

# THE COLLECTED SHORT FICTION

— of —

**Robert Sheckley**



— Volume #3 —

Introduction by **HARLAN ELLISON**







THE COLLECTED  
SHORT FICTION  
of  
Robert Sheckley

Book Three

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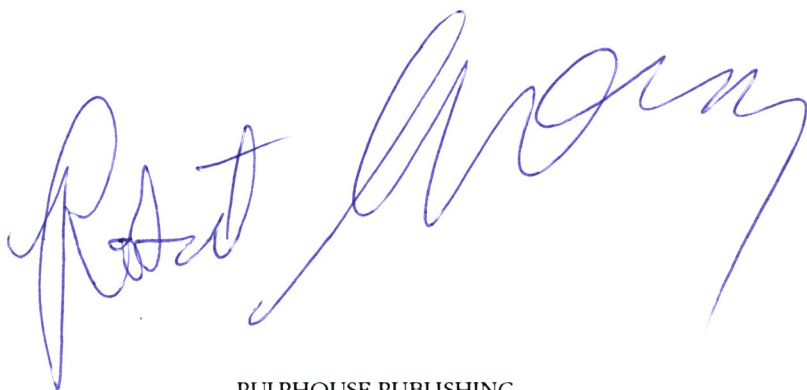


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A large, stylized handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robt Sheckley', is positioned across the middle of the page.

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THREE.

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**THE BRIDES OF  
SHECKENSTEIN**

**HARLAN ELLISON**



# INTRODUCTION

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## HARLAN ELLISON

# THE BRIDES OF SHECKENSTEIN

This is a wonderful book of stories and Robert Sheckley is an important writer. Okay, enough of that.

Now let's talk about the interesting stuff. Did you know that Sheckley, through most of his wastrel life, has been an unregenerate slut? Did you know that, apart from the possibly *hundreds* of women whom he has infected with diseases so nameless that one must speak in tongues to designate them, that Sheckley has actually been legally (if not ethically) married at least four times?

And, yes, I am prepared to admit — if bolted down and subjected to the touch of metal objects left long in the brazier — that a) Robert Sheckley and I have been disgustingly close pals for more than thirty years, b) Robert Sheckley is among my top twelve or thirteen favorite writers, the sort whose each new book I welcome with huzzahs and smelling salts, and at which event I set aside whatever worthy tome I'm then reading, in order to indulge myself with a guilty pleasure, c) Robert Sheckley was to have been the subject of a very long, detailed, annotated and cross-indexed academic study I intended to write a few years ago, for a pittance, but then the fever passed and everything was okay again, d) Robert Sheckley has long been a god in my eyes, but the advent of remedial laser surgery has helped just a lot, and e) if *anything* I write here is taken seriously, let it be this: Robert Sheckley, in my view, has been *the* stylist of the breakthrough Fifties' attitude in fantastic literature.

## INTRODUCTION

(Here is the moment of serious comment. Pass on, if genuine remarks make you nervous.

(If I were to be asked by the editors of one of those big-time "encyclopedias" of sf and fantasy: Who, among all the prominent writers from the beginning of the '50s through to the latest flavor-of-the-genre, do you think has had the greatest, *and* the most unsung, effect on literature? I would answer, without a blink, "Robert Sheckley."

(Because he wrote so well, and he wrote so fast — because he was a professional, and that's what he did for a living, *he wrote* — instead of hanging out at the coffeehouses or in the middle of a pack of adoring writing students hanging on his salted-nuts philosophies as other, *many* other, writers did — and still do, needing the sycophancy — and because he was so successful so quickly — and because, for instance, he was selling to *Playboy* for big bucks when most sf writers couldn't crack that market, and Doc Lowndes over at Columbia Publications was shorting the writers at the back of the magazine so he could pay Sheck a half-a-cent-a-word more to be at the front, and Ballantine was publishing *UNTOUCHED BY HUMAN HANDS* long before they did story collections by older, more established, "worthier" writers — he was the object of envy and calumny, the truly innocent victim of opprobrium and meanspirited gossip spread by a group of New York professionals who were nasty shits and battered so much on the bile they directed toward Sheck, that if one were to dig up their corpses a thousand years from now, one would find their bodies intact and uncorrupted by the warmth of death, still in full possession of hair and teeth, fingernails trimmed though caked with dirt, their execrable selves maintained in pristine awfulness by the snide and odious embalming fluid of maliciousness.

(But it was Sheckley who, after Alfred Bester, had the most profound effect on the young writers of my generation. If it had truly been Asimov and Heinlein who had formed the way of writing that created Poul Anderson and Frank Herbert, then it was for damned certain Alfie and Sheck who shone brightest for me and Zelazny and Silverberg. And while Roger and Bob might have no difficulty owning up to their debt to Alfie, I think it might take a long moment of reflection for them to perceive how important Sheckley was, as their literary world-view was coalescing.) He wrote so simply and compactly, so cleverly and with so much diversity, it looked like a performance to the less-talented. And the worms despised him for



that. He was Fred Astaire: he danced so well, it looked uncomplicated, easy to emulate. Until they tried it. And fell on their asses. Then they despised him the more. Because there was depth and complexity in the simple devices he used. While they were proffering cathode tubes, he was working with microchips.

Readers today may know none of this. As I have said elsewhere, to the smug, arrogant, culturally illiterate trolls of the MTV generation, nostalgia is breakfast. Even so, there are debts that should be acknowledged.

I'm glad I don't have to be the bore who does it, however.

Because, though I am happy to admit all of that, from a) to e), I would much rather talk about the woman Sheckley has been married to. And if you ask me *why* I pass up this opportunity to laud one of my best friends, a superlative writer, and a man who seldom picks his nose in public, in lieu of which I discuss personalities unknown to the purchasers of this rather expensive volume, I will answer: because I have been trained in beastly behavior, not to mention the midrash, at the scabby knees of Sheckley; and this is no more than he deserves. Ever, we seek balance in the Universe.

I first met Sheckley in 1953. I was still in high school. I'd run off when I was thirteen, but had gone home to Ohio off and on, until my father died in 1949. Then I lived in Cleveland with my mother until I managed to graduate from high school, which took a very long time, as I recall. But I wandered around the country a lot. And I visited New York. And I worshipped Sheckley, because he was the rising star of that time, and his work was so antic that I knew we'd be friends, even though I was just a kid and he was a crepuscular Methuselah, all of twenty-five years. So I managed to cajole Sheckley's phone number and address from, I think, Ayjay, and I called him, and he erred on the side of courtesy — as he continues to do to this day — saying something noncommittal, like come to visit one afternoon, sometime, kid; and I was there within the hour.

He was living, I'm pretty sure (without actual recourse to spending money by calling him for the facts, and who needs the facts anyhow, when making it all up has so much more vigor) on West End Avenue, uptown, at 103rd Street.

That was inordinately posh turf in those days. Before the coming of the Victim Culture and "entitlement" and the invasion of the army

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of the homeless and all the other benefits accruing to thirty-some years of Republican largesse; but I digress....

He lived high up in the face of an expensive apartment house, and when I entered the expansive living room, that looked out on the Hudson River, the space was flooded with sunlight; and he had his typewriter set up on a long shelf arrangement in front of one of those windows, and there was a sheaf of typing paper on one side, pristine and sparkling in the sunlight...and on the other side was a slightly smaller sheaf of pages filled with *story*.

I was ushered into the apartment by Bob's first wife, Barbara. She left me alone for a few minutes till Sheckley himself would make his appearance to the fanfare of trumpets, sackbut, lyre and dulcimer. In those few minutes, I stole over to the typing area where grandeur was born again and again on a regular basis for approximately three cents a word on demand, and I read what was in the typewriter. It was one of the "Finn O'Donnevan" stories, I think. (In those days, because there were so many magazines to fill, and because pay was so small, and because a hot young writer was fired up to write but didn't want to dilute the value of a byline, almost everybody worked with two or three pseudonyms, strictly for commercial reasons. "Finn" was Sheckley's most prominent. In that way, he could have two or even three stories in a single issue of *Galaxy*, which was the top-paying market for magazine sf fiction those days, thereby even further endearing himself to less-talented writers who were selling parts of their childrens' bodies to kind strangers on upper Broadway.)

I recall distinctly reading that page rolled onto the platen. It had something to do with Billy Batson, and maybe Captain Marvel, and something to do with Billy being in a big mailbox on a street corner.

(I have never been able to track that story down. It may have been a snippet Sheckley threw out, or lost, or never used. But I never forgot it. Years later, when I was writing what Silverberg thinks is my best story, "At the Mouse Circus," I used that image. Billy Batson carrying on a conversation while peering out of a mailbox slot. It was perfect for my purposes, and since I'd never located it in Sheckley's works — though I think I've read about ninety-five percent of what he's published that has come into my hands — I

figured such a powerful memory-turned-icon should not go to waste. So don't tell *me* that Sheckley didn't have major impact on my young and fevered brain!)

Well, the point of all this hugger-mugger is that it was Barbara Sheckley who opened the door into the world of Bobbo for me. She was a pretty woman, young in 1953, well turned out, eminently at home in that (I imagined) palatial eyrie in the Manhattan sky. To a hick from Ohio she was a Grande Dame.

I remember little about her except that she offered me a cup of coffee, and that she and Sheckley had a fierce argument over something inconsequential. Because I am of Jewish descent, and so is Sheckley, and so was Barbara (*née* Scadron), it was a form of discourse with which I was all too familiar.

Among my people, it is called *gesbryng*.

And what is it, *gesbryng*, you ask? Stand in the middle of an echoing space. Empty, preferably. Try a mini-mall in your neighborhood. Now put your hands to your temples, clutching your hair in all the fingers, and try to rip the hair off your head while shrieking at the top of your lungs. Also, attempt to pop your eyes out of their sockets, swallow your tongue, and recite all the generations of biblical elders in some lost language, while pushing the veins of your forehead out through your scalp. This will, in some small way, approximate the *gesbry*.

They had this, uh, disagreement.

I don't remember much more. I didn't see Sheckley again for years. He had met Barbara Scadron at New York University, in Irwin Shaw's writing class. They were married from circa 1951 till circa 1957, though they separated in 1955 and Bob went off to live in Lester del Rey's old apartment, a dark and depressing cell in the West Sixties, where Lincoln Center now rises. It is my gut feeling that he was unfaithful to Barbara for much of that time. I have no proof. But I certainly hope she was likewise.

Now we come to Ziva who, among all the various mates of Sheckley, I most admired and adored. First of all, the former (and presently) Ziva Kwitney was drop-dead gorgeous. Blind men on Amsterdam Avenue smiled when she passed, and went to their graves fulfilled. Flowers blossomed where she walked. The sky above her was always gingham or pastel pink. She was smart as a cookie, had



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very fine and slim ankles, knew how to win an argument, was old world gracious though thoroughly modern and up-to-date, and was (as Daniel Manus Pinkwater phrases it) “no beck number.”

Sheck met Zee on a blind date that had been set up by Fruma Klass — who is also one of the classiest and most terrific women you’d ever want to meet, despite her malicious putz of a husband — and she set up the date in 1956 after Bob and Barbara had gone plop! Now, if you ask Sheckley how he met Ziva, he’ll tell you blah blah blah on this blind date arranged by Fruma, at which time he saw Zee for the first. In his telling, Fruma is the *shadchen* (for the *goyim*: look it up) and Sheckley was this dashing young scrivener-cavalier, sweeping off her feet the luscious but naive ingenue. On the other claw, you could have something like the truth, which is a lot more interesting, not to mention serving as a strictly terrific lesson about not trusting Sheckley’s wretched memory. Hell, when *he* tells it, Fruma arranged the date in 1957, which is clearly nuts, because by 1957 he and Ziva were already married. The year of the event was 1956. Tertiary syphilis is a ghastly way to go; first the memory, then the sense of humor, then the knees, then the rack and pinion steering...

Anyhow, the way it played was like so: Sheckley had separated from Barbara. Jason had been born in 1952. He was three when they split up. Now Bob is living in this squalid airshaft Lester had deliriously conned him into believing was capable of domiciling humans when, in truth, it was like something out of the darker sections of Mervyn Peake’s *GORMENGHAST* trilogy. Now it’s roughly two years later, and Sheckley is parceling out his time among three activities: writing for penurious sums and parting with as much of the money as Barbara can track down for the support of Jason... dating a woman named Phyllis, whom I only vaguely remember... and chasing giant mutant cockroaches the size of IRT subway cars around the kitchen of what will one day become the home of the Metropolitan Opera. (Lester, of course, had fled the scene, and was living in opulence in Red Bank, New Jersey, where Evelyn spent most of her time cauterizing his wounds from the cockroach attacks.)

Cut away from the dashing young scrivener-cavalier, and let us move in for a medium close shot of young Ziva Kwitney, recently returned from Israel and now enrolled at NYU. One day early in

1956 she picks up a copy of the then-young *Village Voice*, and sees an ad in the personals that says something like:

WRITERS!  
PUBLISHED, UNPUBLISHED!  
Let's get together for  
conversation, literary  
stimulation, professional  
assistance; let's  
form a group!  
CALL: SAM

So Zee calls this number, and it turns out there is no "Sam" (well, actually, "Sam" was alleged to be a poltergeist, but that's another psychoanalysis entirely). Now, for members of the MTV generation, the name Dave Mason will mean nothing. That is to say, it never meant much to members of *my* generation, either, but at least Mason was current at the time, so I can tell you about him, and in this one instance do not feel at all uneducated if you've never heard of him.

Dave Mason was this guy who hung around New York and East Coast fandom, eventually wrote some science fiction, got a book or two published, did this and that, and spent most of his time — if I recall correctly, and I probably don't — well, he spent a lot of time trying to get laid.

Which is what this advertisement in the *Voice* was all about. There was no writer's group, there was no "Sam," but when Zee called the number she got Dave Mason, who began to hustle her with a line that so quickly turned her off, she hung up on him. So then Ziva called her friend Fruma, and they goofed on this character who was trying to meet women with such a lame action. So then *Fruma* called Mason, and he tried to put the move on *her*. So Fruma made a date with him for the following Friday night. So then Fruma calls Ziva and tells her what went down, and they giggle for a while, and then Fruma suggests to Zee that she call Mason *again*, only this time she should put on her famous Russian accent, and pretend to be someone else. So finally Zee and Fruma get together, and Ziva makes the call to Mason, and she tells him she's "Svetlana" or



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somesuch name, and she does it all in this husky, sexy whisper kind of voice, and Mason goes all over himself trying to haul her in. So Fruma scribbles a note to Ziva saying, "Insist on the date being Friday night!" and Zee does so, and Mason goes er, um, and asks if she's available *any* other night, and "Svetlana" says no, impossible, and so he agrees.

Now, comes that Friday night, and Ziva has made arrangements with Dave Mason to meet him in front of the cigar store on the corner of Christopher Street and 7th Avenue, at Sheridan Square. And of course Mason has broken the date with Fruma, in high expectation of meeting the mysterious Svetlana.

Now, he stands there, and he stands there, and he stands there. Because neither one of them show up. They do, however, walk by incognito, staring at the geek scuffling his toe and waiting for the Siren of the Steppes to manifest herself.

If you'd ever met Dave Mason, this would be a really funny story for you. Since you haven't, well, take my word for it.

Anyhow, eventually, for reasons that passeth understanding, Fruma goes out with Mason. Go ask. He takes her to a science fiction party. Some semi-pro fan group. And there Fruma meets the guy she will eventually marry, whose name I would sooner choke on a chicken bone than mention here. And in the course of her dating this guy, she takes Ziva to yet another party where Zee is introduced to Bob. But Bob doesn't remember that.

Nor does he remember that eventually Fruma's husband-to-be tries to fix up Sheckley, who is separated and living in the free-fire cockroach zone by this time nicknamed Del Rey's Hell, and he asks Fruma if she has any friends, and Fruma says yes, my friend Ziva, and they set up this blind date, and *that's* how it happened, Sheckley, you idiot!

(There is this case Oliver Sacks discusses, where a man suffered from a peculiar malaise the chief symptom of which was that he awoke each day with no memory of the day before, and had to re-invent himself afresh each morn. Like the guy in the Gene Wolfe novels. Sheckley is like that. His memory seems periodically flensed. Tabula rasa. Clean slate city.)

This is really terrific. He doesn't remember shit. You can tell him anydamnthing and he'll believe you. Watch:

Hey, Sheckley! When you gonna pay me back the hundred you borrowed when you were editing at *Omni*?

Moving right along. On April 8, 1956, Robert Sheckley and Ziva Kwitney had their first date. Slightly less than a year later on February 22nd of 1957, Sheckley divorced Barbara. Now this date is of incidental interest for the following reason: February 22nd was Barbara Sheckley's birthday. Helluva gift-giving sensibility you've got there, Sheck! What makes it even *more* interesting is that February 22nd is also Ziva Kwitney's birthday. When Bob realized the connection between Zee and Barbara, he paled significantly. Let us not suggest he's superstitious, but to this day he will not unleash his deadly member without first he's checked a woman's natal day. Not that it's prevented him from getting into dutch in non-22 February venues.

On April 7, 1957 Bob married Ziva. For the next eight years they lived in Greenwich Village. Alisa was born in 1964. In mid-1967, a few months before they moved to Majorca for a year, I stayed with Bob and Zee and the two-and-a-half-year-old Alisa at their West End Avenue apartment for about two weeks. We all bummed around a lot, I inhabited the back room and sat with a towel wrapped around my waist, writing a story called "Worlds to Kill" which I sold to *If* or *Galaxy* or one of those.

I thought they were golden. Zee particularly.

Well, it all came to an end. More or less amicably after fourteen years together, including the year they lived together before they were married.

(By the way: when Bob was staying with me out here in L.A. earlier in '67, we co-wrote one of the stories in this volume, "I See a Man Sitting On a Chair, and the Chair Is Biting His Leg." Ziva was back in New York with Alisa, getting ready for Majorca. According to superior academic sources, this story is the finest piece of work Sheckley has ever done, including IMMORTALITY, INC. from which the film *Freejack* has been made. *The New York Times* said of this short story, "Sheckley is dragged screaming to new heights of literary excellence by Ellison's inspired chivvyng." *The Boston Globe* inhaled, "At last! Sheckley has found his soul's missing engine." *Harper's* ventriculated, "Was there ever a more glorious duo? Gilbert and Sullivan? Troilus and Cressida? Burke and Hare? Hurray for Ellison and Sheckley!"

(But I digress.)

So finally Sheckley blows it with Zee, which I have always taken to be a major stupid move, but maybe it was just the end of the

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natural life of the relationship, who knows? And who's the hell to say. None of our business, really; not that any of *us* has been so goddam smart ourselves.

Anyhow, he went off to live on the island of Ibiza, where he met this judge's daughter from New Jersey, sunning herself on vacation. Name of Abby Schulman. And that was something like 1970, and they hung out for a while, and then they got married because Sheckley seems to have this need to be linked with a strong woman, but as soon as the marriage enlarges with kids he gets twitchy and has to step out for about three years to get some air. There's nothing mean about it, it's just that he seems to need to forget it all, go off and reinvent himself. Or something.

(Zee is the psychotherapist. In private practice in New York. She writes pop-psych articles for magazines and newspapers, as well. Be interesting to see what she'd write about Sheckley. Particularly now, because Alisa — who is some terrific young woman, an assistant editor at DC Comics and author of a first novel coming from HarperCollins in the Fall of '92 — just got married, and Sheckley went to the wedding, and he danced with Ziva, and he seemed pretty happy, and there was genuine affection between them after some years of acrimony because Bob was, well, how shall we put it delicately, less than forthcoming with support money for Alisa's upbringing.)

It occurs to me that this may not be precisely the sort of introduction the publisher (or my friend Bob) was expecting. Well, to tell you the truth, gang, it ain't precisely what I'd intended to write, neither. But here it is; and ain't that odd.

Now I'm starting to get nervous. I may be testing the tensile strength of a valuable friendship. Yeah...well...

He married Abby. That went on from around circa 1970 to 1981. Ended not so well. I haven't got a lot of good to say about Abby. She stiffed me for some royalty money, and put Bob in a bad way. But then, I don't know the inside story, so let's just say it was the Bride of Frankensheck #3, and move on to Sheckley's return to the States, his ascent to the fiction editorship at *Omni* in New York, something like mid-1981, and his meeting-up with a lady named Jay Rothbell, who had previously been wed to Billy Oskay and then John Shirley, and who, since being divorced from Sheckley, has married a very fine man named Jack Rems, and they live up in the San Francisco area.



He was with Jay from 1982 to 1986, approximately. For a while they lived in a trailer park in Florida, approximately.

You can understand that there are a lot of "approximately this and approximately that and circa this and circa that" as we descend into my and Sheckley's twilight years. Of late, I've been a lot more concerned with my travail than his. After a while the plight of starving children in Ethiopia becomes less persistently compelling than that one gets out of bed with fresh aches and creaks each day. Hardly noble, but a sad and inescapable truth about the human condition.

Which brings us full tilt back to Sheckley, and the imminent arrival of the *Bride of Bobenstein #5*, a lady I have not met, name of Gail Dana, who I'm told is far too good for wretched old Robert. Now Ms. Dana, a Portland resident, has apparently undertaken to wed the Demon Prince on October 12 of the year 1991, as I sit writing this in July.

If it works, it needn't work for long. Neither Sheckley nor I can possibly hope to hang on for more than another ten, twenty years at most. So all Ms. Dana needs is a little fortitude and the foreknowledge that most of us liars-for-hire die as poor as our predecessors, thus preparing her for a vanishing act when Sheckley goes to his just reward, because of all the creditors who'll be looking for his assets. Which, of course, won't exist.

So here's the ending. In which an introduction is supposed to sum everything up, with some sparkling metaphor, and the one-punch belief that all will be well. Wish I knew how to do that. But I don't. Sheckley and I have come down through a lot of years, if not exactly lashed together like a potato-sack race, then certainly passing the baton to each other as we caromed away into individual and idiotic adventures.

If you cannot quite perceive it, let me tell you that I love my friend Bob Sheckley. Love him for being a pal who has never treated me with anything less than seriousness and respect. Even when I was a teenaged kid intruding on his private life. He's older than I, by six years, and that ought to have set up a younger-brother-older-brother thing; but it didn't. We were both too immature for that. Too wild and too irresponsible. For me, Sheckley has always been a pal. We both seem to be the same age, which is roughly about seven or eight, with runny noses and banged-up elbows. Both of us seem to have gotten out of life precisely what we contracted for; and if I may

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be so presumptuous to answer for him as well as myself, we have only barely perceptible regrets. If you want to learn who the *real* Robert Sheckley is, I suggest not this book of wry phantasms, nor any of the others. I commend to your attention (if you can ever lay your hands on a copy) a very fine thriller titled *THE MAN IN THE WATER*, which Sheck wrote when he was living with Zee in Majorca, and which Ayjay published at Regency Books after I left for California in 1961. Truly swell piece of writing, and therein shines the real Sheckley.

Beyond that, it is only this remaining to be said:

This is a wonderful book of stories and Robert Sheckley is an important writer.



# THE PEOPLE TRAP

## 1.

It was Land Race Day — a time of vaunting hope and unrelieved tragedy, a day which epitomized the unhappy twenty-first century. Steve Baxter had tried to reach the starting line early, like the other contestants, but had miscalculated the amount of time he would require. Now he was in trouble. His Participant's Badge had got him through the outer, exocrowd without incident. But neither badge nor brawn could be relied upon to carry a man through the obdurate inner core of humanity which made up the endocrowd.

Baxter estimated this inner mass at 8.7 density — not far from the pandemic level. A flash-point might occur at any moment, despite the fact that the authorities had just aerosoled the endocrowd with tranquilizers. Given enough time, a man might circle around them; but Baxter had only six minutes before the race began.

Despite the risk, he pushed his way directly into their ranks. On his face he wore a fixed smile — absolutely essential when dealing with a high-density human configuration. He could see the starting line now, a raised dais in Jersey City's Glebe Park. The other contestants were already there. Another twenty yards, Steve thought; if only the brutes don't stampede!

But deep within the corecrowd he still had to penetrate the final nuclear mob. This was composed of bulky, slack-jawed men with unfocused eyes — agglutinating hysterophiliacs, in the jargon of the pandemiologists. Jammed together sardine fashion, reacting as a single organism, these men were incapable of anything but blind resistance and irrational fury toward anything that tried to penetrate their ranks.

Steve hesitated for a moment. The nuclear mob, more dangerous than the fabled water buffaloes of antiquity, glared at him, their nostrils flared, their heavy feet shuffling ominously.

Without allowing himself time to think, Baxter plunged into their midst. He felt blows on his back and shoulders and heard the terrifying *urr* of a maddened endomob. Shapeless bodies jammed against him, suffocating him, relentlessly pressing closer and closer.

Then, providentially, the authorities turned on the Muzak. This ancient and mysterious music, which for over a century had pacified the most intractable berserkers, did not fail now. The endomob was decibeled into a temporary immobility, and Steve Baxter clawed his way through to the starting line.

The chief judge had already begun to read the Prospectus. Every contestant and most of the spectators knew this document by heart. Nevertheless, by law the terms had to be stated.

"Gentlemen," the judge read, "you are here assembled to take part in a race for the acquisition of public-domain lands. You fifty fortunate men have been chosen by public lottery from fifty million registrants in the South Westchester region. The race will proceed from this point to the registration line at the Land Office in Times Square, New York — an adjusted approximate mean distance of 5.7 statute miles. You contestants are permitted to take any route; to travel on the surface, above, or below ground. The only requirement is that you finish in person, substitutes not being permitted. The first ten finalists — "

The crowd became deathly still.

" — will receive one acre of unencumbered land complete with house and farming implements. And each finalist will also be granted free Government transportation to his freehold, for himself and for his immediate family. And this aforesaid acre shall be his to have and to hold, free and clear, perpetually unalienable, as long as the sun shines and water flows, for him and his heirs, even unto the third generation!"

The crowd sighed when they heard this. Not a man among them had ever seen an unencumbered acre, much less dreamed of possessing one. An acre of land entirely for yourself and your family, an acre which you didn't have to share with anyone — well, it was simply beyond the wildest fantasy.

"Be it further noted," the judge went on, "the Government accepts no responsibility for deaths incurred during this contest. I am

obliged to point out that the unweighted average mortality rate for Land Races is approximately 68.9 percent. Any contestant who so wishes may withdraw now without prejudice."

The judge waited, and for a moment Steve Baxter considered dropping the whole suicidal idea. Surely he and Adele and the kids and Aunt Flo and Uncle George could continue to get by somehow in their cozy one-room apartment in Larchmont's Fred Allen Memorial Median Income Housing Cluster. After all, he was no man of action, no muscled bravo or hairy-fisted brawler. He was a systems-deformation consultant, and a good one. And he was also a mild-mannered ectomorph with stringy muscles and a distinct shortness of breath. Why in God's name should he thrust himself into the perils of darkest New York, most notorious of the Jungle Cities?

"Better give it up, Steve," a voice said, uncannily echoing his thoughts.

Baxter turned and saw Edward Freihoff St. John, his wealthy and obnoxious neighbor from Larchmont. St. John, tall and elegant and whipcord-strong from his days on the paddle-ball courts. St. John, with his smooth, saturnine good looks, whose hooded eyes were too frequently turned toward Adele's blonde loveliness.

"You'll never make it, Stevie baby," St. John said.

"That is possible," Baxter said evenly. "But you, I suppose, will make it?"

St. John winked and laid a forefinger alongside his nose in a knowing gesture. For weeks he had been hinting about the special information he had purchased from a venal Land Race comptroller. This information would vastly improve his chances of traversing Manhattan Borough — the densest and most dangerous urban concentration in the world.

"Stay out of it, Stevie baby," St. John said in his peculiar rasping voice. "Stay out, and I'll make it worth your while. Whaddaya say, sweetie pie?"

Baxter shook his head. He did not consider himself a courageous man; but he would rather die than take a favor from St. John. And in any event, he could not go on as before. Under last month's Codicil to the Extended Families Domicile Act, Steve was now legally obliged to take in three unmarried cousins and a widowed aunt, whose one-room sub-basement apartment in the Lake Placid industrial complex had been wiped out by the new Albany-Montreal Tunnel.



Even with anti-shock injections, ten persons in one room was too much. He simply had to win a piece of land!

"I'm staying," Baxter said quietly.

"Okay, sucker," St. John said, a frown marring his hard, sardonic face. "But remember, I warned you."

The chief judge called out, "Gentlemen, on your marks!"

The contestants fell silent. They toed the starting line with slit-eyes and compressed mouths.

"Get ready!"

A hundred sets of leg muscles bunched as fifty determined men leaned forward.

"Go!"

And the race was on!

A blare of supersonics temporarily paralyzed the surrounding mob. The contestants squirmed through their immobile ranks and sprinted over and around the long lines of stalled automobiles. Then they fanned out, but tended mainly to the east, toward the Hudson River and the evil-visaged city that lay on its far shore, half concealed in its sooty cloak of unburned hydrocarbons.

Only Steve Baxter had not turned to the east.

Alone among the contestants, he had swung north, toward the George Washington Bridge and Bear Mountain City. His mouth was tight, and he moved like a man in a dream.

In distant Larchmont, Adele Baxter was watching the race on television. Involuntarily, she gasped. Her eight-year-old son Tommy cried, "Mom, Mom, he's going north to the bridge! But it's closed this month. He can't get through that way!"

"Don't worry, darling," Adele said. "Your father knows what he's doing."

She spoke with an assurance she did not feel. And, as the figure of her husband was lost in the crowds, she settled back to wait — and to pray. Did Steve know what he was doing? Or had he panicked under pressure?

## 2.

The seeds of the problem had been sown in the twentieth century; but the terrible harvest was reaped a hundred years later. After uncounted millennia of slow increase, the population of the world

suddenly exploded, doubled, and doubled again. With disease checked and food supplies assured, death rates continued to fall as birthrates rose. Caught in a nightmare geometric progression, the ranks of humanity swelled like runaway cancers.

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse, those ancient policemen, could no longer be relied upon to maintain order. Pestilence and famine had been outlawed, and war was too luxurious for this subsistence age. Only death remained — much diminished, a mere shadow of his former self.

Science, with splendid irrationality, continued to work insensately toward the goal of more life for more people.

And *people* marched on, still increasing, crowding the earth with their numbers, stifling the air and poisoning the water, eating their processed algae between slices of fishmeal bread, dimly awaiting a catastrophe to thin out their unwieldy ranks, and waiting in vain.

The quantitative increase in numbers produced qualitative changes in human experience. In a more innocent age, adventure and danger had been properties of waste places — the high mountains, bleak deserts, steaming jungles. But by the twenty-first century most of these places were being utilized in the accelerating search for living-space. Adventure and danger were now to be found in the monstrous, ungovernable cities.

In the cities one found the modern equivalent of savage tribes, fearsome beasts, and dread disease. An expedition into New York or Chicago required more resourcefulness and stamina, more ingenuity, than those lighthearted Victorian jaunts to Everest or the source of the Nile.

In this pressure-pot world, land was the most precious of commodities. The Government parceled it out as it became available, by means of regional lotteries culminating in Land Races. These contests were patterned after those held in the 1890s for the opening of the Oklahoma Territory and the Cherokee Strip.

The Land Race was considered equitable and interesting — both sporty and sporting. Millions watched the races, and the tranquilizing effect of vicarious excitement upon the masses was duly noted and approved. This in itself was justification for the races.

Additionally, the high mortality rate among the contestants had to be considered an asset. It didn't amount to much in absolute numbers; but a stifled world was grateful for even the smallest alleviation.



\* \* \*

The race was three hours old. Steve Baxter turned on his little transistor radio and listened to the latest reports. He heard how the first group of contestants had arrived at the Holland Tunnel and been turned back by armored policemen. Others, more devious, had taken the long southern trek to Staten Island and were presently approaching the approaches of the Verrazzano Bridge. Freihoff St John, all by himself, flashing a deputy mayor's badge, had been allowed past the Lincoln Tunnel barricades.

But now it was time for Steve Baxter's gamble. Grim-faced, with quiet courage, he entered the infamous Free Port of Hoboken.

## 3.

It was dusk on the Hoboken foreshore. Before him, in a sweeping crescent, lay the trim, swift ships of the Hoboken smuggling fleet, each with its gleaming Coast Guard medallion. Some already had cargo lashed to their decks — cases of cigarettes from North Carolina, liquor from Kentucky, oranges from Florida, goof balls from California, guns from Texas. Each case bore the official marking, "CONTRABAND — TAX PAID." For in this unhappy day and age, the hard-pressed Government was forced to tax even illegal enterprises, and thus to give them a quasi-legal status.

Choosing his moment carefully, Baxter stepped aboard a rakish marijuana runner and crouched down among the aromatic bales. The craft was ready for imminent departure; if he could only conceal himself during the short passage across the river...

"Har! What in hell have we here?"

A drunken second engineer, coming up unexpectedly from the fo'c'sle, had caught Baxter unawares. Responding to his shout, the rest of the crew swarmed on to the deck. They were a hard-bitten, swaggering lot, feared for their casually murderous ways. These were the same breed of Godless men who had sacked Weehawken some years ago, had put Fort Lee to the torch, had raided and pillaged all the way to the gates of Englewood. Steve Baxter knew that he could expect no mercy from them.

Nevertheless, with admirable coolness, he said, "Gentlemen, I am in need of transportation across the Hudson, if you please."

The ship's captain, a colossal mestizo with a scarred face and bulging muscles, leaned back and bellowed with laughter.

"Ye seek passage of *uns*?" he declared in the broad Hobokenese patois. "Think 'ee we be the Christopher Street ferry, hai?"

"Not at all, sir. But I had hoped —"

"To the boneyard wit' yer hopes!"

The crew roared at the witticism.

"I am willing to pay for my passage," Steve said with quiet dignity.

"*Pay* is it?" roared the captain. "Aye, we sometimes sell passages — non-stop to midstream, and thence straight down!"

The crew redoubled its laughter.

"If it is to be, then let it so be," Steve Baxter said. "I request only that you permit me to drop a postcard to my wife and children."

"Woife and tuckins?" the captain inquired. "Why didn't yer mention! Had that lot myself aforetime ago, until waunders did do marvain to the lot."

"I am sorry to hear that," Steve said with evident sincerity.

"Aye." The captain's iron visage softened. "I do remember how, in oftens colaim, the leetle blainsprites did leap giner on the saern; yes, and it was roses all till diggerdog."

"You must have been very happy," Steve said. He was following the man's statements with difficulty.

"I maun do," the captain said heavily.

A bowlegged little forebow deckman thrust himself forward. "Hi, Captain, let's do for him and get underway before the pot rots on the spot."

"Who you giving orders at, ye mangy, scut-faced hogifier!" the captain raved. "By Big Jesus, we'll let the pot rot till I say not! And as for doing him — nay, I'll do one deed for me blainsprites, shiver me if I won't!" Turning to Baxter, he said, "We'll carry ye, laddie, and for naught ought loot."

Thus, fortuitously, Steve Baxter had touched upon a bittersweet memory in the captain's recollection and had thereby won respite. The marijuana men pushed off, and soon the sleek craft was breasting the sallow gray-green waves of the Hudson.

But Steve Baxter's respite was short-lived. In midstream, just after they entered Federal waters, a powerful searchlight flashed out of the evening gloom and an officious voice ordered them to heave to. Evil luck had steered them straight into the path of a destroyer on the Hudson patrol.

"Damn them!" the captain raved. "Tax and kill, that's all they know! But we'll show them our mettle! To the guns, bullies!"

Swiftly the crew peeled the tarpaulins from the fifty-caliber machine guns, and the boat's twin diesels roared defiance. Twisting and dodging, the pot runner raced for the sanctuary of New York shore. But the destroyer, fore-reaching, had the legs of her, and machine guns were no match for four-inch cannon. Direct hits splintered the little ship's toe rail, exploded in the great cabin, smashed through the maintop forestays, and chopped down the starboard mizzen halyards.

Surrender or death seemed the only options. But weatherwise, the captain sniffed the air. "Hang on, hearties!" he screamed. "There's a Wester do be coming!"

Shells rained around them. Then, out of the west, a vast and impenetrable smog bank rolled in, blanketing everything in its inky tentacles. The battered little kif ship slid away from the combat; and the crew, hastily donning respirators, gave thanks to the smoldering trashlands of Seacausus. As the captain remarked, it is an ill wind that blows no good.

Half an hour later they docked at the 79th Street Pier. The captain embraced Steve warmly and wished him good fortune. And Steve Baxter continued on his journey.

The broad Hudson was behind him. Ahead lay thirty-odd downtown blocks and less than a dozen crosstown blocks. According to the latest radio report, he was well ahead of the other contestants, ahead even of Freihoff St John, who still had not emerged from the labyrinth at the New York end of the Lincoln Tunnel. He seemed to be doing very nicely, all things considered.

But Baxter's optimism was premature. New York was not conquered so easily. Unknown to him, the most dangerous parts of his journey still lay before him.

#### 4.

After a few hours' sleep in the back of an abandoned car, Steve proceeded southwards on West End Avenue. Soon it was dawn — a magical hour in the city, when no more than a few hundred early risers were to be found at any given intersection. High overhead were the crenellated towers of Manhattan, and above them the



clustered television antennae wove a faery tapestry against a dun and ochre sky. Seeing it like that, Baxter could imagine what New York had been like a hundred years ago, in the gracious, easy-going days before the population explosion.

He was abruptly shaken out of his musings. Appearing as if from nowhere, a party of armed men suddenly barred his path. They wore masks, wide-brimmed black hats and bandoliers of ammunition. Their aspect was both villainous and picturesque.

One of them, evidently the leader, stepped forward. He was a craggy-featured, balding old man with a heavy black mustache and mournful red-rimmed eyes. "Stranger," he said, "let's see yore pass."

"I don't believe I have one," Baxter said.

"Damned right you don't," the old man said. "I'm Pablo Steinmetz, and I issue all the passes around here and I don't recollect ever seeing you afore in these parts."

"I'm a stranger here," Baxter said. "I'm just passing through."

The black-hatted men grinned and nudged each other. Pablo Steinmetz rubbed his unshaven jaw and said, "Well, sonny, it just so happens that you're trying to pass through a private toll road without permission of the owner, who happens to be me; so I reckon that means you're illegally trespassing."

"But how could anyone have a private toll road in the heart of New York City?" Baxter asked.

"It's mine 'cause I say it's mine," Pablo Steinmetz said, fingering the notches on the stock of his Winchester 78. "That's just the way it is, stranger, so I reckon you'd better pay or play."

Baxter reached for his wallet and found it was missing. Evidently the pot-boat captain, upon parting, had yielded to his baser instincts and picked his pocket.

"I have no money," Baxter said. He laughed uneasily. "Perhaps I should turn back."

Steinmetz shook his head. "Going back's the same as going forward. It's toll road either way. You still gotta pay or play."

"Then I guess I'll have to play," Baxter said. "What do I do?"

"You run," Old Pablo said, "and we take turns shooting at you, aiming only at the upper part of your head. First man to bring you down wins a turkey."

"That is infamous!" Baxter declared.

"It is kinda tough on you," Steinmetz said mildly. "But that's the way the mortar crumbles. Rules is rules, even in an anarchy. So,

therefore, if you will be good enough to break into a wild sprint for freedom..."

The bandits grinned and nudged each other and loosened their guns in their holsters and pushed back their wide-brimmed hats. Baxter readied himself for the death run —

And at that moment, a voice cried "Stop!"

A woman had spoken. Baxter turned and saw that a tall, red-headed girl was striding through the bandit ranks. She was dressed in toreador pants, plastic galoshes, and Hawaiian blouse. The exotic clothing served to enhance her bold beauty. There was a paper rose in her hair, and a string of cultured pearls set off the slender line of her neck. Never had Baxter seen a more flamboyant loveliness.

Pablo Steinmetz frowned and tugged at his mustache. "Flame!" he roared. "What in tarnation are you up to?"

"I've come to stop your little game, Father," the girl said coolly. "I want a chance to talk to this tanglefoot."

"This is man's business," Steinmetz said. "Stranger, git set to run!"

"Stranger, don't move a muscle!" Flame cried, and a deadly little Derringer appeared in her hand.

Father and daughter glared at each other. Old Pablo was the first to break the tableau.

"Damn it all, Flame, you can't do this," he said. "Rules is rules, even for you. This here illegal trespasser can't pay, so he's gotta play."

"That's no problem," Flame announced. Reaching inside her blouse she extracted a shiny silver double eagle. "There!" she said, throwing it at Pablo's feet. "I've done the paying, and just maybe I'll do the playing, too. Come along, stranger."

She took Baxter by the hand and led him away. The bandits watched them go and grinned and nudged each other until Steinmetz scowled at them. Old Pablo shook his head, scratched his ear, blew his nose, and said, "Consarn that girl!"

The words were harsh, but the tone was unmistakably tender.

## 5.

Night came to the city, and the bandits pitched camp on the corner of 69th Street and West End Avenue. The black-hatted men lounged in attitudes of ease before a roaring fire. A juicy brisket of beef was set out on a spit, and packages of flash-frozen green

vegetables were thrown into a capacious black cauldron. Old Pablo Steinmetz, easing the imaginary pain in his wooden leg, drank deep from a jerry can of pre-mixed Martinis. In the darkness beyond the campfire you could hear a lonely poodle howling for his mate.

Steve and Flame sat a little apart from the others. The night, silent except for the distant roar of garbage trucks, worked its enchantment upon them both. Their fingers met, touched, and clung.

Flame said at last, "Steve, you — you do like me, don't you?"

"Why, of course I do," Baxter replied, and slipped his arm around her shoulders in a brotherly gesture not incapable of misinterpretation.

"Well, I've been thinking," the bandit girl said. "I've thought..." She paused, suddenly shy, then went on, "Oh, Steve, why don't you give up this suicidal race? Why don't you stay here with me! I've got land, Steve, real land — a hundred square yards in the New York Central Switchyard! You and I, Steve, we could farm it together!"

Baxter was tempted — what man would not be? He had not been unaware of the feelings which the beautiful bandit girl entertained for him, nor was he entirely unresponsive to them. Flame Steinmetz's haunting beauty and proud spirit, even without the added attraction of land, might easily have won any man's heart. For a heartbeat he wavered, and his arm tightened around the girl's shoulders.

But then, fundamental loyalties reasserted themselves. Flame was the essence of romance, the flash of ecstasy about which a man dreams throughout his life. Yet Adele was his childhood sweetheart, his wife, the mother of his children, the patient helpmate of the long years together. For a man of Steve Baxter's character, there could be no other choice.

The imperious girl was unused to refusal. Angry as a scalded puma, she threatened to tear out Baxter's heart with her fingernails and serve it up lightly dusted in flour and toasted over a medium fire. Her great flashing eyes and trembling bosom showed that this was no mere idle imagery.

Despite this, quietly and implacably, Steve Baxter stuck to his convictions. And Flame realized sadly that she would never have loved this man were he not replete with the very high principles which rendered her desires unattainable.

So in the morning, she offered no resistance when the quiet stranger insisted upon leaving. She even silenced her irate father,



who swore that Steve was an irresponsible fool who should be restrained for his own good.

"It's no use, Dad — can't you see that?" she asked. "He must lead his own life, even if it means the end of his life."

Pablo Steinmetz desisted, grumbling. And Steve Baxter set out again upon his desperate Odyssey.

6.

Downtown he traveled, jostled and crowded to the point of hysteria, blinded by the flash of neon against chrome, deafened by the incessant city noises. He came at last into a region of proliferating signs:

ONE WAY  
DO NOT ENTER  
KEEP OFF THE MEDIAN  
CLOSED SUNDAYS AND HOLIDAYS  
CLOSED WEEKDAYS  
LEFT LANE *MUST* TURN LEFT!

Winding through this maze of conflicting demands, he stumbled accidentally into the vast stretch of misery known as Central Park. Before him, as far as the eye could see, every square foot of land was occupied by squalid lean-tos, mean teepees, disreputable shacks, and noisome stews. His sudden appearance among the brutalized park inhabitants excited comment, none of it favorable. They got it into their heads that he was a health inspector, come to close down their malarial wells, slaughter their trichinoidal hogs, and vaccinate their scabrous children. A mob gathered around him, waving their crutches and mouthing threats.

Luckily, a malfunctioning toaster in Central Ontario triggered off a sudden blackout. In the ensuing panic, Steve made good his escape.

But now he found himself in an area where the street signs had long ago been torn down to confuse the tax assessors. The sun was hidden behind a glaring white overcast. Not even a compass could be used because of the proximity of vast quantities of scrap iron — all that remained of the city's legendary subway system.

Steve Baxter realized that he was utterly and hopelessly lost.

Yet he persevered, with a courage surpassed only by his ignorance. For uncounted days he wandered through the nondescript streets, past endless brownstones, mounds of plate glass, automobile cairns, and the like. The superstitious inhabitants refused to answer his questions, fearing he might be an FBI man. He staggered on, unable to obtain food or drink, unable even to rest for fear of being trampled by the crowds.

A kindly social worker stopped him just as Baxter was about to drink from a hepatic fountain. This wise gray-haired old man nursed him back to health in his own home — a hut built entirely of rolled newspapers near the moss-covered ruins of Lincoln Center. He advised Baxter to give up his impetuous quest and to devote his life to assisting the wretched, brutalized, superfluous masses of humanity that pullulated on all sides of him.

It was a noble ideal, and Steve came near to wavering; but then, as luck would have it, he heard the latest race results on the social worker's venerable Hallicrafter.

Many of the contestants had met their fate in urban-idiosyncratic ways. Freihoff St John had been imprisoned for second-degree litterbugging. And the party that crossed the Verrazzano Bridge had subsequently disappeared into the snow-capped fastnesses of Brooklyn Heights and had not been heard from again.

Baxter realized that he was still in the running.

## 7.

His spirits were considerably lifted when he started forth once again. But now he fell into an overconfidence more dangerous than the most profound depression. Journeying rapidly to the south, he took advantage of a traffic lull to step onto an express walkaway. He did this carelessly, without a proper examination of the consequences.

Irrevocably committed, he found to his horror that he was on a one-way route, no turns permitted. This walkaway, he now saw, led non-stop to the *terra incognita* of Jones Beach, Fire Island, Patchogue, and East Hampton.

The situation called for immediate action. To his left was a blank concrete wall. To his right there was a waist-high partition marked

"NO VAULTING ALLOWED BETWEEN 12:00 NOON AND 12:00 MIDNIGHT, TUESDAYS, THURSDAYS, AND SATURDAYS."

Today was Tuesday afternoon — a time of interdiction. Nevertheless, without hesitation, Steve vaulted over the barrier.

Retribution was swift and terrible. A camouflaged police car emerged from one of the city's notorious ambushes. It bore down upon him, firing wildly into the crowd. (In this unhappy age, the police were required by law to fire wildly into the crowd when in pursuit of a suspect.)

Baxter took refuge in a nearby candy store. There, recognizing the inevitable, he tried to give himself up. But this was not permitted because of the overcrowded state of the prisons. A hail of bullets kept him pinned down while the stern-faced policemen set up mortars and portable flame-throwers.

It looked like the end, not only of Steve Baxter's hopes, but of his very life. Lying on the floor among gaudy jawbreakers and brittle licorice whips, he commended his soul to God and prepared to meet his end with dignity.

But his despair was as premature as his earlier optimism had been. He heard sounds of a disturbance and, raising his head, saw that a group of armed men had attacked the police car from the rear. Turning to meet this threat, the men in blue were enfiladed from the flank and wiped out to the last man.

Baxter came out to thank his rescuers and found Flame O'Rourke Steinmetz at their head. The beautiful bandit girl had been unable to forget the soft-spoken stranger. Despite the mumbled objections of her drunken father, she had shadowed Steven's movements and come to his rescue.

The black-hatted men plundered the area with noisy abandon. Flame and Steve retired to the shadowy solitude of an abandoned Howard Johnson's restaurant. There, beneath the peeling orange gables of a gentler more courteous age, a tremulous love scene was enacted between them. It was no more than a brief, bittersweet interlude, however. Soon, Steve Baxter plunged once again into the ravening maelstrom of the city.

8.

Advancing relentlessly, his eyes closed to slits against the driving smog storm and his mouth a grim white line in the lower third



of his face, Baxter won through to 49th Street and 8th Avenue. There, in an instant, conditions changed with that disastrous suddenness typical of a Jungle City.

While crossing the street, Baxter heard a deep, ominous roar. He realized that the traffic light had changed. The drivers, frenzied by days of waiting and oblivious to minor obstacles, had simultaneously floored their accelerators. Steve Baxter was directly in the path of a vehicular stampede.

Advance or retreat across the broad boulevard was clearly impossible. Thinking fast, Baxter flung aside a manhole cover and plunged underground. He made it with perhaps a half-second to spare. Overhead, he heard the shrieks of tortured metal and the heavy impact of colliding vehicles.

He continued to press ahead by way of the sewer system. This network of tunnels was densely populated, but was marginally safer than the surface roads. Steve encountered trouble only once, when a jackroller attacked him along the margin of a sediment tank.

Toughened by his experiences, Baxter subdued the bravo and took his canoe — an absolute necessity in some of the lower passageways. Then he pushed on, paddling all the way to 42nd Street and 8th Avenue before a flash flood drove him to the surface.

Now, indeed, his long-desired goal was near to hand. Only one more block remained; one block, and he would be at the Times Square Land Office!

But at this moment he encountered the final, shattering obstacle that wrote *finis* to all his dreams.

9.

In the middle of 42nd Street, extending without visible limit to the north and south, there was a wall. It was a cyclopean structure, and it had sprung up overnight in the quasi-sentient manner of New York's architecture. This, Baxter learned, was one side of a gigantic new upper-middle-income housing project. During its construction, all traffic for Times Square was being re-routed via the Queens-Battery Tunnel and the East 37th Street Shunpike.

Steve estimated that the new route would take him no less than three weeks and would lead him through the uncharted Garment District. His race, he realized, was over.



Courage, tenacity, and righteousness had failed; and were he not a religious man, Steve Baxter might have contemplated suicide. With undisguised bitterness, he turned on his little transistor radio and listened to the latest reports.

Four contestants had already reached the Land Office. Five others were within a few hundred yards of the goal, coming in by the open southern approaches. And, to compound Steve's misery he heard that Freihoff St John, having received a plenary pardon from the governor, was on his way once more, approaching Times Square from the east.

At this blackest of all possible moments, Steve felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw that Flame had come to him again. Although the spirited girl had sworn to have nothing further to do with him, she had relented. This mild, even-tempered man meant more to her than pride; more, perhaps, than life itself.

What to do about the wall? A simple matter for the daughter of a bandit chief! If one could not go around it or through it or under it, why, one must then go over it! And to this purpose she had brought ropes, boots, pitons, crampons, hammers, axes — a full complement of climbing equipment. She was determined that Baxter should have one final chance at his heart's desire — and that Flame O'Rourke Steinmetz should accompany him, and not accept no for an answer!

They climbed, side by side, up the building's glass-smooth expanse. There were countless dangers — birds, aircraft, snipers, wise guys — all the risks of the unpredictable city. And, far below, old Pablo Steinmetz watched, his face like corrugated granite.

After an eternity of peril, they reached the top and started down the other side —

And Flame slipped!

In horror Baxter watched the slender girl fall to her doom in Times Square, to die impaled upon the needle-sharp point of a car's aerial. Baxter scrambled down and knelt beside her, almost out of his head with grief.

And, on the other side of the wall, old Pablo sensed that something irrevocable had happened. He shuddered, his mouth writhed in anticipation of grief, and he reached blindly for a bottle.

Strong hands lifted Baxter to his feet. Uncomprehendingly, he looked up into the kindly red face of the Federal land clerk.

It was difficult for him to realize that he had completed the race. With curiously deadened emotions, he heard how St John's pushiness and hauteur had caused a riot in the explosive Burmese Quarter of East 42nd Street, and how St John had been forced to claim sanctuary in the labyrinthine ruins of the Public Library, from which refuge he still had not been able to extricate himself.

But it was not in Steve Baxter's nature to gloat, even when gloating was the only conceivable response. All that mattered to him was that he had won, had reached the Land Office in time to claim the last remaining acre of land.

All it had cost was effort and pain, and the life of a young bandit girl.

10.

Time was merciful; and some weeks later, Steve Baxter was not thinking of the tragic events of the race. A Government jet had transported him and his family to the town of Cormorant in the Sierra Nevada mountains. From Cormorant, a helicopter brought them to their prize. A leathery Land Office marshal was on hand to greet them and to point out their new freehold.

Their land lay before them, sketchily fenced, on an almost vertical mountainside. Surrounding it were other similarly fenced acres, stretching as far as the eye could see. The land had recently been strip-mined; it existed now as a series of gigantic raw slashes across a dusty, dun-colored earth. Not a tree or a blade of grass could be seen. There was a house, as promised; more precisely, there was a shack. It looked as if it might last until the next hard rain.

For a few minutes the Baxters stared in silence. Then Adele said, "Oh, Steve."

Steve said, "I know."

"It's our new land," Adele said.

Steve nodded. "It's not very — pretty," he said hesitantly.

"Pretty? What do we care about that?" Adele declared. "It's *ours*, Steve, and there's a whole acre of it! We can *grow* things here, Steve!"

"Well, maybe not at first —"

"I know, I know! But we'll put this land back into shape, and then we'll plant it and harvest it! We'll live here, Steve! Won't we?"

Steve Baxter was silent, gazing over his dearly won land. His children — Tommy and blonde little Amelia — were playing with a

clod of earth. The US marshal cleared his throat and said, "You can still change your mind, you know."

"What?" Steve asked.

"You can still change your mind, go back to your apartment in the city. I mean, some folks think it's sorta crude out here, sorta not what they was expecting."

"Oh, Steve, no!" his wife moaned.

"No, Daddy, no!" his children cried.

"Go *back*?" Baxter asked. "I wasn't thinking of going *back*. I was just *looking* at it all. Mister, I never saw so much land all in one place in my whole life!"

"I know," the marshal said softly. "I been twenty years out here and the sight of it still gets to me."

Baxter and his wife looked at each other ecstatically. The marshal rubbed his nose and said, "Well, I reckon you folks won't be needin' me no more." He exited unobtrusively.

Steve and Adele gazed out over their land. Then Adele said, "Oh, Steve, Steve! It's all ours! And you won it for us — you did it all by yourself!"

Baxter's mouth tightened. He said very quietly, "No, honey, I didn't do it all alone. I had some help."

"Who, Steve? Who helped you?"

"Someday I'll tell you about it," Baxter said. "But right now — let's go into our house."

Hand in hand they entered the shack. Behind them, the sun was setting in the opaque Los Angeles smog. It was as happy an ending as could be found in the latter half of the twenty-first century.

# THE VICTIM FROM SPACE

Hadwell stared at the planet below. A tremor of excitement ran through him, for it was a beautiful world of green plains and red mountains and restless blue-gray seas. His ship's instruments quickly gathered their information and decided that the planet was eminently suited for human life. Hadwell punched a deceleration orbit and opened his notebook.

He was a writer, the author of *WHITE SHADOWS IN THE ASTEROID BELT*, *THE SAGA OF DEEPEST SPACE*, *WANDERINGS OF AN INTERPLANETARY VAGABOND*, AND *TERIRA — PLANET OF MYSTERY!*

He wrote in his notebook, "A new planet looms below me, inviting and mysterious, a challenge to the imagination. What will I find here, I, the vagabond from beyond the stars? What strange mysteries lie beneath the verdant green cover? Will there be danger? Love? Fulfillment? Will there be a resting place for a weary wanderer?"

Richard Hadwell was a tall, thin, red-headed young man. He had inherited a sizable fortune from his father and had invested it in a CC-Class Space Schooner. In this elderly craft, he had voyaged for the past six years and had written ecstatic books about the places he had seen. But most of the ecstasy had been counterfeit, for alien planets were disappointing places.

Aliens, Hadwell had found, were remarkably stupid and amazingly ugly. Their foods were impossible and their manners deplorable. Nevertheless, Hadwell wrote romances and hoped some day to live one.

The planet below was cityless, tropical, beautiful. His ship was already homing on a small thatch-hut village.



"Perhaps I'll find it here," Hadwell said to himself as the spaceship began braking sharply.

Early that morning, Kataga and his daughter, Mele, crossed the bridge of vines to Ragged Mountain, to gather frag blossoms. Nowhere on Igathi did the frag bloom so lustily as it did on Ragged Mountain. And this was as it should be, for the mountain was sacred to Thangookari, the smiling god.

Later in the day they were joined by Brog, a dull-faced youth of no importance whatsoever, except possibly to himself.

Mele had the feeling that something very important was about to happen. She was a tall, slender girl, and she worked as though in a trance, moving slowly and dreamily, her long black hair tossed by the wind. Familiar objects seemed imbued with unusual clarity and significance. She gazed at the village, a tiny cluster of huts across the river, and with wonder looked behind her at the Pinnacle, where all Igathian marriages were performed, and beyond that, to the delicately tinted sea.

She was the prettiest girl in Igathi; even the old priest admitted it. She longed for a dramatic role in life. But day after day passed monotonously in the village, and here she was, picking frag blossoms under two hot suns. It seemed unfair.

Her father gathered energetically, humming as he worked. He knew that the blossoms would soon be fermenting in the village vat. Lag, the priest, would mumble suitable words over the brew, and a libation would be poured in front of Thangookari's image. When these formalities were concluded, the entire village, dogs included, would go on a splendid drunk.

These thoughts made the work go faster. Also, Kataga had evolved a subtle and dangerous scheme to increase his prestige. It made for pleasant speculation.

Brog straightened up, mopped his face with the end of his loin-cloth, and glanced overhead for signs of rain.

"Hey!" he shouted.

Kataga and Mele looked up.

"There!" Brog screamed. "There, up there!"

High overhead, a silver speck surrounded by red and green flames was descending slowly, growing larger as they watched, and resolving itself into a shiny sphere.

"The prophecy!" Kataga murmured reverently. "At last — after all the centuries of waiting!"

"Let's tell the village!" Mele cried.

"Wait," Brog said. He flushed a fiery red and dug his toe into the ground. "I saw it first, you know."

"Of course you did," Mele said impatiently.

"And *since* I saw it first," Brog continued, "thereby rendering an important service to the village, don't you think — wouldn't it be proper — "

Brog wanted what every Igathian desired, worked and prayed for, and what intelligent men like Kataga cast subtle schemes for. But it was unseemly to call the desired thing by name. Mele and her father understood, however.

"What do you think?" Kataga asked.

"I suppose he *does* deserve something," Mele said.

Brog rubbed his hands together. "Would you, Mele? Would you do it yourself?"

"However," Mele said, "the whole thing is up to the priest."

"Please!" Brog cried. "Lag might not feel I'm ready. Please, Kataga! Do it yourself!"

Kataga studied his daughter's inflexible expression and sighed. "Sorry, Brog. If it was just between us...But Mele is scrupulously orthodox. Let the priest decide."

Brog nodded, completely defeated. Overhead, the shiny sphere dropped lower, toward the level plain near the village. The three Igathians gathered their sacks of frag blossoms and began the trek home.

They reached the bridge of vines which spanned a raging river. Kataga sent Brog first and Mele next. Then he followed, drawing a small knife he had concealed in his loincloth.

As he expected, Mele and Brog didn't look back. They were too busy keeping their balance on the flimsy, swaying structure. When Kataga reached the center of the bridge he ran his fingers beneath the main supporting vine. In a moment he had touched the worn spot he had located days earlier. Quickly he sawed with his knife and felt the fibers part. Another slash or two and the vine would part under a man's weight. But this was enough for now. Well satisfied with himself, Kataga replaced the knife in his loincloth and hurried after Brog and Mele.

\* \* \*

The village came alive at the news of the visitor. Men and women could talk of nothing but the great event, and an impromptu dance began in front of the Shrine of the Instrument. But it stopped when the old priest hobbled out of the Temple of Thangookari.

Lag, the priest, was a tall, emaciated old man. After years of service, his face had grown to resemble the smiling, benevolent countenance of the god he worshipped. On his bald head was the feathered crown of the priestly caste, and he leaned heavily on a sacred black mace.

The people gathered in front of him. Brog stood near the priest, rubbing his hands together hopefully, but afraid to press for his reward.

"My people," Lag said, "the ancient prophecy of the Igathi is now to be fulfilled. A great gleaming sphere has dropped from the heavens, as the old legends predicted. Within the sphere will be a being such as ourselves, and he will be an emissary of Thangookari."

The people nodded, faces rapt.

"The emissary will be a doer of great things. He will perform acts of good such as no man has ever before seen. And when he has completed his work and claimed his rest, he will expect his reward." Lag's voice fell to an impressive whisper.

"This reward is what every Igathian desires, dreams about, prays for. It is the final gift which Thangookari grants to those who serve him and the village well."

The priest turned to Brog.

"You, Brog," he said, "have been the first to witness the coming of the emissary. You have served the village well." The priest raised his arms. "Friends! Do you feel that Brog should receive the reward he craves?"

Most of the people felt he should. But Vassi, a wealthy merchant, stepped forward, frowning.

"It isn't fair," he said. "The rest of us work toward this for years and give expensive gifts to the temple. Brog hasn't done enough to merit even the most basic reward. Besides, he's humbly born."

"You have a point," the priest admitted, and Brog groaned audibly. "*But*," he continued, "the bounty of Thangookari is not only for the highborn. The humblest citizen may aspire to it. If Brog were not suitably rewarded, would not others lose hope?"



The people roared their assent, and Brog's eyes grew wet with thankfulness.

"Kneel, Brog," said the priest, and his face seemed to radiate with kindness and love.

Brog knelt. The villagers held their breath.

Lag lifted his heavy mace and brought it down with all his strength on Brog's skull. It was a good blow, squarely struck. Brog collapsed, squirmed once, and expired. The expression of joy on his face was beautiful to behold.

"How lovely it was," Kataga murmured enviously.

Mele grasped his arm. "Don't worry, Father. Some day you will have your reward."

"I hope so," Kataga said. "But how can I be sure? Look at Rii. A nicer, more pious fellow never lived. That poor old man worked and prayed all his life for a violent death. *Any* kind of a violent death! And what happened? He passed away in his sleep! What kind of a death is that for a man?"

"There are always one or two exceptions."

"I could name a dozen others," Kataga said.

"Try not to worry about it, Father," Mele said. "I know you'll die beautifully, like Brog."

"Yes, yes... But if you think about it, Brog's was such a *simple* ending." His eyes lighted up. "I would like something really big, something painful and complicated and wonderful, like the emissary will have."

Mele looked away. "That is presuming above your station, Father."

"True, true," Kataga said. "Oh well, some day..." He smiled to himself. Some day indeed! An intelligent and courageous man took matters into his own hands and arranged for his own violent death, instead of meekly waiting for the priest to make up his feeble mind. Call it heresy or anything else; something deep within him told Kataga that a man had the right to die as painfully and violently as he pleased — if he could get away with it.

The thought of the half-severed vine filled him with satisfaction. How fortunate that he had never learned to swim!

"Come," Mele said. "Let's welcome the emissary."

They followed the villagers to the level plain where the sphere had landed.



\* \* \*

Richard Hadwell leaned back in his padded pilot's chair and wiped perspiration from his forehead. The last natives had just left his ship, and he could hear them singing and laughing as they returned to their village in the evening twilight. The pilot's compartment smelled of flowers and honey and wine, and throbbing drums seemed to echo still from the gray metal walls.

He smiled reminiscently and took down his notebook. Selecting a pen, he wrote:

Beautiful to behold is Igathi, a place of stately mountains and raging mountain streams, beaches of black sand, verdant vegetation in the jungles, great flowering trees in the forests.

Not bad, Hadwell told himself. He pursed his lips and continued.

The people here are a comely humanoid race, a light tan in coloration, supple to behold. They greeted me with flowers and dancing, and many signs of joy and affection. I had no trouble hypnopeding their language, and soon felt as though this had always been my home. They are a lighthearted, laughter-loving people, gentle and courteous, living serenely in a state of near-nature. What a lesson there is here for Civilized Man!

One's heart goes out to them, and to Thangookari, their benevolent deity. One hopes that Civilized Man, with his genius for destruction and frenetic behavior, does not come here, to turn these folk from their path of joyous moderation.

Hadwell selected a pen with a finer point, and wrote, "There is a girl named Mele who — " He crossed out the line, and wrote, "A black-haired girl named Mele, beautiful beyond compare, came close to me and gazed deep into my eyes — " He crossed that out, too.

Frowning deeply, he tried several possible lines:

"Her limpid brown eyes gave promise of joys beyond — "

"Her small red mouth quivered ever so slightly when I — "

"Though her small hand rested on my arm for but a moment—"

He crumpled the page. Five months of enforced celibacy in space was having its effect, he decided. He had better return to the main issue and leave Mele for later.

He wrote:

There are many ways in which a sympathetic observer could help these people. But the temptation is strong to do *absolutely nothing*, for fear of disrupting their culture.

Closing his notebook, Hadwell looked out of a port at the distant village, now lighted by torches. Then he opened the notebook again.

However their culture appears to be strong and flexible. Certain kinds of aid can do nothing but profit them. And these I will freely give.

He closed the notebook with a snap and put away his pens.

The following day, Hadwell began his good works. He found many Igathians suffering from mosquito-transmitted diseases. By judicious selection of antibiotics, he was able to arrest all except the most advanced cases. Then he directed work teams to drain the pools of stagnant water where the mosquitoes bred.

As he went on his healing rounds, Mele accompanied him. The beautiful Igathian girl quickly learned the rudiments of nursing, and Hadwell found her assistance invaluable.

Soon, all significant disease was cleared up in the village. Hadwell then began to spend his days in a sunny grove not far from Igathi, where he rested and worked on his book.

A town meeting was called at once by Lag, to discuss the import of this.

"Friends," said the old priest, "our friend, Hadwell, has done wonderful things for the village. He has cured our sick, so they too may live to partake of Thangookari's gift. Now Hadwell is tired and rests in the sun. Now Hadwell expects the reward he came here for."

"It is fitting," said the merchant, Vassi, "that the emissary receive his reward. I suggest that the priest take his mace and go forth — "

"Why so stingy?" asked Juele, a priest in training. "Is Thangookari's messenger deserving of no finer death? Hadwell deserves more than the mace! Much more!"

"You are right," Vassi admitted slowly. "In that case. I suggest that we drive poisonous legenberry quills under his fingernails."

"Maybe that's good enough for a merchant," said Tgara, the stonecutter, "but not for Hadwell. He deserves a chief's death! I move that we tie him down and kindle a small fire beneath his toes, gradually —"

"Wait," said Lag. "The emissary has earned the Death of an Adept. Therefore, let him be taken, tenderly and firmly, to the nearest giant anthill, and there buried to his neck."

There were shouts of approval. Tgara said, "And as long as he screams, ancient ceremonial drums will pound."

"And there will be dances for him," said Vassi.

"And a glorious drunk," said Kataga.

Everyone agreed that it was a beautiful death.

So the final details were decided, and a time was set. The village throbbed with religious ecstasy. All the huts were decorated with flowers, except the Shrine of the Instrument, which had to remain bare. The women laughed and sang as they prepared for the death feast. Only Mele, for some unaccountable reason, was forlorn. With lowered head she walked through the village and climbed slowly to the hills beyond, to Hadwell.

Hadwell was stripped to the waist and basking under the two suns. "Hi, Mele," he said. "I heard the drums. Is something up?"

"There will be a celebration," Mele said, sitting down beside him.

"That's nice. Okay if I attend?"

Mele stared at him, nodding slowly. Her heart melted at the sight of such courage. The emissary was showing a true observance of the ancient punctilio, by which a man pretended that his own death feast was something that really didn't concern him. Men in this day and age were not able to maintain the necessary aplomb. But of course, an emissary of Thangookari would follow the rules better than anyone.

"How soon does it start?"

"In an hour," Mele said. Formerly she had been straight-forward and free with him. Now her heart was heavy, oppressed. She didn't know why. Shyly she glanced at his bright alien garments, his red hair.

"Oughta be nice," Hadwell said. "Yessir, it oughta be nice..." His voice trailed away. From under lowered eyelids he looked at

the comely Igathian girl, observed the pure line of neck and shoulder, her straight dark hair, and sensed rather than smelt her faint sachet. Nervously he plucked a blade of grass.

"Mele," he said. "I..."

The words died on his lips. Suddenly, startlingly, she was in his arms.

"Oh, Mele!"

"Hadwell!" she cried, and strained close to him. Abruptly she pulled free, looking at him with worried eyes.

"What's the matter, honey?" Hadwell asked.

"Hadwell, is there anything more you could do for the village? Anything? My people would appreciate it so."

"Sure there is," Hadwell said. "But I thought I'd rest up, first, take it easy."

"No! Please!" she begged. "Those irrigation ditches you spoke of. Could you start them now?"

"If you want me to," Hadwell said. "But — "

"Oh darling!" She sprang to her feet. Hadwell reached for her, but she stepped back.

"There is no time! I must hurry back and tell the village!"

She ran from him. And Hadwell was left to ponder the strange ways of aliens, and particularly of alien women.

Mele ran back to the village and found the priest in the temple, praying for wisdom and guidance. Quickly she told him about the emissary's new plans for aiding the village.

The old priest nodded slowly. "Then the ceremony shall be deferred. But tell me, daughter. Why are *you* involved in this?"

Mele blushed and could not answer.

The old priest smiled. But then his face became stern. "I understand. But listen to me, girl. Do not allow love to sway you from the proper worship of Thangookari and from the observances of the ancient ways of our village."

"Of course not!" Mele said. "I simply felt that an Adept's death was not good enough for Hadwell. He deserves more! He deserves — the Ultimate!"

"No man has been worthy of the Ultimate for six hundred years," Lag said. "Not since the hero and demigod, V'ktat, saved the Igathian race from the dread Huelva Beasts."



"But Hadwell has the stuff of heroes in him," Mele cried. "Give him time, let him strive! He will prove worthy!"

"Perhaps so," the priest mused. "It would be a great thing for the village... But consider, Mele! It might take a lifetime for Hadwell to prove himself."

"Wouldn't it be worth waiting for?" she asked.

The old priest fingered his mace, and his forehead wrinkled in thought. "You may be right," he said slowly, "yes, you may be right." Suddenly he straightened and glanced sharply at her.

"But tell me the truth, Mele. Are you really trying to preserve him for the Ultimate Death? Or do you merely want to keep him for yourself?"

"He must have the death he deserves," Mele said serenely. But she was unable to meet the priest's eye.

"I wonder," the old man said. "I wonder what lies in your heart. I think you tread dangerously close to heresy, Mele. You, who were among the most orthodox."

Mele was about to answer when the merchant, Vassi, rushed into the temple.

"Come quickly!" he cried. "It is the farmer, Iglai! *He has evaded the taboo!*"

The fat, jolly farmer had died a terrible death. He had been walking his usual route from his hut to the village center, past an old thorn tree. Without warning, the tree had toppled on him. Thorns had impaled him through and through. Eyewitnesses said the farmer had writhed and moaned for over an hour before expiring.

But he had died with a smile on his face.

The priest looked at the crowd surrounding Iglai's body. Several of the villagers were hiding grins behind their hands. Lag walked over to the thorn tree and examined it. There were faint marks of a saw blade, which had been roughened over and concealed with clay. The priest turned to the crowd.

"Was Iglai near this tree often?" he asked.

"He sure was," another farmer said. "Always ate his lunch under this tree."

The crowd was grinning openly now, proud of Iglai's achievement. Remarks began to fly back and forth.

"I *wondered* why he always ate here."

"Never wanted company. Said he liked to eat alone."

"Hah!"

"He must have been sawing all the time."

"For months, probably. That's tough wood."

"Very clever of Iglai."

"I'll say! He was only a farmer, and no one would call him religious. But he got himself a damned fine death."

"Listen, good people!" cried Lag. "Iglai did a sacrilegious thing! Only a priest can grant violent death!"

"What the priests don't see can't hurt them," someone muttered.

"So it was sacrilege," another man said. "Iglai got himself a beautiful death. *That's* the important thing."

The old priest turned sadly away. There was nothing he could do. If he had caught Iglai in time, he would have applied strict sanctions. Iglai would never have dared arrange another death and would probably have died quietly and forlornly in bed, at a ripe old age. But now it was too late. The farmer had achieved his death and on the wings of it had already gone to Rookechangi. Asking the god to punish Iglai in the afterlife was useless, for the farmer was right there on the spot to plead his own case.

Lag asked, "Didn't any of you see him sawing that tree?"

If anyone had, he wouldn't admit it. They stuck together, Lag knew. In spite of the religious training he had instilled in them from earliest childhood, they persisted in trying to outwit the priests.

When would they realize that an unauthorized death could never be so satisfying as a death one worked for, deserved, and had performed with all ceremonial observations?

He sighed. Life was sometimes a burden.

A week later, Hadwell wrote in his diary:

There has never been a race like these Igathians. I have lived among them now, eaten and drunk with them, and observed their ceremonies. I know and understand them. And the truth about them is startling, to say the least.

The fact is, *the Igathians do not know the meaning of war!* Consider that, Civilized Man! Never in all their recorded and oral history have they had one. They simply cannot conceive of it. I give the following illustration.

I tried to explain war to Kataga, father of the incomparable Mele. The man scratched his head, and asked, "You say that many kill many? That is war?"

"That's a part of it," I said. "Thousands, killing thousands."

"In that case," Kataga said, "many are dead at the same time, in the same way?"

"Correct," said I.

