

AN ACE BOOK 166

The old war machine was a relic, but it still
had guns, fuel — and the habit of killing!

THE big SHOW

KEITH LAUMER



They called it Bobby. It was an old war machine, and it sat in the middle of the village square with the rust coating it and the weeds growing around it.

The workmen nearby got a great big kick out of it. They'd say: "How's it going, Bobby?" and the old machine, its computerized vocal mechanism still functional, would reply, "Very well, thank you."

One day a military man drove up in a turbocar. He was a disposal officer, and he was going to put the old relic completely out of commission with his ray gun. . . .

But was he doing the right thing?

Read "A Relic of War"—and the five other tense, provocative tales in this superb collection by Keith Laumer.

KEITH LAUMER has been a captain in the United States Air Force and is the author of many novels and short stories in the science fiction field. He makes his home in Florida.

The Big Show

by **KEITH LAUMER**

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THE BIG SHOW

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IN THE QUEUE

The old man fell just as Farn Hestler's power wheel was passing his Place in Line, on his way back from the Comfort Station. Hestler, braking, stared down at the twisted face, a mask of soft, pale leather in which the mouth writhed as if trying to tear itself free of the dying body. Then he jumped from the wheel, bent over the victim. Quick as he was, a lean woman with fingers like gnarled roots was before him, clutching at the old man's fleshless shoulders.

"Tell them *me*, Millicent Dredgewicke Klunt," she was shrilling into the vacant face. "Oh, if you only knew what I've been through, how I *deserve* the help—"

Hestler sent her reeling with a deft shove of his foot. He knelt beside the old man, lifted his head.

"Vultures," he said. "Greedy, snapping at a man. Now, I *care*. And you were getting so close to the Head of the Line. The tales you could tell, I'll bet. An Old-timer. Not like these Line, er, jumpers," he diverted the obscenity. "I say a man deserves a little dignity at a moment like this—"

"Wasting your time, Jack," a meaty voice said. Hestler glanced up into the hippopotamine features of the man he always thought of as Twentieth Back. "The old coot's dead."

Hestler shook the corpse. "Tell them Argall Y.

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Hestler!" he yelled into the dead ear. "Argall, that's A-R-G-A-L-L—"

"Break it up," the brassy voice of a Line Policeman sliced through the babble. "You, get back." A sharp prod lent urgency to the command. Hestler rose reluctantly, his eyes on the waxy face slackening into an expression of horrified astonishment.

"Ghoul," the lean woman he had kicked snarled. "Line —!" She mouthed the unmentionable word.

"I wasn't thinking of myself," Hestler countered hotly. "But my boy Argall, through no fault of his own—"

"All right, quiet!" the cop snarled. He jerked a thumb at the dead man. "This guy make any disposition?"

"Yes!" the lean woman cried. "He said, to Millicent Dredgewicke Klunt, that's M-I-L—"

"She's lying," Hestler cut in. "I happened to catch the name Argall Hestler—right, sir?" He looked brightly at a slack-jawed lad who was staring down at the corpse.

The boy swallowed and looked Hestler in the face.

"Hell, he never said a word," he said, and spat, just missing Hestler's shoe.

"Died intestate," the cop intoned, and wrote a note in his book. He gestured and a clean-up squad moved in, lifted the corpse onto a cart, covered it, trundled it away.

"Close it up," the cop ordered.

"Intestate," somebody grumbled. "Crap!"

"A rotten shame. The slot goes back to the government. Nobody profits. Goddamn!" the fat man who had spoken looked around at the others. "In a case like this we ought to get together, have some equitable plan worked out and agreed to in advance—"

"Hey," the slack-jawed boy said. "That's conspiracy!"

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"I meant to suggest nothing illegal," the fat man faded back to his Place in Line. As if by common consent, the small crowd dissipated, sliding into their Places with deft footwork. Hestler shrugged and remounted his wheel, put-putted forward, aware of the envious eyes that followed him. He passed the same backs he always passed, some standing, some sitting on canvas camp stools under sun-faded umbrellas, here and there a nylon queuebana, high and square, some shabby, some ornate, owned by the more fortunate. Like himself: he was a lucky man, he had never been a Standee, sweating the Line exposed to the sun and prying eyes.

It was a bright afternoon. The sun shone down on the vast concrete ramp across which the Line snaked from a point lost in distance across the plain. Ahead—not far ahead now, and getting closer every day—was the blank white wall perforated only by the Window, the terminal point of the Line. Hestler slowed as he approached the Hestler queuebana; his mouth went dry as he saw how close it was to the Head of the Line now. One, two, three, four slots back! Ye Gods, that meant six people had been processed in the past twelve hours—an unprecedented number. And it meant—Hestler caught his breath—he might reach the Window himself, this shift. For a moment, he felt a panicky urge to flee, to trade places with First Back, and then with Second, work his way back to a safe distance, give himself a chance to think about it, get ready. . . .

"Say, Farn," the head of his proxy, Cousin Galpert, poked from the curtains of the three foot square, five foot high nylon-walled queuebana. "Guess what? I moved up a spot while you were gone."

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Hestler folded the wheel and leaned it against the weathered cloth. He waited until Galpert had emerged, then surreptitiously twitched the curtains wide open. The place always smelled fudgy and stale after his cousin had spent half an hour in it while he was away for his Comfort Break.

"We're getting close to the Head," Galpert said excitedly, handing over the lockbox that contained the Papers. "I have a feeling—" He broke off as sharp voices were suddenly raised a few Spaces behind. A small, pale-haired man with bulging blue eyes was attempting to force himself into Line between Third Back and Fifth Back.

"Say, isn't that Four Back?" Hestler asked.

"You don't understand," the little man was whimpering. "I had to go answer an unscheduled call of nature. . . ." His weak eyes fixed on Fifth Back, a large, coarse-featured man in a loud shirt and sunglasses. "You said you'd watch my Place . . . !"

"So whattaya think ya got a Comfort Break for, ya bum! Beat it!"

Lots of people were shouting at the little man now:

"Line-ine-ucker-bucker—Line bucker, Line bucker. . . ."

The little man fell back, covering his ears. The obscene chant gained in volume as other voices took it up.

"But it's my *Place*," the evictee wailed. "Father left it to me when he died, you all remember him. . . ." His voice was drowned in the uproar.

"Serves him right," Galpert said, embarrassed by the chant. "A man with no more regard for his inheritance than to walk off and leave it. . . ."

They watched the former Fourth Back turn and flee,

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his hands still over his ears.

After Galpert left on the wheel, Hestler aired the queuebana for another ten minutes, standing stony-faced, arms folded, staring at the back of One Up. His father had told him some stories about One Up, back in the old days, when they'd both been young fellows, near the end of the Line. Seemed he'd been quite a cutup in those days, always joking around with the women close to him in Line, offering to trade Places for a certain consideration. You didn't see many signs of that now: just a dumpy old man in burst-out shoe-leather, sweating out the Line. But he himself was lucky, Hestler reflected. He'd taken over from Father when the latter had had his stroke, a twenty-one thousand two hundred and ninety-four slot jump. Not many young fellows did that well. Not that he was all that young, he'd put in his time in the Line, it wasn't as if he didn't deserve the break.

And now, in a few hours maybe, he'd hit the Head of the Line. He touched the lockbox that contained the old man's Papers—and of course his own, and Cluster's and the kids'—everything. In a few hours, if the Line kept moving, he could relax, retire, let the kids, with their own Places in Line, carry on. Let them do as well as their dad had done, making Head of the Line at under forty-five!

Inside the queuebana it was hot, airless. Hestler pulled off his coat and squatted in the crouch-hammock—not the most comfortable position in the world, maybe, but in full compliance with the Q-law requirement that at least one foot be on the ground at all times, and the head higher than the waist. Hestler remembered an incident years before, when some poor devil without a

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queuebana had gone to sleep standing up. He'd stood with his eyes closed and his knees bent, and slowly sunk down to a squat; then bobbed slowly up and blinked and went back to sleep. Up and down, they'd watched him for an hour before he finally let his head drop lower than his belt. They'd pitched him out of Line then, and closed ranks. Ah, there'd been some wild times in the queue in the old days, not like now. There was too much at stake now, this near the Head. No time for horseplay.

Just before dusk, the Line moved up. Three to go! Hestler's heart thumped.

It was dark when he heard the voice whisper: "*Four Up!*"

Hestler jerked wide awake. He blinked, wondering if he'd dreamed the urgent tone.

"*Four Up!*" the voice hissed again. Hestler twitched the curtain open, saw nothing, pulled his head back in. Then he saw the pale, pinched face, the bulging eyes of Four Back, peering through the vent slot at the rear of the tent.

"You have to help me," the little man said. "You saw what happened, you can make a deposition that I was cheated, that—"

"Look here, what are you doing out of Line?" Hestler cut in. "I know you're on-shift, why aren't you holding down a new slot?"

"I . . . I couldn't face it," Four Back said brokenly. "My wife, my children—they're all counting on me."

"You should have thought of that sooner."

"I swear I couldn't help it. It just hit me so suddenly. And—"

"You lost your Place. There's nothing I can do."

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"If I have to start over now—I'll be over seventy when I get to the Window!"

"That's not my lookout—"

". . . but if you'll just tell the Line Police what happened, explain about my special case—"

"You're crazy, I can't do that!"

"But you . . . I always thought you looked like a decent sort—"

"You'd better go. Suppose someone sees me talking to you?"

"I had to speak to you here, I don't know your name, but after all we've been four Spaces apart in Line for nine years—"

"Go away! Before I call a Line cop!"

Hestler had a hard time getting comfortable again after Four Back left. There was a fly inside the queuebana. It was a hot night. The Line moved up again, and Hestler had to emerge and roll the queuebana forward. Two Spaces to go! The feeling of excitement was so intense that it made Hestler feel a little sick. Two more moves up, and he'd be at the Window. He'd open the lockbox, and present the Papers, taking his time, one at a time, getting it all correct, all in order. With a sudden pang of panic he wondered if anyone had goofed, anywhere back along the line, failed to sign anything, missed a Notary's seal, or a witness' signature. But they couldn't have. Nothing as dumb as that. For that you could get bounced out of Line, lose your Place, have to go all the way back—

Hestler shook off the morbid fancies. He was just nervous, that was all. Well, who wouldn't be? After tonight, his whole life would be different; his days of

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standing in Line would be over. He'd have time—all the time in the world to do all the things he hadn't been able to think about all these years. . . .

Someone shouted, near at hand. Hestler stumbled out of the queuebana to see Two Up—at the Head of the Line now—raise his fist and shake it under the nose of the small, black-moustached face in the green eye-shade framed in the Window, bathed in harsh white light.

"Idiot! Dumbbell! Jackass!" Two Up yelled. "What do you mean take it back home and have my wife spell out her middle name!"

Two burly Line police appeared, shone lights in Two Up's wild face, grabbed his arms, took him away. Hestler trembled as he pushed the queuebana forward a Space on its roller skate wheels. Only one man ahead of him now. He'd be next. But no reason to get all upset; the Line had been moving like greased lightning, but it would take a few hours to process the man ahead. He had time to relax, get his nerves soothed down, get ready to answer questions. . . .

"I don't understand, sir," the reedy voice of One Up was saying to the small black moustache behind the Window. "My Papers are all in order, I swear it—"

"You said yourself your father is dead," the small, dry voice of Black Moustache said. "That means you'll have to reexecute Form 56839847565342-B in sextuplicate, with an endorsement from the medical doctor, the Residential Police, and waivers from Department A, B, C, and so on. You'll find it all, right in the Regulations."

"But—but he only died two hours ago: I just received word—"

"Two hours, two years; he's just as dead."

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"But—I'll lose my Place! If I hadn't mentioned it to you—"

"Then I wouldn't have known about it. But you did mention it, quite right, too."

"Couldn't you just pretend I didn't say anything? That the messenger never reached me?"

"Are you suggesting I commit fraud?"

"No . . . no . . ." One Up turned and tottered away, his invalidated Papers clutched in his hand. Hestler swallowed hard.

"Next," Black Moustache said.

It was almost dawn six hours later when the clerk stamped the last Paper, licked the last stamp, thrust the stack of processed documents into a slot and looked past Hestler at the next man in Line.

Hestler hesitated, holding the empty lockbox in nerveless fingers. It felt abnormally light, like a cast husk.

"That's all," the clerk said. "Next."

One Down jostled Hestler getting to the Window. He was a small, bandy-legged Standee with large, loose lips and long ears. Hestler had never really looked at him before. He felt an urge to tell him all about how it had been, give him a few friendly tips, as an old Window veteran to a newcomer. But the man didn't give him a glance.

Moving off, Hestler noticed the queuebana. It looked abandoned, functionless. He thought of all the hours, the days, the years he had spent in it, crouched in the sling. . . .

"You can have it," he said on impulse to Two Down, who, he noted with surprise, was a woman, dumpy, slack-jowled. He gestured toward the queuebana. She

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made a snorting sound and ignored him. He wandered off down the Line, staring curiously at the people in it, at the varied faces and figures, tall, wide, narrow, old, young—not so many of those—dressed in used clothing, with hair combed or uncombed, some with facial hair, some with paint on their lips, all unattractive in their own individual ways.

He encountered Galpert whizzing toward him on the powerwheel. Galpert slowed, gaping, came to a halt. Hestler noticed that his cousin had thin, bony ankles in maroon socks, one of which suffered from perished elastic so that the sock drooped, exposing clay-white skin.

“Farn—what . . . ?”

“All done.” Hestler held up the empty lockbox.

“All done . . . ?” Galpert looked across toward the distant Window in a bewildered way.

“All done. Not much to it, really.”

“Then . . . I . . . I guess I don’t need to . . .” Galpert’s voice died away.

“No, no need, never again, Galpert.”

“Yes, but what . . . ?” Galpert looked at Hestler, looked at the Line, back at Hestler. “You coming, Farn?”

“I . . . I think I’ll just take a walk for a while. Savor it, you know.”

“Well,” Galpert said. He started up the wheel and rode slowly off across the ramp.

Suddenly, Hestler was thinking about time—all that time stretching ahead, like an abyss. What would he do with it . . . ? He almost called after Galpert, but instead turned and continued his walk along the Line. Faces stared past him, over him, through him.

Noon came and went. Hestler obtained a dry hot dog

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and a paper cup of warm milk from a vendor on a three-wheeler with a big umbrella and a pet chicken perched on the back. He walked on, searching the faces. They were all so ugly. He pitied them, so far from the Window. He looked back; it was barely visible, a tiny dark point toward which the Line dwindled. What did they think about, standing in Line? How they must envy him!

But no one seemed to notice him. Toward sunset he began to feel lonely. He wanted to talk to someone; but none of the faces he passed seemed sympathetic.

It was almost dark when he reached the End of the Line. Beyond, the empty plain stretched toward the dark horizon. It looked cold out there, lonely.

"It looks cold out there," he heard himself say to the oatmeal-faced lad who huddled at the tail of the Line, hands in pockets. "And lonely."

"You in Line, or what?" the boy asked.

Hestler looked again at the bleak horizon. He came over and stood behind the youth.

"Certainly," he said.

A RELIC OF WAR

I

The old war machine sat in the village square, its impotent guns pointing aimlessly along the dusty street. Shoulder-high weeds grew rankly about it, poking up through the gaps in the two-yard-wide treads; vines crawled over the high, rust-and guano-streaked flanks. A row of tarnished enamel battle honors gleamed dully across the prow, reflecting the late sun.

A group of men lounged near the machine; they were dressed in heavy work-clothes and boots; their hands were large and calloused, their faces weather-burned. They passed a jug from hand to hand, drinking deep. It was the end of a long workday and they were relaxed, good-humored.

"Hey, we're forgetting old Bobby," one said. He strolled over and sloshed a little of the raw whiskey over the soot-blackened muzzle of the blast cannon slanting sharply down from the forward turret. The other men laughed.

"How's it going, Bobby?" the man called.

Deep inside the machine, there was a soft chirring sound.

"Very well, thank you," a faint, whispery voice scraped from a grill below the turret.

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"You keeping an eye on things, Bobby?" another man called.

"All clear," the answer came: a bird-chirp from a dinosaur.

"Bobby, you ever get tired just setting here?"

"Hell, Bobby don't get tired," the man with the jug said. "He's got a job to do, old Bobby has."

"Hey, Bobby, what kind o' boy are you?" a plump, lazy-eyed man called.

"I am a good boy," Bobby replied obediently.

"Sure Bobby's a good boy." The man with the jug reached up to pat the age-darkened curve of chromalloy above him. "Bobby's looking out for us."

Heads turned at a sound from across the square: the distant whine of a turbocar, approaching along the forest road.

"Huh! Ain't the day for the mail," a man said. They stood in silence, watched as a small, dusty cushion-car emerged from deep shadow into the yellow light of the street. It came slowly along to the plaza, swung left, pulled to a stop beside the boardwalk before a corrugated metal storefront lettered *Blauvelt Provision Company*. The canopy popped open and a man stepped down. He was of medium height, dressed in a plain city-type black coverall. He studied the storefront, the street, then turned to look across at the men. He stepped down into the street and came across toward them.

"Which of you men is Blauvelt?" he asked as he came up. His voice was unhurried, cool. His eyes flickered over the men.

A big, youngish man with a square face and sun-bleached hair lifted his chin.

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"Right here," he said. "Who're you, Mister?"

"Crewe is the name. Disposal Officer, War Materiel Commission." The newcomer looked up at the great machine looming over them. "*Bolo Stupendous, Mark XXV*," he said. He glanced at the men's faces, fixed on Blauvelt. "We had a report that there was a live Bolo out here. I wonder if you realize what you're playing with?"

"Hell, that's just Bobby," a man said.

"He's town mascot," someone else said.

"This machine could blow your town off the map," Crewe said. "And a good-sized piece of jungle along with it."

Blauvelt grinned; the squint lines around his eyes gave him a quizzical look.

"Don't do getting upset, Mr. Crewe," he said. "Bobby's harmless—"

"A Bolo's never harmless, Mr. Blauvelt. They're fighting machines, nothing else."

Blauvelt sauntered over and kicked at a corroded tread-plate. "Eighty-five years out in this jungle is kind of tough on machinery, Crewe. The sap and stuff from the trees eats chromalloy like it was sugar candy. The rains are acid, eat up equipment damn near as fast as we can ship it in here. Bobby can still talk a little, but that's about all."

"Certainly it's deteriorated; that's what makes it dangerous. Anything could trigger its battle reflex circuitry. Now, if you'll clear everyone out of the area, I'll take care of it."

"You move kind of fast for a man that just hit town,"

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Blauvelt said, frowning. "Just what you got in mind doing?"

"I'm going to fire a pulse at it that will neutralize what's left of its computing center. Don't worry; there's no danger—"

"Hey," a man in the rear rank blurted. "That mean he can't talk anymore?"

"That's right," Crewe said. "Also, he can't open fire on you."

"Not so fast, Crewe," Blauvelt said. "You're not messing with Bobby. We like him like he is." The other men were moving forward, forming up in a threatening circle around Crewe.

"Don't talk like a fool," Crewe said. "What do you think a salvo from a Continental Seige Unit would do to your town?"

Blauvelt chuckled and took a long cigar from his vest pocket. He sniffed it, called out: "All right, Bobby—fire one!"

There was a muter clatter, a sharp *click!* from deep inside the vast bulk of the machine. A tongue of pale flame licked from the cannon's soot-rimmed bore. The big man leaned quickly forward, puffed the cigar alight. The audience whooped with laughter.

"Bobby does what he's told, that's all," Blauvelt said. "And not much of that." He showed white teeth in a humorless smile.

Crewe flipped over the lapel of his jacket; a small, highly polished badge glinted there. "You know better than to interfere with a Concordiat officer," he said.

"Not so fast, Crewe." A dark-haired, narrow-faced fellow spoke up. "You're out of line. I heard about you

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Disposal men. Your job is locating old ammo dumps, abandoned equipment, stuff like that. Bobby's not abandoned. He's town property. Has been for near thirty years."

"Nonsense. This is battle equipment, the property of the Space Arm—"

Blauvelt was smiling lopsidedly. "Uh-uh. We've got salvage rights. No title, but we can make one up in a hurry. Official. I'm mayor here, and District Governor."

"This thing is a menace to every man, woman, and child in the settlement," Crewe snapped. "My job is to prevent tragedy—"

"Forget Bobby," Blauvelt cut in. He waved a hand at the jungle wall beyond the tilled fields. "There's a hundred million square miles of virgin territory out there," he said. "You can do what you like out there. I'll even sell you provisions. But just leave our mascot be, understand?"

Crewe looked at him, looked around at the other men.

"You're a fool," he said. "You're all fools." He turned and walked away, stiff-backed.

II

In the room he had rented in the town's lone boarding house, Crewe opened his baggage and took out a small, gray plastic cased instrument. The three children of the landlord who were watching from the latchless door edged closer.

"Gee, is that a real star radio?" the eldest, a skinny, long-necked lad of twelve asked.

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"No," Crewe said shortly. The boy blushed and hung his head.

"It's a command transmitter," Crewe said, relenting. "It's designed for talking to fighting machines, giving them orders. They'll only respond to the special shaped-wave signal this puts out." He flicked a switch, and an indicator light glowed on the side of the case.

"You mean like Bobby?" the boy asked.

"Like Bobby used to be." Crewe switched off the transmitter and put it aside.

"Bobby's swell," another child said. "He tells us stories about when he was in the war."

"He's got medals," the first boy said. "Were you in the war, Mister?"

"I'm not quite that old," Crewe said.

"Bobby's old, he's older'n Granddad."

"You boys had better run along," Crewe said. "I have to . . ." He broke off, cocked his head, listening. There were shouts outside; someone was calling his name.

Crewe pushed through the boys and went quickly along the hall, stepped through the door onto the boardwalk. He felt rather than heard a slow, heavy thudding, a chorus of shrill squeaks, a metallic groaning—A red-faced man was running toward him from the square.

"It's Bobby!" he shouted. He's moving! What'd you do to him, damn you, Crewe!"

Crewe brushed past the man, ran toward the plaza. The Bolo appeared at the end of the street, moving ponderously forward, trailing uprooted weeds and vines.

"He's headed straight for Spivac's warehouse!" someone yelled.

"Bobby! Stop there!" Blauvelt came into view, running

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in the machine's wake. The big machine rumbled onward, executed a half-left as Crewe reached the plaza, clearing the corner of a building by inches. It crushed a section of boardwalk to splinters, advanced across a storage yard. A stack of rough-cut lumber toppled, spilled across the dusty ground. The Bolo trampled a board fence, headed out across a tilled field. Blauvelt whirled on Crewe.

