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Were the celestial judges
themselves guiltless?

the TRIAL OF TERRA

JACK WILLIAMSON



First Book Publication

SOLAR FIRE WAITS FOR A GUILTY VERDICT

Earth was about to reach a contact crisis and the quarantine service of Denebola IV had an important decision to make. Earth could be allowed to make further progress and be admitted to star traffic. Or, Earth could be judged incapable of ever reaching civilized standards and thus be doomed to destruction.

The decision rested with one man—scrawny, freckle-faced Wain Scarlet, whose less than perfect conditioning caused him to hatch plans of personal gain.

The evidence accumulated, while Scarlet waited for the man with the biggest bribe and Earth waited, unknowingly, for the decision of doom.

Author's Note

THE TRIAL OF TERRA was begun several years ago as a series of stories based on the increasing astronomical evidence that we are not alone in space—that millions or billions of other planets in the visible universe are probably inhabited.

The series was interrupted when I signed a contract to write a comic strip, *Beyond Mars*, about the astronauts of a future century. It was interrupted again when I went to graduate school and began teaching English, first at New Mexico Military Institute and the University of Colorado—where I am still working toward the Ph. D. in English literature—and later at Eastern New Mexico University, which is in my home town, Portales.

Now finished at last, the novel seems to be just in time, what with John Glenn and the other astronauts and cosmonauts well on their way to discovering what—or who—is really waiting for us on the other side of the moon.

—Jack Williamson

THE TRIAL OF TERRA

by
JACK WILLIAMSON

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TO KARLA

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I

On Earth, a secret agent cloaked in the native identity named Charles Fort spent many years collecting the incredible. He published reports of strange lights seen, of vanishing Ambroses, of imitation human beings, of rains of fish and virgins, of holes in the sky.

"The natives will never suspect that they are quarantined," he boasted to his superiors on the moon at the end of his assignment. "I have them doubting everything. Today we could land a starship at high noon in the middle of their biggest village without letting them guess that we are what we are!"

ON DENEbola IV, at the regional headquarters of the quarantine service, some thirty light-years from the tranquilized natives, Wain Scarlet was scanning a memo from the district office. Young man wanted, to judge the life or death of a dozen planets. Must have one hundred years experience in the service, and psionic classification five or better. Pay—well, an enterprising deputy warden with the Earth to sell could set his own price.

The memo was not literally so bald, but those were the terms in which Scarlet summed up the situation for his own benefit. He had spent a tedious century on Denebola IV, waiting for just such an opening, and he jumped at it.

The jump wasn't easy.

His own face was the first great barrier. He was a scrawny, red-freckled runt, in a world where such needless ugliness was shocking. His half-conditioned parents had refused to meddle with nature, and before he was old enough to ar-

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range his own aesthetic surgery he had come to enjoy a cruel satisfaction in the pain he could inflict upon the beautiful beings around him, with the bulge of his low forehead and the jut of his rodent teeth and the defiant stare of his yellow eyes.

The other barriers he had built upon that one within his own mind. A habit of suspicion. A pattern of unprovoked aggression and unnecessary flight. Although he had used the time-contracting neutronic ships of the service to put a dozen different worlds behind him forever, he had not escaped his gnawing need to strike and run again.

This time he was going to strike harder, and run farther. His goal was the galactic frontier, the fast-expanding bubble of new planetary systems claimed and conquered by interstellar pioneers. Out there, a thousand or ten thousand light-years beyond the utmost outposts of the service, all men were human. Perhaps, with the price of planets to spend, he could buy one last escape from everything he feared.

If his plans seemed somewhat large for a common clerk in regional personnel, they had been growing for a long hundred years, while he patiently endured all the incessant psionic indoctrination in the glorious traditions and the lofty obligations of the service, and carefully concealed his rankling resentment of all the handsome men around him. When chance struck, he was ready.

The instrument of luck was Warden Thornwall, an innocent dark youth whom he secretly despised for his dark beauty and his frank friendship and his well-conditioned intelligence.

"Wain, here's a case that ought to interest you." The warden tossed a little packet of documents into the action basket on his desk. "A savage planet out the far side of nowhere, about to reach a contact crisis. The natives are playing with rockets and atomic theory. Our watchers report that they will soon discover us. That means the end of our rights and duties under the Covenants of Non-Contact. If they really qualify, we'll have to usher them into civilization."

"I won't hold my breath till they do." Scarlet made a painful effort to reflect Thornwall's open smile. "I've seen contact

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crises before. The new races usually need several generations of supervised psionic training before we can certify that they are, in fact, human."

"Sol III will be no exception." The lovely youngster nodded, unaware of Scarlet's veiled aversion. "You'll find all the old arguments for extending the quarantine and for lifting it today—advanced by fussy old zookeepers and by pirates who want an open planet to loot and by social workers who need a new world to save. But this case gives us a novel complication."

Scarlet looked hastily down at the documents, trying to hide the flicker of illicit hope in his tawny eyes. Cunning enough to know his own mental handicaps, he did his best to disguise them.

"You'll see a notice from the signal service," the warden explained. "They want to use Sol for the first unit of their new intergalactic blinker. They're asking us to evacuate all human beings from its vicinity, before they begin transmission."

"Must they use Sol?"—Scarlet peered up at Thornwall, privately wondering how the blazing demolition of a whole solar system might be turned into personal profit. "Aren't there desert suns enough?"

"By their definition, Sol is a desert sun." The beautiful man smiled serenely. "Even after five thousand years under our supervision, the native anthropoids have failed to qualify for galactic citizenship. I'm afraid that the progress reports allow doubts that they ever will."

"Yet they're alive."

"Any star you point at has half a dozen planets with life of some sort. The signal people have made a scientific survey of the stars available for their initial project. They need twelve thousand stars of the right spectral type, compactly grouped here at the center. Sol is first on their list."

"There will be protests." Scarlet squinted shrewdly. "Even from old hands in the service."

"I knew the case would interest you." Thornwall glowed with executive assurance. "Why don't you look over the

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memo? I'll have to check with the record section, but I believe you're in line for the assignment if you want it."

Scarlet murmured a few polite words of praise for his rivals in the office, but he knew what the records section would say. Once, sixty years before, another beautiful and innocent young warden had gone sun-diving, trusting Scarlet with the records. He fumbled quickly through the documents, trying to cover the sudden flare of triumph in his yellow eyes.

"You'll have three possible decisions," Thornwall went on. "You may decide that the inhabited planet needs a few more centuries under our care to mature its native culture. If so, you may act within the limits of the Covenants to delay the contact and extend the quarantine."

Scarlet nodded, without much interest. Such a decision might please the cautious old heads in the service, but it offered no profit to him.

"On the other hand, you may find that the natives are ready for admission to civilization," the warden said. "In that case, you may open the planet to traffic with the stars under any supervision you see fit to impose."

Scarlet brightened, scenting money. Every contact crisis brought outsiders swarming from all the worlds around, drawn by a hundred motives to welcome the new race into the dangerous freedoms of galactic civilization. Surely, somebody would pay what he wanted.

"Or, finally, you may decide that the aborigines will never qualify," Thornwall finished. "If so, you may overrule the protests against the blinker project and order the evacuation of every galactic citizen within a light-year of Sol."

Scarlet frowned, considering that. The signal service was unlikely to offer bribes, but there were many ways that a clever man might take toward the free-living frontiers. The first deadly flash of the intergalactic beacon might be the signal of his fortune. His tawny eyes flared again.

"I thought you would be interested," the warden said. "Let me speak to the director."

Even after that assurance, the actual orders seemed a long time coming. Scarlet sat for three days grimly pretending to

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work, fighting a cold fear that his tampering with the records had been discovered. When at last Thornwall came up and clapped him on the back, he gasped with terror in spite of himself.

"Uh—" He caught a quick breath. "Yes, sir?"

"The director wants to see you." A luminous smile reassured him. "You're going to get the break I spoke of. About time, too!"

Yet his knees were trembling when he walked in to face the director, whose muscular perfection gleamed through a film of steely dust. He wanted to sit down, but the sleek metallic god kept him standing half a minute, probing him with cool gray eyes which glinted with the passionless authority of perfect psionic conditioning. He couldn't help cringing.

"Nervous, Scarlet?"

He nodded, grinning stiffly through his secret misery.

"Not that I blame you." With a cool steel smile, the giant allowed him to sit. "After all your years in this easy berth, you must dread being uprooted."

His greater fear was that he might appear too eager.

"I have been very happy here, sir," he agreed, in a voice which he tried to make regretful. "I hate to leave my marriage group, and I've a number of hobbies that I don't like to interrupt."

The metal god nodded sympathetically.

"Sun-diving, for one." Actually, he detested the sport because his imperfect integration had left him dangerously inept with the psionic diving gear, but a nervous compulsion drove him on. "Just bought an outfit from a friend who got transferred. He's been diving into sunspots, looking for the famous living lights. He had a theory they're intelligent—"

"Perhaps they are," The director's cool nod froze his apologetic grin. "I don't know how any complex of ions and electromagnetic energy can support intelligence, but I've brought back some queer psiographs from my own dives."

"Anyhow, I'll be selling my gear." Alarmed, Scarlet retreated as hastily as if the director had suddenly become a

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hissing solar fireball. "I wasn't quite prepared for such a mission, but the service comes first."

"We're living for the worlds we watch." The steel man intoned that old slogan so solemnly that Scarlet felt an uncomfortable prickling at the back of his neck. "We left our own worlds behind when we took the service oath."

"I'm not looking back, sir." His palms were clammy from a sudden fear that he had overdone his appearance of reluctance, but his eyes were on the new worlds ahead. "Though I suppose I've been here a little too long. I had almost forgotten how it feels to board a neutronic flyer to skip across a dozen or a hundred years, knowing that you can't come back."

"That's our lives." The magnificent man paused to study the records he had altered, so closely that he shuddered. "A bad situation, out there on Sol III. Frankly, Scarlet, I was hesitant to send a man of your incomplete conditioning. Especially one without field experience. But we've too many planets to watch, and too few dedicated men. I'm a little surprised that we've kept you here so long." The director gave him a quicksilver smile. "But this situation is apt to call for all you've learned in this hundred years."

Scarlet scanned the little stack of psionic dispatches that he pushed across the desk, trying to absorb them as swiftly as if he really rated five. Thornwall's briefing helped him decide upon a troubled frown.

"This last report from Sol III is already fifty years old." His concern grew swiftly genuine. "I'll be at least that long getting there by the regular routes. What can I expect to find?"

"Your problem, Warden." The director was already turning, reaching for another stack of dispatches. "The finite speed of our communications is all that makes your mission necessary. In a contact crisis, we must have a responsible man on the spot."

"Trust me, sir." Scarlet spoke with a pious gratitude for that finite limit upon the velocity of every sort of signal, even upon the flash of the intergalactic blinker. By the time any report of his decision could come back here, he would

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be so far beyond Sol that no possible pursuit could ever overtake him. "I'll be on guard."

"You'll need to be," the steel man admonished him. "A contact crisis draws all sort of people. Some pure as light. Some more savage than the savages we give our lives to guard."

Scarlet boarded the supply ship next morning, carrying most of his material possessions in one small bag. The true rewards of the service were the joys of service itself; certainly he had received very little besides.

He was glad enough to abandon what he had to leave behind, the too-risky sun-diving and the dabbling in psionic art and the aimless multicuture with which he had tried to kill the idle years; he couldn't help feeling a secret relief at the separation from his marriage group, although he tried to make a convincing display of regret.

He even asked Glade to come with him. She was the sultry if somewhat shallow blonde who had always insisted that she was simply fascinated with his phenomenal ugliness, but now he was not surprised when she chose to remain with her more handsome husbands and the civilized amenities of Denebola IV.

The flyer caught the neutrionic streams, the vast winds of invisible neutrinos that burst from the novas and blow through the galaxies at almost the speed of light. Velocity foreshortened time. A long quarter-century on the planets ahead and behind was only a few weeks for Scarlet, and he was still elated with the wine of one more triumphant escape from all the perfection he hated, when the flyer touched at Procyon Station.

In the spaceport bar, he bought a drink for a service courier from the Regulus region and asked for news of Earth.

"Light's so damned slow," he grumbled, disguising this casual boast about his mission. "A contact crisis comes up on a world like Earth, and it's out of hand before you can get there to do anything about it. What about Earth?"

The courier looked blank.

"Sol III," Scarlet said.

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"Oh, we touched there." The courier grinned maliciously. "Better take along a durable woman and a good library, if you're waiting for those quarrelsome apes to civilize themselves."

"Huh?" Scarlet downed his drink uncomfortably. "Aren't they near contact?"

"Not that I heard about."

"They were firing military rockets a hundred years ago," he protested hopefully. "They'll be getting to space."

"But not for any peaceful purpose. They were groping toward fusion bombs, when we picked up those dispatches. They'll soon be blowing the crust off their grubby little planet. Even if they do blunder into our outpost, it doesn't mean that they're fit for civilized society."

"Have another?"

Scarlet blinked at his time ring. "Thanks, but my ship will be lifting."

He hurried back aboard, frowning gloomily.

After a few worried weeks of ship time, he watched Sirius flare out ahead like a natural nova. The news of Sol III was twenty years fresher, but still distressing.

"Larger tribes are fighting bigger wars with better weapons." The post communications officer grinned sardonically. "If they do make contact, they'll probably attack us with fusion bombs. We're the ones who need protection!"

"They may be troublesome." Slowly tightening muscles accented the ugliness of Scarlet's pinched and chinless face, until the better-integrated man looked uncomfortably away. "But I'll civilize them," he muttered defiantly. "If they are human at all."

Perhaps they were not, he reflected silently. Perhaps he would have to approve the blinker project, after all. But, before he decided to approve that fatal flash, he intended to be well paid for his decision. His first concern was the source of his payment.

He was alert for the scent of money when the flyer touched at Proxima Station. He got off to sniff for it, and caught only the odor of trouble. The restless aborigines had

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fired rockets into space, but the radiation zones had slowed their efforts to reach the satellite of Earth.

Wandering unhappily back to the flyer, he found a girl at the lock ahead of him. A deck officer had blocked her way. She was protesting in some liquid-toned tongue he had never heard before, so vehemently that he snapped on his psionic translator.

"—unconditioned blunder!" The sense of her ringing words came suddenly through. "You can see that my passage was cleared through your own transportation office."

"You may come." The officer nodded grudgingly. "But not your rubbish."

Scarlet heard the indignant catch of her breath, as the officer gestured stubbornly at a mountain of packing cases stacked beside the ramp. In response to his glance, their blank labels flashed with words that he could read as if in his native tongue.

CONTENT:: Psionic Conditioning Equipment

CONSIGNOR: Briarstone Mission

CUSTODIAN: Coral Fell

DESTINATION: Sol III

The labels faded as his eyes went back to Coral Fell.

"It isn't rubbish and it isn't mine," she was warmly informing the officer. "It belongs to the people of Sol III. They're near a contact crisis. The moment the quarantine is raised, they'll need help. I'm going out there to open a psionic training center, to help them make the difficult jump to civilization. All this is just the barest essential equipment for our first clinic—"

"No matter if it's a captive living light, this is not a common carrier," the officer snapped. "Our limited cargo space is already filled with supplies for Sol Station. Wait for a freighter."

"But there won't be any freighters." A sob shattered her well-conditioned confidence. "Not till the quarantine is raised. And not another supply ship, for three whole years—"

"Too bad." He shrugged unsympathetically. "But we're lifting off—"

"Wait!" Her desperate voice fell, but the translator still

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caught her words. "I've funds of my own. Maybe we can reach some private understanding—"

"I'm the wrong man to bribe!" The officer recoiled in indignation. "I can see to it that you aren't allowed off any ship at Sol Station."

She turned, and Scarlet shrank from her angry loveliness. Her long hair shone with blue psionic moons, and her mouth was a quivering golden slash across her exquisite lean face. With tears burning in her violet eyes, she stalked toward him blindly.

"Warden Scarlet!" The deck officer moved to meet him with an unexpected graciousness. "So you've already seen the sights of Proxima—"

"You're a service executive?" Suddenly the girl saw him, but somehow not his ugliness. Her smile illuminated him. "Could you help me?"

"Perhaps I can." He turned briskly to the officer. "When the quarantine is lifted, the natives will need all the help they can get. We're taking Coral Fell and all her cargo. In my own suite, if necessary."

"Yes, sir." The officer had become somewhat purple, but he nodded stiffly. "I'll arrange the space, sir."

"Thank you, Warden." Her kiss took his breath, before he had time to reflect that she must have come from a world of more casual conventions than his own. "How can I ever repay you?"

"I wish no pay." Uncomfortably, he disengaged himself. In his judiciary position, he could hardly ask outright for the bribe the deck officer had refused. Dealing with her was going to require a delicate tact. "But—uh—shall we meet aboard for dinner?"

She met him for dinner, wondrous in a gown of woven psionic filaments that reflected all his thoughts and moods in their flow of patterned color, and always amplified his own responses to her beauty. She was far more, he soon discovered, than merely a dedicated missionary.

He cringed from her shimmering perfection, with his old uneasy defiance, but she was somehow neither fascinated nor repelled by his total ugliness. She simply failed to notice.

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Perhaps, he thought, she had lived on some frontier where aesthetic surgery was not the fashion. Or perhaps his very deformity appealed to the same generosity that had brought her to aid the natives of Earth.

"So the whole future of these planets is yours to decide?" Her glowing admiration overwhelmed his remaining defenses. "Isn't that an awfully important decision to be left to just one man?"

He caught his breath to assure her that he had been long trained for his task, and his fitness carefully tested, but when he remembered how he had secretly insured his own selection, a wave of shame submerged him.

Fortunately, their food was being served. There were dishes he had never seen before; by the time she had informed him that these were multicultured bioforms from Proxima II, he had begun to recover from his unexpected confusion.

"The service is a volunteer organization," he muttered awkwardly. "Though of course we do have official status. Our trouble is that so few people ever volunteer to leave their own times and planets, to go voyaging down through strange worlds and ages, giving their lives to guard ignorant savages. We never have men enough, but we do what we can."

"We are volunteers ourselves." She nodded sympathetically. "I joined the mission because of my father. A galactic buccaneer, my mother used to call him. He owned a great fleet of neutrionic flyers. He used to operate out toward the Edge, looting new worlds of everything portable, using his profits to build more flyers and loot more worlds. All legal enough, but Mother taught me not to like it. When I inherited his fortune, I came back to these forgotten central planets, to return what he had taken."

Inwardly elated at this news of all she had to give away, Scarlet began cautiously trying to convey the idea that he would be receptive. He admitted over the wine that he had long ago lost the youthful illusions that led him to volunteer.

"I can remember when the feeling of it made me shiver all over," he told her. "Skipping down the centuries, watch-

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ing over all the retarded worlds as they clamber up out of the jungle. The trouble is, they take too long. They stumble too often, and fall back too far. We've been guarding Earth for five thousand years."

He tingled again, in her admiring glow.

"Frankly, Coral, I have decided to leave the service as soon as I can afford it. I'm sick of the discipline, the long monotony, all the sacrifices. I want a decent living and a permanent family."

As she smiled, the psionic fibers of her gown made a veil of rosy flame in which their reflected pleasures in each other flowed into a mingled radiance. He thought for an instant that he had made his point.

"To your new future!" She clinked her glass against his. "I think you're wise to resign, because I've never agreed with the quarantine philosophy. It seems almost criminal to let a world like Earth stumble in the dark for five thousand years, when psionic training could civilize it in two or three generations."

"To your mission on Earth!" He drained the wine, trying not to think of all the young civilizations that had been destroyed by premature contact. "If I can lift the quarantine."

That was as clear as he dared to be, but still she failed to understand. His own dismay quenched all the burning glory of her gown, leaving her nearly nude beneath the dead gray filaments as she leaned to kiss his glass again with her own.

"To *our* new Earth!" she breathed. "Let's make it that. You'll find yourself again, in the exciting work of civilizing the planet. You and I, together—"

Panic shook him.

"Wait for my decision," he muttered desperately. "You're forgetting that Sol III has not yet qualified for civilization. Unless I find grounds for granting galactic citizenship, the planet will be incinerated."

Her glowing gown faded pale with shock, when he told her about the blinker project.

"Wain, how can you consider that?" Her widened eyes

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were black. "The murder of a world? Murder multiplied three billion times!"

"The extinction of the native culture may appear deplorable," he told her. "But it won't be murder at all—not unless the natives have been granted human status."

"But they are *people*, Wain!" Her face glowed again, with a pleading urgency. "One social worker from our mission spent months there, bundled up in their horrid fiber clothing, disguised as a medical student. He examined hundreds of them. Physically, they're as fully human as we are."

"Human status depends on mental attainments," he reminded her craftily. "Or, to be more accurate, it depends in this particular case upon my own considered judicial decree."

Even then, she didn't understand. To her well-conditioned innocence, a deputy warden stood far above any question of corruption. Her pure illusions remained immune to the boldest hints he dared to make, as red Proxima dimmed behind and died.

The bribe he wanted, she might never pay. But all her innocence failed to restrain her from using the arts of psionics to press upon him another kind of bribe, which included herself. She seemed to mind neither the jut of his rodent teeth nor the squint of his yellow eyes nor even his own sadly botched conditioning.

All the way to Sol, she talked of her magnificent plans for Earth. The equipment he had rescued would barely fit out the first psionic training center, but she had funds to purchase more. Her staff would be pitifully inadequate at first, even if he decided to join her mission, but the natives they trained would soon be scattering out to open new centers in every jungle village.

At the end of the flight, they were sitting together in the ocular dome when the airless satellite eclipsed the driving glare of Sol. Earth still burned in the black space ahead—a thin, green-veined crescent, one horn tipped with a dazzle of ice. Watching, Coral caught her breath with a tiny gasp of pure delight.

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"So beautiful!" she breathed. "So wonderful and new. Every opportunity I've come so far to find."

Scarlet nodded, but his eyes hardly left her. With an ultimate missionary zeal, she had rinsed her hair with a psionic wash that came to flaming life with her joy, and powdered her body with a dust that caught and amplified all his feelings of desire in a glitter of diamond points.

"Say you'll stay, Wain!" She caught his hand. "In a couple of hundred years, we'll have civilization blooming here."

"But I'm not—uh—completely conditioned," he reminded her uncomfortably. "In that time, I'd be getting into—uh—middle age." Watching her hair turn dull with his discomfort, he muttered bleakly, "I'm getting out where life is worth living, as soon as my duty here is done."

"But, Wain! The psionic dust turned cold and blue upon her, reflecting her own distress. "I can't just abandon the mission, and you know that our work here will take a good two or three hundred years."

"Your work," he said unhappily.

However magical it might seem to those without it, psionic training required toil and time. To become fully effective, the preconditioning had to begin at the instant of conception, guided by preconditioned parents. The first generations were always awkward half-things, lost between worlds, as he himself had been. He wanted no more of their hopeless yearnings and agonized frustrations.

"Stay!" She leaned toward him, bathed in a sudden glow of devotion. "We'll be married the day you leave the service. My own conditioning will help complete yours. And you will find our work worth everything. A thousand years on Earth won't be too long, now that we're in love."

In spite of himself, he almost took her in his arms. Less than half-conditioned, he had little immunity to her psionic lure. Yearning to kiss the cold green blaze of her mouth, he shivered with despair. He thought that everything was lost.

But darkness fell across the dome. He looked out to see the black-toothed rim of the moon rising to gnaw the

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jeweled Earth away, as the flyer fell to land. Grateful for the interruption, he squirmed desperately away.

"What's wrong, Wain?"

Her wounded voice tore at him, but he refused to look back at her psionic charms. He stood watching the crescent Earth until its last glitter was gone.

"Tell me, dear," she begged him. "Whatever's wrong, I want to help you. But your late conditioning disturbs your reactions. You're hard for me to understand."

He felt grimly thankful for that dark veil across his mind. He couldn't tell her, but he was getting back his balance. She had swayed him dangerously, but he would surely find other lovely women glad enough to overlook his ugliness after he was rich. He had already squandered far too much of his short life for the hollow rewards of the service; he didn't intend to give up the rest of his youth for her. Surely, somebody else would pay him to raise the quarantine.

"Darling—" Alarm caught her voice. "Don't ever think I feel above you!"

"Of course I don't." He stared into the dark, afraid to look at her. "But we're landing now. I've—I've just recalled my duty."

"I don't see—"

"I am a deputy warden." He was deliberately gruff. "I have come here to decide the future of a planet. The rules and traditions of the service do not allow me to become intimate with anyone who has a special interest in my decision."

"Is that all?" She laughed breathlessly. "You silly dear! You don't know how much you need reconditioning. But I do respect your principles. I'll stop pestering you until Earth has been admitted to civilization."

He gave her an uneasy glance, and found her only normally alluring. The flyer lurched and swayed, settling upon the satellite. They turned together to look for Sol Station. Here it was night.

"It's all magnificent!" she whispered, before her first delight was clouded with bewilderment. "But where is the station?"

"Still camouflaged." He pointed. "Those rock hummocks

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are painted membranes, if you know how to look, inflated to hide the neutrionic flyers on the field. The main installations are in that peak, and underneath. Seel"

He nodded toward a glint of moving metal in a dummy craterlet. A hidden air lock opened. Belted spacemen rose into view, riding the arms of a multiple crane, hoisting billowing membranes.

"What are they doing?"

"Rigging a screen to hide us," he told her. "We'll be getting off as soon as it's inflated."

She said she had to go below to finish packing, but lingered instead in the dome, watching him so sharply that he stiffened. Although he understood that advanced conditioning included a taboo against uninvited mental prying, he couldn't help an uneasy resentment of her psionic superiority.

"Go ahead," he snapped. "I'll meet you down at the lock."

"You're worried, Wain." Her warm concern assured him that she had not been picking any guilty secrets from his mind. "Why?"

"That camouflage." He gestured at the hummocks clumped below the mountain. "It's too good. The station is still concealed. I see no native rockets. I'm afraid we're here too soon."

When he walked down the ramp from the lock, a few minutes later, into the cavernous tent that had been rigged to hide the flyer, the station commandant was waiting to greet him with the formalities due his rank and mission.

Commander Newbolt was a lean blond giant who enhanced his virile presence with a liberal use of psionic cosmetics. Hearing the sharp intake of Coral's breath when she first saw the shining mantle of magnified masculinity that revealed his muscular beauty, Scarlet hated him instantly.

"Your accommodations are ready, sir. Down in Tunnel Seven. I hope you find them adequate, because I believe you're going to be here for some time."

"The crisis?" He couldn't stop the question. "Have the natives arrived?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Why not?" He tried to gulp his panic down. "They were

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reported entering a contact crisis a hundred years ago. I expected to find their rockets here."

Revulsion from his ugliness and contempt for his judgment was thinly veiled behind the smug satisfaction of Newbolt's thin-lipped smile.

"I'm afraid you'll discover that my predecessor was badly mistaken when he prepared for such an early crisis here. I urged him at the time not to send for you."

Scarlet glared up at the towering commander, bracing himself for trouble. He could already see that Newbolt was stupid enough to take a very dangerous attitude toward bribery.

"How's that?" he rapped. "Weren't the natives about to reach this satellite?"

"They have crashed their clumsy little rockets here." Newbolt nodded scornfully. "But even if they ever lived to discover us, they aren't fit for civilization. Their culture is sick with a pathological militarism."

"I'll give due weight to your opinion," Scarlet slashed, "when I come to judge their fitness."

Newbolt remained undevastated.

"We have been assembling evidence for your Equity's consideration. When your flyer was sighted, I ordered all human beings in the solar system to gather here to meet you."

"Thank you."

"My own recommendation will be that you approve the signal project," Newbolt added. "I'm convinced that our long vigil here has been a waste of time. The natives have been growing more numerous and more destructive, but hardly more human."

"I'll ask for your advice when I require it," Scarlet told him. "Please have my luggage taken to my quarters. Arrange for the hearing to begin without delay."

"Yes, your Equity."

"Wain!" Coral Fell came floating toward them in a pink glow of admiration, her wide eyes fixed on Newbolt. "I want to meet the commander."

"I don't think you'll like him," Scarlet warned her. "He is advising me to approve the blinker project."

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"Is he, though?"

Unhappily, Scarlet introduced them. Her psionic powder shone like galactic dust, reflecting her delight and Newbolt's manly pleasure. When she asked to go with them to the hearing, Newbolt agreed without waiting for Scarlet's permission.

A crude mechanical elevator dropped them from the lock tower into the moon, so fast that Scarlet, not yet used to the light gravitation, had to snatch at a handrail to keep his feet on the floor.

A mile below, Newbolt escorted them briskly through a long gallery that was a museum of the guarded planet. Crystal cases stood filled with stone axes, rust-eaten blades, and primitive robot missiles.

"Our newest exhibit." Newbolt paused at a niche where a sleek aluminum rocket hung against star-dusted emptiness above the ice-gemmed splendor of the crescent planet. "The first spaceship from Earth."

"How'd you get it here?"

"We followed it out from Earth. The natives were trying for the moon, but they ran into a burst of solar radiation too hot for their shielding. After they were dead, we salvaged their equipment." He chuckled. "If they had known how closely we were watching—"

"You let them die?" Scarlet interrupted. "Out here in space?"

"You know the Covenants." Newbolt shrugged, not very respectfully. "They had failed to make contact. Consequently, we couldn't interfere."

Eighty-seven human beings had responded to his call. Most of them were attached to the quarantine service, but others had sought these wilderness worlds for ends as varied as their interstellar culture. A trio of prospectors had been sifting through the asteroids. A primitive artist had been recording an epic fantasy of a wrecked flyer down on a rocky moon on Saturn, surrounded by the phantom lights of space legend. An archeologist had abandoned a dig on Mars. Half a dozen outside agents had hastily discarded their disguises as inhabitants of Earth. Waiting under the old

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stone dome of the little auditorium, these legally human beings had sorted themselves into three contending factions.

"Beasts of prey!" Newbolt gave the nearest group a snarl of contempt. "Rumors of the crisis have been spreading out through space for a century now. These wolves have come swarming in, howling for leave to loot the planet." He chuckled. "The signal project serves them properly!"

Scarlet made no answer. Robed in his blue official light, he mounted to his bench and waited sternly for Newbolt to silence the chamber. His feral eyes narrow with his most judicial scowl, he studied the three hostile factions.

Newbolt was marching toward the neatly seated contingent from the quarantine station. Coral shimmered beside him, clad in golden dust and the cascade of psionic fire falling from her waist. Scarlet tightened his bony jaws, turning painfully away from her magnified allure.

The hermit, his detached head blind and cadaverous in its crystal cell, had wheeled himself to join the three lean young men in the plain space dress of the signal service. Scarlet frowned disapprovingly at their contented poverty, and looked for the beasts of prey.

The straggling group down at his left included the bearded artist and the space-worn prospectors, among half a dozen others. They were feeble beasts; he saw no evidence of the wealth he wanted. Bitterly, hunched and ugly on the bench, he droned the official formula which invoked the olden justice of man.

"A routine affair," he rasped, and paused again to savor the pain of the beautiful men. "We'll dispense with formality, to get at the facts. I'll summarize the briefs. The natives of Sol III are reported near contact crisis. Social workers are waiting to usher them into civilization. Their qualifications for human status have been challenged, however, and the signal service has filed notice of intention to appropriate Sol for use as an intergalactic beacon." Looking sourly for Coral, he found her now at the back of the room, glowing over a stooped little stranger. "A few individuals have seen fit to protest—"

"Certainly we protest!" She started toward the bench,

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towing the stranger. "Because Sol is not a barren star. Earth has three billion native inhabitants, whose human rights must be protected."

"Human?" He let his voice grate unpleasantly. "I understand that all human beings on these threatened planets were ordered to assemble here. I don't count three billion."

