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THEY AMENDED THE
LAWS OF NATURE

THE GOLDEN PEOPLE

FRED SABERHAGEN



Complete Novel

PLANETEERS, GO HOME!

The planet was called Golden in honor of the planeteer whose ship had crashed there years before. It was an Earth-type world, with humanoid natives, and other creatures that were—something less.

Or maybe more, for almost all of the planet was covered by an invisible Field which blanked radar, damped the power of the Earthmen's stunners, immobilized their robots and caused watches to run backward. No machine or weapon more complicated than the lever or knife could work inside the Field.

Which meant that the Space Force had to revert to the primitive to explore the world of Golden. And obviously, someone or something hidden in the vast reaches of the planet had planned it that way. . . .

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

FRED SABERHAGEN has had stories in several science-fiction magazines. An Air Force veteran and a bachelor, he lives in Chicago and claims to enjoy "karate, chess, and science-fiction conventions, besides such more peaceful activities as writing and looking out for the right girl."

He is currently working on a "mainline" novel, plus science-fiction of "diverse shapes and sizes."

THE GOLDEN PEOPLE

FRED SABERHAGEN

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EXILE FROM XANADU

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PART ONE

I

FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD Ray Kedro was backed up against a wall in the Middle Boys' Playground when twelve-year-old Adam first saw him. Adam glanced up from the pages of *Space Force Adventures*, watching indifferently at first, until he realized that the six kids facing Ray had more in mind than the routine teasing and roughing of a newcomer. The guys were really hot about something.

Most of the bunch were a year or two older and taller than Adam, but he was respected. He stuffed the comic book into his pocket and moved toward them.

"What goes on?" Adam demanded.

"He's a snooper!" Big tough Pete slapped the new kid again. "He kin read yer mind. He's gonna sing for the bosses here—"

"I'm not!" The new kid was tall and thin, with good clothes dusty now from being pushed around, and mussed blond hair falling over blue eyes that looked scared but didn't blink at being slapped. He had a sort of delicate face, bleeding now in a couple of places. But he didn't look to Adam like a sissy, only like a guy who couldn't understand what it was all about.

"He made them dice move!" a guy yelled.

"You wanted me to play with dice!" the new kid shouted back. "I had to show you, first, what I can do. If I play, you'll have to trust me—"

"Play dice, play with dice!" Pete mimicked, in a changing, cracking voice. The guys all yelled again. Adam was suddenly a little scared, in a cold clear way, not of getting hurt, but that these guys he knew could get so wild over nothing. He was beginning to understand, vaguely. Psionics, the books in the library called it. Once no one had believed it existed.

The little mob surged forward. On impulse, Adam shoved his own stocky body in front of the new kid, and knocked down big Pete's upraised arm. "Let 'im alone!"

Pete halted, gaping. "Why?"

"Because I say so!"

Pete gave an angry grunt and swung. Adam's reflexes were excellent; his head moved safely aside, and Adam got enough weight behind his counterpunch to flatten Pete's nose.

The mob closed in, clumsy and furious. In a daze, Adam found himself flat on his back, looking up at a ring of faces filled with hate and excitement. Somehow he wanted to laugh at the foolishness of it all, even while he kicked and struck at the faces, and feet kicked at him.

Then the monitors came, shouting, from wherever they had been goofing off, to break up the fight before anyone was killed or crippled.

In the infirmary, waiting to get his lumps patched up, Adam listened with some satisfaction to the moans and curses from the next cubicle, where big Pete lay. Beside Adam sat the new kid, holding a coldpack to his head, an empty, stunned look on his battered and dirty face.

"What's your name, guy?"

"Ray Kedro." The kid pulled in a deep breath and got himself steady. "You may have saved my life today—I won't forget." He tested a loose tooth with a finger. "Your name's Adam? I hope this doesn't mean a lot more trouble for you."

Adam tried to laugh with a split lip. "Hell, they won't do much to us. I was due to fight Pete anyway. Hey, was all that true, about you being psionic?" It was the first time

Adam had tried to pronounce the fancy word, but he felt pretty sure he had it right.

Ray hesitated, and then nodded. "I can do some things. About reading minds—well, you just don't reach into someone's thoughts, for no good reason. It'd be like—well, like doing the dirtiest thing you can imagine. Maybe you *can* do it, really, but you don't. If the other person wants to cooperate, that's different."

"Huh. Hey, a guy told me once that anyone who could move dice could kill people, you know, just grab a little valve or something in their heart—"

"No." Ray's voice was flat. "Psi doesn't work that way, it won't kill. Oh, there are a few very rare cases, of people being burned—" Ray smiled suddenly, wincing as he did. "If I had any kind of knockout punch, I'd have used it today."

"Hey, yeah, I guess."

The next day, those involved in the fight were given extra work after school. While cleaning a long tiled corridor with a sonic machine, Adam and Ray talked again.

Adam asked, "You know anyone else who's psionic?"

"Yes." Ray paused. "Have you heard about Dr. Nowell?"

Adam thought. He looked through newspapers when he could find them. "Isn't he the guy who bought some old Space Force installation out on Ganymede? He was raising kids out of bottles, until the government found out. Hey, are you—?"

Ray guided the cleaning machine along, mechanically. "Yes, I'm one of his kids. The law took us all away from him, and split us up in different Homes. We can still touch minds with each other, now and then."

Adam, fascinated, stared at Ray. "You look human, like everyone else."

The blue eyes looked at Adam, deep pain visible for just a moment. "We came from human seed, from human cells."

"Then what's the difference? I mean . . ." Adam was confused, but he didn't want to give offense.

"Do you know what genes are?"

"No."

"They're little parts in the center of a cell, that decide everything you inherit from your parents; the way you look, your potential intelligence, your psionic potential

too. Dr. Nowell found a way to make forcefield manipulators small enough to work on genes. He experimented on animal cells first, then on human. He rebuilt a hundred fertilized human eggs, and then he stopped. He says he'll wait a quarter century, to see how we turn out."

"He rebuilt you to grow up perfect, huh? You don't sound too happy about it."

"Well, Adam, we're very lucky. Lots of people are born crippled. If we were perfect, I don't think the world would like it."

Adam was silent for a while, working with the cleaning nozzle. This Ray gave him a lot to think about. Talked with fancy words and a high-class accent, but they sounded natural, for him.

Ray spoke up again, as if he had paused to think something out. "Look, Ad, if things go right and I get out of here pretty soon, how'd you like to come along to Doc's place for a visit?"

Adam almost dropped the nozzle. "You mean to Gany-mede?" For him, space travel existed in another world, glimpsed only in stories and dreams. For Adam at twelve the Space Force was a holy cause.

Ray smiled. "No, Doc had to give that up. He's going to open a kind of school for us now, here on Earth. There are legal reasons why he doesn't want anyone else to live there permanently, but you'd be welcome to visit."

"Gee, I'd like to. You sound like he's going to win this case in court and get you kids back again."

Ray's smiled broadened. "I think he will."

II

ADAM LOOKED out from under a huge metal helmet that tickled his scalp. The big psych chair in which he sat was much like the one at the Home, where each child had a brain check twice a year. But Doc Nowell's laboratory was expensive, modern, and disorderly, not worn and scrubbed and neat. Here, unbarred windows looked out on acres of green trees and grass and gardens. It was hard to believe that one man owned it all.

"Doc, can I ask you something?" Adam wondered, a little timidly.

"Sure. I won't guarantee an answer." Doc, a tall, lean, gray-ing man, was seated now before the psych chair's control panel. He had begun a series of physical and mental tests on Adam, just, as he said, out of curiosity.

Adam put his question: "About how much money have you got?"

Doc had a contagious laugh. "I thought you were worried about the machine. Well, Adam, let's just say my wealth is sufficient for my purposes, which makes me a very rare scientist." Watching the panel, Doc paused to make a note. "Oh, I haven't earned my money from society by probing for the secrets of life. No. It's mine by inheritance; candy and chewing gum, a couple of generations back. Let's just say that I'm too rich to be pushed around in court!"

The door opened, and a girl entered the lab—Merit Creston. She was a year younger than Adam, which made her the baby of Doc's hundred. The others ranged in age up to seventeen. Adam was a visiting child among adolescents, who were mentally more mature than any adults he had known. But all of them were so good at saying and doing the right thing that Adam rarely felt out of place.

Merit stood in the doorway of the psych lab, wearing white shorts and blouse and what Adam had learned were called tennis shoes. She had light brown hair with a glint in it—

Adam supposed that in a year or two he would start wanting girls in a physical way, like the older guys at the Home. What he felt about Merit now wasn't that, it was something more—or something less, he didn't know which. It was just confusion if he tried to think about it.

She greeted him now with a giggle. "Hi, Ad. You look like you're getting your hair dried."

Adam grunted. He wanted desperately to say something witty, and so could think of nothing at all. Suddenly he remembered there were a hundred telepaths around, and felt his face getting warm. Why did she have to stand there—

"I think you'd better leave, young lady," said Doc. "You're a disturbing influence just now."

"All right, Grouchy Doc," said Merit. "Call me if he's mean to you, Adam." She winked at the boy in the chair, and gracefully closed the door behind her.

"So long," Adam called out, lamely. Suddenly he felt irritated with Doc, with Doc's wife Regina, with the whole crew of them here.

"Let's try something, Adam," With an air of decision, Doc flipped a switch on the panel. "I want you to close your eyes now, and imagine a white screen, waiting for a picture. Got it? Now just let the screen stay there and listen to the story."

A recorded voice came through the helmet, telling about a man named Caesar, who long ago had taken a fleet of eighty ships, and sailed with an army to Britain.

"Adam," said Doc's voice, as the storyteller paused. "As you listen, try to imagine an ending for the story, and guide the story to it. Understand?"

"How can I change the story?"

"You don't have to, really. Just try."

Adam shrugged. "All right."

The story went on. Caesar poked around Britain, lost some ships in a storm, and fought against blue-painted warriors who rode in chariots and hurled javelins. Adam didn't like Caesar, whoever he was. He seemed to have no good reason for attacking Britain.

Eyes shut, Adam concentrated on changing the story. But the voice just droned on, of course. If only some of the Britons could have sneaked into the invaders' camp, right into Caesar's tent. They could surround Caesar, and pull out knives, and attack him . . . and Caesar's eyes closed, then opened, fastening on one of the killers, and . . .

"*Kai su teknon!*"

The shouting voice broke with emotion; Adam lurched upright in his chair, vaguely aware of the psych lab around him, but still seeing the inside of Caesar's tent. Caesar and his killers were gone, but something stirred the fabric of the tent flap, and the head of a handsome man was thrust inside. With horror Adam saw that the head was borne on a long reptilian neck. Now, all around, there were people gathered, giants, godlike in their beauty and power. And now a single figure pushed his way through them, a stocky, powerful man, ordinary in appearance. His face came into clear focus, solemn now, but Adam thought there was a habit of humor in the eyes.

"My name is Alexander Golden," said the strong man to

Adam. He turned toward the long necked creature, striking at it—

And then the psych lab was the only reality. The helmet had been lifted from Adam's head, and Doc stood by the chair looking down at him.

"What happened?" they asked each other, speaking together.

Doc smiled faintly. "Well, you went to sleep. Sometimes my stories, recorded or not, have that effect. But what did you experience?"

Adam told him. "And the last man said his name was Alec Golding, or something like that."

"It's fading?" Doc's tone was sharp. "His face, you say you saw it plainly. Do you know him?"

Adam could still remember the face. "No."

Doc hesitated, then turned away to shut off the control panel. "Kai su teknon is Greek—means something like 'you too, my child.' It's what Caesar is supposed to have cried out when he was stabbed, though that wasn't in Britain. His death-scene is a fairly common result of this test. You picked it up either from me, or directly from the past. Shows you have more psi potential than most people, certainly more than I do. If you had begun training very early, you might have become expert."

Doc walked back to the chair. "Adam, you interest me; your biological inheritance is almost equal to that of my children here. Of course, I flatter myself they've had a better environment than that Home of yours—no matter.

"Sheer good fortune has given you the physique to become an outstanding athlete, but I think you have too good a mind to be satisfied with that. And you have the psi potential—but you may be happier with that undeveloped."

Adam thought of Ray, backed up against the playground wall.

Out of the hundred Jovian kids, only Merit and Ray became Adam's close friends. The others, older, were always pleasant, but when they were out of Adam's sight he could hardly remember their names or faces.

Already they all seemed to look up to Ray, though he was among the youngest. Once Adam thought: Ray's a late model,

with all the tested improvements built in. Then he felt ashamed of the thought.

He came back for visits at gradually increasing intervals over the next five years; his psi talent appeared to fade steadily, and finally Doc stopped testing him. Somehow the school seemed a little less familiar every time he came, the Jovians a little more remote.

On his last visit, now seventeen, proudly wearing the uniform of a Space Force recruit, Adam walked into a room where he thought Merit might be. She was there, with Ray. Adam stopped, hesitated, and stood silently watching, without comprehension.

Hand in hand, eyes closed, Ray and Merit floated together in the air, four feet above the floor. They gave no sign that they were aware of him, so after a few seconds Adam stepped out of the room, shaken.

Later he would talk to Merit. Now he decided to find Doc. The halls and grounds were nearly empty now, most of the unique family out in the world, making their way with invariable success, fading out of public attention.

When Adam slid open the lab door, he saw Doc sitting alone at his desk, hands folded. There was a picture on the desk of Doc's wife, killed a year earlier in a city pedestrian stampede.

"Well, Adam!" Doc came quickly to shake hands, his eyes lighting when he saw the uniform. "So, it's up and out for you! I knew you'd make it. Are you sorry now that your psi faded out? The Space Force psych tests seem to weed out almost everyone who *has* psi talent; a couple of my boys tried to enter and were turned down."

Adam was surprised; but he supposed no tests were infallible. He mentioned the levitation he had just seen.

Doc nodded, without surprise. "I no longer try to teach them anything, Adam. I just try to keep up, and I can't. What kind of lives they're going to have in this world I don't know. And what are they going to mean to humanity?"

The aging man and the young one looked at each other, two humans, wondering.

"Often I wonder, Adam; was there some force, some law of evolution acting through me when I pushed my tools into those living cells, and tore down and built, and rearranged molecules? Are these kids really the next step up from man?"

"I don't know, Doc. You can be proud if they are."

"Proud of what? Being used?" Doc fell silent, making an irritated gesture. "Blind laws," he said finally, with disgust. His face was more lined than Adam remembered it—could he be failing just a bit with age?

"She was incurably sterile, you know," Doc said, looking at the picture on his desk. "We could never have any children biologically our own. Well." He brightened, with an effort. "Enough of that. You're going to the Academy, eh? How soon will you have a chance to get into planeteering?"

III

THE CHANCE had come after four years of training. His second planeteering mission was on a world named Killcrazy by the survivors among the men who landed first. But that was behind him now, along with the starships and the Terraluna shuttle and the ferry down to New York. Ahead were thirty glorious days of leave, with Alice. Then together they would go out to the Space Force base at Antares; the baby could be born out there.

Adam had married her only a month before starting out on the Killcrazy thing. But Alice understood, she was Space Force herself, like her parents before her.

For once the roaring confusion of the great city pleased Adam. He made his way nimbly through the port crowd, a thick-limbed, strong young man of average size, wearing a dress uniform that hadn't seen much use and a new ribbon on his chest. Alice had written something about his coming home with the uniform on, so he was wearing it instead of civvies.

Near the port exit, a newsstand poster read:

JOVIAN SUPERKIDS—WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Blond and ruggedly handsome, Ray Kedro looked down from the poster. Adam hadn't seen him, or Merit, or Doc, in the flesh for a long time. He recalled hearing that most of the Jovians were pairing off and marrying each other. He wondered about Merit. There had been a time . . .

With a little flash of guilt, Adam recalled that Alice was waiting for him. Alice was not a Jovian, but Alice was perfection in her own way, the human way. And human is what I am, thought Adam.

The heavy travel bag felt feather-light in his grip as he stepped onto the slideway heading toward the little sublevel apartment. This was better than trying to meet her in the spaceport swarm. There had been people queued up at the phone booths, so he hadn't delayed to call. She knew when his ship was due.

On Antares Six they would have better quarters. There would be no outdoors for the baby except a little domed-over garden, but that was about all the outdoors you got in New York.

He let himself into the tiny apartment, sneaking, ready to jump at Alice when he spotted her. He tiptoed into the bedroom, and then the kitchen, where he found the note.

Darling—Suddenly I can't wait to see you, so I'm going to the spaceport. If you find this, I've missed you, and the joke's on me for being impatient. Sit tight and I'll be home soon.

Love XXXX Me

He sat tight for an hour, savoring his joy. He looked at her clothes in the closet, and touched them tenderly.

The phone chimed.

A man's voice. "Spaceport Authority. Am I speaking to Spaceman Adam Mann?" Then, bringing the first cold blow of fear: "Is Alice Mann your wife? There's been an—accident."

Adam raced in a nightmare through the bright anthill of the city. The port again. Traveler's Aid. The Portmaster's Office. Sudden grave looks when he gave his name, looks of sympathy and hidden triumph: It happened to you, not to us.

After hearing the words several times, he began to realize that she was dead. The doctor said the baby was dead, too, though he had ripped it out of her, trying to save it.

"We did all we could. Sometimes it still just isn't enough . . . !"

A policeman talked calmly and gently. It had been a violent and deliberate attack, right in the crowded port. One suspect had been seized, but no one had yet come forward as a witness.

"These teenpacks—I don't know what the answer is. We

do all we can. This year some of them hunt pregnant women; last year it was something else."

"Who's your suspect?" Adam's stomach had turned sick, and his knees weak. But still it hadn't really sunk in.

"I'll show you. He's a real prize."

They looked through oneway glass at a slouching young man, his body grown out of adolescence, mind and soul still caught like baby worms on some unknown fishhook. Greasy pigtails framed the masklike face. The oddly-styled jacket was lipstick-marked with obscene clan-symbols.

Adam opened the door and stepped through, moving too fast for the cop. The other police in the room looked up, wondering.

"This one did it?" Adam's knees no longer felt weak.

The sneering young face held out insult, trying to touch someone, like a blind man's groping hand. "Sure, father-man. I must have did whatever it was."

"Easy, now. Maybe it wasn't him at all." The gentle cop stood beside Adam again, soothing. The others watched him with pity and calculation, ready to lead him away if he should become violent.

Violent. Little they knew. The impersonal trained-in combat computer offered the plan: three quick strides to the target, then kicks and blows that would break bone and crush nerves and send killing shock waves through blood vessels to the brain.

The Academy training in personal combat had flowed into Adam's brain and body as if he had been designed as its receptacle. Arm-twisting stuff, he had called it with distaste. But before he left the Academy, he could be more effectively violent than almost any of the instructors.

The police were not wearing stunguns; even so, they made it an interesting technical problem, but Adam doubted that they would be able to stop him. The target might react to some purpose by the time he reached it. He doubted that, too.

"Come along." The cop's gentle hand on his arm. "We'll find out, if it was him."

The youth said, "C'mere, father-man. I got a present for ya." He giggled, and made a gesture that meant nothing to Adam.

Adam waited, for whatever spark it would take to set him

off. Once before, as a teenager, he had killed with his hands, clumsily and desperately defending himself against attack on the street near the Home. But what good had it done? Now another man had found another way to take Adam's life.

He felt no reluctance to kill, but no spark came. His loss was beyond all paying-back, and it made all action pointless. He let himself be turned around and led away. He was very tired. It would be good to get home finally and . . .

It sank in further: Alice was dead. When he did get home, her silent note still waited for him.

He had scream-it-out grief therapy, and then tranquilizers. He went on with the motions of living, and then with living itself. After a tour of duty as personal combat instructor at the Academy, his delayed orders finally came through for Antares.

IV

THE FOOTSTEPS came to a halt at the messroom door, and the courier captain's face appeared, wearing an expression of faint disapproval.

"Antares Base is on alert, gentlemen," he informed his two passengers; then he hurried on, footsteps fading.

Adam Mann looked across the chessboard at his new boss, Chief Planeteer Colonel Boris Brazil, and asked, "Suppose it's just practice?"

"Yeah." Brazil slouched in his chair, a tall, lean, blond, bony-faced man. "Or maybe something scared 'em. Maybe they heard old spit-and-polish was coming." He nodded after the courier captain. "Anyway, we'll soon know. I concede a draw," he added, nodding cheerfully at his hopeless chess position.

One good thing about an alert, thought General Grodsky, was that it got him into a ship again. But his logistics were complex when he held most of his fleet off planet, while keeping emergency maintenance docks and a skeleton crew functioning on the surface of Antares Six. So most of the paperwork shuffled inexorably after him, and he still spent most of his time at a desk.

"Molly," he told his secretary as she came into the inner

office, "get Colonel Brazil up to me as soon as he's aboard." The courier ship had begun to send official messages from Earth as soon as it had appeared in normal space within radio range of the base; but those messages were routine. Grodsky wanted to get the unofficial news of attitudes and rumors at home, and then to get his Chief Planeteer briefed on this new Fakhuri thing.

Adam waited for some minutes in Grodsky's outer office aboard the flagship; then the inner door, through which Brazil had passed, opened and a young woman in uniform looked out. "The colonel asked me to lure you in," she said with a smile.

In the inner office, Grodsky sat behind a massive desk, while Brazil perched on a corner of it, staring into space as if at some fascinating new thing.

Adam marched straight to the desk. "Spaceman Mann reporting, sir." He threw the general a sharp salute.

The general returned it carelessly. "At ease. Mann, Colonel Brazil thinks you can fill the vacancy in the planeteering crew of this flagship."

"I hope he's right, sir."

On the general's desk was a permapaper copy of Adam's service record, which Brazil had been carrying and had somehow managed to dogear slightly. Grodsky began to study it, and looked up with a frown. "You've had only two missions, Mann?" He turned to Brazil. "I don't know . . ."

Brazil wore his I'm-one-up expression. "Read a little further. One of those was the rescue job on Killcrazy."

"Oho." The general looked back at Adam with some respect. "Were you with the party that went into the crater?"

"Yes sir."

Grodsky read on. "Boris found you teaching hand-to-hand combat at the Academy. Well, that fits. Krishnan—the man you'd be replacing—had a high combat rating. Hm, I see you've married a Space Force girl. Congrat—oh. I'm very sorry."

"Sir." Adam hesitated. "I wanted planeteering before—that. I want to get back to it now."

The general nodded, his eyes probing Adam's. Then he got up from behind the desk. "Sit down, Mann. I've told

Boris the reason for this alert; now I'm going to show both of you."

Grodsky dimmed the lights and made ready to play a tridi tape, on a stage that slid up in front of his large view-screen. "This was made about eight weeks ago, aboard the *Marco Polo 7*," he announced.

The tape began with solid-looking symbols on the stage showing the astronomical coordinates of the system which the *Marco* had been investigating. A star remarkably like Sol, from which its light had been blocked throughout recorded history by a narrow twisted cloud of opaque dust—now it lay on Earthman's frontier, at the edge of the thirty million cubic light years of space he had more or less explored in the end of one arm of the galaxy's spiraled bulk.

"Planet Four looked very good from a distance," said Grodsky. "They went in for investigation, and—well, you'll see."

The stage showed the control bridge of the *Marco 7*. The picture, made as routine recording of key periods of activity, centered on a dark, intense-looking man in the captain's acceleration chair.

"That's Fakhuri, a good man," Grodsky commented. "At this point, planet Four still looked almost like a moonless twin of Earth. Now they're launching the scoutship. Remember, Fakhuri is following survey SOP and he hasn't used any radar yet."

Earthmen had never yet met aliens technically advanced enough to detect radar; but if any such existed, it was hoped to get a look at them before they spotted Earthmen.

As if looking over Fakhuri's shoulder aboard the *Marco*, a quarter of a million miles from planet Four, Adam and Boris watched and listened as the scoutship, piloted by Fakhuri's Chief Planeteer, made one swing around the planet at a hundred thousand miles without incident, and another at ten thousand.

During his one thousand mile swing, the planeteer reported something strange on the surface.

"Like a lunar ringwall, or a half-buried foundation for a building four or five miles across," said the radio voice. "Lots of clouds there—I couldn't get a very good look."

Fakhuri's image rubbed its chin. "Make a lower pass over it."

Six seconds ticked by while the finite speed of radio carried his order down to the scoutship, and brought the answer back.

"Roger. Descending to four hundred miles."

The magnification of Fakhuri's screen showed a tiny dark scoutship creeping across the blue and green and brown of a sunlit alien continent, then almost disappearing over a dark ocean.

The edited tape jumped to a slightly later time.