"This is your doing, damn you! We never had trouble before—"

"Never mind that! Have you got a field-car?"

"We—" Blauvelt checked himself. "What if we have?"

"I can stop it—but I have to be close. It will be into the jungle in another minute. My car can't navigate there."

"Let him go," a man said, breathing hard from his run. "He can't do no harm out there."

"Who'd of thought it?" another man said. "Setting there all them years—who'd of thought he could travel like that?"

"Your so-called mascot might have more surprises in store for you," Crewe snapped. "Get me a car, fast! This is an official requisition, Blauvelt!"

There was a silence, broken only by the distant crashing of timber as the Bolo moved into the edge of the forest. Hundred foot trees leaned and went down before its advance.

"Let him go," Blauvelt said. "Like Stinzi says, he can't hurt anything."

"What if he turns back?"

"Hell," a man muttered. "Old Bobby wouldn't hurt us. . . ."

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"The car," Crewe snarled. "You're wasting valuable time."

Blauvelt frowned. "All right—but you don't make a move unless it looks like he's going to come back and hit the town, clear?"

"Let's go."

Blauvelt led the way at a trot toward the town garage.

III

The Bolo's trail was a twenty-five feet wide swathe cut through the virgin jungle; the tread-prints were pressed eighteen inches into the black loam, where it showed among the jumble of fallen branches.

"It's moving at about twenty miles per hour, faster than we can go," Crewe said. "If it holds its present track, the curve will bring it back to your town in about five hours."

"He'll sheer off," Blauvelt muttered.

"Maybe. But we won't risk it. Pick up a heading of two hundred and seventy degrees, Blauvelt. We'll try an intercept by cutting across the circle."

Blauvelt complied wordlessly. The car moved ahead in the deep green gloom under the huge shaggy-barked trees. Oversized insects buzzed and thumped against the canopy. Small and medium lizards hopped, darted, flapped. Fern leaves as big as awnings scraped along the car as it clambered over loops and coils of tough root, leaving streaks of plant juice. Once they grated against an exposed ridge of crumbling brown rock; flakes as big as saucers scaled off, exposing dull metal.

"Dorsal fin of a scout-boat," Crewe said. "That's what's

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left of what was supposed to be a corrosion resistant alloy."

They passed more evidence of a long-ago battle: the massive shattered breech mechanism of a platform-mounted Hellbore, the gutted chassis of what might have been a bomb car, portions of a downed aircraft, fragments of shattered armor. Many of the relics were of Terran design, but often it was the curiously curved, spidery lines of a rusted Axorc microgun or implosion projector that poked through the greenery.

"It must have been a heavy action," Crewe said. "One of the ones toward the end that didn't get much notice at the time. There's stuff here I've never seen before, experimental types, I imagine, rushed in for a last-ditch stand."

Blauvelt grunted.

"Contact in another minute or so," Crewe said. As Blauvelt opened his mouth to reply, there was a blinding flash, a violent impact, and the jungle erupted in their faces.

IV

The seat webbing was cutting into Crewe's ribs. His ears were filled with a high, steady ringing; there was a taste of tarnished brass in his mouth. His head throbbed in time with the heavy thudding of his heart.

The car was on its side, the interior a jumble of loose objects, torn wiring, broken plastic. Blauvelt was half under him, groaning. He slid off him, saw that he was groggy but conscious.

"Changed your mind yet about your harmless pet?"

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he asked, wiping a trickle of blood from his right eye. "Let's get clear before he fires those empty guns again. Can you walk?"

Blauvelt mumbled, crawled out through the broken canopy. Crewe gropped through debris for the command transmitter—

"Mother of God," Blauvelt croaked. Crewe twisted, saw the high, narrow, iodine-dark shape of the alien machine perched on jointed crawler-legs fifty feet away framed by blast-scorched foliage. Its multiple-barreled microgun battery aimed dead at the overturned car.

"Don't move a muscle," Crewe whispered. Sweat trickled down Crewe's face. An insect, like a stub-winged four inch dragonfly, came and buzzed about them, moved on. Hot metal pinged, contracting. Instantly, the alien hunter-killer moved forward another six feet, depressed its gun muzzles.

"Run for it!" Blauvelt cried. He came to his feet in a scrabbling lunge; the enemy machine swung to track him—

A giant tree leaned, snapped, was tossed aside. The great green-streaked prow of the Bolo forged into view, interposing itself between the smaller machine and the men. It turned to face the enemy; fire flashed, reflecting against the surrounding trees; the ground jumped once, twice, to hard, racking shocks. Sound boomed dully in Crewe's blast-numbed ears. Bright sparks fountained above the Bolo as it advanced. Crewe felt the shock as the two fighting machines came together; he saw the Bolo hesitate, then forge ahead, rearing up, dozing the lighter machine aside, grinding over it, passing on, to leave a crumpled mass of wreckage in its wake.

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"My God, did you see that, Crewe?" Blauvelt shouted in Crewe's ear. "Did you see what Bobby did? He walked right into its guns and smashed it flatter'n crock-brewed beer!"

The Bolo halted, turned ponderously, sat facing the men. Bright streaks of molten metal ran down its armored flanks, fell spattering and smoking into crushed greenery.

"He saved our necks," Blauvelt said. He staggered to his feet, picked his way past the Bolo to stare at the smoking ruins of the smashed adversary.

"That thing was headed straight for town," he said. "My God, can you picture what it would have done?"

"Until nine-five-four of the line, reporting contact with hostile force." The mechanical voice of the Bolo spoke suddenly. "Enemy unit destroyed. I have sustained extensive damage, but am still operational at nine point six percent base capability, awaiting further orders."

"Hey," Blauvelt said. "That doesn't sound like . . ."

"Now maybe you understand that this is a Bolo combat unit, not the village idiot," Crewe snapped. He picked his way across the churned-up ground, stood before the great machine.

"Mission accomplished, Unit nine-five-four," he said. "Enemy forces neutralized. Close out Battle Reflex and revert to low alert status." He turned to Blauvelt.

"Let's go back to town," he said, "and tell them what their mascot just did."

Blauvelt stared up at the grim and ancient machine; his square, tanned face looked yellowish and drawn. "Yeah," he said. "Let's do that."

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V

The ten piece town band was drawn up in a double rank before the newly-mown village square. The entire population of the settlement—some three hundred and forty-two men, women, and children—were present, dressed in their best. Pennants fluttered from strung wires. The sun glistened from the armored sides of the newly-cleaned and polished Bolo. A vast bouquet of wild flowers poked from the no longer sooty muzzle of the Hellbore.

Crewe stepped forward.

"As a representative of the Concordiat government I've been asked to make this presentation," he said. "You people have seen fit to design a medal and award it to Unit nine-five-four in appreciation for services rendered in defense of the community above and beyond the call of duty." He paused, looked across the faces of his audience.

"Many more elaborate honors have been awarded for a great deal less," he said. He turned to the machine; two men came forward, one with a stepladder, the other with a portable welding rig. Crewe climbed up, fixed the newly-struck decoration in place beside the row of century-old battle honors. The technician quickly spotted it in position. The crowd cheered, then dispersed, chattering, to the picnic tables set up in the village street.

VI

It was late twilight. The last of the sandwiches and stuffed eggs had been eaten, the last speeches declaimed,

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the last keg broached. Crewe sat with a few of the men in the town's lone public house.

"To Bobby." A man raised his glass.

"Correction," Crewe said. "To Unit nine-five-four of the line." The men laughed and drank.

"Well, time to go, I guess," a man said. The others chimed in, rose, clattering chairs. As the last of them left, Blauvelt came in. He sat down across from Crewe.

"You, ah, staying the night?" he asked.

"I thought I'd drive back," Crewe said. "My business here is finished."

"Is it?" Blauvelt said tensely.

Crewe looked at him, waiting.

"You know what you've got to do, Crewe."

"Do I?" Crewe took a sip from his glass.

"Damn it, have I got to spell it out? As long as that damned machine was just as oversized half-wit, it was all right. Kind of a monument to the war, and all. But now I've seen what it can do—my God, Crewe—we can't have a live killer in the middle of our town, us never knowing when it might take a notion to start shooting again!"

"Finished?" Crewe asked.

"It's not that we're not grateful—"

"Get out," Crewe said.

"Now, look here, Crewe—"

"Get out. And keep everyone away from Bobby, understand?"

"Does that mean—?"

"I'll take care of it."

Blauvelt got to his feet. "Yeah," he said. "Sure."

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After he was gone, Crewe rose and dropped a bill on the table; he picked the command transmitter from the floor, went out into the street. Faint cries came from the far end of the town, where the crowd had gathered for fireworks. A yellow rocket arced up, burst in a spray of golden light, falling, fading. . . .

Crewe walked toward the plaza. The Bolo loomed up, a vast, black shadow against the star-thick sky. Crewe stood before it, looking up at the already draggled pennants, the wilted nosegay drooping from the gun muzzle.

"Unit nine-five-four, you know why I'm here?" he said softly.

"I compute that my usefulness as an engine of war is ended," the soft, rasping voice said.

"That's right," Crewe said, "I checked the area in a thousand mile radius with sensitive instruments. There's no enemy machine left alive. The one you killed was the last."

"It was true to its duty," the machine said.

"It was my fault," Crewe said. "It was designed to detect our command carrier and home on it. When I switched on my transmitter, it went into action. Naturally, you sensed that, and went to meet it."

The machine sat silent.

"You could still save yourself," Crewe said. "If you trampled so under and made for the jungle it might be centuries before . . ."

"Before another man comes to do what must be done? Better that I die now, at the hands of a friend."

"Good-bye, Bobby."

"Correction: Unit nine-five-four of the line."

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Crewe pressed the key. A sense of darkness fell across the machine.

At the edge of the square, Crewe looked back. He raised a hand in a ghostly salute; then he walked away along the dusty street, white in the light of the rising moon.

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I

Lew Jantry awoke with soft feminine arms around him, a warm body snuggled against his, perfumed hair tickling his chin.

He didn't open his eyes at once; he was too old a trouper for that. Instead, he rapidly sorted through his recollections, orienting himself before making a move. He was in a bed, that was a starting point; and the quality of the light shining through his closed lids indicated it was full daylight—or its equivalent. That was no help: both the Jantry and Osgood bedrooms featured large east-exposure windows with fluffy curtains. He'd have to speak to Sol about that: a fellow needed a little sharper demarcation of environmental detail to avoid role-fatigue.

Lew opened one eye half a millimeter, made out the smooth curve of a shoulder, the sleek line of a bare back. Still no clue that would answer the burning question: was he in bed with his real wife, or his TV wife?

The seconds were ticking past. Jantry thought furiously, trying to summon up the memory of the circumstances under which he had turned in. Had he slept an hour, a minute, or all night? Had he been at home, in the class A Banshire Towers Apartment of a medium-rated actor, with Marta, his lawful wedded spouse? Or

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had he dropped off on the set, in the cardboard and plastic mock-up where he spent twelve of every twenty-four hours, with Carla, his co-star on *The Osgoods*? Damn! He remembered cocktails, the Bateses dropping in, late talk; but that had been a scene in Rabinowitz's latest script of the blab-blab school—or had it? Was he thinking of the Harrises, the bores in the next apartment at the Banshire? Uh-huh, that was it. Al Harris had rattled on and on about his new two hundred channel set, with the twenty screen monitor attachment, where a sharp viewer with a good wrist could keep in touch with practically every top show simultaneously, at least well enough to hold up his end of a cultured conversation. . . .

Satisfied, Lew relaxed, slid his hand casually down toward the curved hip beside him. The woman moved, twisted her head back to impale him with a sharp black eye.

"You're ten seconds off-cue, Buster!" Carla's sub-vocalized voice rasped in the pickup set in the bone back of his right ear. *"And let's watch those hands! This is a family-type show, and my husband Bruno is a dedicated viewer!"*

Lew's face snapped in a smile, lazy, marital, degree one, a stylized grimace that would instantly dispel all implications of lust from the minds of well-conditioned viewers. Meanwhile, he was stalling, groping for his line. Where the hell was the prompter?

"Hi, darling," the dubber's voice sounded in the pick-up set in the bone back of Lew's left ear, just as the audience would hear it. *"Today's the day of the big event. Excited?"* In the background, he could hear the

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hundred piece orchestra sliding into "Camptown Races." He grabbed at the cue.

"Sure—but, uh, with you in the stands, rooting for him, who could lose?" he improvised, mouthing the words distinctly for the vocal stand-in to mine later.

"What who, you boob?" Carla's voice hissed in his right ear. *"I'm having a baby at two o'clock!"*

"Oh, Freddy Osgood—sometimes I think I'm the luckiest girl in the world, having you all to myself!" the canned line crackled in his left ear.

"A baby?" Lew blurted, struggling to pick up the thread.

"What do you think, you schlock—a litter of kitties?" Carla snarled in his right ear.

"I didn't know you were—I mean, that you'd—that we'd—" Lew caught himself. "Congratulations," he ad-libbed desperately.

"We'd better hurry and get ready; we're going water-skiing with the Poppins before we're due at the Vitabort Center," his left ear cooed.

"Sure," Lew agreed, glad of the chance of escape. He threw back the blanket, caught just a glimpse of a saucy derriere before Carla squalled and yanked the sheets back up.

"Cut!" A godlike bellow rattled Lew's occipital sutures. The wall with the window slid aside to admit the charging bulk of Hugo Fleischpultzer himself. "Jantry, you just set the industry back fifty years!" the director howled. "Whattaya mean, insulting five hundred million clean-living Americans with the sight of a bare behind first thing in the morning! It'll take the psychan channels

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two weeks of intensive primetime therapy to clear out the damage you done! You're fired! Or you would be if it wasn't for the lousy Guild! Not that I mean anything by the word 'lousy'!"

Carla Montez sat up, holding the covers to her chin, pointed a scarlet-nailed finger at Lew.

"I want a divorce!" she screamed. "Tell Oscar to write this louse out of the script for screening no later than Friday in the late early mid-afternoon segment!"

"Now, Carla baby, you know that's impossible," Abe Katz, the makeup man soothed, reaching past Fleischpultzer's bulk to adjust the star's eyelashes.

"I'm sorry, Hugo," Lew said. "I just got a little mixed up for a second. You know how it's been since we went to nonstop sitcom: a three hour shift at home, three on the set, half my meals here, half there, barely time to scan the scripts—"

"See?" Carla shrilled. "He practically admits he prefers being with that blowsy dame he's supposedly married to—"

"I do not—I mean Marta's no blowsier than you are!" Lew flared. "I mean, neither one of you is blowsy! And I love being cooped up with you in this make-believe egg crate for half my life!"

"The kids!" Carla sobbed. "What will become of the kids? Joey, and little Suzie, and that new one, Irving or whatever, that we hired last week for the cousin!"

"Rusty, his air name is," Hugo boomed. "Carla's right, we got to think of the little ones. We don't want to go making a broken home out of a fine American family,

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which it's the favorite escape of millions, just over a little misunderstanding like this. Lew, I'll give you one more chance—"

"Oh, no you won't!" A furious contralto cut across the conversation. All eyes turned to the pert, green-eyed woman who had just burst onto the set. "I've watched my husband crawl into bed with that harpie for the last time! I'm here to scratch her eyes out!"

"Martal Nol" Lew, leaping from the bed, collided with Carla, leaping in the opposite direction. They struck the floor together, a confused mass of flailing limbs, complicated by the actress' efforts to simultaneously escape, attack, and observe the conventions of modesty.

"Look at them—right in front of me!" Marta keened. "Lew! How could you!"

"Carla baby—watch the hairdo!" Abe Katz called.

"Quiet on the set!" Hugo's bass roar dominated the scene. Carla came to her feet, swathed in the sheet, as Lew struggled to arrange a blanket, Navaho style, about himself.

"Now, Marta honey," he said hastily. "Don't leap to conclusions! It's just that I was tuckered out from staying up late worrying about little Egbert. How is Eggie? Did he pull through the crisis OK?"

"You fiend!" Marta wailed. "*Our* son's name is Augustus!"

"Ah—I was thinking of Augustus, of course." Max scrambled for verbal footing. "Today's the day of the Little League tryouts, right? And—"

"Monster! You don't know your real family from that

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horrible TV family of yours! It's that nasty little midget that plays Sammy Osgood that's the ball player! Our Augustus plays the violin!"

"Sure—I remember perfectly! And his sister, Cluster, is a whiz on the glockenspiel!"

"Murderer! Our daughter's name is Finettel And she hates German food! I'm through with you, you . . . you Bluebeard!" She turned to flee. As Lew jumped after her, Carla aimed a roundhouse slap that connected with a report like a dropped light bulb.

"Keep away from me, you deviate!" she yelped.

"Look at the hairdo," Abe mourned.

"Mr. Fleischpultzer!" A penetrating voice sounded. A small, pouty-faced man in an expensive gray Gooberlon executive coverall had appeared from behind a fly.

"Why—if it isn't the sponsor, Mr. Harlowe Goober of Goober Industries," Hugo babbled. "Welcome to the set, Mr. Goober, which we were just horsing around a little, you know, high spirits and all that—"

"I'm canceling the show," Goober barked. "I've noticed for some time the gradual disintegration of the moral tone of this network. This orgy is the final straw. I'm taking my trade to NABAC!"

"But—Mr. Goober—"

"Unless—that person is replaced at once!" Goober pointed dramatically at Lew Jantry.

"But . . . but . . . but . . . his contract!" Hugo blurted. "And what about the script? They're about to have a baby!"

"Let him die in childbirth," Goober proposed, and stamped off the set.

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"My lawyer will call you, you bum!" Marta shrilled. "Married to an actor is bad enough—but an out-of-work actor . . .!"

"But the Guild," Lew rallied weakly. "Hugo, say something!"

"Half the Guild's working on Goober-sponsored accounts." Fleischpultzer shrugged. "They won't buck him."

"We'll have him suicide when it comes out he's an embezzler." Carla's voice sounded above the hubbub. "And I'll meet that handsome obstetrician. . . ."

"You mean—" Lew swallowed hard, watching the set empty as all personnel moved to disassociate themselves from failure. "You mean I'm washed up in TV? But what will I do? All those hours of leisure time—"

"View TV," Hugo said. "Or maybe get a job in a factory."

"And stand by an automated machine two hours a day, watching telly? You don't understand, Hugo! I'm an artist, not a . . . a drone!"

"Well . . . there is just one remote possibility," Hugo said reluctantly. "But no—you wouldn't go for it."

"Anything!" Lew said hastily. "Anything at all, Hugo!"

"Well—if I work it right, I think I can get you a spot in a new documentary."

"I'll take it!"

"Sign here!" Hugo whipped out a thick bundle of contract documents. Lew grabbed the pen.

"I'll be in a star slot, of course?"

"Natcherally. Would I do you that way?"

Lew signed. "Thanks a million, Hugo." He sighed,

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gathering his blanket about him. "What set do I report to?"

Hugo shook his head. "No set, Lew. The pic ain't being shot here."

"You don't mean—not—not on location?"

"You guessed it."

"Omigod. Where?"

"A place called Byrdland."

"Birdland?" Lew brightened.

"Byrdland. It's in Antarctica."

II

"It's the biggest, finest Eskimo reservation on the globel" Hugo's parting words rang in Lew Jantry's ears as he peered out through the bubble canopy of the automatic one-passenger flitter that was ferrying him on the last stage of the journey south. Across the blue-black sheen of the South Polar Sea, a line dazzling white cliffs loomed ahead. Dropping rapidly, the machine skimmed low over the peaks, settling toward a rugged terrain resembling nothing so much as a vast frosted cake, a jumble of glassy blocks and smooth-drifted whiteness. Now he could make out the porous texture of the surface below, the network of wind-scoured ridges rushing up at him with surprising swiftness—

At the last possible instant, Lew realized that the robot voice of the autopilot, over the rushing of the wind, was squawking "*Mayday! Mayday!*" He grabbed the safety-frame lever, yanked it hard in the same moment that the craft struck with an impact that turned the universe into a whirling pinwheel of stars.

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It seemed like a long time before pieces stopped raining down around him. Lew kicked free of the frame, dropped to the hard ground. The crash had burst the pod of the copter like a pumpkin, but he himself seemed to be intact. The weather suit was keeping him warm, in spite of the stiff wind that whipped the floury snow against his legs. Lew shaded his eyes and stared out across the desolate landscape. No sign of the Eskimo agent's office, or even of the tribal structures of the aborigines. Lew snorted. He'd invoke Section Nine, Paragraph Three of his contract on this one, all right—the part that provided bonuses for inconvenience occasioned by inadequate travel and housing accommodations for artists on field assignment. And the hardship clause would come in, too. Oh, boy, wait till he got hold of Hugo, he'd make that shrewdie regret the day he fast-talked Lew antry into a fiasco like this one.

He flipped back the cover of his wristphone and snapped an order to the operator. There was no reply. He raised his voice, then held the tiny transceiver to his ear. The reassuring carrier tone was conspicuously lacking.

"Damn!" Lew yelled, then swallowed hard as the true seriousness of his plight struck him. Marooned—God knew how far from the nearest food, shelter, and TV. And no one would know precisely where he was. The malfunctioning copter could have wandered a hundred miles off course since Tierra, for all he knew. In fact, he was lucky to have hit land at all, with all that ocean out there.

Lew shuddered and checked his pockets, found nothing but the regulation ration capsules and a book of

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matches. The copter yielded a road map of Chilicothe County, Kansas, and a package of welfare-issue contraceptive devices. He tried the panel TV, caught a much-distorted snatch of *Marty Snell, Trigamist*, but the picture rippled into static. Too bad: it was one of the few shows he enjoyed, a wild sitcom that he liked to view while on-camera, listening to Carla make chitchat to bring late tuners—in up-to-date on the last segment.

But he had more important things than Marty Snell to worry about now. The reservation was only a couple of miles inland. Maybe he could see it from the ridge ahead. It wouldn't hurt to walk that far. He faced into the antarctic wind and started across the treacherous footing.

He had gone a hundred yards when a sound behind him made him look back. A large polar bear had appeared beside the heli. The monster circled the downed machine, his mouth open like an awestricken yokel. The fanged head turned toward Lew, affording him a horrifying view down the creature's throat. It stared at him for a long beat, then started toward him at an easy lope. Lew stifled a yell and sprinted for the ridge with a speed that would have astonished his fans.

Heavy pads thudded close behind as he bounded across a rough stretch, hit a glass-smooth patch and went down, skidded twenty yards on his back, came to his feet scrambling for footing among the tumbled slabs at the base of the rise. He hauled himself upslope on all fours, spurred by the buzzing sound of ursine breath behind him, reached the crest—and a squat, fur-clad figure rose up before him, raising a short-hafted harpoon with a murderous hooked blade. For an instant the

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Eskimo poised, arm back, his teeth bared in a ferocious grin. Then he hurled the spear.

