching. He lay with his mouth open, spittle dribbling over his lips. The pain returned, hammered
at his entrails. He fought the pain numbly, like a man grappling in the dark.

The wave subsided and he lay there gasping, his fists clenched.

"The pain will come in increasingly powerful waves," the Doctor had said. "At a certain point, it will be so
great, the analytical mind will completely short-circuit. It will stay that way enroute to Mars, and meanwhile your
body will rapidly change into that of a beast. Don't worry about it. A catalytic agent will return you to normal before
you reach the planet. If you live, you'll be human again."

* * * * *

A male human couldn't stand the acceleration. But a woman could. Animals could. They had experimented on
human males and animals in the giant centrifuges, and learned what to do. Animals could stand 25 "G" consistently,
or centrifugal forces as high as 120 revolutions a minute. About 10 "G" was the limit of female endurance. Less for
men.

It had never been thoroughly determined why women had been able to stand higher acceleration. But human
females had the same physical advantages over men as female rats, rabbits, and cats over males of the same species.
A woman's cellular structure was different; her center of gravity was different, the brain waves given off during
acceleration were different. It was suspected that the autonomic nervous system in women could function more
freely to protect the body during emergency situations. The only certainty about it was that no man had ever been
able to get into space and live.

But animals could so they had worked on it and finally they decided to change a man into an animal, at least
temporarily. Geneticists and biochemists and other specialists had been able to do a lot with hormones and hard
radiation treatment. Especially with hormones. You could shoot a man full of some fluid or another, and do almost
anything to his organism. You could induce atavism, regression to some lower form of animal life--a highly speeded
up regression. When you did that, naturally the analytical mind, the higher thought centers of a more recent
evolutionary development, blanked out and the primal mind took over. The body changed too, considerably.

Bowren was changing. Then the pain came and he couldn't think. He felt his mind cringing--giving way before
the onslaught of the pain. Dimly he could feel the agony in his limbs, the throbbing of his heart, the fading power of
reason.

He retched, languished through flaccid minutes. There were recurring spasms of shivering as he rolled his
thickened tongue in the arid cavity of his mouth. And then, somewhere, a spark exploded, and drowned him in a
pool of streaming flame.

* * * * *

Consciousness returned slowly--much as it had gone--in waves of pain. It took a long time. Elements of reason
and unreason fusing through distorted nightmares until he was lying there able to remember, able to wonder, able to
think.

Inside the tiny compartment were supplies. A hypo, glucose, a durolene suit neatly folded which he put on. He
gave himself a needle, swallowed the tablets, and waited until energy and a sense of well-being gave him some
degree of confidence.

It was very still. The ship would be cradled on Mars now. He lay there, relaxing, preparing for the real
challenge. He thought of how well the Earth Investigation Committee had planned the whole thing.

The last desperate attempt of man to get into space--to Mars--a woman's world. At least it was supposed to be.
Whatever it was, it wasn't a man's world.

The women didn't want Earth anymore. They had something better. But what? There were other questions, and
Bowren's job was to find the answers, remain unobserved and get back aboard this ship. He would then hypo himself
again, and when the ship blasted off to Earth, he would go through the same transition all over again.

He put on the soft-soled shoes as well as the durolene suit and crawled through the small panel into the big
cargo bin. It was empty. Only a dim yellow light shone on the big cargo vices along the curved walls.

He climbed the ladders slowly, cautiously, through a gnawing silence of suspense, over the mesh grid flooring
along the tubular corridors. He wondered what he would find.

Could the women have been influenced by some alien life form on Mars?

That could explain the fact that women had divorced themselves completely from all men, from the Earth.
Something had to explain it.

There was one other possibility. That the women had found human life on Mars. That was a very remote
possibility based on the idea that perhaps the Solar system had been settled by human beings from outer space, and
had landed on two worlds at least.

Bowren remembered how his wife, Lora, had told him he was an idiot and a bore, and had walked out on him
five years before; taken her three months course in astrogation, and left Earth. He hadn't heard of her or from her
since. It was the same with every other man, married or not. The male ego had taken a beating for so long that the
results had been psychologically devastating.

The ship seemed to be empty of any human being but Bowren. He reached the outer lock door. It was ajar. Thin cold air came through and sent a chill down his arms, tingling in his fingers. He looked out. It was night on Mars, a strange red-tinted night, the double moons throwing streaming color over the land.

Across the field, he saw the glowing Luciferin-like light of a small city. Soaring spherical lines. Nothing masculine about its architecture. Bowren shivered.

He climbed down the ladder, the air biting into his lungs. The silence down there on the ground under the ship was intense.

He stood there a minute. The first man on Mars. Man's oldest dream realized.

But the great thrill he had anticipated was dulled somewhat by fear. A fear of what the women had become, and of what might have influenced their becoming.

He took out a small neurogun and walked. He reached what seemed to be a huge park that seemed to surround the city. It grew warmer and a soft wind whispered through the strange wide-spreading trees and bushes and exotic blossoms. The scent of blossoms drifted on the wind and the sound of running water, of murmuring voices.

The park thickened as Bowren edged into its dark, languid depth. It seemed as though the city radiated heat. He dodged suddenly behind a tree, knelt down. For an instant he was embarrassed seeing the two shadowy figures in each other's arms on a bench in the moonlight. This emotion gave way to shock, anger, fear.

One of them was a--man!

Bowren felt the perspiration start from his face. An intense jealousy surrendered to a start of fearful curiosity.

Where had the man come from? Bowren's long frustration, the memory of his wife, the humiliation, the rejection, the abandonment, the impotent rage of loneliness--it all came back to him.

He controlled his emotion somehow. At least he didn't manifest it physically. He crept closer, listened.

"This was such a sweet idea," the woman was whispering. "Bringing me here to the park tonight. That's why I love you so, Marvin. You're always so romantic."

"How else could I think of you, darling," the man said. His voice was cultured, precise, soft, thick with emotion.

"You're so sweet, Marvin."

"You're so beautiful, darling. I think of you every minute that you're away on one of those space flights. You women are so wonderful to have conquered space, but sometimes I hate the ships that take you away from me."

The woman sighed. "But it's so nice to come back to you. So exciting, so comfortable."

The kiss was long and deep. Bowren backed away, almost smashing into the tree. He touched his forehead. He was sweating heavily. His beard dripped moisture. There was a hollow panicky feeling in his stomach. Now he was confused as well as afraid.

Another couple was sitting next to a fountain, and a bubbling brook ran past them, singing into the darkness. Bowren crouched behind a bush and listened. It might have been the man he had just left, still talking. The voice was slightly different, but the dialogue sounded very much the same.

"It must be wonderful to be a woman, dear, and voyage between the stars. But as I say, I'm glad to stay here and tend the home and mind the children, glad to be here, my arms open to you when you come back."

"It's so wonderful to know that you care so much. I'm so glad you never let me forget that you love me."

"I love you, every minute of every day. Just think--two more months and one week and we will have been married ten years."

"It's so lovely," she said. "It seems like ten days. Like those first thrilling ten days, darling, going over and over again."

"I'll always love you, darling."

"Always?"

"Always."

The man got up, lifted the woman in his arms, held her high. "Darling, let's go for a night ride across the desert."

"Oh, you darling. You always think of these little adventures."

"All life with you is an adventure."

"But what about little Jimmie and Janice?"

"I've arranged a sitter for them."

"But darling--you mean you--Oh, you're so wonderful. You think of everything. So practical, yet so romantic ... so--"

He kissed her and ran away, holding her high in the air, and her laughter bubbled back to where Bowren
crouched behind the bush. He kept on crouching there, staring numbly at the vacancy the fleeing couple had left in
the shadows. "Good God," he whispered. "After ten years--"

He shook his head and slowly licked his lips. He'd been married five years.

It hadn't been like this. He'd never heard of any marriage maintaining such a crazy high romantic level of manic
neuroticism as this for very long. Of course the women had always expected it to. But the men--

And anyway--where did the men come from?

* * * * *

Bowren moved down a winding lane between exotic blossoms, through air saturated with the damp scent of
night-blooming flowers. He walked cautiously enough, but in a kind of daze, his mind spinning. The appearance of
those men remained in his mind. When he closed his eyes for a moment, he could see them.

Perfectly groomed, impeccably dressed, smiling, vital, bronze-skinned, delicate, yet strong features; the kind of
male who might be considered, Bowren thought, to be able to assert just the right degree of aggressiveness without
being indelicate.

Why, he thought, they've found perfect men, their type of men.

He dodged behind a tree. Here it was again. Same play, same scene practically, only the players were two other
people. A couple standing arm in arm beside a big pool full of weird darting fish and throwing upward a subdued
bluish light. Music drifted along the warm currents of air. The couple were silhouetted by the indirect light. The
pose is perfect, he thought. The setting is perfect.

"You're so wonderful, darling," the man was saying, "and I get so lonely without you. I always see your face,
hear your voice, no matter how long you're away."

"Do you? Do you?"

"Always. Your hair so red, so dark it seems black in certain lights. Your eyes so slanted, so dark a green they
seem black usually too. Your nose so straight, the nostrils flaring slightly, the least bit too much sometimes. Your
mouth so red and full. Your skin so smooth and dark. And you're ageless, darling. Being married to you five years,
it's one exciting adventure."

"I love you so," she said. "You're everything any woman could want in a husband. Simply everything, yet
you're so modest with it all. I still remember how it used to be. Back there ... with the other men I mean?"

"You should forget about them, my dear."

"I'm forgetting, slowly though. It may take a long time to forget completely. Oh, he was such an unpleasant
person, so uninteresting after a while. So inconsiderate, so self-centered. He wasn't romantic at all. He never said he
loved me, and when he kissed me it was mere routine. He never thought about anything but his work, and when he
did come home at night, he would yell at me about not having ordered the right dinner from the cafelator. He didn't
care whether he used hair remover on his face in the mornings or not. He was surly and sullen and selfish. But I
could have forgiven everything else if he had only told me every day that he loved me, that he could never love
anyone else. The things that you do and say, darling."

"I love you," he said. "I love you, I love you. But please, let's not talk about him anymore. It simply horrifies
me!"

Bowren felt the sudden sickening throbbing of his stomach. The description. Now the slight familiarity of
voice. And then he heard the man say, murmuring, "Lois ... darling Lois...."

Lois! LOIS!

Bowren shivered. His jowls darkened, his mouth pressed thin by the powerful clamp of his jaws. His body
seemed to loosen all over and he fell into a crouch. Tiredness and torn nerves and long-suppressed emotion throbbed
in him, and all the rage and suppression and frustration came back in a wave. He yelled. It was more of a sound, a
harsh prolonged animal roar of pain and rage and humiliation.

"Lois ..." He ran forward.

She gasped, sank away as Bowren hit the man, hard. The man sighed and gyrated swinging his arms, teetering
and flipped backward into the pool among the lights and the weird fish. A spray of cold water struck Bowren,
sobering him a little, sobered his burst of mindless passion enough that he could hear the shouts of alarm ringing
through the trees. He turned desperately.

Lois cringed. He scarcely remembered her now, he realized. She was different. He had forgotten everything
except an image that had changed with longing. She hadn't been too impressive anyway, maybe, or maybe she had.
It didn't matter now.

He tried to run, tried to get away. He heard Lois' voice, high and shrill. Figures closed in around him. He
fought, desperately. He put a few temporarily out of the way with the neurogun, but there were always more. Men,
men everywhere. Hundreds of men where there should be no men at all. Well-groomed, strong, bronzed, ever-
smiling men. It gave him intense pleasure to crack off a few of the smiles. To hurl the gun, smash with his fists.
Then the men were swarming all over him, the clean faces, the smiling fragrant men, and he went down under the weight of men.

He tried to move. A blow fell hard and his head smashed against the rocks. He tried to rise up, and other blows beat him down and he was glad about the darkness, not because it relieved the pain, but because it curtained off the faces of men.

* * * * *

After a time it was as though he was being carried through a dim half-consciousness, able to think, too tired to move or open his eyes. He remembered how the men of Earth had rationalized a long time, making a joke out of it. Laughing when they hadn't wanted to laugh, but to hate. It had never been humorous. It had been a war between the sexes, and the women had finally won, destroying the men psychologically, the race physically. Somehow they had managed to go on with a culture of their own.

The war between the sexes had never really been a joke. It had been deadly serious, right from the beginning of the militant feminist movements, long before the last big war. There had always been basic psychological and physiological differences. But woman had refused to admit this, and had tried to be the "equal" if not the better of men. For so long woman had made it strictly competitive, and in her subconscious mind she had regarded men as wonderful creatures, capable of practically anything, and that woman could do nothing better than to emulate them in every possible way. There was no such thing as a woman's role unless it had been the same as a man's. That had gone on a long time. And it hadn't been a joke at all.

How ironic it was, there at the last! All of man's work through the ages had been aimed at the stars. And the women had assumed the final phase of conquest!

For a long time women had been revolting against the masculine symbols, the levers, pistons, bombs, torpedoes and hammers, all manifestations of man's whole activity of overt, aggressive power.

The big H-bombs of the last great war had seemed to be man's final symbol, destructive. And after that, the spaceships, puncturing space, roaring outward, the ultimate masculine symbol of which men had dreamed for so long, and which women had envied.

And then only the women could stand the acceleration. It was a physiological fact. Nothing could change it. Nothing but what they had done to Bowren.

All of man's evolutionary struggle, and the women had assumed the climax, assumed all the past wrapped up in the end, usurped the effect, and thereby psychologically assuming also all the thousands of years of causation.

For being held down, being made nerveotic by frustration and the impossibility of being the "equal" of men, because they were fundamentally psychologically and physiologically different, women had taken to space with an age-old vengeance. Personal ego salvation.

But they hadn't stopped there. What had they done? What about the men? A man for every woman, yet no men from Earth. That much Bowren knew. Native Martians? What?

He had been transported somewhere in a car of some kind. He didn't bother to be interested. He couldn't get away. He was held fast. He refused to open his eyes because he didn't want to see the men who held him, the men who had replaced him and every other man on Earth. The men who were destroying the civilization of Earth.

The gimmicks whereby the women had rejected Earth and left it to wither and die in neglect and bitter, bitter wonderment.

He was tired, very tired. The movement of the car lulled him, and he drifted into sleep.

He opened his eyes and slowly looked around. Pretty pastel ceiling. A big room, beautiful and softly furnished, with a marked absence of metal, of shiny chrome, of harshness or brittle angles. It was something of an office, too, with a desk that was not at all business-like, but still a desk. A warm glow suffused the room, and the air was pleasantly scented with natural smelling perfumes.

A woman stood in the middle of the room studying him with detached interest. She was beautiful, but in a hard, mature, withdrawn way. She was dark, her eyes large, liquid black and dominating her rather small sharply-sculptured face. Her mouth was large, deeply red. She had a strong mouth.

He looked at her a while. He felt only a deep, bitter resentment. He felt good though, physically. He had probably been given something, an injection. He sat up. Then he got to his feet.

She kept on studying him. "A change of clothes, dry detergent, and hair remover for your face are in there, through that door," she said.

He said: "Right now I'd rather talk."
"But don't you want to take off that awful--beard?"
"The devil with it! Is that so important? It's natural isn't it for a man to have hair on his face? I like hair on my face."

She opened her mouth a little and stepped back a few steps.
"And anyway, what could be less important right now than the way I look?"
"I'm--I'm Gloria Munsel," she said hesitantly. "I'm President of the City here. And what is your name, please?"

"Eddie Bowren. What are you going to do with me?"
She shrugged. "You act like a mad man. I'd almost forgotten what you men of Earth were like. I was pretty young then. Well, frankly, I don't know what we're going to do with you. No precedent for the situation. No laws concerning it. It'll be up to the Council."

"It won't be pleasant for me," he said, "I can be safe in assuming that."

She shrugged again and crossed her arms. He managed to control his emotions somehow as he looked at the smooth lines of her body under the long clinging gown. She was so damn beautiful! A high proud body in a smooth pink gown, dark hair streaming back and shiny and soft.

* * * * *

It was torture. It had been for a long time, for him, for all the others. "Let me out of here!" he yelled harshly. "Put me in a room by myself!"

She moved closer to him and looked into his face. The fragrance of her hair, the warmth of her reached out to him. Somehow, he never knew how, he managed to grin. He felt the sweat running down his dirty, bearded, battered face. His suit was torn and dirty. He could smell himself, the stale sweat, the filth. He could feel his hair, shaggy and long, down his neck, over his ears.

Her lips were slightly parted, and wet, and she had a funny dark look in her eyes, he thought. She turned quickly as the door opened, and a man came in. He was only slightly taller than Gloria and he nodded, smiled brightly, bowed a little, moved forward. He carried a big bouquet of flowers and presented them to her.

She took the flowers, smiled, thanked him, and put them on the table. The man said. "So sorry, darling, to intrude. But I felt I had to see you for a few minutes. I left the children with John, and dashed right up here. I thought we might have lunch together."

"You're so thoughtful, dear," she said.

The man turned a distasteful look upon Bowren. He said. "My dear, what is this?"

"A man," she said, and then added. "From Earth."

"What? Good grief, you mean they've found a way--?"

"I don't know. You'd better go back home and tend the yard today, Dale. I'll tell you all about it when I come home this evening. All right?"

"Well I--oh yes, of course, if you say so, darling."

"Thank you, dear." She kissed him and he bowed out.

She turned and walked back toward Bowren. "Tell me," she said. "How did you get here alive?"

Why not tell her? He was helpless here. They'd find out anyway, as soon as they got back to Earth on the cargo run. And even if they didn't find out, that wouldn't matter either. They would be on guard from now on. No man would do again what Bowren had done. The only chance would be to build secret spaceships of their own and every time one blasted, have every member of the crew go through what Bowren had. It couldn't last. Too much injury and shock.

As he talked he studied the office, and he thought of other things. An office that was like a big beautiful living room. A thoroughly feminine office. Nor was it the type of office a woman would fix for a man. It was a woman's office. Everything, the whole culture here, was feminine. When he had finished she said, "Interesting. It must have been a very unpleasant experience for you."

He grinned. "I suffered. But even though I've failed, it's worth all the suffering, if you'll tell me--where did all the ah--men come from?"

She told him. It was, to say the least, startling, and then upon reflection, he realized how simple it all was. No aliens. No native Martians. A very simple and thoroughly logical solution, and in a way, typically feminine.

Hormone treatment and genetic manipulation, plus a thorough reconditioning while the treatment was taking place.

And the women had simply turned approximately half of their number into men!

She paused, then went on. "It was the only way we could see it, Mr. Bowren. Earth was a man's world, and we could never have belonged in it, not the way we wanted to. Men wouldn't stand it anyway, down there, having us going into space, usurping their masculine role. And anyway--you men of Earth had become so utterly unsatisfactory as companions, lovers, and husbands, that it was obvious nothing could ever be done about it. Not unless we set up our own culture, our own civilization, our way."

"But meanwhile we die down there," Bowren said. "Logic is nice. But mass murder, and the death of a whole world civilization seems pretty cold from where I'm standing. It's pathological, but it's too late to think about that. It's done now."
"But we're happy here," she said. "For the first time in a long, long time, we women feel like ourselves. We feel truly independent. The men around us are the kind of men we want, instead of us being what they want us to be, or even worse, the men being what we want them to be but resenting it and making life unbearable for both. All through the process of being changed into men, our women undergo such a thorough conditioning that they can never be anything else but model men in every sense. Their attitude as women with which they started treatment helped. They knew what they wanted in men, and they became what we wanted them to be, as men."

"Very logical," Bowren said. "It smells to heaven it's so logical." It was purely impulse, what he did then. He couldn't help it. It wasn't logical either. It was emotional and he did it because he had to do it and because he didn't see any reason why he shouldn't.

He put his arm out suddenly, hooked her slim waist, and pulled her to him. Her face flushed and his eyes were very wide and dark as she looked up at him.

"Listen," he said. "The whole thing's insane. The lot of you are mad, and though I can't help it, I hate to see it happen this way. What kind of men are these? These smiling robots, these goons who are nothing else but reflections in a woman's mirror? Who'd want to be a man like that. Who would really want a man like that? And who would want a woman who was just what a man wanted her to be? Where's the fire? Where's the individuality? Where's the conflict, the fighting and snarling and raging that makes living. All this is apathy, this is death! You don't grow by being agreeable, but by conflict."

"What are you trying to sell now?" she whispered.

He laughed. It was wild sounding to him, not very humorous really, but still it was laughter. "Selling nothing, buying nothing." He pulled her closer and kissed her. Her lips parted slightly and he could feel the warmth of her and the quick drawing of breath. Then she pushed him away. She raised her hand and brushed it over his face.

She shook her head slowly. "It feels rather interesting," she said, "your face. I've never felt a man's face before, that wasn't smooth, the way it should be."

He laughed again, more softly this time. "Why reform your men? You women always wanted to do that."

"We don't reform men here," she said. "We start them out right—from the beginning."

She backed away from him. She raised her hand to her face and her fingers touched her lips. Wrinkles appeared between her eyes and she shook her head again. Not at him, but at something, a thought perhaps, he couldn't tell.

Finally she said. "That was an inexcusable, boorish thing to do. A typical thoughtless egomaniac Earth-male action if there ever was one. Our men are all perfect here, and in comparison to them, you're a pretty miserable specimen. I'm glad you showed up here. It's given me, and other women, a good chance for comparison. It makes our men seem so much better even than they were to us before."

He didn't say anything."

"Our men are perfect! Perfect you understand? What are you smiling about? Their character is good. They're excellent conversationalists, well informed, always attentive, moderate, sympathetic, interested in life, and always interested in us."

"And I suppose they are also--human?"

"This is nonsense," she said, her voice rising slightly. "You will take that door out please. The Council will decide what's to be done with you."

He nodded, turned, and went through the door. There were two men there waiting for him. They were both blond, with light blue eyes, just medium height, perfectly constructed physically, perfectly groomed, impeccably dressed. They smiled at him. Their teeth had been brushed every morning. One of them wrinkled his nose, obviously as a reaction to Bowren. The other started to reach, seemed reluctant to touch him.

"Then don't touch me, brother," Bowren said. "Put a hand on me, and I'll slug you." The man reached away, and it gave Bowren an ecstatic sensation to send his fist against the man's jaw. It made a cracking sound and the man's head flopped back as his knees crumbled and he swung around and stretched out flat on the long tubular corridor.

"Always remember your etiquette," Bowren said. "Keep your hands off people. It isn't polite."

The other man grunted something, still managing to smile, as he rushed at Bowren. Bowren side-stepped, hooked the man's neck in his arm and ran him across the hall and smashed his head into the wall.

He turned, opened the door into Munsel's office, dragged both of them in and shut the door again. He walked down the corridor several hundred feet before a woman appeared, in some kind of uniform, and said. "Will you come this way please?"

He said he would.

* * * * *

It was a small room, comfortably furnished. Food came through a panel in the wall whenever he pressed the right button. A telescreen furnished entertainment when he pushed another button. Tasty mixed drinks responded to
other buttons.

He never bothered to take advantage of the facilities offered for removing his beard, bathing, or changing clothes. Whatever fate was going to befall him, he would just as soon meet it as the only man on Mars who looked the part—according to Bowren’s standards, at least—at least by comparison.

He thought of trying to escape. If he could get away from the city and into the Martian hills, he could die out there with some dignity. It was a good idea, but he knew it was impossible. At least so far, it was impossible. Maybe something would come up. An opportunity and he would take it. That was the only thing left for him.

He was in there for what seemed a long time. It was still, the light remaining always the same. He slept a number of times and ate several times. He did a lot of thinking too. He thought about the men on Earth and finally he decided it didn’t matter much. They had brought it on themselves in a way, and if there was anything like cause and effect operating on such a scale, they deserved no sympathy. Man had expressed his aggressive male ego until he evolved the H-bombs and worse, and by then the whole world was neurotic with fear, including the women. Women had always looked into the mirror of the future (or lack of it), of the race, and the more she had looked, the more the insecurity. The atomic wars had created a kind of final feeling of insecurity as far as men were concerned, forced them to become completely psychologically and physiologically self-sufficient. They had converted part of their own kind into men, their own kind of men, and theoretically there wouldn’t be any more insecurity brought on by the kind of male psychology that had turned the Earth around for so long.

All right, drop it right there then, he thought. It’s about all over. It’s all over but the requiem. Sometime later he was in a mood where he didn’t mind it when an impersonal face appeared on the screen and looked right at him and told him the Council’s verdict. It was a woman, and her voice was cold, very cold.

"Mr. Eddie Bowren. The Council has reached a verdict regarding what is to be done with you. You are to be exterminated. It is painless and we will make it as pleasant as possible."

"Thanks," Bowren said. A woman’s world was so polite, so mannerly, so remembering of all the social amenities. It would be so difficult after a while to know when anyone was speaking, or doing anything real.

"Thanks," he said again. "I will do all in my power to make my extermination a matter of mutual pleasure." By now he was pretty drunk, had been drunk for some time. He raised his glass. "Here’s to a real happy time of it, baby."

The screen faded. He sat there brooding, and he was still brooding when the door unlocked and opened softly. He sat there and looked at Gloria Munsel for a while, wondering why she was here. Why she would look so provocative, so enchanting, so devastating, whatever other words you cared to dream up.

She moved toward him with a slight swaying motion that further disturbed him. He felt her long white fingers rubbing over the stiff wiry beard of his face. "I dreamed about the way that beard felt last night," she said. "Silly of me wasn’t it? I heard of the way you smell, of the way you yelled at me, so impolitely. Why did I dream of it, I said this morning, so now I’m here to find out why."

"Get out and let me alone," Bowren yelled. "I’m going to be exterminated. So let me alone to my own company."

"Yes, I heard about that verdict," she said. She looked away from him. "I don’t know why they made that choice. Well, I do in a way, they’re afraid of you, your influence. It would be very disruptive socially. Several of our men--"

"It doesn’t matter why," Bowren said. "What matters is that it will be as pleasant as possible. If you’re going to kill a man, be nice about it."

She stared down at him. Chills rippled down his back as her warm soft fingers continued to stroke his bearded chin and throat. He got up. It was too uncomfortable and it was torture. He said, "Get out of here. Maybe I’m not a conformist, but I’m damn human!"

She backed away. "But--but what do you mean?"

He got up and put the flat of his hands cupping her shoulder blades. Her eyes stared wildly, and her lips were wet and she was breathing heavily. He could see the vein pulsing faster in her slim throat. She had an exciting body.

He saw it then, the new slow smile that crept across her face. His left hand squirmed at the thick piled hair on her shoulders and he tugged and her face tilted further and he looked at the parted pouting lips. The palm of his right hand brushed her jaw and his fingers took her cheeks and brought her face over and he spread his mouth hard over her mouth. Her lips begged. Hammers started banging away in his stomach.

Music from the screen was playing a crescendo into his pulse. They swayed together to the music, her head thrown back, her eyes closed. He stepped back, dropped her arms limply at her sides. There was the clean sweet odor of her hair.

"I’d better go now," she whispered. "Before I do something that would result in my not being President anymore."

* * * * *
He wiped his face. Don't beg, he thought. The devil with her and the rest. A man could lose everything, all the women, not one, but all of them. He could live alone, a thousand miles from nowhere, at the North Pole like Amundsen, and it didn't matter. He could be killed pleasantly or unpleasantly, that didn't matter either. All that mattered was that he maintain some dignity, as a man.

He stood there, not saying anything. He managed to grin. Finally he said, "Goodbye, and may your husband never say a harsh word to you or do anything objectionable as long as you both shall live, and may he love you every hour of every day, and may he drop dead."

She moved in again, put her arms around him. There were tears in her eyes. She placed her cheek on his shoulder. "I love you," she whispered. "I know that now."

He felt a little helpless. Tears, what could you do with a woman's tears?

She sobbed softly, talking brokenly. Maybe not to him, but to someone, somewhere. A memory, a shadow out of a long time back....

"Maybe it's... it's all a mistake after all... maybe it is. I've never been too sure, not for a while now. And then you--the way you talked and looked--the excitement. I don't know why. But the touch of your beard--your voice. I don't know what happened. We've carried it to extremes, extremes, Eddie. It was always this way with us--once we were sure of our man, and even before, when he was blinded by new love, we tried to make him over, closer to our idea of what was right. But now I know something... those faults and imperfections, most of them were men's, the real men's chief attractions. Individuality, that's the thing, Eddie, that's it after all. And it's imperfections too, maybe more than anything else. Imperfections.... Oh, Eddie, you're close, much closer to human nature, to real vitality, through your imperfections. Not imperfections. Eddie--your beard is beautiful, your dirt is lovely, your yelling insults are wonderful--and...."

She stopped a minute. Her hands ran through his hair. "When you get a man made over, he's never very nice after that, Eddie. Never--"

She sobbed, pulled his lips down. "Eddie--I can't let them kill you."

"Forget it," he said. "No one can do anything. Don't get yourself in a jam. You'll forget this in a little while. There's nothing here for a guy like me, and I'm not for you."

She stepped way, her hands still on his shoulders. "No--I didn't mean that. I've got to go on living in the world I helped make, among the men we all decided we would always want. I've got to do that. Listen, Eddie, how did you intend to get back to Earth?"

He told her.

"Then it's just a matter of getting back aboard that same ship, and into this secret room unobserved?"

"That's all, Gloria. That and keep from being exterminated first."

"I can get you out of here. We'll have to do it right now. Take that beard off, and get that hair smoothed down somehow. I hate to see it happen, but I've got to get you out of here, and the only way to do it is for you to be like one of the men here."

He went to work on his face and hair. She went out and returned with a suit like the other men wore. He got into it. She smiled at him, a hesitant and very soft smile, and she kissed him before they left the room and cautiously went out of the City.

* * * * *

The way was clear across the moonlit field and under the deep dark shadow of the ship. He kissed her and then took hold of the ladder. She slipped a notebook of velonex, full of micro-film, into his hands. "Goodbye, Eddie," she said. "Take this with you. It may give you men down there a way out. I never thought much before of how mad it must be for you."

He took the folder. He looked up at the double moons painting the night a fantastic shifting wave of changing light. And then he looked down at Gloria Munsel again, at the glinting shine of her hair.

"Goodbye," he said. "I might stay after all--except that a lot of men on Earth are waiting for me to tell them something. They'll be surprised. I--" He hesitated. Her eyes widened. Warmth of emotion moved him and he said, or started to say, "I love you," and many other things, but she interrupted him.

"Don't please, Eddie. Anything you said now would sound just like what my devoted husband says, every day. I'd rather you wouldn't say anything at all now, Eddie, just goodbye."

"Goodbye then," he said again.

He looked back from the opened door in the ship's cargo bin. Her face was shining up at him, her lips slightly parted, her cheeks wet. It was a picture he would never be able to forget, even if he wanted to.

"When you forget to shave in the mornings, Eddie, think of me."

* * * * *

Bowren stood up and addressed the investigation committee which had sent him to Mars. He hadn't made any
statements at all up to this moment. The ten members of the Committee sat there behind the half-moon table. None of them moved. Their faces were anxious. Some of them were perspiring.

Eddie told them what he had seen, what he had heard, his own impressions about the whole thing, about his escape. He left out certain personal details that were, to him, unnecessary to this particular report.

The Committee sat there a while, then started to talk. They talked at once for a while, then the Chairman rapped for order and stood up. His face had an odd twist to it, and his bald head was pocked with perspiration.

Eddie Bowren took the book of micro-film from under his arm, the one Gloria Munsel had given him. He put it on the table. "That has been thoroughly checked by scientists, and their report is included. I thought it surely was a false report, until they checked it. The first page there gives a brief outline of what the micro-film contains."

The Chairman read, then looked up. He coughed. He mopped at his head.

Eddie said. "As I saw it up there, this is the way it's going to stay. We'll never get into space, not without using the methods that were used with me. And they're too destructive. I've been examined. I could never go through it again and live. And that's the only way Earth men can ever get into space. The women aren't coming back to us. They have husbands of their own now. Believe me, those women aren't going to leave their perfect husbands. They've set up a completely feminine culture. It's theirs, all theirs. They'll never give it up to return to a masculine world, and that's what Earth will always be to them. There are only a few women left on Earth, and they're of such subnormal intelligence as to be only a menace to any possible future progeny. Our birthrate has stopped. We are living under extremely abnormal circumstances without women. I have, as I said before, but one recommendation to this Committee, and you take it for what it's worth. I personally don't care--much--and that isn't important either."

"What is your recommendation, Bowren?"

"I assure you that the formulas in that book will work for us, Mr. Chairman. Will you accept the reports of the scientists who investigated those formulas?"

"I will," the Chairman said hoarsely. "I'll accept it. Why not--?"

Bowren grinned thinly at the ten men. "There's the secret of doing what the women have done. It'll work for us too. Our only chance for survival is to follow their procedure. We've got to start turning at least a percentage of ourselves into women."

One man leaned forward and put his head on his arms. The others sat there, in a kind of stunned numb attitude, their eyes drifting vaguely.

The Chairman coughed and looked around the silent hall, and at the other ten men in it.

"Any volunteers?" he whispered.
The passengers rocketed through space in luxury. But they never went below decks because rumor had it that Satan himself manned the controls of The Hell Ship.

The giant space liner swung down in a long arc, hung for an instant on columns of flame, then settled slowly into the blast-pit. But no hatch opened; no air lock swung out; no person left the ship. It lay there, its voyage over, waiting.

The thing at the controls had great corded man-like arms. Its skin was black with stiff fur. It had fingers ending in heavy talons and eyes bulging from the base of a massive skull. Its body was ponderous, heavy, inhuman.

After twenty minutes, a single air lock swung clear and a dozen armed men in Company uniforms went aboard. Still later, a truck lumbered up, the cargo hatch creaked aside, and a crane reached its long neck in for the cargo.

Still no creature from the ship was seen to emerge. The truck driver, idly smoking near the hull, knew this was the Prescott, in from the Jupiter run—that this was the White Sands Space Port. But he didn't know what was inside the Prescott and he'd been told it wasn't healthy to ask.

Gene O'Neil stood outside the electrified wire that surrounded the White Sands port and thought of many things. He thought of the eternal secrecy surrounding space travel; of the reinforced hush-hush enshrouding Company ships. No one ever visited the engine rooms. No one in all the nation had ever talked with a spaceman.

Gene thought of the glimpse he'd gotten of the thing in the pilot's window. Then his thoughts drifted back to the newsrooms of Galactic Press Service; to Carter in his plush office.

"Want to be a hero, son?"
"Who, me? Not today. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day."
"Don't be cute. It's an assignment. Get into White Sands."
"Who tried last?"
"Jim Whiting."
"Where is Whiting now?"
"Frankly we don't know. But—"
"And the four guys who tried before Whiting?"
"We don't know. But we'd like to find out."
"Try real hard. Maybe you will."
"Cut it out. You're a newspaperman aren't you?"
"God help me, yes. But there's no way."
"There's a way. There's always a way. Like Whiting and the others. Your pals."

Back at the port looking through the hot wire. Sure there was a way. Ask questions out loud. Then sit back and let them throw a noose around you. And there was a place where you could do the sitting in complete comfort. Where Whiting had done it—but only to vanish off the face of the earth. Damn Carter to all hell!

Gene turned and walked up the sandy road toward the place where the gaudy neons of the Blue Moon told hard working men where they could spend their money. The Blue Moon. It was quite a place.

Outside, beneath the big crescent sign, Gene stopped to watch the crowds eddying in and out. Then he went in, to watch them cluster around the slot machines and bend in eager rows over the view slots of the peep shows.

He moved into the bar, dropped on one of the low stools. He ordered a beer and let his eyes drift around.

A man sat down beside him. He was husky, tough looking. "Ain't you the guy who's been asking questions about the crews down at the Port?"

Gene felt it coming. He looked the man over. His heavy face was flushed with good living, eyes peculiarly direct of stare as if he was trying to keep them from roving suspiciously by force of will. He was well dressed, and his heavy hands twinkled with several rather large diamonds. The man went on: "I can give you the information you want—for a price, of course." He nodded toward an exit. "Too public in here, though."

Gene grinned without mirth as he thought, move over Whiting—here I come, and followed the man toward the door.

Outside the man waited, and Gene moved up close.
"You see, it's this way...."
Something exploded against Gene's skull. Even as fiery darkness closed down he knew he'd found the way. But
only a stupid newspaperman would take it. Damn Carter!

Gene went out.

He seemed to be dreaming. Over him bent a repulsive, man-like face. But the man had fingernails growing on his chin where his whiskers should have been. And his eyes were funny--walled, as though he bordered on idiocy. In the dream, Gene felt himself strapped into a hammock. Then something pulled at him and made a terrible racket for a long time. Then it got very quiet except for a throbbing in his head. He went back to sleep.

* * * * *

She had on a starched white outfit, but it wasn't a nurse's uniform. There wasn't much skirt, and what there was of it was only the back part. The neckline plunged to the waist and stopped there. It was a peculiar outfit for a nurse to be wearing. But it looked familiar.

Her soft hands fixed something over his eyes, something cold and wet. He felt grateful, but kept on trying to remember. Ah, he had it; the girls wore that kind of outfit in the Blue Moon in one of the skits they did, burlesquing a hospital. He took off the wet cloth and looked again.

She was a dream. Even with her lips rouge-scarlet, her cheeks pink with makeup, her eyes heavy with artifice. "What gives, beautiful?" He was surprised at the weakness of his voice.

Her voice was hard, but nice, and it was bitter, as though she wanted hard people to know she knew the score, could be just a little harder. "You're a spaceman now! Didn't you know?"

Gene grinned weakly. "I don't know a star from a street light. Nobody gets on the space crews these days--it's a closed union."

Her laugh was full of a knowledge denied him. "That's what I used to think!"

She began to unstrap him from the hammock. Then she pushed back his hair, prodded at the purple knob on his head with careful fingertips.

"How come you're on this ship?" asked Gene, wincing but letting her fingers explore.

"Shanghaied, same as you. I'm from the Blue Moon. I stepped out between acts for a breath of fresh air, and whom, a sack over the head and here I am. They thought you might have a cracked skull. One of the monsters told me to check you. No doctor on the ship."

Gene groaned. "Then I didn't dream it--there is a guy on this ship with fingernails instead of a beard on his chin!"

She nodded. "You haven't seen anything yet!"

"Why are we here?"

"You've been shanghaied to work the ship, I'm here for a different purpose--these men can't get off the ship and they've got to be kept contented. We've got ourselves pleasant jobs, with monsters for playmates, and we can't get fired. It'll be the rottenest time of our lives, and the rest of our lives, as far as I can see."

Gene sank down, put the compress back on his bump. "I don't get it."

"You will. I'm not absolutely sure I'm right, but I know a little more about it than you."

"What's your name?"

"They call me Queenie Brant. A name that fits this business. My real name is Ann O'Donnell."

"Queenie's a horse's name--I'll call you Ann. Me, I'm Gene O'Neil."

"That makes us both Irish," she said. He lifted the compress and saw the first really natural smile on her face. It was a sweet smile, introspective, dewy, young.

"You were only a dancer." He said it flatly.

"Thanks. You got inside the gate on that one."

"It's in your eyes. I'm glad to know you, Ann. And I'd like to know you better."

"You will. There'll be plenty of time; we're bound for Io."

"Where's Io?"

"One of Jupiter's moons, you Irish ignoramus. It has quite a colony around the mines. Also it has a strange race of people. But Ann O'Donnell is going to live there if she can get off this ship. I don't want fingernails growing on my chin."

O'Neil sat up. "I get it now! It's something about the atomic drive that changes the crew!"

"What else?"

Gene looked at Ann, let his eyes rove over her figure.

"Take a good look," she said bitterly. "Maybe it won't stay like this very long!"

"We've got to get off this ship!" said Gene hoarsely.

* * * * *

The door of the stateroom opened. A sharp-nosed face peered in, followed by a misshapen body of a man in a dirty blue uniform. Hair grew thick all around his neck and clear up to his ears. It also covered the skin from chin to
shirt opening. The hair bristled, coarse as an animal's. His voice was thick, his words hissing as though his tongue was too heavy to move properly.

"Captain wants you, O'Neil."

Gene got up, took a step. He went clear across the room, banged against the wall. The little man laughed.

"We're in space," Ann said. "We have a simulated gravity about a quarter normal. Here, let me put on your metal-soled slippers. They're magnetized to hold you to the floor." She bent and slipped the things on his feet, while Gene held his throbbing head.

The little man opened the door and went out. Gene followed, his feet slipping along awkwardly. After a minute his nausea lessened. At the end of the long steel corridor the little man knocked, then opened the door to a low rumble of command. He didn't enter, just stood aside for Gene. Gene walked in, stood staring.

The eyes in the face he saw were black pools of nothingness, without emotion, yet behind them an active mind was apparent. Gene realized this hairy thing was the Captain—even though he didn't even wear a shirt!

"You've shanghaied me," said Gene. "I don't like it."

The voice was huge and cold, like wind from an ice field. "None of us like it, chum. But the ships have got to sail. You're one of us now, because we're on our way and by the time you get there, there'll be no place left for you to work, unless it's in a circus as a freak."

"I didn't ask for it," said Gene.

"You did. You wanted to know too much about the crew—and if you found out, you'd spread it. You see, the drives are not what they were cooked up to be—the atomics leak, and it wasn't found out until too late. After they learned, they hid the truth, because the cargo we bring is worth millions. All the shielding they've used so far only seems to make it worse. But that won't stop the ships—they'll get crews the way they got you, and nosey people will find out more than they bargain for."

"I won't take it sitting down!" said Gene angrily.

The Captain ignored him. "Start saying sir. It's etiquette aboard ship to say sir to the Captain."

"I'll never say sir to anyone who got me into this...."

The Captain knocked him down.

Gene had plenty of time to block the blow. He had put up his arms, but the big fist went right through and crashed against his chin. Gene sat down hard, staring up at the hairy thing that had once been a man. He suddenly realized the Captain was standing there waiting for an excuse to kill him.

Through split and bleeding lips, while his stomach turned over and his head seemed on the point of bursting, Gene said: "Yes, sir!"

The Captain turned his back, sat down again. He shoved aside a mass of worn charts, battered instruments, cigar butts, ashtrays with statuettes of naked girls in a half-dozen startling poses, comic books, illustrated magazines with sexy pictures, and made a space on the top. He thrust forward a sheet of paper. He picked up a fountain pen, flirted it so that ink spattered the tangle of junk on his desk, then handed it to Gene. "Sign on the dotted line."

Gene picked up the document. It was an ordinary kind of form, an application for employment as a spacehand, third class. The ship was not named, but merely called a cargo boat. This was the paper the Company needed to keep the investigators satisfied that no one was forced to work on the ships against their will. Anger blinded him. He didn't take the pen. He just stood looking at the Captain and wondering how to keep himself from being beaten to death.

After a long moment of silence the Captain laid the pen down, grinned horribly. He gave a snort. "It's just a formality. I'm supposed to turn these things over to the authorities, but they never bother us anymore. Sign it later, after you've learned. You'll be glad to sign, then."

"What's my job, Captain?"

"Captain Jorgens, and don't forget the sir!"

"Captain Jorgens, sir."

"I'll put you with the Chief Engineer. He'll find work for you down in the pile room."

The Captain laughed a nasty laugh, repeating the last phrase with relish. "The pile room! There's a place for you, Mr. O'Neil. When you decide to sign your papers, we'll get you a job in some other part of this can!"

Gene found his way back to the cabin he had just left. The little guy with the hairy neck was there, leering at the girl.

"Put you in the pile gang didn't he?"

Gene nodded, sat down wearily. "I want to sleep," he said.

"Nuts," said the little man. "I'm here to take you to the Chief Engineer. You go on duty in half an hour. Come on!"

Gene got up. He was too sick to argue. Ann looked at him sympathetically, noting his split lips. He managed a
grin at her, "If I never see you again, Ann, it's been nice knowing you, very nice."
"I'll see you, Gene. They'll find us tougher than they bargained for."

* * * * *

The engine room looked like some of the atomic power stations he'd seen. Only smaller. There was no heavy concrete shielding, no lead walls. There was shielding around the central pile, and Gene knew that inside it was the hell of an atomic chain reaction under the control of the big levers that moved the cadmium bars. There was a steam turbine at one end, and a huge boiler at the other. Gene didn't even try to guess how the pile activated the jets that drove the space ship. Somehow it "burned" the water.

This pile had been illegal from the first. Obviously some official had been bribed to permit the first use of it on a spaceship. Certainly no one who knew anything about the subject would have allowed human beings to work around a thing like this.

Gene's skin crawled and prickled with the energies that saturated the room. Little sparks leaped here and there, off his fingertips, off his nose.

The Chief Engineer was on a metal platform above the machinery level. The face had hair all over it, even on the eyelids. The eyes, popping weirdly, were double. They looked as if second eyes had started growing inside the original ones. They weren't reasonable; they weren't even sane. The look of them made Gene sick.

The Engineer shook his head back and forth to focus the awful, mutilated eyes. His voice was infinitely weary, strangely muffled. "Another sacrifice to Moloch, an's the pity! So they put you down here, as if there was anything to be done? Well, it'll be nice to work with someone who still has his buttons--as long as they last. Sit down."

Gene sat down and the metal chair gave him a shock that made him jump. "I don't know anything about this kind of work."

The man shrugged, "Who does? The pile runs itself. Ain't enough of it moves to need much greasing. You ought to be able to find the grease cups--they're painted red. Fill them, wipe off the dust, and wait. Then do it over again."

"What's the score on this bucket?"
"We're all signed on with a billy to the knob. And kept aboard by a guard system that's pretty near perfect. After awhile the emanations get to our brains and we don't care anymore. Then we're trusted employees. Only reason I don't blow her loose, it wouldn't do any good."

He got up, a fragile old body clad in dirty overalls. He beckoned Gene to follow him. He led the way to a periscope arrangement over the shielded pile. Gene peered in. It was like a look into boiling Hell. As Gene stared, the old man talked in his ear.

"Supposed to be perfectly shielded, and maybe they are. But something gets out. I think it happens in the jet assembly. A tiny trickle of high pressure steam crosses the atomic beam just above a pinhole that leads into the jet tube. It's exploded by the beam, exploded into God knows what, and the result is your jet. It's a wonderful drive, with plenty of power for the purpose. But I think it forms a strong field of static over the whole shell of the ship, a kind of sphere of reflection that throws the emanations back into the ship from every point. Just my theory, but it explains why you get these physical changes, because that process of reflection gives a different ray than was observed in the ordinary shielded jet."

Gene nodded, asked: "Can I look at the jet assembly?"
"Ain't no way to look at it! It's sealed up to hold in the expanding gases from that exploded steam. Looking in this periscope is what changed my eyes. Only other place the unshielded emanations could escape is from the jet chamber. Only way they can get back into the ship is by reflection from some ionized layer around the ship. If I could talk to some of those big-brained birds that developed this drive, I'd sure have things to say."

Gene was convinced the old man knew what he was talking about. "Why don't you try to put your information where it'll do some good? How about the Captain?"
"He's coocoo." The old man slapped the cover back on the periscope, tottered back to his perch on the platform. "He sure has changed the last two years. Won't listen to reason."

Gene squatted on the steps, just beneath the old engineer's chair. The old man seemed glad to have someone to talk to.

"It's got us trapped. And it's so well covered up from the people. Old spacers are changed physically, changed mentally. They know they can't go back to normal life, because it's gone too far. They'd be freaks. No woman would want a monstrosity around. Besides, it don't stop, even after you leave the ships. God knows what we'll look like in the end."

Gene shivered. "But you're all grown men! A fight with no chance of winning is better than this! Why do you take it?"

"Because the mind changes along with the body. It goes dead in some ways, gets more active in others. The
personality shifts inside, until you're not sure of yourself, and can't make decisions any more. That's why nobody does anything. Something about those rays destroys the will. Nobody leaves the ships."

"I will!" Gene said confidently. "When the time comes, I'll go. All Hell can't stop me."

The old man yawned. "Hope you do, son. Hope you do. I'm going to take me a nap." He propped his feet up on the platform rail and in seconds was snoring.

Gene clenched his fists, growing despair in his thoughts.
"Tain't no worse than dying in a war," muttered the old man in his sleep.

The days went by and Gene learned. He understood why these men didn't actively resent the deal they were getting. No wonder the secrecy was so effective! The radiations deadened the mind, gave one the feeling of numbness, so that nothing mattered but the next meal, the next movie in the recreation lounge, the next drink of water. Values changed and shifted, and none of them seemed important.

The chains that began to bind him were far stronger than steel. The chains were mental deterioration, degeneration, mutation within the very cells of the mind. He knew that now he must tend this monster forever, grease and wipe the ugly metal of it, and sit and talk idly to MacNamara, its keeper. He realized it, and didn't know how to care!

The anger and hate came later. The real, abiding anger, and the living hate. At first the numbness, the sudden incomprehensible enormity of what had happened to him, then the anger. Hate churned and ground away inside him, getting stronger by the hour. It all revolved around the Captain who tramped eternally around the corridors bellowing orders, punching with his huge fists. He knew there was more to it; the lying owners of the Company, the bribe-taking officials, the health officers who failed to examine the ships and the men and the ships' papers. But somehow it all boiled down to the Captain.

Sometimes he was sure he must be crazy already. Sometimes he would wake up screaming from a nightmare only to find reality more horrible.

Then he would go to Ann.

Ann was not the only woman aboard ship. There were three others, and to the crew of twenty imprisoned, enslaved men they represented all beauty, all womanhood. They lived with the men--as the men--and nobody cared. Here, so close to the raging elemental of the pile, life itself was elemental.

As one of them expressed it to Gene: "Why worry? We're all sterile from the radioactivity anyway. Or didn't you know?" She had been on the ship for years, and was covered with a fine fur, like a cat's. Her eyes were wide, placid, empty; an animal's unthinking eyes. Gene prayed Ann would never turn monster before his eyes; hoped desperately they could get away in time.

"We've got to fight, Ann," he said to her one day. "We must find a way to get off at the end of the trip, or it will be too late for us to live normal lives. It's then or never. Besides that, we've got to warn people of what's going on. They think space travel is safe. In time this could effect the whole race. The world must be told, so something can be done."

Ann's young face showed signs of the strain. The fear of turning into some hideous thing was preying on her mind. She spoke rapidly, her voice breaking a little. "I've been talking to several of the crew, the old-timers, trying to get an understanding of why nothing is done. It's this way: when the ships land, guards come aboard. They're posted at the cargo locks and the passenger entrances. The only door aboard the ship that leads to the passenger compartment is in the Captain's cabin, and it's locked from both sides. Even our Captain never meets the passengers. There's only one chance, a mutiny. Then we could open the door, show the passengers."

"It wouldn't do any good. When we landed, they'd find a way to shut us all up before we got to anybody. They've had a lot of practice keeping this quiet. They know the answers."

She stamped a foot angrily. "It was you who said we had to fight! Now you say it's hopeless!"

Gene leaned against the wall and passed a hand across his eyes. He looked at Ann's flushed beauty and managed a grin. "Guess I'm getting as bad as the rest of them, baby. We'll fight. Sure we'll fight."

It started with Schwenky. Schwenky was a gigantic Swede. He was the boss freight handler. It was his job to sort the cargo for the next port of call. He would get it into the cargo lock, then seal the doors so nobody would try to smuggle themselves out with the freight. Schwenky was intensely loyal and stupid enough not to understand the real reason behind their imprisonment—which was why he held his job. No one got by Schwenky.

But this time, in Marsport, something was missing. They'd driven the trucks up to the cargo port, unloaded everything, and then compared invoices with the material. They swore some claimed machinery parts were due them. Schwenky swore he'd placed them in the cargo lock, and that the truckers were trying to hold up the Company.
The Captain allowed the truckers claim and after the ship had blasted off into space, called Schwenky in to bawl him out. They must have gotten really steamed up, because Gene and Frank Maher heard the racket clear down on the next deck where they were cleaning freight out of a sealed compartment for the next stop.

Gene and Frank raced up the ladders to the top deck, and Gene found the break he had prayed for. Schwenky holding the Captain against the wall; beating the monstrosity that had once been a man with terrible fists. Gene felt a sudden thrill. In a situation like this you used any weapon you could find. Schwenky was a deadly weapon.

Gene laid a hand on Schwenky's massive shoulder. "Hold it man! You'll kill him!"

Schwenky turned a face, red and popeyed, to Gene. "The Captain make a mistake. He try to knock Schwenky down. No man do that to Schwenky."

"When he comes to, he'll lock you in the brig, put you on bread and water...."

Suddenly Schwenky realized the enormity of his offense. It was obvious from his face that he considered himself already dead. "Nah, my friend Gene! Now they kill Schwenky. Bad! But what I do?"

Gene eyed him carefully. "Put the Captain in the brig, of course. What else? Then he can't kill you."

"Lock him up, eh? Good idea! Then we think, you and I, what we do next. Maybe something come to us, eh?"

Gene bent over the Captain's body, found the pistol in his hip pocket, put it in his own. He took the ring of keys from the belt.

"Bring him along, Schwenky. If we meet anyone, I'll use this." Gene patted the gun. "I won't let them hurt my friend, Schwenky."

"Damn! let them come! I fix them! Don't have to shoot them. I got fists!"

"I'd rather be shot, myself," said Gene, watching the ease with which the giant freight handler lifted the huge body of the Captain, tossing it over his shoulder like a sack of straw.

"I'll go ahead," said Frank Maher. "If I run into Perkins, the First, I'll whistle once. If I run into Symonds, the Second, I'll whistle twice. I don't think there's another soul aboard we need worry about. All we got to do is slap the Cap in the brig, round up Perkins and Symonds, and the ship is ours. What worries me, Gene, then what do we do?"


"Nah!" said Schwenky hastily. "I don' know. Maybe we just sail on till we find good place, leave ship, go look for job."

Maher said, "Me with my lumpy face? And the Chief with hair on his cheekbones and double eyeballs? And Heinie with fingernails growing where his collar button should be? I wonder what we can do, if we get free?"

They got down the first stairwell, but passing along the rather lengthy companionway to the next stairhead, they heard Maher whistle twice. Schwenky put the Captain down, conked him with one massive fist to make sure he stayed out, then stood there, waiting. The Second came up out of the stairwell, turned and started toward them. Gene put his hand on the gun butt, waiting until he had to pull it. Schwenky said: "Come here, Mr. Perkins, sir. Look see what has happened!"

The Englishman peered at the shapeless, hairy mass of the unconscious Captain. His face went white. Gene knew he was wondering if he could keep the crew from mutiny without the Captain present to cow them. Perkins straightened, his face a pallid mask in the dimness. "What happened, Schwenky?"

"This, Mr. Perkins, sir--" said Schwenky. He slapped an open palm against the side of Perkins' head. Perkins sprawled full length on the steel deck, but he wasn't out, which surprised Gene. He lay there, staring up at the gigantic Swede, his face half red from the terrible blow, the other half white with the fear in him. His hand was tugging at his side and Gene realized he was after his gun. Gene pulled out his own weapon even as he leaped upon the slim body of the man on the floor. His feet missed the moving arm, the hand came out with a snub-nosed automatic in it. Gene grabbed it, bore down. But the gun went off, the bullet ricocheting off the wall-plates with a scream. Gene slugged the man across the head with the barrel of the Captain's gun. Perkins went limp. Maher came up now and grabbed Perkins' gun.

"Lead on," said Gene. He picked Perkins up and put him over his shoulder. Schwenky retrieved the slumbering Captain and they proceeded on their way to the cell on the bottom deck.

But the shot had been heard, and from above came the sound of running feet. Gene began to trot, almost fell down the last flight of stairs, went along the companionway at a run. At the cell door he dropped Perkins, tried four or five keys frantically. One fit. He pulled open the door and Schwenky drove in, kicking the body of Perkins over the sill. The Captain dropped heavily to the deck and Schwenky was out again. Gene was locking the door when he heard the shout from Symonds, running toward them.

"What's going on there, men?"

Schwenky started to amble toward the dark, wiry Second, his big face smiling like that of a simpleton. "We haf little trouble, Mr. Symonds, sir. Maybe we should call you, but we did not haf time. Everything is all right now. You
come see, we explain everything...."

He made a grab for the little Second Mate's neck with one big paw. But the Second was wary, ducked quickly, was off. Gene and Maher sprang after him. Gene shouted: "Stop or I'll fire, Symonds! You're all alone now!"

Gene let one shot angle off the wall, close beside the fleeing form, but the man didn't stop. Instead he headed for the bridge. Gene realized he could lock himself in, keep them from the ship controls. He could hold out there the rest of the voyage.

"We've got to stop him!"

Maher close behind, they ran up the stairs on the Second's heels. Up the companionway they pounded, the Second increasing his lead. A door opened ahead of him and Ann O'Donnell appeared.

Symonds cursed and tried to pass her. Ann deftly slid out one pretty leg and the officer turned a somersault, and brought up against the wall at the foot of the stairs to the upper deck and the bridge.

But the Second was too frightened to let a little thing like a fall stop him. He went scrambling up the stairs on all fours. Gene was still too far away, and Ann moved like a streak of light. She sailed through the air in a long dancer's leap and with two bounds was up the stair, ahead of the scrambling, fear-stricken officer.

"Out of my way, bitch," and Symonds hurled himself toward Ann.

Gene leaped forward, but he needn't have bothered. Ann lifted one of her educated feet, caught the Second under the chin and he came down the stair like a sack of meal. Gene caught his full weight.

The two men fell in a scramble of flailing arms and legs, knocking the props out from under Maher, who had started out after them. Just how the mixup might have turned out they were not to know, for just then the vast weight of Schwenky descended upon the three and Maher let out a scream of anguish. But Gene and Symonds were on the bottom, too crushed by this tactic to make a sound.

* * * * *

It was minutes later when Gene came back to consciousness, finding his head resting in Ann O'Donnell's lap while her swift hands prodded him here and there, looking for broken bones.

"I'm dead for sure," groaned Gene.

"You've just had the wind knocked out of you. You'll be all right," and Ann let his head fall from her grasp with a thump. She stood up, a little abashed at the going over she'd been giving him.

"Where're my mutineers?" Gene asked.

"Went to lock Symonds with the others. What is going to happen now? I'm not sure I like this development, now it's happened."

"You should have thought of that before you tripped Symonds," said Gene. "But I'll admit there are problems. For instance, with all the officers in the brig, how can we be sure we can keep this atomic junk heap headed in the right direction?"

"What is the correct direction?" asked Ann, squatting down beside him.

"I don't know. We'll have to figure it out, then see if we can point her that way."

"Let's get up to the bridge," she said.

Schwenky and Maher found them brooding over the series of levers and buttons which comprised the control board. Schwenky noted their baffled frowns. His big face took on a worried look. "You fix!" he said. "You good fellow, Gene. We run ship, let officers go to hell. Yah!"

Maher scratched one patch of greying hair over his left eye. The rest of his skull was covered with brown bumps like fungus growths. "It's just possible we'll wreck the ship, let the air out of her or something, if we experiment," he warned.

"Go get MacNamara," said Gene. "He's been on the ship longer than any of us. Maybe he'll know."

He didn't. "All I know is grease cups," he reminded Gene.

Hours later eighteen men and four women gathered together in the recreation room to discuss a plan of action. Everyone had his or her ideas, but after an hour of wrangling, they got nowhere. Finally Gene held up a hand and shouted for silence.

"Let's decide who's boss, then follow orders," he said. "If I may be so bold, how about me?"

"Yah!" said Schwenky. "I do what you say. I like you!"

Old MacNamara grumbled to himself. "Do nothing, I say. We ought to stick to our duty, and save the lives of those who would have to take our places...." The unguarded pile had given MacNamara a martyr complex.

Maher looked over at him. "Your idea of sacrifice is all very fine, MacNamara. But we're not all anxious to die. You know what would happen now if we gave up!"

Gene spoke up again. "Let me summarize the position we're in--maybe then we can make a better decision."

"Go ahead," said Ann. The others nodded and fell silent, waiting.

Gene cleared his throat. "The way it looks to me, we've had a lucky accident in getting control of the ship. So
far, we've not contacted the passengers. They know nothing of the change that's taken place. As it is, I see no point in contacting them. It might force us to face another mutiny, that of the passengers, who would regard us as what we are, mutineers, and when they found we weren't going to our destination, they'd certainly not all take it lying down. Point number one, then, is to ignore the passengers, keep the knowledge of a mutiny from them.

"Now, our real purpose in this mutiny is to expose this whole vicious secret slavery, tell Earth of the danger of the unshielded piles in space ships, destroy the Company's monopoly, and bring about new research which I'm sure would eventually overcome the difficulty. Just how are we going to do that? The answer is simple--we must get back to Earth, and we must get back in a way the Company will not be able to intercept us. As I understand it, this won't be easy. The Company is in complete control of space travel, and they have the ships to knock us out of space before we can get near Earth. Somehow we've got to win through. Can we do it by a direct return to Earth? I doubt it. However, say we do it. Then where do we go? The government might look upon us as mutineers and thus give the Company a chance to quash the whole affair.

"So we've got to go directly to the people, who, once they see us, and realize what space travel with these piles means, will demand an explanation with such public feeling even the government can't avoid a showdown. It's the secrecy we must break. Thus, we must land on Earth with the biggest possible splurge of publicity. We've got to do it so no Company ship can prevent it.

"Then there's this to consider. Most of you would find it a difficult thing to take up a life on Earth. I know that many of you want to take off for some remote world, and try to live out your lives by yourselves. I say that would be a cowardly thing to do. So, before we decide anything else, I say let's decide here and now that the only thing we will do is go back to Earth."

One of the most grotesquely deformed of the crew spoke up. "No woman would ever look at me," he said defiantly. "Children would stare at me and scream in terror. I've suffered enough. Why should I suffer more?"

The woman in the fine fur got to her feet and walked over to him. She sat down beside him and took his hand in hers. "I will look at you," she said. "When we get back to Earth, I will marry you and live with you—if you are brave enough to take me there."

For an instant the crewman stared at her out of his horribly bulging popeyes, then he swallowed hard and clutched her hand fiercely.

"The Devil himself will not keep me from it!" he said hoarsely.

Gene, staring at the man, felt a warm hand slip into his, and he turned to find Ann.

"I think that answers for all of us," she said.

The room rang with the shouts of approval.

Once more Gene began talking. "All right, then, I've a plan. First, we'll try to find out how to maneuver this craft. I believe we can persuade one of the Mates to show us the controls without much trouble."

"Yah!" interrupted Schwenky. "They show!"

"We'll set a course for Earth by the sun. We'll come in with the sun at our back, which means we'll have to make a wide circle off the traveled spacelanes, through unknown space, and come in from the direction of the inner planets, which are uninhabited and unvisited. Also, with the sun behind us, we won't be observed from Earth. Then, with all our speed, we'll come in, land at high noon in Chicago, right in front of the offices of the Sentinel, the newspaper for which I work."

There was a chorus of exclamations. Ann looked at him in amazement. "You, a newspaperman!" she gasped.

"Yes. I was sent out by my boss to find out what was behind the secrecy of the space ships. I got shanghaied as a crew member. Now, with your help, maybe I can complete my assignment. Once we get to my boss, the show will be over. He'll blast the story wide open."

"Wonderful!" shouted Maher. "Come, Schwenky! We will get Perkins and make him show us how to run the ship!"

Schwenky chortled in glee. "Yah! We get. By golly, I know that Gene O'Neill is good man! Maybe I get my picture in newspaper?"

"Yah!" agreed Schwenky. "In comic section!"

Two weeks later, as the ship crossed Earth's orbit and headed in behind the planet in the plane of the sun, the meteorite hit. It tore a great hole in the passenger side of the ship, and knocked out the port jets.

The ship veered crazily under the influence of its lopsided blast, and the crew was hurled against the wall and pinned there as the continuing involuntary maneuver built up acceleration.

Gene, who had been in his bunk, was pressed against the wall by a giant hand. Savagely he fought to adjust himself into a more bearable position, then tried to figure out what had happened. Obviously the ship was veering
about, out of control.

"Meteorite!" he gasped. "We've been hit."

He pulled himself from the bunk, slid along the wall to the door. It was all he could do to open it, but once in
the companionway outside, he found that he could crawl along one wall, off the floor, in an inching progress. He
made it finally to the control room, and forced his body around the door jamb and inside. Against the far wall Maher
was plastered, dazed, but conscious. At his feet lay Heinie, his head crushed, obviously dead.
"Cut off the rest of the jets!" gasped Maher. "I can't make it!"

Gene crawled slowly around the room, following the wall, until he could reach the controls, then he pulled the
lever that controlled the jet blast. The ship's unnatural veering stopped instantly and both Maher and Gene dropped
heavily to the floor.

Gene was up first and helped Maher to his feet. Together they turned to the indicators.
"Passenger deck's out!" said Maher. "Except for a few compartments. The automatic seals have operated. But
there must be somebody left alive in them."

"We've got to get them," said Gene. "But first, we've got to check up on what damage has been done here, and
how many casualties we have."

"Heinie's dead," said Maher. "He hit the wall with his head."

Gene shuddered, and deep in his stomach nausea churned. He thought of Ann and his blood froze in his veins.
"You take below decks, I'll go up," he said. Ann's cabin was on the deck above.
Maher nodded and staggered away. Gene scrambled up the stairwell as fast as he could, and ran down the
corridor. At Ann's door he stopped, turned the knob. The door opened. The room was empty.
Suddenly he heard running footsteps, and Ann threw herself into his arms, sobbing.
"Where were you?" he asked, almost savagely.
"I went to your cabin, to see if you were hurt. What happened to the ship?"

"Meteorite hit us. Knocked out the passenger deck. Most of the passengers will be dead, but we've got to go in
and rescue the survivors."

Doors were opening here and there and the crew members able to make it were congregating around them.
They went to the recreation room. There Gene counted noses. Five crewmen were missing. Of those present, six
men were injured, and one woman exhibited a black eye, accentuating her other abnormalities. The three prisoners
were reported unharmed.

"What about the missing men?" Gene asked.
"Three dead," Maher replied, "two badly hurt. We'll need somebody to look after them."
"I'll go," volunteered Ann. The woman in fur stepped forward also, and they left the room behind Maher and
Schwenky.

Gene faced the rest. "We've got a real problem now. With a reduced crew, we'll have to finish a trip that would
have been tough with an uninjured ship. But first, we've got to search the passenger deck and remove the survivors.
All of you who are able, put on pressure suits and come with me."

He led the way to the locker containing the pressure suits. Seven men, those who were not too deformed to don
the suits, made up the party. Gene led the way to the Captain's stateroom, ordered the door sealed behind them, then
opened the only door to the damaged deck. The air rushed out as the door swung open, and suddenly complete
silence descended upon them. There would be no more communication between them except for signs.

[Illustration]

In an hour they had determined the truth. All passengers but one, a woman, had been killed instantly. The
woman was unconscious, but suffering only from bruises. It had been necessary, after discovering her unpierced
cabin, to return to the deck above and cut through with a torch.
When she regained consciousness and saw her rescuers, she screamed.
"That'll give us some idea of how the people back on Earth will receive us," said Gene. "If we get there, that
is."

Later, in the control room, Maher and MacNamara gave their report.

"We can make it," said MacNamara, "but we'll come in limping like a wounded moose. If any of the Company
ships sight us, we'll be a sitting duck. But maybe it will be better that way. This is like war, and some of us must
die...." His voice trailed off in a mumble.
"Some of us are dying," said Maher. "But he's right, Gene; we can make it, with luck. We'll not be able to come
in fast, nor land in the city, but we'll make it to Earth."
"That's enough," decided Gene. "If we can land near Chicago, I think I can manage the rest."
They turned to the controls, and MacNamara went back to his pile room. Once more the ship limped on, this
time directly toward the ball of Earth, looming a scant twenty million miles away.
It took eight days to come within a million miles of their goal. Then tragedy struck again. The cabin on the passenger deck from which they had removed the sole survivor blew its door, and the air on the deck above rushed out through the hole they had burned into the cabin. It had been forgotten, and it meant the lives of three more crew members.

Then, as they prepared to bring the ship into the atmosphere, Maher, peering through the telescope, let out a shout. "Company ship, coming up fast! They're after us!"

Gene leaped to the telescope and peered through. Far to the left, a glowing silver streak in the sky, was the familiar shape of a space ship, growing larger by the minute. Studying it, Gene saw that it was an armed cruiser. "They've got wise," said Maher. "I thought they would, when we didn't check in at Io. Probably radioed back to be on the lookout for us."

"Call MacNamara," said Gene. "We've got to see if he can set us down faster. Maybe there's some way to step up that pile."

Maher rushed off, and Ann came in. "What's up?" she asked.
"Cruiser after us," said Gene, his face grim. "Looks like we won't get to Chicago unless MacNamara has something up that old sleeve of his."

Ann went white, and together they waited for the old Engineer.

When he came in, Gene gestured to the telescope. "Take a look."

MacNamara squinted through the eyepiece with his double popeyes. "Don't see a thing," he grumbled.
"Well, it's a Company Cruiser, gunned to the limit. She's going to be near enough to shoot us down in about three hours."

"Three hours, you say?" MacNamara scratched his head. "How near we to Earth?"

"Half a million miles."

"You could make it in the lifeboat."

Gene snorted. "That Cruiser'd shoot down the lifeboat as easy as it will the ship--a lot easier."

"If they can catch you," said MacNamara. "Some of us must die, that the rest may live."

"Don't start that again, Mac," said Maher impatiently. "What we want to know is whether you can soup up that pile so we can beat that Cruiser down to Earth?"

"Not a thing I can do," said the Chief Engineer. "We've only one set of tubes. Full power would shoot us all over the sky. But I can do something as good."

"What?"

The old Engineer considered them through his double eyes. "The rest of you'll take the lifeboat and make for Earth. I'll remain here on the ship and shield your flight. I'm sure I can hide the little boat for awhile, and then, even with one jet, I think I can delay the cruiser until you get away. Someone's got to make a sacrifice. I'm old, and I didn't want any of this to begin with."

Maher gasped. "Mac, you old fool. D'ya mind if I apologize for what I just said? But you're right, that's a possible answer. Only I'll be the one to stay."

"Do you know how to adjust the pile and the jets to make a weapon out of them?" asked MacNamara.

"No ..." began Maher.

MacNamara grinned, "Nor am I going to tell you! So, you see, you can't be the one to stay."

Maher gripped the old man's hand and pumped it. "You win," he said. "You old ... crackpot!" There was real affection in his voice.

"Then be off with you," said the Chief Engineer. "You've not a minute to lose. Every man jack of you into the boat, including the Captain and the Mates. I'll not have my ship cluttered up with extra hands that might cramp my style...." And turning, the old man made his way back to the pile room, mumbling to himself.

Eyes wet, Gene gave the orders to abandon ship, and within thirty minutes every living soul was aboard the lifeboat.

MacNamara had finished his work with the pile and was back in the control room, waiting for the lifeboat to cast off. As it did so, he waved, then turned to the controls.

As the lifeboat darted away on its chemical jet engines, they could see the old man maneuvering the big ship so as to keep it ever between them and the Cruiser. An hour later when they were within a hundred thousand miles of Earth, MacNamara sent up a flare denoting surrender.

Tensely they watched the distant speck of light that was the ship with MacNamara on it. Then, around its side came the Company Cruiser, steering in toward it to make the capture. It was scarcely a thousand miles from the disabled ship. Gradually it drew closer, then edged in. Now it was only a few miles away, and at this distance, both specks seemed to merge.
"They got him!" Maher said.
"Yah!" Schwenky boomed, disappointment in his voice. "Me, I should have been the one to stay. I would slap them."

Suddenly, out in space, a bright flower grew. A flower of incandescent light that blossomed with terrifying rapidity, until it seemed to engulf all space in the area of the two ships. The familiar sphere of brilliance that marked an exploding atom bomb hung there in the heavens an instant, then it was gone. In its place was only a vast cloud of smoke, the dust and scattered atoms that were all that remained of two gigantic space ships.

"He detonated the pile!" said Gene, "He turned himself into an atom bomb!"

"Yah!" said Schwenky, his voice strangely muted. "Yah!" Awkwardly he turned and patted Ann's head as she began to sob.

* * * * *

"Is it not handsome?" asked Schwenky proudly, holding the front page of the newspaper up for all to see. "I have my picture in the paper! Is it not nice?"

Laughing, Ann kissed the big Swede right on the lips, and hugged him, paper and all. "It's beautiful, you big lug!" she said. "The handsomest picture I've ever seen in any paper."

"Nah!" denied Schwenky. "It is not the handsomest. All of us have our pictures in the paper. We are all very good looking! Not only Schwenky. Is it not so, Gene, my friend?"

Gene grinned at him, and at the others. Maher pounded him on the back, and over the uproar came the voice of the editor of the Sentinel. "Telephone for Mr. Schwenky!"

Schwenky looked dazed, cocked his big ears at the editor. "For Schwenky?" he asked stupidly. "Telephone? Who would call Schwenky on the telephone?"

"How do I know?" said the editor. "It's some lady...." He thrust the phone into the big Swede's hand.

"Lady?" said Schwenky wonderingly. "Hello ... lady ..." he spoke into the receiver, his booming voice making it rattle.

"The other ..." began Gene, then desisted. "Never mind, she'll hear you...."

"What? You want to marry me? Lady...." Schwenky's eyes bulged even more, and he roared into the transmitter. "Lady! You wait! I come!" He thrust the phone into the editor's hands and made for the door like a lumbering bull.

"Where you going?" yelled Gene.

Schwenky halted, turned with a big grin, "I go to marry lady. She asked me to become my wife!"

"Where is she?" asked Gene. "Where are you going to meet her?"

Schwenky looked stupidly at the now silent phone. "By golly! I forget to ask her!" There was tragedy in his voice. "Now I never find her!"

The editor laughed. "Never mind--you'll get a hundred more proposals before the day's over. You can take your pick!"

Schwenky's eyes opened wide. Then he grinned again. "Yah!" he roared. "I take my pick! She will be so beautiful! Yah!"

The chatter of the teletype interrupted him, and the editor turned to watch the tape as it came from the machine. Then he began to read:

"Washington. April 23. President Walworth has grounded all spaceships and ordered all those enroute to proceed to the nearest port. A Congressional committee has been picked, including top members of the cabinet, to investigate the ships, the atomic drives, and the system of secret slavery among crews. In a statement to the Press, President Walworth said that space travel will not be resumed until proper shields are developed. But he added that he had been informed by leading physicists that the problem can be solved within a year if sufficient funds were available. Said the President: 'I will see that the funds are made available!'"

The editor dropped the tape and turned to Gene. "I have one more bit of information, this one direct from the President by phone. He has asked me to inform you that he has appointed you new head of FAST."

"FAST?" asked Gene. "What's that?"

"Federal Agency for Space Travel," grinned the editor. "And congratulations. I hate to lose a good reporter, but maybe you'll be back after you finish in Washington--at a substantial increase in salary."

Gene grinned back. "Maybe I will," he said. "And I'll need the money." He put an arm around Ann and drew her to him. "Two can't live as cheap as one, you know."
THE MERCENARIES
By H. Beam Piper

Once, wars were won by maneuvering hired fighting men; now wars are different—and the hired experts are
different. But the human problems remain!

Duncan MacLeod hung up the suit he had taken off, and sealed his shirt, socks and underwear in a laundry
envelope bearing his name and identity-number, tossing this into one of the wire baskets provided for the purpose.
Then, naked except for the plastic identity disk around his neck, he went over to the desk, turned in his locker key,
and passed into the big room beyond.

Four or five young men, probably soldiers on their way to town, were coming through from the other side. Like
MacLeod, they wore only the plastic disks they had received in exchange for the metal ones they wore inside the
reservation, and they were being searched by attendants who combed through their hair, probed into ears and
nostrils, peered into mouths with tiny searchlights, and employed a variety of magnetic and electronic detectors.

To this search MacLeod submitted wearily. He had become quite a connoisseur of security measures in fifteen
years' research and development work for a dozen different nations, but the Tonto Basin Research Establishment of
the Philadelphia Project exceeded anything he had seen before. There were gray-haired veterans of the old
Manhattan Project here, men who had worked with Fermi at Chicago, or with Oppenheimer at Los Alamos, twenty
years before, and they swore in amused exasperation when they thought of how the relatively mild regulations of
those days had irked them. And yet, the very existence of the Manhattan Project had been kept a secret from all but
those engaged in it, and its purpose from most of them. Today, in 1965, there might have been a few wandering
tribesmen in Somaliland or the Kirghiz Steppes who had never heard of the Western Union's Philadelphia Project, or
of the Fourth Komintern's Red Triumph Five-Year Plan, or of the Islamic Kaliphate's Al-Borak Undertaking, or of
the Ibero-American Confederation's Cavor Project, but every literate person in the world knew that the four great
power-blocs were racing desperately to hunch the first spaceship to reach the Moon and build the Lunar fortress that
would insure world supremacy.

He turned in the nonmagnetic identity disk at the desk on the other side of the search room, receiving the metal
one he wore inside the reservation, and with it the key to his inside locker. He put on the clothes he had left behind
when he had passed out, and filled his pockets with the miscellany of small articles he had not been allowed to carry
off the reservation. He knotted the garish necktie affected by the civilian workers and in particular by members of
the MacLeod Research Team to advertise their nonmilitary status, lit his pipe, and walked out into the open gallery
beyond.

* * * * *

Karen Hilquist was waiting for him there, reclining in one of the metal chairs. She looked cool in the belted
white coveralls, with the white turban bound around her yellow hair, and very beautiful, and when he saw her, his
heart gave a little bump, like a geiger responding to an ionizing particle. It always did that, although they had been
together for twelve years, and married for ten. Then she saw him and smiled, and he came over, fanning himself
with his sun helmet, and dropped into a chair beside her.

"Did you call our center for a jeep?" he asked. When she nodded, he continued: "I thought you would, so I
didn't bother."

For a while, they sat silent, looking with bored distaste at the swarm of steel-helmeted Army riflemen and
tommy-gunners guarding the transfer platforms and the vehicles gate. A string of trucks had been passed under
heavy guard into the clearance compound: they were now unloading supplies onto a platform, at the other side of
which other trucks were backed waiting to receive the shipment. A hundred feet of bare concrete and fifty armed
soldiers separated these from the men and trucks from the outside, preventing contact.

"And still they can't stop leaks," Karen said softly. "And we get blamed for it."

MacLeod nodded and started to say something, when his attention was drawn by a commotion on the driveway.
A big Tucker limousine with an O.D. paint job and the single-starred flag of a brigadier general was approaching,
horning impatiently. In the back seat MacLeod could see a heavy-shouldered figure with the face of a bad-tempered
great Dane—General Daniel Nayland, the military commander of Tonto Basin. The inside guards jumped to attention
and saluted; the barrier shot up as though rocket-propelled, and the car slid through; the barrier slammed down
behind it. On the other side, the guards were hurling themselves into a frenzy of saluting. Karen made a face after
the receding car and muttered something in Hindustani. She probably didn't know the literal meaning of what she
had called General Nayland, but she understood that it was a term of extreme opprobrium.

Her husband contributed: "His idea of Heaven would be a huge research establishment, where he'd be a five-
star general, and Galileo, Newton, Priestley, Dalton, Maxwell, Planck and Einstein would be tech sergeants."

"And Marie Curie and Lise Meitner would be Wac corporals," Karen added. "He really hates all of us, doesn't he?"

"He hates our Team," MacLeod replied. "In the first place, we're a lot of civilians, who aren't subject to his regulations and don't have to salute him. We're working under contract with the Western Union, not with the United States Government, and as the United States participates in the Western Union on a treaty basis, our contract has the force of a treaty obligation. It gives us what amounts to extraterritoriality, like Europeans in China during the Nineteenth Century. So we have our own transport, for which he must furnish petrol, and our own armed guard, and we fly our own flag over Team Center, and that gripes him as much as anything else. That and the fact that we're foreigners. So wouldn't he love to make this espionage rap stick on us!"

"And our contract specifically gives the United States the right to take action against us in case we endanger the national security," Karen added. She stuffed her cigarette into the not-too-recently-emptied receiver beside her chair, her blue eyes troubled. "You know, some of us could get shot over this, if we're not careful. Dunc, does it really have to be one of our own people who--?"

"I don't see how it could be anybody else," MacLeod said. "I don't like the idea any more than you do, but there it is."

"Well, what are we going to do? Is there nobody whom we can trust?"

"Among the technicians and guards, yes. I could think of a score who are absolutely loyal. But among the Team itself--the top researchers--there's nobody I'd take a chance on but Kato Sugihara."

"Can you even be sure of him? I'd hate to think of him as a traitor, but--"

"I have a couple of reasons for eliminating Kato," MacLeod said. "In the first place, outside nucleonic and binding-force physics, there are only three things he's interested in. Jitterbugging, hand-painted neckties, and Southern-style cooking. If he went over to the Komintern, he wouldn't be able to get any of those. Then, he only spends about half his share of the Team's profits, and turns the rest back into the Team Fund. He has a credit of about a hundred thousand dollars, which he'd lose by leaving us. And then, there's another thing. Kato's father was killed on Guadalcanal, in 1942, when he was only five. After that he was brought up in the teachings of Bushido by his grandfather, an old-time samurai. Bushido is open to some criticism, but nobody can show where double-crossing your own gang is good Bushido. And today, Japan is allied with the Western Union, and in any case, he wouldn't help the Komintern. The Japs'll forgive Russia for that Mussolini back-stab in 1945 after the Irish start building monuments to Cromwell."