"Coming up toward that ringwall again," said the planet-*eer's* voice. "I'll go right over it, this time. Leveling off at four hundred miles. Should get a little atmos—"

That was all. Fakhuri moved his head, trying to see the scout on his screen. Seconds later, another watcher cried out: "He's falling, out of control!" A closeup of another screen showed that the scout's motion had changed from a nearly horizontal creeping to the steep curve of a dropped stone.

"Golden! Golden!" Fakhuri was shouting.

Another voice: "Radio beam's unlocked too, sir. We can't reach him."

"Get right over him," ordered Fakhuri, his hand reaching for a red stud on the panel before him. At the bottom of Grodsky's stage appeared the words: RED ALERT CALLED ABOARD MARCO. Scoutship drives and radios did not fail by accident, just like that.

Now, through a low cloud cover, the monstrous ringwall of splashed or piled stone became partially visible in the *Marco's* powerful scopes, the scoutship an almost invisible dot tumbling toward it as if toward the center of a target.

"No sign of his escape capsule."

"Radio still out, sir."

"Radar," Fakhuri snapped. "Track him. Planeteering, have that standby scout ready."

Grodsky said, "Watch now, here it comes."

Fakhuri's image switched its viewscreen to pick up the radar image when the bouncing pulses brought it back. The seconds of delay inched by.

The echo came. Fakhuri's screen was electronic hash for a moment; then the radar computer gave up its search for a small moving target, and *dispassionately* showed the waiting humans what it saw.

Some watcher cried out: "Captain!"

The radar picture frozen electronically on Fakhuri's screen held him—and now Adam—rigid in disbelief. Not the expected rough semblance of the Earthlike planet which the optical scopes showed—here was a bright spheroid, eight hundred miles greater in diameter than the planet it shrouded, smooth and opaque as a steel ball.

Fakhuri switched his screen back to the optical scopes. Planet Four still reflected the radiation of her sun as naturally as did Earth—again she was innocent and friendly in her bright aura of atmosphere, plain and ordinary behind a tattered film of clouds where her shape curved closest to the *Marco*.

"Evasive action!" Fakhuri ordered. "Around the planet!" If this world was shielded from radar, it might be well armed in other ways. Anything might come up from it.

The brutal acceleration of evasive action was evidently too much for the *Marco's* artificial gravity, for Fakhuri's chair folded itself protectively around him, and put forth mechanical arms toward the panel, slaved to the captain's motor-nerve impulses.

"Passive detection, still blank screen, sir." That meant there was no sign of artificially produced radiation from the planet.

"We lost him in the surface clouds, before we moved," said an astronomer's shaken voice.

"Radar gears checks OK, captain. I don't know what—"

"Pulse again, then! Give me the whole planet again."

The *Marco* was over nightside now, the planet showing in the optical scopes as a vague dark bulk embraced by a thin bright crescent. Then it was gone as Fakhuri switched his screen to radar again. The pulses would be hurtling down toward the planet . . . down . . . back . . . back. . . .

The marvelous thing flashed from the screen again, electrically beautiful. The only difference on this side of the planet was at the point antipodal to that where the scout had disappeared; here, the radar-outlined, metallic-looking surface curved steeply down to normal planet surface in an amplexicaul depression like that around the stem of an apple. Fakhuri stared, as if the wonder of it was stronger than alarm, for him. But there were standing orders for exploration captains; any technically advanced strangers found were to be treated with utmost caution, for one

starship could carry a weapon capable of destroying a planet in minutes. There was a chance that the scout pilot might be still alive; but Fakhuri's mechanical slave-hand slammed down on a stud marked EMERGENCY FLIGHT.

The flight had been to Antares, not Earth; no possible trail must lead toward home.

The stage went blank. Then Grodsky said: "This is the planeteer who was lost, Mann. Colonel Brazil knew him."

There appeared the figure of a heavy, cheerful-looking, quick-moving man, wearing a planeteer's groundsuit, carrying his helmet under one arm.

"Alexander Golden, Chief Planeteer," said Grodsky, as if wondering what the name and title ultimately meant.

Molly had re-entered the office a minute earlier, carrying some papers. "Did he leave a family?" she asked now, pausing to look into the stage.

"No." Grodsky nodded toward his desk. "As I recall from his records, he grew up in some institution—like you, Mann. Very able spaceman."

Brazil had picked up the service record from beside Adam's. "Another happy bachelor bit the dust; not many of us left. I guess I met him two or three times."

Adam stared at the last motionless frame of Golden on the stage. "I—think I must have met him, somewhere." But the sense of recognition vanished when he tried to pin it down. He shrugged.

As the stage dimmed out and the lights came up, Boris shifted around to face the general. "Well, boss, what do we do?"

"We go back there," said Grodsky, moving back to his desk. His face was lined and tight-looking. The situation was in his lap. Earth would not be able to control it, assuming they could be foolish enough to try—not when it took forty days for a message to be sent and answered.

"Now," said Grodsky, resuming serious business. "That forcefield or whatever it is around that planet—let's start calling it Golden—the field around planet Golden seems an impossibility. Consider:

"First, it entirely envelops an Earth-size planet. Second, the *Marco's* passive detection crew saw no trace of it. Third,

it let a scoutship enter as a falling object, but cut off its engines, its radio, and possibly everything else aboard. Gentlemen, we've nothing like that, anywhere!"

Brazil spoke up, casually, after a little silence: "Taking a fleet?"

"No, just three ships. A fleet might look like an attack, to—them." Grodsky shrugged. "If *they* even exist. We have no proof that this—field—is not a natural phenomenon. Golden couldn't see it without his radar, and just drove right into it."

"And just accidentally happened to drop right into that ringwall," said Boris. All of them were thinking it. He went on, "If I ever drive a scout near that thing, I won't be so damn sneaky about it. Next time we'll go in radiating the whole frequency spectrum in every direction. If someone spots me, it won't be by accident."

"I intend to take a very good look around there before anyone drives near it again," said the general grimly. "And I want you ready for the best job you ever did, if and when we do go down on Golden. You can pick any planetees you want, from any crews in the fleet."

"If you mean to approach with just one ship, my own boys are as good as any."

Adam thought he saw the general's eyes start to flick in his direction.

"My crew's up to full strength now," Boris added casually. Adam felt a sudden surge of pride and loyalty, about which he would never speak.

Grodsky nodded decisively. "All right. Mann, you can go look up your quarters, or whatever you have to do."

"Yes sir!" This time, Adam didn't bother to make the salute quite as sharp. When the office door had closed after him, he looked up and down the corridor to make sure he was unobserved, and snapped his body into a flip, a somersault in the air without touching his hands to the deck. He walked away grinning widely.

He was still quite a young man. And the murdered love had been forgotten, for a little time.

When Adam had gone, the general said thoughtfully, "Boris, I wonder if we can really function as a military outfit."

The question was partly rhetoric; Grodsky knew well the advances in psychology that over the last century had made possible the highly accurate admission tests the Space Force used. With a high degree of certainty, anyone under his command would face death in the line of duty if he so ordered. There was little need for the external trappings of discipline, for any social boundary between officers and men. Yet the Space Force had never faced a real war; who knew what would happen if one came?

"I do believe that courier captain thought *me* unmilitary," Brazil answered. "And all I had done was—well, never mind. You really expect a fight, boss?"

On an impulse, Grodsky flicked on the big viewscreen. The hellish red bulk of Antares seemed to fill the room; then the flagship's slow rotation brought into view the tiny green companion star, and the other multicolored sparks, cloud behind cloud of them, further and dimmer out to infinity.

"This time, or the next," the general said. "Sooner or later."

V

GRODSKY'S FLAGSHIP was a sphere half a mile in diameter, fast and tough, bearing no permanent name; its code designation for this mission was Alpha One. It appeared in normal space near the Golden system, and after an hour of general observation began to move along a curve that would bring it in three days to planet Four.

Alpha Two, custom built for high interstellar speed and long range observation, winked into existence out on the edge of the system, just as One began to move in. Two would alternate with Three, its twin, in observing the activities of One and in carrying news back to Antares.

At twenty million miles General Grodsky ordered his first radar probe of planet Golden's surface, and found the enveloping forcefield to be exactly as Fakhuri's recordings showed. Then he turned his flagship away from Golden, and spent a month in a methodical preliminary survey of the system's other planets, finding no indication on them of intelligent life.

Then, moved back near Golden, Alpha One focused her instruments with great interest upon the surface formation that resembled a lunar ringwall.

The Ringwall filled most of an island five miles across, at the confluence of two large rivers, in a country of low rocky hills and subtropical jungle. The island seemed always obscured by clouds and low mist, and infra-red photos of the area were fogged as if by high volcanic heat. The irregular polygon of mountainous walls might be titanic architecture, now obscured by jungle growth as well as mist and clouds. Or it might be accepted as an accidental formation, except that it lay exactly at the antipodal point from where the Field curved down to planet surface. And, of all the planet's area, Golden's scout had fallen into the Ringwall.

In the first approach, Brazil drove a scoutship twice around the planet, keeping about a thousand miles above the Field, and radiating a wide assortment of signals, as he had promised. There was no response from below.

That "evening" he knocked at the door of Adam's tiny cabin, and slid it open.

"Alpha Three should be in the system tomorrow, Junior," he announced. "Two will be heading back to Antares; we're sending a robocourier over to her in a couple of hours with mail, if you want to send some."

"Thanks, I was just writing one." Adam paused; the colonel looked as if he might be thinking over something important. "How did it look today," Adam asked, "from down there?"

"Here, I'll drop it in the mail bag. Oh, it looked just a little closer. Tell you what, Mann—you get ready for a little ride tomorrow. I want someone along to make sure my scout keeps transmitting on all fifty frequencies. Briefing at oh-five-hundred.

"Roger!"

"Don't look so happy. My good planeteers will be driving their own scouts tomorrow." Boris started to close the door, then paused, shamelessly reading the address of the letter Adam had handed him. "Say, this Doctor Nowell— isn't he the one who had the secret biological lab on Ganymede some years back? Geneticist who started all that Jovian superkid business?"

"Yeah. I used to visit his place on Earth; tell you about it sometime."

Boris' brows rose over innocent blue eyes. "You move in exalted circles," he whispered, and made his exit.

But in the morning it was all business with the colonel. "This reminds me a little bit of a mousetrap," he muttered, sitting strapped and cushioned in the left seat of the scoutship's little control room, staring at his radar screen. Alpha One was a million airless miles above the scout; the fair true surface of planet Golden less than four hundred miles below.

The radar showed the smooth hump of the Field rising high above the scout on all sides as Brazil drove down in a slow descending spiral, as if into the vortex of a whirlpool invisible to human eyes. The walls of the funnel narrowed gradually; below, a thirty-mile-diameter circle of planet surface was free of the Field and supposedly open to normal landings and exploration.

"I don't see any bait," said Adam. He was buttoned into the right seat, alertly watching his screens and indicators. "But we're here, aren't we? Maybe an obvious trap is bait enough for the curious."

"Now's a fine time to propound that theory," Brazil growled. "How d'ya read me, Alpha One?"

The distance delay, then:

"Loud and clear. Good picture."

Adam could imagine the Field-funnel closing in on the little ship with a sudden snap, dropping them rock-like to share Al Golden's fate. But no change had been observed in the Field since Fakhuri's first sighting.

An hour ago, from another scout, long probes with loops of current-carrying wire had been lowered into the Field, and the current had instantly ceased. But mice, in sealed boxes, survived the mysterious condition for several minutes without apparent ill effect, faintly raising the hope that Golden might be still alive.

The Field-free area Earthmen were beginning to call the Stem lay in the low north temperate zone, on Golden's second largest continent. Below the scout, Adam's view-screens showed rolling, open plains, covered with a probably grasslike plant. Patches of deciduous-looking forest were scattered over a line of hills that grew into a range of mountains north of the Stem. One wide, winding river ran in several places briefly congruent with the intersection of Field and planet surface; this seemed accidental.

"Enough for today," said Brazil, when they had cruised

for ten minutes at two hundred miles altitude. "Let's ease up out of this hole."

On a sunny afternoon a few days later, Adam and Boris were cruising within a mile of the surface, now with the feeling of being part of the world below. The starship overhead was of course invisible beyond the sky.

Early summer warmed and brightened Golden's northern hemisphere. The viewscreens showed green plains and forest that made the scout's cabin seem stuffy, as black space or high purple atmosphere never did.

"Makes you want to get out and go camping," Adam commented.

Brazil grunted. He was easing the scout still lower, at a few feet per second. It slid forward through the clear summer sky at about a hundred miles an hour.

"Looks like a herd of large herbivores there." Brazil pointed to a scattering of dots on the plain ahead. Under magnification they became deerlike creatures with stretchable necks. In a few minutes the scout passed over the herd on silent engines, still too high to alarm them.

Adam continually swept the landscape and the air with his viewscreens; he even scanned a nearby bird suspiciously. "I don't see any Field-building superbeings."

"Maybe they've all dried up and blown away. Are you keeping one eye on the Field? I'm spending most of my time on it."

"Ah, roger. I have one screen on radar."

But the Field only waited, motionless as stone.

Boris drove steadily lower. In another hour they were circling the Stem area just off the deck, dipping below hilltops and nearly brushing trees, some of which stood fifty feet high and looked much like the hardwoods of Earth.

Now the scout was moving not much faster than a man might run. Birds fluttered away, singly and in squawking flights, their cries coming plainly into the cabin through the outside mikes. On the ground an occasional animal fled, or crouched snarling in the scout's moving shadow.

Brazil said, "Big trail over there, down that ravine toward the river."

"Animals only?"

"Maybe." Boris drove the scout down the ravine, low and

slow; and there was the little village huddled under trees on the riverbank, a cluster of teepees whose colors blended with the muddy earth. For a long second, naked humanoid figures stood in frozen poses, gaping up at the approaching scout; then they dropped fishnets and cooking pots and exploded into frenzied motion.

"Wow—get all those cameras going!" Boris turned the scout out over the river and backed it slowly away from the village. "We'll disappear for a while—starting a major panic won't help us."

Voices from Alpha One began to gabble in their ears, urging them to turn the viewscreens on this or that in the fast-emptying village.

Many more low-level approaches were made in the next few days. It began to look as if the unknown powers of Golden had no enmity toward the scouts of Earth. An early morning came when Brazil circled the Stem area only once, letting the red sunrise catch up with his descent. Then he drove toward a grassy hill on the plain near the river, a spot selected on an earlier trip.

The scout sank gently; landing gear extended itself to touch down in the grass. The little ship settled quietly to rest on the hill.

The men inside looked around them with eyes and radar and infra-red. Here and there life moved, in the grass, in the tall reeds and bushes along the river.

"No reaction, Alpha One," said Brazil finally.

"Roger, proceed as briefed," said the delayed voice.

Brazil turned in his seat, and fixed Adam with what a stranger might have taken for an angry stare. "Well, I need a body outside, to lure these Field-builders into my snare. Get moving."

Adam got up, wearing his groundsuit, gave his boss a half-smile, and moved to the decontamination chamber, where he stood with arms raised and legs spread, while poison gas and ultraviolet sterilized the outside of his suit to prevent any possible contamination of the new planet with Earthly microorganisms.

First Out, on *this* planet, where Total Investigation was a certainty. That didn't necessarily mean you were the best

planeteer around. Without argument, it meant you were expected to be one of the best.

A hatch opened near the base of the scout, and a short ramp extended itself to the ground. A figure, anonymous in an armored groundsuit, appeared in the opening. The morning sun glinted on its faceplate as it walked down the ramp and into the kneehigh grass.

Adam's boots left a dark trail in the dew-silvered grass as he slowly walked around the scout. The sun was well clear of the horizon now, and he could see for miles in every direction. There was not a native in sight, or even an animal, except for a few birds high and far away to the south. The looming amplexicaul curve of Field was of course invisible to his eyes. There was hardly a cloud in all the kindly blue vastness of sky. The whole planet seemed to be—not watching him, but still aware of him, and waiting for what he might do. He thought: There must have been many places on Earth that looked like this, before men crowded them.

"How's it going, Mann?" asked the voice of General Grodsky. A lot of people aboard Alpha One would be watching via the TV relay through the scoutship from the tiny camera in Adam's helmet.

"Fine," he answered, "It just looks good." His own words sounded somehow inadequate to him, but there were no new facts to report, and he could think of nothing better.

Adam turned away from the scout and walked about fifty yards to where he could look downhill to a bend of the river. A heavy growth of short trees and tall reeds lined the bank. He watched for natives in boats or on foot, his mind running quickly through the basic procedures for first contact with Apparent Primitives. But no Apparent Primitives were in sight.

As Adam moved again something sprang out of the grass near his feet, making him jump nervously. Like a jackrabbit the thing went bounding down the slope away from him; it looked like an inoffensive small herbivore. After the first few yards it began to tumble clownishly, leaping and playing like an otter. Near the heavy bush by the river it stopped, looking back at Adam with apparent good cheer.

Adam grinned downhill at it; then he looked around again

at the peaceful river and hills and sky. He surprised himself: he wanted to pray that this new planet could be treated right, that good would come from its discovery. He had rarely had a consciously religious feeling in his life, and never since Alice—

Something huge moved silently in the bush by the river; then it burst into the open, a massive, bloated-looking quadruped that moved with startling speed. The rabbit-thing was taken by surprise; one heavy, clawed foot caught it in the middle of its first frightened leap, and crushed it into the dirt, where it wriggled helplessly and let out shrill faint screams.

The big animal paused, speed leaving its movements as if a switch had been opened. It was a little smaller than a hippopotamus, but just as graceless.

Adam had seen the species before, distantly, from the scout; but now when it turned its head and looked up the hill at him, fifty yards away, armed and armored as he was, he felt a chill. Because the face of the beast was human, though enlarged to fit the massive head.

He dialed magnification into his faceplate, and saw that the face was covered with very short pale fur. The red-rimmed yellow eyes were human in shape to the very lids and lashes. Above them rose a smooth shield of some horny substance in a shape that in a man might have been called a noble forehead. But behind this, the skull sloped off sharply into a dark and matted mane—there was no room for a proportional brain behind that mask-like face.

There was no snout, but a human nose. Even the width of the mouth, the size of omnivorous teeth and heavy jaw, could not destroy the illusion of man-larger-than-life that was the effect of the face. Nor could the ears, curving along the head in a shape that looked neither human nor animal.

It wore the hide of an elephant, and a thin coat of greenish-black hair. The feet looked half-adapted for gripping and clawing. Mud was beginning to cake dry on the thick legs, and a little green slime drooled from a corner of the frowning mouth.

It must have been feeding on river plants, thought Adam. Hand on the butt of his sidearm, he stared back at the creature. The mask-like face, taken by itself, would be

handsome—there was no other word. But when he saw it on the beast, the total effect was so hideous he almost wished it would charge him, so he would have reason to kill it.

"Ugly thing," said a fascinated voice in Adam's helmet. "What's that it's caught?"

"Something like a rabbit," he answered.

The big animal turned attention back to its victim, bent its long neck slowly and chewed with delicacy. The faint screams went to a higher frequency. Adam thought: Like an Earth housecat, playing with a victim. Not unusual for a predator. But on a deeper, stronger level, he also thought: Come on, you obscenity, come try that on me. But he was a fool, to be upset because an animal ate another animal.

When he got back inside the scout, Brazil looked at him with an oddly fascinated expression and said: "I wonder why your big playmate didn't have wings."

"Wings? Why?"

"The original did; Geryon was his name. Remember?"

"Jur-who?" But a faint memory stirred for Adam. Somewhere in his reading . . .

"G-e-r-y-o-n. A thing Dante met in the Inferno, remember? It had the face of a just and kindly man. And wings, among other attributes."

Adam gave a half-laugh. "He met it in a likely place, I think. Kind of took me by surprise, here."

VI

By THE THIRD day after First Landing, scoutships were in almost continuous shuttle between Alpha One and the tiny accessible area of Golden's surface. Total investigation meant that everything within reach on Golden was eventually to be sampled and studied. Planeteer teams had begun with the air, water, soil, and smaller forms of life. No attempts had yet been made to get specimens of the larger animals. The natives might object, and there was at least a theoretical chance of getting an intelligent non-humanoid in the game bag by mistake. A very few such races were known.

Radarmen never left the Field unwatched for a millisecond, but it never moved or changed. It simply existed, covering the planet except for the tiny stem area.

On the third day after First Landing, a small group of

suites men approached on foot the invisible line where the Field came down in a nearly vertical wall to meet the soil of Golden.

The men carried long wired probes, whose currents died when any part of the wire entered the Field. The surface of it was soon found to be smooth and sharply defined, and to extend for at least a few feet below ground level. Plans for later deep excavations were begun.

Any electrical device went dead when shoved across the invisible boundary; yet birds and animals passed in and out of the Field at will, the bioelectric activity of their bodies presumably unaffected.

"Do you know what the word is on Golden?" asked Adam through his airspeaker, carefully driving another marking pole just inside the newly charted boundary of the Stem.

Kwame Chun Lui, the only planeteer on the mission younger than Adam, moved his electric probe a little further on. "Presumably?" he offered. "I hear the physicists are having it built into their writers on a single key."

"Apparently' is the one I had in mind," said Adam.

Small Earth animals shoved into the Field in a cage showed no symptoms—but the little padlock securing the cage door fell open.

Further experiments showed that a lever or screw or other simple machine performed normally in the Field, but any complex mechanism displayed wildly erratic behavior. A fine chronometer pushed across the boundary was certain to run at the wrong speed, and might even go backwards for brief periods.

No pattern was apparent. In the Field, the law of complex machines was Chaos. Hope for the life of Al Golden, never bright, faded again; it seemed the complex mechanism of his bailout capsule could never have gotten him free of his falling scoutship.

The forcefields Earthmen could generate ceased to exist at the border of the Field. On the other side, chemical reactions in flasks could not be made to work properly. Atomic clocks and power supplies failed as if their impelling isotopes had been turned to lead, and a fusion power lamp flared out like a cheap candle. Yet the devices always operated normally again when pulled out of the Field; radiation counters in the Stem showed normal background activity coming

across the border. And—over there—fire burned as always, animals lived, and lightning darted when a rainstorm came. Nature was unperturbed by the Field; only the works of the Earthmen were affected.

Natives were seen to walk directly from Stem into Field, and back again, without visible awareness of any change. Of course they wore no groundsuits, complex with valves and circuits, and depended upon no machines more complex than the bow.

The local people fled every time an Earthman came near them; Brazil did not try to press the issue. His people had plenty to do. Diplomacy could wait for awhile.

As the hypothetical Field-builders offered no objection to Earth explorers, Grodsky brought his flagship down to fifty thousand miles above the Stem, and the communication lag between ship and surface practically disappeared.

The odd Ringwall on the other side of the planet remained a mystery. Photos taken from just above the Field at that point showed no more than the first pictures—an irregular polygon of mountainous walls, several miles across, above which the lower atmosphere seemed always hazy enough to blur detail. If it was indeed architecture, there was no other building on Golden anywhere near its size. Neither were there cities, or large ocean-going ships.

There came a lull in data-gathering, while human brains and computers paused to digest what they had so far accumulated. Brazil went to attend a meeting aboard Alpha One, leaving just Adam Mann and Kwame Chun Lui, with a single scoutship, on planet.

"You're the boss until I get back this afternoon," the colonel told Adam. "May the mighty spirits aid the human race on Golden."

Adam and Chun Lui began hopping the scout around the perimeter of the Stem, repeating earlier tests to see if the effects of the Field had changed. They had not.

Shortly after noon Adam raised his head from his work and said, "More of the damn things."

Three geryons had just come over a hilltop outside the Stem, a hundred yards from the two planetees. Now another appeared on the hill, and two more at one side of it.

"They're after something," said Adam. "That's how they

hunt anything bigger than a rabbit—in a pack.” The geryons subsisted mainly on plants, and as scavengers.

“After us, maybe?” Chun Lui wondered. The geryons’ dead yellow eyes looked down the hill toward the men.

“Maybe. Let’s pull back; I don’t care to start messing around with weapons at the edge of this Field.”

“Roger.” Chun Lui pulled on the rope he was holding; the other end was tied to the ankle of a humanoid robot which lay fallen on its face just beyond the line of marking poles which defined the Field border. It was now one of the routine tests to send the robot walking in and haul it out after it collapsed. Chun Lui dragged the metal body back into the Stem, and animation quickly returned. It climbed to its feet and took an unsteady step toward the boundary.

“Halt, Otto,” said Chun Lui. The machine stopped obediently and stood watching the animals on the hill.

