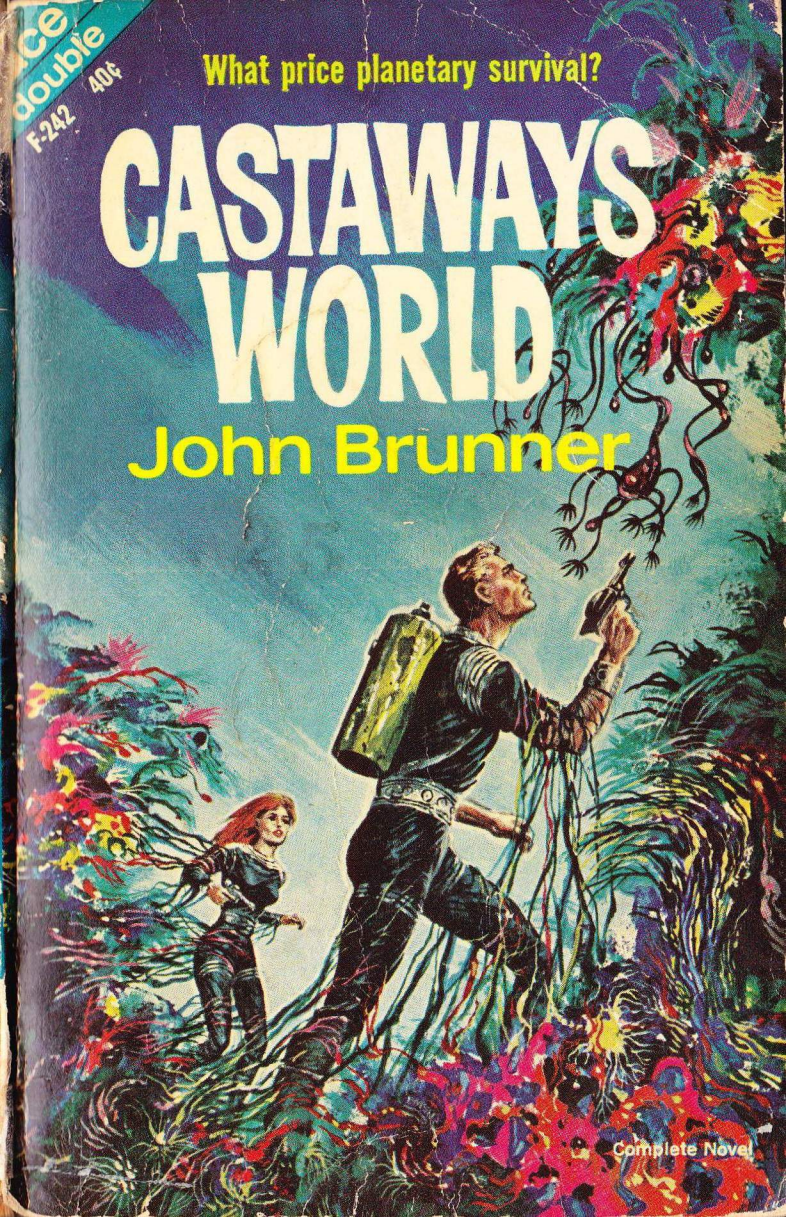


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# CASTAWAYS WORLD

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# CASTAWAYS' WORLD

by  
JOHN BRUNNER

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## I

ONE THING about those winter gales," Delvia said in a make-the-most-of-it tone, "they gave us a bit of stored power to play with."

She cut the accumulator out of circuit, and the whine and thump of the air-compressor died. With practiced fingers she uncoupled the pipe from the cylinder, checked the pressure-gauge by bleeding a few pounds off, then dropped it with a clank against the two already lying on the sand. Taking an empty one, she began to connect it up.

"You can have those three, Lex," she added.

"Right," Lex acknowledged. "Finished, Naline?"

The darker girl, "baby" of the surviving refugees, nodded and turned to catch the eye of the lined-faced man standing a few paces distant on the sand. "Ready for you, captain," she said.

Captain Arbogast seemed to come back from a long way away; he had been staring out across the calm sea of the bay to where a polished arc of metal showed above the water. He moved forward now beside Naline.

Lex, his lean tallness emphasized by the odd-looking garb he had on, gathered the three full air-cylinders into his arms. He was wearing a spacesuit, the fluorescent orange fabric of which—designed for maximum visibility in space—was almost blinding under the blue-white glare of the morning sun.

He picked up his helmet, and addressed Arbogast.

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"I'll go down and see if the boat's ready, captain."

"Go ahead," Arbogast answered. His voice sounded dead, and there was no expression in his face.

The compressor started again, and Delvia straightened to her full height. Wiping the palms of her hands down the ragged tunic she wore, she glanced at Lex.

"I envy you," she said. "After the winter I feel dirty all through. Nothing I'd like more than a long cool swim."

"I shouldn't try it," Lex responded soberly. "Not after what happened to young Bendle."

Delvia nodded. Unconsciously she lifted one foot from the ground, supporting herself with a hand on the compressor, and began to scratch at the calf of her leg. Lex looked at the reddened area under her fingertips.

"Del," he said. "Are you itching a lot?"

In annoyance, the girl dropped her foot to the ground. She said, "A bit. Sunburn, I guess."

"Then what are you doing in that skimpy rag? What do you want—a case of lupus from the high ultra-violet? This isn't—"

Lex broke off, acutely aware that both Naline and Arbogast had turned their eyes on him. He had been going to say, "This isn't Zarathustra, you know." And that, of course, was a stupid thing to say.

He licked his lips. "You ought to be wearing a whole-body garment, Del," he finished.

"I know, I know. I'm blonde, so it's foolish not to. But after the winter it's unbearable. I'll see if Doc can give me a screening ointment."

"Don't forget that now," Lex said. With a nod to Arbogast, he turned away.

Still smoldering, Lex made toward the spot where Aldric and Cheffy were inspecting their makeshift boat for leaks. Up to the moment when he had to snap at Delvia, his mood had been cheerful enough. The grey chilly fogs and the appalling gales of winter had been like a prison for the spirit; now they were released, and a summer stretched ahead as long as an Earthly year. They had endured the



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worst their new home could throw at them, and most of them had survived.

Inland, in the cleft-valley where they had huddled for shelter, damaged houses were being mended and new ones planned. Here on the beach a party of a dozen people under the leadership of Bendle—recovered from the shock of losing his son last fall—was carrying out a methodical survey of the rocks and pools. It was all changed, of course. The winter gales had done more than spin the windmills for weeks on end. The dunes, the shoals, even the huge rocks, scattered like currants in a sand-pudding, had been stirred into a new arrangement. Nonetheless, the situation felt—well, under control.

Here and there on the beach were brownish, greenish and reddish pieces of organic debris. Bendle's team had looked at these first. Most of them were harmless fronds of a rooted sea-plant, torn up by the last storms; those which were mobile and possibly dangerous, though dying out of water, had been marked with a warning splash of white paint, and one had been pegged to the ground with a sharp stake. A circle—implying DON'T GO NEAR—had been scraped around it in the sand.

Lex paused and looked at this creature. Like many of the sea-beasts, it wasn't easy to kill. Pinkish and greenish, quadrilaterally symmetrical, the paired flexible trunk-like organs, which were limbs, gullets, channels of excretion and reactor-pipes combined, writhed vainly towards him. Leaking a sour-smelling fluid, the staked body humped and pulsed.

*A long cool swim . . .* Lex shuddered and strode on briskly towards the boat.

"Admiring our prize exhibit?" Aldric called, turning his dark glasses as Lex approached. He was a stocky redhead, and not all the privation of the winter had pared away his fat.

"You could say so." Lex set down his air-cylinders and put his helmet atop them. "Anyone hung a name on it yet?"

"No. Haven't thought of one horrible enough. Though Bendle gave it some official label which I can't recall."

*"Polystoma abominabilis,"* Cheffy said. He didn't raise his

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round head, which was capped with close-curling black hair. He was using a hot-spray to apply quickset plastic to a pair of pegs projecting from the rim of the boat's pea-pod hull.

"Any leaks?" Lex inquired.

"No, not now. Two or three cracks we had to seal." Cheffy shut off the hot-spray and stood up.

"What are the pegs for?"

"Rowlocks," Aldric said. He kicked at a pair of long, wide-ended objects lying in the boat's shadow. "These oars pivot in them. The free paddles we were trying last year weren't very efficient, you'll recall. Oars should drive a loaded boat better. We've hung a tiller on the stern, too."

"What makes you so sure the boat will be loaded?" Lex said sourly.

Aldric looked out to sea. "She has settled, hasn't she?"

"Sunk is more the word," said Cheffy. "Probably sifted half-full of wet sand into the bargain. You'll be working in at least thirty feet of water, Lex."

"Luck's been with us so far." Lex shrugged. "It may not be so bad as you think."

Cheffy shrugged. After a pause, he said, "How do you imagine the others made out? I gather we haven't raised them by radio yet."

True enough, Lex thought. Consequently no one was giving much for the chances of the only other refugees known to have reached the sanctuary of this planet.

"Gales must have been pretty bad there on the plateau," Aldric said, turning away. "Well, let's get her down to the water. . . . The captain coming, Lex?"

Shading his eyes, Lex stared back up the beach to where the air-compressor stood. "Looks like he's just ready," he said.

The last band was tied. Critically Naline passed her hand over the slick surface of the suit, touching the knots in turn. As she felt the one on Arbogast's chest, she gave a murmur. "Are you all right, captain?"

"Of course," Arbogast grunted. "Why?"

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"You're shivering," Naline said. In the act of laying down the latest charged cylinder on the sand, Delvia glanced up.

"Nonsense," Arbogast said. He stepped back, avoiding the eyes of the girls. "Is my air ready, Delvia?"

"Yes—three cylinders."

Arbogast bent stiffly to pick them up, paused while Naline—still looking worried—placed his helmet on them, muttered a word of thanks and headed for the waiting boat.

Looking after him, Naline said under her breath, "I hope he hasn't got a fever. You can't see it, but his whole body is—well, sort of vibrating."

"He hasn't got a fever," Delvia said. She turned quickly to the compressor and disconnected the accumulator leads from the motor, then picked up and began to unfold the solar collector sheets. "Give me a hand to get these spread flat, will you?" she added over her shoulder.

Moving to obey, Naline said in a puzzled voice, "But he is shivering, I tell you. And in warm sunlight."

"Not shivering. Trembling." Delvia pegged down the corners of the sheets and coupled the accumulator leads to the output terminals.

"What? Why, then?"

"The ship—what else? All winter long he's been thinking in terms of patching her up and getting her aloft. Now he comes out and sees what's happened. He's grounded."

"Aren't we all?" Naline said bitterly.

"He's a spaceman. I guess that makes it tougher. And he isn't so young any more." Delvia brushed sand from herself.

"Besides," she went on, "don't you remember when things began to get bad at the start of the winter, he kept trying to persuade everyone to take shelter in the ship?" She gestured in the direction of the thin shining arc which was all of the vessel now showing above water. "How'd you like to be in there?"

## II

"AIR," ALDRIC SAID, checking the items of gear over the stern of the boat. "Weighted belts. Boots. Two hatchets—the best we could think of in the way of weapons. We couldn't figure out a way to make an energy gun operable under water."

Lex scrambled lightly aboard, taking the bow thwart and setting his helmet on the duckboard between his feet. "Okay, captain," he said, glancing over his shoulder.

Arbogast was staring out towards the sunken spaceship, his hands hooked together in front of him, his knuckles bright white. He didn't seem to have heard what Lex said.

"All set, captain." Aldric said sharply.

Arbogast let his hands fall to his sides. He swallowed hard before speaking. "I—I changed my mind. I'm not going."

"What?" Aldric took a pace towards him. Cheffy, startled, paused in the act of setting the oars in the rowlocks. Only Lex, who turned around on the forward thwart so he could see the captain, gave a slow nod. He hadn't been altogether unprepared for this.

Arbogast turned, head bowed, and walked off up the beach, his dragging feet leaving smeared marks. The dying horror pegged to the ground sensed his passage and hunched once more to try and strike at him.

"Now just a moment!" Aldric said hotly, starting after him. "You can't leave Lex to—"

"Aldric!" Lex launched the name on the air like a dart. "Aldric, let him alone."

"The hell!" Aldric snapped. "Look, it was his idea he should go, wasn't it? Are we to waste another hour finding a suit to fit me or Cheffy, have it tied up, go hunting for different boots? It took most of yesterday to get things ready!"

"Keep your temper," Lex said. "Think of it his way. How'd you like to have to go see your old home wrecked and smashed, with alien creatures crawling around all the rooms?"

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"Did I suggest it? Did I?" Aldric wiped his face. "And—hell, talk about homes being wrecked and smashed!"

"Calm down, Aldric," Cheffy said. "Lex is right. At least we don't have to see what's become of our homes." He spat over the side of the boat.

Aldric took a deep breath. "Okay," he said resignedly. "So we'd better go hunt out a suit for me, I guess."

Lex hesitated, thinking wryly that just a few minutes ago he had rebuked Delvia for taking risks. But—a survey of the ship was essential before tomorrow's assembly, when they were due to take stock of their resources. He said, "I can go down by myself."

"You're crazy," Aldric said. "Without a phone? When we don't know half the species of sea-life around here? When it's likely the rutting season for things as dangerous as that multi-limbed horror Bendle had to nail down? You're apt to wind up as stock-nourishment for a brood of eggs!"

"I'll keep my hatchet in my hand. Oh, get in the boat!" Lex was suddenly impatient. "We need to know today what's happened in the ship, don't we?"

And, as another argument struck him, "I did two dives last summer, damn it, and the captain hasn't done one before—it's probably safer for me on my own."

Aldric shrugged. "Okay—but I don't have to like it."

He bent to the stern, leaned his full weight against it, and pushed it free of the sand. It rocked violently as he jumped aboard. For a minute or so Cheffy fumbled with the oars, finding it hard to synchronize them; then he abruptly got the hang of it and the boat began to move steadily over the calm water.

"The ship's moved five hundred yards at least," Aldric said from the stern. "Lex, how do you imagine it traveled so far?"

"Rolled, I guess." Who could have predicted that on a moonless world—hence effectively a tideless one—no beach was stable? He went on, "If I remember the old layout correctly, the whole stretch of ground where the ship rested must have been undermined. And we know the bottom shelves gently. As soon as it rolled enough for the locks to

admit water, there was nothing to stop it till it sank into the sea-bed."

"Why did we pick the place, anyway?" Aldric said sourly.

"Reckon we'd have done better on high ground?" Cheffy countered.

"No. No, probably not. Lex, what do you suppose has become of the others? Think they lived through the winter?"

"Maybe. After all, they did at least have the ship's hull for shelter—if a gale didn't topple it."

"Wouldn't have rolled like ours," Cheffy said. "It was like a squashed egg. Arbogast was pleased as hell because he thought he'd put down badly until he saw what the other captain had done. What's his name—the other captain, I mean?"

"Gomes," Lex supplied. "Yes, the ship was badly cracked, wasn't it? And they'll have had sub-zero temperatures for much longer than us. Probably iced solid, half-buried in snow—at least the salt-spray off the sea kept that from happening to us. But there were chunks of ice in the river till two or three days ago."

Aldric turned the tiller a little and peered past Cheffy. "Getting close now," he reported. "Better have the anchor ready, Lex."

"Will do." Lex picked up the wicked-tined device, eyeing the scythe-like blades. That would certainly shock any bottom prowler which tried to hang on to it. A hidden trap. Like the one which had sunk their spaceship in thirty feet of water.

He hadn't answered Aldric's question: "Why did we pick the place?"—any more than Cheffy had; it hadn't needed answering. They'd chosen it because both sea and land teemed with life, offering a double range of potential food-stuffs. Any ocean is a repository of salts, and if they couldn't eat the native protoplasm or needed to supplement it, then simple processing of sea-water would provide a source of trace elements for the diet synthesizers. There was a river-mouth running back into a sheltered valley, and near fresh water was a good site for their town. There were tree-like growths, and wood was a material you could work

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with hand-tools. . . . The choice hadn't been made lightly, and in almost every way it had been a good one.

Now, in the clear water, Lex could see far down the curving side of the hull. At about the limit of vision there were soft darknesses and a motion not entirely due to the changing angle as the boat rocked. Lex shivered.

"Stop rowing, Cheffy," he said, pleased with the levelness of his voice. He cast the anchor overside; it sank, gleaming, as he let out the cable.

"Here's your belt," Cheffy said. "Put it on while I hitch up your air."

"Right—wish me luck." Lex set his helmet on his head and with a quick twist seated it against the sealing-ring. For better or worse, this was it.

### III

HER EYES WERE red with lack of sleep, her voice was hoarse from addressing the dumb microphone, and her head was swimming so that the words she spoke no longer seemed to mean anything.

All of a sudden Ornelle reached the end of her endurance. She thrust the microphone away from her, put her head in her arms on the cool, smooth surface of the table, and began to sob.

She wished she was dead. Like the others.

Once there had been a planet called Zarathustra; people said comfortably, "Zara." There were two hundred and ninety million people who said it. Figures of ash rose in Ornelle's mind and marched across a blazing desert that had been fertile ground. A burning child screamed. She had not seen that. To stay so long would have meant she also burned.

Zarathlstra had ended in such nightmare that—had it been a dream—those who dreamed it would have bitten themselves, threshed wildly about, tried to throw their bodies to the floor rather than slip back into sleep and see more horror. It had been incredible—the sun was yellow-white

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each day as always, round as usual. You didn't see the change. But in the observatories someone said a word: nova. Someone else said: how long? The answer was: soon.

Then into the calm pleasant settled life chaos and terror reached like a scythe ripping into grass. Go now, they said. No, not stopping to take anything. No, not to look for children or parents, not to find a sweetheart or a friend. *Now*.

And if you didn't, they had no time to drag you. *Go*.

White-faced officials. Spacemen moving like machines. Machines moving like men in panic, emptying the holds of cargo vessels on a spaceport in darkness. Useless goods being hurled aside, trucks and helicopters and handcarts moving in with canned and dehydrated foods, medicines, bales of clothing. Diet synthesizers being charged with trace elements. All the time, everywhere, screaming, wailing, and sometimes a shout of savage anger for a moment's peace and silence. People shoveled like broken toys into the bellies of the shining ships.

Then those who had not acted for themselves or been passive like Ornelle, bewildered into letting action be performed for them, felt the truth and came weeping and howling, naked from bed, clamoring like wolves for survival. But the ships were full; the ships were lifting into space.

In the dark holds there had been time to think of those who were left at home. There was a terrible oppressive darkness—not physical but in the mind.

For some reason Ornelle didn't understand, to get clear of the continuum distortions caused by the nova shifting fantastic masses of matter over giant distances at appalling speed, it was necessary to run ahead, under maximum hyperphotonic drive, in whatever direction they chanced to select.

In fact: into unknown darkness.

At the season when its sun exploded, Zarathustra had been at the side of its orbit furthest from Earth and most of the other human-inhabited worlds. It was a recently opened planet—indeed, Ornelle's own parents had been born on Earth and had emigrated when they were young. The idea of trying to beat back around the nova and approach a



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settled system had been considered, but it was impossible; their ship was a freighter, not one of the passenger expresses disposing of as much power as a small star.

Then, squeezed between the narrowing jaws of shrinking fuel reserves and the limits of the ship's internal ecology, the only hope was to find a planet—any planet—with supportable gravity and adequate oxygen. One system in sixty had a planet where human beings could survive; about one in two hundred had a planet where they could live.

At the end of their resources, they had touched down here to find summer ending. They had no time to determine whether this was a one-in-sixty or a one-in-two-hundred world. At first only the lashing of the few who wanted to survive at all costs had driven the majority to behave as though there was hope; in truth, they felt themselves alone, abandoned, condemned.

The arrival of a second ship from Zarathustra, that landed on a high plateau inland, was like a new dawn. Abruptly life, not just temporary survival, seemed possible. While the people worked like demons to build a crude town of wood and scraps from the ship, a team made its way inland to the site of the other landing, to ask news of friends or relations.

There were none; the other ship was from a different continent on Zarathustra. Still, the mere presence of it was comforting; a radio link was organized on an agreed frequency and news was exchanged.

The savage speed with which winter slammed down had prevented any further contact. But soon it became possible to set up transmissions again, the radio was rigged and powered. Ornelle, to whom the presence of the others on this world signified—something—she couldn't have described it—had waited feverishly to learn what news there was.

When intermittent calls had not been answered for some days, most people were resigned to giving the others up for lost. But Ornelle had insisted on being allowed to continue. Now she had spent three long days and most of three nights calling, calling—and hearing nothing.

This then wasn't life she had secured; as it appeared to her, it was mere illusion. The strange planet would grind

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them down eventually. It had already killed half the intruders.

She had tried to convince herself that if her parents had been able to emigrate from Earth, she could live on this alien ground. But her parents had come to a place prepared for them; there were already fifty million people settled on Zarathustra. First one island, then a chain, had been sterilized and terraformed by experts, assessing the risk from native life-forms, whether they were useful, neutral or dangerous. A complete new ecology had been designed to include domestic creatures and even bacteria brought from Earth, and only after half a century's careful organization were immigrants invited, with one of the fabulous human computers called "polymaths" to supervise and protect them.

What chance did a few hundred refugees, with hardly any tools or weapons, a random selection of scientists, and no knowledge of primitive existence, stand in face of a hostile and unpredictable world?

"Ornelle! Ornelle!"

With a guilty start, she raised her head. Standing in the rough doorway, one hand holding aside the curtain and the other carrying his medikit, was Doc Jerode. His white shirt and overfoot breeches were yellowing and frayed, and since being out of reach of tricholene treatments his mass of shining grey hair had thinned to a crescent on the back of his head. But he was picking up a healthy-looking tan already.

"I—I'm sorry, doc. Didn't hear you come in." Ornelle licked her lips. Her throat was stiff after her fit of sobbing, and the words came painfully. "I'm all right. Just a bit tired."

"Tired." The doctor said. "Exhausted is more the word. How long have you been at that radio?"

"Oh—most of the past three days."

"And not sleeping properly, and gulping your meals. Here, take one of these." Jerode rolled a small white pill from a tube in the medikit, giving a rueful glance at the few others remaining as he put the tube back. "Blast you, woman! Why do you have to let me down? I've been telling myself that you

were one of the reliable people we had here, able to think fairly straight. What's the panic about contacting the other party? They probably have a tougher winter on high ground; now the summer's back, do you think they can spare time to sit by a radio and hope to hear from us? Give 'em time to clear up the mess of winter and organize things."

"If they were in that kind of trouble," Ornelle said stonily, "the first thing they'd want would be to know if we're okay. No, I'm afraid there's not much hope for them."

"So that's the weight you've got on your shoulders."

Not quite grasping his meaning, she gave him a puzzled glance. "Weight on my shoulders?"

"That's what I said. You're standing there like a—like a badly stuffed doll. Here, look at yourself!" Jerode unfolded the lid of his medikit and snapped it to the mirror setting. "You ought to be ashamed of wasting your body that way."

Dully, Ornelle regarded her reflection. Her skin was pallid, there was a slackness around her eyes as well as the red of tiredness and tears, and her breasts, pale-nippled, were like shrunken pears. Whereas her belly was sagging forward.

"You want some sun," he said. "Ten or fifteen minutes a day for the first few days, no more—I'm troubled enough with sunburn cases. But I want a color on you like mine in ten days, understand? All over. What's the point of neglecting yourself?"

Flushing, Ornelle turned to pick her clothes from the chair where she had hung them. "I'm sorry," she said after a while. "It's just—oh, you know."

Jerode didn't say anything. She went on, "Anyway, what did you want me for?"

"A bit of advice. I think I want a sensible woman's view before I do anything. You know Delvia?"

Ornelle, drawing her shirt on, gave a bitter chuckle.

"Yes," Jerode nodded. "People feel like that about her. Well, she came to see me—one of the sunburn cases I mentioned—and I checked her over. She's pregnant."

Taken aback, Ornelle made to say something, then changed

her mind and chuckled again, this time without bitterness. She said, "Good for her."

"What do you mean?" Jerode perched on the table.

"Why—" Ornelle made a vague gesture. "I wouldn't have thought it of her. I thought she was simply a bit nympho."

"Yes. You've had some trouble with her in the single women's house, haven't you?"

"Who told you that?" Ornelle demanded sharply.

"People tell doctors things. That's irrelevant, anyway. The point is this. We agreed on arrival that we weren't going to permit children until we knew more about our environment. Embryonic tissue is fragile, and we don't want to start off with teratoid births. That was a unanimous decision on my advice. I think we'll probably be safe in relaxing the order now—in fact, I planned to say so at the stocktaking assembly tomorrow. But it still stands at the moment, and I've been wondering whether we oughtn't to establish a precedent by imposing a compulsory abortion on Delvia."

Ornelle was silent for a moment. She said at last, "Doc, I couldn't agree to that. I had children, you know—back home."