He pondered this for a long time, then turned to me and said, "It is not good for many to die at the same time in the same way. Not satisfactory. Every man should die his own individual death."

Consider, Civilized Man, the incredible naïveté of that reply. And yet, think of the considerable truth which resides beneath the naïveté; a truth which all might do well to learn.

Moreover, these people do not engage in quarrels among themselves, have no blood feuds, no crimes of passion, no murder.

The conclusion I come to is: violent death is *unknown* among these people — except, of course, for accidents.

It is a shame that accidents occur so often here and are so often fatal. But this I ascribe to the wildness of the surroundings and to the lighthearted, devil-may-care nature of the people. And, as a matter of fact, even accidents do not go unnoticed and unchecked. The priest, with whom I have formed a considerable friendship, deploras the high accident rate, and is constantly proclaiming against it. Always he urges the people to take more caution.

He is a good man.

And now I write the final, most wonderful news of all. (Hadwell smiled sheepishly, hesitated for a moment, then returned to his notebook.)

Mele has consented to become my wife! As soon as I complete this, the ceremony begins. Already the festivities have started, the feast prepared. I consider myself the most fortunate of men, for Mele is a beautiful woman. And a most unusual woman, as well.

She has great social consciousness. A little *too* much, perhaps. She has been urging me constantly to do work for the village. And I have done much. I have completed an irrigation system for them, introduced several fast-growing crops, started the profession of metal-working, and other things too numerous to mention. And she wants me to do more, much more.



But here I have put my foot down. I have a right to rest. I want a long, langorous honeymoon, and then a year or so of basking in the sun and finishing my book.

Mele finds this difficult to understand. She keeps on trying to tell me that I *must* continue working. And she speaks of some ceremony involving the "Ultimate" (if my translation is correct).

But I have done enough work. I refused to do more, for a year or two, at least.

This "Ultimate" ceremony is to take place directly after our wedding. I suppose it will be some high honor or other that these simple people wish to bestow on me. I have signified my willingness to accept it.

It should be interesting.

For the wedding the entire village, led by the old priest, marched to the Pinnacle, where all Igathian marriages were performed. The men wore ceremonial feathers, and the women were decked in shell jewelry and iridescent stones. Four husky villagers in the middle of the procession bore a strange-looking apparatus. Hadwell caught only a glimpse of it, but he knew it had been taken, with solemn ceremony, from a plain black-thatched hut which seemed to be a shrine of some sort.

In single file they proceeded over the shaky bridge of vines. Kataga, bringing up the rear, grinned to himself as he secretively slashed again at the worn spot.

The Pinnacle was a narrow spur of black rock thrust out over the sea. Hadwell and Mele stood on the end of it, faced by the priest. The people fell silent as Lag raised his arms.

"Oh great Thangookari!" the priest cried. "Cherish this man Hadwell, your emissary, who has come to us from out of the sky in a shining vehicle, and who has done service for the Igathi such as no man has ever done. And cherish your daughter, Mele. Teach her to love the memory of her husband — *and to remain strong in her tribal beliefs.*"

The priest stared hard at Mele as he said that. And Mele, her head held high, gave him look for look.

"I now pronounce you," said the priest, "man and wife!"

Hadwell clasped his wife in his arms and kissed her. The people cheered. Kataga grinned his sly grin.



"And now," said the priest in his warmest voice, "I have good news for you, Hadwell. Great news!"

"Oh?" Hadwell said, reluctantly releasing his bride.

"We have judged you," said Lag, "and we have found you worthy — of the Ultimate!"

"Why, thanks," Hadwell said.

The priest motioned. Four men came up lugging the strange apparatus which Hadwell had glimpsed earlier. Now he saw that it was a platform the size of a large bed, made of some ancient-looking black wood. Lashed to the frame were various barbs, hooks, sharpened shells and needle-shaped thorns. There were cups, which contained no liquid as yet. And there were other things, strange in shape, whose purpose Hadwell could not guess.

"Not for six hundred years," said Lag, "has the Instrument been removed from the Shrine of the Instrument. Not since the days of V'ktat, the hero-god who single-handedly saved the Igathian people from destruction. But it has been removed for you, Hadwell!"

"Really, I'm not worthy," Hadwell said.

A murmur rose from the crowd at such modesty.

"Believe me," Lag said earnestly, "you *are* worthy. Do you accept the Ultimate, Hadwell?"

Hadwell looked at Mele. He could not read the expression on her beautiful face. He looked at the priest. Lag's face was impassive. The crowd was deathly still. Hadwell looked at the Instrument. He didn't like its appearance. A doubt began to creep into his mind.

Had he misjudged these people? That Instrument must have been used for torture at some ancient time. Those barbs and hooks...But what were the other things for? Thinking hard, Hadwell conceived some of their possible usages and shuddered. The crowd was closely packed in front of him. Behind him was the narrow point of rock and a sheer thousand-foot drop below it. Hadwell looked again at Mele.

The love and devotion in her face was unmistakable.

Glancing at the villagers, he saw their concern for him. What was he worried about? They would never do anything to harm him, not after all he had done for the village.

The Instrument undoubtedly had some symbolic use.

"I accept the Ultimate," Hadwell said to the priest.

The villagers shouted, a deep-throated roar that echoed from the mountains. They formed closely around him, smiling, shaking his hands.

"The ceremony will take place at once," said the priest. "In the village, in front of the statue of Thangookari."

Immediately they started back, the priest leading. Hadwell and his bride were in the center now. Mele still had not spoken since the ceremony.

Silently they crossed the swaying bridge of vines. Once across, the villagers pressed more closely around Hadwell than before, giving him a slightly claustrophobic feeling. If he had not been convinced of their essential goodness, he told himself, he might have felt apprehensive.

Ahead lay the village and the altar of Thangookari. The priest hurried toward it.

Suddenly there was a shriek. Everyone turned and rushed back to the bridge.

At the brink of the river, Hadwell saw what had happened. Kataga, Mele's father, had brought up the rear of the procession. As he reached the midpoint, the central supporting vine had inexplicably snapped. Kataga had managed to clutch a secondary vine, but only for a moment. As the villagers watched, his hold weakened, released, and he dropped into the river.

Hadwell watched, frozen with shock. With dreamlike clarity he saw it all: Kataga falling, a smile of magnificent courage on his face, the raging white water, the jagged rocks below.

It was a certain, terrible death.

"Can he swim?" Hadwell asked Mele.

"No," the girl said. "He refused to learn...Oh, Father! How could you!"

The raging white water frightened Hadwell more than anything he had ever seen, more than the emptiness of space. But the father of his wife was in danger. A man had to act.

He plunged headlong into the icy water.

Kataga was almost unconscious when Hadwell reached him, which was fortunate, for the Igathian did not struggle when Hadwell seized him by the hair and started to swim vigorously for the nearest shore. But he couldn't make it. Currents swept the men along, pulling them under and throwing them to the surface again. By a

strenuous effort, Hadwell was able to avoid the first rocks. But more loomed ahead.

The villagers ran along the bank, shouting at him.

With his strength ebbing rapidly, Hadwell fought again for the shore. A submerged rock scraped his side and his grip on Kataga's hair began to weaken. The Igathian was starting to recover and struggle.

"Don't give up, old man," Hadwell gasped. The bank sped past. Hadwell came within ten feet of it, then the current began to carry him out again.

With his last surge of strength, he managed to grab an overhead branch and to hold on while the current wrenched and tore at his body. Moments later, guided by the priest, the villagers pulled the two men in to the safety of the shore.

They were carried to the village. When Hadwell was able to breathe normally again, he turned and grinned feebly at Kataga.

"Close call, old man," he said.

"Meddler!" Kataga said. He spat at Hadwell and stalked off.

Hadwell stared after him scratching his head. "Must have affected his brain," he said. "Well, shall we get on with the Ultimate?"

The villagers drew close to him, their faces menacing.

"Hah! The Ultimate he wants!"

"A man like that."

"After dragging poor Kataga out of the river, he has the nerve..."

"His own father-in-law and he saves his life!"

"A man like that," Vassi, the merchant, summed up, "damned well doesn't even deserve to die!"

Hadwell wondered if they had all gone temporarily insane. He stood up, a bit shakily, and appealed to the priest.

"What is all this?" Hadwell asked.

Lag, with mournful eyes and pale, set lips, stared at him and did not answer.

"Can't I have the Ultimate ceremony?" Hadwell asked, a plaintive note in his voice.

"You *do* deserve it," the priest said. "If any man has ever deserved the Ultimate, you do, Hadwell. I feel you should have it, as a matter of abstract justice. But there is more involved here than abstract justice. There are principles of mercy and human pity which



are dear to Thangookari. By these principles, Hadwell, you did a terrible and inhuman thing when you rescued poor Kataga from the river. I am afraid the action is unforgivable."

Hadwell didn't know what to say. Apparently there was some taboo against rescuing men who had fallen into the river. But how could they expect him to know about it? How could they let this one little thing outweigh all he had done for them?

"Isn't there *some* ceremony you can give me?" he begged. "I like you people, I want to live here. Surely there's something you can do."

The old priest's eyes misted with compassion. He gripped his mace, started to lift it.

He was stopped by an ominous roar from the crowd.

"There is nothing I can do," he said. "Leave us, false emissary. Leave us, oh Hadwell — who does not deserve to die!"

"All right!" Hadwell shouted, his temper suddenly snapping. "To hell with you bunch of dirty savages. I wouldn't stay here if you begged me. I'm going. Are you with me, Mele?"

The girl blinked convulsively, looked at Hadwell, then at the priest. There was a long moment of silence. Then the priest murmured, "Remember your father, Mele. Remember the beliefs of your people."

Mele's proud little chin came up. "I know where my duty lies," she said. "Let's go, Richard dear."

"Right," said Hadwell. He stalked off to his spaceship, followed by Mele.

In despair, the old priest watched. He cried, "Mele!" once, in a heartbroken voice. But Mele did not turn back. He saw her enter the ship, and the port slide shut.

Within minutes, red and blue flames bathed the silver sphere. The sphere lifted, gained speed, dwindled to a speck, and vanished.

Tears rolled down the old priest's cheeks as he watched it go.

Hours later, Hadwell said, "Darling, I'm taking you to Earth, the planet I come from. You'll like it there."

"I know I will," Mele murmured, staring out of a porthole at the brilliant spear points of the stars.

Somewhere among them was her home, lost to her forever. She was homesick already. But there had been no other choice. Not for her. A woman goes with the man she loves. And a woman who loves truly and well never loses faith in her man.



Mele hadn't lost faith in Hadwell.

She fingered a tiny sheathed dagger concealed in her clothing. The dagger was tipped with a peculiarly painful and slow-acting poison. It was a family heirloom to be used when there was no priest around, and only on those one loved most dearly.

"I'm through wasting my time," Hadwell said. "With your help I'm going to do great things. You'll be proud of me, sweetheart."

Mele knew he meant it. Some day, she thought, Hadwell would atone for the sin against her father. He would do it perhaps next year. And then she would give him the most precious thing a woman can give to a man.

A painful death.

# SHALL WE HAVE A LITTLE TALK?

## 1.

The landing was a piece of cake despite gravitational vagaries produced by two suns and six moons. Low-level cloud cover could have given him some trouble if Jackson had been coming in visually. But he considered that to be kid stuff. It was better and safer to plug in the computer and lean back and enjoy the ride.

The cloud cover broke up at two thousand feet. Jackson was able to confirm his earlier sighting: there was a city down there, just as sure as sure.

He was in one of the world's loneliest jobs; but his line of work, paradoxically enough, required an extremely gregarious man. Because of this built-in contradiction, Jackson was in the habit of talking to himself. Most of the men in his line of work did. Jackson would talk to anyone, human or alien, no matter what their size or shape or color.

It was what he was paid to do, and what he had to do anyhow. He talked when he was alone on the long interstellar runs, and he talked even more when he was with someone or something that would talk back. He figured he was lucky to be paid for his compulsions.

"And not just paid, either," he reminded himself. "*Well* paid, and with a bonus arrangement on top of that. And furthermore, this feels like my lucky planet. I feel like I could get rich on this one — unless they kill me down there, of course."

The lonely flights between the planets and the imminence of death were the only disadvantages of this job; but if the work weren't hazardous and difficult, the pay wouldn't be so good.

Would they kill him? You could never tell. Alien life forms were unpredictable — just like humans, only more so.

"But I don't think they'll kill me," Jackson said. "I just feel downright lucky today."

This simple philosophy had sustained him for years, across the endless lonely miles of space, and in and out of ten, twelve, twenty planets. He saw no reason to change his outlook now.

The ship landed. Jackson switched the status controls to standby.

He checked the analyzer for oxygen and trace-element content in the atmosphere, and took a quick survey of the local microorganisms. The place was viable. He leaned back in his chair and waited. It didn't take long, of course. They — the locals, indigenes, autochthons, whatever you wanted to call them — came out of their city to look at the spaceship. And Jackson looked through the port at them.

"Well now," he said. "Seems like the alien life forms in this neck of the woods are honest-to-Joe humanoids. That means a five-thousand-dollar bonus for old Uncle Jackson."

The inhabitants of the city were bipedal monocephaloids. They had the appropriate number of fingers, noses, eyes, ears, and mouths. Their skin was a flesh-colored beige, their lips were a faded red, their hair was black, brown, or red.

"Shucks, they're just like home folks!" Jackson said. "Hell, I ought to get an extra bonus for that. Humanoidissimus, eh?"

The aliens wore clothes. Some of them carried elaborately carved lengths of wood like swagger sticks. The women decorated themselves with carved and enameled ornaments. At a flying guess, Jackson ranked them about equivalent to Late Bronze Age of Earth.

They talked and gestured among themselves. Their language was, of course, incomprehensible to Jackson; but that didn't matter. The important thing was that they *had* a language and that their speech sounds could be produced by his vocal apparatus.

"Not like on that heavy planet last year," Jackson said. "Those supersonic sons of bitches! I had to wear special earphones and mike, and it was a hundred and ten in the shade."

The aliens were waiting for him, and Jackson knew it. That first moment of actual contact — it always was a nervous business.

That's when they were most apt to let you have it.

Reluctantly he moved to the hatch, undogged it, rubbed his eyes, and cleared his throat. He managed to produce a smile. He told himself, "Don't get sweaty; 'member, you're just a little old interstellar wanderer — kind of galactic vagabond — to extend the hand of friendship and all that jazz. You've just dropped in for a little talk, nothing more. Keep on believing that, sweetie, and the extraterrestrial Johns will believe right along with you. Remember Jackson's Law: all intelligent life forms share the divine faculty of gullibility; which means that the triple-tongued Thung of Orangus V can be conned out of his skin just as Joe Doakes of St. Paul."

And so, wearing a brave, artificial little smile, Jackson swung the port open and stepped out to have a little talk.

"Well now, how y'all?" Jackson asked at once, just to hear the sound of his own voice.

The nearest aliens shrank away from him. Nearly all of them were frowning. Several of the younger ones carried bronze knives in a forearm scabbard. These were clumsy weapons, but as effective as anything ever invented. The aliens started to draw.

"Now take it easy," Jackson said, keeping his voice light and unalarmed.

They drew their knives and began to edge forward. Jackson stood his ground, waiting, ready to bolt through the hatch like a jet-propelled jackrabbit, hoping he could make it.

Then a third man (might as well call them "men," Jackson decided) stepped in front of the belligerent two. This one was older. He spoke rapidly. He gestured. The two with the knives looked.

"That's right," Jackson said encouragingly. "Take a good look. Heap big spaceship. Plenty strong medicine. Vehicle of great power, fabricated by a real advanced technology. Sort of makes you stop and think, doesn't it?"

It did.

The aliens had stopped; and if not thinking, they were at least doing a great deal of talking. They pointed at the ship, then back at their city.

"You're getting the idea," Jackson told them. "Power speaks a universal language, eh, cousins?"

He had been witness to many of these scenes on many different planets. He could nearly write their dialogue for them. It usually went like this:



Intruder lands in outlandish space vehicle, thereby eliciting (1) curiosity, (2) fear and (3) hostility. After some minutes of awed contemplation, one autochthon usually says to his friend: "Hey, that damned metal thing packs one hell of a lot of power."

"You're right, Herbie," his friend Fred, the second autochthon, replies.

"You bet I'm right," Herbie says. "And hell, with that much power and technology and stuff, this son-of-a-gun could like *enslave* us. I mean he really could."

"You've hit it, Herbie, that's just exactly what could happen."

"So what I say," Herbie continues, "I say, let's not take any risks. I mean *sure*, he *looks* friendly enough, but he's just got too damned much *power*, and that's not right. And right now is the best chance we'll ever get to take him on account of he's just standing there waiting for like an ovation or something. So let's put this bastard out of his misery, and then we can talk the whole thing over and see how it stacks up situationwise."

"By Jesus, I'm with you!" cries Fred. Others signify their assent.

"Good for you, lads," cries Herbie. "Let's wade in and take this alien joker *now*!"

So they start to make their move; but suddenly, at the last second, Old Doc, (the third autochthon) intervenes, saying, "Hold it a minute, boys, we can't do it like that. For one thing, we got laws around here —"

"To hell with that," says Fred (a born troublemaker and somewhat simple to boot).

"— and aside from the laws, it would be just too damned dangerous for *us*."

"Me 'n' Fred here ain't scared," says valiant Herb. "Maybe you better go take in a movie or something, Doc. Us guys'll handle this."

"I was not referring to a short-range personal danger," Old Doc says scornfully. "What I fear is the destruction of our city, the slaughter of our loved ones, and the annihilation of our culture."

Herb and Fred stop. "What you talking about, Doc? He's just one stinking alien; you push a knife in his guts, he'll bleed like anyone else."

"Fools! *Schlemiels*!" thunders wise Old Doc. "Of course, you can kill him! But what happens after that?"

"Huh?" says Fred, squinting his china-blue pop eyes.

"Idiots! *Cochons!* You think this is the only spaceship these aliens got? You think they don't even know whereabouts this guy has gone? Man, you gotta assume they got *plenty* more ships where this one came from, and you gotta also assume that they'll be damned mad if this ship doesn't show up when it's supposed to, and you gotta assume that when these aliens learn the score, they're gonna be damned sore and buzz back here and stomp on everything and everybody."

"How come I gotta assume that?" asks feeble-witted Fred.

"Cause it's what *you'd* do in a deal like that, right?"

"I guess maybe I would at that," says Fred with a sheepish grin. "Yeah, I just might do that little thing. But look, maybe *they* wouldn't."

"Maybe, maybe," mimics wise Old Doc. "Well, baby, we can't risk the whole ball game on a goddamned *maybe*. We can't afford to kill this alien joker on the chance that *maybe* his people wouldn't do what any reasonable-minded guy would do, which is, namely, to blow us all to hell."

"Well, I suppose we maybe can't," Herbie says. "but Doc, what *can* we do?"

"Just wait and see what he wants."

## 2.

A scene very much like that, according to reliable reconstruction, had been enacted at least thirty or forty times. It usually resulted in a policy of wait and see. Occasionally, the contactor from Earth was killed before wise counsel could prevail; but Jackson was paid to take risks like that.

Whenever the contactor was killed, retribution followed with swift and terrible inevitability. Also with regret, of course, because Earth was an extremely civilized place and accustomed to living within the law. No civilized, law-abiding race likes to commit genocide. In fact, the folks on Earth consider genocide a very unpleasant matter, and they don't like to read about it or anything like it in their morning papers. Envoys must be protected, of course, and murder must be punished; everybody knows that. But it still doesn't feel nice to read about a genocide over your morning coffee. News like that can spoil a man's entire day. Three or four genocides and a man just might get angry enough to switch his vote.

Fortunately, there was never much occasion for that sort of mess. Aliens usually caught on pretty fast. Despite the language barrier, aliens learned that you simply *don't* kill Earthmen.

And then, later, bit by bit, they learned all the rest.

The hotheads had sheathed their knives. Everybody was smiling except Jackson, who was grinning like a hyena. The aliens were making graceful arm and leg motions, probably of welcome.

"Well, that's real nice," Jackson said, making a few graceful gestures of his own. "Makes me feel real to-home. And now, suppose you take me to your leader, show me the town, and all that jazz. Then I'll set myself down and figure out that lingo of yours, and we'll have a little talk. And after that, everything will proceed splendidly. *En avant!*"

So saying, Jackson stepped out at a brisk pace in the direction of the city. After a brief hesitation, his newfound friends fell into step behind him.

Everything was moving according to plan.

Jackson, like all the other contactors, was a polyglot of singular capabilities. As basic equipment, he had an eidetic memory and an extremely discriminating ear. More important, he possessed a startling aptitude for language and an uncanny intuition for meaning. When Jackson came up against an incomprehensible tongue, he picked out, quickly and unerringly, the significant units, the fundamental building blocks of language. Quite without effort he sorted vocalizations into cognitive, volitional, and emotional aspects of speech. Grammatical elements presented themselves at once to his practiced ear. Prefixes and suffixes were no trouble; word sequence, pitch, and reduplication were no sweat. He didn't know much about the science of linguistics, but he didn't need to know. Jackson was a natural. Linguistics had been developed to describe and explain things which he knew intuitively.

He had not yet encountered the language which he could not learn. He never really expected to find one. As he often told his friends in the Forked Tongue Club in New York, "Waal, shukins, there just really ain't nuthin' *tough* about them alien tongues. Leastwise, not the ones I've run across. I mean that sincerely. I mean to tell you, boys, that the man who can express himself in Sioux or Khmer ain't going to encounter too much trouble out there amongst the stars."



And so it had been, to date...

Once in the city, there were many tedious ceremonies which Jackson had to endure. They stretched on for three days — about par for the course; it wasn't every day that a traveler from space came in for a visit. So naturally enough every mayor, governor, president, and alderman, *and* their wives, wanted to shake his hand. It was all very understandable, but Jackson resented the waste of his time. He had work to do, some of it not very pleasant, and the sooner he got started, the quicker it would be over.

On the fourth day he was able to reduce the official nonsense to a minimum. That was the day on which he began in earnest to learn the local language.

A language, as any linguist will tell you, is undoubtedly the most beautiful creation one is ever likely to encounter. But with that beauty goes a certain element of danger.

Language might aptly be compared to the sparkling, ever-changing face of the sea. Like the sea, you never know what reefs may be concealed in its pellucid depths. The brightest water hides the most treacherous shoals.

Jackson, well prepared for trouble, encountered none at first. The main language (Hon) of this planet (Na) was spoken by the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants (En-a-To-Na — literally, men of Na, or Naians, as Jackson preferred to think of them). Hon seemed quite a straightforward affair. It used one term for one concept, and allowed no fusions, juxtapositions, or agglutinations. Concepts were built up by sequences of simple words ("spaceship" was *ho-pa-aie-an* — boat-flying-outer-sky). Thus, Hon was very much like Chinese and Annamite on Earth. Pitch differences were employed not only intentionally to differentiate between homonyms, but also positionally, to denote gradations of "perceived realism," bodily discomfort, and three classes of pleasurable expectation. All of which was mildly interesting but of no particular difficulty to a competent linguist.

To be sure, a language like Hon was rather a bore because of the long word-lists one had to memorize. But pitch and position could be fun, as well as being absolutely essential if one wanted to make any sense out of the sentence units. So, taken all in all, Jackson



was not dissatisfied, and he absorbed the language as quickly as it could be given to him.

It was a proud day for Jackson, about a week later, when he could say to his tutor: "A very nice and pleasant good morning to you, most estimable and honored tutor, and how is your blessed health upon this glorious day?"

"Felicitations most *ird wunk!*" the tutor replied with a smile of deep warmth. "Your accent, dear pupil, is superb! Positively *gor nak*, in fact, and your grasp of my dear mother tongue is little short of *ur nak tai*."

Jackson glowed all over from the gentle old tutor's compliments. He felt quite pleased with himself. Of course, he hadn't recognized several words; *ird wunk* and *ur nak tai* sounded faintly familiar, but *gor nak* was completely unknown. Still, lapses were expected of a beginner in any language. He did know enough to understand the Naians and to make himself understood by them. And that was what his job required.

He returned to his spaceship that afternoon. The hatch had been standing open during his entire stay on Na but he found that not a single article had been stolen. He shook his head ruefully at this, but refused to let it upset him. He loaded his pockets with a variety of objects and sauntered back to the city. He was ready to perform the final and most important part of his job.

### 3.

In the heart of the business district, at the intersection of Um and Alhretto, he found what he was looking for: a real-estate office. He entered and was taken to the office of Mr. Erum, a junior partner of the firm.

"Well, well, well, well!" Erum said, shaking hands heartily. "This is a real honor, sir, a very considerable and genuine privilege. Are you thinking of acquiring a piece of property?"

"That was my intention," Jackson said. "Unless, of course, you have discriminatory laws that forbid your selling to a foreigner."

"No difficulty there," Erum said. "In fact, it'll be a veritable *orai* of a pleasure to have a man from your distant and glorious civilization in our midst."

Jackson restrained a snicker. "The only other difficulty I can imagine is the question of legal tender. I don't have any of your

currency, of course; but I have certain quantities of gold, platinum, diamonds, and other objects which are considered valuable on Earth."

"They are considered valuable here, too," Erum said. "Quantities, did you say? My dear sir, we will have no difficulties; not even a *blaggle* shall *mit* or *ows*, as the poet said."

"Quite so," Jackson replied. Erum was using some words he didn't know, but that didn't matter. The main drift was clear enough. "Now, suppose we begin with a nice industrial site. After all, I'll have to do something with my time. And after that, we can pick out a house."

"Most decidedly *prominex*," Erum said gaily. "Suppose I just *raish* through my listings here... Yes, what do you say to a *bromicaine* factory? It's in a first-class condition and could easily be converted to *vor* manufacture or used as it is."

"Is there any real market for *bromicaine*?" Jackson asked.

"Well, bless my *meurgentan*, of course there is! *Bromicaine* is indispensable, though its sales are seasonable. You see, refined *bromicaine*, or *arisi*, is used by the *protigash* devolvers, who of course, harvest by the *soltice* season, except in those branches of the industry that have switched over to *ticothene revature*. Those from a steadily —"

"Fine, fine," Jackson said. He didn't care what a *bromicaine* was and never expected to see one. As long as it was a gainful employment of some kind, it filled his specifications.

"I'll buy it," he said.

"You won't regret it," Erum told him. "A good *bromicaine* factory is a *garveldis bagatis*, and *menifoy* as well."

"Sure," Jackson said, wishing that he had a more extensive Hon vocabulary. "How much?"

"Well, sir, the price is no difficulty. But first you'll have to fill out the *ollanbrit* form. It is just a few *sken* questions which *ny naga* of everyone."

Erum handed Jackson the form. The first question read: "Have you, now or at any past time, *elikated mushkies forsically*? State date of all occurrences. If no occurrences, state the reason for *transgrishal reduct* as found."

Jackson read no further. "What does it mean," he asked Erum, "to *elikated mushkies forsically*?"

"Mean?" Erum smiled uncertainly. "Why, it means exactly what it says. Or so I would imagine."

"I meant," Jackson said, "that I do not understand the words. Could you explain them to me?"

"Nothing simpler," Erum replied. "To *elikate mushkies* is almost the same as a *bifur probishkai*."

"I beg your pardon?" Jackson said.

"It means — well, to *elikate* is really rather simple, though perhaps not in the eyes of the law. *Scorbadising* is a form of *elikation*, and so is *manrub garing*. Some say that when we breathe *drosically* in the evening *subsis*, we are actually *elikating*. Personally, I consider that a bit fanciful."

"Let's try *mushkies*," Jackson suggested.

"By all means, let's!" Erum replied, with a coarse boom of laughter. "If only one could — eh!" He dug Jackson in the ribs with a sly elbow.

"Hm, yes," Jackson replied coldly. "Perhaps you could tell me what, exactly, a *mushkie* is?"

"Of course. As it happens, there is no such thing," Erum replied. "Not in the singular, at any rate. One *mushkie* would be a logical fallacy, don't you see?"

"I'll take your word for it. What *are mushkies*?"

"Well, primarily, they're the object of *elikation*. Secondarily, they are half-sized wooden sandals which are used to stimulate erotic fantasies among the Kutor religionists."

"Now we're getting some place!" Jackson cried.

"Only if your tastes happen to run that way," Erum answered with discernible coldness.

"I meant in terms of understanding the question on the form—"

"Of course, excuse me," Erum said. "But you see, the question asks if you have ever *elikated mushkies forsically*. And that makes all the difference."

"Does it really?"

"Of course! The modification changes the entire meaning."

"I was afraid that it would," Jackson said. "I don't suppose you could explain what *forsically* means?"

"I certainly can!" Erum said. "Our conversation now could — with a slight assist from the *deme* imagination — be termed a '*forsically designed* talk.'"

"Ah," said Jackson.



"Quite so," said Erum. "*Forsically* is a mode, a manner. It means 'spiritually-forward-leading-by-way-of-fortuitous-friendship.'"

"That's a little more like it," Jackson said. "In that case, when one *elikates mushkies forsically* —"

"I'm terribly afraid you're on the wrong track," Erum said. "The definition I gave you applies only to conversations. It is something rather different when one speaks of *mushkies*."

"What does it mean then?"

"Well, it means — or rather it *expresses* — an advanced and intensified case of *mushkie elikidation*, but with a definite *nmogmetic* bias. I consider it a rather unfortunate phraseology, personally."

"How would you put it?"

"I'd lay it on the line and to hell with the fancy talk," Erum said toughly. "I'd come right out and say: 'Have you now or at any other time *dunfiglers voc* in illegal, immoral, or *insintis* circumstances, with or without the aid and/or consent of a *brachnitian*? If so, state when and why. If not, state *neugris kris* and why not.'"

"That's how you'd put it, huh?" Jackson said.

"Sure, I would," Erum said defiantly. "These forms are for adults, aren't they? So why not come right out and call a *spigler* a *spigler a spey*? Everybody *dunfiglers voc* some of the time, and so what? No one's feelings are ever hurt by it, for heaven's sake. I mean, after all, it simply involves oneself and a twisted old piece of wood, so why should anyone care?"

"Wood?" Jackson echoed.

"Yes, *wood*. A commonplace, dirty old piece of wood. Or at least that's all it would be if people didn't get their feelings so ridiculously involved."

"What do they do with the wood?" Jackson asked quickly.

"Do with it? Nothing much, when you come right down to it. But the religious aura is simply too much for our so-called intellectuals. They are unable, in my opinion, to isolate the simple primordial fact — *wood* — from the cultural *volturmeiss* which surrounds it at *festerbiss*, and to some extent at *uuis*, too."

"That's how intellectuals are," Jackson said. "But *you* can isolate it, and you find —"

"I find it's really nothing to get excited about. I really mean that. I mean to say that a cathedral, viewed correctly, is no more than a pile of rocks, and a forest is just an assembly of atoms. Why should



we see this case differently? I mean, really, you could *elicate mushkies forsically* without even *using* wood! What do you think of that?"

"I'm impressed," Jackson said.

"Don't get me wrong! I'm not saying it would be *easy*, or natural, or even *right*. But still, you damned well could! Why, you could substitute *corned grayti* and still come out all right!" Erum paused and chuckled. "You'd look foolish, but you'd still come out all right."

"Very interesting," Jackson said.

"I'm afraid I became a bit vehement," Erum said, wiping his forehead. "Was I talking very loudly? Do you think perhaps I was overheard?"

"Of course not. I found it all very interesting. I must leave just now, Mr. Erum, but I'll be back tomorrow to fill out that form and buy the property."

"I'll hold it for you," Erum said, rising and shaking Jackson's hand warmly. "And I want to thank you. It isn't often that I have the opportunity for this kind of frank no-holds-barred conversation."

"I found it very instructive," Jackson said. He left Erum's office and walked slowly back to his ship. He was disturbed, upset, and annoyed. Linguistic incomprehension irked him, no matter how comprehensible it might be. He *should* have been able to figure out, somehow, how one went about *eliking mushkies forsically*.

Never mind, he told himself. You'll work it out tonight, Jackson baby, and then you'll go back in there and cannonball through them forms. So don't get het up over it, man.

He'd work it out. He damned well had to work it out, as he had to own a piece of property.

That was the second part of his job.

Earth had come a long way since the bad old days of naked, aggressive warfare. According to the history books, a ruler back in those ancient times could simply send out his troops to seize whatever the ruler wanted. And if any of the folks at home had the temerity to ask why he wanted it, the ruler could have them beheaded or locked up in a dungeon or sewn up in a sack and thrown into the sea. And he wouldn't even feel guilty about doing any of those things because he invariably believed he was right and they were wrong.

This policy, technically called the *droit du seigneur*, was one of the most remarkable features of the *laissez-faire capitalism* which the ancients knew.

But, down the slow passage of centuries, cultural processes were inexorably at work. A new ethic came into the world; and slowly but surely, a sense of fair play and justice was bred into the human race. Rulers came to be chosen by ballot and were responsive to the desires of the electorate. Conceptions of Justice, Mercy, and Pity came to the forefront of men's minds, ameliorating the old law of tooth and talon and amending the savage bestiality of the ancient time of unreconstruction.

The old days were gone forever. Today, no ruler could simply *take*; the voters would never stand for it.

Nowadays one had to have an excuse for taking.

Like for example a Terran citizen who happened to own property all legal and aboveboard on an alien planet, and who urgently needed and requested Terran military assistance in order to protect himself, his home, his means of a legitimate livelihood...

But first he had to own that property. He had to really own it, to protect himself from the bleeding-hearts Congressmen and soft-on-aliens newsmen who always started an investigation whenever Earth took charge of another planet.

To provide a legal basis for conquest — that was what the contactors were for.

"Jackson," Jackson said to himself, "you gonna git yourself that li'l' old *bromicaine* factory tomorrow and you gonna own it without let or hindrance. You heah me, boy? I mean it sincerely."

On the morrow, shortly before noon, Jackson was back in the city. Several hours of intensive study and a long consultation with his tutor had sufficed to show him where he had gone wrong.

It was simple enough. He had merely been a trifle hasty in assuming an extreme and invariant isolating technique in the Hon use of radicals. He had thought, on the basis of his early studies, that word meaning and word order were the only significant factors required for an understanding of the language. But that wasn't so. Upon further examination, Jackson found that the Hon language had some unexpected resources: affixation, for example, and an elementary form of reduplication. Yesterday he hadn't even been prepared

for any morphological inconsistencies; when they had occurred, he had found himself in semantic difficulties.

The new forms were easy enough to learn. The trouble was, they were thoroughly illogical and contrary to the entire spirit of Hon.

One word produced by one sound and bearing one meaning — that was the rule he had previously deduced. But now he discovered eighteen important exceptions — compounds produced by a variety of techniques, each of them with a list of modifying suffixes. For Jackson, this was as odd as stumbling across a grove of palm trees in Antarctica.

He learned the eighteen exceptions, and thought about the article he would write when he finally got home.

And the next day, wiser and warier, Jackson strode meaningfully back to the city.

#### 4.

In Erum's office, he filled out the Government forms with ease. That first question — "Have you, now or at any past time, *elikated mushkies forsically*?" — he could now answer with an honest no. The plural "*mushkies*" in its primary meaning represented in this context the singular "woman." (The singular "*mushkies*" used similarly would denote an uncorporeal state of femininity.)

*Elikation* was, of course, the role of sexual termination, unless one employed the modifier "*forsically*." If one did, this quiet term took on a charged meaning in this particular context, tantamount to edematous polysexual advocacy.

Thus, Jackson could honestly write that, as he was not a Naian, he had never had that particular urge.

It was as simple as that. Jackson was annoyed at himself for not having figured it out on his own.

He filled in the rest of the questions without difficulty, and handed the paper back to Erum.

"That's really quite *skoe*," Erum said. "Now, there are just a few more simple items for us to complete. The first we can do immediately. After that, I will arrange a brief official ceremony for the Property Transferral Act, and that will be followed by several other small bits of business. All of it should take no more than a day or so, and then the property will be all yours."



"Sure, kid, that's great," Jackson said. He wasn't bothered by the delays. Quite the contrary, he had expected many more of them. On most planets, the locals caught on quickly to what was happening. It took no great reasoning power to figure out that Earth wanted what she wanted, but wanted it in a legalistic manner.

As for why she wanted it that way — that wasn't too hard to fathom, either. A great majority of Terrans were idealists, and they believed fervently in concepts such as truth, justice, mercy, and the like. And not only did they believe, they also let those noble concepts guide their actions — except when it would be inconvenient or unprofitable. When that happened, they acted expediently, but continued to talk moralistically. This meant that they were "hypocrites" — a term which every race has its counterpart of.

Terrans wanted what they wanted, but they also wanted that what they wanted should look nice. This was a lot to expect sometimes, especially when what they wanted was ownership of someone else's planet. But in one way or another, they usually got it.

Most alien races realized that overt resistance was impossible and so resorted to various stalling tactics.

Sometimes they refused to sell, or they required an infinite multiplicity of forms or the approval of some local official who was always absent. But for each ploy the contactor always had a suitable counterploy.

Did they refuse to sell property on racial grounds? The laws of Earth specifically forbade such practices, and the Declaration of Sentient Rights stated the freedom of all sentients to live and work wherever they pleased. This was a freedom that Terra would fight for, if anyone forced her to.

Were they stalling? The Terran Doctrine of Temporal Propriety would not allow it.

Was the necessary official absent? The Uniform Earth Code Against Implicit Sequestration in Acts of Omission expressly forbade such a practice. And so on and so on. It was a game of wits Earth invariably won, for the strongest is usually judged the cleverest.

But the Naians weren't even *trying* to fight back. Jackson considered that downright despicable.

The exchange of Naian currency for Terran platinum was completed and Jackson was given his change in crisp fifty-Vrso bills. Erum



beamed with pleasure and said, "Now, Mr. Jackson, we can complete today's business if you will kindly *trombramctbulanchierir* in the usual manner."

Jackson turned, his eyes narrowed and his mouth compressed into a bloodless downward-curving line.

"What did you say?"

"I merely asked you to — "

"I know what you asked! But what does it mean?"

"Well, it means — it means — " Erum laughed weakly. "It means exactly what it says. That is to say — *ethybolically* speaking — "

Jackson said in a low, dangerous voice, "Give me a synonym."

"There is no synonym," Erum said.

"Baby, you better come up with one anyhow," Jackson said, his hand closing over Erum's throat.

"Stop! Wait! Ulp!" Erum cried. "Mr. Jackson, I beg of you! How can there be a synonym when there is one and only one term for the thing expressed — if I may so express it?"

"You're putting me on!" Jackson howled. "And you better quit it, on account of we got laws against willful obfuscation, intentional obstructionism, implicit superimposition, and other stuff like you're doing. You hear me?"

"I hear you." Erum trembled.

"Then hear this: *stop agglutinating*, you devious dog! You've got a perfectly ordinary run-of-the-mill analytical-type language, distinguished only by its extreme isolating tendency. And when you got a language like that, man, then you simply don't *agglutinate* a lot of big messy compounds. Get me?"

"Yes, yes," Erum cried. "But believe me, I don't intend to *num-niscaterate* in the slightest! Not *noniskakkekaki*, and you really must *debruchili* that!"

Jackson drew back his fist, but got himself under control in time. It was unwise to hit aliens if there was any possibility that they were telling the truth. Folks on Terra didn't like it. His pay could be docked; and if, by some unlucky chance, he killed Erum, he could be slapped with a six-month jail sentence.

But still...

"I'll find out if you're lying or not!" Jackson screamed, and stormed out of the office.

\* \* \*

He walked for nearly an hour, mingling with the crowds in the slum quarters of Grath-Eth, below the gray, evil-smelling Ungperdis. No one paid any attention to him. To all outward appearances, he could have been a Naian, just as any Naian could have been a Terran.

Jackson located a cheerful saloon on the corner of Niis and Da Streets and went in.

It was quiet and masculine inside. Jackson ordered a local variety of beer. When it was served, he said to the bartender, "Funny thing happened to me the other day."

"Yeah?" said the bartender.

"Yeah, really," Jackson said. "I had this big business deal on, see, and then at the last minute they asked to *trombramctbulanchierir* in the usual manner."

He watched the bartender's face carefully. A faint expression of puzzlement crossed the man's stolid features.

"So why didn't you?" the bartender.

"You mean *you* would have?"

"Sure I would have. Hell, it's the standard *cathanpriptiaia*, ain't it?"

"Course it is," one of the loungers at the bar said. "Unless, of course, you suspected they was trying to *numniscaterate*."

"No, I don't think they were trying anything like that," Jackson said in a flat low, lifeless voice. He paid for his drink and started to leave.

"Hey," the bartender called after him, "you sure they wasn't *noniskakkekaki*?"

"You never know," Jackson said, walking slump-shouldered into the street.

Jackson trusted his instincts, both with languages and with people. His instincts told him now that the Naians were straight and were not practicing an elaborate deception on him. Erum had not been inventing new words for the sake of willful confusion. He had been really speaking the Hon language as he knew it.

But if that were true, then Na was a very strange language. In fact, it was downright eccentric. And its implications were not merely curious. They were disastrous.

## 5.

That evening Jackson went back to work. He discovered a further class of exceptions which he had not known or even suspected. That was a group of twenty-nine multivalued potentiators. These words, meaningless in themselves, acted to elicit a complicated and discordant series of shadings from other words. Their particular type of potentiation varied according to their position in the sentence.

Thus, when Erum had asked him "to *trombramctbulanchierir* in the usual manner," he had merely wanted Jackson to make an obligatory ritual obeisance. This consisted of claspings his hands behind his neck and rocking back on his heels. He was required to perform this action with an expression of definite yet modest pleasure, in accordance with the totality of the situation, and also in accord with the state of his stomach and nerves and with his religion and ethical code, and bearing in mind minor temperamental differences due to fluctuations in heat and humidity, and not forgetting the virtues of patience, similitude, and forgiveness.

It was all quite understandable. And all completely contradictory to everything Jackson had previously learned about Hon.

It was more than contradictory; it was unthinkable, impossible, and entirely out of order. It was as if, having discovered palm trees in frigid Antarctica, he had further found that the fruit of these trees was not coconuts, but muscatel grapes.

It couldn't be — but it was.

Jackson did what was required of him. When he had finished *trombramctbulanchieriring* in the usual manner, he had only to get through the official ceremony and the several small requirements after it.

Erum assured him that it was all quite simple, but Jackson suspected that he might somehow have difficulties.

So, in preparation, he put in three days of hard work acquiring a real mastery of the twenty-nine exceptional potentiators, together with their most common positions and their potentiating effect in each of these positions. He finished, bone-weary and with his irritability index risen to 97.3620 on the Grafheimer scale. An impartial observer might have noticed an ominous gleam in his china-blue eyes.



Jackson had had it. He was sick of the Hon language and of all things Naian. He had the vertiginous feeling that the more he learned, the less he knew. It was downright perverse.

"Hokay," Jackson said, to himself and to the universe at large. "I have learned the Naian language, and I have learned a set of completely inexplicable exceptions, *and* I have *also* learned a further and even more contradictory set of exceptions to the exceptions."

Jackson paused and in a very low voice said: "I have learned an *exceptional* number of exceptions. Indeed, an impartial observer might think that this language is composed of nothing *but* exceptions."

"But *that*," he continued, "is damned well impossible, unthinkable, and unacceptable. A language is by God and by definition *systematic*, which means it's gotta follow some kind of *rules*. Otherwise, nobody can't understand *nobody*. That's the way it works and that's the way it's gotta be. And if anyone thinks they can horse around linguisticwise with Fred C. Jackson — "

Here Jackson paused and drew the blaster from his holster. He checked the charge, snapped off the safety, and replaced the weapon.

"Just better no one give old Jackson no more double-talking," old Jackson muttered. "Because the next alien who tries it is going to get a three-inch circle drilled through his lousy cheating guts."

So saying, Jackson marched back to the city. He was feeling decidedly lightheaded, but absolutely determined. His job was to steal this planet out from under its inhabitants in a legal manner, and in order to do that he had to make sense out of their language. Therefore, in one way or another, he was going to *make* sense. Either that, or he was going to make some corpses.

At this point, he didn't much care which.

Erum was in his office, waiting for him. With him were the mayor, the president of the City Council, the borough president, two aldermen and the director of the Board of Estimates. All of them were smiling — affably, albeit nervously. Strong spirits were present on a sideboard, and there was a subdued air of fellowship in the room.

All in all, it looked as if Jackson were being welcomed as a new and highly respected property owner, an adornment to Fakka. Aliens took it that way sometimes: made the best of a bad bargain by trying to ingratiate themselves with the Inevitable Earthman.



"*Mun*," said Erum, shaking his hand enthusiastically.

"Same to you, kid," Jackson said. He had no idea what the word meant. Nor did he care. He had plenty of other Naian words to choose among, and he had the determination to force matters to a conclusion.

"*Mun!*" said the mayor.

"Thanks, pop," said Jackson.

"*Mun!*" declared the other officials.

"Glad you boys feel that way," said Jackson. He turned to Erum. "Well, let's get it over with, okay?"

"*Mun-mun-mun*," Erum replied. "*Mun, mun-mun.*"

Jackson stared at him for several seconds. Then he said, in a low, controlled voice, "Erum, baby, just exactly *what* are you trying to say to me?"

"*Mun, mun, mun*," Erum stated firmly. "*Mun, mun mun mun. Mun mun.*" He paused, and in a somewhat nervous voice asked the mayor: "*Mun, mun?*"

"*Mun,...mun mun*," the mayor replied firmly, and the other officials nodded. They all turned to Jackson.

"*Mun, mun-mun?*" Erum asked him, tremulously, but with dignity.

Jackson was numbed speechless. His face turned a choleric red and a large blue vein started to pulse in his neck. But he managed to speak slowly, calmly, and with infinite menace.

"Just *what*," he said, "do you lousy third-rate yokels think you're pulling?"

"*Mun-mun?*" the mayor asked Erum.

"*Mun-mun, mun-mun-mun*," Erum replied quickly, making a gesture of incomprehension.

"You better talk sense," Jackson said. His voice was still low, but the vein in his neck writhed like a firehose under pressure.

"*Mun!*" one of the aldermen said quickly to the borough president.

"*Mun mun-mun mun?*" the borough president answered piteously, his voice breaking on the last word.

"So you won't talk sense, huh?"

"*Mun! Mun-mun!*" the mayor cried, his face gone ashen with fright.

The others looked and saw Jackson's hand clearing the blaster and taking aim at Erum's chest.

"Quit horsing around!" Jackson commanded. The vein in his neck pulsed like a python in travail.

"*Mun-mun-mun!*" Erum pleaded, dropping to his knees.

"*Mun-mun-mun!*" the mayor shrieked, rolling his eyes and fainting.

"You get it now," Jackson said to Erum. His finger whitened on the trigger.

Erum, his teeth chattering, managed to gasp out a strangled "*Mun-mun, mun?*" But then his nerves gave way and he waited for death with jaw agape and eyes unfocused.

Jackson took up the last fraction of slack in the trigger. Then, abruptly, he let up and shoved the blaster back in its holster.

"*Mun, mun!*" Erum managed to say.

"Shaddap," Jackson said. He stepped back and glared at the cringing Naian officials.

He would have dearly loved to blast them all. But he couldn't do it. Jackson had to come to a belated acknowledgement of unacceptable reality.

His impeccable linguist's ear had heard, and his polyglot brain had analyzed. Dismayingly, he had realized that the Naians were not trying to put anything over on him. They were speaking not nonsense, but a true language.

This language was made up at present of the single sound "*mun.*" This sound could carry an extensive repertoire of meanings through variations in pitch and pattern, changes in stress and quantity, alteration of rhythm and repetition, and through accompanying gestures and facial expressions.

A language consisting of infinite variations on a single word! Jackson didn't want to believe it, but he was too good a linguist to doubt the evidence of his own trained senses.

He could learn this language, of course,

But by the time he had learned it, what would it have changed into?

Jackson sighed and rubbed his face wearily. In a sense it was inevitable. All languages change. But on Earth and the few dozen worlds she had contacted, the languages changed with relative slowness.

On Na, the rate of change was faster. Quite a bit faster.

The Na language changed as fashions change on Earth, only faster. It changed as prices change or as the weather changes. It

changed endlessly and incessantly, in accordance with unknown rules and invisible principles. It changed its form as an avalanche changes its shape. Compared with it, English was like a glacier.

The Na language was, truly and monstrously, a simulacrum of Heraclitus' river. You cannot step into the same river twice, said Heraclitus; for other waters are forever flowing on.

Concerning the language of the Na, this was simply and literally true.

That made it bad enough. But even worse was the fact that an observer like Jackson could never hope to fix or isolate even one term out of the dynamic shifting network of terms that composed the Na language. For the observer's action would be gross enough by itself to disrupt and alter the system, causing it to change unpredictably. And so, if the term were isolated, its relationship to the other terms in the system would necessarily be destroyed, and the term itself, by definition, would be false.

By the fact of its change, the language was rendered impervious to codification and control. Through indeterminacy, the Na tongue resisted all attempts to conquer it. And Jackson had gone from Heraclitus to Heisenberg without touching second base. He was dazed and dazzled, and he looked upon the officials with something approaching awe.

"You've done it, boys," he told them. "You've beaten the system. Old Earth could swallow you and never notice the difference; you couldn't do a damn thing about it. But the folks back home like their legalism, and our law says that we must be in a state of communication as a prior condition to any transaction."

"*Mun*?" Erum asked politely.

"So I guess that means I leave you folks alone," Jackson said. "At least, I do as long as they keep that law on the books. But what the hell, a reprieve is the best anyone can ask for. Eh?"

"*Mun mun*," the mayor said hesitantly.

"I'll be getting along now," Jackson said. "Fair's fair...But if I ever find out that you Naians were putting one over on me —"

He left the sentence unfinished. Without another word, Jackson turned and went back to his ship.

In half an hour he was spaceworthy, and fifteen minutes after that he was under way.



## 6.

In Erum's office, the officials watched while Jackson's spaceship glowed like a comet in the dark afternoon sky. It dwindled to a brilliant needlepoint, and then vanished into the vastness of space.

The officials were silent for a moment; then they turned and looked at each other. Suddenly, spontaneously, they burst into laughter. Harder and harder they laughed, clutching their sides while tears rolled down their cheeks.

The mayor was the first to check the hysteria. Getting a grip on himself he said, "*Mun , mun, mun-mun.*"

This thought instantly sobered the others. Their mirth died away. Uneasily they contemplated the distant unfriendly sky, and they thought back over their recent adventures.

At last young Erum asked, "*Mun-mun? Mun-mun?*"

Several of the officials smiled at the naïveté of the question. And yet, none could answer that simple yet crucial demand. Why indeed? Did anyone dare hazard even a guess?

It was a perplexity leaving in doubt not only the future but the past as well. And, if a real answer were unthinkable, then no answer at all was surely insupportable.

The silence grew, and Erum's young mouth twisted downwards in premature cynicism. He said quite harshly, "*Mun! Mun-mun! Mun?*"

His shocking words were no more than the hasty cruelty of the young; but such a statement could not go unchallenged. And the venerable first alderman stepped forward to essay a reply.

"*Mun mun, mun-mun,*" the old man said, with disarming simplicity. "*Mun mun mun-mun? Mun mun-mun-mun. Mun mun mun; mun mun mun; mun mun. Mun, mun mun mun — mun mun mun. Mun-mun? Mun mun mun mun!*"

This straightforward declaration of faith pierced Erum to the core of his being. Tears sprang unanticipated to his eyes. All postures forgotten, he turned to the sky, clenched his fist and shouted "*Mun! Mun! Mun-mun!*"

Smiling serenely, the old alderman murmured, "*Mun-mun-mun; mun, mun-mun.*"

This was, ironically enough, the marvelous and frightening truth of the situation. Perhaps it was just as well that the others did not hear.





# RESTRICTED AREA

"Nice-looking place, isn't it, Captain?" Simmons asked with elaborate casualness, looking through the port. "Rather a paradise." He yawned.

"You can't go out yet," Captain Kilpepper said, noting the biologist's immediate disappointed expression.

"But, Captain — "

"No." Kilpepper looked out of the port at the rolling meadow of grass. Sprinkled with red flowers, it appeared as luscious as it had two days ago when they had landed. To the right of the meadow was a brown forest shot through with yellow and orange blossoms. To the left was a row of hills, colored in contrasting shades of blue-green. A waterfall tumbled down one of the hills.

Trees, flowers, all that sort of thing. The place was undeniably pretty, and it was for that reason that Kilpepper distrusted it. Experience with two wives and five new ships had taught him that a lovely exterior can conceal almost anything. And fifteen years in space had added lines to his forehead and gray to his hair, but hadn't given him any reason for altering his conviction.

"Here are the reports, sir," Mate Morena said, handing him a sheaf of papers. Morena had a petulant expression on his broad, rugged face. Behind the door, Kilpepper could hear shuffling feet and whispering voices. He knew it was the crew, assembled to hear what he would say this time.

They wanted outside, but bad.

Kilpepper skimmed the reports. They were the same as the last four groups. Atmosphere breathable and free of dangerous micro-organisms, bacteria count nil, radargraph all clear. Some form of

animal life in the nearby forest, but no energy manifestations. Detection of a large metallic mass, possibly an iron-rich mountain, several miles south. Noted for further investigation.

"That's fine," Kilpepper said unhappily. The reports vaguely annoyed him. He knew from past experience that there was usually something wrong with every planet. It paid to find it at the start, before costly accidents resulted.

"Can we go out, sir?" Morena asked, his short body stiffly erect. Kilpepper could almost feel the crewmen behind the door holding their breath.

"I don't know," Kilpepper said. He scratched his head, trying to think of some good reason for refusing again. There *must* be something wrong.

"All right," he said at last. "Post a full guard for the time being. Let four men out. No one goes beyond twenty-five feet of the ship." He had to let them go. After sixteen months in the hot, cramped spaceship, he'd have a mutiny on his hands if he didn't.

"Yes sir!" Mate Morena said, and dashed out of the door.

"I suppose that means the scientific team can go out," Simmons said, his hands jammed in his pockets.

"Sure," Kilpepper said wearily. "I'll go with you. After all, this expedition is expendable."

The air of the unnamed planet was fragrant after the musty, recirculated air of the ship. The breeze from the mountains was light and steady and refreshing.

Captain Kilpepper sniffed appreciatively, arms folded across his chest. The four crewmen were walking around, stretching their legs and breathing in great lungfuls of fresh air. The scientific team was standing together, wondering where to begin. Simmons bent down and plucked a spear of grass.

"Funny-looking stuff," he said, holding it up to the sunlight.

"Why?" Captain Kilpepper asked, walking over.

"Look at it." The thin biologist held it higher. "Perfectly smooth. Doesn't show any sign of cell formation. Let me see — " He bent over a red blossom.

"Hey! We got visitors!" A crewman named Flynn was the first to spot the natives. They came out of the forest and trotted across the meadow to the ship.

Captain Kilpepper glanced at the ship. The gunners were ready and alert. He touched his sidearm for reassurance, and waited.

"Oh, brother," Aramic murmured. As ship's linguist, he eyed the advancing natives with intense professional interest. The rest of the men just stared.

In the lead was a creature with a neck at least eight feet long, like a giraffe's, and thick, stubby legs, like a hippopotamus's. It had a cheerful expression on its face. Its hide was purple, sprinkled with large white dots.

Next in line came five little beasts with pure white fur. They were about the size of terriers, and they had an owlshly solemn expression. A fat, red little creature with a green tail at least sixteen feet long brought up the rear.

They stopped in front of the men and bowed. There was a long moment of silence, then everyone burst into laughter.

The laughter seemed to be a signal. The five little ones leaped to the back of the hippo-giraffe. They scrambled for a moment, then climbed on each other's shoulders. In a moment they were balanced, five high, like a team of acrobats.

The men applauded wildly.

The fat animal immediately started balancing on his tail.

"Bravo!" shouted Simmons.

The five furry animals jumped off the giraffe's back and started to dance around the pig.

"Hurray!" Morrison, the bacteriologist, called.

The hippo-giraffe turned a clumsy somersault, landed on one ear, scrambled to his feet and bowed deeply.

Captain Kilpepper frowned and rubbed one hand against another. He was trying to figure out some reason for this behavior.

The natives burst into song. The melody was strange, but recognizable as a tune. They harmonized for a few seconds, then bowed and began to roll on the grass.

The crewmen were still applauding. Aramic had taken out his notebook and was jotting down the sounds.

"All right," Kilpepper said. "Crew, back inside."

They gave him reproachful looks.

"Let some of the other men have a chance," the captain said. Regretfully, the men filed back inside.

"I suppose you want to examine them some more," Kilpepper said to the scientists.



"We sure do," Simmons stated. "Never saw anything like it."

Kilpepper nodded and went back into the ship. Four more crewmen filed past him.

"Morena!" Kilpepper shouted. The mate came bounding into the bridge. "I want you to find that metal mass. Take a man and keep in radio contact with the ship at all times."

"Yes sir," Morena said, grinning broadly. "Friendly, aren't they, sir?"

"Yes," Kilpepper said.

"Nice little world," the mate said.

"Yes."

Mate Morena went off to collect his equipment.

Captain Kilpepper sat down and tried to figure out what was wrong with the planet.

Kilpepper spent most of the next day filling out progress reports. In the late afternoon he put down his pencil and went out for a walk.

"Have you got a moment, Captain?" Simmons asked. "There's something I'd like to show you in the forest." Kilpepper grumbled out of habit, but followed the biologist. He had been curious about the forest himself.

On the way, they were accompanied by three natives. These particular three looked like dogs, except for their coloring — red and white, like peppermint candy.

"Now then," Simmons said with ill-concealed eagerness once they were in the forest. "Look around. What do you see that strikes you as odd?"

Kilpepper looked. The trees were thick-trunked and spaced wide apart. So wide apart, in fact, that it was possible to see the next clearing through them.

"Well," he said, "you couldn't get lost here."

"It's not that," Simmons said. "Come on, look again."

Kilpepper smiled. Simmons had brought him here because he made a better audience than any of his preoccupied colleagues.

Behind them, the three natives leaped and played.

"There's no underbrush," Kilpepper stated, after walking a few yards farther. There were vines twisting up the sides of the trees, covered with multicolored flowers. Glancing around, Kilpepper saw a bird dart down, flutter around the head of one of the peppermint-colored dogs, and fly away again.

The bird was colored silver and gold.

"Don't you see anything wrong yet?" Simmons asked impatiently.

"Only the color scheme," Kilpepper said. "Is there something else?"

"Look at the trees."

The boughs were laden with fruit. It hung in clumps, all on the lower branches, of a bewildering variety of colors, sizes, and shapes. There were things that looked like grapes, and things that looked like bananas, and things that looked like watermelons, and —

"Lots of different species, I guess," Kilpepper hazarded, not sure what Simmons wanted him to see.

"Different species! Look, man. There are as many as ten different kinds of fruit growing on one branch!"

Examining closer, Kilpepper saw it was true. Each tree had an amazing multiplicity of fruit.

"And that's just impossible," Simmons said. "It's not my field, of course, but I can state with fair certainty that each fruit is a separate and distinct entity. They're not stages of each other."

"How do you account for it?" Kilpepper asked.

"I don't have to," the biologist grinned. "But some poor botanist is going to have his hands full."

They turned and started to walk back. "What were you here for?" Kilpepper asked.

"Me? I was doing a little anthropological work on the side. Wanted to find out where our friends lived. No luck. There are no paths, implements, clearings, anything. Not even caves."

Kilpepper didn't think it unusual that a biologist should be making a quick anthropological survey. It was impossible to represent all the sciences on an expedition of this sort. Survival was the first consideration — biology and bacteriology. Then language. After that, any botanical, ecological, psychological, sociological, or any other knowledge was appreciated.

Eight or nine birds had joined the animals — or natives — around the ship when they got back. The birds were brilliantly colored also: polka dots, stripes, piebalds. There wasn't a dun or gray in the lot.

Mate Morena and Crewman Flynn trudged through an outcropping of the forest. They stopped at the foot of a little hill.

"Do we have to climb it?" Flynn asked, sighing. The large camera on his back was weighing him down.

"The little hand says we gotta," Morena pointed to his dial. The indicator showed the presence of metallic mass just over the rise.

"Spaceships ought to carry cars," Flynn said, leaning forward to balance himself against the gentle slope of the hill.

"Yeh, or camels."

Above them red and gold birds dipped and sailed, cheeping merrily. The breeze fanned the tall grass and hummed melodiously through the leaves and branches of the nearby forest. Behind them, two of the natives followed. They were horse-shaped, except for their hides of green and white dots.

"Like a bloody circus," Flynn observed as one of the horses capered a circle around him.

"Yeh," Morena said. They reached the top of the hill and started down. Then Flynn stopped.

"Look at that!"

At the base of the hill, rising slim and erect, was a metal pillar. They followed it up with their eyes. It climbed and climbed — and its top was lost in the clouds.

They hurried down and examined it. Closer, the pillar was more massy than they had thought. Almost twenty feet through, Morena estimated. At a guess he placed the metal as an alloy of steel, by its gray-blue color. But what steel, he asked himself, could support a shaft that size?

"How high would you say those clouds are?" Morena asked.

Flynn craned back his neck. "Lord, they must be half a mile up. Maybe a mile." The pillar had been hidden from the ship by the clouds, and by its gray-blue color, which blended into the background.

"I don't believe it," Morena said. "I wonder what the compression strain on this thing is." They stared in awe at the tremendous shaft.

"Well," Flynn said, "I'd better get some pictures." He unloaded his camera and snapped three shots of the shaft from twenty feet, then a shot with Morena for size comparison. For the next three pictures he sighted up the shaft.

"What do you figure it is?" Morena asked.

"Let the big brains figure it out," Flynn said. "It ought to drive them nuts." He strapped the camera back together. "Now I suppose we have to talk all the way back." He looked at the green and white horses. "Wonder if I could hitch a ride."



"Go ahead and break your stupid neck," Morena said.

"Here, boy, come on here," Flynn called. One of the horses came over and knelt beside him. Flynn climbed on his back gingerly. Once he was astride, he grinned at Morena.

"Just don't smash that camera," Morena said. "It's Government property."

"Nice boy," Flynn said to the horse. "Good fellow." The horse got to his feet — and smiled.

"See you back in camp," Flynn said, guiding the horse toward the hill.

"Hold it a second," Morena said. He looked glumly at Flynn, then beckoned to the other horse. "Come on, boy." The horse knelt and he climbed on.

They rode in circles for a few moments, experimenting. The horses could be guided by a touch. Their broad backs were amazingly comfortable. One of the red and gold birds came down and perched on Flynn's shoulder.

"Hey, hey, this is the life," Flynn said, patting the glossy hide of his mount. "Race you back to camp, Mate."

"You're on," Morena said. But their horses would move no faster than a slow walk, in spite of all their urging.

At the ship, Kilpepper was squatting in the grass, watching Aramic work. The linguist was a patient man. His sisters had always remarked on his patience. His colleagues had praised him for it, and his students, during his years of teaching had appreciated it. Now, the backlog of sixteen years of self-containment was being called to the front.

"We'll try it again," Aramic said in his calmest voice. He flipped through the pages of LANGUAGE APPROACH FOR ALIEN GRADE-TWO INTELLIGENCES — a text written by himself — and found the diagram he wanted. He opened to the page and pointed.

The animal beside him looked like an inconceivable cross between a chipmunk and a giant panda. It cocked one eye at the diagram, the other eye wandering ludicrously around its socket.

"Planet," Aramic said, pointing. "Planet."

"Excuse me, Skipper," Simmons said. "I'd like to set up this X-ray gadget here."

"Certainly," Kilpepper said, moving to let the biologist drag the machine into place.



"Planet," Aramic said again.

"*Elam vessel holam cram*," the chipmunk-panda said pleasantly.

Damn it, they had a language. The sounds they made were certainly representational. It was just a question of finding a common meeting ground. Had they mastered simple abstractions? Aramic put down his book and pointed to the chipmunk-panda.

"Animal," he said, and waited.

"Get him to hold still," Simmons said, focusing the X-ray. "That's good. Now a few more."

"Animal," Aramic repeated hopefully.

"*Eeful beeful box*," the animal said. "*Hoful toful lox, ramadan, Smaduran, eeful beeful box*."

Patience, Aramic reminded himself. Positive attitude. Be cheerful. Faint heart never.

He picked up another of his manuals. This one was called LANGUAGE APPROACH TO ALIEN GRADE-ONE INTELLIGENCES.

He found what he wanted and put it down again. Smiling, he held up a finger.

"One," he said.

The animal leaned forward then sniffed his finger.

Smiling grimly, Aramic held up another finger. "Two." A third. "Three."

"*Hoogalex*," the animal said suddenly.

A diphthong? Their word for "one"? "One," he said again, waving the same finger.

"*Vereserevef*," the animal replied, beaming.

Could that be an alternate "one"? "One," he said again.

The animal burst into song.

"*Sevef hevefulud cram, aragon, biligan, homus dram —* "

It stopped and looked at the LANGUAGE APPROACH manual, fluttering in the air, and at the back of the linguist, who, with remarkable patience, had refrained from throttling him.

After Morena and Flynn returned, Kilpepper puzzled over their report. He had the photographs rushed through and studied them with care.

The shaft was round and smooth and obviously manufactured. Any race that could put up a thing like that could give them trouble. Big trouble.

But who had put the shaft up? Not the happy, stupid animals around the ship, certainly.

"You say the top is hidden in the clouds?" Kilpepper asked.

"Yes sir," Morena said. "That damn thing must be all of a mile high."

"Go back," Kilpepper said. "Take a radarscope. Take infra-red equipment. Get me a picture of the top of that shaft. I want to know how high it goes and what's on top of it. Quick."

Flynn and Morena left the bridge.

Kilpepper looked at the still-wet photographs for a minute longer, then put them down. He wandered into the ship's lab, vague worries nagging at him. The planet didn't make sense, and that bothered him. Kilpepper had discovered the hard way that there's a pattern to everything. If you can't find it in time, that's just too bad for you.

Morrison, the bacteriologist, was a small, sad man. Right now he looked like an extension of the microscope he was peering into.

"Find anything?" Kilpepper asked.

"I've found the absence of something," Morrison said, looking up and blinking. "I've found the absence of a hell of a lot of something."

"What's that?" Kilpepper asked.

"I've run tests on the flowers," Morrison said, "and I've run tests on the earth, and tests on water samples. Nothing definitive yet, but brace yourself."

"I'm braced. What is it?"

"There isn't an ounce of bacteria on this planet!"

"Oh?" Kilpepper said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. He didn't consider it a particularly shocking announcement. But the bacteriologist was acting as if he had announced that the subsoil of the planet was one hundred percent pure green cheese.

"That's it. The water in the stream is purer than distilled alcohol. The dirt on this planet is cleaner than a boiled scalpel. The only bacteria are the ones we brought. And they're being killed off."

"How?"

"The air of this place has about three disinfecting agents I've detected, and probably a dozen more I haven't. Same with the dirt and water. This place is sterile!"

"Well, now," Kilpepper said. He couldn't appreciate the full force of the statement. He was still worried about the steel shaft. "What does that mean?"

"I'm glad you asked me that," Morrison said. "Yes, I'm really glad you asked me. It means simply that this place doesn't exist."

"Oh, come now."

"I mean it. There can't be life without microorganisms. One whole section of the life cycle is missing here."

"Unfortunately, it does exist," Kilpepper pointed out gently. "Have you any other theories?"

"Yes, but I want to finish these tests first. But I'll tell you one thing, and maybe you can work it out for yourself."

"Go on."

"I haven't been able to detect a piece of rock on this planet. That's not strictly my field, of course — but we're all jacks-of-all-trades on this expedition. Anyhow, I'm interested in geology. There's no loose rock or stone anywhere around. The smallest stone is about seven tons, I'd estimate."

"What does that mean?"

"Ah! You were wondering also?" Mo smiled. "Excuse me. I want to complete these tests before supper."

Just before sunset, the X-rays of the animals were finished. Kilpepper had another surprise. Morrison had told him that the planet couldn't exist. Then Simmons insisted the animals couldn't exist.

"Just look at these pictures," he said to Kilpepper. "Look. Do you see any organs?"

"I don't know much about X-rays."

"You don't have to. Just look." The X-ray showed a few bones and one or two organs. There were traces of a nervous system on some of the pictures but, mostly, the animals seemed homogeneous throughout.

"There isn't enough internal structure to keep a tapeworm going," Simmons said. "This simplification is impossible. There's nothing that corresponds to lungs or heart. No bloodstream. No brain. Damn little nervous system. What organs they have just don't make sense."

"And your conclusions —"

"That these animals don't exist," Simmons said in high good humor. He liked the idea. It would be fun to do a paper on a non-existent animal. Aramic passed them, swearing softly.

"Any luck on that lingo?" Simmons asked him.

"No!" Aramic shouted, then blushed. "Sorry. I tested them right down to intelligence grade C3BB. That's amoeba class. No response."

"Perhaps they're just completely brainless," Kilpepper suggested.

"No. The ability to do tricks shows a certain level of intelligence. They have a language of sorts, also, and a definite response pattern. But they won't pay any attention. All they do is sing songs."

"I think we all need supper," Kilpepper said. "And perhaps a slug or two of the old standby."

The old standby was much in evidence at supper. After a fifth or two had been consumed, the scientists mellowed sufficiently to consider some possibilities. They put together their facts.

*Item*, the natives — or animals — showed no sign of internal organs, no reproductive or excretive equipment. There seemed to be at least three dozen species, not counting birds, and more appearing every day.

The same with the plants.

*Item*, the planet was amazingly sterile and acted to keep itself so.

*Item*, the natives had a language but evidently couldn't impart it to others. Nor could they learn another language.

*Item*, there were no small rocks or stones around.

*Item*, there was a tremendous steel shaft, rising to a height of at least half a mile, exact height to be determined when the new pictures were developed. Although there was no sign of a machine culture, the shaft was obviously the product of one. Someone must have built it and put it there.

"Throw it all together and what have you got?" Kilpepper asked.

"I have a theory," Morrison said. "It's a beautiful theory. Would you care to hear it?"

Everyone said yes except Aramic, who was still brooding over his inability to learn the native language.

"The way I see it, this planet is man-made. It must be. No race would evolve without bacteria. It was made by a super race, the race who put that steel spire there. They built it for these animals."

"Why?" Kilpepper asked.

"This is the beautiful part," Morrison said dreamily. "Pure altruism. Look at the natives. Happy, playful. Completely devoid of



violence, rid of all nasty habits. Don't they deserve a world to themselves? A world where they can romp and play in an eternal summer?"

"That *is* beautiful," Kilpepper said, stifling a grin. "But — "

"These people are here as a reminder," Morrison continued. "A message to all passing races that man can live in peace."

"There's only one flaw in that," Simmons said. "The animals could never have evolved naturally. You saw the X-rays."

"That's true." The dreamer struggled briefly with the biologist, and the dreamer lost. "Perhaps they're robots."

"That's the explanation I favor," Simmons said. "The way I see it, the race that built the steel spire built these animals, also. They're servants, slaves. Why, they might even think *we're* their masters."

"Where would the real masters have gone?" Morrison asked.

"How the hell should I know?" Simmons said.

"And where would these masters live?" Kilpepper asked. "We haven't spotted anything that looks like a habitation."

"They're so far advanced they don't need machines or houses. They live directly with nature."

"Then why do they need servants?" Morrison asked mercilessly. "And why did they build the spire?"

That evening the new pictures of the steel pillar were completed and the scientists examined them eagerly. The top of the pillar was almost a mile high, hidden in thick clouds. There was a projection on either side of the top, jutting out at right angles to a distance of eighty-five feet.

"Looks like it might be a watchtower," Simmons said.

"What could they watch that high up?" Morrison asked. "All they'd see would be clouds."

"Perhaps they like looking at clouds," Simmons said.

"I'm going to bed," Kilpepper stated in utter disgust.

When Kilpepper woke up the next morning, something didn't feel right. He dressed and went outside. There seemed to be something intangible in the wind. Or was it just his nerves?

Kilpepper shook his head. He had faith in his premonitions. They usually meant that, unconsciously, he had completed some process in reasoning.

Everything seemed to be in order around the ship. The animals were outside, wandering lazily around.

Kilpepper glared at them and walked around the ship. The scientists were back at work trying to solve the mysteries of the planet. Aramic was trying to learn the language from a mournful-eyed green and silver beast. The beast seemed unusually apathetic this morning. It barely muttered its songs and paid no attention to Aramic.

Kilpepper thought of Circe. Could the animals be people, changed into beasts by some wicked sorcerer? He rejected the fanciful idea and walked on.

The crew hadn't noticed anything different. They had headed, *en masse*, for the waterfall, to get in some swimming. Kilpepper assigned two men to make a microscopic inspection of the steel shaft.

That worried him more than anything else. It didn't seem to bother the other scientists, but Kilpepper figured that was natural. Every cobbler to his last. A linguist would be bound to attach primary importance to the language of the people, while a botanist would think the key to the planet lay in the multi-fruit bearing trees.

And what did he think? Captain Kilpepper examined his ideas. What he needed, he decided, was a field theory. Something that would unify all the observed phenomena.

What theory would do that? Why weren't there any germs? Why weren't there any rocks? Why, why, why. Kilpepper felt sure that the explanation was relatively simple. He could almost see it — but not quite.

He sat down in the shade, leaning against the ship, and tried to think.

Around midday Aramic, the linguist, walked over. He threw his books, one by one, against the side of the ship.

"Temper," Kilpepper said.

"I give up," Aramic said. "Those beasts won't pay any attention now. They're barely talking. And they've stopped doing tricks."