"Of course they can't obey psionic orders, because they don't know psionics. But now I know they're human." She hauled the wispy stranger toward him. "This is Mark Whitherly, the anthropologist. He found on Mars—"

"Please, Miss Fell," Newbolt intercepted her. "You're here as a guest. You can't interrupt the proceedings—"

"Never mind, Commander." Scarlet smiled to welcome a possible bribe. "I won't be bound by red tape. I intend to explore every source of evidence."

Newbolt muttered and sat down.

Scarlet waited, watching Coral and her discovery. The anthropologist, with his shuffling gait and his trembling hands and his dry yellow skin drawn tight over fine old bones, looked a good five hundred years overdue for euthanasia. The dull blue dust of his scholarly robe reflected nothing of Coral's bright excitement.

"Listen, Wain!" she was bubbling. "Mark has found evidence—proof you can't ignore. Now you will have to lift the quarantine at once. And you will disapprove the blinker project."

"I'll listen." Scarlet frowned doubtfully. "To any actual evidence."

"I do have evidence." The old scholar spoke slowly but clearly, in a child's high voice. "Your Equity, I have been watching this planet at intervals for two thousand years. It is my great experiment."

"What sort of experiment?"

"A study in cultural collision." The dull dust brightened now with an eagerness that made the old man seem oddly boyish. "You hear a lot of theories about what happens when our galactic civilization impinges upon primitive societies. You hear that the primitives are usually benefited, and you hear that they are usually destroyed. I have been waiting for this

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crisis, preparing to settle that question scientifically. Now that the moment has come—”

“Has it come?”

“It has.” A single comic lock of yellow hair waved above old Whitherly’s bobbing head. “I have been watching the aborigines fumble closer to contact. They have observed our psionic monitors—which they call dirigible dishes. They have written books about us. Their rockets have even reached this satellite. All they lack is your formal recognition of their human status.”

“Your Equity, I object!” The signal officer was alertly on his feet, tanned and handsome even without cosmetics, almost insolent. “I must inform you that our corps did not select suns at random for the intergalactic beacon. We traced the records of early migration, and chose a sector which evidently had been bypassed. If Whitherly is a real authority, I challenge him to show you one shard of evidence that human colonists ever landed on Earth.”

Scarlet looked inquiringly at the worn old man.

“I can’t do that,” Whitherly said.

“Then how can you claim human status for these filthy anthropoids?” Smugly confident, the tall signalman turned to Scarlet. “Your Equity, since Whitherly admits that he had discovered no evidence of biological relationship, which is the first essential qualification for human status, I move that this inquiry be closed with a formal order approving our signal project—”

“Wain, wait!” Blue alarm shivered around Coral. “You haven’t heard about Mark’s great discovery.”

Scarlet looked impatiently back at the lean old man, noting sourly that he looked too poor to pay for the least satellite of these worlds he wished to save.

“Penwright jumped to a false conclusion.” Whitherly nodded feebly toward the signal officer. “I do have proof that the aborigines of Earth are our human kin. If no colonists ever landed here, that is simply because the movement was in the other direction.”

A puzzled hush whispered through the chamber.

“Listen, Wain,” Coral breathed.

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"The first civilized observers here noted the odd fact that all life on Earth appears to have sprung from a single family tree," Whitherly's high voice resumed. "Now I know why. All my evidence supports the obvious explanation that this world is where human life evolved."

Swaying unsteadily, he paused for breath.

"Tell them!" Flickering with a purple urgency, Coral caught his sticklike arm. "Tell them what you found on Mars."

"In the last few centuries," he labored slowly on. "I have extended my search to the desert planets. On Mars I found a buried human site, dating from some thirty thousand years ago. My excavations reveal that primitive neutrionic flyers landed at the site. Some of them remained there, abandoned. But some of them went on, after they had been refitted to cross interstellar distances."

The blue dust glowed around him.

"The first neutrionic ships!" he whispered thinly. "They had brought primitive men from Earth to Mars. They carried our ancestors out to claim the galaxy." Unsteadily defiant, Whitherly blinked at Penwright. "You can't be allowed to kill our mother world—"

"That is loaded language." Penwright chuckled tolerantly. "Your Equity, I submit that every planet within two hundred light-years has been claimed as the original cradle of mankind. On none of them, unfortunately, has any reliable evidence survived. The wave of migration has left these middle worlds too far behind. Even those few that were ever civilized have been abandoned for twenty thousand years."

"But why must you murder the Earth?" Coral blazed at him. "Aren't there suns enough with no planets at all, which you could explode for your signals?"

"Perhaps there are." Penwright shrugged. "If we could ignore the vital conditions that must control the project." His careless smile mocked at such naive lay attitudes. "First of all, to make our signal waves concentric with the galactic frontier, we require this central location. Then, to avoid the excessive directional distortion of our signal which would otherwise result from the finite speed of light, we must fire

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our compact group of selected suns in a carefully computed sequence. Our whole plan begins with the detonation of Sol."

"Can you ignore the innocent people of Earth?" Scorn chilled Coral's voice. "Is your project that important?"

"It will be mankind's monument." His eyes lit with a cold reflection of her blue psionic moons. "It is our supreme bid for immortality. Whether we evolve or die, our species can't endure forever. The best of our descendants will never get beyond this little galaxy. But the range of our beacon will be all but infinite."

His bright eyes looked past her, smiling out toward the invisible limits of the universe.

"Our signal will keep on spreading, almost forever," he whispered solemnly. "Through hundreds of millions of light-years, and hundreds of billions of galaxies. Our beacon will announce the fact that we have lived, ages after we are gone. It will carry the selected fruits of human intelligence and human culture to more new worlds than we can ever imagine."

He swung vehemently to Scarlet.

"What are these brutes?" he demanded. "How can you weigh their miserable lives against the infinite reach of our project?"

"Please, your Equity," old Whitherly quavered. "I am not blind to the splendor of that plan, but still it is only a plan. It can be revised, if you disapprove it. But the splendid past of Earth is historic fact, which that first flash would destroy forever."

"I know galactic history," Scarlet reminded him. "I am competent to rule upon the evidence."

"You will act promptly?" Old Whitherly peered anxiously. "You can see that my own time is running out. My younger associates scattered when they heard of the blinker project. If there is any long delay, my chance to observe the crisis will be lost."

"Your own misfortunes are irrelevant—"

"But, Wain! Why wait?" Coral's urgency washed her with rainbow opalescence. "Since the natives are our proven kins-

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men, and since they are already landing their rockets on the moon, can't you end the quarantine now?"

Sadly, Scarlet shook his head. Whitherly's sociological research, like her own educational program and Penwright's magnificent dream, seemed inconsistent with bribery. Their noble claims might make a useful cover for him when he came to pronounce his decision, but that would have to wait until he had found a purchaser for Earth.

"Not for a thousand years, my dear." Newbolt's smile beamed through rosy sparks of virile confidence. "Never, in my own opinion. If the blinker project is not approved, we shall have long centuries here to while away together—"

"Wrong, Newbolt!" That loud hail boomed from the back of the dome, and Scarlet swung to see a big stranger stalking in. "I'm just up from Earth, with news about the crisis." He paused, staring boldly up at Scarlet. "Your Equity, I have come to inform you that the natives are about to make a contact that can't be ignored. They'll be here in exactly twenty hours!"

Scarlet stood smiling down at the stranger, captured by an unrepaired ugliness more violent than his own. Long-chinned and broken-nosed, the man was bald as a boulder, burned dark as weathered copper, splotted with livid scars where wounds must have been sewed up by savage surgeons. Sheer muscular bulk made him look grotesquely short. Almost nude, he required no psionic cosmetics to amplify his powerful animal vitality.

Beckoning Newbolt to the bench, Scarlet whispered, "Who is he?"

"Nobody with any right to waste our time." The commander gave the stranger one contemptuous glance. "Another of these beasts of prey waiting for the quarantine to end—and alarmed now because the blinker project is about to vaporize the planet he came to devour."

Scarlet nodded silently, fascinated by the barbaric blaze of priceless natural diamonds at the stranger's dark throat and on his gigantic hands.

"An interstellar pirate, who calls himself a trader." Although the man was coming near, Newbolt refused to lower

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his scornful voice. "Dirk Flintledge. A loud-mouthed nuisance, but I'll soon dispose of him—"

"Wait! If he has news about the crisis—"

"He's lying." The commander glared at Flintledge, who had been intercepted by Coral Fell, her make-up all aglow with pink admiration. "My agents have infiltrated the native centers of space research. They report no new flight attempts since the loss of the rocket we salvaged—"

"But this man has been on Sol III?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Indignantly, he turned his back on Coral and the trader. "Though not through any fault of mine. He arrived here before I relieved Commander Rivers, and was permitted to begin an undercover commercial survey of the planet. A glaring indiscretion, I believe. I don't trust such men to respect the Covenants."

"Let me talk to him."

"Wain, this is wonderful news!" Haloed with glowing elation, Coral led the trader toward the bench. "Dirk says there is a native rocket coming to this very spot!"

"Commander Newbolt questions that."

"His own facts are incomplete." Flintledge turned a hideous grin upon the startled commander. "This new rocket was built at a secret military installation which his quarantine agents had failed to penetrate. Launched before I left the planet, it is already halfway to the moon. Its arrival will present you with a full-blown crisis."

"You see, some of the savage tribes are fighting what they call a cool war, which is forcing the development of space weapons. Native spies have been feeding each faction disturbing reports about the progress of the others. One tribe was told that it was in danger from an enemy space base on the moon. This rocket is the reply to that report." His grin grew frightening. "Unfortunately for Newbolt's policies, their planned impact point coincides precisely with the location of this station."

"He's lying!" Newbolt turned pale before his vicious ugliness. "He's attempting to influence your Equity."

"Wait and see." The scarred man remained as cheerfully monstrous as a black stone god rotting in some jungle

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temple. "But I must inform you that the savages have armed their space ship with what they classify as five hundred-megaton fusion missiles."

Newbolt's bright attire flickered.

"A moment, your Equity." He bent over his wrist communicator. "Let me check my monitors."

Scarlet waited, watching the trader, weighing his wealth, until Newbolt spoke stiffly through a haze of angry blue. "Our monitors are now following an object moving out from Sol III. Its emanations indicate both nuclear devices and living bodies. Its trajectory will bring it toward this side of the satellite."

"Toward contact!" Eager sparks swirled around Coral. "This is the crisis."

"A false contact!" Newbolt glared at the trader. "These natives had failed to find their own way through the radiation zones. They must have received illicit information—including our own location here." The blue dust glittered frostily. "Your Equity, I accuse Dirk Flintledge of a criminal violation of the Covenants."

"Now, sir." Flintledge remained undismayed. "Why should you suspect me?"

"Because you want to force a crisis," Newbolt rapped. "Because you have been down on the planet, among the builders of this rocket. Because I have received reports of your illegal methods in previous collisions with the quarantine service."

"Such circumstances are not proof—"

"I'll find proof." Newbolt blazed balefully. "Your Equity, I intend to convict and punish this criminal."

"But he won't have long to assemble his evidence." Flintledge smirked insolently at Scarlet. "The natives will be here in twenty hours, with missiles that he can't ignore. If he decides to intercept them in space, that act itself will be contact—"

"I'll rule on what is contact." Scarlet tried to match the savage ugliness of Flintledge with the harshness of his own slurred and strident voice. "I'll decide whether this man has violated the Covenants."

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"But, your Equity—"

Stern on the bench, Scarlet silenced Newbolt. He sat scowling judicially, wondering how to negotiate with Flintledge without exciting dangerous suspicions. Tension lifted under the dome. Glowing with a delicious violet alarm, Coral wanted to know how the station could be protected from the savage attack—unless he recognized the contact and lifted the quarantine.

Abruptly he recessed the inquiry, announcing that he wanted time to consider his ruling on the incident. He ordered Newbolt to monitor the savage rocket, but not to interfere with its flight. Ignoring the startled murmur in the chamber, he asked Newbolt about the trader's background.

"He's unconditioned." Newbolt dropped his eyes from Scarlet's own unconditioned ugliness, and hurried on. "Unconditioned and desperate. You see, he has made an unwise gamble on an early end of the quarantine. Now he is about to lose everything."

"Is Flintledge wealthy?" Scarlet asked.

"I suppose he has been." Newbolt shrugged disapprovingly. "Made a fortune cheating savages, I suppose, and lost most of it as they picked up enough psionics to match his tricks. When he learned that Sol III was getting ripe, he mortgaged his ship for the capital to pluck it. I learned that from the competent young man who has followed him from the Bank of Vega to look after the loan. The money is due in just sixty years. He'd need that time to dig it out of the natives, even if you lifted the quarantine today. If you approve the blinker project, he'll have no time to look for another plum. He'll be erased!"

"I see." Scarlet scowled to hide his elation. "Now please show me to my quarters."

The bare little cell, two miles below the lock tower, was adequate enough. The service cherished a tradition of austere simplicity; he was used to nothing better. Yet the thought of lonely centuries here, waiting for this world to fumble its own way toward a real contact, was enough to make him shiver.

The signalmen were welcome to broil the planet—for all

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that it mattered to him—unless Flintledge would pay to save it. Too cautious to make the first overture, Scarlet killed time with his bath and depilation. He deliberately spun a new official robe. Still waiting, he hesitated over his own meager stock of psionic scents and powders, and decided again that he needed the more powerful lure of wealth.

Disappointed when Flintledge did not call, he went dully up to eat alone. Mark Whitherly waylaid him outside the dining lounge. While he ate, the shriveled little anthropologist tried to brief him on the native culture, and tried to find out how soon he meant to lift the quarantine.

"That depends." He paused, even though he could see that the aged man was too high-minded to think of bribery. "I may be compelled to approve the signal project."

"You can't!" Whitherly's yelp held a satisfying anguish. "You can't let these rash young fools burn the mother world and all its people—just to generate one flash of light."

"I'm aware of my duty in this situation." Scarlet drew himself up stiffly, concealing an inward grin. "I'll yield to no improper pressures."

"I'm not trying to bribe you." Whitherly flushed and trembled with an agitation that alarmed Scarlet for his tired heart. "But I must remind you that your own superiors have approved my plan to observe this contact crisis—"

"What sort of monster are you?" Certain now that the old scholar would never offer him money, Scarlet let indignation into his voice. "Would you risk destroying these people with a premature contact, simply for the opportunity to observe it?"

"Certainly." Whitherly gasped for his breath. "But I'm no monster. I'm simply a scientist, trained to exclude all emotional considerations from the field of research. I refuse to price truth in terms of anything material. Even if you can't understand that kind of idealism, perhaps you can understand in practical terms that what we learn from the sacrifice of this world can help us save ten thousand others."

"I understand you," Scarlet said. "But the Covenants apply."

Breathing unevenly, the old man contained whatever reckless words he had almost uttered. Scarlet crouched appre-

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hensively, but Whitherly had been conditioned beyond any crude display of physical violence. Muttering something about the mother world, he shuffled unsteadily away.

Left alone, Scarlet sat fingering the blank disk of his wrist transceiver, anxious to call Flintledge, but yet afraid. He gasped when the crystal lit with the trader's image under his fingers, a bald and hideous doll.

"I suppose I shouldn't interrupt your deliberations." The black beads of eyes glittered sardonically. "What with Penwright so anxious to light his blinker, and Coral Fell so eager to enlighten the aborigines, and old Whitherly dying to observe his contact crisis, your decision is already difficult enough."

"I am pleased that you called," Scarlet answered carefully. "I have been considering your own interest in the outcome of the crisis."

"If you care to come aboard for a drink," Flintledge suggested smoothly, "we might consider it together—unless you fear that contact with me might tarnish your Equity."

"Uh, thanks." Scarlet could not help stiffening against the trader's familiarity, but he tried to control his righteous resentment. "I should like very much to come."

"My call must be brief," he added. "I'm resuming the hearing in just two hours."

He put on a space belt in the lock tower, and hurried out to the flyer. He found Flintledge beneath the air lock, waving his arms and blustering at the men who had come with camouflage screens to turn the ship into a lunar peak.

"That fool Newbolt thinks we can hide here," he growled. "I know better. I don't intend for those attacking savages to catch me sitting—unless your Equity can reassure me."

Scarlet followed him through the lock. The rich immensity of the interstellar vessel had taken his breath at first, but now it began whetting a resolution to ask for more than he had dared.

In the wanton luxury of the trader's stateroom, a dancing figurine caught his dazzled eye. Poised upon the gem-stone inlay that topped a dark block of polished wood, the tiny nude was featureless at first, an anonymous symbol of all

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feminine enchantment, cut with an exquisite economy from some limpid crystal. But it came to life as he looked, reflecting all his own images of woman's loveliness, refined and transfigured through the perceptions of the artist who had fashioned its psionic matrix. Suddenly it was Coral Fell, but younger and more tender than the actual Coral, not quite so firm about the mouth, smiling adoringly. Its stark beauty stabbed through him, leaving a haunting ache of unquenchable desire.

"Like it?"

Flintledge's question startled him. He tore his attention from the figurine, flushing self-consciously, before he could remind himself that its response to his mind had been a private thing. Even though he might suspect that Coral's charms had begun to color its reaction to the trader, too, they had not met to quarrel over her.

"Look around." Flintledge squinted at him frightfully. "Anything you want, just let me know."

He certainly wanted a great deal more than a psionic figurine. Looking appraisingly around the magnificent state-room, he found two pictures that arrested him. Stereos, in twin crystal plaques, they were also psionic. His reflected thoughts brushed them with life and meaning, instantly.

Two men . . .

They made him shiver. One was winning, one hideous. One was lean and young, a dashing smile lighting his hard brown face. The other was older, puffy, with sly cunning peering evilly through a pallor of fear. Yet somehow they were twins.

Both of them were he.

Shrinking in confusion, he turned to find the trader watching with an insolent amusement which angered him.

"Uh—what are they?"

"Perhaps I should apologize." The trader's chuckle was not apologetic. "Psionic mirrors, you might call them. They are matrixed to reflect the self you wish to show the world, and the one you don't. I like to watch my friends react."

Scarlet managed, with some effort, not to inquire how Flintledge saw himself.

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"I like—like your reaction." The trader bellowed with coarse laughter. "But sit down." He struggled to contain his amusement. "I see that you need that drink."

They sat, while a psionic robot came with a strange bottle and two glasses of ice on a tray. Silently responsive to the trader's wishes, it poured a fuming distillation over the ice. Scarlet sat back to taste it cautiously. Recovering now from his first surge of unconditioned resentment, he began to observe that Flintledge was no better conditioned than he was.

The bottle had come from Sol III. The savages called it whiskey, and there was nothing like it anywhere. As the trader declaimed about its rare aroma, Scarlet saw the glass shaking in his scarred, enormous fist. Gulping it too fast, he strangled.

"Won—wonderful stuff!" Wheezing, he wiped at his eyes. "From a wonderful planet. I had discovered that, before our friends from the signal service got here with their incinerator. Wonderful wealth, that has never been touched."

Scarlet sipped the burning liquid, waiting impatiently for their game to reach the monetary moves. Flintledge coughed and recovered his voice, but his loud enthusiasm had a hollow ring.

"Whole continents rich enough to mill!" His restless eyes stabbed at Scarlet, blades thrust through his jovial mask. "Oceans to export! We can scrape the planet a hundred miles deep."

"I have studied some of the old surveys." Scarlet nodded cautiously. "I'm sure the natural resources are still untouched—because we've been on guard. But don't they belong to the natives?"

"A miserable lot," Flintledge said. "Too backward to make any trouble. We can soon dispose of their nuclear weapons. The survivors may even be useful around our new installations, after Coral has tamed them with a pinch of psionics."

"They are—uh—my responsibility." Scarlet scowled sternly. "You must convince me that this contact is the culmination of their unaided progress toward civilization."

"I was waiting for that one." Flintledge laughed too heartily

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again. "You knew that I'd infiltrated that tribal group, and you're acute enough to infer that I'd guide them toward this contact."

"So you admit that you have forced a premature contact?"

"On the contrary." The trader's unnatural merriment subsided; he sat blinking at Scarlet with bold black eyes. "But even if I should, my own testimony would be irrelevant. As your Equity is certainly aware, this contact is what you say it is."

Scarlet merely nodded, watching him.

Dull beads of sweat had come out on his unperfected face, betraying his incomplete integration. His battered fists clenched and trembled. He reached suddenly for another whiskey.

"Here, your Equity!" Hastily draining the drink, he opened a file of bright psionic films. "I want to show you my plans to develop the planet."

Coolly, Scarlet scanned his designs for enormous installations to harvest the guarded wealth of Earth. Dams to divert the excess oceans into export tanks. Mills to devour continents. A heat-exchanging neutrionic net, to cool the deeper crust for the open-pit machines. Compressing stations, for the surplus atmosphere. Ports for the trading fleets that would drain the plunder into space.

"Competent engineering." Scarlet nodded casually. "You ought to make some money."

"I expect to." His hoarse voice quivered with a tension that he could not completely contain. "In fact, I must. I have a large investment, in my flyer and my trade cargo and my terraforming machinery, which I must protect."

"I see." Scarlet turned cheerfully to a new survey of that wealthy room. "I suppose that any long delay would be expensive to you."

"It would kill me!" His harsh and sudden violence was startling, but then he grinned bleakly at the way Scarlet cringed. "I was talking to Coral," he added. "She tells me that you spoke of leaving the service."

"A foolish dream of my youth." Wistfully grave, Scarlet

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shook his head. "An old dream of a new life, out among the new stars of the galactic frontier. If I had the means for a new start there, I'd quit the service today."

"Good." The trader's flinty grin began to soften. "I see that we can do business. With your service background, you're just the man I need to handle my affairs with these anthropoids. If you'll sign with me for just a hundred years—"

"I won't," Scarlet said. "I've already thrown too many centuries away, pampering savages."

"What else do you want?"

"I—uh—" Scarlet checked himself, to peer uneasily at the strange luxury around him. His throat felt dry. His temples throbbed. For a moment he wished that he had been more securely integrated, but then of course his psionic maladjustment was his secret strength.

"We have privacy." Flintledge winked appallingly. "Neither of us is likely to violate it." He gestured for the robot. "Have another drink, and tell me what you want."

Weakly, Scarlet waved the robot away.

"I want the flyer." He gasped for his breath, blinking at his own audacity. "The flyer—and half your cargo."

"If that is meant to be a joke—"

"That's my price."

The trader's dark face turned yellow. Wheezing alarmingly, he gulped another whiskey. His great, dark hands spread into grasping talons, reached out violently, and then slowly sank.

"You're an unconditioned fool," he breathed at last. "Why should I pay you such a price?"

"If I had been better conditioned, I'd have nothing for sale," Scarlet reminded him. "As things stand, I have nine planets on the block, one of them half-terraformed and inhabited. I am offering you a bargain."

"If I refuse—"

"I'll approve the blinker project." Scarlet laughed as unpleasantly as possible. "Penwright will proceed to give us all a peculiar immortality. You can look for another world to loot—if your Vegan bankers care to give you time."

"Your Equity is a hard trader!" Flintledge grinned, briefly

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revealing a pained admiration. "As two misfits, striving to heal our psionic scars with money, we ought to strike a reasonable bargain. But you know I can't give up this flyer—"

"With planets to sell, you can buy a better one."

"You're unintegrated!" The trader's voice lifted vehemently. "You don't realize all the scheming, the waiting, the daring, the borrowing, the begging pretty men—"

"I do realize." Scarlet rose. "That's how I know that you can't afford to let me approve the blinker."

"Sit down!" Flintledge yelped. "Let's have another drink, over a reasonable arrangement—"

"We have just concluded a reasonable arrangement," Scarlet said. "I am going back to reconvene the inquiry now. For the sake of appearances, I shall have to skim through the evidence, but I shall be forced to rule on the crisis before that savage ship arrives."

"Listen, your Equity!" Flintledge was weeping. "Listen to reason—"

"If you want a favorable ruling," Scarlet interrupted him, "send your banker to the hearing. Let him bring formal legal conveyances to the ship, half the trade goods, and half the terraforming gear. He can pass the documents up to me as a final packet of evidence."

"You have thought of everything!"

"I hope!" A pale smile showed Scarlet's rodent teeth. "I believe we understand each other. My ruling in your favor will not become final until I have actual possession of the flyer and my share of the cargo, with time for a start toward my secret destination."

"If your Equity is absolutely unconditioned—"

"That's our bargain." Scarlet let his voice grate painfully. "Send me your banker." He nodded curtly at the dancing figurine. "By the way, I'm keeping her."

"I'll leave the others, too." Flintledge glanced sardonically at the two crystal plaques where Scarlet had seen his public and his private selves. "You will be needing them."

Silently, avoiding those disturbing mirrors, Scarlet turned to go.

"I'll prepare the documents." Flintledge followed him

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anxiously toward the air lock. "I trust your Equity to anticipate whatever difficulties may be created for us by Newbolt and old Whitherly and the signal crew—"

Clothed in the cold blue purity of his judicial light, Scarlet spun a sound barrier to shut out the trader's whining voice. He was drunk with elation, too drunk to fret with petty detail. The frontier stars were in his grasp.

II

On Earth, outside agents had penetrated a few native schools and a cluster of quaint pre-psionic signal systems called science-fiction magazines. Using terms new to the aborigines, they published sensational reports of what they called ESP or psionics, which they described as a magical power unconfined by space or time or law.

"This simple deception has frustrated all the serious psycho-physical research that was threatening to expose us," they reported to the moon. "It has conditioned the natives to abandon their most valid intuitions, in favor of pure nonsense. Their 'psionic' wizards are shuffling cards and rolling dice and blundering through fogs of what they call statistical analysis, but none of them is likely to discover the actual laws of the mind."

ON THE MOON, that domed room was crowded again when Wain Scarlet returned. The contending groups were as breathlessly tense as if they had never been conditioned. Newbolt rose ominously to report that his monitors were still tracking the savage attacker, which was now more than halfway to the moon. Concealing his elation, Scarlet resumed the inquiry, asking with an obnoxious bored voice if anyone present was prepared to offer additional relevant evidence.

"Your Equity, please!" Coral fluttered to the bench, bring-

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ing tape from the frail ivory hands of old Mark Whitherly. "Not all contacts are disastrous. Here is the record of a case which proves that the natives are as highly civilized as you are."

Frowning at the doorway, Scarlet still saw nothing of Flintledge or the banker. He assumed his most severe indifference, while Coral adjusted the tape in the scanner. It recorded the accidental arrival on Earth of another outsider, a prince of the matriarchy on Altair II.

The cruise of the space yacht *Royal Mother*, out from his maternal planet and back again, had been arranged to kill some sixty years of time, until the matriarch was ready to round out her iron-willed reign by directing the coronation and the formal nuptials of her daughter. Aboard the neutronic yacht, however, in the flux of time and space at interstellar speeds, the years had shrunk to days.

The prince had been twenty-four when the cruise began. A slim and unobtrusive man with a hesitant voice and dark curly hair, he was still boyishly engaging when he smiled, although the waiting burden of his royal duties had slightly stooped his narrow shoulders and sobered his blue eyes with a wistful resignation. His newly granted title was as yet unblooded; he had never killed a man.

He was expected to return unchanged by time, still a fit consort for his future ruler—who had been a red and wrinkled infant when he left, squalling alarmingly through the betrothal ceremony. And he fully intended to return on time. He had assented without protest when his mother and the matriarch announced the traditional arrangements. He was merely a man. He knew his place.

A faint discontent had begun to nip him now and then, however, even while the faint spark of Altair hung reddened and fading behind the ship. Moody silences began to blight the small talk expected of him at dinners and receptions, on the civilized planets he visited. For all his efforts at a princely submission, rebellion smoldered in him. When the psionic screens in his suite showed him Altair turning bright and blue ahead, beyond Alpha Centuari and Sol, desperation took hold of him.

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Trapped in the cold luxury of the royal suite, he tried to learn the speech his aide had written for him to make on Proxima IV, but the hollow phrases mocked him. He tried to sleep and paced the decks, until a wild impulse drove him to arouse the aide—a grizzled, hard-bitten old duelist who had fought his way to a title which may be rendered as count.

“Call the bridge and change our course.” He gulped to smooth his voice. “I—I want to stop at Sol instead of Proxima.”

“But your Highness!” An apprehensive disapproval flickered through the old aristocrat’s well-bred reserve. “You know that the matriarch herself picked out our ports of call. She won’t be pleased. And if we’re late for the coronation—”

The count paused ominously, without words to convey the enormity of that, but the prince understood the danger. Other mothers had coveted the throne for their own sons; their jealousy would surely turn any delay into disaster for him.

“I mean to be on time,” he protested hastily. Afterwards, all his life would be arranged for him, but suddenly now he felt that he had to have one moment of his own.

“Why Sol?” The count spoke with the candor of old friendship. “A desert system, except for a handful of savages on the third planet. I was there with the quarantine service, before I came into the fighting class. Why go there?”

“I don’t quite know,” the prince admitted hesitantly. “But when I saw Sol ahead, it set me to thinking of history. The Men’s Rebellion. There’s a legend, you know, that the survivors escaped into space, and one of my tutors had a theory they settled that third planet. I’d like to forget speech-making long enough to investigate that theory.”

“There’s evidence that the migration came the other way,” the bluff old nobleman objected. “Even today, some tribes there are largely woman-ruled. But you’ll have to take my word for that, because they’re under the Covenants of Non-Contact. No outsiders allowed.”

“That won’t stop me from exploring some of the desert planets, to look for traces of those exiled men.”

“Perhaps not.” The gaunt count frowned sadly at the

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prince. "There's another reason for keeping on the safe route the matriarch selected for us. The galactic drift."

"Haven't we safety devices enough?"

"For the charted interstellar lanes. But if we change course out here—" The old man shrugged. "Who knows?"

"If you think there's too much risk for the crew, I'll give it up."

"Our lives are safe enough," the count admitted. "With all our survival devices. It's just that any collision might delay us for years, waiting for a rescue ship. We might be late for your coronation."

The prince straightened uneasily.

"If that's all that worries you, call the bridge."

"Are you out of your head?" The count scowled forbiddingly. "Risking the favor of the matriarch now, for such a whim?"

"It's more than a whim," the prince insisted. "Even if it seems an empty gesture, it's something I must do. The only free choice, perhaps, that I'll ever be allowed to make."

"I'll call the bridge, but watch yourself." The stern old nobleman lifted a cautionary finger. "Freedom is a dangerous drink for any man to sip. A deadly habit. Difficult to break."

He called the bridge. An astonished officer made him repeat the incredible command, but then the ship answered.

On the planets, half a dozen years flashed away. The matriarch reigned, attending to the education and the travels of her daughter. The childish natives of Sol III rashly split the atom, and laughed at rumors of mysterious machines in the sky.

Aboard the *Royal Mother*, speed turned time to distance. The prince slept well again, once. He spent a day scanning the films on the planets of Sol in the ship's library. After dinner, he had a few drinks with the count. Listening to the old man's tales of desperate undercover missions, he almost forgot his own stern future. He went to bed again.

He was sleeping when it happened.

Neutrionic ships were all but perfect. The yacht had been armed and armored against disaster, but this time something

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failed. Somehow, as she picked her automatic path into the thin cloud of galactic debris around Sol, some hostile scrap of iron or stone escaped her psionic detectors and came through some unguarded chink in her shielding fields. She was wounded fatally.

Her shudder woke the prince. He stumbled out of his bed, cold with disaster, but for a moment he found nothing wrong. The impact was not repeated. The lights came on, and he had time to see the unbroken glasses and the empty bottle where he had sat talking with the count. He was trying to believe that the sickening jar had been a dream, when the alarm came.

COLLISION ALERT!

That shocking warning exploded silently from the same psionic screen where they had sat watching Sol exploding like a bomb of violet light.

Main drive disabled. Emergencies burning out. All hands adjust life belts. Stand by to abandon ship!

He reached automatically for the life belt in its glowing holder above his bed. It snapped out to meet his hand, a flat mechanical serpent. Almost alive, it slid out of his fingers and coiled itself around his waist. Its wonderful quickness was comforting, until he thought of the count.