A light-blue jeep, lettered MacLeod Research Team in cherry-red, was approaching across the wide concrete apron. MacLeod grinned.

"Here it comes. Fasten your safety belt when you get in; that's Ahmed driving."

Karen looked at her watch. "And it's almost time for dinner. You know, I dread the thought of sitting at the table with the others, and wondering which of them is betraying us."

"Only nine of us, instead of thirteen, and still one is a Judas," MacLeod said. "I suppose there's always a place for Judas, at any table."

The MacLeod Team dined together, apart from their assistants and technicians and students. This was no snobbish attempt at class-distinction: matters of Team policy were often discussed at the big round table, and the more confidential details of their work. People who have only their knowledge and their ideas to sell are wary about bandying either loosely, and the six men and three women who faced each other across the twelve-foot diameter of the teakwood table had no other stock-in-trade.

They were nine people of nine different nationalities, or they were nine people of the common extra-nationality of science. That Duncan MacLeod, their leader, had grown up in the Transvaal and his wife had been born in the Swedish university town of Upsala was typical not only of their own group but of the hundreds of independent research-teams that had sprung up after the Second World War. The scientist-adventurer may have been born of the relentless struggle for scientific armament supremacy among nations and the competition for improved techniques among industrial corporations during the late 1950s and early '60s, but he had been begotten when two masses of uranium came together at the top of a steel tower in New Mexico in 1945. And, because scientific research is pre-eminently a matter of pooling brains and efforts, the independent scientists had banded together into teams whose leaders acquired power greater than that of any condottiere captain of Renaissance Italy.

Duncan MacLeod, sitting outwardly relaxed and merry and secretly watchful and bitterly sad, was such a free-captain of science. One by one, the others had rallied around him, not because he was a greater physicist than they, but because he was a bolder, more clever, less scrupulous adventurer, better able to guide them through the maze of international power-politics and the no less ruthless if less nakedly violent world of Big Industry.
There was his wife, Karen Hilquist, the young metallurgist who, before she was twenty-five, had perfected a new hardening process for SKF and an incredibly tough gun-steel for the Bofors works. In the few minutes since they had returned to Team Center, she had managed to change her coveralls for a skirt and blouse, and do something intriguing with her hair.

And there was Kato Sugihara, looking younger than his twenty-eight years, who had begun to demonstrate the existence of whole orders of structure below the level of nuclear particles.

There was Suzanne Maillard, her gray hair upswept from a face that had never been beautiful but which was alive with something rarer than mere beauty: she possessed, at the brink of fifty, a charm and smartness that many women half her age might have envied, and she knew more about cosmic rays than any other person living.

And Adam Lowiewski, his black mustache contrasting so oddly with his silver hair, frantically scribbling equations on his doodling-pad, as though his racing fingers could never keep pace with his brain, and explaining them, with obvious condescension, to the boyish-looking Japanese beside him. He was one of the greatest of living mathematicians by anybody's reckoning--the greatest, by his own.

And Sir Neville Lawton, the electronics expert, with thinning red-gray hair and meticulously-clipped mustache, who always gave the impression of being in evening clothes, even when, as now, he was dressed in faded khaki.

And Heym ben-Hillel, the Israeli quantum and wave-mechanics man, his heaping dinner plate an affront to the Laws of Moses, his white hair a fluffy, tangled chaos, laughing at an impassively-delivered joke the English knight had made.

And Farida Khouroglu, the Turkish girl whom MacLeod and Karen had found begging in the streets of Istanbul, ten years ago, and who had grown up following the fortunes of the MacLeod Team on every continent and in a score of nations. It was doubtful if she had ever had a day's formal schooling in her life, but now she was secretary of the Team, with a grasp of physics that would have shamed many a professor. She had grown up a beauty, too, with the large dark eyes and jet-black hair and paper-white skin of her race. She and Kato Sugihara were very much in love.

A good team; the best physics-research team in a power-mad, knowledge-hungry world. MacLeod thought, toying with the stem of his wineglass, of some of their triumphs: The West Australia Atomic Power Plant. The Segovia Plutonium Works, which had got them all titled as Grandees of the restored Spanish Monarchy. The seawater chemical extraction plant in Puerto Rico, where they had worked for Associated Enterprises, whose president, Blake Hartley, had later become President of the United States. The hard-won victory over a seemingly insoluble problem in the Belgian Congo uranium mines----He thought, too, of the dangers they had faced together, in a world where soldiers must use the weapons of science and scientists must learn the arts of violence. Of the treachery of the Islamic Kaliphate, for whom they had once worked; of the intrigues and plots which had surrounded them in Spain; of the many attempted kidnappings and assassinations; of the time in Basra when they had fought with pistols and Tommy guns and snatched-up clubs and flasks of acid to defend their laboratories.

A good team--before the rot of treason had touched it. He could almost smell the putrid stench of it, and yet, as he glanced from face to face, he could not guess the traitor. And he had so little time--

* * * * *

Kato Sugihara's voice rose to dominate the murmur of conversation around the table.

"I think I am getting somewhere on my photon-neutrino-electron interchange-cycle," he announced. "And I think it can be correlated to the collapsed-matter research."

"So?" von Heldenfeld looked up in interest. "And not with the problem of what goes on in the 'hot layer' surrounding the Earth?"

"No, Suzanne talked me out of that idea," the Japanese replied. "That's just a secondary effect of the effect of cosmic rays and solar radiations on the order of particles existing at that level. But I think that I have the key to the problem of collapsing matter to plate the hull of the spaceship."

"That's interesting," Sir Neville Lawton commented. "How so?"

"Well, you know what happens when a photon comes in contact with the atomic structure of matter," Kato said. "There may be an elastic collision, in which the photon merely bounces off. Macroscopically, that's the effect we call reflection of light. Or there may be an inelastic collision, when the photon hits an atom and knocks out an electron—the old photoelectric effect. Or, the photon may be retained for a while and emitted again relatively unchanged—the effect observed in luminous paint. Or, the photon may penetrate, undergo a change to a neutrino, and either remain in the nucleus of the atom or pass through it, depending upon a number of factors. All this, of course, is old stuff; even the photon-neutrino interchange has been known since the mid-'50s, when the Gamow neutrino-counter was developed. But now we come to what you have been so good as to christen the Sugihara
Effect—the neutrino picking up a negative charge and, in effect, turning into an electron, and then losing its charge, turning back into a neutrino, and then, as in the case of metal heated to incandescence, being emitted again as a photon.

"At first, we thought this had no connection with the spaceship insulation problem we are under contract to work out, and we agreed to keep this effect a Team secret until we could find out if it had commercial possibilities. But now, I find that it has a direct connection with the collapsed-matter problem. When the electron loses its negative charge and reverts to a neutrino, there is a definite accretion of interatomic binding-force, and the molecule, or the crystalline lattice or whatever tends to contract, and when the neutrino becomes a photon, the nucleus of the atom contracts."

Heym ben-Hillel was sitting oblivious to everything but his young colleague's words, a slice of the flesh of the unclean beast impaled on his fork and halfway to his mouth.

"Yes! Certainly!" he exclaimed. "That would explain so many things I have wondered about: And of course, there are other forces at work which, in the course of nature, balance that effect—"

"But can the process be controlled?" Suzanne Maillard wanted to know. "Can you convert electrons to neutrinos and then to photons in sufficient numbers, and eliminate other effects that would cause compensating atomic and molecular expansion?"

Kato grinned, like a tomcat contemplating the bones of a fish he has just eaten.

"Yes, I can. I have." He turned to MacLeod. "Remember those bullets I got from you?" he asked.

MacLeod nodded. He handloaded for his .38-special, and like all advanced cases of handloading-fever, he was religiously fanatical about uniformity of bullet weights and dimensions. Unlike most handloaders, he had available the instruments to secure such uniformity.

"Those bullets are as nearly alike as different objects can be," Kato said. "They weigh 158 grains, and that means one-five-eight-point-zero-zero-zero-practically-nothing. The diameter is .35903 inches. All right; I've been subjecting those bullets to different radiation-bombardments, and the best results have given me a bullet with a diameter of .35892 inches, and the weight is unchanged. In other words, there's been no loss of mass, but the mass had contracted. And that's only been the first test."

"Well, write up everything you have on it, and we'll lay out further experimental work," MacLeod said. He glanced around the table. "So far, we can't be entirely sure. The shrinkage may be all in the crystalline lattice: the atomic structure may be unchanged. What we need is matter that is really collapsed."

"I'll do that," Kato said. "Barida, I'll have all my data available for you before noon tomorrow: you can make up copies for all Team members."

"Make mine on microfilm, for projection," von Heldenfeld said.


"Better make microfilm copies for everybody," Heym ben-Hillel suggested. "They're handier than type-script."

MacLeod rose silently and tiptoed around behind his wife and Rudolf von Heldenfeld, to touch Kato Sugihara on the shoulder.

"Come on outside, Kato," he whispered. "I want to talk to you."

The Japanese nodded and rose, following him outside onto the roof above the laboratories. They walked over to the edge and stopped at the balustrade.

"Kato, when you write up your stuff, I want you to falsify everything you can. Put it in such form that the data will be absolutely worthless, but also in such form that nobody, not even Team members, will know it has been falsified. Can you do that?"

Kato's almond-shaped eyes widened. "Of course I can, Dunc," he replied. "But why--?"

"I hate to say this, but we have a traitor in the Team. One of those people back in the dining room is selling us out to the Fourth Komintern. I know it's not Karen, and I know it's not you, and that's as much as I do know, now."

The Japanese sucked in his breath in a sharp hiss. "You wouldn't say that unless you were sure, Dunc," he said.

"No. At about 1000 this morning, Dr. Weissberg, the civilian director, called me to his office. He found him very much upset. He told me that General Nayland is accusing us—by which he meant this Team—of furnishing secret information on our subproject to Komintern agents. He said that British Intelligence agents at Smolensk had learned that the Red Triumph laboratories there were working along lines of research originated at MacLeod Team Center here. They relayed the information to Western Union Central Intelligence, and WU passed it on to United States Central Intelligence, and now Counter Espionage is riding Nayland about it, and he's trying to make us the goat."

"He would love to get some of us shot," Kato said. "And that could happen. They took a long time getting tough about espionage in this country, but when Americans get tough about something, they get tough right. But
look here; we handed in our progress-reports to Felix Weissberg, and he passed them on to Nayland. Couldn't the leak be right in Nayland's own HQ?"

"That's what I thought, at first," MacLeod replied. "Just wishful thinking, though. Fact is, I went up to Nayland's HQ and had it out with him; accused him of just that. I think I threw enough of a scare into him to hold him for a couple of days. I wanted to know just what it was the Komintern was supposed to have got from us, but he wouldn't tell me. That, of course, was classified-stuff."

"Well?"

"Well then, Karen and I got our digestive tracts emptied and went in to town, where I could use a phone that didn't go through a military switch-board, and I put through a call to Allan Hartley, President Hartley's son. He owes us a break, after the work we did in Puerto Rico. I told him all I wanted was some information to help clear ourselves, and he told me to wait a half an hour and then call Counter Espionage Office in Washington and talk to General Hammond."

"Ha! If Allan Hartley's for us, what are we worried about?" Kato asked. "I always knew he was the power back of Associated Enterprises and his father was the front-man: I'll bet it's the same with the Government."

"Allan Hartley's for us as long as our nose is clean. If we let it get dirty, we get it bloodied, too. We have to clean it ourselves," MacLeod told him. "But here's what Hammond gave me: The Komintern knows all about our collapsed-matter experiments with zinc, titanium and nickel. They know about our theoretical work on cosmic rays, including Suzanne's work up to about a month ago. They know about that effect Sir Neville and Heym discovered two months ago."

"And they know about the photon-neutrino-electron interchange."

Kato responded to this with a gruesome double-take that gave his face the fleeting appearance of an ancient samurai war mask.

"That wasn't included in any report we ever made," he said. "You're right: the leak comes from inside the Team. It must be Sir Neville, or Suzanne, or Heym ben-Hillel, or Adam Lowiewski, or Rudolf von Heldenfeld, or-- No! No, I can't believe it could be Farida!" He looked at MacLeod pleadingly. "You don't think she could have--?"

"No, Kato. The Team's her whole life, even more than it is mine. She came with us when she was only twelve, and grew up with us. She doesn't know any other life than this, and wouldn't want any other. It has to be one of the other five."

"Well, there's Suzanne," Kato began. "She had to clear out of France because of political activities, after the collapse of the Fourth Republic and the establishment of the Rightist Directoire in '57. And she worked with Joliot-Curie, and she was at the University of Louvain in the early '50s, when that place was crawling with Commies."

"And that brings us to Sir Neville," MacLeod added. "He dabbles in spiritualism; he and Suzanne do planchette-seances. A planchette can be manipulated. Maybe Suzanne produced a communication advising Sir Neville to help the Komintern."

"Could be. Then, how about Lowiewski? He's a Pole who can't go back to Poland, and Poland's a Komintern country," Kato pointed out. "Maybe he'd sell us out for amnesty, though why he'd want to go back there, the way things are now--?"

"His vanity. You know, missionary-school native going back to the village wearing real pants, to show off to the savages. Used to be a standing joke, down where I came from." MacLeod thought for a moment. "And Rudolf: he's always had a poor view of the democratic system of government. He might feel more at home with the Komintern. Of course, the Ruskis killed his parents in 1945--"

"So what?" Kato retorted. "The Americans killed my father in 1942, but I'm not making an issue out of it. That was another war; Japan's a Western Union country, now. So's Germany----How about Heym, by the way? Remember when the Komintern wanted us to come to Russia and do the same work we're doing here?"

"I remember that after we turned them down, somebody tried to kidnap Karen," MacLeod said grimly. "I remember a couple of Russians got rather suddenly dead trying it, too."

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking of our round-table argument when the proposition was considered. Heym was in favor of accepting. Now that, I would say, indicates either Communist sympathies or an overtrusting nature," Kato submitted. "And a lot of grade-A traitors have been made out of people with trusting natures."

MacLeod got out his pipe and lit it. For a long time, he stared out across the mountain-ringed vista of sagebrush, dotted at wide intervals with the bulks of research-centers and the red roofs of the villages.

"Kato, I think I know how we're going to find out which one it is," he said. "First of all, you write up your data, and falsify it so that it won't do any damage if it gets into Komintern hands. And then--"

The next day started in an atmosphere of suppressed excitement and anxiety, which, beginning with MacLeod and Karen and Kato Sugihara, seemed to communicate itself by contagion to everybody in the MacLeod Team's laboratories. The top researchers and their immediate assistants and students were the first to catch it; they ascribed
the tension under which their leader and his wife and the Japanese labored to the recent developments in the collapsed-matter problem. Then, there were about a dozen implicitly-trusted technicians and guards, who had been secretly gathered in MacLeod's office the night before and informed of the crisis that had arisen. Their associates could not miss the fact that they were preoccupied with something unusual.

They were a variegated crew; men who had been added to the Team in every corner of the world. There was Ahmed Abd-el-Rahman, the Arab jeep-driver who had joined them in Basra. There was the wiry little Greek whom everybody called Alex Unpronounceable. There was an Italian, and two Chinese, and a cashiered French Air Force officer, and a Malay, and the son of an English earl who insisted that his name was Bertie Wooster. They had sworn themselves to secrecy, had heard MacLeod's story with a polylingual burst of pious or blasphemous exclamations, and then they had scattered, each to the work assigned him.

MacLeod had risen early and submitted to the ordeal of the search to leave the reservation and go to town again, this time for a conference at the shabby back-street cigar store that concealed a Counter Espionage center. He had returned just as Farida Khouroglu was finishing the microfilm copies of Kato's ingeniously-concocted pseudo-data. These copies were distributed at noon, while the Team was lunching, along with carbons of the original typescript.

He was the first to leave the table, going directly to the basement, where Alex Unpronounceable and the man who had got his alias from the works of P. G. Wodehouse were listening in on the telephone calls going in and out through the Team-center switch-board, and making recordings. For two hours, MacLeod remained with them. He heard Suzanne Maillard and some woman who was talking from a number in the Army married-officers' settlement making arrangements about a party. He heard Rudolf von Heldenfeld make a date with some girl. He listened to a violent altercation between the Team chef and somebody at Army Quartermaster's HQ about the quality of a lot of dressed chicken. He listened to a call that came in for Adam Lowiewski, the mathematician.

"This is Joe," the caller said. "I've got to go to town late this afternoon, but I was wondering if you'd have time to meet me at the Recreation House at Oppenheimer Village for a game of chess. I'm calling from there, now."

"Fine; I can make it," Lowiewski's voice replied. "I'm in the middle of a devil's own mathematical problem; maybe a game of chess would clear my head. I have a new queen's-knight gambit I want to try on you, anyhow."

Bertie Wooster looked up sharply. "Now there; that may be what we're--"

The telephone beside MacLeod rang. He scooped it up; named himself into it.

It was Ahmed Abd-el-Rahman. "Look, chief; I tail this guy to Oppenheimer Village," the Arab, who had learned English from American movies, answered. "I'm in the middle of a devil's own mathematical problem; maybe a game of chess would clear my head. I have a new queen's-knight gambit I want to try on you, anyhow."

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watch him; don't let him get rid of anything," he added to the Greek.

"If you would explain this outrage--" Lowiewski began. "I assume it is your idea of a joke--"

Without even replying, MacLeod slammed the doors and started the elevator upward, letting it rise six floors to the living quarters. Karen Hilquist and the aristocratic black-sheep who called himself Bertie Wooster were waiting when he opened the door. The Englishman took one of Lowiewski's arms; MacLeod took the other. The rest fell in behind as they hustled the captive down the hall and into the big sound-proofed dining room. They kept Lowiewski standing, well away from any movable object in the room; Alex Unpronounceable took his left arm as MacLeod released it and went to the communicator and punched the all-outlets button.

"Dr. Maillard; Dr. Sir Neville Lawton; Dr. ben-Hillel; Dr. von Heldenfeld; Mlle. Khouroglu," he called. "Dr. MacLeod speaking. Come at once, repeat at once, to the round table--Dr. Maillard; Dr. Sir Neville Lawton--"

* * * * *

Karen said something to the Japanese and went outside. For a while, nobody spoke. Kato came over and lit a cigarette in the bowl of MacLeod's pipe. Then the other Team members entered in a body. Evidently Karen had intercepted them in the hallway and warned them that they would find some unusual situation inside; even so, there was a burst of surprised exclamations when they found Adam Lowiewski under detention.

"Ladies and gentlemen," MacLeod said, "I regret to tell you that I have placed our colleague, Dr. Lowiewski, under arrest. He is suspected of betraying confidential data to agents of the Fourth Komintern. Yesterday, I learned that data on all our work here, including Team-secret data on the Sugihara Effect, had got into the hands of the Komintern and was being used in research at the Smolensk laboratories. I also learned that General Nayland blames this Team as a whole with double-dealing and selling this data to the Komintern. I don't need to go into any lengthy exposition of General Nayland's attitude toward this Team, or toward Free Scientists as a class, or toward the research-contract system. Nor do I need to point out that if he pressed these charges against us, some of us could easily suffer death or imprisonment."

"So he had to have a victim in a hurry, and pulled my name out of the hat," Lowiewski sneered.

"I appreciate the gravity of the situation," Sir Neville Lawton said. "And if the Sugihara Effect was among the data betrayed, I can understand that nobody but one of us could have betrayed it. But why, necessarily, should it be Adam? We all have unlimited access to all records and theoretical data."

"Exactly. But collecting information is the smallest and easiest part of espionage. Almost anybody can collect information. Where the spy really earns his pay is in transmitting of information. Now, think of the almost fantastic security measures in force here, and consider how you would get such information, including masses of mathematical data beyond any human power of memorization, out of this reservation."

"Ha, nobody can take anything out," Suzanne Maillard said. "Not even one's breakfast. Is Adam accused of sorcery, too?"

"The only material things that are allowed to leave this reservation are sealed cases of models and data shipped to the different development plants. And the Sugihara Effect never was reported, and wouldn't go out that way," Heym ben-Hillel objected.

"But the data on the Sugihara Effect reached Smolensk," MacLeod replied. "And don't talk about Darwin and Wallace: it wasn't a coincidence. This stuff was taken out of the Tonto Basin Reservation by the only person who could have done so, in the only way that anything could leave the reservation without search. So I had that person shadowed, and at the same time I had our telephone lines tapped, and eavesdropped on all calls entering or leaving this center. And the person who had to be the spy-courier called Adam Lowiewski, and Lowiewski made an appointment to meet him at the Oppenheimer Village Recreation House to play chess."

"Very suspicious, very suspicious," Lowiewski derided. "I receive a call from a friend at the same time that some anonymous suspect is using the phone. There are only five hundred telephone conversations a minute on this reservation."

"Immediately, Dr. Lowiewski attempted to leave this building," MacLeod went on. "When I intercepted him, he tried to draw a pistol. This one." He exhibited the Beretta. "I am now going to have Dr. Lowiewski searched, in the presence of all of you." He nodded to Alex and the Englishman.

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They did their work thoroughly. A pile of Lowiewski's pocket effects was made on the table; as each item was added to it, the Pole made some sarcastic comment.

"And that pack of cigarettes: unopened," he jeered. "I suppose I communicated the data to the manufacturers by telepathy, and they printed it on the cigarette papers in invisible ink."

"Maybe not. Maybe you opened the pack, and then resealed it," Kato suggested. "A heated spatula under the cellophane; like this."

He used the point of his knife to illustrate. The cellophane came unsealed with surprising ease; so did the
revenue stamp. He dumped out the contents of the pack: sixteen cigarettes, four cigarette tip-ends, four bits snapped from the other ends—and a small aluminum microfilm capsule.

Lowiewski's face twitched. For an instant, he tried vainly to break loose from the men who held him. Then he slumped into a chair. Heym ben-Hillel gasped in shocked surprise. Suzanne Maillard gave a short, feline-like cry. Sir Neville Lawton looked at the capsule curiously and said: "Well, my painted Aunt Agatha!"

"That's the capsule I gave him, at noon," Farida Khouroglu exclaimed, picking it up. She opened it and pulled out a roll of colloidex projection film. There was also a bit of cigarette paper in the capsule, upon which a notation had been made in Kyrilic characters.


The film and the paper passed from hand to hand. The other members of the Team sat down; there was a tendency to move away from the chair occupied by Adam Lowiewski. He noticed this and sneered.

"Afraid of contamination from the moral leper?" he asked. "You were glad enough to have me correct your stupid mathematical errors."

Kato Sugihara picked up the capsule, took a final glance at the cigarette pack, and said to MacLeod: "I'll be back as soon as this is done." With that, he left the room, followed by Bertie Wooster and the Greek.

Heym ben-Hillel turned to the others: his eyes had the hurt and puzzled look of a dog that has been kicked for no reason. "But why did he do this?" he asked.

"He just told you," MacLeod replied. "He's the great Adam Lowiewski. Checking math for a physics-research team is beneath his dignity. I suppose the Komintern offered him a professorship at Stalin University." He was watching Lowiewski's face keenly. "No," he continued. "It was probably the mathematics chair of the Soviet Academy of Sciences."

"But who was this person who could smuggle microfilm out of the reservation?" Suzanne Maillard wanted to know. "Somebody has invented teleportation, then?"

MacLeod shook his head. "It was General Nayland's chauffeur. It had to be. General Nayland's car is the only thing that gets out of here without being searched. The car itself is serviced at Army vehicles pool; nobody could hide anything in it for a confederate to pick up outside. Nayland is a stuffed shirt of the first stuffing, and a tinpot Hitler to boot, but he is fanatically and incorruptibly patriotic. That leaves the chauffeur. When Nayland's in the car, nobody even sees him; he might as well be a robot steering-device. Old case of Father Brown's Invisible Man. So, since he had to be the courier, all I did was have Ahmed Abd-el-Rahman shadow him, and at the same time tap our phones. When he contacted Lowiewski, I knew Lowiewski was our traitor."

Sir Neville Lawton gave a strangling laugh. "Oh, my dear Aunt Fanny! And Nayland goes positively crackers on security. He gets goose pimples every time he hears somebody saying 'E = mc\(^2\)', for fear a Komintern spy might hear him. It's a wonder he hasn't put the value of Planck's Constant on the classified list. He sets up all these fantastic search rooms and barriers, and then he drives through the gate, honking his bloody horn, with his chauffeur's pockets full of top secrets. Now I've seen everything!"

"Not quite everything," MacLeod said. "Kato's going to put that capsule in another cigarette pack, and he'll send one of his lab girls to Oppenheimer Village with it, with a message from Lowiewski to the effect that he couldn't get away. And when this chauffeur takes it out, he'll run into a Counter Espionage road-block on the way to town. They'll shoot him, of course, and they'll probably transfer Nayland to the Mississippi Valley Flood Control Project, where he can't do any more damage. At least, we'll have him out of our hair."

"If we have any hair left," Heym ben-Hillel gloomed. "You've got Nayland into trouble, but you haven't got us out of it."

"What do you mean?" Suzanne Maillard demanded. "He's found the traitor and stopped the leak."

"Yes, but we're still responsible, as a team, for this betrayal," the Israeli pointed out. "This Nayland is only a symptom of the enmity which politicians and militarists feel toward the Free Scientists, and of their opposition to the research-contract system. Now they have a scandal to use. Our part in stopping the leak will be ignored; the publicity will be about the treason of a Free Scientist."

"That's right," Sir Neville Lawton agreed. "And that brings up another point. We simply can't hand this fellow over to the authorities. If we do, we establish a precedent that may wreck the whole system under which we operate."

"Yes: it would be a fine thing if governments start putting Free Scientists on trial and shooting them," Farida Khouroglu supported him. "In a few years, none of us would be safe."

"But," Suzanne cried, "you are not arguing that this species of an animal be allowed to betray us unpunished?"

"Look," Rudolf von Heldenfeld said. "Let us give him his pistol, and one cartridge, and let him remove himself
like a gentleman. He will spare himself the humiliation of trial and execution, and us all the embarrassment of having a fellow scientist pilloried as a traitor."

"Now there's a typical Prussian suggestion," Lowiewski said.

* * * * *

Kato Sugihara, returning alone, looked around the table. "Did I miss something interesting?" he asked.

"Oh, very," Lowiewski told him. "Your Junker friend thinks I should perform seppuku."

Kato nodded quickly. "Excellent idea!" he congratulated von Heldenfeld. "If he does, he'll save everybody a lot of trouble. Himself included." He nodded again. "If he does that, we can protect his reputation, after he's dead."

"I don't really see how," Sir Neville objected. "When the Counter Espionage people were brought into this, the thing went out of our control."

"Why, this chauffeur was the spy, as well as the spy-courier," MacLeod said. "The information he transmitted was picked up piecemeal from different indiscreet lab-workers and students attached to our team. Of course, we are investigating, mumble-mumble. Naturally, no one will admit, mumble-mumble. No stone will be left unturned, mumble-mumble. Disciplinary action, mumble-mumble."

"And I suppose he got that microfilm piecemeal, too?" Lowiewski asked.

"Oh, that?" MacLeod shrugged. "That was planted on him. One of our girls arranged an opportunity for him to steal it from her, after we began to suspect him. Of course, Kato falsified everything he put into that report. As information, it's worthless."

"Worthless? It's better than that," Kato grinned. "I'm really sorry the Komintern won't get it. They'd try some of that stuff out with the big betatron at Smolensk, and a microsecond after they'd throw the switch, Smolensk would look worse than Hiroshima did."

"Well, why would our esteemed colleague commit suicide, just at this time?" Karen Hilquist asked.

"Maybe plutonium poisoning." Farida suggested. "He was doing something in the radiation-lab and got some Pu in him, and of course, shooting's not as painful as that. So--"

"Oh, my dear!" Suzanne protested. "That but stinks! The great Adam Lowiewski, descending from his pinnacle of pure mathematics, to perform a vulgar experiment? With actual things?" The Frenchwoman gave an exaggerated shudder. "Horrors!"

"Besides, if our people began getting radioactive, somebody would be sure to claim we were endangering the safely of the whole establishment, and the national-security clause would be invoked, and some nosy person would put a geiger on the dear departed," Sir Neville added.

"Nervous collapse." Karen said. "According to the laity, all scientists are crazy. Crazy people kill themselves. Adam Lowiewski was a scientist. Ergo Adam Lowiewski killed himself. Besides, a nervous collapse isn't instrumentally detectable."

Heym ben-Hillel looked at MacLeod, his eyes troubled.

"But, Dunc; have we the right to put him to death, either by his own hand or by an Army firing squad?" he asked. "Remember he is not only a traitor; he is one of the world's greatest mathematical minds. Have we a right to destroy that mind?"

Von Heldenfeld shouted, banging his fist on the table: "I don't care if he's Gauss and Riemann and Lorenz and Poincare and Minkowski and Whitehead and Einstein, all collapsed into one! The man is a stinking traitor, not only to us, but to all scientists and all sciences! If he doesn't shoot himself, hand him over to the United States, and let them shoot him! Why do we go on arguing?"

* * * * *

Lowiewski was smiling, now. The panic that had seized him in the hallway below, and the desperation when the cigarette pack had been opened, had left him.

"Now I have a modest proposal, which will solve your difficulties," he said. "I have money, papers, clothing, everything I will need, outside the reservation. Suppose you just let me leave here. Then, if there is any trouble, you can use this fiction about the indiscreet underlings, without the unnecessary embellishment of my suicide--"

Rudolf von Heldenfeld let out an inarticulate roar of fury. For an instant he was beyond words. Then he sprang to his feet.

"Look at him!" he cried. "Look at him, laughing in our faces, for the dupes and fools he thinks we are!" He thrust out his hand toward MacLeod. "Give me the pistol! He won't shoot himself; I'll do it for him!"

"It would work, Dunc. Really, it would," Heym ben-Hillel urged.

"No," Karen Hilquist contradicted. "If he left here, everybody would know what had happened, and we'd be accused of protecting him. If he kills himself, we can get things hushed up: dead traitors are good traitors. But if he remains alive, we must disassociate ourselves from him by handing him over."

"And wreck the prestige of the Team?" Lowiewski asked.
"At least you will not live to see that!" Suzanne retorted.
   Heym ben-Hillel put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. "Is there no solution to this?" he almost
   wailed.
   "Certainly: an obvious solution," MacLeod said, rising. "Rudolf has just stated it. Only I'm leader of this Team,
   and there are, of course, jobs a team-leader simply doesn't delegate." The safety catch of the Beretta clicked a period
   to his words.
   "No!" The word was wrenched almost physically out of Lowiewski. He, too, was on his feet, a sudden
   desperate fear in his face. "No! You wouldn't murder me!"
   "The term is 'execute'," MacLeod corrected. Then his arm swung up, and he shot Adam Lowiewski through the
   forehead.
   For an instant, the Pole remained on his feet. Then his knees buckled, and he fell forward against the table,
   sliding to the floor.

   * * * * *

   MacLeod went around the table, behind Kato Sugihara and Farida Khouroglu and Heym ben-Hillel, and stood
   looking down at the man he had killed. He dropped the automatic within a few inches of the dead renegade's
   outstretched hand, then turned to face the others.
   "I regret," he addressed them, his voice and face blank of expression, "to announce that our distinguished
   colleague, Dr. Adam Lowiewski, has committed suicide by shooting, after a nervous collapse resulting from
   overwork."
   Sir Neville Lawton looked critically at the motionless figure on the floor.
   "I'm afraid we'll have trouble making that stick, Dunc," he said. "You shot him at about five yards; there isn't a
   powder mark on him."
   "Oh, sorry; I forgot." MacLeod's voice was mockingly contrite. "It was Dr. Lowiewski's expressed wish that his
   remains be cremated as soon after death as possible, and that funeral services be held over his ashes. The big electric
   furnace in the metallurgical lab will do, I think."
   "But ... but there'll be all sorts of formalities--" the Englishman protested.
   "Now you forget. Our contract," MacLeod reminded him. "We stand upon our contractual immunity: we
certainly won't allow any stupid bureaucratic interference with our deceased colleague's wishes. We have a regular
M.D. on our payroll, in case anybody has to have a death certificate to keep him happy, but beyond that--" He
shrugged.
   "It burns me up, though!" Suzanne Maillard cried. "After the spaceship is built, and the Moon is annexed to the
Western Union, there will be publicity, and people will eulogize this species of an Iscariot!"
   Heym ben-Hillel, who had been staring at MacLeod in shocked unbelief, roused himself.
   "Well, why not? Isn't the creator of the Lowiewski function transformations and the rules of inverse
probabilities worthy of eulogy?" He turned to MacLeod. "I couldn't have done what you did, but maybe it was for
the best. The traitor is dead; the mathematician will live forever."
   "You miss the whole point," MacLeod said. "Both of you. It wasn't a question of revenge, like gangsters
bumping off a double-crosser. And it wasn't a question of whitewashing Lowiewski for posterity. We are the
MacLeod Research Team. We owe no permanent allegiance to, nor acknowledge the authority of, any national
sovereignty or any combination of nations. We deal with national governments as with equals. In consequence, we
must make and enforce our own laws.
   "You must understand that we enjoy this status only on sufferance. The nations of the world tolerate the Free
Scientists only because they need us, and because they know they can trust us. Now, no responsible government
official is going to be deceived for a moment by this suicide story we've confected. It will be fully understood that
Lowiewski was a traitor, and that we found him out and put him to death. And, as a corollary, it will be understood
that this Team, as a Team, is fully trustworthy, and that when any individual Team member is found to be
untrustworthy, he will be dealt with promptly and without public scandal. In other words, it will be understood, from
this time on, that the MacLeod Team is worthy of the status it enjoys and the responsibilities concomitant with it."
Chapter I

There was a long, uneasy swell on the surface of the Indian Ocean as though someone were gently rocking the floor beneath it, and a hot, moist wind blew against the face of Walter Weyl, A.B., A.M., B.Sc., as he stood against the rail of the pudgy little Messageres Maritimes steamer, wondering whether he would dare to chance a spell of seasickness by lighting a well-cured pipe for the fourth time that afternoon.

It was hot—and off to the west, Tamatave's houses gleamed white and blistering against the green background of the Madagascar jungle, blued by the distance. Away to the north the coastline stretched illimitable. It would be another day at least before the steamer arrived at Andovorata, and Walter Weyl, A.B., A.M., B.Sc, would be able to get at the heart of the mysterious occurrences that had brought him there.

His mind traveled back to the letter from his friend of college days, Raoul Duperret, now on French government service in that mysterious land—Madagascar. He saw it again before him, the characteristic French handwriting, the precise French phrasing:

"... alas, we cannot pursue these investigations, through lack of money. To you, then, my friend, I appeal. To you belongs, permit me to say, that combination so rare of the talent for scientific investigation and the means to pursue it. To you also will appertain the credit for any discovery.

"Let me, in detail, tell you of what we know. Diouma-Mbobo is a chieftain of the blacks in the part of the island, who have never been rescued from cannibal practices. He is, as far as we know, a man who rules by law and is of a truthfulness. Thus, when he accused the Tanôsy, who are the next tribe to him, of stealing people and eating them, we took measures and did not too much believe the denials of the Tanôsy. But Diouma-Mbobo's people continue to disappear, and when the commandant sent a whole company of Senegalese to preserve order, they still disappeared. What is still more distressing, is that some of the Senegalese also disappeared, and save but a solitary rifle or two found in the jungle, no trace of them remains.

"There is some fear in the island and we are in danger of losing our grip on the natives, for we cannot at all explain these disappearances nor prevent them. The commandant says, 'Send a battalion of chasseurs,' but it is my belief that a battalion of chausseurs would likewise fail, and I send for you, for I believe the agency that destroys men thus is not human. No human would neglect the rifles.

"As you know, Madagascar is a country apart. We have here the giant spiders, large as bats; the lizards, large as sheep, and no, not a single snake. All our animals are outré, impossible even, and what if one more impossible than all . . . ? And thus it is to you, my rich American friend, I appeal for myself and my country."

It had offered precious little real information, that letter, but enough to have caused Walter Weyl to drop a learned monograph on the ammonites of the Upper Cretaceous and hurry across ten thousand miles of ocean with microscopes, rifles and all the equipment of the modern scientist, to the aid of his friend.

The sun went down suddenly, as it does in the tropics, and the sea was purple darkness all at once. The lights of Tamatave twinkled away behind and were blotted out; off to the west was only the menacing blot of the huge island, forbidding and dangerous in the gloom. Weyl sat musing by the rail, listening to the hushed voices of a couple of men in the bows.

Forgetting his dinner below, he fell into a half-doze, from which he was suddenly awakened by a sense of approaching evil, definite, yet which could not be located. He looked about lazily. The Southern Cross hung brilliant in the sky; there was no other light but the flare of portholes on the water, and no sound but the slap of waves against the bows. Yet the night had suddenly become dreadful. He struggled lazily to put a name to the sense of impending doom, and as he struggled there was a sudden and terrible scream from the bow &mdash; the cry of a man in mortal anguish and fear.

"Oh&mdash;oh&mdash;oh&mdash;uh&mdash;" it went, running off into a strangled sob, and through it cut the shout of the other sailor, "Secours! Secours! Ferent ..." and the sound of a blow on soft flesh.

Weyl leaped to his feet and ran forward; there was the sound of a slamming door, and a quick patter of feet behind him. In front was the blackness of the bows, out of which emerged a panic-stricken man who charged against him, babbling incoherent French, and bore him to the deck. As he went down he caught a glimpse of two waving prehensile arms, like lengths of fire-hose, silhouetted against the sky.

Somebody ran past him, the deck leaped into illumination as lights were switched on, and he picked himself up to see &mdash; nothing. The bows were empty. There was a babble of conversation:

"Where is Ferentini?"
"What is the trouble?"
"Who is there?"

There was confusion, stifled by the appearance of the captain, a eupeptic little man in a blue coat and a tremendous moustache which swept his shoulders. "This uproar &mdash; what does it mean?" he said. "Let the sailor Dugasse come forward."
A big Basque, obviously panic-stricken and with rolling eyes, was shoved into the light. "Tell us the reason for this," demanded the captain.

"Ferentini and I," he gasped, "we were talking, so, in the bow. One, two big arms, like a gorilla, seize him by the neck, the chest, and zut! he is gone. I strike at them, but he is gone."

"Assassin!" said the captain briefly, "Confess that you quarreled and you threw him over."

"No, no. He was taken. I swear it. By the Holy Virgin, I swear it."

"Put this man in the lazarette, you Marulaz, and you Noyon. There will be an investigation. Take his knife away from him."

"His knife is gone, monsieur," said one of the seamen who had stepped forward to take charge of the sailor Dugasse.

"Without doubt, he stabbed the other. Put him in irons," was the captain's succinct reply, as he turned toward the cabin and his interrupted dinner.

Walter Weyl stepped forward. "I think the man's story is true," he offered. "I think I saw something myself."

"Permit me to inform you, monsieur, that I am the commandant of the vessel," remarked the eupeptic captain, with the utmost courtesy. "There will be an investigation. If the man is innocent it will do him no harm to spend a night in the lazarette." And again he turned away.

Dissatisfied, but realizing that he could do nothing, Weyl walked toward the bows, to see if he could find any trace of the strange encounter. There was nothing, but as he was about to return and go below, his foot struck something, which on investigation with a flashlight, proved to be the knife of the sailor Dugasse.

The blade was wet, and as he picked the weapon up there dripped slowly from it a pale, greenish oleaginous liquid, totally unlike human blood. With this bit of evidence in his hand, he started thoughtfully for his cabin.

Chapter II

Two days later the friends sat under the giant mimosa, in whose shade Raoul Duperret had built a little cottage on the height overlooking Andananarivo. A table had been dragged outdoors and was now piled with a miscellaneous collection of instruments, papers and microscope slides.

Weyl leaned back in his chair with a sigh and lit his pipe.

"Let us see what we have, after all this study," he said. "Check me if I go wrong. Diouma-Mbobo's people and about a dozen of the Senegalese have disappeared mysteriously. So did the sailor Ferentini on the boat that brought me here. In no case was any trace found of the man after he disappeared, and in the cases on the island when anything was found it was always a knife or a rifle.

"This report," he ruffled the papers, "from one of the Senegalese, says that he saw his companion jerked up into a tree by a huge black rope, but when he rushed to the tree he could see nothing. It was late in the evening. Now this account agrees singularly with that of the sailor Dugasse — and moreover, if natives were responsible for the disappearances, they would at least have taken the knives, if not the guns.

"Therefore, I consider that the disappearance of Ferentini, the Senegalese and the natives was due to the same agency, and that the agency was not human; and, therefore, I think the Tanôsy and the sailor Dugasse, although he is still in jail, should be acquitted."

Duperret nodded a grave assent.

"But I am sure it was nothing supernatural. I saw something on that boat, Duperret, and the Senegalese saw something. Moreover, there is Dugasse's knife. I have analyzed that liquid which dripped from it; it is blood, indubitably, but blood different from any I have ever seen. It contains a tremendous number of corpuscles of a new character, not red, but greenish yellow, and the liquid in which they float is similar to that of all other bloods. More than anything, it resembles the blood of an oyster, which is impossible, as oysters do not lift men into trees. Therefore, I accuse some hitherto unknown animal of these deaths.

"But what kind of an animal are we dealing with?" Weyl went on without paying any attention to an interruption from Duperret. "Evidently a very swift and formidable one. It killed Ferentini in a few seconds. It dragged a powerful Senegalese, who was provided with a rifle, off with equal swiftness, and the stabs of Dugasse were as futile against it as the rifle of the other black boy.

"In both cases, the attack came from above, and I am inclined to think, since we were attacked some distance off the coast and the natives some distance inland, that the animal possesses extraordinary mobility; probably wings. This would make a bird of it; which is impossible because of the blood; therefore, making the whole thing absurd. But in any case, the hunt for this animal, or animals, for there may be more than one, will be a dangerous business."

"All is decided then?" asked Duperret. "Very well, let us depart. I am eager for action, my friend." And he stood up, stretching his muscular frame toward the towering tree.

"Done," said Weyl.
He rose. "You have same influence with the military authorities, you of the civil arm? If the matter were put to
the commandant in the proper way, do you suppose we could get an escort? I need not conceal from you that this
big-game hunt is likely to be a serious business. Any animal that devours live men . . ."

"The commandant and I were at St. Cyr together," replied Duperret. "He will doubtless appoint a lieutenant and
a demi-company of African chasseurs to assist us."

Chapter III
A week later found them with a dapper French lieutenant, Dubosc by name, making the best of insufficient pup
tents and canned French sausage by a dank, slow stream a few miles out of Fort Dauphin. Around them lay or
squatted a perspiring group of black soldiers in the uniform of the Chasseurs d’Afrique, while round them again,
further from the sun of the white men's presence, were as many natives, equally sable of hue, and with no uniforms
at all. These were the guides lent by Diouma-Mbobo, silent and somewhat scared men, for that portion of the jungle
had earned a bad reputation from the repeated disappearances.

Weyl was annoyed. "If we only knew what we were looking for and where to find it," he said to Duperret that
evening, "but here we are three days out, with our labor for our pains. Hunting for one animal in this jungle is like
the old needle and haystack saying."

"Yes, and I'm afraid for the guides," the Frenchman had answered. "They'll desert unless they are given
something to do."

Night found them as restless as the guides. Weyl woke to a sense of something impending, looked out and saw
only the calm sentries speaking in low tones as they encountered each other at the end of their rounds. He felt
reassured, and dropped off into another hour or two of slumber punctuated by fierce dreams, woke again and saw a
moonlit shadow on the flap of his tent. "Raoul!" he called softly.

The Frenchman bent and entered.
He was fully dressed.

"Nerves keep you awake, too?" said Weyl. "I've been awake before, but everything's quiet. But why are you
dressed?"

"I have a premonition. Also, I hear something unusual. You hear that strange whistling? No, you would not.
You are not used to jungle noises. To me it is very much to notice. Something . . ." and he looked at his friend, who,
though in a strictly unofficial manner, was recognized as commander of the expedition. "Shall we rouse the
soldiers?"

"They'll need sleep if we're to march all day," Weyl answered.

"But I am thinking we will not need to march. However&mdash;" Raoul was about to dismiss his feeling as a
fancy and threw another glance over his shoulder through the open tent flap.

In an instant he was on his feet, almost tearing the tent from its pegs, a half cry escaping his lips that caused
Weyl to leap up beside him, seizing the revolver that lay by his hand.

Three, four, half a dozen snakelike arms, mysterious in the moonlight, hovered for an instant over the heads of
two sentries who had met at the edge of the trees, and before they had comprehended their danger, before they could
be warned, they were gripped, lifted from their feet and their cries stifled before they reached the gloom of the
branches fully ten feet above.

Weyl, with a horror such as he had never felt before, seemed to clutch at his throat, fired rapidly into the tree.
Something dropped with a crash of leaves; a veritable chorus of whistlings and swishings rose around the camp, and
in the tents and along the sentry line there were sudden lights and activity, shouts of "Qui vive?" "Aux armes!" and
the thick note of a hastily blown bugle as its owner was roused from sleep.

Men ran from their tents to stand gazing. "Raoul!" shouted the American. "It's here! The machine gun!" and,
pistol in hand, in his sleeping garments, he dashed for the tree.

He glanced up. A subdued rustling gave no clue to its source, nothing to shoot at, but out of the tail of his eye
he caught a glimpse of motion among the giant ferns, and the peculiar whistling again became audible.

He turned, and was suddenly conscious of an insane disbelief in his senses. What he saw resembled nothing so
much as an enormous umbrella, standing ten feet high on stilt-like, but prehensile arms, while at the point where
they gathered, a huge, bulbous head rose and fell rhythmically as the thing emitted that singular, high-pitched
whistle. There was something unspeakably loathsome, some touch reminiscent of putrefaction and decay about it.

An arm, like a huge snake, lifted from the ground and swung aimlessly about under the leaves. Abruptly,
another animal, the duplicate of the first in all respects, came from behind a tree to join it, and the two, despite their
clumsy form and lurching uneven movement, began to advance toward him with a rapidity that was astonishing.

Weyl awoke to the necessity of flight. He raced back toward the camp, where Lieutenant Dubosc, aroused by
the shots and cries, and aware that something was impending, had formed the Senegalese in a rough, slanting angle
of a line, the men facing the jungle, while behind them Diouma-Mbobo's natives crouched in frightened curiosity.
The American turned as he reached the line. Behind him, into the clearing, with an odd semblance of order, came a half-dozen, a dozen, twenty of those terrible umbrella-like shapes, moving deliberately, but covering the ground as fast as a man runs.

A shot was followed by an order, a bugle note, and the irritating crash of the volley, which shaded into the rattling drum of the machine guns. When his eyes again became used to the dark after the flame of the rifles, Weyl saw that the giant, shapeless beasts were moving forward as swiftly and imperturbably as before. Had all the shots missed?

Another volley collapsed into a frantic and spasmodic burst of firing, as no effect was visible on the hideous shapes that came on swiftly.

Weyl aimed his revolver carefully at one bobbing head, and the shot was drowned in a crashing chorus of fire; the beast came right on. He was dimly conscious of shooting again and again in a kind of frenzy at those horrible bulky umbrellas that kept coming closer, dim figures of horror in the green moonlight, huge and impregnable, towering over the little group of humans who shouted and cursed and fired impotently.

One man, half maddened, even ran forward, waving his bayonet, and was gathered gently up by two of those big arms as a child might be picked up by its parent.

A thrill of wavering ran down the line; one or two threw away their rifles, when suddenly, right at their feet, one of the monsters collapsed. There was a chorus of whistling and they moved backward, apparently without turning, as rapidly and silently as they had come.

A feeble cheer rose from the Senegalese, a cheer that was silenced instantly, for a glance revealed that half the hastily formed line was missing, the men gone as completely as though they had never been.

Weyl was aware that he had been clicking an empty pistol, that his throat was dry, that Duperret sat at his feet, his face in his hands, seemingly without power of motion. Senegalese and natives, frightened to the verge of madness, babbled like children all around him. The iron voice of Dubosc rose:

"Silence, my children!"

Out in the clearing before them was no sign that men had battled for their lives, save one ugly, loathsome shape, that sprawled on the ground and twitched feebly in the gloom.

Chapter IV

The survivors of that unbelievable, one-sided battle dragged themselves back into Fort Dauphin five days later. One man was violently insane, tightly bound, and as for the rest, it seemed that only remnants of sanity remained. The emotional blacks had almost collapsed under the strain, and nothing but incoherent gibberings could be extracted from them by the soldiers who cared for the exhausted, weaponless, starving and almost naked remainder of the trim company of Chasseurs who marched out with drum and bugle only a fortnight before.

Weyl begged off from an immediate report to the commandant, and went to bed, where he slept the sleep of exhaustion for twenty hours on end, and Duperret did likewise.

Weyl woke vastly refreshed, and with the horror that had been dragging at his mind relieved, though with such a feeling of weariness as he had not known since college football days. The black boy at the door obligingly brought him the latest newspapers, now not quite a month old, and he re-established his touch with the world of men by reading them over the tiny breakfast of coffee and rolls which was all the fort physician would allow him.

An item in one of them caught his eye, and caused him to sit up in his chair with a whoop of joy, that brought a scandalized glance from Major Larivet, the white-moustached old Alsatian who was in command of the fort, and a grin from Duperret, the first since that dreadful night of the attack.

The item, in bad French, was a translation from the bad English of a New York newspaper telling of Weyl's departure for Madagascar. It was filled with the exalted pseudo-science of which newspapers are fond and contained much ingeniously sketchy biographical and geographical data, but its appeal was obvious.

The American leaned forward over the cups.

"Does your fort boast a typist?" he asked. "Lieutenant Dubosc has probably already told you of the terrible experience we have had. I am anxious to make my report on it through the newspapers."

"Monsieur," said Major Larivet, gravely, "he died an hour ago by my side. I know nothing but that I have lost many men from my command."

"So . . ." said Weyl, "All the more reason I should make my report in writing. I need not conceal from you the fact that we are facing a danger which threatens not merely Fort Dauphin and Madagascar, but the entire world."

There was incredulity on the major's face, but he replied courteously, "My means are entirely at your service, gentlemen."

Beginning his report with scientific exactitude, Weyl included Duperret's letter, noted the sudden midnight attack on the steamer and went on to the details of the expedition:

".... For hours after the attack," he wrote, "W were unable to get anything like control out of the chaos in the
camp. I think another attack of these unspeakably loathsome 'Umbrella Beasts' would have brought complete panic; certainly hardly any rifles but Duperret's and mine would have met them.

"We could not hope to escape by an immediate dash for the fort, though it was less than thirty hours' march away. The beasts seemed to be on every side, and they would have every advantage in the jungle, where we would have been instantly swept into the trees by their swinging tentacles.

"Fortunately, these hideous monsters appeared to have gathered their fill of human food for the time being, and meanwhile the idea of fire occurred to us. All the wood we could gather without too closely approaching the trees was collected and heaped in piles about five feet apart in a complete circle. These were set alight, and we huddled in the center of the blazing ring, almost roasted by the heat, but feeling infinitely safer. With the coming of day, the heat was almost intolerable, but we gained confidence as it became apparent that the beasts would not dare the fire, though we could hear them whistling in the trees.

"Our situation was bad. The supply of wood was not inexhaustible, and that of water was already used up. I am convinced that these beasts were possessed of a comparatively high intelligence. The manner of their attack, the character of the one killed in the battle, led to this conclusion; and they were evidently deliberately laying siege to us with the intention of starving us out of our refuge.

"Our rifles were useless, and to make a sudden dash through the lines would certainly involve the sacrifice of most of those present; perhaps all. So we sat down to plan a way out. Obviously, we had to find a means to make ourselves immune to their attacks.

"I thought I had it when I remembered that no barbarian, beast or insect, would tolerate castor oil. Desperate as was our situation, the idea of escaping a deadly and horrific death by means of that homely remedy made me want to laugh hysterically. I remember Duperret watching me trying to smother the urge, looking queerly at me, quite obviously doubtful of my mental balance. His speculative and startled glance added to the absurdity of the thing, and I almost lost my self-control. I realized we were all on the edge of madness.

"The idea had, of course, to be discarded. We had castor oil among our medical supplies, but barely enough to discourage the insects of the tropical jungle; certainly not enough to smear ourselves from head to foot to keep off those giant monstrosities menacing us from all sides.

"The solution we hit upon finally may not have been the best, but it was simple, and like many another, did not occur to us till we were ready to give up in despair. Duperret, Dubosc and I had spent the entire first day of our siege discussing and rejecting ways and means, and we had just about decided that the only thing to do was to make a concerted dash into the jungle, firing into the trees, and trusting to luck and mobility to carry us through, when the lieutenant startled us with a sudden leap, and shouted something wild, something we did not understand.

"We feared for his sanity as mutely we watched him dashing about furiously from spot to spot in the clearing, tearing up handful after handful of liana grass and throwing them on the fire.

"When, however, a dense cloud of thick, choking, black smoke rolled up, and when Dubosc turned to us with a triumphant light in his face, we understood dimly what his idea was, and in a frenzy of relief several of us danced foolishly in a circle about the fire and its column of smoke.

"In a council that followed, we decided that our attempt to escape had better be made during the day, once we had all noticed that there was less activity among our besiegers during the hours when the heat was most intense. We kept our fires burning, then, throughout the night until dawn. Nobody slept; we were too apprehensive, and too busy improvising torches for our protection during the march. The beasts, evidently fearful of the fire, remained in their trees all that night, and though we could hear them whistling in the trees.

"Fortunately, these hideous monsters appeared to have gathered their fill of human food for the time being, and we could not hope to escape by an immediate dash for the fort, though it was less than thirty hours' march along our march. Progress was necessarily slow. At some dark spots, where the jungle was thick, it was necessary to proceed in narrow files, and these were the most dangerous, not only because of the 'Umbrella Beasts' but also because of the fright and impatience of the men.

"It was in one of these places that a casualty occurred. One of the chasseurs suddenly broke from the line and ran, shouting madly, to wave his torch at a vinous growth hanging from a tree, which he must have taken for a
tentacle of one of the beasts. He stumbled, his torch flying from his hand as he fell. His danger then evidently deprived him of what senses he had remaining, for, regaining his feet, he ran, not back into the line but deeper into the jungle. We heard a strangled cry in a few moments. That was all. None of us dared to leave the company to bring him back.

"Another time, a man went raving mad, and made a violent attack on Dubosc. Before he could be caught, he stabbed that brave man twice in the breast.

"Now, as to the animals which attacked us. I had one before me for some sixty hours, though with little opportunity to examine and none at all to dissect it. My observations, though somewhat scanty, lead me to the conclusion that we are dealing with a hitherto unknown member of the great mollusk family. The family includes the octopus and oyster, neither with red blood, and it was the nearly colorless fluid that puzzled me about the blood of the beast that attacked the ship.

"The beast that was killed at the camp had a larger body than any known member of the family, and tentacles at least fifteen feet in length and correspondingly powerful. A protective covering of chitin appears to have been developed, and due to the lack of any internal skeleton and the fact that the muscles must base on it, this protective covering to its body is of a thickness and strength sufficient to be quite impervious to rifle bullets. The one we killed had received a bullet full in the eye, which passed through into its brain.

"It is this brain that offers the most remarkable feature of these creatures. A brief investigation shows me that their brains are certainly larger than those of any animals except the big apes, and probably as large as those of the lower races of man. This argues an intelligence extremely high, and makes them more than ever dangerous, since they can evidently plan acts and execute them in concert.

"They have eight tentacular arms, covered on the lower side with the usual cephalopod type of suckers, the center of each sucker being occupied, as in some species of octopus, by a small, sharp claw. The thickness, and therefore the muscular strength of these arms is enormous. It is no wonder men proved utterly powerless against them.

"I am unable to say anything about either their method of breeding or what device they have arrived at for breathing air; probably some protective covering keeps the gill-plumes moist, as in the crayfish, making access to water at times necessary.

"In the face are two very large eyes, capable of seeing well in the dark and located directly in front of the large brain. The mouth consists of a huge beak, razor-edged. There are no teeth. Add this formidable beak to their extraordinary powers of swimming, their swift progress on land, their giant strength and their great intelligence, and it becomes evident that the human race is faced with a great peril.

"There is nothing whatever to prevent these animals from swimming the ocean or attacking the greatest city. One of these beasts could kill a hundred people in an hour and hardly any weapon we possess would be of the slightest use."

As he wrote, Weyl's mind was again filled with the terror of that mad march through the jungle with the "Umbrella Beasts" whistling on every side, and his imagination shuddered at the picture of London or New York under an invasion from those grim Madagascar jungles; all business stopped, every door barred, the octopuses triumphantly parading the streets, breaking in here and there and strangling the last resistance of families cowering in corners, powerless against the invulnerable and irresistible animals. Here and there some squad armed with dynamite or some other weapon more powerful than rifles, would offer a brief resistance, but they too would go down in time. Civilization throttled, and in its place a ghastly reign of animalism...

Chapter V

Major Larivet was inclined to skepticism over Weyl's report. In a brusque, but kindly way, he had suggested that it be delayed, "...till you have had time to think it over. Perhaps, when the effect of your experience has &mdash; ah &mdash; worn off &mdash;"

Weyl gazed at him in astonishment at this suggestion, but he was to remember it forty days later.

Meanwhile, there was nothing to do but wait till the report reached the outer world, and some echo of it in the form of men, aeroplanes, scientists with their instruments and death dealing concoctions arrived to wipe out that terrible blot. And during the waiting, even Major Larivet's skepticism vanished under the pressure of events.

The octopuses, as Weyl called them, had confined their raids to isolated districts up to the time of his expedition, but now, acting apparently upon a well-formed plan, they became bolder and began a systematic extermination of every native in this part of the island.

Three days after the return of the expedition, a native runner dashed in half-crazed with fright to report a twilight raid on a whole village, from which hardly a soul escaped. As the days drew on, this ominous news was followed by such demonstrations of the power and intelligence of the octopuses as confirmed Weyl's darkest fears.

A village on the coast was attacked, and the natives, taking to their clumsy boats to escape the terror by land,
found themselves no less helpless on the water, the only news of the dreadful event coming from some native who had gone there and found only a circle of empty huts.

Alarm of panic proportions spread like wildfire among the Malagasy, and in a stream that became a torrent they poured into Fort Dauphin for protection.

Daily the reports of depredations showed that the octopus terror was spreading and coming nearer, and Major Larivet found himself faced with the problem of feeding several hundred hungry and frightened natives with means wholly inadequate.

The climax came with the arrival of four men, or rather, shadows of men, who babbled that they were the last of the great tribe of the Tanôsy. Fighters to the core, instead of flying, they had stood out in battle array against their antagonists. The result had been unspeakably horrible &mdash; they had seen their comrades torn to pieces before their eyes, and the women and children hunted down.

It was while things were in this state that the little tin-pot mail boat arrived with its cargo of supplies and European newspapers.

Weyl's heart rose as he marched off to his quarters eagerly with the papers under his arm, but it sank like lead when he and Duperret opened journal after journal, in quick, disappointed perusals.

Not one, they perceived, took the matter seriously. Weyl's phrase, "Umbrella Beasts," had been seized upon by humorous commentators with gusto, rolled on their tongues and spun off their pens to tickle the ribs of readers. Of serious acceptance there was not a sign. The general tone of the papers was one of howling derision. It was suggested that Weyl had gone crazy, that he was a publicity-mad mountebank. But the more usual spirit of the papers was that of the French wit who blared: "Weyl's Umbrella Beasts; Inseparable companions for that rainy-day walk. No one acquainted with the dictates of fashion can afford to dispense with this novel combination of household pet and Protective Implement!"

And the cartoons . . . !

Weyl looked up from the papers to meet Duperret's glance. There were actual tears in the Frenchman's eyes.

"It seems to be up to us," said Weyl, after a moment. "Well &mdash; I am not a rich man, as it is reckoned in America, but I can command a considerable amount of money, and can borrow more. I will write a cable-gram to be sent off immediately, and have every cent spent for materials to fight this thing."

Together they composed the carefully worded message to Weyl's assistant in the laboratory in New York, and together they took it to the dock and delivered it to the captain of the boat with the most urgent instructions to send it the moment he arrived at Andovoranbo.

Chapter VI

Not long after daybreak the American was roused from his sleep by a confused shouting under the window. Hurrying into his clothes, he dashed out to see the little mail boat wallowing crazily off the jagged rocks that guarded the entrance to the harbor, her funnels silent and smokeless. Within ten minutes she was right among the breakers, pounding in the surf, but there was no sign of officers, crew, or lifeboats.

It was late in the afternoon before he could secure a native dhow to get out to the wreck. When he stepped on the slanting deck of the wrecked boat, Weyl found what he had feared. There was no one on board — only a blood-stain here and there.

Every man in the settlement was quite capable of visualizing what had happened. Writhing, black-grey tentacles reaching up out of the midnight sea, the swarming of hideous bodies over the ship, relentless groping arms searching out the screaming seamen, the fatally prehensive embrace of repulsive flesh ...

That very night Fort Dauphin received notice that it was under close siege. A mile out on the northeast beach two natives were taken by an octopus that came unexpectedly out of the water on them, and on the opposite side of town a soldier was pursued along the sand right up to the walls of the fort. Later the report ran in that one of the sentinels on the west side had disappeared.

But neither Weyl nor Major Larivet was quite prepared for the bold attack on the fort two days later.

Twilight was just blueing the edges of the jungle a quarter mile from the bastions of the fort, and the three white men were smoking gloomily over their coffee, when a shot and a shout from the sentry brought them to their feet.

They hastened to the bastion. Out of the jungle in the same regular, military order they had preserved on that fatal night of the first attack, came the octopuses, huge ugly heads bobbing above, undulating tentacles below.

Larivet, with a gleam in his eyes at being at last able to come to grips with the enemy, snapped sharp orders as the artillerymen swung the two "seventy-fives" into position. Duperret and Weyl watched breathlessly, heedless of the wild cries of alarm that issued from the natives who had seen the octopuses. The mouth of the gun swung down slowly. An order. Brief motions, the crash of the discharge, and right in the center of the advancing line a terrific burst of flame and dust.
An octopus staggered, stumbled with wildly flailing arms and flopped inertly to the ground.

Crash! The bright flames from the two guns mingled, and in the flare of the explosions three more of the monsters went to oblivion. They were not invulnerable, then! There was a ray of hope!

Weyl found himself cheering frantically. He felt a pressure at his shoulder and saw a couple of natives beside him, their courage revived. The black artillerymen worked like mad. They could not miss at that point-blank range.

All down the octopus line were gaps, and the wounded beasts strove to right themselves. They wavered, broke, and in disorderly flight headed back into the jungle, pursued by the avenging shells of the seventy-fives till they had passed from sight.

The natives were crowding about, shouting with emotion and hurling epithets after the retreating monsters. They were saved — at least for the time being.

But the conference of the three white men that night was grave.

"We have not really accomplished very much," said Weyl, "except to show them that we have weapons against which they are not invulnerable. I don't think they will attempt to rush the fort again, but they are terribly intelligent. They may try a surprise attack at night or from the sea, or may even give us a regular starvation siege."

"No, they will not soon approach your guns again," agreed Duperret, "but what are we to do if they attack the town from the other side. The fort surely cannot hold all the people you have here."

"Gentlemen," said Larivet gravely, "in that case we can only do our duty. I shall have one of the guns moved to the other side of town. Meanwhile we can do nothing but wait till someone comes to help us."

"Or until we go to them," from Weyl.

Duperret paled slightly, and stood up. "I offer myself as a messenger," he said. "I will take a dhow out. If I am attacked, well, I know where to shoot them; in the eyes. I'll try it;"

"No, Raoul, no," said Weyl, "let me try it. It would be simply..."

He was interrupted. A native servant entered excitedly.

"Him one piece boat in town," said the black. "White man comes."

"Boat? White man?" queried Larivet, puzzled. A cheery voice in the doorway answered him, "I say, is anybody here?" it said, and in marched an extraordinary figure of a man.

A large sign saying "Englishman" could not have stamped his face more effectively than his expression of cheerful vapidity. His clothes were white, scrupulously clean, and meticulously pressed, and in one hand he bore what looked like a small fire extinguisher. He extended the other toward Weyl.

"You're Weyl, aren't you?" he said. "Mulgrave's my name; Henry Seaton Mulgrave. Earl of Mulgrave and Pembroke, and all that rot. At your service."

"Of course I remember," said Weyl cordially. "You gave that extraordinary paper on the Myxinidae before the British Association. Ah, that paper! Allow me," he said, and translated into rapid French for the benefit of Larivet, "to present the Earl of Mulgrave, one of the most distinguished of living scientists."

There were bows, a drink offered and accepted, and the visitor, carefully placing his fire extinguisher in the corner, curled his lanky frame up in a chair.

Chapter VII

"Seriously, though, y'know," Mulgrave said after finishing his whisky and soda, "if it hadn't been that I was a bit in the doldrums at the time your report came out, I believe I would have joined the rest of the world in thinking you somewhat..."

"But," Weyl exclaimed, "you can't possibly..."

"Oh, yes, I have," Mulgrave smiled. "The ruddy animals hadn't the decency to wait for a proper introduction, and paid us a visit on the Morgana; my yacht, y'know; just outside the harbor. I fancy when we got through with them they were rather scorched. Morgana was war-built and has steel decks, so we didn't mind putting the Flammenwerfer to work against them. We've got what's left of one stretched out on the deck. Others got away."

Weyl breathed a sigh of relief and thankfulness that this casual Englishman had come prepared. How easily the mail boat disaster might have been duplicated! He shuddered.

"Well then, part of our horrible problem seems to be solved, thanks to your foresight, Mulgrave. At least we have a means of wiping them out. But here's the difficulty. It will take years, killing them off one by one, as we'll have to do with your pump gun. I tell you, they infest the whole island, thousands of 'em. They're increasing and
multiplying faster than we could possibly kill them off. That's the only way I can explain this recent outbreak. They were few enough in number, before this, to remain in obscurity except in isolated districts, and known only to ignorant and superstitious natives. "Weyl's forehead creased in perplexity and worry. "If they keep on &mdash; well, they'll need the whole globe. And that means only one thing; man will have to get off it to make room for them. They're powerful enough, and intelligent enough, to have their own way about it, too. Don't doubt it. Unless&mdash;"

Mulgrave evidently did not share Weyl's anxiety, though he did not seem to underestimate the danger. "I'll finish that last sentence of yours, Weyl, although I'll admit things are a bit worse than I had thought. But meanwhile, let's look over our resources, and try to find out a bit more about the nature of the beast we're up against. The post-mortem of that lamentably deceased visitor on the Morgana's deck ought to tell us something of his weak points. Do you want to go out there now?"

With chairs tilted back against the cabin of the Morgana, the three men regarded the sundown sky in a moody and depressed silence. Their dissection of the octopus killed by Mulgrave's pump-gun had added little to their knowledge of the anatomy of the menacing brutes, save a confirmation of Weyl's hypothesis that their breathing, while on land, was conducted by means of the same gills which supplied them with oxygen in the water, protected, like the lobster's, by a covering of chitin.

Mulgrave's chair scraped on the deck. "Well, let's get back ashore," he said. "Can't do any more now I fancy, unless they decide to stage a party for us this evening."

"It comes down to this, then," said Weyl, continuing the conversation which had been abandoned with the end of their anatomical researches. "Fire, or some kind of guns heavier than the ordinary service rifle, are the only things that will do any particular good."

"Have you thought of gas, my friend?" asked Duperret.

"Huh," answered Weyl shortly. "Airplanes? Chemicals? And what about all the men on the island &mdash; for we should have to cover it all with gas to be of any use."

"The time is rather short, too, I fancy," chirped Mulgrave. "How long will provisions last?"

"Not long," agreed Duperret, moodily. "A week, or perhaps a little more."

"Then, within seven days, or at the most ten, we must concoct a plan and put it into force &mdash; a plan that will wipe out God knows how many of these unearthly enemies of the earth. It must be extermination, too, for if one pair were left to breed. . . I'm more than half convinced that the thing is hopeless. Yet I don't like to show the white flag. These are, after all, only beasts. Super-beasts, it is true, but the equals and heirs of man? I hate to believe it."

"But, my friend, you forget the force of mere numbers," said Duperret. "So many rats could easily overpower us, guns and all, from mere lack of time to kill them as fast as they came on. Comparative values, as of man and beast, are insignificant."

"There's only one chance," he said. "If we could find some way to attack them in the water &mdash; they must go there to breed at least, and I fancy they must make periodic visits to the water to wet their gill plumes in addition."

Chapter VIII

It was three days later.

Another octopus attack on the little fort had met with a bloody repulse, and a score of the great bodies lay at the edge of the jungle in varying stages of decomposition, where they had been blown to extinction by the swift shells of the seventy-fives. A conference was in progress on Major Larivet's verandah; a conference of beaten men.

"As a last resort," Duperret was saying, "there is the open sea and Mulgrave's yacht."

"Why, as for that," Weyl answered, "it wouldn't hold a tenth of us, even crowded to the rails. Besides, leave those natives behind? Damn it, they trust us."

"It would hardly be cricket," said Mulgrave. "What of the mail steamer? Aren't they apt to send someone to look us up when she does not appear?"

"Not even yet is the boat due at Andovoranto," said Major Larivet, "and there is the time for the news to reach Andananerivo. . . The lack of news to them will be but a token that we have pacified the Tanôsy and are in need of nothing."

"Yes," Duperret agreed, "I know these officials. They are aware of something unusual only when they have seventeen dossiers, each neatly tied in red tape and endorsed by the proper department head. My friends, we are alone."

"Which means," Weyl continued, "that we have about a week more to live before the food runs out or they overwhelm us. And then &mdash; good-by world of men!"

There was little silence, broken only by the sound of Mulgrave puffing at his pipe. It was ended by a shot and a
shout from one of the sentries at the western side of the fort; the signal of another attack.

During that night the great octopuses twice fought their way down to the fort, and twice were repulsed, though the second effort, bigger and more violently sustained than the first, only ended when Mulgrave, called in the crew of his yacht and their flammenwerfer.

As the following day drew on, the unrest in the jungle about the army post became more pronounced. Major Larivet, Duperret, and Weyl, worn with lack of sleep, kept vigil by the little counterscarp, listening to the innumerable whistlings and rustlings so near to them, while the soldiers and natives, visibly shaken, were difficult to keep in line.

When evening came, it seemed as though the octopuses had concentrated their forces for a great drive. The whistlings had increased to such a volume that sleep was nearly impossible, and as soon as the sun went down, the movements of dark forms could be observed where the animals were silhouetted against the sky along the beach.

The first attack came half an hour later. It was a sporadic outburst, apparently, consisting of only three or four individuals, and these were quickly dispersed or slain by a few bursts from the seventy-fives. But it was followed by another, and another, the numbers of the attackers ranging all the way from three to fifteen or twenty. Unlike the previous attempts on the fort they were frenzied and unorganized as though the directing intelligence behind them had suddenly failed. Immune to fear, the living octopuses came right on, through the hail of fire and died at the foot of the rampart, or dashed over it even, to be wounded to death by bayonets fixed on long poles with which the black soldiers reached and stabbed frenziedly at eyes and softer parts.

Once, during a lull in the combat, the commandant and Weyl were called to witness a monstrous dud, at the very edge of the fort between two of the hideous beasts. The ungainly creatures locked in each other's tentacles, rolled hideously together, tearing at each other with their great beaks, till a Senegalese reached over with one of those improvised bayonet pikes and dealt first one and then the other mortal stabs. Weyl felt a singular sensation of nausea.

Toward dawn it became evident to the exhausted artillerymen and their wearied leaders that the octopuses were now aiming not so much at conquest, as at escape. They no longer blundered into the fires that had been built about the fort and village; no longer hurled themselves upon Mulgrave's crew of flame-throwers and the shells of the seventy fives. They seemed to be heading for the beach, to be striving to reach the water.

And when dawn broke, the men in the enclosure saw a few stragglers from the hideous army at the edge of the jungle, making their way, like the others, with ungainly flappings and swishings, always toward the beach. It was impossible to watch them without feeling an almost physical sensation of illness, of sinking. But what did it mean? No one among the harassed defenders of Fort Dauphin was prepared to say.

Chapter IX

Mulgrave's wearied crew had gone aboard with their ship, and the white men, refreshed by a few hours' sleep and a bath, were discussing the question. "I am of the opinion," Weyl was declaring, "that they have certain periods when they must wet their gill-plumes again, and last night's disturbance represents one of those periods. If we could only attack them at such a time...""

He was interrupted by the arrival of an excited Senegalese, who addressed Major Larivet:

"The boat she is smoke. She go."

"How?" "What?" cried the four, leaping to their feet and starting down the road in the direction of the pier.

It was too true. The Morgana, out beyond the reef line, was marked by a tiny plume of smoke from her funnel, and as they gazed, she seemed to move a bit.

"Quick!" shouted Weyl, "let's push off a dhow."

Followed by the Englishman, and at a longer distance by Duperret, he raced for the pier and leaped into the little craft. "Grab a sweep," he called to Larivet.

Propelled by sail and oar, the little craft began to swing out from the pier, and then catching the land breeze in its full strength, heeled over. Duperret drew in his sweep, useless at that speed. He shaded his eyes and looked toward the Morgana. Suddenly he turned with a short bitter laugh.

"Look," he said, pointing. A few hundred yard. ahead of the dhow, Weyl and Mulgrave saw a globular grey shape among the waves. From it, lying flush with the water, radiated tentacles. Weyl put the tiller over to avoid it, and as the craft swang saw another, and then another. It was the end.

But even as he prepared to wear the little ship round and run back for the pier, if indeed they could make that temporary safety, they saw out beyond the loathsome globular head and spreading arms a triangular fin-shape that cut the water with hardly a ripple.

It was charging straight at the octopus, and as they watched, there was a swift turmoil in the water, the flash of a sleek, wet, black body, a vision of dazzling teeth, had the globular head of the octopus disappeared into a boil of water from which rose two tentacles, waving vainly. Off to the right, another of those knife-like fins was coming,
followed by more — a half dozen, a dozen, a score; and suddenly around each of them there gathered the whirl and flush of a combat.

The dhow drew ahead, right toward the center of one of the tumultuous whirlpools. Out of it dissolved an octopus that was only half an octopus, its tentacles torn and a huge gash across that inhuman parody of a face — an octopus that was striving vainly to escape from a flashing fate that ran behind it.

Weyl shouted — Duperret began to weep; the unaffected tears of joy of the emotional Frenchman and Mulgrave, stirred from his imperturbability, was shouting, "Killer whales!" to an audience that had eyes and ears only for the savage battles all about them.

Everywhere, they could see through the clear tropical water that the killers, stronger and swifter, if less intelligent, were the victors. The octopuses, routed, were trying to get away as vainly as the natives had tried to escape from them.

"Let the bally yacht go," shouted Mulgrave to Weyl. "I want to enjoy this."

For fifteen, twenty minutes, they watched, until they saw the vanishing fin of a killer moving off to northward, signal that that part of the battle was over, and that the killers were departing for new fields of triumph. Three men, with hearts lighter than they had known them for weeks, manoeuvred the boat back to the pier.

Chapter X

"They seem to be gone, sure enough," said Weyl, tossing down on the table a brace of the native pheasants. It was only two days later, but he had returned from a four hours' trip into the jungle.

"I didn't even come across the traces of a single one of them — unless you can call a trace the fact that they seem to have cleaned out about all the animals in this district. Even the monkeys are gone."

"Do you think they will come back?" asked Major Larivet.

"I am sure they will not," said Weyl. "There seem to be perfect shoals of killer whales off the coast, attracted no doubt by the octopuses, which are their favorite food. You may be sure they would hunt down every one, as the killers are very voracious."

"But what made them appear in the first place?"

"God knows. It is, or was, since they are now gone, some phenomenon allied to that which produces the lemming migrations every twenty-eight years. You, Mulgrave, are a biologist. You know how, once in twenty-eight years, these little rat-like animals breed in such numbers that they overrun whole districts, and then migrate into the ocean where they are drowned by the thousand.

"These octopuses would have plenty of opportunity to develop their extraordinary size and intelligence, as well as their quality of breathing air by life in the shallow, deserted lagoons all around Madagascar, and if they were actuated by a life-cycle similar to that of the lemmings, they would breed in the vast numbers which we saw. It seems the only logical hypothesis.

"In any case, there is nothing for the rest of the world to fear. A sort of wireless telegraphy seems to exist among animals with regard to neighborhoods where food can be obtained in quantities, and just as you will see the condors of the Andes flock to where food is, the killer whales gathered around this visitation of giant cuttle fish.

"It is one of Nature's numerous provisions to right the balance of things on the earth when they threaten to get out of joint in any direction. If any other enemy of man were to multiply as these octopuses did, you may be sure he would find an animal ally.

"We were merely panic-stricken and foolish to think we could accomplish anything. We should have waited."

"And now, my friend," said Duperret, "I suppose I must bid you farewell."

"Yes. I am anxious to get back to my monograph on the Ammonites of the Upper Cretaceous. It will astonish the scientific world, I think."
There were but three days in which to decipher the most cryptic message ever delivered to earth.

George Harrison noticed the flashing red light on the instrument panel as he turned onto the bridge to Balboa Island. Just over the bridge, he pulled the car to the curb and flipped the switch with violence. "Harrison," he muttered.

"How's the water, fella?" asked the voice of Bob Mills, his assistant.

There was a beautiful moon over the island. The surf lapped at the tiers of the picturesque bridge. Soft music was playing somewhere. There was a tinkle of young laughter on the light sea breeze.

Harrison was vacationing and he viewed the emergency contact from Intersolar Spaceport with annoyance. "What do you want, Bob?"

"Sorry, George," Bob Mills said more seriously. "I guess you got to come back."

"Listen--" protested Harrison.

"Orders, George--orders from upstairs."

Harrison took a long look at the pleasant island street stretching out before him. Sea-corroded street lamps lit the short, island thoroughfare. People in light blue jeans, bronzed youths in skipper caps, deep-tanned girls in terry-cloth.

"What the hell is it?"

"Don't know, but it's big. Better hurry." He clicked off.

Harrison skidded the car into a squealing turn. Angrily, he raced over the bridge and onto the roaring highway. Thirty minutes later Intersolar Spaceport, Los Angeles, blazed ahead of him.

The main gate guards waved him in immediately and two cycle guards ran interference for him through the scores of video newsmen who lined the spaceport street.

Bob Mills met him at the entrance to the Administration building.

"Sorry, George, but--"

"Yeah. Oh, sure. Now what the hell is it all about?"

Mills handed him a sheaf of tele-transmittals. They bore heavy secret stamps. Harrison looked up quizzically. "You saw the video boys," Mills said. "The wheels think there might be some hysteria."

"Any reason for it?"

"Not that we know of--not that I know of anyway. The thing is coming in awfully fast--speed of light times a factor of at least two, maybe four."

Harrison whistled softly and scanned the reports frowning. "They contacted us--"

"What?"

"--in perfect Intersolar Convention code. Said they were coming in. That's all. The port boys have done all they could to find out what to expect and prepare for it. Somebody thought Engineering might be needed--that's why they sent for you."

"Used Intersolar Convention code, eh," mused Harrison.

"Yes," said Mills. "But there's nothing like this thing known in the solar system, nothing even close to this fast. Besides that, there was a sighting several days ago that's being studied."

"One of the radio observatories claims to have received a new signal from one of the star clusters...."

* * * * *

The huge metal vessel settled to a perfect contact with its assigned strip. It hovered over the geometric center of the long runway and touched without raising a speck of dust.

Not a sound, not a puff of smoke issued from any part of it. Immediately it rose a few feet above the concrete and began to move toward the parking strip. It moved with the weightless ease of an ancient dirigible on a still day. It was easily the largest, strangest object ever seen before at the spaceport.

A team of searchlight men swivelled the large spot atop the tower and bathed the ship in orange light.

"What's that mean?" asked Mills paging his way through a book.

"Halt propulsion equipment, I think," said Harrison.

"It's a good thing the code makers were vague about that," smiled Mills. "It's a good thing they didn't say jets or
rockets--'cause this thing hasn't got any."

"Attention!"
That single word suddenly issued from the alien ship.
"The Races of Wan greet you."
It might have been the voice of a frog. It was low, gutteral, entirely alien, entirely without either enthusiasm or trace of human emotion.

"Jesus!" muttered Mills.
Scores of video teams focused equipment on the gleaming alien.
"The Races of Wan desire contact with you."
"In English yet!" amazed Mills.
"The basis of this contact together with its nature are dependent upon you!"
The voice had become ugly. There was nothing human about it save only the words, which were in flawless English.
"Your system has long been under surveillance by the Races of Wan. Your--progress has been noted."
There was almost a note of contempt, thought Harrison, in the last sentence.
"Your system is about to reach others. It therefore becomes a matter of urgency that the Races of Wan make contact.
"Your cultural grasp is as yet quite small. You reach four of your own system's planets. You have attempted--with little success--colonization. You anticipate further penetrations.
"You master the physical conditions of your system with difficulty. You are a victim of many of the natural laws--natural laws which you dimly perceive.
"But you master yourselves with greatest difficulty, and you are infinitely more a victim of forces within your very nature--forces which you know almost not at all."

