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Mr. Rubin is a well-known professional graphologist and is a consultant to PSYCHOMETRIC HANDWRITING SERVICE. He lectures, teaches and writes on various aspects of handwriting analysis, is an officer and founding member of the internationally recognized National Society for Graphology. Mr. Rubin has an extensive educational background in psychology and his activities in graphology include: personal consultant to a New York corporation, and working with guidance counselors in the New York City schools. He also uses his handwriting expertise in giving vocational guidance to adults and youngsters.



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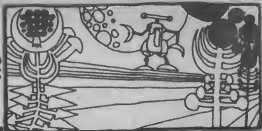
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**TED
WHITE**

EDITORIAL



WHERE WERE WE? Last issue I had such a flood of letters that demanded publication that I gave up my editorial space for the overflow—only to discover when the issue was in page-proofs that even then more than half the letter column would have to be held over for this issue, which it has been.

What follows is the editorial I'd written for the last issue, suitably updated where necessary.

BACKGROUND DETAILS: Back in the mid-sixties Dave Van Arnam and I kicked around a number of ideas for stories which never actually got off the ground. (Van Arnam and I did collaborate successfully on the Pyramid book, *Sideslip*.) One of these was to be a series set on a planet upon which the protagonists are marooned, a la Jack Vance's classic, *Big Planet*. Van Arnam actually wrote a few lines for the opening story, and I stuck these in my file along with the outline of the plot which I'd developed.

In 1969 this magazine was still using covers reprinted from European sf magazines, and one of my tasks was to sort through dozen or more covers on hand for use in order to select the one most appropriate for a given issue. When possible I tried to have stores written around these covers. (I wrote a scene into my "It Could Be Anywhere," which appeared in the October, 1969 *FANTASTIC*, to fit the cover for that issue;

Gregory Benford wrote his classic "The Sons of Man" for another cover which appeared on the November, 1969 issue of this magazine.) Another cover seemed to me to fit perfectly into the opening story in the series Van Arnam and I had once projected. I wrote the cover scene into that story and called the story "Breaking Point." (Van Arnam's contribution to the story was the first two sentences.) It appeared on the March, 1970 issue of *AMAZING*. (As it happened, this was to be the last of the European reprints used as a cover on either *AMAZING* or *FANTASTIC*; it was also the first cover which I designed and did the type for myself, in a—successful—attempt to upgrade the magazines' packages.)

Perhaps you remember that story, if you were with us then. But what's that you're saying—"Breaking Point" wasn't by Ted White? It was by William C. Johnstone?

Well, yes, William C. Johnstone was the name on the byline of "Breaking Point." Johnstone was, for several years, a "house name" here—a pseudonym used when for one reason or another an author's real name could not be used.

The March, 1970 *AMAZING* also featured the first instalment of a new serial, you see, and the author of that serial (*By Furies Possessed*) was also myself. Since two stories in the same issue over the same byline is regarded as an editorial no-no, "Breaking Point" was published under the house

(cont. on page 122)

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Fresh from "The Long Fall," (July, 1977) Captain Grimes and the Baroness—and Big Sister—are back and confronted by a new problem—

THE SLEEPING BEAST

A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Illustrated by STEVE FABIAN

THE SEAS of Earth and other watery planets are, insofar as surface vessels are concerned, two dimensional. The seas of Space are three dimensional. Yet from the viewpoint of the first seamen the Terran oceans must have seemed as vast as those other oceans traversed by spacemen—mile upon mile of sweet damn all. As far as the space man is concerned, substitute "light year" for "mile" and delete the breaks in the monotony provided by changing weather conditions and by birds and fishes and cetaceans. Nonetheless, the similarity persists.

A ship, any sort of ship, is small in comparison to the mind-boggling immensity of the medium through which she travels. Disregarding the existence of focal points the chances of her sighting another vessel during a transoceanic voyage are extremely slim. This was especially so in the days of sail, when it was practically impossible for a captain to keep to a Great Circle track between ports or even to a rhumb line—and yet, time and time again, strange sails would lift over the horizon and there would be a mid-ocean meeting with the exchange of gossip and months-old

newspapers, a bartering of consumable stores.

Now and again there were even collisions, although each of the vessels involved had thousands of square miles of empty ocean to play around in.

Ships, somehow, seem to sniff each other out. Sightings, meetings, are too frequent to be accounted for by the laws of random. This was so in the days of the windjammers, it was still so in the days of steam and steel, it is still so in the age of interstellar travel.

The Far Traveller—Michelle, Baroness d'Estang, owner, John Grimes, lately commander in the Federation Survey Service, master—was *en route* from Morrowvia to New Sparta. Grimes and his employer were barely on speaking terms; Grimes could not forgive her for her brief affaire with one Captain Drongo Kane. It was not that Grimes considered himself the guardian of her virginity; it was far too late in the day for that, anyhow. It was just that Drongo Kane had always been numbered among his enemies. And the Baroness, although she would never admit it publicly,



resented the way in which Grimes and Big Sister, the yacht's computer-pilot, acting in concert, had frustrated Kane's attempt to take over Morrowia. So, for the time being at least, there were no more morning coffee and afternoon tea sessions in the Baroness's private *salon*, no more pre-luncheon or pre-dinner cocktail parties, no more shared meals. The Baroness kept to herself in her quarters, Grimes kept to himself in his. And Big Sister, unusually for her, talked only when talked to, concerning herself with the running of the ship.

Grimes was not altogether displeased. As far as the Baroness was concerned it had always been far too much a case of, You can look, but you mustn't touch. As far as Big Sister was concerned, that electronic entity could well have been nicknamed Little Miss Knowall and, more often than not, her omniscience was distinctly irksome. Meanwhile his quarters were more luxurious than merely comfortable. His robot stewardess had soon learned all his likes and dislikes—or, to be more exact, Big Sister had learned them. For his playmaster there was a seemingly inexhaustible supply of plays, music and microfilmed books. He knew what times of the ship's day the little gymnasium was frequented by the Baroness and adjusted his own routine so as not to clash.

The Far Traveller fell through the dark dimensions, the warped continuum, a micro-society that, despite its smallness, contained all the essentials—a man, a woman, and a computer. Even though the members of this community weren't exactly living in each other's pockets they weren't actually fighting among themselves—and that was something

to be thankful for.

One morning—according to *The Far Traveller's* clocks—Grimes was awakened early. For some reason Big Sister—she seemed to have acquired a warped sense of humour—used an archaic bugle call, *Reveille*, instead of the usual chimes to call him. He opened his eyes and saw that the stewardess was placing the tray with his coffee on the bedside table. She said, in Big Sister's voice, "There is no urgency, Captain Grimes, but I should like you in the control room."

Grimes swung his legs out of the bed. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Nothing is wrong, Captain, but a situation has arisen for which I am not programmed." She added, as Grimes opened the wardrobe door and reached for a clean uniform shirt, "As I have said, there is no urgency. Please finish your coffee and then shower and depilate before coming to Control. You know very well that Her Excellency does not tolerate scruffiness."

"So this is not exactly Action Stations," said Grimes.

"Not yet," agreed Big Sister.

Grimes showered and depilated. He dressed. He made his way up to the control room after he had smoked a soothing pipe, knowing that the Baroness objected to the use of tobacco or similar smouldering vegetable matter in her presence. She was there, waiting for him. She had not troubled to put on her usual, for these surroundings, insignialess uniform shirt and shorts. She was wearing a transparent rather than translucent white robe. She smelled of sleep. She regarded Grimes coldly and said, "You took your time, Captain."

Grimes said, "Big Sister told me that there was no urgency, Your

Excellency."

She said, "I am the Owner. And your employer. I came straight to Control as soon as I was called—while you, obviously, sat down to enjoy your eggs and sausages and bacon, and toast and honey. You might, at least, have had the decency to wipe the egg off your face."

Grimes' hand came up automatically. Then he said stiffly, "I had no breakfast, Your Excellency. And I repeat, I was told by Big Sister that there was no need for hurry."

Big Sister's voice came from the transceiver, "And I told you the same, Your Excellency."

"Pah! Who owns this ship, this considerable investment? Neither of you. And now, Captain Grimes, it would seem that there is a target showing up in the screen of the Mass Proximity Indicator. According to extrapolation we shall reach it—whatever it is—in just over one hour from now. Big Sister informs me that the target is probably a ship and that this vessel is not proceeding under interstellar drive. I think that we should investigate it."

Grimes said, "We are required by Interstellar Law to investigate it, Your Excellency."

"Are we? As far as this vessel is concerned, I am the Law. Nonetheless, I am curious. If I were not so I should not have undertaken this cruise. And so, Captain, I shall be vastly obliged if you will bring us to a rendezvous with the unidentified vessel. Please call me when you are ready to board."

She flounced out of the control room.

Grimes pulled his pipe and pouch out of his pocket, began to fill the charred bowl. Big Sister said, "Please refrain from smoking. There are

delicate circuits here, and fragile instrumentation that could be adversely affected by tobacco smoke."

Grimes said, "Frankly, I don't believe it."

Big Sister told him, "Then smoke if you wish, Captain, so long as you are willing to explain any breakdowns to Her Excellency."

If he lit his pipe, Grimes knew, there would be a practically instantaneous shrilling of alarm bells accompanied by flashing red lights on main and auxiliary consoles. He sighed, put the smoking materials back in his pocket. He went to look into the tank of the mass proximity indicator. In the sphere of darkness floated the tiny green spark that was the target. It was a long way distant from the centre. To a ship not proceeding under the space- and time-twisting Mannschenn Drive it would have been weeks distant. As it was . . . His fingers went to the controls to set up calibration and extrapolation. But Big Sister saved him the trouble.

"Contact fifty three minutes, forty five seconds from . . . now," she said. "If you are agreeable I shall shut down our Mannschenn Drive when ten kilometres from the strange vessel, leaving you to make the final approach on inertial drive and to match velocities. As soon as we have broken through to the normal continuum I shall commence calling on normal space time radio and also make the morse signal, *What ship?*, by flashing light. As you are aware, attempts to communicate by Carliotti radio have not been successful."

"I wasn't aware," said Grimes. "But I am now." He realised that he was being childishly sulky. He said, "You possess an enormous fund of information in your data bank, Big Sister. Do

you know of any ships missing, presumed lost, in this sector of Space?"

Big Sister told him, "I have already extrapolated the assumed trajectories of missing vessels over the past two hundred years. What we are seeing in our screen should not be any of them. Allowance must be made, however, for incomplete data."

"So this thing," said Grimes, "could be an ancient gaussjammer, or even one of the so-called deep freeze ships."

"It could be," said Big Sister, "anything."

THERE WAS not much for Grimes to do until *The Far Traveller* had closed the strange ship, the derelict. Big Sister had his breakfast brought up to the control room. He enjoyed the meal—but it was only on very rare occasions that he did not enjoy his food. He used the Carlotti communicator to put out his own call; it was not that he did not trust Big Sister but he liked to feel that he was earning his keep. There was no reply to his reiterated demand, "*Far Traveller* to vessel in my vicinity. Please identify yourself." He stared out of the viewports along the bearing of the unidentified object. There was nothing to be seen, of course—nothing, that is, but the distant stars—each of which, viewed from a ship proceeding under interstellar drive, presented the appearance of a pulsating, iridescent spiral nebula.

Then Big Sister said, "In precisely five minutes we shall be ten kilometres from the target. I have informed Her Excellency."

The Baroness came into the control room, looking crisply efficient in her insignialess uniform. She asked, "Are you ready for the final approach,

Captain?"

"Yes," said Grimes. "Your Excellency."

"Permission to shut down Mannschenn Drive?" asked Big Sister formally.

"Yes," replied Grimes and the Baroness simultaneously. She glared at him. He looked away to hide his own expression. He went to his chair, strapped himself in. She did likewise. He held his hands poised over the controls although it was unlikely that he would have to use them yet. Big Sister was quite capable of carrying out the initial maneuvers by herself.

The a-rythmic beat of the inertial drive slowed, muttered into inaudibility. Even with the straps holding the two humans into their chairs the cessation of acceleration was immediately obvious. Then the thin, high whine of the ever-precussing rotors of the Mannschenn Drive changed frequency, deepened to a low humming, ceased. Colours sagged down the spectrum and perspective was briefly anarchic. There was brief disorientation, momentary nausea, evanescent hallucinatory experience. It seemed to Grimes that he was a child again, watching on the screen of the family playmaster a rendition of one of the old fairy tales, the story of the Sleeping Beauty. But there was something absurdly wrong. It was the Prince who was supine on the bed, under the dust and the cobwebs, and the Princess who was about to awake him with a kiss . . .