The old nobleman had stretched his stories to last out the bottle. Afraid he wouldn't wake, the prince turned to call him—and felt the emergency drive collapse. Suddenly weightless, he floated from the deck. He snatched wildly at a passing chair, but it eluded him. He tried to shout, but panic took his voice.

LAST ALERT!

The screen flickered and dimmed.

Stand by escapeways.

The screen went out. For an instant he thought the whole ship was dead, but then he saw the escape hatch in the wall of his bedroom glow red and burst open. Outrushing air flung him toward it, but he clutched at a table, still hoping to reach and help the count. A roaring wind tore the table away, tossed it ahead of him, splintered it.

For the stricken ship had died before the escapeway was

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fully open. The door had stopped half across his path. He had time to see the empty bottle and the weightless glasses shattered against its hard metal face, and he tried desperately to gather his own spinning body for the shock.

The next thing he knew, he was lying somewhere in the dark. He had been savagely mauled. Grating agony caught his right arm when he tried to raise himself. One side of his face felt stiff with dried blood. He tried to imagine what had happened, but his senses and his brain seemed useless as his throbbing arm.

He wondered dimly if the belt had brought him to some dark and airless asteroid, before he remembered that it ought to give illumination and ought to renew the oxygen around him. He explored the broad links of it with his good hand, and found three caved in.

Its psionic servos had been battered as badly as his body, but there were the manual controls. He felt for the control link and slid the cover back and twisted the oxygen booster stud. His gasping lungs found comfort again, and soon his foggy senses cleared.

The damage to himself and the belt bewildered him at first, because that device was designed to guard itself and its wearer from almost any hazard. But then he remembered that half-open door, which he must have struck before the belt was fully activated.

He sat up carefully, clutching at his disabled arm with the other, and tried to see where he was. The shielding field of the belt supported him a few feet above the muddy ground. Steep banks of rain-cut clay loomed up around him. A few stars danced feebly in the murky sky above. Straggling weeds stood dark against the sky, rustling in the wind.

Wind and weeds: air and life. This was no dead asteroid, but some habitable planet of Sol. Relief eased his pain for an instant. For the quarantine station was near the inhabited planet, hidden on its moon. He would surely be picked up at once.

Or would he be? His unhurt hand moved numbly to finger the harsh stubble bristling through the caked blood on his chin, and he tried vainly to wet the rusty dryness in his

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mouth. He must have been adrift for many hours. The damaged belt had failed to take him to the station or to call help for him, but perhaps the voice transmitter would work. He groped with a feverish haste for that little instrument on its flexible cable.

"Calling Sol Station!" He croaked his name and title. "I'm off the *Royal Mother*," he gasped. "Down in a gully on some savage planet. Please trace my signal, and send a rescue craft."

He put the instrument anxiously to his ear and heard nothing at all, not even the whisper of the converter. The thing was dead. It slipped out of his fingers and the little cable snapped it back into place.

But part of the belt was working, for it still held him off the ground. Perhaps it could carry him on to the station, under manual control—if he could breathe. The air was already bad again, however, even with the booster stud all the way out. He was panting in spite of the pain in his chest, and anoxia was once more clouding his senses.

He saw that he must try to repair the damage. Though he wasn't an expert technician, he had been tutored in the theory of neutrionics.

Yet he shrank from taking off the belt, even to inspect the damage. Without its invisible field around him, he would be exposed to all the unseen dangers of this unknown world—to hostile monsters and deadly microbes and perhaps to savage men.

Anxiously he blinked again at the fringe of ragged weeds above him. The light seemed stronger now, as if dawn were coming; he could see that the plants were green. Green leaves meant chlorophyl, releasing free oxygen. That assurance decided him.

Twisting painfully, he groped for the emergency link. His quivering fingers found the repair kit and the tiny psionic translator and the deadly little neutrionic pistol, but he left them in the link. He slipped out the flat little first aid packet. Peering dimly at the bright psionic labels, he found the general immunization needle. Clumsily, he pulled

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off the sheath with his teeth, and stabbed the tiny point into his disabled arm, above the injury.

That would protect him from infection. There were drugs in the packet to ease pain and speed tissue repair, but the labels were blurring in his mind. He had to have air. He found the release key, where the belt fastened, and twisted it frantically. Something clicked. The field died. He fell.

He had meant to land on his feet, but the gravitation caught him like a great wave breaking. He must have been weaker than he knew, from his injuries and anoxia, for he staggered and went down. Blinding pain twisted his arm again, and his lacerated face plowed into cold mud.

His breath went out. For a moment the only thing in the world was the agony in his arm, but that faded slowly into a dull numbness. He sucked good air into his aching lungs again, rubbed the mud out of his eyes, and sat up stiffly, reaching for the belt.

It was gone.

He scrabbled desperately around him, searching for it in the weeds, and stopped when he heard the faint clink of it against the hard clay bank behind him. He turned in time to see it, almost severed where the links were crushed, crawling away from him like a crippled snake.

The release key had failed to stop its damaged mechanisms. He swayed to his feet and stumbled after it. Before he was half across the gully, however, it had glided to the top of the bank. A sick dread of losing it had weakened him, when it struck a projecting root and dropped back to the bottom with a faint tinkle of the links. Sobbing with relief, he staggered on to seize it.

It slithered away, and darted upward. He saw it for an instant, a silver spark flying out toward interstellar space. Then it was gone.

He sat down weakly on a driftwood slab, gasping painfully again for air and overwhelmed by his predicament. Down alone on a savage planet, crippled and unarmed, with no way to call for help, he didn't even know where he was. With the belt, anywhere, he had still been a prince of the

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matriarchy. Without it, he was nothing. He was suddenly robbed of place and class, reduced to a naked human zero.

"So you weren't afraid of being late for the coronation?" he muttered harshly at himself. "You simply had to have a look for those lost men who came this way to look for liberty. Well, here you are!" He looked around him sardonically. "Now what are you going to do about it?"

He felt fairly certain that this must be the third planet, because of the good air and the green leaves. Even here, the chill of the dawn had already set him to shivering. He huddled down in his thin night clothing, nursing his numb arm and watching the bright blood oozing from his bruised toes, wondering hopelessly how to save his life.

From where he sat on the damp driftwood, the whim that had brought him here appeared incredibly fatuous. The bite of the wind and the throb of his untended injuries gave a new luster to everything that he had thrown away. His stunned mind fled from this muddy gulch to the magnificent palaces and the quick psionic servants on his mother's vast estates, which he might never see again.

The shrieking infant princess whom he had knelt to kiss was doubtless a handsome girl by now, and her own interstellar travels would be arranged to preserve her youth—and to protect her mother from any unfilial haste to take the throne. But she was lost, and all the empire he might have shared with her. His mother's enemies would make the most of his fantastic indiscretion. Unless he returned on schedule, he would find some rival in his place. Disgraced, robbed of title and fighting rights, he would probably live out his broken life in some labor camp.

Unless he got back—he lurched to his feet in the mud. He had to get back, and civilization was less than two seconds away. If he could only reach the quarantine station on the satellite with any sort of message, he would be rescued at once and on his way to claim his princess and his throne.

If—but how? Without the belt, he had no way to call the station, or even to talk to the natives here. The meaning of the quarantine came home to him, with a crushing effect, when he thought of the lost translator. Protected under the

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Covenants, this backward planet knew nothing of the civilized galaxy. He could hope for no help from these savages, not even if they turned out to be friendly.

But they wouldn't be friendly. He saw with a sickening clarity what would happen to a stranger caught wandering on his own world without any weapon to prove and defend his social place. The best an unarmed and classless alien could expect was forced labor.

Hunched and shrinking from the wind, he looked around him for any warning signs of men. He found only the red banks of the gully and the rank weeds along the rim, until his eyes fell abruptly back to the shattered timber where he had sat. It had been sawed square.

He started away from the broken beam, almost as if it had been some savage workman or warrior, and then paused to listen anxiously. All he could hear was the wind. After a moment, with a stiff little grin at his own alarm, he limped cautiously up the easier side of the gully, to see what lay beyond.

Sol was rising when his cautious head came above the ragged stand of weeds, a yellow disk larger than the sun at home. It lit a level green plain, scattered in the distance with clumps of trees around tiny wooden huts. A herd of spotted cattle were grazing near him, and a primitive sort of motor cart crept along a road beyond them. The whole landscape had a comforting feel of peace, and a wild hope shook him when he saw the ship.

It burst out of the sky above the low sun. The glint of its bright metal dazzled him; for an instant he thought it was a neutrionic flier. He thought the belt had brought him to some civilized planet, after all. He thought that shining ship could take him home.

In another moment, however, as it lumbered slowly across above him, he saw the clumsy spread of its wings and heard the noisy heat engines of a crude atmospheric flier. This was Sol III. He was still marooned.

Real spaceships must come here now and then, he knew, on the business of the station, but he would never see them. They would always slip down silently at night, to leave or

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to meet some undercover agent at a secret rendezvous on the desert or the ocean. He had no way of knowing when or where.

Those disguised outsiders—could he seek out one of them? Scowling after that vanishing aircraft, he shrugged helplessly. Such undercover experts would visit the planet only rarely, on important special missions. He might never encounter one of them, even in a lifetime here. Even if he should, he had no means of recognition.

Could he bring them to him? They were here to prevent culture-collisions. Suppose he learned some native dialect, and simply began telling the truth about himself. That ought to bring the inspectors fast enough; but it wouldn't get him home in time for the coronation.

Violators of the Covenants, he remembered the count's saying, were always carried to some distant headquarters of the service for trial, so that no matter what the verdict the bewildered offender found himself released so far away in time and distance from any world he knew that he had no choice except to atone for his crime by enlistment in the service. Time never turned; such exiles never got home.

No, he could expect no aid from anybody. He cradled his hurt arm with the other and turned to let the sun warm it, wondering desperately how to reach the station without some fatal breach of the Covenants. His only real chance, he saw at last, was to try building a psionic transmitter.

Any large or spectacular application of civilized technology would certainly excite the wrath of the inspectors, but they themselves carried psionic equipment. A transmitter with the short range he needed would be a tiny thing, simple enough to conceal from people who knew nothing of psionics. One brief call would bring quick rescue.

To accumulate parts and materials for the instrument would take all his luck, however, and probably years of vital time. He would doubtless have to learn some native tongue, and try somehow to gain the respect or at least the sufferance of these savages. He was not at all a skilled psionic technician; although even the crudest kind of improvised device ought to reach the station on the satellite, he would

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have to allow for a good deal of experimental test and error.

The first step was to come to some sort of terms with the natives. Although some degree of hostility seemed certain, he couldn't stay hidden forever. Even at the risk of probable mistreatment, he must have food and shelter and whatever medical care they could give him.

Uneasily, careful to set his bruised bare feet where the ground looked smoothest, he climbed out of the gully. He hoped to reach the road beyond the pasture and wait there for another passing cart. Pretending to be the victim of some traffic accident, he could conceal his ignorance of any native dialect by appearing dazed or even unconscious. With any favorable turn of luck, he might obtain emergency care and knowledge enough of the tribal customs to help him plan another step.

Picking his tender-footed way across the unkind turf, he paused abruptly when the grazing cattle raised their heads to watch him. The fat beasts made no hostile movement, however, and he had started limping on again toward the narrow pavement when he saw the tower.

That sent him crouching back into the gully, careless of his naked feet. It stood implacably over a cluster of huts far in the distance, where the weeds around him had hidden the horizon. An armored turret on tall metal legs. A guard tower, precisely like those on his mother's estates at home. Those huddled huts below must be the prison barracks. And all this friendly-seeming plain was an agricultural labor camp.

His first hopeful plan was shattered. In or near a labor camp, he would surely be taken for an escaping worker. His injuries would get him no consideration.

Even if he managed to survive in the camp, he couldn't hope to find materials or time for any sort of psionic experiment. Cowering down among the weeds, away from the watchers and the weapons in that frowning tower, he considered how to gain his liberty.

His first impulse was simply to follow down the gully, keeping out of sight. That might lead him to water that he could drink. Thirst burned his throat again, when he thought

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of water. The gully should bring him, sooner or later, to the fence around the camp.

Yet that scheme was impossible, he saw at once. Hurt and half naked, he couldn't travel far. Cold and thirst and hunger would pursue him, relentless as the guards.

No, that wouldn't do. Dependence on such devices as the belt had left him too little faith in his own limbs and senses, and his tutors had not trained him for any such slinking, animal effort. He knew how to fight, but very little else. He had to play some bolder, more human game.

Searching for some sane first move, he dropped lower among the weeds and turned uneasily from that ominous tower to study the nearest little group of trees and huts, just across the pasture. The neat white buildings, too small to be barracks, had no stockade around them. The place was a dwelling, he decided; probably the dwelling of some minor camp official.

Certainly there was food and water about the huts; he could see a motor cart beside them. There, no doubt, was everything he needed to survive and escape.

Awkward with his arm, he clambered back to the muddy bottom of the gully and waded cautiously along it toward the little villa. Where the gully turned, he climbed clumsily back to the rim, to look for some other cover. There was none.

The huts were still several hundreds yards ahead, across the open pasture. An unpaved path came down to a rude wooden bridge near him. The tower commanded the path, but the bridge seemed to offer shelter of a sort. He limped on to it, hoping that the traffic over it would bring him some kind of opportunity.

In preparation, he tried to arm himself. He looked for a stone, and found only crumbling clay. He found another driftwood slab beneath the bridge, but it was far too heavy for a club. He tugged at a smaller stick lodged beneath it, but the rotten wood snapped and made him stumble backward. His hurt arm struck the bank.

For a moment he could only huddle there, crushed beneath all his handicaps, but slowly a dogged pride came back to stiffen him. He was still a prince of his mother's

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house; he had learned long ago to withstand equally bitter frustration when his sisters used to mock him for being only a boy.

When he could move again, he ripped both sleeves from his pajamas. One, he split to make a clumsy sling for his arm. The other, tied at the end, he packed with all the wet clay that he could readily swing. So meagerly equipped, he climbed back to his post at the end of the bridge.

As he settled himself in the screening weeds, a man came out of the dwelling. A vigorous-looking, dark-haired savage, outlandishly clad in jacket and trousers. That womanish garb was a badge, no doubt, of some superior position, for he got into the cart alone. It began to roll at once.

The prince crouched lower, breathlessly testing the weight of his weapon. There came all he needed to make his forlorn bid for freedom. The queer clothing, the wheeled machine, the superior weapon of an officer. But how was he to take them?

Crippled as he was, he could hardly jump into the moving cart. He had to make it stop. Desperately, he dropped back into the gully and seized that decaying timber. It was too heavy for him to lift one-handed. Yet, though the effort hurt his arm and his damaged ribs, he managed to drag it up the sloping bank and roll it out across the path.

Gasping and trembling, he snatched his heavy little bag of clay and turned to look for the cart. It had turned the other way, toward the road beyond the huts. Sick with disappointment, he watched it creep out of sight toward that staring tower.

Feebly, then, still panting from his struggle with the driftwood beam, he groped for another plan. If he could slip into the huts unchallenged while the owner was away, he might at least find food and water.

He dropped flat when another native left the dwelling and came walking toward the bridge. A slighter savage than the first, in more masculine clothing. A guard, perhaps, left to watch the premises while the officer was away. He carried a heavy-seeming, black-cased device that must be a weapon.

The prince wrapped the top of the weighted bag around

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his quivering hand, and crouched down to wait among the weeds. He would let the man walk on by, and then rise up to strike from behind. Here, fighting these simple human beasts, he wouldn't have to utter any challenge or warning—or would he?

A sudden cold uncertainty crumpled his first eager resolution. Although he knew that any honorable challenge would be fatal to him, the code he had learned wasn't easy to ignore. The ruling sex might take everything else, as the old count used to tell him, but men could always keep their honor.

Desperately, he tried to sweep his compunctions aside. He was fighting for his life and a throne, against wild men who had probably never heard of honor. Why worry about the rules?

Panic swept away his indecision when the guard stopped, halfway to him, and lifted that device. He thought he had been detected. The watchers in that tower must have seen him when he started across the pasture. He flattened himself in the shallow ditch beside the road, waiting helplessly.

Nettle stung him, and pollen from a stinking little yellow bloom tickled his nostrils alarmingly. Jamming his finger against his upper lip to keep from sneezing, he watched the savage bending with an implacable deliberation to adjust the weapon.

That black device puzzled him. It looked too short to be any kind of accurate gun. Distance hid all its details, until sunlight flashed on a lens. He dropped his head among the nettles at that, trying to shield it with his arm, waiting for the blaze of some primitive lethal ray.

Nothing happened. Nothing that he could detect. He felt no heat, heard no blast, saw no blue glow of ions. He lay flat as long as he could endure the nettles and the strain of waiting and the pressure on his damaged arm. When he looked again, he had to blink with astonishment.

The savage had turned away to point the weapon at the cattle. He looked fearfully to see its effect, but the beasts grazed on unharmed. To his growing perplexity, the man

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calmly replaced the ineffectual device in its case and came strolling on toward the bridge with no appearance of alertness or caution. Perhaps the gadget was no weapon, after all. Perhaps after all, he had not yet been discovered.

A shock of terror shattered his returning hope. For the savage had come near enough for him to see the delicate fair face and the shocking shape beneath the deceptively masculine dress.

A woman!

A girl, really, soft-haired and graceful, tall with the pride of her sex. He froze, afraid even to breathe, trying to hope that she might walk on by. He was baffled by her presence, as well as terrified. Even though these tribes might be barbarous enough, for all he knew, to imprison or enslave women, she was obviously no forced worker. Yet she could hardly be a guard; no woman would lower herself to such man's work. He tried for a moment to doubt that this was a prison farm at all, but the shadow of that brooding tower was still too ominous to be forgotten.

Afraid to look at her, but more afraid to turn his head, he lay watching her go by. Whatever her business here, her sex was a fortress around her. The men of the matriarchy were expected to shed one another's blood as freely as they could, so long as honor was observed; naturally the customs here would be more or less the same. Women, however, were taboo.

He couldn't touch her. Even if the mysterious device in that black case had been another life belt, he couldn't have swung his useless bag of clay to take it. That inhibition was his mother's stern voice speaking in him, imperative and final.

The girl passed him, not three steps away. He thought for a moment that she would surely see him, but she held her head as high as any matriarch, her dark hair brushed with red by the sunlight, her lean face scrubbed pinkly clean. Her clear brown eyes looked beyond him to the red fingers of erosion reaching out from the gully, and her face turned sadly wistful.

"Wasted land," she breathed softly to herself. *"Lost like*

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my own country and my people. Perhaps freedom also—what is the English word? Erodes, I think. For want of care, like the soil. Of course the doctor's trying now to save this old farm. Perhaps that is the difference. The land can be reclaimed."

He strained to hear, but the murmured words meant nothing to him. The psionic translator in his belt would have brought him the sense of every syllable, and enabled even these psionic illiterates to understand him, but that device was now just another atom in the interstellar drift.

Relaxing a little, as she went on by, he let his eyes follow. She looked surprisingly healthy and clean for a savage, and the sadness he sensed about her almost made him forget his own danger. Inexplicably, he felt that she was another troubled exile, as far from home as he was.

She went on out of view, but he could follow the tap of her feet on the bridge, going on beyond him. He was breathing again, when her footfalls paused. He saw that she had stopped halfway across. She leaned over the wooden rail to study the footprints he had left in the gully, and turned back to look at the timber he had dragged into the path. Her frowning eyes lifted. She saw him.

He lay petrified, so still that he heard the startled intake of her breath. Whether she called the men from the tower, or decided to dispose of him for her own amusement, there was nothing he could do. She was a woman; he had no right or strength against her.

"How did you get here?" she gasped.

Though the words meant nothing, he heard the breathless shock in her voice. She stepped instantly backward, lifting that black-cased device defensively. He shrank from the bright threat of its lens, but nothing happened to him. She let it fall when she saw his blood-caked face and the sling around his arm, and called anxiously, *"Are you badly hurt?"*

Her sympathetic tone astonished him, for the women he knew were merely amused by the duels and the wounds of men. Puzzled but still afraid, he thought of the futile threat of his own clumsy weapon. He dropped the weighted sleeve and sat up hastily to hide it with his body.

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"Who are you?" She bent over him. *"Can't you speak?"*

He caught her interrogative inflections and saw her waiting anxiously for some reply, but he kept his mouth shut. Evidently she had taken him to be one of her own tribesmen in trouble, but any word he uttered might give his life away. He sat watching her apprehensively.

"You're afraid," she whispered suddenly. *"I see you are. Because you don't belong here—why else would you look at me that way? Are you another refugee? Did you parachute, perhaps? Great Plains County is a long way from the iron curtain, but not too far I think for bombers."*

She paused to peer at him nodding slowly.

"If that's the way you got here, I know how things must be with you. Though I came out on foot, hiding in the woods and gnawing frozen turnips, until people who remembered freedom helped me cross the border. And I want to help you—if you really are a friend of freedom. Don't you trust me? Or is it just that you do not understand the English?"

He made no effort to answer, and soon she spoke again in a tone of troubled urgency. From the sudden changes in the accent and rhythm of her words, he guessed that she must be trying different local dialects, all equally unknown to him, but he sat blinking at her blankly, not even shaking his head.

"Can't you walk?" She beckoned abruptly for him to stand up. *"Come with me, if you can. You must be cold and hungry, even if you aren't too badly hurt. I can find food for you, and call Dr. Stuben to do what he can for you. There were strangers beyond the frontier who did as much me."*

She held out her hands to him—clean as his mother's, though the nails were cut short as a man's, not grown into twisted ornamental claws. Protestingly, he showed her the mud on his good hand. With a quick little shrug, and a smile that said the grime didn't matter, she caught his hand and tugged him to his feet.

That uncovered his bag of clay. He tried to kick it back into the weeds, but in spite of him she saw it. And she must have understood the purpose of it, from the shaken way in which she dropped his hand and stepped back to study him.

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"So you were that desperate?" She shook her head, her lean face darkly troubled. *"Yet perhaps I understand. All one night I lay hiding from the frontier patrols, with a dagger made from an old file hidden in my clothing. I meant to kill the man who found me. But don't you know this is America?"*

He shifted his weight uncomfortably on his sore feet, listening mutely. He was now convinced, from her quiet self-assurance in the shadow of that grim tower and from the curious little side arm she carried so carelessly, that she herself must be an official of the camp. He had expected her to kill him instantly, when his own worthless weapon betrayed his abject desperation. Now he couldn't understand why she didn't.

"You have no cause for such alarm," she said softly. *"You can't be in that much danger. Are the police after you? I don't think so. You don't look criminal. Anyhow, I won't hurt you. I've seen too many informers; I know what freedom is worth."*

Confused by the senseless words and her inexplicable behavior, he stood wishing hopelessly that the count had got here with him. The count would have known what to do with this enigmatic savage.

"Can't you understand at all?" Her urgent voice was now clear and slow, as if she spoke to a troubled child. *"I want you to come with me—and try not to be afraid. Even if your head is injured—I'm afraid it is—so that you can't talk or can't remember, my sister's husband can surely help you. A kind man and a clever young doctor. Whatever's wrong, I think he'll understand. Won't you come?"*

The count would have known how to deal with this dangerous girl, but the prince felt helpless. He knew no world except the matriarchy, and far too little of that.

"Won't you come?" the girl repeated anxiously. *"Or can't you walk?"*

He saw his peril clearly, but he could not escape it. He knew her people must live by other laws and customs: no woman at home would ever have debased herself by touching or even speaking to an unarmed and classless man. The

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count might have guided him around the deadly traps that must lie hidden in that cultural difference, but now he could only blunder on alone.

"If you simply won't understand, I'm going to call the doctor." She turned from him slowly. *"He ought to know what to do."*

She started away from him, and swung abruptly back. He wondered with a stab of apprehension if she had decided to try that odd side arm again, but then he saw that she was only beckoning for him to follow. Although he still couldn't guess what she wanted, he dared not disobey a woman. He limped hastily after her, toward the huts.

She adjusted her pace to fit his painful steps, with a confusingly masculine consideration. And when he blundered into a patch of sandburs and danced helplessly from one bare foot to the other, she didn't laugh at him as a normal woman should, but bent instead to help him remove the thorned seeds with a quick solicitude that seemed almost indecent. He didn't understand her, and he felt somewhat relieved when another native emerged from the larger hut ahead.

"Well, Eliska?"

An older woman, the other came out across the neat patch of clipped grass in front of the white-painted hut, and halted when she saw him. While her shocked eyes swept him, he studied her hopefully. She looked akin to the girl, with the same wide forehead and wavy dark hair, though her chin and nose were bolder. A pale scar-line zigzagged down one thin cheek. The harsh lines around her mouth showed a really feminine severity, when she swung to rap at the girl, *"Where did you find that tramp?"*

Even though he didn't understand the words, her decisive air and her strident voice reassured him. He sensed something of his mother in her, and more of the matriarch. The girl's masculine softness had baffled him; this was the sort of woman he knew.

"I walked down to that old wooden bridge with my camera," the girl was answering. *"I found him lying in the*

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ditch by the road. But I don't think he's what you call a tramp."

"Then what's wrong with him?"

"He seems hurt. But I don't really know, because he doesn't speak."

"Deaf, maybe?"

"I think he hears. Perhaps he'll be able to talk, when he recovers a little. I want to bring him in and call Carl for him."

"You want to bring that into my clean house?"

The girl flushed and bit her lip, as if choking back some angry outburst. The prince felt the clash between them, and saw that the older was the one in authority.

"If you don't want him in the house," the girl said at last, "I'll put him out in the little room where the hired man used to stay. Do you object to that?"

"I didn't mean to seem hard," the woman answered more quietly. "Feed him in the kitchen, if you like. And find clothes for him. There's an old suit of Carl's, and a pair of shoes the hired man left under the cot, if he can wear them. But why keep him in the place?"

"He's in trouble. Afraid, as well as hurt. He needs more than food and shoes. Maybe Carl can find out what the matter is."

"Why not just send him on to the hospital in Great Plains?"

"He can't have money for the bill—not with him, anyhow. Besides, I don't think he'd want to go. From the way he was hiding in the weeds, I think he must be some kind of refugee—"

"From jail!" the woman broke in harshly. "He looks like the sort to brain us all in our sleep, so that he can loot the house."

"If he's dangerous, Carl should know," the girl said. "But I don't think he is—except perhaps to those hunting him. He does seem desperate, but then I was desperate once, before people I had never seen took me in and risked their lives to help me cross the border."

"He doesn't look so harmless to me." The woman swung to study his slung arm and lacerated face with a visible

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suspicion. "And what could make him so desperate, if he wasn't hurt holding up somebody or breaking out of prison?"

"I think he parachuted out of a plane," the girl said. "He doesn't seem to speak English, or any other language I tried, but perhaps he's just too dazed to talk. I think perhaps he is a Soviet flier, who didn't want to bomb the free world."

"A likely notion!" the woman muttered scornfully. "The trouble with you Eliska, you're trying to look at this homicidal maniac—a fool could see that's what he is—in the light of your own unfortunate experience."

"I have no other light."

"The horde of crooks and bums and convicts that come hitchhiking along the highway yonder have given me another kind of experience," the woman said. "Though I admit I never saw quite the like of him. He does look foreign, with that queer haircut and those odd pajamas. Can't he talk at all?"

She stalked to the prince and prodded his chest where the ribs were cracked so hard that he almost flinched. His breath sobbed out, and he had to blink.

"You?" Her harsh voice lifted. "What's your name?"

Yes, she was clearly the one in command. Her loud assertiveness had already convinced him that she was some high official of the camp, and now her grimly imperative air made him fairly sure that she was demanding his class weapon, though she must see that he was unarmed.

"Well?" She jabbed at his ribs again, so vigorously that he gasped and swayed backward in spite of himself. "Can't you speak?"

Holding a manful silence, he looked at the girl.

"Please, Greta!" She spoke quickly, as if in answer to his mute appeal. "You hurt him—don't you see how white he went?"

"I don't intend to be cruel," the woman muttered grudgingly. "You may go ahead and put him in the garage room if you like—but just for now. Let him wash up if he's able, and take him something to eat. I'll call Carl."

"Thank you, Greta," the girl whispered.

The woman stalked back toward the dwelling hut, with

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tha air of an affronted matriarch. The girl beckoned again, and the prince followed her across the grass to another tiny building. He could see, from the concrete ramp and the wide doorway facing the road, that it must house the motor cart, but the girl took him to a little door at the side and motioned for him to enter.

Beyond the door, he saw a narrow little cell, that looked and smelled surprisingly clean. Furnished only with two wooden chairs and a metal bed covered with a faded but spotless blanket, it still looked inviting to him. The girl stood nodding for him to go inside, but he stopped to examine the lock, afraid she meant to shut him up.

"You needn't be afraid of me." She smiled, and her quiet tone seemed disarming. *"I'm sorry my sister's so ungracious, but she takes America for granted."*

She entered ahead of him, as if to show that she meant him no harm, and he followed her doubtfully. While he stood waiting uneasily, she stepped inside a closet almost as wide as the room. Beyond her, he saw shelves cluttered with dusty oddments—the puzzling, clumsy paraphernalia of people without psionics or neutrionics, quaint artifacts that were probably most of them broken or discarded now. Most of them he couldn't identify, but leaning in one corner was a rusty iron tube—

He looked away from it with an apprehensive start, as the girl came out. Holding a towel and a frayed white garment, she nodded for him to follow into another room: a tiny bath, primitive but clean. She turned a valve to let water run, and he bent thirstily to drink.

"Wait." She gave him water in a glass. After he had rinsed his mouth and drunk, she helped him wash himself and put on the clean bathrobe and a pair of woven slippers. When that was done, she opened the bed for him, but he still felt too apprehensive to lie down. He sat uncomfortably in a chair. She saw him flinch from an unexpected twinge of his arm and came quickly to help him move it in the sling. Her unwomanly tenderness embarrassed him, yet he couldn't help feeling a baffled gratitude.

"Now," she said, *"aren't you hungry?"*

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He started to follow again when he saw that she was leaving, but she shook her head and backoned him back and showed him that she would leave the door ajar. When she was out of sight, he limped hastily into the closet to look at that iron tube.

Yes, it was obviously a discarded dueling piece, one made for long-range use. The tube was rifled, and mounted on a thick wooden stock. He bent anxiously beside it, to test the crude breech mechanism. The massive parts had been shaped with a surprising precision. However rusty and in need of oil, they still worked. He scrabbled hopefully among the stranger debris on the shelves above, and found a carton almost full of heavy little projectiles, sized to fit the chamber.

He was armed!

The mere possession of such a formidable piece might entitle him to leave the camp unquestioned, if a man's weapon was the mark of his position here as at home. Even if he were challenged, a victory would give him the rights and weapons of the challenger—assuming that the customs of combat here were more or less like those he knew.

But were they? No man at home would leave such a deadly piece to rust in an unlocked closet. Did that indicate a different code of honor here? He rummaged hastily through the shelves in search of clues, and found rough clothing, a simple battery lantern, a pair of primitive binoculars, a long iron knife in a sheath.

Equipment for a private killer, clearly. But the nature of it suggested that the killing was done in the open, possibly in some wilderness district set aside for combat; its apparent lack of any recent use seemed to hint that affairs of honor might be restricted to some special season.

He couldn't guess the rules. His momentary elation flickered out, when he perceived that the weapon, powerful as it looked, had only sharpened the horns of his dilemma. Every possible course of action required assumptions about the way these people would react, but all he knew was that he didn't know. Inexperience paralyzed him.

He had loaded and cocked the rifle, in the brief triumph of its discovery, but now he set it reluctantly back in the

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closet and limped unhappily out to wait for the girl. Her warm kindness seemed so unwomanly and even unnatural that he couldn't quite believe it, or help expecting some cruel betrayal.

