

**A
M
E**

DOUBLE NOVEL BOOKS 35c

Showdown On The Sun's Last Planet!

D-427

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS



Complete Novel

SUPERMAN HUNT ON THE RIM OF THE STARS

A greedy, ruthless tyrant, Cyrus Holm was on the march to conquer the entire universe. With his gigantic armada, he figured on turning the whole solar system into one vast personal empire.

And Burke Hartford was the only man alive who had any idea of how to stop him. To save the universe, he would have to gamble that the legendary Race X really existed. Because *if* they did—and *if* he could find them—their secret power would be the one perfect weapon in the fight against Holm.

It was an almost impossible task, searching throughout the galaxy for an unknown race that might not even exist. But in spite of the odds, Hartford knew he had to give it a try. Because the alternative was too overwhelming; universal annihilation!

CAST OF CHARACTERS

BURKE HARTFORD

He would sacrifice anything to save the Universe—even his life!

CYRUS HOLM

A tyrannical ruler, he was threatened by his own ruthless power.

EINER

In his youthful body dwelt the wisdom of the ages.

MICKI ADCOCK

Working for Holm, she discovered, was like playing with fire.

ED TELLER

He wasn't sure who he was, but he knew what he wanted.

RUCK KEGLAR

A lowly servant, he aspired to be king.

World of the Masterminds

by

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Copyright ©, 1960, by Ace Books, Inc.

All Rights Reserved

TO THE END OF TIME AND OTHER STORIES

Copyright ©, 1960, by Ace Books, Inc.

Printed in U. S. A.

"No HUMAN'S HERE," the native said. He drew his knife.

The face of the native who was trying to bar Burke Hartford's entry into the Zylon, the place of peace, was green. The color told Hartford enough. The knife confirmed the color. Hartford hit the green face just under the jaw, a jolting blow that knocked the native backward and across the big room before he could use the knife he had already drawn.

Hartford waited for whatever was to happen next. Behind him, Ed Teller made frightened noises deep in his throat. Hartford ignored them.

A black line drawn on the floor ran down the middle of the big room. To the left of his line were the blue men, a hundred or more of them, around Korder, their chief. To the right of the line were the green men, also at least a hundred strong, around Thethal, their war chief. This was the Zylon, the place of peace. Although these two bitterly warring tribes had been ordered to assemble here and make peace, there was no peace in this place as yet. A hundred throwing knives might spin through the air from the green side of the room.

Hartford dropped his hand to the gun holstered at his hip but did not draw it. Instead, he waited. He saw no guns in sight. Space traders had not yet found it profitable to make the long hop to this planet to sell modern weapons to these tribesmen. But the natives knew what guns were and respected them, Hartford hoped.

A roar of laughter went up from the blue side of the room as the green man sprawled on the floor. The blue men en-

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

joyed seeing one of their hated enemies get his comeuppance. Also this human was their friend, their ally. Because he had knocked a green man sprawling, because he was their ally, they felt stronger.

The green man got to his feet. Screaming, he started toward Hartford. Thethol, the war chief of the green men, pulled a knife from his belt and threw it with deadly accuracy. It sank up to the hilt into the back of the green man. His screams of rage turned to fear. Trying to twist his body to pull the knife from his back, he fell lifeless to the floor. Two green men picked up his body and carried it to the back door, where they flung it like so much carrion out into the night.

Hartford took his hand off the gun at his hip.

"They knifed their own man!" Teller gasped.

"They sure did."

"But why?"

"Because he made them lose face, because he tried to bluff me and failed," Hartford answered. "The only law they know is that of survival of the fittest. If you start a fight and lose it, your own kind will eliminate you on this planet."

"R—rough on losers," Teller commented, in a voice that had developed into a squeak.

"It's their world, let them run it the way they please," Hartford answered. "Where food is short and life is hard, races often eliminate their weaklings, sometimes leaving sickly infants to the wolves. We had this custom on Earth long, long ago. In one sense, we still have it. The big space companies are as ruthless as these natives. They don't care who dies, as long as they show a profit." Bitterness that came of a knowledge of the space companies, and a sickness with their ways, crept into his voice. Glancing around the room, his gaze fell on Korder, the war chief of the blue men. He

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

nodded to Korder. The war chief nodded in reply. With Teller following close behind him, Hartford crossed the line that ran down the middle of the floor of the big room.

In this place of peace, you were either blue or green. There was no middle ground. A buzz of smothered anger went up from the green side of the line. Hartford stopped and turned to face the green men. The buzz went into quick silence. Perhaps it was the gun at his hip that made the green men try to hide their feelings, perhaps it was the sight of the lithe six feet of height, with an Earth weight that was close to 180 pounds of muscle and bone with no fat anywhere in sight, that sent the buzz of anger into silence. Perhaps it was the expression on his face that made them think twice. It was not a grim expression, but it showed that the big man was wary, alert, and ready for anything. Hartford turned back to the blue side of the room.

Burke Hartford and Ed Teller had been here almost six months. During this time they had learned to like the blue men. Perhaps Hartford liked them most of all because they were almost hopelessly outnumbered here in this Great Depression of Pluto, the only place on the Outermost Planet where enough air lingered to make life of a sort possible. If it was not a good life, it was still the best these people knew. The outnumbered blue race would not continue to have even this very much longer, unless they were helped. They were definitely the underdogs. Because of this, Burke Hartford liked them. He and Teller had learned their language. Though their business here on Pluto did not concern either race, they had adopted the blue people.

As the buzz of anger went into silence and Hartford turned away from the green men, a sort of grateful sigh went up from the blue side of the room. Perhaps the blue people saw in these two humans the answer to their prayers for help.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Korder's battered, scarred face broke into a grin. Hartford bowed to the blue war chief, not the deep bow that an inferior makes to a superior, but the short bow that is fitting between equals. Korder bowed in return. The blue chief outweighed the human at least forty pounds. In his hands he held a huge war club, the end of which rested on the floor. His belt was studded with throwing knives. A round shield made of metal, which Hartford had given him, rested on his left shoulder.

"It is good that you showed the green devils where you stand," Korder said, in the blue language. "They will not be so eager to come upon our homes in our absence, and carry away our women and children, now that they know we have powerful friends."

"It is good to be with the blue people," Hartford answered politely. "Has the—ah—peacemaker arrived yet?"

"The Great One has not as yet honored us with his presence."

"How long will you wait for him?"

Korder showed surprise at this question. "Until he arrives," he answered.

Hartford tried to imagine the state of mind that would produce patient waiting for days, weeks, or months if need be. He failed in the effort. Humans had little of such patience.

"Who is this Great One?"

"He said his name was Einer."

"How do you know he is coming?"

"He appeared before one of our young men, with a great war club that glowed with many colors, and said that the war was over and for us to come to the Zylon and make peace," Korder patiently explained.

"Young men are sometimes given to visions," Hartford said, doubt in his voice.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Korder nodded toward the green men. "They are here," he said, as if this settled the matter.

"But why did he come to a young man? Why didn't he come to you, the war chief, and tell you to make peace? You are the leader of your people."

"The Great Ones go to whom they please," Korder answered. "They care no more for a war chief than they do for a child in its mother's arms—sometimes less, it has always seemed to me."

"Did you see this Great One, this Einer?"

"No."

"Did you ever see a peacemaker?"

"Yes, twice. The first, when I was too young yet to lift a war club, one came to stop the fighting. I caught a glimpse of him. He was red in color, and tall and thin, like the pictures of the ones from the Red Planet that you showed me in a book."

"Was he a Martian?" Hartford questioned. Behind him, he knew that Ed Teller was listening very eagerly.

"Perhaps. I have never seen a Martian, unless he was one. Again—this was the second Great One that I saw—I was a young man and had just won my right to the great war club. The green devils attacked us. A Great One came and stopped the fighting. He looked much like a frog."

"A Venusian?" Hartford said, trying hard to keep doubt out of his voice.

"Perhaps," Korder answered. He had little interest in this talk and was only answering out of politeness. His main interest was in the open doorway, where he obviously expected the coming peacemaker to appear.

Behind him, Hartford heard Ed Teller sigh and move to the wall where he squatted down and opened a small instrument which he took from the pack at his back. A native off-

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

fered him *peynar* from a bubbling cauldron but Teller waved the strong drink away. Teller was disappointed again, Hartford knew. In a lifetime of searching for the Great Ones Teller had suffered so many disappointments that one more ought not to matter much. But it did, Hartford knew. Ed Teller was an old man, how old only space knew. There would come a time when one more disappointment would finally break his heart.

"How do Martians and Venusians get here? Do they come in a ship?"

"We have not seen such ships," Korder replied. "Long, long before the humans came in ships, the Great Ones were coming, our legends say. Some say they ride the light beams, others say they are gods and come out of nothing when they wish."

"Um," Hartford said. It was his turn to be disappointed. Always when he and Teller seemed to have a good clue to the mysterious people that Teller insisted existed, the trail faded away into superstitious talk of gods that rode light planes. The natives had legends of these people, the jungle traders on Venus had heard of them, the desert traders on Mars told stories about them, even the single trader here in the Great Depression of Pluto was willing to admit that the green men had heard of them. If given enough *peynar*, this trader would have talked about the mysterious people at great length, but Hartford and Teller had not stayed long with him. He was on the green side.

Yet the trail that they had followed led here, to the Outermost Planet. Race X, Hartford thought. I wonder—He let his thoughts trail off into nothingness. Wondering was not much good when you did not have some solid facts to back it up.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Would you care for a drink of *peynar*?" Hartford asked Korder.

The war chief bowed and refused. "At some other time, my friend. Now I wait for him who comes." Resting his weight on the huge war club, Korder watched the doorway as he waited patiently for someone he was sure was coming. Somewhere inside him, Hartford was aware of a tremendous eagerness. Perhaps someone was coming! Perhaps the trail that Ed Teller had followed all of his life, and that Burke Hartford had followed too since he had met Teller two years before, finally reached its end in something tangible here in the Zylon, the place of peace, in the Great Depression of the Outermost Planet!

Teller pulled at Hartford's arm. "There's a big ship!" Teller spoke terse, clipped English as he gestured toward his detector.

"Bringing the peacemaker here?" Hartford gasped. Perhaps the trail really did end here!

Teller's lined face fell. "I don't think so. I think it is a ship of one of the great space companies. It has arrived since I checked last, within the past hour, and has gone into orbit around the planet. But he will come, Burke. He will come. You will see. He will come." Teller's face lightened with eagerness and hope as he spoke. "There is something here on Pluto. You will see that I speak true."

"What would a space company ship be doing here?" Hartford's voice was suddenly sharp. He knew the great space companies. They were robber-barons, they were thieves, they were plunderers of the worlds and of the peoples of space. They infested Mars and Venus and fought wars among themselves over trading rights. So far, Pluto had been relatively free of them, except for scouting expeditions, but this was

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

only because the planet was too far out and too poor in people and in mineral wealth to make stealing profitable.

"My instruments cannot answer that question," Teller said. "The ship in orbit is big, a floating palace. It has already sent out a small ship which is almost ready to make a landing." Teller pointed to a wavering line on the tiny screen of his instrument. "Perhaps they come to trade."

"Traders don't come in a liner so big it cannot land safely but has to go into orbit. I don't like this, Ed." Hartford broke off speaking as he became aware of the far-off drum of jets that were rapidly coming closer, which had just become audible. Everyone present in the Zylon heard the sound. The natives looked toward the roof. The faces of the blue men showed no happiness at the sound. With the blue men few in numbers and ready for destruction, the arrival of a peace-maker was not an event they sought.

The sound of the jets dropped a notch in volume, then picked up again, then roared overhead, then went into complete silence. Landing bursts roared, then were silent.

"It's a landing party and somebody signalled it down," Hartford said. "I wonder if that trader living with the green people—" He shook his head. So far as they knew, the trader living with the green men was the only other human on Pluto.

Ed Teller's gnome-like face suddenly had additional wrinkles on it. "There have been many times when I have stayed alive by staying out of sight," Teller said. "I'm not saying we should run, but I don't like this big ship in orbit, and I like this landing party even less. Why should one of the space companies send a big ship here now?"

"I don't know," Hartford said. "If you want to wait outside—"

Teller shook his head. "I'll wait with you." The old man's voice had a sudden touch of asperity in it. "Sometimes you

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

stay alive by running. Sometimes you do the same thing by staying and fighting. I've come too far to run now, especially when I don't know what is coming."

With the natives, they watched the open doorway. Perhaps half an hour passed before heavy boots clumped outside. From the way they hit the ground, the boots held important feet. Through the opening came two men in the uniforms of the police of Earth, Inc. They had drawn guns. Like the weapons which Hartford had at his hip, and which he had in good supply in his own ship hidden in the country of the blue people, these were gas powered guns that threw either an explosive cartridge with tremendous muzzle velocity and penetrating power, or a sliver of drug-coated steel. Relatively silent in operation, the weapons were none the less deadly because of their lack of sound. The weapons concerned Burke Hartford far less than did the uniforms. The police of Earth, Inc., the greatest of the space companies! Although they were called police, and had legal status according to the laws of Earth—laws that Earth, Inc., had gotten passed for its own benefit—they were actually a private army that was used to persuade traders on the various planets to sell goods provided by Earth, Inc.; to shake down settlers; or, if the major companies themselves quarrelled with each other, to fight bitter, no-quarter wars in space and on the planets themselves.

Their commanding general was Cyrus Holm, president of Earth, Inc. Holm, however, rarely got his fat fingers dirty by personally directing his private army. This task he left to Ruck Keglär, who relished it. In all of space there was hardly a single spaceman who would not have relished booting Ruck Keglär through a port, preferably when the ship was several thousand miles above the surface of a planet, for the long drop on which Keglär and Holm had sent many men.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Behind the first two men who came through the entrance to the Zylon came Ruck Keglär himself. Hartford had not seen Keglär before, but he had seen his picture and recognized him instantly. He took one look at Keglär's bulk and felt an urge to slug him where the fat of the neck became the fat of the jaw. Following Keglär were four other men. Two of them wore the stars of the company police, the third was the trader who lived with the green men. The fourth did not wear a star. With the exception of the trader, who had lived here long enough to become accustomed to the thin air, all wore oxygen tanks and packs at their backs, with small plastic tubes extending over their shoulders so they could get a quick whiff of life-giving oxygen if this became necessary. All were armed. At the sight of the trader, Hartford knew who had brought Ruck Keglär here.

The person who did not wear a star caught Hartford's attention. He looked a second time to make sure. In spite of the tight fitting one-piece suit, the tight helmet, and the gun at the hip, this person was a woman. Hartford knew Holm used women for many purposes but not as members of a landing group bent on a pillage. He saw that she was staring at him as if she was seeing a ghost.

Keglär's gaze came to rest on Hartford and Teller. A look of irritation crossed his face. While these two did not look as if they would give him trouble, it was always best to have no witnesses. He moved forward and would have crossed the line dividing the blue men from the green if the trader, who knew better, had not hurried forward and caught him by the arm. The trader whispered in his ear. Keglär took a quick look at the line, which he had not noticed until it was called to his attention, then backed away from it.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Keglär's voice was heavy with authority. Most men jumped when he

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

spoke to them. He was expecting these two men to jump. The old one did jump. The young one took a step forward.

"My name is my own business," Hartford answered. "What I am doing here is also my own business." He spoke impulsively, knowing his words were not diplomatic, knowing also that he was going to say them. The sight of Ruck Keglär made Hartford's hands ball into fists.

Keglär's face turned red. "My name is Keglär. I am chief of police of Earth, Inc., and I have authority—"

"You have no authority here and you know it," Hartford interrupted. "This is Pluto. By agreement among the space companies, Pluto is free territory."

Keglär's mouth hung open in surprise. Few men dared to talk back to him. Even Holm was a little afraid of his own bully boy. In Keglär's experience, any man who talked back to him like this had friends handy. His eyes went around the room, seeking those friends. He saw about a hundred blue men quietly gathering behind a burly war chief. True, they only had clubs and knives, but in Keglär's experience these could be deadly at close quarters. The human who was defying him had a gun and looked to be ready to use it.

"Better remember where you are," Hartford continued. All he meant was that Keglär should remember that Pluto was free territory, but to Keglär they meant that he should remember he was far away from the great ship where he had real authority, that he only had three men with him, excluding a shivering trader and a woman who did not count. True, the trader had told him that the green men were on his side, but after taking a second look at them, Keglär was not sure that he trusted them any farther than the blues. As Keglär hesitated, and the green men looked happy at the prospect of a fight, the woman came forward.

"I know him, Keg," she said. "Let me handle him."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Glad to get out of this situation, Keglär nodded for her to go ahead. The trader caught him by the arm and steered him to the green side of the line. The woman looked at the line, hesitated a split second, long enough to indicate she knew its meaning, then crossed it. She stood looking up at Burke Hartford.

Hartford saw that her eyes were gray, the color of a high mountain lake under clear skies of Earth, a lake in a setting of green pines, a lake with a mirror surface that reveals white clouds in the far infinity of the sky. For a split second, he thought he had seen these eyes before, somewhere, then decided he was mistaken. He also decided that the yearning which he thought he saw in them, and inexplicable yearning for him, was a projection of his own deep and carefully hidden feelings.

"You bluffed him, Burke," the woman said. "But it just doesn't make sense to bluff Ruck Keglär. He remembers things like that and waits for years to get even."

Hartford heard only one word, his own first name. He saw now that the gray eyes hoped he would remember her too. They also hoped for something else; that he would not judge her too harshly because of the company in which he found her.

"It was long ago in time and far away in space; planets away. When you were just sixteen, you spent a summer with a friend named Reggie—"

"Reggie Adcock!" Hartford said. Memory flowed into him. He and Reggie had been pals that summer, then had gone their separate ways. Something had happened to Reggie, Hartford had never learned what. Reggie's folks had been wealthy. They had had an estate high in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. He remembered all of this, including a high mountain lake which this woman's eyes resembled, but

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

he did not remember her. As he stared at her, memory came and went, then came again. There had been a girl around that summer, a long-legged creature of twelve, all freckles on her nose and braces on her teeth, and awkwardness in her long legs: a continuous pest who had wanted to swim and ride with Reggie and him. And though she could do neither, she had always been willing to try again, no matter how many times she hit the water flat when diving or how many times she fell off a horse.

The gray eyes were suddenly eager, with a moisture in them that was suddenly and inexplicably like happy tears. "You do remember me after all? I see it in your eyes. You haven't forgotten."

Hartford's memory gave him a name. "Micki Adcock. Reggie's half sister! The long-legged tomboy that I ducked in the lake."

"You tried to drown me because I was a nuisance," Micki answered.

"You were a nuisance, but I did not try to drown you," Hartford answered. Suddenly he was shaking her hand as if she were a man and he was trying to tell her in this way how glad he was to see her. Because she was not a man, he was inclined to grab her in his arms and hug her. Then he was demanding, "But what happened to the tomboy?" His eyes went down her figure. The long legs had grown no longer, but in spite of the bulky clothing the fact that she was a woman was clearly evident. Hartford tried not to think about this. In his life, he had had no time for women.

Micki blushed. "The tomboy grew up into me," she answered.

"A fine job he did of it too," Hartford commented. Her blush deepened into embarrassment, but there was happiness in her smile, the kind of happiness that comes from deep, vi-

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

tal roots. Seeing her blush, Hartford was reminded how she had hung around him that summer so long ago when he had been discovering what it meant to be a man. "You were twelve that summer and I was sixteen. I'm thirty now and you're—"

"Please! Would you reveal a lady's age before everybody?" Her happy laugh faded as she looked again at the big man. Into her gray eyes came wonder. She looked over his shoulder at Ed Teller, then on past him at the blue men. In her eyes questions formed.

Hartford, in his turn, was remembering what he had momentarily forgotten. "You keep strange company these days, Micki." He nodded across the room. Over there, the trader was introducing Keglär and his men to Thethol. The green men were grinning. Now they had human allies too, with guns! Many throats might yet be cut, many brains blown to bits, with the help of these allies.

"I was thinking the same of you," Micki said, glancing at the blue men.

"These are my friends," Hartford answered. "Can you say the same for Ruck Keglär?"

He watched shadows come into the gray eyes. "No. But I'm here for a reason. Don't judge me too harshly until you know the truth, Burke."

"Do you work for Keglär or for Holm? Or is this just sort of a pleasure trip?"

"I work for Holm. I am one of his many private secretaries, one of the trusted ones who are taught how to use a gun and are sometimes sent on secret missions."

As she mentioned Holm's name, Ed Teller seemed to stop breathing.

"Is Holm here?" Hartford asked.

"His ship is in orbit around the planet. He sent Keglär

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

down on a job which he didn't explain to me. He sent me along to take notes, actually, I think, to act as a private spy on Keglär. I don't think he quite trusts Keglär."

"He doesn't trust anybody—he doesn't dare. The blood of too many men is on his hands." Behind him, Hartford knew that Teller had hissed between his teeth. "What does Holm want here on Pluto?"

"I don't know, Burke. His ship has been on a pleasure cruise but he has been keeping it near Pluto for the past month. Suddenly he ordered it brought in close, put into orbit, and he sent Keglär down in a landing barge to meet a trader. The trader brought us here. Probably Keglär knows what Holm wants, but I don't."

"It must be important to interest the president of Earth, Inc. This is the biggest of the great space companies, you know."

"I know." Micki's gray eyes regarded him with growing concern. "You're trying to learn something from me, Burke, but I don't know the answer to your question. What—what are you doing here?"

"I hope my reason and Holm's reason are not the same." Anger came up in Hartford, a burst of it which was mixed with fear. Had the great space companies gotten an inkling of the great secret that might exist here on Pluto? Was there more here than even Ed Teller had imagined?

"That's not an answer, Burke," Micki said.

"I'm afraid you won't get an answer from me."

"Why not?"

"Because you work for Cyrus Holm. That's good enough reason in my book, any day."

He watched shadows come into her eyes as he spoke. The shadows became a tautness on her face and a line between her eyebrows.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Is Holm *all* beast, Burke?"

"No honest beast would admit to kinship."

"Does that make me lower than a beast too?"

"Nothing could make you as low as Holm. But you are working for him. You have admitted it."

"I just work for him." Micki's voice had grown toneless. "Burke, if you can't believe me, try to remember that I was a good kid that summer so long ago. I took my jolts and I got up and came back for more. I've taken a lot of jolts since then but I'm still coming back for more. It doesn't matter who I work for, or why. I'm still Micki Adcock."

At her words, a wave of feeling came up in Burke Hartford, a feeling that he could not name, a vague intangible longing for something he knew not what. All his life he had searched for something that lay beyond beyond. He did not know for what he searched. Perhaps it was for the meaning of life. He wondered now if the long-legged tomboy that he had known so long ago and so many planets away shared that same feeling. Was she also searching for something that lay farther out than beyond, something that words could not name, something that had the elements of a fine man-woman relationship in it but also went far beyond this? Life was all over the solar system, ready for the living of it, but who could state its purpose and its meaning? Did Micki Adcock share this same search?

As Hartford tried to find words to answer the woman who had come so suddenly and so perturbingly out of his past, he was aware that Korder had stiffened and was standing at attention. Across the line, the green men had left off their chatter and had become quiet. Behind him, Hartford heard Teller hiss a warning.

Lifting his eyes past Micki Adcock, Hartford saw that someone had come through the entrance of the Zylon.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Someone, whose mere presence had stiffened these wild, warlike natives to instant attention, had come into the room; someone the natives called the peacemaker.

Hartford's eyes came to focus on this peacemaker. In his mind was great and growing surprise.

2

BURKE HARTFORD had a mental image in his mind of a peacemaker. The evidence he and Teller had gathered indicated that such a person might be a Martian, dry and spindle legged, as sere as the ocher deserts on which he had been born, and the same color. He might be a bulbous Venusian, squishy because of a high water content, his voice the croak of a frog from which most of the life forms on the Veiled Planet seemed to have evolved. He might even be one of the round creatures from giant Jupiter, looking like a small butter ball on top of a much larger one, with steel-strong muscles developed to overcome the heavy gravity of his home world. If he came from Jupiter, he would be certain to be wearing a face mask and a back tank to give him a breathing atmosphere similar to that of his own world.

If he was human—and here was the real mental image that Burke Hartford had in his mind—he would be an old, old man with a long white beard and a body gaunt from much fasting. He would have a lined but serene face. His mind, having known all of hate and fear, treachery and cunning; having cast all these aside for the real meaning of true peace, was willing and able to share with others.

Perhaps he would be so old and so frail that he would

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

have to lean upon a staff for support, but even if he was old, he would have authority, power, and knowledge.