“Carry this back to the scout, Otto,” said Adam. “And these.” The robot turned, picked up the indicated equipment, and strode purposefully toward the scout, about forty yards inside the Stem.

Adam and Chun Lui followed, carrying the rest of the gear, looking back over their shoulders. The geryons moved toward them in a spread-out line.

“Hey, it’s not us they’re after,” said Chun Lui when the walking men were almost at the scout. “Looks like they’ve caught—” His eyes went wide behind the faceplate, and he stopped so suddenly that Adam almost walked into him.

Adam spun around, as the machine called Otto hurtled past him, running. Fifty yards inside the Field the geryons ringed around a native child who danced in panic, looking too terrified to scream. The robot’s compulsion to save human life drove it toward the animals, into the Field, where it instantly collapsed tumbling in the grass.

Adam vaguely heard the first excited comment from Alpha One as he turned and barked to Chun Lui, “Get in the scout and man the turret!” Then he took off running back toward the animals on the hill.

He stopped a few yards from the Field. The heavy machine pistol seemed to come by itself out of the holster and into his armored hand. The child—looked like a little girl—was trying to dodge out of the geryon circle but they

blocked her in with graceless speed. Adam saw the white teeth in her open mouth and heard a thin wailing cry.

He sighted at the largest beast and fired a burst that should have torn its backbone out. The tracers snuffed out like candles when they hit the Field; there was a faint pattering disturbance in the grass on the other side, as if he had tossed over a handful of gravel.

The geryons ignored Adam; the largest caught the child's arm in its teeth, and Adam saw the blood. The others watched, seeming to wait their turn impatiently.

"Fire the turret! For effect!" Adam shouted. Main turret fire might kill the child, too, if it broke through the Field. There was no way he could see to avoid taking the chance.

"What's going on?" yelled the general's voice in Adam's helmet. Then there was a burst of drowning noise as the sharp, nearly invisible beams stabbed out from the turret; the air thundered around Adam, and his armor glowed in the mighty splash of heat that billowed up and down the Field surface, from the place where the beams struck. Grass went up in smoke on the Stem side; an inch away, across the invisible barrier, the blades stood green and fresh. Several of the animals turned, as if annoyed by the sound.

"The siren!" Adam shouted. "Turn the siren on!"

Another geryon caught at the child with its teeth, and nibbled delicately. Her rising scream was drowned out with all other sound when the scoutship's siren climbed to a full-volume howl. Adam turned off his air mikes and realized that Grodsky was shouting questions at him.

"Native attacked by animals, inside the Field," he called back. "We're trying to help."

The siren did not greatly distract the beasts. Chun Lui was trying a searching-light in their eyes, but the beam diffused a great deal once it entered the Field. The geryons snarled and squinted and kept on with what they were doing, like starving animals at food.

It was not food they wanted, but bloody sport. Adam caught another glimpse of the child, between massive gray bodies, and could see only too well that she still lived.

If he entered the Field in his suit, valves would malfunction and he would collapse at once, unable to breathe. He brought an arm in from the groundsuit sleeve and had

two fasteners loose inside his helmet when the general's voice blasted at him: "Mann, what are you doing?"

"Going up there."

"No! That's an order! Fasten your helmet!"

A third fastener fell loose. "There's nothing else to try."

"Chun Lui, stop him! Stun him!"

Adam dashed toward the Field, which would shield him from stunbeams. Once across the border, he would have to get his helmet off quickly, to let himself breathe, then run up the hill and distract the animals. There might be some chance yet—

The paralyzing beam from the scout struck him before he could reach the Field, and the grassy ground swung heavily up to strike his faceplate. His suit was little protection against the scout's heavy projector at this close range. Somehow he rolled on one side, reached out an arm. If he could drag himself across . . . it was surprising that he could move at all. . . . The beam struck again, and his body went dead as ice. The last thing he saw before darkness came was a geryon frowning down the hill at him with red-stained mouth.

VII

ALICE HELD OUT her arms, but he could not reach her, because the fight in the playground was still going on. The faces of strangers had surrounded Adam; they were looking down and shouting hate at him. He tried to hit them but his arms were numb and heavy and useless. Then all the faces were gone, except one—

—Chun Lui, bending over him. He was back in his bunk in the scout; his helmet and groundsuit were gone. He sat up with a grunt, still half paralyzed, nearly toppling over sideways. "Uh. How long—?"

"You've been out about an hour," said Chun Lui, looking relieved and a bit wary. "I had to do it, Ad. Good thing Otto still had that rope on his ankle; I reeled him in and he carried you in through decontamination."

Adam said something vulgar and let himself flap back on the bunk. "Why didn't you use that damn' thing on *them* instead of me?"

Chun Lui's voice was quiet. "Well, I tried it, Ad. It did no more good than the main burner."

Adam swore aimlessly and sat up again, trying to rub and flex the woodenness out of his arms. There had been a chance, some chance, to help the kid, and they had stopped him. It was all he could think of.

The communication screen lit up, and General Grodsky's image glared sourly out at him. "Well, Mann. Since you disobey orders, I presume you know something about conditions there you didn't have time to explain to me. Let's have it."

Adam stared doggedly back. "Sir, I wanted to help that kid."

"You think I didn't?" The screen seemed to vibrate slightly with the volume of voice. "That Field you were so eager to enter, that air you were so anxious to breathe, are still unknown quantities as to their effects on Earthmen. Didn't you learn anything on Killcrazy? Have you no respect for new planets? We've already lost one man here, and I don't—"

"How about that little girl?" Adam heard himself shouting. "Does she fit on your scorecard?"

Violence looked out of Grodsky's eyes for a moment; but when he spoke again, it was in a quieter tone. "I'm not sure you should have tried to shoot through the Field at those things—but I'll go along with you that far. Now how do we know that whole scene wasn't arranged—by someone—just to get an Earthman into the Field?"

The suggestion probably sounded incredible to everyone; the Field was incredible. Adam did not argue; he was getting a little scared. He knew the general would have been legally justified in ordering him killed, for disobedience in an emergency situation. He wouldn't be shot now, of course; the emergency was over. But he might be sent back to Earth and retrained for some desk job. He might be kicked out of the Space Force. Damn it, he had done what was right, and would do it again. But he was getting a little scared.

Grodsky had turned, to include some of his hearers aboard Alpha One in his frosty stare. "Some of you people are getting too cocky about this Field-situation. Remember we still really don't have idea one about the how or why of it." He faced back to Adam. "You got anything more to say?"

Adam drew a deep breath. "Apart from humanitarian reasons, it could help us a lot with the natives, to have pulled one of them out of trouble."

"Sure," said Grodsky, unimpressed. "And the girl might have been a ritual sacrifice, and interference would hurt us with the natives—apart from humanitarianisms. But that's not the point. The point is that I must be the boss here."

Adam nodded. Brazil appeared behind Grodsky on the screen, for once no trace of humor in his face.

There was a little silence. Then Chun Lui said: "I think sooner or later we'll have to fight those beasts in self-defense. More and more of them keep hanging around, watching us, and they seem to build up courage in large groups."

Grodsky seemed to relax a bit, and turned around. "Boris, those animals do seem devilish hard to frighten. Of course we can defend ourselves inside the Stem, but I want to hold any slaughter of them to a minimum, at least until we know—"

"Seven humanoids approaching on foot," interrupted Otto's robotic voice.

The viewscreen showed six naked warriors, armed with bows, approaching the scout with an air of timid determination. The one woman walking in their midst wore a wrap of cloth about her hips, and looked to be in a near-hysteria of grief. She bore in her arms what the geryons had left of the little girl, and her legs were stained with the child's blood.

"I would suggest one of you go out and say hello, since they finally want contact," said Brazil. "Mann, you're still the ranking planeteer down there, so take charge."

And may the mighty spirits aid the human race on Golden, thought Adam. All right; here we go again. He stood up.

"Can't walk so good; Chun, help me to the left seat. Then you go out."

Chun Lui assisted him. "Sorry I had to use that stun beam."

"Just shut up about it." Then Adam grimaced. "I'm sorry. Now you better get outside quick."

The seven natives knelt before Chun Lui when he descended to greet them.

Dr. Osa Yamaguchi, head of Linguistics, was getting up in years, and sometimes adopted the manner of a school-teacher. Her husband worked in Drive.

"They're appealing for help against the geryons," she told General Grodsky, tapping the papers on the conference table before her. The language of the local people—Tenoka,

they called themselves—was well on the way to solution. It had taken several weeks of recording and computing and study, since it was not a simple tongue and the Tenoka spoke mostly on one subject.

Grodsky turned to Anthropology. "How does it look to you?"

"They're not really too surprised at our visit; they accept us as some kind of demigods." The Chief Anthropologist was a small man named Pamon, of usually vague appearance. He seemed to absorb the behavior of whatever people he worked with; already he sat with hands clasped in the fashion of a Tenoka warrior, though he had not yet seen one of the natives except on a screen.

"So, they ask our help," he went on. "I gather they've had more than the usual trouble lately with these geryons. The beasts don't often attack healthy adults, and like crows, they can tell when a man is armed. But for a child or two to leave the village unescorted is very dangerous; and yet the children do. I suppose they must, to learn the adult skills."

"Girls?"

"I suspect she sneaked out just to watch our men, out of curiosity." Pamon sighed.

Grodsky frowned. "Have they any taboo against killing these animals? I don't mean to slaughter them wholesale; no telling what we'd do to the ecology. But if they're cunning enough to avoid armed men, we might find a way to teach them that from now on attacking children is dangerous."

"No taboo against it, but they're doubtless hard to kill with primitive weapons."

"I think we can educate 'em," said Boris Brazil, breaking a thoughtful silence.

"We have made this magic-doll, in the semblance of a child of your people," Brazil announced a few days later, standing outside his scoutship. Intensive training had made him almost fluent in the Tenoka tongue. "It has no spirit of its own. When we will, the spirit of one of our warriors will enter into it. Thus we hope all geryons will come to fear the children of your people, who will then walk safe from geryons within the thirty-mile circle I have described to you, bounded by the line of posts we have set to mark the limits of our power."

The Tenoka delegation shifted their feet uncertainly. Strong Breather, who seemed to be the biggest available chief, essayed a grunt. Pierced Arms, the shaman, gave no sign of what he was thinking. He was daubed with colored goo, and the scarred loops of tissue on his arms and shoulders, that had puzzled Earthmen on his earlier visits, were now strung with feathered cords.

All the Tenoka kept watching the semblance of a child. It stood with back almost against a landing strut of the scout, about three feet high, a good likeness of a naked native youngster, though obviously not alive if you looked closely at it. A breeze stirred the realistic hair; otherwise it was motionless. Not quite a true robot, it was nicknamed Shorty and had been given its present appearance for this job.

"I tell you now," Brazil resumed, "how we of Earth plan to help our friends, the Tenoka. As is well known, the Tenoka are fearless warriors; if they see one of their tribe in danger, they will rush fiercely to help."

Two of the fearless warriors giggled suddenly, hands over mouths. Strong Breather looked at them, but his own mouth twitched. Wait a minute, thought Boris—did I use the word for "fiercely" or "drunkenly"? But it seemed no harm had been done.

"This magic-doll," he went on, "will not need the help of warriors. Our magic within the circle of our power is stronger than any number of the geryons. Therefore if you see this seeming child attacked by geryons tomorrow, you must make no move to interfere. Is this understood?" He got the chin-thrusts and grunts that meant yes.

"And tomorrow the real children must be kept in the villages, so there will be no mistake."

The delegation agreed.

Now came what might be the ticklish part. "You have brought used blankets, and the clothing worn but not washed." Brazil didn't make a question of it; he could see they had brought the stuff as requested, tied into a bundle. But such things were often considered powerful tools of magic against the owners. The Tenoka might refuse at the last minute to turn them over.

The technicians aboard Alpha One had given Shorty no odor of his own, but a plastic skin that would absorb any

smells he came in contact with from now on. The plan was to immerse him in the bundle of Tenoka-redolent cloth for a day. Smell might be more important than sight to a geryon.

"Take the things now and wrap the child-doll in them, so it may convey to the geryons the danger of attacking your children. Tomorrow you may reclaim the things."

After a brief pause Pierced Arms stepped forward and delivered a sing-song harangue to Shorty, who received it stoically; then another to Boris, who understood not a word of either speech. Apparently this did not matter. The old man untied the bundle of laundry and draped it piece by piece around Shorty.

"Well, you're the combat expert," Brazil said to Adam in the scout that evening. "Ready to go tomorrow?"

"All set." Adam looked at the puppet chamber that had come down from Alpha One with Shorty and now filled most of the scoutship's living space.

Its glass walls enclosed enough space for a man to stand or jump or turn a somersault. Now it resembled an empty shower room; when the power was on, a fine three-dimensional grid of forcefield lines filled the interior. When the human operator moved inside, the fields recorded every instantaneous position of his body and passed the data on to a radio transmitter, and so to Shorty or any other yesman, which then followed the movements of the human. Whatever Shorty's electronic senses experienced was radioed back to the puppet chamber and presented to the human operator, reduced in intensity when necessary for his safety or comfort. A forcefield floor in the chamber acted as a treadmill that changed shape to imitate whatever was under the yesman.

Shorty now stood inside the airlock, near ground level, still wrapped in Tenoka bedding and garments. Adam had spent some time in practice, marching and climbing the little figure about just outside the scout. It did not take long for someone with his reflexes to regain the walking habits of childhood, with his legs seemingly reduced to about half their adult length. For routine travel, control of Shorty's legs and balance could be shifted to a robot brain in Shorty's belly.

"I'd just like to get started on the job," Adam got up and paced, in the little space left for movement.

Brazil sat down, produced a pack of cards from somewhere, and began to deal two hands in an abstracted way. He thought this young Adam Mann was able and deep and hard, and might amount to a lot some day if kept in line now.

Adam watched the cards, "Two handed poker?"

"Not necessarily. Look, Junior, don't find some way to go wild tomorrow; Grodsky and I are both sticking our necks out a bit by keeping you on the job after what happened."

Mann stared at him for a moment, then spun away with nervous speed, to pace again. "It's just that I keep thinking about that kid."

Brazil's own past was not very long yet, as years counted. But it was crowded. "You'll see a lot of bad things, in this job. You can't get too involved."

"But I was involved! I was right there!" Mann seemed to be holding back a surge of anger. Lord, don't let him swing at me, thought Boris. I don't want to fire him—and I don't think I could duck in time, either.

"You did what you could," Boris said. "Possibly we were wrong to stop you. *If* he made the wrong decision—well, Grodsky's still a good man, and a good commander. Humans make mistakes. Now you admit you might have been wrong."

Mann made a defeated gesture; he seemed to relax a little. "Sure. That's the trouble with being human. We can make such damned deadly mistakes. We're stuck with that."

"Well, I don't ask that you evolve a whole new philosophy of life tonight. Just get it into your head that you don't ignore orders again; not around me. Or you'll wish you were back being retrained already."

Mann smiled faintly. "Okay, boss, I'm stuck with you."

"Right. Now bring back some geryon ears tomorrow, and as a special reward I'll stop calling you Junior."

Adam dozed, on the border of sleep. When he got tomorrow's job out of the way, when he had smashed those damnable animals, things would somehow clear up. Planet-eering could again mean what it once had meant to him, before Alice had been . . .

In sleep, Alice's face drifted before him, only to be quickly replaced by the sight of the mangled Tenoka girl.

"Turns out she was an orphan," Pamon had told him. "The woman who carried her in was a widow acting as a foster parent, supported by the tribe. Interesting institution."

Later there was another dream, involving yellow teeth.

"Overseer reports another group of five, coming this way, bearing one-two—oh," said Brazil, referring to a mile-high scoutship's survey of geryons in the area. "About a mile out. That makes twenty-two in the area. Be nice if you could get 'em all after you."

"I'll walk by 'em," said Adam, standing in the puppet chamber, trying to stretch the skin tight operator's suit to a comfortable fit. "Let's hope they want to play."

"Chamber power coming on."

"Roger." Adam unhooked the helmet from its suspension, fitted his head into it, and got the robot-walking control where his teeth could reach it.

He dropped his arms to his sides. Color swam and steadied before his eyes, becoming the inside of an airlock door. Background noise changed subtly in his ears.

The illusion was perfect. Sight and hearing told him he was standing in the airlock, in Shorty's three-foot tall metal body, wrapped in the Tenoka cloth. He shrugged the stuff away, thinking himself probably lucky that the yesman had no functioning nose. He stepped forward and raised an arm; the stiff latch of the airlock door eased open at a touch of Shorty's baby-sized finger, steel-boned, electrically muscled, powered by a tiny fusion lamp in Shorty's chest.

Adam-Shorty toddled down the short landing ramp. He could barely see over the tallest grass.

"Robot," Adam said, and let his legs relax as the chamber forcefield tightened to support his weight. The code word caused the robot brain to take over the routine of making step after step with the yesman's legs. This might be an all-day job. Adam steered with the sterile-tasting mouth control, and with a light biting pressure held Shorty's speed to that of a walking child.

Tall grass flowed easily by him, still bearing traces of morning dew.

"Bear about ten degrees left," said the voice of the aerial observer in his ear. "You'll find the first group, four beasts,

about two hundred yards ahead, moving down a little ravine."

Adam bore left. He looked up into kindly blue. After a bit he spotted Overseer. If geryons noticed distant scoutships at all, they would be used to them by now; this one would mean nothing special to them.

He didn't want to run right into the animals ahead; he wanted to go past them and get them to stalk him. They were cunning things, but the lesson had to be plain. Death-beams or bullets might not be connected in the geryons' minds with the seeming child they were, he hoped, about to attack. Therefore beams and bullets would not be used.

He came to the ravine and walked along the high bank. He saw the four geryons, all adults, moving slowly in sparse cover at the bottom, and gave no sign that he saw them. He walked past and let them become aware of him, then turned away from the ravine.

"Where's the next bunch?" he whispered into his helmet mike. Then he chuckled at himself for whispering.

Ninety minutes later he had fourteen of the animals following him, in a widespread formation that still tried to give the impression of aimless drifting. Taking care to stay away from the Field, he headed now toward an eroded slope above a bend of the river, where there was rocky ground to give firm support to Shorty's little feet, and a small box canyon that figured in the plan.

He looked over his shoulder. The geryons were following a little more obviously, with a slow intent certainty in their movements. He took a quick count—fifteen of them now, three or four only half grown. The illusion of his actual presence out there on the plain, small and alone before gigantic animals, was intense. How many real children had turned and seen the things following, and had run and tripped and screamed—?

The illusion heightened further as he shifted Shorty's legs back to his direct control. The rocks were not far ahead. Out of nervous habit he felt with the yesman's hand for a holster at his side. Then he grinned to himself; Shorty did not carry sidearms. Or need them.

Adam began to run as he neared the stony area, imitating the movements of a frightened child. Glancing back, he saw the animals drop all pretense and give chase, clever

enough to know that a child might find a sheltering crevice among the rocks.

He toddled into the box canyon only a few seconds ahead of the geryons, then stood as if frozen in despair, near the center of the steep-walled natural trap. His pursuers crowded after him through the narrow entrance, snapping and shoving to get ahead of one another. One child would not provide much sport for fifteen geryons.

He stood as if paralyzed with fright while they settled a pecking order among themselves, and waddled to form a ring around him. When the ring was closed they began to tighten it, moving with almost the precision of practiced ritual. Some inched forward on their bellies, scummy tongues lolling from frowning mouths. Some moved in with high dainty steps, looking down their human noses as if in righteous pride.

Adam felt his breathing quicken and his hands tremble. The sun beat down in the arena. The pack gurgled and howled, softly.

He ran Shorty to and fro in quick uncertain rushes, as if seeking hopelessly to escape. He was no longer pretending; he could feel himself a Tenoka child in the canyon.

The deadly circle was barely ten feet wide. Adam fought down genuine panic. He made Shorty spin wildly and cry out in his high child's voice.

Something struck the yesman from behind; his legs were now slaved to human reflexes, so he was knocked on his face. Adam felt the scaled-down impact as a pat between the shoulder blades. He made Shorty roll over, and stared up at a circle of nightmare-handsome faces. He felt his breath sawing in his throat and saw the kindly sky remote and indifferent beyond the sinuous necks, the clustered evil power.

The thought flickered through his mind: How many, in all the universe, have seen the world this way—?

A massive foot came slowly down on Shorty's midsection—not with any weight on it. A dead victim would be no sport at all. Adam choked off a scream as one huge human-masked head sank toward Shorty's face, unspeakable mouth gaping. Now, he thought, now, and he thrust up an arm, and the big yellow-brown teeth closed deliberately on Shorty's tiny child-fingers.

He closed Shorty's fingers on one big tooth, yanked it out like a thumbtack, and flipped it away.

Adam heard his own near-hysterical laughter at the reaction in the geryon's face as the long neck whipped up away from him. Another head loomed over him, lowering uncertainly. Adam drove an arm up hard and fast. Shorty's fusion-powered arm, slaved to follow Adam's, drove up too, metal fingers stabbing through thick neck hide, driving on spearlike through yielding tissue until Adam felt the harder neck vertebrae in his grip. He squeezed, and had the sensation of crumpling paper in his hand.

He had Shorty out from under the thing before the mountainous convulsions had ceased, before the others could decide the time to run had come. He got between them and the entrance to the canyon.

They turned and plunged around, startled and confused, raising dust in the sunlight, unable to sense any familiar danger. The biggest animal turned toward Shorty, looking past him to the narrow way out of the canyon. Adam blocked the path as it charged with a snarling howl; in a flash the animal looked to him like the one that had been first to bite the little girl.

He leaned forward, bracing Shorty's feet on firm rock. The geryon did not try to avoid him. Adam felt the sudden snapping yielding of heavy bone breaking, in an impact to him like a swat from a pillow.

The geryon fell sideways with a hideous scream, and the pack that had started to follow it halted again, in colliding confusion.

He strode toward them. Most of them scattered before him, not yet in panic, but wary, not knowing what was harming their kind. As a big one dodged past he caught it by the tail in Shorty's mangling grip, braced his feet on rock and swung the two-ton squirming mass around hand over hand to face the yesman. The huge head came around biting; Adam swung Shorty's fist with all his strength. The geryon's head vanished in a gory explosion, spattering the other beasts. They howled and turned to frantic flight from Shorty, trying to get out of the canyon.

Adam pushed his latest victim aside and stamped after them on tiny feet; with horror he saw that a couple were already climbing the steep canyon walls.

He grabbed up a loose rock the size of a basketball, and let fly at one of the desperately scrambling animals. The impact was not all he had hoped for, as the yesman's throwing arm was slaved to human speed; still the target beast came sliding and rolling down the slope.

Adam picked up more rocks and trotted Shorty forward. Something feral and howling took over completely inside his own skull, and the world shrank to a rocky arena where time was gone and only violent destruction had meaning.

"Hey, save a few," said the voice of Brazil, who was watching through Shorty's eyes. "We want some to spread the fear to the others, remember?"

"Some got away," Adam heard himself say. He had seen two or three make it up over the wall. Maybe some had gotten out the narrow exit. He came to a panting halt, and realized what a slaughterhouse he stood in. One geryon, worn out in panic, still labored to climb an impossible wall. Another crouched, paralyzed by fear, yellow eyes riveted on him. The five others he could see—no, six—no, seven, eight—lay scattered around the arena, hunched up, sprawled, torn open, broken. Several were still twitching, but none looked to be really alive.

The crouching geryon suddenly bolted for the canyon exit. Adam flung a handful of gravel after it and watched it jump and nearly fall, before it galloped on out of sight. After a moment he walked slowly in the same direction. Behind him he could hear the last geryon still scrambling at the impossible wall, as if hypnotized.

Shorty's metal arms were trembling. Something's wrong with me, Adam thought. I felt it too deeply, the fear and the hate. . . .

"Bring us a good sample for Biology, eh, boy?" someone asked him.

"What? Oh, sure." He turned back to the first beast he had slain—it was about the least damaged of any—grabbed it by one leg and began to pull it toward the exit. He noticed that his arms were all glistening slimy red. "I need a bath," he muttered.

"Huh? You're still here in the scout, remember?"

"Sure—I mean I'm sweating." I better pull myself together, he thought, or psych will be examining me half to death.

The carcass he was towing caught and tore on rocks.

Shorty could pull the leg right off if he wasn't careful, and naturally the biologists wanted a specimen in reasonably good condition.

Already the scavenger birds were gathering overhead.

Adam got Shorty under the hulk and lifted it. It did not feel heavy, but it was an awkward thing to handle. When he got away from the canyon there was no rock to support Shorty's tiny feet, and the burdened yesman sank above his waist in the soil. Half swimming in earth, he could still plow ahead with little effort.