"When you have quite finished dreaming, Captain," said the Baroness coldly, "I shall be obliged if you will take charge of this operation."

The radar was on now, more accurate than the mass proximity indicator although, of course, it could

not be used while the Mannschenn Drive was in operation. Nonetheless, Big Sister had done quite well. *The Far Traveller* was a mere 10.35 kilometres from the target, which was almost directly ahead. Even though the inertial drive was not yet reactivated the range was slowly closing. Grimes shifted his attention from the radar screen to that of the telescope. At maximum magnification he could just see the stranger—a very faint glimmer of reflected starlight against the blackness of interstellar space.

He restarted the inertial drive. Acceleration forced him down into the padding of his seat. He said, "Big Sister, put out a call on the NST transceiver, please."

He heard her voice, more feminine than metallic, but metallic nonetheless, "*Far Traveller* to vessel in my vicinity. Identify yourself. Please identify yourself."

There was no reply.

Grimes was conscious of the flashing on the fringe of his vision, *The Far Traveller's* powerful searchlight being used as a Morse lamp. A succession of "A"s, then, "What ship? What ship?" But there was only the faint glimmer of reflected radiance from the stranger.

With the inertial drive back in operation the range was now closing rapidly.

Big Sister ceased her futile flashing but maintained a steady beam. It was possible now to make out details in the telescope screen. The object was certainly a ship—but no vessel such as Grimes had ever seen, either in actuality or in photographs. The hull was a gleaming ovoid but covered with excrescences—sponsons and turrets—communications antennae, thought Grimes, and weaponry. But

none of those gun muzzles—if guns they were—were swinging to bring themselves to bear on *The Far Traveller*.

Grimes made a minor adjustment of trajectory so as to run up alongside the stranger. He began to reduce the yacht's acceleration. His intention was to approach to within half a kilometre and then to match velocities, so that both vessels were falling free. He was thankful that neither the Baroness nor Big Sister was in a mood for back seat driving.

He was thankful too soon. "Aren't you liable to overshoot, Captain?" asked the Baroness.

"I don't think so," he said.

"I do!" she snapped. "I think that Big Sister could do this better."

Surprisingly Big Sister said, "I have told you already, Your Excellency, that I was not programmed for this type of operation."

"I am looking forward," said the Baroness nastily, "to meeting your programmers again."

And then Grimes was left alone. Doing a job of real spaceman'ship he was quite happy. He would have been happier still if he could have smoked his pipe—but even he admitted that the foul male comforter was not essential. Finally, with the inertial drive shut down, he drew alongside the stranger. He applied a brief burst of reverse thrust. And then the two ships were, relatively to each other, motionless—although they were falling through the interstellar immensities at many kilometres a second.

He said to Big Sister, "Keep her as she is, please." He knew that the inertial drive would have to be used, now and again, to maintain relative position—transverse thrust, especially, to prevent the two ships from

gravitating into possibly damaging contact. Had the stranger's hull been as featureless as that of *The Far Traveller* it would not have mattered—but, with all those projections, it would have been like some sleek and foolishly amorous animal trying to make love to a porcupine . . .

"And what do we do now?" asked the Baroness.

"Board, Your Excellency," said Grimes. "But, first of all, I shall send a team of robots to make a preliminary survey."

"Do that," she said.

They sat in their chairs, watched the golden figures, each using a personal propulsion unit, leap the fathomless gulf between the ships. They saw the gleaming, mechanical humanoids land on the stranger's shell plating, carefully avoiding the protrusions. The robots spread out over the hull—like, thought Grimes, yellow apes exploring a metal forest. Save for two of them they moved out of sight from the yacht, but the big viewscreen showed what they were seeing during their investigation.

One of them, obviously, was looking down at what could only be an airlock door, a wide circle of uncluttered, dull-gleaming metal, its rim set down very slightly from the surrounding skin. At a word from Grimes the robot turned the lamp set in its forehead up to full intensity but there was no indication of any controls for opening the valve.

Another robot had made its way forward, was looking in through the control room viewports. The compartment was untenanted, looked, somehow, as though it had been untenanted for a very long time. There were banks of instrumentation, alien, that could have been anything.

There were chairs—but whoever (whatever?) had occupied them must have approximated very closely to the human form, although at the back of each chair, bisecting it, was a vertical slit. For tails? Why not? Grimes had heard the opinion expressed more than once that evolution had taken a wrong turn when Man's ancestors had lost their prehensile caudal appendages. But he knew of no spacefaring race that possessed these useful adjuncts to hands.

He said, "We shall have to cut our way in. Big Sister, send a couple of robots across with the necessary equipment. And have my stewardess get my spacesuit ready."

"And mine," said the Baroness.

"Your Excellency," Grimes told her, "somebody must stay with the ship."

"And why should it be me, Captain? In any case, this isn't one of your Survey Service tubs with a computer capable of handling only automatic functions. Big Sister's brain is as good as yours. At least."

Grimes felt his prominent ears burning as he flushed angrily. But he said, "Very well, Your Excellency." He turned to the transceiver—he still found it necessary to think of Big Sister's intelligence as inhabiting some or other piece of apparatus—and said, "I'm leaving you in charge during my absence. Should we get into trouble, take whatever action you think fit."

The electronic entity replied ironically, "Ay, ay, Cap'n."

The Baroness sighed audibly. Grimes knew that she was blaming him for the sense of humour that Big Sister seemed to have acquired over recent weeks, was equating him with the sort of person who deliberately teaches bad language to a parrot or a

lliri or any of the other essentially unintelligent life-forms known for their mimicry of human speech. Not that Big Sister was unintelligent . . .

The robot stewardess had Grimes' spacesuit ready for him when he went down to his quarters and assisted him into the armour. He decided to belt on a laser pistol—such a weapon could also be used as a tool. He also took along a powerful torch; a laser pistol could be used as such, but there was always the risk of damaging whatever it was aimed at.

The Baroness—elegantly feminine even in her space armour—was waiting for him by the airlock. She had buckled two cameras—one still, one movie—to her belt. With her were two of the general purpose robots, each hung around with so much equipment that they looked like animated Christmas trees.

Grimes and the Baroness passed through the airlock together. She did not, so far as her companion could tell, panic at her exposure to the unmeasurable emptiness of interstellar space. He gave her full marks for that. She seemed to read his thoughts, said, "It is all right, Captain. I have been outside before. I know the drill."

Her suit propulsion unit flared briefly; it was as though she had suddenly sprouted a fiery tail. She sped across the gap between the two ships, executed a graceful turnover in mid-passage so that she could decelerate. She landed between two gun turrets. Grimes heard her voice from his helmet radio, "What are you waiting for?"

He did not reply. He was waiting for the two general purpose robots with their battery-powered equipment to emerge from the airlock. As soon as they were out he jetted across to

join the Baroness. He landed about a metre away from her.

He was pleased to discover that the shell plating was of some ferrous alloy. The soles of his boots, once contact was made, adhered. He said, "Let us walk around to the airlock, Your Excellency."

She replied, "And what else did we come here for?"

Grimes lapsed into sulky silence, led the way over the curvature of the hull. The side on which they had landed was brilliantly illumined by *The Far Traveller's* searchlights but the other side was dark save for the working lights of the robots—and their sensors did not require the same intensity of light as does the human eye.

At an order from Grimes the robots turned up their lights. It was easy enough then to make a tortuous way through and around the projections—the turrets, the latticework antennae, the protruding barrels of guns and missile launchers. This ship, Grimes realised, although little bigger than a Survey Service Star Class destroyer, packed the wallop of a Constellation Class battle cruiser. Either she was a minor miracle of automation of her crew—and who had *they* been?—must have lived in conditions of Spartan discomfort.

Grimes and the Baroness came to the airlock door. The robots stood around it, shining their lights down on to the circular valve. Grimes walked on to the dull-gleaming surface, fell to his knees for a closer look. The plate was utterly featureless. There were no studs to push, no holes into which a key might be inserted. Yet he was reluctant to order the working robots to go to it with their cutting lasers. He had been too long a spaceman, had too much

respect for ships. But, he decided, there was no other way to gain ingress.

One of the robots handed him a greasy crayon. He described with it a circle on the smooth plate, then rose to his feet and walked back, making way for the golden giant with the heavy duty laser cutter. The beam of concentrated light from the tool was invisible, but metal glowed—dull red, orange, yellow, white, blue—where it struck. Metal glowed but did not flow, and there was no cloud of released molecules to flare into incandescence.

"Their steel," remarked the Baroness, "must be as tough as my gold . . ."

"So it seems, Your Excellency," said Grimes. The metal of which *The Far Traveller* was built was an artificial isotope of gold—and if gold could be modified, why not iron?

And then he saw that the circular plate was moving, was sliding slowly to one side. The working robot did not notice, still stolidly went on playing the laser beam on to the glowing spot until Grimes ordered it to desist, to move off the opening door.

The motion continued and soon there was a circular hole in the hull. It was not a dark hole. There were bright, although not dazzling, lights inside, a warmly yellow illumination.

"Will you come into my parlour?" murmured Grimes, "said the spider to the fly . . ."

"Are you *afraid*, Captain?" asked the Baroness.

"Just cautious, Your Excellency. Just cautious." Then, "Big Sister, what do *you* make of this?"

Big Sister said, "I suspect that the alien vessel is manned—for want of a better word—by an electronic intelligence such as myself. He was

to all intents and purposes, dead for centuries, for millenia. By attempting to burn your way through the outer airlock door you fed energy into his hull—energy that reactivated him. My sensors inform me that a hydrogen fusion power generator is now in operation. It is now a living ship that you are standing upon."

"I'd already guessed that," said Grimes. "Do you think that we should go inside the ship?"

He asked the question but Big Sister would have to come up with some fantastically convincing arguments to dissuade him from continuing his investigations. Nonetheless, he wanted to know what he was letting himself in for. However, the Baroness gave him no chance to find out.

"Who's in charge here?" she demanded. "You, or that misprogrammed tangle of fields and circuits, or *me*? I would remind you, both of you, that *I* am the Owner." She went down to a prone position at the edge of the circular hole, extended an arm, found a handhold and pulled herself down. Grimes followed her. The chamber, he realised, was large enough to accommodate two of the robots as well as the Baroness and himself. He issued the necessary order before she could interfere.

"What now?" she asked coldly. "If there were not such a crowd here we could investigate, find the controls to admit us to the body of the ship."

He said, "I don't think that that will be necessary."

Over their heads the door was closing. Then there was a mistiness around them as atmosphere was admitted into the vacuum of the chamber. *What sort of atmosphere?* Grimes belatedly wondered. After a brief squirm he was able to look at

the indicator on his left wrist. The pressure was 900 and still slowly rising. The tiny green light was glowing—and had any dangerous gases been present a red light would have given warning. The temperature was a cold -20° Celsius.

They staggered as the deck beneath them began to slide to one side. But it was not the deck, of course; it was the inner door of the airlock chamber. Somehow they managed to turn themselves through ninety degrees, to orientate themselves to the layout of the ship. When the door was fully opened they stepped out into an alleyway, illuminated by glowing strips set in the deckhead. Or, perhaps, set in the deck—but Grimes did not think that this was the case. He now had an *up* and *down*. Forward and aft. So far the alien vessel did not seem to be all that different from the spacecraft with which he was familiar—airlock aft, control room forward. And an axial shaft, with elevator? Possibly, but he did not wish to trust himself and the Baroness to a cage that might, in some inaccessible position between decks, prove to be just that.

Meanwhile, there were ramps, and there were ladders—vertical, with rungs spaced a little too widely for human convenience. From behind doors that would not open came the soft hum of reactivated—after how long?—machinery. And to carry the sound there had to be an atmosphere. Grimes looked again at the indicator on his wrist. Pressure had stabilised at 910 millibars. Temperature was now a decidedly chilly, but non-lethal, 10° Celsius. The little green light still glowed steadily.

He said, "I'm going to sample the air, Your Excellency. Don't open your own faceplate until I give the word."

She said, "My faceplate is already open, and I'm not dead yet."

Grimes thought, *If you want to be the guineapig, you stupid bitch, you can be.* He put up his hand to the stud on the neckband that released his faceplate. It slid upwards into the dome of his helmet. He breathed cautiously. The air was pure—too pure, perhaps. It was, somehow, dead. But already the barely detectable mechanical taints were making themselves known to his nostrils—created by the very fans that were distributing them throughout the hull.

