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Follow the doctor's orders
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The Caves of Mars

EMIL PETAJA



BEWARE OF THE UNIVERSAL PANACEA

Ric Coltor had lost an arm in an interplanetary exploration. For a spaceman at any other time that would have meant the end of his career. But not with the marvelous Martian Panacea in existence. Extracted from a fungus found only on the Red Planet, it promised mankind perfect health and longer life, for it grew back internal organs, conquered disease, and could even grow back arms.

So Ric went to one of the M-P colonies to become whole again and discovered a defect in that new Utopia—M-P not only gave its users glowing good health but it also gave them a fanatical devotion to the man who administered it, Dr. Morton Krill. A devotion that was so all-encompassing that any man who received it could easily become dictator of two planets if he were twisted enough to desire that. Dr. Krill was.

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second complete novel

EMIL PETAJA, who was born in Montana of Finnish ancestry, has been for most of his life an enthusiastic follower of science-fiction and fantasy. Now a resident of San Francisco, and for many years there a professional photographer, he is devoting himself full time to his writing. Over the years he has had many short stories and novelettes in national magazines.

His previous novel in an Ace edition was *Alpha Yes, Terra No!* (M-121).

THE CAVES OF MARS

by

EMIL PETAJA



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**TO
ELSIE AND DON**

SPACE MERCENARIES

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I

RIC COLTOR looked down, way down, to where Calcity winked in the night. Calcity stretched out over what had once been coast, then forest, then desert. Now it was a maze of towers, steel and glass business battlements, spidery flow-ramps. Further down some self-conscious older buildings huddled, **ashamed**. **There** were a few private cop-ters and late cabs idling across the night. But up here Ric was the **only** evidence of life. He had the winter wind and the foretaste of **death all to himself**.

He'd stopped at a bar and downed two quick drinks before his climb up this neon-splashed ad pylon on the highest building he could find. But he wasn't fuzzy. By no means! Wind pressed his leanness against a narrow strut; three inches of steel supported his booted feet. His normal one-seventy

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muscular pounds had wasted to one-forty-eight those months in the space hospital; that, taken together with enforced abstinence, and the alcohol should have hit him like a ton of bricks. But it didn't. State of mind, he decided, grimly. Never had his mind cut so sharp a swath at life; never had his senses taken such a hungry bite at conscious existence. Why way up here? That was easy. Space had been his life. This was as close to it as he'd ever get again.

The dope they'd kept him on, against unbearable physical and psychological pain, was all worn off. Back in the hospital time had **mushed** together in a mindless lump, a vehicle for continuous torment. So they'd kept him under drugs practically all of the time.

Now, suddenly, this rush of intense feeling.

He didn't want it. He couldn't bear to think ahead, either. He couldn't bear to look down at the plastic arm they had glued onto his right shoulder stump. It worked after a fashion, sure. It had helped him climb up here. But, being the kind of man he was, an awkward mechanical arm just wasn't enough. He couldn't take it. He *wouldn't*. So . . .

The thoughts churned up. Happy ones. Angry ones. They took hold of his sharpened senses and somehow they only honed down the knife.

From the time Richard Franklin Coltore was old enough to grab a hold of whatever chunk of matter his parents had first tossed him to play with, he had grabbed it with *both* hands. That was the key. *Both* eager fists. At fourteen he stowed away on a moonship because they laughed at his eagerness and kicked his tail out of the Union office when he swaggered in demanding a space job, any kind so long as it was space-side.

Guts and perspicacity won out and they kept him on. To Ric Coltore life was not to be nibbled at but gulped dry, ravished with your whole being.

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Pushing thirty now, the arbitrary age when hard core spacemen were given a penetrating twice-over by the meds—especially pilots—Ric would normally have been given the emphatic nod for a good twenty more years of exploratory seat-of-the-pants spacing.

It fed his soul, being part of the big push which now included a landing or near-look at all the Sol planets, major and minor. Next stop, Alpha. Ric had done his share; more. He'd crossed swords with death on a daily basis. He loved it. To toe dance down that skittish ribbon that separates life from death was to know what existence was all about.

But now . . .

"Come back early next week. Tuesday okay? We'll check up on that new arm." Doc Ace Rannigan was wiry and all elbows, like a grasshopper, the way he moved and cocked his head, but thank God he didn't talk with that enforced Pippa cheery tone some of the others used on him. That did make Ric curl up at the toes. Flat. Dry. Efficient.

Ric flexed his new fingers and shuddered. It wasn't that moving this skillful mechanical member caused pain, which it did, it was knowing what it represented. "I don't want to live half a man," shot-up soldiers used to say. But usually they would come around. Not Ric. He simply wasn't the type.

He said nothing. Doc Rannigan had done his best. What more could he do? Medical science hadn't reached the miracle stage yet. They couldn't grow him a new arm, could they?

His two cute nurses seemed to have been handpicked to keep him wanting to live. He played along. He tried. It was an uphill battle. There was continuous massage, enforced exercise, psychological byplay. Ric was a top pilot so he got the red carpet treatment. Now he was free to walk out of his

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room, this sanctuary from life, to take up the suddenly obnoxious business of breathing and functioning.

"So long, Doc," he just said. "Thanks."

Dr. Rannigan nodded severely. No slop. No kind words.

Walking down the long antiseptic corridor toward the front door Ric shivered. A cold hand pressed down on the back of his neck. Suddenly he knew he would never make it. Spacing was out. And spacing was his life. So . . .

"Oh, Coltor." A Plorix Consolidated official caught hold of his plastic arm just as the automatic door swooshed open. "I'm James Ledbetter. Remember me? Well, perhaps not. You were in pretty bad shape last time we met. Will you come into my office, please?"

"Sure."

For many weeks walking out through the front door had represented a desirable goal. Now, somehow, it didn't matter a damn.

"Sit down, Coltor." The man indicated a leathery chair on the other side of his crescent-shaped desk. "Drink?"

Ric shook his head. He wanted one, but not here. Not with this hawk-faced character, whose eyes behind those focals reminded Ric of a bug-eyed Venurian swamp lizard. He took a cigarette, though.

"Keep the pack," James F. Ledbetter urged, magnanimously.

"What do you want to see me about?" Ric asked. "Doc says I'm a free man."

Ledbetter gave him a sharp calculating look of measuring a client for size. "Part of my job as Personnel Head is coordination between the Pilot Union and the insurance settlements." He rattled a dossier of papers on his desk. "It so happens that our Board meeting took your case under advisement just this morning. I'm glad I caught you so I can give you the good news."

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"Good news?" For one fleeting moment Ric thought that maybe the enormous space metallics company was going to relax its strict rule about physically handicapped on ships. The hope died aborning.

"They voted you the full disability compensation!" James F. Ledbetter's saurian eyes gleamed. "Wonderful, no? Of course it won't keep you in caviar, but it will tide you over until you can snag onto something—er—suitable. Office job, I imagine."

Ric just looked at him. The Personnel Manager's frown was reproachful. "I know it's bad to lose a—limb. Especially for a man with a record as dramatic as yours. But consider our standpoint, the Company's. The vote was by no means unanimous and it could have gone flat against you. After all, that jaunt of yours to the Polar Cave wasn't authorized. It was strictly on your own. Under the provisions of the injury and Accident Liability contract between the Pilot Union and Florix—"

While his glib legal verbiage droned crisply on, Ric's thoughts flicked back to the fateful weekend. He was on three day leave. Port Mars. Alan had snagged him down in one of the bars with his wild proposition, excited as hell that Ric should be on Mars coincidentally with his own project. Alan Tork wasn't just an old school buddy anymore. He was Dr. Alan Tork, with half a dozen degrees after his name, one of the foremost space-bio savants of the day, young as he was. Alan had this bug in his ear about the Polar Cave. Ric had to join him in an explorative project up there. He *had* to. It would only take two days. Alan's entourage was all waiting and ready. They could take off right away.

"What for?" was Ric's natural objection.

It turned out that years of examining microscopic specimens gleaned from various sections of the Martian wastes, particularly in the *Lacus Maeris* and *Lacus Solis* areas, and

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a significant double-canal complex that threaded north to the region of winter ice caps and orange clouds, had led Alan to believe that once fantastically great cities had existed in these areas and that some enormous catastrophe had culminated in a vast exodus to the Cave.

"It's not a new theory, exactly," Ric pointed out.

"No. But my evidence is. In my opinion the migration was *not* caused by any lack of water or dwindling atmosphere. They had progressed to the point of producing their own, or evolved beyond the point of need. No. Some sudden overwhelming tragedy occurred. Possibly self-inflicted. Something that wiped away all trace of the existence of these great cities and reduced them to electronic dust."

"What could do that?"

"We almost succeeded in doing the same thing," Alan pointed out. "Had it not been for an almost perfect stalemate, the Third War would have brought Earth to exactly the same kind of an ending."

Ric nursed his drink and scowled. "Those caves have been gone over dozens of times. Nothing but ice and rock."

"They didn't probe deep enough," Alan said. "I'm prepared to go deeper. Follow microscopic animal and plant leads with an utterly new type of probe."

"Yeah?" Ric gulped down his drink hastily, already figuring it to be his last. "What'd you expect to find?"

Alan's sallow face grinned an oddly solemn grin. "Suppose you come along and find out?"

They took full advantage of the earlier digs. Alan had secured the most detailed maps available from colleagues who had explored the polar cavern and its network of honeycomb sub-caves—and who had been so sharply disappointed. Mars had always been special. It was the only Sol World where highly intelligent life could logically be expected to

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be found, even residually. But none had been found. Not a trace.

Newer, more efficient bores were put into action by Alan's crew. Quarter of a mile down from the deepest earlier dig they found breathable atmosphere. A last breakthrough opened out on a huge chamber where the warm rock was laced through with loamy soil. Heat, apparently from a series of fissures and minor tunnels leading to the interior of the planet, made them drag off their outer parka-like clothing, and microscopic vegetable life slicking the damp walls glowed with a blue spectral light.

Then they found the fungi.

"Look at the size of them!" Alan chortled. "They remind me somewhat of our *lepista procera*, with the long thin stems and the umbrella crests. But that greenish color is unlike any—"

Ric left Alan to his ecstatic snipping and on-the-spot testing, moved further in beyond a stalagmite wall to the cave's end. A wide arc that reminded him of a cathedral window, or one side of it, caught his curious eye. It was so clean-cut. One might imagine that it had been tooled, like one side of a sealed door which had been snapped open by an age-old earthquake. Ric ran his hand along the smooth rim thoughtfully, then in, further and further in and down, where the crevice widened near the floor.

It happened then, and fast.

His arm was bitten off, as if by sudden lightning. His torment-scream was sheered off by oblivion. All that he knew next about being alive was a drug-saturated blur in the Port Mars space-facility hospital; blurred changes indicative of a ship's dispensary; then—fire and brimstone of a hell that centered itself in a right arm he didn't have anymore.

"—so you see, Coltore, the Company has been more than

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generous." Ledbetter's babbling terminated and that brought Ric back to reality with a wrench.

"The locals thought Plorix might derive favorable publicity out of the dig," Ric said.

"Sure, sure. It is quite true that Dr. Alan Tork is a great man in his field, that he did bring back some interesting specimens, although perhaps it would have been better if he—never mind all that. In any case official permission should have been obtained from our head office."

"There wasn't time."

Ledbetter shrugged, then put on a forgiving smile. "There's no point in discussing it further. I only wanted you to know that the full disability payment will reach you in due course. Just let us know your address. Then of course there's your new plast-arm. In my view, Pilot Coltore, you're a very lucky man."

A very lucky man.

Yeah. So lucky that even Alan hadn't once bothered to contact him, in person or otherwise, at the hospital, even though most of his lab work was centered in or near Calcity. Nor Candi. Candi was Dr. Candida Lucas-Long. Candi was Alan's beautiful green-eyed assistant when he worked at the Cal-U labs and, emotionally speaking, she seemed to be divided into two roughly equal parts. On the one hand there was the pale, scholarly Alan, whom she adored. On the other hand, there was Pilot Richard Coltore, exciting and virile and shot through with the glamour of deep space.

What's to chose now? Ric mused.

It was ex-Pilot Coltore, now, with his right arm cut off at the triceps. While Alan had hit the jackpot with his Martian fungi, and not just with the scientific world either. The fungi must have made him billions. Along with Candi's wide-eyed adoration of Alan's stature as a biochemist there was all

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that money. No wonder she hadn't sent him a get-well card. Get lost was more like it.

Candida. Ric said her name softly into the wind. And the thought of her statuesque beauty, of those green eyes, of that flame of pale burgundy hair, put a head on his cup of hemlock.

Ric could endure all thoughts but **this one** with icy-cold dispassion, standing here an inch from eternity, while the night wind mourned through the pilings and nagged at his silvery space-pilot's tunic with the chevrons stripped off.

His blue-gray eyes moved up from the dizzy spectacle far below—up, up, up into the **blackness** and the secret star-paths he used to plunge through. He looked up one last time and now he was glad. He'd had it. The good space life. A man can have no more. There isn't any more.

When his glance dragged away from those winking stars his eyes were caught by something that made them widen, then narrow in disbelief. Something forbidden. A copter and a hypno-ad-writer. Messing up the clean black sky with a luminous message for him.

It said: "Ric Coltor! Don't do it! We know how you feel, but don't! Try Martian Panacea—the Miracle Fungi! It will solve all your problems." A needle of light searched, probed, found him, clung. "Don't jump, Ric! Use M-P! Live forever!"

II

HE KEPT to the deepest shadows of seamy waterfront street and had to grin wryly at himself. Ric had been so sure that all his feelings and emotions had been squeezed out; but right now there was one small cocklebur of feeling inside his brain, roweling him on.

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What? Curiosity, of course. What killed the cat. He had to find out why that sky-adman risked prison and perhaps death to single him out for his pitch. After he found out he could then pick his spot and keep that rendezvous with death.

Walking randomly along the black asphalt he thought about hypno-advertising. Unscrupulous companies still occasionally toyed with it wistfully and, of course, lobbied for it like crazy. Some fifty or sixty years ago the ad groups had contented themselves with hiring psychologists and brain-boys to determine peoples' weak points and play up to them via video, news sheets, or whatever. There were subliminals, invidious low-pressures, snide snob-pitches. Then one day some bright greedy egghead rang in overt hypnotism, which included personal ESP probes of specific groups of customers. These all-too-personal findings were religiously taped onto central IBM banks and this information peddled to admen. It got pretty rough. In fact, it went so far out of line that pretty soon nobody was safe—not one busy housewife nor one nine-to-five—and when the vicious competition began to percolate it wasn't long before the available nut-hatches were filled to overflowing.

The law stepped in with a very heavy foot.

So now it was back to the old drawing board. Advertising as a whole took two giant steps backwards; housewives could stop cowering and snivelling in corners because they forgot to use the right deodorant, and office workers could switch to a different cigarette every week without walking in terror of some vague nemesis overtaking them. The reaction was bad, at first. Conditioned themselves to believe in the rightness of their cause, admen didn't give up easily. There were dirty messes, a kind of warfare, and even now some trigger-happy skycop might just take a shot at an adman who flaunted his pitch the way Ric's skybuddy had.

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Why? Why Ric? Up to this point nobody had cared whether Ric lived or died. Candi and Alan, for instance. Then who?

Who wanted him to try M-P, and why?

Prowling the Bay fog that clung wetly to the old section of warehouses and cheap bars, Ric kept wondering, hearing the mournful hooting of a foghorn at the Gate and passing a mangy cat that sprang out, spitting wrathfully at him for invading its malodorous domain.

Ric's ad-needed brain ran over what he had read about M-P in the periodicals they had brought him in the hospital, and what he had seen on the hospital video. Martian Panacea. That cure-all connotation was the tip-off. Anything that cured *everything* just had to be phoney. Whether the fungi derivatives the users had pumped into their veins by hypodermic needles were in any way connected with the mushroom Alan had found in that deep chamber of the Polar Caves was something Ric had no way of knowing at this point. Maybe so. Or maybe the promoters of M-P only used Dr. Alan Tork's discovery as a gimmick.

Anyway, M-P—the pushers tagged it *fun* for fungi—enjoyed the biggest promotional scheme of any product ever made available to a hope-hungry planet. Every ad-medium was saturated for the period of three months. The ads never mentioned Dr. Alan Tork; they never even mentioned the Polar Caves, but they implied a lot. And, short of the outlawed hypno-ads, they spread the gospel. If there breathed a single man, woman, or child in the world who hadn't heard of M-P and its "miraculous benefits," that person must have spent the last six months in a diving bell.

M-P didn't need hypno-ads. Everyone who tried it praised it to the skies. Their health was so improved they were re-born. New teeth sprouted in octogenerian mouths, diseased organs replaced themselves, sightless people saw. Deaf-mutes

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chortled their heads off, extolling M-P. The strange fungi spores swept the world like a beautiful plague.

Then the backlash.

What started the reverse action was hard to figure. Was it because M-P was *too* good? Was it that after using it for a couple of months a person tended to glow bluely in the dark? Or was it, perhaps, that Dr. Morton Krill—who began by giving his important name openly and extravagantly to M-P promotion—suddenly did an abrupt about face?

Whatever it was, M-P promotions dwindled, then vanished altogether. The Law took the present view that all its "benefits" must be potentially dangerous. The Earth Medical Association, after exhaustive testing, found nothing in the fungi that could (or should, anyway) bring about such wonderful transformations, and declared that there must be a catch to it somewhere. Perhaps some hideous reaction. They were unanimous in damning Dr. Morton Krill for having given it his unqualified blessing, pointing out that now Dr. Krill had disappeared. Nobody knew where. That alone, the medics said, was reason enough to ban the use of M-P entirely.

These severe warnings swung the Law into action. M-P users went under cover; use of the fungi was equated with opium addiction. Anyone caught with the raw fungi or the injective distillation from them got a stiff prison sentence. Some local authorities went even further; there were unexplained deaths of transportees to the special M-P prisons.

Yet rumors persisted of secret cults dedicated to M-P. Dr. Morton Krill's name kept cropping up, even though he had mysteriously vanished from public life.

Still . . .

Hope dies hard, and its filmy hand had a clutch on Ric's heart and guts, as he moved like a lanky one-armed shadow down the street.

If M-P could grow new internal organs and new eyes . . .

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When he paused in a black doorway to warm his cold-bitten limbs and to light up a cigarette, he saw that he was being followed. He had been so absorbed he hadn't noticed until just now. When he stopped the man following him did, too. Ric dragged on his smoke and waited. The dark ill-dressed figure just stood there.

It was an educated guess that whoever engineered the hypno-ad was having him tailed. Maybe because they wanted to steer him to an M-P outlet. Underground as these outlets were now, he might need help finding one. Ric had employed elementary deduction when he had come down here south of the Market Street move-walk; one was most likely to find an M-P cell down here in the slums.

So he had an escort. Of course there was the off-chance that his stalker was a legitimate mugger out on late-evening business.

Ric's muscles tightened to potential danger. The adrenaline pounding into his heart, the razor-edged wariness, the urgency for hair-trigger action when the need came—all of this was quixotically familiar. To smell danger, where and when it came, was a Spaceman's life. It made life desirable; even to gulp in the cold marine-scented air was a good thing.

He finished his smoke and waited for his tailer to make his move. He moved finally, in a shuffling vag's gait, up even with Ric. Then he stopped.

"Got another smoke, Spacer?" Ric's silver-gray uniform (the only clothes he had) was distinctive and respect-commanding, and the slouchy figure couldn't see where his Grade One chevrons had been neatly scissored off. Spacers had a reputation for hardness; they earned it.

"Sure."

Ric jerked up a cigarette from his rumpled pack, then flicked on his lighter for the man so he could get a brief but clear look at his face. The man's clothes were dirty; they

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looked crawly too. His square-jawed face was grimy. The hand that propelled the smoke to his thin lips shook like a wino's, but the whites of his eyes were too clean for a wino, and his fingernails were too clean underneath.

He showed narrow insunk teeth when he grinned thanks. "Cold night," he said.

"Getting that way," Ric agreed. "Know this part of town?"

"A little."

"Know where I can find some?"

"Some what?"

Ric shrugged. "Fun." He accented the word a little, but left room for other meanings.

"I'm not quite sure just what you mean."

Ric came to the point. "M-P. I'm looking for an M-P pusher."

The play-bum jerked a rapid glance up the street, then down in the direction of the Bay. The street was empty except for a couple of low-flying seagulls. The foghorns gave out their mechanical keening.

"Maybe I can help you out, Spacer. I'm not a user, nothing like that. But a guy hears things."

He started walking. Ric followed him into deeper dark without further conversation. His muscles and nerves were still ready for the unexpected. He felt an angry ganglion twinge in his stump, and that brought up a new and critical problem. Could he handle himself? He was moving into a strange, off-color league. During those final months Doc Rannigan had forced him to exercise what was left of him and he had done it, out of boredom more than anything, so that his sinews and muscles weren't the pudding they could have been, even though they weren't quite the old iron-tough Ric Coltore; but how could he possibly match any man with two good arms?

When his escort dipped abruptly into a narrow squalid

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alleyway, Ric sucked in a sharp breath and missed a stride. If he was going to get taken, this was it. He ought to have gotten hold of a blaster or at least one of those hollow switch-blades with stun-juice in them which the young hoods affected these days. At least then he'd have a fighting chance. Die, sure. He wanted it. But not like this. Not giving some sadistic punk his kicks mangling him to a pulp in a black alley.