She came back at last, with dishes on a tray. A fragrant hot drink, toasted pieces of some thick native loaf, steaming soup. The odors made him suddenly famished, and he began eating with an uncourtly haste when she set the tray on the arm of his chair. The food was surprisingly good, but his appetite left him when he heard the throb of an engine and saw a motor cart rolling to a stop outside the windows.

He rose apprehensively, as a tall savage rapped and entered. By his own code, a man caught with no weapon at hand to show his place was fair game for any stranger, but all he could do was to stand and compose his face, ready to die like a man.

The native made no sign, however, that looked like a challenge. Surprisingly, in fact, the man carried no obvious weapon, certainly nothing like the dueling piece in the closet, but only a small leather bag. Only casually alert, he didn't seem prepared to fight. The prince looked at him and sat down again, suddenly weak in the knees.

"Eliska," he said, "so this is your mysterious airman?"

The girl hurried to him, speaking with a low-voiced urgency. She was begging a favor, obviously, which he appeared indisposed to grant. He shrugged and shook his head, with an air of firm decision that seemed almost feminine.

"No," he said, "I'll have to make a report. Really, Eliska, I can't say I think much of your refugee theory. I'd say he was more likely hurt in a traffic accident. If so, he'll probably have people looking for him. In any case, I can't be responsible for hiding him."

"But he seems so desperately afraid."

"For some good reason, Greta's sure. Don't be a fool, Eliska. If he's really wanted, you'd soon have us all in trouble."

"Is it foolish to look for freedom, or to help men find it?"

"I'm afraid your own adventures have left you a little melodramatic, Eliska." The tall man grinned. *"But since*

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you're so set on it, I'll give him first aid enough so he can stay here until I do report the case. A dressing for his lacerations, and a temporary splint for that fracture. But I imagine that either his relatives or the law will soon turn up to take him off your hands."

"Carl, please give him a chance—"

"I'm due at the office now," the man broke in firmly. "Let's see your patient."

She nodded silently and followed him across the little room, with a quiet resignation strange in a woman. The prince could see the dark anxiety brooding in her eyes, however, and the mute rebellion trembling on her compressed lips. He could guess that this curiously commanding man was somehow his enemy, and she his friend, defeated now in some obscure effort to defend him.

"Let's have a look at that arm."

When the doctor was done, the girl followed him out to the cart, her voice hushed and hurried with some troubled appeal. The prince sat waiting, his arm almost easy in the primitive splint, the fire of the harsh antiseptic still burning beneath the clumsy bandages on his face. He wondered dully what the girl wanted, and whether it had anything to do with him, but he felt too limp and weak to do anything about it.

She came back at last, with a thin grave look of half-beaten determination on her face. Silently, she set up a little folding table in front of his chair. She brought sheets of rough paper, and primitive marking-sticks, and a stack of huge, quaint native books.

"Now," she begged him earnestly, "can't you somehow tell me who you are? And what you're hiding from? Carl's going to report you, in spite of all I can say. I'm afraid that even here in America the police aren't always very careful about the rights of moneyless strangers, but I want to help you if can."

He felt her worried urgency, and guessed that she wanted him to identify himself. Hopefully, he opened one of the queer, thick books. The lines of crowded symbols, in flat black pre-psionic printing, meant less to him than her speech.

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He found a few childish pictures, bare little outlines of things, without depth or movement or psionic meaning. He closed the book and shook his head.

"Here's a pencil," she whispered anxiously. *"Can't you write?"*

He dragged the marking-stick awkwardly across the paper, and bent to look at the track it left: a thick black smudge, which failed to reflect his striving mind with any image at all. He dropped the useless pre-psionic implement, hopelessly.

"Don't get depressed," she murmured quickly. *"Let's just try something else. Maybe you can show me on a map where you're from."*

He leaned eagerly to study the patterns of color in the next book she opened for him. At first they looked almost psionic, but they made no response to his mind. They were only irregular flat splotches, lifeless as the pictures. He gave the girl a puzzled frown.

"Don't you even know where we are?" She made sweeping gestures at the room around and the land outside, and then bent to pencil a careful dot on a wide green splotch. *"Great Plains County is right about here. Understand?"*

He peered again at the spots and the grid of lines across them, and caught his breath when he recognized the continental outlines of Sol III, not as he had seen them in the psionic charts on the yacht, but distorted into some kind of flat projection. Evidently, then, the colored patches symbolized something about the land surface of the planet, probably tribal territories.

"Here's Prague, in my own unfortunate country." With a momentary sadness on her face, she touched another dot in a narrow red strip, pointed the pencil at herself, drew a ragged line from red land to green as if to represent a journey. *"Now can't you show me where you are from?"*

She gave him the marking-stick, but he shrugged and put it down.

"From Sibera?"

She touched him with the black point and put it to the page again on a vast yellow space, looking at him eagerly

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as if to see if he understood. He thought he did, yet he could only shake his head.

She meant to tell him, evidently, that she had come from the area shown in red, perhaps as a hostage or a prisoner of war. And she believed that he belonged to that third tribe, whose wider lands were in yellow—a people allied to her own, no doubt, and hostile to her savage captors here. That would account for her obviously inferior position, and her apparent apprehension now.

"Don't you trust me?" she whispered quickly. *"I can see on your face that you do understand."*

He didn't try to answer. If he touched that yellow splotch, the act would doubtless brand him as an alien foe of her captors, with all rights forfeit. Impulsively, he started to set the point down, hit or miss, on some other color, but he checked himself instantly; with such tribal rivalries extending over all the planet, he could too easily claim some people she hated, and so lose even her uncertain friendship. Yet, if he let her suspect that he came from nowhere at all on the planet, that would be a dangerous violation of the Covenants.

"Try to answer," she was begging. *"I'm afraid you won't have much time."*

Her air of frightened urgency forced his decision. He set the point down at random on the green and traced a wandering spiral toward the dot where they were, put down the stick to peer around him with shaded eyes like one lost, and then firmly closed the book to end that dangerous line of inquiry.

"I don't quite get it." She looked at him searchingly. *"Can't you speak? Or can't you remember? Or are you just afraid?"*

"Fraid?"

He imitated the meaningless syllable, and gave her the stick. At first she merely stared, but then with a nod of comprehension she uttered the word again and carefully formed a symbol for it. The mark she made was senseless to him as the sound, but he kept on trying. He pointed at her,

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and made the movement of marking, and cupped a hand at his ear.

"*My name?*" she said. "*Eliska. Eliska Machar.*" She drew it on the paper and repeated the sound and corrected him when he mouthed it after her. "*Now who are you?*"

He knew what she meant when she pointed at him, but he touched his bandaged head and shrugged again. Any sound he uttered, except his imitations of her speech, would let her know that he hadn't come from any friendly land. Hastily, he began indicating objects around them, trying to learn the names she gave them. At first she seemed reluctant.

"*English is hard for a Russian,*" she murmured uneasily. "*And I'm afraid we won't have time for many language lessons, before Carl sends out the police.*"

He firmly ignored the protest he sensed in her voice. Anything he tried to tell her, true or false, might destroy him, but he had to learn all he could from her. He began thumbing eagerly through the books, pausing to make her name those few of the dead, dimensionless pictures that meant anything at all.

He thought she seemed pleased with him, as they went on. She smiled a little once as if in amusement at some blunder of his tongue, and again with a quick approval when she found that he was really learning words. *Table, pencil, chair. Map, picture, book. Sit, stand, walk. Eliska Machar.*

As he spoke her name again, more easily now, and watched her frowning over ways to teach him verbs a little less simple than *move* and *strike* and *fall*, he found a moment to hope that the matriarch's screeching infant had grown up to be as charming as this simple savage girl. But that was unlikely, he knew; his future consort, if he really got back for the coronation, would be louder and bolder and altogether more womanly, entertained instead of hurt if he happened to break his head again.

"*I'm afraid that's all,*" she whispered suddenly. "*Here they come.*"

He tried to shape the sounds, before he saw her alarm. She turned to the window, her face drawn grave. Beyond her, he saw three motor carts that came in an ominous

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procession down the pavement from that armored tower and turned off the highway toward the huts.

"Eliska?" He swayed out of the chair and shuffled quickly to her side. "Eliska—"

He wanted to ask her why the carts had come, what he could do to meet the danger reflected on her face, but those primitive vehicles were not tables, nor the stilted fortress beyond them a chair. All he could say was her name.

The carts stopped. Four men left them. He recognized the tall native doctor. The lean savage striding from the second cart also looked somehow familiar, but the others were strangers, and they terrified him with the bright badges on their blue jackets and the short guns belted to their bodies. Obviously, they were guards from the tower.

The scarred, older woman ran out of the dwelling to meet the four. The doctor called something, and she pointed, and they all came toward the little hut where he waited with the silent girl. Quivering at the brink of panic, he caught her arm.

"Eliska!"

He wanted her to tell him what to do, the way his mother had always done, the way the new matriarch would do—if he ever got back to become prince consort. But the girl shrugged confusedly, herself torn by an unwomanly uncertainty and concern. She was only another placeless alien here, far from her tribe, friendless and defenseless as he was.

"I can't imagine why you're so afraid." Her voice was hushed and troubled. *"I can't believe you're wanted for anything serious. But I don't know who you are, and there's nothing else I can do."*

She gave him a long, searching glance, which let him see the uneasy wonder and the baffled resignation dark in her eyes, before she turned quietly to wait for the oncoming savages. Clearly, she could do no more to help him. Suddenly alone beside her, waiting helplessly for life or death, he tried to find a manly calm.

He even tried to hope these men had not come to do him harm. After all, he tried to cheer himself, the native doctor had seemed surprisingly skillful and kind. But he couldn't

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keep from feeling the girl's disturbed expectancy, or seeing that bleak steel tower behind the stalking guards, nor hearing the screams of placeless men who had failed to win the mercy of the matriarch.

These people were different, he told himself hopefully, so different that their culture had to be protected. Certainly this humble, generous, troubled girl would find no womanly delight in baiting and humiliating men. But then she came from another tribe. That loud, scarred female with the men outside was more like his mother.

He knew she had been displeased with him, and he thought she must have called these guards to take him. Though they might be willing to grant him some sort of honorable truce, honor was not a table, nor peace a chair. Time wouldn't wait for him to learn a language.

He was beaten. His notion of improvising means to reach the moon was nonsense. This world was too different for him to cope with. These incomprehensible savages would kill him, now or later, because of some local law or custom he had never guessed, and that would be the end.

He caught his breath and bit his lip and tried to wait in a manly way. Without the words, he couldn't talk. He couldn't hide in this bare room. He couldn't even try to run; men of honor didn't run. He couldn't fight, with his right arm useless. Or could he?

A hot bright joy burst through his blank despair, when he thought of that rusty rifle leaning in the closet. His trembling stopped. His breath came back. His slung arm stopped throbbing. He was suddenly strong enough.

He ran from the window to the closet and came back with the rifle. It was too heavy for him to raise with one hand, but he thrust it across the back of the chair and dropped to his knees behind it. He found the trigger, as the guards came to the open door, and settled the stock against his shoulder. Defenseless as he was against this alien culture, he still knew how to kill and how to die.

"Stop it!" the girl screamed. *"They don't intend to shoot. What sort of savage are you?"*

He caught the unbelieving shock in her voice. He knew

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he had shattered her inexplicable sympathy, yet he shut his ears to her hurt outcry. For she was just another stranger, seemingly, trapped here as hopelessly as he was. She couldn't help him now.

Her frightened voice had checked the guards at the doorway. They crouched. Their brown faces sobered instantly with the frowning effort of all men at the old game of death. Their lean hands snatched for their own short guns, and they ran diagonally into the room, separating warily.

The quick and silent competence of their advance gave him a keen satisfaction in them, as well-trained antagonists. Their deadly readiness even restored his desperate hope that they might be civilized enough to know and keep his own high code of honor, which granted the winner the loser's rights and rank and weapons.

He hugged the rifle, swung the muzzle toward the empty doorway, squeezed the clumsy trigger. It came back stubbornly, but the report was a devastating blast. The recoil jarred him painfully, but the savages crouched back with a pleasing respect for the weapon. That warning shot was his challenge, adequate, surely, by any code of honor.

He bent behind the chair to reload. The neglected mechanism was hard to work, with his one good hand, but a fierce elation gave him strength enough. This was what he understood. This hot haste, this cold test of hand and eye, this healing release of all the bottled violence accumulated in him from his own frustrations and the crippling tyrannies of woman.

His next shot would be to kill. That was all that mattered now, for he knew at last that he would never reach the moon or see his home again or kneel before the throne of the new matriarch. If one of these fighting men didn't get him now, some other savage would. But let it come. Even though all his civilized education hadn't taught him how to survive in this barbarous culture, at least he knew the decent way for a man to die.

"Drop your gun, brother," the nearer savage called. *"We don't want to shoot."*

The quiet words sounded to him like a formal counter-

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challenge. He drove the stiff bolt home, leveled the rifle over the chair again, rose on his knees to kill the challenger. There was time enough, for the savage hadn't fully drawn. He drew the heavy gun against him, in a last grateful embrace, and found the trigger.

"Your Highness—please!"

The words paralyzed him. Because he understood them. Because he almost recognized the breathless voice that shouted them. His finger slackened on the trigger. He let the rifle drop across the chair and stumbled to his feet, staring at the door.

"All right, brother," rasped the nearer savage. "*Just stay where you are.*"

The sound of that was a senseless echo. He had forgotten the two crouching guards and their guns. He scarcely saw the pale girl shrunk back against the wall, her face lax with shock. He stood dazedly watching the door, and the three others entering.

The bewildered native doctor. The scarred woman, twisting nervously at a lank lock of hair, her manner of womanly dominion shattered by the shot. The fourth man, who had looked unaccountably familiar, walking from the carts. A man he must have known—where?

The prince stared at him. A rough-hewn and weather-beaten savage, taller than the lean doctor even in spite of the forward stoop of readiness that marked him for a man of honor. He was unarmed now, however, though he carried a flat brown leather case; and he looked somehow uncomfortable, as if the thick fabric of his clumsy native coat and trousers got in his way. He paused in the doorway to listen for an instant with one hand cupped to his ear, glanced down to adjust his hearing aid, and then drawled softly, "Don't you know me?"

The deep hearty voice and the hard-bitten grin at last disclosed the man inside that fantastic native garb. The noble aide he had last seen staggering away to his stateroom on the *Royal Mother*, just before the collision.

"I—I didn't. Not in those queer rags. Not without that monstrous moustache." The prince groped weakly with his

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good hand for the back of the chair. "I was blown out of the wreck before I could reach you. I didn't expect to see you again. Not here, anyhow."

"I missed it all." The old count shrugged regretfully. "Perhaps I had taken a drop too much of your good brandy. The first I knew about the disaster was when I woke up in a strange bed at Sol Station. It seems my belt had brought me there, without much help from me."

"The yacht?"

"She went on into the sun," the tall outsider said. "The men at the station picked up our distress signals too late to salvage her."

"The crew?"

"All safe." Anxiety lined the count's hollowed visage. "All except yourself, sir. You were reported lost." He laughed nervously. "It looks as if that report was nearly true."

"*That your old deer rifle, Doc?*" the nearer guard said. "*Won't you pick it up, before we have an accident?*"

"You got here at a good time." Grinning wanly at the old nobleman, the prince paused to watch the native doctor uneasily recovering the dueling piece he had dropped. "This trial of honor—against these savages who probably never heard of honor—had begun to look like my last. How did you find me?"

"*That's better.*" The guard relaxed a little, wiping at his forehead, turning to the count. "*Think you can calm him down?*"

"A moment, your Highness."

Once more the count stopped to set his hearing aid, frowning as if it didn't work to suit him, and then he swung to face the watchful natives.

"He's my man." His bluff old voice thinned and lifted, in the way of deafness. "My missing client. I can see that he has been quite a problem for you, but I understand him. I'm sure he'll be all right now, and I'll gladly take him off your hands. All I need is a little time to talk to him alone."

The doctor and the guards retreated toward the door, nodding in a relieved way as if they understood. But how? The prince caught his breath, and stared at that apparent

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hearing aid. Of course, it was a psionic translator, disguised to fit the Covenants.

"You really know this man?" His startled glance went to the girl, who stood peering oddly at the count. She spoke the language of the matriarchy—but that was impossible. In an instant he realized that now the sense of her words had come to his mind through that tiny instrument, so clearly that his ears could scarcely hear the strangeness of the sounds even when he tried.

"If you do, won't you tell me who he is?"

"Surely, Miss Machar." The old duelist smiled at her appreciatively and replied with an enviable ease that he must have learned on worlds where women were not supreme. "Dr. Stuben was telling me about your kindness to my client, and I'm deeply grateful. He's Mr. King. Mr. Jim King." He gestured at the door. "Now, if you don't mind giving us a few minutes alone—"

The other natives had gone, but the girl still hesitated, looking from the prince to the count again with an air of puzzled unease.

"Thank you," she whispered. "But—if you don't mind—who are you?"

"His attorney," the count rumbled heartily. "And his friend. Here's my card. John W. Pottle, of Pottle and Swickley." He beamed ingratiatingly. "If you're still concerned about Jim's predicament, you needn't be. He's in good hands now."

She shook her head slightly, as if unsure of that.

"He seemed so terribly afraid," she said impulsively. "If you don't mind—what is his predicament?"

"Nothing alarming." The old man smiled at her anxiety. "He's all right now."

"Something dreadful must have happened to him."

"A highway accident, apparently," the count murmured easily. "But Dr. Stuben says he isn't hurt too badly."

"When was it?" She watched them both. "Where?"

"Sometime last night," he said. "Somewhere near here. Jim and I were driving through on business, you see. The car went dead, at the bridge this side of town. It was al-

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ready dark, and nobody would stop to help us. Jim finally started walking down the road, to find a phone and call a wrecker. He never came back. I've been looking for him ever since daylight, but I couldn't find a trace anywhere until I called Dr. Stuben's office. He told me you had found him. He must have been struck by a hit-run driver."

"If that was all, what made him so desperate?" Eliska Machar looked back at the prince, her eyes still dark with doubt.

"Why was he hiding in that gully like some hunted animal?"

"Nothing strange about it." The count's rawboned features straightened soberly. "You see, Jim was once a fighter pilot. In the last winter of the war, he had a pretty grim experience. His airplane was shot to pieces over Germany. Jim bailed out and got down alive with a splinter of flack in his leg. For three weeks of cruel winter weather, he lived in hiding among enemies whose language he didn't understand. The wound became infected, and he was half out of his head when he got back across the American lines. A thing like that is hard to forget. Dr. Stuben agrees with me that his accident on the road last night must have brought it all back to him. He was hurt and hiding again. As you put it, like a hunted animal. And he thought he couldn't speak the language."

"I see." Her dark eyes went back to the prince, concerned again. "Then his head injury is serious?"

"Only a slight concussion, Dr. Stuben says." The old man smiled cheerfully. "You can see that he knows me, and I'm sure his speech difficulty will clear up as he recuperates. Mostly, I think he's just shaken up and nervous."

"Then I'll go and let him rest." She started toward the door, but turned abruptly back. "When you spoke to him and he answered—what language was that?"

"An Indian dialect," the count said smoothly. "One we learned from the guides on our vacation trips, when he and my own son were boys together. Jim was calling for my son in that dialect, before he came back to himself in the army

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hospital. When I used it to speak to him just now, I was hoping that the link with his boyhood would help him."

"I think it did." The girl nodded gravely. "Please forgive the questions, but I had to be sure you really were his friend. I'll go now."

The old man let her out and closed the door.

"She had me going." He grinned with relief. "But that ought to satisfy her, long enough at least to get us started home."

"Everything seems so simple when you do it." The prince smiled at him with a tired gratitude. "But I was done for. At first I had a crazy notion I could throw together some kind of psionic gadget that would reach the station, but this planet turned out to be too savage for me."

"Never underrate the natives—that was the first lesson I learned in the service." The count came briskly to inspect the bandages. "Looks like a competent emergency job." He nodded approvingly. "Do you feel able to travel?"

The prince nodded eagerly, although his splinted arm was throbbing again from the heavy recoil of the rifle.

"Then we had better be on our way. There's only one ship a year to this dismal little outpost, but luckily she's here unloading now. If we get aboard, we ought to reach the next planet of call just in time to catch one of Her Majesty's liners. I looked up the interstellar schedules before I left the station, and I believe we can still get back in time for your coronation."

"Excellent." The prince nodded brightly and settled back to ease his arm. Suddenly, he felt curiously reluctant to leave the hard comforts of the bare little hut. "I'm glad you got here," he murmured. "But how did you ever find me?"

"The psionic detectors at the station traced the automatic signals from our belts," the count said. "The rest of us were picked up quickly, but your belt was moving erratically and it stopped transmitting before the rescue craft could run it down. It seemed hardly possible that you had survived the collision, but when the commandant called off the search I got permission to make an undercover visit to this sector of

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Sol III—because your belt had been moving this way when the signal stopped.”

The prince looked up gratefully. The count's weather-worn visage suddenly blurred. He didn't trust his voice, but he reached impulsively with his undamaged hand to squeeze the gnarled fingers of the loyal old veteran.

“So don't you worry, sir,” the count rumbled softly. “We can work out everything. With good luck, perhaps we can keep the matriarch from learning that we ever left the route that she arranged for us. Even if she finds out the truth, we can probably keep her favor. Just so we're back for the coronation.”

The prince sat silent for a few moments, gazing absently at the little folding table where Eliska Machar had left her clumsy pre-psionic writing implements. He aroused himself, almost with a start.

“I'm fit to travel,” he said slowly. “I suppose you are safe enough, as a service agent. But what I don't understand is how we are going to explain my own sudden arrival and departure, without some violation of the Covenants.”

“That's all cared for.” The count snapped open the brown brief case to dig out a bundle of quaint native documents. “Even though I hardly hoped to find you alive—nobody else expected me to find you at all—I brought papers from the undercover office to account for you properly as Mr. James A. King.”

“Did you bring me any side arms?” The prince leaned toward him eagerly. “Or any sort of passport?”

“We'll have to do without arms.” Frowning, the count was thumbing through the coarse fiber sheets. “Here's your birth certificate. Social security card. Army discharge. Bank book, with four thousand dollars on deposit. Four hundred in currency. But no passport.”

The prince sank uneasily back in his chair, but the gaunt old fighting man was grinning at him as if unaware of his disappointment.

“We just continue our business trip,” the count went on confidently. “My car is to be picked up late tonight, from a lonely side road three hundred miles west of here, by a

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patrol craft from the station. We ought to get there with just time enough to let the station surgeon attend to your injuries, before we have to go aboard the interstellar ship.

"These papers won't cause you any trouble." The count swept them back into the brief case. "The currency is good. The bank deposit actually exists. The other documents were really issued at one time or another to agents using the name. The service understands such work."

The prince nodded wearily, trying not to worry.

"I'll take care of everything." The count swung toward the door. "Now I'm going to call the natives back. I'll do the talking—under the Covenants, you can't recover too rapidly. I'll pay the doctor and the girl for all they've done, and we'll be on our way."

The battered old duelist went to open the door. The prince sat nursing his arm, silent, while the count called the waiting natives back from the dwelling hut and drew the doctor aside. The guards and the woman stopped cautiously at the door, but Eliska Machar came to straighten the sling on his arm, where the rifle kick had twisted it.

"Only five dollars?" the count was saying. "Since you've been so kind, let's call it ten." He paid the doctor and came smiling to the girl, with another ten in his fingers. "Miss Machar, you've been very good to Jim. As a little token of my own gratitude—"

"You don't owe me anything." She flushed and stiffened, as if offended. "I helped Mr. King because I thought he was a refugee who had given up everything to strike out for freedom. I'm glad to know he's not in danger, but I don't want your money." Something shone in her dark eyes. "I helped him because I know the worth of freedom," she added softly. "Since my free people have been captured and enslaved."

The prince saw her sadness, and suddenly he wanted to help her out of her own captivity. If he and the count could smuggle her past that dark tower in the motor cart—but that was impossible. The Covenants prohibited such meddling with native affairs; he knew the count would never allow it.

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"Jim and I are both deeply grateful, anyhow, Miss Mac-har." The count smiled and bowed. "Your generosity is a thing we won't forget, but we've a long way to drive to-night. We must go."

"Tonight?" Urgency hushed her voice again. "Don't forget that Jim needs medical attention at once. Dr. Stuben says he ought to have X-rays taken right away, and I'm afraid his head injury may turn out to be worse than it looks."

"I'll attend to that," the count assured her blandly. "I'll take care of everything. Now, Jim, do you feel like walking to the car?"

The prince stood up uncertainly. The girl saw his momentary weakness and reached quickly to steady him, and he clung to her fingers for an instant, feeling sick and grim in spite of himself because he knew his future consort would never sink to any such show of unwomanly sympathy.

Suddenly, he wanted to say something to her, some little word of parting, that she might recall when he was gone. He caught his breath, but before he could speak he saw the count's stern frown, reminding him that his moment of freedom was spent. A dangerous habit, and difficult to break—He checked that rash impulse obediently. He smiled at her wistfully and dropped her hand and turned to go.

"Wait." She turned quickly to the count. "He needs clothing before he goes out. We can find him something—"

"That's all right," the count broke in firmly. "Very kind of you, but I have his bag at the Great Plains hotel. We'll leave the robe and slippers there at the desk for you. I'll take care of him."

The prince was hesitating, still somehow reluctant to leave, but the count took his arm and led him firmly on ahead of the natives toward the waiting carts. He went silently, until he saw the long warning finger of the tower beyond.

"You're certain?" he whispered suddenly. "Certain we can get out?"

"Why not?" The count snapped off the translator and dropped his voice. "What's in the way?"

"For one thing, the watchtower yonder. How am I to pass the guards, without some weapon of position?"

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"What guards?" The count stared at him, and then grinned faintly. "This isn't our world, you remember. These savages haven't yet invented any civilized social order—not in this tribe, anyhow. These simple children of nature are still free to go about pretty much as they please. We don't need any arms of identification."

"Huh?" The prince blinked again at that frowning tower. "Isn't this a forced labor camp? Or some sort of prison?"

"So that tower worries you?" The count's lean grin widened. "It does look amazingly like the guard turrets on Her Majesty's farms. I admit that it rather upset me at first glance, before I knew what it was."

"You mean it isn't—"

"We're in another culture, remember. Actually, in spite of its grim appearance, that turret wasn't built to house spy screens or neutrionic guns. You'll be relieved to know that it's really only a harmless part of the Great Plains municipal water works."

"But those fighting men I challenged?" The prince peered unbelievably after the two armed natives departing in their own cart. "Aren't they tower guards?"

"State cops," the count said. "And I'm afraid they misunderstood your challenge. We aren't at home, remember. There's no code of honor here. Not as we know honor. These timid folk have no heart for civilized combat. No decent respect for good killers. Instead of fighting as men should, they bribe these cops to defend their rights and lives. And even the cops—if you can imagine such an outlandish culture—even the cops disapprove of killing."

"You mean I wasn't in danger?" The prince caught his breath. "Not until I challenged them?"

The count nodded. "Yet that one gesture of decency almost destroyed you. The cops have a revolting custom of blood-revenge, so I was warned at the station. If you had killed one of them, the service couldn't have saved you. Let's get off this barbarous planet while we can."

The prince turned thoughtfully back to look at the three remaining natives, the doctor and his wife and Eliska Mac-har, who were walking slowly now from the dwelling hut

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toward the doctor's cart. In spite of the man's fantastic dress and the mannish skirts the women wore, they were suddenly human beings. He felt the count's imperative fingers on his arm, and slowly shook his head.

"I'm not going," he blurted abruptly. "I want to stay here."

"Your Highness!" The count was shocked. "You can't."

"I think I can." The prince swung to face him, breathlessly grave. "You brought all those documents to prove that I'm a native named Jim King. Why can't I stay Jim King?"

"You know the Covenants forbid migration."

"But you can say you found me dead just as the commandant expected," the prince whispered quickly. "You can say you left the papers to explain the body. You're an old hand in the service; you can arrange things so that I won't be discovered."

"Perhaps I could." The old nobleman stood scowling at him reproachfully. "But just think of—everything! All the fine future your mother schemed and I fought to arrange for you. The crown princess. Your place at her knees. Would you turn your back on the throne—on our whole civilization—for nothing at all?"

"Not quite for nothing." The prince looked away toward the gully in the bridge, where he had lain hidden in the weeds waiting for Eliska Machar. "How did she put it? I want to strike for freedom?" His voice sank huskily, as the three natives came nearer. "Tell them I'm staying."

"Your Highness—consider!" The count's hard fingers dug painfully into his good arm. "If you stay here now, you'll never have a chance to change your mind. I can't come back, and you'll have no way out. You'll live and die here like a savage."

"But at least a free savage."

"Even that wouldn't be so easy," the count whispered grimly. "You'd have to adjust yourself to these grotesque tribal customs. You'd have to learn to speak their barbarous dialects and train yourself to earn some kind of living—all without the use of any outside knowledge or devices that might betray you to the station. Is freedom worth all that cost and effort?"

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He nodded.

"Your mother would never approve." The old duelist squinted at him, shrugging sadly. "But your will is my honor. If you are certain you know what you are doing—"

"I know," he said. "Tell them."

"Your Highness—"

The old man's voice seemed to hang. He stood motionless for a moment and then sighed and straightened and strode firmly toward the three natives standing beside the other cart, fingering at his hearing aid.

"Dr. Stuben—" His bluff old voice seemed to falter for an instant, but then it went on clearly. "I've been trying to talk to Jim, and I'm afraid he's worse off than I thought. He still can't talk—not even much of our private dialect—but I believe he wants to stay here. I can't stay with him because I've a long trip to make. I'd like to leave him in your care."

"Good." The doctor nodded, smiling gravely. "He does need immediate attention. I doubt that he's in shape to travel far, at least for several days."

"I won't be back soon." The old man's voice thinned and cracked. "In view of my own failing health, perhaps not even at all. If I don't get back, and if it does turn out that Jim has a long convalescence, I want to know he's in good hands."

"I'll help him." The girl spoke out impulsively. "Before you came, I had started working with him. His speech was coming back." She turned anxiously to the doctor. "Couldn't we let him have the hired man's job? I mean, if he's going to be here long. The work needn't be more than he feels like doing, and I think it would be good for him to be here while he's getting over all that's happened to him."

"Servant to savages!" the count muttered faintly.

"Please," the prince whispered, but the count ignored him.

"Jim has money," the stern old man said stiffly. "Here with his papers in this brief case. Enough at least to pay for his care until he is able to look for some proper employment. He won't have to take such menial work—"

The prince silenced him at last, with an imperative gesture. Bleak-featured with the effort to control his agitated emo-

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tions, the proud old fighting man glanced at his native timepiece and gripped the prince's hand in the native way of parting and got hastily into his own cart. It lurched away at once, in a reek of fumes from the primitive engine, driven rather blindly.

"Come along, Mr. King." The doctor opened the door of the other cart. "*We've some X-rays to make.*"

The prince shrank back, crouching to shield his arm again.

"Don't be afraid, Jim," Eliska whispered quickly. "*You'll soon be all right again.*"

He couldn't help staring at her fearfully, for the untranslated words were strange again. He was cut off from all the world he knew, even from the enigmatic kindness he had found in her, forever marooned and alone. The finality of his isolation stunned him. His frightened glance fled after the departing outsider, and found that distant tower.

Not a guard turret, but only the village water tank. This simple world was not his own, but suddenly he felt at home. Even if he had to go unarmed as these childlike natives did, even if he had to work with his hands to live, he had found something greater than the throne of the matriarchy. He straightened to inhale the sweet air of Earth, and smiled at Eliska and the doctor, and stepped hopefully into the cart.

III

The first disturbing experiments with rockets intended to leave the Earth had been undertaken by a bold native named Goddard. His work was rewarded with feeble support, brief ridicule, and a crushing indifference. He died unknown, never aware that he had been defeated by agents assigned to forestall any premature contact with the watchers in space.