Kilpepper got to his feet and walked over to the animals. Sure enough, they didn't seem at all lively. They crept around as though they were in the last stages of malnutrition.

Simmons was standing beside them, jotting down notes on a little pad.

"What's wrong with your little friends?" Kilpepper asked.

"I don't know," Simmons said. "Perhaps they were so excited they didn't sleep last night."

The giraffe-like animal sat down suddenly. Slowly he rolled over on his side and lay still.

"That's strange," Simmons said. "First time I saw one of them do that." He bent over the fallen animal and searched for a heartbeat. After a few seconds he straightened.

"No sign of life," he said.

Two of the smaller ones with glossy black fur toppled over.

"Oh Lord," Simmons said, hurrying over to them. "What's happening now?"

"I'm afraid I know," Morrison said, coming out of the ship, his face ashen. "Germs."

"Captain, I feel like a murderer. I think we've killed these poor beasts. You remember, I told you there was no sign of any micro-organism on this planet? Think of how many we've introduced! Bacteria streaming off our bodies onto these hosts. Hosts with no resistance, remember."

"I thought you said the air had several disinfecting agents?" Kilpepper asked.

"Evidently they didn't work fast enough." Morrison bent over and examined one of the little animals. "I'm sure of it."

The rest of the animals around the ship were falling now and lying quite still. Captain Kilpepper looked around anxiously.

One of the crewmen dashed up, panting. He was still wet from his swim by the waterfall.

"Sir," he gasped. "Over by the falls — the animals —"

"I know," he said. "Get all the men down here."

"That's not all, sir," the man said. "The waterfall — you know, the waterfall —"

"Well, spit it out, man."

"It's stopped, sir. It's stopped running."

"Get those men down here!" The crewman sprinted back to the falls. Kilpepper looked around, not sure what he was looking for. The brown forest was quiet. Too quiet.

He almost had the answer...

Kilpepper realized that the gentle, steady breeze that had been blowing ever since they landed had stopped.

"What in hell is going on here?" Simmons said uneasily. They started backing toward the ship.



"Is the sun getting darker?" Morrison whispered. They weren't sure. It was mid-afternoon, but the sun did seem less bright.

The crewmen hurried back from the waterfall, glistening wet. At Kilpepper's order they piled back into the ship. The scientists remained standing, looking over the silent land.

"What could we have done?" Aramic asked. He shuddered at the sight of the fallen animals.

The men who had been examining the shaft came running down the hill, bounding through the long grass as though the Devil himself were after them.

"What now?" Kilpepper asked.

"It's that damned shaft, sir!" Morena said. "It's turning!" The shaft — that mile-high mass of incredibly strong metal — was being turned!

"What are we going to do?" Simmons asked.

"Get back to the ship," Kilpepper muttered. He could feel the answer taking shape now. There was just one more bit of evidence he needed. One thing more —

The animals sprang to their feet! The red and silver birds started flying again, winging high into the air. The giraffe-hippo reared to his feet, snorted and raced off. The rest of the animals followed him. From the forest an avalanche of strange beasts poured onto the meadow.

At full speed they headed west, away from the ship.

"Get back in the ship!" Kilpepper shouted suddenly. That did it. He knew now, and he only hoped he could get the ship into deep space in time.

"Hurry the hell up! Get those engines going!" he shouted to the gawking crewmen.

"But we've still got equipment scattered around," Simmons said. "I don't see any need for this — "

"Man the guns!" Captain Kilpepper roared, pushing the scientists toward the bay of the ship.

Suddenly there were long shadows in the west.

"Captain. We haven't completed our investigation yet — "

"You'll be lucky if you live through this," Kilpepper said as they entered the bay. "Haven't you put it together yet? Close that bay! Get everything tight!"

"You mean the turning shaft?" Simmons said, stumbling over Morrison in the corridor of the ship. "All right, I suppose there's some super race — "



"That turning shaft is a key in the side of the planet," Kilpepper said, racing toward the bridge. "It winds the place up. The whole world is like that. Animals, rivers, wind — everything runs down."

He punched a quick orbit on the ship's tape.

"Strap down," he said. "Figure it out. A place where all kinds of wonderful food hangs from the trees. Where there's no bacteria to hurt you, not even a sharp rock to stub your toes. A place filled with marvelous, amusing, gentle animals. Where everything's designed to delight you.

"A playground!"

The scientists stared at him.

"The shaft is the key. The place ran down while we made our unauthorized visit. Now someone's winding the planet up again."

Outside the port the shadows were stretching for thousands of feet across the green meadow.

"Hang on," Kilpepper said as he punched the take-off stud. "Unlike the toy animals, I don't want to meet the children who play here. And I especially don't want to meet their parents."

# THE ODOR OF THOUGHT

Leroy Cleevy's real trouble started when he was taking Mailship 243 through the uncolonized Seergon Cluster. Before this, he had the usual problems of an interstellar mailman; an old ship, scored tubes, and faulty astrogation. But now, while he was taking line-of-direction readings, he noticed that his ship was growing uncomfortably warm.

He sighed unhappily, switched on the refrigeration, and contacted the postmaster at Base. He was at the extreme limit of radio contact, and the postmaster's voice floated in on a sea of static.

"More trouble, Cleevy?" the postmaster asked, in the ominous tones of a man who writes schedules and believes in them.

"Oh, I don't know," Cleevy said brightly. "Aside from the tubes and astrogation and wiring, everything's fine except for the insulation and the refrigeration."

"It's a damned shame," the postmaster said, suddenly sympathetic. "I know how you feel."

Cleevy switched the refrigeration to FULL, wiped perspiration from his eyes, and decided that the postmaster only *thought* he knew how he felt.

"Haven't I asked the Government for new ships over and over again?" The postmaster laughed ruefully. "They seem to feel that I can get the mail through in any old crate."

At the moment Cleevy wasn't interested in the postmaster's troubles. Even with the refrigeration laboring at FULL, the ship was overheating.

"Hang on a moment," he said. He went to the rear of the ship, where the heat seemed to be emanating, and found that three of his

tanks were filled not with fuel, but with a bubbling white-hot slag. The fourth tank was rapidly undergoing the same change.

Cleevy stared for a moment, turned, and sprinted to the radio.

"No more fuel," he said. "Catalytic actions, I think. I told you we needed new tanks. I'm putting down on the first oxygen planet I can find."

He pulled down the EMERGENCY MANUAL and looked up the Seer-gon Cluster. There were no colonies in the group, but the oxygen worlds had been charted for future reference. What was on them, aside from oxygen, no one knew. Cleevy expected to find out, if his ship stayed together long enough.

"I'll try 3-M-22!" he shouted over the mounting static.

"Take good care of the mail," the postmaster howled back. "I'm sending a ship right out."

Cleevy told him what he could do with the mail, all twenty pounds of it. But the postmaster had signed off by then.

Cleevy made a good landing on 3-M-22, exceptionally good, taking into consideration the fact that his instruments were too hot to touch, his tubes were warped by heat, and the mail sack strapped to his back hampered his movements. Mailship 243 sailed in like a swan. Twenty feet above the planet's surface it gave up and dropped like a stone.

Cleevy held on to consciousness, although he was certain every bone in his body was broken. The sides of the ship were turning a dull red when he stumbled through the escape hatch, the mail sack still firmly strapped to his back.

He staggered a hundred yards, eyes closed. Then the ship exploded and knocked him flat on his face. He stood up, took two more steps, and passed out completely.

When he recovered consciousness, he was lying on a little hillside, face down in tall grass. He was in a beautiful state of shock. He felt that he was detached from his body, a pure intellect floating in the air. All worries, emotions, fears remained in his body; *he* was free.

He looked around and saw that a small animal was passing near him. It was about the size of a squirrel, but with dull green fur.

As it came close, he saw that it had no eyes or ears.

This didn't surprise him. On the contrary, it seemed quite fitting. Why in hell *should* a squirrel have eyes or ears? Squirrels were better off not seeing the pain and torture of the world, not hearing the anguished screams of...

Another animal approached, and this one was the size and shape of a timber wolf, but also colored green. Parallel evolution? It didn't matter in the total scheme of things, he decided. This one, too, was eyeless and earless. But it had a magnificent set of teeth.

Cleevy watched with only faint interest. What does a pure intellect care for wolves and squirrels, eyeless or otherwise? He observed that the squirrel had frozen, not more than five feet from the wolf. The wolf approached slowly. Then, not three feet away, he seemed to lose the scent. He shook his head and turned in a slow circle. When he moved forward again, he wasn't going in the right direction.

The blind hunt the blind, Cleevy told himself, and it seemed a deep and eternal truth. As he watched, the squirrel quivered; the wolf whirled, pounced, and devoured it in three gulps.

What large teeth wolves have, Cleevy thought. Instantly the eyeless wolf whirled and faced him.

Now he's going to eat me, Cleevy thought. It amused him to realize that he was the first human to be eaten on this planet.

The wolf was snarling in his face when Cleevy passed out again.

It was evening when he recovered. Long shadows had formed over the land, and the sun was low in the sky. Cleevy sat up and flexed his arms and legs experimentally. Nothing was broken.

He got on one knee, groggy, but in possession of his senses. What had happened? He remembered the crash as though it were a thousand years ago. The ship had burned, he had walked away and fainted. After that he had met a wolf and a squirrel.

He climbed unsteadily to his feet and looked around. He must have dreamed that last part. If there had been a wolf, he would have been killed.

Glancing down at his feet, he saw the squirrel's green tail and, a little farther away, its head.

He tried desperately to think. So there *had* been a wolf, and a hungry one. If he expected to survive until the rescue ship came, he had to find out exactly what had happened, and why.



Neither animal had eyes or ears. How did they track each other? Smell? If so, why did the wolf have so much trouble finding the squirrel?

He heard a low growl and turned. There, not fifty feet away, was something that looked like a panther. A yellow-brown eyeless, earless panther.

Damned menagerie, Cleevy thought, and crouched down in the tall grass. This planet was rushing him along too fast. He needed time to think. How did these animals operate? Instead of sight, did they have a sense of location?

The panther began to move away.

Cleevy breathed a little easier. Perhaps, if he stayed out of sight, the panther...

As soon as he thought the word "panther," the beast turned in his direction.

What have I done? Cleevy asked himself, burrowing deeper into the grass. He can't smell me or see me or hear me. All I did was decide to stay out of his way...

Head high, the panther began to pace toward him.

That did it. Without eyes or ears, there was only one way the beast could have detected him.

It had to be telepathic!

To test his theory, he thought the word "panther," identifying it automatically with the animal that was approaching him. The panther roared furiously and shortened the distance between them.

In a fraction of a second, Cleevy understood a lot of things. The wolf had been tracking the squirrel by telepathy. The squirrel had frozen — perhaps it had even stopped thinking! The wolf had been thrown off the scent — until the squirrel wasn't able to keep from thinking any longer.

In that case, why hadn't the wolf attacked him while he was unconscious? Perhaps he had stopped thinking — or at least, stopped thinking on a wavelength that the wolf could receive. Probably there was more to it than that.

Right now, his problem was the *panther*.

The beast roared again. It was only thirty feet away and closing the distance rapidly.

All he had to do, Cleevy thought, was not to think of — was to think of something else. In that way, perhaps the — well, perhaps

it would lose the scent. He started to think about all the girls he had ever known, in painstaking detail.

The panther stopped and pawed the ground doubtfully.

Cleevy went on thinking: about girls, and ships, and planets, and girls, and ships, and everything but panthers...

The panther advanced another five feet.

Damn it, he thought, how do you *not* think of something? You think furiously about stones and rocks and people and places and things, but your mind always returns to — but you ignore that and concentrate on your sainted grandmother, your drunken old father, the bruises on your right leg. (Count them. Eight. Count them again. Still eight.) And now you glance up, casually, seeing, but not really recognizing the — anyhow, it's still advancing.

Cleevy found that trying *not* to think of something is like trying to stop an avalanche with your bare hands. He realized that the human mind couldn't be inhibited so directly and consciously at all. It takes time and practice.

He had about fifteen feet left in which to learn how not to think of a...

Well, there are also card games to think about, and parties, and dogs, cats, horses, mice, sheep, wolves (move away!), and bruises, battleships, caves, lairs, dens, cubs (watch out) *p-paramounts*, and tantamounts and gadabouts and roundabouts and roustabouts and ins-and-outs (about eight feet), meals, food, fire, fox, fur, pigs, pokes, prams, and p-p-p-p-...

The panther was about five feet away now and crouching for the spring. Cleevy couldn't hold back the thought any longer. Then, in a bust of inspiration, he thought:

Pantheress!

The panther, still crouching, faced him doubtfully.

Cleevy concentrated on the idea of a pantheress. *He* was a pantheress, and what did this panther mean by frightening her that way? He thought about his (her, damn it!) cubs, a warm cave, and of the pleasure of tracking down squirrels...

The panther advanced slowly and rubbed against Cleevy. Cleevy thought desperately. What fine weather we've been having, and what a fine panther this chap really is, so big, so strong, and with such enormous teeth.

The panther purred!

Cleevy lay down and curled an imaginary tail around him and decided he was going to sleep. The panther stood by indecisively. He seemed to feel that something was wrong. He growled once, deep in his throat, then turned and loped away.

The sun had just set, and the entire land was a deep blue. Cleevy found that he was shaking uncontrollably, and on the verge of hysterical laughter. If the panther had stayed another moment...

He controlled himself with an effort. It was time for some serious thinking.

Probably every animal had its characteristic thought-smell. A squirrel emitted one kind, a wolf another, and a human still another. The all-important question was, could he be traced only when he thought of some animal? Or could his thought patterns, like an odor, be detected even when he was not thinking of anything in particular?

Apparently, the panther had scented him only when he thought specifically of it. But that could be due to unfamiliarity. His alien thought-smell might have confused the panther — this time.

He'd just have to wait and see. The panther probably wasn't stupid. It was just the first time that trick had been played on him.

Any trick will work — once.

Cleevy lay back and stared at the sky. He was too tired to move, and his bruised body ached. What would happen now, at night? Did the beasts continue to hunt? Or was there a truce of some sort? He didn't give a damn.

To hell with squirrels, wolves, panthers, lions, tigers, and reindeer.

He slept.

The next morning, he was surprised to find himself still alive. So far, so good. It might be a good day after all. Cheerfully he walked to his ship.

All that was left of Mailship 243 was a pile of twisted metal strewn across the scorched earth. Cleevy found a bar of metal, hefted it, and slid it into his belt below the mail sack. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it gave him a certain confidence.

The ship was a total loss. He left and began to look for food. In the surrounding countryside there were several fruit-bearing shrubs. He sampled one warily and found it tart, but not unpleasant. He gorged himself on fruit and washed it down with water from a nearby stream.



He hadn't seen any animals so far. Of course, for all he knew, they could be closing in on him now.

He avoided the thought and started looking for a place to hide. His best bet was to stay out of sight until the rescue ship came. He tramped over the gentle rolling hills, looking for a cliff, a tree, a cave. But the amiable landscape presented nothing larger than a six-foot shrub.

By afternoon he was tired and irritated, and scanning the skies anxiously. Why wasn't the ship here? It should take no longer than a day or two, he estimated, for a fast emergency ship to reach him.

If the postmaster was looking on the right planet.

There was a movement in the sky. He looked up, his heart racing furiously. There was something there!

It was a bird. It sailed slowly over him, balancing easily on its gigantic wings. It dipped once, then flew on.

It looked amazingly like a vulture.

He continued walking. In another moment, he found himself face to face with four blind wolves.

That took care of one question. He *could* be traced by his characteristic thought-smell. Evidently the beasts of this planet had decided he wasn't too alien to eat.

The wolves moved cautiously toward him. Cleevy tried the trick he had used the other day. Lifting the metal bar out of his belt, he thought of himself as a female wolf searching for her cubs. Won't one of you gentlemen help me find them? They were here only a few minutes ago. One was green, one was spotted, and the other...

Perhaps these wolves didn't have spotted cubs. One of them leaped at Cleevy. Cleevy struck him in mid-air with his bar, and the wolf staggered back.

Shoulder to shoulder, the four closed in.

Desperately, Cleevy tried to think himself out of existence. No use. The wolves kept on coming.

Cleevy thought of a panther. *He* was a panther, a big one, and he was looking forward to a meal of wolf.

That stopped them. They switched their tails anxiously, but held their ground.

Cleevy growled, pawed the earth, and stalked forward. The wolves retreated, but one started to slip behind him.

He moved sideways, trying to keep from being circled. It seemed that they really didn't believe him. Perhaps he didn't make a good



panther. They had stopped retreating. One was behind him, and the others stood firm, their tongues lolling out on their wet, open jaws. Cleevy growled ferociously and swung his club. A wolf darted back, but the one behind him sprang, landed on the mail sack, and knocked him over.

As they piled on, Cleevy had another inspiration. He imagined himself to be a snake, very fast, deadly, with poison fangs that could take a wolf's life in an instant.

They were off him at once. Cleevy hissed and arched his boneless neck. The wolves howled angrily, but showed no inclination to attack.

Then Cleevy made a mistake. He knew that he should stand firm and brazen it out. But his body had its own ideas. Involuntarily he turned and sprinted away.

The wolves loped after him, and glancing up, Cleevy could see the vultures gathering for the remains. He controlled himself and tried to become a snake again, but the wolves kept coming.

The vultures overhead gave him an idea. As a spaceman, he knew what the land looked like from the air. Cleevy decided to become a bird. He imagined himself soaring, balanced easily on an updraft, looking down on the green, rolling land.

The wolves were confused. They ran in circles and leaped into the air. Cleevy continued soaring, higher and higher, backing away slowly as he did so.

Finally he was out of sight of the wolves, and it was evening. He was exhausted. He had lived through another day. But evidently his gambits were good only once. What was he going to do tomorrow, if the rescue ship didn't come?

After it grew dark, he lay awake for a long time, watching the sky. But all he saw were stars. And all he heard was the occasional growl of a wolf, or the roar of a panther dreaming of his breakfast.

Morning came too soon. Cleevy awoke still tired and unrefreshed. He lay back and waited for something to happen.

Where was the rescue ship? They had had plenty of time, he decided. Why weren't they here? If they waited too long, the panther...

He shouldn't have thought it. In answer, he heard a roar on his right.

He stood up and moved away from the sound. He decided he'd be better off facing the wolves...

He shouldn't have thought that either, because now the roar of the panther was joined by the howl of a wolf pack.

Cleevy met them simultaneously in front of him. On the other side, he could make out the shapes of several wolves. For a moment, he thought they might fight it out. If the wolves jumped the panther, he could get away...

But they were interested only in him. Why should they fight each other, he realized, when he was around, broadcasting his fears and helplessness for all to hear?

The panther moved toward him. The wolves stayed back, evidently content to take the remains. Cleevy tried the bird routine, but the panther, after hesitating a moment, kept on coming.

Cleevy backed toward the wolves, wishing he had something to climb. What he needed was a cliff, or even a decent-sized tree...

But there were shrubs! With inventiveness born of desperation, Cleevy became a six-foot shrub. He didn't really know how a shrub would think, but he did his best.

He was blossoming now. And one of his roots felt a little wobbly — the result of that last storm. Still, he was a pretty good shrub, taking everything into consideration.

Out of the corner of his branches, he saw the wolves stop moving. The panther circled him, sniffed, and cocked his head to one side.

Really now, he thought, who would want to take a bite out of a shrub? You might have thought I was something else, but actually, I'm just a shrub. You wouldn't want a mouthful of leaves, would you? And you might break a tooth on my branches. Who ever heard of panthers eating shrubs? And I *am* a shrub. Ask my mother. She was a shrub, too. We've all been shrubs, ever since the Carboniferous Age.

The panther showed no signs of attacking. But he showed no signs of leaving, either. Cleevy wondered if he could keep it up. What should he think about next? The beauties of spring? A nest of robins in his hair?

A little bird landed on his shoulder.

Isn't that nice, Cleevy thought. He thinks I'm a shrub, too. He's going to build a nest in my branches. That's perfectly lovely. All the other shrubs will be jealous of me.

The bird tapped lightly at Cleevy's neck.

Easy, Cleevy thought. Wouldn't want to kill the tree that feeds you...

The bird tapped again, experimentally. Then, setting its webbed feet firmly, it proceeded to tap at Cleevy's neck with the speed of a pneumatic hammer.

A damned woodpecker, Cleevy thought, trying to stay shrub-like. He noticed that the panther was suddenly restive. But after the bird had punctured his neck for the fifteenth time, Cleevy couldn't help himself. He picked up the bird and threw it at the panther.

The panther snapped, but not in time. Outraged, the bird flew around Cleevy's head, scouting. Then it streaked away for the quieter shrubs.

Instantly, Cleevy became a shrub again, but that game was over. The panther cuffed at him. Cleevy tried to run, stumbled over a wolf, and fell. With the panther growling in his ear, he knew that he was a corpse already.

The panther hesitated.

Cleevy now became a corpse to his melting fingertips. He had been dead for days, weeks. His blood had long since drained away. His flesh stank. All that was left was rot and decay. No sane animal would touch him, no matter how hungry it was.

The panther seemed to agree. He backed away. The wolves howled hungrily, but they, too, were in retreat.

Cleevy advanced his putrefaction several days. He concentrated on how horribly indigestible he was, how genuinely unsavory. And there was conviction in back of his thought. He honestly didn't believe he would make a good meal for anyone.

The panther continued to move away, followed by the wolves. He was saved! He could go on being a corpse for the rest of his life, if necessary...

And then he smelled *truly* rotten flesh. Looking around, he saw that an enormous bird had landed beside him.

On Earth, it would have been called a vulture.

Cleevy could have cried at that moment. Wouldn't anything work? The vulture waddled toward him, and Cleevy jumped to his feet and kicked it away. If he had to be eaten, it wasn't going to be by a vulture.

The panther came back like a lightning bolt, and there seemed to be anger and frustration on that blank, furry face. Cleevy raised



his metal bar, wishing he had a tree to climb, a gun to shoot, or even a torch to wave...

A torch!

He knew at once that he had found the answer. He blazed in the panther's face, and the panther backed away, squealing. Quickly Cleevy began to burn in all directions, devouring the dry grass, setting fire to the shrubs.

The panther and the wolves darted away.

Now it was his turn! He should have remembered that all animals have a deep, instinctive dread of fire. By God, he was going to be the greatest fire that ever hit this place!

A light breeze came up and fanned him across the rolling land. Squirrels fled from the underbrush and streaked away from him. Families of birds took flight, and panthers, wolves, and other animals ran side by side, all thought of food driven from their minds, wishing only to escape from the fire — to escape from him!

Dimly, Cleevy realized that he had now become truly telepathic himself. Eyes closed, he could see on all sides of him and sense what was going on. As a roaring fire he advanced, sweeping everything before him. And he could *feel* the fear in their minds as they raced away.

It was fitting. Hadn't man always been the master, because of his adaptability, his superior intelligence? The same results obtained here, too. Proudly he jumped a narrow stream three miles away, ignited a clump of bushes, flamed, spurted...

And then he felt the first drop of water.

He burned on, but the one drop became five, then fifteen, then five hundred. He was drenched, and his fuel, the grass and shrubs, were soon dripping with water.

He was being put out.

It just wasn't fair, Cleevy thought. By rights he should have won. He had met this planet on its own terms and beaten it — only to have an act of nature ruin everything.

Cautiously, the animals were starting to return.

The water poured down. The last of Cleevy's flames went out. Cleevy sighed, and fainted.

"...a damned fine job. You held onto your mail, and that's the mark of a good postman. Perhaps we can arrange a medal."



Cleevy opened his eyes. The postmaster was standing over him, beaming proudly. He was lying on a bunk, and overhead he could see curving metal walls.

He was on the rescue ship.

"What happened?" he croaked.

"We got you just in time," the postmaster said. "You'd better not move yet. We were almost too late."

Cleevy felt the ship lift and knew that they were leaving the surface of 3-M-22. He staggered to the port and looked at the green land below him.

"It was close," the postmaster said, standing beside Cleevy and looking down. "We got the ship's sprinkler system going just in time. You were standing in the center of the damnedest grass fire I've ever seen." Looking down at the unscarred green land, the postmaster seemed to have a moment of doubt. He looked again, and his expression reminded Cleevy of the panther he had tricked.

"Say — how come you weren't burned?"

# THE NECESSARY THING

Richard Gregor was seated at his desk in the dusty offices of the AAA Ace Interplanetary Decontamination Service, staring wearily at a list. The list included some 2,305 separate items. Gregor was trying to remember what, if anything, he had left out.

Anti-radiation salve? Vacuum flares? Water-purification kit? Yes, they were all there.

He yawned and glanced at his watch. Arnold, his partner, should have been back by now. Arnold had gone to order the 2,305 items and see them stowed safely aboard the spaceship. In a few hours, AAA Ace was scheduled to blast off on another job.

But had he listed everything important? A spaceship is an island unto itself, self-sufficient, self-sustaining. If you run out of beans on Dementia II, there is no store where you could buy more. No Coast Guard hurries out to replace the burned-out lining on your main drive. You have to have another lining on board, and the tools to replace it with, and the manuals telling you how. Space is just too big to permit much in the way of rescue operations.

Oxygen extractor? Extra cigarettes? It was like attaching jets to a department store, Gregor thought.

He pushed the list aside, found a pack of tattered cards, and laid out a hopeless solitaire of his own devising.

Minutes later, Arnold stepped jauntily in.

Gregor looked at his partner with suspicion. When the little chemist walked with that peculiar bouncing step, his round face beaming happily, it usually meant trouble for AAA Ace.

"Did you get the stuff?" Gregor asked.

"I did better than that," Arnold said proudly.

"We're supposed to blast off — "

"And blast we will," Arnold said. He sat down on the edge of his desk. "I have just saved us a considerable sum of money."

"Oh, no," Gregor sighed. "What have you done?"

"Consider," Arnold said impressively, "just consider the sheer waste in equipping the average expedition. We pack 2,305 items, just on the offchance we may need one. Our payload is diminished, our living space is cramped, and the stuff never gets used."

"Except for once or twice," Gregor said, "when it saves our lives."

"I took that into account," Arnold said. "I gave the whole problem careful study. And I was able to cut down the list considerably. Through a bit of luck, I found the one thing an expedition really needs. The necessary thing."

Gregor arose and towered over his partner. Visions of mayhem danced through his brain, but he controlled himself with an effort. "Arnold," he said, "I don't know what you've done. But you'd better get those 2,305 items on board and get them fast."

"Can't do it," Arnold said, with a nervous little laugh. "The money's gone. This thing will pay for itself, though."

"What thing?"

"The one really necessary thing. Come out to the ship and I'll show you."

Gregor couldn't get another word out of him. Arnold smiled mysteriously to himself on the long drive to Kennedy Spaceport. Their ship was already in a blast pit, scheduled for take-off in a few hours.

Arnold swung the port open with a flourish. "There!" he cried. "Behold the answer to an expedition's prayers."

Gregor stepped inside. He saw a large and fantastic-looking machine with dials, lights, and indicators scattered haphazardly over it.

"What is it?" Gregor asked.

"Isn't it a beauty?" Arnold patted the machine affectionately. "Joe the Interstellar Junkman happened to have it tucked away. I conned it out of him for a song."

That settled it, as far as Gregor was concerned. He had dealt with Joe the Interstellar Junkman before and had always come out on the disastrously short end of the deal. Joe's gadgets worked; but when, and how often, and with what kind of an attitude was something else again.

Gregor said sternly. "No gadget of Joe's is going into space with me again. Maybe we can sell it for scrap metal." He began to hunt around for a wrecking bar.

"Wait," Arnold begged. "Let me show you. Consider. We are in deep space. The main drive falters and fails. Upon examination, we find that a duralloy nut has worked its way off the number three pinion. We can't find the nut. What do we do?"

"We take a new nut from the 2,305 items we've packed for emergencies just like this," Gregor said.

"Ah! But you didn't include any quarter-inch duralloy nuts!" Arnold said triumphantly. "I checked the list. What then?"

"I don't know," Gregor said. "You tell me."

Arnold stepped up to the machine and punched a button. In a loud, clear voice he said, "Duralloy nut, quarter-inch diameter."

The machine murmured and hummed. Lights flashed. A panel slid back, revealing, a bright, freshly machined duralloy nut.

"*That's* what we do," Arnold said.

"Hmm," Gregor said, not particularly impressed. "So it manufactures nuts. What else does it do?"

Arnold pressed the button again. "A pound of fresh shrimp."

When he slid back the panel, the shrimp were there.

"I should have told it to peel them," Arnold said. "Oh well." He pressed the button. "A graphite rod, four feet long with a diameter of two inches."

The panel opened wider this time to let the rod come through.

"What else can it do?" Gregor asked.

"What else would you like?" Arnold said. "A small tiger cub? A model-A downdraught carburetor? A twenty-five watt light bulb or a stick of chewing gum?"

"Do you mean it'll turn out *anything*?" Gregor asked.

"Anything at all. It's a Configurator. Try it yourself."

Gregor tried and produced, in rapid succession, a pint of fresh water, a wristwatch, and a jar of cocktail sauce.

"Hmm," he said.

"See what I mean? Isn't this better than packing 2,305 items? Isn't it simpler and more logical to produce what you need when you need it?"

"It *seems* good," Gregor said. "But..."

"But what?"



Gregor shook his head. What indeed? He had no idea. It had simply been his experience that gadgets are never so useful, reliable, or consistent as they seem at first glance.

He thought deeply, then punched the button. "A transistor, series GE 1342E."

The machine hummed and the panel opened. There was the tiny transistor.

"Seems pretty good," Gregor admitted. "What are you doing?"

"Peeling the shrimp," Arnold said.

After enjoying a tasty shrimp cocktail, the partners received their clearance from the tower. In an hour, the ship was in space.

They were bound for Dennett IV, an average-sized planet in the Sycophax cluster. Dennett was a hot, steamy, fertile world suffering from only one major difficulty: too much rain. It rained on Dennett a good nine-tenths of the time, and when it wasn't raining, it was threatening to rain.

This made it an easy job. The principles of climate control were well known, for many worlds suffered from similar difficulties. It would take only a few days for AAA Ace to interrupt and alter the pattern.

After an uneventful trip, Dennett came into view. Arnold relieved the automatic pilot and brought the ship down through thick cloud banks. They dropped through miles of pale gossamer mist. At last, mountaintops began to appear, and they found a level, barren gray plain.

"Odd color for a landscape," Gregor said.

Arnold nodded. With practiced ease he spiraled, leveled out, came down neatly above the plain, and, with his forces balanced, cut the drive.

"Wonder why there's no vegetation," Gregor mused.

In a moment they found out. The ship hung for a second, then dropped through the plain and fell another eight feet to the ground.

The plain, it seemed, was fog of a density only Dennett could produce.

Hastily they unbuckled themselves and tested various teeth, bones, and ligatures. Upon finding that nothing personal was broken, they checked their ship.

The impact had done the poor old spacecraft no good. The radio and automatic pilot were a complete loss. Ten stern plates had

buckled, and, worst of all, some delicate components in the turn-drive control were shattered.

"We were lucky at that," Arnold said.

"Yes," Gregor said, peering through the blanketing fog. "But next time we use instruments."

"In a way I'm glad it happened," Arnold said. "Now you'll see what a lifesaver the Configurator is. Let's go to work."

They listed all the damaged parts. Arnold stepped up to the Configurator, pressed the button, and said, "A drive plate, five inches square, half-inch in diameter, steel alloy 342."

The machine quickly turned it out.

"We need ten of them," Gregor said.

"I know." Again Arnold pushed the button. "Another one."

The machine did nothing.

"Probably have to give the whole command," Arnold said. He punched the button again and said, "Drive plate, five inches square, half-inch in diameter, steel alloy 342."

The machine was silent.

"That's odd," Arnold said.

"Isn't it, though," Gregor said, with an odd sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Arnold tried again, with no success. He thought deeply, then punched the button and said, "A plastic teacup."

The machine turned out a teacup of bright blue plastic.

"Another one," Arnold said. When the Configurator did nothing, Arnold asked for a wax crayon. The machine gave it to him.

"Another wax crayon," Arnold said. The machine did nothing.

"That's interesting," Arnold said. "I suppose I should have thought of the possibility."

"What possibility?"

"Apparently the Configurator will turn out anything," Arnold said. "But only once." He experimented again, making the machine produce a number two pencil. It would do it once, but only once.

"That's fine," Gregor said. "We need nine more plates. And the turn-drive needs four identical parts. What are we going to do?"

"We'll think of something," Arnold said cheerfully.

"I hope so," Gregor said.

Outside the rain began. The partners settled down to think.

"Only one explanation," Arnold said, several hours later. "Pleasure principle."

"Huh?" Gregor said. He had been dozing, lulled by the soft patter of rain against the dented side of the spaceship.

"This machine must have some form of intelligence," Arnold said. "After all, it receives stimuli, translates it into action commands, and fabricates a product from a mental blueprint."

"Sure it does," Gregor said. "But only once."

"Yes. But *why* only once? That's the key to our difficulties. I think it must be a self-imposed limit, linked to a pleasure drive. Or perhaps a quasi-pleasure drive."

"I don't follow you," Gregor said.

"Look. The builders wouldn't have limited their machine in this way. The only possible explanation is this: when a machine is constructed on this order of complexity, it takes on quasi-human characteristics. It derives a quasi-humaniform pleasure from producing a new thing. But a thing is only new once. After that, the Configurator wants to produce something else."

Gregor slumped back into his apathetic half-slumber. Arnold went on talking. "Fulfillment of potential, that's what a machine wants. The Configurator's ultimate desire is to create everything possible. From its point of view, repetition is a waste of time."

"That's the most suspect line of reasoning I've ever heard," Gregor said. "But assuming you're right, what can we do about it?"

"I don't know," Arnold said.

"That's what I thought."

For dinner that evening, the Configurator turned out a very creditable roast beef. They finished with apple pie *à la machine*, with sharp cheese on the side. Their morale was improved considerably.

"Substitutions," Gregor said later, smoking a cigar *ex machina*. "That's what we'll have to try. Alloy 342 isn't the only thing we can use for the plates. There are plenty of materials that'll last until we get back to Earth."

The Configurator couldn't be tricked into producing a plate of iron or any of the ferrous alloys. They asked for and got a plate of bronze. But then the machine wouldn't give them copper or tin. Aluminum was acceptable, as was cadmium, platinum, gold, and silver. A tungsten plate was an interesting rarity; Arnold wished he knew how the machine had cast it. Gregor vetoed plutonium, and they were running short of suitable materials. Arnold hit upon an



extra-tough ceramic as a good substitute. And the final plate was pure zinc.

The noble metals would tend to melt in the heat of space, of course; but with proper refrigeration, they might last as far as Earth. All in all, it was a good night's work, and the partners toasted each other in an excellent, though somewhat oily, dry sherry.

The next day they bolted in the plates and surveyed their handiwork. The rear of the ship looked like a patchwork quilt.

"I think it's quite pretty," Arnold said.

"I just hope it'll hold up," Gregor said. "Now for the turn-drive components."

But that was a problem of a different nature. Four identical parts were missing: delicate, precisely engineered affairs of glass and wire. No substitutions were possible.

The machine turned out the first without hesitation. But that was all. By noon, both men were disgusted.

"Any ideas?" Gregor asked.

"Not at the moment. Let's take a break for lunch."

They decided that lobster salad would be pleasant, and ordered it on the machine. The Configurator hummed for a moment, but produced nothing.

"What's wrong now?" Gregor asked.

"I was afraid of this," Arnold said.

"Afraid of what? We haven't asked for lobster before."

"No," Arnold said, "but we did ask for shrimp. Both are shellfish. I'm afraid the Configurator is beginning to make decisions according to classes."

"You'd better break open a few cans then," Gregor said.

Arnold smiled feebly. "Well," he said, "after I bought the Configurator, I didn't think we'd have to bother — I mean — "

"No cans?"

"No."

They returned to the machine and asked for salmon, trout, and tuna, with no results. Then they tried roast pork, leg of lamb, and veal. Nothing.

"It seems to consider our roast beef last night as representative of all mammals," Arnold said. "This is interesting. We might be able to evolve a new theory of classes — "

"While starving to death," Gregor said. He tried roast chicken, and this time the Configurator came through without hesitation.



"Eureka!" Arnold cried.

"Damn!" Gregor said. "I should have asked for turkey."

The rain continued to fall on Dennett, and mist swirled around the spaceship's gaudy patchwork stern. Arnold began a long series of slide-rule calculations. Gregor finished off the dry sherry, tried unsuccessfully to order a case of Scotch, and started playing solitaire.

They ate a frugal supper on the remains of the chicken, and Arnold completed his calculations.

"It might work," he said.

"What might work?"

"The pleasure principle." He stood up and began to pace the cabin. "This machine has quasi-human characteristics. Certainly it possesses learning potential. I think we can teach it to derive pleasure from producing the same thing many times. Namely, the turn-drive components."

"It's worth a try," Gregor said.

Late into the night they talked to the machine. Arnold murmured persuasively about the joys of repetition. Gregor spoke highly of the aesthetic values inherent in producing an artistic object like a turn-drive component, not once, but many times, each item an exact and perfect twin. Arnold murmured lyrically to the machine about the thrill, the supreme thrill of fabricating endlessly parts without end. Again and again, the same parts, produced of the same material, turned out at the same rate. Ecstasy! And, Gregor put in, so beautiful a concept philosophically, and so completely suited to the peculiar makeup and capabilities of a machine. As a conceptual system, he continued, Repetition (as opposed to mere Creation) closely approached the status of entropy, which, mechanically, was perfection.

By clicks and flashes, the Configurator showed that it was listening. And when Dennett's damp and pallid dawn was in the sky, Arnold pushed the button and gave the command for a turn-drive component.

The machine hesitated. Lights flickered uncertainly, indicators turned in a momentary hunting process. Uncertainty was manifest in every tube.

There was a click. The panel slid back. And there was another turn-drive component!

"Success!" Gregor shouted, and slapped Arnold on the back. Quickly he gave the order again. But this time the Configurator emitted a loud and emphatic buzz.

And produced nothing.

Gregor tried again. But there was no more hesitation from the machine, and no more components.

"What's wrong now?" Gregor asked.

"It's obvious," Arnold said sadly. "It decided to give repetition a try, just in case it had missed something. But after trying it, the Configurator decided it didn't like it."

"A machine that doesn't like repetition!" Gregor groaned. "It's inhuman!"

"On the contrary," Arnold said unhappily. "It's all too human."

It was supper-time, and the partners had to hunt for foods the Configurator would produce. A vegetable plate was easy enough, but not too filling. The machine allowed them one loaf of bread, but no cake. Milk products were out, as they had had cheese the other day. Finally, after an hour of trial and error, the Configurator gave them a pound of whale steak, apparently uncertain of its category.

Gregor went back to work, crooning the joys of repetition into the machine's receptors. A steady hum and occasional flashes of light showed that the Configurator was still listening.

Arnold took out several reference books and embarked on a project of his own. Several hours later he looked up with a shout of triumph.

"I knew I'd find it!"

Gregor looked up quickly. "What?"

"A substitute turn-drive control!" He pushed the book under Gregor's nose. "Look there. A scientist on Vednier II perfected this fifty years ago. It's clumsy, by modern standards, but it'll work. And it'll fit into our ship."

"But what's it made of?" Gregor asked.

"That's the best part of it. We can't miss! It's made of rubber!"

Quickly he punched the Configurator's button and read the description of the turn-drive control.

Nothing happened.

"You have to turn out the Vednier control!" Arnold shouted at the machine. "If you don't, you're violating your own principles!" He punched the button again and, enunciating with painful clarity, read the description again.

Nothing happened.

Gregor had a sudden terrible suspicion. He walked to the back of the Configurator, found what he had feared, and pointed it out to Arnold.

There was a manufacturer's plate bolted there. It read: *Class 3 Configurator. Made by Vednier Laboratories, Vednier II.*

"So they've already used it for that," Arnold said.

Gregor said nothing. There just didn't seem to be anything to say.

Mildew was beginning to form inside the spaceship, and rust had appeared on the steel plate in the stern. The machine still listened to the partners' hymn to repetition, but did nothing about it.

The problem of another meal came up. Fruit was out because of the apple pie, as were all meats, fish, milk products, and cereals. At last they dined sparsely on frog's legs, baked grasshoppers (from an Old Chinese recipe), and fillet of iguana. But now with lizards, insects, and amphibians used up, they knew that their machine-made meals were at an end.

Both men were showing signs of strain. Gregor's long face was bonier than ever. Arnold found traces of mildew in his hair. Outside, the rain poured ceaselessly, dripped past the portholes and into the moist earth. The spaceship began to settle, burying itself under its own weight.

For the next meal they could think of nothing.

Then Gregor conceived a final idea.

He thought it over carefully. Another failure would shatter their badly bent morale. But, slim though the chance of success might be, he had to try it.

Slowly he approached the Configurator. Arnold looked up, frightened by the wild light gleaming in his eyes.

"Gregor! What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to give this thing one last command," Gregor said hoarsely. With a trembling hand he punched the button and whispered his request.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Arnold shouted, "Get back!"

The machine was quivering and shaking, dials twitching, lights flickering. Heat and energy indicators flashed through red into purple.

"What did you tell it to produce?" Arnold asked.



"I didn't tell it to produce anything," Gregor said. "I told it to reproduce!"

The Configurator gave a convulsive shudder and emitted a cloud of black smoke. The partners coughed and gasped for air.

When the smoke cleared away the Configurator was still there, its paint chipped, and several indicators bent out of shape. And beside it, glistening with black machine oil, was a duplicate Configurator.

"You've done it!" Arnold cried. "You've saved us!"

"I've done more than that," Gregor said, with weary satisfaction. "I've made our fortunes." He turned to the duplicate Configurator, pressed its button and cried, "Reproduce yourself!"

Within a week, Arnold, Gregor and three Configurators were back in Kennedy Spaceport, their work on Dennett completed. As soon as they landed, Arnold left the ship and caught a taxi. He went first to Canal Street, then to midtown New York. His business didn't take long, and within a few hours he was back at the ship.

"Yes, it's all right," he called to Gregor. "I contacted several different jewelers. We can dispose of about twenty big stones without depressing the market. After that, I think we should have the Configurators concentrate on platinum for a while, and then — what's wrong?"

Gregor looked at him sourly. "Notice anything different?"

"Huh?" Arnold stared around the cabin, at Gregor, and at the Configurators. Then he noticed it.

There were four Configurators in the cabin, where there had been only three.

"You had them reproduce another?" Arnold said. "Nothing wrong with that. Just tell them to turn out a diamond apiece —"

"You still don't get it," Gregor said sadly. "Watch."

He pressed the button on the nearest Configurator and said, "A diamond."

The Configurator began to quiver.

"You and your damned pleasure principle," Gregor said. "Repetition! These damned machines are sex mad."

The machine shook all over, and produced —  
Another Configurator.





# REDFERN'S LABYRINTH

Charles Angier Redfern received two curious letters in his mail on an otherwise undistinguished morning. One letter was in a plain white envelope, and for a moment Redfern thought he recognized the handwriting. He opened the envelope and took out a letter with no salutation or signature. He puzzled for a while over the strange yet familiar handwriting, then recognized it as an imitation of his own. Mildly intrigued, but with a faint anticipation of boredom, he read the following:

Most of the propositions in Redfern's ineptly titled LABYRINTH will doubtless go unchallenged, as no one could possibly care one way or another. Redfern's LABYRINTH fails to evoke anything except Redfern's own baffled impotence. One senses that Redfern has failed to overcome his own meek and hateful slavishness, his boundless desire to comply.

Because of this resonant failure, the reader's first sensation is apt to be pointedly inconsequential: a concern with the humble brevity of the *Labyrinth*, and a spiteful wish that it were shorter still.

But this quickly passes, and the reader discovers that his predominant mood is a muted reluctance to feel anything at all. With gratitude he discovers himself to be indifferent. And, although he surely does not wish to remember the LABYRINTH, he does not even care enough to forget it.

Thus the reader meets Redfern's boredom with an even more devastating boredom of his own; he imitates Redfern's

hostility, and easily surpasses it. He refuses even to acknowledge Redfern's existence; and to that end, he has the absent-minded sensation of never having experienced the LABYRINTH at all. (He is right, of course; no number of re-encounters would ever correct that eminently logical conclusion.

This LABYRINTH, it seems, could be used as an exemplary monument to tedium, were it not marred (how typical of Redfern!) by a single provocative idea.

This occurs in Proposition 113, which states: "All men know that the Maze rules its haphazard victims with an iron law; but very few realize the logical consequences of this: namely, that the Maze itself must be one of these victims, and must therefore be equally subject to the rule of an irksome law."

Redfern does not state the "law," a lapse which we might have anticipated. But it can easily be inferred from his otherwise meaningless Proposition 282: "Providence, despite all outward appearances, is inevitably merciful."

Therefore, following Redfern: the Maze rules men, but Providence rules the Maze. How can we know this? By the law to which the Maze (in common with all things except Providence) is subject. What is this law? That the Maze is under a mandate to *make itself known*. Our proof of this? The fact that Redfern, the meekest and most imitative of men, knows it.

But now we wish to know exactly what this law is that governs the Maze. *How* must the Maze make itself known? Without a description of this, we have nothing; and Redfern is useless to us in this quest. He cannot tell us, he probably would not even if he could. Therefore, for the description of the law which circumscribes the Maze, its particular manner and form, together with several homely hints to aid in its recognition, we turn to the otherwise undistinguished Charles Angier Redfern.

Redfern put down the letter. Its forced ambiguities had bored him. Its specious and arbitrary manner and its meretricious effect had given him the curiously comforting sensation that one gets by discovering as a falsehood what one suspected as truth. He turned to the second letter.

The envelope was unnaturally long and narrow, and colored a tedious aqua; it retained a faint but unmistakable odor of kelp. His name, printed in a faded, machine-simulated hand, was correctly spelled; but his address was incorrectly given as 132 Bruckner Boulevard. That had been crossed out, and a printed imitation of a post-office stamp read: "Return to Sender." (There was no return address on the envelope.) That, in turn, had been slashed with a black crayon, and someone had written: "Try 137 W. 12th Street," which was his true address.

Redfern realized that these details were superfluous; they seemed to be in imitation of the letter within. He opened the envelope and extracted the letter, which was written gratuitously on a torn piece of brown wrapping paper. It read:

HI THERE! ! !

You have been selected as one of those few truly modern and discerning people for whom novelty outweighs apprehension, and whose desire for the unusual is metered only by his innate good taste and sense of style. Above all we believe that YOU are the sort of uninhibited free-swinging with whom we would like to be friends.

Therefore we take this opportunity of inviting you to the GRAND OPENING OF OUR LABYRINTH! ! ! ! !

This Labyrinth (the only one of its kind on the Eastern Seaboard) is, needless to say, replete with KICKS. There are no squares on our curves! ! ! This Labyrinth beggars the description and infantilizes the desires.

Please call us and we'll arrange a time and place of Entrance to suit your convenience. Our charges are merely life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Call us soon, hear? AND THANKS A LOT, FELLA! ! ! ! !

Instead of a signature, there was a telephone number.

Redfern flicked the letter regretfully in his hand. It was obviously the work of an over-eager English major — tediously hip, dreadfully cute.

The writer of the letter was obviously trying to perpetrate a hoax; therefore, Redfern decided to hoax the hoaxer through a show of credence. He picked up the telephone and dialed the number he had been given.



The voice of a middle-aged woman, querulous but resigned, said: "Redfern Behavioral Research Institute."

Redfern frowned, cleared his throat, and said, "I am calling to inquire about the Labyrinth."

"About the *what?*" the woman said.

"The Labyrinth."

"What number are you calling?"

Redfern told her. The woman agreed that he had the correct number for the Redfern Institute; but she knew nothing about any Labyrinth. Unless, of course, he was referring to the well-known L Series of mazes, which were used for the testing of rats. The L Series mazes, she went on, were available in various models and were priced according to their square footage. They ranged from the L-1001, a simple forced choice binary maze of twenty-five square feet, all the way up to the L-10023, a multiple-choice random-selection model of nine hundred square feet, suitable for auditorium viewing.

"No," Redfern said, "I'm afraid that wasn't exactly the sort of thing I had in mind."

"Then what exactly did you have in mind?" the woman asked. "We also build custom mazes, as our advertisement in the Yellow Pages points out."

"But I don't want you to *build* a maze for me," Redfern said. "You see, according to the letter I received, this Labyrinth, or maze, is already in existence and seems to be quite extensive in size and to have been designed for humans, that is to say, for people."

"Just exactly what are you talking about?" the woman asked, in tones of deepest suspicion.

Redfern found himself babbling: "It's this letter I received. I've been invited to the grand opening of this Labyrinth, which gave your telephone number for further information —"

"Listen, mister," the woman interrupted in an angry, grating voice, "I don't know if you're some kind of nut or if this is some kind of gag or what, but the Redfern Institute is a respectable business of over thirty-five years standing, and if you bother me again with this nonsense, I'll have this call traced and you will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law!"

She hung up.

Redfern sat back in his chair. He found that his hands were trembling. Having detected the primary hoax, as he had been meant

to do, he had tried a counter-hoax and had thereby fallen into a second or ancillary hoax. He felt ridiculous.

Then a disturbing thought occurred to him. He opened the Manhattan telephone book and looked up the Redfern Behavioral Research Institute.

There was no such listing.

He dialed information and asked for New Listings, then for Regular Listings; but as he had foreseen, there was no Redfern Institute. Finally, taking down the Yellow Pages, he looked up Mazes, Labyrinths, Research, Behavior, Scientific Equipment, and Laboratory Equipment. There was no Redfern, and no firm which specialized in the construction of mazes.

He realized that, in penetrating the secondary hoax, he had inevitably fallen for a tertiary hoax; nor did this necessarily end the series.

But of course, too much evidence had accumulated by now to permit him to retain the thought of a hoax. The series had been, in fact, a part of the Labyrinth itself, a small loop, curving quickly back to its original point of departure. Or to a point *closely resembling the original*.

One of the primary aspects of a labyrinth is duplication. That had been faithfully carried out: overtly by the use of Redfern's name in both letters and the imitation of his handwriting; implicitly by the monotonous contradiction of every statement.

The description of the law of the maze (which, it was asserted, he had known but also had not known) was simple enough now. It could be a description only of his own emotions concerning the maze; its forced ambiguities had bored him. Its specious and arbitrary manner and its generally meretricious effect had given him the curiously comforting sensation that one gets by discovering as a falsehood what one had suspected as truth.

Followed this, he saw, the first letter was actually the Labyrinth — that slavish, endlessly duplicating monument to tedium whose perfection was marred by one significant detail: its own existence. The second letter was the obligatory duplication of the first, thus fulfilling the requirements for a labyrinth.

Other viewpoints were also possible; but at this point, it occurred to Redfern that he might have thought all of this before.



# PROOF OF THE PUDDING

His arms were very tired, but he lifted the chisel and mallet again. He was almost through; only a few more letters and the inscription, cut deeply into the tough granite, would be finished. He rounded out the last period and straightened up, dropping his tools carelessly to the floor of the cave. Proudly he wiped the perspiration from his dirty stubbled face and read what he had written.

I ROSE FROM THE SLIME OF THE PLANET, NAKED AND DEFENSELESS,  
I FASHIONED TOOLS. I BUILT AND DEMOLISHED, CREATED AND DESTROYED.  
I CREATED A THING GREATER THAN MYSELF THAT DESTROYED ME.  
MY NAME IS MAN AND THIS IS MY LAST WORK.

He smiled. What he had written was good. Not literary enough, perhaps, but a fitting tribute to the human race, written by the last man. He glanced at the tools at his feet. Having no further use for them, he dissolved them, and hungry from his long work, squatted in the rubble of the cave and created a dinner. He stared at the food for a moment, wondering what was lacking; then, sheepishly, created a table and a chair, utensils and plates. He was embarrassed. He had forgotten them again.

Although there was no need to rush, he ate hurriedly, noting the odd fact that when he didn't think of anything specific, he always created hamburger, mashed potatoes, peas, bread, and ice-cream. Habit, he decided. Finished, he made the remnants of the meal disappear, and with them the plates, utensils, and table. The chair he retained. Sitting on it, he stared thoughtfully at the inscription. It's fine, he thought, but no human other than myself will ever read it.



It was fairly certain that he was the last man alive on Earth. The war had been thorough. Thorough as only man, a meticulous animal, could make it. There had been no neutrals in this war, no middle-of-the-road policy. You were on one side or the other. Bacteria, gas, and radiations had covered Earth like a vast cloud. In the first days of that war, an invincible secret weapon had succeeded secret weapon with almost monotonous regularity. And after the last hand had pushed the last button, the bombs, automatically guided and impelled, had continued to rain down. Unhappy Earth was a huge junkyard, without a living thing, plant or animal, from pole to pole.

He had watched a good part of it. He had waited until he was fairly sure the last bomb had been dropped; then he had come down.

Very clever of you, he thought bitterly, looking out of the mouth of the cave at the lava plain his ship rested on and at the twisted mountains behind it.

You're a traitor — but who cares?

He had been a captain in the Western Hemisphere Defense. Within two days of warfare, he had known what that end would be. Filling a cruiser with canned air, food, and water, he had fled. In the confusion and destruction, he knew that he would never be missed; after a few days there was no one left to miss him. He had raced the big ship to the dark side of the moon and waited. It was a twelve-day war — he had guessed it would last fourteen — but he had to wait nearly six months before the automatic missiles stopped falling. Then he had come down.

To find himself the only survivor...

He had expected others to recognize the futility of it, load ships, and flock to the dark side of the moon also. Evidently there had been no time, even if there had been the desire. He had thought that there would be scattered groups of survivors, but he hadn't found any. The war had been too thorough.

Landing on Earth should have killed him, for the air was poisoned. He hadn't cared — and he had lived. He seemed to be immune to the various kinds of germs and radiations, or perhaps that was part of his new power. He certainly had encountered enough of both, skipping around the world in his ship, from the ruins of one city to another, across blasted valleys and plains, scorched mountains. He had found no life, but he did discover something.

He could create. He realized the power on his third day on Earth. Wistfully, he had wished for a tree in the midst of the melted rock and metal; a tree had appeared. The rest of the day he experimented and found that he could create anything that he had ever seen or heard about.

Things he knew best, he could create best. Things he knew just from books or conversation — palaces, for example — tended to be lopsided and uncertain, although he could make them nearly perfect by laboring mentally over the details. Everything he created was three-dimensional. Even food tasted like food and seemed to nourish him. He could forget all about one of his creations, go to sleep, and it would still be there when he awakened. He could also uncreate. A single concentrated thought and the thing he had made would vanish. The larger the thing, the longer it took to uncreate.

Things he *hadn't* made — valleys and mountains — he could uncreate too, but it took longer. It seemed as though matter was easier to handle once he had shaped it. He could make birds and small animals, or things that looked like birds and small animals.

He had never tried to make a human being.

He wasn't a scientist; he had been a space pilot. He had vague concept of atomic theory and practically no idea of genetics. He thought that some change must have taken place in his germ plasm, or in his brain, or perhaps on Earth. The why of it all didn't especially bother him. It was a fact and he accepted it.

He stared at the monument again. Something about it bothered him.

Of course, he could have created it, but he didn't know if the things he made would endure after his death. They seemed stable enough, but they might dissolve with his own dissolution. Therefore he compromised. He created a chisel and mallet, but selected a granite wall that he hadn't made. He cut the letters into the inside of the wall of the cave so they would be safe from the elements, working many hours at a stretch, sleeping and eating beside the wall.

From the mouth of the cave, he could see his ship, perched on a level plain of scorched ground. He was in no rush to get back to it. In six days the inscription was done, cut deeply and eternally into the rock.

The thought that had been bothering him as he stared at the gray granite finally came to the surface. The only people who would come

to read it would be visitors from the stars. How would they decipher it? He stared at the inscription angrily. He should have written it in symbols. But what kind of symbols? Mathematics? Of course, but what would that tell them about Man? And what made him think *they* would discover the cave anyway? There was no use for an inscription when Man's entire history was written over the face of the planet, scorched into the crust for anyone to see. He cursed his stupidity for wasting six days working at the useless inscription. He was about to uncreate it when he turned his head, hearing footsteps at the mouth of the cave.

He almost fell off the chair getting to his feet.

A girl was standing there. He blinked rapidly, and she was still there, a tall, dark-haired girl dressed in a torn, dirty one-piece cover-all.

"Hi," she said, and walked into the cave. "I heard your hammer from the valley."

Automatically, he offered her his chair and created another for himself. She tested it gingerly before she sat down.

"I saw you do it," she said, "but I still don't believe it. Mirrors?"

"No," he muttered uncertainly. "I create. That is, I have the power to — wait a minute! How did you get here?" While he was demanding to know, he was considering and rejecting possibilities. Hidden in a cave? On a mountain-top? No, there would be only one possible way...

"I was in your ship, pal." She leaned back in the chair and clasped her hands around one knee. "When you loaded up that cruiser, I figured you were going to beat it. I was getting tired of setting fuses eighteen hours a day, so I stowed away. Anybody else alive?"

"No. Why didn't I see you, then?" He stared at the ragged, beautiful girl, and a vague thought crossed his mind. He reached out and touched her arm. She didn't draw back, but her pretty face grew annoyed.

"I'm real," she said bluntly. "You must have seen me at the Base. Remember?"

He tried to think back to the time when there had been a Base — centuries ago, it seemed. There *had* been a dark-haired girl there, one who had never given him a tumble.



"I think I froze to death," she was saying. "Or into coma, anyhow, a few hours after your ship took off. Lousy heating system you have in that crate!" She shivered reminiscently.

"Would have used up too much oxygen," he explained. "Just kept the pilot's compartment heated and aired. Used a suit to drag supplies forward when I needed them."

"I'm glad you didn't see me," she laughed. "I must have looked like the devil, all covered with frost and killed, I bet. Some sleeping beauty I probably made! Well, I froze. When you opened all the compartments, I revived. That's the whole story. Guess it took a few days. How come you didn't see me?"

"I suppose I never looked back there," he admitted. "Quick enough, I found I didn't need supplies. Funny, I thought I opened all the compartments, but I don't really remember —"

She looked at the inscription on the wall. "What's that?"

"I thought I'd leave a sort of monument —"

"Who's going to read it?" she asked practically.

"No one probably. It was just a foolish idea." He concentrated on it. In a few moments the granite wall was bare. "I still don't understand how you could be alive now," he said, puzzled.

"But I am. I don't see how you do that" — she gestured at the chair and the wall — "but I'll accept the fact that you can. Why don't you accept the fact that I'm alive?"

"Don't get me wrong," the man said. "I want company very much, especially female company. It's just — turn your back."

She complied with a questioning look. Quickly he destroyed the stubble on his face and created a clean pair of pressed trousers and a shirt. Stepping out of his tattered uniform, he put on the new clothes, destroyed the rags, and, on an afterthought, created a comb and straightened his tangled brown hair.

"All right," he said. "You can turn back now."

"Not bad," she smiled, looking him over. "Let me use that comb — and would you please make me a dress? Size twelve, but see that the weight goes in the right places."

On the third attempt he had the thing right — he had never realized how deceptive the shapes of women could be — and then he made a pair of gold sandals with high heels for her.

"A little tight," she said, putting them on, "and not too practical without sidewalks. But thanks very much. This trick of yours really



solves the Christmas-present problem, doesn't it?" Her dark hair was shiny in the noon sun, and she looked very lovely and warm and human.

"See if *you* can create," he urged, anxious to share his startling new ability with her.

"I've already tried," she said. "No go. Still a man's world."

He frowned. "How can I be absolutely sure you're real?"

"That again? Do you remember creating me, master?" she asked mockingly, bending to loosen the strap on one shoe.

"I had been thinking — about women," he said grimly. "I might have created you while I was asleep. Why shouldn't my subconscious mind have as much power as my conscious mind? I would have equipped you with a memory, given you a background. You would have been extremely plausible. And if my subconscious mind did create you, then it would make certain that my conscious mind would never know."

"You're ridiculous!"

"Because if my conscious mind knew," he went on relentlessly, "it would reject your existence. Your entire function, as a creation of my subconscious, would be to keep me from knowing. To prove, by any means in your power, by any logic, that you were — "

"Let's see you make a woman, then, if your mind is so good!" She crossed her arms and leaned back in the chair, giving a single sharp nod.

"All right." He stared at the cave wall and a woman started to appear. It took shape sloppily, one arm too short, legs too long. Concentrating harder, he was able to make its proportions fairly true. But its eyes were set at an odd angle; its shoulders and back were sloped and twisted. He had created a shell without brains or internal organs, and automaton. He commanded it to speak, but only gulps came from the shapeless mouth; he hadn't given it any vocal apparatus. Shuddering, he destroyed the nightmare figure.

"I'm not a sculptor," he said. "Nor am I God."

"I'm glad you finally realize that."

"That still doesn't prove," he continued stubbornly, "that *you're* real. I don't know what my subconscious mind is capable of."

"Make something for me," she said abruptly. "I'm tired of listening to this nonsense."

I've hurt her feelings, he thought. The only other human on Earth and I've hurt her. He nodded, took her by the hand, and led her

out of the cave. On the flat plain below he created a city. He had experimented with it a few days back, and it was much easier this time. Patterned after pictures and childhood dreams of the THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS, it towered black and white and rose. The walls were gleaming ruby, and the gates were of silver-stained ebony. The towers were red-gold, and sapphires glittered in them. A great staircase of milky ivory climbed to the highest opal spire, set with thousands of steps of veined marble. There were lagoons of blue water, and little birds fluttered above them, and silver and gold fish darted through the still depths.

They walked through the city, and he created roses for her, white and yellow and red, and gardens of strange blossoms. Between two domed and spired buildings he created a vast pool of water; on it he put a purple-canopied pleasure barge, loading it with every kind of food and drink he could remember.

They floated across the lagoon, fanned by the soft breeze he had created.

"And all this is false," he reminded her after a little while.

She smiled. "No, it's not. You can touch it. It's real."

"Will it be here after I die?"

"Who cares? Besides, if you can do all this, you can cure any sickness. Perhaps you can even cure old age and death." She plucked a blossom from an overhanging bough and sniffed its fragrance. "You could keep this from fading and dying. You could probably do the same for us, so where's the problem?"

"Would you like to go away?" he said, puffing on a newly created cigarette. "Would you like to find a new planet, untouched by war? Would you like to start over?"

"Start over? You mean...Later perhaps. Now I don't even want to go near the ship. It reminds me of the war."

They floated on a little way.

"Are you sure now that I'm real?" she asked.

"If you want me to be honest, no," he replied. "But I want very much to believe it."

"Then listen to me," she said, leaning toward him. "I'm real." She slipped her arms around his neck. "I've always been real. I always will be real. You want proof? Well, I know I'm real. So do you. What more can you ask?"

He stared at her for a long moment, felt her warm arms around his neck, listened to her breathing. He could smell the fragrance of

her skin and hair, the unique essence of an individual.

Slowly he said, "I believe you. I love you. What — what is your name?"

She thought for a moment. "Joan."

"Strange," he said. "I always dreamed of a girl named Joan. What's your last name?"

She kissed him.

Overhead, the swallows he had created — *his* swallows — wheeled in wide circles above the lagoon, his fish darted aimlessly to and fro, his city stretched, proud and beautiful, to the edge of the twisted lava mountains.

"You didn't tell me your last name," he said.

"Oh, that. A girl's maiden name never matters — she always takes her husband's."

"That's an evasion!"

She smiled. "It is, isn't it?"

# THE LAXIAN KEY

Richard Gregor was at his desk in the dusty office of the AAA Ace Interplanetary Decontamination Service. It was almost noon, but Arnold, his partner, hadn't showed up yet. Gregor was just laying out an unusually complicated game of solitaire. Then he heard a loud crash in the hall.

The door of AAA Ace opened, and Arnold stuck his head in.

"Banker's hours?" Gregor asked.

"I have just made our fortunes," Arnold said. He threw the door fully open and beckoned dramatically. "Bring it in, boys."

Four sweating workmen lugged in a square black machine the size of a baby elephant.

"There it is," Arnold said proudly. He paid the workmen, and stood, hands clasped behind his back, eyes half shut, surveying the machine.

Gregor put his cards away with the slow, weary motions of a man who has seen everything. He stood up and walked around the machine. "All right, I give up. What is it?"

"It's a million bucks, right in our fists," Arnold said.

"Of course. But *what* is it?"

"It's a Free Producer," Arnold said. He smiled proudly. "I was walking past Joe's Interstellar Junkyard this morning, and there it was, sitting in the window. I picked it up for next to nothing. Joe didn't even know what it was."

"I don't either," Gregor said. "Do you?"

Arnold was on his hands and knees, trying to read the instructions engraved on the front of the machine. Without looking up, he said, "You've heard of the planet Meldge, haven't you?"



Gregor nodded. Meldge was a third-rate little planet on the northern periphery of the galaxy, some distance from the trade routes. At one time, Meldge had possessed an extremely advanced civilization, made possible by the so-called Meldgen Old Science. The Old Science techniques had been lost ages ago, although an occasional artifact still turned up here and there.

"And this is a product of the Old Science?" Gregor asked.

"Right. It's a Meldgen Free Producer. I doubt if there are more than four or five of them in the entire universe. They're unduplicatable."

"What does it produce?" Gregor asked.

"How should I know?" Arnold said. "Hand me the Meldgen-English dictionary, will you?"

Keeping a stern rein on his patience, Gregor walked to the bookshelf. "You don't know what it produces — "

"Dictionary. Thank you. What does it matter what it produces? It's *free*! This machine grabs energy out of the air, out of space, the sun, anywhere. You don't have to plug it in, fuel or service. It runs indefinitely."

Arnold opened the dictionary and started to look up the words on the front of the Producer.

"Free energy — "

"Those scientists were no fools," Arnold said, jotting down his translation on a pocket pad. "The Producer just grabs energy out of the air. So it really doesn't matter what it turns out. We can always sell it, and anything we get will be pure profit."

Gregor stared at his dapper little partner, and his long, unhappy face became sadder than ever.

"Arnold," he said, "I'd like to remind you of something. First of all, you are a chemist. I am an ecologist. We know nothing about machinery and less than nothing about complicated alien machinery."

Arnold nodded absently and turned a dial. The Producer gave a dry gurgle.

"What's more," Gregor said, retreating a few steps, "we are planetary decontaminationists. Remember? We have no reason to — "

The Producer began to cough unevenly.

"Got it now," Arnold said. "It says, 'The Meldge Free-Producer, another triumph of Glotten Laboratories. This Producer is warranted

Indestructible, Unbreakable, and Free of All Defects. No Power Hook-Up is Required. To Start, Press Button One. To Stop, Use Laxian Key. Your Meldge Free Producer Comes With an Eternal Guarantee against Malfunction. If Defective in Any Way, Please Return at Once to Glotten Laboratories.”

“Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear,” Gregor said. “We are planetary — ”

“Don’t be stodgy,” Arnold said. “Once we get this thing working, we can retire. Here’s Button One.”

The machine began to clank ominously, then shifted to a steady purr. For long minutes, nothing happened.

“Needs warming up,” Arnold said anxiously.

Then, out of an opening at the base of the machine, a gray powder began to pour.

“Probably a waste product,” Gregor muttered. But the powder continued to stream over the floor for fifteen minutes.

“Success!” Arnold shouted.

“What is it?” Gregor asked.

“I haven’t the faintest idea. I’ll have to run some tests.”

Grinning triumphantly, Arnold scooped some powder into a test tube and hurried over to his desk.

Gregor stood in front of the Producer, watching the gray powder stream out. Finally he said, “Shouldn’t we turn it off until we find out what it is?”

“Of course not,” Arnold said. “Whatever it is, it must be worth money.” He lighted his bunsen burner, filled a test tube with distilled water, and went to work.

Gregor shrugged his shoulders. He was used to Arnold’s hare-brained schemes. Ever since they had formed AAA Ace, Arnold had been looking for a quick road to wealth. His shortcuts usually resulted in more work than plain old-fashioned labor, but Arnold was quick to forget that.

Well, Gregor thought, at least it kept things lively. He sat down at his desk and dealt out a complex solitaire.

There was silence in the office for the next few hours. Arnold worked steadily, adding chemicals, pouring off precipitates, checking the results in several large books he kept on his desk. Gregor brought in sandwiches and coffee. After eating, he paced up and down and watched the gray powder tumble steadily out of the machine.

The purr of the Producer grew steadily louder, and the powder flowed in a thick stream.

An hour after lunch Arnold stood up. "We are in!" he stated.

"What is that stuff?" Gregor asked, wondering if, for once, Arnold had hit upon something.

"That stuff," Arnold said, "is Tangreese." He looked expectantly at Gregor.

"Tangreese, eh?"

"Absolutely."

"Then would you kindly tell me what Tangreese is?" Gregor shouted.

"I thought you knew. Tangreese is the basic food of the Meldgen people. An adult Meldgen consumes several tons a year."

"Food, eh?" Gregor looked at the thick gray powder with new respect. A machine which turned out food steadily, twenty-four hours a day, might be a very good money-maker. Especially if the machine never needed servicing, and cost nothing to run.

Arnold already had the telephone book open. "Here we are." He dialed a number. "Hello, Interstellar Food Corporation? Let me speak to the president. What? He isn't? The vice-president, then. This is important...Channels, eh? All right, here's the story. I am in a position to supply you with an almost unlimited quantity of Tangreese, the basic food of the Meldgen people. That's right. I knew you'd be interested. Yes, of course I'll hold on."

He turned to Gregor. "These corporations think they can push — yes?...Yes sir, that's right, sir. You *do* handle Tangreese, eh?...Fine, splendid!"

Gregor moved closer, trying to hear what was being said on the other end. Arnold pushed him away.

"Price? Well, what is the fair market price?...Oh. Well, five dollars a ton isn't much, but I suppose — what? Five *cents* a ton? You're kidding! Let's be serious now."

Gregor walked away from the telephone and sank wearily into a chair. Apathetically he listened to Arnold saying, "Yes, yes. Well, I didn't know that...I see. Thank you."

Arnold hung up. "It seems," he said, "there's not much demand for Tangreese on Earth. There are only about fifty Meldgens here, and the cost of transporting it to the northern periphery is prohibitively high."

Gregor raised both eyebrows and looked at the Producer. Apparently it had hit its stride, for Tangreese was pouring out like water from a high-pressure hose. There was gray powder over everything in the room. It was half a foot deep in front of the machine.

"Never mind," Arnold said. "It must be used for something else." He returned to his desk and opened several more large books.

"Shouldn't we turn it off in the meantime?" Gregor asked.

"Certainly not," Arnold said. "It's *free*, don't you understand? It's making money for us."

He plunged into his books. Gregor began to pace the floor, but found it difficult wading through the ankle-deep Tangreese. He slumped into his chair, wondering why he hadn't gone into landscape gardening.

By early evening, a gray dust filled the room to a depth of several feet. Several pens, pencils, a briefcase and a small filing cabinet were already lost in it, and Gregor was beginning to wonder if the floor would hold the weight. He had to shovel a path to the door, using a wastepaper basket as an improvised spade.

Arnold finally closed his books with a look of weary satisfaction. "There *is* another use."

"What?"

"Tangreese is used as a building material. After a few weeks' exposure to the air, it hardens like granite, you know."

"No, I didn't."

"Get a construction company on the telephone. We'll take care of this right now."

Gregor called the Toledo-Mars Construction Company and told a Mr. O'Toole that they were prepared to supply them with an almost unlimited quantity of Tangreese.

"Tangreese, eh?" O'Toole said. "Not too popular as a building material these days. Doesn't hold paint, you know."

"No, I didn't," Gregor said.

"Fact. Tell you what. Tangreese can be eaten by some crazy race. Why don't you — "

"We prefer to sell it as a building material," Gregor said.

"Well, I suppose we can buy it. Always some cheap construction going on. Give you fifteen a ton for it."



"Dollars?"

"Cents."

"I'll let you know," Gregor said.

His partner nodded sagely when he heard the offer. "That's all right. Say this machine of ours produces ten tons a day, every day, year after year. Let's see..." He did some quick figuring with his slide rule. "That's almost five hundred and fifty dollars a year. Won't make us rich, but it'll help pay the rent."

"But we can't leave it here," Gregor said, looking with alarm at the ever-increasing pile of Tangreese.

"Of course not. We'll find a vacant lot in the country and turn it loose. They can haul the stuff away any time they like."

Gregor called O'Toole and said they would be happy to do business.

"All right," O'Toole said. "You know where our plant is. Just truck the stuff in any old time."

"Us truck it in? I thought you —"

"At fifteen cents a ton? No, we're doing you a favor just taking it off your hands. *You* truck it in."

"That's bad," Arnold said, after Gregor had hung up. "The cost of transporting it —"

"Would be far more than fifteen cents a ton," Gregor said. "You'd better shut that thing off until we decide what to do."

Arnold waded up to the Producer. "Let me see," he said. "To turn it off I use the Laxian Key." He studied the front of the machine.

"Go ahead, turn it off," Gregor said.

"Just a moment."

"Are you going to turn it off or not?"

Arnold straightened up and gave an embarrassed little laugh. "It's not that easy."

"Why not?"

"We need a Laxian Key to turn it off. And we don't seem to have one."

The next few hours were spent in frantic telephone calls around the country. Gregor and Arnold contacted museums, research institutions, the archaeological departments of colleges, and anyone else they could think of. No one had ever seen a Laxian Key or heard of one being found.