As the weapon shot forward, Lew dived under it. He hit the smaller man amidships, carried him with him in a wild tumble down the opposite slope. At the bottom, Lew crawled clear, looked up dazedly just in time to see the yellow-white bulk of the bear hurtling down directly on him, jaws agape.

Lew awoke, staring up at the glossy white curve of a ceiling only three feet above his face, through which pale sunlight filtered. He turned his head, saw a grinning, brown-faced man in a Gooberplast playsuit sitting cross-legged on a synthetic bearskin rug, laying out a hand of solitaire. It was cool, Lew thought confusedly, but not as cold as he'd have expected in a building made of ice. He reached up and touched the ceiling. It was pleasantly warm to the touch, and dry. At that moment, he noticed a low hum in the background.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "It can't be an . . . an . . ."

"An air-conditioned igloo?" the card-player inquired in a deep voice. "Why not? You Gringos think us 'Skimos got no rights?"

"It's not that," Lew stuttered, sitting up. His head ached abominably. "It's just that . . . well . . . it's hardly what I expected. Say—" He broke off, remembering the encounter on the ridge. "Are you the fellow with the spear?"

"Right. Charlie Urukukalukuku's the name. Charlie Kuku for short. TVVAG, Local three-four-nine-eight. I'm not really an actor, I'm a cameraman. I just do the oc-

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casional walk-on when we're short of extras." He held out a well-manicured hand.

"You're a member of the Guild?" Lew blurted, taking the proffered member.

"Sure. You don't think we're letting scabs work down here in Byrdland, I hope."

"You mean the business with the bear—and the spear—the whole thing was just a skit?"

"Hardly a skit, Jantry. An important human document, delineating the plight of the haughty Kabloona when plummeted into the harsh Antarctic environment to which he has driven the patient Eskimo."

"That sounds like Hugo Fleischpultzer. And when did the white man ever drive the Eskimo into a harsh environment?"

"About fifty thousand years ago. Didn't you ever view any anthropology on educational TV?"

"Is that why you tried to stick me with that bloody great harpoon?"

"Stick you? Are you kidding? I tossed it a good quarter inch wild."

"And what about the bear? *He* wasn't kidding!"

"Yeah—too bad about that. Busted wide open. One of Hugo's ideas. It was a mech, you know. We got no live ones around, except a couple in the zoo. Too hot for 'em, since the big melt."

"Hot? Out there in all that ice?"

"What ice? Project Defrost cleared all that away years ago. But tourists come all this way to see Eskimos in their native habitat, they want to see snow. So—snow they get. Plastic snow, like this igloo."

"A plastic igloo?"

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"Sure. It's part of the Native Village. A big grosser."

"But—why a mechanical bear?"

"The bear houses the number two aux camera. It shoots through the mouth. I was remoting it from the ridge. Got some swell shots of the clobber-in, then tried to dolly in for some CU's of you encountering the savage natives—that's me—"

"How did you know where I was going to crash?"

"Think I can't read a script? I was out there a good hour early, picking my camera angles. I got to hand it to you. You made it look good, Jantry. I was surprised to see you walk away from it."

"I made it look good?" Lew yelped. "Are you kidding? That thing was on full automatic the whole time—" He broke off. "Hugo planned it that way! He programmed the heli to crash—with me in it—"

"So? It figures. But it worked out OK. I got the death scene in the can. Great footage."

"Death scene?"

"Sure. I try to save you with my trusty spear, but the bear gets the both of us. It's the Noble Savage Gives Life for Paleface bit; wows 'em in the sticks."

"But—I came here to make a ninety-hour documentary on the colorful natives! Why kill me off in the opening sequence?" Lew broke off as a man in a gray coverall appeared on all fours in the entry tunnel, pushing a briefcase ahead of him.

"Thanks for sitting in for me, Charlie," he said to the Eskimo. "If you'll excuse us now, I'd like a word in private with Mr. Jantry."

"Sure." Charlie left. The newcomer rose, dusted his

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knees, showed Lew a small gold badge pinned inside his lapel.

"I'm Clabbinger, CIA," he said. "I can understand your confusion, Jantry. Of course the business of a role was merely a cover story enabling us to spirit you out of the States without attracting attention."

"Huh?" Lew said.

"Your true destination is the South Pacific Nature Reserve; place called the Cannibal Islands," the CIA man said crisply. "And it's not a play, Jantry. It's for real."

III

Lew stood on the deck of the LSP, shivering in a scanty sarong.

"The whole thing is illegal," he complained for the seventy-third time to Clabbinger, who stood impassively beside him, looking out through the pre-dawn mist toward the distant sound of surf. "I see now it was a put-up job from the beginning: me getting fired, the phony documentary—and now this! Threatening to blackball me in the industry if I don't sign a paper saying I volunteered!"

"It's your patriotic duty," the CIA man said calmly. "We know something's going on inside the Reserve. Naturally, we can't just blunder in and demand to search the entire archipelago."

"Why not?"

"Policy," Clabbinger said tersely. "Now, as I said, someone—no doubt in the service of a Certain Power—"

"You mean Russia?"

"Please let's keep it impersonal. Now, these Russians—"

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I mean this Certain Power has infiltrated the Reserve in defiance of solemn international commitments, and has set up some sort of secret installation—”

“How do we know that?”

“Our intrepid undercover men on the island reported it. Now, just what they’re up to, we don’t know. That’s your job, Jantry: to tell us.”

“Why do they want to make a Reserve out of these god-forsaken islands anyway?” Lew burst out. “If it wasn’t for that, there wouldn’t be any place for the, uh, Certain Power to set up secret installations in!”

“Opening the islands would destroy a cultural museum that can never be duplicated,” Clabbingger said indignantly. “This is the only spot on Earth where cannibalism and headhunting still flourish, uncontaminated by automation. And the diseases—why, if we let antibiotics in, hundreds of unique organisms would be rendered extinct overnight!”

“Why don’t you send a regular agent into this pest-hole?” Lew demanded. “Why me?”

“We need an accomplished actor to carry this off, Jantry. An ordinary agent would be incapable of passing himself off as a long-lost tribe member returning home after having been carried out to sea at the age of four in a paddleless canoe. He’d be caught and tortured to death in a most gruesome fashion.”

“Swell,” Lew groaned. “I either go and get roasted in my sarong, or refuse and never work again.”

“Still—if you survive, I personally assure you you’ll find your contract at Void Productions renewed for a long term at a substantial increase.”

“What good’s a substantial increase, with ninety-five

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percent going for taxes?" Lew inquired gloomily.

"Prestige," Clabbinger pointed out. "And if it weren't for the tax level, corporations wouldn't allocate the large tax-exempt advertising budgets needed to support over three hundred major TV networks with round-the-clock programming, nor would we enjoy the enlightened legislation that provides every citizen with a subsistence allowance, plus leisure time to view—and thus you'd be out of work."

"All right," Lew snarled. "I guess you've got me boxed—but these damned shark's-teeth earplugs hurt like hell!"

"Ah, that sounds a little more like Daredevil Jack, star of the show of the same name!" Clabbinger clapped Lew heartily on the back. "I'll confide that I always admired you in that one."

"I hated it," Lew said. "I was always afraid of the rest of the cast, they talked so tough."

A man had come up beside the G-man. "Half a mile offshore," he muttered. "This is as far as I can go without tripping the detectors."

"Well, Lew, this is it," Clabbinger said sternly, shaking the actor's hand. "Remember: as soon as you've located the site and beamed me the coordinates, get out fast! We'll drop a megatonner right down their stack six minutes later, and let them complain to the UN!"

"Just don't forget to have that sub standing by in case I come paddling out from shore in a hell of a hurry," Lew said bitterly.

Three minutes later, squatting in the outrigger canoe, he was gliding toward the palm-fringed shoreline ahead. The surf, though noisy, was not excessively high. He

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rode a long swell in, grounded on a sandy beach. He sprang from the boat listening alertly for any indication that his approach had been observed. Stealthily, he moved toward the shelter of the trees. Ten feet from his goal, a beam of dazzling white light speared out from the darkness to catch him full in the eyes. Blinded, he stumbled back, heard the quick rasp of feet—

A bomb exploded in his skull. He was dimly aware of falling, of being roughly rolled on his back.

"Nuts," a hoarse voice grated. "It's just another lousy native. Shoot the bum and let's get back to work."

"Wait!" Another, more guttural voice spoke up. "Don't shoot dog of native. Noise might bring unwelcome attention. Instead, tie up and dump out of way someplace."

Lew struggled feebly as hard hands threw multiple loops of hemp around his wrists and ankles, jammed a wad of oily cloth in his mouth. A man caught his shoulders, another his feet; they carried him well up into the jungle and dropped him into a clump of palmetto. Feet crashed through the underbrush, receding. Silence fell.

The night breeze stirred the fronds above Lew. Mosquitoes whined about his ears. He struggled onto his back, spitting leaf mold past the crude gag. Abruptly, something buzzed sharply, back of his right ear. Lew stiffened, awaiting the bite of the deadly snake—

"Hello?" a tinny voice said. "*Clabbing*er to special agent L.J. Good work, boy! My instruments indicate you've penetrated the beach and are now behind the enemy lines! However, I note you're lying doggo. Let's not be too cautious. Remember Daredevil Jack! Play this one the way he would! Go get'em, tiger! We're rooting for you! *Clabbing*er out."

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"Hello?" Lew whispered. "Hello? Clabbinger?"

There was no answer. Lew groaned. Why hadn't they included a two-way connection? But who would have thought there'd be any need, with the tight-beam signaler tucked in his sarong to pinpoint the target for the missile strike? And anyway, Clabbinger wouldn't move a foot to help him; he'd told him that. He was on his own.

Lew took a deep breath and concentrated, the way he always did when slipping into a demanding role.

"All right, Russkies," Daredevil Jack breathed. "You started it. Now get ready for a counterattack by the Free Enterprise system!"

IV

Ten minutes later, Daredevil Jack, free of his amateurishly tied bonds, raised his head and peered past the fronds at the half dozen figures grouped before a small tent from which the yellow glow of a lantern shone on a map table where a brightly colored eighteen inch disk lay. If he could get a little closer, make out the markings....

Flat on his stomach, Jack inched nearer. The men around the table seemed to be engaged in a heated argument, although keeping their voices low. One shook his fist under another's nose. A third man stepped between them. No doubt a dispute over the details of their treachery. Jack studied the palm trees just ahead. From the top of one, it might be possible to make out the details of the chart, using the small 'tronscope Clabbinger had supplied.

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It was the work of another sweaty five minutes to reach the trees, shin up the curving trunk, and take up a position among the coconuts. Swiftly, Jack unclipped the scope, fine-focused the UV beam, adjusted the aperture. There! The red-orange coloring of the target leaped into clarity, a maze of complex markings. It was obviously a detailed relief map, the roughly circular shape indicating the island's outline, with mountains, valleys, rivers all delineated in vivid pigments. And there—that was doubtless the location of the illegal site. Jack studied the black circle, nestled between a sardine-shaped lake and what appeared to be a sliver of salami. The circle itself showed a remarkable resemblance to a slice of ripe olive.

"I told you, I can't eat pizza!" A vagrant breeze wafted a scrap of conversation to Jack. "I hate Mexican food!"

"Damn!" Lew Jantry muttered. He scanned past the disputants, surveyed the remains of a camp fire, a heap of empty TV dinner cartons, settled on a huddled figure lying in the shadows of a flowering bush. He made out a vividly colored sarong, a mass of dark, wavy hair, a pair of slender ankles, bound with rope.

"It's a native girl," Lew muttered. "They've got her tied up, the rats!" He lowered the scope, frowning thoughtfully.

Maybe, Daredevil Jack thought, she's been in the camp long enough to have heard something. And even if she hasn't, her people will be grateful enough for her release to give me a hand in finding that Russian installation. . . .

Silently, smiling a grim smile, Daredevil Jack de-

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scended to the ground, began a circuitous approach to the spot where the captive girl lay.

She watched him with wide eyes as he sawed at her ropes with a bit of sharp-edged seashell.

"Shh!" he admonished as he pulled away the gag to reveal a remarkably pretty face, olive brown, pert-nosed, red-lipped. She looked around fearfully, then at Jack.

"Aholui thanks you," she breathed.

"Time for thanks later," Jack said kindly but firmly. "We're not out of this yet." He took her hand, helped her to her knees. "The coast is clear this way."

They had gone approximately ten feet when a bush parted just ahead, and a man appeared, buttoning his clothes. For an instant, his eyes and Jack's locked.

"What th—" he started as Jack's head rammed him squarely in the belt buckle. He went down hard as Lew Jantry staggered to his feet, rubbing his neck and uttering small cries.

"Let's get out of here!" Aholui grabbed his hand and hauled him off down a winding path into the deep jungle as questioning shouts rose behind them.

"I don't care . . . if they do catch us . . ." Lew gasped, flopping down and sucking air into his lungs. "I'm all in!"

"Not much farther now," the girl said. "You must have been living soft out there in the great outside world, or wherever it was you said you've been."

A gusty wind had risen; a sudden heavy splatter of rain rattled on the palmettos. Lew got to his feet, rubbing at the gooseflesh on his arms.

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"What a place," he carped. "One minute you're broiling, the next you're freezing. Where are we going, anyway?"

"To a place where we'll be safe from the white-eyes," Aholui said. "Up there." She pointed. In the sudden vivid glare of a flash of lightning, Lew saw a rugged volcanic peak thrusting up above the wind-lashed palm trees. The rain struck then, like a battery of fire hoses. Stumbling, colliding with trees in the dark, his hide rasped by sharp-edged tropical shrubbery, Lew followed as the girl led the way toward the high ground.

It might have been half an hour later—or half of eternity—before Lew dragged himself over a rocky ledge and lay flat, breathing heavily. Before him, the dark mouth of a cave opened. With his last strength, he crawled to it, and inside. With the girl tugging at his arm, he managed to negotiate a sharp turn, and was in a low-ceilinged chamber twelve feet on a side. He propped himself against the wall and wiped the water from his eyes. Aholui seated herself beside him.

"Now, tell me again," she said. "What were you doing down there in the outlanders' camp?"

"You remember—about the plot they're hatching. You never told me why they had you tied up."

"They caught me snooping."

Lew put a sympathetic arm around the girl's shoulders. "The rotters!" he said. "Just because you were curious about a bunch of foreign devils invading the place."

Aholui shrugged his arm off. "Can't blame them," she said. "I was outside the tribal turf."

"Nonsense! The whole island belongs to you. Now"—

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he reinsinuated his arm—"if you'll just take me to your leader . . ." He leaned over, zeroing in on the girl's half parted lips.

A light bulb exploded in his ear, accompanied by a ringing sound.

"Carla," Lew mumbled dazedly. "I just had the craziest dream. . . ."

The girl was standing by the wall, fumbling with a bump on the stone. With a soft whine of well-oiled machinery, a panel slid back to reveal a well-equipped laboratory. A broad-shouldered young man in a white coat and a white-haired oldster looked up in surprise.

"Grab this cluck, George," Aholui said, jerking a thumb at Lew. "He's some kind of Interpol fink, or I'll eat a bunch of bananas, insides and all!"

V

Strapped to a chair, with a lump on his head that throbbed in time with his pulse, Lew Jantry stared from the grim-eyed girl to the square-jawed young man to the elderly one, who returned the look through a set of half inch thick trifocals.

"You think you can kidnap a federal agent and get away with it?" he demanded in a tone that quavered only slightly.

No one bothered to answer the question.

"It was pretty slick, the way he handled it," the girl said. "He pretended to be rescuing me—as if anyone could really sneak into that campful of Feds, with guards posted every ten feet, and cut somebody loose. Then, as soon as he thought I was in the clear, he started pour-

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ing on the oil and pumping me for information."

"I did not!" Lew cut in. "I only wanted to kiss you. I thought *they* were the crooks." He broke off, staring at the old man. "Say, don't I know you?"

"Maybe." The white head nodded. "Lots of people used to, before I decided to Get Away from It All."

"Rex Googooian, the Armenian Valentinol" Lew gasped. "You used to be the biggest draw on the whole early mid-morning sector! Every middle-aged housewife in America was in love with you! And then you dropped out of sight a few years ago, blop, just like that!"

"Yes indeed." Googooian nodded. "It dawned on me one day that I had only a few years left in which to expiate the crimes I'd been practicing for thirty years."

"Crimes?"

"Did you ever notice the dialogue on the early mid-morning sector?" the aged actor inquired succinctly. "So I came here—secretly, of course—bringing with me my daughter, Baby Lou." He nodded toward Aholui, who was vigorously scrubbing away her tan makeup.

"—And my assistant, George. And a considerable stock of equipment, of course."

"But—that must have cost a fortune!"

"I had one. And what better way to employ it than in putting an end to the pernicious plague that for the better part of eighty years had been rising like a flood of materialistic mediocrity, drowning our culture in its infancy?"

"Plague? You mean you're doing dandruff research?" Lew groped.

"I refer," Googooian said in implacable tones, "to the greatest menace in the world today!"

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"What menace? Cuba? Nepal? Lebanon?"

"Think of it!" Googooian's eyes lit with a messianic fervor. "No more commercials, no more sitcoms, no quizzes, no panels, no more pomaded heads huddled together, staring with vacuous, counterfeit smiles from flickering screens, no more idiotic dialogue, no more cardboard characterizations, no more creaking plots, no more moronic villains and sweepstake-winning heroes, no more mummified sex appeal, no more relatives of producers posing as Thespians—"

"Are you trying to say—no more television?" Lew choked the words out.

"In approximately seven hours," Googooian stated firmly, "TV broadcasting will come to a halt. Worldwidel Forever!"

"You're out of your mind!" Lew blurted. "That's impossible!"

"Is it!" Googooian smiled sardonically. "I believe otherwise. You've heard of the Van Allen Radiation belts?"

"Is that like those suspenders that glow in the dark?" Lew hazarded.

"Not quite. They are layers of high energy charged particles two thousand and twelve thousand miles above the Earth, respectively. They are of interest here only in that the Googooian Belt will in some ways resemble them. I have prepared a rocket, sir, housed here in the volcano's crater, which, when fired, will ascend to an altitude of fifteen hundred miles, and there assume an orbit which will carry it over every point on the planet in the first fifty revolutions—about seventy-two hours. As it travels, it will release a steady stream of very specially charged particles—particles which will emit elec-

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tromagnetic impulses creating a powerful static interference across the entire broadcast band! Every station on the planet will be drowned in a pure noise signal. TV, sir, is dead!"

"You can't!" Lew protested. "What will all those people do, left with twenty-two hours a day of leisure time on their hands? What will the sponsors do with all that ad money? Society as we know it will collapse!"

"You've been brainwashed." George spoke up coldly. "You and the rest of those FBI smarties down there. If you know so much, why have you been poking around the island for six months without finding us?"

"We haven't—I mean, I did—I mean—oh, what's the use?" Lew buried his face in his hands. "I'm a failure," his muffled voice stated mournfully. "And Clabbingger was counting on me!"

Googooian came over to pat him consolingly on the shoulder. "Why not lend a hand with the gear?" he suggested in a fatherly tone. "Afterward you'll feel better, knowing you played a part in the liberation of man from electronic tyranny."

"Never!" Lew yelled. "First, I'll—" He broke off as a chirping voice rasped in his left ear:

"Operative LJ, Clabbingger here. I see you've moved inland to a point at the approximate center of the island. I'm expecting to pick up a pulse from that signaler any time now, pinpointing that target. Keep up the good work! Over and out."

Lew Jantry's heart took a great leap, then settled down to a steady thudding. He'd totally forgotten the signaler, but his course was plain. All he had to do was reach the button with his fingertips and send out the

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pulse that would bring a megatonner screaming in on the hidden launch pad. Googooian's mad scheme would go up in radioactive gas.

And Lew Jantry along with it.

"You knew," he whispered. "Clabbinger, you monster, you knew all along it was a suicide mission!"

"Ah, beginning to have some second thoughts, eh?" Googooian said cheerfully. "Beginning to see that you're a mere dupe of the vested interests that are reducing the nation to a common level of imbecility, eliminating literacy, callousing esthetic sensibilities, and imposing a shabby standard of mercantile expediency and conformity to a false and superficial ideal of synthetic glamour!"

"Something like that," Lew muttered. His fingers inched their way toward the concealed signaler.

"If you'll give me your parole, I'll untie you," the ex-actor proposed. "George and I could really use some help with the last-minute details."

"Well . . ." Lew stalled. His finger touched the button. He gritted his teeth—and stiffened as the pickup behind his left ear clicked suddenly.

"Hello?" a brisk voice chirped. "*Oh, it's you, Simenov . . . uh-huh, in about six hours. . . . Of course it'll work! Why do you lousy Commies hire American technicians if you don't have confidence?*" There was a lengthy pause. "*Look, you have your programming ready, that's all! I'll guarantee we'll blanket every channel of television on the planet. The Commie line will be coming out of every TV set on the North and South American continents! And there's no possible way they can stop it! Not with a transmitter sunk below the Mohorovicic*

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Discontinuity in an insulated vault, powered by the core heat! Not when you're using the whole planet's fluid interior as an antennal It's all set! Stop worrying and synchronize watches! We throw the switches at six A.M. on the dot!" There was a sharp *click!* followed by silence.

"Ye Gods!" Lew mumbled. "Two targets—and only one bomb!" He swallowed hard, his thoughts racing.

"Googooian," he barked. "Are you sure this invention of yours will blanket *all* television, not just part of it?"

"Absolutely!"

"What about a super-powerful station?"

Googooian chuckled. "All the better. The particles will absorb and re-radiate as noise any impinging electromagnetic radiation. The more energetic, the better."

"Sold!" Lew said. "I'll help you! Get these ropes off and let's get going!"

VI

The eastern sky was heralding dawn with a glory of purple and crimson when Lew, Googooian, George, and Baby Lou retired to the blockhouse carved deep in the flank of the mountain, and grouped themselves around the rocket control console. Solemnly, the aging actor-turned-researcher depressed the firing button. A low rumble passed through the solid rock.

On the closed-circuit screen, the crater mouth erupted through which a needle prow emerged, rising slowly at first, then more swiftly, mounting toward the cloud-dotted sky, trailing fire and thunder.

"She's off!" Googooian chortled as the others clapped

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him on the back, laughing merrily—all but Lew Jantry. Glumly, he watched the ship disappear into the high haze.

"Cheer up, lad," Googooian called. "It's all for the best! You'll see!"

"Look what we'll be missing!" George called cheerfully as he switched on the forty-eight inch full color three-D set. The screen blinked, flickered, firmed into an image of a woman with a face like an oversized Pekinese.