The dead beast wobbled in his grip, the head trailing on the long broken neck. Now he had vengeance, overwhelming and brutal and sour; but there was no satisfaction, only disgust.

On the morning of first landing, he had seen Alice here, in the goodness and newness of the virgin planet. Then came the evil and the violence that followed men, on Golden as on Earth. But what had he expected? He or someone else would have to repeat today's performance, over and over, until every geryon in the Stem fled from Tenoka children. A good cause, but a bad job.

The "touch" of the dead bulk was repulsive, and he dropped it.

"Pretty tough going," he said. "Can't you send a scout or a copter?"

A voice from Alpha One reached him. "Good job, Mann. All right, a couple of biologists are coming down anyway, and they can pick it up right there. Be there in a minute or two."

When he saw the scout coming Adam left the geryon and began walking Shorty in the direction of his own ship. Blood was drying on the yesman and insects were beginning to follow it.

He trudged on, a little metal man under the enormous sky of Golden.

PART TWO

VIII

ADAM RAISED the paddle from the river and lowered the outboard motor at the square stern of the canoe. As he glided from Field to Stem between moss-grown marker poles,

the motor purred smoothly into life and pushed him toward the dock at Far Landing.

An Earthman who left his technology behind him could live in the Field with no trouble at all. An Earthman who had taken off his helmet to breathe freely might once have saved a child from timid monsters—or he might not. But that was seven years past, now.

An Earthman who had surprised the friends who thought they knew him, by quitting the Space Force to stay on one planet—this man with planeteeering experience might have made himself wealthy on a raw world just open to colonization. But Adam loved money only for the independence it could give.

Earlier on this mild winter morning, he had looked from the window of his cabin on the Field side of the river, and seen a shuttle descending to the Stem City spaceport. The starships came more and more frequently to Golden now, bringing tourists and adventurers and businessmen. Three hundred thousand colonists lived now in Stem City, amid a continual roar of construction. On Earth, demand was high for the exotic furs of Golden, of which Adam now had a silvery bundle in the bottom of his canoe.

There was no road yet from Stem City to the Far Landing dock, but copters flew a regular schedule. As his outboard pushed him nearer, Adam watched one copter landing now at the dock. It sat with rotor idling, while a few people in plain black clothing got out of it and began to unload from the cargo space what looked like primitive tools—spades and hoes and axes. They were religious colonists, who had planted themselves a mile beyond Adam's cabin in the wilderness.

There was only one tourist on the copter, a blonde woman wearing slacks and a bulky jacket against the mild low-latitude winter. She raised binoculars, and swept them around until they aimed at Adam. They stayed fixed on him for half a minute.

All right, girl, he thought. We'll see about you, just as soon as I get these furs checked in. Lately there were more and more tourist women ready for casual fun with the half-savage fur hunter.

The canoe neared the dock, where a couple of Tenoka men stood beside the lonely trading shack, arguing something

with the Space Force guard. For ceding the Stem area to Earth, the Great Council of Tenoka subtribes had accepted a mountain of trade goods and the permanent right of free medical care for any native who could reach the Stem. Until Earthmen had marked it off, the Stem had been in no way set apart from the surrounding land.

Adam tied up beside a Tenoka canoe, tossed his fur bundle onto the dock, and raised his head to look at—

"Merit Creston," he said in astonishment. It had been more than seven years.

She was laughing down at him, like a little girl who had carried off a joke. He hopped up onto the dock. His own face felt strange, as if smiling had become abnormal.

"Adam, it's been so long." She took his hands.

"Too long. I wonder that you know me." He was long-haired, dirty, bearded, dressed in hunter's clothes, with a long knife sheathed at his belt. "You know I quit the Space Force."

"Yes." She looked out across the wide river, where a sky not dotted or notched by any work of man arched down over the winter-brown forest. "It's beautiful." As he remembered, she didn't often use that word.

"How're Ray, and all the others?"

"All well. Ray's here, on Golden. We both arrived this morning."

He looked at her in solemn joy for a moment. "Then welcome to my planet!" He lifted her in the air and she squealed and he kissed her.

She rested easily in the circle of his arms. "Someone else was on the ship, too—my husband."

"Well." It hit him hard for just a moment. "I'll congratulate him when I meet him. Felicitations for you. Does he beat you frequently?"

The little girl's laugh that he remembered. "Hardly at all."

"Would I know him?"

"Oh, I don't think so. His name is Vito Ling—he's a physicist for Earth Universities Research."

"Then he's not one of Doc's kids? I don't remember the name. And tell me, how is Doc?"

"No, Vito's not Jovian." Laughter went out of her. "Doc died about a year ago, Adam."

After a moment, he asked, "How?"

"A heart defect. He was alone in the lab when he collapsed. When they found him—it was too late."

"And no one—sensed—?"

"None of us. Psi, the undependable. Maybe it was because he felt no fear at dying, no wish to tell us anything. Doc's life with us was a hard one, in some ways."

Adam squeezed her shoulders. "He chose it." They walked along the dock. "But tell me about your life, girl."

Her cheerfulness returned. "Vito's been most of my life for the past two years. He's tall and brilliant and quick-tempered."

He asked it bluntly: "Doesn't it ever bother him to be left out, when you and the others start your psionic tricks?"

"Oh, no." There was pride in her eyes. "Vito won't let it bother him. He won't see anything more in Jovians than gifted humans."

"Are you anything more? I remember Doc wondering that." Adam knew, better than most people, what the differences really were—the Jovian intelligence profiles, curving off the upper end of the human IP charts, into areas no one could measure; the psi powers; the physical perfection. No one of their advantages was beyond possibility for a plain human; the sum of their qualities made them unique.

"Oh, Adam, I'm not." The impish little girl was with him again. "Not if you don't want me to be."

"But you are still cooperating like a family?" He didn't really need to ask.

"Yes, though we've spread out over several planets. I suppose Ray is the father, now."

They came back to where his furs lay. He scooped up the bundle, said, "Let me stow these," and went into the trading shack. When he came out, he asked, "Where are Ray and your husband now?"

"They went straight to the physics lab, at a place called Fieldedge. Scientists to the core. I told them I'd rather locate you, and see some of the scenery. Since Earth people are rather confined on Golden, I felt I could find you."

"Glad you did. So, Ray and Vito are here to work on the Field. What do you think of it?"

Merit looked out over the river, then closed her eyes briefly. "I don't sense it at all. Do you know if anyone has tried psi work with it?"

"Some civilians did, years ago, but of course they weren't Jovians; they had no success. Listen, girl, how about a canoe ride? You can experience the Field first hand."

"Oh yes, I'd like to!"

They walked back to where Adam had tied up. The Space Force guard looked up from his weary debate with the Tenoka long enough to nod to Adam.

"Does the Space Force trust me not to start trouble with the natives?" Merit asked, as Adam helped her down into the canoe.

"You're with me." He shoved off from the dock. "And the Space Force humors me because I'm a privileged character with the Tenoka. They identify me with the help we gave them against geryons in the early days. Of course if I go beyond their territory, things are different." He got the outboard purring.

Merit trailed fingers in the water. "Adam, are Earthmen ever going to see much of this planet?"

"I think not, while the Field covers it. The natives beyond the Tenoka don't like us, and we're not going to become a primitive, conquering army."

Merit pulled her fingers from the water, as if suddenly afraid something would snap at them. "There should be some way," she said thoughtfully.

"Sure, when the physicists solve the secret of the Field. With all respect, I don't think they will, in this century. It's just too far ahead of anything we know."

Merit laughed. "I can see that you and Vito will spend your first conversation in argument. I suspect you oppose the noble advance of science."

He enjoyed a laugh, for what seemed the first time in years. "At certain points, I suppose I do. Watch, now." They were near the line of markers; he cut the motor and let the canoe drift toward the boundary.

Merit was again a wide-eyed little girl as Adam pointed to the timepiece on her wrist. As the canoe drifted between the marking poles, the watch stopped. In a few seconds it started again, the hands moving in opposite directions. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask why she wore the watch; no Jovian in his memory had ever needed an artificial chronometer. But the convincing idea at once suggested itself that the watch was a present from her husband, who

had not known her then as well as Adam did. He felt an irrational stab of jealousy.

Merit raised her head from contemplation of the watch. "Are we going anywhere in particular?" She sounded as if she would be satisfied either way.

"If you've got time, I'll show you my cabin."

When they were quite near the Field-side shore, he spotted something moving in the bushes and rested his paddle for a moment. Two Tenoka children, a boy and a girl, came out into the open when they saw he was aware of them, and stood there giggling and dumb with shyness, impressed by the strange woman.

"You have a couple of admirers," he told Merit. "Wave to them."

They had a waving good time until the canoe reached Adam's little plastic dock. Then the kids vanished back into the leafless winter brush, too shy to approach the stranger closely.

He led Merit along the well-worn narrow path that wound a hundred yards up the low bluff upon which his cabin stood, built of logs, with clay-filled chinks, a shingled roof, and a chimney of clay and stone.

"I could have built it from prefabricated parts, like the dock," he told her. "But this suits me better."

"And me." A thought struck her. "How do you lock the door when you leave?"

"You'll see a latchstring hanging out when we get a little closer."

"Don't the Tenoka ever steal?"

"Oh, yes. But rarely from a man's home. And I'm a privileged character, as I told you. If the tourists get thicker I may need more protection." He swung the door open, on its Earth metal hinges, and bowed her in. "Welcome, my lady."

Following Earth custom, she slipped off her shoes at the door. Inside, she was instantly fascinated by his hearth and trophies and hewn furniture. A small fire was still burning and the cabin was warm.

"I bought the rug in Stem City," Adam said. He closed the door and let the heavy bar fall into place. He went to

Merit and turned her around to face him, and pulled her against him.

She didn't struggle, or protest, or say anything at all, but after a moment he knew it could never be any good like this, not with her. He raised his hands to her shoulders, holding her gently, and said, "I guess that husband is important."

"I'm glad to hear someone say that," she told him, with a kind of tired tenderness.

And so someone had said otherwise. Or telepathed?

IX

THE OUTBOARD purred into life after they passed the line of markers in midstream. Adam asked, "Back to Far Landing?"

"Vito and Ray went to a place called Fieldedge. Since it's a physics lab, no doubt they're still there. Is it far?"

"Just a couple of miles. And we can take the boat right to the door." Adam turned downstream.

Ahead, the river curved deeply into the Stem. The marker poles marched in their great steady circle toward the wild bank, up onto it, and away from the water.

Now on both sides of the river the land bore roads and surveying markers, and men and machines worked at building and clearing. Adam sat in the stern of the canoe, steering with the motor. Merit's face was turned away from his as often as not, while she looked at the new land about her.

Watching the beauty of her face, and the curved grace of her body, turning from side to side, he tried to imagine that they had grown up together in some normal family, that she was his sister.

Such imagining was useless.

After curving a mile into the Stem, the river bent back to the Field again. The great circle of marker poles reappeared, marching toward the water and into it, crossing a bend of the river at an acute angle. Where their line came closest to the Stem bank, a concrete and glass building jutted out over the water; the part of the building extending beyond the markers into the Field was formed of simple interlocking plastic slabs, resting on stone piers.

The canoe was still a good distance away when three men walked out of the building to stand on an esplanade above the Fieldedge dock.

Vito Ling's mind, energized now by anger, moved with the speed and skill of an acrobat's warmed-up musculature, juggling equations and shuttling values in and out of them. Kedro had been right: they should have insisted that the time-quanta device be redesigned, before they left Earth with it. Now it seemed to be too late: in its present form the device was not going to help them with the Field, and it was not a thing you fiddled with to adjust, like a television set.

It boiled down to the fact that Kedro had been a step ahead of him again. This time they had been on the same side, against the false economy of the Research Foundation administrators. But he, Vito, had been willing to give in to them, for fear they might call off his trip to Golden altogether; while Kedro had been firm in his opposition, only yielding at last to Vito Ling as supposedly the senior scientist. It was as if Kedro had been using precognitive talent to foresee their present trouble, and with the Jovian Kedro, precognition was possible.

But looking back, Vito had to admit that psi talent was not necessary to have predicted the blind alley they were in now with the experiment. Looking back, blending what he knew of physics and of the administrators, he could see it. Only Kedro had been certain of it when looking forward, not letting himself be blinded by impatience or anything else.

The perfect intellect, thought Vito now, watching Kedro's massive tapering back move ahead of him out the door at the side of the Fieldedge lab. The perfect man—or better say the perfect being. Vito was jealous, and angry, and angrier because he knew himself to be thinking unreasonably.

"Well, we can't be sure today," said the calm voice of little Dr. Shishido, director of the Fieldedge lab. "Tomorrow, maybe we learn more."

Vito suppressed an angry answer. Enough was known now to predict total failure for the time-quanta gadget.

Ray Kedro leaned on a railing overlooking the dock and river, and stared across the wide, moving water as if trying to pierce the mystery of the Field with his unaided senses.

The hero posing, Vito thought. Challenging the Mystery Too Great for Man. Well, we'll see. I don't admit a damned thing about your superiority, and Merit is my wife, and I

bet that gripes you yet, for all you act like her older brother. And I hope you're reading my mind.

Then a recurring question nagged Vito: Why, really, didn't Merit want kids yet?

"Why don't both of you have dinner with my wife and me tonight?" asked Dr. Shishido, coming to stand beside Vito and taking a deep breath of the mild winter air. "We're looking forward to meeting Mrs. Ling."

"Glad to." It was an effort to make that much of a civil answer. Temper, if you could only watch your temper, friends said. To hell with his temper. But he eased his mental wrestler's grip on the Field problem, and took notice of the new world around him.

A stair led down from where the three men stood, to a small dock where a couple of native men were sitting without any visible purpose. The country was only beginning to be settled on this side of the river, and looked utterly wild on the other.

"I gladly accept your invitation, Doctor," said Kedro. "And I think you'll meet Mrs. Ling before this evening."

Vito now noticed the small boat approaching, with two figures in it. One was a blonde woman in a bulky jacket that looked like Merit's. The other—?

Some man. Had she hired a boat? But she had said something about looking up a childhood friend today, some guy who had lost his wife.

They all watched in silence as the boat drew near and pulled in at the dock. Merit waved up at them cheerfully, said something to the man with her, and hopped out. The man was a rough-looking character, bearded and dirty, with a knife at his belt; after one glance up, and a quick wave, he busied himself with tying the canoe. The natives came over to him and began a conversation, while Merit started up the stairs.

She climbed, smiling happily. Vito stood at the top, looking down at her.

"Who the devil is *that*?" It came out rougher than he had intended.

"An old friend." She looked suddenly worried. "His name is Adam Mann. I told you about him, darling."

The anger rose up in him like a flame finding new fuel.

"Didn't lose any time getting cozy with him, did you? He looks like a tramp. Is he another of your psionic friends?"

"No—no." She was shaken; somehow that made him worse.

"So, you got off the ship and went straight to see him." The wrong, hurting words came with perverse ease, even while he knew they were essentially wrong.

"Yes, Vito." She had complete control of herself again, as usual. "And I visited the cabin where he lives. Be angry if you must. You could trust me."

"Oh? I could?" How good it would be to find good reason to hit someone. Shishido was watching the argument with a worried look, making little fussing starts of movement. Kedro looked steadily down at his huge hands clamped onto the railing, as if determined not to interfere.

The man below looked up and smiled pleasantly. To Vito it looked as if he meant: She came straight to me and I took her to my cabin. What are you going to do about it?

Vito growled in his throat and started downstairs. The guy, Mann, down there was shorter and probably a little lighter, but he was carrying a knife and if he wanted to try using it Vito right now didn't give a damn.

"Vito, no!" Merit clutched at him as he went by, and he tore past her with a feeling of satisfaction, and skipped down the stairs with the unthinking balance of the natural athlete. And he knew in the back of his mind that he was wrong, going overboard, but this was one of those times temper got out of hand, and afterward there could always be apologies.

He heard Shishido making some ineffectual protest behind him; he hit the bottom of the stairs and bounced along straight toward the man who owned the attractive cabin. The natives saw him coming and the way he looked, and they hastily backed away to stand with folded arms and wooden faces.

At close range, he could see Mann had a deep chest and strong arms; good. There wouldn't be much difference in weight after all. Mann's pleasant smile had changed to startled caution.

Vito stopped just within his own long reach of the bearded man. "Have a good time with my wife today?" he asked. He felt his lips drawn back, the blood beating in his

head, the muscles in his face hurting a little. He felt his fists big and hard and his feet ready to shift.

"Yeah," said Mann plainly. He squinted with his head a little tilted, as if trying to understand something.

Vito said a filthy name and his weight shifted and his left arm snapped out in a well-aimed jab that shot past Mann's instantly moving face. The second jab missed too, and the hard overhand right, thrown without having the range at all, missed so badly that Vito almost fell.

He lost sight of Mann for an instant and spun around with his guard up. But Mann was only shuffling backward away from him, clumsy-looking, his arms down, still puzzled. "What goes on?" he asked, seeming no more than annoyed.

Vito moved after him with cold precision and no lessening of the urge to strike and destroy. He shifted and feinted, like the good amateur boxer he was, but drew no response. He moved in with another left jab that also missed the unblinking elusive eyes, and a long hook that touched only air, and a looping right that was stopped when his forearm caught on Mann's, which came up with unhurried speed and felt like a wooden club.

Vito stood there for a long instant with his right arm caught and his left out of position, his feet somehow misplaced and his balance failing as Mann's forearm pulled him slightly forward, and he knew he was ripe to be clobbered, by someone who knew how.

But he wasn't clobbered. Mann disengaged at once and stepped back again.

"Keep it up, bud, and I'll have to toss you in the river," he said in a flat voice. "Pretty cold this time of year."

Vito stepped back, too, breathing heavily. Merit was still calling, as if she was almost crying, and Shishido like an angry schoolmaster was saying, "Here, now! Stop it, you two!"

There flickered through Vito's memory the time he had begun a casual game of chess against a man who unknown to him was a national champion, and how the game had virtually ended in ten moves. And now his rage was burning out quickly, not in fear or frustration, though he began to feel them, but as if the fuel were being cut off. He backed carefully away from Mann, turned and headed for the stairway.

Oh by all the Laws, he thought, the vicious anger draining out of him, leaving him shaky. I really popped my circuit breakers this time. He stopped and half-turned to say something to Mann; but what could he say?

Vito turned again and climbed the stairs. At the top he muttered some apology to Dr. Shishido, who nodded with a look of sad pity. Vito plunged on into the lab; he had to be alone for a minute. What kind of damn fool *am* I? he thought. What have I done to Merit? I never blew up like *that* before in my adult life.

He leaned against a generator that was still humming down toward silence after the day's futile experiment. After a few seconds he heard the door, and Merit's blessed footsteps behind him.

"Adam, from the way you look, I'd say that going native on Golden is healthy," said Ray Kedro, looking down from his great height, gripping Adam's hand hard.

"Seeing you and Merit is beneficial for me," said Adam. He was introduced to Dr. Shishido.

"Perhaps we'd better postpone our dinner engagement," the doctor said, looking hesitantly after Vito.

Ray nodded good-humoredly. "I think you're right, I'll call you tomorrow; maybe we can get together then. But right now I'd better start for town—I have an appointment to see General Lorsch. Ride in with me, Ad?"

While he and Ray walked toward the Fieldedge copter landing, Adam said, "The General hasn't much to do these days; there isn't much Space Force left on Golden."

"And you left the Space Force, to settle here." Ray watched him.

Adam shrugged. "When Alice died . . . I don't know. You can get away from humanity here." He grinned. "Planeteers are always looking for the right place; there are a hundred jokes about buying the farm and settling down."

"Yes." Ray looked back toward the Field. "I can see why you like it here; the unspoiled quality is certainly worth preserving. But there are one or two changes I would like to make."

There was no humor in the last statement. Adam held his breath for a moment; he knew Jovians, or he thought he did.

The planet Golden was supremely and personally important to Ray Kedro.

X

"WHY DO you want the Space Force off this planet?" General Lorsch made his voice casual. "I know you're putting pressure on Earth Parliament."

The only other person in the general's private office was Ray Kedro, who sat relaxed in the visitor's chair on the other side of the desk. "General, I just got off the ship this morning. I've come to Golden as the representative of several organizations, so I'm not sure I know what you mean by 'you people'."

Lorsch consulted a scrap of paper on his untidy desk. "You represent the Research Foundation, plus a hotel chain, plus a mining corporation, plus one or two others. Some of them have schemes to get rich fast, and would like a free hand in trading and dealing with the natives here, and then leave a mess for someone else to worry about. But they have the same schemes on other planets."

"There's recently been extra heavy pressure on Parliament to get us to leave Golden—and I don't mean pressure from mining corporations. Indirectly, at least, it's always from you people. And you know who I mean."

"One might say that my people are the human race." Kedro's eyes seemed to ask for understanding.

"One might say that," agreed the general drily. "But I have in mind a certain sub-class of that group. You and your gene-altered friends. In the popular phrase, the Jovians."

"You should not view us as opponents," said Kedro calmly. "I think your organization and mine can help each other, to the benefit of the entire human race."

"Fine!" Lorsch offered Kedro a cigar, which was politely refused. The general leaned back and lit his own smoke. Then he asked again, "Why do you want the Space Force off this planet?"

Kedro said patiently, "I think the Field adequately protects the natives against exploitation. I think the place for the Space Force is out on the frontier, pushing it back."

Lorsch drummed his fingers on the desk. "Golden is a frontier. We have a beachhead on an unexplored planet,

though people living here tend to get used to having the Field around them and think of it as something natural. You're going to work on the Field at the lab—can you suggest any way to push it back?"

Kedro shook his head, thoughtfully.

Lorsch went on, "So, we're still very much on the frontier here, though we've explored a dozen light-years beyond this system in every direction, trying to find further evidence of the Field-Builders. So far, no success."

"I don't know that there are any Field-Builders." Kedro shrugged. "Well, stay on Golden if you like. I have no very strong objection, and no real influence in the matter, whatever you think. But it seems to me you do little frontier work here. Have you made a serious attempt to explore the planet outside the Stem?"

"We've made a few short scouting trips, necessarily on foot—neither horses or native animals have worked out as transportation. We intend more expeditions, probing deeper."

"I'd like to go along on the next such expedition, General. It might be possible to make some observations that would materially help our work at Fieldedge."

"Well." Somewhat surprised, Lorsch thought it over. "Maybe it can be arranged. I'll let you know if a chance comes while you're still on the planet."

"I'll be here quite a while. Why did you call me in here today?"

"You weren't forced to come when I called. You're a practicing telepath, aren't you? Do you need to ask me about my motives?"

"You know something of telepathy, General Lorsch. The idea of probing your mind is as distasteful to me as it must be to you. And it's not a reliable way to get information. Now why do you think I want you to leave Golden? To make myself governor? To get rich by smuggling?"

The general shook his head. "I don't think you want such things, except maybe in an incidental way. You people don't reach for government office, or ostentatious wealth. You stay behind the scenes, and marry each other, and cooperate to accumulate indirect control over all kinds of human activity."

"I might say the same about the Space Force. Are those things evil when *we* do them, and good—"

"It's not the same, dammit!" Lorsch felt his temper slipping, to his own surprise. "It's simply not true that we try to control all kinds of human activity. And we don't consider ourselves to be more than human!"

Kedro looked at the floor for a few seconds, his face sad. When he raised his eyes and spoke, his voice was soft and almost tentative, "Why should you consider yourselves more than human, general?"

"Do you think *you're* more than human? Homo Superior? I've heard you do!"

"Do you think I am human, General Lorsch? Or even something less, perhaps?" Kedro's voice was very calm, but no longer soft or tentative.

Seconds slid away in silence. In those seconds, trying with unexpected difficulty to frame his answer, Lorsch felt an impression grow with the speed and force of nightmare. It was that what sat and talked with him in his office was not a man in any sense, but an elemental force, a materialized law that had taken a slightly larger than human form, and might at any moment take a different one.

While remaining physically calm, the general found himself somehow—unable? unwilling?—to move or speak. And his inner being was freezing and silently screaming in fright at the thought of facing directly, seeing clearly, the alien being, the god, who sat across the desk from him.

Part of the general's outer mind said comfortingly: Nonsense, this is just a foolish notion that's taken me. Nothing is happening. I can move and speak whenever I like.

He looked into Kedro's compassionate blue eyes, and his ego cowered and whimpered: Is this how a dog feels, when he looks up at—?

"Well, do you?" Kedro asked, and the spell or whatever it was was gone.