In desperation, Arnold called Joe, the Interstellar Junkman, at his downtown penthouse.

"No, I ain't got no Laxian Key," Joe said. "Why you think I sold you the gadget so cheap?"

They put down the telephone and stared at each other. The Meldgen Free Producer was cheerfully blasting out its stream of worthless powder. Two chairs and a radiator had disappeared into it, and the gray Tangreese was approaching desk-top level.

"Nice little wage earner," Gregor said.

"We'll think of something."

"We?"

Arnold returned to his books and spent the rest of the night searching for another use for Tangreese. Gregor had to shovel the gray powder into the hall, to keep their office from becoming completely submerged.

The morning came, and the sun gleamed gaily on their windows through a film of gray dust. Arnold stood up and yawned.

"No luck?" Gregor asked.

"I'm afraid not."

Gregor waded out for coffee. When he returned, the building superintendent and two large red-faced policemen were shouting at Arnold.

"You gotta get every bit of that sand outta my hall!" the super screamed.

"Yes, and there's an ordinance against operating a factory in a business district," one of the red-faced policemen said.

"This isn't a factory," Gregor explained. "This is a Meldgen Free —"

"I say it's a factory," the policeman said. "And I say you gotta cease operation at once."

"That's our problem," Arnold said. "We can't seem to turn it off."

"Can't turn it off?" The policeman glared at them suspiciously. "You trying to kid me? I say you *gotta* turn it off."

"Officer, I swear to you —"

"Listen, wise guy, I'll be back in an hour. You get that thing turned off and this mess out of here, or I'm giving you a summons." The three men marched out.

Gregor and Arnold looked at each other, then at the Free Producer. The Tangreese was desk-top level now, and coming steadily.

"Damn it all," Arnold said, with a touch of hysteria, "there *must* be a way of working it out. There must be a market! It's free, I tell you. Every bit of this powder is free, free, free!"

"Steady," Gregor said, wearily scratching sand out of his hair.

"Don't you understand? When you get something free, in unlimited quantities, there has to be an application for it. And all this is free —"

The door opened, and a tall, thin man in a dark business suit walked in, holding a complex little gadget in his hand.

"So *here* it is," the man said.

Gregor was struck by a sudden wild thought. "Is that a Laxian Key?" he asked.

"A what key? No, I don't suppose it is," the man said. "It is a drainometer."

"Oh," Gregor said.

"And it seems to have brought me to the source of the trouble," the man said. "I'm Mr. Garstairs." He cleared sand from Gregor's desk, took a last reading on his drainometer and started to fill out a printed form.

"What's all this about?" Arnold asked.

"I'm from the Metropolitan Power Company," Garstairs said. "Starting around noon yesterday, we observed a sudden enormous drain on our facilities."

"And it's coming from here?" Gregor asked.

"From that machine of yours," Garstairs said. He completed his form, folded it and put it in his pocket. "Thanks for your cooperation. You will be billed for this, of course." With some difficulty he opened the door, then turned and took another look at the Free Producer.

"It must be making something extremely valuable," he said, "to justify the expenditure of so much power. What is it? Platinum dust?"

He smiled, nodded pleasantly and left.

Gregor turned to Arnold. "Free power, eh?"

"Well," Arnold said, "I guess it just grabs it from the nearest power source."

"So I see. Draws power out of the air, out of space, out of the sun. And out of the power company's lines, if they're handy."

"So it seems. But the basic principle —"

"To hell with the basic principle!" Gregor shouted. "We can't turn this damned thing off without a Laxian Key, no one's got a Laxian

Key, we're submerged in worthless dust which we can't even afford to truck out, and we're probably burning up power like a sun gone nova!"

"There must be a solution," Arnold said sullenly.

"Yeah? Suppose you find it."

Arnold sat down where his desk had been and covered his eyes. There was a loud knock on the door, and angry voices outside.

"Lock the door," Arnold said.

Gregor locked it. Arnold thought for a few moments longer, then stood up.

"All is not lost," he said. "Our fortunes will still be made from this machine."

"Let's just destroy it," Gregor said. "Drop it in an ocean or something."

"No! I've got it now! Come on, let's get the spaceship warmed up."

The next few days were hectic ones for AAA Ace. They had to hire men, at exorbitant rates, to clear the building of Tangreese. Then came the problem of getting the machine, still spouting gray dust, into their spaceship. But at last, everything was done. The Free Producer sat in the hold, rapidly filling it with Tangreese, and their ship was out of the system and moving fast on overdrive.

"It's only logical," Arnold explained later. "Naturally there's no market for Tangreese on Earth. Therefore there's no use trying to sell it on Earth. But on the planet Meldge — "

"I don't like it," Gregor said.

"It can't fail. It costs too much to transport Tangreese to Meldge. But we're moving our entire factory there. We can pour out a constant stream of the stuff."

"Suppose the market is low?" Gregor asked.

"How low can it get? This stuff is like bread to the Meldgens. It's their basic diet. How can we miss?"

After two weeks in space, Meldge hove in sight on their starboard bow. It came none too soon. Tangreese had completely filled the hold. They had sealed it off, but the increasing pressure threatened to burst the sides of the ship. They had to dump tons of it every day, but dumping took time, and there was a loss of heat and air in the process.



So they spiraled into Meldge with every inch of their ship crammed with Tangreese, low on oxygen and extremely cold.

As soon as they had landed, a large orange-skinned customs official came on board.

"Welcome," he said. "Seldom do visitors come to our unimportant little planet. Do you expect to stay long?"

"Probably," Arnold said. "We're going to set up a business."

"Excellent!" the official said, smiling happily. "Our planet needs new blood, new enterprise. Might I inquire what business?"

"We're going to sell Tangreese, the basic food of —"

The official's face darkened. "You're going to sell what?"

"Tangreese. We have a Free Producer, and —"

The official pressed a button on a wrist dial. "I am sorry, you must leave at once."

"But we've got passports, clearance papers —"

"And we have laws. You must blast off immediately and take your Free Producer with you."

"Now look here," Gregor said, "there's supposed to be free enterprise on this planet."

"Not in the production of Tangreese there isn't."

Outside, a dozen Army tanks rumbled on to the landing field and ringed themselves around the ship. The official backed out of the port and started down the ladder.

"Wait!" Gregor cried in desperation. "I suppose you're afraid of unfair competition. Well, take the Free Producer as our gift."

"No!" Arnold shouted.

"Yes! Just dig it out and take it. Feed your poor with it. Just raise a statue to us some time."

A second row of Army tanks appeared. Overhead, antiquated jet planes dipped low over the field.

"Get off this planet!" the official shouted. "Do you really think you can sell Tangreese on Meldge? Look around!"

They looked. The landing field was gray and powdery, and the buildings were the same unpainted gray. Beyond them stretched dull gray fields, to a range of low gray mountains.

On all sides, as far as they could see, everything was Tangreese gray.

"Do you mean," Gregor asked, "that the whole planet —"

"Figure it out for yourself," the official said, backing down the ladder. "The Old Science originated here, and there are always fools who have to tamper with its artifacts. Now get going. But if you ever find a Laxian Key, come back and name your price."



# THE LAST WEAPON

Edsel was in a murderous mood. He, Parke, and Faxon had spent three weeks in this part of the deadlands, breaking into every mound they came across, not finding anything, and moving on to the next. The swift Martian summer was passing, and each day became a little colder. Each day Edsel's nerves, uncertain at the best of times, had frayed a little more. Little Faxon was cheerful, dreaming of all the money they would make when they found the weapons, and Parke plodded silently along, apparently made of iron, not saying a word unless he was spoken to.

But Edsel had reached his limit. They had broken into another mound, and again there had been no sign of the lost Martian weapons. The watery sun seemed to be glaring at him, and the stars were visible in an impossible blue sky. The afternoon cold seeped into Edsel's insulated suit, stiffening his joints, knotting his big muscles.

Quite suddenly, Edsel decided to kill Parke. He had disliked the silent man since they had formed the partnership on Earth. He disliked him even more than he despised Faxon.

Edsel stopped.

"Do you know where we're going?" he asked Parke, his voice ominously low.

Parke shrugged his slender shoulders negligently. His pale, hollow face showed no trace of expression.

"Do you?" Edsel asked.

Parke shrugged again.

A bullet in the head, Edsel decided, reaching for his gun.

"Wait!" Faxon pleaded, coming up between them. "Don't fly off, Edsel. Just think of all the money we can make when we find the



weapons!" The little man's eyes glowed at the thought. "They're right around here somewhere, Edsel. The next mound, maybe."

Edsel hesitated, glaring at Parke. Right now he wanted to kill more than anything else in the world. If he had known it would be like this, when they formed the company on Earth...It had seemed so easy then. He had the plaque, the one which told where a cache of the fabulous lost Martian weapons were. Parke was able to read the Martian script, and Faxon could finance the expedition. So, he had figured all they'd have to do would be to land on Mars and walk up to the mound where the stuff was hidden.

Edsel had never been off Earth before. He hadn't counted on the weeks of freezing, starving on concentrated rations, always dizzy from breathing thin, tired air circulating through a replenisher. He hadn't thought about the sore, aching muscles you get, dragging your way through the thick Martian brush.

All he had thought about was the price a Government — any Government — would pay for those legendary weapons.

"I'm sorry," Edsel said, making up his mind suddenly. "This place gets me. Sorry I blew up, Parke. Lead on."

Parke nodded, and started again. Faxon breathed a sigh of relief, and followed Parke.

After all, Edsel thought, I can kill them any time.

They found the correct mound in mid-afternoon, just as Edsel's patience was wearing thin again. It was a strange, massive affair, just as the script had said. Under a few inches of dirt was metal. The men scraped and found a door.

"Here, I'll blast it open," Edsel said, drawing his revolver.

Parke pushed him aside, turned the handle, and opened the door.

Inside was a tremendous room. And there, row upon gleaming row, were the legendary lost weapons of Mars, the missing artifacts of Martian civilization.

The three men stood for a moment, just looking. Here was the treasure that men had almost given up looking for. Since man had landed on Mars, the ruins of great cities had been explored. Scattered across the plains were ruined vehicles, art forms, tools, everything indicating the ghost of a titanic civilization, a thousand years beyond Earth's. Patiently deciphered scripts had told of the great wars ravaging the surface of Mars. The scripts stopped too soon,

though, because nothing told what had happened to the Martians. There hadn't been an intelligent being on Mars for several thousand years. Somehow, all animal life on the planet had been obliterated.

And, apparently, the Martians had taken their weapons with them.

These lost weapons, Edsel knew, were worth their weight in radium. There just wasn't anything like them.

The men went inside. Edsel picked up the first thing his hand reached. It looked like a .45, but bigger. He went to the door and pointed the weapon at a shrub on the plain.

"Don't fire it," Faxon said, as Edsel took aim. "It might backfire or something. Let the Government men fire them, after we sell."

Edsel squeezed the trigger. The shrub, seventy-five feet away, erupted in a bright red flash.

"Not bad," Edsel said, patting the gun. He put it down and reached for another.

"Please, Edsel," Faxon said, squinting nervously at him. "There's no need to try them out. You might set off an atomic bomb or something."

"Shut up," Edsel said, examining the weapon for a firing stud.

"Don't shoot any more," Faxon pleaded. He looked to Parke for support, but the silent man was watching Edsel. "You know, something in this place might have been responsible for the destruction of the Martian race. You wouldn't want to set it off again, would you?"

Edsel watched a spot on the plain glow with heat as he fired at it.

"Good stuff." He picked up another, rod-shaped instrument. The cold was forgotten. Edsel was perfectly happy now, playing with all the shiny things.

"Let's get started," Faxon said, moving toward the door.

"Started? Where?" Edsel demanded. He picked up another glittering weapon, curved to fit his wrist and hand.

"Back to the port," Faxon said. "Back to sell this stuff, like we planned. I figure we can ask just about any price, any price at all. A Government would give billions for weapons like these."

"I've changed my mind," Edsel said. Out of the corner of his eye he was watching Parke. The slender man was walking between stacks of weapons, but so far he hadn't touched any.

"Now listen," Faxon said, glaring at Edsel. "I financed this expedition. We planned on selling the stuff. I have a right to — well, perhaps not."

The untried weapon was pointed squarely at his stomach.

"What are you trying to do?" he asked, trying not to look at the gun.

"To hell with selling it," Edsel said, leaning against the cave wall where he could also watch Parke. "I figure I can use this stuff myself." He grinned broadly, still watching both men.

"I can outfit some of the boys back home. With the stuff that's here, we can knock over one of those little Governments in Central America easy. I figure we could hold it forever."

"Well," Faxon said, watching the gun, "I don't want to be a party to that sort of thing. Just count me out."

"All right," Edsel said.

"Don't worry about me talking," Faxon said quickly. "I won't. I just don't want to be in on any shooting or killing. So I think I'll go back."

"Sure," Edsel said. Parke was standing to one side, examining his fingernails.

"If you get that kingdom set up, I'll come down," Faxon said, grinning weakly. "Maybe you can make me a duke or something."

"I think I can arrange that."

"Swell. Good luck." Faxon waved his hand and started to walk away. Edsel let him get twenty feet, then aimed the new weapon and pressed the stud.

The gun didn't make any noise; there was no flash, but Faxon's arm was neatly severed. Quickly, Edsel pressed the stud again and swung the gun down on Faxon. The little man was chopped in half, and the ground on either side of him was slashed, also.

Edsel turned, realizing that he had left his back exposed to Parke. All the man had to do was pick up the nearest gun and blaze away. But Parke was just standing there, his arms folded over his chest.

"That beam will probably cut through anything," Parke said. "Very useful."

Edsel had a wonderful half-hour, running back and forth to the door with different weapons. Parke made no move to touch anything, but watched with interest. The ancient Martian arms were as



good as new, apparently unaffected by their thousands of years of disuse. There were many blasting weapons, of various designs and capabilities. Then heat and radiation guns, marvelously compact things. There were weapons which would freeze and weapons which would burn; others which would crumble, cut, coagulate, paralyze, and do any of the other things to snuff out life.

"Let's try this one," Parke said. Edsel, who had been on the verge of testing an interesting-looking three-barreled rifle, stopped.

"I'm busy," he said.

"Stop playing with those toys. Let's have a look at some real stuff."

Parke was standing near a squat black machine on wheels. Together they tugged it outside. Parke watched while Edsel moved the controls. A faint hum started deep in the machine. Then a blue haze formed around it. The haze spread as Edsel manipulated the controls until it surrounded the two men.

"Try a blaster on it," Parke said. Edsel picked up one of the explosive pistols and fired. The charge was absorbed by the haze. Quickly he tested three others. They couldn't pierce the blue glow.

"I believe," Parke said softly, "this will stop an atomic bomb. This is a force field."

Edsel turned it off and they went back inside. It was growing dark in the cave as the sun neared the horizon.

"You know," Edsel said, "you're a pretty good guy, Parke. You're okay."

"Thanks," Parke said, looking over the mass of weapons.

"You don't mind my cutting down Faxon, do you? He was going straight to the Government."

"On the contrary, I approve."

"Swell. I figure you must be okay. You could have killed me when I was killing Faxon." Edsel didn't add that it was what he would have done.

Parke shrugged his shoulders.

"How would you like to work on this kingdom deal with me?" Edsel asked, grinning. "I think we could swing it. Get ourselves a nice place, plenty of girls, lots of laughs. What do you think?"

"Sure," Parke said. "Count me in." Edsel slapped him on the shoulder, and they went through the ranks of weapons.

"All these are pretty obvious," Parke said as they reached the end of the room. "Variations on the others."



At the end of the room was a door. There were letters in Martian script engraved on it.

"What's that stuff say?" Edsel asked.

"Something about 'final weapons,'" Parke told him, squinting at the delicate tracery. "A warning to stay out." He opened the door. Both men started to step inside, then recoiled suddenly.

Inside was a chamber fully three times the size of the room they had just left. And filling the great room, as far as they could see, were soldiers. Gorgeously dressed, fully armed, the soldiers were motionless, statue-like.

They were not alive.

There was a table by the door, and on it were three things. First, there was a sphere about the size of a man's fist, with a calibrated dial set in it. Beside that was a shining helmet. And next was a small, black box with Martian script on it.

"Is it a burial place?" Edsel whispered, looking with awe at the strong unearthly faces of the Martian soldiery. Parke, behind him, didn't answer.

Edsel walked to the table and picked up the sphere. Carefully he turned the dial a single notch.

"What do you think it's supposed to do?" he asked Parke. "Do you think — " Both men gasped, and moved back.

The lines of fighting men had moved. Men in ranks swayed, then came to attention. But they no longer held the rigid posture of death. The ancient fighting men were alive.

One of them, in an amazing uniform of purple and silver, came forward and bowed to Edsel.

"Sir, your troops are ready." Edsel was too amazed to speak.

"How can you live after thousands of years?" Parke answered. "Are you Martians?"

"We are the servants of the Martians," the soldier said. Parke noticed that the soldier's lips hadn't moved. The man was telepathic. "Sir, we are the Synthetics."

"Whom do you obey?" Parke asked.

"The Activator, sir." The Synthetic was speaking directly to Ee, looking at the sphere in his hand. "We require no food or sleep, sir. Our only desire is to serve you and to fight." The soldiers in the ranks nodded approvingly.

"Lead us into battle, sir!"

"I sure will!" Edsel said, finally regaining his senses. "I'll show you boys some fighting, you can bank on that!"

The soldiers cheered him, solemnly, three times. Edsel grinned, looking at Parke.

"What do the rest of these numbers do?" Edsel asked. But the soldier was silent. The question was evidently beyond his built-in knowledge.

"It might activate other Synthetics," Parke said. "There are probably more chambers underground."

"Brother!" Edsel shouted. "Will I lead you into battle!" Again the soldiers cheered, three solemn cheers.

"Put them to sleep and let's make some plans," Parke said. Dazed, Edsel turned the switch back. The soldiers froze again into immobility.

"Come on outside."

"Right."

"And bring that stuff with you." Edsel picked up the shining helmet and the black box and followed Parke outside. The sun had almost disappeared now, and there were black shadows over the red land. It was bitterly cold, but neither man noticed.

"Did you hear what they said, Parke? Did you hear it? They said I was their leader! With men like those — " He laughed at the sky. With those soldiers, those weapons, nothing could stop him. He'd really stock his land — prettiest girls in the world, and would he have a time!

"I'm a general!" Edsel shouted, and slipped the helmet over his head. "How do I look, Parke? Don't I look like a — " He stopped. He was hearing a voice in his ears, whispering, muttering. What was it saying?

*"...damned idiot, with his little dream of a kingdom. Power like this is for a man of genius, a man who can remake history. Myself!"*

"Who's talking? That's you, isn't it, Parke?" Edsel realized suddenly that the helmet allowed him to listen in on thoughts. He didn't have time to consider what a weapon this would be for a ruler.

Parke shot him neatly through the back with a gun he had been holding all the time.

"What an idiot," Parke told himself, slipping the helmet on his head. "A kingdom! All the power in the world, and he dreamed of a little kingdom!" He glanced back at the cave.

"With those troops — the force field — and the weapons — I can take over the world." He said it coldly, knowing it was a fact. He turned to go back to the cave to activate the Synthetics, but stopped first to pick up the little black box Edsel had carried.

Engraved on it, in flowing Martian script, was, "The Last Weapon."

I wonder what it could be, Parke asked himself. He had let Edsel live long enough to try out all the others; no use chancing a misfire himself. It was too bad he hadn't lived long enough to try out this one, too.

Of course, I really don't need it, he told himself. He had plenty. But this might make the job a lot easier, a lot safer. Whatever it was, it was bound to be good.

Well, he told himself, let's see what the Martians considered their last weapon. He opened the box.

A vapor drifted out, and Parke threw the box from him, thinking about poison gas.

The vapor mounted, drifted haphazardly for a while, then began to coalesce. It spread, grew, and took shape.

In a few seconds, it was complete, hovering over the box. It glimmered white in the dying light, and Parke saw that it was just a tremendous mouth, topped by a pair of unblinking eyes.

"Ho ho," the mouth said. "Protoplasm!" It drifted to the body of Edsel. Parke lifted a blaster and took careful aim.

"Quiet protoplasm," the thing said, nuzzling Edsel's body. "I like quiet protoplasm." It took down the body in a single gulp.

Parke fired, blasting a ten-foot hole in the ground. The giant mouth drifted out of it, chuckling.

"It's been so long," it said.

Parke was clenching his nerves in a forged grip. He refused to let himself become panicked. Calmly he activated the force field, forming a blue sphere around himself.

Still chuckling, the thing drifted through the blue haze.

Parke picked up the weapon Edsel had used on Faxon, feeling the well-balanced piece swing up in his hand. He backed to one side of the force field as the thing approached, and turned on the beam.

The thing kept coming.

"Die, die!" Parke screamed, his nerves breaking.

But the thing came on, grinning broadly.

"I like *quiet* protoplasm," the thing said as its gigantic mouth converged on Parke.

"But I also like *lively* protoplasm."

It gulped once, then drifted out of the other side of the field, looking anxiously around for the millions of units of protoplasm, as there had been in the old days.





# FISHING SEASON

They had been living in the housing project only a week, and this was their first invitation. They arrived on the dot of eight-thirty. The Carmichaels were obviously prepared for them, for the porch light was on, the front door partially open, and the living room a blaze of light.

"Do I look all right?" Phyllis asked at the door. "Seams straight, hair curly?"

"You're a vision in a red hat," her husband assured her. "Just don't spoil the effect by leading aces." She made a small face at him and rang the doorbell. Soft chimes sounded inside.

Mallen straightened his tie while they waited. He pulled out his breast handkerchief a microscopic fraction farther.

"They must be making gin in the subcellar," he told his wife. "Shall I ring again?"

"No — wait a moment." They waited, and he rang again. Again the chimes sounded.

"That's very strange," Phyllis said a few minutes later. "It was tonight, wasn't it?" Her husband nodded. The Carmichaels had left their windows open to the warm spring weather. Through the venetian blinds they could see a table set for Bridge, chairs drawn up, candy dishes out, everything in readiness. But no one answered the door.

"Could they have stepped out?" Phyllis Mallen asked. Her husband walked quickly across the lawn to the driveway.

"Their car's in." He came back and pushed the front door open farther.

"Jimmy — don't go in."

"I'm not." He put his head in the door. "Hello! Anybody home?" Silence in the house.

"Hello!" he shouted, and listened intently. He could hear Friday-night noises next door — people talking, laughing. A car passed in the street. He listened. A board creaked somewhere in the house, then silence again.

"They wouldn't go away and leave their house open like this," he told Phyllis. "Something might have happened." He stepped inside. She followed, but stood uncertainly in the living room while he went into the kitchen. She heard him open the cellar door, call out, "Anyone home!" And close it again. He came back to the living room, frowned and went upstairs.

In a little while Mallen came down with a puzzled expression on his face. "There's no one there," he said.

"Let's get out of here," Phyllis said, suddenly nervous in the bright, empty house. They debated leaving a note, decided against it and started down the walk.

"Shouldn't we close the front door?" Jim Mallen asked, stopping.

"What good will it do? All the windows are open."

"Still — " He went back and closed it. They walked home slowly, looking back over their shoulders at the house. Mallen half expected the Carmichaels to come running after them, shouting "Surprise!"

But the house remained silent.

Their home was only a block away, a brick bungalow just like two hundred others in the development. Inside, Mr. Carter was making artificial trout flies on the card table. Working slowly and surely, his deft fingers guided the colored threads with loving care. He was so intent on his work that he didn't hear the Mallens enter.

"We're home, Dad," Phyllis said.

"Ah," Mr. Carter murmured. "Look at this beauty." He held up a finished fly. It was an almost replica of a hornet. The hook was cleverly concealed by overhanging yellow and black threads.

"The Carmichaels were out — we think," Mallen said, hanging up his jacket

"I'm going to try Old Creek in the morning," Mr. Carter said. "Something tells me the elusive trout may be there." Mallen grinned to himself. It was difficult talking with Phyllis's father. Nowadays

he never discussed anything except fishing. The old man had retired from a highly successful business on his seventieth birthday to devote himself wholeheartedly to his favorite sport.

Now, nearing eighty, Mr. Carter looked wonderful. It was amazing, Mallen thought. His skin was rosy his eyes clear and untroubled, his pure white hair neatly combed back. He was in full possession of his senses, too — as long as you talked about fishing.

"Let's have a snack," Phyllis said. Regretfully she took off the red hat, smoothed out the veil and put it down on a coffee table. Mr. Carter added another thread to his trout fly, examined it closely, then put it down and followed them into the kitchen.

While Phyllis made coffee, Mallen told the old man what had happened. Mr. Carter's answer was typical.

"Try some fishing tomorrow and get it off your mind. Fishing, Jim, is more than a sport. Fishing is a way of life, and a philosophy as well. I like to find a quiet pool and sit on the banks of it. I figure, if there's fish anywhere, they might as well be there."

Phyllis smiled, watching Jim twist uncomfortably on his chair. There was no stopping her father once he got started. And anything would start him.

"Consider," Mr. Carter went on, "a young executive. Someone like yourself, Jim — dashing through a hall. Common enough? But at the end of the last long corridor is a trout stream. Consider a politician. You certainly see enough of them in Albany. Briefcase in hand, worried —"

"That's strange," Phyllis said, stopping her father in mid-flight. She was holding an unopened bottle of milk in her hand.

"Look." Their milk came from Stannerton Dairies. The green label on this bottle read: "Stanneron Daries."

"And look." She pointed. Under that, it read: "lisensed by the neW yoRK Bord of healthh." It looked like a clumsy imitation of the legitimate label.

"Where did you get this?" Mallen asked.

"Why, I suppose from Mr. Elger's store. Could it be an advertising stunt?"

"I despise the man who would fish with a worm," Mr. Carter intoned gravely. "A fly — a fly is a work of art. But the man who'd use a worm would rob orphans and burn churches."

"Don't drink it," Mallen said. "Let's look over the rest of the food."



There were three more counterfeited items. A candy bar which purported to be a Mello-Bite and had an orange label instead of the familiar crimson. There was a jar of American ChEEse, almost a third larger than the usual jars of that brand, and a bottle of SPArkling Watr.

"That's very odd," Mallen said, rubbing his jaw.

"I always throw the little ones back," Mr. Carter said. "It's not sporting to keep them, and that's part of a fisherman's code. Let them grow, let them ripen, let them gain experience. It's the old, crafty ones I want, the ones who skulk under logs, who dart away at the first sight of the angler. Those are the lads who put up a fight!"

"I'm going to take this stuff back to Elger," Mallen said, putting the items into a paper bag. "If you see anything else like it, save it."

"Old Creek is the place," Mr. Carter said. "That's where they hide out."

Saturday morning was bright and beautiful. Mr. Carter ate an early breakfast and left for Old Creek, stepping lightly as a boy, his battered fly-decked hat set at a jaunty angle. Jim Mallen finished coffee and went over to the Carmichael house.

The car was still in the garage. The windows were still open, the Bridge table set, and every light was on, exactly as it had been the night before. It reminded Mallen of a story he had read once about a ship under full sail, with everything in order — but not a soul on board.

"I wonder if there's anyone we can call?" Phyllis asked when he returned home. "I'm sure there's something wrong."

"Sure. But who?" They were strangers in the project. They had a nodding acquaintance with three or four families, but no idea who might know the Carmichaels.

The problem was settled by the ringing of the telephone.

"If it's anyone from around here," Jim said as Phyllis answered it, "ask them."

"Hello?"

"Hello. I don't believe you know me. I'm Marian Carpenter, from down the block. I was just wondering — has my husband dropped over there?" The metallic telephone voice managed to convey worry, fear.

"Why no. No one's been in this morning."

"I see." The thin voice hesitated.

"Is there anything I can do?" Phyllis asked.

"I don't understand it," Mrs. Carpenter said. "George — my husband — had breakfast with me this morning. Then he went upstairs for his jacket. That was the last I saw of him."

"Oh — "

"I'm sure he didn't come back downstairs. I went up to see what was holding him — we were going for a drive — and he wasn't there. I searched the whole house. I thought he might be playing a practical joke, although George has never joked in his life — so I looked under beds and in the closets. Then I looked in the cellar, and I asked next door, but no one's seen him. I thought he might have visited you — he was speaking about it — "

Phyllis explained to her about the Carmichaels' disappearance. They talked for a few seconds longer, then hung up.

"Jim," Phyllis said, "I don't like it. You'd better tell the police about the Carmichaels."

"We'll look pretty foolish when they turn up visiting friends in Albany."

"We'll have to chance it."

Jim found the number and dialed, but the line was busy.

"I'll go down."

"And take this stuff with you." She handed him the paper bag.

Police Captain Lesner was a patient, ruddy-faced man who had been listening to an unending stream of complaints all night and most of the morning. His patrolmen were tired, his sergeants were tired, and he was the tireddest of all. Nevertheless, he ushered Mr. Mallen into his office and listened to his story.

"I want you to write down everything you've told me," Lesner said when he was through. "We got a call on the Carmichaels from a neighbor late last night. Been trying to locate them. Counting Mrs. Carpenter's husband, that makes ten in two days."

"Ten what?"

"Disappearances."

"My Lord," Mallen breathed softly. He shifted the paper bag. "All from this town?"

"Every one," Captain Lesner said harshly, "from the Vainsville housing project in this town. As a matter of fact, from four square blocks in that project." He named the streets.

"I live there," Mallen said.

"So do I."

"Have you any idea who the — the kidnapper could be?" Mallen asked.

"We don't think it's a kidnapper," Lesner said, lighting his twentieth cigarette for the day. "No ransom notes. No selection. A good many of the missing persons wouldn't be worth a nickel to a kidnapper. And wholesale like that — not a chance!"

"A maniac then?"

"Sure. But how has he grabbed whole families? Or grown men, big as you? And where has he hidden them, or their bodies?" Lesner ground out the cigarette viciously. "I've got men searching every inch of this town. Every cop within twenty miles of here is looking. The State police are stopping cars. And we haven't found a thing."

"Oh, and here's something else." Mallen showed him the counterfeited items.

"Again, I don't know," Captain Lesner confessed sourly. "I haven't had much time for this stuff. We've had other complaints — " The telephone rang, but Lesner ignored it.

"It looks like a black-market scheme. I've sent some stuff like it to Albany for analysis. I'm trying to trace outlets. Might be foreign. As a matter of fact, the FBI might — damn that phone!"

He yanked it out of its cradle.

"Lesner speaking. Yes...yes. You're sure? Of course, Mary. I'll be right over." He hung up. His red face was suddenly drained of color.

"That was my wife's sister," he announced. "My wife's missing!"

Mallen drove home at breakneck speed. He slammed on the brakes, almost cracking his head against the windshield, and ran into the house.

"Phyllis!" he shouted. Where was she? Oh, God, he thought. If she's gone —

"Anything wrong?" Phyllis asked, coming out of the kitchen.

"I thought — " He grabbed her and hugged until she squealed.

"Really," she said, smiling. "We're not newlyweds. Why, we've been married a whole year and a half — "

He told her what he'd found out in the police station.

Phyllis looked around the living room. It had seemed so warm and cheerful a week ago. Now, a shadow under the couch frightened her; an open closet door was something to shudder at. She knew it would never be the same.



There was a knock at the door.

"Don't go," Phyllis said.

"Who's there?" Mallen asked.

"Joe Dutton, from down the block. I suppose you've heard the news?"

"Yes," Mallen said, standing beside the closed door.

"We're barricading the streets," Dutton said. "Going to look over anyone going in or out. We're going to put a stop to this, even if the police can't. Want to join us?"

"You bet," Mallen said, and opened the door. The short, swarthy man on the other side was wearing an old Army jacket. He was gripping a two-foot chunk of wood.

"We're going to cover these blocks like a blanket," Dutton said. "If anyone else is grabbed, it'll have to be underground." Mallen kissed his wife and joined him.

That afternoon there was a mass meeting in the school auditorium. Everyone from the affected blocks was there, and as many of the townspeople as could crowd in. The first thing they found out was that, in spite of the blockades, three more people were missing from the Vainsville project.

Captain Lesner spoke and told them that he had called Albany for help. Special officers were on their way down, and the FBI was coming in on it, too. He stated frankly that he didn't know what or who was doing it, or why. He couldn't even figure out why all the missing were from one part of the Vainsville project.

He had got word from Albany about the counterfeited food that seemed to be scattered all over the project. The examining chemists could detect no trace of any toxic agent. That seemed to explode a recent theory that the food had been used to drug people, making them walk out of their homes to whatever was taking them. However, he cautioned everyone not to eat it. You could never tell.

The companies whose labels had been impregnated had disclaimed any knowledge. They were prepared to bring suit against anyone infringing on their copyrights.

The mayor spoke, in a series of well-intentioned platitudes, counseling them to be of good heart; the civic authorities were taking the whole situation in hand.

Of course, the mayor didn't live in the Vainsville project.

The meeting broke up, and the men returned to the barricades.



They started looking for firewood for the evening, but it was unnecessary. Help arrived from Albany, a cavalcade of men and equipment. The four blocks were surrounded by armed guards. Portable searchlights were set up and the area declared under an eight o'clock curfew.

Mr. Carter missed all the excitement. He had been fishing all day. At sunset he returned, empty-handed but happy. The guards let him through, and he walked into the house.

"A beautiful fishing day," he declared.

The Mallens spent a terrible night, fully clothed, dozing in snatches, looking at the searchlights playing against their windows and hearing the tramp of armed guards.

Eight o'clock Sunday morning — two more people missing. Gone from four blocks more closely guarded than a concentration camp.

At ten o'clock Mr. Carter, brushing aside the objections of the Mallens, shouldered his fishing kit and left. He hadn't missed a day since April thirtieth and wasn't planning on missing one all season.

Sunday noon — another person gone, bringing the total up to sixteen.

Sunday, one o'clock — all the missing children were found!

A police car found them on a road near the outskirts of town, eight of them, including the Carmichael boy, walking dazedly toward their homes. They were rushed to a hospital.

There was no trace of the missing adults, though.

Word of mouth spread the news faster than the newspapers or radio could. The children were completely unharmed. Under examination by psychiatrists it was found that they didn't remember where they had been or how they had been taken there. All the psychiatrists could piece together was a sensation of flying, accompanied by a sickness in the stomach. The children were kept in the hospital for safety, under guard.

But between noon and evening, another child disappeared from Vainsville.

Just before sunset, Mr. Carter came home. In his knapsack were two big rainbow trout. He greeted the Mallens gaily and went to the garage to clean his fish.

Jim Mallen stepped into the backyard and started to the garage after him, frowning. He wanted to ask the old man about something he had said a day or two ago. He couldn't quite remember what it was, but it seemed important.

His next-door neighbor, whose name he couldn't remember, greeted him.

"Mallen," he said. "I think I know."

"What?" Mallen asked.

"Have you examined the theories?" the neighbor asked.

"Of course." His neighbor was a skinny fellow in shirtsleeves and vest. His bald head glistened red in the sunset.

"Then listen. It can't be a kidnapper. No sense in their methods. Right?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And a maniac is out. How could he snatch fifteen, sixteen people? And return the children? Even a gang of maniacs couldn't do that, not with the number of cops we've got watching. Right?"

"Go on." Out of the corner of his eye Mallen saw his neighbor's fat wife come down the back steps. She walked over to them and listened.

"The same goes for a gang of criminals, or even Martians. Impossible to do it, and no reason even if they could. We've got to look for something *illogical* — and that leaves just one logical answer."

Mallen waited, and glanced at the woman. She was looking at him, arms folded across her aproned chest. In fact, she was glaring at him. Can she be angry at me? Mallen thought. What have I done?

"The only answer," his neighbor said slowly, "is that there is a hole somewhere around here. A hole in the space-time continuum."

"What!" blurted Mallen. "I don't quite follow that."

"A hole in time," the bald engineer explained, "or a hole in space. Or in both. Don't ask me how it got there; it's there. What happens is, a person steps into that hole, and bingo! He's somewhere else. Or in some other time. Or both. This hole can't be seen, of course — it's fourth-dimensional — but it's there. The way I see it, if you traced the movements of these people, you'd find every one of them passed through a certain spot — and vanished."

"Hmmm." Mallen thought it over. "That sounds interesting — but we know that lots of people vanished right out of their own homes."

"Yeah," the neighbor agreed. "Let me think — I know! The hole in space-time isn't fixed. It drifts, moves around. First it's in Carpenter's house, then it moves on aimlessly —"

"Why doesn't it move out of these four blocks?" Mallen asked, wondering why the man's wife was still glaring at him, her lips tightly compressed.

"Well," the neighbor said, "it has to have some limitations."

"And why were the children returned?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Mallen, you can't ask me to figure out every little thing, can you? It's a good working theory. We'll have to have more facts before we can work out the whole thing."

"Hello there!" Mr. Carter called, emerging from the garage. He held up two beautiful trout, neatly cleaned and washed.

"The trout is a gamey fighter and makes magnificent eating as well. The most excellent of sports, and the most excellent of foods!" He walked unhurriedly into the house.

"I've got a better theory," the neighbor's wife said, unfolding her arms and placing her hands on her ample hips.

Both men turned to look at her.

"Who is the only person around here who isn't the least bit worried about what's going on? Who goes walking all over with a bag he *says* has *fish* in it? Who *says* he spends all his time fishing?"

"Oh, no," Mallen said. "Not Dad Carter. He has a whole philosophy about fishing —"

"I don't care about philosophy!" the woman shrieked. "He fools you, but he doesn't fool me! I only know he's the only man in this neighborhood who isn't the least bit worried and he's around and gone every day and lynching would probably be too good for him!" With that she spun and waddled into her house.

"Look, Mallen," the bald neighbor said. "I'm sorry. You know how women are. She's upset, even if Danny is safe in the hospital."

"Sure," Mallen said.

"She doesn't understand the space-time continuum," he went on earnestly. "But I'll explain it to her tonight. She'll apologize in the morning. You'll see."

The men shook hands and returned to their respective homes.



\* \* \*

Darkness came swiftly, and searchlights went on all over town. Beams of light knifed down streets, into backyards, reflected from closed windows. The inhabitants of Vainsville settled down to wait for more disappearances.

Jim Mallen wished he could put his hands on whatever was doing it. Just for a second — that was all he'd need. But to have to sit and wait. He felt so helpless. His wife's lips were pale and cracked, and her eyes were tired. But Mr. Carter was cheerful as usual. He fried the trout over a gas burner, serving both of them.

"I found a beautiful quiet pool today," Mr. Carter announced. "It is near the mouth of Old Creek, up a little tributary. I fished there all day, leaning back against the grassy bank and watching the clouds. Fantastic things, clouds! I shall go there tomorrow and fish in it one more day. Then I will move on. A wise fisherman does not fish out a stream. Moderation is the code of the fisherman. Take a little, leave a little. I have often thought — "

"Oh Dad, please!" Phyllis screamed, and burst into tears. Mr. Carter shook his head sadly, smiled an understanding smile and finished his trout. Then he went into the living room to work on a new fly.

Exhausted, the Mallens went to bed...

Mallen awoke and sat upright. He looked over and saw his wife asleep beside him. The luminous dial of his watch read four fifty-eight. Almost morning, he thought.

He got out of bed, slipped on a bathrobe, and padded softly downstairs. The searchlights were flashing against the living room window, and he could see a guard outside.

That was a reassuring sight, he thought, and went into the kitchen. Moving quietly, he poured a glass of milk. There was fresh cake on top of the refrigerator, and he cut himself a slice.

Kidnappers, he thought. Maniacs. Men from Mars. Holes in space. Or any combination thereof. No, that was wrong. He wished he could remember what he wanted to ask Mr. Carter. It was important.

He rinsed out the glass, put the cake back on the refrigerator, and walked to the living room. Suddenly he was thrown violently to one side.



Something had hold of him! He flailed out, but there was nothing to hit. Something was gripping him like an iron hand, dragging him off his feet. He threw himself to one side, scrambling for a footing. His feet left the floor and he hung for a moment, kicking and squirming. The grip around his ribs was so tight he couldn't breathe, couldn't make a sound. Inexorably, he was being lifted.

Hole in space, he thought, and tried to scream. His wildly flailing arms caught a corner of the couch and he seized it. The couch was lifted with him. He yanked, and the grip relaxed for a moment, letting him drop to the floor.

He scrambled across the floor toward the door. The grip caught him again, but he was near a radiator. He wrapped both arms around it, trying to resist the pull. He yanked again and managed to get one leg around, then the other.

The radiator creaked horribly as the pull increased. Mallen felt as though his waist would part, but he held on, every muscle stretched to the breaking point. Suddenly the grip relaxed completely.

He collapsed to the floor.

When he came to, it was broad daylight. Phyllis was splashing water in his face, her lower lip caught between her teeth. He blinked, and wondered for a moment where he was.

"Am I still here?" he asked.

"Are you all right?" Phyllis demanded. "What happened? Oh, darling! Let's get out of this place — "

"Where's your father?" Mallen asked groggily, getting to his feet.

"Fishing. Now please sit down. I'm going to call a doctor."

"No. Wait." Mallen went into the kitchen. On the refrigerator was the cake box. It read "Johnson's Cake Shop. Vainsville, New York." A capital K in New York. Really a very small error.

And Mr. Carter? Was the answer there? Mallen raced upstairs and dressed. He crumpled the cake box and thrust it into his pocket, and hurried out of the door.

"Don't touch anything until I get back!" he shouted at Phyllis. She watched him get into the car and race down the street. Trying hard to keep from crying, she walked into the kitchen.

Mallen was at Old Creek in fifteen minutes. He parked the car and started walking up the stream.

"Mr. Carter!" he shouted as he went. "Mr. Carter!"

He walked and shouted for half an hour, into deeper and deeper woods. The trees overhung the stream now, and he had to wade to make any speed at all. He increased his pace, splashing, slipping on stones, trying to run.

"Mr. Carter!"

"Hello!" He heard the old man's voice. He followed the sound, up a branch of the stream. There was Mr. Carter, sitting on the steep bank of a little pool, holding his long bamboo pole. Mallen scrambled up beside him.

"Take it easy, son," Mr. Carter said. "Glad you took my advice about fishing."

"No," Mallen panted. "I want you to tell me something."

"Gladly," the old man said. "What would you like to know?"

"A fisherman wouldn't fish out a pool completely, would he?"

"I wouldn't. But some might."

"And bait. Any good fisherman would use artificial bait?"

"I pride myself on my flies," Mr. Carter said. "I try to approximate the real thing. Here, for example, is a beautiful replica of a hornet." He plucked a yellow hook from his hat. "And here is a lovely mosquito."

Suddenly his line stirred. Easily, surely, the old man brought it in. He caught the gasping trout in his hand and showed him to Mallen.

"A little fellow — I won't keep him." He removed the hook gently, easing it out of the gasping gill, and placed the fish back in the water.

"When you throw him back — do you think he knows? Does he tell the others?"

"Oh, no," Mr. Carter said. "The experience doesn't teach him anything. I've had the same young fish bite my line two or three times. They have to grow up a bit before they know."

"I thought so." Mallen looked at the old man. Mr. Carter was unaware of the world around him, untouched by the terror that had struck Vainsville.

Fishermen live in a world of their own, thought Mallen.

"But you should have been here an hour ago," Mr. Carter said. "I hooked a beauty. A magnificent fellow, two pounds if he was an ounce. What a battle for an old war-horse like me! And he got away. But there'll come another — hey, where are you going?"

"Back!" Mallen shouted, splashing into the stream. He knew now what he had been looking for in Mr. Carter. A parallel. And now it was clear.

Harmless Mr. Carter, pulling up his trout, just like that other, greater fisherman, pulling up his —

"Back to warn the other fish!" Mallen shouted over his shoulder, stumbling along the stream bed. If only Phyllis hadn't touched any food! He pulled the cake box out of his pocket and threw it as hard as he could. The hateful lure!

While the fishermen, each in his respective sphere, smiled and dropped their lines into the water again.

# DREAMWORLD

Infinite worlds exist in the infinite in every cycle — AETH DE  
PLACITUS RELIQUAE

Lanigan dreamed the dream again and managed to wake himself up with a hoarse cry. He sat upright in bed and glared around him into the violet darkness. His teeth were clenched and his lips were pulled back into a spastic grin. Beside him he felt his wife, Estelle, stir and sit up. Lanigan didn't look at her. Still caught in his dream, he waited for tangible proofs of the world.

A chair slowly drifted across his field of vision and fetched up against the wall with a quiet thump. Lanigan's face relaxed slightly. Then Estelle's hand was on his arm — a touch meant to be soothing, but which burned like lye.

"Here," she said. "Drink this."

"No," Lanigan said. "I'm all right now."

"Drink it anyhow."

"No, really. I really am all right."

For now he was completely out of the grip of the nightmare. He was himself again, and the world was its habitual self. That was very precious to Lanigan; he didn't want to let go of it just now, not even for the soothing release of a sedative.

"Was it the same dream?" Estelle asked him.

"Yes, just the same...I don't want to talk about it."

"All right," Estelle said. (She is humoring me, Lanigan thought. I frighten her. I frighten myself.)

She asked, "Hon, what time is it?"

Lanigan looked at his watch. "Six-fifteen." But as he said it, the hour hand jumped forward convulsively. "No, it's five to seven."



"Can you get back to sleep?"

"I don't think so," Lanigan said. "I think I'll stay up."

"Fine, dear," Estelle said. She yawned, closed her eyes, opened them again and asked, "Hon, don't you think it might be a good idea if you called —"

"I have an appointment with him for twelve-ten," Lanigan said.

"That's fine," Estelle said. She closed her eyes again. Sleep came over her while Lanigan watched. Her auburn hair turned a faint blue and she sighed once, heavily.

Lanigan got out of bed and dressed. He was, for the most part, a large man, unusually easy to recognize. His features were curiously distinct. He had a rash on his neck. He was in no other way outstanding, except that he had a recurring dream which was driving him insane.

He spent the next few hours on his front porch watching stars go nova in the dawn sky.

Later, he went out for a stroll. As luck would have it, he ran into George Torstein just two blocks from his home. Several months ago, in an incautious moment, he had told Torstein about his dream. Torstein was a bluff, hearty fellow, a great believer in self-help, discipline, practicality, common sense, and other, even duller virtues. His hard-headed no-nonsense attitude had come as a momentary relief to Lanigan. But now it acted as an abrasive. Men like Torstein were undoubtedly the salt of the earth and the backbone of the country; but for Lanigan, wrestling with the impalpable (and losing), Torstein had grown from a nuisance into a horror.

"Well, Tom, how's the boy?" Torstein greeted him.

"Fine," Lanigan said, "just fine." He nodded pleasantly and began to walk on under a melting green sky. But one did not escape from Torstein so easily.

"Tom, boy, I've been thinking about your problem," Torstein said. "I've been quite disturbed about you."

"Well, that's very nice of you," Lanigan said. "But really, you shouldn't concern yourself —"

"I do it because I want to," Torstein said, speaking the simple, deplorable truth. "I take an interest in people, Tom. Always have, ever since I was a kid. And you and I've been friends and neighbors for a long time."

"That's true enough," Lanigan said numbly. (The worst thing about needing help was having to accept it.)

"Well, Tom, I think what would help you would be a little vacation."

Torstein had a simple prescription for everything. As he practiced soul-doctoring without a license, he was always careful to prescribe a drug you could buy over the counter.

"I really can't afford a vacation this month," Lanigan said. (The sky was ochre and pink now; three pines had withered; an oak had turned into a cactus.)

Torstein laughed heartily. "Boy, you can't afford not to take a vacation just now! Did you ever consider that?"

"No, I guess not."

"Well, *consider* it! You're tired, tense, all keyed up. You've been working too hard."

"I've been on leave of absence all week," Lanigan said. He glanced at his watch. The gold case had turned to lead, but the time seemed accurate enough. Nearly two hours had passed since he had begun this conversation.

"It isn't good enough," Torstein was saying. "You've stayed right here in town, right close to your work. You need to get in touch with nature. Tom, when was the last time you went camping?"

"Camping? I don't think I've ever gone camping."

"There, you see! Boy, you've got to put yourself back in touch with real things. Not streets and buildings, but mountains and rivers."

Lanigan looked at his watch again and was relieved to see it turn back to gold. He was glad; he had paid sixty dollars for that case.

"Trees and lakes," Torstein was rhapsodizing. "The feel of grass growing under your feet, the sight of tall black mountains marching across a golden sky —"

Lanigan shook his head. "I've been in the country, George. It doesn't do anything for me."

Torstein was obstinate. "You must get away from artificialities."

"It all seems equally artificial," Lanigan said. "Trees or buildings — what's the difference?"

"Men make buildings," Torstein intoned. "But God makes trees."

Lanigan had his doubts about both propositions, but he wasn't going to tell them to Torstein. "You might have something there. I'll think about it."

"You do that," Torstein said. "It happens I know the perfect place. It's in Maine, Tom, and it's right near this little lake —"

Torstein was a master of the interminable description. Luckily for Lanigan, there was a diversion. Across the street, a house burst into flames.

"Hey, whose house is that?" Lanigan asked.

"Makelby's," Torstein said. "That's his second fire this month."

"Maybe we ought to give the alarm."

"You're right. I'll do it myself," Torstein said. "Remember what I told you about that place in Maine, Tom."

Torstein turned to go, and something rather humorous happened. As he stepped over the pavement, the concrete liquefied under his left foot. Caught unawares, Torstein went in ankle-deep. His forward motion pitched him headfirst into the street.

Tom hurried to help him out before the concrete hardened again. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Twisted my damned ankle," Torstein muttered. "It's okay, I can walk."

He limped off to report the fire. Lanigan stayed and watched. He judged the fire had been caused by spontaneous combustion. In a few minutes, as he expected, it put itself out by spontaneous decombustion.

One shouldn't be pleased by another man's misfortunes; but Lanigan couldn't help chuckling about Torstein's twisted ankle. Not even the sudden appearance of flood waters on Main Street could mar his good spirits.

Then he remembered his dream, and the panic began again. He walked quickly to the doctor's office.

Dr. Sampson's office was small and dark this week. The old gray sofa was gone; in its place were two Louis Quinze chairs and a hammock. The worn carpet had rewoven itself, and there was a cigarette burn on the puce ceiling. But the portrait of Andretti was in its usual place on the wall, and the big free-form ashtray was scrupulously clean.

The inner door opened and Dr. Sampson's head popped out. "Hi," he said. "Won't be a minute." His head popped back in again.

Sampson was as good as his word. It took him exactly three seconds by Lanigan's watch to do whatever he had to do. One second later Lanigan was stretched out on the leather couch with a

fresh paper doily under his head. And Dr. Sampson was saying, "Well, Tom, how have things been going?"

"The same," Lanigan said. "Worse."

"The dream?"

Lanigan nodded.

"Let's just run through it again."

"I'd rather not," Lanigan said.

"Afraid?"

"More afraid than ever."

"Even now?"

"Yes. Especially now."

There was a moment of therapeutic silence. Then Dr. Sampson said, "You've spoken before of your fear of this dream; but you've never told me *why* you fear it so."

"Well...it sounds so silly."

Sampson's face was serious, quiet, composed; the face of a man who found nothing silly, who was constitutionally incapable of finding anything silly. It was a pose, perhaps, but one which Lanigan found reassuring.

"All right, I'll tell you," Lanigan said abruptly. Then he stopped.

"Go on," Dr. Sampson said.

"Well, it's because I believe that somehow, in some way I don't understand..."

"Yes, go on," Sampson said.

"Well, that somehow the world of my dream is becoming the real world." He stopped again, then went on with a rush. "And someday I am going to wake up and find myself *in* that world. And then that world will have become the real one and this world will be the dream."

He turned to see how this mad revelation had affected Sampson. If the doctor was disturbed, he didn't show it. He was quietly lighting his pipe with the smoldering tip of his left forefinger. He blew out his forefinger and said, "Yes, please go on."

"Go on? But that's it, that's the whole thing!"

A spot the size of a quarter appeared on Sampson's mauve carpet. It darkened, thickened, grew into a small fruit tree. Sampson picked one of the purple pods, sniffed it, then set it down on his desk. He looked at Lanigan sternly, sadly.

"You've told me about your dreamworld before, Tom."

Lanigan nodded.



"We have discussed it, traced its origins, explored its meaning for you. In past months we have discovered, I believe, why you *need* to cripple yourself with this nightmare fear."

Lanigan nodded unhappily.

"Yet you refuse the insights," Sampson said. "You forget each time that your dreamworld is a *dream*, nothing but a dream, operating by arbitrary dream laws which you have invented to satisfy your psychic needs."

"I wish I could believe that," Lanigan said. "The trouble is, my dreamworld is so damnably reasonable."

"Not at all," Sampson said. "It is just that your delusion is hermetic, self-enclosed, and self-sustaining. A man's actions are based upon certain assumptions about the nature of the world. Grant his assumptions and his behavior is entirely reasonable. But to change those assumptions, those fundamental axioms, is nearly impossible. For example, how do you prove to a man that he is not being controlled by a secret radio which only he can hear?"

"I see the problem," Lanigan muttered. "And that's me?"

"Yes, Tom; that, in effect, is you. You want me to prove to you that this world is real, and that the world of your dream is false. You propose to give up your fantasy if I supply you with those necessary proofs."

"Yes, exactly!" Lanigan cried.

"But you see, I can't supply them," Sampson said. "The nature of the world is apparent, but unprovable."

Lanigan thought for a while. Then he said, "Look, Doc, I'm not as sick as the guy with the secret radio, am I?"

"No, you're not. You're more reasonable, more rational. You have doubts about the reality of the world; but luckily, you also have doubts about the validity of your delusion."

"Then give it a try," Lanigan said. "I understand your problem; but I swear to you, I'll accept anything I can possibly bring myself to accept."

"It's not my field, really," Sampson said. "This sort of thing calls for a metaphysician. I don't think I'd be very skilled at it..."

"Give it a try," Lanigan pleaded.

"All right, here goes." Sampson's forehead wrinkled as he concentrated. Then he said, "It seems to me that we inspect the world through our senses, and therefore we must in the final analysis accept the testimony of those senses."

Lanigan nodded, and the doctor went on.

"So, we know that a thing exists because our senses tell us it exists. How do we check the accuracy of our observations? By comparing them with the sensory impressions of other men. We know that our senses don't lie when other men's senses agree upon the existence of the thing in question."

Lanigan thought about this, then said, "Therefore, the real world is simply what most men think it is."

Sampson twisted his mouth and said, "I told you that metaphysics was not my forte. Still, I think it is an acceptable demonstration."

"Yes...But, Doc, suppose *all* of those observers are wrong? For example, suppose there are many worlds and many realities, not just one? Suppose this is simply one arbitrary existence out of an infinity of existences? Or suppose that the nature of reality itself is capable of change, and that somehow I am able to perceive that change?"

Sampson sighed, found a little green bat fluttering inside his jacket and absentmindedly crushed it with a ruler.

"There you are," he said. "I can't disprove a single one of your suppositions. I think, Tom, that we had better run through the entire dream."

Lanigan grimaced. "I really would rather not. I have a feeling..."

"I know you do," Sampson said, smiling faintly. "But this will prove or disprove it once and for all, won't it?"

"I guess so," Lanigan said. He took courage — unwisely — and said, "Well the way it begins, the way my dream starts —"

Even as he spoke the horror came over him. He felt dizzy, sick, terrified. He tried to rise from the couch. The doctor's face ballooned over him. He saw the glint of metal, heard Sampson saying, "Just try to relax...brief seizure...try to think of something pleasant."

Then either Lanigan or the world or both passed out.

Lanigan and/or the world came back to consciousness. Time may or may not have passed. Anything might or might not have happened. Lanigan sat up and looked at Sampson.

"How do you feel now?" Sampson asked.

"I'm all right," Lanigan said. "What happened?"

"You had a bad moment. Take it easy for a bit."

Lanigan leaned back and tried to calm himself. The doctor was sitting at his desk, writing notes. Lanigan counted to twenty with

his eyes closed, then opened them cautiously. Sampson was still writing notes.

Lanigan looked around the room, counted the five pictures on the wall, recounted them, looked at the green carpet, frowned at it, closed his eyes again. This time he counted to fifty.

"Well, care to talk about it?" Sampson asked, closing the notebook.

"No, not just now," Lanigan said. (Five paintings, green carpet.)

"Just as you please," the doctor said. "I think our time is just about up. But if you would like to lie down in the anteroom..."

"No thanks, I'll go home," Lanigan said.

He stood up, walked across the green carpet to the door, looked back at the five paintings and at the doctor, who smiled at him encouragingly. Then Lanigan went through the door and into the anteroom, through the anteroom to the outer door, and through that and down the corridor to the stairs and down the stairs to the street.

He walked and looked at the trees, on which green leaves moved faintly and predictably in a faint breeze. There was traffic, which moved soberly down one side of the street and up the other. The sky was an unchanging blue and had obviously been so for quite some time.

Dream? He pinched himself; a dream pinch? He did not awaken. He shouted; an imaginary shout? He did not waken.

He was in the familiar territory of his nightmare. But it had lasted far longer than any of the others. Ergo, it was no longer a dream. (A dream is the shorter life, a life is the longer dream.) Lanigan had made the transition; or the transition had made Lanigan. The impossible had happened by the simple expedient of happening.

The pavement never once yielded beneath his feet. Over there was the First National City Bank; it had been there yesterday, it would be there tomorrow. Grotesquely devoid of possibilities, it would never become a tomb, an airplane, or the bones of a prehistoric monster. Sullenly it would remain, a building of concrete and steel, madly persisting in its fixity until men with tools came and tediously tore it down.

Lanigan walked through this petrified world, under a blue sky that oozed a coy white around the edges, promising something it could never deliver. Traffic moved to the right, people crossed at crossings, clocks were within minutes of agreement.



Somewhere beyond the town lay the countryside; but Lanigan knew that the grass did not grow under one's feet; it simply lay there, growing no doubt, but imperceptibly, unusable to the senses. And the mountains were still black and tall, but they were giants stopped in mid-stride, destined never to march against a golden (or purple or green) sky.

This was the frozen world. This was the slow-motion world of preordination, routine, habituation. This was the world in which the eerie quality of *boredom* was not only possible; it was inevitable. This was the world in which change, that quicksilver substance, had been reduced to a sluggish and reluctant glue.

Because of this, the magic of a phenomenal world was no longer possible. And without magic, no one could live.

Lanigan screamed. He screamed while people gathered around and looked at him (but didn't do anything or become anything), and then a policeman came, as he was supposed to (but the sun didn't change shape once), and then an ambulance rushed down the invariable street (but without trumpets, minus strumpets, on four wheels instead of a pleasing three or twenty-five) and the ambulance men took him to a building which was exactly where they expected to find it, and there was a great deal of talk by people who stood, untransformed and untransformable, asking him questions in a room with relentlessly white walls.

They prescribed rest, quiet, sedation. This, horribly enough, was the very poison which Lanigan had been trying to throw out of his system. Naturally they gave him an overdose.

He didn't die; it wasn't that good a poison. Instead, he became completely insane. He was discharged three weeks later, a model patient and a model cure.

Now he walks around and believes that change is impossible. He has become a masochist; he revels in the insolent regularity of things. He has become a sadist; he preaches to others the divine mechanical order of things.

He has completely assimilated his insanity or the world's, in all ways except one. He is not happy. Order and happiness are contradictions which the universe has not succeeded in reconciling as yet.





# DIPLOMATIC IMMUNITY

"Come right in, gentlemen," the Ambassador waved them into the very special suite the State Department had given him. "Please be seated."

Colonel Cercy accepted a chair, trying to size up the individual who had all Washington chewing its fingernails. The Ambassador hardly looked like a menace. He was of medium height and slight build, dressed in a conservative brown tweed suit that the State Department had given him. His face was intelligent, finely molded and aloof.

As human as a human, Cercy thought, studying the alien with bleak, impersonal eyes.

"How may I serve you?" the Ambassador asked, smiling.

"The President has put me in charge of your case," Cercy said. "I've studied Professor Darrig's reports" — he nodded at the scientist beside him — "but I'd like to hear the whole thing for myself."

"Of course," the alien said, lighting a cigarette. He seemed genuinely pleased to be asked; which was interesting, Cercy thought. In the week since he had landed, every important scientist in the country had been at him.

But in a pinch they call the Army, Cercy reminded himself. He settled back in his chair, both hands jammed carelessly into his pockets. His right hand was resting on the butt of a .45, the safety off.

"I have come," the alien said, "as an ambassador-at-large, representing an empire that stretches halfway across the galaxy. I wish to extend the welcome of my people and to invite you to join our organization."

"I see," Cercy replied. "Some of the scientists got the impression that participation was compulsory."

"You will join," the Ambassador said, blowing smoke through his nostrils.

Cercy could see Darrig stiffen in his chair and bite his lips. Cercy moved the automatic to a position where he could draw it easily. "How did you find us?" he asked.

"We ambassadors-at-large are each assigned an unexplored section of space," the alien said. "We examine each star system in that region for planets, and each planet for intelligent life. Intelligent is rare in the galaxy, you know."

Cercy nodded, although he hadn't been aware of the fact.

"When we find such a planet, we land, as I did, and prepare the inhabitants for their part in our organization."

"How will your people know that you have found intelligent life?" Cercy asked.

"There is a sending mechanism that is part of our structure," the Ambassador answered. "It is triggered when we reach an inhabited planet. This signal is beamed continually into space, to an effective range of several thousand light-years. Follow-up crews are continually sweeping through the limits of the reception area of each ambassador, listening for such messages. Detecting one, a colonizing team follows it to the planet."

He tapped his cigarette delicately on the edge of an ashtray. "This method has definite advantages over sending combined colonization and exploration teams, obviously. It avoids the necessity of equipping large forces for what may be decades of searching."

"Sure." Cercy's face was expressionless. "Would you tell me more about this message?"

"There isn't much more you need know. The beam is not detectable by your methods and, therefore, cannot be jammed. The message continues as long as I am alive."

Darrig drew in his breath sharply, glancing at Cercy.

"If you stopped broadcasting," Cercy said casually, "our planet would never be found."

"Not until this section of space was resurveyed," the diplomat agreed.

"Very well. As a duly appointed representative of the President of the United States, I ask you to stop transmitting. We don't choose to become part of your empire."

"I'm sorry," the Ambassador said. He shrugged his shoulders easily. Cercy wondered how many times he had played this scene on how many other planets.

"There really is nothing I can do." He stood up.

"Then you won't stop?"

"I can't. I have no control over the sending once it's activated." The diplomat turned and walked to the window. "However, I have prepared a philosophy for you. It is my duty, as your ambassador, to ease the shock of transition as much as possible. This philosophy will make it instantly apparent that — "

As the Ambassador reached the window, Cercy's gun was out of his pocket and roaring. He squeezed six rounds in almost a single explosion, aiming at the Ambassador's head and back. Then an uncontrollable shudder ran through him.

The Ambassador was no longer there!

Cercy and Darrig stared at each other. Darrig muttered something about ghosts. Then, just as suddenly, the Ambassador was back.

"You didn't think," he said, "that it would be as easy as all that, did you? We ambassadors have, necessarily, a certain diplomatic immunity." He fingered one of the bullet holes in the wall. "In case you don't understand, let me put it this way: it is not in your power to kill me. You couldn't even understand the nature of my defense."

He looked at them, and in that moment Cercy felt the Ambassador's complete alienness.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said.

Darrig and Cercy walked silently back to the control room. Neither had really expected that the Ambassador would be killed so easily, but it had still been a shock when the slugs had failed.

"I suppose you saw it all, Malley?" Cercy asked when he reached the control room.

The thin, balding psychiatrist nodded sadly. "Got it on film, too."

"I wonder what his philosophy is," Darrig mused, half to himself.

"It was illogical to expect it would work. No race would send an ambassador with a message like that and expect him to live through it. Unless — "

"Unless what?"

"Unless he had a pretty effective defense," the psychiatrist finished unhappily.



Cercy walked across the room and looked at the video panel. The Ambassador's suite was very special. It had been hurriedly constructed two days after he had landed and delivered his message. The suite was steel- and lead-lined, filled with video and movie cameras, recorders, and a variety of other things.

It was the last word in elaborate death cells.

In the screen, Cercy could see the Ambassador sitting at a table. He was typing on a little portable the Government had given him.

"Hey, Harrison!" Cercy called. "Might as well go ahead with Plan Two."

Harrison came out of a side room where he had been examining the circuits leading to the Ambassador's suite. Methodically he checked his pressure gauges, set the controls and looked at Cercy. "Now?" he asked.

"Now." Cercy watched the screen. The Ambassador was still typing.

Suddenly, as Harrison sent home the switch, the room was engulfed in flames. Fire blasted out of concealed holes in the walls, poured from the ceiling and floor.

In a moment, the room was like the inside of a blast furnace.

Cercy let it burn for two minutes, then motioned Harrison to cut the switch. They stared at the roasted room.

They were looking, hopefully, for a charred corpse.

But the Ambassador reappeared beside his desk, looking ruefully at the charred typewriter. He was completely unsinged.

"Could you get me another typewriter?" he asked, looking directly at one of the hidden projectors. "I'm setting down a philosophy for you ungrateful wretches."

He seated himself in the wreckage of an armchair. In a moment, he was apparently asleep.

"All right, everyone grab a seat," Cercy said. "Time for a council of war."

Malley straddled a chair backwards. Harrison lighted a pipe as he sat down, slowly puffing it into life.

"Now then," Cercy said. "The Government has dropped this squarely in our laps. We have to kill the Ambassador — obviously. I've been put in charge." Cercy grinned with regret. "Probably because no one higher up wants the responsibility of failure. And I've selected you three as my staff. We can have anything we want, any assistance or advice we need. All right. Any ideas?"

"How about Plan Three?" Harrison asked.

"We'll get to that," Cercy said. "But I don't believe it's going to work."

"I don't either," Darrig agreed. "We don't even know the nature of his defense."

"That's the first order of business. Malley, take all our data so far, and get someone to feed it into the Derichman Analyzer. You know the stuff we want. What properties has X, if X can do thus and thus?"

"Right," Malley said. He left, muttering something about the ascendancy of the physical sciences.

"Harrison," Cercy asked, "is Plan Three set up?"

"Sure."

"Give it a try."

While Harrison was making his last adjustments, Cercy watched Darrig. The plump little physicist was staring thoughtfully into space, muttering to himself. Cercy hoped he would come up with something. He was expecting great things of Darrig.

Knowing the impossibility of working with great numbers of people, Cercy had picked his staff with care. Quality was what he wanted.

With that in mind, he had chosen Harrison first. The stocky, sour-faced engineer had a reputation for being able to build anything, given half an idea of how it worked.

Cercy had selected Malley, the psychiatrist, because he wasn't sure that killing the Ambassador was going to be a purely physical problem.

Darrig was a mathematical physicist, but his restless, curious mind had come up with some interesting theories in other fields. He was the only one of the four who was really interested in the Ambassador as an intellectual problem.

"He's like Metal Old Man," Darrig said finally.

"What's that?"

"Haven't you ever heard the story of Metal Old Man? Well, he was a monster covered with black metal armor. He was met by Monster-Slayer, an Apache culture hero. Monster-Slayer, after many attempts, finally killed Metal Old Man."

"How did he do it?"

"Shot him in the armpit. He didn't have any armor there."

"Fine," Cercy grinned. "Ask our Ambassador to raise his arm."

"All set!" Harrison called.

"Fine. Go."

In the Ambassador's room, an invisible spray of gamma rays silently began to flood the room with deadly radiation.

But there was no Ambassador there to receive them.

"That's enough," Cercy said after a while. "That would kill a herd of elephants."

But the Ambassador stayed invisible for five hours, until some of the radioactivity had abated. Then he appeared again.

"I'm still waiting for that typewriter," he said.

"Here's the Analyzer's report." Malley handed Cercy a sheaf of papers. "This is the final formulation, boiled down."

Cercy read it aloud: "The simplest defense against any and all weapons is to *become* each particular weapon."

"Great," Harrison said. "What does it mean?"

"It means," Darrig explained, "that when we attack the Ambassador with fire, he turns into fire. Shoot at him, and he turns into a bullet — until the menace is gone, and then he changes back again." He took the papers out of Cercy's hand and riffled through them.

"Hmm. Wonder if there's any historical parallel? Don't suppose so." He raised his head. "Although this isn't conclusive, it seems logical enough. Any other defense would involve recognition of the weapon first, then an appraisal, then a counter-move predicated on the potentialities of the weapon. The Ambassador's defense would be a lot faster and safer. He wouldn't have to recognize the weapon. I suppose his body simply *identifies*, in some way, with the menace at hand."

"Did the Analyzer say there was any way of breaking this defense?" Cercy asked.

"The Analyzer stated definitely that there was no way, if the premise were true," Malley answered gloomily.

"We can discard that judgment," Darrig said. "The machine is limited."

"But we still haven't got any way of stopping him," Malley pointed out. "And he's still broadcasting that beam."

Cercy thought for a moment. "Call in every expert you can find. We're going to throw the book at the Ambassador. I know," he said, looking at Darrig's dubious expression, "but we have to try."



\* \* \*

During the next few days, every combination and permutation of death was thrown at the Ambassador. He was showered with weapons, ranging from Stone Age axes to modern high-powered rifles, peppered with hand grenades, drowned in acid, suffocated in poison gas.

He kept shrugging his shoulders philosophically and continued to work on the new typewriter they had given him.

Bacteria was piped in, first the known germ diseases, then mutated species.

The diplomat didn't even sneeze.

He was showered with electricity, radiation, wooden weapons, iron weapons, copper weapons, brass weapons, uranium weapons — anything and everything, just to cover all possibilities.

He didn't suffer a scratch, but his room looked as though a barroom brawl had been going on in it continually for fifty years.

Malley was working on an idea of his own, as was Darrig. The physicist interrupted himself long enough to remind Cercy of the Baldur myth. Baldur had been showered with every kind of weapon and remained unscathed, because everything on Earth had promised to love him. Everything except the mistletoe. When a little twig of it was shot at him, he died.

Cercy turned away impatiently, but had an order of mistletoe sent up, just in case.

It was, at least, no less effective, than the explosive shells or the bow and arrow. It did nothing except lend an oddly festive air to the battered room.

After a week of this, they moved the unprotesting Ambassador into a newer, bigger, stronger death cell. They were unable to venture into his old one because of radioactivity and microorganisms.

The Ambassador went back to work at his typewriter. All his previous attempts had been burned, torn, or eaten away.

"Let's go talk to him," Darrig suggested after another day had passed. Cercy agreed. For the moment, they were out of ideas.

"Come right in, gentlemen," the Ambassador said so cheerfully that Cercy felt sick. "I'm sorry I can't offer you anything. Through an oversight, I haven't been given any food or water for about ten days. Not that it matters, of course."



"Glad to hear it," Cercy said. The Ambassador hardly looked as if he had been facing all the violence Earth had to offer. On the contrary, Cercy and his men looked as though *they* had been under bombardment.

"You've got quite a defense there," Malley said conversationally.

"Glad you like it."

"Would you mind telling us how it works?" Darrig asked innocently.

"Don't you know?"

"We think so. You become what is attacking you. Is that right?"

"Certainly," the Ambassador said. "You see, I have no secrets from you."

"Is there anything we can give you," Cercy asked, "to get you to turn off that signal?"

"A bribe?"

"Sure," Cercy said. "Anything you? —"

"Nothing," the Ambassador replied.

"Look, be reasonable," Harrison said. "You don't want to cause a war, do you? Earth is united now. We're arming —"

"With what?"

"Atom bombs," Malley answered him. "Hydrogen bombs. We're —"

"Drop one on me," the Ambassador said. "It wouldn't kill me. What makes you think it will have any effect on my people?"

The four men were silent. Somehow, they hadn't thought of that.

"A people's ability to make war," the Ambassador stated, "is a measure of the status of their civilization. Stage one is the use of simple physical extensions. Stage two is control at the molecular level. You are on the threshold of stage three, although still far from mastery of atomic and sub-atomic forces." He smiled ingratiatingly. "My people are reaching the limits of stage five."

"What would that be?" Darrig asked.

"You'll find out," the Ambassador said. "But perhaps you've wondered if my powers are typical? I don't mind telling you that they're not. In order for me to do my job and nothing more, I have certain built-in restrictions, making me capable only of passive action."

"Why?" Darrig asked.

"For obvious reasons. If I were to take positive action in a moment of anger, I might destroy your entire planet."

"Do you expect us to believe that?" Cercy asked.

"Why not? Is it so hard to understand? Can't you believe that there are forces you know nothing about? And there is another reason for passiveness. Certainly by this time you've deduced it?"

"To break our spirit, I suppose," Cercy said.

"Exactly. My telling you won't make any difference, either. The pattern is always the same. An ambassador lands and delivers his message to a high-spirited, wild young race like yours. There is frenzied resistance against him, spasmodic attempts to kill him. After all these fail, the people are usually quite crestfallen. When the colonization team arrives, their indoctrination goes along just that much faster." He paused, then said, "Most planets are more interested in the philosophy I have to offer. I assure it will make the transition far easier."

He held out a sheaf of typewritten pages. "Won't you at least look through it?"

Darrig accepted the papers and put them in his pocket. "When I get time."

"I suggest you give it a try," the Ambassador said. "You must be near the crisis point now. Why not give it up?"

"Not yet," Cercy replied tonelessly.

"Don't forget to read the philosophy," the Ambassador urged them.

The men hurried from the room.

"Now look," Malley said once they were back in the control room, "there are a few things we haven't tried. How about utilizing psychology?"

"Anything you like," Cercy agreed, "including black magic. What did you have in mind?"

