

Edited by
Brian Aldiss

Galactic Empires

VOLUME ONE



GALACTIC EMPIRES

VOLUME ONE

By Brian Aldiss

Interstellar civilizations rise, flourish and fall in this unique collection of superb stories!

GALACTIC EMPIRES is more than an anthology: it is a vast two-volume novel of the future by some of the greatest science fiction writers alive, including Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Poul Anderson, Clifford Simak, Cordwainer Smith, A. E. Van Vogt, Harry Harrison, and many others.

Brian Aldiss has selected twenty-six stories and assembled them into a mammoth saga which explores many dimensions of the Galactic Empire: its origins, laws, mores, educational systems, not to mention its incredible variety of inhabitants, and their experience with the natural quirks of the universe in which they, and we, all live. Aldiss has created nothing less than the epic rise and fall of the Galactic Empire.

Some of the stories have been undeservedly neglected since their publication in obscure and now defunct sci-fi magazines; others are acknowledged classics. All of them have been placed carefully so that they fit logically into the overall saga of man's conquest of the galaxy, the wars of empire, and the final dissolution and destruction of humanity's greatest endeavor.

The result is a vast panorama which begins with the first quiverings of incipient Time and is confined only by the limits of the world's most daring and creative imaginations.

*Book Club
Edition*

GALACTIC EMPIRES

VOLUME I

GALACTIC EMPIRES

VOLUME I

edited by

BRIAN W. ALDISS

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CONTENTS

Introduction viii

Section 1 **Rise and Shine**

- i *A Sense of Perspective* 1
 - Been a Long Time *R A Lafferty* 5
 - The Possessed *Arthur C Clarke* 12
 - Protected Species *H B Fyfe* 18
 - All the Way Back *Michael Shaara* 30
- ii *'Wider Still and Wider . . .'* 49
 - The Star Plunderer *Poul Anderson* 54
 - Foundation *Isaac Asimov* 81
 - We're Civilized! *Mark Clifton and Alex Apostolides* 114

Section 2 **Maturity or Bust**

- i *Horses in the Starship Hold* 127
 - The Crime and Glory of Commander Suzdal
Cordwainer Smith 132
 - The Rebel of Valkyr *Alfred Coppel* 149
 - Brightness Falls from the Air *Idris Seabright* 194
 - Inmigrant *Clifford Simak* 201
- ii *The Health Service in the Skies* 251
 - Resident Physician *James White* 261
 - Age of Retirement *Hal Lynch* 287
 - Planting Time *P Adams and Charles Nightingale* 293

INTRODUCTION

Galactic empires represent the ultimate absurdity in science fiction.

Galactic empires represent a promiscuous liaison between Science and Glamour, with Glamour generally in the ascendant.

Galactic empires represent the spectaculars of the sf field.

As such, galactic empires have often been condemned by the serious-minded. That may be less because of faults intrinsic in the genre than because the serious-minded are practised in condemnation. One can be fairly sensible and still get pleasure from reading about armoured chaps with flambeaux, drinking out of bellarmine and leading war-horses into starships before they dash across the parsecs at many times the speed of light.

You can, in other words, take these stories seriously. What you must not do is take them literally. Their authors didn't. There's a way of reading everything.

Most of these stories were written for fun. But there are levels of fun. It is the responsibility of an anthologist to get serious-minded on that score; but first—a quote from one of the stories in this volume (you will come on it in good time):

'Metal-clad heels struck the paving in harsh cadence as the twelve guards escorted Deralan down the centre of the Avenue of Kings. The once proud street had become a place of bazaars. Rael was a wise and sour old planet. To it had come the dregs of a thousand planets, the sycophants, the cheats, with their smell of depravity, their swaggering insolence. One did not walk alone at night on Rael.'

Tumbledown squalor is often an attraction in the galactic story. The streets of Rael are depraved with good inventions, but they take second place to the picturesque. In a thousand Raels, the authors instinctively escort us to the nearest low drinking booth rather than showing us how the sewage system functions (unless our hero escapes down it) or how the rates are gathered to the mutual benefit of all. They know our tastes.

What the authors do in the main is tell us a story adorned with alien creatures, swordplay, fascinating gadgets, and—for preference—beautiful princesses. The story itself is generally fairly

traditional, the crux being resolved by quick wits, courage, and brute strength. If this sounds like the recipe for a fairy-tale, the point about fairy-tales is that they enchant us and enlarge our perceptions. As Michael Shaara puts it in his story:

“The history of Earth and of all Mankind just faded and dropped away. They heard of great races and worlds beyond number, the illimitable government which was the Galactic Federation. The fiction, the legends, the dreams of a thousand years had come true in a moment, in the figure of a square little old man who was not from Earth. There was a great deal for them to learn and accept in the time of a single afternoon, on an alien planet.”

Science is thin stuff beside this legendary material.

I say that this is what the authors give us in the main. Yet there is a moral which blows ever and anon like a chill wind down Rael’s High Street, through the galactic tale: that it is better to govern than be governed. In more than one tale included here, the governed become the governors in the course of the story. In case the message does not quite get home, we have a special department in Volume Two entitled ‘The Other End of the Stick’, in which Mack Reynolds and colleagues take us properly to task. Mark Clifton and Alex Apostolides also have something cogent to say on the matter.

Morality is all very well, but give me luxury every time. There is an undeniable luxuriousness in the most characteristic of these stories, which shows itself in the asides. You have to love the throw-away explanation, which contains in a few lines the gaudiness of technology and the tudorishness of the past:

‘He followed her swaying body along the drape-hung corridors, into small rooms and past oak-beamed doors. She came to a blank wall, reached up and pressed pink fingertips against a rose-red stone.

“The whorls at the tips of my fingers set off a light-switch mechanism within the stone,” she explained. “It’s better than any key.”

‘Somewhere an engine hummed and the rock wall began to turn.’

You have to love the way villains or heroes flee across the remote star galaxies in pursuit of each other. You have to love the way Elder Races, Hideous Secrets, Ancient Forces or plain sneaky old teleportators crop up at every turn. And you have to love the imperial women.

It must be said that most of these stories were written in an innocent age, before Women's Lib and often when the authors themselves were of an innocent age. So a distinctly romantic view is taken of girls like Daylya 'whose beauty had been like a warm cry in the night'. Cordwainer Smith's Commander is practically alone in having a wife whom he prosaically loves. The beauties you meet here are apt to materialise in sinister circumstances, and to dress—or undress—to kill, like Alys in the showiest of the tales in this volume.

'He watched the graceful line of her unadorned throat, the bare shoulders and breasts, the small waist, the flat, firm stomach—all revealed by the studied nakedness of the fashions of the Inner Marches. This was no child.'

So we all fervently hope. Often a note of longing and despair sounds, when the heroine is lost. 'He remembered the sound of her voice and the sweetness of her lips, and he loved her. A million years, and she was dust blowing on the night wind . . .'

Some commentators have claimed to find something sinister in the idea of a galactic civilization, linking it to American Imperialist designs. This seems to me absurd; the stories do not bear that sort of weight of interpretation. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that all the best exponents of galactic empires are American, with one exception (the greatest, Olaf Stapledon). Presumably the British, who had an empire, regarded the matter more matter-of-factly.

Another objection is that we are morally unfit to rule our own world as yet, so that to think of us spreading to other worlds is to offend mightily. This objection might have more strength if the authors were actually attempting prophecy or endeavouring to show us how we could in fact take over the galaxy. But of course nothing is further from the truth. They are interested in the perennial business of writers, of catching an audience by its collective ear and telling it a good tale and a few home truths at the

same time. Prediction does not enter into it. (All I'm prepared to admit is that if Earth establishes or becomes incorporated in a galactic empire in, say, three hundred years, then clearly the idea was festering in our racial collective unconscious during the twentieth century—particularly that bit of the collective unconscious called Poul Anderson.)

C S Lewis—in general an astute critic of sf—brought another objection against the galactic story, when he complained that the author 'then proceeds to develop an ordinary love-story, spy-story, wreck-story, or crime-story. This seems to me tasteless. Whatever in a work of art is not used, is doing harm.' Lewis misses the point, amazingly for a keen follower of science fiction. We read the love-story, the spy-story, or whatever, *because* it takes place on a fifty-kilometre long spaceship, *because* it is set on a planet where the sun goes into eclipse every hour on the hour, *because* it happens in the capital city of the greatest empire the universe has ever known. Our sensibilities are affected by these settings, and by the knowledge that we are reading about legendary characters living hundreds of years in our future. We would toss the story aside unread if it all took place in Leicester in 1976.

Am I then saying that this anthology contains mere escapism? If I am, then let me summon the spirit of C S Lewis again, this time on the side of justice (my side). He thought the charge of escapism a puzzling one. 'I never fully understood it until my friend Professor Tolkein asked me the very simple question "What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?" and gave the obvious answer: jailers.'

In this connection, I noticed when I had assembled the stories that the majority of them were first published in the fifties. This may be partly because a great many sf magazines—more than before or since—were then being printed. But a more significant part of the explanation is surely that that was the era of the Cold War, those frigid years when West and East confronted each other across a pile of H-bombs. The Earth was not particularly habitable to the imagination; it was a relief to go a-voyaging. (And you will notice that *radiation* appears as a sinister and often curiously unrealistic threat in a number of these stories.)



As in the previous anthologies in this series, I have confined myself virtually to selecting from sf magazines. There are many sf anthologies on the market; few of their editors appear to have studied anything but other anthologies. I am interested in rescuing from oblivion stories, not necessarily by famous authors, which—for one reason or another—can be read and enjoyed today.

The two volumes of this anthology contain twenty-six stories culled from fourteen different sources spanning thirty-four years. Some of those magazines were obscure, some well-loved. Most have gone the way of the dodo. They were great while they lasted; they formed another empire which has vanished.

We print the original blurbs which appeared with the stories on first publication. Blurbs were a minor art-form in their own right. Where blurbs have not been available, they have been forged.

BRIAN ALDISS

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SECTION ONE

RISE AND SHINE

i *A Sense of Perspective*

R A Lafferty: BEEN A LONG LONG TIME	5
Arthur C Clarke: THE POSSESSED	12
H B Fyfe: PROTECTED SPECIES	18
Michael Shaara: ALL THE WAY BACK	30

Germinating in regions far apart, these empires easily mastered any sub-utopian worlds that lay within reach. Thus they spread from one planetary system to another, till at last empire made contact with empire.

Then followed wars such as had never occurred before in our galaxy. Fleets of worlds, natural and artificial, manoeuvred among the stars to outwit one another, and destroyed one another with long-range jets of sub-atomic energy. As the tides of battle spread hither and thither through space, whole planetary systems were annihilated. Many a world spirit found a sudden end. Many a lowly race that had no part in the strife was slaughtered in the celestial warfare that raged around it.

Olaf Stapledon: Star Maker

Some ideas are so powerful, lie so close to the foundations of human thinking, that they impose themselves in realms where they appear to have no rightful place. The idea of cycles or seasons is one such. Christian thought is familiar with the idea of an Eternal Kingdom but, 'on Earth', in Reality, no kingdom lasts for ever. The ghostly galactic empires of sf also prove seasonal. So, for that matter, do galaxies themselves.

For those who live on the equator, or for those who live on planets without seasons, the cyclic nature of the universe may be less obtrusive. *May be*. But the basic conditions of life, being born, giving birth, dying, acquaint us forcefully with the meaning of seasonal change. In this section, we begin in Mother Nature's way, with the spring of empires.

Yet most of the stories in the section would belong almost as well at the end. Take the case of Jeff Otis, investigating some ruins on the planet of a binary star. Terrestrial civilization is reaching out into interplanetary space at last, and already five planetary systems have been opened up. This one is now being made ready for colonization. And then Otis gets a little closer to one of the alien creatures. As H. B. Fyfe relates in his beautifully

constructed story, the creature has a scrap of information which will change perspectives all round.

Curious the attraction that ruins have for science fiction writers. It is part of the gothic heritage of the literature and at the same time, I believe, a symbol of the way we see ourselves as living in the ruins of religious belief or of a deeper culture. Only in the last ten years has science fiction been paid any sort of critical attention; most critics have observed the startling way in which sf, by abandoning literalism and moving towards surrealism, provides a special kind of mirror for its own times. One might say that galactic empires have been invented because we have a longing for that sort of cosmic cohesion; their tendency is as much religious as materialist.

So don't be too surprised if all sorts of implications leap unexpectedly from these stories. The implication in Michael Shaara's story concerns evil and its relationship with the human race. It is a typical sf story in the way in which it takes large chunks of time and space for granted—a freedom for which many of us read sf. Inevitably, perspectives become changed in the process.

This was Shaara's first or second story to be published, incidentally. He was one of many new authors to appear in the early fifties. He has recently won a Pulitzer Prize for his Civil War novel, *The Killer Angels*.

The two opening stories, by Arthur C. Clarke and R. A. Lafferty, are brief. They serve as overtures to the grand theme of colonial expansion. They set the scene within a frame of reference. Clark reminds us, in a vein characteristic of him, that the large and the small are connected; both are part of the processes at work in the universe. A process on the whole indifferent to man. It may be that man's incursions into the universe, if he gets that far, will be lemminglike, rather than a rational progression.

As for R. A. Lafferty, he reminds us—well, Lafferty is a very funny man, and he reminds us of that. We shall need a sense of humour as much as a blaster on the *Long Voyage Out*.

You've heard the one about the monkeys, the typewriter, and the complete works of Shakespeare? So did Michael . . . but he set out to prove it—!

BEEN A LONG, LONG TIME

by R A Lafferty

It doesn't end with one—it *Begins* with a whimper.

It was a sundering Dawn—Incandescence to which all later lights are less than candles—Heat to which the heat of all later suns is but a burnt-out match—the Polarities that set up the tension forever.

And in the middle was a whimper, just as was felt the first jerk that indicated that time had begun.

The two Challenges stood taller than the radius of the space that was being born; and one weak creature, Boshel, stood in the middle, too craven to accept either challenge.

'Uh, how long you fellows going to be gone?' Boshel snuffled.

The Creative Event was the Revolt rending the Void in two. The two sides formed, opposing Nations of Lightning split above the steep chasm. Two Champions had it out with a bitterness that has never passed—Michael wrapped in white fire—and Helel swollen with black and purple blaze. And their followers with them. It has been put into allegory as Acceptance and Rejection, and as Good and Evil; but in the Beginning there was the Polarity by which the universes are sustained.

Between them, like a pigmy, stood Boshel alone in whimpering hesitation.

'Get the primordial metal out of it if you're coming with us,' Helel growled like cracked thunder as he led his followers off in a fury to form a new settlement.

'Uh, you guys going to be back before night?' Boshel whimpered.

'Oh, get to Hell out of here,' Michael roared.

'Keep the little oaf!' Helel snorted. 'He hasn't enough brimstone in him to set fire to an outhouse.'

The two great hosts separated, and Boshel was left alone in

the void. He was still standing there when there was a second little jerk and time began in earnest, bursting the pod into a shower of sparks that traveled and grew. He was still standing there when the sparks acquired form and spin; and he stood there yet when life began to appear on the soot specks thrown off from the sparks. He stood there quite a long, long time.

'What are we going to do with the little bugger?' an underling asked Michael. 'We can't have him fouling up the landscape forever.'

'I'll go ask,' said Mike, and he did.

But Michael was told that the responsibility was his; that Boshel would have to be punished for his hesitancy; and that it was up to Michael to select the suitable punishment and see that it was carried out.

'You know, he made time itself stutter at the start,' Mike told the underling. 'He set up a random that affected everything. It's got to be a punishment with something to do with time.'

'You got any ideas?' the underling asked.

'I'll think of something,' Michael said.

Quite a while after this, Michael was thumbing through a book one afternoon at a news-stand in Los Angeles.

'It says here,' Michael intoned, 'that if six monkeys were set down to six typewriters and typed for a long enough time, they would type all the words of Shakespeare exactly. Time is something we've got plenty of. Let's try it, Kitabel, and see how long it takes.'

'What's a monkey, Michael?'

'I don't know.'

'What's a typewriter?'

'I don't know.'

'What's Shakespeare, Mike?'

'Anybody can ask questions, Kitabel. Get the things together and let's get the project started.'

'It sounds like a lengthy project. Who will oversee it?'

'Boshel. It's a natural for him. It will teach him patience and a sense of order, and impress on him the majesty of time. It's exactly the punishment I've been looking for.'

They got the things together and turned them over to Boshel.

'As soon as the project is finished, Bosh, your period of waiting will be over. Then you can join the group and enjoy yourself with the rest of us.'

'Well, it's better than standing here doing nothing,' Boshel said. 'It'd go faster if I could educate the monkeys and let them copy it.'

'No, the typing has to be random, Bosh. It was you who introduced the random factor into the universe. So, suffer for it.'

'Any particular edition the copy has to correspond to?'

'The "Blackstone Readers" Edition Thirty-Seven and a half Volumes in One that I have here in my hand will do fine,' Michael said. 'I've had a talk with the monkeys, and they're willing to stick with it. It took me eighty thousand years just to get them where they could talk, but that's nothing when we're talking about time.'

'Man, are we ever talking about Time!' Boshel moaned.

'I made a deal with the monkeys. They will be immune to fatigue and boredom. I cannot promise the same for you.'

'Uh, Michael, since it may be quite a while, I wonder if I could have some sort of clock to keep track of how fast things are going.'

So Michael made him a clock. It was a cube of dressed stone measuring a parsec on each edge.

'You don't have to wind it, you don't have to do a thing to it, Bosh,' Michael explained. 'A small bird will come every millenium and sharpen its beak on this stone. You can tell the passing of time by the diminishing of the stone. It's a good clock, and it has only one moving part, the bird. I will not guarantee that your project will be finished by the time the entire stone is worn away, but you will be able to tell that time has passed.'

'It's better than nothing,' Boshel said, 'but it's going to be a drag. I think this concept of time is a little Mediaeval, though.'

'So am I,' Michael said. 'I tell you what I can do, though, Bosh. I can chain you to that stone and have another large bird dive-bomb you and gouge out hunks of your liver. That was in a story in another book on that news-stand.'

'You slay me, Mike. That won't be necessary. I'll pass the time somehow.'

Boshel set the monkeys to work. They were conditioned to punch the typewriters at random. Within a short period of time (as the Larger Creatures count time) the monkeys had produced whole Shakespearian words: 'Let' which is found in scene two of act one of Richard III; 'Go' which is in scene two of act two of

Julius Caesar; and 'Be' which occurs in the very first scene and act of *The Tempest*. Boshel was greatly encouraged.

Some time after this, one of the monkeys produced two Shakespearian words in succession. By this time, the home world of Shakespeare (which was also the home world of the news-stand in Los Angeles where was born a great idea) was long out of business.

After another while, the monkeys had done whole phrases. By then, quite a bit of time had run out.

The trouble with that little bird is that its beak did not seem to need much sharpening when it did come once every thousand years. Boshel discovered that Michael had played a dirty seraphic trick on him and had been feeding the bird entirely on bland custard. The bird would take two or three light swipes at the stone, and then be off for another thousand years. Yet, after no more than a thousand visitations, there was an unmistakable scratch on the stone. It was a hopeful sign.

Boshel began to see that the thing could be done. A monkey—and not the most brilliant of them—finally produced a whole sentence: 'What say'st thou, bully-rook?' And at that very moment another thing happened. It was surprising to Boshel, for it was the first time he had ever seen it. But he would see it milliards of times before it was finished.

A speck of cosmic dust, on the far outreaches of space, met another speck. This should not have been unusual; specks were always meeting specks. But this case was different. Each speck—in the opposite direction—had been the outmost in the whole cosmos. You can't get farther apart than that. The speck (a teeming conglomerate of peopled worlds) looked at the other speck with eyes and instruments, and saw its own eyes and instruments looking back at it. What the speck saw was itself. The cosmic tetradimensionate sphere had been completed. The first speck had met itself coming from the other direction, and space had been transversed.

Then it all collapsed.

The stars went out, one by one, and billion by billion. Nightmares of falling! All the darkened orbs and oblates fell down into the void that was all bottom. There was nothing left but one tight pod in the void, and a few out of context things like Michael and his associates, and Boshel and his monkeys.

Boshel had a moment of unease: he had become used to the appearance of the expanding universe. But he need not have been uneasy. It began all over again.

A few billion centuries ticked by silently. Once more, the pod burst into a shower of sparks that traveled and grew. They acquired form and spin, and life appeared again on the soot specks thrown off from those sparks.

This happened again and again. Each cycle seemed damnably long while it was happening; but in retrospect, the cycles were only like a light blinking on and off. And in the Longer Retrospect, they were like a high-frequency alternator, producing a dizzy number of such cycles every over-second, and continuing for tumbling ages. Yet Boshel was becoming bored. There was just no other word for it.

When only a few billion cosmic cycles had been completed, there was a gash in the clock-rock that you could hide a horse in. The little bird made very many journeys back to sharpen its beak. And Pithekos Pete, the most rapid of the monkeys, had now random-written *The Tempest*, complete and perfect. They shook hands all around, monkeys and angel. It was something of a moment.

The moment did not last. Pete, instead of pecking at furious random to produce the rest of the plays, wrote his own improved version of *The Tempest*. Boshel was furious.

'But it's better, Bosh,' Pete protested. 'And I have some ideas about stage-craft that will really set this thing up.'

'Of course it's better! We don't want them better. We want them just the same. Can't you monkeys realize that we are working out a problem of random probabilities? Oh, you clunker-heads!'

'Let me have that damned book for a month, Bosh, and I'll copy the plagued things off and we'll be finished,' Pithekos Pete suggested.

'Rules, you lunk-heads, rules!' Boshel grated out. 'We have to abide by the rules. You know that isn't allowed, and besides it would be found out. I have reason to suspect, and it cuts me to say this, that one of my own monkeys and associates here present is an informer. We'd never get by with it.'

After the brief misunderstanding, things went better. The monkeys stayed with their task. And after a number of cycles ex-

pressed by nine followed by zeros in pica type sufficient to stretch around the universe at a period just prior to its collapse (the radius and the circumference of the ultimate sphere are, of course, the same), the first complete version was ready.

It was faulty, of course, and it had to be rejected. But there were less than thirty thousand errors in it; it presaged great things to come, and ultimate triumph.

Later (Peöple, was it ever later!) they had it quite close. By the time that the gash in the clock-rock would hold a medium-sized solar system, they had a version with only five errors.

'It will come,' Boshel said. 'It will come in time. And time is the one thing we have plenty of.'

Later—much, much later—they seemed to have it perfect; and by this time, the bird had worn away nearly a fifth of the bulk of the great stone with its millennial visits.

Michael himself read the version and could find no error. This was not conclusive, of course, for Michael was an impatient and hurried reader. Three readings were required for verification, but never was hope so high.

It passed the second reading, by a much more careful angel, and was pronounced letter-perfect. But it was later at night when that reader had finished it, and he may have gotten a little careless at the end.

And it passed the third reading, through all the thirty-seven plays of it, and into the poems at the end. This was Kitabel, the scribing angel himself, who was appointed to that third reading. He was just about to sign the certification when he paused.

'There is something sticking in my mind,' he said, and he shook his head to clear it. 'There is something like an echo that is not quite right. I wouldn't want to make a mistake.'

He had written 'Kitab—', but he had not finished his signature.

'I won't be able to sleep tonight if I don't think of it,' he complained. 'It wasn't in the plays; I know that they were perfect. It was something in the poems—quite near the end—some dissonance. Either the bard wrote a remarkably malapropos line, or there was an error in the transcription that my eye overlooked but my ear remembered. I acknowledge that I was sleepy near the end.'

'Oh, by all the worlds that were ever made, sign!' pleaded Boshel.

'You have waited this long, a moment more won't kill you, Bosh.'

'Don't bet on it, Kit. I'm about to blow, I tell you.'

But Kitabel went back and he found it—a verse in the Phoenix and the Turtle:

'From this session interdict
Every fowl of tyrant wing,
Save the eagle, feather'd king:
Keep the obsequy so strict.'

That is what the book itself said. And what Pithekos Pete had written was nearly, but not quite, the same thing:

'From this session interdict
Every fowl of tyrant wingg,
ave the eaggle, feather'd kingg:
Dam machine the g is sticked.'

And if you never saw an angel cry, words cannot describe to you the show that Boshel put on then.

They are still at it tonight, typing away at random, for that last sad near-victory was less than a million billion cycles ago. And only a moment ago—half way back in the present cycle—one of the monkeys put together no less than nine Shakespearian words in a row.

There is still hope. And the bird has now worn the rock down to about half its bulk.

They moved towards the future—in quest for something hidden in the distant past.

THE POSSESSED

by Arthur C Clarke

And now the sun ahead was so close that the hurricane of radiation was forcing the Swarm back into the dark night of space. Soon it would be able to come no closer; the gales of light on which it rode from star to star could not be faced so near their source. Unless it encountered a planet very soon, and could fall down into the peace and safety of its shadow, this sun must be abandoned as had so many before.

Six cold outer worlds had already been searched and discarded. Either they were frozen beyond all hope of organic life, or else they harbored entities of types that were useless to the Swarm. If it was to survive, it must find hosts not too unlike those it had left on its doomed and distant home. Millions of years ago the Swarm had begun its journey, swept starward by the fires of its own exploding sun. Yet even now the memory of its lost birth-place was still sharp and clear, an ache that would never die.

There was a planet ahead, swinging its cone of shadow through the flame-swept night. The senses that the Swarm had developed upon its long journey reached out toward the approaching world, reached out and found it good.

The merciless buffeting of radiation ceased as the black disc of the planet eclipsed the sun. Falling freely under gravity, the Swarm dropped swiftly until it hit the outer fringe of the atmosphere. The first time it had made planetfall it had almost met its doom, but now it contracted its tenuous substance with the unthinking skill of long practice, until it formed a tiny, close-knit sphere. Slowly its velocity slackened, until at last it was floating motionless between earth and sky.

For many years it rode the winds of the stratosphere from Pole to Pole, or let the soundless fusillades of dawn blast it westward from the rising sun. Everywhere it found life, but nowhere intel-

ligence. There were things that crawled and flew and leaped, but there were no things that talked or built. Ten million years hence there might be creatures here with minds that the Swarm could possess and guide for its own purposes; there was no sign of them now. It could not guess which of the countless life-forms on this planet would be the heir to the future, and without such a host it was helpless—a mere pattern of electric charges, a matrix of order and self-awareness in a universe of chaos. By its own resources the Swarm had no control over matter, yet once it had lodged in the mind of a sentient race there was nothing that lay beyond its powers.

It was not the first time, and it would not be the last, that the planet had been surveyed by a visitant from space—though never by one in such peculiar and urgent need. The Swarm was faced with a tormenting dilemma. It could begin its weary travels once more, hoping that ultimately it might find the conditions it sought, or it could wait here on this world, biding its time until a race had arisen which would fit its purpose.

It moved like mist through the shadows, letting the vagrant winds take it where they willed. The clumsy, ill-formed reptiles of this young world never saw its passing, but it observed them, recording, analyzing, trying to extrapolate into the future. There was so little to choose between all these creatures; not one showed even the first faint glimmerings of conscious mind. Yet if it left this world in search of another, it might roam the universe in vain until the end of time.

At last it made its decision. By its very nature, it could choose both alternatives. The greater part of the Swarm would continue its travels among the stars, but a portion of it would remain on this world, like a seed planted in the hope of future harvest.

It began to spin upon its axis, its tenuous body flattening into a disc. Now it was wavering at the frontiers of visibility—it was a pale ghost, a faint will-of-the-wisp that suddenly fissured into two unequal fragments. The spinning slowly died away: the Swarm had become two, each an entity with all the memories of the original, and all its desires and needs.

There was a last exchange of thoughts between parent and child who were also identical twins. If all went well with them both, they would meet again in the far future here at this valley in the mountains. The one who was staying would return to this

point at regular intervals down the ages; the one who continued the search would send back an emissary if ever a better world was found. And then they would be united again, no longer homeless exiles vainly wandering among the indifferent stars.

The light of dawn was spilling over the raw, new mountains when the parent swarm rose up to meet the sun. At the edge of the atmosphere the gales of radiation caught it and swept it unresisting out beyond the planets, to start again upon the endless search.

The one that was left began its almost equally hopeless task. It needed an animal that was not so rare that disease or accident could make it extinct, nor so tiny that it could never acquire any power over the physical world. And it must breed rapidly, so that its evolution could be directed and controlled as swiftly as possible.

The search was long and the choice difficult, but at last the Swarm selected its host. Like rain sinking into thirsty soil, it entered the bodies of certain small lizards and began to direct their destiny.

It was an immense task, even for a being which could never know death. Generation after generation of the lizards was swept into the past before there came the slightest improvement in the race. And always, at the appointed time, the Swarm returned to its rendezvous among the mountains. Always it returned in vain: there was no messenger from the stars, bringing news of better fortune elsewhere.

The centuries lengthened into millennia, the millennia into eons. By the standards of geological time, the lizards were now changing rapidly. Presently they were lizards no more, but warm-blooded, fur-covered creatures that brought forth their young alive. They were still small and feeble, and their minds were rudimentary, but they contained the seeds of future greatness.

Yet not only the living creatures were altering as the ages slowly passed. Continents were being rent asunder, mountains being worn down by the weight of the unwearying rain. Through all these changes, the Swarm kept to its purpose; and always, at the appointed times, it went to the meeting place that had been chosen so long ago, waited patiently for a while, and came away. Perhaps the parent swarm was still searching or perhaps—it was a hard and terrible thought to grasp—some un-

known fate had overtaken it and it had gone the way of the race it had once ruled. There was nothing to do but to wait and see if the stubborn life-stuff of this planet could be forced along the path to intelligence.

And so the eons passed. . . .

Somewhere in the labyrinth of evolution the Swarm made its fatal mistake and took the wrong turning. A hundred million years had gone since it came to Earth, and it was very weary. It could not die, but it could degenerate. The memories of its ancient home and of its destiny were fading: its intelligence was waning even while its hosts climbed the long slope that would lead to self-awareness.

By a cosmic irony, in giving the impetus which would one day bring intelligence to this world, the Swarm had exhausted itself. It had reached the last stage of parasitism; no longer could it exist apart from its hosts. Never again could it ride free above the world, driven by wind and sun. To make the pilgrimage to the ancient rendezvous, it must travel slowly and painfully in a thousand little bodies. Yet it continued the immemorial custom, driven on by the desire for reunion which burned all the more fiercely now that it knew the bitterness of failure. Only if the parent swarm returned and reabsorbed it could it ever know new life and vigor.

The glaciers came and went; by a miracle the little beasts that now housed the waning alien intelligence escaped the clutching fingers of the ice. The oceans overwhelmed the land, and still the race survived. It even multiplied, but it could do no more. This world would never be its heritage, for far away in the heart of another continent a certain monkey had come down from the trees and was looking at the stars with the first glimmerings of curiosity.

The mind of the Swarm was dispersing, scattering among a million tiny bodies, no longer able to unite and assert its will. It had lost all cohesion; its memories were fading. In a million years, at most, they would all be gone.

Only one thing remained—the blind urge which still, at intervals which by some strange aberration were becoming ever shorter, drove it to seek its consummation in a valley that long ago had ceased to exist.



Quietly riding the lane of moonlight, the pleasure steamer passed the island with its winking beacon and entered the fjord. It was a calm and lovely night, with Venus sinking in the west out beyond the Faroes, and the lights of the harbor reflected with scarcely a tremor in the still waters far ahead.

Nils and Christina were utterly content. Standing side by side against the boat rail, their fingers locked together, they watched the wooded slopes drift silently by. The tall trees were motionless in the moonlight, their leaves unruffled by even the merest breath of wind, their slender trunks rising whitely from pools of shadow. The whole world was asleep; only the moving ship dared to break the spell that had bewitched the night.

Then suddenly, Christina gave a little gasp and Nils felt her fingers tighten convulsively on his. He followed her gaze: she was staring out across the water, looking toward the silent sentinels of the forest.

‘What is it, darling?’ he asked anxiously.

‘Look!’ she replied, in a whisper Nils could scarcely hear. ‘There—under the pines!’

Nils stared, and as he did so the beauty of the night ebbed slowly away and ancestral terrors came crawling back from exile. For beneath the trees the land was alive: a dappled brown tide was moving down the slopes of the hill and merging into the dark waters. Here was an open patch on which the moonlight fell unbroken by shadow. It was changing even as he watched: the surface of the land seemed to be rippling downward like a slow waterfall seeking union with the sea.

And then Nils laughed and the world was sane once more. Christina looked at him, puzzled but reassured.

‘Don’t you remember?’ he chuckled. ‘We read all about it in the paper this morning. They do this every few years, and always at night. It’s been going on for days.’

He was teasing her, sweeping away the tension of the last few minutes. Christina looked back at him, and a slow smile lit up her face.

‘Of course!’ she said. ‘How stupid of me!’ Then she turned once more toward the land and her expression became sad, for she was very tender-hearted.

‘Poor little things!’ she sighed. ‘I wonder why they do it?’

Nils shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

'No one knows,' he answered. 'It's just one of those mysteries. I shouldn't think about it if it worries you. Look—we'll soon be in harbor!'

They turned toward the beckoning lights where their future lay, and Christina glanced back only once toward the tragic, mindless tide that was still flowing beneath the moon.

Obedying an urge whose meaning they had never known, the doomed legions of the lemmings were finding oblivion beneath the waves.

When men arrived on the planet, they found ruins, and a few hard-to-see aliens. And they decided to protect the species—which was a mistaken idea based on inadequate understanding of the facts.

PROTECTED SPECIES

by H B Fyfe

The yellow star, of which Torang was the second planet, shone hotly down on the group of men viewing the half-built dam from the heights above. At a range of eighty million miles, the effect was quite Terran, the star being somewhat smaller than Sol.

For Jeff Otis, fresh from a hop through space from the extra-bright star that was the other component of the binary system, the heat was enervating. The shorts and light shirt supplied him by the planet co-ordinator were soaked with perspiration. He mopped his forehead and turned to his host.

‘Very nice job, Finchley,’ he complimented. ‘It’s easy to see you have things well in hand here.’

Finchley grinned sparingly. He had a broad, hard, flat face with tight lips and mere slits of blue eyes. Otis had been trying ever since the previous morning to catch a revealing expression on it.

He was uneasily aware that his own features were too frank and open for an inspector of colonial installations. For one thing, he had too many lines and hollows in his face, a result of being chronically underweight from space-hopping among the sixteen planets of the binary system.

Otis noticed that Finchley’s aides were eying him furtively.

‘Yes, Finchley,’ he repeated to break the little silence, ‘you’re doing very well on the hydroelectric end. When are you going to show me the capital city you’re laying out?’

‘We can fly over there now,’ answered Finchley. ‘We have tentative boundaries laid out below those precolony ruins we saw from the ’copter.’

‘Oh, yes. You know, I meant to remark as we flew over that they looked a good deal like similar remnants on some of the other planets.’

He caught himself as Finchley's thin lips tightened a trifle more. The co-ordinator was obviously trying to be patient and polite to an official from whom he hoped to get a good report, but Otis could see he would much rather be going about his business of building up the colony.

He could hardly blame Finchley, he decided. It was the fifth planetary system Terrans had found in their expansion into space, and there would be bigger jobs ahead for a man with a record of successful accomplishments. Civilization was reaching out to the stars at last. Otis supposed that he, too, was some sort of pioneer, although he usually was too busy to feel like one.

'Well, I'll show you some photos later,' he said. 'Right now, we—Say, why all that jet-burning down there?'

In the gorge below, men had dropped their tools and seemed to be charging toward a common focal point. Excited yells carried thinly up the cliffs.

'Ape hunt, probably,' guessed one of Finchley's engineers.

'Ape?' asked Otis, surprised.

'Not exactly,' corrected Finchley patiently. 'That's common slang for what we mention in reports as Torangs. They look a little like big, skinny, gray apes; but they're the only life large enough to name after the planet.'

Otis stared down into the gorge. Most of the running men had given up and were straggling back to their work. Two or three, brandishing pistols, continued running and disappeared around a bend.

'Never catch him now,' commented Finchley's pilot.

'Do you just let them go running off whenever they feel like it?' Otis inquired.

Finchley met his curious gaze stolidly.

'I'm in favor of anything that will break the monotony, Mr Otis. We have a problem of morale, you know. This planet is a key colony, and I like to keep the work going smoothly.'

'Yes, I suppose there isn't much for recreation yet.'

'Exactly. I don't see the sport in it myself but I let them. We're up to schedule.'

'Ahead, if anything,' Otis placated him. 'Well, now, about the city?'

Finchley led the way to the helicopter. The pilot and Otis

waited while he had a final word with his engineers, then they all climbed in and were off.

Later, hovering over the network of crude roads being leveled by Finchley's bulldozers, Otis admitted aloud that the location was well-chosen. It lay along a long, narrow bay that thrust in from the distant ocean to gather the waters of the same river that was being dammed some miles upstream.

'Those cliffs over there,' Finchley pointed out, 'were raised up since the end of whatever civilization used to be here—so my geologist tells me. We can fly back that way, and you can see how the ancient city was once at the head of the bay.'

The pilot climbed and headed over the cliffs. Otis saw that these formed the edge of a plateau. At one point, their continuity was marred by a deep gouge.

'Where the river ran thousands of years ago,' Finchley explained.

They reached a point from which the outlines of the ruined city were easily discerned. From the air, Otis knew, they were undoubtedly plainer than if he had been among them.

'Must have been a pretty large place,' he remarked. 'Any idea what sort of beings built it or what happened to them?'

'Haven't had time for that yet,' Finchley said. 'Some boys from the exploration staff poke around in there every so often. Best current theory seems to be that it belonged to the Torangs.'

'The *animals* they were hunting before?' asked Otis.

'Might be. Can't say for sure, but the diggers found signs the city took more of a punch than just an earthquake. Claim they found too much evidence of fires, exploded missiles, and warfare in general—other places as well as here. So . . . we've been guessing the Torangs are degenerated descendants of the survivors of some interplanetary brawl.'

Otis considered that.

'Sounds plausible,' he admitted, 'but you ought to do something to make sure you are right.'

'Why?'

'If it is the case, you'll have to stop your men from hunting them; degenerated or not, the Colonial Commission has regulations about contact with any local inhabitants.'

Finchley turned his head to scowl at Otis, and controlled himself with an obvious effort.

'Those *apes*?' he demanded.

'Well, how can you tell? Ever try to contact them?'

'Yes! At first, that is; before we figured them for animals.'

'And?'

'Couldn't get near one!' Finchley declared heatedly. 'If they had any sort of half-intelligent culture, wouldn't they let us make *some* sort of contact?'

'Offhand,' admitted Otis, 'I should think so. How about setting down a few minutes? I'd like a look at the ruins.'

Finchley glared at his wrist watch, but directed the pilot to land at a cleared spot. The young man brought them down neatly and the two officials alighted.

Otis, glancing around, saw where the archaeologists had been digging. They had left their implements stacked casually at the site—the air was dry up here and who was there to steal a shovel?

He left Finchley and strolled around a mound of dirt that had been cleared away from an entrance to one of the buildings. The latter had been built of stone, or at least faced with it. A peep into the dim excavation led him to believe there had been a steel framework, but the whole affair had been collapsed as if by an explosion.

He walked a little way further and reached a section of presumably taller buildings where the stone ruins thrust above the sandy surface. After he had wandered through one or two arched openings that seemed to have been windows, he understood why the explorers had chosen to dig for their information. If any covering or decoration had ever graced the walls, it had long since been weathered off. As for ceiling or roof, nothing remained.

'Must have been a highly developed civilization just the same,' he muttered.

A movement at one of the shadowed openings to his right caught his eye. He did not remember noticing Finchley leave the helicopter to follow him, but he was glad of a guide.

'Don't you think so?' he added.

He turned his head, but Finchley was not there. In fact, now

that Otis was aware of his surroundings, he could hear the voices of the other two mumbling distantly back by the aircraft.

'Seeing things!' he grumbled, and started through the ancient window.

Some instinct stopped him half a foot outside.

Come on, Jeff, he told himself, don't be silly! What could be there? Ghosts?

On the other hand, he realized, there were times when it was just as well to rely upon instinct—at least until you figured out the origin of the strange feeling. Any spaceman would agree to that. The man who developed an animal sixth sense was the man who lived longest on alien planets.

He thought he must have paused a full minute or more, during which he had heard not the slightest sound except the mutter of voices to the rear. He peered into the chamber, which was about twenty feet square and well if not brightly lit by reflected light.

Nothing was to be seen, but when he found himself turning his head stealthily to peer over his shoulder, he decided that the queer sensation along the back of his neck meant something.

Wait, now, he thought swiftly. I didn't see quite the whole room.

The flooring was heaped with wind-bared rubble that would not show footprints. He felt much more comfortable to notice himself thinking in that vein.

At least, I'm not imagining ghosts, he thought.

Bending forward the necessary foot, he thrust his head through the opening and darted a quick look to left, then to the right along the wall. As he turned right, his glance was met directly by a pair of very wide-set black eyes which shifted inward slightly as they got his range.

The Torang about matched his own six-feet-two, mainly because of elongated, gibbonlike limbs and a similarly crouching stance. Arms and legs, covered with short, curly, gray fur, had the same general proportions as human limbs, but looked half again too long for a trunk that seemed to be ribbed all the way down. Shoulder and hip joints were compactly lean, rather as if the Torang had developed on a world of lesser gravity than that of the human.

It was the face that made Otis stare. The mouth was toothless and probably constructed more for sucking than for chewing.

But the eyes! They projected like ends of a dumb-bell from each side of the narrow skull where the ears should have been, and focused with obvious mobility. Peering closer, Otis saw tiny ears below the eyes, almost hidden in the curling fur of the neck.

He realized abruptly that his own eyes felt as if they were bulging out, although he could not remember having changed his expression of casual curiosity. His back was getting stiff also. He straightened up carefully.

'Uh . . . hello,' he murmured, feeling unutterably silly but conscious of some impulse to compromise between a tone of greeting for another human being and one of pacification to an animal.

The Torang moved then, swiftly but unhurriedly. In fact, Otis later decided, deliberately. One of the long arms swept downward to the rubble-strewn ground.

The next instant, Otis jerked his head back out of the opening as a stone whizzed past in front of his nose.

'Hey!' he protested involuntarily.

There was a scrabbling sound from within, as of animal claws churning to a fast start among the pebbles. Recovering his balance, Otis charged recklessly through the entrance.

'I don't know why,' he admitted to Finchley a few minutes later. 'If I stopped to think how I might have had my skull bashed in coming through, I guess I'd have just backed off and yelled for you.'

Finchley nodded, but his narrow gaze seemed faintly approving for the first time since they had met.

'He was gone, of course,' Otis continued. 'I barely caught a glimpse of his rump vanishing through another window.'

'Yeah, they're pretty fast,' put in Finchley's pilot. 'In the time we've been here, the boys haven't taken more than half a dozen. Got a stuffed one over at headquarters though.'

'Hm-m-m,' murmured Otis thoughtfully.

From their other remarks, he learned that he had not noticed everything, even though face to face with the creature. Finchley's mentioning the three digits of the hands or feet, for instance, came as a surprise.

Otis was silent most of the flight back to headquarters. Once

there, he disappeared with a perfunctory excuse toward the rooms assigned him.

That evening, at a dinner which Finchley had made as attractive as was possible in a comparatively raw and new colony, Otis was noticeably sociable. The co-ordinator was gratified.

'Looks as if they finally sent us a regular guy,' he remarked behind his hand to one of his assistants. 'Round up a couple of the prettier secretaries to keep him happy.'

'I understand he nearly laid hands on a Torang up at the diggings,' said the other.

'Yep, ran right at it bare-handed. Came as close bagging it as anybody could, I suppose.'

'Maybe it's just as well he didn't,' commented the assistant. 'They're big enough to mess up an unarmed man some.'

Otis, meanwhile and for the rest of the evening, was assiduously busy making acquaintances. So engrossed was he in turning every new conversation to the Torangs and asking seemingly casual questions about the little known of their habits and possible past, that he hardly noticed receiving any special attentions. As a visiting inspector, he was used to attempts to entertain and distract him.

The next morning, he caught Finchley at his office in the sprawling one-story structure of concrete and glass that was colonial headquarters.

After accepting a chair across the desk from the co-ordinator, Otis told him his conclusions. Finchley's narrow eyes opened a trifle when he heard the details. His wide, hard-muscled face became slightly pink.

'Oh, for—! I mean, Otis, why must you make something big out of it? The men very seldom bag one anyway!'

'Perhaps because they're so rare,' answered Otis calmly. 'How do we know they're not intelligent life? Maybe if you were hanging on in the ruins of your ancestors' civilization, reduced to a primitive state, *you'd* be just as wary of a bunch of loud Terrans moving in!'

Finchley shrugged. He looked vaguely uncomfortable, as if debating whether Otis or some disgruntled sportsman from his husky construction crews would be easier to handle.

'Think of the overall picture a minute,' Otis urged. 'We're

pushing out into space at last, after centuries of dreams and struggles. With all the misery we've seen in various colonial systems at home, we've tried to plan these ventures so as to avoid old mistakes.'

Finchley nodded grudgingly. Otis could see that his mind was on the progress charts of his many projects.

'It stands to reason,' the inspector went on, 'that some day we'll find a planet with intelligent life. We're still new in space, but as we probe farther out, it's bound to happen. That's why the Commission drew up rules about native life forms. Or have you read that part of the code lately?'

Finchley shifted from side to side in his chair.

'Now, look!' he protested. 'Don't go making *me* out a hard-boiled vandal with nothing in mind but exterminating everything that moves on all Torang. *I* don't go out hunting the apes!'

'I know, I know,' Otis soothed him. 'But before the Colonial Commission will sanction any destruction of indigenous life, we'll have to show—*besides* that it's not intelligent—that it exists in sufficient numbers to avoid extinction.'

'What do you expect me to do about it?'

Otis regarded him with some sympathy. Finchley was the hard-bitten type the Commission needed to oversee the first breaking-in of a colony on a strange planet, but he was not unreasonable. He merely wanted to be left alone to handle the tough job facing him.

'Announce a ban on hunting Torangs,' Otis said. 'There must be something else they can go after.'

'Oh, yes,' admitted Finchley. 'There are swarms of little rabbit-things and other vermin running through the brush. But, I don't know—'

'It's standard practice,' Otis reminded him. 'We have many a protected species even back on Terra that would be extinct by now, but for the game laws.'

In the end, they agreed that Finchley would do his honest best to enforce a ban provided Otis obtained a formal order from the headquarters of the system. The inspector went from the office straight to the communications center, where he filed a long report for the chief co-ordinator's office in the other part of the binary system.

It took some hours for the reply to reach Torang. When it came that afternoon, he went looking for Finchley.

He found the co-ordinator inspecting a newly finished canning factory on the coast, elated at the completion of one more link in making the colony self-sustaining.

'Here it is,' said Otis, waving the message copy. 'Signed by the chief himself. "As of this date, the apelike beings known as Torangs, indigenous to planet number and so forth, are to be considered a rare and protected species under regulations and so forth et cetera."'

'Good enough,' answered Finchley with an amiable shrug. 'Give it here, and I'll have it put on the public address system and the bulletin boards.'

Otis returned satisfied to the helicopter that had brought him out from headquarters.

'Back, sir?' asked the pilot.

'Yes . . . *no!* Just for fun, take me out to the old city. I never did get a good look the other day, and I'd like to before I leave.'

They flew over the plains between the sea and the upjutting cliffs. In the distance, Otis caught a glimpse of the rising dam he had been shown the day before. This colony would go well, he reflected, as long as he checked up on details like preserving native life forms.

Eventually, the pilot landed at the same spot he had been taken on his previous visit to the ancient ruins. Someone else was on the scene today. Otis saw a pair of men he took to be archaeologists.

'I'll just wander around a bit,' he told the pilot.

He noticed the two men looking at him from where they stood by the shovels and other equipment, so he paused to say hello. As he thought, they had been digging in the ruins.

'Taking some measurements in fact,' said the sunburned blond introduced as Hoffman. 'Trying to get a line on what sort of things built the place.'

'Oh?' said Otis, interested. 'What's the latest theory?'

'Not so much different from us,' Hoffman told the inspector while his partner left them to pick up another load of artifacts.

'Judging from the size of the rooms, height of doorways, and such stuff as stairways,' he went on, 'they were pretty much our size. So far, of course, it's only a rough estimate.'

'Could be ancestors of the Torangs, eh?' asked Otis.

'Very possible, sir,' answered Hoffman, with a promptness that suggested it was his own view. 'But we haven't dug up enough to guess at the type of culture they had, or draw any conclusions as to their psychology or social customs.'

Otis nodded, thinking that he ought to mention the young fellow's name to Finchley before he left Torang. He excused himself as the other man returned with a box of some sort of scraps the pair had unearthed, and strolled between the outlines of the untouched buildings.

In a few minutes, he came to the section of higher structures where he had encountered the Torang the previous day.

'Wonder if I should look in the same spot?' he muttered aloud. 'No . . . that would be the *last* place the thing would return to . . . unless it had a lair thereabouts—'

He stopped to get his bearings, then shrugged and walked around a mound of rubble toward what he believed to be the proper building.

Pretty sure this was it, he mused. *Yes, shadows around that window arch look the same . . . same time of day—*

He halted, almost guiltily, and looked back to make sure no one was observing his return to the scene of his little adventure. After all, an inspector of colonial installations was not supposed to run around ghost-hunting like a small boy.

Finding himself alone, he stepped briskly through the crumbling arch—and froze in his tracks.

'I am honored to know you,' said the Torang in a mild, rather buzzing voice. 'We thought you possibly would return here.'

Otis gaped. The black eyes projecting from the sides of the narrow head tracked him up and down, giving him the unpleasant sensation of being measured for an artillery salvo.

'I am known as Jal-Ganyr,' said the Torang. 'Unless I am given incorrect data, you are known as Jeff-Otis. That is so.'

The last statement was made with almost no inflection, but some still-functioning corner of Otis' mind interpreted it as a question. He sucked in a deep breath, suddenly conscious of having forgotten to breathe for a moment.

'I didn't know . . . yes, that is so . . . I didn't know you Torangs could speak Terran. Or anything else. How—?'

He hesitated as a million questions boiled up in his mind to be asked. Jal-Ganyr absently stroked the gray fur of his chest with his three-fingered left hand, squatting patiently on a flat rock. Otis felt somehow that he had been allowed to waste time mumbling only by grace of disciplined politeness.

'I am not of the Torangs,' said Jal-Ganyr in his wheezing voice. 'I am of the Myrbs. You would possibly say Myrbii. I have not been informed.'

'You mean that is your name for yourselves?' asked Otis.

Jal-Ganyr seemed to consider, his mobile eyes swiveling inward to scan the Terran's face.

'More than that,' he said at last, when he had thought it over. 'I mean I am of the race originating at Myrb, not of this planet.'

'Before we go any further,' insisted Otis, 'tell me, at least, how you learned our language!'

Jal-Ganyr made a fleeting gesture. His 'face' was unreadable to the Terran, but Otis had the impression he had received the equivalent of a smile and a shrug.

'As to that,' said the Myrb, 'I possibly learned it before you did. We have observed you a very long time. You would unbelieve how long.'

'But then—' Otis paused. That must mean before the colonists had landed on this planet. He was half-afraid it might mean before they had reached this sun system. He put aside the thought and asked, 'But then, why do you live like this among the ruins? Why wait till now? If you had communicated, you could have had our help rebuilding—'

He let his voice trail off, wondering what sounded wrong. Jal-Ganyr rolled his eyes about leisurely, as if disdaining the surrounding ruins. Again, he seemed to consider all the implications of Otis' questions.

'We picked up your message to your chief,' he answered at last. 'We decided time is to communicate with one of you.'

'We have no interest in rebuilding,' he added. 'We have concealed quarters for ourselves.'

Otis found that his lips were dry from his unconsciously having let his mouth hang open. He moistened them with the tip of his tongue, and relaxed enough to lean against the wall.

'You mean my getting the ruling to proclaim you a protected

species?' he asked. 'You have instruments to intercept such signals?'

'I do. We have,' said Jal-Ganyr simply. 'It has been decided that you have expanded far enough into space to make necessary we contact a few of the thoughtful among you. It will possibly make easier in the future for our observers.'

Otis wondered how much of that was irony. He felt himself flushing at the memory of the 'stuffed specimen' at headquarters, and was peculiarly relieved that he had not gone to see it.

I've had the luck, he told himself. I'm the one to discover the first known intelligent beings beyond Soll

Aloud, he said, 'We expected to meet someone like you eventually. But why have you chosen me?'

The question sounded vain, he realized, but it brought unexpected results.

'Your message. You made in a little way the same decision we made in a big way. We deduce that you are one to understand our regret and shame at what happened between our races . . . long ago.'

'Between—?'

'Yes. For a long time, we thought you were all gone. We are pleased to see you returning to some of your old planets.'

Otis stared blankly. Some instinct must have enabled the Myrb to interpret his bewildered expression. He apologized briefly.

'I possibly forgot to explain the ruins.' Again, Jal-Ganyr's eyes swiveled slowly about.

'They are not ours,' he said mildly. 'They are yours.'

There is one circumstance under which it is exceedingly difficult to establish communications with another individual—or race. A new author considers a point that could make technically adequate communications quite futile . . .

ALL THE WAY BACK

by Michael Shaara

Great were the Antha, so reads the One Book of history, greater perhaps than any of the Galactic Peoples, and they were brilliant and fair, and their reign was long, and in all things they were great and proud, even in the manner of their dying—

Preface to Loab: History of The Master Race.

The huge red ball of a sun hung glowing upon the screen.

Jansen adjusted the traversing knob, his face tensed and weary. The sun swung off the screen to the right, was replaced by the live black of space and the million speckled lights of the farther stars. A moment later the sun glided silently back across the screen and went off at the left. Again there was nothing but space and the stars.

‘Try it again?’ Cohn asked.

Jansen mumbled: ‘No. No use,’ and he swore heavily. ‘Nothing. Always nothing. Never a blessed thing.’

Cohn repressed a sigh, began to adjust the controls.

In both of their minds was the single, bitter thought that there would be only one more time, and then they would go home. And it was a long way to come to go home with nothing.

When the controls were set there was nothing left to do. The two men walked slowly aft to the freeze room. Climbing up painfully on to the flat steel of the beds, they lay back and waited for the mechanism to function, for the freeze to begin.

Turned in her course, the spaceship bore off into the open emptiness. Her ports were thrown open, she was gathering speed as she moved away from the huge red star.

* * *

The object was sighted upon the last leg of the patrol, as the huge ship of the Galactic Scouts came across the edge of the Great Desert of the Rim, swinging wide in a long slow curve. It was there on the massometer as a faint *blip*, and, of course, the word went directly to Roymer.

'Report,' he said briefly, and Lieutenant Goladan—a young and somewhat pompous Higiandrian—gave the Higiandrian equivalent of a cough and then reported.

'Observe,' said Lieutenant Goladan, 'that it is not a meteor, for the speed of it is much too great.'

Roymer nodded patiently.

'And again, the speed is decreasing'—Goladan consulted his figures—'at the rate of twenty-four dines per segment. Since the orbit appears to bear directly upon the star Mina, and the decrease in speed is of a certain arbitrary origin, we must conclude that the object is a spaceship.'

Roymer smiled.

'Very good, lieutenant.' Like a tiny nova, Goladan began to glow and expand.

A good man, thought Roymer tolerantly, his is a race of good men. They have been two million years in achieving space flight; a certain adolescence is to be expected.

'Would you call Mind-Search, please?' Roymer asked.

Goladan sped away, to return almost immediately with the heavy-headed non-human Trian, chief of the Mind-Search Section.

Trian cocked an eyelike thing at Roymer, with grave inquiry.

'Yes, commander?'

The abrupt change in course was noticeable only on the viewplate, as the stars slid silently by. The patrol vessel veered off, swinging around and into the desert, settled into a parallel course with the strange new craft, keeping a discreet distance of—approximately—a light-year.

The scanners brought the object into immediate focus, and Goladan grinned with pleasure. A spaceship, yes, Alien, too. Undoubtedly a primitive race. He voiced these thoughts to Roymer.

'Yes,' the commander said, staring at the strange, small, projectilelike craft. 'Primitive type. It is to be wondered what they are doing in the desert.'

Goladan assumed an expression of intense curiosity.

'Trian,' said Roymer pleasantly, 'would you contact?'

The huge head bobbed up and down once and then stared into the screen. There was a moment of profound silence. Then Trian turned back to stare at Roymer, and there was a distinctly human expression of surprise in his eyelike things.

'Nothing,' came the thought. 'I can detect no presence at all.'

Roymer raised an eyebrow.

'Is there a barrier?'

'No'—Trian had turned to gaze back into the screen—'a barrier I could detect. But there is nothing at all. There is no sentient activity on board that vessel.'

Trian's word had to be taken, of course, and Roymer was disappointed. A spaceship empty of life—Roymer shrugged. A derelict, then. But why the decreasing speed? Pre-set controls would account for that, of course, but why? Certainly, if one abandoned a ship, one would not arrange for it to—

He was interrupted by Trian's thought:

'Excuse me, but there is nothing. May I return to my quarters?'

Roymer nodded and thanked him, and Trian went ponderously away. Goladan said:

'Shall we prepare to board it, sir?'

'Yes.'

And then Goladan was gone to give his proud orders.

Roymer continued to stare at the primitive vessel which hung on the plate. Curious. It was very interesting, always, to come upon derelict ships. The stories that were old, the silent tombs that had been drifting perhaps, for millions of years in the deep sea of space. In the beginning Roymer had hoped that the ship would be manned, and alien, but—nowadays, contact with an isolated race was rare, extremely rare. It was not to be hoped for, and he would be content with this, this undoubtedly empty, ancient ship.

And then, to Roymer's complete surprise, the ship at which he was staring shifted abruptly, turned on its axis, and flashed off like a live thing upon a new course.

When the defrosters activated and woke him up, Jansen lay for a while upon the steel table, blinking. As always with the freeze, it was difficult to tell at first whether anything had actually hap-

pened. It was like a quick blink and no more, and then you were lying, feeling exactly the same, thinking the same thoughts even, and if there was anything at all different it was maybe that you were a little numb. And yet in the blink time took a great leap, and the months went by like—Jansen smiled—like fenceposts.

He raised a languid eye to the red bulb in the ceiling. Out. He sighed. The freeze had come and gone. He felt vaguely cheated, reflected that this time, before the freeze, he would take a little nap.

He climbed down from the table, noted that Cohn had already gone to the control room. He adjusted himself to the thought that they were approaching a new sun, and it came back to him suddenly that this would be the last one, now they would go home.

Well then, let this one have planets. To have come all this way, to have been gone from home for eleven years, and yet to find nothing—

He was jerked out of the old feeling of despair by a lurch of the ship. That would be Cohn taking her off the auto. And now, he thought, we will go in and run out the telescope and have a look, and there won't be a thing.

Wearily, he clumped off over the iron deck, going up to the control room. He had no hope left now, and he had been so hopeful at the beginning. As they are all hopeful, he thought, as they have been hoping now for three hundred years. And they will go on hoping, for a little while, and then men will become hard to get, even with the freeze, and then the starships won't go out any more. And Man will be doomed to the System for the rest of his days.

Therefore, he asked humbly, silently, let this one have planets.

Up in the dome of the control cabin, Cohn was bent over the panel, pouring power into the board. He looked up, nodded briefly as Jansen came in. It seemed to both of them that they had been apart for five minutes.

'Are they all hot yet?' asked Jansen.

'No, not yet.'

The ship had been in deep space with her ports thrown open. Absolute cold had come in and gone to the core of her, and it was always a while before the ship was reclaimed and her in-

struments warmed. Even now there was a sharp chill in the air of the cabin.

Jansen sat down idly, rubbing his arms.

'Last time around, I guess.'

'Yes,' said Cohn, and added laconically, 'I wish Weizsäcker was here.'

Jansen grinned. Weizsäcker, poor old Weizsäcker. He was long dead and it was a good thing, for he was the most maligned human being in the System.

For a hundred years his theory on the birth of planets, that every sun necessarily gave birth to a satellite family, had been an accepted part of the knowledge of Man. And then, of course, there had come space flight.

Jansen chuckled wryly. Lucky man, Weizsäcker. Now, two hundred years and a thousand stars later, there had been discovered just four planets. Alpha Centauri had one: a barren, ice-crusted mote no larger than the Moon; and Pollux had three, all dead lumps of cold rock and iron. None of the other stars had any at all. Yes, it would have been a great blow to Weizsäcker.

A hum of current broke into Jansen's thought as the telescope was run out. There was a sudden beginning of light upon the screen.

In spite of himself and the wry, hopeless feeling that had been in him, Jansen arose quickly, with a thin trickle of nervousness in his arms. There is always a chance, he thought, after all, there is always a chance. We have only been to a thousand suns, and in the Galaxy a thousand suns are not anything at all. So there is always a chance.

Cohn, calm and methodical, was manning the radar.

Gradually, condensing upon the center of the screen, the image of the star took shape. It hung at last, huge and yellow and flaming with an awful brilliance, and the prominences of the rim made the vast circle uneven. Because the ship was close and the filter was in, the stars of the background were invisible, and there was nothing but the one great sun.

Jansen began to adjust for observation.

The observation was brief.

They paused for a moment before beginning the tests, gazing upon the face of the alien sun. The first of their race to be here

and to see, they were caught up for a time in the ancient, deep thrill of space and the unknown Universe.

They watched, and into the field of their vision, breaking in slowly upon the glaring edge of the sun's disk, there came a small black ball. It moved steadily away from the edge, in toward the center of the sun. It was unquestionably a planet in transit.

When the alien ship moved, Roymer was considerably rattled.

One does not question Mind-Search, he knew, and so there could not be any living thing aboard that ship. Therefore, the ship's movement could be regarded only as a peculiar aberration in the still-functioning drive. Certainly, he thought, and peace returned to his mind.

But it did pose an uncomfortable problem. Boarding that ship would be no easy matter, not if the thing was inclined to go hopping away like that, with no warning. There were two hundred years of conditioning in Roymer, it would be impossible for him to put either his ship or his crew into an unnecessarily dangerous position. And wavery, erratic spaceships could undoubtedly be classified as dangerous.

Therefore, the ship would have to be disabled.

Regretfully, he connected with Fire Control, put the operation into the hands of the Firecon officer, and settled back to observe the results of the actions against the strange craft.

And the alien moved again.

Not suddenly, as before, but deliberately now, the thing turned once more from its course, and its speed decreased even more rapidly. It was still moving in upon Mina, but now its orbit was tangential and no longer direct. As Roymer watched the ship come about, he turned up the magnification for a larger view, checked the automatic readings on the board below the screen. And his eyes were suddenly directed to a small, conical projection which had begun to rise up out of the ship, which rose for a short distance and stopped, pointed in on the orbit towards Mina at the center.

Roymer was bewildered, but he acted immediately. Firecon was halted, all protective screens were re-established, and the patrol ship back-tracked quickly into the protection of deep space.

There was no question in Roymer's mind that the movements of the alien had been directed by a living intelligence, and not by any mechanical means. There was also no doubt in Roymer's mind that there was no living being on board that ship. The problem was acute.

Roymer felt the scalp of his hairless head beginning to crawl. In the history of the galaxy, there had been discovered but five nonhuman races, yet never a race which did not betray its existence by the telepathic nature of its thinking. Roymer could not conceive of a people so alien that even the fundamental structure of their thought process was entirely different from the Galactics.

Extra-Galactics? He observed the ship closely and shook his head. No. Not an extra-Galactic ship certainly, much too primitive a type.

Extraspatial? His scalp crawled again.

Completely at a loss as to what to do, Roymer again contacted Mind-Search and requested that Trian be sent to him immediately.

