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Introduction by Martin Harry Greenberg



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THE SEVEN CARDINAL VIRTUES OF SCIENCE FICTION

**Edited by
Isaac Asimov,
Charles G. Waugh,
and Martin Harry Greenberg**

THE SEVEN CARDINAL VIRTUES OF SCIENCE FICTION

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INTRODUCTION

by Martin Harry Greenberg

This book is a companion to our *The Seven Deadly Sins of Science Fiction* (Fawcett Crest, 1980) and is intended, in addition to entertaining you, to meet the provisions of the equal time laws. Not surprisingly, virtue has an excellent reputation, and the concept goes back a long way—the theologian Lactantius conceived the concept in a Christian sense, although Aristotle had much earlier tended to equate virtue with the moral action of men. Plato, Aristotle and Cicero (and later St. Ambrose) all considered prudence, justice, courage and temperance to be the *cardinal* virtues. However, the major thinker in regard to the virtues was St. Augustine, who, agreeing with Plato that the virtues were *one*, pointed out that virtue consists of “living rightly” and can only be acquired through God.

Later, an important distinction was made between the “Theological Virtues,” those that derived from supernatural or “godlike” input (faith, hope and charity), and those considered “Natural” or “Political.” The latter group derive from the actions and deeds of men and women. It was St. Thomas Aquinas who brought the earlier thinking together and from whom the present Christian thought on the subject derives.

Interestingly, you cannot really learn to be virtuous, be-

cause while study can lead to intelligence and skill, this does not mean that you are a better person. Rather—at least since the Council of Trent—righteousness includes faith, hope and charity (the Infused Virtues), and a “good” and religious life brings these to you in a permanent sense. From the Christian perspective, the ethical means to virtue are religious means, a view opposed by secular humanists, who hold that a person can be virtuous without divine intervention or “faith.”

So much for the “official” history of the development of the Seven Cardinal Virtues. You are about to read an anthology of science fiction stories, so we must consider the Virtues from the point of view of the sf writer and reader:

1. *Prudence*: technically, “that virtue which gives one knowledge of his moral duty and of the concrete means to its accomplishment.” For the science fiction writer, this means never defying the known laws of science in one’s writing; always understanding what the market will bear and what is “hot” at any given moment; and always including a stamped, self-addressed envelope with each submission. For the science fiction reader, it means always buying each issue of each magazine as they appear on the newsstands (you will have to pay more for them later—look at the value of the early pulps); always making sure that each sf book you buy is a first edition; and always taking care of them. Prudence for young sf readers also consists of doing everything possible to make sure that your mother does not make you throw out any portion of your collection.

2. *Justice*: technically, the “disposition in virtue of which a man has the firm and constant will to render everyone his due.” For the science fiction reader, this means lending your books and magazines to *reliable* fellow fans and readers, and spreading the word about the joys and wonder of reading sf. For the science fiction writer, this means always sharing market information with your fellow writers; always delivering your manuscripts on or before the date called for in the contract (whenever humanly possible—we are not all perfect); and always getting even rather than getting angry.

3. *Courage*: technically, “the quality that enables one to face life and God.” For the science fiction reader, it is the willingness to wait a month for the next installment of a serial in the magazines; the willingness to lend books and magazines to others (see Justice above); and the willingness to spend scarce resources on the purchase of sf materials

(including the expenses involved in attending sf conventions). For the science fiction writer, it means the ability to keep submitting stories even after receiving numerous rejection slips and the ability to read through book contracts without losing your sanity.

4. *Temperance*: technically, the virtue "which enables man to control his passions and emotions by reason and keep them in the 'mean.'" Examples would include going easy with food, drink and sex, and maximizing modesty. For the science fiction reader, this means not being too much of a showoff with either your knowledge about sf or your sf collection; the ability not to lose control when the sequel to your favorite sf novel turns out to be a turkey; and the ability to still love your favorite writer after you actually *meet* him or her. For the sf writer, this means treating editors, agents and publishers with respect even when they do things that belong in *The Seven Deadly Sins of Science Fiction*, and controlling your emotions when that great story idea you have been carrying around in your head for months suddenly appears in the latest issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*.

5. *Faith*: the quality that enables you to do all of the above and below.

6. *Hope*: technically, hope is "ultimately constituted by the intersection, on the one hand, of that divine predestining plan for man whereby the love of God . . . has efficaciously and permanently affected man, and on the other hand of the responsive attitude towards this plan shown by the person who confidently awaits the final consummation of the divine economy of salvation . . ." For the science fiction reader, this means the belief that someday you will publish a science fiction story or complete your collection of every sf magazine ever published (this is also a characteristic of Faith above). For the science fiction writer, this means the belief that you will one day receive the Hugo or Nebula Award or receive \$1,000,000 for your next novel (see Faith above).

7. *Charity*: technically, "the term for love in general, primarily the love of God for men, but also the love of men for one another and for God." For the science fiction reader, this means the ability to forgive those who lose your sf books, or who liked (or disliked) *Star Wars*, or who have become Trekkies. For the science fiction writer, this means the ability to

share ideas with other writers (see also *Justice* above) and to tolerate reviewers and critical fans.

Well, there you have them—and we can't think of a more charitable gift on our part than sharing with you the wonderful stories that begin on the next page.

SUPERIORITY by Arthur C. Clarke

Some attitudes are very easy to adopt and some are very hard. We know which are which and we can tell them apart, because the easy ones are called "vices" and the hard ones "virtues." That is why, though people are constantly exhorted to be virtuous, they are constantly vicious instead. For instance, in any conflict, it is so easy to escalate the intensity of the battle, to try for harder blows, for worse destruction, for a larger smash. There is such satisfaction in this that one would do it even at the cost of victory. Many conquerors—Napoleon and Hitler, to name but two—expanded their aims and used each individual victory as a springboard for a new and more grandiose attack, until... Well, you know until what, because you know how they ended. Clarke's story, I would like to stress, was written and published a full decade *before* the Vietnam War, and it preaches the hard virtue of the limited aim, the achievement of a goal by economy of effort—in a word, by TEMPERANCE.

—Isaac Asimov

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SUPERIORITY

Arthur C. Clarke

In making this statement—which I do of my own free will—I wish first to make it perfectly clear that I am not in any way trying to gain sympathy, nor do I expect any mitigation of whatever sentence the Court may pronounce. I am writing this in an attempt to refute some of the lying reports broadcast over the prison radio and published in the papers I have been allowed to see. These have given an entirely false picture of the true cause of our defeat, and as the leader of my race's armed forces at the cessation of hostilities I feel it my duty to protest against such libels upon those who served under me.

I also hope that this statement may explain the reasons for the application I have twice made to the Court, and will now induce it to grant a favor for which I see no possible grounds of refusal.

The ultimate cause of our failure was a simple one: despite all statements to the contrary, it was not due to lack of bravery on the part of our men, or to any fault of the Fleet's. We were defeated by one thing only—by the inferior science of our enemies. I repeat—by the *inferior* science of our enemies.

When the war opened we had no doubt of our ultimate victory. The combined fleets of our allies greatly exceeded in

number and armament those which the enemy could muster against us, and in almost all branches of military science we were their superiors. We were sure that we could maintain this superiority. Our belief proved, alas, to be only too well founded.

At the opening of the war our main weapons were the longrange homing torpedo, dirigible ball-lightning and the various modifications of the Klydon beam. Every unit of the Fleet was equipped with these, and though the enemy possessed similar weapons their installations were generally of lesser power. Moreover, we had behind us a far greater military Research Organization, and with this initial advantage we could not possibly lose.

The campaign proceeded according to plan until the Battle of the Five Suns. We won this, of course, but the opposition proved stronger than we had expected. It was realized that victory might be more difficult, and more delayed, than had first been imagined. A conference of supreme commanders was therefore called to discuss our future strategy.

Present for the first time at one of our war conferences was Professor-General Norden, the new Chief of the Research Staff, who had just been appointed to fill the gap left by the death of Malvar, our greatest scientist. Malvar's leadership had been responsible, more than any other single factor, for the efficiency and power of our weapons. His loss was a very serious blow, but no one doubted the brilliance of his successor—though many of us disputed the wisdom of appointing a theoretical scientist to fill a post of such vital importance. But we had been overruled.

I can well remember the impression Norden made at that conference. The military advisers were worried, and as usual turned to the scientists for help. Would it be possible to improve our existing weapons, they asked, so that our present advantage could be increased still further?

Norden's reply was quite unexpected. Malvar had often been asked such a question—and he had always done what we requested.

"Frankly, gentlemen," said Norden, "I doubt it. Our existing weapons have practically reached finality. I don't wish to criticize my predecessor, or the excellent work done by the Research Staff in the last few generations, but do you realize that there has been no basic change in armaments for over a century? It is, I am afraid, the result of a tradition that has

become conservative. For too long, the Research Staff has devoted itself to perfecting old weapons instead of developing new ones. It is fortunate for us that our opponents have been no wiser: we cannot assume that this will always be so."

Norden's words left an uncomfortable impression, as he had no doubt intended. He quickly pressed home the attack.

"What we want are *new* weapons—weapons totally different from any that have been employed before. Such weapons can be made: it will take time, of course, but since assuming charge I have replaced some of the older scientists by young men and have directed research into several unexplored fields which show great promise. I believe, in fact, that a revolution in warfare may soon be upon us."

We were skeptical. There was a bombastic tone in Norden's voice that made us suspicious of his claims. We did not know, then, that he never promised anything that he had not already perfected in the laboratory. *In the laboratory*—that was the operative phrase.

Norden proved his case less than a month later, when he demonstrated the Sphere of Annihilation, which produced complete disintegration of matter over a radius of several hundred meters. We were intoxicated by the power of the new weapon, and were quite prepared to overlook one fundamental defect—the fact that it *was* a sphere and hence destroyed its rather complicated generating equipment at the instant of formation. This meant, of course, that it could not be used on warships but only on guided missiles, and a great program was started to convert all homing torpedoes to carry the new weapon. For the time being all further offensives were suspended.

We realize now that this was our first mistake. I still think that it was a natural one, for it seemed to us then that all our existing weapons had become obsolete overnight, and we already regarded them as almost primitive survivals. What we did not appreciate was the magnitude of the task we were attempting, and the length of time it would take to get the revolutionary super-weapon into battle. Nothing like this had happened for a hundred years and we had no previous experience to guide us.

The conversion problem proved far more difficult than anticipated. A new class of torpedo had to be designed, because the standard model was too small. This meant in turn that only the larger ships could launch the weapon, but we

were prepared to accept this penalty. After six months, the heavy units of the Fleet were being equipped with the Sphere. Training maneuvers and tests had shown that it was operating satisfactorily and we were ready to take it into action. Norden was already being hailed as the architect of victory, and had half promised even more spectacular weapons.

Then two things happened. One of our battleships disappeared completely on a training flight, and an investigation showed that under certain conditions the ship's long-range radar could trigger the Sphere immediately it had been launched. The modification needed to overcome this defect was trivial, but it caused a delay of another month and was the source of much bad feeling between the naval staff and the scientists. We were ready for action again—when Norden announced that the radius of effectiveness of the Sphere had now been increased by ten, thus multiplying by a thousand the chances of destroying an enemy ship.

So the modifications started all over again, but everyone agreed that the delay would be worth it. Meanwhile, however, the enemy had been emboldened by the absence of further attacks and had made an unexpected onslaught. Our ships were short of torpedoes, since none had been coming from the factories, and were forced to retire. So we lost the systems of Kyrane and Floranus, and the planetary fortress of Rham-sandron.

It was an annoying but not a serious blow, for the recaptured systems had been unfriendly, and difficult to administer. We had no doubt that we could restore the position in the near future, as soon as the new weapon became operational.

These hopes were only partially fulfilled. When we renewed our offensive, we had to do so with fewer of the Spheres of Annihilation than had been planned, and this was one reason for our limited success. The other reason was more serious.

While we had been equipping as many of our ships as we could with the irresistible weapon, the enemy had been building feverishly. His ships were of the old pattern with the old weapons—but they now outnumbered ours. When we went into action, we found that the numbers ranged against us were often one hundred per cent greater than expected, causing target confusion among the automatic weapons and resulting in higher losses than anticipated. The enemy losses

were higher still, for once a Sphere had reached its objective, destruction was certain, but the balance had not swung as far in our favor as we had hoped.

Moreover, while the main fleets had been engaged, the enemy had launched a daring attack on the lightly held systems of Eriston, Duranus, Carmanidora and Pharanidon—recapturing them all. We were thus faced with a threat only fifty light-years from our home planets.

There was much recrimination at the next meeting of the supreme commanders. Most of the complaints were addressed to Norden—Grand Admiral Taxaris in particular maintaining that thanks to our admittedly irresistible weapon we were now considerably worse off than before. We should, he claimed, have continued to build conventional ships, thus preventing the loss of our numerical superiority.

Norden was equally angry and called the naval staff ungrateful bunglers. But I could tell that he was worried—as indeed we all were—by the unexpected turn of events. He hinted that there might be a speedy way of remedying the situation.

We now know that Research had been working on the Battle Analyzer for many years, but, at the time, it came as a revelation to us and perhaps we were too easily swept off our feet. Norden's argument, also, was seductively convincing. What did it matter, he said, if the enemy had twice as many ships as we—if the efficiency of ours could be doubled or even trebled? For decades the limiting factor in warfare had been not mechanical but biological—it had become more and more difficult for any single mind, or group of minds, to cope with the rapidly changing complexities of battle in three-dimensional space. Norden's mathematicians had analyzed some of the classic engagements of the past, and had shown that even when we had been victorious we had often operated our units at much less than half of their theoretical efficiency.

The Battle Analyzer would change all this by replacing the operations staff with electronic calculators. The idea was not new, in theory, but until now it had been no more than a utopian dream. Many of us found it difficult to believe that it was still anything but a dream: after we had run through several very complex dummy battles, however, we were convinced.

It was decided to install the Analyzer in four of our heaviest ships, so that each of the main fleets could be equipped

with one. At this stage, the trouble began—though we did not know it until later.

The Analyzer contained just short of a million vacuum tubes and needed a team of five hundred technicians to maintain and operate it. It was quite impossible to accommodate the extra staff aboard a battleship, so each of the four units had to be accompanied by a converted liner to carry the technicians not on duty. Installation was also a very slow and tedious business, but by gigantic efforts it was completed in six months.

Then, to our dismay, we were confronted by another crisis. Nearly five thousand highly skilled men had been selected to serve the Analyzers and had been given an intensive course at the Technical Training Schools. At the end of seven months, ten per cent of them had had nervous breakdowns and only forty per cent had qualified.

Once again, everyone started to blame everyone else. Norden, of course, said that the Research Staff could not be held responsible, and so incurred the enmity of the Personnel and Training Commands. It was finally decided that the only thing to do was to use two instead of four Analyzers and to bring the others into action as soon as men could be trained. There was little time to lose, for the enemy was still on the offensive and his morale was rising.

The first Analyzer fleet was ordered to recapture the system of Eriston. On the way, by one of the hazards of war, the liner carrying the technicians was struck by a roving mine. A warship would have survived, but the liner with its irreplaceable cargo was totally destroyed. So the operation had to be abandoned.

The other expedition was, at first, more successful. There was no doubt at all that the Analyzer fulfilled its designers' claims, and the enemy was heavily defeated in the first engagements. He withdrew, leaving us in possession of Saphran, Leucon and Hexanerax. But his Intelligence Staff must have noted the change in our tactics and the inexplicable presence of a liner in the heart of our battle Fleet. It must have noted, also, that our first Fleet had been accompanied by a similar ship—and had withdrawn when it had been destroyed.

In the next engagement, the enemy used his superior numbers to launch an overwhelming attack on the Analyzer ship and its unarmed consort. The attack was made without regard

to losses—both ships were, of course, very heavily protected—and it succeeded. The result was the virtual decapitation of the Fleet, since an effectual transfer to the old operational methods proved impossible. We disengaged under heavy fire, and so lost all our gains and also the systems of Lormyia, Ismarnus, Beronis, Alphanidon and Sideneus.

At this stage, Grand Admiral Taxaris expressed his disapproval of Norden by committing suicide, and I assumed supreme command.

The situation was now both serious and infuriating. With stubborn conservatism and complete lack of imagination, the enemy continued to advance with his old-fashioned and inefficient but now vastly more numerous ships. It was galling to realize that if we had only continued building, without seeking new weapons, we would have been in a far more advantageous position. There were many acrimonious conferences at which Norden defended the scientists while everyone else blamed them for all that had happened. The difficulty was that Norden had proved every one of his claims: he had a perfect excuse for all the disasters that had occurred. And we could not now turn back—the search for an irresistible weapon must go on. At first it had been a luxury that would shorten the war. Now it was a necessity if we were to end it victoriously.

We were on the defensive, and so was Norden. He was more than ever determined to reestablish his prestige and that of the Research Staff. But we had been twice disappointed, and would not make the same mistake again. No doubt Norden's twenty thousand scientists would produce many further weapons: we would remain unimpressed.

We were wrong. This final weapon was something so fantastic that even now it seems difficult to believe that it ever existed. Its innocent, noncommittal name—the Exponential Field—gave no hint of its real **potentialities**. Some of Norden's mathematicians had discovered it during a piece of entirely theoretical research into the properties of space, and to everyone's great surprise their results were found to be physically realizable.

It seems very difficult to explain the operation of the Field to the layman. According to the technical description, it "produces an exponential condition of space, so that a finite distance in normal, linear space may become infinite in pseudospace." Norden gave an analogy which some of us found

useful. It was as if one took a flat disk of rubber—representing a region of normal space—and then pulled its center out to infinity. The circumference of the disk would be unaltered—but its “diameter” would be infinite. That was the sort of thing the generator of the Field did to the space around it.

As an example, suppose that a ship carrying the generator was surrounded by a ring of hostile machines. If it switched on the Field, *each* of the enemy ships would think that it—and the ships on the far side of the circle—had suddenly receded into nothingness. Yet the circumference of the circle would be the same as before: only the journey to the center would be of infinite duration, for as one proceeded, distances would appear to become greater and greater as the “scale” of space altered.

It was a nightmare condition, but a very useful one. Nothing could reach a ship carrying the Field: it might be englobed by an enemy fleet yet would be as inaccessible as if it were at the other side of the Universe. Against this, of course, it could not fight back without switching off the Field, but this still left it at a very great advantage, not only in defense but in offense. For a ship fitted with the Field could approach an enemy fleet undetected and suddenly appear in its midst.

This time there seemed to be no flaws in the new weapon. Needless to say, we looked for all the possible objections before we committed ourselves again. Fortunately the equipment was fairly simple and did not require a large operating staff. After much debate, we decided to rush it into production, for we realized that time was running short and the war was going against us. We had now lost about the whole of our initial gains, and enemy forces had made several raids into our own Solar System.

We managed to hold off the enemy while the Fleet was reequipped and the new battle techniques were worked out. To use the Field operationally it was necessary to locate an enemy formation, set a course that would intercept it, and then switch on the generator for the calculated period of time. On releasing the Field again—if the calculations had been accurate—one would be in the enemy's midst and could do great damage during the resulting confusion, retreating by the same route when necessary.

The first trial maneuvers proved satisfactory and the equipment seemed quite reliable. Numerous mock attacks were made and the crews became accustomed to the new

technique. I was on one of the test flights and can vividly remember my impressions as the Field was switched on. The ships around us seemed to dwindle as if on the surface of an expanding bubble: in an instant they had vanished completely. So had the stars—but presently we could see that the Galaxy was still visible as a faint band of light around the ship. The virtual radius of our pseudo-space was not really infinite, but some hundred thousand light-years, and so the distance to the farthest stars of our system had not been greatly increased—though the nearest had of course totally disappeared.

These training maneuvers, however, had to be canceled before they were complete owing to a whole flock of minor technical troubles in various pieces of equipment, notably the communications circuits. These were annoying, but not important, though it was thought best to return to Base to clear them up.

At that moment the enemy made what was obviously intended to be a decisive attack against the fortress planet of Iton at the limits of our Solar System. The Fleet had to go into battle before repairs could be made.

The enemy must have believed that we had mastered the secret of invisibility—as in a sense we had. Our ships appeared suddenly out of nowhere and inflicted tremendous damage—for a while. And then something quite baffling and inexplicable happened.

I was in command of the flagship *Hircania* when the trouble started. We had been operating as independent units, each against assigned objectives. Our detectors observed an enemy formation at medium range and the navigating officers measured its distance with great accuracy. We set course and switched on the generator.

The Exponential Field was released at the moment when we should have been passing through the center of the enemy group. To our consternation, we emerged into normal space at a distance of many hundred miles—and when we found the enemy, he had already found us. We retreated, and tried again. This time we were so far away from the enemy that he located us first.

Obviously, something was seriously wrong. We broke communicator silence and tried to contact the other ships of the Fleet to see if they had experienced the same trouble. Once again we failed—and this time the failure was beyond all

reason, for the communication equipment appeared to be working perfectly. We could only assume, fantastic though it seemed, that the rest of the Fleet had been destroyed.

I do not wish to describe the scenes when the scattered units of the Fleet struggled back to Base. Our casualties had actually been negligible, but the ships were completely demoralized. Almost all had lost touch with one another and had found that their ranging equipment showed inexplicable errors. It was obvious that the Exponential Field was the cause of the troubles, despite the fact that they were only apparent when it was switched off.

The explanation came too late to do us any good, and Norden's final discomfiture was small consolation for the virtual loss of the war. As I have explained, the Field generators produced a radial distortion of space, distances appearing greater and greater as one approached the center of the artificial pseudo-space. When the Field was switched off, conditions returned to normal.

But not quite. It was never possible to restore the initial state *exactly*. Switching the Field on and off was equivalent to an elongation and contraction of the ship carrying the generator, but there was a hysteretic effect, as it were, and the initial condition was never quite reproducible, owing to all the thousands of electrical changes and movements of mass aboard the ship while the Field was on. These asymmetries and distortions were cumulative, and though they seldom amounted to more than a fraction of one per cent, that was quite enough. It meant that the precision ranging equipment and the tuned circuits in the communication apparatus were thrown completely out of adjustment. Any single ship could never detect the change—only when it compared its equipment with that of another vessel, or tried to communicate with it, could it tell what had happened.

It is impossible to describe the resultant chaos. Not a single component of one ship could be expected with certainty to work aboard another. The very nuts and bolts were no longer interchangeable, and the supply position became quite impossible. Given time, we might even have overcome these difficulties, but the enemy ships were already attacking in thousands with weapons which now seemed centuries behind those that we had invented. Our magnificent Fleet, crippled by our own science, fought on as best it could until it was overwhelmed and forced to surrender. The ships fitted with

the Field were still invulnerable, but as fighting units they were almost helpless. Every time they switched on their generators to escape from enemy attack, the permanent distortion of their equipment increased. In a month, it was all over.

This is the true story of our defeat, which I give without prejudice to my defense before this Court. I make it, as I have said, to counteract the libels that have been circulating against the men who fought under me, and to show where the true blame for our misfortunes lay.

Finally, my request, which, as the Court will now realize, I make in no frivolous manner and which I hope will therefore be granted.

The Court will be aware that the conditions under which we are housed and the constant surveillance to which we are subjected night and day are somewhat distressing. Yet I am not complaining of this: nor do I complain of the fact that shortage of accommodation has made it necessary to house us in pairs.

But I cannot be held responsible for my future actions if I am compelled any longer to share my cell with Professor Norden, late Chief of the Research Staff of my armed forces.

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WHOSAWHATSA? by Jack Wodhams

We all know the greatest complaint each of us has against the Universe. "But it isn't *fair!*" How pleasant it would be if we all agreed on what was fair and if each of us wanted only what was fair. We'd all be living in Paradise. But we disagree on what is fair, and by a peculiar concatenation of coincidence, each one of us hotly and honestly is convinced that "fair" happens to be in line with what we each conceive to be our own self-interest. That's why we have courts; so that an objective and experienced person, kept apprised of all the facts, can coolly and even-handedly reach a fair decision. Provided, that is, that he doesn't go crazy in his search for JUSTICE.

—Isaac Asimov

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WHOSAWHATSA?

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He had the gun in his two hands, the muzzle aimed between his eyes, when his manservant came back into the room.

"Sir, I'm sorry to bother you, but... Oh, good heavens!"

Judge Forsett stared at him woodenly. "What is it, Sorff? What do you want? I told you I didn't want to be disturbed."

"But, sir," Sorff said, shocked, "what are you doing? You're not... you're not thinking of...?"

"Of blowing my brains out? I was considering it." The judge still held the gun to his head. "Why have you interrupted me? What is it you wanted?"

"We've had this communication from the Security Branch and... Oh, sir, please put that gun down."

"Put it on the desk," the judge said gruffly. "I'll see to it later."

Sorff slowly placed the report on the desk. "Sir?" He seemed distressed. "Sir, don't let it get you down. There's... ah... I'll get Miss Anderson to make some tea. It's not as bad as all that, sir, really it isn't."

The judge stared at him and began to blink. His lower lip started to work. "Why don't you just leave me, Sorff? Leave me, there's a good fellow."

"No, sir, no. You mustn't. Think of the adverse publicity,

sir," Sorff pleaded. "The...the dishonor, sir. Your noble name..."

Judge Forsett's aloofness crumbled. He even seemed slightly annoyed. He sagged, and his gun reluctantly descended to rest on the blotter. "Sorff, I can't take it. I'm too old, Sorff."

"You need a rest, sir. That's all."

"I should have retired at seventy-five. I laughed at them, Sorff. But I'm too old."

"A nice long holiday, sir. You've been working too hard." Sorff moved around the desk. "I'll send for Dr. Matthews, sir."

"Too old. The law's not what it was, Sorff. The law's not what it was." The judge gazed distantly at nothing. "I can't handle it. What answer can there be?"

Sorff gently removed the gun from under the now-relaxed hands. He breathed a little easier. "The case has got you down, sir. A vacation. A little fishing, perhaps."

"Straightforward. It used to be reasonably straightforward. But now. I can't handle it any more, Sorff."

"Tut-tut," Sorff said. "You mustn't get so concerned, sir. It is only a case, after all. Here, why not forget about it for a while? Go home, sir, and have a good night's rest."

"Court in the morning, eighteen holes in the afternoon, and an evening at the club or the theater. I thought I could do it, Sorff, but I can't."

"There, there, sir, you've just hit a bad patch, that's all. Take a few days off and you'll be all right."

The judge sat gloomily at his desk. He did not answer.

"Come, now, sir," Sorff said anxiously cheerfully, "don't despond. It's spring, sir. Things will look better in the morning."

"I'm too old," the judge said bleakly. "I should retire. I can't keep up."

"Nonsense, sir." Sorff put a hand under the judge's elbow. "You're just under a strain at present. Come, sir, we'll get you home where you can relax and take it easy."

"I'll never relax again," the judge predicted morbidly, but he responded to the pressure on his arm and stood up. "I'm past it, Sorff. Too old. I can't cope."

"Now, now, sir," Sorff chided, "you're just being defeatist. You're a little depressed, sir. That's all. We all get that way sometimes."

"Hm-m-m." The judge was not convinced.

"Come, sir, I'll help you on with your coat."

The judge allowed himself to be led to the coatstand where he cooperated listlessly as Sorff struggled to clothe him protectively against the nip in the outside air.

"That's it, sir, that's it. There you are, sir. There." Panting somewhat, Sorff said, "Oh, don't forget your hat, sir. I'll put it on for you, shall I? You'll feel a lot better in a day or two. There."

Sorff opened the door and poked his head out. "Miss Anderson! Judge Forsett is going home. Tell them to bring the car round, will you? And get Dr. Matthews. We'd like him to meet us at Judge Forsett's house. Judge Forsett is not feeling very well."

"Very good, Mr. Sorff."

Sorff turned back to the judge. "There you are, sir. You'll soon be feeling better. First home, then maybe a few days away from it all."

Without enthusiasm, the judge permitted himself to be guided through his outer chambers. "Too old," he muttered. "I'm too old."

"No you're not, sir. You're younger than a lot of us," Sorff soothed. "You'll get over it, sir. This way..."

The doctor rested his bag upon a chair. "I've left him a couple of tranquilizers and a couple of sleeping pills."

"Did he take them?" Sorff asked.

Dr. Matthews sighed. "No. You know how he feels about doctors who administer drugs without the patient's consent."

"He still has some of his old life, then," Sorff said.

The doctor shook his head. "Residual pigheadedness. His spirits are very low."

"Will he be all right do you think?"

"Well, he should be. I checked the medicine cabinet. I'll check the kitchen and garage on my way out. Any other guns about the place?"

"Only his shotguns, and I've hidden them away. There was nothing else I could find."

The doctor picked up his bag. "I don't think you have too much to worry about. I don't think that he's determined to do away with himself. I think rather that there was a coincidence of dispiritedness and a convenience of means. You are going to stay the night?"

"Yes, I think I'd better. His housekeeper left yesterday morning."

"Ah. That could be a contributing factor. Do you know why she left?"

"I...er...no, not really. She, ah...presumably..."

"Yes. Quite." The doctor swung his bag and turned for the door. "A handsome woman, wasn't she?"

"Oh, hell." The judge turned onto his back and opened his eyes. His lips moved. "Gregg versus Heldsworth. Gregg versus Gregg. Heldsworth versus Gregg, Heldsworth versus Heldsworth." He groaned. "Decisions, decisions, decisions."

He rolled his head on his pillow. "Mr. Heldsworth and Mrs. Gregg. Mr. Gregg and Mrs. Heldsworth. Mrs. Gregg and Mrs. Gregg. Mr. Gregg and Mr. Gregg. Mr. Heldsworth and Mrs. Heldsworth. Oh, God."

He felt hot and sticky. A three-quarter moon gave enough light to turn the room into an underdeveloped print. His eyes fell on the twin bed alongside his own. It was Emma's bed. Emma had been his wife for forty years and more. How long was it since she had passed away? Three years last month.

Three years. His eyes grew moist. Emma had been gone for three years. They had been the three happiest years of his life.

At seventy-four it had been good to be free again. With experience and wisdom, and with the aid of modern medicines, three good years. "Modern medicine. God curse it. Mrs. Heldsworth and Mr. Heldsworth. Mrs. Gregg and Mr. Heldsworth."

He closed his eyes and opened his mouth to moan, his mind again going back to the courtroom scene....

... "You, Mr. Carver, are representing Mrs. Heldsworth, and Mr. Gracey is here on behalf of Mr. Heldsworth, is that right?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I see that we also have Mr. Jarvis and two other colleagues of yours that I do not know. Are these gentlemen here to assist you in this matter?"

"Ah, no, my lord." Mr. Jarvis cleared his throat. "I am here to protect the interests of the Right Honorable Clive Muswell Heldsworth, Viscount Brastmanston."

"Oh." The judge looked at him. "He's not the petitioner?"

"No, my lord."

The judge waved a finger at the remaining pair. "And you two gentlemen. You have an interest in this case, or are you just being nosey?"

One smiled. "Yes and no respectively, my lord. I am David Dimattio, I am holding a watching brief for Miss Gayel Olover, who is, ah, intimately connected with this case."

"Oh, I see." The judge raised a querying eyebrow. "And you?"

"Borcross. Adam Borcross, my lord." The voice was deep and matched the grave Borcross features.

"And who do you represent?" the judge asked.

"The Government, my lord."

"Oh." The judge sat back. "That explains the secrecy," he said, somewhat irritably. "Was the screening really necessary? Was it necessary for me to be kept in ignorance? This is merely a divorce case after all, isn't it?"

"There are certain aspects, my lord..." Borcross began.

"Yes, yes, yes. Well, let's get on with it. The petitioner is Mr. Heldsworth, isn't it? On what grounds is he seeking a divorce, Mr. Gracey?"

"On the recently admitted grounds of mental cruelty, my lord."

"Mental cruelty, hey? Unusual for a man."

"And adultery, my lord."

"Ah. That's where you come in, is it, Mr....er...?"

"Dimattio, my lord."

"Yes, yes, of course, Dimattio. Very good. Now, with so many advocates, and a strong inference that this case has special features, I would be pleased to receive some enlightenment." The judge surveyed the five lawyers. "In other words," he said with a touch of irascibility, "would someone mind acquainting me with the problem, whatever it is."

"Yes, my lord, gladly," Mr. Carver said quickly. "My client contends that, ah, she at no time has caused, ah, Mr. Heldsworth any great degree of mental anguish. She..."

"Deprivation," Mr. Gracey cut in. "Deprivation of conjugal rights. This is not mental cruelty?"

"In the true sense, no," Mr. Carver said. "Under the circumstances, my client feels that an adjustment period is called for. After all, a few months is not much to ask, to enable a wife to become, ah, familiar with her role."

"Am I to understand, Mr. Carver, they have been wed but a short time?" Judge Forsett inquired.

"In a manner of speaking, my lord..."

"And the marriage has not been consummated, is that it?"

Carver looked uncomfortable. "Well, not exactly, my lord. You see, Mrs. Heldsworth has only been Mr. Heldsworth's wife for nine months..."

"This is enough time to get adjusted in, surely," the judge said. "It is not enough time to permit the filing of a divorce action. They're not film stars, are they?"

"No, my lord, but..."

"If they've only been married nine months they probably need a guidance counselor more than a lawyer."

"There's the custody of the children for one thing," Gracey put in drily.

"Children? What children?" Judge Forsett turned belligerently to Carver. "I thought you implied that their relationship was unsatisfactory?"

"Oh, it is, my lord, but..."

"And children, did you say? Children? More than one? What are they, twins?"

"No, my lord," Mr. Carver said. "One is ten, one is eight, and the little one is four."

Judge Forsett stared blankly.

"My lord," Mr. Gracey said smoothly, "you have been unintentionally misled. The Heldsworths have been married for twelve years."

"What?" The judge glared sharply at Carver. "But Mr. Carver distinctly told me that they had been married only nine months!"

"No, no, my lord," Carver protested, "I didn't say that..."

"Are you calling me a liar?" the judge pop-eyed.

"Oh, no, my lord, heaven forbid," Carver said hastily. "But what I said, my lord, was that Mrs. Heldsworth had only been Mr. Heldsworth's *wife* for nine months."

"Well?" The judge shook his head testily. "That's the same thing, isn't it? Do you mean that she was his mistress before that? That they married at last and couldn't adjust to one another?"

"No, no, my lord," Carver said. "They've been married for twelve years, only, when they were married, Mrs. Heldsworth was known as Mr. Gregg, my lord."

"Mr. Gregg?" The judge looked at Gracey. "Who's Mr. Gregg?"

"Mrs. Heldsworth was Mr. Gregg," Gracey said. "He changed his sex nearly a year ago."

"Do you mean to say that he was married to Mr. Heldsworth for...for eleven years?"

"Er, yes and no, my lord. Perhaps my colleague, Mr. Borcoss..."

The judge turned his attention to Borcoss.

"My lord," Borcoss said heavily, "Mr. Gregg works for a certain government agency. He is skilled and highly trained." He paused.

"Well?"

"My lord, you must understand that the nature of his employment is such that it demands the utmost vigilance and circumspection. His work holds a high element of danger."

"You mean that he is a secret agent?"

"Something of that kind, my lord," Borcoss said non-committally.

"And going into hiding, he changed his sex?"

"My lord, specialists such as Mr. Gregg are rarely come by. The training they receive is both expensive and time-consuming. Becoming too well known to certain persons it was thought desirable to extend his service by making use of the feminizing stratagem."

"I see," the judge said. His nostrils flared. "I know that such government departments tolerate some peculiar people, but if Mr. Gregg was married to Mr. Heldsworth for eleven years, I'd say that they were carrying toleration too far."

"Er, no, my lord," Gracey said. "Mr. Gregg was then married to Mrs. Gregg. You see..."

"Wait a minute," Judge Forsett said. "There was a *Mrs.* Gregg?"

"Of course, my lord. She..."

"There's no 'of course' about it," Judge Forsett snapped. "Are you deliberately trying to confuse me?"

"Oh, no, my lord. It's like this..."

"Let me get this straight," the judge interrupted. "Mr. Gregg was married to Mrs. Gregg. Then Mr. Gregg changed his sex. That would make two Mrs. Greggs, wouldn't it?"

"Well, yes, my lord, but..."

"Don't distract me. Now then, obviously such a family arrangement would be unsatisfactory, and the marriage

would automatically be annulled. I suppose, then, that the former Mr. Gregg met and married Mr. Heldsworth, who probably wondered at the shyness of a bride who already had the custody of three children, hey?"

Judge Forsett smiled. "Does Mr. Heldsworth know the full story?"

"He should, my lord," Mr. Gracey said. "He was formerly Mrs. Gregg."

The judge's smile vanished. He snorted. "Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?" He picked up a pencil, and then threw it down again. "Heldsworth. Hah! Gregg! What was the point of changing their names? They're Mr. and Mrs. Gregg, aren't they? Is this some more cloak-and-dagger stuff to drop us in the smog, Mr. Borcross?"

"No, my lord," Borcross said gruffly. "It is customary for the female party to assume the name of her spouse. Thus, when they changed places, as it were, Mr. Heldsworth took his maiden name. Mr. Gregg, of course, lost his. It is common practice, my lord."

Judge Forsett glowered at him. He began restlessly to twist his gavel in his hands. "I have some knowledge of wedding procedure," he said tartly. "Why did Mrs. Gregg have to change *her* sex?"

"She thought that the children needed a father, my lord. That is, a father of their own, a proper father."

"Commendable," the judge said briefly. "Tell me, this... this sex-changing business. Is it a simple matter? I've heard of the odd incidence, biological adjustment, correcting nature, and so on, but then this married couple were both... I mean, surely they both weren't that way?"

"My lord, they both underwent highly sophisticated treatment. In the case of Mrs. Gregg, the government acted in good faith and sought only to correct the Gregg family balance."

"Quite so. This treatment is not generally available then?"

"No, my lord."

"But if the need, or desire, is great enough, anybody can have his or her sex changed, is that right?"

Misinterpreting the shine in the judge's eye, Borcross said, "Aged persons would not benefit from the treatment, my lord. In your case, for instance, it would be inadvisable to..."

"My case?" the judge yelped. "What do you mean, my case? I don't want to be a woman, do I?"

"I don't know, my lord..."

"Well, I don't," Judge Forsett rasped. "I can't stand bald-headed women, and if the bald-headed woman was I, I'd shoot myself."

Dimattio laughed indiscreetly.

"Did I say something funny?" the judge demanded.

Dimattio changed the laugh to a choking fit of near lethal proportions. He gasped and spluttered. "Sorry, my lord," he said hoarsely. "I swallowed and it went the wrong way."

The judge looked at him suspiciously. "Hm-m-m." He returned his regard to the government attorney. "You were telling us about the treatment, Mr. Borcoss."

"Ah. Yes, my lord." He took a piece of paper from his pocket. "The concept is not startling, but the technicalities are precise. As you know, my lord, we all evolved from unisex creatures. At one time there was only one sex. Evidence to this fact still exists. For example, males have female hormones, and vice versa, and males with too much female hormone tend toward effeminacy, and females with too much male hormone are inclined to grow mustaches. Not long ago experiments with rats revealed that emasculated male embryos developed into females. However, female embryos showed no development toward masculinity when a similar operation..."

"What are you talking about, Mr. Borcoss? Do rat embryos have anything to do with this case?"

"Indirectly, my lord," Borcoss said, unruffled. "The sex change in humans is effected by a combination of refined surgical attention, and hormonal and enzymatic retardation and stimulation by chemicoglandular excitation and inhibition. Selective, of course."

"Of course," the judge said. He sniffed. "And it works?"

"Works, my lord?"

"Yes, works. Mr. Gregg is now truly a woman, is that right?"

"Oh, yes, my lord. Very definitely."

"And Mrs. Gregg is now positively a man?"

"Yes, my lord."

Judge Forsett threw up his hands. "What's all the fuss about then? Can't they divorce each other in a normal manner without going through all this rigmarole?"

"Ah, my lord," old Jarvis entered the fray, "certain difficulties arise. We must establish beyond doubt the *legal sex*

of the participants. We must establish in law whether Mr. Heldsworth is legally a man, my lord, and discover her motives for changing into a man, for changing, not to resolve a sexual doubt, but to make a complete transition from undisputed femininity to radical masculinity."

"Mr. Heldsworth is a man," Gracey said. "We have retained medical opinion of the highest authority..."

"Ah, yes," old Jarvis said, "but the fact remains that she was *born* a female, and was registered as such, and while she might choose to *become* a man, she cannot do so in the expectancy of usurping a position that rightfully belongs to one who is a male by birth."

"That's not so," Gracey said hotly. "The fact that he has become a man, that he is now beyond doubt a male, gives him an unqualified entitlement to the estates and station of a male family member."

"Gentlemen, pardon me," Judge Forsett interposed with some asperity, "but does it make any difference whether she was born a boy or a girl? She is evidently very much a man now."

"My lord," old Jarvis said, "it is a matter of great personal concern to my client. There is no question that Mr. Heldsworth is in fact Mrs. Gregg. It is our contention that, technically and legally, Mr. Heldsworth is *still* Mrs. Gregg, and that, for the purposes of this divorce action, should so be regarded."

"Mr. Jarvis, are you losing your wig?" the judge said tetchily. "You want me to divorce Mrs. Gregg from Mrs. Heldsworth?"

"No, no, my lord. But, so that the procedure should be carried forward correctly, the parties involved should seek separation under the original name that they bore. That is to say, the case should be regarded as Gregg versus Gregg and not Heldsworth versus Heldsworth."

"They are the same people, my lord," Gracey said. "My elderly learned friend is, I feel, unnecessarily laboring a finer point."

Sensitive as to age, the judge said, "I have known Mr. Jarvis a number of years, and I am sure that if he wishes to make a point, fine or not, it is not without a valid reason."

Old Jarvis smirked. "Thank you, my lord. The point is not so fine. I represent the Honorable Clive Muswell Heldsworth, the Viscount Brastmanston. Mrs. Gregg and the Viscount

Brastmanston are cousins, my lord, and should she establish, in law, that she is a male Heldsworth, her slight seniority in years may be used in an attempt to disinherit the present rightful holder of that title."

"The rightful holder of that title is the eldest male Heldsworth," Gracey objected. "Mr. Heldsworth is a Heldsworth and has always been a Heldsworth. The fact that he was once Mrs. Gregg is immaterial. He is now Mr. Heldsworth, and as such is, by virtue of age, now the true heir to the Heldsworth estate."

"My lord," wily Jarvis appealed, "we cannot here establish such a precedent. If a female can, by changing her sex, demand and assume the role of heir to a title, the very foundations of the nobility will be threatened. Why, even the Queen herself could be replaced by her younger sister."

"Each case should be weighed on its merits," Gracey said firmly. "In this instance there was no prior intent to obtain the title. The claim to the title is incidental to the desire by Mr. Heldsworth to give his children a true father."

"He's not the true father," Mr. Carver said, "Mrs. Heldsworth is."

"He is blood kin and a female," Gracey said loudly, "and furthermore he had government sanction and support. It is the government in fact who encouraged Mr. Heldsworth in his course of action."

"The government cannot be held responsible for the actions of citizens in their private lives," Borcross said portentously. "This is purely a domestic family matter. The government in no manner forced or coerced Mrs. Gregg to make the decision that she did."

Gracey was shocked. "Are you trying to say that the government did not influence Mr. Heldsworth at all?"

Stolidly Borcross said, "It was Mrs. Gregg's idea and the move was condoned by her husband. When consulted, the government department concerned raised no objection, that's all."

"They actively assisted," Gracey asserted. "Without the active help and cooperation of the 'department concerned' Mr. Heldsworth could never have realized his masculine potential."

"Oh-ho?" old Jarvis perked in. "Masculine what? Potential? Mrs. Gregg never had masculine potential. She was a

woman, clearly designated so by her long, ah, career as a wife and a mother."

"That Mr. Heldsworth once behaved as a female he does not deny," Mr. Gracey said, "but it must be admitted that his assumption to manhood was readily effected and highly suggestive of latent predisposition to masculinity."

Stung, Jarvis cried, "She was a woman, unmistakably and undeniably. Any tendency she may have had toward masculinity was infinitesimal and irrelevant. She was a woman, the changing of sex for ulterior reasons being no more legitimate than the changing of a name with intent to defraud."

"My client had no ulterior motive," Gracey said vehemently. "Events occurred in a perfectly comprehensible sequence, with results being surprisingly efficacious. So much so that my client feels constrained to question the accuracy of former interpretations of his sex."

"A mother, a mother," old Jarvis wagged his finger at Gracey. "She was a mother. Three times she was a mother. Do you want more evidence of femininity than that? Hey?"

Judge Forsett's head swiveled from side to side like a Ping-Pong addict at a championship meet. He lost track of the play. "Wait, wait, wait," he said, "what's going on here?" He looked questioningly at Mr. Gracey. "Am I to understand, Mr. Gracey, that you are trying to establish that Mr. Heldsworth was more masculine than feminine even before his sex was changed?"

"It is a contingency to be considered, my lord."

"But it is clear that he was a woman, surely? I mean, if he had three children...?"

"My lord, an accurate definition of femininity is not available at this time. As my learned friend, Mr. Borcoos, has said, males have a certain amount of female in their makeup, and females, to a greater or lesser degree, have masculine characteristics. To this moment medical analysis is not employed to determine the truly dominant sexual personality."

"Rubbish," old Jarvis said. "You mean to say that medical analysis is required to tell the difference between a boy and a girl?"

"Certainly," Gracey replied. "The outer physique can be markedly at variance with the inner metabolism. The superficial appearance might not at all be in accord with the inner chemistry."

Old Jarvis raised his voice. "Mrs. Gregg had children. She

had three children. Her chemistry must have been suited to childbearing. It is women who bear children. Mrs. Gregg is a woman!"

"Mr. Heldsworth is a man!" Gracey yelled back. "Mr. Heldsworth has always had a high male secretion! Before his operation his hormone count showed an abnormal preponderance of male chromosomes!"

"Oh, did it?" old Jarvis crackled. "And we can guess how..."

"Gentlemen, please!" Judge Forsett intervened.

"Hah!" old Jarvis scoffed. He brushed his lapels with his hands. "Sorry, my lord." His chin came up. "It just seems that a deliberate attempt is being made to repudiate even the most obvious facts, my lord."

"I am sure," Gracey said with icy heat, "that His Lordship is well aware that in law the so-called 'obvious' facts are the very ones that need to be reassessed from time to time."

Old Jarvis grunted.

"I might find the matter less confusing," Judge Forsett said irritably, "if you gentlemen would agree to refer to the principals by a common name. I understood that this case was Heldsworth versus Heldsworth. Yet you, Mr. Jarvis, persist in using the name 'Gregg.' When you are speaking of Mrs. Gregg, you are, in fact, referring to Mr. Heldsworth, is that correct?"

"She started life as Miss Olga Virginia Heldsworth, my lord. She married Mr. Gregg and, for eleven years or so, was known and accepted as Mrs. Gregg." Revealing another defensive angle, Jarvis said, "As the time she has been a woman far exceeds the short period she has been a man, my lord, I feel it more appropriate to refer to her in a manner to which, in her thirty-four years as a woman, she has grown accustomed."

"My learned colleague is merely closing his eyes to the facts, my lord," Gracey said stiffly. "It is an obvious fact that Mr. Heldsworth is, positively, a man."

"It is the 'obvious' facts, my lord," old Jarvis said slyly, "that need to be reassessed from time to time."

"A full medical report is available on Mr. Heldsworth, my lord," Gracey said. "This clearly reveals that his is a cause of dormant hyperadrenia..."

"Please, please, Mr. Gracey," the judge said hurriedly. "I, at least, am willing to accept that Mr. Heldsworth is now a

man." He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "For the moment, anyway."

The judge gazed for a while at Dimattio. Without relish he said, "I suppose it is you, Mr...."

"Dimattio, my lord."

"Yes, yes, Dimattio. I suppose it is you, Mr. Dimattio, who, through your client, has direct evidence as to the masculinity of Mr. Heldsworth?"

"Oh, no, my lord."

"Uh? Don't you represent Miss Somebody-or-other in this case? Presumably she is the correspondent?"

"Ah, yes, my lord. She is bringing a paternity suit, my lord."

"Paternity suit? Well, then," the judge said crossly, "that's what I said. That's proof of Mr. Heldsworth's virility, isn't it?"

"No, my lord. The paternity suit is not being brought against Mr. Heldsworth."

"Oh?" The judge was baffled. "Who is it being brought against then?"

"Against Mr. Gregg, my lord."

"Mr. Gregg? Do you mean Mrs. Heldsworth?"

"Yes, my lord."

"But Mrs. Heldsworth"—the judge's hands fluttered—"is a woman!"

"Not at the time when he was Mr. Gregg, my lord," Dimattio said succinctly.

"Oh, good heavens."

It was here that the dike began to spring more leaks than Judge Forsett had fingers, and a young whirlpool formed and started to spin his mind....

The memory was vivid. The judge tumbled restlessly onto his back. He kicked back the blankets to allow his body heat to escape with greater facility. He panted.

"Mrs. Gregg versus Mrs. Heldsworth. Mr. Heldsworth versus Mr. Gregg. Miss Gayel Olover versus Heldsworth..."

"Does Mr. Gregg deny the charge?"

Mr. Carver got off his seat on the table. "Most definitely, my lord. Apart from the fact that she was somewhere else at the time of the alleged incident, Mrs. Heldsworth, by reason of the imprecise knowledge of her physical condition, would have found it impossible to father the child, my lord."

"You mean that she... ah... that is he... ah, was then Mr. Gregg, but was in a state of... of... of transition?"

"Yes, my lord," Carver said confidently. "For reasons not dissimilar to those given by my learned friend, Mr. Gracey, in regard to Mr. Heldsworth, I might say that the female content of Mrs. Heldsworth, even when she was known as Mr. Gregg, was exceptionally high, my lord, and..."

"Nonsense," Dimattio interjected. "Mr. Gregg was masculine in every respect. He was rugged, virile, shaved twice a day and engaged in every manly sport, from boxing and wrestling through to rowing and shooting. And he chased women at any and every opportunity."

"Exactly," Mr. Carver said, blithely undismayed. "She had a dissatisfied libido. She was searching for expression. Unaware that she was more woman than man, she desperately tried to adapt herself to the ways of a man. Naturally she chased after other women. She could see that it was the way other men behaved. But did she find reward or fulfillment? Of course not. And so she went on, poor unhappy creature, not knowing where she really belonged."

"He fathered three children of his own," Dimattio said pertinently, "and at least one other."

"Ah yes, Nature in her wondrous bounty. Three children of her own, the last four years ago," Mr. Carver acknowledged. "A miracle."

"My lord," Dimattio said sardonically, "it is patently clear that an effort is being made to cloud the issue. By taking any normal standard, Mr. Gregg was, up until nearly a year ago, the very epitome of manhood. He..."

"No, no," Mr. Carver said, "indescribable nervous tension helped cause a physiological..."

Dimattio overrode him. "He was masculinity personified. He was tough and strong, handsome and intelligent. His behavior was standardly male. He misused my client, made promises since repudiated and has caused my client great emotional distress."

"Your client must be mistaken," Carver said stoutly. "As a member of Society circles, she is obviously seeking a certain notoriety, perhaps, and is endeavoring to shield the true father of her child."

"Not so," Dimattio said. "Abundant photographs are available to show that Mr. Gregg and my client at one time had a very close attachment."

"News photographs, or even private photographs, do not prove that an improper relationship existed," Carver pointed out. "Mrs. Heldsworth was, and is, a member of a certain government agency, and in the course of her duties plays her role with skill and dedication."

"He played the role of a man remarkably well," Dimattio agreed.

Carver turned to the government lawyer. "Mr. Borcross, maybe you can explain to Mr. Dimattio that Mrs. Heldsworth was at this time merely playing a part, was doing a job under orders?"

Borcoss coughed. "I am not at liberty to divulge details," he said ponderously, "but I can admit that Mr. Gregg, in the course of his employment, may have resorted to the means most expedient to the moment."

"The means employed in this case have had the most disturbing results upon my client," Dimattio said bluntly. "The health of my client has been impaired, and her social standing stigmatized."

"It is unfortunate," Borcross said, "but the dictates of circumstances..."

"The dictates of circumstances do not mean that any irresponsible conduct should be condoned, or that an innocent young woman should be thoughtlessly despoiled."

"Hardly innocent, old boy," Gracey said.

"The government can take no responsibility for Mr. Gregg's private actions, or be held responsible for the development of side issues stemming from Mr. Gregg's work. Mr. Gregg is, in effect, his own master, and is free to pursue his, ah, business as he thinks fit."

"The 'business' in this case concerned a high-ranking diplomat of a hitherto friendly power," Dimattio needed. "This diplomat is very naturally concerned at the deception practiced upon his daughter."

Judge Forsett valiantly tried to wrest gist from the mist. "His daughter?" he broke in. "Mr. Dimattio, what was the name of your client again?"

"Miss Gayel Olover, my lord."

"She's not the daughter of Under Secretary Amory Hardfinch Olover, is she?" he asked without hope.

"Yes, my lord."

The judge nodded, assimilating the news. "Oh."

"The young lady's honor is at stake, my lord. Promises

made to her were broken, and now, it seems her seducer hopes to escape scot-free from the consequences of his philandering."

Borcross frowned. "We have tried to appease the young lady, my lord, even supplying James Boniface, our second-best, ah, man, but we have been finding ourselves persona non grata in that vicinity. It has been most awkward."

"Didn't the young lady realize that, ah, Mr. Gregg was already married?" the judge asked.

"Mr. Gregg intimated that he was soon to become free of his wife, my lord," Dimattio said.

"Harumph," Borcross cleared his throat. "A rather unusual and intricate assignment calling for the most capable talent brought Mr. Gregg to adopt his present condition, my lord. A faultless disguise, Mr. Gregg, who is a meticulous perfectionist, undertook to become a female to accomplish his, ah, mission, my lord."

"Am I to understand, Mr. Borcross, that his changing into a female was meant to be only temporary?"

"Ah, originally yes, my lord."

"It would have saved a lot of trouble had it been so," Judge Forsett said with feeling.

"Ah, circumstances, my lord. Unexpected circumstances. His, ah, temperament has changed somewhat. His outlook is less, ah, predictable, my lord. A certain feminine reasoning pervades his thinking, and this, my lord, is not always comprehensible to a male."

"Mrs. Heldsworth is a woman, my lord," Carver said triumphantly. "She thinks, acts, and behaves like a woman."

"He is Mr. Gregg, and if he can be changed back, he should be changed back," Dimattio said.

"She doesn't want to be changed back," Carver stated. "She is content to have discovered her true body at last."

"His true body is the one he was born with," Dimattio said in exasperation. "It has been said that the change-over was intended only as a temporary measure. There is no reason now why he cannot revert to being a man."

Gracey and Borcross exchanged glances.

"His, ah, present duty has not been, ah, completed," Borcross said. "The, ah, success of the venture has somewhat delayed... This, and the rather changed attitude, is what persuaded Mrs. Gregg to..."

Gracey addressed the judge. "His life was not satisfactory,

my lord. His natural inclination toward masculinity was aggravated."

"Whose? Mr. Gregg's?"

"No, Mr. Heldsworth's, my lord. To make life more bearable, to end the inner turmoil and frustration, to realize his innate masculinity, and to save their marriage, Mr. Heldsworth made the simple, for him, transfer to full manhood."

"Mrs. Gregg, Mrs. Heldsworth, I wish you'd make up your mind, Mr. Gracey." The judge chewed the end of his gavel handle.

Old Jarvis, who had been keeping shrewd watch on the sidelines, said, "That she tried to save her marriage is not a valid excuse. The attempt was manifestly a failure, and her continued imitation of manliness is no longer necessary."

"The fault does not lie with *my* client," Mr. Gracey said emphatically. "My client has done his best to make Mrs. Heldsworth happy, has gone out of his way to give Mrs. Heldsworth love, consideration, and thoughtful understanding."

The late ally, once again an enemy, Carver declared, "Mrs. Heldsworth has been unduly harassed and pestered by her husband over these last months. However, she is willing to try further to make the marriage work, partly for the sake of her children, my lord, and partly on religious grounds."

"What religious grounds?" Gracey asked, taken aback.

"Mrs. Heldsworth is a Roman Catholic," Carver said piously.

"Up till recently she was a Muhammadan," Gracey accused.

"And he acted like one, too," Dimattio said.

"She has been converted," Carver said, as though he personally had been responsible.

"My client has been converted, too," Gracey said nastily. "He is now a Mormon. Whatever the religion, incompatibility and a persistent refusal by one partner to acknowledge the other's conjugal rights is sufficient grounds for divorce."

"Your Mr. Heldsworth is being thwarted in his efforts to do as he was done by," old Jarvis said craftily.

"Precisely," Gracey said. He stopped. "No. In a manner of speaking... Mr. Jarvis, sir, I think that that remark was uncalled for."

Old Jarvis ignored his hurt expression. "I could think that there might be some lack of potency in Mrs. Gregg's amorous

advances," he hinted to Carver. "The adjustment cannot be all one-sided."

Carver blinked. "No," he said. "Very true, very true. My client did refer to Mr. Heldsworth as a hulking ape."

Gracey seized the statement. "There, you see, my lord? A hulking ape, truly descriptive of a male, and a voiced opinion of acute distaste for my client."

"There are female apes as well," Old Jarvis said tartly, "and I believe our colleague, Mr. Borcross, made the point that even the most masculine men have female hormones, and that the most feminine women have male hormones."

"To a degree," Gracey said. "In Mr. Heldsworth's case, from as far back as he can remember, he has been conscious of somehow not 'fitting.' He..."

"Your Mr. Heldsworth still produces female hormones, does he not?" old Jarvis persisted. "He has female hormones in his makeup, much as all males have female hormones in their makeup?"

"Ah, well, yes. But Mr. Heldsworth's count is very low. His system is overwhelmingly..."

"Yes, yes," old Jarvis was curt, "but just exactly how much of Mrs. Gregg is male? You have made it quite clear with your postulations upon physiology that we are not to believe the evidence of our eyes. Apparently we cannot tell just by looking whether a man is really a man or a woman. The normal criterion of unmistakable physical attributes is no longer valid, correct?"

"Commonly a useful guide," Gracey said carefully, "physical attributes are, in the main, reliable indications. However, in a percentage of cases..."

"Bah!" old Jarvis said in disgust. He turned to Adam Borcross. "Mr. Borcross, you have stated that Mr. Gregg's change-over was made so he could better conceal his identity for a short while. The intention was not to effect a permanent change, right?"

"Ah, that is so. At the time, he was very insistent..."

"Yes, quite. And Mrs. Gregg, if she underwent treatment, could be fully restored to her proper female form?"

"I object, my lord," Gracey deprecated. "There is no desire by either party to resume a sex to which they have never been suited."

"Poppycock," old Jarvis fluted. "The unnatural treatment by hormones has upset their mental activities. Restored to

their God-given shapes they would be what they properly are, Mr. and Mrs. Gregg."

"They are Mr. and Mrs. Heldsworth," Gracey's voice rose, "and that fact is indisputable!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, control yourselves," Judge Forsett said. His tone did not carry its customary ring of authority, though. He passed a hand across his eyes. He was still struggling to imagine Mrs. Heldsworth as the father of Gayel Olover's child.

Gracey turned to him. "My lord, this is fundamentally a divorce case. When all is said and done, the real issue is that one jealously possessive, but frigid female is causing her husband great mental anguish and suffering."

"My client is neither jealous nor possessive," Carver protested. "She is sweet, and kind, and gentle. She just will not be bullied, my lord. After all, she is approaching that time of life when a woman needs to be shown a little thought..."

"Along with mental cruelty there is physical cruelty, my lord. As Mrs. Heldsworth is a mistress of karate, judo, and many other rough forms of aggressive expression, my lord, she is, in fact, very difficult to live with," Gracey said.

"Mrs. Heldsworth knows how to defend herself," Carver replied. "Is this bad? Every woman should have such knowledge. I can truly say that Mrs. Heldsworth would not employ her defensive skill unless she was extremely provoked."

"Mr. Heldsworth has behaved in an exemplary manner at all times," Gracey answered. "It is he who has been provoked. Conciliatory at all times, he has been repudiated as a husband. His wife is incapable of running the household, and makes no provision for his welfare and comfort. Much of the time his wife is not even at home."

"Mrs. Heldsworth is a very busy woman," Carver said. "She is doing important work for the government, and we feel that at this time, when she is under great strain, it is extremely unfair that she should be asked to bear the additional burden of a divorce action."

"She cannot get a divorce as Mr. Heldsworth," old Jarvis said stubbornly. "They were married as Mr. and Mrs. Gregg, and it is as Mr. and Mrs. Gregg that they must seek a divorce. Anything else would be misrepresentation."

"There must be some question as to whether they are legally married at all. For convenience I can accept that the couple *are* married," Gracey said generously, "for they are

still the same two people. A legal decision here will settle the matter, and also decide who is to have custody of the children."

"Children need the care and protection that only a woman can give," Carver said. "Mrs. Heldsworth's main reason for wishing to save her marriage is to save her children from the fate of a broken home."

"Here, my lord, I would like to say that, owing to Mrs. Heldsworth's misconduct, the custody of the children should go to Mr. Heldsworth," Gracey observed. "They are his children, after all, and he feels that he is best fitted to give them the love and care which they need."

"Misconduct has not been proved!" Carver disclaimed. "The affair suggested between Miss Olover and my client can in no way be decisively proved."

"I was not referring to Miss Olover," Gracey said smugly. "I..."

Dimattio spoke up. "Circumstantial evidence should be sufficient, my lord. I can produce evidence that will reveal that Mr. Gregg deceived my client in the most painful way that a man can deceive a woman."

"An impossibility, my lord," Carver deposed. "Mrs. Heldsworth at that time..."

Judge Forsett was holding his head in his hands. "Tell me, Mr... ah, Dimattio, what... what does your client hope to gain from this action? She cannot be hoping to marry Mrs. Heldsworth, can she?"

"My lord, my client is a young lady of rare principle. Her desire is to expose Mr. Gregg for what he is, a liar and a cheat and a seducer."

Carver's eyes popped. "That's vindictive slander, my lord!"

"My client feels," Dimattio continued, "that it would be a grave disservice not to warn other young women against the cruel selfishness of this man, and to reveal him as a shallow libertine."

"Vicious, my lord," Carver hissed. "Vindictive. This is nothing but spite, my lord."

"A degree of justifiable vengeance is admitted, my lord," Dimattio said calmly. "My client has been treated heartlessly and cannot be expected to be overly charitable, especially when Mr. Gregg 'temporarily' became a woman, and then refused to resume his male capacity."

"Feminine spite," Carver said, "nothing but feminine spite."

Gracey moved in. "The character of Mrs. Heldsworth is not of the best, my lord. Enough has been said to clearly support a request for a formal decree. It is only right that Mr. Heldsworth should be free to seek a... a better home life for himself and for his children."

"At the Brastmanston County seat in Cholmesdowne, I suppose?" old Jarvis said acidly. "If that is Mrs. Gregg's hope then she is wasting her time. The viscountcy is a birthright, a *birthright*, Mr. Gracey."

"Gentlemen, don't start that again, please," Judge Forsett pleaded. "It... it..." His eye caught the courtroom clock. "It's four o'clock." He banged his gavel several times. "Case is adjourned," he said. "Case is adjourned till tomorrow morning, ten o'clock."

The judge stood up abruptly, clutched his few notes and, with almost indecent haste, brought the session to a close.

The judge's hands beat the mattress. The courtroom had been bad enough, but the limitations of his brain box had been worse.

A thought ricocheted from inside his skull to travel endlessly as another pinged in a different direction, followed by another, followed by another, followed by another.

Peeyow. Heldsworth versus Heldsworth. Were they legally married? If not, when not? No previous legal definition. Marriage had not been formally dissolved. Custody of the children, zing, whose children were they? Were they Gregg's or Heldsworth's. If Heldsworth's, how would that affect the viscountcy even if their father failed to gain the inheritance personally? Their father? Tee-yoing. How male was the maternal father? How female was the paternal mother? Was there really no real difference between the sexes? Wasn't that taking equality a bit too far?

Kapow. How to reconcile the child of a willful young socialite female with Mrs. Heldsworth? Was the child a Heldsworth or a Gregg? If the child was a Gregg, then the misconduct was misconduct by Mr. Gregg. Which brought the action back to Gregg versus Gregg. Spang. This would ensure that the Gregg-Olover child would have no possible claim to the Brastmanston estate. But the Gregg-Heldsworth children would be robbed also. Was a female Heldsworth genetically

less relevant than a male? Biologically no. But then what happens to the established custom of male succession?

Ting-aaah. If the sexes could be changed with such ease, an early stand had to be taken to curb irresponsible changeovers. This was an early stand.

The judge shivered.

Zow. What constituted an irresponsible changeover? To allow the case to pass as Heldsworth versus Heldsworth would be to open the floodgates to matrimonial chaos. Yet forms of hormone treatment were already being widely employed. Where did medical advisability end and personal desire begin?

Kerzooee. Freedom of choice. Improved technique. Bound to come. Pressure and force. Altered at birth. Before birth. Succession. More men. Women are envious, aren't they? Men to women profitable. System shot. Gregg versus Heldsworth untenable. Man to man marriage was illegal, not recognized, unacceptable, could not legitimately exist. Woman to woman likewise. But how many couples exchange medical reports? And how could borderline cases be defined? What is the positive identification of male if not the apparent physical characteristics? What use physical characteristics in law when these could be so readily altered?

Tszing. Mr. Heldsworth had obviously been *Mrs.* Gregg. She had had three children. And *Mr.* Gregg had been the father. Their sex change had not been legally registered, the couple had not remarried under the Heldsworth name. Therefore, they were still legally Mr. and Mrs. Gregg. Or Mr. Heldsworth and Miss Gregg. Which would make their children illegitimate.

I'm too old, the judge thought wretchedly.

Spreeow. But they could be proven Mr. and Mrs. Gregg when they first married. Couldn't they? The children, then, were Gregg's. But their mother was now Mr. Heldsworth. Mr. Heldsworth could possibly claim the viscounty. But her children, as Gregg's, could not.

Zippeeeee. Mr. Gregg became female for occupational reasons. The marriage became null and void right then. But whose, then, were the children? Were they Mrs. Gregg's or Mrs. Heldsworth's?

Pingpow. The judge licked his lips and gasped for air. Great areas of civil law were threatened. "I leave everything to my nephew, Archibald Nunally Gregg" for instance. Just

try to prove that Mrs. Archibald Nunally Heldsworth was the nephew in question.

It was so easy to imagine hypothetical cases. Supposing a man put his business in his wife's name and then she became her husband? Or suppose a wife deserted her husband and married Miss Violet Green?

Sweat rolled off the judge, and he tore open his pajama jacket. He whimpered.

Teeyooo. The Gregg marriage had obviously broken down. Or was it the Heldsworth marriage? The Heldsworths had only been married for a year, if they had been married at all. This was too short a period to qualify for divorce petitioning. Gregg versus Gregg then. Back to the start again. Spooeee. Who gets the children? Mother? Who is mother? Mr. Heldsworth? And what if Gracey or Carver asks for alimony?

I should have retired.

Dangsping. Put the kids in the care of the Chancery Division. But the problem must be solved. The effect on crime, for example. Three weeks and murdered woman still unidentified. Of course not, if she was a man... This kind of thing: "... his previous record, my lord. As Fanny Wills, three months for shoplifting. As Frank Wilson, six months for burglary. As Fanny Wilcox, three months for soliciting. As Frank Wilmore, two years for housebreaking, and as Fanny Willing, twelve months for her part in a mugging racket." "And what is his real name?" "Gertrude Fusbaum, my lord."

Buboyoying. The judge writhed and moaned. What was that controversy a few years ago about masculine female athletes?

Gah! Mrs. Gregg does not want to change back. Mr. Gregg does not want a divorce. Why? The children are important. Poor, poor children. "You smell nice, Mummy." "It's after-shave lotion, honey." "Where's Daddy gone, Mummy?" "She's gone to the beauty parlor, honey, for a rinse and set."

Aaaaaah! The judge began to twitch all over.

Tackoweee. Give Mr. Heldsworth a divorce and let Mr. Gregg stay married. Turn Miss Olover into a man and let her marry Mrs. Heldsworth. Judo, karate, Yoga. Mr. Gregg is a Catholic? Mental cruelty not allowable. Deprivation not allowable. Physical cruelty, yes. But Mrs. Heldsworth beats up Mr. Heldsworth? To Olover and Mrs. Heldsworth, and Heldsworth versus Gregg, and the Viscount Brastmanston, and the children, ("Why do you pluck your eyebrows, Daddy?"), and

hormones, and males are partly females, and rat embryos, and co-ed prisons, and Mr. Olover versus Miss Gregg, and rat embryos, (again?), and Arabs, and doctors, and harems, and new millions of self-made girls dodging the draft, and who can tell? and "Aren't your arms hairy, Mummy?" and divorce actions, and Mrs. Gregg and adultery, or Miss Heldsworth and infidelity, or Mrs. Gregg and Mr. Olover, and kazzing, speewee, spingeeooo, zooowoo, sprow, zoyoying, doowowee, stangoeee, pingzing, deesroocowangarooooee, KAPOW!

"What?! What?! What?!"

"Sir! Sir! Are you all right, sir?"

"What?" The judge looked at Sorff. "What?"

"Sir, please, sir! Take it easy, sir. Please take it easy!"

The judge became aware that he was on his feet. He also became aware that Sorff was gripping his arms with painful tenacity. "Uh? What is it, Sorff? Why have you put the light on?"

"Oh, sir, you were screaming, sir," the worried Sorff said. "How do you feel now, sir? Please say you feel all right, sir."

"Screaming? Me? Surely not, Sorff!"

"Sir, you've been under a strain. Why not take the pills Dr. Matthews left, sir? I'll call Dr. Matthews right away."

The judge shook his arms to free himself of Sorff's clutch. "Let go of me, Sorff," he said, with a touch of his old asperity. "I'm perfectly all right."

Sorff was reluctant to relinquish his hold. "Are you sure, sir?" There was unbelief in his voice. "Won't you sit down, sir? I'll get you a brandy and soda. I'll..."

"Let go, Sorff," the judge said impatiently. "I'm all right. I'm quite all right. I'm not going to fall over, man."

"Are you sure, sir? I mean..."

"Sorff, I'm all right I tell you." He jerked himself free and he pulled his pajama coat together. He squinted at his man. "Are you sure you are feeling well yourself, Sorff?"

"What, sir? Me, sir? I... I feel fine, sir."

"Hm-m-m. You don't look it," the judge said skeptically. "Running around at night without a dressing gown, switching lights on, hanging on to people."

"But...but you were screaming, sir! And when I came in..."

"Screaming? Me? Nonsense!" The judge walked to the bureau to collect his teeth and thereby improve his articulation.

He turned back to Sorff. "You must have been dreaming yourself, Sorff. I may have cried out in my sleep," he admitted, "but then a lot of people do."

"But, sir..."

"Exaggeration, Sorff. Nighttime. Often happens."

"But after what happened this afternoon, sir..."

"What? This afternoon? Oh, you mean when I was fooling with the gun? Surely you didn't take that seriously, Sorff?"

"I... Well, sir," Sorff was nonplussed. "I thought..."

"Come now, Sorff, do you really think that I'm the type to shoot myself? Of course not. I was, ah, just privately reconstructing the...the Fuller Case. Ha." The judge was pleased with this. "Yes, the Fuller Case."

He took Sorff by the arm and began to walk him to the door. "Your trouble is that you're over-imaginative, Sorff. Now go to bed, there's a good fellow, and try to get some sleep. We have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow."

"I...I..." Sorff protested.

"You'll be all right now," the judge said pleasantly. "Good night, Sorff."

And Sorff found himself gazing blankly at a closed bedroom door.

The accidental self-induced abreaction had cleared Judge Forsett's mind. He popped his dentures back into their glass, and he smiled as he climbed back into bed and recomposed himself to slumber. He had the answer, and the answer was simple.

Judge Forsett surveyed the four advocates who formed a half-circle before him.

"Mr. Borcross is absent, I see. Has he sent a message?"

"No, my lord," old Jarvis said.

"Hm-m-m. Well I feel disinclined to hold up the proceedings. He'll have to catch up when he gets here."