"What the hell--" began Mills.
"Because of this disparity your maturity as a race is much in doubt. There are many among the cultures of the stars who would consider your race deviant and deadly. There are a very few who would welcome you to the reaches of space.
"But most desire more information. Thus our visit. We have come to gather data that will determine your--disposition--
"Your race accepts the principle of extermination. You relentlessly seek and kill for commercial or political advantage. You live in mistrust and envy and threat. Yet, as earthlings, you have power. It is not great, but it contains a threat. We wish now to know the extent of that threat.

"Here is the test."
Suddenly an image resolved itself on the gleaming metal of the ship itself.
It was a blueprint.
A hundred cameras focused on it.
"Construct this. It is defective. Correct that which renders it not useful. We shall return in three days for your solution."

"Good God!" exclaimed Harrison. "It's a--sword!"
"A what?" asked Mills.
"A sword--people used to chop each other's heads off with them."

Almost at once the metal giant was seen to move. Quickly it retraced its path across the apron, remained poised on the center of the runway, then disappeared almost instantaneously.

* * * * *
The Intersolar Council weathered the storm. The representative of the colony on Venus was recalled, his political life temporarily ended. A vigilante committee did for a time picket the spaceport. But the tremendous emotional outbursts of the first day gradually gave way to a semblance of order.

Video speakers, some of them with huge followings, still denounced the ISC for permitting the alien to land in the first place. Others clamored for a fleet to pursue the arrogant visitor. And there were many fools who chose to ignore the implications of the strange speech and its implied threat. Some even thought it was a gigantic hoax.

But most men soon came to restore their trust in the scientists of the Intersolar Council.
Harrison cast down the long sheet of morning news that had rolled out of the machine.
"The fools! They'll play politics right up to the last, won't they?"

"What else?" asked Mills. "Playing politics is as good a way as any of avoiding what you can't figure out or solve."

"And yet, what the hell are we doing here?" Harrison mused. "Listen to this."
He picked up a stapled sheaf of papers from his desk.

"Analysis of word usage indicates a complete knowledge of the English language—that's brilliant, isn't it? The ideational content and general semantic tone of the alien speech indicates a relatively high intelligence.

"Usage is current, precise....' Bob, the man who wrote that report is one of the finest semantics experts in the solar system. He's the brain that finally broke that ancient Martian ceremonial language they found on the columns."

"Well, mastermind," said Mills. "What will the Engineering report say when you get around to writing it?"

"Engineering report? What are you talking about?"

"You didn't read the memo on your desk then? The one that requested a preliminary report from every department by 2200 today."

"Good God, no," said Harrison snapping up the thin yellow sheet. "What in hell has a sword got to do with Engineering?"

"What's it got to do with Semantics?" mocked Robert Mills.

* * * * *

Construct this. It is defective. Correct that which renders it not useful.

Harrison's eyes burned. He would have to quit pretty soon and dictate the report. There wasn't any use in trying to go beyond a certain point. You got so damned tired you couldn't think straight. You might as well go to bed and rest. Bob Mills had gone long before.

He poured over the blueprint again, striving to concentrate. Why in hell had he not given up altogether? What possible contribution could an engineer make toward the solution of such a problem?

Construct this.

You simply made the thing according to a simple blueprint. You tried out what you got, found out what it was good for, found out then what was keeping it from doing that. You fixed it.

Well, the sword had been constructed. Fantastic effort had been directed into producing a perfect model of the print. Every minute convolution had been followed to an incredible point of perfection. Harrison was willing to bet there was less than a ten thousandths error—even in the handle, where the curves seemed to be more artistic than mechanical.

It is defective.

What was defective about it? Nobody had actually tried the ancient weapon, it was true. You didn't go around chopping people's heads off. But experts on such things had examined the twelve-pound blade and had pronounced it "well balanced"—whatever that meant. It would crack a skull, sever arteries, kill or maim.

Correct....

What was there to correct? Could you make it maim or kill better? Could you sharpen it so that it would go through thick clothing or fur? Yes. Could you make it a bit heavier so that it might slice a metal shield? Yes, perhaps. All of these things had been half-heartedly suggested. But nobody had yet proposed any kind of qualitative change or been able to suggest any kind of change that would meet the next admonition of the alien:

Correct that which renders it not useful.

What actually could be done to a weapon to make it useful? Matter of fact, what was there about the present weapon that made it not useful. Apparently it was useful as hell—useful enough to cut a man's throat, pierce his heart, slice an arm off him....

What were the possible swords; what was the morphology of concept sword?

Harrison picked up a dog-eared report.

There was the rapier, a thin, light, extremely flexible kind of sword (if you considered the word "sword" generic, as the Semantics expert had pointed out). It was good for duels, man-to-man combat, usually on what the ancients had called the "field of honor."

There were all kinds of short swords, dirks, shivs, stilettos, daggers. They were the weapons of stealth men—and sometimes women—used in the night. The assassin's weapon, the glitter in the darkened alley.

There were the machetes. Jungle knives, cane-cutting instruments. The bayonets....

You could go on and on from there, apparently. But what did you get? They were all more or less useful, Harrison supposed. There was nothing more you could do with any kind of sword that was designed for a specific purpose.

Harrison sighed in despair. He had expected vastly more when he had first heard the alien mention "test". He had expected some complex instrument, something new to Terra and her colonies. Something involving complex and perhaps unknown principles of an alien technology. Something appropriate to the strange metal craft that traveled so very fast.

Or perhaps a paradox. A thing that could not be constructed without exploding, like a lattice of U235 of exactly critical size. Or an instrument that must be assembled in an impossible sequence, like a clock with a complete,
single-pieced outer shell. Or a part of a thing that could be "corrected" only if the whole thing were visualized, constructed, and tested.

No, the blueprint he held now involved an awareness that must prove beyond mere technology, or at least Terran technology. Maybe it involved an awareness that transcended Terran philosophy as well.

Harrison slapped the pencil down on his desk, rose, put his coat on, and left the office.

* * * * *
"... we are guilty as the angels of the bible were guilty. Pride! That's it, folks, pride. False pride...."
Harrison fringed the intent crowd of people cursing when, frequently, someone carelessly bumped into him in an effort to get nearer the sidewalk preacher.
"We tried to live with the angels above. We wanted to fly like the birds. And then we wanted to fly like the angels...."

Someone near Harrison muttered an "Amen". Harrison wove his way through them wondering where the hundreds of such evangelists had come from so suddenly.
"Ya know, folks, the angels themselves got uppity once. They wanted to be like Gawd himself, they did. Now, it's us."

There was a small flutter of laughter among the crowd. It was very quickly suppressed--so quickly that Harrison gained a new appreciation of the tenor of the crowd.

"That's right, laugh! Laugh at our folly!" continued the thin-faced, bright-eyed man. "It was a sword that the angel used to kick Adam and Eve out of the garden. The sword figures all through the bible, folks. You ought to read the bible. You ought to get to know it. It's all there. All there for you to read...."

By Christ, thought Harrison. Here was an aspect of the concept, sword, he had not considered. Morphological thinking required that all aspects of a concept be explored, all plotted against all others for possible correlation....

No. That was silly. The bible was a beautiful piece of literature and some people believed it inspired. But the great good men who wrote the bible had little scientific knowledge of a sword. They would simply describe the weapon as a modern fiction writer would describe a blaster--without knowing any more about one than that it existed and was a weapon.

Surely the ISC's weapons expert could be trusted to know his swords.

* * * * *
"Go on home," Mills pleaded. "You're shot and you know it. You said yourself this isn't our show."
"You go home, Bob. I'm all right."
"George ... you're acting strange. Strange as hell."
"I'm all right. Leave me alone," snapped Harrison becoming irritable.
Mills watched silently as the haggard man slipped a tablet into his mouth.
"It's all right, Bob," smiled Harrison weakly. "I know how to use Benzedrine."
"You damn fool, you'll wreck yourself...."

But the engineer ignored him. He continued paging his way through the book--the bible, no less. George Harrison and the bible!

* * * * *
Mills was awakened by the telephone. Reaching in the dark for it he answered almost without reaching consciousness.

It was Harrison.
"Bob, listen to me. If an angel were to look at us right now, what would he think?"
"For God's sake!" Mills cried into the instrument. "What's up? You still at the office?"
"Yeah, answer the question."
"Hold on, George. I'll be down and get you. What you been drinking?"
"Bob, would he--she--think much of us? Would the angel figure we were...."
"How the hell would I know?"
"No, Bob, what you should have asked is 'how the hell would he know."

* * * * *
In a daze Mills heard the click as the other hung up.

* * * * *
"Mr. Harrison, your assistant is looking for you."
"Yes, I know, Kirk. But will you do it?"
"Mr. Harrison, we only got one of them. If we screw it up it'll take time to make another and today's the day, you know."
"I'll take the blame."
"Mr. Harrison, you look kind of funny. Hadn't I better...."
Harrison was sketching a drawing on a piece of waste paper. He was working in quick rough strokes, copying something from a book.
"They'll blame us both, Mr. Harrison. Anyway, it might hold up somebody who's got a real idea...."
"I have a real idea, Kirk. I'm going to draw it for you."
The metal worker noticed that the book Harrison was copying from was a dictionary, a very old and battered one.
"Here, can you follow what I've drawn?"
The metal worker accepted it reluctantly, giving Harrison an odd, almost patronizing look. "This is crazy."
"Kirk!"
"Look, Mr. Harrison. We worked a long time together. You...."
Harrison suddenly rose from the chair.
"This is our one chance of beating this thing, no matter how crazy it seems. Will you do the job?"
"You believe you got something, eh," the other said. "You think you have?"
"I have to have."
* * * * *
"Gentlemen," said the President of the Intersolar Council. "There is very little to say. There can be no denying the fact that we have exhausted our efforts at finding a satisfactory solution.
"The contents of this book of reports represents the greatest concentration of expert reasoning perhaps ever applied to a single problem.
"But alas, the problem remains—unsolved."
He paused to glance at his wristwatch.
"The aliens return in an hour. As you very well know there is one action that remains for us. It is one we have held to this hour. It is one that has always been present and one that we have been constantly urged to use.
"Force, gentlemen. It is not insignificant. It lies at our command. It represents the technology of the Intersolar alliance. I will entertain a motion to use it."
There were no nay votes.
* * * * *
The alien arrived on schedule. The ship grew from a tiny bright speck in the sky to full size. It settled to a graceful landing as before on the strip and silently moved into the revetment.
Again it spoke in the voice of the frog, but the tone was, if anything, less human this time.
"Earthmen, we have come for your solution."
At that instant a hundred gun crews stiffened and waited for a signal behind their carefully camouflaged blast plates and inside dummy buildings....
Harrison was running. The Administration building was empty. His footsteps echoed through the long, silent halls. He headed for an emergency exit that led directly to the blast tunnel. All doors were locked.
The only way was over the wall. He paused and tossed the awkward, heavy object over the ten-foot wall. Then, backing toward the building, he ran and jumped for a hold onto the wall's edge. He failed by several inches to reach it.
"Earthmen, we have come for your solution."
He ran at the wall once more. This time he caught a fair hold with one hand. Digging at the rough concrete with his feet he was able to secure the hold and begin pulling his body upward.
Quickly he was over the wall and onto the apron, a hundred yards from the shining metal ship.
"Wait!" he shouted. "Wait, for God's sake!"
Picking up the object he had tossed over the wall, he raised it above his head and ran toward the alien ship.
"Wait! Here is the solution," he gasped.
Somehow the command to fire was not given. There was a long moment of complete silence on the field.
Nothing moved.
Then the voice of the frog boomed from the alien ship.
"The solution appears to be correct."
* * * * *
The alien left three days later. Regular communications would begin within the week. Future meetings would work out technical difficulties. Preliminary trade agreements, adequately safeguarded, were drafted and transmitted to the ship. The Races of Man and the Races of Wan were in harmony.
* * * * *
"It was simply too obvious for any of us to notice," explained Harrison. "It took that street-corner evangelist to
jar something loose--even then it was an accident."
"And the rest of us--" started Mills.
"While all of us worked on the assumption that the test involved a showing of strength--a flexing of technological muscle."
"I still don't see--"
"Well, the evangelist put the problem on the right basis. He humbled us, exalted the aliens--that is, he thought the alien was somehow a messenger from God to put us in our places."
"We were pretty humble ourselves, especially the last day," protested Mills.
"But humble about our technology," put in Harrison. "The aliens must be plenty far beyond us technologically. But how about their cultural superiority. Ask yourself how a culture that could produce the ship we've just seen could survive without--well destroying itself."
"I still don't understand."
"The aliens developed pretty much equally in all directions. They developed force--plenty of it, enough force to kick that big ship through space at the speed of light plus. They must also have learned to control force, to live with it."
"Maybe you better stick to the sword business," said Mills.
"The sword is the crux of the matter. What did the alien say about the sword? 'It is defective.' It is defective, Bob. Not as an instrument of death. It will kill a man or injure him well enough.
"But a sword--or any other instrument of force for that matter--is a terribly ineffectual tool. It was originally designed to act as a tool of social control. Did it--or any subsequent weapon of force--do a good job at that?"
"As long as man used swords, or gunpowder, or atom bombs, or hydrogen bombs, he was doomed to a fearful anarchy of unsolved problems and dreadful immaturity.
"No, the sword is not useful. To fix it--to 'correct that which renders it not useful'--meant to make it something else. Now what in the hell did that mean? What can you do with a sword?"
"'You mean besides cut a man in two with it,' said Mills.
"Yes, what can you do with it besides use it as a weapon? Here our street-corner friend referred me to the right place: The bible!
"'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.
"'The aliens just wanted to know if we meant what we said."
"'Do we?"
"We better. It's going to take a hell of a lot more than a silly ploughshare to convince those babies on that ship. But there's more to it than that. The ability of a culture finally to pound all of its swords--its intellectual ones as well as its steel ones--into ploughshares must be some kind of least common denominator for cultures that are headed for the stars."

Contents

CODE THREE
by Rick Raphael

The cars on high-speed highways must follow each other like sheep. And they need shepherds. The highway police cruiser of tomorrow however must be massively different--as different as the highways themselves!

The late afternoon sun hid behind gray banks of snow clouds and a cold wind whipped loose leaves across the drill field in front of the Philadelphia Barracks of the North American Continental Thruway Patrol. There was the feel of snow in the air but the thermometer hovered just at the freezing mark and the clouds could turn either into icy rain or snow.

Patrol Sergeant Ben Martin stepped out of the door of the barracks and shivered as a blast of wind hit him. He pulled up the zipper on his loose blue uniform coveralls and paused to gauge the storm clouds building up to the west.

The broad planes of his sunburned face turned into the driving cold wind for a moment and then he looked back down at the weather report secured to the top of a stack of papers on his clipboard.

Behind him, the door of the barracks was shouldered open by his junior partner, Patrol Trooper Clay Ferguson.
The young, tall Canadian officer's arms were loaded with paper sacks and his patrol work helmet dangled by its strap from the crook of his arm.

Clay turned and moved from the doorway into the wind. A sudden gust swept around the corner of the building and a small sack perched atop one of the larger bags in his arms blew to the ground and began tumbling towards the drill field.

"Ben," he yelled, "grab the bag."

The sergeant lunged as the sack bounced by and made the retrieve. He walked back to Ferguson and eyed the load of bags in the blond-haired officer's arms.

"Just what is all this?" he inquired.

"Groceries," the youngster grinned. "Or to be more exact, little gourmet items for our moments of gracious living."

Ferguson turned into the walk leading to the motor pool and Martin swung into step beside him. "Want me to carry some of that junk?"

"Junk," Clay cried indignantly. "You keep your grimy paws off these delicacies, peasant. You'll get yours in due time and perhaps it will help Kelly and me to make a more polished product of you instead of the clodlike cop you are today."

Martin chuckled. This patrol would mark the start of the second year that he, Clay Ferguson and Medical-Surgical Officer Kelly Lightfoot had been teamed together. After twenty-two patrols, cooped up in a semiarmored vehicle with a man for ten days at a time, you got to know him pretty well. And you either liked him or you hated his guts.

As senior officer, Martin had the right to reject or keep his partner after their first eleven-month duty tour. Martin had elected to retain the lanky Canadian. As soon as they had pulled into New York Barracks at the end of their last patrol, he had made his decisions. After eleven months and twenty-two patrols on the Continental Thruways, each team had a thirty-day furlough coming.

Martin and Ferguson had headed for the city the minute they put their signatures on the last of the stack of reports needed at the end of a tour. Then, for five days and nights, they tied one on. MSO Kelly Lightfoot had made a beeline for a Columbia Medical School seminar on tissue regeneration. On the sixth day, Clay staggered out of bed, swigged down a handful of anti-reaction pills, showered, shaved and dressed and then waved good-by. Twenty minutes later he was aboard a jet, heading for his parents' home in Edmonton, Alberta. Martin soloed around the city for another week, then rented a car and raced up to his sister's home in Burlington, Vermont, to play Uncle Bountiful to Carol's three kids and to lap up as much as possible of his sister's real cooking.

While the troopers and their med officer relaxed, a service crew moved their car down to the Philadelphia motor pool for a full overhaul and refitting for the next torturous eleven-month-tour of duty.

The two patrol troopers had reported into the Philadelphia Barracks five days ago--Martin several pounds heavier courtesy of his sister's cooking; Ferguson several pounds lighter courtesy of three assorted, starry-eyed, uniform-struck Alberta maidens.

They turned into the gate of the motor pool and nodded to the sentry at the gate. To their left, the vast shop buildings echoed to the sound of body-banging equipment and roaring jet engines. The darkening sky made the brilliant lights of the shop seem even brighter and the hulls of a dozen patrol cars cast deep shadows around the work crews.

The troopers turned into the dispatcher's office and Clay carefully placed the bags on a table beside the counter. Martin peered into one of the bags. "Seriously, kid, what do you have in that grab bag?"

"Oh, just a few essentials," Clay replied "Pate de foie gras, sharp cheese, a smidgen of cooking wine, a handful of spices. You know, stuff like that. Like I said--essentials."

"Essentials," Martin snorted, "you give your brains to one of those Alberta chicks of yours for a souvenir?"

"Look, Ben," Ferguson said earnestly, "I suffered for eleven months in that tin mausoleum on tracks because of what you fondly like to think is edible food. You've got as much culinary imagination as Beulah. I take that back. Even Beulah turns out some better smells when she's riding on high jet than you'll ever get out of her galley in the next one hundred years. This tour, I intend to eat like a human being once again. And I'll teach you how to boil water without burning it."

"Why you ungrateful young--" Martin yelped.

* * * * *

The patrol dispatcher, who had been listening with amused tolerance, leaned across the counter.

"If Oscar Waldorf is through with his culinary lecture, gentlemen," he said, "perhaps you two could be persuaded to take a little pleasure ride. It's a lovely night for a drive and it's just twenty-six hundred miles to the next service station. If you two aren't cooking anything at the moment, I know that NorCon would simply adore having
the services of two such distinguished Continental Commandos."

Ferguson flushed and Martin scowled at the dispatcher. "Very funny, clown. I'll recommend you for trooper status one of these days."

"Not me," the dispatcher protested. "I'm a married man. You'll never get me out on the road in one of those blood-and-gut factories."

"So quit sounding off to us heroes," Martin said, "and give us the clearances."

The dispatcher opened a loose-leaf reference book on the counter and then punched the first of a series of buttons on a panel. Behind him, the wall lighted with a map of the eastern United States to the Mississippi River. Ferguson and Martin had pencils out and poised over their clipboards.

The dispatcher glanced at the order board across the room where patrol car numbers and team names were displayed on an illuminated board. "Car 56--Martin-Ferguson-Lightfoot," glowed with an amber light. In the column to the right was the number "26-W." The dispatcher punched another button. A broad belt of multi-colored lines representing the eastern segment of North American Thruway 26 flashed onto the map in a band extending from Philadelphia to St. Louis. The thruway went on to Los Angeles in its western segment, not shown on the map. Ten bands of color--each five separated by a narrow clear strip, detailed the thruway. Martin and Ferguson were concerned with the northern five bands; NAT 26-westbound. Other unlighted lines radiated out in tangential spokes to the north and south along the length of the multi-colored belt of NAT 26.

This was just one small segment of the Continental Thruway system that spanned North America from coast to coast and crisscrossed north and south under the Three Nation Road Compact from the southern tip of Mexico into Canada and Alaska.

Each arterial cut a five-mile-wide path across the continent and from one end to the other, the only structures along the roadways were the turretlike NorCon Patrol check and relay stations--looming up at one-hundred-mile intervals like the fire control islands of earlier-day aircraft carriers.

Car 56 with Trooper Sergeant Ben Martin, Trooper Clay Ferguson and Medical-Surgical Officer Kelly Lightfoot, would take their first ten-day patrol on NAT 26-west. Barring major disaster, they would eat, sleep and work the entire time from their car; out of sight of any but distant cities until they had reached Los Angeles at the end of the patrol. Then a five-day resupply and briefing period and back onto another thruway.

During the coming patrol they would cross ten state lines as if they didn't exist. And as far as thruway traffic control and authority was concerned, state and national boundaries actually didn't exist. With the growth of the old interstate highway system and the Alcan Highway it became increasingly evident that variation in motor vehicle laws from state to state and country to country were creating impossible situations for any uniform safety control.

* * * * *

With the establishment of the Continental Thruway System two decades later, came the birth of the supra-cop--The North American Thruway Patrol, known as NorCon. Within the five-mile bands of the thruways--all federally-owned land by each of the three nations--the blue-coveralled "Continental Commandos" of NorCon were the sole law enforcement agency and authority. Violators of thruway law were cited into NorCon district traffic courts located in the nearest city to each access port along every thruway.

There was no challenge to the authority of NorCon. Public demand for faster and more powerful vehicles had forced the automotive industry to put more and more power under the touch of the ever-growing millions of drivers crowding the continent's roads. Piston drive gave way to turbojet; turbojet was boosted by a modification of ram jet and air-cushion drive was added. In the last two years, the first of the nuclear reaction mass engines had hit the roads. Even as the hot Ferraris and Jags of the mid-'60s would have been suicide vehicles on the T-model roads of the '20s so would today's vehicles be on the interstates of the '60s. But building roads capable of handling three hundred to four hundred miles an hour speeds was beyond the financial and engineering capabilities of individual states and nations. Thus grew the continental thruways with their four speed lanes in each direction, each a half-mile wide separated east and west and north and south by a half-mile-wide landscaped divider. Under the Three Nation Compact, the thruways now wove a net across the entire North American continent.

On the big wall map, NAT 26-west showed as four colored lines; blue and yellow as the two high and ultra-high speed lanes; green and white for the intermediate and slow lanes. Between the blue and yellow and the white and green was a red band. This was the police emergency lane, never used by other than official vehicles and crossed by the traveling public shifting from one speed lane to another only at sweeping crossovers.

The dispatcher picked up an electric pointer and aimed the light beam at the map. Referring to his notes, he began to recite.

"Resurfacing crews working on 26-W blue at milestone Marker 185 to Marker 187, estimated clearance 0300 hours Tuesday--Let's see, that's tomorrow morning."

The two officers were writing the information down on their trip-analysis sheets.
"Ohio State is playing Cal under the lights at Columbus tonight so you can expect a traffic surge sometime shortly after 2300 hours but most of it will stay in the green and white. Watch out for the drunks though. They might filter out onto the blue or yellow.

"The crossover for NAT 163 has painting crews working. Might watch out for any crud on the roadway. And they've got the entrance blocked there so that all 163 exchange traffic is being rerouted to 164 west of Chillicothe."

The dispatcher thumbed through his reference sheets. "That seems to be about all. No, wait a minute. This is on your trick. The Army's got a priority missile convoy moving out of the Aberdeen Proving Grounds bound for the west coast tonight at 1800 hours. It will be moving at green lane speeds so you might watch out for it. They'll have thirty-four units in the convoy. And that is all. Oh, yes. Kelly's already aboard. I guess you know about the weather."

Martin nodded. "Yup. We should be hitting light snows by 2300 hours tonight in this area and it could be anything from snow to ice-rain after that." He grinned at his younger partner. "The vacation is over, sonny. Tonight we make a man out of you."

Ferguson grinned back. "Nuts to you, pop. I've got character witnesses back in Edmonton who'll give you glowing testimonials about my manhood."

"Testimonials aren't legal unless they're given by adults," Martin retorted. "Come on, lover boy. Duty calls."

Clay carefully embraced his armload of bundles and the two officers turned to leave. The dispatcher leaned across the counter.

"Oh, Ferguson, one thing I forgot. There's some light corrugations in red lane just east of St. Louis. You might be careful with your souffles in that area. Wouldn't want them to fall, you know."

Clay paused and started to turn back. The grinning dispatcher ducked into the back office and slammed the door.

* * * * *

The wind had died down by the time the troopers entered the brilliantly lighted parking area. The temperature seemed warmer with the lessening winds but in actuality, the mercury was dropping. The snow clouds to the west were much nearer and the overcast was getting darker.

But under the great overhead light tubes, the parking area was brighter than day. A dozen huge patrol vehicles were parked on the front "hot" line. Scores more were lined out in ranks to the back of the parking zone. Martin and Ferguson walked down the line of military blue cars. Number 56 was fifth on the line. Service mechs were just re-housing fueling lines into a ground panel as the troopers walked up. The technician corporal was the first to speak. "All set, Sarge," he said. "We had to change an induction jet at the last minute and I had the port engine running up to reline the flow. Thought I'd better top 'er off for you, though, before you pull out. She sounds like a purring kitten."

He tossed the pair a waving salute and then moved out to his service dolly where three other mechs were waiting.

"Beulah looks like she's been to the beauty shop and had the works," Martin said. He reached out and slapped the maglurium plates. "Welcome home, sweetheart. I see you've kept a candle in the window for your wandering son." Ferguson looked up at the lighted cab, sixteen feet above the pavement.

Car 56--Beulah to her team--was a standard NorCon Patrol vehicle. She was sixty feet long, twelve feet wide and twelve feet high; topped by a four-foot-high bubble canopy over her cab. All the way across her nose was a three-foot-wide luminescent strip. This was the variable beam headlight that could cut a day-bright swath of light through night, fog, rain or snow and could be varied in intensity, width and elevation. Immediately above the headlight strip were two red-black plastic panels which when lighted, sent out a flashing red emergency signal that could be seen for miles. Similar emergency lights and back-up white light strips adorned Beulah's stern. Her bow rounded down like an old-time tank and blended into the track assembly of her dual propulsion system. With the exception of the cabin bubble and a two-foot stepdown on the last fifteen feet of her hull, Beulah was free of external protrusions. Racked into a flush-decked recess on one side of the hull was a crane arm with a two-hundred-ton lift capacity. Several round hatches covered other extensible gear and periscopes used in the scores of multiple operations the NorCon cars were called upon to accomplish on routine road patrols.

Beulah resembled a gigantic offspring of a military tank, sans heavy armament. But even a small stinger was part of the patrol car equipment. As for armament, Beulah had weapons to meet every conceivable skirmish in the deadly battle to keep Continental Thruways fast-moving and safe. Her own two-hundred-fifty-ton bulk could reach speeds of close to six hundred miles an hour utilizing one or both of her two independent propulsion systems.

At ultra-high speeds, Beulah never touched the ground--floating on an impeller air cushion and driven forward by a pair of one hundred fifty thousand pound thrust jets and ram jets. At intermediate high speeds, both her air cushion and the four-foot-wide tracks on each side of the car pushed her along at two hundred-mile-an-hour-plus
speeds. Synchro mechanisms reduced the air cushion as the speeds dropped to afford more surface traction for the tracks. For slow speeds and heavy duty, the tracks carried the burden.

Martin thumbed open the portside ground-level cabin door.

"I'll start the outside check," he told Clay. "You stow that garbage of yours in the galley and start on the dispensary. I'll help you after I finish out here."

As the younger officer entered the car and headed up the short flight of steps to the working deck, the sergeant unclipped a check list from the inside of the door and turned towards the stern of the big vehicle.

Clay mounted to the work deck and turned back to the little galley just aft of the cab. As compact as a spaceship kitchen—as a matter of fact, designed almost identically from models on the Moon run—the galley had but three feet of open counter space. Everything else, sink, range, oven and freezer, were built-ins with pull-downs for use as needed. He set his bags on the small counter to put away after the pre-start check. Aft of the galley and on the same side of the passageway were the double-decked bunks for the patrol troopers. Across the passageway was a tiny latrine and shower. Clay tossed his helmet on the lower bunk as he went down the passageway. At the bulkhead to the rear, he pressed a wall panel and a thick, insulated door slid back to admit him to the engine compartment. The service crews had shut down the big power plants and turned off the air exchangers and already the heat from the massive engines made the compartment uncomfortably warm.

He hurried through into a small machine shop. In an emergency, the troopers could turn out small parts for disabled vehicles or for other uses. It also stocked a good supply of the most common failure parts. Racked against the ceiling were banks of cutting torches, a grim reminder that death or injury still rode the thruways with increasing frequency.

In the tank storage space between the ceiling and top of the hull were the chemical fire-fighting liquids and foam that could be applied by nozzles, hoses and towers now telescoped into recesses in the hull. Along both sides and beneath the galley, bunks, engine and machine-shop compartments between the walls, deck and hull, were Beulah's fuel storage tanks.

The last after compartment was a complete dispensary, one that would have made the emergency room or even the light surgery rooms of earlier-day hospitals proud.

Clay tapped on the door and went through. Medical-Surgical Officer Kelly Lightfoot was sitting on the deck, stowing sterile bandage packs into a lower locker. She looked up at Clay and smiled. "Well, well, you DID manage to tear yourself away from your adoring bevies," she said. She flicked back a wisp of golden-red hair from her forehead and stood up. The patrol-blue uniform coverall with its belted waist didn't do much to hide a lovely, properly curved figure. She walked over to the tall Canadian trooper and reached up and grabbed his ear. She pulled his head down, examined one side critically and then quickly snatched at his other ear and repeated the scrutiny. She let go of his ear and stepped back. "Damned if you didn't get all the lipstick marks off, too."


The olive-complexioned redhead grinned at him and turned back to her stack of boxes on the deck. She bent over and lifted one of the boxes to the operating table. Clay eyed her trim figure. "You might act like ma sometimes," he said, "but you sure don't look like her."

It was the Irish-Cherokee Indian girl's turn to flush. She became very busy with the contents of the box. "Where's Ben?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Making outside check. You about finished in here?"

Kelly turned and slowly scanned the confines of the dispensary. With the exception of the boxes on the table and floor, everything was behind secured locker doors. In one corner, the compact diagnostician—capable of analyzing many known human bodily ailments and every possible violent injury to the body—was locked in its riding clamps. Surgical trays and instrument racks were all hidden behind locker doors along with medical and surgical supplies. On either side of the emergency ramp door at the stern of the vehicle, three collapsible autolitters hung from clamps. Six hospital bunks in two tiers of three each, lined another wall. On patrol, Kelly utilized one of the hospital bunks for her own use except when they might all be occupied with accident or other kind of patients. And this would never be for more than a short period, just long enough to transfer them to a regular ambulance or hospital vehicle. Her meager supply of personal items needed for the ten-day patrol were stowed in a small locker and she shared the latrine with the male members of the team.

Kelly completed her scan, glanced down at the checklist in her hand. "I'll have these boxes stowed in five minutes. Everything else is secure." She raised her hand to her forehead in mock salute. "Medical-Surgical Officer Lightfoot reports dispensary ready for patrol, sir."

Clay smiled and made a checkmark on his clipboard. "How was the seminar, Kelly?" he asked.

Kelly hiked herself onto the edge of the operating table. "Wonderful, Clay, just wonderful. I never saw so many
good-looking, young, rich and eligible doctors together in one place in all my life.”

She sighed and smiled vacantly into space.

Clay snorted. “I thought you were supposed to be learning something new about tissue regeneration,” he said.

“Generation, regeneration, who cares,” Kelly grinned.

Clay started to say something, got flustered and wheeled around to leave--and bounded right off Ben Martin’s chest. Ferguson mumbled something and pushed past the older officer.

Ben looked after him and then turned back to Car 56’s combination doctor, surgeon and nurse. “Glad to see the hostess aboard for this cruise. I hope you make the passengers more comfortable than you’ve just made the first mate. What did you do to Clay, Kelly?”

“Hi, Ben,” Kelly said. “Oh, don’t worry about junior. He just gets all fluttery when a girl takes away his masculine prerogative to make cleverly lewd witticisms. He’ll be all right. Have a happy holiday, Ben? You look positively fat.”

Ben patted his stomach. “Carol’s good cooking. Had a nice restful time. And how about you. That couldn’t have been all work. You’ve got a marvelous tan.”

“Don’t worry,” Kelly laughed, “I had no intention of letting it be all study. I spent just about as much time under the sun dome at the pool as I did in class. I learned a lot though.”

Ben grinned and headed back to the front of the car. “Tell me more after we’re on the road,” he said from the doorway. “We’ll be rolling in ten minutes.”

When he reached the cab, Clay was already in the right-hand control seat and was running down the instrument panel check. The sergeant lifted the hatch door between the two control seats and punched on a light to illuminate the stark compartment at the lower front end of the car. A steel grill with a dogged handle on the upper side covered the opening under the hatch cover. Two swing-down bunks were racked up against the walls on either side and the front hull door was without an inside handle. This was the patrol car brig, used for bringing in unwilling violators or other violent or criminal subjects who might crop up in the course of a patrol tour. Satisfied with the appearance of the brig, Ben closed the hatch cover and slid into his own control seat on the left of the cab. Both control seats were molded and plastiformed padded to the contours of the troopers and the armrests on both were studded with buttons and a series of small, finger-operated, knobs. All drive, communication and fire fighting controls for the massive vehicle were centered in the knobs and buttons on the seat arms, while acceleration and braking controls were duplicated in two footrest pedals beneath their feet.

Ben settled into his seat and glanced down to make sure his work-helmet was racked beside him. He reached over and flipped a bank of switches on the instrument panel. “All communications to ‘on,’” he said. Clay made a checkmark on his list. “All pre-engine start check complete,” Clay replied.

“In that case,” the senior trooper said, “let’s give Beulah some exercise. Start engines.”

Clay’s fingers danced across the array of buttons on his seat arms and flicked lightly at the throttle knobs. From deep within the engine compartment came the muted, shrill whine of the starter engines, followed a split-second later by the full-throated roar of the jets as they caught fire. Clay eased the throttles back and the engine noise softened to a muffled roar.

Martin fingered a press-panel on the right arm of his seat.

“Car 56 to Philly Control,” Ben called.

The speakers mounted around the cab came to life. “Go ahead Five Six.”

“Five Six fired up and ready to roll,” Martin said.

“Affirmative Five Six,” came the reply, “You’re clear to roll. Philly Check estimates white density 300; green, 840; blue 400; yellow, 75.”

Both troopers made mental note of the traffic densities in their first one-hundred-mile patrol segment; an estimated three hundred vehicles for each ten miles of thruway in the white or fifty to one hundred miles an hour low lane; eight hundred forty vehicles in the one hundred to one hundred fifty miles an hour green, and so on. More than sixteen thousand westbound vehicles on the thruway in the first one hundred miles; nearly five thousand of them traveling at speeds between one hundred fifty and three hundred miles an hour.

Over the always-hot intercom throughout the big car Ben called out. “All set, Kelly?”

“I’m making coffee,” Kelly answered from the galley. “Let ‘er roll.”

Martin started to kick off the brakes, then stopped. “Oops,” he exclaimed, “almost forgot.” His finger touched another button and a blaring horn reverberated through the vehicle.

In the galley, Kelly hurled herself into a corner. Her body activated a pressure plant and a pair of mummy-like plastifoam plates slid curvingly out the wall and locked her in a soft cocoon. A dozen similar safety clamps were located throughout the car at every working and relaxation station.
In the same instance, both Ben and Clay touched another plate on their control seats. From kiosk-type columns behind each seat, pairs of body-molded crash pads snapped into place to encase both troopers in their seats, their bodies cushioned and locked into place. Only their fingers were loose beneath the spongy substance to work arm controls. The half-molds included headforms with a padded band that locked across their foreheads to hold their heads rigidly against the backs of their reinforced seats. The instant all three crew members were locked into their safety gear, the bull horn ceased.

"All tight," Ben called out as he wiggled and tried to free himself from the cocoon. Kelly and Clay tested their harnesses.

Satisfied that the safety cocoons were operating properly, Ben released them and the molds slid back into their recesses. The cocoons were triggered automatically in any emergency run or chase at speeds in excess of two hundred miles an hour.

Again he kicked off the brakes, pressed down on the foot feed and Car 56--Beulah--rolled out of the Philadelphia motor pool on the start of its ten-day patrol.

* * * * *

The motor pool exit opened into a quarter-mile wide tunnel sloping gently down into the bowels of the great city. Car 56 glided down the slight incline at a steady fifty miles an hour. A mile from the mouth of the tunnel the roadway leveled off and Ben kicked Beulah up another twenty-five miles an hour. Ahead, the main tunnel ended in a series of smaller portal ways, each emblazoned with a huge illuminated number designating a continental thruway.

Ben throttled back and began edging to the left lanes. Other patrol cars were heading down the main passageway, bound for their assigned thruways. As Ben eased down to a slow thirty, another patrol vehicle slid alongside. The two troopers in the cab waved. Clay flicked on the "car-to-car" transmit.

The senior trooper in Car 104 looked over at Martin and Ferguson. "If it isn't the gruesome twosome," he called. "Where have you two been? We thought the front office had finally caught up with you and found out that neither one of you could read or write and that they had canned you."

"We can't read," Ben quipped back. "That's why we're still on the job. The front office would never hire anyone who would embarrass you two by being smarter than either of you. Where're you headed, Eddie?"

"Got 154-north," the other officer said.

"Hey," Clay called out, "I've got a real hot doll in Toronto and I'll gladly sell her phone number for a proper price."

"Wouldn't want to hurt you, Clay," the other officer replied. "If I called her up and took her out, she'd throw rocks at you the next time you drew the run. It's all for your own good."

"Oh, go get lost in a cloverleaf," Clay retorted.

The other car broke the connection and with a wave, veered off to the right. The thruway entrances were just ahead. Martin aimed Beulah at the lighted orifice topped by the number 26-W. The patrol car slid into the narrower tunnel, glided along for another mile and then turned its bow upwards. Three minutes later, they emerged from the tunnel into the red patrol lane of Continental Thruway 26-West. The late afternoon sky was a covering of gray wool and a drop or two of moisture struck the front face of the cab canopy. For a mile on either side of the police lane, streams of cars sped westward. Ben eyed the sky, the traffic and then peered at the outer hull thermometer. It read thirty-two degrees. He made a mental bet with himself that the weather bureau was off on its snow estimates by six hours. His Vermont upbringing told him it would be flurrying within the hour.

He increased speed to a steady one hundred and the car sped silently and easily along the police lane. Across the cab, Clay peered pensively at the steady stream of cars and cargo carriers racing by in the green and blue lanes--all of them moving faster than the patrol car.

The young officer turned in his seat and looked at his partner.

"You know, Ben," he said gravely, "I sometimes wonder if those old-time cowboys got as tired looking at the south end of northbound cows as I get looking at the vanishing tail pipes of cars."

The radio came to life.

"Philly Control to Car 56."

Clay touched his transmit plate. "This is Five Six. Go ahead."

"You've got a bad one at Marker 82," Control said. "A sideswipe in the white."

"Couldn't be too bad in the white," Ben broke in, thinking of the one-hundred mile-an-hour limit in the slow lane.

"That's not the problem," Control came back. "One of the sideswiped vehicles was flipped around and bounded into the green, and that's where the real mess is. Make it code three."

"Five Six acknowledge," Ben said. "On the way."

He slammed forward on the throttles. The bull horn blared and a second later, with MSO Kelly Lightfoot
snugged in her dispensary cocoon and both troopers in body cushions, Car 56 lifted a foot from the roadway, and
leaped forward on a turbulent pad of air. It accelerated from one hundred to two hundred fifty miles an hour.

The great red emergency lights on the bow and stern began to blink and from the special transmitter in the hull
a radio siren wail raced ahead of the car to be picked up by the emergency receptor antennas required on all vehicles.

The working part of the patrol had begun.

* * * * *

Conversation died in the speeding car, partly because of the concentration required by the troopers, secondly
because all transmissions whether intercom or radio, on a code two or three run, were taped and monitored by
Control. In the center of the instrument panel, an oversized radiodometer was clicking off the mileage marks as the
car passed each milestone. The milestone posts beamed a coded signal across all five lanes and as each vehicle
passed the marker, the radiodometer clicked up another number.

Car 56 had been at MM 23 when the call came. Now, at better than four miles a minute, Beulah whipped past
MM 45 with ten minutes yet to go to reach the scene of the accident. Light flurries of wet snow bounced off the
canopy, leaving thin, fast-drying trails of moisture. Although it was still a few minutes short of 1700 hours, the last
of the winter afternoon light was being lost behind the heavy snow clouds overhead. Ben turned on the patrol car's
dazzling headlight and to the left and right, Clay could see streaks of white lights from the traffic on the green and
blue lanes on either side of the quarter-mile wide emergency lane.

The radio filled them in on the movement of other patrol emergency vehicles being routed to the accident site.
Car 82, also assigned to NAT 26-West, was more than one hundred fifty miles ahead of Beulah. Pittsburgh Control
ordered Eight Two to hold fast to cover anything else that might come up while Five Six was handling the current
危机. Eastbound Car 119 was ordered to cut across to the scene to assist Beulah's crew, and another eastbound
patrol vehicle was held in place to cover for One One Nine.

At mile marker 80, yellow caution lights were flashing on all westbound lanes, triggered by Philadelphia
Control the instant the word of the crash had been received. Traffic was slowing down and piling up despite the half-
mile wide lanes.

"Philly Control this is Car 56."

"Go ahead Five Six."

"It's piling up in the green and white," Ben said. "Let's divert to blue on slowdown and seal the yellow."

"Philly Control acknowledged," came the reply.

* * * * *

The flashing amber caution lights on all lanes switched to red. As Ben began de-acceleration, diagonal red
flashing barriers rose out of the roadway on the green and white lanes at the 85 mile marker and lane crossing. This
channelled all traffic from both lanes to the left and into the blue lane where the flashing reds now prohibited speeds
in excess of fifty miles an hour around the emergency situation. At the same time, all crossovers on the ultra high
yellow lane were sealed by barriers to prevent changing of lanes into the over-congested area.

As Car 56's speed dropped back below the two hundred mile an hour mark the cocoon automatically slid open.
Freed from her safety restraints, Kelly jumped for the rear entrance of the dispensary and cleared the racking clamps
from the six autolitters. That done, she opened another locker and reached for the mobile first-aid kit. She slid it to
the door entrance on its retractable casters. She slipped on her work helmet with the built-in transmitter and then sat
don down on the seat by the rear door to wait until the car stopped.

Car 56 was now less than two miles from the scene of the crash and traffic in the green lane to the left was at a
standstill. A half mile farther westward, lights were still moving slowly along the white lane. Ahead, the troopers
could see a faint wisp of smoke rising from the heaviest congregation of headlights. Both officers had their work
helmets on and Clay had left his seat and descended to the side door, ready to jump out the minute the car stopped.

Martin saw a clear area in the green lane and swung the car over the dividing curbing. The big tracks floated
the patrol car over the two-foot high, rounded abutment that divided each speed lane. Snow was falling faster as the
headlight picked out a tangled mass of wreckage smoldering a hundred feet inside the median separating the green
and white lanes. A crumpled body lay on the pavement twenty feet from the biggest clump of smashed metal, and
other fragments of vehicles were strung out down the roadway for fifty feet. There was no movement.

NorCon thruway laws were strict and none were more rigidly enforced than the regulation that no one other
than a member of the patrol set foot outside of their vehicle while on any thruway traffic lane. This meant not giving
any assistance whatsoever to accident victims. The ruling had been called inhuman, monstrous, unthinkable, and
lawmakers in the three nations of the compact had forced NorCon to revoke the rule in the early days of the
thruways. After speeding cars and cargo carriers had cut down twice as many do-gooders on foot at accident scenes
than the accidents themselves caused, the law was reinstated. The lives of the many were more vital than the lives of
a few.
Martin halted the patrol vehicle a few feet from the wreckage and Beulah was still rocking gently on her tracks by the time both Patrol Trooper Clay Ferguson and MSO Kelly Lightfoot hit the pavement on the run.

In the cab, Martin called in on the radio. "Car 56 is on scene. Release blue at Marker 95 and resume speeds all lanes at Marker 95 in--" he paused and looked back at the halted traffic piled up before the lane had been closed "--seven minutes." He jumped for the steps and sprinted out of the patrol car in the wake of Ferguson and Kelly.

The team's surgeon was kneeling beside the inert body on the road. After an ear to the chest, Kelly opened her field kit bag and slapped an electrode to the victim's temple. The needle on the encephalic meter in the lid of the kit never flickered. Kelly shut the bag and hurried with it over to the mass of wreckage. A thin column of black, oily smoke rose from somewhere near the bottom of the heap. It was almost impossible to identify at a glance whether the mangled metal was the remains of one or more cars. Only the absence of track equipment made it certain that they even had been passenger vehicles.

Clay was carefully climbing up the side of the piled up wrecks to a window that gaped near the top.

"Work fast, kid," Martin called up. "Something's burning down there and this whole thing may go up. I'll get this traffic moving."

He turned to face the halted mass of cars and cargo carriers east of the wreck. He flipped a switch that cut his helmet transmitter into the remote standard vehicular radio circuit aboard the patrol car.

"Attention, please, all cars in green lane. All cars in the left line move out now, the next line fall in behind. You are directed to clear the area immediately. Maintain fifty miles an hour for the next mile. You may resume desired speeds and change lanes at mile Marker 95. I repeat, all cars in green lane...." he went over the instructions once more, relayed through Beulah's transmitter to the standard receivers on all cars. He was still talking as the traffic began to move.

By the time he turned back to help his teammates, cars were moving in a steady stream past the huge, red-flashing bulk of the patrol car.

Both Clay and Kelly were lying flat across the smashed, upturned side of the uppermost car in the pile. Kelly had her field bag open on the ground and she was reaching down through the smashed window.

"What is it Clay?" Martin called.

The younger officer looked down over his shoulder. "We've got a woman alive down here but she's wedged in tight. She's hurt pretty badly and Kelly's trying to slip a hypo into her now. Get the arm out, Ben."

Martin ran back to the patrol car and flipped up a panel on the hull. He pulled back on one of the several levers recessed into the hull and the big wrecking crane swung smoothly out of its cradle and over the wreckage. The end of the crane arm was directly over Ferguson. "Lemme have the spreaders," Clay called. The arm dipped and from either side of the tip, a pair of flanges shot out like tusks on an elephant. "Put 'er in neutral," Clay directed. Martin pressed another lever and the crane now could be moved in any direction by fingertip pulls at its extremity.

Ferguson carefully guided the crane with its projecting tusks into the smashed orifice of the car window. "O.K., Ben, spread it."

The crane locked into position and the entire arm split open in a "V" from its base. Martin pressed steadily on the two levers controlling each side of the divided arm and the tusks dug into the sides of the smashed window. There was a steady screeching of tearing and ripping metal as the crane tore window and frame apart. "Hold it," Ferguson yelled and then eased himself into the widened hole.

"Ben," Kelly called from her perch atop the wreckage, "litter."

Martin raced to the rear of the patrol car where the sloping ramp stood open to the lighted dispensary. He snatched at one of the autolitters and triggered its tiny drive motor. A homing beacon in his helmet guided the litter as it rolled down the ramp, turned by itself and rolled across the pavement a foot behind him. It stopped when he stopped and Ben touched another switch, cutting the homing beacon.

Clay's head appeared out of the hole. "Get it up here, Ben. I can get her out. And I think there's another one alive still further down."

Martin raised the crane and its ripper bars retracted. The split arms spewed a pair of cables terminating in magnalocks. The cables dangled over the ends of the autolitter and triggered its tiny drive motor. A homing beacon in his helmet guided the litter as it rolled down the ramp, turned by itself and rolled across the pavement a foot behind him. It stopped when he stopped and Ben touched another switch, cutting the homing beacon.

Clay's head appeared out of the hole. "Get it up here, Ben. I can get her out. And I think there's another one alive still further down."

Martin raised the crane and its ripper bars retracted. The split arms spewed a pair of cables terminating in magnalocks. The cables dangled over the ends of the autolitter, caught the lift plates on the litter and a second later, the cart was swinging beside the smashed window as Clay and Kelly eased the torn body of a woman out of the wreckage and onto the litter. As Ben brought the litter back to the pavement, the column of smoke had thickened. He disconnected the cables and homed the stretcher back to the patrol car. The hospital cart with its unconscious victim, rolled smoothly back to the car, up the ramp and into the dispensary to the surgical table.

Martin climbed up the wreckage beside Kelly. Inside the twisted interior of the car, the thick smoke all but obscured the bent back of the younger trooper and his powerful handlight barely penetrated the gloom. Blood was smeared over almost every surface and the stink of leaking jet fuel was virtually overpowering. From the depths of
the nightmarish scene came a tortured scream. Kelly reached into a coverall pocket and produced another sedation hypo. She squirmed around and started to slip down into the wreckage with Ferguson. Martin grabbed her arm. "No, Kelly, this thing's ready to blow. Come on, Clay, get out of there. Now!"

Ferguson continued to pry at the twisted plates below him.
"I said 'get out of there' Ferguson," the senior officer roared. "And that's an order."

Clay straightened up and put his hands on the edge of the window to boost himself out. "Ben, there's a guy alive down there. We just can't leave him."

"Get down from there, Kelly," Martin ordered. "I know that man's down there just as well as you do, Clay. But we won't be helping him one damn bit if we get blown to hell and gone right along with him. Now get outta there and maybe we can pull this thing apart and get to him before it does blow."

The lanky Canadian eased out of the window and the two troopers moved back to the patrol car. Kelly was already in her dispensary, working on the injured woman.

Martin slid into his control seat. "Shut your ramp, Kelly," he called over the intercom, "I'm going to move around to the other side."

The radio broke in. "Car 119 to Car 56, we're just turning into the divider. Be there in a minute."

"Snap it up," Ben replied. "We need you in a hurry."

As he maneuvered Beulah around the wreckage he snapped orders to Ferguson.
"Get the foam nozzles up, just in case, and then stand by on the crane."

A mile away, they saw the flashing emergency lights of Car 119 as it raced diagonally across the yellow and blue lanes, whipping with ponderous ease through the moving traffic.

"Take the south side, 119," Martin called out. "We'll try and pull this mess apart."

"Affirmative," came the reply. Even before the other patrol vehicle came to a halt, its crane was swinging out from the side, and the ganged magnalocks were dangling from their cables.

"O.K., kid," Ben ordered, "hook it."

At the interior crane controls, Clay swung Beulah's crane and cable mags towards the wreckage. The magnalocks slammed into the metallic mess with a bang almost at the same instant the locks hit the other side from Car 119.

Clay eased up the cable slack. "Good," Ben called to both Clay and the operating trooper in the other car, "now let's pull it ... LOOK OUT! FOAM ... FOAM ... FOAM," he yelled.

The ugly, deep red fireball from the exploding wreckage was still growing as Clay slammed down on the fire-control panel. A curtain of thick chemical foam burst from the poised nozzles atop Beulah's hull and a split-second later, another stream of foam erupted from the other patrol car. The dense, oxygen-absorbing retardant blanket snuffed the fire out in three seconds. The cranes were still secured to the foam-covered heap of metal. "Never mind the caution," Ben called out, "get it apart. Fast."

Both crane operators slammed their controls into reverse and with an ear-splitting screech, the twisted frames of the two vehicles ripped apart into tumbled heaps of broken metal and plastics. Martin and Ferguson jumped down the hatch steps and into ankle-deep foam and oil. They waded and slipped around the front of the car to join the troopers from the other car.

Ferguson was pawing at the scum-covered foam near the mangled section of one of the cars. "He should be right about," Clay paused and bent over, "here." He straightened up as the others gathered around the scorched and ripped body of a man, half-submerged in the thick foam. "Kelly," he called over the helmet transmitter, "open your door. We'll need a couple of sacks."

He trudged to the rear of the patrol car and met the girl standing in the door with a pair of folded plastic morgue bags in her hands. Behind her, Clay could see the body of the woman on the surgical table, an array of tubes and probes leading to plasma drip bottles and other equipment racked out over the table.

"How is she?"


Ferguson nodded, took the bags from her and waded back through the foam.

The four troopers worked in the silence of the deserted traffic lane. A hundred yards away, traffic was moving steadily in the slow white lane. Three-quarters of a mile to the south, fast and ultra high traffic sped at its normal pace in the blue and yellow lanes. Westbound green was still being rerouted into the slower white lane, around the scene of the accident. It was now twenty-six minutes since Car 56 had received the accident call. The light snow flurries had turned to a steady fall of thick wet flakes, melting as they hit on the warm pavement but beginning to coat the pitiful flotsam of the accident.

The troopers finished the gruesome task of getting the bodies into the morgue sacks and laid aside the
dispensary ramp for the ambulance to pick up with the surviving victim. Car 119's MSO had joined Kelly in Beulah's dispensary to give what help she might. The four patrol troopers began the grim task of probing the scattered wreckage for other possible victims, personal possessions and identification. They were stacking a small pile of hand luggage when the long, low bulk of the ambulance swung out of the police lane and rolled to a stop. Longer than the patrol cars but without the non-medical emergency facilities, the ambulance was in reality a mobile hospital. A full, scrubbed-up surgical team was waiting in the main operating room even as the ramps opened and the techs headed for Car 56. The team had been briefed by radio on the condition of the patient; had read the full recordings of the diagnostician; and were watching transmitted pulse and respiration graphs on their own screens while the transfer was being made.

The two women MSOs had unlocked the surgical table in Beulah's dispensary and a plastic tent covered not only the table and the patient, but also the plasma and Regen racks overhead. The entire table and rig slid down the ramp onto a motor-driven dolly from the ambulance. Without delay, it wheeled across the open few feet of pavement into the ambulance and to the surgery room. The techs locked the table into place in the other vehicle and left the surgery. From a storage compartment, they wheeled out a fresh patrol dispensary table and rack and placed it in Kelly's miniature surgery. The dead went into the morgue aboard the ambulance, the ramp closed and the ambulance swung around and headed across the traffic lanes to eastbound NAT-26 and Philadelphia.

Outside, the four troopers had completed the task of collecting what little information they could from the smashed vehicles.

They returned to their cars and One One Nine's medical-surgical officer headed back to her own cubby-hole.

The other patrol car swung into position almost touching Beulah's left flank. With Ben at the control seat, on command, both cars extended broad bulldozer blades from their bows. "Let's go," Ben ordered. The two patrol vehicles moved slowly down the roadway, pushing all of the scattered scraps and parts onto a single great heap. They backed off, shifted direction towards the center police lane and began shoving the debris, foam and snow out of the green lane. At the edge of the police lane, both cars unshipped cranes and magnalifted the junk over the divider barrier onto the one-hundred-foot-wide service strip bordering the police lane. A slow cargo wrecker was already on the way from Pittsburgh barracks to pick up the wreckage and haul it away. When the last of the metallic debris had been deposited off the traffic lane, Martin called Control.

"Car 56 is clear. NAT 26-west green is clear."

Philly Control acknowledged. Seven miles to the east, the amber warning lights went dark and the detour barrier at Crossover 85 sank back into the roadway. Three minutes later, traffic was again flashing by on green lane past the two halted patrol cars.

"Pitt Control, this is Car 119 clear of accident," the other car reported.

"Car 119 resume eastbound patrol," came the reply.

The other patrol car pulled away. The two troopers waved at Martin and Ferguson in Beulah. "See you later and thanks," Ben called out. He switched to intercom. "Kelly. Any ID on that woman?"

"Not a thing, Ben," she replied. "About forty years old, and she had a wedding band. She never was conscious, so I can't help you."

Ben nodded and looked over at his partner. "Go get into some dry clothes, kid," he said, "while I finish the report. Then you can take it for a while."

Clay nodded and headed back to the crew quarters.

Ben racked his helmet beside his seat and fished out a cigarette. He reached for an accident report form from the work rack behind his seat and began writing, glancing up from time to time to gaze thoughtfully at the scene of the accident. When he had finished, he thumbed the radio transmitter and called Philly Control. Somewhere in the bloody, oil and foam covered pile of wreckage were the registration plates for the two vehicles involved. When the wrecker collected the debris, it would be machine sifted in Pittsburgh and the plates fed to records and then relayed to Philadelphia where the identifications could be added to Ben's report. When he had finished reading his report he asked, "How's the woman?"

"Still alive, but just barely," Philly Control answered. "Ben, did you say there were just two vehicles involved?"

"That's all we found," Martin replied.

"And were they both in the green?"

"Yes, why?"

"That's funny," Philly controller replied, "we got the calls as a sideswipe in white that put one of the cars over into the green. There should have been a third vehicle."

* * * * *

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"That's funny," Philly controller replied, "we got the calls as a sideswipe in white that put one of the cars over into the green. There should have been a third vehicle."
"That's right," Ben exclaimed. "We were so busy trying to get that gal out and then making the try for the other man I never even thought to look for another car. You suppose that guy took off?"

"It's possible," the controller said. "I'm calling a gate filter until we know for sure. I've got the car number on the driver that reported the accident. I'll hold of him and see if he can give us a lead on the third car. You go ahead with your patrol and I'll let you know what I find out."

"Affirmative," Ben replied. He eased the patrol car onto the police lane and turned west once again. Clay reappeared in the cab, dressed in fresh coveralls. "I'll take it, Ben. You go and clean up now. Kelly's got a pot of fresh coffee in the galley." Ferguson slid into his control seat.

A light skiff of snow covered the service strip and the dividers as Car 56 swung back westward in the red lane. Snow was falling steadily but melting as it touched the warm ferrophalt pavement in all lanes. The wet roadways glistened with the lights of hundreds of vehicles. The chronometer read 1840 hours. Clay pushed the car up to a steady 75, just about apace with the slowest traffic in the white lane. To the south, densities were much lighter in the blue and yellow lanes and even the green had thinned out. It would stay moderately light now for another hour until the dinner stops were over and the night travelers again rolled onto the thruways.

Kelly was putting frozen steaks into the infra-oven as Ben walked through to crew quarters. Her coverall sleeves were rolled to the elbows as she worked and a vagrant strand of copper hair curled over her forehead. As Martin passed by, he caught a faint whisper of perfume and he smiled appreciatively.

In the tiny crew quarters, he shut the door to the galley and stripped out of his wet coveralls and boots. He eyed the shower stall across the passageway.

"Hey, mother," he yelled to Kelly, "have I got time for a shower before dinner?"

"Yes, but make it a quickie," she called back.

Five minutes later he stepped into the galley, his dark, crew-cut hair still damp. Kelly was setting plastic, disposable dishes on the little swing-down table that doubled as a food bar and work desk. Ben peered into a simmering pot and sniffed. "Smells good. What's for dinner, Hiawatha?"

"Nothing fancy. Steak, potatoes, green beans, apple pie and coffee."

Ben's mouth watered. "You know, sometimes I wonder whether one of your ancestors didn't come out of New England. Your menus always seem to coincide with my ideas of a perfect meal." He noted the two places set at the table. Ben glanced out the galley port into the headlight-striped darkness. Traffic was still light. In the distance, the night sky glowed with the lights of Chambersburg, north of the thruway.

"We might as well pull up for dinner," he said. "It's pretty slow out there."

Kelly shoveled dishes over and began laying out a third setting. About half the time on patrol, the crew ate in shifts on the go, with one of the patrol troopers in the cab at all times. When traffic permitted, they pulled off to the service strip and ate together. With the communications system always in service, control stations could reach them anywhere in the big vehicle.

The sergeant stepped into the cab and tapped Ferguson on the shoulder. "Dinnertime, Clay. Pull her over and we'll try some of your gracious living."

"Light the candles and pour the wine," Clay quipped, "I'll be with you in a second."

Car 56 swung out to the edge of the police lane and slowed down. Clay eased the car onto the strip and stopped. He checked the radiodometer and called in. "Pitt Control, this is Car 56 at Marker 158. Dinner is being served in the dining car to the rear. Please do not disturb."

"Affirmative, Car 56," Pittsburgh Control responded. "Eat heartily, it may be going out of style." Clay grinned and flipped the radio to remote and headed for the galley.

* * * * *

Seated around the little table, the trio cut into their steaks. Parked at the north edge of the police lane, the patrol car was just a few feet from the green lane divider strip and cars and cargo carriers flashed by as they ate.

Clay chewed on a sliver of steak and looked at Kelly. "I'd marry you, Pocahontas, if you'd ever learn to cook steaks like beef instead of curing them like your ancestral buffalo robes. When are you going to learn that good beef has to be bloody to be edible?"

The girl glared at him. "If that's what it takes to make it edible, you're going to be an epicurean delight in just about one second if I hear another word about my cooking. And that's also the second crack about my noble ancestors in the past five minutes. I've always wondered about the surgical techniques my great-great-great grandpop used when he lifted a paleface's hair. One more word, Clay Ferguson, and I'll have your scalp flying from Beulah's antenna like a coontail on a kid's scooter."

Ben bellowed and nearly choked. "Hey, kid," he spluttered at Clay, "ever notice how the wrong one of her ancestors keeps coming to the surface? That was the Irish."

Clay polished off the last of his steak and reached for the individual frozen pies Kelly had put in the oven with
the steaks. "Now that's another point," he said, waving his fork at Kelly. "The Irish lived so long on potatoes and prayers that when they get a piece of meat on their menu, they don't know how to do anything but boil it."

"That tears it," the girl exploded. She pushed back from the table and stood up. "I've cooked the last meal this big, dumb Canuck will ever get from me. I hope you get chronic indigestion and then come crawling to me for help. I've got something back there I've been wanting to dose you with for a long time."

She stormed out of the galley and slammed the door behind her. Ben grinned at the stunned look on Clay's face. "Now what got her on the warpath?" Clay asked. Before Ben could answer the radio speaker in the ceiling came to life.

"Car 56 this is Pitt Control."

Martin reached for the transmit switch beside the galley table. "This is Five Six, go ahead."

"Relay from Philly Control," the speaker blared. "Reference the accident at Marker 92 at 1648 hours this date; Philly Control reports a third vehicle definitely involved."

Ben pulled out a pencil and Clay shoved a message pad across the table.

"James J. Newhall, address 3409 Glen Cove Drive, New York City, license number BHT 4591 dash 747 dash 1609, was witness to the initial impact. He reports that a white over green, late model Travelaire, with two men in it, sideswiped one of the two vehicles involved in the fatal accident. The Travelaire did not stop but accelerated after the impact. Newhall was unable to get the full license number but the first six units were QABR dash 46 ... rest of numerals unknown."

Ben cut in. "Have we got identification on our fatalities yet?"

"Affirmative, Five Six," the radio replied. "The driver of the car struck by the hit-and-run vehicle was a Herman Lawrence Hanover, age forty-two, of 13460 One Hundred Eighty-First Street South, Camden, New Jersey, license number LFM 4151 dash 603 dash 2738. With him was his wife, Clara, age forty-one, same address. Driver of the green lane car was George R. Hamilton, age thirty-five, address Box 493, Route 12, Tucumcari, New Mexico."

Ben broke in once more. "You indicate all three are fatalities. Is this correct, Pitt Control? The woman was alive when she was transferred to the ambulance."

"Stand by, Five Six, and I'll check."

A moment later Pitt Control was back. "That is affirmative, Five Six. The woman died at 1745 hours. Here is additional information. A vehicle answering to the general description of the hit-and-run vehicle is believed to have been involved in an armed robbery and multiple murder earlier this date at Wilmington, Delaware. Philly Control is now checking for additional details. Gate filters have been established on NAT 26-West from Marker-Exit 100 to Marker-Exit 700. Also, filters on all interchanges. Pitt Control out."

Kelly Lightfoot, her not-too-serious peeve forgotten, had come back into the galley to listen to the radio exchange. The men got up from the table and Clay gathered the disposable dishware and tossed them into the waste receiver.

"We'd better get rolling," Ben said, "those clowns could still be on the thruway, although they could have got off before the filters went up."

They moved to the cab and took their places. The big engines roared into action as Ben rolled Car 56 back onto the police-way. Kelly finished straightening up in the galley and then came forward to sit on the jump seat between the two troopers. The snow had stopped again but the roadways were still slick and glistening under the headlights. Beulah rolled steadily along on her broad tracks, now cruising at one hundred miles an hour. The steady whine of the cold night wind penetrated faintly into the sound-proofed and insulated cabin canopy. Clay cut out the cabin lights, leaving only the instrument panel glowing faintly along with the phosphorescent buttons and knobs on the arms of the control seats.

A heavy express cargo carrier flashed by a quarter of a mile away in the blue lane, its big bulk lit up like a Christmas tree with running and warning lights. To their right, Clay caught the first glimpse of a set of flashing amber warning lights coming up from behind in the green lane. A minute later, a huge cargo carrier came abreast of the patrol car and then pulled ahead. On its side was a glowing star of the United States Army. A minute later, another Army carrier rolled by.

"That's the missile convoy out of Aberdeen," Clay told Kelly. "I wish our hit-runner had tackled one of those babies. We'd have scraped him up instead of those other people."

The convoy rolled on past at a steady one hundred twenty-five miles an hour. Car 56 flashed under a crossover and into a long, gentle curve. The chronometer clicked up to 2100 hours and the radio sang out. "Cars 207, 56 and 82, this is Pitt Control. 2100 hours density report follows...."

Pittsburgh Control read off the figures for the three cars. Car 82 was one hundred fifty miles ahead of Beulah, Car 207 about the same distance to the rear. The density report ended and a new voice came on the air.
"Attention all cars and all stations, this is Washington Criminal Control." The new voice paused, and across the continent, troopers on every thruway, control station, checkpoint and relay block, reached for clipboard and pen.

"Washington Criminal Control continuing, all cars and all stations, special attention to all units east of the Mississippi. At 1510 hours this date, two men held up the First National Bank of Wilmington, Delaware, and escaped with an estimated one hundred seventy-five thousand dollars. A bank guard and two tellers, together with five bank customers were killed by these subjects using automatic weapon fire to make good their escape. They were observed leaving the scene in a late model, white-over-green Travelaire sedan, license unknown. A car of the same make, model and color was stolen from Annapolis, Maryland, a short time prior to the holdup. The stolen vehicle, now believed to be the getaway car, bears USN license number QABR dash 468 dash 1113...." 

"That's our baby," Ben murmured as he and Clay scribbled, on their message forms.

"... Motor number ZB 1069432," Washington Criminal Control continued. "This car is also now believed to have been involved in a hit-and-run fatal accident on NAT 26-West at Marker 92 at approximately 1648 hours this date.

"Subject Number One is described as WMA, twenty to twenty-five years, five feet, eleven inches tall, medium complexion, dark hair and eyes, wearing a dark-gray sports jacket and dark pants, and wearing a gray sports cap. He was wearing a ring with a large red stone on his left hand.

"Subject Number Two is described as WMA, twenty to twenty-five years, six feet, light, ruddy complexion and reddish brown hair, light colored eyes. Has scar on back left side of neck. Wearing light-brown suit, green shirt and dark tie, no hat.

"These subjects are believed to be armed and psychotically dangerous. If observed, approach with extreme caution and inform nearest control of contact. Both subjects now under multiple federal warrants charging bank robbery, murder, and hit-and-run murder. All cars and stations acknowledge. Washington Criminal Control out."

The air chattered as the cars checked into their nearest controls with "acknowledged."

"This looks like it could be a long night," Kelly said, rising to her feet. "I'm going to sack out. Call me if you need me."

"Good night, princess," Ben called.

"Hey, Hiawatha," Clay called out as Kelly paused in the galley door. "I didn't mean what I said about your steaks. Your great-great-great grandpop would have gone around with his bare scalp hanging out if he had had to use a buffalo hide cured like that steak was cooked."

He reached back at the same instant and slammed the cabin door just as Kelly came charging back. She slammed into the door, screamed and then went storming back to the dispensary while Clay doubled over in laughter.

Ben smiled at his junior partner. "Boy, you're gonna regret that. Don't say I didn't warn you."

* * * * * 

Martin turned control over to the younger trooper and relaxed in his seat to go over the APB from Washington. Car 56 bored steadily through the night. The thruway climbed easily up the slight grade cut through the hills north of Wheeling, West Virginia, and once more snow began falling.

Clay reached over and flipped on the video scanners. Four small screens, one for each of the westbound lanes, glowed with a soft red light. The monitors were synchronized with the radiometer and changed view at every ten-mile marker. Viewing cameras mounted on towers between each lane, lined the thruway, aimed eastward at the oncoming traffic back to the next bank of cameras ten miles away. Infra-red circuits took over from standard scan at dark. A selector system in the cars gave the troopers the option of viewing either the block they were currently patrolling; the one ahead of the next ten-mile block; or, the one they had just passed. As a rule, the selection was based on the speed of the car. Beamed signals from each block automatically switched the view as the patrol car went past the towers. Clay put the slower lane screens on the block they were in, turned the blue and yellow lanes to the block ahead.

They rolled past the interchange with NAT 114-South out of Cleveland and the traffic densities picked up in all lanes as many of the southbound vehicles turned west on to NAT 26. The screens flicked and Clay came alert. Some fifteen miles ahead in the one-hundred-fifty-to-two-hundred-mile an hour blue lane, a glowing dot remained motionless in the middle of the lane and the other racing lights of the blue lane traffic were sheering around it like a racing river current parting around a boulder.

"Trouble," he said to Martin, as he shoved forward on the throttle.

A stalled car in the middle of the high-speed lane was an invitation to disaster. The bull horn blared as Beulah leaped past the two hundred mile an hour mark and safety cocoons slid into place. Aft in the dispensary, Kelly was sealed into her bunk by a cocoon rolling out of the wall and encasing the hospital bed.

Car 5 slanted across the police lane with red lights flashing and edged into the traffic flow in the blue lane. The
great, red winking lights and the emergency radio siren signal began clearing a path for the troopers. Vehicles began edging to both sides of the lane to shift to crossovers to the yellow or green lanes. Clay aimed Beulah at the motionless dot on the screen and eased back from the four-mile-a-minute speed. The patrol car slowed and the headlight picked up the stalled vehicle a mile ahead. The cocoons opened and Ben slipped on his work helmet and dropped down the steps to the side hatch. Clay brought Beulah to a halt a dozen yards directly to the rear of the stalled car, the great bulk of the patrol vehicle with its warning lights serving as a shield against any possible fuzzy-headed speeders that might not be observing the road.

As Martin reached for the door, the Wanted bulletin flashed through his head. "What make of car is that, Clay?"

"Old jalopy Tritan with some souped-up rigs. Probably kids," the junior officer replied. "It looks O.K."

Ben nodded and swung down out of the patrol car. He walked quickly to the other car, flashing his handlight on the side of the vehicle as he went up to the driver. The interior lights were on and inside, two obviously frightened young couples smiled with relief at the sight of the uniform coveralls. A freckled-faced teenager in a dinner jacket was in the driver's seat and had the blister window open. He grinned up at Martin. "Boy, am I glad to see you, officer," he said.

"What's the problem?" Ben asked.

"I guess she blew an impeller," the youth answered. "We were heading for a school dance at Cincinnati and she was boiling along like she was in orbit when blooey she just quit."

Ben surveyed the old jet sedan. "What year is this clunker?" he asked. The kid told him. "You kids have been told not to use this lane for any vehicle that old." He waved his hand in protest as the youngster started to tell him how many modifications he had made on the car. "It doesn't make one bit of difference whether you've put a first-stage Moon booster on this wreck. It's not supposed to be in the blue or yellow. And this thing probably shouldn't have been allowed out of the white--or even on the thruway."

The youngster flushed and bit his lip in embarrassment at the giggles from the two evening-frocked girls in the car.

"Well, let's get you out of here." Ben touched his throat mike. "Drop a light, Clay and then let's haul this junk pile away."

In the patrol car, Ferguson reached down beside his seat and tugged at a lever. From a recess in Beulah's stern, a big portable red warning light dropped to the pavement. As it touched the surface, it automatically flashed to life, sending out a bright, flashing red warning signal into the face of any approaching traffic. Clay eased the patrol car around the stalled vehicle and then backed slow into position, guided by Martin's radioed instructions. A tow-bar extruded from the back of the police vehicle and a magnalamp locked onto the front end of the teenager's car. The older officer walked back to the portable warning light and rolled it on its four wheels to the rear plate of the jalopy where another magnalock secured it to the car. Beulah's two big rear warning lights still shone above the low silhouette of the passenger car, along with the mobile lamp on the jalopy. Martin walked back to the patrol car and climbed in.

He slid into his seat and nodded at Clay. The patrol car, with the disabled vehicle in tow moved forward and slanted left towards the police lane. Martin noted the mileage marker on the radiodometer andfingered the transmitter. "Chillicothe Control this is Car 56."

"This Chillicothe. Go ahead Five Six."

"We picked up some kids in a stalled heap on the blue at Marker 382 and we've got them in tow now," Ben said. "Have a wrecker meet us and take them off our hands."

"Affirmative, Five Six. Wrecker will pick you up at Marker 412."

* * * * *

Clay headed the patrol car and its trailed load into an emergency entrance to the middle police lane and slowly rolled westward. The senior trooper reached into his records rack and pulled out a citation book.

"You going to nail these kids?" Clay asked.

"You're damn right I am," Martin replied, beginning to fill in the violation report. "I'd rather have this kid hurting in the pocketbook than dead. If we turn him loose, he'll think he got away with it this time and try it again. The next time he might not be so lucky."

"I suppose you're right," Clay said, "but it does seem a little rough."

Ben swung around in his seat and surveyed his junior officer. "Sometimes I think you spent four years in the patrol academy with your head up your jet pipes," he said. He fished out another cigarette and took a deep drag.

"You've had four solid years of law; three years of electronics and jet and air-drive engine mechanics and engineering; pre-med, psychology, math, English, Spanish and a smattering of Portuguese, to say nothing of dozens of other subjects. You graduated in the upper tenth of your class with a B.S. in both Transportation and Criminology which is why you're riding patrol and not punching a computer or tinkering with an engine. You'd think with all that
education that somewhere along the line you'd have learned to think with your head instead of your emotions."

Clay kept a studied watch on the roadway. The minute Ben had turned and swung his legs over the side of the seat and pulled out a cigarette, Clay knew that it was school time in Car 56. Instructor Sergeant Ben Martin was in a lecturing mood. It was time for all good pupils to keep their big, fat mouths shut.

"Remember San Francisco de Borja?" Ben queried. Clay nodded. "And you still think I'm too rough on them?"

Ferguson's memory went back to last year's fifth patrol. He and Ben with Kelly riding hospital, had been assigned to NAT 200-North, running out of Villahermosa on the Guatemalan border of Mexico to Edmonton Barracks in Canada. It was the second night of the patrol. Some seven hundred fifty miles north of Mexico City, near the town of San Francisco de Borja, a gang of teenage Mexican youngsters had gone roaring up the yellow at speeds touching on four hundred miles an hour. Their car, a beat-up, fifteen-year-old veteran of less speedy and much rockier local mountain roads, had been gimmicked by the kids so that it bore no resemblance to its original manufacture.

From a junkyard they had obtained a battered air lift, smashed almost beyond use in the crackup of a ten-thousand dollar sports cruiser. The kids pried, pounded and bent the twisted impeller lift blades back into some semblance of alignment. From another wreck of a cargo carrier came a pair of 4000-pound thrust engines. They had jury-rigged the entire mess so that it stuck together on the old heap. Then they hit the thruway--nine of them packed into the jalopy--the oldest one just seventeen years old. They were doing three hundred fifty when they flashed past the patrol car and Ben had roared off in pursuit. The senior officer whipped the big patrol car across the crowded high speed blue lane, jockeyed into the ultra-high yellow and then turned on the power.

By this time the kids realized they had been spotted and they cranked their makeshift power plant up to the last notch. The most they could get out of it was four hundred and it was doing just that as Car 56, clocking better than five hundred, pulled in behind them. The patrol car was still three hundred yards astern when one of the bent and re-bent impeller blades let go. The out-of-balance fan, turning at close to 35,000 rpm, flew to pieces and the air cushion vanished. At four hundred miles an hour, the body of the old jalopy fell the twelve inches to the pavement and both front wheels caved under. There was a momentary shower of sparks, then the entire vehicle snapped cartwheeling more than eighty feet into the air and exploded. Pieces of car and bodies were scattered for a mile down the thruway and the only whole, identifiable human bodies were those of the three youngsters thrown out and sent hurtling to their deaths more than two hundred feet away.

Clay's mind snapped back to the present.

"Write 'em up," he said quietly to Martin. The senior officer gave a Satisfied nod and turned back to his citation pad.

At marker 412, which was also the Columbus turnoff, a big patrol wrecker was parked on the side strip, engines idling, service and warning lights blinking. Clay pulled the patrol car alongside and stopped. He disconnected the tow bar and the two officers climbed out into the cold night air. They walked back to the teenager's car. Clay went to the rear of the disabled car and unhooked the warning light while Martin went to the driver's window. He had his citation book in hand. The youngster in the driver's seat went white at the sight of the violation pad. "May I see your license, please," Ben asked. The boy fumbled in a back pocket and then produced a thin, metallic tab with his name, age, address and license number etched into the indestructible and unalterable metal.

"Also your car registration," Ben added. The youth unclipped similar metal strip from the dashboard.

The trooper took the two tabs and walked to the rear of the patrol car. He slid back a panel to reveal two thin slots in the hull. Martin slid the driver's license into one of the slots, the registration tab into the other. He pressed a button below each slot. Inside the car, a magnetic reader and auto-transmitter "scanned" the magnetic symbols implanted in the tags. The information was fed instantly to Continental Headquarters Records division at Colorado Springs. In fractions of a second, the great computers at Records were comparing the information on the tags with all previous traffic citations issued anywhere in the North American continent in the past forty-five years since the birth of the Patrol. The information from the driver's license and registration tab had been relayed from Beulah via the nearest patrol relay point. The answer came back the same way.

Above the license recording slot were two small lights. The first flashed green, "license is in order and valid." The second flashed green as well, "no previous citations." Ben withdrew the tag from the slot. Had the first light come on red, he would have placed the driver under arrest immediately. Had the second light turned amber, it would have indicated a previous minor violation. This, Ben would have noted on the new citation. If the second light had been red, this would have meant either a major previous violation or more than one minor citation. Again, the driver
would have been under immediate arrest. The law was mandatory. One big strike and you're out--two foul tips and the same story. And "out" meant just that. Fines, possibly jail or prison sentence and lifetime revocation of driving privileges.

Ben flipped the car registration slot to "stand-by" and went back to the teenager's car. Even though they were parked on the service strip of the police emergency lane, out of all traffic, the youngsters stayed in the car. This one point of the law they knew and knew well. Survival chances were dim anytime something went wrong on the high-speed thruways. That little margin of luck vanished once outside the not-too-much-better security of the vehicle body.

Martin finished writing and then slipped the driver's license into a pocket worked into the back of the metallic paper foil of the citation blank. He handed the pad into the window to the driver together with a carbon stylus.

The boy's lip trembled and he signed the citation with a shaky hand.

Ben ripped off the citation blank and license, fed them into the slot on the patrol car and pressed both the car registration and license "record" buttons. Ten seconds later the permanent record of the citation was on file in Colorado Springs and a duplicate recording of the action was in the Continental traffic court docket recorder nearest to the driver's hometown. Now, no power in three nations could "fix" that ticket. Ben withdrew the citation and registration tag and walked back to the car. He handed the boy the license and registration tab, together with a copy of the citation. Ben bent down to peer into the car.

"I made it as light on you as I could," he told the young driver. "You're charged with improper use of the thruway. That's a minor violation. By rights, I should have cited you for illegal usage." He looked around slowly at each of the young people. "You look like nice kids," he said. "I think you'll grow up to be nice people. I want you around long enough to be able to vote in a few years. Who knows, maybe I'll be running for president then and I'll need your votes. It's a cinch that falling apart in the middle of two-hundred-mile an hour traffic is no way to treat future voters.

"Good night, Kids." He smiled and walked away from the car. The three young passengers smiled back at Ben.

The young driver just stared unhappily at the citation.

Clay stood talking with the wrecker crewmen. Ben nodded to him and mounted into the patrol car. The young Canadian crushed out his cigarette and swung up behind the sergeant. Clay went to the control seat when he saw Martin pause in the door to the galley.

"I'm going to get a cup of coffee," the older officer said, "and then take the first shift. You keep Beulah 'til I get back."

Clay nodded and pushed the throttles forward. Car 56 rolled back into the police lane while behind it, the wrecker hooked onto the disabled car and swung north into the crossover. Clay checked both the chronometer and radiodometer and then reported in. "Cinncy Control this is Car 56 back in service." Cincinnati Control acknowledged.