With this image in his mind, Hartford looked at the man who had just entered. The mental image suffered a rude shock. The man was human. This much was certain. But he wasn't a man yet in the full meaning of the word. He was a stripling, a slender reed of a youth, who looked as if he had not yet turned sixteen, and whose face had never known the bite of a razor. Adding a last startling touch, curling hair fell in ringlets around his shoulders.

He did have a staff but it was not made of wood and he did not lean upon it. He spun it in his fingers. As he did this, the staff glowed with soft colors which shifted and changed through all the hues of the rainbow.

He was not armed—at least no weapon was in sight—but he could not have carried himself with more calm assurance if he had had a C-bomb under each arm.

At the sight of this stripling, Hartford felt a gulp come into his throat. He, Burke Hartford, had almost been this, once! At least he had been this in physical appearance and calm assurance, though his hair had been close cropped. Somewhere he had gone astray! Youths, such as this stripling, in the long-gone past of Earth's history had thronged the Yard at Harvard, manned shells on the Charles, learned their manners on the playing fields of Eton. They had been at MIT and Cal Tech, engrossed there in the equations of the atom, the intricacies of quantum physics, and Riemann's geometry. Some of them had caught far-flung passes and had run for yardage on the football fields of America. They had raced jalopies in that ancient day, they had manned high-flying jets. And when the space age had dawned, and man had blasted off for the moon, they had ridden that ship. As officers and crews, they still manned the ships of space.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

They had been daredevils, ready to laugh or to fight, always ready to die, wearing life as a bright garment to be carelessly tossed aside when the time came. Always they had been ready to kiss a maiden hard on her full red lips. Hartford knew their history, he knew they still existed on Mother Earth, he knew they were still looking at the planets and wondering what lay in the space sea beyond the rim of the Solar System.

As the stripling came into the room, Korder went down flat on his face. His lieutenants and his men followed their chieftan's lead. Hartford knew Korder well. To the best of his knowledge, the blue chieftan did not know the meaning of fear. But Korder, his great war club beside him, was flat on the floor.

Across the room, Thethol stood erect, to stare defiantly at this youth who had come into the Zylon. The green chieftan's face was scarred, he was two feet taller than the youth, he was broader and stronger, but when the stripling glanced sharply at him, Thethol went to the floor. The stripling looked like a puppy, Thethol looked like a grim old war dog, but it was the war dog that went to its knees, then went flat on its face. Keglar and his four men stared at the youth. Apparently Keglar wanted to laugh. The trader spoke quickly to him and the laugh vanished from Keglar's face. He and his men also went down.

Hartford, Micki, and Ed Teller were left standing. Micki looked as if she was in a trance, Teller had an expression in his eyes which indicated he did not know where he was. The stripling was walking directly toward them. The expression on his face indicated he wanted to know why they stayed erect when all others went down.

Hands pulled at Hartford, he saw one native fumbling for a knife. "Down! Down!" the blue man hissed at him. Hart-

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

ford remained standing. He had done nothing wrong, he feared no man. Why should he lower himself?

"*Tsen nal*" the stripling spoke in the blue dialect to the native who was reaching for his knife. "No violence here!"

His voice was firm but not sharp. It was the voice of a man accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed. The native recognized the tone of command. The knife clattered to the floor. "*No val esto, kuman.*" The native protested. "They do not kneel."

"*Tsen nal*" the stripling repeated.

Instantly, the blue man ceased his argument. Then Hartford had the full attention of the stripling. He saw that the youth's body was very slender and that his skin was almost pink. Hartford wondered if he was actually sixteen. Perhaps fifteen would be a better age for him! But though his body was young, his eyes were old, as old as the oldest hills on Earth, as old as the oldest planet, but—startling contrast—a youthful twinkle was present in them.

"They come of a proud and stubborn breed that has not yet learned how to bow its stiff neck," the stripling spoke, in the blue dialect, to the native who had drawn the knife.

"We bow to The All," Hartford answered, in English. "All lesser breeds have to prove their right to our respect."

This comment got Hartford the full attention of the ancient eyes in the beardless face. The youth looked a trifle startled. "You understand the blue tongue?" he said, in English. "Not many humans have bothered to learn it."

"I understand it," Hartford answered.

The old, wise eyes in the face that had never known a razor studied him thoughtfully.

"You are Einer?" Hartford questioned.

"I am. There is something strange about you, my friend," the stripling said slowly. "You are a seeker, a searcher, a man

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

with a thirst for knowledge so great that it will not let him stand still. Always you must be hunting, for what, you know not."

"If I knew what it was, I wouldn't have to hunt for it."

"An excellent answer," Einer replied. "What are you doing here on this planet?"

"Hunting for something."

"What?"

"It could be you!"

"Eh?" The eyes were startled. "But I am young. You did not know I existed." He waved the staff as he talked. The plastic tube glowed with living colors.

"We knew something existed, we did not know it was you. As to your youth, your body tells me that. But your eyes are those of a man who has seen much and has thought about what he has seen."

"You see too much," Einer answered. Again he studied Hartford thoughtfully. "But when I am finished with these unruly children—" the shaft shone with shifting colors as he used it to gesture at the natives on the floor, "I will talk further with you."

"I am honored," Hartford said. He bowed now, if for no other reason than to hide the elation he was sure was visible in his eyes. Einer looked over Hartford's shoulder at Teller. Surprise showed on his face, then was gone as he shook his head to shake off some impression that had come to him, then turned his attention to Micki. He blinked at her.

"You are a female!"

Few women like to be called a female. This word, in their opinion, relates them too closely to their biological function. Micki was no exception. Her nose went in the air. "Yes. But I never heard there was anything wrong with being a woman."

Einer sensed from her tone that he had made a mistake.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"There is nothing wrong with being a woman. Females are necessary, at the level of evolution on these planets, and from what I understand, they are often very wonderful."

Fewer women still like to be regarded as strictly a biological necessity. Micki's nose went even higher. "You must have found your mother necessary."

"My mother?" The stripling appeared startled.

"Females sometimes become mothers," Micki explained, acid in her voice. "They occasionally produce boy children to whom they try to teach manners. I understand the effort is often wasted on the little monsters."

Einer chuckled. "Well said. Unfortunately, this was an opportunity I missed. I had no mother."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Micki said, instantly contrite. "I didn't know you were an orphan."

"I didn't say I was an orphan. I said I had no mother." Einer answered, smiling. "Now if you will excuse me, these children do not understand our talk. Failing to understand, they grow suspicious and restless, particularly the green ones. I must go and make peace among them." He moved to the center of the room.

Micki started to follow him. Hartford's fingers closed over her shoulder and pulled her back.

"Burke, that man said he was not an orphan, but that he didn't have a mother, either. I want to find out what he meant. Let go of me, Burke. I want to talk to him."

"So do the rest of us," Hartford answered. "If you stick your freckled nose into this situation and spoil it for me, so help me heaven, I'll spank you, to teach you some manner the absence of which you deprecate in others!"

Micki stared at him in startled confusion. Her nose started to go into the air again. Who was he, a mere man, to tell her what to do? Then she looked at Hartford's face. "Burke! You

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

mean it! About spanking me, I mean. Is this that important?"

"It's important enough. Please keep still and use your eyes and ears."

"Sure, Burke. Say *please* and I'll do anything you want." She grinned at him and was still.

"We have found a Great One, Burke," Teller hissed in Hartford's ear. "Probably Einer was brought to Pluto as a child and has been trained here. We must not let him get away from us. Another chance like this may not come in our lifetime." Teller's voice sounded heavily choked with emotion.

"I know," Hartford answered. "We haven't come this far to lose now." Inside, he was aware of a tumult of growing excitement which continued to increase in intensity as he watched what was happening here.

In the middle of the room, with a fine disregard for the line and its meaning, Einer's eyes sought out Thethol. With the staff, he waved for Thethol to come closer. The battle-scarred chieftan obeyed by crawling like a snake to where Einer stood. Again the staff beckoned. This time Korder was called. Korder obeyed. Ordered to do so, both rose, to stand with downcast eyes before the peacemaker. They were two great dogs of war. Each was much taller than Einer, each outweighed him at least a hundred pounds, each could have broken him in their bare hands. But if Einer looked fragile before them, the war dogs obeyed him.

"He has power!" Teller hissed. Hartford nodded. Whether this power was real, or whether it existed only in the superstitious minds of the natives, Hartford did not know. It could produce a similar result in either case but it was his opinion that back of most superstitions was something real.

With an expert command of both the blue and the green dialects, Einer swiftly searched out the cause for the present war. Eight women had been stolen from the blue tribe. For

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

this, Einer decided, restitution must be made. It was illegal to steal women. Then it developed that the women had not been stolen at all—or so Thethol claimed—they had gone to the green men of their own free will, because the green men were superior lovers and better husbands. At this slur, a buzz of hot anger came from the blue side of the room, fists were shaken, knives were flourished, clubs were lifted, and hot words were spoken in refutation. The blue men said they were wonderful lovers but that the green men had lured their women away by lies. Thinking that fighting was going to break out at any moment, Hartford drew Micki closer to him and automatically dropped his hand to the gun at his hip.

Einer had other ideas. He smiled serenely at the angry blue men and pointed his staff at the one who was shouting the loudest among them. Colors swirled. The troublemaker fell to the floor, where he lay moaning and groaning. The hubbub went into quick silence.

"Energy is beamed from that staff," Teller whispered

"I saw nothing," Hartford answered.

"Neither did I. The energy is far beyond the visible range. If he swung that staff in a circle, and turned the energy on at full power, it would paralyze everyone in the room."

Hartford was silent. Was this staff the reason why Cyrus Holm had his ship in orbit around the planet? The secret of the staff was big enough to attract Holm's interest. Or was there something on Pluto bigger than the secret of the staff? Hartford was aware that Micki was watching him, also that she had heard what Teller had said. He had not seen her since she was twelve. Did he really dare trust her? A frown appeared on his face. Inside him, he was aware of the wordless creep of growing tension.

In the middle of the room, Einer was calmly uncovering the real facts of the case. Thethol, keeping a wary eye on the

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

staff, was telling the truth. The women had been lured by lies to the edge of the green country, then kidnapped. Einer sternly ordered the women returned. In the future, there was to be no more kidnapping of women, "lest my wrath fall upon the guilty."

"He's laying down the law," Hartford said. "Will they take it lying down?"

Not a voice was raised in protest at the edict.

"How much do you know about that?" Micki asked.

"You're asking too many questions," Hartford answered.

"I'm sorry." Her eyes were contrite. "But I want to know."

"So you can report to Holm?"

"I'll have to report what happened. That's my job. If I don't, Keglär will. But I want to know for me. There's something here that I want to know about, that I want to join, maybe. There's a lot I don't understand—"

"There's a lot I hope Cyrus Holm never-understands, or you, either, as long as you are on his payroll."

"You can trust me, Burke. I swear you can."

"I think I do trust you, Micki, but I don't trust how much you may reveal without intending to or even knowing you are doing it."

Her eyes were perturbed but she was quiet. In the center of the room, Einer had ordered peace. He was now making certain that the two chiefs, and their men, went through their ancient formula for confirming a peace pact. The handshake had never been invented on Pluto, nor the oath of the blood brother, nor swearing on a Bible. The formula for cementing peace on Pluto was rubbing posteriors. By turning your back on your ex-enemy and rubbing your butt against his, you showed you had supreme confidence in him. Who would dare turn his back on a real enemy? Entranced by the sight, Hartford watched Korder and Thethol go through this per-

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

formance. Even Thethol's battle-scarred face showed signs of good humor. Perhaps peace was better than war, after all! Then all the blue and green men advanced to the line that ran down the middle of the room and began to rub butts together. An hour earlier they had been interested in nothing except ways and means to cut each other's throats. Then a stripling from Earth had entered the Zylon and had given them their orders. They had obeyed him! Burke Hartford found cause for great wonder in this simple fact.

Beaming like a jovial godling, his staff tucked under his arm, Einer presided over the entire scene. In some subtle way, the atmosphere of the room changed. It had been charged with hate, with the threat of sudden death, with fear and suspicion. Now all of these were gone. A feeling of good will was present. Hartford was well aware of this feeling. He found himself wondering what would happen if he went forward to the line and offered to rub behinds with Keglari! Looking across the room, he could not see Holm's so-called chief of police or any of the men with him.

"Something wonderful has happened here," Micki said. Her face was glowing and her eyes were shining. "That wonderful boy has taken all the hate and fear out of these people."

Einer moved toward the door. He nodded to the three humans to follow him. "I'll talk to you outside," he called.

"L—l—let's go," Teller stuttered. The press of blue and green men held them up as they moved toward the door. Hartford stepped through the opening and into the night outside.

On this planet, the star-shine was so strong that the darkest night was never darker than Earth's dawn at sunrise. As Hartford stepped outside, great Jupiter was as bright as a minor sun in the sky. Beyond the sky giant, uncounted millions of stars added their light to the glowing flood that

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

poured down into the Great Depression of Pluto. On Earth, the atmosphere dimmed the stars. Even in the Great Depression, there was not much air. On the high plateau that made up most of the surface of the planet, there was none. When he stepped outside, Hartford expected to be able to see clearly.

He was not disappointed. But what he saw shocked him. Somewhere deep inside, it hurt him.

Einer was moving away from the Zylon. From the left side of the building, two men darted upon him from behind. One struck, swiftly and accurately, with a blackjack, a blow that went home at the back of his head.

As the stripling started to fall, the second man grabbed the glowing staff and jerked it from his hands.

The youth that had made peace between two warring tribes on Pluto had not been equally successful with the police of the great space company known as Earth, Inc.

"We got him, Keg!" the blackjack wielder yelled.

"But you won't have him long!" Hartford thought. He and Teller reached for the guns they carried.

"Don't draw those guns!" Micki's voice came from behind them. "If you try to shoot, I'll knock holes in both of you. Get your hands up, fast!"

Hartford turned a grim face behind him. Micki, a drawn gun in her hand, stood there. Her face was wretched but the gun in her hand did not waver from its target on his back.

THE TWO MEN let the half-drawn weapons slide back into their holsters. Hartford did not try to say what he thought.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Micki was a good kid. She had told him so herself! Gentlemen did not swear in the presence of good kids who might possibly grow up to be ladies some day. And might not live so long! She drew close and lifted the guns from the holsters of the two men. Thumps sounded as she tossed them to one side. Hartford felt her hands pat his body in a search for hidden weapons. She did a thorough job. "You should check my inlays too," he told her, bitterness in his voice. "I might have a C-bomb under a filling.

"S—shut up, Burkel" she whispered in a voice taut with fear.

"What are you scared off?" he demanded. "Are you afraid I will really spank you now?"

"S—s—shut up!" she hissed at him. Then in another tone of voice, she called out, "Okay, Keg! I've got them both clean."

Not until then did Keglal and two men, including the shivering trader, come around the corner of the Zylon. They had drawn guns. Keglal looked pleased as he recognized Hartford with his hands in the air.

"The smart guy who told me who he was was his business," Keglal said, satisfaction in his voice. "How do you like this, smart guy?" Hartford managed to sway to one side enough so that much of the force of the blow aimed at his jaw was taken up by his shoulder. Still, a savage jolt jarred him.

"I'll remember that," he said.

"You should live so long!" Keglal answered. He had more that he wanted to say and another lick or two that he wanted to land, but he saw that the youth was getting to his feet.

"Keep 'em here, Micki," he called out. "If they make a move, knock a hole in 'em. The law will back you up."

"Y—You can rely on me, Keg!" Micki answered.

Einer got slowly to his feet. Rubbing the back of his head,

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

he explored the skull with gentle, probing fingers, winced as he found a sore spot, then shook his head as if he was shaking off not only the pain but all thoughts of soreness. Turning to face Keglär, the expression on his face was not quite as serene as it had been back in the Zylon. He looked around for his staff, but seeing that one of the men had it, made no effort to recover it.

"That's him, Mr. Keglär," the trader blurted. "The big ship landed somewhere up in the old country. I got a glimpse of it as it came in. While I didn't see him get out of it, being as how nobody can live out there without a heated suit and a big oxygen supply, when the green boys told me that a peacemaker had come, it was a cinch he came in that ship. So I set my transmitter and sent the word along—"

"Shut up!" Keglär said.

"I wonder how many traders they've got working as spies?" Hartford said.

"I can tell you," Micki whispered. "Every trader on their list is a company spy."

"What can just two of us do against all the men working for a big space company?" Teller asked, in a doleful voice.

"The first thing we can do is try to stay alive," Hartford grunted. "If we can do that much, maybe there will be something else we can do later." He did not add that he thought their chances of doing this much were extremely small. Keglär would leave no witnesses behind him!

"But he is our only link with Race X," Teller whispered. "I've searched all my life, for the secret of this race. He's the only human I've ever found who can't deny he knows something about them. We can't let them get him, Burke. We simply can't!" Teller's voice had the wail of a desperate ghost in it.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Hartford glanced over his shoulder at Micki. "The most important thing right now is to keep our mouths shut."

"Honest, Burke, you can trust me," Micki whispered.

"You say that when you're holding a gun on me."

"If I hadn't pulled a gun, Keglar would have shot both of you." Micki sounded like a very small girl who has actually done a very brave thing but is certain in her own mind that she is going to be accused of doing wrong.

"Huh! Oh." Hartford realized that she was telling the truth. She had actually saved their lives! "I'll thank you later," he said. "Right now—"

She read the meaning in his glance. "If I let you get away, Keglar will kill me," she whispered.

"You're under arrest," Keglar was saying, to Einer. At this moment, with the situation under complete control, Keglar had regained his feeling of self-importance. In the Zylon, surrounded by wild natives, he had been a little scared. Out here, with his own men backing him with drawn guns, he had regained his lost courage. This kid, whoever he was, would wilt when he realized what he was facing. If he didn't wilt right away, they would take him to the ship, where they had drugs, gas, and other persuaders to use on him. No kid could stand up against the persuaders they had on the ship. If nothing else worked, they could even show him the long drop! That got 'em all, except now and then a crazy fool who would not listen to reason.

"Am I?" Einer asked.

"You sure are!" Keglar said. Triumph was in his voice, plus a sort of gloating that said he was going to enjoy teaching this raw, big-headed kid how to treat his betters with respect.

What happened next was almost too fast for the eye to follow. Hartford had an impression of motion so fast it was blurred. He did not actually see Einer hit Keglar, the youth

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

moved too fast for this, striking two lightning-quick blows, the first at the pit of Keglar's stomach, the second home against the jaw. This happened with split second speed. Keglar reeled backward. His legs were collapsing under him. He was actually unconscious, a falling body.

Unconscious or not, the reflex action in his hand pulled the trigger of the gun he was holding. The weapon burped its gas propelled projectile. But even if Keglar's finger could still pull the trigger—he would have done this even if he had been dead, a last spasmodic action—the brain needed to aim the gun was out of action. The shot went wild. Striking the ground, the slug exploded in a flare of hot white light.

The man who had slugged the stripling with the blackjack was now covering him with a gun. Einer turned and hit this man a furious blow in a movement that was split-second fast. The man gulped and dropped his gun. Spinning like a cat, Einer turned again and dived toward the man who had his staff. This was what he wanted. He wanted it badly enough to risk his life to get it.

A gas gun whooshed its charge from one of the two men who had been with Keglar. A split second before the gun was discharged, Einer seemed to sense what was going to happen. As he dived at the man who had his staff, he twisted his body sideways. The slug missed. Another explosion took place on the ground. It could not be said that Einer dodged the bullet. He merely anticipated exactly when it was coming.

The man who held the staff was also trying to dodge now. He was also trying to pull the gun at his hip. Einer didn't strike him, he went around him. Clamping one arm around the man's throat, he reached for the staff with the other hand.

Again a gas gun throbbed. The bullet went home in the body of the man who was trying to hold the staff away from Einer. Bits of flesh exploded outward. Einer, still holding the

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

dead body in front of him as a shield, was reaching for the staff, which had fallen to the ground.

Keglar and two of his men were out of the fight. But two more men, and a trader, were left. For a dazed instant, Hartford had had the impression that this stripling, this peace-maker, was going to whip six armed men with nothing but his fists and blinding speed. He knew that on any football field on Earth, this stripling would be a sensation. In any boxing ring, in any weight class, he would be a champion.

In another instant, he would be dead. Two men were trying to shoot him, and the trader, slow to understand what was happening, was at last reaching for his own gun.

"Micki, don't shoot now!" Hartford said. He launched his body at the two men in uniform. Striking the one nearest him in the middle of the back, he shoved him into the one who was farther away. Both went down. Guns exploded wildly in the night. Hartford leaped for his own gun, grabbing frantically for it on the ground where Micki had thrown it. He got it into his hand and turned in time to see that he did not need to shoot.

Einer had gotten the staff into his hands. He had pointed it at the two men on the ground. Their bodies were quivering and trembling but they had no interest in guns or in anything else at this moment. In the hands of Einer, the shaft glowed with subtle color changes.

This left the trader. Hartford swung his gun toward him only to see that the trader had dropped his gun and was running like a badly scared rabbit. Einer swung up his staff to point it at the fleeing trader, then grinned, and let the end of the staff drop.

Hartford got to his feet and moved toward the stripling. Micki shoved her weapon back into its holster. "Burke! Are you all right?" she asked. Hartford nodded. Behind them, the

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

entrance to the Zylon was crowded with blue and green faces, looking to see what the noise was all about.

"Thank you," Einer said to Hartford. "If you hadn't knocked those two men down, one of them would certainly have succeeded in shooting me."

"It was a pleasure," Hartford answered. "But—I thought you came here as a peacemaker."

"So I did."

"For a peacemaker, you sure pack a mean wallop in both fists."

Einer grinned again. "Sometimes that is the way to make peace. A long time ago, a president of the United States said, 'Carry a big stick and walk softly.' " He spun the shaft in his hands and watched the glittering lights swirl within the plastic tube.

"I have a hunch that your staff is a mighty big stick," Hartford said.

"That is as it may be." He turned to several blue men. "My children, pick up these unhappy ones and take them inside and give them a little *peynar*. Except this one here." A wave of the glittering staff indicated the body of the man who had stopped the explosive slug. "I do not think he will respond to *peynar*. But first, give this man back his weapon—" He nodded toward Teller. "Then collect the weapons of all the others and bring them and lay them on the ground in front of me. No, you may not keep these weapons."

A blue man handed Teller his weapon. He holstered it. The others were reluctantly laid on the ground in front of Einer. Then the unconscious men were taken inside and the dead body was moved away. The natives remained by the entrance to the Zylon to watch what was to happen next.

"A small demonstration will do much to convince these unruly children of the desirability of keeping the peace," Einer

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

said. He pointed his staff at the weapons lying on the ground. Colors swirled in it, then faded to a pure white radiation.

The weapons lost their outlines in a gray mist that seemed to ooze out of them. The watching natives sighed and Teller gibbered meaningless words. Micki caught Hartford's arm.

The weapons were gone, vanished into a gray mist which the slight wind had blown away.

"The gas chambers did not explode," Hartford said, as quietly as he could manage. "Nor did the slugs."

"No?" Einer said, smiling. "That is strange, is it not?"

"Very strange! A force powerful enough to melt metal—"

"The metal was not melted. This would require heat. The bonds that held the atoms together within the metal were released. The energy contained in the atomic vortices went inward."

"Inward?"

"Yes. If it had come outward, there would have been an explosion. But it went inward, back to its source."

Hartford wanted to talk more about this. Teller was desperately eager to ask questions. But Einer smiled at them and turned away. "If you would like to walk with me—"

"I certainly would!" Teller shouted.

"Then come along, all of you." Einer moved away from the Zylon and into the fern forest that covered most of the Great Depression. Star-shine gave them plenty of light to see clearly even in this place where giant tree ferns formed a canopy of rustling leaves overhead. Teller was bubbling with questions, but Hartford, with another problem on his mind, asked the old man to wait.

"You have something you think important that you wish to say?" Einer asked Hartford.

"Something I have to say. I think it is important."

"Then say it."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Hartford glanced at the girl beside him. Even if he did owe his life to her, how far could he really trust her? Her associations were a dark spot in his mind.

"I'm sorry, Micki," he said reluctantly. "But I am going to have to say this."

"Go ahead, Burke. I don't know what it is but if it concerns me—"

"It does." Hartford turned to Einer. "Too much is at stake here not to tell you that Micki is in the employment of Cyrus Holm."

At his words, Micki turned a horrified face toward him. Einer smiled and spread his hands. "Cyrus Holm? The name means nothing to me."