He waited a couple of breaths, watching the red glow of his escort's cigarette float off to a central point down the alley. Then, with a shrug, he moved in. A few yards off, he pressed his wide shoulders against the dank building, ears pricked for any telltale sound, such as the gulp of intake before a sudden attack.

It didn't come. Ric flicked on his lighter. They were standing in front of a narrow door, just a peeled-paint metal slab. No sign. No number.

"Here?" Ric asked.

"Like I said, I'm not sure. Want to try?"

When he stepped aside Ric rapped his knuckles sharply on the little door. They waited, breathing out little vaporous ghosts.

The door opened just a crack.

"Yeah?" a rough voice asked.

It appeared Ric was to take over. "We're looking for some fun," he said.

"Fun?"

"Yeah. Fun as *not* in fun and games."

From the dark interior came an indignant snort. "So go someplace else. You won't find any here."

The door closed but not before Ric's space-boot jammed the crack. "Listen, Bud, I want some M-P and I want it now. And my friend told me—"

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"Which friend is that?" A ring of torchlight splashed Ric's face, then swept the area around him.

Ric's eyes moved with it and he grunted his surprise. His escort was gone, evaporated into the night. Oh, well. He'd done his job. He'd got Ric here.

The light from the torch lingered thoughtfully on Ric's false arm.

"How about just a drink?" Ric said. "It's damn cold standing out here."

"I guess I can sell you a drink, Spacer."

The door closed quickly behind them and Ric followed the man with the torch down a stretch of musty hall; it was dark out of the perimeter of the beam and Ric noticed an odd phenomenon. The man who'd let him in was not tall but he was very wide, like a wrestler. His grizzly-bear mid-section and sloping shoulders were limned by a blue-white glow, a nimbus, a fox fire that exuded from the man himself, through his clothes.

At the hall's end the big man stopped. He rapped at the closed door three times, looked over the cavernous room, with its sickly pale wall-lights which didn't quite reach the high metal rafters and the peeled gray walls. There were deal tables, around which men were playing poker, as if killing time. Waiting. There was a beat-up bar at the far end with a row of dusty bottles behind it.

Ric moved to the bar and slid onto a stool. The big man was the bartender. He moved behind it and swiped a bar rag in front of Ric. "What's your pleasure?"

"Bourbon. Straight."

The big man frowned, as if he disapproved not only of Ric's choice but of drinking in general. But he nodded and poured out a liberal shot.

Sipping, Ric eyed the heavy jowls and the thatch of black

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eyebrows. "This is for the cold night air. Later I would like something more to the point."

"Such as?" Carefully.

Ric held out his new arm. "As you see, I've got a problem."

The bartender nodded gravely.

"You glory boys do get yourselves in trouble."

Ric sipped deep. "Any suggestions?"

The big man's worried look relaxed into a deep-throated chuckle. "My suggestion is stay the hell out of the sky. We got enough trouble right here."

"Looks like I don't have any choice." Ric gave the stripped chevrons a glum look.

Ric thought he glimpsed a flicker of sympathy behind those pinched careful eyes.

"I'm Rolff," the bartender said, adding, "stick around." He edged out from behind the bar and over to the hall door. A thin, hollow-eyed youngster with a tousle of uncombed hair had a chair tilted against the door and was perched on it, unhygienically cleaning his fingernails with a small fang. The bartender said something to the boy, and the youngster nodded and sauntered off through a back door and vanished.

When Rolff came back he leaned across the bar and asked, "What put you onto M-P? Most people nowadays think it's a ten-carat phoney and a dead one."

Leaving out all but crucial facts Ric told him about the pylon and the hypno-ad.

"Those ESP probes work like lightning," Rolff whistled. "Imagine putting you on by name."

"That was their initial gimmick," Ric said. "Everybody likes the sound and sight of his own name."

"Guess you're right." He jerked his thumb at Ric's arm. "You really think M-P can do it? Grow you a new arm?"

Ric's forehead tightened. "Don't know what to think. I've

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been out of circulation over eight months. All I know is what I read in the papers." He downed his double shot. "Suppose *you* tell *me*!"

Rolff grinned uneasily. "Me? How should I know? Course," he went on like stepping over eggs, "I hear lots of stories. How people with one foot in the grave take it and are still going strong. How it grows new hearts. New livers. Even repairs damaged brains. All kinds of talk. But I don't know from nothing—*personally*."

"No? Then how come you lit up like a Christmas tree back there in the dark hall?"

The moment that followed stretched out like rubber. Rolff's deep chuckle broke the wall of silence.

"Touché, space-boy." He bulked closer and his voice was a tight whisper. "A man's got to be super careful these days. The Law's especially tough, even on suspects, here in the Bay area. This is where it all started, you know."

A wild gleam flashed up in his dark eyes, transfiguring that wide unbeautiful face, as he let go of his mask. "Why can't people accept the miracle of M-P? Can't they see? Everybody who ever took it was helped. Health of a kind they didn't even know existed. Not to mention the cripples who are now dancing! The blind who can see! God! Look at me. Doctors gave me up for dead. There was something wrong with my ductless glands, something unfixable. Even starving myself I kept gaining weight until I was a candidate for a freak show. It had already damaged my heart. Since I've been using *fun* I've dropped over fifty pounds and I'm strong as a bull. I feel so damn good, man! You just don't know! Sometimes I have to hold myself back from yelling and singing, I feel so good." That glow in his eyes was unbridled rapture. "Brother, I'm going to help anybody and everybody who wants it to find out what I found."

Ric had to look away from such ecstasy; he couldn't stand

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the sight of it, unleashed. It occurred to him that if all M-P users carried on like this no wonder the Law branded them drug-addicts. It wasn't normal. Abnormal or supernormal, he couldn't say. But it was the kind of fanatic behavior that was bound to make non-users suspicious and angry, people with their every-day aches and pains.

Rolff touched his artificial arm, grinning. "Sure it'll grow you a new arm, man! Might take a while. I'll show you to a place to hole up in while it's growing out."

"Money?"

Rolff shrugged. "Sure. You must have got something for that gone arm. We can use it, in spreading the word, keeping our colonies fed, enlarging our fungi-farms. Nobody wants to get rich out of it. Not even Dr. Krill."

There was reverence in the way he spoke the name. And the way he pulled in afterwards made Ric think he hadn't meant to say it. Not just yet.

"I had the impression that Dr. Krill was the one who put the hex on M-P before he took off."

Rolff's smile was complacent and far-off. "Later. When you've got your new arm you'll be told lots of things, things that will surprise you." He checked his watch and glanced at the back door. "Putter went out to check on you and pick up the stuff. He ought to be back soon."

Ric asked for another drink but Rolff shook his head. "Might slow down the action. An hour from now you won't need it."

After a fifteen minute wait that seemed twice as long, Putter's long emaciated face showed in the back doorway. He nodded at Rolff, grinned, and went back to his post at the hall door. Rolff gestured Ric to precede him into the back room. It was a meager little cell, furnished only with a straight metal chair and a shakedown cot in the corner.

"Roll up your sleeve," Rolff directed.

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"Which one?" Ric's wry smile spawned out of the surge of hope boiling up inside of him. He had always felt, and most of all out there in deep space staring into the salt-sprinkled blackness, that somewhere there was an answer to all of mankind's many troubles. Could M-P be the answer?

It was plain that Rolff thought so. The fire in his eyes was stronger than ever as he set about preparing a hypo of liquid, sucking it out of a sealed phial which he took out of the hollowed-out center of a loaf of French bread. The liquid was whitish, the consistency of coconut milk; his pudgy fingers primed the needle with caressing familiarity.

All ready; Ric felt a last qualm of doubt cut into him; then, with a faint shrug, he held up his bare arm for the shot.

The shot came, but not from the needle.

Fascinated as they both were, for somewhat different reasons, by the stuff in the hypo, neither Ric nor Rolff saw the door to the bar swing open. The hypo needle dimpled Ric's forearm when it came. A sharp, flat hiss-click from the open doorway. The hypo needle powdered into dust, with nothing but an acrid scent lingering momentarily on the dead air. The liquid in the needle boiled up and vaporized before the smallest drop could spray Ric's arm. Ric yelled when the blast creased his arm with searing pain.

"Cops!" Rolff screamed.

His hand whipped under his blouse for a weapon, a hollow fang filled with venom, but it got only halfway out. The lead-man in the doorway spit blast-fire again. Rolff's face took on a look of crumpling pain; his mouth twitched and bubbled with unspoken words as he fell.

Ric looked from him to the cops. There were two, both in plain clothes. One of them was dressed like a vag and this one was vaguely familiar.

"You!"

"Yeah, me. And thanks for doing your part so nice."

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"You used me to get in here," Ric said.

The cop in bum's clothing showed those thin recessive teeth gleefully. "I wasn't just sure about this place. Wanted to nab them with the crud on them. In action. Figured that the pusher would feel sorry for you and let you in. Oh, yeah. I'll take this."

He reached down and yanked an antique coin-sized hunk of shiny metal off the back of Ric's wide spacebelt. It had been clamped there by two pin-sized prongs.

"You had me bugged," Ric said, anger boiling up.

The cop sniggered. "Heard every loving word you and this—" he kicked at the body on the floor, "said to each other. And that's enough to put you in our special M-P lock-up for a lot of years."

Ric stared at that gleeful sadistic face. The cop's self-approving smirk grew and spread out into a riot of angry colors. He looked down at the dead Rolff, at the smashed phial, and the hollowed-out bread loaf. Now it was as if—as if this grinning cop had robbed him of a new arm. And prison. Years of it, for wanting something most men took for granted. Two arms.

Words began tumbling out of him. All of the hate and despair and hopeless fury he'd been storing up in his soul for many months. It was all pointed at this cop and his blaster and it cut a wide swath in a spacer's meaty vocabulary.

The words broke off when that blaster-butt started smashing his face, rocking it from side to side.

He moved back fast, first—then he got in one good left before a crack on the head buckled his knees.

"Lay off, Jake." The other cop brushed his partner aside and hauled Ric up on his feet. "Get back in the bar and see that the rest of them are rounded up."

In the big room the late stragglers were being lined up

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into a disconsolate row in front of the bar. The uniformed cop in there started to hustle them out.

Putter, the young doortender, was close to tears. "Where you taking us?" Ric heard him demand, tightly.

A cop pushed him ahead and laughed. "Where do you think, punk? We got special pokeys for M-P freaks."

III

THE UNHAPPY huddle of users and potentials—there were eleven including Ric—were handled with contempt by the four officers, all with blasters at the ready. They were crammed into a landcar waiting in the back alley. In what had once been Candlestick Park, a baseball field, they were transferred to a plane for removal to the "special pokey" the cop had told Putter about.

Ric groped along the metal wall to find a vacant section of steel bench next to Putter.

As the metal giant jetted upwards in a shivering roar of thunder, Ric found his angry belly-knot of resentment subsiding as he looked at the youth beside him. Putter was skinny and big-eared and homely and, in spite of a swaggering bravado, Ric detected in him a bitter desperation. Capture by the Law had changed the desperation to utter hopelessness; his thin hands roved across his scrawny neck and shock of untidy blond hair; his eyes stared in bleak horror. Ric's open empathy for other humans hadn't been used much lately, but now it moved out toward Putter.

"Cigarette?" he proffered the limp half of a pack.

Putter started shaking his head, then changed his mind and nodded. He groped out one and lit it, tight-eyed.

"Thanks."

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"You're a user?" Ric asked, keeping his voice down so that the two guards at the rear wouldn't hear them.

"Yes." Putter's voice was dry, throaty. "But not enough, yet."

Ric was aware now in the half-light that the boy's skin didn't glow with that swamp-fire argence; nor did any of the others', for that matter.

"You've got special problems?"

The boy's cheekbones stuck out as his hollow jaw tautened. "I was born with it. My father worked in a hydrogen reactor plant. The San Andreas fault kicked up one night; there was a crack they didn't notice until some of the men got over-hot. You know, radiation. Pop died from it. Just after that I was born. There was something wrong with my bones, something like pernicious anemia. I take shots. I'll hang on for a while, but every year's a present. When I met Rolff he told me M-P would cure it completely. It has before, lots of times, at the camps."

"But you haven't taken enough?"

"Not for something bad like I got. It's like a miracle, Rolff said. But even miracles take time." His bony fingers made tight balls. "I was going to be in the next bunch, Rolff promised. But, hell, there's so many who need it. We got to be so damn careful, and there just ain't enough M-P camps!"

Ric got the picture. The boy, in spite of orthodox medical treatment, was dying by inches. No hope at all. Then—Rolff, and the fungi. Who wouldn't grab at straws? Ric looked around at the silent misery lined up on the twin benches in the ship's belly and saw the picture duplicated nine more times. In spite of prodigious strides in medical knowledge there were thousands and tens of thousands who needed more than that—they needed *miracles*. Like Putter.

"Where are these camps?" Ric asked.

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Putter shrugged. "Nobody knows. Well, I guess the pilots who make the pickups know and Dr. Krill knows, and maybe a few others. They're spotted around in secret places. Also, there are lots of smaller outlets, guys like Rolff, trying to help out. These guys here were all waiting for their shots or hoping to get on the list for one of the camps—where they wouldn't have to sneak around like criminals!" The boy's voice welled up in bitterness. "Just because we want to live. That's all we ask—to live, like anybody else. The medics can't help us so we're to die, just to prove *they're* right and Dr. Krill's wrong!"

Putter's shaking hand dropped his smoke-butt; he hunched his spine, hiding his face from an inimical world.

Ric chewed on what he'd learned. There were M-P camps, clandestine villages where desperate men and women and children could go to take the drug openly. But not enough of them, so that many thousands sneaked into alley-holes like Rolff's place for their shots and waited and dreamed of getting on a camp list.

All we ask is to live, Putter had said. Ric's jaws tightened. Hours ago all Ric had asked was to die. . . .

Ric guessed that they'd crossed the Imperial Valley and had reached a desert area near the Salton Sea, by the time the airwagon began to drop. He envisioned a pattern of muzzy yellow lights stabbing the wet sky, felt the lurch as the gyros took over, a jolt of the spinal column when the craft thudded, landing.

They were hustled out. Ric was next to Putter. The boy staggered to his knees under a sudden dizzy spell when it came to his turn to hop out onto what must be the prison's roof; Ric grabbed him and pulled him to the side until he recovered. The others shuffled on through the wet dark, lighted by blurry searchlights and hand torches.

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"You okay now?" Ric asked gently.

"I'll make it. Thanks."

The last of the prisoners was moving into a hooded concrete stairwell. One guard waited, beckoned impatiently.

"Keep your pants on!" Ric growled. He kept his good arm around Putter and didn't hurry.

The bullet-headed guard was shoving them into the concrete roof hut when behind them somebody snapped out, "Hold it!"

It was the pilot. They turned, waited. The guard growled something under his breath.

The pilot, a thin sharp-faced man in a black uniform, moved under the glow of the hut light and up to Ric. He gave Ric a narrow, penetrating look.

"You are Ric Colt?"

Ric nodded, frowning. How had he found that out? Ship's radio, maybe.

Ric nodded. "So?"

The pilot flashed a quick look at the guard. "You take the punk. I'll handle this one."

"But—"

"Shut up!" the pilot snapped. "Get going!"

The guard scowled as he started grabbing Putter, roughly, to make up for the implied humiliation.

"The boy stays with me," Ric said.

The pilot gave him a slitted look. Ric moved in front of Putter and stayed there. Putter leaned against the wall, too pale and beat to care what happened. Ric's mind was busy. Whoever was behind that hypno-ad knew all about him, didn't want him to kill himself. Wanted to help him, maybe. They had passed the word to their pilot by some kind of covert radio, during their flight. Ric was special. Well, they'd damn well make Putter special too. He owed the kid something. It was in Putter's face that any length of time, how-

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ever brief, in this prison and without his M-P shots, would kill him. Ric couldn't help them all. But he might be able to help Putter.

The black uniformed pilot read that in the set of Ric's jaw, in his hard even look.

"Okay." He gave a faint shrug and motioned the guard to go down the stairs. When the guard vanished he beckoned for Ric and Putter to follow him across the wide turreted roof toward the far end. Two flunkies in coveralls appeared. He motioned them to unshroud a smaller ship.

"Get in," he told Ric.

"Where are we going?"

"Never mind. You'll find out when we get there."

Ric helped Putter climb aboard the four-seater and took the bucket seat next to him, just behind their hawk-faced pilot. Putter huddled against the window, white-lipped and weak. As they lifted into the muzzling dark again, Ric's mind searched for answers. There weren't any answers outside the rain-smearred window of the small fast-moving craft. Nor were there any to be had from the pilot.

This much Ric could figure out for himself. The M-P outlaw groups had spies and agents in the minions of the Law itself. Their pilot was one. They made routine airlifts of users and hauled them to the M-P camps. There was money behind all of it. Money and fanatical determination. Also there was a guiding genius. And one thing in his favor was that the Law was still in the bumbling stages before full-scale war. But soon the Law would catch up. It had all the aces. And when it did . . .

The pilot maintained his cautious silence to all of Ric's careful proddings, as the craft flung its way south, his best reaction an indifferent shrug. Ric thought now he must be a paid menial, likely a pilot tossed out of the Union and without proper license. He would have to be on the run from

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the Law himself to take a job like this, and whoever had hired him knew this fact and used it to keep him in line. No use even trying to get anything out of him. He found it healthier to keep his lips tightly buttoned.

Putter was snoring now, but Ric's nervous system was all keyed up. His eyes were sharp and bright, and they snapped back and forth from the wet dark outside to the back of the pilot's sturdy neck. His training told him they were winging south, and a glimpse at the instruments corroborated the guess—southeast.

When they bumped into a series of air pockets and a lashing rainstorm, Ric put his geography to work and decided they must be in old Mexico and the mountains under them must be the Sierra Madres. What had once been the Republic of Mexico was now a central division of United America. There were sections of Sonora and Chihuahua and the rugged areas further south which were virtually untouched by civilization. Some of these *indio* areas still were untouched by modern technology. The inhabitants lived agrarian Biblical lives. The genius who had selected such an area for his M-P camp, isolated yet easily and quickly accessible, was to be congratulated.

With a heart-twinge, Ric thought about Candi. Candida Lucas-Long, Doctor of Biochemistry. Alan was so preoccupied with his research he took the tall green-eyed beauty to be part of the lab furniture. Not so Ric. He fell and fell hard, right from the first.

Ric gave his head an angry shake. He mustn't think about Candi. She and Alan were doubtless married now and busily occupied in living happily ever after. Yet . . . That last night, the eve of his fateful Port Mars run—something in those lambent emerald eyes had sent Ric off singing lark-songs and mere inches from the certainty that she had made up her heart and that he was the one, not Alan. . . .

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For emotional distraction he jerked a look out beyond where Putter snored away. And saw—stars. Great flinty sharp fields of stars, so that for a wrenching moment he thought he was spaceside again. No. Couldn't be. But they were out of the storm, clear out, and moving eastward fast. Below, Ric glimpsed reaches of starlit desert, the cactus-tops eerily white-tipped.

"Zacatecas," Ric decided aloud, as the ship made an abrupt downward plunge, then began skirting canyon walls, darting and searching.

In a while the pilot found what he was looking for in the jigsaw; he nosed down through a washboard of air-holes, and Ric saw mist blanketing the basalt rock, and beneath it, a long patch of green and brown and yellow. The plateau was roughly rectangular and it hung on the lip of a cliff that dropped away many hundreds of yards straight down. At the terminus of the deep canyon, Ric glimpsed a faint zig-zag ribbon of silver water.

Nearer, he caught a sharp breath to see that the green-brown-yellow landing strip was painted, artistically camouflaged to match the surrounding verdure, even to three-dimensional Daliesque rises and potholes. What struck him hardest was the size of the strip; it had been engineered to accommodate even spacecraft.

"The end of the line." The wooden-faced pilot twisted around and spoke for the first time, and there was an odd twist to his mouth.

Ric nudged Putter awake and they descended. The pilot left the ship to the attendants who came running out from the cliff-line. He swung off toward the seemingly solid rock-wall.

"Where we going?" Putter wondered.

"We'll find out when we get there."

As they sloughed across the camouflage in the wind, Ric

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imagined he heard, above the moaning of the wind in the canyon, a shrill unearthly piping. There was a melancholy tune to it, in whole-tone scale; like some half-mythical folklore creature greeting them from his secret lair here at the top of the world. Ric stopped, listening. It was Putter who located its source, pointing.

"Look!"

Straight ahead of them, on a narrow grassy ledge thirty feet up the wall, surrounded by goats, was a boy in hooded sheepskin, playing on a primitive herdsman's pipe. When the pilot gave the boy a hand signal the cowed figure stood up and played again; this time the melody was a happy spirited air.

While the pilot waited a few yards ahead, the dark cliff-wall moved. It opened to the signal. The pilot moved rapidly into a well-tooled arch, like a mine shaft, and Ric and Putter followed after. The shaft angled down at a twenty-degree angle, and there were yellow lights glowing at intervals, attached to the smooth walls.

It was a long but easy pull; then they burst out into clean mountain air again. Putter squeaked like a mouse at what they saw; Ric sucked in a gasp.

Ahead, in the wash of new dawn, stretched a wide green valley, dotted at its center with adobe dwellings and other buildings landscaped in a circular pattern. There were carefully cultivated gardens and budding trees; all covered by soft morning mist that gave the scene a dreamlike quality. Near the center of the neat pastel-colored buildings was a random triple-street of older adobe huts. This nucleous, Ric guessed without much trouble, must be the original little village. Tucked away up here in this isolated valley, self-sustaining by virtue of the rich loamy soil and mountain springs and rivers, it had existed for many hundreds of years—until the M-P people found it and enlarged it and modi-

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fied it by super-technology and fanatical man-labor into an important M-P colony. Perhaps the main one.