Ten minutes later, Ben reappeared in the cab, slid into the left-hand seat. "Hit the sack, kid," he told Ferguson. The chronometer read 2204. "I'll wake you at midnight--or sooner, if anything breaks."

Ferguson stood up and stretched, then went into the galley. He poured himself a cup of coffee and carrying it with him, went back to the crew quarters. He closed the door to the galley and sat down on the lower bunk to sip his coffee. When he had finished, he tossed the cup into the basket, reached and dimmed the cubby lights and kicked off his boots. Still in his coveralls, Clay stretched out on the bunk and sighed luxuriously. He reached up and pressed a switch on the bulkhead above his pillow and the muted sounds of music from a standard broadcast commercial station drifted into the bunk area. Clay closed his eyes and let the sounds of the music and the muted rumble of the engines lull him to sleep. It took almost fifteen seconds for him to be in deep slumber.

* * * * *

Ben pushed Beulah up to her steady seventy-five-mile-an-hour cruising speed, moved to the center of the quarter-mile-wide police lane and locked her tracks into autodrive. He relaxed back in his seat and divided his gaze between the video monitors and the actual scene on either side of him in the night. Once again the sky was lighted, this time much brighter on the horizon as the road ways swept to the south of Cincinnati.

Traffic was once again heavy and fast with the blue and green carrying almost equal loads while white was really crowded and even the yellow "zoom" lane was beginning to fill. The 2200 hour density reports from Cinncy had been given before the Ohio State-Cal football game traffic had hit the thruways and densities now were peaking near twenty thousand vehicles for the one-hundred-mile block of westbound NAT 26 out of Cincinnati.

Back to the east, near the eastern Ohio state line, Martin could hear Car 207 calling for a wrecker and meat wagon. Beulah rumbled on through the night. The video monitors flicked to the next ten-mile stretch as the patrol car rolled past another interchange. More vehicles streamed onto the westbound thruway, crossing over and dropping down into the same lanes they held coming out of the north-south road. Seven years on patrols had created
automatic reflexes in the trooper sergeant. Out of the mass of cars and cargoes streaming along the rushing tide of traffic, his eye picked out the track of one vehicle slanting across the white lane just a shade faster than the flow of traffic. The vehicle was still four or five miles ahead. It wasn't enough out of the ordinary to cause more than a second, almost unconscious glance, on the part of the veteran officer. He kept his view shifting from screen to screen and out to the sides of the car.

But the reflexes took hold again as his eye caught the track of the same vehicle as it hit the crossover from white to green, squeezed into the faster lane and continued its sloping run towards the next faster crossover. Now Martin followed the movement of the car almost constantly. The moving blip had made the cut-over across the half-mile wide green lane in the span of one crossover and was now whipping into the merger lane that would take it over the top of the police lane and drop down into the one hundred fifty to two hundred mile an hour blue. If the object of his scrutiny straightened out in the blue, he'd let it go. The driver had been bordered on violation in his fast crossover in the face of heavy traffic. If he kept it up in the now-crowded high-speed lane, he was asking for sudden death. The monitors flicked to the next block and Ben waited just long enough to see the speeding car make a move to the left, cutting in front of a speeding cargo carrier. Ben slammed Beulah into high. Once again the bull horn blared as the cocoons slammed shut, this time locking both Clay and Kelly into their bunks, sealing Ben into the control seat.

Beulah lifted on her air cushion and the twin jets roared as she accelerated down the police lane at three hundred miles an hour. Ben closed the gap on the speeder in less than a minute and then edged over to the south side of the police lane to make the jump into the blue lane. The red emergency lights and the radio siren had already cleared a hole for him in the traffic pattern and he eased back on the finger throttles as the patrol car sailed over the divider and into the blue traffic lane. Now he had eyeball contact with the speeding car, still edging over towards the ultra-high lane. On either side of the patrol car traffic gave way, falling back or moving to the left and right. Car 56 was now directly behind the speeding passenger vehicle. Ben fingered the cut-in switch that put his voice signal onto the standard vehicular emergency frequency—the band that carried the automatic siren-warning to all vehicles.

The patrol car was still hitting above the two-hundred-mile-an-hour mark and was five hundred feet behind the speeder. The headlamp bathed the other car in a white glare, punctuated with angry red flashes from the emergency lights.

"You are directed to halt or be fired upon," Ben's voice roared out over the emergency frequency. Almost without warning, the speeding car began braking down with such deceleration that the gargantuan patrol car with its greater mass came close to smashing over it and crushing the small passenger vehicle like an insect. Ben cut all forward power, punched up full retrojet and at the instant he felt Beulah's tracks touch the pavement as the air cushion blew, he slammed on the brakes. Only the safety cocoon kept Martin from being hurled against the instrument panel and in their bunks, Kelly Lightfoot and Clay Ferguson felt their insides dragging down into their legs.

The safety cocoons snapped open and Clay jumped into his boots and leaped for the cab. "Speeder," Ben snapped as he jumped down the steps to the side hatch. Ferguson snatched up his helmet from the rack beside his seat and leaped down to join his partner. Ben ran up to the stopped car through a thick haze of smoke from the retrojets of the patrol car and the friction-burning braking of both vehicles. Ferguson circled to the other side of the car. As they flashed their handlights into the car, they saw the driver of the car kneeling on the floor beside the reclined passenger seat. A woman lay stretched out on the seat, twisting in pain. The man raised an agonized face to the officers. "My wife's going to have her baby right here!"

"Kelly," Ben yelled into his helmet transmitter. "Maternity!"

The dispensary ramp was halfway down before Ben had finished calling. Kelly jumped to the ground and sprinted around the corner of the patrol car, medical bag in hand.

She shoved Clay out of the way and opened the door on the passenger side. On the seat, the woman moaned and then muffled a scream. The patrol doctor laid her palm on the distended belly. "How fast are your pains coming?" she asked. Clay and Ben had moved away from the car a few feet.

"Litter," Kelly snapped over her shoulder. Clay raced for the patrol car while Ben unshipped a portable warning light and rolled it down the lane behind the patrol car. He flipped it to amber "caution" and "pass." Blinking amber arrows pointed to the left and right of the halted passenger vehicle and traffic in the blue lane began picking up speed and parting around the obstructions.

By the time he returned to the patrol car, Kelly had the expectant mother in the dispensary. She slammed the door in the faces of the three men and then she went to work.

The woman's husband slumped against the side of the patrol vehicle.

Ben dug out his pack of cigarettes and handed one to the shaking driver.
He waited until the man had taken a few drags before speaking. "Mister, I don't know if you realize it or not but you came close to killing your wife, your baby and yourself," Ben said softly, "to say nothing of the possibility of killing several other families. Just what did you think you were doing?"

The driver's shoulders sagged and his hand shook as he took the cigarette from his mouth. "Honestly, officer, I don't know. I just got frightened to death," he said. He peered up at Martin. "This is our first baby, you see, and Ellen wasn't due for another week. We thought it would be all right to visit my folks in Cleveland and Ellen was feeling just fine. Well, anyway, we started home tonight—we live in Jefferson City—and just about the time I got on the thruway, Ellen started having pains. I was never so scared in my life. She screamed once and then tried to muffle them but I knew what was happening and all I could think of was to get her to a hospital. I guess I went out of my head, what with her moaning and the traffic and everything. The only place I could think of that had a hospital was Evansville, and I was going to get her there come hell or high water." The young man tossed away the half-smoked cigarette and looked up at the closed dispensary door. "Do you think she's all right?"

Ben sighed resignedly and put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Don't you worry a bit. She's got one of the best doctors in the continent in there with her. Come on," he said. He took the husband by the arm and led him around to the patrol car cab hatch. "You climb up there and sit down. I'll be with you in a second."

The senior officer signaled to Ferguson. "Let's get his car out of the traffic, Clay," he directed. "You drive it."

Ben went back and retrieved the caution blinker and re-racked it in the side of the patrol car, then climbed up into the cab. He took his seat at the controls and indicated the jump seat next to him. "Sit down, son. We're going to get us and your car out of this mess before we all get clobbered."

He flicked the headlamp at Ferguson in the control seat of the passenger car and the two vehicles moved out. Ben kept the emergency lights on while they eased carefully cross-stream to the north and the safety of the police lane. Clay picked up speed at the outer edge of the blue lane and rolled along until he reached the first "patrol only" entrance through the divider to the service strip. Ben followed him in and then turned off the red blinkers and brought the patrol car to a halt behind the other vehicle.

The worried husband stood up and looked to the rear of the car. "What's making it so long?" he asked anxiously. "They've been in there a long time."

Ben smiled. "Sit down, son. These things take time. Don't you worry. If there were anything wrong, Kelly would let us know. She can talk to us on the intercom anytime she wants anything."

The man sat back down. "What's your name?" Ben inquired.

"Haverstraw," the husband replied distractedly, "George Haverstraw. I'm an accountant. That's my wife back there," he cried, pointing to the closed galley door. "That's Ellen."

"I know," Ben said gently. "You told us that."

Clay had come back to the patrol car and dropped into his seat across from the young husband. "Got a name picked out for the baby?" he asked.

Haverstraw's face lighted. "Oh, yes," he exclaimed. "If it's a boy, we're going to call him Harmon Pierce Haverstraw. That was my grandfather's name. And if she's a girl, it's going to be Caroline May after Ellen's mother and grandmother."

The intercom came to life. "Anyone up there?" Kelly's voice asked. Before they could answer, the wail of a baby sounded over the system. Haverstraw yelled.

"Congratulations, Mr. Haverstraw," Kelly said, "you've got a fine-looking son."

"Hey," the happy young father yelped, "hey, how about that? I've got a son." He pounded the two grinning troopers on the back. Suddenly he froze. "What about Ellen? How's Ellen?" he called out.

"She's just fine," Kelly replied. "We'll let you in here in a couple of minutes but we've got to get us gals and your new son looking pretty for papa. Just relax."

Haverstraw sank down onto the jump seat with a happy dazed look on his face.

Ben smiled and reached for the radio. "I guess our newest citizen deserves a ride in style," he said. "We're going to have to transfer Mrs. Haverstraw and er, oh yes, Master Harmon Pierce Haverstraw. That was my grandfather's name. And if she's a girl, it's going to be Caroline May after Ellen's mother and grandmother."

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"Gosh, no," the man replied. "I guess the closest one to wherever we are." He paused thoughtfully. "Just where are we? I've lost all sense of distance or time or anything else."

Ben looked at the radiodometer. "We're just about due south of Indianapolis. How would that be?"

"Oh, that's fine," Haverstraw replied.

"You can come back now, Mr. Haverstraw," Kelly called out. Haverstraw jumped up. Clay got up with him. "Come on, papa," he grinned, "I'll show you the way."
Ben smiled and then called into Indianapolis Control for an ambulance.

"Ambulance on the way," Control replied. "Don't you need a wrecker, too, Five Six?"

Ben grinned. "Not this time. We didn't lose one. We gained one."

He got up and went back to have a look at Harmon Pierce Haverstraw, age five minutes, temporary address, North American Continental Thruway 26-West, Mile Marker 632.

Fifteen minutes later, mother and baby were in the ambulance heading north to the hospital. Haverstraw, calmed down with a sedative administered by Kelly, had nearly wrung their hands off in gratitude as he said goodbye.

"I'll mail you all cigars when I get home," he shouted as he waved and climbed into his car.

Beulah's trio watched the new father ease carefully into the traffic as the ambulance headed down the policeway. Haverstraw would have to cut over to the next exchange and then go north to Indianapolis. He'd arrive later than his family. This time, he was the very picture of careful driving and caution as he threaded his way across the green.

"I wonder if he knows what brand of cigars I smoke?" Kelly mused.

* * * * *

The chrono clicked up to 2335 as Car 56 resumed patrol. Kelly plumped down onto the jump seat beside Ben. Clay was fiddling in the galley. "Why don't you go back to the sack?" Ben called.

"What, for a lousy twenty-five minutes," Clay replied. "I had a good nap before you turned the burners up to high. Besides, I'm hungry. Anyone else want a snack?"

Ben shook his head. "No, thanks," Kelly said. Ferguson finished slapping together a sandwich. Munching on it, he headed into the engine room to make the midnight check. Car 56 had now been on patrol eight hours. Only two hundred thirty-two hours and two thousand miles to go.

Kelly looked around at the departing back of the younger trooper. "I'll bet this is the only car in NorCon that has to stock twenty days of groceries for a ten-day patrol," she said.

Ben chuckled. "He's still a growing boy."

"Well, if he is, it's all between the ears," the girl replied. "You'd think that after a year I would have realized that nothing could penetrate that thick Canuck's skull. He gets me so mad sometimes that I want to forget I'm a lady." She paused thoughtfully. "Come to think of it. No one ever accused me of being a lady in the first place."

"Sounds like love," Ben smiled.

Hunched over on the jump seat with her elbows on her knees and her chin cupped in both hands, Kelly gave the senior officer a quizzical sideways look.

Ben was watching his monitors and missed the glance. Kelly sighed and stared out into the light streaked night of the thruway. The heavy surge of football traffic had distributed itself into the general flow on the road and while all lanes were busy, there were no indications of any overcrowding or jam-ups. Much of the pattern was shifting from passenger to cargo vehicle as it neared midnight. The football crowds were filtering off at each exchange and exit and the California fans had worked into the blue and yellow--mostly the yellow--for the long trip home. The fewer passenger cars on the thruway and the increase in cargo carriers gave the troopers a breathing spell. The men in the control buckets of the three hundred and four hundred-ton cargo vehicles were the real pro's of the thruways; careful, courteous and fast. The NorCon patrol cars could settle down to watch out for the occasional nuts and drunks that might bring disaster.

Once again, Martin had the patrol car on auto drive in the center of the police lane and he steeled back in his seat. Beside him, Kelly stared moodily into the night.

"How come you've never married, Ben?" she asked. The senior trooper gave her a startled look. "Why, I guess for the same reason you're still a maiden," he answered. "This just doesn't seem to be the right kind of a job for a married man."

Kelly shook her head. "No, it's not the same thing with me," she said. "At least, not entirely the same thing. If I got married, I'd have to quit the Patrol and you wouldn't. And secondly, if you must know the truth, I've never been asked."

Ben looked thoughtfully at the copper-haired Irish-Indian girl. All of a sudden she seemed to have changed in his eyes. He shook his head and turned back to the road monitors.

"I just don't think that a patrol trooper has any business getting married and trying to keep a marriage happy and make a home for a family thirty days out of every three hundred sixty, with an occasional weekend home if you're lucky enough to draw your hometown for a terminal point. This might help the population rate but it sure doesn't do anything for the institution of matrimony."

[Illustration]

"I know some troopers that are married," Kelly said.
"But there aren't very many," Ben countered. "Comes the time they pull me off the cars and stick me behind a desk somewhere, then I'll think about it."

"You might be too old by then," Kelly murmured.

Ben grinned. "You sound as though you're worried about it," he said.

"No," Kelly replied softly, "no, I'm not worried about it. Just thinking." She averted her eyes and looked out into the night again. "I wonder what NorCon would do with a husband-wife team?" she murmured, almost to herself.

Ben looked sharply at her and frowned. "Why, they'd probably split them up," he said.

* * * * *

"Split what up?" Clay inquired, standing in the door of the cab.

"Split up all troopers named Clay Ferguson," Kelly said disgustedly, "and use them for firewood--especially the heads. They say that hardwood burns long and leaves a fine ash. And that's what you've been for years."

She sat erect in the jump seat and looked sourly at the young trooper.

Clay shuddered at the pun and squeezed by the girl to get to his seat. "I'll take it now, pop," he said. "Go get your geriatrics treatment."

Ben got out of his seat with a snort. "I'll 'pop' you, skinhead," he snapped. "You may be eight years younger than I am but you only have one third the virility and one tenth the brains. And eight years from now you'll still be in deficit spending on both counts."

"Careful, venerable lord of my destiny," Clay admonished with a grin, "remember how I spent my vacation and remember how you spent yours before you go making unsubstantiated statements about my virility."

Kelly stood up. "If you two will excuse me, I'll go back to the dispensary and take a good jolt of male hormones and then we can come back and finish this man-to-man talk in good locker room company."

"Don't you dare," Ben cried, "I wouldn't let you tamper with one single, tiny one of your feminine traits, princess. I like you just the way you are."

Kelly looked at him with a wide-eyed, cherubic smile. "You really mean that, Ben?"

The older trooper flushed briefly and then turned quickly into the galley. "I'm going to try for some shut-eye. Wake me at two, Clay, if nothing else breaks." He turned to Kelly who still was smiling at him. "And watch out for that lascivious young goat."

"It's all just talk, talk, talk," she said scornful. "You go to bed Ben. I'm going to try something new in psychiatric annals. I'm going to try and psychoanalyze a dummy." She sat back down on the jump seat.

At 2400 hours it was Vincennes Check with the density reports, all down in the past hour. The patrol was settling into what looked like a quiet night routine. Kelly chatted with Ferguson for another half hour and then rose again. "I think I'll try to get some sleep," she said. "I'll put on a fresh pot of coffee for you two before I turn in."


"It take all that time to make coffee?" Clay queried.

"No," she said. "I'm also getting a few things ready so we can have a fast breakfast in case we have to eat on the run. I'm just about through now."

A couple of minutes later she stuck her head into the cab. "Coffee's done. Want some?"

Clay nodded. "Please, princess."

She poured him a cup and set it in the rack beside his seat.

"Thanks," Clay said. "Good night, Hiawatha."

"Good night, Babe," she replied.

"You mean 'Paul Bunyon,' don't you?" Clay asked. "'Babe' was his blue ox."

"I know what I said," Kelly retorted and strolled back to the dispensary. As she passed through the crew cubby, she glanced at Ben sleeping on the bunk recently vacated by Ferguson. She paused and carefully and gently pulled a blanket up over his sleeping form. She smiled down at the trooper and then went softly to her compartment.

In the cab, Clay sipped at his coffee and kept watchful eyes on the video monitors. Beulah was back on auto drive and Clay had dropped her speed to a slow fifty as the traffic thinned.

At 0200 hours he left the cab long enough to go back and shake Ben awake and was himself re-awakened at 0400 to take back control. He let Ben sleep an extra hour before routing him out of the bunk again at 0700. The thin, gray light of the winter morning was just taking hold when Ben came back into the cab. Clay had pulled Beulah off to the service strip and was stopped while he finished transcribing his scribbled notes from the 0700 Washington Criminal Control broadcast.

Ben ran his hand sleepily over his close-cropped head. "Anything exciting?" he asked with a yawn. Clay shook his head. "Same old thing. 'All cars exercise special vigilance over illegal crossovers. Keep all lanes within legal speed limits.' Same old noise."
"Anything new on our hit-runner?"
"Nope."
"Good morning, knights of the open road," Kelly said from the galley door. "Obviously you both went to sleep after I left and allowed our helpless citizens to slaughter each other."
"How do you figure that one?" Ben laughed.
"Oh, it's very simple," she replied. "I managed to get in a full seven hours of sleep. When you sleep, I sleep. I slept. Ergo, you did likewise."
"Nope," Clay said, "for once we had a really quiet night. Let's hope the day is of like disposition."
Kelly began laying out the breakfast things. "You guys want eggs this morning?"
"You gonna cook again today?" Clay inquired.
"Only breakfast," Kelly said. "You have the honors for the rest of the day. The diner is now open and we're taking orders."
"I'll have mine over easy," Ben said. "Make mine sunny-up," Clay called.
Kelly began breaking eggs into the pan, muttering to herself. "Over easy, sunny-up, I like 'em scrambled. Next tour I take I'm going to get on a team where everyone likes scrambled eggs."
A few minutes later, Beulah's crew sat down to breakfast. Ben had just dipped into his egg yolk when the radio blared. "Attention all cars. Special attention Cars 207, 56 and 82."
"Just once," Ben said, "just once, I want to sit down to a meal and get it all down my gullet before that radio gives me indigestion." He laid down his fork and reached for the message pad.

The radio broadcast continued. "A late model, white over green Travelaire, containing two men and believed to be the subjects wanted in earlier broadcast on murder, robbery and hit-run murder, was involved in a service station robbery and murder at Vandalia, Illinois, at approximately 0710 this date. NorCon Criminal Division believes this subject car escaped filter check and left NAT 26-West sometime during the night.

"Owner of this stolen vehicle states it had only half tanks of fuel at the time it was taken. This would indicate wanted subjects stopped for fuel. It is further believed they were recognized by the station attendant from video bulletins sent out by this department last date and that he was shot and killed to prevent giving alarm.

"The shots alerted residents of the area and the subject car was last seen headed south. This vehicle may attempt to regain access to NAT-26-West or it may take another thruway. All units are warned once again to approach this vehicle with extreme caution and only with the assistance of another unit where possible. Acknowledge. Washington Criminal Control out."

Ben looked at the chrono. "They hit Vandalia at 0710, eh. Even in the yellow they couldn't get this far for another half hour. Let's finish breakfast. It may be a long time until lunch."

The crew returned to their meal. While Kelly was cleaning up after breakfast, Clay ran the quick morning engine room check. In the cab, Ben opened the arms rack and brought out two machine pistols and belts. He checked them for loads and laid one on Clay's control seat. He strapped the other around his waist. Then he flipped up a cover in the front panel of the cab. It exposed the breech mechanisms of a pair of twin-mounted 25 mm auto-cannon. The ammunition loads were full. Satisfied, Ben shut the inspection port and climbed into his seat. Clay came forward, saw the machine pistol on his seat and strapped it on without a word. He settled himself in his seat. "Engine room check is all green. Let's go rabbit hunting."

Car 56 moved slowly out into the police lane. Both troopers had their individual sets of video monitors on in front of their seats and were watching them intently. In the growing light of day, a white-topped car was going to be easy to spot.

* * * * *

It had all the earmarks of being another wintery, overcast day. The outside temperature at 0800 was right on the twenty-nine-degree mark and the threat of more snow remained in the air. The 0800 density reports from St. Louis Control were below the 14,000 mark in all lanes in the one-hundred-mile block west of the city. That was to be expected. They listened to the eastbound densities peaking at twenty-six thousand vehicles in the same block, all heading into the metropolis and their jobs. The 0800, 1200 and 1600 hours density reports also carried the weather forecasts for a five-hundred-mile radius from the broadcasting control point. Decreasing temperatures with light to moderate snow was in the works for Car 56 for the first couple of hundred miles west of St. Louis, turning to almost blizzard conditions in central Kansas. Extra units had already been put into service on all thruways through the midwest and snow-burners were waging a losing battle from Wichita west to the Rockies around Alamosa, Colorado.

Outside the temperature was below freezing; inside the patrol car it was a comfortable sixty-eight degrees. Kelly had cleared the galley and taken her place on the jump seat between the two troopers. With all three of them in the cab, Ben cut from the intercom to commercial broadcast to catch the early morning newscasts and some pleasant
music. The patrol vehicle glided along at a leisurely sixty miles an hour. An hour out of St. Louis, a big liquid cargo carrier was stopped on the inner edge of the green lane against the divider to the police lane. The trucker had dropped both warning barriers and lights a half mile back. Ben brought Beulah to a halt across the divider from the stopped carrier. "Dropped a track pin," the driver called out to the officers.

Ben backed Beulah across the divider behind the stalled carrier to give them protection while they tried to assist the stalled vehicle.

Donning work helmets to maintain contact with the patrol car, and its remote radio system, the two troopers dismounted and went to see what needed fixing. Kelly drifted back to the dispensary and stretched out on one of the hospital bunks and picked up a new novel.

Beulah's well-equipped machine shop stock room produced a matching pin and it was merely a matter of lifting the stalled carrier and driving it into place in the track assembly. Ben brought the patrol car alongside the carrier and unshipped the crane. Twenty minutes later, Clay and the carrier driver had the new part installed and the tanker was on his way once again.

Clay climbed into the cab and surveyed his grease-stained uniform coveralls and filthy hands. "Your nose is smudged, too, dearie," Martin observed.

Clay grinned, "I'm going to shower and change clothes. Try and see if you can drive this thing until I get back without increasing the pedestrian fatality rate." He ducked back into the crew cubby and stripped his coveralls.

Bored with her book, Kelly wandered back to the cab and took Clay's vacant control seat. The snow had started falling again and in the mid-morning light it tended to soften the harsh, utilitarian landscape of the broad thruway stretching ahead to infinity and spreading out in a mile of speeding traffic on either hand.

"Attention all cars on NAT 26-West and east," Washington Criminal Control radio blared. "Special attention Cars 56 and 82. Suspect vehicle, white over green Travelaire reported re-entered NAT 26-West on St. Louis interchange 179. St. Louis Control reports communications difficulty in delayed report. Vehicle now believed...."

"Car 56, Car 56," St. Louis Control broke in. "Our pigeon is in your zone. Commercial carrier reports near miss sideswipe three minutes ago in blue lane approximately three miles west of mile Marker 957.

"Repeating. Car 56, suspect car...."

Ben glanced at the radiodometer. It read 969, then clicked to 970.

"This is Five Six, St. Louis," he broke in, "acknowledged. Our position is mile marker 970...."

Kelly had been glued to the video monitors since the first of the bulletin. Suddenly she screamed and banged Ben on the shoulder. "There they are. There they are," she cried, pointing at the blue lane monitor.

Martin took one look at the white-topped car cutting through traffic in the blue lane and slammed Beulah into high. The safety cocoons slammed shut almost on the first notes of the bull horn. Trapped in the shower, Clay was locked into the stall dripping wet as the water automatically shut off with the movement of the cocoon.

* * * * *

"I have them in sight," Ben reported, as the patrol car lifted on its air pad and leaped forward. "They're in the blue five miles ahead of me and cutting over to the yellow. I estimate their speed at two twenty-five. I am in pursuit."

Traffic gave way as Car 56 hurtled the divider into the blue.

The radio continued to snap orders.

"Cars 112, 206, 76 and 93 establish roadblocks at mile marker crossover 1032. Car 82 divert all blue and yellow to green and white."

Eight Two was one hundred fifty miles ahead but at three-hundred-mile-an-hour speeds, 82's team was very much a part of the operation. This would clear the two high-speed lanes if the suspect car hadn't been caught sooner.

"Cars 414, 227 and 290 in NAT-26-East, move into the yellow to cover in case our pigeon decides to fly the median." The controller continued to move cars into covering positions in the area on all crossovers and turnoffs. The sweating dispatcher looked at his lighted map board and mentally cursed the lack of enough units to cover every exit. State and local authorities already had been notified in the event the fugitives left the thruways and tried to escape on a state freeway.

In Car 56, Ben kept the patrol car roaring down the blue lane through the speeding westbound traffic. The standard emergency signal was doing a partial job of clearing the path, but at those speeds, driver reaction times weren't always fast enough. Ahead, the fleeing suspect car brushed against a light sedan, sending it careening and rocking across the lane. The driver fought for control as it swerved and screeched on its tilting frame. He brought it to a halt amid a haze of blue smoke from burning brakes and bent metal. The white over green Travelaire never slowed, fighting its way out of the blue into the ultra-high yellow and lighter traffic. Ben kept Beulah in bulldog pursuit.

The sideswipe ahead had sent other cars veering in panic and a cluster inadvertently bunched up in the path of
the roaring patrol car. Like a flock of hawk-frightened chickens, they tried to scatter as they saw and heard the massive police vehicle bearing down on them. But like chickens, they couldn't decide which way to run. It was a matter of five or six seconds before they parted enough to let the patrol car through. Ben had no choice but to cut the throttle and punch once on the retrojets to brake the hurtling patrol car. The momentary drops in speed unlocked the safety cocoons and in an instant, Clay had leaped from the shower stall and sped to the cab. Hearing, rather than seeing his partner, Martin snapped over his shoulder, "Unrack the rifles. That's the car." Clay reached for the gun rack at the rear of the cab.

Kelly took one look at the young trooper and jumped for the doorway to the galley. A second later she was back. Without a word, she handed the nude Ferguson a dangling pair of uniform coveralls. Clay gasped, dropped the rifles and grabbed the coveralls from her hand and clutched them to his figure. His face was beet-red. Still without speaking, Kelly turned and ran back to her dispensary to be ready for the next acceleration.

Clay was into the coveralls and in his seat almost at the instant Martin whipped the patrol car through the hole in the blue traffic and shoved her into high once more.

There was no question about the fact that the occupants of the fugitive car knew they were being pursued. They shot through the crossover into the yellow lane and now were hurtling down the thruway close to the four-hundred-mile-an-hour mark.

Martin had Beulah riding just under three hundred to make the crossover, still ten miles behind the suspect car and following on video monitor. The air still crackled with commands as St. Louis and Washington Control maneuvered other cars into position as the pursuit went westward past other units blocking exit routes.

Clay read aloud the radiodometer numerals as they clicked off a mile every nine seconds. Car 56 roared into the yellow and the instant Ben had it straightened out, he slammed all finger throttles to full power. Beulah snapped forward and even at three hundred miles an hour, the sudden acceleration pasted the car's crew against the back of their cushioned seats. The patrol car shot forward at more than five hundred miles an hour.

The image of the Travelaire grew on the video monitor and then the two troopers had it in actual sight, a white, racing dot on the broad avenue of the thruway six miles ahead.

Clay triggered the controls for the forward bow cannon and a panel box flashed to "ready fire" signal.

"Negative," Martin ordered. "We're coming up on the roadblock. You might miss and hit one of our cars."

"Car 56 to Control," the senior trooper called. "Watch out at the roadblock. He's doing at least five hundred in the yellow and he'll never be able to stop."

Two hundred miles east, the St. Louis controller made a snap decision. "Abandon roadblock. Roadblock cars start west. Maintain two hundred until subject comes into monitor view. Car 56, continue speed estimates of subject car. Maybe we can box him in."

At the roadblock forty-five miles ahead of the speeding fugitives and their relentless pursuer, the four patrol cars pivoted and spread out across the roadway some five hundred feet apart. They lunged forward and lifted up to air-cushion jet drive at just over two hundred miles an hour. Eight pairs of eyes were fixed on video monitors set for the ten-mile block to the rear of the four vehicles.

Beulah's indicated ground speed now edged towards the five hundred fifty mark, close to the maximum speeds the vehicles could attain.

The gap continued to close, but more slowly. "He's firing hotter," Ben called out. "Estimating five thirty on subject vehicle."

Now Car 56 was about three miles astern and still the gap closed. The fugitive car flashed past the site of the abandoned roadblock and fifteen seconds later all four patrol cars racing ahead of the Travelaire broke into almost simultaneous reports of "Here he comes."

A second later, Clay Ferguson yelled out, "There he goes. He's boondocking, he's boondocking."

"He has you spotted," Martin broke in. "He's heading for the median. Cut, cut, cut. Get out in there ahead of him."

The driver of the fugitive car had seen the bulk of the four big patrol cruisers outlined against the slight rise in the thruway almost at the instant he flashed onto their screens ten miles behind them. He broke speed, rocked wildly from side to side, fighting for control and then cut diagonally to the left, heading for the outer edge of the thruway and the unpaved, half-mile-wide strip of landscaped earth that separated the east and westbound segments of NAT-26.

The white and green car was still riding on its airpad when it hit the low, rounded curbing at the edge of the thruway. It hurtled into the air and sailed for a hundred feet across the gently-sloping snow-covered grass, came smashing down in a thick hedgerow of bushes--and kept going.

Car 56 slowed and headed for the curbing. "Watch it, kids," Ben snapped over the intercom, "we may be buying a plot in a second."
Still traveling more than five hundred miles an hour, the huge patrol car hit the curbing and bounced into the air like a rocket-boosted elephant. It tilted and smashed its nose in a slanting blow into the snow-covered ground. The sound of smashing and breaking equipment mingled with the roar of the thundering jets, tracks and air drives as the car fought its way back to level travel. It surged forward and smashed through the hedgerow and plunged down the sloping snowbank after the fleeing car.

"Clay," Ben called in a strained voice, "take 'er."
Ferguson's fingers were already in position. "You all right, Ben?" he asked anxiously.
"Think I dislocated a neck vertebra," Ben replied. "I can't move my head. Go get 'em, kid."
"Try not to move your head at all, Ben," Kelly called from her cocoon in the dispensary. "I'll be there the minute we slow down."

A half mile ahead, the fugitive car plowed along the bottom of the gentle draw in a cloud of snow, trying to fight its way up the opposite slope and onto the eastbound thruway.

But the Travelaire was never designed for driving on anything but a modern superhighway. Car 56 slammed through the snow and down to the bottom of the draw. A quarter of a mile ahead of the fugitives, the first of the four roadblock units came plowing over the rise.

The car speed dropped quickly to under a hundred and the cocoons were again retracted. Ben slumped forward in his seat and caught himself. He eased back with a gasp of pain, his head held rigidly straight. Almost the instant he started to straighten up, Kelly flung herself through the cab door. She clasped his forehead and held his head against the back of the control seat.

Suddenly, the fugitive car spun sideways, bogged in the wet snow and muddy ground beneath and stopped. Clay bore down on it and was about two hundred yards away when the canopy of the other vehicle popped open and a sheet of automatic weapons fire raked the patrol car. Only the low angle of the sedan and the nearness of the bulky patrol car saved the troopers. Explosive bullets smashed into the patrol car canopy and sent shards of plastiglass showering down on the trio.

An instant later, the bow cannon on the first of the cut-off patrol units opened fire. An ugly, yellow-red blossom of smoke and fire erupted from the front of the Travelaire and it burst into flames. A second later, the figure of a man staggered out of the burning car, clothes and hair aflame. He took four plunging steps and then fell face down in the snow. The car burning and crackled and a thick funereal pyre of oily, black smoke billowed into the gray sky. It was snowing heavily now, and before the troopers could dismount and plow to the fallen man, a thin layer of snow covered his burned body.

* * * * *

An hour later, Car 56 was again on NAT 26-West, this time heading for Wichita barracks and needed repairs. In the dispensary, Ben Martin was stretched out on a hospital bunk with a traction brace around his neck and a copper-haired medical-surgical patrolwoman fussing over him.

In the cab, Clay peered through the now almost-blinding blizzard that whirled and skirted thick snow across the thruway. Traffic densities were virtually zero despite the efforts of the dragonlike snow-burners trying to keep the roadways clear. The young trooper shivered despite the heavy jacket over his coveralls. Wind whistled through the shell holes in Beulah's canopy and snow sifted and drifted against the back bulkhead.

The cab communications system had been smashed by the gunfire and Clay wore his work helmet both for communications and warmth.

The door to the galley cracked open and Kelly stuck her head in. "How much farther, Clay?" she asked.
"We should be in the barracks in about twenty minutes," the shivering trooper replied.
"I'll fix you a cup of hot coffee," Kelly said. "You look like you need it."

Over the helmet intercom Clay heard her shoving things around in the galley. "My heavens, but this place is a mess," she exclaimed. "I can't even find the coffee bin. That steeplechase driving has got to stop." She paused.
"Clay," she called out, "Have you been drinking in here? It smells like a brewery."

Clay raised mournful eyes to the shattered canopy above him. "My cooking wine" he sighed.
It would, of course, take a trio of Ivory Tower scientists to conceive of tracking down that statistical entity, the Common Man, and testing out an idea on him. And only the Ivory Tower type would predict that egregiously wrongly!

Frederick Braun, M.D., Ph.D., various other Ds, pushed his slightly crooked horn-rims back on his nose and looked up at the two-story wooden house. There was a small lawn before it, moderately cared for, and one tree. There was the usual porch furniture, and the house was going to need painting in another six months or so, but not quite yet. There was a three-year-old hover car parked at the curb of a make that anywhere else in the world but America would have been thought ostentatious in view of the seeming economic status of the householder.

Frederick Braun looked down at the paper in his hand, then up at the house again. He said to his two companions, "By Caesar, I will admit it is the most average-looking dwelling I have ever seen."

Patricia O'Gara said impatiently, "Well, do we or don't we?" Her hair should have been in a pony tail, or bouncing on her shoulders, or at least in the new Etruscan revival style, not drawn back in its efficient bun.

Ross Wooley was unhappy. He scratched his fingers back through his reddish crew cut. "This is going to sound silly."

Patricia said testily, "We've been through all that, Rossie, good heavens."

"Nothing ventured, nothing ..." Braun let the sentence dribble away as he stuffed the paper into a coat pocket, which had obviously been used as a waste receptacle for many a year, and led the way up the cement walk, his younger companions immediately behind.

He put his finger on the doorbell and cocked his head to one side. There was no sound from the depths of the house. Dr. Braun muttered, "Bell out of order."

"It would be," Ross chuckled sourly. "Remember? Average. Here, let me." He rapped briskly on the wooden door jamb. They stood for a moment then he knocked again, louder, saying almost as though hopefully, "Maybe there's nobody home."

"All right, all right, take it easy," a voice growled even as the door opened.

He was somewhere in his thirties, easygoing of face, brownish of hair, bluish of eye and moderately good-looking. His posture wasn't the best and he had a slight tummy but he was a goodish masculine specimen by Mid-Western standards. He stared out at them, defensive now that it was obvious they were strangers. Were they selling something, or in what other manner were they attempting to intrude on his well being? His eyes went from the older man's thin face, to the football hero heft of the younger, then to Patricia O'Gara. His eyes went up and down her figure and became approving in spite of the straight business suit she affected.

He said, "What could I do for you?"

"Mr. Crowley?" Ross said.

"That's right."

"I'm Ross Wooley and my friends are Patricia O'Gara and Dr. Frederick Braun. We'd like to talk to you."

"There's nobody sick here."

Patricia said impatiently, "Of course not. Dr. Braun isn't a practicing medical doctor. We are research biochemists."

"We're scientists," Ross told him, putting it on what he assumed was the man's level. "There's something on which you could help us."

Crowley took his eyes from the girl and scowled at Ross. "Me? Scientists? I'm just a country boy, I don't know anything about science." There was a grudging self-deprecation in his tone.

Patricia took over, a miracle smile overwhelming her air of briskness. "We'd appreciate the opportunity to discuss it with you."

Dr. Braun added the clincher. "And it might be remunerative."

Crowley opened the door wider. "Well, just so it don't cost me nothing." He stepped back for them. "Don't mind the place. Kind of mussed up. Fact is, the wife left me about a week ago and I haven't got around to getting somebody to come in and kind of clean things up."

He wasn't exaggerating. Patricia O'Gara had no pretensions to the housewife's art herself, but she sniffed when she saw the condition of the living room. There was a dirty shirt drooped over the sofa back and beside the chair
which faced the TV set were half a dozen empty beer cans. The ashtrays hadn't been emptied for at least days and the floor had obviously not been swept since the domestic tragedy which had sent Mrs. Crowley packing.

Now that the three strangers were within his castle, Crowley's instincts for hospitality asserted themselves. He said, "Make yourself comfortable. Here, wait'll I get these things out of the way. Anybody like a drink? I got some beer in the box, or," he smirked at Patricia, "I got some port wine you might like, not this bellywash you buy by the gallon."

They declined the refreshments, it wasn't quite noon.

Crowley wrestled the chair which had been before the TV set around so that he could sit facing them, and then sat himself down. He didn't get this and his face showed it.

Frederick Braun came to the point. "Mr. Crowley," he said, "did it ever occur to you that somewhere amidst our nearly one hundred million American males there is the average man?"

Crowley looked at him.

Braun cleared his throat and with his thumb and forefinger pushed his glasses more firmly on the bridge of his nose. "I suppose that isn't exactly the technical way in which to put it."

Ross Wooley shifted his football shoulders and leaned forward earnestly. "No, Doctor, that's exactly the way to put it." He said to Crowley, very seriously, "We've done this most efficiently. We've gone through absolute piles of statistics. We've...."

"Done what?" Crowley all but wailed. "Take it easy, will you? What are you all talking about?"

Patricia said impatiently, "Mr. Crowley, you are the average American. The man on the street. The Common Man."

He frowned at her. "What'd'ya mean, common? I'm as good as anybody else."

"That's exactly what we mean," Ross said placatingly. "You are exactly as good as anybody else, Mr. Crowley. You're the average man."

"I don't know what the devil you're talking about. Pardon my language, Miss."

"Not at all," Patricia sighed. "Dr. Braun, why don't you take over? We seem to all be speaking at once."

* * *

The little doctor began to enumerate on his fingers. "The center of population has shifted to this vicinity, so the average American lives here in the Middle West. Population is also shifting from rural to urban, so the average man lives in a city of approximately this size. Determining average age, height, weight is simple with government data as complete as they are. Also racial background. You, Mr. Crowley, are predominately English, German and Irish, but have traces of two or three other nationalities."

Crowley was staring at him. "How in the devil did you know that?"

Ross said wearily, "We've gone to a lot of trouble."

Dr. Braun hustled on. "You've had the average amount of education, didn't quite finish high school. You make average wages working in a factory as a clerk. You spent some time in the army but never saw combat. You drink moderately, are married and have one child, which is average for your age. Your I.Q. is exactly average and you vote Democrat except occasionally when you switch over to Republican."

"Now wait a minute," Crowley protested. "You mean I'm the only man in this whole country that's like me? I mean, you mean I'm the average guy, right in the middle?"

Patricia O'Gara said impatiently. "You are the nearest thing to it, Mr. Crowley. Actually, possibly one of a hundred persons would have served our purpose."

"O.K.," Crowley interrupted, holding up a hand. "That gets us to the point. What's this here purpose? What's the big idea prying, like, into my affairs till you learned all this about me? And what's this stuff about me getting something out of it? Right now I'm between jobs."

The doctor pushed his battered horn-rims back on his nose with his forefinger. "Yes, of course," he said reasonably. "Now we get to the point. Mr. Crowley, how would you like to be invisible?"

The three of them looked at him. It seemed to be his turn.

Crowley got up and walked into the kitchen. He came back in a moment with an opened can of beer from which he was gulping even as he walked. He took the can away from his mouth and said carefully, "You mean like a ghost?"

"No, of course not," Braun said in irritation. "By Caesar, man, have you no imagination? Can't you see it was only a matter of time before someone, possibly working away on an entirely different subject of research, stumbled upon a practical method of achieving invisibility?"

"Now, wait a minute," Crowley said, his voice belligerent. "I'm only a country boy, maybe, without any egghead background, but I'm just as good as the next man and just as smart. I don't think I like your altitude."

"Attitude," Ross Wooley muttered unhappily. He shot a glance at Patricia O'Gara but she ignored him.
Patricia turned on the charm. Her face opened into smile and she said soothingly, "Don't misunderstand, Mr. Crowley. May I call you Don? I'm sure we're going to be associates. You see, Don, we need your assistance."

This was more like it. Crowley sat down again and finished the can of beer. "O.K., it won't hurt to listen. What's the pitch?"

The older man cleared his throat. "We'll cover it quickly so that we can get to the immediate practical aspects. Are you interested in biodynamics ... umah ... no, of course not. Let me see. Are you at all familiar with the laws pertaining to refraction of ... umah, no." He cleared his throat again, unhappily. "Have you ever seen a medusa, Mr. Crowley? The gelatinous umbrella-shaped free swimming form of marine invertebrate related to the coral polyp and the sea anemone?"

Ross Wooley scratched his crew cut and grimaced. "Jellyfish, Doctor, jellyfish. But I think the Portuguese Man-of-War might be a better example."

"Oh, jellyfish," Crowley said. "Sure, I've seen jellyfish. I got an aunt lives near Baltimore. We used to go down there and swim in Chesapeake Bay. Sting the devil out of you. What about it?"

Patricia leaned forward, still smiling graciously. "I really don't see a great deal of point going into theory, gentlemen." She looked at Ross and Dr. Braun, then back at Crowley. "Don, I think that what the doctor was leading up to was an attempt to describe in layman's language the theory of the process onto which we've stumbled. He was using the jellyfish as an example of a life form all but invisible. But I'm sure you aren't interested in technical terminology, are you? A good deal of gobbledygook, really, don't you think?"

"Yeah, that's what I say. Let's get to the point. You mean you think it's possible to make a guy invisible. Nobody could see him, eh?"

"It's not a matter of thinking," Ross said sourly. "We've done it."

Crowley stared at him. "Done it? You mean, you, personal? You got invisible?"

"Yes. All three of us. Once each."

"And you come back all right, eh? So anybody can see you again."

The doctor said reasonably, "Here we are, quite visible. The effect of the usual dosage lasts for approximately twelve hours."

They let him assimilate it for a few minutes. Some of the ramifications were coming home to him. Finally he got up and went into the back again for another can of beer. By this time Ross Wooley was wishing he would renew his offer, but the other had forgotten his duties as a host.

He took the can away from his mouth and said, "You want to make me invisible. You want me to, like, kind of experiment on." His eyes thinned. "Why pick me?"

The doctor said carefully, "Because you're the common man, the average man, Mr. Crowley. Before we release this development, we would like to have some idea of the scope of the effects."

[Illustration]

The beer went down chuck-a-luck. Crowley put the can aside and licked his bottom lip, then rubbed it with a fingertip. He said slowly, "Now take it easy while I think about this." He blinked. "Why you could just walk into a bank and...."

The three were watching him, empty-faced.

"Exactly," Dr. Braun said.

* * * * *

Frederick Braun stared gloomily from the hotel suite's window at the street below. He peered absently at his thin wrist, looked blank for a moment, then realized all over again that his watch was being cleaned. He stared down at the street once more, his wrinkled face unhappy.

The door opened behind him and Patricia O'Gara came in briskly and said, "No sign of the guinea pig yet, eh?"

"No."

"Where's Rossie?"

The doctor cleared his throat. "There was an item on the newscast. A humor bit. It seems that the head waiter of the Gourmet... Have you ever eaten at the Gourmet, Patricia?"

"Do I look like a millionaire?"

"At any rate, a half pound of the best Caspian caviar disappeared, spoonful at a time, right before his eyes."

Patricia looked at him. "Good heavens."

"Yes. Well, Ross has gone to pay the tab."

Patricia looked at her watch. "The effects will be wearing off shortly. Crowley will probably be back at any time. We warned him about returning to visibility in the middle of some street, completely naked." She sank into a seat and looked up at the doctor. "I suppose you admit I was right." Her voice was crisp.

The other turned on her. "And just why do you say that?"
"This caviar bit. Our friend, Donald Crowley, has obviously walked into the Gourmet restaurant, having heard it was the most expensive in New York, and ate as much as he could stuff down of the most expensive item on the menu."

The elderly little doctor pushed his battered horn-rims farther back on his nose. "Tell me, Patricia, when you made the experiment, did you do anything ... umah ... anything at all, that saved you some money?"

Uncharacteristically, she suddenly giggled. "I had the time of my life riding on a bus without paying the fare."

Braun snorted. "Then Donald Crowley, in eating his caviar, did substantially the same thing. It's probably been a life's ambition of his to eat in an ultra-swank restaurant and then walk out without paying. To be frank," the doctor cleared his throat apologetically, "it's always been one of mine."

Patricia conceded him a chuckle, but then said impatiently, "It's one thing my saving fifteen cents on a bus ride, and his eating twenty-five dollars worth of caviar."

"Merely a matter of degree, my dear."

Patricia said in irritation, "Why in the world did we have to bring him to New York where he could pull such childish tricks? We could have performed the experiment right there in Far Cry, Nebraska."

Dr. Braun abruptly ceased the pacing he had begun and found a chair. He absently stuck a hand into a coat pocket, pulled out a crumbled piece of paper, stared at it for a moment, as though he had never seen it before, grunted, and returned it to the pocket. He looked at Patricia O'Gara. "We felt that on completely unknown territory he would feel less constrained, don't you remember? In his home town, his conscience would be more apt to restrict him."

Something suddenly came to her. She looked at her older companion suspiciously. "That newscast. Was there anything else on it? Don't look innocent, you know what I mean."

"Well, there was one item."

"Out with it," she demanded.

"The Hotel Belefonte threatens to sue that French movie star, Brigette whatever-her-name is."

"Brigette Loren," Patricia said, staring. "What's that got to do with Donald Crowley?"

The good doctor was embarrassed. "It seems that she came running out of her suite, umah, semi-dressed and screaming that the hotel was haunted."

"Good heavens," Patricia said with sudden vision. "That's one aspect I hadn't thought of."

"Evidently Crowley did."

Patricia O'Gara said definitely, "My point's been proven. Our average man is a slob. Give him the opportunity to exercise unlimited freedom without danger of consequence and he becomes an undisciplined and dangerous lout."

* * *

Ross Wooley had come in, scowling, just in time to catch most of that. He tossed his hat onto a table and fished in his pockets for pipe and tobacco. "Nuts, Pat," he said. "In fact, just the opposite's been proven. Don's just on a fun binge. Like a kid in a candy shop. He hasn't done anything serious. Went into a fancy restaurant and ate some expensive food. Sneaked into the hotel room of the world's most famous sex-symbol and got a close-up look. He grinned suddenly. "I wish I had thought of that."

"Ha!" Patricia snorted. "Our engagement is off, you Peeping Tom."

"Children, children," Braun chuckled. "I'll admit, though, I think Ross is correct. Don's done little we three didn't when first given the robe of invisibility. We experimented, largely playfully, even childishlly."

Patricia bit out, "This experiment is ridiculous, anyway, and I don't know why I ever agreed to it. Scientific? Nonsense. Where are our controls? For it to make any sense we'd have to work with scores of subjects. Suppose we do agree that the manner in which Don Crowley has reacted is quite harmless. Does that mean we can release this discovery to the world? Certainly not."

Ross said sullenly, "But you agreed that we'd go by the results of this...."

"I agreed to no such thing, Rossie Wooley, you overgrown lug. All I agreed to do was consider the results. I was, and am, of the opinion that if the person our politicians so lovingly call the Common Man was released of the restrictions inhibiting him, he'd go hog wild and destroy both society and himself. What is to prevent murder, robbery, rape and a score of other crimes, given invisibility for anyone who has a couple of dollars with which to go into a drugstore and purchase our serum?"

Her fiancé sighed deeply, jamming tobacco fiercely into the bowl of his briar. He growled, "Look, you seem to think that the only thing that restricts man is the fear of being punished. There are other things, you know."

"Good heavens," she said sarcastically. "Name one."

"There is the ethical code in which he was raised, based on religion or otherwise. There is the fact that man is fundamentally good, to use a trite term, given the opportunity."

"My education has evidently been neglected," Patricia said, still argumentatively. "I've never seen evidence to
support your claim.

"I'm not saying individuals don't react negatively, given opportunity to be antisocial," he all but snarled. "I'm just saying people in general, common, little people, trend toward decency, desire the right thing."

"Individuals my ... my neck," Patricia snapped back. "Did you ever hear of Rome and the games? Here a whole people, millions of them, were given the opportunity to indulge in sadistic spectacles to their heart's desire. How many of them stayed home from the games?" She laughed in ridicule.

Ross flushed. "Some of them did, confound it."

Dr. Braun had been taking in their debate, uncomfortably. As though in spite of himself, he said now, "Very few, I am afraid."

"Religious ethic," Patricia pursued, relentlessly. "The greatest of the commandments is Thou Shalt Not Kill, but comes along a war in which killing becomes not only permissible but an absolute virtue and all our good Christians, Jews, Mohammedans and even Buddhists, who supposedly are not even allowed to kill mosquitoes, wade in with sheer happiness."

"War releases abnormal passions," Ross said grudgingly.

"You don't need a war. Look at the Germans, supposedly one of our most highly civilized people. When the Nazi government released all restraints on persecution of the Jews, gypsies and others, you know what happened. This began in peace time, not in war."

Dr. Braun shifted in his chair. He said, his voice low, "We needn't look beyond our own borders. The manner in which our people conducted themselves against the Amerinds from the very beginning of the white occupation of North America was quite shocking."

Ross said to him, "I thought you were on my side. The Indian wars were a long time ago. We're more advanced now."

Dr. Braun said softly, "My father fought against Geronimo in Arizona. It wasn't so long ago as all that."

Ross Wooley felt the argument going against him and lashed back. "We've been over and over this, what's your point?"

Patricia said doggedly, "The same point I tried to make from the beginning. This discovery must not be generally released. We'll simply have to suppress it."

* * * * *

The door opened behind them. They turned. Nothing was there. Ross, scowling, lumbered to his feet to walk over and close it.

"Hey, take it easy," a voice laughed. "Don't walk right into a guy."

Ross stopped, startled.

Dr. Braun and Patricia stood up and stared, too.

Crowley laughed. "You all look like you're seeing a ghost."

Ross rumbled a grudging chuckle. "It'd be all right if we saw the ghost, it's not seeing you that's disconcerting."

The air began to shimmer, somewhat like heat on the desert's face.

Crowley said, "Hey, the stuff's wearing off. Where're my clothes?"

"Where you left them. There in that bedroom," Ross said. "We'll wait for you." He went back and rejoined his associates. The door to the bedroom opened, there was a shimmering, more obvious now, and then the door closed behind it.

"He rejoined us just in time," Dr. Braun murmured. "Another ten minutes and he would have ... umah ... materialized down on the street."

Ross hadn't finished the discussion, he said, his face in all but pout, "What you don't realize, Pat, is the world has gone beyond the point where scientific discoveries can be suppressed. If we try to keep the lid on this today, the Russians or Chinese, or somebody, will hit on it tomorrow."

Patricia said impatiently, "Good heavens, let's don't bring the Cold War into it."

Ross opened his mouth to snap something back at her, closed it again and shrugged his bulky shoulders angrily.

In a matter of less than ten minutes the bedroom door reopened and this time a grinning Crowley emerged, fully dressed. He said, "Man, that was a devil of an experience!"

They saw him to a chair and had him talk it all through. He was candid enough, bubbling over with it all.

In the some eleven and a half hours he'd been on his own, he had covered quite an area of Manhattan.

Evidently the first hour had been spent in becoming used to the startling situation. He couldn't even see himself, which, to his surprise affected walking and even use of his hands. You had to get used to it. Then there was the fact that he was nude and felt nude and hence uncomfortable walking about in mixed pedestrian traffic. But that phase passed. Early in the game he found that there was small percentage in getting into crowds. It led to all sorts of complications, including the starting of minor rows, one person thinking another was pushing when it was simply a
matter of Crowley trying to get out from underfoot.

Then he went through a period of the wonder of it all. Being able to walk anywhere and observe people who had no suspicion that they were being observed. It was during that phase that he had sought out the hotel in which he had read the chesty French movie actress Brigette Loren was in residence. Evidently, he’d hit the nail right on the head. Brigette was at her toilette when he arrived on scene. In telling about this, Crowley leered amusedly at Patricia from the side of his eyes. She ignored him.

Then he’d gone through a period when the full realization of his immunity had hit him.

At this point he turned to Braun, "Hey, Doc, you ever eaten any caviar? You know, that Russian stuff. Supposed to be the most expensive food in the world."

The doctor cleared his throat. "Small amounts in hors d'oeuvres at cocktail parties."

"Well, maybe I'm just a country boy but the stuff tastes like fish eggs to me. Anyway, to get back to the story...."

He’d gone into Tiffany's and into some of the other swank shops. And then into a bank or two, and stared at the treasures of Manhattan.

At this point he looked at Ross. "You know, just being invisible don't mean all that. How you going to pick up a wad of thousand dollar bills and just walk out the front door with them? Everybody’d see the dough just kind of floating through the air."

"I came to the same conclusion myself, when I experimented," Ross said wryly.

He had ridden on the subways ... free. He had eaten various food in various swank restaurants. He had even had drinks in name bars, sampling everything from Metaxa to vintage champagne. He was of the opinion that even though he remained invisible for the rest of his years, he’d still stick to bourbon and beer.

He had gone down to Wall Street and into the offices of the top brokerage firms and into the sanctum sanctorums of the wealthiest of mucky-mucks but had been too impatient to stick around long enough to possibly hear something that might be profitable. He admitted, grudgingly, that he wouldn't have known what to listen for anyway. Frustrated there, he had gone back uptown and finally located the hangout of one of the more renown sports promoters who was rumored to have gangster connections and was currently under bail due to a boxing scandal. He had stayed about that worthy's office for an hour, gleaning nothing more than several dirty jokes he'd never heard before.

All this activity had wearied him so he went to the Waldorf, located an empty suite in the tower and climbed into bed for a nap after coolly phoning room service to give him a call in two hours. That had almost led to disaster. Evidently, someone on room service had found the suite to be supposedly empty and had sent a boy up to investigate. However, when he had heard the door open, Crowley had merely rolled out of the bed and left, leaving a startled bellhop behind staring at rumpled bedclothes which had seemed to stir of their own accord.

* * *

The rest of the day was little different from the first hours. He had gone about gawking in places he couldn't have had he been visible. Into the dressing room of the Roxie, into the bars of swank private clubs, into the offices of the F.B.I. He would have liked to have walked in on a poker game with some real high rollers playing, such as Nick the Greek, but he didn't have the time nor know-how to go about finding one.

Crowley wound it all up with a gesture of both hands, palms upward. "I gotta admit, it was fun, but what the devil good is it?"

They looked at him questioningly.

Crowley said, "I mean, how's it practical? How can you make a buck out of it, if you turn it over to the public, like? Everybody'd go around robbing everybody else and you'd all wind up equal."

Dr. Braun chuckled in deprecation. "There would be various profitable uses, Don. One priceless one would be scientific observation of wild life. For that matter there would be valid usage in everyday life. There are often personal reasons for not wishing to be observed. Celebrities, for instance, wishing to avoid crowds."

"Yeah," Crowley laughed, "or a businessman out with his secretary."

Dr. Braun frowned. "Of course, there are many other aspects. It would mean the end of such things as the Iron Curtain. And also the end of such things as American immigration control. There are many, many ramifications, Don, some of which frighten us. The world would be never quite the same."

Crowley leaned forward confidentially. "Well, I'll tell you. I was thinking it all out. What we got to do is turn it over to the Army and soak them plenty for it."

The others ignored his cutting himself a piece of the cake.

Ross Wooley merely grunted bitterly.

Patricia said impatiently, "We've thought most of these things through, Don. However, Dr. Braun happens to be
quite a follower of Lord Russell."

Crowley looked at her blankly.
"He's a pacifist," she explained.

Braun pushed his glasses back more firmly on his nose and said, gently, "The military already have enough
gadgets to destroy quite literally everything and I trust one set of them no more than the other. If both sides had our
discovery, then, very well, each would go about attempting to find some manner of penetrating the invisibility, or
taking various measures to protect their top secrets. But to give it to just one would be such an advantage that the
other would have to embark immediately upon a desperate attack before the advantage could be fully realized. If we
turn this over to the Pentagon, for exclusive use, the Soviets would have to begin a preventative war as soon as they
learned of its existence."

"You a red?" Crowley said, scowling.

The doctor shrugged hopelessly. "No," he said.

Crowley turned to the other two. "If you think it's the patriotic thing to do, why don't one of you sell it to the
government?"

Patricia said testily, "You don't understand, Don. Even if we were so thoroughly in disagreement that we would
act unilaterally, we couldn't. You see, this is a three-way discovery. No one of us knows the complete process."

His face twisted. "Look, maybe some of this egghead stuff doesn't get through to me but I'm not stupid, see?
You got the stuff, haven't you? You gave me that shot this morning."

Braun took over, saying reasonably, "Don, this discovery was hit upon by accident. The three of us are
employed in the laboratories of a medical research organization. I am the department head. Patricia and Ross were
doing some routine work on a minor problem when they separately stumbled upon some rather startling effects,
practically at the same time. Each, separately, brought their discoveries to me, and, working you might say
intuitively, I added some conclusions of my own, and ... well, I repeat, the discovery was stumbled upon."

Crowley assimilated that. "None of you knows how to do it, make those injections like, by himself?"

"That is correct. Each knows just one phase of the process. Each must combine with the other two."

Patricia said impatiently, "And thus far we wish to keep it that way. Rossie believes the discovery should be
simultaneously revealed on a world-wide basis, and let man adapt to it as best he can. I think it should be suppressed
until man has grown up a little--if he ever does. The doctor vacillates between the two positions. What he would
truly like to see, is the method kept only for the use of qualified scientists, but even our good doctor realizes what a
dream that is."

Crowley took them all in, one at a time. "Well, what the devil are you going to do?"

"That's a good question," Ross said unhappily.

"This experiment was a farce," Patricia said irritably. "After all our trouble locating Don, our Common Man,
we have found out nothing that we didn't know before. His reactions were evidently largely similar to our own
and...." She broke it off and frowned thoughtfully. The other three looked at her questioningly.

"What do you mean, Pat?" Ross growled.

She turned to him. "We haven't given Don the chance to prove which one of us is right. One day is insufficient.
Half the things he wished to do, such as sneaking around picking up stock tips in Wall Street and inside information
on sporting events...."

"Hey, take it easy," Crowley protested. "I was just, like, curious."

Ross said heately, "That's not fair. I'll admit, I, too, thought of exactly the same possibilities. But thinking
about them and going through with them are different things. Haven't you ever thought about what you'd do if given
the chance to be world-wide supreme dictator? But, truly, if the job was offered, would you take it?"

"Good heavens," Patricia said disgustedly, "remind me to break off our engagement if I haven't already done it.
I hate overpowering men. All I'm saying is that we'll have to give Don at least a week. One day isn't enough."

Dr. Braun cocked his head to one side and said uncomfortably, "I'm not sure but that in a week's time our friend
Don might be able.... See here, Don, do you mind going on down to the hotel's bar while we three talk this through?"

Crowley obviously took umbrage at that, but there was nothing to be done. Frowning peevishly, he left.

The doctor looked from one to the other of his associates. "By Caesar, do you realize the damage friend Don
could accomplish in a week's time?"

Patricia laughed at him. "That's what I keep telling the two of you. Do you realize the damage any person could
do with invisibility? Not to speak of giving it to every Tom, Dick and Harry in the world."

Ross said, "We've started this, lets go through with it. I back Pat's suggestion, that we give Don sufficient
serum to give him twelve hours of invisibility a day for a full week. However, we will ration it out to him day by
day, so that if things get out of hand we can cut his supply."
"That's an idea," Patricia said. "And I suspect that within half the period we'll all be convinced that the process will have to be suppressed."

Ross leaned forward. "Good. I suggest we three keep this suite and get Don a room elsewhere, so he won't be inhibited by our continual presence. Once a day we'll give him enough serum for one shot and he can take it any time he wishes to." He ran his beefy hand back through his red crew cut in a gesture of satisfaction. "If he seems to get out of hand, we'll call it all off."

Dr. Braun cleared his throat unhappily. "I have premonitions of disaster, but I suppose if we've come this far we should see the experiment through."

Patricia said ungraciously, "At least the lout will be limited in his accomplishments by his lack of imagination. Imagine going into that French girl's dressing room."

"Yeah," Ross said ludicrously trying to make his big open face look dreamy.

"You wretch," Patricia laughed. "The wedding is off!!"

* * * * *

But Crowley was no lout. He was full of the folk wisdom of his people. God helps those who help themselves. It's each man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. Not to speak of. Never give a sucker an even break. If I didn't do it, somebody else would.

Had he been somewhat more of a student he might also have run into that nugget of the ancient Greek. Morals are the invention of the weak to protect themselves from the strong.

Once convinced that the three eggheads were incapable of realizing the potentialities of their discovery, he had little difficulty in arguing himself into the stand that he should. It helped considerably to realize that in all the world only four persons, including himself, were aware of the existence of the invisibility serum.

He spent the first day in what Marx called in "Das Kapital" the "original accumulation of capital," although it would seem unlikely that even in the wildest accusations of the most confirmed Marxist, no great fortune was ever begun in such wise.

It was not necessary, he found, to walk into a large bank and simply seemingly levitate the money out the front door. In fact, that would have meant disaster. However, large sums of money are to be found elsewhere on Manhattan and for eleven hours Crowley used his native ingenuity and American know-how, most of which had been gleaned from watching TV crime shows. By the end of the day he had managed to accumulate in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand dollars and was reasonably sure that the news would not get back to his sponsors. The fact was, he had cleaned out the treasuries of several numbers rackets and those of two bookies.

It was important, he well realized, that he be well under way before the three eggheads decided to lower the boom.

The second day he spent making his preliminary contacts, an operation that was helped by his activities of the day before. He was beginning already to get the feel of the underworld element with which he had decided he was going to have to work, at least in the early stages of his operations.

Any leader, be he military, political or financial, knows that true greatness lies in the ability to choose assistants. Be you a Napoleon with his marshals, a Roosevelt with his brain trust, a J. P. Morgan with his partners, the truism applies. No great leader has ever stood alone.

But Crowley also knew instinctively that he was going to have to keep the number of his immediate associates small. They were going to have to know his secret, and no man is so naive as not to realize that while one person can keep a secret, it becomes twice as hard for two and from that point on the likelihood fades in a geometric progression.

On the fifth day he knocked on the door of the suite occupied by Dr. Braun and his younger associates and pushed his way in without waiting for response.

The three were sitting around awaiting his appearance and to issue him his usual day's supply of serum. They greeted him variously, Patricia with her usual brisk, almost condescending smile; Dr. Braun with a gentle nod and a speaking of his first name; Ross Wooley sourly. Ross obviously had some misgivings, the exact nature of which he couldn't quite put his finger upon.

Crowley grinned and said, "Hello, everybody."

"Sit down, Don," Braun said gently. "We have been discussing your experiment."

While the newcomer was finding his seat, Patricia said testily, "Actually, we are not quite happy about your reports, Don. We feel an ... if you'll pardon us ... an evasive quality about them. As though you aren't completely frank."
"In short," Ross snapped, "have you been pulling things you haven't told us about?"
Crowley grinned at them. "Well you folks are downright suspicious."
Dr. Braun indicated some notes on the coffee table before him. "It seems hardly possible that your activities would be confined largely to going to the cinema, to the swankier night clubs and eating in the more famed restaurants."
Crowley's grin turned into a half embarrassed smirk. Patricia thought of a small boy who had been caught in a mischief but was still somewhat proud of himself. He said, "Well, I gotta admit that there's been a few things. Come on over to my place and I'll show you." He looked at Braun. "Hey, Doc, about how much is one of them Rembrandt paintings worth?"
Braun rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, "Great Caesar," he murmured. He came to his feet and looked around at the rest of them. "Let us go over there and learn the worst," he said.
At the curb, before the hotel, Ross Wooley looked up and down the street for a cab.
Crowley said, his voice registering self-deprecation, "Over here."
Over here was a several toned, fantastically huge hover-limousine, a nattily dressed, sharp-looking, expressionless-faced young man behind the wheel.
The three looked at Crowley.
He opened the door. "Climb in folks. Nothing too good for you scientists, eh?"
Inside, sitting next to a window with Patricia beside him and Dr. Braun at the far window, and with Ross in a jump seat, Crowley said expansively, "This is Larry. Larry, this is Doc Braun and his friends I was telling you about, Ross Wooley and Pat O'Gara. They're like scientists."
Larry said, "Hi," without inflection, and tooled the heavy car out into the traffic. [Illustration]
Ross spun on Crowley. "Don, where'd you get this car?"
Crowley laughed. "You'll see. Take it easy. You'll see a lot of things."

* * *
They were too caught up in their own thoughts and in the barrage of demands they were leveling at Crowley to notice direction. It wasn't until they were already on the George Washington Bridge that Patricia blurted, "Don, this isn't the way to your hotel!"
Crowley said tolerantly, "Take it easy, Pat. We're taking a short detour. Something I have to show you in Jersey."
"I don't like this," Ross snapped. The redhead shifted his heavy shoulders in a reflexive protest against the confining tweed coat he wore.
"Relax," Crowley told him reasonably. "I've been thinking things out quite a bit and I've got a lot to discuss with you folks."
They were across the bridge now and Larry headed into the maze which finally unraveled itself to the point that it was obvious they were heading north. Larry hit the lift lever and they rose ten feet from the surface.
Dr. Braun said evenly, "You had no intention of taking us to your room. You used that as a ruse to get us out of our hotel and, further, across the bridge until we are now in a position where it's quite impossible for us to summon police assistance."
Crowley grinned. "That's right, Doc. Didn't I tell you these three were real eggheads, Larry? Look how quick he figured that out."
Larry grunted in what might have been amusement.
Ross, growling low in his throat, turned suddenly in his jump seat and grabbed Crowley by the coat front.
"What's going on here?"
Crowley snapped, "Larry!"
From seemingly nowhere, the chauffeur had produced a thin black automatic and was now lazily pointing it, not so much at Ross Wooley as at Dr. Braun and Patricia. He said evenly, softly, "Easy, friend."
Ross released his grip, "Put that thing away," he blurted.
"Sure, sure," Larry said, his voice all but disinterested. The gun disappeared.
Crowley, only slightly ruffled, said now, "Take it easy, Ross. Nothing's going to happen to you. I'm going to need you folks and I'm going to treat you right."
"Where are we going?" Ross growled.
"I had the boys rent me a big estate like up in the Catskills. Big place, nice and quiet. In fact, the last tenants used it for one of these rest sanitariums. You know, rich people with DTs or trying to get a monkey off their back."
"The boys?" Patricia said softly.
He looked at her and grinned again. Crowley was obviously enjoying himself. "I got a few people working for
me," he explained.

Dr. Braun blurted, "You fool! You mean you've revealed the existence of the process Pat, Ross and I worked out to a group of ignoramuses?"

Crowley said angrily, "Now look, Doc, let's don't get on that bit. Maybe I'm just a country boy but I'm as smart as the next man. Just because some of you eggheads spend half your life in college don't mean you've got any monopoly on good common sense. I went to the school of hard knocks, understand, and I got plenty of diplomas to prove it. Take it easy on that ignoramus talk."

Patricia said suddenly, "Don's right, Dr. Braun. I think you've badly underestimated him."

Ross snorted sourly at that remark. "We've all underestimated him. Well, I think you'll agree that our friend Don will get no more injections of the invisibility serum."

Crowley chuckled.

They looked at him. Three sinkings of stomach taking place simultaneously.

"Now, you know I thought that might be your altitude...."

"Attitude," Ross muttered.

"... So I went to the trouble of coming up to your suite last night and sort of confiscating the supply. By the looks of it, I'd say there was enough for another ten shots or so."

"See," Patricia said to Ross. "You're not as smart as you thought you were. Don's one up on you."

The estate which the "boys" had secured for Crowley was two or three miles out of Tannersville on a mountainside and quite remote. He took considerable pride in showing them about, although it was obvious that he had been here before only once himself.

He was obviously enjoying the situation thoroughly and had planned it out in some detail. Besides the empty-faced Larry, who had driven the car, they were introduced to two more of Crowley's confederates, neither of whom gave any indication that the three were present under duress. The first was a heavy-set, moist palmed southerner with a false air of the jovial. He shook hands heartily, said nothing with a good many words for a few minutes and then excused himself. The third confidant was an older man of sad mien who would have passed easily in the swankest of Washington, New York or London private clubs. He was introduced simply as Mr. Whitely, greeted them pleasantly as though all were fellow guests, had a word to say about the weather then and passed on.

Patricia was frowning. "Your southern friend, Paul Teeter, it seems to me I've heard his name before."

Crowley grinned. "Oh, Paul's been in the news from time to time."

Ross was looking after Mr. Whitely who had disappeared into the main building. They were standing on the lawn, as part of the guided tour Crowley was giving them. He growled, "I suppose the two of them are experienced confidence men, or something."

"Take it easy with those cracks, Ross," Crowley said. "Whitely used to have a seat on the Stock Exchange. A real big shot. But that was before they disbarred him, or whatever they call it."

"See here," Dr. Braun said urgently. "We've had enough of all this, Don. I propose we go somewhere where it will be possible for us to bring you to your senses, and save you from disaster."

"Kind of a powwow, eh? O.K., Doc, come on in here." He led them to the entrance, conducted them inside and into a library that led off the main entraada. He said, "By the way, Larry has a few of his boys up here just kind of like estate watchmen. Some of them aren't much used to being out of the city and they get nervous. So...."

Ross growled, "All right, all right, don't try to make like a third-rate villain in a B-Movie. You have guards about and it would be dangerous to try to leave without your permission."

"How about that?" Crowley exclaimed as though amazed. "Man, you eggheads catch on quick. Nothing like a college education." He waved them to chairs. "I'm going to have to leave for a while. Whitely's got some big deal brewing and we got to work it out." He grinned suddenly. "And Larry's got a different kind of deal. One he's been planning for years but hasn't been able to swing one or two details. It's a caution how many details a little man who wasn't there can handle in one of these king-size capers."

He had used the pseudo-criminal term, caper, with considerable satisfaction. Crowley was obviously having the time of his life.

"Very well," Braun said, "we'll wait." When the other had left the room, leaving the door open behind him, the doctor turned to his two younger associates. "What children we've been."

Ross Wooley growled unhappily, "Brother, we couldn't have picked a worse so-called Common Man, if we'd tried. That character is as nutty as a stuffed date. Do you realize what he's in a position to do?"

Patricia twisted her mouth thoughtfully. "I wonder if any of us really realize. I am afraid even with all our speculation, we never truly thought this out."

Dr. Braun pushed his glasses back on his nose with a forefinger. He shook his head. "You make a mistake,
Ross. We didn't make a bad choice in our selection of Don Crowley for our typical Common Man."

Ross looked at him and snorted.

Braun said doggedly, "Remember, we attempted to find the average man, the common man, the little man, the man in the street. Well, it becomes obvious to me that we did just that."

Patricia said thoughtfully, "I don't know. I'm inclined to think that from the beginning you two have underestimated Don. He has certainly shown considerable ingenuity. Do you realize that he's done all this in a matter of less than a week?"

"Done all what?" Ross said sarcastically.

She gestured. "Look at this establishment. He's obviously acquired considerable money, and he already has an organization, or at least the beginnings of one."

"That is beside the point," Braun said ruefully. "I say that he is reacting as would be expected. As the average man in the street would react given the opportunity to seize almost unlimited power, and with small chance of reprisal."

Patricia shrugged as though in disagreement.

Braun looked at Ross Wooley. "Close the door, Ross. Lord knows when we'll have another chance to confer. Obviously, something must be done."

Ross came quickly to his feet, crossed to the door, looked up and down the hallway which was empty and then closed the door behind him. He came back to the others and drew his chair in closer so that they could communicate in low voices.

Braun said, "One thing is definite. We must not allow him to secure further serum. For all we know, he might be planning to inject some of those gangsters he's affiliated himself with."

Patricia shook her head thoughtfully. "I still think you underestimate Don. He must realize he can't trust them. At this stage, he has had to confide in at least two or three, fully to utilize his invisibility. But in the long run it isn't to his advantage to have anybody know about it. If the authorities, such as the F.B.I., began looking for an invisible man, sooner or later they would penetrate the field of invisibility."

"You mean you think Crowley will use these men for a time and then destroy them?"

"He'll have to, or sooner or later the secret will be out."

Braun said in soft logic, "If he can't allow anyone to know about it, then we, too, must be destroyed."

Ross growled, "Then we've got to finish him first."

Patricia said, "Now, I don't know. Don is showing considerably more sense than you two evidently give him credit for. I think in many ways what he's done is quite admirable. He's seen his chance--and has grasped it. Why, I wouldn't be surprised that Don will be the most powerful man in the country within months."

The two men were staring at her. Ross sputtered, "Have you gone completely around the bend? Are you defending this ... this...."

* * *

A voice chuckled, "Mind your language, Buster. Just take it easy or you'll wind up with some missing teeth."

Ross jumped to his feet as though couched with an electric prod. Dr. Braun stiffened in his chair and his eyes darted about the room.

Patricia alone seemed collected. "Don Crowley!" she exclaimed. "You should be ashamed of yourself, listening in on private conversations."

"Yeah," the voice said. "However, it's handy to know what the other side is dreaming up in the way of a bad time for you. Sit down, Buster. I've got a few things to say."

Muttering, Ross resumed his place. The doctor sighed deeply and sank back onto the sofa he had been occupying. The three could see an indentation magically appear in the upholstery of an easy-chair across from them.

Crowley's voice said confidently, "You know, from the first, I've kept telling you eggheads that I'm not stupid, but none of you've bothered to listen. You think just because you spent six or eight years of your life in some college that you're automatically smarter than other people. But I got a theory, like, that it doesn't make any difference if you spent your whole life going to college, you still wouldn't wind up smart if you didn't start that way."

Ross began to mutter something, but Crowley snapped, "Shut up for a minute, I'm talking." He resumed his condescending tone. "Just for example, take a couple of guys who got to the top. Edison in science and Khrushchev in politics. For all practical purposes, neither of them went to school at all. Khrushchev didn't even learn to read until he was twenty-eight years old."

"Then take Dr. Braun here. He's spent half his life in school, and where's it got him? He'd make more dough if he owned the local garage and dealer franchise for one of the automobile companies in some jerkwater town. And look at Ross. He'd probably make more money playing pro football than he does messing around with all those test tubes and Bunsen burners and everything. What good has all the school done either?"
Dr. Braun said gently, "Could we get to the point?"

"Take it easy, Doc. I'm in charge here. You just sit and listen. The point is, you three with your smart-Aleck egghead education started off thinking Mr. Common Man, like you call me, is stupid. Well, it just so happens I'm not. Take Pat there. She's smarter than you two, but she had the same idea. That this here country boy isn't as smart as she is. She's going to fox him, see? As soon as she saw the way the cards were falling, she started buttering up to me. She even figured out that I was probably right in this room listening to you planning how to trip me up. So she pretended to take sides against you."

"Why, Don!" Patricia protested.

"Come off it, kid. You probably hate my guts worse than the others. You were the one who thought this particular average man was a slob. That all common people were slobs."

Patricia's face went expressionless, but Ross, knowing her well, could sense her dismay. Crowley was right. She had been trying to play a careful game but their supposedly average man had seen through her.

Crowley's voice went thoughtful. "I been doing a lot of thinking this week. A lot of it. And you want to know something? You know what I decided? I decided that everybody talks a lot about the Common Man but actually he's never had a chance to, like, express himself. He's never been able to put over the things he's always wanted."

"Haven't you ever heard of democracy?" Ross said sourly. "Who do you think elects our officials?"

"Shut up, I told you. I'm talking now. Sure, every four years the lousy politicians come around and they stick coonskin caps on their heads or Indian bonnets and start saying ain't when they make their speeches. Showing they're just folks, see? They go out into the country, and stick a straw in their mouth and talk about crops to the farmers, all that sort of thing. But they aren't really common folks. Most of them are lawyers or bankers or something. They run those political parties and make all the decisions themselves. The Common Man never really has anything to say about it."

Dr. Braun said reasonably, "You have your choice. If you think one candidate is opposed to your interests you can elect the other."

Crowley grunted his contempt. "But they're both the same. No, there hasn't been no common man in Washington since Lincoln, and maybe he wasn't. Well, I'll tell you something. The kind of talk I hear down in the corner saloon from just plain people makes a lot more sense to me than all this stuff the politicians pull."

Dr. Braun cleared his throat and stared at the seemingly empty chair from whence came the other's belligerent voice. "Are you thinking of entering politics, Don?"

"Maybe I am."

"Good heavens," Patricia ejaculated.

"Oh, I'm not smart enough, eh? Well, listen baby, the eggheads don't seem to be so great in there. Maybe it's time the Common Man took over."

Dr. Braun said reasonably, "But see here, Crowley, the ability to achieve invisibility doesn't give you any advantages in swinging elections or..." He broke off in mid-sentence and did a mental double take.

Crowley laughed in contempt. "The biggest thing you need to win elections, Doc, is plenty of dough. And I'll have that. But I'll also have the way to do more muck-raking than anybody in history. I'll sit in on every important private get-together those crook politicians have. I'll get the details of every scheme they cook up. I'll get into any safe or safe deposit box. I'll have the common people, you sneer so much about, screaming for their blood."

Ross rumbled, "What do you expect to accomplish in office, Crowley?"

The voice became expansive. "Lots of things. Take this Cold War. If you drop into any neighborhood bar, you'll hear what the common man thinks about it."

The three of them stared at the seemingly empty chair.

"Drop the bomb first!" Crowley snapped. "Finish those reds off before they start it. In fact, I'm not even sure they've got the bomb. They're not smart enough to...."

"There was sputnik, you know," Ross interrupted sourly.

"Yeah, but built by those captured German scientists. We're way ahead of those Russkies in everything. Hit 'em now. Finish 'em off. The eggheads in Washington are scared of their own shadows. Another thing I'd end is getting suckered in by those French and English politicians. What does America need with those countries? They always start up these wars and get us to bail them out. And I say stop all this foreign aid and keep the money in our own country."

"And we can do a lot of cleaning up right here, too. We got to kick all the commies out of the government. Make all the commies and socialists and these egghead liberals, illegal. In fact, I'm in favor of shooting them. When you got an enemy, finish him off. And take the Jews. I'm not anti-Semitic, like, understand. Some of my best friends are Jews. But you got to realize that wherever they go they cause trouble. They stick together and take over the best businesses and all. O.K., you know what I say? I say kick them out of the country. And they all came over here poor
and made their money here. So let them leave the way they came. We'll, like, confiscate all their property except like personal things."

Patricia had closed her eyes in pain long before this. She said, softly, "I imagine somewhere along in here we'll get to the Negroes."