". . . Dear Sally Sweetbreads, this viewer writes," a high-pitched nasal intoned. "I never miss your show, which is the cause of the trouble between my husband and me. He says it breaks his scene when you give some of that clinical-type advice just at the most romantic moment. Signed, Perplexed. Well, Perplexed, assuming you don't want to change husbands"—the plump features compressed into a leer—"I'd suggest you rearrange the bedroom. And now—"

"That's not all we'll be missing," Lew snarled. "When the depression this thing causes hits, we'll miss everything from meals to martinis! There'll be millions out of work! Tax revenue will drop to zero! The government may collapse—and we'll be stuck here, on this infernal island!"

"Tsk," Googooian said. "My analysis suggests that the creative energies released from thralldom to television mania will produce an upsurge in every facet of our culture. There'll be a flowering of science and the arts to rival the Renaissance! Of course, there may be a short period of readjustment—say a decade. But no matter. We'll be quite happy here. The entire interior of the mountain is honeycombed with facilities: luxurious

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quarters, a nuclear power plant, well-shielded, a ten-year stockpile of gourmet food to supplement the native diet, a vast library of books and music!"

On the screen, a loose-lipped young man with intent eyes leaned toward a jawless woman in a grotesque hat.

"Mrs. Wiltoff, would you just tell us in your own words how it feels to be the wife of the man scheduled to be gassed tomorrow on a nationwide hookup for the brutal slaying of the nine chorus girls whose pictures you are now admiring?"

"Well, Bob," the interviewee started; abruptly, the image flickered, turned to a flapping pattern of diagonal lines. A new picture burned into focus over it. A thick-necked man with small eyes looked out of the screen.

"Capitalist swine," he began in a glutinous voice—and was drowned under a deluge of white blips which danced across the tube face, swiftly coalescing into a solid rectangle of glare. A roar like Niagara swelled to blot out the sound.

"Hooray!" Googooian capered madly, embracing his teammates, while Lew wandered disconsolately to the blackhouse door. From the tiny balcony overhanging the interior of the volcano, he looked down into the fire-blackened silo from which the rocket had emerged minutes before. There was a step beside him.

"Thanks for helping Pop," Baby Lou said. "I expected you to try something, but you didn't. Maybe I was wrong about you being a CIA man."

"Well . . ." Lew moved closer to the girl, slid an arm around her waist. "Inasmuch as we're stuck here," he said, "we may as well make the best of it."

"What's *that*?" Baby Lou felt over Lew's side, plucked

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something from his sarong. "It was sticking me," she said, and pushed the button.

"No!" Lew grabbed the signaler and hurled it into the pit—far too late. Already its telltale pulse had raced to the ship waiting hull-down over the horizon.

"Well—I never!" Baby Lou snapped and marched away.

"Everybody to the beach!" Lew yelled, plunging after her. "We've got six minutes before the island goes up in smoke!"

VII

It was a balmy evening six months later. Lew, Googooian, and Simenov sat under the thatched shelter they had constructed above high tide line, playing a game of homemade dominoes by lantern light. In the background, a native electric guitar band played *Aloha Oe* in time to the chugging of a portable generator.

"Tomorrow comes maybe supply ship," the Russian said, eyeing the empty horizon.

"I doubt it," Googooian said.

Baby Lou came up, trailed by George. "No, I do *not* believe in sharing the wealth," she was saying tartly. "Father, make George stop bothering me!"

"Ah—perhaps if Lew chaperoned you—"

"I'd like to see him try, the lousy actor," George snarled.

"Oh, yeah?" Daredevil Jack half rose, then sank back. "It's too hot," Lew Jantry said.

Baby Lou sniffed and stalked away. George wandered off. Simenov glowered at the dominoes.

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"Now, now," Googooian said in tones of forced heartiness. "Here we are, living in paradise, plenty of fruit and fresh seafood, sunshine every day, cool breezes at night, no responsibilities, no problems! We should all be perfectly delighted!"

"Then why aren't we?" Lew demanded.

"I tell you why," Simenov stated. "Is no damned thing to do! Are not building socialism! Not even building capitalism! Is building only sand castles, and is getting pretty damn boring!"

"Say," Googooian said suddenly.

What?" Lew said.

"I was just wondering—not that I regret anything I've done, you understand. . . ."

"Go on," Simenov said.

"If we used the stuff you fellows had left over"—he eyed the Russian—"and if we could salvage a few items from the mountain—"

"Yes?" Lew and Simenov said in chorus.

"We might just be able to tinker up a little line-of-sight rig. Nothing elaborate, mind you. Just straight black and white, two-D—at least at first. . . ."

"Hmm. Is possibility." The Russian pulled at his lower lip. Together, the two technical men strolled off deep in conversation. Lew Jantry sat where he was, staring after them, a thoughtful look on his face. Then he rose, hurried toward the slight figure wandering lonely along the beach.

"Oh, Baby Lou," he called. "I've been meaning to ask you: have you ever thought of taking up acting as a profession?"

"Why, Lew! Do you really think I might have talent?"

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"I'm sure of it. It's just a matter of finding an outlet for it."

Together they strolled along the shore of the lagoon toward the silvery path of the rising moon.

MESSAGE TO AN ALIEN

I

Dalton tossed the scorched, plastic encased diagram on the Territorial Governor's wide, not recently polished desk. The man seated there prodded the document with a stylus as if to see if there were any life left in it. He was a plump little man with a wide, brown, soft-leather face finely subdivided by a maze of hairline wrinkles.

"Well, what's this supposed to be?" He had a brisk, no-nonsense voice, a voice that said it had places to go and things to do. He pushed out his lips and blinked up at the tall man leaning on his desk. Dalton swung a chair around and sat down.

"I closed up shop early today, Governor," he said, "and took a little run out past Dropoff and the Washboard. Just taking the air, not headed anywhere. About fifty miles west I picked up a radac pulse, a high one, coming in fast from off-planet."

The Governor frowned. "There's been no off-world traffic cleared into the port since the Three-Planet shuttle last Wednesday, Dalton. You must have been mistaken. You—"

"This one didn't bother with a clearance. He was headed for the desert, well away from any of the settlements."

"How do you know?"

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"I tracked him. He saw me and tried some evasive maneuvers, too close to the ground. He hit pretty hard."

"Good God, man! How many people were aboard? Were they killed?"

"No people were killed, Governor."

"I understood you to say—"

"Just the pilot," Dalton went on. "It was a Hukk scout-boat."

Several expressions hovered over the Governor's mobile face; he picked amused disbelief.

"I see: you've been drinking. Or possibly this is your idea of hearty frontier humor."

"I took that off him." Dalton nodded at the pastie covered paper on which a looping pattern of pale blue lines was drawn. "It's a chart of the Island. Being amphibious, the Hukk don't place quite the same importance on the interface between land and water as we do; they trace the contour lines right down past the shore line, map sea bottoms and all. Still, you can pick out the outline easily enough."

"So?"

"The spot marked with the pink circle was what he was interested in. He crumped in about ten miles short of it."

"What the devil would a Hukk be looking for out there?" the Governor said in a voice from which all the snap had drained.

"He was making a last-minute confirmation check on a landing site."

"A landing site—for what?"

"Maybe I should have said beachhead."

"What kind of nonsense is this, Dalton? A *beachhead*?"

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"Nothing elaborate. Just a small Commando-type operation, about a hundred troops, light armor, hand weapons, limited objectives—"

"Dalton, what is this?" the official exploded. "It's only been seven years since we beat the Hukk into the ground! They know better than to start anything now!"

Dalton turned the chart over. There were complex characters scrawled in columns across it.

"What am I supposed to make of this—this Chinese laundry list?" the Governor snapped.

"It's a brief of a Hukk Order of Battle. Handwritten notes, probably jotted down by the pilot, against regulations."

"Are you suggesting the Hukk are planning an invasion?"

"The advance party is due in about nine hours," Dalton said. "The main force—about five thousand troops, heavy equipment—is standing by off-planet, waiting to see how it goes."

"This is fantastic! Invasions don't happen like this! Just . . . just out of a clear sky!"

"You expect them to wait for a formal invitation?"

"How—how do you pretend to know all this?"

"It's all there. The scout was a fairly high-ranking intelligence officer. He may even have planned the operation."

The Governor gave an indignant grunt, then pursed his lips, pushing his brows together. "See here, if this fellow you intercepted doesn't report back—"

"His report went out right on schedule."

"You said he was killed!"

"I used his comm gear to send the prearranged signal."

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Just a minimike pulse on the Hukk LOS freke."

"You warned them off?"

Dalton shook his head. "I gave them the all-clear. They're on the way here now, full gate and warheads primed."

The Governor grabbed up his stylus and threw it at the desk. It bounced high and clattered across the floor.

"Get out of here, Dalton! You've had your fun! I could have you thrown into prison for this! If you imagine I have nothing better to do than listen to the psychotic imaginings of a broken-down social misfit—"

"If you'd like to send someone out to check," Dalton cut in, "they'll find the Hukk scout-boat right where I left it."

The Governor sat with his mouth open, eyes glued to Dalton.

"You're out of your mind. Even if you did find a wrecked boat—and I'm not conceding you did—how would *you* know how to make sense of their pothooks?"

"I learned quite a bit about the Hukk at the Command and Staff school."

"At the Com—" The Governor barked a laugh. "Oh, certainly, the Admiralty opens up the Utter Top Secret C&S school to tourists on alternate Thursdays. You took two weeks off from your junk business to drop over and absorb what it takes a trained expert two years to learn."

"Three years," Dalton said. "And that was before I was in the junk business."

The Governor looked Dalton up and down with sudden uncertainty. "Are you hinting that you're a . . . a retired admiral, or something of the sort?"

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"Not exactly an admiral," Dalton said. "And not exactly retired."

"Eh?"

"I was invited to resign—during the Hukk treaty debates."

The Governor looked blank, then startled.

"You're not . . . *that* Dalton?"

"If I am—you'll concede I might know the Hukk hand-script?"

The Governor rammed himself bolt upright.

"Why, I have a good mind to—" he broke off. "Dalton, as soon as word gets around who you are, you're finished here! There's not a man on Grassroots who'd do business with a convicted traitor!"

"The charge was insubordination, Governor."

"I remember the scandal well enough! You fought the treaty, went around making speeches undermining public confidence in the Admiralty that had just saved their necks from a Hukk takeover! Oh, I remember you, all right! Hard-line Dalton! Going to grind the beaten foe down under a booted heel! One of those ex-soldier-turned-rabble-rousers!"

"Which leaves us with the matter of a Hukk force nine hours out of Grassroots."

"Bah, I . . ." The Governor paused, twisting in his chair. "My God, man, are you sure of this?" He muttered the words from the corner of his mouth, as if trying to avoid hearing them.

Dalton nodded.

"All right," the Governor said, reaching for the screen. "Subject to a check, of course, I'll accept your story. I'll notify CDT HQ at Croanie. If this is what you say it is,

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it's a gross breach of the treaty—"

"What can Croanie do? The official Love Thine Enemy line ties their hands. A public acknowledgment of a treaty violation by the Hukk would discredit the whole Softline party—including some of the top Admiralty brass and half the major candidates in the upcoming elections. They won't move—even if they had anything to move with, and could get it here in time."

"What are you getting at?"

"It's up to us to stop them, Governor."

"Us—stop an armed force of trained soldiers? That's Admiralty business, Dalton!"

"Maybe—but it's our planet. We have guns and men who know how to use them."

"There are other methods than armed force for handling such matters, Dalton! A few words in the right quarter—"

"The Hukk deal in actions. Seven years ago they tried and missed. Now they're moving a new pawn out onto the board. That makes it our move."

"Well—suppose they do land a small party in the desert, perhaps they're carrying out some sort of scientific mission, perhaps they don't even realize the world is occupied. After all, there are less than half a million colonists here. . . ."

Dalton was smiling a little. "Do you believe that, Governor?"

"No, damn it! But it *could* be that way!"

"You're playing with words, Marston. The Hukk aren't wasting time talking."

"And your idea is . . . is to confront them—"

"Confront, Hell," Dalton growled. "I want a hundred

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militiamen who know how to handle a gun: the blast rifles locked up in the local armory will do. We'll pick our spots and be waiting for them when they land."

"You mean—ambush them?"

"You could call it that," Dalton said indifferently.

"Well . . ." The Governor looked grave. "I could point out to the council that in view of the nature of this provocative and illegal act on the part of—"

"Sure." Dalton cut off the speech. "I'll supply transport from my yard, there's an old ore tug that will do the job. You can make it legal later. Right now I need an authorization to inspect the armory."

"Well . . ." Frowning, the Governor spoke a few words into the dictyper, snatched the slip of paper as it popped from the slot, signed it with a slash of the stylus.

"Have the men alerted to report to the arms depot at twenty-two hundred hours," Dalton said as he tucked the chit away. "In field uniform, ready to move out."

"Don't start getting too big for your breeches yet, Dalton!" the Governor barked. "None of this is official, you're still just the local junk man as far as I'm concerned."

"While you're at it, you'd better sign a commission for me as a lieutenant of militia, Governor. We may have a guardhouse lawyer in the bunch."

"Rather a comedown for a former commodore, isn't it?" Marston said with a slight lift of the lip. "I think we'll skip that. You'd better just sit tight until the Council acts."

"Twenty-two hundred, Governor," Dalton said. "That's cutting it fine. And tell them to eat a good dinner. It may be a long wait for breakfast."

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II

The Federation Post Office was a blank gray five story front of local granite, the biggest and ugliest building in the territorial capital. Dalton went in along a well-lit corridor lined with half glass doors, went through the one lettered *Terran Space Arm*, and below, in smaller letters, *GSgt Brunt—Recruiting Officer*. Behind the immaculate counter decorated with colorful posters of clear-eyed young models in smart uniforms, a thick-necked man of medium height and age, with a tanned face and close-cropped sandy hair looked up from the bare desk with an expression of cheerful determination that underwent an invisible change to wary alertness as his eyes flicked over his caller.

"Good morning, Sergeant," Dalton said. "I understand you hold the keys to the weapons storage shack north of town."

Brunt thought that over, nodded once. His khakis were starched and creased to a knife-edge. A Combat Crew badge glinted red and gold over his left shirt pocket.

Dalton handed over the slip of paper the Governor had signed. Brunt read it, frowned faintly, read it again, folded it and tapped it on the desk.

"What's it all about, Dalton?" He had a rough-edged voice.

"For now that has to be between the Governor and me, Brunt."

Brunt snapped a finger at the note. "I'd like to oblige the Governor," he said. "But the weapons storage facility is a security area. No civilians allowed in, Dalton. He

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tossed the note across the desk.

Dalton nodded. "I should have thought of that," he said. "Excuse the interruption."

"Just a minute," Brunt said sharply as Dalton turned away. "If you'd like to tell me what's behind this . . . ?"

"Then you might stretch a regulation, eh? No thanks, Sergeant. I couldn't ask you to do that."

As Dalton left, Brunt was reaching for his desk screen.

III

Dalton lived a mile from town in a small pre-fab at the side of a twenty-acre tract covered with surplus military equipment, used mining rigs, salvaged transport units from crawlers to pogos. He parked his car behind the house and walked back between the looming hulks of gutted lighters, stripped shuttle craft ten years obsolete, wrecked private haulers, to a big, use-scarred cargo carrier. He started it up, maneuvered it around to the service ramp at the back, spent ten minutes checking it over. In the house, he ate a hasty meal, packed more food in a carton, changed clothes. He strapped on a well-worn service pistol, pulled on a deck jacket. He cranked up the cargo hauler, steered it out to the highway. It was a ten minute drive past the two-factory heavy industry belt, past scattered truck-gardens, on another three miles into the pink chalk, ravine-sliced countryside. The weapons depot was a ribbed-metal Quonset perched on a rise of ground to the left of the road. Dalton turned off, pulled to a stop and waited for the dust to settle before stepping down from the high cab.

There was a heavy combination lock on the front door.

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It took Dalton ten minutes with a heavy-duty cutter to open it. Inside the long, narrow building, he switched on an unshielded overhead light. There was a patina of dust over the weapons racked in lock-frames along the walls.

Another three minutes with the cutter had the lock-bars off the racks. The weapons were 2mm Norges, war-time issue, in fair shape. The charge indicators registered *nil*.

There was a charging unit against the end wall, minus the energy coil. Dalton went out to the big vehicle, opened the access hatch, lifted out the heavy power unit, lugged it inside, used cables to jump it to the charger.

It took him an hour and thirty-eight minutes to put a full charge on each of one hundred and two weapons. It was twenty-one thirty when he put through a call on the vehicle's talker to the Office of the Governor. The answering circuit informed him that the office was closed. He tried the Gubernatorial residence, was advised that the Governor was away on official business. As he switched off, a small blue-painted copter with an Admiralty eagle and the letters FRS on the side settled in beside him. The hatch popped open and Brunt emerged, crisp in his khakis. He stood, fists on hips, looking up at the hauler's cab.

"All right, Dalton," he called. "Game's over. You can haul that clanker back to the yard. Nobody's coming—and you're not going anywhere."

"I take it that's a message from his Excellency the Governor?" Dalton said.

Brunt's eye strayed past the big vehicle to the shed door, marred by a gaping hole where the lock had been.

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"What the—" Brunt's hand went to his hip, came up gripping a palm-gun.

"Drop it," Dalton said.

Brunt froze. "Dalton, you're already in plenty of trouble—"

"The gun, Brunt."

Brunt tossed the small gun to the ground. Dalton climbed down, his pistol in his hand.

"The Council said no, eh?"

"What did you expect, you damned fool? You want to start a war?"

"No—I want to finish one." Dalton jerked his head. "Inside." Brunt preceded him into the hut, at Dalton's direction gathered up half a dozen weapons, touching only the short, thick barrels. He carried them out and stowed them in the rear of the hauler.

Dalton ordered Brunt into the cab, climbed up beside him. As he did, Brunt aimed a punch at his head; Dalton blocked it and caught his wrist.

"I've got thirty pounds and the reach on you, Sergeant," he said. "Just sit quietly. Under the circumstances I'm glad you happened along." He punched the door-lock key, started up, lifted onto the air-cushion and headed west into the desert.

IV

Dusk' was trailing purple veils across the sky when Dalton pulled the carrier in under a wind-carved wing of violet chalk at the base of a jagged rock-wall and cut power. Brunt grumbled but complied when Dalton ordered him out of his seat.

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"You've got a little scramble ahead, Sergeant." Dalton glanced up the craggy slope looming above.

"You could have picked an easier way to go off your rails," the recruiter said. "Suppose I say I won't go?"

Dalton smiled faintly, doubled his right fist and rotated it against his left palm. Brunt spat.

"If I hadn't been two years in a lousy desk job, I'd take you, Dalton, reach or no reach."

"Pick up the guns, Brunt."

It took Dalton most of an hour to place the five extra blast rifles in widely-spaced positions around the crater's half mile rim, propping them firmly, aimed at the center of the rock-strewn natural arena below. Brunt laughed at him.

"The old Fort Zinderneuf game, eh? But you don't have any corpses to man the ramparts."

"Over there, Brunt—where I can keep an eye on you." Dalton settled himself behind a shielding growth of salt weed, sighting along the barrel of the blast rifle. Brunt watched with a sour smile.

"You really hate these fellows, don't you, Dalton? You were out to get them with the treaty, and failed, and now you're going to even it all up, single-handed."

"Not quite single-handed. There are two of us."

"You can kidnap me at gun-point, Dalton, and you can bring me out here. But you can't make me fight."

"That's right."

Brunt made a disgusted sound. "You crazy fool! You'll get us both killed!"

"I'm glad you concede the possibility that this isn't just a party of picnickers we're here to meet."

"What do you expect, if you open fire on them?"

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"I expect them to shoot back."

"Can you blame them?" Brunt retorted.

Dalton shook his head. "That doesn't mean I have to let them get away with it."

"You know, Dalton, at the time of your court-martial, I wondered about a few things. Maybe I even had a few doubts about the treaty myself. But this . . ." He waved a hand that took in the black desert, the luminous horizon, the sky. "This confirms everything they threw at you. You're a pananoic—"

"But I can still read Hukk cursive," Dalton said. He pointed overhead. A flickering point of pink light was barely visible against the violet sky.

"I think you know a Hukk drive when you see one," Dalton said. "Now let's watch and see whether it's stuffed eggs or blast cannon they brought along."

V

"It doesn't make sense," Brunt growled. "We've shown them we can whip them in war, we gave them generous peace terms, let them keep their space capability almost intact, even offered them economic aid—"

"While we scrapped the fighting ships that we didn't build until ten years of Hukk raids forced us to."

"I know the Hardline, Dalton. OK, you told 'em so. Maybe there was something in it. But what good is this caper supposed to do? You want to be a martyr, is that it? And I'm the witness. . . ."

"Not quite. The Hukk picked this spot because it's well-shielded from casual observation, close enough to Grassport and Bedrock to launch a quick strike, but not

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so close as to be stumbled over. That's sound, as far as it goes, but as a defensive position, it couldn't be worse. Of course, they didn't expect to have to defend it."

"Look, Dalton, OK, you were right, the Hukk are making an unauthorized landing on Grassroots' soil. Maybe they're even an armed party, as you said. Swell. I came out here with you, I've seen the ship, and I'll so testify. So why louse it up? We'll hand the file to the CDT and let them handle it! It's their baby, not yours! Not mine! We've got no call to get ourselves blasted to Kingdom Come playing One-Man Task Force!"

"You think Croanie will move in fast and slap 'em down?"

"Well—it might take some time—"

"Meanwhile the Hukk will have brought in their heavy stuff. They'll entrench half a mile under the surface and then start spreading out. By the time the Admiralty gets into the act, they'll hold half the planet."

"All right! Is that fatal? We'll negotiate, arrange for the release of Terry nationals, the return of Terry property—"

"Compromise, in other words."

"All right, you give a little, you get a little!"

"And the next time?"

"What next time?"

"The Hukk will take half of Grassroots with no more expense than a little time at a conference table. That will look pretty good to them. A lot better than an all-fronts war. Why gulp, when you can nibble?"

"If they keep pushing, we'd slap them down, you know that."

"Sure we will—in time. Why not do it now?"

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"Don't talk like a damned fool, Dalton! What can one man do?"

The Hukk ship was visibly lower now, drifting down silently on the stuttering column of light that was its life-beam. It was dull black, bottle-shaped, with a long ogee curve to the truncated prow.