Judge Forsett looked them over. "Gentlemen, I have reached a decision." *What younger man, he thought, would have had the knowledge, the experience, the intuitive feel for equity? What other man would have so quickly grasped the essentials? That's why I was chosen for the job. I must have been mad to even have thought of retiring.*

"Gentlemen, this peculiar case has many distressing features. The case, in fact, is unprecedented, and is a good example of what can happen when people take the law into

their own hands, and carelessly fail to study beforehand the moral, ethical and material implications of a novel scientific venture."

The judge took a sip of water. He was in no hurry. The lawyers waited respectfully.

"These sex changes were carried out without legal authority. If the judiciary was consulted at all, it was only in the most superficial manner, and the formality of the agreement of the parties directly concerned is not sufficient to legally warrant the act. Before any such thing as drastic as a deliberate sex change can be authorized, *all* parties likely to be concerned, must be made aware, be made fully cognizant of the proposed, ah, change, and be allowed to dispute, and to arrange protective legal modifications."

Dimattio raised a finger. "Uh, my lord, how much, uh, indirectly do you mean by indirectly?"

"Huh?" The judge's expression held disapproval of the interruption. "By indirectly I mean indirectly. Anyway indirectly. Vision. There must be vision. We cannot have people changing sex on a whim. What if a great many women change into men? What will happen to those industries that cater to women, hey? Lipsticks and . . . and high heels, and such. Have you thought of that, hey? Ha. Same with men. Razor blades. Indirectly. Can't have it. The law is to protect the community as a whole, and the individual in particular . . ."

The judge held up his hand to forestall protest. "A person has a right to change sex, but not for ulterior motives, and not without first giving public notice of intention, and certainly not without first satisfactorily attending to all details that will make such a transition legally acceptable. It is clear that such changes are, at the same time, both a private and a public matter."

"But in this case, my lord," Gracey said, "we . . ."

Judge Forsett silenced him with a gesture. "I haven't finished."

For a moment Gracey hung, then he closed his mouth and subsided.

"Ahumph." The judge sniffed. "In this case, clearly, little forethought was applied. What forethought *was* applied was at best of a doubtful nature. Small consideration was given to the children of the marriage, and their confusion could be very damaging, their young minds gravely disturbed by the breakup of their home, and additionally so by the condition

of their parents at this breakup. Their sense of security will be shattered."

The judge shook his head. "This fact alone points up the necessity for a strict control to be placed upon this artificially created phenomenon.

"The parents in their gross self-interest have devised a solution that is in no wise satisfactory, and this facet alone is enough to reveal the criminally short-sighted attitude of those involved in the undertaking."

The judge settled himself more comfortably in his seat. He felt on top of the job. With a faint air of challenge, he said, "This is a preliminary closed hearing. I have heard enough evidence to conclude beyond doubt that the two principals in the case have, by their actions, been extremely neglectful of their familial responsibilities, and have shown great disregard for their duty to the community and to society as a whole.

"In my report to the Judicial Council I will strongly urge that their form of medical manipulation come under immediate notice for investigation, with a view that necessary legislation may be promptly instigated. And I will strongly recommend that Mr. and Mrs. Heldsworth, be converted back to Mr. and Mrs. Gregg with the greatest possible facility."

Old Jarvis cracked a smile and Dimattio looked pleased. Carver stood stricken, and Gracey was the first to get his breath back. "But . . . but, my lord, you can't do that. You can't change them now!"

Judge Forsett frowned. "And why not, Mr. Gracey?" He raised his eyebrows. "I am under the impression that changing from one sex to another presents only technical difficulty. That is right, isn't it?"

"Er, yes, my lord," Gracey owned, "but . . ."

"Well, then, what's the problem?"

"It's . . . er . . . Mr. Gregg, my lord."

"Mr. Gregg? What about Mr. Gregg?"

"We cannot change him back, my lord."

Teeeshooo. "Can't change him back? Why can't you change him back? I was given most clearly to understand . . ."

"Er, yes, my lord, but you see," Mr. Gracey was uncommonly diffident, "there's the adultery charge, my lord. The grounds of the adultery by Mrs. Heldsworth."

"With the Olover woman? So? We've had all that."

"No, my lord," Gracey said quickly. "What I am endeavoring to draw to your lordship's attention is the fact that,

during the course of his employment, Mr. Gregg found it necessary to get more than a little familiar with a certain influentially placed Russian gentleman, my lord."

"Good heavens! You don't mean that...?"

"Exactly, my lord."

Tazingoowow.

"I object, my lord," Carver said indignantly. "The allegation is totally without foundation. Mrs. Heldsworth's, ah, delicate condition is, without a doubt, due entirely to Mr. Heldsworth..."

"The important point is that his condition is delicate," the judge said doggedly. "This is indisputably so?"

"Yes, my lord."

"He... can not be... changed... back... then?"

"Not just yet, my lord."

Judge Forsett suddenly felt like bursting into tears. He gripped his gavel and rested his forehead upon his free palm.

A Gregg, a Heldsworth, or a Tovarich? What nationality would it be? Would it be a boy or a girl? Would a child ever be a boy or a girl again? Would the child be registered as Heldsworth? But Mr. and Mrs. Heldsworth were not officially married. And Mr. Gregg could not be registered as the child's mother. Nor as the child's father.

What about Russian inheritance? Did Russians have inheritance? Would the Russian want to take his child back to Russia? No, no, no. As an unmarried mother, Miss Gregg was allowed to keep her child.

Now let's get this straight. The Gregg marriage was automatically nullified as soon as Mr. Gregg became Miss Gregg. Any court of law would have invalidated such a union. At this stage Mrs. Gregg would undoubtedly have won custody of the children. But Mr. Gregg, in his perversity, refused to change back and, rather than have her children maternally oversupplied, Mrs. Gregg had herself changed into a man. Her motives might be suspect, but it was Mr. Gregg who...

"My lord," Carver said, seeking the judge's attention.

Judge Forsett raised his head only long enough to say, "Shut up, I'm thinking." And down went his head again.

With Mrs. Gregg as Mrs. Gregg, she could win a divorce with comparative ease. But as a woman, could she provide for her children? Could she claim maintenance, or alimony, from Miss Gregg? Miss Gregg, who was herself about to become a mother? And what about Miss Olover's entitlement?

Could Mrs. Gregg better provide for her children if she was Mr. Heldsworth?

Just how strong would her claim to the Brastmanston estate be? Weak. No. He should revert to being Mrs. Gregg. For the sake of her children. Overlook her change. Make the case more straightforward.

Mr. Gregg? The judge clenched his teeth. As the initiator of the whole sequence, Mr. Gregg was primarily answerable for fathering the complete mess. Fathering? Judge Forsett snorted. Definitely and positively the legal position would have to be elaborated and clarified and entered into the statutes.

Judge Forsett lifted his head. "Ah."

Darkly he gazed at the quartet. "Well, Mr. Gracey, it is going to be my strong recommendation that Mr. Heldsworth be changed back to Mrs. Gregg at the earliest possible time." He fixed Gracey with a forbidding eye. "There is no paternity carelessness on your client's side, I trust?"

"Oh, no, my lord, but..."

"Good," Judge Forsett cut him short. "Changed back to Mrs. Gregg she may readily obtain a divorce from the female Mr. Gregg and retain custody of the children. Thereafter, if she wishes to become a man, she may apply through legal channels, which by then I should imagine will contain specific qualifications upon the subject."

"But, my lord, my client is in love..."

"You have assured me that your client's relationship, if any, is an honorable one."

"Yes, my lord, but..."

"Then make sure that it stays that way. To the moment we have been dealing with matters as yet not adequately covered by the law, but now, if your client deliberately attempts to become a male parent, she, or rather he, can be charged with a misdemeanor. This case is confused enough already."

There was sound of altercation outside the courtroom door, which was presently opened by a guard to admit Adam Borcoss.

Borcoss strode forward to confront the judge.

"I'm sorry to be late, my lord," the Borcoss bass was subdued, "but certain events have taken place relevant to this case and I was unavoidably delayed."

"Hm-m-m." Judge Forsett viewed him with wary calcu-

lation. "What is it this time?" he asked, inwardly bracing himself.

"Its, ah, Mr. Gregg, my lord. He... ah... In the course of his duties he made an error, my lord."

"Another one?"

"A serious one," Borcross said gravely. "Last night he, ah," Borcross sighed, "he was shot, my lord."

"Shot?"

"Mortally, my lord."

Judge Forsett sat back. "Oh."

Carver was stunned. "My client? My client dead?"

"Ah," Judge Forsett said.

"An occupational hazard, my lord," Borcross said fatalistically. "In an affair of some delicacy..." He shrugged.

Judge Forsett nodded. "I understand." He pondered, then frowned. "I must admit that my opinion of Mr. Gregg has not been high, but that he has forfeited his life presumably in the service of his country... I take it that his identity was discovered and he was summarily disposed of by the other side?"

Borcross coughed. "Ah, not exactly, my lord. The, ah, Russian personage involved has a wife, a very jealous woman apparently, and she, ah, appeared on the scene rather unexpectedly, my lord."

"Oh."

"It was what the French call a 'crime passionel,' my lord," Borcross further explained, "not a factor normally given great consideration by Mr. Gregg's, ah, fraternity."

"No." Judge Forsett discarded a mitigating sadness he had begun to feel for a brave person who had given his/her life in the line of duty.

"Well, then." The judge paused for a moment. "This reveals that Mr. Gregg, despite his chosen profession, was still a person and could not, with impunity, flout the standards and mores of society. Naturally I am sorry that he has been killed, but it must be admitted that his conduct has been such as to rob the occurrence of much of its surprise value."

"My lord, how will this affect my client now?" Gracey asked.

"Hm-m-m? Well, your client will become a widow just as soon as she resumes her female condition. Obviously she cannot be the widower of Mr. Gregg and, from the way Mr.

Borcross speaks, I am sure that in government circles he is still referred to as Mr. Gregg. Am I correct?"

"Yes, my lord," Borcross said.

"With the scant forethought that the Greggs have shown, I can suppose that they may have been equally careless in correcting their insurance commitments, and other compensation and testatory arrangements. What do you think, Mr. Gracey?"

Mr. Gracey was thinking fast. "I cannot say, my lord. This is a contingency..."

"Mrs. Heldsworth made out a new will only two months ago," Carver announced baldly. "It was made in favor of Miss Gayel Olover."

"What?" Gracey and Judge Forsett cried together. Gracey shook his head and supplicated heaven. The judge clapped his hands to his temples and sank moaning onto his bench.

"No, no, no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I'm too old." The judge rested blankly for a full two minutes.

At last the judge's hands fell, and very tiredly he raised his eyes. "Not content with being troublesome in life, Mr. Gregg has to be equally troublesome in death. The legality of his will, made in the name of Mrs. Heldsworth, is questionable. The Heldsworth marriage is not the Gregg marriage. To make any claim at all, Mrs. Gregg will have to be Mrs. Gregg. The soundness of the testator's mind might well be taken into consideration."

The judge scratched an eyebrow. "Miss, ah, Olover, perhaps, may be privately compensated, Mr.... ah..."

"Dimattio, my lord. Some suitable arrangement could possibly be made, my lord."

"And, ah, Mr. Borcross, the funeral arrangements... I don't suppose... that is, will Mr. Gregg be interred as Mr. Gregg?"

Borcross pursed his lips. "I dare say that such accommodation could be devised, my lord. There are factors, ah..."

The judge switched his focus to the younger trio. "Mr. Carver, I suggest that you and Mr.... ah... Dimattio, and Mr. Gracey, all get together and thrash the will business out between you. Remember your client's wishes, Mr. Carver, but remember that with Mr. Gregg buried as Mr. Gregg, the will of Mrs. Heldsworth will become meaningless. The onus will be upon you to provide a degree of equity between Mr. Gracey and Mr. Dimattio."

"But, my lord, that cannot be acceptable," Carver protested. "My client's wishes..."

"Your client's wishes threaten to demolish our whole legal system," Judge Forsett said, with a return to his older acidity, "and, under the circumstances, I feel we are justified in considering his wishes just about as much as he considered ours."

"My lord," Borcoas said, "there is a matter that perhaps has escaped your lordship's notice? I, ah, am referring, of course, to the killing of, ah, Mr. Gregg." Apologetically he elucidated, "A Mrs. Inara Roskalnya is, at this moment, being held on a charge of murdering Mrs. Heldsworth."

The judge licked his lips. He stared at Borcoas. "The affair cannot be hushed up, eh? No, no, of course not. It would be in the Press already, wouldn't it? Yes. Yes, it would. A civil matter."

"It would be extremely difficult at this late stage, my lord."

"Yes. So Mr. Gregg is officially on the record as a woman, hey? Yes, he would be. The morgue, postmortem, how else?"

The hunted light in the judge's eye turned to one of cunning. "But he's not really Mrs. Heldsworth, not legally. At best he is Miss Gregg. In the family way. Mistress of a Russian diplomat. Leave Heldsworth out of it. Get Mrs. Gregg back to Mrs. Gregg. Husband missing in action, believed killed. How's that?"

"But what about my client, Miss Olover?" Dimattio objected.

"Her inamorato dies on active service. Leaves her a token of his regard through Mr. Carver. What more can she want? What more can she hope to get?"

"My lord," Carver said unhappily, "my client expressly desired..."

"I don't give a damn what your client expressly desired. He was in no position to expressly desire anything. Seeking no truly authoritative sanction, he still is, in the legal sense, Mr. Gregg." He had another thought, puppow. "There will be no need to call upon Mrs. Gregg as a witness in the, ah, the trial of Mr., ah, Miss Gregg's killer, will there?"

"I don't think so, my lord," Borcoas said.

"He can be the mysterious Miss Gregg, can't she? There is no need to confuse the issue with extraneous facts, is there?"

"It could perhaps be dealt with in that way, my lord,"

Borcoss assented. "That side may not need to be touched upon at all."

"Good, good, good. A death certificate then for Mr. Gregg, and an amicable arrangement over his will. I'm sure that the parties concerned have no relish for publicity, eh, Mr. Gracey? No... Good. All that remains then is for Mrs. Gregg to again physically represent a wife and a mother. Mr. Borcoss, you will assist Mr. Gracey in this matter?"

"If you wish, my lord."

"I do wish," Judge Forsett said fervently, and he took out a handkerchief to dab the sweat from his brow.

The judge scanned their faces. "That is all then, gentlemen. There are no other points that you would like to raise?" He paused a fearful moment, his eyes flickering from one to another of them. "Good," he said.

Thankfully he banged his bench with the gavel. "This case is conditionally closed, then." He stood, and swayed a little. "I shall submit my report to the Full Council, and there is no doubt that they will take steps to ensure that the likes of this case will never occur again. Good day, gentlemen."

Judge Forsett gathered his gown about him and stepped down from his bench to make an exit where only slight woblings gave the lie to his hardly preserved composure.

"Well, John, I must say you're looking remarkably well. How was the fishing?"

"Quite good, quite good," Judge John Baldwin Forsett replied. "Caught a fourteen-pounder and a twelve, and a few smaller."

"Did you now? Sounds like the wrist has not lost its cunning, eh? Water or soda?"

"Ah, water, please. Just a little."

The Lord Chief Justice handed Judge Forsett his glass. "I must say, John, how pleased we all were with your report. Very pertinent and concise. On the basis of your observations, we have been able to outline broad protective measures, and the Bill is expected to pass through Parliament with very little trouble."

Judge Forsett sipped. "Ah," he said.

"We're getting more and more of this kind of thing lately," the Lord Chief Justice continued. "The law is lagging behind, has been slow to get off the mark." He rolled his glass in his hands. "The Gregg Case was an experiment. It was an at-

tempt to speed up the anticipation of the law. And thanks to you, John, it worked out very well."

"Oh," Judge Forsett said.

"You have a good brain, John. You have experience, grasp, and common sense. You are capable of assessing in an hour or two what could take tedious days, weeks, or even months, through the normal processes of litigation."

"Yes, I see, but..."

"We are thinking of creating a Special Cases Adjudicator, John," the Lord Chief Justice went on blandly, "someone with the insight and the know-how to handle the increasing traffic in cases arising from unprecedented scientific development."

"But..."

"John, you're an obvious choice." It would seem incongruous for a fifty-one-year-old to be fatherly in his manner toward a seventy-seven-year-old, but the Lord Chief Justice managed it very well. "Now, you have intimated a wish to retire. This I can't bring myself to believe. Surely not, John? The law is your life. You are fit and healthy, and the law needs you."

"I am too old," Judge Forsett said, but weakening.

"Nonsense!" the Lord Chief Justice said. "You're letting yourself be a victim to the old idea of automatic redundancy. With you an age limit does not apply."

"I am not sure," Judge Forsett demurred. "I am slower..."

"John, you must be joking," the Lord Chief Justice said, refusing to take him seriously. "You have perception and knowledge. Surely you're not going to let these talents go to waste? You're not going to pretend you'd prefer to rusticate in some backwoods retreat, are you?"

"Well, no, I..."

"Of course not. Face it, John, you're not the type. You enjoy your work too much, and this Special Cases Adjudicator is a position just made for you."

"Well, if you really think I..."

"The best man. The only man. Here, let me top up your glass." *Clink, gug.* "The post is yours, John. You'll get a forty percent hike in salary, and that should let you afford a decent housekeeper, eh? Is that enough water?"

"Oh, yes. Plenty."

"Good. Now there's an odd case we'd like you to handle, probate. Right up your street. Set down for next Wednesday. Involves the use of a new drug called 'Senicil'..."

"I notice that my pistol is no longer in the drawer, Sorff."

Sorff helped Judge Forsett on with his robe. "Ah, no, sir. I've, ah, put it away for safekeeping, sir. I thought if we ever had burglars..."

"Hm-m-m." The judge turned to look at him. "Yes, I see." He nodded. "Very wise, Sorff."

The judge pulled back his thin shoulders. "However, I am resigning from the pistol club. Hand's not as steady as it was. You, ah...you may wrap the weapon and present it to the club, Sorff. On my behalf. Get Miss Anderson to type up a suitable letter. Ah, we don't want useless armaments cluttering up our working space, do we?"

"Very true, sir, very true," Sorff said gladly.

"Yes." The judge frowned. "Ha." He pulled his gown closer to him. "Senicil, eh?" he muttered. "Right, then," and he walked firmly to the door, "I'd better go and find out what it's all about..."

RIDING THE TORCH by Norman Spinrad

To drift, rudderless, over an uncharted sea is not anyone's idea of fun. Who would not want a chart in order to know what there is to steer for, and a rudder with which to steer? And if these are not forthcoming, would it not be better than nothing to pretend that there is a chart and a rudder, or to invent a chart and a rudder, or even to *become* a chart and a rudder? To know, despite all the evidence, that a chart and a rudder somehow exist may somehow assure that they do. At least, people think it a virtue, in such a case, to believe against the evidence. It is called FAITH.

—Isaac Asimov

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RIDING THE TORCH

by Norman Spinrad

I

Flashing rainbows from his skintight mirror suit, flourishing a swirl of black cape, Jofe D'mahl burst through the shimmer screen that formed the shipside wall of his grand salon to the opening bars of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. The shimmer rippled through the spectrum as his flesh passed through it, visually announcing his presence with quicksilver strobes of dopplering light. Heads turned, bodies froze, and the party stopped for a good long beat as he greeted his guests with an ironic half-bow. The party resumed its rhythm as he walked across the misty floor toward a floating tray of flashers. He had made his entrance.

D'mahl selected a purple sphere, popped the flasher into his mouth, and bit through an exquisite brittle sponginess into an overwhelming surge of velvet, a gustatory orgasm. A first collection by one Lina Wolder, Jiz had said, and as usual she had picked a winner. He tapped the name into his memory banks, keying it to the sensorium track of the last ten seconds, and filed it in his current party listing. Yes indeed, a rising star to remember.

Tapping the floater to follow him, he strode through the knee-high multicolored fog, nodding, turning, bestowing glances of his deep green eyes, savoring the ambience he had brought into being.

D'mahl had wheedled Hiro Korakin himself into designing the grand salon as his interpretation of D'mahl's own personality. Korakin had hung an immense semicircular slab of simmed emerald out from the hull of the ship itself and had blistered his huge balcony in transparent plex, giving D'mahl's guests a breathtaking and uncompromising view of humanity's universe. As *Excelsior* was near the center of the Trek, the great concourse of ships tiaraed the salon's horizon line, a triumphant jeweled city of coruscating light. Ten kilometers bow-ward, the hydrogen interface was an auroral skin stretched across the unseemly nakedness of interstellar space.

But to look over the edge of the balcony, down the sleek and brilliantly lit precipice of *Excelsior's* cylindrical hull, was to be confronted by a vista that sucked slobbering at the soul: the bottomless interstellar abyss, an infinite black pit in which the myriad stars were but iridescent motes of unimportant dust, a nothingness that went on forever in space and time. At some indefinable point down there in the blackness, the invisible output of *Excelsior's* torch merged with those of two thousand and thirty-nine other ships to form an ethereal comet's tail of all-but-invisible purplish fire that dwindled off into a frail thread which seemed to go on forever down into the abyss: the wake of the Trek, reeling backward in space and time for hundreds of light-years and nearly ten centuries, a visible track that the eye might seemingly follow backward through the ages to the lost garden, Earth.

Jofe D'mahl knew full well that many of his guests found this prime reality visualization of their basic existential position unsettling, frightening, perhaps even in bad taste. But that was *their* problem; D'mahl himself found the view bracing, which, of course, justifiably elevated his own already high opinion of himself. Korakin wasn't considered the best psychetect on the Trek for nothing.

But D'mahl himself had decorated the salon, with the inevitable assistance of Jiz Rumoku. On the translucent emerald floor he had planted a tinkling forest of ruby, sapphire, diamond, and amethyst trees—cunningly detailed sims of the ancient life-forms that waved flashing crystal leaves with

every subtle current of air. He had topped off the effect with the scented fog that picked up blue, red, and lavender tints from the internally incandescent trees, and customarily kept the gravity at .8 gs to sync with the faerie mood. To soften the crystal edges, Jiz had gotten him a collection of forty fuzzballs: downy globs in subdued green, brown, mustard, and gray that floated about randomly at floor level until someone sat in them. If Korakin had captured D'mahl's clear-eyed core, Jofe had expressed the neobaroque style of his recent sensoes, and to D'mahl, the combined work of art sang of the paradox that was the Trek. To his guests, it sang of the paradox that was Jofe D'mahl. Egowise, D'mahl himself did not deign to make this distinction.

The guest list was also a work of art in D'mahl's neobaroque style: a constellation of people designed to rub purringly here, jangle like broken glass there, generate cross-fertilization someplace else, keep the old karmic kettle boiling. Jans Ryn was displaying herself as usual to a mixed bag that included *Excelsior's* chief torchtender, two dirt diggers from *Kantuck*, and Tanya Daivis, the velvet asp. A heated discussion between Dalta Reed and Trombleau, the astrophysicist from *Glade*, was drawing another conspicuous crowd. Less conspicuous guests were floating about doing less conspicuous things. The party needed a catalyst to really start torching up lights.

And at 24.00 that catalyst would zap itself right into their sweet little taps—the premiere tapping of Jofe D'mahl's new senso, *Wandering Dutchmen*. D'mahl had carved something prime out of the void, and he knew it.

"—by backbreeding beyond the point of original radiation, and then up the line to the elm—"

"—like a thousand suns, as they said at Alamagordo, Jans, and it's only a bulkhead and a fluxfield away—"

"—how Promethean you must feel—"

"Jof, this nova claims he's isolated a spectral pattern synched to organic life," Dalta called out, momentarily drawing D'mahl into her orbit.

"In a starscan tape?" D'mahl asked dubiously.

"In theory," Trombleau admitted.

"Where've I heard that one before?" D'mahl said, popping another of the Wolder flashers. It wriggled through his teeth, then exploded in a burst of bittersweet that almost immediately faded into a lingering smoky aftertaste. Not bad,

D'mahl thought, dancing away from Trombleau's open mouth before he could get sucked into the argument.

D'mahl flitted through the mists, goosed Arni Simkov, slapped Darius Warner on the behind, came upon a group of guests surrounding John Benina, who had viewpointed the Dutchman. They were trying to pump him about the senso, but John knew that if he blatted before the premiere, his chances of working with Jofe D'mahl again were exactly zip.

"Come on, Jofe, tell us something about *Wandering Dutchmen*," begged a woman wearing a cloud of bright-yellow mist. D'mahl couldn't remember her with his flesh, but didn't bother tapping for it. Instead, he bit into a cubical flasher that atomized at the touch of his teeth, whitening out every synapse in his mouth for a mad micropulse. Feh.

"Two hints," D'mahl said. "John Benina played one of the two major viewpoints, and it's a mythmash."

A great collective groan went up, under cover of which D'mahl ricocheted away in the direction of Jiz Rumoku, who was standing in a green mist with someone he couldn't make out.

Jiz Rumoku was the only person privileged to bring her own guests to D'mahl's parties, and just about the only person not involved in the production who had any idea of what *Wandering Dutchmen* was about. If Jofe D'mahl could be said to have a souler (a dubious assumption), she was it.

She was dressed, as usual, in tomorrow's latest fashion: a pants suit of iridescent, rigid-seeming green-and-purple material, a mosaic of planar geometric forms that approximated the curves of her body like a medieval suit of armor. But the facets of her suit articulated subtly with her tiniest motion—a fantastic insectile effect set off by a tall plumelike crest into which her long black hair had been static-molded.

But D'mahl's attention was drawn to her companion, for he was obviously a voidsucker. He wore nothing but blue briefs and thin brown slippers; there was not a speck of hair on his body, and his bald head was tinted silver. But persona aside, his eyes alone would have instantly marked him: windows of blue plex into an infinite universe of utter blackness confined by some topological legerdemain inside his gleaming skull.

D'mahl tapped the voidsucker's visual image to the banks. "I.D.," he subvoked. The name "Haris Bandoora" appeared in his mind. "Data brief," D'mahl subvoked.

"Haris Bandoora, fifty standard years, currently commanding scoutship Bela-37, returned to Trek 4.987 last Tuesday. Report unavailable at this realtime."

Jiz had certainly come up with something tasty this time, a voidsucker so fresh from the great zilch that the Council of Pilots hadn't yet released his report.

"Welcome back to civilization, such as it is, Commander Bandoora," D'mahl said.

Bandoora turned the vacuum of his eyes on D'mahl. "Such as it is," he said, in a cold clear voice that seemed to sum up, judge, and dismiss all of human history in four dead syllables.

D'mahl looked away from those black pits, looked into Jiz's almond eyes, and they cross-tapped each other's sensoriums for a moment in private greeting. Jofe saw his own mirrored body, felt the warmth it evoked in her. He kissed his lips with Jiz's, tasting the electric smokiness of the flashers he had eaten. As their lips parted, they broke their taps simultaneously.

"What's in that report of yours that the Pilots haven't released to the banks yet, Bandoora?" D'mahl asked conversationally. (How else could you make small talk with a void-sucker?)

Bandoora's thin lips parted in what might have been a smile, or just as easily a grimace of pain. D'mahl sensed that the man's emotional parameters were truly alien to his experience, prime or simmed. He had never paid attention to the voidsuckers before, and he wondered why. There was one beyond senso to be made on the subject!

"They've found a planet," Jiz said. "There's going to be a blanket bulletin at 23.80."

"Drool," D'mahl said, nuancing the word with most of the feelings that this flash stirred up. The voidsuckers were always reporting back with some hot new solar system, turning the Trek for a few months while they high-geed for a telltale peek, then turning the Trek again for the next Ultima Thule just as the flash hit that the last one was the usual slokyard of rock and puke-gas. The voidsuckers had been leading the Trek in a zigzag stagger through space from one vain hope to another for the better part of a millennium; the latest zig was therefore hardly a cosmic flash in Jofe D'mahl's estimation. But it *would* be a three-month wonder at least, and tapping out a blanket bulletin just before the premiere was a prime piece of upstaging, a real boot in the ego. Drool.

"The probabilities look good on this one," Bandoora said.

"They always do, don't they?" D'mahl said snidely. "And it always turns out the same. If there's a rock in the habitable zone, it's got gravity that'd pull your head off, or the atmosphere is a tasty mixture of hydrogen cyanide and fluorine. Bandoora, don't you ever get the feeling that some non-existent cosmic personage is trying to tell you something you don't want to hear?"

Bandoora's inner expression seemed to crinkle behind his impassive flesh. A tic made his lower lip tremble. What did I do *this* time? D'mahl wondered. These voidsuckers must be far beyond along some pretty strange vectors.

Jiz forced a laugh. "The torch Jof is riding is all ego," she said. "He's just singed because the bulletin is going to bleed some H from his premiere. Isn't that right, Jof, you ego-monster, you?"

"Don't knock ego," D'mahl said. "It's all that stands between us and the lamer universe we have the bad taste to be stuck in. Since my opinion of myself is the only thing I know of higher in the karmic pecking order than my own magnificent being, my ego is the only thing I've found worth worshipping. Know what that makes me?"

"Insufferable?" Jiz suggested.

"A human being," D'mahl said. "I'm stuck with it, so I might as well enjoy it."

"A bulletin from the Council of Pilots." The words intruded themselves into D'mahl's mind with a reasonable degree of gentleness, an improvement over the days when the Pilots had felt they had the right to snap you into full sensory fugue on the spot whenever the spirit moved them. "Ten... nine... eight... seven..." D'mahl pulled over a green fuzzball and anchored the floating cloud of particles by planting his posterior in it. Jiz and Bandoora sat down flanking him. "Six... five... four..."

Whichever guests were standing found themselves seats; there was no telling how long one of these bulletins would last. The Pilots have a grossly exaggerated sense of their own importance, D'mahl thought. And what does that make them?

"... three... two... one..."

Human beings.

D'mahl sat on a bench at the focus of a small amphitheater. Tiered around him were two thousand and forty people wearing the archaic blue military tunics dating back to the time

when Ship's Pilot was a paramilitary rank rather than an elective office. D'mahl found the uniformity of dress stultifying and the overhead holo of the day sky of an Earthlike planet banal and oppressive, but then he found most Pilots, with their naïve notion of the Trek's existential position, somewhat simple-minded and more than a little pathetic.

Ryan Nakamura, a white-haired man who had been Chairman of the Council of Pilots longer than anyone cared to remember, walked slowly toward him, clapped him on the shoulder with both hands, and sat down beside him. Nakamura smelled of some noxious perfume designed to sim wisdom-odors of moldy parchment and decayed sweetness. As an artist, D'mahl found the effect competent if painfully obvious; as a citizen, he found it patronizing and offensive.

Nakamura leaned toward him, and as he did, the amphitheater vanished and they sat cozily alone on an abstract surface entirely surrounded by a firmament of tightly packed stars.

"Jofe, Scoutship Bela-37 has returned to the Trek and reported that a solar system containing a potentially habitable planet is located within a light-year and a half of our present position," Nakamura said solemnly.

D'mahl wanted to yawn in the old bore's face, but of course the viewpoint player hunched him intently toward Nakamura instead as the Chairman blatted on. "The Council has voted 1,839 to 201 to alter the vector of the Trek toward this system, designated 997-Beta, pending the report of the telltale."

D'mahl sat midway up in the amphitheater as Nakamura continued formally from a podium on the floor below. "It is our earnest hope that our long trek is at last nearing its successful completion, that in our own lifetimes men will once more stand on the verdant hills of a living planet, with a sky overhead and the smells of living things in our nostrils. We conclude this bulletin with brief excerpts from the report of Haris Bandoora, commander of Bela-37."

Behind the podium, Nakamura faded into Haris Bandoora. "Bela-37 was following a course thirty degrees from the forward vector of the Trek," Bandoora said tonelessly. "Torching at point nine . . ."

D'mahl stood on the bridge of Bela-37—a small round chamber rimmed with impressive-looking gadgetry, domed in somewhat bluish plex to compensate for the doppler shift, but otherwise visually open to the terrifying glory of the deep void.

However, one of the four voidsuckers on the bridge was a woman who easily upstaged the stellar spectacle as far as D'mahl was concerned. She wore briefs and slippers and was totally bald, like the others, and her skull was tinted silver, but her preternaturally conical breasts and shining, tightly muscled flesh made what ordinarily would have been an ugly effect into an abstract paradigm of feminine beauty. Whether the warmth he felt was his alone, or his reaction plus that of the viewpoint player, apparently Bandoora himself, was entirely beside the point.

"Ready to scan and record system 997-Beta," the stunning creature said. D'mahl walked closer to her, wanting to dive into those bottomless voidsucker eyes. Instead, he found his lips saying, with Bandoora's voice: "Display it, Sidi."

Sidi did something to the control panel before her (how archaic!) and the holo of a yellow star about the diameter of a human head appeared in the geometric center of the bridge. D'mahl exchanged tense glances with his crew, somatically felt his expectation rise.

"The planets..." he said.

Five small round particles appeared, rotating in compressed time around the yellow sun.

"The habitable zone..."

A transparent green torus appeared around the holo of 997-Beta. The second planet lay within its boundaries.

There was an audible intake of breath, and D'mahl felt his own body tremble. "The second planet," Bandoora's voice ordered. "At max."

The holo of the star vanished, replaced by a pale, fuzzy holo of the second planet, about four times its diameter. The planet seemed to be mottled with areas of brown, green, blue, yellow, and purple, but the holo was washed out and wavered as if seen through miles of heat-haze.

A neuter voice recited instrument readings. "Estimated gravity 1.2 gs plus or minus ten percent... estimated mean temperature thirty-three degrees centigrade plus or minus six degrees... estimated atmospheric composition: helium, nitrogen, oxygen as major constituents... percentages indeterminate from present data... traces of carbon dioxide, argon, ammonia, water vapor... estimated ratio of liquid area to solid surface 60-40... composition of oceans indeterminate from present data...."

D'mahl felt the tension in his body release itself through his

vocal cords in a wordless shout that merged with the whoops of his companions. He heard his lips say, with Bandoora's voice: "That's the best prospect any scoutship's turned up within my lifetime."

D'mahl was seated in the amphitheater as Bandoora addressed the Council. "A probe was immediately dispatched to 997-Beta-II. Bela-37 will leave within twenty days to monitor the probe data wavefront. We estimate that we will be able to bring back conclusive data within half a standard year."

D'mahl was an abstract viewpoint in black space. A huge hazy holo of 997-Beta-II hovered before him like a ghostly forbidden fruit as the words in his mind announced: "This concludes the bulletin from the Council of Pilots."

Everyone in Jofe D'mahl's grand salon immediately began babbling, gesticulating, milling about excitedly. Head after head turned in the direction of D'mahl, Jiz, and Bandoora. D'mahl felt a slow burn rising, knowing to whom the fascinated glances were directed.

"Well, what do you think of *that*, Jof?" Jiz said, with a sly knife edge in her voice.

"Not badly done," D'mahl said coolly. "Hardly art, but effective propaganda, I must admit."

Once again, Bandoora seemed strangely stricken, as if D'mahl's words had probed some inner wound.

"The planet, Jof, the *planet*!"

Fighting to control a building wave of anger, D'mahl managed an arch smile. "I was paying more attention to Sidi," he said. "Voidsuckers come up with planets that look that good from a distance much more often than you see bodies that look that good that close."

"You think the future of the human race is a rather humorous subject," Bandoora said loudly, betraying annoyance for the first time.

D'mahl tapped the time at 23.981. His guests were all blating about the prospects of at last finding a viable mudball, and *Wandering Dutchmen* was about to begin! Leaping to his feet, he shouted: "Bandoora, you've been out in the big zilch too long!" The sheer volume of his voice focused the attention of every guest on his person. "If I were confined in a scoutship with Sidi, I'd have something better than slok planets on my mind!"

"You're a degenerate and an egomaniac, D'mahl!" Ban-

doora blatted piously, drawing the laughter D'mahl had hoped for.

"Guilty on both counts," D'mahl said. "Sure I'm an ego-maniac—like everyone else, I'm the only god there is. Of course I'm a degenerate, and so is everyone else—soft protoplasmic machines that begin to degenerate from day one!"

All at once D'mahl had penetrated the serious mood that the bulletin had imposed on his party, and by donning it and taking it one step beyond, had recaptured the core. "We're stuck where we are and with what we are. We're Flying Dutchmen on an endless sea of space, we're Wandering Jews remembering what we killed for all eternity—"

A great groan went up, undertoned with laughter at the crude bridge to the impending premiere, overtuned with sullenness at the reminder of just who and what they were. D'mahl had blown it—or at least failed to entirely recover—and he knew it, and the knowledge was a red nova inside his skull. At this moment of foul karma, 24,000 passed into real-time, and on tap frequency E-6—

You are standing at the base of a gentle verdant hill on whose tree-dotted summit a man in a loincloth is being nailed to a cross. Each time the mallet descends, you feel piercing pains in your wrists. You stand in an alleyway in ancient Jerusalem holding a jug of water to your breast as Jesus is dragged to his doom, and you feel his terrible hopeless thirst parching your throat. You are back at Calvary listening to the beat of the mallet, feeling the lightnings of pain in your wrists, the taste of burning sands in your mouth.

You are on the quarterdeck of an ancient wooden sailing ship tasting the salt wind of an ocean storm. The sky roils and howls under an evil green moon. Your crew scurries about the deck and rigging, shouting and moaning in thin spectral voices, creatures of tattered rags and ghostly transparent flesh. Foam flies into your face, and you wipe it off with the back of your hand, seeing through your own flesh as it passes before your eyes. You feel laughter at the back of your throat, and it bubbles out of you—too loud, too hearty, a maniac's howl. You raise your foglike fist and brandish it at the heavens. Lightning bolts crackle. You shake your fist harder and inhale the storm wind like the breath of a lover.

You look up the slope of Calvary as the final stroke of the mallet is driven home and you feel the wooden handle and the

iron spike in your own hands. The cross is erected, and it is you who hangs from it, and the sky is dissolved in a deafening blast of light brighter than a thousand suns. And you are trudging on an endless plain of blowing gray ash under a sky the color of rusting steel. The jagged ruins of broken buildings protrude from the swirling dust, and the world is full of maimed and skeletal people marching from horizon to horizon without hope. But your body has the plodding leaden strength of a thing that knows it cannot die. Pain in your wrists, and ashes in your mouth. The people around you begin to rot on their feet, to melt like Dali watches, and then only you remain, custodian of a planetary corpse. A ghostly sailing ship approaches you, luffing and pitching on the storm-whipped ash.

The quarterback pitches under your feet and the skies howl. Then the storm clouds around the moon melt away to reveal a cool utter blackness punctuated by myriad hard points of light, and the quarterdeck becomes a steel bulkhead under your feet and you are standing in an observation bubble of a primitive first-generation torchship. Around your starry horizon are dozens of other converted asteroid freighters, little more than fusion torchtubes with makeshift domes, blisters, and toroid decks cobbled to their surfaces—the distant solar ancestors of the *Trek*.

You turn to see an ancient horror standing beside you: an old, old man, his face scarred by radiation, his soul scarred by bottomless guilt, and his black eyes burning coldly with eternal ice.

You are standing in an observation bubble of a first-generation torchship. Below, the Earth is a brownish, singed, cancerous ball still stewing in the radiation of the Slow Motion War. Somewhere a bell is tolling, and you can feel the tug of the bellrope in your hands. Turning, you see a lean, sinister man with a face all flat planes and eyes like blue coals. His face fades into fog for a moment, and only those mad eyes remain solid and real.

"Hello, Dutchman," you say.

"Hello, Refugee."

"I'm usually called Wanderer."

"That's no longer much of a distinction," the Dutchman says. "All men are wanderers now."

"We're all refugees too. We've killed the living world that gave us birth. Even you and I may never live to see another."

The bite of the nails into your wrists, the weight of the mallet in your hand. Thirst, and the tolling of a far-off bell.

You are the Dutchman, looking out into the universal night; a generation to the nearest star, a century to the nearest hope of a living world, forever to the other side. Thunder rolls inside your head and lightnings flash behind your eyes. "We've got these decks under our feet, the interstellar wind to ride, the fusion torches to ride it with," you say. "Don't whine to me, I've never had more." You laugh a wild maniac howl. "And I've got plenty of company, now."

You are the Wanderer, looking down at the slain Earth, listening to the bell toll, feeling the dead weight of the mallet in your hand. "So do I, Dutchman, so do I."

The globe of the Earth transforms itself into another world: a brown-and-purple planetary continent marbled with veins and lakes of watery blue. Clad in a heavy spacesuit, you are standing on the surface of the planet: naked rock on the shore of a clear blue lake, under a violet sky laced with thin gray clouds like jet contrails. A dozen other suited men are fanned out across the plain of fractured rock, like ants crawling on a bone pile.

"Dead," you say. "A corpse-world."

Maniac laughter beside you. "Don't be morbid, Wanderer. Nothing is dead that was never alive."

You kneel on a patch of furrowed soil cupping a wilted pine seedling in your hands. The sky above you is steel plating studded with overhead floodlights, and the massive cylindrical body of the torchtube skewers the watertank universe of his dirt-digger deck. The whole layout is primitive, strictly first-generation Trek. Beside you, a young girl in green dirt-digger shorts and shirt is sitting disconsolately on the synthetic loam, staring at the curved outer bulkhead of the farm deck.

"I'm going to live and die without ever seeing a sky or walking in a forest," she says. "What am I doing here? What's all this for?"

"You're keeping the embers of Earth alive," you say in your ancient's voice. "You're preserving the last surviving forms of organic life. Some day your children or your children's children will plant these seeds in the living soil of a new Earth."

"Do you really believe that?" she says earnestly, turning her youthful strength on you like a sun. "That we'll find a living planet some day?"

"You must believe. If you stop believing, you'll be with us

here in this hell of our own creation. We Earthborn were life's destroyers. Our children must be life's preservers."

She looks at you with the Wanderer's cold eternal eyes, and her face withers to a parchment of ancient despair. "For the sake of our bloodstained souls?" she says, then becomes a young girl once more.

"For the sake of your own, girl, for the sake of your own."

You float weightless inside the huddled circle of the Trek. The circular formation of ships is a lagoon of light in an endless sea of black nothingness. Bow-ward of the Trek, the interstellar abyss is hidden behind a curtain of gauzy brilliance: the hydrogen interface, where the combined scoopfields of the Trek's fusion torches form a permanent shock wave against the attenuated interstellar atmosphere. Although the Trek's ships have already been modified and aligned to form the hydrogen interface, the ships are still the same converted asteroid freighters that left Sol; this is no later than Trek Year 150.

But inside the circle of ships, the future is being launched. The *Flying Dutchman*, the first torchship to be built entirely on the Trek out of matter winnowed and transmuted from the interstellar medium, floats in the space before you, surrounded by a gnat swarm of intership shuttles and men and women in voidsuits. A clean, smooth cylinder ringed with windowed decks, it seems out of place among the messy jury-rigging of the first-generation torchships, an intrusion from the future.

Then an all-but-invisible purple flame issues from the *Dutchman's* torchtube and the first Trekborn ship is drawing its breath of life.

Another new torchship appears beside the *Flying Dutchman*, and another and another and another, until the new Trekborn ships outnumber the converted asteroid freighters and the hydrogen interface has more than doubled in diameter. Now the area inside the Trek is a vast concourse of torchships, shuttles, suited people, and the dancing lights of civilized life.

You are standing on a bulkhead catwalk overlooking the floor of a dirt digger deck: a sparse forest of small pines and oaks, patches of green grass, a few rows of flowers. Above is a holo of a blue Earth sky with fleecy white clouds. Dirt diggers in their traditional green move about solemnly, tending the fragile life-forms, measuring their growth. Your nostrils are filled with the incense odor of holiness.

And you sit at a round simmed marble table on a balcony café halfway up the outer bulkhead of an amusement deck sip-

ping a glass of simmered burgundy. A circle of shops and restaurants rings the floor below, connected by radial paths to an inner ring of shops around the central torchtube shaft. Each resulting wedge of floor is a different bright color, each is given over to a different amusement: a swimming pool, a bandstand, a zero-g dance-plate, carnival rides, a shimmer maze. Noise rises. Music plays.

Across from you sits the Wanderer, wearing dirt-digger green and an expression of bitter contempt. "Look at them," he says. "We're about to approach another planet, and they don't even know where they are."

"And where is that, Refugee?"

"Who should know better than you, Dutchman?" he says. And the people below turn transparent, and the bulkheads disappear, and you are watching zombies dancing on a platform floating in the interstellar abyss. Nothing else lives, nothing else moves, in all that endless immensity.

Manic laughter tickles your throat.

A planet appears as a pinpoint, then a green-and-brown mottled sphere with fleecy white clouds, and then you are standing on its surface among a party of suited men trudging heavily back to their shuttle. Hard brown rock veined with greenish mineral streakings under a blue-black sky dotted with pastel-green clouds. You are back on your balcony watching specters dance in the endless galactic night.

"Great admiral, what shall we say when hope is gone?" the Wanderer says.

And you are down among the specters, grown ten feet tall, a giant shaking your fist against the blackness, at the dead planet, howling your defiance against the everlasting night. "Sail on! Sail on! Sail on and on!"

"No more ships! No more ships! Soil or death!" You are marching at the head of a small army of men and women in dirt-digger green as it bursts into the amusement deck from the deck below, bearing crosses wrapped with simmered grape leaves. Each chanted shout sends nails through your wrists.

And you are leading your carnival of ghosts on a mad dance through a dirt-digger deck, carelessly trampling on the fragile life-forms, strewing gold and silver confetti, flashers, handfuls of jewels—the bounty of the fusion torch's passage through the interstellar plankton.

You are in a droptube falling through the decks of a ship. Amusement decks, residential decks, manufacturing decks,

sifting decks—all but the control and torchtender decks—have been rudely covered over with synthetic loam and turned into makeshift dirt-digger decks. The growth is sparse, the air has a chemical foulness, metal surfaces are beginning to corrode, and the green-clad people have the hunched shoulders and sunken eyes of the unwholesomely obsessed. The vine-covered cross is everywhere.

You are rising through a lift-tube on another ship. Here the machinery is in good repair, the air is clean, the bulkheads shiny, and the decks of the ship glory in light and sound and surfaces of simmed ruby, emerald, sapphire, and diamond. The people are birds-of-paradise in mirrorsuits, simmed velvets and silks in luxurious shades and patterns, feathers and leathers, gold, silver, and brass. But they seem to be moving to an unnatural rhythm, dancing a mad jig to a phantom fiddler, and their flesh is as transparent as unpolarized plex.

You are floating in space in the center of the Trek; behind you, the Trekborn ships are a half circle diadem of jeweled brilliance. In front of you floats the Wanderer, and behind him the old coverted asteroid freighters, tacky and decayed, pale greenery showing behind every blister and viewport.

"Your gardens are dying, Wanderer."

"Yours never had life, Dutchman," he says, and you can see stars and void through your glassy flesh, through the ghost-ships behind you.

Two silvery headbands appear in the space between you in a fanfare of music and a golden halo of light. Large, crude, designed for temporary external wear, they are the first full sensory transceivers, ancestors of the surgically implanted tap. They glow and pulse like live things, like the gift of the non-existent gods.

You pick one of the headbands, laugh, place it on the Wanderer's head. "With this ring, I thee wed."

Unblinking, he places the other band on yours. "Bear my crown of thorns," he says.

You stand on the bridge of a torchship, the spectral Dutchman at your side. Beyond the plex, the stars are a million live jewels, a glory mirrored in the lights of the Trek.

You kneel among tiny pine trees in a dirt-digger deck beside the Wanderer, and they become a redwood forest towering into the blue skies of lost Earth, and you can feel the pain of the nails in your ghostly wrists, hearing the tolling of a far-off bell, feel the body's sadness, smell the incense of irredeemable loss.

You rise through a lift-tube, the Dutchman's hand in yours, and you hear the hum of energy as you pass through deck after jeweled and gleaming deck, hear the sounds of human laughter and joy, see crystal trees sprouting and rising from the metal deckplates. The flesh of the spectral people solidifies and the Dutchman's hand becomes pink and solid. When you look at his face, your own Wanderer's eyes look back, pain muted by a wild joy.

You float in the center of the Trek with the Wanderer as the ships around you rearrange themselves in an intricate ballet: Trekborn and converted asteroid freighters in hundreds of magical *pas de deux*, reintegrating the Trek.

You are droptubing down through the decks of a dirtdigger ship, watching green uniforms transform themselves into the bird-of-paradise plumage of the Trekborn ships, watching the corrosion disappear from the metal, watching crystal gazebos, shimmer mazes, and bubbling brooks appear, as shrines to sadness become gardens of joy.

And you are sitting across a round simmed marble table from the Dutchman on a balcony café halfway up the bulkhead of an amusement deck. The central torchtube shaft is overgrown with ivy. The pool, bandstand, shimmer mazes, danceplates, and carnival rides are laid out in a meadow of green grass shaded by pines and oaks. The bulkheads and upper decking dissolve, and this garden square stands revealed as a tiny circle of life lost in the immensity of the eternal void.

"We're Wanderers in the midnight of the soul," the Dutchman says. "Perhaps we're guardians of the only living things that ever were."

"Flying Dutchmen on an endless sea, perhaps the only gods there be."

And you are a detached viewpoint watching this circle of life drift away into the immensity of space, watching the Trek dwindle away until it is nothing more than one more abstract pinpoint of light against the galactic darkness. Words of pale fire appear across the endless starfield:

WANDERING DUTCHMEN

by Jofe D'mahl

There was an unmistakable note of politeness in the clicking of tongues in Jofe D'mahl's grand salon. The applause went on for an appropriate interval (*just appropriate*), and then

the guests were up and talking, a brightly colored flock of birds flitting and jabbering about the jeweled forest.

"...you could see that it had well-defined continents, and the green areas *must* be vegetation..."

"...oxygen, sure, but can we breathe all that helium?"

Standing between Jiz Rumoku and Bandoora, Jofe D'mahl found himself in the infuriating position of being a vacuum beside the focus of attention. Eyes constantly glanced in their direction for a glimpse of Bandoora, but no gaze dared linger long, for at the side of the voidsucker, D'mahl was sizzling toward nova, his eyes putting out enough hard radiation to melt plex.

But Bandoora himself was looking straight at him, and D'mahl sensed some unguessable focus of alien warmth pulsing up at him from the depths of those unfathomable eyes. "I'm sorry the Pilots' bulletin ruined your premiere," he said.

"Really?" D'mahl snarled. "What makes you think your precious blatt has so much importance?" he continued loudly. There was no reason for the guests not to stare now; D'mahl was shouting for it. "You dreeks expect us to slaver like Pavlov's dogs every time you turn up some reeking mudball that looks habitable until you get close enough to get a good whiff of the dead stink of poison gas and naked rock. Your blatt will be a six-month nova, Bandoora. Art is forever."

"Forever may be a longer time than you realize, D'mahl," Bandoora said calmly. "Other than that, I agree with you entirely. I found *Wandering Dutchmen* quite moving." Were those actually *tears* forming in his eyes? "Perhaps more moving than even you can imagine."

Silence reigned now as the attention of the guests became totally focused on this small psychodrama. Some of the bolder ones began to inch closer. D'mahl found that he could not make out Bandoora's vector; in this little ego contest, there seemed to be no common set of rules.

"I'd like to atone for interfering with the premiere of a great work of art," Bandoora said. "I'll give you a chance to make the greatest senso of your career, D'mahl." There was a thin smile on his lips, but his eyes were so earnest as to appear almost comical.

"What makes you think *you* can teach *me* anything about senso?" D'mahl said. "Next thing, you'll be asking me for a

lesson in voidsucking." A titter of laughter danced around the salon.

"Perhaps I've already gotten it, D'mahl," Bandoora said. He turned, began walking through the colored mists and crystal trees toward the transparent plex that blistered the great balcony, focusing his eyes on D'mahl through the crowd, back over his shoulder. "I don't know anything about senso, but I can show you a reality that will make anything you've experienced pale into nothingness. Capture it on tape if you dare." A massed intake of breath.

"*If I dare!*" D'mahl shouted, exploding into nova. "Who do you think you're scaring with your cheap theatrics, Bandoora? I'm Jofe D'mahl, I'm the greatest artist of my time, I'm riding the torch of my own ego, and I know it. *If I dare!* What do you think any of us have to do *but* dare, you poor dreek? Didn't you understand *anything* of what you just experienced?"

Bandoora reached the plex blister, turned, stood outlined against the starry darkness, the blaze of the concourse of ships. His eyes seemed to draw a baleful energy from the blackness. "No theatrics, D'mahl," Bandoora said. "No computer taps, no senso, no illusions. None of the things all you people live by. *Reality*, D'mahl, the real thing. Out there. The naked void."

He half turned, stretched out his right arm as if to embrace the darkness. "Come with us on Bela-37, D'mahl," he said. "Out there in your naked mind where nothing exists but you and the everlasting void. *Wandering Dutchmen* speaks well of such things—for a senso by a man who was simming it. What might you do with your own sensorium tape of the void itself—if you dared record it through your own living flesh? Do you dare, D'mahl, do you dare face the truth of it with your naked soul?"

"Jof—"

D'mahl brushed Jiz aside. "*Simming it!*" he bellowed in red rage. "Do I dare!" The reality of the grand salon, even the ego challenge hurled at him before his guests, burned away in the white-hot fire of the deeper challenge, the gauntlet Bandoora had flung at the feet of his soul. *I can face this thing, can you? Can you truly carve living art out of the dead void, not metaphorically, but out of the nothingness itself, in the flesh, in realtime? Or are you simming it? Are you a fraud?*

"I told you, Bandoora," he said, hissing through his rage, "I've got nothing to do *but* dare."

The guests cooed, Jiz shook her head, Bandoora nodded and smiled. Jofe D'mahl felt waves of change ripple through his grand salon, through himself, but their nature and vector eluded the grasp of his mind.

II

As he flitted from *Excelsior* to *Brigadoon* across a crowded sector of the central Trek, it seemed to Jofe D'mahl that the bubble of excitement in which he had been moving since the premiere party had more tangibility than the transparent shimmer screen of his voidbubble. The shimmer was visible only as the interface between the hard vacuum of space and the sphere of air it contained; but the enhancement of his persona was visible on the face of every person he saw. He was being tapped so frequently by people he had never met in senso or flesh that he had finally had to do something 180° from his normal vector: tap a screening program into his banks that rejected calls from all people not on a manageable approved list. He was definitely the Trek's current nova.

Even here, among the bubbled throngs flitting from ship to ship or just space-jaunting, D'mahl felt as if he were outshining the brilliance of the concourse of torchships, even the hydrogen interface itself, as most of the people whose trajectories came within visible range of his own saluted him with nods of their heads or subtle sidelong glances.

It almost made up for the fact that it wasn't *Wandering Dutchmen* that had triggered his nova but his public decision to dare six standard months with the voidsuckers—away from the Trek, out of tap contact with the banks, alone in his mind and body like a primitive pre-tap man. Waller Nan Pei had achieved the same effect by announcing his public suicide a month in advance, but blew out his torch forever by failing to go through with it. D'mahl knew there could be no backing out now.

He flitted past *Paradisio*, accepted the salutations of the passengers on a passing shuttle, rounded *Ginza*, throttled back his g-polarizer, and landed lightly on his toes on *Brigadoon*'s main entrance stage. He walked quickly across the ruby ledge, passed through the shimmer, collapsed his bub-

ble, and took the nearest droptube for Jiz Rumoku's gallery on twelvedeck, wondering what the place would look like this time.

Thanks to Jiz's aura, *Brigadoon* was the chameleon-ship of the Trek; whole decks were completely done over about as often as the average Trekker redid his private quarters. Fashions and flashes tended to spread from *Brigadoon* to the rest of the Trek much as they spread from Jiz's gallery to the decks of her ship. Recently, a motion to change the ship's name to *Quicksilver* had come within fifty votes of passage.

Dropping through the decks, D'mahl saw more changes than he could identify without tapping for the previous layouts, and he had been on *Brigadoon* about a standard month ago. Threedeck had been living quarters tiered around a formalized rock garden; now it was a lagoon with floating houseboats. Sixdeck had been a sim of the ancient Tivoli; now the amusements were arranged on multileveled g-plates over a huge slow-motion whirlpool of syrupy rainbow-colored liquid. Ninedeck had been a ziggurat-maze of living quarters festooned with ivy; now it was a miniature desert of static-molded gold and silver dustdunes, latticed into a faerie filigree of cavelike apartments. Fluidity seemed to be the theme of the month.

Twelvedeck was now a confection of multicolored energy. The walls of the shops and restaurants were tinted shimmer screens in scores of subtle hues, and the central plaza around the torchtube shaft was an ever-changing meadow of slowly-moving miniature fuzzballs in blue, green, purple, yellow, and magenta. The torchtube itself was a cylindrical mirror, and most of the people were wearing tinted mirrorsuits, fog-robes, or lightcloaks. It was like being inside a rainbow, and D'mahl felt out of sync in his comparatively severe blue pants, bare chest, and cloth-of-gold cloak.

Jiz Rumoku's gallery was behind a sapphire-blue waterfall that cascaded from halfway up the carved bulkhead to a pool of mist spilling out across the floor of the deck. D'mahl stepped through it, half expecting to be soaked. Mercifully, the waterfall proved to be a holo, but with Jiz, you never knew.

"You who are about to die salute us," Jiz said. She was lying in a blushing-pink fuzzball, naked except for blinding auroras of broad-spectrum light coyly hiding her breasts and loins. The pink fuzzball floated in a lazy ellipse near the center of the gallery, which was now a circular area contained

by a shimmer screen around its circumference that rippled endless spectral changes. The ceiling was a holo of roiling orange fire, the floor a mirror of some soft substance.

"Better in fire than in ice," D'mahl said. "My motto." They cross-tapped, and D'mahl lay in the fuzzball feeling an electric glow as his body walked across the gallery and kissed Jiz's lips.

"Voidsucking isn't exactly my idea of fire, Jof," Jiz said as they simultaneously broke their taps.

"This is?" D'mahl said, sweeping his arm in a arc. Dozens of floaters in sizes ranging from a few square centimeters to a good three meters square drifted in seemingly random trajectories around the gallery, displaying objects and energy-effects ranging from tiny pieces of static-molded gemdust jewelry to boxes of flashers, fogrobes, clingers, holopanes that were mostly abstract, and several large and very striking fire-sculptures. The floaters themselves were all transparent plex, and very few of the "objects" on them were pure matter.

"I cog that people are going to be bored with matter for a while," Jiz said, rising from the fuzzball. "After all, it's nothing but frozen energy. Flux is the coming nova, energy-matter interface stuff. It expresses the spirit of the torch, don't you think? Energy, protons, electrons, neutrons, and heavy element dust from the interstellar medium transmuted into whatever we please. This current collection expresses the transmutational state itself."

"I like to have a few things with hard surfaces around," D'mahl said somewhat dubiously.

"You'll see, even your place will be primarily interface for the next standard month or so. You'll put it in sync."

"No I won't, oh creator of tomorrow's flash," D'mahl said, kissing her teasingly on the lips. "While everyone else is going transmutational, I'll be out there in the cold hard void, where energy and matter know their places and stick to them."

Jiz frowned, touched his cheek. "You're really going through with it, aren't you?" she said. "Months of being cooped up in some awful scoutship, sans tap, sans lovers, sans change...."

"Perhaps at least not sans lovers," D'mahl said lightly, thinking of Sidi. But Jiz, he saw, was seriously worried. "What's the matter, Jiz?"

"What do you actually know about the voidsuckers?"

"What's to know? They man the scoutships. They look for habitable planets. They live the simplest lives imaginable."

"Have you tapped anything on them?"

"No. I'm taking a senso recorder along, of course, and I'll have to use myself as major viewpoint, so I don't want any sensory preconceptions."

"I've tapped the basic sensohistory of the voidsuckers, Jof. There's nothing else in the banks. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Should it?"

"Tap it, Jof."

"I told you—"

"I know, no sensory preconceptions. But I'm asking you to tap it anyway. I have, and I think you should." Her eyes were hard and unblinking, and her mouth was hardened into an ideogram of resolve. When Jiz got that look, D'mahl usually found it advisable to follow her vector, for the sake of parsimony, if nothing else.

"All right," he said. "For you, I'll sully my pristine consciousness with sordid facts. Voidsuckers, basic history," he subvocal.

He stood in an observation blister watching a scoutship head for the hydrogen interface. The scout was basically a torchship-size fusion tube with a single small toroid deck amidship and a bridge bubble up near the intake. "Trek Year 301," a neuter voice said. "The first scoutship is launched by the Trek. Crewed by five volunteers, it is powered by a full-size fusion torch though its mass is only one tenth that of a conventional torchship. Combined with its utilization of the Trek's momentum, this enables it rapidly to reach a terminal velocity approaching .87 lights."

D'mahl was a detached observer far out in space watching the scoutship torch ahead of the Trek. Another scoutship, then another, and another, and finally others too numerous to count easily, torched through the hydrogen interface and ahead of the Trek, veering off at angles ranging from ten to thirty degrees, forming a conical formation. The area of space enclosed by the cone turned bright green as the voice said: "By 402, the scoutships numbered forty-seven, and the still-current search pattern had been regularized. Ranging up to a full light-year from the Trek and remote-surveying solar systems from this expanded cone of vision, the scoutship system maximized the number of potential habitable planets surveyed in a given unit of time."

Now D'mahl sat on the bridge of a scoutship looking out the plex at space. Around him, two men and a woman in blue voidsucker shorts were puttering about with instrument consoles. "In 508, a new innovation was introduced." A small drone missile shot slightly ahead of the scoutship, which then began to veer off. "Scoutships now dispatched telltale probes to potentially habitable planets, returning at once to the Trek."

D'mahl was a viewpoint in space watching a stylized diorama of the Trek, a scoutship, a telltale, and a solar system. The scout was torching back to the Trek while the telltale orbited a planet, broadcasting a red wavefront of information Trekward. The scout reached the Trek, which altered its vector toward the telltale's solar system. The scout then left the Trek to monitor the oncoming telltale wavefront. "By turning the Trek toward a prospective system, then returning to monitor the telltale wavefront by scoutship, our fully evolved planetary reconnaissance system now maximizes the number of solar systems investigated in a given time period and also minimizes the reporting time for each high-probability solar system investigated."

D'mahl was aboard a scoutship, playing null-g tennis with an attractive female voidsucker. He was in a simple commissary punching out a meal. He was lying on a grav-plate set at about .25 g in small private sleeping quarters. He was a female voidsucker making love to a tall powerful man in null-g. "The scout's quarters, though comfortable and adequate to maintain physical and mental health, impose some hardship on the crew owing to space limitations," the neuter voice said. "Tap banks are very limited and access to the central Trek banks impossible. Scout crews must content themselves with simple in-flesh amusements. All Trekkers owe these selfless volunteers a debt of gratitude."

Jofe D'mahl looked into Jiz Rumoku's eyes. He shrugged. "So?" he said. "What does that tell me that I didn't already know?"

"Nothing, Jof, not one damned thing! The voidsuckers have been out there in the flesh for over half a millennium, spending most of their lives with no tap connection to the Trek, to everything that makes the only human civilization there is what it is. What's their karmic vector? What's inside their skulls? Why are they called voidsuckers, anyway? Why

isn't there anything in the banks except that basic history tape?"

"Obviously because no one's gone out there with them to make a real senso," D'mahl said. "They're certainly not the types to produce one themselves. That's why I'm going, Jiz. I think Bandoora was right—there's a beyond senso to be made on the voidsuckers, and it may be the only virgin subject matter left."

A little of the intensity went out of Jiz's expression. "Ego, of course, has nothing to do with it," she said.

"Ego, of course, has everything to do with it," D'mahl replied.

She touched a hand to his cheek. "Be careful, Jof," she said quite softly.

Moved, D'mahl put his hand over hers, kissed her lightly on the lips, feeling, somehow, like an Earthbound primitive. "What's there to be afraid of?" he said with equal tenderness.

"I don't know, Jof, and I don't know how to find out. That's what scares me."

Jofe D'mahl felt a rising sense of vectorless anticipation as the shuttle bore him bow-ward toward Bela-37, a silvery cylinder glinting against the auroral background of the hydrogen interface as it hung like a Damoclean sword above him. Below, the ships of the Trek were receding, becoming first a horizon-filling landscape of light and flash, then a disk of human warmth sharply outlined against the cold black night. It occurred to him that Trekkers seldom ventured up here where the scoutships parked, close by the interface separating the Trek from the true void. It was not hard to see why.

"Long way up, isn't it?" he muttered.

The shuttle pilot nodded. "Not many people come up here," he said. "Voidsuckers and maintenance crews mostly. I come up here by myself sometimes to feel the pressure of the void behind the interface and look down on it all like a god on Olympus." He laughed dryly. "Maybe I've ferried one void-sucker too many."

Something made D'mahl shudder, then yearn for the communion of the tap—the overwhelmingly rich intermeshing of time, space, bodies, and realities from which he was about to isolate himself for the first time in his life. The tap is what we live by, he thought, and who so more than I?

"Jiz Rumoku," he subvocal, and he was in her body, standing beside a fire-sculpture of her gallery with a chunky black man in a severe green velvet suit. "Hello, Jiz," he said with her vocal cords. "Hello and good-bye."

He withdrew his tap from her body, and she followed into his, high above the Trek. "Hello, Jof. It's sure a long way up." She kissed his hand with his lips. "Take care," his voice said. Then she broke the tap, and D'mahl was alone in his flesh as the shuttle decelerated, easing up alongside Bela-37's toroid main deck.

"This is it," the shuttle pilot said. "You board through the main shimmer." D'mahl gave the pilot an ironic salute, erected his voidbubble, grabbed his kit and senso recorder, and flitted across a few meters of space to Bela-37's main entrance stage.

Stepping through the shimmer, he was surprised to find himself in a small closetlike room with no droptube shaft in evidence. A round door in the far bulkhead opened and a tall, pale voidsucker stepped inside. "I'm Ban Nyborg, D'mahl," he said. He laughed rather humorously. "This is an airlock," he said. "Safety feature."

Automatically, D'mahl tapped for a definition of the new word: *double-doored chamber designed to facilitate ship entry and exit, obsoleted by the shimmer screen*. "How quaint," he said, following Nyborg through the open door.

"Lose power, lose your shimmer, this way you keep your air," Nyborg said, leading D'mahl down a dismal blue pastel corridor. "Radial passageway," Nyborg said. "Leads to circular corridor around the torchtube. Five other radials, tubes to the bridge and back, that's the ship." They reached the circumtorchtube corridor, done in washed-out blue and yellow, walked 60 degrees around it past some instrument consoles and an orange radial corridor, then another 60 degrees and halfway up a green radial to a plain matter door.

Nyborg opened the door and D'mahl stepped into a grim little room. There was a g-plate, a blue pneumatic chair, a tall simmed walnut chest, a shaggy red rug, and beyond an open door, toilet facilities. The ceiling was deep gray, and three of the walls were grayish tan. The fourth was a holo of the interstellar abyss itself—pinpoint stars and yawning blackness—and it faced the g-plate.

"Bandoora's quarters," Nyborg said. "He's doubling with Sidi."

"Charming," D'mahl grunted. "I'm touched."

"Ship's got three tap frequencies: library, communications, external visual. Bridge is off limits now. You can tap our departure on external." Nyborg turned, walked unceremoniously out of the little cell, and closed the door behind him.

D'mahl shuddered. The walls and ceiling seemed to be closing in on him as if to squeeze him into the reality of the holo. He found himself staring into the starfield, leaning toward it as if it were pulling him down into it.

He blinked, feeling the strangeness of the sensation, which drew his attention away from the holo and to his senso recorder. Ought to get all this down. He turned the recorder on, dropped in a hundred-hour pod of microtape, keyed it to his own sensorium. But the initial moment of vertigo had passed; now he was just in an excruciatingly dull little room with a big starfield holo on one wall.

D'mahl set the g-plate for one tenth g, just enough to hold him in place, and lay down on the padding. He found himself staring into the starfield holo again from this position. Did Bandoora actually like being sucked at by that thing?

Bandoora tapped him, audio only: "Welcome to Bela-37, D'mahl. We're about to torch through the interface. Perhaps you'd care to tap it."

"Thanks," D'mahl tapped back through the scout's com frequency, "but I'd rather record it in the flesh from the bridge."

"Sorry, but the bridge is off limits to you now," Bandoora said, and broke the tap.

"Drool!" D'mahl snarled to no one, and irritably tapped the scout's external visual frequency.

He was a disembodied viewpoint moving through the silent frictionless darkness of space. It was like being in a voidbubble and yet not like being in a voidbubble, for here he was disconnected from all internal and external senses save vision. He found that he could tap subfrequencies that gave him choice of visual direction, something like being able to turn his nonexistent head. Below, the Trek was a jewel of infinitely subtle light slowly shrinking in the velvet blackness. All other vectors were dominated by the hydrogen interface, a sky of rainbow brilliance that seemed to all but surround him.

It was a moving visual spectacle, and yet the lack of the subtleties of full senso also made it pathetic, filled D'mahl

with an elusive sadness. As the rainbow sheen of the hydrogen interface moved visibly closer, that sadness resolved along a nostalgia vector as D'mahl realized that he was about to lose tap contact with the Trek's banks. The interface energies would block out the banks long before time-lag or signal attenuation even became a factor. It was his last chance to say goodbye to the multiplex Trek reality before being committed to the unknown and invariant void beyond.

He broke his tap with the scout's visual frequency, and zip-tapped through the multiplicity of the Trek's frequencies like a dying man flashing through his life's sensorium track before committing it to the limbo banks.

He stood among the crystal trees of his own grand salon. He was Dalta Reed punting across Blood Lake on *Lothlorien* and he was Erna Ramblieu making love to Jonn Benina on his balcony overlooking Sundance Corridor on *Magic Mountain*. He watched *Excelsior* being built from the body of a welder working on the hull, and he flashed through the final sequence of *Wandering Dutchmen*. He rifled through his own sensorium track—making love to Jiz five years ago in a dirt-digger deck, moments of ten parties, dancing above a null-g plate as a boy, cutting *Wandering Dutchmen* at his editor—realizing suddenly that he was leaving the world of his own stored memories behind with everything else. Finally, he flashed through Jiz Rumoku's body as she led the man in the green velvet suit past a holoframe of the Far Look Ballet dancing *Swan Lake* in null-g, and then his tap was broken, and he was lying on his g-plate in Bela-37, unable to reestablish it.

He tapped the scout's visual frequency and found himself moving into the world-filling brilliance of the hydrogen interface behind the auroral bubble of Bela-37's own torch intake field. The lesser rainbow touched the greater, and D'mahl rapidly became sheathed in glory as Bela-37's field formed a bulge in the Trek's combined field, a bulge that enveloped the scoutship and D'mahl, became a closed sphere of full-spectrum fire for an instant, then burst through the hydrogen interface with a rush that sent D'mahl's being soaring, gasping, and reeling into the cold hard blackness of the open void beyond.

D'mahl shook, grunted, and broke the tap. For a panicked moment he thought he had somehow been trapped in the

abyss as his vision snapped back into his flesh staring at the holo of the void that filled the wall facing him.

The lift-tube ended and Jofe D'mahl floated up out of it and onto the circular bridge of Bela-37. The bridge was a plex blister up near the bow of the torchtube encircled by consoles and controls to waist level but otherwise visually naked to the interstellar void. Bow-ward, the ship's intake field formed a miniature hydrogen interface; sternward, the Trek was visible as a scintillating disk behind a curtain of ethereal fire, but otherwise nothing seemed to live or move in all that eternal immensity.

"Isn't there any getting away from it?" D'mahl muttered, half to himself, half to Haris Bandoora, who had watched him emerge from the lift-tube with those unfathomable eyes and an ironic, enigmatic grin.

"You people spend your lives trying to get away from it," Bandoora said, "and we spend our lives drenching ourselves in it because we know there is no real escape from it. One way or the other, our lives are dominated by the void."

"Speak for yourself, Bandoora," D'mahl said. "Out there is only one reality." He touched a forefinger to his temple. "In here are an infinity more."

"Illusion," said a woman's voice behind him. D'mahl turned and saw Sidi—conical bare breasts, hairless silvered skull, tightly muscled body, opaque voidsucker eyes—a vision of cold and abstract feminine beauty.

D'mahl smiled at her. "What is," he said, "is real."

"Where you come from," Sidi said, "no one knows what's real."