"I'm not against them. Just so they stay in their place. But this integration stuff is bunk. You got to face facts. Negroes aren't as smart as white people, neither are Chinks or Mexicans or Puerto Ricans. So, O.K., give them their own schools, up to high school is all they need, and let them have jobs like waiters and janitors and like that. They shouldn't take a white man's job and they shouldn't be allowed to marry white people. It deteriorates the race, like."

Crowley was really becoming wound up now. Wound up and expansive. "There's a lot of things I'd change, see. Take freedom of speech and press and like that. Sure I believe in that, I'm one hundred per cent American. But you can't allow people to talk against the government. Freedom of speech is O.K., but you can't let a guy jump up in the middle of a theater and yell fire."

"Why not?" Ross growled. "Freedom of speech is more important than a few movie houses full of people. Besides, if one man is allowed to jump up and yell fire, then somebody else can yell out 'You're a liar, there is no fire.'"

"You're not funny," Crowley said ominously.

"I wasn't trying to be," Ross muttered, and then blurred into sudden action. He shot to his feet, and then, arms extended, dashed toward the source of the voice. He hit the chair without slowing, grappled crazily.

Patricia was on her feet. She grasped an antique bronze candle-holder and darted toward the now fallen chair and to where Ross was wrestling desperately on the floor. Crowley was attempting to shout, but was largely smothered.

Patricia held the candlestick at the ready, trying to find an opening, trying to locate the invisible Crowley's head.

Frederick Braun staggered to his own feet, bewildered, shaking.

A voice from the door said flatly, "O.K., that's it." Then, sharper, "I said cut it out. You all right, Mr. Crowley?"

It was Larry. His thin black automatic was held almost negligently in his right hand. He ran his eyes up and down Patricia, taking in the candlestick weapon. His ordinarily empty face registered a flicker of amused approval.

Patricia gasped, "Oh, no," dropped her bludgeon and sank into a chair, her head in her hands.

Ross, his face in dismay, came slowly to his feet. The redhead stared at the gunman, momentarily considering further attack. Larry, ignoring both Braun and Patricia, swung the gun to cover him exclusively. "I wouldn't," he said emptily.

Of a sudden, Ross' head jerked backward. His nose flattened, crushingly, and then spurted blood. He reeled back, his head flinging this way and that, bruises and cuts appeared magically.

Crowley's voice raged, "You asked for it, wise guy. How do you like these apples?"

The saturnine Larry chuckled sourly. "Hey, take it easy, chief. You'll kill the guy."

Ross had crumpled to the floor. There were still sounds of blows. Crowley raged, "You're lucky I'm not wearing shoes, I'd break every rib in your body!"

Patricia was staring in hopeless horror. She said sharply, "Don, remember you need Ross! You need all of us! Without all of us there can be no more serum."

The blows stopped.

"There will be no more serum anyway," Braun said shakily. The thin little man still stood before his chair having moved not at all since the action began.

Crowley's heavy breathing could be heard but he managed a snarl. "That's what you think, Doc."

Braun said, "By Caesar, I absolutely refuse to...."

Crowley interrupted ominously. "You know, Doc, that's where this particular common man has it all over you eggheads. You spend so much time reading, you don't take in the action shows on TV. Now what you're thinking is that even if we were going to twist your arm a little, you'd stick to your guns. But suppose, like, it was Pat we was working on, while you had to sit and watch."

The elderly man's brave front collapsed and his thin shoulders slumped.

Crowley barked a laugh.

Patricia by now, was bent over the unconscious Ross crying even as she tried to help him.

Crowley said to the silent, all but disinterested Larry, "Have these three put in separate rooms in that section they used for the violent wing when the place was a nuthouse. Have a good guard and see they don't talk back and forth."

"You're the boss," Larry said languidly.
Crowley was thorough. For that they had to give him credit. They were kept divided, each in a different room-cell and with at least two burly, efficient guards on constant watch. They were fed on army-type trays and their utensils checked carefully. There was no communication allowed—even with the guard.

The second day, Crowley took measures to see their disappearance raised no alarm at either their place of employment or at their residences. This raised few problems since all were single and all had already taken off both from the job and from their homes in order to carry out their experiment. Crowley forced them to write further notes and letters finding excuses for extending their supposed vacations. He also had Larry return to the hotel suite, pay their bill, pack their things and bring them to the Catskill estate which had become their prison.

He had them make up lists of materials and equipment they would need for further manufacture of the serum upon which they had stumbled, and sent off men to acquire the things.

And on three occasions during the following weeks he had them brought from their cells and spent an hour or so with them at lunch or dinner. Crowley evidently needed an audience beyond that of his henchmen. The release of his basic character, formerly repressed, was progressing geometrically and there seemed to be an urgency to crow, to brag, to boast.

On the third of these occasions he was already seated at the table when they were ushered into the dining room. Crowley dismissed the guards with a wave of his hand as though they were liveried servants.

All had eaten but there were liqueurs and coffee, cigars and cigarettes on the broad table.

Ross sank into a chair and growled, "Well, what hath the great man wrought by now?"

Crowley grinned at him, poured coffee and then a dollop of Napoleon brandy into it. He gestured with a hand. "Help yourselves, folks. How you feeling? You been getting all the books you wanted? You look kind of peaked, Pat."

"Miss O'Gara to you, you ape with delusions of grandeur," she snapped. "When are you going to let us out of those prison cells?"

Crowley wasn't provoked. The strong can afford to laugh at the malcontented weak. "That's one of the things you never know," he said easily. "You sure you want out? Something the Doc said the other day had a lotta fact in it. The fewer people know about this secret of mine, the better off I'll be and the better off I am, the better off the whole country is going to be and I gotta think about that. I got responsibilities."

"A combination of Engine Charley and Louis XIV, eh?" Ross muttered, running his beefy hand back over his crew cut. It was a relief to get out of his room and talk with the others, but he didn't want Crowley to see that.

"What's that?" the other was impatient of conversation that went above his head.

Dr. Braun explained gently. "One said, I am the State, and the other, anything that's good for my corporation is good for the United States—or something quite similar."

Crowley sipped at his coffee royal. "Well, anyway, Pat, the day you're ready to leave that cell, you'd better start worrying cause that'll mean I don't need you any more."

Ross growled, "You didn't answer my question. Robbed any banks lately, great man?"

The other eyed him coldly. "Take it easy, Buster. Maybe in the early stages of the Common Man Movement we hafta take some strong-arm measures, but that stage's about finished."

Patricia O'Gara was interested in spite of herself. She said. "You mean you already have all the money you need?"

He was expansive. Obviously there was nothing to lose with these three and he liked a sounding board. In spite of his alleged contempt for eggheads there was an element in Crowley which wished to impress them, to grant him equal status in their own estimations.

"There's a devil of a lot to know about big finance. You need a starter, but once you get it, the stuff just rolls in automatic." He grinned suddenly, almost boyishly. "Especially when you got a certain little advantage, like me."

Braun said, interestingly, "How do you put your advantage to work?"

"Well, now, I gotta admit we aren't quite out of the woods. We need more capital to work with, but after tonight we'll have it. Remember that Brinks job up in New England a long time ago? Well, we got something lined up even bigger. I work with Larry and his boys to pull it. Then there's another thing cooking that Whitely's been keeping tabs on. It looks like IBM is going to split its stock, three for one. I gotta attend their next secret executive meeting and find out. If they do, we buy in just before, see? We buy on margin, buy options, all that sort of jazz. Whitely knows all about it. Then we got another big deal in Washington. Looks like the government might devalue the dollar. Whitely explained it to me, kind of. Anyway, I got to sit in on a conference the President's gonna have. If they really decide to devalue, then Whitely and me, we go ahead and put every cent we got into Swiss gold. Then the day after devaluation, we switch it all back into dollars again. Double our money. Oh, we got all sorts of angles, Doc."
"By Caesar," Braun ejaculated. "You seem to have."

* * *

Patricia had poured herself some coffee and was sipping it, black, even as she stared at him. "But, Don, what do you need all this money for? You already have more than plenty. Why not call it all off. Get out from under."

Ross grunted, "Too late, Pat. Can't you see? He's got the power urge already."

Crowley ignored him and turned to her, pouring more coffee and cognac for himself. "I'm not running up all this dough just for me. You think you're the only one's got ideals, like? Let me tell you, I might just be a country boy but I got ambitions to put some things right in this world."

"Such as..." Patricia prodded, bitterness in her voice.

"Aw, we went through all that the other day. The thing is, now it's really under way. If you was seeing the newspapers these days, you'd know about the Common Man Party."

"Oh, oh," Ross muttered unhappily.

"It's just getting under way," Crowley said modestly, "but we're hiring two of the top Madison Avenue outfits to handle publicity and we're recruiting some of the best practical politicians in the field."


The other misunderstood him. "Yeah, and even better. We're going in big for TV time, full-page ads in the newspapers and magazines. That sort of thing. The average man's getting tired of the same old talk from the Republicans and Democrats. Paul Teeter thinks we might have a chance in the next election, given enough dough to plow into it."

Ross leaned back disdainfully. "What a combination. Whitley, the broker who has been barred from activity on Wall Street; Teeter, the crooked politician, but with connections from top to bottom; and Larry, whatever his name is...."

"Morazzoni," Crowley supplied. "You know where I first ran into his name? In one of them true crime magazines. He's a big operator."

"I'll bet he is," the redhead growled. "Probably with good Mafia connections. I'm surprised you haven't attempted to take over that outfit."

Crowley laughed abruptly. "We're working on that, pal. Just take it easy and all these things will work their way out. But meanwhile I didn't bring you jokers here to make snide remarks. I got work for you. I'm fresh out of that serum and you three are going to brew me up another batch."

They looked at him, Dr. Braun, Ross Wooley, Patricia O'Gara, their faces registering stubbornness, revolt and dismay.

He shook his head. "Larry and some of his boys have experience. I gotta admit, I wouldn't even want to watch."

"I'm for standing firm," Braun said stiffly. "There are but three of us. The most they can do is kill us. But if this man's insanity is released on the world...."

Crowley was shaking his head in deprecation. "Like when you say the worst we can do is kill you. Man, haven't you heard about the Nazis and commies and all? You oughta read some of the men's adventure magazines. How do you think Joe Stalin got all them early Bolsheviks to confess? You think they weren't tough buzzards? Why make us go to all the trouble, when you'd just cave in eventually anyway? Save yourself the grief."

Patricia said impatiently, "He's right, I'm afraid. I would collapse rather quickly under physical coercion. You might last a bit longer, Ross possibly longer still. But in the end we would concede."

Crowley said, as though in amazement, "You know, eggheads aren't as stupid as some would reckon. O.K., folks, I got a laboratory all fixed up with your things. Let's go. Ah, Ross, old pal, I'm carrying heat, as Larry would say, so let's don't have any trouble, eh?"

He had been as good as his word in regards to the laboratory. It was obviously one of the rooms used by the staff when the place had been a sanitarium. Now, each of the three had all the equipment and supplies they required. Crowley took a seat at the far end of the room, facing them. There had been a guard outside the door when they entered and a call would bring him in seconds. Even so, Crowley sat in such wise that his right hand was ready to plunge inside his coat to the gun that evidently was holstered there. He said, "O.K., folks, let's get about it."

* * *

It took them half an hour or so to sort out those materials each needed in his own contribution to the end product.

Their captor looked at his watch impatiently. "Let's get a move on, here. I thought this was going to take a few minutes."

Patricia said testily, "What's the hurry, Don?"

He grinned at her. "Tonight's the big night. This evening, just before closing, I walk into.... Well, you don't have to know the name. Like I said, it'll make the Brinks job look like peanuts. They lock up the place and leave,
see? O.K., about two o'clock in the morning, when the city's dead, Larry and the boys drive up into an alley, behind.
I go around, one by one, and sock the four guards on the back of the head. Then I open up for Larry and they take
their time and clear the place out. From then on, we got all the dough we need to start pyramiding it up on the Stock
Exchange and like that."

Patricia had drawn on rubber gloves, pulled a lab apron around her. She began reaching for test tubes,
measuring devices. She murmured softly, "What keeps you from telling yourself you're nothing but a crook, Don?
When we first met you--it seems a terribly long time ago, back there in Far Cry--you didn't seem to be such a bad
egg."

"We didn't know, then, he was a cracked egg," Ross muttered. He looked to where Crowley slouched, his eyes
narrow as though considering his chances of rushing the other. Crowley grinned and shook his head. "Don't try it,
Buster."

Crowley looked at Patricia. "You don't get it, sister. It's like somebody or other said. The ends, uh, justify the
means. That means...."

"I know what it means," Patricia said impatiently.

Dr. Braun, who rather hopelessly was also beginning to work at the equipment their captor had provided, said
reasonably, "Don, the greater number of the thinkers of the world have rejected that maxim. If you will, umah,
analyze it, you will find that the end and the means are one."

"Yeah, yeah, a lot of complicated egghead gas. What I'm saying, Pat, is that what I'm eventually heading for is
good for everybody. At least it's good for all real hundred per cent Americans. Everybody's going to go to college
and guaranteed to come out with what you three got, a doctor's degree. Everybody's going to get a guaranteed annual
wage, like, whether or not they can do any work. It's not a guy's fault if he gets sick or unemployed or something.
Everybody...."

"Shades of all the social-reformers who ever lived," Ross muttered.

"By Caesar," Braun said in despair, "I have an idea you'll get the vote of every halfwit in the country."

Crowley came to his feet. "I don't like that kind of talk, Doc. Maybe I'm just a country boy, but I know what the
common man wants and what I'm going to do is give it to him."

Patricia looked up from her work long enough to frown at him. "What special are you going to get out of this,
Don?"

That took him back for a moment and he scowled at her.

"Come, come," she said. "You've already admitted to we three just what you think and are going to do. Now, how
do you picture yourself, after all this has been accomplished?"

His face suddenly broke into its grin, a somewhat sly element in it now. "You know, when I get this all worked
out, the folks are going to be pretty thankful."

"I'll bet," Ross muttered. He, too, was working at his element of compounding the serum.

"Yeah, they will, Buster," Crowley said truculently. "And they're going to want to show it. You ever seen one
of those movies like 'Ben Hur' back in Roman days? Can you imagine everybody in the whole country thinking you
were the best guy ever lived? You know, like an Emperor."

"Like Caligula," Dr. Braun said softly.

"I don't know any of their names, but they really had it made. Snap your fingers and there's a big banquet with
the best floor show in the world. Snap your fingers and here comes the sexiest dames in Hollywood. Snap your
fingers and some big entertainment like a chariot race, or something. Once I put this over, the Common Man Party,
that's the way people are going to feel about me and want to treat me."

"And if they don't, you'll make them?" Ross said sarcastically.

"You're too smart for your own britches, egghead," Crowley snarled. He looked at his watch. "Let's get this
rolling. I got to get on down to the city and start this caper going."

Ross handed a test tube to Dr. Braun and began stripping the gloves from his hands. "That's my contribution,"
he said.

Patricia had already delivered hers. Dr. Braun combined them, then heated the compound, adding a distillate of
his own. He said, "When this cools...."

Crowley crossed the room to the door and said something to the guard there. He returned in a moment with an
anthropoid ape in a cage. He sat it on the table and looked at them.

"O.K.," he said to Braun, his voice dangerous. "Let's see you inject the monk with this new batch of serum."

Braun raised his eyebrows.

The other watched him narrowly, saying nothing further.

Dr. Braun shrugged, located a hypodermic needle and prepared it. In a matter of moments, the animal was
injected.
Ross Wooley said sourly, "Don't you trust your fellow man, Don?"
"No, I don't, and stop calling me Don. It's Dan. Daniel Crowley."
The three of them looked at him in bewilderment.
The ape was beginning to shimmer as though he was being seen through a window wet with driving rain.
"Don's my goody-goody brother. Used to live in the same house with me, but ever since we were kids and I got
picked up on a juvenile delinquent rap for swiping a car, he's been snotty. Anyway, now he's moved out to Frisco."
Patricia blurted, "But ... but you let us believe you were Donald..."
He brushed it off with a flick of his hand. "You said you had some deal where I could make me some money.
O.K., I was between jobs."
The ape was invisible now. Crowley peered in at him. "Seems to work, all right."
Dr. Braun sighed. "I am not a Borgia, Daniel Crowley."
"You're not a what?"
"Never mind. I wouldn't poison even you, if that is what you feared."
Daniel Crowley took up the new container of serum and put a lid on it. He said, "I got to get going. The guy out
in front will get you back to your rooms. No tricks with him, Buster"--he was talking directly to Ross--"he's already
beat a couple of homicide raps."
* * * * *
Back in their cell-rooms, they found that there was but one guard. Evidently, the all-out robbery attempt to be
held this night involved practically all of Larry Morazzoni's forces. Beyond that, this guard did not seem particularly
interested in keeping them from talking back and forth to each other through the peepholes that centered their doors.
After a couple of hours during which time they largely held silence, immersed in their own thoughts, Dr. Braun
called out, "Patricia, Ross, I should tender my apologies. It was my less than brilliant idea to find the average man
and use him as a guinea pig."
"No apology necessary," Patricia said impatiently. "We all went into it with open eyes."
"But you were correct, Pat," the doctor said unhappily. "Our common man turned out to be a Frankenstein
monster."
Ross growled, "That's the trouble. It turned out he wasn't our common man but his brother, whose petty
criminal record evidently goes back to juvenile days."
"Even that doesn't matter," Patricia said testily. "I've about come to the conclusion that it wouldn't have made
any difference who we'd put in Don's ... I mean Daniel Crowley's position. Man is too near the animal, as yet at
least, to be trusted with such power. Any man."
"Why, Pat," Dr. Braun said doggedly, "I don't quite believe you correct. For instance, do you feel the same
about me? Would I have reacted like our friend Dan?" He chuckled in depreciation.
"That's my point," she said. "I think you would ... ultimately. Once again look at the Caesars, they held godlike
power."
"You're thinking of such as Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Commodus...."
"I'm also thinking of such as Claudius, the scholar who was practically forced to take the Imperial mantle. And
Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher who although bound up in learning himself allowed his family free rein in their
vices and finally turned the Empire over to his son Commodus, one of the most vicious men of all time. But take
Caligula and Nero if you will. Both of them stepped into power comparatively clean and with the best of prospects.
Well approved, well loved. What happened to them when given power without restraint?"
Ross grumbled, "I admit I missed the boat, but not for the reasons Pat presents. In a sane society, our serum
would be a valuable contribution. But in a dog eat dog world, where it's each man for himself, then it becomes a
criminal tool."
Patricia said sarcastically, "And can you point out a sane society?"
Ross grunted. "No," he said. After a moment he added, "You know, in a way Crowley was right. We three
eggheads didn't do so well up against what he called his common sense. I tried to slug him, with negative results. Dr.
Braun, you tried sweet reason on him. Forgive me if I laugh. Pat, you tried your womanly wiles, but he saw through
that, too."
"The chickens have not all come home to roost," Patricia said mysteriously. "What time is it?"
Ross told her.
She called to the guard, "See here, you."
"Shut up. You ain't supposed to be talking at all. Go to sleep."
"I want to speak to Mr. Morazzoni. It's very important and you are going to be dreadfully sorry if you don't
bring him."
"Larry can't be bothereded. He's getting ready to go on down to the city."
"I know what he's doing, but if he doesn't listen to me, he's going to be very unhappy and probably full of bullet holes."

The guard came over to her door and stared at her for a long moment. He checked the lock on her door and then those of Dr. Braun and Ross Wooley. "We'll see who's going to be sorry," he grunted. He turned and left.

* * *

When he returned it was with both Larry Morazzoni and Paul Teeter, Dan Crowley's political adviser. Morazzoni growled, "What goes on? You squares looking for trouble?"

Patricia said testily, "I suggest you let us out of here, Mr. Morazzoni. If you do, we pledge not to press kidnapping charges against you. I believe you are aware of the penalty in this State."

"You trying to be funny?"

"Definitely not, Mr. Morazzoni," Patricia said icily. "Daniel Crowley bragged to us of your plans for tonight."

The hoodlum muttered a contemptuous obscenity under his breath.

Paul Teeter, the heavy-set southerner said jovially, "But what has this to do with releasing you, Miss O'Gara? Admittedly Dan is a bit indiscreet but...." He let the sentence fade away.

"Yes," Patricia said. "I realize that he is a nonprofessional in your ranks, and have little doubt that eventually you would have surmounted whatever precautions he has kept to keep you in underling positions. That's beside the point. The point is that by this time Daniel Crowley has, ah, infiltrated the institution you expected to burglarize tonight. He is inside, and you are still outside. There are four guards also inside, whom he is expected to eliminate before you can join him."

"He told you everything all right, the jerk," Larry said coldly. "But so what?"

"So Dan Crowley had us make up a new amount of serum tonight and tested it on a chimpanzee in the lab. If you'll go and check, you'll undoubtedly find the chimp is again visible."

The gunman looked at Paul Teeter blankly.

The other's reactions were quicker. "The serum lasts for twelve hours," Teeter barked.

"This batch lasts for three hours," Patricia said definitely. "Your friend Crowley is suddenly going to become visible right before the eyes of those four guards--and long before he had expected to eliminate them."

Teeter barked, "Larry, check that monkey."

Doc Braun spoke up for the first time since the appearance of the two. He said dryly, "You'll also notice that the animal is sound asleep. It seems that I added a slow-acting but rather potent sleeping compound to the serum."

The gunman started from the room in a rush.

Ross called after him, "If you'll look closely, you'll also note the chimp's skin has turned a brilliant red. There have been some basic changes in the pigment."

"Holy smokes," Paul Teeter protested, mopping his face with a handkerchief. "Didn't he take any precautions against you people at all?"

Ross said, "He was too busy telling us how smart a country boy he happened to be."

Larry returned in moments, biting his lip in the first nervous manifestation any of them had ever seen in him. He took Teeter to one side.

Patricia called to them impatiently. "You have no time and no one to contact Crowley now. Don't be fools. Mend your bridges while you can. Let us out of here, and we'll prefer no charges."

Larry was a man of quick decisions. He snapped to the blank-faced guard who had assimilated only a fraction of all this, "Go on back to the boys and tell them to start packing to get out of here. Tell them the fix has chilled. It's all off. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"O.K., chief." The other had the philosophical outlook of those who were meant to take orders and knew it. He left.

Larry and Teeter opened the cell doors.

Teeter said, "How do we know we can trust you?"

Ross looked at him.

Larry said, "It's a deal. Give us an hour to get out of here. Then use the phone if you want to call a taxi, or whatever. I ain't stupid, this thing was too complicated to begin with."

When Teeter and Morazzoni were gone, the three stood alone in the corridor, looking at each other.

The doctor pushed his glasses back onto his nose with a thumb and forefinger. "By Caesar," he said.

Ross ran a hefty paw back through his red crew cut and twisted his face into a mock grimace. "Well," he said, "I have to revise my former statement. I used brute strength against Crowley, the doctor used sweet reason, and Pat her womanly wiles. And all failed. But as biochemists, each working without the knowledge of the others, we used science--and it paid off. I suppose the thing to do now is buy three jet tickets for California."

Braun and Patricia looked at him blankly.
Ross explained. "Didn't you hear what Crowley said? His brother, Donald, has moved out to San Francisco. He's our real Common Man, we'll have to start the experiment all over again."

Dr. Braun snorted.

Patricia O'Gara, hands on hips, snapped, "Ross Wooley, our engagement is off!"
Beauclaire was given his first ship at Sirius. He was called up before the Commandant in the slow heat of the afternoon, and stood shuffling with awkward delight upon the shaggy carpet. He was twenty-five years old, and two months out of the Academy. It was a wonderful day.

The Commandant told Beauclaire to sit down, and sat looking at him for a long while. The Commandant was an old man with a face of many lines. He was old, was hot, was tired. He was also very irritated. He had reached that point of oldness when talking to a young man is an irritation because they are so bright and certain and don't know anything and there is nothing you can do about it.

"All right," the Commandant said, "there are a few things I have to tell you. Do you know where you are going?"

"No, sir," Beauclaire said cheerfully.

"All right," the Commandant said again, "I'll tell you. You are going to the Hole in Cygnus. You've heard of it, I hope? Good. Then you know that the Hole is a large dust cloud--estimated diameter, ten light-years. We have never gone into the Hole, for a number of reasons. It's too thick for light speeds, it's too big, and Mapping Command ships are being spread thin. Also, until now, we never thought there was anything in the Hole worth looking at. So we have never gone into the Hole. Your ship will be the first."

"Yes, sir," Beauclaire said, eyes shining.

"A few weeks ago," the Commandant said, "one of our amateurs had a lens on the Hole, just looking. He saw a glow. He reported to us; we checked and saw the same thing. There is a faint light coming out of the Hole--obviously, a sun, a star inside the cloud, just far enough in to be almost invisible. God knows how long it's been there, but we do know that there's never been a record of a light in the Hole. Apparently this star orbited in some time ago, and is now on its way out. It is just approaching the edge of the cloud. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, sir," Beauclaire said.

"Your job is this: You will investigate that sun for livable planets and alien life. If you find anything--which is highly unlikely--you are to decipher the language and come right back. A Psych team will go out and determine the effects of a starless sky upon the alien culture--obviously, these people will never have seen the stars."

* * * * *

The Commandant leaned forward, intent now for the first time.

"Now, this is an important job. There were no other linguists available, so we passed over a lot of good men to pick you. Make no mistake about your qualifications. You are nothing spectacular. But the ship will be yours from now on, permanently. Have you got that?"

The young man nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

"There is something else," the Commandant said, and abruptly he paused.

He gazed silently at Beauclaire--at the crisp gray uniform, the baby-slick cheek--and he thought fleetingly and bitterly of the Hole in Cygnus which he, an old man, would never see. Then he told himself sternly to leave off self-pity. The important thing was coming up, and he would have to say it well.

"Listen," he said. The tone of his voice was very strong and Beauclaire blinked. "You are replacing one of our oldest men. One of our best men. His name is Billy Wyatt. He--he has been with us a long time." The Commandant paused again, his fingers toying with the blotter on his desk. "They have told you a lot of stuff at the Academy, which is all very important. But I want you to understand something else: This Mapping Command is a weary business--few men last for any length of time, and those that do aren't much good in the end. You know that. Well, I want you to be very careful when you talk to Billy Wyatt; and I want you to listen to him, because he's been around longer than anybody. We're relieving him, yes, because he is breaking down. He's no good for us any more; he has no more nerve. He's lost the feeling a man has to have to do his job right."

The Commandant got up slowly and walked around in front of Beauclaire, looking into his eyes.

"When you relieve Wyatt, treat him with respect. He's been farther and seen more than any man you will ever meet. I want no cracks and no pity for that man. Because, listen, boy, sooner or later the same thing will happen to you. Why? Because it's too big--" the Commandant gestured helplessly with spread hands--"it's all just too damn big. Space is never so big that it can't get bigger. If you fly long enough, it will finally get too big to make any sense, and you'll start thinking. You'll start thinking that it doesn't make sense. On that day, we'll bring you back and put you into an office somewhere. If we leave you alone, you lose ships and get good men killed--there's nothing we can
do when space gets too big. That is what happened to Wyatt. That is what will happen, eventually, to you. Do you understand?"

The young man nodded uncertainly.

"And that," the Commandant said sadly, "is the lesson for today. Take your ship. Wyatt will go with you on this one trip, to break you in. Pay attention to what he has to say--it will mean something. There's one other crewman, a man named Cooper. You'll be flying with him now. Keep your ears open and your mouth shut, except for questions. And don't take any chances. That's all."

Beauclaire saluted and rose to go.

"When you see Wyatt," the Commandant said, "tell him I won't be able to make it down before you leave. Too busy. Got papers to sign. Got more damn papers than the chief has ulcers."

The young man waited.

"That, God help you, is all," said the Commandant.

* * * * *

Wyatt saw the letter when the young man was still a long way off. The white caught his eye, and he watched idly for a moment. And then he saw the fresh green gear on the man's back and the look on his face as he came up the ladder, and Wyatt stopped breathing.

He stood for a moment blinking in the sun. Me? he thought ... me?

Beauclaire reached the platform and threw down his gear, thinking that this was one hell of a way to begin a career.

Wyatt nodded to him, but didn't say anything. He accepted the letter, opened it and read it. He was a short man, thick and dark and very powerful. The lines of his face did not change as he read the letter.

"Well," he said when he was done, "thank you."

There was a long wait, and Wyatt said at last: "Is the Commandant coming down?"

"No, sir. He said he was tied up. He said to give you his best."

"That's nice," Wyatt said.

After that, neither of them spoke. Wyatt showed the new man to his room and wished him good luck. Then he went back to his cabin and sat down to think.

After 28 years in the Mapping Command, he had become necessarily immune to surprise; he could understand this at once, but it would be some time before he would react. Well, well, he said to himself; but he did not feel it.

Vaguely, flicking cigarettes onto the floor, he wondered why. The letter had not given a reason. He had probably flunked a physical. Or a mental. One or the other, each good enough reason. He was 47 years old, and this was a rough business. Still, he felt strong and cautious, and he knew he was not afraid. He felt good for a long while yet ... but obviously he was not.

Well, then, he thought, where now?

He considered that with interest. There was no particular place for him to go. Really no place. He had come into the business easily and naturally, knowing what he wanted--which was simply to move and listen and see. When he was young, it had been adventure alone that drew him; now it was something else he could not define, but a thing he knew he needed badly. He had to see, to watch ... and understand.

It was ending, the long time was ending. It didn't matter what was wrong with him. The point was that he was through. The point was that he was going home, to nowhere in particular.

When evening came, he was still in his room. Eventually he'd been able to accept it all and examine it clearly, and had decided that there was nothing to do. If there was anything out in space which he had not yet found, he would not be likely to need it.

He left off sitting, and went up to the control room.

* * * * *

Cooper was waiting for him. Cooper was a tall, bearded, scrawny man with a great temper and a great heart and a small capacity for liquor. He was sitting all alone in the room when Wyatt entered.

Except for the pearl-green glow of dashlights from the panel, the room was dark. Cooper was lying far back in the pilot's seat, his feet propped up on the panel. One shoe was off, and he was carefully pressing buttons with his huge bare toes. The first thing Wyatt saw when he entered was the foot glowing luridly in the green light of the panel. Deep within the ship he could hear the hum of the dynamos starting and stopping.

Wyatt grinned. From the play of Coop's toes, and the attitude, and the limp, forgotten pole of an arm which hung down loosely from the chair, it was obvious that Coop was drunk. In port, he was usually drunk. He was a lean, likable man with very few cares and no manners at all, which was typical of men in that Command.

"What say, Billy?" Coop mumbled from deep in the seat.

Wyatt sat down. "Where you been?"
"In the port. Been drinkin' in the goddam port. Hot!"

"Bring back any?"

Coop waved an arm floppily in no particular direction. "Look around."

The flasks lay in a heap by the door. Wyatt took one and sat down again. The room was warm and green and silent. The two men had been together long enough to be able to sit without speaking, and in the green glow they waited, thinking. The first pull Wyatt took was long and numbing; he closed his eyes.

Coop did not move at all. Not even his toes. When Wyatt had begun to think he was asleep, he said suddenly:

"Heard about the replacement."

Wyatt looked at him.

"Found out this afternoon," Coop said, "from the goddam Commandant."

Wyatt closed his eyes again.

"Where you goin'?" Coop asked.

Wyatt shrugged. "Plush job."

"You got any plans?"

Wyatt shook his head.

Coop swore moodily. "Never let you alone," he muttered. "Miserable bastards." He rose up suddenly in the chair, pointing a long matchstick finger into Wyatt's face. "Listen, Billy," he said with determination, "you was a good man, you know that? You was one hell of a good goddam man."

Wyatt took another long pull and nodded, smiling.

"You said it," he said.

"I sailed with some good men, some good men," Coop insisted, stabbing shakily but emphatically with his finger, "but you don't take nothin' from nobody."

[Illustration]

"Here's to me, I'm true blue," Wyatt grinned.

* * * * *

Coop sank back in the chair, satisfied. "I just wanted you should know. You been a good man."

"Betcher sweet life," Wyatt said.

"So they throw you out. Me they keep. You they throw out. They got no brains."

Wyatt lay back, letting the liquor take hold, receding without pain into a quiet world. The ship was good to feel around him, dark and throbbing like a living womb. Just like a womb, he thought. It's a lot like a womb.

"Listen," Coop said thickly, rising from his chair. "I think I'll quit this racket. What the hell I wanna stay in this racket for?"

Wyatt looked up, startled. When Coop was drunk, he was never a little drunk. He was always far gone, and he could be very mean. Wyatt saw now that he was down deep and sinking; that the replacement was a big thing to him, bigger than Wyatt had expected. In this team, Wyatt had been the leader, and it had seldom occurred to him that Coop really needed him. He had never really thought about it. But now he let himself realize that, alone, Coop could be very bad. Unless this new man was worth anything and learned quickly, Coop would very likely get himself killed.

Now, more than ever, this replacement thing was ridiculous; but for Coop's sake, Wyatt said quickly:

"Drop that, man. You'll be on this ship in the boneyard. You even look like this ship--you got a bright red bow."

When the tall man was dark and silent, Wyatt said gently, "Coop. Easy. We leave at midnight. Want me to take her up?"

"Naw." Coop turned away abruptly, shaking his head. "Thell with you. Go die." He sank back deeply in the seat, his gaunt face reflecting the green glow from the panel. His next words were sad, and, to Wyatt, very touching.

"Hell, Billy," Coop said wearily, 'this ain' no fun."

Wyatt let him take the ship up alone. There was no reason to argue about it. Coop was drunk; his mind was unreachable.

At midnight, the ship bucked and heaved and leaped up into the sky. Wyatt hung tenuously to a stanchion by a port, watched the night lights recede and the stars begin blooming. In a few moments the last clouds were past, and they were out in the long night, and the million million speckled points of glittering blue and red and silver burned once more with the mighty light which was, to Wyatt, all that was real or had ever meant living. In the great glare and the black he stood, as always, waiting for something to happen, for the huge lonely beauty to resolve itself to a pattern and descend and be understood.

It did not. It was just space, an area in which things existed, in which mechanized substance moved. Wondering, waiting, Wyatt regarded the Universe. The stars looked icily back.
At last, almost completely broken, Wyatt went to bed.

Beauclaire's first days passed very quickly. He spent them in combing the ship, seeking her out in her deepest layers, watching and touching and loving. The ship was to him like a woman; the first few days were his honeymoon. Because there is no lonelier job that a man can have, it was nearly always this way with men in the Command.

Wyatt and Cooper left him pretty much alone. They did not come looking for him, and the few times that he did see them he could not help but feel their surprise and resentment. Wyatt was always polite. Cooper was not. Neither seemed to have anything to say to Beauclaire, and he was wise enough to stay by himself. Most of Beauclaire's life until now had been spent among books and dust and dead, ancient languages. He was by nature a solitary man, and therefore it was not difficult for him to be alone.

On a morning some weeks after the trip began, Wyatt came looking for him. His eyes twinkling, Wyatt fished him up, grease-coated and embarrassed, out of a shaft between the main dynamos. Together they went up toward the astrogation dome. And under the great dome, beneath the massive crystal sheet on the other side of which there was nothing for ever and ever, Beauclaire saw a beauty which he was to remember as long as he lived.

They were nearing the Hole in Cygnus. On the side which faces the center of the Galaxy the Hole is almost flat, from top to bottom, like a wall. They were moving in on the flat side now, floating along some distance from the wall, which was so huge and incredible that Beauclaire was struck dumb.

It began above him, light-years high. It came down in a black, folding, rushing silence, fell away beneath him for millions upon millions of miles, passed down beyond sight so far away, so unbelievably far away and so vast, that there could be nothing as big as this, and if he had not seen the stars still blazing on either side he would have had to believe that the wall was just outside the glass, so close he could touch it. From all over the wall a haze reflected faintly, so that the wall stood out in ridges and folds from the great black of space. Beauclaire looked up and then down, and then stood and gazed.

After a while, Wyatt pointed silently down. Beauclaire looked in among the folds and saw it, the tiny yellow gleam toward which they were moving. It was so small against the massive cloud that he lost it easily.

Each time he took his eyes away, he lost it, and had to search for it again.

"It's not too far in," Wyatt said at last, breaking the silence. "We'll move down the cloud to the nearest point, then we'll slow down and move in. Should take a couple of days."

Beauclaire nodded.

"Thought you'd like to see," Wyatt said.

"Thanks." Beauclaire was sincerely grateful. And then, unable to contain himself, he shook his head with wonder. "My God!" he said.

Wyatt smiled. "It's a big show."

Later, much later, Beauclaire began to remember what the Commandant had said about Wyatt. But he could not understand it at all. Sure, something like the Hole was incomprehensible. It did not make any sense--but so what? A thing as beautiful as that, Beauclaire thought, did not have to make sense.

They reached the sun slowly. The gas was not thick by any Earthly standards--approximately one atom to every cubic mile of space--but for a starship, any matter at all is too much. At normal speeds, the ship would hit the gas like a wall. So they came in slowly, swung in and around the large yellow sun.

They saw one planet almost immediately. While moving in toward that one they scanned for others, found none at all.

Space around them was absolutely strange; there was nothing in the sky but a faint haze. They were in the cloud now, and of course could see no star. There was nothing but the huge sun and the green gleaming dot of that one planet, and the endless haze.

From a good distance out, Wyatt and Cooper ran through the standard tests while Beauclaire watched with grave delight. They checked for radio signals, found none. The spectrum of the planet revealed strong oxygen and water-vapor lines, surprisingly little nitrogen. The temperature, while somewhat cool, was in the livable range.

It was a habitable planet.

"Jackpot!" Coop said cheerfully. "All that oxygen, bound to be some kind of life."

Wyatt said nothing. He was sitting in the pilot chair, his huge hands on the controls, nursing the ship around into the long slow spiral which would take them down. He was thinking of many other things, many other landings. He was remembering the acid ocean at Lupus and the rotting disease of Altair, all the dark, vicious, unknowable things he had approached, unsuspecting, down the years.

... So many years, that now he suddenly realized it was too long, too long.
Cooper, grinning unconsciously as he scanned with the telescope, did not notice Wyatt's sudden freeze.

It was over all at once. Wyatt's knuckles had gradually whitened as he gripped the panel. Sweat had formed on his face and run down into his eyes, and he blinked, and realized with a strange numbness that he was soaking wet all over. In that moment, his hands froze and gripped the panel, and he could not move them.

It was a hell of a thing to happen on a man's last trip, he thought. He would like to have taken her down just this once. He sat looking at his hands. Gradually, calmly, carefully, with a cold will and a welling sadness, he broke his hands away from the panel.

"Coop," he said, "take over."

Coop glanced over and saw. Wyatt's face was white and glistening; his hands in front of him were wooden and strange.

"Sure," Coop said, after a very long moment. "Sure."

Wyatt backed off, and Coop slid into the seat.

"They got me just in time," Wyatt said, looking at his stiff, still fingers. He looked up and ran into Beauclaire's wide eyes, and turned away from the open pity. Coop was bending over the panel, swallowing heavily.

"Well," Wyatt said. He was beginning to cry. He walked slowly from the room, his hands held before him like old gray things that had died.

* * * * *

The ship circled automatically throughout the night, while its crew slept or tried to. In the morning they were all forcefully cheerful and began to work up an interest.

There were people on the planet. Because the people lived in villages, and had no cities and no apparent science, Coop let the ship land.

It was unreal. For a long while, none of them could get over the feeling of unreality, Wyatt least of all. He stayed in the ship and got briefly drunk, and then came out as carefully efficient as ever. Coop was gay and brittle. Only Beauclaire saw the planet with any degree of clarity. And all the while the people looked back.

From the very beginning it was peculiar.

The people saw the ship passing overhead, yet curiously they did not run. They gathered in groups and watched. When the ship landed, a small band of them came out of the circling woods and hills and ringed the ship, and a few came up and touched it calmly, ran fingers over smooth steel sides.

The people were human.

There was not, so far as Beauclaire could tell, a single significant difference. It was not really extraordinary--similar conditions will generally breed similar races--but there was something about these men and women which was hard and powerful, and in a way almost grand.

They were magnificently built, rounded and bronzed. Their women especially were remarkably beautiful. They were wearing woven clothes of various colors, in simple savage fashions; but there was nothing at all savage about them. They did not shout or seem nervous or move around very much, and nowhere among them was there any sign of a weapon. Furthermore, they did not seem to be particularly curious. The ring about the ship did not increase. Although several new people wandered in from time to time, others were leaving, unconcerned. The only ones among them who seemed at all excited were the children.

Beauclaire stood by the view-screen, watching. Eventually Coop joined him, looking without interest until he saw the women. There was one particular girl with shaded brown eyes and a body of gentle hills. Coop grinned wildly and turned up the magnification until the screen showed nothing but the girl. He was gazing with appreciation and making side comments to Beauclaire when Wyatt came in.

"Looka that, Billy," Coop roared with delight, pointing. "Man, we have come home!"

* * * * *

Wyatt smiled very tightly, changed the magnification quickly to cover the whole throng around them.

"No trouble?"

"Nope," Coop said. "Air's good, too. Thin, but practically pure oxygen. Who's first to go out?"

"Me," Wyatt said, for obvious reasons. He would not be missed.

No one argued with him. Coop was smiling as Wyatt armed himself. Then he warned Wyatt to leave that cute little brown-eyed doll alone.

Wyatt went out.

The air was clear and cool. There was a faint breeze stirring the leaves around him, and Wyatt listened momentarily to the far bell-calls of birds. This would be the last time he would ever go out like this, to walk upon an unknown world. He waited for some time by the airlock before he went forward.

The ring of people did not move as he approached, his hand upraised in what the Mapping Command had come to rely on as the universal gesture of peace. He paused before a tall, monolithic old man in a single sheath of green
"Hello," he said aloud, and bowed his head slowly.

From the ship, through the wide-angle sights of a gun, Beauclaire watched breathlessly as Wyatt went through the pantomime of greeting.

None of the tall people moved, except the old man, who folded his arms and looked openly amused. When the pantomime was done, Wyatt bowed again. The old man broke into a broad grin, looked amiably around at the circle of people, and then quite suddenly bowed to Wyatt. One by one the people, grinning, bowed.

Wyatt turned and waved at the ship, and Beauclaire stood away from his gun, smiling.

It was a very fine way to begin.

* * * * *

In the morning Wyatt went out alone, to walk in the sun among the trees, and he found the girl he had seen from the ship. She was sitting alone by a stream, her feet cooling and splashing in the clear water.

Wyatt sat down beside her. She looked up, unsurprised, out of eyes that were rich and grained like small pieces of beautiful wood. Then she bowed, from the waist. Wyatt grinned and bowed back.

Unceremoniously he took off his boots and let his feet plunk down into the water. It was shockingly cold, and he whistled. The girl smiled at him. To his surprise, she began to hum softly. It was a pretty tune that he was able to follow, and after a moment he picked up the harmony and hummed along with her. She laughed, and he laughed with her, feeling very young.

Me Billy, he thought of saying, and laughed again. He was content just to sit without saying anything. Even her body, which was magnificent, did not move him to anything but a quiet admiration, and he regarded himself with wonder.

The girl picked up one of his boots and examined it critically, clucking with interest. Her lovely eyes widened as she played with the buckle. Wyatt showed her how the snaps worked and she was delighted and clapped her hands.

Wyatt brought other things out of his pockets and she examined them all, one after the other. The picture of him on his ID card was the only one which seemed to puzzle her. She handled it and looked at it, and then at him, and shook her head. Eventually she frowned and gave it definitely back to him. He got the impression that she thought it was very bad art. He chuckled.

The afternoon passed quickly, and the sun began to go down. They hummed some more and sang songs to each other which neither understood and both enjoyed, and it did not occur to Wyatt until much later how little curiosity they had felt. They did not speak at all. She had no interest in his language or his name, and, strangely, he felt all through the afternoon that talking was unnecessary. It was a very rare day spent between two people who were not curious and did not want anything from each other. The only words they said to each other were goodbye.

Wyatt, lost inside himself, plodding, went back to the ship.

* * * * *

In the first week, Beauclaire spent his every waking hour learning the language of the planet. From the very beginning he had felt an unsettling, peculiar manner about these people. Their behavior was decidedly unusual. Although they did not differ in any appreciable way from human beings, they did not act very much like human beings in that they were almost wholly lacking a sense of awe, a sense of wonder. Only the children seemed surprised that the ship had landed, and only the children hung around and inspected it. Almost all the others went off about their regular business—which seemed to be farming—and when Beauclaire tried learning the language, he found very few of the people willing to spend time enough to teach him.

But they were always more or less polite, and by making a pest of himself he began to succeed. On another day when Wyatt came back from the brown-eyed girl, Beauclaire reported some progress.

"It's a beautiful language," he said as Wyatt came in. "Amazingly well-developed. It's something like our Latin-same type of construction, but much softer and more flexible. I've been trying to read their book."

Wyatt sat down thoughtfully and lit a cigarette.

"Book?" he said.

"Yes. They have a lot of books, but everybody has this one particular book—they keep it in a place of honor in their houses. I've tried to ask them what it is—I think it's a bible of some kind—but they just won't bother to tell me."

Wyatt shrugged, his mind drifting away.

"I just don't understand them," Beauclaire said plaintively, glad to have someone to talk to. "I don't get them at all. They're quick, they're bright, but they haven't the damnedest bit of curiosity about anything, not even each other. My God, they don't even gossip!"

Wyatt, contented, puffed quietly. "Do you think not seeing the stars has something to do with it? Ought to have slowed down the development of physics and math."
Beauclaire shook his head. "No. It's very strange. There's something else. Have you noticed the way the ground seems to be sharp and jagged almost everywhere you look, sort of chewed up as if there was a war? Yet these people swear that they've never had a war within living memory, and they don't keep any history so a man could really find out."

When Wyatt didn't say anything, he went on:

"And I can't see the connection about no stars. Not with these people. I don't care if you can't see the roof of the house you live in, you still have to have a certain amount of curiosity in order to stay alive. But these people just don't give a damn. The ship landed. You remember that? Out of the sky come Gods like thunder--"

Wyatt smiled. At another time, at any time in the past, he would have been very much interested in this sort of thing. But now he was not. He felt himself--remote, sort of--and he, like these people, did not particularly give a damn.

But the problem bothered Beauclaire, who was new and fresh and looking for reasons, and it also bothered Cooper.

"Damn!" Coop grumbled as he came stalking into the room. "Here you are, Billy. I'm bored stiff. Been all over this whole crummy place lookin for you. Where you been?" He folded himself into a chair, scratched his black hair broodingly with long, sharp fingers. "Game o' cards?"

"Not just now, Coop," Wyatt said, lying back and resting.

Coop grunted. "Nothin to do, nothin to do," he swiveled his eyes to Beauclaire. "How you comin, son? How soon we leave this place? Like Sunday afternoon all the time."

Beauclaire was always ready to talk about the problem. He outlined it now to Cooper again, and Wyatt, listening, grew very tired. There is just this one continent, Beauclaire said, and just one nation, and everyone spoke the same tongue. There was no government, no police, no law that he could find. There was not even, as far as he could tell, a system of marriage. You couldn't even call it a society, really, but dammit, it existed--and Beauclaire could not find a single trace of rape or murder or violence of any kind. The people here, he said, just didn't give a damn.

[Illustration]

"You said it," Coop boomed. "I think they're all whacky."

"But happy," Wyatt said suddenly. "You can see that they're happy."

"Sure, they're happy," Coop chortled. "They're nuts. They got funny looks in their eyes. Happiest guys I know are screwy as--"

The sound which cut him off, which grew and blossomed and eventually explained everything, had begun a few seconds ago, too softly to be heard. Now suddenly, from a slight rushing noise, it burst into an enormous, thundering scream.

They leaped up together, horrified, and an overwhelming, gigantic blast threw them to the floor.

The ground rocked, the ship fluttered and settled crazily. In that one long second, the monstrous noise of a world collapsing grew in the air and filled the room, filled the men and everything with one incredible, crushing, grinding shock.

When it was over there was another rushing sound, farther away, and another, and two more tremendous explosions; and though all in all the noise lasted for perhaps five seconds, it was the greatest any of them had ever heard, and the world beneath them continued to flutter, wounded and trembling, for several minutes.

Wyatt was first out of the ship, shaking his head as he ran to get back his hearing. To the west, over a long slight rise of green and yellow trees, a vast black cloud of smoke, several miles long and very high, was rising and boiling. As he stared and tried to steady his feet upon the shaking ground, he was able to gather himself enough to realize what this was.

Meteors.

He had heard meteors before, long before, on a world of Aldebaran. Now he could smell the same sharp burning disaster, and feel the wind rushing wildly back to the west, where the meteors had struck and hurled the air away.

In that moment Wyatt thought of the girl, and although she meant nothing to him at all--none of these people meant anything in the least to him--he began running as fast as he could toward the west.

Behind him, white-faced and bewildered, came Beauclaire and Cooper.

When Wyatt reached the top of the rise, the great cloud covered the whole valley before him. Fires were burning in the crushed forest to his right, and from the lay of the cloud he could tell that the village of the people was not there any more.
He ran down into the smoke, circling toward the woods and the stream where he had passed an afternoon with the girl. For a while he lost himself in the smoke, stumbling over rocks and fallen trees.

Gradually the smoke lifted, and he began running into some of the people. Now he wished that he could speak the language.

They were all wandering quietly away from the site of their village, none of them looking back. Wyatt could see a great many dead as he moved, but he had no time to stop, no time to wonder. It was twilight now, and the sun was gone. He thanked God that he had a flashlight with him; long after night came, he was searching in the raw gash where the first meteor had fallen.

He found the girl, dazed and bleeding, in a cleft between two rocks. He knelt and took her in his arms. Gently, gratefully, through the night and the fires and past the broken and the dead, he carried her back to the ship.

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It had all become frighteningly clear to Beauclaire. He talked with the people and began to understand.

The meteors had been falling since the beginning of time, so the people said. Perhaps it was the fault of the great dust-cloud through which this planet was moving; perhaps it was that this had not always been a one-planet system—a number of other planets, broken and shredded by unknown gravitational forces, would provide enough meteors for a very long time. And the air of this planet being thin, there was no real protection as there was on Earth. So year after year the meteors fell. In unpredictable places, at unknowable times, the meteors fell, like stones from the sling of God. They had been falling since the beginning of time. So the people, the unconcerned people, said.

And here was Beauclaire's clue. Terrified and shaken as he was, Beauclaire was the kind of man who saw reason in everything. He followed this one to the end.

In the meantime, Wyatt nursed the girl. She had not been badly hurt, and recovered quickly. But her family and friends were mostly dead now, and so she had no reason to leave the ship.

Gradually Wyatt learned the language. The girl's name was ridiculous when spoken in English, so he called her Donna, which was something like her real name. She was, like all her people, unconcerned about the meteors and her dead. She was extraordinarily cheerful. Her features were classic, her cheeks slim and smiling, her teeth perfect. In the joy and whiteness of her, Wyatt saw each day what he had seen and known in his mind on the day the meteors fell. Love to him was something new. He was not sure whether or not he was in love, and he did not care. He realized that he needed this girl and was at home with her, could rest with her and talk with her, and watch her walk and understand what beauty was; and in the ship in those days a great peace began to settle over him.

When the girl was well again, Beauclaire was in the middle of translating the book—the bible-like book which all the people seemed to treasure so much. As his work progressed, a striking change began to come over him. He spent much time alone under the sky, watching the soft haze through which, very soon, the stars would begin to shine.

He tried to explain what he felt to Wyatt, but Wyatt had no time.

"But, Billy," Beauclaire said fervently, "do you see what these people go through? Do you see how they live?"

Wyatt nodded, but his eyes were on the girl as she sat listening dreamily to a recording of ancient music.

"They live every day waiting," Beauclaire said. "They have no idea what the meteors are. They don't know that there is anything else in the Universe but their planet and their sun. They think that's all there is. They don't know why they're here—but when the meteors keep falling like that, they have only one conclusion."

Wyatt turned from the girl smiling absently. None of this could touch him. He had seen the order and beauty of space, the incredible perfection of the Universe, so often and so deeply that, like Beauclaire, he could not help but believe in a Purpose, a grand final meaning. When his father had died of an insect bite at Oberon he had believed in a purpose for that, and had looked for it. When his first crewmate fell into the acid ocean of Alcestis and the second died of a horrible rot, Wyatt had seen purpose, purpose; and each time another man died, for no apparent reason, on windless, evil useless worlds, the meaning of things had become clearer and clearer, and now in the end Wyatt was approaching the truth, which was perhaps that none of it mattered at all.

It especially did not matter now. So many things had happened that he had lost the capacity to pay attention. He was not young any more; he wanted to rest, and upon the bosom of this girl he had all the reason for anything and everything he needed.

But Beauclaire was incoherent. It seemed to him that here on this planet a great wrong was being done, and the more he thought of it the more angry and confused he became. He went off by himself and looked at the terrible wound on the face of the planet, at all the sweet, lovely, fragrant things which would never be again, and he ended by cursing the nature of things, as Wyatt had done so many years before. And then he went on with the translation of the book. He came upon the final passage, still cursing inwardly, and reread it again and again. When the sun was rising on a brilliant new morning, he went back to the ship.
"They had a man here once," he said to Wyatt, "who was as good a writer as there ever was. He wrote a book which these people use as their Bible. It's like our Bible sometimes, but mostly it's just the opposite. It preaches that a man shouldn't worship anything. Would you like to hear some of it?"

Wyatt had been pinned down and he had to listen, feeling sorry for Beauclaire, who had such a long way to go. His thoughts were on Donna, who had gone out alone to walk in the woods and say goodbye to her world. Soon he would go out and bring her back to the ship, and she would probably cry a little, but she would come. She would come with him always, wherever he went.

"I have translated this the best way I could," Beauclaire said thickly, "but remember this. This man could write. He was Shakespeare and Voltaire and all the rest all at once. He could make you feel. I couldn't do a decent translation if I tried forever, but please listen and try to get what he means. I've put it in the style of Ecclesiastes because it's something like that."

"All right," Wyatt said.

* * * * *

Beauclaire waited for a long moment, feeling this deeply. When he read, his voice was warm and strong, and something of his emotion came through. As Wyatt listened, he found his attention attracted, and then he felt the last traces of his sadness and weariness fall away.

He nodded, smiling.

These are the words Beauclaire had gathered from the Book:
Rise up smiling, and walk with me. Rise up in the armor of thy body and what shall pass shall make thee unafraid. Walk among the yellow hills, for they belong to thee. Walk upon grass and let thy feet descend into soft soil; in the end when all has failed thee the soil shall comfort thee, the soil shall receive thee and in thy dark bed thou shalt find such peace as is thy portion.
In thine armor, hear my voice. In thine armor, hear. Whatsoever thou doest, thy friend and thy brother and thy woman shall betray thee. Whatsoever thou dost plant, the weeds and the seasons shall spite thee. Wheresoever thou goest, the heavens shall fall upon thee. Though the nations shall come unto thee in friendship thou art curst. Know that the Gods ignore thee. Know that thou art Life, and that pain shall forever come into thee, though thy years be without end and thy days without sleep, even and forever. And knowing this, in thine armor, thou shalt rise up.
Red and full and glowing is thy heart; a steel is forging within thy breast. And what can hurt thee now? In thy granite mansion, what can hurt thee ever? Thou shalt only die. Therefore seek not redemption nor forgiveness for thy sins, for know that thou hast never sinned.
Let the Gods come unto thee.
When it was finished, Wyatt sat very still.
Beauclaire was looking at him intently.
Wyatt nodded. "I see," he said.
"They don't ask for anything," Beauclaire said. "No immortality, no forgiveness, no happiness. They take what comes and don't--wonder."

Wyatt smiled, rising. He looked at Beauclaire for a long while, trying to think of something to say. But there was nothing to say. If the young man could believe this, here and now, he would save himself a long, long, painful journey. But Wyatt could not talk about it--not just yet.

He reached out and clapped Beauclaire gently upon the shoulder. Then he left the ship and walked out toward the yellow hills, toward the girl and the love that was waiting.

* * * * *

What will they do, Beauclaire asked himself, when the stars come out? When there are other places to go, will these people, too, begin to seek?
They would. With sadness, he knew that they would. For there is a chord in Man which is plucked by the stars, which will rise upward and outward into infinity, as long as there is one man anywhere and one lonely place to which he has not been. And therefore what does the meaning matter? We are built in this way, and so shall we live.
Beauclaire looked up into the sky.
Dimly, faintly, like God's eye peeking through the silver haze, a single star had begun to shine.
The first time this little guy comes in I'm new on the job. He looks around as if he's scared a prohibition agent will pop out of the walls and bite him. Then he gets up his nerve and sidles to the bar. His voice is as thin as the rest of him.

"Glass of beer."
I draw. He drinks and pays and goes out.
That keeps on, Monday through Friday at five-ten p.m., year in and year out. He slips in, peers around, has his beer, and pops out. Even in '33, when we become legitimate, he acts the same way--scared of his shadow. Except he isn't big enough to have a shadow.

During the war, when we're rationed, I save him his daily glass. He never fails to come in except for two weeks every summer when he's on vacation. From 1922 to 1953 he drinks one daily beer.

In thirty-one years, he and I grow older together, and after the first ten he talks a little so that over a period of time I manage to learn something about him. That first day he'd come in, he was on his first job out of college. Well, so was I, only I went to bartending school to learn how to mix prohibition liquor. But even so, it gave us something in common, and when he learned we had started life together--as he put it--he talked a little more.

His name is Pettis. Six months after I learn that, I get his first name. It's Rabelais, and I could see why he doesn't like it. But when he breaks down and tells me, he gets real bold and says:

"And what's yours, my male Hebe?"
"Mike Murphy."
"Naturally," he said. He laughs. It is the only time I hear him laugh in thirty-one years. I can't see anything funny.
He is a draftsman for those old skinflints Cartner and Dillson. When they die, their sons take over and are even worse. In the depression, Pettis gets a little shabby but he always has the price of a glass of beer. In '53 he's at the same desk and doing the same job he started on in '22.
In '35 he gets married. He tells me so. Tasting his beer, he says, "I'll be married this time tomorrow." I often wonder what his wife looks like but I never see her. Not even when it gets decent for ladies to come in, she never shows. Marriage doesn't seem to change him; he never looks happier or less shabby or less browbeat.
In '42 I heard his first complaint. By then we're both getting into our forties and, what with his lack of size and caved-in chest and my insides all busted up from pre-World War I football, the army doesn't want us. So he never misses a day except on his vacation.
He says, "I can't get raw materials." About three months later, I understand what he means when he says, "My hobby is inventing."
In '45 I ask him, "What do you invent?"
It takes him two years to decide to tell me. By now we are pretty good pals. He never tells anyone else that I know of. He says, "I invent machines. Super machines."
In '48 he says, "But they don't work. Someday...."

And in '53, on the day of our thirty-first anniversary, you might say, he comes in and things are different. All different. I can feel it when he opens the door and comes in at five-o-nine instead of five-ten. There is plenty more different, too. He walks up to the bar like it's his and roars:

"Two beers, Mike!"
I drop a glass I'm so surprised, but I give him two beers like he wants. He gulps them both down, puts a foot on the rail and looks me straight in the eye. His eyes are a sort of washed blue. I've never noticed them before.
"Beer for the house!" he yells at me.
"Take it easy, Mr. Pettis," I says.
"Easy, hell!" he shouts and slaps a roll as big as his hand on the bar. "And call me Rabelais, Mike. We're pals, aren't we?"

"You bet," I assure him. And I mean it. Not because of the dough. That makes me sweat. I can't figure where this little guy gets such a wad. And good money, too.
He sets them up three times. By now he's feeling fine. I suggest he get going before he misses the last train home.
"I already missed it," he says proudly. "And I'm not going home. Let the old battle-axe really have something to complain about. Beer, Mike!"

In a way I hate to see it, but then I figure a man has a right to let off a little steam once every thirty-one years. Even so, I get a little worried when he asks for the phone and calls up his wife.
He says, "Myrtle, this Rabelais. Rabelais, your husband, you old sow." He takes a breath and says, "You're damned right I'm drunk. And I'm staying that way. Go home to your mother.... Oh yes, you are. You're leaving on the 12:05 tomorrow and you'll eat chicken à la king on the train and fall asleep at Holt's Corner and snore all the way home. And your mother will be mad because her left fender will get dented on the way to the station." Bang! He hangs up.

"Beer, Mike."

"Now look, Mr.--Rabelais--"

He ignores me. "Mike, who owns this place?"

I don't, but I'd like to. I tell him who my boss is and he hunts him up in the phone book and calls him. He says, "This is Rabelais Pettis. I want to buy your Fifth Avenue Tavern. How much?.... Sold!"

And so help me, the boss comes down and Rabelais hauls bills from every pocket and lays it on the bar in a great big pile. Then he has the boss sign the place over to me. Me, Mike Murphy. I figure tomorrow when he wakes up broke I'll have to give it back. But tonight I own it. I'm real proud.

But I don't get to enjoy it. He says, "Mike, let's do the town." Can you refuse a guy who just gives you a thirty thousand dollar property? We do the town. We do the girl shows, and he yells at all the dames and tries to date the usherettes until we finally get pitched out. We get pitched out of five before I steer him to a hash house.

"Phooey," he says. "We'll go to the Buster for a steak." That's our fanciest place where the food starts at ten dollars. We have two of the biggest steaks I ever saw with champagne and stuff, and so help me, when Rabelais tries to date the floor show girls, instead of getting pitched out, we walk out with two of the cutest kids I ever hope to see. Only they're young enough to be our daughters or maybe grand-daughters even.

Rabelais is big hearted if not big in any other way. He says to his kid, a redhead a foot taller than he, "Do you have a fur coat?"

"No, Rabelais." She learns fast that he likes the name now.

"Ha," he says. "Then we'll get some."

"In the summer?" I asks.

"We'll make it winter," Rabelais says. "I'm tired of summer. Besides in '56 there's a new bar in town and it's a pip."

Now the three of us are halfway sober and we just look at each other and shrug. But Rabelais acts and talks normal enough. He calls a cab and has us hauled to an old cottage in the suburbs. He waves the cabby off with a twenty dollar bill. When we go inside, he points across the way. "I live there. This is my secret laboratory."

We think he is kidding us some more because there isn't anything but dust and cobwebs in the place. But he takes us to the basement and there is a whole mess of junk lying around. There are bars and gears and wires and some stuff that doesn't make any sense at all. It has cobwebs and dust on it too.

"My super machines," he says. "They don't work."

The redhead looks a little as if she thinks he's nuts. But what can she do? Already he's given her a hundred dollar bill just for fun.

"But," he says, leading us into another room, "this one does work."

There isn't anything in the room but a big metal plate on the floor with a wooden bench on it and levers and rods in front of the bench. "Climb on," Rabelais says.

We sit on the bench to humor him and he pulls one lever as far left as he can, then another a little ways, then another, and a fourth. Then he twists a rod to the right. The lights go out and a cold draft of air comes in through a window. When the lights come on the air is still cold. The girls are shivering.

"Three p.m., January 12, 1956," says Rabelais. "Let's go get fur coats."

So we go out the way we came in and it's daylight. And there's snow on the ground. The cottage is the same but the street is a highway now. Rabelais hails the fanciest looking cab I ever see and we get driven to town where he buys all of us fur coats in a store I never heard of. Then we go to a dinner club that makes the Buster look like a greasy spoon. None of us can say a word.

After he pays the check, Rabelais says, "I'm short of cash. Let's go to the bank."

"Banks ain't open," I remind him.

"Mine is," he says and makes a phone call. Pretty soon a big fancy limousine with a chauffeur drives up and we all pile in. I manage to balk long enough to buy a newspaper. Sure enough, the date is January 12, 1956.

We go to the financial section and right past my tavern. It's all lighted up and fancy looking and there's a big sign saying, "MIKE'S" outside.

Rabelais says, "You're making a mint, Mike."

"I see," I agrees, dazed. Rabelais flicks the paper with a silly grin and tells me to look on page four. I do and there's an editorial beside a cartoon of me, pot belly and all, and it says, "Mayor Mike Murphy agrees to run for
Congress...."
"Me?"
"You," says Rabelais. "You make it, too, Mike."

Before I can answer, we stop at a building lighted up. Over the door it says, "Pettis." That's all. It's his, the whole building. And it's full of offices. He shows me one where his former bosses are slaving over drafting boards. The bank part is closed but some slaves are working late as people in banks always do and we go in and Rabelais gets a wad of money and we leave.

It goes on like that. I'm ashamed to say we get sort of looped and the next thing we know we're in Paris and having a fine time. Then we take another flyer on his machine and it's summer. We enjoy that for a while and then try another season. It goes on that way for a couple weeks. Once we accept the fact that we're traveling in time, it's easy.

But Rabelais, even when he's looped, won't take us into the past or far into the future. He just says, "We have to watch probability, Mike."

I don't get the idea but it doesn't seem to matter much. We're having too good a time kicking around in the near future. Finally when we all feel ready for a Keeley cure, Rabelais takes us home. We land in the basement at the very moment we left it but with our fur coats and fancy luggage and souvenirs. Rabelais looks over all the gadgets we have and those that are too much ahead of our time, he throws away.

In a taxi heading for town, I smoke my dollar cigar. I'm happy. The girls are quiet, a little sad.
"It was fun," the redhead sighs. "Kicking won't seem the same."
"Quit that kind of work," Rabelais says. "Go to college or something." And he hands each of them a big wad of money.

Downtown we split up, each of us going off somewhere to get the rest we need. I sleep around the clock and a little more. When I wake up I'm the owner of a tavern still, so I figure I'm to be mayor in '54 and congressman in '56. It's a wonderful life for a while. The only thing is that I miss Rabelais coming in at five-ten for his beer.

In '54 I get elected Mayor like he said. My business gets remodelled and all is swell.

Then one night I go to sleep in my new house and I wake up in the middle of the night feeling a cold draft. When I turn over I roll onto a lump in the mattress and I know it was all a dream and I'm Mike Murphy, bartender, again.

The next a.m. I pick up the paper and it's the summer of '53, the day of Rabelais and my thirty-first anniversary and I'm back at the old stand. It was a fine dream, I says, and go to work.

At five-o-nine, though, I can't help looking at the clock. And sure enough, Rabelais comes in, walks up to the bar like he owns it and roars at me, "Two beers, Mike!"

I can't help saying, "Look, haven't we done this before?"
He grins at me. "And we may have to do it again a few times," he says.

By now I know him pretty well, I think--or maybe I dreamed I know him; I'm not sure. Anyway, I give him the two beers and wait for him to get around to telling me whatever is on his mind.

He goes through the same act as before--only I can't be sure he did go through the act or I dreamed he did.
"Beer for the house," he yells.
"Take it easy," I cautions. "Take it easy, Rabelais."
"You never called me by my first name before, did you, Mike?"

I open my mouth to remind him that he told me to back in 1953 and then I remember it is 1953. That confuses me because I remember, too, that in 1954 I was--or maybe it's that I'm going to be--mayor. I just close my mouth and wait.

Rabelais takes his time. When the early rush clears out, he gets me off to one end of the bar and says, "Sorry to keep you waiting, Mike, but we have to do it all over again."

"Then it wasn't a dream?"
"No dream," he says.
"But everything was going fine."
"Up to a point," he says. "Up to the sixties."

Then he explains the way his machine works. But all I get out of what he says is that there's a law of probability so he can't go back and shoot his grandfather when the old man is a boy or juggle stocks in '47 to pay off and make him rich in '53 and things like that. That is why he wouldn't let us go back into the past. He was afraid we would do something to change history and--bingo.

And he wouldn't let us go into the future very far because up a way the atom bomb gets loose and it is awfully sad to see and dangerous besides.
"That was in the sixties," he says. "Or will be in the sixties. Only I got it figured out so it won't be, Mike."
It's over my head; I just keep on waiting.
He explains that he made a pile of dough in the near future by betting on horse races and cleaning out a few bookies and investing his winnings in stocks he knew were going up (and in fact they wouldn't have gone up if he hadn't looked into the future and known they would so he could go back and buy them) and anyway, he figured the exact day it would be safe to start and so he did.
"Only," he says, "we made a mistake by making you mayor and then congressman. I have it figured out for you to be congressman right from the start--in fifty-four. That gives you two extra years of seniority on Congress and so when the chips are down you have a little more pull."
"Fine," I says and start to take off my apron.
"The thing is," he explains, "there are a couple of lunkheads in Congress that get super-patriotic and they're the ones who cause the trouble with the bomb getting loose." He leans over the bar and looks real serious at me. "And you," he goes on, "are the one who stops them before they get started."
"Me? Me, Mike Murphy?"
"You," he says. "We just go on a different time track from the one we tried before. And this one ought to work." He gives me his grin. "You should see the history books about the year 2000. You're a real national hero, Mike."
I throw my apron into a corner and roll down my sleeves. I'm ready.
And it goes just like Rabelais says. I pass up the mayor's job and go straight to Congress. In my third term I get a chance to cool those two excitable characters--cool them politically, that is, and I do.
The only thing wrong is that Rabelais never lets me go into the future to read the history books that tell what a great guy I was and the things I did. So I'm never sure I'm doing the right thing. Like I tell him, how can I be sure what to do if he won't let me read about what I did?
THE END

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Contents

SUCCESS STORY
By Robert Turner

What is to be will be. Our only refuge lies in that which might not have been.

December 8th, 1952, Two-Thirty A. M.
After awhile the blinding light was like actual physical pressure against his tightly squinched eyes. He tried to burrow deeper into the protectively warm, cave-like place where he'd been safe from them for so long. But he couldn't escape them. Their hands, their big, red, hideously smooth hands had him, now. They were tugging and pulling at him with a strength impossible to fight. Still he struggled.
He tried to cry out but there was no sound from his constricted throat. There were only the frightening noises from outside, louder, now. He tried to twist and squirm against the hands dragging him toward that harsh, blinding light. He was too small, too weak, compared to them. He couldn't fight them off. He felt himself being stretched and strained and forced with cruel determination. He didn't want to go out there. He knew what was waiting for him out there. He couldn't go. Not out there, where....

* * * * *
When Jeff McKinney was three years old he tipped a pot of scalding water from the stove onto himself. He was badly burned and scarred. He hovered between life and death for several weeks. Jeff's father was out of work at the time and they were living in a cold water tenement. Something about the case caught a tabloid's attention and it was played up as a human interest sob story. It came to the attention of a wealthy man who volunteered to pay for plastic surgery. Then followed, long months of that kind of torture, but Jeff McKinney came out of it not too badly scarred. Not on the surface, anyhow. But his face had a strange hue. There was a frozen, mask-like cast to his features when he smiled.

[Illustration]
He was eight when he saw his father killed. He was in the taxi the older McKinney now drove for a living when the father stepped out of the driver's side onto a busy street without looking back first. The speeding truck took the car door and Jeff's father with it for half a block, wedged between front wheel and fender. Jeff never forgot the
sound of that, and the screaming. Nor his shock when he suddenly realized that the screams were his own.

Jeff was a strange boy. He didn't have an average childhood. The poverty was more extreme after his father's death. He stayed home alone while his mother was out working at whatever job she could get, reading too much and thinking too much. Once, he looked at her with haunted eyes and said: "Mother, why is life so bad? Why are people even born into a world like this?"

What could she say to a question like that? She said: "Please, Jefferson! Please don't talk that way. Life isn't all bad. You'll see. Some day, in spite of everything, you'll be somebody and you'll be happy. The good times will come."

They did, of course. A few of them. There was the day he went upstate on an outing for underprivileged boys and went fishing for the first time. He caught a whopping trout and won a prize for it. That was nice; that was fun. That was when he was thirteen. That was the year the gang of kids caught him on the way home from school and beat him unconscious because he never laughed; because they couldn't make him laugh. The year before his mother died.

At the orphanage he didn't mingle much with the other boys. He spent most of his after-classes hours alone in the school's chemistry lab. He liked to tinker with chemicals. They were cold, emotionless, immune to joy and sadness, yet they had purpose. He played the cello, too, with haunting beauty, but not in the school band, only when he wanted to, when nobody was around and he could really feel the music.

Once, on the way home from his cello lesson in the music building, he saw some boys playing football on the orphanage athletic field. He was suddenly seized with a fierce determination to belong, to grab at some of the shouting, laughing happiness these boys seemed to have. He told them he wanted to join in and play, too. He didn't understand why they laughed so at this idea.

They stopped laughing, though, after the first time he ran with the ball, and they all piled up on him and he didn't get up. He lay there, looking so ghostly and breathing so harshly and with the trickle of blood coming out of his ears. But Jeff didn't know they had stopped laughing.

He recovered from that skull fracture, all right. Worse, though, than any of the unhappiness he suffered during his life, worse even than the shocks of his father's and mother's deaths, was the thing that happened to him when he was twenty and working at the laboratories of a big drug company.

He met and fell hopelessly in love with a girl named Nina, a girl a few years older than he was. They married and for the first few weeks Jeff McKinney had happiness he'd never known before. Until he came home from work sick, one afternoon and saw Nina with the man from the apartment over them. She didn't whine and beg for forgiveness, Nina didn't. She stood boldly while the other man laughed and laughed and she screamed invective upon Jefferson McKinney, telling him what she really thought of him, a gloomy, puny weakling who couldn't even make a decent living, telling him that she was through with him.

A blank spot came into Jeff's life right then. When it was over, Nina and the other man were on the floor and there was blood on the kitchen carving knife in Jeff's hand.

They didn't find him for awhile. He changed his name and appearance and hid in the soiled seams and ragged fringes of society. He learned the anaesthetic powers of drugs and alcohol. He gave up trying to get anything out of this life. Then they finally picked him up, fished him from the river into which he'd jumped. There were days of torture after that, without the alcohol and drugs his wrecked system craved. Right there was the final hell that could have broken him completely. But it didn't. It was like the terrible crisis after a long illness. Things began to get better, to go to the other extreme after that.

A state psychiatrist brought Jeff's case to the attention of a noted criminal lawyer. Neither Nina nor her lover had died from their knife wounds. On the plea of the unwritten law, Jeff McKinney got off with a suspended sentence. The lawyer and psychiatrist learned of his interest and knowledge and talent for chemistry and got him another job in the experimental laboratory of a big university.

Later he married a girl named Elaine, who worked at the lab with him. They had two children, and lived in a small comfortable cottage just off the University campus. For several years, they had all they wanted of life—comfort, health, happiness. Jeff thought that life could never be more wonderful. All of his former, bitter, cynical views fell away from him. Hadn't he, with all odds against him, finally won out and acquired peace and contentment and a purpose in life? What was wrong with a world in which that could happen?

Then there was the topper. Jefferson McKinney discovered a new drug which would cure and eventually eliminate a disease that was one of the world's worst killers, the drug for which thousands of scientists had been seeking for years.

He was feted and honored, became a national hero. The story of his life and his discovery temporarily pushed even the doleful forecasts of an early Third War, the Big War, off the front pages. And Jeff was humbly proud and grateful that he had paid now the debt he owed to a society that could make a final victory, like his, possible.
In a zenith of almost holy happiness, he stood one evening on a lecture platform in a huge auditorium in a great city, before thousands of worshipping people to make a thank-you speech after being awarded a world prize for his great scientific discovery.

But in the middle of his talk he broke off suddenly. A flash of blinding brilliance slashed through the windows. Horror painted his face. In a whisper, he cried: "No! No! It would make it all so senseless!" His eyes looked like the eyes of a man with flaming splinters jammed under his fingernails. His face seemed to pucker, and grow infantile. Then he screamed: "No! Leave me alone! I told you I didn't want to come out here, to be one of you! Damn you, why did you bring me out here? For--for this?..."

There were the shards of glass from the great auditorium windows, floating inward, turning lazily. There were the brick walls crumbling, tumbling inward, scattering through the air in the same seeming slow motion. The dust cloud and the sound, the flat blast-sound, came after that, as the entire building--perhaps the world--disintegrated in the eye-searing light....

December 8th, 1952, Two-Thirty A. M.

The flat of a rubber-gloved hand striking flesh made a splatting noise. A thin, breathless but concentrated crying followed. The doctor looked down at his charity clinic patient, the woman under the bright delivery room lights.

"Look at him--fighting like a little demon!" the doctor said. "Seemed almost as though he didn't want to come out and join us.... What's the matter, son? This is a bright, new, wonderful world to be born into.... What are you going to call the boy, Mrs. McKinney?"

The woman under the lights forced a tired smile. "Jeff. Jefferson McKinney. That's going to be his name," she whispered proudly.

The baby's terrified squalling subsided into fretful, whimpering resignation.
Why did everybody step off the ship in this strange valley and promptly drop dead? How could a well-equipped corps of tough spacemen become a field of rotting skeletons in this quiet world of peace and contentment? It was a mystery Peter and Sherri had to solve. If they could live long enough!

Peter Wayne took the letter out of the machine, broke the seal, and examined it curiously. It was an official communication from the Interstellar Exploration Service. It read:

FROM: Lieutenant General Martin Scarborough, I.E.S. TO: Captain Peter Wayne, Preliminary Survey Corps

Report immediately to this office for assignment to I.E.S. Lord Nelson. Full briefing will be held at 2200 hours, 14 April 2103.

By order of the Fleet Commandant.

It was short, brief, and to the point. And it gave no information whatsoever. Peter Wayne shrugged resignedly, put the letter down on his bed, walked over to the phone, and dialed a number.

A moment later, a girl's face appeared--blonde-haired, with high cheekbones, deep blue-green eyes, and an expression of the lips that intriguingly combined desirability and crisp military bearing.

"Lieutenant James speaking," she said formally. Then, as Wayne's image appeared on her screen, she grinned.

"Hi, Pete. What's up?"

"Listen, Sherri," Wayne said quickly. "I'm going to have to cancel that date we had for tomorrow night. I just got my orders."

The girl laughed. "I was just going to call you, I got a fac-sheet too. Looks as though we won't see each other for a while, Pete."

"What ship are you getting?"

"The Lord Nelson."

It was Wayne's turn to laugh. "It looks as though we will be seeing each other. That's my ship too. We can keep our date in the briefing room."

Her face brightened. "Good! I'll see you there, then," she said. "I've got to get my gear packed."

"Okay," Wayne said. "Let's be on time, you know how General Scarborough is."

She smiled. "Don't worry, Peter. I'll be there. So long for now."

"Bye, Sherri." He cut the connection, watched the girl's face melt away into a rainbow-colored diamond of light, and turned away. There were a lot of things to do before he would be ready to leave Earth for an interstellar tour of duty.

He wondered briefly as he started to pack just what was going on. There was usually much more notice on any big jump of this order. Something special was up, he thought, as he dragged his duffle-bag out of the closet.

He was at the briefing room at 2158 on the nose. The Interstellar Exploration Service didn't much go for tardiness, but they didn't pay extra if you got there a half-hour early. Captain Peter Wayne made it a point of being at any appointment two minutes early--no more, no less.

The room was starting to fill up, with men and women Wayne knew well, had worked with on other expeditions, had lived with since he'd joined the IES. They looked just as puzzled as he probably did, he saw; they knew they were being called in on something big, and in the IES big meant big.

At precisely 2200, Lieutenant General Scarborough emerged from the inner office, strode briskly up the aisle of the briefing room, and took his customary stance on the platform in front. His face looked stern, and he held his hands clasped behind his back. His royal blue uniform was neat and trim. Over his head, the second hand of the big clock whirled endlessly. In the silence of the briefing room, it seemed to be ticking much too loudly.

The general nodded curtly and said, "Some of you are probably wondering why the order to report here wasn't more specific. There are two reasons for that. In the first place, we have reason to believe that we have found a substantial deposit of double-nucleus beryllium."

There was a murmur of sound in the briefing room. Wayne felt his heart starting to pound; D-N beryllium was big. So big that a whole fleet of IES ships did nothing but search the galaxy for it, full time.

"Naturally," the general continued, "we don't want any of this information to leak out, just in case it should prove false. The prospect of enough D-N beryllium to make fusion power really cheap could cause a panic if we didn't handle it properly. The Economics Board has warned us that we'll have to proceed carefully if there actually is
a big deposit on this planet."

Captain Wayne stared uneasily at Sherri James, who frowned and chewed her lip. To his left, a short, stubby private named Manetti murmured worriedly, "That means trouble. D-N beryllium always means trouble. There's a catch somewhere."

General Scarborough, on the platform, said, "There's a second reason for secrecy. I think it can better be explained by a man who has the evidence first-hand."

He paused and looked around the room. "Four weeks ago, the Scout Ship Mavis came back from Fomalhaut V." There was a dead silence in the briefing room.

"Lieutenant Jervis, will you tell the crew exactly what happened on Fomalhaut V?"

Lieutenant Jervis stepped forward and took his place on the platform. He was small and wiry, with a hawk nose and piercingly intense eyes. He cleared his throat and smiled a little sheepishly.

"As well as I can remember it, it goes something like this."

"We orbited around Fomalhaut V for a Scouting Survey," Jervis said. "The planet is hot and rocky, but it has a breathable atmosphere. The detectors showed various kinds of metals in the crust, some of them in commercially feasible concentration. But the crust is so mountainous and rocky that there aren't very many places to land a ship.

"Then we picked up the double-nucleus beryllium deposit on our detectors. Nearby, there was a small, fairly level valley, so we brought the ship down for a closer check. We wanted to make absolutely positive that it was double-nucleus beryllium before we made our report."