Putter shouted his joy. He grabbed Ric's arm. "Look up there—way up to the top of the cliffs!"

Ric obeyed and puckered his mouth to an involuntary whistle. Up there was a shroud of mist that could only be man-created, to shield the colony from the prying eyes of passing aircraft. And below the mist itself was layer after layer of translucent netting, skillfully colored in elusive combinations of reds and grays and browns and greens.

"Clever," Ric opined. "Damn clever!"

The pilot led them to one of the larger buildings and a stocky oriental in a pastel green uniform bowed and grinned at them. The pilot vanished and the oriental led them to a small cheerful room with two beds. There was an adjoining bathroom, all functional and sparkling clean. There were green uniforms for them to put on after washing up.

Putter showered briefly, then went straight to bed. Ric looked down at the emaciated figure curled up foetally under the pastel green covering and sighed his hope that Putter had at last found his dream.

Ric bathed and put on his uniform. He was a little surprised to find the hall door unlocked, somehow. Like the whole concept of M-P, Ric found all this too good to be true. In his space-tough lexicon, life didn't work like that. There was a catch to everything, and if things came too easy—watch out.

He prowled out and down the hall.

Everything was immaculate. The green doors had blank imperturbable faces. Everything was green. Somebody loved that color, or considered it psychologically right.

Rounding a corner Ric caught sight of a slim figure in a lab smock moving through a doorway at the far end of the hall. Ric gave a yell. The man turned slowly, then, without

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a sign of recognition, moved through the doorway and closed it behind him.

Ric went to the door. It was locked.

Ric fell asleep wondering why Alan hadn't even bothered to say hello.

IV

RIC WAS WOLFING a breakfast of *chorizo* and eggs with Putter in the cafeteria-like dining room, empty at this hour. He wondered why the food tasted so food. Then he remembered his nearness to death and the desultory way he had taken meals in the hospital. To live was to eat.

"There comes our Chinese buddy," he told Putter.

"Hope he's got good news," Putter said anxiously.

"You'll be okay," Ric assured him. Now that the boy was here, list or no list, they'd take him in the fold.

The oriental moved up to them and curved a fat finger in Putter's direction. Putter scrambled to his feet. Ric called "Good luck," after him and meant it. The boy deserved a break. For the sake of the human race one could but hope that the miracles of M-P were true. Ric frowned this over while he poured out more coffee from the self-heater.

An invisible voice pulled him to his feet.

"Dr. Alan Tork can see you now," it said.

"About time," Ric told the blank walls. "I was beginning to wonder."

"Just follow the Keen."

"What's the Keen?"

His answer was an aggravating banshee wail that didn't come from anywhere in particular. It pulled him. It dragged him out of the cafeteria and down the hall.

Ric moved under its impulse through a labyrinth of halls

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and across a garden court to another low building. When he reached the right door the Keen cut off sharp. Ric opened the door and stepped in.

The nose-twitching chemical smells reminded him forcefully of Alan. Yes. There he was, hunched over a long cluttered white table. Just like in the old days.

He looked up.

"Alan! You son of a robot!"

Alan smiled thinly. His narrow face was gaunt and his sandy hair less messy than Ric remembered because there was less of it. His pale wide forehead gleamed under the spiral light above his stool. Those clear blue eyes still seemed to look right through you into some other plane of existence, vaguely annoyed by reality. They showed a flicker of gladness, then misted and became almost furtive.

One thing sure, Ric thought. Alan wasn't a user.

"Nice to see you at last," Alan said.

"Why haven't I heard from you?" Ric exploded. "You could have written or visphoned."

"Not from here," Alan smiled bleakly. "Secrecy is our watchword."

Ric moved up to massage his friend's smocked shoulders. "Okay. Get it. But last night?"

Alan gave a darting glance around them. "I—I wasn't supposed to be—" He broke off with a forced smile. "We have our rules. Security rules, you understand." A twinge crossed his lips and italics appeared between his eyes when he took Alan's right hand.

"Ric, I—"

"Never mind." Ric lumped a lot of forgiving into those two words. He found himself a stool and pulled it close to Alan. "Now. How about some information?"

Some of the remembered blue fire lit up Alan's eyes. "I guess you've earned that. Where do I start?"

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"You were the one who put the hypno-ad flier onto me, weren't you?"

"Yes. I wanted you here. But first you had to be in shape and the whole thing had to be worked secretly. *Their* way."

"Get it."

"I kept a constant check on you, Ric. All the time you were at the hospital, through one of our *spies*." He grinned wryly. "This cloak and dagger stuff is necessary. You know about the anti-laws. We didn't dare risk exposure. Gilead is the main colony."

"Gilead," Ric murmured. "*There is a Balm in Gilead. . .*" He moved uneasily. "Now tell me about the fungi. How did all this get started? I don't see *you* as—"

Alan frowned. "Not me. No." He sighed and plunged into words. "Routine research with the fungi occasioned consultations with researchers in many fields outside of mine. M-P was utterly new, alien-new. It demanded explorative experimentation in every area. As you know, I'm not a medical man. This area led me to Dr. Morton Krill."

"Krill's private hospital in Mendocino was handy and his work in metabolics and cellular regeneration outstanding. He worked a lot in gerontology. Some of his methods in retarding the aging process in humans came in for a lot of criticism, but we scientists are used to that. Most of his patients at his Mendocino hospital were old, many given up as terminal by other medics. Many were wealthy and able to contribute generously to the cause."

"Get it," Ric said. "Anything to keep the pump pumping and the cells growing."

"That's it. I joined Dr. Krill at his hospital for a time, at his request. I'm still with him." Alan's lips were tight, his eyes somber.

"Go on," Ric said gently.

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"In our routine experiments with rodents and simians we soon discovered that in every case the subject's health improved. Some improved so fast that the heart burst. We had many failures, of course, until we learned to control the dosage. A hamster who'd been maimed by a companion, one of the new super-breed, had a foot torn off. Under the drug the foot grew back!"

"Wow!" Ric touched his plast-arm.

"We knew now that what we were dealing with was earth-shaking. Still there was a long way to go. I advised extreme caution when it came to human subjects. Not Krill. Patients were dying who could be saved. It was criminal to wait. Without my consent he went ahead on his own. Some died. Krill rationalized it by saying they were terminal in any case and they died for a great cause. He pointed out that the neo-cancer strains are still killing many thousands monthly, that microbial and viral forms are still battling us, mutating as fast as we discover cures for them. Then of course there are accidents, lost limbs, and degenerative organs that need replacing and can't be built artificially. Plus our arch-enemy—old age."

"He had a point."

Alan nodded. "We found ourselves facing a great cross-road. A millenium. A new dawn. Conquerors of death and disease on a sweeping scale. Especially when our old folks practically leaped out of their beds to kiss Dr. Krill's hands."

"I get the picture," Ric said.

"One thing Krill agreed to do was keep it a careful secret. Should the news leak out you can imagine what the reaction would be!" Alan rubbed the cherubic cleft in his chin. "I lost here, as well. Turned out that Dr. Krill had injected himself with the fungi, early in the game. He is such an—an ebullient person that the characteristic *joie de vivre* an M-P user experiences wasn't noticeable. Not at first."

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"You couldn't keep a thing like this secret very long," Ric interjected thoughtfully. "Then there's the fact of all those people dying who might be saved. Moral responsibility, and all that."

"Don't you suppose I spent many sleepless nights mulling over all this?" Alan reproached. "But we weren't ready yet. We had to be sure there wouldn't be some terrible secondary reaction. You know me. I'm not an organization man. I'm happiest in my little lab, poking and probing. If the results of my probing help mankind I'm very happy about it. But I have no interest in glory-grabbing. And I was determined not to let the fungi which I brought back to this planet be misused. Besides the economic chaos it could cause if it were flung out *en masse*, it might be turned into a political football. Above all, it must not become controlled by swindlers!

"Dr. Morton Krill is different. He is a man of resolution, dynamic action. Once he was aware of the fierce loyalty his old people displayed for him he—well, maybe it started something working in his brain. His already brilliant capacities became supernormal, under the impetus of the fungi. . . ."

"In other words, he took over."

"Yes. What could I do? I had to trail along. Through relatives of the cured people it became obvious that there was something remarkable going on. They came to visit. Maybe some were marking time, waiting for their grandparents to kick off. They were astonished to find them dancing fandangos instead. It became impossible soon to hush the facts, and Dr. Krill decided to go whole hog. He hired the best image-makers in the ad business and pushed M-P up to the status of a household word. Until—"

"Came the reaction."

Alan nodded. "There were a lot of reasons and Dr. Krill

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preconceived them well in advance and laid his plans accordingly."

"The medics were certain there was a joker in the pack someplace."

"Not only that, but consider the sociological upheaval. Half of our world business is based on the premise of people living to such-and-such an age, of so many dying of such-and-such. Insurance charts go insane. You can't upset the status quo overnight and prevent chaos. Dr. Krill realized this. I think he realized it right from the first. But he wanted the world to know that M-P did exist and even, more subtly, that it continued to flourish undercover.

"M-P took on the aspect of a new religion. It had its martyrs, its godheads, its secret conclaves, just as the Christians had theirs, in the catacombs outside ancient Rome. Only this new religion didn't give people promises of pie in the sky—it gave them its miraculous benefits *now!*"

Ric whistled.

"How many of these colonies are there?"

"Twenty-eight, at last count. Then there is the Port Mars plant that distributes the live spores and the synthesized fluid, and the Cave. That's heavily guarded since Dr. Krill bought it from Plorix Incorporated. Since it's personal property the local law doesn't interfere, presuming it to be inactive. I imagine, also, that—"

"I know," Ric grunted. "The old payola. Port Mars is famous for the bribe bit." As a busy clearinghouse for import and export from a dozen thinly colonized but heavily exploited worlds, Mars had its own perverted style of policing, and the UN grumbled but politely turned its eyes to problems less complex and closer to home.

"Of course the twenty-eight colonies are only the above-water islands. Megalopoli such as Calcity are rampant with secret users who get their injections at hidden alley-holes."

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"I know, I know," Ric assured him. "How many users would you judge Dr. Krill has under his thumb by now?"

Alan winced and raised a cautionary hand. "Let's be careful what we say, shall we?" His eyes narrowed and made blue sparks; his eyebrows tilted.

Ric pulled in a sharp breath. "Oh." He looked around at the light green walls, which were bare and innocent. "Oh," he said again.

"Yes," Alan nodded. "To answer your question, I would guess in the neighborhood of two or three million. It might run as high as ten million. I have no way of knowing. Of course, the number is moving up very rapidly. So many desperate, miserable wretches in the world."

"Must have cost a lot of money. Just building and supplying units like this one. Not to mention the pickers-up, Mars transports, and payoffs."

"Dr. Krill took his cue from the adoration his old people displayed at the hospital. Most of them were rich. He concentrated on elderly millionaires with discreet invitations. As to labor, no problem here. M-P users who might be dead or crippled will, and do, work twelve hours a day at whatever jobs he chooses for them. And being supremely healthy, they can take it. They are constantly reminded how lucky they are by signs in their dormitories, and by Dr. Krill's voice in his inspirational morning talks over the invisible wall-radio.

"Yes, to users Gilead is heaven. Right here. Attempts to stifle such a thing only strengthen it, as you know. They see the results with their own eyes, feel it in their own boundless good health."

"So what's wrong then?" Ric demanded.

"Nothing."

"No? Have you ever tried MP? And if not, why not?"

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V

ALAN'S FROWNING SHRUG was his only answer for the moment. Ric grimaced at the blank sterile wall.

"Is Dr. Krill here in Gilead? Now?"

"Yes."

"Will I see him?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you ever see him?"

"Not much, these days. He's very busy."

"I'm sure he is."

Ric scowled in silent thought for a few moments, while Alan went back to his work, or pretended to. Ric noticed that his hands didn't seem too steady, nor were the things they did decisive.

Alan was not a user, that fact was pointedly significant. He could put it down to not needing it, but that didn't ring true, either. From the looks of his haggard face Alan could use a little of that boundless energy and *joi de vivre* the users exhibited.

Here he was, a sort of captive in a bugged lab. Why? Why hadn't he left Dr. Krill back at the Mendocino hospital? Why trundle down here to the wilds of Mexico along with Dr. Morton Krill's re-animated octogenerians and other assorted disciples? He hadn't been forced here at the point of a gun, had he? No. There was some other reason, something that had to do with Alan's high sense of morality and responsibility. He was involved in Dr. Krill's Great Plan, whatever that might be; and he had started it by bringing the fungi back to Earth and giving it to him. He was responsible, in a way, for what was now happening all over the world. He must be watchful; he must be sure that the tremendous power Dr. Krill had unleashed was not misused. In order to

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do this he must stay close to Dr. Krill, here at the nucleus of the fast-spreading cult. . . .

That must be it, Ric decided.

Another thing. Candida. She was always on his mind, like a happy hurt.

"Where is she?" he blurted.

Alan blinked up from his work. "Candida?"

"Who else? I thought you two would be married by now."

Alan's narrow jaw tightened. "You're something of a dope, Ric, for a trained tech."

"Don't try and tell me it's been me all along! Candi's been hanging on your every word these many years. If you told her to stick her hand in a vat of boiling acid she would do it."

Alan laughed hollowly. "If I told her anything like that there would be an excellent scientific reason. Candida knows that. Use your brain, Ric. Candida is a fine, dedicated bio-research scientist. She admires my work. We think alike, in the lab. We understand each other. We mesh. As for the woman, Candida's light-years away from me. If I love her, that's my misfortune. Not yours. Not Candida's."

Ric's heart galloped. His sympathy for Alan, guessing at once how much Alan did love the green-eyed goddess, could not help being overwhelmed by leaping joy that caught in his throat and made it hard to think straight, much less talk.

"So why wasn't she there when I needed her so much, holding the hand I didn't have?"

"She wanted to be, believe me. But there was really nothing we could do. You were having the best care possible, and our time was taken up here. We both gave every minute to something related to the fungi discovery. Something we pushed to a conclusion by working night and day. Something for you, Ric!"

"What—"

"Come and see for yourself."

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Ric followed him wonderingly into another lab, a large room that seemed to have been planned and dedicated to one particular purpose. To one side was a great tank which was fed by color-coded pipes from great vats hung above it. Alan pointed. Ric looked down. When a light leaped on Ric saw, through a rectangle of plastic or glass, floating free in gently seething fluids, a rigid length of pale flesh anchored to a steel and plastic shoulder. A translucent shoulder, so that Ric saw an intricate network of veins and arteries and fine nerve threads running into it, fed from the vats overhead.

"What is it?" Ric asked, staring.

"Your new arm. See the hand? We got the measurements from photographs you didn't know existed, and through evidence assimilated from all your body measurements. To all intents and purposes it will be your old arm. The preliminary tissue specimens we grew it from came from *you*. From the hospital. We've got spies there, as I said."

"You grew it!"

Alan nodded. "From your own body cells. I'd been working under UN grants in fields allied with cybernetics and cellular growth for some time. When you lost your arm because I dragged you up to the Polar Cave, I dropped everything to work on this. So did Candida."

"But—how in the—!"

"The fungi put us on the track. The basis for its remarkable power is that it acts as a growth catalyst on the glands that promote cellular regeneration."

"Then—if you manage to transplant that arm on me I'll be a user?"

Alan shook his head. "No. I didn't say we actually used the fungi on it. But the fungi experiments pointed the way. So, ironically, while M-P lost you your arm it also helped you get one back. I hope."

"You mean you're not sure my body will accept it?"

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Alan nodded. "That's been the *bête noir* of medical transplanting for a hundred years or more. But I'm not using tissue from a close relative. I'm growing cells from your own body. Muscle. Blood cells. Nerve cells. In a way that arm *is* you, already."

"When?" Ric gulped. "Now?"

"Sorry. We need some more sample tissue from you, to feed in. There are a few finishing touches before we can start on the painful job of fussion. Meanwhile—now about a look around the grounds? Dr. Krill's proud of what his workers have done here in Gilead in such a short time."

On their brisk walk about the circle-patterned city of green and brown buildings and neat gardens, Ric listened to Alan's rambling spiel of the communal life Gilead provided for the M-P users, who toiled cheerfully and endlessly in the fields, barns, and kitchens. It was a healthy, outdoor life. Virtually all the necessities were produced on the colony.

Once they passed a bower of roses and ivy. Ric looked in curiously at an arched cairn of round stones. It looked suspiciously like a shrine. On a stone at the back was an image carved out of wood. It was a man, of rather less than medium height, stocky, wearing a modern tunic but with an off-shoulder cape that suggested classical Grecian times. The face was a trifle wide, but stylized into lines of great nobility.

"Dr. Krill?"

Alan sighed and nodded. "The sculptor has never seen him, of course. But they spend a good deal of time gossiping about what they have heard via the grapevine." He shrugged and gestured Ric on. "They call Dr. Krill, Father. Father doesn't approve of this sort of thing. He will have this removed. But then in a few days another one will spring up somewhere else."

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"Still, it might give a man ideas."

"It might," Alan agreed grimly.

Ric shot a look around the curving paths and across the saffron-misted fields where the city ended and the vegetable gardens began. He wondered just how far the bugging of their conversation extended. Far enough, he decided. No point in taking chances. Alan was being innocuous and careful.

"Hi!" a blithe voice shouted, as they moved past an elephant's-eye-high cornfield down a path between fields of fresh-turned earth.

Ric turned and saw Putter perched on a plow-hitched tractor, waving and grinning.

"Hey, Putter! How you doing?" Ric yelled.

The skinny boy called back: "Perfect! Thanks to you, I made it!"

"Good show."

They moved onto the concrete path that wound up to the plateau tunnel.

"Everybody's happy as jaybirds," Ric stated. "It's like Eden."

"Eden had its—problems."

Halfway to the tunnel-mouth Alan took Ric's arm and pointed back at the valley in a grandiose sweep. "I want you to see the panoramic view. Isn't it something?"

Obediently, Ric shaded his eyes from the afternoon sun and looked again at the neat pattern of buildings and the gardens. "I saw it from up there, when we came in. I was impressed and I still am. But—"

Alan's clutch on his arm tightened. "Never mind!" he whispered fiercely, changed. "I didn't bring you up here for the view! Far as I know Dr. Krill hasn't got around to wiring this far up. His people never come up here. They don't even want to think about leaving Gilead."

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"So—?"

"We haven't got much time. Keep admiring the view while I talk. If we stay too long they'll have somebody up here. I'm watched every second. That's why I didn't talk to you in the hall this morning. I was making one of my tries at finding out Krill's secret!"

"What secret?"

"Listen! There's something about the fungi that Krill discovered and I haven't. Maybe he found out by using it." Alan kept pointing out sites of interest like a moon-guide making his spiel for the tourists. "Krill took M-P before we had honed down the tests. Something happened to him. A change. In a confiding moment, full of bloated ego, he hinted to me that there was some odd power involved in the fungi—something *strange*. Something nobody but he knows because he keeps strict control over it. He doesn't mind my not using it because he doesn't want me to find out **what it is!**"

"If you took it you might be like him."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'm responsible for bringing it here, and the responsibility is an albatross around my neck. That's why I stick to Krill like glue. I've got to find out his secret and you've got to help me!"

Ric scowled in thought. "Suppose I took a shot and—"

"For God's sake, Ric, *no!* Whatever you do, don't touch it until we find out!"

"What about Candi?"

"She's not a user, either. Since she might guess, Krill doesn't want her to become one, either. In spite of constant bugging and surveillance, Candida and I have a tacit understanding between us. We wanted you here, Ric. To give you that new arm, of course. And to help!"

"Where is Candi now?" Ric demanded. "Why can't I see her?"

"She's not here. Krill had some important new work for

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her at Port Mars. She hated to go and not see you, but Krill insisted. This new project is something big. Part of a Master Plan—

"To get everybody on M-P?"

"God knows. The secret is still locked in that Polar Cave. Listen, Ric! My job's to stick here with Krill. Yours is to get back to the Cave, somehow. Find out what is behind all of this. . . ."

"For this I get a new arm," Ric mused. He rubbed his beard stubble briskly. "What about bringing in the Law?"

"The UN police might kill off a few users, stamp out some of the colonies. But I doubt they'd catch Krill. He's mostly just an invisible voice. And they wouldn't get to the core of the secret."

A wasp's buzz from the direction of the Gilead core made them both turn. A small copter was lifting abruptly from a slid-back roof down there. It moved purposefully in their direction.

"He's dispatched somebody up here to check on us," Alan said crisply. "We won't get a chance to talk again, unmonitored. So don't say anything you wouldn't want Dr. Krill to hear. And don't trust anybody. Not *anybody!*"

The one-man craft eased down on them; the bubble opened and a smiling user in a light green uniform stepped out.

"As I was telling you," Ric murmured, "Dr. Krill impresses me as a great benefactor to all mankind."

VI

RIC SPENT most of the next few weeks flat on his back, on the crest of a wave of ceaseless, poignant agony. He might as well be back in the space hospital, he groaned, except—Alan kept reminding him over and over—this time the tor-

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ture was constructive. The pain had to be there; it could be muted by drugs but not wholly absent, because each spasm of muscle or twitch of a nerve registered on the Dr. Frankenstein machine to which he was hooked up, and told Alan and his hawk-eyed assistant, Dr. Lambert Furr, that bone and tissue and arterial were knitting and that his body was accepting the lab-created member for its own.