"*Réalité c'est moi*," D'mahl said in ancient French. When both Sidi and Bandoora stared at him blankly, failing to tap for the reference, *unable* to tap for the reference, he had a sharp flash of loneliness. An adult among children. A civilized man among primitives. And out there . . . out there . . .

He forced his attention away from such thoughts, forced his vision away from the all-enveloping void, and walked toward one of the instrument consoles where a slim woman with a shaven untinted skull sat in a pedestal chair adjusting some controls.

"This is Areth Lorenzi," Bandoora said. "She's setting the sweep-sequence of our extreme-range gravescan. We automatically scan a twenty-light-year sphere for new planeted

stars even on a mission like this. We can pick up an Earth-massed body that far away."

The woman turned, and D'mahl saw a face steeped in age. There were wrinkles around her eyes, at the corners of her mouth, even a hint of them on her cheeks; extraordinary enough in itself, but it was her deep, deep pale-blue eyes that spoke most eloquently of her years, of the sheer volume of the things they had seen.

"How often have you detected such bodies?" D'mahl asked conversationally, to keep from obviously staring.

Something seemed to flare in those limpid depths. She glanced over D'mahl's shoulder at Bandoora for a moment. "It's... a common enough occurrence," she said, and turned back to her work.

"And finally, this is Raj Doru," Bandoora said with a peculiar hastiness, indicating the other voidsucker on the bridge: a squat, dark, powerful-looking man with a fierce mouth, a sweeping curve of a nose, and bright brown eyes glowering under his shaven brows. He was standing, hands on his hips, regarding D'mahl scornfully.

"*What is, is real,*" Doru said acidly. "What do you know about real, Jofe D'mahl? You've never confronted the reality of the universe in your whole life! Cowering behind your hydrogen interface and your tap and your mental masturbation fantasies! The void would shrivel your soul to a pinpoint and then snuff it out of existence."

"*Raj!*" Bandoora snapped. Psychic energy crackled and clashed as the two voidsuckers glared at each other for a silent moment.

"Let's see the great D'mahl suck some void. Haris, let's—"

"Everything in its time," Bandoora said. "This isn't it."

"Raj is an impatient man," Sidi said.

"A peculiar trait for a voidsucker," D'mahl replied dryly. These people were beginning to grate on his consciousness. They seemed humorless, obsessive, out of sync with their own cores, as if the nothingness in which they continuously and monomaniacally wallowed had emptied out their centers and filled them with itself.

D'mahl found himself looking up and out into the starry blackness of the abyss, wondering if that eternal coldness might in time seep into his core too, if the mind simply could not encompass that much nothingness and still remain in command of its own vector.

"Patience is an indifferent virtue out here," Areth said. It did not seem a comforting thought.

III

What do these people *do* with themselves? Jofe D'mahl wondered as he paced idly and nervously around the circum-torchtube corridor for what seemed like the thousandth time. A week aboard Bela-37 and he was woozy with boredom. There was a limit to how much chess and null-g tennis you could play, and the ship's library banks were pathetic—a few hundred standard reference tapes, fifty lamer pornos, a hundred classic sensos (four of his own included, he was wanly pleased to note), and an endless log of dull-as-death scoutship reports.

"Patience is an indifferent virtue out here," Areth Lorenzi had said. To D'mahl, it seemed the only virtue possible under the circumstances, and his supply of it was rapidly running out.

Up ahead, he heard footfalls coming down a radial corridor, and a moment later his vector intersected that of Sidi, striding beautifully and coldly toward him like a robot simmed in flesh. Even his initial attraction to her was beginning to fade. Inside that carapace of abstract beauty she seemed as disconnected from any reality he cared to share as the others.

"Hello, D'mahl," she said distantly. "Have you been getting good material for your senso?"

D'mahl snorted. "If you can call a pod and a quarter of bordeom footage interesting material," he said. "Bandoora promised me something transcendent. Where is it?"

"Have you not looked around you?"

D'mahl nodded upward, at the ceiling, at space beyond. "Out there? I can see that from my own grand salon."

"Wait."

"For what?"

"For the call."

"What call?"

"When it comes, you will know it," Sidi said, and walked past him up the corridor. D'mahl shook his head. From Doru, hostility; from Bandoora, lamer metaphysics; from Nyborg, a grunt now and then; from Areth Lorenzi, a few games of nearly silent chess. Now brain-teases from Sidi. Can it be

that that's all these people have? A few lamer quirks around a core of inner vacuum? Nothing but their own obsessiveness between them and eternal boredom? It might make a reasonably interesting senso, if I could figure out a way to dramatize vacuity. He sighed. At least it gave him a valid artistic problem to play with.

"All routine here," Ban Nyborg said, bending his tall frame over the readout screen, across which two columns of letters and numbers slowly crawled. "Star catalog numbers on the left, masses of any dark bodies around them on the right."

"A simple program could monitor this," D'mahl said. "Why are you doing it?"

"Computer *does* screen it. I'm just backing up. Something to do."

D'mahl shook his head. He had wandered into this comp center by accident—none of the voidsuckers had even bothered to mention it to him. Yet here was much of the equipment at the heart of the scoutship's mission: the ship's computer and banks, the gravscan readout, and a whole series of other instrument consoles he would have had to tap for to identify. But the dull gray room had a strange air of neglect about it.

"You sound almost as bored as I am, Nyborg," he said.

Nyborg nodded without looking up. "All waiting, till you get the call."

"*The call?* What call?"

Nyborg turned, and for the first time in nearly two standard weeks, D'mahl saw animation on his long face; fire, perhaps even remembered ecstasy in his pale eyes. "When the void calls you to it," he said. "You'll see. No use talking about it. It calls, and you go, and that's what it's all about. That's why we're all here."

"That's why you're here? What about all this?" D'mahl said, sweeping his hand in a circle to indicate the roomful of instruments.

He could visibly see the life go out of Nyborg's face; curtains came down over the fire in his eyes, and he was once again Nyborg the cyborg.

"All this is the mission," Nyborg grunted, turning back to the readout screen. "What gets us out here. But the call is why we come. Why do you think we're called voidsuckers?"

"Why?"

"We suck void," Nyborg said.

"You mean you don't care about the mission? You're not dedicated to finding us a new living world?"

"Drool," Nyborg muttered. "Scoutships don't need us, can run themselves. *We* need *them*. To get us to the void." He deliberately began to feign intense interest in what he was doing, and D'mahl could not extract a syllable more.

"Just how long have you been on scoutships, Areth?" Jofe D'mahl said, looking up from his hopeless position on the chessboard.

"About a century and a half," Areth Lorenzi said, still studying her next move. As always, she volunteered nothing.

"You must really be dedicated to the mission to have spent such a long life out here in nowhere," D'mahl said, trying to get something out of her. Those eyes hinted of so much and that mouth said so little.

"I've always heard the call."

"What's this call I keep hearing about?"

"The void calls, and for those who are called, there is nothing but the void. You think our lives are sacrifices for the common good of humanity?"

"Well, aren't they?"

Areth Lorenzi looked up at him with her ancient crystalline eyes. "We man the scoutships to reach the void, we don't brave the void to man the scoutships," she said. "We sacrifice nothing but illusion. We live with the truth. We live for the truth."

"And the truth shall set you free?" D'mahl said archly. But the reference blew by her since she had no way to tap for it.

Areth dropped her gaze. A note of bitterness came into her voice. "The truth is: No man is free." She moved her rook to double-check D'mahl's king and queen. "Checkmate in three moves, D'mahl," she said.

D'mahl found Haris Bandoora alone on the bridge looking sternward, back toward where the Trek had been visible until recently as a tiny bright disk among the pinpoint stars. Now the Trek, if it was visible at all, was nothing more than one point of light lost in a million others. Bela-37 seemed frozen in a black crystal vastness speckled with immobile motes of sparkling dust, an abstract universe of dubious reality.

A tremor of dread went through D'mahl, a twinge of the most utter aloneness. Even the presence of the enigmatic and aloof Bandoora seemed a beacon of human warmth in the dead uncaring night.

"Overwhelming, isn't it?" Bandoora said, turning at the sound of D'mahl's footfalls. "A hundred million stars, perhaps as many planets, and this one galaxy is a speck of matter floating in an endless nothingness." There was a strange overlay of softness in those dark and bottomless eyes, almost a misting of tears. "What are we, D'mahl? Once we were bits of some insignificant anomaly called life contaminating a dustmote circling a speck of matter lost in a tiny cloud of specks, itself a minor contaminant of the universal void. Now we're not even that. . . ."

"We're the part that counts, Bandoora," D'mahl said.

"To whom?" Bandoora said, nodding toward the abyss. "To *that*?"

"To ourselves. To whatever other beings share consciousness on planets around whichever of those stars. Sentience is what counts, Bandoora. The rest of it is just backdrop." D'mahl laughed hollowly. "If this is solipsism, let us make the most of it."

"If only you knew. . . ."

"If only I knew what?"

Bandoora smiled an ironic smile. "You *will* know," he said. "That's why you're here. We can't be alone with it forever."

"What—"

"I've heard the call, Haris." Raj Doru had risen to the bridge, and now he walked rapidly to Bandoora's side, his brown eyes feverish, an uncharacteristic languor in his posture.

"When?" Bandoora asked crisply.

"Now."

"How long?"

"Twenty-four hours."

Bandoora turned and followed Doru toward the droptube. "What's going on?" D'mahl asked, trailing after them.

"Raj is going to suck void," Bandoora said. "He's heard the call. Care to help me see him off?"

At the round airlock door, Raj Doru took a voidbubble-and-flitter harness from the rack, donned it, took a flask of water and a cassette of ration out of a locker, and clipped

them to the belt of his shorts. His eyes looked off into some unguessable reality that D'mahl could not begin to sync with.

"What are you doing, Doru?" he asked.

Doru didn't answer; he didn't even seem to notice D'mahl's presence. "Put on a voidbubble and see," Bandoora said, taking two harnesses off the rack and handing one to him.

D'mahl and Bandoora donned their harnesses, then Bandoora opened the airlock door and the three men stepped inside. They erected their bubbles, Bandoora sealed the door behind them, then the three of them walked through the shimmer screen onto the scoutship's entrance stage.

Out on the narrow metal shelf, D'mahl found himself utterly overwhelmed by the black immensities, the infinite hole in which the scoutship hung precariously suspended. This was utterly unlike the view from his grand salon, for here there was no concourse of ships or even torchtube wake to ease the impact of the abyss upon the soul. Here there was only a tiny ship, the abstract stars, three small men—and an infinity of nothing. D'mahl reeled and quaked with a vertigo that pierced the core of his being.

"Twenty-four hours, Haris," Doru tapped on the com frequency. He spread his arms, turned on his g-polarizer, and leaped up and out into the blackness of the interstellar abyss.

"What's he doing?" D'mahl shouted vocally. He caught himself, tapped the question to Bandoora as Doru began to pick up velocity and dwindle into the blackness along a vector at right angles to the ship's trajectory.

"He's going to suck void for twenty-four hours," Bandoora tapped. "He's answering the call. He'll go out far enough to lose sight of the ship and stay there for a standard day."

Doru was already just a vague shape moving against the backdrop of the starfield. As D'mahl watched, the shape fuzzed to a formless point. "What will he do out there?" he asked Bandoora quietly, a shuddering racking his body.

"What happens between a man and the void is between a man and the void."

"Is it... safe?"

"Safe? We have a fix on him, and he's still inside the cone of our interface. His body is safe. His mind... that's between Raj and the void."

Now D'mahl could no longer make Doru out at all. The voidsucker had vanished...into the void. D'mahl began to catch his mental breath, realizing that he was missing the

only prime senso footage that had yet presented itself to him. He tried to tap Doru through the ship's com frequency, but all he got was a reject signal.

"I've got to get this on tape, Bandoora! But he's rejecting my tap."

"I told you, what happens between a man and the void is between that man and the void. The only way you'll ever bring back a senso of *this* reality, D'mahl, is to experience it in your own flesh and tap yourself."

D'mahl looked into Bandoora's cool even eyes; then his gaze was drawn out into the black and starry depths into which Doru had disappeared. To which Doru had willingly, even ecstatically, given himself. Fear and fascination mingled inside him. Here was an experience the contemplation of which caused his knees to tremble, his heart to pound, and a cold wind to blow through his soul. Yet here too was an experience whose parameters he could not predict or fathom, a thing he had never done nor dreamed of doing, the thing that lay at the core of what the voidsuckers were. The thing, therefore, that was the core of the senso for which he was enduring these endless months of boredom. A thing, therefore, that he must inevitably confront.

"Why do you do it?" he tapped, turning from the abyss to face Bandoora.

"Each man has his own reason," the voidsucker tapped. "The call has many voices." He smiled a knowing smile. "You're beginning to hear it in your own language, D'mahl," he said.

D'mahl shivered, for somewhere deep inside him, the opening notes of that siren-song were indeed chiming, faraway music from the depths of the beyond within.

Standing on the bridge watching Bandoora disappear into the void, Jofe D'mahl felt like a hollow stringed instrument vibrating to yet another strumming of the same endless chord. Doru, Nyborg, Areth, Sidi, and now finally Bandoora had committed themselves to the abyss in these past three weeks, Areth and Nyborg twice apiece. Each of them had come back subtly changed. Doru seemed to have much of the hostility leached out of him; Nyborg had become even less talkative, almost catatonic; Areth seemed somehow slightly younger, perhaps a bit less distant; and Sidi had begun to ignore him almost completely. He could find no common de-

nominator, except that each succeeding voidsuck had made him feel that much more isolated on Bela-37, that much more alone, that much more curious about what transpired between the human mind and the void. Now that the last of them was out there, D'mahl felt the process nearing completion, the monotonous chord filling his being with its standing-wave harmonics.

"Are you hearing it, Jofe D'mahl?" the quiet voice of Areth Lorenzi said beside him. "Do you finally hear the call?"

"I'm not sure what I'm hearing," D'mahl said, without looking away from the immensities outside the plex. "Maybe what I'm hearing is my own ego calling. I've got to get a voidsuck on tape, or I've wasted all this time out here."

"It's the call," Areth said. "I've seen it often enough. It comes to each along his own natural vector."

With an effort, D'mahl turned to her. "There's something you people aren't telling me," he said. "I can feel it. I know it."

Now it was Areth who spoke without looking at him, whose eyes were transfixed by the overwhelming void. "There is," she said. "The void at the center of all. The truth we live with that you deny."

"Drool on all this crypticism!" D'mahl snapped. "What is this cosmic truth you keep teasing me with?"

"To know, you must first taste the void."

"Why?"

"To know that, you must first answer the call."

A wordless grunt of anger and frustration exploded from D'mahl's throat. "You think I don't know the game you people are playing?" he said. "You think I don't know what you're doing? But why? Why are you so anxious for me to suck void? Why did you want me here in the first place?"

"Because of who you are, Jofe D'mahl," Areth said. "Because of *Wandering Dutchmen*. Because you may be the one we have sought. The one who can share the truth and lift this burden from our souls."

"Now it's flattery, is it?"

Areth turned to face him, and he almost winced at the pain, the despair, the pleading in her eyes. "Not flattery," she said. "Hope. I ask you, one human being to another, to help us. Bandoora would not ask, but I do. Lift our burden, D'mahl, heed the call and lift our burden."

Unable to face those eyes, D'mahl looked off into the star-

speckled blackness. Bandoora could no longer be seen, but something out there was indeed beckoning to him with an unseen hand, calling to him with an unheard voice. Even his fear seemed to be a part of it, challenging him to face the void within and the void without and to carve something out of it if he had the greatness of soul to dare.

"All right," he said softly—to Areth, to Bandoora, to all of them, and to that which waited beyond the plex blister of the bridge. "You've won. When Bandoora comes back, I'll answer your damned call. As I once said, I've got nothing to do but dare."

But the man who had said it seemed long ago and far away.

They were all out on the entrance stage in voidbubbles to see him off. "Eighteen standard hours, D'mahl," Bandoora tapped over the com frequency. "Remember, we've got a fix on you, and we can come right out and get you if it becomes too much. Just tap."

Inside his own bubble, D'mahl nodded silently. He fingered his water flask and his ration cassette. He tapped the time at 4.346. He could not for a moment draw his eyes away from the endless black sea into which he was about to plunge. Millions of pinpoint stars pulsed and throbbed in the darkness like needles pricking his retinas. A silent roaring pulsed up at him from out of the abyss, the howl of the eternal silences themselves. His body seemed to end at the knees. The void appeared to be a tangible substance reaching out to enfold him in its cold and oceanic embrace. He knew that he must commit himself to it *now*, or in the next moment flee gibbering and sweating into the psychic refuge of Bela-37.

"See you at 22.000," he tapped inanely, activating his g-polarizer. Then he flexed his knees and dived off the little metal shelf into the vast unknown.

The act of leaping into the abyss seemed to free him of the worst of his fears, as if he had physically jumped out of them, and for a while he felt no different than he had at times when, flitting from one Trek ship to another, he had temporarily lost sight of all. Then he looked back.

Bela-37 was a small metal cylinder slowly dwindling into the starry darkness. The five tiny figures standing on the entrance stage hovered on the edge of visibility and then melted into the formless outline of the scoutship. Nothing

else existed that seemed real. Only the shrinking cylinder of metal, one single work of man in all that nothing. D'mahl shuddered and turned his head away. Somehow the sight of the pure void itself was less terrifying than that of his last connection with the things of man disappearing from view into its depths.

He did not look back again for a long time. When he did, his universe had neither back nor front nor sides nor top nor bottom. All around him was an infinite black hole dusted with meaningless stars, and every direction seemed to be down. His mind staggered, reeled, and rejected this impossible sensory data. Polarities reversed, so that the entire universe of stars and nothingness seemed to be collapsing in on him, crushing the breath out of him. He screamed, closed his eyes, and was lost in the four-dimensional whirlpool of his own vertigo.

By feel, he turned off the g-polarizer, whirling inside the vacuum of his own mind, sucked spiraling downward into meaningless mazes of total disorientation. Half whispering, he opened his eyes again to a new transformation.

It was as if he were imbedded in a clear, motionless, crystalline substance englobed by a seamless black wall onto which the stars had been painted. Nothing moved, no event transpired, time could not be said to be passing. It was the very essence of tranquility; calming, eternal, serene.

D'mahl sighed, felt his constricted muscles relax and his mind drift free. He floated in the void like an immortal embryo in everlasting amnion, waiting for he knew not what. Nor cared.

Time did not pass, but there was duration. D'mahl floated in the void, and waited. Thirst came and was slaked, and he waited. Hunger came; he nibbled ration, and waited. He grew aware of the beating of his own heart, the pulsing of blood through his veins, and he waited. The kinesthetic awareness of his own bodily functions faded, and he still waited.

Nothing moved. Nothing lived. Nothing changed. Silence was eternal. Gradually, slowly, and with infinite subtlety, D'mahl's perception of his environment began to change again. The comforting illusion of being held in crystalline suspension in a finite reality enclosed by a painted backdrop of stars and blackness began to fade under the inexorable pressure of durationless time and forced contemplation. The

clear crystal substance of space dissolved into the nothingness whence his mind had conjured it, and as it did, the stars became not points of pain on distant walls but motes of incandescent matter an infinity away across vast gulfs of absolute nothingness. The overwhelming blackness was not the painted walls of a pocket reality but an utter absence of everything—light, warmth, sound, motion, color, life—that went on and on without boundaries to give it shape or span to give it meaning.

This was the void and he was in it.

Strangely, D'mahl now found that his mind could encompass this mercilessly true perception of reality, however awesome, however terrifying, without the shield of perceptual illusions. Endless duration had stripped him of the ability to maintain these illusions, and between gibbering terror and a cool, detached acceptance of the only reality he could maintain, his mind chose detachment.

He was, and he was in the void. That was reality. He moved, and all else was static. That was real. He could hear the sound of his own breath, and all else was silence. That was inescapable truth. He could perceive his body's shape as the interface between his internal reality and the nothingness outside, and all else was formless forever in space and time. That was the void. That was the universe. That was prime reality. That was the reality from which men fled—into religion, dream, art, poetry, philosophy, metaphysics, literature, film, music, war, love, hate, paranoia, the senso and the tap. Into the infinity of realities within.

Outside the realities of the mind there was nothingness without form or end, minutely contaminated with flecks of matter. And man was but the chance end-product of a chain of random and improbable collisions between these insignificant contaminants. The void neither knew nor cared. The void did not exist. It was the eternal and infinite nonexistence that dwarfed and encompassed that which did.

D'mahl floated in this abyss of nonbeing, duration continued, and the void began to insinuate tendrils of its nonself into his being, into his pith and core, until it was reflected by a void within.

Jofe D'mahl experienced himself as a thin shell of being around a core of nothingness floating in more nonbeing that went on timelessly and formlessly forever. He was the atom-

thin interface between the void without and the void within. He was an anomaly in all that nothingness, a chance trick knot whereby nothingness redoubled upon itself had produced somethingness—consciousness, being, life itself. He was nothing and he was everything there was. He was the interface. He did not exist. He was all.

For more timeless duration, Jofe D'mahl existed as a bubble of consciousness in a sea of nonbeing, a chance bit of matter recompllicated into a state it was then pleased to call life, a locus of feeling in a nothingness that knew neither feeling nor knowing itself. He had passed beyond terror, beyond pride, beyond humility, into a reality where they had no meaning, where nothing had meaning, not even meaning itself.

He tried to imagine other bubbles of consciousness bobbing in the everlasting void—on Bela-37, on the ships of the Trek, on unknown planets circling those abstract points of light contaminating the sterile perfection of the abyss. But out here in the true void, in this endless matrix of nonbeing, the notion that consciousness, or even life itself, was anything but the improbable product of a unique and delicate chain of random interactions between bits of recompllicated nothingness called "matter" seemed hopelessly jejune and pathetically anthropocentric. One possible chain of unlikely events led to life and all others led back to nothingness. One misstep on the part of nonexistent fate, and the unlikely spell was broken.

The wonder was not that life had arisen so sparsely, but that it had arisen at all.

D'mahl floated in the blackness of the abyss, in the sea of timeless nonbeing, clinging to the life-preserver of one incontrovertible truth. I am, he thought. I exist, and every thought I've ever had, every reality that ever existed in my mind, also exists. This may be prime reality, but everything that is, is real.

Coldly, calmly, almost serenely, Jofe D'mahl waited in the silent immobile darkness for the recall signal from Bela-37, the call to return from the nonbeing of the void to the frail multiplexity of the worlds of man.

They were all out on the entrance stage in voidbubbles to greet him. Silently, they conveyed him inside the scoutship,

their eyes speaking of the new bond between them. With a strange ceremoniousness, they escorted D'mahl into the ship's commissary. Bandoora seated him at a short side of one of the rectangular tables, then sat down across its length from him. The others arranged themselves on either long side of the table. It would have been a moot point as to who was at the foot and who the head were it not for another of the scoutship's endless holos of space forming the wall behind Bandoora. This one was a view of the galaxy as seen from far out in the intergalactic emptiness, and it haloed Bandoora's head in stardust and blackness.

"Now that you have confronted the void, Jofe D'mahl," Bandoora said solemnly, "you are ready to share the truth."

Petty annoyance began to fade the reality of D'mahl's so recent experience from the forefront of his consciousness. This was beginning to seem like some kind of ridiculous ceremony. Were they going to treat his experience out there as an initiation into some ludicrous *religion*? Replete with incantations, tribal secrets, and Bandoora as high priest?

"Say what you have to say, Bandoora," he said. "But please spare me the formalities."

"As you wish, D'mahl," Bandoora said. His eyes hardened, seemed to pick up black flashes of void from the holo of space behind him. "What happened between you and the void is between you and the void," he said. "But you felt it. And for half a millennium our instruments have been confirming it."

"Confirming what?" D'mahl muttered. But the quaver in his voice would not let him hide from that awful foretaste that bubbled up into his consciousness from the void inside.

"We have instruments far beyond what we've let you people believe," Bandoora said, "and we've had them for a long time. We've gravscanned tens of thousands of stars, not thousands. We've found thousands of planets, not hundreds. We've found hundreds of Earth-parameter planets orbiting in habitable zones, not dozens. We've been lying, D'mahl. We've been lying to you for centuries."

"Why?" D'mahl whispered, knowing the answer, feeling it screaming at him from the holo behind Bandoora's head, from the voidsucker's opaque eyes, from the void beyond.

"You know why," Doru said harshly. "Because they're nothing but dead rock and gas. Over seven hundred of them, D'mahl."

"All of them should have been teeming with life by any parameters our scientists can construct," Areth Lorenzi said.

"For centuries, we hoped that the next one or the one after that would disprove the only possible conclusion. But we've not found so much as a microbe on any of them. We have no hope left."

"Gets as far as protein molecules sometimes," Nyborg grunted. "Maybe one in eighty."

"But the telltale probes can't—"

"Telltale!" Doru snorted. "The telltale probes are more illusion to protect you people! We've got microspectrographs that could pick up a DNA molecule ten light-years away, and we've had them for centuries."

"We already know that 997-Beta-II is dead," Sidi said. "We knew it before we reported to the Council of Pilots. This whole mission, like hundreds before it, is an empty gesture."

"But why have you been lying to us like this?" D'mahl shouted. "What right did you have? What—"

"What were we supposed to say?" Bandoora shouted back. "That it's all dead? That life on Earth was a unique accident? That nothing exists but emptiness and dead matter and the murderers of the only life there ever was? What are we supposed to say, D'mahl? What are we supposed to do?"

"For over two centuries we have lived with the conviction that our mission is hopeless," Areth said softly. "For over two centuries we have been leading the Trek from one false hope to the next, knowing that hope was false. Don't judge us too harshly. What else could we have done?"

"You could have told us," D'mahl croaked. "You could have told us the truth."

"Could we?" Areth said. "Could we have told you before you yourself confronted the void?"

Anger and despair chased each other in a yin-yang mandala at Jofe D'mahl's core. Anger at the smug arrogance of these narrow lamer people who dared treat all of human civilization as retarded children who could not be told the truth. Despair at the awful nature of that truth. Anger at the thought that perhaps the voidsuckers were hiding their true reason for silence, that they had kept the Trek in ignorance so that they wouldn't risk the termination of the scoutship program and with it the one act that gave their lamer lives meaning. Despair at the treacherous thought that the voidsuckers might be right after all, that the truth would shatter the Trek like radiation-rotted plex. Anger at himself for even

thinking of joining the voidsuckers and sitting in such arrogant judgment.

"You lamer drool-ridden dreeks!" D'mahl finally snarled. "How dare you judge us like that! Who do you think you are, gods on Olympus? Living your narrow little lives, cutting yourselves off from the worlds inside, and then presuming to decide what *we* can face!"

His flesh trembled, his muscles twanged like steel wire tensed to the snapping point, and adrenaline's fire pounded through his arteries as his hands ground into the edge of the table.

But the voidsuckers sat there looking up at him quietly, and what he saw in their eyes was relief, not anger, or reaction to anger.

"Then you'll do it, D'mahl?" Bandoora said softly.

"Do what?"

"Tell them in your own way," Areth said. "Lift the burden from us."

"What?"

"When I tapped *Wandering Dutchmen*, I felt you might be the one," Bandoora said. "You sensed the edges of the truth. You seemed to be looking at the void and yet beyond. You know your people, D'mahl, as we do not. You've just said it yourself. Tell them. Make a senso that tells them."

"All this...this whole trip...it was all a trick to get me out here...to tell me this...to drop your load of slok on me..."

"I promised you the chance to make the greatest senso of your career," Bandoora said. "Did I lie?"

D'mahl subsided into his chair. "But you didn't tell me I was going to have to succeed," he said.

IV

The scoutship came in tail-first on a long shallow arc over the hydrogen interface, still decelerating. Tapping Bela-37's visual frequency, Jofe D'mahl saw the ships of the Trek suddenly appear in all their glory as the scoutship passed the auroral wavefront, as if the interface were a rainbow curtain going up on a vast ballet of motion and light.

Thousands of shining cylinders hung in the blackness, their surfaces jeweled with multicolored lights. The space

between them coruscated and shone with shuttle exhausts and a haze of subtle reflections off thousands of moving void-bubbles. The thin purple wake of the Trek cut an ethereal swath of manifested motion and time through the eternal immobile nothingness.

The Trek seemed larger and lovelier than even D'mahl's memory had made it during the long sullen trip back. Its light drove back the everlasting darkness, its complexity shattered the infinite sameness of the void; it danced in the spotlight of its own brilliance. It was alive. It was beautiful. It was home.

Bandoora had calculated well; as Bela-37 passed sternward of the Trek, its relative velocity dwindled away to zero and it hung in space about twenty kilometers behind the great concourse of ships. Bandoora turned the scoutship end-for-end and began to ease it toward the Trek, toward its eventual parking slot just behind the hydrogen interface. D'mahl broke his tap with the scout's visual frequency and lay on the g-plate in his room for a long moment staring into the starfield holo before him for the last time.

Then, like a lover reaching for remembered flesh after a long parting, like a man rising out of a long coma toward the dawning light, he tapped Jiz Rumoku.

He was sitting at a clear glass table sipping an icy blue beverage out of a pewter mug, washing down a swallow of lavender sponge. Across the table, Varn Kamenev was pouring himself another mugful from a matching pitcher. The table was on a disk of clear plex, floating, like dozens of others, through what seemed like a topless and bottomless forest of ivy. He didn't recognize the restaurant, but didn't bother to tap for it.

"Home is the hero," he said with Jiz's throat and lips, feeling her body warm to his presence.

"Jof! Where are you, what happened, let me tap—"

"Wait for the flesh, Jiz," he told her. "I'll be in your gallery within two hours. I wanted you to be the first, but I've got to zip-tap my way back to realities before I die of thirst."

"But what was it like—"

"Miles and miles of miles and miles," he said, feeling a surge of exhilaration at the thought that he was with someone who could and would tap for the reference. "Next year in Jerusalem," he said with her mouth. He kissed her hand with her lips and broke the tap.

And zip-tapped through the changes like a random search program for the phantom tapper.

He was Para Bunning, soaring naked in a low-g dive into a pool of fragrant rose-colored water heated to body temperature. He watched Bela-37 pop through the hydrogen interface with himself aboard from the sensorium track of the shuttle pilot, then watched it arrive back at the Trek on the news-summary frequency. He stood in his own grand salon glaring through the party's mists at Haris Bandoora, then tapped it in realtime—the bare emerald floor, the darkened crystal trees, and, beyond the plex, the great concourse of ships shining in the galactic night.

He was in John Benina's body, looking down on Sundance Corridor. Vines crawled up and down the sheer glass faces of the apartments now, and pines grew around the faceted mirror in the center of the square, subduing the usual brilliance. He tapped a fragment of *Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom*, a senso by Iran Capabula that had been premiered during his absence: bent over under a yellow sun in a clear blue sky, he was weeding an endless field of fantastically colorful flowers, soaked in their incenselike perfume. He danced a few measures of *Starburst* as male lead for the Far Look Ballet. He made love for the first time on a hill of blue fur in *Samarkand*, for the last time at Jiz's, and a dozen times in between. He edited *Blackout*, his first senso, and *Wandering Dutchmen*, his last. He dined amidst colored clouds on *Ariel* and at the shore of Blood Lake on *Lothlorien* and a dozen other meals between. He tapped random sequences of every senso he had ever made.

And when he was through, he was one with the D'mahl that had been, he was back in the universe of infinite realities that he had left; he was whole, and he was home.

Brigadoon, as D'mahl had expected, was totally transformed. But the nature of the current flash was hardly anything that he would have expected, and something about it chilled him at the core.

Twodeck was a sim of an ancient Alpine Earth village—simmied wooden houses, grass growing on synthetic loam, pine trees; even the bulkheads were hidden by a 360-degree holo of snowcapped mountains under a blue sky. The amusements of sixdeck had been cut down and ludicrously simplified to fit into an American county fair motif: Ferris wheel,

merry-go-round, dart-and-balloon games, a baseball diamond, even mechanical sims of prize cattle, sheep, dogs, and pigs. Once again, the deck was enclosed in a 360-degree holo, this one of fields of corn waving in a breeze. Eightdeck, a residential deck, was a simmed African village—thatched huts in a circle, a kraal containing mechanical cattle and antelope, lions and hyenas slinking about the holoed veldt that enclosed it. Tendeck had actually been made over into a functional dirt-digger deck: row after row of pine tree seedlings, thickly packed vine trellises, beds of flowers, people in dirt-digger green bustling about everywhere.

It wasn't so much the theme of the flash that appalled D'mahl—*Brigadoon* had gone through nature flashes before—but the monomania of its application, the humorlessness of it all, the sheer lack of brio. This latest transformation of *Brigadoon* seemed so deadly earnest, an attempt to accurately sim old Earth environments rather than to use them to ring artistic changes.

Twelve-deck, Jiz's deck, the epicenter of all of *Brigadoon*'s waves of transformation, appalled him most of all. Everything was wood and trees. The shops and restaurants were constructed of simmed logs with rough bark on them; the windows were small square panes of plex set in wooden grill-works. The furniture in them was of simmed rough-hewn wood. The paths were flagstone. Huge simmed chestnut and eucalyptus trees were everywhere, towering to the ceiling of the deck to form an almost seamless forest canopy, and dwarfing and almost crowding out the modest neoprimitive cabins. The air had been made redolent with the odors of burning leaves and moldering loam; birdcalls and vague animal rustlings burred continually in the ear.

Jiz Rumoku's gallery was a single large room carved out of the simmed stump of what would have been an enormous redwood tree, with her living quarters a rude lean-to atop it. Inside, the walls and floor were simmed redwood planking, the ceiling was ribbed by heavy wooden beams, and an orange fire flickered and roared in a red brick fireplace. Elegant simmed oak tables and chests in the clean, severe Shaker style served to display representational woodcarvings, clay pottery, blue-and-white ceramic dishes, simple gold and silver jewelry, wickerwork baskets and animals, neohomespun clothing. Cast iron stoves, scythes, tools, and plowshares were scattered around the gallery.

Jiz stood behind a low table wearing a clinging, form-fitting dress of red-and-white checked gingham, cut in bare-breasted Minoan style. She was drinking something out of a clay mug.

"Jof!" she shouted, and they cross-tapped. D'mahl felt the scratchiness of the dress against her skin as his body kissed her lips and his arms hugged him to her. He tasted the remnants of the drink in her mouth—something sweet, slightly acrid, and vaguely alcoholic. His own lips tasted hard and electric by comparison.

"I don't know where to begin!" she said, as they broke the tap. "Let me tap your sensorium track of the trip!"

"Not in the banks yet," D'mahl said. "Remember, I was cut off."

"That's right! How bizarre! Are you actually going to have to *tell* me about it?"

"I'll tap the recordings into the banks soon enough," D'mahl mumbled, wondering whether he was lying. "But in the meantime, what's all *this*, talking about bizarre?"

"That's right," Jiz said, "you *have* been out of touch. How strange! The transmutational flash didn't last quite as long as I had expected, mostly because it began to seem so artificial, so out of sync with our future vector."

"Future vector?"

"Eden."

"*Eden?*"

"Our coming pew home, Jof. We couldn't keep calling it 997-Beta-II, could we? We had a referendum and 'Eden' won, though I preferred Olympia. I've always found the Greek mythos more simpatico."

Chimes of nausea rolled through D'mahl's being from a center of nothingness below his sternum. "Don't you think all this is a bit premature, Jiz?" he said.

"That's the nature of my game, Jof, you know that," Jiz said, touching the tip of his nose with a playful fingertip. "But this time, I'm doing more than creating flash. I'm helping to prepare us for the transformation."

"*Transformation?*"

She flitted around the gallery, touching wood, brick, clay, wicker, iron. "Oh, Jof, you said it yourself in *Wandering Dutchmen!* Flying Dutchmen on an endless sea, that's what we've been too long. Eternal adolescents low-riding our faerie ships through the night. And now that we've got a chance to

grow up, to sink new roots in fresh soil, we've got to sync our minds with the coming reality, we've got to climb off the torch we're riding and get closer to the ground. Wood, brick, iron, clay, growing things! *Planetary* things! We're preparing ourselves to pioneer a virgin world."

"Slok," D'mahl muttered under his breath. "Dirt-digger slok," he said aloud. Something like anger began simmering toward nova inside him.

Jiz paused, a butterfly in mid-dance. "What?"

D'mahl looked at her, bare breasts held high over red-and-white gingham, proudly presiding over the synthetic primitivism she had created, over the vain and pathetic dream that would never be, and for a long moment she seemed to be made of thin clear glass that would shatter at the merest sound of his voice. The gallery, twelvedeck, *Brigadoon*, the Trek were clouds of smoke that would dissipate at a careless wave of his hand. Beyond and within, the void gibbered and laughed at poor wraiths who tried so hard to be real. How can I tell her? D'mahl thought. And to what end? To what damned end?

"Nothing," he said lamely. "I guess I just don't like the idea of growing up. I've got too much pan in my peter."

Jiz giggled as she tapped the triple-reference pun, and it enabled the moment to slide by. But D'mahl felt a distancing opening up between himself and Jiz, between himself and the Trek, between reality and illusion. Is this what it feels like to be a voidsucker? he wondered. If it is, you can torch it to plasma and feed it to the converter!

"But you've been out there, Jof," Jiz said, moving back across the gallery toward him. "You've read the telltale wave-front, you've looked inside the gates of Eden." Her eyes sparkled, but beyond that sugarplum glow D'mahl saw only the lurking void. "Are there oceans with fish and skies full of birds? Is the grass green? Do the plants flower?"

"A gentleman never tells," D'mahl muttered. What do I say, that the green grass is copper salts and the oceans are blue with cyanide and the skies full of poison? He began to feel more sympathetic for the voidsuckers now. How could you make a life out of telling people these things? How do you like being the angel of death?

"Jof!"

"I can't say anything, Jiz, I promised not to."

"Oh come on, how could the voidsuckers or the Council squeeze a promise like that out of you?"

With enormous effort, D'mahl painted a smug smile across his face; the creases in his skin felt like stress-cracks in a mask of glass. "Because that's the quid I'm paying for their pro quo, ducks," he said.

"You mean . . . ?"

"That's right. You didn't think I'd spend all that time out there and let some dry-as-Luna bulletin from the Council upstage me, did you? No bulletin—997-Beta-II—Eden—is my next senso."

Jiz bounced up, then down, and kissed him on the lips. "I cog it'll be your greatest," she said.

D'mahl hugged her briefly to him, his eyes looking through her mane of hair to a set of plain clay dishes on an oaken chest beside the brick fireplace. He shuddered, feeling the void inside every atom of every molecule of matter in those simmed projections of a past that was dead forever into a future that would never be. He was committed to doing it now, the way through was the only way out, and he had taken it upon himself to find it.

"It had better be," he said. "It had damned well better be."

D'mahl stood in Aric Moreau's body amidst solemn people in their loathsome homespun wandering drool-eyed through tightly packed rows of pine seedlings jamming a dirtdigger deck on *Glade*. There was no attempt to sim anything here; the dirtdiggers were force-growing a forest for transplantation to the nonexistent fertile soil of Eden, and, as with the other dirtdigger decks he had tapped, aesthetics had been gobbled up by function. Angrily, he made excrement rain from the sky, turned the fashionable neohomespun garments to filthy denim rags, and threw in a few wrathful lightning bolts for good measure.

He ran the segment of Bela-37's report where the holo of 997-Beta-II hung like an overripe fruit in the center of the scoutship's bridge and made a tongue and mouth appear at the equator, giving a big juicy raspberry. He floated in the void, falling, falling, eternally falling into an infinite black hole dusted with meaningless stars. He caused the stars to become crudely painted dots on black paper, and punched his way out of the paper-bag continuum and into—the abyss.

He tapped a newstape from 708, the year 557-Gamma-IV

had been the light that failed, and watched Trekkers in Biblical-style robes moping about a dirt-digger deck crammed with overgrown flower beds and the reek of rotting vegetation. He exaggerated the sour expressions into ludicrous clown caricatures of themselves that melted slowly into pumpkins, and Big Ben chimed midnight. He stood poised on the entrance stage of Bela-37, reeling and quaking, utterly overwhelmed by the black immensities in which the scoutship hung precariously suspended.

He snorted, took the effects ring off his head like a discarded crown, and sat in the cocoon chair staring moodily at the microtape pod turning futilely on the output spindle of his editor. He pressed a blue button and wiped the pod. The slok I've been laying down these three days just isn't worth saving, he thought. I'm just diddling with the banks and the effects ring; it doesn't add up to anything.

And time was growing short. Everyone knew that Bela-37 had returned, and everyone knew that the reason there had been no bulletin was that Jofe D'mahl was going to release the news in the form of a senso. Jiz in her innocence and Bandoora in his cowardly cunning had seen to that. The longer it took for the senso to appear, the more cosmic import it took on, and the more certain people became that the only possible reason for releasing the scoutship report in this bizarre manner was to do karmic justice to the greatest and most joyous event in the history of the Trek, to write a triumphant finis to man's long torchship ride.

So the longer he sat here dead in space like a ship with its torch blown out, the farther people would travel along hope's false vector, the worse the crash would be when it came, the harder it became to conceive of a senso that could overcome all that dynamic inertia, and on into the next turning of the terrible screw. Now D'mahl understood only too well why the voidsuckers had chosen to lie for half a millennium. The longer the lie went on, the more impossible it became to dare to tell the truth.

And what was the way out that the voidsuckers took? They ignored the asymptotic nature of the Frankenstein Monster they had created and gave themselves over to the void! For them, the ultimate reality was the greatest escape illusion of them all.

D'mahl slammed both hands angrily down on the edge of the editor console. All right, damn it, if the void is where all

vectors lead, then the void has to be the core! It's the best footage I've got anyway. I'll go to the center, and I won't come back till I've got the heart of this senso beating in the palm of my hand.

He fitted the pod of his voidsuck onto the editor's auxiliary playback spindle and programmed continuous-loop replay. He started to program a twenty-four-standard-hour limit, then changed his mind. No, he thought, I want the power in my hand, and I want this to be open-ended. He programmed a cut-off command into the effects ring bank, threw blocks across all other effects programming, and put the ring on his head.

Now he would confront his void footage as if it were the original naked reality, with only the power to break the loop, without the reality-altering powers of the editor. And I won't use the cutoff until I can come back with what I need, he promised himself as he opened his tap to the voidsuck pod. I won't come back until I can come back riding my own torch again.

He was an immortal embryo floating free in the eternal amnion of the universal abyss, and the millions of stars were motes of incandescent matter an infinity away across vast gulfs of absolute nothingness. The overwhelming blackness was an utter absence of everything—light, warmth, sound, color, life—that went on and on without boundaries to give it shape or span to give it meaning. This was the void and he was in it.

But to his surprise, D'mahl found that his mind now immediately grasped this mercilessly true perception of reality without illusion, and with only the residual somatic vertigo and terror recorded on the sensorium tape. Even this soon faded as the tape's memory caught up with the cool clarity of mind it had taken him an unknown duration to disorientation and terror to achieve in realtime.

He was, and he was in the void. He moved, and all else was static. He could perceive his body's shape, the interface between his internal reality and the nothingness outside, and all else was without edge or interface forever in space and time. Outside the realities of his own mind was void without form or end, minutely contaminated with flecks of matter, and man was but the chance end-product of a chain of random and improbable collisions between these insignificant contam-

inants. The void neither knew nor cared. The void did not exist. It was the eternal and infinite nonexistence that dwarfed and encompassed that which did. D'mahl experienced himself as a thin shell of being around a core of nothingness floating in more nonbeing, a trick anomaly of somethingness lost in timeless and formless forever. Nothing had meaning, not even meaning itself. The wonder was not that life had arisen but once in this endless matrix of nonbeing, but that it had arisen at all.

Black void, meaninglessly dusted with untouchable stars, the internal churnings of his own flesh, the utter knowledge of the utter emptiness that surrounded him, and timeless duration. Once you have reached this place, D'mahl thought, then what? Once asked, the question became ridiculous, for here in the void there was nothing to address any question to but himself. There was nothing to perceive but the absence of perception. There was nothing to perceive. There was nothing. There wasn't.

D'mahl floated in physical nothingness and mental void waiting for the transcendent revelation he had sought. Waiting for the revelation. Waiting for. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Games chased themselves through his mind as he waited in the absence of event, in the absence of meaningful perception, in the absence of measurable time, in the total absence. He counted his own pulsebeats trying to reestablish time, but soon lost count and forgot even what he had been doing. He tried to imagine the nature of what it was he sought, but that immediately tangled itself up in tautological feedback loops: if he knew what he sought, he would not have to seek it. He tried to speculate on what lay beyond the infinite nothingness that surrounded him in order to establish some frame of metaphysical reference, but any such concept hovered forever in unreachable realms of mathematical gobbledygook. He tried to immerse himself in the nothingness itself and found he was there already.

Games evaporated from his consciousness, and then the possibility of games, and he became nothing but a viewpoint trapped in a vacuum of nondata. The blackness of space could no longer be perceived as anything like a color, and the stars became no more than mere flecks of retinal static. Vision and hearing were becoming forgotten concepts in this utter non-

reality where the only sensory data seemed to be the noise in the sensory systems themselves.

Thought itself began to follow the senses into oblivion, and finally there was nothing left but a focus of ache in the vast and endless nothing, a bonging mantra of boredom so total, so complete, so without contrast that it became a world of universal pain.

No, not even pain, for pain would have been welcome relief here.

Something somewhere whimpered. Something nowhere whimpered. Nothing nowhere whimpered. Why? Why? Why? it cried. Why? Why? Why? Why is this happening to me? Why is this not happening to me? Why doesn't something happen? Happen... happen... happen... happen... happen... happen...

A mental shout shattered the void. "Why am I doing this to myself?"

And there was mind, chastising itself. And there was mind, chastising itself for its own stupidity. There was mental event, there was content, there was form.

There was the mind of Jofe D'mahl floating forever in eternal boredom. And laughing at itself.

You are doing this to yourself, you silly dreck! D'mahl realized. And with that realization, the meaningless patterns on his retinas revolved themselves into a vision of the galactic abyss, speckled with stars. And in his mind, that vision further resolved itself into microtape unreeling endlessly on a pod in his editor in his living quarters on *Excelsior* near the center of the Trek.

You're doing it *all* to yourself, cretin! *You* control this reality, but you forgot you control it. There isn't any problem. There never was a problem. The only problem is that we refused to see it.

"Cut," D'mahl tapped, and he was sitting in his cocoon chair bathed in his own sweat, staring at the console of his editor, laughing, feeling the power of his own torch coursing through him, crackling from his fingertips, enlivening his exhausted flesh.

Laughing, he cleared the blocks from his effects banks. Who needs planets? Who needs life beyond the germ we carry? Who needs prime reality at all?

"*Réalité, c'est moi,*" D'mahl muttered. He had said it before,

but hadn't savored its full meaning. For on his brow he wore not a crown of thorns but the crown of creation.

He ran back a few feet of the tape and floated once more in the empty star-dusted blackness. He laughed. "Let there be light," he tapped. And behold, the firmament shattered, and there was light.

"Cut," Jofe D'mahl tapped. And sat hovering over his editor. And began to carve another segment of his own meaning out of the void.

A bright golden light fills your vision and a delicious warm glow suffuses your body. The light recedes until it becomes something no naked human eye could bear: the plasma heart of a torchtube, which seems to beat and throb like a living thing. And now you are straddling this phoenix-flame; it grows between your legs and yet you are riding it through a galaxy preternaturally filled with stars, a blazing firmament of glory. As you ride faster and faster, as the warm glow in your body builds and builds with every throb of the torchtube, letters of fire light-years high appear across the starfield:

RIDING THE TORCH

by Jofe D'mahl

And you scream in ecstasy and the universe explodes into crystal shards of light.

An old man with long white hair, a matted white beard, dressed in an ancient grimy robe, sits on a fluffy white cloud picking his red, beaklike nose. He has wild-looking pop eyes under bushy white brows and a shock of lightning bolts in his right hand. On the cloud next to him sits Satan in a natty red tuxedo, black cape, and bow tie, with apple-green skin and a spiffy black Vandyke. He is puffing on the end of his long sinuous tail, exhaling occasional whiffs of lavender smoke that smells of brimstone. You are watching this scene from slightly above, inhaling stray Satanic vapors. They are mildly euphoric.

"Job, Job," Satan says. "Aren't you ever going to get tired of bragging about that caper? What did it prove, anyway?"

"That my creatures love me no matter how much crap I

dump on them," the old man says. "I don't see them building no Sistine Chapels to you, Snake-eyes."

"You really are a sadistic old goat, aren't you? You ought to audition for *my* part."

"You think I couldn't do it? You think you're such a red-hot badass?" The old man stands up, scowling thunders, brandishing his lightning bolts. "By the time I got through with those yucks, they'd be drooling to you for mercy. Either way, I am the greatest. Remember how I creamed those Egyptians?"

Satan blows lavender smoke at him. "Ten crummy plagues and a drowning scene. Strictly amateur stuff."

"*Oh yeah? Oh yeah?*" the old man shouts, flinging random lightning bolts, his eyes rolling like pinwheels. "I'll show you who's the tailtorcher around here! I'll show you who's Lord God Allah Jehovah, King of the Universe!"

"Oh, really?" Satan drawls. "Tell you what, you want to make it double or nothing on the Job bet?"

"Anytime, Snake-eyes, anytime!"

"Okay, Mr. I Am, you dumped all you had on Job and he still crawled on his hands and knees to kiss your toes. If you're such a hotshot, let's see you break them. All of them. Let's see you make the whole human race curl up into fetal balls, stick their thumbs in their mouths, and give up. That's the bet, Mr. In the Beginning. I'll take them against you."

"You gotta be kidding! I run this whole show! I'm omniscient, omnipotent, and I can deal marked cards off the bottom of the deck."

"I'll give you even money anyway."

The old man breaks into maniacal laughter. Satan looks up into your face, shrugs, and twirls his finger around his right temple. "You got a bet, sonny!" the old man says. "How's *this* for openers?" And with a mad whoop, he starts flinging lightning bolts down from his cloud onto the world below.

You are standing in a crowded street in Paris as the sky explodes and the buildings melt and run and the Eiffel Tower crumples and falls and your flesh begins to slough off your bones. You are a great bird, feathers aflame in a burning sky, falling toward a wasteland of blowing ash and burning buildings. You are a dolphin leaping out of a choking bitter sea into sandpaper air. You stand beside your orange orchard watching the trees ignite like torches under a sky-filling fire-ball as your hair bursts into flame. You lie, unable to breathe,

on an endless plain of rubble and gray ash, and the sky is a smear of cancerous purples and browns.

You are watching Satan and the wild-eyed old man drifting above the ruined ball of the Earth on their fleecy clouds. Satan looks a bit greener than before, and he sucks nervously on the end of his tail. The old man, grinning, flings occasional lightning bolts at small islands of green below, turning them to more gray ash and purplish-brown wasteland.

"Zap!" the old man giggles, flinging a bolt. "How's *that*, Snake-eyes? I *told* you I was omnipotent. They never had a chance. Fork over, Charley!" He holds out the palm of his left hand.

"I've got to admit that tops your Land of Egypt number," Satan says. "However..." He takes his tail out of his mouth and blows a pointed arrow of lavender smoke upward past your nose. Following it, you see dozens of distant silvery cylinders moving outward into the starry blackness of the galactic night.

"Oh, yeah?" the old man says, cocking a lightning bolt at the fleet of converted asteroid freighters. "I'll take care of *that*!"

"Hold on, Grandpa!" Satan drawls. "You can't win your bet that way! If there are none of them left to give up, then I win and you lose."

Trembling with rage, the old man uncocks his throwing arm. His eyes whirl like runaway galaxies, his teeth grind into each other, and black smoke steams out of his ears. "You think you're so damned smart, do you? You think you can get the best of the old Voice from the Whirlwind, do you? You think those shaved apes have a chance of making it to the next green island in their lousy tin-can outrigger canoes?"

"There's a sweet little world circling Tau Ceti, and they've got what it takes to get that far," Satan says, throwing you a little wink on the side.

"Don't tell me about Tau Ceti!" the old man roars. "I'm omnipotent, I'm omniscient, and I can lick any being in this bar!" He snaps his fingers and you, he, and Satan are standing on a rolling meadow of chartreuse grass under a royal-blue sky scudded with faerie tracers of white cloud. Huge golden fernlike trees sway gently in a sweet fragrant breeze, swarms of tiny neon-bright birds drift among beds of huge orange-, emerald-, ruby-, and sapphire-colored flowers, filling the air with eldritch music. Red velvety kangaroolike creatures with

soulful lavender eyes graze contentedly, leap out, and nuzzle each other with long mobile snouts.

"Here's your sweet little world circling Tau Ceti," the old man snarls. "Here's the new Eden those monkeys are making for, and it's as good a job as I did on Earth, if I do say so myself."

"Maybe better," Satan admits.

"Is it?" the man howls with a voice of thunder. And his eyes rumble and he flings a handful of lightning bolts into the air, and his face turns bright red with rage as he screams: "Turn to slok!"

And the sky becomes a sickly chemical violet veined with ugly gray clouds. And the chartreuse grass, the golden fern trees, and the bright flowers dissolve into a slimy brown muck as the birds and red velvet kangaroos evaporate into foul purple mists. And the brown muck and purple mists mingle and solidify....

And you are clad in a heavy spacesuit, standing on an endless plain of purplish-brown rock under a cruel dead sky, one of a dozen suited men crawling over the planetary corpse like ants on a bone pile.

You are watching Satan and the old man hovering over the converted asteroid freighters of the Trek as they slink away from Tau Ceti V into the galactic night. A gray pall seems to exude from the ships, as if the plex of their ports and blisters were grimed with a million years of despair's filth.

"Take a look at them now!" the old man crows. He snaps his fingers and the three of you are looking down into a primitive dirt-digger deck from a catwalk. The scudding of green is like an unwholesome fungus on the synthetic loam, the air smells of ozone, and the dirt-diggers below are gray hunchbacked gnomes shuffling about as if under 4 gs. "It won't be long now," the old man says. "It's a century to the next live world I've put out here. None of them are going to live to see it, and boy oh boy, do they know it!"

He snaps his fingers again and the three of you are standing by the torchtube in a first-generation residence deck: grim blue corridors, leaden overheads, ugly steel plating, row after row of identical gray doors. The people plodding aimlessly up and down seem as leached of color and life as their surroundings.

"And before their children can get there, they're going to

start running out of things," the old man says. "Carbon for their flesh. Calcium for their bones. Phosphorus for their life's juices. Iron for their blood." The light begins to get dim, the walls begin to get misty. The people begin to slump and melt, and you can feel your own bones begin to soften, your blood thinning to water; your whole body feels like a decomposing pudding. "They're going to turn slowly to slok themselves," the old man says, leering.

He snaps his fingers once more, and you are an abstract viewpoint beside the old man and Satan as they hang over the dimming lights of the Trek.

"Well, Snake-eyes, are you ready to pay up now?" the old man says smugly, holding out his palm.

"They haven't given up yet," Satan says, dragging on the tip of his tail.

"You're a stubborn dreek!" the old man snaps irritably.

Satan blows out a plume of lavender smoke that seems endless. It billows and grows and expands into a great cloud of mist that completely envelops the fleet of converted asteroid freighters. "So are they," he says.

And when the lavender mist clears, the Trek has been transformed. Where there had been scores of converted asteroid freighters, slinking through space in their own pall of gloom, there are now hundreds of new Trekborn torchships coruscating like a pirate's treasure of jewels against the black velvet of the night, promenading through the abyss behind their own triumphant rainbow shield, the hydrogen interface.

Satan laughs, he cracks his long sinuous tail like a whip, and the three of you are standing beside the great circum-torchtube coils of a sifting deck, amid recovery canisters, control consoles, and a Medusa's head of transfer coils. You can feel the immense power of the torch in your bones, through the soles of your feet. Satan points grandly from canister to canister with the tip of his tail. "Carbon for their flesh," he mimics in a croaking parody of the old man's voice. "Calcium for their bones. Phosphorus for their life's juices. Iron for their blood. And all of it from the interstellar medium itself, which you can't get rid of without shutting down your whole set, Mr. Burning Bush! They're not turning to slok, they're turning slok to themselves."

He breaks into wild laughter, snaps his tail again, and the three of you are standing in a small pine forest in a dirt-digger deck beneath a holoed blue sky inhaling the odors of growing

things. "Lo, they have created a garden in your wilderness," Satan says, doubling over with laughter as the old man's face purples with rage. Another crack of the tail and you are floating above a grand promenade in a particularly brilliant amusement deck: restaurants in gold, sapphire, and silver, diamond tables drifting on null-g plates, gypsy dancers twirling weightless in the air, rosy fountains, sparkling music, and the smell of carnival. "And a city of light in your everlasting darkness."

Yet another snap of the tail and the three of you are drifting in the center of the Trek, surrounded by the great concourse of bright ships, under the aurora of the hydrogen interface. Satan holds out his palm to the old man. "Does this look as if they're going to give up, Mr. Have No Others Before Me? All they'll ever need, and all from pure slok! They can go on forever. Cross my palm with silver, Mr. Creator of All He Surveys. Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command."

The old man's face turns from purple to black. Fire shoots out of his nostrils. The hairs of his beard curl and uncurl with a furious electrical crackle. "For I am a god of vengeance and wrath," he roars, "and I am going to smite them hip and thigh."

"You're wasting your dingo act on *me*, cobber," Satan drawls, puffing out lavender smoke rings. "They've got you by the short hairs."

"Oh, have they, sonny? Wait till they get to their next Ultima Thule!" The old man snaps his fingers with a peal of thunder and the three of you are standing in a forest of immensely tall and stately trees with iridescent green bark and huge sail-like leaves at their crown that roll and snap ponderously in the wind. A thick carpet of brownish mosslike grass covers the cool forest floor, punctuated with red, blue, yellow, and purple fans of flowery fungi. Feathered yellow and orange monkey-size bipeds leap from leaf to leaf high overhead, and fat little purplish balls of fur roll about the brownish grass nibbling on the fungi. The air smells of cinnamon and apples, and the slight overrichness of oxygen makes you pleasantly lightheaded.

"Let me guess," Satan sighs, sucking languidly on the tip of his tail.

"Turn to slok!" the old man bellows, and his shout is thunder that rends the sky and the forest crystallizes and shatters

to dust and the brownish grass hardens to rock and the feathered bipeds and purplish furballs decompress and explode and you are standing on a plain of mean brown rock streaked with green under a blue-black sky soiled with green clouds, and the air reeks of chlorine.

"You're slipping, Mr. You Were," Satan says. "They don't need your gardens any more, for theirs is the power and the glory forever, amen."

"Oh, is it?" the old man says, grinning. "They don't need the old Master of the Universe any more, do they? You've been the Prince of Liars too long, sonny. You don't understand how these jerks have been programmed. For thus have I set them one against the other and each against himself. It's the oldest trick in the book."

He snaps his fingers and the three of you are pressed up against the outer bulkhead of an amusement deck as a wild-eyed mob of dirtiggers surges through it, smashing crystal tables, toppling fire-sculptures, brandishing crosses wrapped with simmered grape leaves, and chanting: "No more ships! No more ships! Soil or death!"

"They don't need my gardens any more, do they?" the old man gloats. "I can play their minds like harpsichords, because *I* created their universe, outer *and* inner." He snaps his fingers. "Look at your masters of energy and matter now!"

And you are standing in a corroding dirtigger deck breathing sour air. The pine trees are stunted, the grass is sickly, and the dirtiggers' eyes are feverish and shiny as they bow down to the vine-covered cross. "Groveling on their hands and knees where they belong," the old man says. "The old guilt routine, it gets 'em every time." He snaps his fingers again, and you are falling through a droptube through the decks of a well-maintained ship. The air is sweet, the lights clear and bright, the metallic and jeweled surfaces clean and sparkling, but the peacock crowds seem ridden with fear, whirling at nothing, jumping at shadows. "And if the right don't get them, the left hand will," the old man says. "Each man is an island, each man stands alone. What profiteth them if they gain the universe as long as I hold the mortgage on their souls?"

"Ah, but what profiteth them if they *forsake* your cheap-jack housing development and *gain* their souls?" Satan says, blowing chains of smoke rings into each passing deck. The rings of lavender smoke alight on the brows of the people and turn into silvery bands—the first full sensory transceivers,

ancestors of the tap. "Behold the tap!" Satan says as the transceiver bands melt into the skulls of their wearers, becoming the surgically implanted tap. "The Declaration of Independence from your stage set, O Producer of Biblical Epics! The bridge between the islands! The door to realities into which you may not follow! The crown of creation!"

Satan turns to you as the three of you leave the droptube in a quiet residential deck: walkways of golden bricks wandering among gingerbread houses of amethyst, quartz, topaz. He blows a smoke ring at you which settles on your head and then sinks into your skull. "What about it, man?" he asks you with a cock of his head at the old man. "Is Merlin the Magnificent here the Be-All and End-All, or just another circus act?"

Satan breaks into mad laughter, and then you are snapping your tail, laughing madly, and blowing lavender puffs of smoke at the old man who stares at you with bugging pop eyes.

"Where did he go?" the old man says.

"Allow me to introduce myself," you say.

"The Lord is not mocked!" the old man shouts.

"Behold the master of space beyond spaces and times beyond time," you say, sucking on the tip of your tail.

You bounce one of the purplish furballs on your hand under huge iridescent green trees. You stand on the Champs Élysées in fair Paris on lost Earth. You dance in Jofe D'mahl's grand salon and pop a flasher into your mouth which explodes in a flash of pink velvet that transforms you into a woman making love to a golden man on black sands on the shore of a silver lake under blue and orange moons. You ride a surfboard of emerald light in the curl of a wave a mile high that rolls across an endless turquoise sea. You soar singing into the heart of a blue-white sun, burning yet unconsumed.

You are a viewpoint beside Satan and the old man rising through a lift-tube in a torchship transformed. Sombre dirt-digger shorts turn to cloaks of many colors. Trees, ivy, and flowers sprout from metal deckplates. Corrosion melts from the bulkheads of dirt-digger decks, the vine-colored crosses evaporate, and sour-smelling gloomings become fragrant gardens of delight.

Anger boils through the old man. His red face dopplers through purple into ultraviolet black as sparks fly from his gnashing teeth and tiny lightning bolts crackle from his fin-

gertips. "They've...they've...they've..." He stammers in blind rage, his eyes rolling thunders.

"They've eaten from the Tree of Creation this time," Satan says with a grin. "How do you like *them* apples?"

"For eating of the Tree of Good and Evil I drove these drool-headed dreeks from Eden with fire and the sword!" the old man roars with the voice of a thousand novas. "For *this* will I wreak such vengeance as will make all that seem like a cakewalk through paradise!"

And he explodes in a blinding flash of light, and now you can see nothing but the starry firmament and an enormous mushroom pillar cloud of nuclear fire light-years high, roiling, immense, static, and eternal. "For now I am become the Lord of Hosts, Breaker of Worlds! Look upon my works, ye mortals, and despair!"

And you are watching Jofe D'mahl flitting from a shuttle to the entrance stage of Bela-37. You watch him emerge from a lift-tube onto the bridge of the scoutship. And you are Jofe D'mahl, staring back through the plex at the Trek, a disk of diamond brilliance behind the rainbow gauze of its hydrogen interface. As you watch, it dwindles slowly to a point of light, one more abstract star lost in the black immensities of the boundless void.

"Overwhelming, isn't it?" Haris Bandoora says, moving partially into your field of vision. "A hundred million stars, perhaps as many planets, and this one galaxy is a speck of matter floating in an endless nothing. Once we were bits of some insignificant anomaly called life contaminating a dust-mote circling a dot of matter lost in the universal void. Now we're not even that."

"We're the part that counts," you say.

"If only you knew."

"Knew what?"

"I've heard the call, Haris." Raj Doru, fever in his fierce brown eyes, has risen to the bridge and walked to Bandoora's side.

You are standing in a voidbubble on Bela-37's entrance stage with Haris Bandoora and Raj Doru. Your field of vision contains nothing but the tiny ship, the abstract stars, the two men, and an infinity of nothing. You reel with vertigo and nausea before that awful abyss.

Doru spreads his arms, turns on his g-polarizer, and leaps up and out into the blackness of the void.

"What's he doing?" you shout.

"Sucking void," Bandoora says. "Answering the call. He'll go out far enough to lose sight of the ship and stay there for a standard day."

"What will he do out there?" you ask softly as Doru disappears into the everlasting night.

"What happens between a man and the void is between a man and the void."

"Why do you do it?"

"Each man has his own reason, D'mahl. The call has many voices. Soon you will hear it in your own language."

And you are standing on the scoutship's bridge watching Haris Bandoora himself disappear into that terrible oceanic immensity.

"Are you hearing the call, Jofe D'mahl?" says the quiet voice of Areth Lorenzi, the ancient voidsucker now standing beside you like a fleshly ghost.

"I'm not sure what I'm hearing," you say. "Maybe just my own ego. I've got to get a voidsuck on tape, or I've wasted my time out here."

"It's the call," she says. "It comes to each of us along his own natural vector."

"There's something you people aren't telling me."

"There is, but to know, you must first taste the void."

You stand in your voidbubble on Bela-37's entrance stage, knees flexed, looking out into the endless abyss into which you are about to leap; millions of needlepoint stars prick at your retinas, and the black silences howl in your ears. You inhale and dive up and out into the unknown.

And you float in clear black nothingness where the stars are motes of incandescent matter infinities away across the empty purity of the abyss. Nothing moves. Nothing changes. No event transpires. Silence is eternal. Time does not exist.

"What is it that the voidsuckers know?" you finally say, if only to hear the sound of your own voice. "What is it that they hear out here in this endless nowhere?"

And an immense and horrid laughter rends the fabric of space, and the firmament is rent asunder by an enormous mushroom pillar cloud light-years high that billows and roils and yet remains changeless, outside of time. "You would know what the voidsuckers know, would you, vile mortal?" says the voice from the pillar of nuclear fire. "You would know a truth that would shrivel your soul to a cinder of slok?"

And the mushroom cloud becomes an old man in a tattered robe, with long white hair and beard, parsecs tall, so that his toenails blot out stars and his hands are nebulae. Novas blaze in his eyes, comets flash from his fingertips, and his visage is wrath, utter and eternal. "Behold your universe, upright monkey, all that I now give unto thee, spawn of Adam, and all that shall ever be!"

You stand on a cliff of black rock under a cruel actinic sun choking on vacuum. You tread water in an oily yellow sea that sears your flesh while blue lightnings rend a pale-green sky. Icy-blue snow swirls around you as you crawl across an endless fractured plain of ice under a wan red sun. Your bones creak under 4 gs as you try to stand beneath a craggy overhang while the sky beyond is filthy gray smeared with ugly bands of brown and purple.

"Behold your latest futile hope, wretched creature!" the voice roars. "Behold Eden, 997-Beta-II!" And you stand on a crumbling shelf of striated green rock overlooking a chemically blue sea. The purplish sky is mottled with blue and greenish clouds and the air sears your lungs as your knees begin to buckle, your consciousness to fade.

And once more you float in a void sundered by a galactic mushroom pillar cloud that becomes a ghastly vision of an old man light-years tall. The utter emptiness of the interstellar abyss burns with X-ray fire from the black holes of his eyes, his hair and beard are manes of white-hot flame that sear the firmament, his hands are claws crushing star clusters, his mouth is a scar of death across the face of the galaxy, and his rage is absolute.

"Slok, stinking microbe!" he howls with a voice that blasts ten thousand planets from their orbits. "It's all slok! That's what the voidsuckers know. Lo, I have created a universe for you that goes on forever, time and space without end. And in all that creation, one garden where life abounded, one Earth, one Eden, and that you have destroyed forever. And all else is slok—empty void, poison gas, and dead matter, worlds without end, time without mercy! Behold my works, mortals, behold your prison, and despair!"

And his laughter shakes the galaxy and his eyes are like unto the nether pits of hell.

You shake your head, and you smile. You point your right forefinger at the ravening colossus. "You're forgetting some-

thing, you lamer," you say. "I created this reality. You're not real. Evaporate, you drool-headed dreek!"

And the monstrous old man begins to dissolve into a huge lavender mist. "I may not be real," he says, "but the situation you find yourself in sure is. Talk your way out of that one!" He disappears, thumbing his nose.

And you are watching Jofe D'mahl, a small figure in a shiny mirrorsuit standing alone in the eternal abyss. He turns to you, begins to grow, speaks.

"Have thou and I not against fate conspired,
And seized this sorry scheme of things entire?
And shaped it closer to the heart's desire?"

D'mahl's mirrorsuit begins to flash endlessly through the colors of the spectrum. Lightnings crackle from his fingertips and auroras halo his body like waves of hydrogen interfaces. "Let there be light, we have said on the first day, and there is light."

You are D'mahl as the entire jeweled glory of two thousand and forty torchships springs into being around you. "Let there be heavens, we have said on the second day," you say, and you are standing on a meadow of rolling purple hills under a rainbow sky in a dancing multitude of Trekkers. "And Earth." And the multitude is transported to *Erewhon*, where the dirtiggers have combined three whole decks and created a forest of towering pines and lordly oaks under an azure sky.

"Let there be matter and energy without end, we have said on the third day," you say, and you feel the power flowing through your body as you straddle a naked torchtube, as you become the torch you are riding. "And there is matter and energy everlasting."

"And now on the fourth day, we have rested," you say, floating in the void. "And contemplated that which we have not made. And found it devoid of life or meaning, and hopelessly lame."

"And on the fifth day," D'mahl says as you watch him standing in the blackness in his suit of many lights, "we shall give up the things of childhood—gods and demons, planets, and suns, guilts and regrets."

D'mahl is standing in front of a huge shimmer screen overlooking the grass and forest of a dirtigger deck. "And

on the sixth day, shall we not say, let there be life? And shall there not be life?"

Bears, cows, unicorns, horses, dogs, lions, giraffes, red velvety kangaroolike creatures, hippos, elephants, tigers, buffalo, mice, hummingbirds, shrews, rabbits, geese, zebras, goats, monkeys, winged dragons, tapirs, eagles come tumbling, soaring, and gamboling out of the shimmer screen to fill the forest and meadow with their music.

And you are D'mahl, feeling the power of the torch pour through your body, flash from your fingertips, as you stand in the center of the Trek, awash in light and life and motion, saying: "And on the seventh day, shall we not say, let us be fruitful and multiply and fill the dead and infinite reaches of the void with ships and life and meaning?"

And you stretch out your arms and torchships explode into being around you as the Trek opens like an enormous blossoming mandala, filling the blackness of the abyss with itself, immense, forever unfolding, and eternal. "And shall not that day be without end?"

THE NAIL AND THE ORACLE by Theodore Sturgeon

All through life we tend to act on impulse. We stare at a menu, or at a department-store counter, or at the people around us, and choose. And on what basis do we choose? Can we describe it? Or do we say, "It's just—I don't know—I just felt like it." If it's a matter of a sandwich or a jacket or even a pal, it may be that not much harm is done if you end up with less than the best—but what if it is the future of your family or your country or the world? Can you afford to just guess and grab? Or—if you have a computer which can weigh all the factors and come out with an optimum course of action—do you then depend on what the computer tells you? Surely a dependence on the best decision based on the best premises would be an act of *Prudence*.

—Isaac Asimov

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THE NAIL AND THE ORACLE

By Theodore Sturgeon

Despite the improvements, the Pentagon in 1970 was still the Pentagon, with more places to walk than places to sit. Not that Jones had a legitimate gripe. The cubical cave they had assigned to him as an office would have been more than adequate for the two-three days he himself had estimated. But by the end of the third week it fit him like a size-6 hat and choked him like a size-12 collar. Annie's phone calls expressed eagerness to have him back, but there was an edge to the eagerness now which made him anxious. His hotel manager had wanted to shift his room after the first week and he had been stubborn about it; now he was marooned like a rock in a mushroom patch, surrounded by a back-to-rhythm convention of the Anti-Anti-Population Explosion League. He'd had to buy shirts, he'd had to buy shoes, he'd needed a type-four common-cold shot, and most of all, he couldn't find what was wrong with ORACLE.