"So did I. Two boys and a girl." Jerode's voice was perfectly level. "When you said 'good for her,' I take it you were assuming Delvia had done this because she was—well, defying a rule which was now obsolescent?"

"I—yes, that was about it."

"Mph. But, you see, I doubt if this was intentional. She doesn't know about it herself yet; it's only fifteen or twenty days gone." He got to his feet. "We're having a preliminary committee meeting before the stocktaking assembly—at dark this evening. I'd like you to think this over and come to the committee to give your views. All right?"

## IV

LEX SLIPPED into the water, feeling extraordinarily isolated from it because of the insulating properties of his spacesuit. To be in water without feeling its coolness was disconcerting.

The vast silver egg-form of the ship lay about one-third buried. The seabed was sandy for a considerable distance from shore, but out here the sand was slack and muddy with no solidity; the heavy hull had sunk slowly into it.

There were no openings to the ship except the locks: two for the crew, two much larger ones for cargo. He could just see the top of an open cargo lock on this side of the hull. That was fortunate. He could enter through there and probably conduct quite an extensive exploration, though sand and mud would have sifted over much of the gear inside.

For a moment a stab of savage anger against fate made him clench his teeth and scowl down through the water. As though it wasn't bad enough to be stranded on a hostile planet with only those resources found in a space-freighter and some odds and ends crammed hastily aboard before their flight; now much of even that scanty material was out here, spoiled by a winter's immersion. What they had taken from the ship after the landing had been dictated by immediate necessity. Diet synthesizers, portable furniture and tools, accumulators, solar energy collectors, medical equipment, books, maps, records and scientific instruments—what few there were—had been taken inland. But very little else.

Lex sighed, telling himself it was useless to worry about what couldn't be helped, and made to continue his descent.

Hooking the handlight on its helmet mount he detached a couple of the rocks which weighted his belt. Neutral buoyancy would be better under these conditions than any weight at all; he didn't like the look of the massed vegetation around the lower edge of the open cargo-lock, and wanted to see if he could drift or swim into the ship without walking through the plants.

Something touched the hand with which he was grasping the cable.

His head and his light turned together, and fell on a reddish creature with many claw-tipped feet and a bag-like body from which fronds, like those of the bottom-weed, swirled in the water. It was walking up the anchor cable, holding tight with groups of four claws, and on coming to the obstacle which his hand presented had paused to investigate. A leech-like neck with a ring of antennae fringing a dark sucking mouth was fumbling along his arm.

The light seemed not to affect it at all; eyes were extraordinary late in developing among these sea-beasts, Bende had said.

It might not be able to harm him, Lex thought. But those claws looked unpleasantly powerful. Besides, it would not be good for Aldric and Cheffy to find this thing swarming up into the boat. It was about four feet long, and a nip or bite from it might be as poisonous to men as human flesh apparently was to similar creatures.

He readied his hatchet. Then, as the beast decided his arm offered a better course than continuing up the cable, he swung the blade and severed the first six or eight of its clawed legs, expecting it to fall.

Instantly the water turned a filthy yellow, blinding him completely, and the fronded bag at the rear of the creature's body burst open. Startled, Lex lost his grip on the cable and began to fall towards the bottom. In seconds he was away from the cloud of yellow ink and could see that the creature had been deflated into a mis-shapeden ball.

Out of it, like darts, plunged a score or more of stiff, wriggling-legged miniatures of the thing he had attacked. All of them were heading toward him. He flailed the hatchet violently, beating them off as he tumbled down, but two of them attached themselves to his faceplate. He saw how their little leech-mouths opened wide, spread to a diameter of two inches, and then began to fold back as if the creatures were going to turn completely inside out.

His feet found bottom. He straightened and clawed the creatures loose, hurling them from him as far as the re-

sistance of the water would allow. By this time the mouths had folded back halfway along the bodies and the capacity to swim seemed to have been lost altogether; the things dropped into the weed and *something*—Lex couldn't tell what because it moved so fast—engulfed them, emitting a moment later a jet of the ubiquitous yellow ink.

Lex was beginning to regret his off-hand decision to make this trip alone. He had never imagined such a totally hostile environment.

He was standing a few yards from the cargo-lock, swaying because he had made himself too light for stability, yet not light enough to float. The compromise might be satisfactory; it would enable him to make slow leaps like a man in barely perceptible gravity. His legs were calf-deep in the bottom-weed and his boot-soles were apparently in squelchy mud, but he didn't seem to be sinking in.

Something passed between him and the gleaming roof of the surface. He glanced up and saw a pulsing creature with a flat plane-like body and clusters of irregularly-distributed tentacles dangling beneath. It took no notice of him.

He ignored it and aimed himself at the cargo-lock. A carefully-judged leap, dreamlike in the water, brought him with a slight bump against the upper left corner of the opening where he could grip a projection and look inside.

Sand had sifted across the tilted floor, and patching the sand now were weeds and little round sessile animals with fern-like filter-mouths, which sorted drifting plankton from the water. On the walls of the hold clung sucker-rooted clusters of trailing cell-associations, vaguely similar to stranded algae colonies.

The ship was becoming a water jungle. Lex knew at that first glance that salvage operations were going to take much of this long summer, and at that it was a toss-up whether power cutting tools could be brought down to reclaim the valuable metals from the hull itself. Since the sand-floor was relatively clear, he pushed himself down to it and ventured a little further into the ship.

Fortunately, a few of the internal doors were still closed.

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Strange animals, lost in the corridors, scuttered at his approach or adopted stiff threatening postures which he might have found ludicrous but for the circumstances. He made his way along the spinal corridor of the ship, toward the forward control sections.

The control sections held the most valuable items. And here the chaos was terrible.

Computers, loosed from their mounts in readiness for removal, then left behind when winter shut down, had fallen across the floor and shattered against the wall. The navigation room was a shambles out of which he could pick nothing but a few odds and ends to go in his net bag.

He made his way towards the stern, where the engines were located. Something had happened here, too; a gap big enough to walk through in the wall of the fuel-reserve store was the first sign of a succession of chemical explosions that had wrecked most of the drive equipment beyond repair. His light revealed smears of multi-colored corrosion, cracked plates, instrument panels pockmarked as though by shrapnel.

He could sum up his report for tomorrow's stocktaking assembly here and now. Nothing in the ship worth salvaging except raw materials. He turned dejectedly back the way he had come.

He first thought when he approached the cargo-lock from inside was that the sea had gone dark. Then he saw that the opening was blocked by something. His light showed a slick dark surface, pulsating and straining, splitting open along horizontal lines to emit hordes of tiny flapping creatures toward which the hanging strands on the walls reached out eagerly.

At the sight of this, a tremendous anger filled Lex. He spoke aloud, and the words sounded eerie inside his helmet.

"Damn you," he said. "It's still ours! In spite of everything—it's still ours!"

He raised the hatchet and stormed forward at the creature sowing its multitudinous young. They swarmed like midges around him as he chopped, ripped, tore at the leathery flesh of the beast, with his hand as well as the hatchet; plunged through the very middle of it, through writh-



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ing blackness, and out into discolored water where hopeful lesser carnivores were already gathering to pick at carrion. Then, covered with foul ichor and trailing some ribband-formed internal organ of the beast, he floated to the surface in dismal triumph, leaving the shabby symbol of his defiance to die on the bed of the sea.

### V

ZARATHUSTRA'S DAY had run about twenty-two and a half hours Earth-basic time and, as was customary on colonized planets, had been cut into an arbitrary standard twenty hours. Here on the other hand noon-to-noon ran about twenty-eight Earth-basic hours. Some attempt had been made to modify one of the clocks they had with them, which of course all ran to Zarathustra time, but there had been more demanding tasks. Now clocks and natural time were totally out of gear, though it was to be hoped that someone was keeping track.

Was it the first sign of reversion to actual primitivism that people were suddenly thinking in terms of daylight and dark, or a matter of mere convenience? Jerode pondered the question as he looked out over the little ramshackle town from the crude verandah of the headquarters office. Most people were coming for evening chow, walking slowly and wearily back from their work.

He had already had his meal, wanting a little time to think before the steering committee assembled at dusk. It had consisted as usual of a damp mealy cake from a diet synthesizer wrapped in two crisp leaf-like growths from the salad-tree and a chunk of preserved all-fruit about the size of a thumbnail. So far the salad-tree and only three more local plants had been found completely safe and nutritious—most other plants contained some sort of allergen.

But that was going to have to change. As a matter of urgency they would be compelled to tinker with one of the synthesizers so that it would secrete an antidote to the

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allergen. Once that was done, they would be able to choose from a range of nearly thirty vegetable foods.

And the trace element hoppers on the synthesizers were almost empty—during the worst part of the winter they had had to subsist on nothing else but snythesizer-cake—so another immediate job would be to set up salt-pans and get sea-salt in quantity, then fractionate the residue into appropriate sub-mixtures and top up the synthesizers. . . .

Jerode passed a tired hand across his face. There was no end to the list of essential tasks.

The river was a blessing. It wasn't very wide except at the mouth, and it was shallow enough for wading, even now when the winter snows were melting around its headwaters. Last fall they had located the town on both sides of the river simply because they didn't want to have to carry timber too far, and there were two stands of trees, one on either side of the valley, which they were using. In mid-winter, of course, it had been frozen part of the time, but wind-borne salt spray had helped to thaw it quickly. They had never lacked drinking water, although the baths had had to be shut down—anyway, in such bitter cold there were more important uses for fuel. And once they set up salt-pans they would get distilled fresh water as a by-product.

The town. Well, it wasn't such a grandiose word as "city", at least. But for a mere fifteen buildings it was still a pious hope. At first they had slept in the ship, but the cramped quarters were inducing frightening tensions between the refugees. He himself had insisted that an early start be made on housing. So long one-story buildings had been set up, using split-log planks on a frame of natural tree-posts, and Lex had doctored a diet synthesizer to secrete a tough organic glue which had endured—most of it—through the winter. A barracks for single men, another for single women, and five others divided crudely into screened-off rooms for couples who had either been together when the evacuation started or who had linked up for mutual comfort.

There had been problems when new attachments formed during the winter, of course. But the few fights could be ascribed to mild claustrophobia. The traditions of Zarathustra,

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like most settled colonies, had been opposed to violent sexual jealousy. And the plans were in hand for extending the—well, the married accommodation.

Jerode sighed. Yes, there was going to have to be some kind of discipline to make these *ad hoc* unions stick—something stiffer than the casual suit-yourself practices of Zarathustra. Because there would be children if the assembly agreed, and children must not become a community charge.

He wished he knew more about primitive psychology. But it would have to be a cut-and-try process, like everything else.

Four of the original fifteen houses were currently derelict. They had been incomplete at the start of the winter, and they had been cannibalized to reinforce the walls of the biggest buildings. This one, the headquarters hut which served as a kind of administrative office, was in fairly good shape, though. Jerode gave the split-log planks of the wall an approving push.

His mere touch dislodged one of the planks and it fell to the ground.

Heart sinking, he bent to examine the site of it. On the brownish smear of glue which had held the log, a cluster of yellow specks moved uncertainly as though startled by the sudden light. Some parasite which found the glue digestible. Add one to the list of immediate jobs.

"I see you've found our latest problem, doc," a voice said from behind him. He straightened and turned. It was Fritch, a burly red-faced man who had been an architect on Zarathustra and had supervised all their building here.

Jerode gestured at the yellow specks. "Is the trouble serious?" he said.

"Pretty." Fritch shrugged. "Little Hannet leaned on a plank where that mold or whatever had been at work, and it gave way and she fell ten feet. Wasn't hurt, luckily. Landed on a bed."

"Well, are all our houses going to fall on our heads?" Jerode demanded.

"No, don't think so. I've put a team to work making some nails out of scrap sheet metal. We can reinforce the

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worst-affected houses until you or Bendle find something we can add to the glue and make it unpalatable. Bendle says he thinks there's antimony in some of the sea-plants; we could burn some and add the ash and see if that works. Anyway," he finished, raising his food to his mouth, "I see I needn't have hurried over. I thought I'd find everyone else here."

"Arbogast is coming," Jerode said, looking towards the river. "Bendle is back from the beach, and so are Aldric and Cheffy—saw them go for chow a few minutes ago. Did you see Lex?"

"Yes. He went down to the ship. Says it's bad."

"We didn't expect much. Still," Jerode amended, frowning, "if he says it's bad we can take it for truth. If Arbogast had said it, I'd have assumed he was disheartened. What *did* Arbogast say?"

"He didn't go down, I gather." Fritch spoke around a mouthful of food.

"Couldn't face it, hey? Well, I'm not surprised."

There was silence for a moment. Then Arbogast came in sight around the corner of the single men's house, heading their way. He walked with a bowed head. When they greeted him he muttered his reply and went straight into the hut to take his place at the committee table.

Jerode lifted an eyebrow at Fritch, who shrugged.

"Not taking it well," the burly man said under his breath. "Hell. We're short enough of capable people as it is."

Jerode nodded and answered equally softly. "I asked Ornelle to come to the meeting. I've always pegged her for one of the more sensible of the older women, and we're going to need people to take charge of human problems now as well as just the various kinds of work to be done."

"I'm pinning my hopes on young Lex," Fritch said. "He's the most original mind we have. The rest of us—hell, let's face it. We're shackled by the things we were used to at home."

A few minutes later they were all assembled around the table: Arbogast at the head by custom, Jerode on his right.

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A man with a label of rank was an automatic choice for seniority. There were also Fritch, Aldric, Cheffy, Ornelle—subdued and wan—and Bendle, looking very tired. Last, facing Arbogast, was Lex.

There was silence. They looked expectantly at Arbogast, who had his hands before him on the table palms up with the fingers curved over. He didn't raise his head.

In a grating voice he said suddenly, "I—I think I should vacate this place in favor of someone who deserves it."

He got to his feet, thrusting his chair back with a scraping noise, and walked out of the room looking neither right nor left.

Bendle and Ornelle looked startled and made to stop the captain. Jerode and Fritch exchanged glances and signaled to the others not to speak. When Arbogast was gone, Jerode made up his mind. He moved to the head of the table and cleared his throat.

"I'm afraid the captain isn't very well," he said. "He's been—well, affected by what happened to the ship. You know about this; don't you, Lex? Aldric? Cheffy?"

Nods came back. Jerode looked down at notes he had made, spread on the table before him.

"Very well then. We'll proceed to business. I'll give my report on the health situation, then we'll hear from Fritch about accommodation, Lex regarding the ship, Bendle about our summer biosphere, Aldric and Cheffy about other material resources. . . .

It wasn't too bad. It wasn't too bad at all. When they had got through all the reports and the list was complete, Jerode knew that he ought to make his recommendation about permitting births. He did so, adding the rider that it should be limited to the immediate future so that children now conceived would be delivered before the winter.

"It was for a woman's view on this that I called in Ornelle," he finished. "You see, we have a special problem of group discipline." He told them about Delvia, warning them that it must go no further, and then looked to Ornelle for comment.

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"As to the question of children," Ornelle shrugged, "I think we've got to say yes. There were few enough of us to start with, and now that the winter has wiped out the other party—"

"Ornelle!" Jerode cut in, seeing the astonished looks on faces around the table. "There's no proof of the others not surviving."

"Nobody's said anything about going to see," Ornelle retorted.

"That's only because we need all our manpower until our worst problems are solved," Jerode soothed.

"Nonsense. If anyone here seriously thought they were alive, they'd be eager to get up to the plateau and see if we can help each other." Ornelle spoke with finality. "Anyway, I don't see why we need to argue about Delvia. From what I know of her—and believe me, I've had a chance to see her close too—she won't want the child anyway. It'd burden her."

"I agree," Jerode said. "But it's not the point. It's a disciplinary question. We agreed on landing that we'd have to impose some rules and keep them strictly for mutual safety. And the rule against conceiving children was accepted by all."

"Listen!" Ornelle said, leaning forward on the table and looking from side to side at all the others. "I haven't been in these meetings before, but I can tell you something you don't seem to know. It wasn't conscious choice that made all the women agree to this ban. It was helplessness—apathy—whatever you call it. This evening we've gone over lots of nice tidy future plans. I want to know this, because it's got to be faced." She slapped the table. "What are you going to do if people won't agree, now they feel a bit more confident, to do exactly as self-appointed experts tell them? Well?"

## VI

"I'M GLAD YOU thought to invite Ornelle," Lex said in a low voice. Jerode glanced up from the papers he was shuffling back into the envelope he used to hold them.

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The others were already at the door. Ornelle herself was outside and out of earshot. Nonetheless, Jerode spoke equally softly.

"Why do you say that? She hasn't been exactly constructive in what she said, and I'm regretting the idea now."

"No, your impulse was the right one. You know what the trouble with most of our people is, don't you?"

"Tell me your diagnosis," the doctor invited sourly.

"Remoteness from reality. Not in any sense that you'd say that, of course—not in the form of a psychological disorder. A straightforward consequence of the way they're used to living." He leaned forward a little.

"Consider what most of us used to do to get the necessities of life. Five hours a day, five days a week in some task absolutely remote from the tangibles of feeding, clothing and sheltering ourselves. In technical, managerial, administrative, supervisory tasks.

"Look at those of us who've had the responsibility devolve on us, this little group which has adjusted fairly quickly. Fritch, a creative person used to thinking of material problems. Bendle, a research scientist who can let his fascination with brand-new flora and fauna drive him day and night. Aldric and Cheffy with technical backgrounds, people to whom their work was also play. And you, used to working for people. No, don't pretend modesty. Now you're stuck with the job Arbogast couldn't handle, and modesty is going to be a handicap."

Jerode studied Lex thoughtfully. This was an aspect of the young man he hadn't encountered before. He said, "I see what you mean. Go on."

"Go on?" Lex made a vague gesture. "That's it. That's why I said I was glad Ornelle came tonight. Because she's typical of our human resources. You aren't. Fritch isn't. Hell, we've got a continental manager somewhere in this crowd—has anything been heard of him lately? We've got people who ranked all of us back home. And they're like dummies!"

"Yes, all I've heard of Manager Nanseltine lately—or of his wife, for that matter—is a stream of criticism and a lot of hypochondriacal disease symptoms." Jerode sounded wor-

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ried. "But—well, how about you, Lex? If you're opposed to being modest, I guess that entitles me to tell you that you've got the most original mind in sight. If I remember rightly, you'd never been in space before the—the flight. But you served as scratch crew to replace one of Arbogast's men who was on ground leave and got lost, and Arbogast seemed impressed. And it's getting to the point where, if we hit a snag, we think of asking you for a solution before puzzling it out ourselves. Yet, I know practically nothing about you."

Lex laughed and got to his feet, stretching. He said deprecatingly, "We were almost all total strangers, weren't we? We just got thrown together."

"Lex, I think I might have a straight answer." Jerode looked the younger man straight in the eye; he had to tip his head back to do so. "You've explained why Fritch and Bendle and the rest of us are more fitted to cope than some of us. I want to know how you managed it." A further point struck him, and he added, puzzled, "And another thing. How old are you?"

Lex hesitated. He said finally, "Well, it's no credit to me personally—it was all done for me. I'm twenty, Earth-basic years."

"What?" Jerode took a pace backward. "Now look here, Lex, I'm a medically trained man. Twenty's ridiculous. You're a biological thirty, and that's the age I've always pegged you at, give or take a year."

"That's right. That's—uh—protective coloration." Incredibly, Lex seemed embarrassed. "You see, I'm a trainee polymath. Tetraploid genes, modified neurones, vision extended into the infra-red, heightened reflexes, accelerated nerve-signal transmission, compacted bone-structure, induced immunity to practically everything. Oh, they gave me the full treatment!" He laughed a trifle self-consciously.

Jerode's mouth had fallen unashamedly open. Now he realized it and snapped his jaw shut. He said, "A *polymath*! Why didn't you say so?"

"Because when I say trainee I mean trainee." Lex's tone was level but sharp. "And if Arbogast hadn't moved out of that chair tonight, I wouldn't have told you. I've deliberately



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avoided any kind of medical check by you in case you spotted something. You're to keep this to yourself."

"No! No, you can't say that." Jerode was sweating. "Damn it, Lex! Of all the people here you're the only one who's been given any kind of training for such a situation, and it's up to you to take the responsibility you're fitted for."

"Think again," Lex said stonily. "Think why I was given an appearance ten years over my chronological age. You, and all the rest, are thinking of me nonetheless as 'young Lex.' How old are you, doc? Seventy?"

"Sixty-nine," Jerode said.

"Exactly. Average life-expectancy on Zara is—was—one hundred twelve for men, one hundred fifteen for women. What's it going to be here, without geriatric clinics, tissue regenerants, orthophased diets, maternity units? In one generation it'll be down to an average of twenty or less, and someone your age will be a remarkable old man! But right now none of the older people who used to have rank on Zara will accept orders from a mere youngster. You know that. And one more thing!" He poked a finger through the air at Jerode.

"True, a polymath is trained to take charge of a newly developed planet. A *particular* planet. And the job is given him at the age of sixty or over. At ninety he's usually retired because the work is done. But he's spent ten years of his training just learning the planet to which he'll be appointed. Get that? And a planet like this might not even be chosen for colonization."

He moved toward the door, leaving Jerode silent. On the point of going out he turned back for a moment, his face dark and stern.

"I don't *want* the job this way, anyhow. Do you see why?" And he was gone.

Outside, the alien star-patterns loomed out of the soft velvet sky. Moodily Lex walked towards the single men's house, from which drifted the sound of laughter. But he had only gone a few yards when his name was spoken out of

shadow, and he turned to see Ornelle standing uncertainly, her hands linked before her.

"Yes?" he said.

She moved closer. "Do you mind walking down with me?" she said in a low voice. "I—I was wanting to ask you a favor. I don't want to be presumptuous, but after this meeting we had I think somebody's got to take responsibility. . . ." Her voice trailed away.

He sighed, knowing the sound was too faint to be heard, and said encouragingly, "Yes, if there's something I can do just ask."

She fell in beside him, not looking at him. "It was talking about Delvia that reminded me," she said. "You know Naline?"

"Of course."

"What do you think of her?"

Lex considered for a moment, wondering what was going to follow. He said, "Frankly, she hasn't made much impression on me. She's probably naturally shy and doing her best to hide it by being artificially brash. Rather unsure of herself, I imagine, but above average in intelligence."

"Attractive?"

Now why ask that? Lex's interest began to quicken. He gave Ornelle a sidelong glance. "In a way, I guess. Her long dark hair is in her favor. But why are you asking me, anyway? Our standards of attraction are going to change, and change fast, under these conditions!"

"All right, I'll come to the point." She turned and faced him. "Naline isn't pretty—she's got a nice figure, but she's not more than a child and the figure is just from youth; it'll go and she knows. I'm . . . Well, I had twin daughters at home, Lex, not as old as her, but nearly. And you see—there's Delvia, who doesn't care much about anyone else."

"I begin to see," Lex murmured. "How bad is it?"

"Very bad, I guess. Oh, maybe I should have done something!" Ornelle made a distracted gesture. "But I didn't want to start any worse rows in that horrible claustrophobic place. You know Del. She came to the top simply by asserting her own interests, and she's quite a capable person. She

knew better than to turn her attention on anyone mature, but Naline was natural prey, and of course poor Naline was flattered when Del courted her."

"You mean that literally," Lex nodded. "Del wouldn't be one to settle for half measures."

"Of course not. But to her it was just a stopgap." Ornelle caught herself, then gave a sour chuckle. "Yes, I guess that's an apt term. She has some conscience, but not much. She's not tossed Naline aside now the winter's over and there's a chance to get men again. But Naline can't assert herself; she doesn't know how, and sooner or later she'd going to have an emotional storm because Del has found a man she wants and is parading the fact."

"Found a man," Lex echoed. He was frowning. "In your view, she hasn't done so already."

"Her pregnancy? She's probably been taking men in the shadows since it got warm enough to lie down without frostbite."

"What do you want done?" Lex demanded. "Aside from cushioning the shock for Naline, I don't see—"

"Exactly, but how?" Ornelle cut in. She put out her hand and laid it on Lex's arm. "Lex, I don't think I could ask any other of the single men to do it, but you seem more self-possessed and sensible than all the rest. Somebody has to pay attention to Naline until she works out of the hero-worship stage."

Lex didn't answer for a moment. He was working a calculation in his head—not cynically, just assessing facts. There was a slight majority of women now; marginally hardier than men, they had lost seven to the males' fourteen and fewer of them were falling sick. On the other hand you had to consider not human beings so much as brood-stock. . . .

His mind revolted. He wasn't trained to that peak of detachment, though he knew it was required of polymaths when they took up their ultimate posts.

"I—I'm very sorry, Ornelle," he said at length, and had to lick his lips. "I can't do it."

"Very well," Ornelle sighed. "I didn't know you were going with any of the girls, but—"

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"No, I'm not. I haven't even got my eye on one. There's a point of principle. Our survival here depends on facing the total environment as it is. The psychological repercussions of acting a lie even between two people are a potential handicap. Like it or not, we're going to be hammered into place. And it's got to apply to Naline along with everyone else."