"If I had any heavy stuff up here, I'd go for her landing jacks," Dalton said. "But a 2mm Norge doesn't pack enough wallop to be sure of crippling her. And if I miss, they're warned: they can lift and cook us with an ion bath. So we'll wait until they're off-loaded, then pour it into the port. That's a weak spot on a Hukk ship. The iris is fragile, and any malfunction there means no seal, ergo no lift. Then we settle down to picking them off, officers first. With fast footwork, we should have them trimmed down to manageable size before they can organize a counterattack."

"What if I don't go along with this harebrained suicide scheme?"

"Then I'll have to wire your wrists and ankles."

"And if you're killed, where does that leave me?"

"Better make up your mind."

"Suppose I shoot at you instead of them?"

"In that case I'd have to kill you."

"You're pretty sure of yourself, Dalton." When Dalton didn't answer Brunt licked his lips and said: "I'll go this far: I'll help you burn the port, because if you foul it up it's my neck too. But as for shooting fish in a barrel—negative, Dalton."

"I'll settle for that."

"But afterward, once she's grounded—all bets are off."

"Tell that to the Hukk," Dalton said.

VI

"Lousy light for this work," Brunt said over his gun-sights. Dalton, watching the Hukk ship settle in almost soundlessly in a roil of dust, didn't answer. Suddenly, floodlights flared around the base of the ship, bathing it in a reflected violet glow as, with a grating of rock, the Hukk vessel came to rest.

"Looks like a stage all set up for *Swan Lake*," Brunt muttered.

For five minutes, nothing happened. Then the circular exit valve dilated, spilling a widening shaft of green light out in a long path across the crater floor, casting black shadows behind the thickly scattered boulders. A tiny silhouette moved in the aperture, jumped down, a long-legged shadow matching its movement as it stepped aside. Another followed, and more, until seven Hukk stood outside the ship. They were slope-backed quadrupeds, hunched, neckless, long faced, knob jointed, pendulous bellied, leathery hided. A cluster of sheathed digital numbers lay on either side of the slab-like cheeks.

"Ugly bastards," Brunt said. "But that's got nothing to do with it, of course."

Now more troops were emerging, falling in in orderly rows. At a command faintly audible to Dalton as a squeaky bark, the first squad of ten Hukk about-faced and marched fifty feet from the ship, halted, opened ranks.

"Real parade ground types," Brunt said. "Kit inspection, no less."

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"What's the matter, Sergeant? Annoyed they didn't hit the beach with all guns blazing?"

"Dalton, it's not too late to change your mind."

"I'm afraid it is—by about six years."

The disembarkation proceeded with promptness and dispatch. It was less than ten minutes before nine groups of ten Hukk had formed up, each with an officer in charge. At a sharp command, they wheeled smartly, executed a complicated maneuver which produced a single hollow square two Hukk deep around the baggage stacked at the center.

"All right, Brunt, off-loading complete," Dalton said. "Commence firing on the port."

The deep *chuff! chuff!* of the blast rifles echoed back from the far side of the crater as the two guns opened up. Brilliant flashes winked against the ship. The Hukk stood fast, with the exception of two of the officers who whirled and ran for the ship. Dalton switched sights momentarily, dropped the first one, then the second, returned to the primary target.

Now the square broke suddenly, but not in random fashion; each side peeled away as a unit, spread out, hit the dirt, each Hukk scrambling for shelter, while the four remaining officers took up their positions in the centers of their respective companies. In seconds, the dispersed troops were virtually invisible. Here and there the blink and *pop!* of return fire crackled from behind a boulder or a gully.

The port was glowing cherry red; the iris seemed to be jammed half closed. Dalton shifted targets, settled the cross hairs on an officer, fired, switched to another as the first fell. He killed three before the remaining

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Hukk brasshat scuttled for the protection of a ridge of rock. Without a pause, Dalton turned his fire on the soldiers scattered across the open ground.

"Stop, you bloodthirsty fool!" Brunt was yelling. "The ship's crippled, the officers are dead! The poor devils are helpless down there—"

There was a violet flash from near the ship, a deep-toned *warhoom!*, a crashing fall of rock twenty feet to their left. A second flash, a second report, more rock exploded, closer.

"Time to go," Dalton snapped and, without waiting to see Brunt's reaction, slid down the backslope, scrambled along it while rock chips burst from the ridge above him amid the smashing impacts of the Hukk power cannon. He surfaced two hundred yards to the left of his original position, found the rifle emplacement. He aimed the weapon, depressed the trigger and set the hold-down for automatic rapid fire, paused long enough to fire half a dozen aimed bolts at the enemy, then moved on to the next gun to repeat the operation.

VII

Twenty minutes later Dalton, halfway around the crater from his original location, paused for a breather, listening to the steady crackle of the Hukk return fire, badly aimed but intense enough to encourage him to keep his head down. As well as he could judge, he had so far accounted for eight Hukk in addition to the five officers. Of the five blast rifles he had left firing on automatic, two had been knocked out or had exhausted their charges. The other three were still firing steadily,

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kicking pits in the bare rock below.

A few of the ship's ground-lights were still on; the rest had been shot out by the Hukk soldiery. By their glow Dalton picked an exposed target near the ship, brought his rifle to bear on him. He was about to pull the trigger when he saw Brunt sliding downslope thirty degrees around the perimeter of the ringwall from him, waving an improvised white flag.

VIII

The words from the Hukk PA system were loud and clear if somewhat echoic, and were delivered in excellent Terran, marred only by the characteristic Hukk difficulty with nasals:

"Terran warrior." The deep, booming voice rolled across the crater. ". . . orrior, rier. Hwe hno hnow that you are alone. You have fought hwel. Hnow you must surrender or be destroyed."

The lone Hukk officer stood in an exposed position near the center of the semicircular dispersement of soldiers, holding the end of a rope which was attached to Brunt's neck.

"Unless you show yourself at once," the amplified voice boomed out, "you hwil be hunted out and killed."

The Hukk officer turned to Brunt. A moment later Brunt's hoarse voice echoed across the crater:

"För God's sake, Dalton, they're giving you a chance! Throw down your gun and surrender!"

Sweat trickled down across Dalton's face. He wiped it away, cupped his hands beside his mouth and shouted in the Hukk language:

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"Release the prisoner first."

There was a pause. "You offer an exchange, himself for yourself?"

"That's right."

Another pause. "Very well, I accept," the Hukk called. "Come forward now. I assure you safe-conduct."

Dalton lifted his pistol from its holster, tucked it inside his belt, under the jacket. He studied the ground below, then worked his way fifty feet to the right before he stood, the blast gun in his hands, and started down the slope along the route he had selected, amid a rattle of dislodged rock fragments.

"Throw down your weapon!" the PA ordered as he reached the crater floor. Dalton hesitated, then tossed the gun aside. Empty-handed, he advanced among the boulders toward the waiting Hukk. The captain—Dalton was close enough to see his rank badges now—had pulled Brunt in front of him. The latter, aware of his role as a human shield, looked pale and damp. His mouth twitched as though there were things it wanted to say, but was having trouble finding words equal to the occasion.

When Dalton was twenty feet from the officer, passing between two six-foot-high splinters of upended rock, he halted abruptly. At once, the captain barked an order. There was a flicker of motion to Dalton's left. He darted a hand under his jacket, came out with the pistol, fired, and was facing the officer again as a yapping wail came from the target.

"Tell your troops to down guns and pull back," Dalton said crisply.

"You call on *me* to surrender?" The officer was care-

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fully keeping his members in Brunt's shadow.

"You've been had, Captain. Only three of your soldiers can bear on me here—and they have to expose themselves to fire. My reaction time is somewhat quicker than theirs; you see the result."

"You bluff—"

"The gun in my hand will penetrate two inches of flint steel," Dalton said. "The man in front of you is a lot softer than armor."

"You would kill the man for whose freedom you offered your life?"

"What do you think?"

"My men will surely kill you!"

"Probably. But you won't be here to transmit the all-clear to the boys standing by off-planet."

"Then what do you hope to gain, Man?"

"Dalton's the name, Captain."

"That name is known to me. I am Ch'oova. I was with the Grand Armada at Van Doom's world."

"The Grand Armada fought well—but not quite well enough."

"True, Commodore. Perhaps our strategy has been at fault." The captain raised his head, barked an order. Hukk soldiers began rising from concealment, gun muzzles pointing at the ground; they cantered away toward the ship by twos and threes, their small hooves raising cottony puffs of dust.

When they were alone, Captain Ch'oova tossed the rope aside.

"I think," he said, with a small, formal curtsy, "that we had best negotiate."

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IX

"That fellow Ch'ooova told me something funny," Brunt said as the cargo carrier plowed toward the dawn. "Seven years ago, at Van Doom's world, you were left in command of the Fleet after Admiral Hayle was hit. You were the one who fought the Grand Armada to a standstill."

"I took over from Hayle, yes."

"And won the battle. Funny, that part didn't get in the papers. But not so funny, maybe, at that. According to Ch'ooova, after the fighting was over, you refused a direct Admiralty order."

"Garbled transmission," Dalton said.

"Tempers run high in wartime," Brunt said. "The Hukk had made a lot of enemies before we finally faced up to going to war. The High Command wanted a permanent solution. They gave you secret orders to accept the Hukk surrender, and then blow them out of space. You said no."

"Not really; I just didn't get around to carrying out the order."

"And in a few days, cooler heads prevailed. But not before you were relieved and posted to the boondocks, and your part in the victory covered up."

"Just a routine transfer," Dalton said.

"And then, by God, you turned around—you, the white-haired boy who'd saved the brass from making a blunder that would have ruined them when it got known—and went after the treaty hammer and tongs, to toughen it up! First you save the Hukks' necks—and

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then you break yourself trying to tighten the screws on them!"

Dalton shook his head. "Nope; I just didn't want to mislead them."

"You wanted their Armada broken up, occupation of their principle worlds, arms limitations with inspections—"

"Brunt, this night's work cost the lives of fourteen Hukk soldiers, most of them probably ordinary citizens who were drafted and sent out here all full of patriotic fervor. That was a dirty trick."

"What's that got to do—"

"We beat them once. Then we picked 'em up, dusted 'em off, and gave them back their toys. That wasn't fair to a straightforward bunch of opportunists like the Hukk. It was an open invitation to blunder again. And unless they were slapped down quick, they'd keep on blundering in deeper—until they goaded us into building another fleet. And this time, there might not be enough pieces left to pick up."

Brunt sat staring thoughtfully out at the paling sky ahead; he laughed shortly. "When you went steaming out there with fire in your eye, I thought you were out for revenge on the Hukk for losing you your fat career. But you were just delivering a message."

"In simple terms that they could understand," Dalton said.

"You're a strange man, Commodore. For the second time, single-handed, you've stopped a war. And because you agreed with Ch'oova to keep the whole thing confidential, no one will ever know. Result: You'll be a laughingstock for your false alarm. And with your

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identity known, you're washed up in the junk business. Hell, Marston will have the police waiting to pick you up for everything from arms theft to spitting on the sidewalk! And you can't say a word in your own defense."

"It'll blow over."

"I could whisper a word in Marston's ear—"

"No you won't, Brunt. And if you do, I'll call you a liar. I gave Ch'oova my word; if this caper became public knowledge, it would kick the Hukk out of every Terran market they've built up in the past six years."

"Looks like you've boxed yourself into a corner, Commodore," Brunt said softly.

"That's twice you've called me Commodore—Major."

Brunt made a surprised sound. Dalton gave him a one-sided smile.

"I can spot a hotshot Intelligence type at half a mile. I used to wonder why they posted you out here."

"To keep an eye on you, Commodore, what else?"

"Me?"

"A man like you is an enigma. You had the brass worried. You didn't hew to any party line. But I think you've gotten the message across now—and not just to the Hukk."

Dalton grunted.

"So I think I can assure you that you won't need to look for a new place to start up your junk yard. I think the Navy needs you. It'll take some string pulling, but it can be swung. Maybe not as a commodore—not for a while—but at least you'll have a deck under your feet. How does it sound?"

"I'll think about it," Dalton said.

THE PLAGUE

I

The man faced the monster at a distance of twenty feet.

Dr. Reed Nolan, khaki-clad, gray-haired, compactly built, dark-tanned by the big sun of the world called Kaka Nine, would hardly have been recognized by his former colleagues at the university where he had spent the earlier decades of his life.

The creature confronting him would have been even less familiar. Massive as a rhino, horned, fanged like a warthog, with a mottled hide and slim, curiously jointed legs, the tusker lowered its head and gouged at the turf.

"Well, Emperor," Nolan said genially, "you're here early this year. That's fine; I have a lush crop of pest-weed for you. I guess the herd's not far behind you. . . ?"

He plucked a stalk of wild-growing leatherplant, stripped off the tough husk, offered the succulent pith to the beast. The native omnivore ambled forward, accepted the offering, regarding the man with the same tolerance it did any other nonnutritive substance.

At their first encounter, three years before, Nolan had had a few bad moments when the tusker herd had arrived like a sudden plague, charging down from the hills. The big beasts had sniffed at his heels where he roosted

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in the only perch available: a stunted tree from which the monster could have plucked him easily had it been so minded. Then they had passed on. Now, better educated, Nolan was deeply appreciative of the thoroughness with which the big animals rooted out the native plant and rodent life from his fields and the scrupulous care with which they avoided any contact with the alien Terrestrial crops. As self-maintaining cultivators, weeding machines, and fertilizer spreaders, the tuskers left little to be desired.

The communicator at Nolan's wrist buzzed softly.

"Reed—there's a surface boat in the lagoon," a woman's voice said, rather excitedly. "Quite a big boat. Who do you suppose it could be?"

"In our lagoon, Annette? Beats me. I'm in the high pasture, over beyond North Ridge. I'll buzz over and have a look. By the way, Emperor's here; the herds ought to be along in another week."

Nolan remounted his soft-wheeled range cart and trundled upslope to a point from which he had a wide view of the planted fields and seedling orchards sweeping down toward the mile-distant beach and the island-dotted sea beyond. The boat was a few hundred yards offshore, obviously making for the landing wharf Nolan had completed the previous month. It was a big, wide, gray-painted vessel, clumsy but powerful looking, riding low in the water. Annette heard his grunt of surprise.

"Maybe we're on the tourist routes now. Take it easy, girl. Don't start rushing around making sandwiches. It's probably some kind of official survey party. I can't think of anyone else who'd have an interest in our homestead."

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"What are they doing out here, twelve hundred miles from Toehold? The Bureau's never paid us any attention before. . . ."

"For which we're duly grateful. Never mind; I'm on my way down. Maybe it will be nice to talk to strangers, after three years."

It was a fifteen minute trip down from the heights to the hedge line delineating the limits of the tilled acreage. The perfume of the force-grown gardenias was sweet on the air. For all their beauty, the imported plants were no luxury; Nolan had discovered early that their fragrance was an effective deterrent to the tuskers. The hedge system had been laid out with care to channel the big animals' seasonal migration—stampede might be a better word, Nolan reflected—as they swept down from the winter heights to graze their traditional meadows along the shore—meadows now under intensive cultivation. The herds, Nolan admitted to himself, had probably made the difference between bare survival and the success of the plantation.

Timmy, Nolan's twelve-year-old son, met him on the path above the house. Nolan paused to let him hop aboard.

"They're tying up at the pier, Dad," the boy said excitedly. "Who do you s'pose they are?"

"Probably some junketing bureaucrats, Timmy. Taking a census or something of the sort."

There were men down on the pier now, making cables fast. The sound of a turbine started up. A tracked vehicle, bright yellow in color, was trundling down the gangplank.

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Annette, a petite brunette, emerged from the house to meet her husband and son.

"They look awfully busy," she said, glancing toward the shore. "Reed, did you order any equipment that I don't know about. . . ?"

"Nothing. Someone's made a navigational error, I suspect."

"Dad, look!" Timmy pointed.

A deck boom, probing in an open hatch, had lifted a laden pallet, swung it over the side to deposit it on the dock. A forklift picked up the pallet, advanced along the length of the pier; it rolled off onto the grassy shore, gouging deep parallel ruts through the planted turf as it went.

"Dad, we spent all spring getting that grass to grow—"

"Never mind, Timmy, we can replace it. You two stay here," Nolan said to Annette. "I'll go down and see what this is all about."

"Aren't you going to wash up, Reed? They'll think you're the hired man. . . ."

"Don't I wish I had one," he said as he headed for the dock.

The path down from the crest where he had built the house led close under a dense stand of blue-needled spruce-like trees. Native wild flowers in many shades of yellow grew in profusion here; a stream splashed down across goldmossed rocks. The Terrestrial birds that Nolan had released—and fed daily—had thrived: mocking-birds, robins, and parakeets chirped and twittered comfortably in the alien shade of the forest. Next year, he might be able to bring in a few dozen seedlings of pine and cedar to supplement the native woods, since this year's crops

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would, for the first time, show a handsome profit. . . .

As Nolan emerged from the shelter of the trees the vehicle he had seen earlier was churning briskly across the grass in his direction. It halted and a bulky bundle tumbled from it to the ground. The machine drove on, dropped a second package fifty feet from the first. It continued on its way, depositing the loads at regular intervals across the wide lawn. Nolan angled across to intercept the vehicle as it stopped again. Two men, one youngish, with a thinning crew cut, the other middle-aged and bald, both dressed in badly cut but new-looking coveralls, looked down at him without visible interest.

"Better hold it, fellows," Nolan called. "There's been some mistake. That cargo doesn't belong here."

The men exchanged glances. The elder of the two turned and spat carelessly past Nolan.

"Ha," he said. The vehicle moved on.

Nolan walked over to the nearest bundle. It was a tailored plastic casing, roughly cubical, two feet on a side. Markings stenciled on the side read:

SHELTER, PERSONNEL (MALE) cat 567/09/a10
CAP 20. APSC. CL II.

Nolan continued down to the pier. Vehicles were rolling off it in a steady stream, some loaded with men, others with equipment. The growl of turbines filled the air, along with an acrid stink of burned hydrocarbons. A small, slender man in sub-executive coveralls stood amid the confusion, clipboard in hand. He looked around sharply as Nolan came up.

"Here," he snapped, "what are you doing here, fellow? What's your crew and unit number?" He riffled the pa-

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pers on the clipboard as if the answer to his question was to be found there.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," Nolan said mildly. "What you're doing here, I mean. I'm afraid you're in the wrong place. This is—"

"None of your impertinence, now! Stand over there; I'll get to you presently." The small man turned his back to Nolan.

"Where can I find the man in charge?" Nolan asked. The man ignored him. He turned toward the boat; the little man shouted after him, but he went on.

At the pier, a harassed-looking fellow with a tight, office-pale face stared him up and down.

"In charge?" he echoed Nolan's inquiry. "Don't worry about it. Get back to your crew."

"I'm not a crew member," Nolan said patiently. "I'm—"

"Don't argue with me!" the man snapped, and motioned to a bigger man overseeing the maneuvers of the forklift. "Grotz; take his number." He turned away.

"All right, you, let's have that number," Grotz demanded tiredly.

"Number one," Nolan said.

"One what? One-ten?"

"If you say so."

"All right." Grotz jotted. "They were looking for you, one-ten. Better get busy now, before I dock you."

"I think I'll do just that," Nolan said, and left the pier.

II

Back at the house, he went directly to the study, switched on the callbox.

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"Some kind of official snafu," he told Annette. "I'll have to place a call to Toehold and see what they know about it."

"Reed—that's so expensive. . . ."

"Can't be helped. They seem to be too busy to talk to me." Nolan looked up the code for the Office of Colonial Affairs, punched it out.

"Reed," Annette said from the window. "They're putting up some kind of big tents on the lawn!"

"I know. . . ." An operator came on the line; another minute passed before Nolan reached the OCA.

"Nolan, you say?" a harassed official voice said. "Oh, yes, I recall the name. . . ."

Briefly, Nolan outlined the situation. "Someone's apparently got his coordinates confused," he finished. "If you'd put a call through on the IC band to whoever's in charge—"

"Just a minute, Nolan. What was that number of the boat again?"

Nolan told him.

"Mm. Just a moment. . . . Ah, yes. I see that the vessel is chartered to the Union for Human Privileges. They're only semiofficial, of course—but they're a powerful organization."

"Not powerful enough to legally pitch camp on my land," Nolan said.

"Well—I think it's more than a camping trip, Mr. Nolan. The HPU intends to set up a permanent relocation facility for underprivileged persons displaced by overcrowding from the Welfare Center."

"On *my* claim?"

"Well, as to that, your claim isn't actually finalized,

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you realize. The five year residency requirement hasn't yet been fulfilled, of course—"

"Nonsense. That approach wouldn't hold up in court for five minutes!"

"Perhaps—but it might be some years before the case appeared on the agenda. Meanwhile—well, I'm afraid I can't offer much encouragement, Mr. Nolan. You'll just have to adjust."

"Reed!" Annette gasped. "There's a man with a power saw; he's cutting down one of the sycamores!"

As Nolan turned to the window a black-painted personnel car pulled to a stop outside. The hatches popped up. Four men, a stout woman, and a lath-thin youth stepped down. A moment later Nolan heard the front door open. A short, heavily-built man with bristly reddish hair strolled into the front hall, his retinue close behind him.

"Well, a fortunate find," a suety voice said. "The structure seems sound enough. We'll establish my administrative HQ here, I think. And you can make ready personal quarters for me as well; much as I'd prefer to share issue accommodations with out people, I'll need to remain close to affairs."

"I think there's ample room for all the staff here, Director Fraswell," another voice said, "if we make do with a room apiece—"

"Don't be afraid to share a little hardship with the men, Chester." The man called Fraswell cut off his subordinate's remark curtly. "I'll remind you—" He broke off abruptly as he caught sight of Nolan and Annette.

"Who's this?" the plump man barked. He had a mottled complexion and a wide, unsmiling mouth. He turned

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to the man beside him. "What's this fellow doing here, Chester?"

"Here, who're you?" A lean, bony man with a crooked face spoke sharply, coming forward from behind his chief.

"My name is Nolan—"

"Get his crew number." A third man spoke up.

"Here, fellow, what's your number?" the crooked-faced man said quickly.

"Who's the woman?" the plump man barked. "I made it clear there was to be no fraternization!"

"Get the woman's number," Chester said sharply.

"All right, crew and unit numbers," the man in the rear rank said, coming forward. "Let's see your wrists, both of you."

Nolan stepped in front of Annette. "We don't have numbers," he said. "We're not in your party. We live here. My name is Nolan—"

"Eh?" The plump man interjected in elaborate puzzlement. "*Live here?*"

"*Live here?*" his aid echoed.

"That's right. That's my dock you tied up to. This is my house. I—"

"Oh, yes." The plump man nodded, making a show of recalling a trivial datum. "You'd be the fellow, what's-his-name, ah, Nolan. Yes. I was told you'd established some sort of squatter's claim here."