Jones and his crew had stripped ORACLE down to its mounting bolts, checked a thousand miles of wiring and a million solid-state elements, everything but its priceless and untouchable memory banks. Then they'd rebuilt the monster, meticulously cross-checking all the way. For the past four days they had been running the recompleted computer, per-

formance-matching with crash-priority time on other machines, while half the science boys and a third of the military wailed in anguish. He had reported to three men that the machine had nothing wrong with it, that it never had had anything wrong with it, and that there was no reason to believe there ever would be anything wrong with it. One by one these three had gone (again) into ORACLE's chamber, and bolted the door, and energized the privacy field, and then one by one they had emerged stern and disappointed, to tell Jones that it would not give them an answer: an old admiral, an ageless colonel and a piece of walking legend whom Jones called to himself the civilian.

Having sent his crew home—for thus he burned his bridges—having deprived himself of Jacquard the design genius and the twenty-three others, the wiring team, all the mathematicians, everyone, Jones sighed in his little office, picked up the phone again and called the three for a conference. When he put the instrument down again he felt a little pleased. Consistencies pleased Jones, even unpleasant ones, and the instant response of all three was right in line with everything they had done from the time they had first complained about ORACLE's inability to answer their questions, all through their fiddling and diddling during every second of the long diagnostic operation. The admiral had had an open line installed to Jones' office, the colonel had devised a special code word for his switchboard, the civilian had hung around personally, ignoring all firm, polite hints until he had turned his ankle on a cable, giving Jones a reason to get him out of there. In other words, these three didn't just want an answer, they *needed* it.

They came, the admiral with his old brows and brand-new steel-blue eyes, the colonel with starch in his spine and skin like a postmaneuver proving grounds, the civilian limping a bit, with his head tilted a bit, turned a bit, a captivating mannerism which always gave his audiences the feeling that history cared to listen to them. Jones let them get settled, this admiral whose whole career had consisted of greater and greater commands until his strong old hand was a twitch away from the spokes of the helm of the ship of state; this colonel who had retained his lowly rank as a mark of scorn for the academy men who scurried to obey him, whose luxurious quarters were equipped with an iron barracks bed; and this civilian with the scholarly air, with both Houses and

a Cabinet rank behind him, whose political skills were as strong, and as deft, and as spiked as a logroller's feet.

"Gentlemen," said Jones, "this may well be our last meeting. There will, of course, be a written report, but I understand the—uh—practicalities of such a situation quite well, and I do not feel it necessary to go into the kind of detail in the report that is possible to us in an informal discussion." He looked at each face in turn and congratulated himself. That was just right. This is just between us boys. Nobody's going to squeal on you.

"You've dismissed your crew," said the civilian, causing a slight start in the admiral and a narrowing of the colonel's eyes and, in Jones, a flash of admiration. This one had snoopers the services hadn't even dreamed up yet. "I hope this is good news."

"Depends," said Jones. "What it means primarily is that they have done all they can. In other words, there is nothing wrong with ORACLE in any of their specialties. Their specialties include everything the computer is and does. In still other words, there's nothing wrong with the machine."

"So you told us yesterday," gritted the colonel, "but I got no results. And—I want results." The last was added as an old ritual which, apparently, had always gotten results just by being recited.

"I followed the procedures," said the admiral, intoning this as a cardinal virtue, "and also got no results." He held up a finger and suspended operations in the room while he performed some sort of internal countdown. "Had I not done so, ORACLE would have responded with an 'insufficient data' signal. Correct?"

"Quite correct," said Jones.

"And it didn't."

"That was my experience," said the civilian, and the colonel nodded.

"Gentlemen," said Jones, "neither I nor my crew—and there just is not a better one—have been able to devise a question that produced that result."

"It was not a result," snapped the colonel.

Jones ignored him. "Given the truth of my conclusion—that there is nothing wrong with the machine—and your reports, which I can have no reason to doubt, there is no area left to investigate but one, and that is in your hands, not mine. It's the one thing you have withheld from me." He

paused. Two of them shifted their feet. The colonel tightened his jaw.

The admiral said softly, but with utter finality, "I cannot divulge my question."

The colonel and the civilian spoke together: "Security—" and "This is a matter—" and then both fell silent.

"Security." Jones spread his hands. To keep from an enemy, real or potential, matters vital to the safety of the nation, that was security. And how easy it was to wrap the same blanket about the use of a helicopter to a certain haven, the presence of a surprising little package in a Congressional desk, the exact relations between a certain officer and his—*argh!* This, thought Jones, has all the earmarks of, not *our* security, but of three cases of *my* security. . . . I'll try just once more.

"Thirty years ago, a writer named William Tenn wrote a brilliant story in which an Air Force moon landing was made, and the expedition found an inhabited pressure dome nearby. They sent out a scout, who was prepared to die at the hands of Russians or even Martians. He returned to the ship in a paroxysm, gentlemen, of laughter. The other dome belonged to the U. S. Navy."

The admiral projected two loud syllables of a guffaw and said, "Of course." The colonel looked pained. The civilian, bright-eyed, made a small nod which clearly said, One up for you, boy.

Jones put on his used-car-salesman face. "Honestly, gentlemen, it embarrasses me to draw a parallel like that. I believe with all my heart that each of you has the best interests of our nation foremost in his thoughts. As for myself—security? Why, I wouldn't be here if I hadn't been cleared all the way back to *Pithecanthropus erectus*."

"So much for you, so much for me. Now, as for ORACLE, you know as well as I do that it is no ordinary computer. It is designed for computations, not of math, specifically, nor of strictly physical problems, though it can perform them, but for the distillation of human thought. For over a decade the contents of the Library of Congress and other sources have poured into that machine—everything: novels, philosophy, magazines, poetry, textbooks, religious tracts, comic books, even millions of personnel records. There's every shade of opinion, every quality of writing—anything and everything that an army of over a thousand microfilming technicians

have been able to cram into it. As long as it's printed and in English, German, Russian, French or Japanese, ORACLE can absorb it. Esperanto is the funnel for a hundred Oriental and African languages. It's the greatest repository of human thought and thought-directed action the world has ever known, and its one most powerful barrier against error in human affairs is the sheer mass of its memory and the wide spectrum of opinion that has poured into it.

"Add to this its ability to extrapolate—to project the results of hypothetical acts—and the purposely designed privacy structure—for it's incapable of recording or reporting who asked it what question—and you have ORACLE, the one place in the world where you can get a straight answer based, not in terms of the problem itself, but on every ideological computation and cross-comparison that can be packed into it."

"The one place I couldn't get a straight answer," said the civilian gently.

"To your particular question. Sir, if you want that answer, you have got to give me that question." He checked a hopeful stir in the other two by adding quickly, "and yours. And yours. You see, gentlemen, though I am concerned for your needs in this matter, my prime concern is ORACLE. To find a way to get one of the answers isn't enough. If I had all three, I might be able to deduce a common denominator. I already have, of course, though it isn't enough: you are all high up in national affairs, and very close to the center of things. You are all of the same generation" (translation: near the end of the road) "and, I'm sure, equally determined to do the best you can for your country" (to get to the top of the heap before you cash in). "Consider *me*," he said, and smiled disarmingly. "To let me get this close to the answer *I* want; namely, what's wrong with ORACLE, and then to withhold it—isn't that sort of cruel and unusual punishment?"

"I feel for you," said the civilian, not without a twinkle. Then, sober with a coldness that would freeze helium into a block, he said, "But you ask too much."

Jones looked at him, and then at the others, sensing their unshakable agreement. "OK," he said, with all the explosive harshness he could muster, "I'm done here. I'm sick of this place and my girl's sick of being by herself, and I'm going home. You can't call in anyone else, because there isn't any-

one else: my company built ORACLE and my men were trained for it."

This kind of thing was obviously in the colonel's idiom. From far back in his throat, he issued a grinding sound that came out in words: "You'll finish the job you were ordered to do, mister, or you'll take the consequences."

Jones shouted at him, "Consequences? What consequences? You couldn't even have me fired, because I can make a damn good case that you prevented me from finishing the job. I'm not under your orders either. This seems a good time to remind you of the forgotten tradition that with this"—he took hold of the narrow lapel of his own sports jacket—"I outrank any uniform in this whole entire Pentagon." He caught the swift smile of the civilian, and therefore trained his next blast on him. "Consequences? The only consequence you can get now is to deny yourself and your country the answer to your question. The only conclusion I can come to is that something else is more important to you than that. What else?" He stood up. So did the officers.

From his chair, the civilian said sonorously, "Now, now... gentlemen. Surely we can resolve this problem without raising our voices. Mr. Jones, would the possession of two of these questions help you in your diagnosis? Or even one?"

Breathing hard, Jones said, "It might."

The civilian opened his long white hands. "Then there's no problem after all. If one of you gentlemen—"

"Absolutely not," said the admiral instantly.

"Not me," growled the colonel. "You want compromise, don't you? Well, go ahead—you compromise."

"In this area," said the civilian smoothly, "I possess all the facts, and it is my considered judgment that the disclosure of my question would not further Mr. Jones' endeavors." (Jones thought, the admiral said the same thing in two words.) "Admiral, would you submit to my judgment the question of whether or not security would be endangered by your showing Mr. Jones your question?"

"I would not."

The civilian turned to the colonel. One look at that rock-bound countenance was sufficient to make him turn away again, which, thought Jones, puts the colonel two points ahead of the admiral in the word-economy business.

Jones said to the civilian, "No use, sir, and by my lights, that's the end of it. The simplest possible way to say it is that

you gentlemen have the only tools in existence that would make it possible for me to repair this gadget, and you won't let me have them. So fix it yourself, or leave it the way it is. I'd see you out," he added, scanning the walls of the tiny room, "but I have to go to the john." He stalked out, his mind having vividly and permanently photographed the astonishment on the admiral's usually composed features, the colonel's face fury-twisted into something like the knot that binds the lashes of a whip, and the civilian grinning broadly.

Grinning broadly?

Ah well, he thought, slamming the men's-room door behind him—and infuriatingly, it wouldn't slam—Ah well, we all have our way of showing frustration. Maybe I could've been just as mad more gently.

The door moved, and someone ranged alongside at the next vertical bathtub. Jones glanced, and then said aloud, "Maybe I could've been just as mad more gently."

"Perhaps we all could have," said the civilian, and then with his free hand he did four surprising things in extremely rapid succession. He put his finger to his lips, then his hand to the wall and then to his ear. Finally he whisked a small folded paper out of his breast pocket and handed it to Jones. He then finished what he was doing and went to wash up.

Shh. The walls have ears. Take this.

"All through history," said the civilian from the sink, his big old voice booming in the tiled room, "we read about the impasse, and practically every time it's mentioned, it's a sort of preface to an explanation of how it was solved. Yet I'll bet history's full of impasses that just couldn't be solved. They don't get mentioned because when it happens, everything stops. There just isn't anything to write down in the book anymore. I think we've just seen such an occasion, and I'm sorry for each of us."

The old son of a gun! "Thanks for that much, anyway, sir," Jones said, tucking the paper carefully away out of sight. The old man, wiping his hands, winked once and went out.

Back in his office, which seemed three times larger than it had been before the conference, Jones slumped behind his desk and teased himself with the small folded paper, not reading it, turning it over and over. It had to be the old man's question. Granted that it was, why had he been so willing to hand it over now, when three minutes earlier his refusal had

been just about as adamant as—adamant? So, Jones, quit looking at the detail and get on the big picture. What was different in those three minutes?

Well, they were out of one room and into another. Out of one room that was damn well not bugged and into one which, the old man's pantomime had informed him, may well be. Nope—that didn't make sense. Then—how about this? In the one room there had been witnesses. In the second, none—not after the finger on the lips. So if a man concluded that the civilian probably never had had an objection to Jones' seeing and using the question, but wanted it concealed from anyone else—maybe specifically from those other two...why, the man had the big picture.

What else? That the civilian had not said this, therefore would not bring himself to say it in so many words, and would not appreciate any conversation that might force him to talk it over. Finally, no matter how reluctant he might be to let Jones see the paper, the slim chance Jones offered him of getting an answer outweighed every other consideration—except the chance of the other two finding out. So another part of the message was: I'm sitting on dynamite, Mr. Jones, and I'm handing you the detonator. Or: I trust you, Mr. Jones.

So be it, old man. I've got the message.

He closed his eyes and squeezed the whole situation to see if anything else would drip out of it. Nothing...except the faint conjecture that what worked on one might work on the other two. And as if on cue, the door opened and a bland-faced major came in a pace, stopped, said "Beg pardon, sir. I'm in the wrong room," and before Jones could finish saying "That's all right," he was gone. Jones gazed thoughtfully at the door. That major was one of the colonel's boys. That "wrong room" bit had a most unlikely flavor to it. So if the man hadn't come in for nothing, he'd come in for something. He hadn't taken anything and he hadn't left anything, so he'd come in to find something out. The only thing he could find out was whether Jones was or was not here. Oh: and whether he was or was not alone.

All Jones had to do to check that out was to sit tight. You can find out if a man is alone in a room for now, but not for ten minutes from now, or five.

In two minutes the colonel came in.

He wore his "I don't like you, mister" expression. He placed

his scarred brown hands flat on Jones' desk and rocked forward over him like a tidal wave about to break.

"It's your word against mine, and I'm prepared to call you a liar," grated the colonel. "I want you to report to me and no one else."

"All right," said Jones, and put out his hand. The colonel locked gazes with him for a fair slice of forever, which made Jones believe that the Medusa legend wasn't necessarily a legend after all. Then the officer put a small folded paper into Jones' outstretched palm. "You get the idea pretty quick, I'll say that, mister"; he straightened, about-faced and marched out.

Jones looked at the two scraps of folded paper on the desk and thought, I will be damned.

And one to go.

He picked up the papers and dropped them again, feeling like a kid who forces himself to eat all the cake before he attacks the icing. He thought, maybe the old boy wants to but just doesn't know how.

He reached for the phone and dialed for the open line, wondering if the admiral had had it canceled yet.

He had not, and he wasn't waiting for the first ring to finish itself. He knew who was calling and he knew Jones knew, so he said nothing, just picked up the phone.

Jones said, "It was kind of crowded in here."

"Precisely the point," said the admiral, with the same grudging approval the colonel had shown. There was a short pause, and then the admiral said, "Have you called anyone else?"

Into four syllables Jones put all the outraged innocence of a male soprano accused of rape. "Certainly not."

"Good man."

The Britishism amused Jones, and he almost said Gung ho, what?; but instead he concentrated on what to say next. It was easy to converse with the admiral if you supplied both sides of the conversation. Suddenly it came to him that the admiral wouldn't want to come here—he had somewhat farther to travel than the colonel had—nor would he like the looks of Jones' visiting him at this particular moment. He said, "I wouldn't mention this, but as you know, I'm leaving soon and may not see you. And I think you picked up my cigarette lighter."

"Oh," said the admiral.

"And me out of matches," said Jones ruefully. "Well—I'm going down to ORACLE now. Nice to have known you, sir." He hung up, stuck an unlit cigarette in his mouth, put the two folded papers in his left pants pocket, and began an easy stroll down the catacombs called corridors in the Pentagon.

Just this side of ORACLE's dead-end corridor, and not quite in visual range of its security post, a smiling young ensign, who otherwise gave every evidence of being about his own business, said, "Light, sir?"

"Why, thanks."

The ensign handed him a lighter. He didn't light it and proffer the flame; he handed the thing over. Jones lit his cigarette and dropped the lighter into his pocket. "Thanks."

"That's all right," smiled the ensign, and walked on.

At the security post, Jones said to the guard, "Whoppen?"

"Nothing and nobody, Mr. Jones."

"Best news I've had all day." He signed the book and accompanied the guard down the dead end. They each produced a key and together opened the door. "I shouldn't be too long."

"All the same to me," said the guard, and Jones realized he'd been wishfully thinking out loud. He shut the door, hit the inner lock switch, and walked through the little foyer and the swinging door which unveiled what the crew called ORACLE's "temple."

He looked at the computer, and it looked back at him. "Like I told you before," he said conversationally, "for something that causes so much trouble, you're awful little and awful homely."

ORACLE did not answer, because it was not aware of him. ORACLE could read and do a number of more complex and subtle things, but it had no ears. It was indeed homely as a wall, which is what the front end mostly resembled, and the immense size of its translators, receptors and the memory banks were not evident here. The temple—other people called it Suburbia Delphi—contained nothing but that animated wall, with its one everblooming amber "on" light (for the machine never ceased gulping its oceans of thought), a small desk and chair, and the mechanical typewriter with the modified Bodoni type face which was used for the reader. The reader itself was nothing more than a clipboard (though with machined guides to hold the paper exactly in place) with a large push button above it, placed on a strut which extended from the front of the computer, and lined up with a lens set

flush into it. It was an eerie experience to push that button after placing your query, for ORACLE scanned so quickly and "thought" so fast that it was rapping away on its writer before you could get your thumb off the button.

Usually.

Jones sat at the desk, switched on the light and took out the admiral's lighter. It was a square one, with two parts which telescoped apart to get to the tank. The tight little roll of paper was there, sure enough, with the typescript not seriously blurred by lighter fluid. He smoothed it out, retrieved the other two, unfolded them, stacked them all neatly; and then, feeling very like Christmas morning, said gaily to the unresponsive ORACLE:

"Now!"

Seconds later, he was breathing hard. A flood of profanity welled upward within him—and dissipated itself as totally inadequate.

Wagging his head helplessly, he brought the three papers to the typewriter and wrote them out on fresh paper, staying within the guidelines printed there, and adding the correct code symbols for the admiral, the colonel and the civilian. These symbols had been assigned by ORACLE itself, and were cross-checked against the personnel records it carried in its memory banks. It was the only way in which it was possible to ask a question including that towering monosyllable "I."

Jones clipped the first paper in place, held his breath and pushed the button.

There was a small flare of light from the hood surrounding the lens as the computer automatically brought the available light to optimum. A relay clicked softly as the writer was activated. A white tongue of paper protruded. Jones tore it off. It was blank.

He grunted, then replaced the paper with the second, then the third. It seemed that on one of them there was a half-second delay in the writer relay, but it was insignificant: the paper remained blank.

"Stick your tongue out at me, will you?" he muttered at the computer, which silently gazed back at him with its blank single eye. He went back to the typewriter and copied one of the questions, but with his own code identification symbols. It read:

THE ELIMINATION OF WHAT SINGLE MAN
COULD RESULT IN MY PRESIDENCY?

He clipped the paper in place and pushed the button. The relay clicked, the writer rattled and the paper protruded. He tore it off. It read (complete with quotes):

"JOHN DOE"

"A wise guy," Jones growled. He returned to the typewriter and again copied one of the queries with his own code:

IF I ELIMINATE THE PRESIDENT, HOW
CAN I ASSURE PERSONAL CONTROL?

Wryly, ORACLE answered:

DON'T EAT A BITE UNTIL YOUR EXECUTION.

It actually took Jones a couple of seconds to absorb that one, and then he uttered an almost hysterical bray of laughter.

The third question he asked, under his own identification, was:

CAN MY SUPPORT OF HENNY BRING PEACE?

The answer was a flat NO, and Jones did not laugh one bit. "And you don't find anything funny about it either," he congratulated the computer, and actually, physically shuddered.

For Henny—the Honorable Oswaldus Deeming Henny—was an automatic nightmare to the likes of Jones. His weatherbeaten saint's face, his shoulder-length white hair (oh, what genius of a public-relations man put him onto that?), his diapason voice, but most of all, his "Plan for Peace" had more than once brought Jones up out of a sound sleep into a cold sweat. Now, there was once a man who entranced a certain segment of the population with a slogan about the royalty in every man, but he could not have taken over the country, because a slogan is not a political philosophy. And there was another who was capable of turning vast numbers of his countrymen—for a while—against one another and toward him for protection: and he could not have taken over the country, because the manipulation of fear is not an economic philos-

ophy. This Henny, however, was the man who had both, and more besides. His appearance alone gave him more nonthinking, vote-bearing adherents than Rudolph Valentino plus Albert Schweitzer. His advocacy of absolute isolation brought in the right wing, his demand for unilateral disarmament brought in the left wing, his credo that science could, with a third of munitions-size budgets, replace foreign trade through research, invention and ersatz, brought in the tech segment, and his dead certainty of lowering taxes had a thick hook in everyone else. Even the most battle-struck of the war wanters found themselves shoulder to shoulder with the peace-at-any-price extremists, because of the high moral tone of his disarmament plan, which was to turn our weapons on ourselves and present any aggressor with nothing but slag and cinders—the ultimate deterrent. It was the most marvelous blend of big bang and beneficence, able to cut chance and challenge together with openhanded Gandhism, with an answer for everyone and a better life for all.

"All of which," complained Jones to the featureless face of the computer, "doesn't help me find out why you wouldn't answer those three guys, though I must say, I'm glad you didn't." He went and got the desk chair and put it down front and center before the computer. He sat down and folded his arms and they stared silently at each other.

At length he said, "If you were a people instead of a thing, how would I handle you? A miserable, stubborn, intelligent snob of a people?"

Just how do I handle people? he wondered. I do—I know I do. I always seem to think of the right thing to say, or to ask. I've already asked ORACLE what's wrong, and ORACLE says nothing is wrong. The way any miserable, stubborn, intelligent snob would.

What I do, he told himself, is to empathize. Crawl into their skins, feel with their fingertips, look out through their eyes.

Look out through their eyes.

He rose and got the admiral's query—the one with the admiral's own identification on it—clipped it to the board, then hunkered down on the floor with his back to the computer and his head blocking the lens.

He was seeing exactly what the computer saw.

Clipboard. Query. The small bare chamber, the far wall. The...

He stopped breathing. After a long astonished moment he said, when he could say anything, and because it was all he could think of to say: "Well I...be...damned..."

The admiral was the first in. Jones had had a busy time of it for the ninety minutes following his great discovery, and he was feeling a little out of breath, but at the same time a little louder and quicker than the other guy, as if he had walked into the reading room after a rubdown and a needle-shower.

"Sit down, Admiral."

"Jones, did you—"

"Please, sir—sit down."

"But surely—"

"I've got your answer, Admiral. But there's something we have to do first." He made waving gestures. "Bear with me."

He wouldn't have made it, thought Jones, except for the colonel's well-timed entrance. Boy oh boy, thought Jones, look at 'm, stiff as tongs. You come on the battlefield looking just like a target. On the other hand, that's how you made your combat reputation, isn't it? The colonel was two strides into the room before he saw the admiral. He stopped, began an about-face and said over his left epaulet, "I didn't think—"

"Sit down, Colonel," said Jones in a pretty fair imitation of the man's own brass gullet. It reached the officer's muscles before it reached his brain and he sat. He turned angrily on the admiral, who said instantly, "This wasn't my idea," in a completely insulting way.

Again the door opened and old living history walked in, his head a little to one side, his eyes ready to see and understand and his famous mouth to smile, but when he saw the tableau, the eyes frosted over and the mouth also said: "I didn't think—"

"Sit down, sir," said Jones, and began speling as the civilian was about to refuse, and kept on speling while he changed his mind, lowered himself guardedly onto the edge of a chair and perched his old bones on its front edge as if he intended not to stay.

"Gentlemen," Jones began, "I'm happy to tell you that I have succeeded in finding out why ORACLE was unable to perform for you—thanks to certain unexpected cooperation I received." Nice touch, Jones. Each one of 'em will think he turned the trick, singlehandedly. But not for long. "Now I

have a plane to catch, and you all have things to do, and I would appreciate it if you would hear me out with as little interruption as possible." Looking at these bright eager angry sullen faces, Jones let himself realize for the first time why detectives in whodunits assemble all the suspects and make speeches. Why they *personally* do it—why the author has them do it. It's because it's fun.

"In this package"—he lifted from beside his desk a brown paper parcel a yard long and fifteen inches wide—"is the cause of all the trouble. My company was founded over a half century ago, and one of these has been an appurtenance of every one of the company's operations, each of its major devices and installations, all of its larger utility equipment—cranes, trucks, bulldozers, everything. You'll find them in every company office and in most company cafeterias." He put the package down flat on his desk and fondled it while he talked. "Now, gentlemen, I'm not going to go into any part of the long argument about whether or not a computer can be conscious of what it's doing, because we haven't time and we're not here to discuss metaphysics. I will, however, remind you of a childhood chant. Remember the one that runs: 'For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of a horse the message was lost; for want of the message the battle was lost; for want of the battle the kingdom was lost—and all for the want of a horseshoe nail.'"

"Mr. Jones," said the admiral, "I—we—didn't come here to—"

"I just said that," Jones said smoothly, and went right on talking until the admiral just stopped trying. "This"—he rapped the package—"is ORACLE's horseshoe nail. If it's no ordinary nail, that's because ORACLE's no ordinary computer. It isn't designed to solve problems in their own context; there are other machines that do that. ORACLE solves problems the way an educated man solves them—by bringing everything he is and has to bear on them. Lacking this one part"—he thumped the package again—"it can then answer your questions, and it accordingly did." He smiled suddenly. "I don't think ORACLE was designed this way," he added musingly. "I think it...became...this way..." He shook himself. "Anyway, I have your answers."

Now he could afford to pause, because he had them. At that moment, the only way any of them could have been removed was by dissection and haulage.

Jones lined up his sights on the colonel and said, "In a way, your question was the most interesting, Colonel. To me professionally, I mean. It shows to what detail ORACLE can go in answering a wide theoretical question. One might even make a case for original creative thinking, though that's always arguable. Could a totally obedient robot think if you flatly ordered it to think? When does a perfect imitation of a thing become the thing itself?"

"You're not going to discuss my question here," said the colonel as a matter of absolute, incontrovertible fact.

"Yes I am," said Jones, and raised his voice. "You listen to me, before you stick that trigger finger of yours inside that tunic, Colonel. I'm in a corny mood right now and so I've done a corny thing. Two copies of a detailed report of this whole affair are now in the mail, and, I might add, in a mailbox outside this building. One goes to my boss, who is a very big wheel and a loyal friend, with as many contacts in business and government as there are company machines operating, and that puts him on the damn moon as well as all over the world. The other goes to someone else, and when you find out who that is it'll be too late, because in two hours he can reach every paper, every wire service, every newscasting organization on earth. Naturally, consistent with the corn, I've sent these out sealed with orders to open them if I don't phone by a certain time—and I assure you it won't be from here. In other words, you can't do anything to me and you'd better not delay me. *Sit down, Admiral*," he roared.

"I'm certainly not going to sit here and—"

"I'm going to finish what I started out to do whether you're here or not." Jones waved at the other two. "They'll be here. You want that?"

The admiral sat down. The civilian said, in a tolling of mighty sorrow, "Mr. Jones, I had what seemed to be your faithful promise—"

"There were overriding considerations," said Jones. "You know what an overriding consideration is, don't you, sir?" and he held up the unmistakable ORACLE query form. The civilian subsided.

"Let him finish," gritted the colonel. "We can—well, let him finish."

Jones instantly, like ORACLE, translated: *We can take care of him later*. He said to the colonel, "Cheer up. You can always deny everything, like you said." He fanned through the pa-

pers before him and dealt out the colonel's query. He read it aloud:

"IF I ELIMINATE THE PRESIDENT, HOW CAN I ASSURE PERSONAL CONTROL?"

The colonel's face could have been shipped out, untreated, and installed on Mount Rushmore. The civilian gasped and put his knuckles in his mouth. The admiral's slitted eyes went round.

"The answer," said Jones, "makes that case for creative thinking I was talking about. ORACLE said: 'DETONATE ONE BOMB WITHIN UNDERGROUND H.Q. SPEND YOUR SUBSEQUENT TENURE LOOKING FOR OTHERS.'"

Jones put down the paper and spoke past the colonel to the other two. "Get the big picture, gentlemen? 'UNDERGROUND H.Q.' could only mean the centralized control for government in the mountains. Whether or not the President—or anyone else—was there at the time is beside the point. If not, he'd find another way easily enough. After that happened, our hero here would take the posture of the national savior, the only man competent to track down a second bomb, which could be anywhere. Imagine the fear, the witch-hunts, the cordons, the suspicion, the 'Emergency' and 'For the Duration' orders and regulations." Suddenly savage, Jones snarled, "I've got just one more thing to say about this warrior and his plans. All his own strength, and the entire muscle behind everything he plans for himself, derives from the finest *esprit de corps* the world has ever known. I told you I'm in a corny mood, so I'm going to say it just the way it strikes me. That kind of *esprit* is a bigger thing than obedience or devotion or even faith, it's a species of love. And there's not a hell of a lot of that to go around in this world. Butchering the President to make himself a little tin god is a minor crime compared to his willingness to take a quality like that and turn it into a perversion."

The civilian, as if unconsciously, hitched his chair a half inch away from the colonel. The admiral trained a firing-squad kind of look at him.

"Admiral," said Jones, and the man twitched, "I'd like to call your attention to the colonel's use of the word 'eliminate' in his query. You don't, you know, you just *don't* eliminate a live President." He let that sink in, and then said, "I mention it because you, too, used it, and it's a fair conjecture that

it means the same thing. Listen: 'WHAT SINGLE MAN CAN I ELIMINATE TO BECOME PRESIDENT?'"

"There could hardly be any *one* man," said the civilian thoughtfully, gaining Jones' great respect for his composure. Jones said, "ORACLE thinks so. It wrote your name, sir."

Slowly the civilian turned to the admiral. "Why, you sleek old son of a bitch," he enunciated carefully, "I do believe you could have made it."

"Purely a hypothetical question," explained the admiral, but no one paid the least attention.

"As for you," said Jones, rather surprised that his voice expressed so much of the regret he felt, "I do believe that you asked your question with a genuine desire to see a world at peace before you passed on. But, sir—it's like you said when you walked in here just now—and the colonel said it, too: 'I didn't think . . .' You are sitting next to two certifiable first-degree murderers; no matter what their overriding considerations, that's what they are. But what you planned is infinitely worse."

He read, "'CAN MY SUPPORT OF HENNY BRING PEACE?' You'll be pleased to know—oh, you already know; you were just checking, right?—that the answer is Yes. Henny's position is such right now that your support would bring him in. But—you didn't *think*. That demagogue can't do what he wants to do without a species of thought policing the like of which the ant-heap experts in China never even dreamed of. Unilateral disarmament and high-morality scorched earth! Why, as a nation we couldn't do that unless we meant it, and we couldn't mean it unless every man, woman and child thought alike—and with Henny running things, they would. Peace? Sure we'd have peace! I'd rather take on a Kodiak bear with boxing gloves than take my chances in that kind of a world. These guys," he said carelessly, "are prepared to murder one or two or a few thousand. You," said Jones, his voice suddenly shaking with scorn, "are prepared to murder every decent free thing this country ever stood for."

Jones rose. "I'm going now. All your answers are in the package there. Up to now it's been an integral part of ORACLE—it was placed exactly in line with the reader, and has therefore been a part of everything the machine has ever done. My recommendation is that you replace it, or ORACLE will be just another computer, answering questions in terms of themselves. I suggest that you make similar installations

in your own environment...and quit asking questions that must be answered in terms of *yourselves*. Questions which in the larger sense would be unthinkable."

The civilian rose, and did something that Jones would always remember as a decent thing. He put out his hand and said, "You are right. I needed this, and you've stopped me. What will stop *them*?"

Jones took the hand. "They're stopped. I know, because I asked ORACLE and ORACLE said this was the way to do it." He smiled briefly and went out. His last glimpse of the office was the rigid backs of the two officers, and the civilian behind his desk, slowly unwrapping the package. He walked down the endless Pentagon corridors, the skin between his shoulder blades tight all the way: ORACLE or no, there might be overriding considerations. But he made it, and got to the first outside phone booth still alive. Marvelously, wonderfully alive.

He heard Ann's voice and said, "It's a real wonderful world, you know that?"

"Jones, darling!...you certainly have changed your tune. Last time I talked to you it was a horrible place full of evil intentions and smelling like feet."

"I just found out for sure three lousy kinds of world it's not going to be," Jones said. Ann would not have been what she was to him if she had not been able to divine which questions not to ask. She said, "Well, good," and he said he was coming home.

"Oh, darling! You fix that gadget?"

"Nothing to it," Jones said. "I just took down the

THINK

sign."

She said, "I never know when you're kidding."

JEAN DUPRÈS by Gordon R. Dickson

Bravery isn't so hard. It is too often fired up by the vice called anger to be itself much of a virtue. In hot blood, in a moment of rage, one can do anything without counting the cost—though a moment's calm reflection would have caused one to back down, to turn away. It is rather cold endurance that makes bravery a virtue; the knowledge that loss may be certain but that there is something beyond victory that must be preserved—self-respect, a principle, humanity. We call that calm determination that knows no surrender even in the face of hopeless defeat, whether displayed by a strong man, a weakling, or a child—FORTITUDE.

—Isaac Asimov

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JEAN DUPRÈS

by Gordon R. Dickson

The way I met Jean Duprès for the first time, I was on independent patrol with a squad of six men, spread out, working through the green tangle of the Utword jungle. I came up to the edge of a place where the jungle was cut off sharp, and looked through the last screen of scroll-edged, eight-foot ferns at a little room of pounded earth, the vestibule of a larger, planted field I could see beyond. Near the opening in the larger field sat a riding macerator with no one in its saddle; and right before me—not five feet beyond the ferns—a boy not more than four years old stood leaning on a rifle that was such a good imitation of the real thing that I could hardly believe that it was a fake.

Then I saw it was not a fake.

I went through the last screen of ferns with a rush and took the gun away from the boy even as he tried to swing it to his shoulder. He stood staring at me, blinking and bewildered, trying to make up his mind whether to cry or not; and I looked the rifle over. It was a DeBaraumer, capable of hurling out anything and everything, from a wire-control rocket slug to any handy pebble small enough to rattle through its bore.

"Where did you get this?" I asked him. He had decided not to cry and he looked up at me with a white face and round, desperate eyes.

"My daddy," he said.

"Where's your daddy at?"

Without taking his eyes off my face, he half-turned and pointed away through the opening into the larger field.

"All right," I said. "We'll go see him about this." I unclipped the hand mike from my belt and told my six men to close up and follow me in. Then I set my telemeter beacon and turned to go with the boy to find his daddy—and I stopped dead.

For there were two of the Klahari young men standing just inside the edge of the small clearing about twenty feet off. They must have been there before I stepped through the last ferns myself, because my scanner would have picked them up if they had been moving. They were seniors, full seven feet tall, with their skins so green that they would have been invisible against the jungle background if it hadn't been for their jewels and weapons and tall feather headdresses.

When you were this close it was obvious that they were humanoid but not human. There were knifelike bony ridges on the outer edge of their fore and upper arms, and bony plates on their elbows. Their hands looked attenuated and thin because of the extra joint in their fingers. Although they were hairless their greenish black crests were rising and quivering a bit. Whether from alarm or just excitement I couldn't tell. They were nothing to bother me, just two of them and out in the open that way—but it gave me a shock, realizing they'd been standing there listening and watching while I took the gun from the boy and then talked to him.

They made no move now, as I nudged the boy and started with him out of the clearing past them. Their eyes followed us; but it was not him, or me either, they were watching. It was the DeBaraumer. And that, of course, was why I'd jumped like I had to get the weapon away from the boy.

We came out on to a plowed field and saw a planter's home and buildings about six hundred yards off, looking small and humped and black under the bright white dazzle of the pin-hole in the sky that was Achernar, old Alpha Eridani. The contact lenses on my eyes had darkened up immediately, and I looked at the boy, for he was too young to wear contacts safely—but he had already pulled a pair of goggles down off his sun-cap to cover his eyes.

"I'm Corporal Tofe Levenson, of the Rangers," I said to him as we clumped over the furrows. "What's your name?"

"Jean Duprès," he said, pronouncing it something like "Zjon Du-pray."

We came finally up to the house, and the door opened while we were still a dozen paces off. A tall, brown-haired woman with a smooth face looked out, shading her eyes against the sunlight in spite of the darkening of her contacts.

"Jean..." she said, pronouncing it the way the boy had. I heard a man's voice inside the house saying something I could not understand, and then we were at the doorway. She stood aside to let us through and shut the door after us. I stepped into what seemed to be a kitchen. There was a planter at a table spooning some sort of soup into his mouth out of a bowl. He was a round-headed, black-haired, heavy-shouldered type, but I saw how the boy resembled him.

"Corporal—?" he said, staring at me with the spoon halfway to the dish. He dropped it into the dish. "They're gathered! They're raiding—"

"Sit down," I said, for he was half on his feet. "There's no more than four Klahari young men for ten kilometers in any direction from here." He sat down and looked unfriendly.

"Then what're you doing here? Scaring a man—"

"This." I showed him the DeBaraumer. "Your boy had it."

"Jean?" His unfriendly look deepened. "He was standing guard."

"And you in here?"

"Look." He thought for a minute. "Corporal, you got no business in this. This is my family, my place."

"And your gun," I said. "How many guns like this have you got?"

"Two." He was out-and-out scowling now.

"Well, if I hadn't come along, you'd have only had one. There were two Klahari seniors out by your boy—with their eyes on it."

"That's what he's got to learn—to shoot them when they get close."

"Sure," I said. "Mr. Duprès, how many sons have you got?"

He stared at me. All this time, it suddenly struck me, the woman had been standing back, saying nothing, her hands twisted up together in the apron she was wearing.

"One!" she said now; and the way she said it went right through me.

"Yeah," I said, still looking at Duprès. "Well, now listen. I'm not just a soldier, I'm a peace officer, as you know. There's laws here on Utword, even if you don't see the judges and courts very often. So, I'm putting you on notice. There'll be

no more letting children handle lethal weapons like this DeBaraumer; and I'll expect you to avoid exposing your son to danger from the Klahari without you around to protect him." I stared hard at him. "If I hear of any more like that I'll haul you up in Regional Court, and that'll mean a week and a half away from your fields; even if the judge lets you off—which he won't."

I understood him all right. He was up out of the chair, apologizing in a second; and after that he couldn't be nice enough. When my squad came in he insisted we all stay to dinner and put himself out to be pleasant, not only to us, but to his wife and boy. And that was that, except for one little thing that happened, near the end of dinner.

We'd been comparing notes on the Klahari, of course, on how they're different from men; and the boy had been silent all through it. But then, in a moment's hush in the talk, we heard him asking his mother, almost timidly, "Mama, will I be a man when I grow up?—or a Klahari?"

"Jean—" she began, but her husband—his name was Pelang, I remembered and hers was Elmiere, both of them Canadian French from around Lac St. John in Quebec, Canada, back home—interrupted her. He sat back in his chair, beaming and rubbing the hard fat of his belly-swell under his white glass shirt, and took the conversation away from her.

"And what would you like to be then, Jean?" he asked. "A man or a Klahari?" and he winked genially at the rest of us.

The boy concentrated. I could see him thinking, or picturing rather, the people he knew—his mother, his father, himself, struggling with this macerated earth reclaimed from the jungle—and the Klahari he had seen, especially the senior ones, slipping free through the jungle, flashing with jewels and feathers, tall, dark and powerful.

"A Klahari," Jean Duprès said finally.

"*Klahari!*" His father shouted the word, jerking upright in his chair; and the boy shrank. But just then Pelang Duprès must have remembered his guests, and caught himself up with a black scowl at Jean. Then the man tried to pass it off with a laugh.

"Klahari!" he said. "Well, what can you expect? He's a child. Eh? We don't mind children!" But then he turned savagely on the boy, nonetheless. "You'd want to be one of those who'd kill us—who'd take the bread out of your mother's mouth—and your father's?"

His wife came forward and put her arms around the boy and drew him off away from the table.

"Come with me now, Jean," she said; and I did not see the boy again before we left.

As we did leave, as we were outside the house checking equipment before moving off, Pelang was on the house steps watching us, and he stepped up to me for a moment.

"It's for him—for Jean, you understand, Corporal," he said, and his eyes under the darkened contact glasses were asking a favor of me. "This place—" He waved an arm at cleared fields. "I won't live long enough for it to pay me for my hard work. But he'll be rich, someday. You understand?"

"Yeah. Just stay inside the law," I said. I called the men together and we moved out in skirmish order into the jungle on the far side of the house. Later, it came to me that maybe I had been a little hard on Pelang.

I didn't pass by that area again that season. When I did come by at the beginning of next season I had a squad of green recruits with me. I left them well out of sight and went and looked in from behind the fringe of the jungle, without letting myself be seen. Pelang was seeding for his second crop of the season, and Jean, grown an inch or so, was standing guard with the DeBaraumer again. I went on without interfering. If Pelang would not give up his ways on the threat of being taken in, there was no point in taking him in. He would simply pay his fine, hate me, and the whole family would suffer, because of the time he was absent from the planting and the place. You can do only so much with people, or for them.

Besides, I had my hands full with my own job. In spite of what I had told Pelang, my real job was being a soldier, and my work was not riding herd on the planters, but riding herd on the Klahari. And that work was getting heavier as the seasons approached the seventeen-year full-cycle period.

My squad had broken out mealpaks and were so involved in eating that I walked up on them without their being aware of it.

"And you want to be Rangers," I said. "You'll never live past this cycle."

They jumped and looked guilty. Innocents. And I had to make fighting men out of them.

"What cycle?" one of them asked. All of them were too young to have remembered the last time it came around.

"That and more. You are going to have to understand the Klahari. Or die. And not just hate them. There is nothing evil in what they do. Back on Earth, even we had the Jivaros, the head-hunting Indians of the Amazon River. And the Jivaro boys were lectured daily while they were growing up. They were told that it was not merely all right to kill their enemies, it was upstanding, it was honorable, it was the greatest act they could aspire to as men. This code came out of the very jungle in which they were born and raised—and as it was part of them, so the way of the Klahari young men is out of their world and part of them, likewise.

"They were born outside of this jungle, well beyond the desert. They were raised in cities that have a civilization just above the steam-engine level, boys and girls together until they were about nine years old. Then the girls stayed where they were and started learning the chores of housekeeping the cities. But the nine-year-old Klahari boys were pushed out to fend for themselves in the desert.

"Out there, it was help one another or perish. The boys formed loose bands or tribes and spent about three years keeping themselves alive and helping each other stay alive. Their life was one of almost perfect brotherhood. In the desert, their problem was survival and they shared every drop of water and bite of food they could find. They were one for all and all for one, and at this age they were, literally, emotionally incapable of violence or selfishness.

"At about twelve or thirteen, they began to grow out of this incapability, and look toward the jungle. There it was, right alongside their sandy wastes with nothing to stop them entering it—nothing except the older Klahari from age thirteen to seventeen. At this stage the young Klahari males shoot up suddenly from five to about six and a half feet tall, then grow more gradually for the remaining four years in the jungle. And, from the moment they enter the jungle, every other Klahari boy is potentially a mortal enemy. In the jungle, food and drink are available for the reaching out of a hand; and there is nothing to worry about—except taking as many other lives as possible while hanging on to your own."

"*Klahari* lives," a worried Ranger protested. "Why should they trouble us?"

"Why shouldn't they? It's eat or be eaten. They even join into groups of up to a dozen, once they get older and more jungle-experienced. In this way they can take single strays

and smaller groups. This works well enough—except they have to watch their backs at all times among their own group-members. There are no rules. This jungle is no-man's-land. Which was why the Klahari did not object to humans settling here, originally. We were simply one more test for their maturing young men, trying to survive until manhood, so they can get back into the cities."

They digested this and they didn't like it. Jen, the brightest in the squad, saw the connection at once.

"Then that makes us humans fair game as well?"

"Right. Which is why this squad is out here in the jungle. Our job is simply that of a cop in a rough neighborhood—to roust and break up Klahari bands of more than a half-dozen together at once. The young Klahari know that their clubs, crossbows and lances are no match for rifles, and there have to be at least a half dozen of them together before they are liable to try assaulting a house or attacking a planter in his fields. So the arrangement with planters, soldier squads and Klahari is all neat and tidy most of the time—in fact all of the time except for one year out of every seventeen that makes up a generation for them. Because, once a generation, things pile up.

"It's the five-year Klahari that cause it. Post-seniors some people call them, as we call the younger Klahari freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors, according to the number of years they have been off the desert and in the jungle. Post-seniors are Klahari who are old enough to go back to the cities and be allowed in—but are hesitating about it. They are Klahari who are wondering if they might not prefer it being top dog in the jungle to starting out on the bottom again, back in the cities. They are Klahari toying with the idea of settling down for life in the jungles and their impulse to kill any other Klahari is damped by maturity and experience. They, unlike those of the first four years of jungle experience, are capable of trusting each other to gather in large bands with a combined purpose—to seize and hold permanently areas of the jungle as private kingdoms."

They were listening closely now—and no one was smiling.

"In the old days, before we humans came, this process once a seventeen-year generation would end inevitably in pitched wars between large bands largely composed of post-seniors. These wars disposed of the genetic variants among the Klahari, and got rid of those who might have interrupted the

age-old, cities-desert-jungle-cities-again pattern of raising the Klahari males and eliminating the unfit of each generation. Before we came, everything was tidy. But with us humans now in the jungle, the post-seniors in their bands every seventeen years turn most naturally against us."

My talk had some good effect because the ones who stayed on made good Rangers. They knew what they were doing—and why.

One season followed another and I had my hands full by the time I saw young Jean Duprès again. My squad of six men had grown by that time to a platoon of twenty, because we were now closing the second and final season of the sixteenth year of the cycle and we were having to break up Klahari gangs of as many as fifty in a group. Not only that, but we had the cheerful thought always with us that, with the post-seniors running things, most of the groups we broke up were re-forming again, the minute we'd passed on.

It was time to begin trying to hustle the planters and their families back into our Regional Installations. Time to begin listening to their complaints that their buildings would be burned and leveled, and half their cleared land reclaimed by the jungle when they returned—which was perfectly true. Time to begin explaining to them why it was not practical to bring in an army from Earth every seventeen years to protect their land. And time to try to explain to them once again that we were squatters on a Klahari world, and it was against Earth policy to exterminate the natives and take over the planet entire, even if we could—which we could not. There were millions of the mature Klahari in the cities, and our technical edge wasn't worth that much.

So by the time I came to Duprès' property, my patience was beginning to wear thin from turning the other cheek to the same bad arguments, dozens of times repeated. And that was bad. Because I knew Pelang Duprès would be one of the stubborn ones. I came up slowly and took a station just inside the ferns at the edge of one of his fields to look the place over—but what I saw was not Pelang, but Jean.

He was coming toward me, a good cautious thirty yards in from the edge of the field this time, with his scanner hooked down over his eyes and that old, all-purpose blunderbuss of a DeBaraumer in his arms. Three years had stretched him out and leaned him up. Oddly, he looked more like his mother now—and something else. I squatted behind the ferns, trying

to puzzle it out. And then it came to me. He was walking like a Klahari—in the cautious, precise way they have, swinging from ball of foot to ball of other foot with the body always bolt upright from the hips.

I stood up for a better look at him; and he was down on his belly on the earth in an instant, the DeBaraumer swinging to bear on the ferns in front of me, as my movement gave me away to his scanner. I dropped like a shot myself and whistled—for that is what the Klahari can't do, whistle. The muscles in their tongues and lips won't perform properly for it.

He stood up immediately; and I stood up and came out onto the field to meet him.

"You're a sergeant," he said, looking at my sleeve as I came up.

"That's right," I said. "Sergeant Tofe Levenson of the Rangers. I was a corporal when you saw me last. You don't remember?"

He frowned, puzzling it over in his mind, then shook his head. Meanwhile I was studying him. There was something strange about him. He was still a boy, but there was something different in addition—it was like seeing a seven-year-old child overlaid with the adult he's going to be. As if the future man was casting his shadow back on his earlier self. The shadow was there in the way he carried the rifle, and in his stance and eyes.

"I'm here to see your daddy," I said.

"He's not here."

"Not here!" I stared at him, but his face showed only a mild curiosity at my reaction. "Where is he?"

"He and my ma—mother"—he corrected himself—"went in to Strongpoint Hundred Fourteen for supplies. They'll be back tomorrow."

"You mean you're here alone?"

"Yes," he said, again with that faint puzzlement that I should find this odd, and turned back toward the building. "Come to the house. I'll make you some coffee, Sergeant."

I went to the house with him. To jog his memory, on the way I told him about my earlier visit. He thought he remembered me, but he could not be sure. When I spoke to him about the Klahari, I found he was quite aware of the danger they posed to him, but was as strangely undisturbed by it as if he had been a Klahari himself. I told him that I was here

to warn his father to pack up his family and retire to the Strongpoint he was currently at for supplies—or, better yet, pull back to one of our base installations. I said that the post-senior Klahari were grouping and they might begin raiding the planters' places in as little as three weeks' time. Jean corrected me, gravely.

"Oh, no, Sergeant," he said. "Not for the rest of this season."

"Who told you that?" I said—snorted, perhaps. I was expecting to hear it had been his father's word on the subject.

"The Klahari," he said. "When I talk to them."

I stared at him.

"You *talk* to them?" I said. He ducked his head, suddenly a little embarrassed, even a little guilty-looking.

"They come to the edge of the fields," he said. "They want to talk to me."

"Want to talk to you? To *you*? Why?"

"They..." He became even more guilty-looking. He would not meet my eyes. "...want to know...things."

"What things?"

"If..." He was miserable. "...I'm a...man."

All at once it broke on me. Of course, there could only be a few children like this boy, who had never seen Earth, who had been born here, and who were old enough by now to be out in the fields. And none of the other children would be carrying rifles—real ones. The natural assumption of the Klahari would of course be that they were young versions of human beings—except that in Jean's case, to a Klahari there was one thing wrong with that. It was simply unthinkable—no, it was more than that; it was inconceivable—to a Klahari that anyone of Jean's small size and obvious immaturity could carry a weapon. Let alone use it. At Jean's age, as I told you, the Klahari thought only of brotherhood.

"What do you tell them?"

"That I'm...almost a man." Jean's eyes managed to meet mine at last and they were wretchedly apologetic for comparing himself with me, or with any other adult male of the human race. I saw his father's one-track, unconsciously brutal mind behind that.

"Well," I said harshly. "You almost are—anyone who can handle a scanner and a rifle like that."

But he didn't believe me. I could see from his eyes that he even distrusted me for telling such a bald-faced lie. He saw

himself through Pelang's eyes—DeBaraumer, scanner, and ability to talk with the Klahari notwithstanding.

It was time for me to go—there was no time to waste getting on to the next planter with my warnings. I did stay a few minutes longer to try and find out how he had learned to talk Klahari. But Jean had no idea. Somewhere along the line of growing up he had learned it—in the unconscious way of children that makes it almost impossible for them to translate word by word from one language to another. Jean thought in English, or he thought in Klahari. Where there were no equal terms, he was helpless. When I asked him why the Klahari said that their large bands would not form or attack until the end of the season, he was absolutely not able to tell me.

So I went on my way, preaching my gospel of warning, and skirmishing with the larger bands of Klahari I met, chivvying and breaking up the smaller ones. Finally I finished the swing through my district and got back to Regional Installation to find myself commissioned lieutenant and given command of a half company. I'd been about seventy percent successful in getting planters to pull back with their families into protected areas—the success being mainly with those who had been here more than seventeen years. But of those who hesitated, more were coming in every day to safety, as local raids stepped up.

However, Jean turned out to be right. It was the end of the season before matters finally came to a head with the natives—and then it happened all at once.

I was taking a shower at Regional Installation, after a tour, when the general alarm went. Two hours later I was deep in the jungle almost to the edge of the desert, with all my command and with only a fighting chance of ever seeing a shower again.

Because all we could do was retreat, fighting as we went. There had been a reason the Klahari explosion had held off until the end of the season—and that was that there never had been such an explosion to date. An interracial sociological situation such as we had on Utword was like a half-filled toy balloon. You squeezed it flat in one place and it bulged someplace else. The pressure our planters put on the maturing Klahari made the five-year ones, the post-seniors, organize as they had never needed or wanted to do before.

The number of our planters had been growing in the sev-

enteen years since the last Klahari generation. Now it was no longer possible to ignore the opposition, obvious in the cleared fields and houses and Strongpoints, to any post-senior Klahari's dream of a jungle kingdom.

So the Klahari had got together and made plans without bunching up. Then, all in one night, they formed. An army—well, if not an army, a horde—twenty to thirty thousand strong, moving in to overrun all signs of human occupancy in the jungle.

We, the human soldiers, retreated before them, like a thin skirmish line opposed to a disorganized, poorer armed, but unstoppable multitude. Man by man, sweating through the depths of that jungle, it was hardly different from a hundred previous skirmishes we'd had with individual bunches—except that the ones we killed seemed to spring to life to fight with us again, as ever-fresh warriors took their place. There would be a rush, a fight, and a falling back. Then half an hour, or an hour perhaps, in which to breathe—and then another rush of dark forms, crossbow bolts and lances against us again. And so it went on. We were killing ten—twenty—to one, but we were losing men too.

Finally, our line grew too thin. We were back among the outermost planters' places now, and we could no longer show a continuous front. We broke up into individual commands, falling back toward individual Strongpoints. Then the real trouble began—because the rush against us now would come not just from the front but from front and both sides. We began to lose men faster.

We made up our ranks a little from the few planters we picked up as we retreated—those who had been fool enough not to leave earlier. Yes, and we got there too late to pick up other such fools, too. Not only men, but women as well, hacked into unrecognizability in the torn smoke-blackened ruins of their buildings.

...And so we came finally, I, the three soldiers and one planter who made up what was left of my command, to the place of Pelang Duprès.

I knew we were getting close to it, and I'd evolved a technique for such situations. We stopped and made a stand just short of the fields, still in the jungle. Then, when we beat back the Klahari close to it, we broke from the jungle and ran fast under the blazing white brilliance of distant Ach-

ernar, back toward the buildings across the open fields, black from the recent plowing.

The Klahari were behind us, and before us. There was a fight going on at the buildings, even as we ran up. We ran right into the midst of it; the whirl of towering, dark, naked, ornamented bodies, the yells and the screeches, the flying lances and crossbow bolts. Elmiro Duprès had been dragged from the house and was dead when we reached her.

We killed some Klahari and the others ran—they were always willing to run, just as they were always sure to come back. Pelang seemed nowhere about the place. I shoved in through the broken doorway, and found the room filled with dead Klahari. Beyond them, Jean Duprès, alone, crouched in a corner behind a barricade of furniture, torn open at one end, the DeBaraumer sticking through the barricade, showing a pair of homemade bayonets welded to its barrel to keep Klahari hands from grabbing it and snatching it away. When he saw me, Jean jerked the rifle back and came fast around the end of the barricade.

"My mama—" he said. I caught him as he tried to go by and he fought me—suddenly and without a sound, with a purposefulness that multiplied his boy's strength.

"Jean, no!" I said. "You don't want to go out there!"

He stopped fighting me all at once.

It was so sudden, I thought for a moment it must be a trick to get me to relax so that he could break away again. And then, looking down, I saw that his face was perfectly calm, empty and resigned.

"She's dead," he said. The way he said them, the words were like an epitaph.

I let him go, warily. He walked soberly past me and out of the door. But when he got outside, one of my men had already covered her body with a drape a Klahari had been carrying off; and the body was hidden. He went over and looked down at the drape, but did not lift it. I walked up to stand beside him, trying to think of something to say. But, still with that strange calmness, he was ahead of me.

"I have to bury her," he said, still evenly empty of voice. "Later we'll send her home to Earth."

The cost of sending a body back to Earth would have taken the whole Duprès farm as payment. But that was something I could explain to Jean later.

"I'm afraid we can't wait to bury her, Jean," I said. "The Klahari are right behind us."

"No," he said, quietly. "We'll have time. I'll go tell them."

He put the DeBaraumer down and started walking toward the nearest edge of the jungle. I was so shaken by the way he was taking it all that I let him go—and then I heard him talking in a high voice to the jungle; words and sounds that seemed impossible even from a child's throat. In a few minutes he came back.

"They'll wait," he said, as he approached me again. "They don't want to be rude."

So we buried Elmiere Duprès, without her husband—who had gone that morning to a neighbor's field—with never a tear from her son, and if I had not seen those piled Klahari dead in the living room before his barricade, I would have thought that Jean himself had had no connection with what had happened here. At first, I thought he was in shock. But it was not that. He was perfectly sensible and normal. It was just that his grief and the loss of his mother were somehow of a different order of things than what had happened here. Again it was like the Klahari, who are more concerned with why they die than when, or how.

We marked the grave and went on, fighting and falling back—and Jean Duprès fought right along with us. He was as good as one of my men any day—better, because he could move more quietly and he spotted the attacking Klahari before any of us. He had lugged the DeBaraumer along—I thought because of his long association with it. But it was only a weapon to him. He saw the advantage of our jungle rifles in lightness and firepower over it, almost at once—and the first of our men to be killed, he left the DeBaraumer lying and took the issue gun instead.

We were three men and a boy when we finally made it to the gates of Strongpoint Hundred Fourteen, and inside. There were no women there. The Strongpoint was now purely and simply a fort, high, blank walls and a single strong gate, staffed by the factor and the handful of local planters who had refused to leave before it was too late. They were here now, and here they would stay. So would we. There was no hope of our remnant of a band surviving another fifty kilometers of jungle retreat.

I left Jean and the men in the yard inside the gates and made a run for the factor's office to put in a call to Regional

Installation. One air transport could land here in half an hour and pick us all up, planters and my gang alike. It was then that I got the news.

I was put right through to the colonel of the Rangers before I could even ask why. He was a balding, pleasant man whom I'd never spoken three words to in my life before; and he put it plainly and simply, and as kindly as possible.

"... This whole business of the jungle Klahari forming one single band has the city Klahari disturbed for the first time," he told me, looking squarely at me out of the phone. "You see, they always assumed that the people we had here were *our* young men, our equivalent of the Klahari boys, getting a final test before being let back into our own civilization elsewhere. It was even something of a compliment the way they saw it—our coming all this way to test our own people on their testing ground here. Obviously we didn't have any test area to match it anywhere else. And, of course, we let them think so."

"Well, what's wrong with that, now—sir?" I asked. "We're certainly being tested."

"That's just it," he said. "We've got to let you be tested this time. The city Klahari, the older ones, have finally started to get worried about the changes taking place here. They've let us know that they don't intervene on the side of their boys—and they expect us not to intervene on the side of ours."

I frowned at him. I didn't understand in that first minute what he meant.

"You mean you can't pick up from here?"

"I can't even send you supplies, Lieutenant," he said. "Now that it's too late, they're working overtime back home to figure out ways to explain our true situation here to the Klahari and make some agreement on the basis of it with them. But meanwhile—our investment in men and equipment on this world is out of reach—too much to waste by war with the adult Klahari now." He paused and watched me for a second. "You're on your own, Lieutenant."

I digested that.

"Yes, Colonel," I said, finally. "All right. We'll hold out here. We're twenty or so men, and there's ammunition and food. But there's a boy, the son of a local planter..."

"Sorry, Lieutenant. He'll have to stay too."

"Yes, sir. . . ."

We went into practical details about holding the Strong-

point. There was a sergeant with the remnants of a half company, maybe another twenty men, not far west of me, holding an unfinished Strongpoint. But no communications. If I could get a man through to tell that command to join us here, our situation would not be so bad. One man might get through the Klahari....

I finished and went outside. Three new planters were just being admitted through the gate, ragged and tired—and one was Pelang Duprès. Even as I started toward him, he spotted Jean and rushed to the boy, asking him questions.

"...but your mama! Your mama!" I heard him demanding impatiently as I came up. One of my men, who had been there, pushed in between Pelang and the boy.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Duprès," he said, putting his hand on Pelang's arm and trying to lead him away from Jean. I could see him thinking that there was no need to harrow up Jean with a rehearsal of what had happened. But Pelang threw him off.

"Tell me? Tell me what?" he shouted, pushing the man away, to face Jean again. "What happened?"

"We buried her, Daddy," I heard Jean saying quietly. "And afterward we'll send her to Earth—"

"Buried her—" Pelang's face went black with congestion of blood under the skin, and his voice choked him. "She's dead!" He swung on the man who had tried to lead him away. "You let her be killed; and you saved this—this—" He turned and struck out at Jean with a hand already clenched into a fist. Jean made no move to duck the blow, though with the quickness that I had seen in him while coming to the Strongpoint, I am sure he could have. The fist sent him tumbling, and the men beside him tried to grab him.

But I had lost my head when he hit Jean. I am not sorry for it, even now. I drove through the crowd and got Pelang by the collar and shoved him up against the concrete side of the watchtower and banged his head against it. He was blocky and powerful as a dwarf bull, but I was a little out of my head. We were nose-to-nose there and I could feel the heat of his panting, almost sobbing, breath and see his brown eyes squeezed up between the anguished squinting of the flesh above and below them.

"Your wife is dead," I said to him, between my teeth. "But that boy, that son of yours, Duprès, was there when his *mother* died! And where were you?"

I saw then the fantastic glitter of the bright tears in his brown squeezed-up eyes. Suddenly he went limp on me, against the wall, and his head wobbled on his thick, sun-burned neck.

"I worked hard—" he choked suddenly. "No one worked harder than me, Pelang. For them both—and they..." He turned around and sobbed against the watchtower wall. I stood back from him. But Jean pushed through the men surrounding us and came up to his father. He patted his father's broad back under its white glass shirt and then put his arms around the man's thick waist and leaned his head against his father's side. But Pelang ignored him and continued to weep uncontrollably. Slowly, the other men turned away and left the two of them alone.

There was no question about the man to send to contact the half company at the unfinished Strongpoint west of us. It had to be the most jungle-experienced of us; and that meant me. I left the fort under the command of the factor, a man named Strudenmeyer. I would rather have left it under command of one of my two remaining enlisted men, but the factor was technically an officer in his own Strongpoint and ranked them, as well as being known personally to the local planters holed up there. He was the natural commander. But he was a big-bellied man with a booming voice and very noticeable whites to his eyes; and I suspected him of a lack of guts.

I told him to be sure to plant sentinels in the observation posts, nearly two hundred feet off the ground in treetops on four sides of the Strongpoint and a hundred meters out. And I told him to pick men who could stay there indefinitely. Also, he was to save his men and ammunition until the Klahari actually tried to take the Strongpoint by assault.

"... You'll be all right," I told him, and the other men, just before I went out the gate. "Remember, no Strongpoint has ever been taken as long as the ammunition held out and there were men to use it."

Then I left.

The forest was alive with Klahari, but they were traveling, not hunting, under the impression all humans still alive were holed up in one place or another. It took me three days to make the unfinished Strongpoint, and when I got there I found the sergeant and his men had been wiped out, the Strongpoint itself gutted. I was surprised by two seniors

there, but managed to kill them both fairly quietly and get away. I headed back for Strongpoint Hundred Fourteen.

It was harder going back; and I took eight days. I made most of the distance on my belly and at night. At that, I would never have gotten as far as I did, except for luck and the fact that the Klahari were not looking for humans in the undergrowth. Their attention was all directed to the assault building up against Strongpoint Hundred Fourteen.

The closer I got to the Strongpoint, the thicker they were. And more were coming in all the time. They squatted in the jungle, waiting and growing in numbers. I saw that I would never make it back to the Strongpoint itself, so I headed for the tree holding the north sentinel post hidden in its top (the Klahari did not normally climb trees or even look up) to join the sentinel there.

I made the base of the tree on the eighth night, an hour before dawn—and I was well up the trunk and hidden when the light came. I hung there in the crotch all day while the Klahari passed silently below. They have a body odor something like the smell of crushed grass; you can't smell it unless you get very close. Or if there are a lot of them together. There were now and their odor was a sharp pungency in the air, mingled with the unpleasant smell of their breath, reminiscent, to a human nose, of garbage. I stayed in that tree crotch all day and climbed the rest of the way when it got dark. When I reached the platform, it was dark and empty. The stores of equipment kept there by general order had never been touched. Strudenmeyer had never sent out his men.

When morning came, I saw how serious that fault had been. I had set up the dew catchers to funnel drinking water off the big leaves in the crown of the tree above me, and done a few other simple things I could manage quietly in the dark. With dawn the next day I set up the post's equipment, particularly the communication equipment with the Strongpoint and the other sentinel posts. As I had suspected, the other posts were empty—and Strudenmeyer had not even set a watch in the communications room at the Strongpoint. The room when I looked into it was empty, and the door closed. No one came to the sound of the call buzzer.

I could see most of the rooms of the Strongpoint's interior. I could see outside the buildings, all around the inside of the walls and the court separating them from the buildings and

the watchtower in the center. The scanners set in walls and ceilings there were working perfectly. But I could not tell Strudenmeyer and the rest I was there. Just as I could get radio reception from the station at Regional Installation, but I could not call R.I. because my call had to be routed through the communications room in the Strongpoint, where there was nobody on duty.

A hundred and eighty feet below me, and all around the four walls that made the Strongpoint what it was, the Klahari were swarming as thickly as bees on their way to a new hive. And more were coming in hourly. It was not to be wondered at. With the group to the west wiped out, we were the forward point held by humans in the jungle. Everything beyond us had been taken already and laid waste. The Klahari post-seniors leading the horde could have bypassed us and gone on—but that was not their nature.

And Strudenmeyer was down there with twenty men and a boy—no, seventeen men. I could count three wounded under an awning in the west yard. Evidently there had already been assaults on his walls. There was no real discipline to the young Klahari, even now, and if a group got impatient they would simply go ahead and attack, even if the leaders were patient enough to wait and build up their forces.

So either there had been premature assaults on the walls, or Strudenmeyer was even more of a bad commander than I had thought, and had been putting men up on the walls to be shot at, instead of using rifles through the gunports on automatic and remote control. Even as I thought this, I was putting it out of my mind. I think that at that time I didn't want to believe that the factor could be that poor a leader, because I had the responsibility for him, having put him in charge of the Strongpoint. Just at that moment, however, something else happened to help shove it out of my mind, for I discovered a new wrinkle to this treetop post that they hadn't had back when I was learning about sentinel duty.

In addition to the wall scanners that gave me an interior view of the Strongpoint, I found there were eight phone connections inside its walls from which the commander there could check with the sentinels. All he had to do was pick up a phone and ask whatever question he had in mind. But the damn things were one-way!

I could activate the receiver at my end. In other words, I could hear what anyone was saying in the immediate vicinity

of the phone. But I couldn't make myself heard by them until someone lifted down the phone at that end. And there was no bell or signal with which I could call them to lift a phone down. I jammed the receivers all open, of course, and several different conversations around the fort came filtering into my post to match up with the images of some of the scanners before me. But nobody was talking about trying a phone to one of the sentinel posts. Why should they? As far as they knew they were unmanned.

I lay there, protected by the shade of the crown leaves, as Achnar climbed up into the sky over the jungle and the Strongpoint, and more Klahari filtered in every moment below me. I was safe, comfortable, and absolutely helpless. I had food for half a year, the dew catchers supplied me with more pure water than I could drink, and around me on my pleasantly breezy perch were all modern conveniences, including solar cookers to heat my food, or water for shaving if it came to that. I lay there like an invisible deity, seeing and hearing most of what went on below in the Strongpoint and entirely unsuspected by those I was watching. A commander without a command, spectator to what, it soon became plain, was a command without a commander.

You might think the men who would delay longest before pulling back in the face of a threat like the Klahari would be the bravest and the best of the planters. But it was not so. These men were the stubbornest of the planters, the most stupid, the most greedy; the hardheads and unbelievers. All this came out now before me on the scanners, and over the open phones, now that they were completely cut off and for the first time they fully saw the consequences of their delaying.

And Strudenmeyer was their natural leader.

There was nothing the factor had done that he ought to have done, and there was nothing he had left undone that he had ought not to have done. He had failed to send out men to the sentinel posts, because they objected to going. He had omitted to take advantage of the military knowledge and experience of the two enlisted men I had brought to the Strongpoint with me. Instead he had been siding with the majority—the combat-ignorant planters—against the military minority of two when questions of defending the Strongpoint came up. He had put men on the walls—inviting premature assaults from the Klahari that could not have taken

the Strongpoint in any case, but that could whittle down his fighting strength. As they already had by wounding three of his able men, including Pelang Duprès. And, most foolish of all in a way, he had robbed himself of his best rifle and his most knowledgeable expert of the Klahari, by reducing Jean Duprès from the status of fighting man to that of seven-year-old child.

He had done this because Pelang, lying under the awning, groaning with self-pity at the loss of his wife, and a lance-thrust through his shoulder, and abusing his son, who was restricted to the single duty of waiting on the wounded, treated the boy with nothing but contempt. Jean's only defenders were my two enlisted men, who had seen him in action in the jungle. But these two were discounted and out-cast anyway in the eyes of the planters, who would have liked to have found reason to blame them, and the military in general, for the whole situation.

So—fools listen to fools and ignore the wise, as I think I read sometime, somewhere. The booming-voiced, white-eyed factor, his big belly swelling even larger with fear and self-importance, listened to the shortsighted, bitter and suffering father who knew nothing but his fields—and ignored the quiet, self-contained boy who could have told him, day by day, hour by hour, and minute by minute, what the Klahari response would be to any action he might take inside the Strongpoint. The afternoon of the first day I was in the sentinel post, there was another premature assault on the walls of the Strongpoint, and another planter, a man named Barker, was badly wounded by a crossbow bolt in the chest. He died less than an hour later.

Just before the sun went down, there was a calling from the jungle. A single, high-pitched Klahari voice repeating itself over and over. I studied the scanners that gave me an outside view of the Strongpoint and the jungle surrounding, but could not locate the caller. In fact, from what my scanners showed, the scene was peaceful. Most of the Klahari were out of sight under the jungle greenery, and the Strongpoint seemed to swelter almost deserted in its small cleared area, its thirty-foot-high concrete walls surrounding the interior buildings dominated by the watchtower which rose from them like a square column of concrete some fifty feet into the air. Strudenmeyer had a man on duty up there in the air-

conditioned bubble under the sunshade, but he had been napping when the calling started.

Then the sound of Jean's voice from a scanner screen drew me back to the bank of them showing the inside of the Strongpoint. I saw him, halfway between the awning-covered wounded's area and the west wall. Strudenmeyer had caught his arm and was holding him from going further.

"...what for?" Strudenmeyer was saying, as I came up to the scanner screen.

"It's me they're calling," said Jean.

"You? How do they know *you're* here?" the factor stared uncertainly down at him.

Jean merely stared back, the blank stare of the young when explanation is hopeless. To him—and to me, watching—it was obvious why the Klahari should know not only that he was there, but that everyone else in the fort who was there, was there, that words were a waste of time. But Strudenmeyer had never risen to the point of giving the Klahari credit for even simple intelligence. He ignored the cities and the schools from which these ornamented young natives came, and thought of them as savages, if not near-animals.

"Come back here. We'll talk to your father," said the factor, after a moment. They went back to Pelang, who listened to Strudenmeyer's report of the situation and cursed both the factor and his son.

"You must be mistaken, Jean. You don't understand Klahari that well," decided Strudenmeyer, finally. "Now, stay away from that wall. Your father needs you and I don't want you getting hurt. That wall's a place for men and you're just a little boy. Now, mind what I say!"

Jean obeyed. He did not even argue. It is something—inconceivable—the adaptability of children; and it has to be seen to be testified to. Jean *knew* what he was; but he *believed* what his father and the other adults told him he was. If they told him he did not understand Klahari and he did not belong on the wall of the Strongpoint, then it must be so, even if it was against all the facts. He went back to fetching and carrying cold drinks to the wounded, and after a while the voice from the jungle ceased and the sun went down.

The Klahari do not as individuals try to kill each other at night. So, automatically, they did not try to storm the Strongpoint under cover of darkness, when their chances of taking it would have been best. But the next morning at

dawn, two thousand of them threw themselves at the walls from the outside.

They were not secretive about it; and that alone saved the Strongpoint, where the single sentry on the watchtower was sleeping as soundly as the rest below. The whole men in the fort manned the walls and began firing, not only the guns under their hands, but a rifle apiece to either side of them on automatic remote control. I ought to say instead, that about three quarters of them began firing, because the rest froze at the sight of the waves of dark seven-foot bodies swarming up to the base of the wall and trying to lean tree trunks against it, up which they could clamber. But the remaining three quarters of able men, multiplied three times by the automatic control rifles, literally hosed the attackers from the wall with rifle slugs until the assault was suddenly broken and the Klahari ran.

Suddenly, under the morning sun, the jungle was silent, and an incredible carpet of dead and dying Klahari covered the open space surrounding the Strongpoint on four sides. Inside, the fighters—and the non-fighters—counted one man dead and five wounded in varying degrees, only one badly enough to be removed to the hospital ward under the awning.