"THE PRINCE IS still on Earth," Coral Fell whispered quickly in the dome on the moon, when that transcription ended.

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"He is living there as a native doctor. He has married that native girl. When Mark recognized him, a few years ago, he refused again to leave. He says that his native village is worth more than all the matriarchy."

"A touching display of sentimental primitivism!" Penwright scoffed. "But the outcome is not surprising when you come to consider the dubiously human status of Altair II, which itself very narrowly escaped condemnation for our signal project."

"Don't you see that his native friends are as fully human as he is?" Coral turned desperately to Scarlet. "Your Equity, you simply can't let the blinker kill them."

Scarlet was watching the doorway for Flintledge and the banker, scowling with a puzzled impatience at their tardiness. Coral's urgency spurred him only to a noncommittal grunt.

Scarlet turned his carefully irascible frown upon old Mark Witherly, who was wildly waving another bright psionic tape.

A sudden stir among the worried quarantine people huddled at the door gave him a moment of hope that the trader had come with his bribe, but the man who entered was only Newbolt, bringing a curt report that the savage rocket was now near the moon.

"Your Equity, we can wait no longer." The commander's muscular shoulders lifted majestically, as if tossing off his tattered respect for Scarlet. "Our own safety demands either that we recognize this contact and welcome our visitors into civilization—or else that we deny their human status and allow the signal project to proceed."

"I'll decide," Scarlet rasped unpleasantly. "When I have weighed all the evidence."

He looked again for Flintledge, and decided that the trader was waiting to drive a harder bargain in another private meeting. His narrow jaws set stubbornly. Unless he got his price, Earth could burn.

"The inquiry is recessed," he rapped. "Clear the chamber—"

"Wain, wait!" Coral snatched Whitherly's tape and rippled toward the bench. "Scan this before you decide." Bright

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excitement cascaded from the moons in her hair. "It's better than proof that these people are human. It is proof that they are our own ancestral race. It's the clue that led Mark to the site of that prehistoric spaceport on Mars. Do take time to scan it!"

Ignoring the signals of contempt and alarm that were flickering between the cool signal officer and the boiling commander, Scarlet let Coral place the tape in the scanner. It picked up an explorer on his way to Earth. He was a worn little wisp of a man, with a bald spot and a stubborn chin and a burning eagerness in his pale, nearsighted eyes. He came to the moon on the yearly supply flyer and was met by a frosty welcome.

"I'm looking for Atlantis," he told the hulking quarantine inspector who received his credentials. "The forgotten place, however you render the name, where our interstellar culture was born. I expect to find it here."

They were standing in the cramped and cheerless undercover office at the station. Earth itself was still a quarter-million miles away, but against the long light-centuries which the explorer had already crossed, such a distance was nothing at all.

"Atlantis, huh?" The inspector squinted painfully at the psionic films, and tossed them to his desk with a bored contempt. A soft clumsy man, somewhat too bulky for his blue uniform, he had adjusted himself to the simple details of watching the spy screens and filling out reports in triplicate and waiting for promotion, and any interruption of that routine annoyed him.

"There never was such a place," he stated flatly. "It's nothing but a silly myth." His bulging, lead-colored eyes blinked with a faint hostility. "Though some fool is always coming to look for it—I don't know why."

"Perhaps the name is only a legend." The explorer spoke mildly, trying hard to be agreeable. "But human civilization has been spreading out through the galaxy at an average rate of half the speed of light, for at least twenty thousand years. It must have begun somewhere."

"What if it did?"

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The slight man straightened thoughtfully, puzzled at this ponderous obstinacy and already alarmed by it. He understood the working of the quarantine service and knew that he couldn't visit Earth without the aid of the inspector, who headed the undercover staff.

"I'm a scientist." He chose the words with care, trying to penetrate the big man's stolid skepticism. "I'm looking for the cradle of civilized mankind, but also and chiefly for the truth. It seems a tragedy that our forefathers, in their haste to reach the stars, somehow lost their own beginnings. Our mislaid past is what I hope to recover. But even if I only found that the people of Sol III are wanderers themselves, as we are, from some unknown human homeland, that fact would fill one more gap in scientific knowledge."

"If Atlantis ever existed anywhere, it wasn't here." The inspector's loud voice seemed oddly belligerent. "I've been down to Sol III on undercover missions. A filthy pesthole, crawling with verminous savages so backward they actually think they're the only people anywhere. They can't build neutrionic fliers today. What makes you think they could twenty thousand years ago?"

"The first interstellar ships were probably built by people who wanted to leave the planet," the explorer answered mildly. "I suppose they did."

"You theorists!" The inspector snorted scornfully. "Looking for the beginnings of civilization among savages who never heard of it, while every civilized people for a hundred light-years around can show you the site of Atlantis on one of their own planets."

"I know." The explorer's bent shoulders drooped wearily. "I've been looking for Atlantis nearly all my life. The search has taken me to several hundred worlds where the legend still lives—and cost me so far too much objective time, wasted on the flights between them." He sighed. "Now I'm displaced and alone, with nothing left to do but keep on looking."

"But still you haven't found it."

"Not yet." The grizzled little man nodded patiently. "The legend was there, but I always found evidence that it had

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come from somewhere else, carried by some forgotten migration."

"Would people remember such a myth?" The fat man's dull eyes blinked with a heavy skepticism. "Even after they had forgotten the actual history of interstellar migrations?"

"There are plenty of planets where stories of the early migrations have survived," the explorer told him. "The trouble is that few accounts are specific enough to help identify the places from which the legendary starships came.

"Those first interstellar pioneers must have found life pretty hard, don't you see? They lacked psionics, and nearly all the neutrionic devices we can use to tame new worlds today. Whole colonies perished—more, probably, than didn't. The severe struggle for survival forced most back toward savagery. Only now and then did the settlers keep the science of neutrionic flight alive, so that they could start new waves of migration, such as spread out from Denebola VII."

"From that sinkhole?" The inspector sniffed. "I've been there, from our Denebola base. A handful of pitiful savages, as backward as these, scrabbling to keep alive on a desert planet. If that's such a fountainhead of culture, why must it be quarantined?"

"No planet lasts very long as a center of migration," the slight man answered. "The natural resources are used up to build the ships in which all the more enterprising people depart. After a few generations, the doubly impoverished world sinks back into stagnation.

"The wave of civilization left Denebola VII behind at least eighteen thousand years ago. The natives today have their legends of a lost golden age ended by a deluge, but they've forgotten that their ancestors came from anywhere else."

"Maybe they didn't."

"Some of the natives do believe mankind evolved there," the explorer agreed soberly. "And it's true that nearly all the land plants and animals and even the important micro-organisms there do show an evolutionary kinship—but you must remember that the human colonists on new worlds al-

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ways have to establish a whole ecological environment of related species around them, or else they can't survive. The indigenous life is always worthless for food and is generally hostile; it has to be pretty well exterminated before men can prosper.

"On Denebola VII, the transplanted economy of friendly life is firmly established on all the continents. But in the oceans and in a few neglected crannies ashore I found the real native life surviving—things of another living kingdom, with a wholly different biochemistry. Even the soil must have been poisonous to our sort of plants until friendly bacteria were growing in it; now it is equally deadly to the few survivors of that other evolution."

"Evolution, huh? I don't like such talk." The inspector had stiffened, as if both shocked and offended. "Are you trying to prove that men came from some filthy crawling creature, here on Sol III?"

Astonishment widened the explorer's faded eyes.

"Logically, men must have evolved on the same planet where spaceships were invented," he said quietly. "The fossil remains of our ancestral species would make a very interesting find, but the fact that men did evolve somewhere is already pretty well established. I'm interested in a more recent event: the invention of civilization."

"So evolution is well established?" The inspector spoke with a sudden harsh vehemence. "You may think so, but you aren't going to find much proof of that or anything else here on Sol III."

The explorer was beginning to see that he had blundered upon a dangerous topic. Remembering now the way the inspector had scowled and squinted at his credentials, he realized that the big man had been poorly trained in psionics. Cut off by that handicap from the main stream of human thought, he could doubt such facts as organic evolution.

He could see no reason why his references to evolution should provoke such hostility, but then such illiterates were never very reasonable. The inspector's inadequate conditioning was going to be a serious difficulty, but he knew no way to change the big man's attitude. Resolving to make the best

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of a bad situation, he nodded hopefully at his films where the inspector had tossed them on the desk.

"Anyhow, I want to have a look." He spoke mildly, trying to ignore the other man's challenging tone. "After all, I've come fifty light-years to visit Sol III, and I won't have another chance—"

"You ought to know you can't go there," the big man broke in harshly. "Haven't you heard about the Covenants?"

"Naturally," the explorer assured him. "But I expect to work under cover. I've had experience enough among other quarantined peoples. Just look over my visas."

The inspector picked up the films, to grope for the psionic impressions they carried with a frown of half-baffled effort on his broad face. He shrugged uncertainly, and peered again at the explorer with a stubborn distrust.

"Whatever anybody thinks about the origins of these unfortunate savages," he muttered ominously, "our business here is to protect them from meddling outsiders."

"Just look at that transcription." The explorer pointed out a film he had failed to scan. "You'll find that my trip here was authorized by your Denebola headquarters. Your regional commander promised me all possible help from the undercover department at Sol Station."

"Ahem. I see." The inspector studied the film, and then frowned at the explorer with an inexplicable dislike. "Even with my help," he said coldly, "I doubt that you will find Atlantis. I see that your visa to stay here expires with the arrival of the next supply ship, and you can't do much in a year. Not when you must work under the limitations of the Covenants."

"But I'll have help." The explorer smiled confidently. "I'm authorized to ask you to loan me up to a dozen psionic technicians, with portable search equipment."

"That's too bad." The inspector shook his head and pursed his fat lips, in an unsuccessful effort to look apologetic. "We're always understaffed, and just now we have something more important on our hands." Genuine worry overshadowed his smoldering antagonism, for an instant. "These savages,

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you see, are just now learning how to release nucleonic energy, several centuries too early for their own good."

"A serious crisis, I understand." The slight man nodded soberly. "But I have serious reasons for going ahead, now that I'm here." He smiled wistfully. "Because this is really my last chance. I'm getting old, you see, dislocated from my own era and working all alone. My means are running out along with my life. If you refuse—"

"But I'm not refusing." The inspector stiffened, in an injured way. "If Denebola wants me to help you, I'll certainly do what I can—even though my help was promised fifty years ago, by an officer who must have failed to anticipate our other troubles here."

"Then I'd like to go ahead at once." The explorer smiled with an uncertain relief. "I can work alone, if necessary—"

"We can't permit that," the inspector broke in sternly. "We respect the Covenants here, and we take pains with our undercover work. I'll give you what help I can, but you will have to settle down in our transient quarters here while I'm setting up the arrangements. That will take several months—"

"Months?" Alarm thinned the slight man's voice. "With just a year here, I can't spare months."

But he had to spare them. Bumbling officiously, the inspector escorted him to a bare little cubicle in the transient tunnel and left him there to wait. He had the freedom of the station, but those few miles of passages carved into the lonely lunar peak were like a prison to him.

Forced to deal with the inspector, he began trying to win the big man's friendship. He found that difficult, because the inspector had no friends. Morose and reserved, the fat official worked alone and ate alone, and even drank alone when sometimes after hours he came into the station bar.

The explorer found him there one evening, slumped glumly behind a little corner table, and approached him to ask when he would be ready for the trip to Earth.

"Hard to say." He shrugged vaguely. "The way we do things here, these undercover expeditions have to be supplied with completely authentic native clothing and equip-

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ment, and planned down to the last minute and the last inch. All of that takes time."

"I understand." The explorer smiled thinly, trying to hide his bitter resentment of the time it took. "Mind if I buy you a drink?"

"If you like." The big man nodded without enthusiasm. "After all, you may as well relax, because you're going to be around here for some time yet."

"I'm trying to make the best of it," the explorer agreed, as amiably as he could manage. "I've been scanning all the biological and geological survey reports on Sol III in the station files—though, of course, such secondhand information can't take the place of actual exploration."

He paused to signal the psionic waiter for their drinks, and then swung back to study the fat man's cheerless face.

"One trouble with those reports," he added deliberately, "is the lack of anything on human evolution."

That reference was a calculated risk. It caused the inspector to bunch his sagging shoulders and lurch abruptly forward, angry fingers tightening around his empty glass.

"Does that upset you?" The explorer blinked innocently against his sullen glare. "I've been wondering if you're opposed to my search for Atlantis because you're afraid I might also turn up evidence that mankind evolved on Sol III. Is that true?"

"I'm not afraid of any lie." The big man's voice lifted stridently. "But even if you showed me proof that these filthy natives are the children of the lowest monsters crawling in the mud, that wouldn't make me kin to them."

"For my people," he added smugly, "are the sacred children of Kares. So I was taught in the temple of light, while I was still a child. And my own eyes have seen the truth of the Karian doctrine. I have witnessed the dreadful end of one divine cycle, and the bright beginning of the next."

The inspector appeared more belligerent than friendly, but the slight man leaned toward him across the little table with a sudden eager interest.

"So you come from the Karian system?"

"From the second planet," he said. "Kares, our sun, is

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also the dwelling and the symbol of Kares the Remaker, Lord of the Cycles and Conqueror of Rigel and Reincarnator of Life."

"Isn't Kares—the star, that is—the small companion of Rigel? The one with the enormously elongated orbit, that carries it far out from Rigel and then brings it back to pass within a few light-hours, once every two thousand years?"

"In the language of misbelieving astronomers," the inspector sniffed. "The truth I learned from the brothers of the sacred flame was phrased in words that had more meaning."

Facing his brooding gaze, the explorer realized again that he was unconditioned, and therefore immune to logic. Any discussion of his superstitious irrationalities seemed more likely to deepen his enmity than otherwise, but they had already gone too far to stop.

"I know nothing about your own ancestry," he was rasping hoarsely. "But do you think men—or any other life—could possibly evolve on the Karian planets, which are cleansed with fire at the end of every cycle?"

"I don't," the explorer said quietly. "I believe Rigel is about fifty thousand times as bright as Kares. Its radiation must be intense enough to sterilize the Karian planets completely, as they pass by. In fact, I wonder why the system was colonized at all, but perhaps the first settlers hadn't discovered the eccentricity of its orbit."

"The Karian planets were never colonized." The inspector spoke with a dogmatic conviction. "Kares, the Remaker, creates my people anew at the opening of each cycle. And he allows them to perish, as each cycle closes, only so that he can show the impotence of Rigel and impermanence of death by restoring them to a more perfect state."

The explorer nodded uneasily, anxious now to retreat from any pointless quarrel over the ways of strange divinities.

"The giant star Rigel is also the symbol of evil and the dwelling of death," the big man plowed on doggedly. "Rigel is the eternal enemy of Kares, the burning destroyer who is allowed only by his infinite mercy to survive and return again, after each defeat, to strive once more for the lives and the souls of men. In the declining years of each cycle, Rigel

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grows night by night in the sky, a terrible omen of the end. I remember it well."

A husky earnestness had come into his voice, and the mud-colored eyes were swollen with his smoldering emotion. The explorer began to see that he was an unhappy man, pursued across all the light-years he had fled by recollections of terror and perhaps of guilt.

"I was a young man on Kares II when the last cycle closed," his haunted words ran on. "That was six hundred years ago—several lifetimes for one with my late conditioning, if I hadn't spent so many centuries aboard service fliers moving so fast that subjective time was almost stopped. But I still recall those fearful days, and the dreadful choice I made. The wrong choice, Kares restore me!"

"What choice was that?"

"Life," he whispered. "When I should have chosen to die, along with my good father and the flame-pure girl I loved. That was my moral duty, as my older brother pointed out. He was a priest of the light. But I was afraid. I wanted to live. I renounced our god, and joined the quarantine service."

Perspiration had begun to polish the sleekness of the inspector's oily skin, and his dark fat face was tightened and twisted with the remembered agony that had now overwhelmed all his usual sullen reserve.

"It was my misfortune to be born into a troubled age," he said. "Kares II had been quarantined until a few years before my birth, for the protection of our native culture. My own father could remember when our first crude atomic rockets found the quarantine stations, and brought back news of the great interstellar world outside."

The big man seemed to squirm in his chair as if flinching from the old, cruel pressures that compelled his tormented confession.

"That news—and not the fire of Rigel—was what destroyed my people," he muttered bitterly. "Even though the service was still attempting to protect us, just the knowledge of its existence was enough to shatter all our old ways. Many lost the old religion, when they were told that the Restorer's abode was only another insignificant star, lost among all the millions

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with peopled planets of their own. I was one of those unfortunates—because I was afraid.

“The priests had foretold the end of the cycle before I was born,” he went on hoarsely. “When I can first remember, Rigel was already hot and blue and dreadful in the sky. In the last years, the planet itself began to tremble with fear, and the omens of death burned every night—”

He checked himself, when he saw the explorer’s puzzled expression.

“Those omens were meteors—if you prefer the words of the faithless astronomers,” he said harshly. “There were terrible storms of fire, caused, so they said, by the cometary debris swarming around Rigel. And the quakes were due only to the thawing of the polar ice—so the lying scientists assured us—and to the tidal strains caused by the approach of Rigel.

“Long before the end, that evil star was brighter than Kares—”

“Didn’t the service offer any help?” the explorer broke in. “Unless the planet was going to be completely shattered, it should have been possible to set up cooler installations to turn the surplus heat into harmless neutrinos. In any case, the endangered people could have been evacuated.”

“A misguided outsider did arrive with plans for a neutronic cooler plant,” the big man admitted. “The brotherhoods warned him, but he kept on trying to save us in spite of ourselves. When the people learned that he hoped to thwart the sacred laws of Kares, they stoned him to death.”

“Huh?” The explorer blinked. “Why?”

“That long cycle of life and death and resurrection is the great plan of Kares.” The tortured man spoke almost mechanically, as if reciting some temple litany. “The old must ever fall, to make way for the new, and those who die to prove the impotence of Rigel are the first to be reborn.”

The explorer peered at him sharply. “If you believe that, why are you still alive?”

“I didn’t—then.” The inspector half rose, as if to walk the empty room. “And I was afraid.” He sank back hopelessly,

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his fat hands clenched and trembling. "I was afraid and the outsiders had made escape too easy. Though they didn't build the cooler system, after their engineer was mobbed, they did send fliers to save us."

He turned to hide his anguished face.

"And I fled," he gasped. "That is my sin, and I am damned for it. Those who dared defy Rigel have been reborn already, into a finer creation. And I am a homeless wanderer, driven from world to world before the wrath of Kares, doomed to extinction when I die."

He sat slumped over the little table for a moment, sobbing audibly, before he straightened to finish his drink and order another and wipe his reddened eyes.

"The night I left my native world is one I can't forget," he resumed huskily. "I call it night, though the murky sky was hacked and slashed with blades of fire. Meteors were blazing and fire was spewing from a new volcano in the north and a great fire was eating up the city where I lived. The streets were already blocked here and there with rubble, and new quakes shook more houses down every hour. The star of death had set before Kares, which seemed pale and cool as a moon going down behind it. When Rigel rose again, I knew that its futile fire would be permitted to consume everything alive."

"Yet, beneath that ghastly sky, the city lay cloaked with the infinite grace of Kares. Nobody was fighting the conflagration. The rubble lay where it fell. The streets were nearly empty. Most of the faithful were gathered around the sacred hearths in their own homes, singing the old hymns and praying for rebirth, while they feasted on the burnt offerings and dulled their fears of Rigel with the sacramental wine—as I should have done."

The inspector's fat features were contorted with remorse.

"But an interstellar flier from Kares Station had already landed at the edge of the city, in a burnt-out amusement park. Her men came out through the streets with psionic amplifiers, promising escape to all who would go aboard before the rising of Rigel."

"I was then a law clerk, too poor to marry the girl I loved."

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I had been at court all that last day—our firm was asking pardons for some of our convicted clients, who hoped to improve their chances of rebirth. A report of the flier waiting in the park came to the judge, who must have been a heretic, and he adjourned the court.

"In the ruined street outside, beneath the meteors and the drifting smoke, the outsiders were shouting their offers of escape. I listened to them, and forgot my faith, and went to rescue the ones I loved.

"First I went to the temple of fire, but I got there too late. My brother had already gone with a pilgrimage to Karestead. That was our sacred city, built around the ruins of an ancient shrine of the light which had been miraculously spared, so the people believed, when the previous cycle ended.

"My father's house was near the temple, and I hurried there. He had let the servants go back to their own hearths, and I found him alone, kneeling beside his holy fire. When I told him I had come to save his life, he looked up at me with a strange light shining in his eyes.

"His life was already saved, he told me, and I saw that he was dying. He had eaten a wafer of life my brother had brought him from the temple, and he begged me to break another with him. The wafers are made of sacred drugs, that were said to assure a blessed death and an easy resurrection. He urged me with his last breath to take them, but I didn't want to die—not then."

The inspector drained his glass again, and wiped his sweaty face.

"I went on to the home of the girl I wanted to marry," he whispered huskily. "It stood near the spreading fire, and sparks were falling like rain upon me before I came through the debris to her door.

"I found her with her people around the sacred hearth. Her father and her brothers were sleeping from the wine they had drunk, and her mother was busy consoling a frightened younger daughter.

"My beloved ran to greet me, crying with her gladness, and tried to lead me back to the hearth. If we perished side

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by side, she whispered, we would surely meet and love more happily in our next incarnation. She brought me a plate of the holy meat and a cup of the sacramental wine.

"But I hadn't come to die with her. I told her about the great ship ready in the park, waiting to carry us away before Rigel rose again. We needn't wait to be reborn, I told her, for the outsiders were promising that we could join the great migration to the frontier planets.

"She seemed too deeply shocked to move at first, and then she tried to stop my mouth with her hand. She begged me to kneel with her at the hearth and ask Kares to forgive my frightful impieties.

"By that time the house was burning. The red glare of the conflagration flickered through the curtained windows, and the roaring of it was like a sea. Smoke began seeping in and the air was suddenly hot, even in the ground-floor room. We heard the roof beams crash down on an upper floor, and fear swept over me, terrible as the fire."

Sitting miserably slumped, his fat shoulders creasing the tight blue jacket, the inspector paused to blow his nose and wipe unashamedly at his swollen eyes.

"She was too lovely," he whispered hopelessly. "I loved her too desperately—and I had lost my faith. I was afraid to let her die. I caught her arm, when she brought me the wine and meat, and tried to make her come with me.

"She turned against me then, for she was loyal to Kares. She snatched the food of life away, and screamed to wake her father and her brothers. She made them put me out of the house—and I saw it cave in and crush them all, when a new quake struck.

"Volcanic mud had begun raining on the ruined city, too late to quench the flames. I was trapped against new walls of rubble, with sparks hissing in the mud around me and that great sea of fire rolling on behind. But I got away."

He paused to shake his head, gasping for his breath.

"I remember climbing a building already on fire, to reach the next street. I remember another quake; I was ill from the motion of the ground, even while I tried to keep on running; and broken masonry was thundering down all around

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me. The next thing I knew, I was stumbling up a ramp into the rescue ship, half dead from burns and a wound in my scalp. I had saved my life and lost my soul. Now I'll never be reborn."

"How do you know anybody will be?" the explorer inquired.

The fat man blinked at him sadly and then continued. "Later, I went back. After I had recovered from my injuries, I joined the quarantine service. I joined it gladly, because I had seen the harm that strange ideas can do to such worlds as mine was."

"And whom did you find reborn?"

"My brother," he said. "Perhaps not literally reborn, but just as miraculously alive. Only twenty years had passed when I came back. Most of the planet was still a sterile desert; even the topsoil had been fused into glass. But the holy city stood unharmed, and I found my brother there."

"But didn't you say no cooler plant was built?"

"I did." The big man stiffened. "And none was built. My brother told me how the shrine and the city around it had been translated intact into the new cycle, by a special miracle of Kares."

"How did that happen?"

"At the dawn of the last day, before Rigel rose, there was a flicker of darkness in the sky. A flash of cold, my brother said, and then a flash of heat—and a year of time had gone. The burned lands were cool again, and Rigel was once more in flight from the perfect grace of Kares, and all the pilgrims crowded into the holy city had been spared."

The explorer nodded suddenly. Such a remarkable miracle, it occurred to him, could have been wrought only by a neutrionic freezer—an exchanger designed to preserve the contents of its field at the absolute zero by converting all heat energy into neutrinos, and then in due time re-converting enough neutrionic energy to restore heat and motion.

"My brother welcomed me as gladly as if I had been reborn," the undercover man was adding sadly. "He wanted me to leave the service and join the temple staff, but when

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his superiors found that I had run away from Rigel before the cycle ended, they said my soul was dead."

Watching the big man's unconcealed despair, the explorer began to sense a more imperative urgency in his own search for the lost beginnings of mankind. The inspector's life, it seemed to him, had been bound and crippled by ignorance; that whole world had died for want of the truth he hoped to find beneath the ruins of Atlantis.

Suddenly, in his mind, this tormented man became a symbol standing for countless other billions, cut off as he had been from the knowledge of their own true origins, rootless and doomed. Men had left the past behind, and they were incomplete without it. Half the restless discontent that pushed the race out across the galaxy must be an unconscious need of something lost. It came to him now—a vague but driving hunger for the knowledge that alone could make men whole again.

In the clear light of that new meaning, his own personal fate was no longer important. He had grown too old in the search to have much desire for the material rewards or even the scholarly honors he had once expected, but now this haunted fugitive had given his goal a mystic significance. What he sought was no longer merely the spot where something unknown had kindled the first spark of civilization; he was looking now for the lost soul of all mankind.

"And that's why I reject the lie of human evolution." Defiance firmed the inspector's sagging face. "My people are the children of Kares, and I have seen them saved from the evil fire of Rigel by his miraculous compassion."

In fact, the explorer thought, that sacred spot must have been the site where the first settlers landed, and the neutronic exchanger that sheltered it from the rays of Rigel must have been rebuilt from the engines of the interstellar fliers. In all likelihood, the holy fraud had been unconscious. Even the priestly engineers had doubtless forgotten the secular origins of that sacred machine, as those recurrent holocausts erased the past, until the duties of maintenance and operation must have now become a fixed temple ritual.

But he kept that to himself.

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"I haven't come to look for traces of human evolution," he insisted, instead. "The extreme range of my portable finder is only about twenty thousand years—too short a time to show much physical change in men. All I hope to find is the site where neutrionic fliers were invented."

"Why look here?"

"Sol III is near the geometric center of civilization, and even nearer the center of the core of older planets settled in prehistoric or prepsionic times. And I have eliminated most of the other nearby planets."

He had found better evidence, besides, buried in the archives of the learned societies—evidence confirmed by the survey reports in the files here. All known life on Earth was biochemically akin; no trace of any rival kingdom was preserved even in the oldest rocks. Mankind must have sprung up here.

He decided to say nothing of that, but in spite of his restraint he found the inspector blinking at him with a returning antagonism.

"I still don't think much of your project," the big man was muttering. "Even the proof that other peoples spread from Sol III—if you could ever prove it—might do my own race harm. It could corrupt this new cycle with doubt, the way my own was corrupted—"

His hesitant voice ceased uncertainly. His dull eyes lifted in a bewildered way toward the low ceiling of the bar, peering vaguely in the direction of Rigel and its faint companion.

"Though sometimes I still don't know quite what to think," he whispered uneasily. "I was taught that Kares created all mankind, but since I joined the service I've seen more men than the wisest priest knew anything about. And the bright abode of their god is so far away from Sol that I can't even see it, in the glare of Rigel, not even with our best telescopes." He shook his head unhappily. "Perhaps some men did evolve without his miraculous intervention. I just don't know. But I don't see how men alone could have created civilization."

"I've wondered, myself." The explorer nodded thoughtfully. "Because progress is uncommon. More peoples have

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slipped backward, than ever advanced. Even here on Sol III, men must have existed many thousand years before the invention of civilization. There must have been some unique event—some great first invention—that kindled all the rest.”

“What could that have been?” A momentary interest flickered through the inspector’s skepticism. “Neutrionics?”

“Something simpler, surely,” the explorer told him. “I don’t know what it was, but I’m pretty anxious to get on with the search.”

“You won’t find anything,” the big man said bluntly. “I hope you don’t. Though, of course,” he added hastily, “I intend to give you all possible aid, as Denebola requested.”

The inspector refused another drink, and the explorer wandered despondently back to his bare little cubicle in the transient tunnel. Even though he had failed to crack that stubborn antagonism, however, now he understood its cause. And it seemed to him that the haunted man allowed the preparations for their trip to Earth to move a little faster after that tormented confession.

Many months later, the Starling Expedition made camp on the rim of a waterless wadi in the western Sahara. Dry gravel sloped upward from the little circle of parked trucks to a low ridge of wind-carved granite. Beyond the ridge lay a gray sea of dunes and the last hope for Atlantis.

The flags of Mauritania, France, and the United States hung wilted beneath the pitiless glare of the afternoon sun, beside the windshields of the dusty trucks. Keeping the Covenants, the two outsiders were traveling as natives. A patrol flier from Sol Station had set them down one dark night on an empty highway in western Montana, in a Ford sedan the inspector had bought on an earlier mission. Their hearing aids were really psionic translators. They wore native clothing, and carried credentials manufactured at the station laboratory.

The inspector had resumed an identity he had established before, as Colonel André Foureau, a French army veteran who had taken up the law; he used the mythical affairs of nameless clients to explain his travels and disappearances.

The explorer was now Mr. Mayhew Starling, a retired soap

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manufacturer from Kansas City, spending his modest fortune in pursuit of his hobby of amateur archeology. He had retained the colonel, so their story went, to arrange financial, diplomatic and personnel matters for his expeditions.

While the native members of the party were pitching their tents beside the wadi, the two outsiders left the camp and climbed the ridge. The dune beyond lay parched and shimmering in the heat, dead as the moonscape around the lunar station.

"There you are!" The fat man shrugged disgustedly, gasping from the climb and wiping feebly with a soiled handkerchief at the reddish crusts of dust and drying sweat on his face. "Though I don't see much but sand."

"You wouldn't expect to find the shops and launching ways still standing, after so many thousand years," the explorer answered patiently. "But this must be the spot from which civilization spread."

"I don't see why."

"You don't want to." A faint asperity sharpened the slight man's voice. "Though I've showed you a thousand facts to prove that men existed here long before the neutrionic age."

"Facts?" The inspector snorted. "A few teeth and bits of bone! A few chipped flints! I've far better evidence for the miraculous translation of our sacred city. Remember, I talked with my brother."

The explorer merely shrugged; he knew the big man was immune to facts.

"You've failed to find anything at far likelier spots," the inspector persisted. "What makes you think Atlantis ever stood here?"

"We have followed a process of elimination," the explorer told him. "At first, because of the deluge-legend still current among the natives, I looked for a drowned continent. When we failed to locate Atlantis under the sea, I turned next to the places we have been visiting—the centers from which the crude culture of the contemporary natives seems to have spread—Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, even Mexico and Peru. But I'm now convinced that those are all secondary centers, where some dying spark of our own civilization must have

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lived long enough to awaken the savages among whom it fell."

"I see." The inspector nodded sardonically. "And now you have eliminated every possible location."

"Except this." The explorer nodded hopefully toward the rolling dunes. "A likelier spot than it looks," he insisted, "because the climate has been changing. During the last glacial age, all this desert was a humid grassland. Even at the date when neutronic flight began, there was still an inhabited oasis here."

"How do you know?"

"Psionics," the explorer said. "I have been searching artifacts from Egypt and those other secondary centers, with the portable finder. Each object has led me back to earlier ones, until the oldest always came from the forgotten settlement here."

He heard the inspector's skeptical grunt.

"An Egyptian scarab guided me to a flint hand-ax," he explained. "When I adjusted the finder to search the image of the ax, I found a blue glass bead made at this oasis by the same people who also, within just a few centuries earlier or afterwards, must have built the first interstellar flier."

The inspector shook his head, mopping stolidly at his mud-grimed face again.