Trian was preceded by a puzzled Goladan. The orders to alien contact, then to Firecon, and finally for a quick retreat, had affected the lieutenant deeply. He was a man accustomed to a strictly logical and somewhat ponderous course of events. He waited expectantly for some explanation to come from his usually serene commander.

Roymer, however, was busily occupied in tracking the alien's new course. An orbit about Mina, Roymer observed, with that conical projection laid on the star; a device of war; or some measuring instrument?

The stolid Trian appeared—walking would not quite describe how—and was requested to make another attempt at contact with the alien. He replied with his usual eerie silence and in a moment, when he turned back to Roymer, there was surprise in the transmitted thought.

'I cannot understand. There is life there now.'

Roymer was relieved, but Goladan was blinking.

Trian went on, turning again to gaze at the screen.

'It is very remarkable. There are two life-beings. Human-type race. Their presence is very clear, they are'—he paused briefly—

'explorers, it appears. But they were not there before. It is extremely unnerving.'

So it is, Roymer agreed. He asked quickly: 'Are they aware of us?'

'No. They are directing their attention on the star. Shall I contact?'

'No. Not yet. We will observe them first.'

The alien ship floated upon the screen before them, moving in slow orbit about the star Mina.

Seven. There were seven of them. Seven planets, and three at least had atmospheres, and two might even be inhabitable. Jansen was so excited he was hopping around the control room. Cohn did nothing, but grin widely with a wondrous joy, and the two of them repeatedly shook hands and gloated.

'Seven!' roared Jansen. 'Old lucky seven!'

Quickly then, and with extreme nervousness, they ran spectrograph analyses of each of those seven fascinating worlds. They began with the central planets, in the favorable temperature belt where life conditions would be most likely to exist, and they worked outwards.

For reasons which were as much sentimental as they were practical, they started with the third planet of this fruitful sun. There was a thin atmosphere, fainter even than that of Mars, and no oxygen. Silently they went on to the fourth. It was cold and heavy, perhaps twice as large as Earth, had a thick envelope of noxious gases. They saw with growing fear that there was no hope there, and they turned quickly inwards toward the warmer area nearer the sun.

On the second planet—as Jansen put it—they hit the jackpot.

A warm, green world it was, of an Earthlike size and atmosphere; oxygen and water vapor lines showed strong and clear in the analysis.

'This looks like it,' said Jansen, grinning again.

Cohn nodded, left the screen and went over to man the navigating instruments.

'Let's go down and take a look.'

'Radio check first.' It was the proper procedure. Jansen had gone over it in his mind a thousand times. He clicked on the receiver, waited for the tubes to function, and then scanned for

contact. As they moved in toward the new planet he listened intently, trying all lengths, waiting for any sound at all. There was nothing but the rasping static of open space.

'Well,' he said finally, as the green planet grew large upon the screen, 'if there's any race there, it doesn't have radio.'

Cohn showed his relief.

'Could be a young civilization.'

'Or one so ancient and advanced that it doesn't *need* radio.'

Jansen refused to let his deep joy be dampened. It was impossible to know what would be there. Now it was just as it had been three hundred years ago, when the first Earth ship was approaching Mars. And it will be like this—Jansen thought—in every other system to which we go. How can you picture what there will be? There is nothing at all in your past to give you a clue. You can only hope.

The planet was a beautiful green ball on the screen.

The thought which came out of Trian's mind was tinged with relief.

'I see how it was done. They have achieved a complete stasis, a perfect state of suspended animation which they produce by an ingenious usage of the absolute zero of outer space. Thus, when they are—frozen, is the way they regard it—their minds do not function, and their lives are not detectable. They have just recently revived and are directing their ship.'

Roymer digested the new information slowly. What kind of a race was this? A race which flew in primitive star ships, yet it had already conquered one of the greatest problems in Galactic history, a problem which had baffled the Galactics for millions of years. Roymer was uneasy.

'A very ingenious device,' Trian was thinking, 'they use it to alter the amount of subjective time consumed in their explorations. Their star ship has a very low maximum speed. Hence, without this—freeze—their voyage would take up a good portion of their lives.'

'Can you classify the mind-type?' Roymer asked with growing concern.

Trian reflected silently for a moment.

'Yes,' he said, 'although the type is extremely unusual. I have never observed it before. General classification would be Hu-

man-Four. More specifically, I would place them at the Ninth level.'

Roymer started. 'The Ninth level?'

'Yes. As I say, they are extremely unusual.'

Roymer was now clearly worried. He turned away and paced the deck for several moments. Abruptly, he left the room and went to the files of alien classification. He was gone for a long time, while Goladan fidgeted and Trian continued to gather information plucked across space from the alien minds. Roymer came back at last.

'What are they doing?'

'They are moving in on the second planet. They are about to determine whether the conditions are suitable there for an establishment of a colony of their kind.'

Gravely, Roymer gave his orders to navigation. The patrol ship swung into motion, sped off swiftly in the direction of the second planet.

There was a single, huge blue ocean which covered an entire hemisphere of the new world. And the rest of the surface was a young jungle, wet and green and empty of any kind of people, choked with queer growths of green and orange. They circled the globe at a height of several thousand feet, and to their amazement and joy, they never saw a living thing; not a bird or a rabbit or the alien equivalent, in fact nothing alive at all. And so they stared in happy fascination.

'This is it,' Jansen said again, his voice uneven.

'What do you think we ought to call it?' Cohn was speaking absently. 'New Earth? Utopia?'

Together they watched the broken terrain slide by beneath them.

'No people at all. It's ours.' And after a while Jansen said: 'New Earth. That's a good name.'

Cohn was observing the features of the ground intently.

'Do you notice the kind of . . . circular appearance of most of those mountain ranges? Like on the Moon, but grown over and eroded. They're all almost perfect circles.'

Pulling his mind away from the tremendous visions he had of the colony which would be here, Jansen tried to look at the mountains with an objective eye. Yes, he realized with faint surprise, they were round, like Moon craters.

'Peculiar,' Cohn muttered. 'Not natural, I don't think. Couldn't be. Meteors not likely in this atmosphere. What in—?'

Jansen jumped. 'Look there,' he cried suddenly, 'a round lake!'

Off toward the northern pole of the planet, a lake which was a perfect circle came slowly into view. There was no break in the rim other than that of a small stream which flowed in from the north.

'That's not natural,' Cohn said briefly, 'someone built that.'

They were moving on to the dark side now, and Cohn turned the ship around. The sense of exhilaration was too new for them to be let down, but the strange sight of a huge number of perfect circles, existing haphazardly like the remains of great splashes on the surface of the planet, was unnerving.

It was the sight of one particular crater, a great barren hole in the midst of a wide red desert, which rang a bell in Jansen's memory, and he blurted:

'A war! There was a war here. That one there looks just like a fusion bomb crater.'

Cohn stared, then raised his eyebrows.

'I'll bet you're right.'

'A bomb crater, do you see? Pushes up hills on all sides in a circle, and kills—' A sudden, terrible thought hit Jansen. Radioactivity. Would there be radioactivity here?

While Cohn brought the ship in low over the desert, he tried to calm Jansen's fears.

'There couldn't be much. Too much plant life. Jungles all over the place. Take it easy, man.'

'But there's not a living thing on the planet. I'll bet that's why there was a war. It got out of hand, the radioactivity got everything. We might have done this to Earth!'

They glided in over the flat emptiness of the desert, and the counters began to click madly.

'That's it,' Jansen said conclusively, 'still radioactive. It might not have been too long ago.'

'Could have been a million years, for all we know.'

'Well, most places are safe, apparently. We'll check before we go down.'

As he pulled the ship up and away, Cohn whistled.

'Do you suppose there's really not a living thing? I mean, not a

bug or a germ or even a virus? Why, it's like a clean new world, a nursery!' He could not take his eyes from the screen.

They were going down now. In a very little while they would be out and walking in the sun. The lust of the feeling was indescribable. They were Earthmen freed forever from the choked home of the System, Earthmen gone out to the stars, landing now upon the next world of their empire.

Cohn could not control himself.

'Do we need a flag?' he said grinning. 'How do we claim this place?'

'Just set her down, man,' Jansen roared.

Cohn began to chuckle.

'Oh, brave new world,' he laughed, 'that has *no* people in it.'

'But why do we have to contact them?' Goladan asked impatiently. 'Could we not just—'

Roymer interrupted without looking at him.

'The law requires that contact be made and the situation explained before action is taken. Otherwise it would be a barbarous act.'

Goladan brooded.

The patrol ship hung in the shadow of the dark side, tracing the alien by its radioactive trail. The alien was going down for a landing on the daylight side.

Trian came forward with the other members of the Alien Contact Crew, reported to Roymer, 'The aliens have landed.'

'Yes,' said Roymer, 'we will let them have a little time. Trian, do you think you will have any difficulty in the transmission?'

'No. Conversation will not be difficult. Although the confused and complex nature of their thought-patterns does make their inner reactions somewhat obscure. But I do not think there will be any problem.'

'Very well. You will remain here and relay the messages.'

'Yes.'

The patrol ship flashed quickly up over the north pole, then swung inward toward the equator, circling the spot where the alien had gone down. Roymer brought his ship in low and with the silence characteristic of a Galactic, landed her in a wooded spot a mile east of the alien. The Galactics remained in their ship for a short while as Trian continued his probe for information.

When at last the Alien Contact Crew stepped out, Roymer and Goladan were in the lead. The rest of the crew faded quietly into the jungle.

As he walked through the young orange brush, Roymer regarded the world around him. Almost ready for repopulation, he thought, in another hundred years the radiation will all be gone, and we will come back. One by one the worlds of that war will be reclaimed.

He felt Trian's directions pop into his mind.

'You are approaching them. Proceed with caution. They are just beyond the next small rise. I think you had better wait, since they are remaining close to their ship.'

Roymer sent back a silent yes. Motioning Goladan to be quiet, Roymer led the way up the last rise. In the jungle around him the Galactic crew moved silently.

The air was perfect; there was no radiation. Except for the wild orange color of the vegetation, the spot was a Garden of Eden. Jansen felt instinctively that there was no danger here, no terrible blight or virus or any harmful thing. He felt a violent urge to get out of his spacesuit and run and breathe, but it was forbidden. Not on the first trip. That would come later, after all the tests and experiments had been made and the world pronounced safe.

One of the first things Jansen did was get out the recorder and solemnly claim this world for the Solar Federation, recording the historic words for the archives of Earth. And he and Cohn remained for a while by the air lock of their ship, gazing around at the strange yet familiar world into which they had come.

'Later on we'll search for ruins,' Cohn said. 'Keep an eye out for anything that moves. It's possible that there are some of them left and who knows what they'll look like. Mutants, probably, with five heads. So keep an eye open.'

'Right.'

Jansen began collecting samples of the ground, of the air, of the nearer foliage. The dirt was Earth-dirt, there was no difference. He reached down and crumbled the soft moist sod with his fingers. The flowers may be a little peculiar—probably mutated, he thought—but the dirt is honest to goodness dirt, and I'll bet the air is Earth-air.

He rose and stared into the clear open blue of the sky, feeling again an almost overpowering urge to throw open his helmet and breathe, and as he stared at the sky and at the green and orange hills, suddenly, a short distance from where he stood, a little old man came walking over the hill.

They stood facing each other across the silent space of a foreign glade. Roymer's face was old and smiling; Jansen looked back at him with absolute astonishment.

After a short pause, Roymer began to walk out onto the open soil, with Goladan following, and Jansen went for his heat gun. 'Cohn!' he yelled, in a raw brittle voice, 'Cohn!'

And as Cohn turned and saw and froze, Jansen heard words being spoken in his brain. They were words coming from the little old man.

'Please do not shoot,' the old man said, his lips unmoving.

'No, don't shoot,' Cohn said quickly. 'Wait. Let him alone.' The hand of Cohn, too, was at his heat gun.

Roymer smiled. To the two Earth-men his face was incredibly old and wise and gentle. He was thinking: Had I been a nonhuman they would have killed me.

He sent a thought back to Trian. The Mind-Searcher picked it up and relayed it into the brains of the Earthmen, sending it through their cortical centers and then up into their conscious minds, so that the words were heard in the language of Earth. 'Thank you,' Roymer said gently. Jansen's hand held the heat gun leveled on Roymer's chest. He stared, not knowing what to say.

'Please remain where you are,' Cohn's voice was hard and steady.

Roymer halted obligingly. Goladan stopped at his elbow, peering at the Earthmen with mingled fear and curiosity. The sight of fear helped Jansen very much.

'Who are you?' Cohn said clearly, separating the words.

Roymer folded his hands comfortably across his chest, he was still smiling.

'With your leave, I will explain our presence.'

Cohn just stared.

'There will be a great deal to explain. May we sit down and talk?'

Trian helped with the suggestion. They sat down.

The sun of the new world was setting, and the conference went on. Roymer was doing most of the talking. The Earthmen sat transfixed.

It was like growing up suddenly, in the space of a second.

The history of Earth and of all Mankind just faded and dropped away. They heard of great races and worlds beyond number, the illimitable government which was the Galactic Federation. The fiction, the legends, the dreams of a thousand years had come true in a moment, in the figure of a square little old man who was not from Earth. There was a great deal for them to learn and accept in the time of a single afternoon, on an alien planet.

But it was just as new and real to them that they had discovered an uninhabited, fertile planet, the first to be found by Man. And they could not help but revolt from the sudden realization that the planet might well be someone else's property—that the Galactics owned everything worth owning.

It was an intolerable thought.

'How far,' asked Cohn, as his heart pushed up in his throat, 'does the Galactic League extend?'

Roymer's voice was calm and direct in their minds.

'Only throughout the central regions of the galaxy. There are millions of stars along the rim which have not yet been explored.'

Cohn relaxed, bowed down with relief. There was room then, for Earthmen.

'This planet. Is it part of the Federation?'

'Yes,' said Roymer, and Cohn tried to mask his thought. Cohn was angry, and he hoped that the alien could not read his mind as well as he could talk to it. To have come this far—

'There was a race here once,' Roymer was saying, 'a humanoid race which was almost totally destroyed by war. This planet has been uninhabitable for a very long time. A few of its people who were in space at the time of the last attack were spared. The Federation established them elsewhere. When the planet is ready, the descendants of those survivors will be brought back. It is their home.'

Neither of the Earthmen spoke.

'It is surprising,' Roymer went on, 'that your home world is in

the desert. We had thought that there were no habitable worlds—'

'The desert?'

'Yes. The region of the galaxy from which you have come is that which we call the desert. It is an area almost entirely devoid of planets. Would you mind telling me which star is your home?'

Cohn stiffened.

'I'm afraid our government would not permit us to disclose any information concerning our race.'

'As you wish. I am sorry you are disturbed. I was curious to know—' He waved a negligent hand to show that the information was unimportant. We will get it later, he thought, when we decipher their charts. He was coming to the end of the conference, he was about to say what he had come to say.

'No doubt you have been exploring the stars about your world?'

The Earthmen both nodded. But for the question concerning Sol, they long ago would have lost all fear of this placid old man and his wide-eyed, silent companion.

'Perhaps you would like to know,' said Roymer, 'why your area is a desert.'

Instantly, both Jansen and Cohn were completely absorbed. This was it, the end of three hundred years of searching. They would go home with the answer.

Roymer never relaxed.

'Not too long ago,' he said, 'approximately thirty thousand years by your reckoning, a great race ruled the desert, a race which was known as the Antha, and it was not a desert then. The Antha ruled hundreds of worlds. They were perhaps the greatest of all the Galactic peoples; certainly they were as brilliant a race as the galaxy has ever known.

'But they were not a good race. For hundreds of years, while they were still young, we tried to bring them into the Federation. They refused, and of course we did not force them. But as the years went by the scope of their knowledge increased amazingly; shortly they were the technological equals of any other race in the galaxy. And then the Antha embarked upon an era of imperialistic expansion.

'They were superior, they knew it and were proud. And so they pushed out and enveloped the races and worlds of the area

now known as the desert. Their rule was a tyranny unequaled in Galactic history.'

The Earthmen never moved, and Roymer went on.

'But the Antha were not members of the Federation, and, therefore, they were not answerable for their acts. We could only stand by and watch as they spread their vicious rule from world to world. They were absolutely ruthless.

'As an example of their kind of rule, I will tell you of their crime against the Apectans.

'The planet of Apectus not only resisted the Antha, but somehow managed to hold out against their approach for several years. The Antha finally conquered and then, in retaliation for the Apectans' valor, they conducted the most brutal of their mass experiments.

'They were a brilliant people. They had been experimenting with the genes of heredity. Somehow they found a way to alter the genes of the Apectans, who were humanoids like themselves, and they did it on a mass scale. They did not choose to exterminate the race, their revenge was much greater. Every Apectan born since the Antha invasion, has been born without one arm.'

Jansen sucked in his breath. It was a very horrible thing to hear, and a sudden memory came into his brain. Caesar did that, he thought. He cut off the right hands of the Gauls. Peculiar coincidence. Jansen felt uneasy.

Roymer paused for a moment.

'The news of what happened to the Apectans set the Galactic peoples up in arms, but it was not until the Antha attacked a Federation world that we finally moved against them. It was the greatest war in the history of Life.

'You will perhaps understand how great a people the Antha were when I tell you that they alone, unaided, dependent entirely upon their own resources, fought the rest of the Galactics, and fought them to a standstill. As the terrible years went by we lost whole races and planets—like this one, which was one the Antha destroyed—and yet we could not defeat them.

'It was only after many years, when a Galactic invented the most dangerous weapon of all, that we won. The invention—of which only the Galactic Council has knowledge—enabled us to turn the suns of the Antha into novae, at long range. One by one

we destroyed the Antha worlds. We hunted them through all the planets of the desert; for the first time in history the edict of the Federation was death, death for an entire race. At last there were no longer any habitable worlds where the Antha had been. We burned their worlds, and ran them down in space. Thirty thousand years ago, the civilization of the Antha perished.'

Roymer had finished. He looked at the Earthmen out of grave, tired old eyes.

Cohn was staring in open-mouth fascination, but Jansen—unaccountably felt a chill. The story of Caesar remained uncomfortably in his mind. And he had a quick, awful suspicion.

'Are you sure you got all of them?'

'No. Some surely must have escaped. There were too many in space, and space is without limits.'

Jansen wanted to know: 'Have any of them been heard of since?'

Roymer's smile left him as the truth came out. 'No. Not until now.'

There were only a few more seconds. He gave them time to understand. He could not help telling them that he was sorry, he even apologized. And then he sent the order with his mind.

The Antha died quickly and silently, without pain.

Only thirty thousand years, Roymer was thinking, but thirty thousand years, and they came back out to the stars. They have no memory now of what they were or what they have done. They started all over again, the old history of the race has been lost, and in thirty thousand years they came all the way back.

Roymer shook his head with sad wonder and awe. The most brilliant people of all.

Goladan came in quietly with the final reports.

'There are no charts,' he grumbled, 'no maps at all. We will not be able to trace them to their home star.'

Roymer did not know, really, what was right, to be disappointed or relieved. We cannot destroy them now, he thought, not right away. He could not help being relieved. Maybe this time there will be a way, and they will not have to be destroyed. They could be—

He remembered the edict—the edict of death. The Antha had

forged it for themselves and it was just. He realized that there wasn't much hope.

The reports were on his desk and he regarded them with a wry smile. There was indeed no way to trace them back. They had no charts, only a regular series of course-check coordinates which were preset on their home planet and which were not decipherable. Even at this stage of their civilization they had already anticipated the consequences of having their ship fall into alien hands. And this although they lived in the desert.

Goladan startled him with an anxious question:

'What can we do?'

Roymer was silent.

We can wait, he thought. Gradually, one by one, they will come out of the desert, and when they come we will be waiting. Perhaps one day we will follow one back and destroy their world, and perhaps before then we will find a way to save them.

Suddenly, as his eyes wandered over the report before him and he recalled the ingenious mechanism of the freeze, a chilling, unbidden thought came into his brain.

And perhaps, he thought calmly, for he was a philosophical man, they will come out already equipped to rule the galaxy.

ii *'Wider Still and Wider . . .'*

Poul Anderson: THE STAR PLUNDERER 54

Isaac Asimov: FOUNDATION 81

Mark Clifton and Alex Apostolides:

WE'RE CIVILIZED! 114

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The paper spaceships are on their way. The galaxy, like the Wild West, is wide open.

What surprises humankind met with in the galaxy was a matter for speculation, and the authors answered the question according to their own temperaments. Almost every science fiction writer took a look at interplanetary empires at one time or another and, whether they talked of federalism or colonialism, produced their own interpretation. Robert Heinlein, E E Smith, Van Vogt, Beam Piper, Henry Kuttner, James Blish—each offered his own version. E E Smith's multispecific galactic culture, spreading over the six volumes of the Lensman saga, has become particularly famous.

All authors agreed on one item: power was needed to establish or to maintain any sort of empire. This section contains three interesting interpretations of how that power might be wielded.

Mark Clifton and Alex Apostolides, in *We're Civilized!*, demonstrate the immorality of power—and we feel that immorality most forcibly when it is wielded against us. Carl Sagan was recently talking on the question of communicating with other intelligences in the galaxy. At one point, 'Let's consider what we should do,' he said, 'if they chose to get in touch with us—' And an urgent voice from the audience said, 'Don't answer the phone!' No doubt that gentleman had read Clifton and Apostolides' story.

The Asimov story represents the first section of his 'Foundation', trilogy, which has been voted the most popular sf book ever written. This story appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1942, and immediately captured the imagination of readers. It is not hard to see why. There is one comic moment when the Mayor of Terminus jumps up and cries 'The Galaxy is going to pot!' In the hands of sf writers, this is what it constantly does. But Asimov's human-ruled galaxy has special qualities, in particular the quality which distinguished him from many of his fellow-writers: he is for order. Like H. G. Wells, whom Asimov has emulated in turning from fiction to extensive scientific populari-

zation, he is against the untidiness of war and killing. Just as his robots are governed by rules which prevent them harming men (whereas before Asimov's day robots were constantly running amok), so his Foundation-ruled galaxy is designed to work in orderly fashion according to the programming of Hari Seldon's psycho-history.

The currency on Terminus is made—as currencies generally are—of a rare metal: steel. It is characteristic of Asimov's method that the Foundation, destined to play such a powerful role in the history of the galaxy over the next ten thousand years, is set on a world virtually without metals.

The power in this story is the power of an intellectual idea: that the seeds of the Renaissance are sown on Terminus. To the ordinary people, this idea becomes almost a religious belief—a development the scientists of Terminus constantly have to fight against.

There are signs, I believe, that Asimov intended Terminus to be something of a utopia, with no metals, no warlike intent, and no psychologists. Armed with all these interesting intentions, he can be forgiven for making the one politician, Lord Dorwin, a parody of an eighteenth-century English statesman, down to his lisp and snuff-box ('over-adorned and poor workmanship at that', Hardin notes).

So Foundation is that rare thing, an attempt at an intellectual galactic empire. Poul Anderson's empire starts from very different directions. It is an out-and-out adventure story with a starry background and a galaxy swarming with semi-human savages. Within three paragraphs, we are watching a big grey barbarian 'spin on his heels, stagger and scream with all four hands clutching his belly, and sink slowly to his knees' to die.

This appetite for mad or multi-shaped aliens is, of course, deplorably un-solemn, and the reverse of Asimov's rather austere stage-setting. It was the fashion at one time in science fiction circles to deprecate such imaginative swash-buckle. The feeling was that it acted as a barrier against a general acceptance of sf.

One sees the force of this line of argument; I have been at least partly convinced by it myself. But the other side of the argument has greater force. Stories like *The Star Plunderer* epitomise what sf once was, before it became acceptable. When sf writers began taking themselves seriously, they tended to aban-

don their imaginations and rely instead on the predictions of think-tanks or on extrapolations from scientific journals and population statistics; the result was a descent into greyness, a loss of the original driving force, an espousal of literalism.

Literalism is something we shall encounter rarely in this anthology, or in its companions in the series. Poul Anderson gives us a savage empire and a go-getting Earthman, 'a blend of all humanity'. It's the sort of tale at which the youthful Anderson excelled, told with considerable emotional clout. Just for a treat, we have another Poul Anderson in the second volume.

We will continue later the argument about motley galactic empires and what they may or may not represent. Meanwhile, let's get into that stinking Gorzuni slave-ship . . .

Empires start oddly . . . one grew from a mutiny in the hold of a Gorzuni slave-ship.

THE STAR PLUNDERER

by Poul Anderson

The following is a part, modernized but otherwise authentic, of that curious book found by excavators of the ruins of Sol City, Terra—the Memoirs of Rear Admiral John Henry Reeves, Imperial Solar Navy. Whether or not the script, obviously never published or intended for publication, is a genuine record left by a man with a taste for dramatized reporting, or whether it is pure fiction, remains an open question; but it was undoubtedly written in the early period of the First Empire and as such gives a remarkable picture of the times and especially of the Founder. Actual events may or may not have been exactly as Reeves described, but we cannot doubt that in any case they were closely similar. Read this fifth chapter of the Memoirs as historical fiction if you will, but remember that the author must himself have lived through that great and tragic and triumphant age and that he must have been trying throughout the book to give a true picture of the man who even in his own time had become a legend.

Donvar Ayeghen,
President of the Galactic Archeological Society

They were closing in now. The leader was a gray bulk filling my sight scope, and every time I glanced over the wall a spanging sleet of bullets brought my head jerking down again. I had some shelter from behind which to shoot in a fragment of wall looming higher than the rest, like a single tooth left in a dead man's jaw, but I had to squeeze the trigger and then duck fast. Once in a while one of their slugs would burst on my helmet and the gas would be sickly-sweet in my nostrils. I felt ill and dizzy with it.

Kathryn was reloading her own rifle, I heard her swearing as the cartridge clip jammed in the rusty old weapon. I'd have given her my own, except that it wasn't much better. It's no fun

fighting with arms that are likely to blow up in your face but it was all we had—all that poor devastated Terra had after the Baldics had sacked her twice in fifteen years.

I fired a burst and saw the big gray barbarian spin on his heels, stagger and scream with all four hands clutching his belly, and sink slowly to his knees. The creatures behind him howled, but he only let out a deep-throated curse. He'd be a long time dying. I'd blown a hole clear through him, but those Gorzuni were tough.

The slugs wailed around us as I got myself down under the wall, hugging the long grass which had grown up around the shattered fragments of the house. There was a fresh wind blowing, rustling the grass and the big war-scarred trees, sailing clouds across a sunny summer sky, so the gas concentration was never enough to put us out. But Jonsson and Hokusai were sprawled like corpses there against the broken wall. They'd taken direct hits and they'd sleep for hours.

Kathryn knelt beside me, the ragged, dirty coverall like a queen's robe on her tall young form, a few dark curls falling from under her helmet for the wind to play with. 'If we get them mad enough,' she said, 'they'll call for the artillery or send a boat overhead to blow us to the Black Planet.'

'Maybe,' I grunted. 'Though they're usually pretty eager for slaves.'

'John—' She crouched there a moment, the tiny frown I knew so well darkening her blue eyes. I watched the way leaf-shadows played across her thin brown face. There was a grease smudge on the snub nose, hiding the freckles. But she still looked good, really good, she and green Terra and life and freedom and all that I'd never have again!

'John,' she said at last, 'maybe we should save them the trouble. Maybe we should make our own exit.'

'It's a thought,' I muttered, risking a glance above the wall.

The Gorzuni were more cautious now, creeping through the gardens toward the shattered outbuilding we defended. Behind them, the main estate, last knot of our unit's resistance, lay smashed and burning. Gorzuni were swarming around it, dragging out such humans as survived and looting whatever treasure

was left. I was tempted to shoot at those big furry bodies but I had to save ammunition for the detail closing in on us.

'I don't fancy life as the slave of a barbarian outworlder,' I said. 'Though humans with technical training are much in demand and usually fairly well treated. But for a woman—' The words trailed off. I couldn't say them.

'I might trade on my own mechanical knowledge,' she said. 'And then again I might not. Is it worth the risk, John, my dearest?'

We were both conditioned against suicide, of course. Everyone in the broken Commonwealth navy was, except bearers of secret information. The idea was to sell our lives or liberty as exorbitantly as possible, fighting to the last moment. It was a stupid policy, typical of the blundering leadership that had helped lose us our wars. A human slave with knowledge of science and machinery was worth more to the barbarians than the few extra soldiers he could kill out of their hordes by staying alive till captured.

But the implanted inhibition could be broken by a person of strong will. I looked at Kathryn for a moment, there in the tumbled ruins of the house, and her eyes met mine and rested, deep-blue and grave with a tremble of tears behind the long smoky lashes.

'Well—' I said helplessly, and then I kissed her.

It was our big mistake. The Gorzuni had worked closer than I realized and in Terra's gravity—about half of their home planet's—they could move like a sunbound comet. One of them came soaring over the wall behind me, landing on his clawed splay feet with a crash that shivered in the ground. His wild 'Who-oo-oo-ool' was hardly out of his mouth before I'd blown the horned, flat-faced head off his shoulders. But there was a gray mass swarming behind him, and Kathryn yelled and fired into the thick of another attack from our rear.

Something stung me, a bright sharp pain and then a bomb exploding in my head and a long sick spiral down into blackness. The last thing I saw was Kathryn, caught in the four arms of a soldier. He was half again as tall as she, he'd twisted the barrel off her gun as he wrenched it from her hands, but she was giving him a good fight. A hell of a good fight. Then I didn't see anything else for some time.

* * *

They herded us aboard a tender after dark. It was like a scene from some ancient hell—night overhead and around, lit by a score of burning houses like uneasy furnaces out there in the dark, and the long, long line of humans stumbling toward the boat with kicks and blows from the guards to hurry them along.

A house was aflame not far off, soaring red and yellow fire glancing off the metal of the ship, picking a haggard face from shadow, glimmering in human tears and in steely unhuman eyes. The shadows wove in and out, hiding us from each other save when a gust of wind blew up the fire. Then we felt a puff of heat and looked away from each other's misery.

Kathryn was not to be seen in that weaving line. I groped along with my wrists tied behind me, now and then jarred by a gun-butt as one of the looming figures grew impatient. I could hear the sobbing of women and the groaning of men in the dark, before me, behind me, around me as they forced us into the boat.

'Jimmy. Where are you, Jimmy?'

'They killed him. He's lying there dead in the ruins.'

'O God, what have we done?'

'My baby. Has anyone seen my baby? I had a baby and they took him away from me.'

'Help, help, help, help help—'

A mumbled and bitter curse, a scream, a whine, a rattling gasp of breath, and always the slow shuffle of feet and the sobbing of the women and the children.

We were the conquered. They had scattered our armies. They had ravaged our cities. They had hunted us through the streets and the hills and the great deeps of space, and we could only snarl and snap at them and hope that the remnants of our navy might pull a miracle. But miracles are hard to come by.

So far the Baldic League had actually occupied only the outer planets. The inner worlds were nominally under Commonwealth rule but the government was hiding or nonexistent. Only fragments of the navy fought on without authority or plan or hope, and Terra was the happy hunting ground of looters and slave raiders. Before long, I supposed bitterly, the outworlders would come in force, break the last resistance, and incorporate all the Solar System into their savage empire. Then the only free hu-

mans would be the extrasolar colonists, and a lot of them were barbaric themselves and had joined the Baldic League against the mother world.

The captives were herded into cells aboard the tender, crammed together till there was barely room to stand. Kathryn wasn't in my cell either. I lapsed into dull apathy.

When everyone was aboard, the deckplates quivered under our feet and acceleration jammed us cruelly against each other. Several humans died in that press. I had all I could do to keep the surging mass from crushing in my chest but of course the Gorzuni didn't care. There were plenty more where we came from.

The boat was an antiquated and rust-eaten wreck, with half its archaic gadgetry broken and useless. They weren't technicians, those Baldics. They were barbarians who had learned too soon how to build and handle spaceships and firearms, and a score of their planets united by a military genius had gone forth to overrun the civilized Commonwealth.

But their knowledge was usually by rote; I have known many a Baldic 'engineer' who made sacrifices to his converter, many a general who depended on astrologers or haruspices for major decision. So trained humans were in demand as slaves. Having a degree in nuclear engineering myself, I could look for a halfway decent berth, though of course there was always the possibility of my being sold to someone who would flay me or blind me or let me break my heart in his mines.

Untrained humans hadn't much chance. They were just flesh-and-blood machines doing work that the barbarians didn't have automatics for, rarely surviving ten years of slavery. Women were the luxury trade, sold at high prices to the human renegades and rebels. I groaned at that thought and tried desperately to assure myself that Kathryn's technical knowledge would keep her in the possession of a nonhuman.

We were taken up to a ship orbiting just above the atmosphere. Airlocks were joined, so I didn't get a look at her from outside, but as soon as we entered I saw that she was a big interstellar transport of the Thurnogan class used primarily for carrying troops to Sol and slaves back, but armed for war. A formidable fighting ship when properly handled.

There were guards leaning on their rifles, all of Gorzuni race,

their harness worn any way they pleased and no formality between officers and men. The barbarian armies' sloppy discipline had blinded our spit-and-polish command to their reckless courage and their savage gunnery. Now the fine-feathered Commonwealth navy was a ragged handful of hunted, desperate men and the despised outworlders were harrying them through the Galaxy.

This ship was worse than usual, though. I saw rust and mold on the unpainted plates. The fluoros were dim and in some places burned out. There was a sickening pulse in the gravity generators. The cabins had long ago been stripped of equipment and refurnished with skins, stolen household goods, cooking pots, and weapons. The Gorzuni were all as dirty and unkempt as their ship. They lounged about gnawing on chunks of meat, drinking, dicing, and glancing up now and then to grin at us.

A barbarian who spoke some Anglic bellowed at us to strip. Those who hesitated were cuffed so the teeth rattled in their heads. We threw the clothes in a heap and moved forward slowly past a table where a drunken Gorzuni and a very sober human sat. Medical inspection.

The barbarian 'doctor' gave each of us the most cursory glance. Most were waved on. Now and then he would look closer, blearily, at someone.

'Sickly,' he grunted. 'Never make the trip alive. Kill.'

The man or woman or child would scream as he picked up a sword and chopped off the head with one expert sweep.

The human sat halfway on the desk, swinging one leg and whistling softly. Now and again the Gorzuni medic would glance at him in doubt over some slave. The human would look closer. Usually he shoved them on. One or two he tapped for killing.

I got a close look at him as I went by. He was below medium height, strongly built, dark and heavy-faced and beak-nosed, but his eyes were large and blue-gray, the coldest eyes I have ever seen on a human. He wore a loose colorful shirt and trousers, rich material probably stolen from some Terran villa.

'You filthy bastard,' I muttered.

He shrugged, indicating the iron slave-collar welded about his neck. 'I only work here, Lieutenant,' he said mildly. He must have noticed my uniform before I shucked it.

Beyond the desk, a Gorzuni played a hose on us, washing off

blood and grime, and then we were herded down the long corridors and by way of wooden ladders (the drop-shafts and elevators weren't working it seemed) to the cells. Here they separated men and women. We went into adjoining compartments, huge echoing caverns of metal with bunks tiered along the walls, food troughs, and sanitary facilities the only furnishing.

Dust was thick on the corroded floor, and the air was cold and had a metallic reek. There must have been about five hundred men swarming hopelessly around after the barred door clanged shut on us.

There were windows between the two great cells. We made a rush for them, crying out, pushing and crowding and snarling at each other for first chance to see if our women still lived.

I was large and strong. I shouldered my way through the mob up to the nearest window. A man was there already, flattened against the wall by the sweating bodies behind, reaching through the bars to the three hundred women who swarmed on the other side.

'Agnes!' he shrieked. 'Agnes, are you there? Are you alive?'

I grabbed his shoulder and pulled him away. He turned with a curse, and I fed him a mouthful of knuckles and sent him lurching back into the uneasy press of men. 'Kathryn!' I howled.

The echoes rolled and boomed in the hollow metal caves, crying voices, prayers and curses and sobs of despair thrown back by the sardonic echoes till our heads shivered with it. 'Kathryn! Kathryn!'

Somehow she found me. She came to me and the kiss through those bars dissolved ship and slavery and all the world for that moment. 'Oh, John, John, John, you're alive, you're here. Oh, my darling—'

And then she looked around the metal-gleaming dimness and said quickly, urgently: 'We'll have a riot on our hands, John, if these people don't calm down. See what you can do with the men. I'll tackle the women.'

It was like her. She was the most gallant soul that ever walked under Terran skies, and she had a mind which flashed in an instant to that which must be done. I wondered myself what point there was in stopping a murderous panic. Those who were killed would be better off, wouldn't they? But Kathryn never surrendered so I couldn't either.

We turned back into our crowds, and shouted and pummeled and bullied, and slowly others came to our aid until there was a sobbing quiet in the belly of the slave ship. Then we organized turns at the windows. Kathryn and I both looked away from those reunions, or from the people who found no one. It isn't decent to look at a naked soul.

The engines began to thrum. Under way, outward bound to the ice mountains of Gorzun, no more to see blue skies and green grass, no clean salt smell of ocean and roar of wind in tall trees. Now we were slaves and there was nothing to do but wait.

II

There was no time aboard the ship. The few dim fluoros kept our hold forever in its uneasy twilight. The Gorzuni swilled us at such irregular intervals as they thought of it, and we heard only the throb of the engines and the asthmatic sigh of the ventilators. The twice-normal gravity kept most of us too weary even to talk much. But I think it was about forty-eight hours after leaving Terra, when the ship had gone into secondary drive and was leaving the Solar System altogether, that the man with the iron collar came down to us.

He entered with an escort of armed and wary Gorzuni who kept their rifles lifted. We looked up with dull eyes at the short stocky figure. His voice was almost lost in the booming vastness of the hold.

'I'm here to classify you. Come up one at a time and tell me your name and training, if any. I warn you that the penalty for claiming training you haven't got is torture, and you'll be tested if you do make such claims.'

We shuffled past. A Gorzuni, the drunken doctor, had a tattoo needle set up and scribbled a number on the palm of each man. This went into the human's notebook, together with name, age, and profession. Those without technical skills, by far the majority, were shoved roughly back. The fifty or so who claimed valuable education went over into a corner.

The needle burned my palm and I sucked the breath between my teeth. The impersonal voice was dim in my ears: 'Name?'

'John Henry Reeves, age twenty-five, lieutenant in the Com-

monwealth navy and nuclear engineer before the wars.' I snapped the answers out, my throat harsh and a bitter taste in my mouth. The taste of defeat.

'Hmmm.' I grew aware that the pale chill eyes were resting on me with an odd regard. Suddenly the man's thick lips twisted in a smile. It was a strangely charming smile, it lit his whole dark face with a brief radiance of merriment. 'Oh, yes, I remember you, Lieutenant Reeves. You called me, I believe, a filthy bastard.'

'I did,' I almost snarled. My hand throbbed and stung, I was unwashed and naked and sick with my own helplessness.

'You may be right at that,' he nodded. 'But I'm in bad need of a couple of assistants. This ship is a wreck. She may never make Gorzun without someone to nurse the engines. Care to help me?'

'No,' I said.

'Be reasonable. By refusing you only get yourself locked in the special cell we're keeping for trained slaves. It'll be a long voyage, the monotony will do more to break your spirit than any number of lashings. As my assistant you'll have proper quarters and a chance to move around and use your hands.'

I stood thinking. 'Did you say you needed two assistants?' I asked.

'Yes. Two who can do something with this ruin of a ship.'

'I'll be one,' I said, 'if I can name the other.'

He scowled. 'Getting pretty big for the britches you don't have, aren't you?'

'Take it or leave it,' I shrugged. 'But this person is a hell of a good technician.'

'Well, nominate him, then, and I'll see.'

'It's a her. My fiancée, Kathryn O'Donnell.'

'No.' He shook his dark curly head. 'No woman.'

'No man, then.' I grinned at him without mirth.

Anger flamed coldly in his eyes. 'I can't have a woman around my neck like another millstone.'

'She'll carry her own weight and more. She was a j.g. in my own ship, and she fought right there beside me till the end.'

The temper was gone without leaving a ripple. Not a stir of expression in the strong, ugly, olive-skinned face that looked up at me. His voice was as flat. 'Why didn't you say so before? All

right, then, Lieutenant. But the gods help you if you aren't both as advertised!

It was hard to believe it about clothes—the difference they made after being just another penned and naked animal. And a meal of stew and coffee, however ill prepared, scrounged at the galley after the warriors had messed, surged in veins and bellies which had grown used to swilling from a pig trough.

I realized bleakly that the man in the iron collar was right. Not many humans could have remained free of soul on the long, heart-cracking voyage to Gorzun. Add the eternal weariness of double weight, the chill dark grimness of our destination planet, utter remoteness from home, blank hopelessness, perhaps a touch of the whip and branding iron, and men became tamed animals trudging meekly at the heels of their masters.

'How long have you been a slave?' I asked our new boss.

He strode beside us as arrogantly as if the ship were his. He was not a tall man for even Kathryn topped him by perhaps five centimeters and his round-skulled head barely reached my shoulder. But he had thick muscular arms, a gorilla breadth of chest and the gravity didn't seem to bother him at all.

'Going on four years,' he replied shortly. 'My name, by the way, is Manuel Argos, and we might as well be on first-name terms from the start.'

A couple of Gorzuni came stalking down the corridor, clanking with metal. We stood aside for the giants, of course, but there was no cringing in Manuel's attitude. His strange eyes followed them speculatively.

We had a cabin near the stern, a tiny cubbyhole with four bunks, bleak and bare, but its scrubbed cleanliness was like a breath of home after the filth of the cell. Wordlessly, Manuel took one of the sleazy blankets and hung it across a bed as a sort of curtain. 'It's the best privacy I can offer you, Kathryn,' he said.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

He sat down on his own bunk and looked up at us. I loomed over him, a blond giant against his squatness. My family had been old and cultured and wealthy before the wars, and he was the nameless sweepings of a hundred slums and spaceports, but from the first there was never any doubt of who was the leader.

'Here's the story,' he said in his curt way. 'I knew enough prac-

tical engineering in spite of having no formal education to get myself a fairly decent master in whose factories I learned more. Two years ago he sold me to the captain of this ship. I got rid of the so-called chief engineer they had then. It wasn't hard to stir up a murderous quarrel between him and a jealous subordinate. But his successor is a drunken bum one generation removed from the forests.

'In effect, I'm the engineer of this ship. I've also managed to introduce my master, Captain Venjain, to marijuana. It hits a Gorzuni harder than it does a human, and he's a hopeless addict by now. It's partly responsible for the condition of this ship and the laxness among the crew. Poor leadership, poor organization. That's a truism.'

I stared at him with a sudden chill along my spine. But it was Kathryn who whispered the question: 'Why?'

'Waiting my chance,' he snapped. 'I'm the one who made junk out of the engines and equipment. I tell them it's old and poorly designed. They think that only my constant work holds the ship together at all but I could have her humming in a week if I cared to. I can't wait too much longer. Sooner or later someone else is going to look at that machinery and tell them it's been deliberately haywired. So I've been waiting for a couple of assistants with technical training and a will to fight. I hope you two fit the bill. If not—' he shrugged—'Go ahead and tell on me. It won't free you. But if you want to risk lives that won't be very long or pleasant on Gorzun, you can help me to take over the ship!'

I stood for some time looking at him. It was uncanny, the way he had sized us up from a glance and a word. Certainly the prospect was frightening. I could feel sweat on my face. My hands were cold. But I'd follow him. Before God, I'd follow him!

Still—"Three of us?" I jeered. "Three of us against a couple of hundred warriors?"

'There'll be more on our side,' he said impassively. After a moment's silence he went on: 'Naturally, we'll have to watch ourselves. Only two or three of them know Anglic. I'll point them out to you. And of course our work is under surveillance. But the watchers are ignorant. I think you have the brains to fool them.'

'I—' Kathryn stood reaching for words. 'I can't believe it,' she said at last. 'A naval vessel in this condition—'

'Things were better under the old Baldic conquerors,' admitted

Manuel. 'The kings who forged the League out of a hundred planets still in barbaric night, savages who'd learned to build spaceships and man atom-blasts and little else. But even they succeeded only because there was no real opposition. The Commonwealth society was rotten, corrupt, torn apart by civil wars, its leadership a petrified bureaucracy, its military forces scattered over a thousand restless planets, its people ready to buy peace rather than fight. No wonder the League drove everything before it!

'But after the first sack of Terra fifteen years ago, the barbarians split up. The forceful early rulers were dead, and their sons were warring over an inheritance they didn't know how to rule. The League is divided into two hostile regions now and I don't know how many splinter groups. Their old organization is shot to hell.

'Sol didn't rally in time. It was still under the decadent Commonwealth government. So one branch of the Baldics has now managed to conquer our big planets. But the fact that they've been content to raid and loot the inner worlds instead of occupying them and administering them decently shows the decay of their own society. Given the leadership, we could still throw them out of the Solar System and go on to over-run their home territories. Only the leadership hasn't been forthcoming.'

It was a harsh, angry lecture, and I winced and felt resentment within myself. 'Damn it, we've fought,' I said.

'And been driven back and scattered.' His heavy mouth lifted in a sneer. 'Because there hasn't been a chief who understood strategy and organization, and who could put heart into his men.'

'I suppose,' I said sarcastically, 'that you're that chief.'

His answer was flat and calm and utterly assured. 'Yes.'

In the days that followed I got to know more about Manuel Argos. He was never loath to talk about himself.

His race, I suppose, was primarily Mediterranean-Anatolian, with more than a hint of negro and oriental, but I think there must have been some forgotten nordic ancestor who looked out of those ice-blue eyes. A blend of all humanity, such as was not uncommon these days.

His mother had been a day laborer on Venus. His father,

though he was never sure, had been a space prospector who died young and never saw his child. When he was thirteen he shipped out for Sirius and had not been in the Solar System since. Now, at forty, he had been spaceman, miner, dock walloper, soldier in the civil wars and against the Baldics, small-time politician on the colony planets, hunter, machinist, and a number of darker things.

Somewhere along the line, he had found time to do an astonishing amount of varied reading, but his reliance was always more on his own senses and reason and intuition than on books. He had been captured four years ago in a Gorzuni raid on Alpha Centauri, and had set himself to study his captors as cold-bloodedly as he had studied his own race.

Yes, I learned a good deal about him but nothing of him. I don't think any living creature ever did. He was not one to open his heart. He went wrapped in loneliness and dreams all his days. Whether the chill of his manner went into his soul, and the rare warmth was only a mask, or whether he was indeed a yearning tenderness sheathed in armor of indifference, no one will ever be sure. And he made a weapon out of that uncertainty, a man never knew what to await from him and was thus forever strained in his presence, open to his will.

'He's a strange sort,' said Kathryn once, when we were alone. 'I haven't decided whether he's crazy or a genius.'

'Maybe both, darling,' I suggested, a little irritably. I didn't like to be dominated.

'Maybe. But what is sanity, then?' She shivered and crept close to me. 'I don't want to talk about it.'

The ship wallowed on her way, through a bleak glory of stars, alone in light-years of emptiness with her cargo of hate and fear and misery and dreams. We worked, and waited, and the slow days passed.

The laboring old engines had to be fixed. Some show had to be made for the gray-furred giants who watched us in the flickering gloom of the power chambers. We wired and welded and bolted, tested and tore down and rebuilt, sweltering in the heat of bursting atoms that rolled from the anti-radiation shields, deafened by the whine of generators and thud of misadjusted turbines and deep uneven drone of the great converters. We fixed Manuel's

sabotage until the ship ran almost smoothly. Later we would on some pretext throw the whole thing out of kilter again. 'Penelope's tapestry,' said Manuel, and I wondered that a space tramp could make the classical allusion.

'What are we waiting for?' I asked him once. The din of the generator we were overhauling smothered our words. 'When do we start our mutiny?'

He glanced up at me. The light of his trouble lamp gleamed off the sweat on his ugly pockmarked face. 'At the proper time,' he said coldly. 'For one thing, it'll be when the captain goes on his next dope jag.'

Meanwhile two of the slaves had tried a revolt of their own. When an incautious guard came too near the door of the men's cell one of them reached out and snatched his gun from the holster and shot him down. Then he tried to blast the lock of the bars. When the Gorzuni came down to gas him, his fellow battled them with fists and teeth till the rebels were knocked out. Both were flayed living in the presence of the other captives.

Kathryn couldn't help crying when we were back in our cabin. She buried her face against my breast and wept till I thought she would never stop weeping. I held her close and mumbled whatever foolish words came to me.

'They had it coming,' said Manuel. There was contempt in his voice. 'The fools. The blind stupid fools! They could at least have held the guard as a hostage and tried to bargain. No, they had to be heroes. They had to shoot him down. Now the example has frightened all the others. Those men deserved being skinned.'

After a moment, he added thoughtfully: 'Still, if the fear-emotion aroused in the slaves can be turned to hate it may prove useful. The shock has at least jarred them from their apathy.'

'You're a heartless bastard,' I said tonelessly.

'I have to be, seeing that everyone else chooses to be brainless. These aren't times for the tender-minded, you. This is an age of dissolution and chaos, such as has often happened in history, and only a person who first accepts the realities of the situation can hope to do much about them. We don't live in a cosmos where perfection is possible or even desirable. We have to make our compromises and settle for the goals we have some chance of at-

aining.' To Kathryn, sharply: 'Now stop that snuffing. I have to think.'

She gave him a wide-eyed tear-blurred look.

'It gives you a hell of an appearance.' He grinned nastily. 'Nose red, face swollen, a bad case of hiccoughs. Nothing pretty about crying, you.'

She drew a shuddering breath and there was anger flushing her cheeks: Gulping back the sobs, she drew away from me and turned her back on him.

'But I stopped her,' whispered Manuel to me with a brief impishness.

III

The endless, meaningless days had worn into a timelessness where I wondered if this ship were not the Flying Dutchman, outward bound forever with a crew of devils and the damned. It was no use trying to hurry Manuel, I gave that up and slipped into the round of work and waiting. Now I think that part of his delay was on purpose, that he wanted to grind the last hope out of the slaves and leave only a hollow yearning for vengeance. They'd fight better that way.

There wasn't much chance to be alone with Kathryn. A brief stolen kiss, a whispered word in the dimness of the engine room, eyes and hands touching lightly across a rusty, greasy machine. That was all. When we returned to our cabin we were too tired, generally, to do much except sleep.

I did once notice Manuel exchange a few words in the slave pen with Ensign Hokusai, who had been captured with Kathryn and myself. Someone had to lead the humans, and Hokusai was the best man for that job. But how had Manuel known? It was part of his genius for understanding.

The end came suddenly. Manuel shook me awake. I blinked wearily at the hated walls around me, feeling the irregular throb of the gravity field that was misbehaving again. More work for us. 'All right, all right,' I grumbled. 'I'm coming.'

When he flicked the curtain from Kathryn's bunk and aroused her, I protested. 'We can handle it. Let her rest.'

'Not now!' he answered. Teeth gleamed white in the darkness

of his face. 'The captain's off in never-never land. I heard two of the Gorzuni talking about it.'

That brought me bolt awake, sitting up with a chill along my spine. 'Now—?'

'Take it easy,' said Manuel. 'Lots of time.'

We threw on our clothes and went down the long corridors. The ship was still. Under the heavy shuddering drone of the engines, there was only the whisper of our shoes and the harsh rasp of the breath in my lungs. Kathryn was white-faced, her eyes enormous in the gloom. But she didn't huddle against me. She walked between the two of us and there was a remoteness over her that I couldn't quite understand. Now and then we passed a Gorzuni warrior on some errand of his own, and shrank aside as became slaves. But I saw the bitter triumph in Manuel's gaze as he looked after the titans.

Into the power chambers where the machines loomed in a flickering red twilight like heathen gods there were three Gorzuni standing there, armed engineers who snarled at us. One of them tried to cuff Manuel. He dodged without seeming to notice and bent over the gravity generator and signaled me to help him lift the cover.

I could see that there was a short circuit in one of the field coils, inducing a harmonic that imposed a flutter on the space-warping current. It wouldn't have taken long to fix. But Manuel scratched his head, and glanced back at the ignorant giants who loomed over our shoulders. He began tracing wires with elaborate puzzlement.

He said to me: 'We'll work up to the auxiliary atom-converter. I've fixed that to do what I want.'

I knew the Gorzuni couldn't understand us, and that human expressions were meaningless to them, but an uncontrollable shiver ran along my nerves.

Slowly we fumbled to the squat engine which was the power source for the ship's internal machinery. Manuel hooked in an oscilloscope and studied the trace as if it meant something. 'Ah-hah!' he said.

We unbolted the antiradiation shield, exposing the outlet valve. I knew that the angry, blood-red light streaming from it was harmless, that baffles cut off most of the radioactivity, but I

couldn't help shrinking from it. When a converter is flushed through the valve, you wear armor.

Manuel went over to a workbench and took a gadget from it which he'd made. I knew it was of no use for repair but he'd pretended to make a tool of it in previous jobs. It was a lead-plated flexible hose springing from a magnetronic pump, with a lot of meters and switches haywired on for pure effect. 'Give me a hand, John,' he said quietly.

We fixed the pump over the outlet valve and hooked up the two or three controls that really meant something. I heard Kathryn gasp behind me, and the dreadful realization burst into my own brain and numbed my hands. There wasn't even a gasket—

The Gorzuni engineer strode up to us, rumbling a question in his harsh language, his fellows behind him. Manuel answered readily, not taking his gaze off the wildly swinging fake meters.

He turned to me, and I saw the dark laughter in his eyes. 'I told them the converter is overdue for a flushing out of waste products,' he said in Anglic. 'As a matter of fact, the whole ship is.'

He took the hose in one hand and the other rested on a switch of the engine. 'Don't look, Kathryn,' he said tonelessly. Then he threw the switch.

I heard the baffle plates clank down. Manuel had shorted out the automatic safety controls which kept them up when the atoms were burning. I threw a hand over my own eyes and crouched.

The flame that sprang forth was like a bit of the sun. It sheeted from the hose and across the room. I felt my skin shriveling from incandescence and heard the roar of cloven air. In less than a second, Manuel had thrown the baffles back into place but his improvised blaster had torn away the heads of the three Gorzuni and melted the farther wall. Metal glowed white as I looked again, and the angry thunders boomed and echoed and shivered deep in my bones till my skull rang with it.

Dropping the hose, Manuel stepped over to the dead giants and yanked the guns from their holsters. 'One for each of us,' he said.

Turning to Kathryn: 'Get on a suit of armor and wait down

here. The radioactivity is bad, but I don't think it'll prove harmful in the time we need. Shoot anyone who comes in.'

'I—' Her voice was faint and thin under the rolling echoes, 'I don't want to hide—'

'Damn it, you'll be our guard. We can't let those monsters recapture the engine room. Now, null gravity!' And Manuel switched off the generator.

Free fall yanked me with a hideous nausea. I fought down my outraged stomach and grabbed a post to get myself back down to the deck. Down—no. There was no up and down now. We are floating free. Manuel had nullified the gravity advantage of the Gorzuni.

'All right, John, let's go!' he snapped.

I had time only to clasp Kathryn's hand. Then we were pushing off and soaring out the door and into the corridor beyond. Praise all gods, the Commonwealth navy had at least given its personnel free-fall training. But I wondered how many of the slaves would know how to handle themselves.

The ship roared around us. Two Gorzuni burst from a side cabin, guns in hands. Manuel burned them as they appeared, snatched their weapons, and swung on toward the slave pens.

The lights went out. I swam in a thick darkness alive with the rage of the enemy. 'What the hell—' I gasped.

Manuel's answer came dryly out of blackness: 'Kathryn knows what to do. I told her a few days ago.'

At the moment I had no time to realize the emptiness within me from knowing that those two had been talking without me. There was too much else to do. The Gorzuni were firing blind. Blaster bolts crashed vividly down the halls. Riot was breaking loose. Twice a lightning flash sizzled within centimeters of me. Manuel fired back at isolated giants, killing them and collecting their guns. Shielded by the dark, we groped our way to the slave pens.

No guards were there. When Manuel began to melt down the locks with low-power blasting I could dimly see the tangle of free-floating naked bodies churning and screaming in the vast gloom. A scene from an ancient hell. The fall of the rebel angels. Man, child of God, had stormed the Stars and been condemned to Hell for it.

And now he was going to burst out!

Hokusai's flat eager face pressed against the bars. 'Get us out,' he muttered fiercely.

'How many can you trust?' asked Manuel.

'About a hundred. They're keeping their heads, see them waiting over there? And maybe fifty of the women.'

'All right. Bring out your followers. Let the rest riot for a while. We can't do anything to help them.'

The men came out, grimly and silently, hung there while I opened the females' cage. Manuel passed out such few guns as we had. His voice lifted in the pulsing dark.

'All right. We hold the engine room. I want six with guns to go there now and help Kathryn O'Donnell keep it for us. Otherwise the Gorzuni will recapture it. The rest of us will make for the arsenal.'

'How about the bridge?' I asked.

'It'll keep. Right now the Gorzuni are panicked. It's part of their nature. They're worse than humans when it comes to mass stampedes. But it won't last and we have to take advantage of it. Come on!'

Hokusai led the engine room party—his naval training told him where the chamber would be—and I followed Manuel, leading the others out. There were only three or four guns between us but at least we knew where we were going. And by now few of the humans expected to live or cared about much of anything except killing Gorzuni. Manuel had timed it right.

We fumbled through a livid darkness, exchanging shots with warriors who prowled the ship firing at everything that moved. We lost men but we gained weapons. Now and again we found dead aliens, killed in the rioting, and stripped them too. We stopped briefly to release the technicians from their special cage and then shoved violently for the arsenal.

The Gorzuni all had private arms, but the ship's collection was not small. A group of sentries remained at the door, defending it against all comers. They had a portable shield against blaster bolts. I saw our flames splatter off it and saw men die as their fire raked back at us.

'We need a direct charge to draw their attention, while a few of us use the zero gravity to soar "overhead" and come down on them from "above,"' said Manuel's cold voice. It was clear, even in that wild lightning-cloven gloom. 'John, lead the main attack.'

'Like hell!' I gasped. It would be murder. We'd be hewed down as a woodman hews saplings. And there was Kathryn waiting—Then I swallowed rage and fear and lifted a shout to the men. I'm no braver than anyone else but there is an exaltation in battle, and Manuel used it as calculatingly as he used everything else.

We poured against them in a wall of flesh, a wall that they ripped apart and sent lurching back in tattered fragments. It was only an instant of flame and thunder, then Manuel's flying attack was on the defenders, burning them down, and it was over. I realized vaguely that I had a seared patch on my leg. It didn't hurt just then, and I wondered at the minor miracle which had kept me alive.

Manuel fused the door and the remnants of us swarmed in and fell on the racked weapons with a terrible fierceness. Before we had them all loaded a Gorzuni party charged us but we beat them off.

There were flashlights too. We had illumination in the seething dark. Manuel's face leaped out of that night as he gave his crisp, swift orders. A gargoye face, heavy and powerful and ugly, but men jumped at his bidding. A party was assigned to go back to the slave pens and pass out weapons to the other humans and bring them back here.

Reinforcements were sent to the engine room. Mortars and small antigrav cannon were assembled and loaded. The Gorzuni were calming too. Someone had taken charge and was rallying them. We'd have a fight on our hands.

We did!

I don't remember much of those fire-shot hours. We lost heavily in spite of having superior armament. Some three hundred humans survived the battle. But many of them were badly wounded. But we took the ship. We hunted down the last Gorzuni and flamed those who tried to surrender. There was no mercy in us. The Gorzuni had beaten it out, and now they faced the monster they had created. When the lights went on again three hundred weary humans lived and held the ship.

IV

There was a conference in the largest room we could find. Everyone was there, packed together in sweaty silence and staring at the man who had freed them. Theoretically it was a democratic assembly called to decide our next move. In practice Manuel Argos gave his orders.

'First, of course,' he said, his soft voice somehow carrying through the whole great chamber, 'we have to make repairs, both of battle damage and of the deliberately mishandled machinery. It'll take a week, I imagine, but then we'll have us a sweet ship. By that time, too, you'll have shaken down into a crew. Lieutenant Reeves and Ensign Hokusai will give combat instruction. We're not through fighting yet.'

'You mean—' A man stood up in the crowd. 'You mean, sir, that we'll have opposition on our return to Sol? I should think we could just sneak in. A planet's too big for blockade, you know, even if the Baldics cared to try.'

'I mean,' said Manuel calmly, 'that we're going on to Gorzun.'

It would have meant a riot if everyone hadn't been so tired. As it was, the murmur that ran through the assembly was ominous.

'Look, you,' said Manuel patiently, 'we'll have us a first-class fighting ship by the time we get there, which none of the enemy has. We'll be an expected vessel, one of their own, and in no case do they expect a raid on their home planet. It's a chance to give them a body blow. The Gorzuni don't name their ships, so I propose we christen ours now—the *Revenge*.'

It was sheer oratory. His voice was like an organ. His words were those of a wrathful angel. He argued and pleaded and bullied and threatened and then blew the trumpets for us. At the end they stood up and cheered for him. Even my own heart lifted, and Kathryn's eyes were wide and shining. Oh, he was cold and harsh and overbearing, but he made us proud to be human.

In the end, it was agreed, and the Solar ship *Revenge*, Captain Manuel Argos, First Mate John Henry Reeves, resumed her way to Gorzun.

In the days and weeks that followed, Manuel talked much of

his plans. A devastating raid on Gorzun would shake the barbarian confidence and bring many of their outworld ships swarming back to defend the mother world. Probably the rival half of the Baldic League would seize its chance and fall on a suddenly weakened enemy. The *Revenge* would return to Sol, by that time possessed of the best crew in the known universe, and rally mankind's scattered forces. The war would go on until the System was cleared—

‘—and then, of course, continue till all the barbarians have been conquered,’ said Manuel.

‘Why?’ I demanded. ‘Interstellar imperialism can’t be made to pay. It does for the barbarians because they haven’t the technical facilities to produce at home what they can steal elsewhere. But Sol would only be taking on a burden.’

‘For defense,’ said Manuel. ‘You don’t think I’d let a defeated enemy go off to lick his wounds and prepare a new attack, do you? No, everyone but Sol must be disarmed, and the only way to enforce such a peace is for Sol to be the unquestioned ruler.’ He added thoughtfully: ‘Oh, the empire won’t have to expand forever. Just till it’s big enough to defend itself against all comers. And a bit of economic readjustment could make it a paying proposition, too. We could collect tribute, you know.’

‘An empire—?’ asked Kathryn. ‘But the Commonwealth is democratic—’

‘Was democratic!’ he snapped. ‘Now it’s rotted away. Too bad, but you can’t revive the dead. This is an age in history such as has often occurred before when the enforced peace of Caesarism is the only solution. Maybe not a good solution but better than the devastation we’re suffering now. When there’s been a long enough period of peace and unity it may be time to think of reinstating the old republicanism. But that time is many centuries in the future, if it ever comes. Just now the socio-economic conditions aren’t right for it.’

He took a restless turn about the bridge. A million stars of space in the viewport blazed like a chill crown over his head. ‘It’ll be an empire in fact,’ he said, ‘and therefore it should be an empire in name. People will fight and sacrifice and die for a gaudy symbol when the demands of reality don’t touch them. We need a hereditary aristocracy to put on a good show. It’s always effective, and the archaism is especially valuable to Sol just

now. It'll recall the good old glamorous days before space travel. It'll be even more of a symbol now than it was in its own age. Yes, an empire, Kathryn, the Empire of Sol. Peace, ye underlings!

'Aristocracies decay,' I argued. 'Despotism is all right as long as you have an able despot but sooner or later a meathead will be born—'

'Not if the dynasty starts with strong men and women, and continues to choose good breeding stock, and raises the sons in the same hard school as the fathers. Then it can last for centuries. Especially in these days of gerontology and hundred-year active lifespans.'