"Eh?" Hartford said. He was bewildered. Babies in their cribs knew who Holm was! The Bushmen of Australia knew the name of the president of Earth, Inc.! Mothers on Venus frightened their children into obedience by telling them that Holm would get them if they weren't good! "Holm is—"

"Let me tell it, Burke," Micki burst out. "I was going to tell him, if I ever got a chance to get a word in edgeways." She turned to Einer who was staring at her with amused tolerance, much as if she was a small girl whose antics he found delightful. "It is true that I used to work for Cyrus Holm—"

"When did you quit?" Hartford interrupted.

"When I had to pull a gun on you to save your life!" Micki snapped at him. "You keep out of this, Burke. There comes a time in the life of each of us when we have to make up our mind what we stand for. This time came to me there in the door of the Zylon. Right there I made up my mind I was quitting Holm." She looked straight at Einer. "I don't know who or what you are or where you came from, but no matter what you are, I'm going with you—if you will have me."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Her words were sharp little sounds in the quiet night. Overhead, at a great distance, rockets roared. Hartford heard this sound but ignored it. In this moment, he was seeing Micki Adcock very clearly. He liked what he was seeing. Einer, on the other hand, seemed confused.

"I—well, I am honored," Einer said, bowing.

"Then you will let me go with you?" Micki demanded. "I can be useful. I can do a lot of things, anything I have to do, as long as I'm heading in the right direction. But until I saw you, I didn't know what this direction was."

"How do you know it now?" Einer questioned.

"I sense it," Micki answered. "You're going to be somebody important, somebody who does things, big things."

"Um," Einer said. The expression on his face indicated he was not quite sure this was a compliment. "But I am still at a loss. Who is this Holm?"

Micki also seemed at a loss to understand his lack of information on this subject. Hartford explained, briefly and bluntly. "He is the boss of the men who tried to arrest you back there. At this moment, his ship is circling this planet. If you have anything that Holm wants—and I think you have—you are in very serious danger. He will get it. If you are killed in the process, this is not important. Do you mean to tell me you have never heard of Cyrus Holm?"

Einer seemed slightly embarrassed. "Until this moment, I had not."

"If I may ask it, where have you spent all your life?"

"Here and there," Einer answered. "Here and there."

"That covers a lot of territory," Hartford said.

"He isn't old enough to have spent much time anywhere," Micki pointed out.

Talking, they continued moving through the fern forest. Einer did not seem to be going in any particular direction.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"I assumed when I first saw them that the presence of the humans in the Zylon was accidental. I gather that you are suggesting they were there to find me?"

"Micki can answer that better than I can," Hartford said.

"I don't know that they were looking for *you*, but they expected to find somebody or something," Micki answered.

"Then humans, and if I understand correctly, very highly placed and powerful humans, are interested in me. This gives me an importance I do not feel I possess. I am only one individual in all of this!" The wave of his hand indicated the vast immensity of sparkling stars beyond the thin leaves of the fern forest.

"It may not be that you are important as an individual," Ed Teller pointed out. "It may be that you are important because you have a contact with—" He paused, in doubt as to whether or not it was wise to say what lay so heavily on his mind.

Einer looked at him and was silent. His eyes came to Hartford. "Was your presence in the Zylon related to my presence there?"

Hartford knew that the old, wise eyes were watching him closely. The youthful face that had never known a razor was polite. The staff was tucked under Einer's arm. Hartford knew that Ed Teller seemed to have stopped breathing. Agony was on Teller's lined face. Teller had worked a lifetime, or close to it, to bring about this meeting. His life's work, the success or failure of it, rested on the way Burke Hartford answered this question and on the way the slender stripling reacted to the answer. There was cause for agony in this. In Hartford's mind was the thought that he could lie, that he could evade and wait until he knew better what he was dealing with in Einer. But he also knew that the old eyes

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

in the young face were watching him closely. He took a deep breath.

Overhead jets sounded again, closer now. "They've sent out another landing craft," Hartford muttered. "Probably reinforcements for the first one." He ignored the sound in the sky. If things got too hot, his own ship was not too far away. Meanwhile he had to answer this question.

"Yes. There was a connection. We were there because we had reason to believe that—but let Teller give you the story. It's his story, really, and he can tell it far better than I can."

At last Ed Teller had his chance to talk. All his life he had longed for this opportunity, he had thought about it by day and dreamed about it by night. Now it had come. He was so eager to talk that he couldn't say a word. When he had overcome this block, words poured out of him so fast that they were not understandable. Einer listened politely until Teller ran out of breath, then advised him to start over again and go slower this time.

"In 2809, Adam Hollendorf came to Pluto, on a sight-seeing trip, he said. Within a year after he had visited this planet, he came up with the invention that destroyed the last lingering traces of smog from every city on Earth; the electronic marvel that precipitates the pollutant particles as they are formed. In 2820, Dr. Kelvin Marsh spent several months on Pluto. When he returned to Earth he announced the discovery of a cure for all forms of cancer. On Earth today you will find monuments erected to this benefactor of the human race. In 2831 an obscure mathematician took a job as a member of the crew of the ship of a scientific expedition coming to Pluto. The expedition didn't discover a thing of importance, but within two years after he had returned to Earth, this obscure mathematician developed and gave to the world what is now known as Carter's Geometry, which de-

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

scribes and sets forth the laws that govern the distribution of sub-space energy through the Solar System." Teller paused for breath.

"Interesting," Einer observed.

"That's not even the beginning," Teller continued. "In 2851, on Earth, two great groups of nations were at each other's throats. War seemed inevitable. With it would probably come the end of life on the planet, perhaps in the Solar System as well. Just when the war clouds appeared blackest, when the last meeting of the two heads of the war hungry groups was about to break up in hot words, an unknown, unimportant little man managed to evade the guards and enter the meeting room. The identity of this man is known. He was Joseph Hirsh, a government clerk who had done nothing more important in his life than act as librarian. After his talk to the two heads of state, he went back to his job. Nobody knows what he said to the two leaders, nobody knows what he did in that room. The leaders have never admitted publicly that he even talked to them. As for him, he said nothing. But the facts are that this meeting, so fraught with danger for humanity before the arrival of Joseph Hirsh, suddenly took a turn for the better. The differences were smoothed out. War was avoided. All of this happened because an obscure librarian managed—and how he managed to get past the guards is not known—to get into a closed room and talk to two men."

"Very, very interesting," Einer observed. "But where does this take us?"

"I have talked to Joseph Hirsh," Teller continued. "Without ever letting him know who I was, I became his friend. He would tell me nothing that had happened, he admitted no unusual powers, but I did find out that as a young man he had spent a year on Pluto."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Now this is really astonishing," Einer said.

"As to where this is taking us—what I want to know is whether or not Joseph Hirsh had a staff like yours?" Teller pointed to the glowing staff that Einer was holding carelessly under his arm as he walked through the fern forest.

For the first time, Einer almost lost his composure. "Well, really, I have no idea."

"I think you do," Teller said bluntly. "I think you know." He ignored Hartford's frantic cough. Teller had his chance to talk and he was going to take advantage of it. "I think that twenty or thirty or forty years from now another obscure man will walk into another meeting room where war is brewing and bring about peace. I think you will be that man. I think history will miss your name just as it has missed the name of Joseph Hirsh. I think that what happened back there," Teller gestured through the fern forest in the direction of the now distant Zylon, "was really only a part of your training in preparation for the important work that will come later."

Einer was so startled that he took a step away from Teller. His expression was that of a man suddenly come face to face with a totally alien form of life. He tried to put the staff on the other side of him, thus conceal it from view, then thought better of this action. Hartford knew that this youth was greatly surprised. For a moment the mask was dropped. It was hard to be certain in the dim light here, but Hartford thought the old eyes showed great concern, though what Einer was concerned about, he did not know. The stripling glanced around as if he wanted nothing so much as a chance to run away.

"I—us—That story is completely fantastic," he stuttered.

Teller was still talking. "Is it? Remember, I have spent much of my life gathering the data on which it is based. I will vouch for the accuracy of my facts. My interpretations

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

and predictions may be in error, but my facts are not. The facts lead me to the belief that a race of people exists here on Pluto, and has existed since time began to run. Mental giants, scientific wizards, a race whose smallest achievement may well be larger than the **greatest invention** the human race has as yet produced, who **may, in fact, be responsible for many human inventions. I call this people Race X—**

"Responsible for human inventions?" Einer whispered.

"Yes. I have always been suspicious of the unknown genius who invented the bow. It was certainly a great invention. How did the inventor manage to put together a piece of rawhide or twisted gut with a stout bent stick? How did he learn to make an arrow with a notched end and fit it to the string? The invention of the bow is either an act of pure intuitive genius, or somebody taught early man how to do it. Was the teacher a member of Race X? And the art of making pottery so man could store water against drought and grains against famine? Who taught man to make the potter's wheel? Who taught him how to make a simple wheel, for that matter?"

Ed Teller had really warmed to his subject. He not only knew it thoroughly but it lay close to his heart. He had overcome his first mental block and had succeeded in slowing down the first torrent of words. Speaking slowly, with complete composure, he was driving his points home.

"But those inventions took place long before the invention of the space ship," Einer protested. "They go back to the dawn of human history. In fact, they belong to the pre-dawn ages."

"They took place before *humans* invented the space ship," Teller answered. "But did they take place before Race X invented it? For hundreds of thousands of years, I think there has been a regular flow of space ships between Pluto and Earth and that selected humans have been brought here for

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

training, then returned to their home planet to use what they had been taught. The same may be true of the other planets."

"Preposterous!" Einer tried to say.

But Teller was not to be turned aside. "Going farther, I think the evidence in favor of evolution is incontestable. That a lower form often, but not always, evolves into a higher form is very clear. Thus the human species is clearly similar to certain of the apes. Perhaps a mutation took place in one tribe of apes and they suddenly spurted forward, grew longer legs and shorter arms, learned an upright posture, and stopped living in trees. But was this mutation an accident or did Race X bring it about?"

Einer was obviously squirming. Now, more than ever, he was looking for a way to escape.

"Consider other of the early inventions in the history of the human race. Who taught men to grow grain, to save the seed from one year and plant it the next? Was this their own discovery or were they helped. Who taught them to tame the wild ox? Who showed them how to make cheese and butter? Who taught them that the horse could be domesticated, could be ridden and could also bear heavy burdens and draw large loads, Who—"

"But this is utterly fantastic," Einer interrupted.

"Of course," Teller answered. "If you will but think about it, life is always fantastic. The fact that it is fantastic, the stuff of dreams woven into living bodies and brains, does not make it any less true."

Something of the prophet was in Ed Teller at this moment. As he put his dream into words, his old, wrinkled face took on a new life. He was like a young man with a new love, or an old, old man who has finally found again his first sweetheart and has discovered that she is still as beautiful as he had always remembered her to be.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"I suppose you have told this story to many people?" Einer inquired cautiously. Hartford realized that this was a probing question, possibly a dangerous one, but Teller saw no danger in it.

"That I have done," Teller answered.

"And many have believed you?"

"No," Teller said, sadly. "Only Burke Hartford. When I told him the story, he said, 'Ed, Let's go find out if you know what you are talking about.' So he brought me here in his ship. If it hadn't been for him, I would never have gotten here. I couldn't afford the price myself, and I am too old to sign on as a crewman."

Einer looked appraisingly at Hartford. The expression on his face said that he was on the verge of regarding this big man as a bothersome meddler into affairs that did not concern him.

"Did you try stowing away?" Einer questioned Teller.

"That I did, many times. The loading docks were too well guarded. They always caught me."

"You were thoroughly determined to get here?"

"That I was."

"Didn't you know this planet has been surveyed and mapped from the air and that expeditions have covered at least part of its surface?"

"I knew it."

"Did you study the maps?"

"I know 'em all by heart."

"Did you read the reports of the expeditions?"

"I've read every word of every one that has been published."

"Then you surely know that these primitive tribes which manage to stay alive in these fern forests at the bottom of the great depression are the only races ever found on Pluto?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"I know this too."

"You surely don't mean to tell me that either the blues or the greens are Race X?"

"I have no such intention."

"Then don't you think that your idea that some mysterious, unknown race exists here is—well, rather silly?" Einer asked persuasively.

"No," Teller answered.

"Why not?"

"Because I have seen you," Teller said triumphantly. "No human could do what I just saw you do. No human has a staff like yours. You are my proof that Race X exists."

"But I'm just here on a sort of a vacation."

"With a staff like that? Making peace between two warring tribes? No ordinary human could do that, or would even want to do it."

"But if no human—"

"You were brought here, perhaps as a child. You've been taught and trained here, by Race X. And you're going to take us to them." The note of triumph was very strong in Teller's voice.

"Am I?" Einer asked.

Teller's face lost its glow of happiness. "Well; that's what I'm hoping you will do. And maybe praying you will do it. Of course, we can't force you to do it."

"But there are those who will force you," Hartford said. He nodded toward the sky. The sound of a muted jet was clearly audible now. The vessel up there was not coming in for a landing. It was merely floating in the sky, loafing along up there, using very little power.

Einer listened to the sound in the sky. "Um," he said. His tone was very thoughtful.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Will your staff knock a hole in a landing barge?" Hartford asked.

"At full charge, at a distance of not over five feet, yes," Einer answered. "But it is not at full charge."

"Um," Hartford said.

"I gather that you mean something definite by that sound," Einer said.

"Yes," Hartford answered. "I mean this: It will be easier, and much safer, if you take us to the place where you have been spending your—ah—vacation. This would not only save us the trouble of hunting for you, but it will also keep us from the danger of falling into Holm's hands."

"You will hunt for me?" Einer queried wonderingly.

"For the rest of our lives," Hartford answered. "Like Ed Teller, I have seen too much. I want to know the rest of the story."

Overhead the landing barge was coursing back and forth like a great hound hunting through the night for its prey.

"My ship is about two miles from here," Hartford said. "It is well hidden now, but if we take off in it, they will be certain to spot us on their screens." He looked expectantly at Einer, who looked away.

"Sorry to say this," Hartford said. "But you are going to have to make up your mind one way or the other."

"Not that I am admitting that there is a word of truth in this fantastic story you have told me, but if it is true, and if I take you to Race X—this is all pure hypothesis, you understand—but if there should be a Race X and I should take you to it, what would you do after you got there?"

"Do?" Ed Teller whispered. He was dumbfounded at the question. "I hadn't thought about that. Just finding Race X has always seemed enough. I—I don't know what I would do?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Why do you ask this question?" Hartford asked.

"Because the question is important. The answers to it are even more important. Because, if what you have said is true, then much more that you have not said—and perhaps have not even guessed—is also true."

"I—"

"The question is, if you could do what you will, what do you will to do?" Einer asked.

"I—" Thoughts formed in Hartford's mind, vague chaotic things, the desires of childhood, the bright dreams that he had now. These formed a fabric of many colors. He had to select among these many colors and decide which was the brightest, which dream pulled at him the strongest, which he would rather follow. There had been many dreams. He had many choices. Which would he choose?

It was Micki who spoke first. "If I could do what I would, first of all I would learn all that Race X could teach me, then I would go back to Earth—" Micki was looking at her own dreams and was selecting those she liked best. Her breath failed as she tried to find words to express the tumult in her own mind.

"Yes," Einer said, encouragingly.

"I do not know, for sure," Micki answered. "The pictures in my mind crowd so closely upon each other that it is hard to separate them, but I think I would go back to Earth and work with children, the waifs that still crowd our cities, the forlorn and unloved ones, these I would work with, helping them. And if I should marry and have children of my own," her voice caught, then came on with new strength as if she had finally found the very heart of the brightest and strongest dream she had ever had, "I would teach them to grow up straight and tall, so that while their feet were on Earth, their heads would reach the far-off stars. I don't mean this

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

literally, of course, I mean it symbolically. I would teach them to remember, always, that the far-off stars are also a part of the universe."

Einer smiled at Micki. "This is what you would do?" he asked.

"Yes. Do I get to do it?"

Einer smiled and turned to Teller.

"I do not know what I would do," Teller said slowly. "I am an old, old man. It seems to me that what I could do—I have already done."

Einer's smile slid away and was replaced by a look of thoughtful wonder. He looked at Hartford.

"I am an adventurer," the big man said. "All my life I have searched for something. I have gone adventuring in an effort to find it. I know now that what I seek is not in the Earth, or the sun, or any of the planets, but lies in the reason why these things are. What is the purpose of all of this?" His hand swept up to indicate the stars that glittered beyond the fernforest.

"You ask a big question," Einer said.

"Perhaps it is too big for me to know all the answers. No man can know all. But we can learn more and more, we can push back the darkness of our ignorance. If Race X could teach me at least part of what I want to know, then, while I continued to search for the rest of it, I would be happy to teach others, the very few who really want to know what I have learned."

Einer nodded as if he was pleased. Overhead jets sounded again. "You all gave good answers. They are not perfect answers, they are not complete answers, but you are not perfect human beings. No man is. Now, without ever admitting that there is a grain of truth in the fantastic story you have

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

told me, if you would care to follow me—" A wave of his staff indicated a change of direction.

"He's going to take us with him!" Micki gasped. "It's true, about Race X! It's really true."

"Thank God," Ed Teller said.

"Lead on, Einer," Hartford spoke.

The stripling changed direction and began to move toward the sloping uplands that led eventually to the airless plateau of tumbled rock and twisted mountain chain. Here the fern forest began to thin, as did the air. Jets growled above them.

"That landing barge is following us," Micki gasped.

"Yes. I've known it all along. I want to know why," Hartford said.

"Don't look at me as if I know the reason," Micki said.

"Have they got a probe beam that will penetrate the leaves of the fern trees?"

"They've got the best of everything."

Suddenly, with a swift motion, Hartford lifted the pack from Micki's back. Jerking it open, he saw what it contained. From it, he pulled a miniature radio transmitter.

"Damn!" He flung the transmitter on the ground and jumped on it.

"It has transmitted every word we have said back to Holm's ship. Now he knows everything we know. Also it has been transmitting a beam for that barge to use in following us. Micki—"

At this moment, Micki Adcock looked as if she wished she was dead. Horror was deep on her face. "But I didn't know it was there, Burke. They told me I might need the things in the pack, but they didn't tell me what was in it. I didn't—"

In the sky, jets howled, jets in a landing pattern. A searchlight beam flicked out. It fingered with its shaft of glaring light through the thin fern forest.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Don't let them spot us!" Hartford shouted.

As he spoke, the beam caught them, held on them. With a great crashing of breaking boughs, which snapped like match sticks, the barge itself came straight down through the tops of the fern trees. It settled to the ground and disgorged armed men.

Einer raised his staff.

Hartford jerked the gun from the holster at his hip.

A gas gun coughed, then another and another. Explosions snapped in the thin air. Hartford tried to lift his gun to shoot and discovered that Micki was hanging on to his and fiercely telling him that if he tried to fight now, he would certainly be killed. He saw Teller with his hands in the air. Then he was under the guns of a dozen burly men with the stars of Earth, Inc. police glittering on the front of their suits and he was surrendering his own weapon.

He turned to look for Micki.

She was on her knees sobbing as if her heart had broken. Beside her lay Einer's body.

It had no head.

An explosive slug had struck him in the face and had blown off all of his head.

Under his lifeless body, his staff still glowed with many colors.

Above both of them, a vague, ball-shaped halo of light was visible in the air. As Hartford watched, trying to understand what had happened, the light disappeared. He was aware of three sounds. The first was that of Micki crying. The second was that of Teller sobbing. The third was the triumphant profanity of the men who had captured them and in that act of capture had killed the finest human being that Burke Hartford had ever known—or ever hoped to know.

"INTO THE SHIP, you two," the officer in charge of the landing party ordered Hartford and Teller. His voice was brusque, his manner a subtle copy of Holm. He was only a lieutenant but since he had carried off this affair so successfully, and had even captured the weird staff that the boss wanted so badly, visions of promotion to captain were already dancing in his mind. Their arms tied behind their backs, Hartford and Teller obeyed

"Yes, Micki, you too, please," the lieutenant continued. He had no orders about this woman except to return her to the big ship. Since he suspected she was one of Holm's spies, he treated her with respect. Because she was an attractive woman, he also tried to flirt with her. The answer he got from her sizzled his back hair and made him remember his manners. Micki looked like a very forlorn small girl whose favorite doll had just been smashed beyond recognition by the bully in the next block. She couldn't make up her mind whether to burst into tears or to sock the bully in the eye. The look she gave the lieutenant indicated she had selected him for the role of the bully.

When she entered the landing barge, she sagged into the nearest seat. Hartford saw that she was in a state of shock. Teller was in the same state. His hands tied behind his back, Teller sat with his head bowed. For the first time, Hartford clearly saw the multitude of wrinkles on the old man's face. There seemed to be thousands of them, each one sharply etched. Did each one represent a disappointment Ed Teller had suffered? How big a wrinkle would the death of Einer put into Teller's face?

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Perhaps it would be the big wrinkle called death.

Hartford knew that he was in some degree of shock also; knew it because the big wrinkle called death did not seem to be of much concern to him at this moment. In Einer, he had met the finest kid he had ever known. The future of mankind lay in kids like Einer—if there were any others like him. Yet Einer had been casually and indifferently murdered. His body was back there under the fern trees. Before he entered the barge, the lieutenant had casually examined this body and had shrugged the sight of it away. Einer's staff was in the possession of the lieutenant as he ordered the last man inside the barge and prepared to blast off. The glow in the staff now was dull and white, without color and without swirl. When Einer had died, the swirl of colors had gone from the staff, as life had gone from him.

"Take her up!" the lieutenant ordered.

With a swoosh and a roar, the landing craft burst through the fern forest and into the sky of Pluto. The lieutenant got busy on the radio, then spoke again to the pilot. "Take her home!" The expression on his face indicated he was again entertaining visions of promotion to captain.

Eventually Hartford realized they were overhauling an object that looked almost as big as a planet. Shock came up in him again when he saw that this was actually Holm's ship. It had a long pointed nose and a blunt stern from which both rockets and jets could blast if need arose. Steering rockets were visible in twin rows that extended clear to the nose. Below the hull, a heavy three-pronged grapnel hook was visible. Matching the speed and course of the barge to the speed and direction of the huge bulk sliding so easily through the vastness of space above him, the pilot aimed for the grapnel, hooking it with scarcely a jar. Unseen eyes within the ship observed this contact. As the pilot cut the power on the

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

barge, it was lifted upward toward the square hole that had appeared in the belly of the ship. "To launch 'em, all they do is drop 'em," Hartford thought.

Inside the big ship, Hartford and Teller were given into the hands of two big, armed cops wearing the uniforms of Earth, Inc., police.

"Come on, you," one of the cops told them. "And if you give us any trouble, we'll just shove you down the hole." He nodded at the opening through which the landing barge had been lifted into the ship. As they were taken away, Hartford saw that Micki was not being treated as a prisoner. The look she gave him had desperation in it—and a warning.

"This is your happy home, bub," the cop told them as he paused in front of a door set in a steel bulkhead. "If you get tired of it, just wiggle out the porthole."

"Good," Hartford said. "How do I open the porthole?"

"Just turn the wheel there," the cop answered, pointing to a wheel set into the bulkhead of the corridor.

"But the wheel is outside the cell," Hartford protested.

"Yeah, I know. Walk in, both of you." Inside, the ropes were cut from their hands. "If you don't get what you want, just ring for room service." Slamming the door, the cops left. Air was hissing softly into the room. The room contained a double bunk, set against the far wall, with springs but without mattresses, blankets, or even pillows. There were no chairs, there was no water supply. A bucket in one corner had an obvious use.

Teller dragged his weary body to the lower bunk and threw himself on it. Hartford moved to the porthole. Beyond it lay space.

An hour later, food and water arrived. Teller refused to eat and even Hartford had to force himself to swallow. Hours later, the door opened again. Keglars stood there. The sight

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

of this man brought Ed Teller to life. Hartford jumped from the top bunk in time to catch Teller and keep him from slugging the startled Keglar.

"Is he out of his head?" Keglar wanted to know, indicating Teller.

"He was rather attached to Einer," Hartford explained.

"That crazy kid who called himself a peacemaker. I hear the boys got him!" Keglar looked pleased. This time it was Hartford who had to restrain himself. "Come on," Keglar continued. "The boss wants you."

"What does he want with us?" Hartford snapped.

"He'll tell you that," Keglar answered. "All you're required to do is to walk along with the boys here, and when you get to the boss, to answer his questions not only in a respectful manner but also as if you have good sense. Start walking!" Keglar gestured them out of the cell.