"That's only one line of search," the slight man told him hopefully. "One of a dozen I've been able to follow. Another began in Yucatan, with a Mayan pot. That led me to a bone fishhook from Japan. Tracing the image of the fishhook, I found a stone plowshare made in the Gobi. The plowshare revealed the broken shard of another pot, made where these dunes lie."

"Broken pots!" The inspector sniffed. "Is pottery the great invention you're looking for?"

"I doubt it." The explorer spoke thoughtfully, as if unaware of his derision. "Although the primary invention may have been something equally simple."

"How do you trace such objects?" The inspector's voice was suddenly quickened, as if he had caught the explorer's interest in spite of himself. "Or can you explain it?"

The geometry of pisonic energy-particles wasn't simple,

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not even for conditioned minds, but the explorer answered carefully, "The finder is a machine that acts almost as a new hemisphere of the operator's brain. It expands the range and precision of the time-sense we all have—though you need conditioning to make it fully conscious. In effect, it extends a kind of mental bridge into the past."

The inspector still looked faintly bewildered.

"Take the flint scraper I found at our Chinese site on the Yellow River," the explorer went on. "Focused on that, the finder showed me the Neolithic man who made it. His tribe possessed a sacred blade of polished obsidian, already very old. Shifting to the blade, I followed it back to Turkestan. The trader who bartered for it there, when it was new, also owned a stone seal cylinder from Babylon. And the same trail led me on from Babylon, through several other objects, back to a spear point flaked by the people of this same oasis."

His eager eyes explored the gray waste of shifting dunes again.

"So you see I've already had several glimpses of this spot, as it used to be," he said. "They were all badly blurred, however, because in each case I was following a secondary image instead of a real object. I need artifacts, actual things that were part of the period we are searching."

And he climbed again, to reach a weathered granite knob that stood above the other outcroppings. He began pecking at it with a geologist's hammer, collecting the fragments.

"The people who flaked that spear point used this rock for a lookout," he called back. "Perhaps it also witnessed the launching of the first interstellar flier."

"If rocks could see!"

"They guide the finder." The slight man bagged his granite chips, with a quiet nod of satisfaction. "These should show us where to start the power shovel. In a few weeks, I think we'll be uncovering more interesting objects for the finder than spear points and beads."

"Weeks, did you say?" The inspector straightened with a self-conscious importance. "I can't allow you more than two days here. Not even if you've already found Atlantis."

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The explorer clambered feebly back down from the knob, shaken with a pained amazement.

"Just two days?" he protested huskily. "That's not enough."

"Your visa is expiring," the inspector reminded him complacently. "You've known from the first that you had to leave on the next supply flier."

"But that isn't due for six weeks," the explorer answered heatedly. "I had been counting on at least another month, and I see no reason to start back now. We can arrange to have a patrol craft pick us up on the desert, a night or two before the ship is due."

"We don't do things that way at *this* station." The bulky man inflated himself. "We plan and conduct every undercover mission with elaborate precautions to protect the natives."

"I know that." The explorer nodded bitterly. "But I must have time—"

"All our reservations are already made," the inspector broke in firmly. "I'm allowing us time enough in Dakar to make a convincing disposition of our heavy equipment, and to see that our native employees are properly cared for. We're catching the air liner for Paris on the last day of the month. Incidental matters will occupy me at my Paris office, until we sail for New York. Another outsider will be waiting at our hotel there to drive west with us. The patrol craft is to pick us up from a lonely side road in Arizona, a week before the supply flier is due."

"Can't you somehow leave me here a little longer?"

"We don't do things that way here." The inspector's dust-caked lips tightened sternly. "You and I are following my schedule, together."

The explorer shrugged helplessly. The inspector's stubborn way of doing things had defeated him many times before, but there was nothing that he could do about it. These elaborate precautions went only a little way beyond the expected duty of an undercover officer, and of course the Covenants had to be maintained.

"Very well." He nodded, with the best face he could find. "Anyhow, I'm going to make the most of these two days."

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"I'll run the finder on these rocks tonight, and stake out the trenches early in the morning."

He started back toward the trucks, but paused abruptly.

"Would you like to watch the search?" he asked. "I've a spare headset, and even without psionic training you should be able to see a good deal."

"Thanks." The big man smiled gratefully. "I've several other matters that need attention first. The driver of the water truck has reported motor trouble, and the cook needs dosing for dysentery, and the new men we hired in Dakar want more money. But I'll be over later."

For a few moments, as they plodded back down toward the camp, heads bowed and eyes squinted against the pitiless blaze of the sinking sun, the fat official seemed human and competent and almost likeable. But then he snorted and exploded defiantly, "But you aren't bribing me. I'll take a look through your finder, just out of curiosity. But no matter what you show me, we're still leaving here on schedule. Precisely."

The laboratory truck carried painted signs to warn the unconditioned natives in their own written languages. HIGH VOLTAGE—KEEP OUT! The vehicle was armored with steel plate and kept carefully locked. The native driver had been led to infer that the equipment inside was used to determine the age of objects from measurements of radioactivity.

The inspector himself had never been inside, and he entered from the breathless dusk with a quick curiosity. The steel door was still hot to his touch from the sun, and in spite of a humming fan the narrow interior was a suffocating oven. He glanced over the research equipment with a professional watchfulness, and nodded with a faint relief when he saw nothing that might betray the outside.

"This is it—really it!"

Speaking with a tired excitement, the worn little explorer plugged another headset into the finder, which had been cased to look like a portable Geiger counter of native manufacture. The inspector sat down gingerly on a flimsy folding chair and adjusted the headset. He listened expect-

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tantly, but all he could hear was the slight man's hushed and eager voice.

It always seemed to him, through the mysterious magic of the translator, that the stooped little stranger was speaking his own Karian language, and for a moment now he sat awed by the subtle wonders of psionics and embittered because they were denied him.

The explorer replaced his own headset and leaned to adjust the finder above a chip of granite from that old lookout point.

"This wadi was once a living river," he was saying. "It flowed out of a wide grassy valley above us, where those dunes lie now. Its waters cut the gap in the ridge, just below our camp. These heights beside the stream must have been a favorite camping place for primitive men, long before they settled down to make that first invention."

The inspector grunted doubtfully.

"From the geological evidence in sight," the explorer continued, "I think that valley must have been a great lake before the gap was cut, and afterwards the basin still collected underground water to feed springs and wells along the lower river channel."

The river channel must have curved back from the gap toward that granite knob. In his mind the inspector could almost see the low mud huts clustered along the protected strip between the river and the ridge, within hailing distance of the watchers on the knob. A thick stone wall had crossed the narrow neck of open ground to guard the village, and dusty date palms had stood clumped around the water holes, even after the stream was choked with wind-drifted sand.

"Can't you see it?" the explorer whispered. "The dying oasis?"

The inspector caught his breath. He didn't understand psionics; he never would. But it came to him now that the image of that mud town had reached him through the silent device adjusted over that granite flake. He nodded uneasily.

"There it is," the explorer said. "The way it looked from the ridge, twenty thousand years ago. The soil on the drier

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uplands was already blown to dunes. And the wells here must have been failing, even then, because the site was soon abandoned."

"Mud huts!" The inspector shrugged and tried to scoff. "Where are your neutrionic fliers?"

"They had been launched and forgotten thousands of years before," the slight man answered, "if they were really built here—and they must have been."

"Show me."

"I'm trying." The explorer had leaned to adjust the finder again, his pale eyes preoccupied. "But that's the limit of this particular fragment, as an effective focal guide. Perhaps some of these others carry older impressions."

He tried another rock chip and then a third, frowning over the instrument and whistling softly through his teeth in an absent way that annoyed the inspector. At last he sat back hopefully.

"Better, don't you think?"

Still no sound had come from the headset. The inspector had noticed no difference at all, but now when he tried again to visualize the vanished town beyond the ridge, the mud houses appeared larger and more numerous. The defensive wall had not yet been built. A stone bridge arched the sluggish river. The stand of palms along the channel was wider, and the dunes had not appeared. On the higher ground beyond the bridge, grassy mounds of flattened rubble lay around a tall, red-brick chimney.

"Everything looks different," the inspector admitted grudgingly. "But still I don't see any interstellar fliers."

"Because we can't see far enough." The explorer bit his lip in disappointment. "We're still several hundred years too late. But look at that smokestack!" A stubborn eagerness lifted his voice. "Evidence of an earlier technological culture, already forgotten."

He bent abruptly to the dials again. Watching the sharp conflict of effort and frustration on his withered face, the inspector waited expectantly. All he could see, however, was the laboratory equipment crowded on the narrow shelves

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and benches around them. The breathless heat was suddenly unbearable.

"I've found a ship." The explorer looked up briefly, his tired eyes oddly troubled. "The image is bad, but I'm sure it's a ship."

The inspector replaced his own headset. After a moment of disappointment, the impressions of that ancient town came back to him—more like memories than new perceptions. The houses had been stone instead of mud, in that more distant past, neatly roofed with red tile. On the height beyond the river and the palms, long buildings were crowded around the stack. Farther beyond, on the outskirts of the settlement, stood the ship—if it had been a ship.

To the inspector, it looked more like some sort of storage tank. Built of riveted metal plates, it was an untapered cylinder with bulging top and bottom. It stood on a wide masonry platform, shored upright with heavy wooden props. He thought he could see an entrance valve at the lower end, but because of the intervening trees and buildings, and because the whole image was somehow dimmed and wavering, he couldn't be sure.

"That thing looks too small to be an interstellar vessel," he protested at last. "Even the first space rockets my own people built on Kares II were larger."

"But neutrionic fliers don't really have to be large, not even for interstellar travel," the slight man answered thoughtfully. "With the novas for power plants, they need no fuel aboard. Because of the time-contraction, the supply requirements of the passengers are small, of course, too."

"If that's a ship, then let's see it fly."

The inspector tried to watch that puzzling cylinder, while the explorer bent over the finder again, but the image of it faded, veiled by sudden clouds of red dust that came rolling out of the drying uplands beyond the river.

"Look!" the little scientist whispered suddenly. "I believe those people are boarding it, carrying loads on their backs. Could it be that neutrionics came before the wheel?" His voice lifted. "Can't you see them, rushing aboard?"

The inspector had not been aware of the people them-

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selves before, but now when he tried he found them. Stumbling under their bundled possessions, they were crowding out of the town, crossing the bridge and climbing the heights. They leaned against the wind, and many fell as if smothered by the blinding dust. Those who reached the ship seemed to fight for space aboard.

He waited for the machine to lift, as the explorer touched the finder again, but it was hidden instead by the dust clouds. When the image cleared again, the storm was over. The vessel had vanished. He found only the empty streets of the abandoned town, and the tattered palms, and the small new dunes the drifting sand had made against the bodies of those who failed to get aboard.

"So it was a ship." The explorer nodded soberly. "It carried mankind and the beginnings of civilization away to the planets of some other star."

The big man grunted sardonically. "Just to escape a sandstorm?"

"There must have been some greater challenge than the drying climate." The slight man sat frowning for a moment, and then turned quickly to a drawing board. "I'm going to map the site," he said. "And plan the dig. We can't do much more with the finder until we uncover better targets."

The inspector started to go, because it was cooler outside, but he paused at the door to glance back curiously; what he saw made him return to watch, fascinated in spite of himself. He wiped impatiently once at the tickling drops of sweat creeping down his face and neck, and then forgot the heat.

The stooped little scientist was drawing his map of that sand-drowned city on a large sheet of common native paper with a simple native pen. The strange thing was the way he worked. He still wore the headset, and his hurried pen strokes had an astonishing certainty.

"We'll start the shovel at dawn, right here, stripping off the drift sand." He glanced up briefly, but the pen seemed not to pause. "Four thousand and thirty meters due east of the lookout knob. The sand there runs from seven to ten

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meters deep, but a trench cut through it will cross the site of that launching pier."

The big man bent to study the map, and shook his head with an awed bewilderment. Its look of careful accuracy made him sure that pier had stood precisely where the explorer meant to remove the dunes. He straightened uneasily, and cleared his throat.

"About that great invention—" He waited for the busy man to look up at him. "Couldn't it have been psionics?"

The explorer laid down his pen. "Why psionics?"

"If that can show you where every house in Atlantis stood, from just those chips of rock, couldn't it have taught men everything they know?"

"But those people had no psionic devices; the finder shows none." Reaching for his pen, the explorer paused to add, "If they had known psionics, their children would never have relapsed into savagery on so many thousand other planets. The science seems to prevent such breakdowns."

"I see." The inspector's perspiring bulk shifted uncomfortably, as if he didn't. "Then what about neutrionics, itself? Those people can't have known much else."

"The inventors of neutrionics must have understood the physics of the atom," the slight man said. "The basic invention, the thing we're looking for, must have come long before."

"I suppose you're right." The inspector turned unwillingly again to go, but swung back at the door. "Don't think you're tricking me." An abrupt truculence hardened his voice. "We're leaving here on schedule, no matter what you show me."

The explorer went out at dawn, with his map and a primitive native transit, to show the native operator where to start the power shovel. He stood for an impatient hour watching the slow bucket bite drift sand from the trench, before he plodded back across the dunes to camp. He was sitting wearily slumped on a bench in the hot cook tent, eating a gritty and indigestible breakfast, when the inspector came to tell him the machine had broken down.

"I couldn't do anything about it." The big outsider

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shrugged helplessly. "I did notice oil leaking out of the crankcase, soon after you left. But the native operator didn't see it—he's sick with dysentery—and I couldn't say anything about it?"

"Why not?"

"I'm here as lawyer." The inspector spoke with a ponderous complacency. "Not as a mechanic. Out of respect for the Covenants, we must keep in character."

"But this is serious." Dismay shook the slight man's voice. "That sand's too deep to move without the shovel in the time you're giving me. Can't it be repaired?"

"Not in two days." The inspector fanned himself feebly with his sweat-stained sun helmet. "The heat cracked the cylinder block, and a loose connecting rod broke through the crankcase. The operator says the engine's finished."

"Then, we'll pull another out of a truck." The explorer pushed back his plate and stood up suddenly, breathing hard in his agitation. "Anything to run that shovel."

"The operator's too sick to work." The inspector sat down deliberately at the end of the table, and called for the cook to bring him coffee. "I gave the fellow an antibiotic and sent him off to bed. We've nobody else to oversee the job."

"I can do it myself."

"No doubt you could." The bulky man waited for the cook to pour his coffee, and then adjusted the range of his translator to keep the native from understanding. "You might even improvise a power plant from the parts of the finder, to operate that machine on neutrionic energy. But you're not going to."

The worn little man leaned weakly against the rough table, suddenly ill.

"Don't forget the Covenants," the inspector rebuked him smugly. "Or your own established identity, as a retired soap maker. I can't let you touch that machine."

It seemed to the explorer that the inspector's bulging eyes had a glint of sullen satisfaction, but even if his project had been deliberately sabotaged, there wasn't much that he could do about it. He sank wearily back to the bench, staring at his fat antagonist with a mute bitterness.

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"Have a cup of coffee." The inspector touched his translator for an instant, to order the drink. "I'm afraid you're allowing yourself to be needlessly upset by this little incident."

"Little incident?" The explorer's voice was swift and harsh with emotion. "The truth buried under those dunes is something civilization needs. Something, I think, that you need. If I don't find it now, it may be lost forever."

"Nobody else will be coming to look." The inspector set down his cup with an air of cold self-importance. "I'll take care of that, with my report on this affair. If these natives aren't ready for civilization, then they aren't ready to uncover Atlantis."

"They won't," the explorer protested hopelessly. "This site is too remote and deeply buried. Even the artifacts I hope to find would mean very little, without psionic search."

"Anyhow, your visa will be the last."

The explorer studied the big official, with a bleak wonderment. Once he caught his breath as if to speak, but instead he only shrugged and sighed and sipped absently at his coffee, although he disliked the bitter native drink.

"I'm glad you're taking this so well." The inspector beamed at him, with a sudden unconvincing heartiness. "Do you know, I sort of like you, in spite of all your queer ideas?"

He moved his head uncomfortably. Although his dislike for this crude and intolerant man was tempered by understanding and even by a kind of pity, he found it hard to contain his hot resentment now.

"Since you've failed," the inspector added smoothly, "I suppose we may as well start getting out of here this morning. I really need a few more days in Paris, on service matters, if we can get an earlier plane from Dakar—"

"But I haven't failed." He straightened defiantly. "I've already learned a good bit, and I still have two more days. I intend to use them."

"You can't do anything." The big man blinked, as if dimly alarmed. "Not with the shovel wrecked—"

"We've spades."

"That drift sand is too deep—"

"Where we started digging." The explorer nodded grimly.

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"But farther out, where the sand is only three or four meters deep, there was a cemetery. A less promising site, but it might yield something."

"Nothing good," the inspector muttered. "You had better forget it."

The slight man was rising to leave the table, but the inspector's tone made him turn back watchfully. The big outsider sat gulping his coffee with an uneasy haste; the heat of it was sending new rivulets of sweat down his thick-featured face, which now wore an open hostility.

"You promised me these two days," the explorer reminded him evenly. "Will you please call all the men fit to work? Promise them double pay, and send them out with spades."

The fat man sat motionless for an instant. His protruding eyes began to narrow, as if he intended to refuse. Instead, however, he shrugged and nodded.

"Very well," he said flatly. "I did promise you these two days."

The digging went slowly. Lifeless under the scorching sun, the natives worked with a limp deliberation, and the loose dune sand caved back into the pit almost as fast as they removed it. The explorer watched with a tormented impatience, but he was not allowed to direct the men or hurry them, or even to use a spade himself. He was a retired soap maker who didn't even know their language, and he had to keep in character.

All that day, the spades revealed only lower layers of sand. The explorer wanted to hire volunteers to work on through the night, by lantern light. The inspector refused, however, because any such show of urgency might excite the natives to begin digging for themselves, and so violate the Covenants.

Late next morning, the tools began to ring against a bed of gravel and hardened clay, that once had been the top of the cemetery ridge. The explorer worked eagerly all through the baking afternoon, crumbling and sifting the clodded ancient soil, but he had still found no new target for the finder when the inspector told the men to turn in their tools and quit.

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"But it's just getting really cool enough to work." The dusty little scientist glanced anxiously at the red western sun. "We've still two more hours before the usual quitting time, and the next pick-stroke might uncover a burial, with tools or ornaments that would tell all we want to know."

"So it might." The big man shrugged. "But I'm sending the men to salvage the wreckage of that power shovel. We can't leave it here."

"Why not, if it's useless?"

"It would mark this spot," the inspector answered blandly. "It might cause some native to come back and dig up something that he shouldn't know about. Now let's go."

But the explorer hung back, peering miserably into the abandoned pit.

"Come along." The inspector's voice dropped warningly. "And don't look back. Don't excite the natives. The search is over, and you didn't find Atlantis—"

The slight man heard no more. He had seen a dull greenish stain on the wall of the pit, at the level of the buried cemetery. Ignoring the inspector's harsh protest, he scrambled down to examine it. His fingers found a thin shard of corroded bronze projecting from the hardened clay. It broke to his touch, and he straightened triumphantly with the fragment.

"What's that?"

"Nothing that would tell the natives anything," he answered cautiously, "but it looks like a promising guide for the finder."

"Throw it back!" The inspector's voice was brittle as the age-eaten metal. "I'm ordering you."

The fat man looked implacable enough to leave the scientist buried here among these ancient graves, a sacrifice to Kares.

"You've orders of your own," he whispered huskily. "From Denebola, remember." He met the inspector's glassy stare, and tried to catch his rasping breath. "I'm going back to the truck, to take a look at this."

Nodding sullenly, the big man let him go.

When the wreckage of the power shovel was loaded, and

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all the vehicles were ready to start back toward Dakar at dawn, the inspector plodded once more through the hot dark to the laboratory truck. His knock was not answered, but he opened the armored door without invitation.

He found the slight scientist sitting motionless in the narrow oven of the truck, seemingly unconscious of the heat. The psionic finder on the bench was adjusted over that ragged scrap of green-crueted bronze, and the explorer's half-closed eyes and shrunken face had a look of intense absorption in whatever it revealed.

The fat official stood watching silently until the small man heard his heavy breathing and sprang up apprehensively, snatching off the headset.

"Well?" The inspector's cold, bulging eyes shifted quickly and almost guiltily from the uneasy scientist to the thin bronze shard. "Was that a part of your great invention?"

"A lucky find, at least." The explorer nodded, still watching him sharply. "Though I've only begun to search its past."

"What is it?"

"A memorial plaque." The slight man hesitated for an instant and then went on quickly, as if relieved to see the inspector's interest. "It was set in the face of a stone monument, which was old but still standing when the ship took off."

"Was that actually a ship?"

"A neutronic flier." The pale alarm and the tired age were erased from the explorer's face, by a smile of elation. "You can see that from the way it rose, without wings or jets, when it caught the galactic wind."

"But we couldn't see, through that sandstorm."

"The monument stood nearer than the lookout rock," the slight man told him patiently. "The image is much better. It even shows men mounting the neutronic drive, and taking up the unfinished hull to test it."

"If it was a ship, where did it go?"

"Nothing here can tell us where," the explorer said, "but now I know why those people fled the planet."

"Climatic changes?"

"Disease. Men didn't evolve alone; they were accompanied by countless parastic things, adapted to prey on them. You

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know the pills and shots we outsiders must take, to keep alive here. Those people left to escape a great pandemic. That cemetery is full of its earlier victims."

"Would people civilized enough to build neutrionic fliers have to run away from viruses and germs?"

"They didn't have psionics," the explorer reminded him. "And they hadn't had time to accumulate the empirical medical knowledge these savages have today. They were apparently defenseless against the epidemics caused by the spread of their own civilization."

"How's that?"

"An unfortunate biological cycle. Rising civilization increased the population and caused contacts between previously isolated tribes—each with its own collection of malignant microorganisms to which the others had acquired no immunity. The thing has happened many times on many planets."

"Which shows the flaw in your twisted thinking." The inspector grinned triumphantly. "Diseases are common on nearly all these older planets, which means that your hypothetical refugees didn't escape them, after all."

"Some people survived," the explorer insisted gently. "Though it seems that most of the early starships must have carried germs as well as men. That's another reason, besides the lack of psionics, for the frequent lapses into savagery. But this oasis is where interstellar travel began."

His shining eyes fell to the bit of metal beneath the finder.

"We've found Atlantis!" he whispered softly. "Even if I carried back nothing else, that flake of rust is enough to convince every doubter that men and germs and civilization evolved right here."

"I—I can't quite believe it."

The inspector's thick voice had a strangled sound. A sudden sweat had filmed his broad face. The explorer glanced anxiously up at him, as if alarmed by his voice and the sudden hurried rasp of his breath, and saw him staggering feebly away toward the door of the truck.

"This heat," he gasped. "I don't see how you stand it."

The slight man followed to help him, but he seemed to

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recover as soon as he got outside. He stood for a moment with his head bare to the dry night wind, and then fumbled for his salt tablets. The explorer poured water for him from the bag, while he rinsed his mouth and gulped the pill and splashed his face.

"Thanks," he muttered. "I'm all right now—though I don't see how you bear that heat." He offered the little vial. "I think you need one of these."

"I hadn't really noticed, but I suppose it is hot."

The explorer swallowed one white tablet, and turned quickly back to the finder. The big man waited at the doorway, as if reluctant to leave the cooler air outside, watching him with a sullen fixity.

"I've just begun to search this target." He spoke absently, intent on adjusting the finder again. "The plaque was already old, and the stone crumbling under it, when that ship rose. It must have seen generations of earlier history. Perhaps it can show how civilization began."

"That bit of rust?"

The inspector shook his head scoffingly.

"Look at it." Abstractedly, the explorer plugged in the other headset. "When it was whole."

The big man put on the headset and peered at that insignificant sliver of corrosion. What he saw was still the same, but his mind was already forming another image of the plaque, almost as if he had just remembered the way it once had looked.

A thick rectangular tablet of cast bronze, bearing a raised inscription. Most of the symbols on it meant nothing to him, but there was one he understood—three squares grouped to enclose a right triangle. Each square was divided into smaller units, all equal, as if to demonstrate a simple geometric theorem he had learned in the temple school on Kares II.

"The monument must have marked the grave of some great man," the explorer commented softly. "And he must have been a mathematician."

"Then do you think this means that mathematics is the basic invention we're after?" The big official spoke with an

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uneasy haste, as if to conceal his actual thoughts. "Or writing? Or perhaps the working of metal?"

"Mathematics and writing and metal are all still known among many many peoples who have lost the spark of civilization," the slight man answered unsuspectingly. "The vital invention must have been something less obvious—"

A gasp of pain checked his voice. His face hollowed and tightened, abruptly drained of blood. For an instant his worn body stood rigid with agony; then he sank weakly back into his chair, clutching aimlessly at the bench beside him and fighting desperately to breathe.

"Heatstroke," the inspector murmured unfeelingly, leaning to watch his struggle with a cold intentness. "Perhaps you need another pill."

"So . . . so that was it?" His breath and voice came back, as that sudden seizure seemed to pass, and he swung upon the impassive official with a dazed accusation in his eyes. "What have you done to me?"

"I've killed you." The inspector's voice was slow and loud and flat. "The salt tablets I offered you were mixed with the sacred wafers of life my father gave me, the night I left my native world." Remorse flickered across the stolid blackness of his perspiring face. "I only wish I had eaten them with him, myself."

He watched with a bleak amusement as the explorer rushed abruptly to the shelves of chemicals over the sink at the end of the truck and splashed something frantically into a beaker of water.

"You're too late for any antidote to save you," he said calmly. "Those sacred drugs were compounded to relieve the last hours of the faithful from any disturbing indecision or uncertainty. When the pain strikes, they have already reached the nervous system. You'll feel much better, during the time left to you, if you don't take anything at all."

The slight man hesitated, peering at him miserably.

"Your pain will soon be gone," he murmured soothingly. "The wafers were made to insure the tranquil passage essential to a favorable rebirth. In an hour or so, your heart will stop, but until that time you should feel no more dis-

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comfort. You will soon be relaxed, and even elated by the exquisite grace of Kares."

The poisoned man lifted the beaker uncertainly again, but set it down at last, untasted. He stood staring at the inspector with a bleak amazement.

"So you've murdered me?" he whispered harshly. "Will that go into your reports to Denebola?"

"I can report my duty done." The big man's voice was hoarse and uneven. "Our business here is the prevention of damaging cultural collisions. That goes beyond protecting these savages. I have acted deliberately, with a full awareness of all the consequences, to shield all the worlds outside from that scrap of metal and the lies you make it tell."

"Lies?" The explorer shook his head sadly. He came wearily back to his chair at the fender and sank into it hopelessly. "You have murdered the truth," he whispered bitterly. "To protect your own ignorance."

"What is truth—except belief?" The inspector spoke defensively, too loudly. "When all my people believed in Kares, his omnipotence was our truth. When my own belief was broken, by such unholy ideas as yours, I was robbed of certainty and the happiness it brings. Now my own soul is dead. I can do nothing for myself. But there must be billions more, content within some strong faith of their own. My duty now is to shield their happiness, from whatever you have found."

He nodded ponderously at the bit of old bronze.

"I intend to bury that," he said. "That, and everything else you have found here, in your own grave. The natives here will be informed that Mr. Mayhew Starling died of coronary thrombosis, but my official reports will state that you were attacked by a new mutant microorganism which makes this planet so dangerous that no more visas for exploration can be issued. I'll add that you died convinced that Atlantis never existed."

"You can't—" The stricken man blinked at him incredulously, and nodded at last with a stunned acceptance. "I see that you can. You're capable of killing the truth, even though you really know it's true."

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Sweating again, the big man squirmed uncomfortably before that pale stare. He gulped and wet his lips and finally swung to beckon nervously at the shard of rust under the finder.

"Let's have another look," he urged abruptly. "You have an hour or more left, and your mind will stay clear until the end. Maybe you can still discover that lost invention."

"So you're uneasy?" The explorer smiled painfully. "You were afraid to die—and afraid to kill me in any honest way. And now you're afraid to talk about the truth."

"Nothing you can say really matters now," the inspector whispered harshly, "because you can neither save your life nor alter my intentions. If you have no use for the time I've left you, you had better take another pill."

The slight man sat stiffly erect for a time, biting at his lip until blood reddened it. He shrugged apathetically at last, and turned slowly back to the finder.

"I'll just watch, if you don't mind." The inspector reached for the other headset, without waiting to see whether he minded. "I'll have to stay with you, anyhow, to make certain you don't attempt to break the Covenants."

The explorer nodded indifferently, as if nothing mattered to him now. The big man put on the headset and looked expectantly at the flake of verdigris, but nothing seemed to happen.

"Well?" He said impatiently. "What does it show?"

"More, I think, than I'll have time to see," the small man said. "The first impressions I can read were made by savage minds, that knew nothing of other worlds and very little of this. Can't you see?"

The inspector tried again. Still that scrap of metal looked the same, but other images came into his mind. The bend of an unknown river, dried to green-scummed water holes. A lean and nearly naked boy, with long red hair. A shaggy gray thing, stalking the young savage.

The boy stood stooped in a shallow pool, fishing patiently with his hands. The gray creature crept out of the tall yellow grass along the river bank. A wolf, or perhaps a wild

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dog. It circled warily down the wind and then came trotting slowly toward him across the dried sand bars.

Kneeling now to watch a sluggish fish, the boy seemed unaware of danger. The beast was close behind, before he snatched and missed and rose to see it. Terror shook him. He screamed and tried to run and fell sprawling on the gravel.

His fear and his flight seemed astonishing at first, because the gaunt beast looked rather small and quite cautious. When he stumbled and went down so weakly, however, the inspector could see that he was wasted from starvation.

The lean creature came rushing more boldly as he fell, driven perhaps by a hunger as keen as his own. It snarled and sprang, as he scrambled feebly to his feet, but he turned to face it now. He had come up with a flat red rock in his hand. He threw. And the beast came down dead beside him, its skull caved in.

The emaciated youth picked up the stone. He began hungrily licking the blood from it, but something stopped him. He held it away from him, weighing it on his thin hand and peering at it with a sudden awe in his haggard eyes. Where he had licked away the blood, it had the ruddy gleam of native copper.

At that point, the image changed. That scrawny boy had been so vivid that the inspector wanted to warn him of the stalking beast; even his feelings of hunger and terror and triumph had been curiously distinct. But now everything began shifting and blurring disconcertingly.

Fleeting, the inspector sensed the chill and roar and gloom of driving storms, the strong reek of smoke and men and rotting offal in narrow caves, the hushed excitement of the hunt and the hot scent of a gutted deer and the warm salt taste of blood. He felt wonder and triumph and terror again—all somehow linked to that native lump of copper and the red-haired boy who had first picked it up.

The explorer had stooped, he saw, to adjust the finder.

"Wait." He slipped the headset off, to relieve a dull pain that had caught the top of his head. "Remember, I've had no proper conditioning," he muttered hastily. "You're going too

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fast for me. Where did those things happen? How long ago? What about that boy?"

The explorer turned. His pale eyes studied the man who had killed him, with a troubled and incredulous intentness, until the big inspector flinched and demanded nervously, "Was that this same spot, before the desert came?"

"Another river," he answered at last. "But it ran from these same uplands, when they were still humid, down into the great depression north of us that is now the Mediterranean Sea. When that boy picked up the copper nugget, a thousand years and more before his descendants quit the planet, the Atlantic had not yet broken through between Africa and Spain."

The inspector nodded heavily, licking at his fat lips. He felt a twinge of jealousy because the tantalizing wonders of psionics were forever beyond his own reach. That gave him another moment of bleak satisfaction in what he had done—not even psionics could defeat the wafers of Kares. But then a dim shame touched him, and he fled from it, repeating uneasily, "The boy—who was he?"