I laughed at him. 'One ship, and you're planning an empire in the Galaxy!' I jeered. 'And you yourself, I suppose, will be the first emperor?'

His eyes were expressionless. 'Yes,' he said. 'Unless I find a better man, which I doubt.'

Kathryn bit her lip. 'I don't like it,' she said. 'It's—cruel.'

'This is a cruel age, my dear,' he said gently.

Gorzun rolled black and huge against a wilderness of stars. The redly illuminated hemisphere was like a sickle of blood as we swept out of secondary drive and rode our gravbeams down toward the night side.

Once only were we challenged. A harsh gabble of words came over the transonic communicator. Manuel answered smoothly in the native language, explaining that our vision set was out of order, and gave the recognition signals contained in the codebook. The warship let us pass.

Down and down and down, the darkened surface swelling beneath us, mountains reaching hungry peaks to rip the vessel's belly out, snow and glaciers and a churning sea lit by three hurtling moons. Blackness and cold and desolation.

Manuel's voice rolled over the intercom: 'Look below, men of Sol. Look out the viewports. This is where they were taking us!'

A snarl of pure hatred answered him. That crew would have died to the last human if they could drag Gorzun to oblivion with them. God help me, I felt that way myself.

It had been a long, hard voyage even after our liberation, and the weariness in me was only lifted by the prospect of battle. I'd

been working around the clock, training men, organizing the hundred units a modern warcraft needs. Manuel, with Kathryn for secretary and general assistant, had been driving himself even more fiercely, but I hadn't seen much of either of them. We'd all been too busy.

Now the three of us sat on the bridge watching Gorzun shrieking up to meet us. Kathryn was white and still, the hand that rested on mine was cold. I felt a tension within myself that thrummed near the breaking point. My orders to my gun crews were strained. Manuel alone seemed as chill and unruffled as always. There was steel in him. I sometimes wondered if he really was human.

Atmosphere screamed and thundered behind us. We roared over the sea, racing the dawn, and under its cold colorless streaks of light we saw Gorzun's capital city rise from the edge of the world.

I had a dizzying glimpse of squat stone towers, narrow canyons of streets, and the gigantic loom of spaceships on the rim of the city. Then Manuel nodded and I gave my firing orders.

Flame and ruin exploded beneath us. Spaceships burst open and toppled to crush buildings under their huge mass. Stone and metal fused, ran in lava between crumbling walls. The ground opened and swallowed half the town. A blue-white hell of atomic fire winked through the sudden roil of smoke. And the city died.

We slewed skyward, every girder protesting, and raced for the next great spaceport. There was a ship riding above it. Perhaps they had been alarmed already. We never knew. We opened up, and she fired back, and while we maneuvered in the heavens the *Revenge* dropped her bombs. We took a pounding, but our force-screens held and theirs didn't. The burning ship smashed half the city when it fell.

On to the next site shown by our captured maps. This time we met a cloud of space interceptors. Ground missiles went arcing up against us. The *Revenge* shuddered under the blows. I could almost see our gravity generator smoking as it tried to compensate for our crazy spins and twists and lurchings. We fought them, like a bear fighting a dog pack, and scattered them and laid the base waste.

'All right,' said Manuel. 'Let's get out of here.'

Space became a blazing night around us as we climbed above

the atmosphere. Warships would be thundering on their way now to smash us. But how could we locate a single ship in the enormousness between the worlds? We went into secondary drive, a tricky thing to do so near a sun, but we'd tightened the engines and trained the crew well. In minutes we were at the next planet, also habitable. There were only three colonies there. We smashed them all.

The men were cheering. It was more like the yelp of a wolf pack. The snarl died from my own face and I felt a little sick with all the ruin. Our enemies, yes. But there were many dead. Kathryn wept, slow silent tears running down her face, shoulders shaking.

Manuel reached over and took her hand. 'It's done, Kathryn,' he said quietly. 'We can go home now.'

He added after a moment, as if to himself: 'Hate is a useful means to an end but damned dangerous. We'll have to get the racist complex out of mankind. We can't conquer anyone, even the Gorzuni, and keep them as inferiors and hope to have a stable empire. All races must be equal.' He rubbed his strong square chin. 'I think I'll borrow a leaf from the old Romans. All worthy individuals, of any race, can become terrestrial citizens. It'll be a stabilizing factor.'

'You,' I said, with a harshness in my throat, 'are a megalomaniac.' But I wasn't sure any longer.

It was winter in Earth's northern hemisphere when the *Revenge* came home. I walked out into snow that crunched under my feet and watched my breath smoking white against the clear pale blue of the sky. A few others had come out with me. They fell on their knees in the snow and kissed it. They were a wild-looking gang, clad in whatever tatters of garment they could find, the men bearded and long-haired, but they were the finest, deadliest fighting crew in the Galaxy now. They stood there looking at the gentle sweep of hills, at blue sky and ice-flashing trees and a single crow hovering far overhead, and tears froze in their beards.

Home.

We had signalled other units of the Navy. There would be some along to pick us up soon and guide us to the secret base on Mercury, and there the fight would go on. But now, just now in this eternal instant, we were home.

I felt weariness like an ache in my bones. I wanted to crawl bear-like into some cave by a murmuring river, under the dear tall trees of Earth, and sleep till spring woke up the world again. But as I stood there with the thin winter wind like a cleansing bath around me, the tiredness dropped off. My body responded to the world which two billion years of evolution had shaped it for and I laughed aloud with the joy of it.

We couldn't fail. We were the freemen of Terra fighting for our own hearthfires and the deep ancient strength of the planet was in us. Victory and the stars lay in our hands, even now, even now.

I turned and saw Kathryn coming down the airlock gangway. My heart stumbled and then began to race. It had been so long, so terribly long. We'd had so little time but now we were home, and she was here and I was here and all the world was singing.

Her face was grave as she approached me. There was something remote about her and a strange blending of pain with the joy that must be in her too. The frost crackled in her dark unbound hair, and when she took my hands her own were cold.

'Kathryn, we're home,' I whispered. 'We're home, and free, and alive. O Kathryn, I love you!'

She said nothing, but stood looking at me forever and forever until Manuel Argos came to join us. The little stocky man seemed embarrassed—the first and only time I ever saw him quail, even faintly.

'John,' he said, 'I've got to tell you something.'

'It'll keep,' I answered. 'You're the captain of the ship. You have authority to perform marriages. I want you to marry Kathryn and me, here, now, on Earth.'

She looked at me unwaveringly, but her eyes were blind with tears. 'That's it, John,' she said, so low I could barely hear her. 'It won't be. I'm going to marry Manuel.'

I stood there, not saying anything, not even feeling it yet.

'It happened on the voyage,' she said, tonelessly. 'I tried to fight myself, I couldn't. I love him, John. I love him even more than I love you, and I didn't think that was possible.'

'She will be the mother of kings,' said Manuel, but his arrogant words were almost defensive. 'I couldn't have made a better choice.'

'Do you love her too,' I asked slowly, 'or do you consider her

good breeding stock?' Then: 'Never mind. Your answer would only be the most expedient. We'll never know the truth.'

It was instinct, I thought with a great resurgence of weariness. A strong and vital woman would pick the most suitable mate. She couldn't help herself. It was the race within her and there was nothing I could do about it.

'Bless you, my children,' I said.

They walked away after awhile, hand in hand under the high trees that glittered with ice and sun. I stood watching them until they were out of sight. Even then, with a long and desperate struggle yet to come, I think I knew that those were the parents of the Empire and the glorious Argolid dynasty, that they carried the future within them.

And I didn't give a damn.

It's a characteristic of a decadent civilization that their 'scientists' consider all knowledge already known—that they spend their time making cyclopedic gatherings of that knowledge. But that Foundation was something rather tricky—

FOUNDATION

by Isaac Asimov

Hari Seldon was old and tired. His voice, roared out though it was, by the amplifying system, was old and tired as well.

There were few in that small assemblage that did not realize that Hari Seldon would be dead before the next spring. And they listened in respectful silence to the last official words of the Galaxy's greatest mind.

'This is the final meeting,' that tired voice said, 'of the group I had called together over twenty years ago.' Seldon's eyes swept the seated scientists. He was alone on the platform, alone in the wheel chair to which a stroke had confined him two years before, and on his lap was the last volume—the fifty-second—of the minutes of previous meetings. It was opened to the last page.

He continued: 'The group I called together represented the best the Galactic Empire could offer of its philosophers, its psychologists, its historians, and its physical scientists. And in the twenty years since, we have considered the greatest problem ever to confront any group of fifty men—perhaps the greatest ever to confront any number of men.

'We have not always agreed on methods or on procedure. We have spent months and, doubtless, years on futile debates over relatively minor issues. On more than one occasion, sizable sections of our group threatened to break away altogether.

'And yet—his old face lit in a gentle smile—'we solved the problem. Many of the original members died and were replaced by others. Schemes were abandoned; plans voted down; procedures proven faulty.

'Yet we solved the problem; and not one member, while yet alive, left our group. I am glad of that.'

He paused, and allowed the subdued applause to die.

'We have done; and our work is over. The Galactic Empire is falling, but its culture shall not die, and provision has been made for a new and greater culture to develop therefrom. The two Scientific Refuges we planned have been established: one at each end of the Galaxy, at Terminus and at Star's End. They are in operation and already moving along the inevitable lines we have drawn for them.

'For us is left only one last item, and that fifty years in the future. That item, already worked out in detail, will be the instigation of revolts in the key sectors of Anacreon and Loris. It will set that final machinery in motion to work itself out in the millennium that follows.'

Hari Seldon's tired head dropped. 'Gentlemen, the last meeting of our group is hereby adjourned. We began in secret; we have worked throughout in secret; and now end in secret—to wait for our reward a thousand years hence with the establishment of the Second Galactic Empire.'

The last volume of minutes closed, and Hari Seldon's thin hand fell away from it.

'I am finished!' he whispered.

Lewis Pirenne was busily engaged at his desk in the one well-lit corner of the room. Work had to be co-ordinated. Effort had to be organized. Threads had to be woven into a pattern.

Fifty years now; fifty years to establish themselves and set up Encyclopedia Foundation Number One into a smoothly working unit. Fifty years to gather the raw material. Fifty years to prepare.

It had been done. Five more years would see the publication of the first volume of the most monumental work the Galaxy had ever conceived. And then at ten-year intervals—regularly—like clockwork—volume after volume after volume. And with them there would be supplements; special articles on events of current interest, until—

Pirenne stirred uneasily, as the muted buzzer upon his desk muttered peevishly. He had almost forgotten the appointment. He shoved the door release and out of an abstracted corner of one eye saw the door open and the broad figure of Salvor Hardin enter. Pirenne did not look up.

Hardin smiled to himself. He was in a hurry, but he knew better than to take offense at Pirenne's cavalier treatment of any-

thing or anyone that disturbed him at his work. He buried himself in the chair on the other side of the desk and waited.

Pirenne's stylus made the faintest scraping sound as it raced across paper. Otherwise, neither motion nor sound. And then Hardin withdrew a two-credit coin from his vest pocket. He flipped it and its stainless-steel surface caught glitters of light as it tumbled through the air. He caught it and flipped it again, watching the flashing reflections lazily. Stainless steel made good medium of exchange on a planet where all metal had to be imported.

Pirenne looked up and blinked. 'Stop that!' he said querulously.

'Eh?'

'That infernal coin tossing. Stop it.'

'Oh.' Hardin pocketed the metal disk. 'Tell me when you're ready, will you? I promised to be back at the City Council meeting before the new aqueduct project is put to a vote.'

Pirenne sighed and shoved himself away from the desk. 'I'm ready. But I hope you aren't going to bother me with city affairs. Take care of that yourself, please. The Encyclopedia takes up all my time.'

'Have you heard the news?' questioned Hardin, phlegmatically.

'What news?'

'The news that the Terminus City ultra-wave set received two hours ago. The Royal Governor of the Prefect of Anacreon has assumed the title of king.'

'Well? What of it?'

'It means,' responded Hardin, 'that we're cut off from the inner regions of the Empire. Do you realize that Anacreon stands square across what was our last remaining trade route to Santanni and to Trantor and to Vega itself? Where is our metal to come from? We haven't managed to get a steel or aluminum shipment through in six months and now we won't be able to get any at all, except by grace of the King of Anacreon.'

Pirenne *tch-tched* impatiently. 'Get them through him, then.'

'But can we? Listen, Pirenne, according to the charter which established this Foundation, the Board of Trustees of the Encyclopedia Committee has been given full administrative powers. I, as Mayor of Terminus City, have just enough power to blow my

own nose and perhaps to sneeze if you countersign an order giving me permission. It's up to you and your Board then. I'm asking you in the name of the City, whose prosperity depends upon uninterrupted commerce with the Galaxy, to call an emergency meeting—'

'Stop! A campaign speech is out of order. Now, Hardin, the Board of Trustees has not barred the establishment of a municipal government on Terminus. We understand one to be necessary because of the increase in population since the Foundation was established fifty years ago, and because of the increasing number of people involved in non-Encyclopedia affairs. *But* that does not mean that the first and *only* aim of the Foundation is no longer to publish the definitive Encyclopedia of all human knowledge. We are a State-supported, scientific institution, Hardin. We cannot—must not—*will* not interfere in local politics.'

'Local politics! By the Emperor's left big toe, Pirenne, this is a matter of life and death. The planet, Terminus, by itself cannot support a mechanized civilization. It lacks metals. You know that. It hasn't a trace of iron, copper, or aluminum in the surface rocks, and precious little of anything else. What do you think will happened to the Encyclopedia if this whatchamacallum King of Anacreon clamps down on us?'

'On *us*? Are you forgetting that we are under the direct control of the Emperor himself? We are not part of the Prefect of Anacreon or of any other prefect. Memorize that! We are part of the Emperor's personal domain and no one touches us. The Empire can protect its own.

'Then why didn't it prevent the Royal Governor of Anacreon from kicking over the traces? And only Anacreon? At least twenty of the outermost prefects of the Galaxy, the entire Periphery as a matter of fact, have begun steering things their own way. I tell you I feel darned uncertain of the Empire and its ability to protect us.'

'Hokum! Royal Governors, Kings—what's the difference? The Empire is always shot through with a certain amount of politics and with different men pulling this way and that. Governors have rebelled, and, for that matter, Emperors have been deposed or assassinated before this. But what has that to do with the Empire itself? Forget it, Hardin. It's none of our business. We are

first of all and last of all—scientists. And our concern is the Encyclopedia. Oh, yes, I'd almost forgotten. Hardin!

'Well?

'Do something about that paper of yours!' Pirenne's voice was angry.

'The Terminus City *Journal*? It isn't mine; it's privately owned. What's it been doing?'

'For weeks now it has been recommending that the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Foundation be made the occasion for public holidays and quite inappropriate celebrations.'

'And why not? The radium clock will open the First Vault in three months. I would call that a big occasion, wouldn't you?'

'Not for silly pageantry, Hardin. The First Vault and its opening concern the Board of Trustees alone. Anything of importance will be communicated to the people. That is final and please make it plain to the *Journal*.'

'I'm sorry, Pirenne, but the City Charter guarantees a certain minor matter known as freedom of the press.'

'It may. But the Board of Trustees does not. I am the Emperor's representative on Terminus, Hardin, and have full powers in this respect.'

Hardin's expression became that of a man counting to ten, mentally. He said grimly: 'In connection with your status as Emperor's representative, then, I have a final piece of news to give you.'

'About Anacreon?' Pirenne's lips tightened. He felt annoyed.

'Yes. A special envoy will be sent to us from Anacreon. In two weeks.'

'An envoy? Here? From Anacreon?' Pirenne chewed that. 'What for?'

Hardin stood up, and shoved his chair back up against the desk. 'I give you one guess.'

And he left—quite unceremoniously.

Anselm haut Rodric—'haut' itself signifying noble blood—Subprefect of Pluema and Envoy Extraordinary of his Highness of Anacreon—plus half a dozen other titles—was met by Salvor Hardin at the spaceport with all the imposing ritual of a state occasion.

With a tight smile and a low bow, the sub-prefect had flipped his blaster from its holster and presented it to Hardin butt first. Hardin returned the compliment with a blaster specifically borrowed for the occasion. Friendship and good will were thus established, and if Hardin noted the barest bulge at Haut Rodric's shoulder, he prudently said nothing.

The ground car that received them then—preceded, flanked, and followed by the suitable cloud of minor functionaries—proceeded in a slow, ceremonious manner to Cyclopeda Square, cheered on its way by a properly enthusiastic crowd.

Sub-prefect Anselm received the cheers with the complaisant indifference of a soldier and a nobleman.

He said to Hardin, 'And this city is all your world?'

Hardin raised his voice to be heard above the clamor. 'We are a young world, your eminence. In our short history we have had but few members of the higher nobility visiting our poor planet. Hence, our enthusiasm.'

It is certain that 'higher nobility' did not recognize irony when he heard it.

He said thoughtfully: 'Founded fifty years ago. Hm-m-m! You have a great deal of unexploited land here, mayor. You have never considered dividing it into estates?'

'There is no necessity as yet. We're extremely centralized; we have to be, because of the Encyclopedia. Some day, perhaps, when our population has grown—'

'A strange world! You have no peasantry?'

Hardin reflected that it didn't require a great deal of acumen to tell that his eminence was indulging in a bit of fairly clumsy pumping. He replied casually, 'No—nor nobility.'

Haut Rodric's eyebrows lifted. 'And your leader—the man I am to meet?'

'You mean Dr Pirenne? Yes! He is the Chairman of the Board of Trustees—and a personal representative of the Emperor.'

'Doctor? No other title? A *scholar*? And he rates above the civil authority?'

'Why, certainly,' replied Hardin, amiably. 'We're all scholars more or less. After all, we're not so much a world as a scientific foundation—under the direct control of the Emperor.'

There was a faint emphasis upon the last phrase that seemed

to disconcert the sub-prefect. He remained thoughtfully silent during the rest of the slow way to Cyclopedia Square.

If Hardin found himself bored by the afternoon and evening that followed, he had at least the satisfaction of realizing that Pirenne and Haut Rodric—having met with loud and mutual protestations of esteem and regard—were detesting each other's company a good deal more.

Haut Rodric had attended with glazed eye to Pirenne's lecture during the 'inspection tour' of the Encyclopedia Building. With polite and vacant smile, he had listened to the latter's rapid patter as they passed through the vast storehouses of reference films and the numerous projection rooms.

It was only after he had gone down level by level into and through the composing departments, editing departments, publishing departments, and filming departments that he made his first comprehensive statement.

'This is all very interesting,' he said, 'but it seems a strange occupation for grown men. What good is it?'

It was a remark, Hardin noted, for which Pirenne found no answer, though the expression of his face was most eloquent.

The dinner that evening was much the mirror image of the events of that afternoon, for Haut Rodric monopolized the conversation by describing—in minute technical detail and with incredible zest—his own exploits as battalion head during the recent war between Anacreon and the neighboring newly proclaimed Kingdom of Smyrno.

The details of the sub-prefect's account were not completed until dinner was over and one by one the minor officials had drifted away. The last bit of triumphant description of mangled spaceships came when he had accompanied Pirenne and Hardin onto the balcony and relaxed in the warm air of the summer evening.

'And now,' he said, with a heavy joviality, 'to serious matters.'

'By all means,' murmured Hardin, lighting a long cigar of Vegan tobacco—not many left, he reflected—and teetering his chair back on two legs.

The Galaxy was high in the sky and its misty lens shape stretched lazily from horizon to horizon. The few stars here at

the very edge of the universe were insignificant twinkles in comparison.

'Of course,' said the sub-prefect, 'all the formal discussions—the paper signing and such dull technicalities, that is—will take place before the—What is it you call your Council?'

'The Board of Trustees,' replied Pirenne, coldly.

'Queer name! Anyway, that's for tomorrow. We might as well clear away some of the underbrush, man to man, right now, though. Hey?'

'And this means—' prodded Hardin.

'Just this. There's been a certain change in the situation out here in the Periphery and the status of your planet has become a trifle uncertain. It would be very convenient if we succeeded in coming to an understanding as to how the matter stands. By the way, mayor, have you another one of those cigars?'

Hardin started and produced one reluctantly.

Anselm haut Rodric sniffed at it and emitted a clucking sound of pleasure. 'Vegan tobacco! Where did you get it?'

'We received some last shipment. There's hardly any left. Space knows when we'll get more—if ever.'

Pirenne scowled. He didn't smoke—and, for that matter, detested the odor. 'Let me understand this, your eminence. Your mission is merely one of clarification?'

Haut Rodric nodded through the smoke of his first lusty puffs.

'In that case, it is soon over. The situation with respect to Encyclopedia Foundation Number One is what it always has been.'

'Ah! And what is it that it always has been?'

'Just this: A State-supported scientific institution and part of the personal domain of his august majesty, the Emperor.'

The sub-prefect seemed unimpressed. He blew smoke rings. 'That's a nice theory, Dr Pirenne. I imagine you've got charters with the Imperial Seal upon it—but what's the actual situation? How do you stand with respect to Smyrno? You're not fifty parsecs from Smyrno's capital, you know. And what about Konom and Daribow?'

Pirenne said: 'We have nothing to do with any prefect. As part of the Emperor's—'

'They're not prefects,' reminded Haut Rodric; 'they're kingdoms now.'

'Kingdoms then. We have nothing to do with them. As a scientific institution—'

'Science be dashed!' swore the other, via a bouncing soldiery oath that ionized the atmosphere. 'What the devil has that got to do with the fact that we're liable to see Terminus taken over by Smyrno at any time?'

'And the Emperor? He would just sit by?'

Haut Rodric calmed down and said: 'Well, now, Dr Pirenne, you respect the Emperor's property and so does Anacreon, but Smyrno might not. Remember, we've just signed a treaty with the Emperor—I'll present a copy to that Board of yours tomorrow—which places upon us the responsibility of maintaining order within the borders of the old Prefect of Anacreon on behalf of the Emperor. Our duty is clear, then, isn't it?'

'Certainly. But Terminus is not part of the Prefect of Anacreon.'

'And Smyrno—'

'Nor is it part of the Prefect of Smyrno. It's not part of any prefect.'

'Does Smyrno know that?'

'I don't care what it knows.'

'We do. We've just finished a war with her and she still holds two stellar systems that are ours. Terminus occupies an extremely strategic spot, between the two nations.'

Hardin felt weary. He broke in: 'What is your proposition, your eminence?'

The sub-prefect seemed quite ready to stop fencing in favor of more direct statements. He said briskly: 'It seems perfectly obvious that, since Terminus cannot defend itself, Anacreon must take over the job for its own sake. You understand we have no desire to interfere with internal administration—'

'Uh-huh,' grunted Hardin, dryly.

'—but we believe that it would be best for all concerned to have Anacreon establish a military base upon the planet.'

'And that is all you would want—a military base in some of the vast unoccupied territory—and let it go at that.'

'Well, of course, there would be the matter of supporting the protecting forces.'

Hardin's chair came down on all fours, and his elbows went

forward on his knees. 'Now we're getting to the nub. Let's put it into language. Terminus is to be a protectorate and to pay tribute.'

'Not tribute. Taxes. We're protecting you. You pay for it.'

Pirenne banged his hand on the chair with sudden violence. 'Let me speak, Hardin. Your eminence, I don't care a rusty half-credit coin for Anacreon, Smyrno, or all your local politics and petty wars. I tell you this is a State-supported tax-free institution.'

'State-supported? But *we* are the State, Dr Pirenne, and we're not supporting.'

Pirenne rose angrily. 'Your eminence, I am the direct representative of—'

'—his august majesty, the Emperor,' chorused Anselm haut Rodric sourly, 'and I am the direct representative of the King of Anacreon. Anacreon is a lot nearer, Dr Pirenne.'

'Let's get back to business,' urged Hardin. 'How would you take these so-called taxes, your eminence? Would you take them in kind: wheat, potatoes, vegetables, cattle?'

The sub-prefect stared. 'What the devil? What do we need with those? We've got hefty surpluses. Gold, of course. Chromium or vanadium would be even better, incidentally, if you have it in quantity.'

Hardin laughed. 'Quantity! We haven't even got iron in quantity. Gold! Here, take a look at our currency.' He tossed a coin to the envoy.

Haut Rodric bounced it and stared. 'What is it? Steel?'

'That's right.'

'I don't understand.'

'Terminus is a planet practically without metals. We import it all. Consequently, we have no gold, and nothing to pay unless you want a few thousand bushels of potatoes.'

'Well—manufactured goods.'

'Without metal? What do we make our machines out of?'

There was a pause and Pirenne tried again. 'This whole discussion is wide of the point. Terminus is not a planet, but a scientific foundation preparing a great encyclopedia. Space, man, have you no respect for science?'

'Encyclopedias don't win wars.' Haut Rodric's brows furrowed.

'A completely unproductive world, then—and practically unoccupied at that. Well, you might pay with land.'

'What do you mean?' asked Pirenne.

'This world is just about empty and the unoccupied land is probably fertile. There are many of the nobility on Anacreon that would like an addition to their estates.'

'You can't propose any such—'

'There's no necessity of looking so alarmed, Dr Pirenne. There's plenty for all of us. If it comes to what it comes, and you co-operate, we could probably arrange it so that you lose nothing. Titles can be conferred and estates granted. You understand me, I think.'

Pirenne sneered, 'Thanks!'

And then Hardin said ingenuously: 'Could Anacreon supply us with adequate quantities of praseodymium for our atomic-power plant? We've only a few years' supply left.'

There was a gasp from Pirenne and then a dead silence for minutes. When Haut Rodric spoke it was in a voice quite different from what it had been till then:

'You have atomic power?'

'Certainly. What's unusual in that? I imagine atomic power is fifty thousand years old now. Why shouldn't we have it? Except that it's a little difficult to get praseodymium.'

'Yes . . . yes.' The envoy paused and added uncomfortably: 'Well, gentlemen, we'll pursue the subject tomorrow. You'll excuse me—'

Pirenne looked after him and gritted through his teeth: 'That insufferable, dull-witted donkey! That—'

Hardin broke in: 'Not at all. He's merely the product of his environment. He doesn't understand much except that "I got a gun and you ain't".'

Pirenne whirled on him in exasperation. 'What in space did you mean by the talk about military bases and tribute? Are you crazy?'

'No. I merely gave him rope and let him talk. You'll notice that he managed to stumble out with Anacreon's real intentions—that is, the parceling up of Terminus into landed estates. Of course, I don't intend to let that happen.'

'You don't intend. You don't. And who are you? And may I ask what you meant by blowing off your mouth about our atomic-

power plant? Why, it's just the thing that would make us a military target.'

'Yes,' grinned Hardin. 'A military target to stay away from. Isn't it obvious why I brought the subject up? It happened to confirm a very strong suspicion I had had.'

'And that was what?'

'That Anacreon no longer has an atomic-power economy—and that, therefore, the rest of the Periphery no longer has one as well. Interesting, wouldn't you say?'

'Bah!' Pirenne left in fiendish humor, and Hardin smiled gently.

He threw his cigar away and looked up at the outstretched Galaxy. 'Back to oil and coal, are they?' he murmured—and what the rest of his thoughts were he kept to himself.

When Hardin denied owning the *Journal*, he was perhaps technically correct, but no more. Hardin had been the leading spirit in the drive to incorporate Terminus into an autonomous municipality—he had been elected its first mayor—so it was not surprising that, though not a single share of *Journal* stock was in his name, some sixty percent was controlled by him in more devious fashions.

There were ways.

Consequently, when Hardin began suggesting to Pirenne that he be allowed to attend meetings of the Board of Trustees, it was not quite coincidence that the *Journal* began a similar campaign. And the first mass meeting in the history of the Foundation was held, demanding representation of the City in the 'national' government.

And, eventually, Pirenne capitulated with ill grace.

Hardin, as he sat at the foot of the table, speculated idly as to just what it was that made physical scientists such poor administrators. It might be merely that they were too used to inflexible fact and far too unused to pliable people.

In any case, there was Tomaz Sutt and Jord Fara on his left; Lundin Crast and Yate Fulham on his right; with Pirenne, himself, presiding. He knew them all, of course, but they seemed to have put on an extra-special bit of pomposity for the occasion.

Hardin half dozed through the initial formalities and then

perked up when Pirenne sipped at the glass of water before him by way of preparation and said:

'I find it very gratifying to be able to inform the Board that, since our last meeting, I have received word that Lord Dorwin, Chancellor of the Empire, will arrive at Terminus in two weeks. It may be taken for granted that our relations with Anacreon will be smoothed out to our complete satisfaction as soon as the Emperor is informed of the situation.'

He smiled and addressed Hardin across the length of the table. 'Information to this effect has been given the *Journal*.'

Hardin snickered below his breath. It seemed evident that Pirenne's desire to strut this information before him had been one reason for his admission into the sacro-sanctum.

He said evenly: 'Leaving vague expressions out of account, what do you expect Lord Dorwin to do?'

Tomaz Sutt replied. He had a bad habit of addressing one in the third person when in his more stately moods.

'It is quite evident,' he observed, 'that Mayor Hardin is a professional cynic. He can scarcely fail to realize that the Emperor would be most unlikely to allow his personal rights to be infringed.'

'Why? What would he do in case they were?'

There was an annoyed stir. Pirenne said, 'You are out of order,' and, as an after-thought, 'and are making what are near-treasonable statements, besides.'

'Am I to consider myself answered?'

'Yes! If you have nothing further to say—'

'Don't jump to conclusions. I'd like to ask a question. Besides this stroke of diplomacy—which may or may not prove to mean anything—has anything concrete been done to meet the Anacreonic menace?'

Yate Fulham drew one hand along his ferocious red mustache. 'You see a menace there, do you?'

'Don't you?'

'Scarcely'—this with indulgence. 'The Emperor—'

'Great space!' Hardin felt annoyed. 'What is this? Every once in a while someone mentions "Emperor" or "Empire" as if it were a magic word. The Emperor is fifty thousand parsecs away, and I doubt whether he gives a damn about us. And if he does, what

can he do? What there was of the imperial navy in these regions is in the hands of the four kingdoms now and Anacreon has its share. Listen, we have to fight with guns, not with words.

'Now, get this. We've had two months of grace so far, mainly because we've given Anacreon the idea that we've got atomic weapons. Well, we all know that that's a little white lie. We've got atomic power, but only for commercial uses, and darn little at that. They're going to find that out soon, and if you think they're going to enjoy being jollied along, you're mistaken.'

'My dear sir—'

'Hold on; I'm not finished.' Hardin was warming up. He liked this. 'It's all very well to drag chancellors into this, but it would be much nicer to drag a few great big siege guns fitted for beautiful atomic bombs into it. We've lost two months, gentlemen, and we may not have another two months to lose. What do you propose to do?'

Said Lundin Crast, his long nose wrinkling angrily: 'If you're proposing the militarization of the Foundation, I won't hear a word of it. It would mark our open entrance into the field of politics. We, Mr Mayor, are a scientific foundation and nothing else.'

Added Sutt: 'He does not realize, moreover, that building armaments would mean withdrawing men—valuable men—from the Encyclopedia. That cannot be done, come what may.'

'Very true,' agreed Pirenne. 'The Encyclopedia first—always.'

Hardin groaned in spirit. The Board seemed to suffer violently from Encyclopedia on the brain.

He said icily: 'Has it ever occurred to the Board that it is barely possible that Terminus may have interests other than the Encyclopedia?'

Pirenne replied: 'I do not conceive, Hardin, that the Foundation can have any interest other than the Encyclopedia.'

'I didn't say the Foundation; I said *Terminus*. I'm afraid you don't understand the situation. There's a good million of us here on Terminus, and not more than a hundred and fifty thousand are working directly on the Encyclopedia. To the rest of us, this is *home*. We were born here. We're living here. Compared with our farms and our homes and our factories, the Encyclopedia means little to us. We want them protected—'

He was shouted down.

'The Encyclopedia first,' ground out Crast. 'We have a mission to fulfill.'

'Mission, hell,' shouted Hardin. 'That might have been true fifty years ago. But this is a new generation.'

'That has nothing to do with it,' replied Pirenne. 'We are scientists.'

And Hardin leaped through the opening. 'Are you, though? That's a nice hallucination, isn't it? Your bunch here is a perfect hallucination, isn't it? Your bunch here is a perfect example of what's been wrong with the entire Galaxy for thousands of years. What kind of science is it to be stuck out here for centuries classifying the work of scientists of the last millennium? Have you ever thought of working onward, *extending* their knowledge and improving upon it? No! You're quite happy to stagnate. The whole Galaxy is, and has been for space knows how long. That's why the Periphery is revolting; that's why communications are breaking down; that's why petty wars are becoming eternal; that's why whole systems are losing atomic power and going back to barbarous techniques of chemical power.

'If you ask me,' he cried, '*the Galaxy is going to pot!*'

He paused and dropped into his chair to catch his breath, paying no attention to the two or three that were attempting simultaneously to answer him.

Crast got the floor. 'I don't know what you're trying to gain by your hysterical statements, Mr Mayor. Certainly, you are adding nothing constructive to the discussion. I move, Mr Chairman, that the last speaker's remarks be placed out of order and the discussion be resumed from the point where it was interrupted.'

Jord Fara bestirred himself for the first time. Up to this point Fara had taken no part in the argument even at its hottest. But now his ponderous voice, every bit as ponderous as his three-hundred-pound body, burst its bass way out.

'Haven't we forgotten something, gentlemen?'

'What?' asked Pirenne, peevishly.

'That in a month we celebrate our fiftieth anniversary.' Fara had a trick of uttering the most obvious platitudes with great profundity.

'What of it?'

'And on that anniversary,' continued Fara, placidly, 'Hari Sel-

don's First Vault will open. Have you ever considered what might be in the First Vault?

'I don't know. Routine matters. A stock speech of congratulations, perhaps. I don't think any significance need be placed on the First Vault—though the *Journal*—and he glared at Hardin, who grinned back—'did try to make an issue of it. I put a stop to that.'

'Ah,' said Fara, 'but perhaps you are wrong. Doesn't it strike you'—he paused and put a finger to his round little nose—'that the Vault is opening at a very convenient time?'

'Very *inconvenient* time, you mean,' muttered Fulham. 'We've got some other things to worry about.'

'Other things more important than a message from Hari Seldon? I think not.' Fara was growing more pontifical than ever, and Hardin eyed him thoughtfully. What was he getting at?

'In fact,' said Fara, happily, 'you all seem to forget that Seldon was the greatest psychologist of our time and that he was the founder of our Foundation. It seems reasonable to assume that he used his science to determine the probable course of the history of the immediate future. If he did, as seems likely, I repeat, he would certainly have managed to find a way to warn us of danger and, perhaps, to point out a solution. The Encyclopedia was very dear to his heart, you know.'

An aura of puzzled doubt prevailed. Pirenne hemmed. 'Well, now, I don't know. Psychology is a great science, but—there are no psychologists among us at the moment, I believe. It seems to me we're on uncertain ground.'

Fara turned to Hardin. 'Didn't you study psychology under Alurin?'

Hardin answered, half in reverie: 'Yes. I never completed my studies, though. I got tired of theory. I wanted to be a psychological engineer, but we lacked the facilities, so I did the next best thing—I went into politics. It's practically the same thing.'

'Well, what do you think of the First Vault?'

And Hardin replied cautiously, 'I don't know.'

He did not say a word for the remainder of the meeting—even though it got back to the subject of the Chancellor of the Empire.

In fact, he didn't even listen. He'd been put on a new track

and things were falling into place—just a little. Little angles were fitting together—one or two.

And psychology was the key. He was sure of that.

He was trying desperately to remember the psychological theory he had once learned—and from it he got one thing right at the start.

A great psychologist such as Seldon could unravel human emotions and human reactions sufficiently to be able to predict broadly the historical sweep of the future.

And that meant—hm-m-m!

Lord Dorwin took snuff. He also had long hair, curled intricately and, quite obviously, artificially; to which were added a pair of fluffy, blond sideburns, which he fondled affectionately. Then, too, he spoke in over-precise statements and left out all the *r*'s.

At the moment, Hardin had no time to think of more of the reasons for the instant detestation in which he had held the noble chancellor. Oh, yes, the elegant gestures of one hand with which he accompanied his remarks and the studied condescension with which he accompanied even a simple affirmative.

But, at any rate, the problem now was to locate him. He had disappeared with Pirenne half an hour before—passed clean out of sight, blast him.

Hardin was quite sure that his own absence during the preliminary discussions would quite suit Pirenne.

But Pirenne had been seen in this wing and on this floor. It was simply a matter of trying every door. Halfway down, he said, 'Ah!' and stepped into the darkened room. The profile of Lord Dorwin's intricate hairdo was unmistakable against the lighted screen.

Lord Dorwin looked up and said: 'Ah, Hahdin. You ah looking foah us, no doubt?' He held out his snuffbox—overadorned and poor workmanship at that, noted Hardin—and was politely refused, whereat he helped himself to a pinch and smiled graciously.

Pirenne scowled and Hardin met that with an expression of blank indifference.

The only sound to break the short silence that followed was the clicking of the lid of Lord Dorwin's snuffbox. And then he put it away and said:

'A gweat achievement, this Encyclopedia of yoahs, Hahdin. A feat, indeed, to rank with the most majestic accomplishments of all time.'

'Most of us think so, milord. It's an accomplishment not quite accomplished as yet, however.'

'Fworn the little I have seen of the efficiency of yoah Foundation, I have no feahs on that scoah.' And he nodded to Pirenne, who responded with a delighted bow.

Quite a love feast, thought Hardin. 'I wasn't complaining about the lack of efficiency, milord, as much as of the definite excess of efficiency on the part of the Anacreonians—though in another and more destructive direction.'

'Ah, yes, Anacweon.' A negligent wave of the hand. 'I have just come from theah. Most bahbawous planet. It is thowoughly inconceivable that human beings could live heah in the Pe-wiphewy. The lack of the most elementawy wequiahments of a cultuahed gentleman; the absence of the most fundamental necessities foah comfoht and convenience—the uttah disuetude into which they—'

Hardin interrupted dryly: 'The Anacreonians, unfortunately, have all the elementary requirements for warfare and all the fundamental necessities for destruction.'

'Quite, quite.' Lord Dorwin seemed annoyed, perhaps at being stopped midway in his sentence. 'But we ahn't to discuss business now, y'know. Weally, I'm othah-wise concuhned. Doctah Pi-wenne, ahn't you going to show me the second volume? Do, please.'

The lights clicked out and for the next half-hour Hardin might as well have been on Anacreon for all the attention they paid him. The book upon the screen made little sense to him, nor did he trouble to make the attempt to follow, but Lord Dorwin became quite humanly excited at times. Hardin noticed that during these moments of excitement the chancellor pronounced his *r*'s.

When the lights went on again, Lord Dorwin said: 'Mahvelous. Twuly mahvelous. You ah not, by chance, intewested in ah-chaeology, ah you, Hahdin?'

'Eh?' Hardin shook himself out of an abstracted reverie. 'No, milord, can't say I am. I'm a psychologist by original intention and a politician by final decision.'

'Ah! No doubt intewesting studies. I, myself, y'know'—he helped himself to a giant pinch of snuff—'dabble in ahchaeology.'

'Indeed?'

'His lordship,' interrupted Pirenne, 'is most thoroughly acquainted with the field.'

'Well, p'haps I am, p'haps I am,' said his lordship complacently. 'I *have* done an awful amount of wuhk in the science. Extwemely well-read, in fact. I've gone thwough all of Jawdun, Obijasi, Kwomwill . . . oh, all of them, y'know.'

'I've heard of them, of course,' said Hardin, 'but I've never read them.'

'You should some day, my deah fellow. It would amply repay you. Why, I cutainly considah it well wuhth the twip heah to the Pewiphewy to see this copy of Lameth. Would you believe it, my libwawy totally lacks a copy. By the way, Doctah Piwenne, you have not fohgotten yoah pwomise to twansdevelop a copy foah me befoah I leave?'

'Only too pleased.'

'Lameth, you must know,' continued the chancellor, pontifically, 'pwesents a new and most intewesting addition to my pwevious knowledge of the "Owigin Question".'

'Which question?' asked Hardin.

'The "Owigin Question." The place of the owigin of the human species, y'know. Suahly you must know that it is thought that owiginally the human wace occupied only one planetawy system.'

'Well, yes, I know that.'

'Of cohse, no one knows exactly which system it is—lost in the mists of antiquity. Theah ah theawies, howevah. Siwius, some say. Othahs insist on Alpha Centauwi, oah on Sol, oah on 61 Cygni—all in the Siwius sectah, you see.'

'And what does Lameth say?'

'Well, he goes off along a new twail completely. He twies to show that ahchaeological wemains on the thuhd planet of the Ahctuwian System show that humanity existed theah befoah theah wah any indications of space-twavel.'

'And that means it was humanity's birth planet?'

'Phaps. I must wead it closely and weigh the evidence befoah I can say foah cuhtain. One must see just how weliable his obshvations ah.'

Hardin remained silent for a short while. Then he said, 'When did Lameth write his book?'

'Oh—I should say about eight hundwed yeahs ago. Of cohse, he has based it lahgly on the pwevious wuhk of Gleen.'

'Then why rely on him? Why not go to Arcturus and study the remains for yourself?'

Lord Dorwin raised his eyebrows and took a pinch of snuff hurriedly. 'Why, whatevah foah, my deah fellow.'

'To get the information firsthand, of course.'

'But wheah's the necessity? It seems an uncommonly wound-about and hopelessly wigmawolish method of getting any-wheahs. Look heah, now, I've got the wuhks of all the old mas-tahs—the gweat ahchaeologists of the past. I weigh them against each othah—balance the disagweements—analyze the conflicting statements—decide which is pwobably cowwect—and come to a conclusion. That is the scientific method. At least'—patronizingly—'as *I* see it. How insuffewably cwude it would be to go to Ahc-tuwus, oah to Sol, foah instance, and blundah about, when the old mastahs have covahed the gwound so much moah effectually than we could possibly hope to do.'

Hardin murmured politely, 'I see.'

Scientific method, hell! No wonder the Galaxy was going to pot.

'Come, milord,' said Pirenne, 'I think we had better be returning.'

'Ah, yes. P'haps we had.'

As they left the room, Hardin said suddenly, 'Milord, may I ask a question?'

Lord Dorwin smiled blandly and emphasized his answer with a gracious flutter of the hand. 'Cuhtainly, my deah fellow. Only too happy to be of service. If I can help you in any way fwom my pooah stoah of knowledge—'

'It isn't exactly about archaeology, milord.'

'No?'

'No. It's this: Last year we received news here in Terminus about the explosion of a power plant on Planet V of Gamma Andromeda. We got the barest outline of the accident—no details at all. I wonder if you could tell me exactly what happened.'

Pirenne's mouth twisted. 'I wonder you annoy his lordship with questions on totally irrelevant subjects.'

'Not at all, Doctah Piwenne,' interceded the chancellor. 'It is quite all wight. Theah isn't much to say concuhning it in any case. The powah plant did explode and it was quite a catas-twophe, y'know. I believe seweval million people wah killed and at least half the planet was simply laid in wuins. Weally, the govuhnment is sewiously considewing placing seweah westwic-tions upon the indiscwiminate use of atomic powah—though that is not a thing for genewal publication, y'know.'

'I understand,' said Hardin. 'But what was wrong with the plant?'

'Well, weally,' replied Lord Dorwin indifferently, 'who knows? It had bwocken down some yeahs pweviously and it is thought that the weplacements and wepaiah wuhk was most infewiah. It is so difficult these days to find men who *weally* undahstand the moah technical details of ouah powah systems.' And he took a sorrowful pinch of snuff.

'You realize,' said Hardin, 'that the independent kingdoms of the Periphery have lost atomic power altogether?'

'Have they? I'm not at all suhpwised. Barbawous planets—Oh, but my deah fellow, don't call them independent. They ahn't, y'know. The tweaties we've made with them ah pwoof of that. They acknowledge the soveweignty of the Empewah. They'd have to, of cohse, oah we wouldn't tweat with them.'

'That may be so, but they have considerable freedom of action.'

'Yes, I suppose so. Considewable. But that scahcely mattahs. The Empiah is fah bettah off, with the Pewiphewy thwown upon its own wesoahces—as it is, moah oah less. They ahn't any good to us, y'know. *Most* bahbawous planets. Scahcely civilized.'

'They were civilized in the past. Anacreon was one of the richest of the outlying provinces. I understand it compared favorably with Vega itself.'

'Oh, but, Hahdin, that was centuwies ago. You can scahcely dwaw conclusion fwom that. Things wah diffewent in the old gwheat days. We ahn't the men we used to be, y'know. But, Hahdin, come, you ah a most puhsistent chap, I've told you I simply won't discuss business today. Doctah Piwenne did pwepayah me

foah you. He told me you would twy to badgah me, but I'm fah too old a hand foah that. Leave it foah next day.'

And that was that.

This was the second meeting of the Board that Hardin had attended, if one were to exclude the informal talks the Board members had had with the now-departed Lord Dorwin. Yet the mayor had a perfectly definite idea that at least one other, and possibly two or three, had been held, to which he had somehow never received an invitation.

Nor, it seemed to him, would he have received notification of this one had it not been for the ultimatum.

At least, it amounted to an ultimatum, though a superficial reading of the visigraphed document would lead one to suppose that it was a friendly interchange of greetings between two potentates.

Hardin fingered it gingerly. It started off floridly with a salutation from 'His Puissant Majesty, the King of Anacreon, to his friend and brother, Dr Lewis Pirenne, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, of the Encyclopedia Foundation Number One,' and it ended even more lavishly with a gigantic, multicolored seal of the most involved symbolism.

But it was an ultimatum just the same.

Hardin said: 'It turned out that we didn't have much time after all—only three months. But little as it was, we threw it away unused. This thing here gives us a week. What do we do now?'

Pirenne frowned worriedly. 'There must be a loophole. It is absolutely unbelievable that they would push matters to extremities in the face of what Lord Dorwin has assured us regarding the attitude of the Emperor and the Empire.'

Hardin perked up. 'I see. You have informed the King of Anacreon of this alleged attitude?'

'I did—after having placed the proposal to the Board for a vote and having received unanimous consent.'

'And when did this vote take place?'

Pirenne climbed onto his dignity. 'I do not believe I am answerable to you in any way, Mayor Hardin.'

'All right. I'm not that vitally interested. It's just my opinion that it was your diplomatic transmission of Lord Dorwin's valua-

ble contribution to the situation'—he lifted the corner of his mouth in a sour half-smile—'that was the direct cause of this friendly little note. They might have delayed longer otherwise—though I don't think the additional time would have helped Terminus any, considering the attitude of the Board.'

Said Yate Fulham: 'And just how do you arrive at that remarkable conclusion, Mr Mayor?'

'In a rather simple way. It merely required the use of that much-neglected commodity—common sense. You see, there is a branch of human knowledge known as symbolic logic, which can be used to prune away all sorts of clogging deadwood that clutters up human language.'

'What about it?' said Fulham.

'I applied it. Among other things, I applied it to this document here. I didn't really need to for myself because I knew what it was all about, but I think I can explain it more easily to five physical scientists by symbols rather than by words.'

Hardin removed a few sheets of paper from the pad under his arm and spread them out. 'I didn't do this myself, by the way,' he said. 'Muller Holk of the Division of Logic has his name signed to the analyses, as you can see.'

Pirenne leaned over the table to get a better view and Hardin continued: 'The message from Anacreon was a simple problem, naturally, for the men who wrote it were men of action rather than men of words. It boils down easily and straightforwardly to the unqualified statement, which in symbols is what you see, and which in words, roughly translated, is, "You give us what we want in a week, or we beat the hell out of you and take it anyway".'

There was silence as the five members of the Board ran down the line of symbols, and then Pirenne sat down and coughed uneasily.

Hardin said, 'No loophole, is there, Dr Pirenne?'

'Doesn't seem to be.'

'All right.' Hardin replaced the sheets. 'Before you now you see a copy of the treaty between the Empire and Anacreon—a treaty, incidentally, which is signed on the Emperor's behalf by the same Lord Dorwin who was here last week—and with it a symbolic analysis.'

The treaty ran through five pages of fine print and the analysis was scrawled out in just under half a page.

'As you see, gentlemen, something like ninety percent of the treaty boiled right out of the analysis as being meaningless, and what we end up with can be described in the following interesting manner:

'Obligations of Anacreon to the Empire: *None!*

'Powers of the Empire over Anacreon: *None!*'

Again the five followed the reasoning anxiously, checking carefully back to the treaty, and when they were finished, Pirenne said in a worried fashion, 'That seems to be correct.'

'You admit, then, that the treaty is nothing but a declaration of total independence on the part of Anacreon and a recognition of that status by the Empire?'

'It seems so.'

'And do you suppose that Anacreon doesn't realize that, and is not anxious to emphasize the position of independence—so that it would naturally tend to resent any appearance of threats from the Empire? Particularly when it is evident that the Empire is powerless to fulfill any such threats, or it would never have allowed independence.'

'But then,' interposed Sutt, 'how would Mayor Hardin account for Lord Dorwin's assurances of Empire support? They seemed—' He shrugged. 'Well, they seemed satisfactory.'

Hardin threw himself back in the chair. 'You know, that's the most interesting part of the whole business. I'll admit I had thought his lordship a most consummate donkey when I first met him—but it turned out that he was actually an accomplished diplomat and a most clever man. I took the liberty of recording all his statements.'

There was a flurry, and Pirenne opened his mouth in horror.

'What of it?' demanded Hardin. 'I realize it was a gross breach of hospitality and a thing no so-called gentleman would do. Also, that if his lordship had caught on, things might have been unpleasant; but he didn't, and I have the record, and that's that. I took that record, had it copied out and sent that to Holk for analysis, also.'

Lundin Crast said, 'And where is the analysis?'

'That,' replied Hardin, 'is the interesting thing. The analysis was the most difficult of the three by all odds. When Holk, after

two days of steady work, succeeded in eliminating meaningless statements, vague gibberish, useless qualifications—in short, all the goo and dribble—he found he had nothing left. Everything cancelled out.

‘Lord Dorwin, gentlemen, in five days of discussion *didn't say one damned thing*, and said it so you never noticed. *There are the assurances you had from your precious Empire.*’

Hardin might have placed an actively working stench bomb upon the table and created no more confusion than existed after his last statement. He waited, with weary patience, for it to die down.

‘So,’ he concluded, ‘when you sent threats—and that’s what they were—concerning Empire action to Anacreon, you merely irritated a monarch who knew better. Naturally, his ego would demand immediate action, and the ultimatum is the result—which brings me to my original statement. We have one week left and what do we do now?’

‘It seems,’ said Sutt, ‘that we have no choice but to allow Anacreon to establish military bases on Terminus.’

‘I agree with you there,’ replied Hardin, ‘but what do we do toward kicking them off again at the first opportunity?’

Yate Fulham’s mustache twitched. ‘That sounds as if you have made up your mind that violence must be used against them.’

‘Violence,’ came the retort, ‘is the last refuge of the incompetent. But I certainly don’t intend to lay down the welcome mat and brush off the best furniture for their use.’

‘I still don’t like the way you put that,’ insisted Fulham. ‘It is a dangerous attitude; the more dangerous because we have noticed lately that a sizable section of the populace seems to respond to all your suggestions just so. I might as well tell you, Mayor Hardin, that the Board is not quite blind to your recent activities.’

He paused and there was general agreement. Hardin shrugged.

Fulham went on: ‘If you were to inflame the City into an act of violence, you would achieve elaborate suicide—and we don’t intend to allow that. Our policy has but one cardinal principle, and that is the Encyclopedia. Whatever we decide to do or not

to do will be so decided because it will be the measure required to keep that Encyclopedia safe.'

'Then,' said Hardin, 'you come to the conclusion that we must continue our intensive campaign of doing nothing.'

Pirenne said bitterly: 'You have yourself demonstrated that the Empire cannot help us; though how and why it can be so, I don't understand. If compromise is necessary—'

Hardin had the nightmarelike sensation of running at top speed and getting nowhere. 'There is no compromise? Don't you realize that this bosh about military bases is a particularly inferior grade of drivel? Haut Rodric told us what Anacreon was after—outright annexation and imposition of its own feudal system of landed estates and peasant-aristocracy economy upon us. What is left of our bluff of atomic power may force them to move slowly, but they will move nonetheless.'

He had risen indignantly, and the rest rose with him—except for Jord Fara.

And then Jord Fara spoke. 'Everyone will please sit down. We've gone quite far enough, I think. Come, there's no use looking so furious, Mayor Hardin; none of us have been committing treason.'

'You'll have to convince me of that!'

Fara smiled gently. 'You know you don't mean that. Let me speak!'

His little shrewd eyes were half closed, and the perspiration gleamed on the smooth expanse of his chin. 'There seems no point in concealing that the Board has come to the decision that the real solution to the Anacreonian problem lies in what is to be revealed to us when the First Vault opens six days from now.'

'Is that your contribution to the matter?'

'Yes.'

'We are to do nothing, is that right, except to wait in quiet serenity and utter faith for the *deus ex machina* to pop out of the First Vault?'

'Stripped of your emotional phraseology, that's the idea.'

'Such unsubtle escapism! Really, Dr Fara, such folly smacks of genius. A lesser mind would be incapable of it.'

Fara smiled indulgently. 'Your taste in epigrams is amusing, Hardin, but out of place. As a matter of fact, I think you re-

member my line of argument concerning the First Vault about three weeks ago.'

'Yes, I remember it. I don't deny that it was anything but a stupid idea from the standpoint of deductive logic alone. You said—stop me when I make a mistake—that Hari Seldon was the greatest psychologist in the System; that, hence, he could foresee the tight and uncomfortable spot we're in now; that, hence, he established the First Vault as a method of telling us the way out.'

'You've got the essence of the idea.'

'Would it surprise you to hear that I've given considerable thought to the matter these last weeks?'

'Very flattering. With what result?'

'With the result that pure deduction is found wanting. Again what is needed is a little sprinkling of common sense.'

'For instance?'

'For instance, if he foresaw the Anacreonian mess, why not have placed us on some other planet nearer the Galactic centers? Why put us out here at all if he could see in advance the break in communication lines, our isolation from the Galaxy, the threat of our neighbors—and our helplessness because of the lack of metals on Terminus? That above all! Or if he foresaw all this, why not have warned the original settlers in advance that they might have had time to prepare, rather than wait, as he is doing, until one foot is over the cliff, before doing so?'

'And don't forget this. Even though he could foresee the problem *then*, we can see it equally well *now*. Therefore, if he could foresee the solution then, we should be able to see the solution now. After all, Seldon was not a magician. There are no trick methods of escaping from a dilemma that he can see and we can't.'

'But, Hardin,' reminded Fara, 'we can't!'

'But you haven't *tried*. You haven't tried once. First, you refused to admit that there was a menace at all! Then you reposed an absolutely blind faith in the Emperor! Now you've shifted it to Hari Seldon. Throughout you have invariably relied on authority or on the past—never on yourselves.'

His fists balled spasmodically. 'It amounts to a diseased attitude—a conditioned reflex that shunts aside the independence of your minds whenever it is a question of opposing authority. There seems no doubt ever in your minds that the Emperor is

more powerful than you are, or Hari Seldon wiser. And that's wrong, don't you see?

For some reason, no one cared to answer him.

Hardin continued: 'It isn't just you. It's the whole Galaxy. Pirenne heard Lord Dorwin's idea of scientific research. Lord Dorwin thought the way to be a good archaeologist was to read all the books on the subject—written by men who were dead for centuries. He thought that the way to solve archaeological puzzles was to weigh opposing authorities. And Pirenne listened and made no objections. Don't you see that there's something wrong with that?'

Again the note of near-pleading in his voice. Again no answer.

He went on: 'And you men and half of Terminus as well are just as bad. We sit here, considering the Encyclopedia the all-in-all. We consider the greatest end of science to be the classification of past data. It *is* important, but is there no further work to be done? We're receding and forgetting, don't you see? Here in the Periphery they've lost atomic power. In Gamma Andromeda, a power plant has blown up because of poor repairs, and the Chancellor of the Empire complains that atomic technicians are scarce. And the solution? To train new ones? Never! Instead, they're to restrict atomic power.'

And for the third time: 'Don't you *see*? It's Galaxy-wide. It's a worship of the past. It's a deterioration—a *stagnation*!'

He stared from one to the other and they gazed fixedly at him.

Fara was the first to recover. 'Well, mystical philosophy isn't going to help us here. Let us be concrete. Do you deny that Hari Seldon could easily have worked out historical trends of the future by simple psychological technique?'

'No, of course not,' cried Hardin. 'But we can't rely on him for a solution. At best, he might indicate the problem, but if ever there is to be a solution, we must work it out ourselves. He can't do it for us.'

Fulham spoke suddenly. 'What do you mean—"indicate the problem"? We *know* the problem.'

Hardin whirled on him. 'You think you do? You think Anacreon is all Hari Seldon is likely to be worried about. I disagree! I tell you, gentlemen, that as yet none of you has the faintest conception of what is really going on.'

'And you do?' questioned Pirenne, hostilely.

'I think so!' Hardin jumped up and pushed his chair away. His eyes were cold and hard. 'If there's one thing that's definite, it is that there's something smelly about the whole situation; something that is bigger than anything we've talked about yet. Just ask yourself this question: Why was it that among the original population of the Foundation not one first-class psychologist was included, except Bor Alurin? And *he* carefully refrained from training his pupils in more than the fundamentals.'

A short silence and Fara said: 'All right. Why?'

'Perhaps because a psychologist might have caught on to what this was all about—and too soon to suit Hari Seldon. As it is, we've been stumbling about, getting misty glimpses of the truth and no more. And that is what Hari Seldon wanted.'

He laughed harshly. 'Good day, gentlemen!'

He stalked out of the room.

Mayor Hardin chewed at the end of his cigar. It had gone out but he was past noticing that. He hadn't slept the night before and he had a good idea that he wouldn't sleep this coming night. His eyes showed it.

He said wearily, 'And that covers it?'

'I think so.' Yohan Lee put a hand to his chin. 'How does it sound?'

'Not too bad. It's got to be done, you understand, with impudence. That is, there is to be no hesitation; no time to allow them to grasp the situation. Once we are in position to give orders, why, give them as though you were born to do so, and they'll obey out of habit. That's the essence of a coup.'

'If the Board remains irresolute for even—'

'The Board? Count them out. After tomorrow, their importance as a factor in Terminus affairs won't matter a rusty half-credit.'

Lee nodded slowly. 'Yet it is strange that they've done nothing to stop us so far. You say they weren't entirely in the dark.'

'Fara indicated as much. And Pirenne's been suspicious of me since I was elected. But, you see, they never had the capacity of really understanding what was up. Their whole training has been authoritarian. They are sure that the Emperor, just because he is the Emperor, is all-powerful. And they are sure that the

Board of Trustees, simply because it is the Board of Trustees acting in the name of the Emperor, cannot be in a position where it does not give the orders. That incapacity to recognize the possibility of revolt is our best ally.'

He heaved out of his chair and went to the water cooler. 'They're not bad fellows, Lee, when they stick to their Encyclopedia—and we'll see that that's where they stick in the future. They're hopelessly incompetent when it comes to ruling Terminus. Go away, now, and start things rolling. I want to be alone.'

He sat down on the corner of his desk and stared at the cup of water.

Space! If only he were as confident as he pretended! The Anacreonians were landing in two days and what had he to go on but a set of notions and half-guesses as to what Hari Seldon had been driving at these past fifty years? He wasn't even a real, honest-to-goodness psychologist—just a fumbler with a little training trying to outguess the greatest mind of the age.

If Fara were right; if Anacreon were all the problem Hari Seldon had foreseen; if the Encyclopedia were all he was interested in preserving—then what price *coup d'état*?

He shrugged and drank his water.

The First Vault was furnished with considerably more than six chairs, as though a larger company had been expected. Hardin noted that thoughtfully and seated himself wearily in a corner just as far from the other five as possible.

The Board members did not seem to object to that arrangement. They spoke among themselves in whispers, which fell off into sibilant monosyllables, and then into nothing at all. Of them all, only Jord Fara seemed even reasonably calm. He had produced a watch and was staring at it somberly.

Hardin glanced at his own watch and then at the glass cubicle—absolutely empty—that dominated half the room. It was the only unusual feature of the room, for aside from that there was no indication that somewhere a speck of radium was wasting away toward that precise moment when a tumbler would fall, a connection be made and—

The lights went dim!

They didn't go out, but merely yellowed and sank with a sud-

denness that made Hardin jump. He had lifted his eyes to the ceiling lights in startled fashion, and when he brought them down the glass cubicle was no longer empty.

A figure occupied it—a figure in a wheel chair!

It said nothing for a few moments, but it closed the book upon its lap and fingered it idly. And then it smiled, and the face seemed all alive.

It said, 'I am Hari Seldon.' The voice was old and soft.

Hardin almost rose to acknowledge the introduction and stopped himself in the act.

The voice continued conversationally: 'I can't see you, you know, so I can't greet you properly. I don't even know how many of you there are, so all this must be conducted informally. If any of you are standing, please sit down; and if you care to smoke, I wouldn't mind.' There was a light chuckle. 'Why should I? I'm not really here.'

Hardin fumbled for a cigar almost automatically, but thought better of it.

Hari Seldon put away his book—as if laying it upon a desk at his side—and when his fingers let go, it disappeared.

He said: 'It is fifty years now since this Foundation was established—fifty years in which the members of the Foundation have been ignorant of what it was they were working toward. It was necessary that they be ignorant, but now the necessity is gone.

'The Encyclopedia Foundation, to begin with, is a fraud, and always has been!'

There was the sound of a scramble behind Hardin and one or two muffled exclamations, but he did not turn around.

Hari Seldon was, of course, undisturbed. He went on: 'It is a fraud in the sense that neither I nor my colleagues care at all whether a single volume of the Encyclopedia is ever published. It has served its purpose, since by it we extracted an imperial charter from the Emperor, by it we attracted the hundred thousand scientists necessary for our scheme, and by it we managed to keep them pre-occupied while events shaped themselves, until it was too late for any of them to draw back.

'In the fifty years that you have worked on this fraudulent project—there is no use in softening phrases—your retreat has

been cut off, and you have now no choice but to proceed on the infinitely more important project that was, and is, our real plan.

"To that end we have placed you on such a planet and at such a time that in fifty years you were maneuvered to the point where you no longer have freedom of action. From now on, and into the centuries, the path you must take is inevitable. You will be faced with a series of crises, as you are now faced with the first, and in each case your freedom of action will become similarly circumscribed so that you will be forced along one, and only one, path.

"It is that path which our psychology has worked out—and for a reason.

"For centuries Galactic civilization has stagnated and declined, though only a few ever realized that. But now, at least, the Periphery is breaking away and the political unity of the Empire is shattered. Somewhere in the fifty years just past is where the historians of the future will place an arbitrary line and say: "This marks the Fall of the Galactic Empire."

"And they will be right, though scarcely any will recognize that Fall for additional centuries.

"And after the Fall will come inevitable barbarism, a period which, our psychohistory tells us, should, under ordinary circumstances, last from thirty to fifty thousand years. We cannot stop the Fall. We do not wish to; for Empire culture has lost whatever virility and worth it once had. But we can shorten the period of barbarism that must follow—down to a single thousand of years.

"The ins and outs of that shortening, we cannot tell you; just as we could not tell you the truth about the Foundation fifty years ago. Were you to discover those ins and outs, our plan might fail; as it would have, had you penetrated the fraud of the Encyclopedia earlier; for then, by knowledge, your freedom of action would be expanded and the number of additional variables introduced would become greater than our psychology could handle.

"But you won't, for there are no psychologists on Terminus, and never were, but for Alurin—and he was one of us.

"But this I can tell you: Terminus and its companion Foundation at the other end of the Galaxy are the seeds of the Renaissance and the future founders of the Second Galactic Empire.