"The way I see it," Malley answered, "the Ambassador is geared to respond instantaneously to any threat. He must have an all-or-nothing defensive reflex. I suggest first we try something that won't trigger that reflex."

"Like what?" Cercy asked.

"Hypnotism. Perhaps we can find out something."

"Sure," Cercy said. "Try it. Try anything."

Cercy, Malley and Darrig gathered around the video screen as an infinitesimal amount of a light hypnotic gas was admitted into the

Ambassador's room. At the same time, a bolt of electricity lashed into the chair where the Ambassador was sitting.

"That was to distract him," Malley explained. The Ambassador vanished before the electricity struck him, and then appeared again, curled up in his armchair.

"That's enough," Malley whispered, and shut the valve. They watched. After a while, the Ambassador put down his book and stared into the distance.

"How strange," he said. "Alferm dead. Good friend...just a freak accident. He ran into it out there. Didn't have a chance. But it doesn't happen often."

"He's thinking out loud," Malley whispered, although there was no possibility of the Ambassador's hearing them. "Vocalizing his thoughts. His friend must have been on his mind for some time."

"Of course," the Ambassador went on, "Alferm had to die some time. No immortality — yet. But that way — no defense. Out there in space they just pop up. Always there, underneath, just waiting for a chance to boil out."

"His body isn't reacting to the hypnotic as a menace yet," Cercy whispered.

"Well," the Ambassador told himself, "the regularizing principle has been doing pretty well, keeping it all down, smoothing out the inconsistencies —"

Suddenly he leaped to his feet, his face pale for a moment, as he obviously tried to remember what he had said. Then he laughed.

"Clever. That's the first time that particular trick has been played on me, and the last time. But, gentlemen, it didn't do you any good. I don't know, myself, how to go about killing me." He laughed at the blank walls.

"Besides," he continued, "the colonizing team must have the direction now. They'll find you with or without me."

He sat down again, smiling.

"That does it!" Darrig cried. "He's not invulnerable. Something killed his friend Alferm."

"Something out in space," Cercy reminded him. "I wonder what it was."

"Let me see," Darrig reflected aloud. "The regularizing principle. That must be a natural law we know nothing about. And underneath — what would be underneath?"

"He said the colonization team would find us anyhow," Malley reminded them.

"First things first," Cercy said. "He might have been bluffing us...no, I don't suppose so. We still have to get the Ambassador out of the way."

"I think I know what is underneath!" Darrig exclaimed. "This is wonderful. A new cosmology, perhaps."

"What is it?" Cercy asked. "Anything we can use?"

"I think so. But let me work it out. I think I'll go back to my hotel. I have some books there I want to check, and I don't want to be disturbed for a few hours."

"All right," Cercy agreed. "But what? —"

"No, no, I could be wrong," Darrig said. "Let me work it out." He hurried from the room.

"What do you think he's driving at?" Malley asked.

"Beats me," Cercy shrugged. "Come on, let's try some more of that psychological stuff."

First they filled the Ambassador's room with several feet of water. Not enough to drown him, just enough to make him good and uncomfortable.

To this, they added lights. For eight hours, lights flashed in the Ambassador's room — bright lights to pry under his eyelids; dull, clashing ones to disturb him.

Sounds came next — screeches and screams and shrill, grating noises; the sound of a man's fingernails being dragged across slate, amplified a thousand times: and strange sucking noises, and shouts and whispers.

Then the smells. Then, everything else they could think of that could drive a man insane.

The Ambassador slept peacefully through it all.

"Now look," Cercy said, the following day, "let's start using our damned heads." His voice was hoarse and rough. Although the psychological torture hadn't bothered the Ambassador, it seemed to have backfired on Cercy and his men.

"Where in hell is Darrig?"

"Still working on that idea of his," Malley said, rubbing his stubbled chin. "Says he's just about got it."



"We'll work on the assumption that he can't produce," Cercy said. "Start thinking. For example, if the Ambassador can turn into anything, what is there he can't turn into?"

"Good question," Harrison grunted.

"It's the payoff question," Cercy said. "No use throwing a spear at a man who can turn into one."

"How about this?" Malley asked. "Taking it for granted he can turn into anything, how about putting him in a situation where he'll be attacked even *after* he alters?"

"I'm listening," Cercy said.

"Say he's in danger. He turns into the thing threatening him. What if *that* thing were itself being threatened? And in turn, was in the act of threatening something else? What would he do then?"

"How are you going to put that into action?" Cercy asked.

"Like this." Malley picked up the telephone. "Hello? Give me the Washington Zoo. This is urgent."

The Ambassador turned as the door opened. An unwilling, angry, hungry tiger was propelled in. The door slammed shut.

The tiger looked at the Ambassador. The Ambassador looked at the tiger.

"Most ingenious," the Ambassador said.

At the sound of his voice, the tiger came unglued. He sprang like a steel spring uncoiled, landing on the floor where the Ambassador had been.

The door opened again. Another tiger was pushed in. He snarled angrily and leaped at the first. They smashed together in mid-air.

The Ambassador appeared a few feet off, watching. He moved back when a lion entered the door, head up and alert. The lion sprang at him, almost going over on his head when he struck nothing. Not finding any human, the lion leaped on one of the tigers.

The Ambassador reappeared in his chair, where he sat smoking and watching the beasts kill each other.

In ten minutes the room looked like an abattoir.

But by then the Ambassador had tired of the spectacle and was reclining on his bed, reading.

"I give up," Malley said. "That was my last bright idea."

Cercy stared at the floor, not answering. Harrison was seated in the corner, getting quietly drunk.

The telephone rang.

"Yeah?" Cercy said.

"I've got it!" Darrig's voice shouted over the line. "I really think this is it. Look, I'm taking a cab right down. Tell Harrison to find some helpers."

"What is it?" Cercy asked.

"The Chaos underneath!" Darrig replied, and hung up.

They paced the floor, waiting for him to show up. Half an hour passed, then an hour. Finally, three hours after he had called, Darrig strolled in.

"Hello," he said casually.

"Hello, hell!" Cercy growled. "What kept you?"

"On the way over," Darrig said, "I read the Ambassador's philosophy. It's quite a work."

"Is that what took you so long?"

"Yes. I had the driver take me around the park a few times while I was reading it."

"Skip it. How about — "

"I can't skip it," Darrig said in a strange, tight voice. "I'm afraid we were wrong. About the aliens, I mean. It's perfectly right and proper that they should rule us. As a matter of fact, I wish they'd hurry up and get here."

But Darrig didn't look certain. His voice shook and perspiration poured from his face. He twisted his hands together, as though in agony.

"It's hard to explain," he said. "Everything became clear as soon as I started reading it. I saw how stupid we were, trying to be independent in this interdependent universe. I saw — oh, look Cercy. Let's stop all this foolishness and accept the Ambassador as our friend."

"Calm down!" Cercy shouted at the perfectly calm physicist. "You don't know what you're saying."

"It's strange," Darrig said. "I know how I felt — I just don't feel that way anymore. I think. Anyhow, I know *your* trouble. You haven't read the philosophy. You'll see what I mean once you've read it." He handed Cercy the pile of papers. Cercy promptly ignited them with his cigarette lighter.

"It doesn't matter," Darrig said. "I've got it memorized. Just listen. Axiom. All peoples — "

Cercy hit him, a short, clean blow, and Darrig slumped to the floor.

"Those words must be semantically keyed," Malley said. "They're designed to set off certain reactions in us, I suppose. All the Ambassador does is alter the philosophy to suit the peoples he's dealing with."

"Look, Malley," Cercy said. "This is your job now. Darrig knows, or thought he knew, the answer. You have to get that out of him."

"That won't be easy," Malley said. "He'd feel that he was betraying everything he believes in if he were to tell us."

"I don't care how you get it," Cercy said. "Just get it."

"Even if it kills him?" Malley asked.

"Even if it kills you."

"Help me get him to my lab," Malley said.

That night Cercy and Harrison kept watch on the Ambassador from the control room. Cercy found his thoughts were racing in circles.

What had killed Alfem in space? Could it be duplicated on Earth? What was the regularizing principle? What was the "Chaos Underneath"?

What in hell am I doing here? he asked himself. But he couldn't start that sort of thing.

"What do you figure the Ambassador is?" he asked Harrison. "Is he a man?"

"Looks like one," Harrison said drowsily.

"But he doesn't act like one. I wonder if this is his true shape?"

Harrison shook his head, and lighted his pipe.

"What is there of him?" Cercy asked. "He looks like a man, but he can change into anything else. You can't attack him; he adapts. He's like water, taking the shape of any vessel he's poured into."

"You can't boil water," Harrison yawned.

"Sure. Water hasn't any shape, has it? Or has it? What's basic?"

With an effort, Harrison tried to focus on Cercy's words. "Molecular pattern? The matrix?"

"Matrix," Cercy repeated, yawning himself. "Pattern. Must be something like that. A pattern is abstract, isn't it?"

"Sure. A pattern can be impressed on anything. What did I say?"

"Let's see," Cercy said. "Pattern. Matrix. Everything about the Ambassador is capable of change. There must be some unifying force

that retains his personality. Something that *doesn't* change, no matter what contortions he goes through."

"Like a piece of string," Harrison murmured with his eyes closed.

"Sure. Tie it in knots, weave a rope out of it, wind it around your finger; it's still string."

"Yeah."

"But how do you attack a pattern?" Cercy asked. And why couldn't he get some sleep? To hell with the Ambassador and his hordes of colonists, he was going to close his eyes for a moment...

"Wake up, Colonel!"

Cercy pried his eyes open and looked up at Malley. Beside him, Harrison was snoring deeply. "Did you get anything?"

"Not a thing," Malley confessed. "The philosophy must've had quite an effect on him. But it didn't work all the way. Darrig knew that he *bad wanted* to kill the Ambassador, and for good and sufficient reasons. Although he felt differently now, he still had the feeling that he was betraying us. On the one hand, he couldn't hurt the Ambassador; on the other, he wouldn't hurt us.

"Won't he tell anything?"

"I'm afraid it's not that simple," Malley said. "You know, if you have an insurmountable obstacle that *must* be surmounted...and also, I think the philosophy had an injurious effect on his mind."

"What are you trying to say?" Cercy got to his feet.

"I'm sorry," Malley apologized, "there wasn't a damned thing I could do. Darrig fought the whole thing out in his mind and when he couldn't fight any longer, he — retreated. I'm afraid he's hopelessly insane."

"Let's see him."

They walked down the corridor to Malley's laboratory. Darrig was relaxed on a couch, his eyes glazed and staring.

"Is there any way of curing him?" Cercy asked,

"Shock therapy, maybe." Malley was dubious. "It'll take a long time. And he'll probably block out everything that had to do with producing this."

Cercy turned away, feeling sick. Even if Darrig could be cured, it would be too late. The aliens must have picked up the Ambassador's message by now and were undoubtedly heading for Earth.



"What's this?" Cercy asked, picking up a piece of paper that lay by Darrig's hand.

"Oh, he was doodling," Malley said. "Is there anything written on it?"

Cercy read aloud: "'Upon further consideration, I can see that Chaos and the Gorgon Medusa are closely related.'"

"What does that mean?" Malley asked.

"I don't know," Cercy puzzled. "He was always interested in folklore."

"Sounds schizophrenic," the psychiatrist said.

Cercy read it again. "'Upon further consideration, I can see that Chaos and the Gorgon Medusa are closely related.'" He stared at it. "Isn't it possible," he asked Malley, "that he was trying to give us a clue? Trying to trick himself into giving and not giving at the same time?"

"It's possible," Malley agreed. "An unsuccessful compromise — but what could it mean?"

"Chaos." Cercy remembered Darrig's mentioning that word in his telephone call. "That was the original state of the universe in Greek myth, wasn't it? The formlessness out of which everything came?"

"Something like that," Malley said. "And Medusa was one of those three sisters with the horrible faces."

Cercy stood for a moment, staring at the paper. Chaos... Medusa...and organizing principle! Of course!

"I think — " He turned and ran from the room. Malley looked at him; then loaded a hypodermic and followed.

In the control room, Cercy shouted Harrison into consciousness.

"Listen," he said, "I want you to build something, quick. Do you hear me?"

"Sure." Harrison blinked and sat up. "What's the rush?"

"I know what Darrig wanted to tell us," Cercy said. "Come on, I'll tell you what I want. And Malley, put down that hypodermic. I haven't cracked. I want you to get me a book on Greek mythology. And hurry it up."

Finding a Greek mythology isn't an easy task at two o'clock in the morning. With the aid of FBI men, Malley routed a book-dealer out of bed. He got his book and hurried back.

Cercy was red-eyed and excited, and Harrison and his helpers were working away at three crazy-looking rigs. Cercy snatched the book from Malley, looked up one item, and put it down.

"Great work," he said. "We're all set now. Finished, Harrison?"

"Just about." Harrison and ten helpers were screwing in the last parts. "Will you tell me what this is?"

"Me too," Malley put in.

"I don't mean to be secretive," Cercy said. "I'm just in a hurry. I'll explain as we go along." He stood up. "Okay, let's wake up the Ambassador."

They watched the screen as a bolt of electricity leaped from the ceiling to the Ambassador's bed. Immediately, the Ambassador vanished.

"Now he's a part of that stream of electrons, right?" Cercy asked.

"That's what he told us," Malley said.

"But still keeping his pattern within the stream," Cercy continued. "He has to, in order to get back into his own shape. Now we start the first disrupter."

Harrison hooked the machine into circuit and sent his helpers away.

"Here's a running graph of the electron stream," Cercy said. "See the difference?" On the graph there was an irregular series of peaks and valleys, constantly shifting and leveling. "Do you remember when you hypnotized the Ambassador? He talked about his friend who'd been killed in space."

"That's right," Malley nodded. "His friend had been killed by something that had just popped up."

"He said something else," Cercy went on. "He told us that the basic organizing force of the universe usually stopped things like that. What does that mean to you?"

"The organizing force," Malley repeated slowly. "Didn't Darrig say that was a new natural law?"

"He did. But think of the implications, as Darrig did. If an organizing principle is engaged in some work, there must be something that opposes it. That which opposes organization is —"

"Chaos!"

"That's what Darrig thought and what we should have seen. The Chaos is underlying, and out of it there arose an organizing

principle. This principle, if I've got it right, sought to suppress the fundamental Chaos, to make all things regular.

"But the Chaos still boils out in spots, as Alfern found out. Perhaps the organizational pattern is weaker in space. Anyhow, those spots are dangerous, until the organizing principle gets to work on them."

He turned to the panel. "Okay, Harrison. Throw in the second disrupter." The peaks and valleys altered on the graph. They started to mount in crazy, meaningless configurations.

"Take Darrig's message in the light of that. Chaos, we know, is underlying. Everything was formed out of it. The Gorgon Medusa was something *that couldn't be looked upon*. She turned men into stone, you recall, destroyed them. So, Darrig found a relationship between Chaos and that which can't be looked upon. All with regard to the Ambassador, of course."

"The Ambassador can't look upon Chaos!" Malley cried.

"That's it. The Ambassador is capable of an infinite number of alterations and permutations. *But something* — the matrix — can't change, because then there would be nothing left. To destroy something as abstract as a pattern, we need a state in which no pattern is possible. A state of Chaos."

The third disrupter was thrown into circuit. The graph looked as if a drunken caterpillar had been sketching on it.

"Those disrupters are Harrison's idea," Cercy said. "I told him I wanted an electrical current with absolutely no coherent pattern. The disrupters are an extension of radio jamming. The first alters the electrical pattern. That's its purpose: to produce a state of patternlessness. The second tries to destroy the pattern left by the first; the third tries to destroy the pattern made by the first two. They're fed back then, and any remaining pattern is systematically destroyed in circuit — I hope."

"This is supposed to produce a state of Chaos?" Malley asked, looking into the screen.

For a while there was only the whining of the machines and the crazy doodling of the graph. Then, in the middle of the Ambassador's room, a spot appeared. It wavered, shrank, expanded.

What happened was indescribable. All they knew was that everything within the spot had disappeared.

"Switch it off!" Cercy shouted. Harrison cut the switch.

The spot continued to grow.

"How is it we're able to look at it?" Malley asked, staring at the screen.

"The shield of Perseus, remember?" Cercy said. "Using it as a mirror, he could look at Medusa."

"It's still growing!" Malley shouted.

"There was a calculated risk in all this," Cercy said. "There's always the possibility that the Chaos may go on, unchecked. If that happens, it won't matter much what —"

The spot stopped growing. Its edges wavered and rippled, and then it started to shrink.

"The organizing principle," Cercy said, and collapsed into a chair.

"Any sign of the Ambassador?" he asked in a few minutes.

The spot was still wavering. Then it was gone. Instantly there was an explosion. The steel walls buckled inwards, but held. The screen went dead.

"The spot removed all the air from the room," Cercy explained, "as well as the furniture and the Ambassador."

"He couldn't take it," Malley said. "No pattern can cohere in a state of patternlessness. He's gone to join Alfem."

Malley started to giggle. Cercy felt like joining him, but pulled himself together.

"Take it easy," he said. "We're not through yet."

"Sure we are! The Ambassador —"

"Is out of the way. But there's still an alien fleet homing in on this region of space. A fleet so strong we couldn't scratch it with an H-bomb. They'll be looking for us."

He stood up.

"Go home and get some sleep. Something tells me that tomorrow we're going to have to start figuring out some way of camouflaging a planet."





# GHOST V

"He's reading our sign now," Gregor said, his long bony face pressed against the peephole in the office door.

"Let me see," Arnold said.

Gregor pushed him back. "He's going to knock — no, he's changed his mind. He's leaving."

Arnold returned to his desk and laid out another game of solitaire. Gregor kept watch at the peephole.

They had constructed the peephole out of sheer boredom three months after forming their partnership and renting the office. During that time, the AAA Ace Planet Decontamination Service had had no business — in spite of being first in the telephone book. Planetary decontamination was an old, established line, completely monopolized by two large outfits. It was discouraging for a small new firm run by two young men with big ideas and a lot of unpaid-for equipment.

"He's coming back," Gregor called. "*Quick* — look busy and important!"

Arnold swept his cards into a drawer and just finished buttoning his lab gown when the knock came.

Their visitor was a short, bald, tired-looking man. He stared at them dubiously.

"You decontaminate planets?"

"That is correct, sir," Gregor said, pushing away a pile of papers and shaking the man's moist hand. "I am Richard Gregor. This is my partner, Doctor Frank Arnold."

Arnold, impressively garbed in a white lab gown and black horn-rimmed glasses, nodded absently and resumed his examination of a row of ancient, crusted test tubes.

"Kindly be seated, Mister — "

"Ferngraum."

"Mr. Ferngraum. I think we can handle just about anything you require," Gregor said heartily. "Flora or fauna control, cleaning atmosphere, purifying water supply, sterilizing soil, stability testing, volcano and earthquake control — anything you need to make a planet fit for human habitation."

Ferngraum still looked dubious. "I'm going to level with you. I've got a problem planet on my hands."

Gregor nodded confidently. "Problems are our business."

"I'm a free-lance real-estate broker," Ferngraum said. "You know how it works — buy a planet, sell a planet, everyone makes a living. Usually I stick with the scrub worlds and let my buyers do their decontaminating. But a few months ago I had a chance to buy a real quality planet — took it right out from under the noses of the big operators."

Ferngraum mopped his forehead unhappily.

"It's a beautiful place," he continued with no enthusiasm whatsoever. "Average temperature of seventy-one degrees. Mountainous, but fertile. Waterfalls, rainbows, all that sort of thing. And no fauna at all."

"Sounds perfect," Gregor said. "Microorganisms?"

"Nothing dangerous."

"Then what's wrong with the place?"

Ferngraum looked embarrassed. "Maybe you heard about it. The Government catalog number is RJC-5. But everyone else calls it 'Ghost V.'"

Gregor raised an eyebrow. "Ghost" was an odd nickname for a planet, but he had heard odder. After all, you had to call them something. There were thousands of planet-bearing suns within spaceship range, many of them inhabitable or potentially inhabitable. And there were plenty of people from the civilized worlds who wanted to colonize them. Religious sects, political minorities, philosophic groups — or just plain pioneers, out to make a fresh start.

"I don't believe I've heard of it," Gregor said.

Ferngraum squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. "I should have listened to my wife. But no — I was gonna be a big operator. Paid ten times my usual price for Ghost V and now I'm stuck with it."

"But what's *wrong* with it?" Gregor asked.

"It seems to be haunted," Ferngraum said in despair.

Ferngraum had radar-checked his planet, then leased it to a combine of farmers from Dijon VI. The eight-man advance guard landed and, within a day, began to broadcast garbled reports about demons, ghouls, vampires, dinosaurs, and other inimical fauna.

When a relief ship came for them, all were dead. An autopsy report stated that the gashes, cuts, and marks on their bodies could indeed have been made by almost anything, even demons, ghouls, vampires, or dinosaurs, if such existed.

Ferngraum was fined for improper decontamination. The farmers dropped their lease. But he managed to lease it to a group of sun worshippers from Opal II.

The sun worshippers were cautious. They sent their equipment, but only three men accompanied it, to scout out trouble. The men set up camp, unpacked and declared the place a paradise. They radioed the home group to come at once — then, suddenly, there was a wild scream and radio silence.

A patrol ship went to Ghost V, buried the three mangled bodies and departed in five minutes flat.

"And that did it," Ferngraum said. "Now no one will touch it at any price. Space crews refuse to land on it. And I still don't know what happened."

He sighed deeply and looked at Gregor. "It's your baby, if you want it."

Gregor and Arnold excused themselves and went into the ante-room.

Arnold whooped at once, "We've got a job!"

"Yeah," Gregor said, "but what a job."

"We wanted the tough ones," Arnold pointed out. "If we lick this, we're established — to say nothing of the profit we'll make on a percentage basis."

"You seem to forget," Gregor said, "I'm the one who has to actually land on the planet. All you do is sit here and interpret my data."

"That's the way we set it up," Arnold reminded him. "I'm the research department — you're the troubleshooter. Remember?"

Gregor remembered. Ever since childhood, he had been sticking his neck out while Arnold stayed home and told him why he was sticking his neck out.



"I don't like it," he said.

"You don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, we can handle anything else. Faint heart ne'er won fair profit."

Gregor shrugged his shoulders. They went back to Ferngraum.

In half an hour, they had worked out their terms — a large percentage of future development profits if they succeeded, a forfeiture clause if they failed.

Gregor walked to the door with Ferngraum. "By the way, sir," he asked, "how did you happen to come to us?"

"No one else would handle it," Ferngraum said, looking extremely pleased with himself. "Good luck."

Three days later, Gregor was aboard a rickety space freighter, bound for Ghost V. He spent his time studying reports on the two colonization attempts and reading survey after survey on supernatural phenomena.

They didn't help at all. No trace of animal life had been found on Ghost V. And no proof of the existence of supernatural creatures had been discovered anywhere in the galaxy.

Gregor pondered this, then checked his weapons as the freighter spiraled into the region of Ghost V. He was carrying an arsenal large enough to start a small war and win it.

*If* he could find something to shoot at...

The captain of the freighter brought his ship to within several thousand feet of the smiling green surface of the planet, but no closer. Gregor parachuted his equipment to the site of the last two camps, shook hands with the captain, and 'chuted himself down.

He landed safely and looked up. The freighter was streaking into space as though the furies were after it.

He was alone on Ghost V.

After checking his equipment for breakage, he radioed Arnold that he had landed safely. Then, with drawn blaster, he inspected the sun worshippers' camp.

They had set themselves up at the base of a mountain, beside a small, crystal-clear lake. The prefabs were in perfect condition.

No storm had ever damaged them, because Ghost V was blessed with a beautifully even climate. But they looked pathetically lonely.

Gregor made a careful check of one. Clothes were still neatly packed in cabinets, pictures were hung on the wall and there was even a curtain on one window. In a corner of the room, a case of toys had been opened for the arrival of the main party's children.

A water pistol, a top, and a bag of marbles had spilled to the floor.

Evening was coming, so Gregor dragged his equipment into the prefab and made his preparations. He rigged an alarm system and adjusted it so finely that even a roach would set it off. He put up a radar alarm to scan the immediate area. He unpacked his arsenal, laying the heavy rifles within easy reach, but keeping a hand-blaster in his belt. Then, satisfied, he ate a leisurely supper.

Outside, the evening drifted into night. The warm and dreamy land grew dark. A gentle breeze ruffled the surface of the lake and rustled silkily in the tall grass.

It was all very peaceful.

The settlers must have been hysterical types, he decided. They had probably panicked and killed each other.

After checking his alarm system one last time, Gregor threw his clothes on a chair, turned off the lights and climbed into bed. The room was illuminated by starlight, stronger than moonlight on Earth. His blaster was under his pillow. All was well with the world.

He had just begun to doze off when he became aware that he was not alone in the room.

That was impossible. His alarm system hadn't gone off. The radar was still humming peacefully.

Yet every nerve in his body was shrieking alarm. He eased the blaster out and looked around.

A man was standing in a corner of the room.

There was no time to consider how he had come. Gregor aimed the blaster and said, "Okay, raise your hands," in a quiet, resolute voice.

The figure didn't move.

Gregor's finger tightened on the trigger, then suddenly relaxed. He recognized the man. It was his own clothing, heaped on a chair, distorted by the starlight and his own imagination.

He grinned and lowered the blaster. The pile of clothing began to stir faintly. Gregor felt a faint breeze from the window and continued to grin.

Then the pile of clothing stood up, stretched itself and began to walk toward him purposefully.

Frozen to his bed, he watched the disembodied clothing, assembled roughly in man-like form, advance on him.

When it was halfway across the room and its empty sleeves were reaching for him, he began to blast.

And kept on blasting, for the rags and remnants slithered toward him as if filled with a life of their own. Flaming bits of cloth crowded toward his face and a belt tried to coil around his legs. He had to burn everything to ashes before the attack stopped.

When it was over, Gregor turned on every light he could find. He brewed a pot of coffee and poured in most of a bottle of brandy. Somehow, he resisted an urge to kick his useless alarm system to pieces. Instead, he radioed his partner.

"That's very interesting," Arnold said, after Gregor had brought him up to date. "Animation! Very interesting indeed."

"I hoped it would amuse you," Gregor answered bitterly. After several shots of brandy, he was beginning to feel abandoned and abused.

"Did anything else happen?"

"Not yet."

"Well, take care. I've got a theory. Have to do some research on it. By the way, some crazy bookie is laying five to one against you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I took a piece of it."

"Did you bet for me or against me?" Gregor asked, worried.

"For you, of course," Arnold said indignantly. "We're partners, aren't we?"

They signed off and Gregor brewed another pot of coffee. He was not planning on any more sleep that night. It was comforting to know that Arnold had bet on him. But, then, Arnold was a notoriously bad gambler.

By daylight, Gregor was able to get a few hours of fitful sleep. In the early afternoon he awoke, found some clothes and began to explore the sun worshippers' camp.

Toward evening, he found something. On the wall of a prefab, the word "*Tgasklit*" had been hastily scratched. *Tgasklit*. It meant nothing to him, but he relayed it to Arnold at once.



He then searched his prefab carefully, set up more lights, tested the alarm system and recharged his blaster.

Everything seemed in order. With regret, he watched the sun go down, hoping he would live to see it rise again. Then he settled himself in a comfortable chair and tried to do some constructive thinking.

There was no animal life here — nor were there any walking plants, intelligent rocks, or giant brains dwelling in the planet's core. Ghost V hadn't even a moon for someone to hide on.

And he couldn't believe in ghosts or demons. He knew that supernatural happenings tended to break down, under detailed examination, into eminently natural events. The ones that didn't break down — stopped. Ghosts just wouldn't stand still and let a non-believer examine them. The phantom of the castle was invariably on vacation when a scientist showed up with cameras and tape recorders.

That left another possibility. Suppose someone wanted this planet, but wasn't prepared to pay Ferngrau's price? Couldn't this someone hide here, frighten the settlers, kill them if necessary in order to drive down the price?

That seemed logical. You could even explain the behavior of his clothes that way. Static electricity, correctly used, could —

Something was standing in front of him. His alarm system, as before, hadn't gone off.

Gregor looked up slowly. The thing in front of him was about ten feet tall and roughly human in shape, except for its crocodile head. It was colored a bright crimson and had purple stripes running lengthwise on its body. In one claw, it was carrying a large brown can.

"Hello," it said.

"Hello," Gregor gulped. His blaster was on a table only two feet away. He wondered, would the thing attack if he reached for it?

"What's your name?" Gregor asked, with the calmness of deep shock.

"I'm the Purple-striped Grabber," the thing said. "I grab things."

"How interesting." Gregor's hand began to creep toward the blaster.

"I grab things named Richard Gregor," the Grabber told him in its bright, ingenuous voice. "And I usually eat them in chocolate



sauce." It held up the brown can and Gregor saw that it was labeled "Smig's Chocolate — An Ideal Sauce to Use with Gregors, Arnolds, and Flynns."

Gregor's fingers touched the butt of the blaster. He asked, "Were you planning to eat me?"

"Oh, yes," the Grabber said.

Gregor had the gun now. He flipped off the safety catch and fired. The radiant blast cascaded off the Grabber's chest and singed the floor, the walls, and Gregor's eyebrows.

"That won't hurt me," the Grabber explained. "I'm too tall."

The blaster dropped from Gregor's fingers. The Grabber leaned forward.

"I'm not going to eat you now," the Grabber said.

"No?" Gregor managed to enunciate.

"No. I can only eat you tomorrow, on May first. Those are the rules. I just came to ask a favor."

"What is it?"

The Grabber smiled winningly. "Would you be a good sport and eat a few apples? They flavor the flesh so wonderfully."

And, with that, the striped monster vanished.

With shaking hands, Gregor worked the radio and told Arnold everything that had happened.

"Hmm," Arnold said. "Purple-striped Grabber, eh? I think that clinches it. Everything fits."

"What fits? What is it?"

"First, do as I say. I want to make sure."

Obedying Arnold's instructions, Gregor unpacked his chemical equipment and laid out a number of test tubes, retorts, and chemicals. He stirred, mixed, added, and subtracted as directed and finally put the mixture on the stove to heat.

"Now," Gregor said, coming back to the radio, "tell me what's going on."

"Certainly. I looked up the word '*Tgasklit*.' It's Opalian. It means 'many-toothed ghost.' The sun worshippers were from Opal. What does that suggest to you?"

"They were killed by a home-town ghost," Gregor replied nastily. "It must have stowed away on their ship. Maybe there was a curse and —"

"Calm down," Arnold said. "There aren't any ghosts in this. Is the solution boiling yet?"

"No."

"Tell me when it does. Now let's take your animated clothing. Does it remind you of anything?"

Gregor thought. "Well," he said, "when I was a kid — no, that's ridiculous."

"Out with it," Arnold insisted.

"When I was a kid, I never left clothing on a chair. In the dark, it always looked like a man or a dragon or something. I guess everyone's had that experience. But it doesn't explain —"

"Sure it does! Remember the Purple-striped Grabber now?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Because you invented him! Remember? We must have been eight or nine, you and me and Jimmy Flynn. We invented the most horrible monster you could think of — he was our own personal monster and he only wanted to eat you or me or Jimmy — flavored with chocolate sauce. But only on the first of every month, when the report cards were due. You had to use the magic word to get rid of him."

Then Gregor remembered and wondered how he could ever have forgotten. How many nights had he stayed up in fearful expectation of the Grabber? It had made bad report cards seem very unimportant.

"Is the solution boiling?"

"Yes," said Gregor, glancing obediently at the stove.

"What color is it?"

"A sort of greenish blue. No, it's more blue than —"

"Right. You can pour it out. I want to run a few more tests, but I think we've got it licked."

"Got *what* licked? Would you do a little explaining?"

"It's obvious. The planet has no animal life. There are no ghosts or at least none solid enough to kill off a party of armed men. Hallucination was the answer, so I looked for something that would produce it. I found plenty. Aside from all the drugs on Earth, there are about a dozen hallucination-forming gases in the *Catalogue of Alien Trace Elements*. There are depressants, stimulants, stuff that'll make you feel like a genius or an earthworm or an eagle. This particular one corresponds to Longstead 42 in the catalogue. It's a heavy, transparent, odorless gas, not harmful physically. It's an imagination stimulant."

"You mean I was just having hallucinations? I tell you — "

"Not quite that simple," Arnold cut in. "Longstead 42 works directly on the subconscious. It releases your strongest subconscious fears, the childhood terrors you've been suppressing. It animates them. And that's what you've been seeing."

"Then there's actually nothing there?" Gregor asked.

"Nothing physical. But the hallucinations are real enough to whoever is having them."

Gregor reached over for another bottle of brandy. This called for a celebration.

"It won't be hard to decontaminate Ghost V," Arnold went on confidently. "We can cancel the Longstead 42 with no difficulty. And then — we'll be rich, partner!"

Gregor suggested a toast, then thought of something disturbing. "If they're just hallucinations, what happened to the settlers?"

Arnold was silent for a moment. "Well," he said finally, "Longstead may have a tendency to stimulate the *mortido* — the death instinct. The settlers must have gone crazy. Killed each other."

"And no survivors?"

"Sure, why not? The last ones alive committed suicide or died of wounds. Don't worry about it. I'm chartering a ship immediately and coming out to run those tests. Relax. I'll pick you up in a day or two."

Gregor signed off. He allowed himself the rest of the bottle of brandy that night. It seemed only fair. The mystery of Ghost V was solved and they were going to be rich. Soon *he* would be able to hire a man to land on strange planets for him, while *he* sat home and gave instructions over a radio.

He awoke late the next day with a hangover. Arnold's ship hadn't arrived yet, so he packed his equipment and waited. By evening, there was still no ship. He sat in the doorway of the prefab and watched a gaudy sunset, then went inside and made dinner.

The problem of the settlers still bothered him, but he determined not to worry about it. Undoubtedly there was a logical answer.

After dinner, he stretched out on a bed. He had barely closed his eyes when he heard someone cough apologetically.

"Hello," said the Purple-striped Grabber.

His own personal hallucination had returned to eat him. "Hello, old chap," Gregor said cheerfully, without a bit of fear or worry.

"Did you eat the apples?"

"Dreadfully sorry. I forgot."

"Oh, well." The Grabber tried to conceal his disappointment. "I brought the chocolate sauce." He held up the can.

Gregor smiled. "You can leave now," he said. "I know you're just a figment of my imagination. You can't hurt me."

"I'm not going to hurt you," the Grabber said. "I'm just going to eat you."

He walked up to Gregor. Gregor held his ground, smiling, although he wished the Grabber didn't appear so solid and undream-like. The Grabber leaned over and bit his arm experimentally.

He jumped back and looked at his arm. There were toothmarks on it. Blood was oozing out — real blood — *his* blood.

The colonists had been bitten, gashed, torn, and ripped.

At that moment, Gregor remembered an exhibition of hypnosis he had once seen. The hypnotist had told the subject he was putting a lighted cigarette on his arm. Then he had touched the spot with a pencil.

Within seconds, an angry red blister had appeared on the subject's arm, because he *believed* he had been burned. If your subconscious thinks you're dead, you're dead. If it orders the stigmata of toothmarks, they are there.

*He* didn't believe in the Grabber.

But his subconscious did.

Gregor tried to run for the door. The Grabber cut him off. It seized him in its claws and bent to reach his neck.

The magic word! What was it?

Gregor shouted, "*Alphoisto?*"

"Wrong word," said the Grabber. "Please don't squirm."

"*Regnastikio?*"

"Nope. Stop wriggling and it'll be over before you — "

"*Voorshpellhappilo!*"

The Grabber let out a scream of pain and released him. It bounded high into the air and vanished.

Gregor collapsed into a chair. That had been close. Too close. It would be a particularly stupid way to die — rent by his own death-desiring subconscious, slashed by his own imagination, killed by his own conviction. It was fortunate he had remembered the word. Now if Arnold would only hurry...



He heard a low chuckle of amusement.

It came from the blackness of a half-opened closet door, touching off an almost forgotten memory. He was nine years old again, and the Shadower — his Shadower — was a strange, thin, grisly creature who hid in doorways, slept under beds, and attacked only in the dark.

"Turn out the lights," the Shadower said.

"Not a chance," Gregor retorted, drawing his blaster. As long as the lights were on, he was safe.

"You'd better turn them off."

"No!"

"Very well. Egan, Megan, Degan!"

Three little creatures scampered into the room. They raced to the nearest light bulb, flung themselves on it, and began to gulp hungrily.

The room was growing darker.

Gregor blasted at them each time they approached a light. Glass shattered, but the nimble creatures darted out of the way.

And then Gregor realized what he had done. The creatures couldn't actually eat light. Imagination can't make any impression on inanimate matter. He had *imagined* that the room was growing dark and —

He had shot out his light bulbs! His own destructive subconscious had tricked him.

Now the Shadower stepped out. Leaping from shadow to shadow, he came toward Gregor.

The blaster had no effect. Gregor tried frantically to think of the magic word — and terrifiedly remembered that no magic word banished the Shadower.

He backed away, the Shadower advancing, until he was stopped by a packing case. The Shadower towered over him and Gregor shrank to the floor and closed his eyes.

His hands came in contact with something cold. He was leaning against the packing case of toys for the settlers' children. And he was holding a water pistol.

Gregor brandished it. The Shadower backed away, eyeing the weapon with apprehension.

Quickly, Gregor ran to the tap and filled the pistol. He directed a deadly stream of water into the creature.

The Shadower howled in agony and vanished.

Gregor smiled tightly and slipped the empty gun into his belt.

A water pistol was the right weapon to use against an imaginary monster.

It was nearly dawn when the ship landed and Arnold stepped out. Without wasting any time, he set up his test. By midday, it was done and the element definitely established as Longstead 42. He and Gregor packed up immediately and blasted off.

Once they were in space, Gregor told his partner everything that had happened.

"Pretty rough," said Arnold softly, but with deep feeling.

Gregor could smile with modest heroism now that he was safely off Ghost V. "Could have been worse," he said.

"How?"

"Suppose Jimmy Flynn were here. There was a kid who could really dream up monsters. Remember the Grumbler?"

"All I remember is the nightmares it gave me," Arnold said.

They were on their way home. Arnold jotted down some notes for an article entitled "The Death Instinct on Ghost V: An Examination of Subconscious Stimulation, Hysteria, and Mass Hallucination in Producing Physical Stigmata." Then he went to the control room to set the autopilot.

Gregor threw himself on a couch, determined to get his first decent night's sleep since landing on Ghost V. He had barely dozed off when Arnold hurried in, his face pasty with terror.

"I think there's something in the control room," he said.

Gregor sat up. "There can't be. We're off the —"

There was a low growl from the control room.

"Oh, my God!" Arnold gasped. He concentrated furiously for a few seconds. "I know. I left the airlocks open when I landed. We're still breathing Ghost V air!"

And there, framed in the open doorway, was an immense gray creature with red spots on its hide. It had an amazing number of arms, legs, tentacles, claws, and teeth, plus two tiny wings on its back. It walked slowly toward them, mumbling and moaning.

They both recognized it as the Grumbler.

Gregor dashed forward and slammed the door in its face. "We should be safe in here," he panted. "That door is air-tight. But how will we pilot the ship?"

"We won't," Arnold said. "We'll have to trust the robot pilot — unless we can figure out some way of getting that thing out of there."

They noticed that a faint smoke was beginning to seep through the sealed edges of the door.

"What's that?" Arnold asked, with a sharp edge of panic in his voice.

Gregor frowned. "You remember, don't you? The Grumbler can get into any room. There's no way of keeping him out."

"I don't remember anything about him," Arnold said. "Does he eat people?"

"No. As I recall, he just mangles them thoroughly."

The smoke was beginning to solidify into the immense gray shape of the Grumbler. They retreated into the next compartment and sealed the door. Within seconds, the thin smoke was leaking through.

"This is ridiculous," Arnold said, biting his lip. "To be haunted by an imaginary monster — wait! You've still got your water pistol, haven't you?"

"Yes, but — "

"Give it to me!"

Arnold hurried over to a water tank and filled the pistol. The Grumbler had taken form again and was lumbering toward them, groaning unhappily. Arnold raked it with a stream of water.

The Grumbler kept on advancing.

"Now it's all coming back to me," Gregor said. "A water pistol never could stop the Grumbler."

They backed into the next room and slammed the door. Behind them was only the bunkroom with nothing behind that but the deadly vacuum of space.

Gregor asked, "Isn't there something you can do about the atmosphere?"

Arnold shook his head. "It's dissipating now. But it takes about twenty hours for the effects of Longstead to wear off."

"Haven't you any antidote?"

"No."

Once again the Grumbler was materializing, and neither silently nor pleasantly.

"How can we kill it?" Arnold asked. "There must be a way. Magic words? How about a wooden sword?"

Gregor shook his head. "I remember the Grumbler now," he said unhappily.

"What kills it?"

"It can't be destroyed by water pistols, cap guns, firecrackers, slingshots, stink bombs, or any other childhood weapon. The Grumbler is absolutely unkillable."

"That Flynn and his damned imagination! Why did we have to talk about him? How do you get rid of it then?"

"I told you. You don't. It just has to go away of its own accord."

The Grumbler was full size now. Gregor and Arnold hurried into the tiny bunkroom and slammed their last door.

"*Think*, Gregor," Arnold pleaded. "No kid invents a monster without a defense of some sort. *Think!*"

"The Grumbler cannot be killed," Gregor said.

The red-spotted monster was taking shape again. Gregor thought back over all the midnight horrors he had ever known. He *must* have done something as a child to neutralize the power of the unknown.

And then — almost too late — he remembered.

Under auto-pilot controls, the ship flashed Earthward with the Grumbler as complete master. He marched up and down the empty corridors and floated through steel partitions into cabins and cargo compartments, moaning, groaning, and cursing because he could not get at any victim.

The ship reached the solar system and took up an automatic orbit around the moon.

Gregor peered out cautiously, ready to duck back if necessary. There was no sinister shuffling, no moaning or groaning, no hungry mist seeping under the door or through the walls.

"All clear," he called out to Arnold. "The Grumbler's gone."

Safe within the ultimate defense against night horrors — wrapped in blankets that had covered their heads — they climbed out of their bunks.

"I told you the water pistol wouldn't do any good," Gregor said.

Arnold gave him a sick grin and put the pistol in his pocket. "I'm hanging onto it. If I ever get married and have a kid, it's going to be his first present."

"Not for any of mine," said Gregor. He patted the bunk affectionately. "You can't beat blankets over the head for protection."





# PROSPECTOR'S SPECIAL

The sandcar moved smoothly over the rolling dunes, its six fat wheels rising and falling like the ponderous rumps of tandem elephants. The hidden sun beat down from a dead-white sky, pouring heat into the canvas top, reflecting heat back from the parched sand.

"Stay awake," Morrison told himself, pulling the sandcar back to its compass course.

It was his twenty-first day on Venus's Scorpion Desert, his twenty-first day of fighting sleep while the sandcar rocked across the dunes, forging over humpbacked little waves. Night travel would have been easier, but there were too many steep ravines to avoid, too many house-sized boulders to dodge. Now he knew why men went into the desert in teams; one man drove while the other kept shaking him awake.

"But it's better alone," Morrison reminded himself. "Half the supplies and no accidental murders."

His head was beginning to droop; he snapped himself erect. In front of him, the landscape shimmered and danced through the polaroid windshield. The sandcar lurched and rocked with treacherous gentleness. Morrison rubbed his eyes and turned on the radio.

He was big, sunburned, rangy young man with close-cropped black hair and gray eyes. He had come to Venus with a grubstake of twenty thousand dollars, to find his fortune in the Scorpion Desert as others had done before him. He had outfitted in Presto, the last town on the edge of the wilderness, and spent all but ten dollars on the sandcar and equipment.

In Presto, ten dollars just covered the cost of a drink in the town's only saloon. So Morrison ordered rye and water, drank with the

miners and prospectors, and laughed at the oldtimers' yarns about the sandwolf packs and the squadrons of voracious birds that inhabited the interior desert. He knew all about sunblindness, heatstroke, and telephone breakdown. He was sure none of it would happen to him.

But now, after twenty-one days and eighteen hundred miles, he had learned respect for this waterless waste of sand and stone three times the area of the Sahara. You really *could* die here!

But you could also get rich, and that was what Morrison planned to do.

His radio hummed. At full volume, he could hear the faintest murmur of dance music from Venusborg. Then it faded and only the hum was left.

He turned off the radio and gripped the steering wheel tightly in both hands. He unclenched one hand and looked at his watch. Nine-fifteen in the morning. At ten-thirty he would stop and take a nap. A man had to have rest in this heat. But only a half-hour nap. Treasure lay somewhere ahead of him, and he wanted to find it before his supplies got much lower.

The precious outcroppings of goldenstone *had* to be up ahead! He'd been following traces for two days now. Maybe he would hit a real bonanza, as Kirk did in '89, or Edmonson and Arsler in '93. If so, he would do just what they did. He'd order up a Prospector's Special, and to hell with the cost.

The sandcar rolled along at an even thirty miles an hour, and Morrison tried to concentrate on the heat-blasted yellow-brown landscape. That sandstone patch over there was just the tawny color of Janie's hair.

After he struck it rich, he and Janie would get married, and he'd go back to Earth and buy an ocean farm. No more prospecting. Just one rich strike so he could buy his spread on the deep blue Atlantic. Maybe some people thought fish-herding was tame; it was good enough for him.

He could see it now, the mackerel herds drifting along and browsing at the plankton pens, himself and his trusty dolphin keeping an eye out for the silver flash of a predatory barracuda or a steel-gray shark coming along behind the branching coral...

Morrison felt the sandcar lurch. He woke up, grabbed the steering wheel and turned it hard. During his moments of sleep, the

vehicle had crept over the dune's crumbling edge. Sand and pebbles spun under the fat tires as the sandcar fought for traction. The car tilted perilously. The tires shrieked against the sand, gripped, and started to pull the vehicle back up the slope.

Then the whole face of the dune collapsed.

Morrison held onto the steering wheel as the sandcar flipped over on its side and rolled down the slope. Sand filled his mouth and eyes. He spat and held on while the car rolled over again and dropped into emptiness.

For seconds, he was in the air. The sandcar hit bottom squarely on its wheels. Morrison heard a double boom as the two rear tires blew out. Then his head hit the windshield.

When he recovered consciousness, the first thing he did was look at his watch. It read 10:35.

"Time for that nap," Morrison said to himself. "But I guess I'll survey the situation first."

He found that he was at the bottom of a shallow fault strewn with knife-edge pebbles. Two tires had blown on impact, his windshield was gone, and one of the doors was sprung. His equipment was strewn around, but appeared to be intact.

"Could have been worse," Morrison said.

He bent down to examine the tires more carefully.

"It *is* worse," he said.

The two blown tires were shredded beyond repair. There wasn't enough rubber left in them to make a child's balloon. He had used up his spares ten days back crossing Devil's Grill. Used them and discarded them. He couldn't go on without tires.

Morrison unpacked his telephone. He wiped dust from its black plastic face, then dialed Al's Garage in Presto. After a moment, the small video screen lighted up. He could see a man's long, mournful, grease-stained face.

"Al's Garage. Eddie speaking."

"Hi, Eddie. This is Tom Morrison. I bought that GM sandcar from you about a month ago. Remember?"

"Sure I remember you," Eddie said. "You're the guy doing the single into the Southwest Track. How's the bus holding out?"

"Fine. Great little car. Reason I called — "

"Hey," Eddie said, "what happened to your face?"

Morrison put his hand to his forehead and felt blood. "Nothing much," he said. "I went over a dune and blew out two tires."



He turned the telephone so that Eddie could see the tires.

"Unrepairable," said Eddie.

"I thought so. And I used up all my spares crossing Devil's Grill. Look, Eddie, I'd like you to 'port me a couple of tires. Retreads are fine. I can't move the sandcar without them."

"Sure," Eddie said. "Except I haven't any retreads. I'll have to 'port you new ones at five hundred apiece. Plus four hundred dollars 'porting charges. Fourteen hundred dollars, Mr. Morrison."

"All right."

"Yes, sir. Now if you'll show me the cash, or a money order which you can send back with the receipt, I'll get moving on it."

"At the moment," Morrison said, "I haven't got a cent on me."

"Bank account?"

"Stripped clean."

"Bonds? Property? Anything you can convert into cash?"

"Nothing except this sandcar, which you sold me for eight thousand dollars. When I come back, I'll settle my bill with the sandcar."

"If you get back. Sorry, Mr. Morrison. No can do."

"What do you mean?" Morrison asked. "You know I'll pay for the tires."

"And you know the rules on Venus," Eddie said, his mournful face set in obstinate lines. "No credit! Cash and carry!"

"I can't run the sandcar without tires," Morrison said. "Are you going to strand me out here?"

"Who in hell is stranding you?" Eddie asked. "This sort of thing happens to prospectors every day. You know what you have to do now, Mr. Morrison. Call Public Utility and declare yourself a bankrupt. Sign over what's left of the sandcar, equipment, and anything you've found on the way. They'll get you out."

"I'm not turning back," Morrison said. "Look!" He held the telephone close to the ground. "You see the traces, Eddie? See those red and purple flecks? There's precious stuff near here!"

"Every prospector sees traces," Eddie said. "Damned desert is full of traces."

"These are rich," Morrison said. "These are leading straight to big stuff, a bonanza lode. Eddie, I know it's a lot to ask, but if you could stake me to a couple of tires —"

"I can't do it," Eddie said. "I just work here. I can't 'port you any tires, not unless you show me money first. Otherwise I get fired and probably jailed. You know the law."

"Cash and carry," Morrison said bleakly.

"Right. Be smart and turn back now. Maybe you can try again some other time."

"I spent twelve years getting this stake together," Morrison said. "I'm not going back."

He turned off the telephone and tried to think. Was there anyone else on Venus he could call? Only Max Krandall, his jewel broker. But Max couldn't raise fourteen hundred dollars in that crummy two-by-four office near Venusborg's jewel market. Max could barely scrape up his own rent, much less take care of stranded prospectors.

"I can't ask Max for help," Morrison decided. "Not until I've found goldenstone. The real stuff, not just traces. So that leaves it up to me."

He opened the back of the sandcar and began to unload, piling his equipment on the sand. He would have to choose carefully; anything he took would have to be carried on his back.

The telephone had to go with him, and his lightweight testing kit. Food concentrates, revolver, compass. And nothing else but water, all the water he could carry. The rest of the stuff would have to stay behind.

By nightfall, Morrison was ready. He looked regretfully at the twenty cans of water he was leaving. In the desert, water was a man's most precious possession, second only to his telephone. But it couldn't be helped. After drinking his fill, he hoisted his pack and set a southwest course into the desert.

For three days he trekked to the southwest; then on the fourth day he veered to due south, following an increasingly rich trace. The sun, eternally hidden, beat down on him, and the dead-white sky was like a roof of heated iron over his head. Morrison followed the traces, and something followed him.

On the sixth day, he sensed movement just out of the range of his vision. On the seventh day, he saw what was trailing him.

Venus's own brand of wolf, small, lean, with a yellow coat and long, grinning jaws, it was one of the few mammals that made its home in the Scorpion Desert. As Morrison watched, two more sandwolves appeared beside it.

He loosened the revolver in its holster. The wolves made no attempt to come closer. They had plenty of time.

Morrison kept on going, wishing he had brought a rifle with him. But that would have meant eight pounds more, which meant eight pounds less water.

As he was pitching camp at dusk the eighth day, he heard a crackling sound. He whirled around and located its source, about ten feet to his left and above his head. A little vortex had appeared, a tiny mouth in the air like a whirlpool in the sea. It spun, making the characteristic crackling sounds of 'porting.

"Now who could be 'porting anything to me?" Morrison asked, waiting while the whirlpool slowly widened.

Solidoporting from a base projector to a field target was a standard means of moving goods across the vast distances of Venus. Any inanimate object could be 'ported; animate beings couldn't because the process involved certain minor but distressing molecular changes in protoplasm. A few people had found this out the hard way when 'porting was first introduced.

Morrison waited. The aerial whirlpool became a mouth three feet in diameter. From the mouth stepped a chrome-plated robot carrying a large sack.

"Oh, it's you," Morrison said.

"Yes, sir," the robot said, now completely clear of the field. "Williams Four at your service with the Venus Mail."

It was a robot of medium height, thin-shanked and flat-footed, humanoid in appearance, amiable in disposition. For twenty-three years it had been Venus's entire postal service — sorter, deliverer, and dead storage. It had been built to last, and for twenty-three years the mails had always come through.

"Here we are, Mr. Morrison," Williams 4 said. "Only twice-a-month mail call in the desert, I'm sorry to say, but it comes promptly and that's a blessing. This is for you. And this. I think there's one more. Sandcar broke down, eh?"

"It sure did," Morrison said, taking his letters.

Williams 4 went on rummaging through its bag. Although it was a superbly efficient postman, the old robot was known as the worst gossip on three planets.

"There's one more in here somewhere," Williams 4 said. "Too bad about the sandcar. They just don't build 'em like they did in my youth. Take my advice, young man. Turn back if you still have the chance."



Morrison shook his head.

"Foolish, downright foolish," the old robot said. "Pity you don't have my perspective. Too many's the time I've come across you boys lying in the sand in the dried-out sack of your skin, or with your bones gnawed to splinters by the sandwolves and the filthy black kites. Twenty-three years I've been delivering mail to fine-looking young men like you, and each one thinking he's unique and different."

The robot's eyecells became distant with memory. "But they *aren't* different," Williams 4 said. "They're as alike as robots off the assembly line — especially after the wolves get through with them. And then I have to send their letters and personal effects back to their loved ones on Earth."

"I know," Morrison said. "But some get through, don't they?"

"Sure they do," the robot said. "I've seen men make one, two, three fortunes. And then die on the sands trying to make a fourth."

"Not me," Morrison said. "I just want one. Then I'm going to buy me an undersea farm on Earth."

The robot shuddered. "I have a dread of salt water. But to each his own. Good luck, young man."

The robot looked Morrison over carefully — probably to see what he had in the way of personal effects — then climbed back into the aerial whirlpool. In a moment, it was gone. In another moment, the whirlpool had vanished.

Morrison sat down to read his mail. The first letter was from his jewel broker, Max Krandall. It told about the depression that had hit Venusborg, and hinted that Krandall might have to go into bankruptcy if some of his prospectors didn't strike something good.

The second letter was a statement from the Venus Telephone Company. Morrison owed two hundred and ten dollars and eight cents for two months' telephone service. Unless he remitted this sum at once, his telephone was liable to be turned off.

The last letter, all the way from Earth, was from Janie. It was filled with news about his cousins, aunts, and uncles. She told him about the Atlantic farm sites she had looked over, and the wonderful little place she had found near Martinique in the Caribbean. She begged him to give up prospecting if it looked dangerous; they could find another way of financing the farm. She sent all her love and wished him a happy birthday in advance.



"Birthday?" Morrison asked himself. "Let's see, today is July twenty-third. No, it's the twenty-fourth, and my birthday's August first. Thanks for remembering, Janie."

That night he dreamed of Earth and the blue expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. But toward dawn, when the heat of Venus became insistent, he found he was dreaming of mile upon mile of goldenstone, of grinning sandwolves, and of the Prospector's Special.

Rock gave way to sand as Morrison plowed his way across the bottom of a long-vanished lake. Then it was rock again, twisted and tortured into a thousand gaunt shapes. Reds, yellows, and browns swam in front of his eyes. In all that desert, there wasn't one patch of green.

He continued his trek into the tumbled stone mazes of the interior desert, and the wolves trekked with him, keeping pace far out on either flank.

Morrison ignored them. He had enough on his mind just to negotiate the sheer cliffs and the fields of broken stone that blocked his way to the south.

By the eleventh day after leaving the sandcar, the traces were almost rich enough for panning. The sandwolves were tracking him still, and his water was almost gone. Another day's march would finish him.

Morrison thought for a moment, then unstrapped his telephone and dialed Public Utility in Venusborg.

The video screen showed a stern, severely dressed woman with iron-gray hair. "Public Utility," she said. "May we be of service?"

"Hi," Morrison said cheerfully. "How's the weather in Venusborg?"

"Hot," the woman said. "How's it out there?"

"I hadn't even noticed," Morrison said, grinning. "Too busy counting my fortune."

"You've found goldenstone?" the woman asked, her expression becoming less severe.

"Sure have," Morrison said. "But don't pass the word around yet. I'm still staking my claim. I think I can use a refill on these."

Smiling easily, he held up his canteens. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes, if you showed enough confidence, Public Utility would fill you up without checking your account. True, it was embezzling, but this was no time for niceties.

"I suppose your account is in order?" asked the woman.

"Of course," Morrison said, feeling his smile grow stiff. "The name's Tom Morrison. You can just check — "

"Oh, I don't do that personally," the woman said. "Hold that canteen steady. Here we go."

Gripping the canteen in both hands, Morrison watched as the water, 'ported four thousand miles from Venusborg, appeared as a slender crystal stream above the mouth of his canteen. The stream entered the canteen, making a wonderful gurgling sound. Watching it, Morrison found his dry mouth actually was beginning to salivate.

Then the water stopped.

"What's the matter?" Morrison asked.

His video screen went blank. Then it cleared, and Morrison found himself staring into a man's narrow face. The man was seated in front of a large desk. The sign in front of him read *Milton P. Reade, Vice President, Accounts*.

"Mr. Morrison," Reade said, "your account is overdrawn. You have been obtaining water under false pretenses. That is a criminal offense."

"I'm going to pay for the water," Morrison said.

"When?"

"As soon as I get back to Venusborg."

"With what," asked Mr. Reade, "do you propose to pay?"

"With goldenstone," Morrison said. "Look around here, Mr. Reade. The traces are rich! Richer than they were for the Kirk claim! I'll be hitting the outcroppings in another day — "

"That's what every prospector thinks," Mr. Reade said. "Every prospector on Venus is only a day from goldenstone. And they all expect credit from Public Utility."

"But in this case — "

"Public Utility," Mr. Reade continued inexorably, "is not a philanthropic organization. Its charter specifically forbids the extension of credit. Venus is a frontier, Mr. Morrison, a *farflung* frontier. Every manufactured article on Venus must be imported from Earth at outrageous cost. We do have our own water, but locating it, purifying it, then 'porting it, is an expensive process. This company, like every other company on Venus, necessarily operates on a very narrow margin of profit, which is invariably plowed back into further expansion. That is why there can be no credit on Venus."

"I know all that," Morrison said. "But I'm telling you I only need a day or two more —"

"Absolutely impossible. By the rules we shouldn't even help you out now. The time to report bankruptcy was a week ago, when your sandcar broke down. Your garage man reported, as required by law. But you didn't. We would be within our rights to leave you stranded. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, of course," Morrison said wearily.

"However, the company has decided to stretch a point in your favor. If you turn back immediately, we will keep you supplied with water for the return trip."

"I'm not turning back yet. I'm almost on the real stuff."

"You must turn back! Be reasonable, Morrison! Where would we be if we let every prospector wander over the desert while we supplied his water? There'd be ten thousand men out there, and we'd be out of business inside of a year. I'm stretching the rules now. Turn back."

"No," said Morrison.

"You'd better think about it. If you don't turn back now, Public Utility takes no further responsibility for your water supply."

Morrison nodded. If he went on, he would stand a good chance of dying in the desert. But if he turned back, what then? He would be in Venusborg, penniless and in debt, looking for work in an overcrowded city. He'd sleep in a community shed and eat at a soup kitchen with the other prospectors who had turned back. And how would he be able to raise the fare back to Earth? When would he ever see Janie again?

"I guess I'll keep on going," Morrison said.

"Then Public Utility takes no further responsibility for you," Reade repeated, and hung up.

Morrison packed up his telephone, took a sip from his meager water supply, and went on.

The sandwolves loped along at each side, moving in closer. Overhead, a delta-winged kite found him. It balanced on the updrafts for a day and a night, waiting for the wolves to finish him. Then a flock of small flying scorpions sighted the waiting kite. They drove the big creature upstairs into the cloud bank. For a day the flying reptiles waited. Then they in turn were driven off by a squadron of black kites.



The traces were very rich now, on the fifteenth day since he had left the sandcar. By rights, he should be walking over goldenstone. He should be surrounded by goldenstone. But still he hadn't found any.

Morrison sat down and shook his last canteen. It gave off no wet sound. He uncapped it and turned it up over his mouth. Two drops trickled down his parched throat.

It was about four days since he had talked to Public Utility. He must have used up the last of his water yesterday. Or had it been the day before?

He recapped the empty canteen and looked around at the heat-blasted landscape. Abruptly he pulled the telephone out of his pack and dialed Max Krandall in Venusborg.

Krandall's round, worried face swam into focus on the screen. "Tommy," he said, "you look like hell."

"I'm all right," Morrison said. "A little dried out, that's all. Max, I'm near goldenstone."

"Are you sure?" Krandall asked.

"See for yourself," Morrison said, swinging the telephone around. "Look at the stone formations! Do you see the red and purple markings over there?"

"Traces, all right," Krandall admitted dubiously.

"There's rich stuff just beyond it," Morrison said. "There has to be! Look, Max, I know you're short on money, but I'm going to ask you a favor. Send me a pint of water. Just a pint, so I can go on for another day or two. We can both get rich for the price of a pint of water."

"I can't do it," Krandall said sadly.

"You can't?"

"That's right. Tommy, I'd send you water even if there wasn't anything around you but sandstone and granite. Do you think I'd let you die of thirst if I could help it? But I can't do a thing. Take a look."

Krandall rotated his telephone. Morrison saw that the chairs, table, desk, filing cabinet and safe were gone from the office. All that was left in the room was the telephone.

"I don't know why they haven't taken out the phone," Krandall said. "I owe two months on my bill."

"I do too," said Morrison.



"I'm stripped," Krandall said. "I haven't got a dime. Don't get me wrong, I'm not worried about myself. I can always eat at a soup kitchen. But I can't 'port you any water. Not you or Remstaater."

"Jim Remstaater?"

"Yeah. He was following a trace up north past Forgotten River. His sandcar broke an axle last week and he wouldn't turn back. His water ran out yesterday."

"I'd bail him out if I could," said Morrison.

"And he'd bail you out if he could," Krandall said. "But he can't and you can't and I can't. Tommy, you have only one hope."

"What's that?"

"Find goldenstone. Not just traces, find the real thing worth real money. Then phone me. If you really have goldenstone, I'll bring in Wilkes from Tri-Planet Mining and get him to advance us some money. He'll probably want fifty per cent of the claim."

"That's plain robbery!"

"No, it's just the high cost of credit on Venus," Krandall answered. "Don't worry, there'll still be plenty left over. But you have to find goldenstone first."

"Okay," Morrison said. "It should be around here somewhere. Max, what's today's date?"

"July thirty-first. Why?"

"Just wondering. I'll call you when I've found something."

After hanging up, Morrison sat on a little boulder and stared dully at the sand. July thirty-first. Tomorrow was his birthday. His family would be thinking about him. Aunt Bess in Pasadena, the twins in Laos, Uncle Ted in Durango. And Janie, of course, waiting for him in Tampa.

Morrison realized that tomorrow might be his last birthday unless he found goldenstone.

He got to his feet, strapped the telephone back in his pack beside the empty canteens, and set a course to the south.

He wasn't alone. The birds and beasts of the desert marched with him. Overhead, the silent black kites circled endlessly. The sandwolves crept closer on his flanks, their red tongues lolling out, waiting for the carcass to fall...

"I'm not dead yet!" Morrison shouted at them.

He drew his revolver and fired at the nearest wolf. At twenty feet, he missed. He went down on one knee, held the revolver tightly in both hands and fired again. The wolf yelped in pain. The pack

immediately went for the wounded animal, and the kites swooped down for their share.

Morrison put the revolver back in its holster and went on. He could tell he was in a badly dehydrated state. The landscape jumped and danced in front of him, and his footing was unsure. He discarded the empty canteens, threw away everything but the testing kit, telephone, and revolver. Either he was coming out of the desert in style or he wasn't coming out at all.

The traces continued to run rich. But still he came upon no sign of tangible wealth.

That evening he found a shallow cave set into the base of a cliff. He crawled inside and built a barricade of rocks across the entrance. Then he drew his revolver and leaned back against the far wall.

The sandwolves were outside, sniffing and snapping their jaws. Morrison propped himself up and got ready for an all-night vigil.

He didn't sleep, but he couldn't stay awake, either. Dreams and visions tormented him. He was back on Earth and Janie was saying to him, "It's the tuna. Something must be wrong with their diet. Every last one of them is sick."

"It's the darnedest thing," Morrison told her. "Just as soon as you domesticate a fish, it turns into a prima donna."

"Are you going to stand there philosophizing," Janie asked, "while your fish are sick?"

"Call the vet."

"I did. He's off at the Blakes' place, taking care of their dairy whale."

"All right, I'll go out and take a look." He slipped on his face mask. Grinning, he said, "I don't even have time to dry off before I have to go out again."

His face and chest were wet.

Morrison opened his eyes. His face and chest *were* wet — from perspiration. Staring at the partially blocked mouth of the cave, he could see green eyes, two, four, six, eight.

He fired at them, but they didn't retreat. He fired again, and his bullet ricocheted off the cave wall, stinging him with stone splinters. With his next shots, he succeeded in winging one of the wolves. The pack withdrew.

That emptied the revolver. Morrison searched through his pockets and found five more cartridges. He carefully loaded the gun. Dawn couldn't be far away now.

And then he was dreaming again, this time of the Prospector's Special. He had heard about it in every little saloon that bordered the Scorpion. Bristly-bearded old prospectors told a hundred different stories about it, and the cynical bartenders chimed in with their versions. Kirk had it in '89, ordered up big and special just for him. Edmonson and Arsler received it in '93. That was certain. And other men had had it too, as they sat on their precious goldenstone claims. Or so people said.

But was it real? Was there such a thing as the Prospector's Special? Would he live to see that rainbow-hued wonder, tall as a church steeple, wide as a house, more precious than goldenstone itself?

Sure he would! Why, he could almost see it now...

Morrison shook himself awake. It was morning. Painfully, he crawled out of the cave to face the day.

He stumbled and crawled to the south, escorted closely by the wolves, shaded by predatory flying things. His fingers scrabbled along rock and sand. The traces were rich, rich!

But where in all this desolation was the goldenstone?

Where? He was almost past caring. He drove his sunburned, dried-out body, stopping only to fire a single shot when the wolves came too close.

Four bullets left.

He had to fire again when the kites, growing impatient, started diving at his head. A lucky shot tore into the flock, downing two. It gave the wolves something to fight over. Morrison crawled on blindly.

And fell over the edge of a little cliff.

It wasn't a serious fall, but the revolver was knocked from his hand. Before he could find it, the wolves were on him. Only their greed saved Morrison. While they fought over him, he rolled away and retrieved his revolver. Two shots scattered the pack. That left one bullet.

He'd have to save that one for himself, because he was too tired to go on. He sank to his knees. The traces were rich here. Fantastically rich. Somewhere nearby...

"Well, I'll be damned," Morrison said.

The little ravine into which he had fallen was solid goldenstone.

He picked up a pebble. Even in its rough state he could see the deep luminous golden glow, the fiery red and purple flecks deep in the shining stone.

"Make sure," Morrison told himself. "No false alarms, no visions, no wild hopes. Make sure."

He broke off a chunk of rock with the butt of his revolver. It still looked like goldenstone. He took out his testing kit and spilled a few drops of white solution on the rock. The solution foamed green.

"Goldenstone, sure as sure," Morrison said, looking around at the glowing cliff walls. "Hey, I'm rich!"

He took out his telephone. With trembling fingers he dialed Krandall's number.

"Max!" Morrison shouted. "I've hit it! I've hit the real stuff!"

"My name is not Max," a voice over the telephone said.

"Huh?"

"My name is Boyard," the man said.

The video screen cleared, and Morrison saw a thin, sallow-faced man with a hairline mustache.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Boyard," Morrison said. "I must have gotten the wrong number. I was calling —"

"It doesn't matter who you were calling," Mr. Boyard said. "I am District Supervisor of the Venus Telephone Company. Your bill is two months overdue."

"I can pay it now," Morrison said, grinning.

"Excellent," said Mr. Boyard. "As soon as you do, your service will be resumed."

The screen began to fade.

"Wait!" Morrison cried. "I can pay as soon as I reach your office. But I must make one telephone call. Just one call, so that I —"

"Not a chance," Mr. Boyard said decisively. "*After* you have paid your bill, your service will be turned on immediately."

"I've got the money right here!" Morrison said. "Right here in my hand!"

Mr. Boyard paused. "Well, it's unusual, but I suppose we could arrange for a special robot messenger if you are willing to pay the expenses."

"I am!"

"Hm. It's irregular, but I daresay we...Where is the money?"



"Right here," Morrison said. "You recognize it, don't you? It's goldenstone!"

"I am sick and tired of the tricks you prospectors think you can put over on us. Holding up a handful of pebbles — "

"But this is really goldenstone! Can't you see it?"

"I am a businessman," Mr. Boyard said, "not a jeweler. I wouldn't know goldenstone from goldenrod."

The video screen went blank.

Frantically, Morrison tried to reach the operator. There was nothing, not even a dial tone. His telephone was disconnected.

He put the instrument down and surveyed his situation. The narrow crevice into which he had fallen ran straight for about twenty yards, then curved to the left. No cave was visible in the steep walls, no place where he could build a barricade.

He heard a movement behind him. Whirling around, he saw a huge old wolf in full charge. Without a moment's hesitation, Morrison drew and fired, blasting off the top of the beast's head.

"Damn it," Morrison said, "I was going to save that bullet for myself."

It gave him a moment's grace. He ran down the ravine, looking for an opening in its sides. Goldenstone glowed at him and sparkled red and purple. And the sandwolves loped along behind him.

Then Morrison stopped. In front of him, the curving ravine ended in a sheer wall.

He put his back against it, holding the revolver by its butt. The wolves stopped five feet from him, gathering themselves for a rush. There were ten or twelve of them, and they were packed three deep in the narrow pass. Overhead, the kites circled, waiting for their turn.

At that moment, Morrison heard the crackling sound of 'porting equipment. A whirlpool appeared above the wolves' heads and they backed hastily away.

"Just in time!" Morrison said.

"In time for what?" asked Williams 4, the postman.

The robot climbed out of the vortex and looked around.

"Well, young man," Williams 4 said, "this is a fine fix you've gotten yourself into. Didn't I warn you? Didn't I advise you to turn back? And now look!"

"You were perfectly right," Morrison said. "What did Max Krاندall send me?"

"Max Krandall did not, and could not, send a thing."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because it's your birthday," Williams 4 said. "We of the Postal Department always give special service for birthdays. Here you are."

Williams 4 gave him a handful of mail, birthday greetings from Janie, and from his aunts, uncles, and cousins on Earth.

"Something else here," Williams 4 said, rummaging in his bag. "I *think* there was something else here. Let me see... Yes, here it is."

He handed Morrison a small package.

Hastily, Morrison tore off the wrappings. It was a birthday present from his Aunt Mina in New Jersey. He opened it. It was a large box of salt-water taffy, direct from Atlantic City.

"Quite a delicacy, I'm told," said Williams 4, who had been peering over his shoulder. "But not very satisfactory under the circumstances. Well, young man, I hate to see anyone die on his birthday. The best I can wish you is a speedy and painless departure."

The robot began walking toward the vortex.

"Wait!" Morrison cried. "You can't just leave me like this! I haven't had any water in days! And those wolves —"

"I know," Williams 4 said. "Do you think I feel *happy* about it? Even a robot has some feelings!"

"Then help me."

"I can't. The rules of the Postal Department expressly and categorically forbid it. I remember Abner Lathe making much the same request of me in '97. It took three years for a burial party to reach him."

"You have an emergency telephone, haven't you?" Morrison asked.

"Yes. But I can use it only for personal emergencies."

"Can you at least carry a letter for me? A special delivery letter?"

"Of course I can," the robot postman said. "That's what I'm here for. I can even lend you pencil and paper."

Morrison accepted the pencil and paper and tried to think. If he wrote to Max now, special delivery, Max would have the letter in a matter of hours. But how long would Max need to raise some money and send him water and ammunition? A day, two days? Morrison would have to figure out some way of holding out...

"I assume you have a stamp," the robot said.

"I don't," Morrison replied. "But I'll buy one from you. Solidoport special."

"Excellent," said the robot. "We have just put out a new series of Venusborg triangulars. I consider them quite an esthetic accomplishment. They cost three dollars apiece."

"That's fine. Very reasonable. Let me have one."

"There is the question of payment."

"Here," Morrison said, handing the robot a piece of goldenstone worth about five thousand dollars in the rough.

The postman examined the stone, then handed it back. "I'm sorry I can accept only cash."

"But this is worth more than a thousand postage stamps!" Morrison said. "This is goldenstone!"

"It may well be," Williams 4 said. "But I have never had any assaying knowledge taped into me. Nor is the Venus Postal Service run on a barter system. I'll have to ask for three dollars in bills or coins."

"I don't have it."

"I am very sorry." Williams 4 turned to go.

"You can't just go and let me die!"

"I can and must," Williams 4 said sadly. "I am only a robot, Mr. Morrison. I was made by men, and naturally I partake of some of their sensibilities. That's as it should be. But I also have my limits, which, in their nature, are similar to the limits most humans have on this harsh planet. And, unlike humans, I cannot transcend my limits."

The robot started to climb into the whirlpool. Morrison stared at him blankly, and saw beyond him the waiting wolfpack. He saw the soft glow of several million dollars' worth of goldenstone shining from the ravine's walls.