"Do I what? Oh. No, I can't admit you're more than human." Lorsch moved slightly in his chair. The words of his answer almost stuck in his throat, but everything was normal again, except that he was sweating a little. It was only a big man, sitting across from him.

"Then isn't your fear of us unreasonable? Really, we have the talent to get what wealth we want by ordinary, legal means. Power? We don't especially want the responsibility of governing. We *do* like to guide the world of Earth-

men a bit, to keep it from catastrophic mistakes and show it values it might otherwise miss. We'd like to do a better job of guiding."

Kedro leaned his perfectly-proportioned bulk forward on the desk, smiling, handsome eyes narrowing in friendly intentness. "Think of the good we could do, if we had, working with us instead of against us, the wealth and power and organization of the Space Force. Or even part of it. . . ."

The general could visualize the benevolent giants, golden in their virtue. From their height above the struggling confusion of humanity that had given them birth, they saw far and accurately into the future, discerning and warning of a thousand dangers to their parent race. The godlike powers of their minds won victory after victory over ignorance and disease and human misery . . . but now the golden people turned toward Lorsch, seeming to ask: Help us, help us do these things, for your own sake.

The dream of glory faded. Of course Kedro had been projecting it into his mind. Lorsch started to say, "Oh, how I wish—" He meant to finish, "—we could do that."

"—I could believe you," he said.

Kedro leaned his face into his hands and rubbed his eyes. He looked tired when he straightened up. "I wish you could," he said, and got to his feet. "Anything else?"

The general shook his head. He felt he might make some spectacular failure if the interview went on any longer.

Kedro towered over the desk. "Let me know about the expedition," he said, and walked out of the office.

It was over. The general sat quietly for a minute. When he got up to check the hidden cameras and recorders in his office walls he found that all of them had unaccountably stopped functioning and nothing of the interview was preserved.

XI

ADAM STRETCHED, yawned, pulled open his cabin door, and stood looking out upon a mild winter afternoon with something like contentment—yet a contentment mixed now with a new restlessness.

The idea of living on crowded Earth still repelled him. He didn't want to rejoin the Space Force. What he really

wanted, when he looked at it squarely, was to be a Jovian, to have Merit for his woman and Ray and the others as his peers, brothers and sisters. That was all he wanted. Just a few little changes like that in his situation.

He stretched again. Tonight he would go into town and have one last little fling before starting back to spend a week in the northern mountains. One more good haul of fine furs should be possible before spring.

Someday the tribesmen up there might try to kill him, just to steal his marvelous bow. That risk, he thought, was not yet great. But what was the risk of going into town tonight, to look for another man's wife and spend as much time as possible with her? Because that's what he was going to do, there was no use lying to himself about it. Out of all of them, she was the one who had chosen a non-Jovian to marry. She chose a human who lived on Earth like an Earthman, not one who wanted to be a hermit—

Someone was approaching his cabin, walking quietly but not sneaking, along the faint path which followed the top of the river bluff from the direction of the religious colony. Adam heard movement and saw small birds fly from the brush near the path.

He had an enemy or two in Stem City, hoodlums settling on the fringes of the fur business. There was Tooth Biter, the Tenoka he had caught stealing. Adam reached an arm along the inside cabin wall to take down the sixty-pound recurved glass bow from its pegs, and to pull a broadbladed hunting arrow from the quiver. He remained standing in the doorway.

In a few seconds he saw the black robes, put back the weapons, and stepped out in smiling welcome. "Father, glad to see you."

Father Francis Marti was young and small; at first glance, he might have been a theological student lost in the woods. His hobby was studying the life of Golden; his work was in a Stem City parish.

He might have been greeting a favorite parishioner. "Adam. Are you keeping well?"

"Still alive. You trying to convert your religious competitors over there?"

"No," the priest said seriously. "I did want to warn them—some of them travel alone and unarmed in the woods.

Maybe their patriarch would listen to you more readily than to me."

Both men looked down at the priest's right hand, metal and plastic nearly as useful as the real thing, souvenir of his wrestling match with a geryon. Now he wore a Bowie knife belted under his outer robe.

"I'll talk to them tomorrow," Adam said. Before I leave for the mountains, he thought. Why don't I tell the Father I'm making one more hunting trip? Because I know I'm not going. I mean to stay here and hang around another man's wife. Being human, I always lie to myself.

"Father . . ."

"What is it, Adam?"

And there was nothing to say.

By the time he had gotten ready and crossed the river to Far Landing, darkness was near. The Stem City copter rose in the last fire-glory of the sunset. The only other passengers were a tourist couple with cameras and disappointed expressions. Maybe I shouldn't have washed up, Adam thought. He pictured himself boarding the copter in hunting clothes, saying to the tourists, "Me half Tenoka. You take picture?" He grinned. He felt good about life.

When he got into the city, he tried to call the Lings at their hotel, but they were out. They might be at the home of one of the Fieldedge scientists; but he could look for them among the rapidly multiplying nightspots.

Already the center of Stem City was barely distinguishable from a gambling resort on Earth. If the buildings were not yet quite as tall, the money flowed even more freely. Any Earthman who sought amusement at Golden's distance had money to spend; the percentage of such Earthmen was small indeed, but still their number was high.

Adam started a round of bars, working his way out from the center of town. He had a mild drink in each place; alcohol never brought him much pleasure. While smoking a cigar in a lounge that featured the worst music he had heard in a year, he happened to glance out through a large bubble window. Miles away, out near the Stem's northern perimeter, stood the newest tower on the planet, a thousand vertical feet of steel and stone, bathed in searchlights of changing color. A huge sign flashed—bubbles pouring from

a glass, a couple dancing, the name of some entertainer blazing out.

It was advertised as the top-status hotel on planet. It was built on a hill outside the city, looking up to the northern mountains in the distance, whence the savage fur hunters could look down at it in wonder. Merit might be out there. Anyway, she would not be here listening to this subhuman music.

An enclosed, multilane slideway had been stretched from the center of Stem City out to the new resort; it bore a thin scattering of passengers. FASTEST IN TEN LIGHT YEARS! advertised the sign. Adam stepped quickly out to the rapid center strip, and was whistled along at highway speed. People going the other way, on the other side of the air-buffered plastic center divider, blurred past him.

Every hundred yards or so, glass observation platforms bubbled out from the enclosed tunnel of the slideway, accessible from the slow outer strips, giving day or night a good view of the Stem country, which was lighted at night and sketched for future building with roads and markers. Soon the city would fill the Stem, and then try to spread itself out into Field territory. Which should be fun to watch.

A pair of teener boys hurtled by Adam on the other side of the center divider. With an expertly violent throw, one of them heaved something over the barrier as they came shooting toward him, something that was caught and spun in the air buffers but still came past Adam's dodging head at forty or fifty miles an hour, to land on the strip as a long streaked splash of something messy. For a second he thought of chasing the kids; but it would be a waste of time, whether he caught them or not.

As the terminal approached, the flow of the slideway began to thicken and slow under his feet, like water in a deepening river. Soon all the lanes were moving at the same low speed, and Adam walked forward to the splendid entrance of the Pioneer Hotel.

Ten copied pairs of Ghiberti's gigantic bronze doors opened into nothing resembling the baptistery at Florence; the interior lobby was Imitation Primitive, with fake logs in fake fireplaces, and a few real furs and trophies on the walls. Adam made a mental note that he might find a good market here after his next hunting trip. There were no geryon heads

mounted, here, or anywhere else. With the beast's body gone, their look was too overwhelmingly human. People moved through the lobby, tourists in a hurry, coming and going.

"Welcome to Golden, sir," said a voice in Adam's ear. A pale young man stood beside him, evidently some kind of hotel clerk who had seen Adam looking at the trophies.

"Were you desirous of a room, sir?"

"No."

"Entertainment and refreshment on the one hundred and first floor, sir, high speed lifts to your right. If you're not meeting anyone, sir, companionship is available in—"

Adam started to his right. "Thanks for the welcome to Golden," he called back.

The restaurant-bar-dance floor-whatever on Floor 101 was a vast dim circular area with fake trees and rocks everywhere, and paths among the rocks and tables. Overhead rolled clouds of some light vapor, shot through with multi-colored light. There seemed hundreds of people scattered through the place; it would take some searching to find anyone.

Sidestepping waiters and a nearly naked hostess, Adam made his way to an observation bubble that bulged out over the side of the building. A number of tourists were here, at the radarscopes which let them see the sides of the Field-funnel above and around them. A thousand feet below, the surface of the Stem flamed with all the colors man could get from electricity, and crawled in rivulets of people and vehicles. I stand here like Dante on the lip of the Pit, thought Adam. I need a Geryon to fly me down. Bah.

Adam went back to the bar and bought a drink, and pinched a hostess, who seemed to enjoy it. He looked around.

There they were, at a table a good distance off, Merit, talking and laughing and gay. Dr. Shishido, with a woman who would be his wife. And of course Vito Ling, lean and strong, handsome, energetic, restless, laughing now with his wife. If I join them, Adam thought, maybe he'll try again to hit me. Maybe I should let him. Or maybe I should—no.

"This time I think it's safe," said a magnificent voice at Adam's elbow.

"Well, that's what you were wondering, isn't it?" Ray

asked, grinning down at him. "I don't have to probe a yard into your subconscious to detect that."

Adam relaxed, leaning on the bar. "He didn't give me a chance to say hello, the other day. He can't be always that touchy."

"He's not." Ray paused thoughtfully. "Actually, he's a pretty good guy, for one of you second rate ordinary human types. Merit picked him out, didn't she?"

"Right." Adam wondered if Ray could tell how he felt about Merit. He wondered how Ray himself felt.

"Our trouble at the lab has been getting Vito down," said Ray. He ordered a drink, and Adam got another.

"What kind of trouble?"

"Expensive gizmo the Foundation sent with us from Earth. Vito and I told them it should have been built differently, but they wouldn't believe us. They were wrong." Ray swallowed half his drink.

"So you haven't much hope of success with the Field?"

"We might have had a start." Ray brooded. "Now—we'll have to find another way."

A hostess approached Ray, looking a little awed in spite of herself by his size and masculine beauty. When she opened her mouth to speak, Ray closed it gently with a lift of one massive finger under her chin. "You might look for me in a couple of hours," he told her. She backed away, with the professional smile half dazed off her face, until she bumped into people.

There was a blare of music, and colored lights began to focus upon a low wide stage.

"So." Ray's eyes considered Adam. "Something drew you to settle on this planet. Something keeps you here."

"Yes." Adam sipped his drink. "And you, too. What does this planet mean to a Jovian? Is the Field just another scientific challenge?"

"You're still perceptive, Adam." Ray slouched easily on the bar, like a crouching lion. "No, it means much more than that."

"You mean someone built the Field, and you have to learn who and how and why."

"Since coming to Golden I'm certain of that." Ray downed his drink. "Let's go over to the table. I don't think you'll have to dodge any more punches."

Adam emptied his own glass. "So, why did our unknown, invisible aliens build the Field? And where are they now?"

"Why? I think to see what would happen when someone else found it. And they're not too far away." Ray led the way from the bar toward the distant table where the Lings and Shishidos celebrated.

"Think it could be a psi effect?" Adam asked, walking behind him. Suddenly the low stage was filled with dancing girls wearing colored lights and nothing else Adam could discern. He felt a little idiotic walking almost amongst them, discussing psi effects.

"If it is, it's a damn good one." Ray paused briefly to answer, the lights playing on his face. "Psi truly integrated with the physical sciences. That's a little beyond us, so far." Ray turned again and moved on.

Vito Ling saw them coming; his face took on an anxious look, he scrambled to his feet and stuck out his hand to Adam. "Sorry about the other day. I had no reason to act that way, no excuse at all." He was obviously sincere.

"It's all right—no harm done."

"I'll say not. I'm just lucky you're cooler than I am."

The handshake was firm. It might be easy to get to like this guy, Adam thought. That would make things nice. Oh, yes.

Merit was smiling up at him. He sat down in the chair Ray pulled up for him, between Merit and Ray. A drink was poured for him. He was introduced to Mrs. Shishido, who beamed at him.

"Well, now!" said Dr. Shishido, pleased to see peace. "Well! Mr. Mann, I understand you were actually the first Earthman to set foot on this planet, except perhaps for the unfortunate Golden. I wish I might have met you sooner."

Shishido was genuinely interested. Adam began to talk of the earliest days of Earthmen on Golden, telling as an eye-witness of the first experiments with the Field. He could talk well when he wanted to, and now he had a willing audience. Shishido and Vito listened with complete attention. Ray stared into space but Adam felt he was absorbing every word. The women's eyes stayed on Adam's face. The noise and glitter of the Pioneer Hotel faded into a vague background.

When Adam paused, Vito let out a sighing breath, and shook his head. "I wish I'd been here then!"

"It's still the same planet, outside the Stem," said Adam. "That's what I like about Golden, men can't ruin it."

The scientists began a three-way argument, each damning the theories of the Research Foundation for a different reason. Adam danced with Mrs. Shishido, though he didn't much care for dancing. Then he led Merit out onto the crowded floor. The music was part of an uproar, nothing more. Bodies jostled them this way and that.

"What brought you to the Pioneer Hotel?" he asked.

"The Shishidos' idea. I don't mind a place like this—about once a year." She didn't ask what had brought him. Probably she knew. "How do you like my husband?"

"I guess I like him."

"I love him, Adam. He's a good man." Something was worrying her. "What more important things can you say about anyone? You, or Ray, or anyone?"

"You know better than I." He held her gently and chastely in his arms while they bounced like fools around the stampeded dance floor. "Tell me, what's your problem?"

"Maybe there isn't any." She smiled, as the music faded off into the background noise.

When they got back to the table, Adam looked carefully at Vito for signs of another jealous fit, but Vito only smiled vacantly at them and went on with the discussion of the Field.

Adam sat and listened, sipping on another drink. Now the alcohol in his bloodstream was easing him past the point of slight exhilaration to where there seemed to be electronic noise in his brain, and concentration was needed to drive clear signals through.

Ray and Merit. Always his friends, and more than friends. And yet always above him, above the rest of humanity, with their ninety-eight . . . kinsmen? clansmen?

Not pretending to be superior. Not claiming a birthright above others to boost their own egos or to attain power. Adam might fear or fight or deride people who did those things, but he would never envy them. And he did envy the Jovians. They *were* superior, standing together above the world. Suddenly he wondered if there were any little second-generation Jovians. Strange if there were not.

Something caught his ear, and he broke into the talk of Golden's possible future: "Hold on, this planet may be pretty well populated now."

"Primitive," said Vito. "Oh, I don't mean we should walk all over 'em. But there must be large uninhabited areas, eh?"

Adam said, "It's hard to tell, from photos taken from above four hundred miles. The Field causes random distortion of detail."

Ray chuckled. "I wonder."

Merit said to him suddenly, "You're thinking of the Field-Builders. Ray—?"

Ray smiled over at her, past Adam. We'll talk of that later, he seemed to be saying.

Adam stood up; he felt a little drunk, and it was unpleasant. "Well, glad to have seen all you people. I feel the urge to move on." They made protests and farewells, and he started away from the table. From near the exit he looked back and saw Ray standing, resting one giant hand gently on Merit's head, while she sat with eyes closed and face relaxed. The others at the table watched, not understanding. And we never will, thought Adam. Ray left the table and walked toward the stage. The musicians had abandoned their efforts; no one was dancing at the moment. Vito and Merit seemed to be getting ready to leave.

Adam found his way to the wall, to an alcove where stood a discreet machine, dispenser of sobering pills. He gulped down a pill and looked around again. Ray was seated at the piano beside the stage. Adam remembered how beautifully all the Jovian kids had played and sung at Nowell's school. It would be like a Jovian to play fine music in a place like this, where no one would be able to hear it.

It struck Adam that the drunken uproar was diminishing noticeably. Around the stage, a circle of heads now turned toward the piano. The polarized ring of quiet people widened. Now even at the wall Adam could hear some of the notes.

The attentive silence had almost won. Ray's music flowed out to where the night sky of Golden curved around the bubble windows. I've never heard this, Adam thought, what can you call this music, what is it? He moved forward a

step, and stood gripping the back of someone's chair. He can do this, too, he thought. They can do this.

The vast room was almost quiet. Somewhere one person sobbed drunkenly. A door opened in the wall near Adam, and a fat man came hurrying out, as if the silence had startled him. Then he too stood quietly listening.

Experience this, said the music. Feel this, touch it, almost. This is what life is about.

No. Adam turned and headed quickly for the exit and the elevators. How do you know what human life is like, Ray? His mind felt blurred as the alcohol and the sobering pill fought it out in his bloodstream.

The elevator door closed on the golden sounds. He was alone, going down. I usually am alone, he thought. You stupid drunk, he told himself, why don't you go off and cry somewhere?

There were only a few people in the lobby. Adam looked at his watch. Two in the morning. He hadn't realized it was so late.

He stepped onto the slideway, his head full of vague thoughts, none demanding his attention. He shot back toward Stem City, passing observation alcoves. In one of them eight or ten young people were dancing to the jukebox, atop which the image of some retchsinger contorted in three dimensions and unnatural color.

The rest of the alcoves were empty. There were only a few people on the slideway, most of them riding in a grim hurry on the fast center strips.

Far ahead of Adam, going in the same direction but on the slow outer strip, a man and woman glided along, arm in arm. At this distance they looked like Merit and Vito; they were dressed the same. But how could they have gotten ahead—?

Four figures erupted from an alcove just as the couple were passing, like a pack of wild teeners attacking from behind, swinging fists and weapons. The man and woman were knocked down, were being dragged off the slideway into the alcove.

The cold combat computer flicked on and Adam hurtled forward, running in a curved path over slower and slower strips toward the alcove. He pounded off the slowest strip just in time to see the top of one pigtailed head vanish down

through a utility trapdoor at the rear of the alcove. The attackers were gone.

Vito Ling lay on the floor, twitching, wide-eyed, dead, his face and head all blood.

A few yards away—Merit—

He turned her over, to lie face up. She was alive, unconscious but with no visible injury; a pulse beat under Adam's shaky fingers.

He looked away, toward the trapdoor. Would he have a chance of catching anyone? He had better stay with Merit. He looked back at her.

He screamed, as his legs thrust him erect, away from her. His hands came slapping up to hide the world from his eyes.

Instead of Merit, he had seen Alice on the floor, pregnant and butchered and dead.

His mind scrambled for some truth to hang on to. He fearfully uncovered his eyes, looking toward where Vito was—gone. No blood. Nothing.

Numb, he looked around. No Merit on the floor. No Alice either, of course not Alice. He was alone in the alcove, breathing hard and trembling. A couple of people shot by on the slideway, paying him no attention.

Hallucination. Forcing himself to think, to act, Adam walked to the rear of the alcove and lifted the trapdoor. Dust lay evenly on the steps below; no one had used them in days.

Hallucination. He stumbled out onto the slideway, shaken, hardly aware of what was around him. To think that he had envied others their psi powers—but what could have caused this experience? His feelings for Merit—relating her to Alice—but it *might* have been genuine precognition, which would mean that sometime in the future Merit and Vito would travel this way, and would be attacked.

Shock hit Adam again. Merit had said, "I don't mind a place like this—about once a year." It wasn't likely she'd be on Golden that long. Tonight it would be, of course, tonight.

He had moved in a slow unthinking way out to the rapid strip again; now he spun around and raced for the immobile utility walk along the side. He had to get back to that alcove. He looked down the slideway toward the Pioneer Hotel, and could see Merit and Vito in the distance, approaching arm in arm, gliding along the slow outer strip.

Adam reached the utility walk and sprinted back toward them. Vending machines on the walk blocked his view of them. How far to the alcove? God, it mustn't be far, the attack and killing took only seconds. A man went by on the sidewalk, turning his head curiously to watch Adam run.

There was a scuffle and faint outcry from ahead. Adam dashed around a vending machine and came into the alcove. In the rear, a figure in teener clothes was turning on the jukebox, a retchsinger figure was coming gigantically alive in the plastic cage above the machine. Vito Ling was not dead on the floor, but one of his arms was being twisted behind his back by a tall powerful young man while another stood before him with brassknuckled fist drawn back, holding Vito's bleeding head up by the hair while turning his own head to look at Adam. The fourth attacker was a short, light man, with a face lined well beyond the age of twenty. He looked around with surprise, then put a smile on his face and stepped toward Adam.

And behind the short man, Merit was lying on her face, just as in the vision.

The short man stepped forward, a cocky little guy with dangerous eyes, who was now going to do his imitation of polite reasonableness.

"Friend, we really don't need no help here," said the short man in a pleasant voice. The other three had paused, waiting, watching. Vito looked like he might be dying.

"I mean the lady had a touch too much to drink, you know, and it's just a friendly little argument," said the short man.

Adam leaned forward a little. He felt his arms hanging strong and ready, and his chest heaving with the run and the adrenalin building up in him. Alice. And now Merit. Twice in one lifetime. But now he had them in front of him. He watched the short man's eyes, and smiled at him.

"I mean, why be a dead hero?" asked the short man, in a tone meant to frighten. When nothing happened, he stepped forward to get within reach, making his voice friendly again: "Let me explain—"

Adam saw the short man's subtle shift of weight in stride, which meant the right knee was going to come up for Adam's groin. The combat computer guided Adam's sidestep, and launched his right fist in what would have been a clumsy

sucker punch if it had not come with almost invisible speed from a standing start. The punch took the short man on his neck under his left ear, and lifted him onto his toes. He fell, rolled over, and lay without moving.

The retchsinger image tore off its shirt and jittered in its plastic cage.

"Get him!" ordered the lean figure standing under the noise and light.

The two holding Vito let him drop and came at Adam, spreading out to get him between them. Their faces also were too old for teeners. Adam defended cautiously when they closed in, and in the first blurred second of savage motion and impact he knew they were a professional team. It was all he could do to keep himself alive and spin out from between them.

The lean figure in the rear came forward, cursing at them all. "Get him, I said!"

Merit had not moved.

The two big men regarded Adam with awe, and paused before coming at him again. One was flexing his wrist, where the edge of Adam's hand had caught him. The man was getting his fingers to work again, but his length of metal pipe had bounced away and was riding the slideway to Stem City.

"Come on!" said the lean one. "Quick!"

Adam started a move at the biggest man, a subtle feint to fool a good fighter. The man jumped back a step as Adam spun around to catch the lean man moving in, and snapped a karate kick that hit the lean man's knee like a swung hammer.

The giant with the metal knuckles was almost quick enough; Adam felt a scrape across his forehead as he dodged back from the swing. Then he was stepping in, hands working with unthinking skill, fingers jabbing, paralyzing, then his arm swinging the killing edged blow across the neck.

The big guy who had lost his pipe weapon was the only one still on his feet, no longer a workman going at a job, but a man with the fear in him. He backed away, flexing his fingers, his eyes wide, shaking his head. This one knew what was going to happen.

The man looked into Adam's face, and turned, and ran for the slideway. Just at the edge of the alcove Adam caught him

from behind. The man strained and squealed and his neck was broken. Adam dropped him and turned around. The lean opponent had overcome the pain of his knee enough to pull out a gun—and Vito, battered almost to death, had gotten up to throw himself at the enemy and save Adam from a bullet.

Vito had luckily banged the lean man's sore knee, and now the two wounded were struggling feebly against their injuries and against each other. Adam crossed the intervening space and kicked the lean man in the head, which bounced like a punching bag and then was still.

Vito sat on the floor, bloody and gasping. Adam stood, looking around him warily. People were still going by on the slideway, going by and looking and then turning away with a desperate blankness in their faces, eager to not-involve themselves. Adam eyed them cautiously. But it seemed none of them meant to try to hurt Merit.

Merit was just stunned. Adam touched her face with one of his terrible hands; yes, she had to be alive, because the universe had to be a place where a man could live.

The jukebox tape still played; probably less than two minutes had passed since the start of the fight. The imaged retchsinger was silent for the moment, drinking from his bottles of colored liquids, twisting his body in time to the throbbing music, his sculptured belly muscles writhing.

Then the image raised its arms; the music crashed to a climax. The imaged body snapped forward, and with a heaving groan projectile-vomited a streaming rainbow of gay color that splattered and filmed the inside of the plastic cage.

XII

VITO LOOKED up from his hospital bed, aware of his visitors and trying to smile. A hundred fine-stranded cables led to the helmet that cradled his head.

Adam watched Merit as she sat on the bed holding Vito's hand. For five full minutes now her happy eyes had not left Vito's, her voice had not been loud enough for Adam to hear it clearly. Vito could not answer her, but he was listening, and perhaps he was being healed.

A nurse came to touch Merit's arm and whisper, "Better not tire him. Maybe you can stay longer this evening."