And it is the present crisis that is starting Terminus off to that climax.

'This, by the way, is a rather straight-forward crisis, much simpler than many of those that are ahead. To reduce it to its fundamentals, it is this: You are a planet suddenly cut off from the still-civilized centers of the Galaxy, and threatened by your stronger neighbors. You are a small world of scientists surrounded by vast and rapidly expanding reaches of barbarism. You are an island of atomic power in a growing ocean of more primitive energy; but are helpless despite that, because of your lack of metals.

'You see, then, that you are faced by hard necessity, and that action is forced on you. The nature of that action—that is, the solution to your dilemma—is, of course, obvious!'

The image of Hari Seldon reached into open air and the book once more appeared in his hand. He opened it and said:

'But whatever devious course your future history may take, impress it always upon your descendants that the path has been marked out, and that at its end is a new and greater Empire!'

And as his eyes bent to his book, he flicked into nothingness, and the lights brightened once more.

Hardin looked up to see Pirenne facing him, eyes tragic and lips trembling.

The chairman's voice was firm but toneless. 'You were right, it seems. If you will see us tonight at six, the Board will consult with you as to the next move.'

They shook his hand, each one, and left; and Hardin smiled to himself. They were fundamentally sound at that; for they were scientists enough to admit that they were wrong—but for them, it was too late.

He looked at his watch. By this time, it was all over. Lee's men were in control and the Board was giving orders no longer.

The Anacreonians were landing their first spaceships tomorrow, but that was all right, too. In six months, *they* would be giving orders no longer.

In fact, as Hari Seldon had said, and as Salvor Hardin had guessed since the day that Anselm haut Rodric had first revealed to him Anacreon's lack of atomic power—the solution to this first crisis was obvious.

Obvious as all hell!

Naturally, the superior race should win . . . but superior by which standards . . . and whose?

WE'RE CIVILIZED!

by Mark Clifton and Alex Apostolides

The females and children worked among the lichen growth, picking off the fattest, ripest leaves for their food and moisture, completing their arc of the circle of symbiosis.

The males worked at the surface of the canals, or in open excavations. Their wide, mutated hands chipped into the rock-hard clay, opening a channel which was to be filled with sand and then sealed off with clay on all sides and surface. That water might seep through the sand without evaporation, without loss, from the poles to the equator of Mars—seep unimpeded, so that moisture might reach the lichen plants of everyone, so that none might thirst or hunger.

The seepage must flow. Not even buried in the dim racial memory had there ever been one who took more than his share, for this would be like the fingers of one hand stealing blood from the fingers of the other.

Among the Mars race there were many words for contentment, kinship of each to all. There were words to express the ecstasy of watching the eternal stars, by night and by day, through the thin blackish atmosphere. There were words to express the joy of opening slitted nostrils to breathe deeply in those protected places where the blowing sands did not swirl, of opening folds of rubbery skin to catch the weak rays of the distant Sun.

But there were no words for 'mine' as separate from 'yours.' And there was no urge to cry out, 'Why am I here? What is the purpose of it all?'

Each had his purpose, serene, unquestioning. Each repaired or extended the seepage canals so that others, unborn, might know the same joys, and ecstasies as they. The work was in itself a part of the total joy, and they resisted it no more than healthy lungs resist clear, cool air.

So far back that even the concept of beginnings had been for-

gotten, the interwoven fabric of their symbolic interdependence seeped through their lives as naturally as the precious water seeped through the canal sands. As far back as that, they had achieved civilization.

Their kind of civilization.

Captain Griswold maintained an impassive face. (Let that, too, be a part of the legend.) Without expression, he looked through the screen at the red land flashing below the ship. But unconsciously he squared his shoulders, breathed deeply, enjoying the virile pull of his uniform over his expanding chest. Resolutely he pushed aside the vision of countless generations of school children, yet to come, repeating the lesson dutifully to their teachers.

'Captain Thomas H. Griswold took possession of Mars, June 14, 2018.'

No, he must not allow any mood of vanity to spoil his own memories of this moment. It was beside the point that his name would rank with the great names of all times. Still, the history of the moment could not be denied.

Lieutenant Atkinson's voice broke through his preoccupation, and saved him the immodest thought of wondering if perhaps his cap visor might not be worn a little more rakishly to one side. He must father a custom, something distinctive of those who had been to Mars—

'Another canal, sir.'

Below them, a straight line of gray-green stretched to the horizon, contrasting sharply with the red ferrous oxide of the landscape. An entire planet of ferrous oxide—iron—steel for the already starving technology of the Western Alliance. The captain felt a momentary irritation that even this narrow swath displaced the precious iron ore.

Obviously these canals served no purpose. His ship had circled the planet at its equator, and again from pole to pole. Canals everywhere, but nothing else. Enough time and fuel had been wasted. They must land. Obviously there was no intelligent life. But the history of the moment must not be marred by any haste. There must be no question within the books yet to be written. There must be no accredited voice of criticism raised.

'My compliments to Mr Berkeley,' he said harshly to Lt

Atkinson, 'and would he kindly step to the control room?' He paused and added dryly, 'At his convenience.'

Mister Berkeley, indeed. What was it they called the civilian—an ethnologist? A fellow who was supposed to be an authority on races, civilizations, mores and customs of groups. Well, the man was excess baggage. There would be no races to contact here. A good thing, too. These civilian experts with their theories—show them a tooth and they'll dream up a monster. Show them a fingernail paring and they'll deduce a civilization from it. Non-sense!

'You wanted to see me, Captain?' The voice was young, quiet, controlled.

Without haste, Captain Griswold turned and faced Berkeley. Not only a theorist, but a young theorist. These super-bright young men with their sharp blue eyes. A lot of learning and no knowledge. A lot of wisdom and no common sense. He carefully controlled his voice, concealing his lack of respect for the civilian.

'Well, Mr Berkeley, we have quartered the globe. We have seen no evidence of civilization.'

'You discount the canals, Captain?' Berkeley asked, as if more from curiosity than refutation.

'I must discount them,' the captain answered decisively. 'Over all the planet we have seen no buildings, not even ruins, no evidence at all that intelligence exists here.'

'I consider straight lines, running half the length of a world, to be evidence of something, sir.' It was a flat statement, given without emphasis.

Arguments! Arguments! Little men who have to inflate themselves into a stature of importance—destroy the sacred history of the moment. But quietly now. There must be no memory of petty conflict.

'Where are their buildings, Mr Berkeley?' he asked with patient tolerance. 'Where are their factories? The smoke from their factories? The highways? The transportation facilities? Where are the airplanes? Even this thin air would support a fast jet. I do not require they have spaceships, Mr Berkeley, to concede them intelligence. I do not require they be the equal of Man. I also have some scientific training. And my training tells me I

cannot recognize the existence of something where there is no evidence at all.'

'The canals,' Berkeley answered. His voice also was controlled, for he, too, knew the history of this moment. But his concern was not for his own name in the history books. He knew only too well what its writers did to individuals for the sake of expediency. His concern was that this moment never be one of deep shame for Man. 'Perhaps they have no buildings, no factory smoke, because they don't need them. Perhaps they don't have highways because they don't want to go anywhere. Perhaps their concept of living is completely unlike ours.'

Griswold shrugged his shoulders. 'We speak an entirely different language, Mr Berkeley.'

'I'm afraid you're right, Captain,' Berkeley sighed. 'And it might be a tragic thing that we do. Remember, European man spoke a different language from that of the American Indian, the Mayan, Polynesian, African, Indonesian—' He broke off as if the list were endless. 'I ask only that we don't hasten into the same errors all over again.'

'We can't hover here above the surface forever,' Griswold said irritably. 'We have quartered the globe. The other experts are anxious to land, so they can get to their work. We have made a search for your civilization and we have not found it.'

'I withdraw all objections to landing, Captain. You are entirely correct. We must land.'

The intercom on the wall squawked into life.

'Observation to Control. Observation to Control. Network of canals forming a junction ahead.'

'Prepare for landing, Lieutenant Atkinson,' Griswold commanded sharply. 'At the junction.' He turned and watched the screen. 'There, Mr Berkeley, dead ahead. A dozen—at least *a* dozen of your canals joining at one spot. Surely, if there were a civilization at all, you would find it at such a spot.' Slowly and carefully, he constructed the pages of history. 'I do not wish the implication ever to arise that this ship's commander, or any of its personnel, failed to cooperate in every way with the scientific authorities aboard.'

'I know that, Captain,' Berkeley answered. 'And I agree. The junction, then.'



The sigh of servo-mechanism, the flare of intolerably hot blue flame, and the ship stood motionless above the junction of canals. Ponderously, slowly, she settled; held aloft by the pillars of flame beneath her, directly above the junction, fusing the sand in the canals to glass, exploding their walls with steam. Within their warm and protected burrows beside the canals, slitted nostrils closed, iris of eyes contracted, fluted layers of skin opened and pulled tight, and opened again convulsively in the reflexes of death.

There was a slight jar only as the ship settled to the ground, bathed in the mushrooming flame.

‘A good landing, Lieutenant,’ Captain Griswold complimented. ‘A good landing, indeed.’

His head came up and he watched the screen to see the landscape reappear through the dust and steam.

‘Prepare to disembark in approximately six hours, Lieutenant. The heat should have subsided sufficiently by then. The ship’s officers, the civ—er—scientific party, a complement of men. I will lead the way. You, Lieutenant, will carry the flag and the necessary appurtenances to the ceremony. We will hold it without delay.’

Berkeley was watching the screen also. He wondered what the effect of the landing heat would be on the canals. He wondered why it had been considered necessary to land squarely on the junction; why Man always, as if instinctively, does the most destructive thing he can.

He shrugged it away. Wherever they landed might have been the wrong place.

Farther along the canals, where the heat had not reached, the Mars race began to emerge from their protecting burrows. They had seen the meteor hurtling downward, and it was part of their conditioning to seek their burrows when any threatening phenomenon occurred.

Flaming meteors had fallen before, but never in the interlocked racial mind was there memory of one which had fallen directly on a canal junction. Within the fabric of their instinct, they sensed the fused sand, the broken clay walls, the water boiling through the broken walls, wasted. They sensed the waters on

the other side of the barrier seeping onward, leaving sand unfilled. Within the nerves of their own bodies they felt the anticipated pangs of tendril roots searching down into the sand for water, and not finding it.

The urgency came upon them, all within the region, to remove this meteor; restore the canals as soon as the heat would permit. They began to gather, circling the meteor, circling the scorched ground around it. The urgency of getting at it before there was too much water lost drove them in upon the hot ground.

The unaccustomed heat held them back. They milled uncertainly, in increasing numbers, around the meteor.

Since Captain Griswold had not asked him to leave the control room during landing operations, Berkeley still stood and watched the screen. At the first appearance of the Mars race emerging from the soil, he exclaimed in great excitement:

‘There they are! There they are, Captain!’

Griswold came over and stood beside him, watching the screen. His eyes widened.

‘Horrible,’ he muttered in revulsion. The gorge arose in his throat and stopped his speech for a moment. But history took possession of him again. ‘I suppose we will get accustomed to their appearance in time,’ he conceded.

‘They’re the builders, Captain. Wonderful!’ Berkeley exulted. ‘Those shovel-shaped forelimbs—they’re the builders!’

‘Perhaps,’ Griswold agreed. ‘But in the way a mole or gopher—still, if they were intelligent enough to be trained for mining operations—but then you certainly cannot call these things intelligent, Mr Berkeley.’

‘How do we know, Captain?’

But the Captain was looking about vainly for buildings, for factory smoke, for highways.

‘Lieutenant Atkinson!’ he called.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Send an immediate order throughout the ship. The Mars things are not to be molested.’ He glanced at Berkeley as he gave the order, and then glanced away. ‘Double the complement of men on the landing party and see that they are fully armed.’ Then back to Berkeley, ‘A good leader guards against every con-

tingency. But there will be no indiscriminate slaughter. You may be assured of that. I am as anxious as you that Man—'

'Thank you, Captain,' Berkeley answered. 'And the planting of the flag? The taking possession?'

'Well, now, Mr Berkeley, what shall we do, now that we have seen some—things? Go away? Leave an entire planet of iron ore to be claimed later by Eastern Alliance? The enemy is not far behind us in their technology, Mr Berkeley.'

He warmed to his theme, his head came up, his shoulders back.

'Suppose these things are intelligent. Suppose they do have feelings of one kind or another. What would happen to them if the Eastern Alliance laid claim to this planet? Under us, at least, they will have protection. We will set aside reservations where they may live in peace. Obviously they live in burrows in the ground; I see no buildings. Their total food supply must be these miserable plants. What a miserable existence they have now!

'We will change that. We will provide them with adequate food, the food to fill their empty stomachs—if they have stomachs. We will clothe their repulsive nakedness. If they have enough sense to learn, we will give them the pride of self-employment in our mines and factories. We would be less than human, Mr Berkeley, if we did not acknowledge our duty.'

The light of noble intention shone in his face. He was swept away with his own eloquence.

'If,' he finished, 'we take care of the duty, the destiny will take care of itself!'

That was very good. He hoped they would have the grace to quote him on that. It was a fine summing up of his entire character.

Berkeley smiled a rueful smile. There was no stopping it. It was not a matter of not planting the flag, not taking possession. The captain was right. If not the Western Alliance, then certainly the Eastern Alliance. His quarrel was not with the captain nor with the duty, but with the destiny. The issue was not to be decided now. It had already been decided—decided when the first apeman had crept into the tree nest of another and stolen his mate.

Man takes. Whether it be by barbaric rapine, or reluctant ac-

ceptance of duty through carefully contrived diplomacy, Man takes.

Berkeley turned and made his way out of the control room.

Outside, the soil shifted in its contortions of cooling. The wind whispered dryly over the red landscape, sending up little swirls of dust, eternally shifting it from one place to another. The soil was less hot, and as it cooled, the Mars race pressed inward. Theirs was the urgency to get at this meteor as quickly as possible, remove it, start the water flowing once more.

'Observation reports ground cool enough for landing!' The magic words seemed to sing into the control cabin.

'Summon all landing party,' Captain Griswold commanded immediately.

The signal bells rang throughout the ship. The bell in the supercargo cabin rang also. With the other scientists, Berkeley dressed in his protecting suit, fitted the clear glassite oxygen helmet over his head, fastened it. Together with the rest, he stood at the designated airlock to await the captain's coming.

And the captain did not keep them waiting. At precisely the right moment, with only a flicker of a side glance at the photographic equipment, the captain strode ahead of his officers to the airlock. The sealing doors of the corridor behind them closed, shutting off the entire party, making the corridor itself into a great airlock.

There was a long sigh, and the great beams of the locks moved ponderously against their weight. There was the rush of air from the corridor as the heavier pressure rushed out through the opening locks, to equalize with the thin air of Mars. With the air rushed outward fungus spores, virus, microbes; most of them to perish under the alien conditions, but some to survive—and thrive.

The red light above the lock was blinking on-off-on-off.

The officers, the scientists, the armed men, watched the light intently. It blinked off for the last time. The locks were open. The great ramp settled to the ground.

In ordered, military file, the captain at their head, the landing party passed down the corridor, through the locks, out upon the ramp beneath the blue-black sky; and down to the red soil. Cap-

tain Griswold was the first man to set foot on Mars, June 14, 2018. The photographers were second.

Now the Mars race was moving closer to the ship, but the ground was still too hot for their unprotected feet. The pressing need for removing the meteor possessed them. The movement of the men disembarking from the ship was to them no more than another unintelligible aspect of this incredible meteor.

The sound of a bugle pierced the thin air, picked up by the loudspeaker from the ship, reverberating through their helmets. The landing party formed a semi-circle at the foot of the ramp.

Captain Griswold, his face as rigidly set as the marble statuary of him to follow, reached out and took the flag from Lieutenant Atkinson. He planted it firmly, without false motion, in the framework one of the men had set upon the baked ground to receive it.

He pointed to the north, the south, the east, the west. He brought his hands together, palms downward, arms fully outstretched in front of him. He spread his arms wide open and down, then back together and up, completing a circle which encompassed all the planet. He held out his right hand and received the scroll from Lieutenant Atkinson.

With a decisive gesture, not quite theatrical, he unfurled the scroll. He read in a voice firm enough to impress all posterity:

‘By virtue of authority invested in me from the Supreme Council of the Western Alliance, the only true representatives of Earth and Man, I take possession of all this planet in the name of our President, the Supreme Council, the Western Alliance, Earth, and in the name of God.’

The ground was cool enough now that their feet might bear it. The pain was great, but it was lost in the greater pain of feeling the killing obstruction the great meteor had brought to their canals. The Mars race began to press inward, inexorably.

It was in the anticlimactic moment, following the possession ceremony, when men milled around in uncertainty, that Lt Atkinson saw the Mars race had come closer and were still moving.

‘The monsters!’ he exclaimed in horror. ‘They’re attacking!’

Berkeley looked, and from the little gestures of movement out of his long training he deduced their true motive.

'Not against us!' he cried. 'The ship.'

Perhaps his words were more unfortunate than his silence might have been; for the ship was of greater concern to Captain Griswold than his own person.

'Halt!' Griswold shouted toward the approaching Mars race. 'Halt or I'll fire!'

The Mars race paid no heed. Slowly they came forward, each step on the hot ground a torture, but a pain which could be borne. The greater torture, the one they could not bear, was the ache to press against this meteor, push it away, that they might dig the juncture clean again. As a man whose breath is stopped fights frantically for air, concerned with nothing else, so they felt the desperation of drying sands.

They came on.

'For the last time,' Griswold shouted, 'halt!' He made a motion with his hands, as if to push them back, as if to convey his meaning by signs. Involuntarily, then, his eyes sought those of Berkeley. A look of pleading, helplessness. Berkeley met the glance and read the anxiety there, the tragic unwillingness of the man to arouse posterity's rage or contempt.

It was a brief glance only from both men and it was over. Captain Griswold's head came up; his shoulders straightened in the face of the oncoming monsters. They were close now, and coming closer. As always, the experts were free with their advice when it was not needed. When the chips were down, they could do no more than smirk and shrug a helpless shoulder.

He gave the command, and now there was no uncertainty.

'Fire!'

The celebration was being held in the Great Stadium, the largest, most costly structure that Man had ever built. It was a fitting structure for the more important football games; and used on occasion, if they could be fitted in without upsetting the schedule, for State affairs. Now the stadium was filled to capacity, its floor churned by the careless feet of the thousands upon thousands who had managed to obtain an entrance.

From the quarter-mile-high tiers of seats, from the floor of the stadium, the shouts welled up, washing over the platform at the North end.

'Griswold! Griswold!'

It was not yet time for history to assess the justice of the massacre.

The President raised his hand. The battery of video cameras picked up each move.

'Our hopes, our fears, our hearts, our prayers rode through every space-dark, star-flecked mile with these glorious pioneers.' He turned then to the captain. 'For the people of Earth, *Admiral* Griswold, this medal. A new medal for a Guider of Destiny, Maker of Empire, Son of Man!'

The voice faltered, stopped.

The crowd on the floor of the stadium was pressing outward from the center, screaming in pain and terror. At the moment when the people should be quiet, rapt in reverence, they were emptying the floor of the stadium. But not willingly. They were being pressed back and out, as a great weight pushes its way through water. Those who could move outward no farther were crushed where they stood.

And then the ship appeared.

Hazy of outline, shimmering with impossible angles, seen by its glinting fire of light rather than by its solid form, as if its reality were in some other dimension and this only a projection, the ship appeared.

The President's hand reached out and gripped Griswold's shoulder as he leaned back and back, trying to determine its vast height. A silence then clutched the crowd—a terrified silence.

A full minute passed. Even on the platform, where all the pioneers of Mars were assembled with Earth's dignitaries, even there the people cowered back away from this unseeable, unknowable horror.

But one man leaned forward instead, frantically studying the shimmering outline of the ship. One man—Berkeley.

With the training of the ethnologist, a man who really can deduce an entire civilization from mystifying data, he recognized the tremendous import.

At the end of that minute, without warning, a group of figures hovered in the air near the floor of the stadium.

Quickly, Berkeley's eyes assessed their form, their color, the increasing solidity of the humanoids. There are some movements,

some gestures, common to all things of intelligence—the pause, the resolution, the lift of pride.

‘No!’ he screamed and started forward. ‘Oh, no! We’re civilized. We’re intelligent!’ He was pulled back, as in his terror he tried to leap from the platform to get at the humanoids.

Held there, unable to move, he read the meaning of the actions of the group hovering near the ship. One flashed a shining tentacle around, as if to point to the stadium, the pitifully small spaceship on display, the crowds of people.

The leader manifestly ignored him. He flowed forward a pace, his ovoid head held high in pride and arrogance. He pointed a tentacle toward the south end of the stadium, and a pillar of leaping flame arose; fed with no fuel, never to cease its fire, the symbol of possession.

He pointed his tentacles to the north, the south, the east, the west. He motioned with his tentacles, as if to encircle all of Earth.

He unfurled a scroll and began to read.



SECTION TWO

MATURITY OR BUST

i *Horses in the Starship Hold*

Cordwainer Smith: THE CRIME AND GLORY OF
COMMANDER SUZDAL 132

Alfred Coppel: THE REBEL OF VALKYR 149

Idris Seabright: BRIGHTNESS FALLS FROM
THE AIR 194

Clifford Simak: IMMIGRANT 201

In cycle after cycle, civilization would emerge from barbarism, mechanization would bring the people into uneasy contact, national wars and class wars would breed the longing for a better world order, but breed it in vain. Disaster after disaster would undermine the fabric of civilization. Gradually barbarism would return. Aeon after aeon, the process would repeat itself . . .

Olaf Stapledon: *Star Maker*

Olaf Stapledon's synoptic view of the universe is far removed from the fun and games of magazine science fiction. Nevertheless, his cyclic approach was generally adopted. Its intellectual respectability was vouched for by Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West*.

Magazine sf, which began as a continuity when Hugo Gernsback founded his *Amazing Stories* in 1926, was in general a sort of cheer-leader for technology. However often the robots ran amok, they were seen as good things in themselves, needing only to be controlled to increase the sum of human happiness. It appears that the later generation of writers who produce the sort of science-fantasy incorporated in this anthology were in general of a different view. Their opinion might be roughly summarised in the words of Arnold Toynbee: 'With the increase in our power, our sense of responsibility and our sense of distress increases.' Toynbee has said that the growth of science and technology makes more acute the disparity between the real and the ideal.

If this is so, then the galactic empire does make a contribution to one of the central problems of our time, sharing as it does both the real and the ideal; that it manages this via swordplay, suppurating aliens, and gadgets is an indication that philosophers are not being addressed.

The warning has already been given: take your galactic empire with a pinch of salt. It is a gaudy balloon launched for the hell of it. See how high it goes before it pops.

Clifford Simak, however, keeps a straight face as he tells his

story of Selden Bishop, the bright kid from Earth who passes all his exams, qualifying for a place on Kimon, that planet at the galactic rainbow's end. There was a time when Simak was everyone's favourite author. A Simak story was unmistakeable. When everyone else appeared to be describing big tough heroes going out and giving alien races what-for, Simak would tell you about this little old Earthman sitting on his verandah, whittling a stick, when up comes this green guy. The green guy has a funny big machine come down out of the skies. The two of them get talking, and the little old Earthman takes a can of oil and fixes the green man's funny big machine, and in exchange this green guy makes the little old Earthman's crops grow a darn sight better'n his neighbour's ever do. Or words to that effect. Simak was the poet of rural space. People were always clearing off to Jupiter or wherever, and leaving Earth as green and pleasant as it used to be. Remember *City*?

Immigrant is a little different. But it does have that leisurely Simak quality. Surely somewhere on Kimon they have sense enough to hand out degrees in Stick-whittling.

It is a pity to say anything about Idris Seabright's story. Let her tell you about the bird people, who were really too delicate for empire.

Empires were generally in trouble. The empire Alfred Coppel portrays is only just holding together. Fans of galactic empires like ray-guns and swordplay. The trick is to marry the two convincingly. Coppel, with a mad, bold stroke, has FTL ships loaded to the hull with warriors and their horses, lit by smokey oil lamps. The picturesque can hardly be carried further.

When I wrote to Mr Coppel asking permission to publish his story here, I mentioned his recent successful novel, *Thirty-Four East*, and wondered whether he still recalled his early fantasy with affection. It appears that he does. Moreover, he expanded *Rebel of Valkyr* into a trilogy of novels, writing under the pen-name of Robert Cham Gilman. If you enjoy this long story, you might try hunting down the trilogy, the volumes of which are entitled *The Rebel of Rhada*, *The Navigators of Rhada*, and *The Starkahn of Rhada*.

Like Robert Gilman, Cordwainer Smith is an alias. So, for that matter, is Idris Seabright. Smith wrote several stories centering round his empire before he died. He called its government

The Instrumentality—an appropriate name, for there is something scalpel-like about Smith's extraordinary imagination. Inventing a whole race of cats? Flinging them back in time? Preposterous. Amazing. Admirable.

Most writers write about life as it is or as they think it ought to be. Cordwainer Smith wrote about a heaven-and-hell which seemed more real to him than life.

Off his gallant Commander goes, with his imaginary companions . . .

Do not read this story; turn the page quickly. The story may upset you. Anyhow, you probably know it already. It is a very disturbing story. Everyone knows it. The glory and the crime of Commander Suzdal have been told in a thousand different ways. Don't let yourself realize that the story really is the truth.

It isn't. Not at all. There's not a bit of truth to it. There is no such planet as Arachosia, no such people as klopts, no such world as Catland. These are all just imaginary, they didn't happen, forget about it, go away and read something else.

THE CRIME AND GLORY OF COMMANDER SUZDAL

by Cordwainer Smith

The Beginning

Commander Suzdal was sent forth in a shell-ship to explore the outermost reaches of our galaxy. His ship was called a cruiser, but he was the only man in it. He was equipped with hypnotics and cubes to provide him the semblance of company, a large crowd of friendly people who could be convoked out of his own hallucinations.

The Instrumentality even offered him some choice in his imaginary companions, each of whom was embodied in a small ceramic cube containing the brain of a small animal but imprinted with the personality of an actual human being.

Suzdal, a short, stocky man with a jolly smile, was blunt about his needs:

'Give me two good security officers. I can manage the ship, but if I'm going into the unknown, I'll need help in meeting the strange problems which might show up.'

The loading official smiled at him, 'I never heard of a cruiser commander who *asked* for security officers. Most people regard them as an utter nuisance.'

'That's all right,' said Suzdal. 'I don't.'

'Don't you want some chess players?'

'I can play chess,' said Suzdal, 'all I want to, using the spare

computers. All I have to do is set the power down and they start losing. On full power, they always beat me.'

The official then gave Suzdal an odd look. He did not exactly leer, but his expression became both intimate and unpleasant. 'What about other companions?' he asked, with a funny little edge to his voice.

'I've got books,' said Suzdal, 'a couple of thousand. I'm going to be gone only a couple of years Earth time.'

'Local-subjective, it might be several thousand years,' said the official, 'though the time will wind back up again as you re approach Earth. And I wasn't talking about books,' he repeated, with the same funny, prying lilt to his voice.

Suzdal shook his head with momentary worry, ran his hand through his sandy hair. His blue eyes were forthright and he looked straightforwardly into the official's eyes. 'What do you mean, then, if not books? Navigators? I've got them, not to mention the turtle-men. They're good company, if you just talk to them slowly enough and then give them plenty of time to answer. Don't forget, I've been out before. . . .'

The official spat out his offer: 'Dancing girls. WOMEN. Concubines. Don't you want any of those? We could even cube your own wife for you and print her mind on a cube for you. That way she could be with you every week that you were awake.'

Suzdal looked as though he would spit on the floor in sheer disgust. 'Alice? You mean, you want me to travel around with a ghost of her? How would the real Alice feel when I came back? Don't tell me that you're going to put my wife on a mousebrain. You're just offering me delirium. I've got to keep my wits out there with space and time rolling in big waves around me. I'm going to be crazy enough, just as it is. Don't forget, I've been out there before. Getting back to a real Alice is going to be one of my biggest reality factors. It will help me to get home.' At this point, Suzdal's own voice took on the note of intimate inquiry, as he added, 'Don't tell me that a lot of cruiser commanders ask to go flying around with imaginary wives. That would be pretty nasty, in my opinion. Do many of them do it?'

'We're here to get you loaded on board ship, not to discuss what other officers do or do not do. Sometimes we think it good to have a female companion on the ship with the commander, even if she is imaginary. If you ever found anything among the

stars which took on female form, you'd be mighty vulnerable to it.'

'Females, among the stars? Bosh!' said Suzdal.

'Strange things have happened,' said the official.

'Not that,' said Suzdal. 'Pain, craziness, distortion, panic without end, a craze for food—yes, those I can look for and face. They will be there. But females, no. There aren't any. I love my wife. I won't make females up out of my own mind. After all, I'll have the turtle-people aboard, and they will be bringing up their young. I'll have plenty of family life to watch and to take part in. I can even give Christmas parties for the young ones.'

'What kind of parties are those?' asked the official.

'Just a funny little ancient ritual that I heard about from an Outer Pilot. You give all the young things presents, once every local-subjective year.'

'It sounds nice,' said the official, his voice growing tired and final. 'You still refuse to have a cube-woman on board. You wouldn't have to activate her unless you really needed her.'

'You haven't flown, yourself, have you?' asked Suzdal.

It was the official's turn to flush. 'No,' he said, flatly.

'Anything that's in that ship, I'm going to think about. I'm a cheerful sort of man, and very friendly. Let me just get along with my turtle-people. They're not lively, but they are considerate and restful. Two thousand or more years, local-subjective, is a lot of time. Don't give me additional decisions to make. It's work enough, running the ship. Just leave me alone with my turtle-people. I've gotten along with them before.'

'You, Suzdal, are the commander,' said the loading official. 'We'll do as you say.'

'Fine,' smiled Suzdal. 'You may get a lot of queer types on this run, but I'm not one of them.'

The two men smiled agreement at one another and the loading of the ship was completed.

The ship itself was managed by turtle-men, who aged very slowly, so that while Suzdal coursed the outer rim of the galaxy and let the thousands of years—local count—go past while he slept in his frozen bed, the turtle-men rose generation by generation, trained their young to work the ship, taught the stories of the earth that they would never see again, and read the computers correctly, to awaken Suzdal only when there was a need

for human intervention and for human intelligence. Suzdal awakened from time to time, did his work and then went back. He felt that he had been gone from earth only a few months.

Months indeed! He had been gone more than a subjective ten-thousand years, when he met the siren capsule.

It looked like an ordinary distress capsule. The kind of thing that was often shot through space to indicate some complication of the destiny of man among the stars. This capsule had apparently been flung across an immense distance, and from the capsule Suzdal got the story of Arachosia.

The story was false. The brains of a whole planet—the wild genius of a malevolent, unhappy race—had been dedicated to the problem of ensnaring and attracting a normal pilot from Old Earth. The story which the capsule sang conveyed the rich personality of a wonderful woman with a contralto voice. The story was true, in part. The appeals were real, in part. Suzdal listened to the story and it sank, like a wonderfully orchestrated piece of grand opera, right into the fibers of his brain. It would have been different if he had known the real story.

Everybody now knows the real story of Arachosia, the bitter terrible story of the planet which was a paradise, which turned into a hell. The story of how people got to be something different from people. The story of what happened way out there in the most dreadful place among the stars.

He would have fled if he knew the real story. He couldn't understand what we now know:

Mankind could not meet the terrible people of Arachosia without the people of Arachosia following them home and bringing to mankind a grief greater than grief, a craziness worse than mere insanity, a plague surpassing all imaginable plagues. The Arachosians had become *unpeople*, and yet, in their innermost imprinting of their personalities, they remained people. They sang songs which exalted their own deformity and which praised themselves for what they had so horribly become, and yet, in their own songs, in their own ballads, the organ tones of the refrain rang out,

And I mourn Man!

They knew what they were and they hated themselves. Hating themselves they pursued mankind.

Perhaps they are still pursuing mankind.

• • •

The Instrumentality has by now taken good pains that the Arachosians will never find us again, has flung networks of deception out along the edge of the galaxy to make sure that those lost ruined people cannot find us. The Instrumentality knows and guards our world and all the other worlds of mankind against the deformity which has become Arachosia. We want nothing to do with Arachosia. Let them hunt for us. They won't find us.

How could Suzdal know that?

This was the first time someone had met the Arachosians, and he met them only with a message in which an elfin voice sang the elfin song of ruin, using perfectly clear words in the old common tongue to tell a story so sad, so abominable, that mankind has not forgotten it yet. In its essence the story was very simple. This is what Suzdal heard, and what people have learned ever since then.

The Arachosians were settlers. Settlers could go out by sail-ship, trailing behind them the pods. That was the first way.

Or they could go out by planoform ship, ships piloted by skilful men, who went into space-two and came out again and found man.

Or for very long distances indeed, they could go out in the new combination. Individual pods packed into an enormous shell-ship, a gigantic version of Suzdal's own ship. The sleepers frozen, the machines waking, the ship fired to and beyond the speed of light, flung below space, coming out at random and homing on a suitable target. It was a gamble, but brave men took it. If no target was found, their machines might course space forever, while the bodies, protected by freezing as they were, spoiled bit by bit, and while the dim light of life went out in the individual frozen brains.

The shell-ships were the answers of mankind to an overpopulation, which neither the old planet Earth nor its daughter planets could quite respond to. The shell-ships took the bold, the reckless, the romantic, the wilful, sometimes the criminals out among the stars. Mankind lost track of these ships, over and over again. The advance explorers, the organized Instrumentality, would stumble upon human beings, cities and cultures, high or low, tribes or families, where the shell-ships had gone on, far, far beyond the outermost limits of mankind, where the instruments of search had found an earth-like planet, and the shell-

ship, like some great dying insect, had dropped to the planet, awakened its people, broken open, and destroyed itself with its delivery of newly re-born men and women, to settle a world.

Arachosia looked like a good world to the men and women who came to it. Beautiful beaches, with cliffs like endless rivieras rising above. Two bright big moons in the sky, a sun not too far away. The machines had pretested the atmosphere and sampled the water, had already scattered the forms of old earth life into the atmosphere and in the seas so that as the people awakened they heard the singing of earth birds and they knew that earth fish had already been adapted to the oceans and flung in, there to multiply. It seemed a good life, a rich life. Things went well.

Things went very, very well for the Arachosians.

This is the truth.

This was, thus far, the story told by the capsule.

But here they diverged.

The capsule did not tell the dreadful, pitiable truth about Arachosia. It invented a set of plausible lies. The voice which came telepathically out of the capsule was that of a mature, warm happy female—some woman of early middle age with a superb speaking contralto.

Suzdal almost fancied that he talked to it, so real was the personality. How could he know that he was being beguiled, trapped?

It sounded right, *really* right.

‘And then,’ said the voice, ‘the Arachosian sickness has been hitting us. Do not land. Stand off. Talk to us. Tell us about medicine. Our young die, without reason. Our farms are rich, and the wheat here is more golden than it was on earth, the plums more purple, the flowers whiter. Everything does well—except people.

‘Our young die . . .’ said the womanly voice, ending in a sob.

‘Are there any symptoms?’ thought Suzdal, and almost as though it had heard his question, the capsule went on.

‘They die of nothing. Nothing which our medicine can test, nothing which our science can show. They die. Our population is dropping. People, do not forget us! Man, whoever you are, come quickly, come now, bring help! But for your own sake, do not land. Stand off-planet and view us through screens so that you

can take word back to the Home of Man about the lost children of mankind among the strange and outermost stars!’

Strange, indeed!

The truth was far stranger, and very ugly indeed.

Suzdal was convinced of the truth of the message. He had been selected for the trip because he was good-natured, intelligent, and brave; this appeal touched all three of his qualities.

Later, much later, when he was arrested, Suzdal was asked, ‘Suzdal, you fool, why didn’t you test the message? You’ve risked the safety of all the mankind for a foolish appeal!’

‘It wasn’t foolish!’ snapped Suzdal. ‘That distress capsule had a sad, wonderful womanly voice and the story checked out true.’

‘With whom?’ said the investigator, flatly and dully.

Suzdal sounded weary and sad when he replied to the point. ‘It checked out with my books. With my knowledge.’ Reluctantly he added, ‘And with my own judgment. . . .’

‘Was your judgment good?’ said the investigator.

‘No,’ said Suzdal, and let the single word hang on the air as though it might be the last word he would ever speak.

But it was Suzdal himself who broke the silence when he added, ‘Before I set course and went to sleep, I activated my security officers in cubes and had them check the story. They got the real story of Arachosia, all right. They cross-ciphered it out of patterns in the distress capsule and they told me the whole real story very quickly, just as I was waking up.’

‘And what did you do?’

‘I did what I did. I did that for which I expect to be punished. The Arachosians were already walking around the outside of my hull by then. They had caught my ship. They had caught me. How was I to know that the wonderful, sad story was true only for the first twenty full years that the woman told about. And she wasn’t even a woman. Just a klopt. Only the first twenty years. . . .’

Things had gone well for the Arachosians for the first twenty years. Then came disaster, but it was not the tale told in the distress capsule.

They couldn’t understand it. They didn’t know why it had to happen to them. They didn’t know why it waited twenty years, three months and four days. But their time came.

We think it must have been something in the radiation of their sun. Or perhaps a combination of that particular sun's radiation and the chemistry, which even the wise machines in the shell-ship had not fully analyzed, which reached out and was spread from within. The disaster hit. It was a simple one and utterly unstoppable.

They had doctors. They had hospitals. They even had a limited capacity for research.

But they could not research fast enough. Not enough to meet this disaster. It was simple, monstrous, enormous.

Femininity became carcinogenetic.

Every woman on the planet began developing cancer at the same time, on her lips, in her breasts, in her groin, sometimes along the edge of her jaw, the edge of her lip, the tender portions of her body. The cancer had many forms, and yet it was always the same. There was something about the radiation which reached through, which reached into the human body, and which made a particular form of desoxycorticosterone turn into a subform—unknown on earth—of pregnandiol, which infallibly caused cancer. The advance was rapid.

The little baby girls began to die first. The women clung weeping to their fathers, their husbands. The mothers tried to say goodbye to their sons.

One of the doctors, herself, was a woman, a strong woman.

Remorselessly, she cut live tissue from her living body, put it under the microscope, took samples of her own urine, her blood, her spit, and she came up with the answer: *There is no answer.* And yet there was something better and worse than an answer.

If the sun of Arachosia killed everything which was female, if the female fish floated upside down on the surface of the sea, if the female birds sang a shriller, wilder song as they died above the eggs which would never hatch, if the female animals grunted and growled in the lairs where they hid away with pain, female human beings did not have to accept death so tamely. The doctor's name was Astarte Kraus.

The Magic of the Klopts

The human female could do what the animal female could not. She could turn male. With the help of equipment from the ship,

tremendous quantities of testosterone were manufactured, and every single girl and woman still surviving was turned into a man. Massive injections were administered to all of them. Their faces grew heavy, they all returned to growing a little bit, their chests flattened out, their muscles grew stronger, and in less than three months they were indeed men.

Some lower forms of life had survived because they were not polarized clearly enough to the forms of male and female, which depended on that particular organic chemistry for survival. With the fish gone, plants clotted the oceans, the birds were gone but the insects survived; dragonflies, butterflies, mutated versions of grasshoppers, beetles, and other insects swarmed over the planet. The men who had lost women worked side by side with the men who had been made out of the bodies of women.

When they knew each other, it was unutterably sad for them to meet. Husband and wife, both bearded, strong, quarrelsome, desperate and busy. The little boys somehow realizing that they would never grow up to have sweethearts, to have wives, to get married, to have daughters.

But what was a mere world to stop the driving brain and the burning intellect of Dr Astarte Kraus? She became the leader of her people, the men and the men-women. She drove them forward, she made them survive, she used cold brains on all of them.

(Perhaps, if she had been a sympathetic person, she would have let them die. But it was the nature of Dr Kraus not to be sympathetic—just brilliant, remorseless, implacable against the universe which had tried to destroy her.)

Before she died, Dr Kraus had worked out a carefully programmed genetic system. Little bits of the men's tissues could be implanted by a surgical routine in the abdomens, just inside the peritoneal wall, crowding a little bit against the intestines, an artificial womb and artificial chemistry and artificial insemination by radiation, by heat, made it possible for men to bear boy children.

What was the use of having girl children if they all died? The people of Arachosia went on. The first generation lived through the tragedy, half insane with the grief and disappointment. They sent out message capsules and they knew that their message would reach Earth in 6 million years.

As new explorers, they had gambled on going further than other ships went. They had found a good world, but they were not quite sure where they were. Were they still within the familiar galaxy, or had they jumped beyond to one of the nearby galaxies? They couldn't quite tell. It was a part of the policy of old earth not to overequip the exploring parties for fear that some of them, taking violent cultural change or becoming aggressive empires, might turn back on earth and destroy it. Earth always made sure that it had the advantages.

The third and fourth and fifth generations of Arachosians were still people. All of them were male. They had the human memory, they had human books, they knew the words 'mama,' 'sister,' 'sweetheart,' but they no longer really understood what these terms referred to.

The human body, which had taken five million years on earth to grow, has immense resources within it, resources greater than the brain, or the personality, or the hopes of the individual. And the bodies of the Arachosians decided things for them. Since the chemistry of femininity meant instant death, and since an occasional girl baby was born dead and buried casually, the bodies made the adjustment. The men of Arachosia became both men and women. They gave themselves the ugly nickname, 'klopt.' Since they did not have the rewards of family life, they became strutting cockerels, who mixed their love with murder, who blended their songs with duels, who sharpened their weapons and who earned the right to reproduce within a strange family system which no decent earth-man would find comprehensible.

But they did survive.

And the method of their survival was so sharp, so fierce, that it was indeed a difficult thing to understand.

In less than four hundred years the Arachosians had civilized into groups of fighting clans. They still had just one planet, around just one sun. They lived in just one place. They had a few spacecraft they had built themselves. Their science, their art and their music moved forward with strange lurches of inspired neurotic genius, because they lacked the fundamentals in the human personality itself, the balance of male and female, the family, the operations of love, of hope, of reproduction. They

survived, but they themselves had become monsters and did not know it.

Out of their memory of old mankind they created a legend of old earth. Women in that memory were deformities, who should be killed. Misshapen beings, who should be erased. The family, as they recalled it, was filth and abomination which they were resolved to wipe out if they should ever meet it.

They, themselves, were bearded homosexuals, with rouged lips, ornate earrings, fine heads of hair, and very few old men among them. They killed off their men before they became old; the things they could not get from love or relaxation or comfort, they purchased with battle and death. They made up songs proclaiming themselves to be the last of the old men and the first of the new, and they sang their hate to mankind when they should meet, and they sang 'Woe is earth that we should find it,' and yet something inside them made them add to almost every song a refrain which troubled even them,

And I mourn Man!

They mourned mankind and yet they plotted to attack all of humanity.

The Trap

Suzdal had been deceived by the message capsule. He put himself back in the sleeping compartment and he directed the turtle-men to take the cruiser to Arachosia, wherever it might be. He did not do this crazily or wantonly. He did it as a matter of deliberate judgment. A judgment for which he was later heard, tried, judged fairly and then put to something worse than death.

He deserved it.

He sought for Arachosia without stopping to think of the most fundamental rule: How could he keep the Arachosians, singing monsters that they were, from following him home to the eventual ruin of earth? Might not their condition be a disease which could be contagious, or might not their fierce society destroy the other societies of men and leave earth and all of other men's worlds in ruin? He did not think of this, so he was heard, and tried and punished much later. We will come to that.

The Arrival

Suzdal awakened in orbit off Arachosia. And he awakened knowing he had made a mistake. Strange ships clung to his shell-ship like evil barnacles from an unknown ocean, attached to a familiar water craft. He called to his turtle-men to press the controls and the controls did not work.

The outsiders, whoever they were, man or woman or beast or god, had enough technology to immobilize his ship. Suzdal immediately realized his mistake. Naturally, he thought of destroying himself and the ship, but he was afraid that if he destroyed himself and missed destroying the ship completely there was a chance that his cruiser, a late model with recent weapons would fall into the hands of whoever it was walking on the outer dome of his own cruiser. He could not afford the risk of mere individual suicide. He had to take a more drastic step. This was not time for obeying earth rules.

His security officer—a cube ghost wakened to human form whispered the whole story to him in quick intelligent gasps:

‘They are people, sir.

‘More people than I am.

‘I’m a ghost, an echo working out of a dead brain.

‘These are real people, Commander Suzdal, but they are the worst people ever to get loose among the stars. You must destroy them, sir!’

‘I can’t,’ said Suzdal, still trying to come fully awake. ‘They’re people.’

‘Then you’ve got to beat them off. By any means, sir. By any means whatever. Save Earth. Stop them. Warn Earth.’

‘And I?’ asked Suzdal, and was immediately sorry that he had asked the selfish, personal question.

‘You will die or you will be punished,’ said the security officer sympathetically, ‘and I do not know which one will be worse.’

‘Now?’

‘Right now. There is no time left for you. No time at all.’

‘But the rules . . . ?’

‘You have already strayed far outside of rules.’

There were rules, but Suzdal left them all behind.

Rules, rules for ordinary times, for ordinary places, for understandable dangers.

This was a nightmare cooked up by the flesh of man, motivated by the brains of man. Already his monitors were bringing him news of who these people were, these seeming maniacs, these men who had never known women, these boys who had grown to lust and battle, who had a family structure which the normal human brain could not accept, could not believe, could not tolerate. The things on the outside were people, and they weren't. The things on the outside had the human brain, the human imagination, and the human capacity for revenge, and yet Suzdal, a brave officer, was so frightened by the mere nature of them that he did not respond to their efforts to communicate.

He could feel the turtle-women among his crew aching with fright itself, as they realized who was pounding on their ship and who it was that sang through loud announcing machines that they wanted *in, in, in*.

Suzdal committed a crime. It is the pride of the Instrumentality that the Instrumentality allows its officers to commit crimes or mistakes or suicide. The Instrumentality does the things for mankind that a computer can not do. The Instrumentality leaves the human brain, the human choice in action.

The Instrumentality passes dark knowledge to its staff, things not usually understood in the inhabited world, things prohibited to ordinary men and women because the officers of the Instrumentality, the captains and the sub-chiefs and the chiefs must know their jobs. If they do not, all mankind might perish.

Suzdal reached into his arsenal. He knew what he was doing. The larger moon of Arachosia was habitable. He could see that there were earth plants already on it, and earth insects. His monitors showed him that the Arachosian men-women had not bothered to settle on the planet. He threw an agonized inquiry at his computers and cried out:

'Read me the age it's in!'

The machine sang back, 'More than thirty millions years.'

Suzdal had strange resources. He had twins or quadruplets of almost every earth animal. The earth animals were carried in tiny capsules no larger than a medicine capsule and they consisted of the sperm and the ovum of the higher animals,

ready to be matched for sowing, ready to be imprinted; he also had small life-bombs which could surround any form of life with at least a chance of survival.

He went to the bank and he got cats, eight pairs, sixteen earth cats, *felis domesticus*, the kind of cat that you and I know, the kind of cat which is bred, sometimes for telepathic uses, sometimes to go along on the ships and serve as auxiliary weapons when the minds of the pinlighters direct the cats to fight off dangers.

He coded these cats. He coded them with messages just as monstrous as the messages which had made the men-women of Arachosia into monsters. This is what he coded:

Do not breed true.

Invent new chemistry.

You will serve man.

Become civilized.

Learn speech.

You will serve man.

When man calls you will serve man.

Go back, and come forth.

Serve man.

These instructions were no mere verbal instructions. They were imprints on the actual molecular structure of the animals. They were charges in the genetic and biological coding which went with these cats. And then Suzdal committed his offense against the laws of mankind. He had a chronopathic device on board the ship. A time distorter, usually to be used for a moment or a second or two to bring the ship away from utter destruction.

The men-women of Arachosia were already cutting through the hull.

He could hear their high, hooting voices screaming delirious pleasure at one another as they regarded him as the first of their promised enemies that they had ever met, the first of the monsters from old earth who had finally overtaken them. The true, evil people on whom they, the men-women of Arachosia would be revenged.

Suzdal remained calm. He coded the genetic cats. He loaded them into life-bombs. He adjusted the controls of his chronopathic machine illegally, so that instead of reaching one second for a ship of 80,000 tons, they reached two million years for a

load of less than four kilos. He flung the cats into the nameless moon of Arachosia.

And he flung them back in time.

And he knew he did not have to wait.

He didn't.

The Catland Suzdal Made

The cats came. Their ships glittered in the naked sky above Arachosia. Their little combat craft attacked. The cats who had not existed a moment before, but who had then had two million years in which to follow a destiny printed right into their brains, printed down their spinal cords, etched into the chemistry of their bodies and personalities. The cats had turned into people of a kind, with speech, intelligence, hope, and a mission. Their mission was to attach themselves to Suzdal, to rescue him, to obey him, and to damage Arachosia.

The cat ships screamed their battle warnings.

'This is the day of the year of the promised age. And *now come cats!*'

The Arachosians had waited for battle for 4,000 years and now they got it. The cats attacked them. Two of the cat craft recognized Suzdal, and the cats reported,

'Oh Lord, oh God, oh Maker of all things, oh Commander of Time, oh Beginner of Life, we have waited since Everything began to serve You, to serve Your Name, to obey Your Glory! May we live for You, may we die for You. We are Your people.'

Suzdal cried and threw his message to all the cats.

'Harry the klopts but don't kill them all!'

He repeated 'Harry them and stop them until I escape.' He flung his cruiser into non-space and escaped.

Neither cat nor Arachosian followed him.

And that's the story, but the tragedy is that Suzdal got back. And the Arachosians are still there and the cats are still there. Perhaps the Instrumentality knows where they are, perhaps the Instrumentality does not. Mankind does not really want to find out. It is against all law to bring up a form of life superior to man. Perhaps the cats are. Perhaps somebody knows whether the Ara-

chosians won and killed the cats and added the cat science to their own and are now looking for us somewhere, probing like blind men through the stars for us true human beings to meet, to hate, to kill. Or perhaps the cats won.

Perhaps the cats are imprinted by a strange mission, by weird hopes of serving men they don't recognize. Perhaps they think we are all Arachosians and should be saved only for some particular cruiser commander, whom they will never see again. They won't see Suzdal, because we know what happened to him.

The Trial of Suzdal

Suzdal was brought to trial on a great stage in the open world. His trial was recorded. He had gone in when he should not have gone in. He had searched for the Arachosians without waiting and asking for advice and reinforcements. What business was it of his to relieve a distress ages old? What business indeed?

And then the cats. We had the records of the ship to show that something came out of that moon. Spacecraft, things with voices, things that could communicate with the human brain. We're not even sure, since they transmitted directly into the receiver computers, that they spoke an earth language. Perhaps they did it with some sort of direct telepathy. But the crime was, *Suzdal had succeeded*.

By throwing the cats back two million years, by coding them to survive, coding them to develop civilization, coding them to come to his rescue, he had created a whole new world in less than one second of objective time.

His chronopathic device had flung the little life-bombs back to the earth of the big moon over Arachosia and in less time than it takes to record this, the bombs came back in the form of a fleet built by a race, an earth race, though of cat origin, two million years old.

The court stripped Suzdal of his name and said, 'You will not be named Suzdal any longer.'

The court stripped Suzdal of his rank.

'You will not be a commander of this or of any other navy, neither imperial nor of the Instrumentality.'

The court stripped Suzdal of his life. 'You will not live longer, former Commander, and former Suzdal.'

And then the court stripped Suzdal of death.

'You will go to the planet Shayol, the place of uttermost shame from which no one ever returns. You will go there with the contempt and hatred of mankind. We will not punish you. We do not wish to know about you any more. You will live on, but for us you will have ceased to exist.'

That's the story. It's a sad, wonderful story. The Instrumentality tries to cheer up all the different kinds of mankind by telling them it isn't true, it's just a ballad.

Perhaps the records do exist. Perhaps somewhere the crazy klopts of Arachosia breed their boyish young, deliver their babies, always by Caeserean, feed them always by bottle, generations of men who have no fathers and who have no idea of what the word *mother* might be. And perhaps the Arachosians spend their crazy lives in endless battle with intelligent cats who are serving a mankind that may never come back.

That's the story.

Furthermore, it isn't true.

*. . . From the Dark Ages of Space emerged the Second Empire
. . . ruled by a child, a usurper and a fool! The Great Throne of
Imperial Earth commanded a thousand vassal worlds—bleak,
starved worlds that sullenly whispered of galactic revolt . . . At
last, like eagles at a distant eyrie, the Star-kings gathered . . .
not to whisper, but to strike!*

THE REBEL OF VALKYR

by Alfred Coppel

Out of the dark ages of the Interregnum emerged the Second Empire. Once again in the space of a millennium, the banner of Imperial Earth waved above the decimated lands of the inhabited worlds. Four generations of conquerors, heirs to the greatness of the Thousand Emperors, had recreated the Galactic Empire, by force of arms. But technology, the Great Destroyer, was feared and forbidden. Only witches, warlocks and sorcerers remembered the old knowledge, and the mobs, tortured by the racial memories of the awful destruction of the Civil Wars, stoned these seekers and burned them in the squares of towns built amid the rubble of the old wars. The ancient, mighty space-ships—indestructible, eternal—carried men and horses, fire and sword across the Galaxy at the bidding of the warlords. The Second Empire—four generations out of isolated savagery—feudal, grim; a culture held together by bonds forged of blood and iron and the loyalty of the warrior star-kings . . .

—Quintus Bland,

ESSAYS ON GALACTIC HISTORY.

I

Kieron, Warlord of Valkyr, paced the polished floor angrily. The flickering lights of the vast mirrored chamber glinted from the jewels in his ceremonial harness and shimmered down the length of his silver cape. For a moment, the star-king paused before the tall double doors of beaten bronze, his strong hands toying with the hilt of his sword. The towering Janizaries of the Palace

Guard stood immobile on either side of the arching doorway, their great axes resting on the flagstones. It was as though the dark thoughts that coursed through Kieron's mind were—to them—unthinkable. The huge warriors from the heavy planets of the Pleiades were stolid, loyal, unimaginative. And even a star-king did not dream of assaulting the closed portals of the Emperor's chambers.

Kieron's fingers opened and closed spasmodically over the gem-crusted pommel of his weapon; his dark eyes glittered with unspent fury. Muttering an oath, he turned away from the silent door and resumed his pacing. His companion, a brawny man in the plain battle harness of Valkyr, watched him quietly from under bushy yellow brows. He stood with his great arms folded over the plaits of grizzled yellow hair that hung to his waist, his deeply-lined face framed by the loosened lacings of a winged helmet. A huge sword hugged his naked thigh; a massive blade with worn and sweat-stained hilt.

The lord of Valkyr paused in his angry pacing to glare at his aide. 'By the Great Destroyer, Nevitta! How long are we to stand this?'

'Patience, Kieron, patience.' The old warrior spoke with the assurance of life-long familiarity. 'They try us sorely, but we have waited three weeks. A little longer can do no harm.'

'Three weeks!' Kieron scowled at Nevitta. 'Will they *drive* us into rebellion? Is that their intention? I swear I would not have taken this from Gilmer himself!'

'The great Emperor would never have dealt with us so. The fighting men of Valkyr were ever closest to his heart, Kieron. This is a way of doing that smacks of a woman's hand.' He spat on the polished floor. 'May the Seven Hells claim her!'

Kieron grunted shortly and turned again toward the silent door. Ivane! Ivane the Fair . . . Ivane the schemer. What devil's brew was she mixing now? Intrigue had always been her weapon—and now that Gilmer was gone and she stood by the Great Throne . . .

Kieron cursed her roundly under his breath. Nevitta spoke the truth. There was Ivane's hand in this, as surely as the stars made Galaxies!

Three weeks wasted. Long weeks. Twenty-one full days since their ships had touched the Imperial City. Days of fighting

through the swarms of dilettantes and favor-seekers that thronged the Imperial Palace. There had been times when Kieron had wanted to cut a path through the fawning dandies with his sword!

Gilmer of Kaidor lay dead a full year and still the new Court was a madhouse of simpering sycophants. Petitions were being granted by the score as the favorites collected their long-delayed largess from the boy-Emperor Toran. And Kieron knew well enough that whatever favors were granted came through the ambitious hands of the Consort Ivane. She might not be allowed to wear the crown of an Empress without the blood of the Thousand Emperors in her veins, but by now no one at Court denied that she was the fountain-head of Imperial favor. Yet that wasn't really enough for her, Kieron knew. Ivane dreamed of better things. And because of all this hidden by-play, the old favorites of the warrior Gilmer were snubbed and refused audience. A new inner circle was building, and Kieron of Valkyr was not—it was plain to see—to be included. He was prevented even from presenting his just complaints to the Emperor Toran.

Other matters, he was told again and again, occupied His Imperial Majesty's attention. Other matters! Kieron could feel the anger hot and throbbing in his veins. What other matters could there be of more importance to a sovereign than the loyalty of his finest fighting men? Or if Toran was a fool as the courtiers privately claimed, then surely Ivane had more intelligence than to keep a Warlord of the Outer Marches cooling his heels in antechambers for three weeks! The Lady Ivane, herself so proud, should know how near to rebellion were the warrior peoples of the Periphery.

Under such deliberate provocations it was difficult to loyally ignore the invitation of Freka of Kalgan to meet with the other star-kings in grievance council. Rebellion was not alluring to one like Kieron who had spent his boyhood fighting beside Gilmer, but there was a limit to human endurance, and he was fast reaching it.

'Nevitta,' Kieron spoke abruptly. 'Were you able to find out anything concerning the Lady Alys?'

The grizzled warrior shook his head. 'Nothing but the common talk. It is said that she has secluded herself, still mourning for

Gilmer. You know, Kieron, how the little princess loved her father.'

The lord of Valkyr frowned thoughtfully. Yes, it was true enough that Alys had loved Gilmer. He could remember her at the great Emperor's side after the battle of Kaidor. Even the conquered interregal lords of that world had claimed that Gilmer would have surrendered the planet if they had been able to capture his daughter. The bond between father and daughter had been a close one. Possibly Alys *had* secluded herself to carry on with her mourning—but Kieron doubted it. That would not have been Gilmer's way, nor his daughter's.

'Things would be different here,' said Nevitta with feeling, 'if the little princess ruled instead of Toran.'

Very different, thought Kieron. The foolish Toran bid fair to lose what four generations of loyal fighters had built up out of the rubble of the dark ages. Alys, the warrior princess, would add to the glory of the Imperium, not detract from it. But perhaps he was prejudiced in her favor, reflected Kieron. It was hard not to be.

He recalled her laughing eyes and her courage. A slim child, direct in manner and bearing. Embarrassing him before his roaring Valkyrs with her forthright protestations of love. The armies had worshipped her. A lovely child—with pride of race written into her patrician face. But compassionate, too. Gravely comforting the dying and the wounded with a touch or a word.

Eight years had passed since bloody Kaidor. The child of twelve would be a woman now. And, thought Kieron anxiously, a threat to the ascendant power of the Consort Ivane . . .

The tall bronze doors swung open suddenly, and Kieron turned. But it was not the Emperor who stood there framed in the archway, nor even the Consort. It was the gem-bedecked figure of Landor, the First Lord of Space.

Kieron snorted derisively. First Lord! The shades of the mighty fighters who had carried that title through a thousand of Imperial Earth's battles must have been sickened by young Toran's . . . or Ivane's . . . choice of the mincing courtier who now stood before him.

The more cynical courtiers said that Landor had won his honors in Ivane's bed, and Kieron could well believe it. Out in

the vast emptinesses of the Edge men lived by different standards. Out there a woman was a woman—a thing to be loved or beaten, cherished or enjoyed and cast off—but not a touchstone to wealth and power. Kieron had loathed Landor on sight, and there was reason enough to believe that the First Lord reciprocated most completely. It was not wise for anyone, even a Warlord, to openly scorn the Consort's favorites—but restraint was not one of the lord of Valkyr's virtues, though even Nevitta warned him to take care, Assassination was a fine art in the Imperial City, and one amply subsidized by the First Lord of Space.

'Well, Landor?' Kieron demanded, disdaining to use Landor's title.

Landor's smoothly handsome features showed no expression. The pale eyes veiled like a serpent's.

'I regret,' the First Lord of Space said easily, 'that His Imperial Majesty has retired for the night, Valkyr. Under the circumstances . . .' He spread his slender hands in a gesture of helplessness.

The lie was obvious. Through the open doorway of the royal chambers came the murmuring sound of laughter and the reedy melody of a minstrel's pipes in the age-old ballad of *Lady Greensleeves*. Kieron could hear Toran's uncertain voice singing:

*'Greensleeves was all my joy,
Greensleeves was all my joy,
And who but Lady Greensleeves?'*

Kieron could imagine the boy—lolling foolishly before the glittering Ivane, trying to win with verses what any man could have for a pledge of loyalty to the Consort.

The Valkyr glared at Landor. 'I'm not to be received, is that it? By the Seven Hells, why don't you say what you mean?'

Landor's smile was scornful. 'You out-worlders! You should learn how to behave, really. Perhaps later . . .'

'Later be damned!' snapped Kieron. 'My people are starving *now*! Your grubbing tax-gatherers are wringing us dry! How long do you think they'll stand for it? How long do you imagine I will stand for it?'

'Threats, Valkyr?' asked the First Lord, his eyes suddenly venomous. 'Threats against your Emperor? Men have been whipped to death for much less.'

'Not men of Valkyr,' retorted Kieron.

'The men of Valkyr no longer hold the favored position they once did, Kieron. I counsel you to remember that.'

'True enough,' Kieron replied scornfully. 'Under Gilmer, fighting men were the power of the Empire. Now Toran rules with the hands of women . . . and dancing masters.'

The First Lord's face darkened at the insult. He laid a hand on the hilt of his ornate sword, but the Valkyr's eyes remained insolent. The huge Nevitta stirred, measuring the Pleiadene Janizaries at the door, ready for trouble.

But Landor had no stomach for swordplay—particularly with as young and supple a fighter as the Warlord of Valkyr. His own ready tongue was a better weapon than steel. With an effort, he forced himself to smile. It was a cold smile, pregnant with subtle danger.

'Harsh words, Valkyr. And unwise. I shall not forget them. I doubt that you will be able to see His Majesty, since I do not believe the tribulations of a planet of savages would concern him. You waste your time here. If you have other business, you had better be about it.'

It was Kieron's turn to feel the hot goad of anger. 'Are those Toran's words or Ivane's dancing master?'

'The Consort Ivane, of course, agrees. If your people cannot pay their taxes, let them sell a few of their brats into service,' Landor said smoothly.

The die was cast, then, thought Kieron furiously. All hope for an adjustment from Toran was gone and only one course lay open to him now.

'Nevitta! See that our men and horses are loaded tonight and the ships made ready for space!'

Nevitta saluted and turned to go. He paused, looked insolently at the First Lord, and deliberately spat on the floor. Then he was gone, his spurs ringing metallically as he disappeared through the high curving archway.

'Savage,' muttered Landor.

'Savage enough to be loyal and worthy of any trust,' said Kieron; 'but you would know nothing of that.'

Landor ignored the thrust. 'Where do you go now, Valkyr?' 'Off-world.'

'Of course,' Landor smiled thinly, his eyebrows arching over pale, shrewd eyes. 'Off-world.'

Kieron felt a stab of suspicion. How much did Landor know? Had his spies pierced Freka the Unknown's counter-espionage cordon and brought word of the star-kings gathering on Kalgan?

'It cannot concern you where I go now, Landor,' said Kieron grimly. 'You've won here. But . . .' Kieron stepped a pace nearer the resplendent favorite. 'Warn your tax-gatherers to go armed when they land on Valkyr. Well armed, Landor.'