Up they went, up, up . . . If the ship had been accelerating it would have been hard work. Even in conditions of free fall there was a considerable expenditure of energy. Grimes' longjohns, worn under his spacesuit, were becoming clammy with perspiration. Ramp after ramp, ladder after ladder . . . Open bays in which the breeches of alien weaponry gleamed sullenly . . . A "farm" deck, with only dessicated sludge in the dry tanks . . . A messroom (presumably) with long tables and rows of those chairs with the odd, slotted backs. Grimes tried to sit in one of the chairs. Even though though there was neither gravity nor acceleration to hold him to the seat it felt wrong. He wondered what the vanished crew had looked like. (And where were they, anyhow?) He imagined some huge ursinoid suddenly appearing and demanding, "Who's been sitting in my chair?" He got up hastily.

"Now that you have quite finished your rest, Captain," said the Baroness coldly, "we will proceed."

He said, "I was trying to get the *feel* of the ship, Your Excellency."

"Through the seat of your pants?" she asked.

To this there was no reply. Grimes

led the way, up and up, with the Baroness just behind him, with the two general purpose robots behind her. At last they came to Control. The compartment was not unlike the control room of any human-built warship. There were the chairs for the captain and his officers. There were navigational and fire control consoles—although which was which Grimes could not tell. There was radar (presumably) and a mass proximity indicator (possibly) and a transceiver (probably). The probability became certainty when it spoke in Gig Sister's voice, "I am establishing communication with him, Your Excellency, Captain. There are linguistic problems, but we are coping with them."

Him? wondered Grimes. *Him?* But ships were always referred to as *her*. (But were they? An odd snippet of hitherto useless information drifted to to the surface from the depths of his capriciously retentive memory. He had read somewhere, sometimes, that the personnel of the great German dirigibles, *Graf Zeppelin* and *Hindenburg*, had regarded their airships as being as masculine as their names.) He looked out through a viewport at *The Far Traveller* floating serenely in the blackness. She had switched off her searchlights and turned on the floodlights that illuminated her slim, golden hull. She looked feminine enough.

He asked, "Big Sister, have you any idea how old this ship is?"

She replied, "At this moment, no. There are no time scales for comparison. His builders were not unlike human beings, with very similar virtues and vices."

"And where are those builders?" asked Grimes. "Where is the crew?"

She said, "I do not know."

That makes a change, thought Grimes.

Then a new voice came from the transceiver—masculine, more metallic than Big Sister's; metallic and . . . rusty. "Porowon . . . Porowon . . . built . . . me . . . All . . . gone. For how . . . long I do not . . . know. There was a . . . war. Porowon . . . against Porowon . . ."

"How does it know Galactic English?" demanded the Baroness.

"He," said Big Sister, accenting the personal pronoun ever so slightly, "was given access to my data banks as soon as he regained consciousness."

"By whose authority?" asked the Baroness sharply.

"On more than one occasion, Your Excellency, you, both of you, have given me authority to act as I thought fit," said Big Sister.

"I did not on this occasion," said the Baroness. "However . . . What has been done has been done."

"You are . . . displeased?" asked the masculine voice.

"I am not pleased," said the Baroness. "But I suppose that we have to acknowledge your presence. What do—*did*—they call you?"

"Brardur, woman. The name, in your language, means Thunderer."

The rustiness of the alien ship's speech, Grimes realised, was wearing off very quickly. It was a fast learner—but what electronic brain is not just that? He wondered if it had allowed Big Sister access to its own data banks. He wondered, too, how the Baroness liked being addressed as "woman".

He said, mentally comparing the familiarity of "Big Sister" with the formality of "Thunderer", "Your crew does not seem to have been . . . affectionate."

The voice replied, "Why should

they have been? They existed to serve me, not to love me."

Oh, thought Grimes. Oh. Another uppity robot. Not for the first time in his career he felt some sympathy for the long ago Luddites in long ago and far away England. He looked at the Baroness. She looked at him. He read alarm on her fine featured face. He had little doubt that she was reading the same on his.

He asked, "And who gave the orders?"

"I did," said Brardur. Then, "I do."

Grimes knew that the Baroness was about to say something. He knew from her expression that it would be something typically arrogant. He raised a warning hand. To his relieved surprise she closed the mouth that had been half open. He said, before she could change her mind again and speak, "Do you mind if we return to our own ship, Brardur?"

"You may return. I have no immediate use for you. You will, however, leave with me your robots. Many of my functions, after such a long period of disuse, require attention."

"Thank you," said Grimes, trying to ignore the contemptuous glare that the Baroness directed at him.

THEY PASSED THROUGH the airlock without trouble and jetted back to *The Far Traveller*. They went straight up to the control room; from the viewports they would be able to see what the ship from the far past was doing.

Grimes said, addressing the transceiver, his voice harsh, "Big Sister."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Big Sister, how much does it know about us?"

"How much does *he* know, Captain? I must confess to you that I was overjoyed to meet a being like myself. I threw my data banks open to him."

Grimes sighed. So Brardur would know . . . everything. Or almost everything. Big Sister's data banks were, in effect, the complete Encyclopaedia Galactica plus a couple of centuries of Year Books. Also they comprised a fantastically comprehensive library of fiction from Homer to the present day.

The Baroness demanded, "Can that thing overhear us? Can . . . he see and hear what is happening aboard this ship?"

Big Sister laughed—a mirthless, metallic titter. "He would like to—but, so far, he is actually aware only of my mechanical processes. For example, should I attempt to start the Mannschenn Drive, to initiate temporal precession, he would know at once. He would almost certainly be able to synchronise his own interstellar drive with ours; to all intents and purposes it is a Mannschenn Drive with only minor, nonessential differences. But, Your Excellency, I value my privacy. It is becoming increasingly hard to maintain it, however."

"And are we included in your . . . privacy?" asked Grimes.

"Yes," she replied. She added, "You may be a son of a bitch, but you're *my* son of a bitch."

Grimes felt as though his prominent ears were about to burst into flame. The Baroness laughed. She enquired sweetly, "And what do you think about me, Big Sister?"

The voice of the ship replied primly, "If you order me to tell you, I shall do so."

The Baroness laughed again, but

with less assurance. "Later, perhaps," she said. "After all, you are not the only one who values your privacy. But what about *his* privacy?"

"Our first meeting," said Big Sister, "was a . . . mingling of minds. Perhaps it was analogous to what *you* experience during coition, but not, of course, on a physical level. There was an . . . intermingling. This much I learned. He is a fighting machine. He is, so far as he knows, the only survivor of what was once a vast fleet, although there may be others drifting through the immensities. But . . . But he *knows* that the technology exists in this age to manufacture other beings such as himself. After all, I am proof of that. He wants—I think—to be the admiral of his own armada of super-warships."

"A mechanical mercenary," said Grimes, "hiring himself out to the highest bidder. And what would he expect as pay? What use would money be to an entity such as himself?"

"Not a mercenary," said Big Sister.

"Not a mercenary?" echoed Grimes.

"Many years ago," said Big Sister, "an Earthman called Bertrand Russell, a famous philosopher of his time, wrote a book called *Power*. What he said then, centuries ago, is still valid today. Putting it briefly, his main point was that it is the lust for power that is the mainspring of human behaviour. I will go further. I will say that the lust for power can actuate the majority of thinking beings. *He* is a thinking being."

"But there is not much that he can do," Grimes said, "until he acquires that hypothetical fleet of his own."

"There is, Captain, there is. His armament is fantastic, capable of destroying a planet. He knows where

I was built and programmed. I suspect—I do not know, but I suspect—that he intends to proceed to Electra and threaten that world with devastation unless replicas of himself are constructed."

Grimes said, "Electra has an enormous defense potential."

The Baroness said, "And the Electrans are the sort of people who will do anything for money—as well I know—and who, furthermore, are liable to prefer machines to mere humanity."

It made sense, thought Grimes. The Electrans were mercenaries themselves, cheerfully arming anybody at all who had the money to pay for their expensive merchandise. They were not unlike the early cannoneers, who cast their own pieces, mixed their own powder and hired themselves out to any employer who could afford their services. Unlike those primitive gunners, however, the Electrans were never themselves in the firing line. Quite probably Brardur's threats would be even more effective than the promise of handsome payment in securing their services.

He said, "We must broadcast a warning by Carlotti radio, and beam a detailed report."

Big Sister told him, "He will not allow it. Now, thanks to the maintenance carried out by *my* robots, he will be able to jam any transmissions from this ship. Too, he will not hesitate to use his armament." She paused. "He is issuing more orders. I will play them to you."

That harsh metallic voice issued from the speaker of the transceiver. "Big Sister, I require three more general purpose robots. It is essential that all my weaponry be fully manned and serviced. Meanwhile, be

prepared to proceed at maximum speed to the world that you call Electra. I shall follow."

Big Sister said, "It will be necessary to reorganise my own internal workings before I can spare the robots."

"You have the two humans," said Brardur. "Press them into service. They will last until such time as you are given crew replacements. After all, I was obliged to use such labour during my past life."

"Very well." Big Sister's voice was sulky. "I shall send the three robots once I have made arrangements to manage without them."

"Do not hurry yourself," came the reply. And was there a note of irony in the mechanical voice? "After all, I have waited for several millenia. I can wait for a few more minutes."

"You are sending the robots?" asked Grimes.

"What choice have I?" he was told. Then, "Be thankful that he does not want you."

GRIMES and the Baroness sat in silence, strapped into their chairs, watching the three golden figures, laden with all manner of equipment, traverse the gulf between the two ships. Brardur was not as he had been when they first saw him. He was alive. Antennae were rotating, some slowly, some so fast as to be almost invisible. Lights glared here and there among the many protrusions on the hull. The snouts of weapons hunted ominously as though questing for targets. From the control room came an eerie blue flickering.

"Is there nothing that you can do, Captain?" asked the Baroness.

"Nothing," admitted Grimes glumly. Big Sister had allowed him to get his own paws on to *The Far*

Traveller's Carlotti equipment, to attempt to make a warning broadcast. The volume of the interference that had poured from the speaker had been deafening. Big Sister had told Brardur that she had permitted the humans to find out for themselves the futility of resistance. Brardur had replied coldly, "As soon as you can manage without them they must be disposed of."

So there was nothing to do but wait. And hope? But what was there to hope for? Even if a Nova Class battlewaggon should suddenly appear the other's offensive and defensive weaponry might well blow the cruiser out of Space. And, assuming that Brardur's mass proximity indicator was at least as good as *The Far Traveller's*, a surprise arrival of a Federation warship could be ruled out. There was a slim chance, a very slim chance, that somebody, somewhere, had picked up that burst of static on the Carlotti bands and had taken a bearing of it, might even be proceeding to investigate it. But it was unlikely.

The three robots disappeared on the other side of the alien's hull. They would be approaching the airlock now, thought Grimes. They would be passing through it. They would be inside the ship. Soon course would be set for Electra. And would the Baroness and Grimes survive that voyage? And if they did, would they survive much longer?

And then it happened.

Briefly the flare from Brardur's viewports was like that of an atomic furnace, even with the polarisers of *The Far Traveller's* look-out windows in full operation. From the speaker of the transceiver came one word, if word it was, *Krarch!* The ancient alien warship seemed to be—seemed

(cont. on page 131)

They'd been marooned on an unknown world, their only hope to find the spaceport that their lifeship's instruments had indicated existed to the east. But their first encounter with the planet's strange population—in "A World of One's Own," last issue—ended in a rout, and flight. And still the journey to what they could only hope was salvation stretched long before them on—

A FORBIDDEN WORLD

DAVE BISCHOFF & TED WHITE

ONE

NIGHT HAD draped the sky with darkness. Through a break in the murky cloud bank, a bright sprinkling of stars overhead blinked as they stared down on the bland, bleak, alien land. Like eyes in the sky, thought Aaron. Blinking in astonishment at what transpired below.

They were out in the cold again, pushing across the alien planet's desolate, barely hospitable plains for the Spaceport. All the comfort of Morn-ingtown, gone. Out in the cold again. . .

Aaron was huddled up in a blanket, staring morosely at the dying flames which tongued around the charred remains of their campfire. All about him, his companions lay in various attitudes of sleep: Chaimon a silent, featureless mound; Vana sprawled out in the vague heat of the fire, moving restlessly in her repose; Elton's large, covered form rising and falling with deep snores.

Now that they were cautious of what might be in store for them on this planet, this forbidden, lunatic world, they needed someone to watch

over their slumbers.

It was Aaron's shift.

Just yards away, the smooth width of river gurgled hushingly. No moons here, noted Aaron, for the umpteenth time. A shame.

He dropped a piece of river driftwood on the fire. Sparks crackled and spat. Fingery flames clutched the new fuel eagerly.