Ric's torso bitterly resented the intruder. Try as he did to convince it cerebrally and psychologically that it would be glad later on, it fought back.

After a solid week of effort and vigil, Alan collapsed. Dr. Furr took over. He was eminently qualified to take over the finalizing stages, Alan knew that, but that ever-present user's smile put Ric's teeth on edge.

"Take it easy!" Ric bellowed, when the moon-faced young medic poked at recalcitrant nerve tendrils with the enthusiasm of a county coroner with a fresh corpse.

Furr clucked his tongue and laughed. "Everything is knitting beautifully! Beautifully!"

"It hurts, damn it."

"Never mind; tonight I'll give you something to help you sleep. Your body needs rest more than anything, now. Rest."

"Thanks," Ric said, fervently.

The world was mint-new and beautiful when he awakened after a round-the-clock sleep. Morning sun outside of his window glistened on verdure and sent little nebulas of steam up from the brown paths and the green adobe walls. His new arm was still numb, but that, Alan assured him, would pass. By effort he managed to twitch the muscles in his thumb and forefinger. That was all he needed right now.

It would come. The stars were his again. Gilead was a place of miracles, fungi or no fungi.

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Alan watched him eat his first solid breakfast in weeks, with eyes that gleamed triumph.

"Father!"

The chanting voices drifted from around the corner of the open window.

"Greetings, my children," said a deep, benevolent voice.

Ric's fork stopped halfway. "What is it?"

"See for yourself." Alan beckoned Ric out of his convalescent chamber to the front side of the lab. Ric looked down from the quasi-balcony. Below them the wide central plaza was lined with neat columns of men, women, and children, all wearing the same pastel green tunic. The morning light, sifting between the camouflage-nets at the cliff-tops, glowed softly, on thousands of eager uplifted faces. They were silent now, breathlessly intent.

The voice out of nowhere came again.

"My dear friends! My children!"

"Father!" they chanted in ecstasy.

"I greet you again before our day of happy toil begins," the deep voice intoned, with a sense of inner power and paternal warmth. "We are all happy here in Gilead, are we not?"

"Yes!" The affirmation was a great roar to the topmost crag.

The rich voice was deliberately slow in coming. Each word was a pearl. "We are happy because we are healthy. Our bodies and our minds are free from all ills. That is as it should be. That is as it *will* be for all mankind!"

"Father!"

"I thank you for your love and your trust. Now, each one of us must dedicate this bright day to his tasks. With sustained courage and hope, and with the realization that he is participating in the beginning of a new and glorious Earth!

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There are greater miracles to come, my children. All of you shall become the vanguard of a new super race!"

There was more, a hint that the time was drawing near when the whole world would not only accept them with open arms but would revere them as courageous pioneers. All the while this benevolent voice rang out across the wide valley Ric squirmed. The verbiage was familiar and distasteful, somehow. It smacked of bad old times, of dictators who cozened their followers with "superior race" nonsense.

Yet Dr. Krill *was* different from them. He not only promised, he gave. He pulled thousands out of the jaws of death. He healed the sick, the blind, the lame. He gave them a well-being few humans enjoy beyond middle age. M-P had its effect on the mind, as well. It relieved them of the ever-present horror of death. New technologies created their own kinds of terror. The primitive fears of the dark and the unknown were still there.

"It wasn't *him!*" Ric muttered fiercely, watching the mob file off to their tasks, blessed and refreshed.

"No. But he put the fungi to work. He pushed the thing forward. And the human soul needs a father image to look up to. Something greater than itself. Something to blame for its own shortcomings, something to run to for forgiveness. Call it God. Or—"

"Or call it Dr. Krill."

Alan gave him a sharp significant look. Every word they spoke was being taped for careful analysis by Father.

"When do I get to meet him?" Ric wondered aloud.

"I don't know."

"Can't you arrange it?"

Alan's smile was tight, sardonic. "I'm not one of the apostles. I have my uses, but I'm on the outside looking in. You, too."

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"Then it looks like we'll just have to wait until Father gets ready to turn us on."

As his new arm flexed into active use and became part of him his impatience mounted. He resented having Dr. Krill to thank for it, even in part. But the rankling obligation was there, all the same. *Why?* Ric wondered. *Why had Krill made it possible?*

The turn-on came around two at night. Alan shook Ric awake.

"Get up, Ric! This is it!"

Ric climbed out of bed, yawning. He groped toward the shower. "What is what?"

"We've got company. Martian company!"

"An M-P shipment?"

"No. The synthesized M-P comes here on regular transports to Calc City, with legitimate cargo, then it's rerouted here. This ship is very special. Soon as they get it readied—off we go!"

"We?"

"Yes. Both of us!"

While he let the cold needles of water drench him awake and added a brisk toweling to complete the job, Ric felt his heart pound the way it hadn't in many months. To feel the shudder of rockets under him again! To view the splash of star-suns against the black deeps! It had been so long. So damn long!

"I'll get to see Candi!" he cried out.

"I imagine so. Apparently Dr. Krill wants us both up at the Port Mars unit at this stage of the game. Things are moving to a head." Alan laughed shortly. "And I thought I had served my term and was about to be discarded."

Gilead's machine-made mists hung over the plateau land-strip heavier than ever to shroud the long whale-shaped

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spaceship that pointed spaceward. Ric kept Alan at the run as they moved after the officers and crew toward the open hatch. Wind nagged across the painted field and up on his perch Ric heard the goatherd piping his song to the glimmering new dawn.

The ship lifted.

Ric grinned inwardly at the brazen openness of their landing at Port Mars. After the radio operator demanded and got permission and landing instructions from the Tower Authority, the vessel vectored its way to a neat down in the busy Port. The captain's false papers were accepted with alacrity by the Port's officials.

Ric was in his element. It was a joy, too, to be away from the bland smug environment of Gilead and back in this roaring ganglion. Elbowing with Alan through the fantastic wash of humans and non-humans from many worlds, Ric hummed a space chantey. Even Dr. Krill and his sinister secrets seemed unreal for the moment.

"What now?" he asked their captain, who accompanied them to the gated periphery of the noisy Port.

Captain Kunnick was a dapper little man with lead-gray, simian eyes. "An aircar's meeting us. I'm to drop you two off at Lief Swen Square. You'll be met."

His manner was patronizing and Ric boiled inwardly. The tunics both he and Alan had been given to wear suggested prosperous Earth merchants or maybe politicians on tour, but he wasn't either, and play-games made him impatient.

Captain Kunnick nodded them into the waiting aircar. Their flight across the wide pocket of mixed air that blanketed the city was rapid and silent. The car cushioned down in an empty drop-and-lift space in the Square.

"Wait here," Captain Kunnick directed, as they stepped down.

They found themselves in a gaggle of merchants and bug-

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eyed tourists with tri-di cameras, plus wary-eyed predators, aliens, and of course neat rows of wheeled robos.

"Right in front of the Space Emigration office," Ric told Alan, grinning. "There are more cops, public and private, on this patch of plaza than anywhere else in the solar system.

"What do we do?" Alan wondered.

"Act natural."

"What's natural?"

"Almost anything, here."

Ric nudged Alan forward in the direction of a great fountain, which spayed fine rust-red sand, not precious water. He snuggled the blaster Captain Kunnick had handed him just before they left the ship. It was concealed in his tunic under his left arm, readily accessible.

Ric appreciated what the weapon implied, that since he and Alan were after all outlaws and here illegally, they just might run into trouble. Ric was expected to get them out of it.

While they ambled forward Ric savored the fine taste of freedom and the pungent sights and smells of Port Mars. He shot Alan a paternal glance. Alan was nervous. Well, nobody would hurt him while Ric was around.

A space opened in the crowd and he saw her.

"Candi!"

She was standing a few yards from the fountain and when he yelled she turned and saw them. She waved. Ric's insides did flips. Candi had been sent to meet them. He hadn't dared hope for this!

She moved toward them, slowly, brushing her way. Smiling that catapult smile, in her white-flecked-with-green-gold tunic, she was all the goddesses personified. Tall, delightfully feminine, her movements were sinuous and graceful. And those sea-green eyes. Unique in space and time.

Ric was frankly pole-axed. Struck dumb. Immobilized.

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No wonder she kept herself hidden in a research lab. She was dangerous. Lethal.

Alan was bounding ahead toward her.

Ric watched. Something happened in those seconds, something over which he had no control whatsoever. His new arm moved.

It moved without his brain telling it to.

Moved under his tunic and pulled out the blaster Captain Kunnick had given him.

His arm pointed it at Alan.

His finger pressed the stud.

Alan dropped.

VII

RIC DIDN'T BUDGE for an eon that lasted just ten seconds. He couldn't. Around him in a gaggle of other dimensions people were rushing and roaring. First his head bent and he gaped down at his outstretched arm—the arm Alan had grown for him. That arm still held **onto the blaster** that had just killed Alan. Now, rock-steady, **the arm lowered and dropped the blaster**. Then it, too, shuddered like the rest of him.

If your right arm offend thee—cut it off.

Ric stifled a **whimper**. What could he do? He had just killed his best friend with **the physical part** of him that best friend had created for him by his genius. Why didn't all those people gathering leap on him and tear him to pieces? It was simple justice.

Candi was on her knees, cradling Alan's seared body in her arms. Moaning. Then all at once she was up on her feet, facing Ric with her beautiful face contorted, eyes green fire.

"You killed him! Why! Why! Why!"

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Someplace there was an answer but Ric's rocking mind was unable to grope it up out of his misery.

"Candi!" he shouted. "My arm! It—"

That was as far as they let him get. A growling breath and the creak of boots behind him alerted that part of his mind which was ever-tuned to danger. He whirled and dipped to recover the dropped blaster, but he didn't make it. A universe slammed down on his head and he had a split-second's preview of death.

The cell-box he woke in had a sour unwashed flavor clinging to the paintless surfaces. Ric groaned himself up on one elbow for a look.

His head was splitting, and no wonder. One side of it and the back of his neck were patched over with dry blood. His blood. His right hand, gingerly exploring, took away a red smear.

Blinking down at that hand brought it all back.

If your right hand offend thee—cut it off.

The knowing hurt worse than the bash on the head—much worse.

"I killed Alan," he moaned, dropping back on the smelly bunk-bed and snapping his eyes shut.

He refuted it, **denied it, pushed back** all the clocks in creation—but there it was again. It was just not possible that he could have done such a thing. But he *had*. Alan was the last person anybody but a sadistic lunatic could harm, *yet he had killed him*. Alan and he had been closer than brothers. Alan had provided him with the kill-weapon. His new arm. Irony piled on irony until his brain tottered.

"No!" he yelled, and leaped up. He was about to smash the offending hand against the cell wall when a voice spoke out of the dark shadows.

"You are in despair," the somber voice murmured. "Your

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soul is in torment for what you have done. You repent your evil deed but you shall receive no mercy. Not from your soul. Not from the Law."

Ric wondered for a moment if his mind had tumbled over that fine-line edge between sanity and madness.

"You know how the Law operates here in Mars, Richard Coltör," the voice went on. "Mars is a jumping-off place to many worlds and there is no time for long debative trials. Justice has to be swift and certain here. An eye for an eye. With so many alien types and so many criminals seeking refuge here the Law can take no chances. For example, your trial lasted seven minutes."

"My-trial-?" Ric muttered. "But I was unconscious!"

"So what if you were? Thirty-one witnesses saw you kill Dr. Alan Tork. Nine of these were Lawmen."

"But—"

"In one hour you will die, Richard Coltör. You will be taken from your cell and marched down the long corridor to the Doom Door. Behind the Doom Door you will become nothing. Nothing but a contemptible memory and a soul that can never know peace because it bears the Mark of Cain."

Ric whipped around, probing the half-dark. The voice came from the dark corridor beyond the cell bars. He strode to the barred door and curled his fingers around the corroded metal.

"Come on out where I can see you!" he cried.

Across, the shadow stirred, and a figure floated toward him. Floated, because his accusing nemesis was swathed in gray robes, and cowled, like a neo-monk. It was tall, more than eight feet tall, so that Ric gasped. It was like a Hamlet's ghost, faceless and terrible.

Ric sucked in air. "Who are you?" he managed.

"I am the Voice of Eternity."

Fanged horror clawed his throat. "Who—who sent you?"

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Was this some new kind of punishment invented by some sadistic outworld Lawman? Ghosts sent to torment you, rub it in?

The figure moved still closer and Ric saw that it did have a face—a translucent face. He could see blood vessels under the gray-white flesh, and high cheekbones. When the apparition raised a cloaked arm Ric saw that the long five-fingered hand was see-through too.

"Who sent you?" Ric demanded in a hard whisper.

"She."

"She?" Ric's knuckles whitened on the bars. "Candida?"

"Yes."

"Why? To make me suffer more than I am already?"

"No. To bring you solace—"

"You're doing great so far," Ric said bitterly.

"—and to tell you that she will keep trying to understand and perhaps forgive."

Ric's confused mind chewed on that for a moment. "I don't blame her. She saw me do it. Still—she did send you. . . ."

His thoughts floundered and roiled. Candi had sent this living scarecrow to sound him out, to find out if he had killed Alan deliberately, or if that, too, was all part of Dr. Krill's Great Plan. Alan had said it himself. His usefulness was over. He must be got rid of. Ric was merely the weapon.

Don't trust anybody. That's what Alan had said during their brief unbugged conversation halfway up the hill. More irony. Dr. Lambert Furr must have inserted something in his arm while he was unconscious those twenty-four hours. Something that caused the arm to obey, a machine monitored and directed from a distance.

That machine was still with him. . . .

Therefore, he too must die.

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Candi was nobody's fool, and, like Alan, she suspected Dr. Krill's motives. The lightning quickness of Alan's murder had shaken her badly for a while, but when she had had a chance to think rationally about it she must have realized Ric was incapable of such an act. Ric might have gone crazy, blaming Alan for his lost arm, or killed him out of jealousy over her. But to do it *there*—in view of hundreds of witnesses. Lawmen everywhere. It didn't make any sense.

They had been fiendish about it. They had caught him while his whole mind and being were wrapped up in that first sight of Candi after all those hungry months. . . .

"We haven't got much time," his visitor reminded Ric.

When the figure moved closer Ric got a better look.

"Hey! You're an android!"

"Believe what you wish."

"Why the monkish getup?"

"A device to get inside the prison. Even a condemned man is permitted spiritual comfort during his last hour."

Ric squirmed, thinking about androids. The science of cybernetics was not yet in full flower; mostly the subject of androids was considered in questionable taste. Near-men and near-women had been laboratory creations, yes, but it was horribly expensive and not too successful. Most of the early experiments had been financed by wealthy weirdos and were erotic in nature. These were quite at variance with industrial robos of all kinds; robos were never human in appearance, or only as much their function required them to be. They performed laborious tasks and solved mathematical problems.

"You're an android!" Ric repeated in awe. "Candi made you! But—"

"You are thinking about Dr. Krill, and whether I am from him. Another trick. No?"

"Yes. Can you blame me?"

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"I am not. I am loyal to Candida. But I am not an android."

"Then what are you?"

"A Martian."

Before Ric could do much besides gulp he found his hand grabbed and held firmly. His right hand. "What you doing?" he demanded. "And don't give me this Martian jazz. You're a Martian because you were *made* on Mars. Otherwise, there aren't any such—"

"Please. I'm trying to see what—ah!—there it is. Underneath, just above your elbow."

"What in the living—"

"Not living, Richard. It's a transistorized machine. The device at the other end triggered it remotely."

"Am I bugged?" Ric wondered.

"No. It was **designed** for one purpose only. Ingenious, but limited. Meanwhile, we have other things to worry about. Such as those two guards coming to drag you off to the Doom Room."

Ric said: "By the way, what's your name, Martian?"

"Alph. Short for Alpha. At least Candida calls me that. I am the first of my race to be brought back and this body, while it resembles **our true structure** closely, was made transparent so that **the organal and neural** functions could be observed and, when necessary, corrected. I am, you might say, an experimental model. You might also say that Dr. Candida Lucas-Long is my mother."

"But—"

"No time," Alph said, as two big, hairy-legged guards moved up to the cell.

They wore brown leatheroid tunics like Roman skirts, with laced leggings, and both of them carried blasters. Their wide bristle-bearded faces were not calculated to win beauty contests.

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"Hey!" One spun Alph around. "What you doing here?"

"Humans, even such a one as this miserable wretch, are entitled to hopeful prayer before liquidation."

"Yeah? You don't look like one of the regular kooks to me. Look at that blue mouth and those veins, Muk. Ever see anything like it?"

"I am of the Cannymedan hill cult," Alph lied smoothly.

"Robo Jesus, they got," the big guard gaffawed. "Let's see your pass."

Alph pulled a slip of plast out of his voluminous sleeve and the guards squinted it over.

"Okay. Stand aside. You've had your time with him."

"I am permitted to see him to the Doom Door."

He grunted while Muk opened the cell door with a flasher that snapped open the electronic lock. "Let's get this over. Breakfast's getting cold."

They began the long walk to the Doom Door. Beyond it Ric would cease to exist. The Saturnic gases employed were fantastically effective, as early explorers of the Rings found out.

Alph went into a dismal droning about dire, eternal horrors.

The blue door to extinction moved closer.

Ric, between the giant-size guards and their fisted guns, marched and tried not to listen. Alph's bell-like chanting mocked him, poked icy needles into his conscience.

Only a few yards now. Straight ahead. Inside the sealed chamber, the gases would be released. When they had been sucked back and the apertures sealed again, the Doom Door would be opened again, and there would be nothing there.

Nothing.

At the door Muk took out the cylindrical flasher to flick it on the lock and break the contact.

"One last prayer," Alph intoned.

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"Our breakfast will be ice cold, damn it!"

"Permission?" Alph cracked out.

"Okay. Half a minute. No more."

Alph lifted his robed arms, his blue lips mouthing a silent prayer. Swiftly, then, he moved to take hold of Ric's hands. Ric felt a shock pass between them.

"Repent!" Alph quavered. Then, his voice altered: "If you are to be freed from this eternal damnation—*act now!*"

VIII

RIC DID an unnatural thing. He began to moan and totter backwards in an ecstasy of death-terror. Muk, at the Door, had holstered his blaster under his wide leather belt in order to take out his flasher. The other guard jumped back a step, and stood there scowling at Ric's frenzy, blaster drooping. Ric had gone nuts. Well, it figured.

The guards exchanged sour glances, relaxing until Ric got over his fit.

In the middle of his crazy fit, Ric butted forward. Right at the guard with the blaster. His tackle sent the burly giant grunting against the wall and sliding down it. Ric's fast judo chop slammed the back of his neck, and it was over.

When he straightened up, sucking air, he was not surprised to notice that Alph's bony hands were squeezing Muk's fat neck; Muk tumbled.

"This might prove useful." Alph nipped up the flasher that opened doors from the guard's hand.

"I prefer this." The blaster fit neatly into Ric's fist—his left fist. He didn't quite trust the other one.

They prowled down the hall warily.

"These jailhouse halls must be monitored," Ric thought aloud. "Especially condemned row."

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Alph nodded. "Of course. However, I did contrive to post-jam the vid at the entrance to this wing when I came in. It's early. Most of the officers are still sleeping or having pseudo-coffee."

Out of the folds of his robe Alph produced another robe like his. He handed it to Ric. "Slip it on," he advised.

"Your pass reads *two* priests?"

"No. But the robe has a scrambler in it. That machine in your arm is beamed. Dr. Krill's people can track your location by it. You're supposed to be liquidated, arm and all, remember. Also it will be a disguise."

Ric nodded and donned the robe hastily.

There was only one wing guard at the steel-barred entrance to condemned row; his back was to them. He was cursing the blacked-out vid scanner which gave him a view of the wing. The last thing he'd seen on it was the guards hauling Ric toward the Doom Room, with that weird priest. Busy fiddling with knobs and swearing, he didn't turn when the wing door slid open.

"That you Muk? Roffey?"

"Yeah." Ric imitated the tough growl. They moved out and past the desk.

When the vid guard snapped a fast look at them he realized his error. His hand jumped for the blaster on his desk. Ric's balled fist swung out. He tumbled with only a weak sigh.

The scanner came buzzing erratically to life as two cowed figures hurried toward the front door, as if late for morning Mass. . . .

Central Prison was bustling outside. Creatures from many worlds hopped, shambled, or merely walked across the high-walled quad. Two neo-monks in gray floating across the yard to the main gate were not unusual enough to cause

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more than an eye-flick of interest. Everybody had his problems gnawing his guts.

Halfway to the gate Alph slipped Ric the gate pass.

"What about you?" Ric wondered, keeping his face muffled in the hood.

Alph muttered something about it not mattering and he was doing this for Mother. Ric wanted to know what he meant by that but there wasn't time for questions and answers.

The giant guard at the main gate took Ric's pass, squinted it over carefully, then shot Alph a puckered, suspicious look. He gave his counterpart at the other end of the gate a significant nod. Ric saw the Number Two guard train a rifle-sized weapon on them.

"What you trying to pull, skinny?" the guard demanded.

"I am Man's servant," Alph said, with great dignity.

"Bull!"

"Open up," Ric told him. "This is *my* servant. That's what he means. He's not very bright."

The wide face peered closer. "What is he?"

"He's an experimental android. We neo-monks can't have human helpers, so we are starting to make them, to help us in our soul-saving crusade. This one didn't turn out very well. Sometimes he says the wrong things. He's got a quirk."

"Quirk or no quirk, he stays," the guard growled stubbornly. "One pass means one kook, whether he walks, flies, or slides on his belly. Take him, Lars!"