His voice had suddenly hardened. Ornelle drew in her breath sharply. "Lex!" she said. "That's not like you—where do you get that idea?"

He shrugged and turned away. It was true, but whether he should have said it or not was another matter.

She made no attempt to call him back. He walked straight to the single men's house. There were only half a dozen men in the house, chatting among themselves; the rest were out, working or relaxing.

He couldn't help wondering whether one of them was with Delvia.

## VII

"WHAT DO YOU think, Lex?" Jerode said. He was visibly tense. They were all coming together now—everyone who had survived the winter, the poisons, the sicknesses, the cold—in the assembly which had been called to take stock of the situation.

Standing in the shadow of the headquarters hut, watching the way people were grouping themselves as they sat on the gently rising ground and trying to read implications into the arrangement of individuals, Lex shook his head.

"I think Ornelle may have been only too right," he said.

"So do I." Jerode tapped a sheaf of paper in his hand. "We made out this list of priority jobs. I was wondering if we ought not to have drawn up an assignment list, too, naming everyone."

"Why didn't you suggest it?"

"One: Arbogast was the person I'd have looked to for an opinion, and he isn't fit to give it right now. Two: it seems

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to me that it's better to build on a nucleus of volunteers for every job—then the ones who hang back can be shamed into joining the others."

"Shrewd," Lex nodded.

"I did right, then?" Jerode was hungry for the answer.

"Doc, don't look to me," Lex said with some anger. "We'll just have to see if it works out. Now I wonder—" his voice dropped as his eyes roamed the growing crowd, "why there are those vacant spaces near the front. See them? Ah yes. The old lions."

"What?" Jerode blinked at him.

"Manager Nanseltine isn't here yet, or his wife; that man Rothers who was on the spaceport computing staff; Delvia, come to that. The ones with rank hung over from home or assumed since they got here by pecking-order methods. Here they come."

Heads turned in the seated crowd. Arbogast was approaching, and with him, talking volubly, were tall, stout Nanseltine and his florid, graying wife. Arbogast clearly was taking no notice, just enduring what was said.

"All right, here we go," Jerode muttered, and moved to welcome the captain.

Leaning negligently against the hut Lex studied the crowd's faces. Yes, there were factions. On the useful side were the young men and women like Aldric, Cheffy, possibly Delvia: capable, intelligent, willing to face the facts and work. Many of them were sitting near Bendle, with pencils and scraps of paper ready to take notes. Others were ringed around Fritch; these were mostly members of his building team. Not for the first time he was grateful for the sheer statistical accident which had ensured a majority of people under forty and yet so few children. Bendle's son, at seventeen, had been the youngest adult; Naline was a month or two older and had succeeded him.

Of course, that had been due to the season. Nine out of every ten children on Zarathustra's northern hemisphere were on life-education courses away from home at the time of the disaster. And the infants had succumbed—all four of them—to that infection of the lungs. . . .

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Present, not past, he reminded himself. On the useless side, then, there were the Nanseltines and their ilk. And in the middle of these useful and useless categories, almost half the total number: category unsettled. . . .

An expectant hush fell.

Slowly Arbogast drew himself to his feet. He looked dreadfully old, as though the past day had aged him fifty years. But his voice was firm, and carried across the crowd.

He said, "Fellow . . . castaways! Up till now you have in a sense looked to me as a—well, a leader. In space, I was willing to accept the rôle. I was fitted for it. But al' I know is space and spaceships. On a planet's surface, I think it better for everyone if I turn over this unenviable position to someone suited to the circumstances."

Lex looked at Manager Nanseltine and his wife the instant he realized what was coming. Nanseltine didn't react, but his wife did.

The corners of Lex's mouth turned down sharply. So that was it. He might have guessed.

"I propose to you," Arbogast went on, "that the business of our assembly should be conducted by someone we all respect and admire for his invaluable work. Dr. Jerode, will you—?"

He made a quick flourish; then he picked up his chair and carried it away to the side of the crowd distant from Nanseltine. A buzz of comment rose and faded.

Jerode looked at Lex and shrugged. He turned and called across the crowd, "Is that—uh—acceptable?"

There was a ripple of applause.

"Very well, then." The doctor walked forward. "I'll do my best. As you know, we're in quite a fortunate position now. . . ."

Lex managed to sort a great many more of the crowd into the appropriate categories by watching them while Jerode reviewed the urgent work ahead. The useful ones frowned, but were cheered by realizing that a planned program was in hand. The useless ones also frowned, but then grew restive and began to mutter among themselves.

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"The ship!" someone called at the back of the crowd. "Hey! What about the *ship*?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Twenty voices shouted agreement, and a pattern of nods made heads wave like grass under wind. Jerode, uncertain, stood blinking, and Aldric—on his feet to walk to the front—hesitated with his notes in his hand.

"Very well," the doctor said at last. "If it's your wish I'll call on Lex to report on the ship's condition."

The useless ones were those who shouted. The others only came alert. Exactly what one might have predicted, Lex thought as he unfolded his long legs and stood up.

"The ship," he said in a clear, penetrating voice which made his every word keen as a knife, "is in thirty feet of water. Salt water. The locks were open." His eyes flicked to Arbogast; he saw him wince and regretted it, but he had to rub in the facts. "It rolled over. Everything that was loose was thrown against walls or ceilings, and most of it smashed."

He paused, trying to assess the effect of what he was saying.

"Accordingly," he resumed. "Accordingly, the best we can call the ship from now on is a stockpile of metal and other raw materials."

He glanced at Jerode. "I think that's all I can say."

"Just a moment!" a voice called from near Nanseltine's place. Lex turned; Nanseltine's wife was speaking urgently to her husband and several people nearby were nodding vigorously. Now, heavily and slowly, Nanseltine got up.

"Who went over the ship?" he demanded, setting his shoulders back.

"I did." Lex was still standing where he had been.

"You did!" Old mannerisms were returning to Nanseltine, that was obvious. "Are we to take it that this—this defeatist view is exclusively yours?"

"You're welcome to put on a suit and come down with me to see for yourself." Lex weighted the words with deliberate sarcasm. "That is, if you feel up to risking it."

"Don't descend to personal insult, young man!" Nanseltine glowered. "What I, and a lot of other people here, want to

know, is why we haven't got the expert opinion of a spaceman instead of this—this amateur estimate."

There was a silence. Someone whispered, "Which spaceman?" The words carried; the speaker hadn't intended them to.

Arbogast heard. With dignity, his head erect, the old man—suddenly it was natural to think of him by that name—rose and faced Nanseltine.

"Manager Nanseltine!" he said. "Perhaps you're not aware of the condition of the *spacemen* among us. You seem aware of rather little."

A ragged cheer commented on the insult.

"I had four men. One suffered a fractured skull when a bale of goods hit him as we were clearing our holds on Zara. One, who is present, had to have a leg amputated after frostbite. One was swept out to sea last winter and presumably drowned. One was on ground leave on Zara. That leaves myself and Lex, who worked under me on the flight and in whom I, if not you, have some confidence. I had meant to go and inspect the ship. I didn't do so, for reasons I—" His voice cracked, and he ended on a lower tone, "I would rather not try to explain. I will only apologize. Excuse me."

He lowered his head and walked away, out of sight as he turned the corner of the nearest building.

Nanseltine had the grace to sit down and shut up. Unfortunately not everyone else did. Rothers, the former computer chief at the port from which they had left Zarathustra, jumped up in his place.

"You mean there's no attempt going to be made to refit the ship and get us off this—this pestilential mudball?"

"It's a heap of scrap—didn't you hear?" called Cheffy.

"Sit down and shut up!" chorused a dozen young voices. For a moment it looked as though the trouble was going to die down. But then—and Lex clenched his fists in impotent anger—Ornelle tossed fuel on the flames.

"The other party had a ship," she said. "That one isn't under water. And we haven't heard anything from them, so it's likely they have no further use for it."



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The lunatic proposition snatched at the fancy of those who would rather delude themselves than face facts. At once a roar of excitement went up. People leapt to their feet—Nanseltine, Rothers, forty or fifty in all, demanding to be heard. In vain Jerode shouted for order.

Lex drew a deep breath and let out a sudden wordless bellow, so shocking that everyone froze, blinking in surprise. Before they could recover, he had lanced a bald statement at Jerode.

"Notice of motion, doc. Resolved that from this moment if anyone doesn't work for any reason other than sickness or injury, that person doesn't eat. Request one minute's silence for thought."

The minute wasn't necessary. The quickest-minded of the useful ones—Cheffy, Aldric, even Delvia—saw the point at once and raised their hands. It was a majority of more than two-thirds.

Cowed, for the moment at least, the useless ones made no more trouble.

It was not until the assembly ended just before dusk that Arbogast's body was found among the rocks at the end of the beach, with a spent energy gun clasped in the right hand. His hand was now the only recognizable feature except his feet. He had turned the beam to widest spread and leveled the weapon against himself.

## VIII

THE SHADOW of his suicide lay chill across the hot bright days that followed. Towing a sled laden with scrap salvaged from the ship up the beach to where Cheffy's gang was working on the solar boilers and stills, Lex wondered how long the precarious balance was going to last. Twenty days had passed, then thirty, without disaster. But the days were like grains of sand dropping in an hourglass. And eventually . . .

Cheffy raised a face half-masked with dark glasses to ac-

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knowledge the delivery. Lex tipped the scrap to the ground and stepped back, wiping sweat from his forehead.

"How are things with you, Cheffy?" he said, low-voiced. "Going smoothly, by the look of all this."

Cheffy hesitated, then shook his head. Glancing around to make sure no one would overhear, he said, "No, Lex. Not so smooth. Matter of fact, I'd been wanting a word with you, and now might be as good a time as any." He strolled a few paces, casually.

Lex caught the handle of his sled in one hand and drew it behind him as he fell in alongside.

"I'm wondering how hot it's going to be in mid-summer," Cheffy said. He paused, judging that they were out of earshot of his crew. "I'm getting a lot of complaints about noontide work, and not frivolous ones either—I had a case of heatstroke yesterday."

"So I heard," Lex said. "If heat's our only problem, we can either develop the siesta habit or else find some jobs that can be done in shade during the hottest part of the day."

"It isn't just that," Cheffy said. "It's a question of temper. Look, I gave Rothers a job to keep him sweet, put him in sole charge with half a dozen assistants."

"Yes, you said you were going to give him a solar furnace and put him to melting down scrap."

"That's right. Well, he had an argument with one of the others, lost his temper, hit the guy—knocked him against the back of the furnace-mirror and bent it all to hell. That's why it isn't out here and working. I had to get my two ablest handymen to restore the curvature. Meantime Rothers is snarling at everyone and slowing down my work."

Lex sighed. "I think it's about time we cheered ourselves up somehow. I'll talk to the doc about it. An encouraging report to the next assembly—initiate some leisure-time hobbies, perhaps, stimulate a competition, provide some luxuries. . . . I'd been wondering about music. Handcraft some instruments together."

"Just so long as somebody's thinking about the problem, I guess it's pointless for me to help with the worrying,"

Cheffy said. He forced a smile and raised his hand. "See you, Lex."

He turned back to his work.

Yes, Lex thought. The physical jobs could be done. Given the rest of the summer, the town could be made moderately comfortable, twice as warm as last winter, with half as much room again for people to stretch out. The food problem was almost licked. There was adequate water. Clothing was still a difficulty, but it was amazing how long fraying fabrics could be made to hold together by oversewing the edges.

A related point struck him. He glanced towards Delvia again. Yes, Naline was there. While the men from Fritch's gang were loading up the charged accumulators on their truck, she was keeping her back turned and her head bowed as though to avoid having to see Delvia laughing and joking with the men.

It hadn't come to an explosion yet. But it would. *Damn* Delvia. Her old tunic was becoming a collection of rags linked by threads; instead of darning it like the other girls she had simply reduced it to a kind of kilt and left her handsome breasts bare to the sun. That was one thing at a resort on Zarathustra where sex was a fashionable holiday pastime, but another altogether in a community of interdependent workers.

And yet she was a tough and reliable worker herself. That was the core of the problem. She had not been assigned to her job; she had just seen that someone would have to make sure charged accumulators were in regular supply for the power tools and other purposes, so she had proceeded to co-ordinate the arrangements in an orderly and economical manner.

In the end, they had made no public fuss about Delvia's pregnancy. Jerode had agreed to slide over it in view of the tension at the stocktaking assembly and had spoken privately to her the following day. Of course she had accepted the rebuke—mildly and meekly—and then demanded a shot to terminate the process.

The idea wasn't an attractive one. But Lex was beginning

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to suspect that this involuntary colony could do with many more Delvias and far fewer Ornelles and Nalines.

"Lex! Lex!"

He paused and turned. Running towards him from the direction of the river was Aldric, waving and shouting. The first glance told him it was urgent.

"What is it?" he demanded when he came close.

"Just you come and look," Aldric snapped, whirling around and making his way back to the river.

It was only a matter of moments before they came in sight of what had been yesterday a wide calm expanse of steadily flowing water. Yesterday! This morning, even, when Lex came down to start work.

Now it was reduced to a rickle. Irregular curves of mud had been exposed; a few writhing creatures lay gasping in puddles, and water-weeds were already turning grey-yellow and decaying into a liquescent mess on exposure to the full sun. The mouth of the river normally passed such a flow that the course of the fresh water could be traced out a hundred feet from shore; now the sea was coming into the river.

Lex halted, appalled. They had staked everything on the river. Aldric was planning to draw water for drinking and washing via a sedimentation system a mile up stream, to replace the crude bucket-pumps they still depended on.

And now---this!

He wasn't the only person Aldric had summoned to witness the phenomenon. Jerode was here already. Work had stopped on all Aldric's projects, and those of his team who were busy here were clustered around the bank, discussing the question in low, worried voices.

He walked swiftly up to Jerode, who acknowledged his arrival with a nod.

"What do you make of it?" the doctor demanded grimly.

"When did it happen?" Lex countered.

Jerode gestured at Aldric, who answered. "The level began to drop about an hour ago---maybe an hour and a half. It was slow to start with, so I guess we didn't notice. But then it dropped really sharply. You could watch it going down, like water running out of a tub. What do you make

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of it? A seasonal stoppage? Because without the water, we can just tear up our plans."

"No, not a seasonal stoppage," Lex said. "Remember we got here at the end of summer, and this river was still deep and wide. Besides, a winter stream dries up slowly, over a period of days. This is due to a blockage higher up—a solid blockage."

Jerode nodded. "That makes sense. What could have caused it—a landslide? Or . . ." He rubbed his chin, looking thoughtful. "Do you reckon there could be a dam-building animal here?"

"There not only could be," Lex said after a pause. "There is."

Aldric and Jerode looked at him, puzzled.

"Man," Lex said. "If you remember, we found that this river leads to within a short distance of where the other party set down."

"Lex, that's an absurd suggestion," Jerode snapped. "We've tried and tried—we're still trying occasionally—to make contact with the other party, and there's total silence. They *must* be dead."

Lex shrugged. "I was just thinking aloud. Nonetheless, whatever the reason for this blockage, we've got to clear it—though I guess we can manage for a few days, for drinking purposes only, with the water from the solar stills."

"But I was thinking of asking permission to take an expedition up to the other party's site now we've cleared all the loose gear from our own ship, to see what happened to them and maybe to cannibalize their ship as well. Maybe we can combine the two operations."

"In any case," Aldric said, "we'll have to send someone out. With explosives. We've got to get that river back, or we're done for."

## IX

IT WAS INEVITABLE that an emergency assembly should be called to consider the problem.

Jerode sent for the members of the steering committee and called them into session in the headquarters hut to discuss what suggestion they might lay before the assembly. When they had gathered Jerode spoke first. "Lex appears to think that the other party might still be alive and might have—uh—been responsible."

All heads turned on Lex, who shrugged. "I was only wondering. But as I mentioned to the doc, I've been contemplating setting up an expedition to the other party's site. Up till now people have been trying not to think of what must have happened to the other party. Even Ornelle, who was nearly hysterical a month ago over their fate, doesn't refer to them any more. I think we may have swung too far the opposite way. It's time we went to see."

"That sounds sensible," Bendle said. The gray-haired scientist rubbed a raspberry rash on his cheek, souvenir of an encounter this morning with a trailing plant they had nicknamed blisterweed. "You're proposing yourself to lead this expedition, Lex? I'd have no objection. I'd just suggest that, instead of taking all your salvage team, you select one of my people who's intimately acquainted with our data on the local flora and fauna. Perhaps likewise one of Fritch's people, too, in case there's a natural blockage and you want expert advice on how best to demolish it."

"Sounds sensible," Fritch rumbled. The others also signified agreement. You could see their thoughts on their faces: *he's a capable young fellow, tough, levelheaded—and rather him than me.*

"All right, let's settle for that," Fritch went on when it was clear the others approved. "And leave it to Lex to pick his companions. Half-a-dozen should be enough—we can give them our energy guns and they can carry rations and water for a week, which will be plenty."

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During the afternoon, Lex had gone the rounds of the various work-gangs and picked his companions. From his own salvage team he asked for Minty, a wiry young woman in her early thirties with the figure of an athlete, and brawny, imperturbable Aykin; these two had been among the first couples to indicate their intention of starting a family, and Lex took that as a sign of determination.

Fritch recommended to him a sober young man called Aggereth, who had proved himself reliable and hard working. Lex had met him in the single men's house often enough, and thought the choice a good one. Rather to his surprise, Bendle's recommendation was a woman, Lodette, plump-faced and dark-skinned. She had been concentrating on the study of the inland ecology and knew it intimately.

Lex himself knew the way because he had accompanied Arbogast during a brief and hazardous trip at the end of last summer to visit the other refugees. But by then the country had been dying towards winter; at this time of year it would be altogether different.

Nonetheless, he thought someone else from that first expedition was advisable. He consulted Aldric, and the red-head proposed Baffin, a tall, fair man who had studied hydraulics and hydrodynamics. Lex was pleased. Baffin had acquitted himself well on the earlier expedition, and would have been his selection anyway.

Lastly, at Jerode's insistence, Lex agreed to take one of the girls who had constituted themselves into an emergency nursing staff during last winter. Zanice was known to Lex by sight, as everyone in the town was, but he could not remember ever having exchanged a word with her.

It seemed like a balanced group, and Lex was confident he would have no trouble during the trip from any of his companions.

In accordance with Jerode's precedent of allowing people to seem to volunteer when a tough job was ahead, even if they had previously made up their minds, Lex asked his chosen six to scatter themselves through the crowd and come forward when he called for them. There was a risk of a rush of volunteers; there would be a psychological lag

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before anyone without previous preparation would decide to face seeing what had happened to the other party up in the hills, and he had primed the steering committee members to improvise reasons why hotheaded undesirables who came forward were actually indispensable down here. He had a clear idea of which people might stand up in addition to his own group.

At dusk, the gathering began. Jerode's request for members of the team, the six got up—not too hurriedly—and stood while he noted them, nodded, and beckoned them to him. But there was one other volunteer: not one of those he had expected, indeed almost the last person he would have named as likely to come forward.

"I want to go," Delvia said in a clear firm voice.

Now what was to be done about that? Lex's mind raced. He saw that Naline—still, despite everything, dogging the older girl's footsteps—was reaching up from the ground where she sat and tugging at Delvia's hand. Impatiently Delvia shook her fingers loose. Lex began to recite the qualifications of those he wanted to accept on the expedition, but no one paid any attention. They were looking at Delvia.

Although it was cool after sunset, she had defiantly added nothing to her working dress—undress, rather. Now she was apparently regretting it, with several hundred pairs of eyes on her. Perhaps embarrassment would change her mind? No, Lex decided regretfully. Not in Delvia's case.

Well, he had to improvise a reason for turning her down.

"Uh—Delvia," he said randomly, "I think we have enough to make up a team now. You're doing too much good work here to—"

"Claptrap," Delvia said.

Lex gave Jerode a worried glance, wondering if the doctor could save him from saying straight out that he didn't want Delvia to come. Taking his momentary silence for resignation, Delvia started to pick her way forward among the seated crowd.

"No!" Suddenly there was a shrill cry, and Naline was on



her feet, clawing at Delvia's back. "No! You aren't going to go!"

Her hand caught the piece of cloth which was Delvia's only covering; there was a ripping sound and it tore away. With a gasp Delvia spun around to face Naline.

Tears coursing down her cheeks, voice rough-edged with hysteria, Naline shrieked, "Why don't you say why you want to go? Why don't you say it's to get away from me? Why don't you say it's so that you can get Lex the way you've had every other man you could drag in the bushes?" She raised the cloth in her hand, head-high, and waved it wildly. "What do you want with this, anyway? Practically everyone else has had your clothes off already!"

She hurled the rag away from her, whirled, and with her hands out before her like a blind girl ran into the darkness.

There was total stillness, as though the watchers were trying to persuade themselves this thing had not happened. It was broken by Delvia in a tone of absolute self-possession.

She said, "May I have my tunic back, please?"

It was passed to her. She sorted it out after a fashion and knotted it about her, covering her breasts as well as her hips. Then with arrogance that took Lex's breath away she resumed walking toward the other volunteers.

"Delvia!" he said. "Please go back to your place."

She stopped, cocking her head; a faint smile passed over her face. She said, "Oh! So you're afraid Naline was telling the truth!"

"I don't think she said anything which was news to us," Lex rapped. "Go back to your place, I said. We would prefer that you did not come with us."

A little color showed in Delvia's cheeks now. But her voice was still level when she said, "May I ask why?"

"Because occasionally you give way to stupid impulses—as for instance not so long ago when you got yourself a case of sunburn through inexcusable carelessness. And there's another thing which I won't state straight out. But Dr. Jerode knows what I mean. An expedition into wild country has no place for someone as careless as that."

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"I see," Delvia said after a pause. She looked not at Lex but at Jerode. "I see. Very well then."

With perfectly good grace—or so it appeared—she went back to where she had been sitting. A buzz of comment rose and on Jerode's bidding stilled again. After that the meeting had no more trouble.

But right to the end Delvia was studying Lex, and there was a smile on her lips which he found somehow disconcerting.

### X

"KEEPING RADIO watch for you is about all I'm fit for now," Elbing said ruefully. He lifted his pegleg from the ground to relieve the pressure on his stump. He was the last surviving member of Arbogast's crew; many spacemen suffered from circulatory troubles, and the frost of last winter had cost him his right leg below the knee.

Lex clapped him on the shoulder. "Okay, come in the hut. The rest of the group are inside. I'm going to find Jerode."

The air was muggy and oppressive, and dark clouds fringed the seaward horizon. Lex shrugged and went off in search of the doctor.

Lex strode up to the curtained doorway of the infirmary. When he was a few paces away, the curtain swung back and Ornelle came out, her face pale.

On seeing Lex she froze for a moment, then let the curtain fall and continued forward.

"Is Jerode in there?" Lex demanded.

"Yes, but you can't see him. He's busy." There was a bitter ring to Ornelle's voice which made Lex stare.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Yes. Something you could have prevented. Only you said it was a question of principle, if I recall. . . . Naline has tried to follow Arbogast's example." Ornelle gestured at the hut. "Jerode says she'll live, but it looks as though she's blinded herself. Are you pleased that she's being—what did you call it? Hammered into place, wasn't that it?"

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"Because of Delvia?" Lex forced himself to ignore the stab.

"What do you think?"

"Exactly how did it happen?"

"She and Delvia were charging the energy guns for your expedition," Ornelle said bitingly. "I imagine they had an argument. Maybe Delvia said straight out that she'd used Naline as a toy for the winter and that was all their relationship meant to her. Anyway, Naline took one of the guns and went off by herself. Bendle found her among the trees. The gun wasn't charged—it only flashed. But that was enough to blind her."

"And Delvia?"

"Her!" Ornelle stamped her foot. "Still charging your guns, I guess. Sooner or later she'll probably notice that one is missing. Maybe she noticed already. But I haven't seen her."

Lex drew a deep breath. He said, "You're determined to lay this at my door, aren't you?"

Ornelle looked at him with smoldering eyes.

"*My* expedition, *my* guns, *my* responsibility!" Lex rapped. "Well, listen to me, Ornelle! I'm tired of this and I'm going to put up with no more of it. Have you done anything for Naline? Well, have you? Have you tackled Delvia about it?"

Ornelle flinched. Defensively she countered, "I asked you to—"

"Why me? You watched this from the beginning, and you didn't interfere—neither you nor any of the other supposedly responsible women in the house. All winter you let it stew; then the most you were willing to do was try and lay the job of picking up the pieces on my shoulders. I am *not* going to carry your guilt for you, and nor is anyone else. Do you understand?"

Ornelle's mouth worked. Suddenly her mask broke. She screamed a filthy name at him and slapped him on the cheek. He rode the blow impassively.