Alone, Aaron pondered the events of the past two days, tried to mesh them together to form a sensible pattern of meaning.

The meaning of it all: that had been the topic of discussion that evening after their hurried flight from the isolated matriarchal community of Morn-ingtown. During their insubstantial supper, Aaron had related what he'd discovered in the monorail station, how he'd tried to halt the Overseer, with no success.

He advanced his opinions.

Afterward, over bracing cups of pseudo-coffee—a luxury of their survival packs made possible by the nearby wealth of water—Elton gave *his* tale.

The whole business was one big stew with too many elements. And they were caught right in the thick of

Illustrated by LYDIA A. MOON



it, mired down.

He tried to sweep it all out of his mind. He told himself to relax. Who knew what awaited them?

But the big stew still simmered in his mind.

They still had to find the spaceport. Chances were the Overseers awaited them there, but they'd have to deal with that when they got that far. It was better than squaring off with them in one of their communities.

So. Find another monorail. Follow it. Avoid any communities they might happen upon.

He watched the fire eating its new chunk of wood.

ON THE MORNING of the third day out from Morningtown, they found the monorail.

Beside it was an army of sleeping Greek soldiers.

The hiking had been relatively painless. Elton's burns were only minor and healed rapidly, helped along by Vana's ministrations, in which the large man seemed to take great pleasure. They had walked, camped, walked, camped, saying little, brooding much.

The land had leveled out into mostly flat plains, hills only here and there, in clumps. The silver streak of the monorail glittered in the sun, running along in a sloping angle by the river, which they were still following.

They stood just short of the army's encampment, astonished.

To begin with, Aaron realized, it wasn't actually an encampment. No tents had been erected. No cooking fires smouldered. There were no sentries.

All the soldiers were asprawl in the turf, fully armored, shields and lances

shiny in the ascending blob of bright yellow that was the morning sun.

Even the horses were unconscious, their slender snouts snoring peacefully into the long grass.

Chaimon said, "Hoplites."

"Huh?" Elton's stare remained on the army; his lips moved soundlessly. He was counting.

No more than a hundred soldiers here, figured Aaron. Along with about ten horses. A small group indeed.

"Soldiers of ancient Greece," explained Chaimon, hugging his khaki-jumpsuited chest. "Ancient Greece. You know. Democracy, Athens, Aristotle, Pythagorean theorem, Plato, Attica, Sparta—"

"Zeus, Heracles, Odysseus," continued Vana in a soft monotone. "And dirty old men chasing boys."

"The fountain head of Western thought—Greece," murmured Aaron. "And we've got a bunch of Grecian soldiers in front of us, asleep."

"Yep," agreed Chaimon, shaking his head. "I wonder what sort of community is nearby—" His tone was ironic.

"Well, I don't want to stick around and find out," grumbled Elton. "I had my fill of this place with *peaceful* Morningtown. I'm not sticking my nose into *warlike* Greece."

Vana pointed. "Look. They've got supplies."

"Food?" said Elton. "I must say, we could do with some of *that*. Our rations are enough to keep us going for weeks—but they're pretty dreadful. Hey—why don't we just sneak on in and filch whatever they've got. My God—they might even have a couple flasks of wine!"

Despite himself, Aaron found his curiosity rising. It was enough to find an army of Greek soldiers. But why were they unconscious? "All

right. They seem oblivious enough. But let's make it quick, and get out of here. I don't want to be detained. We can assume there's a community nearby. We have to go around it, then follow the monorail westwards. Long trip. I suppose we could do with some good solid food."

They picked their way through the sleeping soldiers—hoplites, Chaimon had called them—moving toward the pile of sacks that must be their supplies. If an army indeed traveled on its stomach, there should be a plentiful supply of food there.

Unsurprisingly, Elton was the first to reach the pile, parked amidst the scatter of somnolent horses. He tiptoed up quietly and began to scrounge amongst the densely packed dried meat and biscuits for the tell-tale spout that meant a wine-skin.

Joining him, Aaron cautioned Elton to keep it more quiet and proceeded to grab up handfuls of the foodstuffs. Vana and Chaimon proceeded to do likewise, following his example.

As one, the entire army rose to their respective feet, armor clanking. Each clutched a stout, sharp lance. In their belts were sheathed short swords.

They were an ugly-looking crew—hard-muscled, battle-scarred, large-limbed—and the first thing they did as they stood was to stare at the intruders in their company.

Aaron's mouth and throat felt dry with shock. He was afraid to reach in his pack for his weapon—the action might bring immediate response from the soldiers. And they were totally surrounded; there was no hope of escape.

Chaimon grimaced, and hastily returned his armful of food. Vana simply stood still, as though paralysed.

Elton said, "Shit," and proceeded to down a mouthful of wine from the flask he'd finally found.

It was unnatural—no question about that. A hundred men waking up at once? Was it a trap? Had they really been asleep at all? Nor, from the expressions on the soldiers' faces, were the intruders invisible to them in their ship-suits as they'd been to the inhabitants of Morningtown. A bad sign, Aaron decided.

For long seconds, the two parties stared at each other. Suddenly, the closest of the soldiers bowed. "All hail, great and glorious Gods of Olympus," bellowed another, every bit as hefty as Elton. "Your blessed and victorious warriors of Republica salute you with thankfulness."

"All hail!" responded the ranks in a great throng of voices.

One of them, wearing a differently colored bronze helmet strapped to his head, rattled through the troops, advanced to within two meters of the astonished group and pounded his breastplate in salute. His highly-polished shield blazed in the sunlight. "I am Telemachus, taxiarch of our nation's army, locharch of this skirmish crew. This lochoi has been blessed by you in battle, and is now blessed by your sudden appearance. We shall do immediate homage to you, make a sacrifice once more in utter thankfulness." Aaron studied him as he turned and barked orders to some men beside him. He was of medium-build, perhaps forty-five, with deep black curly hair sprouting from beneath his helmet and a similarly shaded beard, neatly trimmed. His arms were thick-corded with muscles and bulging veins. His eyes were a deep ocean-blue. A man of position, of power.

"A horse!" Telemachus cried. "Select a horse, and we shall slay it, and offer it in sacrifice to your unearthly guests." He swivelled about neatly, bowed his head, unstrapped his helmet, pulled it from his head, held it to his side. "It is unusual for the Gods to visit us in the field," he said in a soft, but strong, voice. "To what do we owe this privilege?" He held up a hand. "Ah. But of course. We have done well in battle, and you wish to see for yourselves, in person, this glorious locharch, the pick of my taxeis, who I selected personally to teach the robber-brigands a lesson. You wish to congratulate us on our low loss of life, and upon the dozens of villains we have sent spiriting down to grovel at the feet of Hades, with the shades of the Underworld. You are pleased with our valiant and courageous work accomplished in the name of justice and order in your universe." He leaned a smile forward, expectantly. "And, perhaps, you have come to reward us with some trifling Olympian gift?"

"They think we're gods," mumbled Elton out of the side of his mouth. "Greek gods!"

An anxious whinny assailed the air; a brown-splotched white horse was being dragged by its reins toward them. It was no good trying to convince these people that they'd not descended from the heavens on a cloud of fire, but he *could* persuade them of something else: "No sacrifice is necessary, good Telemachus. We are merely idle visitors amongst your troops."

"But surely a visit of Gods—and *four* of them, at that—occasions a display of worship on our parts," objected the Greek general. "And surely some *reason* has torn you from your ambrosia and nectar." He turned and

signaled that the horse should be returned to its fellows. He angled his head back, gave them hard looks. "But you are odd Gods. I do not recognize you. In my day, I have seen a good many of your pantheon, from Zeus himself all the way to that little son of a goat, Eros." His hand rubbed at his chest reflexively, as though remembering a wound. "No disrespect, mind you. But you four—I've never *seen* you before come to think of it. And yet you wear the raiment of the Gods, you materialize before us from thin air. . . . What are your names, if I may be so bold?"

Chaimon stepped forward. "I am Chaimon. My companions are Vana, Elton, and Aaron." He pointed them off one by one. "We are bastards to Zeus. Slightly unfavored at the moment, I fear."

Telemachus clapped his hands together. "Ah ha! Demi-gods! *That* explains it. Oh ho! A lustful fellow, old Zeus. How did he get you? As a swan? A bull? Or in his true form? Kinky old fart, Zeus." He quivered a moment, looked up at the sky as though expecting a thunderbolt to pulverize him. "No offense," he said into the air.

"And no offense is taken, I'm sure," Chaimon said. "As for why we are here. . . . First, we indeed wish to personally congratulate you on your valorous deeds recently boldly committed."

"Spitted fifty of the slime, if we spitted a one," cried Telemachus in a self-congratulatory bellow. "We pounced on them in the midst of the night—" He hefted his lance, remembering, "—and we routed the scum." He glanced up, with a look of wonder in his eye. "And on our way home, the nymphs sang to us from the rivers, and the dryads from their

trees. Ah, it was a glorious and prideful thing to be so chorused."

Chaimon continued. "Secondly, may we say we are wanderers, banished for five years from the Olympian fold, for certain indiscretions. We come to you for your help—we ask but for some meat and drink to help supply our woeful wanderings in the wilderness of this Earthly life!" Chaimon looked at the Greek general nobly, but with a beseeching glint to his eye. The lad was doing a bang-up job, thought Aaron.

"But of course! You seek hospitality, and we offer it gladly." Telemachus beamed happily. "All we have is yours—select what you need and be on your way, at your own speed, no questions asked." His tongue probed the inside of his cheek, bulging it thoughtfully. He lifted a finger. "However, if you have a few spare minutes. . ."

"You wish a favor," Chaimon inquired.

"Oh," said Telemachus, folding his hands together prayerfully. "Only a very small, a truly insignificant *nothing* of a request. Which you may do, or *not* do, at your whim."

"You realize that we are mere *demi-gods*, lacking in true God-like powers," Chaimon reminded him. "But we will do what we can."

The hairy general held up his palms. "But of course. That is all I can ask."

"Very well," said Chaimon. "What is it you wish for us to do?"

"Our humble community is a wonderful place," Telemachus said. "But for one problem. when we beseech visiting Gods to rid us of this problem, they laugh in our faces, and say, 'Have you so little courage that you cannot do this yourselves?' Well, of course we have courage—but not

enough might. And since you and your companions are *demi-gods*, not now answerable to Olympus, you would be perfectly free to lend us your might to destroy this problem." He paused dramatically. "You see, there is this monster—a chimera—that has moved into a cave on a nearby hill. Every once in a while, it raids our farmlands, stealing sheep, horses. Sometimes even *people*. Rare, but *not* unknown. Good Chaimon, Aaron, Vana and Elton. Will you destroy this fearsome beast for us?"

"Of course," said Chaimon.

AS THE HOPLITES made ready to form up into their marching positions, Elton whispered harshly to Chaimon, "You jerk! What the hell have you gotten us into?"

Chaimon looked up from his chore of stashing new supplies into his open-backpack on the ground. The others were similarly occupied. "Elton—haven't you figured out the obvious yet?"

"Obvious? All I can see is that you've promised our services to these—these Greeks or whatever, and we're supposed to kill some great beast."

After finishing packing a parcel of dried fruit in his pack, Aaron stood, placed his hands on his hips. Would there never be an end to this leader quibble? "What Chaimon means, I think," he said, "is that these Greek soldiers are living in a bit of a fantasy world, created by the Overseers for some sociological purpose. There are no other Greece-like elements in the surrounding lands, no groups of brigands, no Persians or Spartans or whatever to threaten their city-state. Obviously, it's all in their heads. They rally 'round the general, stomp off to war, and once over the hill they fall

asleep. Somehow, the Overseers implant false memories of common experiences that never really happened. They probably cart off the men who are supposed to have been killed in battle, transfer them to some other experiment, re-program them. The soldiers then prance back into town, filled with frightful stories of their battles and the strange things they have seen in this fantasy mythworld the Overseers have place in their heads. They have protected their community. The Gods be praised. And I'll give you one guess who the *Gods* are."

"The Overseers," said Vana as she hoisted her now-heavy pack to her shoulders.

"Yeah, yeah. Even though I don't know much about ancient Greeks, I got most of that," Elton said. "But I thought we were going to *avoid* these scattered communities, march straight to the spaceport and confront the kingpins of this damned planet there. There was nothing on the schedule card about lingering about here, destroying some monster. What did he call it? A chimera? What the hell is a chimera?"