Two men in uniform were waiting there. One went ahead, to show them the way. The second followed behind them with Keglar. His anger subsiding, Hartford was again amazed at the size of this ship. It was as big as a small city! He wondered how many thousands of people lived here, ate here, slept here. As they moved nearer to Holm's headquarters, they found a steady stream of people going in both directions. Some were stewards in white uniforms, others were technicians, but most of them were scantily-clad women who served as messengers and as secretaries. Keglar exchanged pointed greeting with each woman.

At the door of Holm's quarters, two uniformed guards were on duty. They saluted Keglar smartly and passed them inside, where they found themselves in a waiting room. Keglar vanished through an inner door. Later he returned and beckoned for them to enter. Inside the door were more armed guards, plus a hard-eyed technician on duty before a device

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

that scanned their bodies for hidden weapons. Then they were in a big room, as big as a throne room in a palace, the most expensively and most richly furnished place Burke Hartford had ever seen. And in the worst taste. Every spot that was not decorated was a mirror. Which ever way you turned, you saw yourself. Hartford got a glimpse of himself, his face bristling with beard, his eyes hot, that startled him. Seen in a mirror, Ed Teller looked like a man walking in a nightmare.

In the center of the room was the throne. It consisted of a specially made, padded reclining chair. Holm was seated in it. He was the biggest man Burke Hartford had ever seen. The bigness did not come from muscle and bone. It came from fat. This man was gross. He weighed more than four hundred pounds. To make him more comfortable, the ship was kept at four-tenths normal Earth gravity. His weight was one reason why he rarely visited a major planet. His legs would not support him for long periods.

This was Cyrus Holm, a monstrous, fat man seated in a padded reclining chair. Standing directly behind him, a beautiful young woman was tenderly massaging the thick muscles at the back of his neck. As they entered, he was eating Martian grouse. They had to wait until he had finished before they could approach him. When he had picked the last fragment of meat from the bones of the dainty Martian bird, had sighed, had dabbed his fingers in a bowl of scented water, and the remains had been taken away by a waitress clad in the scantiest of shorts and halter, Keglär personally conducted them before Holm. Keglär saluted with the fervour of a rookie meeting a general for the first time. Holm returned the salute with a bored air and turned his attention to the two men standing in front of him. The expression on his face indicated he would have liked it better if they had protracted themselves before him.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Here they are, sir, as you ordered," Keglar said.

"I see," Holm said. His eyes were black and apparently bottomless. For an instant, they had the full attention of those bottomless black eyes, then Holm grunted and pushed a button on the arm of his chair. "Bring the staff and the transcript," he spoke into a hidden microphone. In response to his order, a young woman quickly entered the room. She had a sheaf of typewritten notes and Einer's staff. Ed Teller took one look at the staff and came to life. "I'll take that," he said, starting toward Holm.

Hartford had to restrain him again. "But that's Einer's staff," Teller protested.

"I know it is. But Einer is dead."

"Oh." Life flowed out of Teller again, passing away like a receding wave. "Yes. I forgot." On his face the wrinkles deepened.

Holm studied the pages in front of him. "Do you know how this staff operates?" he suddenly asked. His black eyes were focused on Hartford

"I do not," Hartford answered.

"It's not smart to lie to me," Holm shot at him.

"I am not lying.

"Umph!" Holm grunted. "I understand some kind of radiation from this staff knocked out several of my men."

"That is correct."

"I understand it also melted the weapons which had been illegally taken from them."

"The legality of the action will have to rest with a court of law. As to the fact—yes."

"I endorsed the action. It is therefore legal," Holm answered. "Do you know how this staff works?"

"I do not."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

The black eyes turned to Teller. "Do you know how this operates?"

Teller shook his head. The expression on his face indicated he did not dare let himself speak, lest he say too much.

Again Holm grunted. He jabbed a button on the arm of his chair. To the young woman who came running, he handed the staff. "Take this to my technical department. Tell them I expect a solution within twenty-four hours."

"Yes, sir."

When the messenger had departed with Einer's staff, Holm turned his attention again to the transcript in front of him. Guessing that these pages held a full report of the talk transmitted by Micki's radio, Hartford held his breath as the fat man read them. Scowling, Holm's hand went to another button on the arm of his chair.

"This is it!" Hartford thought. "He knows too much about us now." He measured the distance separating him from the fat man, then glanced over his shoulder at the guards at the door. They were alert.

But it turned out that all Holm had in mind at this point was more food. "Bring me some *ollos*," he said to the waitress who appeared. "And see that they are properly chilled."

"Yes, sir." The waitress almost saluted as she turned away. Hartford sighed and dared to breathe again.

As he finished reading the transcript, Holm munched *ollos*, the spicy sweet love fruit of Venus, considered by gourmets to be the greatest delicacy of its kind ever found on any planet.

"Where is Race X located?" Holm asked, without looking up from his reading or his eating.

"I do not know," Hartford answered. Inwardly, he wondered how long this answer was going to hold up.

"But this kid, whoever he was, was taking you there."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"But he hadn't taken us, and he hadn't told us where to go."

"After you found and destroyed my transmitter—which is another illegal act against you—he probably told you how to reach this race."

"Sorry, but he didn't," Hartford said. He knew he was lying when he said he was sorry. In fact, he was glad they didn't know the answer to this question. Methods of persuasion existed, unpleasant methods, which could force men to talk against their will. Hartford did not underestimate this man. Holm was deadly. At this moment their lives hung on the slender thread of their future usefulness to him.

"I told you it wasn't smart to lie to me," Holm repeated.

"I am not lying." Hartford hoped his voice carried conviction. Holm's black eyes revealed nothing of his mental processes. He sighed, and reached for another *ollo*.

"Perhaps a few days alone will help you to remember what I want to know," Holm said. "Take them to their cells, Colonel Keglär. And do it in person."

"Yes, sir," Keglär answered, saluting. "Do you want me to persuade them a little, sir?"

"Ah." Munching on the love fruit from Venus, Holm thought about this question. It was not very important to him, not nearly as important as the *ollo*. "Not yet," he said at last.

At the door of their cell, Hartford noticed again the wheel set into the wall. "What's that for?" he asked.

"You've got other things to do than to think about wheels," Keglär advised him. "You had better remember what the boss wants."

"How can we remember what we never knew?"

"I don't know. But if I was you, I'd do it."

"And if we can't?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"In that case, you're a hell of a long ways from home. You can remember that. You can also remember that the first step on the way home is a whooper-doooper." He nodded toward the porthole in the far wall of the cell and slammed the door. Inside, Ed Teller slumped back on the lower bunk. "That was Einer's staff," he said. "I wanted it as a memento of him." Soul sickness as deep as space was in the tones of his voice. "Better it had been me who went, Burke. My course is nearly run. But Einer had his whole life ahead of him. He had much to give, to all men."

Hartford kept his own feelings to himself. In his mind's eye, he saw a fat throat with his fingers closing around it. He went to the door of the cell and looked through the plastic peephole in it. A guard was on duty in the corridor. Climbing to the upper bunk, he lay down. He must have slept, for what awakened him was the sound of a key turning in the lock. He turned his head to see who it was. When he saw who it was he swung hastily to the floor.

A woman had entered. Dressed in a skin-tight garment that revealed and accentuated every curve in her body, with tiny tinkling bells in her ears, smoking a scented Martian cigarette in a long holder, Hartford had to look twice before he realized that this woman was Micki Adcock.

"I should have drowned you when I had the chance," he said.

"Well, I like that!" Micki's voice had acid in it. "Do you want to talk to me as if you had good manners or do you want me to call the guard and have you strung up by your thumbs?" There was anger in her voice, but under the anger was fear. "Well, big boy, which way do you want it?"

"I liked you better when I could see the freckles on your nose. You were honest then."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Some folks didn't know what they were missing, then. Or now!"

"It can't be much." Hartford's eyes flicked over the skin-tight garment she was wearing. "Practically everything is showing."

Anger showed on her face, then was hidden. She looked as if she could scratch his eyes out, and would too, except that she had more important matters on her mind. "I didn't come here to exchange unpleasant talk on the level of personality." Her voice was haughty, but there was a tremor in it. Tension was showing at the corners of her eyes. Teller never even noticed that she was present.

"Then why did you come?"

"To offer you jobs, both of you." She blew scented smoke in Hartford's face.

"Eh?" Hartford waved his hand in front of his face to dissipate the smoke. "I guess there's just so much smoke in here that I'm not hearing right. I thought you said jobs!"

She shifted the holder from one hand to the other. "So I did."

"Jobs doing what?"

Her fingers moved in an odd rhythm along the cigarette holder. She rearranged the way the cigarette was fitted into the holder. When this was done to her satisfaction, she looked up at Hartford

"You can enter the service of General Holm." Her voice was calm, but it was a forced calmness. Her eyes were not calm. Instead they seemed to be begging the big haggard-faced man to understand something—what he did not know. "General Holm instructed me to make this offer. He will generally overlook the poor way you conducted yourself in his presence, and your illegal acts, and will permit you to take the oath of loyalty to him. After that, he will consider you as

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

loyal subjects and will use you in ways commensurate with your abilities."

"*Subjects?*" Hartford blinked. He opened his mouth to tell Micki and General Holm where both could go, then closed it without saying a word, for two reasons. The first was the look in Micki's eyes. This begged him to be silent. The second reason was the odd way she was using her fingers. She adjusted her ear rings needlessly, she tapped on the cigarette holder, she even made motions in the air. Somewhere he had seen this weird finger motion before. Where? He tried to think. He also tried to decide how he was going to answer this amazing offer to become subjects of Cyrus Holm.

The offer was exactly in character with Holm. Living in space, rarely visiting a major planet, absolute owner of Earth, Inc., Holm had ceased to think of himself as a man subject to the government of Earth and had begun to believe he was a law unto himself.

"This is . . . very generous of General Holm, and is quite in keeping with his magnanimous nature." Hartford almost choked as he spoke these words, but Micki glowed at him as if he was a small child who had just said a very bright thing. He knew from this that he had given the right answer. But why was this answer right? What kind of a game was being played here? Suddenly he caught the rhythm of her moving fingers and realized what was happening. She was talking to him in silent sign language, using a variation of the deaf and dumb sign talk that they had learned in that magic summer of long before, when they had been kids together!

"Room is bugged!" her fingers said. As Hartford realized the meaning back of her flying fingers, Hartford's hitherto sluggish mind seemed to turn on the afterburner and to take off with a zoom. He also knew this language. He thought he had forgotten it long ago, but now, with the afterburner go-

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

ing, his mind recalled it. Under pressure, his mind could do many things that seemed impossible to him under ordinary circumstances. His own fingers went to work, asking a question. "And if we don't accept?"

"Long drop!" Micki's flying fingers answered. "Wheel in corridor. Purpose of porthole is to show where you're going!"

Hartford glanced at the thick plastic window of the porthole. He knew what was out there. Anyone else who was held in this cell would also know what was just outside. But why had she mentioned the wheel in the corridor outside and where did the long drop fit into the picture? Her flying fingers told him. "This cell can be tilted out. Anyone in it will be dumped out. The wheel controls the dumping."

Sweat appeared on Burke Hartford's skin. He was aware of chill at the core of his being. *The long drop!* The one nobody ever walked away from! From this cell, you went out and down. Down, slowly, agonizingly, freezing from the instant the cell dumped you out, dying of lack of oxygen, your body saturated with the hellish radiations of space! Long before you slid into the gravity stream pulling you down to the surface of the nearest planet, your body was frozen solid. When you hit, at the terminal velocity of the planet or asteroid nearest you, your body smashed into a million pieces like a chunk of ice dropped from the top of a fifty story building, landing on solid concrete. There were whispered stories told by the men of space of the falling of such chunks of ice on various planets. No one had ever been able to prove that the chunk of ice had once been a human being!

You didn't care about the impact, of course, except as you visualized it before it happened. You were dead long before you hit. You hoped!

Perhaps this was only a threat! As the thought came into Hartford's mind, he saw that Micki's fingers were already an-

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

swering it for him. "This is no bluff," her fingers shouted at him. "This is the way it will be. Please listen to me, Burke. Because the room is bugged, my voice speaks the language of Cyrus Holm. I have to do this if I want to stay alive myself. But what my fingers tell you comes straight from my heart. You can believe my fingers. They do not lie."

While Hartford stared, the fingers stuttered in their rapid rhythm. The stutter was like a person finding a catch appearing in his voice when he finds he has to say something difficult. "I'm trying to stay alive too, Burke. It's a close thing. They suspect me already."

Trying to speak too, Hartford found he had a catch in his voice also. Which Micki was he going to believe? The Micki who talked with the voice of Cyrus Holm, under-dressed, over-perfumed, over-ornamented, or the Micki who talked with her fingers, and who had her heart in every gesture that she made? Hartford knew instantly which one he was going to believe. The Micki of the flying fingers. This Micki was telling him true!

He tried to think what he was going to say aloud. The wrong word could get them deep trouble. Silences would also be suspicious. Probably no one was watching them, but recorders were certainly spinning, taking down every sound through hidden microphones. "As I said, this is very generous of General Holm. There is little question that we will accept his offer. However, we would like to know the terms of our employment." So much his mouth said. His fingers asked other questions. "What does Holm really want here on Pluto? Why did he come here?"

"The terms of your employment will be the same as those of everyone else, very generous. This is a lifetime job, you know. General Holm makes certain that no one on his payroll lacks for anything," Micki's voice said.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Her fingers told another story. "The fat beast! He came here because one of his spies reported a ship from deep space landing here. He wants that ship. Now that he knows about Race X, he also wants them. His technicians are working on Einer's staff now, trying to find out what it is. I hope it turns into a snake and bites them all!"

"It is good to know that one has security for the rest of his life," Hartford's mouth said. His fingers still had questions. "How can you say these things about him when you are working for him?"

Micki choked when she tried to answer this question. Her fingers got in the way of each other and tied themselves in knots. "Reggie, my brother, went to work for Holm. They disagreed. He—he sent Reggie on the long drop." Micki's fingers made themselves into a fist.

"I'm sorry." Now at last he understood her real motive.

"And if I can get Cyrus Holm into this cell—" The expression on Micki's face left no doubt as to her meaning.

"That job is not for you, girl," Hartford's fingers answered. "That is no job for a woman. Besides, you're way down at the end of the line. Even Ed Teller claims a higher priority on Holm's fat carcass than you have."

"All right." Micki's fingers still wanted to stay balled into a fist. "Just so somebody gets the job done. But don't let the chance come my way!"

"It is very nice of you to call on us," Hartford said aloud for the benefit of the recorders that were spinning somewhere. "Please advise General Holm that we will be glad to go along with his ideas."

"Of course, you also understand that you will be required to take an oath of loyalty."

"Yes."

"And that it may not be broken?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"That is usually true of oaths."

"And that you will be expected to direct an exploration team in the search for Race X?"

"Eh?" Hartford did not have to pretend surprise. "But when we don't know—"

"General Holm is quite sure you do know their hiding place," Micki said. "He thinks the deep space ship belongs to Race X."

"The devil—"

Micki's fingers worked again. "While you are working for him, you will at least have a chance to escape, though a small one. You will be watched. But you can put on a good show. This is the only way I know for you to stay alive, and even it may not work."

"Tell General Holm we will be glad to serve him," Hartford said aloud. "Long enough to cut his throat!" his fingers added.

"Good luck," Micki's flying fingers said, as she left the cell. Much of her tension had gone. Now she was an actress putting on a good show. Hartford heard her snap at the guard on duty outside.

"Did you hear what Micki said?" Hartford asked Teller.

The old man roused himself from the lower bunk. "Micki? Was she here? I was thinking about Einer and didn't notice her."

"Come to life, Ed. We'll be out of here in no time. We've joined General Holm."

Teller blinked at his companion. "Join him where? In hell? I'll gladly join him there. All I want is a chance to tie him to the business end of a rocket and turn on the blast." Ignoring Hartford's frantic signals to be silent, Teller plunged on.

"That's no way to talk about the greatest man in the Solar

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

System!" Hartford shouted. He hoped his voice would drown out what Teller was saying.

"All right," Teller said at last. "If you don't want to listen to me, I'll shut up." He slid back to his position on the lower bunk and returned to his withdrawal state.

"Yes, sir, we've joined General Holm. It's a wonderful opportunity." Hartford continued. He hoped the hidden recorders would believe him but was afraid they would not.

"All right, I heard you," a voice rasped from a speaker hidden somewhere in the cell.

It was Keglar's voice.

"You can cut out the act now," Keglar continued. "I'm coming down to see you."

The speaker went silent. A few minutes later it clicked on again. Keglar's voice, speaking to the guard in the corridor outside, came again. "Beat it, Schmitz. I'll relieve you and take over. Yes, I'll be responsible for the safety of the prisoners. You can bet on that." Keglar's laugh had the harshness of pure sadism coming to the surface.

Feet clumped in the corridor as the guard departed. "You in there," Keglar said.

Hartford, suddenly sweating, spoke the first words that came to his mind. "When are you going to let us out of here?"

"Right away, buddy, right away," Keglar answered.

"You don't want to pay any attention to what my friend said. He's all shook up and doesn't know what he's saying. Actually we're both very happy to have the privilege of joining General Holm." Desperation was in Hartford's voice and he knew it.

"I expect you would be happy, right now, to join him," Keglar answered. The microphone in the corridor picked up the rasp of turning metal. "The trouble is, your pal ain't acting very glad."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"What do you mean? I told you about him."

"I mean you ain't kidding anybody, pal. The boss ain't exactly a damned fool. He knows men will lie to save their necks."

"But—"

"We want to know how to find Race X. And we don't want any damned fool answers. Just the facts."

"But I have told you we don't know."

"And now I'm going to tell you," Keglär said. "Once, you wanted to know what this wheel is for. Well, I'm going to show you."

Again the speaker in the corridor picked up the sound of metal grinding against metal. Keglär was turning the wheel that tilted the cell! Very slightly Hartford felt the floor sway beneath his feet. Along the top edge of the outer wall, just below the ceiling, a crack appeared.

Teller, aroused at last, rose from his bunk and wanted to know what was going on. Hartford spread his hands in helpless horror.

"I want to see the two of you try to hold on to that bunk when I tilt the cell all the way," Keglär continued. "I want to see how long you can hold on when the air goes and the cold comes."

"What does he mean?" Teller questioned blankly.

Hartford explained. As Teller grasped the meaning of the words, horror added new wrinkles to those already existing on the old man's face. Then, slowly, the horror went away.

"It won't last long," Teller said. He seemed to be speaking either to himself or to some invisible third person present. "It will be bad for a few minutes, then we'll get so numb we won't feel anything. We'll hardly notice the long drop, when it starts. Long before it's over, we'll be with Einer." For a moment, Teller almost managed to look happy. His eyes came

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

up to Hartford. "I'm mighty tired of this world, Burke, tired of the Keglars and the Holms in it. Getting out of it will be a relief."

"See how it is with him," Hartford shouted at the hidden mike. "He's out of his head. You can't blame him for anything he says."

"I see," Keglar answered. "And it don't make any difference. Both of you, you can either draw us a map so we can reach Race X, and take us there, or you can take the long drop. And you'll get it right now if you don't give us the answer we want."

Teller's eyes searched for the hidden mike. He located a spot that he thought was the right one. "You and Holm can both go to hell," he answered, lying back down on the bunk.

Even Keglar appeared confused. "Is he really nuts?"

"He spent his life looking for Race X," Hartford said. He made no effort to keep the rage out of his voice. "The first person he ever found who could take him where he wanted to go was killed by your men. Do you expect him to kiss and make up?"

"Well—" Keglar's indecision showed in his voice. This lasted for only an instant. Then his voice came again, changed now. It was a persuasive voice, it argued, and it tried to plead. "Working for the boss is a good go. You'll get everything you want. The boss has got jobs on every planet. You can pick your place. You'll be well paid and there's always the chance of picking up a little something on the side. Nobody but a damned fool would turn the boss down. He'll still take you in if you will go along with him. What do you say to this?"

"You can tell him to go to hell for me too," Hartford answered.

Keglar's voice lost its persuasive note and became a snarl.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"All right for both of you. If you think you can bluff Keglar—" Again metal rasped. This time Hartford distinctly felt the floor give under his feet.

"We're not trying to bluff you." Hartford could feel the sweat gathering in his soul. He suspected that Keglar was bluffing but he wasn't sure that this was true. "You'll gain no information from bodies smashed on the surface of Pluto."

"I've got my orders from the boss," Keglar answered. "Either you talk or you drop. Just make up your—What the hell—"

Keglar's voice faded into a hissing sound. He shouted again, at somebody, but the sound was muffled. Then came a heavy thump. Metal rasped again. Hartford's heart leaped up into his mouth but he did not feel the floor drop again under his feet. Instead it seemed to rise slightly. Then the lock rattled and the door of the cell was jerked open.

A spacesuit clad figure stood there. A gun was firmly held in one hand. The other hand held Einer's staff.

5

BEHIND the tough plastic window of the spacesuit, Micki Adcock's worried face was visible. She swung the visor back, sniffed vigorously, then spoke quickly. "I gassed Keglar but the air seems all right now. Both of you out of here, fast! Walk ahead of me, keep your hands up, and act as if you are my prisoners. Up off of that bunk, Teller. You're going for a ride."

Teller was so surprised that he obeyed without question and without comment.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Kid, I sure am glad to see you," Hartford said. "Keglar meant business."

"Shut up!" Micki hissed at him. "These walls have ears and you know it." The muzzle of her gun gestured them out of the cell.

In the corridor, Keglar was slumped on the floor. Hartford paused long enough to lift the heavy bulk in his arms. Thrown, Keglar's body sprawled on the floor of the cell. Hartford locked the door.

For an instant, he stood beside the wheel that controlled the tilting of the cell. The expression on his face was terrible. Micki gasped and jerked at his arm with the tough plastic of her gloved hand. Hartford ignored her. Deep down inside him, the temptation to spin this wheel and send Keglar on the long drop was very great. There was no question that Keglar deserved such a fate. However, there was something in Burke Hartford which prevented him from destroying a helpless man. In a fair fight, he knew he could kill Keglar with no compunction whatsoever. But he knew he couldn't spin the wheel that would send even Keglar on the long drop. Shaking his head, he moved away.

"Both of you walk ahead of me," Micki ordered. "If we're lucky, we'll get out of here. The men who handle the launching of the landing barges know me." Her face was pale but her eyes were bright with the alertness that comes from the knowledge of great danger.

With Einer's staff tucked under left arm, she covered them with the gun held in her right hand. To Burke Hartford, her effort was so theatrical that it was unbelievable. For this reason, he thought it might have a chance to work. Micki would fool nobody in his right mind for longer than a few minutes. But perhaps a few minutes would be all they needed.

At her orders, they moved quickly through the big ship.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

She seemed to know every turn of every corridor in the vast structure. The way she took them avoided most human traffic. Once they met a scantily-clad messenger who scarcely glanced at them. Next they met a man in the uniform of a pilot. He ignored them completely. Hartford had the impression that in this ship it was extremely good manners to pay attention to your own business. When they reached the hold that held the landing barges, the officer in charge looked inquiringly at Micki.

"Fit them with space suits, Tom," she ordered. Her voice was crisp with the tone of one accustomed to command. "Get a barge ready to drop. I'm taking them down to the planet."

"Yes, Micki," the officer replied. "But—"

"Orders from the boss, Tom," Micki answered. "Tell your men to be fast." She smiled as she spoke. The smile did it. The officer promptly snapped orders which his men leaped to obey.

Somewhat dazed by the speed of events, Hartford and Teller found themselves being put into space suits and being instructed in the use of the valves that controlled the supply of oxygen from the tank with which each suit was fitted. They were also told how to lock the visors in place. "You won't need these visors in the landing barge," the sergeant in charge told them. "But be sure you lock them tight before you go out on the surface, unless you're going into the Big Depression."

"Thank you. We'll be careful," Hartford politely answered.

Meanwhile, a landing barge had been slid on to the launching ramp from which it would be dropped out of the ship under its own power.

"I'll handle the controls, Tom," Micki told the officer in charge. He looked a little worried, but nodded. With Hartford and Teller in front of her, she waited for the blast-off

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

signal. When it came, the floor on which the barge was resting dropped away on a steep slant. With a roar, the barge went free.

Above it, like a vast floating island, the great bulk of the ship slid silently away. Far below them, Pluto was a round ball in the sky. Taking a deep breath, Burke Hartford realized he had hardly been breathing at all. Turning to talk to Micki, he found he could not speak. She had bluffed her way out of Holm's ship!

"You don't have to say anything, Burke," she said. "I know how you feel."