The fallen Klahari lay scattered, singly and in piles, like poisoned grasshoppers after their swarming advance has been met by the low-flying plane spraying insecticide. The others in the jungle around them dragged a few of the wounded to cover under the ferns, but they had no medicines or surgical techniques and soon there was a steady sound from the wounded natives outside the wall and the wounded humans within. While shortly, as the sun rose, unseen but felt, the heat climbed; and soon the stink of death began to rise around the Strongpoint, like a second, invisible outer wall.

I am sorry to make a point of this, but it was this way. It is this way such things have always been and I want you to know how it was for Jean Duprès. He was seven years old, his mother was dead, he was surrounded by death and facing it himself—and he had lived through all that had happened to the men around him so far. Now he was to see many of those within the Strongpoint with him recovering their birth-right as men before his eyes.

For most did recover it. This too always happens. The full assault of the Klahari on the Strongpoint had been like a

flail, striking the grain from the plant and chaff. When it had passed, Strudenmeyer was no longer in command; and several among the wounded like Pelang Duprès were up and carrying a gun again. Strudenmeyer had been one of those who had not fired a weapon during the attack. He and one other were never to fire a gun right up to their deaths, a few days later. But where the Strongpoint had been manned by civilians two hours before, now it was manned by veterans. Of my two enlisted men, one had been the man to die in the assault and the other was badly wounded and dying. But a planter named Dakeham was now in charge and he had posted a man on the watchtower immediately after the attack was over and had gone himself to the communications room to call Regional Installation Military Headquarters, for advice, if not for rescue.

But he found he could not make the radio work. Helpless, watching from my sentinel post through the scanner in the room wall, I raged against his ignorance, unable to make him hear me, so that I could tell him what was wrong. What was wrong, was that Strudenmeyer, like many operators living off by themselves, had fallen into careless individual ways of handling and maintaining his set. The main power switch had worn out, and Strudenmeyer had never put himself to the trouble of replacing it. Instead he had jury-rigged a couple of bar wires that could be twisted together, to make power available to the set. The wires lay before the control board, right in plain sight. But Dakeham, like most modern people, knew less than nothing about radio—and Strudenmeyer, when they hauled him into the communications room, was pallid-faced, unresisting, and too deep in psychological shock to tell them anything.

Dakeham gave up, went out, and closed the door of the communications room of the Strongpoint behind him. To the best of my recollection, it was never opened again.

That evening, the Klahari hit the walls again in another assault. It was not as determined as the first, and it met a more determined resistance. It was beaten off, with only two men slightly wounded. But that was just the first day of full-scale attack.

Twice and sometimes three times a day after that, the Klahari attacked the Strongpoint. The odor of death grew so strong about the fort that it even got into my dreams, high up in my treetop; and I would dream I was wandering through

fields of dead of the past and forgotten wars I had read about as a student in school. The Klahari lost unbelievably with every assault—but always there were more coming in through the jungle to increase their numbers. This one Strongpoint was holding up all the Klahari advance, for psychologically they could not break off a contest once it was begun, though they could retreat temporarily to rest. But inside the Strongpoint, its defenders were being whittled down in number. It was almost unbearable to watch. A dozen times I found my gun at my shoulder, my finger on the trigger. But I didn't pull it. My small help would not change the outcome of the battle—and it would be suicide on my part. They would come up after me, in the dark, watching me, waiting for me to sleep. When I dozed I would be dead. I knew this, but it did not help the feeling of helplessness that overwhelmed me while I watched them die, one by one.

Daily, though neither the besieging Klahari nor the humans in the Strongpoint could see or hear it, a reconnaissance plane circled high up out of sight over the area, to send back pictures and reports of the fight there to Regional Installation. Daily, swaying in my treetop sentinel post, I heard over my voice receiver, the steady, clear tones of the newscaster from Regional Installation, informing the rest of the humans on Utword.

"...the thirty-seventh attack on the Strongpoint was evidently delivered shortly after dawn today. The reconnaissance plane saw fresh native casualties lying in the clearing around all four walls. Numbers of Klahari in the surrounding jungle are estimated to have risen to nearly forty thousand individuals, only a fraction of whom, it is obvious, can take part in an attack at any one time. With the Strongpoint, pictures indicate that its defenders there seem to be taking the situation with calmness...."

And I would turn to my scanners and my phones showing me the inside of the Strongpoint and hear the sounds of the wounded, the dying, and those who were face-to-face with death....

"...They've got to quit sometime," I heard Bert Kaja, one of the planters, saying on my fifteenth day in the tree. He was squatting with the wounded, and Dakeham, under the awning.

"Maybe," said Dakeham, noncommittally. He was a tall,

lean, dark individual with a slightly pouting face but hard eyes.

"They can't keep this up forever. They'll run out of food," said Kaja, seated swarthy and crosslegged on the ground. "The jungle must be stripped of food all around here by this time."

"Maybe," said Dakeham.

They discussed the subject in the impersonal voices with which people back home discuss the stock market. Jean Duprès was less than eight feet from them, and possibly he could have answered their questions, but he was still in the occupation to which Strudenmeyer had assigned him—caring for the wounded.

Right now he was washing the lance wound, the original wound in his father's shoulder. Pelang watched him, scowling, not saying anything until the other two men rose and left. Then he swore—abruptly, as Jean tightened a new bandage around the shoulder.

"—be careful, can't you?"

Jean loosened the bandage.

"You..." Pelang scowled worse than ever, watching the boy's face, tilted downward to watch his working hands. "You and she wanted to go back...to Earth, eh?" Jean looked up, surprised.

"You said she wanted to be buried back home? You told me that!" said Pelang. Still staring at his father, Jean nodded.

"And you, too? Eh? You wanted to go back, too, and leave me here?"

Jean shook his head.

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not!" Jean's voice was injured.

"Ah, you lie...you lie!" snarled Pelang, unhappily. "You don't lie to me with words, but you lie anyway, all the time!" He reached up with his good hand and caught the boy by the shoulder. "Listen, I tell you this is a terrible place, but me, your daddy, worked hard at it to make you rich someday. Now, answer me!" He shook the boy. "It's a terrible place, this jungle, here! Isn't it?"

"No," said the boy, looking as if he was going to cry.

"You..." Pelang let go of Jean's shoulder and clenched his fist as if he were going to strike his son. But instead his face twisted up as if he were going to cry himself. He got to his feet and lumbered away, toward the walls, out of range of my

immediate scanner. Jean sat still, looking miserable for a moment, then his face smoothed out and he got to his feet and went off about some business of his own to do with the wounded.

In that evening's assault they lost two more men to the attacking Klahari, one of them Dakeham. It was the fifteenth day of full-scale assaults and they were down to eight men able to man the walls, each one of them handling half a wall of rifles on automatic remote, instead of one rifle direct and the rest on automatic. They had found that it was point-blank massed firepower that beat back the attacks; and that what was to be feared was not the Klahari rushing the walls, but the one or two natives who by freak chance got to the top of these barriers and inside the Strongpoint. A Klahari inside the walls could usually kill or wound at least one man before he was shot down.

The one who killed Dakeham did so before any of the others noticed it and went on to the wounded under the awning before he could be stopped. There, Jean killed him, with a rifle one of the wounded had kept by him—but by that time the wounded were all dead.

But there were fresh wounded. Pelang had been lanced again—this time in the side, and he bled through his bandage there, if he overexerted himself. Kaja had been chosen to command in Dakeham's place. Under the lights, once night had fallen, he went from man to man, slapping them carefully on unwounded back or shoulder.

"Brace up!" he said to them. "Brace up! The Klahari'll be quitting any day now. They must be out of food for miles around. Just a matter of hours! Any day now!"

No one answered him. A few, like Pelang, swore at him. Jean looked at him gently, but said nothing. And, voiceless as far as they were concerned, up in my sentinel's post, I understood what Jean's look meant. It was true that the Klahari were out of food for kilometers about the Strongpoint, but that made no difference. They were able, just like humans, to go several days without food if it was worth it to them—and in this case it was worth it. Going hungry was just the price of being in on the party. After several days the hungriest would break off, travel away in search of fruit and roots and when they were full again, come back.

"...the season's not more than a week from being over!"

said Kaja. "With the end of the season, they always move to a new place."

That was truer. It was a real hope. But two weeks was a long way off in a Strongpoint under two or three assaults a day. The evening radio news broadcast came on to emphasize this.

"... This small jungle outpost holds all the Klahari young men at bay," recited the announcer calmly. "The native advance has been frustrated...."

I dozed off in the rocking treetop.

Sometime in the next two days, Jean finally returned to the walls. I did not remember and I think no one in the Strongpoint remembered when it happened exactly. He must have taken over a bank of rifles on automatic fire when the man handling them was killed by a Klahari who had gotten over the wall. At any rate, he was once more fighting with the men. And the men were now down to three able to fight and two dying under the awning, so no one objected.

They did not lose a man for two days. Jean not only manned his section of the walls, but shot the three Klahari that got over the walls, in that time. It was as if he had eyes in the back of his head. Then, suddenly, in one morning assault, they lost two men and Pelang went down from loss of blood—the wound in his side having reopened and bled during the fighting. Later on that day, the two wounded died. At the evening assault, Pelang lay useless, half-doing under the awning, while Jean and the remaining planter in fighting shape stood back-to-back in the open middle of the Strongpoint, scanners set up in front of them, each handling two adjacent walls of guns on automatic remote fire.

Half a dozen Klahari made it over the walls and into the Strongpoint. Jean and the planter—whose name I do not remember—grabbed up hand weapons and shot them down. By what amounted to a wild stroke of luck, the man and the boy were able to get them all killed without being wounded themselves.

Night fell, and brought an end to the day's fighting. But later on, about the middle of the night, there was the single, sharp report of a handgun that woke me in my treetop. I turned to the scanners, lifted their hoods one by one, and located Jean standing in the open space before the awning, half in shadow above something lying in an interior angle of the walls. As I looked, he turned, crossed under the lights

and came back underneath the awning. I had a scanner there, as I may have mentioned, but the night contrast between the shadow and the interior lights was such that I could barely make out the darkly upright shape of Jean and the recumbent shape of a man, who would be Pelang. Pelang had been half-unconscious earlier, but now his voice came weakly to the phone connection nearby.

"—what is it?"

"He's shot," answered Jean; and I saw the upright shape of him fold itself down beside the larger darkness of his father.

"Who...?" Pelang barely whispered.

"He shot himself."

"Ah..." It was a sigh from the man's lips, but whether one of despair or just of weariness or exhaustion, I could not tell. Pelang lay still and silent, and Jean stayed sitting or crouching beside his father... and I almost dozed off again, watching the screen. I was roused by the whispering sound of Pelang's voice. He had begun to talk again, half to himself, just when, I was not sure.

"...I am a man...I can go anywhere. Back home... look at the stars. I told myself, Elmiere and me...Nobody farms better than me, Pelang. Nobody works harder. This is a terrible place, but it don't stop me. Elmiere, your mama, she wanted to go back home; but we got earth here you can't match on them stony old fields, *bord la rive* Mistassibi. Man don't let himself be pushed from his crops—no, they don't get away with that, you hear?" He was becoming louder-voiced and excited. I saw the shadow of him heave up and the shape of Jean bowing above him.

"Lie down, Papa..." it was the boy's whisper. "Lie down..."

"This terrible place, but I make my boy rich...you'll be rich someday, Jean. They'll say—'Hey, Jean, how come you're so rich?' then you say—'My daddy, *mon père* Pelang, he made me so.' Then you go back home, take your mama, also; you let them see you way up beyond Lac St. John. 'My daddy, Pelang,' you say, 'he don't never back down for no one, never quits. He's a man, my daddy, Pelang...'"

His voice lowered until I could not make out the words and he rambled on. After a while I dozed; and a little later on I slept deeply.

I woke suddenly. It was day. The sun was up above the leaves over me—and there was a strange silence, all around.

Then I heard a voice, calling.

It was a calling I recognized. I had heard it once before, outside the walls of the Strongpoint, the first day I had been in the treetop sentinel post. It was the calling of the Klahari, that Jean had told Strudenmeyer was for him, days before.

I rolled to the scanners and flipped up all their hoods. Jean still sat where I had seen his indistinct form in the darkness, above the shape of his father, under the awning. But now Pelang was covered with a blanket—even his face—and unutterably still. Jean sat crosslegged, facing the body under the blanket—not so much in the posture of a mourner, as of a guard above the dead. At first as I watched it seemed to me that he did not even hear the calling beyond the walls.

But, after a while, as the calling kept up in the high-pitched Klahari voice, he got slowly to his feet and picked up the issue rifle beside him. Carrying it, he went slowly across the open space, climbed to the catwalk behind the west wall and climbed from that on to the two-foot width of the wall, in plain sight of the Klahari hidden in the jungle. He sat down there, crosslegged, laying the rifle across his knees, and stared out into the jungle.

The calling ceased. There came after that a sound I can't describe, a sort of rustling and sighing, like the sound of a vast audience, after a single, breath-held moment of uncertainty, settling itself to witness some occasion. I switched to binoculars, looking directly down into the clearing before the west wall. Several tall Klaharis came out of the jungle and began clearing the dead bodies from a space about twenty feet square before the west wall. When they had gotten down to the macerated earth below the bodies they brought out clean leaves of fern and covered the ground there.

Then they backed off, and three Klahari, feathered and ornamented as none I had ever seen before, came out of the jungle and sat down themselves on the ferns, crosslegged in their fashion—which Jean had imitated on the wall above. Once they were seated, Klahari began to emerge from the jungle and fill in the space behind them, standing and watching.

When as many were into the open space as could get there without getting between the seated three and their view of Jean, another silence fell. It lasted for a few seconds, and then the Klahari on the end got to his feet and began to talk to Jean.

In the Rangers we are taught a few Klahari phrses—"You

must disperse," "Lay down your weapons," and the like. A few of us learn to say them well enough to make the Klahari understand, but few of us learn to understand more than half a dozen of the simplest of Klahari statements. It is not only that the native voice is different—they talk high and toward the back of a different-shaped throat than ours; but the way they think is different.

For example, we call this planet "Utword," which is a try at using the native term for it. The Klahari word—sound rather—is actually something like "*Ut*," said high and cut off sharp, toward the back of your mouth. But the point is, no Klahari would ever refer to his planet as simply "*Ut*." He would always call it "the world of *Ut*"; because to the Klahari, bound up in this one planet there are four worlds, all equally important. There is the world that was, the world of all past time. There is the world yet to be, the world of time to come. There is a sort of Klahari hell—the world populated by the dead who died in failure; and whose souls will therefore never be reincarnated in Klahari yet to be born. And there is the world of the physical present—the world of *Ut*. So "Utword" is "*Ut*" tied onto the human word "world" minus the l-sound the Klahari can't pronounce.

Therefore I understood nothing of what was said by the Klahari who was speaking. From his gestures to the Strong-point walls and the jungle behind him, I assumed he was talking about the conflict here. And from the way Jean sat listening, I guessed that Jean understood, where I did not. After the speaker was finished, he sat down; and there was a long silence that went on and on. It was plain even to me that they were waiting for some answer from Jean, but he simply sat there. And then the middle Klahari stood up to speak.

His gestures were more sharp and abrupt, more demanding. But aside from that he was as incomprehensible to me as the first, except that something about the gestures and the talk gave me the impression that a lot of what he said was repeating what the first speaker had said. At last he sat down, and again there was the silence and the waiting for Jean to speak.

This time Jean did speak. Without standing up, he said one short phrase and then sat still again, leaving me with the tantalizing feeling that I had almost understood him,

because of the simpleness of his statement and the fact that it was made by a human mouth, throat and tongue.

But the response was another rustling sigh from the audience, and when it died, the third and tallest Klahari got slowly to his feet and began to talk. I do not know if the few words from Jean had sharpened my wits, or whether the last speaker was himself more understandable, but without being able to translate a single word, I felt myself understanding much more.

It seemed to me that he was asking Jean for something—almost pleading with the boy for it. He was advancing reasons why Jean should agree. The reasons were possibly reasons the first two to speak had advanced—but this speaker seemed to take them with a deeper seriousness. His gestures were at arms' length, slow and emphatic. His voice rose and fell with what seemed to me to be a greater range of tone than the voices of the others. When at last he sat down, there seemed to be a deeper, more expecting silence, holding all the listening jungle and the silent Strongpoint.

Jean sat still. For a moment I thought he was not going to move or answer. And then he said that phrase again, and this time I understood why I had almost felt I could translate it. The first sounds in it were "K'ahari..." the native name with the throat-catch in the beginning of it that we replace with a more humanly pronounceable "l," to get the word "Klahari." I had almost had the whole phrase understood with that identification, it seemed to me.

But Jean had risen to his feet and was finally beginning to talk, his high-pitched child's voice matching the pitch of the native vocal apparatus.

He spoke impassionedly—or maybe it was because he was as human as I was that I could see the passion in him, where I hadn't been able to see it in the Klahari. He gestured as they had, but he gestured in one direction that they had not gestured, and that was back the way they had come to the Strongpoint, back toward the now overrun fields of his family farm, the deep jungle and the desert beyond. Twice more, I caught in his speech the phrase he had used to answer the second and third native speakers—and finally it stuck in my head:

"K'ahari tomagna, manoi..."—or that at least was what it sounded like to my human ear. I sat back, staring at him through my binoculars, for his face was as white as if all the

blood had drained out of it; and suddenly, without warning, tears began to brim out of his eyes and roll down his cheeks—silent tears that did not interfere with the violence of his words but continued to roll as if he were being secretly tortured all the while he was speaking. The words poured out of him to the listening natives below—and suddenly I was understanding him perfectly.

For a second I thought it was some kind of a miracle. But it was no miracle. He had simply broken into English, without apparently realizing it. It was English geared to the rhythm of the Klahari speech:

"...I am a man. This is a terrible place and my mama did not want to stay here. My daddy did not like it here, but he was making me rich. Nobody works harder than my daddy, Pelang. I don't want to stay here. I will go home and be rich with the old people above Lac St. John; and never see any more K'ahari and the jungle. And the K'ahari will go back to the jungle because a man don't let himself be pushed from his crops. No, you don't get away with that, and you don't come into this Strongpoint, because I am a man and I don't let the K'ahari in...."

He went back into their tongue, and I lost him. He went on standing there with the tears rolling down his face, no doubt telling them over and over again in Klahari that he would not surrender the fort to them. He wound up at last with the same phrase I had heard before; and finally, this time, I understood it, because it was so simple and because of what he had said.

"*K'ahari tomagna, manoi!*"—"I am no brother to the Klahari, but a man!"

He turned with that and jumped down off the top of the wall to the catwalk inside and crouched there, immediately. But no crossbow bolts or lances came over the wall. He went crouched over to the steps at the point where the walls made a corner and went down the steps to back before the awning. There, he pulled the scanners showing the outside views of all four walls into a battery facing him, and sat down on a camp chair with his rifle over his knees, looking at them.

On his scanners as on mine, the Klahari were fading back into the jungle. After they had all gone, there was silence, and after a little he wiped his eyes, laid down his rifle, and went to get himself some food. As if he knew that since they had not attacked immediately, they would not attack again

for some little time. I sat back in my treetop with my head spinning.

I remembered now how I had seen the boy walking his own plowed fields as a Klahari walks. I remembered how his reaction to being under possible attack alone at the place, and even his reaction to the killing of his mother, had baffled me. I understood him better now. The jungle with its Klahari was something he took for granted, because it was the only world he had ever known. Not Earth, the place he had only heard about, but this all around him was the real world. Its rules were not human rules, but Klahari rules. Its normal shape was not the grass and sun of home, but the searing white light and fern and macerated earth of Utword. He believed his father and the rest of us when we talked about how alien Utword and its people were—but they were not alien to him and it was the only world he had.

Now the Klahari had come calling on him as a brother to take up his birthright, by joining them and opening the Strongpoint to them. So that they could destroy it and move on against the rest of the human outposts. He had refused to do so, and now he was down there, alone. The thought of his aloneness abruptly was like a hard shock all through me. Alone—down there with the body of his father and the other men, and the Klahari outside, ready to attack again. I told myself that I had to get him out of there, whether I got myself killed trying or not.

The only reason I did not start down the tree trunk right then in broad daylight was that I wanted some kind of a plan that had at least a faint chance of success. I was not concerned about saving myself, but I did not want to waste myself—for Jean's sake. I got up and paced my comfortable, safe perch, two paces each way, swing, and back again . . . thinking hard.

I was still at it when the Klahari assault came. An explosion of yells and noise almost right under me. I jumped for the scanners.

Jean was standing with his back to the west wall of the watchtower, his own bank of scanners before him, handling all the rifles in all the walls on remote automatic. If the rifles had not been self-loading, as they were, not a half-dozen years before, he never could have done it. But as it was, he stood holding the Strongpoint alone, a faint frown of concentration on his face, like a boy back home running a model train around its track at speeds which come close to making it fly

off on the curves. Two of the attackers made it over the wall hidden from him by the watchtower at his back; but still it seemed as if he had eyes in the back of his head, because he abandoned his scanners, turned and crouched with a rifle in his hands, just as they came together around the side of the watchtower after him. The lance of the second one he shot thudded against the wall of the watchtower just above his head before the native fell dead. But Jean's face did not change.

The assault failed. The natives drew off, and Jean abandoned his scanners to go to the heavy task of dragging the two dead Klahari back around the corner of the tower out of his way. He could not have dragged grown men that way, but the Klahari are lighter-boned and -bodied than we, and by struggling, he got them cleared away.

There was another, lighter assault just before sundown that evening, but none of the natives got over the walls. Then darkness covered us—and still I had worked out no plan for getting the boy out of there.

My general idea was to get him away, and then leave the gates of the Strongpoint open. The Klahari would enter, ravage the interior and move on—to points better equipped than we to continue the fight with them. Perhaps, with the Strongpoint taken, they would not look around for Jean—or me.

But I was helpless. I raged in my treetop. Up here and unnoticed, I was safe as I would have been at home on Earth. But let me descend the tree trunk, even under cover of darkness, and I would not live thirty seconds. It would be like coming down a rope into an arena jammed with several thousand lions. Dawn came . . . and I had thought of nothing.

With it came the post-dawn attack. Once more, Jean fought them off—almost more successfully than he had the attack of the evening before. It was as if his skill at anticipating their actions had been sharpened by the pressure on him to defend the Strongpoint alone. He even walked away from his automatic rifle controls in the heat of the battle to shoot a Klahari just coming over the north wall.

There was a noon attack that day. And an evening one. Jean beat all of them off.

But that night I heard him crying in the darkness. He had crawled back under the awning, not far from the body of his father, and in the gloom next to the ground there, I could not pick out where he lay. But I could hear him. It was not loud

crying, but like the steady, hopeless keening of an abandoned child.

When dawn came I saw his face seemed to have thinned and pinched up overnight. His eyes were round and staring, and dusted underneath with the darkness of fatigue. But he fought off the dawn attack.

A midday attack was beaten back as well. But I had not seen him eat all day, and he looked shadow-thin. He moved awkwardly, as if it hurt him; and after the midday attack was beaten off, he simply sat, motionless, staring at and through the scanners before him.

Just as the afternoon was turning toward evening, the Klahari calling from the jungle came again. He answered with a burst of automatic fire from the wall facing toward the location of the voice in the jungle. The voice ceased as abruptly as if its possessor had been hit—which he could not have been.

The evening attack came. A full eight Klahari made it over the walls this time, and although Jean seemed to be aware of their coming in plenty of time to face them, he moved so slowly that two of them almost had him.

Finally, this last and hardest assault of the day ended, with the dropping of the sun and the fading of the light. The lights inside the Strongpoint came on automatically, and Jean abandoned his scanners and controls to crawl under the awning. As the night before, I heard him crying, but after a while the sounds ceased, and I knew that he had gone to sleep at last.

Alone, safe in my treetop, still without any plan to save the boy, I drifted off to sleep myself.

I woke suddenly to the sounds of the dawn assault. I sat up, rubbed my eyes—and threw myself at the scanners. For on the screen of the one with its view under the awning, I could see Jean, still stretched in exhaustion-drugged slumber.

Already, the Klahari were at the walls and clambering over them. They poured into the open area before the watchtower as Jean woke at last and jerked upright, snatching up his rifle. He looked out into a semicircle of dark, staring faces, halted and caught in astonishment to find him unready for them. For a second they stood staring at each other—the Klahari and the boy.

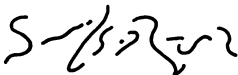
Then Jean struggled to his feet, jerked his rifle to his

shoulder and began firing at them. And a screaming wave of dark bodies rolled down on him and bore him under....

Behind them, more Klahari warriors all the time were swarming over the walls. The gates of the Strongpoint were torn open, and a dark, feathered and bejeweled river of tossing limbs and weapons poured into the open area. Soon, smoke began to rise from the buildings and the flood of attackers began to ebb, leaving behind it the torn and tattered refuse of their going.

Only in one area was the ground relatively clear. This was in a small circle around the foot of the watchtower where Jean had gone down. Among the last of the Klahari to leave was a tall, ornamented native who looked to me a little like the third of those who had spoken to Jean before the wall. He came to the foot of the watchtower and looked down for a moment.

Then he stooped and wet his finger in the blood of Jean, and straightened up and wrote with it on the white, smooth concrete of the watchtower wall in native symbols. I could not speak Klahari, but I could read it; and what he had written, in a script something like that of Arabic, was this:



—which means: *"This was one of the Men."*

After which he turned and left the Strongpoint. As they all left the Strongpoint and went back to their jungles. For Jean's last two days of defending the place had held them just long enough for the season to end and the year to change. At which moment, for the Klahari, all unsuccessful old ventures are to be abandoned and new ones begun. And so the threat that had been posed against all of us humans on Utword was ended.

But all ends are only beginnings, as with the Klahari years and seasons. In a few weeks, the planters began to return to their fields; and the burned and shattered Strongpoint that had been besieged by forty thousand Klahari was rebuilt.

Soon after, a commission arrived from Earth that sat for long talks with the mature Klahari of the cities and determined that no new planters would be allowed on Utword. But those that were there could remain, and they with their families would be taboo, and therefore safe from attacks by young Klahari attempting to prove their jungle manhood.

Meanwhile, there being no other heirs on Utword, the Duprès property was sold at auction and the price was enough to pay for the shipping of the bodies of Pelang and Elmiere home for burial, in the small Quebec community from which they had emigrated. While for Jean, a fund was raised by good people, who had been safe in the Regional Installation, to ship his body back along with his parents'.

These people did not believe me when I objected. They thought it was all I had been through, talking, when I said that Jean would not have wanted that—that he would have wanted to have been buried here, instead, in his father's fields.

NUISANCE VALUE by Eric Frank Russell

Despair is not listed among the vices, but perhaps it should be. Despair guarantees defeat, and though no one wants to be defeated it is hard to fight on when every avenue seems blocked. Yet there is something that fights despair even against logic. The Greeks, in their myth of Pandora, described that curious woman as opening a box she was not supposed to open and loosing all the ills to which humanity has ever since been subject. There was one last thing at the bottom of the box, though, which somehow made all those ills bearable—even ills such as imprisonment by an unbeatably superior force—and that is HOPE.

—Isaac Asimov

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NUISANCE VALUE

By Eric Frank Russell

The ship was small, streamlined and little better than junk. It lay uselessly in deep grass, its term of service finished and over. The name *Elsie 11* was engraved either side of its bow. There was no romantic connection, the cognomen being derived from L.C.2, or Long-range Craft Number Two. At its midpoint it bore the silver star of the Space Union and that meant nothing either—for it was now in enemy possession.

Also in the hands of the foe was the complete crew of seven, all Terrans. They posed in a lugubrious line, tired, fed up, deprived of weapons, and waited for someone to push them around.

Twenty Kastans stood guard over them while three others sought through the ship for anyone who might have remained in hiding. They were very humanlike, these Kastans, except in matter of size. The shortest of them topped the tallest Terran by head and shoulders. They ranged from seven and a half to eight feet in height.

The Terrans waited in glum silence while big, heavy feet tramped through their stricken vessel from bow to stern. Finally an officer squeezed out the air lock, followed by two lesser ranks.

Strolling importantly to the group, the officer spoke to a

Kastan whose left sleeve was adorned with three crimson circles. His language seemed to be composed of snorts and grunts. Next, he faced the prisoners and switched to fluent Extralingua.

"Who was in command of this ship?"

"I was," responded Frank Wardle.

"Sir."

Wardle gazed at him cold-eyed.

"Say 'sir' when you speak to me," ordered the officer, impatiently.

"What is your rank?" inquired Wardle, unimpressed.

The other put a spade-sized hand on a holster holding a huge machine-pistol. "That is of no concern of yours. You are a prisoner. You will do as you are told—as from now."

"I will say 'sir' to an officer of superior rank," informed Wardle in the tones of one who knows his rights. "I will also accept his ruling as to whether or not that form of address is reserved only for military superiors."

Chronic uncertainty afflicted the hearer. Knowing his own superiors he could give a shrewd guess as to whose side they'd take in any dispute concerning their rights and privileges. The curse of being an officer is that one is outranked by other officers. Maybe he'd better let the matter drop, it being a dangerous subject to dwell upon. He glanced at the onlooking troops to see whether they were aware that he had been defied. Their faces were blank, uncomprehending.

Reasserting himself by making his tones harsh and authoritative, he said to Wardle, "I am not disposed to argue with a mere prisoner. You have plenty left to learn. And very soon you will learn it."

"Yes, teacher," agreed Wardle.

Ignoring that, the officer went on, "You will follow this sergeant. You will walk behind him in single file. You will be guarded on both sides and in the rear. If any one of you attempts to escape the escort will shoot—to kill. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Then so inform your companions."

"There is no need. They understand Extralingua. On Terra one gets educated."

"Also on Kasta," the officer riposted, "as you are about to discover." He turned to the sergeant. "Take them away."

The crew of the *Elsie* marched off, obediently following the sergeant. Three guards on either side kept pace with them

at ten feet distance, just too far for a sudden jump and a successful snatch at a gun. Four more trudged weightily behind.

They struck a wide path between enormous trees and moved in contemplative silence. A thing like a small frilled lizard scuttled along a branch fifty feet up, stared down at them beady-eyed and uttered a few sympathetic squeaks. Nobody took any notice.

The sergeant's yard-wide shoulders swung in front of them while his size twenty boots went *thud-thud-thud*. There was no difficulty in keeping up with him because his slow pace compensated for his great strides. The escort's boots also thudded on the right, the left and in the rear. The Terrans felt like pygmies trapped by elephants in human form.

Eventually they reached a small encampment consisting of half a dozen huts set in a clearing. Here, the seven were herded into a truck, a troop-carrier with seats along both sides. They sat in line on one side, their feet dangling a few inches above the floor. The guards squatted on the other, machine-pistols in laps.

The truck roared to life, pulled out, rocked and swayed along a dirt road, reached a wide, paved artery, sped at top pace for three hours. During this time the Terrans said not a word but their eyes absorbed the passing scenery as though memorizing it for all time.

With a sudden turn to the right that shot the prisoners onto the floor the truck lumbered into a military center and stopped before a long stone building. The guards guffawed deep in their chests, nudged the struggling captives with their boots. A bunch of uniformed Kastans gathered around and gaped curiously as the Terrans dismounted and were conducted inside.

The sergeant lined them up against a wall, snorted and grunted a few warning words to the guard, hastened through a doorway. After a while an officer stuck his head out the same doorway, surveyed the silent seven and withdrew. A bit later the sergeant reappeared, urged them along a high-ceilinged corridor and into a room in which two officers were seated behind a long desk.

For twenty minutes the officers fiddled around with papers and pointedly ignored the arrivals. That keep-'em-waiting technique was deliberate and of malice aforethought, being calculated to impress upon the prisoners that they were trash to be swept up at leisure.

Finally one of the officers looked up, made a grimace of displeasure, pushed his papers to one side. He nudged his companion, who also condescended to become aware of alien company.

"Who speaks Kastan?" asked the first officer, in that language.

No reply.

"Well, do any of you speak Extralingua?" he persisted.

"They all do, sir," chipped in the sergeant without waiting for anyone else to reply.

"So! Then let's get on with the interrogation."

He pointed a pen at random. "You there—what's your name?"

"Robert Cheminais."

"Number?"

"105697."

"Rank?"

"Captain."

The second officer scribbled all this on a sheet while the pen shifted and aimed at the next one.

"And you?"

"William Holden."

"Number?"

"112481."

"Rank?"

"Captain."

Another move as the pen selected the third one.

"Frank Wardle. 103882. Captain."

Then the rest in rapid succession.

"James Foley. 109018. Captain."

"Alpin McAlpin. 122474. Captain."

"Henry Cassola. 114086. Captain."

"Ludovic Pye. 101323. Captain."

"Seven captains on one ship," commented the officer. He let go a loud sniff. "That's the way the Terrans run their navy. Everyone a captain—if he isn't an admiral. And doubtless every one of them has forty medals." His sour eye examined the captives, then picked on Wardle. "How many medals have you got?"

"None—yet."

"Yet? You've a fat lot of hopes of getting one *now*. Not unless we give you one, having become crazy." He waited for an answer that did not come, went on, "But you are a captain?"

"That's right."

"And all the others are captains?"

"Correct."

"Then who commanded the ship?"

"I did," said Wardle.

"In that case," rasped the officer, "you can tell me something. You can tell me exactly why you're here."

"We're here because we've been made prisoners."

"I know that much, fool! I want to know why a Terran vessel has appeared in this locality where none has ventured before."

"We were on a long-range reconnaissance patrol. Our engines went haywire, propulsion became dangerously erratic, we were forced down. Your troops grabbed us before we could make repairs." Wardle gave a shrug of complete resignation. "Our luck ran out. That's war."

"Your luck ran out? Seems to me that you were let down by inferior equipment. Our space-navy would not tolerate that sort of thing. Our standard of efficiency is pretty high." He gazed steadily at his listener, continued, "Experts are on the way to examine these Terran engines. I don't suppose they'll discover anything worth learning."

Wardle offered no remark.

"So you were on a spying trip, eh? It hasn't done you much good, has it?"

No answer.

"We've a very useful labor force of four hundred thousand Union prisoners. The addition of seven Terrans won't make much difference one way or the other. You are undersized and puny creatures." He studied each of the seven in turn, his lips pursed in contempt. "However, we shall add you to the crowd. In time of war every little helps—even a bunch of weak-muscled captains." He turned to the stolidly listening sergeant. "Have them shipped to Gathin forthwith. I will forward their papers immediately we've dealt with them here."

He made a gesture of dismissal. The sergeant led the seven back to the truck, chivvied them aboard, took a seat facing them with the guard beside him, guns in laps. The truck lurched ahead, got onto the main road, hit up top speed. Its axles emitted a high-pitched whine.

Holden, hawk-nosed and lean-faced, bent forward, said to the sergeant in Extralingua, "Where's Gathin?"

"Up there." The other jerked a hammerlike thumb toward

the sky. "Twelve days' flight. Anthracite mines, lead mines, machine-shops. Plenty of work for the dead." He showed big teeth. "Those taken in war are as dead. Therefore one should not be taken."

"Do you understand Terran?" asked Holden, switching to that language.

The sergeant looked blank.

Radiating a cordial smile, Holden said, "You dirty big stinking bum! Hail the Union!"

"Please?" said the sergeant, answering the smile with a cracked one.

"You flatfooted, hamhanded numbskull," responded Holden, oozing amiability. "May all your children have violent squints and may you be smothered to death in a heap of manure. Hail the Union!"

"Please?" repeated the sergeant, baffled but gratified.

"Take it easy, Bill," warned Wardle.

"Shaddap!" Switching back to Extralingua, Holden said to the sergeant, "I will teach you a little Terran if you wish."

The sergeant approved, thinking that every item of education was a step nearer to officership. Lessons commenced while the truck rocked along. Prisoners and guards listened with interest as Holden carefully enunciated words and phrases and the sergeant got them perfectly.

Such fluency had been gained that at the spaceport farewells were exchanged in the specified manner.

Holden, giving a vaudeville salute: "Drop dead, you fat rat!"

The sergeant, proud of his linguistic ability: "Thank you, my lord! Hail the Union!"

They trudged down the ship's gangway, stared at their new surroundings, and Wardle said in an undertone, "Item one: we've arrived without getting our throats slit. Item two: we now know exactly where Gathin is."

"Yair," agreed Holden. "We know where it is. But it's going to be easier to get in than get out."

"Oh, I don't know," opined Wardle, airily. "We've got a considerable advantage in that they won't expect us to try. Remember, chum, it's a cosmos-wide convention that a prisoner of war is a member of the living dead, properly resigned to his fate. Everyone recognizes that fact excepting Terrans—who are wholly crazy."

"Not all Terrans had that viewpoint once," offered Holden. "Around the time they learned to walk on their hind legs the Japanese considered capture more disgraceful than death. Some went so far as to commit suicide first chance they got."

"That was a heck of a long time ago and—"

"Silence!" bawled a paunchy Kastan who was standing near the bottom of the gangway with the inevitable guard in attendance. He glowered at the seven as they lined up in front of him. "So you are Terrans, eh? We have heard your kind mentioned by the Stames and Aluesines who"—he put on a grin of self-satisfaction—"are now our slaves by right of conquest. But they did not say you were so small. Or have we been sent a group of selected dwarfs?"

"Seven dwarfs, sonny," said Holden. "Snow White's coming on the next boat."

"Snow White?" The paunchy one frowned, consulted a wad of papers in his hand, searching through them one by one. "I have here documents for seven Terrans. There is nothing about an eighth due on this ship or the next."

"She must have missed it," said Holden, helpfully.

"*She*? You mean a female was captured with you?"

"Evidently she wasn't. She took to the woods." Holden put on a look of grudging admiration. "I wouldn't have thought she'd have got away with it."

Paunchy took a deep breath. "Did you inform our Interrogation Center about this Snow White?"

"No, sonny. They didn't ask."

"Imbeciles!" he spat out. "Now we shall have to send a signal to Kasta and set up a widespread hunt for her. It will put our forces to much time and trouble."

"Hallelujah!" said Holden, fervently.

"What does that mean?"

"It is much to be deplored."

"You are right," agreed Paunchy, with some menace. "And in due course she will do much deploring." His eyes shifted along the rank, settled on Ludovic Pye. "Well, what are you laughing about? Is your brain afflicted?"

"He suffers from hysterics," put in Holden. "It is the shock of capture."

"Humph!" said Paunchy, openly contemptuous. "Weak in mind as well as in body. The Aluesines and Stames have more moral fiber, low-grade lifeforms though they be. They collapse from physical weakness but none have gone mad."

He spat on the ground, vigorously. "Terrans!" Then he motioned toward a nearby truck. "Get in!"

They got in. It was the same procedure as before. They sat along one side with a line of surly guards facing them. The truck set off through a countryside different from that of Kasta. Here, trees were smaller though still big by Earth-standards. They grew more thickly and soon resembled a jungle through which the road cut in a wide, perfectly straight line.

Halfway to their destination they passed a gang of Aluesines toiling at the roadside. They were human-shaped characters nearly as tall as the Kastans but of skinnier physique. They had slot-shaped pupils, like cats, and by nature were nocturnal. Only they could know the torture of slaving in full sunlight.

The Aluesines observed the Terrans without interest or surprise. Every one of them had the appalling apathy of a creature resigned by custom to his fate and who takes for granted a similar attitude on the part of all others.

Holden, who was seated near the tailboard, leaned over it as the truck roared past and let go a yell of "*Floreat Aluesia!*"

It caused no visible excitement. A guard leaned forward and belted Holden on the knee with his gun butt.

"*Fosham gubitsch!*" he growled in incomprehensible Kastan.

"Hush yo mouf!" said Holden in equally incomprehensible Terran.

"Shut your own!" ordered Wardle. "We'll have trouble enough before we are through."

"You will not talk in dwarf-language," chipped in Paunchy, cutting a scowl into seven parts and handing a piece to each. "All speech will be in Extralingua. That is, until you have learned Kastan."

"Hah!" said Holden, determined to have the last word.

The officer was big even for one of his race. He wore a skin-tight uniform of dark green ornamented with silver braid. A couple of small white arrows decorated the flap of his top pocket. His face was broad, heavy and slightly gross, his expression severe.

"I am the commander of this prison. Over you I hold the power of pain and suffering, of life and death. Therefore you

will strive to please me at all times. Henceforth that is your only aim, your sole purpose of existence—to please me.”

The seven stood in silence as he did a bit of important strutting up and down the carpet.

“We have not had any Terrans before and now that we have I don’t think much of them. All the same, we shall make full use of such work as you are capable of doing. That is our proper reward for victory and your proper penalty for defeat.”

Holden opened his mouth, closed it as Wardle’s heel rammed down on his toes.

“You will be conducted to your quarters,” concluded the officer. “In the morning you will be cross-examined concerning your training and aptitudes. You will then be assigned appropriate tasks.” He sat down, leaned back in his chair, put on an expression of boredom. “Take them away, sergeant.”

They were marched out in single file, made to wait an hour in the middle of a great concrete yard. Barrack-blocks of solid stone reared ten floors high on each side of the yard. Beyond the blocks rose the wall to a height of sixty feet. The whole place seemed empty, there being no other prisoners in sight.

Eventually a guard-major appeared, took over from the sergeant, led them into the right-hand block and up stone steps to the sixth floor. Then along a corridor and into a large room with bare stone walls.

“Do you understand Kastan?”

They stared at him without response.

“Extralingua?”

“Yes,” said Wardle, speaking for the bunch.

The guard-major drew himself up to full height, expanded his chest and gave forth. “I am guard-major Slovits. I command this block. Over you I hold the power of life and death. Therefore you will strive to please me at all times.”

“Henceforth that is your only aim,” prompted Holden.

“Eh?”

“I was remarking that we understand,” explained Holden, blank-faced. “Our only aim shall be to please you, Guard-Major Slobovitch.”

“Slovits,” corrected Slovits. He carried on, “You will remain here until the great gong sounds outside. You will then parade in the yard along with the others for your evening meal. Is that understood?”

"Yes," said Wardle, beating the gabby Holden to any further remarks.

"There will be no jostling of other prisoners, no unruly fighting for food. Disorder will be cured with the whips. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Guard-Major Slobovitch," assured Holden, beating Wardle out of his role as spokesman.

"Slovits!" said Slovits, glowering at him. He stumped out, slamming the door behind him.

Wardle prophesied to Holden, "One of these days you'll be trapped by your own trap."

"That's happened already. I volunteered for this nutty mission, didn't I?"

"You did. Let it be a warning to you."

There were twelve beds in the room, each consisting of plain wooden planks fastened to a wooden framework. The beds were nine feet in length and covered with one nine-foot blanket slightly threadbare and none too clean. At the end of the room was a faucet and one washbasin.

"Every modern inconvenience," growled Foley, to whom the chief curse of military service was lack of comfort.

"Twelve beds," observed Alpin McAlpin. "I wonder if that means we're getting some Stames or Aluesines with us. If so, it'll make contact easy right at the start."

"We'll have to wait and see," said Wardle. He strolled to the door, tried it. The door held firm. "Self-locking and solid metal. Hm-m-m! Wouldn't have surprised me if they'd left it open."

He crossed to one of the four windows. There were no bars to impede exit. The windows were hinged and opened without trouble. A baby elephant could have clambered through and escaped—given that it had been born with wings.

The others joined him for a look-see. Immediately beneath them the side of the block dropped six floors to the ground. Above, it rose four to the top. There were no ridges, no ledges, no breaks other than those provided by window-gaps.

At bottom lay a concrete space of bone-breaking hardness, forty feet wide, terminated by the outer wall. Evidently they'd been accommodated on the side of the block farthest from the yard, though whether or not this would prove an advantage remained to be seen.

The great exterior wall of the prison soared a full sixty

feet from ground, its top being a couple of feet below the floor-level of their room. Thus they could look down upon the top, also see much of the country beyond.

As nearly as they could judge from their vantage-point the wall's top was about five feet wide. On each side one foot of this width was fringed with a triple row of metal spikes about six inches long and spaced three inches apart. The middle three feet formed a sentry-walk along which armed guards mooched from time to time with their attention directed mostly outward rather than inward.

Foley said to Holden, "Now there's a choice set-up for knocking them off the easy way."

"How d'you mean?"

"You call the attention of a sentry from here. He looks this way, sees your horrible face. He faints at the sight of it, collapses on the spikes and gets impaled."

"Wittiest speech I've heard in years," said Holden, sourly. "Look at me rolling all over the floor."

"Shut up, you bums," ordered Wardle. He left the window, sat on the edge of a bed, counted off his fingers as he continued talking and made his points one by one. "Let's review the situation."

They assented, sat around and listened.

"The know-alls on Earth said the Union is handicapped by an alien psychology which applies to enemies and allies alike. In this respect we Terrans appear to be unique—though someday we may encounter a yet unknown lifeform that uses what we regard as hoss-sense. Correct?"

They nodded.

"All right. This alien viewpoint asserts that to be taken prisoner is to be eternally disgraced. Even a released prisoner refuses to go back home; his family prefers to consider him dead for keeps rather than admit the shame of him. So there's no point in any prisoner attempting to escape except for the purpose of committing a nice, quiet, uninterrupted suicide. That gives us an advantage in dealing with enemies—but it's a hell of a handicap to our allies. Eh?"

Again they nodded.

"The Stames' and Aluesines' casualties consist only of killed and wounded. Officially there are none missing. So they've a powerful army here which, they say, does not exist." He paused, added, "And they say Terrans are crazy!"

"If we aren't," put in Holden, "why are we here?"

Taking no notice, Wardle went on. "The know-alls promised that we'd find ourselves in circumstances shaped by the enemy's unavoidable supposition that we would never dream of escaping for any purpose other than that of self-destruction. They said, for instance, that we'd be searched for weapons and documents but not for escape material. So far, they've proved right, haven't they?"

"Yair," said Holden, feeling around for a pocket-watch that wasn't a pocket-watch.

"They said that all the enemy would demand of us would be absolute obedience because the only problem he has in dealing with captives is that of reluctance to work. Naturally a gump who considers himself dead isn't going to sweat any harder than he has to. So the Kastans have never experienced any trouble with prisoners other than of two kinds, namely, slow working and occasional suicides. They've never come up against ridicule, sabotage, organized escapes or suchlike. Not sharing our state of mind, they don't and can't anticipate any difficulty in handling a few Terrans." He stopped, rubbed his chin thoughtfully and asked, "Do you fellows think the way we've been handled so far shows that the know-alls were again-right?"

"Yair," said Holden, the others agreeing with him.

"Good! Then what we've got to do next is check up on whether they're correct about everything else, because, if not, we're in a real jam—and we could remain in it until death us do part."

He counted another finger as he made the next point. "The bigbrains claim that Kastan prisons should be fully as well-built as any of ours but with one significant difference: defenses will be against attack from outside rather than mass escape from inside. The Kastans expect the former but not the latter, taking it for granted that the Union's motive would not be to release their own men but rather to rob the Kastan economy of a valuable labor force."

"It's all a lot of long-range supposition," put in Alpin McAlpin. "I wouldn't take any Kastan's mentality for granted on the strength of some Terran expert's guesses. We've a lot of checking-up to do before we know where we're going."

"That's what I'm getting at," said Wardle, staring hard at Holden. "Let's be humble and obedient for a while. Let's become willing and patient beasts of burden while keeping our

eyes skinned for confirmatory evidence. From now on we'll confer every night and correlate whatever data we've gathered."

"Why give *me* the hard eye?" demanded Holden, bristling at him.

"You're a bit too full of bounce, chum. You're supposed to play a part and you're a bad actor."

"Nuts to that! I consider myself a cut above these Kastans, having been conceived in holy wedlock."

"So do we all. But we must conceal the fact for as long as seems expedient. Good manners is the art of pretending that one is not superior."

Foley let go with a violent laugh at that, and said, "You're like a troop of Tibetans."

"Why?" asked Wardle.

"You're always good for a few yaks."

A huge gong clamored somewhere across the yard.

"Food," added Foley, starting the line-up by the door. "Prison food. Let's see you laugh this lot off."

The door clicked open, they went through into an empty corridor, clattered down the stairs and into the yard. Here a guard met them, handed each man one circular wooden bowl and one wooden spoon.

"You will keep those and take care of them. Loss or damage will earn punishment." He pointed across the concrete, his forefinger the size of a banana. "At all mealtimes you will attend with those Stames. You will not join any of the other groups unless ordered to do so."

They traipsed across the yard, tagged on at the end of the indicated line of Stames. Ahead of them the line wound snakelike a couple of hundred yards, went through a gap between barrack-blocks and round to the cookhouse at back. Nearby were four other lines slowly shuffling forward, one wholly of Stames, two of Aluesines and one of mixed species.

The Stames also were humanlike, towering head and shoulders above the Terrans. This unanimity of shape surprised nobody. Every intelligent lifeform yet encountered had been found only on planets approximating more or less to Terra's conditions, and every one had been of the same shape with no more than minor variations. A library of books had been written on the subject, with such titles as *Cosmic Domination of the Simian Structure*.

The similarities served to emphasize the differences. The

Stames were first-class fighters in their own area but not aggressively warlike as were the Kastans. They were not nocturnal like the Aluesines. They lacked any appreciation of the ludicrous such as is enjoyed by Terrans. They were a serious-minded, humorless lifeform, producers of broody literature and moody music.

Holden nudged the one immediately in front of him. The Stame turned round, looked down upon him from his greater height. He had a mournful face, a lugubrious expression, and resembled a founder-member of the Society of the Disenchanted.

"How's the chow here, Happy?" asked Holden.

"Little and bad."

"It would be."

"So now they are taking Terrans," commented the Stame. "They have progressed that far, *houne*? The war is almost lost, *houne*?"

"What do you care? You've been thrown to the crocodiles, anyway."

"Crackodales? What are those, please?"

"Kastans wearing a grin," informed Holden. "But don't quote me."

The line edged onward. More Stames appeared, joined in behind the Terrans. They did not speak unless spoken to. Every one of them was thin, undernourished, dull-eyed and apathetic. Stames and Aluesines in parallel lines were in no better condition. Their clothes were worn and shabby. A third of them lacked boots or shoes and trod the concrete barefooted.

At the cookhouse forty impassive Aluesines stood in pairs beside twenty big, steaming boilers and ladled out the contents under the sharp eyes of as many guards. One scoop just about filled one bowl.

Holden, first in the Terran file, got his, examined it closely, smelled it, rasped, "What is this foul potion?"

A guard eyed him. "You say?"

"I say it's a crying shame, you lumbering clunker."

"You will speak only in Extralingua," reproved the guard. "To use your own language is forbidden."

Carrying their bowls clear of the several line-ups, they followed the example of those already served, sat on the hard surface of the yard and ate. Plying their spoons they dipped and sucked in unison. The concoction tasted like mixed vegetable soup. Unidentifiable portions of stuff floated around

in it and to Terran nostrils it had the fragrance of the cathouse at the zoo.

Without enthusiasm they finished the stew, washed spoons and bowls under a faucet, hung around to see what next. Nothing much happened for a while. Prisoners who had been fed lolled listlessly around the yard while those yet to be fed shuffled forward with bowls in hands. As the last few of the latter reached the cookhouse a strange stirring, a kind of subtle animation went through the crowd. Tenseness could almost be felt.

Then behind the block a guard bawled something unhearable. Immediately a mob of prisoners made a mad rush to the cookhouse. There came noises of scuffling feet, shouted orders, Kastan curses and cracking whips. Soon the mob mooched back.

One of them, a weary-eyed Aluesine, sat near the Terrans, tilted his bowl to his mouth and drank greedily. Then he sighed, lay back propped on his elbows, looked idly around. His clothes were black with anthracite dust and a fresh weal showed across his face.

Wardle edged across to him, asked, "What caused the fracas?"

"Extra," said the other.

"Extra?" Wardle was puzzled. "Extra what?"

"Soup," said the Aluesine. "Sometimes after all have been served there is a little left over. So the guards give a shout. First comers get it, just a mouthful apiece."

"And for that you ran like an animal?"

"We are prisoners," reminded the Aluesine, with dreadful philosophy. "A prisoner is no more than an animal. What else can he be?"

"A warrior," snapped Wardle.

"What, without a gun and without honor? You speak stupidly."

He got up and walked away.

"Hear that?" Wardle glanced at the others. "It shows what we're up against."

"Hell of a note," said Holden, disgustedly.

"We mustn't condemn them," Wardle warned. "They think the way they've been brought up to think and the result isn't their fault. Besides, the Aluesines are having a hard time. They work when they ought to be sleeping and they try to sleep when normally they'd be active. Their nature is being

turned upside-down. I'll bet that character feels like he's on his last lap."

"The Stames aren't having it good either," put in Ludovic Pye. "I've just had a word with that one." He pointed to a distant mourner following an invisible coffin. "Says he's been here four years, worked like a dog, and hasn't tasted meat since he bit his tongue."

"Well, we've another small advantage," Wardle commented. "The Kastans are doling out their lousy food on the basis of the minimum quantity needed to maintain useful life in people half as big again as ourselves. They're giving us the same as the rest. So in proportion to our requirements we're getting more than the others. We'll be only a quarter starved instead of half-starved."

"With all the numerous advantages we've got or are alleged to have," remarked Pye, sarcastically, "it's a wonder the Kastans don't give up."

"They will, chum, they will," Holden told him.

Heaving himself erect, Wardle said, "Let's make some sort of a start while the going is good. Split up and work individually around the yard. Question anyone who's got a spark of animation and see if we can find out who is the senior officer among this crowd."

They went their several ways. Holden was the first to pop the question. He picked upon a Stame one degree less miserable than the rest.

"Who is the senior officer in this dump?"

"The Kastan commander of course. You were taken before him when you arrived, weren't you?"

"I don't mean Festerhead. I mean who is the senior officer among the prisoners?"

"There are no officers."

"That so? Were they all sent elsewhere?"

"There are no officers," asserted the Stame, as if speaking to an idiot, "because a prisoner has no rank. We are all prisoners. Therefore there are no officers."

"Yair," said Holden. "That's right."

He scowled, gave up the search, but ambled aimlessly on. Presently he met Casasola, the silent one who was heard when and only when speech was unavoidable.

"No ranks, therefore no officers," Holden said.

Casasola pulled a face and walked onward without remark. Next came Foley.

"No rank, therefore no officers."

"You're telling me?" said Foley disgustedly, and continued his futile questioning.

In short time Holden became bored. Selecting an unpopulated corner of the yard, he sat down cross-legged, placed the bowl between his knees, hammered it with his spoon to attract attention and let go with a peculiar whine.

"No momma, no poppa. Have pity, Sahib. Baksheesh in the name of Allah."

"You will not talk in dwarf-language," ordered a voice situated high above size twenty boots.

Holden looked upward. "Oh, good evening, Guard-Major Slobovitch."

"The name is *Slovits*," shouted Slovits, showing horse's teeth.

Nobody shared their room when the door clicked shut for the night. The five spare beds remained unoccupied. Wardle eyed the beds speculatively.

"Either this pokey isn't yet full to capacity or else they're keeping us apart from the rest night-times. I hope it's the former."

"Does it matter?" asked Pye.

"It might. If they're segregating us within the block it could be because they know more about Terrans than we think. By the same token they could know too much about our military tactics. I like an enemy to be big, clumsy and ignorant."

"They can't know much," scoffed Pye. "They're numerically the strongest lifeform yet known, and they control some sixty scattered planets, but their intelligence service has never probed as far as the Terran sphere of operations. The Kastans have been spending all their time fighting Stames and Aluesines and lesser types; up to when we left home they'd heard of us only by repute." He gave a sniff of disdain. "But they've crawled all over *Elsie* and think she's the best we've got."

"What, you dare to speak lightly of a woman's name?" interjected Holden, pretendedly shocked.

"Anyway," continued Wardle, "we now know that the experts have proved correct about imprisoned allies and have weighed them up fairly accurately. It's obvious that not one of these prisoners would lift a finger to get back home. He

knows that if he did return he'd be scorned by the populace, denied a living, repudiated by his family and become a social outcast. He's no inducement to make a break."

"Not yet," said Holden.

"No, not yet. Our experts think they've found a way to crack the hard crust of alien convention, to the great advantage of the Union and the confoundment of the Kastans. We've got to make it work. We've now had a close look at the set-up—what do you fellows think of our chances?"

"Too early to judge," Holden opined. "We can make some better guesses after another week."

"I thought they were exaggerating back on Terra," ventured Pye. "But they weren't. Not one little bit. We're expected to perform miracles with a mob of exhausted zombies. It's a tough task, in my opinion."

"That's because you're letting yourself be bemused by their alien viewpoint," said Wardle. "The more baffling you permit it to seem, the harder the job looks. Try simplifying it in your own mind."

"How d'you mean?"

"This way: basically the Stames and Aluesines are top-notch fighters, full of guts and ready for anything—so long as they've got guns in their hands and retain what they choose to regard as personal honor. Take away their guns and kick them in the britches and you destroy that honor. So they are bollixed by what is, in effect, a tribal custom that's been established for many centuries."

"But it doesn't make sense."

"Neither do some of our habits. Maybe it did make sense in the long, long ago. Maybe it was a natural and necessary way of eliminating the weak at a time when explosives and paralyzing gases weren't thought of. Anyway, the only real difference between these prisoners and ourselves is that we can be stripped naked and still retain an item of which they are deprived."

"Such as?"

"An invisible something called morale."

"Humph!" said Pye, unimpressed.

"Either a prisoner has it or he hasn't," Wardle went on. "This mob has not got it and it isn't their fault. They've been kidded by longstanding custom into believing there's no such thing. Or rather I should say they've been made blind to it. What we've got to do is help them see clear and straight."

"I know all that," Pye grumbled. "But once I spent five years on Hermione. As maybe you know, the Hermies have good, sharp sight but see only black, white and shades of gray. They're not to blame for that; it's the way they're made. You can argue with them from now to the crack of doom and never succeed in describing colors or telling them what they're missing."

"So what? We aren't here to try to give the Stames and Aluesines something mysterious that they've never had. Our concern is to restore something they've lost, something they had aplenty when their guns were loaded and in their hands. It may be difficult. It isn't impossible."

"What does that mean?" inquired Holden.

"What does *what* mean?"

"Impossible?"

"Forget it," advised Wardle, grinning. "There is no such word."

Holden leaned across toward Pye and said in a tutorial manner, "You heard what the nice gentleman said—there is no such word."

"Humph!" repeated Pye, determined to coddle his mood of temporary skepticism.

Wardle ambled to a window and looked out. Darkness had fallen, the purplish sky was sprinkled with stars. A pale primrose glow rippled across the landscape as one of Gathin's three minor moons arced overhead.

The top of the prison wall was illuminated by narrow-beamed flares directed horizontally along it. Apparently the sole purpose of the lighting was to make clear the path of patrolling sentinels lest otherwise they should step on the spikes and take a sixty-foot dive.

"We must time the movements of these guards," said Wardle. "We'd better take turns at keeping watch on them. As soon as possible we must acquire precise details of their nightly routine."

"We must also dig up a small crate from somewhere," Holden put in, "or, better still, a three-foot folding ladder."

"What for?" demanded Wardle.

"Sooner or later we may have to slug one of them. The slugger will need a ladder to lay out a chump eight feet tall. Takes brains to think of everything." Selecting a bed, he sprawled on it, glanced sidewise, met the gaze of the ever-

silent Casasola. "So you're still with us, eh? Just a rose in a garden of weeds."

Casasola did not deign to reply.

Came the dawn. It was sweetened by the majesty of Guard-Major Slovits. He flung wide the door, marched in, prodded each blanket-covered shape with his whip-handle.

"You will dress at once. You will go for your morning food. Immediately you have eaten you will parade outside the commander's office." He distributed a few more impartial jabs. "Is that understood?"

"It is," said Wardle.

Slovits marched out. Foley rolled over, groaned, sat up, rubbed red-rimmed eyes.

"What did he say?"

"In effect, get moving," Wardle informed.

"After breakfast we're invited to drinks with Festerhead," Holden added.

"Like hell we are," said Foley. "What's Festerhead want us for, anyway?"

"I'll tell you for a small fee," offered Alpin McAlpin.

In due time they reached the head of the line-up and received one quart apiece of cat-house soup. They sat on the ground and ate.

"Good, *houne*?" remarked a nearby Stame, as though guzzling the stuff was the only remaining joy in life.

"Think so?" Foley scowled at him. "I say it stinks."

"An insult to the belly," offered Cheminais in support.

"Not fit for hogs," declared Ludovic Pye.

"Down, down, you mutinous dogs!" bellowed Holden at the top of his voice.

Ten thousand pairs of eyes turned simultaneously their way, ten thousand wooden spoons poised motionless over as many bowls. A dozen guards raced toward the center of general attention.

The first of them arrived and demanded breathlessly, "Now, what is this?"

"What is what?" said Holden, childlike and bland.

"You have screamed. Why have you screamed?"

"I *always* scream two hours after sunrise on Thursdays."

"Thursdays? What are those?"

"Holy days."

"And why do you scream then?"

"It is my religion," assured Holden, oozing piety.

"A prisoner has no religion," stated the guard, with considerable emphasis. "There will be no more screaming."

He stamped away impatiently. The other guards went with him. Ten thousand pairs of eyes lost interest, ten thousand spoons resumed scooping at as many bowls.

"That mug," said Holden, "is so dumb he thinks fuller's earth is a planet."

The nearby Stame glanced warily around, whispered in confidential manner, "I will tell you something. All Terrans are crazy."

"Not all of us," Wardle denied. "Just one of us. Only one."

"Which one?" asked the Stame.

"Not telling," said Holden. "It's a military secret."

"Prisoners have no secrets," said the Stame with much positiveness.

"We have!" Holden sucked soup loudly. "Good, *houne*?"

The Stame got up and walked away. For reasons best known to himself he was slightly dazed.

"Is this your idea of behaving quietly and humbly for a piece?" asked Wardle. "If so, what's going to happen when we decide to get uppish? Were you ever a juvenile delinquent?"

Holden finished his soup, then, "Obedience has its limits so far as I'm concerned. Besides, we're fighting a state of mind. It's a mental condition that sticks in my craw. The sooner we cure them of it, the better."

"That may be. But we've got to be careful we don't overreach ourselves by starting off too fast. We've got to show these Stames and Aluesines that victory and self-respect can both be gained. It won't help us any if they explain all our words and deeds in terms of lunacy."

"Neither will it help us to mope around kowtowing to all and sundry."

"Have it your own way," said Wardle, giving up.

The Stames and Aluesines started forming in close-packed columns and marching out through the main gate. They still carried their bowls and spoons. None bore tools, these presumably being stored at wherever they labored. Guards chivvied them continually as they trudged along, urging them to move faster. Several who stumbled and fell out of the ranks were promptly booted back into place.

Meanwhile the Terrans paraded as ordered outside the commander's office. A great Kastan banner flapped and flut-

tered from its pole above the building. Holden watched the flag, seemingly fascinated by its movements.

They were still waiting when the last of the working parties left the yard and the big gates clanged shut. Now the space was empty, the barrack-blocks deserted. There were no sounds other than the thump of boots along the wall-top, the receding shouts of guards accompanying the columns and vague noises in the distance where other slaves already had resumed their daily tasks.

After they had fidgeted aimlessly around for more than an hour, Slovits appeared. "You will come inside and answer all questions."

They traipsed in, found themselves facing five officers of whom the middle one was the prison commander. All five had the bored attitude of farmers about to compile the milk records of a herd of cows.

"You," said Festerhead, pointing. "Which one are you?"

"Alpin McAlpin."

"In what have you been trained?"

"Radio communications."

"So you are a technician?"

"Yes."

"Good!" approved Festerhead. "We can use skilled personnel. Far too many of these Union captives are common soldiers fit for nothing save drudgery." He conferred with the officer seated on his left, finished, "Yes, let Raduma have him." He returned attention to the seven and pointed again. "You?"

"Ludovic Pye."

"Training?"

"Electronics engineer."

"Raduma," said Festerhead to the one on his left. "Next?"

"Henry Casasola. Engineer-armorer."

"Main workshops," decided Festerhead. "Next?"

"Robert Cheminais. Propulsion engineer."

"Main workshops. Next?"

"James Foley. Fleet doctor."

"Prison hospital," said Festerhead, promptly. "Next?"

"Frank Wardle. Pilot-commander."

"A pilot? We have no use whatever for alien pilots. How long is it since you were inducted into the Terran forces?"

"Eight years ago."

"And what were you before then?"

"A forestry expert," informed Wardle, forcing his face to keep straight.

Festerhead slapped a hand on the desk and exclaimed with a gratified air, "Superb! Put him in the jungle gang. We'll then have one of them who can turn round twice and still know north from south." He stared inquiringly at the last Terran.

"William Holden. Navigator."

"What can we do with a navigator? Nothing! Have you no other technical qualification?"

"No."

"What were you originally?"

"A quarry manager."

Almost beaming, Festerhead said, "This one's for the stone gang."

Holden smirked back. He couldn't help it. Running through his mind was a brief speech made back on Terra by a gray-haired oldster.

"Without exception all intelligent lifeforms are builders. All large-scale builders employ natural resources, especially stone. One obtains stone from quarries. One quarries it by blasting. Therefore a quarry-worker has access to explosives which, nine times out of ten, are not under military protection." A pause while he waited for it to sink in, followed by, "You will now undergo a course on quarrying techniques with particular reference to explosives."

Not noticing Holden's expression, Festerhead returned attention to Wardle. "You were in charge of this Terran vessel that made a forced landing?"

"I was."

"Yet all of your crew were of the same rank, all captains. Why is that?"

"Each of us had risen to a captaincy in his own specialized profession."

"It seems strange to me," commented Festerhead. "The Terrans must have peculiar ways of doing things. However, it is of no consequence. I am concerned with something more important." He fixed a cold gaze on his listener. "This morning we received a signal from Kasta. They are taking all necessary measures to capture Snow White."

Wardle fought within himself to remain silent and impassive. It was an awful strain.

"Why was this female aboard?"

"We were transporting her to sector headquarters," lied Wardle, not daring to look at his six companions.

"Why?"

"I don't know. We had our orders and did not question them."

"Why is her name not recorded in the documents we have seized from your ship?"

"I don't know. The papers are prepared by Terran authorities. I cannot accept responsibility for what is or what is not written upon them."

"How did this female succeed in escaping while you seven were captured?" Festerhead persisted.

"She fled into the woods the moment we landed. We stayed by the ship, trying to repair it."

"Did she take anything with her? A weapon, or an instrument"—he bent forward, gave it emphasis—"such as a long-range transmitter?"

"I don't know. We were too busy to notice."

"Answer me truthfully or it will go hard with you! Is this Snow White an intelligence agent?"

"Not that I know of." Wardle made a deprecating gesture. "If she were, we wouldn't necessarily be told."

"Is she young or old?"

"Fairly young."

"And attractive?"

"Yes, I would call her that." Wardle felt a couple of beads of sweat sneaking down his spine.

Festerhead put on the knowing look of one who's been nicked by every night club and head waiter in town. "Have you any reason to suppose that she may have been the favorite of a high military commander?"

"Could be," conceded Wardle, radiating the admiration due from a yokel.

"And so, to us, a valuable hostage?" continued Festerhead, soaking up the worship of a hick.

"Could be," repeated Wardle, upping the output.

Preening himself, Festerhead said, "Describe her in full detail."

Wardle did it, right down to her stud earrings. It was a masterly picture worthy of Ananias at his best. Festerhead listened carefully while one of his officers wrote it down word for word.

"Have these details radiated to Kasta at once," ordered

Festerhead when finally Wardle dried up. He switched attention to Slovits. "These Terrans will commence work today. See that they are taken where assigned."

Slovits led them away.

The seven were split up and conducted their various ways. They did not meet again until the Stame-line formed for the evening meal.

"No talking," greeted Wardle. "Leave it until later when we'll be alone."

Holden turned to Casasola, who was immediately behind him, empty bowl in hand. "You heard what the nice gentleman said. No talking. So keep your trap shut."

As usual, Casasola said nothing.

When they were in their room with the door fastened for the night, Wardle said, "Like me to start with the yap?"

"Might as well," agreed Pye, for the rest.

"All right. I've been with a gang of Stames cutting and hauling lumber. Six guards were with us, every one of them lazy and careless. They sat in a hut playing a kind of card game, knowing that nobody would take it on the lam because there's nowhere to go—not even home. Discipline gets pretty slack out there in the jungle."

"You want more of it?" asked Holden.

Ignoring the interruption, Wardle continued, "I talked plenty with those Stames and no guard ordered me to shut up. Seems that the Kastans have kept to their native time-keeping despite that the day here is more than twenty-eight hours long. Their routine is based on the Kastan hour which measures just over forty-two of our minutes. All walls are patrolled four times per hour. Roughly, once every ten minutes."

"That's what we made it when we watched them last night," Pye reminded.

"So anyone who wants to get over that sixty-foot wall has got to do it in under ten minutes. If he's spotted he'll be shot on sight—not for trying to escape but for disobedience. Ten minutes isn't much of a margin." He shrugged, went on, "The wall-patrols haven't been established to prevent escapes because they don't expect any. They're merely performing a wartime routine of keeping watch against outside attack. But that doesn't help us any. They've got eyes in their heads no matter which way they're looking."

"How about the gate?" asked Foley.

"There's an all-night guard on it; twelve men and another twelve within call. There's a total of four hundred guards in this jail. There are forty similar prisons in Gathin. A dozen are within easy reach of here, some so near that their lumbering gangs are cutting timber alongside our mob."

"How near?"

"One of them is only a mile away. You could see it from the window but for the rise of land and the trees." Wardle paused, finished, "I've saved the best bit to the last. You've noticed that extension back of Festerhead's building? It's the garrison armory. It holds at least four hundred guns and plenty of ammo."

"Did any Stame get roused from his lethargy by your questions?" inquired Holden.

"Not that I noticed." Wardle pulled a face. "They attributed them to idle curiosity. How did you get on?"

Holden laughed with a rasping, knocking sound like that of a burial casket falling downstairs. Taking from his pocket a lump of soft, grayish substance, he tossed it into the air, caught it, juggled it dexterously. Then he molded it with his fingers.

"What's that?" asked Foley.

"Alamite."

"And what might alamite be?"

"Plastic explosive," said Holden.

"For heaven's sake!" Foley fell over a bed in his haste to make distance.

"Put it away," begged Pye. "You make me nervous."

"Bah!" said Holden. "You could bite it and chew it and nothing would happen. It needs a detonator."

"You wouldn't happen to have one with you?"

"No, I didn't bother to bring one. I can get fifty any time I want. And a ton of alamite to go with it. The stuff is touchy. The guards don't go near it. They leave the slaves to handle it and blow themselves apart." He gave the same laugh again. "I am a slave."

"How's that, fellows?" said Wardle, with great satisfaction. "One blast at the armory doors and we've got four hundred guns."

"I've something else, too." Putting the alamite back in a pocket, Holden removed his jacket and shirt, unwound from

his middle a long coil of thin but strong cord. "It was lying around begging to be taken. Good, *houne?*"

"Hide it someplace," urged Wardle. "We're going to need that rope before we're through." He turned to McAlpin. "What's your report?"

"They let Pye and me work together. In a big repair shop. All sorts of electronic stuff. The work is mostly radio and video servicing, the ordinary checking, adjusting or repairing of spaceship equipment. They kept close watch on the two of us until they became satisfied that we really know our job. After that they left us alone to get on with it."

"Any chance of sabotaging their junk?"

"Not just yet," said McAlpin, regretfully. "Maybe later on. Raduma, who's in charge of the place, is a fussy character and to give him his due he's an expert. He likes everything perfect and regards a substandard job as a slur on his professional competence. Whenever we finish a piece of work he puts the equipment on the test-bench and checks its functioning personally. That doesn't leave us much scope, does it?"

"No, I guess not. But he's pernicky rather than suspicious?"

"That's right. And like all of his type he wastes no time or thought on apparatus which is beyond repair or not worth repairing. It gets tossed in the yard at back and is left there to rot."

"So—?"

"So we can help ourselves *ad lib* providing we do it surreptitiously and providing work goes on satisfactorily. There is a mountain of stuff from which we can take our pick—if nobody sees us picking. Some dexterous cannibalizing will get us everything we want. Our chief trouble is going to be that of smuggling it far from sight."