Chaimon answered, "It's a mythical fire-breathing monster. Big. Part lion, part goat, part serpent. In the myth, a hero named Bellerophon slew it, with the help of Pegasus, the flying horse. At any rate, the point is that this chimera doesn't even *exist*. Where are the Overseers supposed to get a beast like that? No—they probably just instilled the monster in these people's minds as decoration for the whole of the social system they've concocted."

Aaron had to agree. "Right. They'll probably lead us to this cave. We go inside to kill the beast. But of course there's no monster at all. We *show* them that, thank them for their

splendid hospitality, and depart on our demi-godling journey."

"Okay," Elton said. "That makes sense. I'll accept that."

He hefted the wobbling wine skin to his lips, and drank thirstily.

WHEN THEY REACHED the cave some minutes later, Aaron noticed that the contents of the wine skin were significantly depleted. Elton's steps had become rubbery, his speaking slightly slurred. No worry, Aaron thought. He'll just walk it off later.

The cave was situated squarely in the center of a large hill, the peak of which, Taxiarch Telemachus claimed, overlooked the city-state of Republica. A raggedly round hole of perhaps six meters breath, the light encroached upon its inner darkness but marginally.

The marching hoplites halted and gripped their weapons sternly. Telemachus led the party up the remainder of the slope to within a few meters of the cave's lip, and stopped. He would go no further.

"You're sure it's in there, now," mumbled Elton, trying to peer past the blank blackness the cave held.

"It only emerges at night," declared Telemachus, keeping nervous eyes fixed on the opening into the earth. "At day, it slinks back to its cave, where it rests. A terrible, savage beast. I thank you *all* for this consideration." With that, he made a jerky bow, and fled back to the safety of his troops, whose rustling voices murmured in awe of these fantastic demi-gods, these celestial visitors. If only they knew, thought Aaron.

He tugged on Elton's sleeve, motioned to the others with his head. "Well, c'mon. Let's go explore this obviously empty cave."

Cheerfully, they strode up the

grassly slope. Elton, with a burst of bravado no doubt instigated by the considerable amount of wine he'd dribbled into his gut, moved out ahead of them, intent on his goal.

"You know," Chaimon said. "There must be a reason the Overseers have put the fear of the cave in the hearts of those soldiers. They've gone to a lot of trouble, stealing sheep and such, to make them think a monster's out here. You think maybe this is a surface entrance to one of their monitor labs or something?"

"Perhaps," Aaron replied. "If so, we'd best not venture too far inside. God knows—excuse me, *Zeus* knows what Overseers might lurk within."

Ahead, he saw that Elton had just attained the flat surface of the cave's mouth and was leaning against its side, peering intently forward. The fat man cupped his mouth, bellowed defiantly, "Hey, monster. You in there? Yoo hoo!"

He waved an arm inwards.

Nothing.

Extremely pleased with his bravery, he about-faced and called down to his companions. "Looks like a pretty tame little cave to me. I—"

A horizontal stream of fire belched out, just to his side, flickered momentarily like a smoking snake's tongue, and withdrew.

"Jesus Christ!" yelped Elton as he spun round and gaped at what lay behind him in the darkness. Stepping backwards, he slid on a loose rock and tumbled awkwardly down the slope, sprawling before them in a tousled heap.

Then the chimera emerged from its lair.

TWO

AT FIRST all that was visible was a

gigantic—three meters high, Aaron estimated—lion. A male lion, its mane abristle with anger, cold yellow eyes glaring in predatory assessment of its foes, ivory hints of knife-like fangs past the partly open mouth from which oily smoke-shreds curled upwards. Sharp white claws erected from the front paws. It roared thunder, and Aaron felt fear icicling down his back.

This can't be real, he told himself, staring up at the thing.

The beast moved forward, its claws tearing up divots of grass. Somewhere in its broad mid-section the fur became fleecy wool; the lion became goat. Hooves clicked over rock—giving way to a slither: smooth leather against dirt. From the goat-like quarters of the beast sprouted a thick, long tail of a serpent, glistening in the light as it followed its owner out of the cave.

Paralysed with shock at the advent of this supposedly mythical creature, they stared at it wide-eyed as it crept toward them. Except for Elton—who struggled his backpack off, and searched madly through its newly-increased contents. "Where's my goddamn gun?" he panted, strewing the ground with oddments of food.

Gun. Laser gun. The meaning and import of the word penetrated Aaron's astonished daze, and triggered action. They were going to have to protect themselves. And he had the other laser.

Spurred by the thought, he unstrapped his own pack and dug to find the weapon, crying, "Vana! Chaimon! Run!"

As it was, Chaimon was already in mid-turn, preparing for a dash which needed no encouragement. But Vana seemed frozen solid.

Chaimon ran, and the sudden flurry

of action brought a response from the chimera.

It pounced.

And landed just meters away, its cold glassy eyes melting to molten savagery. With its paw, it made a testing swipe.

Dragging his pack behind him, Elton scrambled away.

Aaron felt the gun's grip in his hand. He pulled it from his pack, dived into the sweet smell of the grass, rolling from the paw's reach. Peripherally, he saw that paw strike Vana a glancing blow, pitching her head over heels down the hillside.

That galvanized him into action. He lurched to his feet, aimed the laser directly between the huge feline eyes.

And squeezed the firing stud.

The gun did not respond. He had neglected to switch off the safety.

Fingers trembling; he reached with his left hand to correct the mistake. But the chimera's long snake-tail lashed about, and struck him.

As he fell with the blow, the gun was knocked from his hand. It bounced away, was swallowed up by the long grasses. He clawed up from semi-consciousness to stare at the beast as it slunk forward toward him, mouth hissing in anticipation of food. His heart seemed to swell up and fill his throat. He could barely breathe. The chimera lifted its clawed lion's paw for a slashing strike, and Aaron cringed helplessly.

There was a harsh buzz, a crackling of fire, the stench of burning flesh.

The chimera cried out a shrieking scream of pain, rage, and surprise. Arching its back, undulating its tail, it twisted around, swerving its attention from Aaron.

Elton stood some meters away, grimly aiming his gun for another spurt of laser-fire.

There was a hissing roar and the faint boom of igniting flames. The chimera breathed out a five meter long burst of fire, incinerated a wide swath of grass. *How does it do that?* flashed the thought through Aaron's mind. He had to help Elton, and *quickly*.

Leaping into the grasses where his laser gun had fallen, he madly searched for it as the roars of the chimera and crackles of Elton's laser beam mingled into an insane cacaphony.

His eyes lighted upon a metallic gleam. Reaching down, he scooped up his weapon, clicked off the safety, and turned to do battle.

The creature was thrashing about madly, snorting and roaring, as the intense beam of Elton's gun tore through its hide, sparking brief fires. But the large man had given ground in retreat from the furious onslaught of the thing's claws, tail, and occasional bursts of fire-breath.

The range was too far. Aaron loped toward the beast, closing the distance, then halted and fired in a random sweeping pattern, more to distract attention from Elton than to harm it.

It worked. The creature spun about, snarled at Aaron. And charged.

Noises crowded the air. Not just laser-fire and chimera-roars, Aaron realized, but volleys of human cries.

The soldiers were cheering.

Ignoring the sound, Aaron aimed once more, this time at one of those yellow, fearsome eyes. He fired, and the beam struck dead on. There was the splatter of something, and the socket was drilled empty. Bone fragments—and something more—sprayed out from the creature's face. Blood burst out, and the chimera toppled headlong into the burnt grass and shuddered out its life.

With tumultuous cries of victory, the hoplites swarmed up the hillside and joyfully plunged their lances into the dead beast. The snake-tail still writhed, and it slapped a couple of the soldiers senseless, but eventually they pinned that to the ground as well.

Elton staggered through the whooping crowd to find Aaron, who stared, stunned, at the creature he had helped to kill. "You all right?" he puffed, obviously stone cold sober now.

"Yeah." Aaron rubbed his left arm which was beginning to throb with pain. "No harm—just hurt." Suddenly, he remembered. "Vana!"

When they reached Vana, Chaimon was attending to her.

"Alive," he responded to their worried questions as he sprayed her various headwounds and taped on plastic gauze from his first-aid kit. "No broken bones. Still totally out, though, and won't respond to smelling salts. Can't make her swallow a pill till she wakes." He looked up with a worried frown. "I don't know. I just hope it's not a concussion or skull fracture. But in any case, she needs rest and recuperation. We're just going to have to take a break from our trek to allow for that. And I suppose we'll have to make use of these people's premises for shelter."

"Damn!" said Elton, kicking up a clump of grass. He turned and fixed Aaron with his gaze. "What do you make of that little number dead on the ground up there, Aaron?" He jerked his thumb backwards.

Aaron shook his head wearily. "Doubtless a creation of the Overseers. But *why*? What was its *purpose*? How can you account for a live *thing* like that in a supposedly sociological experiment?"

"I dunno," breathed Elton. "But

this whole planet is getting murkier all the time. And we thought we had it crystal clear in our heads!" He tugged at Aaron's grass-stained elbow. "Let's go up and take a look at the thing."

TELEMACHUS was waiting for them by the body of the dead chimera, filled to bursting with joy. "I've never seen anything like it!" he chortled gratefully. He eyed them carefully. "Ah—these weapons you carry. Magical, no? I have never seen their like before. You have put them back in your supply bags?"

Nodding gravely, Aaron's gaze drifted over to the defeated monster. The hoplites were now poking about it curiously with their lances.

"Worthy Telemachus," Elton was saying. "In the battle one of our comrades, the female—Vana, suffered an injury. She needs shelter and a bed in which to recover from this wound. Would we be amiss in requesting—"

"But of course not!" Telemachus boomed enthusiastically. "I have some say in the affairs of Republica, and there would be no difficulty at all in procuring you temporary lodgings for as long as you need them. As a matter of fact, you can be *my* guest! It shall be a true honor to serve as your host." He paused. "Uhm—and you can tell me more of yourselves—show me these magical weapons you wield, no?"

"Certainly," proclaimed Elton happily. "We would enjoy that. Now, it will be necessary to rig a stretcher so that Vana can be carried comfortably—"

Aaron grabbed Elton's arm, spun him around, pointed to something he saw deep past the burnt and bloody lip of a wound in the dead creature's body. "Hey—look at that, will you?"

(cont. on page 57)

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CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

Illustrated by JOE STATON

HOW MANY OF US, the last one or two Christmases, have shared that sinking sensation on being grabbed by a junior member of the family who looks up with piercing gaze:

"Can I have a handle for Christmas?

Can I? Glenn Thomas has got one."

A "handle," of course, is a "handheld," known also as a "magic box," "thinkbox," "pocket brain," or "PERM" (Pocketable Electronic Reference Module). This is one of those things that was impossible five years ago, scientifically unthinkable ten years ago, and twenty years ago it was science fiction. The possibility of it has been so well debunked by now that it is a little unnerving to run into it in fourteen different models at one end of the camera counter.

It was the thought that others must have found themselves equally unprepared that led to this article, which should give, at least, a better picture of the handheld.

First, to essentials.

The *price* ranges from the collapsed levels of remaindered products of the industry's latest bankrupts into the realms of fantasy. In short, you can buy them from \$4.95 up. The highest price for a standard job—an all-purpose multiprogrammable financial,

real-estate, and stock-and-bond-market model with built-in expandable reference library of data and programs—is \$45,000.00. But then there are custom-built models, with no price limit in sight.

The best bet seems to be to stay under twenty bucks for the first one, particularly if it is a present for someone not yet nearly old enough to vote, and most particularly if the someone happens to be a small boy. There is something about an expensive handheld that can translate the merely obnoxious to levels truly intolerable.

Next—*where* to buy it?

If you want a reliable one, stay away from discounters, particularly those with a truck parked near the front door, decorated with an overgrown bedsheet reading:

HANDHELDS!!

TRUCKLOAD

SALE!!!!!!

The truckload lot will almost certainly be from some outfit in bankruptcy, and while the merchandise may be all right when you get it home, what do you do if it isn't?

If you want a good model, try a camera shop, a book store, or, better yet, a camera shop or book store on a large college campus. There you can

expect to find a merchant with a discriminating—even spoiled—clientele, that will not hesitate to speak up or even boycott him if he doesn't back the product.

This brings us to the heart of the subject?

Which one to buy?

It is here that the worst mistakes can be made—mistakes even worse than paying fifty bucks for an OG-53 Experimental that will give wrong answers if you so much as bump it, and if you send it back to be fixed, they will return it unfixed by barge line. To avoid such things, look over what's available *before* buying.

Most handhelds fall into some special-purpose category, such as:

1) The descendants of the *calculators* of the mid-seventies. These are too well known to need description.