He flipped the gate open just enough for Ric to get out and jerked a fat thumb for him to do so.

Ric vacillated. One more try. The guard with the rifle was moving on Alph. "But he's my servant! He cost us a lot of credits! You can't—"

"Out!"

Ric shot Alph a wild look; the cowed head nodded gravely. Ric stayed. Then, behind them, sirens began scream-

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ing and he knew he must make it now or never. No good for both of them to die. The Doom guards had been discovered.

He was out, whipping along the crowded thoroughfare as fast as his skirts would permit. What Alph had done he had done with cold deliberation. Because Candi had created him (or recreated him) Alph possessed some irrevocable built-in loyalty to her. She had sent him to find out whether or not Ric was innocent, and if he was, to save him from Doom. Alph had done this, so now it was up to Ric to make the most of it. Which included making Dr. Krill pay for his invidious machination.

Stepping onto a move-ramp that would carry him as far around the perimeter of the city's core as possible, Ric thought grimly: he didn't need Candi's grief to spur him on. His own was quite sufficient.

Port Mars was a cramped beehive of never-ending activity, under its controlled pocket of atmosphere. The machine inside his arm was monitored to an activator somewhere in Dr. Krill's network of colonies, probably in the one right here at Port Mars. This one was important because here the fungi was reduced to an essence for handler shipment. Here, Alan had said, was where the Great Plan was hatching. Candi was here, doing her bit, under Dr. Krill's Argus-eyes.

The robe, Alph had said, would scramble the connection, so that at least Dr. Krill wouldn't know where he was. He would, however, find out that Ric was not dead according to plan. Father had spies everywhere, which would naturally include Central Prison. Some palm-greasing, no doubt, had gone into that seven-minute doom decree. Dr. Krill wanted Ric dead right now.

And Candi?

Ric shivered.

Among other things he must get to Candida right away,

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before Father got ideas about her. It took a mathematical robo to add up his enemies at the moment. The UN Earth-law was after him. Port Mars videos must be flashing his face to every corner of the city by now. Dr. Krill had found him useful for the moment; now he was a nuisance.

His own right arm was his enemy. And maybe Candi's. . . .

Maybe the scrambler would keep them out. If not, what was to prevent Dr. Krill from making it reach up and strangle himself? Or put a blast-hole in him?

When the curving move-way indicated he was as far from the prison as he could get before circling back, he stepped off and was faced with the necessity for a decision. He was on his way—but *where*?

To Candi? To Dr. Krill's Port Mars' outlet?

Sure. But just exactly where was *that*? He couldn't stop a passing cop and say, "I'm Ric Coltore and I'm looking for the big M-P outlet. I know I'm wanted and I know M-P is illegal but—"

I'm getting punchy, he told himself. *Get a grip on yourself.*

"Pardon me," he said to two lawmen who brushed impatiently past him, ignoring his holy vestments.

One glared. Alan bowed and hurried off into a narrow service street. Halfway down the alley he stopped for a long intake of the blended air. He told his gurgling stomach, "Down, boy!" Lord, he could use a double-scootch right now, besides food!

But he didn't dare seek out even a small bar or cafeteria; they all had newsvids tuned to the Prison Authority. His face was public property by now.

Anyway, he was broke. Even his phoney papers had been taken. Wherever he went, it had to be furtively and on foot. Moving deep into the shadows he was aware, in the silence here at the outskirts of the city, of a rumbling sound under

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his feet. The sound of the big air-mixers and filters, down under the street.

A place to hide, to rest.

Ric nagged his mind into a recollection of what he knew about the air machines. Not much. A prodigious feat of engineering when they were installed, these machines thrummed automatically, sucking up oxygen from the low canal areas, and by an ingenious air stream of hurricane velocity, kept it from dissapating; enormous filters made it possible to use the same air over and over, like in spacers. The labyrinthian arcades and towers composing the governing and commercial heart of Port Mars City had a round tube at the center. Called the Shaft, it reached far up, pushing out mixed air from a million tiny vents in its head, a never-ending air fountain.

For security reasons all entrances to the Shaft and the machinery below were heavily guarded at all times. How to get down there? Ric moved on. Then he heard a faint sucking hiss from an oblong mound of metal at the end of the street. There was not much beyond this street and Ric's straining lungs told him why. He had reached no-man's-land. Many more steps and he would fall flat on his face, gasping for oxygen.

He moved weakly up the slanted pylon. The insucking sound came from here. A moment's thought and he knew what it was. This was one of the many vents forming a circle at the city's edges, where old air was sucked in to be re-treaded.

Ric blinked at it thoughtfully.

The metal bands at the top would be electrified of course. Touching them would set off alarms in the Shaft. The vents would all be keyed to some giant map for locating plug-ups.

The trick was not to touch any metal.

The rebel! It just *might* work. Scramble the vid-wave. He

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shot a back-glance down the long alley. All was clear. His hope was that the monks-cloth garment would scramble the trouble-shooter's map to some extent; the vague blur he caused would be taken for some random phenomenon like a blown hunk of paper.

Ric's nature was fast-action. He cat-footed up the rough, pegged wall, leaped the triple bands and landed in the center of the vent. The metal grill here was some ten feet long, and five wide. The sucking noise was a roar, now. Ric's hem slapped against the grill and stuck there.

"Here goes," Ric murmured, pressing the stud on his blast. "Lucky it's not a straight drop."

It took but a minute to blast a rough hole around himself, and before the circle was complete the grill gave way. Down he went.

A patina of scum made it a fast slick ride. He shot down the forty-five degree tangent like a bullet. There was nothing to grab onto. He fell and fell.

Now the roar became a thousand bellowing bulls. Vertigo pushed up dry vomit. For rubber moments he knew only dismay and regret. What a dumb thing to do!

When he hit something it loosed every tooth in his head. Here the tunnel angled off. The offshoot wore a second dust screen. His fingers touched fine wire mesh under him, but not for long.

"Got to get out or I'll end up in a mixer!"

Too late. His plummeting weight yanked the mesh loose in a moment and down he shot. But this tunnel was smaller and the slope less precipitous.

Panic clutched his windpipe. The stygian dark made it hard to think straight. He strained to sit, half-did.

When a second jolt came he was ready for it. He jabbed the blast stud around him. Flame ate the metal. For seconds his butt was hunkered on a thirty-degree corner. He grabbed

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the ragged edge and clung. The robe sleeve cushioned his fingers or they'd have been torn off when the mesh gave way. His right hand, holding the blast, weaved crazily, but contrived to complete the ragged hole around himself.

Barbs of metal tore his back when his improvised door to oblivion gave way.

He dropped.

IX

IT WAS PREPOSTEROUS to imagine that he was alive, but he had to be. He hurt so damn bad. His right arm, for instance, with the blaster still gripped in his fist, seemed to be permanently shattered. His back howled agonies where the metal had scraped the hell out of it. Where his left hand had clung, the insides of the fingers were torn open.

All this in complete darkness.

Slowly, very slowly, the ability to think coherently mounted. There wasn't much his senses could do about it. He saw nothing, heard nothing. *Watt*. Half-deafened by the roaring in the wind tunnel, it took a while to recognize tidbits of sound. There was a far-off thrumming up there, yes. And somewhere else a drip-drip-drip. Now he was unpleasantly aware that the rocky surface under him was wet and his nostrils weren't happy about it. He coughed himself to a sit, if only to move a little ways off the horrible stench.

If only he'd had the brains to bring a torch of some kind, even a cigarette lighter! Finishing chewing himself out about it, he made a tentative test of his limbs and torso. The fall must not have been too far or that alone would have cracked his spine. He was, miraculously, all of a piece. His muscles shrieked protest at every movement, but they did work. And

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the numbness of his right arm was mostly because he'd been lying half on it all this time.

He crawled dizzily up on his feet and found the rocky wall hoping to follow it and get the hell out of this malodorous tomb. He retched sometimes, when a waft of putrescence struck him full in the face. His journey was a mindless one, but he kept going.

"Sewer," he muttered. "I'm somewhere in the damn sewer." His original idea of a cozy hideout where he could rest up and angle things out had not worked too well.

Sloughing through the darkness, his optical nerves strained for cat's eyes, so that he could tell whether or not he was moving the right way. Maybe he should have followed the other wall. Suddenly Ric realized he *was* seeing! Vaguely. The rocky walls took shape and substance, dimly, bluely. Had he become a cat?

His hand came away from the rough luminescent wall; it put Ric in mind of something. Yes. The Polar Cave. Alan had spouted sententiously that the microscopic lichen which lit up the cavern where Ric had left his arm were related to the blue-green lichen that patched Mars' surface every summer.

Here in this man-made tunnel the lichen had begun to brighten the rock as they did up there. Why here?

Ric was able to move faster now that he could see that there were no hideous brinks to fall over. The patches of ethereal blue foxfire became heavier and more frequent; that too spurred him on, although he wasn't sure why. He wasn't anxious to lose another arm.

Something else drew him. Warmth. The robe was woolly, but the back of it was wet with gagging slime; here among the lichen it was warm, like the Polar Cave had been. He was moving in the direction of the heat-source.

At first the darting shadows appeared to be phantoms from

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out of his plagued mind and starved body. What else, down here in the sewer? There was no animal life on Mars of any kind, only what the humans had brought with them—which come to think of it did range from chiggers to *spirochaeta*. Unless you believed in Alph.

"Rats!" Ric yelled, when the shadows moved closer.

They were rodents, just what you might expect to find in a sewer. Stowaways on cargo ships from Earth. But huge.

They'd been edging in silently for some time, but now one gave a loud squeal for the benefit of his companions and then scampered boldly into clear view.

Ric gasped. The rat-leader was fully three feet tall, poised there on his haunches, giving Ric the once-over with sharp beads for eyes. His foot-long feelers twitched; two fangs showed whitely, inimically, over his inset lower lip. While Ric gaped in disbelief, others joined the first rat, until there was a ring of them shutting off his tunnel, their polished black eyes catching the spectral blue light.

The size of them! They appeared to be ordinary house or dock rats. But what could have spurred such a glandular leap in . . .

What indeed?

Ric was beginning to figure it out when the lead-rat squealed out another command to the others and they started closing in for the kill.

Ric gulped and upped the blaster; there were far too many of the creatures. He could never hope to down them all. But he could give them something to think about.

When they got too close for comfort he thumbed the stud. Their leader toppled.

The ring of staring eyes moved back. A low gibbering set up among them, after a horrified moment. Ric got the weird idea that they were talking among themselves. And not in the normal low-level animal fashion. There was cerebral

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thought going on. In a crazy way Ric guessed what they were saying, in their squeaky whispers.

Shall we try it? The monster is only one and we are many.

But he has a fire-thing. He killed our leader.

I'm for trying!

Many will die.

So what? If we don't kill him the monster will find our city and destroy us all. That is the way of monsters.

Let us retreat and take council.

Ric watched them file back into the tunnel in orderly fashion; he leaned against the lichened wall, puffing wonderment and dismay. There were so many of them, and if they were as intelligent as they seemed, they'd find a way of blocking off his retreat, too. A concerted rush and he would end up a heap of gnawed bones.

Curiosity drew him over to the dead leader.

Ric had encountered all manner of creatures, in his space piloting. Earth rats, included. This *was* a gray wharf rat, from his whiskers and ears to his long dwindling furless tail. But the size of him! In the ordinary way, the open environment of Mars killed Terran life, even plant life, and that which managed to survive was invariably stunted in growth, not larger. Fresh edibles were raised in hydro tanks or carefully Earth-simulated nurseries.

Blinking down, Ric glimpsed something hanging from the big rat's furry neck—something metallic. Holding his breath against the charred-flesh odor, he bent for a look. The shiny thing was a coin, an Earth coin with the picture of a UN President on it. It was fastened around his neck by a plastic thong.

His badge of leadership.

"Well, I'll be—"

Whistling, he nipped it off, string and all. That the coin had a human picture on it gave him a sudden flash of hope.

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If the minds of these creatures had evolved as well as their bodies, then they must think of humans, with their enormous city and great noisy burrowing machines, as some kind of gods.

Assumed omnipotence seemed his only chance.

He moved on into the tunnel where they'd disappeared, swinging the bright coin and whistling.

After a while the walls became smooth; thousands of little claws and teeth and perhaps crude tools, too, had turned the ferrous rock opening into a sleek, rust-red half-moon. The floor of the tunnel was free of debris.

He didn't see them, but furtive squeakings in the occasional black offshoot tunnels told him they were there, happier in the total dark.

Ric moved on. The tunnel widened and then abruptly became a huge chamber. He gasped to see a well-organized network of paths like streets in the cave city; along this patterned lacework of engineering were holes at spaced intervals, homes. Even the lichen had been cultivated to grow where they wanted it.

It grew very bright at the far end of the chamber, in an arch around something like an icon, bathing it in a great splash of cold blue light.

There was unseen movement around him; scamperings and gibbering talk. When he pulled his eyes away from the image in the grotto shrine he saw that they were all around him. Thousands. Their eyes made a half-circle of little blue lamps. There was respect in their breathless silence, watching him as he stood there lazily twirling the bright coin on its string.

A sharp fear cut through him when he realized that escape was now impossible. This was their city and that grotto was their church. Behind it was solid wall.

He moved slowly toward it because there was nowhere else to go. The rodents had him cut off from the tunnel. There

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were three rises from the floor to the grotto; Ric moved to the top, then whirled and made a sweep with his blaster.

"Now what am I supposed to do?" he asked, aloud.

The rat-city buzzed with their chitterings. The blaster was a heavy weight in his fist. He almost wished they would rush him and get it over with; he was beat, bone-tired, sick with lack of food and water.

He waited there in front of the illuminated grotto, hands holding up the blaster and the coin.

The chittering stopped; then the multitude flopped down in united genuflection. Ric whistled, guessing the coin to be a talisman to them. A sacred, magic thing. Well, he grinned, it was kind of magic on Earth, too.

He turned for a look at the image in the grotto; it was carved out of red mud and sticks and fashioned to resemble a man. No, not exactly. It was tall and skinny and the fingers were double the length of a human hand's. Ric was reminded of something but there wasn't time to dwell on what.

He shot a glance at his worshippers; they were still on their faces, so he turned his attention back to the grotto. Behind the figure were fissures in the untooled rock; from these cracks dripped a nasty-smelling liquid. Behind the elongated icon was a sluggish pool of it that made him gag.

This, like sacred Lourdes on Earth, had great importance to the rat populace. Why? The sour pungent odor was tantalizingly familiar. His mind flashed back to Gilead, then to Rolff and his hypo of synthesized fungi.

Yes.

That was it. This seepage was the drain-off of fungi residue, wastes from the laboratories that produced the M-P essence. Which meant that he was right below Dr. Krill's Port Mars M-P outlet!

There would naturally be waste-products of the fungi to be disposed of, and such was the power of it even in waste form

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that it had randomly evolved a race of super-rats down here in the sewers. And of course they worshipped the source of their new power. . . .

Behind that grotto wall, and up, was the essence-producing lab. And Candi.

The super-rats lifted to watch when he went to work on the fissured wall with his blaster. They watched gravely for a time, then they began to help. As the blast-flame sheered off rock and rubbed it at Ric's feet they dragged it out of the way on torn sheets of fabric. Ric angled the hole upwards until finally he struck basement floor.

He prayed the fuel would hold out until the hole in the dense artificial rock was big enough for him to crawl through, and that whatever waste disposal area he found himself in would be unoccupied presently.

Luck held.

He lifted himself and scrambled through. It was pitch dark, so that only the nauseating pungency of the fungi lab wastes revealed the presence of some manner of disposal units. Leaky ones, it seemed.

Ric tossed back the talisman-coin to his little gray helpers, who by the sound were already engaged in refilling the hole he had made. The coin was for their new leader. A survival syndrome told them they must make their city a secret, again. Other gods than their visitor of today might not be so benevolent. . . .

By groping, Ric found a door; he moved out into a well-stocked storage room which was diffusely lighted between the orderly stacks. He held his breath, listening for activity. Silence. Whipping his ragged robe skirts around him, he darted from tier to tier until he found an open freight elevator.

He glanced at the controls. There were twelve buttons, twelve floors. The lower ones, Ric decided, would be busiest,

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and Level Twelve was probably the land-roof for local air traffic.

He thumbed Eleven.

The hall he moved out on was empty. The walls, he noted wryly, were that same pea-green color he knew so well by now. Off to one side was a neat clutch of inert robos, movers, but nothing human. Moving down the antiseptic halls Ric determined this must be living quarters, and not for the hot polloi. Top-level quarters for top-level lab workers.

He hesitated at several doors he passed by, wondering which one, if any, might be Candi's. The last time he stopped, hand poised to open the door and find out, a tall figure whipped on him from behind. Ric restrained a yell that would only bring more, as the grabbing arms pinned him and relieved him of his blaster. He was hiked up on a bony shoulder and hauled away down the hall.

X

IT HAPPENED fast and in silence. A door was opened and Ric was hauled through an anteroom and into a small inner room that was green tiled and tidy and appeared to be part dressing room and part bathroom. He was dumped on a padded bench and left there. He didn't get so much as a glance at his captor's face; there was a flash of fish-scale tunic, then the door clicked shut behind him.

Ric was trying the door and getting nowhere with it when something in the milieu struck him with a thrilling force. Perfume! Perfume he knew.

"Candi!" he cried softly.

The door opened and there she was; her pale flame of hair was tumbling over her shoulders and she was still fussing

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with the catches on her silver-green tunic. Her green eyes were heavy with sleep, but leaped when they saw his face.

"You're hurt!"

He only stared at her beauty for a moment. Then: "What in the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"Take it slow, darling, while I get you out of that rag and put something on those cuts."

She found him a nubby wraparound that wasn't too feminine and he slipped it on while she fetched medicines from the bath part of the room.

"Who was that ape with the bony shoulders who dragged me in here?" Ric asked, while she went to work on his lacerations.

"Alph, of course."

"Alph! He's dead!"

"You mean at the prison? Uh-uh. He told me all about it after I got his body back from them. They tried to kill him, Lord knows. He looked dead enough when I fetched him, so they made no fuss. Being part android has its advantages. What happened to you, after?"

Ric told her, succinctly. "Now, you give me a few answers. What about Alph?"

She finished dusting antibois on him; he stopped wincing and dragged the white bathrobe back over his wide shoulders. "As you know, Alph is loyal to me. I recreated him and somehow that makes him mine, in spite of Dr. Krill. We've been hoping somehow you would find your way here. Tonight Alph probed you in the building and in the hall. He's got superhuman mental powers, limited but helpful. He didn't speak in the hall because—"

"I know. The walls are bugged. Father hears all."

Candi nodded. "I have certain privileges, because in spite of the power M-P gives him he still needs my help. Using

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techniques I learned from Alan I brought Alph back. That's the first step in the final stage of his Great Plan."

"Which is—?"

"Let me tell it," Candi begged. "As I said, he still needs me. For how long I'm not sure. I insisted that my apartment be debugged and Alph helped me remove the scanners. I guess Dr. Krill feels that there's no reason to keep me monitored here. The only ones who ever come in my room are Alph and the cleaner-upper, a user. I put it to feminine whim."

"So we're safe from detection here."

She nodded. "And *only* here!"

"What about Alph? Is he really a Martian?"

"Yes. The mobile part of him is a cybernetic husk; that's why I was able to give him a new one after I rescued him this morning."

"Fast work!"

"We've got rooms full of bodies, just waiting. I *had* to work fast. I need Alph. He's all I've got."

Ric saw the shadow of utter weariness behind her eyes; she had suffered and worked and waited hopefully. He put his arms around her tightly. She clung. There was a faint tap at the door.

Ric stiffened.

"Don't worry. It's Alph. I sent him for food. Breakfast for me. I often eat alone here in my rooms. This morning I'm ferociously hungry." Alph stalked in with a plast-tray, loaded down with food and coffee. Ric licked his lips.

"Go ahead. Eat." Alph added helpfully, "On the way to the cafeteria I checked for signs that your presence here was noted. It was not. We are fortunate. I don't understand how you got in."

While he went to work on the food Ric relieved Alph's

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curiosity. "I got in the only way Krill didn't expect—from below."

His ravenous hunger sated, Ric suddenly remembered the bug in his arm. "I've taken off the rebel. The scrambler isn't working!"

Worried, Alph took hold of the contrary arm. His long fingers poked. "Ah. Again we are lucky. Your fall into the sewer has jarred loose some of the delicate wiring."

"Get rid of it, once and for all," Candi said.

From a concealed drawer she lifted out a box which contained surgical tools and chemicals filched from her lab. "I knew these would come in handy. Hold still while I freeze your arm and take out the wicked thing."

Ten minutes later her forceps nipped out the miniscule demon and Candi tossed it in the toilet angrily. Ric sighed to see it gurgle away, the gun that had killed Alan.

"Now you have a good long sleep," Candi told him. "I have to get down to the lab before Father sends somebody up here."

"Krill is *here*?"

"Yes. So I was told, anyway. You never quite know. His special apostles are called Flames. They are officers and wear bright orange flames on the backs of their uniforms. They do the directing and organizing. They're conditioned to take drastic action when necessary and are suicidally fanatical."

"Brass."

"Don't ever underestimate the Flames," Candi warned. "They are handpicked for intelligence and dedication. They wear light uniforms."

"Meaning?"

"Pale green, like mine. Father loves green. The top echelon and lab scientists wear pale green, the workers, darker green. The color of the uniform deepens as you go down the social

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scale. The robo haulers and cleaners wear uniforms that are nearly black."