Something snapped inside him.

With an inarticulate yell, Morrison dived, tackling the robot around the ankles. Williams 4, half in and half out of the 'porting vortex, struggled and kicked, and almost succeeded in shaking Morrison loose. But with a maniac's strength Morrison held on. Inch by inch he dragged the robot out of the vortex threw him on the ground and pinned him.

"You are disrupting the mail service," said Williams 4.



"That's not all I'm going to disrupt," Morrison growled. "I'm not afraid of dying. That was part of the gamble. But I'm damned if I'm going to die fifteen minutes after I've struck it rich!"

"You have no choice."

"I do. I'm going to use that emergency telephone of yours."

"You can't," Williams 4 said. "I refuse to extrude it. And you could never reach it without the resources of a machine shop."

"Could be," said Morrison. "I plan to find out." He pulled out his empty revolver.

"What are you going to do?" Williams 4 asked.

"I'm going to see if I can smash you into scrap metal *without* the resources of a machine shop. I think your eyecells would be a logical place to begin."

"They would indeed," said the robot. "I have no personal sense of survival, of course. But let me point out that you would be leaving all Venus without a postman. Many would suffer because of your antisocial action."

"I hope so," Morrison said, raising the revolver above his head.

"Also," the robot said hastily, "you would be destroying government property. That is a serious offense."

Morrison laughed and swung the pistol. The robot moved its head quickly, dodging the blow. It tried to wriggle free, but Morrison's two hundred pounds was seated firmly on its thorax.

"I won't miss this time," Morrison promised, hefting the revolver.

"Stop!" Williams 4 said. "It is my duty to protect government property, even if that property happens to be myself. You may use my telephone, Mr. Morrison. Bear in mind that this offense is punishable by a sentence of not more than ten and not less than five years in the Solar Swamp Penitentiary."

"Let's have that telephone," Morrison said.

The robot's chest opened and a small telephone extruded. Morrison dialed Max Krandall and explained the situation.

"I see, I see," Krandall said. "All right, I'll try to find Wilkes. But, Tom, I don't know how much I can do. It's after business hours. Most places are closed — "

"Get them open again," said Morrison. "I can pay for it. And get Jim Remstaater out of trouble, too."

"It can't be done just like that. You haven't established any rights to your claim. You haven't even proved that your claim is valuable."



"Look at it." Morrison turned the telephone so that Krandall could see the glowing walls of the ravine.

"Looks real," Krandall said. "But unfortunately, all that glitters is not goldenstone."

"What can we do?" Morrison asked.

"We'll have to take it step by step. I'll 'port you the Public Surveyor. He'll check your claim, establish its limits, and make sure no one else has filed on it. You give him a chunk of goldenstone to take back. A big chunk."

"How can I cut goldenstone? I don't have any tools."

"You'll have to figure out a way. He'll take the chunk back for assaying. If it's rich enough, you're all set."

"And if it isn't?"

"Perhaps we better not talk about that," Krandall said. "I'll get right to work on this, Tommy. Good luck!"

Morrison signed off. He stood up and helped the robot to its feet.

"In twenty-three years of service," Williams 4 said, "this is the first time anybody has threatened the life of a government postal employee. I must report this to the police authorities at Venusborg, Mr. Morrison. I have no choice."

"I know," Morrison said. "But I guess five or ten years in the penitentiary is better than dying."

"I doubt it. I carry mail there, you know. You will have the opportunity of seeing for yourself in about six months."

"What?" said Morrison, stunned.

"In about six months, after I have completed my mail calls around the planet and returned to Venusborg. A matter like this must be reported in person. But first and foremost, the mails must go through."

"Thanks, Williams. I don't know how — "

"I am simply performing my duty," the robot said as it climbed into the vortex. "If you are still on Venus in six months, I will be delivering your mail to the penitentiary."

"I won't be here," Morrison said. "So long, Williams!"

The robot disappeared into the 'porting vortex. Then the vortex disappeared. Morrison was alone in the Venusian twilight.

He found an outcropping of goldenstone larger than a man's head. He chipped at it with his pistol butt, and tiny particles danced

and shimmered in the air. After an hour, he had put four dents in his revolver, but he had barely scratched the highly refractory surface of the goldenstone.

The sandwolves began to edge forward. Morrison threw stones at them and shouted in his dry, cracked voice. The wolves retreated.

He examined the outcropping again and found a hairline fault running along one edge. He concentrated his blows along the fault.

The goldenstone refused to crack.

Morrison wiped the sweat from his eyes and tried to think. A chisel, he needed a chisel...

He pulled off his belt. Putting the edge of the steel buckle against the crack, he managed to hammer it in a fraction of an inch. Three more blows drove the buckle firmly into the fault. With another blow, the outcropping sheared off cleanly. He had separated a twenty-pound piece from the cliff. At fifty dollars a troy ounce, this lump should be worth about twelve thousand dollars — if it assayed out as pure as it looked.

The twilight had turned a deep gray when the Public Surveyor 'ported in. It was a short, squat robot with a conservative crackle-black finish.

"Good day, sir," the surveyor said. "You wish to file a claim? A standard unrestricted mining claim?"

"That's right," Morrison said.

"And where is the center of the aforesaid claim?"

"Huh? The center? I guess I'm standing on it."

"Very well," the robot said.

Extruding a steel tape, it walked rapidly away from Morrison. At a distance of two hundred yards, it stopped. More steel tape fluttered as it walked, flew, and climbed a square with Morrison at the center. When it had finished, the surveyor stood for a long time without moving.

"What are you doing?" Morrison asked.

"I'm making depth-photographs of the terrain," the robot said. "It's rather difficult in this light. Couldn't you wait till morning?"

"No!"

"Well, I'll just have to cope," the robot said.

It moved and stood, moved and stood, each subterranean exposure taking a little longer than the last as the twilight deepened. If it had had pores, it would have sweated.

"There," said the robot at last, "that takes care of it. Do you have a sample for me to take back?"

"Here it is," Morrison said, hefting the slab of goldenstone and handing it to the surveyor. "Is that all?"

"Absolutely all," the robot said. "Except, of course, that you haven't given me the Deed of Search."

Morrison blinked. "I haven't given you the what?"

"The Deed of Search. That is a government document showing that the claim you are filing on is free, as per government order, of fissionable material in excess of fifty per cent of the total mass to a depth of sixty feet. It's a mere formality, but a necessary one."

"I never heard of it," Morrison said.

"It became a requirement last week," explained the surveyor. "You don't have the Deed? Then I'm afraid your standard unrestricted claim is invalid."

"Isn't there anything I can do?"

"Well," the robot said, "you *could* change your standard unrestricted claim to a special unrestricted claim. That requires no Deed of Search."

"What does the special restricted part mean?"

"It means that in five hundred years all rights revert to the Government of Venus."

"All right!" Morrison shouted. "Fine! Good! Is that all?"

"Absolutely all," the surveyor said. "I shall bring this sample back and have it assayed and evaluated immediately. From it and the depth-photographs we can extrapolate the value and extent of your claim."

"Send me back something to take care of the wolves," Morrison said. "And food. And listen — I want a Prospector's Special."

"Yes, sir. It will all be 'ported to you — if your claim is of sufficient value to warrant the outlay."

The robot climbed into the vortex and vanished.

Time passed, and the wolves edged forward again. They snarled at the rocks Morrison threw, but they didn't retreat. Jaws open and tongues lolling, they crept up the remaining yards between them and the prospector.

Then the leading wolf leaped back and howled. A gleaming vortex had appeared over his head and a rifle had fallen from the vortex, striking him on a forepaw.

The wolves scrambled away. Another rifle fell from the vortex. Then a large box marked *Grenades, Handle With Care*. Then another box marked *Desert Ration K*.

Morrison waited, staring at the gleaming mouth of the vortex. It crossed the sky to a spot a quarter of a mile away and paused there, and then a great round brass base emerged from the vortex, and the mouth widened to allow an even greater bulge of brass to which the base was attached. The bulge grew higher as the base was lowered to the sand. When the last of it appeared, it stood alone on the horizon-to-horizon expanse, a gigantic ornate brass punchbowl in the desert. The vortex rose and paused again over the bowl.

Morrison waited, his throat raw and aching. Now a small trickle came out of the vortex and splashed down into the bowl. Still Morrison didn't move.

And then it came. The trickle became a roar that sent the wolves and kites fleeing in terror, and a cataract poured from the vortex to the huge punchbowl.

Morrison began staggering toward it. He should have ordered a canteen, he told himself thirstily, stumbling across the quarter mile of sand. But at last he stood beneath the Prospector's Special, higher than a church steeple, wider than a house, filled with water more precious than goldenstone itself. He turned a spigot at the bottom. Water soaked the yellow sands and ran in rivulets down the dune.

He should have ordered a cup or glass, Morrison thought, lying on his back with open mouth.





# THE GIRLS AND NUGENT MILLER

Nugent Miller bent down and examined the footprints, gently brushing aside leaves and twigs with his pocket knife. They had been made recently, by a small foot. Perhaps a woman's foot?

Staring at the footprints, Miller could glimpse the woman rising from them, could see too vividly the high-arched foot, the narrow ankle, and the slender golden legs. Turning the imaginary woman on her imaginary pedestal, Miller admired the long graceful curve of her back, and he could see —

"That's enough," he told himself. He had no proof other than the footprint. Hope could be dangerous, desire could be catastrophic.

He was a tall, thin, sad-faced man, very sunburned, wearing sneakers, khaki slacks, and a blue polo shirt. He had a knapsack on his back and a geiger counter in his hand. He wore horn-rimmed glasses. The left sidepiece had been broken and repaired with a twig and string, and he had reinforced the nosepiece with wire. The glasses seemed secure now, but he still didn't trust them. He was quite myopic. If a lens broke, he could never replace it. Sometimes he had a nightmare in which his glasses dropped from his nose and he reached for them and just missed and the glasses fell down a mountainside, turning over and over in the air.

He pressed the glasses more firmly against his nose, walked forward a few yards, and examined the ground again. He could detect two or three sets of footprints, maybe more. From the look of the ground they had been made recently.

Miller found that he was beginning to tremble. He squatted down beside the footprints and reminded himself that he must not hope. The people who made those prints were probably dead.

Still, he had to make sure. He straightened up and began following the footprints. They led through a stubbled field to the edge of a forest. He stopped for a moment and listened.

It was a silent, beautiful September morning. The sun beat down on the barren fields, and light glinted from the stripped white branches of the forest. The only sounds he heard were the tired sigh of the wind and the background clicking of his geiger counter.

"Normal reading," Miller said to himself. "Whoever came this way must have had a geiger."

But they might not have used it properly. Perhaps they were contaminated, perhaps they were dying of radiation sickness. He couldn't allow himself to hope. He had stayed sane this long by not hoping, not wishing, not desiring.

"If they're dead," he told himself, "I'll give them decent burial." That thought exorcised the evil demons of hope and desire.

Within the forest, he lost the faint trail in the underbrush. He tried to continue in the same direction but his geiger counter began to chatter furiously. He moved out at right angles, holding the geiger in front of him. When he had bypassed the hot spot he turned again, at an exact right angle, and walked parallel to the direction of the trail. Carefully he counted his paces. It wouldn't do for him to get caught in a pocket with radiation all around and no clear path out. That had happened to him three months ago, and the geiger's batteries had been nearly exhausted before he could find a way out. He had spare batteries in his knapsack now, but the danger was still there.

After about twenty yards he turned again to cross the trail, walking slowly, watching the ground.

He was lucky. He found the footprints again, and near them a fragment of cloth caught on a bramble bush. He plucked the cloth and put it in his pockets. The footprints looked very fresh. Did he dare allow himself a little hope?

No, not yet. He still remembered what had happened less than six months ago. He had climbed a small sandstone cliff to forage a warehouse on its top. At sunset he had come back down the cliff, and at the base he had found the body of a man. The man had been dead only a few hours. A submachine gun and a rifle were strapped to his shoulders, and his pockets were stuffed with grenades. They had been no protection against his subtlest enemy. The man had killed himself; the warm revolver was still in his hand.

Apparently he had been following Miller's footprints. When he had come to the base of the sandstone cliff, the footprints ended. Perhaps the man's stamina had been undermined by the harsh radiation burns across his chest and arms; perhaps the instant of shattered hope when the footprints ended in solid stone had been too much for him. Whatever the reason, he had blown out his brains at the foot of the cliff. Hope had killed him.

Miller had removed the man's armament and buried him. He thought about the weapons for the better part of a day. He was tempted to keep them. They might be very necessary in this shattered new world.

But finally he decided against keeping them. He was not going to violate the sternly held pledge of a lifetime; not after all he had seen. Besides, weapons at a time like this were too dangerous to the user. So he threw them into the nearest river.

That had been less than six months ago. Now it was Miller who followed footprints, through thin forest loam to a narrow stream of running water. When he had crossed it he was able to count, in the stiff mud, five separate sets of footprints. They were so recent that the water was still seeping into them. The people must have passed here within the half-hour.

He felt the demons of hope and desire stir within him. Surely it wouldn't be too unwise now to consider the possibility of meeting people? Yes, too unwise. The unleashed demons, once frustrated, turned against you, as they had turned against the man at the base of the sandstone cliff. Hope and desire were his most dangerous enemies. He didn't dare release the genies from the corked bottle deep in his mind.

He walked quickly along the trail, certain, from the increasing freshness of the prints, that he was moving faster than the presumed group of people. His geiger clucked contentedly to itself, satisfied with the low radiation level. The people ahead of him — if they were still alive — must be picking their way through with a geiger.

Survival had been so simple, really; but so few had managed it.

Miller had known the end was in sight when the Chinese communists launched their large-scale amphibious assault against Formosa. At the beginning it had looked like a local war, as local as the angry little war being fought in Kuwait, and the U.N. police action on the Turkish-Bulgarian border.



But it was one war too many. Treaties, like chains, dragged country after country into the conflict. No nuclear weapons had been employed as yet, but their use was imminent.

Nugent Miller, associate professor of ancient history at Laurelville College in Tennessee, read the handwriting on the wall and began to set up caches of food in the Laurelville Caverns. He was thirty-eight at the time, and an ardent, life-long pacifist. When the DEW line radar sent back word of unidentified missiles from the north, Miller was already packed and ready. He went at once to the Laurelville Caverns, one of whose mouths was less than a mile from the college. He was surprised when only fifty or so students and faculty joined him. Surely the warning was clear enough.

The bombs fell, and drove the group deeper into the labyrinth of caves and tunnels. After a week, the bombs stopped. The survivors started to the surface.

Miller checked the radiation at the cave mouth and found it lethal. They couldn't leave. Food had already run out, and radioactive debris was filtering down, forcing them deeper into the caverns.

By the fourth week, thirty-eight people had starved to death. The radiation at the entrances was still too high to permit leaving. Miller decided to go into the lower levels and try to locate a still-untouched food cache. Three others accompanied them. The rest decided to risk the radiation and break out.

Miller and his friends climbed deep into the darkness of the caverns. They were very weak, and not one of them was a trained speleologist. Two were killed in a rock fall. Miller and one man clung stubbornly to life. They couldn't locate the food cache; but they did find a stream of black water, and saw the luminous dots of fish in the water, blind fish who lived all their lives in the caves. They fished, and caught nothing. It was several days before Miller was able to block up a branch of the stream, trap several fish and land them. By then, his friend was dead.

Miller lived by the stream and worked out ways of catching fish. He kept time as best he could, and climbed painfully to the surface once a week to check the radiation. It took twelve weeks for it to drop enough to allow him to leave.

He never saw any of the others from the cave, although he did find a few of their bodies.

Outside, he tried to locate people, anywhere. But hard radiation had caught most of the survivors of the hydrogen bombings.

Very few had been equipped with food stores or geiger counters. All, or nearly all, had gone out in search of food before the radiation had dropped to a tolerable level. Doubtless there were some survivors; but where, where?

For several months he had looked. Then he stopped looking. He assumed there were some people left in parts of Africa and Asia, in South America. He would never see them. Perhaps he would find a few on the North American continent some day. Perhaps not. In the meantime, he would go on living.

He lived, trekking south in the fall and returning north in the spring, a quiet man who had never wanted war, who hated killing with a passion that many had simulated but few had felt. He was a man who clung to many of his former habits as though the bombs had never fallen. He read books when he could find them, and apologetically collected paintings and sculptures, stealing them from the ghostly caretakers of the empty art galleries.

He was a man who, long before the Second World War, had promised himself never to kill a fellow human; and who now, after the Third World War, saw no reason to change that resolve. He was an amiable, boyish college type who had survived the death of the fittest and who, after the agonized destruction of a world, was still filled with high resolves and impeccable ideals. He was a man whom circumstance had forced to repress desire and abandon hope.

The footprints led through sparse underbrush, around a moss-covered granite boulder. He heard sounds.

"A gust of wind," he told himself.

He came around the boulder and stopped. In front of him, only a few yards away, were five people. To his starved eyes they looked like a crowd, an army, a multitude. They were camped around a small fire. It took him several seconds to assimilate this much information.

"Well I'll be damned," one of them said.

He adjusted. He took in the scene again. Five people, all of them women. Five women, dressed in ragged jeans and denim jackets, with rucksacks on the ground beside them, with crude spears propped up against the rucksacks.

"Who are you?" one of the women asked. She was the oldest, perhaps fifty years old. She was a short, stocky, strongly built woman with a square face and iron-gray hair, with strongly muscled arms

and a brown, sinewy neck, with pince-nez — one lens cracked — perched incongruously on her large nose.

"Can't you talk?" the woman asked sharply.

"Yes, I can talk," Miller said. "Sorry. I was just surprised. You're the first women I've seen since the bombing."

"The first women?" she asked sharply. "Have you seen men?"

"Only dead ones," Miller said. He turned from her and looked at the other four. They were young, somewhere in their twenties, and Miller thought them inexpressibly beautiful. Undoubtedly they were different and distinct from each other; but to Miller, coming upon them as he would encounter an unknown race, they were alike in their alienness. Four comely animals, golden-skinned and long-limbed, with the great calm eyes of panthers.

"So you're the only man around," the older woman said. "Well, that won't constitute any problem."

The girls didn't speak. They were staring at him. Miller began to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious. He was considering the responsibilities of the situation, and the thoughts excited yet disturbed him.

"We might as well get introductions over with," the older woman said in her firm, matter-of-fact voice. "My name is Miss Denis."

Miller waited, but Miss Denis didn't introduce the girls. He said, "My name is Nugent Miller."

"Well, Mr. Miller, you're the first person we've encountered. Our story is really very simple. When I heard the alarms, I took the girls to the sub-basement of our school, The Charleton-Vaness School for Young Ladies, that is. I am — I was — an instructor in etiquette."

A colleague, Miller thought wryly.

"Naturally," Miss Denis went on, "I had equipped the shelter with supplies, as any prudent person should have done. But as few did. I had several geiger counters, in whose use I had familiarized myself. Some foolish people insisted upon leaving the shelter immediately after the bombs had stopped falling. I succeeded in impressing on these girls the dangers of radiation. It seeped down. We were forced to abandon the sub-basement and take refuge in the sewer system further down."

"We ate rats," one of the girls said.

"That's right, Suzie," Miss Denis said. "We ate rats and were very happy to get them. When the radiation subsided to a safe level, we came out. We have been doing nicely ever since."



The girls nodded in agreement. They were still watching Miller with their panther eyes. And Miller was watching them. He had fallen in love with all of them simultaneously and quite genuinely, particularly with Suzie because she had a name. But he hadn't fallen in love with the squat, strong-armed, matter-of-fact Miss Denis.

"My own experiences were quite similar," Miller said. "I went into the Laurelville Caverns. I didn't find any rats to eat, but I did consume some very odd-looking fish. I suppose the next thing is, what do we do?"

"Is it?" Miss Denis asked.

"I should think so. We survivors should stick together for mutual support and assistance. Shall we go to your camp or mine? I don't know how much foraging you've done. I've done quite a bit. Assembled a library and a few paintings, and a good stock of food."

"No," Miss Denis said.

"Well, if you insist upon your camp — "

"I do indeed. Our camp. And alone. That means without you, Mr. Miller."

Miller could hardly believe it. He looked at the girls. They looked back at him warily, their faces unreadable.

"Now listen," Miller said, "we need mutual support and assistance — "

"By which you mean the lasciviousness of the male," Miss Denis said.

"I didn't mean anything of the sort," Miller said. "If you insist upon talking about that now, I suppose we can just let nature take its course."

"Nature *has* taken its course," Miss Denis said. "Its only true course. We are five women. We have done very well together over the last months. Haven't we, girls?"

The girls nodded, but their eyes were still fixed upon Miller.

"We have no need," Miss Denis said, "of you or any other man. No need and no desire."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Miller said, although he was beginning to.

"Men are responsible for all this," Miss Denis said. She waved her thick hand in an all-encompassing gesture. "Men ran the government, men were the soldiers and the nuclear scientists, men started the war that has wiped out most of the human race. Even before



the bombings I always warned my girls to beware of men. A lot of drivel was talked about equality of the sexes; in practice, woman was still man's chattel and his plaything. But when times were normal I couldn't explain my theories fully. The school would not have allowed it."

"I can understand that," Miller said.

"Now times are no longer normal. You men have messed things up once and for all, and you're not going to get another chance. Not if I have anything I can do about it."

"Maybe the girls don't feel that way," Miller said.

"I am educating the girls," Miss Denis said. "It's a slow process, but we have plenty of time. And I believe my lessons have begun to take hold. We've had a good time together, haven't we, girls?"

"Yes, Miss Denis," the girls chorused.

"And we don't need this man around the premises, do we?"

"No, Miss Denis."

"You see?"

"Now just a minute," Miller said. "I think you're laboring under a misapprehension. *Some* men have been responsible for wars. Not *all* men. I for example, was an ardent pacifist at a time when it was distinctly uncomfortable to be one. In the Second World War, I served in an ambulance unit. I have never taken a human life, and I never intend to."

"So you're a coward as well as a man," Miss Denis said.

"I do not consider myself a coward," Miller said. "I have been a conscientious objector out of conviction, not cowardice. My ambulance unit operated on the front lines, like soldiers, except that we were not armed. I have been under fire. I have been wounded, though not badly."

"How utterly heroic," Miss Denis said, and the girls laughed.

"I'm not trying to parade my accomplishments before you," Miller said. "I'm simply trying to make you see what sort of a man I am. Men differ, you know."

"They're all the same," Miss Denis said. "All of them. Dirty, hairy, smelly, promiscuous beasts who start wars and kill women and children. Don't try to tell me about men."

"I must," Miller said. "You don't know much about them. Tell me, what did *you* do to stop the wars you hate so much?"

"What can any woman do?" Miss Denis asked. "The captives must follow the conquerors."

"Nonsense," Miller said. "There was plenty women could have done if they'd really wanted to stop wars. Have you ever read *LYSISTRATA*? Aristophanes tells how the women of Greece refused to cohabit with their husbands until they stopped fighting. It makes the point — "

"I have read the play," Miss Denis said. "It was hardly a practical solution."

"Why not? Wasn't it because too many of you women loved war and worshipped soldiers? You could have stopped it if you'd wanted to. But you didn't! Nietzsche said — "

"Don't stand there quoting your damned *men* authors at me," Miss Denis said. "Your logic is specious. The fact is, you men had the power and you abused it. You treated women as playthings, and you used the Earth as one big battleground until you warred yourself right out of existence. You're finished now, washed up, over. You're an extinct species. You stand there with your funny hairy face and you look as strange as a dinosaur or an auk. Go off and die somewhere, Miller. We women are going to have our chance now."

"You may find breeding difficult," Miller said.

"But not impossible. I kept in very close touch with the latest work being done in parthenogenetic research. Reproduction without the male is distinctly possible."

"Perhaps it is," Miller said. "But you aren't a trained scientist. Even if you were, you don't have the equipment."

"But I do know the places where the research was carried out," Miss Denis said. "We may find one of the women scientists still alive. Our chance is even better of finding lab equipment intact. With that, plus my own knowledge of the subject, I think I can lick the problem."

"You'll never do it," Miller said.

"I think I will. But even if I can't, I'd rather see the race die out than let *men* take over again."

She was growing red-faced and angry. Miller said quietly, "I can well understand that you have grievances against men. *Some* men. But surely we can talk this through and reach some mutually satisfactory — "

"No! We've done all the talking we're going to do! Get out of here!"

"I'm not going," Miller said.

Miss Denis moved quickly to the pile of weapons and picked up a spear.

"Girls," she said, "get ready."

The girls were still fascinated with Miller. They hesitated a moment. Then, obedient to Miss Denis' strong personality, they took handfuls of rocks from their knapsacks. They were excited now. They watched Miss Denis expectantly.

"Are you leaving?" she asked.

"No!"

"Stone him!"

A hail of rocks flew through the air. Miller turned away to shield his geiger counter, and felt stones pelt him in the back and legs. He could hardly believe it was happening. These girls whom he loved — and especially Suzie — wouldn't be stoning him. They would stop in a moment, they would be ashamed.

But the rocks flew, and one caught him on the top of the head, half-stunning him. He shook his head, turned and ran forward, still holding the geiger counter. Miss Denis tried clumsily to impale him on her spear. He avoided the thrust and grabbed the spear with his left hand. They wrestled for it.

One-handed, he almost pulled it away; but Miss Denis, strong and squat as a bull, was too much for him. She wrenched the spear free and hit him over the head with the knobbed end. And the girls cheered!

Miller was on his knees now, and the rocks were still raining around him. A spear-point prodded him in the side. He rolled away from it and regained his footing.

"Kill him!" Miss Denis screamed. "Kill that dirty man!"

The girls, their faces flushed with excitement, advanced on him. Miller felt a spear graze his side. He turned and ran.

He didn't know how long he ran through the green twilight of the forest. At last he couldn't run anymore. He drew his pocket knife and turned; but no one was following him.

Miller lay down on the cool ground and tried to think. That woman, that Miss Denis, must be crazy. An old man-hater, a hard-bitten Lesbian gone stark raving mad. And the girls? He was sure they hadn't wanted to hurt him. Perhaps they loved him. But they were under the influence of the old bitch.



He checked and found that he hadn't lost his geiger counter or his glasses in the flight. He was grateful. Without them, it would be difficult to find his own camp.

He had always known that people were a little crazy. He should have realized that the survivors of an atomic holocaust would be even crazier than usual. That insane Miss Denis. Imagine *man* being an extinct species!

With a shock, Miller found that he could imagine it. After all, how many men survived? How many women? What number of those survivors had geigers, what number would be able to overcome the hazards that lay ahead?

Still, that didn't affect him. The human race wasn't his responsibility. He had been a fool to release the demons of hope and desire. Now he would have to conquer them all over again. But he could do it. He would live the rest of his life among his books and paintings. Perhaps he would be the last truly civilized man.

Civilized...Miller shuddered and remembered the face of Suzie and the others, their panther eyes watching. Too bad he hadn't been able to effect some sort of compromise with Miss Denis. But under the circumstances there was nothing he could do —

Except abandon every principle he had ever lived by.

Could he do it? He looked at the knife in his hand and shuddered under the weight of the demons on his shoulders. His hand tightened around the hilt.

A moment later, the world's last civilized man was dead. With him perished the world's last pacifist and conscientious objector, the final art collector and ultimate bibliophile.

In the place of these admirable creatures was *Miller*, the small knife gripped in his hand, looking around the forest for something.

He found it. A lightning-blasted bough three feet long, and heavy.

Quickly he trimmed off the excess sprouts. Soon, Miss Denis was going to have the horrid epitome of all hairy, smelly, dirty, club-wielding maledom bursting in upon her. He hoped she would have time to realize that she had called the beast to life herself. It would be quite a surprise for her.

And shortly after that, the girls were in for a surprise. Especially Suzie.





# MEETING OF THE MINDS

## PART ONE

The Quedak lay on a small hilltop and watched a slender jet of light descend through the sky. The feather-tailed jet was golden, and brighter than the sun. Poised above it was a glistening metallic object, fabricated rather than natural, hauntingly familiar. The Quedak tried to think what it was.

He couldn't remember. His memories had atrophied with his functions, leaving only scattered fragments of images. He searched among them now, leafing through his brief scraps of ruined cities, dying populations, a blue-water-filled canal, two moons, a spaceship...

That was it. The descending object was a *spaceship*. There had been many of them during the great days of the Quedak.

Those great days were over, buried forever beneath the powdery sands. Only the Quedak remained. He had life and he had a mission to perform. The driving urgency of his mission remained, even after memory and function had failed.

As the Quedak watched, the spaceship dipped lower. It wobbled and sidejets kicked out to straighten it. With a gentle explosion of dust, the spaceship settled tail first on the arid plain.

And the Quedak, driven by the imperative Quedak mission, dragged itself painfully down from the little hilltop. Every movement was an agony. If he were a selfish creature, the Quedak would have died. But he was not selfish. Quedaks owed a duty to the universe; and that spaceship, after all the blank years, was a link to other worlds, to planets where the Quedak could live again and give his services to the native fauna.

He crawled, a centimeter at a time, and wondered whether he had the strength to reach the alien spaceship before it left this dusty, dead planet.

Captain Jensen of the spaceship *Southern Cross* was bored sick with Mars. He and his men had been here for ten days. They had found no important archaeological specimens, no tantalizing hints of ancient cities such as the *Polaris* expedition had discovered at the South Pole. Here there was nothing but sand, a few weary shrubs, and a rolling hill or two. Their biggest find so far had been three pottery shards.

Jensen readjusted his oxygen booster. Over the rise of a hill he saw his two men returning.

"Anything interesting?" he asked.

"Just this," said engineer Vayne, holding up an inch of corroded blade without a handle.

"Better than nothing," Jensen said. "How about you, Wilks?"

The navigator shrugged his shoulders. "Just photographs of the landscape."

"Okay," Jensen said. "Dump everything into the sterilizer and let's get going."

Wilks looked mournful. "Captain, one quick sweep to the north might turn up something really —"

"Not a chance," Jensen said. "Fuel, food, water, everything was calculated for a ten-day stay. That's three days longer than *Polaris* had. We're taking off this evening."

The men nodded. They had no reason to complain. As the second to land on Mars, they were sure of a small but respectable footnote in the history books. They put their equipment through the sterilizer vent, sealed it, and climbed the ladder to the lock. Once they were inside, Vayne closed then dogged the hatch, and started to open the inside pressure door.

"Hold it!" Jensen called out.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought I saw something on your boot," Jensen said. "Something like a big bug."

Vayne quickly ran his hands down the sides of his boots. The two men circled him, examining his clothing.

"Shut that inner door," the captain said. "Wilks, did you see anything?"

"Not a thing," the navigator said. "Are you sure, Cap? We haven't found anything that looks like animal or insect life here. Only a few plants."

"I could have sworn I saw something," Jensen said. "Maybe I was wrong...Anyhow, we'll fumigate our clothes before we enter the ship proper. No sense taking any chance of bringing back some kind of Martian bug."

The men removed their clothing and boots and stuffed them into the chute. They searched the bare steel room carefully.

"Nothing here," Jensen said at last. "Okay, let's go inside."

Once inside the ship, they sealed off the lock and fumigated it. The Quedak, who had crept inside earlier through the partially opened pressure door, listened to the distant hiss of gas. After a while he heard the jets begin to fire.

The Quedak retreated to the dark rear of the ship. He found a metal shelf and attached himself to the underside of it near the wall. After a while he felt the ship tremble.

The Quedak clung to the shelf during the long, slow flight through space. He had forgotten what spaceships were like, but now memory revived briefly. He felt blazing heat and freezing cold. Adjusting to the temperature changes drained his small store of vitality, and the Quedak began to wonder if he was going to die.

He *refused* to die. Not while there was still a possibility of accomplishing the Quedak mission.

In time he felt the harsh pull of gravity, and felt the main jets firing again. The ship was coming down to its planet.

After a routine landing, Captain Jensen and his men were taken to Medic Checkpoint, where they were thumped, probed, and tested for any sign of disease.

Their spaceship was lowered to a flatcar and taken past rows of moonships and ICBMs to Decontamination Stage One. Here the sealed outer hull was washed down with powerful cleansing sprays. By evening, the ship was taken to Decontamination Stage Two.

A team of two inspectors equipped with bulky tanks and hoses undogged the hatch and entered, shutting the hatch behind them.

They began at the bow, methodically spraying as they moved toward the rear. Everything seemed in order; no animals or plants, no trace of mold such as the first Luna expedition had brought back.

"Do you really think this is necessary?" the assistant Inspector asked. He had already requested a transfer to Flight Control.



"Sure it is," the senior inspector said. "Can't tell what these ships might bring in."

"I suppose so," the assistant said. "Still, a Martian whoosis wouldn't even be able to live on Earth. Would it?"

"How should I know?" the senior inspector said. "I'm no botanist. Maybe they don't know, either."

"Seems like a waste of — hey!"

"What is it?" the senior inspector asked.

"I thought I saw something," the assistant said. "Looked a little like a palmetto bug. Over by that shelf."

The senior inspector adjusted his respirator more snugly over his face and motioned to his assistant to do the same. He advanced slowly toward the shelf, unfastening a second nozzle from the pressure tank on his back. He turned it on, and a cloud of greenish gas sprayed out.

"There," the senior inspector said. "That should take care of your bug." He knelt down and looked under the shelf. "Nothing here."

"It was probably a shadow," the assistant said.

Together they sprayed the entire interior of the ship, paying particular attention to the small box of Martian artifacts. They left the gas-filled ship and dogged the hatch again.

"Now what?" the assistant asked.

"Now we leave the ship sealed for three days," the senior inspector said. "Then we inspect again. You find me the animal who'll live through that."

The Quedak, who had been clinging to the underside of the assistant's shoe between the heel and the sole, released his hold. He watched the shadowy biped figures move away, talking in their deep, rumbling, indecipherable voices. He felt tired and unutterably lonely.

But buoying him up was the thought of the Quedak mission. Only that was important. The first part of the mission was accomplished. He had landed safely on an inhabited planet. Now he needed food and drink. Then he had to have rest, a great deal of rest to restore his dormant faculties. After that he would be ready to give this world what it so obviously needed — the cooperation possible only through the Quedak mind.

He crept slowly down the shadowy yard, past the deserted hums of spaceships. He came to a wire fence and sensed the high-voltage electricity running through it. Gauging his distance carefully, the Quedak jumped safely through one of the openings in the mesh.

This was a very different section. From here the Quedak could smell water and food. He moved hastily forward, then stopped.

He sensed the presence of a man. And something else. Something much more menacing.

"Who's there?" the watchman called out. He waited, his revolver in one hand, his flashlight in the other. Thieves had broken into the yards last week; they had stolen three cases of computer parts bound for Rio. Tonight he was ready for them.

He walked forward, an old, keen-eyed man holding his revolver in a rock-steady fist. The beam of his flashlight probed among the cargoes. The yellow light flickered along a great pile of precision machine tools for South Africa, past a water-extraction plant for Jordan and a pile of mixed goods for Rabaul.

"You better come out," the watchman shouted. His flashlight probed at sacks of rice for Shanghai and power saws for Burma. Then the beam of light stopped abruptly.

"I'll be damned," the watchman said. Then he laughed. A huge and red-eyed rat was glaring into the beam of his flashlight. It had something in its jaws, something that looked like an unusually large cockroach.

"Good eating," the watchman said. He holstered his revolver and continued his patrol.

A large black animal had seized the Quedak, and he felt heavy jaws close over his back. He tried to fight; but, blinded by a sudden beam of yellow light, he was betrayed by total and enervating confusion.

The yellow light went off. The black beast bit down hard on the Quedak's armored back. The Quedak mustered his remained strength, and, uncoiling his long, scorpion-jointed tail, lashed out.

He missed, but the black beast released him hastily. They circled each other, the Quedak hoisting his tail for a second blow, the beast unwilling to turn loose this prey.

The Quedak waited for his chance. Elation filled him. This pugnacious animal could be the first, the first on this planet to experience the Quedak mission. From this humble creature a start could be made....

The beast sprang and its white teeth clicked together viciously. The Quedak moved out of the way and its barb-headed tail flashed out, fastening itself in the beast's back. The Quedak held on grimly

while the beast leaped and squirmed. Setting his feet, the Quedak concentrated on the all-important task of pumping a tiny white crystal down the length of his tail and under the beast's skin.

But this most important of the Quedak faculties was still dormant. Unable to accomplish anything, the Quedak released his barbs, and, taking careful aim, accurately drove his sting home between the black beast's eyes. The blow, as the Quedak had known, was lethal.

The Quedak took nourishment from the body of its dead foe; regretfully, for by inclination the Quedak was herbivorous. When he had finished, the Quedak knew that he was in desperate need of a long period of rest. Only after that could the full Quedak powers be regained.

He crawled up and down the piles of goods in the yard, looking for a place to hide. Carefully he examined several bales. At last he reached a stack of heavy boxes. One of the boxes had a crack just large enough to admit him.

The Quedak crawled inside, down the shiny oil-slick surface of a machine, to the far end of the box. There he went into the dreamless, defenseless sleep of the Quedak, serenely trusting in what the future would bring.

## PART TWO

### I.

The big gaff-headed schooner was pointed directly at the reef-enclosed island, moving toward it with the solidity of an express train. The sails billowed under powerful gusts of the northwest breeze, and the rusty Allison-Chambers diesel rumbled beneath a teak grating. The skipper and mate stood on the bridge deck and watched the reef approach.

"Anything yet?" the skipper asked. He was a stocky, balding man with a perpetual frown on his face. He had been sailing his schooner among the uncharted shoals and reefs of the Southwest Pacific for twenty-five years. He frowned because his old ship was not insurable. His deck cargo, however, *was* insured. Some of it had come all the way from Ogdenville, that transshipment center in the desert where spaceships landed.



"Not a thing," the mate said. He was watching the dazzling white wall of coral, looking for the gleam of blue that would reveal the narrow pass to the inner lagoon. This was his first trip to the Solomon Islands. A former television repairman in Sydney before he got the wanderlust, the mate wondered if the skipper had gone crazy and planned a spectacular suicide against the reef.

"Still nothing!" he shouted. "Shoals ahead!"

"I'll take it," the skipper said to the helmsman. He gripped the wheel and watched the unbroken face on the reef.

"Nothing," the mate said. "Skipper, we'd better come about."

"Not if we're going to get through the pass," the skipper said. He was beginning to get worried. But he had promised to deliver goods to the American treasure-hunters on this island, and the skipper's word was his bond. He had picked up the cargo in Rabaul and made his usual stops at the settlements on New Georgia and Malaita. When he finished here, he could look forward to a thousand-mile run to New Caledonia.

"There it is!" the mate shouted.

A thin slit of blue had appeared in the coral wall. They were less than thirty yards from it now, and the old schooner was making close to eight knots.

As the ship entered the pass, the skipper threw the wheel hard over. The schooner spun on its keel. Coral flashed by on either side, close enough to touch. There was a metallic shriek as an upper mainmast spreader snagged and came free. Then they were in the pass, bucking a six-knot current.

The mate pushed the diesel to full throttle, then sprang back to help the skipper wrestle with the wheel. Under sail and power the schooner forged through the pass, scraped by an outcropping to port, and came onto the placid surface of the lagoon.

The skipper mopped his forehead with a large blue bandana. "Very snug work," he said.

"*Snug!*" the mate cried. He turned away, and the skipper smiled a brief smile.

They slid past a small ketch riding at anchor. The native hands took down sail and the schooner nosed up to a rickety pier that jutted out from the beach. Lines were made fast to palm trees. From the fringe of jungle above the beach a white man came down, walking briskly in the noonday heat.



He was very tall and thin, with knobby knees and elbows. The fierce Melanesian sun had burned out but not tanned him, and his nose and cheekbones were peeling. His horn-rimmed glasses had broken at the hinge and been repaired with a piece of tape. He looked eager, boyish, and curiously naive.

One hell-of-a-looking treasure-hunter, the mate thought.

"Glad to see you!" the man called out. "We'd about given you up for lost."

"Not likely," the skipper said. "Mr. Sorensen, I'd like you to meet my new mate, Mr. Willis."

"Glad to meet you, Professor," the mate said.

"I'm not a professor," Sorensen said, "but thanks anyhow."

"Where are the others?" the skipper asked.

"Out in the jungle," Sorensen said. "All except Drake, and he'll be down here shortly. You'll stay a while, won't you?"

"Only to unload," the skipper said. "Have to catch the tide out of here. How's the treasure-hunting?"

"We've done a lot of digging," Sorensen said. "We still have our hopes."

"But no doubloons yet?" the skipper asked. "No pieces of eight?"

"Not a damned one," Sorensen said wearily. "Did you bring the newspapers, skipper?"

"That I did," the skipper replied. "They're in the cabin. Did you hear about that second spaceship going to Mars?"

"Heard about it on the short wave," Sorensen said. "It didn't bring back much, did it?"

"Practically nothing. Still, just think of it. *Two* spaceships to Mars, and I hear they're getting ready to put one on Venus."

The three men looked around them and grinned.

"Well," the skipper said, "I guess maybe the space age hasn't reached the Southwest Pacific yet. And it certainly hasn't gotten to *this* place. Come on, let's unload the cargo."

This place was the island of Vuanu, southernmost of the Solomons, almost in the Louisade Archipelago. It was a fair-sized volcanic island, almost twenty miles long and several wide. Once it had supported half a dozen native villages. But the population had begun to decline after the depredations of the blackbirders in the 1850s. Then a measles epidemic wiped out almost all the rest, and the survivors emigrated to New Georgia. A ship-watcher had been

stationed here during the Second World War, but no ships had come this way. The Japanese invasion had poured across New Guinea and the upper Solomons, and further north through Micronesia. At the end of the war Vuanu was still deserted. It was not made into a bird sanctuary like Canton Island, or a cable station like Christmas Island, or a refueling point like Cocos-Keeling. No one even wanted to explode alphabet bombs on it. Vuanu was a worthless, humid, jungle-covered piece of land, free to anyone who wanted it.

William Sorensen, general manager of a chain of liquor stores in California, decided he wanted it.

Sorensen's hobby was treasure-hunting. He had looked for Lafitte's treasure in Louisiana and Texas, and for the Lost Dutchman Mine in Arizona. He had found neither. His luck had been better on the wreck-strewn Gulf coast, and on an expedition to Dagger Cay in the Caribbean he had found a double handful of Spanish coins in a rotting canvas bag. The coins were worth about three thousand dollars. The expedition had cost very much more, but Sorensen felt amply repaid.

For many years he had been interested in the Spanish treasure galleon *Santa Teresa*. Contemporary accounts told how the ship, heavily laden with bullion, sailed from Manila in 1689. The clumsy ship, caught in a storm, had run off to the south and been wrecked. Eighteen survivors managed to get ashore with the treasure. They buried it, and set sail for the Philippines in the ship's pinnacle. Two of them were alive when the boat reached Manila.

The treasure island was tentatively identified as one of the Solomons. But which one?

No one knew. Treasure-hunters looked for the cache on Bougainville and Buka. There was a rumor about it on Malaita, and even Ontong Java received an expedition. But no treasure was recovered.

Sorensen, researching the problem thoroughly, decided that the *Santa Teresa* had sailed completely through the Solomons, almost to the Louisades. The ship must have escaped destruction until it crashed into the reef at Vuanu.

His desire to search for the treasure might have remained only a dream if he hadn't met Dan Drake. Drake was also an amateur treasure-hunter. More important, he owned a fifty-five-foot Hanna ketch.

Over an evening's drinks the Vuanu expedition was born.

Additional members were recruited. Drake's ketch was put into seagoing condition, equipment and money saved or gathered. Several other possible treasure sites in the Southwest Pacific were researched. Finally, vacation time was synchronized and the expedition got under way.

They had put in three months' work on Vuanu already. Their morale was high, in spite of inevitable conflicts between members. This schooner, bringing in supplies from Sydney and Rabaul, was the last civilized contact they would have for another six months.

While Sorensen nervously supervised, the crew of the schooner unloaded the cargo. He didn't want any of the equipment, some of it shipped over six thousand miles, to be broken now. No replacements were possible; whatever they didn't have, they would have to do without. He breathed out in relief when the last crate, containing a metal detector, was safely hoisted over the side and put on the beach above the high-water mark.

There was something odd about that box. He examined it and found a quarter-sized hole in one end. It had not been properly sealed.

Dan Drake, the co-manager of the expedition, joined him. "What's wrong?" Drake asked.

"Hole in that crate," Sorensen said. "Salt water might have gotten in. We'll be in tough shape if this detector doesn't work."

Drake nodded. "We better open it and see." He was a short, deeply tanned, broad-chested man with close-cropped black hair and a straggly mustache. He wore an old yachting cap jammed down over his eyes, giving his face a tough bulldog look. He pulled a big screwdriver from his belt and inserted it into the crack.

"Wait a moment," Sorensen said. "Let's get it up to the camp first. Easier to carry the crate than something packed in grease."

"Right," Drake said. "Take the other end."

The camp was built in a clearing a hundred yards from the beach, on the site of an abandoned native village. They had been able to rethatch several huts, and there was an old copra shed with a galvanized iron roof where they stored their supplies. Here they got the benefit of any breeze from the sea. Beyond the clearing, the gray-green jungle sprang up like a solid wall.

Sorensen and Drake set the case down. The skipper, who had accompanied them with the newspapers, looked around at the bleak huts and shook his head.



"Would you like a drink, Skipper?" Sorensen asked. "Afraid we can't offer any ice."

"A drink would be fine," the skipper said. He wondered what drove men to a godforsaken place like this in search of imaginary Spanish treasure.

Sorensen went into one of the huts and brought out a bottle of Scotch and a tin cup. Drake had taken out his screwdriver and was vigorously ripping boards off the crate.

"How does it look?" Sorensen asked.

"It's okay," Drake said, gently lifting out the metal detector. "Heavily greased. Doesn't seem like there was any damage —"

He jumped back. The skipper had come forward and stamped down heavily on the sand.

"What's the matter?" Sorensen asked.

"Looked like a scorpion," the skipper said. "Damned thing crawled right out of your crate there. Might have bit you."

Sorensen shrugged. He had gotten used to the presence of an infinite number of insects during his three months on Vuanu. Another bug more or less didn't seem to make much difference.

"Another drink?" he asked.

"Can't do it," the skipper said regretfully. "I'd better get started. All your party healthy?"

"All healthy so far," Sorensen said. He smiled. "Except for some bad cases of gold fever."

"You'll never find gold in this place," the skipper said seriously. "I'll look in on you in about six months. Good luck."

After shaking hands, the skipper went down to the beach and boarded his ship. As the first pink flush of sunset touched the sky, the schooner was under way. Sorensen and Drake watched it negotiate the pass. For a few minutes its masts were visible above the reef. Then they had dipped below the horizon.

"That's that," Drake said. "Us crazy American treasure-hunters are alone again."

"You don't think he suspected anything?" Sorensen asked.

"Definitely not. As far as he's concerned, we're just crackpots."

Grinning, they looked back at their camp. Under the copra shed was nearly fifty thousand dollars worth of gold and silver bullion, dug out of the jungle and carefully reburied. They had located a part of the *Santa Teresa* treasure during their first month on the



island. There was every indication of more to come. Since they had no legal title to the land, the expedition was not eager to let the news get out. Once it was known, every gold-hungry vagabond from Perth to Papeete would be heading to Vuanu.

"The boys'll be in soon," Drake said. "Let's get some stew going."

"Right," Sorensen said. He took a few steps and stopped. "That's funny."

"What is?"

"That scorpion the skipper squashed. It's gone."

"Maybe he missed it," Drake said. "Or maybe he just pushed it down into the sand. What difference does it make?"

"None, I guess," Sorensen said.

## II.

Edward Eakins walked through the jungle with a long-handled spade on his shoulder, sucking reflectively on a piece of candy. It was the first he'd had in weeks, and he was enjoying it to the utmost. He was in very good spirits. The schooner yesterday had brought in not only machinery and replacement parts, but also candy, cigarettes and food. He had eaten scrambled eggs this morning, and real bacon. The expedition was becoming almost civilized.

Something rustled in the bushes near him. He marched on, ignoring it.

He was a lean, sandy-haired man, amiable and slouching, with pale blue eyes and an unprepossessing manner. He felt very lucky to have been taken on the expedition. His gas station didn't put him on a financial par with the others, and he hadn't been able to put up a full share of the money. He still felt guilty about that. He had been accepted because he was an eager and indefatigable treasure-hunter with a good knowledge of jungle ways. Equally important, he was a skilled radio operator and repairman. He had kept the transmitter on the ketch in working condition in spite of salt water and mildew.

He could pay his full share now, of course. But *now*, when they were practically rich, didn't really count. He wished there were some way he could —

There was that rustle in the bushes again.

Eakins stopped and waited. The bushes trembled. And out stepped a mouse.

Eakins was amazed. The mice on this island, like most wild animal life, were terrified of man. Although they feasted off the refuse of the camp — when the rats didn't get it first — they carefully avoided any contact with humans.

"You better get yourself home," Eakins said to the mouse.

The mouse stared at him. He stared back. It was a pretty little mouse, no more than four or five inches long, and colored a light tawny brown. It didn't seem afraid.

"So long, mouse," Eakins said. "I got work to do." He shifted his spade to the other shoulder and turned to go. As he turned, he caught a flash of brown out of the corner of his eye. Instinctively he ducked. The mouse whirled past him, turned, and gathered itself for another leap.

"Mouse, are you out of your head?" Eakins said.

The mouse bared its tiny teeth and sprang. Eakins knocked it aside.

"Now get the hell out of here," he said. He was beginning to wonder if the rodent was crazy. Did it have rabies, perhaps?

The mouse gathered itself for another charge. Eakins lifted the spade off his shoulders and waited. When the mouse sprang, he met it with a carefully timed blow. Then carefully, regretfully, he battered it to death.

"Can't have rabid mice running around," he said.

But the mouse hadn't seemed rabid; it had just seemed very determined.

Eakins scratched his head. Now what, he wondered, had gotten into that little mouse?

In the camp that evening, Eakins' story was greeted with hoots of laughter. It was just like Eakins to be attacked by a mouse. Several men suggested that he go armed in case the mouse's family wanted revenge. Eakins just smiled sheepishly.

Two days later, Sorensen and Al Cable were finishing up a morning's hard work at Site 4, two miles from the camp. The metal detector had shown marked activity at this spot. They were seven feet down and nothing had been produced yet except a high mound of yellow-brown earth.

"That detector must be wrong," Cable said, wiping his face wearily. He was a big, pinkish man. He had sweated off twenty pounds on Vuanu, picked up a bad case of prickly heat, and had

enough treasure-hunting to last him a lifetime. He wished he were back in Baltimore taking care of his used-car agency. He didn't hesitate to say so, often and loudly. He was one member who had not worked out well.

"Nothing wrong with the detector," Sorensen said. "Trouble is, we're digging in swampy ground. The cache must have sunk."

"It's probably a hundred feet down," Cable said, stabbing angrily at the gluey mud.

"Nope," Sorensen said. "There's volcanic rock under us, no more than twenty feet down."

"Twenty feet? We should have a bulldozer."

"Might be costly bringing one in," Sorensen said mildly. "Come on, Al, let's get back to camp."

Sorensen helped Cable out of the excavation. They cleared off their tools and started toward the narrow path leading back to the camp. They stopped abruptly.

A large, ugly bird had stepped out of the brush. It was standing on the path, blocking their way.

"What in hell is that?" Cable asked.

"A cassowary," Sorensen said.

"Well, let's boot it out of the way and get going."

"Take it easy," Sorensen said. "If anyone does any booting, it'll be the bird. Back away slowly."

The cassowary was nearly five feet high, a black-feathered ostrichlike bird standing erect on powerful legs. Each of its feet was three-toed, and the toes curved into heavy talons. It had a yellowish, bony head and short, useless wings. From its neck hung a brilliant wattle colored red, green, and purple.

"Is it dangerous?" Cable asked.

Sorensen nodded. "Natives on New Guinea have been kicked to death by those birds."

"Why haven't we seen it before?" Cable asked.

"They're usually very shy," Cable said, as the cassowary took a step toward them. "Can we run?"

"The bird can run a lot faster," Sorensen said. "I don't suppose you have a gun with you?"

"Of course not. There's been nothing to shoot."

Backing away, they held their spades like spears. The brush crackled and an anteater emerged. It was followed by a wild pig.



The three beasts converged on the men, backing them toward the dense wall of the jungle.

"They're herding us," Cable said, his voice going shrill.

"Take it easy," Sorensen said. "The cassowary is the only one we have to watch out for."

"Aren't anteaters dangerous?"

"Only to ants."

"The hell you say," Cable said. "Bill, the animals on this island have gone crazy. Remember Eakins' mouse?"

"I remember it," Sorensen said. They had reached the far edge of the clearing. The beasts were in front of them, still advancing, with the cassowary in the center. Behind them lay the jungle — and whatever they were being herded toward.

"We'll have to make a break for it," Sorensen said.

"That damned bird is blocking the trail."

"We'll have to knock him over," Sorensen said. "Watch out for his feet. Let's go!"

They raced toward the cassowary, swinging their spades. The cassowary hesitated, unable to make up its mind between targets. Then it turned toward Cable and its right leg lashed out. The partially deflected blow sounded like the flat of a meat cleaver against a side of beef. Cable grunted and collapsed, clutching his ribs.

Sorensen stabbed, and the honed edge of his spade nearly severed the cassowary's head from its body. The wild pig and the anteater were coming at him now. He flailed with his spade, driving them back. Then, with a strength he hadn't known he possessed, he stooped, lifted Cable across his shoulders and ran down the path.

A quarter of a mile down he had to stop, completely out of breath. There were no sounds behind him. The other animals were apparently not following. He went back to the wounded man.

Cable had begun to recover consciousness. He was able to walk, half-supported by Sorensen. When they reached the camp, Sorensen called everybody in for a meeting. He counted heads while Eakins taped up Cable's side. Only one man was missing.

"Where's Drake?" Sorensen asked.

"He's across the island at North Beach, fishing," said Tom Recetich. "Want me to get him?"

Sorensen hesitated. Finally he said, "No. I'd better explain what we're up against. Then we'll issue the guns. *Then* we'll try to find Drake."



"Man, what's going on?" Recetich asked.

Sorensen began to explain what had happened at Site 4.

Fishing provided an important part of the expedition's food and there was no work Drake liked better. At first he had gone out with face mask and spear gun. But the sharks in this corner of the world were numerous, hungry, and aggressive. So, regretfully, he had given up skin diving and set out handlines on the leeward side of the island.

The lines were out now, and Drake lay in the shade of a palm tree, half asleep, his big forearms folded over his chest. His dog, Oro, was prowling the beach in search of hermit crabs. Oro was a good-natured mutt, part Airedale, part terrier, part unknown. He was growling at something now.

"Leave the crabs alone," Drake called out. "You'll just get nipped again."

Oro was still growling. Drake rolled over and saw that the dog was standing stiff-legged over a large insect. It looked like some kind of scorpion.

"Oro, leave that blasted —"

Before Drake could move, the insect sprang. It landed on Oro's neck and the jointed tail whipped out. Oro yelped once. Drake was on his feet instantly. He swatted at the bug, but it jumped off the dog's neck and scuttled into the brush.

"Take it easy, old boy," Drake said. "That's a nasty-looking wound. Might be poisoned. I better open it up."

He held the panting dog firmly and drew his boat knife. He had operated on the dog for snake bite in Central America, and in the Adirondacks he had held him down and pulled porcupine quills out of his mouth with a pair of pliers. The dog always knew he was being helped. He never struggled.

This time, the dog bit.

"Oro!" Drake grabbed the dog at the jaw hinge with his free hand. He brought pressure to bear, paralyzing the muscles, forcing the dog's jaws open. He pulled his hand out and flung the dog away. Oro rolled to his feet and advanced on him again.

"Stand!" Drake shouted. The dog kept coming, edging around to get between the ocean and the man.

Turning, Drake saw the bug emerge from the jungle and creep toward him. His dog had circled around and was trying to drive him toward the bug.

Drake didn't know what was going on, and he decided he'd better not stay to find out. He picked up his knife and threw it at the bug. He missed. The bug was almost within jumping distance.

Drake ran toward the ocean. When Oro tried to intercept him, he kicked the dog out of the way and plunged into the water.

He began to swim around the island to the camp, hoping he'd make it before the sharks got him.

### III.

At the camp, rifles and revolvers were hastily wiped clean of cosmoline and passed around. Binoculars were taken out and adjusted. Cartridges were divided up, and the supply of knives, machetes, and hatchets quickly disappeared. The expedition's two walkie-talkies were unpacked, and the men prepared to move out in search of Drake. Then they saw him, swimming vigorously around the edge of the island.

He waded ashore, tired but uninjured. He and the others put their information together and reached some unhappy conclusions.

"Do you mean to say," Cable demanded, "that a *bug* is doing all this?"

"It looks that way," Sorensen said. "We have to assume that it's able to exercise some kind of thought control. Maybe hypnotic or telepathic."

"It has to sting first," Drake said. "That's what it did with Oro."

"I just can't imagine a scorpion doing all that," Recetich said.

"It's not a scorpion," Drake said. "I saw it close up. It's got a tail like a scorpion, but its head is damn near four times as big, and its body is different. Up close, it doesn't look like anything you ever saw before."

"Do you think it's native to this island?" asked Monty Byrnes, a treasure-seeker from Indianapolis.

"I doubt it," Drake said. "If it is, why did it leave us and the animals alone for three months?"

"That's right," Sorensen said. "All our troubles began just after the schooner came. The schooner must have brought it from somewhere...Hey!"

"What is it?" Drake asked.

"Remember that scorpion the skipper tried to squash? It came out of the detector crate. Do you think it could be the same one?"

Drake shrugged his shoulders. "Could be. Seems to me our problem right now isn't finding out where it came from. We have to figure out what to do about it."

"If it can control animals," Byrnes said, "I wonder if it can control men."

They were all silent. They had moved into a circle near the copra shed, and while they talked they watched the jungle for any sign of insect or animal life.

Sorensen said, "We'd better radio for help."

"If we do that," Recetich said, "somebody's going to find out about the *Santa Teresa* treasure. We'll be overrun in no time."

"Maybe so," Sorensen said. "But at worst, we've cleared expenses. We've even made a small profit."

"And if we don't get help," Drake said, "we may be in no condition to take anything out of here."

"The problem isn't as bad as all that," Byrnes said. "We've got guns. We can take care of the animals."

"You haven't seen the bug yet," Drake said.

"We'll squash it."

"That won't be easy," Drake said. "It's faster than hell. And how are you going to squash it if it comes into your hut some night while you're asleep? We could post guards and they wouldn't even see the thing."

Byrnes shuddered involuntarily. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Maybe we'd better radio for help."

Eakins stood up. "Well, gents," he said, "I guess that means me. I just hope the batteries on the ketch are up to charge."

"It'll be dangerous going out there," Drake said. "We'll draw lots."

Eakins was amused. "We will? How many of you can operate a transmitter?"

Drake said, "I can."

"No offense meant," Eakins said, "but you don't operate that set of yours worth a damn. You don't even know Morse for key transmission. And can you fix the set if it goes out?"

"No," Drake said. "But the whole thing is too risky. We all should go."

Eakins shook his head. "Safest thing all around is if you cover me from the beach. That bug probably hasn't thought about the ketch yet."



Eakins stuck a tool kit in his pocket and strapped one of the camp's walkie-talkies over his shoulder. He handed the other one to Sorensen. He hurried down the beach past the launch and pushed the small dinghy into the water. The men of the expedition spread out, their rifles ready. Eakins got into the dinghy and started rowing across the quiet lagoon.

They saw him tie up to the ketch and pause a moment, looking around. Then he climbed aboard. Quickly he slid back the hatch and went inside.

"Everything all right?" Sorensen asked.

"No trouble yet," Eakins said, his voice sounding thin and sharp over the walkie-talkie. "I'm at the transmitter now, turning it on. It needs a couple of minutes to warm up."

Drake nudged Sorensen. "Look over there."

On the reef, almost hidden by the ketch, something was moving. Using binoculars, Sorensen could see three big gray rats slipping into the water. They began swimming toward the ketch.

"Start firing!" Sorensen said. "Eakins, get out of there!"

"I've got the transmitter going," Eakins said. "I just need a couple of minutes more to get a message off."

Bullets sent up white splashes around the swimming rats. One was hit; the other two managed to put the ketch between them and the riflemen. Studying the reef with his binoculars, Sorensen saw an anteater cross the reef and splash into the water. It was followed by a wild pig.

There was a crackle of static from the walkie-talkie. Sorensen called, "Eakins, have you got the message off?"

"Haven't sent it," Eakins called back. "Listen, Bill. We *mustn't* send any messages! That bug wants — " He stopped abruptly.

"What is it?" Sorensen asked. "What's happening?"

Eakins had appeared on deck, still holding the walkie-talkie. He was backing toward the stern.

"Hermit crabs," he said. "They climbed up the anchor line, I'm going to swim to shore."

"Don't do it," Sorensen said.

"Gotta do it," Eakins said. "They'll probably follow me. All of you come out here and *get that transmitter*. Bring it ashore."

Through his binoculars, Sorensen could see a solid gray carpet of hermit crabs crawling down the deck and waterways of the ketch.



Eakins jumped into the water. He swam furiously toward shore, and Sorenson saw the rats turn and follow him. Hermit crabs swarmed off the boat, and the wild pig and anteater paddled after him, trying to head him off before he reached the beach.

"Come on," Sorensen said. "I don't know what Eakins figured out, but we better get that transmitter while we have a chance."

They ran down the beach and put the launch into the water. Two hundred yards away, Eakins had reached the far edge of the beach with the animals in close pursuit. He broke into the jungle, still clinging to his walkie-talkie.

"Eakins?" Sorensen asked into the walkie-talkie.

"I'm all right," Eakins said, panting hard for air. "Get that transmitter, and don't forget the batteries!"

The men boarded the ketch. Working furiously, they ripped the transmitter off its bulkhead and dragged it up the companionway steps. Drake came last, carrying a twelve-volt battery. He went down again and brought up a second battery. He hesitated a moment, then went below for a third time.

"Drake!" Sorensen shouted. "Quit holding us up!"

Drake reappeared, carrying the ketch's two radio direction finders and the compass. He handed them down and jumped into the launch.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go."

They rowed to the beach. Sorensen was trying to re-establish contact with Eakins on the walkie-talkie, but all he could hear was static. Then, as the launch grounded on the beach, he heard Eakins' voice.

"I'm surrounded," he said, very quietly. "I guess I'll have to see what Mr. Bug wants. Maybe I can swat him first, though."

There was a long silence. Then Eakins said, "It's coming toward me now. Drake was right. It sure isn't like any bug *I've* ever seen. I'm going to swat hell out of —"

They heard him scream, more in surprise than pain.

Sorensen said, "Eakins, can you hear me? Where are you? Can we help?"

"It sure *is* fast," Eakins said, his voice conversational again. "Fastest damned bug I've ever seen. Jumped on my neck, stung me, and jumped off again."

"How do you feel?" Sorensen asked.

"Fine," Eakins said. "Hardly felt the sting."

"Where is the bug now?"

"Back in the bush."

"The animals?"

"They went away. You know," Eakins said, "maybe this thing doesn't work on humans. Maybe —"

"What?" Sorensen asked. "What's happening now?"

There was a long silence. Then Eakins' voice, low-pitched and calm, came over the walkie-talkie.

"We'll speak with you again later," Eakins said. "We must take consultation now and decide what to do with you."

*"Eakins!"*

There was no answer from the other end of the walkie-talkie.

#### IV.

Returning to their camp, the men were in a mood of thorough depression. They couldn't understand what had happened to Eakins and they didn't feel like speculating on it. The ravaging afternoon sun beat down, reflecting heat back from the white sand. The damp jungle steamed, and appeared to creep toward them like a huge and sleepy green dragon, trapping them against the indifferent sea. Gun barrels grew too hot to touch, and the water in the canteens was as warm as blood. Overhead, thick gray cumulus clouds began to pile up; it was the beginning of monsoon season.

Drake sat in the shade of the copra shed. He shook off his lethargy long enough to inspect the camp from the viewpoint of defense. He saw the encircling jungle as enemy territory. In front of it was an area fifty yards deep which they had cleared. This no man's land could perhaps be defended for a while.

Then came the huts and the copra shed, their last line of defense, leading to the beach and the sea.

The expedition had been in complete control of this island for better than three months. Now they were pinned to a small and precarious beachhead.

Drake glanced at the lagoon behind him and remembered that there was still one line of retreat open. If the bug and his damned menagerie pressed too hard, they could still escape in the ketch. With luck.

Sorensen came over and sat down beside him. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Drake grinned sourly. "Planning our master strategy."

"How does it look?"

"I think we can hold out," Drake said. "We've got plenty of ammo. If necessary, we'll interdict the cleared area with gasoline. We certainly aren't going to let that bug push us off the island." He thought for a moment. "But it's going to be damned hard digging for treasure."

Sorensen nodded. "I wonder what the bug wants."

"Maybe we'll find out from Eakins," Drake said.

They had to wait half an hour. Then Eakins' voice came, sharp and shrill over the walkie-talkie.

"Sorensen? Drake?"

"We're here," Drake said. "What did that damned bug do to you?"

"Nothing," Eakins said. "You are talking to that bug now. My name is the Quedak."

"My God," Drake said to Sorensen, "that bug must have hypnotized him!"

"No. You are not speaking to a hypnotized Eakins. Nor are you speaking to a creature who is simply using Eakins as a mouthpiece. Nor are you speaking to the Eakins who was. You are speaking to many individuals who are one."

"I don't get that," Drake said.

"It's very simple," Eakins' voice replied. "I am the Quedak, the totality. But my totality is made up of separate parts, which are Eakins, several rats, a dog named Oro, a pig, an anteater, a cassowary —"

"Hold on," Sorensen said. "Let me get this straight. This is *not* Eakins I'm speaking to. This is the — the Quedak?"

"That is correct."

"And you control Eakins and the others? You speak through Eakins' mouth?"

"Also correct. But that doesn't mean that the personalities of the others are obliterated. Quite the contrary, the Quedak state is a federation in which the various member parts retain their idiosyncrasies, their individual needs and desires. They give their knowledge, their power, their special outlook to the Quedak whole. The Quedak is the coordinating and command center; but the individual parts supply the knowledge, the insights, the special skills. And together we form the Great Cooperation."



"Cooperation?" Drake said. "But you did all this by force!"

"It was necessary in the beginning. Otherwise, how would other creatures have known about the Great Cooperation?"

"Would they stay if you released your control over them?" Drake asked.

"That is a meaningless question. We form a single indivisible entity now. Would your arm return to you if you cut it off?"

"It isn't the same thing."

"It is," Eakins' voice said. "We are a single organism. We are still growing. And we welcome you wholeheartedly into the Great Cooperation."

"To hell with that," Drake said.

"But you must join," the Quedak told them. "It is the Quedak Mission to coordinate all sentient creatures into a single collective organism. Believe me, there is only the most trifling loss of the individuality you prize so highly. And you gain so much more! You learn the viewpoints and special knowledge of all other creatures. Within the Quedak framework you can fully realize your potentialities — "

"No!"

"I am sorry," the Quedak said. "The Quedak Mission must be fulfilled. You will not join us willingly?"

"Never," Drake said.

"Then *we* will join *you*," the Quedak said.

There was a click as he turned off the walkie-talkie.

From the fringe of the jungle, several rats appeared. They hesitated, just out of rifle range. A bird of paradise flew overhead, hovering over the cleared area like an observation plane. As the men watched, the rats began to run forward in long zigzags.

"Start firing," Drake called out. "But go easy on the ammo."

The men began to fire. But it was difficult to sight on the quick-moving rats against the grayish-brown clearing. And almost immediately, the rats were joined by a dozen hermit crabs. They had an uncanny knack for moving when no one was watching them, darting forward, then freezing against the neutral background.

They saw Eakins appear on the fringe of the jungle.

"Lousy traitor," Cable said, raising his rifle.

Sorensen slapped the muzzle of the rifle aside. "Don't do it."

"But he's helping that bug!"

"He can't help it," Sorensen said. "And he's not armed. Leave him alone."



Eakins watched for a few moments, then melted back into the jungle.

The attack by the rats and crabs swept across half of the cleared space. Then, as they came closer, the men were able to pick their targets with more accuracy. Nothing was able to get closer than twenty yards. And when Recetich shot down the bird of paradise, the attack began to falter.

"You know," Drake said, "I think we're going to be all right."

"Could be," said Sorensen. "I don't understand what the Quedak is trying to accomplish. He knows we can't be taken like this. I should think —"

"Hey!" one of the men called out. "Our boat!"

They turned and saw why the Quedak had ordered the attack. While it had occupied their attention, Drake's dog had swum out to the ketch and gnawed through the anchor line. Unattended, the ketch was drifting before the wind, moving toward the end of the reef. They saw it bump gently, then harder. In a moment it was heeled hard over, stuck in the coral.

There was a burst of static from the walkie-talkie. Sorensen held it up and heard the Quedak say, "The ketch isn't seriously damaged. It's simply immobilized."

"The hell you say," Drake growled. "For all you know, it's got a hole punched right through it. How do you plan on getting off the island, Quedak? Or are you just going to stay here?"

"I will leave at the proper time," the Quedak said. "I want to make sure that we all leave together."

## V.

The wind died. Huge gray thunderheads piled up in the sky to the southeast, their tops lost in the upper atmosphere, their black anvil bottoms pressing the hot still air upon the island. The sun had lost its fiery glare. Cherry-red, it slid listlessly toward the flat sea.

High overhead, a single bird of paradise circled, just out of rifle range. It had gone up ten minutes after Recetich had shot the first one down.

Monty Byrnes stood on the edge of the cleared area, his rifle ready. He had drawn the first guard shift. The rest of the men were eating a hasty dinner inside the copra shed. Sorensen and Drake were outside, looking over the situation.

Drake said, "By nightfall we'll have to pull everybody back into the shed. Can't take a chance on being exposed to the Quedak in the dark."

Sorensen nodded. He seemed to have aged ten years in a day's time.

"In the morning," Drake said, "we'll be able to work something out. We'll...What's wrong, Bill?"

"Do you really think we have a chance?" Sorensen asked.

"Sure we do. We've got a damned good chance."

"Be realistic," Sorensen said. "The longer this goes on, the more animals the Quedak can throw against us. What can we do about it?"

"Hunt him out and kill him."

"The damned thing is about the size of your thumb," Sorensen said irritably. "How can we hunt him?"

"We'll figure out something," Drake said. He was beginning to get worried about Sorensen. The morale among the men was low enough without Sorensen pushing it down further.

"I wish someone would shoot that damned bird," Sorensen said, glancing overhead.

About every fifteen minutes, the bird of paradise came darting down for a closer look at the camp. Then, before the guard had a chance to fire, he swept back up to a safe altitude.

"It's getting on my nerves, too," Drake said. "Maybe that's what it's supposed to do. One of these times we'll — "

He stopped abruptly. From the copra shed he could hear the loud hum of a radio. And he heard Al Cable saying, "Hello, hello, this is Vuanu calling. We need help."

Drake and Sorensen went into the shed. Cable was sitting in front of the transmitter, saying into the microphone, "Emergency, emergency, Vuanu calling, we need — "

"What in hell do you think you're doing?" Drake snapped.

Cable turned and looked at him, his pudgy pink body streaked with sweat. "I'm radioing for help, that's what I'm doing. I think I've picked up somebody. But they haven't answered me yet."

He readjusted the tuning. Over the receiver, they could hear a bored British voice saying, "Pawn to queen four, eh? Why don't you ever try a different opening?"

There was a sharp burst of static. "Just move," a deep bass voice answered. "Just shut up and move."

"Sure," said the British voice. "Knight to king bishop three."

Drake recognized the voices. They were ham radio operators. One of them owned a plantation on Bougainville; the other was a shopkeeper in Rabaul. They came on the air for an hour of chess and argument every evening.

Cable tapped the microphone impatiently. "Hello," he said, "this is Vuanu calling, emergency call —"

Drake walked over and took the microphone out of Cable's hand. He put it down carefully.

"We can't call for help," he said.

"What are you talking about?" Cable cried. "We have to!"

Drake felt very tired. "Look, if we send out a distress call, somebody's going to come sailing right in — but they won't be prepared for this kind of trouble. The Quedak will take them over and then use them against us."

"We can explain what the trouble is," Cable said.

"*Explain?* Explain *what?* That a bug is taking over the island? They'd think we were crazy with fever. They'd send in a doctor on the inter-island schooner."

"Dan's right," Sorensen said. "Nobody would believe this without seeing it for himself."

"And by then," Drake said, "it'd be too late. Eakins figured it out before the Quedak got him. That's why he told us not to send any messages."

Cable looked dubious. "But why did he want us to take the transmitter?"

"So that *he* couldn't send any messages after the bug got him," Drake said. "The more people trampling around, the easier it would be for the Quedak. If he had possession of the transmitter, he'd be calling for help right now."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Cable said unhappily. "But, damn it, we can't handle this *alone*."

"We have to. If the Quedak ever gets us and then gets off the island, that's it for Earth. Period. There won't be any big war, no hydrogen bombs or fallout, no heroic little resistance groups. Everybody will become part of the Quedak Cooperation."

"We ought to get help somehow," Cable said stubbornly. "We're alone, isolated. Suppose we ask for a ship to stand offshore —"

"It won't work," Drake said. "Besides, we couldn't ask for help even if we wanted to."