Ray, his face tired, was waiting in the corridor, where windows glowed with a wintry dawn.

"Looks like he'll make it," Adam told him.

Ray nodded. "The doctor was here." He made a gesture of futility. "You saw it coming, I saw nothing. Psionics, the undependable. How can we build on it? And yet we must."

Merit came out of Vito's room, smiling tiredly. She took an arm of each of them, and they started down the corridor.

Two detectives were in the waiting room. "Mr. Mann, we'd like another few minutes with you, if you please."

Adam shrugged wearily. The bandage pulled at the slight cut on his forehead.

"We'll wait downstairs," said Ray. He moved away, Merit leaning on his arm.

The detectives watched them go, then faced back to Adam. "We checked your Space Force background," said one. "I guess it is possible that you laid out four tough hoods all by yourself."

Adam nodded. Merit is all right, he kept thinking. Nothing else mattered much.

"The lady was hit with this," said the second detective, holding something out. "Go ahead, take it, the lab's through with it."

It was a man's sock. An egg-shaped lump of soap rolled out of it into Adam's hand. He turned it in his fingers. "So they wanted to stun her, but not hurt her or even leave a mark."

"What does that suggest to you?" asked the first detective.

"I don't know. You know, they must have intended to kill her husband. They were no amateurs."

"You are correct in saying 'were'," said the second detective. "Three of them are dead, and the fourth isn't likely ever to think straight again."

Their eyes probed to see what Adam thought of that. He looked down at his hands. The fight seemed unreal, now.

"I'm not particularly sorry," he said finally. "I guess I just don't give much of a damn for the human race anymore."

The second detective sighed. "Well, they were professional strongarm boys. Two of them just arrived on Golden last month. The other two have been here a year, working for gamblers."

"We're growing into a big city," Adam said.

"Does this Ling gamble?"

"Beats me; anyway, he's only been on planet a few days."

"Know any reason why anyone would want to kill him?"

Adam thought: Maybe me, I want his wife. His imagination showed him the Research Foundation chairman enforcing discipline with hired killers. He smiled. "I have no idea, no." Something was worrying Merit; he would find out what.

"We understand Mrs. Ling is a—Ganymedan. Is that correct?"

"Yes." What value all the beauty and power of a mind, when some cunning hand swings soap in a sock?

"She's a telepath, then, but she didn't foresee the attack?"

It annoyed Adam. "They don't go around probing people's minds. She must have been stunned before she knew there was anyone near."

The police looked at each other. "That's all for now, Mr. Mann. We're planning no charges against you, of course. It'll smell a little sweeter with those four gone, in my personal opinion."

"There'll be four more—or eight," said Adam, moving wearily away. "Lots of opportunity on Golden."

XIII

"It's ~~this~~ Jovian business," said General Lorsch, sitting behind his desk and looking at Boris Brazil through tired eyes. "Probably that fight on the slideway is somehow tied in with the rest of it."

Colonel Brazil took time to get his cigar fired up. He was glad to see Golden again after a seven year absence, glad in a way that the Field was still unconquered.

"Excuse me, general," he asked, "but is it really just these hundred Jovians? Since they've brought me a hundred light years to mix into this situation, I want to be sure I understand it as well as possible."

"Yes, it's just the hundred Jovians." The general managed a smile. "Maybe I sound like a monomaniac. But I've been through one interview with this Kedro—well, there are the intelligence reports."

Boris had been reading them. Now he glanced down again, skimming over paragraphs that said:

"—Jovian organization has penetrated every stratum of

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human society, probably excepting only the Space Force. Their economic and political power, though indirect, is great."

"—can they be considered subversive? If they would lead or coerce humanity, they have given no real evidence of what direction they would choose."

Boris frowned. There were people, in the Space Force as elsewhere, who tended to see subversives behind every rock. There were also people who did plot anti-government violence for one reason or another. And the Jovians were undoubtedly trying to move themselves in on Golden, and move the Space Force out.

The most urgent message on the table read:

—EVIDENCE INDICATES JOVIAN CONSTRUCTION OF ILLEGAL STARSHIP ON GANYMEDE. GANYMEDE INSTALLATION NOW DESERTED & JOVIAN UNFINDABLE IN SOL SYSTEM. PROBABLE SPECS OF SHIP CONSTRUCTED HERE FOLLOW:

The ship seemed to be big, and built for combat.

"Neat trick, building a starship in secret," Boris commented.

"They're pretty clever people," said the general drily. "We didn't know anything was up on Ganymede until they all began to head that way. Then they were gone."

The whole situation was a dustcloud to Boris. "So, they're all out joyriding in their outlaw bird. Probably they'll bring it here. What'll they do then? They can't fight the whole Space Force."

"No." Lorsch pondered. "I have three ships here. They could be planning a raid, or a delaying action of some sort. . . ." He shook his head. "I'm keeping an eye on Kedro, and Mrs. Ling."

Boris nodded. "Both close friends of my old colleague, Adam Mann."

"Yes. I don't know if he's working for them, or what."

Boris got up and took a quick nervous walk, the length of the office and back. "The Field is the special thing about Golden. If they could control it, obviously they would control the planet, and any other worlds where they could duplicate it."

"Yes. Obviously. But I tell you, Brazil, every time I think I'm on to them—" The intercom sounded. "Yes? Have him wait a minute. Colonel, Mann's here now."

Coming into the office, not knowing why the general had wanted to see him, Adam stopped short at the sight of the unexpected face. "Well, I'll be—Boris!"

Pumping his hand, Brazil said, "Look, when I told you to go out and scout, I didn't mean you had to live five years in the woods. You can come in now, there's a settlement here."

Adam laughed with him, while the general watched the reunion from behind his desk, smiling benevolently. How've you been, and all the usual questions. Brazil hadn't changed, to the eye. Still planeteeering, of course. "There're women chasing me on most of the old planets—the only time I get any rest is on the new ones." Boris would have a lot of new planets behind him now, and a billion and one to go if he could only last that long, and he would try.

"Where was your last one?" Adam asked, now feeling the old lure himself.

Boris glanced over at Lorsch. "A good long way from here. I sort of got pulled off the job."

"Oh?"

"To come here. The massive intellects of our leaders refer to it as the Jovian problem."

That was a puzzler. "Only two Jovians on Golden. What—?"

They told Adam about the Ganymede starship. He had heard no hint of it. "They must have a good reason, though," he said. "They wouldn't just break the law—casually, you know, cynically. Not just for their own personal profit."

"How long since you've been on Earth, Mann?" General Lorsch asked.

"You know. Years. Why?"

"People can change, even your Jovians. There's good evidence indicating that they've been behind a lot of dirty deals on Earth and the settled planets. That they're out to weaken the Space Force. Want to see some reports?"

Adam opened his mouth for an angry answer, but Lorsch looked so tiredly determined that it seemed futile.

"I've known Ray Kedro since we were kids," Adam said finally. "I'd trust him with my life."

Boris asked: "How well have you known him, Ad?"

"Well enough. As well as you can know someone who—you know what they are."

Boris spread out his hands. "We don't know that as well as you do, in a sense. Maybe our suspicions are wrong; can you explain why?"

"I've never known one of them to do a mean thing." Adam's answer was growing. "I've known people to beat *them* up, for the crime of being different. That's our way, isn't it, the way of the great human race?"

"It's not the way the Space Force does things, Ad, you know that as well as I do." Boris smiled grimly. "I do have to say a good word for my employers, in spite of all the blunders they can make. We've never exploited an alien race, or forced them to live in a certain way."

"We've never met another race we had to look up to. Only the Jovians." Adam paused, feeling a little embarrassed by what he was going to say. "They're like our children, growing up and getting ahead of us in the world. I think we should be proud of them."

"I see," said the general, after a little while.

XIV

VITO WAS sitting up in bed and feeding himself, though the helmet was still in place—the thousand tiny probes still keeping his injured brain going, stimulating and guiding a healing process. Some of his cranial bone was still in the deep freeze, awaiting the time for replacement.

A small item in the newspaper across his knees was headed: SEEK MOTIVE IN SLIDEWAY ATTACK. And below: Police Probe Jovian Angle. But no one had found a Jovian angle, or any other. In a few days the thing would be out of the papers, half-forgotten.

Which will suit me fine, thought Adam, eyeing the paper. He stepped closer to Merit, beside Vito's bed, and put a hand on her shoulder.

"I'd like to take your girl on a little sightseeing trip this afternoon," he said to Vito.

"You do that," said Vito instantly. "She needs a little relaxing. Bring me back a picture or two, eh baby? Then when I get out of here we'll take a little sightseeing vacation before I go back to the lab."

"We will indeed." Merit squeezed her husband's hand.

When she had stepped out of the room for a moment, Vito

said, almost truculently, "She'll be safe with you. Safer than with *me*. Some protection I was for her the other night."

"You probably saved *me* by jumping that last guy, remember? And what could you do, with four of them? I mean, I'm sort of a well-trained freak in that kind of thing."

Vito gave a weak laugh. "And I wanted to beat you up, the first time I saw you." His amusement passed. "I hope I never have to fight you—for anything."

The nearest Tenoka village was a mile inside the Field. Now, nearly all the dwellings were made from tough Earth fabrics, and nearly every fire heated a cooking pot of Earth metal. The warriors greeted Adam warmly, and eyed Merit and her camera with toleration, since she was with him.

"There have been omens and signs, Geryon-Slayer," said one of the elders. "Even now Pierced Arms lies in trance. We have been expecting you, for he foretold two visitors for today."

"Get that?" Adam asked Merit.

She wrinkled her forehead. "Not too well." There was nothing unethical in a telepath's "reading" a message that was available to the ears anyway; but thoughts formed in a strange language were apt to be difficult.

When Adam translated, she was interested. "Could we see the medicine man? Do you think it's psionics or fakery?"

"Probably fakery." To the Tenoka, Adam said, "Might scare my lady a bit if we showed her old Pierced Arms." Adam never told the Tenoka a downright lie, though sometimes he hacked up the truth.

The elder smiled and took the bait; they had very little so sacred that it could not be involved in a joke.

"He speaks messages now," whispered an attendant, as they entered the darkened skin lodge where Pierced Arms lay tossing on his pallet, his body daubed with colored clay in intricate patterns, his strings of feathers laced through the loops in his wrinkled skin. His eyes were open, now shut. He jabbered.

"I don't quite get that dialect," Adam whispered.

Merit closed her eyes. "I think—a message from one man to another, distant relatives here on Golden. Congratulations, something will be sent, a present. But they're both surprised

at being able to communicate this way. And Adam, there's something else going on, in the background—"

Merit was excited. Not quite worried: alert.

"I think you're right about the message." Adam was fascinated. "I've never seen this before, though I've heard stories."

Merit pressed his hand; she was concentrating.

The shaman began a new message, his voice changing in tone, and shifting to a language Adam had never heard. More talk followed, more minds were tapped. There were greetings, threats, sometimes obscure jargon that neither Merit nor Adam could understand.

Once when Pierced Arms paused longer than usual, Adam turned to look out the tent flap. "We'd better start back soon. It'll be dark—"

Merit gripped his hand, suddenly and hard.

"Raymond Kedro, a message for him," said Pierced Arms, speaking perfectly the language of Earth's Space Force and colonies. "He closes his mind against me, but he should hear. My name was Alexander Golden. Now I speak to warn Kedro. If he follows his plans for this planet, he must fail. People will die, people will suffer, Kedro may die—"

Merit's scream seemed driven from her by some force greater than the shock of the words. Pierced Arms awoke with a start, at the scream.

Adam held Merit, while she sobbed. The Tenoka at the door giggled quietly at the final success of the joke.

"Adam," she whispered. "Ray was here—his mind, fighting something . . ."

"Hungry," muttered Pierced Arms, scratching his lean ribs. "Where's my worthless eldest wife? Ha, Geryon-Slayer, you bring a woman to hear me speak? No matter, she can help with the food. Wife!"

"Brace up, girl," Adam muttered. "We'd better be good guests."

And she did, immediately. If an ordinary woman recovered from a fright with such speed, one would think she had been acting.

XV

THE ARROW hummed from Ray Kedro's eighty-pound bow
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and punched into the painted bullseye. The target hung on a tree near Adam's cabin.

"I have no doubt it was a genuine message for me," said Ray, drawing another arrow from his new quiver. "I'd prefer that you tell no one else about it." There was no one else in sight now; Merit was at the hospital, from which Vito would soon be released.

"The Space Force will hear about it, through the natives," Adam said.

"I suppose, but let's not hurry it." Ray sank another shaft into the target.

"Alexander Golden," Adam said meditatively. "That I don't understand at all."

"I don't believe the message came from him, but through him," Ray said calmly. "Lately I've been aware of the mental activities of those beings we've called the Field-Builders. They're still on this planet."

Adam stared at him. "If that's so, it's the first contact anyone's had with them."

"Except Alex Golden. They don't want to be seen. They want to hide from us, from Jovian and normal Earthman, and study us. And more and more they hate us, Adam, though they try to bury it deep in their minds when I touch them. I don't think Merit can touch them at all, which is just as well."

Adam remembered her scream in Pierced Arms' lodge.

Ray went on. "And I don't think Alex Golden exists any more, as a human being. Likely all that's left of him is a sort of telepathic frequency converter, a bridge over which messages can be forced from their minds to ours, or to the Tenoka. They don't know I don't need that."

Ray paused, staring into space. Suddenly Adam saw him tired and strained, under a burden too great for any man.

"Alex Golden was an Earthman, like me," Ray said. "The showdown is coming soon, on this planet." He smiled at Adam. "General Lorsch thinks we consider *him* our enemy."

"Why not tell him the truth?"

"I've tried, without mentioning the Field-Builders. I even used projection, which gives me very considerable powers of persuasion. But he is a tough and stubborn man—and I would still have to deal with his superiors if he came to terms with us."

"Why not tell him about the Field-Builders?"

"Because there is nothing he or the Space Force can do about them, while the Field covers them. We must get Lorsch to prepare to fight—and then uncover the real enemy."

"Can you control the Field?"

"Not yet. Not from this side of the planet. But watch."

The eighty-pound bow dropped to the muddy ground; the hand that had held it was gone, along with the rest of Ray.

Adam looked left and right and behind him, though he knew that Ray had teleported. One psi effect Adam had never seen before. He had heard it was practically impossible for anyone but a Jovian, and hard to control—

"I was slightly off target," said Ray's voice from behind him. The big man stood there grinning wryly, his feet and legs plastered with mud up to above the knees.

Scraping it off, Ray explained, "I was aiming for that little hilltop over there; sort of curious about what was on the other side, which may be why I came down beyond it, in a mudhole. But the point is that psionic talent is not adversely affected by the Field."

Adam sat down on a log. "Lucky you didn't land on one of those jagged stumps over there—or right on top of a poison lizard in the swamp."

Ray shook his head. "That would be physical harm caused by the use of psi, within the meaning of the law—and that's still practically impossible, outside of minor bruises and such. So we have psi, if not yet as a weapon, at least as a means of communicating, and of reaching the enemy—believe me, they are our implacable enemies."

"What's the plan?"

"We've built a starship; it will be here when we need it. Then—"

Adam jumped to his feet again. "The Space Force knows about it—I was going to tell you. Look here, I don't like the way this looks, for either side, you or the Space Force. As soon as they spot that ship they'll arrest you—or try to!"

Ray threw back his head and let his laughter roar out. "Of course they know about it. No, Adam, we're not going to fight a battle with the Space Force—although we could. We'll park our ship four hundred miles above the Ringwall, and they'll surround us, planning to arrest us, as you say.

We can keep them at arm's length until events on the surface have made it possible for them to join us, and convinced them we are right."

"I don't understand."

"Adam, we're going to have to show them the Field-Builders. I and a few others are going to teleport to the Ringwall, while the ships are above. The enemy are there; they have the key to the Field there, I've felt it in their minds. We'll turn the place upside down, if need be." Ray strode over to pick up his bow, and stood there gripping it. "We can do it. Numbers won't count for much, at first. A little later we may need the Space Force's ships and weapons, but basically this is Jovian business. Our enemies put the Field here, as a test for explorers; no doubt they like to study the human minds on Golden without having them get too close.

"Adam, good human minds have studied the Field for seven years now. For even a Jovian to understand it from this end will be extraordinarily difficult. So we will leave the study of the experiment, and move to confront the experimenters. If they still refuse to accept us as what we are, we will have to match our strength against theirs. Jovians are not going to serve as their laboratory animals."

Ray was deeply angry, and bitter. Adam had never seen him quite like this; he felt small and inadequate, as he rarely had in his adult life. He asked Ray, "Why do you tell me all this?"

"Because you are a Jovian," Ray answered.

"Doc never knew," Ray explained, a little later. "I was two years old, myself, and hardly ready to assume leadership, when the other children began their experimental duplication of Doc's work. That Ganymede installation was huge. There were vast areas Doc never entered, and we had a good deal of freedom, and abilities that Doc never imagined, then. He didn't miss a pair of gametes from his stock of rebuilt cells. When you were decanted, Adam, one of the lab workers was bribed into smuggling you to Earth, and seeing to it that you were left safely at a Home.

"It was just coincidence that I was the one sent to that Home, when Doc had his trouble with the government. I'd

memorized your fingerprint patterns, and I recognized you. Merit has never known; she'll be as surprised as you."

"But I—" It was all too much; Adam could find no words. He sat down again, making a helpless gesture.

"I haven't told you before," Ray went on, "because there have been times when it seemed to be a distinct disadvantage to be known as a Jovian. Also we had some curiosity about how you would develop in a different environment from ours. Whether you've gained or lost by not knowing—who can say?"

Adam sat staring into space. He couldn't doubt what Ray had told him. A Jovian. No wonder, all his life, the sense of differentness, the outrage at human idiocy.

"I tell you now," said Ray, "because I am soon going to need the willing help of every Jovian mind and body." His bowstring thrummed again.

Adam turned his head to see the arrow hit home. Gradually there grew in him the realization that a new world was going to open to him, a Jovian world in which he might climb to heights that were now beyond his imagination.

XVI

"THIS IS WHAT I call the right way to convalesce," said Vito, pulling two hoppers from his game bag and dropping them on a rock beside the cooking fire.

"Convalesce!" Ray laughed. "I think you've just been loafing for the past week. Like me."

"And I'm glad," said Merit, on her knees beside the fire arranging cooking utensils. "I'm not eager for you two to go back to Fieldedge and find a way to spoil this planet. I've decided I like it the way it is."

"We'll convert our scientists to Field-lovers yet," Adam said. Ray had said he hadn't yet told Merit much about what was coming. She had been plainly surprised to hear of Adam's Jovian origin, but it had made no difference in their relationship.

Adam was sitting with his back against a tree, feeling comfortably tired and at peace. For a week now, he had spent the mornings practicing psionics, and the afternoons in teaching the others his hard-won skills of the primitive life. Probably he would never be able to teleport unaided, but

under Ray's tutelage he had achieved some intermittent telepathic contacts.

And now, relaxed, he felt a sudden quick touch against his mind, like a glimpse of monstrous black wings overhead, foreshadowing some danger.

If Merit perceived it, she gave no sign; she and Vito were horseplaying like happy newlyweds beside the fire. But Ray stood up, and with a beckoning motion of his head got Adam to walk with him away from the fire.

Out of sight of the clearing where they had camped, he stopped, looking Adam in the eye. "By this time tomorrow, we'll be ready to move. Are you with me?"

"I'm keeping up so far."

Ray grinned. "Good enough. Right now, let's jump into Stem City. Ready?"

Adam nodded, and turned his back on Ray, standing a few feet away. He let the trees before him slide out of focus in his eyes. His attention came to be centered somewhere else—

—and then before his eyes was the interior wall of some building. They had arrived.

"A hotel room I use," said Ray. The place was piled with loaded camping packs, canteens, axes, knives and arrows. "Help me decide on what to take. We might be several days at the Ringwall, though I doubt it. Something wrong?"

Adam drew a deep breath. "Who's going on this expedition? You and I?"

"And Merit. And Vito, I expect. We can carry him along if he insists, and he probably will."

"It's really a Space Force job. I don't want Merit to get into it."

"I tell you, a small party must reach the Ringwall on the ground. We're the only ones who can do it, and we'll need Merit. I want to protect her as much as you do—well, almost as much." Ray smiled with understanding approval, when Adam looked sharply at him. "But she will be safer if she goes with us, and brings us success, than if she remains here and we fail."

"I can't argue with you." Adam picked up a pack, and threw it down again. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do when I get there. I won't know a Field-Builder when I see one."

"You'll know. And you'll know what to do, when the time comes."

"If she goes on any such expedition, I'm going," said Vito, very firmly. Darkness was falling at the camp near Stem City. In twenty-four hours they would start. Ray wanted to allow about an hour for the "jumping" and to arrive in the vicinity of the Ringwall soon after dawn.

"Then we can take you," said Ray, speaking to Vito while looking straight at Merit.

"My husband makes his own decisions," she told Ray firmly, before the angered Vito could speak. "He has said that he accepts the risks, on your word that they are necessary. As I accept them."

For a moment, Ray looked quite humanly tired. "The others have agreed with me. Our ship will be in place tomorrow."

Merit closed her eyes, and nodded. "So be it, then."

When the next day's sun dipped out of sight behind the trees in the west, the four of them stood in a circle, not quite touching one another.

"We may be separated after the first jump," Ray warned. "But we'll take off again at the same time. I expect it'll take about four jumps to reach the Ringwall, and that we'll all arrive there at the same time, not in it but in sight of it. Weapons ready? Here we go."

They stood on another wooded hillside; a startled long-necked deer bounded away from them. Vito was gone. Merit looked round in all directions, her sudden fear evident.

"It's all right," Ray told her reassuringly. "The little feller isn't too scared—I've still got a touch on him."

Merit's eyes blazed brief anger; Adam was glad they were not aimed at him.

The sun was not down here, so they had not moved many miles. The three of them waited, walking restlessly but keeping close together. Little was said. In a few minutes, Adam felt something growing in his mind, like a rising tide.

"Time to go," said Ray. They stood back to back. Ray's projected thought came, calmly: See, it's easier when you ride, as if on the ocean tide—

Vito had returned to the group, and Merit was still there, when Adam turned around. Ray was nowhere in sight.

They stood near the middle of an open space, on loose, cultivated soil, and it was night. The galaxy sprawled across a velvet sky; Adam saw by the constellations that it was about two hours after sunset. They were well on their way around the planet, further from Stem City than any other Earthmen had traveled on Golden's surface.

Vito fumbled with something in the dark, then whispered, "We're still in the Field. I thought we might hit a pocket of normality under it somewhere. Theoretical possibility."

Adam whispered, "How long do you think we'll wait here?"

"Maybe as long as half an hour."

"Is that the sea I smell?" Merit asked.

They sniffed. No one could be sure.

Adam said, "But we can't be far from it, anyway. Think we'll make the other coast in one more jump, or will it be an island?"

"There's no way to be sure," Merit said.

They searched for the rising inner tide and were aware when it rose. Adam lost his surroundings in the darkness.

XVII

THE GROUND dropped from under his feet. He was aware, for a moment, of a strong cool wind in his face, in the continuing darkness, before he fell feet first into deep, rough salt water.

He surfaced, swimming desperately to keep afloat against the weight of pack and weapons. He was in the middle of a great ocean.

There seemed to be nothing to prevent his drowning, psi theory to the contrary. He slipped out of his pack straps, dropped bow and arrows, and let the belt that held knife and hatchet sink away from him; there seemed to be no choice.

The water was warm and he swam easily now. He debated with himself about shedding his boots, but they were Space Force surplus, like the rest of his clothing, lightweight and non-absorbent.

No teleporting jump came to rescue him. Did that mean

he was in no grave danger? He bobbed about in moderate waves, turning to look and listen in every direction, trying to keep a mental screen blank for any telepathic message that might come. He called out vocally, but got no answer.

In one direction he thought he saw a dark mass at the horizon, blotting out stars in the lowest part of the sky. Having nothing else to do, he paddled toward it. He took his time, coasting relaxed face down in the water for long seconds, then coming up for a breath and a lunging stroke with arms and legs. He could not tell the distance of the land. It might be clouds. He swam on, through the alien sea and night, each moment half expecting the next jump to whisk him away.

The stars told him that nearly an hour had passed, before he felt sure that the dark mass was solid and that he was definitely closer to it. Then almost at once he heard gentle waves on a beach, and touched sand with his feet.

He was untired by the easy swim when he walked up out of the water onto a sand spit which curved away toward a greater land mass, his dark target bulk. He stared through the darkness, and tried to plan. He should be swept away in another teleporting jump before daylight, but he might not be. Something might have gone wrong.