"My claim is on file at Toehold, ten copies, notarized and fees paid. So I'd appreciate it if you'd load your property back aboard your boat and take another look at your charts. I don't know where you were headed, but I'm afraid this spot's taken."

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The plump man's face went expressionless. He looked past Nolan's left ear.

"I've requisitioned this site for the resettlement of a quota of economically disadvantaged persons," he said solemnly. "We constitute the advance party, to make ready the facilities for the relocatees who're to follow. I trust we'll have your full cooperation in this good work."

"The facilities, as you call them, happen to be private property—"

"You'd prate of selfish interests with the welfare of hundreds at stake?" Fraswell barked.

Nolan looked at him. "Why here?" he asked levelly. "There are thousands of unoccupied islands available—"

"This one seems most easily adaptable for our purposes," Fraswell said flatly. "I estimate a thousand persons can be accommodated here quite nicely—"

"It's no different than any other island in the chain."

Fraswell looked surprised. "Nonsense. The cleared land along the shore is ideal for erection of the initial camp site; and I note various food plants are available to supplement issue rations."

A man in a clerical collar came into the room, rubbing his hands. "A stroke of luck, Director Fraswell," he cried. "I've found a supply of nonissue foodstuffs, including a well-stocked freezer—" He broke off as he saw Nolan and Annette.

"Yes, yes, Padre," Fraswell said. "I'll conduct an inventory and see to an equitable distribution of items found."

"Found—or stolen?" Nolan said.

"Whaaat?"

"Why can't these deserving cases of yours produce

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their own supplies? The land's fertile enough—"

The cleric stared. "Our people are not criminals, condemned to hard labor," he said indignantly. "They're merely disadvantaged. They have the same right to Nature's bounty as yourself—if not more!"

"Aren't you missing the distinction between Nature's bounty and the product of human effort? There's an ample supply of Nature on the next island. You have plenty of labor available. If you take virgin land, in a year you can harvest your own crop."

"You expect me to subject these unfortunate people to unnecessary hardships, merely out of your personal selfishness?" Fraswell snorted.

"I cleared land; they can start off the same way I did—"

"My instructions are to establish my group at a certain standard; the more quickly that standard is reached—"

"The better you'll look back at HQ, eh?"

A woman had followed the priest into the room. She was thick-necked, red-faced, with grimly frizzed gray hair, dressed in drab-colored clothing and stout shoes. She looked indignantly at Nolan.

"The land and what's on it belongs to everyone," she snapped. "The idea, one man trying to hog it all! I guess you'd just sit here in luxury and let women and children starve!"

"I'd let them clear their own land and plant their own crops," Nolan said gently. "And build their own headquarters. This happens to be my family's house. I built it—and the power plant, and the sewage system—"

"Wonder where he got the money for all that," the

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woman wondered aloud. "No honest man has that kind of cash."

"Now, Milly," Fraswell said indulgently.

"I saved eighty credits per month for twenty-seven years, Madam," Nolan said. "From a very modest salary."

"So that makes you better than other folk, eh?" She pursued the point. "Can't live in barracks like everybody else—"

"Now, Miltrude," Fraswell said mildly, and turned back to Nolan.

"Mr, ah, Nolan, inasmuch as I'll be requiring information from you as to various matters, you may as well be assigned a cot here at HQ. I'm sure that now you've considered it you'll agree that the welfare of the community comes first, though modest personal sacrifices may be required of the individual, eh?"

"What about my wife?"

Fraswell looked grave. "I've ordered that there'll be no sexual fraternization for the present—"

"How do *we* know she's your wife?" Miltrude demanded.

Annette gasped and moved closer to Nolan; the crooked-faced man caught at her arm. Nolan stepped forward and knocked it away.

"Oh, violence, eh?" Fraswell nodded as if in satisfaction. "Call Glotz in." Chester hurried away. Annette clutched Nolan's hand.

"It's all right," he said. "Fraswell knows how far he can go." He looked meaningfully at the plump man. "This isn't an accident, is it?" he said. "I suppose you've had your eye on our island for some time; you were just

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waiting until we had it far enough along to make it worth stealing."

The big man from the boat came into the room, looking around. He saw Nolan.

"Hey, you—"

Fraswell held up a hand.

"Now, Nolan—there'll be no more outbursts, I trust. Now, as I say, you'll be assigned quarters here at HQ provided you can control yourself."

A lanky, teen-age lad with an unfortunate complexion sauntered in through the open door. He had a small, nearly ripe tomato in his hand, from which he had just taken a bite, another fruit in his hand.

"Look what I found, Pop," he said.

"Not now, Leston," Fraswell barked. He glared until the lad shrugged and departed. Then he looked alertly at Nolan.

"Tomatoes, eh?" he said thoughtfully. "I'd understood they couldn't be grown here on Kaka Nine."

"Just one experimental plant," Nolan said grimly. "Leston seems to have terminated the experiment."

Fraswell grunted. "Well, have I your word, Nolan?"

"I don't think you'd like the word I'm thinking of, Mr. Fraswell," Nolan said.

"Pahl" the Director snorted. "Very well, then." He eyed Nolan severely. "Don't say I didn't give you every consideration! Glotz—Chester—take them away and lock them up somewhere until they see reason."

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III

In the dark of the tool shed where he had been confined, Nolan massaged his bruised knuckles and listened to the soft sigh of the wind, the lonely call of the native nightbirds—and to a stealthy, persistent rasping, barely audible, coming from beyond the locked door across the small room.

The sound ceased with a soft clank of metal. The knob turned; the door swung inward. Through the opening, a youthful face appeared.

"Tim! Nice work!" Nolan breathed.

"Hi, Dad!" The boy slipped through, closed the door. Nolan held out his wrists, linked by braided steel a quarter inch in diameter. Timmy clamped the bolt cutter on the cable, snipped through the strands.

"My ankle is cuffed to the cot," Nolan whispered.

Timmy found the cable, cut it deftly. A moment later, Nolan and his son were outside. All was silence, though there were still a few lights in the upper rooms of the house, and down by the dock side.

"Your mother?" Nolan said as they moved off.

"They've got her in the last tent in line—down by the pond. Dad, you know what they did? They used a net and took every fish out of the pond! All our panfish and bass fingerlings! They cooked 'em up and ate 'em."

"They can be replaced—in time."

"They sure smelled good," Tim admitted.

"You had anything to eat?"

"Sure. I raided the kitchen while that fat man with the funny lips was trying to figure out how to work the

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tricordeo. All he could get was the ref patterns. He was pretty mad."

They passed behind the ranked tents. A light burned in one.

"That's where the honchos stay," Tim said.

"No sentries?" Nolan asked.

"Nope. They talked about it and decided they didn't need any."

They were behind the last tent in line.

"About here," Tim said, indicating a spot six paces from the corner. "I saw Mom just before they opaqued it."

Nolan asked. "I'll take the knife," he said. "You move back and be ready to run for it if there's an alarm."

"Heck, Dad—"

"So you can try again, if they catch me."

"Oh, OK."

Nolan worked the knife point through the tough material. Air hissed out. He ripped upward. From inside the tent there was a sharp exclamation, followed by a muffled thud. He thrust the cut flap aside and plunged through.

Annette met him.

"I knew you'd come," she whispered, and kissed him swiftly. "I had to hit her over the head." She nodded toward a bulky figure slumped at her feet.

"Timmy's outside," Nolan whispered as he passed her through the breach in the fabric wall.

Already the taut plastic had begun to sag.

"Patching goo," the boy said, and handed Nolan a roll of wide tape. Quickly they sealed the opening.

"Where to first?" Tim asked.

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"The house," Nolan said.

The back door was locked; Nolan keyed it open. Inside, he went silently to the den, selected two small handguns and a lightweight power rifle. In the kitchen, Annette had assembled a small heap of concentrates not yet looted from the stores. Tim came in from the tackle room with packs.

Back outside, Nolan posted his wife and son near the path leading to the hills and set off toward the power house. Inside, he made certain adjustments; he locked the door behind him as he left. Moving on to the pump house, he closed two large valves, opened others. Last, he engaged the massive power lock on the equipment shed.

"That's about it," he said as he rejoined the others. "Let's go."

"If they hadn't showed up," Tim said as they set off up the steep path, "I guess we never would have taken that camping trip we're always talking about."

IV

The cave was a large and airy one, with a narrow entrance well-concealed from below by a rocky ridge and a freshwater spring that trickled at the rate of one gallon per hour into a stone basin. It was a cave the Nolan family knew well; they had once lived in it for two months, until the first rooms of the house had been completed.

It was the work of an hour to sweep out the accumulated wind-blown rubbish, set up the inflatable cots, arrange the collapsible cooking equipment around the

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stone fireplace. By then the sun was coming up.

Nolan looked down across the stunted mountain growth toward the house far below. The binoculars showed a cluster of men around the pump house.

"They must have emptied the reserve tank already," he said.

"They'll just blow the door off the pump house, Reed," Annette said. "Won't they?"

"Maybe—if they have the right explosives. But they'll still have to know which valves to open."

"I feel pretty mean—cutting off their water supply."

"There's always the pond and buckets. They won't suffer—except for a few blisters."

Nolan and Tim spent most of the morning busy on the slopes. The Tusker herds were gathering in the high meadows now; using binoculars, Nolan estimated their numbers at over ten thousand. They returned to the cave with a specimen bag filled with fossils, low grade gemstones, and some new varieties of fungus to add to Tim's slide collection. Annette greeted them with hot soup and sandwiches.

Late in the afternoon they watched a party of men spread out and scour the underbrush near the house. After an hour or two the search petered out.

"I'll bet old Fatty's plenty mad by now," Tim said cheerfully. "I'll bet he still hasn't figured out the tricordeo."

The Nolans set out a board and played three-handed chidge until dinner time. Annette served recon chicken-and-chips. She and Reed had cold dehi-beer, Tim hot cocoa. Just after dusk, all the lights went off in the house and on the grounds below.

"I suppose we'll hear from Director Fraswell pretty

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early in the morning," Nolan said as they composed themselves for sleep.

V

Half an hour before dawn there was a soft *beep!* from the small black box beside Nolan's bed.

"Visitors," he said, checking the indicator lights that told him which of the sensors he and Tim had planted the previous day had been activated. "On the east trail. They didn't waste any time." He rose and donned the clean clothes Annette had run through the precipitator, picked up the power rifle.

"Dad, can I come?"

"Negative. You stay here with your mother."

"Reed—are you sure—"

"I'm not that bad a shot," he said, and grinned at her. "I'll be back for coffee."

It took Nolan ten minutes to reach the vantage point he had selected the previous day. He settled himself in a comfortable prone position, adjusted the sling, and sighted through the scope-sight. Three men toiled upward on the trail. Nolan took aim at the rock wall ten feet above them and squeezed off a burst. Dust spurted. When he lowered his sights, the men were gone. He picked them up a quarter of a mile back downtrail, running for home.

Twice more that day the spotters Nolan had planted on the slopes signaled intruders; twice more a single warning shot sufficed to discourage them.

Late in the afternoon, a bucket brigade formed across the lawn far below, hauling water to the house. The men

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working on the power house door gave up at twilight. A crew of men set about chopping wood to heap on the lawn for a bonfire.

"Reed—the baby peach trees, and the pecans, and the limes—" Annette mourned.

"I know," Nolan said tersely. They watched the fire for an hour before turning in.

VI

It was mid-morning when the signaler beeped again. This time it was a party of three men—one of them the man called Winston whom Nolan had last seen with Fraswell—carrying a white towel attached to a section of sapling—pecan, Nolan thought. They waited for a quarter of an hour at the spot marked by a small crater in the rock wall from Nolan's shot of the previous day. Then they advanced cautiously.

On a rocky ledge a hundred yards below Nolan's position, they halted. A shout rang faintly.

"Nolan! We wish to talk to you!"

He remained silent.

"Director Fraswell has authorized me to offer you leniency if you give yourself up now," Winston shouted.

Nolan waited.

"You're to come down at once," Winston resumed. "No criminal charges will be pressed, provided you cooperate fully henceforth."

Another minute passed in silence.

"Nolan, give yourself up at once!" the angry voice shouted. "Otherwise . . ."

A single shot rang out above Nolan. Instantly the men

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below turned and ran. Nolan looked up toward the cave. Annette, her back to him, stepped from behind the rocky barrier that concealed the entrance, a pistol in her hand. She turned and waved. Nolan climbed back up to her side.

"On the west trail," she said indignantly. "The idea—while they were parleying with you!"

"Never mind," Nolan said mildly. "They're just exploring their environment."

"I'm worried, Reed. How long can this go on?"

"We have food for a month or so. After that, maybe Tim and I will have to raid the larder again."

Annette looked worried but said nothing further on the subject.

VII

For five days, while Nolan watched the unirrigated fields slowly fade and wilt, there were no further overtures from below. Then, in mid-morning of the sixth day a party of four set out from the house, advanced slowly up the east trail. One of the men was Fraswell, Nolan saw. A man in the rear carried what appeared to be a placard. When they paused for their first rest, the man turned the sign to face the heights, but Nolan was unable to make out the lettering at the distance.

"Watch the beepers," he told Annette and Tim. "I don't think that's the game this time, but they may have planted someone on another trail last night after dark." He descended to his lookout station below. Director Fraswell's red face was clearly visible at half a mile,

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even on low mag. Nolan was able to read the placard now:

NOLAN—WE MUST TALK

"Fraswell," Nolan called. "What is it you want?"

The plump man scanned the cliff above for a glimpse of Nolan.

"Show yourself!" he called. "I can't carry on a discussion with a disembodied voice!"

"Don't let me keep you."

"Nolan, in my capacity as a Field Director of the HPU I call on you to descend at once and cease this harassment!"

"My family and I are just taking a long deferred vacation, Mr. Fraswell."

"You shot at my people!"

"If I had, I'd have hit them. I hold a Double Distinguished Marksman's rating. You can check that if you like."

"Look here, Nolan—you're deliberately withholding information essential to the success of this mission!"

"I think you're a little confused, Mr. Fraswell. I'm in no way connected with your mission. I paid my own way here—"

"I'm not concerned with that! It's your duty to serve the people—"

"Mr. Fraswell, I suggest you pack up your people and your equipment and move on to another piece of real estate, and I'll give you all the technical assistance I can in getting started."

"Would you attempt to bargain with the welfare of a thousand men, women, and children?"

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"Not quite. I estimate you have about fifty men in your advance party."

"The relocatees will arrive in less than a fortnight! Unless you give up this dog-in-the-manger attitude at the expense of these poor, helpless souls, I won't be responsible for the outcome!"

"Wrong again, Mr. Fraswell. It's your entire responsibility. I'm just curious as to what you plan to do after you've eaten all the seed corn and cleaned out my emergency reserves. Move on and loot somebody else? What happens when you run out of people to loot, Fraswell?"

"I'm not in the business of making predictions, Nolan! I'm concerned for the success of the present operation!"

"I suppose by the time you run out of goodies you'll be retired, eh? Meanwhile, if you get tired of hauling water and eating issue rations you can always leave, Mr. Fraswell. Tell your headquarters it didn't work; perhaps next time they'll supply you with some equipment of your own."

"The power is off! There's no water! My men can't start the vehicles! The crops are dying! I call on you to come down here and undo your sabotage!"

"The only sabotage I've seen is what your men have done to my lawns and orchards. We won't count the fishpond."

There was a two minute silence during which the men below conferred.

"Look here, Nolan," Fraswell called, sounding reluctantly conciliatory. "I'll concede that, from a purely materialistic standpoint, it might be said you have some right to compensation. Very well. Though it means tak-

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ing bread from the mouths of the innocent, I'll undertake to guarantee payment of the usual credit per acre—for the arable portions of the tract, of course. After survey."

"I paid a credit and a half an acre for the unimproved land, over five years ago—and I paid for all of it—mountains, desert—the whole island. I'm afraid your offer doesn't tempt me."

"You—you exploiter! You think you can victimize the ordinary man, but you'll see! They'll rise in their righteous wrath and destroy you, Nolan!"

"If they'd rise in their wrath and tackle that next island, they could have a quarter section cleared and ready for summer planting."

"You'd condemn these good people to inhuman hardship—for the sake of mere personal avarice! You'd deny them bread! You'd—"

"I know these good people, Mr. Fraswell. I tried to hire some of them when I was breaking ground here. They laughed. They're the untrainables, the unemployables. They've had a free ride all their lives. Now they're overflowing the trough. So you're trying to dump them on me to maintain. Well, I decline the honor, Mr. Fraswell. It looks as if they're going to have to go to work if they want to eat. By the way, what's *your* salary per annum?"

Fraswell made choking noises.

"One last thing, Fraswell," Nolan called. "My gardenia hedges; tell your men to leave them alone; you don't need firewood that badly, and the few steps it would save in coming and going up into the foothills isn't worth destroying them."

"Gardenias, eh? Mean a lot to you, do they? I'm afraid

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I'll have to use my own judgment regarding fuel sources, Nolan!" The Director spun on his heel and walked away. One of his attendants turned to shake a fist upward before disappearing down the trail.

That afternoon, Nolan saw a crew hard at work, leveling the hedges.

The following day, Tim hurried into the cave calling excitedly that the Tusker herds had started to move down from the heights.

VIII

"I don't like it," Annette said as Nolan prepared to leave the cave. "You don't know what that terrible man is likely to do if he gets his hands on you."

"I have to give them fair warning," Nolan said. "I'll be all right. Fraswell's not going to let anything happen that might look awkward on his record."

"How come, Dad?" Tim said. "Why not let the Tuskers surprise 'em? Maybe they'll scare 'em right off the island!"

"Someone could get hurt; they might panic and get trampled. And those horns are sharp."

"Sure, but—you could get hurt, too, Dad, if you try to get in their way! They're pretty hard to stop once they're running!"

"I'll be careful. Don't worry about me."

Nolan set off by the most direct route available: a near-vertical ravine, water-cut, too narrow and precipitate for a Tusker, but just possible for an active man. In twenty minutes he arrived at the valley floor, winded and dusty, with scratched and bleeding hands. As he emerged

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from the tangle of underbrush at the cliff base, three men jumped him.

IX

The house stank. Director Fraswell, somewhat leaner than when Nolan had last seen him, badly shaved, wearing rumpled, sweat-marked clothing, glared triumphantly across the former dining room table, now occupying the center of the living room and covered with papers and empty ration boxes.

"So you finally came to your senses, eh?" He paused to scratch under his left arm. "I suppose you'll expect to hold me to the bargain I proposed. Well, think again! You rejected my offer when I made it. Now suffer the consequences!" He shook his finger in Nolan's face.

Nolan's lip was split. His jaw was swollen painfully. His head ached.

"I didn't come here to bargain," he said. "I came to warn you—"

"You—warn *me*?" Fraswell jumped to his feet. "Listen to me, you arrogant little popinjay! I'll do the warning! I want the power plant in full operation in fifteen minutes from now! I want water flowing ten minutes after that! I want all facilities unlocked and the keys turned over to me before you leave this room!" He scratched furiously at his ribs.

"That would be quite a trick," Nolan said. "Even if I had the keys."

Fraswell's mouth opened and shut. "Search him!"

"We did; he's got nothing on him."

"Nothing on him, *sir*!" Fraswell barked, and whirled

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on Nolan. "Where have you hidden them? Speak up, man! I'm at the end of my patience!"

"Never mind the keys," Nolan said. "That's not what I came here to talk about—"

"You'll talk about it nonetheless!" Fraswell was almost screaming.

"Here, what's the trouble?" a female voice shrilled. Miltrude, looking the worse for ten days without a bath, stood in the doorway, hands on broad hips. "Well—looky who's herel" she said as she saw Nolan. Behind her, Leston peered over her shoulder. "Finally caught him, did you, Alvin?"

"Yes—I caught him. But he's stubborn! But he'll crack! I assure you of that!"

"What about the fancy woman he was keeping?" Miltrude queried grimly. "Turn her over to me; I'll see she makes him cooperate."

"Get out!" Fraswell roared.

"Here, you Alvin!" his spouse snapped. "Mind your tone!"

Fraswell swept an empty concentrate flask from the table and hurled it viciously; it struck the wall beside Miltrude; she screeched and fled, almost knocking her son down in passing.

"Make him talk!" Fraswell yelled. "Get those keys; do whatever you have to do to him, but I want results—now!"

One of the men holding Nolan gave his arm a painful wrench.

"Not here—outside!" Fraswell sank back in his chair, panting. "Of course, you're not to do him any permanent

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injury," he muttered, looking into the corner of the room as they hustled Nolan away.

X

Two men held Nolan's arms while a third doubled his fist and drove it into his midriff. He jackknifed forward, gagging.

"Not in the stomach, you fool," someone said. "He has to be able to talk."

Someone grabbed his hair and forced his head back; an open-handed slap made his head ring.

"Listen, you rich scum," a wild-eyed, bushy-headed man with gaps between his teeth hissed in Nolan's face. "You can't hold out on us—"

Nolan's knee, coming up fast, caught the man solidly; he uttered a curdled scream and went down. Nolan lunged, freed an arm and landed a roundhouse swing on someone's neck. For a moment he was free, facing two men, who hesitated, breathing hard.

"In a matter of minutes there's going to be a stampede, right across this spot," he said blurrily. "It's a wild herd—big fellows, over a ton apiece. You'll have to warn your men."

"Get him," a man snapped, and leaped for Nolan. They were still struggling to pin his legs when a heavy crashing sounded from behind the house. A man screamed—a shocking yell that froze Nolan's attackers in mid-stroke. He rolled free and came to his feet as a man sprinted into view from around the corner of the house, pale face rigid with terror, legs pumping. A heavy thudding sounded behind him. A big male tusker charged across the wheel-

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rutted turf, the remains of a wrecked rose trellis draped around his mighty shoulders. The man dived aside as the beast galloped on into the cover of what remained of the woodlot, whence sounded a diminishing crashing of timber.

For a moment, the three men stood rigid, listening to a sound as of thunder in the mountains, then, as one, they whirled and ran. Nolan hurried around to the front of the house.

Fraswell was on the front terrace, his head cocked, a blank expression on his big features, the boy Leston beside him. The Director shied when he saw Nolan, then charged down the steps, ran for the corner of the house—and skidded to a halt as a tusker thundered past.

“Good God!” Fraswell backed, spun, started for the porch. Nolan blocked his way.

“Run for the boat,” he shouted.

“This is your work! You’re trying to kill us all!” Fraswell shouted.

“Dad,” Leston started as two men sprinted into view around the side of the house. One carried a rifle.

“Get him!” Fraswell yelled, pointing. “He’s a fanatic! It’s his doing!”