"Jolly," Ric said. "Efficient. Everybody carefully color-coded. Regimented, like ants."

Candi nodded. Her face clouded. "I've tried to puzzle it out but I'm afraid I haven't gotten far. The M-P 'slavery' looks simple, but there's more to it than meets the eye. I've been kept frightfully busy since I got here. The walls have ears. There is always a user assistant close at my elbow. Now that I've done my job of reviving Alph . . ."

Ric felt a cold hand squeeze his insides. Taking Alan as an example, Dr. Krill had a way of disposing of people who had served their purpose and were a potential danger to him.

He looked at Alph. Alph was standing in the shadow, immobile, respectful, his deep-sunk eyes yearning toward Candida.

"Alph's your baby," Ric said.

Candi blushed, then laughed. "I'm his mother, in a way, yes. By the methods I learned from Alan I brought Alph back. His organic vitals were provided and I took it from there." She glanced at her wrist chronometer. "But, I've got to go! See you this evening. Get some sleep!"

Ric stopped her for one more question. "Where did Alph's vitals come from?"

"Can't you guess? A sealed casket. From the ice caves!"

"Then he is a Martian!"

"Of course."

It was a luxury to bathe and shave, using one of the surgical scalpels for a razor. Ric piled up cushions on the long bench and stretched out luxuriously; his contented sigh turned into a yawn. He was not to use Candi's bed because any small noise would alert the bugs in the walls of his presence. Here in this cubicle he was safe.

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Blissful oblivion came. He snored away until his sleep was interrupted by a low tap on the door. He leaped awake.

The door opened softly. It was Alph.

"I brought you a vessel of coffee, and sandwiches," the Martian said. He dropped down a dark green bundle from under his arm-crook.

"What's that?" Ric asked.

"Uniform. You can't stay here indefinitely. Mother is working something out for you."

Ric yawned. "What time is it?"

"Just past midday meal. Mother thought it best not to come. She usually doesn't return here until evening. You can sleep some more."

Ric began wolfing sandwiches. "Sit down, Alph."

Alph obeyed promptly. "But I must not be gone long."

As his long legs folded up mantis-like when he sat Ric thought he looked more alien than before. The cowed robe had concealed his odd build. Ric was reminded of old wood carvings of Don Quixote. That long saturnine face was an enigma, those eyes caves with bright jade fire behind them.

"Tell me about you," Ric suggested.

Alph made a sound like a sigh. "What can I say? My present life began on that laboratory table when I looked up and saw Mother."

"But you lived before?"

"Yes. A long time ago. The memories are blurred and dim. Shadows. Something in my mind pushes them away when I try to remember that other life. Perhaps it will all clear when the time comes."

"What time is that?"

Alph seemed puzzled. "I don't know. When we have all been awakened, I suppose." The planes of his face twisted. "I keep trying to work things out. I assume certain things to be true—by deduction."

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Ric waited.

"I think that a long time ago here on this planet we lived an intelligent industrious life. Then something happened to us. Something terrible. My mind doesn't want to remember what. But among us were wise savants who did not want us to perish. They conceived a plan. They sealed up each individual's vitals in caskets of alloy that would resist even time. There in the northern ice caves we were to wait until someday—somehow—we would be awakened."

Ric tossed the residue of his lunch in the disposer. "Alan started things off when he found the fungi. How about that? Maybe the fungi was *put* there so that—"

He broke off. A chill snaked up his spine. What about Alph's race? What part did Dr. Morton Krill actually play in the drama of this race of sleeping beauties? What was the secret? Could it be that Krill was only a tool?

XI

RIC WAS green-uniformed and filled with impatience when Candi finally made her appearance, followed by Alph carrying her dinner tray, double-loaded for Ric's benefit.

"About time," Ric grumbled, kissing her, rubbing his clean-shaven cheek on hers.

"I told you we work long hours." She looked him up and down. "My, you do have that muscle-bound look. You'll do."

"Do for what?" He leered hopefully.

"For one of the new batch. They're flying in fifty users tonight, midnight, to help push the work ahead. I wanted to work you out as a new assistant for my own lab, but you'd be sure to make a boo-boo sooner or later and there are so many more of the greenbacks you will be nicely lost in the shuffle."

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"Greenbacks?"

"Menials."

"I get it," Ric grinned wryly. "Muscles and no brains."

Candi kissed his ear. **"Exactly. And no need to make idle conversation, perhaps give yourself away."**

"Maybe as a dumb user I can find out what Father is really up to." Ric plunked down across from Candi, while she served up their dinner.

"This will be our last chance to talk," she said glumly, while they ate. "Make the most of it."

"I've done some thinking about M-P," he stated. "Whatever evil's there, it has a good side. Think how wonderful life could be if we were all in perfect health and lives were not snuffed out at the height of their creative power."

"Amen. On the other hand, it could be sugar-coated slavery. A welfare state to the nth degree. You get more work out of healthy slaves."

"Ever thought of trying it?"

Candi shuddered. **"I don't much like the syndrome that makes Dr. Krill a new messiah."**

Ric frowned at his forkful. **"Maybe it's not M-P at all. Maybe that part of it's some additive Krill put in."**

"What could that be?"

Ric shrugged. He looked down at his green-clad legs. **"I'm sick of green already."**

"How do you think I feel?"

Ric kissed her. **"Like a bunny in lettuce patch."**

He glowered at his skintight uniform in the mirror. **"Hey! We forgot that my face is wanted. I'm an escapee from the Doom Room!"**

"I didn't." Candi nodded at Alph, who produced a box of stuffs from the lab. **"This plast-putty will do nicely to change your appearance."**

"What is it?" Ric grimaced.

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"Something like what they use in the theater for long-run productions. Synthetic flesh, actually. It's so 'live' it gets to be part of you. I could have grown flesh as Alan did for your arm but that would have been permanent and I like you better just as you are."

"Thanks."

Ric tried not to squirm while she applied the guck. His spacer's life had not included much by way of the theater, nor did it occur to him to wonder why women were always pretty. He eyed his widened jawline, sunk-in eyes, accentuated ears, with displeasure.

"I look like an ape," he grumbled.

"Good. The main thing is to act like a user. Work your head off and genuflect a little when anybody says Father. And for heaven's sake—"

"I know. *Smile.*"

Candi wasn't satisfied with his brave efforts to produce that inner fervor of a user. She gave him a pillbox. "Take three each day. They act on the thalamus, like the old pep-drugs."

Life in the colony was easier to fall into than Ric could have hoped. Nobody paid him much attention. Everybody had his or her hard-driven job. There wasn't much time for idle speculation about anything.

Everyone smiled. Everyone was cheerful and happy at his work. The Flames in charge of Ric's work-gang were condescending but courteous. There was no need for whips.

But there were signs:

"Keep active! Be alert! Work!"

Some of them went into detail. "Each of us is important to the Great Plan. Father is watching each of us. He sorrows when we do not do our best every hour of every day."

The idea that Dr. Krill's very eyes were on each spurred them on. They reveled in his good will. In the work places

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scanners were hardly necessary. As he climbed into his bunk-bed in the dormitory at night Ric wondered about the spectral glow users acquired. Wondered until he found that most menials were new to M-P; only long-time users wore that giveaway glow.

Lying there after twelve grueling hours of loading robes and hauling delicate things the machines couldn't, Ric worried constantly about Candi. Worried and waited.

A week passed. Two. When fellow greenbacks tried to drag him into conversation in the cafeteria he smiled and made likely remarks about Father. That his job was physically exhausting was good. Time fled.

His name was Carson Wills, his card said. He was miner from one of the colonized asteroids. Life there had been bleak and grim; years of inhaling the pumice-like mineral had eaten out his lungs. Here on Mars the fungi was administered in capsule form, luckily, so he was able to fake taking the daily doses. He became expert at palming the gel capsules.

The big push was on; he felt it in the aura that surrounded the colony, in the increased pep-talks each morning before breakfast. It was as if they were ants, running around the rim of a volcano getting ready to blow its top.

Ric yearned for action, but the only thing he could do, besides smiling and keeping his ears open, was to learn the layout of the colony. Where all the elevators were. Where the scanners kept check. Where the Flames hung out and how to avoid them.

In spite of his annoyance with the users and their wild devotion to Dr. Krill, daily association with them, hearing their miraculous stories, engendered a growing empathy. He thought about that rock shrine back at Gilead and the carved figure that was supposed to be Dr. Krill. How logical for simple humans to worship something that gave them some-

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thing—that didn't prate on endlessly about a glorious never-never land after death.

Ric spent sleepless nights thinking and wondering. . . .

It began routinely. After the night meal Ric and two other greenbacks were picked by a prowling Flame for a special job unloading a cargo from a ship that had just landed on the roof.

They hurried out of the elevator toward the freight-lift, where sky cargo was decanted. Greenbacks were not permitted on the landing roof itself. Ric ached for a look. Camouflage like that at Gilead was unnecessary here at Port Mars. Local payoffs helped Dr. Krill get by with plenty. And as Port Mars was a way station for colonial exports and imports, the space-port cargo vessels were humming in and out at all hours, Dr. Krill could even get by with this great block of activity under the very noses of the Interplanetary Law.

The ship's crew was grumbling. Down below Ric and the other two waited for the lift to descend with its first load.

Ric's trained ears caught the last gasps of the ship's motors as it taxied next to the raised unloading dock above his head. He restrained a whistle of surprise. This was not a transport vessel from the Port proper. It was not a space craft that sneaked in, ignoring the Port Authority. It was a big job, though.

Also, there was something odd about the crew. There were only three, from the sounds of their badinage. A few clipped orders from the captain. Monosyllabic responses. Then a strange silence. . . .

Ric pegged the ship as a large planetary craft, like the one Alan had chartered for their polar trip. There weren't many of these middle-sized ships on Mars; decades ago Mars had been put down as not worth exploring; resource-wise

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it was a desert. Even the eager archaeologists had given up the hope of finding traces of a dead civilization.

There was only one place this ship could come from.

The Polar Caves.

To get his hooks on the controls of that ship! God!

"Where are the ice-chests?" a voice cracked the wall of silence. *"Where is your cargo?"*

A depth, an inherent sense of dramatic intensity in the voice put Ric's neck-hairs up on end. He knew this voice. Its deep timbre, its benevolence turned to steel.

"Where are they?" Father's voice thundered. *"Speak up!"*

There was a submissive rejoinder which Ric couldn't hear, it was so low.

"Speak up, man!"

Now a tough clipped voice, probably the captain's, went into a half-apologetic half-defensive burst of rhetoric. Ric strained, but he caught only scraps. There was something about getting everything all lined up and then at the last moment *He* wouldn't permit them to load the ice-chests. The *He* was spoken with awe. Another voice chimed in corroboration, and, when queried, a third. Dr. Krill didn't say much but what he did held in it titanic rage. This first shipment of ice-chests was vital. Everything else was all ready. *He* would hear from Dr. Krill, and soon. How dared R'lyeth—?

R'lyeth. Spoken in one spiraled syllable. Someone non-human. Somehow monumentally important . . .

In that alien name was the answer to everything. To the fungi. To Dr. Krill's power over people. Everything. Up there less than fifty yards away was a ship that could take Ric to the Cave—to the source of Father's world-shaking secret. . . .

"What do we do now?" the pilot was asking.

"Go back! Wait! I will be there to deal with R'lyeth!"

"But—"

The low complaint made Ric grin from its familiarity. The

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long pull from the Cave, this time of night, had left the short-crew tired, hungry. A brief rest, please? A bite?

"All right, but make it fast."

"Can we get something here?"

"No. The corner elevator will take you to the street. One of the all-night warehouse cafés will do it. Be back in twenty minutes!" He rapped out something to a silent attendant.

A Flame's head showed when he flashed a light down on them. "Dismissed!" he snapped, his voice echoing down the hold. "Go to bed!"

Ric lay, every nerve-ending sizzling, while the other two greenbacks crawled into their respective bunks, whispering in awe about having actually heard and almost seen Father. But not for long. It would annoy Father. Dormitory time was sleep time, the signs said.

Ric's five-minute wait was sheer agony; he begrudged every second of it. *Twenty minutes. That's all the time he had had. Now it was fifteen. . . .*

He slipped down to the bare floor. Should he be challenged by a Flame on his rounds he hadn't had time to undress and this was a lavatory call. He didn't stop at the lav; he hotfooted past and into the main corridor.

It was now he congratulated himself for having fixed the layout of hallways in his mind, including just where the spiral stairway was—the one the Techs used when checking the robo controls.

His mind screamed to push back time. If only there wasn't Candi to worry about, but he didn't dare leave her. The least hint of sabotage and she would be the first to get it in her pretty little neck. She had served her purpose: mothered Alph.

His first rap on her door opened it so fast he gulped. Candi

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was not only there, but she was fully dressed. Ric pulled her out and down the hall in one flying scoop.

"You!" Candi cried.

"Who were you expecting?"

"Ric, they took Alph! Yesterday! I've been frantic. He was the only possible link between you and—"

"Never mind all that just now," Ric gritted. "I'm sorry about Alph but we've got places to go and less than no time to get going."

"Where?"

They were in the up-lift and Ric's thumb was pressing Level Twelve. Ric told her briefly, very briefly.

He pulled Candi with him into the cavernous sky-drop hold and looked up. The opening was locked up tight over their heads.

"Must be a way up," he grated.

"From Dr. Krill's private floor," Candi wailed. "He has all of Level Ten to himself."

Ric shut his eyes to think. Where would the spiral stairs be? He prowled the corner, sniffing like a hound. The crack was almost invisible but he found it. From his earlier casings and observation of between-floors troubleshooting he pegged the slide-back opening.

The minute stairs corkscrewed up darkly. At their top Ric gripped Candi's arm for silence. "There'll be a guard left at the ship."

Under a bright canopy of flinty stars they slunk toward the pointed spear. Ric shoved Candi behind him, darting into the crisp-cut shadow of a giant tailfin. Around the far side, a cigarette glowed. In the ache of night silence they heard the kind of tuneless whistling that goes with a lonely watch.

Luck. One guard only. The lowest rank, naturally. He'd get a cold sandwich and a cup of joe when the others re-

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turned. Any minute now. Ric thanked what he used to curse—that the allotted twenty minutes was stretching past thirty. It was only human that the gone two would have a drink with their food.

Candi handed him his blaster, which she had pocketed for her try at finding Alph. It's metallic coldness felt good in Ric's fist. It was still empty, but the guard had no way of knowing that. Ric leaped from the shadow. Its muzzle rammed into the youngster's midback.

"Quiet, punk!"

Surprise produced a boyish curse; the uniformed youngster dipped for his holstered weapon. Ric brought the empty blaster down on his head, medium-hard. He dropped.

Candi helped him hike the young guard up into the gloomy bowels of the ship's hold, which, except for piles of foamy padding materials, was empty. Ric plugged the lad's mouth with a wad of the styrofoam and dragged him back out of sight.

"I hear them coming!" Candi gasped.

Ric pushed Candi behind the padding pile and had just enough time to appropriate the unconscious guard's coat when the voices outside approached and moved to the oval hold-mouth. A torch glanced their way casually. It caught the brass buttons on Ric's purloined coat. His arms hid his face.

"Hey, stupid!" the voice said, thickened by a couple of drinks. From their jets of conversation Ric was aware that the pilot and co-pilot had little regard for Number Three.

"Lemme sleep," he whined.

"Get out of there! We're blasting off!"

Ric's finger tensed on the stud of the guard's blast. "I'm tired," he complained, raising his voice an octave.

"Damn it, Belasco, get your tail out—"

"Let him crap out," the pilot said. "Who needs the jerk?" The hold door thudded shut.

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Ric breathed deep. In the darkness Candi's hand held his arm tight. He squeezed her hand, then went about cushioning them both into a nest for the blast-off.

Minutes later it came. His arms held Candi when the rockets sang.

XII

IT WAS so pleasant, snuggled together in their nest of plastic foam that Candi had to finally push him back.

"Let me get that guck off your face," she said. "It's like rubbing noses with a clothes dummy."

Ric reached down to the wall-torch and snapped it on. Candi went to work on his facial camouflage and Ric ouches. "Take it easy! Some of that's me!"

She finished up the job with water from the canteen Ric found in a wall compartment along with the usual hand tools. As an added fillip her starflower-scented handkerchief carressed his stinging skin.

"Umm," Ric said. "Now can I have that kiss?"

In the middle of it the junior crewman stirred and made muffled sounds. Ric found some rope among the packing material and made a good job of trussing him up. "Now. So long as one of the pilots doesn't take a notion to come back here, we're all set."

"I like your confidence," Candi murmured. "But just exactly what are we set for? Where are we headed, for instance?"

Ric told her about the missing casket shipment and Dr. Krill's temper-tantrum.

"R'llyeth." Her voice shivered a little when she spoke the alien name. "One of the Martians?"

"Seems logical."

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"But Alph's the only one brought back!"

"So we thought. With you the Number One waker-upper. But R'llyeth sounds vastly important, somehow. He's not just one of the boys."

Candi sighed helplessly. "I guess we'll find out—soon enough."

"Besides worrying about you," Ric said, "I've been mulling over the idea of Krill adding something to the fungi to give him psychological control over users. What he's got is more than gratitude. Gratitude has a habit of wearing off all too fast. The users are groveling fanatics and the more they use M-P the worse they get. Reminds me of—" Somewhere in the recesses of his unconscious a tantalizing spark of an idea glowed. It tottered on the edge of recognition, then tumbled back.

His baffled musing was shattered when Candi cried, "The boy's getting loose!"

Ric swore and made a grab for the young guard, who was flopping his way energetically toward the cabin door. "Take it easy, boy. You're not going anyplace." He hauled him back and removed the gag. "Now, how about some information?"

Belasco only tightened his mouth.

"You've had your little nap," Ric prompted. "I want to know all you can tell us about the Cave—now." His blaster emphasized the request.

A whimpered sigh, then: "W-what'd you want from me? I'm only a cargo-hustler." In the lighter flare his youthful wide-apart eyes radiated bitterness. "That hashmark on my skivvies don't mean nothing!"

This, then, was Ric's cue. The boy had been recruited up here with wild promises of wealth, excitement, adventure. What he'd got was sloughing work and second-bests of everything. A healthy if uneducated animal, he didn't need or get M-P; Ric guessed Dr. Krill was choosy, that his con-

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gregation of devotees formed a pattern. Go-betweens such as pilots and crewmen were best free of M-P, lest they unconsciously reveal themselves, outside.

"He's just a boy, Ric. Don't!" Candi's reaction to Ric's hard tone was just right. When he lifted up his arm to slap the beardless cheek she pushed him away in protest. "Why, you can't be more than eighteen!"

"Nearly nineteen." He blinked up at Candi and her smile of genuine sympathy got him. Ric knew it would. "I—I'll tell you anything I can, but I don't know much. Honest."

Ric took over. "A rundown on the operation. Keep it short. How many men? What goes on? And what's the procedure when we land?"

"Mostly it's guards, sir. The whole area's patrolled all the time. The gun towers are all camouflaged, real good. There's about fifty of us, sir. Picked because we're crack shots. Then there're the pilots. We live in barracks, but they got better quarters. I didn't know it was going to be so cold and there's nothing to do. I get so—"

"Sure. I know. What goes on down below?"

"Down the big elevator? Gee, I don't know. I help haul stuff down, and I helped build the shaft. But they don't tell *me* nothing!"

"Any guesses?"

"All I know is the big elevator and the robo tunnel. I was told like the others not to wander into any off-caves or try to open that door at the bottom of the shaft. Couple guys got nosed. They disappeared."

"Ever hear of R'llyeth?"

"I heard what Captain Andrews said. All I know is once when he was kind of loaded I heard him tell Pete, the copilot, that someday he was going to have it out with the so-and-so mechanical monster down at the bottom of the shaft. Do you suppose they did build one down there? We hauled

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enough equipment and junk down there to build ten hundred!"

"What about the ice chests?"

"Dunno. Only the officers are permitted beyond the door off the big drop. I figure they're mining some precious mineral and don't want the word to get around." He sat up, drawing his eyebrows into a pucker of bewilderment. "Hey, if R'llyeth is a machine, how come he won't let them take the chests?"

Ric mulled this over; Candi chatted idly with her new conquest. His name was Belasco Vorpis; he was originally from one of the Slavic countries of mid-Europe. He spoke English but he couldn't read or write well. He just didn't take to book-learning; so when the chance came for outworld adventure he grabbed it. He was good at doing what he was told and he kept his mouth shut. He was proud of the gold-braid on his uniform. Dr. Krill's Polar contingent seemed to be made up of restless youths like Belasco, or by scoundrels. The gunpost guards were criminal types, dead shots, and happy to oblige.

"Are you with some other mining outfit?" Belasco wondered, reasonably.

"No. We think something bad is brewing up here. We want to find out what and if possible, do something about it. Will you help us?"

Belasco frowned, considering this. "Why? I mean, why should I? We get fancy uniforms to wear and I was told later I'll be a big wheel."

"That's all part of the bait," Ric informed him. "You're useful now, but you'll get tossed in the disposal when they get the flags hoisted. Look at how the pilots treat you. Like a dog."

Belasco considered this for a long moment. "Could you untie my hands now? They're awful tight."

Ric grinned and obliged and then Candi massaged Bel-

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asco's wrists to bring back the circulation. Ric gave him back his uniform jacket with the braid-bait. "It's too tight, anyway. But I must say that Dr. Krill is quite a psychologist. Using such well-tailored fancy uniforms. It's sucked them in since Hitler and before, when—"

The changed whine of the fission generators and a sudden gut-grabbing plummet before the anti-gravs caught sliced off his musings.