He paused, as if arranging the story he wanted to tell in his mind, and went on. "The D-N beryllium deposit lies at the top of a fairly low mountain about five miles from the valley. We triangulated it first, and then we decided we ought to send up a party to get samples of the ore if it were at all possible.

"I was chosen to go, along with another member of the crew, a man named Lee Bellows. We left the ship at about five in the morning, and spent most of the day climbing up to the spot where we had detected the beryllium. We couldn't get a sample; the main deposit is located several feet beneath the surface of the mountaintop, and the mountain is too rough and rocky to climb without special equipment. We got less than halfway before we had to stop."

Wayne felt Sherri nudge him, and turned to nod. He knew what she was thinking. This was where he came in; it was a job that called for a specialist, a trained mountaineer--such as Captain Peter Wayne. He frowned and turned his attention back to the man on the platform.

"We made all the readings we could," Jervis continued. "Then we headed back to our temporary base."

His face looked troubled. "When we got back, every man at the base was dead."

Silence in the room. Complete, utter, deafening silence.

"There were only nine of us in the ship," Jervis said. He was obviously still greatly affected by whatever had taken place on Fomalhaut V. "With seven of us dead, that left only Bellows and myself. We couldn't find out what had killed them. They were lying scattered over the valley floor for several yards around the ship. They looked as though they had suddenly dropped dead at whatever they were doing."

Peter Wayne made use of his extra few inches of height to glance around the briefing room. He saw row on row of tense faces--faces that reflected the same emotions he was feeling. Space exploration was something still new and mostly unknown, and even the experienced men of IES still knew fear occasionally. The galaxy was a big place; unknown terrors lurked on planets unimaginably distant. Every now and then, something like this would come up--something to give you pause, before you ventured into space again.

"We couldn't find out what had killed them," Jervis said again. "They were lying scattered every which way, with no clues at all. The small man's fingers were trembling from relived fright. "Bellows and I were pretty scared, I'll have to admit. We couldn't find a sign of what had killed the men--they'd just--just died."

There was a quiver in his voice. It was obvious he could never take the story lightly, no matter how many times he had to tell it.

Wayne heard Private Manetti mutter, "There's always a price for D-N beryllium."

"The Scout Ship hadn't been molested," Jervis went on. "I went inside and checked it over. It was untouched, undisturbed in every way. I checked the control panel, the cabins, everything. All unbothered. The ship was empty and dead. And--outside--"
"When I came out, Bellows was dead too." He took a deep breath. "I'm afraid I panicked then. I locked myself inside the ship, set the autocontrols, and headed back to Earth at top velocity. I set the ship in an orbit around the moon and notified headquarters. I was quarantined immediately, of course, to make sure I wasn't carrying anything. The medics checked me over carefully. I wasn't and am not now carrying any virus or bacteria unknown to Terrestrial medicine.

"Since I'm the only one who knows exactly where this valley is, the general has asked me to guide the Lord Nelson to the exact spot. Actually, it could be found eventually with the D-N beryllium as a guide. But the Mavis was in orbit around Fomalhaut V for two weeks before we found the D-N beryllium deposit, and the Service feels that we shouldn't waste any time."

The lieutenant sat down, and General Scarborough resumed his place on the platform.

"That's the situation," Scarborough said bluntly. "You know the setup, now--and I think some of you see how your specialities are going to fit into the operation. As Lieutenant Jervis pointed out, we don't know what killed the crew of the Mavis; therefore, we are going to take every possible precaution. As far as we know, there are no inimical life forms on Fomalhaut V--but it's possible that there are things we don't know about, such as airborne viruses that kill in a very short time. If so, then Lieutenant Jervis is immune to the virus and is not a transmitter or carrier of it.

"However, to guard against such a possibility, no one will leave the Lord Nelson, once it has landed, without wearing a spacesuit. The air is breathable, but we're taking no chances. Also, no one will go out alone; scouting parties will always be in pairs, with wide open communication with the ship. And at no time will more than ten percent of the ship's company be outside at any one time."

Wayne made a rough mental computation. The Lord Nelson holds sixty. That means no more than six out at any single time. They really must be worried.

"Aside from those orders, which were decided on by the Service Command, you'll be under the direct orders of Colonel Nels Petersen. Colonel Petersen."

Petersen was a tall, hard-faced man with a touch of gray at his temples. He stepped forward and stared intently at the assembled crew.

"Our job is to make the preliminary preparations for getting D-N beryllium out of the crust of Fomalhaut V. We're supposed to stay alive while we do it. Therefore, our secondary job is to find out what it was that killed the scouting expedition of the Mavis. There are sixty of us going aboard the Lord Nelson tomorrow, and I'd like to have sixty aboard when we come back. Got that?"

He leaned forward, stretched upward on his toes, and smiled mechanically. "Fine. Now, you all know your jobs, but we're going to have to work together as a team. We're going to have to correlate our work so that we'll know what we're doing. So don't think we won't have anything to do during the two weeks it will take us to get to Fomalhaut V. We're going to work it as though it were a shakedown cruise. If anyone doesn't work out, he'll be replaced, even if we have to turn around and come back to Earth. On a planet which has wiped out a whole scouting expedition, we can't afford to have any slip-ups. And that means we can't afford to have anyone aboard who doesn't know what he's doing or doesn't care. Is that clear?"

It was.

"All right," said the colonel. "Let's go out and get acquainted with the Lord Nelson."

The briefing session broke up well past midnight, and the group that shortly would become the crew of the Lord Nelson filtered out of the building and into the cool spring air. Each man had a fairly good idea of his job and each man knew the dangers involved. No one had backed out.

"What d'ye think of it, Pete?" Sherri James asked, as they left together. "Sounds pretty mean."

"I wish we knew what the answers were beforehand," Wayne said. He glanced down at Sherri. The moon was full, and its rays glinted brightly off her golden hair. "It's a risky deal, as Petersen said. Nine men go out, and eight die--of what? Just dead, that's all."

"It's the way the game goes," Sherri said. "You knew that when you joined the corps." They turned down the main road of the IES compound and headed for the snack bar.

Wayne nodded. "I know, kid. It's a job, and it has to be done. But nobody likes to walk into an empty planet like that knowing that eight of the last nine guys who did didn't come back."

He put his arm around her and they entered the snack bar that way. Most of the other crew-members were there already; Wayne sensed the heightening tenseness on their faces.

"Two nuclear fizzes," he said to the pfc at the bar. "With all the trimmings."
"What's the matter, Captain?" said a balding, potbellied major a few stools down, who was nursing a beer. "How come the soft drinks tonight, Wayne?"

Peter grinned. "I'm in training, Major Osborne. Gotta kill the evil green horde from Rigel Seven, and I don't dare drink anything stronger than sarsaparilla."

"How about the amazon, then?" Osborne said, gesturing at Sherri. "Her too?"

"Me too," Sherri said.

Osborne stared at his beer. "You two must be in Scarborough's new project, then." He squinted at Peter, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

"You'll need luck," Osborne said.

"No we won't," Wayne said. "Not luck. We'll need more than just luck to pull us through."

The nuclear fizzes arrived. He began to sip it quietly. A few more members of the crew entered the snack bar. Their faces were drawn tensely.

He guzzled the drink and looked up at Sherri, who was sucking down the last of the soda. "Let's get going, Lieutenant James. The noncoms are coming, and we don't want them to make nasty remarks about us."

* * * * *

The Lord Nelson blasted off the next evening, after a frenzied day of hurried preparations. The crew of sixty filed solemnly aboard, Colonel Petersen last, and the great hatch swung closed.

There was the usual routine loudspeaker-business while everyone quickly and efficiently strapped into his acceleration cradle, and then the ship leaped skyward. It climbed rapidly, broke free of Earth's grasp, and, out past the moon, abruptly winked out of normal space into overdrive. It would spend the next two weeks in hyperspace, short-cutting across the galaxy to Fomalhaut V.

It was a busy two weeks for everyone involved. Captain Peter Wayne, as a central part of the team, spent much of his time planning his attack. His job would be the actual climbing of the mountain where the double-nucleus beryllium was located. It wasn't going to be an easy job; the terrain was rough, the wind, according to Jervis, whipped ragingly through the hills, and the jagged peaks thrust into the air like the teeth of some mythical dragon.

Study of the three-dimensional aerial photographs taken from the Mavis showed that the best route was probably up through one end of the valley, through a narrow pass that led around the mountain, and up the west slope, which appeared to offer better handholds and was less perpendicular than the other sides of the mountain.

This time, the expedition would have the equipment to make the climb. There were ropes, picks, and crampons, and sets of metamagnetic boots and grapples. With metamagnetic boots, Wayne thought, they'd be able to walk up the side of the mountain almost as easily as if it were flat.

He studied the thick, heavy soles of the boots for a moment, then set to work polishing. Wayne liked to keep his boots mirror-bright; it wasn't required, but it was a habit of his nonetheless.

He set to work vigorously. Everyone aboard the ship was working that way. Sherri James, who was in charge of the Correlation Section, had noticed the same thing the day before. Her job was to co-ordinate all the information from various members of the expedition, run them through the computers, and record them. She had been busy since blastoff, testing the computers, checking and rechecking them, being overly efficient.

"I know why we're doing it," she said. "It keeps our mind off the end of the trip. When we spend the whole day working out complicated circuits for the computers, or polishing mountain boots, or cleaning the jet tubes, it's just so we don't have to think about Fomalhaut V. It helps to concentrate on details."

Wayne nodded and said nothing. Sherri was right. There was one thought in everyone's mind: what was the deadly secret of the valley?

There was another thought, after that:

Will we find it out in time?

* * * * *

After two weeks of flight through the vast blackness of interstellar space, the Lord Nelson came out of overdrive and set itself in an orbit around Fomalhaut V. Lieutenant Jervis, the sole survivor of the ill-fated Mavis, located the small valley between the giant crags that covered the planet, and the huge spherical bulk of the spaceship settled gently to the floor of the valley.

They were gathered in the central room of the ship ten minutes after the all-clear rang through the corridors, informing everyone that the landing had been safely accomplished. From the portholes they could see the white bones of the Mavis's crew lying on the reddish sand of the valley bottom.

"There they are," Jervis said quietly. "Just bones. Those were my shipmates."

Wayne saw Sherri repress a shudder. Little heaps of bones lay here and there on the sand, shining brightly in the hot sun. That was the crew of the Mavis—or what was left of them.

Colonel Petersen entered the room and confronted the crew. "We're here," he said. "You know the schedule
from now on. No one's to leave the ship until we've made a check outside, and after that--assuming it's OK to go out-no more than six are to leave the ship at any one time."

He pointed to a row of metal magnetic tabs clinging to the wall nearest the corridor that led to the airlock. "When you go out, take one of those tabs and touch it on your suit. There are exactly six tabs. If none are there, don't go out. It's as simple as that."

Four men in spacesuits entered the room, followed by two others. The leader of the group saluted. "We're ready, sir," he said.

"Go out and get a look at the bodies," the colonel told the men, who were Medical Corpsmen. "You know the procedure. Air and sand samples too, of course."

The leader saluted again, turned, and left. Wayne watched the six spacesuited figures step one at a time to the wall, withdraw one of the metal tabs, and affix it to the outer skin of his suit. Then they went outside.

Captain Wayne and Sherri James stood by one of the portholes and watched the six medics as they bent over the corpses outside. "I don't get it, I just don't understand," Wayne said quietly.

* * * * *

"What don't you get?" Sherri asked.

"Those skeletons. Those men have only been dead for two months, and they've been reduced to nothing but bones already. Even the fabric of their clothing is gone. Why? There must be something here that causes human flesh to deteriorate much faster than normal."

"It does look pretty gruesome," Sherri agreed. "I'm glad we've been ordered to keep our spacesuits on. I wouldn't want to be exposed to anything that might be out there."

"I wonder--" Wayne muttered.

"What? What's the matter?"

Wayne pointed to one figure lying on the sand. "See that? What's that over his head?"

"Why--it's a space helmet!"

"Yeah," said Wayne. "The question is: was he wearing just the helmet, or the whole suit? If he was wearing the whole suit, we're not going to be as well protected as we thought, even with our fancy suits."

Fifteen minutes passed slowly before the medics returned, and five minutes more before they had passed through the decontamination chambers and were allowed into the ship proper. A ring of tense faces surrounded them as they made their report.

* * * * *

The leader, a tall, bespectacled doctor named Stevelman, was the spokesman. He shrugged when Colonel Petersen put forth the question whose answer everyone waited for.

"I don't know," the medic replied. "I don't know what killed them. There's dry bones out there, but no sign of anything that might have done it. It's pretty hard to make a quick diagnosis on a skeleton, Colonel."

"What about the one skeleton with the bubble helmet?" Peter Wayne asked. "Did you see any sign of a full suit on him?"

Stevelman shook his head. "Not a sign, sir."

"I don't recall it very clearly, sir. I honestly couldn't tell you whether they were wearing suits or bubble-helmets or anything. I was too upset at the time to make careful observations."

"I understand," Petersen said.

But the medic had a different theory. He pointed at Jervis and said, "That's a point I've meant to make, Lieutenant. You're a trained space scout. Your psychological records show that you're not the sort of man given to panic or to become confused."

"Are you implying that there's something improper about my statement, Dr. Stevelman?"

The medic held up a hand. "Nothing of the sort, Lieutenant. But since you're not the sort to panic, even in such a crisis as the complete destruction of the entire crew of your scout ship, you must have been ill--partly delirious from fever. Not delirious enough to cause hallucinations, but just enough to impair your judgment."

Jervis nodded. "That is possible," he said.

"Good," said Stevelman. "I have two tentative hypotheses, then." He turned to the colonel. "Should I state them now, Colonel Petersen?"

"There's to be no secrecy aboard this ship, Doctor. I want every man and woman on the ship to know all the facts at all times."

"Very well," the medic said. "I'd suggest the deaths were caused by some unknown virus--or, perhaps, by some virulent poison that occurred occasionally, a poisonous smog of some kind that had settled in the valley for a time
and then dissipated."

Wayne frowned and shook his head. Both hypotheses made sense.
"Do you have any suggestions, Doctor?" Petersen said.
"Since we don't have any direct information about why those men died, Colonel, I can't make any definite statements. But I can offer one bit of advice to everyone: wear your suits and be alert."

During the week that followed, several groups went out without suffering any ill effects. A short service was held for the eight of the Mavis and then the skeletons were buried in the valley.

They ran a check on the double-nucleus beryllium toward the end of the week, after it had been fairly safely established that no apparent harm was going to come to them. Wayne and Sherri were both in the crew that went outside to set up the detector.

"You man the detector plate," said Major MacDougal, who was in charge of the group, turning to Wayne.

He put his hand on the plate and waited for the guide coordinates to be set. MacDougal fumbled at the base of the detector for a moment, and the machine began picking up eloptic radiations.

Wayne now looked down at the detector plate. "Here we are," he said. "The dial's oscillating between four and eight, all right. The stuff's here."

MacDougal whistled gently. "It's really sending, isn't it?" He pointed toward the mountaintop. "From up there, too. It's going to be a nice climb. Okay, pack the detector up and let's get back inside."

They entered the airlock and passed on into the ship.

"The D-N beryllium up there, sir," Major MacDougal said. "It's going to be a devil of a job to get up to find the stuff."


"It would have been easier to bring along a helicopter," Wayne said wryly. "Pity the things don't fit into spaceships. But I think I can get up there. I'd like to try surveying the lay of the land, first. I want to know all the possible routes before I start climbing."

"Good idea," Petersen said. "I'll send you out with three men to do some preliminary exploring. Boggs! Manetti! MacPherson! Suit up and get with it!"

Wayne strode toward the spacesuit locker, took out his suit, and donned it. Instead of the normal space boots, he put on the special metamagnetic boots for mountain climbing. The little reactors in the back of the calf activated the thick metal sole of each boot so that it would cling tightly to the metallic rock of the mountain. Unlike ordinary magnetism, the metamagnetic field acted on all metals, even when they were in combination with other elements.

His team of three stood before him in the airlock room. He knew all three of them fairly well from Earthside; they were capable, level-headed men, and at least one--Boggs--had already been out in the valley surveying once, and so knew the area pretty well.

He pulled on the boots and looked up. "We're not going to climb the mountain this time, men. We'll just take a look around it to decide which is the best way."

"You have any ideas, sir?" Sergeant Boggs asked.

"From looking at the photographs, I'd guess that the western approach is the best. But I may be wrong. Little details are hard to see from five hundred miles up, even with the best of instruments, and there may be things in our way that will make the west slope impassible. If so, we'll try the southern side. It looks pretty steep, but it also seems rough enough to offer plenty of handholds."

"Too bad we couldn't have had that helicopter you were talking about," said Boggs.

Wayne grinned. "With these winds? They'd smash us against the side of the mountain before we'd get up fifty feet. You ought to know, Sergeant--you've been out in them once already."

"They're not so bad down in this valley, sir," Boggs said. "The only time you really notice them is when you climb the escarpment at the northern end. They get pretty rough up there."

Wayne nodded. "You can see what kind of a job we'll have. Even with metamagnetic boots and grapples, we'll still have to use the old standbys. He looked at the men. "Okay; we're all ready. Let's go."

They unhooked four of the six tabs from the wall and donned them. Then they moved on into the airlock and closed the inner door. The air was pumped out, just as though the ship were in space or on a planet with a poisonous atmosphere. As far as anyone knew, the atmosphere of Fomalhaut V actually was poisonous. Some of the tension had relaxed after a week spent in safety, but there was always the first expedition to consider; no one took chances.

When all the air had been removed, a bleeder valve allowed the outer air to come into the chamber. Then the outer door opened, and the four men went down the ladder to the valley floor.
Wayne led the way across the sand in silence. The four men made their way toward the slope on the western side of the valley. Overhead, the bright globe of Fomalhaut shed its orange light over the rugged landscape.

When they reached the beginning of the slope, Wayne stopped and looked upwards. "Doesn't look easy," he grunted. "Damned rough hill, matter of fact. MacPherson, do you think you could make it to the top?"

Corporal MacPherson was a small, wiry man who had the reputation of being a first-rank mountaineer. He had been a member of the eighteenth Mount Everest Party, and had been the second of that party to reach the summit of the towering peak.

"Sure I can, sir," he said confidently. "Shall I take the rope?"

"Go ahead. You and Manetti get the rope to the top, and Sergeant Boggs and I will follow up."

"Righto, sir."

Corporal MacPherson reached his gloved hands forward and contracted his fingers. The tiny microswitches in his gloves actuated the relays, and his hands clung to the rock. Then he put his boots against the wall and began to move up the steep escarpment.

Private Manetti followed after him. The two men were lashed together by the light plastisteel cable. The sergeant held the end of the cable in his hands, waiting for the coil to be paid out.

Wayne watched the two men climb, while a chill wind whipped down out of the mountains and raised the sand in the valley. It was less than eighty feet to the precipice edge above, but it was almost perpendicular, and as they climbed, the buffeting winds began to press against their bodies with ever-increasing force.

They reached the top and secured the rope, and then they peered over the edge and signalled that Wayne and the sergeant should start up.

"We're coming," Wayne shouted, and returned the signal. It was at that instant that he felt something slam against the sole of his heavy metamagnetic boot. It was as though something had kicked him savagely on the sole of his right foot.

He winced sharply at the impact. Then, somewhat puzzled he looked down at the boot. He felt something move under the sand. He tried to step back, and almost tripped. It was as though his right foot were stuck firmly to the sand!

He pushed himself back, and with a tremendous heave managed to pull himself free. He braced his body against the cliff, lifted his foot, and looked at it.

Hanging from his boot sole was one of the ugliest monstrosities he had ever seen, unusually grotesque.

It was about the size and shape of a regulation football, and was covered with a wrinkled, reddish hide. At one end was a bright red gash of a mouth studded with greenish, gnashing teeth. From the other end of the creature's body protruded a long, needle-like projection which had imbedded itself in the metal sole of Wayne's boot.

"Good God! If I'd been wearing ordinary boots, that thing would have stuck clear into my foot!"

He hefted the weighted pick with one hand and swung, catching the monster with the point. It sank in and ripped through the creature, spilling red-orange blood over the sand. Shuddering a little, Wayne put his other foot on the dead thing and pulled his right boot free of the needle beak.

He started to say something, but he had a sudden premonition that made him look up in time. Sergeant Boggs put both hands against the Captain's shoulder and pushed.

"What the hell?" Wayne asked in surprise as he felt the shove. He almost fell to the sand, but he had had just enough warning to allow him to keep his balance. He put out a foot and staggered wildly.

A sudden strange noise caused him to turn and look back. Five needles were jabbing viciously up out of the sand in the spot where he would have fallen.

"You out of your head, Boggs?" he started to ask--but before the last word was out of his mouth, the sergeant charged in madly and tried to push him over again. He was fighting like a man gone berserk--which he was.

Wayne grabbed him by the wrist and flipped him desperately aside. The sergeant fell, sprawled out for a moment on the sand, then bounced to his feet again. His eyes were alight with a strange, terrifying flame.

Silently, he leaped for Wayne. The captain slammed his fist forward, sending it crashing into Boggs's midsection. The sergeant came back with a jab to the stomach that pushed Wayne backward. Again the deadly needles flicked up from the ground, but they did not strike home.

Wayne gasped for breath and reached out for Boggs. Boggs leaped on him, trying to push Wayne down where the beaks could get to him. Wayne sidestepped, threw Boggs off balance, and clubbed down hard with his fist.

Boggs wandered dizzily for a second before Wayne's other fist came blasting in, knocking the breath out of him. A third blow, and the sergeant collapsed on the sand.

Wayne paused and caught his breath. The sergeant remained unconscious. Wayne shook his head uncertainly, wondering what had come over the mild-mannered Boggs. A chilling thought struck him: was this what happened to
the crew of the Mavis?

He looked up the cliff, where the other two men were still peering over the edge.
"MacPherson! Manetti! Come down! We're going back to the ship!"
He heaved the unconscious body of Sergeant Boggs over his shoulder like a potato-sack, and waited for the two men to come down. They drew near.
"Boggs must have gone out of his head," Wayne said. "He jumped me like a madman."
They had nothing to say, so he turned and began to trudge back to the Lord Nelson, trying to assemble the facts in his mind. They followed alongside.
What was behind the attack? After seeing the monster, why had Boggs attempted to push his superior officer over into the sand? There were other little beasts under that sand; why would Boggs want one of them--there seemed to be dozens--to jab him with its needle of a beak?
And what were the beastly little animals, anyway?
There were no answers. But the answers would have to come, soon.
He tossed Boggs into the airlock and waited for the others to catch up. They climbed up the ladder and said nothing as the airlock went through its cycle and the antibacterial spray covered them.

Colonel Petersen looked at him across the desk and put the palms of his hands together. "Then, as I understand it, Captain, Sergeant Boggs tried to push you over into the sand when this--ah--monster jabbed you in the foot?"
"That's right, sir," Wayne said. He felt uncomfortable. This wasn't a formal court-martial; it was simply an inquiry into the sergeant's actions. Charges would be preferred later, if there were any to be preferred.
Sergeant Boggs stood stolidly on the far side of the room. A livid bruise along his jaw testified to the struggle that had taken place. One eye was puffed, and his expression was an unhappy one. Near him, MacPherson and Private Manetti stood stiffly at attention.
The colonel looked at Boggs. "What's your side of the story, Sergeant?"
The non-com's face didn't change. "Sir, the captain's statement isn't true."
"What's that?" Wayne asked angrily.
"Quiet, Captain," Petersen said. "Go ahead, Boggs."
The sergeant licked his bruised lips. "I was about to start up the rope when, for no reason at all, he struck me in the stomach. Then he hit me again a few more times, and I passed out."
"Did he say anything when he did this?" the Colonel asked.
"No, sir."
Wayne frowned. What was the sergeant trying to do? What the devil was he up to?
"Corporal MacPherson," the colonel said, "Did you witness the fight?"
"Yes, sir," the small man said, stepping a pace forward.
"Describe it."
"Well, sir, we were up on top of the cliff, and we called--or rather, I called for the captain and the sergeant to come on up. Sergeant Boggs took a hold of the rope and then the captain hit him in the belly, sir. He hit him twice more and the sergeant fell down. Then the captain told us to come down, which we did, sir. That was all."
He gestured with his hands to indicate he had no more to say.
Wayne could hardly believe his ears. Making an effort, he managed to restrain himself.
"Private Manetti, do you have anything to add to that?" the colonel asked.
"No, sir. It happened just like that, sir. We both seen the entire thing. That's the way it happened. The captain hauled off and let him have it."
The colonel swivelled around and let his cold eyes rest on Wayne. "Captain, you have stated that Sergeant Boggs did not talk to either of these two men after you struck him. That eliminates any collusion."
"Yes, sir," Wayne said stonily.
"I talked to both men separately, and they tell substantially the same story. The records of all three of these men are excellent. The sergeant claims he never saw any monster of the type you describe, and the group I sent out to check says that there is no body of any alien animal anywhere near the spot. How do you explain the discrepancies between your story and theirs?"
Wayne glared angrily at the three men. "They're lying, sir," he said evenly. "I don't know why they're doing it. The whole thing took place exactly as I told you."
"I find that very difficult to believe, Captain."
"Is that a formal accusation, sir?"
Petersen shrugged and rubbed his hands against his iron-grey temples. "Captain," he said finally, "you have a very fine record. You have never before been known to strike an enlisted man for any cause whatever. I hold that in your favor."

"Thank you, sir."

"On the other hand, the evidence here definitely indicates that your story is not quite true. Now, we know that Lieutenant Jervis acted peculiarly after the crew of the Mavis met its mysterious end, and the Medical Corps thinks that whatever is causing the deaths could also cause mental confusion. Therefore, I am remanding you to the custody of the Medical Corps for observation. You'll be kept in close confinement until this thing is cleared up."

Wayne frowned bitterly. "Yes, sir," he said.

* * * * *

Peter Wayne sat in his cell in the hospital sector and stared at the wall in confusion. What in blazes was going on? What possible motive would three enlisted men have to frame him in this way? It didn't make any sense.

Was it possible that he really had gone off his rocker? Had he imagined the little beast under the sand?

He lifted his foot and looked again at the sole. There it was: a little pit about an eighth of an inch deep.

The colonel had explained it away easily enough, saying that he might possibly have stepped on a sharp rock.

Wayne shook his head. He knew he wasn't nuts. But what the hell was going on?

There were no answers. But he knew that the eventual answer, when it came, would have something to do with the mystery of the Mavis's eight corpses.

It was late that afternoon when Sherri James came storming into the hospital sector. She was wearing a spacesuit, and she was brandishing a pass countersigned by Colonel Petersen himself. She was determined to enter.

"The medics didn't want to let me in," she explained. "But I told them I'd wear a spacesuit if it would make them any happier."

"Sherri! What the devil are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to check on you," she said. Her voice sounded oddly distorted coming over the speaker in the helmet. "You're supposed to have blown your wig or something. Did you?"

"No. Of course not."

"I didn't think so." She unscrewed her helmet quickly. "Listen, Peter, there's something funny going on aboard this ship."

"Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside."

"Better put your helmet on," Wayne advised. "Whoever's coming might not like to see you this way."

Quickly, she slipped the helmet back on. "I don't know what's going on," she said. "But I intend to find out."

* * * * *

One of the medics entered the cell without knocking and came up to Sherri. "You'll have to go now, Lieutenant," he said. "We're going to perform some tests on the captain now."

Sherri bristled. "Tests? What kind of tests?"

"Nothing very serious," the medic said. "Just a routine checkup to clarify some points we're interested in."

"All right," Sherri said. "You won't find anything the matter with him. She left.

"Come with me, Captain," said the medic politely. He unlocked the cell door and, equally politely, drew a needle-beam pistol. "Don't try anything, please, sir. I have my orders."

Silently, Wayne followed the medic into the lab. Several other medics were standing around watching him, with Stevelman, the head man, in the back.

"Over this way, Captain," Stevelman called.

There was a box sitting on a table in the middle of the room. It was full of sand.

"Give me your hand, please, Captain," the medic said tonelessly.

In a sudden flash of insight, Wayne realized what was in the box. He thought fast but moved slowly. He held out his hand, but just as the medic took it, he twisted suddenly away.

His hand flashed out and grasped the other's wrist in a steely grip. The medic's fingers tightened on the needle-beam, and managed to pull the trigger. A bright beam flared briefly against the lab's plastalloy floor, doing nothing
but scorched it slightly. Wayne's other hand balled into a fist and came up hard against the medic's jaw.

He grabbed the needle-beam pistol from the collapsing man's limp hand and had the other three men covered before the slugged medic had finished sagging to the floor.

"All of you! Raise your hands!"

They paid no attention to him. Instead of standing where they were, they began to move toward him. Wayne swore and, with a quick flip of his thumb, turned the beam down to low power and pulled the trigger three times in quick succession.

The three men fell as though they'd been pole-axed, knocked out by the low-power beam.

"The whole ship's gone crazy," he murmured softly, looking at the three men slumped together on the lab floor.

"Stark, staring, raving nuts."

He took one step and someone jumped him from behind. The needle-beam pistol spun from his hand and slithered across the floor as Wayne fell under the impact of the heavy body. Apparently the whole Medical Corps was out to knock him down today.

He twisted rapidly as an arm encircled his neck, and rammed an elbow into the newcomer's midsection. Then he jerked his head back, smashing the back of his skull into his opponent's nose.

With his nose pouring blood, Wayne's antagonist charged in. His eyes burned with the strange flame that had been gleaming in Boggs's face out on the desert in the valley. He ploughed into Wayne's stomach with a savage blow that rocked Wayne back.

He grunted and drove back with a flurry of blows. The other aimed a wild blow at Wayne's head; Wayne seized the wrist as the arm flew past his ear, and twisted, hard. The medic flipped through the air and came to rest against the wall with a brief crunching impact. He moaned and then lapsed into silence.

* * * * *

Quickly, Wayne grabbed the gun off the floor and planted his back to the wall, looking around for new antagonists. But there was evidently no one left who cared to tangle with him, and the four medics strewn out on the floor didn't seem to have much fight left in them.

Wayne crossed the room in a couple of strides and bolted the door. Then he walked over to the box of sand. If it contained what he suspected--

He stepped over to the lab bench and picked out a long steel support rod from the equipment drawer. He placed the rod gently against the sand, and pushed downward, hard. There was a tinny scream, and a six-inch needle shot up instantly through the surface.

"Just what I thought," Wayne murmured. "Can you talk, you nasty little brute?" He prodded into the sand--more viciously this time. There was a flurry of sand, and the football-shaped thing came to the surface, clashing its teeth and screaming shrilly.

Wayne cursed. Then he turned the needle gun back up to full power and calmly burned the thing to a crisp. An odor of singed flesh drifted up from the ashes on the sand.

* * * * *

He stooped and fumbled in Stevelman's pocket, pulling out a ring of keys.

"They better be the right ones," he told the unconscious medic. Holstering the needle gun, he walked over to the medical stores cabinet, hoping that the things he needed would be inside. He knew exactly what he was facing now, and what he would have to do.

He checked over the labels, peering through the neatly-arranged racks for the substance he was searching for. Finally he picked a large plastine container filled with a white, crystalline powder. Then he selected a couple of bottles filled with a clear, faintly yellow liquid, and took a hypodermic gun from the rack. He relocked the cabinet.

"Who's there?" he asked cautiously, trying to counterfeit Stevelman's voice.

"Harrenburg," said a rumbling voice. "I'm on guard duty. Heard some noise coming from in there a while back, and thought I'd look in. Everything all right, Dr. Stevelman? I mean--"

"Everything's fine, Harrenburg," Wayne said, imitating the medic's thin, dry voice. "We're running some tests on Captain Wayne. They're pretty complicated affairs, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't interrupt again."

"Sure, sir," the guard said. "Just a routine check, sir. Colonel Petersen's orders. Sorry if I've caused any trouble, sir."

"That's all right," Wayne said. "Just go away and let us continue, will you?"

There was the sound of the guard's footsteps retreating down the corridor. Wayne counted to ten and turned
back to the things he had taken from the cabinet.

The bottles of liquid and the hypo gun went into his belt pouch. He tucked the big bottle of white powder under his left arm and cautiously unbolted and opened the door. There was no sign of anyone in the corridor. Good, he thought. It was a lucky thing Harrenburg had blundered along just then, and not two minutes later.

He stepped outside the Medic Section and locked the door behind him with the key he’d taken from Stevelman. After turning the needle gun back to low power again in order to keep from killing anyone, he started on tiptoe toward the stairway that led into the bowels of the ship.

After about ten paces, he saw a shadow on the stairway, and cowered in a dark recess while two crewmen passed, talking volubly. Once they were gone, he came out and continued on his way.

It took quite a while to get where he was going, since it involved hiding and ducking two or three more times along the way, but he finally reached the big compartment where the water repurifiers were. He climbed up the ladder to the top of the reserve tank, opened the hatch, and emptied the contents of the jar into the ship’s water supply.

"That ought to do it," he said to himself. Smiling, he carefully smashed the jar and dropped the fragments down the waste chute. He surveyed his handiwork for a moment, then turned and headed back.

He hadn’t been seen going down, and he didn’t want to be seen going out. If anyone even suspected that he had tampered with the water supply, all they would have to do would be to run the water through the purifiers. That would undo everything Wayne had been carefully preparing.

* * * * *

He made his way safely back up to the main deck and headed through the quiet ship toward the airlock. He wasn’t so lucky this time; a guard saw him.

"Where you goin’, Captain?” the guard demanded, starting to lift his gun. "Seems to me you ought to be in the brig, and--"

Wayne made no reply. He brought his gun up in a rapid motion and beamed the man down. The guard toppled, a hurt expression on his face.

Wayne raced to the airlock. He didn’t bother with a spacesuit—not now, when he knew that the air was perfectly harmless outside. He surveyed his handiwork for a moment, then turned and headed back.

Then, grinning gleefully, he pressed the button that would start the pumping cycle. The outer door started to close automatically, and Wayne just barely managed to get outside and onto the ladder before it clanged shut. As soon as the great hatch had sealed itself, the pumps started exhausting the air from the airlock. No one could open the doors until the pumping cycle was over.

He climbed down the ladder and began walking over toward the western wall. He would have to keep away from the ship for a while, and the rocks were as good a place as any to hide out.

* * * * *

It was dark. Fomalhaut had set, leaving the moonless planet in utter blackness, broken only by the cold gleam of the stars. The lights streaming from the portholes of the Lord Nelson gave a small degree of illumination to the valley.

The valley. It was spread out before him, calm and peaceful, rippling dunes of sand curling out toward the mountains. The valley, he knew, was a betrayer—calm and quiet above, alive with an army of hideous vermin a few feet below its surface.

He started to walk, and moistened his lips. He knew he was going to get awfully thirsty in the next few hours, but there was not the slightest help for it. There hadn’t been any way to carry water from the ship.

"I can wait," he told himself. He stared back at the circular bulk of the Lord Nelson behind him, and his fingers trembled a little. He had known, when he joined the Corps, that space was full of traps like this one—but this was the first time he had actually experienced anything like this. It was foul.

Something slammed into his boot sole, and this time Wayne knew what it was.

"Persistent, aren’t you!” He jerked his foot up. This monster hadn’t stuck as the other one had, but he saw the tip of the needle-beak thrashing around wildly in the loose sand. Wayne thumbed the gun up to full power, and there was a piercing shriek as the gun burned into the sand. There was a sharp shrill sound, and the odor of something burning. He spat.

The little beasts must be all over the floor of the valley! Scurrying frantically, like blood-red giant crabs, sidling up and down beneath the valley, searching upward for things to strike at. How they must hate his metamagnetic boots, he thought!

He kept on walking, expecting to feel the impact of another thrust momentarily, but he was not molested again. They must be getting wise, he thought. They know they can’t get through my boots, and so they’re leaving me alone. That way they don’t call attention to themselves.
A new, more chilling question struck him:
Just how smart are they?
He had made it to the wall and was climbing up the treacherous slope when the airlock door opened, and
someone stood outlined in the bright circle of light that cut into the inky blackness. An amplified voice filled the
valley and ricocheted back off the walls of the mountains, casting eerie echoes down on the lone man on the desert.
"CAPTAIN WAYNE! THIS IS COLONEL PETERSEN SPEAKING. DON'T YOU REALIZE THAT
YOU'RE A SICK MAN? YOU MAY DIE OUT THERE. COME BACK. THAT'S AN ORDER, CAPTAIN.
REPEAT: COME BACK. THAT'S AN ORDER!"
"I'm afraid an order from you just doesn't hold much weight for me right now, Colonel," Wayne said quietly, to
himself. Silently he went on climbing the escarpment, digging into the rough rock.
He kept on climbing until he found the niche for which he had been heading. He dragged himself in and sat
down, as comfortably as possible. He began to wait.

* * * * *
Dawn came in less than three hours, as Fomalhaut burst up over the horizon and exploded in radiance over the
valley. With dawn came a patrol of men, slinking surreptitiously across the valley, probably with orders to bring him
in. Wayne was ensconced comfortably in his little rock niche, hidden from the men in the valley below, but with a
perfect view of everything that went on. The wind whistled around the cliffs, ceaselessly moaning a tuneless song.
He felt like standing up and shouting wildly, "Here I am! Here I am!" but he repressed the perverse urge.
The patrol group stood in a small clump in the valley below, seemingly waiting for something. Moments
passed, and then it became apparent what that something was. Hollingwood, the metallurgist, appeared, dragging
with him the detector. They were going to look for Captain Wayne with it, just as they had searched out the double-
nucleus beryllium.
Wayne frowned. It was a possibility he hadn't thought about. They could easily detect the metal in his boots!
And he didn't dare take them off; he'd never make it back across that hellish stretch of sand without them. He
glanced uneasily at his watch. How much longer do I have to keep evading them? he wondered. It was a wearing
task.
It looked as though it would be much too long.
The muzzle of the detector began to swing back and forth slowly and precisely, covering the valley inch by
inch. He heard their whispered consultations drifting up from below, though he couldn't make out what they were
saying.

* * * * *
They finished with the valley, evidently concluding he wasn't there, and started searching the walls. Wayne
decided it was time to get out while the getting was good. He crawled slowly out of the niche and wriggled along the
escarpment, heading south, keeping low so the men in the valley wouldn't see him.
Unfortunately, he couldn't see them either. He kept moving, hoping they wouldn't spot him with the detector.
He wished he had the metamagnetic hand grapples with him. For one thing, the sharp rock outcroppings sliced his
hands like so much meat. For another, he could have dropped the grapples somewhere as a decoy.
Oh, well, you can't think of everything, Wayne told himself. He glanced at his watch. How long was it going to
take?
He heard the scrape of boot leather on a rock somewhere ahead of him. He glanced up sharply, seeing nothing,
and scowled. They had spotted him.
They were laying a trap.
Cautiously, he climbed over a huge boulder, making no sound. There was one man standing behind it, waiting,
apparently, for Wayne to step around into view. He peered down, trying to see who it was. It seemed to be
Hollingwood, the dignified, austere metallurgist.
Wayne smiled grimly, picked up a heavy rock, and dropped it straight down, square on the man's helmet. The
plexalloy rang like a bell through the clear early-morning air, and the man dropped to his knees, dazed by the shock.

* * * * *
Knowing he had just a moment to finish the job, Wayne pushed off against the side of the rock and plummeted
down, landing neatly on the metallurgist's shoulders. The man reeled and fell flat. Wayne spun him over and
delivered a hard punch to the solar plexus. "Sorry, Dave," he said softly. The metallurgist gasped and curled up in a
tight ball. Wayne stood up. It was brutal, but it was the only place you could hit a man wearing a space helmet.
One down, Wayne thought. Fifty-eight to go. He was alone against the crew--and, for all he knew, against all
fifty-nine of them.
Hollingwood groaned and stretched. Wayne bent and, for good measure, took off the man's helmet and tapped
him none too gently on the skull.
There was the sound of footsteps, the harsh chitch-chitch of feet against the rock. "He's up that way," he heard a deep voice boom.

That meant the others had heard the rock hitting Hollingwood's plexalloy helmet. They were coming toward him.

Wayne sprang back defensively and glanced around. He hoped there were only five of them, that the rule of six was still being maintained. Otherwise things could become really complicated, as they hunted him relentlessly through the twisted gulleys.

He hated to have to knock out too many of the men; it just meant more trouble later. Still, there was no help for it, if he wanted there to be any later. He thought of the bleached bones of the crew of the Mavis, and shuddered.

It was something of an advantage not to be wearing a helmet. Even with the best of acoustical systems, hearing inside a helmet tended to be distorted and dimmed. The men couldn't hear him as well as he could hear them. And since they couldn't hear themselves too well, they made a little more noise than he did.

A space boot came into view around a big rock, and Wayne aimed his needle-beam at the spot where the man's head would appear.

When the head came around the rock, Wayne fired. The man dropped instantly. Sorry, friend, Wayne apologized mentally. Two down. Fifty-seven to go. The odds were still pretty heavy.

He knew he had to move quickly now; the others had seen the man drop, and by now they should have a pretty good idea exactly where Wayne was.

He picked up a rock and lobbed it over a nearby boulder, then started moving cat-like in the other direction. He climbed up onto another boulder and watched two men move away from him. They were stepping warily, their beam guns in their hands. Wayne wiped away a bead of perspiration, aimed carefully, and squeezed the firing stud twice.

Four down. Fifty-five to go.

* * * * *

A moment later, something hissed near his ear. Without waiting, he spun and rolled off the boulder, landing cat-like on his feet. Another crewman was standing on top of a nearby boulder. Wayne began to sweat; this pursuit seemed to be indefinitely prolonged, and it was beginning to look unlikely that he could avoid them forever.

He had dropped his pistol during the fall; it was wedged between a couple of rocks several feet away.

He heard someone call: "I got him. He fell off the rock. We'll take him back down below."

Then another voice--ominously. "He won't mind. He'll be glad we did it for him--afterwards."

"I'll go get him," said the first voice. The man stepped around the side of the boulder--just in time to have a hard-pitched rock come thunking into his midsection.

"Oof!" he grunted, took a couple of steps backwards, and collapsed.

Five down. Fifty-four to go. It could go on forever this way.

"What's the matter?" asked the man who had replied to the first one with those chilling words.

"Nothing," said Wayne, in a fair imitation of the prostrate crewman's voice. "He's heavy. Come help me."

Then he reached down and picked up the fallen man's beam gun. He took careful aim.

When the sixth man stepped around the rock, he fired. The beam went wide of the mark, slowing the other down, and Wayne charged forward. He pounded two swift punches into the amazed crewman, who responded with a woozy, wild blow. Wayne ducked and let the fist glide past his ear, then came in hard with a solid body-blow and let the man sag to the ground. He took a deep breath.

Six down and only fifty-three to go.

* * * * *

He crawled back to the edge of the precipice and peered down into the valley. There was no one to be seen. It was obvious that Colonel Petersen was still enforcing the six-man rule.

As he watched, he saw the airlock door open. A spacesuited figure scrambled down the ladder and sprinted across the deadly sand of the valley floor.

It was Sherri! Wayne held his breath, expecting at any moment that one of the little monsters beneath the sand would sink its vicious needle upward into Sherri's foot. But her stride never faltered.

As she neared the precipice, another figure appeared at the airlock door and took aim with a gun.

Wayne thumbed his own needle-beam pistol up to full and fired hastily at the distant figure. At that distance, even the full beam would only stun. The figure collapsed backwards into the airlock, and Wayne grinned in satisfaction.

Seven down. Fifty-two to go.

He kept an eye on the airlock door and a finger on his firing stud, waiting to see if anyone else would come out. No one else did.
As soon as Sherri was safely up to the top of the precipice, Wayne ran to meet her.

"Sherri! What the devil did you come out here for?"

"I had to see you," she said, panting for breath. "If you'll come back to the ship before they beam you down, we can prove to Colonel Petersen that you're all right. We can show them that the Masters--"

She realized suddenly what she said and uttered a little gasp. She had her pistol out before the surprised Wayne could move.

He stared coldly at the pistol, thinking bitterly that this was a hell of a way for it all to finish. "So they got you too," he said. "That little display at the airlock was a phony. You were sent out here to lure me back into the ship. Just another Judas."

She nodded slowly. "That's right," she said. "We all have to go to the Masters. It is--it--is--is--"

Her eyes glazed, and she swayed on her feet. The pistol wavered and swung in a feeble spiral, no longer pointed at Wayne. Gently, he took it from her nerveless fingers and caught her supple body as she fell.

He wiped his forehead dry. Up above, the sun was climbing toward the top of the sky, and its beams raked the planet below, pouring down heat.

* * * * *

He glanced at his wristwatch while waiting for his nerves to stop tingling. Sherri must have been the last one--the drug must have taken effect at last, and not a moment too soon. He decided to wait another half hour before he tried to get into the spaceship, just the same.

The huge globe of the Lord Nelson stood forlornly in the center of the valley. The airlock door stayed open; no one tried to close it.

Wayne's mouth was growing dry; his tongue felt like sandpaper. Nevertheless, he forced himself to sit quietly, watching the ship closely for the full half hour, before he picked up Sherri, tied his rope around her waist, and lowered her to the valley floor. Then he wandered around the rocks, collecting the six unconscious men, and did the same for them.

He carried them all, one by one, across the sand, burning a path before him with the needle beam.

Long before he had finished his task, the sand was churning loathsomely with the needles of hundreds and thousands of the monstrous little beasts. They were trying frantically to bring down the being that was so effectively thwarting their plans, jabbing viciously with their upthrust beaks. The expanse of sand that was the valley looked like a pincushion, with the writhing needles ploughing through the ground one after another. Wayne kept the orifice of his beam pistol hot as he cut his way back and forth from the base of the cliff to the ship.

When he had dumped the seven unconscious ones all inside the airlock, he closed the outer door and opened the inner one. There was not a sound from within.

Fifty-nine down, he thought, and none to go.

He entered the ship and dashed down the winding staircase to the water purifiers to change the water in the reservoir tanks. Thirsty as he was, he was not going to take a drink until the water had been cleared of the knockout drug he had dropped into the tanks.

After that came the laborious job of getting everyone in the ship strapped into their bunks for the takeoff. It took the better part of an hour to get all sixty of them up--they had fallen all over the ship--and nestled in the acceleration cradles. When the job was done, he went to the main control room and set the autopilot to lift the spaceship high into the ionosphere.

Then, sighting carefully on the valley far below, he dropped a flare bomb.

"Goodbye, little monsters," he said exultantly.

For a short space of time, nothing happened. Then the viewplate was filled with a deadly blue-white glare. Unlike an ordinary atomic bomb, the flare bomb would not explode violently; it simply burned, sending out a brilliant flare of deadly radiation that would crisp all life dozens of feet below the ground.

He watched the radiation blazing below. Then it began to die down, and when the glare cleared away, all was quiet below.

The valley was dead.

When it was all over, Wayne took the hypodermic gun from his pouch, filled it with the anti-hypnotic drug that he had taken from the medical cabinet, and began to make his rounds. He fired a shot into each and every one aboard. He had no way of knowing who had been injected by the small monsters and who had not, so he was taking no chances.

Then he went to the colonel's room. He wanted to be there when the Commanding Officer awoke.

* * * * *

The entire crew of the Lord Nelson was gathered in the big mess hall. Wayne stared down at the tired, frightened faces of the puzzled people looking up at him, and continued his explanation.
"Those of you who were under the control of the monsters know what it was like. They had the ability to inject a hypnotic drug into a human being through a normal space boot with those stingers of theirs. The drug takes effect so fast that the victim hardly has any idea of what has happened to him."

"But why do they do it?" It was Hollingwood, the metallurgist, looking unhappy with a tremendous bruise on his head where Wayne had clobbered him.

"Why does a wasp sting a spider? It doesn't kill the spider, it simply stuns it. That way, the spider remains alive and fresh so that young wasps can feed upon it at their leisure."

Wayne glanced over to his right. "Lieutenant Jervis, you've been under the effect of the drug longer than any of us. Would you explain what really happened when the Mavis landed?"

The young officer stood up. He was pale and shaken, but his voice was clear and steady.

"Just about the same thing that almost happened here," Jervis said. "We all walked around the valley floor and got stung one at a time. The things did it so quietly that none of us knew what was going on until we got hit ourselves. When we had all been enslaved, we were ready to do their bidding. They can't talk, but they can communicate by means of nerve messages when that needle is stuck into you."

Nearly half the crew nodded in sympathy. Wayne studied them, wondering what it must have been like. They knew; he could only guess.

"Naturally," Jervis went on, "those who have already been injected with the drug try to get others injected. When everyone aboard the Mavis had been stung, they ordered me to take the ship home and get another load of Earthmen. Apparently they like our taste. I had to obey; I was completely under their power. You know what it's like."

"And what happened to the others--the eight men you left behind?" asked Colonel Petersen.

"They just laid down on the sand--and waited."

"Horrible!" Sherri said.

Jervis fell silent. Wayne was picturing the sight, and knew everyone else was, too--the sight of hordes of carnivorous little aliens burrowing up through the sand and approaching the eight Earthmen who lay there, alive but helpless. Approaching them--and beginning to feed.

Just when the atmosphere began to grow too depressing, Wayne decided to break the spell. "I'd like to point out that the valley's been completely cauterized," he said. "The aliens have been wiped out. And I propose to lead a mission out to reconnoitre for the double-nucleus beryllium."

He looked around. "MacPherson? Boggs? Manetti? You three want to start over where we left off the last time?"

"I'm sorry I misjudged you, Wayne. If it hadn't been for your quick action, this crew would have gone the way of the Mavis."

"Just luck, Colonel," Wayne said. "If it hadn't been for those heavy-soled climbing boots, I'd probably be lying out there with the rest of you right now."

Colonel Petersen grinned. "Thanks to your boots, then."

Wayne turned to his team of three. "Let's get moving, fellows. We've wasted enough time already."

"Do we need spacesuits, sir?" Manetti asked.

"No, Manetti. The air's perfectly fine out there," Wayne said. "But I'd suggest you wear your climbing boots."

He grinned. "You never can tell when they'll come in handy."

THE END

Contents

MOON GLOW
By G. L. Vandenburg

The Ajax XX was the first American space craft to make a successful landing on the moon. She had orbited the Earth's natural satellite for a day and a half before making history. The reason for orbiting was important. The Russians had been boasting for a number of years that they would be first. Captain Junius Robb, U.S.A.F., had
orders to investigate before and after landing.

The moon's dark side was explored, due to the unknown hazards involved, during the orbiting process. More thorough investigation was possible on the moon's familiar side. The results seemed to be incontrovertible. Captain Junius Robb and his crew of four were the first humans to tread the ashes of the long dead heavenly body. The Russians, for all their boasts, had never come near the place.

The Ajax XX stood tall and gaunt and mighty, framed against the forbidding blackness of space. Captain Robb had maneuvered her down to the middle of an immense crater, which the crew came to nickname "the coliseum without seats."

Robb had orders not to leave the ship. Consequently, the crew of four scrupulously chosen, well-integrated men split into two groups of two. For three days they labored at gathering specimens, conducting countless tests and piling up as much data as time and weight would allow. Captain Robb kept them well reminded of the weight problem attached to the return trip.

Near the end of the third day Captain Robb contacted his far flung crew members over helmet intercom. He ordered them back to the Ajax XX for a briefing session.

Soon the men entered the ship. They were hot, uncomfortable and exhausted. Once back on Earth they could testify that there was nothing romantic about a thirty-five-pound pressure suit.

* * * * *

Hamston, the rocket expert, summed it up: "With that damn bulb over his skull a man is helpless to remove a single bead of perspiration. He could easily develop into a raving maniac."

Robb held his meeting in the control room. "You have eight hours to finish your work, gentlemen. We're blasting off at 0900."

"I beg your pardon, Captain," said Kingsley, the young man in charge of radio operation, "but what about Washington? They haven't made contact yet and I thought--"

"I talked with Washington an hour ago!"

A modest cheer of approval went up from the crew members.

"Well, why didn't you say so before!" said Anderson, the first officer.

Robb explained. "It seems their equipment has been haywire for two days, they haven't been able to get through."

"How do you like that!" cracked Farnsworth, the astrogator. "We're two hundred and forty thousand miles off the Earth and our equipment works fine. They have all the comforts of Earth down at headquarters and they can't repair radio transmission for two days!"

The men laughed.

"Gentlemen," Robb continued, "every radio and TV network in the country was hooked up to the chief's office in Washington. I not only talked to General Lovett, I spoke to the whole damn country."

The men could not contain their excitement. The captain received a verbal pelting of stored-up questions.

"Did you get word to my family, Captain?" asked Kingsley.

"I hope you told them we're physically sound, Captain," said Farnsworth. "I have a fiancée that'll never forgive me if anything happens to me--"

"What's the reaction like around the country--"

"Have the Russians had anything to say yet--"

"Ha! I'll bet they're sore as hell--"

"Do you think the army would mind if I hand in my resignation?" Kingsley's remark brought vigorous applause from the others.

Captain Robb held up his hand for silence. "Hold on! Hold on! First of all, General Lovett has personally contacted relatives and told them we're all physically and mentally sound. Secondly, you'd better get set to receive the biggest damn welcome in history. The general says half the nation has invaded Florida for the occasion."

"Tell them we're not coming back," snapped Kingsley, "until the Florida Tourist Bureau gives us a cut."

"Kingsley, the President has declared a national holiday. We'll all be able to write our own ticket."

"Yes," Anderson put in, "to hell with the Florida Tourist Bureau!"

Captain Robb said, "We'll be so sick of parades we'll wish we'd stayed in this God forsaken place."

"Not me," boasted Farnsworth. "I'm ready for a parade in my honor any old time. The sooner the better."

"Oh, and about the Russians," said Captain Robb, smiling. "There's been nothing but a steady stream of 'no comment' out of the Kremlin since we landed here."

"Right now," said Hamston, "it's probably high noon for every scientist behind the iron curtain."

"I wonder how they plan to talk their way out of this one?" asked Farnsworth.

"Gentlemen, I'd like to go on talking about the welcome we're going to receive, but I think we'd better take first
things first. Before there can be a welcome we have to get back. And we still have work to do before we start."

"What about souvenirs, Captain?" asked Farnsworth.

Robb pursed his lips thoughtfully, "Yes, I guess there is a matter of souvenirs, isn't there."

The others detected a note of disturbance in the way the captain spoke.

Kingsley asked, "Is anything wrong, Captain?"

Robb laughed with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. "Nothing is wrong, Kingsley. The fact is we've taken on

enough additional weight here to give us some concern on the return trip." He paused to study the faces of his men.

They were disappointed. "But," he added emphatically, "I seem to remember promising something about souvenirs--

and I guess a man can't travel five hundred thousand miles without something to show for it. I'll get together with

Hamston and work out something. But remember that weight problem. First trouble we encounter on the return trip

and a souvenir will be our number one expendable."

The crew was more than happy with Robb's compromise. Robb went into a huddle with Hamston, the rocket

expert. When he emerged he informed the crew that each man would be permitted one souvenir which must not

exceed two pounds. He allowed them four hours to find whatever they wanted. The men got back into their pressure

suits and left the ship.

* * * * *

Captain Junius Robb stood outside the Ajax XX. His eyes scanned the great circular plain that stretched for

fifty miles in all directions. The distant jagged rises of the crater's rim resembled the lower half of a gigantic bear

trap.

The moon in all its splendor--wasn't there a song that went something like that?--the moon in all its splendor, or

lack of it was Robb's mute opinion. The scientists, as usual, were right about the place. To all intents and purposes

the moon was as dead as The Roman Empire. True they had found scattered vegetation; there were even two or three

volcanoes spewing carbonic acid, but they spewed it as though it were life's last breath;

Nothing more. The fires of the moon had given way to soft lifeless ashes.

Robb was glad he had allowed the men to look for souvenirs. After all, it wasn't a hell of a lot to ask for. A man
could cut press clippings and collect medals and frame citations; and probably these things would impress

grandchildren someday. But it seemed that nothing would be quite as effective as for a man to be able to produce

something tangible, an authentic piece of the moon itself.

Captain Robb had always tried to be a humble man. He recalled an interview held by the three wire services a

week before take-off. One of the reporters had asked the obvious question, "Why do you want to go to the moon?"

He could have given all of the high sounding, aesthetic reasons, but instead his answer was indirect, given with a

modest smile. "To get to the other side, I guess," he had told them.

Like the chicken crossing the road, that was how simple and uncomplicated Robb's life had been. But now he

stood, his feet spread apart, beside his mighty ship, a quarter of a million miles away from home. He was the first!

And he could not fight back the feeling of pride and accomplishment that welled in him. The word "first" in this

instance conjured up names like Balboa, Columbus, Peary, Magellan--and Junius Robb.

The crew members deserved the hero's welcome they would receive. They could have the banquets, parades

and honorary degrees. But it was Junius Robb who had commanded the flight. It would be Junius Robb's name for

the history books.

He wouldn't be needing any souvenirs.

* * * * *

Kingsley and Anderson were the first to return. They both carried small leather bags. Inside the ship they

revealed the contents to Robb. He examined them carefully.

Kingsley had found an uncommonly large patch of brownish vegetation. He had torn away a sizeable chunk

and placed it in the bag. "Who knows?" he shrugged. "I might be able to cultivate it."

"Or let it play the lead in a science fiction movie," snapped Anderson.

The first officer's bag contained a piece of one of the smaller craters. It had no immediately discernable value.

It was Anderson's intention to polish it up and put some kind of a metal plaque on it.

Four more hours went by and there was no sign of Farnsworth or Hamston. Robb began to worry. He'd never

forgive himself if anything happened to either of the two men. He waited another half hour, then ordered Kinsley

and Anderson to put on their pressure suits and go look for the two missing crew members.

The search was avoided as Farnsworth entered the ship dragging Hamston behind him.

"What happened!" yelled Robb.

Farnsworth began the job of getting out of his pressure suit. "I don't know. Hamston's sick as a dog. I checked
every inch of his suit and couldn't find anything out of order."

Robb bent over the prone rocket expert. Hamston looked up at him with half-opened eyes and an insipid grin
on his face. He mumbled something about "a fine state of affairs."

They removed Hamston's suit and placed his limp frame on a bunk. Robb examined him for forty minutes. He reached the curious conclusion that Hamston was as fit as a fiddle.

The rocket expert fell asleep. Robb and the rest of the crew prepared to blast off.

* * * * *

The Ajax XX thrust itself through space, halfway back to its home planet.

The excitement of her crew members grew with every passing second. In his concern over Hamston, Farnsworth had forgotten about his souvenir. He now opened his bag and displayed it before the others.

"What is it?" asked Kingsley.

"Dust!" was Farnsworth's proud reply.

"What the hell you going to do with dust?"

"Maybe you don't know it but this is going to be the most valuable dust on the face of the Earth! Do you realize what I can get for an ounce of this stuff?"

"What's anybody want to buy dust for?"

"Souvenirs, man, souvenirs!"

Farnsworth asked to see what Kingsley and Anderson had picked up. The two men obliged. For the next hour the three men and Robb discussed the mementoes and their possible uses on Earth.

Then Anderson said, "I sure wouldn't turn down about a gallon of good Kentucky whiskey right now!"

Robb laughed. "We did enough sweating on the way. You wouldn't want to sweat out the trip back on a belly full of booze."

"That may be a better idea than you think it is, Captain."

The four men turned to find Hamston sitting up on his bunk.

"Hamston!" Robb exclaimed, "how do you feel?"

"Terrible."

"What happened to you?" asked Kingsley.

Hamston stared at each man individually. He took a deep breath and his cheeks puffed up as he let it out slowly. "Well, I guess you'd better know now."

Robb frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Farnsworth and I separated after we got about four miles from the ship. I thought I saw something that looked like a cave. I figured I might find something interesting there to take back with me. So I told Farnsworth I'd keep radio contact with him and off I went."

"Did you find a cave?" Robb wanted to know.

"No, it was just a big indentation in the wall of the crater. I threw some light on it and found it to be ten or fifteen feet deep." He paused as though not sure of what to say next.

"So?"

"So that's where I found my souvenir."

"Well, let's see it!" said Anderson.

Hamston opened his leather bag. The object he removed rendered the crew weak in the knees. He said, "We can have that drink, Anderson, but I don't think we'll enjoy it."

He poured them each a shot from a half-filled bottle of Vodka.
The lead-cloth costume was demanded by Dixon's work with radium compounds. The result of that work lay before him on the bench—a tiny lead capsule containing a pinhead lump of a substance which Dixon believed would utterly dwarf earth's most powerful explosives in its cataclysmic power.

So engrossed had Dixon been in the final stages of his work that for the last seventy-two hours he had literally lived there in his laboratory. It remained now only for him to step outside and test the effect of the little contact grenade, and at the same time get a badly needed taste of fresh air.

He set the safety catch on the little bomb and slipped it into his pocket. As he started for the door he threw back his hood, revealing the ruggedly good-looking face of a young man in the early thirties, with lines of weariness now etched deeply into the clean-cut features.

* * * * *

The moment that Dixon entered the short winding tunnel that led to the outer air he was vaguely aware that something was wrong. There was a strange and intangibly sinister quality in the moonlight that streamed dimly into the winding passage. Even the cool night air itself seemed charged with a subtle aura of brooding evil.

Dixon reached the entrance and stepped out into the full radiance of the moonlight. He stopped abruptly and stared around him in utter amazement.

High in the eastern sky there rode the disc of a full moon, but it was a moon weirdly different from any that Dixon had ever seen before. This moon was a deep and baleful green; was glowing with a stark malignant fire like that which lurks in the blazing heart of a giant emerald! Bathed in the glow of the intense green rays, the desolate mountain landscape shone with a new and eery beauty.

Dixon took a dazed step forward. His foot thudded softly into a small feathered body there in the sparse grass, and he stooped to pick it up. It was a crested quail, with every muscle as stonily rigid as though the bird had been dead for hours. Yet Dixon, to his surprise, felt the slow faint beat of a pulse still in the tiny body.

Then a dim group of unfamiliar objects down in the shadows of a small gully in front of him caught Dixon's eye. Tucking the body of the quail inside his tunic for later examination, he hurried down into the gully. A moment later he was standing by what had been the night camp of a prospector.

The prospector was still there, his rigid figure wrapped in a blanket, and his wide-open eyes staring sightlessly at the malignant green moon in the sky above. Dixon knelt to examine the stricken man's body. It showed the same mysterious condition as that of the quail, rigidly stiff in every muscle, yet with the slow pulse and respiration of life still faintly present.

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Dixon found the prospector's horse and burro sprawled on the ground half a dozen yards away, both animals frozen in the same baffling condition of living death. Dixon's brain reeled as he tried to fathom the incredible calamity that had apparently overwhelmed the world while he had been hidden away in his subterranean laboratory. Then a new and terrible thought assailed him.

If the grim effect of the baleful green rays was universal in its extent, what then of old Emil Crawford and his niece, Ruth Lawton? Crawford, an inventor like Dixon, had his laboratory in a valley some five miles away.

An abrupt chill went over Dixon's heart at the thought of Ruth Lawton's vivid Titian-haired beauty being forever stilled in the grip of that eery living death. He and Ruth had loved each other ever since they had first met.

Dixon broke into a run as he headed for a nearby ridge that looked out over the valley. His pulse hammered with unusual violence as he scrambled up the steep incline, and his muscles seemed to be tiring with strange rapidity. He had a vague feeling that the rays of that malignant green moon were beating directly into his brain, clouding his thoughts and draining his physical strength.

Gaining the crest of the ridge, he stopped aghast as he looked down the valley toward Emil Crawford's place. Near the site of Crawford's laboratory home was an unearthly pyrotechnic display such as Dixon had never seen before. An area several hundred yards in diameter seemed one vivid welter of pulsing colors, with flashing lances of every hue crisscrossing in and through a great central cloud of ever-changing opalescence like a fiery aurora borealis gone mad.

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Dixon fought back the ever-increasing lethargy that was benumbing his brain, and groped dazedly for a key to this new riddle. Was it some weird and colossal experiment of Emil Crawford's that was causing the green rays of death from a transformed moon, an experiment the earthly base of which was amid the seething play of blazing colors down there in the valley?

The theory seemed hardly a plausible one. As far as Dixon knew, Crawford's work had been confined almost entirely to a form of radio-propelled projectile for use in war-time against marauding planes.

Dixon shook his head forcibly in a vain effort to clear the stupor that was sweeping over him. It was strange how the vivid rays of that malevolent green moon seemed to sear insidiously into one's brain, stifling thought as a
swamp fog stifles the sunlight.

Then Dixon suddenly froze into stark immobility, staring with startled eyes at the base of a rocky crag thirty yards away. Something was lurking there in the green-black shadows—a great sprawling black shape of abysmal horror, with a single flaming opalescent eye fixed unwinkingly upon Dixon.

The next moment the vivid moon was suddenly obscured by drifting wisps of cloud. As the green light blurred to an emerald haze, the creature under the crag came slithering out toward Dixon.

He had a vague glimpse of a monster such as one should see only in nightmares—a huge loathsome spider-form with a bloated body as long as that of a man, and great sprawling legs that sent it half a dozen yards nearer Dixon in one effortless leap.

* * * * *

The onslaught proved too much for Dixon's morale, half-dazed as he was by the green moon's paralyzing rays. With a low inarticulate cry of terror, he turned and ran, straining every muscle in a futile effort to distance the frightful thing that inexorably kept pace in the shadowy emerald gloom behind him.

Dixon's strength faded rapidly after his first wild sprint. Fifty yards more, and his faltering muscles failed him utterly. The dread rays of that grim green moon sapped his last faint powers of resistance. He staggered on for a few more painful steps then sprawled helplessly to the ground. His brain hovered momentarily upon the verge of complete unconsciousness.

Then he was suddenly aware of a fluttering struggle, inside his tunic where he had placed the body of the quail. A moment later and the bird wriggled free. It promptly spread its wings and flew away, apparently as vibrantly alive as before the mysterious paralysis had stricken it.

The incident brought a faint surge of hope to Dixon as he dimly realized the answer to at least part of the green moon's riddle. The bird had recovered after being shielded in the lead-cloth of his tunic. That could only mean one thing—the menace of those green moon rays must in some unknown way be radioactive. If Dixon could only get the lead-cloth hood over his own head again he also might cheat the green doom.

He fumbled at the garment with fingers that seemed as stiff as wooden blocks. There was a long moment of agony when he feared that his effort had come too late. Then the hood finally slipped over his head just as utter oblivion claimed him.

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Dixon came abruptly back to life with the dimly remembered echo of a woman's scream still ringing in his ears. For a moment he thought that he was awakening on his cot back in the laboratory after an unusually vivid and weird nightmare. Then the garish green moonlight around him brought swift realization that the incredible happenings of the night were grim reality.

The clouds were gone from the moon, leaving his surroundings again clearly outlined in the flood of green light. Dixon lifted his head and cautiously searched the scene, but he could see no trace of the great spider-form that had pursed him.

Wondering curiously why the creature had abandoned the chase at the moment when victory was within its grasp, Dixon rose lithely to his feet. The protecting hood had brought a quick and complete recovery from the devastating effects of the green moon's rays. His muscles were again supple, and his brain once more functioned with clearness.

Then abruptly Dixon's blood froze as the sound of a woman's scream came again. The cry was that of a woman in the last extremity of terror, and Dixon knew with a terrible certainty that that woman was Ruth Lawton!

He raced toward the small ridge of rocks from behind which the sound had apparently come. A moment later he reached the scene, and stopped horror-stricken.

Three figures were there in a small rock-walled clearing. One was old Emil Crawford, sprawled unconscious on his side, the soft glow of a small white globe in a strange head-piece atop his gray hair shining eerily in the green moonlight.

Near Crawford's body loomed the giant spider-creature, and clutched firmly in the great claspers just under the monster's terrible fanged mouth was the slender body of Ruth Lawton. Merciful unconsciousness had apparently overwhelmed the girl now, for she lay supinely in the dread embrace, with eyes closed and lips silent.

* * * * *

As the monster dropped the girl's body to the ground and whirled to confront Dixon, for the first time he had a clear view of the thing in all its horror.

He shuddered in uncontrollable nausea. The incredible size of the creature was repellent enough, but it was the grisly head of the monstrosity that struck the final note of horror. That head was more than half human!

The fangs and other mouth parts were those of a giant tarantula, but these merged directly into the mutilated but unmistakable head of a man—with an aquiline nose, staring eyes, and a tousled mop of dirty brown hair. Resting on
top of the head was a metallic head-piece similar to the one worn by Emil Crawford, but the small globe in this one blazed with a fiery opalescence.

The creature crouched lower, with its legs twitching in obvious preparation for a spring. Dixon looked wildly about him for a possible weapon, but saw nothing. Then he suddenly remembered the little lead grenade in his pocket. The cataclysmic power of that little bomb should be more than a match for even this monster.

His fingers closed over the grenade just as the great spider's twitching legs straightened in a mighty effort that sent it hurtling through the air straight toward him.

Dixon dodged to one side with a swiftness that caused the monster to miss by a good yard. Dixon raced a dozen paces farther away, thenwhirled to face the great spider. The creature's legs began scuttling warily forward. It was to be no wild leap through the air this time, but a swift rush over the ground that Dixon would be powerless to evade.

Releasing the safety catch of the grenade, Dixon hurled the tiny missile straight at the rock floor just under the feet of that vast misshapen creature. There was a vivid flash of blinding blue flame, then a terrific report. Dazed by the concussion, but unhurt, Dixon cautiously went over to investigate the result of the explosion.

* * * * *

One brief glance was enough. The hideous mass of shattered flesh sprawling there on the rocks would never again be a menace. The only thing that had escaped destruction in that shattering blast was the strange head-piece the thing had worn. Either the small shining globe was practically indestructible, or else it had been spared by some odd freak of the explosive, for it still blazed in baleful opalescence atop the shattered head.

Dixon hurried back to where Emil Crawford and Ruth Lawton lay. The girl's body was so rigidly inert that Dixon threw back his encumbering hood and knelt over her for a swift examination. His fears were quickly realized. Ruth was already a victim of the green moon's dread paralysis.

"Dixon! Bruce Dixon!"

Dixon turned at the call. Emil Crawford, his face drawn with pain, had struggled up on one elbow. The old man was obviously fighting off complete collapse by sheer will power.

"Dixon! Replace Ruth's shining head-piece at once!" Crawford gasped. "That will make her immune from the Green Death, and then we can--" The old man's voice swiftly faded away into silence as he again fainted.

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Dixon hurriedly searched the scene and found Ruth's head-piece on the ground where it had apparently fallen in her first struggle with the giant spider, but the tiny white globe in the device was shattered and dark.

Despair gripped Dixon for a moment. Then he remembered the unbroken head-piece of the slain monster. True, the glow of its globe was opalescent instead of white, but it seemed to offer its wearer the same immunity to the green moon's rays.

He swiftly retrieved the head-piece from the spider-creature's body, and set the light metal framework in place on Ruth's auburn curls.

* * * * *

Results came with incredible quickness. The rigidity left Ruth's body immediately. Her breath came in fast-quickening gasps, and her eyes fluttered open as Dixon knelt over her.

"It's Bruce, Ruth--Bruce Dixon," he said tenderly. "Don't you know me, dear?"

But there was no trace of recognition in those wide-open blue eyes staring fixedly up at him. For a moment Ruth lay there with muscles strangely tense. Then with a little strength that was amazing she suddenly twisted free of the clasp of Dixon's arms and sprang to her feet.

The next minute Dixon gave ground, and he found himself battling for his very life. This was not the Ruth Lawton whom he had known and loved. This was a madwoman of savage menace, with soft lips writhing over white teeth in a jungle snarl, and blue eyes that fairly glittered with unrestrained, insensate hate.

He tried to close with the maddened girl, but instantly regretted his rashness. Her slender body seemed imbued with the strength of a tigress as she sent slim fingers clawing at his throat. He tore himself free just in time. Dazed and shaken, he again gave ground before the fury of the girl's attack.

He could not bring himself to the point of actively fighting back, yet he knew that in another moment he would either have to merclessly batter his beautiful adversary into helplessness or else be himself overcome. There was no middle course.

Then old Emil Crawford's voice came again as the old man rallied to consciousness for another brief moment.

"Bruce, the opal globe is a direct link to those devils themselves! Break it, Bruce, break it--for Ruth's sake as well as your own!"

* * * * *

Crawford had barely finished his gasped warning when Ruth again hurled herself forward upon Dixon with tapering fingers curved like talons as they sought his throat. Dixon swept her clutching hands aside with a desperate
left-handed parry, then snatched wildly at the gleaming head-piece with his right hand.

The thing came away in his grasp, and in the same swift movement he savagely smashed it against the rocky wall beside him. Whatever the opalescent globe's eerie powers might be, it was not indestructible. It shattered like a bursting bubble, its fire dying in a tiny cloud of particles that shimmered faintly for a moment, then was gone.

Again, the effect upon Ruth was almost instantaneous. Every trace of her insane fury vanished. She swayed dizzily and would have fallen had not Dixon caught her in his arms. For a moment she looked up into his face with eyes in which recognition now shone unmistakably. Then her eyelids slowly closed, and she again lapsed into unconsciousness.

Dixon looked over at Emil Crawford, and found that the old man had again collapsed. Dixon knew of but one thing to do with the stricken man and girl, and that was to take them to his laboratory. The laboratory, apparently insulated by veins of lead ore in the mountain surrounding it, was the one sure spot of refuge in this weird nightmare world of paralyzing lunar rays and prowling monsters.

* * * * *

Flinging his tunic over Ruth's head to shield her as much as possible from the moonlight, he carried her to the laboratory, then returned for Emil Crawford. Safe within the subterranean retreat with the old scientist, Dixon removed his encumbering lead costume and began doing what he could for the stricken pair.

Ruth was still unconscious, but the cataleptic rigidity was already nearly gone from her body, and her breathing was now the deep respiration of normal sleep.

Emil Crawford's condition was more serious. Not only was the old man's frail strength nearly exhausted, but he was also badly wounded. His thin chest was seared by two great livid areas of burned flesh, the nature of which puzzled Dixon as he began to dress the injuries. They seemed of radioactive origin, yet in many ways they were unlike any radium burns that Dixon had ever seen.

While Dixon was working over him, Crawford stirred weakly and opened his eyes. He sighed in relief as he recognized his surroundings.

"Good boy, Bruce!" he commended wanly. "We are safe here among the insulating veins of lead ore in the mountain. This is where Ruth and I were trying to come after we escaped from those devils to-night. But, Bruce, how did you guess the radioactive nature of the Green Sickness in time to avoid falling a victim to it as soon as you left the shelter of your laboratory?"

"My escape was entirely luck," Dixon admitted grimly. "To-night I left my laboratory for the first time in three days. I found a world gone mad, with a strange green moon blazing down upon a land of living dead men, and with marauding monsters hideous enough to have been spawned in the Pit itself. What in Heaven's name does it all mean?"

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"I am afraid that it means the end of the world, Bruce," Crawford answered quietly. "It was a little over forty-eight hours ago that the incredible event first happened. Without a moment's warning, the moon turned green! Hardly had the world's astronomers had time to speculate upon this amazing phenomenon before the Green Sickness struck—a pestilence of appalling deadliness that swept resistlessly in the path of those weird green rays. Wherever the green moon shone, every living creature succumbed with ghastly swiftness to the condition of living death that you have seen.

"Westward with the racing moon sped the Green Sickness, and nothing stayed its attack. The green rays pierced through buildings of wood, stone, and iron as though they did not exist. A doomed world had neither time nor opportunity to guess that lead was the one armor against those dread rays. To-night, Bruce, we are in all probability the only three human beings on this planet who are not slumbering in the paralytic stupor of the Green Sickness.

"Ruth and I were stricken with the rest of the world," Crawford continued. "We recovered consciousness hours later to find ourselves captives in the Earth-camp of the invaders themselves. You probably saw the display of lights that marks their camp down in the valley a mile beyond my place. We have learned since that the space ship of the invaders dropped silently down into the valley the night before the moon turned green and established the camp as a sort of outpost and observatory. They left two of their number there as pioneers, then the rest of them departed in the space ship for their present post up near the moon.

"Ruth and I were revived only that the two invaders in the camp might question us regarding life on this planet. They have a science that is based upon principles as utterly strange and incomprehensible to us as ours probably is to them. They probed my brain with a thought machine. It was an apparatus that worked both ways. What knowledge they got from me I do not know, but I do know that they unwittingly told me much in the bizarre and incredible mental pictures that the machine carried from their brains to mine.

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"They are refugees. Bruce, from a planet that circled about the star that we know as Alpha Centauri, a star that
is the nearest of all our stellar neighbors, being only four and a third light years distant. Their home planet was disrupted by a colossal engineering experiment of the Centaurians themselves, the only survivors being a group of fifty who escaped in a space ship just before the catastrophe.

"There were no other habitable planets in their own system, so in desperation these refugees sped out across the void to our solar system in the hope of finding a new home here. They reconnoitered our Earth secretly and found it ideal. But first they believed that they must conquer the life that already held this Earth. To do this, they struck with the Green Sickness.

"The rays that are turning the moon green emanate from the space ship hovering up there some fifty thousand miles from the moon itself. The Centaurian's rays, blending with the sunlight striking the disc of the full moon, are intensified in some unknown way, then reflected across the quarter of a million miles to the Earth, to flood this planet with virulent radiance.

"The green moonlight is radioactive in nature, and overcomes animal life within a matter of fifteen minutes or less. The rays are most powerful when the moon is in the sky, but their effect continues even after it has set, because as long as the green moonlight strikes any part of the Earth's atmosphere the entire atmospheric envelope of the planet remains charged with the paralyzing radioactive influence.

"Earth's inhabitants are not dead. They are merely stupefied. If the green rays were to cease now, most of the victims of the Green Sickness would quickly recover with little permanent injury. But, Bruce, if that evil green moonblazes on for twenty-four hours more, the brain powers of Earth's millions will be forever shattered. So weakened will they be by then that recovery will be impossible even with the rays shut off, and the entire planet will be populated only by mindless imbeciles, readily available material for the myriads of monstrous hybrids that the invaders will create to serve them.

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"To-night you saw the hybrid that the invaders sent to recapture Ruth and me. It was a fit specimen of the grisly magic which those devils from outer space work with their uncanny surgery and growth-stimulating radioactive rays. The basic element of that monster was an ordinary tarantula spider, with its growth incredibly increased in a few short hours of intensive ray treatment in the Centaurian's camp. The half-head grafted to it was that of a human being. They always graft the brain cavity of a mammal to a hybrid--half heads of burros, horses, or even dogs, but preferably those of human beings. I think that they prefer to use as great a brain power as possible.

"The hybrids are controlled through the small opalescent globes on their heads, globes that are in direct tune with a huge master globe of opalescent fire in the invaders' camp. When Ruth attacked you after you placed the opal head-piece upon her head, she was for the moment merely another of the invaders' servants blindly obeying the broadcast command to kill. The white globes that Ruth and I wore when we escaped from the camp were identical with those worn by the invaders themselves, being nothing more than harmless insulators against the effect of the green moonlight."

A sudden spasm of pain convulsed Crawford's face. Dixon sprang forward to aid him, but the old man rallied with an effort and weakly waved Dixon back.

"I'm all right, Bruce," he gasped. "My strength is nearly exhausted, that is all. Like a garrulous old fool I've worn myself out talking about everything but the one important subject. Bruce, have you developed that new and infinitely powerful explosive you were working on?"

"Yes," Dixon answered grimly. "I have an explosive right here in the laboratory that can easily blow the Centaurian's camp completely off the map."

* * * * *

Crawford shook his head impatiently. "Destroying the camp would do no good. We must shatter the space ship itself if we are to extinguish those green rays in time to save our world."

"That is impossible if the space ship is hovering up there by the moon!" Dixon protested.

"No, it is not impossible," Crawford answered confidently. "I have a projectile in my laboratory that will not only hurtle across that great gap with incredible speed, but will also infallibly strike its target when it gets there. It is a projectile that is as irresistibly drawn by radio waves as steel is by a magnet, and it will speed as straight to the source of those waves as a bit of steel will to the magnet.

"The Centaurians in the space ship," Crawford continued, "are in constant communication with their camp through radio apparatus much like our own. If you can pack a powerful contact charge of your explosive in my projectile, I can guarantee that when the projectile is released it will flash out into space and score a direct hit against the walls of the space ship."

"I can pack the explosive in the projectile, all right," Dixon answered grimly. "We will need only a lump the size of an egg, and a small container of the heavy gas that activates it. The explosive itself is a radium compound that, when allowed to come in contact with the activating gas, becomes so unstable that any sharp blow will set it off
in an explosion that in a matter of seconds releases the infinite quantities of energy usually released by radium over a period of at least twelve hundred years. The cataclysmic force of that explosion should be enough to wreck a small planet."

"Good!" Crawford commended weakly. "If you can only strike your blow to-night, Bruce, our world still has a chance. If only you--" The old man's voice suddenly failed. He sank back in utter collapse, his eyes closed and his last vestige of strength spent.