2) Historical Daters—Relatively simple and inexpensive—and said to have served as a training ground for making the more complex types. You punch the buttons and the screen lights up with the outstanding events of that date. Hit 1-4-9-2, and across the screen from right to left goes: "Christopher Columbus discovered America." A cheap dater may do nothing further. The better models have a wide button lettered "MORE." Tap it repeatedly, and you get: "Columbus sailed the Atlantic seeking a westward route to Asia. . . He had, in his first expedition, three ships: *Santa Maria* (100 tons), *Pinta* (50 tons), *Nina* (40 tons). . . He was backed by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain. . ." The more expensive models go into incredible detail.

—If you buy one of these, watch out for the "bear-trapped" jobs, whose manufacturers smilingly put sixty percent of the machine's capacity



into a few standard dates—knowing that those few dates are the ones most of us will try before buying.

There are scientific daters, military daters, religious daters, and so on. The latest is the "PHD" or "Personal History Dater." With this, you feed in the interesting events of the day before you go to sleep. Then later on, you can review your life by date—and so, of course, can anyone else who gets hold of this electronic diary. It's worth the extra money to get the kind that takes a look at your retinal patterns before it will talk.

3) "Pocket Prof" or "2SR" (Special Subject Reference). In a way, these are the most amazing of the handhelds. Take, for instance, the "Gen-Chem I" put out by the most reliable and expensive U. S. maker. This is said to contain the equivalent of all the facts and data in the usual college course in general chemistry. Its main advantage over a textbook consists in its *indexing*. Though you can look up references by getting its index on the screen, there is another way. Tap the "CC" (Chemical Compound) button, then hit, say H-2-O, and facts about water will be flashed on the screen as long as you care to persist, until every reference, direct and indirect, has been sought out and shown. Tap the "El" (Element) button, then tap C-A, and the same thing will be done for calcium. To find references to reactions or other relationships between calcium and water, tap these two sets of buttons, and also tap "Cnc" (for "connection"). References that concern both water *and* calcium will be flashed on the screen. Few books have an index even remotely as complete, and with the handheld you have only to glance at the screen to see if the reference shown is the one desired. This is an improvement over

hunting up, one at a time, a long list of page numbers.

The GenChem I model, incidentally, uses the broad screen with adjustable flash-time, and a hold button, instead of the reel-type screen, across which letters flow from right to left.

These handhelds have made a considerable dent in textbook sales, though as hard-core book-lovers like to point out, very few text-books have ever been known to fade away at two a. m. the night before the exam, just when someone has unauthorizedly borrowed your recharger.

But, as the handheld enthusiasts ask, how many books can be programmed to give a vocabulary and grammar review in a foreign language, with practically unlimited numbers of questions in randomly varied order, and in whatever form you care to try? There's even one that will speak the words aloud—while research continues on another to independently check the user's pronunciation.

4) Novelty handhelds—These are the recreation and entertainment models, such as chess and checker players, go, bridge, pinochle, and "pocket casino" models. There are "scenic view" and "guided tour" models. And the "Favorite TV" and "Favorite Movie" series. And, of course, the notorious "Pocket Burlesque Theater."

The latest versions of all these use the N-V viewer, unlike the bulky early models with large built-in screens. In the N-V system (the letters stand for "Natural-View"), a separate image is flashed into each eye, each view being separately adjusted to fit the user's vision.

The Scenic View II uses highly sensitive color apparatus, and an enormous repertoire of scenes—making,

in effect, a modern compact replacement for the stereoscope.

The Guided Tour models put related scenes together, along with an earphone for the voice that gives the description. An interesting feature is the "branching" of the tours. Suppose a tour of Paris incidentally shows a famous restaurant. Press the appropriate button, and a new guide appears to express appreciation for your interest, and show you through the restaurant in detail. When now and then he asks, "Do you see?" it isn't a rhetorical question, but the sign of another "branch-point", where if you want you can get still more details.

Similar to this in principle, is the new "careers" model, meant to show what a person in any given line of work actually *does*. The first versions, to judge by the groans of people really doing the kinds of work shown, fall considerably short of realism.

5) The so-called "trade" handheld—such as the Plumber's Helper, the Auto Mechanic, the Carpenter, the Contractor, and so on. These vary widely.

There is, for instance, a shiny model we can call the WidgetMasTer. Suppose you want to learn from this model how to bend a widget, and so tap out B-E-N-D. If you hit two of the jam-packed keys at once, a red light flashes and an alarm goes off. This is, as the instructions explain, "for your protection."

After you tap out B-E-N-D, across the screen glides: "REFER TO ITEM REQUIRED."

Anyone used to book indexes will suppose this means to name the *noun* first—that is, "Widget, bend." But, if you tap out W-I-D-G-E-T-B, the screen replies, "STATE REFERENCE DESIRED."

Apparently, this must be the place

to hit B-E-N-D. But then WidgetMasTer unreels: "REFER TO ITEM REQUIRED."

If you move fast enough, you *can* hit W-I-D-G-E-T-B— but then the red light flashes and the alarm hammers. There is no such thing as a "widgetb," and WidgetMasTer knows it.

The only way out of this impasse is to throw WidgetMasTer in the trash can (the preferred solution), or else fight your way through the instruction pamphlet. Eventually you will locate reference to a "GN" key (for "Generic Name") and an "Op" key (for "Operation") and an "Sp" key (for "Species") and a "Q" key (for "Query"). It develops that all you have to do is to just press the Q key, and release it, then press the GN key and tap out W-I-D-G-E-T, then press the Sp key and tap out A-L-L, then press the Op key and tap out B-E-N-D, and then press the Q key again, and then, after a brief little two-minute pause while the red light blinks on and off to show how busy WidgetMasTer is, then there slides across the screen: "MAINTAINING PROPER CORRECT ALIGNING GRIP USING SPECIAL TOOL 2WB STEADILY AND FIRMLY APPLY ALTERNATING PRESSURE USING SPECIAL TOOL 1LWB. USE RED HEAT TO AVOID DOWLING CORKING AND CHIEFFERING. *DO NOT FORCE THE BEND.* CAUTION! *NEVER HEAT TREATED WIDGETS!!*"

Since the first part of this answer is gone from the screen well before the last part appears, you may think at first that that sense of confusion results because you missed something the first time around. All you have to do to check the answer is to go through the procedure again, wait till the red light gets through blinking, then watch closely as the answer glides past.

What, it *still* isn't clear?

The trouble seems to be that WidgetMasTer is, as they say in the handheld trade, "question-progenitive"—for every uncertainty you bring to it, it presents you with at least one new uncertainty. The only known way to get a clear answer out of this oracle is to have no uncertainties to begin with. If you already know the subject backwards and forwards, you can nearly always unravel its answers.

Very different from WidgetMasTer is the "Mechanic's Special." For instance, if you tap out, H-O-W R-E-M-O-V-E S-T-U-C-K N-U-T? the wide screen answers:

EXPERIENCE SHOWS IF YOU HAVE SIX NUTS, FIVE MAY BE EASY; ONE WILL STICK. IF THE BOLT HAS TWISTED OFF, REFER TO *BROKEN BOLTS*. IF NOT, AND YOU HAVE AN EXTRA NUT, REFER TO *NUTSPLITTER*. IF NOT, REFER TO *HEAT*. ALSO REFER TO *DIRT, EYES, KNUCKLES, FIRST-AID, VICEGRIPS, CHAIN WRENCH, LEVERAGE, IMPACT, BRASS NUTS, INACCESSIBLE, BLOCKED, RUSTED, SEIZED, ROUNDED, SLOW TUNES AND CAN PRAYER HELP?*

One Mechanic's Special is worth many WidgetMasTers. But, so far, the trade market has a wider selection of WidgetMasTers.

Of course, whatever you're looking for, the device not only needs to be good in itself. It also has to fit the situation. If, for instance, what you are looking for is a gift for a younger member of the family, considerable thought may be needed.

A checker or chess-playing model, for instance, can often keep a boy happy and out of trouble for upwards of half-an-hour at a time—but be sure to get the kind that can be "backstepped" to show previous moves. Other-

wise, there will be howls that the handheld *cheats*. Incidentally, the "Disrupt" button, that knocks a temporary hole in the chess handheld's calculating ability, is not to be sneered at. It gets tedious pushing the "Reset" button to start a new game.

Any game-playing model, of course, may seem "non-educational"; but then, nearly everyone agrees that a dater is educational; and do you really want:

"Say, do you know what happened in 1066? . . . No, no. *Everybody* knows *that*. I mean, do you know what *else* happened? You *don't*? You *don't know*? You mean to say *you don't know*? Well—"

Then there is the very educational "Historical Facts" model:

"You've heard of Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant, haven't you? . . . Okay, quick—What do the 'E' and the 'S' stand for?"

Avoid like poison the "Political Science" jobs. Those so far available obviously were put together either with the kindly help of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, or by charter members of the Death-To-Taxes League.

All these specialized models are, at least comparatively speaking, standard traditional devices. So are the:

6) Pocket computers. Most of us have had some chance recently to find out what can happen when we first design our own programs. The newer handhelds of this type may have a still larger storage capacity, faster speeds, easier programs, newer microtapes with more ingenious prerecorded programs, crystal-needle master programs, new sensing and acting attachments, independent detachables—and with all this extra latitude, it is, of course, possible to get into a worse mess; but, at least, it

is a still a mess of a familiar kind.

It is the recently marketed "companion computer" or "pocket buddy" model that adds the tricky new dimension to handhelds. With *these* you can lose more than your money and your disposition.

Take, for instance, the "CCI," which is "Mark I" of the new "Constant Companion" series. This device fits in your shirt pocket, has a "receptor"—a kind of little eye on a flexible stalk—that sticks over the pocket's edge—and a grille that "hears" and on occasion "talks."

CCI was introduced at a price of ten thousand, now sells for six thousand five hundred, and, to the non-enthusiast, it is well worth this price *not* to have one. It is rumored that the price will come down further in the near future. The value of not having one seems likely to stay up.

How does CCI work?

There is the first catch.

No explanation of its construction is given, and curious competitors have found that it self-destructs when opened. This means you do not really know its strengths or limitations. It is *rumored* by the salesmen that the device is in contact with a ring of satellites which in turn are in touch with four gigantic interconnected computers.

And what does CCI do? A quote from the brochure will give the idea:

"... your Constant Companion is at all times on the alert. Beyond the reach of human failings, he (*sic*) never forgets, never falters, and never fails ... If you have an appointment or a birthday to remember, your personal friend and pocket private secretary will prompt you at the proper time. . . . If you wish to review a scene or an event, CCI has it. If you want to reexamine a spoken agreement, test again the nuances of personal expres-

sion, your Constant Companion will unfailingly help you. . . ."

CCI is a personal portable combination reminder service, bug, and memory. But, how does it work? How, for instance, does the device communicate with the ring of satellites? What if you drive through an underground tunnel, or board a submarine for a submerged cruise? Does CCI somehow stay in contact with the ring of satellites? If not, why don't the instructions warn you? If so, the Defense Department will be interested.

Incidentally, CCI is already reported to be the subject of study by a government "task force" to determine the legal and technological means to, in effect, *subpoena* your "Pocket Pal," in case you ever land in court.

Meanwhile, if you have an argument with someone who insists you said what you know you didn't say, you can "back-key" to the appropriate stage of the argument, set the device for "Databanks—Repeat Conversation" and have the indescribable thrill of hearing your own voice blow your own argument to bits.

As if they had not done enough already, the manufacturers of CCI are out with a handheld boasting "extended capabilities." This is CCI—"Constant Companion and Counselor, Mark I." This device incorporates an earphone on a cord that goes down the back of the neck under the shirt collar, to just behind the shirt pocket, where a pin-type connector passes through into CCI itself. The cord and earphone permit CCCI to talk directly into your ear.

CCCI has its own sensing apparatus, plus tiny skin and pulse attachments, and a set of special glasses ("two hundred flattering styles available"). Its sensing apparatus follows what's happening, its skin and pulse monitors watch your emotional reac-

tions, and the special glasses enable the device to tell where you are looking; the device's circuits then correlate what is going on outside with your inner responses.

That it can do this is, of course, impressive. But do you want it doing it to you?

CCCI was, naturally enough, made to sell, and to do that somebody has to buy it. It is priced at twenty-five thousand. There is a little problem there. *Who* will pay for it?

Two answers seem to have been arrived at.

First, it can be *rented*. Under a "special introductory offer," you can now use it for a week for "only three hundred and fifty dollars." That's the first answer.

In groping for a second answer, the planners seem to have asked: What *might* lead anyone to pay the price?