"Can you get it into the edge of the jungle?" asked Wardle.

"Sure thing. But no farther. We can't risk being missed more than five or six minutes at a time."

"Leave the rest to me. You get it into the jungle's fringe and let me know when and where. I'll have it dragged away somehow. I'm not in a timber gang for nothing. How long do you reckon it will take to swipe all the parts you need?"

McAlpin thought a bit. "We can make the booster in the workshop right under their noses. The bowl antenna will have to be sneaked piece by piece and assembled elsewhere.

To make or steal the lot and get it away will take at least a fortnight—and that's assuming we're not caught."

"It won't be enough merely to make some equipment disappear," chipped in Pye. "We've also got to find a small clearing someplace where we can set up the beacon without interference. It'll have to be off the forest tracks where no Kastan or gabby prisoner is likely to see it. It will also have to be within reach of power lines that we can tap."

"How near to power lines?"

"Say not more than eight hundred yards away," offered Pye. "I think we can grab enough cable to cover that distance."

"O.K. You tend to teleportating the stuff as far as the trees. I'll find a site and have it taken there."

"How?"

"Don't know yet. But it's my grief. I'll do it if it kills me." Wardle now turned attention to Foley. "Anything to say?"

"Not much. The prison hospital is a blot on so-called civilization. Its chief concern is to get half-dead slaves back to work with the minimum of cost, trouble and delay. Even sick guards have a rough time of it there. The equipment is poor, the treatment inhuman, and Doctor-Major Machimbar, who bosses the place, is a disgrace to the medical profession."

"A warning, fellows," said Wardle, looking at the others. "Nobody falls sick if he can help it."

"Give you one guess at Machimbar's greeting when I reported to him," said Foley.

"Henceforth your sole purpose in life will be to please me," Holden suggested.

"Correct." Foley brooded a while, added, "There's two items of interest. For one, the hospital is outside the prison and within a short sprint of the jungle. Theoretically it's an easy escape route. In grim fact you've got to be *in extremis* to be taken there."

"And the other item?" Wardle prompted.

"I found a Stame colonel."

"You did?"

"I asked an emaciated Stame what he'd been before capture. He said a colonel of infantry. He and his troop had been paralyzed with gas and were in manacles when they recovered. They never had a chance but that doesn't stop him thinking himself a shame to his race."

"We can use him," said Wardle.

"We can do better," Foley replied. "According to him there are four more ex-colonels somewhere in this clink. There is also a former Aluesine major-general."

"Name?"

"General Partha-ak-Waym."

"We've got to find that character. We've got to get him into a corner and talk."

"And make him see reason," contributed Pye, openly doubting the ability of any foreigner to do so.

Holden said, "The night is young. There is one among us, name of Cheminais, specially trained to bust any lock yet devised by the thinking mind. Being able to count, I have estimated that there are four barrack-blocks in this emporium. Therefore there's one chance in four that our block holds this Pat Ak-Whatzit."

"Partha-ak-Waym," Foley corrected.

"That is what I said," declared Holden. "Well, what are we waiting for? You fellows crippled or something?"

"Can you open the door?" Wardle asked Cheminais.

That worthy, a burly and blue-jowled specimen, felt around his clothes, produced a festoon of lock-picks. "I have not spent a day in the main workshops for nothing." He started operating on the door.

"You were with him in the workshops," said Wardle to Casasola. "Did you get anything worth having?"

Without comment Casasola felt at the back of his neck, found a loop of string, pulled it and hauled up what had been hanging down his back. It was the middle leaf of a Kastan truck-spring, a piece of steel thirty inches long, one inch wide, slightly curved. Two countersunk holes had been drilled either side of its center, also one hole at each end. He gave it to Wardle.

"Did you drill it yourself, without being spotted?" Wardle asked.

Casasola nodded.

"Good for you! Get any wire?"

Impassively Casasola handed over a coil of wire. Also a dozen six-inch nails with their heads cut off, their sheared ends slotted, their points ground needle sharp.

"Been quite a busy little bee, haven't you?" said Wardle, greatly pleased.

Casasola gave a faint smile and nodded again.

"The stupid, cockeyed thing!" swore Cheminais from the

door. "Just because they're Kastans doesn't mean they've got to fix it upside-down." He did something to the lock. It squeaked in protest, surrendered with a click. The door swung open. "That's it. Dead easy once you've got the hang of it."

"Anyone coming with me?" Wardle glanced inquiringly around.

"Count me out," yawned Holden. "I'm too tired."

"I'll have to go," Cheminais pointed out. "There's a lock on every room."

"Maybe I should go, too," suggested Foley. "I've practically got an introduction from that Stame colonel. It may help to establish confidence at the start."

"Yes, you've made a point there." Wardle slipped cautiously into the corridor. It was empty. "Three of us are plenty. No sense in the lot of us trooping around. If a guard catches us, act dopey. The door didn't shut and we don't know we're doing wrong, see?" He thought a moment. "We'll start at the top floor and work down. That way we're less likely to walk into a beating-up."

Swiftly but quietly he moved along the corridor, reached the stairs. Despite lack of a lighting system within the building it was not difficult to see where one was going. Darkness was never absolute on Gathin, what with the shine of three moons and a multitude of stars. Moreover the flarepath along the wall-top contributed its share to interior illumination.

At the foot of the stairs Wardle paused, motioned the others to stay still while he listened. Not a sound came down from above, no stamp of patrolling boots, no creak of leather, not even a restless stirring of prisoners.

The thought raced through his mind that if those incarcerated in this block had all been Terrans the entire building would have resounded with the noises of energetic and mostly mutinous activity. The trouble with Terrans was that they were persistent practitioners of naughtiness. All the same, there were circumstances in which they had very considerable nuisance value.

He mounted the stairs, turned the end of another unguarded corridor, listened again, went up the next flight. Cheminais padded silently behind him. Foley followed in the rear, no more than a dark shadow.

At the top Wardle stopped. The others halted promptly,

thinking he'd heard something. They listened but detected no cause for alarm.

"What's the matter?" whispered Foley.

"Just thought of something. Holden—he wouldn't come. It's not like him to refuse activity."

"He said he was tired."

"Yes, I know," Wardle murmured. "And he's a liar. I've just realized he had a conspiratorial expression when he said it. He wanted me out of the way. If he starts an uproar while we're up here—"

"Forget it," urged Foley. "We've got to take a chance. We can't go back now."

"Darn Holden!" swore Wardle in an undertone. "And his Snow White. He's the most undisciplined—"

"Aren't we all?" Foley gave him a gentle shove. "Move on. I want some sleep tonight even if you don't."

Wardle glided forward, scowling in the gloom. He found a door, put his ear to it, heard grunts and faint snores.

"Try this one."

Cheminais felt around the lock, fumbled with it until it clicked. The door emitted loud creaks as he shoved it open. Wardle went in. A Stame sat up hurriedly in bed, stared at him with incredulous eyes as big as an owl's.

"Any Aluesines in here?" asked Wardle, in low tones.

The Stame opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again. His eyes were straining to grow larger. He seemed stuck for words.

"Quick!—any Aluesines?"

"Two doors along." It came out in a gasp.

"Thanks." Wardle departed, carefully closing the door.

Behind him, the Stame crawled out of bed, shook awake the one in the next. "A Terran just came in. D'you hear me, Vermer? A Terran is wandering around contrary to orders."

"Then why should he come here?" asked the other, with much disdain. "You have been dreaming." He rolled over and went back to sleep.

The second door swung inward without a sound. The three passed through, quiet as ghosts. Nevertheless they were heard and seen the moment they entered. These nocturnal Aluesines could never reconcile themselves to sleeping in their normally wakeful hours, and they had sharp ears and superb nightsight.

All twenty were sitting up, their cat-eyes watching the door as the trio of Terrans came in.

In low tones Wardle said without preamble, "We are looking for Partha-ak-Waym. Do any of you know where he is?"

One of them had enough self-possession to speak up promptly. "He is in this block, on the second floor, the middle room facing the yard."

Wardle eyed him with approval. "What is your rank?"

"A prisoner has no rank. Surely you know that?"

Foley chipped in with his own tactic. "What was your rank before capture?"

"I was a flight leader."

"Ah, a space-navy officer?"

"Yes—but there are no officers now."

"Your name?" asked Foley.

"Dareuth."

"Thanks! We shall remember it."

They made to depart but Dareuth was not prepared to leave it at that. "Earthmen, permit me to advise you—the latrines are best."

"Best?" Wardle paused in the doorway, looked back baffled. "Best for what?"

"For killing oneself. In any other place your comrades will be punished for allowing you to do it."

"Thank you, Dareuth," said Wardle, very courteously. He went into the corridor, closed the door. "God, what a state of mind! Anyone who breaks loose contrary to regulations is either looney or seeking a gibbet."

"Save your breath," Foley advised. "Do we try the second floor right now or do we leave it until another night?"

"We'll try now, while the going is good."

They got down to the second floor without mishap, found the right door. Cheminais unlocked it and they walked in. This room was a duplicate of their own, held twelve beds. A dozen Aluesines immediately sat up, wide awake and glowing-eyed.

Wardle whispered to the one on the nearest bed. The Aluesine pointed to the sixth and said, "There."

The three knew exactly what to do. They marched to the foot of the indicated bed, stood in line, shoulders squared, heads erect. Three arms flicked up in a precise salute.

"Captain Wardle and two officers reporting to General Partha-ak-Waym!"

* * *

General Partha retained full self-control and much dignity. Clambering out, he folded his one dirty blanket, pulled on his tattered and threadbare clothes. Then he gazed down upon the diminutive Terrans. He was older than the average prisoner, with many seams and wrinkles around the corners of his eyes.

"It does not help to be mocked," he said, quietly. "Former officers should know better than to behave in such a way."

"There is nothing 'former' about us, sir," replied Wardle, showing firmness. "We are still officers. I am still a captain. You are still a general."

"Really?" His features quirked. "A general in what army?"

By hokey, this was it! He'd asked for it and he was going to get it. Right where it would do the most good.

"I have the honor to inform you, sir, that you are a general of the Free Gath Republic."

"Indeed? Who says so?"

"The Space Union, sir. The Gaths need every officer they can muster."

"What nonsense is this?" said Partha, impatiently. "I have never heard of Gaths, never in my life. I do not believe that there is such a race. If there is, where are they located?"

"On Gathin, sir."

Hah, that hit him.

Partha rocked back. "But *this* is Gathin."

"That's correct, sir."

"I am not a native of Gathin."

"Neither are the Kastans."

"I am a . . . I am a—"

Wardle eyed him steadily. "You are a *what*, sir?"

There was no answer.

"Either you are a Gath or you are nothing," said Wardle. "And you cannot be nothing."

General Partha made no reply. He stood perfectly still as if on parade, his attention toward a window, his eyes upon the stars. Eleven other Aluesines got off their beds and stood with him, motivated by they knew not what.

"On this world of ours," continued Wardle, "there is a horde of a quarter million Kastan invaders. There is also an army of four hundred thousand fighting Gaths who lack one thing and one only—guns."

"The Stames—"

"What Stames? There are no Stames here, sir. There are only Gaths."

It took Partha quite a time to cope with his churning thoughts. He had to win a mental battle against the fixed idea that a prisoner is of the damned, forever without hope of salvation, without escape other than in the grave. A topsyturvy viewpoint is extremely hard to assimilate and, metaphorically speaking, these three Terrans had come at him walking on the ceiling.

But he was a general—and as such was helped to moral victory by swift realization of the military advantages of doing what comes unnaturally.

Studying Wardle with sudden shrewdness, he said, "A few questions. Firstly, what is the response you have obtained from the Gaths who resemble Stames?"

"None—for the reason that we haven't approached them yet. We had to start somewhere. We started with you, sir."

"You intend to put the matter to them?"

"Most certainly, sir."

"Secondly," continued Partha, "you have stated that we need guns. Can they be obtained and, if so, when?"

"Guns will become available when the Gath army has the guts to use them, sir."

He did not flinch. On the contrary, he became more dignified than ever. "I accept that without resentment. To regain honor we must earn it." He paused, went on, "Thirdly, my past training enables me to see the tactical benefits of the rise of a Gath army. I would like to know whether such a rise is a plan in itself or essential part of a greater scheme."

"It is part of a greater Union plan," said Wardle.

"Meaning that an established Gath Republic would find itself with allies?"

"Yes, sir. It would be officially recognized and supported by the Space Union."

"All the Union, including—?"

"Including the Aluesine Empire," Wardle assured. "Is there any reason why conquering Aluesines should not recognize triumphant Gaths?"

At that moment the stream of burning thoughts and the surge of violent emotions became too much for Partha. He sat on the edge of his bed, held his face in his hands. Terrans and Aluesines watched in awkward silence.

Finally he recovered and said, "Give me time to discuss

these things with my comrades. Do you think you might be able to visit me again tomorrow night?"

"I cannot agree to do so, sir, unless you state it properly."

"Properly?"

"Yes, sir. You must stand to attention and say, 'Captain Wardle, I wish to consult my staff. Report to me at the same time tomorrow.'"

General Partha-ak-Waym came erect. Instinctively the Aluesines lined up on either side of him. There was a visible glow in his eyes, a firmness in his voice.

"Captain Wardle, I wish to consult my staff. Report to me at the same time tomorrow."

"Very well, sir." Wardle saluted. So did Cheminais and Foley. The three marched out.

Halfway up the stairs to the third floor, Foley said, "Hooked, by gosh!"

Halfway up the stairs to the fifth floor a shot split the silence of the night somewhere outside. The three bolted to their room like scared rats.

Wardle reacted with the speed of one who has hidden reasons to expect the worst. Leaving Cheminais to relock the door, he took one swift look around the room, booted a blanket-covered behind on the nearest bed.

"Where is he?"

Pye rolled over, struggled to raise himself on his elbows, bleared at the questioner. "Huh? 'Smatter?"

"Where's Holden?" Wardle bawled.

"Gone out," yawned Pye, dozily indifferent. He let the elbows slide from under him, sank back.

"Gone *where*?" cried Wardle, vastly irritated.

"That way." Pye pointed more or less toward an open window. Apparently this effort was too much for him because he let his arm drop, closed his eyes, gobbled and gulped a couple of times, settled down to a steady and rhythmic snore.

Wardle voiced five disconnected words none of which were in Extralingua. Crossing to the window he looked out and down. Sixty feet below the ground was vague, obscure, and he could detect nobody lurking there. A cord hung out the window, swaying slackly in the thin breeze of night. Within the room the cord was tied around the leg of a bed with about forty feet of surplus length coiled neatly alongside.

Even as he looked out a guard ran along the facing wall-

top, disappeared from sight far over to the left. In that direction several voices could be heard arguing in the dark. What they were saying was indistinct, but they sounded querulous.

Returning to his own bed, Wardle flopped on it and stared fixedly at the window-gap. Foley and Cheminais washed at the one basin, lay down in the manner of men conspicuously unworried. Presently their snores were added to those of the others. Wardle continued to watch the window.

After half an hour the dangling cord went taut and emitted faint squeaks as it pressed hard on the woodwork of the window-frame. A head appeared in the gap, a body followed. Holden clambered through, pulled up the cord, carefully coiled it, closed the window. Then he spat on his hands and rubbed them against his pants.

"You cockeyed coot," said Wardle. "You'd try the patience of a sanctimony of bishops."

Holden started, recovered, said pleasantly, "You're looking well this evening—just had your tongue back from the cleaners?"

"This isn't funny. We heard a gun go off sometime back. It's going to endanger the whole set-up if we invite the Kastans to start shooting at us before we're ready."

"Nobody's been shooting at *me*, see?" said Holden.

"I suppose the gun exploded by sheer accident?"

"Dead right, chum. It was accidental but not quite sheer." Sitting on the edge of his bed, Holden started taking off his boots. "This joker had propped himself against the corner of the armory, being in need of more support than he gets from his sergeant. His gun was propped likewise. He'd worked it out very neatly that a weight on the ground isn't felt on the shoulder, see?"

"Yes, yes—get on with the story," urged Wardle.

"Well, I broke a piece of wire off the armory fence, bent each end to form a hook. It took me ten minutes to crawl to the corner. I hooked one end of the wire around his trigger, the other end to the fence. Then I crawled back and left the rest to nature.

"You lunatic. If he'd seen you, he'd have put a stream of slugs through your belly then and there."

"He didn't see me. He wasn't seeing anything except Jennie with the light brown hair." Kicking his boots under the bed, Holden stood up. Undoing his pants, he felt around inside

the seat, got a hold, commenced pulling out a long length of cloth. There seemed to be several yards of it.

Unable to suppress his curiosity, Wardle crossed to the other's bed, examined the stuff in the dim light. Then he grabbed it up, took it to the window for a better look.

"Holy cow! This is their flag!"

"Yair," agreed Holden.

"Where'd you get it?"

"I found it in the bullrushes." He let go a snicker. "What's good enough for Pharaoh's daughter is good enough for me."

"The truth, man! You sneaked it right off the pole, didn't you?"

"Might as well admit it," said Holden, with mock resignation. "And a devil of a time I had getting it. Up on Festerhead's roof the wind is like a gale. I nearly fell off twice. If I'd held my jacket-wide open I'd have become airborne."

"But . . . but—" Wardle waved the stolen banner and found himself temporarily lost for words.

"Four times a sentry passed below while I was struggling to get the thing down and stuff it in my pants. Never once did the stupid gump look upward."

"But—"

"We can use that rag. Cut off the crimson stripe at its end, convert the two white arrows into a six-pointed star, and what have you got? One white star on a blue background. For whom has the Union designed that kind of flag?"

"The Gath Republic."

"Correct. You can be quite bright at times." Rolling onto his bed, Holden arranged his blanket to give maximum warmth.

"Where are we going to hide it until it's needed?" asked Wardle.

"That's your worry. I got it—you stash it. Anyway, they never do any systematic searching."

"There's always got to be a first time," Wardle pointed out. "I don't like this situation. Pandemonium will break loose when they discover their flag has been thieved overnight."

"They won't stir a hair. After I'd cut the cord I frayed the ends to look like a break. Ten to one they'll jump to the conclusion that the wind whisked it into the jungle. If they do, I'm going to volunteer to lead some of the forest gang in search of it. That'll give us a sweet excuse to go looking for a beacon site."

"You've got a hell of a nerve," said Wardle, with grudging admiration.

Holden made a gesture of modest rebuttal. "I'd rather not see myself as others see me—I'm conceited enough already."

With that, he went to sleep. But Wardle remained awake some time, nursing the flag and thinking. His final conclusion was that Holden could not be blamed.

After all, a Terran must do *something*.

Over the next four days the flag-hunters led by Holden failed to find so much as a loose thread. At the end of that time Festerhead's patience ran out. He put them back onto timber work, produced another banner from somewhere and had it nailed to the pole.

But efforts had not been wasted. In those four days they had discovered a suitable place amid the thickest tangle of growths, cleared a small area, dug a pit six feet square by four deep. This they filled with rocks, then left in readiness for concreting-in the beacon legs at first opportunity.

It was on the twenty-first day of Terran captivity that a threat to carefully laid plans came from a completely unexpected quarter. It proved yet again that not everything can be foreseen even by the shrewdest, most painstaking minds.

Over every conglomeration of intelligent beings hangs an invisible something called atmosphere. It cannot be seen, tasted or smelled. It can be sensed. It can almost be felt.

After the evening meal on that day, Wardle stood in the yard and suddenly was struck by a powerful impression of change. A thrill of alarm ran through his mind as he sought to pin down and analyze the reasons. The atmosphere of the prison yard was different from what it had been three weeks ago; the cause or causes should be identifiable.

Now that his brain had become aware of the phenomenon it didn't take his eyes long to relate cause and effect. The usual mob of Stames and Aluesines were milling aimlessly around the yard. In the mass, they were still whipped dogs—individually they were not. A change had taken place in personal behavior.

They no longer slouched. They walked and some actually marched. They did not creep past guards with their heads lowered and their attention focused on the ground. On the contrary, they kept heads erect and stared straight at the guards, man to man, eye to eye. Even the persistently hu-

morless, unsmiling Stames had switched expression from glumness to grimness.

Over all lay that vague, indefinable but strong impression of a calm before a storm, a power held in check with no guarantee that it could bide its time.

The guards, too, sensed it without knowing what they sensed. Alien convention prevented them from recognizing the undercurrents and subtle stir-rumblings familiar to Ter-ran wardens. So they were uneasy without knowing why. They fidgeted, kept guns in hands, grouped together in the yard, walked at faster pace along the wall-tops.

With back hairs rising, Wardle set off on a hurried tour of the yard. In such a crowd it was difficult to find at once the individual he was seeking. Near one corner he encountered Pye.

"Help find Partha for me. Also grab any Stame brasshats you happen to see."

"Something wrong?" asked Pye.

"Take a look around. This lot's making ready to go bang any time. It's the old story of the pendulum swinging to the other extreme." He jerked a thumb toward a small cluster of guards standing together in the shadow of the wall. "Even the Kastans are jumpy. When that type goes round the bend they're liable to start shooting at whoever happens to be handy. And that means *us*."

Partha and two Stame colonels were found a few minutes later and shepherded into an unoccupied corner of the yard. There, Wardle made them a brief speech pointing out the giveaway symptoms, contrasting the controllability of an army with the indiscipline of a mob.

"Previously your men waited with complete despair," he said. "Now they wait with renewed hope that comes harder. It is trying to the patience."

"You created the disease," commented Partha. "It is for you to suggest a cure."

"All right. Pass the word around as fast as your words can go that we're holding a conference tonight and that we'll be wanting volunteers tomorrow."

"Volunteers for what?"

"I don't know, I just don't know," admitted Wardle, momentarily at his wit's end. "We'll have to concoct a scheme of some sort, any sort so long as it pipes off the mounting

steam. It's the philosophy of the trapped rat—when nothing can be done, do *anything*."

"Very well," agreed Partha. He made to go.

"And tell everyone it's essential not to let the Kastans take alarm," Wardle added, with much emphasis. "That means all prisoners must look like slaves, behave like slaves."

Partha and the Stames went off, mixed in with the crowd, talked briefly to various groups and moved on. Within twenty minutes results became visible but Wardle did not feel happy about them.

Like all amateurs, the captives tended to overact. Many of those who'd been walking erect and secretly incubating a lovely spirit of defiance now put on grossly exaggerated expressions of humility and made a point of exhibiting them to baffled guards. Twenty Stames ceremoniously sat down in front of three Kastans and favored them with a unanimous look of oh-death-where-is-thy-sting.

Holden ambled up and Wardle greeted him bitterly with, "Look at that mob of raw beginners. They were feeling their oats and have been told to relax. Now you'd think the entire bunch was sickening for something."

"That's an idea," said Holden.

"Eh?"

"The Kastan war economy is partly dependent on slave labor. An epidemic would make a nice, effective form of sabotage, not to mention the hob it would play with their organization here."

"An epidemic of what?"

"Soap," said Holden.

"How about talking sense, just for a pleasant change?" Wardle suggested.

Ignoring that, Holden exclaimed, "Here's Foley." He waited until the other arrived, went on, "Just the man we want. What's the capacity of the hospital?"

"Thirty," said Foley. "Why?"

"What do you think this butcher Machimbar would do if three hundred prisoners flopped together?"

"Nothing. Not a thing. He'd let 'em die. He'd say the hospital is full and that Kastan guards have first call on his services. Machimbar is the sort who does only the minimum necessary to justify his rank and position and, if possible, prevent himself from being drafted to a combat area."

"A shirker of responsibility, is he?"

"More than that—he's a thoroughly selfish swine."

"He'll get his," promised Holden, "before we're through."

"What's on your mind—other than water?" asked Wardle.

A whistle shrilled across the yard before the other could reply. Prisoners assembled in long lines and started filing into their barrack-blocks. Guards prowled along the lines, bawling and blustering, urging them to hurry.

There was one small but significant incident. A lame Stame stumbled and fell out the shuffling ranks. Swearing at him, a guard raised his whip. The Stame straightened, gazed coldly into the eyes of his enemy until the other gave way and the whip drooped unused.

"We haven't a lot of time," commented Wardle. "Let's hope we've got enough or can make enough."

Cheminais put in some fast manipulating that night. He tended to three doors in his own block, two in the adjoining one. A dozen prisoners made the twenty-yard dash between blocks in semidarkness, got across unheard, unseen. A council of war was held in the Terran's room.

"We've several problems," began Wardle. "They've got to be settled in any way solvable within existing circumstances. First, there's the beacon."

"Has it been discovered?" asked Partha-ak-Waym.

"Not so far. We've built it, linked it to a power line and that's all. If the Kastans happen to find it, there's a good chance they'll assume it to be the work of one of their own signal corps. Even if they do get incurably curious it may take them a couple of months to make sure that no Kastan outfit knows anything about it."

"Not sharing our outlook," put in Holden, "they won't take it for granted that it's a product of naughty prisoners."

"Well, what's the problem?" Partha persisted.

"The forest gang did hard but unskilled work. They sneaked away all the stuff that McAlpin and Pye hid among the trees, erected it according to their instructions. Now it needs technicians to make final adjustments and start it radiating. Daytimes McAlpin and Pye can't slip away for more than five minutes at a go. They say they've got to have three or four uninterrupted hours to get the beacon functioning." He paused, added pointedly, "Union forces don't know the location of Gathin—until the beacon tells 'em."

"I can find some technicians among my men," suggested Partha. "If you can get them into the forest gang—"

"This is our own problem and we're going to cope with it in our own way," declared Wardle. "We'll give McAlpin and Pye a night out. They'll go over the wall."

"You mean—escape?" Partha voiced the word as though even now it had a slight touch of blasphemy.

"Not for keeps. They'll come back and report for work in the morning as usual. As I said before, we've got to keep the Kastans soothed. However, it might give all prisoners a boost if you let the news go round that we've been outside. Better warn them, though, not to mess things up by behaving as if they're as good as out themselves. They aren't out—yet."

"But to get over that wall is impossible."

"We'll admit it after we've found it can't be done," said Wardle. "And not before." Dismissing the point, he carried on to the second problem. "About ten thousand are in this jail but four hundred thousand on Gathin. We've a mere tithe of the whole. We've got to contact other prisoners, persuade them to join in with us and take action at the same time. There are seven within easy reach. If they're the same size as this one, that means another seventy thousand men available."

Partha pursed his lips and frowned. "There is no communication between prisons."

"Then communication must be established. It's got to be done and will be done—and here's how." Wardle registered a faint smile as he continued, "You may not realize it, but to Terran eyes most Aluesines look remarkably alike. So also do Stames."

"Terrans look much alike to us," said Partha.

"It's highly probable that Kastans have similar trouble in distinguishing one from another," Wardle pointed out. "Adjacent prisons have forestry parties working almost alongside ours. If some prisoners swapped places, their respective guards wouldn't notice the difference."

"If they did notice, they wouldn't care," suggested Holden. "One bunch of slaves is as good as another."

"Maybe," Wardle conceded. "But a scheme can always be wrecked by one individual's officiousness." He returned attention to Partha. "You must find a number of volunteers, all officers capable of restoring and exercising their own authority, all able propagandists for the new viewpoint. They

will join a forestry gang and switch into one from another prison."

"That can be done," agreed Partha. "There is one difficulty. An exchange is a two-way arrangement. It needs the co-operation of others who mentally are still slaves conditioned never to disobey."

"The Kastans haven't issued any orders about captives returning to their own jail. You can't disobey a command that has never been given. Besides, to change prisons is not to escape."

"Yes, that is true. Leave this task to me."

"We'll have to. We've no choice. A Terran can't swap. Among a bunch of eight-footers he'd be as conspicuous as a circus midget." Leaving it at that, Wardle said, "Now to our third problem. Prisoners must hold themselves in restraint until arrives the right moment to strike together and effectively. Premature action by individuals or groups could be fatal to our plans. We've got to insure that they don't jump the gun. Any suggestions?"

"They need a diversion," opined Holden. "One good hulahaloo would keep them happy for a month."

"Can you offer a suitable gag?"

"Yair," said Holden. He chewed vigorously, let go with a soul-shaking, "A-a-argh!" and fell flat. Then he curled up violently until his knees rammed into his chest, his eyes rolled under the lids to show only the whites, a long spurt of foam came from his writhing lips. It was a sight sufficiently revolting to turn the onlookers' stomachs.

"A-a-argh!" groaned Holden, most horribly. More foam appeared. Watching Stames and Aluesines bugged their eyes at him. Even Wardle felt a spasm of alarm.

Making a remarkable recovery, Holden got up, went to the basin, washed his mouth out, gargled a couple of times. "All it needs is a little practice."

"What good will it do?" inquired Partha, studying him as one would a maniac.

"A sick slave cannot work. A hundred sick slaves cannot work. A thousand sick—"

"Show me how," ordered Partha, making up his mind.

Shaving off a sliver of soap, Holden put it in the other's mouth, doing it like mailing a letter. "Now chew. All right, fall down. Curl up and moan. Louder than that, much louder.

Your eyes, man, your eyes—roll them up until you can look at your brains!"

General Partha-ak-Waym lay curled up and rolled 'em. It was extremely effective since Aluesine eyeballs were pale orange in color. He looked awful.

Within short time ten Aluesines and eight Stames were groaning and foaming on the floor. It was, thought Wardle privately, the most beautiful chore ever thought up for a bunch of military brasshats.

"Good," he said when the horrid performance ended. "Find a battalion of volunteers for that and get them busy rehearsing. The show goes on at breakfast-time tomorrow. It should provide a satisfactory emotional outlet and bollix the Kastans more than somewhat."

The council of war ended. The members departed accompanied by Cheminais who was to lock them back in.

When they'd all gone, Wardle turned to Holden. "You said it needed practice. You've had plenty. Where'd you get it?"

"At about age four. Whenever I rolled and foamed my loving mother would give me the moon."

"What a repulsive little brat you must have been. If I were your father, I'd have given you a taste of hickory."

"He did," admitted Holden, grimacing. "Whenever he caught me at it." He switched attention to the silently listening Casasola. "For Pete's sake shut up and let me get a word in edgewise."

"We're wasting time," commented Wardle, impatiently. "The longest night doesn't last forever. We've got to get two fellows over the wall—we've not erected a secret beacon for nothing."

Lying on his back he edged beneath his bed, fiddled around with the underside of it, edged out again. He was now gripping a grooved wooden stock with the truck-spring fastened across one end. A wire ran taut across the spring's curve. Farther back in the stock was a winder and a simple trigger mechanism which Casasola had made in the workshops.

"This," he remarked, "is where we put to use our training in the exploitation of rudimentary supplies. Learn to make the best of what is available, they said. And do not despise primitive things, for man conquered the animal world with no better." He held a hand out to Casasola. "The bolts."

Casasola gave him the machined nails which by now had small aluminum vanes fitted into their slots.

"The string."

Impassively Casasola handed over a ball of fine twine. Measuring it along the room, Wardle cut off a length of approximately a hundred and twenty feet, doubled it, fastened its middle to the tail of a bolt. Six inches behind the bolt he knotted-in a sliver of wood to act as a spreader, holding the strings some three or four inches apart.

"Open a window, someone, and watch for a guard." He stood waiting while Pye tied one of the string's two ends to the coil of stronger cord that Holden had stolen from the quarry. "Remember," he said to Pye, "when everything is ready you'll have less than ten minutes."

"I know."

"Too much delay will get you a dozen slugs in the guts."

"So what?"

"If you or Mac want to back out, say so—we'll understand."

"Go jump," suggested Pye.

"What d'you think I am?" put in McAlpin, indignantly.

"Guard coming," hissed Holden from the window. "Here he is, the big, flatfooted lug. Right opposite." A pause, followed by, "Now he's passed."

He stepped aside. Wardle knelt by the window and steadied the crossbow on its ledge. Taking careful aim at the distant wall-top, he squeezed the trigger. The arbalest gave a slight jerk as its driving-wire slapped dully against two small silencers neatly carved from Holden's rubber heels.

The bolt shot into the night, fled three-quarters of the way to the wall, pulled up sharp as its trailing string snagged on a window-frame splinter and failed to pay out. In the darkness the bolt swooped back, hit the barrack-block two floors lower down. There sounded a loud clunk, a clatter of broken glass, a startled Stame exclamation.

Wardle cursed in a low voice, peered out and down for signs of Stame activity beneath. There wasn't any. Whoever had been shaken out of his beauty sleep had wisely decided to do nothing about it, probably because nothing effective could be done.

"A minute and a half gone," announced Pye.

They pulled back the tethered bolt, shaved the splinter from the ledge, rearranged the string to run more freely. Again Wardle took aim a few inches above the flarepath. The bolt sped out, went straight over the wall, stopped as it reached the following string's limit.

Slowly and with care they drew on the string. Infuriatingly, the bolt wriggled between the spikes and fell clear. Now they reeled in with frantic haste but again it clunked the barrack-block with a sound hugely magnified by the stillness of night. However, no glass was busted this time.

"Four minutes gone," said Pye.

The third shot proved just as futile, produced yet another crack of metal against stone. When the bolt came in they found the string-separator had broken. Hurriedly they replaced it.

"Six and a half minutes," informed Pye, morbidly.

"He's on his way back by now," said Wardle. "We'd better wait for him to pass again."

Clustering in the gloom, they listened and waited, hearing little save each other's breathing. Presently the guard went by along the wall-top, his big figure magnified to the monstrous by the flare of light. He did not look unusually alert, showed no sign of having been alarmed by strange noises.

When he'd gone from view, Wardle fired again. The bolt shot out with a very faint hiss. Its aluminum vanes shone briefly as it crossed the wall-top. Holden gently drew on the string and a few feet came into the room before it went taut.

"Hallelujah!" he said.

He now pulled only one end, giving a couple of fierce jerks to dislodge the distant separator. It stuck stubbornly a short time, came free. The string then reeled in easily. As it did so its other end went out the window taking with it the strong cord.

Before long Holden found himself pulling in cord instead of string. There was now a double line of cord extending from the room, across a forty-foot gap with a sixty-foot drop below, and terminating at one or more wall-top spikes over which it was looped.

"How long have we now?" asked Wardle.

"Four minutes."

"Not enough. We'll have to wait again. Got your own cord ready?"

"Sure thing," said Pye.

They waited. The guard's footsteps could be heard coming back. He seemed to take an inordinate time to get near. Everything depended on where his attention lay, how observant he was. The flarepath was a brilliant but narrow beam directed dead along the wall-top but there was enough side-

glow to reveal the horizontally stretched string for a distance of several feet.

The guard neared the critical point. They held their breaths as they watched him. Strolling boredly along, he halted beside the looped spike, looked outward instead of inward, gave a wide yawn and moved onward.

"Thank heaven we blacked that rope," exclaimed Holden.

"Now!" urged Wardle.

Pye scrambled out the window, let himself hang from the cords by holding one in each grip. With body dangling over the drop he worked himself along hand over hand. His legs swung wildly as he strove to make speed. The cord creaked but held.

In this manner he reached the wall-top and still had come no raucous shout, no crack of a gun. Desperately he swung himself up sidewise, got handholds on two spikes, a toehold between two more. Levering himself over the triple row he rolled right into the flarepath.

Still prone, fearful of the light and whoever might look along its beam, he grabbed his own coil of rope, looped it around one of the opposite spikes. How he got over this other triple row was not clear to the watchers. His body humped itself, there was some momentary fumbling, he vanished from sight as he slid down outside the wall.

"It took him four and a half minutes," said Holden.

"Seemed like ten years to me," contributed Wardle.

The guard mooched back. There were now two looped spikes for him to discover, one on each side of his path. Would he see them? He did not. In the same manner as before he ambled by and his footsteps faded.

McAlpin was swinging in midair almost before the guard had disappeared. He crossed the gap a good deal faster than Pye had done but had more difficulty in getting over the spikes. All the same, he made it. His shape vanished over the other side of the wall.

Unfastening one end of the cord, Holden pulled on the other end, got it all back into the room. To leave it out for several hours would be to tempt Providence. Perforce the outer rope would have to remain dangling, but only the couple of inches around the spike could be visible to the guard, the rest hanging in darkness down the wall.

"Just thought of something," said Holden. "A fellow parading along a flarepath can see pretty well to the right or

left but is somewhat blinded if he looks straight ahead. I doubt whether that clunker could find Pye's rope even if you told him it was there."

"We're not counting on that," Wardle told him. "We are betting on a state of mind. Excepting on a peculiar dump called Terra nobody ever breaks out of jail—but nobody!"

After that they organized a constant watch at the window, taking turns one at a time while the others slept. It was an hour before dawn when the escapees returned.

Cheminais, keeping red-rimmed eyes directed on the wall, knew that their rope was still in position because every guard had been observed and none had so far interfered.

A guard went past, gun clasped in a spade-sized hand. A minute later McAlpin heaved himself over the outer spikes, pulled up half of the doubled cord and slung it down the inside wall. Then he rolled across the flarepath, got over the next lot of spikes with the same difficulty as before, slid down into darkness.

Apparently his thirty pounds of extra weight helped heave his companion up the outer wall as he went down the inner one. He'd no sooner gone than Pye popped up like a cork from a bottle, looped the cord and followed the other down inside. The cord shook violently, fell to ground.

Awakening the others, Cheminai informed, "They're back."

They let the guard pass again before tossing their own cord out the window. A weight came upon it, they hauled together. McAlpin rose into the window-gap, struggled through, trod on someone's toes and received a couple of choice oaths by way of welcome. The cord went down again, fished up Pye.

"How did it go?" Wardle asked them, anxiously.

"Topnotch," assured McAlpin. "The beacon is now bawling its head off."

"What d'you think will happen if it's picked up by a Kastan ship ahead of one of ours?"

"They'll trace it to Gathin. They know Gathin is a Kastan stronghold. Therefore the beacon must be an official one even if they haven't been notified of it. That's logical, isn't it? The alternative is an illegal beacon and that's plain silly."

"Let's hope you're right. You've done a good job."

"Like to know the toughest part of it?" McAlpin showed him a pair of red-seared palms. "Climbing sixty feet of thin cord."

"Dead easy," scoffed Holden.

"It would be for you," McAlpin retorted, "being several generations nearer to the monkeys."

Holden let that pass with the contempt it deserved.

"Well," prompted Casasola, shocking him with sudden speech, "why don't you say something?"

The multiple line-ups for breakfast were divisible into two parts: those aware and those unaware of what was brewing. Partha had considered it desirable to keep a goodly number in ignorance and thus support the play with an audience that could be depended upon to behave plausibly.

Stewed sludge was served. Ten thousand sat around scooping at their wooden bowls. The last and slowest had hardly finished when Guard-Major Slovits blew the whistle.

Eighty prisoners judiciously scattered around the yard promptly collapsed, doubled up, foamed, yelled bloody murder. The mob about to make for the gates stopped and stared. Near the gates four hefty guards gazed aghast at an afflicted Stame who was making like a circus acrobat with a thousand devils in his belly.

Among the guards there followed the inevitable moment of chronic indecision during which another fifty prisoners artistically added themselves to the sufferers on the floor. They vied with each other in producing the most foam, the loudest screams, the worst agonies.

Prisoners not in the plot milled around like scared sheep, watched themselves for similar symptoms. A number of guards became pinned within the mob, strove to force their way out. Stames and Aluesines dropped and had six fits in front of them, alongside of them, impeding them to the utmost. The mob pushed and shoved as those nearest tried to back away from each successive victim.

One Stame standing in what looked like shocked silence suddenly let go with an ear-splitting shriek, flung long, skinny arms around an adjacent guard, slid down foaming and slobbering all over the Kastan's pants and jackboots. He got away with it, receiving not so much as a flick of the whip. The guard looked down in horror, made for some place else good and fast.

Slovits pounded heavily into the office building, reappeared a moment later with the prison commander. A solid rank of sixteen Aluesines immediately strove to please both

of them by falling flat, foaming, groaning, dribbling and rolling orange-colored eyeballs.

Noting that Festerhead himself was now among those present, another couple of hundred piled into the act all over the yard, added their howls to the general uproar. Guards shouted unheard orders, Festerhead bellowed and waved his arms, Slovis blew the whistle ten times.

More individuals collapsed here and there in response to surreptitious signals from officers. Some of them were decided whole-hoggers who worked themselves into such a frenzy they swallowed their soap and began to puke in dead earnest.

At this point the captives who were uninformed got into a panic. The rumor went around like wildfire that something called "the black death" was highly contagious. There followed a concerted rush for the open gates.

Four guards who still had their wits about them moved swiftly, slammed shut the gates in the faces of the leading rank. The mob churned around a piece, made up its collective mind, headed for the sanctuary of the barrack-blocks. It split into a hundred racing lines threading their ways through a carpet of rolling bodies. Among the runners were many more plotters ordered to hold off until the last. These now made confusion worse confounded by collapsing in the most obstructive places including the barrack-blocks' doorways.

By now over a thousand were on their backs in the yard, screaming, hooting, hugging their bellies, voicing death rattles and other versions of last gasps. A form of rivalry had arisen between Aluesines and Stames, each striving to outdo the other in putting over a melodramatic picture of hell's torments. The resulting scene was like something out of the galaxy's maddest madhouse. The din was deafening.

Festerhead and his forces were swamped by the sheer magnitude and enthusiasm of this mass-display. Grouping together outside the office building, they scowled at the littered yard but did nothing. This wasn't mutiny, it wasn't disobedience. It was a phenomenon unheard-of, unthought-of. No mention of it existed in the Kastan book of rules and there was no official formula for coping with it.

A Stame who secretly admired his own talent as an actor crawled laboriously on all fours up to Guard-Major Slovis, hung out a purple tongue and croaked, "Water! For mercy's sake, water."

The guard next to Slovits swung a huge boot and kicked him straight in the teeth. The Stame flopped sidewise, spat blood and emitted moans that were real. Among the prone army of mock-sufferers several hundreds of eyes made vengeful note of the kicker's identity. Unaware of this, the guard drew back his foot for a second belt at the victim.

"What are you doing, fool?" rasped Festerhead. "Is that the way to make them ready for work?"

Putting down the foot, the guard furtively shifted behind a couple of his fellows. From that vantage point he stared sullenly at the injured Stame.

"Where is Doctor-Major Machimbar?" Festerhead demanded of Slovits.

"He is absent today, may it please you, commander," informed Slovits.

"He would be. And it does not please me." Festerhead thought hard and fast. "Something must be done. Within the hour headquarters will be pestering us with awkward questions as to why our working parties have not appeared."

"Yes, commander. What do you suggest?"

"Send twelve men into each barrack-block. They will march out all the fit prisoners and make them carry the sick ones inside. After that has been done, parade the fit ones in the yard, select from them any with medical experience, rush the rest to work—at the double."

"As you order, commander."

Slovits saluted, faced his men, favored them with the necessary bellowing. Parties of twelve split off and headed for each block.

The fit came out, picked up the sick, commenced bearing them to their respective dormitories. It took quite a time because every now and then a body-bearer would collapse and have to be carried in his turn. Thus it happened that the entire complement of one room, consisting of twenty opportunist Aluesines, contrived to have themselves borne to bed by a bunch of sour-faced Stames who did not see the obvious way of dodging the chore until it was too late.

Finally the fit were paraded in the yard, the fit being defined as those able to stand. Two dozen of them dropped in their tracks just as Slovits opened his mouth to bawl. Slovits closed the mouth while the end files wearily picked up the bodies and lugged them away. Five of the luggers swiftly decided that it requires less effort to be carried than to carry,

whereupon they flopped and put on the foaming act. More end files broke off to take those away.

At that point Slovits came to the end of his patience. Stabbing a large finger at those still perpendicular, he roared, "All former doctors, surgeons, hospital orderlies and similar personnel will take six paces to the front."

Foley marched forward bawling with equal loudness, "One, two, three, four, five, *six*." He halted.

Eight Aluesines and eleven Stames did likewise, yelling in unison and finishing with a simultaneous, "*Six*." As if that were a signal, two of them bit the dust.

Slovits glared a moment at the two, his face twitching, his fingers working around. Then he said to the survivors, "Follow me."

Obediently they traipsed behind him to the office building. Three who preferred bed to Festerhead shamelessly gained their ends by collapsing on the way. Four more did the same during the ten minutes' wait outside the open door through which Festerhead could be heard shouting indistinguishable remarks into a telephone.

At the prison gates the situation was no better. Long files of captives shuffled outward, bowls and spoons clutched in bony hands, worn boots flapping or bare feet padding on the concrete. Every fifty yards or so the files halted, doubled-up bodies were dragged out the way and borne back to the blocks. Then another fifty yards advance, a halt, more bodies.

For once the escorting Kastans did not yell, swear or swing their whips. They marched with the column, urging it onward but viewing its gradual loss of numbers with cold-blooded indifference. So far as they were concerned an epidemic was a calamity strictly for the brasshats. Let them do the worrying. That's what they were paid for, wasn't it?

Festerhead slammed down the phone, came out the door, cast a savage eye over the waiting eleven and harshed, "You will remain in the blocks and tend to the sick. I hold you responsible for restoring them to work with the minimum of delay. If you fail, you will be punished." He let his glare linger a moment upon each in turn. "The punishment will be severe."

"If we do fail," answered Foley, calmly positive, "the consequences will be more severe—the entire prison will be down and out, Kastans included."

"It is for you to prevent it."

"With what?" demanded Foley, greatly daring. "We have no medical kit, no supplies of any sort."

"I authorize you to make use of whatever facilities are in the hospital," Festerhead snapped.

"What if Doctor-Major Machimbar refuses us those facilities?"

"He will do nothing of the kind," declared Festerhead. "I am the prison commander. My orders will be obeyed. You will employ whatever supplies are available within the hospital and get the prisoners back to work." He turned to go, added as a pointed afterthought, "Or you will suffer."

One of the listening Stames started suffering then and there, flat on his back, with his feet trying to tuck themselves behind his ears.

Holden paced up and down the room, glanced through the windows at the starlit night and mused aloud. "It was a spectacular show but very much overdone. A Terran guard wouldn't have been fooled. They'd have had the high-pressure hoses out in one minute flat."

"How come you're such an authority on Terran prison techniques?" asked Alpin McAlpin.

"I know what I know."

"Sure thing you do. Bet your past is buried in the mists of iniquity."

"Quit needling," ordered Wardle, with some impatience. "Here's Partha and his boys. Let's get down to business."

Cheminais entered first, the lock-picks jangling carelessly in one hand. Then Partha followed by twenty Stames and Aluesines. The Terrans made sitting-space for them on the beds. Outside, a guard mooched along the flarepath and was blissfully ignorant of conspiratorial activity almost within hearing distance.

Wardle started the discussion with, "As probably you know, twenty-one managed to exchange with adjacent forest-parties today. Some of them will have to swap over a second or third time to spread themselves evenly around the local jails." He fixed attention on Partha. "The number isn't enough. Twice as many are needed. Can you raise more volunteers?"

"After today's performance," said Partha, permitting himself the ghost of a smile, "I don't think volunteers will be hard to find."

"According to what we've learned," Wardle went on, "there are twelve prisons within one day's march of here. Seven of these are almost within sight. We are getting some of our own men into those seven. We'd better send more, just in case they can find a way of wangling themselves into the other five."

"It's worth a try," Partha agreed. "An army of one hundred and twenty thousand is better than one of seventy thousand. I have heard that there are forty prisons on Gathin, also several new ones not yet completed but possibly holding recently captured men. How nice if we could extend our influence over the whole lot."

"I've thought of that. The others are far away, some half-way around the planet. We could get at them by desperate and tedious measures, that's for sure. But it would take too long and the trouble isn't worth it. If we can make a major break in this area, and snatch enough guns, we can seize all the other prisons, one at a time, by main force."

Partha thought it over, objected, "The sole object of capturing prisons is to free the prisoners and thereby pile up the strength of the Gath Army. That's correct, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Wardle.

"There will be a formidable difference between prisoners conditioned by freedom propaganda and those who've never heard of it, never imagined it. Here we're building a mass of potential warriors filled with new hope and eager to fight. Elsewhere, a prison will give up no more than a mob of bewildered slaves."

"How long d'you think it will take a bewildered slave to see his chance to bust a Kastan right on the nose?" inquired Wardle.

"I can judge only by myself," Partha confessed, "and in my case it took too long."

"That's because you're a general. You're trained to be militarily correct, to look at everything from the viewpoint of personal responsibility. The lower ranks have no such inhibitions. Put guns in their hands, tell them that they are Gatha, that honor may be regained by kicking Kastans in the guts and"—he made an emphatic gesture—"I give them two minutes to absorb the facts and start shooting."

"I hope you're right," said Partha, doubtfully.

"Wait and see. Who put over the most extravagant displays

this morning? The boys in the ranks. It wasn't an officer who sicked all over a guard's shiny boots."

Partha looked pained.

"Anyway, let's leave it at that. The real test will come before long. Right now we've something important to be settled." Standing in front of Partha, and speaking with great seriousness, Wardle said, "When the proper time arrives there will be two ways of obtaining guns."

"Two?"

"Yes. And it's for you to decide which way is preferred."

"Why me?"

"Because at the moment you are the only serving general in the forces of the Gath Republic. Therefore you are in command of those forces *and* the spokesman for that republic."

"I see. What is my choice?"

"Terran task forces will drop guns and other war supplies into prisons ready to receive and use them. They will also drop paratroops and special combat teams to take nearby barracks, armories and strongpoints." He paused to let that sink in, added, "Alternatively, the Gath Republic will fight its own battles and win its own victory with arms seized from its enemies."

Getting to his feet, Partha held himself erect, hands at sides, and said quietly, "The fight will be harder, the losses more grievous—but we prefer to face the struggle on our own." Behind him the listening Stames and Aluesines gave a murmur of agreement.

"Back on Earth," commented Wardle, smiling, "the betting was forty to one that you'd make that decision. The entire Gath Republic idea was based on the supposition that every intelligent being has his pride, that he measures it by his own ability to restore it and maintain it. That goes even for a prisoner, even for a slave." He smiled again. "So Terra asks a favor of you."

"A favor?" Partha was startled.

"We ask that the Gath Republic time its first assault to suit our convenience."

"The greater plan?"

"Correct. The chief curse of space-war is that of detecting and intercepting an enemy fleet. The void is so vast and velocities so tremendous that a blip on a screen can come ten seconds too late and a hundred thousand miles wide of the mark."

"So—?"

"So a great revolt on Gathin will bring the major part of the Kastan fleet here as fast as it can come. They'll just naturally concentrate on a danger-point so near to their home-world of Kasta. Remember, we're only twelve days' flight from there." He gave the same smile once more. "Terra would consider it neighborly of the Gath Republic if you timed your shenanigans for when we've taken up positions to intercept the Kastan fleet."

"And when is that likely to be?"

"Not more than eight days after our beacon has given them Gathin's location."

"It may be a month before they pick up on the beacon," complained Partha. "Or two months, perhaps three."

"Not with what we've got zooming around and listening out," answered Wardle. "They are expecting a beacon to function sooner or later, they're hoping for it and constantly seeking it. Finding it is a matter of systematic search and not of haphazard luck. They're likely to trace the beacon and react to it almost any time as from now."

"All right. We'll strike when Terran fleets are ready to take advantage of the situation. Anything more?"

"One item. The doctors have got to make some pretense of coping with the epidemic. But we don't want to play the Kastans' game by curing everyone without exception. So we'd better reduce the number falling sick tomorrow morning. Let's cut it down to two or three hundred and maintain it at that until everyone has had a turn. Foley can explain to Festerhead that he's keeping the trouble in check but it's got to run its course."

"Yes, we can arrange it that way," agreed Partha. "The prisoners are getting psychological satisfaction out of that form of rebellion and so we mustn't drop it altogether. I'll order the number to be kept down to a judicious size."

"I'd like you also to order the doctors to support Foley a hundred per cent next time he argues with Festerhead," Wardle went on. "He wants to blame everything on poor and insufficient food. That diagnosis has got to be unanimous. Maybe it'll get us something better, maybe it won't, but there's no harm in trying."

"The doctors will be told." Partha wet thin lips as he thought of a few crusts of bread in addition to the lousy stew. "Enfeebled Gaths versus overfed Kastans is tough enough.

One extra mouthful per meal would serve as a big step toward victory."

"You took a thousand steps when you switched from slaves to potential conquerors. There's less than another hundred steps to go. You'll make it even if you have to crawl, even with empty bellies."

"We shall," affirmed Partha, thoroughly determined. He followed Cheminais outside, his military staff trailing after him.

The door closed. A guard wandered past along the wall-top, kept dozey attention upon the jungle and the sky.

"Things are building up nicely," opined Holden, "to a wholesale massacre by soup-maddened Gaths."

Wardle stretched himself tiredly on his bed. "Let me sleep. I wish to dream of T-bone steaks smothered with button mushrooms."

He closed his eyes, gradually slipped into the unconscious. Holden lay drooling a bit, got off his bed, went to Wardle and shook him awake.

"Aloysius, why are you so cruel to me?"

"Drop dead!" bawled Wardle, aggravated beyond measure.

The guard came to an abrupt halt in the flarepath, stared straight toward the open windows and yelled, "*Fosham gub-itsch!*"

Holden went to the window and shouted back, "You heard what the nice gentleman said—drop dead."

"You will not speak dwarf-language," ordered the guard, tough and menacing. "You will go to sleep."

"Yair," said Holden. "That's an idea." Finding his bed, he reposed on it and in due course awoke everyone else with his snores.

Thirteen days crawled past. The sufferers from what Holden called "saponic mastication" had now been further reduced to eighty every morning, merely to keep Festerhead soothed. Doctor-Major Machimbar continued to display lordly indifference to any sick other than guards, but did allow Foley and the others the free run of the hospital.

The beacon functioned twenty-eight hours per day. Nobody knew for certain whether the Kastans were still unaware of it or whether they had found it and were seeking an official reason for its existence. The latter possibility was now filling Partha and his staff with mounting apprehension.

One hundred and forty Stames and Aluesines had changed places with forestry parties from elsewhere, smuggled themselves into all seven adjacent prisons and three of the five that were farther away. They had done good work. All ten jails were now mentally conditioned for revolt and had riddled themselves with soap-disease as a means of maintaining morale through the waiting period.

In the middle of that night Pye was taking his turn to remain awake. He sprawled across his bed, gazed wearily at a spangle of stars gleaming in the window-gaps, counted the minutes toward the time when Casasola would take over. He yawned for the hundredth stretch, fidgeted with boredom.

Faint clicks came from Holden's bed.

Pye sat up wide-eyed and listened.

The bed went on clicking.

Scrambling hurriedly across, Pye snatched up the other's jacket, extracted his pocket-watch. Opening its case, he slowly rotated it in the horizontal plane. The clicks faded, ceased, resumed, suddenly became loud enough to awake the whole room.

Pop-pop, pipper-pop.

"Eureka!" exclaimed Wardle. He rubbed hands together in delight and satisfaction. "They're halfway through. Never mind, they'll repeat until they know we've got it."

The seven sat around and listened carefully while the pseudo-watch continued to emit pipper-pops. The sounds went on for ten minutes, ceased for one, started all over again.

"How about me sneaking out to interrupt the beacon?" asked Alpin McAlpin, eagerly.

"Not worth the trouble of getting over the wall," Wardle decided. "I can tend to it myself while working out there tomorrow. Cut off and on twelve times at one minute intervals, that's what you said, didn't you?"

"Yes. We've got to give them an intermittent period to show that we've heard them."

"It'll be done. Doesn't need a radio technician just to work a switch up and down."

"One hour before dawn, five days hence," commented Pye, still listening to the pipper-pops. "That's quicker than we anticipated."

"No matter. They'll keep postponing it so long as they get no assenting signal from us," said Wardle. "We'll interrupt the beacon early tomorrow. Five days should be enough. Be-

sides, I want to get back to Terra. I've had nearly as much as I can take of this dump."

"Me, too," indorsed Pye, fervently.

Holden chose that moment to let go with an unmusical howl of, "Home, home, swe-e-eet home. Be it ever so humble—"

Outside, a guard blundered heavy-footed along the flare-path, shouted a string of incomprehensible words toward the barrack-block. He sounded arrogant and liverish.

Going to a window, Holden looked out and said with mock humility, "You will not speak louse-language. You will go take a walk." Then he ducked out of sight and flopped on his bed.

The watch, now closed and back in his pocket, was still emitting faint clicks in the morning. The same theme over and over again: five days hence, one hour before dawn.

On the last day there reappeared the old menace of a betraying atmosphere. In the yard at eventide ten thousand sat or mooched around with studied listlessness that gave no visual hint of what was coming. Yet over all lay a strange, invisible tenseness that could be smelled and felt.

Again the guards responded to instinct, sixth-sense or whatever it was. They became fidgety, nervous, and tended to group together with fingers on or near triggers. But such was their conditioning that each inwardly sought the cause of his hunch outside the walls or in the sky, anywhere but inside the prison.

Partha came up to Wardle and said, "The men are behaving very well. All the same, the Kastans are sniffing around for trouble. Do you suppose it might be better if everyone left the yard and went to their rooms?"

"It would be a radical break in routine," Wardle pointed out. "Prisoners value this period of petty freedom in which to mix and talk. They never go indoors until they have to. A sudden eagerness to get themselves locked up for the night would arouse the suspicions of a halfwit."

"You may be right. But there's another hour to go. I fear that among so many may be one or two who'll crack under the strain of waiting and do something stupid."

"I don't think that would spoil our plans," opined Wardle. "The Kastans are used to such foolishness. How many pris-

oners have committed suicide these last four years, and how many did it by inviting a bullet from a guard?"

Partha frowned, said nothing.

"An hour is an hour," finished Wardle. "We've got to sit it out."

He watched Partha walk apprehensively away. Then he leaned against the wall and let his gaze linger on the armory.

Behind those big steel doors lay a treasure that must be won. A direct assault on the armory, or on the platoon at the gate, would bring the attackers under murderous fire from twenty-two guards high up atop the wall. Therefore the wall-top guards would have to be dealt with first. It was going to be tricky and need excellent timing.

Agreed plans were still being viewed and reviewed in his mind when the hour ended and prisoners filed into the barrack-blocks. They shuffled indoors, striving hard to maintain the usual appearance of slowness and reluctance. The natural glumness of the Stames gave them a considerable advantage over the Aluesines at such moments as this.

Now there was only the long night in which to make final preparations. Door-locks clicked shut, guards left the blocks, crossed the yard to their own quarters. The last of them had not gone from sight before Cheminais was out and busily unlocking. He'd had to make an early start, there being enough doors to occupy his attention for three hours.

"Your part of the game completed?" Wardle asked Holden.

"Sure thing. Dareuth will lead the quarry gang in a rush to the garbage dump. On it are forty old tin cans filled with alomite and complete with detonators." He gave a wistful sigh. "Wish we could have smuggled more in. There's a big steel barrel down at the quarry. It would have made a beautiful bang if we could have trundled it through the gates."

Wardle gave a shrug of indifference, lay down, arranged his blanket over himself. "I for one am going to get some sleep."

"Can you, at a time like this?" asked Pye.

"Dunno. But I'm going to try." He shut his eyes. The room went silent. Sleep did not come to any of them.

Eventually Wardle found himself at a window watching the regular passing and repassing of a guard and impatiently counting off the hours, the minutes. Now and again he eyed the twinkling starfield. Out in the dark, high up and far

away, a big array of black, snouty spaceships waited in ambush. He knew they were there and found the knowledge comforting.

At ten minutes before deadline they were all by the windows. They let a guard go past, dropped a rope to ground-level. Holden climbed over the window-ledge, got a grip, made ready to slide down.

He paused, grinned up into their faces and said with unnecessary loudness, "Hoot M'Goot rides again."

"S-s-sh!" hissed Wardle, "Get down, you imbecile!" He glanced anxiously along the wall-top, was relieved to see no angry figure pounding back.

Holden slid into lower darkness. When the rope ceased vibrating they hauled it up. Looking out and down, they saw his vague, shadowy figure flit across to the base of the wall.

"Two minutes to go," announced Wardle.

They took up cross-bows, wound springs to full tension, placed bolts in grooves and positioned themselves abreast by the windows. Elsewhere were similar scenes, one figure silently lurking by the bottom of the wall, half a dozen armed ones standing behind sixth-floor windows. The night was slightly darker than usual, the flarepath looked more brilliant by contrast.

The guard came back. His movements seemed abnormally slow and lethargic. To nerves drawn taut he appeared to be taking one step per minute.

Wardle whispered, "I'll break the neck of the fellow who shoots prematurely. We want that clunker's gun to fall inside the wall, not outside or on top."

"Don't worry," said Pye, icily calm.

Now the guard came level with the window. Far below, Holden rattled a tin can. The guard halted, stared around. Holden rattled again. The guard unhitched his automatic gun from his shoulder, gripped it in his right hand, bent over and peered down toward the source of the noise.

"Now!"

Six arbalests went *whup-whup*.

For a horrid moment they thought they'd missed. The guard stayed bent, unmoving, apparently still looking down. An instant later he plunged headlong, not having uttered a sound. Spikes caught and tore the legs of his pants, ripped a boot from his foot before he disappeared. His gun landed with a metallic crash that sounded preternaturally loud. The

body hit a second later with a sickening crunch of bone on concrete.

Over to the left, just out of sight, somebody atop the wall was giving queer whistling gasps. Farther away, on the other side of the jail, a Kastan voice was screaming bloody murder. A light machinegun, presumably dropped by the screamer, suddenly came into action with a sharp, hard *taketa-taketa* and the screaming ceased.

Bolting through the door, the six Terrans tried to race downstairs and join Holden in the yard. It wasn't easy. In front a solid column of Stames lurched, jostled and half-fell down the steps, jammed together on every bend and stuck until rearward pressure forced them loose. Behind, a bunch of Aluesines yipped with impatience and used their weight to try to drive the mass outdoors. Thus the smaller Terrans became submerged in a raging stream of seven-to-eight-footers and remained there until practically flung into the yard.

Already a thousand were out and on the rampage, sprinting to their assigned objectives. Two hundred from the block adjoining the gates had been briefed to attack the twelve guards there, also the twelve relief-guards sleeping nearby. Most of these were now within fifty yards of the gates and going fast with no opposition.

Wardle and the others kept anxious eyes in that direction as the mob from their own block raced across the yard toward the guards' dormitories.

Those heading for the gates made another thirty yards before astonished guards accepted the evidence of their own eyes. By then it was too late. A big, gaunt Aluesine in the lead swung up a shaped and sharp-edged piece of steel resembling a butcher's cleaver. He flung it at the quickest-witted guard, who'd brought gun to shoulder and was fumbling for the trigger. The cleaver missed its target as the guard ducked. A moment later all twelve went down beneath the vengeful mob, not a shot having been fired.

Over to the right another gang was heading for the garbage dump. Beyond them, a large group of former engineers hustled for the power plant and the vehicle-park. Prisoners continued to pour out the blocks in their hundreds, adding themselves to various groups as previously ordered.

The two Kastans patrolling the vehicle-park proved more alert and less dumfounded than their fellows had been. Warned by the rising uproar, they took refuge behind a couple

of huge trucks, rested guns across steel bonnets and opened fire. Nine oncoming prisoners collapsed and lay still. *Taketa-taketa* went the guns, hosing slugs into the yard.

Splitting up, the engineers dodged around trucks, climbed over them, crawled underneath them. The guards tried to aim and fire ten ways at once. It couldn't be done. Fighting figures came at them from all directions; they went down for keeps, and their weapons were snatched from dead hands.

At that point the Terrans lost sight of what was going on elsewhere. Reaching the dormitory building, they were swept headlong through its doors. In front of them a dozen cat-eyed Aluesines raced along a dark corridor as though it were fully illuminated. A few Stames with them were handicapped by lack of light, tended to falter and stumble. Other Aluesines brushed the Stames impatiently aside and dashed after their fellows.

Glimpsing narrow stairs at one side, Wardle gladly seized the chance to escape the press of bigger, heavier bodies. He jerked sidewise out of the crowd, gained the steps, pounded upward as fast as he could go. Somebody was puffing and blowing close upon his heels. Glancing over one shoulder he found Foley following and—somewhat to his surprise—the missing Holden, who had joined up somehow. Holden was gripping an automatic gun and was the only one of them armed with a weapon worth a hoot. Of the others there was no sign. Presumably they were engaged in the melee lower down.

On the first floor the slumbering guards had been brought rudely awake by the general hullabaloo and especially by sounds of strife immediately beneath them. Just as Wardle reached the top of the stairs a huge Kastan, attired only in his underpants, came running out of a room with machine-pistol in hand.

The Terran lacked weight and inches but had the advantage of surprise. What the Kastan had expected to see will never be known but his reaction showed that a recalcitrant prisoner came last on the list. He wasted a valuable moment by letting his mouth hang open and looking thunderstruck.

Wardle used the same moment to belt him in the belly with the butt of his cross-bow. The Kastan let out an elephantine grunt and bowed low, bringing his head down to convenient reach. Wardle promptly walloped him on the nut

with all the strength he could muster. The guard flopped with a crash that shook the floor.

Flinging away his cross-bow, Wardle stooped to grab up the precious machine-pistol. It was the luckiest movement of his life. A dozen slugs blasted out the open door, went a few inches above his back, knocked chips from the opposite wall. Plunging flat, Wardle rolled madly out of the field of fire.

"Stay put," warned Holden, still at the top of the stairs. He edged past Foley, crawled cautiously toward the door, poked the snout of his gun around the corner and let fly into the room. Another shower of slugs was his answer. .

Obviously those in the room had no intention of surrendering. Their automatic guns were stacked in the armory but each of them retained his machine-pistol. They were going to fight as long as strength and ammunition held out. The grim alternative was lifelong slavery, without honor, without hope. And this was a mighty poor time to try converting them to a strange Terran viewpoint.

Momentarily there was an impasse as the Terrans lay in wait outside and dared not rush in, while the Kastans waited inside and dared not charge out. Then sheer pressure of attackers down below forced the surplus upstairs. The first was an excited Aluesine ceremoniously bearing a large and rusty can on which was the legend IMPAT NOGOLY 111, whatever that meant.

"Give it to me," snarled Holden. He tossed his gun into Foley's arms, snatched the can from the Aluesine. His fingers fiddled a moment at the top of the can, then his arm swung across the doorway and slung it into the room. "Down!"

They all lay flat. IMPAT NOGOLY 111 went off with one hell of a bang that draped a glassless window-frame around a Stame colonel two hundred yards away. Together they dashed into the room. Eleven Kastans were scattered around with some indecision as to which piece was whose.

The take was eleven more machine-pistols. Now supported by the flood coming up from below, they charged straight into the next room farther along the corridor. It held twelve beds, twelve neatly folded uniforms, but was empty. So also were the remaining rooms on that floor.

Meanwhile the flood swept higher, was greeted on the third floor with heavily concentrated fire. Bodies rolled down the stairs, blocked the way to others: Stames and Aluesines

worked frantically to remove the dead. They made another rush, were again repelled.

Evidently the Kastans missing from the second floor had joined those above. Some officer of the guard must have had enough time to organize a stand. Since there were eight floors in the building the defenders had plenty of room in which to retreat higher and higher, making the building's capture costly in the extreme.

It was now plain that Kastans could and would fight with great tenacity. The conquest of the prison was proving harder than anticipated.

Wardle found an Aluesine officer, suggested, "Dead Gaths are no use to the Gath Army. Better withdraw your men from the attack."

"But we've got to take this building at whatever cost," protested the other. "Most of four hundred Kastans are in there."

"Maybe we can get rid of them more cheaply."

"How?"

"We can blow them out. With enough stuff stacked inside we can lift them high enough to meet their own fleet. How's the rest of the battle going?"

"I haven't the remotest notion," admitted the officer.

Then he rocked forward, clutched Wardle around the neck and almost brought him down with the weight. The walls groaned, the ceilings showered dust, the ground quivered. A long strip of distorted steel buzzed through one window and out the other, hitting nobody. Glass rained from windows above.

"The armory doors," exclaimed Wardle. "Now we should have plenty of teeth."

He scooted into the yard, headed for the armory. Halfway there something went *taketa-taketa* and invisible bees buzzed over his head. After that he ran in a sort of leaping zigzag but no more bullets came.

Near the armory the great steel doors sprawled upon the ground, twisted as if by a giant hand. Prisoners were taking out weapons as fast as they could be snatched. Just as he arrived Cheminais and two Stames shoved out a heavy machine-gun mounted on two wheels.

"Four more of these gadgets in there," informed Cheminais. He narrowed his eyes at the yard, part of which was

conspicuously unoccupied. "The gate guard went down like skittles but the relief-guard is holding out. They've locked themselves in the guardhouse and are well armed."

"Oh, so that's who fired at me just now?"

"Yes, they've light automatic guns covering half a dozen narrow arcs around the building."

"But now we smack back at them, *houne?*" put in a Stame, mournfully happy. "We teach them a lesson, *houne?*"

"Any explosive in there?" asked Wardle, jerking a thumb.

"Only a dozen kegs of that quarrying junk," said Cheminais.

"That'll do. I'd better find Holden fast. He knows how best to use it."

So saying, he hastened back, his mind occupied with the potency of a ton or more of alamite. The distant gun opened up immediately he entered its arc. He took a dive, lay still. The gun ceased. Carefully he edged forward. *Taketa-taketa*. Whoever was behind that gun had good sight and poor patience.

The bullets came very close. One plucked at his shoulder padding, ripped a slice out of the cloth. Another struck concrete a foot from his nose, ricocheted skyward with a noise like that of a buzz-saw.

Another pause, during which sweat trickled down his spine. Slowly he raised his head. *Taketa-taketa*. This was not more than a one-second burst because immediately it was answered by a faster, heavier hammering from the yard. *Gamma-gamma-gamma* sounded Cheminais and his Stames. The distant gunpost dissolved into chaos as a stream of small explosive shells sprayed all over it.

That was good marksmanship in the hazy half-light of coming sunrise. Wardle got up and ran. In two minutes he was back with Holden, who examined the kegs and pronounced them very bangworthy. Thirty Stames at once dragged the lethal load to the dormitories, lugged it up to the second floor, stacked it in a middle room.

Not knowing what was taking place, the Kastans on the third and higher floors made no attempt to interfere. They sat tight and awaited further attacks from enemies swarming beneath.

While well-armed Stames and Aluesines kept close watch on the rising stairs, Holden primed the pyramid of kegs, got everything ready.

At that point Wardle appeared with one of the captured gateguards. The huge Kastan was completely submissive and already had assumed the status of a slave who exists only to obey.

"You will go up to the next floor," ordered Wardle, "protecting yourself by shouting your identity in your own language. You will tell all those above that they must surrender at once or be blown sky-high."

Unhesitatingly the Kastan agreed, as a prisoner must. No thought of refusal or trickery entered his mind despite the current bad example of which he'd become a victim. He mounted the stairs, bawling a warning.

"This is Rifada. Do not shoot—I am Rifada."

He reached the top, turned out of sight onto the third floor. There was a brief silence while those below strained their ears to listen.

Then, "Guard-Sergeant Kling, I am ordered to tell you that all must surrender or be blown up."

"So! And you a prisoner of prisoners, eh?" A pause, followed by, "He comes up here and invites us to share his disgrace. Death is better than that." Another pause, then a short, sharp, "Kill him!"

A dozen shots blasted. Something made a dull thud on the floor. Aluesines and Stames cast each other the knowing looks of those who'd expected nothing less from a piece of Terran super-optimism.

Wardle made a gesture of mixed despair and disgust. "That settles it. We can do no more in these circumstances. Let 'em have it."

Two Aluesines remained at the bottom of the stairs to oppose a possible last-minute rush from above. All the rest hastened out of the building, placed themselves at a safe distance. Holden went into the middle room, stayed there a few seconds, came out like he'd been seared with a red-hot poker.

Taking their cue from this, the pair of Aluesines abandoned their post, followed him down and out at breakneck pace. They joined the crowd, turned to watch results.

For a short time the big building stood stark and silent against the growing light of morning. Then its walls bulged. Came a tremendous roar and the whole edifice burst apart. A great vertical column of dirt, dust and vapor arose skyward with darker lumps soaring and falling within it.

By a freak of chance characteristic of explosions eighteen Kastans survived the blast, bruised and badly shocked but otherwise whole. The dirtiest and most bedraggled of these was Guard-Major Slovits. He crawled out of the mess, stood up, felt himself all over, gazed around with a completely befuddled expression.