"They will follow our light on their screens," Teller said.

"When they discover we're gone, we'll be lost," Micki answered. Her face showed signs of growing stress. "Burke, do you know how to fly one of these barges?"

"Of course."

"Then for heaven's sake, take over before I faint. All I know how to do is turn on the power. Tom, back there, was trying to remember whether or not I had been cleared for piloting a landing barge when I blasted off. Take over, Burke! For heaven's sake, take over."

Hartford hastily slid into the pilot's seat and took over control of the madly careening barge. It was some time before Micki regained enough breath to speak. Then she could only whisper. "We made it!"

"If I ever doubt you again, you can give me a knock in the noggin, for free," Hartford answered.

"What have we gained?" Teller wanted to know. "We're out of the ship but we don't have Einer and we don't know where to go."

"We have this!" Micki said, lifting Einer's staff. "The reason I decided to make the break when I did was because the

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

technicians had discovered that this staff, among other things, is a directional device."

"What?" Teller said.

"It's sort of like a compass. It points to a spot on Pluto near the north pole."

"Any compass will do that."

"That's what the technicians also thought, at first, but they checked it against the ship's compasses, and it is not pointing to Pluto's north magnetic pole, but a spot nearby."

"Then what does it point to?" Teller asked.

"Nobody knows. Nobody has gone down to the surface to look. But my guess was that it was pointing to the hiding place of Race X."

"Let me have that staff," Teller said. The tone of his voice said he was going to have it, or else. Micki passed the staff to him, then showed him how to use it. "Pointed in one direction, it gives off a brighter glow," she told him.

Testing it, Teller got the predicted results. The eyes that he turned to Burke Hartford had life in them for the first time since Einer had died. "Burke, this staff points to something! I wonder if—" The glow grew stronger in Teller's eyes as hope came to life in him. By some magic beyond the comprehension of men, the wrinkles seemed to vanish from his face. "Burke, maybe—" Some of the glow faded as another thought came into his mind. "But it would hardly be worth our while in finding Race X, without Einer."

"We'll go look anyhow," Hartford said. He swung the barge so that it followed the direction indicated by the staff. Micki, rummaging in the lockers, brought out tins of food and water. "We can last a couple of weeks on the supplies stored here," she announced. "Um! Good old Tellurian corned beef."

"Make me a sandwich, waitress," Hartford answered. His

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

eyes went upward, searching the vast expanse of space beyond the clear plastic dome of the barge. Holm's ship was already below the horizon of Pluto. They were safe from its screens. So far as he could tell, they were not being pursued. At full speed, he swung the barge nearer and nearer to the north pole until at last they reached a spot where the staff pointed straight down.

Below them lay an airless world of broken, tumbled, twisted mountain ranges of vast lava flows, of boulders as big as apartment houses. In places sheer cliffs rose hundreds of feet into the sky. In other places narrow cracks seemed to drop away to the infernal regions of the planet. No vegetation, not even mosses, grew in this airless area. None had ever grown there. No winds blew, no storm clouds gathered, no rain or sleet or snow fell. Neither vegetation nor erosion had ever worked to soften and round up the sharp corners of this tumbled world. It was a land of harsh contrasts, yet the play of sun light, star light, and planet light over the twisted landscape served to soften it.

"I don't see a place that looks like it might be inhabited," Teller said, disappointment in his voice. "But the staff points down. If we have understood it correctly—"

"We'll go down and look on foot." Hartford landed the barge under an overhanging cliff which shut out most of the view of the sky, then forced it farther out of sight. Looking dubiously upward, Micki said, "We'll be hard to spot from the sky anyhow."

"That's the way I want to be," Hartford answered.

Teller was already at the lock. "The staff says we go that way. We'll keep in touch by radio, huh?" Without waiting for an answer, he clicked shut the visor of his suit, turned up the heating elements, and adjusted the oxygen supply. "I wish this planet had a little less gravity. It would make walking

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

easier." He pointed beyond the barge to the twisted landscape.

Hartford looked doubtfully at this landscape. "Personally, it would have been all right with me if they had never discovered this world at all. No! I don't really mean that. The search that brought us here is worth all that it has cost, or is likely to cost, if—"

"If what?" Micki questioned.

"If we can manage to stay alive. If this barge has a supply of weapons, break 'em out and hang a couple on Teller before he gets out of the lock. The same for you and me."

"Holm's barges are always well equipped." She had to hold Teller to get the weapons strapped on him. "Act like you've seen a gun before," she said to Hartford.

The landing barge had a small lock that had been built into the craft for the purpose of enabling its occupants to land on such a place as this without losing too much of the precious air from the interior of the craft. Teller insisted on going first through the lock. The others followed him.

Outside the barge, the cold of this airless world began its slow, subtle, never-ending search for a way through the space suits. In the long run, the cold was a greater threat, and a more dangerous enemy than Cyrus Holm. It stayed on the job forever, always searching for a way to seep through the protective suits and congeal and still the life forces they contained. Did the universe hate life? Probably it did not, but the conditions of living in the universe were such that life had to be always on the alert to maintain its precarious footing in an unsympathetic world of numbing cold or burning heat.

Teller, refusing to let the staff out of his possession, began to use it as a compass as soon as he was out of the lock. Like some old, weary, but very, very determined hound, Teller followed the staff out from under the cliff. Picking his way

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

around enormous boulders, he never seemed in doubt about the direction to take.

"That old dog will never give up now, until he dies," Hartford said. "He will either find Race X—or his grave."

"I know. And Burke—" Micki's voice had overtones of tension in it.

"Your suit all right? It's not leaking, is it? Oxygen okay?"
"Everything is all right, except I think we are being watched."

"Here?" Hartford's voice was incredulous. "God is the only one who is watching us here, Mick. What else could live in a place like this?"

"I know," her voice came over the radio. "But just the same—"

"Come on." Ahead of them, Teller sounded impatient.

"Sure thing, Ed. Shake a leg, Micki," Hartford answered.

A few minutes later Micki's voice came again. This time it was accompanied by the sound of chattering teeth.

"B—Burke! Since you say that God is the only one who is watching us here, take a look behind and tell me if that's Him!"

"What?" Hartford pulled his right gun as he turned. Something round and white slid out of sight around a huge boulder. The movement was so ghostlike that he was not sure he had seen anything.

"Have you turned into an hysterical female?" He let the gun slide back into its holster.

"I'm a female, but I'm not hysterical. B—Burke, there was something. T—two of them. They looked l—like balls of light."

"But there couldn't be anything out here, Micki. There just couldn't!" Hartford protested. "Ahhhh—"

His mouth hung open as two balls of light appeared

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

around the corner of the boulder. About as big as basketballs, they appeared to be pure light which flowed outward from an intense radiation at the core of each. Stopping moving, they floated in the air side by side.

Cold appeared at Hartford's middle and ran a mad race up his spine. He did not attempt to draw either gun. His hunch was that guns were useless here. Nor did he move. Micki did the moving. She leaped behind him. Over the radio, he could hear her teeth chattering.

"See what I told you about! See! See!" she hissed at him. "I was right. There was something."

"I see them."

"What are they, B—Burke?"

"I don't know." Hartford found that his own teeth were trying to chatter.

"They look like the eyes of some huge monster. The body of the monster is invisible. All we can see are the eyes. It's just sitting there, watching us, and getting ready to spring."

At her words, and the mental picture they presented, the mad race of the cold up Hartford's spine was intensified.

"What are we going to do about those t—things, Burke?"

"More important, what are they going to do about us?" he answered.

"Are they dangerous?"

"How in the hell would I know?" Hartford shouted. "I never saw anything like them before."

"They're between us and our barge."

"I know it," Hartford answered grimly.

As if estimating and evaluating these two intruders into their airless world at the top of Pluto, the two balls of glowing light continued to hang motionless above the rocky terrain. They didn't move forward, they didn't retreat, they didn't go up, they didn't go down.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"I wish they'd do something," Micki said.

"I hope they don't!" Hartford fervidly answered. "They seem to know we are here. This must mean they are alive."

Again the cold chills went up his spine. Here in this stone wilderness, where there was neither air nor vegetation, where the stars glittered so brightly you thought you could reach out and touch them with your hand, had nature contrived a life form adapted to its environment? Hartford had the greatest of respect for the ingenuity of nature. Life in some form existed on every planet. Perhaps in forms not perceptible to human senses, it even existed between planets. The environment might be so harsh that no human could hope to survive, yet life was there. No problem was too difficult for nature to solve.

"Now that I've gotten over being s-scared, they seem harmless to me," Micki spoke. "Perhaps they are wondering as much about us as we are about them. Maybe they're even scared too!"

"I wouldn't bet on them being scared. This is their home world. They know it. We don't. However, we'll give them the first bite."

"First b-bite?" The chatter returned to Micki's teeth.

"You always give a strange dog first bite," Hartford answered. He took a step toward the glowing balls.

Micki grabbed his arm. "How do you know there will be enough of us left for a s-second bite?"

"We don't," Hartford answered. "We can run from the devil or we can face him. A devil fled from is ten times a devil. A devil faced may turn into a pretty nice guy, upon closer acquaintances."

"You're r-right, Burke. It's just that I'm a sissy, I guess. But—"

Hartford moved toward the balls. So intense was the feel-

ing of cold running up his spine that he almost convinced himself that his suit had sprung a leak. As he reached them the balls of light rose higher.

"Hello, there," he said. Speaking was an involuntary action, an effort to establish communication. He felt silly the instant the words left his lips. These creatures had no radio equipment! Yet they seemed to be in communication with each other. He had the dim impression that some sort of an exchange of information was taking place between them.

"A—are your devils turning into nice guys?" Micki whispered, behind him.

"They haven't started biting yet."

"Y—yet?"

Hartford slowly drew one gun. He fired a shot at the nearest boulder. Gas puffed from the muzzle. The slug exploded violently. One ball of light moved down to investigate the gun. The other swirled to the point where the slug had exploded. Both returned to their original positions. Again he had the impression that a conference took place between them.

"They're not s—scared of your gun," Micki said.

"So it seems."

"Maybe they don't know what a gun is."

"Maybe they do know and figure it isn't dangerous to them."

"W—what are you going to do?"

"I walked toward them, and they didn't run. I fired a shot. They still didn't run. I can't talk to them. The only thing I see that is left to do is to walk away from them."

"A—are you going to do that?"

"Yes." Hartford turned away from the balls of glowing light. Cold danced along his spine as he turned his back to them.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Again Micki moved very fast. "In cases like t—this, I—ladies before gentlemen!" She promptly got in front of him and stayed there. "A—are they following us, Burke? I'm scared to look."

"I don't know," Hartford answered. "I haven't looked."

"Well, look!"

Hartford forced himself to look straight ahead. He forced his legs to maintain a moderate pace, like a man taking a casual stroll and interested only in seeing the sights. He was afraid that if he did look around, the panic deep down inside him would burst the chains that bound it. "For a woman who gassed Keglär and wanted to send Holm on the long drop and bluffed her way out of his ship, you're acting mighty chicken," he told Micki.

"But this is different," she answered. "Burke, please look."

"All right." He glanced over his shoulder, then forced himself to continue his casual stroll.

"What did you see?" Micki hissed at him.

"They're following us," he answered.

"Oh, Lord! I was afraid of that! What are we going to do?"

"They haven't harmed us. Keep acting as if you are absolutely sure they're not going to harm us. Also, keep walking straight ahead."

"I'm not sure my legs will hold me up much longer."

"Then I'll ask our friends behind us to carry you."

"My legs are working just fine now," Micki promptly answered.

From somewhere ahead of them, Teller's voice came, urging them to stop lagging.

"We're coming," Hartford answered. "Also, we're bringing a couple of friends."

"Are you out of your mind?" Teller's voice answered, over the radio. "Where would you find friends in this stone pile?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Shall we tell him?" Micki answered.

"No," Hartford answered. "Let him find out for himself."

They found Teller on top of a rocky hill where he was using Einer's staff to point some object below him. "Oh, there you are," he said, as they came up. "I think something has gone wrong with this staff." Glancing at them, he saw the two balls of glowing light. "Hello! What have you got there?"

"Friends," Hartford answered.

"We hope," Micki added.

Both waited for Teller to react. "I've seen things like that before," he said. "Can't remember where." Wonder was in his voice and a touch of longing. "For a moment, when I first saw them, it was like I had seen them in a dream." His voice trailed into silence.

"Where did you see them?" Hartford asked.

"I told you I can't remember." Exasperation was in his voice at his inability to remember. "Where was it, I wonder? It was real, not a dream, I know now."

"Do they b-bite people?" Micki asked.

"Harmless, so far as humans are concerned, as I recall it. At least they're harmless if the people are the decent sort." But Teller was not really interested in the balls of light. Nothing could have held his attention for long. He scowled at the staff and again looked down the slope.

Below him, dropping away, was what looked like a bed of tumbled lava. It stretched for miles into the distance. The volcano from which this had come was not visible. When the lava had been hot, a vast boiling lake, gas had bubbled up from below, forming huge, grotesque pockets which had become congealed in black stone. The face of the flow nearest them revealed that the black stone was two hundred feet thick.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"The staff points directly to that lava bed." Teller demonstrated with the staff, then looked accusingly at Micki.

"Don't blame me for that," she answered.

"There just can't be anything in that pile of lava," Teller muttered. "Yet Einer was taking us somewhere and this is his staff."

"Einer didn't have a spacesuit or an oxygen tank," Hartford commented. "He could hardly have been taking us out on this airless plateau without them."

Nobody was going to challenge Einer in Teller's presence. "He probably had a ship hidden up near the air line. But—"

From the far side of the lava field, a small ship catapulted upward. Like an arrow from the bow, it came out of nowhere and surged into the sky. There was no blast of rocket or jet gas behind it. Constantly gaining speed, it shot into space.

"Did you see that ship?" Teller gasped. "Einer's staff has guided us true. There's something down there." Elation sounded in his voice. Again the dream of his life had a chance to come true.

"Right," Hartford spoke. Something of Teller's excitement had communicated itself to him. "But we've got to find our way into the place—hello! What's cooking now?"

The balls of light had swirled over his head. Floating easily, they went down the slope toward the lava bed. Before they reached it, they stopped.

"They're waiting for us," Teller said. "They're going to show us something. Come on!" He headed down the rocky slope at breakneck speed.

As if this was what they had been waiting for, the balls of light moved forward again.

"They *are* guiding us," Hartford said. "Come on."

"Guiding us to what? A place to bite us better?" Micki wanted to know.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

At the bottom of the slope, the flow of lava loomed up as a wall at least a hundred feet high. Here the black stuff had been congealed by the bitter cold of this airless world, here the eternal battle between heat and cold had been won by the cold. The two balls of light hovered close to the side of the lava flow, here almost as steep as a wall.

In the black stone an irregular opening appeared.

"There's a door!" Teller shouted, over the radio. "I'm going in."

"Hold up, you idiot!" Hartford yelled. "You don't know what you're getting into."

But Teller would not be stayed by words. The black opening was as tall as a man. The two balls of light entered it. Teller was right behind them.

"It's an air lock!" his voice, charged with excitement, came back to them. "Come on."

As Hartford and Micki tried to catch him, the opening closed, shutting off radio communication.

"I told you they might be taking us to a place where they could bite us better." Micki's voice had an overtone of doom in it.

This could be a trap, Burke Hartford realized. In the world he knew, men set traps for each other, they made snares, baiting both with all kinds of cunning lures. This had happened so often that most men had become trap-wary. Would Race X be any different, presuming Race X was to be found on the other side of the door in the side of the lava flow? Unease was rising in him. He knew so little about Race X. Einer had seemed a tremendous person, but what did he really know about the slender stripling? He knew about Cyrus Holm. Holm was an enemy, now, to the death. He had the impression that other enemies were about and was suddenly aware of the slim foothold they had on life here on this

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

rocky plateau at the top of Pluto. Their suits might begin to leak, they might slip and fall and tear a hole in the suit, the oxygen supply might fail. Even if they found Race X, what guarantee did they have that this mysterious group would be friendly?

Only Ed Teller had complete faith in Race X. And Teller was on the other side of an air lock in the side of a lava flow. Maybe he was being paid off for having faith in the wrong thing!

"You're getting the wind up, Burke," Micki said. "I can feel it. But we've got to stick now."

"Don't worry. We're going to find out what's on the other side of that door." Hartford's voice was grim.

In front of them, the door swung open again.

"Guns ready. We're going in."

The lock was empty. As soon as they stepped inside, the outer door began to close. The rising air pressure started to deflate their suits. Guns in hands, they waited. The outer door closed, the inner door began to open.

Burke Hartford took one look at what he saw inside. He let the guns slide back into their holsters. One glance told him that guns would never be used against what he saw inside.

Absolutely nothing in the life of Burke Hartford had prepared him for what he saw on the other side of the inner door. Deep inside, at the core of his being, he was shocked as he had never been shocked before in all his life.

ED TELLER was standing just inside the door. He was busy trying to loosen his visor. It was not Teller who was holding

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Hartford's attention. The two balls of light were floating easily in this place which held air. But they were not what caught Hartford's eyes. Beside him, Micki, after one startled gasp, was frantically loosening her visor, but it was not Micki that was holding Hartford's gaze.

It was the youth standing beside Teller, a youth with curls that fell in ringlets around his shoulders, a lithe, slender body, a smile on his face, and eternally knowing eyes.

"Einer!" Micki had gotten her visor loose at last. Her shout of recognition had heart-bubbling joy in it. She grabbed Hartford with one hand and pointed with the other. "Look, Burkel *Einer!*"

"I see him." Hartford's voice was sombre and bleak.

"But, Burke—" All the heart-bubbling joy went out of Micki's voice. She looked again at the smiling stripling. "But I saw you die." Now her voice had grief in it, and pain and shock, deep hurt that cannot be conveyed by words or washed away by any method known to man.

As she spoke, the smile went away from the stripling's face. He started to speak to Micki but before he could do this, the two balls of glowing light floated down to him and he spoke to them instead.

"Yes, I know. Run along and play." His words were those of an adult addressing two beloved children. The balls of light floated up and away. Again the stripling turned his attention to Micki. But Teller had finally gotten his visor loose. "Einer!" Teller shouted, over and over again.

"Easy Ed," Hartford said. "Remember what we saw."

The joy went from Ed Teller's face as memory of what had happened under the fern trees came back to him too. For a moment, so great had been his joy, he had forgotten that. His voice faltered into silence. Pain appeared on his face too, pain turning to bewilderment.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

The stripling spoke to Teller. "That's Einer's staff you have there." His voice was cold and bleak.

"Y—yes."

"Give it to me."

Teller yielded the staff without a word of protest. As soon as it touched the stripling's hands, colors came back to the staff, a glowing swirl of them. The youth examined it carefully.

"Where did you get this staff?"

"Why—" Teller fumbled for words. He gestured toward Micki. "She stole it from Holm's men. They got it from you—from Einer—after—after—"

"After what?"

"After you—after Einer—after you. You know. You've got to know. Why do you ask such silly questions? You are Einer. This is your staff." Blankness came over Teller's face. "But you can't be Einer." He muttered. "You just can't be."

"Why can't I be?"

"Because Einer is dead." Looking as if he was about to break into tears, Teller gulped his words.

Micki's grip had frozen on Hartford's arm.

At Teller's words, the stripling's face seemed to grow old and bleak. Life went out of his eyes. In his hands, the staff lost its swirling colors.

Beyond him, there was a maze of corridors and rooms. Nothing was visible there, except a few balls of floating light. There was no sound.

"Who killed him?"

"We didn't do it," Teller said. "We loved him. He was bringing us here. I don't know who you are, or who Einer was, but we did him no harm. We loved him. I had never seen another one like him in all this Solar System."

"You so obviously mean what you are saying that I cannot

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

doubt you." Shades of emotion played across the stripling's face. What thoughts moved through his mind, what emotions were trying to surface, no one knew, but a swirl of colors came back to the staff and life came back to his eyes.

"I am sorry that we bring you bad news," Hartford spoke. Being careful to omit nothing, he explained what had happened.

"I see," the stripling answered. His voice still had pain in it, but it was the kind of pain that would go away, eventually. "Einer went out, as part of his training program in learning to be a peacemaker, to stop a war between two native tribes. When he did not return, we feared that something had happened to him." Again the emotions played across the finely moulded face. "I wish, now, that he had not taken that chance. But he was determined to go. However, what is done, is done." His voice changed and grew brisk. "Now I must ask you to explain your purpose here. I saw you coming across the rocky surface and I decided to admit you at least long enough to find out what brought you here."

"What brought us here is a long story," Hartford said. "Before we go into it, we should like—well, you are almost an exact image of the youth who came to us in the Great Depression; Einer."

"Oh, you are wondering about me! That is natural. I had not realized that I might be a shock to you. My name is Elfro. I am Einer's twin brother."

"An identical twin?"

"Yes."

"Then that explains your close resemblance," Hartford answered. "When we came in here, I am sure we all thought we were seeing Einer again, resurrected from the dead by some miracle beyond our understanding."

"An identical twin!" Micki sighed and broke the iron grip

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

she had kept on Hartford's arm. "We all thought—and maybe hoped—that you actually were Einer. I thought I was seeing a ghost for sure. Don't give me any more shocks like that, please."

A smile came to Elfro's face then. "I am sorry. But tell me, how did you find this place? What are you doing here? What do you want?"

Hartford tried to explain, but Teller beat him to it. Words flowed out of Ed Teller. It did not matter to him that they were not coherently organized and that he tried to say them all at once. He succeeded in telling at least something of the tremendous search that had brought him from the Earth to Pluto. Elfro's face indicated he was not understanding one word in ten.

"You came here seeking what you call Race X?" he asked when Teller ran out of breath.

"Yes."

"Um," Elfro said. He looked at the three of them as if he was wondering what strange creatures Mother Earth was sending into space these days. He did not seem to grasp that in all ways he was stranger than any of them. "You solved the problem for yourself?"

"Yes."

"You discovered, first of all, that there was a problem to be solved?"

"Yes," Teller repeated.

Elfro seemed bewildered. "Intelligent life has existed in this system for a very long time. This is the first instance of anyone finding the hiding place of Race X. Even the native tribes on Pluto don't know that this place exists."

"How did *you* solve the problem?" Hartford asked.

This question got him the full attention of Elfro's old, wise

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

eyes, also the respect of the brain behind them. "I was brought here."

"Who—" Hartford began but Elfro's hand waved him into silence.

"Questions later," Elfro said. "Perhaps they will be answered. The Council will decide on that. Now, unless my eyes are lying to me, I've got three exhausted, famished humans on my hands."

"You can say that again," Micki said soulfully.

"Then come along with me and I'll find places for you to stay."

"One question first," Teller begged. "We can stay, can't we? I don't mean just a little while. I mean as long as we want." There was no mistaking the pleading note in his voice. In this cavern hidden under a lava bed at the north pole of Pluto, he had found the Shangri-La he had sought all his life. In his voice was a hungry wistfulness to stay here, hunger not of the body, but hunger of the mind and soul for a haven long sought, desperately searched for.

"That will be for the Council to decide," Elfro answered. "However, if you truly loved Einer, I think this fact will be weighed heavily in your favor."

The grin that appeared on Teller's face was like that of a small boy who has just been told that from now on, as far as time shall run, Christmas will come every day of the year.

As they walked away, Hartford found that he had questions to ask. "These balls of light—"

"They are intelligent creatures, sort of pets of Race X."

"When are we going to meet Race X?" Hartford continued.

"Perhaps that had better wait," Elfro answered.

"Don't tell us we can't see them!" Teller said.

"Again, the Council will have to decide. But first there is

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

the matter of preparing your minds—and particularly your emotions—for meeting this race.”

Teller looked startled. “Preparing us?”

“The mental and emotional shock might be a little heavy unless you were prepared.”

“You make them sound like monsters!” Micki said.

“They are not that,” the stripling said, smiling. “But they are, well . . . different. Even here they keep to themselves and are rarely seen.”

From ahead of them, coming from one of the rooms on their right, was a singsong voice.

“That’s the Martian language,” Hartford said.

“Yes,” Elfro answered. “Look and see,” he said as they passed an open door.

In a large room, a lean Martian was instructing young members of his race. It was his voice that they heard. It rose and fell in a singsong chant. He stopped speaking and bowed to Elfro, who bowed in response. From another room a human voice was coming, speaking very precise English. Glancing through the open door, they saw a blackboard covered with the scrawled hieroglyphics of higher algebra. Seeing them pass, the instructor left his class and came out to greet them.

“Humans!” His hand extended, he came toward them. “I’m Jim Moler.”