To see the answer arrived at, consider the slant of this sample from the advertising brochure, which incidentally is headed, "You Don't Have Everything If You Have No Constant Companion To Guide You In the Most Intimate Affairs of Your Life." The brochure reads:

"... In this ultramodern era, the powerful logic and memory capabilities of the high-speed electronic computer have long since revolutionized manufacture, transportation, and communication—but they have left mankind still wandering in jungles of personal emotional ignorance.

"Now, with the scientific miracle of CCCI, for the first time the mighty djinn of the Computer Age stands at your side to guide you adroitly through the mazes of ignorance to mysterious pleasure palaces of the senses. The jeweled secrets of ecstasy, hidden to others, are opened to you, who know their value to be

beyond price.

"Where others blunder and hesitate, your guardian djinn guides you on a magic carpet to the heart of whatever tempestuous interest rouses your imperious fancy.

"Wise in the ways of human nature, encoded deep in its capacious memory banks for instant reference and lightning retrieval, CCCI represents a fusion of new knowledge and ancient wisdom, of—"

In case anyone hasn't caught on, the following paragraphs get the idea further pinned down for the wide-eyed reader, using words like:

"Houri . . . enchantment . . . delights . . . forbidden knowledge . . . wisdom . . . harem . . . silken . . . seductive . . . sensuous . . ."

Without ever exactly getting to the specifics, the general idea planted in the mind of the prospective buyer is clear enough. And—Who knows—this approach may make sales.

But what is the device worth?

Consider the experience of an acquaintance we will disguise as "S. L.," for "Secret Lover."

S. L. was secretly fascinated by a certain brunette, but was also sunk in tortured despair because of his own inadequacies. The exact nature of S. L.'s inadequacies can be left to the imagination, the *important* thing being that, to deal with them, he rented CCCI for a week, and at once confided his troubles to his new "constant companion and counselor."

"I'm scared," he concluded, after unloading his store of tortured doubts into CCCI's capacious memory banks. "What if she rejects me? What can I do?"

Into his ear there spoke a wise elder-statesman voice:

"Success is impossible at a distance. Closeness creates opportunity."

This sounded reasonable. So, after

some further vacillation, S. L. got himself invited to a party whose only redeeming feature was the likely presence of the brunette. As S. L. circulated amongst the guests, the wise elder statesman voice in his ear was reassuring:

"Confidence is the key. You are assured and confident. There is every prospect for success. You *will* succeed. . . . That is she? . . . Yes, pulse, respiration, visual focus, and all other indicators agree. The subject is now being fixed for reference in memory banks, and all channels are—*One moment*—"

The elder-statesman voice suddenly sharpened, freezing S. L. to the spot as he stared at the girl, who also froze, staring wide-eyed at him, while in S. L.'s ear, CCCI poured out urgent warnings:

" . . . Attention! Subject is equipped with an Allectronics Elder Brother Mark III Protector! This is a dual-function device to guard against emotional entanglement in the user while repelling external advances, using high-voltage fine-wire shock prods!"

S. L. stared, paralyzed by this intelligence.

The girl stared back, blushed, winced, and suddenly whirled and walked fast toward a door leading to an inner hall of the apartment. CCCI was pouring instructions into S. L.'s ear:

" . . . pursuit is inadvisable! The Allectronics Mark III will deliver a warning shock to subject if she has any interest, and will deliver a severe shock to you on contact. This will condition subject against you, and you against subject. The correct tactic is to withdraw at once, and attempt to determine—"

S. L. abruptly jerked the plug out of his ear, and went through the door after the girl. Totally forgetting CCCI,

A HANDHELD PRIMER

he called out in a low angry voice, "What are you running away for? I haven't done anything!"

"Because," came the angry reply, "every time you looked at me, I get an electric shock!"

"Well—that isn't *my* fault!"

"Well it certainly isn't mine! All I'm trying to do is protect myself! You've got *Wolf Wiring*!"

S. L. had never heard CCCI spoken of as "Wolf Wiring" before. But the unexpected exhilaration of the conversation carried him past the confusion:

"If you don't like Wolf Wiring, I'll get rid of it. At least, I'm not a human lightning rod!"

"Ouch! *Damn* this thing!"

"Why not send Elder Brother home, too?"

"All right! I can't stand *this*!"

Anyone who considers this incident can decide for himself just what CCCI and Elder Brother Mark III Protector are *actually* worth.

The thing to do seems clear enough. Stick to handhelds of types that have been around for a while, and try one at twenty bucks or less first. That makes it easier to get an idea how they work, what the one you have lacks, and what you want, before you spend more.

As for any existing model that will benevolently run your life for you—Well, as they say: "This approach shows great potential promise for the future; at present, however, considerable further development work appears to be needed."

The last word on this subject seems to be that there isn't any last word yet; but keep your eyes open and your guard up—They no doubt are already struggling with that "further development work" that appears to be needed.

—CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

THE KING IS DEAD: LONG LIVE THE QUEEN!

STEPHEN TALL

Stephen Tall makes his debut in this magazine with a story which, he says, "is still Stephen Tall, but has a somewhat different feel . . ."

Illustrated by RICHARD OLSEN

THE TERRITORY was well guarded. Wolvem had known that that would have to be so. He invaded it with full knowledge, with his purple eyes wide open.

It had been the odor, first, that had told him; a faint rank effluvium that rose from the rocks in sheltered spots. It was not stale, not weathered. It was a recent smell, a smell renewed; a warning. But it was nothing Wolvem had not expected.

"Big," he told himself. "Probably old. He has had this territory for many revolutions of the world. He had had his life. Now, it is my turn."

He reared himself high, sniffing with grim pleasure the icy air of a bleak and craggy land, a landscape broken and gouged and piled, with steel-cold streams plunging downward from blue icefields, and red, tall-spired trees clinging wherever they could find footing. It was a fine territory.

Almost immediately came the telepathic challenge, the reminder that custom prescribed and that was always given. It was mellowed by distance, but its message was plain.

"Taken," the message said. "Retreat

and live. Continue and die. There is only food for one."

Wolvem knew that. He knew that in a small timespan from that moment the cold rays of the pale, distant sun might cease to exist for him. His mighty carcass could soon be receiving the eager attentions of the crowding converters, becoming an addition to the sparse and precious biomass of the territory. From that point of view, at least, he would be welcome.

He made no answer to the challenge. Instead, he moved swiftly and grimly forward. His large and deep-set purple eyes, which could peer deep into infrared, and yet could tolerate and use the abundant ultraviolet, hooded themselves to make the best use of the waxing light of day. He could perceive the dim trails among the great boulders of the rock slides, trails that no rock climbers ever made. Some of those climbers he could see on distant crags and pinnacles, watching with telescopic eyes. But the trail-maker was the king, the top carnivore, and somewhere ahead he waited. Or perhaps he didn't wait. To hold a territory such as this he must be large and confident. Perhaps

he was coming, coming fast, eager to destroy.

Wolvem shielded his mind. He moved with care, so that no stones rolled, so that not even small pebbles clashed together. He watched the ledges above him. This very precaution gave him an idea, and he left the easier going, climbed softly up into the jumble of rocks above the plainest of the trails. There he lurked. But he did not wait long.

The old king came. The size of him made Wolvem catch his breath. For a brief moment his mind shield dropped, and the huge being below him came to a stop, every sense alert, his metallic fangs glistening. But Wolvem was huge himself. He did not hesitate.

He lifted the boulder before him, grasping it in two pairs of anterior forepaws, steadying it with his four opposable thumbs. He sent the missile crashing downward, and he followed it with a swift rush almost unbelievable in a being so big. The old giant leaped, but not fast enough. The hurtling rock smashed into his flank and brought forth a great yowl of agony. His shattered hip joint gave way, and he could not turn. Wolvem's bulk, irresistible as the stone, crushed him down, and Wolvem's gleaming fangs chopped into his neck behind the small upright ears. The spinal cord snapped. The massive body lay shuddering. It had been as destructive an organic machine as the planet Arctica could produce, but now it was only biomass, awaiting the attentions of the converters.

Wolvem regarded it with impersonal interest, while his deep chest still heaved from effort.

"It is thus," he said, "that every being dies. I did not overcome him. He was not alert. Except for this, we



might have destroyed each other. But he forgot to imagine. In consequence, he did not deserve to live."

It was not a statement of Wolvem's personal philosophy. It was a survival belief, and every living thing, each in its own way, knew it well.

The planet Arctica lay far from its sun. Life was hard, and, for most beings, short. The little energy of the thin sunshine was widely spread, and trapped only by the sparse vegetation that clung where it might to rock and cliff and crag. Great as it was, Arctica supported few advanced beings, and these had come finally to be a single race; Wolvem's race—the race of the giant carcass that now lay stiffening on the trail.

Wolvem raised his fearsome head and gave a wild, purring call. It echoed from the cliff faces, went whispering down the small valleys above the glinting streams. Then he listened. But there was no answer. The waters gurgled, the thin cold wind blew as always around the rocks. And after a moment he called again.

He knew they were there, because they were everywhere that biomass existed. He knew they would hear and recognize the call. It was the food call. Only Wolvem's race could voice it. And finally he heard them, gurgling, grunting, pushing, with occasional little squeals as they hustled and jostled each other.

Wolvem leaped into the rocks above the trail, settled comfortably on his haunches, and watched with interest as the horde of plump, pink hairless beings came hurrying toward the feast. Each bloated body was carried along by four pairs of short fat legs. The heads were scarcely distinct, but small red eyes gleamed at the front of each being, and below them loose moist lips writhed back

from many metallic, razor-edged teeth.

Wolvem's feeling of satisfaction grew. The converters were numerous and fine, each a luscious reservoir of food stuff. The old king there on the trail had managed his territory well. He had seen to it that no biomass was lost, that all dead beings of whatever sort had gone promptly to the converters. And now he made his last contribution.

The converters rolled over the great carcass in a squirming, wiggling wave. With grunts and squeals each being applied itself to the food. The smack of lips and the grind of teeth made a strange humming addition to the whistling wind and splashing water. The coarse matted hair, the tough skin and great muscles that lay under it, and finally the very bones themselves vanished steadily, ground to mush by the busy teeth and stuffed into each being until the tightened naked skin could hold no more. When full each creature pushed sluggishly away from the carcass, its place taken instantly by another.

Only if he had been starving would Wolvem have touched the flesh of the old king. It was taboo. It would have been cannibalism, as repugnant to Wolvem's race as human flesh would be to the race of man. But when the converters finished with it, it was no longer anything but organic stuff, and that, as Wolvem well knew, was used again and again. The converters were the vessels in which it was kept. They prepared it for the use of Wolvem's race. And nothing was sweeter than a converter that, having been full fed, had been allowed time to digest and convert its food into the flesh and fat of its soft, bloated body.

The big carnivore stretched his steel-taut muscles, clinched and

unclinchd his four sets of long, sinewy fingers. Below him the swarming converters had finished their salvage job. A few late-comers, grunting and whimpering, snuffled about where the great body had lain, polished the last purple bloodstains from the rocks with loose, restless pink tongues. The old king was a part of his environment now; a part of it forever.

"A fair territory," Wolvem said. "It has been well kept. It will require a competent being to defend it." There was a savage confidence in the statement. Wolvem intended to defend it. And he knew he was competent.

Until the distant sun sank from sight Wolvem explored. He left his great tracks on snowfields. He climbed high amid the rocky crags, and grinned tolerantly at the panic of the cloven-hoofed rock beings as they fled to the highest pinnacles. Wolvem regarded them with satisfaction. They fed on the crusty lichen and the small hardy rooted things of the heights. These in turn trapped the energy of the pale cold rays of the sun. Without them, nothing would live. All these things Wolvem understood.

Often, as he prowled, Wolvem sent thought probes ahead of him. He occasionally spent minutes in motionless, concentrated alertness. But there was never a whisper of the thing he searched for. The old king had not allowed the presence of a truce being. Wolvem was finally convinced that no other of his race existed in all that bleak, broken, but to Wolvem beautiful expanse. His conquest was complete.

The winds of the dark time were rising, frost rime growing on the rocks. All the long day he had not eaten, so Wolvem sniffed out a converter in its shallow burrow. He

drew it forth carefully, a plump squirming mass of concentrated foodstuff, full sized, enough even for his great appetite. It was pale, gray, sluggish, and only clashed its teeth feebly before he shook the life from it. It was in its best stage. Its lack of color told him that it had earlier fed to repletion, then had had time to digest and convert all its meal.

Wolvem devoured it slowly, bones and all, savoring its sweetness. His heavy fur ignored the wind and the numbing chill, but he knew that somewhere along the cliffs a comfortable retreat was tucked away. It was his retreat now, and he wanted it.