"An outcast," the explorer said. "Because of his red hair. His parents had belonged to a little band of hunters who ranged around the great salt lake in the western end of that great depression. The members of the band were mostly dark, and they suspected red hair. His father's eyesight had been damaged by an infection, soon after the boy was born, and the old hunter blamed the child's hair for the way his game began to elude him. The mother defended the boy as long as she could, but when she was finally overtaken by a lion, the old man was convinced that his hair carried incurable bad luck. The boy had been clubbed out of the band, not long before he found that copper lump."

The inspector blinked doubtfully.

"If the metal carries the impressions, how do you know what happened before he picked it up?"

"Can't you get his thoughts?"

"I wasn't conditioned." The big man shrugged defensively. "At first I thought I could sense his feelings, but when you

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changed the focus everything seemed to blur again. Perhaps because he had thrown away the nugget."

"But he didn't throw it away. He carried it on with him, because it had killed the wolf and broken the disastrous luck of his red hair. He placed the same kind of faith in it, for years afterwards, that you once did in Kares." The explorer grinned sardonically. "The truth—until doubt destroyed it."

The slight man bent quickly over the finder again, absorbed now in what it revealed. The inspector sat sweating, anxiously following the play of fear and relief, of sudden wonder and grave understanding, across his crinkled face. Abruptly, something seemed to startle him. He gasped, and nodded slowly, and finally turned with a strange awe in his faded eyes.

"The same man!" he whispered softly. "That savage boy became the honored man whose bones were finally placed beneath that monument here. He carried that piece of copper with him all his life—hammered into a useful blade after it had ceased to be a hunting charm—and long after his death the wornout tool was melted into the metal for that memorial tablet. It shows his whole career." Elation quickened the explorer's voice. "And he's the man who lit the first spark of actual civilization!"

"That naked savage?" The inspector blinked scornfully. "What qualified him to invent anything?"

"The color of his hair, in the beginning," the slight man answered quietly. "It taught him to doubt the wise men. It deprived him of the aid and restraint of the tribal traditions. It forced him to start thinking himself, or die. And his native genius wouldn't die. His exile must have seemed as cruel to him as yours does to you, but it placed him on the lonely road to intellectual freedom."

The explorer nodded absently, his dim, myopic eyes searching for something far beyond the white enameled walls of the rolling laboratory.

"The red color of his hair," he whispered. "And then the deluge."

The inspector goggled.

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"There really was a deluge," the scientist insisted. "Although the legends have generally inverted the order of events. Instead of overwhelming this first civilization, the flood helped to launch it." He gestured at the other headset. "You can see it for yourself."

Reluctantly, because it hurt his head, the inspector put on the headset. Images of the red-haired savage crowded his mind again, like recollections of someone he had intimately known. Now a robust man, with challenging blue eyes and a sunburned skin darker than his bright beard, he stood tall on a forest trail, fighting off a screaming pack of shorter, swarthy men. He was kneeling in a deep rock gallery, digging flint with a deerhorn pick. He sat on a windy ledge beside the quarry, chipping axes from the flint. Frightened, naked men were chasing him, howling and throwing stones, while the land quivered and pitched. He fled from them—and fled again, from a sudden wall of mad gray water that came rolling down across the forest, snapping huge trees and tossing them high on its muddy crest.

The crowded swiftness of those fleeting impressions bewildered the inspector, yet he clung to the headset as long as he could bear the ache in his head, wondering if that tall savage could have been himself. A temple attendant had told him once that he had been red-haired in some earlier incarnation, and now, because of that, he felt a sudden warm kinship to this bold and lonely figure.

In another moment, however, that thundering wall of mud and trees and the foaming brine had overtaken the stumbling fugitive, and the stark reality of his pain and terror became unendurable. With the frightened native's own desperation, the inspector snatched the headset off.

He was trembling. His head throbbed and swam, and it came back to him now that the shining home of Kares was lost among the stars, invisible from here. That wretched savage had probably known no god, and possessed no soul to be reborn. But yet, somehow—

The inspector wiped his sweaty face and turned impulsively to his companion. He wanted to ask if the explorer could see his likeness in that ancient man, but then

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he recalled that the little scientist, dying now without faith, couldn't hope to live again. Somehow, that shook him. In spite of his own dogged conviction, the pale sad eyes of the man at the finder began to unnerve him.

"Everything comes too fast." He cleared his throat nervously. "That gadget hurts my head, and I can't really understand much of what it shows. Won't you just tell me about the flood and the red-haired man?"

"I'm afraid I haven't time for all of it." The explorer grinned at him, with a weary wistfulness. "I know I can't give you all his emotions and sensations the way the finder recalls them, or the feeling of the whole background."

"I've had sensations enough." The fat man shuddered. "The stones—and that wall of water! But I couldn't tell where the man was, or what was really happening."

"He was still young then," the explorer said. "He had been captured by a fighting tribe that ranged the western slopes of that great basin, and traded to a clan of weapon makers who quarried their flint from a ridge up near sea level.

"He was a slave of the weapon makers, when the deluge came. He had won their respect with his physical strength and his new skill at shaping flints, but he was also getting ideas that made trouble for him."

"Ideas?"

"Chipping flints had always been a sacred art, governed by secret chants recited by the tribal wise men, but our redhead had grown up in conflict with the unchanging wisdom of the past. He was guilty of wicked innovations."

"How?"

"They began with his copper nugget. His recent misfortunes had weakened his earlier faith in its magic, but he had also learned, when he tried to flake it, that it was malleable. When he found other masses of virgin copper in the quarry, he began hammering them into useful tools."

"Was that wrong?"

"The flint-workers disapproved of softer materials. Even though the shatter-proof copper implements had a good barter value, anything soft was evil. When the land began to tremble, the wise old men concluded that his impious work

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had angered the spirits of the rocks. The sea broke through, fortunately, before they had finished stoning him to death."

The fat man wet his lips, shivering again.

"Was that the Atlantic?"

"All the oceans had been rising, as the glaciers thawed." The slight man nodded. "Those quakes must have caused tidal waves that broke through the ridge. The ocean poured in, scouring out the strait. That real deluge ran for many years, and it drowned the whole world he had known."

"But he survived?"

"On a floating log. He rode it all the way down to the overflowing lake, and got ashore alive. He wandered north to the fringes of the retreating glaciers, and south again when winter came. For a long time he was alone, but not so lonely as he once had been. He had learned how to think. Without knowing it, he was already at work on that basic invention.

"In time, he found a friendly people. They must have been distant kinsmen of his own band, because they spoke a similar language, but among them red hair was good magic. Although he had learned to question such beliefs, he joined the tribe. With the beginnings of that invention and the accidental advantage of his red hair, he soon became a leader.

"He found a mate, and had a son. He might have become a successful savage patriarch, as time went on—and might never have completed that first real step toward civilization—but for the deluge that still pursued him.

"The hunting range of his new people had been in the lowlands around another lake, in the eastern end of that great basin, and now they were caught between the fresh water and the salt flood rising. He began urging the tribe to move to higher ground, but the wise old men opposed him.

"They were afraid of the uplands, because the great birds of prey that nested in high places were supposed to be the dangerous spirits of their dead. Not even the notion of reincarnation, you see, was indigenous to the Karian planets."

The explorer smiled somberly.

"And migration was needless, the wise men said. The waters were angry merely because some impious man had

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been taking fish without making the proper ceremonial apologies to the spirits of the lake; they would recede when the guilty fisherman had been discovered and drowned.

"The red-haired wanderer, however, had seen the Atlantic pouring down through that widening gap in the land, and even the thawing ice that fed the flood; he knew that no mumbo-jumbo would ever send it back. And the brothers of his new wife were fishermen. He tried to save their lives.

"Rashly, he challenged the wise men. He made a song to give his own conflicting explanation of the deluge. When writing and psionics were both unknown, such mnemonic chants were the only records. He armed the threatened brothers with copper, and persuaded them to help him build a raft.

"His protests and the color of his hair halted the sacrificial drownings for a time. His wife and her brothers were troubled by his quarrel with the wise men, however, and they refused to embark with him on the raft when the rising waters floated it.

"In the end, when the tribal lands had dwindled to a tiny island, the frightened wise men lost their regard for red hair. They recalled that the stranger had come down from the haunted highlands. The overflowing sea, he himself admitted, had been following him half his life. Clearly, he was the guilty one.

"Even his friends had to give way to the logic of that. Half convinced that he was some monstrous spirit in human shape, his wife begged him to untie the raft and go while he could. But he wouldn't go alone. Before he could persuade her to bring the child and come with him, the tribal elders seized him.

"He was held that night in a guarded cave. He could hear the rising waves outside, and the wise men chanting around a sacred fire, preparing to drown him at dawn. Under that pressure of necessity, he completed and revealed his invention.

"He made another song, and sang it to his captors. When his wife and her brothers heard it, they rescued him from the wise men, and followed him aboard the raft. The winds and

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currents carried them southward, to the new north coast of Africa. He led them ashore and back into these highlands. Before he died, they had settled here at this oasis.

"Outwardly, they were still savages. They wore the skins of animals or nothing at all, and their first dwellings here were pits in the ground. Most of their weapons and tools were still made of stone or bone or even of fire-hardened wood, but that red-bearded genius had invented the essential implement of civilization.

"Already, during their wanderings, that new device had given them the beginnings of cultivation. The old inventor used it, during the last years when he was too feeble for physical toil, to discover the first wonders of mathematics. One of his own grandsons, with its aid, invented a crude sort of picturewriting to help preserve his precious songs.

"In another five hundred years, using that indispensable device, his descendants were making simple experiments with magnetism and static electricity. Their discoveries led, in a few more centuries, to more dangerous work with atomic fission. Fortunately, with his invention, they were better prepared for the impact of the atom than these real savages who rediscovered it here so recently. By the time those great epidemics had begun to threaten their survival, his heirs had gone on beyond the atom to unlock the greater energies of the smaller neutrino. They escaped to the stars, carrying that greatest invention."

When the slight man paused, the sweating inspector cleared his throat imperatively.

"Well?" he demanded. "What was it?"

"Don't you see? But then you weren't conditioned." With an expression of condolence, the scientist nodded at the finder. "Why don't you let the inventor tell you, with his own mnemonic song?"

The big man glared at the psionic instrument.

"The thing hurts my head," he muttered. "And it's too hard to understand. Can't you just give me your own translation of the chant?"

The explorer glanced at the native timepiece ticking on his wrist and shrugged regretfully. "Remember the time you

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allotted me?" he murmured gently. "I'm afraid it isn't long enough."

"Can't you just tell me—"

"Put on the headset, if you want to know."

Yielding to that sudden firmness, and somehow humiliated before the sacred elation of the man he had condemned, the inspector put on the headset. Once more, the instrument made him uneasily aware of the psionic wonders denied him. Staring at that fragment of old bronze, he saw nothing else. He heard nothing, until the explorer spoke.

"The song begins with a set of common platitudes," the slight man said. "With the obvious axioms of intelligence, but they weren't platitudes, remember, to those savages who were preparing to drown the inventor at dawn. Those statements were fresh discoveries then, full of an unspent force."

The inspector's head was already throbbing, but impressions from the finder had begun to crowd his mind again. The tall prisoner stood beside a fire, bound with rawhide thongs, but undefeated. The red firelight gleamed on his blood-matted beard, glinted on the black water lapping close to his feet, flickered over the frightened men waiting to kill him. A young child cried, somewhere in the dark. A sobbing woman hushed it, and then the prisoner sang.

The big man tried to catch the words, but the effort merely increased that squeezing pressure on the top of his head. His hands came up to snatch off the headset.

"Don't." The explorer's low voice had a quivering urgency that stopped him. "You can understand it all, if you will only try. Because the inventor begins in a very simple way, by telling how the conflicting errors of the wise men had taught him to doubt everything, and how he learned to look for the truth. Just listen to him."

Reluctantly, the inspector settled the headset back into place. He sat for a few moments frowning with the mental effort the finder required, and then loosened the headset impatiently, turning to the explorer with a look of puzzled disappointment.

"Is that all it was?" he muttered uncertainly. "Just a way of thinking?"

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"Wasn't that enough?" the scientist said quickly. "He taught men how to think. In that song, he declared the freedom of thought, against habit and ignorance and fear. What he really invented was nothing less than the human mind."

He smiled gravely at the fat man's startled face.

"I know the brain already existed," he said. "Just as the neutrino already existed, before it was harnessed to the interstellar drive. Those savages who hoped to appease the deluge with a human life had brains with all the cells of ours, but they hadn't learned to use them."

"That may be true," the inspector muttered grudgingly, "but still I don't entirely understand—"

"Try again." The slight man gestured urgently at the finder. "Words can't say enough. Only psionics can show you the full meaning of that man's achievement. He was a genius. With his own revealing intuitions, after he had established his own mental independence, he realized the capacities of the liberated mind far more fully than these poor savages around us do today—in spite of all the blundering efforts they call psychoanalysis and parapsychology."

The inspector shook his head stubbornly. "Could men have existed as you say they did, for thousands of years before him, without knowing how to think?"

"Too few do, even now." The explorer grinned wryly. "Possibly, of course, the science of thought had been invented by other men before him—although few enough minds ever reach the caliber of his, even with the best conditioning. But he passed on the art. Fighting that night for his life, he used all he knew to force other men to begin thinking for themselves. And the process, painful as it may be, has never yet entirely stopped."

"But let the finder show you."

Gingerly, the inspector adjusted the headset again. In a moment his thick hands came up apprehensively to take it off, but something checked him. He paused and nodded and sat back again, with an awed intentness in his bulging eyes. His hands relaxed and fell.

After a long time, he removed the instrument as reluc-

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tantly as he had put it on. For a moment he sat peering at the explorer, as if too deeply moved for words. His fat features trembled to some conflict of emotions, and he gasped suddenly for breath. "That makes a difference," he whispered huskily. "Do you know, I could see myself in that savage, even if he had no soul to be reborn. The troubles of his unhappy youth were the same that have followed me all the way from Kares II, and I found the answers to most of my doubts in his song."

Bent over the finder, staring at that shapeless flake of old metal and smiling a little at the forgotten things it had revealed, the explorer seemed not to hear him.

"That makes all the difference." He raised his rasping voice, to get the little man's attention. "I intend to learn how to think. If those savages did it, without psionics, so can I. And then I'm going back to Kares II. Another cycle is running there; the wise men preaching their old faith of sacred death and miraculous rebirth. I think my people need that first invention."

He rose abruptly in that hot narrow space between the shelves and benches, disturbed by the slight man's silence. Sweat poured down his bloodless face. His fat hands shuddered and clenched again, and he shook his head unbelievably.

"Don't you worry about Atlantis!" he shouted desperately. "I'll take care of everything. I'll carry back your artifacts, and all your psionic notes and records. I see now why men must know the truth—"

Dismay took his voice. He reached anxiously to touch the worn little man at the finder, and stumbled numbly back. The smiling man was dead.

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IV

When the awakening natives of Earth began testing their first crude space rockets, a small group of secret agents was assigned to delay any premature discovery of the station on the moon. Infiltrating tribal councils, they scoffed at the importance of space research and whittled down appropriations. Penetrating administrative units, they fostered procrastination and blunders in judgment. On the launching pads, they sabotaged rockets that had somehow reached the testing stage. Hampered by the Covenants, however, they were no match for the blind, prehuman beasts of ignorance and fear and power-lust. They had to look on while the savage tribal rivalries lifted more and larger rockets aloft, carrying the hapless planet into the contact crisis.

OLD MARK WHITHERLY coughed and wheezed and shivered feebly, as the history of that murdered explorer faded into the dimmed stillness, almost as if he had witnessed his own dissolution. Penwright leaned to whisper to his fellow signalmen. Their laughter rang out shockingly.

"Your Equity, that was—us!" Coral flitted to Scarlet as he turned from the scanner. "Mark's tape proves that Earth is our home planet. What that naked jungle boy invented was our own galactic civilization. These people are our mother race, in spite of all they have forgotten. You can't let anybody murder them!"

"Please, Corall!" Penwright reproved her with his cool lean grin, and turned smoothly to the bench. "If your Equity feels that the savage attack from Earth is going to allow us time for any more such entertainments, we have one more transcription to offer as evidence. It shows these degenerate beasts for the nasty vermin they are."

Scarlet glared at the doorway with a genuine spleen. If Flintledge was holding out for a lower price on Earth, he would teach the crook a lesson. Let the Earth burn!

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"If they are worse than their judges, they deserve no pity." She stared at Penwright, and then again at Scarlet.

Deliberately wolfish, he licked his pale lips while Penwright was placing his tape in the scanner. The dome hushed and dimmed, fading into the living image of an angry man puffing noisily into the austere office of Rivers, Newbolt's predecessor as station commandant. The caller was a heavy, hairless man with shrewd little ice-green eyes sunk deep in fat yellow flesh. He had a genial smile when he was getting what he wanted. Just now he was not.

"Here we've come a good hundred light-years, and you can see who I am." He riffled his psionic identification films under the commandant's nose. "I am a collector. I intend to collect at least one of these queer anthropoids, in spite of all your silly red tape."

The shimmering films attested his distinguished scientific attainments. He was authorized to gather specimens for the greatest zoo in the inhabited galaxy, and the quarantine service had been officially requested to expedite his search.

"I see." Rivers nodded respectfully, trying to conceal a weary frown. The delicate business of safeguarding Earth's embryonic culture had taught him to deal cautiously with such unexpected threats. "Your credentials are certainly impressive. We'll give you whatever help we can. Won't you sit down?"

The collector wouldn't sit down. He was thoroughly annoyed with the commandant. He doubted loudly that the quarantine regulations had ever been intended to apply to such a backward planet as Earth, and he proposed to take his specimen without any further fiddle-faddle.

Rivers, who came from a civilization which valued courtesy and reserve, gasped in spite of himself at the terms that came through his psionic translator, but he attempted to restrain his mounting impatience.

"Biologically, these creatures are human," he answered firmly. "And we are stationed here to protect them."

"Human?" The collector snorted. "When they've never got even this far off their stinking little planet!"

"A pretty degenerate lot," the commandant agreed re-

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gretfully. "But their human origins have been well established, and you'll have to leave them alone."

The collector studied the commandant's stern-lipped face and moderated his voice.

"All we need is a single specimen, and we won't injure that." He recovered his jovial smile. "On the contrary, the creature we pick up will be the luckiest one on the planet. I've been in this game a good many centuries, and I know what I'm walking about. Why, if you allowed us to advertise for a specimen, half the population would volunteer."

"You can't advertise," Rivers said flatly. "Our first duty here is to guard this young culture from any outside influence that might cripple its natural development."

"Don't upset yourself." The fat man shrugged. "We're undercover experts. Our specimen will never know that it has been collected, if that's the way you want it."

"It isn't." The commandant rose abruptly. "I will give your party every legitimate assistance, but if I discover that you have tried to abduct one of these people I'll confiscate your ship."

"Then keep your precious pets," the collector grunted ungraciously. "We'll just go ahead with our field studies. Live specimens aren't really essential, anyhow. Our technicians have prepared very authentic displays, with only animated replicas."

"Very well." Rivers managed a somewhat sour smile. "With that understanding, you may land."

He assigned two inspectors to assist the collector and make certain that the quarantine regulations were respected. Undercover experts, they went on to Earth ahead of the expedition, and met the interstellar ship a few weeks later at a rendezvous on the night side of the planet.

The ship returned to the moon, while the outsiders spent several months traveling on the planet, making psionic records and collecting specimens from the unprotected species. The inspectors reported no effort to violate the Covenants, and everything went smoothly until the night when the ship came back to pick up the expedition.

Every avoidable hazard had been painstakingly avoided.

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The collector and his party brought their captured specimens to the pickup point in native vehicles, traveling as Barstow Brothers' Wild Animal Shows. The ship dropped to meet them at midnight, on an uninhabited desert plateau. A thousand such pickups had been made without an incident, but that night things went wrong.

A native anthropoid had just escaped from a place of confinement. Though his angered tribesmen pursued, he had outrun them in a series of stolen motor carts. They blocked the roads, but he got away across the desert. When his last vehicle stalled, he crossed a range of dry hills on foot in the dark. An unforeseen danger, he blundered too near the waiting interstellar ship.

His pursuers discovered his abandoned cart, and halted the disguised outsiders to search their trucks and warn them that a dangerous convict was loose. To keep the natives away from the ship, the inspectors invented a tale of a frightened man on a horse, riding wildly in the opposite direction.

They guided the native officers back to where they said they had seen the imaginary horseman, and kept them occupied until dawn. By that time, the expedition was on the ship, native carts and all, and safely back in space.

The natives never recaptured their prisoner. Through that chance-in-a-million that can never be eliminated by even the most competent undercover work, he had got aboard the interstellar ship.

The fugitive aborigine was a young male. Physically, he appeared human enough, even almost handsome. Lean from the severe prison regimen, he carried himself defiantly erect. Some old injury had left an ugly scar across his cheek. His thin lips had a snarling twist, but he had a poised alertness and a kind of wary grace. He was even sufficiently human to possess clothing and a name. His filthy garments were made of twisted animal and vegetable fibers and the skins of butchered animals. His name was Casey James.

He was armed like some jungle carnivore, however, with a sharpened steel blade. His body, like his whole planet, was contaminated with parasitic organisms. He was quiver-

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ing with fear and exhaustion, like any hunted animal, the night he blundered upon the ship. The pangs of his hunger had passed, but a bullet wound in his left arm was nagging with unalleviated pain.

In the darkness, he didn't even see the ship. The carts were stopped on the road, and the driver of the last had left it while he went ahead to help adjust the loading ramp. The anthropoid climbed on the unattended cart and hid himself under a tarpaulin before it was driven aboard.

Though he must have been puzzled and alarmed to find that the ship was no native conveyance, he kept hidden in the cargo hold for several days. With his animal craftiness, he milked one of the specimen animals for food, and slept in the cab of an empty cart. Malignant organisms were multiplying in his wounded arm, however, and pain finally drove him out of hiding.

He approached the attendants who were feeding the animals, threatened them with his knife, and demanded medical care. They disarmed him without difficulty and took him to the veterinary ward. The collector found him there, already scrubbed and disinfected, sitting up in his bed.

"Where're we headed for?" he wanted to know.

He nodded without apparent surprise when the collector revealed the mission and the destination of the ship.

"Your undercover work ain't quite so hot as you seem to think," he said. "I've seen your flying saucers myself."

"Flying saucers!" The collector sniffed disdainfully. "They aren't anything of ours. Most of them are nothing but refracted images of surface lights, produced by atmospheric inversions. The quarantine people are getting out a book to explain that to our fellow creatures."

"A good one for the cops!" The anthropoid grinned. "I bet they're still scratching their dumb skulls, over how I dodged 'em." He paused to finger his bandaged arm, in evident appreciation of the civilized care he had received. "And when do we get to this wonderful zoo of yours?"

"You don't," the collector told him. "I did want exactly such a specimen as you are, but the stuffy quarantine officials wouldn't let me take one."

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"So you gotta get rid of me?"

The psionic translator revealed the beast's dangerous desperation, even before his hard body stiffened.

"Wait!" The collector retreated hastily. "Don't alarm yourself. We won't hurt you. We couldn't destroy you, even to escape detection. No civilized man can destroy a human life."

"Nothing to it," the creature grunted. "But if you ain't gonna toss me out in space, then what?"

"If the quarantine people caught us with you aboard, they'd cancel our permits and seize everything we've got. Somehow, we'll have to put you back."

"But I can't go back." The anthropoid licked his lips nervously. "I just gut-knifed a guard. If they run me down this time, it's the chair for sure."

The creature's dark, frightened eyes studied the collector cunningly, "If you put me back, you'll be killing me."

"On the contrary." The collector's thick upper lip twitched slightly, and a slow smile oozed across his wide putty face, warming everything except his frosty little eyes. "Human life is sacred. We can arrange to make you the safest creature of your kind—and also the happiest—so long as you are willing to observe two necessary conditions."

"Huh?" The anthropoid squinted. "Whatcha mean?"

"You understand that we violated the quarantine in allowing you to get aboard," the collector explained patiently. "We, and not you, would be held responsible in case of detection, but we need your help to conceal the violation. We are prepared to do everything for you, if you will make and keep two simple promises."

"Such as?"

"First, promise you won't talk about us."

"Easy enough." The beast grinned. "Nobody'd believe me, anyhow."

"The quarantine people would." The collector's cold eyes narrowed. "Their undercover agents are alert for rumors of any violation."

"Okay, I'll keep my mouth shut." The creature shrugged. "What else?"

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"Second, you must promise not to kill again."

The anthropoid stiffened. "What's it to you?"

"We can't allow you to destroy any more of your fellow beings. Since you are now in our hands, the guilt would fall on us." The collector scowled at him. "Promise?"

The anthropoid chewed thoughtfully on his thin lower lip. His hostile eyes looked away at nothing. The collector caught a faint reflection of his thoughts, through the translator, and stepped back uneasily.

"The cops are hot behind me," he muttered. "I gotta take care of myself."

"Don't worry." The collector snapped his fat fingers. "We can get you a pardon. Just say you won't kill again."

"No." Lean muscles tightened in the anthropoid's jaws. "There's one certain man I gotta knock off. That's the main reason I busted outa the pen."

"Who is this enemy?" The collector frowned. "Why is he so dangerous?"

"He ain't so dangerous," the beast grunted. "I just hate his guts."

"I don't understand."

"I always wanted to kick his face in." The creature's thin lips snarled. Ever since we was kids together, back in Las Verdades."

"Yet you have never received any corrective treatment, for such a monstrous obsession?" The collector shook his head incredulously, but the anthropoid ignored him.

"His name is Gabriel Melendez," the creature muttered. "Just a dirty greaser, but he makes out he's just as good as me. I had money from my rich aunt and he was hungry half the time, but he'd never stay in his place. Even when he was just a snotty-nosed kid, and knew I could beat him because I was bigger, he was always trying to fight me." The beast bared his decaying teeth. "I aim to kill him, before I'm through."

"An incredible obsession!" The collector recoiled from the grim-lipped beast and his red-fanged violence. "What has this creature done to you?"

"He took the girl I wanted." The beast caught a rasping

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breath. "He put the cops on me. At least I think it was him, because I got caught not a month after I stuck up the filling station where he works. I think he fingered me. I aim to get him."

The beast glared down into the collector's bright little eyes. They looked back without blinking, coldly reptilian with their lack of brows or lashes. Abruptly, the animal subsided.

"Okay, okay!" He spat deliberately on the spotless floor and grinned at the collector's involuntary start. "What's it worth, to let him live?"

The collector shook off his shocked expression.

"We're undercover experts and we know your planet." A persuasive smile crept across his gross face. "Our resources are quite adequate to take care of anything you can demand. Just give your word not to kill again, and not to talk about us. And tell me what you want."

The anthropoid rubbed his hairy jaw, as if attempting to think.

"First, I want the girl," he muttered huskily. "Carmen Quintana was her name, before she married Gabe. She may give you a little trouble, because she don't like me a little bit. Nearly clawed my eyes out once, even back before I shot her old man at the filling station." His white teeth flashed in a gorilla grin. "Think you can make her go for me?"

"I think we can." The collector nodded blandly. "We can arrange nearly anything."

"You'd better arrange that." The anthropoid's thin brown hand nodded again. "And I'll make her sorry she ever looked at Gabe!"

"You don't intend to injure her?"

"That's my business." The beast laughed. "Just take me back to Las Verdades. That's a little 'dobe town down by the border."

The anthropoid listed the rest of his requirements, and crossed his heart with a ritual gesture of his tribe to solemnize his promises. He knew when the interstellar craft landed again, but he had to stay aboard a long time afterwards, living like a prisoner in a sterile little cell, while he waited for the outsiders to complete their underground

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arrangements for his return. He was fuming with impatience, stalking around his windowless room like a caged carnivore, when the collector finally unlocked his door.

"You're driving me nuts," he growled at the hairless outsider. "What's the delay?"

"The quarantine people." The collector shrugged. "We had to manufacture some new excuse for every move we made, but I don't think they ever suspected anything. And here you are!"

He dragged a heavy piece of primitive luggage into the room and straightened up beside it, puffing and mopping at his broad wet face.

"Open it up," he wheezed. "You'll see that we intend to keep our part of the bargain. Don't forget yours."

The anthropoid dropped on his knees to burrow eagerly through the garments and the simple paper documents in the bag. He looked up with a scowl.

"Where is it?" he snapped.

"You'll find everything," the fat man panted. "Your pardon papers. Ten thousand dollars in currency. Forty thousand in cashier's checks. The clothing you specified—"

"But where's the gun?"

"Everything has been arranged so that you will never need it." The collector shifted on his feet uncomfortably. "I've been hoping you might change your mind about—"

"I gotta protect myself."

"You'll never be attacked."

"You said you'd give me a gun."

"We did." The collector shrugged unhappily. "You may have it, if you insist, when you leave the ship. Better get into your new clothing now. We want to take off again in half an hour."

The yellow Cadillac convertible he had demanded was waiting in the dark at the bottom of the ramp, its chrome trim shimmering faintly. The collector walked with him down through the air lock to the car, and handed him a heavy little package.

"Now don't turn on the headlamps," the yellow man cautioned him. "Just wait here for daylight. You'll see the Albu-

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querque highway then, not a mile east. Turn right to Las Verdades. We have arranged everything to keep you very happy there, so long as you don't attempt to betray us."

"Don't you worry." He grinned in the dark. "Don't worry a little bit."

He slid into the car and flicked on the parking lights. The instrument panel lit up like a Christmas tree. He settled himself luxuriously at the wheel, appreciatively sniffing the expensive new-car scents of leather and rubber and enamel.

"Don't you worry, butter-guts," he murmured. "What you don't know won't hurt you—much!"

The ramp was already lifting back into the interstellar ship when he looked up. The bald man waved at him and vanished. The airlock thudded softly shut. The great disk took off into the night, silently, like something falling upward.

The beast sat grinning in the car. Quite a deal, he was thinking. Everything he had thought to ask for, all for just a couple of silly promises they couldn't make him keep. He already had most of his pay, and old clabber-guts would soon be forty thousand miles away, or however far it was to the stars.

At dawn he started the motor and eased the swaying car across the brown hummocks toward the dawn. In a few minutes he found the highway.

He grimaced at a sign, derisively. JOSE'S OASIS, ONE STOP SERVICE, 8 MILES AHEAD What if he had got his twenty years for sticking up the Oasis and shooting down old Jose? Who cared now if his mother and his aunt had spent their last grubby dimes, paying the lawyers to keep him out of the chair? And Carmen, what if she had spat in his face at the trial? The outsiders had taken care of everything—

Or what if they hadn't?

Cautiously, he slowed the long car and pulled off the pavement where it curved into the valley. The spring rains must have already come, because the rocky slopes were all splashed with wild flowers and tinted green with new grass. The huge old cottonwoods along the river were just coming into leaf, delicately green.

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The valley looked as kind as his old mother's face, when she was still alive, and the little town beyond the river seemed as clean and lovely as he remembered Carmen. Even the sky was shining like a blue glass bowl, as if the outsiders had somehow washed and sterilized it. Maybe they had. They could do anything, except kill a man.

He chuckled, thinking of the way old baldy had made him cross his heart. Maybe the tallow-gutted fool had really thought that jazz would make him keep his promises. Or was there some kind of funny business, about the package that was supposed to be a gun?

He ripped it open. There in the carton was the automatic he had demanded, a .45, with an extra cartridge clip and two boxes of ammunition. It looked all right, flat and black and deadly, and it felt heavy in his hand. He loaded it and stepped out of the car to test it.

He was aiming at an empty whisky bottle beside the pavement when he heard a mockingbird singing in the nearest cottonwood. He shot at the bird instead, and grinned when it dissolved into a puff of brown feathers.

"That'll be Gabe." His hard lips curled sardonically. "Coming at me like a mad dog, if anybody ever wants to know, and I had to stop him to save my own hide."