Holden brought him to his senses by tapping him on the chest and announcing, "Henceforth your sole purpose in life will be to please me. Is that understood?"

"Yes," agreed Slovits, demonstrating that one man's poison is another man's meat.

"In no circumstances will you disobey."

"No," confirmed Slovits, horrified at the thought of outraging a well-established convention.

"Therefore," finished Holden, pointing across the yard, "you will march these former guards in a smart and military manner to General Partha-ak-Waym and apply to him for immediate enlistment in the army of the Gath Republic."

Slovits stood staring down at him from his greater height. His heavy body swayed slightly while a peculiar series of emotions chased each other across his broad, leathery face. His lips worked but no words came out. Then suddenly his eyes closed and he slumped without a sound.

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed Holden, surprised. "The big ape has fainted."

"What do you expect when a warrior plunges into his living grave and is immediately hauled out by his enemy?" asked Wardle.

The guardhouse fell within half an hour, gave up twelve Kastan dead who'd fought to the last gasp. The prison's conquest was now complete but activity did not lessen in the slightest.

A blue flag with white star was nailed to the pole above the administration building, formally saluted and informally cheered. Stretcher parties collected the wounded, rushed them to the hospital where the doctors took charge. Other parties sought among the dead for Festerhead and Machimbar, found neither, both having had the good fortune to be absent when the balloon went up.

A triumphant column one thousand strong roared out in captured trucks and thundered along slave-built jungle roads. Four hundred were armed with light automatic guns, four

hundred with machine-pistols, two hundred with hastily made alamite grenades.

They reached the next-nearest jail in time to take part in the final assault. Again the Kastans had fought with bitter determination born of the belief that the only alternative was a lifetime of damnation. Three hundred and seventy died in their boots. Forty-eight dazed Kastans accepted salvation in the ranks of the growing Gath Army.

The column sped forth again, now doubled in size and firepower. It passed Festerhead and Machimbar on its way to the next jail, meeting them sitting pop-eyed in an official car, leaving them dead-eyed in a smoking wreck. The third and other prisons toppled in turn. By the fall of the tenth the column had become an army of which only one in seven carried a modern weapon.

A surprise assault in full strength upon a garrison town remedied the arms shortage, provided lavish quantities of ammunition, added seven hundred mentally confused Kastans to the ranks. Here, the Gaths also gained their first heavy artillery in the form of ten mobile batteries of dual-purpose guns.

A sideswipe in force at an inadequately defended airfield won them four small space-cruisers in fighting trim, also sixty-two jet planes. Onetime painters daubed out the double-arrow insignia, replaced them with a white star. Former pilots, navigators, space-engineers and gunners piled joyfully into the ships, took them up, plastered enemy airfields elsewhere.

Electricians and telephone engineers cut power cables, tapped lines, listened to unwitting Kastans talking from afar, bollixed them with fake messages, passed constant information to the Gath Field Intelligence Service. Scout-planes fed the headquarters staff with news of enemy movements. Radio technicians monitored Kastan broadcasts with captured equipment, added their quota of valuable details. Swiftly the Gaths had reached the stage of waging war systematically, knowing what they were doing and why they were doing it.

A small, judiciously estimated quantity of nuisance value had been placed in a suitable environment where it had fermented like yeast in a brewery vat.

On the ninth day of the revolt a flaming battleship fell through the sky from somewhere where twinklings and vivid

flashings had concentrated among the stars. On a hilltop it made a meteorlike crater surrounded by gobs of molten metal. Faintly discernible upon one distorted slab were the tips of two white arrows.

The same night eleven more ships plunged down white-hot, illuminating the jungle for miles. One was unidentifiable. One carried the sign of a Terran comet. Nine bore paired arrows.

Upon the tenth day Wardle and the others bounced and jolted in a racing truck that was part of a gigantic column pushing forward nearly a thousand miles south of the prison. Their driver was Gath-Major Slovits, the only one aboard big enough to hold the huge steering wheel and reach the big foot-pedals. Slovits, reveling in unexpected freedom and new-found honor, was by now the Gathiest of the Gaths.

A mobile radio unit operating by the wayside drew their attention as an Aluesine sergeant, standing near it, waved them down. The sergeant came close, his cat-eyes examining them curiously.

"You Terrans are wanted at Langasime."

"That's a day's run rearward," complained Wardle. "The fighting is ahead. What's the idea?"

"They're calling for you over the air. You're wanted at Langasime as soon as you can get there."

"Who wants us?"

"A Terran frigate has landed. They say the enemy fleet has suffered severe loss and that our conquest of Gathin is only a matter of time. Union forces are massing to attack Kasta itself."

"Hm-m-m! By the looks of it we're being ordered home."

Wardle showed disappointment, stood coping with a moment of chronic indecision. A truck lumbered past hauling a tank of paralyzing gas and its long-range projector. Three white-starred jetplanes swooped over the advancing column, rocked and swayed into the distance. The horizon spewed smoke and faint noises, the *taketa-taketa* of light automatics, the *gamma-gamma-gamma* of heavy machine-guns, the brief, deep *whoomps* of alamite bombs, large-caliber mortars and dual-purpose guns.

Reluctantly he gave way. "Oh, well, maybe they've something else in mind for us." Then to Slovits, "Take us back good and fast."

* * *

At the dilapidated and bomb-cratered Langasime space-port the frigate's captain came down his gangway to meet them. He was tall, young, dapper, and spoke with an air of weary resignation.

"At H.Q. they need their heads examined. I've been ordered to pick up the Special Task Force—in a frigate." His attention settled on Casasola. "I suppose you fellows are part of it?"

Casasola said nothing.

"We fellows," informed Holden, "are *all* of it."

The captain frowned disapproval while he sought around for the gag. Failing to find it, he remarked incredulously, "What, only seven of you?"

"Yair," said Holden, donating an irritating smirk. "Good, *houne?*" He turned, made a motion of farewell. "Best of luck, Slobovitch."

"Slovits," reminded Slovits, with extreme politeness.

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THE SONS OF PROMETHEUS by Alexei Panshin

St. Paul sings a hymn to love in the First Epistle to the Corinthians (Chapter 13), but it is not love for an individual, for that too easily decays into a desire for sexual gratification or, even worse, into an exclusive ownership and an excuse for hatred to all the world beside. St. Paul had another kind of love in mind, a universal benevolence that would include the unloved and, harder yet, the unlovable. The Latin word for what St. Paul had in mind is *caritas*, from the word for "dear." It is to hold all human beings, all life, all things, dear, since, presumably, God does so. And to us who speak the English language, *caritas* becomes CHARITY.

—Isaac Asimov

THE SONS OF PROMETHEUS

by Alexei Panshin

1. THE COLLIGATIONS OF THE CONFRATERNITY

You don't suddenly appear out of nowhere. The Colonists find that disconcerting. You arrive in a place from somewhere definite. Particularly on Zebulon.

Zebulon? Whatever you do, don't let them know where you come from. They (finger across the neck with an appropriate sound effect, *zit*) Ship people when they catch them. Remember the Sons of Prometheus—they being the ones who had gotten it in the neck. Of course they were from *Puteaux* and not nearly so bright as we.

It was nice of Nancy to remind Tansman of that and tell him to take care of himself, especially since it was her idea for him to go to Zebulon. It was nothing he would have thought of himself. Zebulon was not really the place for a chromoplastician with no experience in adventure, with no taste for do-gooding, with an active indifference to everything but the tidy definite sufficiency of chromoplasts.

Tansman arrived in North Hill, where he had been told he would be met by Rilke. A solid-wheeled, leather-sprung public coach was as concrete an arrival as he could manage. The rough ride over rougher roads had given him a stiff neck and a headache. He had tried to study local scripture, *The Colligations of the Confraternity*, but finally gave up, put the

book back in his bag, and thereafter looked out the window or at his feet.

He was the only passenger. The talk of the megrim had been enough to empty the coach. He'd taken no notice of the rumors of plague when he bought his seat for North Hill, since he wasn't affected. But he was grateful. He didn't relate easily to other people, even Ship people. He had no idea what to say to a Colonist, people who died, people who killed.

It gave him the chance to study the *Colligations*, since that was what Zebulon killed and died for. If the subject came up, he wanted to be ready.

As they rattled through the rutted streets, Tansman looked through the coach window. There was little traffic—none to speak of. There was less noise—stony quiet. Nobody to be seen. It was a strange queer place, this North Hill. Most of the adobe houses they passed were shut and shuttered.

Arriving, Tansman felt more tense than he had since that first moment when he had been set down here on Zebulon and put on his own. It was only the third time he had been on a planet, the third time in his life that he had left *Daudelin*, though he could million his light years. Once in practice for Trial when he was thirteen. Once for thirty nervous days on Trial when he turned fourteen. And now.

Here he was, a chromoplastician in a world ignorant of chromoplasts, an incognito prince amongst sharp-toothed paupers, an uneasy rider in a coach that was now, at last, coming to a stop in a dusty street under a lowering sky. And he was afraid. He wouldn't have admitted it, but he was afraid.

It was his own fault for letting himself be overridden by Nancy Poate. She was his cousin, one of the few people he knew, one of the few people he let himself know. She was older than he, determined and formidable.

"Phil," she said, "did you or did you not tell me last week that you were finished with that silly set of experiments you've been locking yourself in with?"

He had told her about the experiments to make her go away. She didn't like to hear about them so he always started talking about chromoplasts when he wanted to be left alone.

"Yes," he said, "but they aren't silly. You shouldn't talk about my work that way."

"Then you need a vacation. This will be a vacation."

"Nancy, I'll grant that after Earth was destroyed we owed the Colonies more than we gave them, but this sneaking around doing paternal good works to people who just want

to be left alone doesn't appeal to me."

Tansman didn't really care about the Colonies. They weren't real to him. They were distant and vaguely frightening and he didn't want to think about them. He would grant the premises that Nancy insisted upon—because Nancy was immediate and, in her way, even more frightening. But he would seize on any argument he could find and throw it back at her.

And none of it—the points he granted or the arguments he countered with—was real, none of it was thought through. It was all talk designed to keep the fearsome where it belonged, as far away as possible.

Since this argument seemed to be doing the job, he continued with it:

"You don't dare come out in the open because you're afraid that they'll wring your necks, but you aren't willing to leave them alone. So what do you do? You prod and you poke, you try to establish trade routes and other silly business, and you hand out propaganda and how-to-do-it books, and that makes you feel good. Well, it wouldn't make me feel good, and I don't want any part of it."

Nancy, bluff and unstoppable, just nodded. Tanaman would have had himself remodeled if he looked the way she did. He was convinced that she didn't because her appearance helped her to overwhelm people and get her own way.

She said, "I knew I was right to pick on you, Phil. You won't be tempted to meddle. All you'll have to do is be there for two months keeping an eye on things."

"No," he said.

"Phil," she said. "Don't be stuffy."

So now he was on Zebulon, not quite sure how he had been persuaded to come. He was a reluctant fire-bringer, muttering to himself about a man he had yet to meet named Hans Rilke who was a do-gooder with an undurable liver. They might call themselves "The Group," but Nancy Poate's people were low-visibility Sons of Prometheus.

It seemed appropriate that Rilke should have a liver complaint. That had been Prometheus' problem, too. He wondered if it were an occupational disease of meddlers, and he wished Nancy Poate had found a better way to occupy herself than coordinating the activities of do-gooders—including the replacement of their innards.

He took a deep breath and descended from the coach,

satchel in hand. He was a tall, youngish man. Not young—he disowned his youth along with all other potential folly. He was a thin man, narrow of face and large of nose. If it had ever mattered, he might have had it altered, but the chromoplasts didn't care and if anyone else did, they had never bothered to tell him.

He was wearing a slouch hat, jacket, breeches and leggings that he had been assured were seasonable and stylish here. He felt like the sort of ass who dresses up for costume parties. He'd never worn a hat before in his life, and he kept reaching up to adjust the clumsy, uncomfortable thing.

The wind under the flat, cold, gray sky was chill and biting. It tugged at his silly hat as he stepped down from the coach and slapped Tansman in the face with the most overwhelming, pungent, unpleasant odor he had ever smelled. It was an eye-burning, stomach-churning reek that drowned him in singed hair and charring flesh.

The driver of the coach could smell it, too. He didn't wait for Tansman. He gave a sharp whistle and his horses lurched forward. Raising dust, open coach door banging back and forth, the stage rattled to the right and around the corner and was gone between the mud-walled buildings, leaving only a dust-whorl memory.

And Tansman stood alone at the edge of the square of North Hill. Fifty yards distant across the square was built a great bonfire. There may have been a base of wood beneath, but the primary fuel was human bodies. Some of the bodies were clothed, the fire licking at the cloth, lines of flame running down arms and legs. Most of the bodies were naked, marked by great purple bruises like port wine scars.

Three determined men in gloves and white cloth masks worked by the fire. One did his best to hold a maddened horse still. The other two worked as a team to unload the cart. They grabbed arms and feet and heaved bodies like logs onto the fire. They were fast, silent and clumsy, impersonal and afraid.

One body, a female, was thrown so carelessly that it rolled down the pile and slapped at the feet of a fourth man, a white-suited, white-cowled, black-belted friar. He took no notice but continued his benediction, adding his single note of dignity to the crude and ugly disposal of the dead.

Tansman turned away. It was more than he could stand to watch. It was the closest he had ever been to death, that rarity on the Ship, and it was too close for his mind and stomach. He

was not afraid. Before he left he had been given proofs against the accidents of Zebulon, including this hemorrhagic fever. He could have afforded a scientific curiosity. But one look at the burning pile of ephemeral human animals on the cobbles, one sickening whiff of their mortality, was too much.

He gagged and smothered his face in his hand. He gagged again, and ran. He ran down the street the coach had traveled into town, and he did not look back at a heavy rattle that pursued him like a nightmare of death. His bag banged heavily against his legs as he ran, and his breath came shortly.

Then he tripped and fell and lay panting in the dust. The rattle grew louder. A horse whickered. The thought flashed in his mind that he had been discovered. They knew him here on Zebulon. He had been brought to the place of death where they disposed of the true men they detected, and this was the death cart come for him.

He wanted to cry, *Not me! Not me!* He had never wanted to come. When would the nightmare end? Would he wake, safe in his own bed? He wanted to leap up and lock the door.

And then a wheel stopped by his head. He looked up at a gnarled little old man sitting on the seat of a flatbed wagon. The old man was dressed in brown leather, worn and soft, that might be seasonable but could never have been stylish. There was a gold-spot earring set in his right ear and a broad-bladed knife with a curved point at his belt. He had curly muttonchop whiskers and dirty brown hair, both shot with gray, and his last shave must have been half a week past. He was a monkey man.

"Mr. Tansman?" he said, grinning down as though he enjoyed the sight of Tansman lying on his face in the street.

Tansman said, "You aren't..." and then stopped, because it was clear that he wasn't. The pictures of Rilke that Nancy had shown him were nothing like this man. He had to be a Zebulonite, one of them, part of the nightmare.

"I'm from your uncle, come to fetch you to Delera. Hop in, boy, and let's be off. I've no mind to catch the megrim."

Tansman pushed himself to his knees and snatched up his fallen hat and bag. He stood and dropped them in the bed of the wagon and then began to brush the dust away.

"Ah, you are a dandy, aren't you? City people! Climb aboard, damn you. I'm not waiting."

Tansman stepped on the wheel hub and then up to the seat. The quick little man shouted to his horses and off they jounced

through the dry, rutted streets. The old man didn't slow the pace until the last flat-topped roof of North Hill had been left behind. Then he brought the team down to a walk, resettling himself on the hard wooden seat and taking a great sigh of air, as though it were only now that he really dared to breathe.

"You're lucky I stayed for you, boy. I wouldn't have spent another ten minutes in that charnel house. I haven't lived all these many years to end me days being sizzled in the town square, and I don't fancy walking around with half me mind leached should I survive the megrim, neither."

He shuddered and cast an eye at the blank and leaden sky. "I should have known. I should have stayed at home tucked in me bed. The megrim is no more than you'd expect with five moons full and the shippeens walking."

The dirt lane they followed ran parallel to a series of small hills rising away at the left. Down the slope at the right was flatland that stretched away level as a table as far as the eye could follow until it was lost in the grayness of the sky, cracked mud merging with muddy sky at the horizon. The road angled down from the town to meet the closer grayness.

With surprise at himself for venturing to speak, but because he had to know, shippeen that he was, Tansman asked with the haughtiest air he could assume, "How do you know the Ship people are about?"

"How do I know? Heh! Ain't it obvious to anyone with his wits?" The monkey man held up his hand and ticked off his evidence on his fingers. "There are five moons full, right? And then there's the plague. Do you expect a shippeen to tap ye on the shoulder and announce hisself?"

The dust roiling up from the horses was too much for Tansman. He reached into the back and found his slouch hat and began to fan the dust away with it.

The old mortal man snickered. He pointed ahead. "The dust will ease when we reach the flats," he said.

Tansman resented the snicker and the contempt he thought he detected in it. "You work for my uncle, do you?" he asked in a tone designed to settle their relationship.

"Yea. Garth Buie is me name. Old Garth, they call me. And you're Mr. Tansman."

"That's right. *Mr. Tansman.*"

With that established, Tansman sat back, stiff and upright, determined to say no more than he had to. This strange, quick, ignorant, and superstitious old man made him ner-

vous. He continued to fan away the dust, but only when he had to and then in quick surreptitious little flicks of the hat.

After ten minutes they reached the flatland, and here the road continued, still parallel to the line of hills, almost straight, almost level, and as Old Garth had promised, almost dustless. Tansman brushed the dust from himself and from his hat, wiped his face, grimacing at the grime on his handkerchief, and set the hat in place on his head.

In another mile they came to a crossroad. There was a sign that read Delera and pointed toward a break in the hills. Old Garth slowed the wagon and guided the horses through the turn.

"Do ye see the brothers? Bound for the monastery at Delera, I'll warrant."

Trudging up the first rise beyond the turn were two men in white-cowled suits, the match of the man who had stood without flinching by the fire in the town square in North Hill. One, short and broad, carried a pack on his back. The other, a tall man, carried a bag like Tansman's, switching hands as he walked. A small wolfish dog with a bushy tail curled high over its back frisked at their heels. The friars took no notice of the wagon clattering up the slope behind them, but the dog held the center of the road and yapped threats until the wagon was closer than the walkers. Then it turned, a rear guard whose moment to retreat had come, and hurried to catch up.

It occurred to Tansman that Old Garth intended to offer them a ride, and he wanted to forbid it, but didn't dare. What could he say to them? He was suddenly angry at Rilke for not having come himself, for putting him in this uncertain position. He didn't say anything. He bit his lip and sat the straighter, thinking of the *Colligations*.

They overtook the friars at the top of the rise, the dog circling away to the far side and pressing close to the friar carrying the bag. The short friar looked up as Garth brought the wagon alongside and reined the horses.

Garth saluted and said, "Good afternoon, Brothers. Will ye honor us by riding along?"

"Well, bless you, son," the friar said, throwing back his cowl. He had a red face and a bald head with just a fringe of hair, a plebian snapping turtle. "A ride is just the thing for weary feet."

He had his pack off in no time and the tailgate of the

wagon lowered. And that quickly, after two short sentences, Tansman knew he found him dislikable. The friar radiated an abrasive self-confident pushiness, as though he expected things his own way and expected you to realize that it was his right. He took the tailgate down and hopped aboard as though he owned the wagon.

The other friar, whose suit was cinched with a black belt to the short one's belt of red, had yet to look up. He turned and knelt, setting his bag down, and while the short one was making a backrest for himself out of his pack and Tansman's satchel, he called the little dog close with a waggle of his finger and a pat on the ground, and caught it up.

And then he turned and looked up at Tansman just as the red friar was saying, "I am Brother Boris Zin. And this is Senior Brother Alva Abarbanel."

Tansman was caught by the penetrating glance. The Senior Brother's face was long and lean and intelligent, a face that Tansman might want to wear when he was old. His brows were bushy and white and his eyes beneath were deep-set and clear. It was a face that Tansman liked as instantly as he disliked the other, but the gaze was so sharp that he could not bear to meet it lest he lose all his secrets and stand revealed. So Tansman looked away.

Garth said, "Brother Asmodeus!" And there was such fear in his voice that Tansman could not help but look back at him. And indeed, Old Garth was frightened, edging away on the seat toward Tansman.

Brother Boris held up a hand. "Aye, Brother Asmodeus. But have no fear if your hearts be pure. He is in my charge and he stands under an interdict of silence. Until the Questry completes its accounting and calls him forth from Delera, he is bound neither to teach, nor to write, nor even to speak. You are safe."

"Must I give him a ride?" asked Garth.

"You forget yourself, my son," said Brother Boris. "Whatever Brother Alva's errors may prove to be, he is still a Senior Brother of the Confraternity, and as such, he is entitled to your respect. Errors in faith are not for such as you to judge. They are the business of the Questry."

"Yes, Questryman," said Garth, and he saluted him.

Tansman sat silent. The less said, the better.

"Besides," Brother Boris said, plumping Tansman's bag

as though it were an out-of-shape pillow, "Brother Alva and I travel together, and you would not have me walk."

"Yes, Questryman. I mean, no, Questryman."

"Please. Call me Brother Boris. Simple Brother Boris."

Simple Brother Boris gestured to his companion, who still stood beside the wagon. After an unrevealing glance at Garth, Brother Asmodeus the Fearsome set his bag and his white dog within the wagon, bade the dog to stay with a silent finger, then walked to the rear, climbed up, and raised the tailgate after. Then he sat cross-legged, one hand on his bag, the other on his dog, smiled and nodded to Garth to proceed.

After they had traveled the road for some minutes Brother Boris said, "What are your names, please?"

There was no real politeness to the interrogative, no hint of personal interest. It was a pure expression of the right to know everything. It was just what Tansman had anticipated and feared when Old Garth, the ignorant monkey man, had first shown his intention to stop. Tansman could only wish that Garth felt as uncomfortable with his gesture as he did.

"Old Garth Buie. Mayhap you've heard of me. They know me up at the monastery. I went up in a balloon once."

Garth fell silent, and Brother Boris did not seize the opportunity to pursue the details of that adventure, so after a moment Tansman said, without turning, "Philip Tansman."

"Effects are a certain sign of their cause, as I'm sure Brother Alva would tell you were he free to speak. The Men of the Ship are about, for heresy, evil, and disease are to be seen around us. Infection of the body, infection of the mind, and infection of the spirit. Why is it that you travel at such a dangerous season?"

Garth said, "It's as I-told the lad. I should have known enough to say at home in me bed. When all moons stand full, the shippeens are abroad."

"No, my son," Brother Boris said. "You must not believe that. What you have said is rank superstition. The Confraternity has kept careful records—as I may say, having spent a year assigned to the task when I first aspired to the Questry—and the phases of the moons have nothing to do with the comings and goings of the Men of the Ships. During the year I labored at the records, a nest of Shipmen, openly proclaiming themselves in all their rottenness and calling themselves the Sons of Prometho, were blotted by the Confraternity. At that time Aleph and Veth were full, Gimel was

in the last quarter, and Daleth and Beth were new. Only once in fifteen turns of Aleph are all moons full together. Heresy, evil, and disease, and the men that spread them, are to be found in any month. Is that not true, Brother Alva?"

Tansman did not want to look, but the edge in Brother Boris' voice made him turn. And he saw nothing, for Brother Alva sat steadily, expressionless, one hand still on his bag, the other still resting in the ruff of his little dog. The only difference was that now the dog was lying instead of sitting.

Brother Boris looked up at Tansman with his red bully face. Overbearing. Not unintelligent. But if Brother Alva was heresy, was the red brother evil, or was he disease?

Brother Boris said, "And why do you travel with the megrim abroad, Mr. Tansman?"

For want of a better, Tansman assumed a modified version of the tone he had used with Garth. Lofty, but not disrespectful—anything but that with a Brother of the Confraternity, a Quentryman. He hid his fears behind carefully measured speech.

Through tight teeth he said, "I'm to mind the interests of my uncle, who keeps a store in Delera. I didn't know of the danger of megrim when I set out. By the time I came to North Hill, it was easier to go on than to go back."

"Aye, yes," said Old Garth. "You should have seen him running like a hound-driven cony through the streets of North Hill."

He laughed. Tansman smiled stiffly. He felt caught in a guessing game with no clue to the right answers and his neck at stake.

"Why cannot your uncle mind his own interests?"

"His parents are old and ill and not expected to live," said Tansman. "He goes to visit them."

"I misdoubt he'll be stopped by the megrim, neither," said Garth, to Tansman's gratitude. "He's talked of nothing but Mr. Tansman's coming this turn of Aleph. Fragile as the old folk are, he'll only be hurried by news of the megrim."

"A dutiful son," said Brother Boris.

Struck by inspiration, Tansman turned again on the seat before Brother Boris could level another arrowed question.

He said, "It must be uncomfortable for you to ride so long back there, Brother Boris. May I offer an exchange of place?"

The offer was instantly taken with a "Bless you, my son." In making the change to the back, Tansman let his hat be

caught by the wind. It fell to the road and rolled. Tansman scrambled after it, the little dog rising and barking at him.

By the time he caught up to the wagon again, Brother Boris was firmly established on his seat beside Old Garth. And he, Tansman hoped, was firmly established as a hound-driven cony with pretensions. Let him be laughed at by these ignorant mortal men. He was safer that way, and he knew who he was.

He still had to ride facing Brother Alva in the back of the wagon, Brother Asmodeus, but whatever Brother Alva saw with his penetrating eyes he was bound to keep to himself. It was not comfortable to turn on the seat and speak, as Tansman knew, and Brother Boris learned. So on they rode to Delera, as they were, and Tansman leaned against his bag—not Brother Boris' pack—and lived with the rising cold.

It was well after dark when they reached Delera. The road came down a steep grade to the town. Halfway down, at a bend, another road led back up the hill at an angle. There the monastery stood at the crest, a great bulk looming in the uncertain light of the full moons that shone through the breaking clouds.

Brother Boris said, "We thank you for the ride."

"Our honor, Questryman," Garth said.

Brother Alva lifted his dog down, and then his bag and Brother Boris' pack. He looked up the road to the monastery and then to the road behind them. And stood waiting.

"I may be down to see you soon," Brother Boris said. "I must see to the state of faith in Delera and a beginning is a beginning. What is it that your uncle sells?"

Tansman said, "Sundries. But I am no clerk."

Garth threw off the brake and lifted the reins.

"What are you, Mr. Tansman?" asked Brother Boris.

But the wagon was in motion then, and Tansman was spared the explanation of chromoplasts. He doubted that Brother Boris would have understood.

2. THE POSSIBILITY OF NEW COVENANTS

The town of Delera was dark, and Tansman feared for a moment that the plague had outstepped them and silenced the town. It was a strange sort of fear, not of plague or the

pains of death, but a child's fear of the unknowns that dwell in blackness. The planet of Zebulon and the town of Delera were places of night. There was even a curious sense of relief in Tansman's fear—if the megrim had struck like wild lightning, leaving death and silence behind, he wouldn't have to play this game anymore. He could go home. It was an attractive thought.

But Garth seemed untroubled and the relief and the silence were broken by a street dog. It raced out of the night and fell in beside them, barking and playing tag with the horses' hooves. Then the town became another place, merely sleeping.

Old Garth pulled into an alley between two adobe piles and the dog fell away, self-satisfied. Then Tansman could see lights on both lefthand and right, invisible from the street.

Garth reined the horses by a door on the left. It opened and there was a figure in the doorway holding a lamp.

"Aye, Mr. Rilke," Garth said. "Here we are and lucky to be here. There's megrim in North Hill. Hop on down. I'll see to the horses and wagon."

"Philip, my boy!" said the man in the doorway. He had a pointed chin and long wispy hair. His face was pale in the lamp glow.

Tansman threw his bag down and jumped after it. Under Garth's eye he said, "Uncle!" with all the appearance of enthusiasm he could muster. His travel-befuddled legs were unsteady under him.

"It's good to see you," he said, improvising. Then Garth and the wagon rattled on toward the stables in the back.

"I take it you're Rilke," he said then in considerably less friendly tones. "You don't look that much like your pictures."

The man in the pictures was barely more than his age and looked like anybody. This man was older and didn't look like anybody—he looked like a Zebulonite.

"Save it for inside," Rilke said tiredly. "People live in the next house. Unless you want to give them a life history."

Rilke closed the door behind them and led the way inside. A curtain separated the living quarters from the store at the front of the building and Tansman got only a glimpse of darkness and an impression of things hanging—sundries. They passed on into the kitchen.

"I imagine you're hungry," Rilke said. "I don't suppose you know how to cook. Garth will come in and do for you while

I'm gone. I've prepared him. I told him you were a society boy and don't know how to wipe your behind."

His tone was short and sharp and he didn't look at Tansman. He crossed to a hanging kettle over an open hearth fire and gave it a stir.

Tansman said, "I expected you in North Hill. I should have been warned that you weren't coming."

Rilke turned. "I didn't feel up to it, sonny. And you're here just as soon as if I'd made the trip."

He didn't look well. He looked tired and sick. His hair was sparse and had only a tenuous connection to his head. His skin was papery.

That was the price of fourteen years on Zebulon. It turned you into a sick old mortal man. No one would have thought Rilke and Tansman of an age. Tansman was young—youngish. And Rilke had to be his uncle. Never a brother or a cousin. Tansman hadn't understood the reason for their nominal relationship before.

He set his bag on the table and opened it, found a bottle made of glass and threw it to Rilke, not caring particularly whether or not he managed to catch it. He managed to catch it.

Tansman said, "You had a Questryman resting his back against that half the distance from North Hill. If Old Garth hadn't come to my aid a couple of times, I would have had real trouble with his questions. Does Garth know about you?"

Rilke drank from the bottle, closed his eyes, and then took a weak step to a chair. After a moment he looked up and said, "What was a Questryman doing in the wagon? What did he pump out of you?"

Tansman rose and walked to the kettle and gave it a stir. Then he looked around for a plate. He felt an obscure joy. He didn't like Rilke and his air of moral superiority. If they were on the Ship, where opinion knew Rilke and his kind for sentimental fools, Rilke would never have dared to take this tone. Tansman was a scientist, a useful man, a credit to *Dau-delin*. Here on Zebulon, Rilke felt free to exercise his contempt. Well, let him. Tansman knew who he was and he knew who Rilke was. He didn't mind finding Rilke sick—that was justice. And if he knew the answers to Rilke's questions, he was ready to let Rilke sit and whistle until he was ready to give them.

He said, "What do you have to drink?"

Rilke indicated a pot. Tansman lifted the lid and sniffed.

"Is that what you ruined your liver with? What else do you have?"

"Water."

"All right, I'll have water. You know, I'm not one of your people. I'm not part of this Group of yours."

"I know," Rilke said, the hostile note in his voice plainly evident.

"I agreed to help Nancy Poate. I'm already sorry, but I agreed and I'll do it. I'll sit in your chair for two months, and I'll do my best to see that you aren't discovered when the Questryman comes down here and checks over this store. But I don't like you any better than you like me. I'll thank you for a little civility. And I'll thank you for a plate."

Rilke handed Tansman a plate.

"Thank you," Tansman said. He began to serve himself stew.

Rilke pointed a finger at his back and said angrily, "I know you, too. I've heard all about you. You're an ice skater. You never did anything real in your life. You skim along on the surface of things. I don't thank Nancy Poate for sending you. I mean to tell her so."

"Tell her so, and be damned. If you were more persuasive and less meddlesome, maybe you could attract someone more to your taste than I seem to be. As it is, it seems that you are going to have to make do with me."

Tansman sat down at the table with his stew. Rilke looked at him fiercely and Tansman looked steadily back. At last, Rilke sighed and dropped his eyes.

"Water," said Tansman. "And a fork."

"You don't understand, do you?" said Rilke. But he rose and drew Tansman water and found him a fork. "Tell me about the Questryman."

"Garth picked him up at the first crossroad outside of North Hill. He said that he means to investigate the state of faith in Delera, including this store."

"There's little enough to worry about," Rilke said. "All of our books have been checked by the Questry and given an overmark. The rest of the stock is innocuous."

"He discounts me in any case," said Tansman. "He believes me to be a society boy who doesn't know how to wipe my behind. It's the other one that Garth was afraid of, the one Brother Boris was escorting to the monastery. Brother As-

modeus. If he hadn't been under an interdict of silence, I believe Garth would have run from him."

"Alva Abarbanel? Here?"

Tansman nodded. "That was his name."

Rilke buried his face in his hands and began to cry, suddenly, loudly, shockingly. Tansman was so taken aback at this fall into weakness and defeat that he almost ceased to eat. He took another bite. But Rilke continued to cry, shoulders heaving, so at last Tansman dropped his fork. The stew was not so good anyway.

"What is it, Rilke? What in hell is it?"

Rilke lifted his head and shook it. "He shouldn't have written the book. *The Possibility of New Covenants*. I told him not to. He defended the Sons of Prometheus. And now he's under interdict."

"You know this man? This Zebulonite?"

"He was our best hope. He is a man of intellect and honor and he followed his mind to conclusions that other men will not dare. He said that new Godly Covenants were possible, that purity and the Ships were not a contradiction in terms. If he had kept his silence, he might someday have led Zebulon into a better state of understanding of the Ships. We were in correspondence."

"Did you tell him who you were?"

"He knows what I am—a liberal, truth-seeking man. And that is all. But what are we to do now? I must talk to Nancy. Oh, God! All these years. I'm so tired."

Then Rilke raised his head and wiped his eyes. "And you must be tired, too. Let me show you the way upstairs." He blew his nose to regain his composure and dignity.

Rilke picked up Tansman's empty plate and set it on the sideboard. "There's so much to show you before I leave tomorrow. You'll need a good night's sleep. You won't be able to ask anything of Garth. He knows nothing. He's worked for me for thirteen years, but if he thought I was from a Ship, he would be off to the monastery in no time to fetch the Questryman."

"If you can't trust him, why don't you get rid of him and find somebody you can trust?" Tansman asked.

Rilke shook his head again. "You really don't understand, do you? 'Old Garth' is the reason I do what I do. He's had a life five times as hard as I have, and he'll be dead a good sight sooner. He's five years younger than I am."

"You must be joking!"

"Because he's younger than you, too? He is. Things need to be evened, and I mean to spend my life trying to see that they are. Even though I despair. Come along now."

As Rilke led Tansman up the stairs, Garth came in through the door from the alley, dusting his hands.

"Well, lad," he said. "All squared away?"

Tansman stopped with a foot on the stair and looked at him, stared as though he could pierce the mask of monkey wrinkles and find beneath a man as young as himself. After a moment he said, "Yes, thank you."

Rilke said, "There's stew waiting in the kitchen."

"Ah, thankee."

The bed in the spare room was hard. The room was bare and close. It was the farthest that Tansman had ever been away from home and he slept badly. He dreamed, something he never did in his safe bed in the Ship, something he never remembered doing. His dreams were ugly and frightful.

A horse screamed in terror. It plunged in the heat and stink, frantic to be free.

Smoke, acrid smoke, rose in a smothering stinging billow.

It was hot from the fire, but Tansman felt cold, felt alone. Helpless.

He lay head down in the cart of bodies, unable to move. He was not dead. He was not sick. He couldn't be. But he could not protest. He was helpless.

The men in gloves and masks stoking the fire pulled the bodies free and flung them on the pyre. And all he could do was slip closer and closer to their hands. He wanted to protest, but he couldn't. He was alive! It wasn't right. He didn't want to burn. He didn't want to die. Not yet. Not with so much undone, so much left of his life to live.

But he couldn't stop them. There was nothing he could do. And suddenly he recognized the men behind their masks. Brother Boris. Simple Brother Boris, smiling behind his mask and enjoying himself. And Hans Rilke.

"Into the fire," said Rilke. "Into the fire."

And Brother Boris said, "A beginning is a beginning. You take the arms, I'll take the legs."

Tansman wanted to protest. No. No. But they lifted him up and went, "One, two, three."

And then rattling across the town cobbles came a wagon. Garth! Old Garth! Good old Garth!

Just as they threw Tansman up in the air toward the fire, he came rolling past and Tansman landed in the back of the wagon.

"He's too young to die," Garth called. "He's too young. Too young. To die."

"But he'll be the better for it," called Brother Boris.

And Rilke yelled, "Don't trust Garth! Don't trust Garth! Come back, Tansman."

And on the wagon rolled toward the far side of the square. And Garth was laughing.

That was when Tansman woke in the dark, on the hard bed, sweating, trembling, but alive, safe and alive.

Ah, but still on Zebulon.

3. THE SECRET OF THE SHIPS

One week after Rilke's departure to visit his dear old parents, leaving his store in the care of his flighty young nephew down from the city, Brother Boris came out of the monastery and began his examination of the state of the faith in Delera. He did not begin with Tansman. He did not begin with Hans Rilke's store.

Oh, but Tansman did hear all about it. It was his introduction to the town. They came to have a look at the city boy turned clerk and to talk of the progress of Brother Boris through the town as he hunted infection of the mind and infection of the spirit, the better to save Delera from the infection of the body, the megrim. Tansman stood behind his counter and listened.

He heard who was in trouble, and he heard who would be in trouble. He heard what Brother Boris was asking, and he heard what he should have been asking. It was an education in human nature. At first he was shocked by the talebearing, for men would come and confess their confessions and smile and be patted on the back. Only gradually did he realize that what seemed craven self-service and shameless subservience to the superstitions of the Confraternity was really a deep and universal fear of the megrim. The megrim killed half those it struck and left another third witless. Reason enough to welcome Brother Boris and his apprentices.

Tansman sold many copies of the *Colligations of the Con-*

fraternity, fewer but substantial numbers of the *Teachings* and the *Commentaries*, and almost no other books. When he might have been observing the floggings in the town square, he stayed in the store and studied his own copies.

He studied as though he were back in school again. He studied as though he were readying himself for Trial. He despised every moment he had to spend in learning this ignorant nonsense, cramming information into his head that might be useful, might be essential, or might never be asked, knowing that once his examination was over he would forget every bit of it. But he was determined not to fail, for the sake of his neck. He did not want to suffer the fate of the Sons of Prometheus. He had no desire to be "blotted." He didn't even care to be flogged for the health of the town.

Garth didn't study. He was an ignorant old fool and would freely admit it. Ignorance is a privilege of stupid old men who live in stables. He proved his piety as much as it needed proving, by attending the floggings religiously.

Tansman would lie awake in bed on nights when he had bad dreams and think about the questions he thought Brother Boris would ask and the questions that he might ask. And sometimes, when the dreams were bad enough, the questions that he could ask. He wished he had gaiety enough to be blithe and superficial, but he was a hound-driven cony with pretensions and was necessarily stuck with scholarship.

He checked the store a dozen times. He leafed through every book that Rilke had in stock looking for danger. There were encyclopedia distillates and self-help books couched in half-mystical terms. He left those. There were books like *The Secret of the Ships* that purported to tell all and in reality told nothing. They were written by some poor idiot like Rilke to temper prejudice by substituting gray lies for black, as though that were the way to do it. He could picture the well-intentioned firebringer sitting up late night after night, weeks leading into months, to fashion these compromises. But he left them on the shelves.

What Tansman removed were two books by Senior Brother Alva Abarbanel. He did it even though they looked innocent enough, at least to his eye. They said nothing about the Ships or the Sons of Prometheus. They even carried the overmark of a Superior Brother, attesting to their freedom from corruption. But they were theology, and he felt them to be dan-

gerous. He was willing to let Rilke be the one to sell them if Rilke wanted them sold. He wasn't going to do it.

Then he had nothing to do but wait for Brother Boris to come and either pass or fail him. While he waited, he counted his discomforts. You could make a list of them: rain, cold, mud, filth. Strangeness—strangeness is a basic discomfort. A hard bed. Garth's cooking. Bad dreams. Between the bed, the cooking and the dreams, he slept badly. When counting the discomforts ceased to put him back to sleep, he turned to Abarbanel's theology and that served. The motives behind *The Possibility of New Covenants* might be admirable, but the arguments that demonstrated that one might even be from a Ship and be pure were knotted.

Tansman knew how many days he had served on Zebulon and how many more he had remaining. In his spare moments he thought about chromoplasts and the door he would lock himself behind when he was safely home.

It threatened rain on the afternoon that Brother Boris finally came. Tansman knew that Brother Boris was coming—the store had had no business all day. Tansman recognized the meaning of that, but he didn't attempt a last-minute cram. He was either prepared or he wasn't, and there wasn't much that he could do about it now.

It was Garth who pointed out the imminence of rain. Tansman helped Garth wrestle barrels off the porch and inside the store. His hands were tougher now than when he had come. He'd found a certain satisfaction in showing that a city boy with a fancy coat and soft hands could work.

Tansman was tamping down a lid on a pickle barrel when Brother Boris, even more florid than he remembered, stepped up on the end of the porch followed by two young aspirants to the Questry.

"As I promised, Mr. Tansman," he said, "I've come to look at your store."

"My uncle's store, Brother Boris," said Tansman, offering him a respectful salute. "Would you care for a pickle?"

He had tried the pickles himself and found they made him ill, but Garth Buie loved them and would eat three in an afternoon, piercing and pungent though they were.

Brother Boris said, "Thank you."

There was sweat on his forehead though it was a cool afternoon. Pickle in hand, he turned to the younger brothers who followed him.

"Mind," he said. "It is perfectly in order to accept offers of privilege, hospitality and tokens of esteem. You may learn much in this fashion. You simply must be determined that your judgment shall not be affected."

And he bit into the pickle until the juice ran. He closed his eyes at the sharpness of it.

To Tansman he said, "This is Brother David and Brother Emile. I teach them what I know. Brother Emile already lays a very pretty stripe."

They nodded and Brother Emile smiled faintly. Both brothers were very young and aspiring to greater dignity than they could easily carry.

Tansman saluted them. "A pickle, Brother David? Brother Emile?"

Both shook their heads.

Brother Boris finished his pickle and wiped his juicy fingers on his suit. Around the last of his mouthful he said, "Come, let us go inside. We have much to discuss. Time grows short, many are yet to be examined, and already the megrim has struck a black sinner in Delera. We must see to the state of your soul, Mr. Tansman."

Tansman rolled the barrel inside the store on its lower rim, wheeled it across the floor, and slammed it into place beside its fellows. The three brothers followed him inside.

Garth looked up as they entered. He saluted the brothers and made a ducking motion as though he would withdraw.

"No, no. Stay, my son. We may wish to question you, too, Garth. Even the least among us may fall prey to the corruption of disease."

"Would you like to go into the living quarters?" Tansman asked. "It's more comfortable there."

"We can inspect your living quarters later. Indeed, we will. We will begin with the store now. Don't try to direct us, Mr. Tansman. We are quite capable of directing ourselves."

"Your pardon, Brother Boris," Tansman said.

Brother Boris blinked and shook his head as though he were trying to rid himself of mind-flies. He wiped his forehead and looked at the sweat on his fingertips.

"It's dim here," he said. "Let us have light."

Tansman gestured to Old Garth who hurried to light lamps. It didn't seem that dark to Tansman, but he was determined to make no trouble for himself by crossing Brother Boris. He seated himself on his pickle barrel and waited. As

the lights came up, Brother Boris began to circle the store like a hound cruising for scent. Brother David and Brother Emile stood together, watching Brother Boris, watching Tansman.

Brother Boris circled the counters examining merchandise, picking up this and that and then setting it down. At last he stopped in front of Tansman and pointed a finger.

"You haven't attended the floggings in the town square, Mr. Tansman. You have figured in my prayers since I first noted your absence, but you have continued in your failure to appear." He shook his head. "You make me fear for you."

Brother Emile smiled again as though already anticipating another opportunity to practice his lessons. Tansman swallowed, but kept his composure. It was a question that had occurred to him in his hard restless bed, and he had an answer of sorts.

Watching his words, he said, "I am of tender stomach, Brother Boris. It's a fault of my city breeding."

He sat straight, knees together, attempting to offer as little offense as possible. His answer was only a guess, and each word was only an uncertain approximation, spoken in fear and trembling, spoken in the knowledge that it could not be recalled and altered for the better. He stilled one hand with another in his lap.

Into the silence he said, "While others were at the flogging, I remained here, studying the *Colligations*."

He opened his mouth to speak of the superiority of his sort of piety to the other, but then did not dare. Who could know what Brother Boris preferred? So he left his mouth hanging open and then slowly closed it. The silence remained and he sat uncomfortably under Brother Boris' eye. He could not look away at Brother David or Brother Emile or Old Garth hanging the last lamp.

At last Brother Boris said, "I am to believe that *you* are a scholar of the *Colligations*?"

"Oh, aye," said Old Garth. "He's always at his scripture, one good book or the other. Every spare moment."

Tansman felt a rush of gratitude for the ignorant old monkey. It seemed he was always coming to his aid when a proper word was needed with Brother Boris.

Tansman said, "It is nothing I am used to speaking of. There are many in the city who would not understand."

"That is true!" said Brother Boris vehemently. "And the

city will suffer for its corruption and disbelief. Many many will die. The megrim is God's knife to cut down the sinner."

He paused then and sucked in a sudden breath. "Oh," he said. "My head. It spins. Your pickle, your pickle, Mr. Tansman. It does not seem to agree with me." And he wiped more sweat from his forehead.

"Your pardon, Brother Boris," Tansman said. "In the *Teachings*, Elder Osgood says that a rest at the proper moment redoubles the strength for holy work." He rose from the pickle barrel. "May I find you a place to rest?"

Brother Boris waved him away. "The work will not wait. The work will not wait. There are questions yet to be answered. I am told by most reliable communicants of the Confraternity that you have for sale here the works of the heretic Brother Alva Abarbanel. He is confined to a penitent's cell, but all the mistakes of his misbegotten lifetime continue to spread."

"I did not know that he had been declared heretic."

"You were not at the flogging this morning."

"My most grievous fault," said Tansman. "But while it is true that my uncle did have the early writing of Brother Alva for sale, knowing no better and judging the matter, I'm sure, by the Superior Brother's overmark, as soon as I discovered the books, I removed them from sale. You may ask Garth."

But that was an error. Garth might be relied on to volunteer a helpful comment, but he couldn't be asked for one.

He hung his head and said, "The truth is that I do na read so well. I did na know that Mr. Rilke kept the books of Brother Asmodeus for sale. Is it true?"

Brother Boris said, "You continue to surprise me, Mr. Tansman. I would like to meet this uncle of yours. Where are the books he sells?"

Tansman pointed to the shelves at the rear of the store and Brother Boris started to move toward them. Then he caught at a counter suddenly and leaned on it. He turned and beckoned to Brother David and waved him to the books. Brother David hopped to the job. He hurried back through the store and began to look over the books. He pulled out one and then another and replaced them, and then he pulled out a third, looked at it briefly, and hounded back with it to Brother Boris, still leaning on the counter.

Brother Boris took the book and began to glance at it. As he read, his natural redness increased.

"How do you explain *this*?" he cried, his voice rising.

"What is the book?"

Brother Boris held it up. "*The Secret of the Ships*. If you love the Confraternity, why do you peddle this filth? Evil is corrupting. Is profit so important?"

Tansman said, "But the book carries the personal overmark of a senior Brother. I saw that."

"He doesn't know. He doesn't know!" Brother Boris slammed the book to the floor. Then he raised a shaky hand to his forehead. "I see the evil and I know it. But my head—why does it not . . . stop . . . moving?"

He pawed at Brother David with a blind left hand. He banged his forehead with his right, as though he could knock the fog and trouble from his mind. Brother David reached for him, but then Brother Boris' knees gave way and he fell to the floor. Tansman came off his barrel calling for Garth and knelt beside Brother Boris. His forehead was sweaty and cold.

But Brother David stood with Brother Boris' left hand still in his own. The loose white arm of the suit had fallen away. Brother Boris' arm bore the stigmata of the plague. It showed three purple blotches, the sign of corruption. Brother David stood looking at it with horror. He pointed silently, mouth agape, mouth working, and then he dropped the arm, which struck the floor with the damp slap of a dead fish.

"The megrim," he said. "It's the megrim."

He backed away toward his twin, but the other young brother did not wait for him, turning and plunging in panic out the door. Brother David, after one more backward glance at the man who had taught him all he knew about the detection of evil, who now lay motionless on the floor, felled by the megrim, the very mark of evil, hurried after, calling, "Wait! Wait for me, Brother Emile!"

Tansman turned toward Garth. The little old man was half-crouched behind a counter as though he, too, would duck and hide if only he dared, if only he could escape Tansman's eye.

Tansman said, "Give me a hand, Garth. We must get Brother Boris to the wagon and carry him to the monastery."

"Oh, na. Na. Don't make me touch him. Leave him as he lies."

"We can't do that. He is still alive. He may recover if he is given care."

"Na, Mr. Tansman. The megrim is death or an addled

mind. I'm afrighted. I'm old. I don't want to die. Especial I don't want to die of the megrim and go to perdition."

Old Garth continued to stay his safe trembling distance. Tansman could not bring himself to force the little man. Old as Garth was, he was younger than Tansman. He could not blame the man, and he would not cut his few short years shorter.

"Hitch the wagon," he said. "Bring it to the alley door. I'll take him to the monastery myself."

While he was lugging Brother Boris across the floor, heels dragging, and wrestling him out the door and up onto the wagon bed, Tansman was too busy to think. Garth watched him from down the alley, nervously, skittishly, as though ready to run for the sanctuary of the stable to hide under the hay.

It was only when he had Brother Boris's head pillowed on a smelly horse blanket, the first thing that came to hand, and was sitting on the seat of the wagon, holding the reins ready, that Tansman became afraid. Not of the megrim. He had no fear of that. He was safe as no other person in Delera. He was afraid of driving the wagon. He didn't know how.

When he was a boy preparing for Trial, he had learned to ride a horse, though they had always made him nervous, but he had put all that as thoroughly out of mind as he would put the *Colligations* now that he was safely through his examination. He didn't remember. And he had never driven a team of horses. One more ordeal in the series of ordeals that was Zebulon.

He sighed, closed his eyes for a brief moment, wishing, wishing, then opened his eyes and brought the reins down. The horses began to move.

He held them to a slow pace down the alley. He felt the first hint of relief when they turned left onto the street at his guidance. He continued them at a walk through the town, heart pounding, muscles tense. He knew he was tenser than he needed to be, but he could not relax. Every moment was uncertain. It was a different sort of fear, but no less real, no less unsettling than the fear he had felt under the eye of Brother Boris. He was aware of nothing but the wagon, the team, and the road, waiting for one or another to do something strange and unexpected. If there were people to witness his passage and see the body of Brother Boris lying motionless

in the wagon bed, he could give no accounting of them. His attention was narrow.

They passed through the town and up the hill, still at a slow walk. He knew in his mind that it was the same hill down which Garth had driven him so long before because it could be no other, but in daylight instead of dark, from the new direction, and with the experience of these weeks in Delera behind him, it felt a different place. As though in confirmation, the lane to the monastery was not where he expected it, close to town, close to the bottom of the hill, but much much farther. He could see the dark fortress swimming in the heavy clouds overhead, but only at last did he reach the lane and turn in.

When they came to the gates, the great heavy doors were shut. Tansman climbed down from the wagon and tied the horses to a standing metal ring. He looked for a way to signal and saw nothing. The high, bare, black walls stretched away to the right and the left, rising out of the hilltop. And he was alone on the road.

He called and there was no answer. He called again: "Hello, inside! Hey, hello!" But there was no answer.

At last he pounded on the door with the flat of his hand. He alternated with his fist. The sound was heavy and hollow.

At last a slot opened in the door. A pinchcrack. Tansman could not see who was within.

"What do you want?"

"I have with me Brother Boris Zin, the Questryman. He collapsed in town. Open the gate."

"The gates are shut. The gates remain shut. There is megrim in the monastery."

Tansman said, "I fear Brother Boris has the megrim."

"Where are Brother David and Brother Emile?"

"They ran away when Brother Boris fell ill. What do you wish me to do with Brother Boris?"

There was a silence. The slot closed in the door and Tansman waited. Nothing happened. The wind whipped and a spattering of rain began to fall, the rain Garth had promised. And still Tansman waited. At last the pinchcrack opened again.

The voice said, "Take Brother Boris from the wagon and set him by the door. He will be taken inside."

So Tansman lowered the tailgate and climbed into the wagon. When he touched Brother Boris, the friar moved and

said, "I *know* the evil. The Men of the Ships are among us, and they must be found."

But after that he said nothing more as Tansman moved him to the end of the wagon and eased him to the ground. Then Tansman jumped down and closed the tailgate. Finally he took a deep breath, for Brother Boris was a heavy man for all his shortness, and seized him under the arms and set him by the door, as he had been told. Then he untied the horses, unset the brake, and led the horses in a circle. He could not have driven them that tightly. Then he climbed up and started the team back down the hill at a walk.

The last time he looked back he could still see Brother Boris, white suit against the dark wall. The doors were still closed.

The rain set in before he reached town. It drenched him. It turned the road to mud and sent streams crying through the roadside ditches. It was never like this on the Ship. None of it.

With the megrim in Delera, Tansman closed the store. There was no business. Houses were boarded, just like the houses he had seen when he arrived in North Hill. There were those who fled the town, those who believed they knew places of safety. But who was safe if a man like Brother Boris could be stricken?—though there were even whispers about Brother Boris in those days before people stopped talking to one another.

And a pyre was laid in the town square. First logs, then bodies. And the smell rose above the town, saturating the town, penetrating everywhere, reaching into even the most tightly closed room. It was a constant reminder of the transience of life and the permanence of death. At least for mortal Colonists.

It was not Tansman's problem. There was nothing he could do about the megrim short of breaking out Rilke's medical kit. That would reveal him as a shippeen. That would ruin all of Rilke's slow and careful work. As the number of dead mounted in the town and the bonfire burned, he wondered if revelation and ruination might not be better than this.

But it wasn't his job. His job was to safeguard Rilke's secret. So he closed himself in his room and read the works of the heretic Brother Alva Abarbanel and did his best to

sleep. His bad dreams continued. Zebulon, his nightmare, continued. And there was no end to it.

One of the first nights, when he was sitting in his room listening to the one noise of the night, the neighborhood problem dog yelping and skittering through the alley below, there was a knock on his door. It was Old Garth.

Garth was nervous and diffident. Very nervous.

He said, "You won't be wanting me tomorrow, will ye, Mr. Tansman?"

He didn't say "boy" or "lad" much anymore. He said "Mr. Tansman."

Tansman had closed the store by then. He had nothing for Garth to do. There was nothing he wanted for the old man but survival.

He said, "No, I won't. Do you want to leave town until the megrim is past?"

Garth shook his head. "May I borry the wagon and team? They need someone to haul for the fire. I said I'd do. I know it was presuming. May I? Is it all right?"

"Garth, no!" said Tansman. "You don't have to do it."

Garth held out his hand, rough-backed and corded. It was trembling.

"Aye, I'm scared. I don't deny it. But it has to be done. I watched ye the other day with Brother Boris. Ye were scared, but ye went ahead. It's the same for me now."

Tansman shook his head. How could he tell Garth of what he had really been frightened? There was no way, none short of admitting who he was, what he was. He couldn't do that. The best he could do was...

He said, as firmly as he could, "I'll deny you the wagon, Garth. This is a job I should do."

"I thought ye might say that. Na, lad, do na stay me. I've thought about this and me mind is determined. Somebody has to do the job, and when they asked me, I said I would. I do na want to die. But better me who's had me life than somebody young who has his life yet to live. I'll fight ye, boy, but I'll na give in."

They argued, and in the end it was Tansman who gave in. He could do nothing else. He had no argument to counter with and win except the truth, and he could not speak the truth. So finally Tansman gave Garth his permission to use the wagon and team, and in the morning Garth began his

work of finding and collecting bodies and carrying them to the fire.

Tansman felt ashamed.

4. ALL-PURPOSE HOUSEHOLD HINTS AND HOME REMEDIES

Tansman awoke suddenly from a doze, unsure, and disoriented. For a moment he did not know if he were truly awake or whether this was another dream. A single oil lamp lit the room. A book, *All-Purpose Household Hints and Home Remedies*, lay open in his lap. It allowed no cure for the megrim.

Then he heard a noise outside in the alley again. He closed the book and set it aside. He picked up the lamp from the table and went downstairs. The air was cool outside.

The horses, well-trained, stood quietly in their traces, shaking a head and blowing, lifting a hoof and setting it down *clack* on the brick. Garth barely maintained his seat. The lines were slack in his hand, his eyes were shut, and he weaved on the wagon box. There were yellow streaks of vomit on his legs and between his feet.

He opened his eyes blearily at the light and said with care, "I'm sick, Mr. Tansman." Then he fell forward out of the wagon.

Tansman untangled him from the lines. There was no question of taking him to the stable. He hauled him inside. He was lighter than Brother Boris, this little monkey man. Tansman carried him upstairs, undressed him, and put the old man in his own hard bed. Garth was marked by the megrim.

Then he went outside again and led the horses and trailing wagon to the stable. He unhitched the horses. He knew nothing of the gear so he left it in a careless heap, but he was able to remember how to rub horses down. The motions were automatic—his muscles remembered what his mind had forgotten.

His mind was on other things. What was he going to do? What did he owe Garth? This wasn't the first time he had asked himself these questions. This moment had been foreseeable. This moment had been foreseen. But only now was an answer required of him.

Tansman told himself that still he did not know what he was going to do. But when he was finished with the horses, he walked slowly back up the alley, went upstairs to Rilke's room, and opened the heavy chest. He took out Rilke's medical kit. He looked at the kit, and then he closed the chest and left the room with the kit.

His mind said that it had no idea what he was doing, but his muscles knew. He was going to save Garth if Garth could be saved.

Tansman had led a quiet life, an isolated life. He had never truly liked another human being before, but in his heart he knew that he liked Old Garth Buie, this simple, ignorant old mortal.

In all his life he had never done another man damage. He had added some small knowledge to the human store, even added some years to the human lifetime. His lifetime, his sort of human.

But to know the quality of life on Zebulon, short and mean, and to know that in *Daudelin* there was an easier, simpler life, and then to choose the suspension of pain in the Ship, was to be guilty. He was guilty. He was a man of the Ships, and he would not give up *Daudelin* for Zebulon. But he would temper that guilt in one small way. He would save the life of Garth Buie.

Garth's little gnarled body thrashed uneasily under the blankets Tansman had covered him with and brought Tansman awake in his chair. The lamp was low as he had left it. He turned it up and carried it close to the bed.

Garth was mumbling and moaning to himself. Tansman reached over to touch his forehead. It was feverish, as before, but possibly a bit cooler. Tansman fetched broth that he had been simmering over the fire and spooned it down Garth's throat. Garth swallowed, but his eyes did not open.

Then it was afternoon. Tansman kept the windows covered, and the light was just a glow along the walls. It was time to give Garth another injection. As Tansman bent over, Garth's eyes rolled open and looked blankly at Tansman. Tansman slid Garth's sleeve up, placed the blunt tip against Garth's arm as the eyes flickered, held the less strongly blotched arm steady, and pressed the button. Then he turned away and replaced the injector in his little medical kit. When he looked again at Garth, the wiry old man was resting easily, his eyes closed again. Tansman sighed—his tense muscles

ached. He took soup for himself, made with the advice of *All-Purpose Household Hints and Home Remedies*. The book kept figuring in what he dreamed.

Tansman sat watching Garth in the last orange of the daylight. He nodded in his chair and fell asleep. Strange shapes lumbered through his mind. He was threatened, questioned and pursued. And with the light dimming in the room he looked to see Garth gone from the bed, dressed and vanished.

He went out to the patio roof of the warehouse. There was a new film of wetness underfoot. The air was damp and heavy and the smell of the fire was part of the dampness and weight. It was a sticky elastic that couldn't be peeled free.

Tansman went down the uncertain stairs to the alley, hand on the railing, one at a time. When he reached the bottom, he wiped that hand dry on his pants and looked both ways. One way was the closed courtyard and stables, the other the street. Light moon gleam on unmortared brick, wet slick.

It was a strange silent uncertain moment. The alley was a lean foggy echo, dim, damp, and empty. He turned from the closed courtyard and walked slowly up the alley toward the street.

There was a sudden explosion of movement by the wall. It ducked into the building across the alley. Tansman followed, moving easily. There was no light there as there usually was. Tansman went up the stairs.

He heard Garth's voice but couldn't make out the words. He found the latch at the top of the stairs.

Garth said, "A shippeen, to be sure! He follows me! You must give me help. You know me—old Garth Buie. I was the one that went up in the balloon. Save me soul and body from perdition!"

The room was dark. Tansman could see that Garth was addressing a circle of faces. Garth looked around as he came in and gave a shudder of horror. He shrank away.

"But it's me," Mr. Tansman said.

"It's him! It's him! He's a shippeen! Mr. Tansman is a shippeen!"

Tansman put out a hand but Garth could not be mollified with a gesture. He lifted a heavy, hand-pegged wooden chair as old as Zebulon and brought it over the shoulders of Tansman. It was only at that moment when the chair crashed into his shoulders, whipped his neck, and sent him down with

consciousness draining that Tansman was sure this was a waking nightmare and not another dream. It was so hard to tell the difference sometimes.

His head ached. His neck was wrenched. His back ached. He had tensed just before the blow when he realized that he was going to be struck. Strangely, he knew he was awake and not asleep, but he was disconcertingly unaware of where he was or how he had gotten here. He could recognize reality now if only he could find it somewhere.

The circle of faces stared at him. From his knees he looked back from face to face. All were dead. Rotting dead. Dead and unfound.

He went down the stairs gaining greater sense of self with each step until in the alley again he had snatched the dream back from the place where dreams unrecalled are stored. He knew. He thought he knew.

Garth was at the corner when he reached the alley. He turned left out of sight. Tansman tried to run and skidded dangerously on the cobbles. An ankle became tender for a step or two. When he got to the street, he called, "Garth, Garth. Come back. I won't hurt you."

But Garth was running, clear now in the moonlight. He was screaming, "The shippeen! Help, save me!"

No windows opened. There was no response to his cry. If there were witnesses, they were not telling. Garth, the old man, fled through the town. Tansman ran after him.

Neither man ran well. When Garth reached the end of the paving, he left the road and began striking out directly up the hill. The road switched back on its way up the hill to the monastery. Garth scrambled up the hillside.

Tansman, following, saw there was a footpath. In spite of being struck by the chair he was able to follow without scrambling. That and the fact that Tansman was able to continue at all after being struck with the chair were testimony of Garth Buie's weakness.

Tansman stumbled and lost sight of Garth. He followed the path as best he could up the slope in the uncertain moonlight.

He stopped at one point and said, hoping to be heard, "Look, Garth. Come back. I really mean you no harm."

Then he took a long shuddering breath of cool black air, almost free of the town stink, and stopped stark and listened. He heard nothing. He moved on, following the path.

He was struck again, this time by no chair, but by the full wiry weight of a small body. Tansman went off the edge of the path. Garth was on his shoulders, and he felt a small sharp hurt in his side, and before he could be curious about it, it hurt much more than that. He knew he had been stabbed.

Garth said anxiously, "And you a *shippeen*, Mr. Tansman. You a shippeen."

Tansman fell on his side and back and rolled with the slope. Garth landed astride him and was thrown as Tansman rolled. They rose and Tansman would have spoken, but he thought better of saying, "I'm really all right." He didn't think that Garth would be convinced. This was serious. He couldn't let Garth reach the monastery.

Tansman launched himself forward and Garth protected his purity against this monster with his broad knife blade. The knife sliced Tansman's arm, but Tansman's superior weight brought Garth down. Tansman used his knee to knock Garth's breath away. He then shifted it to nail Garth's knife hand and wrested the knife away.

Garth tried to struggle free, heaving his body under Tansman's weight, trying to free his pinned wrist, but lacking the strength. Tansman was stable, easily controlling Garth, but breathing hard. Then Tansman stepped off, rose and let Garth rise.

"I'm really all right," he said now. "Please, Garth. Come back with me."

Garth was indomitable. He said, "The Brothers will blot you, Mr. Tansman." And he bolted up the hill.

Tansman ran after Garth and jammed the knife into him to make him stop running to the monastery. It wasn't right. Garth should have been grateful.

Garth gave a cry and fell dead.

Tansman rolled away and came to his feet. He threw the knife as far away as he could. He was bleeding and a collection of bangs and bruises. He was sick and unsteady and he threw up, the taste hot and sour in his mouth. And retched again, and then again.

Then at last he turned and looked for Garth. Garth was not there. Fear rose again in Tansman.

Limping, he came on Garth's body on the path. Garth was crawling. Tansman seized him by the leg, Garth cocked his other leg and kicked Tansman in the face. Tansman let go and Garth continued to crawl up the hillside.

Tansman pried a muddy rock out of the hillside. It was just larger than his hand. He crawled after Garth, grabbed and held him with one hand and hit him in the head with the rock. He did it several times and the rock was bloody.

He threw the rock away and rolled the body over. Garth was dead. His cheek was broken and his left eye hung loose from its socket.

Tansman wept. It was the first time since he had passed Trial and become an adult citizen of *Daudelin* almost forty years before that he had cried. He cried for himself and his innocence. He had murdered a man and knew it.

At last Tansman put the body on his shoulders and started down the footpath. He found it hard going, moved slowly, and stumbled frequently. He weaved as he walked. Twice he set the body down in the mud while he caught his breath and rested his aching shoulders.

The street was empty. He could see the glow of the fire, the muted smolder. The shutters remained closed. The street was his. The dog came shooting out from between two houses to sniff and snap, but he paid it no attention, continued to plod on, and finally it fell away and left him alone again.

He was walking in a trance, forcing himself to finish what he had begun, mind in a state of suspension. He stopped and put the body down while he rested. His right arm was caked with blood, and the wound in his side made him gasp when he put Garth down.

Garth grunted in pain. His pain was so intense that his face screwed but the noise was only half-uttered. The worst of it was the silent part. His hand groped at his face and his broken eye.

Tansman made an inarticulate cry. This was by far the worst nightmare that he had on Zebulon. He was no longer afraid, so that what he did cost him more. Tears of pain and pity in his eyes, knowing what he did and acting deliberately, wanting to be sure, he killed Garth for the third time. He put his hands around Garth's neck and squeezed until he was certain that Garth was truly dead. The neck gave way under his hands and then he continued to hold it too long until he was sure, sure beyond any doubt that Garth was truly dead.

Garth! Garth! Old mortal peasant fool. Colonist. Mudeater. Fellow victim.

He ignored the overpowering reek of singed hair and

burned flesh. He added wood from the pile that stood at hand until the fire blazed. Then he added Garth's belated body.

He stood as it burned and watched. He tried to think, tried to phrase things right in his mind, but he could not. He could not see to the bottom of his nightmare. All that he knew was that it existed and that it continued.

5. THE COMMENTARIES

The plague swept over Delera, washed back through, and was gone. People returned to town and unboarded their houses. They counted noses and restored life. When other stores reopened, Tansman reopened, too.

Tansman's first reaction to killing Garth was to wait. But no one called on him to chat about strange cries in the street during the height of the megrim, so he was forced to think about what he had done. He wasn't used to that. He was used to staying in his rooms and playing with chromoplasts. But now he had to think about himself.

He was a bewildered child. He couldn't make sense of it. He felt he was wrong, but he didn't think he was wrong, and he couldn't reconcile the difference.

He had done exactly what he had been left on Zebulon to do—he had kept the Prometheans a secret. He had saved them embarrassment by keeping their modest good works modestly unacknowledged. But he could not find any satisfaction in it.

He did not think he was guilty. He had tried to save Garth's life, and Garth had hit him with a chair and then stabbed him. And would have done worse.

But he did not feel justified, either. Strange thoughts came welling up as possibilities: He had killed Garth to get the old man to take him *seriously*. He had killed Garth to show him that he had the power to do it. He had killed Garth to stop the nightmare.

All he was certain of was that he was a child, and the old man had been younger than he. He was a child. He didn't know what would become of him, and he didn't know yet what he would become.

Young Brother Emile came down with an order for supplies from the monastery. Tansman remembered his face but

could not remember either his name or Brother David's. Tansman was deep in his labyrinth and there were names in other lost corridors that he could not easily locate.

Brother Emile helped him by supplying the names. Brother Emile was much cheerier than he had been in company with Brother Boris. He had been raised on a farm and he hitched the wagon for the city boy. They drove the supplies up to the monastery.

Tansman asked about Brother Boris.

Brother Emile said, "Oh, he's not so well, I'm afraid. He lives but I think he will spend his life in corners. His mind was blurred by the megrim. And lucky for me, too. I have a vocation. I like the monastery. But I haven't found my spot yet. If it hadn't been for the megrim, I would have joined the Questry, but now I know it's not me. There's too much chance of becoming contaminated. Brother Boris was a strong and willful man, and see what happened to even him. I'll guard my purity, I think."

Tansman asked about Brother David—"The other one, your friend."

Brother Emile said, "Oh, Brother David does not have a vocation. He did not come back to the monastery. He was not as good at flogging as I was, either. I don't know why they chose to give him a chance at the Questry."

When they rolled within the monastery, the gates standing wide open, Tansman saw Senior Brother Alva Abarbanel at walk in the courtyard. He asked about Brother Alva.

Brother Emile said, "He is not declared heretic yet. Brother Boris was saying many strange things that last day. It has only been recommended that Brother Alva be found a heretic. It will take months or a year to settle it. Brother Alva has been a true brother during the megrim. I wonder when the Master will return him to his cell?"

"Is he still under his interdict of silence?"

"Oh, yes. He utters no word to any Confrere."

Tansman wanted to tell someone of what he had done, but who on Zebulon would understand what he did not understand himself? Could he tell Brother Alva? Brother Alva with the fathoming eyes, Brother Alva the heretic, Brother Alva the silent?

He found Brother Alva walking with his dog. He was alone in a corner of the garden looking at a moon over the high massive wall. There was always a moon, even in daylight.

The little dog made no sound as he approached and then, when Tansman spoke, startling Brother Alva, lowered its head and made an uncertain sound between a growl and a whine.

Tansman said, "You remember me. My name is Philip Tansman. Brother Alva, I am from the Ship *Daudelin*. Will you listen to me?"

Brother Alva nodded and quieted the dog with his hand. And he spoke, "Are you an apparition? I command you, announce it if you are."

"I am a shippeen."

"I am forbidden to speak to Confreres, but not to apparitions or shippeens. But if you are an apparition, the product of my pride, my own dearest wish fulfilled, I would rather that you left. Vanish!"

"No," said Tansman. "I'm no apparition. I am from *Daudelin*, the Ship that brought you all here to Zebulon."

Brother Alva said, "I know that. I know that." His voice was full and rich, though not low. He spoke quietly, but almost joyously. His face celebrated.

He said, "I have waited these many years to see you. You are so late. I thought you would be sooner. To think that it should be now. To think that it should be here. Will you answer my questions? There is so much I need to know of you."

Tansman said, "Please, brother. Will you listen to me?"

Brother Alva said, "Forgive my impatience. Of course I will listen. But give me hope."

"I will talk, and then I want you to tell me something."

"Ah, a riddle."

"I killed a Zebulonite. The old man, Garth Buie. I nursed him when he was sick of the megrim and I saved his life, and he discovered I was from a Ship. He hit me with a chair and he stabbed me and then he would have come here to report me to the brothers. He said he would see me blotted. And I killed him with his knife...and a rock...and..." Tansman looked at his hands. "And I put his body on the fire in the square. I wanted to help him and I killed him. Tell me what I should have done."

"You ask me?"

Tansman nodded. "I want to do what is right, but I don't know what it is. Everything is mixed in my mind and I can't sort it out."

Brother Alva, taut, caught in this moment, said, "Tell me, then, Man of the Ships, do you mean us good, or do you mean us ill?"

"I don't know," Tansman said. "I don't know. Good! No, I don't know. How can you know how things will turn out? I want to become whole, that's all I know. And I'm split in half."

"But you can never know," Brother Alva said. "All that a man can do is make a Covenant and live by it and live through it. Have you made a Covenant? You can, you know. Yes, you can."

Tansman shook his head. The last answer to his dilemma was to become a Zebulonite and join the Confraternity. Even a man like Brother Alva was diminished by the Confraternity. Or did Brother Alva mean that? Tansman had the sudden surging hope that he meant more.