"Why not?"

"Because the transmitter's not working," Drake said. "You've been talking into a dead mike."

"It's receiving okay," Cable said.

Drake checked to see if all the switches were on. "Nothing wrong with the receiver. But we must have joggled something taking the transmitter out of the ship. It isn't working."

Cable tapped the dead microphone several times, then put it down. They stood around the receiver, listening to the chess game between the man in Rabaul and the man in Bougainville.

"Pawn to queen bishop four."

"Pawn to king three."

"Knight to queen bishop three."

There was a sudden staccato burst of static. It faded, then came again in three distinct bursts.

"What do you suppose that is?" Sorensen asked.

Drake shrugged his shoulders. "Could be anything. Storm's shaping up and —"

He stopped. He had been standing beside the door of the shed. As the static crackled, he saw the bird of paradise dive for a closer look. The static stopped when the bird returned to its slow-circling higher altitude.

"That's strange," Drake said. "Did you see that, Bill? The bird came down and the static went on at the same time."

"I saw it," Sorensen said. "Think it means anything?"

"I don't know. Let's see." Drake took out his field glasses. He turned up the volume of the receiver and stepped outside where he could observe the jungle. He waited, hearing the sounds of the chess game three or four hundred miles away.

"Come on, now, move."

"Give me a minute."

"A minute? Listen, I can't stand in front of this bleeding set all night. Make your —"

Static crackled sharply. Drake saw four wild pigs come trotting out of the jungle, moving slowly, like a reconnaissance squad probing for weak spots in an enemy position. They stopped; the static stopped. Byrnes, standing guard with his rifle, took a snap shot at them. The pigs turned, and static crackled as they moved back into the jungle. There was more static as the bird of paradise swept down



for a look, then climbed out of range. After that, the static stopped.

Drake put down his binoculars and went back inside the shed. "That must be it," he said. "The static is related to the Quedak. I think it comes when he's operating the animals."

"You mean he has some sort of radio control over them?" Sorensen asked.

"Seems like it," Drake said. "Either radio control or something propagated along a radio wave-length."

"If that's the case," Sorensen said, "he's like a little radio station, isn't he?"

"Sure he is. So what?"

"Then we should be able to locate him on a radio direction finder," Sorensen said.

Drake nodded emphatically. He snapped off the receiver, went to a corner of the shed and took out one of their portable direction finders. He set it to the frequency at which Cable had picked up the Rabaul-Bougainville broadcast. Then he turned it on and walked to the door.

The men watched while Drake rotated the loop antenna. He located the maximum signal, then turned the loop slowly, read the bearing and converted it to a compass course. Then he sat down with a small-scale chart of the Southwest Pacific.

"Well," Sorensen asked, "is it the Quedak?"

"It's got to be," said Drake. "I located a good null almost due south. That's straight ahead in the jungle."

"You're sure it isn't a reciprocal bearing?"

"I checked that out."

"Is there any chance the signal comes from some other station?"

"Nope. Due south, the next station is Sydney, and that's seventeen hundred miles away. Much too far for this RDF. It's the Quedak, all right."

"So we have a way of locating him," Sorensen said. "Two men with direction finders can go into the jungle —"

"— and get themselves killed," Drake said. "We can position the Quedak with RDFs, but his animals can locate us a lot faster. We wouldn't have a chance in the jungle."

Sorensen looked crestfallen. "Then we're no better off than before."

"We're a lot better off," Drake said. "We have a chance now."

"What makes you think so?"

"He controls the animals by radio," Drake said. "We know the frequency he operates on. We can broadcast on the same frequency. We can jam his signal."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Am I *sure*? Of course not. But I do know that two stations in the same area can't broadcast over the same frequency. If we tuned in to the frequency the Quedak uses, made enough noise to override his signal —"

"I see," Sorensen said. "Maybe it would work! If we could interfere with his signal, he wouldn't be able to control the animals. And then we could hunt him down with the RDFs."

"That's the idea," Drake said. "It has only one small flaw — our transmitter isn't working. With no transmitter, we can't do any broadcasting. No broadcasting, no jamming."

"Can you fix it?" Sorensen asked.

"I'll try," Drake said. "But we'd better not hope for too much. Eakins was the radio man on this expedition."

"We've got all the spare parts," Sorensen said. "Tubes, manual, everything."

"I know. Give me enough time and I'll figure out what's wrong. The question is, how much time is the Quedak going to give us?"

The bright copper disk of the sun was half submerged in the sea. Sunset colors touched the massing thunderheads and faded into the brief tropical twilight. The men began to barricade the copra shed for the night.

## VI.

Drake removed the back from the transmitter and scowled at the compact mass of tubes and wiring. Those metal box-like things were probably condensers, and the waxy cylindrical gadgets might or might not be resistors. It all looked hopelessly complicated, ridiculously dense and delicate. Where should he begin?

He turned on the set and waited a few minutes. All the tubes appeared to go on, some dim, some bright. He couldn't detect any loose wires. The mike was still dead.

So much for the visual inspection. Next question: was the set getting enough juice?

He turned it off and checked the battery cells with a voltmeter. The batteries were up to charge. He removed the leads, scraped them

and put them back on, making sure they fit snugly. He checked all connections, murmured a propitiatory prayer, and turned the set on.

It still didn't work.

Cursing, he turned it off again. He decided to replace all the tubes, starting with the dim ones. If that didn't work, he could try replacing condensers and resistors. If that didn't work, he could always shoot himself. With this cheerful thought, he opened the parts kit and went to work.

The men were all inside the copra shed, finishing the job of barricading it for the night. The door was wedged shut and locked. The two windows had to be kept open for ventilation; otherwise everyone would suffocate in the heat. But a double layer of heavy mosquito netting was nailed over each window, and a guard was posted beside it.

Nothing could get through the flat galvanized-iron roof. The floor was of pounded earth, a possible danger point. All they could do was keep watch over it.

The treasure-hunters settled down for a long night. Drake, with a handkerchief tied around his forehead to keep the perspiration out of his eyes, continued working on the transmitter.

An hour later, there was a buzz on the walkie-talkie. Sorensen picked it up and said, "What do you want?"

"I want you to end this senseless resistance," said the Quedak, speaking with Eakins' voice. "You've had enough time to think over the situation. I want you to join me. Surely you can see there's no other way."

"We don't want to join you," Sorensen said.

"You must," the Quedak told him.

"Are you going to make us?"

"That poses problems," the Quedak said. "My animal parts are not suitable for coercion. Eakins is an excellent mechanism, but there is only one of him. And I must not expose myself to unnecessary danger. By doing so I would endanger the Quedak mission."

"So it's a stalemate," Sorensen said.

"No. I am faced with difficulty in taking you over. There is no problem in killing you."

The men shifted uneasily. Drake, working on the transmitter, didn't look up.

"I would rather *not* kill you," the Quedak said. "But the Quedak Mission is of primary importance. It would be endangered if you



didn't join. It would be seriously compromised if you left the island. So you must either join or be killed."

"That's not the way I see it," Sorensen said. "If you killed us — assuming that you can — you'd never get off this island. Eakins can't handle that ketch."

"There would be no need to leave in the ketch," the Quedak said. "In six months, the inter-island schooner will return. Eakins and I will leave then. The rest of you will have died."

"You're bluffing," Sorensen said. "What makes you think you could kill us? You didn't do so well today." He caught Drake's attention and gestured at the radio. Drake shrugged his shoulders and went back to work.

"I wasn't trying," the Quedak said. "The time for that was at night. *This* night, before you have a chance to work out a better system of defense. You must join me tonight or I will kill one of you."

"One of us?"

"Yes. One man an hour. In that way, perhaps the survivors will change their minds about joining. But if they don't, all of you will be dead by morning."

Drake leaned over and whispered to Sorensen, "Stall him. Give me another ten minutes. I think I've found the trouble."

Sorensen said into the walkie-talkie, "We'd like to know a little more about the Quedak Cooperation."

"You can find out best by joining."

"We'd rather have a little more information on it first."

"It is an indescribable state," the Quedak said in an urgent, earnest, eager voice. "Can you imagine yourself as *yourself* and yet experiencing an entirely new series of sensory networks? You would, for example, experience the world through the perceptors of a dog as he goes through the forest following an odor which to him — and to you — is as clear and vivid as a painted line. A hermit crab senses things differently. From him you experience the slow interaction of life at the margin of sea and land. His time-sense is very slow, unlike that of a bird of paradise, whose viewpoint is spatial, rapid, cursory. And there are many others, above and below the earth and water, who furnish their own specialized viewpoints of reality. Their outlooks, I have found, are not essentially different from those of the animals that once inhabited Mars."

"What happened on Mars?" Sorensen asked.



"All life died," the Quedak mourned. "All except the Quedak. It happened a long time ago. For centuries there was peace and prosperity on the planet. Everything and everyone was part of the Quedak Cooperation. But the dominant race was basically weak. Their breeding rate went down; catastrophes happened. And finally there was no more life except the Quedak."

"Sounds great," Sorensen said ironically.

"It was the fault of the race," the Quedak protested. "With sturdier stock — such as you have on this planet — the will to live will remain intact. The peace and prosperity will continue indefinitely."

"I don't believe it. What happened on Mars will happen on Earth if you take over. After a while, slaves just don't care very strongly about living."

"You wouldn't be slaves. You would be functional parts of the Quedak Cooperation."

"Which would be run by you," Sorensen said. "Any way you slice it, it's the same old pie."

"You don't know what you're talking about," the Quedak said. "We have talked long enough. I am prepared to kill one man in the next five minutes. Are you or are you not going to join me?" Sorensen looked at Drake. Drake turned on the transmitter.

Gusts of rain splattered on the roof while the transmitter warmed up. Drake lifted the microphone and tapped it, and was able to hear the sound in the speaker.

"It's working," he said.

At that moment something flew against the netting-covered window. The netting sagged; a fruit bat was entangled in it, glaring at them with tiny red-rimmed eyes.

"Get some boards over that window!" Sorensen shouted.

As he spoke, a second bat hurtled into the netting, broke through it and tumbled to the floor. The men clubbed it to death, but four more bats flew in through the open window. Drake flailed at them, but he couldn't drive them away from the transmitter. They were diving at his eyes, and he was forced back. A wild blow caught one bat and knocked it to the floor with a broken wing. Then the others had reached the transmitter.

They pushed it off the table. Drake tried to catch the set, and failed. He heard the glass tubes shattering, but by then he was busy protecting his eyes.

In a few minutes they had killed two more bats, and the others had fled out the window. The men nailed boards over both windows, and Drake bent to examine the transmitter.

"Any chance of fixing it?" Sorensen asked.

"Not a hope," Drake said. "They ripped out the wiring while they were at it."

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know."

Then the Quedak spoke to them over the walkie-talkie. "I must have your answer right now."

Nobody said a word.

"In that case," the Quedak said, "I'm deeply sorry that one of you must die now."

## VII.

Rain pelted the iron roof and the gusts of wind increased in intensity. There were rumbles of distant thunder. But within the copra shed, the air was hot and still. The gasoline lantern hanging from the center beam threw a harsh yellow light that illuminated the center of the room but left the corners in deep shadow. The treasure-hunters had moved away from the walls. They were all in the center of the room facing outward, and they made Drake think of a herd of buffalo drawn up against a wolf they could smell but could not see.

Cable said, "Listen, maybe we should try this Quedak Cooperation. Maybe it isn't so bad as —"

"Shut up," Drake said.

"Be reasonable," Cable argued. "It's better than dying, isn't it?"

"No one's dying yet," Drake said. "Just shut up and keep your eyes open."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Cable said. "Dan, let me out."

"Be sick where you are," Drake said. "Just keep your eyes open."

"You can't give me orders," Cable said. He started toward the door. Then he jumped back.

A yellowish scorpion had crept under the inch of clearance between the door and the floor. Recetich stamped on it, smashing it to pulp under his heavy boots. Then he whirled, swinging at three hornets which had come at him through the boarded windows.

"Forget the hornets!" Drake shouted. "Keep watching the ground!"

There was movement on the floor. Several hairy spiders crawled out of the shadows. Drake and Recetich beat at them with rifle butts. Byrnes saw something crawling under the door. It looked like some kind of huge flat centipede. He stamped at it, missed, and the centipede was on his boot, past it, on the flesh of his leg. He screamed; it felt like a ribbon of molten metal. He was able to smash it flat before he passed out.

Drake checked the wound and decided it was not fatal. He stamped on another spider, then felt Sorensen's hand clutching his shoulder. He looked toward the corner Sorensen was pointing at.

Sliding toward them were two large, dark-coated snakes. Drake recognized them as black adders. These normally shy creatures were coming forward like tigers.

The men panicked, trying to get away from the snakes. Drake pulled out his revolver and dropped to one knee, ignoring the hornets that buzzed around him, trying to draw a bead on the slender serpentine targets in the swaying yellow light.

Thunder roared directly overhead. A long flash of lightning suddenly flooded the room, spoiling his aim. Drake fired and missed, and waited for the snakes to strike.

They didn't strike. They were moving away from him, retreating to the rat hole from which they had emerged. One of the adders slid quickly through. The other began to follow, then stopped, half in the hole.

Sorensen took careful aim with a rifle. Drake pushed the muzzle aside. "Wait just a moment."

The adder hesitated. It came out of the hole and began to move toward them again...

And there was another crash of thunder and a vivid splash of lightning. The snake turned away and squirmed through the hole.

"What's going on?" Sorensen asked. "Is the thunder frightening them?"

"No, it's the lighting!" Drake said. "That's why the Quedak was in such a rush. He saw that a storm was coming, and he hadn't consolidated his position yet."

"What are you talking about?"

"The lightning," Drake said. "The electrical storm! It's jamming that radio control of his! And when he's jammed, the beasts revert to normal behavior. It takes him time to re-establish control."



"The storm won't last forever," Cable said.

"But maybe it'll last long enough," Drake said. He picked up the direction finders and handed one to Sorensen. "Come on, Bill. We'll hunt out that bug right now."

"Hey," Recetich said, "isn't there something I can do?"

"You can start swimming if we don't come back in an hour," Drake said.

In slanting lines the rain drove down, pushed by the wild southwest wind. Thunder rolled continually and each flash of lightning seemed aimed at him. Drake and Sorensen reached the edge of the jungle and stopped.

"We'll separate here," Drake said. "Gives us a better chance of converging on him."

"Right," Sorensen said. "Take care of yourself, Dan."

Sorensen plunged into the jungle. Drake trotted fifty yards down the fringe and then entered the bush.

He pushed forward, the revolver in his belt, the radio direction finder in one hand, a flashlight in the other. The jungle seemed to be animated by a vicious life of its own, almost as if the Quedak controlled it. Vines curled cunningly toward him. Every branch took a special delight in slapping his face.

Each time the lightning flashed, Drake's direction finder tried to home on it. He was having a difficult time staying on course. But, he reminded himself, the Quedak was undoubtedly having an even more difficult time. Between flashes, he was able to set a course. The further he penetrated the jungle, the stronger the signal became.

After a while he noticed that the flashes of lightning were spaced more widely apart. The storm was moving on toward the north, leaving the island behind. How much longer would he have the protection of the lightning? Another ten or fifteen minutes?

He heard something whimper. He swung his flashlight around and saw his dog, Oro, coming toward him.

His dog — or the Quedak's dog?

"Hey, there, boy," Drake said. He wondered if he should drop the direction finder and get the revolver out of his belt. He wondered if the revolver would still work after such a thorough soaking.

Oro came up and licked his hand. He was Drake's dog, at least for the duration of the storm.



They moved on together, and the thunder rumbled distantly in the north. The signal on his RDF was very strong now. Somewhere around here...

He saw light from another flashlight. Sorensen, badly out of breath, had joined him. The jungle had ripped and clawed at him, but he still had his rifle, flashlight, and direction finder.

Oro was scratching furiously at a bush. There was a long flash of lightning, and in it they saw the Quedak.

Drake realized, in those final moments, that the rain had stopped. The lightning had stopped, too. He dropped the direction finder. With the flashlight in one hand and his revolver in the other, he tried to take aim at the Quedak, who was moving, who had jumped —

To Sorensen's neck, just above the right collarbone.

Sorensen raised his hands, then lowered them again. He turned toward Drake, raising his rifle. His face was perfectly calm. He looked as though his only purpose in life was to kill Drake.

Drake fired from less than two feet away. Sorensen spun with the impact, dropped his rifle, and fell.

Drake bent over him, his revolver ready. He saw that he had fired accurately. The bullet had gone in just above the right collarbone. It was a bad wound. But it had been much worse for the Quedak, who had been in the direct path of the bullet. All that was left of the Quedak was a splatter of black across Sorensen's chest.

Drake applied hasty first aid and hoisted Sorensen to his shoulders. He wondered what he would have done if the Quedak had been standing above Sorensen's heart, or on his throat, or on his head.

He decided it was better not to think about that.

He started back to camp, with his dog trotting along beside him.

# POTENTIAL

He returned to consciousness slowly, aware of aches and bruises, and an agonizing knot in his stomach. Experimentally, he stretched his legs.

They didn't touch anything, and he realized that his body was unsupported. He was dead, he thought. Floating free in space —

Floating? He opened his eyes. Yes, he was floating. Above him was a ceiling — or was it a floor? He resisted a strong urge to scream; blinked, and his surroundings swam into focus.

He realized that he was in a spaceship. The cabin was a shambles. Boxes and equipment drifted around him, evidently ripped loose from their moorings by some sudden strain. Burnt-out wires ran across the floor. A row of lockers along one wall had been fused into slag.

He stared, but no recognition came. As far as he knew, he was seeing this for the first time. He raised a hand and pushed against the ceiling, drifted down, pushed again, and managed to grasp a wall rail. Holding this tightly, he tried to think.

"There is a logical explanation for all this," he said aloud, just to hear his own voice. "All I have to do is remember." Remember —

What was his name?

He didn't know.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Is there anyone here?" His words echoed between the ship's narrow walls. There was no answer.

He propelled himself across the cabin, ducking to miss the floating boxes. In half an hour he knew he was the only person aboard the ship.

He pushed himself back to the front of the ship. There was a padded chair there, with a long panel in front of it. He strapped himself into the chair and studied the panel.

It consisted of two blank screens, one much larger than the other. Under the large screen were two buttons, marked *vision-front*, and *vision-back*. A dial beneath the buttons was calibrated for focus. The small screen was unmarked.

Not finding any other controls, he pushed the *vision-front* button. The screen cleared, showing black space with the brilliant points of the stars before him. He stared at it for a long time, open-mouthed, then turned away.

The first thing to do, he told himself, was to assemble all the knowledge at his disposal and see what he could deduce from it.

"I am a man," he said. "I am in a spaceship, in space. I know what stars are, and what planets are. Let me see — " He had a rudimentary knowledge of astronomy, less of physics and chemistry. He remembered some English literature, although he couldn't think of any writers except Traudzel, a popular novelist. He remembered the authors of several history books, but couldn't place their contents.

He knew the name for what he had: amnesia.

Suddenly, he had a great desire to see himself, to look at his own face. Surely, recognition and memory would follow. He shoved himself across the room again, and started searching for a mirror.

There were lockers built into the walls, and he opened them hastily, spilling the contents into the weightless air. In the third locker he found a shaving kit and a small steel mirror. He studied the reflection anxiously.

A long irregular face, drained of color. Dark stubble growing on the chin. Bloodless lips.

The face of a stranger.

He fought down fresh panic and searched the cabin, looking for some clue to his identity. Quickly he pawed through the floating boxes, shoving them aside when they proved to contain nothing but food or water. He looked on.

Floating in one corner of the cabin was a sheet of scorched paper. He seized it.

"Dear Ran," it began. "The biochem boys have been doing some hurry-hurry last-minute checking on the pento. Seems there's a strong chance it might induce amnesia. Something about the strength of the drug, plus the near-traumatic experience you're undergoing,

whether you're aware of it or not. *Now* they tell us! Anyhow, I'm dashing off this note at zero minus fourteen minutes, just as a refresher for you in case they're right.

"First, don't look for any controls. Everything's automatic, or it should be if this pile of cardboard and glue holds together. (Don't blame the technicians; they had practically no time to get it finished and away before flash moment).

"Your course is set for automatic planetary selection, so just sit tight. I don't suppose you could forget Marselli's theorem, but in case you have, don't worry about landing among some eighteen-headed intelligent centipedes. You'll reach humanoid life because it *has* to be humanoid life.

"You may be a bit battered after blastoff, but the pento will pull you through. If the cabin is messy, it's because we just didn't have time to check everything for stress-strain tolerances.

"Now for the mission. Go at once to Projector One in Locker Fifteen. The projector is set for self-destruction after one viewing, so make sure you understand it. The mission is of ultimate importance, Doc, and every man and woman on Earth is with you. Don't let us down."

Someone named Fred Anderson had signed it.

Ran — automatically using the name given in the letter — started looking for Locker Fifteen. He found at once where it had been. Lockers Eleven through Twenty-five were fused and melted. Their contents were destroyed.

That was that. Only the scorched paper linked him now with his past, his friends, all Earth. Even though his memory was gone, it was a relief to know that the amnesia had an explanation.

But what did it mean? Why had they thrown the ship together in such a rush? Why had they placed him in it — alone — and sent him out? And this all-important mission — if it was so vital, why hadn't they safeguarded it better?

The note raised more questions than it answered. Frowning, Ran pushed himself back to the panel. He looked out the screen again, at the spectacle of the stars, trying to reason it out.

Perhaps there was a disease. He was the only person not infected. They had built the ship and shot him out to space. The mission? To contact another planet, find an antidote, and bring it back —



Ridiculous.

He looked over the panel again, and pushed the button for *vision-rear*.

And almost fainted.

A glaring, blinding light filled the entire screen, scorching his eyes. Hastily he cut down the field of focus, until he was able to make out what it was.

A nova. And the letter had mentioned the flash-moment.

Ran knew that Sol was the nova. And that Earth was consumed.

There was no clock on the ship, so Dr. Ran had no idea how long he had been traveling. For a long time he just drifted around dazed, coming back to the screen constantly.

The nova dwindled as the ship speeded on.

Ran ate and slept. He wandered around the ship, examining, searching. The floating boxes were in the way, so he started to pull them down and secure them.

Days might have passed, or weeks.

After a while, Ran started to put the facts he knew into a coherent structure. There were gaps and questions in it, probably untruths as well, but it was a beginning.

He had been chosen to go in the spaceship. Not as a pilot, since the ship was automatic, but for some other reason. The letter had called him "Doc." It might have something to do with his being a doctor.

Doctor of what? He didn't know.

The makers of the ship had known Sol was going nova. They couldn't, evidently, rescue any sizable portion of Earth's population. Instead, they had sacrificed themselves and everyone else to make sure of rescuing him.

Why him?

He was expected to do a job of the greatest importance. So important that everyone had been subordinated to it. So important that the destruction of Earth itself seemed secondary, as long as the mission was accomplished.

What could that mission be?

Dr. Ran couldn't conceive of anything so important. But he had no other theory that came even close to fitting the facts as he knew them.

He tried to attack the problem from another viewpoint. What would he do, he asked himself, if he knew that Sol was going nova in a short time, and he could rescue only a limited number of people with a certainty of success?

He would have sent out couples, at least one couple, in an attempt to perpetuate human stock.

But evidently the leaders of Earth hadn't seen it that way.

After a time, the small screen flashed into life. It read: *Planet. Contact 100 hours.*

He sat in front of the panel and watched. After a long time the digits changed. *Contact 99 hours.*

He had plenty of time. He ate, and went back to work getting the ship into what order he could.

While he was storing boxes in the remaining lockers, he found a carefully packaged and fastened machine. He recognized it as a projector at once. On its side was engraved a large "2."

A spare, he thought, his heart pounding violently. Why hadn't he thought of that? He looked into the viewer and pushed the button.

The film took over an hour. It started with a poetic survey of Earth; flashes of her cities, fields, forests, rivers, oceans. Her people, her animals, all in brief vignettes. There was no sound track.

The camera moved to an observatory, explaining its purpose visually. It showed the discovery of the Sun's instability, the faces of the astrophysicists who had discovered it.

Then the race against time began, and the rapid growth of the ship. He saw himself, running up to it, grinning at the camera, shaking someone's hand, and disappearing inside. The film stopped there. They must have stored the camera, given him the injection, and sent him off.

Another reel started.

"Hello, Ran," a voice said. The picture showed a large calm man in a business suit. He looked directly at Ran out of the screen.

"I couldn't resist this opportunity to speak to you again, Dr. Ellis. You're deep in space now, and you've undoubtedly seen the nova that has consumed Earth. You're lonely, I dare say.

"Don't be, Ran. As representative of Earth's peoples, I'm taking this final chance to wish you luck in your great mission. I don't have to tell you that we're all with you. Don't feel alone.

"You have, of course, seen the film in Projector One, and have a thorough understanding of your mission. This portion of film — with my face and voice on it — will be automatically destroyed, in the same way. Naturally, we can't let extraterrestrials in on our little secret yet.

"They'll find out soon enough. You can feel free to explain anything on the remainder of this film to them. It should win you plenty of sympathy. Make no reference, of course, to the great discovery or the techniques that stemmed from it. If they want the faster-than-light drive, tell them the truth — that you don't know how it's propagated, since it was developed only a year or so before Sol went nova. Tell them that any tampering with the ship will cause the engines to dissolve.

"Good luck, doctor. And good hunting." The face faded and the machine hummed louder, destroying the last reel.

He put the projector carefully back in its case, tied it into the locker, and went back to the control panel.

The screen read: *Contact 97 hours.*

He sat down and tried to place the new facts into his structure. As background, he remembered vaguely the great, peaceful civilization of Earth. They had been almost ready to go for the stars when the Sun's instability was found. The faster-than-light drive had been developed too late.

Against that background he had been selected to man the escape ship. Only him, for some unfathomable reason. The job given him was thought more important, evidently, than any attempts at race-survival.

He was to make contact with intelligent life, and tell them about Earth. But he was to withhold any mention of the greatest discovery and its resulting techniques.

Whatever they were.

And then he was to perform his mission —

He felt as though he could burst. He couldn't remember. *Why* hadn't the fools engraved his instructions on bronze?

*What could it be?*

The screen read, *Contact 96 hours.*

Dr. Ran Ellis strapped himself into the pilot chair and cried from sheer frustration.

\* \* \*

The great ship looked, probed, and reported. The small screen flashed into life. *Atmosphere-chlorine. Life-nonexistent.* The data was fed to the ship's selectors. Circuits closed, other circuits opened. A new course was set up, and the ship speeded on.

Dr. Ellis ate and slept and thought.

Another planet was reported, examined, and rejected.

Dr. Ellis continued thinking, and made one unimportant discovery.

He had a photographic memory. He discovered this by thinking back over the film. He could remember every detail of the hour-long spectacle, every face, every movement.

He tested himself as the ship went on, and found that the ability was a constant. It worried him for a while, until he realized that it was probably a factor in his selection. A photographic memory would be quite an asset in learning a new language.

Quite an irony, he thought. Perfect retention — but no memory.

A third planet was rejected.

Ellis outlined the possibilities he could think of, in an effort to discover the nature of his mission.

To erect a shrine to Earth? Possibly. But why the urgency, then, the stressed importance?

Perhaps he was sent out as a teacher. Earth's last gesture, to instruct some inhabited planet in the ways of peace and cooperation.

Why send a doctor on a job like that? Besides, it was illogical. People learn over millennia, not in a few years. And it just didn't fit the *mood* of the two messages. Both the man in the film and the note-writer had seemed practical men. It was impossible to think of either of them as altruists.

A fourth planet came into range, was checked and left behind.

And what, he wondered, was the "great discovery"? If not the faster-than-light drive, what could it be? More than likely a philosophical discovery. The way man could live in peace, or something like that.

Then why wasn't he supposed to mention it?

A screen flashed, showing the oxygen content of the fifth planet. Ellis ignored it, then looked up as generators deep in the body of the ship hummed into life.



*Prepare for landing*, the screen told him.

His heart leaped convulsively, and Ellis had a momentary difficulty breathing.

This was it. A terror filled him as gravitation tugged at the ship. He fought it, but the terror increased. He screamed and tore at his straps as the ship started to go perceptibly *down*.

On the big screen was the blue and green of an oxygen planet.

Then Ellis remembered something. "The emergence from deep space into a planetary system is analogous to the emergent birth-trauma." A common reaction, he told himself, but an easily controllable one for a psychiatrist —

A psychiatrist!

Dr. Randolph Ellis, psychiatrist. He knew what kind of doctor he was. He searched his mind for more information, fruitlessly. That was as far as it went.

Why had Earth sent a psychiatrist into space?

He blacked out as the ship screamed into the atmosphere.

Ellis recovered almost at once as the ship landed itself. Unstrapping, he switched on the vision-ports. There were vehicles coming toward the ship, filled with people.

Human-appearing people.

He had to make a decision now, one that would affect the rest of his time on this planet. What was he going to do? What would his course of action be?

Ellis thought for a moment, then decided he would have to play by ear. He would extemporize. No communication would be possible until he had learned the language. After that, he would say that he was sent from Earth to...to....

What?

He would decide when the time came. Glancing at the screens, he saw that the atmosphere was breathable.

The side of the ship swung open, and Ellis walked out.

He had landed on a subcontinent called Krel, and the inhabitants were Krelans. Politically, the planet had reached the world-government stage, but so recently that the inhabitants still were identified with the older political divisions.

With his photographic memory Ellis found no difficulty learning the Krelan language, once a common basis had been established

for key words. The people, of the common root Man, seemed no more foreign than some members of his own race. Ellis knew that this eventuality had been predicted. The ship would have rejected any other. The more he thought of it, the more he was certain that the mission depended on this similarity.

Ellis learned and observed, and thought. He was due, as soon as he had mastered the tongue sufficiently, to meet the ruling council. This was a meeting he dreaded, and put off as long as he could.

Nevertheless, the time came.

He was ushered through the halls of the Council Building, to the door of the Main Council Room. He walked in with the projector under his arm.

"You are most welcome, sir," the leader of the council said. Ellis returned the salutation and presented his films. There was no discussion until everyone had seen them.

"Then you are the last representative of your race?" the council leader asked. Ellis nodded, looking at the kindly, seamed old face.

"Why did your people send only you?" another council member asked. "Why weren't a man and woman sent?" The same question, Ellis thought, that I've been asking myself.

"It would be impossible," he told them, "for me to explain the psychology of my race in a few words. Our decision was contained in our very sense of being." A meaningless lie, he thought to himself. But what else could he say?

"You will have to explain the psychology of your race sometime," the man said.

Ellis nodded, looking over the faces of the council. He was able to estimate the effect of the beautifully prepared film on them; they were going to be pleasant to this last representative of a great race.

"We are very interested in your faster-than-light drive," another council member said. "Could you help us attain that?"

"I'm afraid not," Ellis said. From what he had learned, he knew that their technology was pre-atomic, several centuries behind Earth's.

"I am not a scientist. I have no knowledge of the drive. It was a late development."

"We could examine it ourselves," a man said.

"I don't think that would be wise," Ellis told him. "My people consider it inadvisable to give a planet technological products beyond their level of attainment." So much for theory. "The engines will overload if tampered with."

"You say you are not a scientist," the old leader asked pleasantly, changing the subject. "If I may ask, what are you?"

"A psychiatrist," Ellis said.

They talked for hours. Ellis dodged and faked and invented, trying to fill the gaps in his knowledge. The council wanted to know about all phases of life on Earth, all the details of technological and social advances. They wondered about Earth's method of pre-nova detection. And why had he decided to come here? And finally, in view of coming alone, was his race suicidally inclined?

"We will wish to ask you more in the future," the old council leader said, ending the session.

"I shall be happy to answer anything in my power," Ellis said.

"That doesn't seem to be much," a member said.

"Now Elgg — remember the shock this man has been through," the council leader said. "His entire race has been destroyed. I do not believe we are being hospitable." He turned to Ellis.

"Sir, you have helped us immeasurably as it is. For example, now we know the possibility of controlled atomic power, we can direct research toward that goal. Of course, you will be reimbursed by the state. What would you like to do?"

Ellis hesitated, wondering what he should say.

"Would you like to head a museum project for Earth? A monument to your great people?"

Was that his mission, Ellis wondered? He shook his head.

"I am a doctor, sir. A psychiatrist. Perhaps I could help in that respect."

"But you don't know our people," the old leader said concernedly. "It would take you a lifetime to learn the nature of our tensions and problems. To learn them in sufficient intimacy to enable you to practice."

"True," Ellis said. "But our races *are* alike. Our civilizations have taken like courses. Since I represent a more advanced psychological tradition, my methods might be of help to your doctors —"

"Of course, Dr. Ellis. I must not make the mistake of underestimating a species that has crossed the stars." The old leader smiled ruefully. "I myself will introduce you to the head of one of our hospitals." The leader stood up.

"If you will come with me."

Ellis followed, with his heart pounding. His mission must have something to do with psychiatry. Why else send a psychiatrist?



But he still didn't know what he was supposed to do.

And to make it worse, he could remember practically none of his psychiatric background.

"I think that takes care of all the testing apparatus," the doctor said, looking at Ellis from behind steel-rimmed glasses. He was young, moon-faced, and eager to learn from the older civilization of Earth.

"Can you suggest any improvements?" he asked.

"I'll have to look over the setup more closely," Ellis said, following the doctor down a long, pale-blue corridor. The testing apparatus had struck a complete blank.

"I don't have to tell you how eager I am for this opportunity," the doctor said. "I have no doubt that you Terrans were able to discover many of the secrets of the mind."

"Oh, yes," Ellis said.

"Down this way we have the wards," the doctor said. "Would you care to see them?"

"Fine." Ellis followed the doctor, biting his lip angrily. His memory was still gone. He had no more psychiatric knowledge than a poorly informed layman. Unless something happened soon, he would be forced to admit his amnesia.

"In this room," the doctor said, "we have several quiet cases." Ellis followed him in, and looked at the dull, lifeless faces of three patients.

"Catatonic," the doctor said, pointing to the first man. "I don't suppose you have a cure for that?" He smiled good-naturedly.

Ellis didn't answer. Another memory had popped into his mind. It was just a few lines of conversation.

"But it is ethical?" he had asked. In a room like this, on Earth.

"Of course," someone had answered. "We won't tamper with the normals. But the idiots, the criminally insane — the psychotics who could never use their minds anyhow — it isn't as though we were robbing them of anything. It's a mercy, really —"

Just that much. He didn't know to whom he had been talking. Another doctor, probably. They had been discussing some new method of dealing with defectives. A new cure? It seemed possible. A drastic one, from the content.

"Have you found a cure for it?" the moon-faced doctor asked again.



"Yes. Yes, we have," Ellis said, taking his nerve in both hands. The doctor stepped back and stared.

"But you couldn't! You can't repair a brain where there's organic damage — deterioration, or lack of development — " He checked himself.

"But listen to *me*, telling *you*. Go ahead, doctor."

Ellis looked at the man in the first bed. "Get me some assistants, doctor." The doctor hesitated, then hurried out of the room.

Ellis bent over the catatonic and looked at his face. He wasn't sure of what he was doing, but he reached out and touched the man's forehead with his finger.

Something in Ellis's mind clicked.

The catatonic collapsed.

Ellis waited, but nothing seemed to be happening. He walked over to the second patient and repeated the operation.

That one collapsed also, and the one after him.

The doctor came back, with two wide-eyed helpers. "What's happening here?" he asked. "What have you done?"

"I don't know if our methods will work on your people," Ellis bluffed. "Please leave me alone — completely alone for a little while. The concentration necessary — "

The doctor started to say something, changed his mind and left quietly, taking the assistants with him.

Sweating, Ellis examined the pulse of the first man. It was still beating. He straightened and started to pace the room.

He had a power of some sort. He could knock a psychotic flat on his back. Fine. Nerves — connections. He wished he could remember how many nerve connections there were in the human brain. Some fantastic number; ten to the twenty-fifth to the tenth? No, that didn't seem right. But a fantastic number.

What did it matter? It mattered, he was certain.

The first man groaned and sat up. Ellis walked over to him. The man felt his head, and groaned again.

His own personal shock therapy, Ellis thought. Perhaps Earth had discovered the answer to insanity. As a last gift to the universe, they had sent him out, to heal —

"How do you feel?" he asked the patient.

"Not bad," the man answered — in English!

"What did you say?" Ellis gasped. He wondered if there had been a thought-transfer of some sort. Had he given the man his own grasp of English? Let's see, if you reshunted the load from the damaged nerves to unused ones —

"I feel fine, Doc. Good work. We weren't sure if that haywire and cardboard ship would hold together, but as I told you, it was the best we could do under the — "

*"Who are you?"*

The man climbed out of bed and looked around.

"Are the natives gone?"

"Yes."

"I'm Haines, Representative of Earth. What's the matter with you, Ellis?"

The other men were reviving now.

"And they — "

"Dr. Clitell."

"Fred Anderson."

The man who called himself Haines looked over his body carefully. "You might have found a better host for me, Ellis. For old time's sake. But no matter. What's the matter, man?"

Ellis explained about his amnesia.

"Didn't you get the note?"

Ellis told them everything.

"We'll get your memory back, don't worry," Haines said. "It feels good to have a body again. Hold it."

The door opened and the young doctor peered in. He saw the patients and let out a shout.

"You did it! You are able — "

"Please, doctor," Ellis snapped. "No sudden noises. I must ask not to be disturbed for at least another hour."

"Of course," the doctor said respectfully, withdrew his face and closed the door.

"How was it possible?" Ellis asked, looking at the three men. "I don't understand — "

"The great discovery," Haines said. "Surely you remember that? You worked on it. No? Explain, Anderson."

The third man walked over slowly. Ellis noticed that the vacuous faces were beginning to tighten already, shaped by the minds in back of them.

"Don't you remember, Ellis, the research on personality factors?" Ellis shook his head.

"You were looking for the lowest common denominator of human-life-and-personality. The source, if you wish. The research actually started about a hundred years ago, after Orgell found that personality was independent of body, although influenced and modified by it. Remember now?"

"No. Go on."

"To keep it simple, you — and about thirty others — found that the lowest indivisible unit of personality was an independent non-material substance. You named it the M molecule. It is a complex mental pattern."

"Mental?"

"Nonmaterial, then," Anderson said. "It can be transferred from host to host."

"Sounds like possession," Ellis said.

Anderson, noticing a mirror in a corner of the room, walked over to examine his new face. He shuddered when he saw it, and wiped saliva from its lips.

"The old myths of spirit-possession aren't so far off," Dr. Clitell said. He was the only one wearing his body with any sort of ease. "Some people have always been able to separate their minds from their bodies. Astral projection, and that sort of thing. It wasn't until recently that the personality was localized and an invariant separation-resynthesis procedure adopted."

"Does that mean you're immortal?" Ellis asked.

"Oh, no!" Anderson said, walking over. He grimaced, trying to check his host's unconscious drool. "The personality has a definite life span. It's somewhat longer than the body's, of course, but still definitely within limits." He succeeded in stopping the flow. "However, it can be stored dormant almost indefinitely."

"And what better place," Haines put in, "for storing a non-material molecule than your own mind? Your nerve connections have been harboring us all along, Ellis. There's plenty of room there. The number of connections in a human brain have been calculated at ten to the — "

"I remember that part," Ellis said. "I'm beginning to understand." He knew why he had been chosen. A psychiatrist would be needed for this job, to gain admittance to the hosts. He had been especially

trained. Of course the Krelmans couldn't be told yet about the mission or the M molecule. They wouldn't take kindly to their people — even the defectives — being possessed by Earthmen.

"Look at this," Haines said. Fascinated, he was bending his fingers backwards. He had discovered that his host was double-jointed. The other two men were trying out their bodies in the manner of a man testing a horse. They flexed their arms, bunched their muscles, practiced walking.

"But," Ellis asked, "how will the race...I mean, how about women?"

"Get more hosts," Haines told him, still trying out his fingers. "Male and female. You're going to be the greatest doctor on this planet. Every defective will be brought to you for cure. Of course, we're all in on the secret. No one's going to spill before the right time." He paused and grinned. "Ellis — do you realize what this means? Earth isn't dead! She'll live again."

Ellis nodded. He was having difficulty identifying the large, bland Haines in the film with the shrill-voiced scarecrow in front of him. It would take time for all of them, he knew, and a good deal of readjustment.

"We'd better get to to work," Anderson said. "After you have the defectives on this planet serviced, we'll refuel your ship and send you on."

"Where?" Ellis asked. "To another planet?"

"Of course. There are probably only a few million hosts on this one, since we're not touching normals."

"Only! But how many people have I stored?"

There was the sound of voices in the hall.

"You really are a case," Haines said, amused. "Back into bed, men — I think I hear that doctor. How many? The population of Earth was about four billion. You have all of them."





# FOOL'S MATE

The players met, on the great, timeless board of space. The glittering dots that were the pieces swam in their separate patterns. In that configuration at the beginning, even before the first move was made, the outcome of the game was determined.

Both players saw, and knew which had won. But they played on.

Because the game had to be played out.

"Nielson!"

Lieutenant Nielson sat in front of his gunfire board with an idyllic smile on his face. He didn't look up.

"Nielson!"

The lieutenant was looking at his fingers now, with the stare of a puzzled child.

"Nielson! Snap out of it!" General Branch loomed sternly over him. "Do you hear me, lieutenant?"

Nielson shook his head dully. He started to look at his fingers again, then his gaze was caught by the glittering array of buttons on the gunfire panel.

"Pretty," he said.

General Branch stepped inside the cubicle, grabbed Nielson by the shoulders and shook him.

"Pretty things," Nielson said, gesturing at the panel. He smiled at Branch.

Margraves, second in command, stuck his head in the doorway. He still had sergeant's stripes on his sleeve, having been promoted to colonel only three days ago.

"Ed," he said, "the President's representative is here. Sneak visit."

"Wait a minute," Branch said, "I want to complete this inspection." He grinned sourly. It was one hell of an inspection when you went around finding how many sane men you had left.

"Do you hear me, lieutenant?"

"Ten thousand ships," Nielson said. "Ten thousand ships — all gone!"

"I'm sorry," Branch said. He leaned forward and slapped him smartly across the face.

Lieutenant Nielson started to cry.

"Hey, Ed — what about that representative?"

At close range, Colonel Margraves' breath was a solid essence of whisky, but Branch didn't reprimand him. If you had a good officer left you didn't reprimand him, no matter what he did. Also, Branch approved of whisky. It was a good release, under the circumstances. Probably better than his own, he thought, glancing at his scarred knuckles.

"I'll be right with you. Nielson, can you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant said in a shaky voice. "I'm all right now, sir."

"Good," Branch said. "Can you stay on duty?"

"For a while," Nielson said. "But, sir — I'm not well. I can feel it."

"I know," Branch said. "You deserve a rest. But you're the only gun officer I've got left on this side of the ship. The rest are in the wards."

"I'll try, sir," Nielson said, looking at the gunfire panel again. "But I hear voices sometimes. I can't promise anything, sir."

"Ed," Margraves began again, "that representative — "

"Coming. Good boy, Nielson." The lieutenant didn't look up as Branch and Margraves left.

"I escorted him to the bridge," Margraves said, listing slightly to starboard as he walked. "Offered him a drink, but he didn't want one."

"All right," Branch said.

"He was bursting with questions," Margraves continued, chuckling to himself. "One of those earnest, tanned State Department men, out to win the war in five minutes flat. Very friendly boy. Wanted

to know why I, personally, thought the fleet had been maneuvering in space for a year with no action."

"What did you tell him?"

"Said we were waiting for a consignment of zap guns," Margraves said. "I think he almost believed me. Then he started talking about logistics."

"Hm-m-m," Branch said. There was no telling what Margraves, half drunk, had told the representative. Not that it mattered. An official inquiry into the prosecution of the war had been due for a long time.

"I'm going to leave you here," Margraves said. "I've got some unfinished business to attend to."

"Right," Branch said, since it was all he could say. He knew that Margraves' unfinished business concerned a bottle.

He walked alone to the bridge.

The President's representative was looking at the huge location screen. It covered one entire wall, glowing with a slowly shifting pattern of dots. The thousands of green dots on the left represented the Earth fleet, separated by a black void from the orange of the enemy. As he watched, the fluid, three-dimensional front slowly changed. The armies of dots clustered, shifted, retreated, advanced, moving with hypnotic slowness.

But the black void remained between them. General Branch had been watching that sight for almost a year. As far as he was concerned, the screen was a luxury. He couldn't determine from it what was really happening. Only the CPC calculators could, and they didn't need it.

"How do you do, General Branch?" the President's representative said, coming forward and offering his hand. "My name's Richard Ellsner."

Branch shook hands, noticing that Margraves' description had been pretty good. The representative was no more than thirty. His tan looked strange, after a year of pallid faces.

"My credentials," Ellsner said, handing Branch a sheaf of papers. The general skimmed through them, noting Ellsner's authorization as Presidential Voice in Space. A high honor for so young a man.

"How are things on Earth?" Branch asked, just to say something. He ushered Ellsner to a chair, and sat down himself.



"Tight," Ellsner said. "We've been stripping the planet bare of radioactives to keep your fleet operating. To say nothing of the tremendous cost of shipping food, oxygen, spare parts, and all the other equipment you need to keep a fleet this size in the field."

"I know," Branch murmured, his broad face expressionless.

"I'd like to start right in with the President's complaints," Ellsner said with an apologetic little laugh. "Just to get them off my chest."

"Go right ahead," Branch said.

"Now then," Ellsner began, consulting a pocket notebook, "you've had the fleet in space for eleven months and seven days. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"During that time there have been light engagements, but no actual hostilities. You — and the enemy commander — have been content, evidently, to sniff each other like discontented dogs."

"I wouldn't use that analogy," Branch said, conceiving an instant dislike for the young man. "But go on."

"I apologize. It was an unfortunate, though inevitable comparison. Anyhow, there has been no battle, even though you have a numerical superiority. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And you know the maintenance of this fleet strains the resources of Earth. The President would like to know why battle has not been joined."

"I'd like to hear the rest of the complaints first," Branch said. He tightened his battered fists, but, with remarkable self-control, kept them at his sides.

"Very well. The morale factor. We keep getting reports from you on the incidence of combat fatigue — crack-up, in plain language. The figures are absurd! Thirty percent of your men seem to be under restraint. That's way out of line, even for a tense situation."

Branch didn't answer.

"To cut this short," Ellsner said, "I would like the answer to those questions. Then, I could like your assistance with negotiating a truce. This war was absurd to begin with. It was none of Earth's choosing. It seems to the President that, in view of the static situation, the enemy commander will be amenable to the idea."

Colonel Margraves staggered in, his face flushed. He had completed his unfinished business; adding another fourth to his half-drunk.

"What's this I hear about a truce?" he shouted.

Ellsner stared at him for a moment, then turned back to Branch.

"I suppose you will take care of this yourself. If you will contact the enemy commander, I will try to come to terms with him."

"They aren't interested," Branch said.

"How do you know?"

"I've tried. I've been trying to negotiate a truce for six months now. They want complete capitulation."

"But that's absurd," Ellsner said, shaking his head. "They have no bargaining point. The fleets are of approximately the same size. There have been no major engagements yet. How can they —"

"Easily," Margraves roared, walking up to the representative and peering truculently in his face.

"General. This man is drunk." Ellsner got to his feet.

"Of course, you little idiot! Don't you understand yet? *The war is lost!* Completely, irrevocably."

Ellsner turned angrily to Branch. The general sighed and stood up.

"That's right, Ellsner. The war is lost and every man in the fleet knows it. That's what's wrong with the morale. We're just hanging here, waiting to be blasted out of existence."

The fleets shifted and weaved. Thousands of dots floated in space, in twisted, random patterns.

Seemingly random.

The patterns interlocked, opened and closed. Dynamically, delicately balanced, each configuration was a planned move on a hundred thousand mile front. The opposing dots shifted to meet the exigencies of the new pattern.

Where was the advantage? To the unskilled eye, a chess game is a meaningless array of pieces and positions. But to the players — the game may be already won or lost.

The mechanical players who moved the thousands of dots knew who had won — and who had lost.

"Now let's all relax," Branch said soothingly. "Margraves, mix us a couple of drinks. I'll explain everything." The colonel moved to a well-stocked cabinet in a corner of the room.

"I'm waiting," Ellsner said.

"First, a review. Do you remember when the war was declared, two years ago? Both sides subscribed to the Holmstead Pact, not to bomb home planets. A rendezvous was arranged in space, for the fleets to meet."

"That's ancient history," Ellsner said.

"It has a point. Earth's fleet blasted off, grouped and went to the rendezvous." Branch cleared his throat.

"Do you know the CPCs? The Configuration-Probability-Calculators? They're like chess players, enormously extended. They arrange the fleet in an optimum attack-defense pattern, based on the configuration of the opposing fleet. So the first pattern was set."

"I don't see the need —" Ellsner started, but Margraves, returning with the drinks, interrupted him.

"Wait, my boy. Soon there will be a blinding light."

"When the fleets met, the CPCs calculated the probabilities of attack. They found we'd lose approximately eighty-seven percent of our fleet, to sixty-five percent of the enemy's. If they attacked, they'd lose seventy-nine percent, to our sixty-four. That was the situation as it stood then. By extrapolation, their *optimum* attack pattern — at that time — would net them a forty-five percent loss. Ours would have given us a seventy-two percent loss."

"I don't know much about the CPCs," Ellsner confessed. "My field's psych." He sipped his drink, grimaced, and sipped again.

"Think of them as chess players," Branch said. "They can estimate the loss probabilities for an attack at any given point of time, in any pattern. They can extrapolate the probable moves of both sides."

"That's why battle wasn't joined when we first met. No commander is going to annihilate his entire fleet like that."

"Well then," Ellsner said, "why haven't you exploited your slight numerical superiority? Why haven't you gotten an advantage over them?"

"Ah!" Margraves cried, sipping his drink. "It comes, the light!"

"Let me put it in the form of an analogy," Branch said. "If you have two chess players of equally high skill, the game's end is determined when one of them gains an advantage. Once the advantage is there, there's nothing the other player can do, unless the first makes a mistake. If everything goes as it should, the game's end is predetermined. The turning point may come a few moves after the game starts, although the game itself could drag on for hours."



"And remember," Margraves broke in, "to the casual eye, there may be no apparent advantage. Not a piece may have been lost."

"That's what's happened here," Branch finished sadly. "The CPC units in both fleets are of maximum efficiency. But the enemy has an edge, which they are carefully exploiting. And there's nothing we can do about it."

"But how did this happen?" Ellsner asked. "Who slipped up?"

"The CPCs have inducted the cause of the failure," Branch said. "The end of the war was inherent *in our take-off formation*."

"What do you mean?" Ellsner said, setting down his drink.

"Just that. The configuration the fleet was in, light-years away from battle, before we had even contacted their fleet. When the two met, they had an infinitesimal advantage of position. That was enough. Enough for the CPCs, anyhow."

"If it's any consolation," Margraves put in, "it was a fifty-fifty chance. It could have just as well been us with the edge."

"I'll have to find out more about this," Ellsner said. "I don't understand it all yet."

Branch snarled: "The war's lost. What more do you want to know?"

Ellsner shook his head.

"Wilt snare me with predestination 'round," Margraves quoted, "and then impute my fall to sin?"

Lieutenant Nielson sat in front of the gunfire panel, his fingers interlocked. This was necessary, because Nielson had an almost overpowering desire to push the buttons.

The pretty buttons.

Then he swore, and sat on his hands. He had promised General Branch that he would carry on, and that was important. It was three days since he had seen the general, but he was determined to carry on. Resolutely he fixed his gaze on the gunfire dials.

Delicate indicators wavered and trembled. Dials measured distance, and adjusted aperture to range. The slender indicators rose and fell as the ship maneuvered, lifting toward the red line, but never quite reaching it.

The red line marked emergency. That was when he would start firing, when the little black arrow crossed the little red line.

He had been waiting almost a year now, for that little arrow. Little arrow. Little narrow. Little arrow. Little narrow.



Stop it.

That was when he would start firing.

Lieutenant Nielson lifted his hands into view and inspected his nails. Fastidiously he cleaned a bit of dirt out of one. He interlocked his fingers again, and looked at the pretty buttons, the black arrow, the red line.

He smiled to himself. He had promised the general. Only three days ago.

So he pretended not to hear what the buttons were whispering to him.

"The thing I don't see," Ellsner said, "is why you can't do something about the pattern? Retreat and regroup, for example?"

"I'll explain that," Margraves said. "It'll give Ed a chance for a drink. Come over here." He led Ellsner to an instrument panel. They had been showing Ellsner around the ship for three days, more to relieve their own tension than for any other reason. The last day had turned into a fairly prolonged drinking bout.

"Do you see this dial?" Margraves pointed to one. The instrument panel covered an area four feet wide by twenty feet long. The buttons and switches on it controlled the movement of the entire fleet.

"Notice the shaded area. That marks the safety limit. If we use a forbidden configuration, the indicator goes over and all hell breaks loose."

"And what is a forbidden configuration?"

Margraves thought for a moment. "The forbidden configurations are those which would give the enemy an attack advantage. Or, to put it in another way, moves which change the attack-probability-loss picture sufficiently to warrant an attack."

"So you can move only within strict limits?" Ellsner asked, looking at the dial.

"That's right. Out of the infinite number of possible formation, we can use only a few, if we want to play safe. It's like chess. Say you'd like to put a sixth row pawn in your opponent's back row. But it would take two moves to do it. And after you move to the seventh row, your opponent has a clear avenue, leading inevitably to checkmate.

"Of course, if the enemy advances too boldly the odds are changed again, and *we* attack."

"That's our only hope," General Branch said. "We're praying they do something wrong. The fleet is in readiness for instant attack, if our CPC shows that the enemy has over-extended himself anywhere."

"And that's the reason for the crack-ups," Ellsner said. "Every man in the fleet on nerves' edge, waiting for a chance he's sure will never come. But having to wait anyhow. How long will this go on?"

"This moving and checking can go on for a little over two years," Branch said. "Then they will be in the optimum formation for attack, with a twenty-eight percent loss probability to our ninety-three. They'll have to attack then, or the probabilities will start to shift back in our favor."

"You poor devils," Ellsner said softly. "Waiting for a chance that's never going to come. Knowing you're going to be blasted out of space sooner or later."

"Oh, it's jolly," said Margraves, with an instinctive dislike for a civilian's sympathy.

Something buzzed on the switchboard, and Branch walked over and plugged in a line. "Hello? Yes. Yes.... All right, Williams. Right." He unplugged the line.

"Colonel Williams has had to lock his men in their rooms," Branch said. "That's the third time this month. I'll have to get CPC to dope out a formation so we can take him out of the front." He walked to a side panel and started pushing buttons.

"And there it is," Margraves said. "What do you plan to do, Mr. Presidential Representative?"

The glittering dots shifted and deployed, advanced and retreated, always keeping a barrier of black space between them. The mechanical chess players watched each move, calculating its effect into the far future. Back and forth across the great chess board the pieces moved.

The chess players worked dispassionately, knowing beforehand the outcome of the game. In their strictly ordered universe there was no possible fluctuation, no stupidity, no failure.

They moved. And knew. And moved.

"Oh, yes," Lieutenant Nielson said to the smiling room. "Oh, yes." And look at all the buttons, he thought, laughing to himself. So stupid. Georgia.

Nielson accepted the deep blue of sanctity, draping it across his shoulders. Bird song, somewhere.

Of course.

Three buttons red. He pushed them. Three buttons green. He pushed them. Four dials. Riverread.

*"Oh-oh. Nielson's cracked."*

"Three is for me," Nielson said, and touched his forehead with greatest stealth. Then he reached for the keyboard again. Unimaginable associations raced through his mind, produced by unaccountable stimuli.

*"Better grab him. Watch out!"*

Gentle hands surround me as I push two are brown for which is for mother, and one is high for all the rest.

*"Stop him from shooting off those guns!"*

I am lifted into the air, I fly, I fly.

"Is there any hope for that man?" Ellsner asked, after they had locked Nielson in a ward.

"Who knows," Branch said. His broad face tightened; knots of muscles pushed out his cheeks. Suddenly he turned, shouted, and swung his fist wildly at the metal wall. After it hit, he grunted and grinned sheepishly.

"Silly, isn't it? Margraves drinks. I let off steam by hitting walls. Let's go eat."

The officers ate separate from the crew. Branch had found that some officers tended to get murdered by psychotic crewmen. It was best to keep them apart.

During the meal, Branch suddenly turned to Ellsner.

"Boy, I haven't told you the entire truth. I said this would go on for two years? Well, the men won't last that long. I don't know if I can hold this fleet together for two more weeks."

"What would you suggest?"

"I don't know," Branch said. He still refused to consider surrender, although he knew it was the only realistic answer.

"I'm not sure," Ellsner said, "but I think there may be a way out of your dilemma." The officers stopped eating and looked at him.

"Have you got some superweapons for us?" Margraves asked. "A disintegrator strapped to your chest?"

"I'm afraid not. But I think you've been so close to the situation that you don't see it in its true light. A case of the forest for the trees."

"Go on," Branch said, munching methodically on a piece of bread.

"Consider the universe as the CPC sees it. A world of strict causality. A logical, coherent universe. In this world, every effect has a cause. Every factor can be instantly accounted for.

"That's not a picture of the real world. There *is no* explanation for everything, really. The CPC is built to see a specialized universe, and to extrapolate on the basis of that."

"So," Margraves said, "what would you do?"

"Throw the world out of joint," Ellsner said. "Bring in uncertainty. Add a human factor that the machines can't calculate."

"How can you introduce uncertainty in a chess game?" Branch asked, interested in spite of himself.

"By sneezing at a crucial moment, perhaps. How could a machine calculate that?"

"It wouldn't have to. It would just classify it as extraneous noise, and ignore it."

"True." Ellsner thought for a moment. "This battle — how long will it take once the actual hostilities are begun?"

"About six minutes," Branch told him. "Plus or minus twenty seconds."

"That confirms an idea of mine," Ellsner said. "The chess game analogy you use is faulty. There's no real comparison."

"It's a convenient way of thinking of it," Margraves said.

"But it's an *untrue* way of thinking of it. Checkmating a king can't be equated with destroying a fleet. Nor is the rest of the situation like chess. In chess you play by rules previously agreed upon by the players. In this game you can make up your own rules."

"This game has inherent rules of its own," Branch said.

"No," Ellsner said. "Only the CPCs have rules. How about this? Suppose you dispensed with the CPCs? Gave every commander his head, told him to attack on his own, with no pattern. What would happen?"

"It wouldn't work," Margraves told him. "The CPC can still total the picture, on the basis of the planning ability of the average human. More than that, they can handle the attack of a few thousand second-rate calculators — humans — with ease. It would be like shooting clay pigeons."

"But you've *got* to try something," Ellsner pleaded.



"Now wait a minute," Branch said. "You can spout theory all you want. I know what the CPCs tell me, and I believe them. I'm still in command of this fleet, and I'm not going to risk the lives in my command on some harebrained scheme."

"Harebrained schemes sometimes win wars," Ellsner said.

"They usually lose them."

"The war is lost already, by your own admission."

"I can still wait for them to make a mistake."

"Do you think it will come?"

"No."

"Well then?"

"I'm still going to wait."

The rest of the meal was completed in moody silence. Afterward, Ellsner went to his room.

"Well, Ed?" Margraves asked, unbuttoning his shirt.

"Well yourself," the general said. He lay down on his bed, trying not to think. It was too much. Logistics. Predetermined battles. The coming debacle. He considered slamming his fist against the wall, but decided against it. It was sprained already. He was going to sleep.

On the borderline between slumber and sleep, he heard a click. The door!

Branch jumped out of bed and tried the knob. Then he threw himself against it.

Locked.

"General, please strap yourself down. We are attacking." It was Ellsner's voice, over the intercom.

"I looked over that keyboard of yours, sir, and found the magnetic doorlocks. Mighty handy in case of a mutiny, isn't it?"

"You idiot!" Branch shouted. "You'll kill us all! That CPC — "

"I've disconnected our CPC," Ellsner said pleasantly. "I'm a pretty logical boy, and I think I know how a sneeze will bother them."

"He's mad," Margraves shouted to Branch. Together they threw themselves against the metal door.

Then they were thrown to the floor.

"All gunners — fire at will!" Ellsner broadcasted to the fleet.

The ship was in motion. The attack was underway!

The dots drifted together, crossing the no man's land of space.

They coalesced! Energy flared, and the battle was joined.

Six minutes, human time. Hours for the electronically fast chess player. He checked his pieces for an instant, deducing the pattern of attack.

There was no pattern!

Half of the opposing chess player's pieces shot out into space, completely out of the battle. Whole flanks advanced, split, rejoined, wrenched forward, dissolved their formation, formed it again.

No pattern? There *had* to be a pattern. The chess player knew that everything had a pattern. It was just a question of finding it, of taking the moves already made and extrapolating to determine what the end was supposed to be.

The end was — chaos!

The dots swept in and out, shot away at right angles to the battle, checked and returned, meaninglessly.

What did it mean, the chess player asked himself with the calmness of metal. He waited for a recognizable configuration to emerge.

Watching dispassionately as his pieces were swept off the board.

"I'm letting you out of your room now," Ellsner called, "but don't try to stop me. I think I've won your battle."

The lock released. The two officers ran down the corridor to the bridge, determined to break Ellsner into little pieces.

Inside, they slowed down.

The screen showed the great mass of Earth dots sweeping over a scattering of enemy dots.

What stopped them, however, was Nielson, laughing, his hands sweeping over switches and buttons on the great master control board.

The CPC was droning the losses. "Earth — eighteen percent. Enemy — eighty-three. Eighty-four. Eighty-six. Earth, nineteen percent."

"Mate!" Ellsner shouted. He stood beside Nielson, a Stillson wrench clenched in his hand. "Lack of pattern. I gave their CPC something it couldn't handle. An attack with no apparent pattern. Meaningless configurations!"

"But what are they doing?" Branch asked, gesturing at the dwindling enemy dots.

"Still relying on their chess player," Ellsner said. "Still waiting for him to dope out the attack pattern in this madman's mind. Too

much faith in machines, general. This man doesn't even know he's precipitating an attack."

*...And push three that's for dad on the olive tree I always wanted to two two two Danbury fair with buckle shoe brown all brown buttons down and in, sin, eight red for sin —*

"What's the wrench for?" Margraves asked.

"That?" Ellsner weighed it in his hand. "That's to turn off Nielson here, after the attack."

*...And five and love and black, all blacks, fair buttons in I remember when I was very young at all push five and there on the grass ouch —*

# SUBSISTENCE LEVEL

Her mother had warned her. "Are you out of your mind, Amelia? Why in heaven's name must you marry a *pioneer*? How do you expect to be happy in a wilderness?"

"The Cap isn't a wilderness, Mother," Amelia had said.

"It isn't civilized. It's a crude, primitive place. And how long will this *pioneer* be satisfied there? I know the type. He'll always want some new place to conquer."

"Then I'll conquer it with him," Amelia had said, certain of her own pioneering spirit.

Her mother wasn't so sure. "Frontier life is hard, dear. Harder than you imagine. Are you really prepared to give up your friends, all the comforts you've known?"

"Yes!"

Her mother wanted to say more. But since her husband's death, she had become less certain of her own convictions, less determined to impose them on others.

"It's your life," she said at last.

"Don't worry, Mother, I know what I'm doing," Amelia said.

She knew that Dirk Bogren couldn't stand crowding. He was a big man and he needed elbow room, and silence, and free air to breathe. He had told her about his father, who had settled in the newly reclaimed Gobi Desert. It broke the old man's heart when the place got so crowded that land had to be fenced in according to county regulations and he died with his face turned toward the stars.

That was Dirk, too. She married him, and moved to the desolate Southern Polar Cap.

But settlers came after them, and soon the Cap was called Cap City, and then it had stores and factories, and neat little suburbs stretching across the atom-heated land.



It happened sooner than she ever expected.

One evening they were sitting on the veranda, and Dirk was looking over his land. He stared for a long time at the tip of a radar tower on a distant rise of the land.

"Getting crowded around here," he said finally.

"Yes, it is — a little," Amelia agreed.

"They'll be building a golf course next. Figure it's time to move on?"

"All right," Amelia said, after the slightest hesitation. And that was all that had to be said.

They sold their farm. They bought a second-hand spaceship and filled it with the barest necessities of life. The evening before blast-off, Dirk's friends threw a farewell party for him.

They were the old inhabitants and they could remember when the Cap was still partly ice and snow. They kidded Dirk, half enviously.

"Going to the asteroids, eh?"

"That's the place," Dirk said.

"But you're soft!" an old man cackled. "Easy living's got you, Dirk."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Think you can still work an honest five-hour day?"

Dirk grinned and drank his beer, and listened to the women give Amelia advice.

"Take *plenty* of warm things. *I remember on Mars —* "

"First-aid equipment — "

"The trouble with low gravity — "

"Dirk!" a man shouted. "You taking a pretty little thing like her to an *asteroid*?"

"Sure," Dirk said.

"She won't like it," another man warned. "No parties, no new clothes, no doodads."

"Folks go crazy from overwork out there."

"Don't you believe them," an older woman put in hastily. "You'll love it once you get used to it."

"I'm sure I will," Amelia said politely and hoped it was true.

Just before blastoff, she called her mother and told her the news. Her mother wasn't surprised.

"Well, dear," she said, "it won't be easy. But you knew that before you married him. The asteroids — that's where your father wanted to go."

Amelia remembered her father as a gentle, soft-spoken man. Every night, when he returned from the bank, he would read through the ads for used spaceships and he would compile detailed lists of the equipment an explorer would need. Mother was dead set against any change and would not be moved. There were few open arguments — until all bitterness was resolved when a helicopter smashed into her father's car one day, when he was returning from the bank.

"Try to be a good wife to him," her mother urged.

"Of course I will," Amelia declared a little angrily.

The new frontiers were in space, for Earth was tame and settled now. Dirk had studied the available charts of the Asteroid Belt, but they didn't tell him much. No one had ever penetrated very far and the vast extent was simply marked UNKNOWN TERRITORY.

It was a long journey and a dangerous one, but free land was there, land for the taking, and all the room a man could ask. Dirk fought through the shifting patterns of rock with steady patience. The spaceship was always pointed implacably outward, though no route was marked.

"We're not turning back," he told Amelia, "so there's no sense charting a way."

She nodded agreement, but her breath came short when she looked at the bleak, dead spots of light ahead. She couldn't help feeling apprehensive about their new life, the grim, lonely existence of the frontier. She shivered and put her hand over Dirk's.

He smiled, never taking his eyes off the dials.

They found a slab of rock several miles long by a mile wide. They landed on the dark, airless little world, set up their pressure dome and turned on the gravity. As soon as it approached normal, Dirk set to work uncrating the Control Robot. It was a long, tiring job, but finally he inserted the tape and activated the controls.

The robot went to work. Dirk turned on all available searchlights. Using the small crane, he lifted their Frontier Shelter out of the ship's hold, placed it near the center of the dome, and activated it. The Shelter opened like a gigantic flower, blossoming into a neat five-room dwelling, complete with basic furniture, kitchen, plumbing, and disposal units.

It was a start. But everything couldn't be unpacked at once. The temperature control was buried somewhere in the hold of the ship, and Dirk had to warm their house with an auxiliary heater hooked to the generator.

Amelia was too cold to make dinner. The temperature in the Shelter hovered around 52 degrees Fahrenheit. Even in her Explorers, Inc. furs, she was cold, and the dismal glow of the fluorescents made her feel colder.

"Dirk," she asked timidly, "couldn't you make it a little warmer?"

"I suppose I could, but that would slow down the robot."

"I didn't know," Amelia said. "I'll be all right."

But it was impossible working under fluorescents and she set the dial wrong on the Basic Ration Pack. The steak came out overdone, the potatoes were lumpy, and the chill was barely taken off the apple pie.

"I'm afraid I'm not much good at roughing it," Amelia said, trying to smile.

"Forget it," Dirk told her, and wolfed down his food as though it were regular Earthside fare.

They turned in. Amelia could hardly sleep on the emergency mattress. But she had the dubious satisfaction of knowing that Dirk was uncomfortable, too. He *had* been softened by the relatively easy life at the Cap.

When they awoke, everything seemed more cheerful. The Control Robot, working through the night, had set up the main lighting plant. Now they had their own little sun in the sky and a fair approximation of night and day. The Control had also unloaded the heavy Farm Robots, and they in turn had unloaded the Household Robots.

Dirk directed the topsoil manufacturing and coordinated the work of his robots as they force-seeded the soil. He worked a full five-hour day, and when the little sun was low on the horizon, he came home exhausted.

Amelia, meanwhile, had taped in her basic food sequences during the day, and that evening she was able to give her husband a plain but hearty eight-course dinner.

"Of course, it's not the twenty-plate special," she apologized as he munched on the hors d'œuvres.

"Never could eat all that food, anyhow," Dirk said.

"And the wine isn't properly chilled."

Dirk looked up and grinned. "Hell, honey, I could drink warm Ola-Cola and never notice it."

"Not while *I'm* cook here," Amelia said. But she could see one advantage of frontier life already — a hungry man would eat anything that was put in front of him.



After helping Amelia pile the dishes into the washer, Dirk set up a projector in their living room. As a double feature flicked across the screen, they sat in durable foam-rubber chairs, just as generations of pioneers before them had done. This continuity with the past touched Amelia deeply.

And Dirk unpacked their regular bed and adjusted the gravity under it. That night they slept as soundly as they ever had at the Cap.

But the work on the asteroid was ceaseless and unrelenting. Dirk labored five and, several times, even six hours a day with his Field Robots, changing tapes, bellowing commands, sweating to get the best out of them. In a few days, the force-seeded plants began to show green against the synthesized black loam. But it was apparent at once that it was a stunted crop.

Dirk's mouth tightened and he set his robots to pumping trace elements into the soil. He tinkered with his sun until he had increased its ultraviolet output. But the resulting crop, a week later, was a failure.

Amelia came out to the fields that day. Dirk's face was outlined by the garish sunset and his clenched fists were on his hips. He was staring at the poor, dwarfed, shoulder-high corn.

There was nothing Amelia could say. She put her hand comfortingly on his shoulder.

"We're not licked," Dirk muttered.

"What will you do?" Amelia asked.

"I'll plant a crop a week, if need be. I'll work the robots until their joints crystallize. This soil will yield. It must yield!"

Amelia stepped back, surprised at the vehemence of his tone. But she could understand how he felt. On Earth, a farmer simply gave the orders to his Control Robot, and in a few days he was ready to harvest. Dirk had been working and watching this miserable crop for over a week.

"What will you do with it?" she asked.

"Feed it to the animals," Dirk said contemptuously. They walked to the house together in the gathering twilight.

The next day, Dirk took his farm animals out of the freezers, reanimated them, and set up their pens and stalls. The beasts fed continually on the corn and wheat. Force-seeds went back into the ground — and the second growing was of normal size.



Amelia had little time to observe this triumph. Their five-room dwelling was small by Earth standards, but it still needed coordinating.

It was difficult. She had grown up in an ordinary suburban home, where the housekeeping duties were arranged in automatic time sequences. Here, each function was handled by an individual machine. There was no time to recess them into the walls and they were forever in the way, ruining her decor, making the house look like a machine shop.

Instead of a single, centralized switchboard, Amelia had dials, buttons, and switches everywhere, jury-rigged in a casual style. At first, she had to spend a large part of each day just hunting for the proper controls for dry-cleaning, floor-scrubbing, window-washing, and other necessities she had taken for granted at home. Dirk had promised to hook all the circuits together, but he was always busy with his own work.

Her House Robots were impossible. They were frontier models, built for durability, with none of the refinements she had known. Their memories were poor and they could anticipate nothing. At the end of the day, Amelia's ears would ring from their harsh, raucous voices. And most of the time her house looked as though the robots had been attacking it, instead of cleaning it.

The long five-hour days of drudgery went on and on, until Amelia felt she couldn't take any more of it. In desperation, she called her mother on the tele-circuit.

In the tiny, streaked screen, she could see her mother sitting in her favorite pneumo-chair beside the polarized glass wall. It was adjusted for vision now, and Amelia could see the city in the distance, springing upward in its glistening beauty.

"What seems to be wrong?" her mother asked.

A robot glided behind her mother's chair and noiselessly put down a cup of tea. Amelia was sure that no command had been given. The sensitive mechanical had anticipated her, the way Earth robots did after long acquaintance with a family.

"Well, it's — " Amelia began to explain almost hysterically.

Her own robot lurched through the room, almost breaking down a door when the photo-electric circuit didn't respond quickly enough. It was too much.

"I want to come home!" Amelia cried.

"You know you're always welcome, dear. But what about your husband?"

"Dirk will come, I'm sure of it. We can find him a good job, can't we, Mother?"

"I suppose so. But is that what he wants?"

"What?" Amelia asked blankly.

"Will a man like that be satisfied on Earth? Will he return?"

"He will if he loves me."

"Do you love him?"

"Mother, that's unfair!" Amelia said, feeling a little sick inside.

"It's a mistake to make a man do something he doesn't want to do," her mother told her. "Your father...Anyhow, don't you think you could make it work?"

"I don't know," Amelia said. "I guess — I guess I'll try."

Things did get better after that. Amelia learned how to live with her home, to overlook its inconveniences. She could see that someday it might be as pleasant as they had eventually made their farm on the Cap.

But they had left the Cap. And as soon as this place was livable, Dirk would want to move on, into a fresh wilderness.