Kieron turned on his heel and strode out of the antechamber, his booted heels staccato on the flagstones, silver cape flaunting like a proud banner.

II

Past the tall arch of the Emperor's antechamber lay the Hall of the Thousand Emperors. Kieron strode through it, the flickering flames of the wall-sconces casting long shadows out behind him—shadows that danced and whirled on the tapestried walls and touched the composed faces of the great men of Earth.

These were brooding men; men who stared down at him out of their thousand pasts. Men who had stood with a planet for a throne and watched their Empire passing in ordered glory from horizon to horizon across the night sky of Earth—men worshipped as gods on out-world planets, who watched and guided the tide of Empire until it crashed thundering on the shores of ten thousand worlds beyond Vega and Altair. Men who sat cloaked in sable robes with diamond stars encrusted and saw their civilization built out from the Great Throne, tier on shining tier until at last it reached the Edge and strained across the awful gulf for the terrible seetee suns of mighty Andromeda itself . . .

The last few of the men-like gods had watched the First Empire crumble. They had seen the wave of annihilation sweeping in from the Outer Marches of the Periphery; had seen their gem-bright civilization shattered with destructive forces so hideous that the spectre of the Great Destroyer hung like a mantle of death over the Galaxy, a thing to be shunned and feared forever. And thus had come the Interregnum.

Kieron had no eyes for these brooding giants; his world was

not the world they had known. It was in the next chamber that the out-world warrior paused. It was a vast and empty place. Here there were but five figures and space for a thousand more. This was the Empire that Kieron knew. This Empire he had fought for and helped secure; a savage, darkling thing spawned in the dark ages of the Interregnum, a Galaxy-spanning fief of star-kings and serfs—of warlocks and spaceships—of light and shadow. This Empire had been born in the agony of a Galaxy and tempered in the bitter internecine wars of reconquest.

Before the image of Gilmer of Kaidor, Kieron stopped. He stood in silence, looking into the face of his dead liege. The hour was late and the Hall deserted. Kieron knelt, suddenly filled with sadness. He was on his way to rebellion against the Empire that he had helped this stern-faced man to expand and hold—rebellion against the power of Imperial Earth, personified by the weak-faced boy standing draped in the sable mantle of sovereignty in the next niche. Kieron looked from father to son. By its composure and its nearness to the magnetic features of the great Gilmer, the face of young Toran seemed to draw character and strength. It was an illusion, Kieron knew.

The young Valkyr felt driven hard. His people hungered. Military service was no longer enough for the Imperial Government as it had been for decades. Money was demanded, and there was no money on Valkyr. So the people hungered—and Kieron was their lord. He could not stand by and see the agony on the faces of his warrior maids as their children weakened, nor could he see his proud warriors selling themselves into slavery for a handful of coins. The Emperor would not listen. Kieron had recourse only to the one thing he knew . . . the sword.

He bowed his head and asked the shade of Gilmer for forgiveness.

A slight movement caught his battle-sharpened eye as someone stirred behind a fluted column. Kieron's sword whispered as it slid from the scabbard, the gemmed hilt casting shards of light into the dimness of the colonnade.

Treading softly, Kieron eased his tall frame into the shadows, weapon alert. The thought of assassination flashed across his mind and he smiled grimly. Could it be that Landor had his hirelings after him already?

Kieron saw the shadowy shape slip from the colonnade out onto the great curving terrace that bordered the entire west wing of the Palace. Eyes narrowed under his black brows, the lord of Valkyr followed.

The stars gleamed in the moonless night, and far below, Kieron could see the flickering torchlights of the Imperial City fanning out to the horizon like the spokes of some fantastic, glittering wheel. The dark figure ahead had vanished.

Kieron sheathed his sword and drew his poniard. It was far too dark for swordplay, and he did not wish to risk letting the assassin escape. Melting into the shadows of the colonnade again, he made his way parallel to the terrace, alert for any sign of movement. Presently, the figure appeared again beside the balustrade, and the Valkyr moved swiftly and quietly up behind. With a cat-like movement, he slipped his free arm about the slight shape, pulling it tight against himself. The poniard flashed in his upraised hand, the slender blade reflecting the starlight.

The weapon did not descend . . .

Against his forearm, Kieron felt a yielding softness, and the hair that brushed his cheek was warm and perfumed.

He stood transfixed. The girl twisted in his grasp and broke free with a gasping cry. Instantly, a blade gleamed in her hand and she had launched herself at the Valkyr furiously. Her voice was tight with rage.

'Murdering butcher! *You dare . . . !*'

Kieron caught her upraised arm and wrenched the dagger from her grasp. She clawed at him, kicking, biting, but never once calling aloud for aid. At last Kieron was able to pin her to a column with his weight, and he held her there, arms pinioned to her sides.

'You hellcat!' he muttered against her hair. 'Who are you?'

'You know well enough, you murdering lackey! Why don't you kill me and go collect your pay, damn you!' gritted the girl furiously. 'Must you manhandle me too?'

Kieron gasped. '*I kill you!*' He caught the girl's hair and pulled her head back so that her features would catch the faint glow of light from the city below. 'Who are you, hellcat?'

The light outlined his own features and the Arms of Valkyr on the clasp of his cloak at his throat. The girl's eyes widened.

Slowly the tenseness went out of her and she relaxed against him.

‘Kieron! Kieron of Valkyr!’

Kieron was still alert for some trick. Landor could have hired a female assassin just as well as a man.

‘You know me?’ he asked cautiously.

‘*Know you!*’ She laughed suddenly, and it was a silvery sound in the night. ‘*I loved you . . . beast!*’

‘By the Seven Hells, you speak in riddles! Who are you?’ the Valkyr demanded irritably.

‘And I thought you had come to kill me,’ mused the girl in self-reproach. ‘My own Kieron!’

‘I’m not your Kieron or anyone else’s, Lady,’ said Kieron rather stiffly, ‘and you’d better explain why you were watching me in the Hall of Emperors before I’ll let you go.’

‘My father warned me that you would forget me. I did not think you would be so cruel,’ she taunted.

‘I knew your father?’

‘Well enough, I think.’

‘I’ve had a hundred wenches—and known some of their fathers, too. You can’t expect me to . . .’

‘Not *this* wench, Valkyr!’ the girl exploded furiously.

The tone carried such command that Kieron involuntarily stepped back, but still keeping the girl’s hands pinned to her sides.

‘If you had spoken so on Kaidor, I’d have had the skin stripped from your back, outworld savage!’ she cried.

Kaidor! Kieron felt the blood drain away from his face. This, then, was . . . Alys.

‘Ha! So you remember now! Kaidor you can recall, but you have forgotten me! Kieron, you always were a beast!’

Kieron felt a smile spreading across his face. It was good to smile again. And it was good to know that Alys was . . . safe.

‘Highness . . .’

‘Don’t “Highness” me!’

‘Alys, then. Forgive me. I could not have known you. After all it has been eight years . . .’

‘And there have been a hundred wenches . . .’ mimicked the girl angrily.

Kieron grinned. 'There really haven't been that many. I boasted.'

'Any would be too many!'

'You haven't changed, Alys, except that you . . .'

'Have grown so? Spare me that!' She glared at him, eyes flaming in the shadows. Then suddenly she was laughing again, a silvery laugh that hung like a bright thread in the soft tapestry of night sounds. 'Oh, Kieron, it is good to see you again!'

'I thought to hear from you, Alys, when we reached Earth—but there was nothing. No word of any kind. I was told you were in seclusion still mourning Gilmer.'

Alys bowed her head. 'I will never stop mourning him.' She looked up, her eyes suddenly bright with unshed tears. 'Nor will you. I saw you kneeling inside. I thought then that it might be you. No one kneels to Gilmer now but the old comrades.' She walked to the balustrade and stood looking out over the lights of the Imperial City. Kieron watched the play of emotions over her face, caught suddenly by her beauty.

'I tried to reach you, Kieron—tried hard. But my servants have been taken from me since I was caught spying on Ivane. And I'm kept under cover now, permitted out only after dark—and then only on the Palace grounds. Ivane has convinced Toran that I'm dangerous. The people like me because I was father's favorite. My poor stupid little brother! How that woman rules him . . . !'

Kieron was aghast. 'You spied on Ivane? In heaven's name, why?'

'That woman is a born plotter, Kieron. She isn't satisfied with a Consort's coronet. She's brewing something. Emissaries have come to her from certain of the star-kings and *others* . . .'

'Others?'

Alys' voice was hushed. 'A warlock, Kieron! He has been seeing Ivane privately for more than a year. An awful man!'

Superstition stirred like a quickening devil inside the Valkyr. The shuddering horror of the dark and bloody tales he had heard all his life about the warlocks who clung to the knowledge of the Great Destroyer rose like a wave of blackness within him.

Alys felt the same dark tide rising in her. She moved closer to Kieron, her slim body trembling slightly against his. 'The people would tear Ivane to pieces if they knew,' she whispered.

'You *saw* this warlock?' asked Kieron sick with dread.

Alys nodded soundlessly.

Kieron fought down his fears and wondered uneasily what Ivane's connection could be with such a pariah. The warlocks and witches were despised and feared above all other creatures in the Galaxy.

'His name?' Kieron asked.

'Geller. Geller of the Marshes. It is said that he is a conjurer of devils . . . *and that he can create homunculi!* Out of the very filth of the marches! Oh, Kieron!' Alys shuddered.

An awful plan was forming in Kieron's mind. He was thinking that Ivane must be stripped of the spells and powers of this devil-man. With such powers at her command there might be nothing impossible of attainment. Even the crown of the Imperium itself . . .

'Where,' Kieron asked slowly, 'can this warlock be found?'

'On the street of the Black Flame, in the city of Neg . . . on Kalgan.'

'*Kalgan!*' Kieron's heart contracted. Was there a connection? Kalgan! What had Ivane to do with that lonely planet beyond the dark veil of the Coalsack? Was it coincidence? Out of all the thousands of worlds in space . . . Kalgan.

'Is there something wrong, Kieron? You know this man?'

Kieron shook his head. It had suddenly become more than imperative that he go to Kalgan. The mystery of the Imperial Consort's connection with a warlock of Kalgan must be unraveled. And the star-kings were gathering . . .

The Valkyr was suddenly taken with a new and different fear. If Alys had spied on Ivane, then she must be in danger here. Ivane would never tolerate interference with her plans from Gilmer's daughter.

'Alys, are you a prisoner here?'

'More, I'm afraid,' the girl said sadly. 'I'm a reminder to Toran of the days of our father. One that he would like to eliminate, I think.'

Kieron studied her in the starlight. His eyes sought the thick golden hair that brushed her shoulders, the glittering metallic skirt that hung low on her hips, outlining the slim thighs. He watched the graceful line of her unadorned throat, the bare

shoulders and breasts, the small waist, the flat, firm stomach—all revealed by the studied nakedness of the fashions of the Inner Marches. This was no child. The thought of her in danger shook him badly.

'Toran would not dare harm you, Alys,' said Kieron uncertainly. There had been a time when he could have said such a thing with perfect assurance, but since the death of Gilmer, the Imperial City was like an over-civilized jungle—full of beasts of prey.

'No, Toran wouldn't . . . alone,' said Alys; 'but there are Ivane and Landor.' She laughed, suddenly gay; her eyes, seeking Kieron's, were shining. 'But not now! You are here, Kieron!'

The Valkyr felt his heart contract. 'Alys,' he said softly, 'I leave Earth tonight. For Kalgan.'

'For Kalgan, Kieron?' Alys' eyes widened. 'To seek that warlock?'

'For another reason, Alys.' Kieron paused uneasily. It was hard to speak to Gilmer of Kaidor's daughter about rebellion. Yet he could not lie to her. He temporized.

'I have business with the lord of Kalgan,' he said.

Alys' face was shadowed and her voice when she spoke was sad. 'Do the star-kings gather, Kieron? Have they had all they can stand of Toran's foolish rule?'

Kieron nodded wordlessly.

The girl flared up with a sudden imperious anger. 'That fool! He is letting the favorites drive the Empire to ruin!' She looked up at Kieron pleadingly. 'Promise me one thing, Kieron.'

'If I can.'

'That you will not commit yourself to any rebellion until we have spoken again.'

'Alys, I . . .'

'Oh, Kieron! Promise me! If there is no other way, then fight the Imperial House. But give me one chance to save what my father and his father died for . . . !'

'And mine,' added Kieron somberly.

'You know that if there is no other way, I won't try to dissuade you. But while you are on Kalgan, I'll speak to Toran. Please, Kieron, promise me that Valkyr will not rebel until we have tried everything.' Her eyes shone with passion. 'Then if it comes to war, I'll ride by your side!'

'Done, Alys,' said Kieron slowly. 'But take care when you speak to Toran. Remember there is danger here for you.' He wondered briefly what Freka the Unknown would think of his sudden reluctance to commit the hundred spaceships and five thousand warriors of Valkyr to the coming rebellion. A thought struck him and quickly he discarded it. For just an instant he had wondered if Geller of the Marshes and the mysterious Freka the Unknown might be the same . . . Stranger things had happened. But Alys had described Geller as old, and Freka was known to be a six-and-one-half foot warrior, the perfect "type" of the star-king caste.

'One thing more, Alys,' Kieron said; 'I will leave one of my vessels here for your use. Nevitta and a company will remain, too. Keep them by you. They will guard you with their lives.' He slipped his arm about her, holding her to him.

'Nevitta?' Alys said with a slow smile. 'Nevitta of the yellow braids and the great sword? I remember him.'

'The braids are greying, but the sword is as long as ever. He can guard you for me, and keep you safe.'

The girl's smile deepened at the words 'for me' but Kieron did not notice. He was deep in planning. 'Be very careful, Alys. And watch out for Landor.'

'Yes, Kieron,' the girl breathed meekly. She looked up at the tall outworld warrior's face, lips parted.

But Kieron was looking up at the stars of the Empire, and there was uneasiness in his heart. He tightened his arm about Alys, holding her closer to him as though to protect her from the hot gaze of those fiery stars.

III

The spaceship was ancient, yet the mysterious force of the Great Destroyer chained within the sealed coils between the hulls drove it with unthinkable speed across the star-shot darkness. The interior was close and smoky, for the only light came from oil lamps turned low to slow the fouling of the air. Once, there had been light without fire in the thousand-foot hulls, but the tiny orbs set into the ceilings had failed for they were not of a kind with the force in the sealed, eternal coils.

On the lower decks, the horses of the small party of Valkyr warriors aboard stomped the steel deck-plates, impatient in their close confinement; while in the tiny bubble of glass at the very prow of the ancient vessel, two shamen of the hereditary caste of Navigators drove the pulsing starship toward the spot beyond the veil of the Coalsack where their astrolabes and armillary spheres told them that the misty globe of Kalgan lay.

Many men—risking indictment as warlocks or sorcerers—had tried to probe the secrets of the Great Destroyer and compute the speed of these mighty spacecraft of antiquity. Some had even claimed a speed of 100,000 miles per hour for them. But since the starships made the voyage from Earth to the agricultural worlds of Proxima Centauri in slightly less than twenty-eight hours, such calculations would place the nearest star-system an astounding *two million eight hundred thousand* miles from Earth—a figure that was as absurd to all Navigators as it was inconceivable to laymen.

The great spaceship bearing the Warlord of Valkyr's blazon solidified into reality near Kalgan as its great velocity diminished. It circled the planet to kill speed and nosed down into the damp air of the grey world. The high cloud cover passed, it slanted down into slightly clearer air. Kalgan did not rotate: in its slow orbit around the red giant parent star, the planet turned first one face, and then another to the slight heat of its sun. Great oceans covered the poles, and the central land mass was like a craggy girdle of rock and soil around the bulging equator. Only in the twilight zone was life endurable, and the city of Neg, stronghold of Freka the Unknown, was the only urban grouping on the planet.

Neg lay sullen in the eternal twilight when at last Kieron's spaceship landed outside the gates and the debarkation of his retinue had begun; the spaceport, however, was ablaze with flares and torches, and the lord of Kalgan had sent a corps of drummers—signal honors—to greet the visiting star-king. The hot, misty night air throbbed with the beat of the huge kettle-drums, and weapons and jewelled harness flashed in the yellow light of the flames.

At last the debarkation was complete, and Kieron and his warriors were led by a torch-bearing procession of soldiery into the fortified city of Neg—along ancient cobbled streets—through

small crowded squares—and finally to the Citadel of Neg itself. The residence of Freka the Unknown, Lord of Kalgan.

The people they passed were a silent, sullen lot. Dull, brutish faces. The faces of slaves and serfs held in bondage by fear and force. These people, Kieron reflected, would go mad in a carnival of destruction if the heavy hand of their lord should falter.

He turned his attention from the people of Neg to the massive Citadel. It was a powerful keep with high walls and turreted outworks. It spoke of Kalgan's bloody history in every squat, functional line. A history of endless rebellion and uprising, of coups and upheavals. Warrior after warrior had set himself up as ruler of this sullen world only to fall before the assaults of his own vassals. It had ever been the policy of the Imperial Government never to interfere with these purely local affairs. It was felt that out of the crucibles of domestic strife would arise the best fighting men, and they, in turn, could serve the Imperium. As long as Kalgan produced its levy of fighting men and spaceships, no one on Earth cared about the local government. So Kalgan wallowed in blood.

Out of the last nightmare had come Freka. He had risen rapidly to power on Kalgan—and *stayed* in power. Hated by his people, he nevertheless ruled harshly, for that was his way. Kieron had been told that this warrior who had sprung out of nowhere was different from other men. The Imperial courtiers claimed that he cared nothing for wine or women, and that he loved only battle. It would take such a man, thought Kieron studying the Citadel, to take and hold a world like Kalgan. It would take such a man to want it!

If Freka of Kalgan loved bloodshed, he would be happy when this coming council of star-kings ended, the Valkyr reflected moodily. He knew himself how near to rebellion he was, and the other lords of the Outer Marches, the lords of Auriga, Doorn, Quintain, Helia—all were ready to strike the Imperial crown from Toran's foolish head.

Kieron was escorted with his warriors to a luxurious suite within the Citadel. Freka, he was informed, regretted his inability to greet him personally, but intended to meet all the gathered star-kings in the Great Hall within twelve hours. Meanwhile, there would be entertainment for the visiting warriors, and the hospi-

talities of Kalgan. Which hospitality, claimed the hawk-faced steward pridefully, was without peer in the known Universe!

An imp of perversity stirred in Kieron. He found that he did not completely trust Freka of Kalgan. There was a premeditated cold-bloodedness about this whole business of the star-kings' grievance council that alerted him to danger. There should have been less smoothness and efficiency in the way the visitors were handled, Kieron thought illogically, remembering the troubles he, himself, had gone to whenever outworld rulers had visited Valkyr. He was suddenly glad that he had warned Nevitta to use extreme caution should it be necessary to bring Alys to Kalgan. It was possible he was being over-suspicious, but he could not forget that Alys herself had seen a warlock from Kalgan in familiar conversation with the woman really to blame for the danger that smouldered among the worlds of the Empire.

The drums told the Valkyr that the other star-kings were arriving. Torches flared in the courtyards of the Citadel, and the hissing roar of spaceships landing told of the eagles gathering.

Through the long, featureless twilight, the sounds continued. Freka made no appearances, but the promised entertainment was forthcoming and lavish. Food and wine in profusion were brought to the apartments of the Valkyrs. Musicians and minstrels came too, to sing and play the love songs and warchants of ancient Valkyr while the warriors roared approval.

Kieron sat on the high seat reserved for him and watched the dancing yellow light of the flambeaux light up the stone rooms and play across the ruddy faces of his warriors as they drank and gamed and quarreled.

Dancing girls were sent them, and the Valkyrs howled with savage pleasure as the naked bodies, glistening with scented oils, gyrated in the barbaric rhythms of the sword dances, steel whirling in bright arcs above the tawny heads. The long, gloomy twilight passed unregretted in the warm, flame-splashed closeness of the Citadel. Kieron watched thoughtfully as more women and fiery vintages were brought into the merrymaking. The finest wines and the best women were passed hand to hand over the heads of laughing warriors to Kieron's place, and he drank deeply of both. The wines were heady, the full lips of the sybaritic houris bittersweet, but Kieron smiled inwardly—if Freka the Unknown sought to bring him into the gathering of the star-

kings drunk and satiated and amenable to suggestion, the lord of Kalgan knew little of the capacity of the men of the Edge.

The hours passed and revelry filled the Citadel of Neg. Life on the outer worlds was harsh, and the gathering warriors took full measure of the pleasures placed at their disposal by the lord of Kalgan. The misty, eternal dusk rang with the drinking songs and battle-cries, the quarreling and lovemaking of warriors from a dozen outworld planets. Each star-king, Kieron knew, was being entertained separately, plied with wine and woman-flesh until the hour for the meeting came.

The sands had run their course in the glass five times before the trumpets blared through the Citadel, calling the lords to the meeting. Kieron left his men to enjoy themselves, and with an attendant in the harness of Kalgan made his way toward the Great Hall.

Through dark passageways that reeked of ancient violence, by walls hung with tapestries and antique weapons, they went; over flagstones worn smooth by generations. This keep had been old when the reconquering heirs to the Thousand Emperors rode their chargers into the Great Hall and dictated their peace terms to the interregal lords of Kalgan.

The hall was a vast, vaulted stone room filled with the smoky heat of torches and many bodies. It teemed with be-jewelled warriors, star-kings, warlords, aides and attendants. For just a moment the lord of Valkyr regretted having come into the impressive gathering alone. Yet it was unimportant. These men were—for the most part—his peers and friends; the warrior kings of the Edge.

Odo of Helia was there, filling the room with his great laughter; and Theron, the Lord of Auriga; Kleph of Quintain; and others. Many others. Kieron saw the white mane of his father's friend Eric, the Warlord of Doorn, the great Red Sun beyond the Horsehead Nebula. Here was an aggregation of might to give even a Galactic Emperor pause. The warlike worlds of the Edge, gathered on Kalgan to decide the issue of war against the uneasy crown of Imperial Earth.

Questions coursed through Kieron's mind as he stood among the star-kings. Alys—pleading with Toran—what success could she have against the insidious power of the Consort? Was Alys in

danger? And there was Geller, the mysterious warlock of the Marshes. Kieron felt he must seek out the man. There were questions that only Geller could answer. Yet at the thought of a warlock—a familiar of the Great Destroyer—Kieron's blood ran cold.

The Valkyr looked about him. That there was power enough here to crush the forces of Earth, there was no doubt. But what then? When Toran was stripped of his power, who would wear the crown? The Empire was a necessity—without it the dark ages of the Interregnum would fall again. For four generations the mantle of shadows had hovered over the youngling Second Empire. Not even the most savage wanted a return of the lost years of isolation. The Empire must live. But the Empire would need a titular head. If not Toran, the foolish weak boy, then who? Kieron's suspicions stirred. . . .

A rumble of tympani announced the entrance of the host. The murmuring voices grew still. Freka the Unknown had entered the Great Hall.

Kieron stared. The man was—magnificent! The tall figure was muscled like a statue from the Dawn Age; sinews rippling under the golden hide like oiled machinery, grace and power in every movement. A mane of hair the color of fire framed a face of classic purity—ascetic, almost inhuman in its perfection. The pale eyes that swept the assemblage were like drops of molten silver. Hot, but with a cold heat that seared with an icy touch. Kieron shivered. This man was already half a god. . . .

Yet there was something in Freka that stirred resentment in the Valkyr. Some indefinable lack that was sensed rather than seen. Kieron knew he looked upon a magnificent star-king, but there was no warmth in the man.

Kieron fought down the unreasonable dislike. It was not his way to judge men so emotionally. *Perhaps*, thought the Valkyr, *I imagine the coldness*. But it was there!

Yet when Freka spoke, the feeling vanished, and Kieron felt himself transported by the timbre and resonant power of the voice.

'Star-kings of the Empire!' Freka cried, and the sound of his words rolled out over the gathering like a wave, gaining power even as he continued: 'For more than a hundred years you and your fathers have fought for the glory and gain of the Great

Throne! Under Gilmer of Kaidor you carried the gonfalon of Imperial Earth to the Edge and planted it there under the light of Andromeda itself! Your blood was shed and your treasure spent for the new Emperors! And what is your reward? *The heavy hand of a fool!* Your people writhe under the burden of excessive taxation—your women starve and your children are sold into slavery! You are in bondage to a foolish boy who squats like a toad on the Great Throne . . .’

Kieron listened breathlessly as Freka of Kalgan wove a web of half-truths around the assembled warriors. The compelling power of the man was astounding.

‘The worlds writhe in the grip of an idiot! Helia, Doorn, Auriga, Valkyr, Quintain . . .’ He called the roll of the warrior worlds. ‘Yes, and Kalgan, too! There is not enough wealth in the Universe to satiate Toran and the Great Throne! And the Court laughs at our complaints! At us! The star-kings who are the fists of the Empire! How long will we endure it? How long will we maintain Toran on a throne that he is too weak to hold?’

Toran, thought Kieron grimly, always *Toran*. Never a word of Ivane or Landor or the favorites who twisted Toran around their fingers.

Freka’s voice dropped low and he leaned out over the first row of upturned faces. ‘I call upon you—as you love your people and your freedom—to join with Kalgan and rid the Empire of this weakling and his money-grubbing and neglect!’

In the crowd, someone stirred. All but this one seemed hypnotized. It was old Eric of Doorn who stepped forward.

‘You speak treason! You brought us here to discuss grievances, and you preach rebellion and treason, I say!’ he shouted angrily.

Freka turned cold eyes on the old warrior.

‘If this is treason,’ he said ominously, ‘it is the Emperor’s treason—not ours.’

Eric of Doorn seemed to wilt under the icy gaze of those inhuman eyes. Kieron watched him step back into the circle of his followers, fear in his aging face. There was a power in Freka to quell almost any insurrection here, thought the Valkyr uneasily. He, himself, was bound by the promise he had made to Alys, but it was only that that kept him from casting in his lot with the compelling lord of Kalgan. Such a feeling was unreason itself, he

knew, and he fought against it, drawing on his reserves of information to strengthen his resolve to obstruct Freka if he could. Yet it was easy to understand how this strange man had sprung out of obscurity and made himself master of Kalgan. Freka was a creature made for leadership.

Kieron stood away from the crowd and forced himself to speak. All his earlier suspicions were growing like a suffocating cloud within him. Someone was being fooled and used, and it was *not* the lord of Kalgan!

'You, Frekal' he cried, and the lords turned to listen. 'You shout of getting rid of Toran—but what do you offer in his place?'

Freka's eyes were like steel now, glinting dully in the light of the wall-torches.

'Not myself. Is that what you feared?' The fine mouth curled scornfully. 'I ask no man to lay down his life so that *I* may take for myself the Great Throne and the sable mantle of Emperor! I renounce here and now any claim to the Imperial Crown! When the time is right, I will make my wishes known.'

The crowd of star-kings murmured approvingly. Freka had won them.

'A vote!' someone cried. 'Those who are with Freka and against Toran! A vote!'

Swords leaped from scabbards and glittered in the torchlight while the chamber rang to a savage cheer. Here was war and loot to satisfy the savage heart! The sack of Imperial Earth herself! Even old Eric of Doorn's sword was reluctantly raised. Kieron alone remained silent, sword sheathed.

Freka looked down at him coldly.

'Well, Valkyr? Do you ride with us?'

'I need more time to consider,' said Kieron carefully.

Freka's laughter was like a lash. 'Time! Time to worry about risking his skin! Valkyr needs time!'

Kieron felt his quick anger surging. The blood pounded in his temples, throbbing, pulsing, goading him to fight. His hand closed on the hilt of his sword and it slipped half out of the sheath. But Kieron caught himself. There was something sinister in this deliberate attempt to ruin him—to brand him a coward before his peers. A man faced two choices here, apparently; follow Freka into rebellion, or be branded craven. Kieron glared

into the cold eyes of the Kalgan lord. The temptation to challenge him was strong—as strong as Kieron's whole background and training in the harsh warrior-code of the Edge. But he could not. Not yet. There were too many irons in the fire to be watched. There was Alys and her plea to Toran. There was the plight of his people. He could not risk the danger to himself of driving a blade through Freka's throat, no matter how his blood boiled with rage.

He turned on his heel and strode from the Great Hall, the laughter of Freka and the star-kings ringing mockingly in his ears.

IV

Kieron awoke in darkness. Of the fire on the hearth, only embers remained and the stone rooms were silent but for the sound of sleeping men. The single Valkyr sentry was at his elbow, whispering him into wakefulness. Kieron threw back the fur coverlets and swung his feet over the edge of the low couch.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Nevitta, sir.'

'Nevitta! Here?' Kieron sprang to his feet, fully awake now. 'Is there a woman with him?'

'A slave-girl, sir. They wait in the outer chamber.'

Kieron reached for his harness and weapons, threading his way through his sleeping men. In the dimly lit antechamber, Nevitta stood near the muffled figure of Alys. Kieron went immediately to the girl, and she threw back her hood, baring her golden head to the torchlight. Her eyes were bright with the pleasure of seeing Kieron again, but there was anger in them, too. The lord of Valkyr knew at once that she had not succeeded with Toran.

'What happened, Nevitta?'

'An attempt was made on the little princess' life, sir.'

'*What?*' Kieron felt the blood drain from his face.

'As I say, Kieron.' The old Valkyr's face was grim. 'We had to fight our way out of the Palace.'

'I never had a chance to speak to Toran,' the girl said sombrely. 'It was all that could be done to reach the spaceship. Even

the Janizaries tried to stop us. Two of your men died for me, Kieron.'

'Who did this thing?' asked Kieron ominously.

'The men who attacked the princess' quarters,' said Nevitta deliberately, 'wore the harness of Kalgan.'

That hit Kieron like a physical blow . . . hard. 'Kalgan! And you brought her *here*? You fool, Nevitta!'

The old Valkyr nodded agreement. 'Yes, Kieron. Fool is the proper word . . .'

'No!' Alys spoke up imperiously. 'It was my command that brought us here. I insisted.'

'By the Seven Hells! Why?' demanded Kieron. 'Why here? You could have been safe on Valkyr! I know it was my order to bring you here, but after what happened . . .'

'The princess would not hear of seeking safety, Kieron,' said Nevitta. 'When Kalgan proved its treachery by trying to assassinate her, she could think only of your danger here . . . unwarned. She would risk her life to bring you this news, Kieron.'

Kieron turned to face the girl. She looked up at him, eyes bright, lips parted.

'What could make a princess risk her life . . .' Kieron began numbly.

'Kieron . . .' The girl breathed his name softly. 'I was so afraid for you.'

The Valkyr reached slowly for the clasp of her cloak and unfastened it. The heavy mantle dropped unnoticed to the flagstones. Alys stood, swaying slightly, parted lips inviting. Kieron watched the throbbing pulse in her white throat and felt his own pounding. He took a step toward her, his arms closing about her yielding suppleness. His mouth sought her lips.

Unnoticed, Nevitta slipped from the antechamber and silently closed the door after him . . .

Kieron stood before the arched window, staring out into the eternal, misty dusk of Kalgan, his heart heavy. Behind him, Alys lay on the low couch. Her bright hair lay in tumbled profusion about her face as she watched her lover at the window. Kieron turned to look at her, feeling the impact of her warm beauty. He began to pace the floor, wracking his brains for a lead to his next

move in the subtle war of treachery and intrigue that had taken shape around him.

He had ordered his men ready for attack, but for the moment there was little need for that kind of vigilance. What was needed was more information. Carefully, he marshalled what few facts he had at his disposal.

The connection between Freka and the plotters in the Imperial City which he had suspected was proved at last by the attempt on Alys' life by men of Kalgan. The star-kings were being used to fight a battle not their own. But whose? Freka's . . . or Ivane's? No matter which, they were being tricked into striking the Imperial Crown from Toran's head, and the gain to them and their people would be—more oppression.

The treatment he himself had received in the Imperial Court made sense now. Landor sought to drive him into the arms of Freka's revolt. Only Alys had spared him.

Now, the star-kings must be warned. But by the code of the Edge, Kieron must prove to them that he was not the craven coward that Freka's laughter had branded him. And he needed *proof*. Proof of the monstrous structure of treachery and intrigue that had sprung up out of a woman's cupidity and an unknown star-king's cold inhumanity.

Kieron stared moodily down into the damp courtyard beneath the open window. In the early dawn it was deserted. Then, quite suddenly, there was activity in the walled-in square. An officer of the Citadel guard escorted a heavily cloaked figure into the yard, and with every evidence of great respect, withdrew. The solitary figure paced the wet cobbles nervously.

Who, wondered Kieron, would be treated with such obvious obsequiousness and yet left in a back courtyard to await the summons of Freka of Kalgan? A sudden thought struck him. It could be only someone who should not be seen by the star-kings and their attendants that filled the Citadel of Neg to overflowing.

Kieron studied the cloaked nobleman with renewed interest. It seemed to him that he had seen that mincing walk before . . .

Landor!

Kieron flung open the door to the outer chamber. His startled men gathered about him. Alys was on her feet behind him. He signalled for Nevitta and four men to enter.

'Nevitta! Tear down that wall tapestry and cut it into shreds

. . . Alys, tie the strips together and make a rope of it! Make certain the knots are secure enough to bear a man's weight . . . That's Landor down there!

Kicking off his spurred boots, Kieron eased himself over the ledge of the window. The courtyard was thirty feet below, but the ancient walls of the Citadel were rough and full of the ornate projections of Interregnal architecture. Kieron let himself down, feeling the mist wet on his face. Twice he almost lost his footing and pitched to the courtyard floor. Alys stared down at him from the window, whitefaced.

He was ten feet from the bottom when Landor looked up. Recognition was instant. There was a moment of stunned silence, and Kieron dropped the remaining distance to land cat-like on his feet, blade in hand.

'Kieron!' Landor's face was grey.

The Valkyr advanced purposefully. 'Yes, Landor! Kieron! I wasn't supposed to see you here, was I? And you don't dare raise an outcry or the others will see you, too! That would raise quite a smell in the Consort's pretty brew, wouldn't it?'

Landor shrank back, away from the gleaming blade in Kieron's hand.

'Draw, Landor,' said Kieron softly. 'Draw now, or I'll kill you where you stand.'

In a panic, the First Lord of Space drew his sword. He knew himself to be no match for the Valkyr star-king, and at the first touch of blades, he turned and fled for the gate. He banged hard against the heavy panels. The gate was locked. Kieron followed him deliberately.

'Cry for help, Landor,' Kieron suggested with a short, hard laugh. 'The place is full of fighting-men.'

Landor was wide-eyed. 'Why do you want to kill me, Kieron,' he cried hoarsely; 'what have I done to you . . . ?'

'You've taxed my people and insulted me, and if that were not enough there would still be your treachery with Freka—tricking me and the others into rebellion so that Ivane can seize the crown! That's more than enough reason to kill you. Besides . . .'

Kieron smiled grimly, 'I just don't like you, Landor. I'd enjoy spilling some of your milky blood.'

'Kieron! I swear, Kieron . . .'

'Save it, dancing master!' Kieron touched Landor's loosely held weapon with his own. 'Guard yourself'

Landor uttered an animal cry of desperation and lunged clumsily at the Valkyr. Kieron's sword made a glittering encirclement and the First Lord's weapon clattered on the cobblestones twenty feet away.

Kieron's eyes were cold as he advanced on the now thoroughly terrorized courtier. 'Kneel down, Landor. A lackey should always die on his knees.'

The First Lord threw himself to the cobbles, his arms around the outworlder's knees. He was grey with fright and babbling for mercy, his eyes tightly shut. Kieron reversed his sword and brought the heavy hilt down sharply on Landor's head. The courtier sighed and pitched forward. Kieron sheathed his weapon and picked the unconscious man up like a sack of meal. Time was short. The guards would be returning to escort Landor to Freka. Kieron picked up the courtier's fallen sword. There must be no sign of struggle in the courtyard.

The Valkyr carried Landor over to where Alys and Nevitta had lowered their improvised rope. He trussed Landor up like a butchered boar and called to them. 'Haul him up!'

Landor disappeared into the window and the rope came down again. Kieron climbed hand over hand after the vanished courtier. Within seconds he stood among his warriors again, and the courtyard was empty.

'Landor!' Kieron splashed wine in the unconscious man's face. 'Landor, wake up!'

The courtier stirred and opened his eyes. Immediately they filmed with fear. A hostile circle of faces looked down at him. Kieron, his dark eyes flaming. Alys . . . the great red face of Nevitta, framed by the winged helmet . . . other savage looking Valkyrs. It was to Landor a scene from the legendary Seventh Hell of the Great Destroyer.

'If you want to live, talk,' said Kieron. 'What are you doing here on Kalgan? It must be a message of importance you carry. Ivane would have sent someone else if it weren't.'

'I . . . I carry no message, Kieron.'

Kieron nodded to Nevitta who drew his dagger and placed it against Landor's throat.

'We have no time for lies, Landor,' said Kieron.

To emphasize the point, Nevitta pressed the blade tighter against the pulse in the First Lord's neck. Landor screamed.

'Don't . . . !'

'Talk—or I'll cut the gizzard out of you!' Nevitta growled.

'All right! All right! But take that knife away . . . !'

'Ivane sent you here.'

Landor nodded soundlessly.

'Why?'

'I . . . I . . . was to tell Freka that . . . that his men failed to . . . to . . .'

'To kill me!' finished Alys angrily. 'What else?'

'I . . . was also to tell him that the rest of the plan was . . . was . . . carried out . . . successfully.'

'Damn you, don't talk in riddles!' Kieron said. 'What "plan"?'

'The . . . the Emperor is dead,' Landor blurted, eyes wild with terror. 'But not by my hand! I swear it! Not by my hand!'

Alys choked back a cry of pain.

'Toran! Poor . . . Toran . . .'

Kieron took the terrified courtier by the throat and shook him.

'You filthy swine! Who did it? *Who killed the Emperor?*'

'*Ivane!*' gasped Landor. 'The people do not know he is dead and she awaits the star-king's invasion to proclaim herself Empress! . . . In the god's name, Kieron, don't kill me! I speak the truth!'

'Freka helped plan this?' demanded Kieron.

'He is Ivane's man,' stammered Landor, 'but I know nothing of him! Nothing, Kieron! The warlock Geller brought him to Ivane five years ago . . . that is all I know!'

Geller of the Marshes . . . again. Kieron felt the awful dread seeping through his anger. Somehow the connection between Geller and Freka must be discovered. Somehow . . . !

Kieron turned away from the terrified Landor. The picture was shaping now. Freka and Ivane. The star-kings' rebellion. Toran . . . murdered.

'Keep this hound under guard!' ordered Kieron.

Landor was led away, shaken and weak.

'Nevittal'

'Sir?'

'You and the princess will go back to the ship as you came.'

She must be taken to safety at once. As soon as that pig is missed, we'll have visitors . . .'

'No, Kieron! I won't go!' cried Alys.

'You must. If you are captured on Kalgan now it will mean a *carte blanche* for Ivane.'

'But then you must come!'

'I can't. If I tried to leave here now, Freka would detain me by force. I know his plans.' He turned again to Nevitta. 'She goes with you, Nevitta. By force if necessary.'

'Return to Valkyr and gather the tribes. We can do nothing without men at our backs. One of the ships will remain here with me and the men. We will try to get clear after we are certain that—' He looked over at the slim girl, his eyes sombre—'that Her Majesty is safe.'

The Valkyr warriors in the room straightened, a subtle change in their expression as they watched Alys. A gulf had suddenly opened between this girl and their chieftain. They felt it too. One by one they dropped to their knees before her. Alys made a protesting gesture, her eyes bright with tears. She saw the chasm opening, and fought it futilely. But when Kieron, too, went to his knees, she knew it was *so*. In one fleeting moment, they had changed from lover and beloved to sovereign and vassal.

She forced back the tears and raised her head proudly; as Galactic Empress, Heiress to the Thousand Emperors, she accepted the homage of her fighting men.

'My lord of Valkyr,' she said in a low, unsteady voice. 'My love and affection for you—and these warriors will never be forgotten. If we live . . .'

Kieron rose to his full height, naked sword extended in his hands.

'Your Imperial Majesty,' he spoke the words formally and slowly, regretting what was gone. 'The men of Valkyr are yours. To the death.'

Kieron watched Nevitta and Alys vanish down the long, gloomy hall outside the Valkyr chambers—to all appearances a warrior chieftain and his slave-girl ordered away by their master. Even then, thought Kieron bleakly, there was danger. He saw them pass one sentry, two . . . three . . . They turned the corner and were gone, Kieron's hopes and fears riding with them.

Already, there were sounds of confusion in the Citadel of Neg. Men were searching for the vanished Landor. Searching quietly, reflected Kieron with grim satisfaction, for the visiting star-kings must not know that Freka the Unknown held familiar audience with the Imperial First Lord of Space. Spur of the moment hunting parties and entertainments were keeping the visitors occupied while the Kalgan soldiery searched.

Kieron weighed his chances of escape and found them small indeed. They dared not stir from their quarters in the Citadel until the roar of Nevitta's spaceship told that the Empress was safely away. And meanwhile, the search for Landor drew nearer.

An hour passed, the sand in the glass running with agonizing slowness. Once Kieron thought he heard the beat of hooves on the drawbridge of the Citadel, but he could not be certain.

Two hours. Kieron paced the floor of the Valkyr chambers, his twelve remaining warriors armed, alert, watching him. Nervously he fingered the hilt of his sword.

Another hour in the grey, eternal twilight. Still no sound of a spaceship rising. Kieron's anxiety grew to gargantuan proportions. The search for Landor came closer steadily. Kieron could hear the soldiers tramping the stone corridors and causeways of the Citadel.

Suddenly there was a knock at the barred door to the Valkyrs' quarters.

'Open! In the name of the lord of Kalgan!'

A Valkyr near the door replied languidly, 'Our master sleeps. Go away.'

The knocking continued. 'It is regretted that we must disturb him, but a slave of the household has escaped. We must search for him.'

'Would you disturb the Warlord of Valkyr's repose for a slave, barbarians?' demanded the warrior at the door in a hurt tone of voice. 'Go away.'

The officer in the hallway was beginning to lose patience.

'Open, I say! Or we'll break in!'

'Do,' offered the Valkyr pleasantly. 'I have a sword that has been too long dry.'

How Landor must be sweating in that back room, Kieron thought wryly, thinking that the Valkyrs would rather kill him than let his message reach Freka. But Landor's death would

serve no useful purpose now. Time! Time was needed. Time enough to let Nevitta get Alys out of danger!

Kieron stepped to the door, hoping that some warriors of the Outer Marches might possibly be within earshot and catch the implication of his words. 'Kieron of Valkyr speaks!' he cried. 'We have Landor of Earth here! Landor, the First Lord—is *that* the slave you seek?'

But the only response was the sudden crash of a ram against the panels of the wooden door. Kieron prepared to fight. Still, no sound of a spaceship rising . . .

The door collapsed, and a flood of Kalgan warriors poured into the room, weapons flashing.

Savagely, the Valkyrs closed with them, and the air rang with the metallic clash of steel. No mercy was asked and none was given. Kieron cut a circle of death with his long, outworld weapon, the fighting blood of a hundred generations of warriors singing in his ears. The savage chant of the Edge rose above the confused sounds of battle. A man screamed in agony as his arm was severed by a blow from a Valkyr blade, and he waved the stump desperately, spattering the milling men with dark blood. A Valkyr warrior went down, locked in a death-embrace with a Kalgan warrior, driving his dagger into his enemy again and again even as he died. Kieron crossed swords with a guardsman, forcing him backward until the Kalgan slipped on the flagstones made slippery with blood and went down with a sword-cut from throat to groin.

The Valkyrs were cutting down their opponents, but numbers were beginning to tell. Two Valkyrs went down before fresh onslaughts. Another, and another, and still another. Kieron felt the burning touch of a dagger wound. He looked down and saw that a thrust from someone in the *melee* had slashed him to the bone. His side was slick with blood and the white ribs showed along the ten inch gash.

Now, Kieron stood back to back with his two remaining companions. The other Valkyrs were down, lying still on the bloody floor. Kieron caught a glimpse of Freka's tall figure behind his guardsman and he lunged for him, suddenly blind with fury. Two Kalgan guards engaged him and he lost sight of Freka. A Valkyr went down with a thrust in the belly. Kieron took another wound in the arm. He could not tell how badly hurt he was, but

faintness from the loss of blood was telling on him. It was getting hard to see clearly. Darkness seemed to be flickering like a black flame just beyond his range of vision. He saw Freka again and tried to reach him. Again he failed, blocked by a Kalgan soldier. A thrown sword whistled past him and imbedded itself in the last Valkyr's chest. The man sank to the floor in silence, and Kieron fought alone.

He saw the blade of an officer descending, but he could not ward it off. And as it fell, a great hissing roar sounded beyond the open window. Kieron almost smiled. Alys was safe . . .

He lifted his sword to parry the descending stroke. Weakened, the best he could do was deflect it slightly. The blade caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head and he staggered to his knees. He tried to raise his weapon again . . . tried to fight on . . . but he could not. Slowly, reluctantly, he sank to the floor as darkness welled up out of the bloody flagstones to engulf him . . .

V

Kieron stirred, the pulsing ache in his side piercing the reddish veil of unconsciousness. Under him, he could feel wet stones that stank of death and filth. He moved painfully, and the throbbing agony grew worse, making him teeter precariously between consciousness and the dark.

He was stiff and cold. Hurt badly, too, he thought vaguely. His wounds had not been tended. Very carefully, he opened his eyes. They told him what he had already known. He was in a dark cell, filthy and damp. A sick chill shook him. Teeth chattering, huddled on the stone floor, Kieron sank again into unconsciousness.

When he awoke again, he was burning with fever and a cold bowl of solidified, greasy gruel lay beside him. His tongue felt thick and swollen, but the sharp agony of his wounded side had subsided to a dull hurt. With a great effort, he dragged himself into a corner of the dungeon and propped himself up facing the iron-bound door.

His searching hands found that he had been stripped of his harness and weapons. He was naked, smeared with filth and

dried blood. As he moved he felt a renewed flow of warmth flooding down from his torn flank. The wound had reopened. Sweat was streaking the caked blood on his cheek. His mind wandered in a feverish delirium—a nightmare dream in which the tall, coldly arrogant figure of Freka seemed to fill all space and all time. Kieron's over-bright eyes glittered with animal hate. . . .

Somehow, he felt that the hated Kalgan was nearby. He tried to keep his eyes open, but the lids seemed weighted. His head sagged and the fever took him again into the ebony darkness of some fantastic intergalactic night where weird shapes danced and whirled in hideous joyousness . . .

The rattling of the door-lock woke him. It might have been minutes later or days. Kieron had no way of knowing. He felt light-headed and giddy. He watched the door open with fever-bright eyes. A jailer carrying a flambeau entered and the light blinded Kieron. He shielded his face with his hand. There was a voice speaking to him. A voice he knew . . . and hated. With a shuddering effort, he took a grip on his staggering mind, his hate sustaining him now. Moving his hands away from his face, he looked up—into the icy eyes of Freka the Unknown.

'So you're awake at last,' the Kalgan said.

Kieron made no reply. He could feel the fury burning deep inside him.

Freka held a jewelled dagger in his hands, toying with it idly. Kieron watched the shards of light leaping from the faceted gems in the liquid torchlight. The slender blade shimmered, blue and silvery in the Kalgan's hands.

'I have been told that the Lady Alys was with you—here on Kalgan. Is this true?'

Alys . . . Kieron thought vaguely of her for a moment, but somehow the picture brought sadness. He put her out of his mind and squinted up at Freka's gemmed dagger, unable to take his eyes from the glittering weapon.

'Can you speak?' demanded Freka. 'Was Toran's sister with you?'

Kieron watched the weapon, a feral brilliance growing like a flame in his dark eyes.

Freka shrugged. 'Very well, Kieron. It makes no difference. Does it interest you to know that the armies are gathering?'

Earth will be ours within four weeks.' His voice was cold, unemotional. 'You realize, of course, that you cannot be allowed to live.'

Kieron said nothing. Very carefully he gathered his strength. The dagger . . . the dagger . . . !

'I will not risk war with Valkyr by killing you now. But you will be tried by a council of star-kings on Earth when we have done what we must do . . . '

Kieron stared hard at the slender weapon, his hate pounding in his fevered mind. He drew a deep, shuddering breath. Freka spun the blade idly, setting the jewels afire.

'We should have taken you the moment Landor was missed,' mused the Kalgan. 'But . . . it really doesn't matter now . . . '

Kieron's taut muscles uncoiled in a snakelike, lashing movement. He hit Freka below the knees with all his fevered strength and the Kalgan went down without a sound, the slim dagger clattering on the slimy floor of the cell. The guard leaped forward. Kieron's searching hand closed about the hilt of the dagger. With a sound of pure animal rage in his throat he drove it into Freka's unprotected chest. Twice again his hand rose and fell, and then the guard caught him full in the face with a booted foot and the light of the torch faded again into inky blackness . . .

In the darkness, time lost its meaning. Kieron woke a dozen times, feeling the dull throbbing ache of his wounds and then fading again into unconsciousness. He ate—or was fed—enough to keep him alive, but he had no memory of it. He floated in a red-tinged sea of black, unreal, frightening. He screamed or sobbed as the phantasms of his sick dreams dictated, but through it all ran a single thread of elation. Freka, the hated one, was dead. No horror of nightmare or delirium could strip him of that one grip on life. Freka was dead. He remembered vaguely the feel of the dagger plunging again and again into his tormentor's breast. Sometimes he even forgot why he had hated Freka, but he clung to the knowledge that he had killed him the way a drowning man clings to the last suffocating breath.

Sounds filtered into Kieron's dungeon. Sounds that were familiar. The hissing roar of spaceships. Then later the awful susurration of mob sounds. Kieron lay sprawled on the stones of his cell-

floor, not hearing, lost in the fantasmagoric stupor of delirium. His wounds still untended, only the magnificent body of a warrior helped him cling to the thread of life.

Other sounds came. The crash of rams and the clatter of falling masonry. The shrieks of men and women dying. The ringing cacophony of weapons and the curses of fighting men. Hours passed and the din grew louder, closer, in the heart of the Citadel of Neg itself. The torches on the outer cellblocks guttered out and were left untended. The sounds of fighting rose to a wild pitch, interlaced with the inhuman, animal sounds of a mob gone mad.

At last Kieron stirred, some of the familiar sounds of battle striking buried chords in his fevered mind. He listened to the advancing clash of weapons until it rang just beyond his dungeon door.

He dragged himself into his corner again and crouched there, the feral light in his eyes brilliant now. His hands itched for killing. He flexed the fingers painfully and waited.

The silence was sudden and as complete as the hush of the tomb.

Kieron waited.

The door was flung wide, and men bearing torches rushed into the cell. Kieron lunged savagely for the first one, hands seeking a throat.

'Kieron!' Nevitta threw himself backward violently. Kieron clung to him, his face a fevered mask of hate. *'Kieron! It is I . . . Nevitta!'*

Kieron's hands fell away from the old warrior and he stood swaying, squinting against the light of the torches. *'Nevitta . . . Nevitta?'*

A wild laugh came from the prisoner's cracked lips. He looked about him, into the strained faces of his own fighting men.

He took one step and pitched forward into the arms of Nevitta, who carried him like a child up into the light, tears streaking his grizzled cheeks . . .

For three weeks Alys and Nevitta nursed Kieron, sucking the poison of his untended wounds with their mouths and bathing him to break the fiery grip of the fever. At last they won. Kieron opened his eyes—and they were sane and clear.

'How long?' Kieron asked faintly.

'We were gone from Kalgan twenty days . . . you have lain here twenty-one,' Alys said thankfully.

'Why did you come back here?' Kieron demanded bitterly. 'You have lost an Empire!'

'We came for you, Kieron,' Nevitta said. 'For our king.'

'But . . . Alys . . . ' Kieron protested.

'I would not have the Great Throne, Kieron,' said Alys, 'if it meant leaving you to rot in a cell!'

Kieron turned his face to the wall. Because of him, the star-kings fought Ivane's battle. And by now they would have won. The only thing that had been done was the killing of the treacherous Freka. He held Kalgan now, for the Valkyrs had returned seeking their Warlord after Freka's plan had stripped the planet of fighting men—and the mobs had done the Valkyr's work for them. But two worlds were not an Empire of stars. Alys had been cheated. Because of him.

No! thought Kieron, by the Seven Hells, no! They could not be defeated so easily. There were five thousand warriors with him now. If need be, he would fight the Imperium's massed forces to win Alys' rightful place on the throne of Gilmer of Kaidor!

'Let me up,' Kieron demanded. 'If we hit them on Earth before they have a chance to consolidate, there's still a chance!'

'There is no hurry, Kieron,' said Nevitta holding him in the bed with a great hand. 'Freka and the star-kings have already . . .'

'*Freka!*' Kieron sat bolt upright.

'Why, yes . . . ' murmured Nevitta in perplexity. 'Freka.'

'That's impossible!'

'We have had information from the Imperial City, Kieron. Freka is there,' said Alys.

Kieron sank back on the pillows. Had he dreamed killing the Kalgan? No! It wasn't possible! He had driven the blade into his chest three times . . . driven it deep.

With an effort he rose from the bed. 'Order my charger, Nevittal'

'But sir!'

'Quickly, Nevittal! There is no time!'

Nevitta saluted reluctantly and withdrew.

'Help me with my harness, Alys,' ordered Kieron forgetful of majesty.

'Kieron, you can't ride!'

'I have to ride, Alys. Listen to me. I drove a dagger into Freka three times . . . and he has not died! One man can tell us why, and we must know. *That man is Geller of the Marshes!*'

Neg was a shambles. The advent of the Valkyrs had been a signal for the brutish population to go mad. Mobs had thronged the streets, smashing, killing and looting. The few Kalgan warriors left behind to guard the city had had to aid the Valkyrs in restoring order. It seemed to Kieron, as he rode along the now sullenly silent streets, that Kalgan and Neg had been deliberately abandoned as having served a purpose. If Freka still lived, as they said, then he was something unique among men, and not meant for so unimportant a world as Kalgan.

Shops and houses had been gutted by fire. Goods of all kinds were strewn about the streets, and here and there a body—twisted and dismembered—awaited the harassed burial detachments that roamed the shattered megalopolis.

Kieron and Alys rode slowly toward the marshy slums of the lower city, Nevitta following them at a short distance. The three war horses, creatures bred to war and destruction, paced along easily, flaring nostrils taking in the familiar smells of a ruined city.

Along the street of the Black Flame there was nothing left standing whole. Every hovel, every tenement had been gutted and looted by the mobs. Presently, Kieron drew rein before a shuttered shanty between two structures of fire-blackened stone.

Nevitta rode up with a protest. 'Why do you seek this beloved of demons, Kieron?' he asked fearfully. 'No good can come of this!'

Kieron stared at the shanty. It stared back at him with veiled ghoulish eyes. The writhing mists shrouded the grey street in the eternal twilight of Kalgan. Kieron felt his hands trembling on the reins. This was the lair of the warlock.

The stench of the marshes was thick and now the mists turned to soft rain. Kieron dismounted.

'Wait for me here,' he ordered Nevitta and Alys.

With pounding heart, he drew his sword and started for the

door that gaped like the black mouth of a plague victim. Alys touched his elbow, disregarding his instructions. Her eyes were bright with fear, but she followed him closely. Secretly glad of her companionship, Kieron breathed a prayer to his Valkyr gods and stepped inside. . . .

The place was a wreck. Old books lay everywhere, ripped and tattered. In a corner, someone had tried to make a bonfire of a pile of manuscripts and broken furniture and had half succeeded.

'The mob has been here,' Alys said succinctly.

Kieron led the way through the rubble toward the door of a back room. Carefully, he pushed it ajar with the point of his blade. It creaked menacingly, revealing another chamber—one filled with strange machines and twisted tubes of glass. Great black boxes stood along one wall, coils of bright wire running into the jumbled mass of shattered machines that dominated the center of the room. The air of the cold, silent room had a strange and unpleasant tang. The smell, thought the Valkyr, of the Great Destroyer!

The tip of his sword touched one of the bright copper coils springing from the row of black boxes along the wall, and a tiny blue spark leaped up the blade. Kieron yanked his weapon away, his heart racing wildly. A thin curl of smoke hung in the air, and the steel of the blade was pitted. Kieron fought down the urge to run in terror.

'I'm afraid, Kieron!' whispered Alys, clinging to him.

Kieron took her hand and moved cautiously around the pile of broken machinery. He found Geller then, and tried to stop Alys from seeing.

'The Great Destroyer he served failed him,' Kieron said slowly.

The warlock was dead. The mob, terrified—and hating what they could not understand—had killed him cruelly. The staring eyes mocked Kieron, the blackened tongue lolled stupidly out of the dry lips. Geller's mystery, thought Kieron, was still safe with him. . . .

On the way out, Kieron stopped and picked up the remnants of a book of sigils. It was incredibly old, for the characters on the cover were those of the legendary First Empire. With some difficulty he made out the title.

“Perpetually Regenerating Warps and their Application in Interstellar Engines”. . . .’

The words meant nothing to him. He dropped the magic book and picked up two others. This time his eyes widened.

‘What is it, Kieron?’ Alys asked fearfully.

‘Long ago,’ Kieron said thoughtfully, ‘on Valkyr, it was said that the ancients of the First Empire were familiar with the secrets of the Great Destroyer . . .’

‘That’s true. That is why the Interregnum came, and the dark ages,’ said Alys.

‘I wonder,’ mused Kieron looking at the books. ‘What was this Geller known best for?’

Alys shuddered. ‘For his homunculi.’

‘The ancients, it is said, knew many things. Even how to make . . . artificial servants. Robots, they were called.’ He handed her the book. ‘Can you read this ancient script?’

Alys read aloud, her voice unsteady.

“First Principles of Robotics.”

‘And this one?’

“Incubation and Gestation of Androids” . . . !’

Kieron of Valkyr stood in the silent, wrecked laboratory of the dead warlock Geller, his medieval mind trying to break free of the bondage of a millennium of superstition and ignorance. He understood now . . . many things.

VI

Like great silver fish leaping up into the bowl of night, the ships of the Valkyr fleet rose from Kalgan. Within the pulsing hulls five thousand warriors rode, ready for battle. Against the mighty forces of the assembled star-kings, the army of Valkyr counted for almost nothing; but the savage fighting men of the Edge carried with them their talisman—Alys Imperatrix, uncrowned sovereign of the Galaxy, Heiress to the Thousand Emperors—the daughter of their beloved warrior-prince, Gilmer, conqueror of Kaidor.

In the lead vessel, Nevitta dogged the harried Navigators, urging greater speed. Below decks, the war chargers snorted and

stomped the steel decks, sensing the tension of the coming clash in the close, smoky air of the spaceships.

Kieron stood beside the forward port with Alys, looking out into the strangely distorted night of space. As speed increased, the stars vanished and the night that pressed against the flanks of the hurtling ship grew grey and unsteady. Still velocity climbed, and then beyond the great curving glass screen there was nothing. Not blackness, or emptiness. A soul-chilling nothingness that twisted the mind and refused to be accepted by human eyes. Hyperspace.

Kieron drew the draperies closed and the observation lounge of the huge ancient liner grew dim and warm.

'What's ahead, Kieron?' the girl asked with a sigh. 'More fighting and killing?'

The Valkyr shook his head. 'Your Imperium, Your Majesty,' he said formally, 'a crown of stars that a thousand generations have gathered for you. That lies ahead.'

'Oh, Kieron! Can't you forget the Empire for the space of an hour?' Alys demanded angrily.

The Warlord of Valkyr looked at his Empress in perplexity. There were times when women were hard to fathom.

'Forget it, I say!' the girl cried, her eyes suddenly flaming.

'If Your Majesty wishes, I'll not speak of it again,' said Kieron stiffly.

Alys took a step toward him. 'There was a time when you looked at me as a woman. When you *thought* of me as a woman! Am I so different now?'

Kieron studied her slim body and sensuously patrician face. 'There was a time when I thought of you as a child, too. Those times pass. You are now my Empress. I am your vassal. Command me. I'll fight for you. Die for you, if need be. Anything. But by the Seven Hells, Alys, don't torture me with favors I can't claim!'

'So I must command, then?' She stamped her foot angrily. 'Very well, I command you, Valkyr!'

'Lady, I'll never be a Consort!'

The girl's face flushed. 'Did I ask it? I know I can't make a lapdog out of you, Kieron.'

'Stop it, Alys,' Kieron muttered heavily.

'Kieron,' she said softly, 'I've loved you since I was a child. I love you now. Does that mean nothing to you?'

'Everything, Alys.' Lust rose as he felt the tensions in her.

'Then for the space of this voyage, Kieron, forget the Empire. Forget everything except that I love you. Take what I offer you. There is no Empress here . . .'

The silver fleet speared down into the atmosphere of the mother planet. Earth lay beneath them like a globe of azure. The spaceships fanned out into a wedge as they split the thin cold air high above the sprawling megalopolis of the Imperial City.

The capital lay ringed about with the somnolent shapes of the star-kings' great armada. Somewhere down there, Kieron knew, Freka waited. Freka the Unknown. The unkillable? Kieron wondered. For weapons he had his sword and a little knowledge. He prayed it would be enough. It had to be. Five thousand warriors could not defeat the assembled might of the star-kings.

Shunning the spaceport, Kieron led his fleet to a landing on the grassy esplanade that surrounded the city. As the hurried debarkation of men and horses began, Kieron could see a cavalry force massing before the gates to oppose them. He cursed and urged his men to greater speed. Horses reared and neighed; weapons glinted in the late afternoon sunlight.

Within the hour the debarkation was complete, and Kieron sat armed and mounted before the serried ranks of his warriors. The afternoon was filled with the flash of steel and the blazing glory of gonfalons as he ordered his ranks for battle . . . a battle that he hoped with all his heart to avoid.

Across the plain, the Valkyr could make out the pennon of Doorn in the first rank of the advancing defenders. Kieron ordered Nevitta to stay by the Empress in the rear ranks and to escort her forward with all ceremony if he called for her.

Alys rode a white charger and had clad herself in the panoply of a Valkyr warrior maid. Her hips were girded in a harness of linked steel plates, her long legs free to ride astride. Over her chest and breasts was laced a hauberk of chain mail that shimmered in the slanting sunlight. On her head a Valkyr's winged helmet—and from under it her golden hair fell in cascades of light to her shoulders. A silver cloak stood out behind her as she galloped past the ranks of Valkyrs, and they cheered her as she

went. Kieron, watching her, thought she resembled the ancient war-goddess of his own world—imperious, regal.

With a cry, Kieron ordered his riders forward and the glittering ranks swept forward across the esplanade like a turbulent wave, spear-heads agleam, gonfalons fluttering. He rode far ahead, seeking a meeting with old Eric of Doorn, his father's friend.

He signalled, and the two surging masses of warriors slowed as the two star-kings rode to a meeting between the armies. Kieron raised an open right hand in the sign of truce and old Eric did likewise. Their caparisoned chargers tossed their heads angrily at being restrained and eyed each other with white-rimmed eyes.

Kieron drew rein, facing the old star-king.

'I greet you,' he said formally.

'Do you come in friendship, or in war?' asked Eric.

'That will depend on the Empress,' Kieron replied.

The lord of Doorn smiled, and there was scorn on his face. He was remembering Kalgan and Kieron's reluctance. 'You will be pleased to know, then, that the Imperial Ivane bids you enter her city in peace—so that you may do her homage and throw yourself on her mercy for your crimes against Kalgan.'

Kieron gave a short, steely laugh. So Ivane had already learned of the Valkyr sack of Kalgan. 'I do not know any "Imperial Ivane," Eric,' he said coldly. 'When I spoke of the Empress, I meant the true Empress, Alys, the daughter of your lord and mine, Gilmer of Kaidor.' He signalled Alys and Nevitta forward.