They shook hands with him and gave him their names.

“Glad to have you here with us,” Moler said. “Do any of you play chess? No? I had hoped—well, no matter. I teach arithmetic here.”

“From what is on your blackboard, what you teach looks to be a little more complicated than simple arithmetic?”

“Eh?” Moler grinned. “Well, perhaps it is. See you later, eh?”

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Bowing, he moved back into his classroom. The students in there were slender youths.

"They're all boys," Micki whispered, blankly.

"Maybe you're the first girl ever to come here," Hartford said. "If that's true, think what a lot of fun you're going to have!"

"I'll give you a knock on the noggin if you keep talking like that. Look here! Another classroom. And they're all Venusians!"

"And all girls?"

"I don't know. I never could tell one from another on Venus."

Ahead of them the corridor opened into a large open area. To their right, along one wall, were more rooms. Farther to the right was what looked to be the inner door of a large lock, big enough to accommodate large landing barges and perhaps even small space ships. To the left a single door was set into the wall. This door was made of metal. Far ahead in the distance, was another opening. Hartford felt Micki's hand tighten on his arm.

"Do you see what I see?" she questioned.

"I see a space ship," Hartford answered. Beyond the opening, in a space all of its own, a sleek ship rested. The sight of this vessel sent a thrill through him. Glancing at Elfro, he saw that the stripling was so completely engrossed in the questions Ed Teller was asking that he wasn't noticing them. "Come on," Hartford said, to Micki. They walked across the open area and entered the hangar. No one barred their entry. The balls of floating light, the strange pets of Race X, were in the hangar, but they ignored the presence of the two humans. At the end of the hangar was the inner door of another air lock.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

But the ship held their attention. "It looks as if it was made for speed," Micki commented.

"The lock is open," Hartford said. He moved forward.

"But, Burke, they may not like it if we go into that ship," Micki protested.

"We can always say we were just looking around," he answered.

"You can stay outside if you want to, but I'm going in."

The lock was almost too small for a spacesuit clad human body. He had to squeeze to get through it. Micki found entry easier. Once he was inside, Hartford almost wished he had not entered. What he saw was difficult for his tired mind to grasp.

"Do you see that?" He pointed to the meter bank. "This bunch of meters are read by color alone. Here are others that are read by frequency. But look at the spread on that band! And the numbering system is like nothing I have ever seen." His eyes went on the controls.

There was no seat for the pilot. Instead there was a bowl, a round receptacle that sat directly in the nose of the ship. There were no windows of any kind. Instead, set in a semi-circle around the bowl were opaque crystals.

"Those crystals do not pass light. The pilot must use frequencies higher than light." Hartford's voice was tight with a growing unease. "This is the ship of Race X—and it's a deep space ship! There is nothing else like it in the Solar System. Our scientists have only dreamed of a ship like this."

His mind was caught and held by the mystery here. Mystery was piled on top of mystery until the mind was lost as it tried to grasp each one. Fitting them all into a complete picture was impossible.

But Burke Hartford knew one fact. Out beyond the limits

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

of the Solar System, out beyond the vast abyss of space, men had neighbors! This ship proved it.

In this knowledge there was triumph. What many men had wondered about—was the whole vast universe inhabited?—he knew to be true. This ship proved that men were not alone in all the vast expanse of space. This felt good. The old, old lesson learned first on Earth in the exploration of the continents, and later in the exploration of the planets, that men were but one form of life; that there were many other forms; that the Great Life Force, mysterious beyond the comprehension of any rational mind, took an infinite variety of forms, was here relearned and extended beyond the system. In space, men had neighbors.

Yet with the triumph, with the feeling of vast good, there was also uneasiness. In the Solar System, and particularly on Earth, life knew but one law, really; competition, what Jack London called the Law of Club and Fang. Every life form competed in some way with every other life form, for food, for air, for living space, for survival itself. It was a process that led inevitably to the creation of such monstrosities as Cyrus Holm. Often men grew big at the expense of their neighbors.

Would the neighbors that came from deep space seek to grow big at the expense of men?

So the history of life on Earth that was buried deep in the subconscious mind of Burke Hartford, and in all other men as well, came pressing upward from its hiding place and whispered its suspicion to his conscious mind. Were these space neighbors friends?

If they were friends, why was Elfro keeping them in hiding? What was wrong with them?

On Earth, the friend or foe identification was primary. In many cases survival depended on it. Did the same law hold

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

here on Pluto? From what Hartford had seen of the native races in the Great Depression, the law held! If Race X had established this space station here under a lava bed, why hadn't they done something about the warring tribes on the planet where they had landed? They had sent a human strippling out to stop a war! Was this enough? Why hadn't Race X acted itself?

The history of life on Earth, buried deep in the subconscious mind of Burke Hartford, came up out of its hiding place and whispered of doubt, suspicion and fear. Here in this ship were strange things. The ship itself was strange. It came from an unknown place. The crew that manned it, whoever they were, might be anything. Deeply buried fears surfaced, pushing him away. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Pushed by the same fears rising out of her own subconscious mind, and perhaps more acutely aware of them, Micki was already moving toward the lock before he spoke. He followed her.

Outside, three of the balls of glowing light hung in the air.

"They're watching us," Micki whispered.

"Come along," Hartford answered.

They moved away. The balls of light entered the ship. "They seem to have complete freedom of the place," Hartford thought.

They found Teller still talking earnestly to Elfro. Seemingly, neither noticed that they had slipped away. Hartford felt relief, then wondered why he was glad the strippling had not noticed their absence. Elfro was human. You had to trust your own kind. Or did you? Hartford knew from bitter experience that your own kind was the last species you were justified in trusting.

Looking up, Elfro smiled at them. "You are very tired."

He led them to a big room that contained six bunk beds.

"You may all stay here. Food and water will be brought you. Bathing facilities are available."

"Wait a minute," Micki protested. When Elfro asked what was wrong, she began to blush and had difficulty in explaining. Hartford chuckled and Micki's blush became even more pronounced. "Because men and women don't sleep in the same room unless they're married," she burst out.

Elfro stared at her in amazement. "But why not?" he asked.

"Never mind why not!" Micki shouted at him. "Just find me another room."

Obviously confused by all this, but still agreeable, Elfro showed her an adjoining room. His expression indicated he thought all this was nonsense. Hartford waited until the strip-ling had left before bursting into roars of laughter. Micki blushed again, even more furiously.

"He's only a boy, Burke," she said indignately. "He doesn't know about men and women."

"When I was sixteen, I knew about boys and girls," he answered.

"You did?" Micki answered, her voice suspiciously sweet. "You should have told me. I could have cut your throat then instead of having to wait until now." Slamming the door, she disappeared into her own room.

"What's she mad about?" Teller spoke.

"I'm not mad," Micki answered, jerking open the door of her own room. "Just cautious." Again the door slammed, louder this time.

Hartford began to pull off his space suit. Teller, talking like a man who had just swallowed an encyclopedia, followed suit. He talked as they took off their spacesuits, he talked as food and water were brought, and he was still talking as they lay down in their bunks. Hartford hardly heard him. Dog tired, his mind was on this strange place, on the balls of

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

light, on the strange ship they had seen—and on what that ship might mean to the human race. His mind was also exploring Race X. What part did this race play in the history of the Solar System.

But always, back of all questions, back of all thoughts, uneasiness was moving up from the depths of his mind, a sense of questions not answered, of problems not solved. There was also the sure knowledge, perhaps this was really back of his sense of uneasiness, that he had not as yet told Elfro about Cyrus Holm.

He opened his eyes to look at the smiling face of Elfro. "Are you going to sleep all week?" the stripling asked.

"I just this instant closed my eyes," Hartford protested. Teller sprawled on his back, snored in his bunk. The door to Micki's room was closed.

"This instant' was about eighteen hours ago," Elfro answered. "About Micki," Elfro nodded toward the closed door. "Do you suppose I dare awaken her."

"I'm already awake," Micki's voice came in answer.

Breakfast consisted of a hot drink, plus a kind of warm porridge that was both filling and satisfying. "I hope you didn't expect ham and eggs, plus toast and coffee," Elfro said.

"I expected them until I remembered I was on Pluto," Micki answered. "At the same time, I also remembered there was no use in asking how to get to the corner drug store for a new lipstick. I left Holm's ship in such a hurry that I forgot to bring many of the essentials of life."

"Holm. Ah, yes," Hartford said. He told Elfro the story of Holm. The stripling received the news without much show of surprise.

"We always knew, from the time we taught humans space flight, that forces had been set in motion that would lead eventually to our discovery."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"You taught humans space flight?" Hartford gasped.

Elfro made a gesture of annoyance at himself. "After you have been here a while, you begin to talk and think as if you were a member of Race X yourself. You also begin to talk, think, and act as if Race X had had a hand in every important discovery made in the whole Solar System. Forgive my slip of the tongue. Each race, even every individual, has made his own unique contribution. When a race is young, it needs to be taught, to be helped. When it reaches maturity, it must learn its own lessons, often the hard way."

"Has the human race reached maturity?" Micki asked.

Elfro smiled at the question. Then, as some thought came into his mind, the smile faded. "Einer was to have been their last teacher."

Micki was silent.

"As long as wolves like Holm roam the spaceways, I can't see where the human race has reached maturity," Hartford said.

"I didn't say it has reached it. I said Einer was to have been its last teacher. After Einer, the plan was that the human race would be sufficiently advanced to go forward under its own power. As to Holm, there comes a time when each race has to learn how to deal with its own wolves. Humans have all the great basic inventions, tremendous scientific knowledge."

"But no knowledge of how to live with each other and no will to acquire it," Hartford said.

"They will have to learn how to live in peace with themselves and with their neighbors." Elfro's voice was calm and firm, a surprising sound to come from the lips of a stripling with curls falling over his shoulders and with no sign of a beard on his face. "Einer had been trained for teaching that most difficult of all arts, making peace."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"I wish Einer hadn't died," Hartford said slowly.

"Did you really like Einer?" Elfro asked, smiling.

"I loved him," Micki answered. "The kind of love I don't have a word for."

"Perhaps the reason we don't have a word for it is because our race has so rarely experienced it," Elfro said. "Einer had the ability to bring forth this kind of love in others. This was the reason why he would have been a great peacemaker and—but no matter."

"If I had had a kid brother, I could only have asked that he might have been a little like Einer," Hartford said. "If I ever have a son, all I would ask would be for him to be a little like the youth I saw make peace between two bitterly warring tribes. I don't know who Einer was, or what country he came from, but he would have been a great man."

Thoughts moved through Hartford's mind concerning the stripling who had died under the fern trees. They were bitter thoughts. Mixed with them were mental images of Holm.

"We want to see the rest of this city," Teller spoke. "You're going to show it to us, aren't you? And you're going to let us meet Race X."

"I will show you some of the city, but not all of it. As to Race X, you will get to meet them when you are ready." Elfro rose and led the way from the room.

"He's a lot like Einer, that boy is," Micki said, as they followed him. "When he makes up his mind, that's it. Yet, I like him."

"So do I," Hartford answered. "But I suspect he is not telling all he knows."

"Of course he isn't. He said your little mind wouldn't stand the shock of learning everything at once."

"He said the same thing about your little mind," Hartford retorted.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Pooh—" Micki's voice went into silence as another voice began shouting from the air around them. It was a loud voice, an arrogant voice. Coming in over a type of radio transmission which enabled it to be heard without a receiver, it resonated from every wall of every room in the city hidden under the lava bed.

"Hey, you under there! We're directly over you. You are ordered to surrender, at once. You will immediately open the outer doors on all air locks and prepare for the peaceful entry of our landing parties. Any attempt to resist will meet with annihilation."

Elfro turned startled eyes toward Hartford.

"That's Keglär's voice," the big man said. "They followed our barge on their screens. Now they have found your hiding place."

Again the voice came. "This is by order of General Holm." Keglär made this statement sound as if it were of the greatest importance. Holm was probably listening to the words of his colonel.

"We have a K-bomb in its launching rack. It is set to home on your lava bed when we launch it."

Elfro's lips moved, asking a question. "K-bomb?"

"It will knock a hole half a mile deep in the crust of the planet," Hartford answered.

7

IN THE CLASSROOMS of the city under the lava bed, the reactions were mixed. The Martians and the Venusians were disturbed by it, but few of them understood enough English

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

to know what was being said. They did not understand the threat. In the class taught by Jim Moler there was no misunderstanding. The students were from Earth and they understood English.

Only the balls of floating light were undisturbed. As pets of this place, they had always enjoyed the status of privileged characters. Why should a voice from the air change their lives?

Elfro glanced at Hartford, then moved with a purposeful stride toward the metal door in the far wall. Babbling words, Teller tried to keep up with him. Coming out of his classroom, Moler stopped Elfro. The mathematician jerked his thumb skyward. Elfro nodded. Moler turned toward his classroom. His students were outside now. Moler's voice rose sharp and clear as he called instructions to them. "This is the end of lessons for today. Perhaps it is the end of lessons forever."

"We are called to the council chamber immediately." His voice rose in a shout. "*Thidan! Merul!* Bring your students to the council room." At his shout, the Martian and the Venusian emerged from their classrooms. Their voices rose as they called to their classes. Without looking behind him, Elfro moved to the metal door. Here he paused to look at the three humans. His face was very grim.

"We shall all have to leave you here for a while. The Council will meet immediately, to consider this intrusion."

He swung open the door. The students began to enter. The balls of floating light also began to move through the opening.

"Wait a minute, Elfro!" Hartford's voice was hard and sharp. "What will this Council do?"

"That will be for them to decide. However, my guess is that they will quit this place."

"And leave everything to Holm?" Hartford protested. "He will use everything that is here to increase his own power."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

The stripling's face grew grimmer. "It may be that the time has come for the human race to learn how to deal with its own wolves. However, he will get nothing. Everything will be destroyed, the laboratories beyond this door, the council chamber beyond the labs, and the libraries."

"Destroy everything that is here?" Teller's voice had acute pain in it.

"How will the people get away?" Hartford asked.

"In the ship you examined when you thought I was not looking."

"W—what about us?" Micki asked.

"You will be landed on Earth."

"I'm all finished on Earth," Teller shouted.

"Earth is your home planet," Elfro protested. "Where else can you go?"

"I came from Earth, but I don't belong there," Teller protested. "This is where I belong. I have searched all my life for this place. I insist on remaining here."

"That will be a matter for the Council to decide," Elfro said slowly.

"Then I must appear before them, to state my case."

"This means seeing Race X," Elfro said.

"That's all right. I can stand them if they can stand me."

"That is hardly possible," Elfro answered.

"Then you must plead my case for me," Teller insisted.

Teller's pleading was having an effect on the adamant stripling. "Well—I'll report what you say, but they will make their own decision." His eyes came to Hartford and Micki. "What about you two?"

"We had better go with you," Hartford answered. "And not to Earth. Holm will have us hunted through the whole Solar System. There will be no hiding place for us."

"What makes you think we are going outside the system?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"The ship we saw was made for deep space," Hartford answered.

"Well—" Elfro said, hesitantly.

"How are you going to get all the people here in one small ship?" Hartford continued.

"That is a problem that can be solved," the stripling answered. He looked over their shoulders. "*Hurry, you!*" Turning, they saw that a mixed group composed of Venusians, Martians, and humans had appeared in the opening that led to the hangar. "They are being trained in the operation of that ship," Elfro said.

"Then why do you want them here?"

"Because they have to attend the meeting."

WHOOM!

A heavy explosion somewhere outside rocked the underground city. "That's not the K-bomb," Hartford answered the question in Elfro's eyes. "We wouldn't be here now if it had landed. That explosion means something else. Ah. I see!"

The inner door of the main lock was coming open. Beyond it, a landing barge had settled down. The outer door had been rocked by the explosion and had come open. Through the inner door, a group of spacesuit clad men were charging. They had grenades, what looked like a portable flame thrower, and the attack weapon the human race has never forgotten how to use, sub machine guns!

The group of youths started to run across the main area toward Elfro.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat—Boom!

The rattling sound came from the machine guns. The boom came from a thrown grenade.

The group of running youths suddenly had gaps in it. A Martian went down, and a Venusian. Three humans sprawled

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

on the floor. The flame thrower spewed its breath of hell at the fallen and at those who were still running.

The splash of flame caught a running Martian. Screaming, he went down.

Hartford's guns leaped to his hands. Their soft burping was lost in the roar of sound. But the explosion of their slugs was not lost. The man handling the flame thrower threw up his hands, then grabbed at his stomach, then bent over and went down. The flexible nozzle of the flame thrower spewed its breath back toward the men charging through the inner door of the lock. They scattered from it.

The remaining youths had a moment of freedom. Slugs from Hartford's guns went past them. He was aware that other gas guns were burping somewhere near him, knew that Micki had also gone into action. This was not work for a woman, but it was work that a woman had to do.

The running group leaped past them and dived through the door that Elfro was still keeping open.

The attacking group, momentarily halted by their own flame thrower, and by the return of fire, had found concealment. Fire was beginning to come from them. Meanwhile from the barge visible inside the main lock, other armed fighters were emerging.

Hartford pulled Micki back out of the line of fire.

"They've blocked the way to your ship," he said to Elfro. "I don't think any of us are going anywhere."

The stripling's face was bleak and old. He motioned them toward the door. "Come in," he said.

As they entered, balls of glowing light swirled past them. "Where'd they come from?" Micki wanted to know. "I thought they were all inside already."

The door swung shut behind them. What they saw in the huge room which they entered made Burke Hartford forget,

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

at least momentarily, the armed men who were now in control of everything outside the door. It made Ed Teller forget his urgent plea to remain here. It did not make Micki Adcock forget anything, but it sent her into a sort of semi-daze in which she could only stare at what she saw around her.

"What is this place?" Hartford gasped. "An art studio of a totally different kind? Or is it a method of demonstrating how bodies are made, a sort of visual aid teaching device? Or—"

"Or is it a place for the disposal of the dead?" Teller asked.

Awe was in them, and bewilderment. Nothing they had ever seen had prepared them for what they saw here.

Set in tiers along each side of the big room were what at first glance seemed to be glass coffins. Clearly revealed in each of them was a body. Here was a Martian, there a Venusian, there a human. Each body was lying on a slab of milk-white crystal. From a source hidden in the top of the coffins, from sources hidden at the sides and at the bottom, blinding rays of light poured on the body, so that the whole interior of each casket was bathed in intense radiation. More than visible radiation was pouring into each body, for an X-ray effect was being produced, revealing each bone, each organ and every muscle. The result was that both the exterior and the interior of the bodies was visible at the same time. In the nearest one, that of a human, Hartford could see the heart beating in a very slow rhythm, he could detect the pulsing of the arteries and the slow throb of the veins. The man in there—if it was a man—was young. This much was evident. But what was being done to him was not at all evident.

"Are they being disintegrated—or constructed?" Hartford gasped.

"That's a silly question," Micki said.

"But I want to know what is going on here?" The old uneasiness was rising again in Burke Hartford as pressures came

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

up from his subconscious mind. This was a place of death. The subconscious has always been afraid of death. Or was it death that was here?

"This is one of our laboratories," Elfro answered. "You are seeing it much too soon. The only reason I brought you here was to keep you from being killed by the men outside."

Reluctantly, Hartford took his mind off the contents of the glass coffins. The mystery here in this laboratory would have to wait. There were more pressing problems.

"Do you have Einer's staff?"

"Yes."

"Has it been recharged?"

"Yes."

"Then show me how to use it and give it to me."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going outside and make peace!" Hartford said. "If you have enough staffs to give every person here, we'll all go out and make peace talk."

"We have only one staff. Before you could get close enough to use it effectively—and there is doubt that you could use it at all without long training—you would be—" Elfro's voice trailed into silence.

"I know. I'd be dead. Do you have any other weapons?"

The slow shake of Elfro's head answered him. "Race X has always relied on camouflage, on deception, and on speed for protection. They never anticipated a landing in force. Besides, the use of weapons is contrary to their code. They are a peaceful people. They are opposed to war and to fighting."

"That's fine as long as you don't have to live in a universe which contains men like Holm and Keglär," Hartford answered. "Since you can't escape, all you can do is surrender."

"It looks that way," Elfro answered.

There was tumult here in this weird laboratory where

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

light-bathed bodies rested in glass cases. The bodies were indifferent to the tumult. So were the balls of floating light. The fact that their fate was being decided did not impress them.

"If they catch us, Burke, it's the long drop for us," Micki said.

"I know it." Hartford turned to the stripling. "Can you hold out in here for a few hours?"

"That door is stout metal. It won't go down easily."

"Do you have spacesuits here?"

"Yes."

"Can you fit us with suits, then take us to the door by which we entered, so we can get out of here without being seen?"

"Yes. But what are you going to do?"

"I'm going for help."

Elfro's face showed utter astonishment. "Where on Pluto would you find help?"

"Leave that to me. All you have to do is get us out of here."

An hour later, they stood at the air lock. "To get back to our barge, we must show ourselves as little as possible. Also we must not use the radios in our spacesuits. Radiations from them might be picked up. Probably there is at least one landing barge in the sky above us. The big ship may be anywhere but you can bet its radar equipment will be scanning the surface. Okay?"

Micki and Teller both nodded. Hartford looked at Elfro. "Are you sure you won't go with us?"

Elfro shook his head. "My place is here."

"You may die in this place."

"That is as it may be. I am needed here." Elfro's face was sad but resolute. "God go with you, my friends. And if you will permit it, I would like to have you take one of our little

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

pets with you." He beckoned to the ball of glowing light that had followed them from the laboratories.

"What good would it do?"

"In a fight, no good at all. However, these creatures do possess some really remarkable abilities. For one, they can communicate with the ones here, who in turn can report to us."

Hartford shrugged. "One ball of light more or less makes no difference to me. Tell him to come on."

At Elfro's beckoning hand, the ball of light floated down until it was level with his face. He spoke to it very gently and pointed at the three humans. It moved toward them.

They closed the visors of their helmets and moved into the air lock. The ball of light came with them. The last they saw of Elfro, as the inner door closed, a ghost of a smile was struggling for expression on his face. The stripling did not seem to realize that he was a captive of men who were lower than wolves.

Outside the lock, the light of airless space poured down on them. Overhead, a landing barge was moving in slow circles. Higher, so far away that it seemed to be motionless, the great bulk of Holm's ship moved in a tight arc in the sky.

Waiting until the landing barge was at the far side of its circuit, moving slowly from boulder to boulder, always keeping out of sight, they began their slow journey across the treacherous waste land.

Above them, as if concealment was of no concern to it, floated a single ball of glowing light.

IN THE CITY hidden under the lava bed, Colonel Keglar was having his hour of triumph. The attack had been a complete success. He had planned it. Holm had felt that the threat of the K-bomb would be sufficient to frighten the inhabitants into surrender. Keglar had suggested the landing, to coincide with the threat. In the confusion that the threat would produce, Keglar had been sure that his men could force an entrance. He had expected resistance and his men had had orders to shoot to kill.

The resistance had been almost nonexistent. A few dead Martians, Venusians, and humans marked the extent of it. Their bodies were sprawled on the floor, grim reminders of the fate of all fools stupid enough to resist the police force of Earth, Inc. The nauseous smell of burned flesh in the air was another reminder of the fate of such idiots. Those who had not been killed had gone into hiding. Keglar had spotted their hiding place beyond the metal door. He would root them out of there, in time. Meanwhile he had other, more important things to think about.

The first was loot for himself, then loot for his men; good jewels and metal, art objects small enough to be concealed from Holm and valuable enough to bring a good price when offered for private sale to Earth millionaires who wanted something from the Outermost Planet to impress their acquaintances, and were not too concerned how it had been obtained. One of Keglar's private reasons for a landing force, a reason he had not mentioned to Holm, had been his desire to be first on the ground, thus making certain he got first crack at the loot. He had visions of jewels as big as watermelons. There might even be women! Not that women interested him

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

very much. As Holm's jackal, he had always had all the women he wanted. But he didn't have as much loot as he desired.

After the inhabitants of the city had gone into hiding, and he had posted men to make certain that if they came out of hiding, they would get shot, Keglär began his search for the loot he wanted. He found classrooms with strange symbols carved on the blackboards, books written in languages he could not understand, very simple living quarters, and what he thought were amusement centers, where the touch of a button produced three dimensional scenes with living music and dialogue to match the actors who delivered their lines. He found other rooms which had apparently been used for worship. Here the touch of a button yielded a complete view of the universe overhead and underfoot, as seen from a viewpoint which seemed to be the center of all things created. He found evidence of culture, of great intellectual achievement, and of a mental world that went far beyond his comprehension. But he found no loot!