"Bastard!" she shrieked. "All you men are bastards! You won't hear a word against that bitch, that whore, that—"

He moved now, caught her arms and twisted them behind her, locking his steel-strong fingers around both her wrists. The curtain of the hut door parted to reveal a startled Jerode.

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Lex shut off Ornelle's obscene mouthings with the palm of his free hand. He said, "Tranquillizer shot, doc. She's in a state of hysterical jealousy."

A few moments later Ornelle lay in drugged slumber on one of the couches in the hut. Lex looked down at her, shaking his head.

"What happened?" Jerode demanded. Lex explained.

"I ought to have realized it before," he finished. "She's mad-jealous of Delvia, who doesn't seem to let our plight stop her enjoying what she can get out of life. I was thrown off the track by her saying she was concerned about Naline because she had two daughters at home." It occurred to him that the phrase was silly now.

"You think—" Jerode began. Lex cut him short.

"I think you'd better inquire in some detail what happened in the single women's house during the worst part of last winter, doc. With a view to preventing a repetition. Ornelle's disinterest was faked. I'm afraid we may well have more nervous collapses of this kind, mainly among women who lost families and feel obscurely guilty, like Ornelle, about doing anything to replace them."

"It fits," Jerode said heavily. "And I don't know why I've not realized it before. I guess pressure of administration has taken my mind off my real job, which is medicine, after all. Lex, I have to say this—you're partly to blame."

There was a pause. Finally Lex turned away. His back to Jerode, he said, "I know. I'm sorry. Ornelle tried to load me with a responsibility which wasn't mine, and I lost my temper because I've been unwilling to accept a responsibility which really does belong to me. We can't go on burdening our only trained doctor with all the administration. When we get back from this expedition, I'll turn my salvage team over to Aykin and Minty and get on with my proper job."

Jerode exhaled like a man coming up from an unendurable time under water. He said, "Lex, I can't say how glad I am. How long are you figuring on being away?"

"Oh, about seven days altogether," Lex said, "If the vegetation on the way is as thick as Lodette predicts, well need two full days to get up to the other site. Then two days to

clear the blockage if we can, and pick up salvage. And three to come back. We won't be able to follow the river on the return trip—we'll have to hack our way through undergrowth."

When he had left Jerode, Lex was in a thoughtful mood.

Without realizing it he had wandered toward the spot on the beach which Delvia had taken as a site for her self-allotted task. Raising his eyes from the ground, he saw her ahead of him, surrounded by accumulators connected to solar collecting sheets. On a rack of sticks tied with string were the seven energy guns the community possessed, apparently fully charged.

So someone had brought back the gun Naline had used, and told her the news. Yet she was going on with her work, humming to herself. She had wrapped her tunic casually about her hips as before.

One of the accumulators was fully charged. She picked it up, set it on another and those two on another and carried the three of them ten paces to a waiting handtruck. The ease with which she did it took Lex aback. The things were heavy.

He said, "Delvia!"

She straightened and turned, wiping her sweating palms on her ragged kilt. Seeing who had spoken, she nodded. He went closer.

"They told you about Naline?" he said in a rough voice.

"Yes. One of Bendle's team brought the gun back." She waved at the rack. "They're all ready for you, by the way."

Lex simply stood, gazing at her. After a moment she grew irritated and snapped, "Well? Well? Are you waiting for me to burst into tears?"

"I'm not sure," Lex said slowly. "I've been wondering why Naline took a gun which presumably she knew was uncharged."

Delvia gave him a curious look. After a moment relief was plain on her face. She said, "Thank you, Lex. Were you also told that she took care to be seen with the gun beforehand?"

"No, but I rather imagined so." Lex moved to the hand-

truck and sat down on one corner of it. "I think I should have asked for your side of the story earlier. Tell me now."

She hesitated. Then, with uncharacteristic bitterness, she said, "I don't have an ounce of maternal instinct in me. Aside from that I've always been what you'd call a natural animal. I have reflexes. It's easier to give in to them than fight them, and it's more fun."

Lex nodded. "No harm in that. Provided you don't get a kick out of having men quarrel over you."

"I *don't*!" She dropped to her knees on the hot sand and spoke earnestly. "Listen, I didn't know what I was getting mixed up with when I let Naline hang herself around my neck—not being the motherly kind. That was what pushed Naline my way to start with. Here was this gang of biddies competing for her as an adopted daughter, with Ornelle slaving at the head of the rest. Naline hated the idea of being adopted. She wanted to think of herself as independent. I guess she fooled me. In fact she was—still is—a self-dramatizing, greedy, clinging adolescent. I wasn't fussing over her like a hen with chicks, and I was reacting against Ornelle and all the others Naline was trying to evade. So she attached herself to me. That was all, at first."

"Then it got really cold. Do you remember what it was like in midwinter?" Her voice was low and fierce. "Well, one night there she was, climbing under my blanket with me, stiff with cold. I figured out afterwards what I should have done—oh, yes! I knew my reflexes were set to detonate. I ought to have given her my blanket and gone out in the snow to cool off. I didn't. Shivering in my sleep with a pitch-black storm outside, I wasn't able to think of noble gestures. And I tell you this!"

She slapped her thigh with her open palm. "If Ornelle or anyone else says she could have done different, it's a lie."

"Go on," Lex said in a neutral tone. "I'm not accusing you."

"Thank you." She bobbed her head sardonically. "I'm a long way from my adolescence, and I didn't have one like Naline's anyway. It took me a shamefully long time to figure out just what was attaching her to me. It wasn't the simple thing I thought. She wasn't even seeing me, Delvia-

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as-is. She'd invented an image of a Delvia that never was, sweet and noble and so on in quantities enough to justify the way she was throwing herself at me. Why do you think I've been taking men like—like *trophies* even when it was still so cold it was damned uncomfortable and no fun at all? I've been trying to smash up this nonexistent Delvia! I was sick of shallow, silly, selfish Naline. The things she said at the assembly weren't aimed at me, you know. They were aimed at this person she'd invented to excuse her own conduct."

"Did you tell her to come out and work here with you today?"

"I did not. I didn't tell her to go away, though. I'd been hoping she'd recovered from her hysteria. I don't want her to hate me or anything—I just wanted her to see *me* and put up with me. Then she tried to pick a quarrel, and I kept calm, and she accused me of hating her and snatched up a gun and ran off. I didn't go after her. It had been given to me as expended, for re-charging. Lex, I swear I didn't know there was enough power left in it even for a flash discharge."

He looked at her for a long time. At last he said, "Go and talk to Jérôme, Del. Ornelle's had a breakdown, and it was something she said that made me want to listen to you. The doc will listen too. And between you you may be able to figure out how to prevent you being lynched when the news about Naline gets around."

## XI

THE LITTLE EXPEDITION moved off at first light the next day—partly to get as far as possible before having to camp for the night, partly to avoid making a ceremony of the departure.

A wind from off the sea was piling up the clouds which had been on the horizon yesterday, the sun was hidden, and as the clouds crossed the edge of the land they began to be carried upward.

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With luck they might not spill their rain till they were over the high ground inland, then get it over before Lex and his companions caught up with them. But it meant that their first few miles were covered in a depressing gloom.

Last year, right at summer's end, they had found it fairly easy to get up to the place where the other ship had landed. Now it was tougher. Newly sprouted plants of all kinds fringed the river and a network of roots meshed out from the banks. The disappearance of the water had left them dry and fibrous, and the rotting bodies of freshwater animals were piled in what had been the last puddles.

The mud had dried out, and gave a good footing. They made fair progress all through the morning. Around them were strange noises: oddly-shaped birds, yellow-grey and brown, shrilled and boomed, carapaced insectoids hissed and stridulated, and sometimes there were bubbling grunts which suggested that some large creature had been taken by what passed for its throat and strangled to death.

Lex and Baffin took turns leading, their energy guns in their hands. Lodette was walking second, her bright eyes darting from side to side, warning them when they approached strands of poisonous plants such as blisterweed or halting them out of caution when she saw something not previously encountered. Zanice and Aggereth—both apprehensive—followed, and Minty and Aykin walked companionably together at the rear, Aykin toting the heavy radio on his broad back.

It was nearly noon when one of the unpleasant bubbling grunts broke from a few yards away, and they halted in their tracks on seeing branches flail as though a monster were thrashing about on the ground. Lex heard Aggereth draw a sharp breath.

Gun in hand, he advanced to the edge of the riverbed. Over his shoulder he said, "Lodette, we haven't run across any big carnivores, have we?"

"No. And the environment typically wouldn't support any—a beast over say fifty pounds weight would be too heavy to be arboreal among such thin branches, and too big to move quickly through the undergrowth."



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"Then what's that?" Lex said, and was surprised to hear his voice steady.

Peering out of the mesh of vines and creepers less than ten feet away from him was the head of an animal. It was identifiable as a head only because of its gaping mouth; evolution here had not elaborated so many organs out of the basic gastrula as on most human-colonized planets. The hide was mottled. On a jointed neck the head weaved from side to side.

"That's—uh—" Lodette had to pause and swallow. "It's a herbivore, Lex. I've seen a couple of them nearer the coast. They were at our saladtrees."

The mouth closed, opened; the head tilted skyward. The bubbling grunt came out—and Lex slashed the beam of his energy gun down, across, and around. Vegetation shriveled, and jerked back as though the branches were springs in tension; a waft of stinking smoke came to them.

"There's your carnivore," Lex said softly.

On the ground crouched, or squatted, or simply rested, was a thing that looked like a soft black bag, mouth uppermost. The mouth was closed around the body of the creature they had first seen, and was sucking at it, eroding it, dragging it down.

White-faced, they watched with horrified fascination. It seemed impossible that the black bag, big though it was, should engulf the herbivore—it was the size of a pony. Yet it was doing so. Now, with a sudden plop, the herbivore vanished completely.

"The damn thing must live in a burrow!" Lex said. "We can only see the mouth."

*"Lex! Watch out!"*

The cry came from Aykin, standing five yards to the rear. He dived forward. But Lex, whose reflexes had been sharpened artificially like many other of his talents, had needed only the noise of a stone falling on the river bank to alert him.

Inches in front of his feet, almost masked by mud, dead weeds and intertwined roots, another black bag was opening. Its movement cracked off the disguising mud. It gaped,

shut again, then opened to an incredible diameter, almost four feet, so that Lex could see down into it. Its interior was lined with ferny villae, and these were hanging limp.

He said thoughtfully, "Lodette, would I be right to think that this thing needs to drink and eat simultaneously?"

"You mean—these are both part of the same creature?" demanded Aggereth, aghast. "Then we're probably standing on it!"

"Quite possibly," Lex nodded. "This is a hazard of following the river which I hadn't anticipated. Well, we'll just have to be more careful. Lodette, do you see any complex of characteristic signs we can watch out for?"

The biologist bit her lip. She turned around slowly. While she was making her mind up, the black bag in the river bed—still vainly gaping for water—rose questingly upwards, till its rim was a yard high and marked the earth like an ulcer. A thick nauseating stench choked the air and gases bubbled underground.

"Yes, there you are!" Lodette said suddenly. "I've just realized that whenever we've heard the noise of one of those herbivores going down before—about four times, isn't it?—we've been surrounded by *that* particular color and shape of trailing shoot." She pointed at a lush-looking bluish-green stalk with heads on it reminiscent of asparagus. "I'll make a wild guess and say that the herbivores are partial to it."

"They eat it where they aren't themselves eaten, is that it?" Minty said with a wry smile. She was holding Aykin's muscular arm with both hands.

"Exactly. So where we see the shoots are common, we can be fairly sure we need to walk warily."

"Excellent, Lodette," Lex said. "All right, let's move on."

"What about the—the thing?" Aggereth said, gesturing at the black bag.

"It's dying without the water from the river," Lex said. "There's no point in doing anything about it."

But around the next bend what he had been expecting happened. The greenery walling the river-bed closed in, and they were faced by the mouth of a dim tunnel. He

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sighed, and on glancing around was met by looks of dismay.

"It's far worse than it was last year," Baffin said.

"Yes." Lex looked up at the sky. The clouds were darkening, and though the rain had held off so far he felt it would break any time. He came to a decision.

"We'll rest here," he said. "Aykin, I think this would be a good time to talk to Elbing."

The others made no attempt to hide their relief. They set down their burdens and stretched themselves gratefully. Aykin made contact and indicated that Lex should go ahead.

Lex spoke to Elbing, summing up their morning's progress and mentioning the tunnel into which they were now going to have to plunge.

Elbing acknowledged the information laconically and passed on good wishes from the community.

"Uh—how's Naline?" Lex inquired.

"Better, I guess. But there's some pretty strong feeling. The doc has posted a notice giving his view of the facts—saying about knowing the gun was uncharged, and so on. It's a pretty unpleasant business, though."

What were they going to find when they got back? Hate? Hysteria? Demands for a trial? Lex didn't like to think of the possibilities. He made to sign off.

"How's the weather?" Elbing inquired.

"Rain's held off so far," Lex told him. "With luck—"

At that exact instant, a crackle came from the radio. He looked toward the hills, then jumped up. Yes, the dark clouds were piling on the high ground now; he saw lightning like threads of silver wire sewing across their cushiony surface. Very distantly, the rumble of thunder followed.

## XII

THROUGH THE GREEN gloom of the enclosing vegetation they moved slowly but steadily. Lex frowned on seeing how dense it was and how close it came to the river-bank.

They had agreed to make the best possible distance this

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first day. Accordingly they did not halt at sunset, but continued with handlights. But the strain of scrambling up the irregular river-bed—they were climbing more than walking at some points, often over loose rock—grew too much.

At length Lex halted and sighed. He said, "Enough's enough. Let's clear a camp-site and wait till morning. Baffin, burn the vegetation back a bit. The rest of you get down—we don't want to scorch your hair."

The others obeyed. Then, with scything blasts of their guns, Lex and Baffin shriveled the cover for a distance of fifty yards from where they had halted; the stench was foul, but lasted only a few minutes.

They made a fire with dry roots and heated a drink for themselves, then worked out a watch rota and settled exhausted on their bed-rolls. Except for an occasional animal cry, it was very quiet.

Suddenly Minty, who had been apparently asleep, sat up with an exclamation. She snatched her handlight and played it on the ground.

"Water!" she said. "Look!"

Brown trickles were coursing over the pebbles and mud. Lex, thinking of the catastrophe if the river came flooding down on them in the night, hastened to look. But the trickles were only small, and showed no sign of growing.

He said, "I don't think that the flow re-started. It looks more like the first effects of the storm that's been brewing ahead."

"I should have thought of that," Minty said sourly, moving her bedroll out of the lowest part of the streambed.

"Think we ought to tell Elbing?" Aykin suggested. "Just in case?"

Lex shook his head. "It won't carry to the coast, Aykin. It'll have been absorbed in the ground before it gets that far."

He was right. By morning, the sky was clear again, and only a few puddles acknowledged the rain as they continued up-river. Now it was definitely "up"; they came to long rapids and little sharp falls, and they began to see clear sky again for a hundred yards at a time. While breakfasting they

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had spoken with Elbing, who told them Jerode had intended to talk to them this morning, but was still asleep after a disturbed night. Ornelle had had another hysterical fit, and someone had filled Delvia's bed with blisterweed, causing a tremendous row in the single women's house.

At midday they knew they were in striking distance of their goal; they occasionally glimpsed the highest rocks in the neighborhood of the plateau, and once Lex saw a gleam of sunlight reflected on what he took to be the hull of the ship.

He sighted a flat-topped boulder, almost cubical and thirty feet on a side, half-sunk in the soft ground inside a bend of the river's course. It would make a good place to break for a noon rest. He told the others to make for it, and gratefully they scrambled up the smaller rocks around it to reach its flat top and lay their burdens down.

Aykin rigged the radio. Lex heard Elbing acknowledge their call and announce that Jerode was with him.

"Doc!" Lex said. "How are things going?"

"Badly," was the short reply. "Have you reached the blockage in the river yet? It's hot again down here today, and we need that water back—the stink of our sewage alone is enough to drive you crazy."

"No, we haven't found it." Lex caught the wry expressions on the faces of his companions. "We're almost up to the plateau now; we should reach the other party's site in about two to three hours. We could strike directly toward it from here, and in fact—"

"Don't!" Jerode cut in. "Follow the river and clear that blockage." There was a brief pause, and Lex had a vision of Jerode turning to see if he was overheard. In a low tone he went on, "Lex, the water shortage is just compounding a situation that's explosive enough already. I've saved the sight of Naline's right eye, but her left needs a new cornea and I can't do anything about it with the resources we have. Elbing says he told you about Delvia's trouble—I'm inclined to accept her version, but there's a strong hostility to her among the other women." He paused . . . then faintly, as

though picked up by accident, "Hell—what does *he* want? . . . Tell him I'm coming, then."

A sigh, and more loudly, "Lex, I'm being asked for. Do your best, for all our sakes. And get back here as quick as you can."

Baffin was leading on the next stretch, with Lex bringing up the rear. Now the vegetation had thinned to mere scrub, there was less need for watchfulness, but they could progress no quicker because every few hundred yards was a dry falls, a wall of friable rock six, ten or twenty feet high, up which they had to clamber on exiguous toe-holds.

Encountering one of these, about eight feet high, Baffin prepared to do as usual. He poised himself before it, flexed his lean legs, and jumped up to get his arms and the upper part of his body over the brow. He hung there for a second, staring wide-eyed at what he could see over the top; then instead of levering himself up and over, he fell back with a gasp.

Lex darted forward. The others reflexively dropped their hands to guns.

"What is it?" Lex snapped.

"Take a look for yourself!" Baffin said, wiping his forehead. "We've found our blockage all right. What do you make of it?"

Lex pulled himself up the rocks, swung his legs on to the higher level, and stood up. Shading his eyes, he stared at what had so astonished Baffin. From here on, the river's course led directly up into the craggy range of mountains of which the plateau formed an outlying extension. But a couple of hundred yards ahead of where Lex was standing, there was a wall. It not only blocked the riverbed, but extended a considerable distance either side, joining with natural slopes to form a huge basin. At the foot were rocks and clay; at intervals there were wooden posts, and between these and above the piled rocks were what Lex judged to be hurdles of woven branches plastered with sun-dried clay.

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He was still staring at it when Baffin got up beside him and turned to help the others over the obstacle.

"What is it?" Minty called from below.

"It looks like a dam," said Lex harshly. He went on studying it. At the sides of the riverbed there was a pair of extra-sturdy posts, and—although it was hard to make out details—he had the impression that between these posts the mud-plastered hurdles were not fixed in place, but only jammed, to form a kind of crude sluice-gate.

But—He took a pace forward, unconsciously, out of sheer surprise. A glance to right and left showed him the approximate level the pent-up water would ultimately reach. Making the most generous possible allowance for the strength of the improvised dam, this thing was not going to last!

Now they were all up beside him, exclaiming in amazement. Aykin was putting their thoughts into words with the soft-spoken interruption came.

"This thing is man-made!" Aykin was saying. "That means—"

"Stand where you are."

They froze. From among the rocks where he had been crouching a man in a tattered grey shirt and brown breeches rose into view. He was burned teak-brown by the sun and his eyes were narrowed against the glare. But he held an energy gun, and it didn't waver.

"We were expecting you," he said conversationally. "We listened to your radio as you came up-river. All right—go and take their guns!" he added more loudly, and other men as sunburned as he came up from their hiding-places.

"What the—" The question broke from Baffin. "You've got no right to hold us up like robbers."

"Do as they say, Baffin," Lex said. He tossed his own gun to the ground.

"But—I"

"Do as they say," Lex repeated firmly.

"Very sensible!" the first of the ambushers said. To his companions he rapped, "Hurry up there!"

"I believe we met last year," Lex went on. "Cardevant—isn't that your name?"

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"Correct." The sunburned man peered at him. "Oh yes! I recall you came up with Captain Arbogast last year. And I seem to remember the hothead standing next to you. You don't look quite as crestfallen as I'd expected," Cardevant went on, picking his way forward. "You realize, of course, we've got no intention of giving you back your water supply until our reservoir is full."

"Oh, we aren't worried about that," Lex said calmly.

"No?" Cardevant cocked his head. "Please—uh—Lex. Please don't try and fool me. I told you we listened to your radio reports to your base. Only a short while ago your doctor complained that your sewage was stinking."

"Certainly. But the water will come back of its own accord. Your dam is holding so far, granted. But it'll break in—I'd say about seventy-two hours, maybe rather less. It seems absurd to have wasted so much effort."

As though he had been struck on a sensitive spot, Cardevant snapped his teeth together and drew his breath in with a hiss. He said, "You cheap little defeatist bastard! I'm not going to stand here listening to your sneers."

He whirled, gesturing to his companions. "Get them moving!" he barked. "Take 'em up and show 'em to Captain Gomes!"

## XIII

BY THE TIME they were hustled in front of Captain Gomes, Lex was feeling sick. The amount of effort that had been expended here was unbelievable. And the decision to expend it was incontestably insane.

It must have taken the combined efforts of a hundred or more people working like slaves to set up the dam. And it was going to fail soon.

Like slaves, it seemed to Lex, was the right term. For as they were herded up the last few hundred yards to the plateau, he had seen gangs of men and women, filthy and hunger-lean, sweating to reinforce the dam with a man screaming orders at them. On the plateau itself, at one edge



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of which the ship rested—like a squashed egg, Lex observed wryly—one would have expected to see some kind of construction, but not what was actually there: mere shacks of the same mud-plastered hurdles, set up like animal-stalls. There was a stink of sewage and smoke, there were open fires burning in mud-brick grates, and crude pots hung over them on tripods.

Dull-faced, men and women stared at the outsiders as they passed, and overseers howled them back to their tasks.

Around the ship a frame of timber had been erected; ropes dangled from it untidily. Under the hull, stones were being hammered in by weary, half-starved workers, and others were leaning on long wooden levers. A child about ten-years-old was beating time on a metal pan to keep their efforts in rhythm. Clearly an attempt was being made to jack up the ship so that its crushed lower plates could be welded tight.

Lunacy! Lunacy! Lex clenched his fists. He had had this as a suspicion at the back of his mind, but the reality was infinitely worse than anything he had imagined.

Face like thunder, Cardevant was striding ahead of them. Too horrified to contain herself any longer, Minty turned to Lex as they were escorted along.

"Lex, they'll never do it before the winter! If they don't make any preparations they'll—"

Cardevant spun around. "We'll get through the winter like we got through the last one!" he declared. "And if the weaklings die it'll be no loss, understand?"

Under an awning improvised from bedding, Captain Gomes sat on a stool poring over notes made on the back of scraps of paper. There was another man with him that Lex had met before—Probian was his name. He had been Gomes's second officer.

"Good work, Cardevant," Gomes said, leaning back as the seven captives were forced into a group before him. He was a gross man; he wore only shorts, and his hairy torso gleamed with greasy perspiration. "So these are the people who set out

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to smash our dam. Not willing to let anyone prove he has guts, apparently!"

Lex and his companions stood sullenly returning his gaze.

"Get their packs off," Gomes grunted. "See what they have with them. Come on, you—drop your gear!" He folded his arms.

The others looked at Lex, who shrugged, nodded, and lowered his own pack. Cardevant and Probian moved to inspect what they were carrying.

"They all had guns, by the way, captain," Cardevant said, reaching into Lex's pack.

"Seven guns!" Gomes raised his eyebrows. "And you took them with one. That's a fair return on the investment."

"They got rations with them, too," Cardevant said.

Gomes responded to that, hunching forward and laying his hands on the table. It was Probian, though, who sighed on seeing synthesizer cake. There was also a pack of salad-tree leaves, which Cardevant looked at suspiciously.

"What's this for?" he said. "To keep the cake moist?"

Still Lex didn't react, and after a moment Cardevant tossed the leaves aside and put the cake up on Gomes's table. A few crumbs adhered to his hands; he licked them off.

"That all?" the captain said.

"Everything of interest," Probian answered.

"Pity! Still, it's a windfall. I wonder what else they have down there. . . ." Gomes rubbed his bearded chin. Apparently he did not follow the Zarathustra fashion of having the face follicles extirpated, which had kept most of the other refugees smooth-chinned.

"Eight hundred well-fed and healthy people," Lex said. If Gomes was contemplating a raid on the other refugees, he wanted to rub in the reasons why he shouldn't as hard as possible.

What a fantastic catastrophe! It was obvious what had happened. The lack of any capable men to plan for the rational course of action and the privations of the winter, had fostered a grim determination to stop at nothing to refurbish the ship and get away. The fact that the ship, designed for a proper cradle in a spaceport berth, had been

crushed out of shape by its own weight hadn't daunted them; those who opposed this crazy plan were being driven to work regardless.

Consequently, nothing of genuine value had been done at all. . . .

"Yes!" Gomes was saying. "Eight hundred people with no ship of their own."

"How did you know that?" The words burst from Minty.