"We're landing!" Candi's whisper was tight with sudden fear.

"It'll be a while. Relax. Now, Belasco—comrade—tell us the best way to get to that elevator."

"You want to go down *there*?"

"You bet. We've got a date with R'Ilyeth."

When the cargo hold door opened Belasco scrambled down without waiting for the ladder. From their hide-nest among the plastic foam Ric and Candi felt a penetrating blast of icy air before the auto-lock slapped the door back in place. He squeezed Candi's cold hand while, rumbling, rolling, the craft was taxied into the hangar Belasco had told them about, half-constructed, half-cave. There would have to be heat, lest the delicate instruments and machinery freeze solid. Ric marked time by following the ground-crew through the mechanics of their familiar servicing ritual. There was the off-chance they might make a prow through the ship's hold in the direction of the engines but it was still sleep-time and most likely the routine would be kept as sketchy as the Law allowed. Captain Andrews represented the Law, since this was his ship, and from the little he knew about the pilot, Ric figured Andrews for a hot bath, a long snort, and the sack. And to hell with the condition of his ship.

Still, it was best not to rush things.

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After the long silent wait Ric lit up two cigarettes and handed Candi one. They smoked; Candi closed her eyes.

"Tired?"

"I'm praying."

"Say one for me."

When he at last prowled to the hatch and found it unlocked from outside, Ric murmured "Good boy." Belasco had managed to keep the hatch door from getting sealed up with the others. Also he had headed straight for the barracks and chow, before flaking out. Everything normal.

The hangar was far from warm. Silent. Dusky, with only minimum light softening the night loneliness of the cavern, etching the contours of three ships lying like great slumbering whales. Ric moved to the great twin-doors and put his eyes to the round peephole he found. Nothing out there but howling whiteness under blackness, with a faint uncertain twinkle of yellow light that must be a careless barracks window.

He pulled the shivering Candi toward the rear, which was black blasted rock, toward a small corner door. This door, Belasco had told them, led to the robo-mover and the track led to the down-drop:

"Strange they don't have any guards," Candi whispered.

"But you know Father," Ric nodded, feeling a cold chill splash his nerve centers. "His eyes are everywhere."

It was too easy.

The door was locked, probably time-locked. "I don't like to do this but—" Ric pointed his blaster at the magnetic catch and let fly white fire.

The door snapped open but not without raising a fuss about it; the whole hangar was suddenly a pandemonium of screaming sound. The clutch of guards that moved on them seemed to have sprung up out of the ground. Bursting through the door and down the neat long stretch of man-made cave

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beyond, Ric pulled Candi along, and somehow had time to think that these big uniformed hulks had probably been shooting craps or something in one of the nearby outscops.

Shock and surprise were on their side. Such a diversion in the guards' bleak Polar routine—especially a beautiful girl—was practically impossible. Not inside this ring of dedicated killers.

"How—much—further?" Candi pleaded, choking down wind-tears.

"Not far," Ric panted. "The robo hauler and the track are at the end of—*There! See!*"

Ric scooped Candi up and plunked her down into the cab of the vehicle, leaping in after, while irate voices boiled up out of the corridor they had left. Blasters egged them on.

"Same kind as the robos at the Port, thank God. I only hope the track is activated!"

He snapped switches and a high-pitched whine said yes. A gentle cough and the robo went to work, becoming what it was built to be, a fast-traveling hauler, informally—Snake.

Candi's cry was lost in the hurricane wind produced by their abrupt lunge downtrack.

"Do you know where we're going?" Candi wailed.

"What Belasco called The Big Drop, undoubtedly. That's obviously the important deal around here. Just where we want to go." He mused in a mutter, "My worry is they'll snap off the power."

Their frictionless ride a hairbreadth over the electronic track carried them through a series of dim-lit caves; a bust-out leveled the Snake onto a straight terminal length of track in a brighter, wider chamber. At the switchback end of this terminus was a blank steel wall. And in front of this wall, forming a determined phalanx, were guards—uniformed in near-black, mean-looking, and with blasters eagerly pointed at the Snake.

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In a blur Ric counted eight.

He jerked the Snake to a whiplash stop.

"They didn't get here from the other end, that's a cinch. There isn't any faster way than the robo. Which means they were already here, alerted by phone. Why here? Why so many?" Ric whistled. "I know! They're not here to keep tourists out of the Drop! *They're here to keep something in!*"

Blasts began to splat against the breezeshield.

"Down!" Ric pulled the girl out of sight. While they crouched there, he fisted his own blaster, reloaded from Belasco's ammo. "This robo's tough but it won't hold up forever. The heat is what'll get us."

"What'll we do?"

For answer, Ric traded fire with the eight, to keep them at their distance. In moments Candi began coughing from the acrid odor of radiated heat. The cab would soon become a white-hot death trap.

Ric dared a fast look at the wall; now he noted the square crack of doorway, and something else.

Besides the switch-out track over which the guards crouched behind improvised shields of construction material, the twin Snake track dipped and was sheared off by the closed door.

"Goes right *into* the elevator," Ric mused. "If only—damn me for a Venurian loco!"

"Oh, you're not so bad," Candi choked bravely. "What is it?"

"Keep your head down, damn it!"

He was searching the controls panel furiously. "Here it is!"

"Is what, darling?"

"The control that opens the elevator door!" Ric shouted in triumph. "Look!"

The imperturbable steel face was lifting, yawning out into an open mouth.

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"Here goes!"

The Snake leaped ahead. The guards yelled and scrambled out of its path. They shot past them into the elevator in a fury of spitting blast-fire.

XIII

THE BIG DROP was measurable only by time-speed. There was no sound at all, no sensation of falling. But it was deep, very deep, seemingly endless. The Snake's cab cooled; it was possible to touch it by the time a flashing green light overhead implied that they had now plumbed full depth.

Candi groped for the comfort of Ric's hand as they stepped out of the cab.

One wall opened into a rocky cave, wide, high. They stared into the gloom. Ric felt Candi's fingers tighten. Something alien here. Forbidding. Strange.

"Looks like the cave where Alan and I found the fungi," Ric said. "Changed a little, though. Barn's been painted. Uncle Jed put up a new picket fence."

"Don't," Candi begged. "Can't you feel the—the sense of portent?"

"An inner sanctum for Satan," Ric murmured. "A place for lopping off arms. Yeah. Maybe hell's on Mars." His arm curved around her shoulder. "Well, now that we're here—"

They moved in gingerly. The cave had been enlarged, the fungi that was left trained into luminescent patches. There was no other light, just the uncanny blue lichen mingled with the fungi. After their bake in the Snake's cab the hot-house warmth seemed almost cool. The silence was spectral, ominous. Over all clung that vaguely sweet, sickish aroma—the odor of the M-P fungi growing.

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"Look! That doorway at the far end! That's where they got my arm!"

Candi shivered closer as they moved toward the church-window curve of doorway. Suddenly Ric's legs froze. They wouldn't move another step. In a curious twist of memory he thought about Captain Hook and his alligator. The alligator had bitten off his leg and forever after wanted more. . . .

They stood there, silent, then Candi whispered, "Now that we're here, I wonder . . ."

"I know. Maybe Father Krill really *is* St. Morton Krill. Saving mankind from some shattering doom on the other side of that door."

"Something like that."

"All I can say is now is a hell of a time to get religion, Krill-style." Ric added, wincing, "I can't get my legs to moving. They're frozen up tight."

"Trauma," Candi said. "Getting your arm sheared off was a tremendous neural shock. Your unconscious is reliving it."

"Thanks for the lecture. What do I do about it?"

His answer came when the cathedral door ahead of them dissolved. Candi gave an involuntary gasp. Ric only stared at the sharp-edged opening and the blackness beyond.

"R'llyeth?" he ventured.

The answer was smooth, courteous, mental.

"Come in, please. I have been anxiously waiting for your arrival, Richard Coltor."

Ric's freeze-up melted. Holding Candi, he moved through the arch and they found themselves facing a square block of smooth material that seemed to be a combination of ceramic and metal. The chamber housing it was not large, and the block looked to be both immovable and impenetrable. The voice came out of it, and when it spoke inside their minds, a light glowed lambently around it, like a nimbus.

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"You are R'lyeth?" Ric gulped.

"Yes." The voice was gentle as rippling mountain water, and as cooling, somehow. "I know quite a good deal about you, Richard Colt. Your ancestry. Your personality. Even your capacities and your philosophy."

"From my arm?" Ric guessed. "You bit off my arm so that you could read me?"

R'lyeth, by a thrumming in their heads, registered protest and a hint of impatience. "Nothing of the sort. While we wished information about you and your race we would never do anything so primitive."

"What then?"

"It was an accident, caused by your own impetuosity. We regret it. However, it did serve to waken us, to tell us that after thousands of years we had been discovered at last. That our self-bondage was at an end."

"How, an accident?"

"The door was electronically sealed against time and chemical action. This chamber must remain inviolate above all. Sometime during our long sleep a planetary tremor occurred. It was probably the result of some of your race's excavations in this area. When you slid your arm through that crack you touched a nerve ending of the sealed power artery, part of ourselves. This machinery was geared to waken us when the door was opened. We sensed your presence and in that sudden blinding flash when your arm was dissolved we recorded your mind and its contents. But it was not until Dr. Krill opened the door fully that our consciousness wakened fully."

"You keep saying *we*!"

"Yes. We, R'lyeth, are a multiple personality. A compound of several of the greatest intellects of our dying race."

Ric's thoughts flicked over Alan's theories about a lost Martian race and an exodus to the Caves in the face of some

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overwhelming disaster. "Then you did live on the surface once. What—what happened?"

"The Yeth, our race, lived complex lives in great cities along the straight stretches which you call *canali*. These were our highways, actually, between our cities. In physical appearance, in our ecology, and in other ways our race is not too unlike your race on Earth. Even our hands possess the thumb, like yours.

"When Dr. Krill began the task of revivifying the Yeth we provided him with a design for the bodies, so that we will look as we did before. You may put it down as racial pride, but there is actually more than that to it. There are climactic and environmental reasons why we should be as we were.

"The Yeth developed more rapidly than the Earth race, as many of your scientists have guessed. We had great telescopes. We watched the progress of your more primitive civilizations with eager interest. We contacted you again and again by super-radio. We used, as well, a kind of mind-to-mind telepathy. We actually did communicate occasionally, randomly, when sometimes one human who possessed a thrust of intuitive knowledge ahead of the rest of you would partially understand what was happening and sometimes even attempt to let us know that he did by some prodigious undertaking which the rest put down as religious foible. Once a megalithic leader created an ingenious ring of stone on an island, which by its astronomical accuracy in reading the movements of the sun and the moon told *our* astronomers that momentarily our minds could fuse."

"Stonehenge!"

"Then again on your North America our telescopes detected figures of animals as well as geometric designs which again told us our telepathy attempts were randomly hitting a mark."

"The Great Serpent in Ohio! High Banks! The Adena and

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Hopewell cultures! They built enormous animal figures and geometrics one thousand years before Christ!" Candi contained herself with an effort, when Ric squeezed her shoulders and nodded at R'lyeth to go on.

"Yes. Even then your race was groping toward other worlds. We are, as I said, in many ways like yourselves—many unhappy ways. While our scientific minds were hopelessly struggling with Earth-contacts and other vast mysteries, lesser minds were struggling for domination of our people. Just as your lofty minds have been superseded by power-mad militarists, so the Yeth. There were wars, suicidal wars. Atomic fission was discovered. Our resources were depleted. Our atmosphere was polluted.

"When scientific and rational elements realized that soon the fantastic atom-eating weapons we had produced would turn our planet into a desert of electronic dust we conceived the plan of moving what was left down here. We created an underground sea, and a great city on its banks. We created Us. R'lyeth. We created Us to govern over the remnants of our people and to preserve the finest minds of our race to this end. R'lyeth's is a single dispassionate purpose—to preserve the Yeth from their own perverse nature and from—outside."

"What happened to those who remained on the surface?"

"The destruction was complete. So complete that we knew it would seep down into our crystal city eventually. We—R'lyeth—devised a means of sealing each individual's life essences in caskets, which in turn were sealed into ice-chests. These chests are neatly catalogued and stacked up in the chambers of intense cold beyond our lifeless city."

"How do we get to your city and the chests?"

"At my mental command a door will dissolve behind us."

"You've given us quite a dizzy-making chunk to chew on," Ric said wryly. "Give us a chance to latch onto it. Let me

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see. R'lyeth—you—are a composite mind of the greatest minds of the Yeth."

"From varied areas of knowledge. To rule our race, and to control its reawakening."

"You guessed we would eventually come to Mars!"

"Yes. One day the Earth race would reach maturity and it was logical that you would visit our planet. By that time the pollution would have been dissipated. We knew that every trace of our magnificent cities on the surface would have vanished.

"Our ecology has always included absorption of the fungi which you found here in the Caves. Lacks in our thin-atmosphere planet were supplemented by the fungi. We have always nurtured this vegetable growth and now we planted them down here. We planted them where you would be sure to find them. By their very nature we knew, or hoped, that they would survive the overwhelming holocaust. They *alone*. Your scientists know that mosses and lichen and other spore plants have tremendous tenacity for life. They will grow where nothing else will grow. Our fungi is peculiarly tenacious. Absorbed into our bodies, it becomes involved with us in a kind of symbiotic relationship. It becomes a part of a living animal form, permitting that form to partake of its remarkable hardiness."

"Then it is a boon! A blessing!" Candi cried out.

"Let me get this straight," Ric put in. "You planted the fungi here, in front of the sealed door, to attract us to you. To make us aware of your existence. It was a bait. We would be your alarm clock. We would let you know that all was clear above and you could awaken again."

"Yes," R'lyeth said. "We hoped that from our telepathic communications with your primitives that you would evolve to an empathetic, high-natured race. Yet there was always the fear that you would not. There was always the chance

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that we would be awakened by someone evil. A predator who would wake us only to enslave us and use our gifts to some wicked and selfish purpose."

Ric heard Candi catch her breath, felt her fingers involuntarily dig his shoulder.

"Someone like Dr. Krill."

XIV

DOCTOR KRILL. The name rang down the corridors of their minds like the overtones of a satanic chord of music. So. The die was cast. The Yeth had gambled on the human race—and had lost. . . .

It might have been Alan Tork. It should have been Alan who opened that door. Ironically, Ric's messing about had spoiled that chance, and later on Krill had taken over. Dr. Morton Krill had possessed the drive that Dr. Alan Tork lacked.

"You must have weapons to protect yourself," Ric frowned. "How can Dr. Krill just take over?"

"Our greatest weapon is R'lyeth, ourself, and the fact that we are telepathic. But our race is not telepathic. We believed in Dr. Krill until we found out that he has discovered a way of building up an irresistible loyalty to himself into the bodies he creates for our people."

"We know all about that." Ric was getting that glimmer of an idea again, but it didn't quite crystalize, not in the welter of information R'lyeth was thrusting into his cranium.

"You let him start. You let him have Alph."

"Yes. From our first meeting with Dr. Krill we were fearful, but we had to take that one chance. Now our fears have been proven, and we have refused to allow his syco-

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phants permission to go behind this chamber or to remove any others of our race."

"You've got him stymied."

"For the time being. True, he cannot destroy Us. The rare synthetic elements of which this block is made are impregnable, to all intents and purposes. Not so everywhere. There is nothing to prevent Krill from burrowing in elsewhere. He is doing just that already." Pause. "R'llyeth cannot move. R'llyeth has Hands. But they are mechanical Hands only. No, Richard Coltor. You say that we must have weapons that can defeat Dr. Krill. We hope that we have. Now."

"And—?"

"These weapons are *you—both of you.*"

The super-mind retreated, to give them time to ponder this over. Ric prowled the small chamber thoughtfully, wishing for a cigarette. That faint glimmer of hope kept flaring up, then dying again.

"Time! We need time!"

"If only we could find out Dr. Krill's secret!"

"Yeah," Ric growled. "For generations the Yeth have been absorbing the fungi and it must have impregnated the part of them that is in those sealed caskets. So how can Dr. Krill do what never happened to them before—make slaves out of them? Must have something to do with the *human* element and—"

It struck suddenly.

"I think I've got it! Candi, I think I *know!*"

"What—?"

"First we've got to test it. Make sure." He whirled toward toward the great faceless block that was R'llyeth. "You have laboratories in your city. You'd have to have. Someplace where we could work. Where Candi could bring back one more Yeth! Check my wild ideal!"

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R'lyeth rumbled back into their minds.

"Our laboratories are fully equipped. Our Hands will take you there. Assist you."

"What are these Hands?"

His answer came out of the wall. Two small, neat, cer-metal robots slid out and lined themselves in front of the cube.

"We call our Hands Th'ryl and Z'ryl. They are robots, nothing more. They are indelibly one with us. speak out of our minds, and, as they have no life of their own, are limited. They are programmed to obey only us but we will now direct them to obey Richard Coltor, too. Any instructions you wish to give them will be imprinted on their tapes directly. We give them to you, Richard Coltor. We trust you. Good-bye."

The door that led to the underground sea and the crystal city opened. Behind them it became wall again.

The way wound, carved from basalt rock, through tunnels and along tortuous cliffs where weird bone-white bracken grew, in landscapes like negated video. The sea itself was an amazing thing, stretching off into pale blue mists, lit spectrally from within its placid depths by algae and blue lichen. This sea provided the crystal city with water and atmosphere.

They gasped when they saw the city called Yetha.

Its shimmering rock crystal edifices reared up in spires of beauty on the shore of the blue sea. The whole panorama was an eldritch dream in tones of pale fire and silver.

They walked through the silent streets under a cloud-misted sky, over that same lichen-blue so high that it gave the effect of actually being an evening on the surface of Mars. The buildings were elongated, attenuated, like the in-

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habitants who built them, constructed to fit their shapes as well as their aesthetic wants.

The twin robots led them straight to the laboratories.

"I'm so tired," Candi said, collapsing in the nearest chair.

Ric eyed the long rows of lab tables and the machinery that once upon a time had condensed the Yeth to vital essences. He turned to the nearest robot.

"I'm beat, too. We haven't time to be tired. We require sleep but there is no time. Is there something you can give us for fatigue? For energy?"

The twins nodded as one and hustled off. They returned with deep crystalline beakers of golden liquid.

"What is it?" Ric asked.

"For rapid sustenance, when they first awaken. It has excellent rejuvenative qualities," one of the robots said.

Ric tasted his.

"Um. Not bad. A little vodka would help."

They drank.

Ric sent the robots to fetch one of the ice-chests. While they waited he asked Candi, "Can you find what you need here to revive another Yeth?"

"I've been looking," Candi nodded. "I think so. It's different, of course, but with the help of the robots I can do it. R'lyeth's taught them English so they can translate the chemical names for me. And here's a body. Must be the one Dr. Krill used as a model. Why didn't he use this one for Alph, I wonder?"

"Father's a slick one. He probably wanted to make sure his built-in slave syndrome would work. Let's get going."

"Sure, Boss," Candi admonished. "Soon as you tell me what your clever idea *is*!"

Their preoccupation over the task of bringing back a second Martian collapsed time; two hours could have been

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twenty. Ric pushed back the nagging thought that somewhere above them Dr. Krill's crew of mech-moles were burrowing through the black rock to reach Yetha without benefit of R'lyeth.

They only stopped for more of the elixir. When the figure on the table in front of them stirred, Ric said, "How long before he will regain full consciousness?"

"An hour, at least. Maybe five."

Ric scowled. "I'd better go back to R'lyeth, see what's up. I don't want Krill to find us together. Meanwhile, you check on Beta when he wakes. See if my idea's any good. I'll take the robots with me. Better he finds you alone."

He felt a twinge when he turned for a last look. Candi looked so small and feminine and fragile against all those enormous machines. He sighed and hurried out.

When he told R'lyeth his plan the mind-voice replied: "I hope you are right, but we have no basis for such knowledge."

"It seems like the only possible way that--"

A roaring sound from behind broke him off. Machines were biting holes in the chamber wall. When the mechanical chomping stopped a deep voice boomed out of the round hole. A short, almost squat figure leaped through. He wore a green satin cloak trimmed with gold braid.

"Dr. Krill," Ric said.

"Call me Father. Soon everybody will."

XV

DR. MORTON KRILL. Doctor of Gerontics. Self-made god. Here, after all this time, Ric was seeing him face to face. He stared, feeding his curiosity, drinking him in.

Flanked by a covey of Flames holding blasters, the little

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man in the vivid green cloak fairly beamed honest good cheer and benevolence. He was Santa Claus pudgy, with apple-red cheeks, but no beard. His hair was peppery gray and he wore it combed straight to the side to hide incipient baldness. Apparently M-P didn't grow hair. Come to think of it, the Yeth were entirely hairless. Teeth, yes. Dr. Krill's beneficent smile revealed perfect gleaming teeth.

What killed the Santa Claus image were his eyes. They were gray and cold, cold as ice. They caught Ric and told him to stand up straight. Something behind them brought out all kinds of little guilt worms crawling to the surface of his mind. He was ten years old and caught writing a bad word on the chalkboard. But he wouldn't fry in hell forever. No. Father would forgive him. If he submitted his soul to Father's will . . .

All this in one look.

"How are you, Doctor?" Ric found himself asking.

"Perfect, as always." Father chuckled happily. "It is axiomatic that users of my panacea are always in perfect health. Would you like to try some, Richard?"

"Not just now, thanks a whole lot."

"Later, then."