The gonfalons of the Valkyr line dipped in salute as Alys trotted through the ranks. She drew rein, facing the amazed Eric.

'Noble lady!' he gasped. 'We were told you were dead!'

'And so I might have been, had Ivane had her way!'

The old star-king stammered in confusion. There was more here than he could understand. Only a week before, he and the other star-kings had done homage to Ivane and hailed her as their savior from the oppressions of the Emperor Toran, and the nearest living kin to the late Gilmer. And now . . . !

Eric frowned. 'If we have been made fools, Freka must answer for this!'

'And now,' asked Kieron grimly, 'do we enter the city in peace or do we cut our way in?'

Eric signalled his men to swing in beside the ranked Valkyrs and the whole mass of armed men moved through the fading afternoon toward the gates of the Imperial City.

It was dusk by the time the cavalcade reached the walls of the Imperial Palace. Kieron called a halt and ordered his men to rest on their arms. Taking only Nevitta and Alys with him, he joined Eric of Doorn in challenging the Janizaries of the Palace Guard.

They were passed by the stolid Pleiadenes without comment, for the lord of Doorn was known as a vassal of the Imperial Ivane. Faces set, the small party strode up the wide curving stairway that led into the Hall of the Great Throne. The courtiers had been warned by the shouts of the people in the streets that something was happening, and they had already begun to gather in the Throne Room.

He had come a long way, thought Kieron, from the day when he had stood before the Throne begging an audience with Toran. Now, everything hung on his one chance to prove his case—and Alys’—to the assembled nobles.

Kieron noted with some concern that the Palace Guards were gathering too. They covered each exit to the chamber, cutting off retreat.

By now, the Hall of the Great Throne was jammed with courtiers and star-kings, all tensely silent—waiting. Nor did they wait long.

With a blast of trumpets and a rolling of tympani, Ivane entered the Throne Room. Some of the courtiers knelt, but others stood in confusion, looking from Alys to Ivane and back again.

Kieron studied Ivane coldly. She was, he had to admit, a regal figure. A tall woman with hair the color of jet. A face that seemed chiseled out of marble. Dark, predatory eyes and a figure like a Dawn Age goddess. She stood before the Great Throne of the Empire, mantled in the sable robe of the Imperium—a robe as black as space and spangled with diamonds to resemble the stars of the Imperial Galaxy. On her head rested the irridium tiara of Imperatrix.

Ivane swept the Hall with a haughty stare that stung like a lash. When her eyes found Alys standing beside Kieron, they brightened, became feral.

'Guards!' she commanded. 'Seize that woman! She is the killer of the Emperor Toran!'

A murmuring filled the chamber. The Janizaries pressed forward. Kieron drew his sword and leaped to the dais beside Ivane. She did not shrink back from him.

'Touch her, and Ivane dies!' shouted Kieron, his point at Ivane's naked breast. The murmuring subsided and the Janizaries pulled up short.

'Now, you are all going to listen to me!' shouted Kieron from the dais. 'This woman under my blade is a murderess and plotter, and I can prove it!'

Ivane's face was strained and white. Not from fear of his sword, Kieron knew.

'In the Palace dungeons you will likely find Landor . . .' Kieron continued. 'He will be there because he knew of Ivane's plottings and talked too much when he had a dagger at his throat. He will confirm what I say!'

'This woman plotted to usurp the Imperium *as long as five years ago!* It may have been longer . . .' He turned to Ivane. 'How long does it take to incubate an *android*, Ivane? A year? Two? And then to train him, school him so that every move he makes is intended to further your aims? How long does all that take?'

Ivane uttered a scream of terror now. 'Freka! Call Freka!'

Kieron dropped his sword point and stepped away from Ivane as though she were contaminated. There was little danger from *her* now—but there was still another.

Freka appeared at the edge of the dais, his tall form towering above the courtiers. 'You called for me, Imperial Ivane?'

Ivane stared at Kieron with hate-filled eyes. 'You have failed me! *Kill him now!*'

Kieron whirled and caught Freka's blade on his own. The courtiers drew back, giving them room to fight. No one made a move to interfere. It was known that Valkyrs had sacked the city of Neg, and according to the warrior code the two warlords must be allowed to fight to the death if they wished.

Kieron made no attack. Instead he retreated before the expressionless Freka.

'Did you know, Freka,' asked Kieron softly, 'that Geller of the Marshes is dead? He was your father in a way, wasn't he?'

Freka made no reply, and for a moment the only sound in the hushed chamber was the ring of blades.

Suddenly Kieron lunged. His sword pierced Freka from breast to back. The Valkyr stepped back and pulled his blade clear. The crowd gasped, for Freka the Unknown did not fall . . .

'Are you really unkillable?' breathed Kieron. 'I wonder!'

Again he lunged under the mechanical guard of the Kalgan. Again his blade sank deep. Freka backed away for a moment, still alert and unwounded.

Kieron shouted derisively at the star-kings: 'Great warriors! Do you see? You have followed the leadership of an android! A homunculus spawned by the warlock Geller!'

A gasping roar went up in the chamber. A sound of superstitious horror and growing anger.

Kieron parried a thrust and brought his blade down on Freka's sword arm. Hard. A sword clattered to the flagstones—still gripped by a slowly relaxing hand. There was no blood. The android still moved in, eyes expressionless, his one hand reaching for his enemy. Kieron struck again. A clean cut opened from shoulder to belly, slicing the artificial tendons and leaving the android helpless but still erect. Kieron raised and lowered his blade in glittering arcs. Freka . . . or the thing that had been Freka . . . collapsed in a grotesque heap. Still it moved. Kieron passed his point again and again through the quivering mass until at long last it was still. Somewhere a woman fainted.

A thick silence fell over the assemblage. All eyes turned to Ivane. She stood staring at the remnants of the thing that had been . . . almost . . . a man. Her hand fluttered at her throat.

Alys' voice cut through the heavy stillness. 'Arrest that woman for the murder of my brother Toran!'

But the crowd of courtiers was thinking of other things. Jaded and cynical, they had seen with their own eyes that Ivane was a familiar of the dreaded Great Destroyer. Someone cried: 'Witch! Burn her!'

The mass of courtiers and warriors swept forward, screaming for the kill. Kieron leaped for the dais, his sword still bared.

'I'll kill the first one who sets foot on the Great Throne!' he cried.

But Ivane had heard the crowd sounds. The black mantle slipped from her shoulders, and she stood stripped to the waist, like a marble goddess—her eyes recapturing some of their icy hauteur. Then, before she could be stopped, she had taken a jewelled dagger and driven it deep into her breast.

Kieron caught her as she fell, feeling the warm blood staining his hands. He eased her down on the foot of the Great Throne and laid his ear to her breast.

There was no pulse. Ivane was dead.

Before the assembled Court, the Warlord of Valkyr knelt before his Empress. The star-kings had gone, and the Valkyrs were the last outworld warriors remaining in the Imperial City. Now, they too, would take their leave.

The Empress sat on the Great Throne, mantled in sable. Somehow, the huge throne and the vast vaulted chamber seemed to make her look small and frail.

‘Your Imperial Majesty,’ said Kieron, ‘have we your leave to go?’

Alys’ eyes were bright with tears. She leaned forward so that none but Kieron might hear. ‘Stay a while yet, Kieron. At least let us say our goodbyes alone and not . . .’ She looked about the crowded Throne Room, ‘. . . not here.’

Kieron shook his head mutely. Aloud, he said again, ‘Have I Your Majesty’s permission to return to Valkyr?’

‘Kieron . . .’ whispered Alys. ‘Please . . .’

He looked up at her once, pain in his eyes, but he did not speak.

Alys knew then that the gulf had opened between them again; that this time, it was for the rest of their lives. The tears came and streaked her cheeks as she lifted her head and spoke for all the Court to hear.

‘Permission is granted, My Lord of Valkyr. You . . . you may return to Valkyr.’ And then she whispered, ‘And my love goes with you, Kieron!’

Kieron raised her jewelled hands to his lips and kissed them. . . . Then he arose and turned on his heel to stride swiftly from the Great Hall.

The problems of inter-galactic sociology are incisively extrapolated by Idris Seabright in this brief, yet comprehensive study of a culture uneasily propped up by 'bread and circuses.' For all the luminous beauty of her story-telling, it is a poignant picture that Miss Seabright sketches—that of a once creative citizenry using its triumphs to gratify no more than a lust for vicarious blood-letting. You will, of course, be struck by the parallel between this empire of the future and that one of our not too remote past, the Roman. One hopes no actual future culture will fail to heed the lesson the Romans imperially ignored: even slaves and gladiators are human and can love.

BRIGHTNESS FALLS FROM THE AIR

by Idris Seabright

Kerr used to go into the tepidarium of the identification bureau to practise singing. The tepidarium was a big room, filled almost from wall to wall by the pool of glittering preservative, and he liked its acoustics. The bodies of the bird people would drift a little back and forth in the pellucid fluid as he sang, and he liked to look at them. If the tepidarium was a little morbid as a place to practise singing, it was (Kerr used to think) no more morbid than the rest of the world in which he was living. When he had sung for as long as he thought good for his voice—he had no teacher—he would go to one of the windows and watch the luminous trails that meant the bird people were fighting again. The trails would float down slowly against the night sky as if they were made of star dust. But after Kerr met Rhysha, he stopped all that.

Rhysha came to the bureau one evening just as he was going on duty. She had come to claim a body. The bodies of the bird people often stayed in the bureau for a considerable time. Ordinary means of transportation were forbidden to the bird people because of their extra-terrestrial origin, and it was hard for them to get to the bureau to identify their dead. Rhysha made the identification—it was her brother—paid the bureau's fee from a worn purse, and indicated on the proper form the disposal she wanted made of the body. She was quiet and controlled in her

grief. Kerr had watched the televised battles of the bird people once or twice, but this was the first time he had ever seen one of them alive and face to face. He looked at her with interest and curiosity, and then with wonder and delight.

The most striking thing about Rhysha was her glowing, deep turquoise plumage. It covered her from head to heels in what appeared to be a clinging velvet cloak. The colouring was so much more intense than that of the bodies in the tepidarium that Kerr would have thought she belonged to a different species than they.

Her face, under the golden top-knot, was quite human, and so were her slender, leaf-shaped hands; but there was a fantastic, light-boned grace in her movements such as no human being ever had. Her voice was low, with a 'cello's fullness of tone. Everything about her, Kerr thought, was rare and delightful and curious. But there was a shadow in her face, as if a natural gaiety had been repressed by the overwhelming harshness of circumstance.

'Where shall I have the ashes sent?' Kerr asked as he took the form.

She plucked indecisively at her pink lower lip. 'I am not sure. The manager where we are staying has told us we must leave to-night, and I do not know where we will go. Could I come back again to the bureau when the ashes are ready?'

It was against regulations, but Kerr nodded. He would keep the capsule of ashes in his locker until she came. It would be nice to see her again.

She came, weeks later, for the ashes. There had been several battles of the bird people in the interval, and the pool in the tepidarium was full. As Kerr looked at her, he wondered how long it would be before she too was dead.

He asked her new address. It was a fantastic distance away, in the worst part of the city, and after a little hesitation he told her that if she could wait until his shift was over he would be glad to walk back with her.

She looked at him doubtfully. 'It is most kind of you, but—but an earthman was kind to us once. The children used to stone him.'

Kerr had never thought much about the position of the non-human races in his world. If it was unjust, if they were badly

treated he had thought it no more than a particular instance of the general cruelty and stupidity. Now anger flared up in him.

'That's all right,' he said harshly. 'If you don't mind waiting.'

Rhysha smiled faintly. 'No, I don't mind,' she said.

Since there were still some hours to go on his shift, he took her into a small reception room where there was a chaise longue. 'Try to sleep,' he said.

A little before three he came to rouse her, and found her lying quiet but awake. They left the bureau by a side door.

The city was as quiet at this hour as it ever was. All the sign projectors, and most of the street lights, had been turned off to save power, and even the vast, disembodied voices that boomed out of the air all day long and half the night were almost silent. The darkness and quiescence of the city made it seem easy for them to talk as they went through the streets.

Kerr realised afterwards how confident he must have been of Rhysha's sympathy to have spoken to her as freely as he did. And she must have felt an equal confidence in him, for after a little while she was telling him fragments of her history and her people's past without reserve.

'After the earthmen took our planet,' she said, 'we had nothing left they wanted. But we had to have food. Then we discovered that they liked to watch us fight.'

'You fought before the earthmen came?' Kerr asked.

'Yes. But not as we fight now. It was a ritual then, very formal, with much politeness and courtesy. We did not fight to get things from each other, but to find out who was brave and could give us leadership. The earth people were impatient with our ritual—they wanted to see us hurting and being hurt. So we learned to fight as we fight now, hoping to be killed.'

'There was a time, when we first left our planet and went to the other worlds where people liked to watch us, when there were many of us. But there have been many battles since then. Now there are only a few left.'

At the cross street a beggar slouched up to them. Kerr gave him a coin. The man was turning away with thanks when he caught sight of Rhysha's golden top-knot. 'God-damned Extey!' he said in sudden rage. 'Filth! And you, a man, going around with it! Here!' He threw the coin at Kerr.

'Even the beggars!' Rhysha said. 'Why is it, Kerr, you hate us so?'

'Because we have wronged you,' he answered, and knew it was the truth. 'Are we always so unkind, though?'

'As the beggar was? Often . . . it is worse.'

'Rhysha, you've got to get away from here.'

'Where?' she answered simply. 'Our people have discussed it so many times! There is no planet on which there are not already billions of people from earth. You increase so fast!

'And besides, it doesn't matter. You don't need us, there isn't any place for us. We cared about that once, but not any more. We're so tired—all of us, even the young ones like me—we're so tired of trying to live.'

'You mustn't talk like that,' Kerr said harshly. 'I won't let you talk like that. You've got to go on. If we don't need you now, Rhysha, we will.'

From the block ahead of them there came the wan glow of a municipal telescreen. Late as the hour was, it was surrounded by a dense knot of spectators. Their eyes were fixed greedily on the combat that whirled dizzily over the screen.

Rhysha tugged gently at Kerr's sleeve. 'We had better go around,' she said in a whisper. Kerr realised with a pang that there would be trouble if the viewers saw a 'man' and an Extey together. Obediently he turned.

They had gone a block further when Kerr (for he had been thinking) said: 'My people took the wrong road, Rhysha, about two hundred years ago. That was when the council refused to accept, even in principle, any form of population control. By now we're stifling under the pressure of our own numbers, we're crushed shapeless under it. Everything has had to give way to our one basic problem, how to feed an ever-increasing number of hungry mouths. Morality has dwindled into feeding ourselves. And we have the battle sports over the telecast to keep us occupied.'

'But I think—I believe—that we'll get into the right road again sometime. I've read books of history, Rhysha. This isn't the first time we've chosen the wrong road. Some day there'll be room for your people, Rhysha, if only—' he hesitated—'if only because you're so beautiful.'

He looked at her earnestly. Her face was remote and bleak. An

idea came to him. 'Have you ever heard anyone sing, Rhysha?' 'Sing? No, I don't know the word.'

'Listen, then.' He fumbled over his repertory and decided, though the music was not really suited to his voice, on Tamino's song to Pamina's portrait. He sang it for her as they walked along.

Little by little Rhysha's face relaxed. 'I like that,' she said when the song was over. 'Sing more, Kerr.'

'Do you see what I was trying to tell you?' he said at last, after many songs. 'If we could make songs like that, Rhysha, isn't there hope for us?'

'For you, perhaps. Not us,' Rhysha answered. There was anger in her voice. 'Stop it, Kerr. I do not want to be waked.'

But when they parted she clasped hands with him and told him where they could meet again. 'You are really our friend,' she said without coquetry.

When he next met Rhysha, Kerr said: 'I brought you a present. Here.' He handed her a parcel. 'And I've some news, too.'

Rhysha opened the little package. An exclamation of pleasure broke from her lips. 'Oh, lovely! What a lovely thing! Where did you get it, Kerr?'

'In a shop that sells old things, in the back.' He did not tell her he had given ten days' pay for the little turquoise locket. 'But the stones are lighter than I realised. I wanted something that would be the colour of your plumage.'

Rhysha shook her head. 'No, this is the colour it should be. This is right.' She clasped the locket around her neck and looked down at it with pleasure. 'And now, what is the news you have for me?'

'A friend of mine is a clerk in the city of records. He tells me a new planet, near gamma Cassiopeiae, is being opened for colonisation.'

'I've filed the papers, and everything is in order. The hearing will be held on Friday. I'm going to appear on behalf of the Ngayir, your people, and ask that they be allotted space on the new world.'

Rhysha turned white. He started toward her, but she waved him away. One hand was still clasping her locket, that was nearly the colour of her plumage.

The hearing was held in a small auditorium in the basement of the Colonisation building. Representatives of a dozen groups spoke before Kerr's turn came.

'Appearing on behalf of the Ngayir,' the arbitrator read from a form in his hand, 'S 3687 Kerr. And who are the Ngayir, S-Kerr? Some Indian group?'

'No, sir,' Kerr said. 'They are commonly known as the bird people.'

'Oh, a conservationist!' The arbitrator looked at Kerr not unkindly. 'I'm sorry, but your petition is quite out of order. It should never have been filed. Immigration is restricted by executive order to terrestrials. . . .'

Kerr dreaded telling Rhysha of his failure, but she took it with perfect calm.

'After you left I realised it was impossible,' she said.

'Rhysha, I want you to promise me something. I can't tell you how sure I am that humanity is going to need your people sometime. It's true, Rhysha. I'm going to keep trying. I'm not going to give up.'

'Promise me this, Rhysha: promise me that neither you nor the members of your group will take part in the battles until you hear from me again.'

Rhysha smiled. 'All right, Kerr.'

Preserving the bodies of people who have died from a variety of diseases is not without its dangers. Kerr did not go to work that night or the next or for many nights. His dormitory chief, after listening to him shout in delirium for some hours, called a doctor, who filled out a hospital requisition slip.

He was gravely ill, and his recovery was slow. It was nearly five weeks before he was released.

He wanted above all things to find Rhysha. He went to the place where she had been living and found that she had gone, no one knew where. In the end, he went to the identification bureau and begged for his old job there. Rhysha would, he was sure, think of coming to the bureau to get in touch with him.

He was still shaky and weak when he reported for work the next night. He went into the tepidarium about nine o'clock, during a routine inspection. And there Rhysha was.

He did not know her for an instant. The lovely turquoise of

her plumage had faded to a dirty drab. But the little locket he had given her was still around her neck.

He got the big jointed tongs they used for moving bodies out of the pool, and put them in position. He lifted her out very gently and put her down on the edge of the pool. He opened the locket. There was a note inside.

'Dear Kerr,' he read in Rhysha's clear, handsome script, 'you must forgive me for breaking my promise to you. They would not let me see you when you were sick, and we were all so hungry. Besides, you were wrong to think your people would ever need us. There is no place for us in your world.'

'I wish I could have heard you sing again. I liked to hear you sing. Rhysha.'

Kerr looked from the note to Rhysha's face, and back at the note. It hurt too much. He did not want to realise that she was dead.

Outside, one of the vast voices that boomed portentously down from the sky half the night long began to speak: 'Don't miss the newest, fastest battle sport. View the Durga battles, the bloodiest combats ever televised. Funnier than the bird people's battles, more thrilling than an Anda war, you'll . . .'

Kerr gave a cry. He ran to the window and closed it. He could still hear the voice. But it was all that he could do.

After many years of work, the child graduates from grammar school—and is a freshman in high school. After more years of work—he gets to be a freshman again. And if he is very, very wise, he might even get to be a kindergarten student again . . .

IMMIGRANT

by Clifford D Simak

He was the only passenger for Kimon and those aboard the ship lionized him because he was going there.

To land him at his destination the ship went two light-years out of its way, an inconvenience for which his passage money, much as it had seemed to him when he'd paid it back on Earth, did not compensate by half.

But the captain did not grumble. It was, he told Selden Bishop, an honor to carry a passenger for Kimon.

The businessmen aboard sought him out and bought him drinks and lunches and talked expansively of the markets opening up in the new-found solar systems.

But despite all their expansive talk, they looked at Bishop with half-veiled envy in their eyes and they said to him: 'The man who cracks this Kimon situation is the one who'll have it big.'

One by one, each of them contrived to corner him for private conversations and the talk, after the first drink, always turned to billions if he ever needed backing.

Billions—while he sat there with less than twenty credits in his pocket, living in terror against the day when he might have to buy a round of drinks. For he wasn't certain that his twenty credits would stretch to a round of drinks.

The dowagers towed him off and tried to mother him; the young things lured him off and did not try to mother him. And everywhere he went, he heard the whisper behind the half-raised hand:

'To Kimon!' said the whispers. 'My dear, you know what it takes to go to Kimon! An I.Q. rating that's positively fabulous and years and years of study and an examination that not one in a thousand passes.'

It was like that all the way to Kimon.

II

Kimon was a galactic El Dorado, a never-never land, the country at the rainbow's foot. There were few who did not dream of going there, and there were many who aspired, but those who were chosen were a very small percentage of those who tried to make the grade and failed.

Kimon had been reached—either discovered or contacted would be the wrong word to use—more than a hundred years before by a crippled spaceship out of Earth which landed on the planet, lost and unable to go farther.

To this day no one knew for sure exactly what had happened, but it is known that in the end the crew destroyed the ship and settled down on Kimon and had written letters home saying they were staying.

Perhaps the delivery of those letters, more than anything else, convinced the authorities of Earth that Kimon was the kind of place the letters said it was—although later on there was other evidence which weighed as heavily in the balance.

There was, quite naturally, no mail service between Kimon and Earth, but the letters were delivered, and in a most fantastic, although when you think about it, a most logical way. They were rolled into a bundle and placed in a sort of tube, like the pneumatic tubes that are used in industry for interdepartmental communication and the tube was delivered, quite neatly, on the desk of the World Postal Chief in London. Not on the desk of a subordinate, mind you, but on the desk of the chief himself. The tube had not been there when he went to lunch; it was there when he came back, and so far as could be determined, despite a quite elaborate investigation, no one had been seen to place it there.

In time, still convinced that there had been some sort of hoax played, the postal service delivered the letters to the addressees by special messengers who in their more regular employment were operatives of the World Investigative Bureau.

The addressees were unanimous in their belief the letters were genuine, for in most cases the handwriting was recognized and in every letter there were certain matters in the context which seemed to prove that they were *bona fide*.

So each of the addressees wrote a letter in reply and these were inserted in the tube in which the original letters had arrived and the tube was placed meticulously in the same spot where it had been found on the desk of the postal chief.

Then everyone watched and nothing happened for quite some time, but suddenly the tube was gone and no one had seen it go—it had been there one moment and not there the next.

There remained one question and that one soon was answered. In the matter of a week or two the tube reappeared again, just before the end of office hours. The postal chief had been working away, not paying much attention to what was going on, and suddenly he saw that the tube had come back again.

Once again it held letters and this time the letters were crammed with sheafs of hundred-credit notes, a gift from the marooned spacemen to their relatives, although it should be noted immediately that the spacemen themselves probably did not consider that they were marooned.

The letters acknowledged the receipt of the replies that had been sent from Earth and told more about the planet Kimon and its inhabitants.

And each letter carefully explained how come they had hundred-credit notes on Kimon. The notes as they stood, the letters said, were simply counterfeits, made from bills the spacemen had in their pockets, although when Earth's fiscal experts and the Bureau of Investigation men had a look at them there was no way in which you could tell them from the real thing.

But, the letters said, the Kimonian government wished to make right the matter of the counterfeiting. To back the currency the Kimonians, within the next short while, would place on deposit with the World bank materials not only equivalent to their value, but enough additional to set up a balance against which more notes could be issued.

There was, the letters explained, no money as such on Kimon, but since Kimon was desirous of employing the men from Earth, there must be some way to pay them, so if it was all right with the World bank and everyone else concerned . . .

The World bank did a lot of hemming and hawing and talked about profound fiscal matters and deep economic principles, but all this talk dissolved to nothing when in the matter of a day or two several tons of carefully shielded uranium and a couple of

bushels of diamonds were deposited, during the afternoon coffee hour, beside the desk of the bank's president.

With evidence of this sort, there was not much that Earth could do except accept the fact that the planet Kimon was a going concern, that the Earthmen who had landed there were going to stay, and to take the entire situation at face value.

The Kimonians, the letters said, were humanoid and had parapsychic powers and had built a culture which was miles ahead of Earth or any other planet so far discovered in the galaxy.

Earth furbished up a ship, hand-picked a corps of its most persuasive diplomats, loaded down the hold with expensive gifts, and sent the whole business out to Kimon.

Within minutes after landing, the diplomats had been quite undiplomatically booted off the planet. Kimon, it appeared, had no desire to ally itself with a second-rate, barbaric planet. When it wished to establish diplomatic relationships it would say so. Earth people might come to Kimon if they wished and settle there, but not just any Earth person. To come to Kimon, the individual would have to possess not only a certain minimum IQ, but must also have an impressive scholastic record.

And that was the way it was left.

You did not go to Kimon simply because you wished to go there; you worked to go to Kimon.

First of all, you had to have the specified IQ rating and that ruled out ninety-nine per cent or better of Earth's population. Once you had passed the IQ test, you settled down to grueling years of study, and at the end of the years of study you wrote an examination and, once again, most of the aspirants were ruled out. Not more than one in a thousand who took the examinations passed.

Year after year, Earthmen and women dribbled out to Kimon, settled there, prospered, wrote their letters home.

Of those who went out, none came back. Once you had lived on Kimon, you could not bear the thought of going back to Earth.

And yet, in all those years, the sum of knowledge concerning Kimon, its inhabitants and its culture, was very slight indeed. What knowledge there was, the only knowledge that there was, was compiled from the letters delivered meticulously once each week to the desk of the postal chief in London.

The letters spoke of wages and salaries a hundred times the wage and salary that was paid on Earth, of magnificent business opportunities, of the Kimonian culture and the Kimonians themselves, but in no detail, of culture or of business or any other factor, were the letters too specific.

And perhaps the recipients of the letters did not mind too much the lack of specific information, for almost every letter carried with it a sheaf of notes, all crisp and new, and very very legal, backed by tons of uranium, bushels of diamonds, stacked bars of gold and other similar knickknacks deposited from time to time beside the desk of the World bank's president.

It became, in time, the ambition of every family on the Earth to send at least one relative to Kimon, for a relative on Kimon virtually spelled an assured and sufficient income for the rest of the clan for life.

Naturally the legend of Kimon grew. Much that was said about it was untrue, of course. Kimon, the letters protested, did not have streets paved with solid gold, since there were no streets. Nor did Kimonian damsels wear gowns of diamond-dust—the damsels of Kimon wore not much of anything.

But to those whose understanding went beyond streets of gold and gowns of diamonds, it was well understood that in Kimon lay possibilities vastly greater than either gold or diamonds. For here was a planet with a culture far in advance of Earth, a people who had schooled themselves or had naturally developed parapsychic powers. On Kimon one could learn the techniques that would revolutionize galactic industry and communications; on Kimon one might discover philosophy that would set mankind overnight on a new and better—and more profitable?—path.

The legend grew, interpreted by each according to his intellect and his way of thought, and grew and grew and grew . . .

Earth's government was very helpful to those who wished to go to Kimon, for government as well as individuals, could appreciate the opportunities for the revolution of industry and the evolution of human thought. But since there had been no invitation to grant diplomatic recognition, Earth's government sat and waited, scheming, doing all it could to settle as many of its people on Kimon as was possible. But only the best, for even the densest bureaucrat recognized that on Kimon Earth must put its best foot forward.

Why the Kimonians allowed Earth to send its people was a mystery for which there was no answer. But apparently Earth was the only other planet in the galaxy which had been allowed to send its people. The Earthmen and the Kimonians, of course, both were humanoid, but this was not an adequate answer, either, for they were not the only humanoids in the galaxy. For its own comfort, Earth assumed that a certain common understanding, a similar outlook, a certain parallel evolutionary trend—with Earth a bit behind, of course—between Earth and Kimon might account for Kimon's qualified hospitality.

But be that as it may, Kimon was a galactic El Dorado, a never-never land, a planet to get ahead, the place to spend your life, the country at the rainbow's end.

III

Selden Bishop stood in the parklike area, where the gig had landed him, for Kimon had no spaceports, as it likewise failed in having many other things.

He stood, surrounded by his luggage, and watched the gig drive spaceward to rendezvous with the liner's orbit.

When he could see the gig no longer, he sat down on one of his bags and waited.

The park was faintly Earthlike, but the similarity was only in the abstract, for in each particular there was a subtle difference that said this was an alien planet. The trees were too slim and the flowers just a shade too loud and the grass was off a shade or two from the grass you saw on Earth. The birds, if they were birds, were more lizardlike than the birds of Earth and their feathers were put on wrong and weren't quite the color one associated with plumage. The breeze had a faint perfume upon it that was no perfume of Earth, but an alien odor that smelled like a color looked and Bishop tried to decide, but couldn't, which color it might be.

Sitting on his bag, in the middle of the park, he tried to drum up a little enthusiasm, tried to whistle up some triumph that he finally was on Kimon, but the best that he could achieve was a thankfulness that he'd made it with the twenty still intact.

He would need a little cash to get along on until he could find

a job. But, he told himself, he shouldn't have to wait too long before he found a job. The thing, of course, was not to take the first one offered him, but to shop around a little and find the one for which he was best fitted. And that, he knew, might take a little time.

Thinking of it, he wished that he had more than a twenty. He should have allowed himself a bigger margin, but that would have meant something less than the best luggage he could buy and perhaps not enough of it, off-the-rack suits instead of tailored, and all other things accordingly.

It was, he told himself, important that he make the best impression, and sitting there and thinking it over, he couldn't bring himself to regret the money he had spent to make a good impression.

Maybe he should have asked Morley for a loan. Morley would have given him anything he asked and he could have paid it back as soon as he got a job. But he had hated to ask, for to ask, he now admitted, would have detracted from his new-found importance as a man who had been selected to make the trip to Kimon. Everyone, even Morley, looked up to a man who was set to blast for Kimon, and you couldn't go around asking for a loan or for other favors.

He remembered the last visit he had with Morley, and looking back at it now, he saw that while Morley was his friend, that last visit had a flavor, more or less, of a diplomatic job that Morley had to carry out.

Morley had gone far and was going farther in the diplomatic service. He looked like a diplomat and he talked like one and he had a better grasp, old heads at the department said, of Sector Nineteen politics and economics than any of the other younger men. He wore a clipped mustache that had a frankly cultivated look and his hair was always quite in place and his body, when he walked, was like a panther walking.

They had sat in Morley's diggings and had been all comfortable and friendly and then Morley had gotten up and paced up and down the room with his panther walk.

'We've been friends for a long, long time,' said Morley. 'We've been in lots of scrapes together.'

And the two of them had smiled, remembering some of the scrapes they had been in together.

'When I heard you were going out to Kimon,' Morley said, 'I was pleased about it naturally. I'd be pleased at anything that came your way. But I was pleased, as well, for another reason. I told myself here finally was a man who could do a job and find out what we want.'

'What do you want?' Bishop had asked and, as he remembered it, he had asked it as if he might be asking whether Morley wanted Scotch or bourbon. Although, come to think of it, he never would have asked that particular question, for all the young men in the alien relations section religiously drank Scotch. But, anyhow, he asked it casually, although he sensed that there was nothing casual at all about the situation.

He could smell the scent of cloak and dagger and he caught a sudden glimpse of huge official worry and for an instant he was a little cold and scared.

'There must be some way to crack that planet,' Morley had told him, 'but we haven't found it yet. So far as the Kimonians are concerned, none of the rest of us, none of the other planets, officially exist. There's not a single planet accorded diplomatic status. On Kimon there is not a single official representative of any other people. They don't seem to trade with anyone, and yet they must trade with someone, for no planet, no culture can exist in complete self-sufficiency. They must have diplomatic relations somewhere, with someone. There must be some reason, beyond the obvious one that we are an inferior culture, why they do not recognize Earth. For even in the more barbaric days of Earth there was official recognition of many governments and peoples who were cultural inferiors to the recognizing nation.'

'You want me to find out all this?'

'No,' said Morley. 'Not all that. All we want are clues. Somewhere there is the clue that we are looking for, the hint that will tell us what the actual situation is. All we need is the opening wedge—the foot in the door. Give us that and we will do the rest.'

'There have been others,' Bishop told him. 'Thousands of others. I'm not the only one who ever went to Kimon.'

'For the last fifty years or more,' said Morley, 'the section has talked to all the others, before they went out, exactly as I'm talking to you now.'

'And you've gotten nothing?'

'Nothing,' said Morley. 'Or almost nothing. Or nothing, anyhow, that counted or made any sense.'

'They failed—'

'They failed,' Morley told him, 'because once on Kimon they forgot about Earth . . . well, not forgot about it, that's not entirely it. But they lost all allegiance to it. They were Kimon-blinded.'

'You believe that?'

'I don't know,' said Morley. 'It's the best explanation that we have. The trouble is that we talk to them only once. None of them come back. We can write letters to them, certainly. We can try to jog them—indirectly, of course. But we can't ask them outright.'

'Censorship?'

'Not censorship,' said Morley, 'although they may have that, too; but mostly telepathy. The Kimonians would know if we tried to impress anything too forcibly upon their minds. And we can't take the chance of a single thought undoing all the work that we have done.'

'But you're telling me.'

'You'll forget it,' Morley said. 'You will have several weeks in which you can forget it—push it to the back of your mind. But not entirely—not entirely.'

'I understand,' Bishop had told him.

'Don't get me wrong,' said Morley. 'It's nothing sinister. You're not to look for that. It may be just a simple thing. The way we comb our hair. There's some reason—perhaps many little ones. And we must know those reasons.'

Morley had switched it off as quickly as he had begun it, had poured another round of drinks, had sat down again and talked of their school days and of the girls they'd known and of week-ends in the country.

It had been, all in all, a very pleasant evening.

But that had been weeks ago, and since then he'd scarcely remembered it and now here he was on Kimon, sitting on one of his bags in the middle of a park, waiting for a welcoming Kimonian to show up.

All the time that he'd been waiting, he had been prepared for

the Kimonian's arrival. He knew what a Kimonian looked like and he should not have been surprised.

But when the native came, he was.

For the native was six-foot ten, and almost a godlike being, a sculptured humanoid who was, astonishingly, much more human than he had thought to find.

One moment he had sat alone in the little parklike glade and the next the native was standing at his side.

Bishop came to his feet and the Kimonian said, 'We are glad you are here. Welcome to Kimon, sir.'

The native's inflection was as precise and beautiful as his sculptured body.

'Thank you,' Bishop said, and knew immediately that the two words were inadequate and that his voice was slurred and halting compared with the native's voice. And, looking at the Kimonian, he had the feeling that by comparison, he cut a rumpled, seedy figure.

He reached into his pocket for his papers and his fingers were all thumbs, so that he fumbled for them and finally dug them out—dug is the word exactly—and handed them to the waiting being.

The Kimonian flicked them—that was it, flicked them—then he said 'Mr Selden Bishop. Very glad to know you. Your IQ rating, 160, is very satisfactory. Your examination showing, if I may say so, is extraordinary. Recommendations good. Clearance from Earth in order. And I see you made good time. Very glad to have you.'

'But—' said Bishop. Then he clamped his mouth shut tight. He couldn't tell this being he'd merely flicked the pages and could not possibly have read them. For, obviously he had.

'You had a pleasant flight, Mr Bishop?'

'A most pleasant one,' said Bishop and was filled with sudden pride that he could answer so easily and urbanely.

'Your luggage,' said the native, 'is in splendid taste.'

'Why, thank you—' then was filled with rage. What right had this person to patronize his luggage!

But the native did not appear to notice.

'You wish to go to the hotel?'

'If you please,' said Bishop, speaking very tightly, holding himself in check.

'Please allow me,' said the native.

Bishop blurred for just a second—a definite sense of blurring—as if the universe had gone swiftly out of focus, then he was standing, not in the parklike glade, but in a one-man-sized alcove off a hotel lobby, with his bags stacked neatly beside him.

IV

He had missed the triumph before, sitting in the glade, waiting for the native, after the gig had left him, but now it struck him, a heady, drunken triumph that surged through his body and rose in his throat to choke him.

This was Kimon! He finally was on Kimon! After all the years of study, he finally was here—the fabulous place he'd worked for many years to reach.

A high IQ, they'd said behind their half-raised hands—a high IQ and many years of study, and a stiff examination that not more than one in every thousand passed.

He stood in the alcove, with the sense of hiding there, to give himself a moment in which to regain his breath at the splendor of what had finally come to pass, to gain the moment it would take for the unreasoning triumph to have its way with him and go.

For the triumph was something that must not be allowed to pass. It was something that he must not show. It was a personal thing and as something personal it must be hidden deep.

He might be one of a thousand back on Earth, but here he stood on no more than equal footing with the ones who had come before him. Perhaps not quite on equal footing, for they would know the ropes and he had yet to learn them.

He watched them in the lobby—the lucky and the fabulous ones who had preceded him, the glittering company he had dreamed about during all the weary years—the company that he presently would join, the ones of Earth who were adjudged fit to go to Kimon.

For only the best must go—the best and smartest and the quickest. Earth must put her best foot forward for how otherwise would Earth ever persuade Kimon that she was a sister planet?

At first the people in the lobby had been no more than a crowd, a crowd that shone and twinkled, but with that curious lack of personality which goes with a crowd. But now, as he watched, the crowd dissolved into individuals and he saw them, not as a group, but as the men and women he presently would know.

He did not see the bell captain until the native stood in front of him, and the bell captain, if anything, was taller and more handsome than the man who'd met him in the glade.

'Good evening, sir,' the captain said. 'Welcome to the Ritz.'

Bishop stared. 'The Ritz? Oh, yes, I had forgotten. This place is the Ritz.'

'We're glad to have you with us,' said the captain. 'We hope your stay will prove to be a long one.'

'Certainly,' said Bishop. 'That is, I hope so, too.'

'We had been notified,' the captain said, 'that you were arriving Mr Bishop. We took the liberty of reserving rooms for you. I trust they will be satisfactory.'

'I am sure they will be,' Bishop said.

As if anything on Kimon could be unsatisfactory!

'Perhaps you will want to dress,' the captain said. 'There still is time for dinner.'

'Oh, certainly,' said Bishop. 'Most assuredly I will.'

And wished he had not said it.

'We'll send up the bags,' the captain said. 'No need to register. That is taken care of. If you'll permit me sir.'

V

The rooms were satisfactory.

There were three of them.

Sitting in a chair, Bishop wondered how he'd ever pay for them.

Remembering the lonely twenty credits, he was seized with a momentary panic.

He'd have to get a job sooner than he planned, for the twenty credits wouldn't go too far with a layout like this one. Although he supposed if he asked for credit it would be given him.

But he recoiled from the idea of asking for credit, of being

forced to admit that he was short of cash. So far he'd done everything correctly. He'd arrived aboard a liner and not a battered trader; his luggage—what had the native said?—it was in splendid taste; his wardrobe was all that could be expected; and he hoped that he'd not communicated to anyone the panic and dismay he'd felt at the luxury of the suite.

He got up from the chair and prowled about the room. There was no carpeting, for the floor itself was soft and yielding and you left momentary tracks as you walked, but they puffed back and smoothed out almost immediately.

He walked over to a window and stood looking out of it. Evening had fallen and the landscape was covered with a dusty blue—and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, but rolling countryside. There were no roads that he could see and no lights that would have told of other habitations.

Perhaps, he thought, I'm on the wrong side of the building. On the other side there might be streets and roads and homes and shops.

He turned back to the room and looked at it—the Earthlike furniture so quietly elegant that it almost shouted, the beautiful, veined marble fireplace, the shelves of books, the shine of old wood, the matchless paintings hanging on the wall, and the great cabinet that filled almost one end of the room.

He wondered what the cabinet might be. It was a beautiful thing, with an antique look about it and it had a polish—not a wax, but of human hands and time.

He walked toward it.

The cabinet said: 'Drink, sir?'

'I don't mind if I do,' said Bishop, then stopped stock-still, realizing that the cabinet had spoken and he had answered it.

A panel opened in the cabinet and the drink was there.

'Music?' asked the cabinet.

'If you please,' said Bishop.

'Type?'

'Type? Oh, I see. Something gay, but maybe just a little sadness too. Like the blue hour of twilight spreading over Paris. Who was it used that phrase? One of the old writers. Fitzgerald. I'm sure it was Fitzgerald.'

The music told about the blue hour stealing over that city far

away on Earth and there was soft April and distant girlish laughter and the shine of the pavement in slanting rain.

'Is there anything else you wish, sir?' asked the cabinet.

'Nothing at the moment.'

'Very well, sir. You will have an hour to get dressed for dinner.'

He left the room, sipping his drink as he went—and the drink had a certain touch to it.

He went into the bedroom and tested the bed and it was satisfactorily soft. He examined the dresser and the full-length glass and peeked into the bathroom and saw that it was equipped with an automatic shaver and massager, that it had a shower and tub, an exercising machine and a number of other gadgets that he couldn't place.

And the third room.

It was almost bare by the standards of the other two. In the center of it stood a chair with great flat arms and on each of the arms many rows of buttons.

He approached the chair cautiously, wondering what it was—what kind of trap it was. Although that was foolish, for there were no traps on Kimon. This was Kimon, the land of opportunity, where a man might make a fortune and live in luxury and rub shoulders with an intelligence and a culture that was the best yet found in the galaxy.

He bent down over the wide arms of the chair and found that each of the buttons was labeled. They were labeled 'History,' 'Poetry,' 'Drama,' 'Sculpture,' 'Literature,' 'Painting,' 'Astronomy,' 'Philosophy,' 'Physics,' 'Religions' and many other things. And there were several that were labeled with words he'd never seen and had no meaning to him.

He stood in the room and looked around at its starkness and saw for the first time that it had no windows, but was just a sort of box—a theater, he decided, or a lecture room. You sat in the chair and pressed a certain button and—

But there was no time for that. An hour to dress for dinner, the cabinet had said, and some of that hour was already gone.

The luggage was in the bedroom and he opened the bag that held his dinner clothes. The jacket was badly wrinkled.

He stood with it in his hands, staring at it. Maybe the wrinkles would hang out. Maybe—

But he knew they wouldn't.

The music stopped and the cabinet asked: 'Is there something that you wish, sir?'

'Can you press a dinner jacket?'

'Surely, sir, I can.'

'How soon?'

'Five minutes,' said the cabinet. 'Give me the trousers, too.'

VI

The bell rang and he went to the door.

A man stood just outside.

'Good evening,' said the man. 'My name is Montague, but they call me Monty.'

'Won't you come in, Monty?'

Monty came in and surveyed the room.

'Nice place,' he said.

Bishop nodded. 'I didn't ask for anything at all. They just gave it to me.'

'Clever, these Kimonians,' said Monty. 'Very clever, yes.'

'My name is Selden Bishop.'

'Just come in?' asked Monty.

'An hour or so ago.'

'All dewed up with what a great place Kimon is.'

'I know nothing about it,' Bishop told him. 'I studied it, of course.'

'I know,' said Monty, looking at him slantwise. 'Just being neighborly. New victim and all that, you know.'

Bishop smiled because he didn't quite know what else to do.

'What's your line?' asked Monty.

'Business,' said Bishop. 'Administration's what I'm aiming at.'

'Well, then,' Monty said, 'I guess that lets you out. You wouldn't be interested.'

'In what?'

'In football. Or baseball. Or cricket. Not the athletic type.'

'Never had the time.'

'Too bad,' Monty said. 'You have the build for it.'

The cabinet asked: 'Would the gentleman like a drink?'

'If you please,' said Monty.

'And another one for you, sir?'

'If you please,' said Bishop.

'Go in and get dressed,' said Monty. 'I'll sit down and wait.'

'Your jacket and trousers, sir,' said the cabinet.

A door swung open and there they were, cleaned and pressed.

'I didn't know,' said Bishop, 'that you went in for sports out here.'

'Oh, we don't,' said Monty. 'This is a business venture.'

'Business venture?'

'Certainly. Give the Kimonians something to bet on. They might go for it. For a while at least. You see, they can't bet—'

'I don't see why not—'

'Well, consider for a moment. They have no sports at all, you know. Wouldn't be possible. Telepathy. They'd know three moves ahead what their opponents were about to do. Telekinesis. They could move a piece or a ball or what-have-you without touching a finger to it. They—'

'I think I see,' said Bishop.

'So we plan to get up some teams and put on exhibition matches. Drum up as much enthusiasm as we can. They'll come out in droves to see it. Pay admission. Place bets. We, of course, will play the bookies and rake off our commissions. It will be a good thing while it lasts.'

'It won't last, of course.'

Monty gave Bishop a long look.

'You catch on fast,' he said. 'You'll get along.'

'Drinks, gentlemen,' the cabinet said.

Bishop got the drinks, gave one of them to his visitor.

'You better let me put you down,' said Monty. 'Might as well rake in what you can. You don't need to know too much about it.'

'All right,' Bishop told him, agreeably. 'Go ahead and put me down.'

'You haven't got much money,' Monty said.

'How did you know that?'

'You're scared about this room,' said Monty.

'Telepathy?' asked Bishop.

'You pick it up,' said Monty. 'Just the fringes of it. You'll never be as good as they are. Never. But you pick things up from time to time—a sort of sense that seeps into you. After you've been here long enough.'

'I had hoped that no one noticed.'

'A lot of them will notice, Bishop. Can't help but notice, the way you're broadcasting. But don't let it worry you. We all are friends. Banded against the common enemy, you might say. If you need a loan—'

'Not yet,' said Bishop. 'I'll let you know.'

'Me,' said Monty. 'Me or anyone. We all are friends. We got to be.'

'Thanks.'

'Not at all. Now you go ahead and dress. I'll sit and wait for you. I'll bear you down with me. Everyone's waiting to meet you.'

'That's good to know,' said Bishop. 'I felt quite a stranger.'

'Oh, my, no,' said Monty. 'No need to. Not many come, you know. They'll all want to know of Earth.'

He rolled the glass between his fingers.

'How about Earth?' he asked.

'How about—'

'Yes, it still is there, of course. How is it getting on? What's the news?'

VII

He had not seen the hotel before. He had caught a confused glimpse of it from the alcove off the lobby with his luggage stacked beside him, before the bell captain had showed up and whisked him to his rooms.

But now he saw that it was a strangely substantial fairyland, with fountains and hidden fountain music, with the spidery tracery of rainbows serving as groins and arches, with shimmery columns of glass that caught and reflected and duplicated many times the entire construction of the lobby so that one was at once caught up in the illusion that here was a place that went on and on forever and at the same time you could cordon off a section of it in one's mind as an intimate corner for a group of friends.

It was illusion and substantiality, beauty and a sense of home—it was, Bishop suspected, all things to all men and what you wished to make it. A place of utter magic that divorced one from the world and the crudities of the world, with a gaiety that was

not brittle and a sentimentality that stopped short of being cheap, and that transmitted a sense of well being and of self-importance from the very fact of being a part of such a place.

There was no such place on Earth, there could be no such place on Earth, for Bishop suspected that something more than human planning, more than human architectural skill had gone into its building. You walked in an enchantment and you talked with magic and you felt the sparkle and the shine of the place live within your brain.

'It gets you,' Monty said. 'I always watch the faces of the newcomers when they first walk in it.'

'It wears off after a time,' said Bishop, not believing it.

Monty shook his head. 'My friend, it does not wear off. It doesn't surprise you quite so much, but it stays with you all the time. A human does not live long enough for a place like this to wear thin and commonplace.'

He had eaten dinner in the dining room which was old and solemn, with an ancient other-worldness and a hushed, tiptoe atmosphere, with Kimonian waiters at your elbow, ready to recommend a certain dish or a vintage as one that you should try.

Monty had coffee while he ate and there had been others who had come drifting past to stop a moment and welcome him and ask him of Earth, always using a studied casualness, always with a hunger in their eyes that belied the casualness.

'They make you feel at home,' said Monty, 'and they mean it. They are glad when a new one comes.'

He did feel at home—more at home than he had ever felt in his life before, as if already he was beginning to fit in. He had not expected to fit in so quickly and he was slightly astonished at it—for here were all the people he had dreamed of being with, and he finally was with them. You could feel the magnetic force of them, the personal magnetism that had made them great, great enough to be Kimon-worthy, and looking at them, he wondered which of them he would get to know, which would be his friends.

He was relieved when he found that he was not expected to pay for his dinner or his drinks, but simply sign a chit, and once he'd caught onto that, everything seemed brighter, for the dinner of itself would have taken quite a hole out of the twenty nestling in his pocket.

With dinner over and with Monty gone somewhere into the crowd, he found himself in the bar, sitting on a stool and nursing a drink that the Kimonian bartender had recommended as being something special.

The girl came out of nowhere and floated up to the stool beside him and she said:

'What's that you're drinking, friend?'

'I don't know,' said Bishop. He made a thumb toward the man behind the bar. 'Ask him to make you one.'

The bartender heard and got busy with the bottles and the shaker.

'You're fresh from Earth,' said the girl.

'Fresh is the word,' said Bishop.

'It's not so bad,' she said. 'That is, if you don't think about it.'

'I won't think about it,' Bishop promised. 'I won't think of anything.'

'Of course, you do get used to it,' she said. 'After a while you don't mind the faint amusement. You think, what the hell, let them laugh all they want to so long as I have it good. But the day will come—'

'What are you talking about?' asked Bishop. 'Here's your drink. Dip your muzzle into that and—'

'The day will come when we are old to them, when we don't amuse them any longer. When we become passé. We can't keep thinking up new tricks. Take my painting, for example—'

'See here,' said Bishop, 'you're talking way above my head.'

'See me a week from now,' she said. 'The name's Maxine. Just ask to see Maxine. A week from now, we can talk together. So long, Buster.'

She floated off the stool and suddenly was gone.

She hadn't touched her drink.

VIII

He went up to his rooms and stood for a long time at a window, staring out into the featureless landscape lighted by a moon.

Wonder thundered in his brain, the wonder and the newness and the many questions, the breathlessness of finally being here, of slowly coming to a full realization of the fact that he was

here, that he was one of that glittering, fabulous company he had dreamed about for years.

The long grim years peeled off him, the years of books and study, the years of determined driving, the hungry, anxious, grueling years when he had lived a monkish life, mortifying body and soul to drive his intellect.

The years fell off and he felt the newness of himself as well as the newness of the scene. A cleanness and a newness and the sudden glory.

The cabinet finally spoke to him.

'Why don't you try the live-it, sir?'

Bishop swung sharply around.

'You mean—'

'The third room,' said the cabinet. 'You'll find it most amusing.'

'The live-it!'

'That's right,' said the cabinet. 'You pick it and you live it.'

Which sounded like something out of the Alice books.

'It's safe,' said the cabinet. 'It's perfectly safe. You can come back any time you wish.'

'Thank you,' Bishop said.

He went into the room and sat down in the chair and studied the buttons on the arms.

History?

Might as well, he told himself. He knew a bit of history. He'd been interested in it and taken several courses and did a lot of supplemental reading.

He punched the 'History' button.

A panel in the wall before the chair lit up and a face appeared—the face of a Kimonian, the bronzed and golden face, the classic beauty of the race.

Aren't any of them homely? Bishop wondered. None of them ugly or crippled, like the rest of humanity?

'What type of history, sir?' the face in the screen asked him.

'Type?'

'Galactic, Kimonian, Earth—almost any place you wish.'

'Earth, please,' said Bishop.

'Specifications?'

'England,' said Bishop. 'October 14, 1066. A place called Senlac.'

And he was there.



He was no longer in the room with its single chair and its four bare walls, but he stood upon a hill in sunny autumn weather with the gold and red of trees and the blueness of the haze and the shouts of men.

He stood rooted in the grass that blew upon the hillside and saw that the grass had turned to hay with its age and sunshine—and out beyond the grass and hill, grouped down on the plain, was a ragged line of horsemen, with the sun upon their helmets and flashing on their shields, with the leopard banners curling in the wind.

It was October 14th and it was Saturday and on the hill stood Harold's hosts behind their locked shield wall and before the sun had set new forces would have been put in motion to shape the course of empire.

Taillefer, he thought. Taillefer will ride in the fore of William's charge, singing the '*Chanson de Roland*' and wheeling his sword into the air so that it became a wheel of fire to lead the others on.

The Normans charged and there was no Taillefer. There was no one who wheeled his sword into the air, there was no singing. There was merely shouting and the hoarse crying of men riding to their death.

The horsemen were charging directly at him and he wheeled and tried to run, but he could not outrun them and they were upon him. He saw the flash of polished hoofs and the cruel steel of the shoes upon the hoofs, the glinting lance point, the swaying, jouncing scabbard, the red and green and yellow of the cloaks, the dullness of the armor, the open roaring mouths of men—and they were upon him. And passing through him and over him as if he were not there.

He stopped stock-still, heart hammering in his chest, and, as if from somewhere far off, he felt the wind of the charging horses that were running all around him.

Up the hill there were hoarse cries of 'Ut! Ut!' and the high, sharp ring of steel. Dust was rising all around him and somewhere off to the left a dying horse was screaming. Out of the dust a man came running down the hill. He staggered and fell and got up and ran again and Bishop could see that blood

poured out of the ripped armor and washed down across the metal, spraying the dead, sere grass as he ran down the hill.

The horses came back again, some of them riderless, running with their necks outstretched, with the reins flying in the wind, with foam dashing from their mouths.

One man sagged in the saddle and fell off, but his foot caught in the stirrup and his horse, shying, dragged him sidewise.

Up on top the hill the Saxon square was cheering and through the settling dust he saw the heap of bodies that lay outside the shield wall.

Let me out of here! Bishop was screaming to himself. *How do I get out of here! Let me out—*

He was out, back in the room again, with its single chair and the four blank walls.

He sat there quietly and he thought:

There was no Taillefer.

No one who rode and sang and tossed the sword in air.

The tale of Taillefer was no more than the imagination of some copyist who had improved upon the tale to while away his time.

But men had died. They had run down the hill, staggering with their wounds, and died. They had fallen from their horses and been dragged to death by their frightened mounts. They had come crawling down the hill, with minutes left of life and with a whimper in their throats.

He stood up and his hands were shaking.

He walked unsteadily into the next room.

'You are going to bed, sir?' asked the cabinet.

'I think I will,' said Bishop.

'Very good, then, sir. I'll lock up and put out.'

'That's very good of you.'

'Routine, sir,' said the cabinet. 'Is there anything you wish?'

'Not a thing,' said Bishop. 'Good night.'

'Good night,' said the cabinet.

IX

In the morning he went to the employment agency which he found in one corner of the hotel lobby.

There was no one around but a Kimonian girl, a tall, statuesque blonde, but with a grace to put to shame the most petite of humans. A woman, Bishop thought, jerked out of some classic Grecian myth, a blond goddess come to life and beauty. She didn't wear the flowing Grecian robe, but she could have. She wore, truth to tell, but little, and was all the better for it.

'You are new,' she said.

He nodded.

'Wait, I know,' she said. She looked at him: 'Selden Bishop, age twenty-nine Earth years, IQ, 160.'

'Yes, ma'am,' he said.

She made him feel as if he should bow and scrape.

'Business administration, I understand,' she said.

He nodded, bleakly.

'Please sit down, Mr Bishop, and we will talk this over.'

He sat down and he was thinking: It isn't right for a beautiful girl to be so big and husky. Nor so competent.

'You'd like to get started doing something,' said the girl.

'That's the thought I had.'

'You specialized in business administration. I'm afraid there aren't many openings in that particular field.'

'I wouldn't expect too much to start with,' Bishop told her with what he felt was a becoming modesty and a realistic outlook. 'Almost anything at all, until I can prove my value.'

'You'd have to start at the very bottom. And it would take two years of training. Not in method only, but in attitude and philosophy.'

'I wouldn't—'

He hesitated. He had meant to say that he wouldn't mind. But he would mind. He would mind a lot.

'But I spent years,' he said. 'I know—'

'Kimonian business?'

'Is it so much different?'

'You know all about contracts, I suppose.'

'Certainly I do.'

'There is not such a thing as a contract on all of Kimon.'

'But—'

'There is no need of any.'

'Integrity?'

'That, and other things as well.'

'Other things?'

'You wouldn't understand.'

'Try me.'

'It would be useless, Mr Bishop. New concepts entirely so far as you're concerned. Of behavior. Of motives. On Earth, profit is the motive—'

'Isn't it here?'

'In part. A very small part.'

'The other motives—'

'Cultural development for one. Can you imagine an urge to cultural development as powerful as the profit motive?'

Bishop was honest about it. 'No, I can't,' he said.

'Here,' she said, 'it is the more powerful of the two. But that's not all. Money is another thing. We have no actual money. No coin that changes hands.'

'But there is money. Credit notes.'

'For the convenience of your race alone,' she said. 'We created your money values and your evidence of wealth so that we could hire your services and pay you—and I might add that we pay you well. We have gone through all the motions. The currency that we create is as valid as anywhere else in the galaxy. It's backed by deposits in Earth's banks and it is legal tender so far as you're concerned. But Kimonians themselves do not employ money.'

Bishop floundered. 'I can't understand,' he said.

'Of course you can't,' she said. 'It's an entirely new departure for you. Your culture is so constituted that there must be a certain physical assurance of each person's wealth and worth. Here we do not need that physical assurance. Here each person carries in his head the simple book-keeping of his worth and debts. It is there for him to know. It is there for his friends and business associates to see at any time they wish.'

'It isn't business, then,' said Bishop. 'Not business as I think of it.'

'Exactly,' said the girl.

'But I am trained for business. I spent—'

'Years and years of study. But on Earth's methods of business, not on Kimon's.'

'But there are business men here. Hundreds of them.'

'Are there?' she asked.

And she was smiling at him. Not a superior smile, not a taunting one—just smiling at him.

‘What you need,’ she said, ‘is contact with Kimonians. A chance to get to know your way around. An opportunity to appreciate our point of view and get the hang of how we do things.’

‘That sounds all right,’ said Bishop. ‘How do I go about it?’

‘There have been instances,’ said the girl, ‘when Earth people sold their services as companions.’

‘I don’t think I’d care much for that. It sounds . . . well, like baby sitting or reading to old ladies or . . .’

‘Can you play an instrument or sing?’

Bishop shook his head.

‘Paint? Draw? Dance?’

He couldn’t do any of them.

‘Box, perhaps,’ she said. ‘Physical combat. That is popular at times, if it’s not overdone.’

‘You mean prize fighting?’

‘I think that is one way you describe it.’

‘No, I can’t,’ said Bishop.

‘That doesn’t leave much,’ she said as she picked up some papers.

‘Transportation?’ he asked.

‘Transportation is a personal matter.’

And of course it was, he told himself. With telekinesis, you could transport yourself or anything you might have a mind to move—without mechanical aid.

‘Communications,’ he said weakly. ‘I suppose that is the same?’

She nodded.

With telepathy, it would be.

‘You know about transportation and communications, Mr Bishop?’

‘Earth variety,’ said Bishop. ‘No good here, I gather.’

‘None at all,’ she said. ‘Although we might arrange a lecture tour. Some of us would help you put your material together.’

Bishop shook his head. ‘I can’t talk,’ he said.

She got up.

‘I’ll check around,’ she said. ‘Drop in again. We’ll find something that you’ll fit.’

‘Thanks,’ he said and went back to the lobby.

He went for a walk.

There were no roads or paths.

There was nothing.

The hotel stood on the plain and there was nothing else.

No buildings around it. No village. No roads. Nothing.

It stood there, huge and ornate and lonely, like a misplaced wedding cake.

It stood stark against the skyline, for there were no other buildings to blend into it and soften it and it looked like something that someone in a hurry had dumped down and left.

He struck out across the plain toward some trees that he thought must mark a watercourse and he wondered why there were no paths or roads, but suddenly he knew why there were no paths or roads.

He thought about the years he had spent cramming business administration into his brain and remembered the huge book of excerpts from the letters written home from Kimon hinting at big business deals, at responsible positions.

And the thought struck him that there was one thing in common in all of the excerpts in the book—that the deals and positions were always hinted at, that no one had ever told exactly what he did.

Why did they do it? he asked himself. Why did they fool us all?

Although, of course, there might be more to it than he knew. He had been on Kimon for somewhat less than a full day's time. I'll look around, the Grecian blonde had said—I'll look around, we'll find somewhere that you fit.

He went on across the plain and reached the line of trees and found the stream. It was a prairie stream, a broad, sluggish flow of crystal water between two grassy banks. Lying on his stomach to peer into the depths, he saw the flash of fishes far below him.

He took off his shoes and dangled his feet in the water and kicked a little to make the water splash, and he thought:

They know all about us. They know about our life and culture. They know about the leopard banners and how Senlac must

have looked on Saturday, October 14, 1966, with the hosts of England massed upon the hilltop and the hosts of William on the plain below.

They know what makes us tick and they let us come; because they let us come, there must be some value in us.

What had the girl said, the girl who had floated to the stool and then had left with her drink still untouched? Faint amusement, she had said. You get used to it, she had said. If you don't think too much about it, you get used to it.

See me in a week, she had said. In a week you and I can talk. And she had called him Buster.

Well, maybe she had a right to call him that. He had been starry-eyed and a sort of eager beaver. And probably ignorant-smug.

They know about us and how do they know about us?

Senlac might have been staged, but he didn't think so—there was a strange, grim reality about it that got under your skin, a crawling sort of feeling that told you it was true, that that was how it had happened and had been. That there had been no Taillefer and that a man had died with his guts dragging in the grass and that the Englishmen had cried 'Utl! Utl!' which might have meant almost anything at all or nothing just as well, but probably had meant 'Out.'

He sat there, cold and lonely, wondering how they did it. How they had made it possible for a man to punch a button and to live a scene long dead, to see the death of men who had long been dust mingled with the earth.

There was no way to know, of course.

There was no use to guess.

Technical information, Morley Reed had said, that would revolutionize our entire economic pattern.

He remembered Morley pacing up and down the room and saying: 'We must find out about them. We must find out.'

And there was a way to find out.

There was a splendid way.

He took his feet out of the water and dried them with handfuls of grass. He put his shoes back on and walked back to the hotel sitting by himself.

The blond goddess was still at her desk in the Employment Bureau.

'About that baby sitting job,' he said.

She looked startled for a moment—terribly, almost childishly startled, but her face slid swiftly back to its goddess-mask.

'Yes, Mr Bishop.'

'I've thought it over,' he said. 'If you have that kind of job I'll take it.'

XI

He lay in bed, sleepless, for a long time that night and took stock of himself and of the situation and he came to a decision that it might not be as bad as he thought it was.

There were jobs to be had, apparently. The Kimonians even seemed anxious that you should get a job. And even if it weren't the kind of work a man might want, or the kind that he was fitted for, it at least would be a start. From that first foothold a man could go up—a clever man, that is. And all the men and women, all the Earthians on Kimon, certainly were clever. If they weren't clever, they wouldn't be there to start with.

All of them seemed to be getting along. He had not seen either Monty or Maxine that evening, but he had talked to others and all of them seemed to be satisfied—or at least keeping up the appearance of being satisfied. If there were general dissatisfaction, Bishop told himself, there wouldn't even be the appearance of being satisfied, for there is nothing that an Earthian likes better than some quiet and mutual griping. And he had heard none of it—none of it at all.

He had heard some more talk about the starting of the athletic teams and had talked to several men who had been enthusiastic about it as a source of revenue.

He had talked to another man named Thomas who was a gardening expert at one of the big Kimonian estates and the man had talked for an hour or more on the growing of exotic flowers. There had been a little man named Williams who had sat in the bar beside him and had told him enthusiastically of his commission to write a book of ballads based on Kimonian history and another man named Jackson who was executing a piece of statuary for one of the native families.