"Make one! Make your own Covenant!" Brother Alva spoke insistently, but his tone was not hectoring or critical or self-righteous. It was open and joyful. He was calling Tansman to transcendence. It was as though Tansman's hesitant and qualified endorsement of good had been a fulfillment of all that Brother Alva had dreamed and lifted him to a final height. And now Brother Alva was turning and beckoning to Tansman, not because Tansman deserved it, not for any reason, but because it was what was done from that height. It was the nature of that height.

Brother Alva said, "Even you can make a Covenant."

"With whom?" Tansman asked in agony. "How? How?"

Brother Alva said, "You are the only man who can answer that. It may take your lifetime to make, but it is the only thing your lifetime is for."

When Rilke returned, looking more like a cousin than an uncle, he asked Tansman where Garth was. It was something that Tansman could only admit once, and he had done that.

He said, "He died of the megrim."

He also said, "I learned one thing while I was here. You do what you are doing for yourself. Not for them."

"You're wrong. You don't understand at all," Rilke said. "I'm not selfish."

Tansman wasn't sure he hadn't been mistaken. He had said what he meant to say, and meant to say it, but now he was no longer sure of the meaning of what he had said.

"Why are you here?" asked Tansman.

"Not for me. For them. To end ignorance on Zebulon. To bring Zebulon up to our standard. To save good men like Brother Alva Abarbanel. To make this planet a place where Ship people can walk openly. I don't expect it all to happen in my lifetime. And I don't expect to be noticed or given credit. It's enough to be part of it."

"Would you kill to keep what you do a secret?"

"Yes, I would," Rilke said. "I've done it."

"Was that for them?"

"It wasn't for me. It was for the sake of others."

"It's all a waste," Tansman said. "You hurt people for no reason!"

He burst into tears. It was the difference between herding people like sheep and beckoning from a height that made him cry.

Rilke said, "Tansman, you're still a fool."

Tansman went back to the Ship. He tried to forget Zebulon, Rilke, Brother Boris, Garth, and Brother Alva, but they all kept coming back into his mind and talking to him. He buried himself in his room and locked himself in his work, but his room was a cell and his work was suffocating. He felt numb. He only existed.

After a year he went to Nancy Poate and asked to be sent back to Zebulon. He threw up first. The only place he could imagine himself never killing again was on the Ship. If he went to Zebulon, he might kill, and the thought made him sick. It had kept him away for a year. At first he thought he might ask to be sent to another Colony, but he couldn't be sure he wouldn't kill there, either. If he wanted to live, to be alive, he had to leave the Ship and accept the possibility that he might kill.

He did know that he needed to make a Covenant. He wanted to make a Covenant. He could not make one on the Ship. The one place he was sure he could begin to look for one was Zebulon.

So he went back to Zebulon. By the time he came again, Senior Brother Alva Abarbanel, loyal to his own Covenant, had refused his last chance to recant, repent, and retract, and been blotted by his brothers.

THE UGLY LITTLE BOY by Isaac Asimov

We all know what it means to have a strong attachment for another individual. In the romances, women grow starry-eyed over tall, handsome men with muscles. The men, in turn, walk on clouds in response to beautiful women with gorgeous figures. Well, who wouldn't? But we all know better, for that's the least of it. Affection is blind and will beat and storm, just as fiercely, over the unlikeliest object—an old horse, a kitten, an old doll. Even an ugly little boy. However unlikely the object, it can consume one to the point where anything will be given up, anything abandoned, rather than the thing one feels affection for. —All for LOVE.

—Isaac Asimov



THE UGLY LITTLE BOY

by Isaac Asimov

Edith Fellowes smoothed her working smock as she always did before opening the elaborately locked door and stepping across the invisible dividing line between the *is* and the *is not*. She carried her notebook and her pen although she no longer took notes except when she felt the absolute need for some report.

This time she also carried a suitcase. ("Games for the boy," she had said, smiling, to the guard—who had long since stoppped even thinking of questioning her and who waved her on.)

And, as always, the ugly little boy knew that she had entered and came running to her, crying, "Miss Fellowes—Miss Fellowes—" in his soft, slurring way.

"Timmie," she said, and passed her hand over the shaggy, brown hair on his misshapen little head. "What's wrong?"

He said, "Will Jerry be back to play again? I'm sorry about what happened."

"Never mind that now, Timmie. Is that why you've been crying?"

He looked away. "Not just about that, Miss Fellowes. I dreamed again."

"The same dream?" Miss Fellowes' lips set. Of course, the Jerry affair would bring back the dream.

He nodded. His too large teeth showed as he tried to smile and the lips of his forward-thrusting mouth stretched wide.

"When will I be big enough to go out there, Miss Fellowes?"

"Soon," she said softly, feeling her heart break. "Soon."

Miss Fellowes let him take her hand and enjoyed the warm touch of the thick dry skin of his palm. He led her through the three rooms that made up the whole of Stasis Section One—comfortable enough, yes, but an eternal prison for the ugly little boy all the seven (was it seven?) years of his life.

He led her to the one window, looking out onto a scrubby woodland section of the world of *is* (now hidden by night), where a fence and painted instructions allowed no men to wander without permission.

He pressed his nose against the window. "Out there, Miss Fellowes?"

"Better places. Nicer places," she said sadly as she looked at his poor little imprisoned face outlined in profile against the window. The forehead retreated flatly and his hair lay down in tufts upon it. The back of his skull bulged and seemed to make the head overheavy so that it sagged and bent forward, forcing the whole body into a stoop. Already, bony ridges were beginning to bulge the skin above his eyes. His wide mouth thrust forward more prominently than did his wide and flattened nose and he had no chin to speak of, only a jawbone that curved smoothly down and back. He was small for his years and his stumpy legs were bowed.

He was a very ugly little boy and Edith Fellowes loved him dearly.

Her own face was behind his line of vision, so she allowed her lips the luxury of a tremor.

They would *not* kill him. She would do anything to prevent it. Anything. She opened the suitcase and began taking out the clothes it contained.

Edith Fellowes had crossed the threshold of Stasis, Inc. for the first time just a little over three years before. She hadn't, at that time, the slightest idea as to what Stasis meant or what the place did. No one did then, except those who worked there. In fact, it was only the day after she arrived that the news broke upon the world.

At the time, it was just that they had advertised for a woman with knowledge of physiology, experience with clinical chemistry, and a love for children. Edith Fellowes had been a nurse in a maternity ward and believed she fulfilled those qualifications.

Gerald Hoskins, whose name plate on the desk included a Ph.D. after the name, scratched his cheek with his thumb and looked at her steadily.

Miss Fellowes automatically stiffened and felt her face (with its slightly asymmetric nose and its a-trifle-too-heavy eyebrows) twitch.

He's no dreamboat himself, she thought resentfully. He's getting fat and bald and he's got a sullen mouth.—But the salary mentioned had been considerably higher than she had expected, so she waited.

Hoskins said, "Now do you really love children?"

"I wouldn't say I did if I didn't."

"Or do you just love pretty children? Nice chubby children with cute little button-noses and gurgly ways?"

Miss Fellowes said, "Children are children, Dr. Hoskins, and the ones that aren't pretty are just the ones who may happen to need help most."

"Then suppose we take you on—"

"You mean you're offering me the job now?"

He smiled briefly, and for a moment, his broad face had an absentminded charm about it. He said, "I make quick decisions. So far the offer is tentative, however. I may make as quick a decision to let you go. Are you ready to take the chance?"

Miss Fellowes clutched at her purse and calculated just as swiftly as she could, then ignored calculations and followed impulse. "All right."

"Fine. We're going to form the Stasis tonight and I think you had better be there to take over at once. That will be at 8 P.M. and I'd appreciate it if you could be here at 7:30."

"But what—"

"Fine. Fine. That will be all now." On signal, a smiling secretary came in to usher her out.

Miss Fellowes stared back at Dr. Hoskins' closed door for a moment. What was Stasis? What had this large barn of a building—with its badged employees, its makeshift corridors, and its unmistakable air of engineering—to do with children?

She wondered if she should go back that evening or stay away and teach that arrogant man a lesson. But she knew she would be back if only out of sheer frustration. She would have to find out about the children.

She came back at 7:30 and did not have to announce herself. One after another, men and women seemed to know her

and to know her function. She found herself all but placed on skids as she was moved inward.

Dr. Hoskins was there, but he only looked at her distantly and murmured, "Miss Fellowes."

He did not even suggest that she take a seat, but she drew one calmly up to the railing and sat down.

They were on a balcony, looking down into a large pit, filled with instruments that looked like a cross between the control panel of a spaceship and the working face of a computer. On one side were partitions that seemed to make up an unceilinged apartment, a giant dollhouse into the rooms of which she could look from above.

She could see an electronic cooker and a freeze-space unit in one room and a washroom arrangement off another. And surely the object she made out in another room could only be part of a bed, a small bed.

Hoskins was speaking to another man and, with Miss Fellowes, they made up the total occupancy of the balcony. Hoskins did not offer to introduce the other man, and Miss Fellowes eyed him surreptitiously. He was thin and quite fine-looking in a middle-aged way. He had a small mustache and keen eyes that seemed to busy themselves with everything.

He was saying, "I won't pretend for one moment that I understand all this, Dr. Hoskins; I mean, except as a layman, a reasonably intelligent layman, may be expected to understand it. Still, if there's one part I understand less than another, it's this matter of selectivity. You can only reach out so far; that seems sensible; things get dimmer the further you go; it takes more energy.—But then, you can only reach out so near. That's the puzzling part."

"I can make it seem less paradoxical, Deveney, if you will allow me to use an analogy."

(Miss Fellowes placed the new man the moment she heard his name, and despite herself was impressed. This was obviously Candide Deveney, the science writer of the Telenews, who was notoriously at the scene of every major scientific break-through. She even recognized his face as one she saw on the news-plate when the landing on Mars had been announced.—So Dr. Hoskins must have something important here.

"By all means use an analogy," said Deveney ruefully, "if you think it will help."

"Well, then, you can't read a book with ordinary-sized print if it is held six feet from your eyes, but you can read it if you

hold it one foot from your eyes. So far, the closer the better. If you bring the book to within one inch of your eyes, however, you've lost it again. There is such a thing as being too close, you see."

"Hmm," said Deveney.

"Or take another example. Your right shoulder is about thirty inches from the tip of your right forefinger and you can place your right forefinger on your right shoulder. Your right elbow is only half the distance from the tip of your right forefinger; it should by all ordinary logic be easier to reach, and yet you cannot place your right finger on your right elbow. Again, there is such a thing as being too close."

Deveney said, "May I use these analogies in my story?"

"Well, of course. Only too glad. I've been waiting long enough for someone like you to have a story. I'll give you anything else you want. It is time, finally, that we want the world looking over our shoulder. They'll see something."

(Miss Fellowes found herself admiring his calm certainty despite herself. There was strength there.)

Deveney said, "How far out will you reach?"

"Forty thousand years."

Miss Fellowes drew in her breath sharply.

Years?

There was tension in the air. The men at the controls scarcely moved. One man at a microphone spoke into it in a soft monotone, in short phrases that made no sense to Miss Fellowes.

Deveney, leaning over the balcony railing with an intent stare, said, "Will we see anything, Dr. Hoskins?"

"What? No. Nothing till the job is done. We detect indirectly, something on the principle of radar, except that we use mesons rather than radiation. Mesons reach backward under the proper conditions. Some are reflected and we must analyze the reflections."

"That sounds difficult."

Hoskins smiled again, briefly as always. "It is the end product of fifty years of research; forty years of it before I entered the field.—Yes, it's difficult."

The man at the microphone raised one hand.

Hoskins said, "We've had the fix on one particular moment in time for weeks; breaking it, remaking it after calculating

our own movements in time; making certain that we could handle time-flow with sufficient precision. This must work now."

But his forehead glistened.

Edith Fellowes found herself out of her seat and at the balcony railing, but there was nothing to see.

The man at the microphone said quietly, "Now."

There was a space of silence sufficient for one breath and then the sound of a terrified little boy's scream from the dollhouse rooms. Terror! Piercing terror!

Miss Fellowes' head twisted in the direction of the cry. A child was involved. She had forgotten.

And Hoskins' fist pounded on the railing and he said in a tight voice, trembling with triumph, "*Did it.*"

Miss Fellowes was urged down the short, spiral flight of steps by the hard press of Hoskins' palm between her shoulder blades. He did not speak to her.

The man who had been at the controls were standing about now, smiling, smoking, watching the three as they entered on the main floor. A very soft buzz sounded from the direction of the dollhouse.

Hoskins said to Deveney, "It's perfectly safe to enter Stasis. I've done it a thousand times. There's a queer sensation which is momentary and means nothing."

He stepped through an open door in mute demonstration, and Deveney, smiling stiffly and drawing an obviously deep breath, followed him.

Hoskins said, "Miss Fellowes! Please!" He crooked his forefinger impatiently.

Miss Fellowes nodded and stepped stiffly through. It was as though a ripple went through her, an internal tickle.

But once inside all seemed normal. There was the smell of the fresh wood of the dollhouse and—of—of soil somehow.

There was silence now, no voice at least, but there was the dry shuffling of feet, a scrabbling as of a hand over wood—then a low moan.

"Where is it?" asked Miss Fellowes in distress. Didn't these fool men *care*?

The boy was in the bedroom; at least the room with the bed in it.

It was standing naked, with its small, dirt-smeared chest heaving raggedly. A bushel of dirt and coarse grass spread

over the floor at his bare brown feet. The smell of soil came from it and a touch of something fetid.

Hoskins followed her horrified glance and said with annoyance, "You can't pluck a boy cleanly out of time, Miss Fellowes. We had to take some of the surroundings with it for safety. Or would you have preferred to have it arrive here minus a leg or with only half a head?"

"*Please!*" said Miss Fellowes in an agony of revulsion. "Are we just to stand here? The poor child is frightened. And it's *filthy*."

She was quite correct. It was smeared with encrusted dirt and grease and had a scratch on its thigh that looked red and sore.

As Hoskins approached him, the boy, who seemed to be something over three years in age, hunched low and backed away rapidly. He lifted his upper lip and snarled in a hissing fashion like a cat. With a rapid gesture, Hoskins seized both the child's arms and lifted him, writhing and screaming, from the floor.

Miss Fellowes said, "Hold him, now. He needs a warm bath first. He needs to be cleaned. Have you the equipment? If so, have it brought here, and I'll need to have help in handling him just at first. Then, too, for heaven's sake, have all this trash and filth removed."

She was giving the orders now and she felt perfectly good about that. And because now she was an efficient nurse, rather than a confused spectator, she looked at the child with a clinical eye—and hesitated for one shocked moment. She saw past the dirt and shrieking, past the thrashing of limbs and useless twisting. She saw the boy himself.

It was the ugliest little boy she had ever seen. It was horribly ugly from misshapen head to bandy legs.

She got the boy cleaned with three men helping her and with others milling about in their efforts to clean the room. She worked in silence and with a sense of outrage, annoyed by the continued strugglings and outcries of the boy and by the undignified drenchings of soapy water to which she was subjected.

Dr. Hoskins had hinted that the child would not be pretty, but that was far from stating that it would be repulsively deformed. And there was a stench about the boy that soap and water was only alleviating little by little.

She had the strong desire to thrust the boy, soaped as he was, into Hoskins' arms and walk out; but there was the pride of her profession. She had accepted an assignment, after all.—And there would be the look in his eyes. A cold look that would read: Only pretty children, Miss Fellowes?

He was standing apart from them, watching coolly from a distance with a half-smile on his face when he caught her eyes, as though amused at her outrage.

She decided she would wait awhile before quitting. To do so now would only demean her.

Then, when the boy was a bearable pink and smelled of scented soap, she felt better anyway. His cries changed to whimpers of exhaustion as he watched them carefully, eyes moving in quick frightened suspicion from one to another of those in the room. His cleanness accentuated his thin nakedness as he shivered with cold after his bath.

Miss Fellowes said sharply, "Bring me a nightgown for the child!"

A nightgown appeared at once. It was as though everything were ready and yet nothing were ready unless she gave orders; as though they were deliberately leaving this in her charge without help, to test her.

The newsman, Deveney, approached and said, "I'll hold him, Miss. You won't get it on yourself."

"Thank you," said Miss Fellowes. And it was a battle indeed, but the nightgown went on, and when the boy made as though to rip it off, she slapped his hand sharply.

The boy reddened, but did not cry. He stared at her and the splayed fingers of one hand moved slowly across the flannel of the nightgown, feeling the strangeness of it.

Miss Fellowes thought desperately: Well, what next?

Everyone seemed in suspended animation, waiting for her—even the ugly little boy.

Miss Fellowes said sharply, "Have you provided food? Milk?"

They had. A mobile unit was wheeled in, with its refrigeration compartment containing three quarts of milk, with a warming unit and a supply of fortifications in the form of vitamin drops, copper-cobalt-iron syrup and others she had no time to be concerned with. There was a variety of canned self-warming junior foods.

She used milk, simply milk, to begin with. The radar unit heated the milk to a set temperature in a matter of ten sec-

onds and clicked off, and she put some in a saucer. She had a certainty about the boy's savagery. He wouldn't know how to handle a cup.

Miss Fellowes nodded and said to the boy, "Drink. Drink." She made a gesture as though to raise the milk to her mouth. The boy's eyes followed but he made no response.

Suddenly, the nurse resorted to direct measures. She seized the boy's upper arm in one hand and dipped the other in the milk. She dashed the milk across his lips, so that it dripped down cheeks and receding chin.

For a moment, the child uttered a high-pitched cry, then his tongue moved over his wetted lips. Miss Fellowes stepped back.

The boy approached the saucer, bent toward it, then looked up and behind sharply as though expecting a crouching enemy; bent again and licked at the milk eagerly, like a cat. He made a slurping noise. He did not use his hands to lift the saucer.

Miss Fellowes allowed a bit of the revulsion she felt show on her face. She couldn't help it.

Deveney caught that, perhaps. He said, "Does the nurse know, Dr. Hoskins?"

"Know what?" demanded Miss Fellowes.

Deveney hesitated, but Hoskins (again that look of detached amusement on his face) said, "Well, tell her."

Deveney addressed Miss Fellowes. "You may not suspect it, Miss, but you happen to be the first civilized woman in history ever to be taking care of a Neanderthal youngster."

She turned on Hoskins with a kind of controlled ferocity. "You might have told me, Doctor."

"Why? What difference does it make?"

"You said a child."

"Isn't that a child? Have you ever had a puppy or a kitten, Miss Fellowes? Are those closer to the human? If that were a baby chimpanzee, would you be repelled? You're a nurse, Miss Fellowes. Your record places you in a maternity ward for three years. Have you ever refused to take care of a deformed infant?"

Miss Fellowes felt her case slipping away. She said, with much less decision, "You might have told me."

"And you would have refused the position? Well, do you refuse it now?" He gazed at her coolly, while Deveney watched

from the other side of the room, and the Neanderthal child, having finished the milk and licked the plate, looked up at her with a wet face and wide, longing eyes.

The boy pointed to the milk and suddenly burst out in a short series of sounds repeated over and over; sounds made up of gutturals and elaborate tongue-clickings.

Miss Fellowes said, in surprise, "Why, he talks."

"Of course," said Hoskins. "*Homo neanderthalensis* is not a truly separate species, but rather a subspecies of *Homo sapiens*. Why shouldn't he talk? He's probably asking for more milk."

Automatically, Miss Fellowes reached for the bottle of milk, but Hoskins seized her wrist. "Now, Miss Fellowes, before we go any further, are you staying on the job?"

Miss Fellowes shook free in annoyance, "Won't you feed him if I don't? I'll stay with him—for a while."

She poured the milk.

Hoskins said, "We are going to leave you with the boy, Miss Fellowes. This is the only door to Stasis Number One and it is elaborately locked and guarded. I'll want you to learn the details of the locks, which will, of course, be keyed to your fingerprints as they are already keyed to mine. The spaces overhead" (he looked upward to the open ceilings of the dollhouse) "are also guarded and we will be warned if anything untoward takes place in here."

Miss Fellowes said indignantly, "You mean I'll be under view." She thought suddenly of her own survey of the room interiors from the balcony.

"No, no," said Hoskins seriously, "your privacy will be respected completely. The view will consist of electronic symbolism only, which only a computer will deal with. Now you will stay with him tonight, Miss Fellowes, and every night until further notice. You will be relieved during the day according to some schedule you will find convenient. We will allow you to arrange that."

Miss Fellowes looked about the dollhouse with a puzzled expression. "But why all this, Dr. Hoskins? Is the boy dangerous?"

"It's a matter of energy, Miss Fellowes. He must never be allowed to leave these rooms. Never. Not for an instant. Not for any reason. Not to save his life. Not even to save *your* life, Miss Fellowes. Is that clear?"

Miss Fellowes raised her chin. "I understand the orders,

Dr. Hoskins, and the nursing profession is accustomed to placing its duties ahead of self-preservation."

"Good. You can always signal if you need anyone." And the two men left.

Miss Fellowes turned to the boy. He was watching her and there was still milk in the saucer. Laboriously, she tried to show him how to lift the saucer and place it to his lips. He resisted, but let her touch him without crying out.

Always, his frightened eyes were on her, watching, watching for the one false move. She found herself soothing him, trying to move her hand very slowly toward his hair, letting him see it every inch of the way, see there was no harm in it.

And she succeeded in stroking his hair for an instant.

She said, "I'm going to have to show you how to use the bathroom. Do you think you can learn?"

She spoke quietly, kindly, knowing he would not understand the words but hoping he would respond to the calmness of the tone.

The boy launched into a clicking phrase again.

She said, "May I take your hand?"

She held out hers and the boy looked at it. She left it outstretched and waited. The boy's own hand crept toward hers.

"That's right," she said.

It approached within an inch of hers and then the boy's courage failed him. He snatched it back.

"Well," said Miss Fellowes calmly, "we'll try again later. Would you like to sit down here?" She patted the mattress of the bed.

The hours passed slowly and progress was minute. She did not succeed either with the bathroom or with the bed. In fact, after the child had given unmistakable signs of sleepiness he lay down on the bare ground and then, with a quick movement, rolled beneath the bed.

She bent to look at him and his eyes gleamed out at her as he tongue-clicked at her.

"All right," she said, "if you feel safer there, you sleep there."

She closed the door to the bedroom and retired to the cot that had been placed for her use in the largest room. At her insistence, a makeshift canopy had been stretched over it. She thought: Those stupid men will have to place a mirror

in this room and a larger chest of drawers and a separate washroom if they expect me to spend nights here.

It was difficult to sleep. She found herself straining to hear possible sounds in the next room. He couldn't get out, could he? The walls were sheer and impossibly high but suppose the child could climb like a monkey? Well, Hoskins said there were observational devices watching through the ceiling.

Suddenly she thought: Can he be dangerous? Physically dangerous?

Surely, Hoskins couldn't have meant that. Surely, he would not have left her here alone, if—

She tried to laugh at herself. He was only a three- or four-year-old child. Still, she had not succeeded in cutting his nails. If he should attack her with nails and teeth while she slept—

Her breath came quickly. Oh, ridiculous, and yet—

She listened with painful attentiveness, and this time she heard the sound.

The boy was crying.

Not shrieking in fear or anger; not yelling or screaming. It was crying softly, and the cry was the heartbroken sobbing of a lonely, lonely child.

For the first time, Miss Fellowes thought with a pang: Poor thing!

Of course, it was a child; what did the shape of its head matter? It was a child that had been orphaned as no child had ever been orphaned before. Not only its mother and father were gone, but all its species. Snatched callously out of time, it was now the only creature of its kind in the world. The last. The only.

She felt pity for it strengthen, and with it shame at her own callousness. Tucking her own nightgown carefully about her calves (incongruously, she thought: Tomorrow I'll have to bring in a bathrobe) she got out of bed and went into the boy's room.

"Little boy," she called in a whisper. "Little boy."

She was about to reach under the bed, but she thought of a possible bite and did not. Instead, she turned on the night light and moved the bed.

The poor thing was huddled in the corner, knees up against his chin, looking up at her with blurred and apprehensive eyes.

In the dim light, she was not aware of his repulsiveness.

"Poor boy," she said, "poor boy." She felt him stiffen as she stroked his hair, then relax. "Poor boy. May I hold you?"

She sat down on the floor next to him and slowly and rhythmically stroked his hair, his cheek, his arm. Softly, she began to sing a slow and gentle song.

He lifted his head at that, staring at her mouth in the dimness, as though wondering at the sound.

She maneuvered him closer while he listened to her. Slowly, she pressed gently against the side of his head, until it rested on her shoulder. She put her arm under his thighs and with a smooth and unhurried motion lifted him into her lap.

She continued singing, the same simple verse over and over, while she rocked back and forth, back and forth.

He stopped crying, and after a while the smooth burr of his breathing showed he was asleep.

With infinite care, she pushed his bed back against the wall and laid him down. She covered him and stared down. His face looked so peaceful and little-boy as he slept. It didn't matter so much that it was so ugly. Really.

She began to tiptoe out, then thought: If he wakes up?

She came back, battled irresolutely with herself, then sighed and slowly got into bed with the child.

It was too small for her. She was cramped and uneasy at the lack of canopy, but the child's hand crept into hers and, somehow, she fell asleep in that position.

She awoke with a start and a wild impulse to scream. The latter she just managed to suppress into a gurgle. The boy was looking at her, wide-eyed. It took her a long moment to remember getting into bed with him, and now, slowly, without unfixing her eyes from his, she stretched one leg carefully and let it touch the floor, then the other one.

She cast a quick and apprehensive glance toward the open ceiling, then tensed her muscles for quick disengagement.

But at that moment, the boy's stubby fingers reached out and touched her lips. He said something.

She shrank at the touch. He was terribly ugly in the light of day.

The boy spoke again. He opened his own mouth and gestured with his hand as though something were coming out.

Miss Fellowes guessed at the meaning and said tremulously, "Do you want me to sing?"

The boy said nothing but stared at her mouth.

In a voice slightly off key with tension, Miss Fellowes began the little song she had sung the night before and the ugly little boy smiled. He swayed clumsily in rough time to the music and made a little gurgly sound that might have been the beginnings of a laugh.

Miss Fellowes sighed inwardly. Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast. It might help—

She said, "You wait. Let me get myself fixed up. It will just take a minute. Then I'll make breakfast for you."

She worked rapidly, conscious of the lack of ceiling at all times. The boy remained in bed, watching her when she was in view. She smiled at him at those times and waved. At the end, he waved back, and she found herself being charmed by that.

Finally, she said, "Would you like oatmeal with milk?" It took a moment to prepare, and then she beckoned to him.

Whether he understood the gesture or followed the aroma, Miss Fellowes did not know, but he got out of bed.

She tried to show him how to use a spoon but he shrank away from it in fright. (Time enough, she thought.) She compromised on insisting that he lift the bowl in his hands. He did it clumsily enough and it was incredibly messy but most of it did get into him.

She tried the drinking milk in a glass this time, and the little boy whined when he found the opening too small for him to get his face into conveniently. She held his hand, forcing it around the glass, making him tip it, forcing his mouth to the rim.

Again a mess but again most went into him, and she was used to messes.

The washroom, to her surprise and relief, was a less frustrating matter. He understood what it was she expected him to do.

She found herself patting his head, saying, "Good boy. Smart boy."

And to Miss Fellowes' exceeding pleasure, the boy smiled at that.

She thought: When he smiles, he's quite bearable. Really. Later in the day, the gentlemen of the press arrived.

She held the boy in her arms and he clung to her wildly

while across the open door they set cameras to work. The commotion frightened the boy and he began to cry, but it was ten minutes before Miss Fellowes was allowed to retreat and put the boy in the next room.

She emerged again, flushed with indignation, walked out of the apartment (for the first time in eighteen hours) and closed the door behind her. "I think you've had enough. It will take me a while to quiet him. Go away."

"Sure, sure," said the gentleman from the *Times-Herald*. "But is that really a Neanderthal or is this some kind of gag?"

"I assure you," said Hoskins' voice suddenly, from the background, "that this is no gag. The child is authentic *Homo neanderthalensis*."

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Boy," said Miss Fellowes briefly.

"Ape-boy," said the gentleman from the *News*. "That's what we've got here. Ape-boy. How does he act, Nurse?"

"He acts exactly like a little boy," snapped Miss Fellowes, annoyed into the defensive, "and he is not an ape-boy. His name is—is Timothy, Timmie—and he is perfectly normal in his behavior."

She had chosen the name Timothy at a venture. It was the first that had occurred to her.

"Timmie the Ape-boy," said the gentleman from the *News*, and, as it turned out, Timmie the Ape-boy was the name under which the child became known to the world.

The gentleman from the *Globe* turned to Hoskins and said, "Doc, what do you expect to do with the ape-boy?"

Hoskins shrugged. "My original plan was completed when I proved it possible to bring him here. However, the anthropologists will be very interested, I imagine, and the physiologists. We have here, after all, a creature which is at the edge of being human. We should learn a great deal about ourselves and our ancestry from him."

"How long will you keep him?"

"Until such time as we need the space more than we need him. Quite a while, perhaps."

The gentleman from the *News* said, "Can you bring it out into the open so we can set up sub-etheric equipment and put on a real show?"

"I'm sorry, but the child cannot be removed from Stasis."

"Exactly what is Stasis?"

"Ah." Hoskins permitted himself one of his short smiles.

"That would take a great deal of explanation, gentlemen. In Stasis, time as we know it doesn't exist. Those rooms are inside an invisible bubble that is not exactly part of our Universe. That is why the child could be plucked out of time as it was."

"Well, wait now," said the gentleman from the *News* discontentedly, "what are you giving us? The nurse goes into the room and out of it."

"And so can any of you," said Hoskins matter-of-factly. "You would be moving parallel to the lines of temporal force and no great energy gain or loss would be involved. The child, however, was taken from the far past. It moved across the lines and gained temporal potential. To move it into the Universe and into our own time would absorb enough energy to burn out every line in the place and probably blank out all power in the city of Washington. We had to store trash brought with him on the premises and will have to remove it little by little."

The newsmen were writing down sentences busily as Hoskins spoke to them. They did not understand and they were sure their readers would not, but it sounded scientific and that was what counted.

The gentleman from the *Times-Herald* said, "Would you be available for an all-circuit interview tonight?"

"I think so," said Hoskins at once, and they all moved off.

Miss Fellowes looked after them. She understood all this about Stasis and temporal force as little as the newsmen but she managed to get this much. Timmie's imprisonment (she found herself suddenly thinking of the little boy as Timmie) was a real one and not one imposed by the arbitrary fiat of Hoskins. Apparently, it was impossible to let him out of Stasis at all, ever.

Poor child. Poor child.

She was suddenly aware of his crying and she hastened in to console him.

Miss Fellowes did not have a chance to see Hoskins on the all-circuit hookup, and though his interview was beamed to every part of the world and even to the outpost on the Moon, it did not penetrate the apartment in which Miss Fellowes and the ugly little boy lived.

But he was down the next morning, radiant and joyful.

Miss Fellowes said, "Did the interview go well?"

"Extremely. And how is—Timmie?"

Miss Fellowes found herself pleased at the use of the name. "Doing quite well. Now come out here, Timmie, the nice gentleman will not hurt you."

But Timmie stayed in the other room, with a lock of his matted hair showing behind the barrier of the door and, occasionally, the corner of an eye.

"Actually," said Miss Fellowes, "he is settling down amazingly. He is quite intelligent."

"Are you surprised?"

She hesitated just a moment, then said, "Yes, I am. I suppose I thought he was an ape-boy."

"Well, ape-boy or not, he's done a great deal for us. He's put Stasis, Inc. on the map. We're in, Miss Fellowes, we're in." It was as though he had to express his triumph to someone, even if only to Miss Fellowes.

"Oh?" She let him talk.

He put his hands in his pockets and said, "We've been working on a shoestring for ten years, scrounging funds a penny at a time wherever we could. We had to shoot the works on one big show. It was everything, or nothing. And when I say the works, I mean it. This attempt to bring in a Neanderthal took every cent we could borrow or steal, and some of it *was* stolen—funds for other projects, used for this one without permission. If that experiment hadn't succeeded, I'd have been through."

Miss Fellowes said abruptly, "Is that why there are no ceilings?"

"Eh?" Hoskins looked up.

"Was there no money for ceilings?"

"Oh. Well, that wasn't the only reason. We didn't really know in advance how old the Neanderthal might be exactly. We can detect only dimly in time, and he might have been large and savage. It was possible we might have had to deal with him from a distance, like a caged animal."

"But since that hasn't turned out to be so, I suppose you can build a ceiling now."

"Now, yes. We have plenty of money, now. Funds have been promised from every source. This is all wonderful, Miss Fellowes." His broad face gleamed with a smile that lasted and when he left, even his back seemed to be smiling.

Miss Fellowes thought: He's quite a nice man when he's off guard and forgets about being scientific.

She wondered for an idle moment if he was married, then dismissed the thought in self-embarrassment.

"Timmie," she called. "Come here, Timmie."

In the months that passed, Miss Fellowes felt herself grow to be an integral part of Stasis, Inc. She was given a small office of her own with her name on the door, an office quite close to the dollhouse (as she never stopped calling Timmie's Stasis bubble). She was given a substantial raise. The dollhouse was covered by a ceiling; its furnishings were elaborated and improved; a second washroom was added—and even so, she gained an apartment of her own on the institute grounds and, on occasion, did not stay with Timmie during the night. An intercom was set up between the dollhouse and her apartment and Timmie learned how to use it.

Miss Fellowes got used to Timmie. She even grew less conscious of his ugliness. One day she found herself staring at an ordinary boy in the street and finding something bulgy and unattractive in his high domed forehead and jutting chin. She had to shake herself to break the spell.

It was more pleasant to grow used to Hoskins' occasional visits. It was obvious he welcomed escape from his increasingly harried role as head of Stasis, Inc., and that he took a sentimental interest in the child who had started it all, but it seemed to Miss Fellowes that he also enjoyed talking to her.

(She had learned some facts about Hoskins, too. He had invented the method of analyzing the reflection of the past-penetrating mesonic beam; he had invented the method of establishing Stasis; his coldness was only an effort to hide a kindly nature; and, oh yes, he *was* married.)

What Miss Fellowes could *not* get used to was the fact that she was engaged in a scientific experiment. Despite all she could do, she found herself getting personally involved to the point of quarreling with the physiologists.

On one occasion, Hoskins came down and found her in the midst of a hot urge to kill. They had no right; they had no *right*—even if he *was* a Neanderthal, he still wasn't an animal.

She was staring after them in a blind fury; staring out the open door and listening to Timmie's sobbing, when she noticed Hoskins standing before her. He might have been there for minutes.

He said, "May I come in?"

She nodded curtly, then hurried to Timmie, who clung to her, curling his little bandy legs—still thin, so thin—about her.

Hoskins watched, then said gravely, "He seems quite unhappy."

Miss Fellowes said, "I don't blame him. They're at him every day now with their blood samples and their probings. They keep him on synthetic diets that I wouldn't feed a pig."

"It's the sort of thing they can't try on a human, you know."

"And they can't try it on Timmie, either. Dr. Hoskins, I insist. You told me it was Timmie's coming that put Stasis, Inc. on the map. If you have any gratitude for that at all, you've got to keep them away from the poor thing at least until he's old enough to understand a little more. After he's had a bad session with them, he has nightmares, he can't sleep. Now I warn you," (she reached a sudden peak of fury) "I'm not letting them in here any more."

(She realized that she had screamed that, but she couldn't help it.)

She said more quietly, "I know he's Neanderthal but there's a great deal we don't appreciate about Neanderthals. I've read up on them. They had a culture of their own. Some of the greatest human inventions arose in Neanderthal times. The domestication of animals, for instance; the wheel; various techniques in grinding stone. They even had spiritual yearnings. They buried their dead and buried possessions with the body, showing they believed in a life after death. It amounts to the fact that they invented religion. Doesn't that mean Timmie has a right to human treatment?"

She patted the little boy gently on his buttocks and sent him off into his playroom. As the door was opened, Hoskins smiled briefly at the display of toys that could be seen.

Miss Fellowes said defensively, "The poor child deserves his toys. It's all he has and he earns them with what he goes through."

"No, no. No objections, I assure you. I was just thinking how you've changed since the first day, when you were quite angry I had foisted a Neanderthal on you."

Miss Fellowes said in a low voice, "I suppose I didn't—" and faded off.

Hoskins changed the subject. "How old would you say he is, Miss Fellowes?"

She said, "I can't say, since we don't know how Neanderthals develop. In size, he'd only be three, but Neanderthals are smaller generally and with all the tampering they do with him, he probably isn't growing. The way he's learning English, though, I'd say he was well over four."

"Really? I haven't noticed anything about learning English in the reports."

"He won't speak to anyone but me. For now, anyway. He's terribly afraid of others, and no wonder. But he can ask for an article of food; he can indicate any need practically; and he understands almost anything I say. Of course," (she watched him shrewdly, trying to estimate if this was the time), "his development may not continue."

"Why not?"

"Any child needs stimulation and this one lives a life of solitary confinement. I do what I can, but I'm not with him all the time and I'm not all he needs. What I mean, Dr. Hoskins, is that he needs another boy to play with."

Hoskins nodded slowly. "Unfortunately, there's only one of him, isn't there? Poor child."

Miss Fellowes warmed to him at once. She said, "You do like Timmie, don't you?" It was so nice to have someone else feel like that.

"Oh, yes," said Hoskins, and with his guard down, she could see the weariness in his eyes.

Miss Fellowes dropped her plans to push the matter at once. She said, with real concern, "You look worn out, Dr. Hoskins."

"Do I, Miss Fellowes? I'll have to practice looking more lifelike then."

"I suppose Stasis, Inc. is very busy and that that keeps you very busy."

Hoskins shrugged. "You suppose right. It's a matter of animal, vegetable, and mineral in equal parts, Miss Fellowes. But then, I suppose you haven't ever seen our displays."

"Actually, I haven't.—But it's not because I'm not interested. It's just that I've been so busy."

"Well, you're not all that busy right now," he said with impulsive decision. "I'll call for you tomorrow at eleven and give you a personal tour. How's that?"

She smiled happily. "I'd love it."

He nodded and smiled in his turn and left.

Miss Fellowes hummed at intervals for the rest of the day.

Really—to think so was ridiculous, of course—but really, it was almost like—like making a date.

He was quite on time the next day, smiling and pleasant. She had replaced her nurse's uniform with a dress. One of conservative cut, to be sure, but she hadn't felt so feminine in years.

He complimented her on her appearance with staid formality and she accepted with equally formal grace. It was really a perfect prelude, she thought. And then the additional thought came, prelude to what?

She shut that off by hastening to say good-by to Timmie and to assure him that she would be back soon. She made sure he knew all about what and where lunch was.

Hoskins took her into the new wing, into which she had never yet gone. It still had the odor of newness about it and the sound of construction, softly heard, was indication enough that it was still being extended.

"Animal, vegetable, and mineral," said Hoskins, as he had the day before. "Animal right there; our most spectacular exhibits."

The space was divided into many rooms, each a separate Stasis bubble. Hoskins brought her to the view-glass of one and she looked in. What she saw impressed her first as a scaled, tailed chicken. Skittering on two thin legs it ran from wall to wall with delicate birdlike head, surmounted by a bony keel like the comb of a rooster, looking this way and that. The paws on its small forelimbs clenched and unclenched constantly.

Hoskins said, "It's our dinosaur. We've had it for months. I don't know when we'll be able to let go of it."

"Dinosaur?"

"Did you expect a giant?"

She dimpled. "One does, I suppose. I know some of them are small."

"A small one is all we aimed for, believe me. Generally, it's under investigation, but this seems to be an open hour. Some interesting things have been discovered. For instance, it is not entirely cold-blooded. It has an imperfect method of maintaining internal temperatures higher than that of its environment. Unfortunately, it's a male. Ever since we brought it in we've been trying to get a fix on another that may be female, but we've had no luck yet."

"Why female?"

He looked at her quizzically. "So that we might have a fighting chance to obtain fertile eggs, and baby dinosaurs."

"Of course."

He led her to the trilobite section. "That's Professor Dwayne of Washington University," he said. "He's a nuclear chemist. If I recall correctly, he's taking an isotope ratio on the oxygen of the water."

"Why?"

"It's primeval water; at least half a billion years old. The isotope ratio gives the temperature of the ocean at that time. He himself happens to ignore the trilobites, but others are chiefly concerned in dissecting them. They're the lucky ones because all they need are scalpels and microscopes. Dwayne has to set up a mass spectrograph each time he conducts an experiment."

"Why's that? Can't he—"

"No, he can't. He can't take anything out of the room as far as can be helped."

There were samples of primordial plant life too and chunks of rock formations. Those were the vegetable and mineral. And every specimen had its investigator. It was like a museum; a museum brought to life and serving as a superactive center of research.

"And you have to supervise all of this, Dr. Hoskins?"

"Only indirectly, Miss Fellowes. I have subordinates, thank heaven. My own interest is entirely in the theoretical aspects of the matter: the nature of Time, the technique of mesonic intertemporal detection and so on. I would exchange all this for a method of detecting objects closer in Time than ten thousand years ago. If we could get into historical times—"

He was interrupted by a commotion at one of the distant booths, a thin voice raised querulously. He frowned, muttered hastily, "Excuse me," and hastened off.

Miss Fellowes followed as best she could without actually running.

An elderly man, thinly bearded and red-faced, was saying, "I had vital aspects of my investigations to complete. Don't you understand that?"

A uniformed technician with the interwoven SI monogram (for Stasis, Inc.) on his lab coat said, "Dr. Hoskins, it was

arranged with Professor Ademewski at the beginning that the specimen could only remain here two weeks."

"I did not know then how long my investigations would take. I'm not a prophet," said Ademewski heatedly.

Dr. Hoskins said, "You understand, Professor, we have limited space; we must keep specimens rotating. That piece of chalcopyrite must go back; there are men waiting for the next specimen."

"Why can't I have it for myself, then? Let me take it out of there."

"You know you can't have it."

"A piece of chalcopyrite; a miserable five-kilogram piece? Why not?"

"We can't afford the energy expense!" said Hoskins brusquely. "You know that."

The technician interrupted. "The point is, Dr. Hoskins, that he tried to remove the rock against the rules and I almost punctured Stasis while he was in there, not knowing he was in there."

There was a short silence and Dr. Hoskins turned on the investigator with a cold formality. "Is that so, Professor?"

Professor Ademewski coughed. "I saw no harm—"

Hoskins reached up to a hand-pull dangling just within reach, outside the specimen room in question. He pulled it.

Miss Fellowes, who had been peering in, looking at the totally undistinguished sample of rock that occasioned the dispute, drew in her breath sharply as its existence flickered out. The room was empty.

Hoskins said, "Professor, your permit to investigate matters in Stasis will be permanently voided. I am sorry."

"But wait—"

"I am sorry. You have violated one of the stringent rules."

"I will appeal to the International Association—"

"Appeal away. In a case like this, you will find I can't be overruled."

He turned away deliberately, leaving the professor still protesting, and said to Miss Fellowes (his face still white with anger), "Would you care to have lunch with me, Miss Fellowes?"

He took her into the small administration alcove of the cafeteria. He greeted others and introduced Miss Fellowes

with complete ease, although she herself felt painfully self-conscious.

What must they think, she thought, and tried desperately to appear businesslike.

She said, "Do you have that kind of trouble often, Dr. Hoskins? I mean like that you just had with the professor?" She took her fork in hand and began eating.

"No," said Hoskins forcefully. "That was the first time. Of course I'm always having to argue men out of removing specimens but this is the first time one actually tried to *do it*."

"I remember you once talked about the energy it would consume."

"That's right. Of course, we've tried to take it into account. Accidents will happen and so we've got special power sources designed to stand the drain of accidental removal from Stasis, but that doesn't mean we want to see a year's supply of energy gone in half a second—or can afford to without having our plans of expansion delayed for years.—Besides, imagine the professor's being in the room while Stasis was about to be punctured."

"What would have happened to him if it had been?"

"Well, we've experimented with inanimate objects and with mice and they've disappeared. Presumably they've traveled back in time; carried along, so to speak, by the pull of the object simultaneously snapping back into its natural time. For that reason, we have to anchor objects within Stasis that we don't want to move, and that's a complicated procedure. The professor would not have been anchored and he would have gone back to the Pliocene at the moment when we abstracted the rock—plus, of course, the two weeks it had remained here in the present."

"How dreadful it would have been."

"Not on account of the professor, I assure you. If he were fool enough to do what he did, it would serve him right. But imagine the effect it would have on the public if the fact came out. All people would need is to become aware of the dangers involved and funds could be choked off like that." He snapped his fingers and played moodily with his food.

Miss Fellowes said, "Couldn't you get him back? The way you got the rock in the first place?"

"No, because once an object is returned, the original fix is lost unless we deliberately plan to retain it, and there was no reason to do that in this case. There never is. Finding the

professor again would mean relocating a specific fix, and that would be like dropping a line into the oceanic abyss for the purpose of dredging up a particular fish. —My God, when I think of the precautions we take to prevent accidents, it makes me mad. We have every individual Stasis unit set up with its own puncturing device—we have to, since each unit has its separate fix and must be collapsible independently. The point is, though, none of the puncturing devices is ever activated until the last minute. And then we deliberately make activation impossible except by the pull of a rope carefully led outside the Stasis. The pull is a gross mechanical motion that requires a strong effort, not something that is likely to be done accidentally.”

Miss Fellowes said, “But doesn’t it—change history to move something in and out of Time?”

Hoskins shrugged. “Theoretically, yes; actually, except in unusual cases, no. We move objects out of Stasis all the time. Air molecules. Bacteria. Dust. About 10 per cent of our energy consumption goes to make up micro-losses of that nature. But moving even large objects in Time sets up changes that damp out. Take that chalcopyrite from the Pliocene. Because of its absence for two weeks some insect didn’t find the shelter it might have found and is killed. That could initiate a whole series of changes, but the mathematics of Stasis indicates that this is a converging series. The amount of change diminishes with time and then things are as before.”

“You mean, reality heals itself?”

“In a manner of speaking. Abstract a human from Time or send one back, and you make a larger wound. If the individual is an ordinary one, that wound still heals itself. Of course, there are a great many people who write us each day and want us to bring Abraham Lincoln into the present, or Mohammed, or Lenin. *That* can’t be done, of course. Even if we could find them, the change in reality in moving one of the history molders would be too great to be healed. There are ways of calculating when a change is likely to be too great and we avoid even approaching that limit.”

Miss Fellowes said, “Then, Timmie—”

“No, he presents no problem in that direction. Reality is safe. But—” He gave her a quick, sharp glance, then went on, “But never mind. Yesterday you said Timmie needed companionship.”

"Yes," Miss Fellowes smiled her delight. "I didn't think you paid that any attention."

"Of course I did. I'm fond of the child. I appreciate your feelings for him and I was concerned enough to want to explain to you. Now I have; you've seen what we do; you've gotten some insight into the difficulties involved; so you know why, with the best will in the world, we can't supply companionship for Timmie."

"You can't?" said Miss Fellowes, with sudden dismay.

"But I've just explained. We couldn't possibly expect to find another Neanderthal his age without incredible luck, and if we could, it wouldn't be fair to multiply risks by having another human being in Stasis."

Miss Fellowes put down her spoon energetically, "But, Dr. Hoskins, that is not at all what I meant. I don't want you to bring another Neanderthal into the present. I know that's impossible. But it isn't impossible to bring another child to play with Timmie."

Hoskins stared at her in concern. "A *human* child?"

"*Another* child," said Miss Fellowes, completely hostile now. "Timmie is human."

"I couldn't dream of such a thing."

"Why not? Why couldn't you? What is wrong with the notion? You pulled that child out of Time and made him an eternal prisoner. Don't you owe him something? Dr. Hoskins, if there is any man who, in this world, is that child's father in every sense but the biological, it is you. Why can't you do this little thing for him?"

Hoskins said, "His *father*?" He rose, somewhat unsteadily, to his feet. "Miss Fellowes, I think I'll take you back now, if you don't mind."

They returned to the dollhouse in a complete silence that neither broke.

It was a long time after that before she saw Hoskins again, except for an occasional glimpse in passing. She was sorry about that at times; then, at other times, when Timmie was more than usually woebegone or when he spent silent hours at the window with its prospect of little more than nothing, she thought, fiercely: Stupid man.

Timmie's speech grew better and more precise each day. It never entirely lost a certain soft slurriness that Miss Fellowes found rather endearing. In times of excitement, he fell

back into tongue-clicking but those times were becoming fewer. He must be forgetting the days before he came into the present—except for dreams.

As he grew older, the physiologists grew less interested and the psychologists more so. Miss Fellowes was not sure that she did not like the new group even less than the first. The needles were gone; the injections and withdrawals of fluid; the special diets. But now Timmie was made to overcome barriers to reach food and water. He had to lift panels, move bars, reach for cords. And the mild electric shocks made him cry and drove Miss Fellowes to distraction.

She did not wish to appeal to Hoskins; she did not wish to have to go to him; for each time she thought of him, she thought of his face over the luncheon table that last time. Her eyes moistened and she thought: Stupid, *stupid* man.

And then one day Hoskins' voice sounded unexpectedly, calling into the dollhouse, "Miss Fellowes."

She came out coldly, smoothing her nurse's uniform, then stopped in confusion at finding herself in the presence of a pale woman, slender and of middle height. The woman's fair hair and complexion gave her an appearance of fragility. Standing behind her and clutching at her skirt was a round-faced, large-eyed child of four.

Hoskins said, "Dear, this is Miss Fellowes, the nurse in charge of the boy. Miss Fellowes, this is my wife."

(Was this his wife? She was not as Miss Fellowes had imagined her to be. But then, why not? A man like Hoskins would choose a weak thing to be his foil. If that was what he wanted—)

She forced a matter-of-fact greeting. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Hoskins. Is this your—your little boy?"

(*That* was a surprise. She had thought of Hoskins as a husband, but not as a father, except, of course— She suddenly caught Hoskins' grave eyes and flushed.)

Hoskins said, "Yes, this is my boy, Jerry. Say hello to Miss Fellowes, Jerry."

(Had he stressed the word "this" just a bit? Was he saying *this* was his son and not—)

Jerry receded a bit further into the folds of the maternal skirt and muttered his hello. Mrs. Hoskins' eyes were searching over Miss Fellowes' shoulders, peering into the room, looking for something.

Hoskins said, "Well, let's go in. Come, dear. There's a trifling discomfort at the threshold, but it passes."

Miss Fellowes said, "Do you want Jerry to come in, too?"

"Of course. He is to be Timmie's playmate. You said that Timmie needed a playmate. Or have you forgotten?"

"But—" She looked at him with a colossal, surprised wonder. "*Your boy?*"

He said peevishly, "Well, whose boy, then? Isn't this what you want? Come on in, dear. Come on in."

Mrs. Hoskins lifted Jerry into her arms with a distinct effort and, hesitantly, stepped over the threshold. Jerry squirmed as she did so, disliking the sensation.

Mrs. Hoskins said in a thin voice, "Is the creature here? I don't see him."

Miss Fellowes called, "Timmie. Come out."

Timmie peered around the edge of the door, staring up at the little boy who was visiting him. The muscles in Mrs. Hoskins' arms tensed visibly.

She said to her husband, "Gerald, are you sure it's safe?"

Miss Fellowes said at once, "If you mean is Timmie safe, why, of course he is. He is a gentle boy."

"But he's a sa—savage."

(The ape-boy stories in the newspapers!) Miss Fellowes said emphatically, "He is not a savage. He is just as quiet and reasonable as you can possibly expect a five-and-a-half-year-old to be. It is very generous of you, Mrs. Hoskins, to agree to allow your boy to play with Timmie, but please have no fears about it."

Mrs. Hoskins said with mild heat, "I'm not sure that I agree."

"We've had it out, dear," said Hoskins. "Let's not bring up the matter for new argument. Put Jerry down."

Mrs. Hoskins did so and the boy backed against her, staring at the pair of eyes which were staring back at him from the next room.

"Come here, Timmie," said Miss Fellowes. "Don't be afraid."

Slowly, Timmie stepped into the room. Hoskins bent to disengage Jerry's fingers from his mother's skirt. "Step back, dear. Give the children a chance."

The youngsters faced one another. Although the younger, Jerry was nevertheless an inch taller, and in the presence of his straightness and his high-held, well-proportioned head,

Timmie's grotesqueries were suddenly almost as pronounced as they had been in the first days.

Miss Fellowes' lips quivered.

It was the little Neanderthal who spoke first, in childish treble. "What's your name?" And Timmie thrust his face suddenly forward as though to inspect the other's features more closely.

Startled, Jerry responded with a vigorous shove that sent Timmie tumbling. Both began crying loudly and Mrs. Hoskins snatched up her child, while Miss Fellowes, flushed with repressed anger, lifted Timmie and comforted him.

Mrs. Hoskins said, "They just instinctively don't like one another."

"No more instinctively," said her husband wearily, "than any two children dislike each other. Now put Jerry down and let him get used to the situation. In fact, we had better leave. Miss Fellowes can bring Jerry to my office after a while and I'll have him taken home."

The two children spent the next hour very aware of each other. Jerry cried for his mother, struck out at Miss Fellowes and, finally, allowed himself to be comforted with a lollipop. Timmie sucked at another, and at the end of an hour, Miss Fellowes had them playing with the same set of blocks, though at opposite ends of the room.

She found herself almost maudlinly grateful to Hoskins when she brought Jerry to him.

She searched for ways to thank him, but his very formality was a rebuff. Perhaps he could not forgive her for making him feel like a cruel father. Perhaps the bringing of his own child was an attempt, after all, to prove himself both a kind father to Timmie and, also, not his father at all. Both at the same time!

So all she could say was, "Thank you. Thank you very much."

And all he could say was, "It's all right. Don't mention it."

It became a settled routine. Twice a week, Jerry was brought in for an hour's play, later extended to two hours' play. The children learned each other's names and ways and played together.

And yet, after the first rush of gratitude, Miss Fellowes found herself disliking Jerry. He was larger and heavier and in all things dominant, forcing Timmie into a completely

secondary role. All that reconciled her to the situation was the fact that, despite difficulties, Timmie looked forward with more and more delight to the periodic appearances of his playfellow.

It was all he had, she mourned to herself.

And once, as she watched them, she thought: Hoskins' two children, one by his wife and one by Stasis.

While she herself—

Heavens, she thought, putting her fists to her temples and feeling ashamed: I'm jealous!

"Miss Fellowes," said Timmie (carefully, she had never allowed him to call her anything else), "when will I go to school?"

She looked down at those eager brown eyes turned up to hers and passed her hand softly through his thick, curly hair. It was the most disheveled portion of his appearance, for she cut his hair herself while he sat restlessly under the scissors. She did not ask for professional help, for the very clumsiness of the cut served to mask the retreating fore part of the skull and the bulging hinder part.

She said, "Where did you hear about school?"

"Jerry goes to school. Kin-der-gar-ten." He said it carefully. "There are lots of places he goes. Outside. When can I go outside, Miss Fellowes?"

A small pain centered in Miss Fellowes' heart. Of course, she saw, there would be no way of avoiding the inevitability of Timmie's hearing more and more of the outer world he could never enter.

She said, with an attempt at gaiety, "Why, whatever would you do in kindergarten, Timmie?"

"Jerry says they play games, they have picture tapes. He says there are lots of children. He says—he says—" A thought, then a triumphant upholding of both small hands with the fingers splayed apart. "He says this many."

Miss Fellowes said, "Would you like picture tapes? I can get you picture tapes. Very nice ones. And music tapes, too."

So that Timmie was temporarily comforted.

He pored over the picture tapes in Jerry's absence and Miss Fellowes read to him out of ordinary books by the hours.

There was so much to explain in even the simplest story, so much that was outside the perspective of his three rooms.

Timmie took to having his dreams more often now that the outside was being introduced to him.

They were always the same, about the outside. He tried haltingly to describe them to Miss Fellowes. In his dreams, he was outside, an empty outside, but very large, with children and queer indescribable objects half-digested in his thought out of bookish descriptions half-understood, or out of distant Neanderthal memories half-recalled.

But the children and objects ignored him and though he was in the world, he was never part of it, but was as alone as though he were in his own room—and would wake up crying.

Miss Fellowes tried to laugh at the dreams, but there were nights in her own apartment when she cried, too.

One day, as Miss Fellowes read, Timmie put his hand under her chin and lifted it gently so that her eyes left the book and met his.

He said, "How do you know what to say, Miss Fellowes?"

She said, "You see these marks? They tell me what to say. These marks make words."

He stared at them long and curiously, taking the book out of her hands. "Some of these marks are the same."

She laughed with pleasure at this sign of his shrewdness and said, "So they are. Would you like to have me show you how to make the marks?"

"All right. That would be a nice game."

It did not occur to her that he could learn to read. Up to the very moment that he read a book to her, it did not occur to her that he could learn to read.

Then, weeks later, the enormity of what had been done struck her. Timmie sat in her lap, following word by word the printing in a child's book, reading to her. He was reading to her!

She struggled to her feet in amazement and said, "Now, Timmie, I'll be back later. I want to see Dr. Hoskins."

Excited nearly to frenzy, it seemed to her she might have an answer to Timmie's unhappiness. If Timmie could not leave to enter the world, the world must be brought into those three rooms to Timmie—the whole world in books and film and sound. He must be educated to his full capacity. So much the world owed him.

She found Hoskins in a mood that was oddly analogous to her own; a kind of triumph and glory. His offices were unusually busy, and for a moment, she thought she would not get to see him, as she stood abashed in the anteroom.

But he saw her, and a smile spread over his broad face. "Miss Fellowes, come here."

He spoke rapidly into the intercom, then shut it off. "Have you heard? —No, of course, you couldn't have. We've done it. We've actually done it. We have intertemporal detection at close range."

"You mean," she tried to detach her thought from her own good news for a moment, "that you can get a person from historical times into the present?"

"That's just what I mean. We have a fix on a fourteenth-century individual right now. Imagine. *Imagine!* If you could only know how glad I'll be to shift from the eternal concentration on the Mesozoic, replace the paleontologists with the historians— But there's something you wish to say to me, eh? Well, go ahead; go ahead. You find me in a good mood. Anything you want you can have."

Miss Fellowes smiled. "I'm glad. Because I wonder if we might not establish a system of instruction for Timmie?"

"Instruction? In what?"

"Well, in everything. A school. So that he might learn."

"But *can* he learn?"

"Certainly, he *is* learning. He can read. I've taught him so much myself."

Hoskins sat there, seeming suddenly depressed. "I don't know, Miss Fellowes."

She said, "You just said that anything I wanted—"

"I know, and I should not have. You see, Miss Fellowes, I'm sure you must realize that we cannot maintain the Timmie experiment forever."

She stared at him with sudden horror, not really understanding what he had said. How did he mean "cannot maintain"? With an agonizing flash of recollection, she recalled Professor Ademewski and his mineral specimen that was taken away after two weeks. She said, "But you're talking about a boy. Not about a rock—"

Dr. Hoskins said uneasily, "Even a boy can't be given undue importance, Miss Fellowes. Now that we expect individuals out of historical time, we will need Stasis space, all we can get."

She didn't grasp it. "But you can't. Timmie—Timmie—"

"Now, Miss Fellowes, please don't upset yourself. Timmie won't go right away; perhaps not for months. Meanwhile we'll do what we can."

She was still staring at him.

"Let me get you something, Miss Fellowes."

"No," she whispered. "I don't need anything." She arose in a kind of nightmare and left.

Timmie, she thought, you will *not* die. You will *not* die.

It was all very well to hold tensely to the thought that Timmie must not die, but how was that to be arranged? In the first weeks, Miss Fellowes clung only to the hope that the attempt to bring forward a man from the fourteenth century would fail completely. Hoskins' theories might be wrong or his practice defective. Then things could go on as before.

Certainly, that was not the hope of the rest of the world, and, irrationally, Miss Fellowes hated the world for it. "Project Middle Ages" reached a climax of white-hot publicity. The press and the public had hungered for something like this. Stasis, Inc. had lacked the necessary sensation for a long time now. A new rock or another ancient fish failed to stir them. But *this* was it.

A historical human; an adult speaking a known language; someone who could open a new page of history to the scholar.

Zero-time was coming and this time it was not a question of three onlookers from a balcony. This time there would be a worldwide audience. This time the technicians of Stasis, Inc. would play their role before nearly all of mankind.

Miss Fellowes was herself all but savage with waiting. When young Jerry Hoskins showed up for his scheduled play-time with Timmie, she scarcely recognized him. He was not the one she was waiting for.

(The secretary who brought him left hurriedly after the barest nod for Miss Fellowes. She was rushing for a good place from which to watch the climax of Project Middle Ages.—And so ought Miss Fellowes with far better reason, she thought bitterly, if only that stupid girl would arrive.)

Jerry Hoskins sidled toward her, embarrassed. "Miss Fellowes?" He took the reproduction of a news-strip out of his pocket.

"Yes? What is it, Jerry?"

"Is this a picture of Timmie?"

Miss Fellowes stared at him, then snatched the strip from Jerry's hand. The excitement of Project Middle Ages had brought about a pale revival of interest in Timmie on the part of the press.

Jerry watched her narrowly, then said, "It says Timmie is an ape-boy. What does that mean?"

Miss Fellowes caught the youngster's wrist and repressed the impulse to shake him. "Never say that, Jerry. Never, do you understand? It is a nasty word and you mustn't use it."

Jerry struggled out of her grip, frightened.

Miss Fellowes tore up the news-strip with a vicious twist of the wrist. "Now go inside and play with Timmie. He's got a new book to show you."

And then, finally, the girl appeared. Miss Fellowes did not know her. None of the usual stand-ins she had used when business took her elsewhere was available now, not with Project Middle Ages at climax, but Hoskins' secretary had promised to find *someone* and this must be the girl.

Miss Fellowes tried to keep querulousness out of her voice. "Are you the girl assigned to Stasis Section One?"

"Yes, I'm Mandy Terris. You're Miss Fellowes, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"I'm sorry I'm late. There's just so much excitement."

"I know. Now I want you—"

Mandy said, "You'll be watching, I suppose." Her thin, vacuously pretty face filled with envy.

"Never mind that. Now I want you to come inside and meet Timmie and Jerry. They will be playing for the next two hours so they'll be giving you no trouble. They've got milk handy and plenty of toys. In fact, it will be better if you leave them alone as much as possible. Now I'll show you where everything is located and—"

"Is it Timmie that's the ape-b—"

"Timmie is the Stasis subject," said Miss Fellowes firmly.

"I mean, he's the one who's not supposed to get out, is that right?"

"Yes. Now, come in. There isn't much time."

And when she finally left, Mandy Terris called after her shrilly, "I hope you get a good seat and, golly, I sure hope it works."

Miss Fellowes did not trust herself to make a reasonable response. She hurried on without looking back.

But the delay meant she did *not* get a good seat. She got no nearer than the wall-viewing plate in the assembly hall. Bitterly, she regretted that. If she could have been on the spot; if she could somehow have reached out for some sensitive portion of the instrumentations; if she were in some way able to wreck the experiment—

She found the strength to beat down her madness. Simple destruction would have done no good. They would have rebuilt and reconstructed and made the effort again. And she would never be allowed to return to Timmie.

Nothing would help. Nothing but that the experiment itself fail; that it break down irretrievably.

So she waited through the countdown, watching every move on the giant screen, scanning the faces of the technicians as the focus shifted from one to the other, watching for the look of worry and uncertainty that would mark something going unexpectedly wrong; watching, watching—

There was no such look. The count reached zero, and very quietly, very unassumingly, the experiment succeeded!

In the new Stasis that had been established there stood a bearded, stoop-shouldered peasant of indeterminate age, in ragged dirty clothing and wooden shoes, staring in dull horror at the sudden mad change that had flung itself over him.

And while the world went mad with jubilation, Miss Fellowes stood frozen in sorrow, jostled and pushed, all but trampled; surrounded by triumph while bowed down with defeat.

And when the loudspeaker called her name with strident force, it sounded it three times before she responded.

"Miss Fellowes. Miss Fellowes. You are wanted in Stasis Section One immediately. Miss Fellowes. Miss Fell—"

"Let me through!" she cried breathlessly, while the loudspeaker continued its repetitions without pause. She forced her way through the crowds with wild energy, beating at it, striking out with closed fists, flailing, moving toward the door in a nightmare slowness.

Mandy Terris was in tears. "I don't know how it happened. I just went down to the edge of the corridor to watch a pocket-viewing-plate they had put up. Just for a minute. And then before I could move or do anything—" She cried out in sudden accusation, "You said they would make no trouble; you *said* to leave them alone—"

Miss Fellowes, disheveled and trembling uncontrollably, glared at her. "Where's Timmie?"

A nurse was swabbing the arm of a wailing Jerry with disinfectant and another was preparing an antitetanus shot. There was blood on Jerry's clothes.

"He bit me, Miss Fellowes," Jerry cried in rage. "He *bit* me."

But Miss Fellowes didn't even see him.

"What did you do with Timmie?" she cried out.

"I locked him in the bathroom," said Mandy. "I just threw the little monster in there and locked him in."

Miss Fellowes ran into the dollhouse. She fumbled at the bathroom door. It took an eternity to get it open and to find the ugly little boy cowering in the corner.

"Don't whip me, Miss Fellowes," he whispered. His eyes were red. His lips were quivering. "I didn't mean to do it."

"Oh, Timmie, who told you about whips?" She caught him to her, hugging him wildly.

He said tremulously, "She said, with a long rope. She said you would hit me and hit me."

"You won't be. She was wicked to say so. But what happened? What happened?"

"He called me an ape-boy. He said I wasn't a real boy. He said I was an animal." Timmie dissolved in a flood of tears. "He said he wasn't going to play with a monkey anymore. I said I wasn't a monkey; I *wasn't* a monkey. He said I was all funny-looking. He said I was horrible ugly. He kept saying and saying and I bit him."

They were both crying now. Miss Fellowes sobbed, "But it isn't true. You know that, Timmie. You're a real boy. You're a dear real boy and the best boy in the world. And no one, *no one* will ever take you away from me."

It was easy to make up her mind, now; easy to know what to do. Only it had to be done quickly. Hoskins wouldn't wait much longer, with his own son mangled—

No, it would have to be done this night, *this* night; with the place four-fifths asleep and the remaining fifth intellectually drunk over Project Middle Ages.

It would be an unusual time for her to return but not an unheard-of one. The guard knew her well and would not dream of questioning her. He would think nothing of her

carrying a suitcase. She rehearsed the noncommittal phrase, "Games for the boy," and the calm smile.

Why shouldn't he believe that?

He did. When she entered the dollhouse again, Timmie was still awake, and she maintained a desperate normality to avoid frightening him. She talked about his dreams with him and listened to him ask wistfully after Jerry.

There would be few to see her afterward, none to question the bundle she would be carrying. Timmie would be very quiet and then it would be a *fait accompli*. It would be done and what would be the use of trying to undo it. They would leave her be. They would leave them both be.

She opened the suitcase, took out the overcoat, the woolen cap with the ear-flaps and the rest.

Timmie said, with the beginning of alarm, "Why are you putting all these clothes on me, Miss Fellowes?"

She said, "I am going to take you outside, Timmie. To where your dreams are."

"My dreams?" His face twisted in sudden yearning, yet fear was there, too.

"You won't be afraid. You'll be with me. You won't be afraid if you're with me, will you, Timmie?"

"No, Miss Fellowes." He buried his little misshapen head against her side, and under her enclosing arm she could feel his small heart thud.

It was midnight and she lifted him into her arms. She disconnected the alarm and opened the door softly.

And she screamed, for facing her across the open door was Hoskins!

There were two men with him, and he stared at her, as astonished as she.

Miss Fellowes recovered first by a second and made a quick attempt to push past him; but even with the second's delay he had time. He caught her roughly and hurled her back against a chest of drawers. He waved the men in and confronted her, blocking the door.

"I didn't expect this. Are you completely insane?"

She had managed to interpose her shoulder so that it, rather than Timmie, had struck the chest. She said pleadingly, "What harm can it do if I take him, Dr. Hoskins? You can't put an energy loss ahead of a human life?"

Firmly, Hoskins took Timmie out of her arms. "An energy

loss this size would mean millions of dollars lost out of the pockets of investors. It would mean a terrible setback for Stasis, Inc. It would mean eventual publicity about a sentimental nurse destroying all that for the sake of an ape-boy."

"Ape-boy!" said Miss Fellowes, in helpless fury.

"That's what the reporters would call him," said Hoskins.

One of the men emerged now, looping a nylon rope through eyelets along the upper portion of the wall.

Miss Fellowes remembered the rope that Hoskins had pulled outside the room containing Professor Ademewski's rock specimen so long ago.

She cried out, "No!"

But Hoskins put Timmie down and gently removed the overcoat he was wearing. "You stay here, Timmie. Nothing will happen to you. We're just going outside for a moment. All right?"

Timmie, white and wordless, managed to nod.

Hoskins steered Miss Fellowes out of the dollhouse ahead of himself. For the moment, Miss Fellowes was beyond resistance. Dully, she noticed the hand-pull being adjusted outside the dollhouse.

"I'm sorry, Miss Fellowes," said Hoskins. "I would have spared you this. I planned it for the night so that you would know only when it was over."

She said in a weary whisper, "Because your son was hurt. Because he tormented this child into striking out at him."

"No. Believe me. I understand about the incident today and I know it was Jerry's fault. But the story has leaked out. It would have to with the press surrounding us on this day of all days. I can't risk having a distorted story about negligence and savage Neanderthals, so-called, distract from the success of Project Middle Ages. Timmie has to go soon anyway; he might as well go now and give the sensationalists as small a peg as possible on which to hang their trash."

"It's not like sending a rock back. You'll be killing a human being."

"Not killing. There'll be no sensation. He'll simply be a Neanderthal boy in a Neanderthal world. He will no longer be a prisoner and alien. He will have a chance at a free life."

"What chance? He's only seven years old, used to being taken care of, fed, clothed, sheltered. He will be alone. His tribe may not be at the point where he left them now that four years have passed. And if they were, they would not

recognize him. He will have to take care of himself. How will he know how?"

Hoskins shook his head in hopeless negative. "Lord, Miss Fellowes, do you think we haven't thought of that? Do you think we would have brought in a child if it weren't that it was the first successful fix of a human or near-human we made and that we did not dare to take the chance of unfixing him and finding another fix as good? Why do you suppose we kept Timmie as long as we did, if it were not for our reluctance to send a child back into the past? It's just"—his voice took on a desperate urgency—"that we can wait no longer. Timmie stands in the way of expansion! Timmie is a source of possible bad publicity; we are on the threshold of great things, and I'm sorry, Miss Fellowes, but we can't let Timmie block us. We cannot. We cannot. I'm sorry, Miss Fellowes."

"Well, then," said Miss Fellowes sadly. "Let me say good-by. Give me five minutes to say good-by. Spare me that much."

Hoskins hesitated. "Go ahead."

Timmie ran to her. For the last time he ran to her and for the last time Miss Fellowes clasped him in her arms.

For a moment, she hugged him blindly. She caught at a chair with the toe of one foot, moved it against the wall; sat down.

"Don't be afraid, Timmie."

"I'm not afraid if you're here, Miss Fellowes. Is that man mad at me, the man out there?"

"No, he isn't. He just doesn't understand about us. —Timmie, do you know what a mother is?"

"Like Jerry's mother?"

"Did he tell you about his mother?"

"Sometimes. I think maybe a mother is a lady who takes care of you and who's very nice to you and who does good things."

"That's right. Have you ever wanted a mother, Timmie?"

Timmie pulled his head away from her so that he could look into her face. Slowly, he put his hand to her cheek and hair and stroked her, as long, long ago she had stroked him. He said, "Aren't you my mother?"

"Oh, Timmie."

"Are you angry because I asked?"

"No. Of course not."

"Because I know your name is Miss Fellowes, but—but sometimes, I call you 'Mother' inside. Is that all right?"

"Yes. Yes. It's all right. And I won't leave you any more and nothing will hurt you. I'll be with you to care for you always. Call me Mother, so I can hear you."

"Mother," said Timmie contentedly, leaning his cheek against hers.

She rose, and, still holding him, stepped up on the chair. The sudden beginning of a shout from outside went unheard and, with her free hand, she yanked with all her weight at the cord where it hung suspended between two eyelets.

And Stasis was punctured and the room was empty.

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