"You kindly informed us," Gomes retorted. "We were fully intending to enlist your co-operation on a joint project to get our ships aloft, if not to return to civilization, at least to orbit and get out sub-radio signals to help searchers. But when we re-erected the antenna which had blown down during the winter storms, we heard an extraordinary woman moaning over the microphone, weeping because your ship was in the *seg* of all places."

The captives exchanged startled glances on realizing that it must be Ornelle, Gomes was talking about. The captain gave a short laugh. "I'd have liked to see Arbogast's face after what he said about my landing. It's a shame you didn't bring him with you."

"We couldn't very well," Lex said stonily. "He killed himself."

"Faced with a spineless defeatist lot like you, I might have done the same!" Gomes rapped. "Some of this crowd up here were ready to give up and make themselves comfortable—like beasts. But we put a stop to that soon enough. Hah! We listened to this sobbing woman till it turned our stomachs. Were we to let your cowardly defeatists ride parasite on the work we were doing?"

Cardevant spat ostentatiously.

"So we kept quiet," Gomes growled. "Let you think we were dead, so we had time to prepare our defences. You're not going to get what we're paying for."

"Have you been living just on synthesizer cake?" Lex said.

Gomes blinked. Then he snatched at a flattering reading of the question. He said, "Of course. We're half-starved, we've had sickness and frostbite and in spite of hell we're

getting on with the job. Cold, wet—what does it matter? Guts is what counts.”

“How are you off for trace elements?” Lex pursued, and beside him heard Zanice draw breath sharply as she saw his point. “You haven’t got a doctor or biologist with you, have you? A diet synthesizer is meant for emergency use. A man can keep alive for about two years on the cakes, but after six months he’ll start suffering from slight deficiency diseases, and the moment the trace-element hoppers are empty the cakes are nutritionally worthless. They’re just bulk. Eating them, you starve to death.”

“Starve?” Gomes didn’t seem to have been listening. “We’re hungry all the time, but we aren’t starving. Look at what we can do!” He got to his feet, and for the first time Lex saw his legs. His calves were bloated and discolored, and there was a rag tied around his left ankle. He limped as he came forward, his eyes blazing, to point at his ship.

“We’re going to get that ship off this planet! We’re going to get her into orbit. It’s going to take a while. But we’ll do it.”

“Without a cradle for her? Without fluorine welders or fusion arcs? What are you going to use to patch her cracks—mud? She’ll burst open, the same as your useless dam is going to burst.”

“You sneer because you’re jealous,” Gomes said. “You’ve seen what real men can do when they’re determined. Our dam is going to give us water-power—we’re building turbines.”

“What you’re doing is this!” Lex blazed suddenly. “You’re condemning four hundred people needlessly to death! You’ve built a worthless dam that cost appalling effort and probably some lives. By the time your people realize how stupid this plan is, they’ll be too weak with vitamin deficiencies to think of anything better. Next winter will catch you huddling in unheated clay-and-wattle sheds, too weak to resist any sickness, and you’ll come straggling down on bleeding feet to beg for mercy from us!”

His face purpling, Gomes endured the tirade out of sheer astonishment up to that point. Now, wild with anger, he drove his fist at Lex’s jaw.

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Lex avoided the blow easily; Gomes was slowed by illness and dietary lacks.

"What's more, you're risking tipping your ship off the edge of the plateau!" he hammered on. "You'd better get in radio contact with our doctor and biologist, do something about your people's food. We've got an architect—he'll advise you on making proper houses for them. You'll never get that ship in the sky before next winter sets in, but there's a chance it might be done next year if you don't wreck it beyond hope now."

Panting, Gomes glared at him. "You want it, don't you?" he snarled. "You want to steal it for yourselves because you let yours roll into the sea! Cardevant, Probian—get these nauseating defeatists out of my sight! Tie 'em up and put a guard on them—if I see them again today I'll burst a blood-vessel."

### XIV

"WHAT CAN HAVE happened?" Jerode said for the twentieth time. Tiredly, Elbing raised his head.

"Look, doc—do you have to keep asking that? It's getting me down."

"I'm sorry." Jerode wiped his face and dropped to a chair. He glared at the obstinately silent radio. "Is there absolutely no chance that their antenna was inadequate, or something?"

"You asked that before, too." Elbing rubbed the stump of his leg; his pegleg was laid aside on the table. Suddenly he gave a wry grin.

"Know something I miss about being this way? I can't pace up and down when I'm agitated, because the clump of the pegleg disturbs my concentration."

Jerode forced an answering chuckle and went on looking at the radio as though he could will it to crackle into life.

"Doc? Doc?" A hesitant voice came from behind the curtain screening the doorway. Jerode stirred, recognizing it.

"Yes, Delvia," he said. "I'm in here."

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She came through the opening like a shy animal, glancing automatically over her shoulder. Her face was drawn and strained, and her legs were smeared to the thigh with the angry strawberry-mark of the blisterweed which had been put under her blanket last night.

"I—I guess I've come to ask for sanctuary," she said, striving for a light tone. "Doc, I can't spend another night in that house. It's like a ward of psychotics now."

"Where you thinking of going?" Elbing drawled. "Coming over to the men's house?"

"Elbing!" Jerode snapped. Getting to his feet, he looked Delvia over by the dimming light which hung from the middle of the low ceiling. "You're in considerable pain, aren't you?" he went on.

"You could say that." Delvia grimaced and raised one leg to rub at it. "That ointment you gave me helped a little, but I got a fierce dose of this stuff."

"I wish I could find out who was responsible."

"Don't waste time trying. They all approved. I wish I'd handed Naline to them on a plate—they'd have got tired of her as a plaything soon enough." Bitterness stained her voice. "How is she, anyway?"

"I'm keeping her sedated till morning," Jerode said. "I want to build her up a bit before exposing her to the shock of knowing she's lost that eye."

"How about Ornelle, by the way?" Elbing put in.

"I can tell you about Ornelle!" Delvia exclaimed. "Now she's back in circulation, she—no, I won't say it." She stamped her foot to the floor. "Doc, do you have any treatment for a vindictive bitch? Because that's what I'm turning into, and I don't want to be that way. I know they can't help what they're doing, any more than I could help getting involved with Naline."

Elbing was studying her thoughtfully. Now, before Jerode could speak, he said, "Hey, Dell Full of surprises, aren't you?"

"Am I?" She moved stiffly to take the chair Jerode had vacated, sat down, and crossed her legs so she could rub the inflamed skin again. "I know I feel like a stranger to myself

right now, which may account for it. Doc, can you give me a couch in the infirmary hut or something? I need some rest."

"I don't think my nurses are entirely convinced about Naline," Jerode said awkwardly.

"I'm not sure you are," Delvia flared. "Look, she took a gun she thought was uncharged and made sure she was seen with it. Elbing, doesn't that sound to you like she was dramatizing, not seriously meaning to harm herself?"

There was a pause. At length Elbing cleared his throat. He said, "I don't know much about the emotions of kids like her. All I know is I hate harm to come to any kid, no matter how it happens."

"You see?" Delvia said to Jerode. "That's the attitude, and you can't argue with it. Well, if you won't give me room in the infirmary, I guess I'll go out in the brush somewhere. I have to lie down or I'll collapse."

She made to rise. Jerode stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "You sit there for a while," he said. "While I figure something out. I'm sorry—I'm preoccupied. Lex and his party haven't made radio contact since midday. . . ."

Lex and his companions had been herded into a shallow cove among rocks at the edge of the plateau, some distance from the ship and the mud-and-wattle sheds which passed for housing. Part of the reason for isolating them, he suspected, was so that the workers could not see them and contrast their own famine-struck condition with the evident health and strength of the outsiders.

His heart sank still further when chains with locks on them were produced to shackle them together. Those formed no part of a spaceship's gear, and certainly would not have been allowed to take up space in the panicky evacuation. What was one to make of a situation where such things had been painstakingly prepared? The fanatical determination of a few must be driving the others by methods not seen on any so-called "civilized" world for hundreds of years.

As though the chains were not enough, a guard was posted over them, armed with a gun. Until sundown it was one of their original captors who stared menacingly down from the

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top of a nearby boulder; then a lean young man with bristling hair and a broken front tooth took over, mounting a handlight on a post nearby where it glared down on their huddled bodies. No food was offered, nor were their bed-rolls brought.

"Are we supposed to shiver all night?" Baffin demanded of the relief guard.

"It's no worse than what we have to put up with!" the broken-toothed young man barked, jerking his gun. "Be quiet!"

They had talked little, being too dejected, during the last hours of daylight, but Lex had been thinking hard. Now, at the tone of the guard's voice, he came alert.

Tentatively he addressed Baffin. "He's probably right, you know. Gomes is deliberately making these people suffer. Most likely, in the hope that enough of them will die to allow him and a few others to get the ship back to civilization."

"But even with only a few people on board"—Baffin glanced at the guard as though expecting to be silenced—"that ship won't fly again without repairs which can't possibly be done with primitive tools."

"Exactly," Lex said. Noticing the discussion, the others moved a little closer, their chains clinking. "That's why—"

"Quiet, you!" the guard said. They obeyed, glancing up. Another handlight, jerking in a way that showed it was being carried by a walking man, was approaching. In a moment, the guard jumped up.

"Evening, captain," he said in a fawning voice. Gomes's gruff answer preceded his appearance on the overlooking rock, accompanied by Probian and Cardevant.

"That's better," he said. "Hey?" He nudged his companions. "In a day or two, they may even be willing to work for a living! We could use some healthy men with muscles. And the women may prove useful too—ours are getting scrawny."

"We'll recruit at least one rescue party the same way," Cardevant said, and chuckled. "Come to get their river back—hah!"



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"I told you," Lex said, gazing up. "We'll get it back when your dam breaks."

"Shut your mouth!" The guard jerked his gun. Gomes gave him an approving look.

"That's the way, Hosper. I'll come and see how they've enjoyed the night when we start work tomorrow. 'Night."

"Good night, sir."

There was a whimper from Zanice. Aggereth moved closer to her and put his arm, chain-laden, around her shoulders. Lex waited till the sound of footsteps had died, and then addressed the guard.

"Well, Hosper? Are we right?"

Nervously the guard looked around him, while Lex's companions stared at him as though suspecting he had gone crazy. But then Hosper leaned forward, licking his lips.

"Of course you're right!" he whispered savagely. "That maniac and his crew have reduced us to slaves. Why do you think he had chains ready for you? Chains, whips, guns—they're the language of our lives now! You've got to help us, or he'll do just what you said: kill us off like animals!"

Understanding dawned on the faces of the others, and Aykin gave a hoarse chuckle. He said, "How did they do it?"

"How do you think?" Hosper retorted. "We didn't have anyone aboard who could take on authority except the spacecrew. During the flight we got to leaning on them. When we landed, we were helpless, hungry, half out of our minds with shock. We thought when your party came from the coast last summer we were going to get help. Then the winter came, and up here it was terrible. We had no shelter except the ship—people died of frostbite, the power ran down till we had to lie six or eight together at night for warmth. It was pure hell. And in the ship emotions blew up to explosion point. Gomes and his officers decided to impose their rule whether we liked it or not, and two men—the only two with a spark of guts—they put out in the snow. At gun-point." His voice trembled.

"I was smart—or cowardly. I was his supercargo, you see. Training for crew. I saw early that I had to stay on his

right side or go the same way. I've been so ashamed of myself. . . ."

He had to swallow to regain his control.

"Gone all the way back to the Dark Ages in a few months," Lodette said somberly. "I never realized how lucky we were."

"Well, you've got to realize it now," Hosper insisted. "We must get away to your group, tell them, come back and get rid of Gomes and Cardevant and the rest and do something sane."

There was a bleak silence. Eventually Lex stirred. He said, "There's two difficulties. First, we had precisely seven energy guns. We brought them with us. We had no need for them down at the coast."

"Oh, *no*," Hosper bit his lip. Then eagerly he went on, "Yes, but there are eight hundred of you, and all fit and well, while here we're just a gang of starving wretches. No one will fight for Gomes except a handful."

"But against energy guns. . . ." Aykin said slowly.

"Yes," Lex hesitated. "Could we reach a radio?" he suggested.

"Not a chance. It's in the ship, where Gomes and his pals live. Someone did try to get a message to you, and Gomes caught him and had him whipped till he fainted." Hosper's voice shook. "And we can't get the guns back. They're in the ship too, except for this one and the one Probian has to guard the pens they make us sleep in."

"But you had an idea," Lex said.

"Yes. Yes, but not much of one." Hosper hunched forward. "Look, I've fixed to watch here half the night. My girl—Jesset, she's called—she's my relief. Gomes trusts us both. He has very few people he thinks he can rely on. When she gets here, we can burn your chains off with the gun. Cardevant will have kept the keys and taken them to bed with him. We might be able to overpower whoever is guarding the pens—it's Probian now, but someone will relieve him later. It should have been my job. But here I am. If only there was time, we could rouse the whole lot of us and rise up against Gomes, but in the middle of the night

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there isn't a chance of getting them loose without Gomes and the others hearing and coming out with guns to quiet them down."

"I'm glad you said that," Lex said sincerely. "With at most two guns, I'd be unwilling to face Gomes's gang anyway. I'd suggest we slip away down river some distance, and hide. Then one of us can break the dam. I'll do it. It's flimsy. A small breach will be enough. We know the way and the pitfalls; we can beat any pursuit all the way to the coast."

"At night?" Baffin said doubtfully.

"We're going to have to," Minty said. "That's all there is to it, isn't it, Lex?"

## XV

A STONE TURNED underfoot. They tensed, staring out into the darkness, and Hosper swung his handlight. Its beam fell on a figure twenty paces away.

"It's Jesset!" he said under his breath.

The others relaxed. The long hours of waiting had made them stiff and tired. They looked curiously at the girl as she slipped up beside Hosper. She was a cat-like creature, with an elfin face, black hair cut short, and bright eyes; she was very thin, and her ribs showed below her tiny breasts. Her only garment was a pair of torn shorts.

Hosper hugged her quickly and explained that Lex had accepted his plan. Now it was necessary to remove the chains and go and overpower the guard watching the workers' pens.

Jesset smiled, her animal teeth glinting. She said, "Where do you think I've been this last half-hour? And what do you think happened to my shirt?"

She raised her right hand, which she had kept in shadow, and the handlight revealed that she was holding another gun.

"I've been with Cardevant," she said. "He was due to relieve Probian, so I went with him. He thought I was going to make love to him until the last moment when it was too late."

"What did you do?" Hosper asked faintly.

"Strangled him." The answer was offhand. "Tied him and stuffed his mouth with strips of my shirt. But he may work loose—let's not waste any time."

Lex saw the reaction on the faces of his companions. Baffin and Aykin apart, they showed distaste—almost disgust. He sighed to himself. Somehow the lesson would have to be learned: sane behavior was that which circumstances dictated. The problem was not escape. Gomes had made that mistake. It was first and foremost survival.

He said harshly, "Get those chains together where we can cut them with one bolt from a gun."

The plateau was eerie in the starlight as they picked their way across it, fearing at any instant that the sound of movement would come from the spaceship, that a light or a gun might be turned on them. But Hosper had promised that Gomes and the others would be in an exhausted sleep—indeed, he and Jesset were apparently sustained only by sheer nervous effort—and they reached the bed of the river without difficulty.

Here Lex halted them.

"I'm going to wait here," he said. "Leave me one of the guns. Get about a mile down-stream, then find a space on the left bank, and wait till you hear the dam break. I can get to you in about seven minutes. As soon as the water's running, move off. Make as good progress as you can. I'm hoping that Gomes will be too distracted by the dam breaking to find that we're gone for at least ten more minutes. I'm going to try and keep a mile between us all the way to the coast. We'll have to drink river-water filtered through cloth and eat saladtree leaves when we find them, and on that we'll have to get home."

The handlight, its beam narrowed to a pencil, showed him by chance a worried look on Lodette's face. He clapped her shoulder. "Don't look so miserable!" he said, forcing a light tone. "You're the plumpest of us—you'll last best of all. Right, move!"

Hosper handed him his gun, then gripped his hand. He

seemed on the point of saying something, but changed his mind. Together with the rest, he faded into the dark.

Lex waited a while to make sure he was fully dark-adjusted—his infra-red vision had been improved by the technicians who had worked to make him polymath material, and he saw more clearly than an unmodified person, but it took about five minutes to achieve full range after seeing by artificial light. Then he moved silently up the bank of the river to a sheltering rock from which he could examine the face of the dam at leisure.

He could see the water behind the dam, still slightly warmer than the surrounding ground, like a fuzzily glowing coal misted by ash. He leveled the energy gun, using the rock as a prop for his elbow, and put a single bolt into a point above the old river-bank which he had selected as the weakest.

He did not wait to see if he had been correct. He knew it. He turned immediately and began to lope down the riverbed a few yards ahead of the trickling water.

The mud sealing the hurdles was washing away; the mud packed between the rocks that held them was becoming wet, slippery, acting as a lubricant now. Timing the process in his head, Lex ran like a deer, never glancing back. Four minutes of bounding and jumping. Five. The weight of the water was shifting the hurdles across the old river-course.

Six minutes—and Lex hurled himself out of the stream-bed, to fall sprawling on the bank, crushing alien plants and unable to do more than hope he did not encounter a strand of blisterweed, while the flood came thundering past. On the first waves were broken hurdles, sticks, leaves, flotsam of a dozen kinds. Spray lashed up as the fury of the water plunged over old falls and rapids. Stones ground on each other like pain-crazed beasts.

A breeze was coming off the high ground behind him. He tried to tune his ears and detect whether there were already shouts above the rush of water, but he could hear nothing, and he had no time to spare. In a world that seemed shrouded by mist, where bare ground was grey-dark and

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plants and anything else fractionally warmer was grey-pale, he moved into the vegetation fringing the river.

Another couple of minutes, and he had caught up with the others. They had got only a short distance from where they had waited to hear the dam break. He ignored their murmured congratulations, closed his eyes against the beam of the handlight, and thrust between them to take the lead.

"Keep the beam down," he instructed harshly. "I'm dark-adapted now, and I've got to stay that way till dawn. It doesn't matter how much noise you make. What counts is to keep moving as fast as you can. Lodettel Watch for blister-weed or anything else dangerous. Baffin, you've made this trip before when the river was full. Take the other gun—you'll have a margin of extra attention to spare for danger. Now come on!"

He plunged forward.

It was only a few more minutes before there was a commotion behind them, easily audible now that the main flood from the dam had passed and the river was flowing more normally. There were hysterical shouts, too distant for words to be identified, and from the rear of the party Hosper called that an energy gun had been fired.

"Keep moving!" was Lex's only answer. But privately he was hoping that Gomes would not become so desperate that he would tell his men to burn a path for themselves with their guns. It would exhaust the charges quickly, but it would give them an advantage of speed which might prove decisive. After all, they needed only to get within sighting distance of the fugitives to finish them off.

It became a sort of nightmare after that, in which springy branches slashed at their faces and legs, sharp-edged leaves prickled and scratched, and animals which were infinitely terrifying because unseen were heard scrambling among the undergrowth. Their throats became dry, their chests ached with gulping air, and behind them the noise of pursuit grew louder.

"Lex!" It was Jesset's voice, acid-shrill. "They're using their guns all the time now—burning a path for themselves!"

He acknowledge the information by setting a quicker pace

still, but that was no answer, and he knew it. It was out of the question to burn their own path—for one thing, they had only two guns, neither of which was fully charged, and for another the pursuers would eventually reach the point where they had begun to clear the way, and their work would have been done for them.

Lex felt totally at a loss. They couldn't abandon him and they couldn't carry him and maintain their speed.

And yet— He had opened his eyes forgetfully, and was staring around him at the enclosing vegetation. Something teased his memory. Those shoots! Those luscious ones with asparagus-like heads on them!

Where was the thing? Lex moved a pace or two away, parting the lower plants nearby. And—there it was. He whistled. A huge one! A black ring on the ground, eight feet across at the least, like the scab of a loathsome disease. And not just one, but another. Another.

"Baffin, take a look here!"

The fair man moved up beside him. Wonderingly, he said, "But there are—five, six— Hell, how many *are* there?"

"Enough!" said Lex, then he turned to the group. "I want all of you, except Baffin, to cross the river here and make sure there are none on the other bank. Feel your footing carefully. . . . Get a hundred yards along. And wait for me."

"What are you going to do?" Hosper demanded.

"You'll see. Baffin, you have the other gun. You stay with me."

The others, unquestioning, obeyed. As soon as they were safely across the river, Lex began to claw down branches and throw them as a disguise over the traps in the ground. Baffin copied him.

"That's enough," Lex said. "Now when they get closer, we'll burn a path back from here, to make it look as though we're panicking and desperate. Then we'll move down-river a little."

The lights and blazing guns of the pursuers came nearer. In breathless silence Lex and Baffin saw them approach the end of the short false pathway their own guns had burned.

They halted uncertainly, seeing the fallen branches on the ground.

"They're getting to the end of their tether!" a jubilant voice said—Cardevant's, hoarse after what Jesset had done to him. "Come on, they can't be far now."

Lex turned and sent a bolt into the vegetation fifty yards down-river.

"Therel" Cardevant shouted, and the pursuers charged forward.

The ground opened under them. Four—five—six of them seemed to shrink suddenly to half their height. Those behind stopped and shouted; those who were trapped screamed in mortal terror. Out in the river, there was a sound of bubbling as the buried carnivore drew in the water which was also necessary to its metabolism.

The others pulled their arms, but failed to move the trapped ones; they kicked away the disguising branches and fired at the ghastly engulfing black bags, but could not make them loose their prey.

"I—can't watch any more," Baffin said at last, his face white as death.

"Nor can I," Lex said. He turned silently and led Baffin to rejoin the others. The moans and screams died away behind.

## XVI

"I'M A FOOL," Aldric said dispiritedly. "I took it for granted when Lex's party failed to contact us that they'd also failed in their aim of getting the river back. So when it did come flooding down in the middle of the night, it swept away tools, prepared pipes—things on which we'd spent a lot of hard work, and then left lying in the dry river-bed."

"It can't be helped," Jerode said, looking around the committee table. "At least the return of the river has provided a distraction for our trouble-makers."

"Meaning me?" Ornelle said from the foot of the table. She curled her lip. Against his best judgment Jerode had al-



lowed her to sit in on this discussion, since she appeared to have recovered from her temporary breakdown, but so far her contributions had been unconstructive.

"Meaning me?" she repeated, when the others looked uncomfortable and tried to ignore her. "What you mean is that you want people to be distracted by the river from pressing the question of Naline, isn't that right?"

"You've heard what I had to say about Naline," Jerode returned curtly. "We are discussing a different subject. Now, as I was about to say: we have a demand for an assembly to consider the return of the river and the disappearance of Lex and his party."

"Isn't it a shame we didn't force Delvia to go with Lex?" Ornelle said. "That would have been the perfect answer."

"I'd far rather you were lost," Fritch snapped. "You're getting on my nerves, you know that?"

Ornelle flushed. She turned on the big architect. "Oh, I'm not surprised you'd rather have her than me, Fritch! I guess you're probably one of her customers, aren't you?"

"Shut up, Ornelle!" Cheffy flared. Jerode banged the table as all of a sudden everyone started shouting at once. Ornelle leaped to her feet and planted her fists on the table, leaning forward with a glare.

"I will not be quiet!" she exclaimed. "I'm sick of all this deceit! You know as well as I do what must have become of them!"

"Then tell us!" Fritch barked. She swung on him.

"Where were you when the river started running again? In bed asleep! I was out for a walk—I couldn't sleep for worrying about poor Naline." She drew a deep breath, and a look of unpleasant triumph crossed her face. "It wasn't cloudy any longer on the high ground. You could see a long way. There were flashes up where the river runs. Don't try to tell me I saw lightning—the storm was all over. What I saw was guns being fired. Some of the vegetation seemed to burn for a bit."

"What?" The word came hoarsely from two or three throats.

"Oh yes! It's true." That was Aldric, against his will. "I

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came out when I heard the water. I saw flashes up the hillside and took them for lightning. But she's right—they must have been something else."

"Thank you." Honey-sweet sarcasm flavored Ornelle's words. "Why was Lex so eager to go?" she said. "Because he wanted to start the river flowing again? Do you really believe that? Oh, no." Again she sucked in a deep, rib-straining breath. "They found the other party's ship, and that was what they were after. They didn't contact us by radio because they found it could be repaired. When they remembered that we'd go after them if there wasn't some reason why not, they staged this little drama with their guns to make us think they'd been eaten by animals or something. Now they'll take the other ship and get away!"

The almost paranoid quality of the fantasy had shocked her listeners so that for a long moment open mouths and horrified expressions were her only response. Jerode was wondering at the back of his mind what provisions could be made here for insane persons, when he heard something shouted from outside which made him more relieved than he had imagined possible.

Ornelle was still standing, imagining that her revelation had provoked amazement and awe, when the words that were being called—from up-stream of the town, as far as could be judged—became clearly audible.

"They're back! Lex and Baffin and all of them! Here!"

The air seemed to clear of something heavy and dark. They relaxed.