It was not in a planeteer's nature to sit and wait and hope for the best—nor in a Jovian's, he told himself. He began to walk slowly and cautiously toward the dark mass, along the narrow curving spit of sand. He tried to probe ahead with his mind, through a few yards of space, a few seconds of time. He failed.

An island gradually grew and widened and took shape around Adam as he advanced. There were many trees, sheltering pools of deeper blackness.

If he was still on the island at daybreak, a hiding place might be useful. Adam was inching forward, under the trees, when the smell hit him, as suddenly as if a huge animal had yawned in front of him.

It was not the odor of rotteness, though it was far from pleasant. It was totally strange; it stopped him, and sent him inching backward.

"Earthman," said an inhuman, belching voice, speaking with an accent the common language of Earth, seemingly

from the blackness about ten feet in front of him. "I like to think about your kind."

"Uh—uh—" Adam stuttered; he nearly fell. Impulses to turn and run, or to giggle wildly, fought within him and subsided. He backed away another step, his arms rising automatically to a defensive position. Planeteering training won out.

"You like to think of us? Why?" He felt a trivial satisfaction that his voice was steady.

"I marvel at your grasping at the small. Why do you kill each other with such enthusiasm?" The voice had a tympanic sound, like the deepest roar of a lion. Adam could still sense nothing else about the speaker, except the smell.

"I'm not sure why," Adam temporized. "What do you want of me now?"

"You have come to an island where I am. Are you sure why?" There was a pause just long enough for Adam to have forced in an answer if he had had one ready. "Follow me."

There was a receding sound, suggesting a hollow metal drum being dragged through dense thorny bushes.

Adam hesitated only briefly; then he followed the sound, with slow caution, through the almost perfect darkness under the trees. At the place where he judged the creature had been, he stepped on something that quivered and scattered under his boots. A wave of the strange odor rose overpoweringly about him, only to fade quickly as he moved on. It was not, then, the smell of the being itself.

There were no thorn bushes, or metal drums, or anything remotely like them, under the trees. The sound led on ahead, and Adam paced cautiously after it in the darkness, sensing the tree trunks just in time to avoid bumping into them.

Soon the path of the sound turned sharply; there Adam came against a low thick wall of something that felt like sandstone. After a few more turns, following the wall, he saw a yellowish light ahead and at the same time emerged from under the trees. Now the starlight showed him his guide as a vague shape moving close to the ground.

The yellow glow ahead came from inside a low building of simple design, which had doorways and windows open to the tropic night, and seemed to be made of the same rough stone as the wall.

"Go inside," said the voice of Adam's guide. "Go inside and look. I want to see what effect on your psionic theories is had by the sight of a possible result. Did I phrase that correctly? I am not one who knows your kind well. But go and look. Be my fellow scientist, hey?"

Adam walked toward the open doorway. Inside was a large plain room, illumined from no visible source, empty save for a railing around a large open tank sunk into the middle of the floor.

The sight of a possible result. He paused in the doorway, an intuition whispering to him that he was going to find the half-living remains of Alex Golden.

He didn't want to see that. He hoped the next jump would take him quickly. But he made himself walk into the building, up to the railing, and look down.

"They came past the robot picket ships ten hours ago," said General Lorsch. There was no longer an indecision in his voice. His electronic pointer flashed as it marked the sighting on the tridi model of the space around Golden. The dimly lighted briefing room of the flagship was quiet.

"The pickets have been following them, and no doubt they know it," he went on. "Now they're within a thousand miles of planet surface. We're going to surround them with our three ships, and ask them some questions."

Colonel Brazil stood up. "Sir, is an arrest certain?"

Lorsch paused for just a second before answering. "I'd say almost certain. This must be the Jovian ship, and therefore illegal; we can't have people jaunting anywhere they like in starships, involving all humanity in God knows what.

"If they resist—well, we just don't know what weapons they may have. Maybe something new and very good." He looked around solemnly. "We'll be three to one, but frankly, gentlemen, this operation may develop into a battle. We must be ready for that."

Brazil asked, "Boarding parties, too, I presume?"

"Roger—I was going to tell you, Colonel, I want you to take charge of that part of the operation. See me right after this meeting."

Me and my hot shot record, thought Boris, sitting down.

Adam stood looking down into the tank, feeling a kind

of strained relief. Fifteen feet below, an amphibious beast splashed and wallowed in shallow water; there was nothing in its unremarkable appearance to connect it with Alexander Golden. Adam had not seen the species before, but that was hardly surprising.

There was a tiny splash in the water beside the creature, then another and another. Something was falling into the tank.

A rain of tiny objects, looking like pebbles, dropping from nowhere, from out of the air under the low yellow ceiling, to patter around the thing in the tank. Suddenly, like an animated rubber toy, the creature stretched out of shape, altering its form completely. Still it was nothing like Golden, or any human.

"Observe classic symptom of falling stones," said the guide's voice, from the darkness outside. "But do you detect the sickness? I thought you were a sensitive, teleporting as you were."

It seemed wise to change the subject. "Will you tell your name?" Adam asked.

"I am studying you, not the other way around. Cooperation, please."

"I only want to—"

Afterward Adam could not remember just what he had wanted. He found himself sitting on the floor, leaning back against the railing which guarded the tank, with no idea of how long he had been there. He had no memory of any pain, but the feeling that he had driven his will into some analog of a stone wall, so that his will had been bent back on itself. The effect was disorganizing, like an electric shock.

The guide's concussive voice, patiently curious, came from outside the door: "Do you sense the sickness of the one in the tank? Answer, please."

"I sense nothing wrong with him." It seemed wise to avoid argument. Adam got to his feet. He felt all right; but could he have missed a jump?

"He has deformed himself," the guide said. "Crippled his mind and body, by using what you call psi forces in an attack on another being. Such is the usual—" The guide interrupted himself with a sudden skreeking noise. "Did you think he was one of your kind? Not so, he is one of mine. Such as he come to this island to reach for health, and I

am here to help them. I think you came here because of that, and because I sometimes like to think about your kind."

It would not help to strain anxiously for the teleporting jump. Adam tried to reach for Ray's mind, or Merit's. No success.

Trying to think of an answer, Adam for the first time caught a flash of the guide's mind; a glimpse not of black foreshadowing wings, but of something magnificent and incomprehensible. Adam's mind supplied the image of a carven alien palace. Was this a Field-Builder?

The alien was directing some kind of question, with keen curiosity, to another of its kind. Adam sensed that other mind, too, for one instant, then both were gone from his perception. Outside the door he heard the metallic scratching again, as the creature moved away.

He was alone, for the moment, with the thing in the tank. Remembering his hallucination of the Stem City slide-way, he closed his eyes briefly; the stone railing felt real.

On opening his eyes, for an instant he interpreted the light he saw as the dawn; but this was a much nearer fire, not far outside the building and moving closer.

After another glance at the wallowing, stretching thing in the tank, Adam went outside.

The fire walked around the corner of the building toward him, in the shape of a tall man. A man being consumed steadily by flame, pacing toward Adam, who backed away mechanically, with no capacity left for astonishment. With dim horror he saw that the flesh was already charred away from the bones of the arms and fingers. The figure turned a blackened horror that was no longer a face toward Adam; sound came from it, a parody of speech.

Only then could Adam react with some semblance of purpose. He dashed back into the building with the vague thought of getting water to throw on the burning man, or some flame-smothering thing to wrap him. But there was nothing, no way to help. The creature in the tank still sloshed gently, far down out of reach. Adam ran outside again, in time to see the flaming figure collapse, seemingly not through pain or shock but because the body was structurally too damaged to stand.

While Adam watched the body shrivel on the sand, the teleporting jump took him unexpectedly.

Colonel Boris Brazil was conducting a briefing of his own, and wondering in odd moments how he had gotten into this.

"We're about fifteen thousand miles from them right now," he told the hundred planetees who sat looking up at him. "Holding our relative position. They're just sitting there, five hundred miles above the Ringwall. Won't answer us, but there seems no doubt that it's the Jovian ship and that they know we're here. In a few hours we'll start closing in on them from three directions. If it does come to a fight, and the general decides to board her—well, you and I are elected."

The hundred faces asked: Are you going to be able to lead such an operation? How many of us can expect to get killed?

Boris went on, "I don't need to tell you that a genuine battle would be something new to all of us. I've been in a little fight or two, here and there, and I did get a high score the last time I played at maneuvers with robot ships, if that reassures anyone." His audience managed a faint perfunctory laugh. "All right—let's see who among you had the highest ratings in boarding techniques. Those with A-one raise your hands. A-two?"

In a little while he had squad leaders assigned, and was sketching in a tentative battle plan.

"We have half a dozen yesmen for what look like the dirtiest jobs. I'm going to volunteer six of you for the comparative safety of puppet chambers aboard this ship." Wish I had Mr. Adam Mann here for this job, he thought, remembering the geryon hunt long years ago.

Adam came out of the jump into broad daylight, at the bottom of a narrow ravine overgrown with vegetation that was strange to him. He staggered, off balance for an instant, crashing through bushes. The sky above the sides of the ravine was clear blue, sparsely spotted by clouds red-tinged by a sun low in the sky. It was dawn, or later afternoon. There was a sound like steady thunder in the middle distance.

He climbed a few yards up one side of the ravine, and saw drifting, mountainous clouds of spray in the sky, and knew that he was very near the Ringwall, and that he heard the vast falls and rapids of its surrounding rivers.

He climbed all the way up the side, and stopped. His

ravine was halfway up a larger slope. All across the wide valley below, a wild nameless river tore itself over miles of rocks. And above the opposite shore, rainbow-haunted clouds of mist climbed steadily up a steep, barren, mile-long slope, as if impelled by a rising wind, to fog the morning sky above the Ringwall itself.

Atop the mile-long slope was the cliff face of the Ringwall, curving and angling away from Adam in either direction. It had a look of unreality, like a surrealist painting on a stage backdrop; yet flying birds were distant specks between him and it.

It was not a cliff face. It had been built or partly built and partly hewn from the living rock.

There were outcroppings, straight-lined as any Earthly skyscraper, suggesting turrets and battlements; there were niches and columns and buttresses along the length of the awesome wall. In the bluer-shadowed recesses between projections, there was room for small villages—but they would not be there.

The Ringwall. Adam looked down at the foot of its island, looked up at the mile-high face of the wall itself, saw dimly into a million windows or niches cut into the white or brown or gray rock. Streaks of pure crimson, straight or in perfect curves, ran among the openings and marked the joinings of stone blocks with sides measurable in acres. Trees grew, in places, like moss upon a castle wall.

Adam thought of the thousand pictures taken from the Space Force scouts, four hundred miles above this. No telescopic camera had seen anything like this, through the eternally rising mist and whatever it was that fogged infra-red film. He felt no radiant heat now.

There were structures on Earth at least as high as this. There might be one or two as big, measured by volumes and distances. Measured by sight and feel, there was nothing to compare with it.

Adam looked away and scanned the bushy slope around him, searching for the others. He quickly spotted Ray, standing far below him, on a little rocky plateau directly above the river's edge, turned away from Adam and looking steadily across the river, up to where the giants' stonework waited. Adam cupped his hands for a yell, but it died unuttered.

Looking closer, he saw that Ray was standing in the air, a foot above the rock.

He knew Ray could do such things, but the sight now gave Adam a sense of something indefinably wrong.

Nowhere could he see Merit or Vito. Adam scrambled back down to the bottom of the ravine, and followed its curve down the larger slope, toward Ray. He had lost his weapons, his food and his canteen, but such things might not be serious if they could complete whatever Ray had in mind, and jump out of here within a few hours.

Did Ray actually mean to confront the builders—?

A woman was wailing, in low terrible grief, somewhere down the ravine ahead of Adam. He moved forward, a dreaded buried suspicion rising, and he could not yet let himself see what it was.

The woman was Merit, collapsed and weeping, huddled on the ground over a hiking pack. Adam knelt beside her, lifting and turning her, gently. Her face was contorted and her blank eyes looked through him. He saw that the pack she had been crouched over was the one Vito had carried. There were only short remnants left of the shoulder straps, and the ends of them were burned black.

Merit spoke in a hurried, mumbling voice, seeming hardly conscious of what she said. ". . . he said, the time has come for defiance—of something. He said now was the time for a decisive step. He told me he was behind what they did to Vito in Stem City, and he made Vito try to fight you at Fieldedge. I couldn't believe it, then."

"Who?" But he knew.

"Ray. Ray, Ray, Ray Kedro. Then they burned my husband to death, he and the others."

"The others?" Adam whispered dazedly. "I saw a burning man."

"Those who follow him, most of our people up in the ship. I obeyed him, I had no children, but still he killed Vito. Vito, Vito." Merit bent and swayed as if in physical pain. A long keening moan came from her.

After a few moments Adam stood up; he could do nothing for Merit right now. He moved on down the ravine.

The sound of the raging water was loud when he reached the foot of the rock above which Ray still stood, looking across the river toward the Ringwall. One of Ray's arms was

now five feet long, stretched out of shape and proportion like a part of the creature in the tank. Ray paid no attention to it, or to Adam's call.

Adam climbed. Ray, on his peak, looked as massive as the Ringwall itself. By the time Adam reached him, his feet were down on rock again, and his arm back to normal. Ray's pack and weapons, too, were gone.

He looked at Adam without surprise, and pointed to the Ringwall. "Ours," he said. "When we choose to take it. And after that, the Field, and the universe."

"Merit says you killed—"

Ray interrupted. "I was wrong, before, to think that a greater race might come after us. It's impossible, for we're the ultimate peak of evolution. I could have allowed purebred Jovian children: they couldn't be our superiors. But perhaps it's best we waited for them; when this is over, we will have a time of peace—"

Adam grabbed at him. "You and the others killed him? Why?"

"Easy, Ad, easy. We had to spank Merit, but she'll be all right. You don't know yet what it is to be a Jovian, so don't tell me what to do."

"Spank her? We?"

"Our ship's up there now." Ray pointed overhead. His tone was easy and normal. "Yes, we had to discipline her; she fought us, over that human husband of hers. I should never have allowed her to have him—but she'll get over it."

Adam backed away as far as he could on the little plateau. The river roared at the rocks, not caring what men did.

Why do you kill each other with such enthusiasm?

Ray was looking at him with annoyance, while one of Ray's legs elongated, doubling up under him. Ray said, "Don't look so shocked. Remember, Ling was only human—and he was keeping Merit away from us, from me especially. And what if she had gotten pregnant by him? She'll be glad, when she finally understands what it means to be a Jovian. The purity of the race must be preserved." Ray raised his voice. "I tell you, don't look that way at me! After all, we once did the same for you."

The river thundered in Adam's ears. Alice.

XVIII

BRAZIL WAS buttoned into his boarding capsule, a semi-robot that had been pitched out with a swarm of others into the black, sun-lit vacuum of four hundred miles altitude, and now clung like a leech to the huge hull of the Jovian ship. Instruments reported to the man inside that one metal arm was gone, burned or blown away, and that the temperature of the capsule's outer surface had risen past the melting point of lead.

The temperature inside was still tolerable. It was the hole in the capsule foot that might finish him. Something had pierced the capsule, and the leg of his Ground and Space Armor, Heavy, and clobbered his left foot and ankle. The suit's hypos and tourniquet had bitten him.

The capsule had sealed itself again, and he had no time to worry about his numbed leg. He was scrambling his capsule, under semi-automatic control, over the Jovian, probing for some place to hang on and dig in, and at the same time trying to coordinate the rest of the boarding party.

Until about half an hour ago the Jovians had acted like sane people, talking calmly, if a bit unreasonably, to the three Space Force ships while all of them rode around the planet leaving the dawn line behind them and keeping the Ringwall below.

Then had come the uproar in the Jovian ship, plain over the radio. Jubilation: "We've done it, killed with our minds alone!" A minority of protest: "It's wrong!" "The reaction—"

The protestors were shouted down; it was as if most of the Jovians were suddenly drunk, or mad.

"For the purity of the race!" one voice cried, exultantly. Then they had started the firefight without warning, aiming what must have been everything they had at Lorsch's flagship. The flagship was driven a hundred miles away, her outer hull punctured in spite of ready defenses, and three of her crew killed.

Lorsch had driven his ship back as fast as possible to where the others were roasting each other, and his three ships had clamped on to the Jovian with forcefields, with all the power of their space-bending engines, so the four ships hung locked together, like atoms in some giant molecule.

While their computers fenced, striking at one another with flickering immaterial hammers, men huddled in their cocoons of metal and padding, waiting for the next important decision which could be made slowly enough for men to be competent.

General Lorsch made one such decision, and the boarding party was launched, led by yesmen in the first six capsules. The Jovians' smaller weapons destroyed the yesmen, and killed or wounded the first six planetees to launch, Brazil among them, before they reached the enemy hull. And now and again, in a cocoon apparently penetrated by no physical force, a Space Force man burned painlessly to death.

To Boris, the battle was electronic signals inside his capsule, and the moves he made with the capsule's limbs; the gabble of question and answer and noise in his helmet, and heat and shock and pain, and then the sense that his left foot and ankle were gone.

In his helmet a voice said, at intervals, "We're holding, we're holding." Meaning that the generators of the Space Force ships were standing the overload, holding the enemy, and striking him with weapons of heat and force and disruption such as might be in the heart of a sun. And the enemy was still resisting, and still hitting back hard, but it seemed he could spare none of his incredible strength to pick the metal gnats of the boarding party off his armored surface.

Each metal gnat was protected from the Space Force weapons by its own friend-or-foe radar beacon; the racing combat computers picked the tiny voices of friendship out of the inferno of battle noise, and guided their violence elsewhere.

That was hopeful theory.

Practice, to Boris, was being bounced off the hull time after time, when something heavy hit nearby, getting back to it with capsule jets, and scrambling again for a hold.

He was bounced again, more violently than usual, and coming back saw on his screen a red-rimmed dark hole, several feet in diameter, piercing the smooth bright hull ahead of him.

"Breach! Breach!" someone else was shouting, having spotted it at the same time.

"Thor, this is Bee, we are entering breach," Boris called back to the flagship, giving the machine called Fire Control

the information that fragile friendly human flesh was about to do just that.

"We're gaining!" shouted someone who watched an indication of the total force being exerted by the Jovian. The enemy had been hurt—or he was faking, or gathering his strength for a greater effort.

Brazil led his men into the torn-open hull, hoping to stay alive, trying to take the enemy alive. Weapons ready, he scrambled his capsule forward through a slick patch of still semi-molten metal, into the breach.

"You killed Alice, you were behind the things they did to her," said Adam, facing Ray on the flat rock, with the river roaring below them and the Ringwall looking down.

"Never mind that now," said Ray almost absently, looking up at the Ringwall. "The Field-Builders are in there—aware of us. But our ship is overhead—did I tell you that?" He looked inquiringly at Adam.

Adam stared back. "You've forgotten telling me that, two minutes ago?"

Ray's thoughts seemed to be wandering, probably for the first time in his life.

"We began, years ago, to weed the human garden. For a long time we were too conservative. We removed only the power-mad, the organizers of hate groups and crime syndicates—obscene little creatures, unworthy of even humanity. From now on we will do more. You were wrong to mate with that human, of course, but you didn't know you were a Jovian. We can forgive you."

"You forgive me Alice."

Ray paid little attention. "We were right, of course, to dispose of her, but I see now that we were in—can I call it error? Of course I can call it error, I can say whatever I like. Error, in our choice of methods. Hired physical violence. You foiled the attempt on Ling in Stem City, and now I'm glad you did. Such crudity is beneath us. *Now*, after we've killed with our minds alone, I understand that, and I see the true glory—of—our—what was I saying?"

A pebble fell from the clear blue sky, to bounce off Ray's shoulder. He looked up, with slow, vague eyes.

The mighty intelligence was crumbling, the godlike powers

falling in upon their center. Adam watched the collapse, with cold and violent hatred.

"Damn you to hell, you deserve what you're getting!"

"Ohhhh?" Ray tore his gaze down from the Ringwall and for the first time gave full attention to Adam. Ray's body came jerkily back to normal shape. "One thing you must remember, about being a Jovian—I am your leader, and I am always right. If you dispute that, you must be disciplined. We have begun with Merit; I think it will be better to destroy her personality entirely, and rebuild—"

A trigger pulled in Adam's brain, sending him two steps forward, left, right, and the karate kick with the left foot, snapped faster than the eye could follow.

Ray moved almost as fast, very lightly for all his bulk, sidestepping perfectly. He smiled pityingly, and shook his head. "Adam, Adam, will I have to rebuild you, too? How can you hope to fight a telepath—one who is bigger and stronger than you?"

"I think I'll remove both you and Merit to the ship, and begin the process, as soon as the difficulty with the human ships is over. Later I can return to deal with those—creatures." Ray turned to look again up at the Ringwall. He dodged Adam's chop at his neck without looking, then spun around, avoiding a knee, and swung.

Adam saw the huge fist coming, and thought he had it ducked, but it seemed to swing lower, following the movement of his head. There was a flash in his head and his consciousness was gone—

—for what must have been only a second or two; he found himself rolling onto his back, hands and feet ready for defensive work, a numb fogging pressure on his mind, his eyes blurring.

Ray was standing back, calm and safe, talking and talking, a lecture: "—acting like a human—can't condone—"

Ray, Ray, who was Ray? Alice's killer, Merit's tormentor, confessed, standing there. Adam rolled up into a catlike crouch, heard himself muttering the gutter words and threats of his childhood. In a few seconds his head was clear enough, body and cold computer ready. He started forward in a half-crouch.

"You can't fight a telepath in such a way." Ray was leaning forward, speaking very distinctly, as if to a child.

Then a shade of alarm crossed his face and he started his dodging motion in time to avoid the first kick and the second. He parried the smashing hand blow with his forearm, and launched a kick of his own that Adam was expecting and easily avoided.

There was not much latitude for stalking on the little plateau, the cold computer commented unhappily to Adam. He moved in again on Ray, and saw his own plan mirrored in Ray's eyes, disregarded by Ray's confidence.

Adam threw another combination of kicks and blows. Again Ray could not avoid the final impact, though he almost dodged it, so much of the force was lost. But the last kick caught him just above the knee, and now he moved with a limp. This time Ray's counterpunch went only halfway before he jerked it back, just in time to keep from being grabbed, levered off his feet, and slammed down onto rock.

Adam and Ray moved hesitantly closer, then alertly jerked away from each other.

A purple welt from the first exchange was rising on Ray's hairy forearm. "You are a true Jovian," he said, sounding like a proud father. "A true—"

He got his guard up just barely in time. Again the last phase of the attack damaged him; he could not move quickly enough to escape entirely what he perceived was coming, nor could he strike back with Adam's unthinking speed.

Adam made no conscious tactical plan. He moved in on Ray, and let the years of training and practice take over.

Adam was knocked down again. He caught Ray's kicking leg with his own, and threw Ray back and down. Both got to their feet, grappling, falling again together, lungs sobbing for air, arms locking and twisting for advantage. Ray's greater strength began to tell. Adam jabbed him in the throat and broke away. The timeless and bloody business wore on.

Adam stood, watching Ray's head sway against the background of the Ringwall, and could not tell how much of the unsteadiness was Ray's and how much was his own. But Adam had to pause for a minute, he had to. He felt as if a gang had been beating him, though he could remember no details of the times Ray had gotten to him.

All at once Ray sank to a half-sitting, half-kneeling position. His arms moved as if he was trying to lift them. His

breath came with choking whistles, and he had to spit out something bloody before he could speak.

"I must conquer you," Ray sobbed. "Or I must kill you. Can't you see. I must be the leader. The greatest of all." "You killed Alice."

The blue eyes of the superman looked at Adam, hurting. Once before he had seen them like that, long ago. But now Adam bent and picked up a small rock. His hard hands hurt, and a rock would be a handy thing to crush a skull.

Ray was trying to say something more. "I—I—if you *are* the leader—" He gasped, and shook his head. "Lead them well, Adam." He looked up, pleading. "Don't get them into trouble. I—sometimes I feel sick—"

Ray managed to lift his hands up to his head. Then he rolled over sideways, writhing on the rock. From the clear sky came a fall of pebbles to patter around him.

The rock seemed far too heavy; Adam's bruised hand trembled under the weight of it. He turned and tossed it out into the river. There was nothing left.

No, one thing, one person, Merit. He had to get to her.

Climbing down from the rock was painful. He staggered up the little ravine. From across the river the Ringwall looked down, as indifferent as the sun. Someday, he told it, we'll learn what you really are. But now he had no emotion left for it.