“Don’t be a fool, Fraswell,” Nolan snapped. “If you’re in danger, so am I—”

“A fanatic! He intends to pull me down with him! Get him!” Fraswell jumped at Nolan; the other two men closed in. Wild fists pummeled Nolan; clutching hands caught his arms, dragged him down. A boot caught in the side. He grabbed the ankle, brought the man down on top of him. The other man was dancing sideways, gun at the ready.

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"Kill the bloodsucker," the one Nolan had felled shouted as he scrambled up. "Here—gimme that!" He seized the gun from the other's grip, aimed it at Nolan's head. It was tall, thin Leston who jumped forward, knocked the gun down as it fired. A gout of lawn exploded beyond Nolan.

"Pa—you can't—" the boy started; Fraswell whirled on him, struck him an open-handed blow that sent him sprawling.

"A traitor in my own house! You're no son of mine!" The drumming of the approaching herd was a continuous surf-roar now. The man with the gun threw it down and ran for the dock. As more tuskers swung into view, Fraswell turned too, and ran for it, followed by his two men. Nolan struggled to his feet, noted the animals' course, then set off at a dead run toward a stand of native thorn on a low rise near the path of the charging herd, snatching up a broken branch from the uprooted gardenia hedge as he went. The lead animals were less than fifty feet behind him when he stopped and turned, waving the branch and shouting. The approaching tuskers shied from the hateful scent, crowding their fellows to the right of the thorn patch—onto a course dead for the dock.

Nolan dropped down on the grass, catching his breath as the herd thundered past. Through the dust he could see the group gathered down on the pier and on the dock of the boat.

A man on the pier—Fraswell, Nolan thought—was shouting and pointing toward the house. Someone on the boat seemed to yell a reply. It appeared there was

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a difference of opinion among the leadership and the rank-and-file of the HPU.

"Time for one more little nudge," Nolan muttered, getting to his feet. A few elderly cows, stragglers, were galloping past the grove. Nolan searched hastily, wrenched off a stalk of leatherplant, quickly stripped it. A thick, pungent odor came from the ripe pulp. He went forward to intercept a cow, waving the aromatic plant, turned and ran as the cow swung toward him. He could hear the big animal's hooves thudding behind him. He yelled; down below, the men crowding the pier looked up to see Nolan sprinting toward them, the tusker cantering in his wake.

"Help!" he shouted. "Help!"

The men turned and ran for the gangway. Fraswell caught at a man's arm; the man struck at him and fled. The plump figures of Miltrude and the Director held their ground for a moment; then they turned and bolted onto the boat.

As they turned to look back, the sound of the ship's engines started up. The gangplank slid inboard when Nolan was fifty feet from the pier. He tossed the branch aside as the cow braked to a halt beside him, nudging him to capture the succulent prize. Nolan gave a piercing scream and fell, leaving the cow to stare after the hastily departing vessel, munching peacefully.

XI

A tall, lean youth came around the side of the house to meet Nolan as he came up.

"Uh . . . I . . ." he said.

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"Leston—how did you get left behind?" Nolan asked in dismay.

"On purpose," the boy blurted.

"I don't think your father will be back," Nolan said.

Leston nodded. "I want to stay," he said. "I'd like a job, Mr. Nolan."

"Do you know anything about farming, Leston?" Nolan asked dubiously.

"No, sir." The boy swallowed. "But I'm willing to learn."

Nolan looked at him for a moment. He put out his hand and smiled.

"I can't ask any more than that," he said.

He turned and looked across the ruined lawn, past the butchered hedges and the mutilated groves toward the languishing fields.

"Come on, let's get started," he said. "The plague's over, and we've got a lot of work ahead before harvest time."

TEST TO DESTRUCTION

The late October wind drove icy rain against Mallory's face above his turned-up collar where he stood concealed in the shadows at the mouth of the narrow alley.

"It's ironic, Johnny," the small, grim-faced man beside him muttered. "You—the man who should have been World Premier tonight—skulking in the back streets while Koslo and his bully boys drink champagne in the Executive Palace."

"That's all right, Paul," Mallory said. "Maybe he'll be too busy with his victory celebration to concern himself with me."

"And maybe he won't," the small man said. "He won't rest easy as long as he knows you're alive to oppose him."

"It will only be a few more hours, Paul. By breakfast time, Koslo will know his rigged election didn't take."

"But if he takes you first, that's the end, Johnny. Without you the *coup* will collapse like a soap bubble."

"I'm not leaving the city," Mallory said flatly. "Yes, there's a certain risk involved; but you don't bring down a dictator without taking a few chances."

"You didn't have to take this one, meeting Crandall yourself."

"It will help if he sees me, knows I'm in this all the way."

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In silence, the two men waited the arrival of their fellow conspirator.

Aboard the interstellar dreadnought cruising half a parsec from Earth, the compound free mind surveyed the distant solar system.

Radiation on many wavelengths from the third body, the Perceptor cells directed the impulse to the sixty-nine hundred and thirty-four units comprising the segmented brain which guided the ship. Modulations over the forty-ninth through the ninety-first spectra of mentation.

A portion of the pattern is characteristic of exocosmic manipulatory intelligence, the Analyzers extrapolated from the data. Other indications range in complexity from levels one through twenty-six.

This is an anomalous situation, the Recollectors mused. It is the essential nature of a Prime Intelligence to destroy all lesser competing mind-forms, just as I/we have systematically annihilated those I/we have encountered on my/our exploration of the Galactic Arm.

Before action is taken, clarification of the phenomenon is essential, the Interpreters pointed out. Closure to a range not exceeding one radiation/second will be required for extraction and analysis of a representative mind-unit.

In this event, the risk level rises to Category Ultimate, the Analyzers announced dispassionately.

RISK LEVELS NO LONGER APPLY, the powerful thought-impulse of the Egon put an end to the discussion. NOW OUR SHIPS RANGE INTO NEW SPACE, SEEKING EXPANSION ROOM FOR THE GREAT RACE. THE UNALTERABLE COMMAND OF THAT

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WHICH IS GREAT REQUIRES THAT MY/OUR PROBE BE PROSECUTED TO THE LIMIT OF REE CAPABILITY, TESTING MY/OUR ABILITY FOR SURVIVAL AND DOMINANCE. THERE CAN BE NO TIMIDITY, NO EXCUSE FOR FAILURE. LET ME/US NOW ASSUME A CLOSE SURVEILLANCE ORBIT!

In utter silence, and at a velocity a fraction of a kilometer below that of light, the Ree dreadnought flashed toward Earth.

Mallory tensed as a dark figure appeared a block away under the harsh radiance of a polyarc.

"There's Crandall now," the small man hissed. "I'm glad—" He broke off as the roar of a powerful turbine engine sounded suddenly along the empty avenue. A police car exploded from a side street, rounded the corner amid a shriek of overstressed gyros. The man under the light turned to run—and the vivid blue glare of a SURF-gun winked and stuttered from the car. The burst of slugs caught the runner, slammed him against the brick wall, kicked him from his feet, rolled him, before the crash of the guns reached Mallory's ears.

"My God! They've killed Tony!" The small man blurted. "We've got to get out . . .!"

Mallory took half a dozen steps back into the alley, froze as lights sprang up at the far end. He heard booted feet hit pavement, a hoarse voice that barked a command.

"We're cut off," he snapped. There was a rough wooden door six feet away. He jumped to it, threw his weight against it. It held. He stepped back, kicked it in,

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shoved his companion ahead of him into a dark room smelling of moldy burlap and rat droppings. Stumbling, groping in the dark, Mallory led the way across a stretch of littered floor, felt along the wall, found a door that hung by one hinge. He pushed past it, was in a passage floored with curled linoleum, visible in the feeble gleam filtered through a fanlight above a massive, barred door. He turned the other way, ran for the smaller door at the far end of the passage. He was ten feet from it when the center panel burst inward in a hail of wood splinters that grazed him, ripped at his coat like raking talons. Behind him, the small man made a choking noise; Mallory whirled in time to see him fall back against the wall and go down, his chest and stomach torn away by the full impact of a thousand rounds from the police SURF-gun.

An arm came through the broached door, groping for the latch. Mallory took a step, seized the wrist, wrenched backward with all his weight, felt the elbow joint shatter. The scream of the injured policeman was drowned in a second burst from the rapid-fire weapon—but Mallory had already leaped, caught the railing of the stair, pulled himself up and over. He took the steps five at a time, passed a landing littered with broken glass and empty bottles, kept going, emerged in a corridor of sagging doors and cobwebs. Feet crashed below, furious voices yelled. Mallory stepped inside the nearest door, stood with his back to the wall beside it. Heavy feet banged on the stairs, paused, came his way. . . .

Mallory tensed, and as the policeman passed the door, he stepped out, brought his hand over and down in a side-handed blow to the base of the neck that had

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every ounce of power in his shoulders behind it. The man seemed to dive forward, and Mallory caught the gun before it struck the floor. He took three steps, poured a full magazine into the stairwell. As he turned to sprint for the far end of the passage, return fire boomed from below.

A club, swung by a giant, struck him in the side, knocked the breath from his lungs, sent him spinning against the wall. He recovered, ran on; his hand, exploring, found a deep gouge that bled freely. The bullet had barely grazed him.

He reached the door to the service stair, recoiled violently as a dirty-gray shape sprang at him with a yowl from the darkness—in the instant before a gun flashed and racketed in the narrow space, scattering plaster dust from the wall above his head. A thick-set man in the dark uniform of the Security Police, advancing up the stair at a run, checked momentarily as he saw the gun in Mallory's hands—and before he recovered himself, Mallory had swung the empty weapon, knocked him spinning back down onto the landing. The cat that had saved his life—an immense, battle-scarred Tom—lay on the floor, half its head blown away by the blast it had intercepted. Its lone yellow eye was fixed on him; its claws raked the floor, as, even in death, it advanced to the attack. Mallory jumped over the stricken beast, went up the stairs.

Three flights higher, the stair ended in a loft stacked with bundled newspapers and rotting cartons from which mice scuttled as he approached. There was a single window, opaque with grime. Mallory tossed aside the useless gun, scanned the ceiling for evidence

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of an escape hatch, saw nothing. His side ached abominably.

Relentless feet sounded beyond the door. Mallory backed to a corner of the room—and again, the deafening shriek of the SURF-gun sounded, and the flimsy door bucked, disintegrated. For a moment, there was total silence. Then:

“Walk out with your hands up, Mallory!” a brassy voice snarled. In the gloom, pale flames were licking over the bundled papers, set afire by the torrent of steel-jacketed slugs. Smoke rose, thickened.

“Come out before you fry,” the voice called.

“Let’s get out of here,” another man bawled. “This dump will go up like tinder!”

“Last chance, Mallory!” the first man shouted, and now the flames, feeding on the dry paper, were reaching for the ceiling, roaring as they grew. Mallory went along the wall to the window, ripped aside the torn roller shade, tugged at the sash. It didn’t move. He kicked out the glass, threw a leg over the sill, and stepped out onto a rusted fire escape. Five stories down, light puddled on grimy concrete, the white dots of upturned faces—and half a dozen police cars blocking the rain-wet street. He put his back to the railing, looked up. The fire escape extended three, perhaps four stories higher. He threw his arm across his face to shield it from the billowing flames, forced his legs to carry him up the iron treads three at a time.

The topmost landing was six feet below an overhanging cornice. Mallory stepped up on the rail, caught the edge of the carved stone trim with both hands, swung himself out. For a moment, he dangled, ninety

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feet above the street; then he pulled himself up, got a knee over the coping, and rolled onto the roof.

Lying flat, he scanned the darkness around him. The level was broken only by a ventilator stack and a shack housing a stair or elevator head.

He reconnoitered, found that the hotel occupied a corner, with a parking lot behind it. On the alley side, the adjoining roof was at a level ten feet lower, separated by a sixteen foot gap. As Mallory stared across at it, a heavy rumbling shook the deck under his feet: one of the floors of the ancient building, collapsing as the fire ate through its supports.

Smoke was rising all around him now. On the parking lot side, dusky flames soared up thirty feet above him, trailing an inverted cascade of sparks into the wet night sky. He went to the stairhead, found the metal door locked. A rusty ladder was clamped to the side of the structure. He wrenched it free, carried it to the alley side. It took all his strength to force the corroded catches free, pull the ladder out to its full extension. Twenty feet, he estimated. Enough—maybe.

He shoved the end of the ladder out, wrestled it across to rest on the roof below. The flimsy bridge sagged under his weight as he crawled up on it. He moved carefully out, ignoring the swaying of the fragile support. He was six feet from the far roof when he felt the rotten metal crumple under him; with a frantic lunge, he threw himself forward. Only the fact that the roof was at a lower level saved him. He clawed his way over the sheet-metal gutter, hearing shouts ring out below as the ladder crashed to the bricks of the alley.

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A bad break, he thought. Now they know where I am. . . .

There was a heavy trapdoor set in the roof. He lifted it, descended an iron ladder into darkness, found his way to a corridor, along it to a stair. Faint sounds rose from below. He went down.

At the fourth floor, lights showed below, voices sounded, the clump of feet. He left the stair at the third floor, prowled along a hall, entered an abandoned office. Searchlights in the street below threw oblique shadows across the discolored walls.

He went on, turned a corner, went into a room on the alley side. A cold draft, reeking of smoke, blew in through a glassless window. Below, the narrow way appeared to be deserted. Paul's body was gone. The broken ladder lay where it had fallen. It was, he estimated, a twenty foot drop to the bricks; even if he let himself down to arm's length and dropped, a leg-breaker. . . .

Something moved below him. A uniformed policeman was standing at a spot directly beneath the window, his back against the wall. A wolf smile drew Mallory's face tight. In a single motion, he slid his body out over the sill, chest down, held on for an instant, seeing the startled face below turn upward, the mouth open for a yell—

He dropped; his feet struck the man's back, breaking his fall. He rolled clear, sat up, half-dazed. The policeman sprawled on his face, his spine twisted at an awkward angle.

Mallory got to his feet—and almost fell at the stab of pain from his right ankle. Sprained, or broken. His teeth set against the pain, he moved along the wall. Icy

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rainwater, sluicing from the downspout ahead, swirled about his ankles. He slipped, almost went down on the slimy bricks. The lesser darkness of the parking lot behind the building showed ahead. If he could reach it, cross it—then he might still have a chance. He had to succeed—for Monica, for the child, for the future of a world.

Another step, and another. It was as though there were a vast ache that caught at him with every breath. His blood-soaked shirt and pantsleg hung against him, icy cold. Then feet more, and he would make his run for it—

Two men in the black uniforms of the State Security Police stepped out into his path, stood with blast-guns leveled at his chest. Mallory pushed away from the wall, braced himself for the burst of slugs that would end his life. Instead, a beam of light speared out through the misty rain, dazzling his eyes.

"You'll come with us, Mr. Mallory."

Still no contact, the Perceptors reported.

The prime-level minds below lack cohesion; they flicker and dart away even as I/we touch them.

The initiators made a proposal: *By the use of appropriate harmonics a resonance field can be set up which will reinforce any native mind functioning in an analogous rhythm.*

I/we find that a pattern of the following character will be most suitable. . . . A complex symbolism was displayed.

PERSEVERE IN THE FASHION DESCRIBED, the Egon commanded. ALL EXTRANEIOUS FUNCTIONS

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WILL BE DISCONTINUED UNTIL SUCCESS IS ACHIEVED.

With total singleness of purpose, the Ree sensors probed across space from the dark and silent ship, searching for a receptive human mind.

The Interrogation Room was a totally bare cube of white enamel. At its geometric center, under a blinding white glare panel, sat a massive chair constructed of polished steel, casting an ink-black shadow.

A silent minute ticked past; then heels clicked in the corridor. A tall man in a plain, dark military tunic came through the open door, halted, studying his prisoner. His wide, sagging face was as gray and bleak as a tombstone.

"I warned you, Mallory," he said in a deep growling tone.

"You're making a mistake, Koslo," Mallory said.

"Openly arresting the people's hero, eh?" Koslo curved his wide, gray lips in a death's head smile. "Don't delude yourself. The malcontents will do nothing without their leader."

"Are you sure you're ready to put your regime to the test so soon?"

"It's that or wait, while your party gains strength. I chose the quicker course. I was never as good at waiting as you, Mallory."

"Well—you'll know by morning."

"That close, eh?" Koslo's heavy-lidded eyes pinched down on glints of light. He grunted. "I'll know many things by morning. You realize that your personal position is hopeless?" His eyes went to the chair.

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"In other words, I should sell out to you now in return for—what? Another of your promises?"

"The alternative is the chair," Koslo said flatly.

"You have great confidence in machinery, Koslo—more than in men. That's your great weakness."

Koslo's hand went out, caressing the rectilinear metal of the chair. "This is a scientific apparatus designed to accomplish a specific task with the least possible difficulty to me. It creates conditions within the subject's neural system conducive to total recall, and at the same time amplifies the subvocalizations that accompany all highly cerebral activity. The subject is also rendered amenable to verbal cuing." He paused. "If you resist, it will destroy your mind—but not before you've told me everything: names, locations, dates, organization, operational plans—everything. It will be simpler for us both if you acknowledge the inevitable and tell me freely what I require to know."

"And after you've got the information?"

"You know my regime can't tolerate opposition. The more complete my information, the less bloodshed will be necessary."

Mallory shook his head. "No," he said bluntly.

"Don't be a fool, Mallory! This isn't a test of your manhood!"

"Perhaps it is, Koslo: man against machine."

Koslo's eyes probed at him. He made a quick gesture with one hand.

"Strap him in."

Seated in the chair, Mallory felt the cold metal suck the heat from his body. Bands restrained his arms, legs, torso. A wide ring of woven wire and plastic clamped

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his skull firmly to the formed headrest. Across the room, Fey Koslo watched.

"Ready, Excellency," a technician said.

"Proceed."

Mallory tensed. An unwholesome excitement churned his stomach. He'd heard of the chair, of its power to scour a man's mind clean and leave him a gibbering hulk.

Only a free society, he thought, can produce the technology that makes tyranny possible. . . .

He watched as a white-smocked technician approached, reached for the control panel. There was only one hope left: if he could fight the power of the machine, drag out the interrogation, delay Koslo until dawn . . .

A needle-studded vise clamped down against Mallory's temples. Instantly his mind was filled with whirling fever images. He felt his throat tighten in an aborted scream. Fingers of pure force struck into his brain, dislodging old memories, ripping open the healed wounds of time. From somewhere, he was aware of a voice, questioning. Words trembled in his throat, yearning to be shouted aloud.

I've got to resist! The thought flashed through his mind and was gone, borne away on a tide of probing impulses that swept through his brain like a millrace. *I've got to hold out . . . long enough . . . to give the others a chance. . . .*

Aboard the Ree ship, dim lights glowed and winked on the panel that encircled the control center.

I/we sense a new mind—a transmitter of great power, the Perceptors announced suddenly. But the images are

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confused. I/we sense struggle, resistance. . . .

IMPOSE CLOSE CONTROL, the Egon ordered.
NARROW FOCUS AND EXTRACT A REPRESENTATIVE PERSONALITY FRACTION!

It is difficult; I/we sense powerful neural currents, at odds with the basic brain rhythms.

COMBAT THEM!

Again the Ree mind reached out, insinuated itself into the complex field-matrix that was Mallory's mind, and began, painstakingly, to trace out and reinforce its native symmetries, permitting the natural egomosaic to emerge, free from distracting counterimpulses.

The technician's face went chalk-white as Mallory's body went rigid against the restraining bands.

"You fool!" Koslo's voice cut at him like a whipping rod. "If he dies before he talks—"

"He . . . he fights strongly, Excellency." The man's eyes scanned instrument faces. "Alpha through delta rhythms normal, though exaggerated," he muttered. "Metabolic index .99 . . ."

Mallory's body jerked. His eyes opened, shut. His mouth worked.

"Why doesn't he speak?" Koslo barked.

"It may require a few moments, Excellency, to adjust the power flows to ten-point resonance—"

"Then get on with it, man! I risked too much in arresting this man to lose him now!"

White-hot fingers of pure force landed from the chair along the neural pathways within Mallory's brain—and met the adamant resistance of the Ree probe. In the

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resultant confrontation, Mallory's battered self-awareness was tossed like a leaf in a gale.

Fight! The remaining wisp of his conscious intellect gathered itself—

—and was grasped, encapsulated, swept up and away. He was aware of spinning through a whirling fog of white light shot through with flashes and streamers of red, blue, violet. There was a sensation of great forces that pressed at him, flung him to and fro, drew his mind out like a ductile wire until it spanned the Galaxy. The filament grew broad, expanded into a diaphragm that bisected the universe. The plane assumed thickness, swelled out to encompass all space/time. Faint and far away, he sensed the tumultuous coursing of the energies that ravened just beyond the impenetrable membrane of force—

The imprisoning sphere shrank, pressed in, forcing his awareness into needle-sharp focus. He knew, without knowing how he knew, that he was locked in a sealed and airless chamber, constricting, claustrophobic, all sound and sensation cut off. He drew breath to scream—

No breath came. Only a weak pulse of terror, quickly fading, as if damped by an inhibiting hand. Alone in the dark, Mallory waited, every sense tuned, monitoring the surrounding blankness. . . .

I/we have him! The Perceptors pulsed, and fell away. At the center of the chamber, the mind trap pulsed with the flowing energies that confined and controlled the captive brain pattern.

TESTING WILL COMMENCE AT ONCE. The Egon brushed aside the interrogatory impulses from the

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mind-segments concerned with speculation. INITIAL STIMULI WILL BE APPLIED AND RESULTS NOTED. NOW!

. . . and was aware of a faint glimmer of light across the room: the outline of a window. He blinked, raised himself on one elbow. Bedsprings creaked under him. He sniffed. An acid odor of smoke hung in the stifling air. He seemed to be in a cheap hotel room. He had no memory of how he came to be there. He threw back the coarse blanket and felt warped floor boards under his bare feet—

The boards were hot.

He jumped up, went to the door, grasped the knob—and jerked his hand back. The metal had blistered his palm.

He ran to the window, ripped aside the dirt-stiff gauze curtains, snapped open the latch, tugged at the sash. It didn't budge. He stepped back, kicked out the glass. Instantly a coil of smoke whipped in through the broken pane. Using the curtain to protect his hand, he knocked out the shards, swung a leg over the sill, stumbled onto the fire escape. The rusted metal cut at his bare feet. Groping, he made his way down half a dozen steps—and fell back as a sheet of red flame billowed from below.

Over the rail he saw the street, lights puddled on grimy concrete ten stories down, white faces, like pale dots, upturned. A hundred feet away, an extension ladder swayed, approaching another wing of the flaming building, not concerned with him. He was lost, abandoned. Nothing could save him. For forty feet below, the iron ladder was an inferno.