As the others crowded through the door, Ornelle dropped to her chair again, put her head forward on her arms and began to weep.

The double news—not only that Lex and his team had returned, but that the other party was after all alive up on the plateau—spread swiftly. Aldric's gang, picking up the equipment scattered by the rushing water, had been the first to see the team—limping, filthy, scratched. They had come in all together, their work forgotten, and as the word got

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around the rest of the community likewise abandoned the day's jobs.

But it wasn't simply the general interest which compelled the committee to call an immediate assembly. It was what came to Elbing's ears, what he relayed at once to Jerode at the infirmary.

"Doc!" Elbing said breathlessly, clutching a post to relieve the pressure on his stump where his pegleg rubbed. "The story's going around that the others are repairing their ship and are intending to head for home. It's crazy! Captain Arbogast saw that ship last year, and he told me what a state it was in. It couldn't be put back in space without a month in a port repair yard with proper facilities."

Lex, his face showing appalling weariness, looked up from his chair; he was eating a hasty meal while one of Jerode's student nurses attended to his cuts. He said, "That's right. Hosper will tell you—he was Gomes's supercargo."

The assembly came together in the hot air of early evening. It was immediately apparent to Lex that the situation had deteriorated during his absence. People were grouped differently. There were almost two perfectly defined factions. On one side were the useful ones, clustered about the members of the steering committee—lean, tired-looking, heavily tanned, with a kind of serious intentness in their quiet talking together. On the other side there was a totally new focus. Nanseltine and Rothers were together, and Nanseltine's wife, looking unhealthy and bad-tempered.

But that was to be expected. What was new was that next to Nanseltine's wife sat Naline, half her face masked with a thick layer of yellow salve, and a pad of dressing over her eye. Incredibly, there was a kind of self-satisfaction about her. Both Nanseltine's wife, Ornelle—who sat on her other side—and several other women were fussing about her and jumping to make her more comfortable when she told them, and this appeared to console her for the loss of her eye. Lex had read in the history of psychology about self-mutilation to gain sympathy and attention, but centuries of advancement in juvenile education had almost abolished such

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pathological behavior. If he hadn't seen what Gomes was doing, he would have found it hard to believe that regression could be so swift and far-reaching.

Yet, after all, the basic individual was much the same. Only circumstances had changed significantly.

Ornelle, the Nanseltines, Rothers, and all those who orbited them, added up to a larger total than he had anticipated, and when he thought back on what Jerode had told him—hastily, in the infirmary—he felt dejected. He knew that what he and all his companions, most of all Hosper and Jesset, needed worst of anything was a chance to sleep after their nightmare journey. But it was imperative to scotch the wild rumors.

He found himself frowning over the absence of someone he had been looking for. Why . . . Delvia, of course. And there she was, coming shyly up to the fringe of the crowd on the side furthest from Naline. A few people gave her quick nods of greeting. She stood silent, arms folded, some distance apart.

There was a sudden buzz of speech centered on Nanseltine, and the former continental manager was on his feet, his face red, his voice, when he spoke, charged with hostility.

"Dr. Jerode! Since you're delaying the start of the meeting I guess it's up to someone more responsible to initiate discussion. What we want is straight information."

White-faced Jerode stood out in front of the assembly, waiting for more.

"We've been told that the other party, instead of tackling the hopeless and uncalled-for schemes for a permanent stay which have been imposed on us, have made a bold and brave attempt, in spite of crippling handicaps, to get their ship repaired and return to the comforts and sanity of civilization."

A ragged cheer went up. He waited to let it end.

"We have it on the authority of a person invited by yourself on to your self-appointed committee—who can hardly be charged with bad faith—that you propose to slide over this if you can. Whether it's your lack of enterprise, I might say of guts, which impels you to this, or your reckless willingness to jeopardize our valuable possessions, let me cite

only the fact that the team you sent out under the young and inexperienced Lex went with seven precious energy guns and returned with a mere two, plus a pair of deserters from the other party who represent extra mouths to feed, and lost a radio, medical supplies, and so on, and of course let us remember the hard work wasted when equipment for the drinking-water plant was washed out to sea—"

He was going on and on, and a frightening number of people were approving his hysterical onslaught. Jerode looked dumbly at Lex for guidance.

What was to be done? Hosper and Jesset were pale with anger at what Nanseltine was saying. Elbing was muttering to himself. Of the members of Lex's team, both Baffin and Minty sat with their faces in their hands, pictures of hopeless misery, and the others wore expressions of uniform despair.

Would they listen to Elbing's expert testimony, or to Jesset's account of life as Gomes decreed it must be endured? Of course not. One could no longer say that Ornelle was sane, or Naline after what she had done to draw attention to herself. As for Nanseltine and Rothers, they craved adulation and the trappings of rank which here they were not fitted to enjoy.

Rage blinded Lex, and he was too exhausted to struggle against it. He let it lift him to his feet, let it shape shouted words which rang across the assembly like thunderclaps.

"Go to the ship then! Go—now, today! The lot of you! And damned good riddance!"

## XVII

THE FURY OF his words created dead silence in the crowd. Even Nanseltine, the flow of his vituperation broken, stood bewildered for a moment.

Jerode was tugging at Lex's arm, trying to gain his attention. "Lex, you aren't serious," he was insisting. "You can't mean it."

"Why not?" Lex blazed at him. "Let's stop kidding our-

selves—we have one job, and that's survival. People who don't want to live, aren't fit to."

"Jerode!" Nanseltine had drawn breath and was demanding the attention he had been enjoying before. "Jerode, tell this young fool that we have no time to waste on tantrums! We—"

And at that moment the thing happened which broke the fiddle-string tautness of the atmosphere. As always, a dozen or so of the ubiquitous fishingbirds were perched on roof-poles around them. Now one of them, tired of thinking whatever thoughts occupied its roosting-time, spread its dingy white pinions and made a clumsy leap into the air. As it passed over Nanseltine, it let go one of the gummy black cakes of excrement which were scattered indiscriminately on beach, rocks, trees and houses.

The black sticky blob landed plump in Nanseltine's hair, and a gust of laughter like a rising wind swept through the assembly as he spluttered and clawed at it to wipe it away. It smeared his hands, ran on to his forehead, clung to his fingers when he attempted to shake it off; in moments, he had become the clown for the assembly, and all their tension was hooting away in one vast peal of hilarity.

Probably, Lex thought, he was the only person, bar one, of all the hundreds here who knew that that laughter had been triggered by a single forced giggle, reflex-quick after the event.

He looked across the front of the assembly and saw he was right. Delvia wasn't laughing. She was staring at him, one eyebrow lifted. But she wasn't laughing.

The anger drained from him, and a cool determination took its place. Now or never he would have to establish his ascendancy over Nanseltine, Rothers, Ornelle, and the rest—to make sure that so many of the others saw the literal insanity of their arguments they would never again treat them with anything but the contempt they merited.

And a moment when the chief spokesman of the useless ones was a figure of fun was the perfect opportunity.

Out of the sea of laughter new sounds were rising—words,

spoke first by Cheffy, Lex judged, and picked up by those near him.

"Sit down! Be quiet! Sit down!"

He let the shouts increase until they were almost drowning the last peals of laughter, and then spoke sharply, raising his hand.

"All right, calm down. I think that fishingbird deserves an honorary place on our steering committee—it knows nonsense when it hears it, and has no qualms about making the appropriate comment."

That produced another wave of chuckles and fixed their interest securely on him.

"Something we have to get straight right now," he went on. "There are always people who will do anything rather than face facts. Back on Zara, or any developed world, it's possible to put up with such people. One lives remote from facts most of the time—there are a dozen levels of insulation, from automatic housing and disposable clothes to food-factories and air-conditioned resort towns, which are designed to keep facts and us apart.

"We've been pitchforked into primitive conditions. Facts get up and hit us in the face all the time. Here, people who prefer pleasant fantasies are a burden. If you've studied Earthside history, you'll know how long they burdened the race of man in the pre-atomic era—how much harm they caused—how fast we got ahead once sensible people saw that their commonest trick was to fool around fighting other people instead of attempting to master the environment.

"Look around this assembly, and you'll see for yourselves how this trick has been pulled right under your eyes. We're stranded on a hostile, undeveloped world. Are we putting our best efforts into making life livable, all working together as a community? I don't think so. Because when we come to an assembly like this, there are two clear factions, one dragging apart from the other."

In the center of the crowd, a number of people—a satisfyingly large number—looked about them uneasily and tried to adjust their positions so they did not seem to be on a dividing line.

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Well, that was a start.

"I guess you're wondering what makes me talk like this. Well . . ." He measured the length of a pause carefully. "A few minutes ago you heard Nanseltine dismiss me as young, inexperienced and hence by implication unfit to lead even a group of half-a-dozen people who cheerfully accepted my orders. I was not unprepared for him to say that, because it's one of the things they warn you about in polymath training."

He uttered the last sentence very carefully, so that no one would be in doubt as to what he had said. Even so, the shock took a while to be digested. He glanced around, spotting key reactions and noting them.

Jerode: pure relief, which might translate as, "He's come into the open at last!" Nanseltine: naked horror at the extent to which he had made himself appear foolish. Delvia: her lower lip caught up between her teeth, and a slow thoughtful nod. Aldric, Cheffy, Fritch, Aykin, Minty and many many others showed mingled wonder, relief, excitement and surprise.

It was inevitable that someone would challenge the remark. The one who did was Ornelle, clambering to her feet to stand pointing a quivering finger at Lex.

"You're lying!" she shrieked. "It's a plot you've made up with Jerode to cover up what Delvia did to Naline!" She caught convulsively at Naline's shoulder with her other hand. "If you're a polymath, why didn't you say so before? It's a lie!"

"I didn't say I was a polymath," Lex corrected, and let the transparently truthful words sink in before going on. "I've had polymath training and incomplete physical modification. . . . Let's just get it clear what a polymath is, because apparently you don't know, so I guess a lot of others here don't. A polymath is a man or woman trained and adapted over a period of approximately forty years to take on one job on one planet. Not a superman, not a vastly knowledgeable computer in human form—which is the popular misconception. You were asking why I didn't tell you this before. There's part of the answer: I hoped you'd get



acquainted with Lex the person before Lex the partly-trained polymath.

"The rest of the answer is that full training includes a rigorous ten-year course on the individual planet to which the polymath is assigned. Uh—to put it mildly, this world was rather hastily selected for colonization."

Wry grins. Lex estimated four hundred of them. That meant he was bringing a full half of the assembly to his side now. Even so, he had to kick the rest along too.

"The polymath's job after this special training is to oversee the work of the first continental managers."

There. Lex almost winced at the conceit implied in the statement. He saw that Nanseltine was mopping his face and making himself look small, as though hoping to avoid notice. He wasn't after Nanseltine personally, of course; he must, though, deflate Nanseltine's spurious authority as rapidly as possible.

"The training takes forty years, and the job usually lasts thirty and exhausts the polymath. Among the things you're taught to watch for is the danger of what's happening here: people dividing what has to be a united effort until the planet is finally tamed. I'm disappointed that *Manager Nanseltine*"—he loaded the title with bitter sarcasm—"isn't aware of that too. Maybe it's because he's never worked *with* a polymath."

The corollary, that Nanseltine had worked *against* a polymath for all to see, could almost be heard clicking into focus in the minds of the crowd. Ornelle next, then. Lex hated the calculating way in which he was planning this assault, but he knew that it was economical of his most precious asset: time.

"An even worse division is the one which has cut off our fellow-fugitives up on the plateau inland from us here on the coast. I guess a lot of you have been wondering why they refused to answer our radio appeals, why they didn't want to work together with us."

He paused and saw that the assembly would indeed like to hear the reason. He turned to Hosper.

"Captain Gomes told us about the reason for denying

radio contact. Maybe you'd inform everyone of the explanation he gave."

Looking tired to the point of collapse, the shock-haired young man stood up. He said in a flat unemotional voice, "Gomes had us re-rig the antenna when the winter was over, and we hoped we could appeal to you for help against him because he's out of his mind as you may know already, I guess." The words followed each other with almost no stress or inflection. "He heard some woman moaning about how bad it was down here and how your spaceship had rolled out into the sea and you were going to starve to death and die of plague. So Gomes got it into his head you were all going to come up and try and steal his ship from him, and he refused to let anyone transmit at all. I never did understand this and now I've come here and seen the miracles you've accomplished"—life was creeping into his voice at last—"I don't even know if Gomes was telling the truth or made it all up about this woman!"

"He didn't make it up," Jerode said. "I found Ornelle weeping over the microphone of our radio, and I recall I had to give her a sedative because she was on the edge of hysterical!"

Heads turned. All the eight hundred people present looked at Ornelle, and the looks were angry.

"She was at it for going on three days," Jerode finished.

"You mean—*she* did it?" Beside Hosper, Jesset was rising, pointing at Ornelle on whom all eyes were turned. Famine-thin, yet with a fire of hate burning behind her dark eyes, she looked like what suffering had made her—a wild beast. "It was because of her that we had to go on being whipped, starved, frozen, chained together?"

For a moment Lex feared she might spring at Ornelle and serve her as she had treated Cardevant. But Hosper caught at her, drew her down beside him with both arms, and pressed her face against his shoulder. His words to her were audible to the entire gathering.

"You're safe now, Jesset! You're safe! You don't have to be frightened any more."

Lex looked out over the assembly. That brief, bitter out-

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burst of Jesset's had finished his work. People scarcely moved. Yet it was clear that there had been a withdrawal. Nanseltine and Ornelle, because they had been named, were—isolated. Even Naline had turned her single eye on Ornelle and was staring at her as if at a stranger.

Once, Lex reflected with bitterness, there had been creatures called scapegoats. Centuries later, parsecs distant, for the sake of the community he had created scapegoats anew.

### XVIII

WHEN IT WAS over he felt drained of every ounce of vitality—and paradoxically at the same time he was so wound up he could not visualize being able to turn himself off. A temporary solution had been found to the worst human problems afflicting their community; now, as though these had been fogging the foreground of his mind, a hundred other problems sprang sharply into focus. Darkness was gathering. As the assembly melted away, he sat slumped on his chair and stared ahead unseeing. Now he wanted rest, and his busy mind would not give it.

Too, the committee members were gathering around him, a little hesitantly because the young Lex they had known had turned out to be that improbable, near-alien creature, a polymath.

It came to him that they were grouped about him in a semicircle, waiting to be noticed. He spoke irritably, not looking at anyone.

"Let's get something straight before we go any further. You are not going to come running to me with every petty little question that crops up, understood? If you haven't by now got the measure of your own ability, you're not the men I took you for. So if you're here . . . Bendle!" His eye fell at random on one of the people facing him. "If you've come to ask me to solve some tricky problem of chemical analysis or like that, it's no good. I am not a magic box on legs, press a button and out comes whatever you want."

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The committee members exchanged glances. After a pause Fritch spoke bluffly.

"Point taken, Lex. I guess none of us wants to see the same kind of thing happen here as happened up at the other site."

That was sense. Lex cracked a faint relieved smile.

"No, what's bothering us is mainly the other party," Fritch went on. "We want to know if there's any danger of them coming down here after us. Are they likely to attack us—maybe carry out a raid to steal equipment or food?"

"Not tonight, at any rate," Lex said. "But you're right—we're going to have to see about posting a watch of some sort. Anything else?"

"I've been wondering," Bendle said in a low tone, "what we can do to help those miserable people up there."

Aldric nodded—Cheffy—all of them in turn, soberly indicating their agreement.

"Again, we can't do anything tonight," Lex said with a touch of impatience. "Yes, we shall have to think about that, and we shall have to create a formal constitution for ourselves and figure out a way to prevent non-sane individuals being a charge on the community and prepare to be flooded out with sick and starving fugitives when we've seen to Gomes and—and . . ." He slapped his thigh and stood up. "I'm going for a walk on the beach to relax before I lie down. I haven't slept for two nights and anything I say right now is probably going to be so much wasted air. Good night!"

On the edge of the beach he paused. He had been half-hoping, even up to the time when he realized what Gomes was doing, that it might be possible next year or the year after to patch up the other spaceship and get it into orbit with its sub-radios operating, to broadcast a location signal back to the searchers who now must be fanning out around Zarathustra's exploded star.

It wouldn't be done this year or next. It might not be done in his lifetime. For the first time he faced the knowledge squarely. The searchers, without clues to guide them, might

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assume that no others had survived except those who fled in ships leaving early enough to go around the sun and head toward the older worlds.

Ultimately the tide of expansion would engulf this planet too—in five hundred years, maybe. What would the scouting party find? A new branch of the family of man, its planet tamed, reaching back to the stars? Or—

"Bones?" he said aloud. "Scraps of corroded metal and fragments of plastic buried in the sand?"

There was a sound of movement near him. Startled, he whirled, and a voice spoke from deep shadow beside the main solar boiler.

"Lex, is that you?"

"Delvial I'm sorry—I didn't realize there was anyone . . ."

"Oh, I'm alone, if that's what's worrying you." She was standing up now, in plain sight. "I guess I'm becoming a reformed character. I spend a lot of time out here. Sometimes I sleep here."

"Just to be alone?"

"No . . ." She kicked at the sand. "Mainly I come out here to look at Zara. It seems absurd that the star which I used to think of as the sun is still up there, shining quietly, when in fact it's a raging cosmic explosion. How long till we see it happen, Lex? Sixty years?"

"More like seventy," Lex said. Since the early days he hadn't often looked up to see Zarathustra's primary shining, soberly yellow like a thousand thousand others. Now his gaze fastened on it automatically.

"So in fact *we* probably won't see it," Delvia said.

"No. I don't know if that's something to be grateful for, or not."

"Not." She uttered the word positively, with force. "If we could see it—a great blazing sore on the sky—it would mean something to us. It would convince us. It's another thing I think about when I come here and sit on the beach. I look up, and I try to remember what it was like to live in a civilized orderly environment—and because Zara is still there, I almost convince myself that that's the reality and this is a nightmarish interlude."

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She glanced at him. "You know, I think that's half our trouble. It hasn't become real to us yet. All we're doing is playing around. We'll work to make ourselves less uncomfortable, to get food and water and shelter. But inside it's a game."

"I think you're quite right," Lex said.

"Being right—does that count?" She spoke dispiritedly. "I never thought this might happen to me, that I'd be cast away on a strange world with a different sun, with no hope of getting back to things I used to take for granted. One feels so—like a prisoner. A condemned prisoner at that. Do you know something?"

"Uh-huh?" Lex shook his head.

"I always felt there was something special about you, and now I know what it is. Everyone else has this air of shock all the time. But you've known for years that your life would be lived out under a new sun, on a planet strange to man."

"Oh, no." Lex gave a little dry chuckle. "No, it's not like that at all, Del. I'd just got over the first impact of feeling the same things you do. I've been trying to make it clear to myself that what we do here isn't going to be for ourselves after all. It'll have to be for the children who will be born at the end of the summer, and their children maybe. We're living in the past and trying to build for the future, and we have no present for ourselves."

"We've been hurled back to the days when men were a lot of savage tribes spreading out across the Earth," Delvia said. He shook his head violently.

"No! They hadn't had a past snatched away from them, nor had they any concept of a future which differed from what they knew in their own lives. They weren't torn apart as we are."

There was a pause. Delvia began to walk along the beach, and unconsciously he fell in beside her, staring at the sea.

"What's going to become of us, Lex?" she said at last, when they had walked some distance. "Do we have any hope?"

"Of getting home, ourselves?"

"Any sort of hope."

He looked at her as though he had never seen her before.

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He said, "You've changed. Or—no, wait a moment. I wonder if it's we who are changing. Did you just get there a jump ahead of the rest?"

"I don't understand you."

"I remember thinking"—now he halted and turned to face her—"some time ago, before I had any rational reason for thinking it, that what we could do with was a lot more Delvias and far fewer Ornelles and Nalines."

"I'm flattered." She meant the words ironically, but they sounded lifeless. "I'm sure I don't know why."

"Nor did I until now, but I'm beginning to find out. You have a present. You live in the here and now, and that's what the rest of us envy you. Being alive was enough reason to go on living when things got hard. I saw the way you picked a job for yourself, to do by yourself, when the rest of us were arguing and worrying ourselves silly making plans. And of course it turned out to be a job that needed to be done which we hadn't foreseen."

"Is that supposed to be clever?"

"And you went on being able to enjoy living—"

"Did I?" she cut in. "I thought I did. *That* wasn't clever, and you won't persuade me that it was. What it got me was a load of misery. No, living in the present, if that's what I do, isn't any fun at all. The future is what counts now, and that depends on you. . . . Lex, is something wrong?"

He felt himself shaking suddenly, shaking from head to foot like a fiercely vibrating machine about to break off loose mountings. He couldn't say anything. His teeth had locked, his fingers folded into fists, in his struggle to control and end the dreadful trembling. It was as if Delvia's words had dropped the whole immense burden of his responsibility on his shoulders, and he was having to fight to remain standing. He closed his eyes.

As though at a great distance he heard Delvia speak thoughtfully, to herself rather than to him. "I wish I hadn't said it. It must be terrible to have so much depend on . . ." Her voice tailed away. After a moment she sighed.

And then she was saying, "Lex, Lex, Lex, Lex," over and over, and her arms were around him. Dimly, through all the

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layers of his terror, he could feel her skin. She had slipped off her clothes; she was taking his hands and laying them on her body, and some archetypal reflex made the fists uncurl and then close, gripping her flesh; she was making him bend his head to her breast so that he breathed the warmth of her.

When the shaking had stopped, she still said nothing but his name, and drew him down on top of her.

### XIX

DURING THE DAYS that followed, which Lex spent getting to grips with the task he had taken on, the endless vistas of future problems threatened often to paralyze him with the same shivering fear. And if him, then how many others? For the first time he envisaged men overwhelmed by what had happened to them, shocked by calamity, strained to the limit of their endurance, nervous tension knotting their jaw-muscles, drying their mouths, turning their stomachs sour, yet not daring to let themselves explode into aggression or rail at the circumstances which oppressed them. It was worse for the men than the women; imperceptibly their quasi-primitive condition had re-awakened the ancient habit of looking to men as organizers and rulers.

That was the state Lex had found himself in on the beach in the darkness. He knew, looking back, he had been trembling on the border of insanity. But Delvia had known at the time, instantly. Might one say "instinctively"? (She had said—so long before that he felt he was remembering the words from a previous existence—she had always been "what you'd call a natural animal.")

No, not instinctively. By experience. Lex wondered, and could only wonder, from whose shaking, moaning body she had first learned to withdraw the evil of terror.

But he had little time for such a personal question now. It was as though the world had changed on his assumption of responsibility (that too was proved by his sudden near-breakdown). He had tried to shut himself up in the present moment, knowing that if awareness of his real situation



emerged from the background of his mind to occupy his full consciousness he would be burdened, weighed down, possibly broken. But, as he had said grayly to Delvia in the first minutes after recognizing it as truth, there was no present for him or any other of the castaways. Their past had spewed them out, and only in the future could they justify themselves.

So, now, in this oven-heat of summer when the air shimmered across the ground and the still sea gazed up at images of itself reflected on the horizon, everything said to him, "Visualize! Predict! *Plan!*"

Proof was all about them that Jerode had done a fantastic job up till now. But what Lex found most terrifying was that despite this he never stopped thinking of new tasks requiring attention.

And always, always, especially when he saw Hosper or Jesset pass by, but at any other time as well, his mind was clouded by the thought of the other refugees up on the plateau, driven by madmen to waste their efforts and possibly their lives on a useless undertaking.

They would have to be freed before winter. Before winter plans would have to be laid to accommodate a sudden influx of three to four hundred survivors, most of them sick or injured, all weak. If towards the end of summer their overstrained diet synthesizers began to break down, as seemed likely, there would have to be provision for preserving and storing food, and the winter would last months, as they knew. We have a means of neutralizing another of the native allergens, but our only way of producing the compound on a scale large enough to be useful is by adapting a diet synthesizer; the alterations will be irreversible with our present equipment, but they will allow us to eat this plant, that seaweed, and this animal. Shall we do it? *No. We need our diet synthesizers for the winter, when we can't get those things for food.*

It's about Ornelle. She stole a length of tubing from the main boiler and ran off saying she was going to make a spaceship so we could all go home. *So it's finally happened. Tell Jerode.*

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Eighteen people are down with acute diarrhea and a slight fever. Aykin, Fritch, Zanice and Lodette are among them. We think it's analogous to amoeboid dysentery; it can be cured by the same drugs, but we have exactly five doses left. Can we spare one diet synthesizer long enough to produce say a hundred doses for future use? Yes. *But be quick about it. We need Fritch very badly.*

Sixty-five people have the sickness today. Same request. Fritch is better—we're on course. *This time no. Put them on synthesizer cake and boiled water and see if they recover of their own accord. Test samples of all native food for the infective organism and work out a non-poisonous disinfectant to eliminate it before it gets swallowed. Then you can have a synthesizer for long enough to produce the necessary substance.*

The long term. Always the dreadfully long term.