Merit was sitting where he had left her. Her sharpest grief had been acted out, leaving her in apathetic calm. He sank down beside her, looked into her eyes that followed him gently, and reached out his hand. Without meaning to, his fingers left blood on her cheek, and maybe the feel of that pulled her up to full awareness.

"Adam, you're hurt." She pulled his head gently down into her lap and held it there, her hands pressing and rubbing tenderly into his hair. "I was afraid they'd do something to Vito," she said softly. "Still I couldn't believe it."

Adam closed his eyes and trembled violently for a moment, then was able to let himself go in utter relaxation. "I fought with Ray," he told her, as if hoping for an explanation. "He's still alive, sitting up there."

"Later we'll worry about him. Rest now. Heal."

Time passed. He felt the morning sun on his back. Suddenly he became aware that he was intensely thirsty, and that

his cheek was resting on the thigh of a very desirable woman.

He raised his head and opened his eyes and saw a geryon looking at him from a few yards up the ravine.

XIX

THEY HAD one knife between them for defense. Looking over the edge of the little ravine, Adam spotted four more geryons higher on the slope, moving slowly down. They were darker than the geryons of the Stem area, a little larger and perhaps a little slower; but the hunting line looked the same.

He led Merit down toward the water's edge; they would not be able to avoid the animals in any other direction. Ray was no longer on the high rock.

"Adam." Merit paused, holding her hands to her head. Then she looked up at the few clouds in the calm silent sky above the rising mist. "Something terrible is happening—there's killing and killing, out there. We can't expect any help."

"You teleport," Adam said. "Jump out of here. I'll be all right, until you can get some kind of help."

"No, no. I can't do it alone. Not now."

The things smelled the blood on him, of course; they could tell a mile away when something was hurt. He had regained some strength by resting. Should he separate from Merit? Not yet. Try to help her get away down the river, or across.

They came out of some bushes onto the bank, in full view of the Ringwall, towering distantly atop its rocky slope. The river here was a hundred yards of foaming water, dotted with small rocky islands, to the nearest of which a fallen tree made a bridge from shore.

The geryons were hurrying, only fifty yards behind. Adam urged Merit out onto the fallen tree.

The nearest island was easily reached, but it promised no safety. In a minute there were seven geryons gathered on the shore, cautiously testing the water with massive feet. The animals entered the water together, and began a slow swimming and wading progress toward the island.

"We'll have to cross the river." It did not look absolutely impossible—and there was no other choice.

"All right." Merit nodded with calm acceptance.

Gripping hands, they slid into the water.

It would have been bad, even starting fresh and with no danger in pursuit. Where the water was deep, they swam and were swept downstream. When a sandbar or island came within reach, they could grip and climb on rock, and wade again. There were periods, long seconds, when Adam found his mind in contact with Merit's, when without using breath they could trade pictures of grips and footing and the pursuing animals. Perhaps this contact tipped the scales, and brought them through alive.

Adam crawled out onto the shore feeling that another ten feet of river might have been too much. Now, the best possible experience in life was to lie on firm ground, without moving, and concentrate on the enormous job of breathing.

The geryons, following inexorably as death, were making the crossing with their usual prudence, and so had been swept well downstream. It might be half an hour before they reached this spot.

Merit managed a pale watersoaked smile. "My right ankle is sprained."

"Teleport. Get out of here; get help for me."

"A moment ago, I tried to teleport to a spot just in front of the animals, to startle them. I couldn't." The little smile faded. "When Vito died, there was some terrible kind of—backlash. Psionic reaction."

Adam grunted. He found he could move; he got over to Merit and began to examine her ankle.

From behind him, a familiar voice said, "I plan to rebuild your personalities. Both of you."

Ray sat crosslegged in the air ten feet above the ground, his eyes looking vacantly at them from his battered face. One arm hung at his side, elongating and shortening again, over and over, bone and flesh and sleeve. Ray did not appear to notice it.

"I crossed the river easily," said Ray, in a cheery voice which made the rest of him more horrible. "I can still teleport, do you realize that? The Field-Builders won't be able to hide from me." And he flickered out of sight.

"Oh God in heaven," said Merit. She hid her face.

Adam took her by the hand. "Never mind about Ray. Don't think about Vito, now. Those animals haven't given up. We've got to keep ahead of them."

Merit managed to stand up. She found a laugh from somewhere. "At least, we've had a good drink." Her pack and weapons were gone, too, except for the one knife.

Adam filled their single canteen from the river. "Can you walk?"

She tottered. "I can block the pain. There's no great damage."

Adam's own beaten body had stiffened from the short rest. He straightened, with a grunt, and looked up the long rock-strewn slope to the overwhelming pile of the Ringwall.

"Then let's start up the hill," he said. "If there's anyone home, we might get some help." A journey started following a madman; finished, fleeing from animals.

They took dead branches from the shoreline, to serve as staffs. They started up the slope, resting briefly after every few paces.

Ray sat on a rock, ahead of them, waiting.

Merit cried out, "Ray, help us! Do you know me? Can you understand?"

"You two are acting like humans," Ray called to them. "But I'm not human! I refuse to be human. You'll see."

Adam glanced over his shoulder. The geryon pack was coming into view along the riverbank, a few hundred yards away. "Ray, what do you want from us?"

"Adam, I want you to come to our school for a visit, when you can. Doc will be glad to see you. Doc takes care of us when anything is—wrong—ahh." Ray's attention seemed to turn inward, to focus on something frightening. Then he vanished again.

"Adam, what's happening to him, and to the others?" Merit's eyes were full of new terror.

The memory of what he had seen on the hospital island rose up in Adam's mind, and he tried to push it down. The effort had the reverse effect; he saw in Merit's eyes that she was reading the memory.

He took her arm. "No time to think about that now. Come along." There was still only one way to go.

The sun climbed near the zenith, and burned down through the rolling mist clouds. The methodical animals lower on the slope, the rocks nearby, the great pile of the Ringwall ahead, all shimmered in the heat. They drank from the canteen and climbed on, not daring now to pause for a

moment. Every backward glance showed the geryons a step closer.

We'll make it, Adam thought. With his mind he gripped the moment when they would stagger into the shadow of one of the Ringwall's giant buttresses. There was no use looking beyond that moment.

But they were not going to win the race. There was no moment when the hope of escape vanished; it faded slowly away. The geryons were closing in rapidly now, without appearing to exert themselves. Sometimes they let prey exhaust itself in flight, and so weakened the final resistance.

Merit stumbled, and he caught her by the arm. "Teleport out of here," he told her. "If you love me, go."

She shook her head, her body swaying in exhaustion. "I can't." She clung to him, briefly. "I wouldn't."

He took a drink and handed her the canteen. "Finish it," he said. He picked up a rock and threw it thirty yards downhill at the nearest animal; the stone thumped harmlessly off the matted fur of one shoulder.

"You won't get us!" Adam screamed. "We didn't come all this way to finish in your rotten guts!" The geryons paused in their climb, to watch and listen.

Now he had no yesman power in his throwing arm. They climbed again. Human strength failed; it drained out of trembling legs and sliding feet.

The pack followed. One animal pulled out of it, and ran past them up the slope, grunting and wheezing in its effort for speed. It got ahead of them easily, cutting them off from the foot of the Ringwall, now only a hundred yards ahead.

"There must be something there," Merit whispered. "Some help. If they trouble to keep us from it." She was hardly able to stand, and her hands were bleeding from the rock. It would be useless to try to separate from her now.

"Come." He led her on, climbing toward the waiting geryon. It weighed ten times what they weighed together, and its teeth were the size of human hands. Yet it shook its head nervously when they moved straight at it. Adam took the knife and slashed a rough point on the end of his staff. His legs somehow still drove him upward, step after slow step.

"Give me that." Merit took the pointed staff. "I can't throw. You keep the others off."

Adam picked up rocks. There was always some chance,

with geryons, if you could fight back enough to hurt them at all. They waited, and followed, and waited, until you were too weak to hurt them. He hurled his rocks down the slope, and kept climbing, angling slightly to one side, hoping the animal ahead would retreat if they came at it from different directions. He held the hunting knife ready.

Merit climbed straight toward the waiting beast, leveling the pointed stick at its head.

"Wait!" Adam staggered closer. "Let me get—"

She jabbed the spear at its mouth, a second too soon, before it might have backed away. Adam heard the teeth bite through the foolish stick as he lurched forward, stabbing the knife into the thing's neck, trying to turn it away from her. The geryon's lunge at Merit became panicky flight when it felt the knife. It trampled Merit blindly and galloped downhill. The pack hung back, startled.

Merit lay on the rocky ground; for a moment he could touch the blurred confusion of her mind. He put the knife between his teeth, tasting geryon blood, picked up Merit and slung her across his shoulders.

He staggered up the hill again, while the geryons delayed to watch the wounded one leaping and twisting, trying to snap at its own wound. Adam ceased looking back; he would hear the animals on the rocks when they got near. Merit was breathing, and not bleeding much. Adam could not see anything very clearly.

A time came when there was deep cool shade around him. Then he was aware that more time had passed, and that he was lying on his back, after someone or something had just rolled him over. His eyes opened to the sight of a geryon face and he slashed up at it instantly with the knife, carving the human nose.

The animal screamed and reared, spinning around to flee; its foreleg struck Adam's right arm. The knife flew away and he thought for a long instant that the arm had been torn off. But it still hung from his shoulder, bleeding, with a heavy numb pressure inside that would become pain.

The animals had backed away again, to sit in the sunshine twenty yards distant. Merit was lying beside him. Her eyes were closed, but there were no geryon marks on her yet. Adam could not see the knife anywhere. Sitting up, he got his back against cool stone, and slowly realized that

they had reached the shadowed base of the Ringwall. He knew the great smooth stones towered around him, but he could not see or think very clearly.

One of the geryons had caught a little animal, and the pack found amusement in killing it as slowly as possible. Always one of them watched Adam and Merit. Soon, now, you will be weak enough, said the patient yellow eyes. We can make you last much longer than this little animal.

Adam got up, without thinking about whether it might be possible. Packs gone, food and medicines gone. Canteen still here. No water. No knife.

He got his one operational arm around Merit, and half carried, half dragged her deeper into the cool shadow. There was a doorway there, or at least it was an opening of the proper size. He looked at it as calmly as he would have looked now at blank hopeless walls. Holding Merit, he limped forward into a passage large enough for the geryons to follow.

Adam followed the passage. Now and then he fell, found himself on the stone floor, picked up Merit and went on. She moaned as she walked, leaning on him. There was light enough to see; he wasted no effort looking for the source. There were odd blocks of stone projecting from the floor and the walls. He bumped into them and fell on them frequently.

He thanked whoever was responsible that his arm had not yet started to hurt. Or maybe it had, and he was just too far gone to notice.

There were turns in the passage. Sometimes he looked back to see a geryon head sticking around a corner; they could follow only in single file here and were being very cautious. The thing to do was to get into a smaller passage, where they could not follow. But there was only this wide passage, with light enough to see, when his eyes could see, and stone blocks to fall on.

He stumbled into a pool a few inches deep; water gurgled merrily from a plain fount in the wall, for no apparent reason. He drank and wallowed in the pool, and filled the canteen, and shouted echoes at the geryons as they inched closer. He thought he got Merit to swallow a little water from his cupped hand. He himself felt shivering and sick and unreal;

he didn't want to revive, he didn't want to know what was happening.

He was moving on again, somehow, holding Merit up with his good left arm. They came upon Ray sitting in the passage.

"I've thought about the geryons," said Ray, in conversational greeting. His face was sagging and changing like wet plaster. "They're not just animals, you know."

"They're after us now." Adam slumped down, unwillingly, his legs just giving out. "They want to kill us and eat us."

"Not animals at all. I am considering the possibility that they are the Field-Builders. The ones who really built—what was it they built?"

"Ray. Listen. Can you get Merit out of here?"

"You see, there are vegetables, and animals, and humans, and Jovians. That's all. We're at the top. I am considering the possi—the possi—I am thinking about . . ."

"Ray."

"Let me think. I—can't—think—" Ray's body distorted into new frightfulness; he flickered away out of sight.

Adam stared stupidly; had Ray really been there at all, this time? His arm throbbed violently. He must be feverish. He looked around and saw a geryon watching from the last bend in the passage, with unwinking eyes like those of a dead thing. The geryons were real enough.

The animal stretched its neck forward. Adam got up. Merit's mind touched his again; it was as if he heard her calling from a foggy distance: Adam, leave me, go on, look for help.

It took no courage to say no to that. There was no place in the world to go, if he left her.

Sometime later, they were again in glaring sunlight. Adam realized they were inside the Ringwall, because around him were trees and tall stones, and towering, unidentifiable shapes that he had not seen outside. It didn't matter; soon everything would be over. He kept expecting to feel teeth.

Once he realized clearly that he was crawling up a little slope, on his knees and his one good hand, and that Merit was standing beside him, trying to pull him along. Then he was sitting beside her, their backs propped against a wall, looking down a little slope to where geryons peered from among tall rocks to see if their victims were yet weak enough.

Merit had passed out again. Good. She might never feel the teeth.

A frightening thought came to disturb Adam's calm—he might be able to get up and go on yet further, if he really tried. It would be much easier to sit here and be chewed to death. But he couldn't just sit here. There welled up in Adam a terrible puny rage, an anger like that of a sick old man, against the animals. He would not let them defeat him, chew him, destroy him and his woman, he could not. He groped with his left hand for something, anything, to use as a weapon. Like an animal, he growled down the hill at the other animals.

They cringed away uneasily, but not from Adam. They looked round, and then retreated between tall rocks, to watch and wait. Someone was coming. Or something.

A man in Space Force ground armor came from among the rocks a little distance away, walking with steady powerful strides, straight toward Adam and Merit.

"Our operation has been a success," said a voice at Adam's side. Ray sat there, his shape normal again, calmly watching the man approach.

The newcomer halted a few feet in front of them. Through the transparent helmet his face was plainly visible—Adam thought he had seen it before. Somewhere, somewhere.

"You're not real," Adam accused him suddenly. "We're in the Field. Your suit wouldn't work if you were real."

"But my suit does work," said the stranger's airspeaker. "Therefore we are not in the Field. Not right here."

"Now I have you," Ray said to him. "Your race is in my power. I am the supreme being, do you realize that?"

Ray's voice seemed to reach Adam from a distance. Not in the Field, the man had said, not right here. What did that mean? Adam couldn't think. His mind was running itself to death in a little circle of animals and rocks.

Ray was still speaking. "No, I am not human. I am much more than that."

"But you are human," the stranger answered. "And so are we. Did you think we were more than that? What do you think it means, to be human? I have never understood you Earth-descended, though I know you better than most of my kind know you. I have lived among you."

"Alex Golden," Adam croaked, remembering suddenly.

Both of them turned to look at him. Ray, his face normal again except for the marks of the fight, seemed annoyed by the interruption.

The Golden gave Adam interested attention. "Yes, I am he. The only Alex Golden who ever lived. This is the physical shape I used to live among you and study you."

"I can change my shape, too. It's nothing!" Ray demonstrated.

"Your mind has torn itself on its own weapons," Golden told him, with little apparent interest.

"Help—her."

Golden turned back to Adam. "Most of my kind would not bother to help you. It's not that we're your enemies; Kedro here sees our minds only through his own hate. But our minds and yours *are* vastly different. I think only because I lived so long on Earth have I come here now to help my fellow man."

"I'm not a man! I can do anything you can do!" Ray scrambled erect, and grabbed at Golden's arm. Somehow the gesture was awkward and ineffective. Beside this being Ray towered like a giant child, demanding attention.

"Help, then," Adam whispered.

"I've already told you."

There was a silence. Ray stood clenching his hands, helplessly, and staring at Golden. Ray was being ignored.

Adam pushed himself almost erect, leaning against the rock. Every time he blinked, the figure in armor wavered like everything else, but did not disappear.

"Your suit works," Adam croaked. "So there's no Field here, inside the Ringwall."

Golden looked at him calmly, and gave no answer.

"So seven years ago your scoutship had room enough to straighten out from falling. It landed here."

Maybe Golden smiled, just a little, inside the helmet.

Ray sank down on his knees, suddenly, with a loud cry. "No! I must be more than human!"

Golden immediately knelt, too, as if wanting to keep on a level to speak to Ray. He waved at the skulking geryons. "Those are only animals, no matter what their faces say. Perhaps once they were more. We are above them, and the only life above us is called God by those who see it. Is there not pride enough for us in that?"

Ray shook his head, slowly, slowly. "Not human. Not man."
"There is much pain, too," Golden said. "But there is only one way we can turn, to rid ourselves of the pain of being men."

Ray seemed to disappear again. But Adam had no time or strength for Ray. Adam was thinking, and thinking now was like climbing a precipice. He dared not slacken his grip for a moment.

"The scoutship is still here, then." He felt the throbbing in his arm, faster and faster. The sun shone down. He was awake, he must be. "Even if you're not real, it's still here, where it crashed. At least there'll be drugs in the first aid kit."

Golden stood erect again. Now his head turned to one side, so that his eyes looked toward the open space, the vast unroofed center of the Ringwall. Then he was gone.

Adam stood up straight with a gasp, lurching away from the rock. Only Merit was still with him. He slapped her, trying to arouse her; she only moaned. He dragged her to her feet, with his one good arm. The bad one had started to hurt like hell. Good. It would keep him awake.

He laughed aloud, and there was a mad horrible echo, and the geryons shrank back again among the rocks. Maybe he had kept the pack at bay for an hour with the loud sounds of delirium, maybe Golden and Ray were fever dreams. It didn't matter. Somewhere near here, crashed or landed, the scoutship was real.

"C'mon, get moving, kid! We've got to travel!"

He got her walking, down the slope, angling away from the geryons, taking the direction in which Golden had turned his head.

In the middle of a grassy meadow the scout waited undamaged, in perfect landing position. When Adam finished the last dragging step, he heard the geryons moaning behind him, still not quite daring to charge and kill beings who fought them and hurt them.

If an illusion cast a long shadow in the afternoon sun, if it felt like solid smooth metal when you leaned against it, then illusion was enough, no one could ask for more. Adam was gathering his strength to knock on the ground level hatch, when it opened. The standard model planeteeering robot stepped out and caught him as he started to fall.

He was aware of not hurting anywhere—until he tried to move. Even then there was a blanket of protective numbness over his body. He tried the fingers of his right hand and thought he felt them rub against each other. Not bad, then. Not bad.

He opened his eyes and found himself strapped into the right seat of a scoutship control room. Maybe the last seven years had been a dream, and he could turn his head and see Boris—but the robot was bending over him.

"How do you feel, sir?"

"The woman who was with me—"

The robot gestured, and Adam turned his head on a painful neck. Merit was in a bunk.

"She is asleep, sir, and seems in no immediate danger, though she needs medical care as you doubtless know. I have given first aid treatment to both of you. Now will you identify yourself to me, sir?"

"My name is Adam Mann." He thought. "I used to be a planeteer. Oh, one thing, very important. I'm a human being, nothing more."

"Certainly," said the robot, unperturbed. "Please answer this question." It asked him about a technical detail of scoutship operation; not one civilian in ten thousand would know the answer.

Adam consulted his memory, and gave the correct reply.

"I accept that you have had planeteering training," said the machine. "I place myself, with limits, under your orders."

Since the scout had landed here in one piece, it should be possible to take off, accelerating in this pocket of normalcy under the Field, then coasting in free fall up through the Field to space.

He asked the robot, "What were your last orders?"

"My last orders were given approximately seven years ago, by planeteer Golden: 'Stay with the ship and keep it in good shape until another Earthman comes.' The type of order is unique in my experience, as are the conditions under which we landed here."

"You fell, through a condition we have named the Field, which surrounds the planet."

"I was inoperative through the fall," said the robot, "but since landing I have observed this Field on the radar."

"What happened to Golden?"

"Immediately after giving the order I have mentioned, he walked away. I have had no contact with him, or anyone, since then."

So. Adam drew a deep breath. "Can we take off from here, and get back into space?"

"Yes. There is room under the Field for the necessary acceleration."

Adam let his eyes close; a robot could make the takeoff if it could be made. "Let's go, then. You'll probably see Space Force ships when we get through the Field. If they're fighting, just ignore them and go around to the antipodal point—there's a spaceport."

"First there is another matter."

Adam opened his eyes again.

"It requires human judgment to decide," said the machine. "Since shortly after your arrival, a strange creature has been outside the ship, moving among the larger animals which pursued you. I cannot decide whether or not it is human."

The robot turned on the viewscreen before Adam, showing the meadow outside the scout. Adam watched, for long, long seconds.

"Yes," said Adam. "Yes, he's human. Go out and bring him in. Lock him in the alien room. You must stun him if he resists; I order that, and take responsibility. He is mentally and physically ill."

"I will obey. Then we must leave the surface and find medical help."

"Yes." Adam slumped back in the seat. He could let go, now. Drifting toward a pleasant stupor, he watched the screen, where a smaller animal cavorted among the geryons. It had a scaly body and furred legs, like one of their young. Suddenly it went down, as if hit by a stun beam; a second later the robot appeared, driving off the larger beasts and lifting the small one carefully.

Its head hung loosely on the long geryon neck, and it had the wide powerful geryon jaws, but the nose and eyes and forehead were those of Ray Kedro.

Adam realized he was lying in bed. He blinked his eyes open and shut without comprehension, rolled over, and grunted when his arm twinged.

"The beauty sleepeth," said a familiar male voice. "And where in all the realm can be found a maiden desperate enough to awaken him with a kiss?"

Adam opened his eyes again. "Boris."

Brazil sat bathrobed in a wheelchair, grinning, his left leg sealed into a cabled mold. "Howdy, bub. Anything interesting happen lately?"

They were in the infirmary of a big Space Force ship, Adam realized. It was crowded with casualties that overflowed into extra beds.

"Yeah, she's all right, no need to strain your neck looking around for her," Brazil said. "She's walking around already."

Adam lay back. "You lanky ape," he said. "Looks like you had a fight and won."

"You looked like you had one and lost, when that robot flew you in. Yeah, we had quite a scrap. We took about fifty prisoners out of that hundred. We might even have come out on the short end, but they were fighting among themselves. About someone being burned, whether it was right or not."

"Yeah—it's a long story."

"That fellow we took out of the alien room of that scout-ship—he's Kedro?"

"Yes."

"Some of the others were pretty sick, the same way. I wonder what got into those people? All we wanted was to hand 'em a parking ticket, so to speak, and they opened up on us with everything at once. And it seems they burned this fellow Ling."

Maybe this is my first official interrogation, Adam realized suddenly. Boris sitting there in his bathrobe, talking things over. He thought about the question.

"They got to thinking they were something more than human," Adam answered, after a while. "They had a plan that didn't work. It's a long story."

"Yeah. Well, not all of 'em thought that way."

Adam looked at him.

"I mean your girl Merit, among others."

"If you think she—"

"At ease! Calm down! Nobody wants to hang her; it's no crime to have had your chromosomes manipulated. I merely remarked she seems like a nice kid."

"One part of the long story I'll tell you now. Ray Kedro

told me I was one of them, too. Maybe he was lying; maybe not."

Brazil thought that over with raised eyebrows. Then he shrugged. "I can stand it if you can. I expect it'll be a long time before he can tell us a straight story, assuming he wants to. The medics have him in the deep freeze. Do you know what shape he was in when they took him out of that scout?"

"I know what shape he left the planet in," said Adam. I can stand it if you can, Brazil had said. To hell with it. I'm a man whether or not I came out of Doc Nowell's lab.

"I assume I'm not under arrest for anything?" he asked. "Unauthorized exploration, maybe?"

Boris shrugged. "You brought in a prisoner, didn't you? And we asked your help in the situation, if you remember. The Space Force has no argument with you."

"And Merit?"

"Be reasonable. What would we charge her with, teasing the geryons? Unless something new shows up when we get your stories in detail. Hey now, about that scoutship—"

"Later, later." Adam relaxed, closing his eyes in peaceful weariness. He opened them again to see Brazil wheeling away. "Hey. When we're both in one piece again, I may be calling on you. To look for a job."

Boris nodded, his long craggy face solemn, and turned away again. He wheeled a little distance, suddenly roared with laughter, and turned back. "I don't know—look what we started the last time we worked together."

Adam groped with his good hand for something suitable to throw, but found nothing. Never mind. He began to doze off, smiling. He could hear Boris' muttering receding into the distance: "The sleeping beauty sleepeth again, and where in all the realm can be found a maiden of such courage as to—oh. Beg your pardon, ma'am."

Then there was silence. It took no effort of psi engineering for Adam to feel her approaching his bed—the aura of her mind was subtle and sweet as fine perfume. He opened his eyes and stretched out his good left arm.