This sent him into a thundering rage. To have taken all the risk of leading the landing party, when he could just as well have stayed on the big ship and sent lesser men into danger, was enough to make any man mad. When he finally realized there was no loot in this city, he became a raging maniac. His men got hastily out of his way, except one luckless sergeant who reported the discovery of a strange ship, but forgot to salute when he reported.

"Who in hell cares about any damned ship?" Then Keglär realized the sergeant had not saluted. "Sergeant, I thought you had been instructed in military courtesy?"

"I have, sir."

"Then why didn't you salute me?"

"Well, sir, in a combat area—"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Combat area, hell! I decide what is a combat area and what is not! Come here, private!"

When he personally ripped the stripes from the sergeant, Keglar felt a little better. Then he remembered to ask about the ship. The sergeant, now private, took him to it.

When he saw the interior of the ship, and realized its importance, Keglar felt much better. This was what Holm wanted. The boss would reward the man who got this ship for him. From this moment onward the vessel was Keglar's ship. He had found it personally, he had taken it in hand-to-hand fighting, at great risk of life and limb, and all rewards resulting from its discovery and capture belonged strictly to him. He felt so good about the ship that he got on the radio immediately.

"Colonel Keglar reporting to General Holm, sir. Everything secure here, sir. We had opposition, yes, but me and the boys were equal to it. We've found a great place here, with a lot of scientific stuff that the tech boys will have to unravel—"

Holm knew his jackal. "Get to the point!"

"Yes, sir," Keglar hastily answered. "The big thing, sir, the thing that is going to make your mouth open when you see it, the thing—"

"Is what?" Holm interrupted.

"Why this ship, sir. I just this minute secured it. It was a hand-to-hand fight, sir, but we got the job done, me and the boys."

"What about this ship?" A slobbering sound appeared in Holm's voice. "Is it—"

"It is, sir!" Keglar shouted. "I know something about ships and this was one was never made in the Solar System. It's a deep space ship!"

The slobbering sound coming over the radio from the big ship grew stronger.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Are you absolutely sure, Keglär?"

"Yes, sir." Keglär wasn't, but it would never do to sound uncertain.

The slobbering sound grew stronger. Keglär knew this sound, he had heard it before when the boss was about to gobble up a smaller company.

"Are you positively sure that everything is secure there?"

"Yes, sir!"

The slobbering sound was now accompanied by the sound of heavy breathing. Keglär knew what his chief was thinking, what mental images Holm was seeing, what dreams were moving in the murky abyss that Holm called his mind.

At their core, they were dreams of gluttony. They started from a simple desire for food and spread to a compulsive urge for more and more food. In its growth, and it had been growing all of Holm's life, there came a point where this desire could not be satisfied by food. It spread, diffused, over other things that a man might covet. On Earth it had first been a desire to own a small space company. This achieved, the desire had not been satisfied. It had grown larger instead. Eventually Holm had had vast possessions on Earth. But Earth had not satisfied the desire either. There were planets up in the sky. Why not go on to the planets? So Holm's hunger had grown.

It would grow still more, if given the opportunity, and if denied appeasement, it would explode with catastrophic violence.

Holm could not see or touch the ship his jackal had found, he was denied this pleasure, but he could imagine it. As the vision of what this ship could mean to him came into his mind the sound of slobbering grew stronger. Listening, Keglär knew that his chief's jaws were working in a hungry chewing movement that would never stop.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"This is the biggest thing that ever happened to us, General," Keglär spoke. "With this ship, nothing can stop us. Venus and Mars will both fall into our laps."

"Are you absolutely sure that place is secure?" Holm interrupted.

"Yes, sir."

"It will go hard with you if you are lying to me!"

Keglär began to sweat. "I'm telling the truth."

"Very well then. Make preparations to receive me. I'm coming down."

"Eh? What the—Begging your pardon, General, but—" Keglär had not anticipated this development.

"I'm coming down," Holm repeated. "My honor guard will land first, naturally."

"Yes, sir."

"You had better be certain the place is secure, Colonel Keglär." The speaker went into silence before Keglär could gather his wits to protest.

At this point, Keglär really began to sweat. He had overplayed his hand. If anything happened to Holm here, he would be held responsible.

A landing on any planet by Cyrus Holm was not an ordinary affair. It was done in a style befitting his wealth and rank as one who considered himself top-dog in the system. If anything went wrong, heads would roll. Keglär was not at all sure that his head was so securely fastened on his shoulders that it could not come off. He suddenly remembered that he was not at all sure that everything was really secure in this city under the lava bed. The people here had all gone into hiding. What if they came out with tremendous weapons just when Holm was landing? Keglär had seen the kid use his staff. What if they came out with big staffs a hundred times more powerful? What about the balls of floating light? He

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

had discovered a few of them when he first landed. He and his men had fired several shots at them without doing any damage. In his hasty search for loot, he had forgotten about them. What if they turned out to be dangerous?

"Sergeant, get me a squad of men!"

"Can't do it, sir," the private answered. "I ain't got any authority. Nobody would pay any attention to me."

Keglar now realized that this was the sergeant whom he had demoted. His first thought was that he would shoot this private for insubordination, then he realized that this private was not only in the right but that he also had a gun and might not like being shot. In fact, such a private might shoot back. "Here are your damned stripes!" Keglar roared. "Now get that squad. The boss is coming."

Keglar spent a frantic two hours getting everything in shape for Holm's reception. He had his men jerry-rig the damaged outer door of the main air lock, so his chief could descend from his barge into air pressure that was almost normal. He had the dead bodies placed where Holm would be certain to see them and be impressed, and he had three of them moved into the hangar where the ship rested, to lend credence to his own story of personal combat there. At the same time, he had another squad trying to frighten away the walls of floating light. Gun shots produced no effect. The flame thrower did produce a reaction. Seeming to find this flame pleasant, the balls of light bathed in it.

"We can't do anything with them," the squad leader told Keglar.

"All right, let 'em go. We'll tell the boss they're harmless. I hope they don't make liars out of us. What about the yucks you've got cornered?"

"We haven't been able to make more than a dent in the metal of that door."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"If anybody comes out, shoot!"

Before Holm landed, another barge came down. It was eased into the lock, hastily unloaded, then taken out. Hurrying men began to prepare for the coming of the great man. From the spot where he would descend from his barge, they rolled out a red carpet. Cutting it at the inner door, they extended it into the main open area of the city. Other men hastily set up equipment that had been brought in the barge. This included both refrigerators and electric ovens, plus generating equipment, plus a supply of delicacies to be ready for instant serving if the chief suddenly felt hungry. That he would feel hungry, no one doubted.

When Holm landed on a planet, it was an affair of state. Everything was done to give the great man a feeling of his own importance.

When Holm's personal barge came into the lock, and the inner door was open, Keglär and a squad of men marched into the lock and came to stiff attention before the steps. Armed guards in brilliant uniforms descended first, forming a wall of men on each side of the red carpet. Then Holm himself, wearing a uniform that glittered with gold braid, appeared in the port. Keglär, standing as stiff as his gut would permit, saluted his general. Holm returned the salute, descended from the barge, and moved into the avenue formed by the line of men on each side of the red carpet. Like a jackal following a lion, Keglär followed a step behind him.

"How would Martians and Venusians find their way here?" Holm demanded, when he saw the bodies.

"The scientists will have to answer that, sir," Keglär answered. "I am a fighting man. All I know is that we found them here."

"Where's the rest of the population?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"We have them cooped up, sir, beyond that door." Keglar pointed to the metal barrier alertly guarded by his men.

"Why haven't you blasted them out?"

Keglar had his answer ready for this question. "We were waiting for you to take personal command of this operation, sir. We were quite sure your great military skill would provide a solution quicker than we could. We also thought you would like to see the ship first, sir."

"Yes, yes, of course." Holm answered both questions at once. It did not seem unreasonable to him that he could be a military genius. Had not his men captured this city?

As he approached the ship, Holm saw the bodies on the floor. However, he ignored Keglar's detailed description of the stiff battle that had taken place in this hangar. His eyes were on the vessel alone. As soon as he saw it, his jaws began moving and the slobbering sound appeared again. He couldn't get inside the vessel, his bulk was too great for this, and he had to content himself with examination of the ship from the outside. As he realized what he had here, Cyrus Holm began to expand with growing importance.

"From this moment, Colonel, we will go forward to great things."

"That's what I thought when I took the ship, sir," Keglar answered.

"When you found it here, you mean," Holm corrected him.

Keglar managed to look as if his commander's words had wounded him deeply. Ignoring his colonel, Holm gave orders that technicians were to be brought immediately from the big ship overhead to begin the task of finding out how this captured vessel operated.

"If experts are needed, bring them from the planets."

"Yes, sir. How high shall we go in paying them?" Keglar asked.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Who said anything about paying them? Kidnap them, if they won't meet our terms, but get them here."

"Yes, sir." Keglär felt relieved that his chief was not going further into the details of the capture of the ship. However, Holm was not yet finished with him.

"And now, Colonel, show me the loot you have hidden away for yourself."

Keglär actually looked shocked. "Loot, sir?"

"Don't lie to me, Keglär. I know you and your ways. The only reason you volunteered to lead the landing party was so you could be first on the ground and get first crack at everything of value you found. Show me your private pile, Colonel." The tone of Holm's voice indicated that the next word he used might be *lieutenant*.

Greatly chagrined, Keglär was forced to admit that he had found no loot. Holm had great difficulty in accepting this statement. "A first class thief like you could find nothing to steal? Come, come, Colonel. You try my patience."

Fortunately, a ball of light floated by and distracted Holm's attention. "What's that?" he demanded.

"We found 'em here. They don't seem to be of any importance, sir. They haven't bothered us any."

"I hope you know what you are talking about." Again Holm's voice had the *lieutenant* tone in it.

"Shall I show you Race X, sir?" Keglär hastily asked. "We've got them trapped and were waiting for you to take personal command, sir."

Holm examined the metal door and the lava wall with some doubt. He suspected his colonel might be giving him a hot job in asking him to take command, and he checked carefully to make certain that the inhabitants had actually fled without really fighting back. In his mind was the thought that this metal door might turn out to be the lid of another

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Pandora's box. However, he could see no danger. Also the vast ego lift he had gotten from realizing that the deep space ship was actually his was still with him.

"All right, Keglär, since you couldn't do the job, I'll take personal command of this situation. Have your men get cutting torches and make a hole in this metal door. Have gas ready to force through the hole as soon as it is cut."

"Yes, sir." Keglär was glad to give the necessary orders. However, he resented the slur that he had been unable to do this job himself. "I could have done it that way, too, sir, but I didn't want to kill everyone on the other side of the door."

"Why not? Do we need 'em for anything?"

"I thought they might come in handy, sir, in case your technicians cannot find out how the ship operates. There are some very strange features on that vessel, sir, and one of the race that made it may be helpful in finding out how it works."

"My men can solve such problems, Colonel. Have someone bring me a chair, so I can direct this operation properly. Also have them bring me something to eat and drink."

"Yes, sir!"

So it was that Holm sat in a soft chair and munched delicacies and drank chilled wine brought to him by a harassed steward. His honor guard standing at ease in a circle around him, he watched the flare of molten metal as the cutting torches began to make a hole in the door. Gas tanks, painted a brilliant red, were brought up and made ready. At the sight of the gas tanks, Holm hastily ordered masks for everyone. "Some of that stuff might blow back on us!" When he tried on his mask, he didn't like it. "A man can't eat wearing one of these things." He dropped the mask down on his chest and continued his eating.

"Where are those two fellows and the girl who double-crossed me."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"They're hiding back there with the rest," Keglar told him. "We found this place by trailing them here. Kept a ship high up, with super-sensitive screens. The big one, Hartford, knocked off some of my men in the fight, then ran with the rest when things got too hot."

"Give 'em an extra dose of the gas when you catch 'em!"

"The girl too, sir?"

"Particularly the girl. Didn't she double-cross me?" Holm said, surprised.

"Yes, sir." Keglar suppressed a shudder. As bad as he was, he had liked Micki Adcock. True, she had always kept him sharply in his place, which had irritated him, but he had respected her for it. As long as she had been around, the possibility had existed that someday she would give in. Keglar sighed. She was a gone kid now.

Holm reached for another *ollo*, which he stuffed into his mouth, then, seeing the tray was empty, he ordered the steward to bring more. The honor guard made way for the steward. He was one man they passed on to Holm without question. Holm turned his attention to the men working with the cutting torches. They had gouged a deep hole in the stubborn metal and were getting close to the other side.

It was the steward, on his way to Holm's landing barge in the lock, who noticed the light balls clustering around the control mechanism of the inner door.

"Hey, get the hell away from there!" The steward emphasized his command by waving the empty tray at them. They paid no attention to his words or to the waving on the empty tray.

With a slight hiss, as its control mechanism operated, the inner door began to close. In the lock, the steward caught a glimpse of men moving hastily out of the way. Then the door closed completely, and his view was shut off.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"I had better report this," the steward thought.

Turning back, he saw the honor guard. The steward knew he would have to state his business to get past these brilliantly uniformed men. Heretofore his pass had been a full tray of *ollos*. Now his tray was empty. He knew from experience that the officer in charge of the honor guard could say very uncomplimentary things to stewards.

"Hell, it's none of my business!" the steward thought. He wasn't paid to report mysteriously closing doors. Maybe the tech men had another barge coming down with more stuff from the big ship. To get more *ollos* he would have to wait for them to open the inner door of the lock.

Lighting a cigarette, the steward turned his attention to the men working with the cutting torches.

He wondered what was behind the door they were working on and decided it was loot.

"Nothing could make the boss chomp *ollos* like that except loot," the steward thought.

The hiss of the inner door opening again was so slight that the steward did not notice it. Nor did the officer in charge of the honor guard. Nor did Keglär. Nor did Holm.

What happened next was so loud that everyone noticed it.

It was the full-throated, bull-chested, gut-driven roar of fighting men going into battle. It was a torrent of sound. It was a mixture of screams, grunts, and roars. Mixed in it was the scream of a woman turned into a person resembling one of the warrior Amazons of the lost ages of Earth.

THE STARTLED STEWARD turned to look toward the inner door of the lock. It was open again. Pouring through it was a tide of blue men in full war array.

The steward had never seen a blue man. He had no idea that such monsters existed. However, he had good sense. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him, fleeing through the opening that led into the hangar of the deep space ship.

Keglar also heard the sound. Like the steward, he turned to look. He had seen blue men before, he knew what they were, but he couldn't understand how they could possibly have gotten here. His first reaction was simply to doubt his eyes. Was he drunk? He couldn't remember having had a drink.

Hearing the roar, Holm turned in his chair. Pushing his bulk to his feet, he began to scream at Keglar.

"Colonel, you told me this place was secure! Colonel, what's the meaning of this? Colonel, where did those men come from?"

These were not questions that Keglar had either the desire or the information to answer. The blue men were charging. Around Holm, the honor guard waited for orders to fire.

In the van of the blue men, Keglar glimpsed one that was bigger than any of the others. He remembered having seen this huge brute flat on his nose in the Zylon, the place of peace, when the kid with the curls had played tricks on everybody. This was the war chief of the blue men, Korder. Behind Korder, in a space suit with the visor open, he caught a glimpse of a human. The distance was too great for Keglar to be sure of this man's identity, but Keglar was reasonably certain that this was Hartford. Two others in space suits were

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

also occasionally visible in the charge of the blue men, but the humans were being outdistanced by the blue devils and were being pushed to the rear.

The volume of sound coming from the blue men was so great that it stunned Keglar momentarily, slowing his reactions. However, sound had not been known to kill anybody. These blue devils might be noisy but they were armed with shields and war clubs. Primitive weapons against the explosive slugs of the honor guard! The blue men wouldn't last a minute! It would be fun to let them get close, to let them think they had a chance to win, then to kill half of them with one single volley!

Then Keglar saw something that really shocked him. In addition to their shields and clubs, the blue men had gas guns!

Somebody had armed these natives!

According to the police of Earth, Inc., arming natives was a crime punishable by death. Armed natives would shoot back!

"Fire!" Holm screamed.

This was not the proper order to give, if military procedure was to be observed. However, the officer in charge of the honor guard understood Holm's meaning. He shouted to his men. They lifted their weapons.

From somewhere in the press of charging blue men a human voice shouted a single word, "*Verdul*"

Hartford had not anticipated that this wild charge would take place. The situation had gotten beyond his control the instant the blue men had seen their enemy.

The blue men understood the word that Hartford shouted at them. They were not familiar with the strange weapons that this wonderful human had given them from his own ship, which had been hidden near their country. But he had told

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

them a marvelous story of much fighting that needed to be done off yonder in the world of no air. He had told them that the bad men who had killed their peacemaker were there, killing other peacemakers. After he had told them this, he had had no trouble finding his ship. There he had given them guns from his own arsenal and had taught them all that was necessary to know, which was to point these strange war clubs in the general direction of the enemy and pull the trigger.

They did this.

The result was a crash of sound, little of it coming from the guns, most of it coming from the explosions taking place in the brilliant uniforms of the honor guard. Holms appeared in the ranks of the men guarding Cyrus Holm.

Then the answering volley came. The blue men discovered that their shields, which would protect them from spears and thrown war clubs, could not save them from human weapons. Some of the slugs exploded on contact with the shields, others exploded in the space between the shield and the body, and still others exploded on impact with the bodies of the blue men.

As his men began to go down around him, Korder screamed a command. In obedience to it, his men broke up their compact mass and spread like nimble goats to the right and to the left. In this way, they presented individual targets, which were much harder to hit than a mass. As they spread, they continued to charge.

For the first time in his life, Cyrus Holm smelled the reek that comes from explosive slugs doing their deadly work; for the first time he saw men explode in splashing blood, saw them knocked backwards and down, saw them fall in heaps of shapeless muscle.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Beyond his honor guard, he saw the blue men spread like a fan and continue to come on at full charge.

Cyrus Holm fell too, not because he had been hit but because he was so badly scared that his legs would no longer support his gross bulk. Once he was down, he knew it would be wise to stay there. It would even be wiser to dig in. He tried to dig a hole in the tough lava floor of this hidden city. Failing in this, he crawled under the dead bodies of two of his honor guard. He lay there whimpering and waiting for the death he was sure was coming.

Keglar had stronger legs. He used them. Ducking back from the honor guard, he found a room and ducked into it. The room was the one used by Jim Moler to teach mathematics, but Keglar did not know this. Crawling under the desk, he tried to hide. Just as soon as things settled down, he hoped to make his way back to Holm's landing barge and use it to return to the big ship, which was immune to attack. Then to his horror, he realized that these blue men had come from the lock which contained Holm's barge. If the barge was taken, there was no way back to the ship for him. Or for anybody else.

Among the charging blue men, Hartford caught a glimpse of Holm going down and of Keglar running away. He assumed Holm was dead. If the lion was down, it was still necessary to corner the jackal. He turned aside to follow Keglar. Micki followed him. He had tried to make her stay back in the country of the blue men, with their women. She had acidly told him that she was not a blue woman. Later, when the ship had landed, he had tried to make her remain in it until the fighting was finished. He had had no luck with this idea, either. Wherever he went, she was going too.

Hartford had also intended to lead the attack of the blue men. He had led them out of the ship and had remained in

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

the lead until they had seen their enemy. After that, he had had to struggle to keep up with them. A red flag had far less effect on a bull than did the sight of the enemy on these warriors from the **Great Depression of Pluto**. They had been fighters all their lives. **War was the one trade they understood.** After they saw their enemy, everything was in the hands of God.

With the battle raging at his right, Hartford went to the left. Glancing toward the battle, he saw that most of the blue men had already thrown away their guns and were moving in with their clubs. At close quarters, in the hands of the blue men, the clubs were as deadly as guns.

Hartford stopped in front of the classroom where Keglar had gone into hiding. "Come out of there with your hands up!"

Keglar replied with an explosive slug. The guns in Hartford's hands answered. Explosions inside the room became a continuous thud of sound. He saw Keglar come out from under the desk, then saw the slugs hit him. He turned away from the doorway as Micki caught up with him. "Stay away," he said.

"Keglar—"

"Scratch Keglar," he answered. "He will send no more men on the long drop."

She sighed.

He turned back to the melee in time to see the last of the honor guard go down, except for one who was trying to run. Flight gained him nothing. A thrown club knocked his legs out from under him. Some of the guard the blue men had simply overrun and had taken alive. Korder was standing like a grim giant in the middle of the melee. He lifted his club in a semi-salute and grinned as Hartford and Micki came up.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"The fighting here is finished, man from Earth."

"Organize squads and search the place for those who may be hiding."

"At once." At Korder's order, his warriors split themselves into squads which began to range the hidden city.

The place stank with the reek of explosive fumes and the odor of blood.

"Have you seen a huge fat man—Ah! There he is. Dead." He glanced at Holm's bulk hidden under the bodies of his honor guard. "Well, that at least saves us the trouble of hanging him."

Korder stirred Holm with his war club. "But he is not dead, man from Earth. However, that is easily remedied." He lifted the war club.

"No," Hartford shouted.

Korder held the blow. His brow wrinkled as he tried to comprehend the reasoning of this man from the planet far away. "Is he not the leader of the men who killed our peacemaker?"

"Yes. But humans do not kill that way."

"Humans killed Einer," Korder answered.

"Yes, I know. But—"

"To keep an enemy alive is not the mark of great wisdom, but you are our friend and you have brought us here and if you wish it—" He saw that Hartford was not looking at him and he turned to see what had attracted the attention of the man from Earth.

Korder's scarred face took on a look of puzzled surprise. And more than this—of happiness.

Elfro was coming toward them. Behind him were the teachers and the students as well as many of the balls of floating light. In his hand, Elfro held Einer's staff. As if recharged with life, it glittered with swirling colors.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"From the dead, Einer has come back to us," Korder said. His voice had great happiness in it, and no surprise at all. Living in a world of primitive wonder, it did not seem strange to this blue man that his peacemaker should return to him.

Moving away from Holm, he knelt before Elfro. "Tell me, Great One, did I do wrong in breaking your peace by fighting here?"

"You did right. Sometimes war is the only way to peace. In this case, you must be terrible in war." The stripling's voice was very gentle. "But I am Elfro, Einer's twin brother."

"Elfro? This word has a strange taste in my mouth," Korder answered. "I like the sound of Einer better."

"I demand to be taken to my ship!" Holm's voice rose in a shriek. Holm had managed to get to his feet. Korder, rising, lifted his war club. Holm shrank away from the giant blue man. It was Elfro who restrained Korder.

"Who is this monster? Make him stay away from me!" Holm instantly selected Elfro as the important person present. It was obvious that he was repelled by Elfro's youth, but in spite of the stripling's teen-age appearance, Holm sensed that power lay in the youth's hands. He also saw that Elfro held the staff.

Sweating at every pore, with the broken bodies of his honor guard around him, in abject terror, the fat man first demanded that he be taken back to his ship. When this failed, he tried to buy his way back. Slowly he realized there was something in the Solar System even his enormous wealth could not buy.

"I'll give you a billion credits if you will take me back to my ship," he promised.

"Take him in charge," Elfro said to Korder.

The blue chieftan nodded happily. "And if he tries to escape, Great One?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Tap him gently on the head with your club," Elfro instructed.

"Burkel!" Hartford was finally aware that Mcki was pulling at his arm. The visor of her helmet was open, revealing eyes filled with tears. "Come here, Burke."

She led him to a spacesuit clad body that lay sprawling on the floor. A feeling of sad sickness rose up in Burke Hartford as he realized that the body lying on the floor with half its chest missing was all that was left of Ed Teller.

"He searched half the Solar System to find this place—" Hartford felt a lump rise in his throat. "His search ended this way."

The lump in his throat turned to bitterness. Ed Teller had been a decent human being. All that had ever been wrong with him had been his fixed idea that something of importance could be found on Pluto, if only somebody would go there and really look. As things had turned out, this fixed idea had been right. As the bitterness deepened, Hartford started to turn. Micki caught his arm and wanted to know what he was going to do.

"I'm going to shoot Cyrus Holm myself!" he answered.

"No," Micki said.

Elfro was standing in his way. The stripling's gaze went down to the floor. An inscrutable expression came into his eyes. He lifted the glowing staff in a gesture of salute. "Farewell, my friend from Earth."

Hartford felt the impulse to destroy Holm subside. "Is everything all right here?" he asked.

"You arrived just in time. They would soon have had a hole in the door. They were going to use gas."