*How many pregnancies approved? Thirty-eight so far. Close the register—that's as many as we dare handle.*

*How much more accommodation being laid out? Increase of thirty-two per cent. Not enough. Shortage of timber. Then go up-river and find a bank of clay and a way of getting it here in ton lots; we'll use adobe kilns for baking bricks now.*

*Lodette, we're in rags. Linen used to be made from natural fibres prepared by rotting, pounding, sunning, etcetera. I want something like that.*

*Bendle, the sap of some trees can be spread on cloth and heat-treated so it becomes dry, tough, resilient and waterproof. We shall need shoes this winter.*

Proposal: build a hydroponics room on to each living-house to supply fresh native plant-food this winter. Good idea, but ask Bendle if we know enough about the nutriment needs of native flora; Jerode if the diet supplement would repay the effort; Aldric if water, heating and lighting are adequate. Three yeses before we do anything.

Proposal: take a party up to the plateau and kidnap Gomes and his chief aides. Or isn't anything going to be done to help the other refugees? Yes. *When the time is ripe. Now stop bothering me.*

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Proposal: get out of that chair and go for a walk, because you look as though you're going dizzy with so much concentration.

Lex leaned back and smiled up at Delvia. The suggestion came from her, of course. He said, "That's the best idea I've heard for at least three days."

Then he went on looking at her, thoughtfully. She had put on one of Jesset's rough but serviceable outfits consisting of a hip-length tunic and breeches that could be buttoned at the ankle, with which most of the community—both men and women—had gladly replaced their tattered original clothing. Her hair was sun-bleached almost to whiteness, and she had the deep tan that all the outside workers had acquired. It had become known—there was no way of stopping it—that Lex was favoring her, and though they might feel a little puzzled about the fact, people had accepted it because he was their mainstay now. It was making life much easier for her, and she had lost her former air of constant tension.

He pushed back his chair with a scraping of legs and told the two women who were acting as his secretaries that he would be back in half an hour. He took Delvia's arm and walked out into the sunshine.

Automatically, they turned towards the river-bank. When they had gone some distance, he spoke meditatively.

"Yes, you're right—it is making me dizzy. The sheer number of separate things is what does it. Soap, timber, glue, nails, hammers, needles, spools for thread, cooking-pots, spades and shovels, towels, blankets, bandages, boots. . . . I calculate that by the end of the summer we shall have to make one thousand items."

"So we can stay here in comfort," Delvia said.

"So we can stay here," Lex corrected. "Where none of us wants to be." There was a pause. With a hasty shift of subject, he went on, "By the way, how's Naline? I hear she's—uh—getting on better."

"Yes. She seems to have realized what a bad bargain she

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made by her histrionics. I wish I could say the same for Ornelle. Is her case . . . hopeless?"

Lex gave a grim nod. "With our resources, the doc tells me. She takes everything she can lay her hands on now and puts it on a pile; she says she's going to build a spaceship of it and go home." He hesitated, and added in a lower tone, "I've never seen incurable insanity before. It isn't pretty."

"I imagine few people alive today have seen it," Delvia nodded. "But then, few people can realize how many separate things are involved in even a village society like ours. Lex, am I being very dumb, or is it a sensible question? I've been wondering over and over why we didn't do what Hesper says is Gomes's main idea—get an operating sub-radio into orbit and broadcast a distress call so that searchers can find us. I'd have thought that if we can do all this"—she gestured to include the growing settlement around them—"we could have got one sub-radio into at least a low orbit."

Lex didn't answer for a moment. Then he said, "Do you have a watch?"

"Yes. But I'm not wearing it because the length of the day—you know. Nobody wears a watch now."

"Yes. Now the time-keeping element of a modern watch is a crystal, machined to better than millimicron tolerance, in a state of permanent resonance. In order to adjust it to the length of day we have here, you'd need—" He began to count on his fingers. "Ultrasonic cutting tool; microscope; surface finish interferometer; billimicron gauges; a vacuum work-chamber; a radiation dust-sweep and gas-getter; a standard clock against which to calibrate it; and approximately five years' observation to calibrate the standard. Now to build the ultrasonic cutting tool you'd need—"

"All right!" Delvia broke in. "In other words, you couldn't even patch up the other ship to lift its sub-radios."

"No."

The word hung on the air like a cloud between them. They had come now to the riverside, and were standing on the bank looking inland towards the rapidly enlarging sedimentation plant. They could see Aldric's team hauling lengths

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of hollow wooden pipe into position, and hear occasional shouted orders.

Suddenly there was a break in the rhythm of the work. One of the up-river guards—whom Lex had allowed himself almost to forget because to think of them was to remind himself of the plight of the other refugees—came running along the riverbank, waving and shouting.

"People coming down the river! About a dozen of them! I saw them fire their guns! Stand to! Stand to!"

Lex drew a deep breath. So after all this time action was to be forced on him when he still was not ready for it. It wasn't likely Gomes would have let runaways steal his guns a second time. Hence this might all too possibly be a raid.

## XX

HE COULD SCARCELY recall how he had found the time to issue such detailed instructions to Aldric, but he had done it, and they had been faithfully carried out. In addition to the camouflaged watchposts in the trees, from which the guards had now spotted the approaching party, he had ordered the preparation of a sort of tripwire. A mile or so further on from the watchposts, and in plain sight of them, he had had more than twenty holes dug in the banks of the river, so sited that it was hardly possible to avoid them; these holes had been covered with creased sheets of plastic painted black to simulate the relaxed appearance of the bag-mouths.

Lex had reasoned that anyone Gomes might send down-river would tend to panic on seeing such a cluster of the horrible objects. No matter how cautiously they had approached up to this point, they would be tempted to burn out what they took for a monster.

By the time they realized it was a dummy, they would have given themselves away.

The plan had worked to perfection. It did not depend on radio, which might be picked up by the intruders, or on a landline phone, for which they did not possess the spare cable, or on a line-of-sight beam phone which would have

tied up precious lasers in an unproductive capacity. It had enabled him to send Delvia running through the town calling the alarm when the party from the plateau were still out of earshot, and to reach the watchpost on the right bank of the river while they were still wrestling with the decoys.

Elbing was in the watchpost; he had found his pegleg an increasing handicap, and was glad of the chance to volunteer for this job and release someone else. As Lex scrambled up beside him, he turned and gave a smile of greeting.

"They can't figure what hit them," he said. "Want a look?" He moved aside from the eyepiece of the ship telescope with which the post was equipped.

With a murmur of thanks Lex slipped down next to him. The telescope wasn't intended for this kind of work, and magnified so much that he could hardly get the whole of a man's height into view at once, but there was the distinct compensation that the newcomers' faces were as clear as they would have been at five paces.

"Gomes!" he exclaimed. "*And* Probian! Then the chances are that this is no raid. More likely they've been driven to desperation and want a parley."

"I'm glad to hear it," Elbing commented. "Every last one of them has a gun, and we have two among eight hundred of us."

Right enough, Lex noted. Now, Gomes's party was milling around on the opposite bank of the river; Probian was angrily holding up a piece of charred plastic and swearing at the way they had been fooled, and others were poking sticks suspiciously into the holes, as though unwilling to believe their eyes. It might be another five minutes before they moved on towards the rivermouth again.

Who could Gomes have left in charge? After Hosper and Jesset deceived him, it must be hard for him to trust anyone. So he might conceivably have been driven out; this might be a retreat and an appeal for asylum. Not very probable, but to be considered. The most likely explanation for his arrival was that the difficulties of his project had become too great. He would fear that if he sent anyone to the coast—even Probian—that might be the last he heard of him. He

felt that the risk of leaving the plateau outweighed the risk of finding an uprising had taken place on his return. What could he need so badly that he made the hazardous trip—food, medical supplies, technical assistance?

The pattern would probably be that he would appeal for aid in return for the promise of getting the ship aloft. He might feign sympathy for the plight of his subordinates. He would parley with a gun handy in case Lex attempted to overcome him and then go up-river to free the other refugees.

Lex grunted and pushed himself back from the telescope. He turned on his side to look at Elbing.

"Definitely not a raid. Probably an appeal for help. He'll be on the verge of desperation. I want you to put the wind up at them as they go by. What have you got that might do it?"

Elbing grinned. "We fixed about twenty-thirty cords in the bushes. I can make branches move when they're at the corner of their eyes, and like that."

"Perfect. Then I think we'll lay on a show for them, rather than taking cover, when they come in sight of the town. I want them to see the most impressive view they can. Try and hold them up as much as you can with your string-pulling, okay?"

He let himself over the edge of the watchpost floor and swarmed back to the ground.

Gomes and his companions came to the sedimentation plant and found it deserted. They spent a while discussing it, giving nervous glances around them because for the past mile or more they had seen unaccountable movements in the undergrowth. They felt they were being watched. In fact, as of now, they were. Aldric's workers had been told to hide nearby.

Continuing, they came in sight of the town: solid-looking buildings of timber coated with clay, their wooden-shuttered windows open to the hot summer day, smoke rising from the chimneys of the brick kilns and a clangor of nailing, sawing and chopping. They saw where timber had been

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felled, ground cleared. They saw people healthy, well-nourished, in serviceable and clean clothing, and were reminded that they were ragged, filthy, and lean.

The people took notice of them—just a little. They did not interrupt what they were doing, which included the distribution of large bowls of food to people on the job, and the issuing of rations of water from big barrels.

They stood overlooking the town for some minutes, uncertain of themselves. Then Aldric's men rose into sight from among the nearby scrub, and with an oath the intruders whirled to cover them with their guns.

None of Aldric's men was armed. Lex had specifically enjoined them not to take the guns from the watchposts.

Aldric himself, coming forward toward Gomes, said in a level voice, "We've been expecting you. I'll take you to our polymath."

"*What?*" The word ripped from Gomes's mouth as though it would tear his flesh. "You have a *polymath* here? I don't believe it."

"Captain," Probian said under his breath, putting a hand on Gomes's arm. He nodded at the thriving little town, and had no need to continue.

Reading the uncertainty on Gomes's rough-bearded face, Aldric spoke again. "You may keep your guns, of course. I was told you would feel insecure without them. This way."

He didn't pause to see their reaction, but turned and began to walk down into the town. His gang moved behind him, encircling Gomes's party in such a fashion as to suggest they were escorting a group of circus animals—an impression which was reinforced as people working around the houses improvised comments to meet Lex's final order: "Make 'em feel like the dolts they are!"

"Hi, Aldric!" called Zanice, collecting bars of white soap from their setting-trays. "Pretty sorry lot they look, don't they?"

"Dirty!" Aldric agreed. Gomes set his jaw and his grip on his gun tightened.

"Are those they?" Minty inquired, wrinkling her nose as she sat on the step outside the single women's house, spoon-



ing hot food out for members of Fritch's building team. "Look as if they could use a good meal and a bath!"

One of Gomes's companions swallowed so hard the noise was like a shout, and Probian glared at him, his face thunderous.

It went like that all the way to the headquarters hut—personal remarks being passed, never addressed to the intruders but simply commenting on their dirt, their smell, their raggedness and scrawniness—while Aldric's gang watched like hawks for any sign that the newcomers' temper was going to break.

It held. Just. As Lex had hoped, by the time Gomes and his companions were herded into a cluster in front of the headquarters hut, they were angry, impressed and completely discomforted.

From here they could glimpse the installations down on the beach—stills, boilers, the solar furnace and so on—and get the full measure of what had been done while they were insanely striving to repair their ship, building their useless dam, and in short wasting their time.

Lex let them stand in the sun for a minute. Then he pushed aside the curtain covering the hut's doorway, and emerged.

"You?" Gomes said at last, pointing with his gun; his arm shook. "You're a polymath?"

"In training," Lex said. "Well, what do you want? Apart, of course, from a bath with strong soap and a change of clothes." He wrinkled his nose exaggeratedly. He was counting the party, something he had forgotten to do before. There were eleven—a very peculiar number. At random, he said, "You lost one on the way, did you?"

Gomes scowled, and was not going to answer. But one of his companions, a young man Lex remembered seeing with Cardevant when his expedition was held up below the dam, took a step forward and exclaimed incredulously, "How did you know?"

"Shut your mouth, Dockle!" Gomes flared. "I'll do the talking, hear me?"

Lex, an enigmatic look on his face to suggest that he had

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perhaps engineered or at least observed the loss of the twelfth man en route, watched narrowly. He dared not attack eleven men armed with energy guns, even if the guns must now be low on charge. A single bolt could fire one of their buildings, or take irreplaceable lives. Yet he had to undermine the confidence of Gomes's followers by whatever means he could.

"I will not!" Dockle said hysterically. "These people have a polymath to help them, and look at them! Are they hungry, sick, filthy, the way we are? Are they—?"

"I said shut up!" Gomes lifted his gun, and his knuckles were white around the butt.

"Don't fire that gun, Gomes," Lex said quietly. "If you want to say something, go ahead. But be quick—I'm busy."

"Is that all?" Gomes licked his lips. "You tell me to say it—and then what? Just go?"

"How can I tell you until I hear you?" Lex rapped impatiently. "Well, never mind! The situation's this. Up at the other site you are no longer in control. People are demanding who's going to be alive for the rescuers to find even if you do get your ship aloft. People are collapsing at work through fatigue, deficiency diseases and sickness to which they no longer have any resistance. You've been compelled to come down here and beg for help—for food, drugs, blankets, everything—because you're now convinced you may wake up tomorrow with your throat cut. You're hoping to persuade us that you've made such progress with repairing the ship that you can promise to get a sub-radio into orbit and powered to send a distress signal."

Every word printed more clearly on Gomes's face the correctness of Lex's analysis. As he had instructed, people had come drifting in to surround Gomes's party now, and they heard and saw for themselves. One more thing to cement his authority; he dared neglect no chance to reinforce it.

Gomes said, his voice shaking, "I captained that ship! I know it can be got aloft!"

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"I say it can't," Lex contradicted coolly. "I saw it, remember?"

"You're not a spaceman!" Gomes barked. "You don't know—"

"In polymath training one learns a lot of things," Lex said, his voice like a knife. "Now listen to me. Your proposition is unacceptable to us; it's your turn to consider ours. We are extremely anxious to help our fellow castaways"—Arbogast, he recalled, had used that very phrase—"but our resources are limited and our survival is at stake. We will provide food, clothing, accommodation, whatever else is needed, for all of you. To purchase it, you will lay down your guns now. And you, Gomes, you, Probian, and probably certain others—I've no doubt there will be a hundred witnesses to give the names—will be arrested and formally tried for crimes under the Unified Galactic Code, to wit murder, employment of slave labor, violence against the person, unlawful imprisonment and assumption of unlawful authority. There are other charges, but those will suffice. The Galactic Code is the common law of all inhabited planets. This is an inhabited planet; *I say so!*"

"You bastard!" Gomes said, almost in a whisper. "You—" He raised his gun slowly, until it was leveled at Lex's chest, and a murmur of horror went through the watching crowd.

"You're wrong," Gomes said. "These are my terms. Either you give it to us, or we take it at gunpoint. If you had any guns but the two you stole, we'd have seen them by now. *Well?*"

## XXI

FOR THE REST of his life Lex was to look back on that moment and recognize it as the turning point when his knowledge about himself converted into knowledge of himself. They had pressed him from every side to act against Gomes, to liberate the other refugees, to head an avenging army or a party of kidnappers. He had turned down the various suggestions—showing the flaws in them if he had time, merely

uttering a curt negative if he was too busy. He had felt obscurely guilty, yet he sensed in a way he could not define that he was right to delay even at the cost of lives.

He was not afraid for his own life, even now. He knew that in the tenth of a second between Comes closing his finger on the trigger and the launching of the bolt he could throw himself to one side, then spring at the captain and bring him down before he fired again. Polymath training had endowed him with rapid reactions, and there had also been physical improvements. But that wasn't the object of polymath training.

Also, he had been able to advise and give directions for scores of projects which would eventually turn this handful of castaways into a functioning society. But that wasn't the object of his training, either. He had known this, after a fashion. He had assumed without question that in fact the purpose of the training was to fit him for the senior job on a brand-new planet.

But how was a man fitted to such a post? What single faculty entitled him to hold it? Not quick reactions or superior physical condition or encyclopedic knowledge. Anyone could have any of the three, and as for the last, there were books, recordings, computer stores, which could hold more information than any brain.

No. The required talent was the ability to be right.

Given a totally hostile planet and a damaged spaceship, the polymath said, "Tame the planet." An ordinary man said, "Mend the ship." The planet was tamable; the ship was beyond repair.

Given strong personalities in conflict which endangered the safety of the community, the polymath said, "This one is valuable, that one is a handicap." An ordinary man said, "Well—there's a lot to be said on both sides." The valuable one worked like a fury; the other went insane and became a charge on the community.

Lex had had barely a quarter of the full polymath training, and only the first stages of the physical modifications. But those had sufficed. The demands of the situation itself completed the training well enough to crystallize the indispens-

able talent—that, and confrontation with the evidence of what could happen if the man who took charge decided wrongly.

So also: given a lunatic dominating four hundred other castaways at gunpoint, the polymath said, "A man who can be *that* wrong will hang himself." An ordinary man said, "We must liberate the persecuted, even if some of us are killed, even if many of them are killed."

And here was the man who could be *that* wrong, driven by the consequences of his own decisions to put his neck in the noose.

Very slowly, Lex smiled.

At first they thought he was insane to tell Gomes he could have all he wanted. Then they thought he was stalling for time, so that greed would eventually distract the eleven men and they could be overpowered while their minds were not on their guns. Then, as they saw that neither of these explanations fitted, they began to wonder if he was frightened.

They obeyed his instructions—but they began to wonder.

The fearfulness that Gomes and his companions displayed was pitiable. They could not refuse the luxury of a hot bath, with soap of which there had been none on the plateau for months, to soak some of the tiredness out of their bodies. But they refused to enter the bath-huts; they said that they wanted the water brought outside and poured into tubs where they could guard each other, guns at the ready.

Lex told his people to do what they were asked.

They could not refuse the offer of a meal, but they would not let the food be brought to them ready prepared; they went in a group to see it in the kitchen, inspected the diet synthesizers to make sure the settings had not been tampered with, and—when one of Bendle's students sprinkled antiallergen on a piece of native meat—compelled her to eat a mouthful and prove it was not poison she had added.

They could not refuse the offer of vitamin injections to help clear up the skin infections with which they all were afflicted—Gomes's swollen legs in particular had grown

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much worse from his journey through the dense summer undergrowth beside the river. But there too suspicion led them to insist that the first part of each injection be given to one of Jerode's assistants.

Going with them, smiling seraphically, Lex did not let a hint of his jubilation show on his face. He was going to have to be careful, or he might find a riot on his hands. But he was virtually certain he had created enough trust in the community to avoid it.

Your clothing is worn out: we've made rough but serviceable substitutes. Take some.

Your bed-rolls are torn and dirty: we've made blankets now. Have some.

Your journey back will be tough: we have food to spare. Here you are.

Back before the headquarters hut, Gomes looked with satisfaction on everything that had been given to them. He still had his gun in his hand; now, glancing up at Lex, he gestured with it.

"Guess I should have brought more men, so's we could carry more of this away!" he gibed. "Looks like a gun talks about as loud as two men on the average, and more with luck."

He spat in the dust. "So you're a polymath," he added. "But you can be just as dead as anyone else. So we're level."

Lex was very conscious of the many, many eyes turned on him. Everyone had left work to come and witness the appalling spectacle of Gomes and his band of thieves being loaded with as much as they could carry of the community's goods. To his regret, their thinking had apparently stopped there—even Jerode, Fritch, Cheffy did not seem to have questioned whether this single load of booty was of real use to Gomes.

But he was not at all surprised to see that Delvia, standing in shade alongside the headquarters hut, was smiling to herself when none of Gomes's party was looking her way.

"Two more things," Gomes said. "Just a couple more. Lex, you still have a couple of energy guns. The way things are, I believe they'd be more use to us than to you. Get 'em!"

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"No! No, you mustn't!"

From the front rank of the helpless audience, Hosper ran forward, to stand in front of Gomes with his face white, his hands clenched.

"You!" Gomes said. "After what you did, I ought to use this gun on you here and now." His lip curled. "But why should I waste good charge?"

And he reversed the gun and swung it up butt-first against Hosper's jaw.

A cry, and Jesset was trying to leap after her man, fingers like claws; if she had got at Gomes, she would have torn out his eyes. But someone was there to catch her, hold her, talk her back to calm. Delvia, of course.

It was becoming a source of amusement to Lex to see how she was living up to her self-description as a natural animal. If one were to grade the community on a basis of potential for survival, he imagined Delvia would rate second only to himself.

Gomes glared at Hosper, sprawled on the ground before him, then at Jesset panting while Delvia clutched her arm. He said, "Get me those guns, or I'll burn these two."

"Go ahead!" Jesset shouted. "It's a cleaner death than what you're doing to the people on the plateau!"

"Aldric!" Lex said. "Give Gomes the guns."

"Thank you," Gomes said with elaborate sarcasm, wiping the sweat from his face. "You talked pretty big at first, Mister Polymath. But these guns talk bigger."

Silently, with one glance up at Lex as though he thought the community had been betrayed, Aldric came forward and put the two guns on top of one of the packs made up for Gomes's men to carry.

"Right, that's almost all," Gomes said. "Now I want you all to get one thing clear. Don't follow us. Don't try and get up to the plateau. We have all the guns now, and we can spare the time to watch for you creeping up on us. Now I've seen how much you have down here, I can say it's going to be worth our while coming back. So we will be back, guns and all, and we'll collect what we want when we want. Next time maybe we'll ask for more. And when we get the ship

into orbit, we may be kind enough to mention that there are some other refugees here on this miserable mudball. Depends how you treat us, doesn't it?"

He turned to his companions. "All right, load up! Let's get away from here before dark!"

They moved obediently to take their packs and shrug them on to their shoulders—all of them, except Dockle, the one who had burst out before. He was little more than a boy, his face tanned to a burnt-wood color, his limbs stalk-thin, his body meager. He stood rock-still, his burning eyes on Gomes.

"That means you, Dockle!" the captain rumbled.

"I'm not going," the boy said. "I'm not crazy."

There was a sudden icy hush across the heat of the day. All eyes—Gomes', his companions', the watchers'—turned to Dockle.

"I'm not going!" he repeated more loudly, and his voice was ragged at the edge with barely-suppressed tears. "I don't want to go back to the plateau—it's hell up there! You'll never get the ship aloft. We've slaved over it for months, and all we've done is lift it a couple of feet off the ground and shown how badly the belly of the hull is smashed in. If we work the rest of the summer we'll never get it ready, and if we don't do anything to prepare for the winter we'll all die of cold and hunger. I'm not going back!"

A wave of anger could be felt passing through the crowd. Lex knew much of it was directed at him. How could he stop a lynching after what Dockle had said? He might have hoped that the boy's tearful declaration would give a clue to the crowd, indicate to them what his plan was—but he feared that even now they had not followed his reasoning. And yet what he had in mind felt right; it didn't feel as though it would lead to the horror of eight hundred people without weapons attacking eleven with guns.

And then, when he had begun to doubt his talent for being right within an hour or two discovering it, Gomes provided him with the missing answer.

"Pick up that pack, Dockle," he said in a low, dangerous voice. "Because there's one thing more you don't know.



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Maybe our polymath here knows it—his kind are supposed to know everything.

"Sure, it's tough to get a ship fixed without proper facilities. But a polymath is claimed to be a substitute for just about everything."

He whipped around, and his gun was once more leveled at Lex.

"You! Get down here! You're a valuable property, and we're taking you with us."

The wave that passed through the crowd this time was of indrawn breaths, a wave of dismay. Lex let it die; he wanted everyone who was watching—except Gomes and his party—to see with clear eyes the precise manner of his obedience.

He said, "I guess I have no choice." And walked forward.

Gomes was taken aback. "You needn't think you're going to get away!" he threatened. "There'll be two men watching you—and each other—with guns. There aren't any more like Hosper on the plateau. We cleaned house." He cast a glance at Dockle, and gave a jerk of the head. Reluctantly, but now unable to stand his ground, the boy moved to pick up his pack.

Probian had a rope. While the others held back the crowd with their guns, he fixed it around Lex's wrists, lashing them securely behind him and taking the slack as a kind of leash.

"Move," Gomes said under his breath, and then raised his voice. "Anything you do to try and stop us, your boy Lex is the first to suffer. Keep your distance, all of you!"

## XXII

THEY FOLLOWED, helpless, to the edge of the town, hoping for some sign or clue from Lex which they would have obeyed in spite of the threatening guns in the hands of Gomes' men. But Lex walked stonily among his captors, not looking back.

Clenching his hands in impotent fury as he watched the thieves dwindle along the river-bank, Fritch burst out,

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"What came over him? We'll never get him away from them now! He must be out of his mind!"

"He knows what he's doing," Delvia flared. "He's a polymath, isn't he?"