The bushy eyebrows, over those snake-cold eyes, moved up and down in thought. "Perhaps we can become great friends, you and I. You have displayed much ingenuity in your little war against me, Richard. I like clever people. I am quite a student of psychology, you know."

"I'm sure of it." Ric thought about the canned talks. The Father image. The Hitler uniforms. The way Dr. Krill relieved his converts of the necessity of thinking for themselves. Then again, maybe all this genuflection got boring after awhile. Hence the bid for friendship with Ric.

Now he became a brisk dynamo.

"There's a great deal of work to be done." He gave

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R'lyeth only a brief frown and motioned Ric to accompany him to the Yeth city. "They'll have the tunnel completed by now. I've had all the bodies moved here. The laboratory here is really splendid and our police in Port Mars are getting restive. Come along, Richard!"

"Just what is your plan, Doctor?" Ric managed to keep emotion out of his voice. Level and light. "M-P for everybody? One for all and all for Father?"

Dr. Krill clucked sharply. "Why is it that when a saviour arises and offers incredible benefits for his race he is immediately accused of being some kind of a monster? Jesus Christ, Buddha, and others, offered them a formula for universal brotherhood and happiness which they were unable to accept because it was based on an illusionary premise. I offer them health, well-being, extended life. What more can anyone want? And for that matter, what does it matter who gives it to them as long as they get it?"

Ric was within an ace of being convinced, but a sudden glance into those cold gray eyes as they entered the crystal city put things back in proper perspective. He had and did offer the human race a fantastic boon. As with any monomaniac with godhead ideas, all that Dr. Krill said was painfully true. Yet if his motives were as benevolent and altruistic as his Santa Claus facade—*why did he need the additive?* Why not the fungi straight, the way the Martians had used its gifts? Why put people under his pudgy thumb?

And—gruesome thought—as an M-P user and controller, Dr. Krill would continue to live and dominate indefinitely!

They went in the laboratory.

"Ah! Here is my charming leading research genius. Ex, I might add." His cherubic smile for Candi was tinged with reproach. "What are you doing, my dear?" His eyes narrowed. "Probing into forbidden things, I take it?"

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Candi's lips tightened. "I was captivated by all this. You can understand. What a fantastic race!"

"Indeed."

Krill was no dummy. He saw through the surface lie, which they knew he would. The eyes darted from Candi to Ric and back. "When love reared its head you decided to forego your career in the benefit of mankind?"

Candi blushed. "I thought so. But I—I've changed my mind. I don't want to be left out of all this. My life is here, in the lab. One doesn't change habits of a lifetime overnight, even for—love."

Dr. Krill's eyes dug hers. He chuckled, then tittered. "Yes, one understands these libidinal lapses. You have been cooped up in research laboratories for a long time. Too long. Sex was bound to lift its head sooner or later." He shrugged and started out. He whirled sharply. "All right, Dr. Lucas-Long. I can use you. My full staff will be arriving soon, along with the rest of the new bodies. You've had the necessary experience and can be of much help. But, mind you, eyes will be on you—constantly."

He turned to Ric. "As for Casanova, here. Something tedious and muscular will serve to keep him out of mischief."

Weeks of furious activity followed. Work crews on every level were shuttled in from the Port unit. Work schedules were around the clock and more stringent than ever. Ric was put back in the greenback contingent of cargo hustlers and robo operators. It filtered down through the grapevine that outworld Law was beginning to take notice of the surge toward the Polar region; the manned gun posts circling the Cave were primed for liquidating casual snoopers, not for full-scale war. The need for haste was obvious.

Candi played her part to perfection. A dedicated scientist,

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she labored long hours supervising user-lab-crews in the monumental project of bringing the Yeth back to life.

Ric glimpsed Belasco from time to time, but didn't speak or acknowledge friendship. In any case idle conversation was *verboden*.

On a whim Dr. Krill called Ric in for the second Yeth's awakening.

"Do we call him Beta?" Candi asked the Doctor.

Ric glanced at the figure in the crystal case, the one Candi had brought back to test Ric's theory, and immediately deactivated again. *He* was the real Beta. . . .

They stared down at the attenuated figure in its new android body. Ric sucked in a sharp breath. There was a lump of ice in his middle. This moment was crucial, too.

"Fine. Only wake him! Wake him!" Krill's voice was snappish with impatience.

Beta opened his eyes. They were deep-sunk, larger than human eyes, and steel-blue. Like Alph's. The long gaunt face was without expression. It was as if he wasn't sure whether he liked being alive again or not. He would have to work on it.

He looked up at Candi. His unwinking eyes expressed nothing. Then, a puckering, a twinge. His head lifted a few inches; his eyes searched.

They found Dr. Krill. They stopped. His lips formed one word. "*Father!*"

Ric suffered his random moments as Dr. Krill's court jester with equanimity; they gave him a chance to at least see Candi. Now that Dr. Krill's triumph was complete, with Beta his devoted slave, it was full-speed ahead. Under Candi's supervision the huge lab bustled with assembly line reawakenings; Candi had redeemed herself in Father's good graces.

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Ric, too, might be useful later on. Top space pilots were always in demand.

One day Ric found himself hauled into the Presence, as was happening more often during the passing days. Dr. Krill and two tech-Flames were examining R'lyeth's Hands, Th'ryl and Z'yr. They were propped against the wall of Dr. Krill's throne-room, blank-faced chunks of cer-metal, like R'lyeth.

"What do you know about these?" the Doctor demanded. "We can't get them activated."

"What would I know?"

Dr. Krill snorted. "You had a cozy talk with the Big Brain! R'lyeth told me about you and your arm when I first talked with Them!"

Ric shrugged. "Then you know as much about it as I do."

Dr. Krill's look was a blaze of ice-fire. "First I was a saviour of the Yeth. Now I'm poison."

"Maybe they don't like the idea of being dominated."

"R'lyeth is sulking. They want to be the big cheese." That rumbling chuckle. "Never mind. When I've got them all where I want them R'lyeth will knuckle under. There is a lot of knowledge locked up in the chunk of matter. I want it."

He shot a glance at the techs, still busy on the Hands with cutting tools and blasters. "How are you coming?"

"They're like R'lyeth himself," one said. He gulped agony at having to upset Father. "Nothing seems to even dent it."

Dr. Krill swore. "Take them away. Seal them up in the ice caves. Post a guard. Make sure they can't get out." He grinned triumphantly at Ric. "Lucky we found them. They're the only means R'lyeth has of fighting me."

"They were sick to death of war and weapons," Ric said somberly. "They relied on our sense of justice."

Dr. Krill grunted.

"What happens to R'lyeth?" Ric wondered.

Dr. Krill gave his cloak a toss and paced the floor. "What?"

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What? If I can't get inside of Them I'll blast the cave over that cube before I leave here and bury Them under a thousand tons of solid rock. Let Them sit there for the next million years thinking Their long thoughts!"

XVI

To Ric, that was the kiss of death. Suffering through days of toil, his anger at a human being who could do such a monstrous thing boiled up in his craw so that sometimes he thought that his brain was going to explode. The Yeth came off the assembly line like emaciated ten-foot tin soldiers. Was his wild idea, and Candi's work, all for nothing? Was it a flop? Obviously, yes, for nothing happened. Nothing except that Dr. Krill's Great Plan moved forward with the precision of an accelerated time-clock.

Like every dictator, Dr. Krill justified his one-man control as being more effective, more productive, than any form of democratic-socialistic rule such as the UN. It eliminated long harangues, endless pros and cons; it cut through the gordian knot of human complexities and problems the way Hercules had slashed the knot. But it degraded, subtly. Led to far worse evils than vacillation and lack of decisive action. And to deliberately destroy the greatest power for multiple thought ever created!

Somehow he must get to R'llyeth.

He *must*.

First tries at evading the Flame-guards during sleep periods got him nowhere. Then, one midday, moving ice-chests out of the Caves, he spotted Belasco eating his cold ersatz lunch behind a shard of frozen rock. He hunkered down beside the youth.

"Hey!" Belasco started, pleased. "I've been wanting to—"

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"Shush," Ric admonished tautly. "Listen! I've got to get out tonight. I've got a plan. You can help. Listen closely."

Belasco gulped his grub and nodded.

The hooded parkas against the freezing temperature of the Caves were the break Ric needed. Mostly the men didn't bother to remove them for their sleep breaks; the green-backs' bunkrooms were cold, too. The only way a Flame guard could tell one parkaed lump of humanity from another was by the luminous number on his back, luminous for the dark caves where they labored.

In the confusion of change in sleep-shifts, Ric switched parkas with Belasco, who slept in a low-security unit. Ric, naturally, was kept under heavy guard. An hour after sleep-time, Ric made his move. . . .

The guard at this minimum security unit had ambled off for coffee. Ric cat-footed between the lumpy bunks and out. He made his way to R'llyeth's sanctum, thanking his unerring space-taught esp for orientation. He darted between shadows until he heard the voices of guards in R'llyeth's chamber. He hugged the wall and froze.

"I don't know why they put us here, night after night," one of the Flames grumbled. "That hunk of rock ain't going no place."

"There's something inside of it."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"How in hell would I know? But Father knows what he's doing."

That stopped his buddy. Ric's tight muscles yearned to act, but it would be folly to tangle with two blasters. He was weaponless, of course.

Suddenly his mind thrummed with familiar thunder. R'llyeth was making himself known.

"We must not lose hope."

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"Did you hear that, Tom?" one of the guard's yelled out.
"Yeah. Like it was that rock talking."

R'lyeth spoke again. "All within this chamber can hear me. I am able to detect presences only within this room."

Ric understood now. R'lyeth's thrumming voice could not select minds. Nor could he telepath with Ric at a distance. Only with a Yeth mind.

"Hey!" a guard cried. "What's going on!"

"We are Truth," R'lyeth told them. "Put down your weapons. They are useless against Us. All those within my hearing listen carefully. I have communicated with my people. Through them I know what has happened."

Tell me! Ric begged silently. *Did we succeed?*

"It is ordained that all of Our people shall revere the True Father. That—"

Long steely fingers grabbed Ric from behind. The thrumming voice broke off sharply. Ric whirled to see who had hold of him. He looked up into Beta's alien face, his deep-set eyes angry emerald flames.

XVII

"I FOUND HIM skulking in the hall near the sanctum," Beta told Dr. Krill. "I believe that he was trying to communicate with R'lyeth."

Dr. Krill's silk cloak swished about his legs as he strode the emerald-lit antechamber to his bedroom. Ric watched him toy absently with the tassels on his robe belt, shooting icy glances at Ric from time to time.

"Tie his hands," Dr. Krill told Beta. "Behind him."

"Yes, Father."

Beta did a thorough job of it. Ric found his fingers gradually numbing from the pressure of the plastic cords.

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"What are you trying to pull?" Dr. Krill demanded.

Ric said nothing.

"There is some scheme afoot, Father," Beta said. "I don't know what it is but it is in the air, all around me. I can sense it."

Dr. Krill made an impatient sound. "Sense what?"

"I don't know. But R'lyeth is holding back from all of us. He is not permitting telepathic communication. Just before I captured this wretch I heard R'lyeth talking."

"Did you hear what he said?"

"No. He stopped as soon as he felt my presence in the corridor. But I questioned the guards. They heard him."

"And—?"

"Mostly a careful camouflaged beginning—but it was intended for Coltor's ears, I'm sure. There was something about the True Father."

Dr. Krill's mouth curved a triumphant smile. "Maybe the Big Brain is coming around, admitting defeat, knuckling under."

"If you will forgive me, Father, I don't—"

"Never mind!"

Beta gurgled meekly. "May I kill this one, Father? That would stop—"

"Stop me from finding out what he knows!" Dr. Krill cracked. "Send for the girl. If there is anything to this sensing of yours, she must be in on it." He scratched his haunch and paced, while they waited for Candi to be awakened and brought in. "But don't get any ideas that I'm a soft weak-kneed messiah, Mr. Coltor! Savor every moment while you can; you haven't many left."

Ric's wash of rage dissolved into despair. Dr. Krill was not above using primitive methods for getting information out of his enemies, and he would use them on Candi. Ric knew

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he couldn't hold out long watching sadistic stunts being pulled on the girl.

Candi swept in, giving a fair representation of a female dragon breathing fire at having been dragged out of bed in the middle of the night. "I'm dead tired. Twelve hours of work and—"

"I know, I know." Dr. Krill went to her and stroked her hand. "I like you this way, my dear. In your negligee, and with those green eyes. Like hot emeralds. I do like green."

Candi played it all the way. She shot a look at Ric and her lip curled. "I thought you got rid of *him*!"

Dr. Krill laughed. "Soon. Very soon. Our project is moving ahead admirably and soon I shall dispose of him and other excess baggage as well."

"You're not including me, I hope," Candi pouted.

"It all depends, my dear."

"I've worked my fingers to the bone for you!" Candi flared. "I brought Alph back—and Beta!" She gestured at the Number Two Martian, who stood by the closed door with two Flames, casting adoring glances at Father, waiting patiently for him to turn them to his uses.

"Alph wasn't exactly what the doctor ordered," Krill said.

"It wasn't my fault," Candi frowned. "But Beta is."

"True." The Doctor scowled at Ric. "Beta believes that some plot is going on, involving R'llyeth. I don't see what it could be, with the precautions we've taken. But that's what I called you here for. Do you know anything about a plot, my dear?" The silk in his tone hid a bared knife.

Candi frowned. "No. Of course not."

"Then we must make Richard talk."

Candi seemed to consider this. "There's one obvious way. Do you have some M-P handy? A hypo would be best. Make sure it gets to work, and *fast*."

Dr. Krill tittered his admiration. He moved to a desk and

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produced a jade box. The elaborately carved green box contained a hypodermic and a vial of M-P. The Doctor's own. Ric watched him puncture the plastic stopper and fill the hollow needle. Watched with eyes that went wide.

"May I, Doctor?" Candi asked.

Dr. Krill lidded his ophidian eyes a moment, then handed her the hypo. "Just in case," he said fatuously, pulling a green-handled blaster out of his dressing gown pocket and pointing it at her.

Candi shrugged and went to Ric.

"Damn your eyes!" Ric pulled back.

But the needle went out swiftly. There was a wide gleam in Candi's eyes. Dr. Krill moved to the other side; Ric was caught between them.

Candi pounced the hypo into his greenback's tunic.

Dr. Krill chuckled as Candi tossed the empty hypo away. While the Doctor's eyes involuntarily followed its trajectory Candi whipped a scalpel out of her negligee. Almost casually she flicked it across the wire-tight ropes that bound Ric's wrists.

"He won't need these anymore," she smiled.

Ric drooped his head in despair; working his fingers so that the blood would find its way back. Then, swiftly, he lunged.

His jump pinned Dr. Krill to the wall. He nipped the blaster neatly when it popped out from the Doctor's flaccid hand. Then he was between Candi and the doorway—pointing the weapon firmly in Dr. Krill's spine.

"If any of you tries anything, Father gets it," he told the Flames and Beta. He grinned for Candi's benefit. "That guck is cold, running down my arm like that."

"I was petrified you might have a cut or skin-nick," Candi said.

"Nope." His eyes were glued on the three at the door.

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"Now, friends, just toss the lady your blasters. Very carefully, please."

The burly Flames were gaping. For a moment Beta seemed about to fall on his face. "*Father!*" he wailed.

"What shall we do?"

The apples in Dr. Krill's cheeks withered. "Do what he says. For the time being."

The three stopped waving their blasters helplessly and tossed them on the carpet. Candi scooped them up.

"Stay behind us," Ric told her. "First answer me this riddle. What happens to Father's flock if he dies? Will it be good or bad for them?"

"Hard to say. A terrible trauma, I think. Better if they were prepared emotionally first."

Ric herded Dr. Krill and the three myrmidons out and down the cave-corridor. Candi trailed after.

"Where are we going?"

"R'llyeth. We'll keep Father alive—if we can. If not, they'll just have to take their chances. They don't have to know he's dead right away. We'll fake it with tapes."

"You can't kill me!" Dr. Krill raged. "They'll die, all of them!"

Ric paid no attention to his babblings. The little group moved down the darkest, loneliest ways Ric knew of, skirting the edges of the crystal city and the bright-edged sea.

"Don't worry about saying too much, Pop. We know all."

"You *know*?"

"You must have done it accidentally that first time you injected those patients at the hospital, without telling Alan. You were working alone; you were in an almighty sweat to try it. The instrument or the beaker you used to synthesize the fungi wasn't sterile. It was contaminated. *Contaminated with your own blood cells.*"

Dr. Krill stumbled.

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Candi went on: "Leucocytes, biconcave red corpuscles. Both are involved. I ought to have guessed it when Alph displayed yearning toward me and called me his mother. Finally I remembered nicking my finger during the final stages of revivification. Microscopic amounts of my own blood cells were mixed with the fungi essence which had to be used in bringing back the Martians, since it is a concomitant of their ecology."

"Alan told me that when he grew my new arm," Ric said, while they moved toward R'lyeth's chamber. "He got a 'starter' from my own body—the fungi pointed the way toward this growth cycle. There's a theory that living cells have knowledge and emotional responses. As the blood cells from your body multiplied in each user's body they responded to the parent body. *You!*"

Dr. Krill's shoulders quivered in a spasm of hysteria. "Slobbering dogs! All of them! Each one of them became part of *me*. I cured them, yes, but as they were cured and strengthened, every day my blood cells in their bodies pulled them toward me. They *are* me—every one of them!"

They wound in a tight procession up and around the clean-cut rock and soon the shimmering city of Yetha vanished from view. They plunged down the long straight tunnel to R'lyeth.

Two Flames blocked their way.

"Where do you think you're going?" one demanded of Beta, at the lead. Then he saw Dr. Krill. "Forgive me, Father!"

"Suppose you join our happy group," Ric suggested.

Dr. Krill twisted to scream, but he thought better of it, and nodded instead.

It was evident that Dr. Krill was worried, but he was more angry than desperate. It was impossible for him to believe that Ric and Candi could prevail over *him*—his god-

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head, and his army of fanatics whose very cells cried out to him in adoration.

They neared the new door to the sanctum (the one Dr. Krill had had cut) and two sleepy guards popped out.

"Getting crowded," Candi whispered. "Can we handle all of them?"

"Keep your chin and your blaster up," Ric grinned.

But this was the time for the Flames to make their move to save Father. There were six, now, besides Beta. Six against two.

Candi's slim, strong fingers gripped a blaster tightly, valiantly. Ric frowned, wondering if it was in the girl to kill. Her whole life had been dedicated to benefit and save humanity, not destroy. *What shall we do, Father?* they said with their adoring eyes.

"R'lyeth!" Ric yelled. "Can you hear me?"

No answer.

"R'lyeth!" he called again. "Help! You know what to do! Get them here—*fast!*"

Beta reacted first. He moved rashly in front of Ric and his weapon and swung. His fist caught Ric's face a glancing blow. Candi screamed and upped her blaster at the Martian.

"Shoot!" Ric cried.

"I—I can't," she wailed. "Not Beta! It's my fault—what he is! I put those blood cells in him. I—"

Ric grunted and yanked his blaster out of its nest of green satin and spine-bones. He got one shot out before the Flames rushed in, pinning them both against the rocky wall. Beta slapped the gun out of Ric's hand.

"I'm sorry," Candi sobbed.

"Don't be. I understand. We were outnumbered, anyway."

Dr. Krill took a moment to breathe freely, then started slapping Ric's face over and over with his emerald-ringed hand. His relish was hysterical. He strutted in front of them,

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back and forth, his tassels bobbling. Ric thought of a banty rooster parading before a barnyard of worshiping hens.

Beta and the Flames watched and waited for his frenzy of triumph to abate.

Finally Beta said, "Father, we must—"

"Shut up!" All of this had touched off a mainspring within him somewhere, a dictatorial god-complex carried to the nth degree. "I am the Father of the whole Universe! Others have tried to rule the Universe by force, or by their favors. I don't need either. I am inside of you! I am part of you! I will give you boundless health and long life, but in return you must worship me—all of you!"

He raved on and on, silks brushing the floor as he paced in ecstasy. Somewhere during that ecstasy Ric began to hear a distant rolling sound, like the beginnings of a summer storm over the mountains. But it wasn't a storm. It was the sound of marching feet. Hundreds. Thousands. An army of feet, moving nearer and nearer with each tick of time.

"Father!" Beta shrieked. "Listen to me!"

"Silence!" Dr. Krill commanded him. "I listen to no one. I am Supreme! *I am God!*"

The thundering footsteps roared up and into the tunnel. It was like a great host drawn to the object of their fanatical love by an irresistible force within their very veins.

"Father!" the marchers cried. "Father!"

Dr. Krill beamed his face toward the tall army of resurrected Yeths. They moved toward him, their eyes aflame.

"My new super-army!" Dr. Krill screamed. "Nothing can defeat them!"

Beta fell to his knees, hugging the Doctor's skirts and moaning.

"Shall we tell him?" Ric asked Candi.

"It seems a shame to burst his bubble."

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"Thank God R'lyeth did hear me. He did call his people to come here."

"And Dr. Krill never stopped to think that two can play the same game," Candi said. "How are *you* going to enjoy being Father to fifty thousand Yeth?"

"Not a damn bit," Roc groaned. "But there has to be a way of nullifying the action of the blood cells! There just *has* to be!"

"We'll find a way," Candi promised. "And some day—some day soon—we will make the Father bit real. The legal, natural way. Want to join me on such a project?"

With this promise, and Candi's dazzling smile to fortify him, Ric gestured for his army of alien children to take charge.