If a man could get a satisfactory job, Bishop thought, life could be pleasant here on Kimon.

Take the rooms he had. Beautiful appointments, much better than he could expect at home. A willing cabinet-robot who dished up drinks and sandwiches, who pressed clothes, turned out and locked up, and anticipated your no-more-than-half-formed wish. And the room—the room with the four blank walls and the single chair with the buttons on its arm. There, in that room, was instruction and entertainment and adventure. He had made a bad choice in picking the battle of Hastings for his first test of it, he knew now. But there were other places, other times, other more pleasant and less bloody incidents that one could experience.

It was experience, too—and not merely seeing. He had really been walking on the hilltop. He had tried to dodge the charging horses, although there'd been no reason to, for apparently, even in the midst of a happening, you stood by some special dispensation as a thing apart, as an interested but unreachable observer.

And there were, he told himself, many happenings that would be worth observing. One could live out the entire history of mankind, from the prehistoric dawns to the day before yesterday—and not only the history of mankind, but the history of other things as well, for there had been other categories of experience offered—Kimonian and Galactic—in addition to Earth.

Some day, he thought, I will walk with Shakespeare. Some day I'll sail with Columbus. Or travel with Prester John and find the truth about him.

For it was truth. You could sense the truth.

And how the truth?

That he could not know.

But it all boiled down to the fact that while conditions might be strange, one could still make a life of it.

And conditions would be strange, for this was an alien land and one that was immeasurably in advance of Earth in culture and in its technology. Here there was no need of artificial communications nor of mechanical transportation. Here there was no need of contrasts since the mere fact of telepathy would reveal one man to another so there'd be no need of contracts.

You have to adapt, Bishop told himself.

You'd have to adapt and play the Kimon game, for they were

the ones who would set the rules. Unbidden he had entered their planet and they had let him stay, and staying, it followed that he must conform.

'You are restless, sir,' said the cabinet from the other room.

'Not restless,' Bishop said. 'Just thinking.'

'I can supply you with a sedative. A very mild and pleasant sedative.'

'Not a sedative,' said Bishop.

'Then, perhaps,' the cabinet said, 'you would permit me to sing you a lullaby.'

'By all means,' said Bishop. 'A lullaby is just the thing I need.'

So the cabinet sang him a lullaby and after a time Bishop went to sleep.

XII

The Kimonian goddess at the employment bureau told him next morning that there was a job for him.

'A new family,' she said.

Bishop wondered if he should be glad that it was a new family or if it would have been better if it had been an old one.

'They've never had a human before,' she said.

'It's fine of them,' said Bishop, 'to finally take one in.'

'The salary,' said the goddess, 'is one hundred credits a day.'

'One hundred—'

'You will only work during days,' she said. 'I'll teleport you there each morning and in the evening they'll teleport you back.'

Bishop gulped. 'One hundred—What am I to do?'

'A companion,' said the goddess. 'But you needn't worry. We'll keep an eye on them and if they mistreat you—'

'Mistreat me?'

'Work you too hard or—'

'Miss,' said Bishop, 'for a hundred bucks a day I'd—'

She cut him short. 'You will take the job?'

'Most gladly,' Bishop said.

'Permit me—'

The universe came unstuck, then slapped back together.

He was standing in an alcove and in front of him was a woodland glen with a waterfall and from where he stood he could

smell the cool, mossy freshness of the tumbling water. There were ferns and trees, huge trees like the gnarled oaks the illustrators like to draw to illustrate King Arthur and Robin Hood and other tales of very early Britain—the kind of oaks from which the Druids had cut the mistletoe.

A path ran along the stream and up the incline down which the waterfall came tumbling and there was a blowing wind that carried music and perfume.

A girl came down the path and she was Kimonian, but she didn't seem as tall as the others he had seen and there was something a little less goddesslike about her.

He caught his breath and watched her and for a moment he forgot that she was Kimonian and thought of her only as a pretty girl who walked a woodland path. She was beautiful, he told himself—she was lovely.

She saw him and clapped her hands.

'You must be he,' she said.

He stepped out of the cubicle.

'We have been waiting for you,' she told him. 'We hoped there'd be no delay, that they'd send you right along.'

'My name,' said Bishop, 'is Selden Bishop and I was told—'

'Of course you are the one,' she said. 'You needn't even tell me. It's lying in your mind.'

She waved an arm about her.

'How do you like our house?' she asked.

'House?'

'Of course, silly. This. Naturally it's only the living room. Our bedrooms are up in the mountains. But we changed this just yesterday. Everyone worked so hard at it. I do hope you like it. Because, you see, it is from your planet. We thought it might make you feel at home.'

'House,' he said again.

She reached out a hand and laid it on his arm.

'You're all upset,' she said. 'You don't begin to understand.'

Bishop shook his head. 'I just arrived the other day.'

'But do you like it?'

'Of course I do,' said Bishop. 'It's something out of the old Arthurian legend. You'd expect to see Lancelot or Guinevere or some of the others riding through the woods.'

'You know the stories?'

'Of course I know the stories. I read my Tennyson.'

'And you will tell them to us?'

He looked at her, a little startled.

'You mean you want to hear them.'

'Why, yes, of course we do. What did we get you for?'

And that was it, of course.

What had they got him for?

'You want me to begin right now?'

'Not now,' she said. 'There are the others you must meet. My name is Elaine. That's not exactly it, of course. It is something else, but Elaine is as close as you'll ever come to saying it.'

'I could try the other name. I'm proficient at languages.'

'Elaine is good enough,' she said carelessly. 'Come along.'

He fell in behind her on the path and followed up the incline.

And as he walked along, he saw that it was indeed a house—that the trees were pillars holding up an artificial sky that somehow failed to look very artificial and that the aisles between the trees ended in great windows which looked out on the barren plain.

But the grass and flowers, the moss and ferns, were real and he had a feeling that the trees must be real as well.

'It doesn't matter if they're real or not,' said Elaine. 'You couldn't tell the difference.'

They came to the top of the incline into a parklike place, where the grass was cut so closely and looked so velvety that he wondered for a moment if it were really grass.

'It is,' Elaine told him.

'You catch everything I think,' he said. 'Isn't—'

'Everything,' said Elaine.

'Then I mustn't think.'

'Oh, but we want you to,' she told him. 'That is part of it.'

'Part of what you got me for?'

'Exactly,' said the girl.

In the middle of the parklike area was a sort of pagoda, a flimsy thing that seemed to be made out of light and shadow rather than anything with substance, and all around it were a half a dozen people.

They were laughing and chatting and the sound of them was

like the sound of music—very happy, but at the same time, sophisticated music.

‘There they are,’ cried Elaine.

‘Come along,’ she said.

She ran and her running was like flying and his breath caught in his throat at the slimness and the grace of her.

He ran after her and there was no grace in his running. He could feel the heaviness of it. It was a gambol rather than a run, an awkward lope in comparison to the running of Elaine.

Like a dog, he thought. Like an overgrown puppy trying to keep up, falling over its own feet, with its tongue hanging out and panting.

He tried to run more gracefully and he tried to erase the thinking from his mind.

Mustn't think. Mustn't think at all. They catch everything. They will laugh at you.

They were laughing at him.

He could feel their laughter, the silent, gracious amusement that was racing in their minds.

She reached the group and waited.

‘Hurry up,’ she called and while her words were kindly, he could feel the amusement in the words.

He hurried. He pounded down upon them. He arrived, somewhat out of breath. He felt winded and sweaty and extremely uncouth.

‘This is the one they sent us,’ said Elaine. ‘His name is Bishop. Is that not a lovely name?’

They watched him, nodding gravely.

‘He will tell us stories,’ said Elaine. ‘He knows the stories that go with a place like this.’

They were looking kindly at him, but he could sense the covert amusement, growing by the moment.

She said to Bishop: ‘This is Paul. And that one over there is Jim. Betty. Jane. George. And the one on the end is Mary.’

‘You understand,’ said Jim, ‘those are not our names.’

‘They are approximations,’ said Elaine. ‘The best that I could do.’

‘They are as close,’ said Jane, ‘as he can pronounce them.’

‘If you’d only give me a chance,’ said Bishop, then stopped short.

That was what they wanted. They wanted him to protest and squirm. They wanted him to be uncomfortable.

'But of course we don't,' said Elaine.

Mustn't think. Must try to keep from thinking. They catch everything.

'Let's all sit down,' said Betty. 'Bishop will tell us stories.'

'Perhaps,' Jim said to him, 'you will describe your life on Earth. I would be quite interested.'

'I understand you have a game called chess,' said George. 'We can't play games, of course. You know why we can't. But I'd be very interested in discussing with you the technique and philosophy of chess.'

'One at a time,' said Elaine. 'First he will tell us stories.'

They sat down on the grass, in a ragged circle.

All of them were looking at him, waiting for him to start.

'I don't quite know where to start,' he said.

'Why, that's obvious,' said Betty. 'You start at the beginning.'

'Quite right,' said Bishop.

He took a deep breath.

'Once, long ago, in the island of Britain, there was a great king whose name was Arthur—'

'Ycelpt,' said Jim.

'You've read the stories?'

'The word was in your mind.'

'It's an old word, an archaic word. In some versions of the tales—'

'I would be most interested sometime to discuss the word with you,' said Jim.

'Go on with your story,' said Elaine.

He took another deep breath.

'Once, long ago, in the island of Britain, there was a great king whose name was Arthur. His queen was Guinevere and Lancelot was his staunchest knight—'

XIII

He found the writer in the desk in the living room and pulled it out. He sat down to write a letter.

He typed the salutation:

Dear Morley:

He got up and began pacing up and down the room.

What would he tell him?

What could he tell him?

That he had safely arrived and that he had a job?

That the job paid a hundred credits a day—ten times more than a man in his position could earn at any Earth job?

He went back to the writer again.

He wrote:

Just a note to let you know that I arrived here safely and already have a job. Not too good a job perhaps, but it pays a hundred a day and that's better than I could have done on Earth.

He got up and walked again.

There had to be more than that. More than just a paragraph.

He sweated as he walked.

What could he tell him?

He went back to the writer again:

In order to learn the conditions and the customs more quickly I have taken a job which will keep me in touch with the Kimonians. I find them to be a fine people, but sometimes a little hard to understand. I have no doubt that before too long I shall get to understand them and have a genuine liking for them.

He pushed back his chair and stared at what he'd written.

It was, he told himself, like any one of a thousand other letters he had read.

He pictured in his mind those other thousand people, sitting down to write their first letter from Kimon, searching in their minds for the polite little fables, for the slightly colored lie, for the balm that would salve their pride. Hunting for the words that would not reveal the entire truth:

I have a job of entertaining and amusing a certain family. I tell them stories and let them laugh at me. I do this because I will not admit that the fable of Kimon is a booby trap and that I've fallen into it—

No, it would never do to write like that.

Nor to write:

I'm sticking on in spite of them. So long as I make a hundred a day, they can laugh as much as they want to laugh. I'm staying here and cleaning up no matter what—

Back home he was one of the thousand. Back home they talked of him in whispers because he made the grade.

And the businessmen on board the ship, saying to him: 'The one who cracks this Kimon business is the one who'll have it big,' and talking in terms of billions if he ever needed backing.

He remembered Morley pacing up and down the room. A foot in the door, he'd said: 'Some way to crack them. Some way to understand them. Some little thing—no big thing, but some little thing. Anything at all except the deadpan face that Kimon turns toward us.'

Somehow he had to finish the letter. He couldn't leave it hanging and he had to write it.

He turned back to the writer:

I'll write you later at a greater length. At the moment I'm rushed.

He frowned at it.

But whatever he wrote, it would be wrong. This was no worse than any of another dozen things that he might write.

Must rush off to a conference.

Have an appointment with a client.

Some papers to go through.

All of them were wrong.

What was a man to do?

He wrote:

Think of you often. Write me when you can.

Morley would write him. An enthusiastic letter, a letter with a fine shade of envy tingeing it, the letter of a man who wanted to be, but couldn't be on Kimon.

For everyone wanted to go to Kimon. That was the hell of it.

You couldn't tell the truth, when everyone would give their good right arm to go.

You couldn't tell the truth, when you were a hero and the truth would turn you into a galactic heel.

And the letters from home, the prideful letters, the envious letters, the letters happy with the thought you were doing so well—all of these would be only further chains to bind you to Kimon and to the Kimon lie.

He said to the cabinet: 'How about a drink?'

'Yes, sir,' said the cabinet. 'Coming right up, sir.'

'A long one,' Bishop said, 'and a strong one.'
'Long and strong it is, sir.'

XIV

He met her in the bar.

'Why, if it isn't Buster!' she said, as though they met there often.

He sat on the stool beside her.

'That week is almost up,' he said.

She nodded. 'We've been watching you. You're standing up real well.'

'You tried to tell me.'

'Forget it,' said the girl. 'Just a mistake of mine. It's a waste of time telling any of them. But you looked intelligent and not quite dry behind the ears. I took pity on you.'

She looked at him over the rim of her glass.

'I shouldn't have,' she said.

'I should have listened.'

'They never do,' said Maxine.

'There's another thing,' he said. 'Why hasn't it leaked out? Oh, sure, I have written letters, too. I didn't admit what it was like. Neither did you. Nor the man next to you. But someone, in all the years we've been here—'

'We are all alike,' she said. 'Alike as peas in the pod. We are the anointed, the hand-picked, stubborn, vanity-stricken, scared. All of us got here. In spite of hell and high water we got here. We let nothing stand in our way and we made it. We beat the others out. They're waiting back there on Earth—the ones that we beat out. They'll never be quite the same again. Don't you understand it? They had pride, too, and it was hurt. There's nothing they would like better than to know what it's really like. That's what all of us think of when we sit down to write a letter. We think of the belly laughs by those other thousands. The quiet smirks. We think of ourselves skulking, making ourselves small so no one will notice us—'

She balled a fist and rapped against his shirt front.

'That's the answer, Buster. That's why we never write the truth. That's why we don't go back.'

'But it's been going on for years. For almost a hundred years. In all that time someone should have cracked—'

'And lost all this?' she asked. 'Lost the easy living. The good drinking. The fellowship of lost souls. And the hope. Don't forget that. Always the hope that Kimon can be cracked.'

'Can it?'

'I don't know. But if I were you, Buster, I wouldn't count on it.'

'But it's no kind of a life for decent—'

'Don't say it. We aren't decent people. We are scared and weak, every one of us. And with good reason.'

'But the life—'

'You don't lead a decent life, if that was what you were about to say. There's no stability in us. Children? A few of us have children and it's not so bad for the children as it is for us, because they know nothing else. A child who is born a slave is better off, mentally, than a man who once knew freedom.'

'We aren't slaves,' said Bishop.

'Of course not,' Maxine said. 'We can leave any time we want to. All we got to do is walk up to a native and say "I want to go back to Earth." That's all you need to do. Any single one of them could send you back—*swish*—just like they send the letters, just like they whisk you to your work or to your room.'

'But no one has gone back.'

'Of course no one has,' she said.

They sat there, sipping at their drinks.

'Remember what I told you,' she said. 'Don't think. That's the way to beat it. Never think about it. You got it good. You never had it so good. Soft living. Easy living. Nothing to worry about. The best kind of life there is.'

'Sure,' said Bishop. 'Sure that's the way to do it.'

She slanted her eyes at him.

'You're catching on,' she said.

They had another round.

Over in the corner a group had gotten together and was doing some impromptu singing. A couple were quarreling a stool or two away.

'It's too noisy in this place,' Maxine said. 'Want to see my paintings?'

'Your paintings?'

'The way I make my living. They are pretty bad, but no one knows the difference.'

'I'd like to see them.'

'Grab hold then.'

'Grab—'

'My mind, you know. Nothing physical about it. No use riding elevators.'

He gaped at her.

'You pick it up,' said Maxine. 'You never get too good. But you pick up a trick or two.'

'But how do I go about it?'

'Just let loose,' she said. 'Dangle. Mentally, that is. Try to reach out to me. Don't try to help. You can't.'

He dangled and reached out, wondering if he was doing it the way it should be done.

The universe collapsed and then came back together.

They were standing in another room.

'That was a silly thing for me to do,' Maxine said. 'Some day I'll slip a cog and get stuck in a wall or something.'

Bishop drew a deep breath.

'Monty could read me just a little,' he said. 'Said you picked it up—just at the fringes.'

'You never get too good,' said Maxine. 'Humans aren't . . . well, aren't ripe for it, I guess. It takes millennia to develop it.'

He looked around him and whistled.

'Quite a place,' he said.

It was all of that.

It didn't seem to be a room at all, although it had furniture. The walls were hazed in distance and to the west were mountains, peaked with snow, and to the east a very sylvan river and there were flowers and flowering bushes everywhere, growing from the floor. A deep blue dusk filled the room and somewhere off in the distance there was an orchestra.

A cabinet-voice said, 'Anything, madam?'

'Drinks,' said Maxine. 'Not too strong. We've been hitting the bottle.'

'Not too strong,' said the cabinet. 'Just a moment, madam.'

'Illusion,' Maxine said. 'Every bit of it. But a nice illusion. Want a beach. It's waiting for you if you just think of it. Or a

polar cap. Or a desert. Or an old chateau. It's waiting in the wings.'

'Your painting must pay off,' he said.

'Not my painting. My irritation. Better start getting irritated, Buster. Get down in the dumps. Start thinking about suicide. That's a sure-fire way to do it. Presto, you're kicked upstairs to a better suite of rooms. Anything to keep you happy.'

'You mean the Kimonians automatically shift you?'

'Sure. You're a sucker to stay down there where you are.'

'I like my layout,' he told her. 'But this—'

She laughed at him. 'You'll catch on,' she said.

The drinks arrived.

'Sit down,' Maxine said. 'Want a moon?'

There was a moon.

'Could have two or three,' she said, 'but that would be overdoing it. One moon seems more like Earth. Seems more comfortable.'

'There must be a limit somewhere,' Bishop said. 'They can't keep on kicking you upstairs indefinitely. There must come a time when even the Kimonians can't come up with anything that is new and novel.'

'You wouldn't live long enough,' she told him, 'for that to come about. That's the way with all you new ones. You underestimate the Kimonians. You think of them as people, as Earth people who know just a little more. They aren't that, at all. They're alien. They're as alien as a spider-man despite their human form. They conform to keep contact with us.'

'But why do they want to keep contact with us? Why—'

'Buster,' she said, 'that's the question that we never ask. That's the one that can drive you crazy.'

XV

He had told them about the human custom of going out on picnics and the idea was one that they had never thought of, so they adopted it with childish delight.

They had picked a wild place, a tumbled mountain area, filled with deep ravines, clothed in flowers and trees and with a moun-

tain brook with water that was as clear as glass and as cold as ice.

They had played games and romped. They had swam and sunbathed and they had listened to his stories, sitting in a circle, needling him and interrupting him, picking arguments.

But he had laughed at them, not openly, but deep inside himself, for he knew now that they meant no harm, but merely sought amusement.

Weeks before he had been insulted and outraged and humiliated, but as the days went on he had adapted to it—had forced himself to adapt. If they wished a clown, then he would be a clown. If he were court fool, with bells and parti-colored garments, then he must wear the colors well and keep the bells ringing merrily.

There was occasional maliciousness in them and some cruelty, but no lasting harm. And you could get along with them, he told himself, if you just knew how to do it.

When evening came they had built a fire and had sat around it and had talked and laughed and joked, for once leaving him alone. Elaine and Betty had been nervous. Jim had laughed at them for their nervousness.

‘No animals will come near a fire,’ he said.

‘There are animals?’ Bishop had asked.

‘A few,’ said Jim. ‘Not many of them left.’

He had lain there, staring at the fire, listening to their voices, glad that for once they were leaving him alone. Like a dog must feel, he thought. Like a pup hiding in a corner from a gang of rowdy children who are always mauling it.

He watched the fire and remembered other days—outings in the country and walking trips when they had built a fire and lay around it, staring at the sky, seeing the old, familiar skies of Earth.

And here again was another fire.

And here, again, a picnic.

The fire was Earth and so was the picnic—for the people of Kimon did not know of picnics. They did not know of picnics and there might be many other things of which they likewise did not know. Many other things, perhaps. Barbaric, folkish things.

Don’t look for the big things, Morley had said that night. Watch for the little things, for the little clues.

They liked Maxine's paintings because they were primitives. Primitives, perhaps, but likewise not very good. Could it be that paintings also had been something the Kimonians had not known until the Earthmen came?

Were there, after all, chinks in the Kimonian armor. Little chinks like picnics and paintings and many other little things for which they valued the visitors from Earth?

Somewhere in those chinks might be the answer that he sought for Morley.

He lay and thought, forgetting to shield his mind, forgetting that he should not think because his thoughts lay open to them.

Their voices had faded away and there was a solemn night-time quiet. Soon, he thought, we'll all be going back—they to their homes and I to the hotel. How far away, he wondered. Half a world or less? And yet they'd be there in the instant of a thought.

Someone, he thought, should put more wood on the fire.

He roused himself to do it, standing up.

And it was not until then that he saw he was alone.

He stood there, trying to quiet his terror.

They had gone away and left him.

They had forgotten him.

But that couldn't be. They'd simply slipped off in the dark. Up to some prank, perhaps. Trying to scare him. Talking about the animals and then slipping out of sight while he lay dreaming at the fire. Waiting now, just outside the circle of the firelight, watching him, drinking in his thoughts, reveling in his terror.

He found wood and put it on the fire. It caught and blazed.

He sat down nonchalantly, but he found that his shoulders were hunched instinctively, that the terror of aloneness in an alien world still sat by the fire beside him.

Now, for the first time, he realized the alienness of Kimon. It had not seemed alien before except for those few minutes he had waited in the park after the gig had landed him, and even then it had not been as alien as an alien planet should be because he knew that he was being met, that there would be someone along to take care of him.

That was it, he thought. Someone to take care of me. We're

taken care of—well and lavishly. We're sheltered and guarded and pampered—that was it, *pampered*. And for what reason?

Any minute now they'd tire of their game and come back into the circle of the firelight.

Maybe, he told himself, I should give them their money's worth. Maybe I should act scared, maybe I should shout out for them to come and get me, maybe I should glance around, out into the darkness, as if I were afraid of those animals that they talked about. They hadn't talked too much, of course. They were too clever for that, far too clever. Just a passing remark about existent animals, then on to something else. Not stressing it, not laying it on too thick. Not over-doing it. Just planting a suggestion that there were animals one could be afraid of.

He sat and waited, not as scared as he had been before, having rationalized away the fear that he first had felt. Like an Earth campfire, he thought. Except it isn't Earth. Except it's an alien planet.

There was a rustle in the bushes.

They'll be coming now, he thought. They've figured out that it didn't work. They'll be coming back.

The bushes rustled again and there was the sound of a dislodged stone.

He did not stir.

They can't scare me, he thought.

They can't scare—

He felt the breath upon his neck and leaped into the air, spinning as he leaped, stumbling as he came down, almost falling in the fire, then on his feet and scurrying to put the fire between him and the thing that had breathed upon his neck.

He crouched across the fire from it and saw the teeth in the gaping jaws. It raised its head and slashed, as if in pantomime and he could hear the clicking of the teeth as they came together and the little moaning rumble that came from the massive throat.

A wild thought came to him: It's not an animal at all. This is just part of the gag. Something they dreamed up. If they can build a house like an English wood, use it for a day or two, then cause it to disappear as something for which they have no further use, surely it would be a second's work to dream up an animal.

The animal padded forward and he thought: Animals should be afraid of fire. All animals are afraid of fire. It won't get me if I stay near the fire.

He stooped and grabbed a brand.

Animals are afraid of fire.

But this one wasn't.

It padded round the fire. It stretched out its neck and sniffed.

It wasn't in any hurry, for it was sure of him.

Sweat broke out on him and ran down his sides.

The animal came with a smooth rush, whipping around the fire.

He leaped, clearing the fire, to gain the other side of it.

The animal checked itself, spun around to face him.

It put its muzzle to the ground and arched its back. It lashed its tail. It rumbled.

He was frightened now, cold with a fright that could not be laughed off.

It might be an animal.

It must be an animal.

No gag at all, but an animal.

He paced back toward the fire. He danced on his toes, ready to run, to dodge, to fight if he had to fight. But against this thing that faced him across the fire, he knew, there was no fighting chance. And yet, if it came to fighting, he could do no less than fight.

The animal charged.

He ran.

He slipped and fell and rolled into the fire.

A hand reached down and jerked him from the fire, flung him to one side, and a voice cried out, a cry of rage and warning.

Then the universe collapsed and he felt himself flying apart and, as suddenly, he was together once again.

He lay upon a floor and he scrambled to his feet. His hand was burned and he felt the pain of it. His clothes were smoldering and he beat them out with his uninjured hand.

A voice said, 'I'm sorry, sir. This should not have happened.'

The man was tall, much taller than the Kimonians he had seen before. Nine feet, perhaps. And yet not nine feet, actually. Not anywhere near nine feet. He was no taller, probably, than the

taller men of Earth. It was the way he stood that made him seem so tall, the way he stood and looked and the way his voice sounded.

And the first Kimonian, Bishop thought, who had ever shown age. For there was a silvering of the temple hairs and his face was lined, like the faces of hunters or of sailors may be lined from squinting into far distances.

They stood facing one another in a room which, when Bishop looked at it, took his breath away. There was no describing it, no way to describe it—you felt as well as saw it. It was a part of you and a part of the universe and a part of everything you'd ever known or dreamed. It seemed to thrust extensions out into unguessed time and space and it had a sense of life and the touch of comfort and the feel of home.

Yet, when he looked again, he sensed a simplicity that did not square with his first impressions. Basic simplicities that tied in with the simple business of living out one's life, as if the room and the folks who lived within its walls were somehow integrated, as if the room were trying its best not to be a room, but to be a part of life, so much a part of life that it could pass unnoticed.

'I was against it from the first,' said the Kimonian. 'Now I know that I was right. But the children wanted you—'

'The children?'

'Certainly. I am Elaine's father.'

He didn't say Elaine, however. He said the other name—the name that Elaine had said no Earthman could pronounce.

'Your hand?' asked the man.

'It's all right,' said Bishop. 'Only burned a little.'

And it was as if he had not spoken, as if he had not said the words—but another man, a man who stood off to one side and spoke the words for him.

He could not have moved if he'd been paid a million.

'This is something,' said the Kimonian, 'that must be recompensed. We'll talk about it later.'

'Please, sir,' said the man who talked for Bishop. 'Please, sir, just one thing. Send me to my hotel.'

He felt the swiftness of the other's understanding—the compassion and the pity.

'Of course,' said the tall man. 'With your permission, sir.'

XVI

Once there were some children (human children, playfully) who had wanted a dog—a little playful puppy. But their father said they could not have a dog because they would not know how to treat him. But they wanted him so badly and begged their father so that he finally brought them home a dog, a cunning little puppy, a little butterball, with a paunchy belly and four wobbly legs and melting eyes, filled with the innocence of puppyhood.

The children did not treat him as badly as you might have imagined that they would. They were cruel, as all children are. They roughed and tumbled him; they pulled his ears and tail; they teased him. But the pup was full of fun. He liked to play and no matter what they did he came back for more. Because, undoubtedly, he felt very smug in this business of associating with the clever human race, a race so far ahead of dogs in culture and intelligence that there was no comparison at all.

But one day the children went on a picnic and when the day was over they were very tired, and forgetful, as children are very apt to be. So they went off and left the puppy.

That wasn't a bad thing really. For children will be forgetful, no matter what you do, and the pup was nothing but a dog.

The cabinet said: 'You are very late, sir.'

'Yes,' said Bishop, dully.

'You hurt somewhere, sir. I can sense the hurt.'

'My hand,' said Bishop. 'I burned it in a fire.'

A panel popped open in the cabinet.

'Put it in there,' said the cabinet. 'I'll fix it in a jiffy.'

Bishop thrust his hand into the opening. He felt fingerlike appendages going over it, very gently and soothing.

'It's not a bad burn, sir,' said the cabinet, 'but I imagine it is painful.'

Playthings, Bishop thought.

This hotel is a dollhouse—or a doghouse.

It is a shack, a tacked-together shack like the boys of Earth build out of packing cases and bits of board and paint crude, mystic signs upon.

Compared to that room back there it is no more than a hovel, although, come to think of it, a very gaudy hovel.

Fit for humans, good enough for humans but a hovel just the same.

And we? he thought.

And we?

The pets of children. The puppy dogs of Kimon.

Imported puppy dogs.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said the cabinet. 'You are not puppy dogs.'

'What's that?'

'You will pardon me, sir. I should not have spoken out. But I wouldn't have wanted you to think—'

'If we aren't pets, what are we?'

'You will excuse me, sir. It was a slip, I quite assure you. I should not have—'

'You never do a thing,' said Bishop bitterly, 'without having it all figured out. You or any of them. For you are one of them. You spoke because they wanted you to speak.'

'I can assure you that's not so.'

'You would deny it, naturally,' said Bishop. 'Go ahead and do your job. You haven't told me all they wanted you to tell me. Go ahead and finish.'

'It's immaterial to me what you think,' the cabinet told him. 'But if you thought of yourself as playmates . . .'

'That's a hot one,' Bishop said.

'Infinitely better,' said the cabinet, 'than thinking of yourself as a puppy dog.'

'So that's what they want me to think.'

'They don't care,' the cabinet said. 'It all is up to you. It was a mere suggestion, sir.'

So, all right, it was a mere suggestion.

So, all right, they were playmates and not pets at all.

The kids of Kimon inviting the dirty, ragged, runny-nosed urchins from across the tracks to play with them.

Better to be an invited kid, perhaps, than an imported dog.

But even so, it was the children of Kimon who had engineered it all—who had set up the rules for those who wished to come to Kimon, who had built the hotel, had operated it and furnished it with the progressively more luxurious and more enticing rooms,

who had found the so-called jobs for humans, who had arranged the printing of the credits.

And, if that were so, then it meant that not merely the people of Earth, but the government of Earth, had negotiated, or had attempted to negotiate with the children of another race. And that would be the mark of the difference, he thought, the difference between us.

Although, he told himself, that might not be entirely right.

Maybe he *had* been wrong in thinking, in the first flush of his bitterness, that he was a pet.

Maybe he *was* a playmate, an adult Earthman downgraded to the status of a child—and a stupid child, at that.

Maybe, if he had been wrong on the pet angle, he was wrong in the belief as well, that it had been the children of Kimon who had arranged the immigration of the Earth folk.

And if it hadn't been simply a childish matter of asking if some kids from across the tracks, if the adults of Kimon had had a hand in it, what was the set-up then? A school project, a certain phase of progressive education? Or a sort of summer camp project, designed to give the deserving but under-privileged, Earthmen a vacation away from the squalor of their native planet? Or simply a safe way in which the children of Kimon might amuse and occupy themselves, be kept from underfoot?

We should have guessed it long ago, Bishop told himself. But even if some of us might have entertained the thought, that we were either pet or playmate, we would have pushed it far away from us, would have refused to recognize it, for our pride is too tender and too raw for a thought like that.

'There you are, sir,' said the cabinet. 'Almost as good as new. Tomorrow you can take the dressing off.'

He stood before the cabinet without answering. He withdrew his hand and let it fall to his side, like so much dead weight.

Without asking if he wanted it, the cabinet produced a drink.

'I made it long and strong,' said the cabinet. 'I thought you needed it.'

'Thank you,' Bishop said.

He took the drink and stood there with it, not touching it, not wanting to touch it until he'd finished out the thought.

And the thought would not finish out.

There was something wrong. Something that didn't track.

Our pride is too raw and tender—

There was something there, some extra words that badly needed saying.

'There is something wrong, sir?'

'Nothing wrong,' said Bishop.

'But your drink.'

'I'll get around to it.'

The Normans had sat their horses on that Saturday afternoon, with the leopard banners curling in the breeze, with the pennons on their lances fluttering, with the sun upon their armor and the scabbards clinking as the horses pranced. They had charged, as history said they had, and they were beaten back. That was entirely right, for it had not been until late afternoon that the Saxon wall was broken and the final fight around the dragon standard had not taken place until it was nearly dark.

But there had been no Taillefer, riding in the fore to throw up his sword and sing.

On that history had been wrong.

A couple of centuries later, more than likely, some copyist had whiled away a monotonous afternoon by writing into the prosaic story of the battle the romance and the glitter of the charge of Taillefer. Writing it in protest against the four blank walls, against his Spartan food, against the daily dullness when spring was in the air and a man should be in the fields or woods instead of shut indoors, hunched with his quills and inkpots.

And that is the way it is with us, thought Bishop. We write the half-truth and the half-lie in our letters home. We conceal a truth or we obscure a fact, or we add a line or two that, if not a downright lie, is certainly misleading.

We do not face up to facts, he thought. We gloss over the man crawling in the grass, with his torn-out guts snagging on the brambles. We write in the Taillefer.

And if we only did it in our letters, it would not be so bad. But we do it to ourselves. We protect our pride by lying to ourselves. We shield our dignity by deliberate indignation.

'Here,' he said to the cabinet, 'have a drink on me.'

He set the glass, still full, on the top of the cabinet.

The cabinet gurgled in surprise.

'I do not drink,' it said.

'Then take it back and put it in the bottle.'

'I can't do that,' said the cabinet, horrified. 'It's already mixed.' 'Separate it, then.'

'It can't be separated,' wailed the cabinet. 'You surely don't expect me—'

There was a little swish and Maxine stood in the center of the room.

She smiled at Bishop.

'What goes on?' she asked.

The cabinet wailed at her. 'He wants me to unmix a drink. He wants me to separate it, the liquor from the mix. He knows I can't do that.'

'My, my,' she said, 'I thought you could do anything.'

'I can't unravel a drink,' the cabinet said primly. 'Why don't you take it off my hands?'

'That's a good idea,' said the girl. She walked forward and picked up the drink.

'What's wrong with you?' she asked Bishop. 'Turning chicken on us?'

'I just don't want a drink,' said Bishop. 'Hasn't a man got a right to—'

'Of course,' she said. 'Of course you have.'

She sipped the drink, looking at him above the rim.

'What happened to your hand?'

'Burned it.'

'You're old enough not to play with fire.'

'You're old enough not to come barging into a room this way,' Bishop told her. 'One of these days you'll reassemble yourself in the precise spot where someone else is standing.'

She giggled. 'That would be fun,' she said. 'Think of you and me—'

'It would be a mess,' said Bishop.

'Invite me to sit down,' said Maxine. 'Let's act civilized and social.'

'Sure, sit down,' said Bishop.

She picked out a couch.

'I'm interested in this business of teleporting yourself,' said Bishop. 'I've never asked you before but you told me—'

'It just came to me,' she said.

'But you can't teleport. Humans aren't parapsychic—'

'Some day, Buster, you'll blow a fuse. You get so steamed up.' He went across the room and sat down beside her.

'Sure, I get steamed up,' he said. 'But—'

'What now?'

'Have you ever thought . . . well, have you ever tried to work at it? Like moving something else, some object—other than yourself?'

'No, I never have.'

'Why not?'

'Look, Buster. I drop in to have a drink with you and to forget myself. I didn't come primed for a long technical discussion. I couldn't anyway. I just don't understand. There's so much we don't understand.'

She looked at him and there was something very much like fright brimming in her eyes.

'You pretend that you don't mind,' she said. 'But you do mind. You wear yourself out pretending that you don't mind at all.'

'Then let's quit pretending,' Bishop said. 'Let's admit—'

She had lifted the glass to drink and now, suddenly, it slipped out of her hand.

'Oh—'

The glass halted before it struck the floor. It hovered for a moment, then it slowly rose. She reached out and grasped it.

And then it slipped again from her suddenly shaking hand. This time it hit the floor and spilled.

'Try it again,' said Bishop.

She said: 'I never tried. I don't know how it happened. I just didn't want to drop it, that was all. I wished I hadn't dropped it and then—'

'But the second time—'

'You fool,' she screamed, 'I tell you I didn't try. I wasn't putting on an exhibition for you. I tell you that I don't know what happened.'

'But you did it. It was a start.'

'A start?'

'You caught the glass before it hit the floor. You teleported it back into your hand.'

'Look, Buster,' she said grimly, 'quit kidding yourself. They're watching all the time. They play little tricks like that. Anything for a laugh.'

She rose, laughing at him, but there was a strangeness in her laughing.

'You don't give yourself a chance,' he told her. 'You are so horribly afraid of being laughed at. You got to be a wise guy.'

'Thanks for the drink,' she said.

'But Maxine—'

'Come up and see me sometime.'

'Maxine! Wait!'

But she was gone.

XVII

Watch for the clues, Morley had said, pacing up and down the room. Send us back the clues and we will do the rest. A foot in the door is all we expect from you. Give us a foot inside the door and that is all we need.

Let us look for facts.

The Kimonians are a race more culturally advanced than we are, which means, in other words, that they are further along the road of evolution, farther from the ape. And what does it take to advance along the evolutionary road beyond the high tide of my own race of Earth?

Not mere intelligence alone, for that is not enough.

What then would it take to make the next major stride in evolution?

Perhaps philosophy rather than intelligence—a seeking for a way to put to better use the intelligence that one already had, a greater understanding and a more adequate appreciation of human values in relation to the universe.

And if the Kimonians had that greater understanding, if they had won their way through better understanding to closer brotherhood with the galaxy, then it would be inconceivable that they'd take the members of another intelligent race to serve as puppy dogs for children. Or even as playmates for their children, unless in the fact of playing with their children there be some greater value, not to their child alone, but to the child of Earth, than the happiness and wonder of such association. They would be alive to the psychic damage that might be done because of such a practice, would not for a moment run the danger of that

damage happening unless out of it might come some improvement or some change.

He sat and thought of it and it seemed right, for even on his native planet, history showed increasing concern with social values with the improvement of the culture.

And something else.

Parapsychic powers must not come too soon in human evolution, for they could be used disastrously by a culture that was not equipped emotionally and intellectually to handle them. No culture which had not reached an adult stage could have parapsychic powers, for they were nothing to be fooled around with by an adolescent culture.

In that respect at least, Bishop told himself, the Kimonians are the adults and we are the adolescents. In comparison with the Kimonians, we have no right to consider ourselves any more than children.

It was hard to take.

He gagged on it.

Swallow it, he told himself. Swallow it.

The cabinet said: 'It is late, sir. You must be getting tired.'

'You want me to go to bed?'

'It's a suggestion, sir.'

'All right,' he said.

He rose and started for the bedroom, smiling to himself.

Sent off to bed, he thought—just as a child is sent.

And going.

Not saying: 'I'll go when I am ready.'

Not standing on your adult dignity.

Not throwing a tantrum, not beating your heels upon the floor and howling.

Going off to bed—like a child when it is told to go.

Maybe that's the way, he thought. Maybe that's the answer. Maybe that's the *only* answer.

He swung around.

'Cabinet.'

'What is it, sir?'

'Nothing,' Bishop said. 'Nothing at all . . . that is. Thanks for fixing up my hand.'

'That's quite all right,' said the cabinet. 'Good night.'

Maybe that's the answer.

To act like a child.
 And what does a child do?
 He goes to bed when he is told.
 He minds his elders.
 He goes to school.
 He—

Wait a minute!

He goes to school!

He goes to school because there is a lot to learn. He goes to kindergarten so he can get into first grade and he goes to high school so he can go to college. He realizes there is a lot to learn, that before he takes his place in the adult world it must be learned and that he has to work to learn.

But I went to school, Bishop told himself. I went for years and years. I studied hard and I passed an examination that a thousand others failed to pass. I qualified for Kimon.

But just suppose.

You went to kindergarten to qualify for first grade.

You went to high school to qualify for college.

You went to Earth to qualify for Kimon.

You might have a doctorate on Earth, but still be no more than a kindergarten youngster when you got to Kimon.

Monty knew a bit of telepathy and so did some of the others. Maxine could teleport herself and she had made the glass stop before it hit the floor. Perhaps the others could, too.

And they'd just picked it up.

Although just telepathy or stopping a glass from hitting the floor would not be all of it. There'd be much more of it. Much more to the culture of Kimon than the parapsychic arts.

Maybe we are ready, he thought. Maybe we've almost finished with our adolescence. Maybe we are on the verge of being ready for an adult culture. Could that be why the Kimonians let us in, the only ones in the galaxy they are willing to let in?

His brain reeled with the thought.

On Earth only one of every thousand passed the examination that sent them on to Kimon. Maybe here on Kimon only another one in every thousand would be qualified to absorb the culture that Kimon offered them.

But before you could even start to absorb the culture, before you could start to learn, before you ever went to school, you'd

have to admit that you didn't know. You'd have to admit that you were a child. You couldn't go on having tantrums. You couldn't be a wise guy. You couldn't keep on polishing up false pride to use as a shield between you and the culture that waited for your understanding.

Morley, Bishop said, I may have the answer—the answer that you're awaiting back on Earth.

But I can't tell it to you. It's something that can't be told. It's a thing that each one must find out for himself.

And the pity of it is that Earth is not readily equipped to find it out. It is not a lesson that is often taught on Earth.

Armies and guns could not storm the citadel of Kimonian culture, for you simply could not fight a war with a parapsychic people. Earth aggressiveness and business cunning likewise would fail to crack the dead-pan face of Kimon.

There is only one way, Morley, Bishop said, talking to his friend. There is only one thing that will crack this planet and that is humility.

And Earthmen are not humble creatures.

Long ago they forgot the meaning of humility.

But here it's different.

Here you have to be different.

You start out by saying I don't know.

Then you say I want to know.

Then you say I'll work hard to learn.

Maybe, Bishop thought, that's why they brought us here, so that the one of us in every thousand who has a chance of learning would get that chance to learn. Maybe they are watching, hoping that there may be more than one in every thousand. Maybe they are more anxious for us to learn than we are to learn. For they may be lonely in a galaxy where there are no others like them.

Could it be that the ones at this hotel were the failures, the ones who had never tried, or who might have tried and could not pass.

And the others—the one out of every thousand—where were they?

He could not even guess.

There were no answers.

It all was supposition.

It was a premise built upon a pipe-dream—built on wishful thinking.

He'd wake up in the morning and know that it was wrong.

He'd go down to the bar and have a drink with Maxine or with Monty and laugh at himself for the things that he'd dreamed up.

School, he'd told himself. But it wouldn't be a school—at least not the kind of school he'd ever known before.

I wish it could be so, he thought.

The cabinet said, 'You'd better get off to bed, sir.'

'I suppose I should,' said Bishop. 'It's been a long, hard day.'

'You'll want to get up early,' said the cabinet, 'so you aren't late for school.'

ii *The Health Service in the Skies*

James White: RESIDENT PHYSICIAN 261

Hal Lynch: AGE OF RETIREMENT 287

Pete Adams and Charles Nightingale:

PLANTING TIME 293



It must be confessed that many of the operations of a galactic empire have yet to be revealed. Authors prefer to concentrate on such problems as how you get from planet A to planet B when they are hundreds of light-years apart, or who sits on which council or throne. The emphasis is on power, whether in the Main Drive or in the driving seat. We have here three stories which investigate interesting side-issues.

Hal Lynch turns his attention on the good old Space Patrol and tells us who mans it, if that is the appropriate phrase. Pete Adams and Charles Nightingale—as yet not two of the most famous names in sf—deal with the sexual problems of galactic travellers, laughing all the way to the nearest mossy bank.

It seems to have occurred only to James White that, with aliens getting shot up all over the inhabited universe, pretty capacious galactic hospitals will be needed for the wounded. In fact, White's famous space-going Sector General deals mainly with civilian casualties. The case on hand would baffle Dr Kildare, who never had to cope with a patient possessing five large mouths. That Big Health Service in the Skies is used to anything.

Mr White lavishes much ingenuity on the aliens who pass through Sector General. The adventures of his medico, Conway, are detailed in two volumes, *Hospital Station* and *Star Surgeon*. For a change, the central character is a pacifist. Here is an external view of the gigantic station.

Far out on the galactic rim, where star systems were sparse and the darkness was nearly absolute, Sector Twelve General Hospital hung in space. In its three hundred and eighty-four levels were reproduced the environments of all the intelligent life-forms known to the Galactic Federation, a biological spectrum ranging from the ultra-frigid methane life-forms through the more normal oxygen- and chlorine-breathing types up to the exotic beings who existed by the direct absorption of hard radiation. Its thousands of viewports were constantly ablaze with light—light in the dazzling variety of colour and intensity necessary for the visual equipment of its extra-terrestrial pa-

tients and staff—so that to approaching ships the great hospital looked like a tremendous cylindrical Christmas tree.’

Enter one dying criminal weighing one thousand pounds and looking like a giant upright pear . . .

In this new story of the gigantic Sector General Hospital in space, Dr Conway is posed with a particularly sticky problem—to diagnose and cure a sick alien who is both immortal and apparently a murderer.

RESIDENT PHYSICIAN

by James White

1

The patient being brought into the observation ward was a large specimen—about one thousand pounds mass, Conway estimated—and resembled a giant, upright pear. Five thick, tentacular appendages grew from the narrow head section and a heavy apron of muscle at its base gave evidence of a snaillike, although not necessarily slow, method of locomotion. The whole body surface looked raw and lacerated, as though someone had been trying to take its skin off with a wire brush.

To Conway there was nothing very unusual about the physical aspect of the patient or its condition, six years in space Sector General Hospital, having accustomed him to much more startling sights, so he moved forward to make a preliminary examination. Immediately the Monitor Corps lieutenant who had accompanied the patient's trolley into the ward moved closer also. Conway tried to ignore the feeling of breath on the back of his neck and took a closer look at the patient.

Five large mouths were situated below the root of each tentacle, four being plentifully supplied with teeth and the other one housing the vocal apparatus. The tentacles themselves showed a high degree of specialisation at their extremities; three of them were plainly manipulatory, one bore the patient's visual equipment and the remaining member terminated in a horn-tipped, boney mace. The head was featureless, being simply an osseous dome housing the patient's brain.

There wasn't much else to be seen from a superficial examination. Conway turned to get his deep probe gear, and walked on the Monitor officer's feet.

'Have you ever considered taking up medicine seriously, Lieutenant?' he said irritably.

The lieutenant reddened, his face making a horrible clash of colour against the dark green of his uniform collar. He said stiffly, 'This patient is a criminal. It was found in circumstances which indicate that it killed and ate the other member of its ship's crew. It has been unconscious during the trip here, but I've been ordered to stand guard on it just in case. I'll try to stay out of your way, Doctor.'

Conway swallowed, his eyes going to the vicious-looking, horny bludgeon with which, he had no doubt, the patient's species had battered their way to the top of their evolutionary tree. He said drily, 'Don't try too hard, Lieutenant.'

Using his eyes and a portable x-ray scanner Conway examined his patient thoroughly inside and out. He took several specimens, including sections of the affected skin, and sent them off to Pathology with three closely-written pages of covering notes. Then he stood back and scratched his head.

The patient was warm-blooded, oxygen-breathing, and had fairly normal gravity and pressure requirements which, when considered with the general shape of the beastie, put its physiological classification as EPLH. It seemed to be suffering from a well-developed and widespread epithelioma, the symptoms being so plain that he really should have begun treatment without waiting for the Path report. But a cancerous skin condition did not, ordinarily, render a patient deeply unconscious.

That could point to psychological complications, he knew, and in that case he would have to call in some specialised help. One of his telepathic colleagues was the obvious choice, if it hadn't been for the fact that telepaths could only rarely work minds that were not already telepathic and of the same species as themselves. Except for the very odd instance, telepathy had been found to be a strictly closed circuit form of communication. Which left his GLNO friend, the empath Dr Prilicla . . .

Behind him the Lieutenant coughed gently and said, 'When you've finished the examination, Doctor, O'Mara would like to see you.'

Conway nodded. 'I'm going to send someone to keep an eye on the patient,' he said, grinning, 'guard them as well as you've guarded me.'

Going through to the main ward Conway detailed an Earth-human nurse—a very good-looking Earth-human nurse—to duty in the observation ward. He could have sent in one of the Tralthan FGLIs, who belonged to a species with six legs and so built that besides one of them an Earthly elephant would have seemed a fragile, sylph-like creature, but he felt that he owed the Lieutenant something for his earlier bad manners.

Twenty minutes later, after three changes of protective armour and a trip through the chlorine section, a corridor belonging to the AUGL water-breathers and the ultra-refrigerated wards of the methane life-forms, Conway presented himself at the office of Major O'Mara.

As Chief Psychologist of a multi-environment hospital hanging in frigid blackness at the Galactic rim, he was responsible for the mental well-being of a Staff of ten thousand entities who were composed of eighty-seven different species. O'Mara was a very important man at Sector General. He was also, on his own admission, the most approachable man in the hospital. O'Mara was fond of saying that he didn't care who approached him or when, but if they hadn't a very good reason for pestering him with their silly little problems then they needn't expect to get away from him again unscathed. To O'Mara the medical staff were patients, and it was the generally held belief that the high level of stability among that variegated and often touchy bunch of e-ts was due to them being too scared of O'Mara to go mad. But today he was in an almost sociable mood.

'This will take more than five minutes so you'd better sit down, Doctor,' he said sourly when Conway stopped before his desk. 'I take it you've had a look at our cannibal?'

Conway nodded and sat down. Briefly he outlined his findings with regard to the EPLH patient, including his suspicion that there might be complications of a psychological nature. Ending, he asked, 'Do you have any other information on its background, apart from the cannibalism?'

'Very little,' said O'Mara. 'It was found by a Monitor patrol vessel in a ship which, although undamaged, was broadcasting distress signals. Obviously it became too sick to operate the vessel. There was no other occupant, but because the EPLH was a new species to the rescue party they went over its ship with a fine-tooth comb, and found that there should have been another

person aboard. They discovered this through a sort of ship's log cum personal diary kept on tape by the EPLH, and by study of the airlock tell-tales and similar protective gadgetry the details of which don't concern us at the moment. However, all the facts point to there being two entities aboard the ship, and the log tape suggests pretty strongly that the other one came to a sticky end at the hands, and teeth, of your patient.'

O'Mara paused to toss a slim sheaf of papers on to his lap and Conway saw that it was a typescript of the relevant sections of the log. He had time only to discover that the EPLH's victim had been the ship's doctor, then O'Mara was talking again.

'We know nothing about its planet of origin,' he said morosely, 'except that it is somewhere in the other galaxy. However, with only one quarter of our own Galaxy explored, our chances of finding its home world are negligible—'

'How about the Ians,' said Conway, 'maybe they could help?'

The Ians belonged to a culture originating in the other galaxy which had planted a colony in the same sector of the home galaxy which contained the Hospital. They were an unusual species—classification GKNM—which went into a chrysalis stage at adolescence and metamorphosized from a ten-legged crawler into a beautiful, winged life-form. Conway had had one of them as a patient three months ago. The patient had been long since discharged, but the two GKNM doctors, who had originally come to help Conway with the patient, had remained at Sector General to study and teach.

'A Galaxy's a big place,' said O'Mara with an obvious lack of enthusiasm, 'but try them by all means. However, to get back to your patient, the biggest problem is going to come *after* you've cured it.'

'You see, Doctor,' he went on, 'this particular beastie was found in circumstances which show pretty conclusively that it is guilty of an act which every intelligent species we know of considers a crime. As the Federation's police force among other things the Monitor Corps is supposed to take certain measures against criminals like this one. They are supposed to be tried, rehabilitated or punished as seems fit. But how can we give this criminal a fair trial when we know nothing at all about its background, a background which just might contain the possibility of

extenuating circumstances? At the same time we can't just let it go free . . .'

'Why not?' said Conway. 'Why not point it in the general direction from whence it came and administer a judicial kick in the pants?'

'Or why not let the patient die,' O'Mara replied, smiling, 'and save trouble all round?'

Conway didn't speak. O'Mara was using an unfair argument and they both knew it, but they also knew that nobody would be able to convince the Monitor enforcement section that curing the sick and punishing the malefactor were not of equal importance in the Scheme of Things.

'What I want you to do,' O'Mara resumed, 'is to find out all you can about the patient and its background after it comes to and during treatment. Knowing how soft-hearted, or soft-headed you are, I expect you will side with the patient during the cure and appoint yourself an unofficial counsel for the defence. Well, I won't mind that if in so doing you obtain the information which will enable us to summon a jury of its peers. Understood?'

Conway nodded.

O'Mara waited precisely three seconds, then said, 'If you've nothing better to do than laze about in that chair . . .'

Immediately on leaving O'Mara's office Conway got in touch with Pathology and asked for the EPLA report to be sent to him before lunch. Then he invited the two Ian GKNMs to lunch and arranged for a consultation with Prilicla regarding the patient shortly afterwards. With these arrangements made he felt free to begin his rounds.

During the two hours which followed Conway had no time to think about his newest patient. He had fifty-three patients currently in his charge together with six doctors in various stages of training and a supporting staff of nurses, the patients and medical staff comprising eleven different physiological types. There were special instruments and procedures for examining these extra-terrestrial patients, and when he was accompanied by a trainee whose pressure and gravity requirements differed both from those of the patient to be examined and himself, then the 'routine' of his rounds could become an extraordinarily complicated business.

But Conway looked at all his patients, even those whose convalescence was well advanced or whose treatment could have been handled by a subordinate. He was well aware that this was a stupid practice which only served to give him a lot of unnecessary work, but the truth was promotion to a resident Senior Physician was still too recent for him to have become used to the large-scale delegation of responsibility. He foolishly kept on trying to do everything himself.

After rounds he was scheduled to give an initial midwifery lecture to a class of DBLF nurses. The DBLFs were furry, multipedal beings resembling outsize caterpillars and were native to the planet Kelgia. They also breathed the same atmospheric mixture as himself, which meant that he was able to do without a pressure suit. To this purely physical comfort was added the fact that talking about such elementary stuff as the reason for Kelgian females conceiving only once in their lifetime and then producing quads who were invariably divided equally in sex, did not call for great concentration on his part. It left a large section of his mind free to worry about the alleged cannibal in his observation ward.

2

Half an hour later he was with the two Ian doctors in the Hospital's main dining hall—the one which catered for Tralthan. Kelgian, human and the various other warm-blooded, oxygen-breathers on the Staff—eating the inevitable salad. This in itself did not bother Conway unduly, in fact, lettuce was downright appetising compared with some of the things he had had to eat while playing host to other e-t colleagues, but he did not think that he would ever get used to the gale they created during lunch.

The GKNM denizens of Ia were a large, delicate, winged life-form who looked something like a dragonfly. To their rod-like but flexible bodies were attached four insectile legs, manipulators, the usual sensory organs and three tremendous sets of wings. Their table manners were not actually unpleasant—it was just that they did not sit down to dine, they hovered. Apparently

eating while in flight aided their digestions as well as being pretty much a conditioned reflex with them.

Conway set the Path report on the table and placed the sugar bowl on top of it to keep it from blowing away. He said, ' . . . You'll see from what I've just been reading to you that this appears to be a fairly simple case. Unusually so, I'd say, because the patient is remarkably clear of harmful bacteria of any type. Its symptoms indicate a form of epithelioma, that and nothing else, which makes its unconsciousness rather puzzling. But maybe some information on its planetary environment, sleeping periods and so on, would clarify things, and that is why I wanted to talk to you.

'We know that the patient comes from your galaxy. Can you tell me anything at all about its background?'

The GKNM on Conway's right drifted a few inches back from the table and said through its Translator, 'I'm afraid I have not yet mastered the intricacies of your physiological classification system, Doctor. What does the patient look like?'

'Sorry, I forgot,' said Conway. He was about to explain in detail what an EPLH was, then he began sketching on the back of the Path report instead. A few minutes later he held up the result and said, 'It looks something like that.'

Both Ians dropped to the floor.

Conway who had never known the GKNMs to stop either eating or flying during a meal was impressed by the reaction.

He said, 'You know about them, then?'

The GKNM on the right made noises which Conway's Translator reproduced as a series of barks, the e-t equivalent of an attack of stuttering. Finally it said, 'We know of them. We have never seen one of them, we do not know their planet of origin, and before this moment we were not sure that they had actual physical existence. They . . . they are gods, Doctor.'

Another VIP . . . I thought Conway, with a sudden sinking feeling. His experience with VIP patients was that their cases were *never* simple. Even if the patient's condition was nothing serious there were invariably complications, none of which were medical.

'My Colleague is being a little too emotional,' the other GKNM broke in. Conway had never been able to see any physical

difference between the two Ians, but somehow this one had the air of being a more cynical, world-weary dragonfly. 'Perhaps I can tell you what little is known, and deduced, about them rather than enumerate all the things which are not . . .'

The species to which the patient belonged was not a numerous one, the Ian doctor went on to explain, but their sphere of influence in the other galaxy was tremendous. In the social and psychological sciences they were very well advanced, and individually their intelligence and mental capacity was enormous. For reasons known only to themselves they did not seek each other's company very often, and it was unheard of for more than one of them to be found on any planet at the same time for any lengthy period.

They were always the supreme ruler on the worlds they occupied. Sometimes it was a beneficent rule, sometimes harsh—but the harshness, when viewed with a century or so's hindsight, usually turned out to be beneficence in disguise. They used people, whole planetary populations, and even interplanetary cultures, purely as a means to solve the problems which they set themselves, and when the problem was solved they left. At least this was the impression received by not quite unbiased observers.

In a voice made flat and emotionless only because of the process of Translation the Ian went on. ' . . . Legends seem to agree that one of them will land on a planet with nothing but its ship and a companion who is always of a different species. By using a combination of defensive science, psychology and sheer business acumen they overcome local prejudice and begin to amass wealth and power. The transition from local authority to absolute planetary rule is gradual, but then they have plenty of time. They are, of course, immortal.'

Faintly, Conway heard his fork clattering on to the floor. It was a few minutes before he could steady either his hands or his mind.

There were a few extra-terrestrial species in the Federation who possessed very long life-spans, and most of the medically advanced cultures—Earth's included—had the mean of extending life considerably with rejuvenation treatments. Immortality, however, was something they did *not* have, nor had they ever

had the chance to study anyone who possessed it. Until now, that was. Now Conway had a patient to care for, and cure and, most of all, investigate. Unless . . . but the GKNM was a doctor, and a doctor would not say immortal if he merely meant long-lived.

‘Are you sure?’ croaked Conway.

The Ian’s answer took a long time because it included the detailing of a great many facts, theories and legends concerning these beings who were satisfied to rule nothing less than a planet apiece. At the end of it Conway was still not sure that his patient was immortal, but everything he had heard seemed to point that way.

Hesitantly, he said, ‘After what I’ve just heard perhaps I shouldn’t ask, but in your opinion are these beings capable of committing an act of murder and cannibalism—’

‘No!’ said one Ian.

‘Never!’ said the other.

There was, of course, no hint of emotion in the Translated replies, but their sheer volume was enough to make everyone in the dining hall look up.

A few minutes later Conway was alone. The Ians had requested permission to see the legendary EPLH and then dashed off full of awe and eagerness. Ians were nice people, Conway thought, but at the same time it was his considered opinion that lettuce was fit only for rabbits. With great firmness he pushed his slightly mussed salad away from him and dialled for steak with double the usual accessories.

This promised to be a long, hard day.

When Conway returned to the observation ward the Ians had gone and the patient’s condition was unchanged. The Lieutenant was still guarding the nurse on duty—closely—and was beginning to blush for some reason. Conway nodded gravely, dismissed the nurse and was giving the Path report a rereading when Dr Prilicla arrived.

Prilicla was a spidery, fragile, low-gravity being of classification GLNO who had to wear G-nullifiers constantly to keep from being mashed flat by a gravity which most other species considered normal. Besides being a very competent doctor Prilicla was the most popular person in the hospital, because its empathic

faculty made it nearly impossible for the little being to be disagreeable to anyone. And, although it also possessed a set of large, iridescent wings it sat down at mealtimes and ate spaghetti with a fork. Conway liked Prilicla a lot.

Conway briefly described the EPLH's condition and background as he saw it, then ended, ' . . . I know you can't get much from an unconscious patient, but it would help me if you could—'

'There appears to be a misunderstanding here, Doctor,' Prilicla broke in, using the form of words which was the nearest it ever came to telling someone they were wrong. 'The patient is conscious . . .'

'Get back!'

Warned as much by Conway's emotional radiation at the thought of what the patient's boney club could do to Prilicla's egg-shell body as his words, the little GLNO skittered backwards out of range. The Lieutenant edged closer, his eyes on the still motionless tentacle which ended in that monstrous bludgeon. For several seconds nobody moved or spoke, while outwardly the patient remained unconscious. Finally Conway looked at Prilicla. He did not have to speak.

Prilicla said, 'I detect emotional radiation of a type which emanates only from a mind which is consciously aware of itself. The mental processes themselves seem slow and, considering the physical size of the patient, weak. In detail, it is radiating feelings of danger, helplessness and confusion. There is also an indication of some overall sense of purpose.'

Conway sighed.

'So it's playing 'possum,' said the Lieutenant grimly, talking mostly to himself.

The fact that the patient was feigning unconsciousness worried Conway less than it did the Corpsman. In spite of the mass of diagnostic equipment available to him he subscribed firmly to the belief that a doctor's best guide to any malfunction was a communicative and co-operative patient. But how did one open a conversation with a being who was a near deity . . . ?

'We . . . we are going to help you,' he said awkwardly. 'Do you understand what I'm saying?'

The patient remained motionless as before.

Prilicla said, 'There is no indication that it heard you, Doctor.'

'But if it's conscious . . .' Conway began, and ended the sentence with a helpless shrug.

He began assembling his instruments again and with Prilicla's help examined the EPLH again, paying special attention to the organs of sight and hearing. But there was no physical or emotional reaction while the examination was in progress, despite the flashing lights and a considerable amount of ungentle probing. Conway could see no evidence of physical malfunction in any of the sensory organs, yet the patient remained completely unaware of all outside stimulus. Physically it was unconscious, insensible to everything going on around it, except that Prilicla insisted that it wasn't.

What a crazy, mixed-up demi-god, thought Conway. Trust O'Mara to send him the weirdies. Aloud he said, 'The only explanation I can see for this peculiar state of affairs is that the mind you are receiving has severed or blocked off contact with all its sensory equipment. The patient's condition is not the cause of this, therefore the trouble must have a psychological basis. I'd say the beastie is urgently in need of psychiatric assistance.

'However,' he ended, 'the head-shrinkers can operate more effectively on a patient who is physically well, so I think we should concentrate on clearing up this skin condition first . . .'

A specific had been developed at the hospital against ephithelioma of the type affecting the patient, and Pathology had already stated that it was suited to the EPLH's metabolism and would produce no harmful side-effects. It took only a few minutes for Conway to measure out a test dosage and inject subcutaneously. Prilicla moved up beside him quickly to see the effect. This, they both knew, was one of the rare, rapid-action miracles of medicine—its effect would be apparent in a matter of seconds rather than hours or days.

Ten minutes later nothing at all had happened.

'A tough guy,' said Conway, and injected the maximum safe dose.

Almost at once the skin in the area darkened and lost its dry, cracked look. The dark area widened perceptibly as they watched, and one of the tentacles twitched slightly.

'What's its mind doing?' said Conway.

'Much the same as before,' Prilicla replied, 'but with mounting

anxiety apparent since the last injection. I detect feelings of a mind trying to make a decision . . . of making a decision . . .’

Prilicla began to tremble violently, a clear sign that the emotional radiation of the patient had intensified. Conway had his mouth open to put a question when a sharp, tearing sound dragged his attention back to the patient. The EPLH was heaving and throwing itself against its restraining harness. Two of the anchoring straps had parted and it had worked a tentacle free. The one with the club . . .

Conway ducked frantically, and avoided having his head knocked off by a fraction of an inch—he felt that ultimate in blunt instruments actually touch his hair. But the Lieutenant was not so lucky. At almost the end of its swing the boney mace thudded into his shoulder, throwing him across the tiny ward so hard that he almost bounced off the wall. Prilicla, with whom cowardice was a prime survival characteristic, was already clinging with its sucker-tipped legs to the ceiling, which was the only safe spot in the room.