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It would be easier, quicker, to go over the rail, escape the pain, die cleanly, the thought came into his mind with dreadful clarity.

There was a tinkling crash and a window above blew out. Scalding embers rained down on his back. The iron was hot underfoot. He drew a breath, shielded his face with one arm, and plunged downward through the whipping flames. . . .

He was crawling, falling down the cruel metal treads and risers. The pain across his face, his back, his shoulder, his arm, was like a red-hot iron, applied and forgotten. He caught a glimpse of his arm, flayed, oozing, black-edged. . . .

His hands and feet were no longer his own. He used his knees and elbows, tumbled himself over yet another edge, sliding down to the next landing. The faces were closer now; hands were reaching up. He groped, got to his feet, felt the last section swing down as his weight went on it. His vision was a blur of red. He sensed the blistered skin sloughing from his thighs. A woman screamed.

“. . . my God, burned alive and still walking!” a thin voice cawed.

“. . . his hands . . . no fingers . . .”

Something rose, smashed at him, a ghostly blow as blackness closed in . . .

The response of the entity was anomalous, the Analyzers reported. Its life tenacity is enormous! Confronted with apparent imminent physical destruction, it chose agony and mutilation merely to extend survival for a brief period.

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The possibility exists that such a response represents a mere instinctive mechanism of unusual form, the Analyzers pointed out.

If so, it might prove dangerous. More data on the point is required.

I/WE WILL RESTIMULATE THE SUBJECT, the Egon ordered. THE PARAMETERS OF THE SURVIVAL DRIVE MUST BE ESTABLISHED WITH PRECISION. RESUME TESTING!

In the chair, Mallory writhed, went limp.

"Is he . . . ?"

"He's alive, Excellency! But something's wrong! I can't get through to a vocalization level! He's fighting me with some sort of fantasy-complex of his own!"

"Bring him out of it!"

"Excellency, I tried. I can't reach him! It's as though he'd tapped the chair's energy sources, and were using them to reinforce his own defense mechanism!"

"Override him!"

"I'll try—but his power is fantastic!"

"Then we'll use more power!"

"It's . . . dangerous, Excellency."

"Not more dangerous than failure!"

Grim-faced, the technician reset the panel to step up the energy flow through Mallory's brain.

The subject stirs! the Perceptors burst out. Massive new energies flow in the mind-field! My/our grip loosens . . .

HOLD THE SUBJECT! RESTIMULATE AT ONCE, WITH MAXIMUM EMERGENCY FORCE!

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While the captive surged and fought against the restraint, the segmented mind of the alien concentrated its forces, hurled a new stimulus into the roiling captive mind-field.

. . . Hot sun beat down on his back. A light wind ruffled the tall grass growing up the slope where the wounded lion had taken cover. Telltale drops of dark purple blood clinging to the tall stems marked the big cat's route. It would be up there, flattened to the earth under the clump of thorn trees, its yellow eyes narrowed against the agony of the .375 bullet wound in his chest, waiting, hoping for its tormentor to come to it. . . .

His heart was thudding; under the damp khaki shirt. The heavy rifle felt like a toy in his hands—a useless plaything against the primitive fury of the beast. He took a step; his mouth twisted in an ironic grimace. What was he proving? There was no one here to know if he chose to walk back and sit under a tree and take a leisurely swig from his flask, let an hour or two crawl by—while the cat bled to death—and then go in to find the body. He took another step. And now he was walking steadily forward. The breeze was cool on his forehead. His legs felt light, strong. He drew a deep breath, smelled the sweetness of the spring air. Life had never seemed more precious—

There was a deep, asthmatic cough, and the great beast broke from the shadows, yellow fangs bared, muscles pumping under the dun hide, dark blood shining black along the flank—

He planted his feet, brought the gun up, socketed it against his shoulder as the lion charged down the slope.

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By the book, he thought sardonically. *Take him just above the sternum, hold on him until you're sure. . . .* At a hundred feet he fired—just as the animal veered left. The bullet smacked home far back along the ribs. The cat broke stride, recovered. The gun bucked and roared again, and the snarling face exploded in a mask of red— And still the dying carnivore came on. He blinked sweat from his eyes, centered the sights on the point of the shoulder—

The trigger jammed hard. A glance showed him the spent cartridge lodged in the action. He raked at it vainly, standing his ground. At the last instant, he stepped aside, and the hurtling monster skidded past him, dead in the dust. And the thought that struck him then was that if Monica had been watching from the car at the foot of the hill she would not have laughed at him this time. . . .

Again the reaction syndrome is inharmonious with any concept of rationality in my/our experience, the Recollector cells expressed the paradox with which the captive mind had presented the Ree intelligence. *Here is an entity which clings to personality survival with a ferocity unparalleled—yet faces Category Ultimate risks needlessly, in response to an abstract code of behavioral symmetry.*

I/we postulate that the personality segment selected does not represent the true Egon-analogue of the subject, the Speculators offered. *It is obviously incomplete, non-viable.*

Let me/us attempt a selective withdrawal of control over peripheral regions of the mind-field, the Perceptors

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proposed. Thus permitting greater concentration of stimulus to the central matrix.

By matching energies with the captive mind, it will be possible to monitor its rhythms and deduce the key to its total control, the Calculators determined quickly.

This course offers the risk of rupturing the matrix and the destruction of the specimen.

THE RISK MUST BE TAKEN.

With infinite precision, the Ree mind narrowed the scope of its probe, fitting its shape to the contours of Mallory's embattled brain, matching itself in a one-to-one correspondence to the massive energy flows from the Interrogation chair.

Equilibrium, the Perceptors reported at last. However, the balance is precarious.

The next test must be designed to expose new aspects of the subject's survival syndrome, the Analyzers pointed out. A stimulus pattern was proposed and accepted. Aboard the ship in its sub-lunar orbit, the Ree mind-beam again lanced out to touch Mallory's receptive brain. . . .

Blackness gave way to misty light. A deep rumbling shook the rocks under his feet. Through the whirling spray, he saw the raft, the small figure that clung to it: a child, a little girl perhaps nine years old, crouched on hands and knees, looking toward him.

"Daddy!" A high, thin cry of pure terror. The raft bucked and tossed in the wild current. He took a step, slipped, almost went down on the slimy rocks. The icy water swirled about his knees. A hundred feet downstream, the river curved in a gray-metal sheen, over and down, veiled by the mists of its own thunderous descent.

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He turned, scrambled back up, ran along the bank. There, ahead, a point of rock jutted. Perhaps . . .

The raft bobbed, whirled, fifty feet away. Too far. He saw the pale, small face, the pleading eyes. Fear welled in him, greasy and sickening.

Visions of death rose up, of his broken body bobbing below the falls, lying wax-white on a slab, sleeping, powdered and false in a satin-lined box, corrupting in the close darkness under the indifferent sod. . . .

He took a trembling step back.

For an instant, a curious sensation of unreality swept over him. He remembered darkness, a sense of utter claustrophobia—and a white room, a face that leaned close. . . .

He blinked—and through the spray of the rapids, his eyes met those of the doomed child. Compassion struck him like a club. He grunted, felt the clean white flame of anger at himself, of disgust at his fear. He closed his eyes and leaped far out, struck the water and went under, came up gasping. His strokes took him toward the raft. He felt a heavy blow as the current tossed him against a rock, choked as chopping spray whipped in his face. The thought came that broken ribs didn't matter now, nor air for breathing. Only to reach the raft before it reached the edge, that the small, frightened soul might not go down alone—into the great darkness. . . .

His hands clawed the rough wood. He pulled himself up, caught the small body to him as the world dropped away and the thunder rose deafeningly to meet him. . . .

"Excellency! I need help!" The technician appealed to the grim-faced dictator. "I'm pouring enough power

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through his brain to kill two ordinary men—and he still fights back! For a second there, a moment ago, I'd swear he opened his eyes and looked right through me! I can't take the responsibility—"

"Then cut the power, you blundering idiot!"

"I don't dare, the backlash will kill him!"

"He . . . must . . . talk!" Koslo grated. Hold him! Break him! Or I promise you a slow and terrible death!"

Trembling, the technician adjusted his controls. In the chair, Mallory sat tense, no longer fighting the straps. He looked like a man lost in thought. Perspiration broke from his hairline, trickled down his face.

Again new currents stir in the captive; the Perceptors announced in alarm. The resources of this mind are staggering!

MATCH IT! the Egon directed.

My/our power resources are already overextended! the Calculators interjected.

WITHDRAW ENERGIES FROM ALL PERIPHERAL FUNCTIONS! LOWER SHIELDING! THE MOMENT OF THE ULTIMATE TEST IS UPON ME/US!

Swiftly the Ree mind complied.

The captive is held, the Calculator announced. *But I/we point out that this linkage now presents a channel of vulnerability to assault.*

THE RISK MUST BE TAKEN.

Even now the mind stirs against my/our control.

HOLD IT FAST!

Grimly, the Ree mind fought to retain its control of Mallory's brain.

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In one instant, he was not. Then, abruptly, he existed. *Mallory*, he thought. *That symbol represents I/we. . . .* The alien thought faded. He caught at it, held the symbol. Mallory. He remembered the shape of his body, the feel of his skull enclosing his brain, the sensations of light, sound, heat—but here there was no sound, no light. Only the enclosing blackness, impenetrable, eternal, changeless. . . .

But where was here?

He remembered the white room, the harsh voice of Koslo, the steel chair—

And the mighty roar of the waters rushing up at him—
And the reaching talons of a giant cat—

And the searing agony of flames that licked around his body. . . .

But there was no pain, now, no discomfort—no sensation of any kind. Was this death, then? At once, he rejected the idea as nonsense.

Cogito ergo sum. I am a prisoner—where?

His senses stirred, questing against emptiness, sensationlessness. He strained outward—and heard sound; voices, pleading, demanding. They grew louder, echoing in the vastness:

“. . . talk, damn you! Who are your chief accomplices? What support do you expect from the Armed Forces? Which of the generals are with you? Armaments . . . ? Organization . . . ? Initial attack points . . . ?”

Blinding static sleeted across the words, filled the universe, grew dim. For an instant, Mallory was aware of straps cutting into the tensed muscles of his forearms, the pain of the band clamped around his head, the ache of cramping muscles. . . .

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. . . was aware of floating, gravityless, in a sea of winking, flashing energies. Vertigo rose up; frantically he fought for stability in a world of chaos. Through spinning darkness he reached, found a matrix of pure direction, intangible, but, against the background of shifting energy flows, providing an orienting grid. He seized on it, hold. . . .

Full emergency discharge! the Receptors blasted the command through all the sixty-nine hundred and thirty-four units of the Ree mind—and recoiled in shock. *The captive mind clings to the contact! We cannot break free!*

Pulsating with the enormous shock of the prisoner's sudden out-lashing, the alien rested for the fractional nanosecond required to reestablish inter-segmental balance.

The power of the enemy, though unprecedentedly great, is not sufficient to broach the integrity of my/our entity-field, the Analyzers stated, tensely. *But I/we must retreat at once!*

NO! I/WE LACK SUFFICIENT DATA TO JUSTIFY WITHDRAWAL OF PHASE ONE, the Egon countermanded. HERE IS A MIND RULED BY CONFLICTING DRIVES OF GREAT POWER. THIS IS PARAMOUNT? THEREIN LIES THE KEY TO ITS DEFEAT.

I/WE MUST DEVISE A STIMULATION COMPLEX WHICH WILL EVOKE BOTH DRIVES IN LETHAL OPPOSITION.

Precious microseconds passed while the compound mind hastily scanned Mallory's mind for symbols from

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which to assemble the necessary gestalt-form.

Ready, the Perceptors announced. But it must be pointed out that no mind can long survive intact the direct confrontation of these antagonistic imperatives. Is the stimulus to be carried to the point of nonretrieval?

AFFIRMATIVE. The Egon's tone was one of utter finality. TEST TO DESTRUCTION.

Illusion, Mallory told himself. I'm being bombarded by illusions. . . . He sensed the approach of a massive new wave front, descending on him like a breaking Pacific comber. Grimly, he clung to his tenuous orientation—But the smashing impact whirled him into darkness. Far away, a masked inquisitor faced him.

"Pain has availed nothing against you," the muffled voice said. "The threat of death does not move you. And yet there is a way. . . ." A curtain fell aside, and Monica stood there, tall, slim, vibrantly alive, as beautiful as a roe-deer. And beside her, the child.

He said "No!" and started forward, but the chains held him. He watched, helpless, while brutal hands seized the woman, moved casually, intimately, over her body. Other hands gripped the child. He saw the terror on the small face, the fear in her eyes—

Fear that he had seen before. . . .

But of course he had seen her before. The child was his daughter, the precious offspring of himself and the slender female—

Monica, he corrected himself.

—had seen those eyes, through swirling mist, poised above a cataract—

No. That was a dream. A dream in which he had

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died, violently. And there had been another dream of facing a wounded lion as it charged down on him—

"You will not be harmed," the Inquisitor's voice seemed to come from a remote distance. "But you will carry with you forever the memory of their living dismemberment. . . ."

With a jerk, his attention returned to the woman and the child. He saw them strip Monica's slender, tawny body. Naked, she stood before them, refusing to cower. But of what use was courage now? The manacles at her wrists were linked to a hook set in the damp stone wall. The glowing iron moved closer to her white flesh. He saw the skin darken and blister. The iron plunged home. She stiffened, screamed. . . .

A woman screamed.

"My God, burned alive," a thin voice cawed. "And still walking!"

He looked down. There was no wound, no scar. The skin was unbroken. But a fleeting almost-recollection came of cracking flames that seared with a white agony as he drew them into his lungs. . . .

"A dream," he said aloud. "I'm dreaming. I have to wake up!" He closed his eyes and shook his head. . . .

"He shook his head!" the technician choked. "Excellency, it's impossible—but I swear the man is throwing off the machine's control!"

Koslo brushed the other roughly aside. He seized the control lever, pushed it forward. In the chair, Mallory stiffened. His breathing became hoarse, ragged.

"Excellency, the man will die . . . !"

"Let him die! No one defies me with impunity!"

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Narrow focus! the Perceptors flashed the command to the sixty-nine hundred and thirty four energy-producing segments of the Ree mind. *The contest cannot continue long! Almost we lost the captive then . . . !*

The probe beam narrowed, knifing into the living heart of Mallory's brain, imposing its chosen patterns. . . .

. . . the child whimpered as the foot-long blade approached her fragile breast. The gnarled fist holding the knife stroked it almost lovingly across the blue-veined skin. Crimson blood washed down from the shallow wound.

"If you reveal the secrets of the Brotherhood to me, truly your comrades in arms will die," the Inquisitor's faceless voice droned. "But if you stubbornly refuse, your woman and your infant will suffer all that my ingenuity can devise."

He strained against his chains. "I don't tell you," he croaked. "Don't you understand, nothing is worth horror! Nothing. . . ."

Nothing he could have done would have saved her. She crouched on the raft, doomed. But he could join her—

But not this time. This time chains of steel kept him from her. He hurled himself against them, and tears blinded his eyes. . . .

Smoke blinded his eyes. He looked down, saw the faces upturned below. Surely, easy death was preferable to living immolation. But he covered his face with his arms and started down. . . .

Never betray your trust! The woman's voice rang

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clear as a trumpet across the narrow dungeon.

Daddy! the child screamed.

We can die only once! the woman called.

The raft plunged downward into boiling chaos. . . .

"Speak, damn you!" the Inquisitor's voice had taken on a new note. "I want the names, the places! Who are your accomplices? What are your plans? When will the rising begin? What signal are they waiting for? Where . . . ? When . . . ?"

Mallory opened his eyes. Blinding white light, a twisted face that loomed before him goggling.

"Excellency! He's awake! He's broken through. . . ."

"Pour full power into him! Force, man! Force him to speak!"

"I—I'm afraid, Excellency! We're tampering with the mightiest instrument in the universe: a human brain! Who knows what we may be creating—"

Koslo struck the man aside, threw the control lever full against the stop.

. . . The darkness burst into a coruscating brilliance that became the outlines of a room. A transparent man whom he recognized as Koslo stood before him. He watched as the dictator turned to him, his face contorted.

"Now talk, damn you!"

His voice had a curious, ghostly quality, as though it represented only one level of reality.

"Yes," Mallory said distinctly. "I'll talk."

"And if you lie—" Koslo jerked an ugly automatic pistol from the pocket of his plain tunic. "I'll put a bullet in your brain myself!"

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"My chief associates in the plot," Mallory began, "are . . ." As he spoke, he gently disengaged himself—that was the word that came to his mind—from the scene around him. He was aware at one level of his voice speaking on, reeling off the facts for which the other man hungered so nakedly. And he reached out, channeling the power pouring into him from the chair . . . spanning across vast distances compressed now to a dimensionless plane. Delicately, he quested farther, entered a curious, flickering not of living energies. He pressed, found points of weakness, poured in more power—

A circular room leaped into eerie visibility. Ranged around it were lights that winked and glowed. From ranked thousands of cells, white wormforms poked blunt, eyeless heads. . . .

HE IS HERE: The Egon shrieked the warning, and hurled a bolt of pure mind-force along the channel of contact and met a counter-bolt of energy that seared through him, blackened and charred the intricate organic circuitry of his cerebrum, left a smoking pocket in the rank of cells. For a moment, Mallory rested, sensing the shock and bewilderment sweeping through the leaderless Ree mind-segments. He felt the automatic death-urge that gripped them as the realization reached them that the guiding overpower of the Egon was gone. As he watched, a unit crumpled inward and expired. And another—

"Stop!" Mallory commanded. "I assume control of the mind-complex! Let the segments link in with me!"

Obediently, the will-less fragments of the Ree mind obeyed.

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"Change course," Mallory ordered. He gave the necessary instructions, then withdrew along the channel of contact.

"So . . . the great Mallory broke." Koslo rocked on his heels before the captive body of his enemy. He laughed. "You were slow to start, but once begun you sang like a turtledove. I'll give my orders now, and by dawn your futile revolt will be a heap of charred corpses stacked in the plaza as an example to others!" He raised the gun.

"I'm not through yet," Mallory said. "The plot runs deeper than you think, Koslo."

The dictator ran a hand over his gray face. His eyes showed the terrible strain of the last hours.

"Talk, then," he growled. "Talk fast!"

As he spoke on, Mallory again shifted his primary awareness, settled into resonance with the subjugated Ree intelligence. Through the ship's sensors, he saw the white planet swelling ahead. He slowed the vessel, brought it in on a long parabolic course which skimmed the stratosphere. Seventy miles above the Atlantic, he entered a high haze layer, slowed again as he sensed the heating of the hull.

Below the clouds, he sent the ship hurtling across the coast. He dropped to treetop level, scanned the scene through sensitive hull-plates—

For a long moment he studied the landscape below. Then suddenly he understood. . . .

"Why do you smile, Mallory?" Koslo's voice was harsh; the gun pointed at the other's head. "Tell me the joke

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that makes a man laugh in the condemned seat reserved for traitors."

"You'll know in just a moment. . . ." He broke off as a crashing sound came from beyond the room. The floor shook and trembled, rocking Koslo on his feet. A dull boom echoed. The door burst wide.

"Excellency! The capital is under attack!" The man fell forward, exposing a great wound on his back. Koslo whirled on Mallory—

With a thunderous crash, one side of the room bulged and fell inward. Through the breached wall, a glittering torpedo-shape appeared, a polished intricacy of burnished metal floating lightly on pencils of blue-white light. The gun in the hand of the dictator came up, crashed deafeningly in the enclosed space. From the prow of the invader, pink light winked. Koslo spun, fell heavily on his face.

The twenty-eight inch Ree dreadnought came to rest before Mallory. A beam speared out, burned through the chair control panel. The shackles fell away.

I/we await your/our next command. The Ree mind spoke soundlessly in the awesome silence.

Three months had passed since the referendum which had swept John Mallory into office as Premier of the First Planetary Republic. He stood in a room of his spacious apartment in the Executive Palace, frowning at the slender black-haired woman as she spoke earnestly to him:

"John—I'm afraid of that—that infernal machine, eternally hovering, waiting for your orders."

"But why, Monica? That infernal machine, as you call

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it, was the thing that made a free election possible—and even now it's all that holds Koslo's old organization in check."

"John—" Her hand gripped his arm. "With that—thing—always at your beck and call, you can control anyone, anything on Earth! No opposition can stand before you!"

She looked directly at him. "It isn't right for anyone to have such power, John. Not even you. No human being should be put to such a test!"

His face tightened. "Have I misused it?"

"Not yet. That's why . . ."

"You imply that I will?"

"You're a man, with the failings of a man."

"I propose only what's good for the people of Earth," he said sharply. "Would you have me voluntarily throw away the one weapon that can protect our hard-won freedom?"

"But, John—who are you to be the sole arbiter of what's good for the people of Earth?"

"I'm Chairman of the Republic—"

"You're still human. Stop—while you're still human!"

He studied her face. "You resent my success, don't you? What would you have me do? Resign?"

"I want you to send the machine away—back to wherever it came from."

He laughed shortly. "Are you out of your mind? I haven't begun to extract the technological secrets the Ree ship represents."

"We're not ready for those secrets, John. The race isn't ready. It's already changed you. In the end it can only destroy you as a man."

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"Nonsense. I control it utterly. It's like an extension of my own mind—"

"John—please. If not for my sake or your own, for Dian's."

"What's the child got to do with this?"

"She's your daughter. She hardly sees you once a week."

"That's the price she has to pay for being the heir to the greatest man— I mean—damn it, Monica, my responsibilities don't permit me to indulge in all the suburban customs."

"John—" Her voice was a whisper, painful in its intensity. "Send it away."

"No. I won't send it away."

Her face was pale. "Very well, John. As you wish."

"Yes. As I wish."

After she left the room, Mallory stood for a long time staring out through the high window at the tiny craft, hovering in the blue air fifty feet away, silent, ready.

Then: Ree mind, he sent out the call. Probe the apartments of the woman, Monica. I have reason to suspect she plots treason against the state. . . .

AFTERWORD

The process of writing a story is often as enlightening for me as, hopefully, for the reader.

I began with the concept of submitting a human being to an ultimate trial in the same way that an engineer will load a beam until it collapses, testing it to destruc-

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tion. It is in emotional situations that we meet our severest tests: fear, love, anger, drive us to our highest efforts. Thus, the framework of the story suggested itself.

As the tale evolved, it became apparent that any power setting out to put mankind to the test as did Koslo and the Ree—places its own fate in the balance.

In the end, Mallory revealed the true strength of man by using the power of his enemies against them. He wins not only his freedom and sanity—but also immense new powers over other men.

Not until then did the danger in such total victory become apparent. The ultimate test of man is his ability to master himself.

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