"Polymath or not, he's only a youngster," Fritch snapped. "And he turned out to be too fond of life to stand up against Comes' guns."

"You're wrong," Cheffy countered. Now they were gathering into a tight group, and the argument broke into a dozen angry, shifting fragments. "He's been up there and seen for himself what conditions are like. You've heard Hosper, Jerset, the people who went up to the plateau—you know it would be better to die than fall into Comes' hands, and so does he. He *must* have something figured out!"

From somewhere at the back of the crowd, Nanseltine shouldered his way toward them. Not much had been heard of him since his deflation at the assembly where Lex assumed command, but from his manner now it was clear he was frightened back to his old blustering.

"I say he has figured something out, but it's nothing that will help us!" he exclaimed. "What if Comes has managed to refit his ship? Who's told us he couldn't? Lex himself, who isn't a spaceman, and Hosper, who was only a supercargo, not an expert. Next thing you know, we'll find out he's made an arrangement with Comes and we'll see the ship—"

The words ended with a cry, and Nanseltine drew back, his hand to his reddening cheek. Panting, Delvia stood before him, arm raised for a second blow.

"Keep your foul mouth shut," she said. "You're only capable of the worst yourself—you can't think anything good of anyone else, can you? And you too!" She whirled on the leaders of the community grouped about her. "You're practically as bad, laying all the responsibility on Lex and then panicking when he does something cleverer than you could have thought of!"

There was a momentary silence. Eyes began to turn to Jerode, standing beside Fritch. It was habit. Without Lex, they fell automatically into the older pattern.

"Is she right, doc?" Aldric said after a pause.

"I—don't know," Jerode passed his hand over his balding scalp. "Del, you claim to understand his thinking. Explain."

"Yes. Yes, I believe I can!" She drew a deep breath. "Have you thought what would have happened if Gomes' men had been attacked while they were here? They'd have killed fifty of us and maybe got away, or some of them might have. And they can't have all their guns with them—there'll be more on the plateau. People have been on at Lex to go up there and storm the other site, or kidnap Gomes—all kinds of wild schemes. He wouldn't listen. Do you think it was because he didn't care about the condition of those other poor devils?"

She had the whole attention of the crowd now. Eyes blazing, voice ringing, she went on.

"Well, then!" Delvia appealed to the crowd. "Gomes hasn't got you or me to cope with. He's got a ticking bomb, and it's apt to go off in his face. My guess is that the reason Lex has gone quietly is so that when the people on the plateau rise up against Gomes and try to get down here for safety he can guide them."

"Pretty farfetched," Fritch growled. "You make out a good case for your wonder-boy, Del—but you're prejudiced his way."

"What difference does that make?" Delvia said, coloring.

"Doc!" Fritch appealed to Jerode. "As Gomes said, Lex is a valuable property. We can't just leave him to manage by his own."

"I say we can, and should," Delvia contradicted.

Jerode was silent for a moment. Then he drew himself up. "I think Fritch is right," he said. "Though what we can do without arms of any kind, I don't know. We'll send a party after him. Baffin, you've done the trip more often than the rest of us. Pick your men."

Hosper, his face discolored with angry bruises, moved forward at once, and Jesset came with him, clinging to his arm. Fritch grunted and stepped up also; then Aykin, Cheffy, Aldric, and others.

"Baffin, whatever you do," Delvia pleaded, "don't interfere with what Lex has in mind!"

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He shrugged, and didn't answer.

It took some time to find handlights, hatchets, rations and other necessities, and it was late in the afternoon before the party managed to move off. Baffin set a rapid pace. They passed the watchposts, then the site where Lex's ingenious trap had caused Gomes' men to reveal themselves on their way down-river.

A short distance past that point, Baffin—who was leading—gave a low exclamation and threw out his arm to point ahead.

"What is it?" Fritch demanded, striding up beside him.

"I saw the flash of a gun," Baffin muttered. "Quicker! Come on!"

Mouths dry with apprehension, hearts pounding and lungs straining with trying to keep up, they followed him through the whipping undergrowth. They had gone another mile and a half when they found the body.

Two scarecrow-thin legs protruded from a bush heavy with midsummer foliage; the feet were bare. Insectoids were coming to explore the flesh, crawling down the bush's stems and up from the ground.

Horried, they halted. Baffin kicked aside the concealing stems and they recognized the corpse.

"It's the boy," Fritch said.

It was indeed Dockle. A bolt had seared him from throat to waist. He had been stripped of everything he possessed except the charred shirt clinging to his ruined flesh. Out of his open mouth the native carrion-takers were already running.

"Don't just stand here!" Hosper said with violence. "Let's get after them—it'll be Lex next."

But Baffin was staring down at the dead boy, his face set in a meditative frown. "I . . . wonder," he said at last. "You know, somehow I don't think so. I'm beginning to see what Delvia meant."

The trouble started much quicker than Lex had dared to hope. As soon as they were out of sight of the town, Gomes' party split into two clearly defined groups. Gomes, with

Probian and most of the others, keeping Lex himself in the center of them so that Probian could walk him on his rope-leash, went at the front. But Dockle and two others, the youngest of the party, kept a short distance behind, and talked together in low voices.

Gomes was aware of this, and more than once he turned back to snarl at them to keep up. Yet Dockle in particular lagged, and at a point where the vegetation was very thick, he fell far enough back to be out of sight.

Twenty more paces, and Gomes caught on. He glanced back, saw Dockle had vanished, and gave an oath as he thrust past Lex, lifting his gun. His heavy pack caught overhanging branches and made them whine in the air like whiplashes.

They did not see what happened, but they heard: Gomes called Dockle a foul name and told him to come back, and then the boy answered hysterically, and then there was the flash of the gun.

Gomes came back into sight. "Get down there and pick up his stuff," he said gruffly to the youngsters who had been walking with Dockle. "Load it on the polymath. And take a good look at Dockle while you're about it, because that's what will happen to you if you try the same thing."

The two youngsters looked as though they were going to vomit, but they obeyed.

One down; ten to go. Another before dark would be advisable, Lex calculated coldly. He would have preferred that Dockle should live, because he had had the guts to defy Gomes for a moment, but he knew enough about what had been happening on the plateau to recognize what Dockle must have done, or connived at, for Gomes to choose him for this journey. He wasn't thinking of justice, or retribution. What counted was that the **community** must be stable, or they would die.

No one said anything for a long time after that; they just plodded forward beside the river. The going was better than it had been on his own expedition, an age ago. On the way down Gomes had had a lot of vegetation burned back, and it had not grown over the path yet—though it was so luxuriant it would restore itself in another week or so.

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There were bubbling noises in the river ahead. Lex's ultra-keen hearing identified them well before any of the others, and he watched closely to see if they knew what such bubbings meant. Apparently they didn't. Nor did they recognize the rich purple shoots on the unbrowsed trees nearby. And on the way down they had overlooked this particular carnivore, although Lex had already noted one which they had burned out as a precaution.

Not Gomes. Not Probian. Without seeming to change his direction, Lex stepped between the hidden bag-mouths on the ground, and because they kept their distance Gomes and Probian, escorting him, also escaped. But the man next but one behind Probian was walking slightly to one side, and his left leg suddenly plunged into the ground.

At once there were screams, not only from the trapped man, and guns flared. It was altogether convincing that Lex should leap back in terror like everyone else, and jerk Probian's arm so that his bolt burned not into one of the ghastly black mouths, but the legs and belly of the man who was trapped.

By the time darkness was on them, the survivors were in a very bad way. They cleared a large patch with their guns, although the charges were running low, then built a big fire more as a comfort than for warmth, since the night was hot.

Probian, glowering, hobbled Lex with the rest of the rope and left his arms bound behind him. He was given no food, though a grudging mouthful of water was accorded him. The others ate, not talking, but looking about them fearfully at intervals. They avoided meeting Gomes' eye.

Good.

Gomes set up a rota to keep watch on Lex—two wakeful men with guns were to be facing him continuously until dawn. He did not include himself in the rota. He made sure that the two youngsters who had been walking with Dockle were not going to watch together. They knew why, and so did everyone else. Also good. The more suggestions about deserting Gomes that were put in their minds, the better.

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He noted carefully which of his guards-to-be went away into the undergrowth before turning in, to relieve himself. One didn't, but drank heavily from his canteen of water before throwing himself exhausted on his bed-roll.

Perfect. That was the man Gomes had assigned to watch with Probian after midnight. Lex relaxed, leaned back, and dozed.

As he had figured, the first pair of guards were too eager to lie down to permit the man he was counting on to go and relieve himself before assuming his duties. They made him turn out and take his place; growing more uncomfortable, he sat with gun in hand until the others were all snoring. Lex feigned deep sleep, most convincingly.

At last the man's bladder would endure it no longer. He spoke to Probian, handed over his gun, and disappeared out of the circle of the low-burning firelight.

Lex snapped the rope at his wrists and feet and hurled himself forward. Probian had not even time to exclaim before his head jolted back. After that, he was unconscious.

Lex took the other waking man from behind, using the frayed rope as a garrote, and left him unconscious also. He had made no more sound than a passing breeze, and the others were too exhausted to be easily woken. They remained still on their bed-rolls as he went from one to the other collecting all their guns except Gomes' and stringing them together on the rope.

Then, ghostly, he faded into the dark. At the very edge of hearing he could detect noises down-river. Presumably that was a party Jerode or someone else had sent after him. He had to catch them before they came close enough for Gomes' men to be disturbed.

## XXIII

BY THE TIME they found the second body, partly burned, partly digested by the crippled carnivore, Baffin's party were prepared to accept the fact that Delvia had been right. They didn't see how it was being done, but they realized Lex

must be trying to demoralize his captors to the point at which Gomes would lose control.

They saw, as night was falling, that guns were being used to clear ground ahead—obviously, making a camp-site. Then a fire was lit; the reflection of the flames showed on nearby trees. Baffin decided not to do the same, but chose to follow the riverbank in the dark in the hope of catching up.

It was while they were stealing through the night that Lex appeared in front of them, smiling broadly and holding up his strung-together guns like a successful fisherman.

They were so startled at first that they could not react. Then the tension broke and they crowded around him whispering congratulations and apologies. His face red as fire, Fritch hung back.

Lex cut them short, and began to issue the guns.

"How did you manage it?" Baffin demanded incredulously.

He explained briefly. "Now only Gomes has a gun. This implies that hell is going to break loose, and we'll have to stand by and pick up the pieces. I want some of you to come with me—Hosper, you and Jesset because you know the plateau, and you, Aldric, and Cheffy. Baffin, I want the rest of you to camp down here. About dawn they'll find out what's happened. Gomes may finish them because he's so angry, but some of them will probably get away and come back down-river. Wait for them; when they get here, take them back to the town and make up a big party to come up-river. Tell Jerode to come, with all his nurses that aren't pregnant. Bring blankets, clothes, food, anything he can think of. By the time that stuff can be got to the plateau, it's going to be badly needed. Uh—plan for two hundred sick and injured, and everyone weak and exhausted." He grinned at the look of wonder on Baffin's face.

"What's puzzling you? Gomes' situation must have been precarious enough when he had to come down to the coast himself. You figure what will happen when he gets back having lost all but one gun, and probably all but one companion."

He beckoned to the four he had chosen to come with him, turning as he spoke.



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"Now you follow me. Move quiet. We're going back to see what happens when Gomes wakes up."

Gomes rolled over, grunted, blinked his eyes open. One second later he was sitting up, hand on his gun, and shouting at the top of his voice. It was barely dawn, and the light was grey. Probian lay sprawled on the ground, breathing stertorously; there was no sign of his fellow-guard, and the other six men were sleeping deeply. Lex, of course, was gone.

From the safety of two hundred yards away, Lex could just see what was happening. There had been almost total silence for an hour past, and his hearing was fined to such keenness that he could clearly hear the quarrel mounting. Gomes was practically out of his mind with fury; at first he shouted that the missing man was a traitor like Dockle, then, when he was found strangled in the undergrowth, that he and Probian were fools and incompetents.

They roused Probian by throwing water over him, and he was so dazed that he could give no account of what had happened. His incoherence roused Gomes' anger to explosion point. He tried to kick Probian in the face. One of the other men jumped him from behind and dragged him back, demanding whether they were all to be treated like animals now.

His companions shared his view. Mouthing furiously, Gomes confronted them with his gun, calling them fools and traitors who had sold out to the defeatists at the coast. The men exchanged glances. One of them spoke up briefly for Gomes, and moved to his side—most likely, persuaded by the gun, but it was hard to be certain.

Now Gomes was trying to compel them to go back downriver and find Lex, claiming he couldn't have gone far. Lex smiled to himself. Quite right. But the order was the last straw on the men's backs.

They spread out as though to comply, bending and collecting their belongings; then one of them snatched a brand from the dying fire, hurled it in Gomes' face, and threw himself after it. At the end of its charge, Gomes' gun only

flashed, no more than singeing his attacker. The others piled on him and brought him down.

There was a brief conference. All the heart had gone out of them. They were sick and tired of slaving for Gomes, even those who had carried out his orders. Down at the coast it was better, and there was a polymath—yes, definitely, because nobody else could have got away with two armed men on guard and seven others sleeping nearby.

They left Gomes, and Probian, and the man Lex had strangled, and took the empty gun for purposes of bluff, as they said, in case they encountered trouble. They did not look forward to returning to the town, but they would rather take a chance there than go up to the plateau again.

Perfect.

The six deserters had long been met by Baffin's party and taken down to the coast, when Gomes began to recover. The day was bright and hot. He got dizzily to his feet, took in his plight, and cursed the men who had betrayed him. He staggered to the river and sluiced himself with water, then roused Probian, who lay in a near-coma.

With kicks and oaths he got both his companions on their feet, made them pick up what the deserters had been unable to carry, and urged them onward, up-river.

Discreetly, occasionally coming close enough to see them but mostly following by sound, Lex led his companions after them.

The man who had been strangled collapsed late in the afternoon, and would not be compelled to move on. Gomes and Probian abandoned him, and Lex assigned Aldric to make him comfortable, leave some food and water with him, and tell him that he would be found when the main party came up. That would not be before tomorrow, of course.

The vegetation closed in like a tunnel around the river. Sustained now by mere desperation, Gomes and Probian kept on, always with Lex's party a few hundred yards behind. Night came down, and they found a site previously cleared, where they collapsed almost without being able to snatch a mouthful of food and water. Now the torture to which they were submitting the pair began to trouble Lex's

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companions; even Jesset, who at first said hotly that nothing was too good for such madmen, fell silent when she saw the state they were reduced to.

His eyes like chips of stone, Lex stared up toward the cleared ground where the fugitives—that was what they were now—lay sleeping. He said, "If we wake them a little after midnight, we can reach the plateau at first light tomorrow. Get a few hours' sleep. You're going to need it, I promise."

In the dead heart of the night, they crept up on Gomes and Probian, and woke them with handlights in their eyes. They were too weary to offer fight. Fed, given water, they were taken captive in their turn, and driven forward again. Now they were on high ground, having to clamber over the rocky ledges beside the falls and rapids, with starlight and Lex as their only aid. Sometimes having to drag the prisoners, or lift them over the more awkward ledges, they nonetheless made good time. Dawn was just breaking as they found themselves below the sad, futile remains of what had been Gomes's vaunted dam. The river ran free now, and its sound was loud enough to cover a few quietly spoken words.

"I'm going up first," Lex whispered. "Send Gomes and Probian after me, then follow yourselves, as quickly as you can."

The others nodded. Hosper gleefully hugged Jesset to him with his left arm, weighing his gun in his other hand.

"And don't use that unless you have to," Lex ordered. "Move!"

He scrambled over the last rocky shelf, and was on the same level as the wrecked wall of the dam. He had judged that the gap here would be guarded, and he was right. As he turned and dragged the unprotesting Gomes up behind him, he heard a hiss of breath, and then someone said sharply, "Don't shoot—that looks like the captain got back!"

A handlight beam, very narrow, slanted down and fell on Gomes and Probian, standing stupidly on the edge of the shelf. After a moment it snapped off, and men emerged from behind the dam wall, guns in hand.

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Lex waited a fraction of a second, judged it was safe to help the others up—and was wrong. Comes licked his lips.

"Get back!" he croaked. "It's a—!"

Before he could finish, Lex had kicked his legs from under him and thrown him backward off the rock, to land slumped on the ground eight feet below. He would never move again. Probian attempted to run forward; Lex caught him by the arm and spun him around, knocking him to the ground and falling on him. In the same movement he avoided a bolt from a gun in the hands of one of the guards who had come from the dam.

Not as quiet and simple as he might have hoped. However, it could have been worse.

Half over the rock shelf, Cheffy sighted his own gun coolly. Lex knocked it aside before he could fire.

"What's the idea?" Lex called angrily, relying on the half-darkness to confuse the guards. "The captain's gone out of his mind—killed Dockle—we lost—oh, come here and give me a hand!"

He bent and whispered to Hosper and Jesset; "Stay below for a moment! Aldric, Cheffy, come up quickly and keep your faces in shadow."

Bewildered, the guards—there were two of them—came closer in response to the ring of authority in Lex's voice. To prevent them seeing his face, he bent beside Cheffy, muttering something about being hurt and having trouble on the way.

And the moment the puzzled guards were close enough, he knocked them off balance.

Responding as though the job had been rehearsed, Aldric and Cheffy gave each of them the extra push necessary to send them over the lip of the rock, and as they fell Hosper and Jesset pounced on them and beat them into unconsciousness.

"Don't be too savage," Lex adjured them softly. "Remember, that's what we came here to stop."

A little shamefacedly, Jesset and Hosper left their victims and came up to join the others. Lex led them quickly into

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a shadowed dip between the broken halves of the dam, and with them grouped about him spoke under his breath.

"Hosper, Jesset—you know the way around. One of you go with Aldric, one with Cheffy, and see to the guards on the workers' pens. Don't shoot unless it's unavoidable. They may be alert because of noise out here, but much of it would have been covered by the river splashing. Avoid the ship. I'll see to that. Then free as many of the workers as you can. I take it we can trust all those that Gomes keeps chained—Hosper?"

The shock-headed man gave a bitter laugh. "After a while up here, you forget what trust is! But Gomes' men will be the ones sleeping in the ship, probably barricaded in."

"Okay," Lex said. "Try not to make too much noise, hey?"

It was a pious hope. There was a period of about ten minutes when the gray light of early morning lay like a stifling blanket across the plateau, which Lex spent worming his way toward the hull of the ship. Some progress had been made on raising it; it lay now on four piles of rock, its underside exposed to reveal its cracks and splits. Then there was a scream—he didn't identify the source—and time began to run out.

A clanging alarm bell sounded. The locks on the side of the ship flew open. A terrific animal clamor rose from the workers' pens, and haggard men and women, their wrists and ankles galled with chains, began to pour out like angry hornets across the plateau. Two men that Lex recognized stood irresolute at the entrance of the ship, guns in their hands, and saw the freed workers begin to boil towards them. In terror they dashed back into the ship and slammed the door behind them.

They could stew there for as long as they liked, Lex figured. He showed himself now to the workers as they grew in number, putting his gun in the belt of his breeches to indicate his peaceful intentions.

Shouting, he walked toward them. "Be calm if you can! We come from the site down by the coast—you're free now, it's all over, food and clothes are being brought and Gomes is . . ."

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There was a sound behind him which was the most frightening noise he would ever hear in his life, more frightening than the wind wailing across the open locks of the other ship that had reached this world. It was the sound of fusion engines warming up.

In complete bewilderment, to the accompaniment of screams from the workers, he turned. And saw the gleaming hull of the spaceship rising slowly from the ground.

### XXIV

THE COSMOS HAD suddenly become an insane place, full of giddy whirling lights. Yet somehow he was still master of himself and knew what had to be done. He ran forward, away from the ship, shouting at the top of his voice above the climaxing roar of the spacedrive.

"Get down! Lie down! Keep your mouths open!"

Conditioned by intolerable months of blind obedience, they heard him and did as he said, falling like wheat before a sickle. He ran on, catching sight of Hosper and Cheffy emerging from one of the stinking adobe sheds in the wake of the latest group of freed workers. Hosper was about to fire on the ship.

"Hosper! *Don't!*" Lex yelled. And Cheffy, responding, caught his companion's arm.

"You can't let them go!" Hosper shrieked.

"Do you think they can?" Lex bawled back. "*Get down!*" He flung himself forward on the rocky ground and opened his mouth wide as the terrible noise beat at his ears. His whole field of vision embraced only the stones and dirt under his face. The noise went on.

Were they going to? By some miracle, *were* they? He felt sweat crawl down his face and his palms were sticky. Let them do it! Let the ship get aloft, into orbit; let Comes be proved right and Lex be wrong, let him have condemned his fellows needlessly to being stranded on a lonely planet when drive and determination could have sent out a call for help and brought rescuers faster than light. . . .

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The landscape was lit with unbearable brilliance now, and every grain of sand under Lex's face was etched sharp by shadows. He dared not look up.

The noise was dwindling. There was a wind. The angle of the tiny shadows was changing. He put his hands over his face and rolled on his side, risking a peep between his fingers. Shining like a new star, the ship was creeping into the sky. All around him he heard that other people were staring up, heedless of the dazzling light. He identified a weeping voice as that of Hosper, and it mingled with the moans of a hundred others.

And then . . .

He pushed himself up on his knees and looked without shading his eyes. The ship was a mile high, two miles, dwindling and accelerating into the blue edge of the dawn. Silence was falling on the plateau, barely disturbed by a few final moans. They were all staring now, in awe, *willing* the ship to rise. With no reservation at all, Lex wished with the rest.

A beacon of all their hopes, the light dwindled into the sky. A smudge. A pinpoint. A dust-mote.

A . . . a pin-point? A . . . a smudge? A smear!

Back down the blue field of the morning, out beyond the land where the reflection of the sun lay like a road of gold across the smooth summer sea, the ship returned. Lucifer cast from heaven, it tore the air asunder and rode the terrible light of its own destruction downward to the water—and was gone. From where it plunged a single monstrous bubble full of flames, burst forth and a long time later the sea beat sluggishly against the beach.

His eyes still filled with the departed vision, Lex slowly became aware that he was pounding the ground with his fists and that dry, formless sobs were racking his throat.

Later, when they asked to be told what to do about the miserable half-human wrecks of Gomes' rule, he refused an answer and went to sit by himself among the rocks, his head bowed.

"Lex! Lex!"

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He stirred and looked up. Uncertainly, Delvia stood before him, her fair hair shaken back, a gun in her hand and sadness in her eyes. He forced himself back to awareness and greeted her.

"Are the others here?" he said.

"No. We saw the ship, you see, and so I came ahead. I—I couldn't help it. I had to."

"Why did you have to?" His voice was rough, and he didn't look at her.

"Because I thought you might be—well, unhappy." She bit her lip. "You see, we saw the ship go up, and I thought about things you'd said to me, and I remembered that first time on the beach when I saw what it meant to be loaded with the troubles of a whole world—because that's what it means, isn't it?" Her words became a rush, as though she had to get them all out and explain herself completely before he could interrupt and say she was wrong.

"Right up till then we still had some hope, if we could save the other ship, keep it till we had the tools and resources to repair it properly and get it aloft, even if it took years to do. But now it's gone. And—"

Her lip trembled, and her eyes grew large with tears. "It doesn't matter for me or anyone else, but for you because of what you are—oh, Lex, poor dear wonderful *Lex!*"

She let the gun fall with a crash to the ground and was on her knees before him, clutching at him as though she would stop him vanishing from sight. Fiercely, making a kind of invocation of the words, she spoke between her sobs.

"You're going to make it, I know you are. You're going to show us how to conquer the world and we're going to have children and we're going to teach them and we'll find ore and build factories and have farms and then one day we're going to send a message back to tell them where we are, and they'll come for us, and they'll say you're the most wonderful man who ever lived because of what you did for us."

He felt the terror of the future which had gripped him leak away. He held her to him very tightly while he wiped from his memory the blinding sight of the ship as it thun-



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dered down. At last he made her relax her grip and pushed her shoulders back so he could look down at her face.

"You know . . . I figured out just when Gomes came to the town what it is that a polymath has to do. He has to be right. Always and without exception. Nothing else is good enough."

"What a—terrible thing," she whispered.

He didn't respond, but went on steadily, "I remember saying to myself, long before I knew why, that what we needed was more Delvias on this planet."

She smiled, not quite understanding at first. He got to his feet and drew her up also.

"What's it like out there?"

"Chaotic when I came on to the plateau," she answered.

"Then we'd better go and set our home in order." A shadow crossed his face which belied his light words.

Now, finally and definitively, without trace of doubt or hope of qualification: home. All they had. Where their children would be born, where they would be buried.

But it was going to be a good world eventually.

He hadn't meant to say the words aloud, and it was only when he saw that Delvia was smiling that he realized he had. Of course, saying it had made it true. A polymath, after all, was always right.

He took her arm and they walked forward together.