He drove on across the river bridge into Las Verdades. The outsiders had been here, he knew, because the dirt streets were all swept clean, and the wooden parts of all the low adobe buildings were bright with new paint, and all he could smell was the fragrances of coffee and hot bread, when he passed the Esperanza Cafe.

Those good odors wet his dry mouth with saliva, but he didn't stop to eat. With the automatic lying ready beside him on the seat, he pulled into the Oasis. The place looked empty at first, and he thought for a moment that everybody was hiding from him.

As he sat waiting watchfully, crouched down under the wheel, he had time to notice that all the shattered glass had been neatly replaced. Even the marks of his bullets on the walls had been covered with new plaster, and the whole

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station was shining with fresh paint, like everything else in town.

He reached for the gun when he saw the slight dark boy coming from the grease rack, wiping his hands on a rag. It was Carmen's brother Tony, smiling with an envious adoration at the yellow Cadillac. Tony had always been wild about cars.

"Yes, sir! Fill her up?" Tony recognized him then, and dropped the greasy rag. "Casey James!" He ran out across the driveway. "Carmen told us you'd be home!"

He was raising the gun to shoot when he saw that the boy only wanted to shake his hand. He hid the gun hastily; it wasn't Tony that he had come to kill.

"We read all about your pardon." Tony stood grinning at him, lovingly caressing the beautiful car. "A shame the way you were framed, but we'll all try to make it up to you now." The boy's glowing eyes swept the shimmering flow of enamel. "Want me to fill her up?"

"No!" he muttered hoarsely. "Gabe Melendez—don't he still work here?"

"Sure, Mr. James." Tony drew back quickly, as if the car had somehow burned his delicate brown hands. "Eight to five, but he isn't here yet. His home is that white stucco beyond the *acequia madre*—"

"I know."

He gunned the car. It lurched back into the street, roared across the *acequia* bridge, skidded to a screaming stop in front of the white stucco. He dropped the gun into the side pocket of his coat and ran to the door, grinning expectantly.

Gabe would be taken by surprise. The outsiders had set it up for him very cleverly, with all their manufactured evidences that he had been innocent of any crime at all. Gabe wasn't likely to be armed.

The door opened before he could touch the bell, but it was only Carmen. Carmen, pale without her make-up, but beautiful anyhow, yawning sleepily in sheer pink pajamas that were half unbuttoned. She gasped when she saw him.

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"Caseyl" Strangely, she was smiling. "I knew you'd come!"

She swayed toward him eagerly, as if she expected him to take her in his arms, but he stood still, thinking of how she had watched him in the courtroom, all through his trial for killing her father, with pitiless hate in her dark eyes. He couldn't guess how, but old puffy-guts had somehow changed her.

"Oh!" She turned pink and buttoned her pajamas hastily. "No wonder you were staring, but I'm so excited. Oh Caseyl! I've been longing for you so. Come on in, darling. I'll get something on and make us some breakfast."

"Wait a minute!"

He shook his head, scowling at her, annoyed at the outsiders. They had somehow cheated him. He wanted Carmen, but not this way. He wanted to fight Gabe to take her. He wanted her to go on hating him, so that he would have to break her like a wild colt. Old blubber-belly had been too clever and done too much.

"Where's Gabe?" He reached in his pocket to grip the cold gun. "I gotta see Gabe."

"Don't worry, darling." Her tawny shoulders shrugged becomingly. "Gabriel isn't here. He won't be here any more. You see, dear, the state cops talked to me a lot while they were here digging up the evidence to clear you. It came over me then that you had always been the one I loved. When I told Gabriel, he moved out. He's living down at the hotel now. We're getting a divorce right away. You don't have to worry about him."

"I gotta see him, anyhow."

"Don't be mean about it, darling." Her pajamas were coming open again, but she didn't seem to care. "Come on in. Let's forget about Gabriel. He has been so good about everything. I know he won't make us any trouble."

"I'll make the trouble." He seized her bare arm. "Come along."

"Darling, don't!" She hung back, squirming. "You're hurting me!"

He made her shut up, and dragged her out of the house.

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She wanted to go back for a robe. He threw her into the car and climbed over her to the wheel. He waited for her to try to get out, so that he could slap her down, but she only whimpered for a Kleenex and sat there sniffing.

Old balloon-belly had ruined everything.

He tried angrily to clash the gears, as he started off, as if that would damage the outsiders, but the Hydra-Matic transmission wouldn't clash, and anyhow the saucer ship was probably somewhere out beyond the moon by now.

"There's Gabriel," Carmen sobbed. "There crossing the street, going to work. Don't hurt him, please!"

He gunned the car and veered across the pavement to run him down, but Carmen screamed and twisted at the wheel. Gabriel managed to scramble out of the way. He stopped on the sidewalk, hatless and breathless but grinning stupidly.

"Sorry, mister. Guess I wasn't looking—" Then Gabriel saw who he was. "Why, Casey! We've been expecting you back. Seems you're the lucky one, after all." Gabriel had started toward the car, but he stopped when he saw the gun. His voice went shrill as a child's. "What are you doing?"

"Just gut-shooting another dirty greaser, that's all."

"Darling!" Carmen snatched at the gun. "Don't—"

He slapped her down.

"Don't strike her!" Gabriel stood gripping the door of the car with both hands. He looked sick. His twitching face was bright with sweat. He was gasping hoarsely for his breath. He stared at the gun, his wide eyes dull with horror.

"Stop me!"

He smashed the flat of the gun into Carmen's face, and grinned at the way Gabriel flinched when she screamed. This was more the way he wanted everything to be.

"Just try and stop me!"

"I—I won't fight you," Gabriel croaked faintly. "After all, we're not animals. We're civilized humans. I know Carmen loves you. I'm stepping out of the way. But you can't make me fight—"

The gun stopped Gabriel's voice.

Queerly, though, he didn't fall. He just stood there like

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some kind of rundown machine, with his stiffened hands clutching the side of the car.

"Die, damn you!"

Casey James shot again; he kept on shooting till the gun was empty. The bullets hammered into the body, but somehow it wouldn't fall. He leaned to look at the wounds, at the broken metal beneath the simulated flesh of the face and the hot yellow hydraulic fluid running out of the belly; then he slowly recoiled from what he saw, shaking his head, shuddering like any trapped and frightened beast.

"That—*thing!*"

With a wild burst of animal ferocity, he hurled the gun into what was left of its plastic face. At last it toppled stiffly backward. Something jangled faintly inside when it struck the pavement.

"It—it ain't human!"

"But it was an excellent replica." The other thing, the one he had thought was Carmen, gathered itself up from the bottom of the car, speaking gently to him with what now seemed queerly like the voice of old barrel-belly. "We had taken a great deal of trouble to make you the happiest one of your breed." It looked at him sadly with Carmen's limpid dark eyes. "If you had only kept your word."

"Don't—" He cowered back from it, shivering. "Don't k-k-kill me!"

"We never kill," it murmured. "You need never be afraid of that."

While he sat trembling, it climbed out of the car and picked up the ruined thing that had looked like Gabe and carried it easily away toward the Oasis garage.

Now he knew that this place was only a copy of Las Verdades, somewhere not on Earth. When he looked up at the blue crystal sky, he knew that it was only some kind of screen. He felt the millions of strange eyes beyond it, watching him like some queer monster in a cage.

He gunned the Cadillac back across the *acequia* bridge and drove wildly back the way he had come in, on the Albuquerque highway. A dozen miles out, an imitation construction crewman tried to flag him down, pointing at a sign

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that said the road was closed for repairs. He whipped around the barriers and drove the pitching car on across the imitation desert until he crashed into the bars of the exhibition cage.

V

Striving to avert a premature contact, the agents who had penetrated the tribal research programs exaggerated the hazards of progress. They fought every realistic effort to cope with the new dangers of a new age. They manufactured statistics which amplified the horror of radioactive fall-out. With their lurid propaganda of a universal atomic doom, they stalled the construction of survival shelters. They delayed the first adventures into space, producing data which magnified the threat of the radiation belts and multiplied the perils of the micrometeorites.

The people of Earth defeated them at last, however, with a vast burst of primitive vitality. Lifted as if by an unquenchable instinctive urge to seek their kinsmen in space, the awakening natives faced the invisible specters of the atom and of space as sturdily as they had learned through long generations to face the more fearful horrors of their own disease germs and stone axes and colliding motor-carts. Ignorant of the Covenants, such indomitable men as Major Tom Scoggins carried nuclear warheads into space.

SCANNING THAT LAST transcription in the uneasy hush of the dim lunar dome, Wain Scarlet followed the native anthropoid to its fate with an uncomfortable fascination, almost as if that unhappy and unconditioned creature had also been himself.

Though the dome was glowing again, he sat lost, staring blankly at the dead scanner, until at last he remembered to look for Flintledge. When he couldn't see the trader, a

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sudden blaze of fury aroused him to himself. He snarled, as savagely ugly as that primitive thing in the exhibition cage. Whatever the reason for the trader's waiting game, whatever happened to this backward planet, he did not intend to be cheated of his chance to reach the frontier stars.

"How does that strike you?" Removing his tape from the scanner, Penwright stood leering coolly at Coral Fell. "You are the missionary of our galactic culture. Are you certain that you can regenerate such beasts as Casey James?"

"He was sick," she protested quickly. "He was not typical."

"What about this one?" Newbolt looked quickly up from his wrist transceiver, glowering at the bench. "Your Equity, my monitors have just intercepted an electromagnetic signal from the attacking rocket, beamed directly at this station. The sender appears as violent as that animal."

"Please translate the message."

Sound boomed promptly into the dome, amplified through Newbolt's wrist instrument. For a moment it was utterly strange; then Scarlet distinguished a savage voice beneath the metallic distortion of the crude transmission system. In another moment, the psionic translator had given meaning to the roaring syllables.

"United States Aerospace Force Rocket Ship Four One, Major Tom Scoggins in command, calling unidentified base on lunar equator."

"Identify yourselves!" The strained voice rang again through the crackle of static. "Establish your friendly intentions at once. Otherwise we shall be forced to take action to insure the safety of the United States—"

"Wain, that's our contact!" Coral's voice lilted joyously. "You can tell that Major Scoggins is desperately afraid, but this message proves that he is human. How can we wait?"

"We—uh—we can't." Disturbed by a wave of unexpected emotion in himself, Scarlet turned uncertainly to Newbolt. "I—uh—I'm forced to instruct you to reply—"

"Your Equity!"

The shout drew his eyes to the doorway. The dapper young Vegan banker came bursting into the dome, waving a sheaf of psionic documents. Sight of them turned Scarlet

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giddy. Here, at this last instant, was his long dream come true. Here was his escape forever from all the wounds and sneers and cruel sympathy that he had suffered from the beautiful people. Here was glorious revenge for his unconditioned ugliness. He shut his eyes, trying to recover his fragile mask of judicial severity.

"Your Equity!" The bankers's urgent voice seemed far away. "Captain Flintledge wishes me to present these new exhibits in evidence. We are confident that they will persuade you to recognize the contact, disapprove the blinker project, and open Earth to galactic commerce."

Hands trembling, Scarlet accepted the documents. Though his eyes were blurring, he quickly satisfied himself that they were what he had demanded—the neutrionic flyer and a fair half of its load of trade goods and terraforming machinery, legally conveyed to him.

"What is this, your Equity? What kind of unconditioned aberration can delay your decision now?" Newbolt's contemptuous indignation reached him faintly. "Must I remind you that our anthropoid attacker is already arming his fusion missiles?"

"I—uh—I'm aware of the facts."

Scarlet rose unstedily, gasping for his breath. The important facts were the documents in his hands. Even though his decision sacrificed this worn-out world, it would enable him to claim and colonize a hundred or a thousand new ones when he reached the galactic frontier—for his own benefit, perhaps, but also for the expanding community of human civilization.

Yet other, irrelevant facts kept buzzing insanely in his mind.

The decision of the shipwrecked prince flamed brighter than the moons in Coral's hair. He was reeling with the blind red madness of Casey James. But also the quietly disciplined desperation of Major Tom Scoggins was somehow suddenly his own.

Stiffly, he gestured for silence.

"I—uh—I have weighed the evidence."

"I have—uh—given due consideration to all the claims

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which have been presented here." He let his slow voice rasp and whine offensively. "I have reviewed the Covenants of Non-Contact, and all the body of galactic law and custom relating to contact crises. I am ready—uh—to rule."

Snarling hideously, he let them wait again.

"I rule that no contact exists—"

Coral gasped indignantly. Old Whitherly swayed and fell. The banker bellowed. Newbolt and the signal officer shouted their startled approval. The uproar drowned his voice.

In the breathless hush that followed that surprised outburst, he let them wait again. He picked his pointed nose, deliberately savoring their pain.

"The evidence convinces me that this native culture could not survive an uncontrolled contact." Ignoring the baleful rage of the banker, he studied the smug elation of Newbolt and Penwright, and paused again to relish what he meant to do to them. "However, I am equally convinced that they are human beings."

He let his voice drag and grate.

"Aware of my sworn duty under the Covenants, I therefore disapprove the signal project. I order Commander Newbolt and his successors to continue the quarantine of Earth until such time as its native culture may be declared ready for contact."

He stopped again to enjoy the incredulous deflation of the signal officer.

"Pursuant to that directive, I order Newbolt to intercept the savage Tom Scoggins without needless injury to him or to his crew. I suggest that they be enlisted in the quarantine service, as undercover agents acting to prevent any future expeditions from Earth into space."

"Why, Wain? Why?" Coral stared up at him, the blue flame pale and cold and flickering angrily around her. "Why have you done this?"

He merely smiled at her with his offensive teeth, until she hissed and ran from the dome. Newbolt and the banker stalked after her. The signal officer turned to follow, but swung abruptly back.

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"Your Equity?" His cold voice was ominous and slow. "May I ask why?"

"You have no right to ask." Scarlet paused to survey the signs of strain that marred his hard mask of calm perfection. "I don't mind telling you, however, that I came here prepared to make a different decision. You yourself helped to change my first intention, with the evidence you offered about the people of Earth. Even the stories of their imperfections helped to persuade me that they are as human as I am. You seem surprised by my ruling. Perhaps I am, too. Surprised—but pleased!"

Penwright was no longer listening. His wrist screen had flashed. He scanned it, whispering. When at last he looked up again at Scarlet, his cool mask was beautiful again.

"Your Equity," he murmured gently, "I have another surprise for you. I believe it means that your astonishing verdict will soon be reversed by a higher authority, in favor of our signal project."

"Carefull" Scarlet rapped. "You'll find yourself in contempt."

"I am in contempt." Penwright nodded serenely. "I can be candid about that, because we have just received a message from a passenger on another incoming service flyer. He's an old associate of yours, from the quarantine office on Denebola IV. Remember Warden Thornwall?"

"Why is he here?"

"There's something in your past." Penwright chuckled discreetly. "Some tampering with official records. Somebody discovered that you were inadequately conditioned for your mission here. The regional director sent Thornwall out to replace you."

Scarlet stood staring blankly, speechless, with all his new resolutions shattering into panic. Following too close to the limiting velocity of light, his past had overtaken him. His impulsive gesture to help toward the people of Earth had cost him everything.

"Thornwall is an old school friend of mine." Penwright glowed with reminiscent pleasure. "Once I saved his life, when we were sun-diving after the flying lights and he had

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got himself trapped in one of their magnetic nests. I think I can trust him to approve the blinker project."

"Perhaps he will," Scarlet rasped. "But not till he arrives!"

Still robed defiantly in his judicial light, he abandoned the bench and darted down to Mark Whitherly, who sat like a white and silent mummy wrapped in chill gray dust, alive only in his bright and bitter eyes.

"Where is Coral?" Scarlet shouted. "Where did she go?"

"Do you know what you have done?" The fading wisp of Whitherly ignored his own hoarse demand. "With your unconditioned blindness, you have killed my great chance to observe a contact crisis. You have killed me. I am asking for euthanasia."

"I'll approve it gladly!" Scarlet snarled. "But what became of Coral Fell?"

"You will find her with Flintledge," Whitherly whispered faintly through the frosty dust. "If you find her at all!"

Feeling as cold and futile as the dying scientist, he rushed from the dome to the lock tower. At the surface level, he met a flickering red prohibition zone which barred his way. Beyond it, in the operations room, two or three frantic port officials sat battered with emergency signal lights and warning gongs.

"What's all this?" he shouted through the barrier. "I demand access to my flier."

Wheeling desperately from screen to gong to button, the dispatchers seemed not to hear. He raised his voice and waved the documents which established his legal title to the trading flier, but they still ignored him. Furiously, he plunged into the barrier. It seized his own reflexes to propel him backward, so vigorously that he stumbled.

"Careful, your Equity!"

That sardonic bit of advice drew his eyes to the Vegan banker, seated in the dingy little waiting room behind him.

"You might as well relax." The sleek little Vegan chuckled unsympathetically. "You aren't going anywhere."

"Why not?"

"The port is closed."

"I won't put up with any trickery!" Scarlet snapped. "I am

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still officially robed, and I have a clear legal title to that flier—”

“Waste tapel” The banker sneered at the psionic documents in his quivering fingers. “I’m afraid Flintledge was too smart for both of us. We both have our legal claims, but he has the flier. I’m afraid the law will never overtake him now.”

“Where has he gone?”

“Anywhere.” The banker shrugged. “He can pick his own direction to the frontier stars. He can take his choice of a billion new planets to loot.”

“I see.” Scarlet nodded bitterly. “That was what I once hoped to do.” He drew a long uneven breath. “Coral—” He hesitated unhappily. “Do you know where she is?”

“Gone with Flintledge, naturally.”

“Uh—I can’t understand it.” Scarlet peered into the closed operations room, and turned back to the banker with a scowl of puzzled indignation. “What had she in common with that unconditioned monster?”

“Enough.” The banker grinned. “They were both searching for more primitive creatures to exploit, each in his own way. Naturally they found each other. Now they can choose their own new worlds to civilize, in whatever sense they please.”

“How did he manage it?” Scarlet nodded at the barrier behind him. “How did he close the port?”

“He didn’t,” the banker said. “But we must give him credit for a nice sense of timing. Riding the new nova, with all this confusion behind him, there’s not an atom of a chance that he will be overtaken.”

“New nova?” The word hushed Scarlet’s voice. “What nova?”

“Somewhere in the Lion.” The banker nodded vaguely at the ceiling. “The signal service had failed to forecast it—that’s why the operations boys are pulling out their hair.” He grinned at the barrier. “Flintledge must have picked up the warning emanations in time to plan his flight before they closed the port.”

“That’s odd.” Scarlet turned to stare at the flickering signals beyond the barrier. “Odd that there wasn’t any warn-

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ing. Working on the blinker project, Penwright's men should have spotted every unstable star in this sector."

"It's odd, all right." The banker's chuckle had a hollow ring. "I infer, from all I overheard through the barrier, that it's somewhat odder than you might suspect. You see, there was no unstable star."

"Uh—" Scarlet blinked. "Do you mean that it's an artificial nova?"

"They aren't certain yet. The actual explosion is not yet visible. What they are picking up is the preliminary bursts of neutrinos and gamma radiation. Those spaced bursts indicate the same sequence of steps that Penwright had planned to use to make a stable star unstable."

"But it couldn't be the intergalactic beacon!" Afraid to think of what this meant, Scarlet shivered and felt an atavistic prickling at the back of his neck. "The signal service had computed the sequence of stars for the blinker. They had to begin with Sol."

"I gather that somebody else has made a different computation." The banker squinted through the barrier, knowingly. "Apparently that other expert came out with a different sequence of stars to burn."

"What expert—?" Scarlet gasped blankly. "Who?"

"I'm not sure." The banker shrugged. "In any case, I'm afraid your Equity has more immediate problems now." A raw edge of malice cut through his well-conditioned courtesy. "Although I am unfortunately in no position to press charges, I was pleased to learn that Commander Newbolt has ordered your detention."

"I'm immune from his power," Scarlet muttered desperately. "So long as I am robed—"

"But your robe will soon be extinguished," the banker promised unpleasantly. "The arriving flier has made a safe landing, I believe, in spite of the neutrionic disturbances. I understand that Warden Thornwall has uncovered some embarrassing facts that you thought you had buried on Denebola IV."

Speechless with his helpless fury, Scarlet turned to leave the waiting room. He almost collided with Newbolt and

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Penwright, at the elevator door. The signal officer grinned maliciously, but Newbolt spoke with a rigid correctness.

"Your Equity will please wait here for Warden Thornwall."

The banker followed them across the bare little waiting room. The three sat whispering, peering at him with a cold derision. He slumped down silently, and spun a sound screen to shut out their mockery. Waiting miserably in his insecure little cell of silence, he wondered blankly who else could be exploding suns to make another intergalactic signal.

Seeing no answer, he found himself thinking of the savage boy who had invented civilization—or had the dying explorer misunderstood his artifacts? If that wolf had caught the naked boy before he found the copper nugget, would galactic history have been different? Would he himself have ever lived to alter those records on Denebola IV? Would he have approved Penwright's blinker? Would he be waiting here? Would anything—

The barrier flickered and vanished. Newbolt rose importantly and marched into the operations room. Shrugging off his troubled recollections, Scarlet got slowly to his feet. He turned out his sound screen, and stood waiting numbly for Thornwall to remove his glowing robe.

The warden strode into the operations room.

"Here's your man, sir." Newbolt hailed him, with a contemptuous nod toward Scarlet. "I am detaining him, but he has the face to claim judicial immunity—"

"Hello, Wain!" Thornwall looked older, his dark beauty oddly dulled, as if all the long light-years he had voyaged across had somehow overtaken him. Yet his worn smile seemed strangely benign. He walked briskly past Newbolt into the little waiting room, to grasp Scarlet's hand.

"Forgive my bringing up your past sins." Only, Thornwall was grinning. "When I sent that message about your records, I understood from Newbolt that you were about to make a more serious sort of blunder. Fortunately, your ruling on the crisis here was a magnificent vindication."

"What's all this?" Newbolt had turned to follow him, glaring furiously. "Warden Thornwall, am I to understand

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that you are approving the incredible decisions of this unconditioned criminal?"

"The phrases are your own." A stern smile flashed through the shadow on Thornwall's face. "However, I heartily approve Scarlet's judicial action in this crisis."

"You what—?" Newbolt gasped.

"Commander, I am afraid that you have let yourself forget one of our finest traditions in the quarantine service. We allow our people to learn from their mistakes. Although Scarlet was not aware of it, his unconditioned behavior back at headquarters was observed and reported at the time. We debated his case. Some of us had our doubts about him. But the regional director himself offered me a bet that he would prove himself, given this chance."

Scarlet blinked his yellow eyes.

"But—But if—" He had to gulp. "Don't you intend to punish me?"

"Don't be an utterly unconditioned fool!" Thornwall clapped him warmly on the back. "I didn't take that bet. We're few of us perfect—and the perfect few are seldom successful in the service, because they share too little with the people we guard. Now that you have proved yourself, I am glad to recommend you for an early promotion."

"Uh—" His dry throat stuck. "Uh—"

"Warden, I intend to see this creature broken!" Newbolt stormed. "I can prove that he accepted a bribe before he ruled on this crisis. I can prove that he ignored competent evidence. I can prove that the blinker project should have been approved. I intend to advise the signal service to appeal—"

"I'm afraid your advice will be disregarded," Thornwall softly interrupted him. "Because you are relieved of your duties here. Your new orders are effective now. You are re-assigned to the signal service which is facing an extraordinary emergency which will require considerable additional personnel."

Ignoring Newbolt's indignant roar, Thornwall turned briskly back to Scarlet.

"Wain, you are replacing Newbolt as commander of the

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station here. Your decision shows that you know the long and lonely task you face, watching over these people while they lift themselves to truly human status." He smiled sternly. "Perhaps I should remind you that you can hope to succeed only by making the best use of subordinates who are no better conditioned than you are."

Newbolt had moved apart to mutter angrily with Penwright."

"We won't take this!" he shouted suddenly. "Even you must see that the blinker projected will have to be revised and accelerated now, to fit this unexpected nova into our signal. I must remind you that the condemnation of Sol was supported by competent evidence—which Scarlet chose to ignore. Penwright has agreed to appeal this irresponsible decision to your regional headquarters on Denebola IV—"

Thornwall's odd smile stopped him.

"You and Penwright have bigger problems than Scarlet has given you," Thornwall said. "But I'm afraid you won't get much help from our headquarters on Denebola IV—because that nova is Denebola!"

"Denebola?" Newbolt turned to peer at the signal officer, all his manly glow fading into ashen consternation. "Didn't—? Wasn't it surveyed?"

"Denebola is—or was—a stable star!" Penwright's hard confidence was shattered. "I surveyed it myself. It can't have exploded naturally. But it was no part of our signal project."

"Not of yours." Thornwall grinned bleakly. "But I'm afraid there is another."

Penwright sagged weakly to a worn bench. He sat huddled there, like something trapped and desperate. Dulled, haunted, his eyes roved the ancient waiting room, finding no escape. At last he looked blankly back at Thornwall.

"Who—?" He wet his quivering white lip. "Whose?"

"That is your problem now," Thornwall said. "The full interpretation of this unexpected signal seems likely to occupy the enlarged signal service for several thousand years. But at least we have preliminary indications of the probable answer."

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"Who else—?" Penwright gulped and gasped and gulped again. "Who else can detonate stars?"

"I had my first hint of the answer years ago." Thornwall's strained face had turned queerly calm. "I was sun-diving in Denebola, investigating the radiations of those energy complexes that we used to call the flying lights."

"Those fire-balls?"

"I detected neutrionic components in their emissions." Thornwall nodded quietly. "Since, I have been collecting reports from other expeditions into other stars. Several divers have reported observing neutrionic phenomena not different from those associated with your own experiments at igniting super-novas. In fact, I suspect that these other experimenters have learned a good deal from you."

Thornwall chuckled at Penwright's pale amazement.

"About the time that Scarlet left Denebola to supervise the contact crisis here, I witnessed a mass flight of the lights from the surface of that star. I have received other such reports from other suns—though not from Sol. Organizing all the data, I have begun to suspect that our galactic civilization is just reaching contact with another culture more highly advanced than we can easily imagine."

The glint of amusement faded from his voice.

"I imagine that your own signal project will have to be abandoned now," he told Penwright. "Because these electronic beings have apparently selected the suns for their signal project with no more regard for our culture than you had for the native anthropoids of Earth. But perhaps you can persuade them to grant us status in their civilization."

"How—?" Penwright blinked apprehensively. "How can we hope to do that?"

"You are our specialist in interstellar contact."

Still clad in his blue official light, Wain Scarlet turned slowly from Penwright's quivering consternation. When he glanced into the open operations room, the chief dispatcher rose instantly to serve him.

"Dirk Flintledge?" He had to wet his lips. "Flintledge—has he already gone?"

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"With one passenger, your Equity," the dispatcher answered. "Coral Fell."

"What is their destination?"

"Their departure was irregular." The dispatcher looked unhappy. "Their flight plan was never officially approved. It gives no specific destination. If your Equity wishes to have them halted, we should lose no time—"

"Never mind," Scarlet said. "Let them go."

"As you say, sir." The dispatcher seemed relieved. "In any case, I doubt that we could overtake them now." He hesitated, watching Scarlet anxiously. "Your Equity, I couldn't help overhearing what Warden Thornwall said. About the nova and the flying lights. Will that—will that affect our mission here?"

"No." A frown of troubled purpose ridged Scarlet's narrow forehead. "We have no indication that Sol will be exploded. Anyhow, the blinkers are Penwright's business. Our task here is still the salvation of the people of Earth—even if it takes another thousand years."

"Yes, sir."

That quick assent was merely the trained response of a uniformed subordinate, briskly impersonal, not even aware of his ugliness. Yet, with its instant calm acceptance of that tremendous purpose understood and shared, the dispatcher's answer caught hold of Scarlet. Something took his breath and dimmed his eyes and hurt his throat.

"We—we have a closer problem than Penwright's contact crisis." A sober smile smoothed the furrows from his sloping brow. "We have Major Tom Scoggins and his men. We must induct them into the service and teach them our techniques and get them back to Earth. The dangerous radiations from the nova will give them a good pretext to discourage any more adventures into space for at least a generation. By that time, perhaps Earth will be ready for us."

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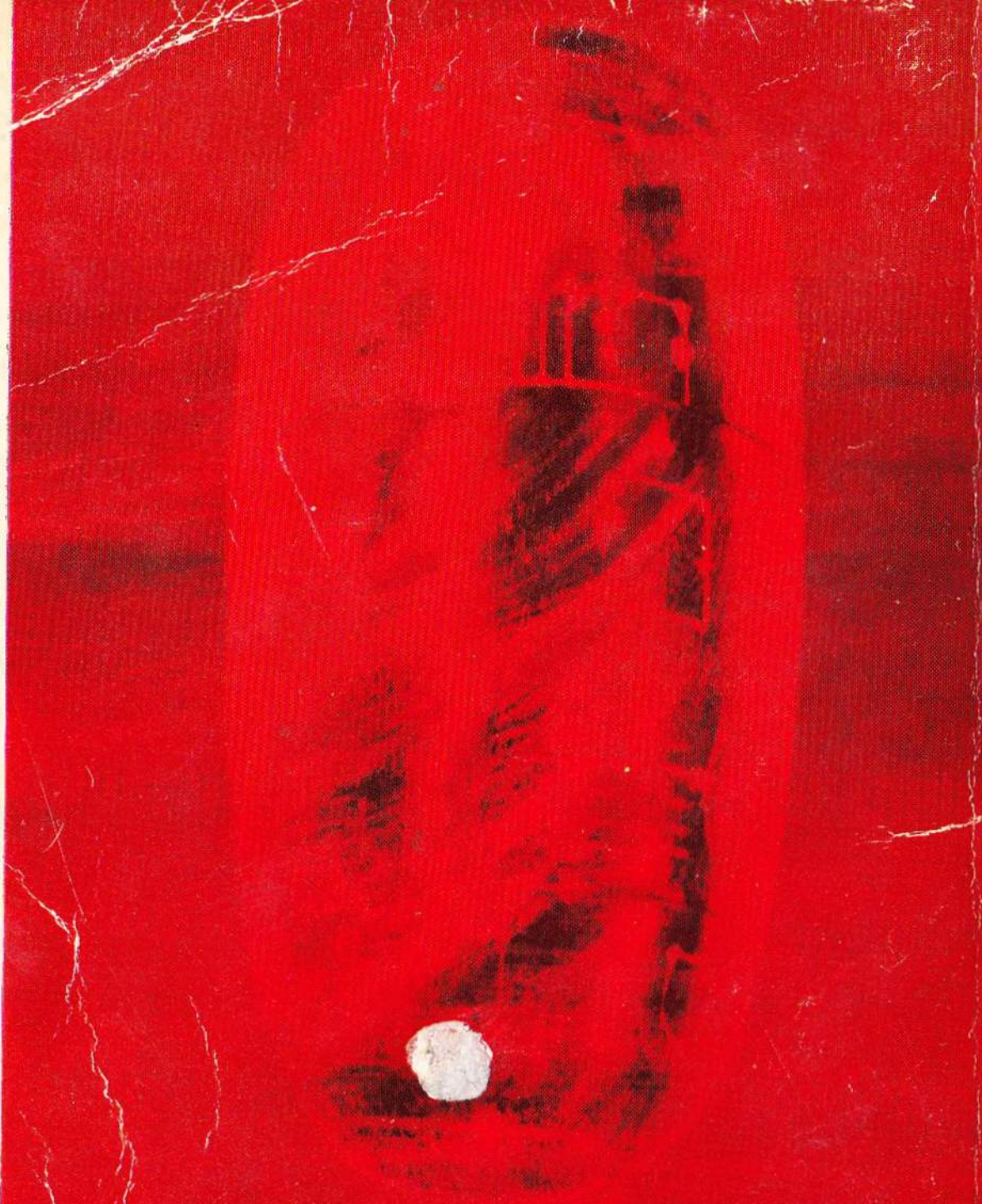
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