From his position flat on the floor Conway heard other straps go and saw two more tentacles flailing about. He knew that in a few minutes the patient would be completely free of the harness and able to move about the room at will. He scrambled quickly to his knees, crouched, then dived for the berserk EPLH. As he hung on tightly with his arms around its body just below the roots of the tentacles Conway was nearly deafened by a series of barking roars coming from the speaking orifice beside his ear. The noise translated as ‘Help me! Help me!’ Simultaneously he saw the tentacle with the great, boney bludgeon at its tip swing downwards. There was a crash and a three-inch hollow appeared on the floor at the point where he had been lying a few seconds previously.

Tackling the patient the way he had done might have seemed foolhardy, but Conway had been trying to keep his head in more ways than one. Clinging tightly to the EPLH’s body below the level of those madly swinging tentacles, Conway knew, was the next safest place in the room.

Then he saw the Lieutenant . . .

The Lieutenant had his back to the wall, half lying and half sitting up. One arm hung loosely at his side and in the other hand

he held his gun, steadying it between his knees, and one eye was closed in a diabolical wink while the other sighted along the barrel. Conway shouted desperately for him to wait, but the noise from the patient drowned him out. At every instant Conway expected the flash and shock of exploding bullets. He felt paralysed with fear, he couldn't even let go.

Then suddenly it was all over. The patient slumped on to its side, twitched and became motionless. Holstering his unfired weapon the Lieutenant struggled to his feet. Conway extricated himself from the patient and Prilicla came down off the ceiling.

Awkwardly, Conway said, 'Uh, I suppose you couldn't shoot with me hanging on there?'

The Lieutenant shook his head. 'I'm a good shot, Doctor. I could have hit it and missed you all right. But it kept shouting, "Help me" all the time. That sort of thing cramps a man's style . . .'

3

It was some twenty minutes later, after Prilicla had sent the Lieutenant away to have a cracked humerus set and Conway and the GLNO were fitting the patient with a much stronger harness, that they noticed the absence of the darker patch of skin. The patient's condition was now exactly the same as it had been before undergoing treatment. Apparently the hefty shot which Conway had administered had had only a temporary effect, and that was decidedly peculiar. It was in fact downright impossible.

From the moment Prilicla's empathic faculty had been brought to bear on the case Conway had been sure that the root of the trouble was psychological. He also knew that a severely warped mind could do tremendous damage to the body which housed it. But this damage was on a purely physical level and its method of repair—the treatment developed and proved time and time again by Pathology—was a hard, physical fact also. And no mind, regardless of its power or degree of malfunction, should be able to ignore, to completely negate, a physical fact. The Universe had, after all, certain fixed laws.

So far as Conway could see there were only two possible explanations. Either the rules were being ignored because the

Being who had made them had also the right to ignore them or somehow, someone—or some combination of circumstances or mis-read data—was pulling a fast one. Conway infinitely preferred the second theory because the first one was altogether too shattering to consider seriously. He desperately wanted to go on thinking of his patient with a small P . . .

Nevertheless, when he left the ward Conway paid a visit to the office of Captain Bryson, the Monitor Corps Chaplain, and consulted that officer at some length in a semi-professional capacity—Conway believed in carrying plenty of insurance. His next call was on Colonel Skempton, the officer in charge of Supply, Maintenance and Communications at the Hospital. There he requested complete copies of the patient's log—not just the sections relevant to the murder—together with any other background data available to be sent to his room. Then he went to the AUGL theatre to demonstrate operative techniques on submarine life-forms, and before dinner he was able to work in two hours in the Pathology department during which he discovered quite a lot about his patient's immortality.

When he returned to his room there was a pile of typescript on his desk that was nearly two inches thick. Conway groaned, thinking of his six-hour recreation period and how he was going to spend it. The thought obtruded of how he would have *liked* to spend it, bringing with it a vivid picture of the very efficient and impossibly beautiful Nurse Murchison whom he had been dating regularly of late. But Murchison was currently with the FGLI Maternity Section and their free periods would not coincide for another two weeks.

In the present circumstances perhaps it was just as well, Conway thought, as he settled down for a good long read.

The Corpsmen who had examined the patient's ship had been unable to convert the EPLH's time units into the Earth-human scale with any accuracy, but they had been able to state quite definitely that many of the taped logs were several centuries old and a few of them dated back to two thousand years or more. Conway began with the oldest and sifted carefully through them until he came to the most recent. He discovered almost at once that they were not so much a series of taped diaries—the refer-

ences to personal items were relatively rare—as a catalogue of memoranda, most of which was highly technical and very heavy going. The data relevant to the murder, which he studied last, was much more dramatic.

. . . *My physician is making me sick, the final entry read, it is killing me. I must do something. It is a bad physician for allowing me to become ill. Somehow I must get rid of it . . .*

Conway replaced the last sheet on its pile, sighed, and prepared to adopt a position more conducive to creative thinking; i.e. with his chair tipped far back, feet on desk and practically sitting on the back of his neck.

What a mess, he thought.

The separate pieces of the puzzle—or most of them, anyway—were available to him now and required only to be fitted together. There was the patient's condition, not serious so far as the Hospital was concerned but definitely lethal if not treated. Then there was the data supplied by the two Ians regarding this God-like, power-hungry but essentially beneficent race and the companions—who were never of the same species—who always travelled or lived with them. These companions were subject to replacement because they grew old and died while the EPLHs did not. There were also the Path reports, both the first written one he had received before lunch and the later verbal one furnished during his two hours with Thornnastor, the FGLI Diagnostician-in-Charge of Pathology. It was Thornnastor's considered opinion that the EPLH patient was not a true immortal, and the Considered Opinion of a Diagnostician was as near to being a rock-hard certainty as made no difference. But while immortality had been ruled out for various physiological reasons, the tests had shown evidence of longevity or rejuvenation treatments of the unselective type.

Finally there had been the emotion readings furnished by Prilicla before and during their attempted treatment of the patient's skin condition. Prilicla had reported a steady radiation pattern of confusion, anxiety and helplessness. But when the EPLH had received its second injection it had gone berserk, and the blast of emotion exploding from its mind had, in Prilicla's own words, nearly fried the little empath's brains in their own ichor. Prilicla had been unable to get a detailed reading on such a violent

eruption of emotion, mainly because it had been tuned to the earlier and more gentle level on which the patient had been radiating, but it agreed that there was evidence of instability of the schizoid type.

Conway wriggled deeper into his chair, closed his eyes and let the pieces of the puzzle slide gently into place.

It had begun on the planet where the EPLHs had been the dominant life-form. In the course of time they had achieved civilisation which included interstellar flight and an advanced medical science. Their life-span, lengthy to begin with, was artificially extended so that a relatively short-lived species like the Ians could be forgiven for believing them to be immortal. But a high price had had to be paid for their longevity: reproduction of their kind, the normal urge towards immortality of race in a species of mortal individuals, would have been the first thing to go; then their civilisation would have dissolved—been forced apart, rather—into a mass of star-travelling, rugged individualists, and finally there would have been the psychological rot which set in when the risk of purely physical deterioration had gone.

Poor demi-gods, thought Conway.

They avoided each other's company for the simple reason that they'd already had too much of it—century after century of each other's mannerisms, habits of speech, opinions and the sheer, utter boredom of looking at each other. They had set themselves vast, sociological problems—taking charge of backward or errant planetary cultures and dragging them up by their bootstraps, and similar large-scale philanthropies—because they had tremendous minds, they had plenty of time, they had constantly to fight against boredom and because basically they must have been nice people. And because part of the price of such longevity was an ever-growing fear of death, they had to have their own personal physicians—no doubt the most efficient practitioners of medicine known to them—constantly in attendance.

Only one piece of the puzzle refused to fit and that was the odd way in which the EPLH had negated his attempts to treat it, but Conway had no doubt that that was a physiological detail which would soon become clear as well. The important thing was that he now knew how to proceed.

Not every condition responded to medication, despite Thornastor's claims to the contrary, and he would have seen that surgery was indicated in the EPLH's case if the whole business had not been so be-fogged with considerations of who and what the patient was and what it was supposed to have done. The fact that the patient was a near-deity, a murderer and generally the type of being not to be trifled with were details which should not have concerned him.

Conway sighed and swung his feet to the floor. He was beginning to feel so comfortable that he decided he had better go to bed before he fell asleep.

Immediately after breakfast next day Conway began setting up things for the EPLH's operation. He ordered the necessary instruments and equipment sent to the observation ward, gave detailed instructions regarding its sterilisation—the patient was supposed to have killed one doctor already for allowing it to become sick, and a dim view would be taken if another one was the cause of it catching something else because of faulty aseptic procedures—and requested the assistance of a Tralthan surgeon to help with the fine work. Then half an hour before he was due to start Conway called on O'Mara.

The Chief Psychologist listened to his report and intended course of action without comment until he had finished, then he said, 'Conway, do you realise what could happen to this hospital if that thing got loose? And not just physically loose, I mean. It is seriously disturbed mentally, you say, if not downright psychotic. At the moment it is unconscious, but from what you tell me its grasp of the psychological sciences is such that it could have us eating out of its manipulatory appendage just by talking at us.

'I'm concerned as to what may happen when it wakes up.'

It was the first time Conway had heard O'Mara confess to being worried about anything. Several years back when a runaway spaceship had crashed into the hospital, spreading havoc and confusion through sixteen levels, it was said that Major O'Mara had expressed a feeling of concern on that occasion also . . .

'I'm trying not to think about that,' said Conway apologetically. 'It just confuses the issue.'

O'Mara took a deep breath and let it out slowly through his

nose, a mannerism of his which could convey more than twenty scathing sentences. He said coldly, 'Somebody should think about these things, Doctor. I trust you will have no objection to *me* observing the coming operation . . . ?'

To what was nothing less than a politely worded order there could be no reply other than an equally polite, 'Glad to have you, sir.'

When they arrived in the observation ward the patient's 'bed' had been raised to a comfortable operating height and the EPLH itself was strapped securely into position. The Tralthan had taken its place beside the recording and anaesthetizing gear and had one eye on the patient, one on its equipment and the other two directed towards Prilicla with whom it was discussing a particularly juicy piece of scandal which had come to light the previous day. As the two beings concerned were PVSJ chlore-breathers the affair could have only an academic interest for them, but apparently their academic interest was intense. At the sight of O'Mara, however, the scandal-mongering ceased forthwith. Conway gave the signal to begin.

The anaesthetic was one of several which Pathology had pronounced safe for the EPLH life-form, and while it was being administered Conway found his mind going off at a tangent towards his Tralthan assistant.

Surgeons of that species were really two beings instead of one, a combination of FGLI and OTSB. Clinging to the leathery back of the lumbering, elephantine Tralthan was a diminutive and nearly mindless being who lived in symbiosis with it. At first glance the OTSB looked like a furry ball with a long ponytail sprouting from it, but a closer look showed that the ponytail was composed of scores of fine manipulators most of which incorporated sensitive visual organs. Because of the *rapport* which existed between the Tralthan and its symbiote the FGLI-OTSB combination were the finest surgeons in the Galaxy. Not all Tralthans chose to link up with a symbiote, but FGLI medics wore them like a badge of office.

Suddenly the OTSB scurried along its host's back and huddled atop the dome-like head between the eye-stalks, its tail hanging down towards the patient and fanning out stiffly. The Tralthan was ready to begin.

'You will observe that this is a surface condition only,' Conway said, for the benefit of the recording equipment, 'and that the whole skin area looks dead, dried-up and on the point of flaking off. During the removal of the first skin samples no difficulty was encountered, but later specimens resisted removal to a certain extent and the reason was discovered to be a tiny rootlet, approximately one quarter of an inch long and invisible to the naked eye. My naked eye, that is. So it seems clear that the condition is about to enter a new phase. The disease is beginning to dig in rather than remain on the surface, and the more promptly we act the better.'

Conway gave the reference numbers of the Path reports and his own preliminary notes on the case, then went on, ' . . . As the patient, for reasons which are at the moment unclear, does not respond to medication I propose surgical removal of the affected tissue, irrigation, cleansing and replacement with surrogate skin. A Tralthan-guided OTSB will be used to insure that the rootlets are also excised. Except for the considerable area to be covered, which will make this a long job, the procedure is straightforward—'

'Excuse me, Doctors,' Prilicla broke in, 'the patient is still conscious.'

An argument, polite only on Prilicla's side, broke out between the Tralthan and the little empath. Prilicla held that the EPLH was thinking thoughts and radiating emotions and the other maintained that it had enough of the anaesthetic in its system to render it completely insensible to everything for at least six hours. Conway broke in just as the argument was becoming personal.

'We've had this trouble before,' he said irritably. 'The patient has been physically unconscious, except for a few minutes yesterday, since its arrival, yet Prilicla detected the presence of rational thought processes. Now the same effect is present while it is under anaesthetic. I don't know how to explain this, it will probably require a surgical investigation of its brain structure to do so, and that is something which will have to wait. The important thing at the moment is that it is physically incapable of movement or of feeling pain. Now shall we begin?'

To Prilicla he added, 'Keep listening just in case . . .'

For about twenty minutes they worked in silence, although the procedure did not require a high degree of concentration. It was rather like weeding a garden, except that everything which grew was a weed and had to be removed one plant at a time. He would peel back an affected area of skin, the OTSB's hair-thin appendages would investigate, probe and detach the rootlets, and he would peel back another tiny segment. Conway was looking forward to the most tedious operation of his career.

Prilicla said, 'I detect increasing anxiety linked with a strengthening sense of purpose. The anxiety is becoming intense . . .'

Conway grunted. He could think of no other comment to make.

Five minutes later the Tralthan said, 'We will have to slow down, Doctor. We are at a section where the roots are much deeper . . .'

Two minutes later Conway said, 'But I can *see* them! How deep are they now?'

'Four inches,' replied the Tralthan. 'And Doctor, they are visibly lengthening as we work.'

'But that's impossible!' Conway burst out; then, 'We'll move to another area.'

He felt the sweat begin to trickle down his forehead and just beside him Prilicla's gangling, fragile body began to quiver—but not at anything the patient was thinking. Conway's own emotional radiation just then was not a pleasant thing, because in the new area and in the two chosen at random after that the result was the same. Roots from the flaking pieces of skin were burrowing deeper as they watched.

'Withdraw,' said Conway harshly.

For a long time nobody spoke. Prilicla was shaking as if a high wind was blowing in the ward. The Tralthan was fussing with its equipment, all four of its eyes focussed on one unimportant knob. O'Mara was looking intently at Conway, also calculatingly and with a large amount of sympathy in his steady grey eyes.

The sympathy was because he could recognise when a man was genuinely in a spot and the calculation was due to his trying to work out whether the trouble was Conway's fault or not.

'What happened, Doctor?' he said gently.

Conway shook his head angrily. 'I don't know. Yesterday the patient did not respond to medication, today it won't respond to surgery. Its reactions to anything we try to do for it are crazy, impossible! And now our attempt to relieve its condition surgically has triggered off—something—which will send those roots deep enough to penetrate vital organs in a matter of minutes if their present rate of growth is maintained, and you know what that means . . .'

'The patient's sense of anxiety is diminishing,' Prilicla reported. 'It is still engaged in purposeful thinking.'

The Tralthan joined in then. It said, 'I have noticed a peculiar fact about those root-like tendrils which join the diseased flakes of skin with the body. My symbiote has extremely sensitive vision, you will understand, and it reports that the tendrils seem to be rooted at each end, so that it is impossible to tell whether the growth is attacking the body or the body is deliberately holding on to the growth.'

Conway shook his head distractedly. The case was full of mad contradictions and outright impossibilities. To begin with no patient, no matter how fouled up mentally, should be able to negate the effects of a drug powerful enough to bring about a complete cure within half an hour, and all within a few minutes. And the natural order of things was for a being with a diseased area of skin to slough it off and replace it with new tissue, not hang on to it grimly no matter what. It was a baffling, hopeless case.

Yet when the patient had arrived it had seemed a simple, straightforward case—Conway had felt more concern regarding the patient's background than its condition, whose cure he had considered a routine matter. But somewhere along the way he had missed something. Conway was sure, and because of this sin of omission the patient would probably die during the next few hours. Maybe he had made a snap diagnosis, been too sure of himself, been criminally careless.

It was pretty horrible to lose a patient at any time, and at Sector General losing a patient was an extremely rare occurrence.

But to lose one whose condition no hospital anywhere in the civilised galaxy would have considered as being serious . . . Conway swore luridly, but stopped because he hadn't the words to describe how he felt about himself.

'Take it easy, son.'

That was O'Mara, squeezing his arm and talking like a father. Normally O'Mara was a bad-tempered, bull-voiced and unapproachable tyrant who, when one went to him for help, sat making sarcastic remarks while the person concerned squirmed and shamefacedly solved his own problems. His present uncharacteristic behaviour proved something, Conway thought bitterly. It proved that Conway had a problem which Conway could not solve himself.

But in O'Mara's expression there was something more than just concern for Conway, and it was probably that deep down the psychologist was a little glad that things had turned out as they did. Conway meant no reflection on O'Mara's character, because he knew that if the Major had been in his position he would have tried as hard if not harder to cure the patient, and would have felt just as badly about the outcome. But at the same time the Chief Psychologist must have been desperately worried about the possibility of a being of great and unknown powers, who was also mentally unbalanced, being turned loose on the Hospital. In addition O'Mara might also be wondering if, beside a conscious and alive EPLH, he would look like a small and untutored boy . . .

'Let's try taking it from the top again,' O'Mara said, breaking in on his thoughts. 'Is there anything you've found in the patient's background that might point to it wanting to destroy itself?'

'No!' said Conway vehemently. 'To the contrary! It would want desperately to live. It was taking unselective rejuvenation treatments, which means that the complete cell-structure of its body was regenerated periodically. As the process of storing memory is a product of ageing in the brain cells, this would practically wipe its mind clean after every treatment . . .'

'That's why those taped logs resembled technical memoranda,' O'Mara put in. 'That's exactly what they were. Still, I prefer our own method of rejuvenation even though we won't live so long,

regenerating damaged organs only and allowing the brain to remain untouched . . .’

‘I know,’ Conway broke in, wondering why the usually taciturn O’Mara had become so talkative. Was he trying to simplify the problem by making him state it in non-professional terms? ‘But the effect of continued longevity treatments, as you know yourself, is to give the possessor an increasing fear of dying. Despite loneliness, boredom and an altogether unnatural existence, the fear grows steadily with the passage of time. That is why it always travelled with its own private physician, it was desperately afraid of sickness or an accident befalling it between treatments, and that is why I can sympathise to a certain extent with its feelings when the doctor who was supposed to keep it well allowed it to get sick, although the business of eating it afterwards—’

‘So you are on its side,’ said O’Mara drily.

‘It could make a good plea of self-defence,’ Conway retorted. ‘But I was saying that it was desperately afraid of dying, so that it would be constantly trying to get a better, more efficient doctor for itself . . . Oh!’

‘Oh, what?’ said O’Mara.

It was Prilicla, the emotion sensitive who replied. It said, ‘Doctor Conway has just had an idea.’

‘What is it, you young whelp? There’s no need to be so damn secretive . . . !’ O’Mara’s voice had lost its gentle fatherly tone, and there was a gleam in his eye which said that he was glad that gentleness was no longer necessary. ‘What is wrong with the patient?’

Feeling happy and excited and at the same time very much unsure of himself, Conway stumbled across to the intercom and ordered some very unusual equipment, checked again that the patient was so thoroughly strapped down that it would be unable to move a muscle, then he said, ‘My guess is that the patient is perfectly sane and we’ve been blinding ourselves with psychological red herrings. Basically, the trouble is something it ate.’

‘I had a bet with myself you would say that sometime during this case,’ said O’Mara. He looked sick.

The equipment arrived—a slender, pointed wooden stake and a mechanism which would drive it downwards at any required

angle and controlled speeds. With the Tralthan's help Conway set it up and moved it into position. He chose a part of the patient's body which contained several vital organs which were, however, protected by nearly six inches of musculature and adipose, then he set the stake in motion. It was just touching the skin and descending at the rate of approximately two inches per hour.

'What the blazes is going on?' stormed O'Mara. 'Do you think the patient is a vampire or something!'

'Of course not,' Conway replied. 'I'm using a wooden stake to give the patient a better chance of defending itself. You wouldn't expect it to stop a steel one, would you?' He motioned the Tralthan forward and together they watched the area where the stake was entering the EPLH's body. Every few minutes Prilicla reported on the emotional radiation. O'Mara paced up and down, occasionally muttering to himself.

The point had penetrated almost a quarter of an inch when Conway noticed the first coarsening and thickening of the skin. It was taking place in a roughly circular area, about four inches in diameter, whose centre was the wound created by the stake. Conway's scanner showed a spongy, fibrous growth forming under the skin to a depth of half an inch. Visibly the growth thickened and grew opaque to his scanner's current setting, and within ten minutes it had become a hard, boney plate. The stake had begun to bend alarmingly and was on the point of snapping.

'I'd say the defences are now concentrated at this one point,' Conway said, trying to keep his voice steady, 'so we'd better have it out.'

Conway and the Tralthan rapidly incised around and undercut the newly-formed boney plate, which was immediately transferred into a sterile, covered receptacle. Quickly preparing a shot—a not quite maximum dose of the specific he had tried the previous day—Conway injected, then went back to helping the Tralthan with the repair work on the wound. This was routine work and took about fifteen minutes, and when it was finished there could be no doubt at all that the patient was responding favourably to treatment.

Over the congratulations of the Tralthan and the horrible threats of O'Mara—the Chief Psychologist wanted some questions answered, fast—Prilicla said, 'You have effected a cure,

Doctor, but the patient's anxiety level has markedly increased. It is almost frantic.'

Conway shook his head, grinning. 'The patient is heavily anaesthetised and cannot feel anything. However, I agree that at this present moment . . .' He nodded toward the sterile container. ' . . . its personal physician must be feeling pretty bad.'

In the container the excised bone had begun to soften and leak a faintly purplish liquid. The liquid was rippling and sloshing gently about at the bottom of the container as if it had a mind of its own. Which was, in fact, the case . . .

Conway was in O'Mara's office winding up his report on the EPLH and the Major was being highly complimentary in a language which at times made the compliments indistinguishable from insults. But this was O'Mara's way, Conway was beginning to realise, and the Chief Psychologist was polite and sympathetic only when he was professionally concerned about a person.

He was still asking questions.

' . . . An intelligent, amoebic life-form, an organised collection of submicroscopic, virus-type cells, would make the most efficient doctor obtainable,' said Conway in reply to one of them. 'It would reside within its patient and, given the necessary data, control any disease or organic malfunction from the inside. To a being who is pathologically afraid of dying it must have seemed perfect. And it was, too, because the trouble which developed was not really the doctor's fault. It came about through the patient's ignorance of its own physiological background.'

'The way I see it,' Conway went on, 'the patient had been taking its rejuvenation treatments at an early stage of its biological life-time. I mean that it did not wait until middle or old age before regenerating itself. But on this occasion, either because it forgot or was careless or had been working on a problem which took longer than usual, it aged more than it had previously and acquired this skin condition. Pathology says that this was probably a common complaint with this race, and the normal course would be for the EPLH to slough off the affected skin and carry on as usual. But our patient, because the type of its rejuvenation treatment caused memory damage, did not know this, so its personal physician did not know it either.'

Conway continued, 'This, er, resident physician knew very lit-

tle about the medical background of its patient-host's body, but its motto must have been to maintain the *status quo* at all costs. When pieces of its patient's body threatened to break away it held on to them, not realising that this could have been a normal occurrence like losing hair or a reptile periodically shedding its skin, especially as its master would have insisted that the occurrence was not natural. A pretty fierce struggle must have developed between the patient's body processes and its Doctor, with the patient's mind also ranged against its doctor. Because of this the doctor had to render the patient unconscious the better to do what it considered to be the right thing.

'When we gave it the test shots the doctor neutralised them. They were a foreign substance being introduced into its patient's body, you see. And you know what happened when we tried surgical removal. It was only when we threatened underlying vital organs with that stake, forcing the doctor to defend its patient at that one point . . .'

'When you began asking for wooden stakes,' said O'Mara drily, 'I thought of putting *you* in a tight harness.'

Conway grinned. He said, 'I'm recommending that the EPLH takes his doctor back. Now that Pathology has given it a fuller understanding of its employer's medical and physiological history it should be the ultimate in personal physicians, and the EPLH is smart enough to see that.'

O'Mara smiled in return. 'And I was worried about what it might do when it became conscious. But it turned out to be a very friendly, likeable type. Quite charming, in fact.'

As Conway rose and turned to go he said slyly, 'That's because it's such a good psychologist. It is pleasant to people *all* the time . . .'

He managed to get the door shut behind him before the paperweight hit it.

The course of evolution shows that the highest achievement of one species becomes an embryonic development in succeeding higher forms. And so, too, perhaps, with cultural evolution.

AGE OF RETIREMENT

by Hal Lynch

Eighty miles below us was the south continent of the planet Uriel. I gave the order, and we roared down, down toward the city of Sathos that had never known night, where the light of four moons filled the sky when the sun was gone. The *Spacebolt* swooped lower over the city, and we dropped our blackness bombs. An inky cloud rose out of Sathos behind us as we arced to return.

I looked across at my troopers, waiting beside the belly-hatch. 'The word is that the city's cleaned out, except for the flickos, and you know just where they'll be hiding. When you hit the streets, blast anything that moves!' Sergeant Kregg grinned, and signaled his boys to switch on their null-gravs. We were over the city again.

'OK, sergeant, let's go get 'em!' I yelled. I led the drop down through the open hatch and into the blackness of Sathos, where the flicko gang waited. They hadn't expected a blackness bomb, they were scattered and confused, but they still knew how to fight. The stun-guns crackled as my troopers dropped into the streets and started hunting the flickos down. Sergeant Kregg and I went after the leaders, who were holed up in their dive downtown. They had a nauseator spraying the streets in front of the place, but the sergeant and I managed to keep out of its line of fire while we moved up. We located them on the third floor; it was already getting lighter now.

From behind a set of steps, the sergeant shouted our we're-here-to-help-you summons. They answered with a nauseator blast, but they couldn't reach him. I fired a couple of stunshots from my side of the street, but they were protected, too.

'Stubborn!' said Kregg. 'You'n' me can pick 'em off, though, soon's it gets light enough.'

'Let's use sleep-gas; I'm in a hurry,' I said. His face filled with disappointment. 'That's an order, sergeant!'

The gas did the job. Soon we had them all 'cuffed and counted.' Kregg called the ship down while I recorded the operation details.

'Any injuries, sergeant?'

'One o' them has a skinned elbow; that's all, sir.' He and the troopers herded our prisoners aboard, then he came back.

'Fastest operation I've ever seen,' he said confidentially. 'I'll bet it's a Space Patrol record, sir!'

I knew it was, and felt good about it, but I couldn't let him know it, of course. I just grunted and snapped back his salute. 'Turn 'em over to the local psychomedics and bring your troop back to Mars Headquarters. I'm going back with the ship; I'm returning by mattercaster, to make the commander's step-down. Take over, sergeant!'

There were a few old folks at the mattercaster station, but they stepped aside for my blue-and-gold uniform.

'Right in here, captain!' said the attendant, leading me to the nearest booth. I felt a twinge of regret as I settled myself on the cushions. I'd have preferred to have flown my ship back. The *Spacebolt* was certainly the trimmest, fastest ship in the whole sector, and it would have been fitting to have flown her in, but we'd run out of time. Even traveling by mattercaster I'd be lucky to be in time for the ceremony.

When I stepped out of the Patrol receiving booth on Mars I found Wenda waiting for me. She saluted me smartly; prettier than ever in her dress uniform. I realized inwardly that I'd have to watch myself. I'd have to stay away from her if I didn't want to wash myself out a couple of years too early.

'Tommy, I've never been to a Final Review before,' she whispered as we hurried down the corridor. 'Are they very exciting?'

'Almost as dull as traveling by mattercaster.' I didn't mean it, of course. They were wonderful. But I wasn't going to enjoy this one at all.

We started down the steps. 'I wonder how the chief's taking it? I mean, knowing this is the last one, and all.'

'I suppose he's got used to the idea,' she said indifferently. We could hear the crowd milling around out on the field now.

Suddenly I just had to tell somebody how I felt. 'It's not fair, Wenda, *it's just not fair!*'

She stopped, and looked at me worriedly. 'You mean making the chief step down? It's for the good of the Patrol, Tommy—you know that. It gives the younger officers a chance.'

'They'll get plenty of chance! Wenda, the chief's as good as he ever was. He can handle anything they throw at him, he—'

'Compulsory retirement at his age is one of the most important Patrol regsl Now, hush—we'll be late!'

As we came out onto the parade ground Colonel Croslake stepped over to meet us. He saluted, and shook my hand.

'Congratulations, Tommy!' he smiled. 'I just heard you stopped another afflicted gang!'

'Tommy! You never told me!' said Wenda.

'I picked 'em up on Uriel. It was short and sweet; we were lucky. A little shooting, but no real trouble.'

The colonel clapped me on the shoulder. 'Keep up that sort of work and you'll be staff rank in no time.' *I'd better hurry*, I thought to myself. *The way things are, I'd better hurry!* 'Uh-oh. Guess we'd better fall in. There go the bugles!'

We found our places while the call sounded. Across the parade ground row upon row of pink-cheeked cadets 'snapped to,' and stood stiff and silent. In the quiet we could hear the distant noises of the rocket sheds, and the faint stir as the first of the troops marched onto the lower end of the field. Then the color guard appeared, followed by the band, playing the inevitable 'Patrol Alert,' and after them the top brass, trim and stern in their new dress blues.

Last of all came the chief, with Halligan, his successor, walking beside him. He already looked older, somehow, and different, though he still marched straight as a ramrod and every inch a soldier. He took his place in the reviewing stand; the band struck up 'The Colors,' and the chief watched his troops march past in review for the last time. Picked men, they were, from all his old campaigns, here to see the Supreme Commander of the Space Patrol step down. I'm not ashamed to say I felt like crying.

After the last of the troops had passed there was a moment of silence, then the chief made a little speech. I don't remember what he said but it was great. The way he said it made it great.

Afterwards he unbuckled his ceremonial belt and fastened it around Commander Halligan's waist while the band struck up 'Honor of The Patrol' and we sang it with tears streaming down our cheeks. Then we cheered until we were hoarse while he went to each one of his staff and shook his hand. While we were cheering I suddenly saw my older brother, Bill, standing in the little crowd of older people at the edge of the field.

Our new CO, Commander Halligan, made a speech, too, but it was sort of an anticlimax. Then we stood Retreat and the chief's Final Review was over. I'd have liked to have had the chance to say something to him personally, but I knew I could never get to him in the crowd. So, as soon as Halligan called 'Dismiss!' I went to find Bill. I avoided Wenda and struggled through the crowd of swarming cadets and troopers to where my brother waited. He grinned down at me.

'Hi, cap'n!' He looked like a stranger in his civvies. We talked for a minute or two about the family—I hadn't seen as much of them recently as I should have—then I led him away from the crowd, down toward the rocket sheds. Things were quieting, and the sun was going down.

'How are things in that, uh . . . philosophy school?' I asked, to be polite.

'Interesting—even exciting, sometimes.'

'I'll bet!'

'I mean it, Tommy. We came across a relationship between music and social thought the other day, that—Well, I'll explain it to you sometime. It's new, and it's wonderful, and it has all kinds of possibilities. By the way, I hear we're going to get your chief, now that he's retired.'

'In your school? You're crazy, Bill!'

'He's got quite a brain, that one. We can use him.'

I stopped walking. 'Listen, Bill, I've got to talk to you,' I said. 'I don't understand this thing. I just don't get it.'

'What's the trouble?'

'Why does the chief have to step down *now*? He's the best we've ever had! Why did they make him quit?'

'If by "they" you mean outsiders, you're wrong, Tommy. Compulsory retirement is the Patrol's own regulation. It wasn't forced on them from outside. Members of the Patrol staff set the age limit themselves. And, of course, it's been set for everybody; the

chief's rank doesn't make any difference. He had to step down just as I had to when I reached his age. We just aren't any good any more, kid.'

I grabbed his arm. 'Don't give me that! Before I took my last duty-tour I spent some time up in the library. I was looking through some old visobooks, and I found some stories of the Patrol . . . of the Patrol of a hundred years ago. They had troopers as old as thirty, then!'

'Sure, kid, I know. And you may not know it, but if you check on law-forces that go back before the Patrol you'll find they used to have even older men. They recruited at an older age, too. But by the time the Patrol came along it had been found that older men just didn't have the speed of reaction, or the coordination to keep up the pace. So they started retiring men younger, and recruiting men younger.

'Then there was another factor: much less killing. Murderers are rarer than Mars clouds these days, but I guess you noticed in those stories that most of the criminals used deadly weapons. In these days of stun-guns and sleep-gas, bringing in the trouble-makers is a lot less dangerous. That's helped to lower the recruiting age, and in turn, the retirement age.'

'What're criminals?'

'It's an old word for afflicteds. You never paid enough attention to history, Tommy. You'll have to specialize in it after you step down.'

'I don't even want to think about stepping down,' I growled. 'I've still got two more years. Maybe . . . maybe if I ever get on the staff, I'll be able to change that retirement reg!'

Bill seemed to find that amusing. 'Not a chance, Tommy. They've tried, and it just doesn't work out any other way. When you reach sixteen, Final Review and out you go—for the good of the service!'

'Are you trying to tell me my coordination will be shot at sixteen?'

'Look at me,' he grinned. 'At nineteen I'm finished.' Then he got serious. 'No, kid, it isn't that. Something else is missing—a certain spirit, or idealism, or maybe a kind of instinct. You see, our race has changed in the last couple of centuries, Tommy. For one thing, our educational system's been put into high gear, we take on responsibilities sooner than our great-grandfathers did,

and by the same token we . . . uh, we settle down a little sooner. Our expansion into space has brought us into contact with dozens of other cultures, some of them centuries older and wiser than ours. So, somehow, we've settled down, as a people, to a different outlook on life than our ancestors had.'

It seemed to me he was getting way off the subject, but I let him talk. We turned and started back toward the parade ground; the sun had set and it was getting pretty dark.

'Tommy, we've started on the big adventure,' he went on. 'We've started on the biggest exploration of all, the exploration of ourselves. That's become so important to us that we don't have time, or inclination, for other things.'

'But there are still afflicteds, and I guess there always will be no matter how much the world changes. Somebody's got to take the time and the trouble and the thought to round 'em up and bring 'em in for treatment. Somebody who still has the patience to take authority and routine without sinking into corruption, who can think without brooding and act without anxiety over consequences. Somebody who can fight without hate and live without sorrow, somebody who can give his whole heart to a cause that gives him little or nothing in return.'

'So we've turned the job over to you, the younger generation. We've given you the weapons and the know-how, and you've supplied the—heart.'

'Bill, I don't understand a word of what you're talking about. I don't get it.'

'You will, Tommy, you will,' he said quietly in the darkness. 'In a few years you'll see what I mean. The Patrol's found out that after your fifteenth year you somehow "put away these things." The glory dies away, as new yearnings come, until you find yourself a stranger to what you used to be. So the Patrol makes you step down before you reach that point, Tommy. Compulsory retirement, before you stop caring, any more.'

'*Stop caring about the Patrol?* That's crazy!'

'Trouble is, Tommy, you don't care when you're grown up.'

'You are my honey, honeysuckle, I am the bee . . .' The way these honies could suckle was enough to give anyone a buzz.

PLANTING TIME

by Pete Adams and Charles Nightingale

Randy Richmond was bored, excessively, intolerably, and what felt like eternally, bored. He was so bored, in fact, that he no longer wondered what kind of programme the hypnoconditioner had pumped into him back at Sector X113 before he got fired off into space again. Whatever it was, it had as usual made no impression at all.

The hypnoconditioner was supposed to alter the time-sense, to relax the intellect into a placid exploration of the more charming byways of spatial mathematics or of any other fashionable problem that currently had the planet-bound research teams stumped. As a result, you were expected to end your trip across the stars not only as fresh as if it had begun that same morning but also in an inspired state approaching the level of genius. Giant mental leaps for mankind had been predicted from this treatment, but Randy had yet to hear of a single plus-light traveller emerging from the experience with anything but ideas of the most fundamental nature, inventive as some of these were reputed to have been.

He supposed that somebody somewhere must at last have noticed that plus-light travel seemed to act more as a physical than a mental stimulus, because the more recent Spacegoer's Companions had begun to develop remarkably sophisticated accessories. Computers had always been essential furniture in space, of course, but the new CMP DIRAC—deriv. Mk. IV Astg. multi-media computers could provide every imaginable form of entertainment and several unimaginable ones when the pilot ran out of steam. You didn't need to ginger them up with a surreptitious screwdriver like the old models. They were a lot of fun.

Yet even they had their limitations, and after nine months in plus-light with his current Companion, its voluptuous frame enfolding the tiny cabin like an insanely plastic eiderdown, Randy found himself sighing for a reality the computer could never pro-

vide. Headed for a particularly obscure K-class star located at the end of the galaxy's spiral arm, he still had to face another nine months of confinement. Books, films, tapes and artworks had been exhausted of their potency, and Randy was reduced to watching the Companion's animated reversioning of Beardsley's 'Under the Hill' illustrations, one of the *Classical Favourites* videotapes. It was evident from the increasingly bizarre departures from the original that the computer shared the pilot's suspicion that his passions might never rise again.

It was at this critical point, so perfectly timed as almost to invite certain conclusions about the computer's motives, that the Companion announced the desirability of a planet call in order to replenish the ship's chemical supplies. A star was located only a few hours distant, possessing an E-type planet stocked with the appropriate materials from which the ship could synthesise what it needed. According to the file, the planet was inhabited by a human-type race at a fairly primitive stage of development; well aware of the strict Federation directives on matters of inter-cultural contact, Randy aimed to land on one of the many uninhabited islands scattered across the oceanic Northern hemisphere.

Finally the computer selected a lush, cone-shaped island which according to the infra-detectors supported no animal life likely to present any major problems, and the ship settled itself down with something of a flourish. The Companions always enjoyed the chance to show off, and landings had been known at which the computers burst out with flags, fireworks, and the Home Planets Anthem, ruining all hopes of peaceful contact with the local life forms. But on this occasion the ship's door merely whispered open and with enormous relief Randy stepped outside.

He was on an open grassy plain close to the sparkling sapphire sea, a beach of fine white sand crusting its edges. Here and there the grassland featured intriguing pod-shaped plants with superbly velvet green leaves. Occasional trees bore fruits which the Companion stated to be acceptable to the human constitution, and Randy gave them enthusiastic attention; they collapsed succulently in his hands, revealing juices and flesh that were intoxicatingly flavoured. When at last he could eat no more, he ran into the clear, astonishing shallows of the ocean and washed nine months of plus-light from his mind. He rolled

in the sun, laughed and shouted, jumped over his own shadow, and did most of the foolish things you'd expect, and in due time he was quiet again, stuck with the one problem that the scents and breezes of the island did nothing to solve.

Part of the trouble was that the ship didn't need him. Its glistening ground serpent, directed by the computer, probed the planet's surface for suitable mineral veins, while the Companion's laboratory section hummed with self-satisfied activity. Samples were tested, ores smelted, reagents mixed and centrifuges whirled; bursts of bluegrass music punctuated the murmuring litany of equations, a racket to which the pilot had become resigned as indication that the computer was deep in thought. He shrugged away the sense of impotence that threatened all too soon to return, and set out to explore the island. It would be good to walk himself into a natural sleep for a change, instead of having to accept one of the computer's nauseating dozee drugs which, whatever the shape and colour (and the range seemed infinite), always gave him nightmares of quite shattering decadence.

The coastline was a delight, composed of clear colours in sudden sweeps and curves. A sun of muted gold hung in the sky as though the afternoon would last forever, and the air tasted of perfume, a kind that seemed to bring back unexpected memories of fulfilment. Dreamily following his nose, Randy strolled through a clump of trees that took him out of sight of the ship, and halted abruptly in their shadow while all considerations of the penalties for cultural interference drained from his mind. On the green plain beyond, reality shimmered as if the light-waves themselves were melting in the heat. Then his vision cleared, and there appeared before him, seated on a couch of velvet leaves, a creature of such spectacular beauty that he found himself vowing feverishly never again to waste his time with the 3-D pull-out pin-downs from *Stagman* magazine.

She appeared not to have seen him as she gazed out to sea with mysterious hooded eyes, her body languid and relaxed on the couch. She wore nothing but a short blue shift of some intricately worked material, and the sunlight lapped across her skin to make a tapestry of glowing curves and enticing shadows. Softly Randy moved to her side and amazingly she turned to welcome him, making a tentative movement with her hand

which he took as an invitation. He sat down, paused for a moment on the edge of conversation, then reached instead to stroke the dark brown hair that swept like a long veil down her back. Words were unnecessary for the messages pouring between them in the electric air, and the lady showed no sign of wanting a language lesson.

She sighed like the murmur of leaves in midsummer and stretched herself out before him, the hem of her garment rising gently to reveal dark and appetising areas of accessibility. Her scent was all cinnamon, musk, and pure violets, stifling rational thought. Randy toppled drunkenly into her and was enfolded by flesh that writhed delicately against his own, and by hair that seemed to caress him with gently powdered tendrils as he plunged and gasped and shook. The afternoon exploded in golden fragments.

Afterwards, Randy slid from the couch and lay on the white sand convinced, as the Companion had never been able to convince him, that he now stood a chance of understanding his place in the universe. It was as though beings from some outer galaxy were suddenly aware of his presence, but as they stirred to greet him he began to fear the hollow echo of their thoughts, the dissonant music of their knowledge, and he sank back into wakefulness. A mist of writhing green and purple shapes lay briefly over his eyes, and warning voices whispered instantly forgotten messages. But the girl still sat placidly on her couch and at the sight of her, Randy's confusion melted away. Purpose and anticipation pulled him briskly to his feet.

To his surprise, her welcome was not repeated. She smiled in an absent-minded fashion and returned her gaze to the ocean. When he tried to caress her as before, her flesh seemed actually to crawl with distaste, she made no move to lie back, and her shift stayed clamped demurely to her knees. Randy was half inclined to force the issue, but the Federation directives had once more begun to hover at the back of his mind and at last he gave up. Promising to return soon with priceless gifts, an offer to which she paid not the slightest attention, he resumed his exploration of the island.

The coastline dipped again, and the girl soon disappeared behind him. The rich grass rippled in the heat and the air quiv-

ered with a spice that made his blood surge; beside him, the ocean flashed a million reflections of the sky. Shading his eyes, he blinked with disbelief at a new girl who lay ahead on her couch of velvet, her body undulating in unmistakable delight at his approach. She could have been the sister of the gorgeous creature he had just left; the same dark hair cascaded over the same perfect slopes of the back, the same kaleidoscope of delicate lights and shadows was picked out by the sun across the smooth and supple limbs, the same sweet savour drifted teasingly across the grass. She even wore a similar shift, although this one was red. It was intricately textured with tiny patterns that changed and flowed as he tried to follow them, their writhing designs suggesting an elusive and haunting symbolism.

Disinclined to question the gifts that fate so seldom placed in his path, Randy made reverent haste towards the startlingly beautiful phenomenon that awaited him. Again words could be discarded as unnecessary; her eyes, deep violet pools of promise, beckoned him with unequivocal invitations, fully reinforced by the receptive and compliant body. He became mindless, drawn into a frenzy of sensations that mingled and mounted, until a nova flared and he sank at last into a dreamlike state where the girl's every movement and gesture seemed part of an obscure but vital communication between one end of the universe and the other. He stared fascinated into her eyes, while a haze of glorious colours spiralled around the couch, and then he must have slept, for there was a time when the grasses and creepers that carpeted the island appeared to explore him with their tendrils and the moss grew restless beneath his back. The sun was a deeper gold and had dipped lower in the sky when Randy splashed ocean over his head and returned refreshed to his delightful partner.

Close to her, he found desire reviving as strongly as if it had never been satisfied, but when he reached again for the girl she was as unyielding as a block of wood, and her gaze was coldly out to sea. Try as he might, he was unable to rekindle her interest in the healthy athletic pursuits he had in mind. She ignored him so completely that he couldn't even be sure she understood what he wanted. Eventually Randy decided he would have to leave her there and hope she'd be around next day in more ame-

nable mood. He kissed the motionless mouth and wandered back in the direction of the ship.

He splashed in the shallows along the dappled coast, the sand crunching beneath his feet, the breeze stirring across the grass dunes and probing the clumps of trees. The girl in the blue shift was still sunbathing where he had left her, and he halted on the edge of the water, uncertain whether to wave and rush by or stop to talk about old times.

Her perfume settled the matter. As he approached, led by the nose, she stirred and stretched and her smile got inside his body and tuned it up like an orchestra. She reached for him with irresistible urgency and once more he felt himself swept into her on an unthinking torrent of enjoyment. Ripping away the shift completely, he abandoned himself to an extraordinary symphony of exotic rhythms and caresses. It was as if the planet itself had opened up to swallow him, the grass and the giant green leaves closing above his head.

The climax seemed to scatter him around the landscape like fragments of a bursting pod. For a long time he lay unable to move, with fantastic visions of strange beings and unearthly music wandering through his mind. The colours of the waning afternoon ran slowly together into a magnificent sunset, and when he finally staggered to his feet it was growing dark. The girl lay on her couch in a tight ball and he could do nothing to rouse her. Reluctant to carry her back to the ship and risk arousing the Companion's suspicion about his illegal activities, he draped the torn shift and some of the big velvet leaves over her as some form of protection against the night, and made his way alone across the grass.

The computer was rather stuffy about having been left on its own for so long but at last it consented, after some argument, to turn the lights out. Randy fell instantly asleep on his bunk as dozee capsules bounced unheeded across his chest to the floor.

When he awoke the next morning, the Companion was strangely silent, although lights pulsed here and there on its console. The datadials indicated that the task of chemical restocking was now complete, but there was no indication that any resumption of the journey had been calculated. Debating whether to give the thing a kick in the fusebox, Randy suddenly noticed that the ship's door was wide open, revealing sea and sand and

sunlight. The spiced air of the island summoned him, and gladly he responded.

It was crowded out there. Green couches were spread around in the sun, thickly clustered near the ship but also dotted across the grass in all directions as far as Randy could see, covering the island. And on them reclined girls of every description, of all sizes, all colours. They all wore shifts of the familiar design, in hues of rainbow miscellany, although red and blue were obvious favourites. Otherwise the girls were only alike in that they were blindingly beautiful and their deep clear eyes were fixed on Randy as if their lives had been specially constructed for this one ecstatic moment. As he appeared, a wave of delight surged across his audience, and he thought he heard the island itself sigh in the shimmering silence of the morning. His fans were waiting and there was much to be done. Their perfume tugged him forward.

For several hours, Randy was extremely busy. Arms, bodies and legs ensnared him in a thicket of willing flesh, and hunger and pleasure pursued each other with frantic urgency. He ploughed and dug his way across this incredible plantation of sunsoaked skin, discarded garments, and voluptuous welcome, until his responses became too painful to be worth the continuing effort, and the pauses between bouts were shadowed with uneasy dreams in which his whole being became fragmented and seemed to crumble into sand with untraceable finality. Dimly he congratulated himself on his performance, and at last he ventured to hope that he might spend the rest of his days without again setting eyes on another female form.

Breaking free from the eager ranks of his admirers, he splashed and floated in the warm ocean until a modest confidence returned to his legs that they could hold him upright once more. The girls fortunately made no attempt to follow him, but gazed in worship from the shoreline, undulating pensively on their couches. Randy chewed some fruit and wandered at the water's edge, keeping out of reach; maintaining a polite smile, he eyed the girls dispassionately and did some hard thinking.

Suddenly he noticed among the sunbathers the girl in blue he had left wrapped in leaves the night before. Evidently her night out had proved far from beneficial. She lay apart from the others, unmoving on the stained and fraying couch, her shift

draped over her limbs like a rotten shroud. The tawny skin that had shone out to him yesterday was now pallid and dull, sagging in places to create hollows of emaciation, and her mane of dark hair had coagulated into a limp, repellent mess. Horrified at this apparent consequence of his attentions, Randy made his way towards her; the Companion had assured him that under normal circumstances there could be no possible compatibility between the local bacteria and Randy's own collection of extra-galactic viruses, but the circumstances had strayed rather far from the normal. If the girl was in trouble, Randy was likely to be in trouble too.

In the first automatic move of diagnosis, he took her hand. It parted immediately from the sagging mass of her body and rested soggily in his grip, greenish matter dripping from the severed wrist. The fingers broke and oozed together in his palm, and the thumb dropped to the ground with a soft squelch. Shaking off the decaying tissue in revulsion, he turned the girl's face towards him. It slipped under his touch, and his fingers sank into the black jelly where her eyes had been.

Randy left in a hurry, clambering heedlessly across a landscape of enchanting smiles. The island heaved beneath his feet, and the sun beat like a hammer on his skull. When he got to the ship he was crawling and had the impression that he was making a lot of noise. He fell through the doorway and dragged the hatch shut.

The computer received Randy's confession in utter contempt. If he had only bothered, said the Companion, to study all the information available before charging out of the ship like some Yugoslavian nudist (the doubtless apocryphal ardour of this legendary race was the basis for one of the more memorable sagas of the spaceways), he might have avoided making so spectacular a fool of himself. He should be aware, added the Companion, that nothing was unknown to or unforeseen by the CMP DIRAC—deriv. Mk. iv Astg. multi-media computers, and that exploits such as Randy's not only had no hope of being kept secret but were even so predictable as to be exactly calculable according to a now-proven constant in which x was equal to fifteen plus-light square roots divided simultaneously by point seven recurring. During the hours in which Randy had been neglecting his duties, stated the Companion, it had taken the opportunity to

prepare a thesis on this very subject, demonstrating a breadth of vision so extraordinary that the Companion made so bold as to be confident that the highest intergalactic honours would be accorded to it when the voyage was completed. With a modest cough, the Companion disgorged a six-hundred-page volume of computer print-outs, handsomely bound in leather with gold edgings. Randy might care, suggested the Companion, to browse through this epoch-making work while preparing his own report to the Federation, although they were unlikely to treat his case with much sympathy if he presented it in his usual inarticulate manner.

Wearily dropping the book into the recycler, Randy pressed the Bowman button (the emergency control known only to the pilot in plus-light ships), and let the Companion sing nursery rhymes for half an hour while he consumed a soothetube of nerve paste. Relaxing on the control couch, he then re-engaged the information banks of the computer and summoned up all available facts and references about the planet they were on. The Companion had neglected to mention, of course, that the place had actually been visited before, so that instead of the usual brief list of aerial survey data there were voluminous technical and ecological reports, mostly incomprehensible to the non-specialist. They rolled across the information screen and Randy scowled his way through them without finding anything helpful. Such biological deductions as had been made seemed in no way related to his own experiences, and only one group of the exploring team had been anywhere near the islands of the Northern hemisphere, their purpose and conclusions connected merely with the botanical.

After presenting all the main texts, the computer automatically began to turn up the footnotes and addenda. Letting these run at double speed, Randy was about to give up hope when a small picture flashed by that struck a faint chord. He turned back and stared for a long time. The brightly coloured illustration showed the cross-section of a flower, and the accompanying article, under a severe Latin headline, was a report by one of the botanists.

Of the three species of *Bacchantius* growing on the planet Rosy Lee, perhaps the most unusual is *Gigantiflora*. The plant is

herbaceous, and perenniates by means of thick starchy tubers. It flowers annually in the correct conditions and is a member of the family *Phorusorchidaceae*, the local orchid family. (See ref. Axaia p. 74,418 for description of the parallel evolution of flowering plants on E-type worlds. See ref. Modoinisk p. 731,111 for detailed parameters of E-type conditions.)

Normally the *Gigantiflora* flowers only after sensing the airborne waste products of the humanoid species *Gaggus gaggus* which inhabits the planet Rosy Lee. The buds take some five months to mature but require no external stimulus to begin formation. When fully developed, they lie dormant under a thick covering of velvety green leaves. Once the presence of a humanoid has aroused the flowering response the buds rise above the leaves overnight and open just before dawn. The flowers are huge and strikingly shaped. Specimens examined ranged from 1.3716 m to 1.8315 m in height.

Pollination is by pseudo-copulation, as in many species of plant, but is exceptional in this case in that the pollinating agent is the male *Gaggus*. The flowers are exact replicas of native women, and their whole structure, composed of united sepals and petals, is complete in almost every external detail. One of the few visible differences is the threadlike though robust stem emerging from the small of the plant's back.

The petal, analogous to the lip in other *orchidaceae*, is primarily bright red or blue, although other shades based on these colours can often be found. Giving the appearance of a short garment, it is united to the perianth only by a tiny join at the nape of the neck and may be removed completely without any noticeable damage, although it quickly shrivels.

The flowers have a very powerful scent, and while the chemical structure of this has yet to be determined it is known to have pronounced hallucinatory and aphrodisiacal properties, which it is thought acted originally to prevent the *Gaggus* from discovering the true nature of the girl that apparently confronts him. Under the influence of the scent, for example, the male finds the eyes of the plant lifelike and mobile, whereas in reality they are the least successful part of the imitation.

Capable of a quite sophisticated series of mechanical movements and reactions, *Gigantiflora* will on being disturbed by a suitable stimulus go through motions resembling those of a prim-

itive coquette. The native male *Gaggus* is often completely addicted to the pleasures afforded by these flowers, to the extent that he will neglect his own wife. The female *Gaggus*, on the other hand, destroys these plants whenever she finds them. The theory appears tenable that the population of Rosy Lee is maintained at a low level by the waste of male effort expended on cultivating *Gigantiflora*.

The pollen develops before the gynoecium and forms a thick powder on the plant's 'pubic' area. During pseudo-copulation this pollen adheres to the male, and when next he amuses himself with a *Gigantiflora* it is transferred to the area surrounding the new flower's 'navel'—which is in fact the stigma, thus completing the pollination. Directly after this process the flower is able to discourage further attempts by the same male, becoming rigid and unapproachable so that self-pollination is avoided.

The seeds of the planet are dust-like and blow many miles, even across oceans. On some of the planet's many uninhabited islands, whole colonies of the plants may be found; as the *Gaggus* is disinclined to travel, lacking any great incentive or energy to do so, these colonies presumably never reach the flowering stage. When members of the present expedition landed on one such island, the flowers appeared by the second day in numbers approaching infestation proportions, the effect resembling that of an overcrowded brothel. Since the team was wholly female, it was not possible to judge the effect on a male, but the sight, smell, and hallucinatory vapours were such as to convince us that the effect would be overpowering even for a civilized man.

I must confess (the report added, taking a suddenly personal tone), that while as a botanist I found the flowers fascinating, as a woman I found them profoundly disturbing, almost disgusting. Even when I was cutting portions of the petal from the 'face', an unsettling exercise, the plant's lower half made several attempts to seduce me, although as far as we were aware only males could inspire the pollination mechanism. The fact that in uninhabited regions the flowers might react to women as well leads to interesting speculation about alternative means of pollination. And although every member of our team professed disgust for the flowers, several plants unquestionably set seed during our stay on the island despite the impossibility of self-pollination.

Further research could doubtless be pursued in this area, but

while this would be diverting enough for the specialists involved, no particular value can be anticipated from it. We are familiar in botany with the basic principles of pseudo-copulation, studied in detail on Terra in the last century. (Ref: *Wild Flowers of the World* by Everard & Morley, reprinted under the *Treasures of Antiquity* label: 'The insect-like form of the lip and the scent of the flower in the *Ophrys* attract the males of certain insects and stimulates them into abortive attempts at copulation. During this pseudo-copulation the insects pick up pollinia or transfer pollen to the stigmas. Some tropical orchids have likewise been shown to possess particular scents which excite insects sexually.') A Research Priority Rating is accordingly recommended at no more than Z-Grade.

Some technicalities followed about the morphology and cytology of the plant, but Randy had read far enough. His head hurt as a torrent of ideas and schemes poured through his mind, and he realized that the hypnoconditioning he'd gone through at Sector X113 was, thanks to his uniquely exhausted condition, at last getting the chance to work. In dizzy flashes of inspiration, he saw that he was destined to become the greatest gardener ever known. He grabbed a screwdriver and got started.

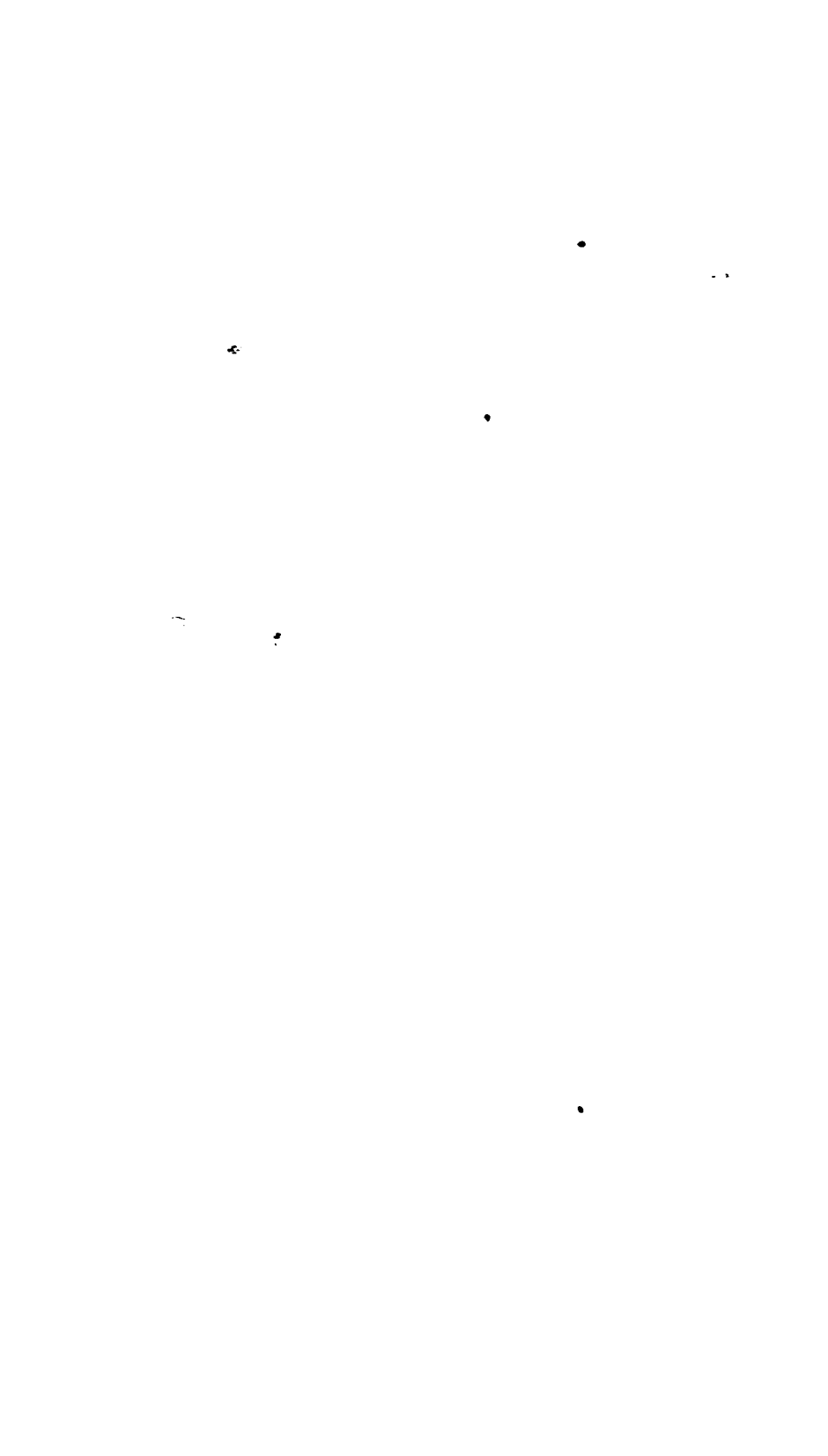
The rest of course is history. Randy waited on Rosy Lee long enough to collect the ten pods of seeds he was later to refer to in his autobiography as his offspring, and within a few months he appeared on the 'dry' planet Bergia (where prostitution is illegal) as the proprietor of 'The Pleasure Gardens of Rosy Lee'. The uproar led to a court case, a magnificent specimen of *Bacchantius Gigantiflora* was produced before the enraptured judge, and all charges were dismissed. The galaxy rang with the news, and Randy's fortune was made. He was able to make the unprecedented purchase of a plus-light ship—his own—from the Federation, complete with Ship's Companion.

Plus-light travel being as complicated as it is, few were in a position to track down the planet where Randy got his supplies, but those who made it to the islands of Rosy Lee said they found there only desert scrubland and bleak crags. The place had an atmosphere of terror, they said, and they were glad to leave; the *Gaggus* population, however, seemed undisturbed despite the

odd preference on the part of the males for a species of cauliflower with a stench like rotten pulp.

It seems that Randy and his screwdriver, whirled to the heights of creativity by the hypnoconditioning that ran through his brain, had converted the Ship's Companion to new levels of chemical accomplishment. When the computer had finished with Rosy Lee, the aphrodisiac breeze that drifted across the planet had acquired a tang that went unnoticed by the *Gaggus* nose but which filled the human senses with stark revulsion. Thus Randy and his brood preserve a comfortable monopoly. The Companion, too, proved to be an unrivalled teacher; the girls in the 'Pleasure Gardens', now a universal attraction, are renowned as much for their seductive conversation as for their physical skills. Naturally they are all experts in bluegrass music. And the hybrid strains developed with the aid of the computer become more delectable year by year, especially those highly prized specimens reputed to resemble famous beauties of the past. The Cleopatra Convulser, the Bardot Brainstorm, and the Lovelace Paralyzer have passed into legend.

So that, girls, is the story of the famed horticulturalist Randy Richmond, known throughout the galaxy (although the plus-light pilots have, I believe, a slightly different version) as 'Mr Greenfingers'. All strength to his compost, and may his flyspray never dwindle! Now, dig in. Another batch of conservationists just stopped by our greenhouse.



Brian Aldiss is the author of **BILLION
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ALL MY SINS REMEMBERED

By Joe Haldeman

Of *MINDBRIDGE*, *Publishers Weekly* lauded Joe Haldeman for his "vivid imagination and first-rate storytelling." *Kirkus* added that "few science fiction writers manage the modest collage form with more fluency and brio than Haldeman." Now in that same tradition of superb craftsmanship and unbounded imagination, he has written *ALL MY SINS REMEMBERED*.

Otto McGavin, thief, spy, murderer, is the Prime Operator for the TBII, guardian of the rights of alien creatures under the Confederación—who with technological voodoo can take on an appearance and personality of any enemy for months at a time. And, when the magic runs out, he can talk fast or fight to the death.

There are gorilla-shaped bismuth junkies who stack their dead ancestors like cordwood in the living room; a throwback fiefdom on the planet where huge poisonous bats rule the night sky; where serpents the size of semi-trailers slither through the rotting jungle; a sarcastic man-sized beetle who's a talmudic scholar and swears like a longshoreman; all these things are in a life's work for Otto McGavin.

And yet, his most difficult task begins when his career ends; when, in trying to find himself among thirty-six unpleasant identities, he comes face to face with all his sins remembered.

Joe Haldeman has quickly become one of the giants of science fiction. His first full-length science fiction novel, The Forever War (St. Martin's 1975), won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards. His recent book, Mindbridge (St. Martin's 1975), won rave reviews and a large audience. He presently makes his home in Iowa City and is at work on a new novel and a non-fiction book on space colonization.