* * * * *

Knowing that the old man would probably remain in his sleep of complete exhaustion for hours, Dixon turned his attention to Ruth. To his surprise, he found her sitting up, apparently completely recovered.

"I'm quite all right again," she said reassuringly. "I've been listening to what Uncle told you. Go ahead and prepare your explosive, Bruce. I'll do what I can for Uncle while you're working."

Dixon donned his lead-cloth hood and tunic again and set to work. Ten minutes later he turned to Ruth with a slender foot-long cylinder of lead in his hand.

"Ruth, will this fit your Uncle's projectile?" he asked.

"Easily," she assured him. "But isn't it frightfully dangerous to carry in that form?"

"No, it's absolutely safe now, and will be safe until this stud is turned, releasing the activating gas from one compartment to mingle with the radium compound in the other section. Then the cylinder will become a bomb that any sharp jar will detonate."

"All right, let's go then," Ruth answered. "Have you any more of those lead clothes that I can wear? I could wear the globe head-piece that Uncle wore, but it would loom up in the dark like a searchlight."

Dixon did not protest Ruth's going with him. There was nothing further that could be done for Emil Crawford for hours and in the hazardous sally to Crawford's laboratory he knew that Ruth's cool courage and quick wits would at least double their chances for success in their desperate mission. He provided her with a reserve hood and tunic of lead cloth, then handed her a tiny leaden pellet.

"Keep this for a last resort," he told her. "It's a contact bomb that becomes ready to throw when this safety catch is snapped over. I wish we had a dozen of them, but that's the last capsule I had and there's no time to prepare more."

He fished a rusty old revolver out of a drawer, and placed it in his pocket. "I'll use this gun for a last resort weapon myself," he said. "The action only works about half the time, but it's the only firearm in the place."

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The green moon was still high in the sky as Ruth and Dixon emerged from the tunnel, but it was already beginning to drop gradually down toward the west. Dixon wheeled his disreputable flivver out of its nearby shed. With engine silent they started coasting down the rough winding road into the valley.

For nearly two miles they wound down the long grade. Then, just as they reached the valley floor they saw, far up among the rocks to the left of the road, the thing they had been dreading--the bobbing opalescent globe that marked the presence of one of the Centaurians' hideous hybrids. The shimmering globe paused for a moment, then came racing down toward them.

The need for secrecy was past. Dixon threw the car in gear and savagely pulled down the gas lever. With throttle wide open they hurtled around the perilous curves of the narrow road, but always in the rocks beside and above them they heard the scuttling progress of some huge, many-legged creature that constantly kept pace with them.

They had occasional glimpses of the thing. Its pale jointed body was some twenty feet in length, and had apparently been developed from that of a centipede, with scores of racing legs that carried it with startling speed over the rocky terrain.

The flivver raced madly on toward the blaze of kaleidoscopic colors that marked the Centaurians' camp. Crawford's home loomed up now barely a hundred yards ahead.

As though sensing that its quarry was about to escape, the hybrid flashed a burst of speed that sent it on by the car for a full fifty yards, then down into the road directly in front, where it whirled to confront them. Dixon knew that he could never stop the car in the short gap separating them from that huge upreared figure, and to attempt swerving from the road upon either side was certain disaster.

He took the only remaining chance. With throttle wide open he sent the little car hurtling straight for the giant centipede. He threw his body in front of Ruth, to shield her as much as possible, just as they smashed squarely into the hybrid.

The impact was too much for even that monstrous figure. It was hurled bodily from the road to crash upon the jagged rocks at the bottom of a thirty-foot gully. There it sprawled in a broken mass, too hopelessly shattered to ever rise again.

The flivver skidded momentarily, then crumpled to a full stop against the rocks at the side of the road. Dixon
and Ruth scrambled from the wreckage and raced for Crawford's home, scarcely fifty yards ahead.

They entered the laboratory and Ruth went directly over to where the radio-projectile rested in a wall-rack. Dixon took the gleaming cylinder down to examine it. Tapering to a rounded point at the front end, it was nearly a yard long and about five inches in diameter.

"The mechanism inside the projectile is turned off now, of course," Ruth said. "If it were turned on, the projectile would have been on its way to the space ship long ago, for the radio waves are as strong here as at the Centaurians' camp."

The girl pointed to a small metal stud in the nose of the projectile.

"When that is snapped over, it makes the contact that sets the magnetizing mechanism into action," she explained. "Then the projectile will go hurtling directly for the source of any radio waves within range. I don't know the nature of its mechanism. Uncle merely told me that it is the application of an entirely new principle of electricity."

Dixon laid the long projectile down on the work-bench, and began packing his lead cylinder of explosive inside it. He had to release the lead cylinder's safety catch before closing the projectile, which made his work a thrillingly precarious one, for any sharp blow now would detonate the unstable mixture of gas and radium compound in one cataclysmic explosion.

He sighed in relief as he finally straightened up with the completed projectile held carefully in both hands.

"All we have to do now, Ruth," he said, "is step out from under this roof and snap that energizing stud. Then this little package of destruction will be on its way to our Centaurian friends up there by that pestilential green moon."

Ruth stepped ahead to open the door for him. With the end of their task so near at hand, both forgot to be cautious.

Ruth threw the door open and took one step outside, then suddenly screamed in terror as her shoulders were encircled by a long snake-like object that came whipping down from some vast something that had been lurking just outside. Dixon tried to dodge back, but too late. Another great hairy tentacle came lashing around his shoulders, pinning his arms tightly and jerking him out of the doorway.

He had a swift vague glimpse of a hybrid looming there in the green moonlight--a tarantula hybrid that in size and horror dwarfed any of the frightful products of Centaurian science that he had yet seen.

Before Dixon had time to note any of the details of his assailant another tentacle curled around him, tearing the projectile from his grasp. Then he was irresistibly drawn up toward that grisly head where Ruth's body was also suspended in one of the powerful tentacles. The next moment, bearing its burdens with amazing ease, the giant hybrid started off.

Dixon tried with all his strength to squirm free enough to get a hand upon the revolver in his pocket, but the constricting tentacle did not give for even an inch. The only result of his effort was to twist his hood to one side, leaving him as effectually blindfolded as though his head were in a sack.

Long minutes of swaying, pitching motion followed as the hybrid sped over the rocky ridges and gullies. It finally came to a halt, and for another minute or so Dixon was held there motionless in mid-air, dimly conscious of a subdued hum of activity all about him. Then he was gently lowered to the ground again.

While one tentacle still held him securely, another tore away his hood and tunic. Almost immediately the hood was replaced by one of the protective white globe devices. Dixon blinked for a moment in half-blinded bewilderment as he got his first glimpse of the Earth-camp of the Centaurians.

The place, located on the smooth rock floor of a large natural basin, seemed a veritable cauldron of seething colors which rippled and blended in a dazzling maze of unearthly splendor. But Dixon forgot everything else in that weird camp as his startled gaze fell upon the creature standing directly in front of him.

He knew instinctively that the thing must be one of the Alpha Centaurians, for in its alien grotesqueness the figure was utterly dissimilar to anything ever seen upon Earth before.

Life upon the shattered planet of that far distant sun had apparently sprung from sources both crustacean and reptilian. The Centaurian stood barely five feet in height. Its bulky, box-like body was completely covered with a chitinous armor that gleamed pale yellowish green.

Two short powerful legs, scaled like those of a lizard, ended in feet that resembled degenerated talons. Two pairs of slender arms emanated from the creature's shoulders, with their many-jointed flexible length ending in delicate three-pronged hands.

The scaly hairless head beneath the Centaurian's white globe device bore a face that was blankly hideous. Two
great lidless eyes, devoid of both pupils and whites, stared unblinkingly at Dixon like twin blobs of red-black jelly. A toothless loose-lipped mouth slavered beneath.

Dixon averted his gaze from the horror of that fearful alien face, and looked anxiously around for Ruth. He saw her almost at once, over at his right. She was tethered by a light metallic rope that ran from her waist to one of the metal beams supporting the great shimmering ball of opalescent fire which formed the central control of the hybrids.

One of the white globe devices had been placed upon Ruth's head and she was apparently unhurt, for she pluckily flashed a reassuring smile at Dixon.

Directly in front of Dixon and some forty yards away there was a large pen-like enclosure, with vari-colored shafts of radiance from banks of projectors constantly sweeping through it. Dixon drew in his breath sharply as he saw the frightful life lying dormant in that pen. It was a solid mass of hybrids--great loathsome figures fashioned from a score of different worms, insects, and spiders. The globes upon the gruesome mammalian half-heads were still dark and unfired with opalescence.

The invaders had apparently raided most of the surrounding country in obtaining those grafted half-heads. Near where Dixon stood there was a tragic little pile of articles taken from the Centaurians' victims--prospectors' picks, shovels, axes, and other tools.

Over to the left of the dormant hybrids stood the second Alpha Centaurian, curiously examining Dixon's projectile. The creature apparently suspected the deadly nature of the gleaming cylinder for it soon laid it carefully down and packed cushions of soft fabric around it to shield it from any possible shock.

Then at an unspoken command from the first Centaurian the great hybrid whirled Dixon around to face a small enclosure just behind him in which were located banks of control panels and other apparatus. One of the pieces of mechanism, with a regularly spaced stream of sparks snapping between two terminals, was apparently a radio receiver automatically recording the broadcast from the space ship. Dixon was unable to even guess the nature of the remaining apparatus.

"Bruce, be careful!" Ruth called in despairing warning. "He is going to put the thought-reading machine on your brain. Then he'll learn what the projectile is for, and everything will be lost!"

Dixon's mind raced with lightning speed in the face of this new danger. He stealthily slipped a hand over the revolver in his pocket. There was one vulnerable spot in the great hybrid holding him, and that was the opalescent globe on the creature's head. If he could only smash that globe with one well-directed shot, he might be able to elude the Centaurians for the precious minute necessary to send the projectile on its deadly journey.

The hybrid began maneuvering Dixon toward the instrument enclosure. For a fleeting second the grip of the tentacles upon his shoulders loosened slightly. Dixon took instant advantage of it. Twisting himself free from the loosened tentacle in one mighty effort, he whirled and fired pointblank at the opalescent globe on the head looming above him.

The bullet smashed accurately home, shattering the globe like a bursting bubble. The great hybrid collapsed with startling suddenness, its life force instantly extinguished as the globe burst.

Dixon leaped to one side and swung the gun into line with the Centaurian's hideous face. He pulled the trigger--but there was no response. The rusty old firearm had hopelessly jammed.

Dixon savagely flung the revolver at the Centaurian. The creature tried to dodge, but the heavy gun struck its body a glancing blow. There was a slight spurt of body fluid as the chitinous armor was partly broken.

Dixon's heart leaped exultantly. No wonder these creatures had to create hybrids to fight for them. Their own bodies were as vulnerable as that of a soft-shelled crab!

The Centaurian quickly drew a slender tube of dark green from a scabbard in its belt. Dixon dodged back, looking wildly about him for a weapon. There was an ax in the pile only a few yards away. Dixon snatched the ax up, and whirled to give battle.

The other Centaurian had come hurrying over now to aid its mate. Dixon was effectually barred from attempting any progress toward the projectile by the two grotesque creatures as they stood alertly there beside each other with their green tubes menacing him. Dixon waited tensely at bay, remembering those searing radium burns upon Emil Crawford's body.

Then the first Centaurian abruptly leveled a second and smaller tube upon Dixon. A burst of yellow light flashed toward him, enveloping him in a cloud of pale radiance before he could dodge.

There was a faint plop as the protecting white globe upon his head was shattered. The yellow radiance swiftly faded, leaving Dixon unhurt, but he realized that the first round in the battle had been won decisively by the Centaurians. His only chance now, was to end the battle before the paralyzing rays of the green moon sapped his
strength.

He warily advanced upon the Centaurians. Their green tubes swung into line and twin bolts of violet flame flashed toward him. He dodged, and the bolts missed by inches. Then Dixon nearly fell as his foot struck a bundle of cloth on the ground.

The next moment he snatched the bundle up with a cry of triumph. It was his lead-cloth tunic, torn and useless as a garment, but invaluable as a shield against the searing effects of those bolts of radioactive flame. He hurriedly wrapped the fabric in a rough bundle around his left forearm. The next time the tubes' violet flames flashed toward him he thrust his rude shield squarely into their path. There was a light tingling shock, and that was all. The bolts did not sear through.

With new confidence, Dixon boldly charged the two Centaurians. A weird battle ensued in the garishly lighted arena.

The effective range of the violet flashes was only about ten feet, and Dixon's muscular agility was far superior to that of his antagonists. By constant whirling and dodging he was able to either catch the violet bolts upon his shielded arm or else dodge them entirely.

Yet, in spite of the Centaurians' clumsy slowness, they maneuvered with a cool strategy that constantly kept the Earth man's superior strength at bay. Always as Dixon tried to close with one of them he was forced to retreat when a flanking attack from the other threatened his unprotected back. And always the Centaurians maneuvered to bar Dixon from attempting any dash toward the projectile.

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The minutes passed, and Dixon felt his strength rapidly ebbing, both from his herculean exertions and from the paralyzing rays of the green moon beating down upon his unprotected head. As his speed of foot lessened the Centaurians began inexorably pressing their advantage.

Dixon was no longer escaping unscathed. In spite of his frantic efforts to dodge, twice the violet bolts grazed his body in searing flashes of exquisite agony.

His muscles stiffened still more in the attack of the Green Sickness. Desperately dodging a Centaurian bolt, he stumbled and nearly fell. As he staggered to regain his balance, one of his antagonists scrambled to the coveted position behind him.

It was only Ruth's scream of warning that galvanized Dixon's numbed brain into action in time to meet the imminent peril.

In one mighty effort he flung his ax at the Centaurian in front of him. The heavy blade cut deep into the thinly armored body. Mortally wounded, the creature collapsed.

Dixon whirled and flung up his shielded left arm just in time to intercept the violet bolt of the other Centaurian. Warily backing away, Dixon succeeded in retrieving his ax from beside the twitching body of the fallen invader.

Then, with the heavy weapon again in his hand, he remorselessly charged his remaining foe. The Centaurian's tube flashed in a veritable hail of hurtling violet bolts, but Dixon caught the flashes upon his shield and closed grimly in.

One final leap brought him to close quarters. The heavy ax whistled through the air in a single mighty stroke that cleft the Centaurian's frail body nearly in two.

Then Ruth's excited scream came again. "Bruce--the other one! Get it quick!"

* * * * *

Dixon turned. The wounded invader, taking advantage of their preoccupation in the final struggle with its mate, had dragged its crippled body over to the instrument enclosure. Dixon staggered toward it as fast as his half-paralyzed muscles would permit.

He was just too late. The Centaurian jerked a lever home a fraction of a second before Dixon's smashing ax forever ended his activities. The lever's action upon the pen of inert hybrids was immediate.

The sweeping lances of light vanished in a brief sheet of vivid flame which kindled the dark globes on the hybrids' gruesome heads to steady opalescence--and the dread horde came to life! Sprawling from the pen, they came scuttling toward Dixon in a surging flood--a scene out of a nightmare.

Dixon faced the oncoming horde in numb despair, knowing that his nearly-paralyzed body had no chance in flight. Then, just as the hybrids were nearly upon him, he heard Ruth's encouraging voice again.

"There's still one chance left, Bruce," she cried, "and I'll take it!"

Dixon turned. Ruth had in her hand the tiny contact grenade he had given her for a last emergency. She snapped the safety catch on the little bomb, then hurled it squarely at the giant opalescent globe looming close beside her.

There was a terrific explosion and the great globe shattered to atoms. Apparently stunned by the concussion but otherwise unhurt, Ruth was flung clear of the wreckage.
With the shattering of the central globe the strange life force of the hybrid horde vanished instantly and completely. Midway in their rush they sprawled inert and dead, with their outstretched legs so close to Dixon that he had to step over one or two to get clear.

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Dixon's brain reeled in the reaction of relief from the horde's hideous menace. Then he grimly fought to clear his fast-numbing senses long enough for the one final task that he knew must still be done.

The projectile, cushioned as it was, had escaped detonation in the blast. He had only to stagger across the twenty yards separating him from it, then release the stud that would send it flashing out into space.

But his last shred of reserve strength had nearly been sapped now by the insidious rays of that malevolent green moon. Even as he started toward the projectile, he staggered and fell. Unable to drag himself to his feet again, he began grimly crawling with arms and legs as stiff and dead as that much stone.

Only ten more yards to go now. And now only five. Grimly, doggedly, with senses reeling and muscles nearly dead, the last survivor of a dying planet fought desperately on under the malignant rays of the vivid green moon!

One last sprawling convulsive effort--and Dixon had the projectile in his hands. His stiff fingers fumbled agonizingly with the activating stud. Then abruptly the stud snapped home. With a crescendo whistle of sundered air the projectile flashed upward into the western sky.

Dixon collapsed upon his back, his dimming eyes fixed upon the grim green moon. Minutes that seemed eternities dragged slowly by. Then his heart leaped in sudden hope. Had there really glowed a small blue spark up there beside the green moon--a spark marking the mighty explosion of the radium bomb against the Centaurians' space ship?

A fraction of a second later, and doubt became glorious certainty. The vivid green of the moonlight vanished. The silvery white sheen of a normal moon again shone serenely up there in the western sky!

With the extinguishing of the dread green rays, new strength surged swiftly through Dixon's tired body. He arose and hurried over to where Ruth lay limp and still near the wreckage of the great globe. He worked over her for many anxious minutes before the normal flush of health returned to her white cheeks and her eyes slowly opened.

Then he took Ruth into his arms and for a long minute the two silently drank in the beauty of that radiant silver moon above them, while their hearts thrilled with a realization of the glorious miracle of awakening life that they knew must already be beginning to rejuvenate a stricken world.
"There is no doubt of it!" The little chemist pushed steel-bowed spectacles up on his high forehead and peered at his dinner guest with excited blue eyes. "Time will come to an end at six o'clock this morning."

Jack Baron, young radio engineer at the Rothafel Radio laboratories, and protégé of Dr. Manthis, his host, laughed heartily.

"What a yarn you spin, Doctor," he said. "Write it for the movies."

"But it's true," insisted the older man. "Something is paralyzing our time-sense. The final stroke will occur about daybreak."

"Bosh! You mean the earth will stop rotating, the stars blink out?"

"Not at all. Such things have nothing to do with time. You may know your short waves, but your general education has been sadly neglected." The scientist picked up a weighty volume. "Maybe this will explain what I mean. It's from Immanuel Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason.' Listen:

'Time is not something which subsists of itself, or which inheres in things as an objective determination, and therefore, remains, when abstraction is made of the subjective conditions of the intuitions of things. For in the former case it would be something real, yet without presenting to any power of perception any real object. In the latter case, as an order of determination inherent in things themselves, it could not be antecedent to things, as their condition, nor discerned or intuited by means of synthetical propositions a priori. But all this is quite possible when we regard time as merely the subjective condition under which all our intuitions take place.'

"Clear as mud," grinned Baron. "Kant is too deep for me."

"I'll give you another proof," snapped Manthis. "Look at your watch."

The other drew out his timepiece. Slowly his face sobered.

"Why, I can't see the second hand," he exclaimed. "It's just a blur!"

"Exactly! Now look at the minute hand. Can you see it move?"

"Yes, quite clearly."

"What time is it?"

[Illustration: A few remained standing like statues.]

"Half past one. Great Scott! So that's why you spun that yarn." Baron hoisted his six feet one out of the easy chair. "It's way past your bedtime. Didn't mean to keep you up." He stared again at his watch as if it had betrayed him. "It seems we just finished dinner. I must have dozed off...."

"Nonsense," sniffed Manthis. "You arrived at eight o'clock--an hour late. You and I and my daughter had dinner. Then the two of us came in here. We smoked a cigarette or two. Now it's half-past one. Do you need more proof?"

"Your theory's all wet somewhere," the younger man protested with a shaky laugh. "If my watch isn't broken, time must be speeding up, not stopping."

"That comes from depending on your senses instead of your intelligence. Think a minute. If the watch seems running double speed that would indicate that your perception of its movements had slowed down fifty per cent."

Baron sank back into his chair, leaned forward and gripped his curly black hair with trembling fingers. He felt dizzy and befuddled.

"June," called the doctor. Then to the agitated youth he added: "Watch my daughter when she comes in if you still think I'm crazy."

As he spoke the door flew open and a slim, golden-haired girl shot into the room like a motion picture character in one of those comedies which is run double speed. Jack's eyes could hardly follow her movements. She came behind her father and threw one slim arm about his shoulders. She spoke, but her usually throaty voice was only a high-pitched squeak.

"Can't understand you, dear," interrupted her father. "Write it down."

"June is using a drug which I prepared to keep her time sense normal," Manthis explained as the girl's pen raced over a pad. "That's why she disappeared after dinner. I wanted you to get the full effect. Now read this."

"The deadline is approaching," the girl's message read. "You'd better take your injection now. It is 2:30 A.M."

"All right, prepare the hypodermics," directed the chemist. He had to repeat this in a falsetto voice before June understood. "Make one for Jack too."

June went out at express-train speed.
Baron glanced at his watch again. The minute hand was moving with the speed at which the second hand usually traveled. Three fifteen already!

When he looked up June was in the room again with two hypodermic needles. Quickly she removed her father's coat and made the injection.

"Let her fix you up too, boy, unless you want to become a graven image," commanded Manthis. His voice, which started at the ordinary pitch, went up like a siren at the end as the drug took effect. Dazedly Jack held out his arm.

The sting of the needle was followed by a roaring in his ears like a hundred Niagaras. The room seemed to pitch and quiver. Staring down at the watch he still clutched, Jack saw the hands slow down and at last resume their accustomed pace. Gradually the unpleasant sensations died away.

"That was a close shave," commented the doctor, drawing a long breath. "I wouldn't have waited so long, except that I wanted to experience the sensation of coming back from the edge of the infinite. Not very nice! Like being pulled out of a whirlpool. It's 4:30 now. Took us an hour to return to normal, although it seemed only minutes. We have an hour and a half before the end. June, have you noticed anything unusual on the streets?"

"Yes," whispered his daughter, her usually piquant face pinched and white. "I've been watching from the balcony. It's dreadful. The people creep about like things in a nightmare."

Manthis tried to reassure her. On his face was a great sadness which was, however, overshadowed by a greater scientific curiosity.

"There's nothing we can do for them now," he said. "But we must learn all we can. Let's go down and watch the city die."

They descended in an automatic elevator and hurried through the hotel lobby. The lights of Fifth Avenue gleamed as brightly as ever. The streets near the lower end of Central Park still were crowded. But such crowds! They moved with infinite langour. Each step required many seconds.

Yet the people apparently did not know that anything unusual was happening. Many perhaps were puzzled because their watches seemed to be misbehaving but this did not stop their conversation as they traveled home from theaters or night clubs. Two white-haired men passed by, engaged in a discussion of business affairs. Their voices were pitched so low that they were almost inaudible to the trio of watchers, while their gestures looked like the slow waving of the antennae of deep sea plants.

"My God, man!" cried Baron, at last awakening from his horror-stricken silence. "Why didn't you warn the world? This is criminal. If what you say is true, all these people will become rooted in their tracks at six o'clock like- -like characters from 'The Sleeping Beauty.'"

"I only discovered the danger a week ago while working out a chemical formula." Manthis' eyes showed the strain he was enduring. "It was a very delicate piece of work having to do with experiments I am making on chlorophyl--quick adjustments, you know. I'd done the thing before many times, but last week I couldn't mix the ingredients fast enough to get the necessary reaction. Puzzled, I made further experiments. The result was that I discovered my perception of time was slowing down. I tested June and found the same thing. There was but one conclusion."

"But the drug we are using. How did you hit on that?"

"I recalled that such drugs as hashish greatly speed up the time sense. An addict is able to review his entire past life or plan an elaborate crime between two heartbeats. So I collected a small supply of the stuff."

"But hashish in large doses is deadly, and I've heard that users of it sooner or later develop homicidal mania--run amuck as they say in India."

"True enough," admitted the chemist, "but Andrev, the Russian, you know, recently worked out a formula to neutralize the deadly effects of the drug but retain its time-expanding effect for medical purposes. I've added that to the pure drug. There isn't enough of it in New York to keep all these people normal for five minutes. Why should I have frightened the poor things?"

He relapsed into silence and the others found no heart to ask further questions as they watched the coming of the end of a world. The procession of passers-by had thinned somewhat by now. The street lights had grown dim. There was a look of increasing puzzlement on the faces of the people who remained. Something was wrong. They knew not what.

Floating along the sidewalk like a figure in a slow motion picture came a tiny tot of three. She was sobbing. Great tears formed with painful slowness and slid down her flushed cheeks.

"She's lost," exclaimed June. "Here, darling, I'll find your mama."
She picked up the child and looked up and down the street. The mother was not in sight. Automatically she turned to a policeman who stood nearby.

"Officer," she said quickly, "this girl is lost. Will you...?"

She stiffened in dismay. The policeman was staring through her as if his eyes had not registered her approach. Slowly his gaze came into focus. A puzzled look came over his Irish face. He spoke. It was only a blurred rumble.

"What can I do for her, Father?" June cried, turning away from the officer in despair. "She's dying. See? Couldn't we give her some of the drug?"

"There's only enough for us," her father replied firmly.

"But she'll be quite dead in an hour!"

"I'm not so sure of that. Perhaps only in a state resembling catalepsy. We must wait. Jack, take her into the lobby. Put her on a sofa there."

Dawn was paling the blue-black sky as the radio engineer returned. The street lights fluttered fitfully and at last died. The streets had become deserted although groups still eddied slowly about the subway kiosks.

"Five forty-five," whispered Manthis. "The end should come any moment."

As he spoke a white-garbed street sweeper, who had been leaning on his broom at the curb ever since the onlookers had reached the sidewalk, decided to move on at last. With infinite slowness his foot came up. He poised, swung forward, then, the universal paralysis overcoming him, remained in a strangely ludicrous position for a moment before crashing downward on his face.

As far as they could see in the semidarkness, others were falling. A few, balanced with feet wide apart, remained standing like statues. Those who collapsed writhed slowly a time or two and were still.

After the thudding of the bodies had ended the silence became ghastly. Not an awakening bird twittered in the trees of Central Park. Not a sheep bleated in the inclosure. Except for their own breathing and the sighing of the wind, not a sound! Then a faraway clock boomed six notes. The noise made them start and turn pale faces toward each other.

"Come," said the doctor heavily. "It's all over. We might as well go up. We'll have to walk. All power will be off. Twenty stories!"

* * * * *

The lobby of the Hotel Atchison, on the roof of which the penthouse apartment was located, was empty now except for a few clerks and bellboys. These sat with bowed heads before their grills or on their benches as if they had merely succumbed to the unpardonable sin of sleeping on duty. But they did not breathe.

June clung to her father's arm as they crossed noiselessly over the heavy carpet.

"The city will be a charnel house when these bodies start to decompose." Baron hesitated. "Shouldn't we get out of town while there is a chance?"

Manthis shook his head. "No. I'm convinced these people aren't dead. They're simply outside of time. Change cannot affect them. If I'm not mistaken they will remain just the same indefinitely."

"But there will be fires throughout the city."

"Not many. The electricity is off. The day is warm so no furnaces are going. Not even a rat is left to nibble matches, for the animals must be affected in the same way that humans are. The world is asleep."

* * * * *

After mounting interminable stairs they regained the apartment and went out on the balcony. It was full daylight now but not a smoke-plume trailed from tall chimneys. Not a bird was on the wing. Elevated trains stood on their tracks, passengers and guards asleep inside.

"I still don't understand," muttered Baron. "The sun comes up. The wind blows. How can that be if there is no time? Might this not be some plague?"

"In a way you are right, boy. It is a plague which has paralyzed man's sense of time. You have become involved by not remembering Kant's axiom that time is purely subjective. It exists in the mind only. It and space are the only ideas inherently in our brains. They allow us to conduct ourselves among a vast collection of things-in-themselves which time does not affect."

"But--"

"Wait a moment. Granting that time is in the mind rather than in the outside world, what will happen if the time-sense is paralyzed? Won't the effect be similar to hypnosis whereby a man is reduced to a cataleptic state? The thought chain which usually passes ceaselessly through the brain is halted."

Seeing that the engineer still looked puzzled, June interposed:

"It's something like enchantment," she explained. "The old legends are full of it—the Sleeping Beauty, Brunhilde, Rip Van Winkle. I am convinced that in ancient times a few persons knew how to draw a fairy ring about those they wished to injure or protect, placing them thus outside the reach of time and change. This has now
happened the world over, perhaps through some drift in the ether or germ in the brain. That is what we must find out so we can solve the mystery and take steps to reawaken the world--"

"Perhaps this will help," interrupted Manthis in his turn. "As you know, all the great scientists--Einstein, Jeans, Pavlov--are convinced that everything in the universe is a form of vibration. Even thought, they believe, operates somewhat like a very short radio wave. What if some agency, either inside or outside the universe, began interfering on the thought-wave channel?"

"Granting your supposition,"--Jack was on his own ground now--"transmission would be impossible on that channel."

"Exactly! Well, that's what I am convinced is taking place. I'm a chemist, not an engineer. I've given you the lead. You'll have to do the rest. Do you think you might locate such interference?"

"Possibly. I'll do my best."

"Fine! Of course, if it is coming from outside the stratosphere as the cosmic rays do, there is no hope. But if someone is broadcasting such a devilish wave from an earthly station we may have a chance to stop it."

"Now, Baron, my boy," he continued, dropping into a more jovial tone and leading his friend into the laboratory, "you'll have to get busy if you intend to keep us ticking. This equipment is at your disposal." He waved toward a newly installed short wave radio transmitter. "Here are storage batteries, all charged." He opened another door. "I have a five kilowatt generator installed here. It is operated by a gasoline engine. If you need other equipment you can raid the Rothafel plant."

* * * * *

Returning to the main laboratory he indicated the work table set close to a great double window overlooking Central Park.

"Couldn't ask for anything better, could you?" he smiled. "Plenty of light and air and a view of the city. Look, you can even see those poor devils lying around the subway kiosk." His face became bleak. Then he shrugged and tried to throw off his depression. "June and I will help you as much as we can. We can raid stores for provisions and hashish. New let's have breakfast."

The next few days were filled with unending labor for the temporal castaways. From daybreak until far into the night, with radio receivers clamped over their ears, the three twisted dials, adjusted rheostats and listened in on long and short wave bands. But the ether, which once had pulsed with music and friendly voices, now was silent, except for static.

"Makes me think of Sunday mornings when I was a boy," Manthis once commented. "Only this is more quiet. It gives me the jitters." There was a note of hysteria in his voice.

When the doctor's nerves began to quiver in that manner, Baron always insisted that they all rest. During such recesses they ate, played cards and helped June with the housework. The younger man was continually amazed by the calmness with which the girl faced their desperate situation. Clad in a blue smock which brought out the color of her eyes, she flitted about the apartment, manufacturing delicious meals out of canned goods and always having a cheery word when the others became discouraged. Yet she never would look out the window.

"I can't bear to see those poor souls lying about like rag dolls," she explained. "The only thing that keeps me sane is the hope that we may reawaken them."

* * * * *

It was on the evening of the third day that Baron lifted the headset from his burning ears and admitted failure.

"We've explored everything but the super-short waves," he sighed. "I'll have to get equipment from the laboratories before we start on those."

June nodded from where she perched on a high stool across the table. But Manthis did not hear. He was making delicate adjustments on his receiving set and listening with rapt attention.


Instantly the others did as he ordered, but were able to catch only the last inflections of a ringing voice. Then silence settled once more.

"What did he say," the youngsters cried in one breath.

"Couldn't understand. Some foreign language." The chemist was furious with disappointment. "But I'd recognize that voice among a thousand. We must get in touch with him. Perhaps he can help us. God knows we need assistance. Quick, Jack. You're an expert. See if you can pick up a reply."

Baron leaned over his instruments, heart thumping. The dreadful loneliness against which he had been fighting was broken. Others were alive!

Minutes passed and the evening light died away. They were too excited to strike a light. Shadows crept out of the corners and surrounded them. At last a faint voice grew in their ears. But again the words were unintelligible.
"Sounds a little like Greek," puzzled the girl, "but it isn't."
Baron adjusted the direction finder and made scribbled calculations.
"Coming from the southeast and far away," he breathed.
"I caught a word then," gasped the doctor. "'Ganja,' it was."
"What does that tell us?" snapped Jack, his nerves jumping.
"Ganja is the Hindu word for hashish, that's all. My Lord, man, don't you understand? The station is in India. Those who operate it are using Andrev's solution as we are. I--"
"Listen!" shouted Jack.

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There was a grinding and clashing in the receivers. Then a new voice, harsh and strained with excitement, almost burst their eardrums.
"Beware! Beware!" it screamed. "Do not trust him. He is a devil and has put the world asleep. His mind is rotten with hashish. He is a demon from--" Then came a dull, crunching sound. The voice screamed and died away.
In the darkened laboratory the faces of the three listeners stood out like ovals of white cardboard.
"What do you make of that?" stammered Baron at last.
"It looks as if the only persons alive, in New York at least, are hashish addicts--the most debased and murderous of drug fiends." The doctor stopped, his eyes dilating with horror. June crept close to him and threw an arm around his shaking shoulders. "Can't you see? Their time-sense expanded too. Like us they were unaffected. But unlike us they use the pure drug. Hashish smokers are without exception homicidal maniacs, vicious criminals. God!"
"Are they responsible for the end of time?" queried Jack.
"I don't know. Perhaps some master mind among them is back of it--some engineering wizard who has succumbed to the drug so recently, or who has such a strong constitution that his intelligence has not been destroyed."

The little doctor dragged off his headset, disarranging his sparse gray hair. His face was tired and worn but his jaw thrust forward pugnaciously.
"We're making headway," he cried. "We know the probable author of the catastrophe is a drug addict and that he is located nearby. We know he has no scruples, for the man who warned us undoubtedly was killed. And I'm convinced those extremely short wave bands hold the secret. Let's knock off for the day. We look like ghosts. Tomorrow morning you and June get what equipment you need from across the river. I'll stay here on guard. You'd better raid a drug-store and get some more of our life-saver, too. It's listed under Cannabis Indica."

* * * * *

The next morning dawned clear and cold. It was early October and there was a chill in the apartment. Baron swung his legs over the edge of the davenport in the living room and stared out at the frost-covered trees of Central Park. The leaves were falling before the brisk wind and forming little eddying mounds over the forms of those lying about the streets. Jack shivered at the thought of the millions and millions of victims of the disaster who littered the Earth. They seemed to accuse him of still being alive. Well, if Manthis was right, perhaps all could be revived before winter set in.

June was singing as he and the doctor came to breakfast. Apparently she wished to forget the events of the previous night, so they laughed and joked as though they intended to go on a picnic rather than across a dead city.

The hotel lobby was as they last had seen it when they descended. The bellboys still nodded on their benches. A travelling salesman was hunched over a week-old Times as if he would awake in a few minutes, glance about guiltily and resume his reading. The child they had rescued still lay on the divan. Her golden hair framed her cheeks like a halo. One arm was thrown above her head. She seemed ready to awake, though she had not breathed for days.
"It all makes me feel so lonely," whispered June, clinging to the engineer's arm. "I want to cry--or whistle to keep up my courage."

"Don't worry," Jack replied softly, patting her hand and speaking with more assurance than he felt. "We'll find a way out."
She squeezed his arm and smiled at him with new courage. For months, in fact ever since his first visit to the Manthis apartment, Baron had admired the doctor's charming daughter. Although nothing had been said of love between them they often had gone to a dance or the theater together, while a firm friendship had been cemented. Now their closer association and the unflinching bravery which she showed was ripening this into a stronger bond.

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They went out into the crisp morning, stepped across the body of a street sweeper who lay in the gutter, and entered the doctor's automobile. Through the silent city they drove, Baron watching carefully to avoid striking stalled cars or grotesquely sprawling bodies.
There was a tangle of wrecked automobiles in the center of the Queensboro Bridge and they were forced to push them apart to get through. While they were engaged in this arduous work, a drifting ferry bumped into a pier, shaking the dreaming captain into a semblance of life at the wheel.

"I used to like fairy tales," moaned June. "They're dreadful, really."
She clung to him like a frightened child. He drew her close and kissed her.

"I love you, June," he whispered, as though fearful that the sleeping drivers of the tangled cars might overhear. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not--now," she smiled through eyes filled with tears. "I've loved you for months, Jack. Whatever happens, we have each other."

He helped her back into the car and drove on in silence. At last the Rothafel plant gloomed before them, forbidding as an Egyptian tomb. With a feeling that he was entering some forbidden precinct, Jack led the way to his office. Somehow, without its usual bustle and bright lights, it seemed alien.

Once inside he forgot his hesitation and set about collecting equipment—queerly shaped neon tubes, reflectors, coils, electrodectores. Soon there was a pile of material glinting on top of his desk.

They were exploring a deep cabinet with the aid of a flashlight when a strange clicking sound made them whirl simultaneously. In a corner of the room a deeper blot of shadow caught their eyes. Jack snapped on the flash. In the small circle of light a long, cadaverous face appeared. Thin lips were drawn back over wide-spaced yellow teeth. Black eyes stared unwinkingly into the light. The flash wavered as the engineer tried to get his nerves under control.

"It's nothing," he assured the trembling girl. "A night watchman caught as he was making his rounds, probably. Don't get excited." He wet his lips.

"He's alive!" screamed June. "The eyelids! They moved!"

"Yes, I'm alive," boomed a hoarse voice. "I thought I was the only man God had spared. Pardon me for frightening you. I was so thunderstruck...."

The stranger stepped forward. He was dressed in a long black topcoat, high collar and string tie. The clicking noise was explained when he rubbed his long white hands together, making the knuckles pop like tiny firecrackers.

"Ivan Solinski, at your service." He smiled with what evidently was intended to be warmth, again showing those rows of teeth like picket fences. "I suppose we're all here on the same mission: to find a solution for the mystery of the world's paralysis." The apparition lit a long and bloated cigarette and through the acrid smoke surveyed them quizzically.

"I'm Jack Baron, formerly on the staff here, and this is June Manthis, daughter of Dr. Frank Manthis, head of the chemical research department." The engineer winced as Solinski enfolded his hand in a clammy grip.

"Ah yes, I know the doctor by hearsay. A great scientist. He has a lovely daughter"—bowing deeply to June as he let his beady eyes wander over her face and figure. "Perhaps we can join forces, although I must admit I have abandoned hope. It is God's will." He rolled his eyes toward heaven, then riveted them once more upon June.

"Why, certainly." Jack was striving to overcome his growing dislike. "We'll be driving back in a few minutes. Would you care to come with us?"

"No." The pupilless eyes skittered toward Baron for a moment. "I know the doctor's address. I will come to visit you soon. Now I must be going." Solinski turned as if to depart, then strode to the desk and looked down at the mass of equipment. "Ah, super-short wave tubes, I see. Very clever." His dexterous fingers lingered over them a moment. Then he bowed and was gone.

The two remained staring at the empty doorway.

"I--I wish he'd been dead--sleeping," whispered June at last, twisting her handkerchief with trembling fingers. "He--I didn't like the way he kept looking at me."

"He seemed all right to me." Jack tried to forget his own prejudice. "He's willing to help us."

"Might he not be one of the hashish addicts? Those eyes--the pupils were mere pinpoints--and those evil-smelling cigarettes."

"Then why should he have offered to help?" puzzled Jack. "He could have killed us."

"Nevertheless I hope we've seen the last of him. Are you about through? Let's get out of this awful place. He looked like a mummy!"

They drove back to the apartment so completely preoccupied that both forgot to obtain the drug which the doctor had requested.

"Yes, I've heard of him," Manthis said after he had been informed of the encounter. "A naturalized Russian. Used to do quite a bit of valuable work in various fields of physics. But he was some sort of radical--seems to me an old-fashioned anarchist--and not popular. He dropped out of sight several years ago. I presumed he was dead."
They soon had the new equipment installed and again began exploring the wave bands, beginning with the comparatively lengthy ones and working down into those only slightly longer than light. It was tedious work, but all were by now as adept as Jack in combing the ether and their task progressed rapidly. Despite the labor, however, nothing could be heard. There was only the universal, breathless silence. At times they moved to the commercial bands and tried to pick up the stations they had heard on the previous day, but even there they met with failure.

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By the evening of the third day they had left the wave bands which could be measured in meters and were exploring those strange and almost wholly uncharted depths of the ether which must be calculated in centimeters. There at last luck favored them. It was Jack who caught a strange pulsating tone on the three-centimeter band. It rose and fell, rose and fell, then died away like the keening of a lost soul.

"Listen," he whispered. "Plug in here. I've found something."

June and the doctor followed his instructions. Delicately fingering the coils, Baron picked up the sound again, only to lose it. Then it came once more. This time he followed it as it changed to the five centimeter band. Back and forth it went as though weaving an intricate and devilish web.

"What do you make of it?" queried the doctor at last.

"Don't know." Jack bit his lips. "It's no natural phenomenon, I'll swear. Somebody is manipulating a broadcasting station of terrific power not far from here and playing with that wave as a helmsman brings a sailing ship into the wind and lets her pay off again."

"What do we do now?" The little chemist, finding his theory apparently confirmed, was at a loss. "Could we wreck that station?"

"Fat chance!" The engineer laughed bitterly as he reached for a cigarette. "Whoever has conceived that bit of hellishness is well guarded. The three of us wouldn't have a ghost of a show. What I can't understand is--"

"No use talking about theories now." Manthis sat down, crushed. Dropping his head in his bands, he pulled his few hairs as though that might drag out an idea. "What's to be done? Do you realise that we hold more responsibility than ever man has held before? Caesar! Napoleon! They were pikers. We have to save a world."

* * * * *

Silence greeted his outburst. The scratching of a match as June lit a cigarette sounded like an explosion. Then the smoke eddied undisturbed while the three stared vacantly into space, trying to think.

"Couldn't we--the girl swallowed hesitantly as she realized her ignorance of radio engineering--"couldn't we interfere with that wave? Interfere with the wave which already is breaking up the thought waves. Cancel its power. Oh, Jack, you must know what I mean."

"With this dinky, five-kilowatt station? We couldn't reach Yonkers against the power they've got. By Jove!" He leaped to his feet as a new thought struck him. "Maybe we could just wake up New York. Get help from the police then! Smash that other station afterwards!"

"But we don't know whether interference would break the spell," interposed the practical doctor. "And it will take a lot of practise to follow that wave. It jumps back and forth like a grasshopper."

"And if we don't do it right the first time, whoever is operating that station will be down on us like a ton of brick," admitted Jack.

"Let's get the child we saved," suggested June. "We can bring her up here. Then we'll need only a little power, just enough to be effective in this room, to bring her to life if we can. They wouldn't hear our wave."

"Great!" Jack bent over and kissed her. "You're a real help. I'll be back in a minute." He dashed out. Soon they heard his step on the stairs and he reappeared, tenderly bearing his golden-haired burden.

"Now, June," he commanded briskly, "place her in a comfortable position on the work table while I get ready."

He began arranging equipment and connecting it with the bank of storage batteries.

"Shall I adjust a headset for her?" asked the impatient doctor.

"Be yourself!" Jack placed a crooked vacuum tube near the child's head and clamped two flat electrodes on her temples. "This wave must act directly on the brain. The sense of hearing has nothing to do with it."

"All right, Sleeping Beauty." He stretched the kinks out of his aching back. "Let's see what we can do for you. Pardon me, Doctor, if I seemed rude. This is ticklish work. Pick up the outside wave for me. Thanks. Now I've got our dinky sending station set on the same wave length at a different frequency. It's adjusted so that I keep in touch through this tuning coil, our wave will fluctuate over the same path as the other. It should take six or eight hours to overcome the effect on her, I judge. Here we go. June, you'd better get yourself and your dad some food. Doctor, you examine the kid from time to time. In an hour or so June can relieve me."

He pressed a switch. The tubes filled with a green glow.

* * * * *

Two hours passed, and the sun was sinking behind the trees of the park in a bloody haze when Jack at last
signaled for June to handle the dials. For a time he guided her slim fingers. Then, as she caught the trick, he rose and stretched his cramped muscles.

"Don't lose the wave for a moment or we'll have to start all over again," he warned. "Now for dinner!"

She nodded and, frowning slightly, bent over the dials.
At that moment there came a heavy knock on the apartment door.
"Who's that?" gasped Manthis, his face turning grey.
"Probably Solinski," replied Jack, feeling his spine crawl as he remembered the moldy Russian. "Fine time he chose for a visit."

"Shall I let him in?"

"Don't see what else there is to do."

"Good evening," cried their guest as Manthis opened the door. "Ah, Dr. Manthis, I believe. I have heard so much about your work." His hoarse yet ringing voice made the little man start violently and caused June to shake her head in annoyance as the sound interfered with the humming of the vagrant wave. "Sorry I could not come earlier." Solinski advanced into the laboratory, giving the effect of driving the chemist before him. "Trying to revive one of the sufferers, I see. May God aid you in this noble work."

* * * * *

He spread the tails of his long coat and sat down. As he talked his eyes flashed about the room, taking in every detail and at last fastening on June's fresh beauty like those of a vampire. "Not," he boomed as he lighted a cigarette, "not that I believe it possible--"

Catching an agonized glance from Jane, Jack interrupted:
"You'll have to speak softly, sir. This is ticklish work."

"I beg your pardon." The Russian lowered his voice so that it squeaked piercingly like a rusty hinge. He wrung his hands audibly.

"Perhaps we'd better move into the living room," suggested the doctor, hovering in the background. "There we can talk without interrupting."

Their guest unfolded joint by joint like a collapsible rule.
"Of course, if you think I'm spying," he grated.

"Not at all," protested Jack, although he longed to strike the brute across the face. "It's just that voices of certain pitches interfere. Surely you have seen radio operators go all to pieces when spoken to."

Ungraciously Solinski allowed himself to be ushered into the outer room. Once there he disposed his lean form on another chair, unctuously refused a highball, and, forgetting his momentary anger, soon was deep in a scientific discussion of the problems involved in revivifying the world.

He mentioned the nearby radio station but declared that he had been unable to locate it despite a careful search. Dismissing this he turned to other topics, displaying a vast knowledge of all departments of scientific achievement and, despite his depressing personality, holding his bearer's attention so closely they forgot the passage of time until the clock struck ten.

"Time for daily injection," said the doctor. "Do you use Andrev's solution too, sir?"

"Naturally," replied the other, lighting one cigarette from the butt of another.

Manthis hurried into the laboratory. A few moments later he reappeared in the doorway and called to Jack in an agitated voice. As the younger man joined him he closed the door and turned a white face to him.

"The drug is almost gone," Manthis said. "Didn't you obtain a new supply?"

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"We--I forgot it," admitted Jack, feeling his own face grow pale. "The shock of running across Solinski at the laboratory upset me."

"Well, that's all right, then. It gave me a turn, but we have plenty of time." The doctor laughed shakily. "Run down to the nearest drug store. There should be a supply there. Better take a flashlight."

He pushed open the door, then shrank back. Leaning against the jamb was the Russian. His manner had changed subtly. His thin lips spread from ear to ear in a wolfish grin. His fingers clicked like castanets.

"Ah," he purred. "So you have used up the last of your solution?"

"What's that to you?" The doctor was gripped by cold unreasoning fear.

"Only that you will be unable to obtain more. Since my first meeting with your daughter I have had my men collect all the Cannabis Indica in the city."

"Your men!" Manthis was thunderstruck.

"Certainly, you old fool. Do you think I'm a bumbling theorist like yourself? Who do you think is operating that short-wave station? I am. Who do you think put the world to sleep? I did. Who do you think will wake it? I will."

Solinski's figure appeared to expand. He took deep drafts from his cigarette. The smoke seemed to impel some
terrific force into his gaunt frame.

"So it was your voice I heard!" cried Manthis bitterly. "And those awful tales about you were true. A hashish
smoker! A person whose mind is rotting, in control of the world!" He seemed about to leap at the other, and his
chubby figure, in that attitude, would have seemed ludicrous if it had not been tragic. "It shall not be!" he shouted.

"Now see here, Doctor"--Solinski assumed a friendly tone--"you're making a grave mistake. I have something
to offer better than you ever dreamed of."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. How would you like to be assistant to the King of the World?"

* * * * *

"Crazy already," sneered the doctor, squinting up at his tormentor.
"Crazy or not, when the world awakes I will be its king."

"Why, damn you, I thought you were an anarchist and wanted to do away with kings and governments," sputtered the little man.

Solinski burst into a gale of fiendish laughter.

"An anarchist is merely a capitalist without money or power," he quoted.

"What do you want of us?" demanded Manthis, playing for time.

"Very simple. This: I intend soon to begin awakening those who will serve me, first in New York and then
throughout the world. When I have a skeleton government built up, I will withdraw the wave and allow the people to
revive. Clever, isn't it? Especially for such a madman as you think me." He snapped his fingers and leered cunningly
at them.

The doctor choked but Jack's hand on his arm steadied him.

"You have a very beautiful daughter," resumed their diabolical visitant.

"Leave my daughter's name out of this," cried Manthis, recoiling.

"Not at all. Her charm and ability have greatly impressed me--so impressed me that I have decided to make her
my queen."

"You scum of the gutter. You filthy beast. I'd die before I'd be a party to such a thing!" The doctor was beside
himself.

"I consider myself justified," replied the other, taking great delight in baiting his foe. "The world was never
able to govern itself. We anarchists have bided our time, although overshadowed by communists, Fascists and such
ridiculous experimenters. Now comes our turn. I shall be the viceroy of God. Under my rule and that of Queen June
the world shall become a second heaven."

He rolled his eyes upward at those words. As he did so, Jack, who had been awaiting just such an opportunity,
struck him on the jaw.

* * * * *

The blow would have felled an ox but Solinski merely staggered back a step and snarled. Before Baron could
renew the attack he jerked an automatic from beneath his coat and leaped to the hall door.

"You I shall kill," he grinned evilly. "But not now. First you must taste the horror of sinking into the long sleep.
You have no more drug, nor can you obtain any. Those pitiful storage batteries will be exhausted by the time you
have aroused the child. So you must sleep unless you have the courage to kill yourself. Doctor, I deeply regret that
this has occurred, but you see that I must let you and June sleep too. When I have need of you I will recall you. That
is all. Farewell. May God pity you, Baron. I will not."

He sprang through the door and, the tails of his black coat flapping like the wings of a gigantic bat, vanished
down the stairs.

Manthis slammed the door and locked it, then leaned weakly against the panels and wiped his round face. His
hands shook pitifully.

"This then is the end," he whispered hoarsely.

"Is there none of the drug left?" Jack shook him out of his lethargy.

"Enough for a half portion for all of us," sighed the doctor. "But what use of that? Better we poisoned ourselves
now and escaped that demon."

"Nonsense. A half portion means twelve hours of life. In that time I can rig up the big transmitter. Perhaps there
is still time to revive New York. Solinski won't know we have a generator until we turn on the power. Quick. Poor
June must be nearly frightened to death at our shouting."

* * * * *

But they found the girl sitting tense and jubilant at the controls.

"Father! Jack!" she cried as the door opened. "It's working. I saw her move. That means we may be able to
revive the world!" Her face was streaked with tears.
"Her heart's beating," whispered the doctor, feeling the child's pulse. "Slow but steady. She'll regain consciousness any moment now."

"No time to wait." Disregarding June's cry of protest Jack stripped off the electrodes. "We must get the big machine working."

"But the little thing will die again," cried June, throwing herself on her knees beside the tot. "I didn't think you could be so cruel."

"Solinski has cut off our drug supply," explained Manthis gently. "He's operating the other station. Don't blame Jack. We must work fast."

"You mean that Russian is responsible for all this?"

"Yes, child. But maybe we can defeat him yet. Don't lose courage. Now I must go and prepare what's left of the drug. We're overdue for it now."

Meanwhile Jack was busy running leads from the generator room, connecting banks of tubes, stringing an aerial on the terrace.

"Twelve hours! Twelve hours!" he muttered. "Just time to make it if the doctor's calculations are correct. June, hand me those pliers, but be careful of the wires. I haven't time to insulate them. When we start the dynamo they'll be carrying twelve thousand volts."

"But won't Solinski and his men come back and kill us?" For the first time the full weight of despair descended upon her brave spirit.

"Probably. Does your father have a revolver?"

"I--I think so."

"Find out." Jack connected a loading coil with deft fingers. "Then go down to a sporting goods store and get some ammunition. If there are any shotguns in the place bring two back with plenty of buckshot shells. I don't think we're being watched yet, but if you're attacked, run for it."

Noting she looked hurt at his abruptness, he kissed her quickly.

"Sorry, darling. Every second counts. Run along, like a good girl."

She smiled for the first time in a long while and patted his hand.

* * * * *

When she returned, two shotguns and several boxes of shells held like wood in her bent arms, the generator was sparkling merrily. The gasoline engine barked steadily and the vacuum tubes glowed green.

Manthis came in at that moment and injected all the remaining drug as Jack gave crisp orders. Automatically the engineer had taken command.

"I'll get things going and handle the dials until Solinski sends his rats down on us. June, you watch the street door. Run up at the first sign of an attack. After that you'll take my place and hold it, no matter what happens, until we succeed or are killed. The doctor and I will go downstairs when you come up, and hold them off or retreat slowly. Thank heaven we can command both the front and rear stairways from the halls. Now doctor, watch the circuit breaker. I'm going to throw on full power."

As he advanced the rheostat the tubes glowed brighter, bathing the room in unearthly light. Jack adjusted his headset, and smiled up at June. She kissed him bravely before hurrying to her dangerous post.

Once more he sat listening to that whining, fluctuating wave. The engineer's thoughts wavered between speculations on the future, fond memories of June and impatience with the dragging hours. Would nothing ever happen? Through the earphones now came a jangling, agonized whine, as if the two antagonistic waves were endowed with life and actually struggling in the ether.

From time to time his glance wandered to the child, who, having obtained a head start through her preliminary treatment, now was stirring fretfully.

Slowly the time plodded by. Jack smoked cigarette after cigarette in an effort to fight off the drowsiness which loaded his eyelids with lead.

It must have been three o'clock when a whimper from the divan apprised them that the child at last had awakened.

"Where's mama?" She blinked into the glare. "I've lost my mama."

"There, there, honey," soothed the doctor, stopping his pacing up and down the room and picking her up. "Your mama had to go away for awhile. She'll be back any minute. Let's go find a drink of water. And I've something for you to play with too." Gently he carried her into June's bedroom.

Soon he reappeared and patted Jack on the shoulder.

"Our first victory," he said in a broken voice. "She's in perfect condition and sleeping naturally now. I gave her one of June's old dolls to play with." He sighed and collapsed into the nearest chair. "I'm almost dead with the strain of it. Do you think there's a chance?"
"Three more hours should turn the trick. I don't understand why Solinski--"

The crash of a shotgun, coming faint but clear from the street below, brought him up short. The shot was answered by a volley of rifle fire.

Jack almost lost the wave in his excitement, but regained it with a desperate twist of the wrist. No time for nerves now. He must be calm!

"Go down and hold them until June can get back to relieve me," he ordered. "Hurry. They may rush her any moment."

The doctor seemed ten years younger as he thrust a revolver into his pocket, snatched a shotgun from behind the door and ran out.

The commotion had awakened the child, who started whimpering, adding further to Jack's distractions. Yet he managed, in spite of ghastly mental pictures of June being torn to pieces by her attackers, to keep his hands steady.

A few minutes later she slipped into the room and laid her cold cheek against his before taking her place at the instruments.

"It's all right," she added. "I don't think they'll attack in the dark. There are five of them. I'm sure I wounded or killed one. They weren't expecting a guard. I left the gun with father. He's behind the cashier's desk." Then, all her courage evaporating, she turned an appealing, little girl face toward her lover. "Don't let yourself be killed, Jack. I'd die too."

"June, you're wonderful," he whispered. "I didn't know there was a girl alive as brave as you. Good-by. No matter what happens, keep the wave in tune." He kissed her tenderly, trying not to think he had done so for the last time, and hurried out.

The stairs were black as the inside of a tomb. Once he stumbled over the body of a charwoman and came near falling headlong.

"Nothing's happened since that first volley," whispered Manthis when Jack slipped into the cage. "They're holding off for dawn. Look!" his voice wavered. "Was that a face at the window?" He fired wildly. Glass tinkled.

"Easy," warned Baron. "Don't waste ammunition. Besides, if you get this place full of smoke they'll jump us."

Dawn was painting the windows gray when the assault began. Their first warning came when a small object was tossed into the lobby. It exploded in a cloud of white vapor.

"Tear gas," yelled Jack. "Back to the stairs." They ran for cover, weeping and choking.

Then began a slow retreat up the stairways, Jack guarding the front and Manthis the back passages. At first it was a simple matter for their enemies to toss tear bombs through the fire doors, then, protected by respirators, capture another floor. But as the light increased this became more and more hazardous. Twice a spray of buckshot laid a Solinski man low.

"He hasn't many men available," called Jack as the attack slackened. "But watch out. His time's about up. Hey, look at that woman!" A white-uniformed maid, whom he remembered having seen lying in the same spot every time he climbed the stairs, had stirred weakly, as though about to wake.

It was their glance at the sleeping form which undid them. When they looked up both fire doors were open and helmeted figures were emerging from them.

The shotguns roared. Two of their attackers collapsed, but the others came on. Before there was time for another shot they were at close quarters. Standing back to back, Manthis and Jack clubbed their guns and held their ground.

The fact that Solinski and his men wore respirators handicapped them immensely, so that the two defenders kept a cleared circle about them.

One of the attackers, more daring than the rest, leaped forward to engage the engineer. He collapsed with a crushed skull.

Then, when victory seemed in their grasp, luck turned. At Jack's next blow the stock of his weapon parted from the barrel, leaving him almost defenseless. At the same time Manthis slipped and collapsed from a knife thrust.

Jack was left alone to face three enemies and would have been killed within the minute had not Solinski, recalling the little time he had left to stop the interfering wave, deserted his comrades and sprinted for the laboratory.

The seeming defection of their chief threw the other two attackers into momentary confusion. Before they could recover, Jack knocked one out with the gun barrel, then came a flying tackle at the other.

But he had caught a tartar. His remaining enemy was a gigantic Negro. Recovering from his surprise the latter lifted high a glittering knife to finish his disarmed foe. Jack snatched at the uplifted arm--missed!

A revolver cracked. The hooded Negro staggered, then crashed forward.
"Remembered my pistol just in time," gasped the doctor from the floor. "Don't bother about me. I'm all right. Stop Solinski, for God's sake."

Although his lungs seemed bursting Baron turned and flew up the stairs. Being familiar with every turn, he gained on the Russian and caught sight of the dreadful black coat-tails as his enemy burst through to the twentieth floor. The locked door of the apartment baffled him only a moment. Stepping back, Solinski hurled his giant frame against the panels. They splintered and crashed inward. But the delay allowed Jack to catch up.

He leaped on the Russian's back. Locked together they reeled into the living room. For a fleeting moment Jack saw June sitting rigidly at the instruments. Her eyes were starting from their sockets but her hands were steady.

"I warned you to kill yourself," Solinski's voice rose in a screaming whisper through the respirator. "Now I will do it." Displaying the strength of madness he hurled Jack from him. Losing all control of his limbs, the younger man flew across the room and demolished the divan in his fall. But the thought of what Solinski would do to June brought him back to the attack.

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The fury of their struggle wrecked the living room. Both bled from numerous wounds. One of the Russian's bleak eyes closed under a well-directed blow, but otherwise he seemed unaffected. Jack grappled again and realized his mistake as he was caught in a bone-cracking grip and forced into the laboratory.

Baron felt a rib snap. A sweat of agony broke out over his body. Holding his enemy helpless the invader worked his way toward the work table. They bumped against it, making the equipment totter perilously. Solinski released his grip, snatched a bottle of distilled water and swung.

Jack felt his head explode. The room went dark. But in his semi-consciousness he remembered he must not let the Russian reach that switch. As he slid slowly to the floor, he grasped the other's legs.

The drug fiend tried to kick free, stumbled, struck the table with his hips. Throwing out his arms to regain his balance he plunged one hand among the naked cables which led from the generator to the transformers and tubes.

A blinding flash of light and the scream of a soul in torment followed. As a nauseating odor of burning flesh filled the room, the Russian was hurled backward like a rubber ball. He struck the window which overlooked the park, crashed through the large panel and fell!

June sat as though hypnotised, forcing herself to manipulate those dials.

Jack crawled to the window and watched the black body swoop downward like a wounded bird, the coat flapping like crippled wings. After what seemed an eon it struck the edge of the subway kiosk, bounced like a rag doll and sprawled across the pavement.

Still Jack did not move. Through a haze of his own blood he stared, the fate of his enemy forgotten. All about the kiosk bodies which had lain so still for the past week were moving. The little figures, not much larger than ants from that height, yawned, sat up and stretched as though it was the commonest thing in the world to take a nap in the midst of Fifth Avenue. It was as if the last swoop of that batlike figure had returned them to consciousness.

"The world is alive! The world is alive!" Baron croaked wildly as he felt his senses slipping from him. "We have won, June! We have won!"

Contents

PLANET OF THE GODS
By Robert Moore Williams

Two planets circling Vega! But a more amazing discovery waited the explorers when they landed!

CHAPTER I

"What do you make of it?" Commander Jed Hargraves asked huskily.

Ron Val, busy at the telescope, was too excited to look up from the eye-piece. "There are at least two planets circling Vega!" he said quickly. "There may be other planets farther out, but I can see two plainly. And Jed, the nearest planet, the one we are approaching, has an atmosphere. The telescope reveals a blur that could only be caused by an atmosphere. And--Jed, this may seem so impossible you won't believe it--but I can see several large spots on the surface that are almost certainly lakes. They are not big enough to be called oceans or seas. But I am almost positive they are lakes!"

According to the preconceptions of astronomers, formed before they had a chance to go see for themselves, solar systems were supposed to be rare birds. Not every sun had a chance to give birth to planets. Not one sun in a
thousand, maybe not one in a million; maybe, with the exception of Sol, not another one in the whole universe.

And here the first sun approached by the Third Interstellar Expedition was circled by planets!

The sight was enough to drive an astronomer insane.

Ron Val tore his eyes away from the telescope long enough to stare at Captain Hargraves. "Air and water on this planet!" he gasped. "Jed, do you realize what this may mean?"

Jed Hargraves grinned. His face was lean and brown, and the grin, spreading over it, relaxed a little from the tension that had been present for months.

"Easy, old man," he said, clapping Ron Val on the shoulder. "There is nothing to get so excited about."

"But a solar system--"

"We came from one."

"I know we did. But just the same, finding another will put our names in all the books on astronomy. They aren't the commonest things in the universe, you know. And to find one of the planets of this new system with air and water--Jed, where there is air and water there may be life!"

"There probably is. Life, in some form, seems to be everywhere. Remember we found spores being kicked around by light waves in the deepest depths of space. And Pluto, in our own system, has mosses and lichens that the biologists insist are alive. It won't be surprising if we find life out there." He gestured through the port at the world swimming through space toward them.

"I mean intelligent life," Ron Val corrected.

"Don't bet on it. The old boys had the idea they would find intelligent life on Mars, until they got there. Then they discovered that intelligent creatures had once lived on the Red Planet. Cities, canals, and stuff. But the people who had built the cities and canals had died of starvation long before humans got to Mars. So it isn't a good bet that we shall find intelligence here."

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The astronomer's face drooped a little. But not for long. "That was true of Mars," he said. "But it isn't necessarily true here. And even if Mars was dead, Venus wasn't. Nor is Earth. If there is life on two of the planets of our own solar system, there may be life on one of the planets of Vega. Why not?" he challenged.

"Hey, wait a minute," Hargraves answered. "I'm not trying to start an argument."

"Why not?"

"If you mean why not an argument--"

"I mean, why not life here?"

"I don't know why not," Hargraves shrugged. "For that matter, I don't know why, either." He looked closely at Ron Val. "You ape! I believe you're hoping we will find life here."

"Of course that's what I'm hoping," Ron Val answered quickly. "It would mean a lot to find people here. We could exchange experiences, learn a lot. I know it's probably too much to hope for." He broke off. "Jed, are we going to land here?"

"Certainly we're going to land here!" Jed Hargraves said emphatically. "Why in the hell do you think we've crossed thirty light years if we don't land on a world when we find one? This is an exploring expedition--"

Hargraves saw that he had no listener. Ron Val had listened only long enough to learn what he wanted to know, then had dived back to his beloved telescope to watch the world spiraling up through space toward them. That world meant a lot to Ron Val, the thrill of discovery, of exploring where a human foot had never trod in all the history of the universe.

New lands in the sky! The Third Interstellar Expedition--third because two others were winging out across space, one toward Sirius, the other toward Cygnus--was approaching land! The fact also meant something to Jed Hargraves, possibly a little less than it did to Ron Val because Hargraves had more responsibilities. He was captain of the ship, commander of the expedition. It was his duty to take the ship to Vega, and to bring it safely home.

Half of his task was done. Vega was bright in the sky ahead and the tough bubble of steel and quartz that was the ship was dropping down to rest on one of Vega's planets. Hargraves started to leave the nook that housed Ron Val and his telescope.

The ship's loudspeaker system shouted with sudden sound.

"Jed! Jed Hargraves! Come to the bridge at once."

That was Red Nielson's voice. He was speaking from the control room in the nose of the ship. Nielson sounded excited.

Hargraves pushed a button under the loudspeaker. The system was two-way, allowing for intercommunication.

"Hargraves speaking. What's wrong?"

"A ship is approaching. It is coming straight toward us."

"A ship! Are you out of your head? This is Vega."
"I don't give a damn if it's Brooklyn! I know a space ship when I see one. And this is one. Either get up here and take command or tell me what you want done."

Discipline among the personnel of this expedition was so nearly perfect there was no need for it. Consequently there was none. Before leaving earth, skilled mental analysts had aided in the selection of this crew, and had welded it together so artfully that it thought, acted, and functioned as a unit. Jed Hargraves was captain, but he had never heard the word spoken, and never wanted to hear it. No one had ever put "sir" after his name. Nor had anyone ever questioned an order, after it was given. Violent argument there might be, before an order was given, with Hargraves filtering the pros and cons through his rigidly logical mind, but the instant he reached a decision the argument stopped. He was one of the crew, and the crew knew it. The crew was one with him, and he knew it.

He might question Nielson's facts, once, in surprise. But not twice. If Nielson said a ship was approaching, a ship was approaching.

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"I'm coming," Hargraves rapped into the mike. "Turn full power into the defense screen. Warn the engine room to be ready for an emergency. Sound the call to stations. And Red, hold us away from this planet."

Almost before he had finished speaking, a siren was wailing through the ship. Although he had used the microphone in the nook that housed the telescope, Ron Val had been so interested in the world they were approaching that he had not heard the captain's orders. He heard the siren.

"What is it, Jed?"

Hargraves didn't have time to explain. He was diving out the door and racing toward the bridge in the nose of the ship. "Come on," he flung back over his shoulder at Ron Val. "Your post is at the fore negatron."

Ron Val took one despairing glance at his telescope, then followed the commander.

As he ran toward the control room, Hargraves heard the ship begin to radiate a new tempo of sound. The siren was dying into silence, its warning task finished. Other sounds were taking its place. From the engine room in the stern was coming a spiteful hiss, like steam escaping under great pressure from a tiny vent valve. That was the twin atomics, loading up, building up the inconceivable pressures they would feed to the Kruchek drivers. A slight rumble went through the ship, a rumble seemingly radiated from every molecule, from every atom, in the vessel. It was radiated from every molecule! That rumble came from the Kruchek drivers warping the ship in response to the controls on the bridge. Bill Kruchek's going-faster-than-hell engines, engineers called them. A fellow by the name of Bill Kruchek had invented them. When Bill Kruchek's going-faster-than-hell drivers dug their toes into the lattice of space and put brawny shoulders behind every molecule within the field they generated, a ship within that field went faster than light. The Kruchek drivers, given the juice they needed in such tremendous quantities, took you from hell to yonder in a mighty hurry. They had been idling, drifting the ship slowly in toward the planet. Now, in response to an impulse from Nielson on the bridge, they grumbled, and hunching mighty shoulders for the load, prepared to hurl the ship away from the planet. Hargraves could feel the vessel surge in response to the speed. Then there was a distant thud, and he could feel the surge no longer. The anti-accelerators had been cut in, neutralizing the effect of inertia.

Shoving open a heavy door, Hargraves was in the control room. A glance showed him Nielson on the bridge. Leaning over, his fingers on the bank of buttons that controlled the ship, he was peering through the heavy quartzite observation port at something approaching from the right. Beside him, on his right, a man was standing ready at the radio panel. And to the left of the bridge two men had already jerked the covers from the negatron and were standing ready beside it.

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Ron Val leaped past Hargraves, dived for a seat on the negatron. That was his post. He had been chosen for it because of his familiarity with optical instruments. Along the top of the negatron was a sighting telescope. Ron Val looked once to see where the man on the bridge was looking, then his fingers flew to the adjusting levers of the telescope. The negatron swung around to the right, centered on something there.

"Ready," Ron Val said, not taking his eyes from the 'scope.

"Hold your fire," Hargraves ordered.

He was on the bridge, standing beside Red Nielson. Off to the right he could see the enemy ship. Odd that he should think of it as an enemy. It wasn't. It was merely a strange ship. But there were relics in his mind, vague racial memories, of the days when stranger and enemy were synonymous. The times when this was true were gone forever, but the thoughts remained.

"Shall we run for it?" Nielson questioned, his hands on the controls that would turn full power into the drivers.

"No. If we run, they will think we have some reason for running. That might be all they would need to conclude we are up to no good. Is the defense screen on full power?"

"Yes." Nielson pushed the lever again to be sure. "I'm giving it all it will take."
Hargraves could barely see the screen out there a half mile from the ship. It was twinkling dimly as it swept up cosmic dust.[1]

[Footnote 1: Originally devised as a protection against meteors, it was a field of force that would disintegrate any solid particle that struck it, always presuming it did not tangle with an asteroid or a meteor too big for it to handle. A blood brother of the negatron, it made space flight, if not a first-class insurance risk, at least fairly safe.--Ed.]

The oncoming ship had been a dot in the sky. Now it was a round ball.

"Try them on the radio," Hargraves said. "They probably won't understand us but at least they will know we're trying to communicate with them."

There was a swirl of action at the radio panel.

"No answer," the radio operator said.

"Keep trying."

"Look!" Nielson shouted. "They've changed course. They're coming straight toward us."

The ball had bobbed in its smooth flight. As though caught in the attraction of a magnet it was coming straight toward them.

For an instant, Hargraves stared. Should he run or should he wait? He didn't want to run and he didn't want to fight. On the other hand, he did not want to take chances with the safety of the men under his command.

His mission was peaceful. Entirely so. But the ball was driving straight toward them. How big it was he could not estimate. It wasn't very big. Oddly, it presented a completely blank surface. No ports. And, so far as he could tell, there was no discharge from driving engines. The latter meant nothing. Their own ship showed no discharge from the Kruchek drivers. But no ports--

It came so fast he couldn't see it come. The flash of light! It came from the ball. For the fractional part of a second, the defense screen twinkled where the flash of light hit it. But--the defense screen was not designed to turn light or any other form of radiation. The light came through. It wasn't light. It carried a component of visible radiation but it wasn't light. The beam struck the earth ship.

Clang!

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From the stern came a sudden scream of tortured metal. The ship rocked, careened, tried to spin on its axis. On the control panels, a dozen red lights flashed, winked off, winked on again. Heavy thuds echoed through the vessel. Emergency compartments closing.

Hargraves hesitated no longer.

"Full speed ahead!" he shouted at Red Nielson.

"Ron Val. Fire!"

This was an attack. This was a savage, vicious attack, delivered without warning, with no attempt to parley. The ship had been hit. How badly it had been damaged he did not know. But unless the damage was too heavy they could outrun this ball, flash away from it faster than light, disappear in the sky, vanish. The ship had legs to run. There was no limit to her speed. She could go fast, then she could go faster.

"Full speed--"

Nielson looked up from the bank of buttons. His face was ashen. "She doesn't respond, Jed. The drivers are off. The engine room is knocked out."

There was no rumble from Bill Kruchek's going-faster-than-hell engines. The hiss of the atomics was still faintly audible. Short of annihilation, nothing could knock them out. Energy was being generated but it wasn't getting to the drive. Leaping to the controls, Hargraves tried them himself.

They didn't respond.

"Engine room!" he shouted into the communication system.

There was no answer.

The ship began to yaw, to drop away toward the planet below them. The planet was far distant as yet, but the grasping fingers of its gravity were reaching toward the vessel, pulling it down.

Voices shouted within the ship.

"Jed!"

"What happened?"

"Jed, we're falling!"

"That ball, Jed--"

Voices calling to Jed Hargraves, asking him what to do. He couldn't answer. There was no answer. There was only--the ball! It was the answer.

Through the observation port, he could see the circular ship. It was getting ready to attack again. The sphere
was moving leisurely toward its already crippled prey, getting ready to deliver the final stroke. It would answer all questions of this crew, answer them unmistakably. It leered at them.

Wham!

The ship vibrated to a sudden gust of sound. Something lashed out from the vessel. Hargraves did not see it go because it, too, went faster than the eye could follow. But he knew what it was. The sound told him. He saw the hole appear in the sphere. A round hole that opened inward. Dust puffed outward.

Wham, wham, wham!

The negatron! The blood brother of the defense screen, its energies concentrated into a pencil of radiation. Faster than anyone could see it happen, three more holes appeared in the sphere, driving through its outer shell, punching into the machinery at its heart.

The sphere shuddered under the impact. It turned. Light spewed out of it, beaming viciously into this alien sky without direction. Smoke boiled from the ball. Turning it seemed to roll along the sky. It looked like a huge burning snowball rolling down some vast hill.

Ron Val lifted a white face from the sighting 'scope of the negatron.

"Did--did I get him?"

"I'll say you did!" Hargraves heard somebody shout exultantly. He was surprised to discover his own voice was doing the shouting. The sphere was finished, done for. It was out of the fight, rolling down the vast hill of the sky, it would smash on the planet below.

They were following it.

There was still no answer from the engine room.

"Space suits!" Hargraves ordered. "Nielson, you stay here. Ron Val, you others, come with me."

CHAPTER II

Vegan World

The engine room was crammed to the roof with machinery. The bulked housings of the atomics, their heavy screens shutting off the deadly radiations generated in the heart of energy seething within the twin domes, were at the front. They looked like two blast furnaces that had somehow wandered into a space ship by mistake and hadn't been able to find their way out again. The fires of hell, hotter than any blast furnace had ever been, seethed within them.

Behind the atomics were the Kruchek drivers, twin brawny giants chained to the treadmill they pushed through the skies. Silent now. Not grumbling at their task. Loafing. Like lazy slaves conscious of their power, they worked only when the lash was on them.

Between the drivers was the control panel. Ninety-nine percent automatic, those controls. They needed little human attention, and got little. There were never more than three men on duty here. This engine room almost operated itself.

It had ceased to operate itself, Jed Hargraves saw, as he forced open the last stubborn air-tight door separating the engine room from the rest of the ship. Ceased because--Involuntarily he cried out.

He could see the sky.

A great V-shaped notch straddled the back of the ship. Something, striking high on the curve of the hull, had driven through inches of magna steel, biting a gigantic chunk out of the ship. The beam from the sphere! That flashing streak of light that had driven through the defense screen. It had struck here.

"Jed! They're dead!"

That was Ron Val's voice, choking over the radio. One of the men in this engine room had been Hal Sarkoff, a black-browed giant from somewhere in Montana. Engines had behaved for Sarkoff. Intuitively he had seemed to know mechanics.

He and Ron Val had been particular friends.

"The air went," Hargraves said. "When that hole was knocked in the hull, the air went. The automatic doors blocked off the rest of the ship. The poor devils--"

The air had gone and the cold had come. He could see Sarkoff's body lying beside one of the drivers. The two other men were across the room. A door to the stern compartment was there. They were crumpled against it.

Hargraves winced with pain. He should have ordered everyone into space suits. The instant Nielson reported the approach of the sphere, Hargraves should have shouted, "Space suits" into the mike. He hadn't.

The receiver in his space suit crisped with sound.

"Jed! Have you got into that engine room yet? For cripes sake, Jed, we're falling."

That was Nielson, on the bridge. He sounded frantic.

Sixteen feet the first second, then thirty-two, then sixty-four. They had miles to fall, but their rate of fall progressed geometrically. They had spent many minutes fighting their way through the air tight doors. One hundred
and twenty-eight feet the fourth second. Jed's mind was racing.

No, by thunder, that was acceleration under an earth gravity. They didn't know the gravity here. It might be less.

It might be more.

Ron Val had run forward and was kneeling beside Sarkoff.

"Let them go," Hargraves said roughly. "Ron Val, you check the drivers. You--" Swiftly he assigned them tasks, reserving the control panel for himself.

* * * * *

They were specialists. Noble, the blond youth, frantically examining the atomics, was a bio-chemist. Ushur, the powerfully built man who had stood at Ron Val's right hand on the negatron, was an archeologist.

They were engineers now. They had to be.

"Nothing seems to be wrong here." That was Ron Val, from the drivers.

"The atomics are working." That was Noble reporting.

"Then what the hell is wrong?" At the control panel, Hargraves saw what was wrong. The damned controls were automatic, with temperature and air pressure cut-offs. When the air had gone from the engine room, that meant something was wrong. The controls had automatically cut off the drivers. The ship had stopped moving.

A manual control was provided. Hargraves shoved the switch home. An oil-immersed control thudded. The loafing giants grunted as the lash struck them, roared with pain as they got hastily to work on their treadmill.

The ship moved forward.

"We're moving!" That was Red Nielson shouting. The controls on the bridge were responding now. "I'm going to burn a hole in space getting us away from here."

"No!" said Hargraves.

"What?" There was incredulous doubt in Nielson's voice. "That damned sphere came from this planet."

"Can't help it. We've got to land."

"Land here, now!"

"There's a hole as big as the side of a house in the ship. No air in the engine room. Without air, we can't control the temperature. If we go into space, the engine room temperature will drop almost to absolute zero. These drivers are not designed to work in that temperature, and they won't work in it. We have to land and repair the ship before we dare go into space."

"But--"

"We land here!"

There was a split second of silence. "Okay, Jed," Nielson said. "But if we run into another of those spheres--"

"We'll know what to do about it. Ron Val. Ushur. Back to the bridge and man the negatron. If you see anything that even looks suspicious, beam it."

Ron Val and Ushur dived through the door that led forward.

"Stern observation post. Are you alive back there?"

"We heard you, Jed. We're alive all right."

Back of the engine room, tucked away in the stern, was another negatron.

"Shoot on sight!" Hargraves said.

The Third Interstellar Expedition was coming in to land—with her fangs bared.

Jed Hargraves called a volunteer to hold the switch—it had to be held in by hand, otherwise it would automatically kick out again—and went forward to the bridge. Red Nielson gladly relinquished the controls to him.

"The sphere crashed over there," Nielson said, waving vaguely to the right.

* * * * *

Not until he stepped on the bridge did Jed Hargraves realize how close a call they had had. The fight had started well outside the upper limits of the atmosphere. They were well inside it now. Another few minutes and they would have screamed to a flaming crash here on this world and the Third Interstellar Expedition would have accomplished only half its mission, the least important half.

He shoved the nose of the ship down, the giants working eagerly at their treadmill now, as if they realized they had been caught loafing on the job and were trying to make amends. The planet swam up toward them. He barely heard the voice of Noble reporting a chemical test of the air that was now swirling around the ship. "—oxygen, so much; water vapor; nitrogen—" The air was breathable. They would not have to attempt repairs in space suits, then.

Abruptly, as they dropped lower, the contour of the planet seemed to change from the shape of a ball to the shape of a cup. The eyes did that. The eyes were tricky. But Jed knew his eyes were not tricking him when they brought him impressions of the surface below them.

A gently rolling world sweeping away into the distance, moving league after league into dim infinities,
appeared before his eyes. No mountains, no hills, even. Gentle slopes rolling slowly downward into plains. No large rivers. Small streams winding among trees. Almost immediately below them was one of the lakes Ron Val had seen through his telescope. The lake was alive with blue light reflected from the--No, the light came from Vega, not Sol. They were light years away from the warming rays of the friendly sun.

Jed lowered the ship until she barely cleared the ground, sent her slowly forward seeking what he wanted. There was a grove of giant trees beside the lake. Overhead their foliage closed in an arch that would cut out the sight of the sky. This was what he wanted. He turned the ship around.

"Hey!" said Nielson.

"I'm going to back her out of sight among those trees," Hargraves answered. "I'm hunting a hole to hide in while we lie up and lick our wounds."

Overhead, boughs crashed as the ship slid out of sight. Gently he relaxed the controls, let her drop an inch at a time until she rested on the ground. Then he opened the switches, and grunting with relief, the giants laid themselves down on their treadmill and promptly went to sleep. For the first time in months the ship was silent.

"Negatron crews remain at your posts. I'm going to take a look."