"Our arrival here was very timely," Hartford said slowly. "Also we were very lucky to get in."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Elfro's eyes became more inscrutable. "I don't understand you."

"Then I will explain. I expected to have to land my ship outside. Since we were the only ones who had space suits, Ed, Micki, and I would have had to leave the ship and force entry of the outer lock. This would have been a difficult and hazardous operation, but it would have had to be done before we could get Korder and his warriors inside where they could breathe. However, as we approached, the outer door swung open. It came as no surprise to me to discover Holm's barge in the lock. I had known intuitively it would be there. Because the air had gone with the opening of the outer door, Holm's men left with the barge were either dead or dying by the time I set my ship down beside his barge. They were already incapable of resistance, hence could not delay us there. Just as I set my ship down, the inner lock began to open. All I had to do was open the door of my ship and Korder and his warriors were able to go out into air."

Hartford paused. Elfro, his eyes growing even more inscrutable, looked away.

"I could regard any one of those events as a coincidence," Hartford continued. "But to regard all of them as being just plain luck, is to stretch the meaning of that word much too far."

"Perhaps—" Elfro said.

"You know the answer." Hartford gestured up toward the ball of light which still floated above him.

"Oh, yes!" The expression on Elfro's face said that now he understood exactly what the big man had in mind. "I told you they could communicate with each other at great distances. The ones here unquestionably communicated that Holm was inside."

"I suppose they also opened the outer and inner doors?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"I wouldn't doubt it in the least," Elfro said. His face was very youthful now. He looked a little like a small boy who is fully expecting to be caught in some misdeed. "They are really quite accomplished, you know."

"They are also Race X," Hartford said.

Elfro looked like a small boy who has been caught. "You are very perceptive, my friend. That is correct. These balls of floating light are really Race X."

Pride came into his voice, a touch of it, but there was humility too. It was as if this stripling had touched the fringe of greatness in being near Race X. There was pride because of that. But there was also humility, as if greatness was a word as big as the universe.

Beside him, Hartford heard Micki gasp in surprise. At his midriff, he felt a surge of emotion. If only Ed Teller could have lived long enough to have known that he had already met Race XI

"I suspected something like this when I saw that the deep space ship could not be operated by a creature with hands." Amazement was growing in Burke Hartford. There was food for wonder here, wonder as deep as the sky. "How can a ball of floating light be intelligent?"

"The Great Life Force takes many forms." Elfro's voice had humility in it too. "In all of these forms intelligence is present, to some degree. You must not make the mistake of assuming that the human brain is the only carrier of intelligence, or even the best one. However, we can save this discussion for later. The immediate problem is what to do with Holm."

Again the bitterness came up in Hartford. "The long drop!"

Elfro's face became thoughtful. "Yes, that is a solution. But is it the only one?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"This is one way humans dispose of their wolves. It is guaranteed to work. He deserves death a thousand times."

"What about human courts?"

"How could we bring him to trial, how could we prove his crimes? If we found witnesses, many of them would mysteriously disappear. If he could not buy them off, he could have them killed. This man has real power."

Elfro's eyes looked far away. Hartford realized there was in this stripling the impulse to save even Cyrus Holm, if he could, in a depth of compassion that Burke Hartford did not pretend to understand. "What if we kept him here, as a prisoner?"

Hartford thought about this. There was compassion in him too, a depth of it that he had not suspected until this moment. "I have no stomach for killing a man who cannot fight back," he said slowly. "If you can guarantee to keep him a prisoner, I will go along with you. But I warn you; holding Holm may not be easy. His ship is still above us. Eventually his men will come looking for us. If he gets into communication with them, they will be on us like wolves." The old uneasiness was rising again in Hartford, directed now toward the fate of Cyrus Holm.

Elfro seemed to share this unease. "This is a problem for the Council," he said slowly.

Behind them, a scream came from Cyrus Holm.

10

"YOU ARE NOT GOING to send me on the long drop!" Holm's voice rose in a shrill scream. "I heard what you said. If you try it, you will all go with me."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Korder lifted his club. Surprisingly, Holm faced the huge blue chieftain. Elfro waved Korder away. Approaching, they saw that Holm was holding a small device in his right hand. Apparently he had concealed it somewhere about his body.

"Don't come too close to me!" he shouted. "I'll blow all of you out of the sky."

They stopped ten feet away from him. Elfro waved Korder to a similar distance.

"I have power!" Holm shouted at them.

"You had power once," Hartford corrected.

"I still have it." Lifting his hand, he exposed the device that he was holding there. "This is the firing control on the K bomb in the launching rack of my ship. The bomb is aimed at this lava bed and is set to home on its target. All I have to do is press this button—" A pudgy finger, jabbing at the button, barely missed it. "—And the bomb will be launched."

In the city of Race X there was silence. The youths around Jim Moler understood what Holm was saying. They looked as if they no longer dared to breathe. The Martians and the Venusians probably did not understand, but they sensed the threat. Only the balls of floating light, Race X, were unperturbed. Didn't they recognize this danger?

"The man has gone mad," Hartford whispered to Elfro. "The sudden loss of all his power has unhinged him."

"I agree," Elfro answered. "But he is none the less dangerous because he is mad."

"Perhaps I can shoot him before he has a chance to push that button!"

"That will be our last chance. Wait! If I cannot win him, then you take that chance. However, he will push the button with his last dying strength." His whisper went into silence. "Tell me, is it possible that he can actually control a bomb in a ship far above us?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Yes. Such remote control devices exist."

The blue men were puzzled. They looked to Korder for guidance. Korder, ten feet away from Holm, looked to Elfro for orders. Elfro was very careful not to give such orders. The blue men had no understanding of the danger they actually faced. To them, the only dangerous enemy was one that could be seen. An enemy that could strike them dead from outer space did not exist.

A sense of lost power regained was rising in Cyrus Holm. "If you reach for that gun—" His eyes were fixed on Hartford. "Or if you—" He looked at Micki. "Throw those guns on the floor. Throw them down, I say."

They obeyed him. Korder, watching, waited for his orders to strike. When they did not come, he shook his head at the foolishness of peacemakers but he did not act.

Holm's sense of growing power grew stronger. "Either I walk out of here unharmed—or nobody walks out."

"If you push that button and kill us all, you will die too," Elfro said.

"I don't mind dying. I'm not afraid of it. My grave will be half a mile deep. It will be your grave too. And the grave of everyone else hiding under this lava bed." His voice indicated that he meant what he said. At this moment, he was capable of carrying out his threat.

"Your grave may be half a mile deep," Elfro's voice was very calm; he shifted the staff in his hands as he spoke, "but it will not be the grave of Race X."

Some of Elfro's calmness penetrated to Holm and shook him. How could any man be calm in the face of death? He decided this kid was trying to bluff him. Anger deepened in him. No kid with curls around his shoulders could bluff Cyrus Holm.

"What do you mean?"

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Elfro tucked Einer's staff carelessly under one arm. With his free hand, he pointed to the balls of floating light.

"These are Race X."

Holm's was unimpressed. "So what? Can they withstand the explosion of a K-bomb?"

"I don't know," Elfro answered. "I have never had a chance to find out. Probably they have never had to face such a weapon."

"They have to face it now!" Holm's bluster grew stronger. "Long before your bomb lands, they will be gone. They can cross interplanetary distances under their own power, though not interstellar distances. To reach the stars they need the ship that you intended to steal from them."

Holm looked a little confused. He glanced at the balls of light.

"Since you cannot destroy them, you will have to answer to them," Elfro continued. "You will not be able to hide from them. There is no hiding place from Race X. So, in the long run, you will have to answer to them. When that day comes, I would not want to be in your shoes."

Holm listened. He was now convinced that this was a bluff. "I'll answer to them, if I have to. But do you really mean they can escape from here without a ship, that they can cross space without protection?"

"Yes. They will be gone long before your bomb lands." Elfro shifted the staff to his other hand. Burke Hartford held his breath. He had a great deal of respect for this staff and he thought he knew what Elfro was trying to do with it. If Elfro failed in the attempt—Hartford took a slow step sideways. However, it was a step that took him a little closer to Cyrus Holm.

"You're lying, kid," Holm said contemptuously. "You're

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

trying to bluff me. They can't cross space without protection. Nothing can do this."

Elfro remained calm. "Nothing *material* can do this." He gestured toward the balls of floating light. "But Race X is not matter, as you know matter. They are finely organized energy states vibrating at a far higher frequency rate than any you know."

Holm's face formed a scowl. His confidence was momentarily shaken. Maybe this kid wasn't bluffing. Maybe this young idiot was telling the truth!

However, there was a flaw in Elfro's argument. Holm saw it.

"You're nothing but a crazy kid with wild ideas. Maybe you're right about the balls of floating light, maybe they would be gone before my bomb landed. But what about you? You are as much flesh and blood as I am! My bomb will scatter you! What about these others?" A gesture of his arm indicated the watching human youths, the Martians and the Venusians. "My bomb will blast them to hell and gone."

Hartford took another sidewise step. He tried to read Elfro's face. For a youngster, Elfro had remarkable control of his facial muscles. Hartford could not decide whether or not Holm's threat meant anything to the stripling. But Elfro shifted the staff in his hands.

For the first time, Holm became really aware of this staff.

"If you point that thing at me, I'm going to push this button!" Holm's voice was high and shrill. A pudgy finger hovered over the red button.

Hartford saw Elfro sigh. He knew from this that the stripling had actually been intending to use Einer's staff on him, unleashing the vast powers hidden within it. Elfro seemed to go within himself. He stood very still, as if even his heart beat had stopped, while he considered the situation. Or was he

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

actually conferring with the balls of light? They seemed to be taking no interest in this situation. Hartford had the sense of mysteries beyond his comprehension in operation here. Even Korder and his blue warriors seemed to grasp at last that the battle here was beyond their primitive weapons. They stood very quiet.

"Well, what have you got to say?" Holm continued. His bluster was back. "Thirty seconds after I push this button, the bomb will be launched from my ship. It is entirely automatic. My crew will have nothing to do with it. Do you want me to launch this bomb . . . or do you want to put me back on my barge and let me go?"

Elfro answered as if he had not heard Holm's question. "Nor am I in any danger from your bomb?"

His calmness, as well as what he said, startled Holm. "What the hell do you mean by that, kid? You're as much flesh and blood as I am."

"Yes. But that is not all I am. Nor is my existence tied to flesh and blood."

"Huh?" Holm's mouth hung open. "What are you, a spook?"

"Watch and see," Elfro answered.

The stripling stood very straight. As if in answer to an unheard summons, the balls of light clustered above him. He lifted his right hand to them in salute, his lips moved silently with unspoken words. A smile appeared on his face.

Again Hartford had the impression of mysteries beyond the comprehension of man. He knew that Micki, standing beside him, seemed to be holding her breath. Mouth open, Holm stood staring. He also sensed that something was happening. Hartford was aware of the wish that Ed Teller could have seen this. How that wrinkle-faced old man would have loved it!

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Elfro collapsed. He went down as lifeless flesh goes down when death comes. One instant he was as proud a figure of a youth as old Mother Earth had ever produced. The next instant, as every muscle in his body let go simultaneously, he was a sprawling figure on the floor.

Out from that body came—a ball of glowing light.

"My God!" Burke Hartford heard himself whisper. "He is Race X too!"

A sigh went up from the watching humans. The Martian and Venusian youths were very quiet. The blue men stirred restlessly. Had the fat man done something to their Great One? If so— At Korder's fierce command, they were quiet.

The ball of light that emerged from Elfro's body moved to Holm, hung in the air above his face for a second, then rose upward and joined the others.

Now, perhaps for the first time, Holm realized there was something really different here. His eyes went upward to the balls of light, then came back to the body on the floor. His face worked. He had tricked many men in his life. He was sure he was being tricked here. "What kind of a gag is this?"

This was what he thought; that what he had seen was a gag. However, there was a way to prove this. Laboriously he bent over and felt of Elfro's wrist. When he found nothing, his fingers searched frantically along the arm, then began exploring the throat. He straightened up. Alarm was on his face. This was no gag!

"He doesn't have any pulse," Holm muttered. "*He's dead!*" Holm looked wildly around for some way to run. He saw Korder and the blue men and cowered away. Hartford took a quick step toward him, then abruptly stopped.

The ball of glowing light was coming back to the body on the floor. Holm saw it too. Mouth open, he watched.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

The ball of light entered the body. It stirred. Elfro rose to his feet, smiling.

"That body—you—" Holm gulped.

"We make these bodies here in our laboratory," Elfro explained. "From light."

"F—from light."

"Yes. Actually the human body, with its intricacies of flesh, bones, nerve tissue, and blood—or any other material object—is made up of energy at differing rates of vibration. Light is another form of energy. If you know how, you can synthesize anything you want from light. So you see, your bomb is not a threat at all."

Listening, Hartford saw clearly what the stripling meant. But what would happen to Micki and to him? They didn't have secret bodies of light hidden away inside them, or not so far as he knew. Holm's bomb would certainly destroy them. What of the students here from three planets? Was Elfro going to sacrifice all of them? Hartford took another step toward him.

The fat man was thinking along different lines. At last he had believed what he had seen with his own eyes. Now he was wondering how to turn this to his own advantage.

"A new body!" Holm whispered. The slobbering noise came again, very clearly now. "You've got to make me a new body! Do you understand? You've got to! No, don't try to point that staff at me—"

Elfro had lifted the staff. All of Holm's attention was on Elfro and the staff. Hartford took the chance that was offered. With reflexes keyed to lightning speed, he took two quick steps toward Holm and slugged him just where the fat of the neck became the fat of the jaw. It was a smashing blow, with power in it. Holm threw up his hands and stumbled back-

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

ward. As his hands went up, he dropped the device he was holding. It started toward the floor.

Hartford caught it before it hit. He went to the floor with it, hugging it to his chest.

Korder, now that someone had taken the lead, released his own reflexes. His mighty club went up and came down in a sweeping blow to hit with a solid thud. It was covered with red and gray, blood and brains, as Holm went lifeless to the floor.

Hartford, kneeling, cuddled in his hands the little device that launched a mighty bomb somewhere in the sky above them. He caught a glimpse of Korder's mighty blow, saw Holm go down to stay forever. Raising one hand he wiped the sweat from his face, then looked upward at Elfro.

"I had hoped you would act," the stripling said. "Even the staff would not have acted fast enough to have stopped him from pushing the button. Only muscles, only human reflexes, were fast enough for that."

Hartford rose to his feet. In his hand, the little device clicked softly, then began to hum.

Horror rising in him, Burke Hartford stared at it. "It went off on its own!" he whispered. "Perhaps the jolt of catching it—" Horror choked him. "He said that thirty seconds after he pushed the button, the bomb would be launched."

Elfro collapsed. A ball of light leaped from his body, then was gone. Gone faster than the eye could follow, gone by some escape route known only to Race X, gone in an instant, gone in a lighting flash. With it went every other ball of floating light present in the cavern, except one, which remained with Hartford.

"But they wouldn't just go off and leave us here to die!" Micki's whisper was the only sound in all the hidden city.

"Everybody to my ship!" Hartford shouted. "You, Korder,

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

tell your men to follow me. Move! As fast as your legs can carry you."

Korder blinked in surprise at this sudden order. He did not understand.

"The whole place will go boom-boom, fast," Hartford told him. "Moler! Get your kids and come running. Tell the Martians and the Venusians to follow."

Korder's bull voice raised his men to instant attention. They would follow him wherever he went. He did not understand, but the man from Earth had said *go*. He would go wherever the man from Earth said

It was Moler who did not move. He shook his head at Hartford. "The thirty seconds are almost gone already. Once launched, not over a minute or two will pass before the bomb strikes." He shrugged to show how it was.

"We have no chance if we stay here. If we run—"

Again Moler shook his head. "You don't understand."

"You're responsible for the lives of these kids! Are you going to let them die like rats in a trap?"

"You still don't understand. Here! Watch and see!" Moving quickly to the wall, Moler punched a button there. The ceiling seemed to fade away. Revealed was space.

There seemed to be some magnifying effect in the mechanism which gave them this view of the sky. Holm's ship was very clearly revealed. It floated like a black blob in the gulf above them.

A puff of smoke appeared along its bottom.

"The bomb being launched!" Hartford said. "It will hit in less than a minute." It seemed to him that the whole vast cavern was suddenly very lonely.

"Then this is the end," Micki whispered. She came very close to Hartford.

"Sorry, Micki." His voice was choked.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

She came still closer. "No need to be sorry, Burke. We fought the best fight we could. Having lost it . . . well, something I have seen here makes me unafraid to die."

"Die?" Moler's voice seemed to come from a vast distance. "The end? Who said anything about the end? Who spoke of dying? We are not helpless here. And we are not alone." He spoke as one who knew what he was talking about. "Ahhhh." His voice faded into a sigh.

Seen through the roof, the whole sky seemed to burst into flame. Light flared out there in space, as bright as a minor sun. In long flaring fingers, it spread outward at incredible speed. The fingers of flame seemed to touch Holm's ship, to fling it upward. Then the ship itself exploded, adding to the intolerable brilliance flaring there.

"The bomb went off just after it left the ship!" Hartford whispered. He turned startled eyes toward Moler. The math teacher was touching the button again. "Best not to admit the radiation from that in here."

"What is it?" Korder's voice growled in Hartford's ear. "One minute, man of Earth, we are to run. Then the roof opens and the sky explodes. Are we to run or are we to fight? We are simple people. We do not understand. Make up your mind, man of Earth, what are we to do."

"We don't have to run any more, ever," Hartford whispered. He glanced at the ball of light above him. It alone had remained behind. Had it stayed to watch over them? He was aware that other balls of light were coming into the city. They came as they had gone, with incredible swiftness, moving so fast that they seemed to come out of nothingness.

One ball swirled to a stop over Elfro's body, then went slowly down into it. The stripling stirred, blinked sleepy eyes, stretched, seemed to wait a moment for the rhythm of his heart to pick up again, then rose to his feet.

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Hartford jerked a thumb toward the sky. "You did that?"

Elfro nodded toward the balls of light flashing into the cavern. "I had help."

"Um," Hartford said. The uneasiness in him was suddenly gone, he knew forever. The old dark depths of the subconscious had been purged somehow. A new knowledge had entered. This new knowledge was flowing into him now. "Yes, I know you had help—Einer!"

"Einer?" the stripling gulped. "But, Einer—"

"Yes, I know," Hartford interrupted. The new knowledge was strong and sure within him. "We saw Einer die under the fern trees in the Great Depression. We saw a sort of halo appear when he died. We did not understand this, then. We also saw you die."

"Well—" The stripling seemed to look up at the balls of light, as if for help. They ignored him. He was becoming embarrassed. "But your thinking is nonsense, the fantasy of an overstrained mind. Relax, my friend from Earth. When we have liked a person very much, as you liked Einer, for instance, all of us like to believe that he is alive in some here-after and that we will see him again. Do you understand me?"

"I understand you very well," Hartford answered. "But I do not believe you at all."

"Eh?" the stripling was really startled. "But you must believe me!"

"I remember that you explained to us that we could not be told too much too fast, that knowledge was a slowly won thing, and that to give it too fast might do damage to the mind."

"So I did," the stripling admitted. "I was thinking of the equipment in the laboratory, the means by which new bodies are synthesized. This idea that I am Einer, I was not thinking of this at all."

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

"Again, I know," Hartford said. "But what I think is this: After we saw Einer die, he came back here and synthesized a new body very similar to the one he had had, the one that we saw destroyed under the fern trees. I think that this particular body pattern will be useful in some future time, so it was retained. When we first arrived, I think it was actually Einer who greeted us, but in order to prevent too much shock to our minds, he pretended he was Elfro and said he was Einer's twin brother. There was never but one."

"You think a great deal, my friend from Earth." The stripling's embarrassment was growing more obvious each minute. "Your ideas are interesting, but you cannot prove them."

"Can't I?" Hartford nodded toward Korder. The giant blue chieftain approached and stood leaning upon his great war club. "Tell me, Korder, who is this?" Hartford pointed to the stripling.

"This is Einer," Korder answered, perplexed that such a question should be asked. "This is our Great One, who came to make peace. Who else could it be?"

"So you see!" Hartford said. Triumph was in his voice.

The stripling smiled and was silent.

"I have also done other thinking," Hartford continued. He gestured toward Jim Moler, toward the human students, toward the Martians and the Venusians. "They are also members of Race X, in bodies adapted to the planets where they are to go and teach after they finish their training here. I saw such bodies in your laboratory but could not then decide whether they were being created or destroyed. Now I know. They were being created."

"Go on," the stripling said. "Perhaps you are digging a trap for yourself!"

"And perhaps I am not," Hartford answered. "Race X is

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

here in our system as our teachers. And you are Einer. And you are their leader!"

The stripling spread his hands. His laugh was very gentle. "There is no trap. Yes, I am Einer."

Again he laughed, a soft sound in the hidden city. "It happened as you said it did. You have solved our secret. For centuries past the counting we have had this hidden school here on the Outermost Planet. From this city, we sent out our teachers to every race in the system. Thus we guided their evolution and their growth. We have been the teachers of human kind, our brothers in the flesh. Because there was no other way to do it, we went among you as humans too. As Teller discovered, occasionally humans came here. But what he did not discover was that every human who came here was also a member of Race X, returning here for further training."

The old eyes in the youthful face smiled very gently at Burke Hartford and at Micki Adcock. "You are the first two real humans who ever found their way to the hidden city of Race X.

Both were silent. In each there was rising happiness and a sense of triumph that was unlike any emotion either had ever felt. For this was not the triumph that comes from amassing wealth or from receiving honors, but that which comes from solving a great mystery. It is the most heady drink that any human can ever have.

"If only Ed Teller could have lived to see his dream come true!" Micki whispered.

"Ed Teller?" The stripling's face showed surprise. "I rather think Ed Teller did live to see his dream come true."

The two humans stared at him.

"Ed Teller was a member of Race X too," the stripling continued. "When he was new on Earth, he had an accident, a

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

blow on the head. As a result of this, he forgot, consciously, who he was. Deep in his mind the memory of his identity remained. He spent the rest of his life trying to solve this puzzle, trying to prove what he knew intuitively to be true but could not quite grasp. When he finally came here, without knowing it, he was coming home."

While Burke Hartford and Micki Adcock stared, but carefully did not glance toward one of the bodies on the floor, the stripling beckoned to one of the balls of glowing light. At his summons, it came down to the two humans and stood before their faces.

"Hi, Burke! Hi, Micki!" Teller's voice whispered in their minds. "He has told you true. I am Ed Teller."

The ball of light rose and floated away.

"Sometimes we entertain Great Ones and do not know it," Hartford whispered.

"Yes," the stripling answered. "Sometimes the one who walks beside us is someone else!"

"As to the future?" Hartford continued.

"As to me, the man you knew as Teller told you the task for which Einer was being trained. Without knowing it, he told you true. As Elfro, I also told you of Einer's mission. As Einer-Elfro, this is a task which I will accomplish one day, when the need for it on your home planet is very great."

The stripling paused, then spoke again. "Einer's task has not been forgotten. His training has merely been momentarily interrupted while he helped two humans deal with the wolves of space." The smile on his face became shy. "As to your future—once two humans told me their dreams, the secret that lay closest to the deepest heart of each of them."

His eyes came to rest on Micki.

"The dream of one of those humans was to work with children, and if she ever had children of her own, to teach them

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

to grow up straight and tall, so that their heads might be high enough to reach the stars."

"That's still my dream!" Micki's voice had a gulp in it. Her hand went through Hartford's arm. "Of course, if she is to have children of her own—" A blush colored her face.

The stripling coughed delicately. But his smile was meaningful. His eyes went to Hartford. "And your secret dream was—"

"It will have to be blended with Micki's dream now," the big man answered. "But it is still my dream."

"I think both of you will realize your dreams," the stripling said. "And in the realization of them, the human race will take another step toward maturity. For now the teachers coming from Race X, will at last have human helpers. You two, helpers who understand the goal and the purpose of our work, understanding it and us will be able to co-operate fully and wholly with it and with us."

"There can be no greater dream than that," Hartford said. His heart was in his mouth and his soul was in his voice. "There is nothing that could please us better than to work with those who came to us from afar. And as for you?"

"As for me, it will be good for me to know that I will have helpers such as you two to stand beside me again, as you stood beside me here, when my need, and the need of the human race, is very great."

The smile on the face of Einer-Elfro, the stripling with the golden curls falling around his shoulders, was a youthful happy face, and also an old, wise face. It was a kind face, the face of someone human, and also the face of someone who had come from worlds that lay afar. As he shook his head and laughed, his golden hair had the touch of a halo about it.