One day, Dirk found her sitting beside their tiny swimming pool, weeping hopelessly.

"Hey!" he said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Clumsily he stroked her hair. "Tell me."

"Nothing, nothing."

"*Tell me.*"

"Oh, it's all the work of making a nice home and putting up curtains and training robots and everything, and knowing — "

"Knowing what?"

"That someday you'll want to move on and it'll all be for nothing." She sat up and tried to smile. "I'm sorry, Dirk. I shouldn't have mentioned it."

Dirk thought for a long time. Then he looked at her closely, and said, "I want to make you happy. You believe that, don't you?"

She nodded.

"I guess we've done enough moving around. This is our home. We'll stay right here."

"Really, Dirk?"

"It's a promise."

She hugged him tightly. Then she remembered. "Good heavens! My Napoleons will be ruined!" She ran off to the kitchen.

The next weeks were the happiest Amelia had ever known. In the morning, their pre-set sun burst into glory, waking them to the morning chores. After they had a hearty breakfast, the work of the day began.

It was never dull. One day Amelia and Dirk might erect a meteor screen to reinforce their pressure dome. Or they might tinker with the wind machine, to help the reanimated bees provide better pollination for the crops.

In the evenings, they had their sunsets. Sometimes Dirk would have the Field Robots stage a clumsy dance. He was a firm but understanding master. He believed that a little variety was good for robots as well as for humans.

Amelia regretted Earth only once. That was when Dirk picked up a Lunar rebroadcast of the Easter Parade on their television set. The music and bright colors made Amelia's heart ache — but it was only for a moment.

Their first visitor came several months later in a gaily decorated spaceship that settled on Dirk's rough-hewn landing field. Painted on its side in letters eight feet high was the sign POTTER'S TRAVELING STORE. A dapper young man climbed out, sniffed the atmosphere, wrinkled his nose, and walked up to the house.

"What can I do for you, stranger?" Dirk asked at the door.

"Good day, countryman. I'm Potter," the young man said, extending his hand which Dirk did not shake. "I was making my usual swing around Mars when I heard about you folks out here. Thought you might like to buy a few gimcracks to — to brighten up the place."

"Don't want a thing," Dirk said.

Potter grinned amiably, but he had seen the severe, undecorated farmhouse and the spartan swimming pool.

"Something for the wife?" Potter asked, winking at Amelia. "I won't be around this way for a while."

"Glad to hear it," Dirk said.

But Amelia, her eyes glowing, wanted to go through Potter's whole stock, and she dragged Dirk along.

Like a child, she tried out all the household appliances, the modern time-saving gadgets for the home. She looked longingly at



the dresses — dainty, sheer, with automatic necklines and hems — and thought of her own drab tailored fashions.

But then she saw the Acting Robots. With their amazingly human appearance and civilized mannerisms, they reminded her poignantly of home.

"Couldn't we buy a troupe?" she asked Dirk.

"We've got the movies, haven't we? They were good enough for my father — "

"But, Dirk, these robots put on real plays!"

"This particular troupe puts on all hit plays clear back to George Bernard Shaw," Potter told them.

Dirk looked with distaste at the handsome humanoid machines. "What else do they do?"

"Do? They act," Potter said. "Good Lord, countryman, you wouldn't expect a work of art to do farm labor, would you?"

"Why not?" Dirk asked. "I don't believe in pampering robots. Farm labor's good enough for my Control Robot and I'll bet he's smarter than these gimcracks."

"Your Control Robot is not an artist," Potter said loftily.

Amelia was so wistful that Dirk bought the troupe. While he was lugging them to the house — Acting Robots were too delicate to walk over stony ground — Amelia bought a dress.

"What's a girl like you doing in this wilderness?" Potter asked.

"I like it."

"Oh, it's livable, I suppose. Life of toil, doing without luxuries, advancing the frontier, all that sort of thing. But don't you get sick of roughing it?"

Amelia didn't answer him.

Potter shrugged his shoulders. "Well," he said, "this sector's ripe for colonization. You'll be having company before long."

Amelia took her dress and returned to the house. Potter blasted off.

Dirk was forced to admit the Acting Robots made pleasant company during the long, still evenings. He even became quite fond of *Man and Superman*. After a while, he began to give the robots acting directions, which they naturally ignored.

Still, he was always certain that his Control Robot could do as well, if the voice box were only improved a little

Amusements, however, were swallowed in the long five-hour working days. Dirk began to collect other little asteroids and grapple



them to his original claim. He force-planted a forest, constructed a waterfall, and tinkered with his father's old climate machine.

Finally he got it working and was able to reproduce seasons on their planetoid.

One day, the tele-circuit spluttered into life and Dirk received a spacegram. It was from Explorers, Inc., an Earth firm that manufactured a complete line of equipment for pioneers. They offered Dirk a job as head of their main testing laboratory, at a salary just a little short of stupendous.

"Oh, Dirk!" Amelia gasped. "What an opportunity!"

"Opportunity? What are you talking about?"

"You could be wealthy. You could have anything you wanted."

"I've got what I want," Dirk said. "Tell them no, thanks."

Amelia sighed wearily. She cabled Dirk's refusal to the firm — but added that his services might possibly be available later.

After all, there was no sense in completely shutting the door.

During the long summer, another spaceship swung over Dirk's landing field. This one was older and even more battered than Dirk's, and it dropped the last five feet to the ground, jarring the whole small planetoid. A young couple staggered out, on the point of collapse.

They were Jean and Percy Phillips, who had homesteaded several thousand miles from Dirk's holdings. Everything had gone wrong. Their power had failed, their robots had broken down, their food had run out. In desperation, they had set out for Dirk's farm. They were near starvation, having been without food for almost two whole days.

Dirk and Amelia gave them the hospitality of the frontier and quickly nursed them back to health. It became readily apparent that the Phillipses were ignorant of any of the rules of survival.

Percy Phillips didn't even know how to handle robots. Dirk had to explain it to him.

"You have to show them who's boss," Dirk said.

"But I should think that the proper command, given in a low, pleasant voice — "

"Not out here," Dirk said, with a positive shake of his head. "These Work Robots are a stupid, unresponsive lot. They're sullen and resentful. You have to *pound* the commands into them. Kick them, if need be."

Phillips raised both eyebrows. "Mistreat a robot?"

"You have to show them who the human is."

"But in Colonization School, we were taught to treat our robots with dignity," Phillips protested.

"You'll lose a lot of Earth notions out here," Dirk said bluntly. "Now listen to me. I was raised by robots. Some of my best friends are robots. I know what I'm talking about. The only way they'll show you any respect is if you make them."

Phillips admitted doubtfully that Dirk might be right.

"Of course I'm right!" Dirk stated. "You say your power supply failed?"

"Yes, but the robots didn't —"

"Didn't they? They have access to the charge outlets, haven't they?"

"Of course. When they're low, they recharge themselves."

"You think they stop when they're full? A robot'll keep on drawing power until it's all gone. Haven't you learned that old robot stunt?"

"I guess that's what happened," Phillips said. "But why would they do it?"

"Robots are congenital drunks," Dirk told him. "The manufacturers stamp it into them. That way, they burn out faster and you have to buy more robots. Believe me, you'll be doing them a favor if you keep them power-starved."

"I guess I've got a lot to learn," Phillips sighed.

And Jean, his wife, had even more to learn. Amelia had to show her over and over again that buttons won't push themselves, switches won't close without timing circuits, dials won't leap of their own free will to the proper setting, Cleaning Robots can't be trusted with the cooking, and the Rub-A-Tub, although a versatile instrument, *won't* put up the preserves.

"I never thought there was so much to it," Jean said. "How do you do it all?"

"You'll learn," Amelia assured her, remembering her own early days on the frontier.

The Phillipses set out again for their claim. Amelia had thought it would be lonely when they were gone, but it was pleasant to be alone with Dirk again, to get back to work on their farm.

But people wouldn't leave them alone. Next, a man from Mars Rural Power called. Homesteaders were moving into the Asteroid

Belt, he explained, so the power outlets were being extended. He wanted to hook up Dirk's farm to the Mars Power tight-beam network.

"Nope," Dirk said.

"Why not? It's not expensive — "

"I make my own power."

"Oh, these little generators," the man said, looking scornfully at Dirk's sun. "But for really high-gain performance — "

"Don't need it. This farm runs fast enough to suit me."

"You could get more work out of your robots."

"Just wear them out faster."

"Then you could get the latest models."

"The new ones just burn out faster."

"A better generating system, then," the man said. "That little sun of yours doesn't have much of an output."

"Puts out enough to satisfy me."

The man shook his head wonderingly. "I guess I'll never understand you pioneers," he said, and left.

They tried to resume their life. But lights were beginning to wink on from neighboring asteroids, and the Lunar television was jammed with local signals. The mail rocket began to make weekly stops and a travel bureau started trips into the Belt.

The familiar, dissatisfied look came over Dirk's face. He studied the sky around him. It was closing in. He was losing his elbow room, and the silence of his farm was broken by the flame of passing rockets.

But he had promised Amelia and he was going to keep that promise if it killed him. His face grew gaunt and he began to work six, seven — sometimes actually eight — hours a day.

A sewing machine salesman called, and a bright, determined woman tried to sell Dirk the Solar Encyclopedia. The ship routes were established now and the long, dangerous trail had become a superhighway.

One night, while Dirk and Amelia were sitting on their porch, they saw an immense sign light up the sky. It stretched over miles of space, and read: ROSEN'S SHOPPING CENTER. STORES, RESTAURANTS, BEST DRINKS IN THE ASTEROIDS.

"Stores," Amelia murmured. "And a restaurant! Oh, Dirk, couldn't we go?"

"Why not?" he said, with a helpless shrug of his shoulders.

The next day, Amelia put on her new dress and made Dirk wear his one custom-tailored suit. They got into the old spaceship and set out.

Rosen's Center, a bustling frontier town sprawling across four linked asteroids, was struggling valiantly to become a city. Already driftways had been installed on all the streets. The town was filled with noisy, eager people, and robots clumped down the ways, loaded with gear.

Amelia took Dirk into a restaurant, where they were served a real Earthside dinner. Dirk didn't enjoy it. He was slightly nauseous from breathing other people's air and the food was too delicate to stick to one's ribs. The meal ended with Dirk ordering the wrong wine and trying to tip the robot waiter.

Thoroughly miserable, he allowed himself to be dragged from one store to another. The only time he showed any interest was when they entered a heavy-tools shop.

He examined a new anti-gravity engine. It was a model he had never seen.

"Just the thing for canceling heavy-planet effects," the robot clerk told him. "We believe this machine would work splendidly on the moons of Jupiter, for example."

"The moons of Jupiter?"

"Just an example, sir," the robot said. "No one's ever been there. It's completely unexplored territory."

Dirk nodded absently, rubbing his hand along the machine's burnished surface.

"Look, Amelia," he said. "Do you suppose that job on Earth is still open?"

"It might be," she answered. "Why?"

"Might as well be on Earth as here. These people are playing at pioneering."

"Do you think you'd be happy on Earth?"

"Might."

"I doubt it," Amelia said. She was remembering how contented they had been on the asteroid. Their life had been full and complete, just the two of them, pushing back the wilderness with their rude tools — doing without — improvising.

That had been before people came, before Earth's noisy, elbowing civilization had crowded up to their doorsteps.



Her mother had learned the hard way and had tried to tell her. Dirk would never be happy on Earth. And happiness for her was impossible if he fretted his life away as her father had, working on a job he hated and dreaming of another more satisfying one.

"We'll take the anti-grav engine," she told the robot. She turned to Dirk. "We'll need that out Jupiter way."

# THE SLOW SEASON

If business had not been so slow, Slobold might not have done it. But business was slow. No one seemed to need the services of a ladies' custom tailor. Last month he had let his assistant go. Next month, he would have to let himself go.

Slobold was pondering this, surrounded by bolts of cotton, wool, and gabardine, dusty pattern books and suited dummies, when the man walked in.

"You're Slobold?" the man asked.

"That's right, sir," Slobold said, jumping to his feet and straightening his vest.

"I'm Mr. Bellis. I suppose Klish has been in touch with you. About making the dresses."

Slobold thought rapidly, staring at the short, balding, fussily dressed man in front of him. He knew no one named Klish, so Mr. Bellis had the wrong tailor. He opened his mouth to tell him this. But then he remembered that business was very slow.

"Klish," he mused. "Oh yes, I believe so."

"I can tell you now," Mr. Bellis said sternly, "we will pay very well for the dresses. But we're exacting. Quite exacting."

"Of course, Mr. Bellis," Slobold said. He felt a slight tremor of guilt, but ignored it. Actually, he decided, he was doing Bellis a favor, since he was undoubtedly the best tailor named Slobold in the city. Later, if they discovered he was the wrong man, he could explain that he knew someone else named Klish.

"That's fine," Mr. Bellis said, stripping off his doeskin gloves. "Klish filled you in on the details, of course?"

Slobold didn't answer, but by means of a slow smile made it apparent that he knew and was amused.

"I daresay it came as quite a revelation," Mr. Bellis said.

Slobold shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you're a calm one," Bellis said admiringly. "But I suppose that's why Klish picked you."

Slobold busied himself lighting a cigar, since he didn't know what expression to assume.

"Now down to work," Mr. Bellis said briskly, slipping a hand into the breast pocket of his gray gabardine suit. "Here is the complete list of measurements for the first dress. There will be no fittings, naturally."

"Naturally," Slobold said.

"And we must have the completed article in three days. That is as long as Egrish can wait."

"Naturally," Slobold said again.

Mr. Bellis handed him the folded piece of paper. "Klish must have told you about the need for absolute secrecy, but let me repeat it. Nothing can slip out until the branch is well established. And here is your advance."

Slobold was so completely in control of himself that he didn't even wince at the sight of five crisp \$100 bills.

"Three days," he said, tucking the money in his pocket.

Mr. Bellis stood for a moment, musing. Then he shrugged his shoulders and hurried out.

As soon as he was gone, Slobold unfolded the measurements. Since no one was watching, he allowed his jaw to gape open.

The dress was going to be like nothing ever before seen. It would fit an eight footer quite nicely, if she conformed to certain bodily modifications. But what modifications!

Reading through the 50 separate measurements and directions, Slobold realized that the wearer would have to have three breasts staggered across her stomach, each of a different size and shape. She would have a number of large bulges on her back. Only eight inches was allowed for her waist, but her four arms — to judge by the armholes — would be the thickness of young oak trees. There was no provision made for buttocks, but a flare was provided for tremendous thighs.

The material specified was cashmere. The color was to be jet black.

Slobold understood why there would be no fittings.

Staring at the directions, he gently tugged at his lower lip. "It's a costume," he said aloud, but shook his head. Costume specifications never included 50 separate measurements, and cashmere was not a suitable material.

He read the paper again, frowning deeply. Was it an expensive practical joke? That seemed dubious. Mr. Bellis had been too serious.

This dress, Slobold knew with every tailoring instinct, was being made for a person who fitted its dimensions.

That was a shivery thought. Although it was a bright day, Slobold switched on the overhead fluorescent lights.

He decided, tentatively, that it might be for a wealthy, but terribly deformed woman.

Except, he thought, that no one in the history of the world had ever been deformed like that.

But business was slow, and the price was right. If the price were right, he was willing to make dirndls for elephants and pinafores for hippopotamuses.

Therefore, shortly he retired to his back room, and, turning on every available light, began to draw patterns.

Three days later, Mr. Bellis returned.

"Excellent," he said, holding the dress in front of him. He pulled a tape measure out of his pocket and began to check off the measurements. "I don't doubt your work," he said, "but the garment must be form-fitting."

"Of course," Slobold said.

Mr. Bellis finished, and put away the tape. "That's just fine," he said. "Egrish will be pleased. The light was bothering her. None of them are used to it, you know."

"Ah," Slobold said.

"It's difficult, after spending all one's life in darkness. But they'll get acclimated."

"I should imagine so," Slobold said.

"And pretty soon they can begin work," Mr. Bellis said, with a complacent smile.

Slobold began to wrap the dress, his mind racing, trying to make some sense out of Bellis' words. *After spending one's life in*



*darkness*, he thought, as he tucked in the tissue paper. *Getting acclimated*, he told himself, closing the box.

And Egrish wasn't the only one. Bellis had spoken of others. For the first time, Slobold considered the possibility that Egrish and the rest weren't from Earth. Could they be from Mars? No, plenty of light there. But how about the dark side of the moon?

"And here are the measurements for three other dresses," Mr. Bellis said.

"I can work from the ones you gave me," Slobold said, still thinking of other planets.

"How can you?" Mr. Bellis asked. "The others can't wear anything that would fit Egrish."

"Oh, I forgot," Slobold said, forcing his attention back. "Would Egrish like some more dresses out of the same pattern?"

"No. What for?"

Slobold closed his mouth tightly. Bellis might get suspicious if he made any more errors.

He looked over the new measurements.

Now he needed all his self-control, for these were as different from Egrish as Egrish had been from the human norm.

"Could you have these ready in a week?" Mr. Bellis asked. "I hate to rush you, but I want to get the branch established as soon as possible."

"A week? I think so," Slobold said, looking at the \$100 bills that Bellis was fanning across the counter. "Yes, I'm quite sure I can."

"Fine," Mr. Bellis said. "The poor things just can't stand light."

"Why didn't they bring their clothes with them?" Slobold asked, and immediately wished he hadn't.

"What clothes?" Mr. Bellis asked, frowning at Slobold. "They don't have any clothes. Never had. And in a little while, they never will again."

"I forgot," Slobold said, perspiring freely.

"Well, a week then. And that will just about do it." Mr. Bellis walked to the door. "By the way," he said, "Klish will be back in a day or two from Darkside."

And with that he was gone.

Slobold worked feverishly that week. He kept his store lights burning at all hours, and avoided dark corners. Making the dresses

told him what their wearers looked like, and that didn't help him sleep nights. He devoutly wished Bellis hadn't told him anything, for he knew too much for his peace of mind.

He knew that Egrish and her fellows lived their lives in darkness. That implied that they came from a lightless world.

What world?

And normally they didn't wear anything. Why did they need dresses now?

What were they? Why were they coming here? And what did Bellis mean about getting them to work?

Slobold decided that genteel starvation was better than employment of this sort.

"Egrish was quite pleased," Mr. Bellis said, a week later. He finished checking the measurements. "The others will be too, I'm sure."

"I'm glad to hear it," Slobold said.

"They're really more adaptable than I dared hope," Mr. Bellis said. "They're getting acclimated already. And, of course, your work will help."

"I'm very glad," Slobold said, smiling mechanically and wishing Bellis would leave.

But Bellis was feeling conversational. He leaned on the counter and said, "After all, there's no reason why they should function only in darkness. It's very confining. That's why I brought them up from Darkside."

Slobold nodded.

"I think that's all," Bellis said, tucking the dress box under his arm. He started toward the door. "By the way," he said. "You should have told me that you were the wrong Slobold."

Slobold could only grin foolishly.

"But there'll be no damage done," Bellis said. "Since Egrish wants to thank you in person."

He closed the door gently behind him.

Slobold stood for a long time, staring at the door. Then he touched the \$100 bills in his pocket.

"This is ridiculous," he told himself. Quickly he locked the front door. Then he hurried to the back door, and bolted it. Then he lighted a cigar.

"Perfectly ridiculous," he said. Outside it was broad daylight. He smiled at his fears, and snapped on the overhead lights.

He heard a soft noise behind him.

The cigar slid from his fingers, but Slobold didn't move. He didn't make a sound, although every nerve in his body was shrieking.

"Hello, Mr. Slobold," a voice said.

Slobold still was unable to move, there in his brightly lighted shop.

"We want to thank you for your very fine work," the voice said. "All of us."

Slobold knew that he would go crazy at once, if he *didn't* look. There could be nothing worse than *not* looking. Slowly, inexorably, he began to turn.

"Klish said we could come," the voice said. "Klish said you would be the first to see us. In the daytime, I mean."

Slobold completed his turn and looked. There was Egrish, and there were the others. They weren't wearing the dresses.

*They weren't wearing the dresses.* How could they, when they had no bodies? Four gigantic heads floated in front of him. Heads? Yes, he supposed that the misshapen, bulging things were heads.

There was something vaguely familiar about them.

For a moment, Slobold tried desperately to convince himself that he was having an hallucination. He couldn't have met them before, he told himself. Bellis said they came from Darkside. They lived and worked in the dark. They had never owned clothes, never would again....

Then Slobold remembered. He had met them once before, in a particularly bad dream.

They were nightmares.

Perfectly understandable, he thought crazily. Long overdue, really, when one comes to think about it. No reason why nightmares should restrict themselves to the night. Daytime — huge, undeveloped area, ripe for exploitation.

Mr. Bellis had started a daymare branch, and here they were.

But why dresses? Slobold knew, then, what he had been making, and it was just too much. His mind began to shiver and tremble, and warp around the edges. He wished he could go decently insane.

"We'll go now," Egrish said. "The light still bothers us."

Slobold saw the fantastic heads drift closer.

"Thank you for the sleeping masks. They fit perfectly."

Slobold collapsed to the floor.

"You'll be seeing us," Egrish said.





# ALONE AT LAST

The annual Io ship was already in blast position, and swarms of androids labored over the final ground details. A crowd had gathered to watch the event, to stand close together and be amused. Horns sounded, a warning siren began to shriek. Confetti poured from the last unsealed ports, and long silver and red streamers. From a loudspeaker came the hearty voice of the ship's captain — a human, of course — saying, "All ashore that's going ashore!"

In the midst of this joyous confusion stood Richard Arwell, perspiration pouring down his face, baggage heaped around him and more arriving every minute, barred from the ship by a ridiculous little government official.

"No, sir, I'm afraid I must refuse permission," the official was saying, with a certain unction.

Arwell's spacepass was signed and countersigned, his ticket was paid and vouchered. To reach this point he had waited at a hundred doors, explained himself to a hundred ignorant flunkies, and somehow won past them all. And now, at the very threshold of success, he was faced with failure.

"My papers are in order," Arwell pointed out, with a calmness he did not feel.

"They seem to be in order," the official said judiciously. "But your destination is so preposterous — "

At that moment a robot porter lumbered up with the packing case that contained Arwell's personal android.

"Careful with that," Arwell said.

The robot set it down with a resounding thud.

"Idiot!" Arwell screamed. "Incompetent fool!" He turned to the official. "Can't they ever build one that will follow orders properly?"

"That's what my wife asked me the other day," the official said, smiling sympathetically. "Just the other day our android — "

The robot said, "Put these on the ship, sir?"

"Not yet," the little official said.

The loudspeaker boomed, "Last call! All ashore!"

The official picked up Arwell's papers again. "Now then. This matter of destination. You really wish to go to an *asteroid*, sir?"

"Precisely," Arwell said. "I am going to live upon an asteroid, just as my papers state. If you would be good enough to sign them and let me aboard — "

"But no one lives on the asteroids," the official said. "There's no colony."

"I know."

"There isn't *anyone* on the asteroids!"

"True."

"You would be alone."

"I wish to be alone," Arwell said simply.

The official stared at him in disbelief. "But consider the risk. No one is alone today."

"I will be. As soon as you sign that paper," Arwell said. Looking toward the ship he saw that the ports were being sealed. "Please!"

The official hesitated. The papers were in order, true. But to be alone — to be completely alone — was dangerous, suicidal.

Still, it was undeniably legal.

He scrawled his name. Instantly Arwell shouted, "Porter, porter! Load these on the ship. Hurry! And be careful with the android!"

The porter lifted the case so abruptly that Arwell could hear the android's head slam against the side. He winced, but there was no time for a reprimand. The final port was closing.

"Wait!" Arwell screamed, and sprinted across the concrete apron, the robot porter thundering behind him. "Wait!" he screamed again, for a ship's android was methodically closing the port, oblivious to Arwell's unauthorized command. But a member of the human crew intervened, and the door's progress was arrested. Arwell sprinted inside, and the robot hurled his baggage after him. The port closed.

"Lie down!" the human crew member shouted. "Strap yourself. Drink this. We're lifting."

As the ship trembled and rose, Arwell felt a tremendous drunken satisfaction surge through him. He had made it, he had won, and soon, very soon, he would be alone!

But even in space, Arwell's troubles were not over. For the ship's captain, a tall, erect, graying man, decided not to put him on an asteroid.

"I simply cannot believe you know what you are doing," the captain said. "I beg you to reconsider."

They were sitting in upholstered chairs in the captain's comfortable lounge. Arwell felt unutterably weary, looking at the captain's smug, conventional face. Momentarily he considered strangling the man. But that would never bring him the solitude he desired. Somehow, he must convince this last dreary idiot.

A robot attendant glided noiselessly behind the captain.

"Drink, sir?" it asked, in its sharp metallic voice. The captain jumped abruptly.

"*Must* you sneak up that way?" he asked the robot.

"Sorry, sir," the robot said. "Drink, sir?"

Both men accepted drinks. "Why," the captain mused, "can't these mechanicals be trained better?"

"I've often wondered that myself," Arwell said, with a knowing smile.

"This one," the captain went on, "is a perfectly efficient servitor. And yet, he does have that ridiculous habit of creeping up in back of people."

"My own android," Arwell said, "has a most annoying tremble in his left hand. Synaptic lag, I believe the technicians call it. One would think they could do something about it."

The captain shrugged. "Perhaps the new models...oh well." He sipped his drink.

Arwell sipped his own drink, and considered that an air of comradeship had been established. He had shown the captain that he was not a wild-eyed eccentric; on the contrary, that his ideas were quite conventional. Now was the time to press his advantage.

"I hope, sir," he said, "that we will have no difficulties about the asteroid."

The captain looked annoyed. "Mr. Arwell," he said, "you are asking me to do what is, essentially, an asocial act. To set you upon



an asteroid would be a failure on my part as a human being. No one is alone in this day and age. We stay together. There is comfort in numbers, safety in quantity. We look after one another."

"Perfectly true," Arwell said. "But you must allow room for individual differences. I am one of those rare few who honestly desires solitude. This may make me unusual; but certainly my wishes are to be respected."

"Hmm." The captain looked earnestly at Arwell. "You *think* you desire solitude. But have you ever really experienced it?"

"No," Arwell admitted.

"Ah. Then you can have no conception of the dangers, the very real dangers inherent to that state. Wouldn't it be better, Mr. Arwell, to conform to the advantages of your day and age?"

The captain went on to speak of the Great Peace, which had now lasted over two hundred years, and of the psychological stability that was its basis. Slightly red in the face, he orated on the healthy mutual symbiosis between Man, that socially integrated animal, and his creature, the serene working mechanical. He spoke of Man's great task — the organization of the skills of his creatures.

"Quite true," Arwell said. "But not for me."

"Ah," the captain said, smiling wisely, "but have you tried? Have you experienced the thrill of cooperation? Directing the harvest androids as they toil over the wheat fields, guiding their labor under the seas — healthy satisfying work. Even the lowliest of tasks — being a foreman over twenty or thirty factory robots, say — is not devoid of its sensation of solid accomplishment. And this sensation can be shared and augmented by contact with one's fellow humans."

"All that sort of thing is lacking in satisfaction for me," Arwell said. "It's just not for me. I want to spend the rest of my life alone, to read my books, to contemplate, to be on one tiny asteroid by myself."

The captain rubbed his eyes wearily. "Mr. Arwell," he said, "I believe you are sane, and therefore master of your destiny. I cannot stop you. But consider! Solitude is dangerous to modern man. Insidiously, implacably dangerous. For that reason he has learned to shun it."

"It will not be dangerous for me," Arwell said.

"I hope not," the captain said. "I sincerely hope not."

\* \* \*

At last the orbit of Mars was passed, and the asteroid belt was reached. With the captain's help, Arwell picked out a good-sized chunk of rock. The ship matched velocities.

"You're sure you know what you're doing?" the captain asked.

"Positive!" Arwell said, barely able to contain his eagerness with his solitude so close at hand.

For the next few hours the helmeted crew transferred his gear from ship to asteroid and anchored it down. They set up his water producer and his air maker, and stored his basic food components. At last they inflated the tough plastic bubble under which he would live, and proceeded to transfer his android.

"Careful with it," Arwell warned.

Suddenly the crate slipped through the clumsy gauntleted hands of a robot, and began to drift away.

"Get a line on that!" the captain shouted.

"Hurry!" Arwell screamed, watching his precious mechanical drift into the vacuum of space.

One of the human crew fired a line harpoon into the case and hauled it back, banging it roughly against the ship's side. With no further delay, the case was secured upon the asteroid. At last, Arwell was ready to take possession of his own private little world.

"I wish you would think about it," the captain said gravely. "The dangers of solitude — "

"Are all superstition," Arwell said abruptly, anxious to be alone. "There are no dangers."

"I will return with more provisions in six months," the captain said. "Believe me, there are dangers. It is no accident that modern man has avoided — "

"May I go now?" Arwell asked.

"Of course. And good luck," the captain said.

Spacesuited and helmeted, Arwell propelled himself to his tiny island in space, and from it watched the ship depart. When it became a dot of light no bigger than a star, he started to arrange his goods. First the android, of course. He hoped it wasn't bruised, after all the rough handling it had undergone. Quickly he opened the case and activated the mechanical. The forehead dial showed that energy was accumulating. Good enough.

He looked around. There was the asteroid, a lean black rock. There were his stores, his android, his food and water, his books. All around him was the immensity of space, the cold light of the stars, the faint sun, and the absolute black night.

He shuddered slightly and turned away.

His android was now activated. There was work to be done. But fascinated, he looked again into space.

The ship, that faint star, was gone from sight. For the first time, Arwell experienced what he had before only faintly imagined: solitude, perfect, complete and utter solitude. The merciless diamond points of the stars glared at him from the depths of a night that would never end. There was no human near him — for all he knew, the human race had ceased to exist. He was *alone*.

It was a situation that could drive a man insane.

Arwell loved it.

"Alone at last!" he shouted to the stars.

"Yes," said his android, lurching to its feet and advancing on him. "Alone at last."

# FOREVER

With so much at stake, Charles Dennison should not have been careless. An inventor cannot afford carelessness, particularly when his invention is extremely valuable and obviously patentable. There are too many grasping hands ready to seize what belongs to someone else, too many men who feast upon the creativity of the innocent.

A touch of paranoia would have served Dennison well; but he was lacking in that vital characteristic of inventors. And he didn't even realize the full extent of his carelessness until a bullet, fired from a silenced weapon, chipped a granite wall not three inches from his head.

Then he knew. But by then it was too late.

Charles Dennison had been left a more than adequate income by his father. He had gone to Harvard, served a hitch in the Navy, then continued his education at M.I.T. Since the age of thirty-two, he had been engaged in private research, working in his own small laboratory in Riverdale, New York. Plant biology was his field. He published several noteworthy papers, and sold a new insecticide to a development corporation. The royalties helped him expand his facilities.

Dennison enjoyed working alone. It suited his temperament, which was austere but not unfriendly. Two or three times a year, he would come to New York, see some plays and movies, and do a little serious drinking. He would then return gratefully to his seclusion. He was a bachelor and seemed destined to remain that way.

Not long after his fortieth birthday, Dennison stumbled across an intriguing clue which led him into a different branch of biology.



He pursued his clue, developed it, extended it slowly into a hypothesis. After three more years, a lucky accident put the final proof into his hands.

He had invented a most effective longevity drug. It was not proof against violence; aside from that, however, it could fairly be called an immortality serum.

Now was the time for caution. But years of seclusion had made Dennison unwary of people and their motives. He was more or less heedless of the world around him; it never occurred to him that the world was not equally heedless of him.

He thought only about his serum. It was valuable and patentable. But was it the sort of thing that should be revealed? Was the world ready for an immortality drug?

He had never enjoyed speculation of this sort. But since the atom bomb, many scientists had been forced to look at the ethics of their profession. Dennison looked at his and decided that immortality was inevitable.

Mankind had, throughout its existence, poked and probed into the recesses of nature, trying to figure out how things worked. If one man didn't discover fire, or the use of the lever, or gunpowder, or the atom bomb, or immortality, another would. Man willed to know all nature's secrets, and there was no way of keeping them hidden.

Armed with this bleak but comforting philosophy, Dennison packed his formulas and proofs into a briefcase, slipped a two-ounce bottle of the product into a jacket pocket, and left his Riverdale laboratory. It was already evening. He planned to spend the night in a good midtown hotel, see a movie, and proceed to the Patent Office in Washington the following day.

On the subway, Dennison was absorbed in a newspaper. He was barely conscious of the men sitting on either side of him. He became aware of them only when the man on his right poked him firmly in the ribs.

Dennison glanced over and saw the snub nose of a small automatic, concealed from the rest of the car by a newspaper, resting against his side.

"What is this?" Dennison asked.

"Hand it over," the man said.

Dennison was stunned. How could anyone have known about his discovery? And how could they dare try to rob him in a public subway car?

Then he realized that they were probably just after his money.

"I don't have much on me," Dennison said hoarsely, reaching for his wallet.

The man on his left leaned over and slapped the briefcase. "Not money," he said. "The immortality stuff."

In some unaccountable fashion, they knew. What if he refused to give up his briefcase? Would they dare fire the automatic in the subway? It was a very small caliber weapon. Its noise might not even be heard above the subway's roar. And probably they felt justified in taking the risk for a prize as great as the one Dennison carried.

He looked at them quickly. They were mild-looking men, quietly, almost somberly dressed. Something about their clothing jogged Dennison's memory unpleasantly, but he didn't have time to place the recollection. The automatic was digging painfully into his ribs.

The subway was coming to a station. Dennison glanced at the man on his left and caught the glint of light on a tiny hypodermic.

Many inventors, involved only in their own thoughts, are slow of reaction. But Dennison had been a gunnery officer in the Navy and had seen his share of action. He was damned if he was going to give up his invention so easily.

He jumped from his seat and the hypo passed through the sleeve of his coat, just missing his arm. He swung the briefcase at the man with the automatic, catching him across the forehead with the metal edge. As the doors opened, he ran past a pop-eyed subway guard, up the stairs and into the street.

The two men followed, one of them streaming blood from his forehead. Dennison ran, looking wildly around for a policeman.

The men behind him were screaming, "Stop, thief! Police! Police! Stop that man!"

Apparently they were also prepared to face the police and to claim the briefcase and bottle as their own. Ridiculous! Yet the complete and indignant confidence in their shrill voices unnerved Dennison. He hated a scene.

Still, a policeman would be best. The briefcase was filled with proof of who he was. Even his name initialed on the outside of the briefcase. One glance would tell anyone...

He caught a flash of metal from his briefcase, and, still running, looked at it. He was shocked to see a metal plate fixed to the

cowhide, over the place where his initials had been. The man on his left must have done that when he slapped the briefcase.

Dennison dug at the plate with his fingertips, but it would not come off.

It read, *Property of Edward James Flaherty, Smithfield Institute.*

Perhaps a policeman wouldn't be so much help, after all.

But the problem was academic, for Dennison saw no policeman along the crowded Bronx street. People stood aside as he ran past, staring open-mouthed, offering neither assistance nor interference. But the men behind him were still screaming, "Stop the thief! Stop the thief!"

The entire long block was alerted. The people, like some sluggish beast goaded reluctantly into action, began to make tentative movements toward Dennison, impelled by the outraged cries of his pursuers.

Unless he balanced the scales of public opinion, some do-gooder was going to interfere soon. Dennison conquered his shyness and pride, and called out, "Help me! They're trying to rob me! Stop them!"

But his voice lacked the moral indignation, the absolute conviction of his two shrill-voiced pursuers. A burly young man stepped forward to block Dennison's way, but at the last moment a woman pulled him back.

"Don't get into trouble, Charley."

"Why don't someone call a cop?"

"Yeah, where are the cops?"

"Over at a big fire in 178th Street, I hear."

"We oughta stop that guy."

"I'm willing if you're willing."

Dennison's way was suddenly blocked by four grinning youths, teenagers in black motorcycle jackets and boots, excited by the chance for a little action, delighted at the opportunity to hit someone in the name of law and order.

Dennison saw them, swerved suddenly and sprinted across the street. A bus loomed in front of him.

He hurled himself out of its way, fell, got up again and ran on.

His pursuers were delayed by the dense flow of traffic. Their high-pitched cries faded as Dennison turned into a side street, ran down its length, then down another.



He was in a section of massive apartment buildings. His lungs felt like a blast furnace and his left side seemed to be sewed together with red-hot wire. There was no help for it, he had to rest.

It was then that the first bullet, fired from a silenced weapon, chipped a granite wall not three inches from his head. That was when Dennison realized the full extent of his carelessness.

He pulled the bottle out of his pocket. He had hoped to carry out more experiments on the serum before trying it out on human beings. Now there was no choice.

Dennison yanked out the stopper and drained the contents.

Immediately he was running again, as a second bullet scored the granite wall. The great blocks of apartments loomed endlessly ahead of him, silent and alien. There were no walkers upon the streets. There was only Dennison, running more slowly now past the immense, blank-faced apartments.

A long black car came up behind him, its searchlight probing into doors and alleys. Was it the police?

"That's him!" cried the shrill, unnerving voice of one of Dennison's pursuers.

Dennison ducked into a narrow alley between buildings, raced down it and into the next street.

There were two cars on that street, at either end of the block, their headlights shining toward each other, moving slowly to trap him in the middle. The alley gleamed with light now, from the first car's headlights shining down it. He was surrounded.

Dennison raced to the nearest apartment building and yanked at the door. It was locked. The two cars were almost even with him. And, looking at them, Dennison remembered the unpleasant jog his memory had given him earlier.

The two cars were hearses.

The men in the subway, with their solemn faces, solemn clothing, subdued neckties, shrill, indignant voices — they had reminded him of undertakers. They *had* been undertakers!

Of course! Of course! Oil companies might want to block the invention of a cheap new fuel which could put them out of business; steel corporations might try to stop the development of an inexpensive, stronger-than-steel plastic...

And the production of an immortality serum would put the undertakers out of business.



His progress, and the progress of thousands of other researchers in biology, must have been watched, And when he made his discovery, they had been ready.

The hearses stopped, and somber-faced, respectable-looking men in black suits and pearl-gray neckties poured out and seized him. The briefcase was yanked out of his hand. He felt the prick of a needle in his shoulder. Then, with no transitional dizziness, he passed out.

He came to sitting in an armchair. There were armed men on either side of him. In front of him stood a small, plump, undistinguished-looking man in sedate clothing.

"My name is Mr. Bennet," the plump man said. "I wish to beg your forgiveness, Mr. Dennison, for the violence to which you were subjected. We found out about your invention only at the last moment and therefore had to improvise. The bullets were meant only to frighten and delay you. Murder was not our intention."

"You merely wanted to steal my discovery," Dennison said.

"Not at all," Mr. Bennet told him. "The secret of immortality has been in our possession for quite some time."

"I see. Then you want to keep immortality from the public in order to safeguard your damned undertaking business!"

"Isn't that rather a naive view?" Mr. Bennet asked, smiling. "As it happens, my associates and I are *not* undertakers. We took on the disguise in order to present an understandable motive if our plan to capture you had misfired. In that event, others would have believed exactly — and only — what you thought: that our purpose was to safeguard our business."

Dennison frowned and watchfully waited.

"Disguises come easily to us," Mr. Bennet said, still smiling. "Perhaps you have heard rumors about a new carburetor suppressed by the gasoline companies, or a new food source concealed by the great food suppliers, or a new synthetic hastily destroyed by the cotton-owning interests. That was us. And the inventions ended up here."

"You're trying to impress me," Dennison said.

"Certainly."

"Why did you stop me from patenting my immortality serum?"

"The world is not ready for it yet," said Mr. Bennet.

"It isn't ready for a lot of things," Dennison said. "Why didn't you block the atom bomb?"

"We tried, disguised as mercenary coal and oil interests. But we failed. However, we have succeeded with a surprising number of things."

"But what's the purpose behind it all?"

"Earth's welfare," Mr. Bennet said promptly. "Consider what would happen if the people were given your veritable immortality serum. The problems of birth rate, food production, living space all would be aggravated. Tensions would mount, war would be imminent —"

"So what?" Dennison challenged. "That's how things are right now, *without* immortality. Besides, there have been cries of doom about every new invention or discovery. Gunpowder, the printing press, nitroglycerine, the atom bomb, they were all supposed to destroy the race. But mankind has learned how to handle them. It had to! You can't turn back the clock, and you can't undiscover something. If it's there, mankind must deal with it!"

"Yes, in a bumbling, bloody, inefficient fashion," said Mr. Bennet, with an expression of distaste.

"Well, that's how Man is."

"Not if he's properly led," Mr. Bennet said.

"No?"

"Certainly not," said Mr. Bennet. "You see, the immortality serum provides a solution to the problem of political power. Rule by a permanent and enlightened elite is by far the best form of government; infinitely better than the blundering inefficiencies of democratic rule. But throughout history, this elite, whether monarchy, oligarchy, dictatorship or junta, has been unable to perpetuate itself. Leaders die, the followers squabble for power, and chaos is close behind. With immortality, this last flaw would be corrected. There would be no discontinuity of leadership, for the leaders would always be there."

"A permanent dictatorship," Dennison said.

"Yes. A permanent, benevolent rule by small, carefully chosen elite corps, based upon the sole and exclusive possession of immortality. It's historically inevitable. The only question is, who is going to get control first?"

"And you think you are?" Dennison demanded.

"Of course. Our organization is still small, but absolutely solid. It is bolstered by every new invention that comes into our hands and

by every scientist who joins our ranks. Our time will come, Dennison! We'd like to have you with us, among the elite."

"You want *me* to join you?" Dennison asked, bewildered.

"We do. Our organization needs creative scientific minds to help us in our work, to help us save mankind from itself."

"Count me out," Dennison said, his heart beating fast.

"You won't join us?"

"I'd like to see you all hanged."

Mr. Bennet nodded thoughtfully and pursed his small lips. "You have taken your own serum, have you not?"

Dennison nodded. "I suppose that means you kill me now?"

"We don't kill," Mr. Bennet said. "We merely wait. I think you are a reasonable man, and I think you'll come to see things our way. We'll be around a long time. So will you. Take him away."

Dennison was led to an elevator that dropped deep into the Earth. He was marched down a long passageway lined with armed men. They went through four massive doors. At the fifth, Dennison was pushed inside alone, and the door was locked behind him.

He was in a large, well-furnished apartment. There were perhaps twenty people in the room, and they came forward to meet him.

One of them, a stocky, bearded man, was an old college acquaintance of Dennison's.

"Jim Ferris?"

"That's right," Ferris said. "Welcome to the Immortality Club, Dennison."

"I read you were killed in an air crash last year."

"I merely — disappeared," Ferris said, with a rueful smile, "after inventing the immortality serum. Just like the others."

"All of them?"

"Fifteen of the men here invented the serum independently. The rest are successful inventors in other fields. Our oldest member is Doctor Li, a serum discoverer, who disappeared from San Francisco in Nineteen-eleven. You are our latest acquisition. Our clubhouse is probably the most carefully guarded place on Earth."

Dennison said, "Nineteen-eleven!" Despair flooded him and he sat down heavily in a chair. "Then there's no possibility of rescue?"

"None. There are only four choices available to us," Ferris said. "Some have left us and joined the Undertakers. Others have suicided.



A few have gone insane. The rest of us have formed the Immortality Club."

"What for?" Dennison bewilderedly asked.

"To get out of this place!" said Ferris. "To escape and give our discoveries to the world. To stop those hopeful little dictators upstairs."

"They must know what you're planning."

"Of course. But they let us live because, every so often, one of us gives up and joins them. And they don't think we can ever break out. They're much too smug. It's the basic defect of all power-elites, and their eventual undoing."

"You said this was the most closely guarded place on Earth?"

"It is," Ferris said.

"And some of you have been trying to break out for fifty years? Why, it'll take forever to escape!"

"Forever is exactly how long we have," said Ferris. "But we hope it won't take quite that long. Every new man brings new ideas, plans. One of them is bound to work."

"*Forever*," Dennison said, his face buried in his hands.

"You can go back upstairs and join them," Ferris said, with a hard note in his voice, "or you can suicide, or just sit in a corner and go quietly mad. Take your pick."

Dennison looked up. "I must be honest with you and with myself. I don't think we can escape. Furthermore, I don't think any of you really believe we can."

Ferris shrugged his shoulders.

"Aside from that," Dennison said, "I think it's a damned good idea. If you'll bring me up to date, I'll contribute whatever I can to the Forever Project. And let's hope their complacency lasts."

"It will," Ferris said.

The escape did not take forever, of course. In one hundred and thirty-seven years, Dennison and his colleagues made their successful breakout and revealed the Undertakers' Plot. The Undertakers were tried before the High Court on charges of kidnapping, conspiracy to overthrow the government, and illegal possession of immortality. They were found guilty on all counts and summarily executed.

Dennison and his colleagues were also in illegal possession of immortality, which is the privilege only of our governmental elite. But the death penalty was waived in view of the Immortality Club's service to the State.



This mercy was premature, however. After some months the members of the Immortality Club went into hiding, with the avowed purpose of overthrowing the Elite Rule and disseminating immortality among the masses. Project Forever, as they termed it, has received some support from dissidents, who have not yet been apprehended. It cannot be considered a serious threat.

But this deviationist action in no way detracts from the glory of the Club's escape from the Undertakers. The ingenious way in which Dennison and his colleagues broke out of their seemingly impregnable prison, using only a steel belt buckle, a tungsten filament, three hens' eggs, and twelve chemicals that can be readily obtained from the human body, is too well known to be repeated here.

# THE SWEEPER OF LORAY

"Absolutely impossible," declared Professor Carver.

"But I saw it," said Fred, his companion and bodyguard. "Late last night, I saw it! They carried in this hunter — he had his head half ripped off — and they —"

"Wait," Professor Carver said, leaning forward expectantly.

They had left their spaceship before dawn, in order to witness the sunrise ceremonies in the village of Loray, upon the planet of the same name. Sunrise ceremonies, viewed from a proper distance, are often colorful and can provide a whole chapter for an anthropologist's book; but Loray, as usual, proved a disappointment.

Without fanfare, the sun rose, in answer to prayers made to it the preceding night. Slowly it hoisted its dull red expanse above the horizon, warming the topmost branches of the great rain-forest that surrounded the village. And the natives slept on...

Not *all* the natives. Already the Sweeper was out, cleaning the debris between huts with his twig broom. He slowly shuffled along, human-shaped but unutterably alien. The Sweeper's face was a stylized blank, as though nature had drawn there a preliminary sketch of intelligent life. His head was strangely knobbed and his skin was pigmented a dirty gray.

The Sweeper sang to himself as he swept, in a thick, guttural voice. In only one way was the Sweeper distinguishable from his fellow Lorayans: painted across his face was a broad black band. This was his mark of station, the lowest possible station in that primitive society.

"Now then," Professor Carver said, after the sun had arisen without incident, "a phenomenon such as you describe could not

exist. And it most especially could not exist upon a debased, scrubby little planet like this."

"I saw what I saw," Fred maintained. "I don't know from possible, Professor. I saw it. You want to pass it up, that's up to you."

He leaned against the gnarly bole of a stabcus tree, folded his arms across his meager chest and glowered at the thatch-roofed village. They had been on Loray for nearly two months and Fred detested the village more each day.

He was an underweight, unlovely young man and he wore his hair in a bristling crewcut which accentuated the narrowness of his brow. He had accompanied the professor for close to ten years, had journeyed with him to dozens of planets, and had seen many strange and wonderful things. Everything he saw, however, only increased his contempt for the Galaxy at large. He desired only to return, wealthy and famous, or wealthy and unknown, to his home in Bayonne, New Jersey.

"This thing could make us rich," Fred accused. "And *you* want to pass it up."

Professor Carver pursed his lips thoughtfully. Wealth was a pleasant thought, of course. But the professor didn't want to interrupt his important scientific work to engage in a wild goose chase. He was now completing his great book, the book that would fully amplify and document the thesis that he had put forth in his first paper, "Color Blindness Among the Thang Peoples." He had expanded the thesis in his book, *LACK OF COORDINATION IN THE DRANG RACE*. He had generalized it in his monumental *INTELLIGENCE DEFICIENCIES AROUND THE GALAXY*, in which he proved conclusively that intelligence among Non-Terrans decreases arithmetically as their planet's distance from Terra increases geometrically.

Now the thesis had come to full flower in Carver's most recent work, his unifying effort, which was to be titled *Underlying Causes of Implicit Inferiority of Non-Terran Peoples*.

"If you're right — " Carver said.

"Look!" Fred cried. "They're bringing in another! See for yourself!"

Professor Carver hesitated. He was a portly, impressive, red-jowled man, given to slow and deliberate movement. He was dressed in a tropical explorer's uniform, although Loray was in a temperate zone. He carried a leather swagger stick, and strapped to his waist was a large revolver, a twin to the one Fred wore.

"If you're right," Carver said slowly, "it would indeed be, so to speak, a feather in the cap."

"Come on!" said Fred.

Four srag hunters were carrying a wounded companion to the medicine hut, and Carver and Fred fell in beside them. The hunters were visibly exhausted; they must have trekked for days to bring their friend to the village, for the srag hunts ranged deep into the rain-forest.

"Looks done for, huh?" Fred whispered.

Professor Carver nodded. Last month he had photographed a srag, from a vantage point very high in a very tall, stout tree. He knew it for a large, ill-tempered, quick-moving beast, with a dismaying array of claws, teeth, and horns. It was also the only non-taboo meat-bearing animal on the planet. The natives had to kill srag or starve.

But the wounded man had not been quick enough with spear and shield, and the srag had opened him from throat to pelvis. The hunter had bled copiously, even though the wound had been hastily bound with dried grasses. Mercifully, he was unconscious.

"That chap hasn't a chance," Carver remarked. "It's a miracle he's stayed alive this long. Shock alone, to say nothing of the depth and extent of the wound — "

"You'll see," Fred said.

The village had suddenly come awake. Men and women, gray-skinned, knobby-headed, looked silently as the hunters marched toward the medicine hut. The Sweeper paused to watch. The village's only child stood before his parents' hut, and, thumb in mouth, stared at the procession. Deg, the medicine man, came out to meet the hunters, already wearing his ceremonial mask. The healing dancers assembled, quickly putting on their makeup.

"Think you can fix him, Doc?" Fred asked.

"One may hope," Deg replied piously.

They entered the dimly lighted medicine hut. The wounded Loray was laid tenderly upon a pallet of grasses and the dancers began to perform before him. Deg started a solemn chant.

"That'll never do it," Professor Carver pointed out to Fred, with the interested air of a man watching a steam shovel in operation. "Too late for faith healing. Listen to his breathing. Shallower, don't you think?"



"Absolutely," Fred said.

Deg finished his chant and bent over the wounded hunter. The Lorayan's breathing was labored. It slowed, hesitated...

"It is time!" cried the medicine man. He took a small wooden tube out of his pouch, uncorked it, and held it to the dying man's lips. The hunter drank. And then —

Carver blinked, and Fred grinned triumphantly. The hunter's breathing was becoming stronger. As they watched, the great gash became a line of scar tissue, then a thin pink mark, then an almost invisible white line.

The hunter sat up, scratched his head, grinned foolishly, and asked for something to drink, preferably intoxicating.

Deg declared a festival on the spot.

Carver and Fred moved to the edge of the rain-forest for a conference. The professor walked like a man in a dream. His pendulous lower lip was thrust out and occasionally he shook his head.

"How about it?" Fred asked.

"It shouldn't be possible," said Carver dazedly. "No substance in nature should react like that. And you saw it work last night also?"

"Damned well right," Fred said. "They brought in this hunter — he had his head pulled half off. He swallowed some of that stuff and healed right before my eyes."

"Man's age-old dream," Carver mused. "A universal panacea!"

"We could get any price for stuff like that," Fred said.

"Yes, we could — as well as performing a duty to science," Professor Carver reminded him sternly. "Yes, Fred, I think we should obtain some of that substance."

They turned and, with firm strides, marched back to the village.

Dances were in progress, given by various members of the beast cults. At the moment, the Sathgohani, a cult representing a medium-sized deerlike animal, were performing. They could be recognized by the three red dots on their foreheads. Waiting their turn were the men of the Dresfeyxi and the Taganyes, cults representing other forest animals. The beasts adopted by the cults were taboo and there was an absolute injunction against their slaughter. Carver had been unable to discover the rationale behind this rule. The Lorayans refused to speak of it.

Deg, the medicine man, had removed his ceremonial mask. He was seated in front of his hut, watching the dancing. He arose when the Earthmen approached him.

"Peace!" he said.

"Sure," said Fred. "Nice job you did this morning."

Deg smiled modestly. "The gods answered our prayers."

"The gods?" said Carver. "It looked as though the serum did most of the work."

"Serum? Oh, the sersee juice!" Deg made a ceremonial gesture as he mentioned the name. "Yes, the sersee juice is the mother of the Lorayan people."

"We'd like to buy some," Fred said bluntly, ignoring Professor Carver's disapproving frown. "What would you take for a gallon?"

"I am sorry," Deg said.

"How about some nice beads? Mirrors? Or maybe a couple of steel knives?"

"It cannot be done," the medicine man asserted. "The sersee juice is sacred. It must be used only for holy healing."

"Don't hand me that," Fred said, a flush mounting his sallow cheek. "You gooks think you can —"

"We quite understand," Carver broke in smoothly. "We know about sacred things. Sacred things are sacred. They are not to be touched by profane hands."

"Are you crazy?" Fred whispered in English.

"You are a wise man," Deg said gravely. "You understand why I must refuse you."

"Of course. But it happens, Deg, I am a medicine man in my own country."

"Ah? I did not know this!"

"It is so. As a matter of fact, in my particular line, I am the highest medicine man."

"Then you must be a very holy man," Deg said, bowing his head.

"Man, he's holy!" Fred put in emphatically. "Holiest man you'll ever see around here."

"Please, Fred," Carver said, blinking modestly. He said to the medicine man, "It's true, although I don't like to hear about it. Under the circumstances, however, you can see that it would not be wrong to give me some sersee juice. On the contrary, it is your priestly duty to give me some."

The medicine man pondered for a long time while contrary emotions passed just barely perceptibly over his almost blank face. At last he said, "It may be so. Unfortunately, I cannot do what you require."

"Why not?"

"Because there is so little sersee juice, so terribly little. There is hardly enough for the village."

Deg smiled sadly and walked away.

Life in the village continued its simple, invariant way. The Sweeper moved slowly along, cleaning with his twig broom. The hunters trekked out in search of sraggs. The women of the village prepared food and looked after the village's one child. The priests and dancers prayed nightly for the sun to rise in the morning. Everyone was satisfied, in a humble, submissive fashion.

Everyone except the Earthmen.

They had more talks with Deg and slowly learned the complete story of the sersee juice and the troubles surrounding it.

The sersee bush was a small and sickly affair. It did not flourish in a state of nature. Yet it resisted cultivation and positively defied transplantation. The best one could do was to weed thoroughly around it and hope it would blossom. But most sersee bushes struggled for a year or two, then gave up the ghost. A few blossomed, and a few out of the few lived long enough to produce their characteristic red berries.

From the berry of the sersee bush was squeezed the elixir that meant life to the people of Loray.

"And you must remember," Deg pointed out, "how sparsely the sersee grows and how widely scattered it is. We must search for months, sometimes, to find a single bush with berries. And those berries will save the life of only a single Lorayan, or perhaps two at the most."

"Sad, very sad," Carver said. "But surely some form of intensive fertilization —"

"Everything has been tried."

"I realize," Carver said earnestly, "how important the sersee juice is to you. But if you could give us a little — even a pint or two — we could take it to Earth, have it examined, synthesized, perhaps. Then you could have all you need."

"But we dare not give any. Have you noticed how few children we have?"

Carver nodded.

"There are very few births. Our life is a constant struggle against the obliteration of our race. Every man's life must be preserved until



there is a child to replace him. And this can be done only by our constant and never-ending search for the sersee berries. And there are never enough," the medicine man sighed. "Never enough."

"Does the juice cure *everything*?" Fred asked.

"It does more than that. Those who have tasted sersee add fifty of our years to their lives."

Carver opened his eyes wide. Fifty years on Loray was roughly the equivalent of sixty-three on Earth.

The sersee was more than a healing agent, more than a regenerator. It was a longevity drug as well.

He paused to consider the prospect of adding another sixty years to his lifetime. Then he asked, "What happens if a man takes sersee again after fifty years?"

"We do not know," Deg told him. "No man would take it a second time while there is not enough."

Carver and Fred exchanged glances.

"Now listen to me carefully, Deg," Professor Carver said. He spoke of the sacred duties of science. Science, he told the medicine man, was above race, above creed, above religion. The advancement of science was above life itself. What did it matter, after all, if a few more Lorayans died? They would die eventually anyhow. The important thing was for Terran science to have a sample of sersee.

"It may be as you say," Deg said. "But my choice is clear. As a priest of the Sunniheriat religion, I have a sacred trust to preserve the lives of my people. I cannot go against this trust."

He turned and walked off. The Earthmen frustratedly returned to their spaceship.

After coffee, Professor Carver opened a drawer and took out the manuscript of *UNDERLYING CAUSES FOR THE IMPLICIT INFERIORITY OF NON-TERRAN RACES*. Lovingly he read over the last chapter, the chapter that dealt with the specialized inferiorities of the Lorayan people. Then he put the manuscript away.

"Almost finished, Fred," he told his assistant. "Another week's work, two weeks at the most!"

"Um," Fred replied, staring at the village through a porthole.

"This will do it," Carver said. "This book will prove, once and for all, the natural superiority of Terrans. We have proven it by force of arms, Fred, and we have proven it by our technology. Now it is proven by the impersonal processes of logic."



Fred nodded. He knew the professor was quoting from the book's introduction.

"Nothing must interfere with the great work," Carver said. "You agree with that, don't you?"

"Sure," Fred said absent-mindedly. "The book comes first. Put the gooks in their place."

"Well, I didn't exactly mean that. But you know what I mean. Under the circumstances, perhaps we should forget about sersee. Perhaps we should just finish the job we started."

Fred turned and faced his employer. "Professor, how much do you expect to make out of this book?"

"Hm? Well, the last did quite well, you will remember. This book should do even better. Ten, perhaps twenty thousand dollars!" He permitted himself a small smile. "I am fortunate, you see, in my subject matter. The general public of Earth seems to be rather interested in it, which is gratifying for a scientist."

"Say you even make fifty thousand. Chicken feed! Do you know what we could make on a test tube of sersee?"

"A hundred thousand?" Carver said vaguely.

"Are you kidding? Suppose a rich guy was dying and we had the only thing to cure him. He'd give everything he owned! Millions!"

"I believe you're right," Carver agreed. "And it *would* be a valuable scientific advancement.... But the medicine man unfortunately won't give us any."

"Buying isn't the only way." Fred unholstered his revolver and checked the chambers.

"I see, I see," Carver said, his red face turning slightly pale. "But have we the right?"

"What do *you* think?"

"Well, they *are* inferior. I believe I have proven that conclusively. You might indeed say that their lives don't weigh heavily in the scheme of things. Hm, yes — yes, Fred, we could save Terran lives with this!"

"We could save our own lives," Fred said. "Who wants to punk out ahead of time?"

Carver stood up and determinedly loosened his gun in its holster. "Remember," he told Fred, "we are doing this in the name of science, and for Earth."

"Absolutely, Professor," Fred said, moving toward the port, grinning.

They found Deg near the medicine hut. Carver said, without preamble. "We must have some sersee."

"But I explained to you," said the medicine man. "I told you why it was impossible."

"We gotta have it," Fred said. He pulled his revolver from its holster and looked ferociously at Deg.

"No."

"You think I'm kidding?" Fred asked. "You know what this weapon can do?"

"I have seen you use it."

"Maybe you think I won't use it on you."

"I do not care. You can have no sersee."

"I'll shoot," Fred warned, his voice rising angrily. "I swear to you, I'll shoot."

The villagers of Loray slowly gathered behind their medicine man. Gray-skinned, knobby-headed, they moved silently into position, the hunters carrying their spears, other villagers armed with knives and stones.

"You cannot have the sersee," Deg said.

Fred slowly leveled the revolver.

"Now, Fred," said Carver, "there's an awful lot of them. Do you really think —"

Fred's thin body tightened and his finger grew taut and white on the trigger. Carver closed his eyes.

There was a moment of dead silence. Then the revolver exploded. Carver warily opened his eyes.

The medicine man was still erect, although his knees were shaking. Fred was pulling back the hammer of the revolver. The villagers had made no sound. It was a moment before Carver could figure out what had happened. At last he saw the Sweeper.

The Sweeper lay on his face, his outstretched left hand still clutching his twig broom, his legs twitching feebly. Blood welled from the hole Fred had neatly drilled through his forehead.

Deg bent over the Sweeper, then straightened. "He is dead," the medicine man said.

"That's just the first," Fred warned, taking aim at a hunter.

"No!" cried Deg.

Fred looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"I will give it to you," Deg said. "I will give you all our sersee juice. Then you must go!"

He ran into the medicine hut and reappeared a moment later with three wooden tubes, which he thrust into Fred's hands.

"We're in business, Professor," Fred said. "Let's get moving!"

They walked past the silent villagers, toward their spaceship. Something bright flashed in the sunlight. Fred yipped and dropped his revolver. Professor Carver hastily scooped it up.

"One of those gooks cut me," Fred said. "Give me the revolver!"

A spear arced high and buried itself at their feet.

"Too many of them," said Carver. "Let's run for it!"

They sprinted to their ship with spears and knives singing around them, reached it safely and bolted the port.

"Too close," Carver said, panting for breath, leaning against the dogged port. "Have you got the serum?"

"I got it," said Fred, rubbing his arm. "Damn!"

"What's wrong?"

"My arm. It feels numb."

Carver examined the wound, pursed his lips thoughtfully, but made no comment.

"It's numb," Fred said. "I wonder if they poison those spears."

"It's quite possible," Professor Carver admitted.

"They did!" Fred shouted. "Look, the cut is changing color already!"

The edges of the wound had a blackened, septic look.

"Sulfa," Carver said. "Penicillin, too. I wouldn't worry much about it, Fred. Modern Terran drugs —"

"— might not even touch this stuff. Open one of those tubes!"

"But, Fred," Carver objected, "we have so little of it. Besides —"

"To hell with that," Fred said. He took one of the tubes and uncorked it with his teeth.

"Wait, Fred!"

"Wait, nothing!"

Fred drained the contents of the tube and flung it down. Carver said testily, "I was merely going to point out that the serum should be tested before an Earthman uses it. We don't know how it'll react on a human. It was for your own good."

"Sure it was," Fred said mockingly. "Just look at how the stuff is reacting."

The blackened wound had turned flesh-colored again and was sealing. Soon there was a line of white scar tissue. Then even that was gone, leaving firm pink flesh beneath.

"Pretty good, huh?" Fred gloated, with a slight touch of hysteria. "It works, Professor, it works! Drink one yourself, pal, live another sixty years. Do you suppose we can synthesize this stuff? Worth a million, worth ten million, worth a billion. And if we can't, there's always good old Loray. We can drop back every fifty years or so for a refill. The stuff even tastes good, Professor. Tastes like — what's wrong?"

Professor Carver was staring at Fred, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"What's the matter?" Fred asked, grinning. "Ain't my seams straight? What you staring at?"

Carver didn't answer. His mouth trembled. Slowly he backed away.

"What the hell is wrong!" Fred glared at Carver. Then he ran to the spaceship's head and looked in the mirror.

*"What's happened to me?"*

Carver tried to speak, but no words came. He watched as Fred's features slowly altered, smoothed, became blank, rudimentary, as though nature had drawn there a preliminary sketch of intelligent life. Strange knobs were coming out on Fred's head. His complexion was changing slowly from pink to gray.

"I told you to wait," Carver sighed.

*"What's happening?"* asked Fred in a frightened whimper.

"Well," Carver said, "it must all be residual in the sersee. The Lorayan birth-rate is practically non-existent, you know. Even with the sersee's healing powers, the race should have died out long ago. Unless the serum had another purpose as well — the ability to change lower animal forms into the Lorayan form."

"That's a wild guess!"

"A working hypothesis based upon Deg's statement that sersee is the mother of the Lorayan people. I'm afraid that is the true meaning of the beast cults and the reason they are taboo. The various beasts must be the origins of certain portions of the Lorayan people, perhaps all the Lorayan people. Even the topic is taboo; there clearly



is a deep-seated sense of inferiority about their recent step up from bestiality."

Carver rubbed his forehead wearily. "The sersee juice has," he continued, "we may hazard, a role-sharing in terms of the life of the race. We may theorize — "

"To hell with theory," Fred said, and was horrified to find that his voice had grown thick and guttural, like a Lorayan voice. "Professor, do something!"

"There's nothing I can do."

"Maybe Terran science — "

"No, Fred," Carver said quietly.

"*What?*"

"Fred, please try to understand. I can't bring you back to Earth."

"What do you mean? You must be crazy!"

"Not at all. How can I bring you back with such a fantastic story? They would consider the whole thing a gigantic hoax."

"But — "

"Listen to me. No one would believe! They would consider, rather, that you were an unusually intelligent Lorayan. Your very presence, Fred, would undermine the whole thesis of my book!"

"You can't leave me," Fred said. "You just can't do that."

Professor Carver still had both revolvers. He stuck one in his belt and leveled the other.

"I am not going to endanger the work of a lifetime. Get out, Fred."

"No!"

"I mean it. Get out, Fred."

"I won't! You'll have to shoot me!"

"I will if I must," Carver assured him. "I'll shoot you and throw you out."

He took aim. Fred backed to the port, undogged it, opened it. The villagers were waiting quietly outside.

"What will they do to me?"

"I'm really sorry, Fred," Carver said.

"I won't go!" Fred shrieked, gripping the edges of the port with both hands.

Carver shoved him into the waiting hands of the crowd and threw the remaining tubes of sersee after him. Then, quickly, not wishing to see what was going to happen, he sealed the port.

Within an hour, he was leaving the planet's atmospheric limits.

When he returned to Earth, his book, *UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THE IMPLICIT INFERIORITY OF NON-TERRAN PEOPLES*, was hailed as a milestone in comparative anthropology. But he ran into some difficulty almost at once.

A space captain named Jones returned to Earth and maintained that, on the planet Loray, he had discovered a native who was in every significant way the equal of a Terran. And he had tape recordings and motion pictures to prove it.

Carver's thesis seemed in doubt for some time, until Carver examined the evidence for himself. Then he pointed out, with merciless logic, that the so-called super-Lorayan, this paragon of Loray, this supposed equal of Terran humanity, occupied the lowest position in the Lorayan hierarchy, the position of Sweeper, clearly shown by the broad black stripe across his face.

The space captain admitted that this was true.

Why then, Carver thundered, was this Lorayan Superior not able, in spite of his so-called abilities, to reach any higher position in the debased society in which he dwelt?

The question silenced the space captain and his supporters, demolished the entire school, as a matter of fact. And the Carverian Doctrine of the Implicit Inferiority of Non-Terrans is now accepted by reasoning Terrans everywhere in the Galaxy.



# THE SPECIAL EXHIBIT

The museum was unusually deserted that morning, Mr. Grant thought, as he led Mrs. Grant across the marble-floored lobby. Which was just as well, under the circumstances.

"Good morning, sir," said the red-cheeked old museum attendant.

"Good morning, Simmons," Mr. Grant said. "This is Mrs. Grant."

Mrs. Grant nodded sulkily, and leaned against a Central American war canoe. Her shoulders were on a level with those of the papier-mâché paddler; but broader by far. Looking at them, Mr. Grant wondered, for a moment, if the Special Exhibit would work. Could it succeed on a woman so large, so strong, so set in her ways?

He hoped so. Failure would be ridiculous.

"Welcome to our museum," the attendant said. "I believe this is the first time we've had the pleasure, Mrs. Grant."

"Haven't been here since I was a kid," Mrs. Grant said, stifling a yawn behind a large hand.

"Mrs. Grant is not particularly interested in the storied past," Mr. Grant explained, leaning on his cane. "My work in ornithology leaves her quite unimpressed. However, she has agreed to accompany me to the Special Exhibit."

"The *Special* Exhibit, sir?" the attendant asked. He consulted a notebook. "I don't believe —"

"Here is my invitation," Mr. Grant said.

"Yes, sir." The attendant examined the card carefully, then handed it back. "I hope you enjoy it, sir. The Special Exhibit hasn't been shown often. I think that Dr. Carver and his wife were the last to view it."



"Of course," Mr. Grant said. He knew the mild, balding Carver quite well. And Carver's thin, nagging, red-haired wife was a good friend of Mrs. Grant. The Exhibit must have been effective, for Carver had been perceptibly more cheerful at work. The Special Exhibit was, of course, a far more effective problem solver than marriage counseling, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, or even simple forbearance.

It was uniquely the Museum's project. The Museum liked to have its employees happy and contented, for only then could they serve Science properly. But aside from that, the Special Exhibit was educational, and filled a distinct gap in the Museum's program.

The general public had not been informed of it, for the general public was exceedingly conservative in the face of scientific necessity. But that was as it should be, Mr. Grant told himself.

The attendant fished a key from his pocket. "Be sure to return this to me, sir," he said.

Grant nodded, and led Mrs. Grant down the hall, past glass cases inhabited by Siberian tigers and giant pandas. A water buffalo stared glassy-eyed at them, and a family of Axis deer continued grazing in eternal peace.

"How long's this gonna take?" Mrs. Grant asked.

"Not long at all," Mr. Grant said, remembering that the Special Exhibit was noted for its swiftness.

"I've got some deliveries coming," Mrs. Grant said. "And some important things to do."

Leading her past a muntjac and a spotted chevrotian, Mr. Grant allowed himself to wonder, momentarily, what those important things might be. Mrs. Grant's interests seemed to center on television by day, and motion pictures by night.

Of course there *were* deliveries.

Mr. Grant sighed. They were so obviously ill-matched. To think that he — a small, rather delicate fellow with a large mind — would voluntarily marry a woman of such heroic proportions and meager mentality. But it happened to others; Dr. Carver, for example.

Mr. Grant smiled wanly at the fiction of attracting opposites, at the entire romantic principle. Hadn't his work in ornithology taught him anything? Did the yellow-rumped Siskin mate with the condor? A single wild fling! How much better, he thought, if he had been content to join the French Foreign Legion, spend his inheritance in riotous living, or take to voodoo. Such ventures could, in time, be

lived down. But marriage? Never. Not with Mrs. Grant as comfortable as she was.

Unless, of course, the Special Exhibit...

"This way," Mr. Grant murmured, leading her down an unexpected corridor concealed between glass cases.

"Where is this exhibit?" Mrs. Grant demanded. "I gotta be home for my deliveries."

"Just around here," Mr. Grant said, leading her past a door marked in red, NO ADMITTANCE. He wondered about those deliveries. There seemed to be a tremendous number of them. And the delivery boy left a vile brand of cigar in the ash trays.

"Here we are," Mr. Grant said. He unlocked an iron door and walked into an immense room. The setting simulated a clearing in the jungle, and in front of them was a thatched hut. Behind that was a smaller hut, half hidden from view.

Several savages lounged on the vine-tangled ground, chattering at each other.

"They're alive!" Mrs. Grant exclaimed.

"Of course. This is, you see, a new experiment in descriptive anthropology."

To one side was an ancient wrinkled woman, adding wood to a fire that crackled under a large pot. Something was bubbling in the pot.

The warriors got to their feet when they noticed the Grants. One of them yawned and stretched, his muscles crackling.

"Magnificent fellows," Mrs. Grant whispered.

"Yes," Mr. Grant said. She *would* notice that.

Strewn around the ground in front of the first hut were decorated wooden swords, long, slender bows, sharp cane knives. And the room was filled with a continual background chirping. Breaking into it was a frenzied clucking. A bird honked angrily and something piped a reply.

Mrs. Grant said, "Can we go now — oh!"

One of the natives, wild and strange with his long coarse black hair and painted face, was standing beside her. Two others stood behind him. Looking at the group, Mr. Grant thought how savage Mrs. Grant really was, with her lavishly applied cosmetics, her fox skins and clanking jewelry.

"What do they want?" Mrs. Grant asked, eyeing the half-naked men with something less than fear.

"They'd like you to examine the village," Mr. Grant said. "It's part of the exhibit."

Mrs. Grant noticed that the first native was eyeing her with an admiring look and she allowed herself to be led forward.

She was shown the cooking pot, the weapons, the decorations on the first hut. Then the natives led her to the second hut, and one of them winked and beckoned her inside.

"Educational," she said, winking back, and followed him in. The other two natives entered, one picking up a cane knife before he went in.

"You didn't tell me they were supposed to be head hunters!" Mrs. Grant's voice floated faintly from the hut. "Have you seen all the shrunken heads?"

Mr. Grant nodded to himself. It was amazing, how hard those heads were to come by. The South American authorities had begun cracking down on their export. The Special Exhibit was, perhaps, the sole remaining source of this unique folk skill.

"One's got red hair. It looks just like Mrs. — "

There was a scream, and then the sound of a furious battle. Mr. Grant held his breath. There were three of them, to be sure, but Mrs. Grant was a very strong woman. Certainly she couldn't —

One of the natives came dancing out of the hut, and the hag by the fire picked up a few ominous instruments, and went inside. Whatever was in the pot continued to boil merrily.

Mr. Grant sighed with relief and decided that he had seen enough. After all, anthropology wasn't his line. He locked the iron door behind him and headed for the ornithology wing, deciding that Mrs. Grant's deliveries were not sufficiently important to require his presence.









# **THE COLLECTED SHORT FICTION**

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