The lock hissed as it opened before him. Hargraves, Nielson, Noble, stepped out, the captain going first. The ground was only a couple of feet away but he lowered himself to it with the precise caution that a twenty-foot jump would have necessitated. He was not unaware of the implications of this moment. His was the first human foot to tread the soil of a planet circling Vega. The great-grand-children of his great-grand-children would tell their sons about this.

The soil was springy under his feet, possessing an elasticity that he had not remembered as natural with turf. Opening his helmet, he sniffed the air. It was cool and alive with a heady fragrance that came from growing vegetation, a quality the ship's synthesizers, for all the ingenuity incorporated in them, could not duplicate. Tasting the air, the cells of his lungs eagerly shouted for more. He sucked it in, and the tensions that kept his body all steel springs and whipcord relaxed a little. A breeze stirred among the trees.

"Sweet Pete!" he gasped.

"That's what I was trying to tell you as we landed," Nielson said. "This is not a forest. This is a grove. These trees didn't just grow here in straight orderly lines. They were planted! We are hiding in what may be the equivalent of somebody's apple orchard."

The trees were giants. Twenty feet through at the butt, they rose a hundred feet into the air. Diminishing in the distance, they moved in regular rows down to the shore of the lake, forming a pleasant grove miles in extent. A reddish fruit, not unlike apples, grew on them.

CHAPTER III

The Four Visitors

"Somebody coming!" the lookout called.

Jed Hargraves dropped the shovel. Behind him the hiss of an electric cutting torch and the whang of a heavy hammer went into sudden silence. Back there, a hundreds yards away, they had already begun work on the ship, attempting to repair the hole gouged in the stout magna steel of the hull. They had heard the call of the lookout and were dropping tools to pick up weapons. Jed's hand slid down to his belt to the compact vibration pistol holstered there. He pulled the gun, held it ready in his hand. Ron Val and Nielson did the same.

Vega, slanting downward, was near the western horizon. The grove was a mass of shadows. Through the shadows something was coming.

"They're human!" Ron Val gasped.

Hargraves said nothing. His fingers tightened around the butt of the pistol as he waited. He saw them clearly now. There were four of them. They looked like--old men. Four tribal gray-beards out for a stroll in the cool of the late afternoon. Each carried a staff. They were walking toward the ship. Then they saw the little group that stood apart and turned toward them.

"The teletron. Will you go get it, please, Ron Val?"

Nodding, the astro-navigator ran back to the ship. The teletron was a new gadget, invented just before the expedition left earth. Far from perfection as yet, it was intended to aid in establishing telepathic communication between persons who had no common language. Sometimes it worked, a little. More often it didn't. But it might be useful here. Ron Val was panting when he returned with it.

"Are you going to talk to them, Jed?"

"I'm going to try."

The four figures approached. Hargraves smiled. That was to show his good intentions. A smile ought to be common language everywhere.
The four strangers did not return his smile. They just stopped and looked at him with no trace of emotion on their faces.

[Illustration: What strange thing was this? Who were these people and what was their power?]

They looked human. They weren't, of course. Parallel evolution accounted for the resemblance, like causes producing like results.

Nielson was watching them like a hawk. Without making an aggressive move, the way he held his gun showed he was ready to go into action at a moment's notice. Behind them, the ship was silent, its crew alert. Hargraves bent to manipulate the complicated tuning of the teletron.

"I am Thulon," a voice whispered in his brain. "No need for that."

Jed Hargraves' leaped to his feet. He caught startled glances from Ron Val and Nielson and knew they had heard and understood too. Understood, rather. There had been nothing for the ears to hear.

"Thulon! No need for--I understood you without--"

Thulon smiled. He was taller than the average human, and very slender. "We are natural telepaths. So there is no need to use your instrument."

"Uh? Natural telepaths! Well, I'm damned!"

"Damned? I cannot quite grasp the meaning of the word. Your mind is radiating on an emotional level. Do you wish to indicate surprise? I cannot grasp your thinking."

Hargraves choked, fought for control of his mind. For a minute it had run away with him. He brought it to heel.

"What are you doing here?" Thulon asked.

Hargraves blinked at the directness of the question. They certainly wasted no time getting down to business.

"We--" He caught himself. No telling how much they could take directly from his mind!

"We came from--far away." He tried to force his thoughts into narrow channels. "We--"

"There is no need to be afraid." Thulon smiled gently. Or was there williness in that smile? Was this stranger attempting to lure him into a feeling of false security?

"I meant, what are you doing here?" Thulon continued. His eyes went down to the ground.

There was only one shovel on the ground. One shovel was all there had been in the ship. Thulon's glance went to it, went on.

There were three mounds. The soft mould had dug easily. It had all been patted back into place. On the middle mound Ron Val had finished placing a small cross that he had hastily improvised from the ship's stores. Scratched in the metal was a name: Hal Sarkoff.

"We had an outbreak of buboes," Hargraves said. "That's a disease. Three of our companions died and we landed here to bury them. We had just finished doing this when you arrived."

"Died! Three of you died? And you hid them under these mounds?"

"Yes. Of course. There was nothing else we could--"

"You are going to leave them here in the ground!"

"Certainly." Hargraves was wondering if this method of disposing of the dead violated some tribal taboo of this people. Different races disposed of their dead in different ways. He did not know the customs of the inhabitants of this world. "If we have offended against your customs, we are sorry."

"No. There was no offense." Thulon blanketeted his thoughts. Hargraves could almost feel the blanket slip into place.

"You came in that ship?" Thulon pointed toward the vessel.

"Yes. It was impossible to conceal this fact."

"Ah." Thulon hesitated, seemed to grope through his mind for the exact shade of expression he wished to convey. Hargraves was aware that the stranger's eyes probed through him, measured him. "It would interest us to examine the vessel. Would you permit this?"

"Certainly." Hargraves knew that Red Nielson jerked startled eyes toward him.

"Jed!" Nielson spoke in protest.

"Shut up!" Hargraves snapped. His body and his mind was a mass of tightly wound springs but his face was calm and his voice was suave. He turned to Thulon. "I will be glad to take you through our ship. However, I do not recommend it."

"No?"

"It might be dangerous, for you and your companions. We have had three cases of buboes, resulting in three deaths. All of us have had shots of immunizing serum and we hope we will have no more cases. However, the germs are unquestionably present in the atmosphere of the ship. Since you probably have no immunity to the disease, to breathe the tainted air would almost certainly result in an attack. This disease is fatal in nine cases out of ten. I
therefore suggest you do not enter the ship. In fact," Hargraves concluded, "I was about to say that it might not be wise for you and your companions even to come near us, because of the possibility that you might contract the disease."

* * * * *

Had he gotten the story over it? Was it convincing? Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Ron Val glance at him. When he had said their companions had died of buboes, Ron Val had looked as if he thought he was out of his mind. Now Ron Val understood. "Good going, Jed," his glance seemed to say.

"Hargraves--" This was Nielson speaking. His face was black.

"I suggest," said Jed casually, "that you let me handle this."

Nielson gulped. "Yes. Yes, sir," he said.

Thulon's companions had been paying attention to the conversation. But all the time they were stealing glances at the ship. With half their minds, they seemed to be listening to what was being said. But the other half of their minds was interested in that silent ship hidden under the trees. Were they merely curious, such as any savage might be? Or was this group making a reconnaissance? Hargraves did not know. It did not look like a reconnaissance in force.

"Do you really think we might contract this disease?" Thulon asked.

Hargraves shrugged. "I'm not certain. You might not. It would all depend on the way your bodies reacted to the organism causing the disease."

"Under such circumstances, you show little consideration for our welfare by bringing a plague ship to land here."

"We didn't know you existed. I assure you, however, that if you will remain away from the ship until we have an opportunity to disinfect it thoroughly, any danger to your people will be very slight. On the other hand, if you wish to look our vessel over, to assure yourselves that we are not a menace to you--which we are not--I shall be glad to take you through the ship."

Was he drawing it too fine? He spoke clearly and forcefully. The words, of course, would carry no meaning. But the thought that went along with them would convey what he wanted to say.

"Ah." The thought came from Thulon. "Perhaps--" Again the blanket came over his mind and Hargraves had the impression Thulon was conferring with his companions.

The silent conference ended.

"Perhaps," Thulon said. "It would be better if we returned to visit you tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow."

He bowed. Without another word he and his silent companions turned and began to walk slowly away. Not until he saw the little group slipping away into the dusk did Jed realize he had been holding his breath.

"Hargraves!" Nielson's voice was harsh. "Are you going to let them get away? You fool! That sphere came from this world. Have you forgotten?"

"I have forgotten nothing, I hope."

"But you offered to take them through the ship! They would have seen how badly damaged she is."

"Of course I offered to take them through the ship, then made it impossible for them to accept. We can't stick up 'No Trespassing' signs here. This is their world. We don't know a damned thing about it, or about them. We can't run and we don't want to fight, if we can help it. Furthermore, Nielson, I want you to learn to control your tongue. Remember that in the future, will you?"

For a second, Nielson glared at him. "Yes, sir."

"All right. Go on back to the ship."

* * * * *

Nielson went clumping back toward the vessel. Hargraves turned to Ron Val.

"What do you make of it?"

"I don't know, Jed. There is something about it that I don't like a little bit. They can read minds. Maybe that is what I don't like because I don't know how to react to it. Jed, it may be that we are in great danger here."

"There is little doubt about that," Hargraves answered. "Tonight we will stand watches. Tomorrow we will make a reconnaissance of our own."

Dusk came over the grove. Vega hesitated on the horizon as though trying to make up its mind, then abruptly took the plunge and dived from sight beyond the rim of the world. Night came abruptly, hiding the ship and its occupants. In the sky overhead, stars twinkled like the eyes of watchful wolves.

CHAPTER IV

The Monster

They blacked out the ship before they moved it, carefully covering each port with paper, then showing no lights. Hargraves handled the controls himself, slowly turning current into the drivers so their grunting would not
reveal what was happening.

"Are we going to take her up high for tonight?" Ushur, the archeologist asked. "She will fly all right as long as we stay in the atmosphere. We would be safer up high, it seems to me."

"Safer from ground attack, yes," Hargraves said thoughtfully. "However, I'm afraid we would be more exposed to attack from a ship."

"Oh! That damned sphere. I had forgotten about it."

Hargraves moved the ship less than a mile, carefully hid her among the trees. Then he posted guards outside all the ports. He took the first watch himself, in the control room. Ron Val was waiting for him there. The astro-navigator's face was grave. "Jed," he said. "I've been talking to several of the fellows. They don't believe you are taking a sufficiently realistic view of our situation. They don't believe you are facing the facts."

"Um. What facts have I been evading?"

"You apparently don't realize that it will take months--if it can be done at all--to repair the damage to the ship."

Hargraves settled deep into his chair. He looked at the astro-navigator. Ron Val wasn't angry. Nor was he mutinous. He wasn't challenging authority. He was just scared.

"Ron," he said, "according to the agreement under which we sailed, any time the majority of the members of this expedition wants a new captain, they can have him."

"It isn't that."

"I know. You fellows are scared. Hells bells, man! What do you think I am?"

Ron Val's eyes popped open. "Jed! Are you? You don't show it. You don't seem even to appreciate the spot we're in."

Hargraves slowly lit a cigarette. The fingers holding the tiny lighter did not shake. "If I had been the type to show it, do you think I would have been selected to head this expedition?"

"No. But--"

"Because I haven't made an official announcement that we may not be able to repair the ship, you seem to think I don't realize the fact. I know how big a hole has been ripped in our hull. I know the ship is made of magna steel, the toughest, hardest, most beautiful metal yet invented. I know the odds are we can't repair the hole in the hull. We don't have the metal. We don't have the tools to work it. I know these things. When I didn't call it to your attention, I assumed it was equally obvious to everyone else that we may never leave this planet."

"Jed! Never leave this planet! Never--go home! That can't be right."

"See," said Hargraves. "When you get the truth flung in your face, even you crack wide open. Yes, it's the truth. The fact you fellows think I'm not facing--the one you don't dare face--is that we may be marooned here for the rest of our lives."

That was that. Ron Val went aft. Hargraves took up his vigil on the bridge. At midnight Ron Val came forward to relieve him.

"I told them what you said, Jed," the astro-navigator said. "We're back of you one hundred per cent."

Hargraves grinned a little. "Thanks," he said. "We were selected to work together as a unit. As long as we remain a unit, we will have a chance against any enemy."

* * * * *

Dog-tired, he went to his bunk and rolled in. It seemed to him he had barely closed his eyes before a hand grabbed him by the shoulder and a shaken voice shouted in his ear. "Jed! Wake up."

"Who is it? What's wrong?" The room was dark and he couldn't see who was shaking him.

"Ron Val." The astro-navigator's voice was hoarse with the maddest, wildest fright Hargraves had ever heard.

"The--the damnedest thing has happened!"

"What?"

"Hal Sarkoff--" That was as far as Ron Val could get.

"What about him?"

"He's outside trying to get in!"

"Have you gone insane? Sarkoff is dead. You helped me bury him."

"I know it. Jed, he's outside. He wants in."

Hargraves had gone to bed without removing even his shoes. He ran forward to the control room, Ron Val pounding behind him. Lights had been turned on here, in defiance of orders. Someone had summoned the crew. They were all here, all eighteen who remained alive. The inner door of the lock was open. A dazed guard, who had been on watch outside the lock, was standing in the door. He had a pistol in his hand but he looked as if he didn't know what to do with it.

In the center of a group of men too frightened to move was a black-haired, rugged giant.

"Sarkoff!" Hargraves gasped.
The giant's head turned until his gaze was centered on the captain. "You moved the ship," he said accusingly. "I had the damnedest time finding it in the dark. What did you move the ship for, Jed?"

If some super-magician had cast a spell over the little group he could not have produced a more complete stasis. No one moved. No one seemed to breathe. All motion, all action, all thinking, had stopped.

Sarkoff's face went from face to face.

"What the heck is the matter with you guys?" he demanded. "Am I poison, or something?"

He seemed bewildered.

"Where--where are the others?" Ron Val stammered.

"What others? What the heck are you talking about, Ron?"

"Nevins and Reese. We--we buried them with you. Where are they?"

"How the hell do I kn----You buried them with me?" Sarkoff's face went from bewilderment to inexplicable good nature. "Trying to pull my leg, huh? Okay. I can go along with a gag." He looked again at Hargraves. "But I can't go along with that gag of moving the ship after you sent me out scouting. Why didn't you wait for me? Wandering around among all these trees, I might have got lost and got myself killed. Why did you do that, Jed?" he finished angrily.

"We were--ah--afraid of an attack," Hargraves choked out. "Sorry, Hal, but we--we had to move the ship. We would have--hunted you up, tomorrow."

Sarkoff was not a man who was ever long angry about anything. The apology satisfied him. He grinned. "Okay, Jed. Forget it. Jeepers! I'm so hungry I could eat a cow. How about a couple of those synthetic steaks we got in the ice-box?" His eyes went around the group, came to rest on the astro-navigator. "How about it, Ron? How about you and you fixing us up some chow?"

"Sure," said Hargraves. "Go on back to the galley and start fixing yourself whatever you want. You go with him, Ron. I'll handle your job up here while you're gone."

Nodding dumbly, Ron Val started to follow Sarkoff toward the galley. "One minute," Hargraves called after him. "I want to check something with you before you go!"

Sarkoff kept going. Ron Val returned. "Take your cues from him," Hargraves said. "You know him better than anyone else. Whatever he says, you agree. Casually bring up past events and watch his reaction. Your job is to find out if that is really Hal Sarkoff?"

The astro-navigator, his face white, clumped toward the galley.

Hargraves faced a torrent of questions.

"Jed! We buried him."

"Jed. He had been in that engine room without air for at least ten minutes before we got there. He can't be alive."

"What did you mean when you told Ron Val to find out if that is really Sarkoff?"

"Just what I said. That may be Sarkoff. It may be something that looks like Sarkoff, acts like him, talks like him--but isn't he!"

"That--that's impossible."

"How do we know what is possible here and what isn't?"

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to act just as we would if that were Sarkoff. We're going to pick up our cues from him? You remember he said he was out scouting. That is his story. We will not question it. We will act as though it were true, until we know what is happening. Now everybody back to his post. Act as if nothing had happened. And for the love of Pete, don't ask me what is going on. I don't know any more than you do."

They didn't want to obey that order. They had just seen a dead man walking, had heard him talking, had spoken to him. There was comfort in just being with each other. Hargraves walked to the bridge, waited. Eventually, discipline sent them back to their posts. He kept on waiting. Ron Val returned.

"I don't know, Jed. I just don't know. We were in school together. I brought up incidents that happened in school, things that only Hal and I knew. Jed, he knew them."

With the exception of a hooded blue lamp on the bridge, all lights had been turned off again. The control room
was in darkness. Ron Val was an uneasy shadow talking from dim blackness.

"Then you think that it is really Sarkoff?"

"I don't know."

"But if he remembers things that only Hal could know--"

"He remembers things that he can't know."

"Um. What things?"

"He asked me how much progress had been made in repairing the ship. Jed, he must have died before he knew
the ship had been damaged."

"Not necessarily," said Hargraves thoughtfully. "He might have been conscious for one or two minutes after the
beam struck us. He would know that the ship had been damaged. What did you tell him?"

"I changed the subject."

"Good for you. If he isn't Sarkoff, the one thing he might want to know is whether the ship has been repaired.
What else?"

"Jed, he remembers everything that happened after the ship was attacked. We almost crashed before we got the
engines started. He remembers that. He remembers hiding the ship among the trees."

Hargraves stirred. The keen logic of his mind was being blunted by facts that would not fit into any logical
pattern. He tried to think. His mind refused the effort. Dead men ought not to remember things that happened after
they died. But a dead man had remembered!

For an instant panic walked through the captain's mind. Then he got it under control. There was always an
answer to every question, a solution to every problem. Or was there? He went hunting facts.

"Does he remember being buried?"

Even in the darkness he could feel Ron Val shiver. "No," Ron Val said. "He doesn't remember. Just as soon as
we landed, he thinks you sent him out, to scout the surrounding territory for possible enemies."

"Does he know that we had visitors in his absence?"

"No. Or if he does, he didn't mention it, and I didn't ask. He says he was returning when he saw the ship being
moved. He says he tried to follow, but lost it in the darkness. He says he had the devil's own time finding it again,
and he's still hot about being left behind."

Again Hargraves had to fight the panic in his mind. This much seemed obvious. Sarkoff's memory was
accurate—until the ship landed. Then it went into fantasy, into error. If one thing was certain, he had not been sent
out to scout for enemies. If there was another fact that was immutable, he had been buried.

"Where is he now?" Hargraves asked abruptly.

"In his bunk, snoring. He ate enough for two men, yawned, said he was sleepy. He was sound asleep almost as
soon as he touched the blankets."

Ron Val's voice relapsed into silence. The whole ship was silent.

"Jed, what are we going to do?"

"You bunk with him, don't you?"

"Yes. Jed! You don't mean--"

Hargraves cleared his throat. "This is not an order. You don't have to do it if you don't want to. But Sarkoff
must be watched. Are you willing to go back to the room you two shared together and get into the upper deck of
your bunk just as if nothing has happened?"

"Yes," said Ron Val.

"Somebody must be with him—all the time. You stay awake. When he gets up, you get up. Whatever he does,
you stay with him. I'll have you relieved as soon as possible. And, Ron--"

"Yes."

"You have something a man could use for courage."

Silently, Ron Val walked out of the control room. He fumbled his way through the door and his steps echoed
down the corridor that led to the sleeping quarters.

Hargraves sat in thought. Then he, too, left the control room.

"Noble, you're a bio-chemist. You come with me. Nielson, you take over here in the control room. In my
absence you are in command."

"Yes sir," Nielson said. "But what are you going to do?"

"See what is in a grave we dug yesterday," Hargraves answered.

CHAPTER V

What the Graves Revealed

Hargraves carried the shovel. He and Noble were armed, and very much alert.

"When you ask me if it is chemically possible for a man--or an animal--to freeze, die, be buried, then rise again
and live, I cannot answer," Noble said. "So far as I know, it is not possible. The physical act of freezing will involve
tremendous and seemingly irreversible changes in the body cells. Thawing will produce almost immediate bacterial
action, which also seems irreversible. All I can say is, if Hal Sarkoff is alive, we have seen a miracle that contradicts
chemical laws as we know them."

"And if he is not alive, we face a miracle of duplication. Whatever it is that is sleeping back in the ship, it looks,
talks, acts, like Hal Sarkoff, even to memory. Can you suggest any method by which flesh and bone could be so
speedily moulded into a living image of a man whom we know died?"

"No," said Noble bluntly. "Jed, do you realize all the possible implications of this situation?"

"Probably not," Hargraves answered. "Some that I do recognize, I exclude from my thoughts."

His tone was so harsh that Noble said nothing more.

Dawn was already breaking over this Vegan world. The sky in the east was the color of pearl. In the trees over
them, creatures that sounded like birds were beginning to chirp.

They reached the place where they had buried Hal Sarkoff and his two companions.
The graves were empty.

No effort had been made to conceal the fact that the graves had been opened. The dirt had been shoveled out
again and had not been shoveled back.

There were marks in the dirt, the tracks of sandaled feet. "Thulon, the three who were with him, wore sandals!"
Hargraves rasped. "They came back here. They opened these graves."

"But what happened after that? Are you suggesting those primitive gray-beards resurrected Hal Sarkoff?"

"I'm not suggesting anything because I don't know anything," Hargraves answered. "I am just remembering that
Thulon and the three who were with him looked human too! I am also remembering that the sphere which attacked
us seemingly was without a crew. Our beams blasted it wide open. It was seemingly filled with machinery. Nothing
else. If there were any intelligent creatures in it, they were in no form that we recognize. Come on!" Hargraves
started running toward the ship.

The ship, badly damaged as it was, represented their sole hope of survival. Without it, they would be helpless.

Hal Sarkoff was with the ship. Or the thing that was masquerading as Sarkoff. Thulon had looked human too.
Possibly Sarkoff and his two dead comrades had been removed from their graves in order to make possible a perfect
duplication of their bodies, the probing of cell structure, both body and brain. Perhaps the things that lurked here on
this world could read memories from dead minds. That might be the explanation of Sarkoff's memory.

The important fact was that Sarkoff's body was not in its grave. Where so much was unknown, this was one
indisputable fact. The thing that was on the ship must be placed not only under heavy guard but in a cage from
which escape was impossible. Then an examination could begin.

There was evil on this world. The trees, the vegetation, the ground under his racing feet, was evil. In his calmer
moments Jed Hargraves would have said that evil was another word for danger. He wasn't calm now. The panic he
had been rigidly excluding from his mind had burst the dam he had built before it. He could feel danger in the air. It
was in the dawn, in the light of the sky. It was everywhere. He and his companions were aliens on this world, and
the planet was striking at them, striving to eliminate them, contriving to destroy them.

He heard it before he saw it.

Something was grunting in the air. Above the tops of the trees something was grunting. He needed seconds to
recognize the sound. Then he recognized it. And jerked himself to a halt, his eyes wildly probing upward.

He saw it.

* * * * *

The ship. The grunting roar had come from the Kruchek drivers fighting the gravity of the planet.
The ship had taken off without them.
Had Nielson gone mad? Had he seen danger approaching and jumped the ship into the sky to escape it?
"Wait! Nielson! Pick us up!"

The ship flew on. Gaining speed, it passed over their heads. They caught another glimpse of it as it passed over
an opening in the branches of the trees. Then it was gone, the throb of the drivers dying quickly away.

"Nielson will come back for us." Noble's voice, usually poised and assured, was garbled. "He'll return and pick
us up. He won't leave us here."

"He had some reason for taking off," Hargraves heard himself saying. "He'll come back. He has to." Subconsciously he knew that this, at the very best, was wishful thinking.

The ship had no more than vanished until another sound came to their ears, that of men shouting. A group came
into sight among the trees, following along the ground the course the ship had taken through the air.

"They're our fellows!" Hargraves heard Noble gasp.

"What happened?" the captain demanded, as the group approached.
Nielson was in the lead. There was a bruise on his cheek and his right eye was already beginning to turn black.
"I'll tell you what happened!" he said savagely. "Sarkoff and Ron Val took over the ship, that's what happened!"
"Ron Val!"
"That's what I said. Ron Val was helping him. They pulled guns. Before we knew what was happening, they
had herded us together and were shoving us outside. I tried to stop it and Sarkoff took a poke at me."
"It wasn't really Sarkoff, then?" Noble whispered.
"Any damned fool would have known that!" Nielson answered. He spoke to the bio-chemist but his eyes were
on Hargraves. "I'm going to repeat that, so there won't be any misunderstanding of my meaning. Any damned fool
would have known that a dead man doesn't get up out of his grave and come to life again. Except you, Hargraves.
You always were a sucker for fairy stories."

Jed Hargraves winced with every word that was spoken. They kept on coming.
"You ought to have known that thing wasn't Hal Sarkoff. Any man in his right senses would have known it
instantly. Any man fit to command would have taken measures to meet the situation, either by destroying that thing,
or locking it up. But you were running things, Hargraves. You were in charge. And you had to sit back and think
before you would act. You had to make sure you were right, before you went ahead. Your negligence, Hargraves,
cost us our only chance of ever returning home."

Nielson's voice was harsh with anger. And--Hargraves recognized the bitter truth--every word Nielson uttered
was correct. Whatever the thing was that had come to the ship, he should have recognized it as a source of danger.
He had so recognized it. But he had not acted.
"I--"
"Shut up!" Nielson snapped. "According to our agreement, any time you are shown to be unfit to command,
you may be removed by a vote of the majority. There is no question but that you have shown yourself unfit to be in
charge of this expedition."

* * * * *

No time was wasted in reaching a decision. To Nielson's question as to whether Hargraves should be removed
from command, there was a chorus of "Ayes."
"No," said one voice. It was Usher, the archeologist.
"State your objection," Nielson rasped.
"The old one about changing horses in mid-stream," the archeologist answered. "Also the old one about not
jumping to conclusions before all the evidence is in."
"What evidence isn't in?"
"We don't know why Ron Val joined Sarkoff," the archeologist answered.
"What difference does that make? We don't even know that Ron Val was still himself. The thing that looked
like Ron Val might have been another monstrosity like Sarkoff."
"So it might," the archeologist shrugged. "Anyhow my vote is not important. I'm just putting it in for the sake
of the record, if there ever is a record. I would also like to mention that if ever we needed discipline and unity, now
is the time."

"We will have discipline, I promise you," Nielson said. "Hargraves, you are removed from command,
understand?"
"Yes," said Hargraves steadily.

Only one ballot was needed to put Nielson in charge.
"All right," said Ushur to the new captain. "You're the boss now. We're all behind you. What are you going to
do?"
"Do? I--" Nielson looked startled. He glanced at Hargraves.
The former captain sighed. It was easy enough to elect a new leader. Vehemently he wished that all problems
could be solved so easily.
"I suggest," he said, "--and this is only a suggestion--that we attempt to find the ship, and if possible, to regain
possession of her. She is the only tool we have to work with."
"That is exactly what I was going to say," Nielson said emphatically. "Find the ship."

To give him credit, he set about the job in a workmanlike manner, sending two scouts ahead of the main group,
throwing out a scout on each flank. The only way they could hope to find the ship was by following the course it had
taken through the air. Since Sarkoff, in taking over the vessel, had not disarmed them, each possessed a vibration
pistol. In a fight against ordinary enemies they would be able to give a good account of themselves. But would any
enemy they met likely be ordinary?

Hargraves drew Usher aside. "I would like to talk to you," he said. "What actually happened when the ship was
taken?"
"I don't know, Jed," the archeologist ruefully answered. "I was in my cabin. The first thing I knew I heard a hell of a hullabaloo going on up in the control room. I dashed up there to see what was going on."

"What was happening?"

"Nielson, Rodney, Turner, and a couple of others were there. So were--well, they looked like Sarkoff and Ron Val. Nielson was getting up off the floor. Sarkoff and Ron Val had both drawn their guns and were covering the group. When I came charging in, Sarkoff covered me. Before I could recover from my surprise, he and Ron Val had kicked every one of us out of the ship. Then they took off.‘ The archeologist shook his shaggy head.

"Ron Val was helping?"

"No question about it. Which means, of course, that he was either under some subtle form of hypnosis, or it wasn't Ron Val. I would bet my life on his loyalty."

* * * * *

"So would I," said Hargraves. And the memory came back of how thrilled Ron Val had been at the prospect of landing on this world. "It would mean a lot to find people here. We could exchange experiences, learn a lot," Ron Val had said, his face glowing at the thought. All the others had felt the same way. The Third Interstellar Expedition had no military ambitions. It was not bent on conquest. The solar system had outgrown military expeditions, war, and the thought of war, and cruisers went out from it not to fight but to learn. Knowledge was the thing they sought, all knowledge, so the human race could determine its place in the cosmos, could know the history of all things past, could possibly forecast the shape of things to come.

The landing of the Third Interstellar Expedition on this Vegan world had been a part of a vast evolution, a march that, starting on earth so long ago that all history of it was forever lost, was now reaching out across the cosmos. A new evolution! Ron Val had always been talking about this new evolution. It was one of his favorite subjects.

"What do you make of this world?" Hargraves asked abruptly. "The only sign of civilization we have seen is this vast grove. No cities, no industrial plants, no evidence of progress. Yet the spherical ship that attacked us certainly indicates a highly mechanical civilization. Of course there may be cities here that we haven't seen, but as we landed we saw a large land area. No roads were visible, no canals, not even any cultivated fields. What does all this mean to you, as an archeologist?"

"Nothing," Usher answered promptly. "I would say this country is a wilderness. But the trees planted in regular rows disprove this. On earth, at least, centuries would be required for trees as large as these to grow. Forestry, planned centuries in advance, can only come from a high and stable culture. However, as you say, all other signs of this high culture are absent, no cities, no transportation facilities, apparently dammed few inhabitants—we have seen only four. All civilizations with which we are familiar move through recognized stages, first the nomadic stage, which involves tending flocks and herds. Then comes the tilling of the soil, in which farming is the principal occupation of most of the people. After that, with industrialization, we have cities developing. If there is another stage we have not reached it on earth."

"Do you think they might have reached the final stage here?" Hargraves questioned.

"I don't know what the final stage may be," the archeologist answered. "Also, and this is more important, I can't begin to guess at the real nature of the inhabitants of this world. Until I do know their real nature, what they look like, what they eat, where they sleep, what they think, I can't even guess intelligently about them. However," Usher broke off with a wry grin, "all these philosophical observations are of no importance while our own necks are threatened with the ax."

Vega was straight overhead when they found the ship. One of the advance scouts came hurrying back with the information.

"She is lying in a little meadow beside the lake," the scout reported. "They're doing something to her. I can't tell what. But the trees extend to within fifty yards of her. We can approach that near without being seen."

CHAPTER VI

The Capture of the Ship

Nielson made his dispositions with care. The ship lay in a little meadow where the trees bent inward from the blue water of the lake to form a cove. Her nose was pointed toward the water and her tail was almost in the trees. Nielson sent three men on a wide circuit. They were to attack from the farther side. It was to be a feint. While the three men drew attention to them, the main body was to charge.

"We have every chance of succeeding," Nielson said. "And if we do gain the ship again, this time we won't stay here. Vega has at least two planets. The ship will fly to the other one without repairs. You should have thought of that, Hargraves."

"There are a lot of things I should have thought of and didn't," Hargraves answered. There was no animosity in his tone. "What I would like to know is what they are doing there beside the ship?"
Thulon and his three companions were visible beside the vessel. They were busily engaged in setting up a device of some kind. Others of their species had joined them until there were possibly thirty or forty present. Through the the gaping hole in the hull, still others could be seen peering out. What they were doing Hargraves could not discern.

"Odd," said Usher beside him.
"What is?"
"It's odd that they should still seem to be human in form," the archeologist answered. "Ah. Perhaps there is the reason."

Both locks were open. The thing that looked like Hal Sarkoff had just emerged from the nearest one. He went directly to the main group. They were erecting something that looked like a tripod. Several were carrying pieces of metal from the ship which they were fastening together to form the legs of the tripod. At the apex of the tripod something that looked like a box was coming into existence.

"They are completely unarmed," Nielson said. "There isn't a weapon in the whole damned bunch. We'll blast them senseless before they even know they're being attacked."

"If they don't succeed in manning the negatron," Usher pointed out. "They don't know how to operate the negatron."

"Don't they? I might mention that they seem to know everything that Sarkoff knew. And Hal certainly knew how that negatron operated. He could take it apart and put it back together blind-folded."

"That's so," Nielson admitted. For a second unease showed on his lean face. "Well, that only means we will have to lick them before they can get that negatron into operation. One thing is certain--we have to have the ship."

"You're right on that score," Usher grimly said.

Seconds ticked away into minutes. The group busy about the ship had no intimation they were about to be attacked. They were careless to the point of foolhardiness. No sentries had been posted, no effort had been made to hide the vessel.

"What are they, really?" Hargraves thought. He wondered if they were some strange form of water-dwelling life that lived in the lakes of this planet. Perhaps that was what they were! Perhaps the transition from the fish to the mammal had never been made on this planet, the fish-form developing keen intelligence. Certainly there was intelligence on this world. But it seemed to be an intelligence humans could not comprehend.

* * * * *

The signal for the attack sounded. Fierce shouts came from the other side of the ship. The shouters were hidden, but there was no mistaking the sounds. They came from human throats.

"Give 'em hell, boys!"
"Tear 'em to pieces!"
The harsh throbbing of vibration pistols split the quiet air.
"Steady!" Nielson said. "Wait until they go to see what's happening."
The group busy around the ship raised startled faces from their task. They seemed to listen. Then they turned and ran around the bow of the vessel.
"Come on!" cried Nielson, leaping from concealment.
There wasn't a person left in sight to oppose them. Fifty yards to cross. Fifty yards to the ship! Fifty yards to a fighting chance for life!

Under their racing feet the soft turf was soundless.
Twenty-five yards to go now. Ten yards. Ten feet to the open lock.
Thulon appeared in the lock. He looked in surprise at the charging men.
Except for the rough staff that he carried he was weaponless.
Nielson didn't give the command to fire, didn't need to give it. Every vibration pistol had been drawn long before the men leaped from cover. Every pistol came up at the same instant, every index finger squeezed a trigger.

Only Thulon stood between them and a fighting chance for life. They came of warrior races, these men. No bugles urged them on. They needed no bugles.

A howling vortex of radiation smashed at the figure in the lock.
One vibration pistol would destroy a man, smash him to bloody bits. More than a dozen pistols were centered on the figure standing before them.

Thulon stood unharmed.
Staff in front of him he stood facing the fingers of hell reaching for him. The flaming fingers grasped, and did not touch him.

The shooting stopped as abruptly as it began. The charge stopped. Hargraves saw Nielson staring dazedly from the figure in the lock to the pistol in his hand as if the two were irreconcilable. The pistol ought to have destroyed
Thulon. It hadn't destroyed him. For a mad moment, Hargraves felt sorry for the new captain. He, too, had run headlong into a logical impossibility.

All sounds were suddenly stilled, all shouting stopped, all noises died away.

Around the bow of the ship Hal Sarkoff came running. He saw the group and looked bewildered. "Hey! How did you guys get here?"

"Blast him!" Nielson said, centering his pistol on this new target.

From the staff in Thulon's hand came a soft tinkle, a bell-like sound. Nothing seemed to happen but Nielson staggered as if he had been hit a sharp blow. The pistol flew out of his hand and landed twenty feet away.

"Listen, you apes," Sarkoff shouted at the top of his voice. "I'm Hal Sarkoff. I've always been Hal Sarkoff. I'll never be anybody else but Hal Sarkoff. Do you get it?"

They didn't get it.

"If you--" Nielson whispered. "If you are really Sarkoff, then who--what--is he?" He pointed toward Thulon still standing in the lock.

"Him?" The grin on the craggy face belonged to Hal Sarkoff and to no one else. "Meet a god," he said.

"A god?" That was Usher speaking now, his voice a tense whisper.

Sarkoff continued grinning. "Well, he resurrected me when I was deader than hell. I guess that makes him a god."

"You--you know you were dead?"

"Yep. At least I guess I know it. The last thing I remember is trying to get back to the control panel when we got that hole knocked in the ship, so I could cut the drivers back in. After that everything gets kind of hazy. The next thing I remember is my pal here," he gestured toward Thulon, "and a lot of his buddies chirping like sparrows while they worked over me. And believe me, they were working me over plenty. I felt like I had been turned inside out, wrung out, hung out to dry, then stuffed all over again."

"But when you came back to the ship," Hargraves spoke, "you said you remembered everything that had happened, the crash of the ship, our hiding her. If you were dead, how did you learn these things?"

"He told me," Sarkoff answered, nodding toward Thulon. "He filled out my memory for me with dope he had taken from your mind while you were talking. Reading minds is one of that old boy's minor accomplishments."

"Then why didn't you tell us the truth?" Hargraves exploded. "You said you had been sent out scouting. Why didn't you tell us what had really happened?" Mentally he added, "If it happened!"

"Because you apes wouldn't have believed me!" Sarkoff answered. "To your knowledge--mine, too, until it happened--dead men don't get up out of their graves and walk. If I had told you the truth, you wouldn't have believed a word of it. If I told you something you knew wasn't true, that you had sent me out on a scouting trip, you would know I was lying, you would figure it was a trick of some kind, and you would wait around and try to discover the trick. While you were waiting around trying to catch me, I could get in some missionary work on Ron Val. I knew I could convert him, if I had a chance to talk to him. With him on my side, we could convince the rest of you. It would have worked too. All it needed was a little time for you boys to get used to the idea of a dead man coming back to life." He looked at Nielson. "Remind me to black that other eye of yours one of these days."

"What?" said Hargraves. "What's this?"

"Our pal Nielson," Sarkoff said. "If you think before you act, he acts before he thinks. You had no sooner gone chasing off to see if I was really where you had buried me, which was what I thought you would do, until Nielson comes poking into where Ron Val and I were holding a conference. Nielson had a gun. He had it out ready to use. He figured the only safe thing to do was to shoot me. So," Sarkoff shrugged, "I had to smack him. He had forced my hand."

[Illustration: Fists lashed out, weapons appeared, and cries of fury rent the air]

There was a slight stir among the group. This was news to all of them.

"Is this true?" Hargraves said.

"Yes," said Nielson defiantly. "And I was right. I should have killed him. He isn't Hal Sarkoff. He isn't telling the truth about coming back to life. Sarkoff is dead."

Sarkoff glanced up at Thulon who was still standing in the lock looking down at the men before him. There was a ghost of a smile on his face.

"See!" said Sarkoff, addressing Thulon. "I told you we couldn't tell these boys anything. They have to see, they have to feel, they have to be shown."

"Well," the thought came from Thulon to everyone. "Why don't you show them?"

"Okay," Sarkoff answered. "Nevins!" he shouted. "Reese! Come out of that ship."
Nevins and Reese were the two engineers who had died with Sarkoff.

Thulon moved a little to one side. Nevins and Reese came out of the ship. They were grinning.

"Feel us!" Sarkoff shouted. "Pinch us. Cut off a slice of skin and examine it under a microscope. Make blood tests. Use X-rays. Do whatever you damned please." He shoved a brawny arm under Nielson's nose. "Here. Pinch this and see if you think it's real."

Nielson shrank away.

Nevins and Reese passed among the men, offering themselves in evidence. Startled voices called softly in answer to other startled voices. "They're real."

"This is no lie. This is the truth."

"I've known this man for years. This is Eddie Nevins."

"And this is Sam Reese."

Hargraves heard the voices, saw the conclusion they were reaching.

"One moment," he said.

The voices went into silence. Eyes turned questioningly to him.

"Even if these men are really Hal Sarkoff and Eddie Nevins and Sam Reese, if they are the companions we knew as dead who have miraculously been returned to us, there are still facts that do not fit into a logical pattern. Even here on this world the laws of logic must hold true."

Silence fell. Men looked at him and at each other. Where there had been wonder on their faces, new doubts were appearing.

"What facts, Jed?" Sarkoff questioned.

"The sphere that attacked us, that attempted to destroy us, without warning. This is a fact that does not fit."

"The sphere?" Uncertainty showed on Sarkoff's face. Then he grinned again and turned to Thulon. "You tell him about that sphere."

"Gladly," Thulon's thoughts came. "As you know, Vega has two planets. Long ago we were at war with the inhabitants of this other planet. Part of our defenses around our own planet were floating fortresses. The war is done but we have left guards in the sky to protect us if we are attacked. The sphere that attacked you was one of our automatic forts which we had left in the sky."

"Ah!" said Hargraves. The cold logic of his mind sought a pattern that would include fortresses in the sky. Presuming war between two planets, such fortresses were logical. But--

"The construction of such a sphere indicates vast technical knowledge, tremendous workshops. I have seen no laboratories and no industrial centers that could produce such a fortress. I have, moreover, seen no civilization that will serve as a background for such construction."

* * * * *

He waited for an answer. Usher, the archeologist, looked suddenly at him, then looked at Thulon.

"The fortresses were built long ago," Thulon said. "In those past milleniums we had industrial centers. We no longer need them and we no longer have them."

"Then there is another stage!" the archeologist gasped. "You are past the city stage in your evolutionary process. You are beyond the metal age. What--" Usher eagerly asked. "What comes after that?"

"We are beyond the age of cities," Thulon answered. "The next but possibly not final stage is a return to nature. We live in the groves and the fields, beside the lakes, under the trees. We need no protection from the elements because we are in unison with them. There are no enemies on this world, no dangers, almost no death. In your thinking you can only describe us as gods. Our activities are almost entirely mental. Our only concession of materialism is this." He lifted the staff. "When you fired at me, this staff canceled your beams. It would have canceled them if they had been a thousand times stronger. When one of you attempted to destroy Sarkoff, force went out from this staff, knocking the weapon from his hand. There are certain powers leashed within this staff, certain arrangements of crystals that are very nearly ultimate matter. Through this staff my will is worked. Some day," he smiled, "we will even be able to discard the staff. That is the goal of our evolution."

The thoughts went into soft silence and Thulon looked down at them. "Does that satisfy you?" His eyes went among the group, came to rest on Hargraves. "No, I see it does not. There is still one fact that you cannot fit into your pattern."

"Yes," said Hargraves. "If all that you have told us is true, why was the ship stolen?"

"Everything has to fit for you?" Sarkoff answered. "Well, that's why you are our leader. I can answer this question. I took the ship so I could have it repaired. Then, when I brought it back to you, fit to fly again, all of us would have evidence that we could not deny. You might doubt my identity, you might doubt me, but you would not doubt a ship that had been repaired. Thulon," Sarkoff ended, "will you do your stuff?"

* * * * *
Standing a little apart from the rest Hargraves watched. Thulon and his comrades brought metal from the vessel. How they used the tripod he could not see but in some way they seemed to use it to melt the metal. This was magna steel. They worked it as if it were pure tin. It didn't seem to be hot but they spread sheets of it over the gaping hole in the hull. They closed the hole. He knew the ship had been repaired but still he did not move. On the ground before him was something that looked like an ant hill. He watched this, his mind reaching out and grasping a bigger problem. The ants, he could see, were swarming.

Nielson detached himself from the group at the ship and came to him.
"Jed," he said hesitatingly.
"What?"
"Jed, what Hal said about me attacking him was right. I thought--I thought he wasn't Sarkoff. I thought I was doing what was right."
"I don't doubt you," Hargraves answered. His mind was not on what Nielson was saying.
"Jed."
"Uh?"
"Jed. I--"
"What is it?"
"Jed, will you take over command again?" The words came fast. "I--"
"Huh? Take over command? Don't you like the job?"
Nielson shivered. "No. I'm not ready for it yet. Jed, will you take it over, please?"
"Huh? Oh, sure, if that is what the fellows want."
"They want it. So do I."
"Okay then." Hargraves was scarcely aware that Nielson had left. Nor did he notice Ron Val approaching.
"Jed."
"Huh?"
"Jed, I've been talking to Thulon." The astro-navigator's voice was trembling with excitement. "Jed, do you know that Thulon and his people belong to our race?"
"What?" the startled captain gasped. "Oh, damn it, Ron Val, you're dreaming again."
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It would be a wonderful dream come true, Hargraves knew, if it was true. The human race had kin folks in the universe! Man did not stand alone. There was something breath-taking in the very thought of it.

"Thulon says the tests he ran on Hal Sarkoff proved it. He says his people sent out exploring expeditions long ago, just like we are doing, only the groups they sent out were more colonists than explorers. He says one of these groups landed on earth and that we are the descendants of that group, sons of colonists come back to the mother world after uncounted centuries of absence--"

Ron Val was babbling, the words were tumbling over each other on his lips.
"Oh, hell, Ron Val, it doesn't fit," Jed Hargraves said. "We can trace our evolutionary chain back to the fish in the seas--"
"Sure," Ron Val interrupted. "But we don't know that those fish came from the seas of earth!"
"Huh?" Hargraves gasped. "Well, I'll be damned! I never thought of that possibility." He looked at the lakes dancing in the Vegan sunshine. From these lakes, from these seas, had come the original fish-like creature that eventually became human in form! The thought was startling.

"The colonists landed on earth thousands of years ago," Ron Val said. "Maybe they smashed their ship in landing, had to learn to live off the country. Maybe they forgot who they were, in time. Jed, we have legends that we are the children of God. Maybe--Oh, Jed, Thulon says it's true."

Hargraves hesitated, torn between doubt and longing. He looked down. On the ground in front of him the ants were still swarming. Hundreds of them were coming from the ant hill and were flying off. There were thousands of them. Eventually, in the recesses of this vast grove, there would be new colonies, which would swarm in their turn. He watched them flying away. The air was bright with the glint of their wings.

He looked up. Thulon was coming toward them. Thulon was smiling. "Welcome home," his voice whispered in their minds. "Welcome home."

Hargraves began to smile.
THE GOD IN THE BOX
By Sewell Peaslee Wright

This is a story I never intended to tell. I would not even tell it now if it were not for the Zenians.

Understand that I do not dislike the Zenians. One of the best officers I ever had was a Zenian. His name was Eitel, and he served under me on the old Tamon, my first command. But lately the Zenians have made rather too much of the exploits of Ame Baove.

The history of the Universe gives him credit, and justly, for making the first successful exploration in space. Baove's log of that trip is a classic that every school-child knows.

But I have a number of friends who are natives of Zenia, and they fret me with their boastsings.

"Well, Hanson," they say, "your Special Patrol Service has done wonderful work, largely under the officership of Earth-men. But after all, you have to admit that it was a Zenian who first mastered space!"

Perhaps it is just fractiousness of an old man, but countless repetitions of such statements, in one form or another, have irritated me to the point of action--and before going further, let me say, for the benefit of my Zenian friends, that if they care to dig deeply enough into the archives, somewhere they will find a brief report of these adventures recorded in the log of one of my old ships, the Ertak, now scrapped and forgotten. Except, perhaps, by some few like myself, who knew and loved her when she was one of the newest and finest ships of the Service.

I commanded the Ertak during practically her entire active life. Those were the days when John Hanson was not an old man, writing of brave deeds, but a youngster of half a century, or thereabouts, and full of spirit. Sometimes, when memory brings back those old days, it seems hard for me to believe that John Hanson, Commander of the Ertak, and old John Hanson, retired, and a spinner of ancient yarns, are one and the same--but I must get on to my story, for youth is impatient, and from "old man" to "old fool" is a short leap for a youthful mind.

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The Special Patrol Service is not all high adventure. It was not so even in the days of the Ertak. There was much routine patrolling, and the Ertak drew her full share of this type of duty. We hated it, of course, but in that Service you do what you are told and say nothing.

We were on a routine patrol, with only one possible source of interest in our orders. The wizened and sour-faced scientists the Universe acclaims so highly had figured out that a certain planet, thus far unvisited, would be passing close to the line of our patrol, and our orders read, "if feasible," to inspect this body, and if inhabited, which was doubted, to make contact.

There was a separate report, if I remember correctly, with a lot of figures. This world was not large; smaller than Earth, as a matter of fact, and its orbit brought it into conjunction with our system only once in some immemorable period of time. I suppose that record is stored away, too, if anybody is interested in it. It was largely composed of guesses, and most of them were wrong. These white-coated scientists do a lot of wild guessing, if the facts were known.

However, she did show up at about the place they had predicted. Kincaide, my second officer, was on duty when the television disk first picked her up, and he called me promptly.

"Strobus"--that was the name the scientists had given this planet we were to look over--"Strobus is in view, sir, if you'd like to look her over," he reported. "Not close enough yet to determine anything of interest, however, even with maximum power."

I considered for a moment, scowling at the microphone.

"Very well, Mr. Kincaide," I said at length. "Set a course for her. We'll give her a glance, anyway."

"Yes, sir," replied Kincaide promptly. One of the best officers in the Service, Kincaide. Level-headed, and a straight thinker. He was a man for any emergency. I remember--but I've already told that story.

* * * * *

I turned back to my reports, and forgot all about this wandering Strobus. Then I turned in, to catch up somewhat on my sleep, for we had had some close calls in a field of meteors, and the memory of a previous disaster was still fresh in my mind.[1] I had spent my "watch below" in the navigating room, and now I needed sleep rather badly. If the scientists really want to do something for humanity, why don't they show us how to do without food and sleep?


When refreshed and ready for anything, I did report to the navigating room, Correy, my first officer, was on duty.

"Good morning, sir," he nodded. It was the custom, on ships I commanded, for the officers to govern themselves by Earth standards of time; we created an artificial day and night, and disregarded entirely, except in our official records, the enar and other units of the Universal time system.

"Good morning, Mr. Correy. How are we bearing?"
"Straight for our objective, sir." He glanced down at the two glowing charts that pictured our surroundings in three dimensions, to reassure himself. "She's dead ahead, and looming up quite sizeably."

"Right!" I bent over the great hooded television disk—the ponderous type we used in those days—and picked up Strobus without difficulty. The body more than filled the disk and I reduced the magnification until I could get a full view of the entire exposed surface.

Strobus, it seemed, bore a slight resemblance to one view of my own Earth. There were two very apparent polar caps, and two continents, barely connected, the two of them resembling the numeral eight in the writing of Earth-men; a numeral consisting of two circles, one above the other, and just touching. One of the roughly circular continents was much larger than the other.

"Mr. Kincaide reported that the portions he inspected consisted entirely of fluid sir," commented Correy. "The two continents now visible have just come into view, so I presume that there are no others, unless they are concealed by the polar caps. Do you find any indications of habitation?"

"I haven't examined her closely under high magnification," I replied. "There are some signs...."

I increased power, and began slowly searching the terrain of the distant body. I had not far to search before I found what I sought.

"We're in luck, Mr. Correy!" I exclaimed. "Our friend is inhabited. There is at least one sizeable city on the larger continent and ... yes, there's another! Something to break the monotony, eh? Strobus is an 'unknown' on the charts."

"Suppose we'll have trouble, sir?" asked Correy hopefully. Correy was a prime hand for a fight of any kind. A bit too hot-headed perhaps, but a man who never knew when he was beaten.

"I hope not; you know how they rant at the Base when we have to protect ourselves," I replied, not without a certain amount of bitterness. "They'd like to pacify the Universe with never a sweep of a disintegrator beam. Of course, Commander Hanson some silver-sleeve will say, 'if it was absolutely vital to protect your men and your ship—ugh! They ought to turn out for a tour of duty once in a while, and see what conditions are.' I was young then, and the attitude of my conservative superiors at the Base was not at all in keeping with my own views, at times."

"You think, then, that we will have trouble, sir?"

"Your guess is as good is mine," I shrugged. "The people of this Strobus know nothing of us. They will not know whether we come as friends or enemies. Naturally, they will be suspicious. It is hard to explain the use of the menore, to convey our thoughts to them."

I glanced up at the attraction meter, reflecting upon the estimated mass of the body we were approaching. By night we should be nearing her atmospheric envelope. By morning we should be setting down on her.

"The largest city seems to be nearer the other continent. You should be able to take over visually before long. Has the report on the atmosphere come through yet?"

"Not yet. Just a moment, sir." Correy spoke for a moment into his microphone and turned to me with a smile.

"Suitable for breathing," he reported. "Slight excess of oxygen, and only a trace of moisture. Hendricks just completed the analysis." Hendricks, my third officer, was as clever as a laboratory man in many ways, and a red-blooded young officer as well. That's a combination you don't come across very often.

"Good! Breathing masks are a nuisance. I believe I'd reduce speed somewhat; she's warming up. The big city I mentioned is dead ahead. Set the Ertak down as close as possible."

"Yes, sir!" snapped Correy, and I leaned over the television disk to examine, at very close range, the great Strobian metropolis we were so swiftly approaching.

The buildings were all tall, and constructed of a shining substance that I could not identify, even though I could now make out the details of their architecture, which was exceedingly simple, and devoid of ornament of any kind, save an occasional pilaster or flying buttress. The streets were broad, and laid out to cut the city into lozenge-shaped sections, instead of the conventional squares. In the center of the city stood a great lozenge-shaped building with a smooth, arched roof. From every section of the city, great swarms of people were flocking in the direction of the
spot toward which the Ertak was settling, on foot and in long, slim vehicles of some kind that apparently carried several people.

"Lots of excitement down there, Mr. Correy," I commented. "Better tell Mr. Kincaide to order up all hands, and station a double guard at the port. Have a landing force, armed with atomic pistols and bombs, and equipped with menores, as an escort."

"And the disintegrator-ray generators--you'll have them in operation, sir, just in case?"

"That might be well. But they are not to be used except in the greatest emergency, understand. Hendricks will accompany me, if it seems expeditious to leave the ship, leaving you in command here."

"Very well, sir!" I knew the arrangement didn't suit him, but he was too much the perfect officer to protest, even with a glance. And besides, at the moment, he was very busy with orders to the men in the control room, forward, as he conned the ship to the place he had selected to set her down.

But busy as he was, he did not forget the order to tune up the disintegrator-ray generators.

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While the great circular door of the Ertak was backing out ponderously from its threaded seat, suspended by its massive gimbals, I inspected the people of this new world.

My first impression was that they were a soldiery people, for there were no jostling crowds swarming around the ship, such as might have been expected. Instead, the citizenry stood at ease in a sort of military formation of numerous small companies, each apparently in charge of an officer. These companies were arranged to form a long wide avenue, leading to the city, and down this avenue a strange procession was coming toward the ship.

I should make it clear at this point that these Strobians were, in form, very similar to Earth-men, although somewhat shorter in stature, and certainly more delicately formed. Perhaps it would be better to say they resembled the Zenians, save for this marked difference: the Strobians were exceedingly light in color, their skins being nearly translucent, and their hair a light straw color. The darkest hair I saw at any time was a pale gold, and many had hair as colorless as silver--which I should explain is a metal of Earth somewhat resembling aluminum in appearance.

The procession was coming toward the ship slowly, the marchers apparently chanting as they came, for I could see their lips moving. They were dressed in short kirtles of brilliant colors--scarlet, green, orange, purple--and wore brilliant belts suspended about their waists by straps which crossed over their breasts and passed over each shoulder.

Each marcher bore a tall staff from which flew a tiny pennon of the same color as his chief garment. At the top of each staff was a metal ornament, which at first glance I took to be the representation of a fish. As they came closer, I saw that this was not a good guess, for the device was without a tail.

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"The exit port is open, sir," reported Hendricks. "The people seem far from hostile, and the air is very good. What are your orders?"

"There will be no change, I think," I said as I hurried toward the now open door. "Mr. Kincaide will be in command of the guard at the port. You and I, with a small landing force, will advance to meet this procession. Make sure that there are a number of extra menores carried by the escort; we shall need them."

"Yes, sir!" Hendricks snapped a command and the landing force fell into place behind us as we passed through the circular doorway, and out onto the rocky ground of Strobus.

The procession stopped instantly, and the chanting died to a murmur. The men forming the living wall on each side bowed their heads and made a quick sign; a peculiar gesture, as though they reached out to shake an invisible hand.

The leader of the procession, a fine-featured man with golden hair, walked forward with bowed head, chanting a single phrase over and over again in a voice as sweet as a woman's: "Toma annerson ... toma annerson ... toma annerson...."

"Sounds friendly enough," I whispered to Hendricks. "Hand me an extra menore; I'll see...."

The chanting stopped, and the Strobian lifted his head.

"Greetings!" he said. "You are welcome here."

* * * * *

I think nothing ever surprised me more, I stared at the man like a fool, my jaw dropping, and my eyes bulging. For the man spoke in a language of Earth; spoke it haltingly and poorly, but recognizably.

"You--you speak English?" I faltered. "Where--where did you learn to speak this language?"

The Strobian smiled, his face shining as though he saw a vision.

"Toma annerson," he intoned gravely, and extended his right hand in a greeting which Earth-men have offered each other for untold centuries!

I shook hands with him gravely, wondering if I were dreaming.

"I thank you for your welcome," I said, gathering my wits at last. "We come as friends, from worlds not unlike
your own. We are glad that you meet us as friends."

"It was so ordered. He ordered it so and Artur is His mouthpiece in this day." The Strobian weighed every word carefully before he uttered it speaking with a solemn gravity that was most impressive.

"Artur?" I questioned him. "That is your name?"

"That is my name," he said proudly. "It came from He Who Speaks who gave it to my father many times removed."

There were many questions in my mind, but I could not be outdone in courtesy by this kindly Strobian.

"I am John Hanson," I told him, "Commander of the Special Patrol Service ship Ertak. This is Avery Hendricks, my third officer."

"Much of that," said Artur slowly, "I do not understand. But I am greatly honored." He bowed again, first to me, and then to Hendricks, who was staring at me in utter amazement. "You will come with us now, to the Place?" Artur added.

I considered swiftly, and turned to Hendricks.

"This is too interesting to miss," I said in an undertone. "Send the escort back with word for Mr. Correy that these people are very friendly, and we are going on into the city. Let three men remain with us. We will keep in communication with the ship by menore."

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Hendricks gave the necessary orders, and all our escort, save for three men, did a brisk about face and marched back to the ship. The five of us, conducted by Artur, started for the city, the rest of the procession falling in behind us. Behind the double file of the procession, the companies that had formed the living wall marched twenty abreast. Not all the companies, however, for perhaps a thousand men, in all, formed a great hollow square about the Ertak, a great motionless guard of honor, clad in kirtles like the pennon-bearers in the procession, save that their kirtles were longer, and pale green in color. The uniform of their officers was identical, save that it was somewhat darker in color, and set of with a narrow black belt, without shoulder straps.

We marched on and on, into the city, down the wide streets, walled with soaring buildings that shone with an iridescent lustre, toward the great domed building I had seen from the Ertak.

The streets were utterly deserted, and when we came close to the building I saw why. The whole populace was gathered there; they were drawn up around the building in orderly groups, with a great lane opened to the mighty entrance.

There were women waiting there, thousands of them, the most beautiful I have ever seen, and in my younger days I had eyes that were quick to note a pretty face.

Through these great silent ranks we passed majestically, and I felt very foolish and very much bewildered. Every head was bowed as though in reverence, and the chanting of the men behind us was like the singing of a hymn.

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At the head of the procession, we entered the great domed, lozenge-shaped building, and I stared around in amazement.

The structure was immense, but utterly without obstructing columns, the roof being supported by great arches buttressed to pilasters along the walls, and furnished with row after row of long benches of some polished, close-grained red wood, so clear that it shone brilliantly.

There were four great aisles, leading from the four angles of the lozenge, and many narrower ones, to give ready access to the benches, all radiating from a raised dais in the center, and the whole building illuminated by bluish globes of light that I recognized from descriptions and visits to scientific museums, as replicas of an early form of the ethon tube.

These things I took in at a glance. It was the object upon the huge central dais that caught and held my attention.

"Hendricks!" I muttered, just loud enough to make my voice audible above the solemn chanting. "Are we dreaming?"

"No, sir!" Hendricks' eyes were starting out of his head, and I have no doubt I looked as idiotic as he did. "It's there."

On the dais was a gleaming object perhaps sixty feet long--which is a length equal to the height of about ten full-sized men. It was shaped like an elongated egg--like the metal object surmounting the staffs of the pennon-bearers!

And, unmistakably, it was a ship for navigating space.

* * * * *

As we came closer, I could make out details. The ship was made of some bluish, shining metal that I took to be
The chanting stopped as we reached the dais, and I turned to our guide. He motioned that Hendricks and I were to precede him up a narrow, curving ramp that led upwards, while the three Zenians who accompanied us were to remain below. I nodded my approval of this arrangement, and slowly we made our way to the top of the great platform, while the pennon-bearers formed a close circle around its base, and the people, who had surrounded the great building filed in with military precision and took seats. In the short space of time that it took us to reach the top of the dais, the whole great building filled itself with humanity.

Artur turned to that great sea of faces and made a sweeping gesture, as of benediction.
"Toma annerson!" His voice rang out like the clear note of a bell, filling that vast auditorium. In a great wave, the assembled people seated themselves, and sat watching us, silent and motionless.

"What does "Toma annerson" mean, sir?" whispered Hendricks. "Something very special, from the way he brings it out. And do you know what we are here for, and what all this means?"

"No," I admitted. "I have some ideas, but they're too wild for utterance. We'll just go slow, and take things as they come."

As I spoke, Artur concluded his speech, and turned to us.
"John Hanson," he said softly, "our people would hear your voice."
"But--but what am I to say?" I stammered. "I don't speak their language."
"It will be enough," he muttered, "that they have heard your voice."

He stood aside, and there was nothing for me to do but walk to the edge of the platform, as he had done, and speak.

My own voice, in that hushed silence, frightened me. I would not have believed that so great a gathering could maintain such utter, deathly silence. I stammered like a school-child reciting for the first time before his class.

"People of Strobus," I said--this is as nearly as I remember it, and perhaps my actual words were even less intelligent--"we are glad to be here. The welcome accorded us overwhelms us. We have come ... we have come from worlds like your own, and ... and we have never seen a more beautiful one. Nor more kindly people. We like you, and we hope that you will like us. We won't be here long, anyway. I thank you!"

I was perspiring and red-faced by the time I finished, and I caught Hendricks in the very act of grinning at his commander's discomfiture. One black scowl wiped that grin off so quickly, however, that I thought I must have imagined it.

"How was that, Artur?" I asked. "All right?"
"Your words were good to hear, John Hanson," he nodded gravely. "In behalf----"

The hundreds of blue lights hung from the vaulted roof clacked suddenly and went out. Almost instantly they flashed on again--and then clicked out. A third time they left us momentarily in darkness, and, when they came on again, a murmur that was like a vast moan rose from the sea of humanity surrounding the dais. And the almost beautiful features of Artur were drawn and ghastly with pain.
"They come!" he whispered. "At this hour, they come!"
"Who, Artur?" I asked quickly. "Is there some danger?"
"Yes. A very great one. I will tell you, but first--" He strode to the edge of the dais and spoke crisply, his voice ringing out like the thin cry of military brass. The thousands in the auditorium rose in unison, and swept down the aisles toward the doors.
"Now," cried Artur, "I shall tell you the meaning of that signal. For three or four generations, we have awaited it with dread. Since the last anniversary of his coming, we have known the time was not far off. And it had to come at this moment! But this tells you nothing.

"The signal warns us that the Neens have at last made good their threat to come down upon us with their great
hordes. The Neens were once men like ourselves, who would have none of Him”--and Artur glanced toward the gleaming ship upon the dais--”nor His teachings. They did not like the new order, and they wandered off, to join those outcasts who had broken His laws, and had been sent to the smaller land of this world, where it is always warm, and where there are great trees thick with moss, and the earth underfoot steams, and brings forth wriggling life. Neen, we call that land, as this larger land is called Libar.

"These men of Neen became the enemies of Libar, and of us who call ourselves Libars, and follow His ways. In that warm country they became brown, and their hair darkened. They increased more rapidly than did the Libars, and as they forgot their learning, their bodies developed in strength.

"Yet they have always envied us; envied us the beauty of our women, and of our cities. Envied us those things which He taught us to make, and which their clumsy hands cannot fashion, and which their brutish brains do not understand.

"And now they have the overwhelming strength that makes us powerless against them." His voice broke, he turned his face away, that I might not see the agony written there.

"Toma annerson!" he muttered. "Ah, toma annerson!" The words were like a prayer.

"Just a minute, Artur!" I said sharply. "What weapons have they? And what means of travel?"

He turned with a hopeless gesture.

"They have the weapons we have," he said. "Spears and knives and short spears shot from bows. And for travel they have vast numbers of monocars they have stolen from us, generation after generation."

"Monocars?" I asked, startled.

"Yes. He Who Speaks gave us that secret. Ah, He was wise; to hear His voice was to feel in touch with all the wisdom of all the air!" He made a gesture as though to include the whole universe.

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There were a score of questions in my mind, but there was no time for them then. I snatched my menore from its clip on my belt, and adjusted it quickly. It was a huge and cumbersome thing, the menore of that day, but it worked as well as the fragile, bejeweled things of today. Maybe better. The guard posted outside the ship responded instantly.

"Commander Hanson emanating," I shot at him. "Present my compliments to Mr. Correy, and instruct him as follows: He is to withdraw the outside guard instantly, and proceed with the Ertak to the large domed building in the center of the city. He will bring the Ertak to rest at the lowest possible altitude above the building, and receive further orders at that time. Repeat these instructions."

The guard returned the orders almost word for word, and I removed the menore with a little flourish. Oh, I was young enough in those days!

"Don't worry any more, Artur," I said crisply. "I don't know who He was, but we'll show you some tricks you haven't seen yet! Come!"

I led the way down the ramp, Hendricks, Artur, and the three Zenians following. As we came out into the daylight, a silent shadow fell across the great avenue that ran before the entrance, and there, barely clearing the shining roof of the auditorium, was the sleek, fat bulk of the Ertak. Correy had wasted no time in obeying orders.

Correy could smell a fight further than any man I ever knew.

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From her emergency landing trap, the Ertak let down the cable elevator, and the six of us, Hendricks, Artur, the three Zenians of the crew, and myself, were shot up into the hull. Correy was right there by the trap to greet me.

"What are the orders, sir?" he asked, staring curiously at Artur. "Is there trouble brewing?"

"I gather that there is, but we'll talk about that in a moment--in the navigating room." I introduced Artur and Correy as we hurried forward, and as soon as the door of the navigating room had closed on the three of us, I turned to Artur with a question.

"Now, where will we find the enemy, these Neens? Have you any idea?"

"Surely," nodded Artur. "They come from their own country, to the south. The frontier is the narrow strip of land that connects Libar with Neen, and since the alarm has been sounded, the enemy is already at the frontier, and the forces of my people and the enemy are already met."

"I don't know anything about the set-up," put in Correy, "but that sounds like poor management to me. Haven't you any advance guards, or spies, or outposts?"

Artur shook his head sadly.

"My people are not warlike. We who spread His teachings have tried to warn the masses, but they would not listen. The land of the Neens was far away. The Neens had never risen against the Libars. They never would. So my people reasoned."

"And you think there is fighting in progress now?" I asked. "How did the word come?"
"By phone or radio, I presume," said Artur. "We are in communication with the frontier by both methods, and the signal of the lights has been arranged for generations. In the day, all lights were to flash on three times; at night, they were to be darkened three times."

So they had telephones and radios! It was most amazing, but my questions could wait. They would have to wait. Correy was shuffling his feet with anxiety for orders to start action.

"All right, Mr. Correy," I said. "Close the ports and ascend to a height that will enable you to navigate visually. You are sufficiently familiar with the country to understand our objective?"

"Yes, sir! Studied it coming down. It's that neck of land that separates the two continents." He picked up the microphone, and started punching buttons and snapping orders. In twenty seconds we were rushing, at maximum atmospheric speed, toward the scene of what, Artur had told us, was already a battle.

Artur proved to be correct. As we settled down over the narrow neck of land, we could see the two forces locked in frenzied combat; the Libars fighting with fine military precision, in regular companies, but outnumbered at least five to one by the mob-like masses of brown Neens.

From the north and from the south slim, long vehicles that moved with uncanny swiftness were rushing up reserve forces for both sides. There were far more monocars serving the Libars, but each car brought but a pitifully few men. And every car shot back loaded with wounded.

"I thought you said your people weren't fighters, Artur?" I said. "They're fighting now, like trained soldiers."

"Surely. They are well trained, but they have no fighting spirit, like the enemy. Their training, it is no more than a form of amusement, a recreation, the following of custom. He taught it, and my people drill, knowing not for what they train. See! Their beautiful ranks crumple and go down before the formless rush of the Neens!"

"The disintegrator beams, sir?" asked Correy insidiously.

"No. That would be needless slaughter. Those brown hordes are witless savages. An atomic bomb, Mr. Correy. Perhaps two of them, one on either flank of the enemy. Will you give the order?"

Correy rapped out the order, and the ship darted to the desired position for the first bomb—darted so violently that Artur was almost thrown off his feet.

"Watch!" I said, motioning to Artur to share a port with me.

The bomb fled downward, a swift black speck. It struck perhaps a half mile to the west (to adopt Earth measures and directions) of the enemy's flank.

As it struck, a circle of white shot out from the point of impact, a circle that barely touched that seething west flank. The circle paled to gray, and settled to earth. Where there had been green, rank growth, there was now no more than a dirty red crater, and the whole west flank of the enemy was fleeing wildly.

I said the whole west flank; that was not true. There were some that did not flee: that would never move again. But there was not one hundredth part of the number that would not have dissolved into dust with one sweep of the disintegrator ray through that pack of striving humanity.

"The other flank, Mr. Correy," I said quietly. "And just a shade further away from the enemy. A little object lesson, as it were!"

The battle was at a momentary standstill. The Neens and the Libars seemed, for the moment, to forget the issue; every face was turned upward. Even the faces of the runners who fled from a disaster they did not understand.

"I think one more will be enough, sir," chuckled Correy. "The beggars are ready to run for it right now." He gave a command, and as though the microphone itself released the bomb, it dropped from the bottom of the Ertak and diminished swiftly as it hurtled earthward.

Again the swift spread of white that turned to gray; again the vast red crater. Again, too, a flank crumpled. As though I could see the faces of the brown men, I saw terror strike to the heart of the Neens. The flanks were melting away, and the panic of fear spread as flame spreads on a surface of oil. Correy has a good eye for such things, and he said there were fifty thousand of the enemy massed there. If there were, in the space that it takes the heart to tick ten times, fifty thousand Neens turned their back to the enemy and fled to the safety of their own jungles.

The Libars made no effort to pursue. They stood there, in their military formations, watching with wonderment. Then, with crisp military dispatch, they maneuvered into great long ranks, awaiting the arrival of transportation.

"And so it is finished, John Hanson," said Artur slowly, his eyes shining with a light that might almost be called holy. "My people are saved! He spoke well, as always, when He said that those who would come after Him would be our friends if we were their friends."
"We are your friends," I replied, "but tell me, who is this one of whom you speak always, but do not name? From what I have seen, I guess a great deal, but there has been no time to learn all the story. Will you tell me, now?"

"I will, if that is your wish," said Artur, "but I should prefer to tell you in the Place. It is a long story, the story of toma annerson, the story of He Who Speaks, and there are things you should see, so that you may understand that story."

"As you wish, Artur." I glanced at Correy and nodded. "Back to the city, Mr. Correy. I think we're through here."

"I believe we are, sir." He gave the orders to the operating room, and the Ertak swung in a great circle toward the gleaming city of the Libars. "It looked like a real row when we got here; I wouldn't have minded being down there for a few minutes myself."

"With the Ertak poised over your head, dropping atomic bombs?"

Correy shook his head and grinned.

"No, sir!" he admitted. "Just hand to hand, with clubs."

* * * * *

Artur and I were together in the great domed building he called "the Place." There were no others in that vast auditorium, although outside a multitude waited. Artur had expressed a wish that no one accompany me, and I could see no valid reason for refusing the request.

"First," he said, pausing beside the great shining body of the space ship upon the central dais, "let me take you back many generations, to the time when only this northern continent was inhabited, and the Libars and the Neens were one people.

"In those days, we were of less understanding than the Neens of today. There were no cities; each family lived to itself, in crude huts, tilling the ground and hunting its own food. Then, out of the sky came this." He touched, reverently, the smooth side of the space ship. "It came to earth at this very spot, and from it, presently, emerged He Who Speaks. Would you inspect the ship that brought Him here?"

"Gladly," I said, and as I spoke, Artur swung open the small circular door. A great ethon flashlight, of a type still to be seen in our larger museums, stood just inside the threshold, and aided by its beams, we entered.

I stared around in amazement. The port through which he had entered led to a narrow compartment running lengthwise of the ship: a compartment twice the length of a man, perhaps, and half the length of a man in breadth. The rest of the ship was cut off by bulkheads, each studded with control devices the uses of which I could but vaguely understand.

* * * * *

Forward was a veritable maze of instruments, mounted on three large panels, the central panel of the group containing a circular lens which apparently was the eyepiece of some type of television disk the like of which I have never seen or heard. From my hasty examination I gathered that the ship operated by both a rocket effect (an early type of propulsion which was abandoned as ineffective) and some form of attraction-repulsion apparatus, evidently functioning through the reddish, pitted disks I had observed around the nose of the ship. The lettering upon the control panels and the instruments, while nearly obliterated, was unmistakably in the same language in which Artur had addressed us.

The ship had, beyond the shadow of doubt, come from Earth!

"Artur," I said gravely, "you have shown me that which has stirred me more than anything in my life. This ship of the air came from my own world, which is called Earth."

"True," he nodded, "that is the name He gave to it: Earth. He was a young man, but He was full of kindness and wisdom. He took my people out of the fields and the forests, and He taught them the working of metals, and the making of such things as He thought were good. Other things, of which He knew, He kept secret. He had small instruments He could hold in His hand, and which roared suddenly, that would take the life of large animals at a great distance, but He did not explain these, saying that they were bad. But all the good things He made for my people, and showed them how to make others.

* * * * *

"Not all my people were good. Some of them hated this great one, and strove against Him. They were makers of trouble, and He sent them to the southern continent, which is called Neen. Those among my people who loved Him and served Him best, He made His friends. He taught them His language, which is this that I speak, and which has been the holy language of His priests since that day. He gave to these friends names from his own country, and they were handed down from father to son, so that I am now Artur, as my father was Artur, and his father before him, for many generations."


"Perhaps so," nodded the priest of this unknown Earth-child. "In many generations, a name might slightly
change. But I must hasten on with my story, for outside my people become impatient.

"In the course of time, He passed away, an old man, with a beard that was whiter than the hair of our new-born
children. Here, our hair grows dark with age, but His whitened like the metal of his ship that brought Him here. But
He left to us His voice, and so long as His voice spoke to us on the anniversary of the day upon which He came out
of the sky, the Neens believed that His power still protected His people.

"But the Neens were only awaiting the time when His voice would no longer sound in the Place. Each year
their brown and savage representatives came, upon the anniversary, to listen, and each time they cowered and went
back to their own kind with the word that He Who Speaks, still spoke to His people.

"But the last anniversary, no sound came forth. His voice was silenced at last; and the Neens went back
rejoicing, to tell their people that at last the god of the Libars had truly died, and that His voice sounded no more in
the Place."

* * * * *

A tense excitement gripped me; my hands trembled, and my voice, as I spoke to Artur, shook with emotion.

"And this voice--it came from where, Artur?" I whispered.

"From here." Sorrowfully, reverently, he lifted, from a niche in the wall, a small box of smooth, shining metal,
and lifted the lid.

Curiously, I stared at the instruments revealed. In one end of the horizontal panel was a small metal membrane,
which I guessed was a diaphragm. In the center of the remaining space was thrust up a heavy pole of rusty metal.
Supported by tiny brackets in such fashion that it did not quite touch the pole of rusty metal, was a bright wire,
which disappeared through tiny holes in the panel, on either side. Each of the brackets which supported the wire was
tipped with a tiny roller, which led me to believe that the wire was of greater length than was revealed, and designed
to be drawn over the upright piece of metal.

"Until the last anniversary," said Artur sadly, "when one touched this small bit of metal, here,"--he indicated a
lever beside the diaphragm, which I had not noted--"this wire moved swiftly, and His voice came forth. But this
anniversary, the wire did not move, and there was no voice."

"Let me see that thing a moment." There were hinges at one end of the panel, and I lifted it carefully. An
intricate maze of delicate mechanism came up with it.

* * * * *

One thing I saw at a glance: the box contained a tiny, crude, but workable atomic generator. And I had been
right about the wire: there was a great orderly coil of it on one spool, and the other end was attached to an empty
spool. The upright of rusty metal was the pole of an electro-magnet, energized by the atomic generator.

"I think I see the trouble, Artur!" I exclaimed. One of the connections to the atomic generator was badly
corroded; a portion of the metal had been entirely eaten away, probably by the electrolytic action of the two
dissimilar metals. With trembling fingers I made a fresh connection, and swung down the hinged panel. "This is the
lever?" I asked.

"Yes; you touch it so." Artur moved the bit of metal, and instantly the shining wire started to move, coming up
through the one small hole, passing, on its rolled-up guides, directly over the magnet, and disappearing through the
other hole, to be wound up on the take-up spool. For an instant there was no sound, save the slight grinding of the
wire on its rollers, and then a bass, powerful voice spoke from the vibrating metal diaphragm:

"I am Thomas Anderson," said the voice. "I am a native of a world called Earth, and I have come through space
to this other sphere. I leave this record, which I trust is imperishable, so that when others come to follow me, they
may know that to Earth belongs the honor, if honor it be, of sending to this world its first visitor from the stars.

"There is no record on Earth of me nor of my ship of space, the Adventurer. The history of science is a history
of men working under the stinging lash of criticism and scoffing; I would have none of that.

* * * * *

"The Adventurer was assembled far from the cities, in a lone place where none came to scoff or criticize. When
it was finished, I took my place and sealed the port by which I had entered. The Adventurer spurned the Earth
beneath its cradles, and in the middle of the Twenty-second century, as time is computed on Earth, man first found
himself in outer space.

"I landed here by chance. My ship had shot its bolt. Perhaps I could leave, but the navigation of space is a
perilous thing, and I could not be sure of singling out my native Earth. This is a happy world, and the work I am
doing here is good work. Here I remain.

"And now, to you who shall hear this, my voice, in some year so far away that my bones shall be less than dust,
and the mind refuses to compute the years, let me give into your charge the happiness and the welfare of these, my
people. May peace and happiness be your portion. That is the wish of Earth's first orphan, Thomas Anderson."

There was a click, and then the sharp hum of the wire re-spooling itself on the original drum.
"Toma annerson," said Artur solemnly: "He Who Speaks." He offered his hand to me, and I understood, as I shook hands gravely, that this old Earth greeting had become a holy sign among these people. And I understood also the meaning of the familiar phrase, "toma annerson"; it was the time-corrupted version of that name they held holy—the name of Thomas Anderson, child of my own Earth, and explorer of space centuries before Ame Baove saw his first sun.

* * * * *

There is more I could tell of Strobus and its people, but an old man's pen grows weary.

The menace of the Neens, Artur agreed, had been settled forever. They knew now that He Who Speaks still watched over the welfare of his people. The Neens were an ignorant and a superstitious people, and the two great craters made by our atomic bombs would be grim reminders to them for many generations to come.

"You have done all that need be done, John Hanson," said Artur, his face alight with gratitude. "And now you must receive the gratitude of my people!" Before I could protest, he signalled to the men who guarded the four great entrances, and my words were lost in the instant tramp of thousands of feet marching down the broad aisles.

When they were all seated, Artur spoke to them, not in the "holy" language I understood, but in their own common tongue. I stood there by the ship, feeling like a fool, wondering what he was saying. In the end he turned to me, and motioned for me to join him, where he stood near the edge of the dais. As I did so, every person in that monstrous auditorium rose and bowed his head.

"They greet you as the successor to He Who Speaks," said Artur gently. "They are a simple folk, and you have served them well. You are a man of many duties that must soon carry you away, but first will you tell these people that you are their friend, as Toma Annerson was the friend of their fathers?"

* * * * *

For the second time that day I made a speech.

"Friends," I said, "I have heard the voice of a great countryman of mine, who is dead these countless centuries, and yet who lives today in your hearts. I am proud that the same star gave us birth." It wasn't much of a speech, but they didn't understand it, anyway. Artur translated it for them, and I think he embroidered it somewhat, for the translation took a long time.

"They worship you as the successor to Toma Annerson," whispered Artur as the people filed from the great auditorium. "Your fame here will be second only to His, for you saved, to-day, the people He called His own."

We left just as darkness was falling, and as I shot up to the hovering Ertak, the chant of Artur and his bright-robed fellows was the last sound of Strobus that fell upon my ears. They were intoning the praises of Thomas Anderson, man of Earth.

And so, my good Zenian friends, you learn of the first man to brave the dangers of outer space. He left no classic journal behind him as did Ame Baove, nor did he return to tell of the wonders he had found.

But he did take strong root where he fell in his clumsy craft, and if this record, supported only by the log of the Ertak, needs further proof, some five or six full generations from now Strobus will be close enough for doubting Zenians to visit. And they will find there, I have no least doubt, the enshrined Adventurer, and the memory, not only of Thomas Anderson, but of one, John Hanson, Commander (now retired) of the Special Patrol Service.
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