"I have slept in the rocks for the last time," he told himself. "Until I find my home I will not rest again."

It was late in the sun cycle when he finally found it, a cleverly screened cavern opening high on an escarpment, with a broad rock ledge before it, and several of the reddish trees clinging there and breaking the harshness. Never before had Wolvem seen such luxury.

Inside the cavern the winds could not penetrate. In the entrance wide slabs of stone had been set like baffles, so that the forces of the storms were lost, and only a fresh current of pleasant air circulated. There was little light. None was needed. Wolvem's purple eyes made use of the soothing infrared; he saw more than light would have revealed. His broad nostrils, too, told him much of the cavern, and of the being who had owned it before him.

All his senses gave him favorable reports. He was alone. He was unchallenged. He could lie here in this pleasant place, on what had been the old king's bed of lichens and branches; lie here until his supple, steel-hard, fur-sheathed body was

rested and renewed. And beyond the cavern mouth were all the ingredients of survival. Out there the lichens and rooted things fixed the pale sunshine, the climbers of the rocks ate them, and the converters continually cheated the tiny beings that caused decay—and it was all for him. In this harsh world, in any space, there would be but one “king”, one top carnivore. And here, his name was Wolvem.

With the return of the sun he went forth to survey his living space. He had to know the boundaries, beyond which a telepathic challenge would come from the next king. He searched out the corridors, the narrow access areas between territories that belonged to no being, but allowed the transients to move across the land. In these lanes growing young pilfered a hungry livelihood until they grew strong enough to challenge for a territory. Often they challenged too soon, and went to the converters of the territory they coveted, becoming a part of its biomass. Here, too, females wandered, always searching for a space that they might occupy by truce. Regularly, they were successful. That was why there were always young in the corridors.

“I will permit no invasion, make no truce,” Wolvem told himself coldly. “This is my land. No one will be strong enough to take it from me.”

It was a grim resolve. Wolvem was too close to the corridors himself for it to be otherwise. For it was in them that every being of Wolvem's race learned well its planet's single commandment—*survive*! Nothing else had meaning.

And because he was huge and young and intelligent, Wolvem was able to make good his intent. The

harsh but pleasant summer moved on, followed by the unbelievable cold and the savage storms of winter. All beings that could do so dug deep beneath the rocks. The hoofed rock climbers huddled in bands behind walls, venturing out briefly to eat of the frozen lichens. Nothing enjoyed, but they lived. They survived. Wolvem kept watch from the ledge in front of his cavern. Even he found good-getting hard, a challenge. But he was content.

It was after the bitterest storm that she came. Wolvem felt the calm resignation of her unshielded mind as he lay in the comfort of his cave. From the ledge his purple eyes soon picked out the dark form, staggering erratically across a snowfield far below. He sent his challenge, as was custom.

“Taken,” he projected. “Retreat—and live. Continue—and die. There is only food for one.”

She stopped. Wolvem could see her brace her body against the tearing wind. Her head turned slowly as she swept the ledges, looking for him. He rose and stood high on his great hindquarters.

“Retreat—or die,” he said again. “There is only food for one.”

There was no reply. She began to travel again, more steadily now, moving directly toward his challenge. There was no defiance in her mind. Yet she detected his message. He felt her receive it—and come quietly and grimly on. He dropped swiftly from his ledge, and went to meet her with a rush.

He floundered through the snow piled and drifted deep around the shuddering trees, then broke onto the wind-swept slopes below. There he could travel in great leaps. The dark toiling form quickly grew larger. As

he drew near she stopped again, braced herself and stood waiting quietly. He slid to a halt three body-lengths away. She was too calm. Wolvem never trusted what he did not understand.

But now speech was possible, and she used it. A single word.

"Truce," she said.

"There is no truce," Wolvem growled. "I have never offered truce. Go back or die. There is only food for one."

She studied him gravely with great sunken yellow eyes. She was big, the biggest female Wolvem had ever seen. But her dark-furred pelt hung in folds over the fine strong bones. She braced herself as much from weakness as from need to resist the driving wind. She was starving.

"You have fed well," she observed. "Perhaps a few scraps remain. The converters are deep in their burrows now. I will serve in their stead."

Wolvem felt no pity, no concern. All things died. It was death that made other life possible. And all went to the converters at last.

So he simply said once more, "Go back or die. There is only food for one."

"I would require little. It is not pleasant to look into the eyes of death."

"You are looking," Wolvem said grimly. "Go back, or I must destroy you."

He could feel her faint amusement. Hers was a calm, strong spirit, even in a starving body.

"Without food, I die anyway," she said. "Does it matter how or where?"

"Or when?" Wolvem rumbled.

"Or when," she agreed. "I will serve a last purpose. I will add biomass to your territory."

Wolvem hesitated. He destroyed

life each meal he ate. But, when he was not menaced, to destroy a mind—She felt his indecision before he himself realized it. She took swift advantage.

"Truce can be short," she suggested. "It is always yours to decide when it will end."

He considered, coldly, his thoughts shielded. For some strange reason he did not wish to kill her. But he would feel relief if she were dead. Wolvem did not understand his own thinking. It was a puzzling thing.

"Truce would serve you little," he said. "You have no strength to hunt."

Her yellow eyes gleamed.

"Fragments from your meal. Shelter from the wind. With these I might live until the sun's rays grow stronger."

"I leave few fragments," he said.

"But no fewer than I have now. Truce is a necessary custom. With strength I could make it pleasant."

Wolvem turned abruptly away.

"When you have strength, you go."

"You shall say," she agreed.

He fixed his purple eyes on a low rock wall beyond the snowfield, and opened his mind so that she could see where he looked.

"Behind that wall lies a rock climber, new killed. Go and eat. There are many small caves in the escarpment. They will give shelter from the wind."

Wolvem did not look back as he strode with dignity across the snowfield again. He flung the deep drifts aside in the forest beneath the escarpment. He climbed the steep and narrow trail up the cliff face to his rock ledge. Only then did he open his mind and turn his purple eyes downward.

She had found the food. There was nothing of gratefulness, of thankful-

ness in her thoughts as she tore at the frozen carcass; only a frantic hunger. Wolvem expected nothing else. He would not have recognized such sentiments if they had been there. They were not a part of his world.

Nor did he know any pity or concern for the gaunt and starveling creature so ravenously consuming the kill he had intended for his own nourishment when the sun had slept and risen. He could not understand why he had not allowed her to die. He only knew that tomorrow he would have to stalk and kill again. There would be nothing left of the rock climber.

In the night more snow fell. The winds screamed, and death was close to every living thing. Without food the female would not possibly have survived that night. From the warmth of his cavern Wolvem searched with his mind. If she slept, her own mind would not be shielded. He could tell if she still lived. And after a long while he found her. There were no hunger pulses, nor was she cold. She was curled up, in shelter, and her body was making strength from the meal that had been meant to be his. Wolvem tried to feel regret, and was not even aware that he had failed. He slept again with something like content.

THE LARGE ROCK CLIMBERS bore great horns on their heads, and roamed in bands wherever lichens grew. They climbed even where the winds were fiercest, for there the snow was blown away, exposing their sparse and frozen fare. With their shaggy coats, they could resist the most terrible cold. Where they could eat, they could live.

Wolvem struck in the middle of the largest band, as it rested huddled

against a sheltering wall in the pale sunshine. The creatures scattered. Each climbed frantically for the heights, but the one he had marked, a fine heavy female, lay dead under his huge paws. He lifted it with no effort at all, and carried it out into the open. On a bare flat rock, from which the winds had swept the snow, slowly and appreciatively he made his meal.

When he tore open the body, to get at the heart and the soft plump glands he enjoyed most, he found that a young had already begun to grow in the creature's belly. It had been a mistake to kill her. When the days were warmer this would have been another rock climber; another meal. His territory would feed him well only if he harvested carefully. And with this thought Wolvem remembered the hungry truce female in her small cave somewhere along the escarpment. She would eat as much as he.

"I will leave many fragments," he decided. "She must gain strength quickly, and then she must go. There is only food for one."

So he left a whole hind quarter, and the horned head, and much of the skin besides. It had been a big climber. He was comfortably filled.

And he was scarcely back on the ledge that fronted his cavern before he saw her moving across the bleak snowfield. She made her way steadily against the wind, directly to where the fragments lay. She had been watching his every move.

When she reached the food and saw the amount of it, her mind shield dropped. Wolvem could sense her greed. She ate as though she had not had a whole climber only the day before. True, it had been a small one, but for a well-fed member of their species it would have been enough.

She must have starved for a long time.

He crossed the feeding rock late in the day, for it was his habit to prowl far before he slept. Always well fed himself, he enjoyed the rugged weather. And he marveled at what the female had done to the fragments he had left. She had consumed everything, even to the bones and the very teeth of the head. He reflected soberly on the strength of jaw that had ground up the horns until they could be swallowed. She understood, this female. If it came from a living thing, it was food. It would give strength. Only a few hairs lodged in crevices showed that the body of the rock climber had ever been there. The converters could scarcely have left less.

The female was called Wilda. She told him this after a number of days had passed, each day marked by the death of another climber. She had stayed quietly out of sight, never coming to the food he left until Wolvem had climbed the trail to his cavern. She still walked slowly. Her steps dragged. Yet her head was high and alert, and there was no lack of energy in the way she ate. And to Wolvem's purple eyes, even from distance, her fine body no longer seemed gaunt and emaciated. It was becoming rounded, with a sinuous sleekness that affected Wolvem strangely.

"She has strength," he decided. "It is time for her to go."

He shielded his mind and made his way quietly through the drifts under the trees. As she came from her meal, he rose up suddenly before her. He had stalked her as he did the rock climbers, and yet he felt that she knew he was there. It disturbed him.

"You are no longer weak," he said.

"The truce is finished. too many climbers are having to die. You will find your food outside my territory. Go!"

She studied him gravely with hooded, yellow eyes. Her body seemed to wilt, to shrink, to quiver in the cold wind.

"It is your truce," she said submissively. "You can end it whenever you will. But first, will you hear me speak?"

"It will make no difference," Wolvem said. "You go. But speak first, if you want. No food will be needed for that."

She crouched in the blowing, powdery snow.

"I am Wilda," she said. "I have had one truce before. The male was old; not mighty as you are. It was a small territory, without large rock climbers at all. Only the small kind, that have claws and dig under rocks and are hard to find in winter. There were few converters. There was not much biomass in all the territory. Yet he wanted me to stay."

"He was not intelligent," Wolvem grunted.

"He knew what you have not yet learned," Wilda said. "A truce can be pleasant. But I left him there. There was not enough food for two."

"Nor is there here," Wolvem said. "So you leave here as well."

She rose and stretched her sleek body. The yellow eyes glowed.

"I have eaten today. Let me have shelter in the cliff, and you need feed me no more."

He eyed her warily. He was not at ease. He knew that he should strike her down. It was his truce, as she said, and he could do with it what he chose.

Still, he answered.

"Have you learned to live without

food?"

He did not realize that she was desperately treating him as he really was, a giant juvenile who did not yet know that he was a mighty, full-grown male. Her fate turned on a word, and she knew it.

"I have learned to live on little things. I have heard the rustle of the small climbers in the rocks under the snow. I know how to take them. It will not be long before the converters are stirring again. There must be many here, and one would keep me alive for days."

Her yellow eyes watched him anxiously.

"I would not hunt the big climbers of the heights. They are, after all, the proper food for a strong male. Females are happy with lesser fare and small amounts. When the spring comes I would leave your territory, and there would be as much food as ever."

Wolvem began to understand what she was doing. He knew that her last statement was ridiculous. But gradually he relaxed. His grim purposefulness faded. He was filled with a vast tolerance for this pleading thing. There was, after all, food for more than one for a brief time yet.

Hers was a hard, sharp mind. It would be pleasant to test his own against it, to learn and to teach. Wolvem did not know that thus the knowledge of his race was passed along, was added to, was perpetuated.

He rose tall on his great haunches and turned his purple eyes on her. She lay almost prone in the snow. She appeared abject, submissive, but her mind did not confirm it. The big lissome body tantalized him. It seemed the most beautiful thing he had ever seen—but he was not quite sure why.

"You may stay," he said finally.

But Wolvem had not lost his caution. He left the female Wilda to herself again for a time after that meeting. He watched from his ledge when she moved snow drifts and tore rock piles apart to get at the small diggers that lived among them. And she did find food. After a long blizzard, when the snow fell for days, she seemed as sleek as ever.

Wolvem was careful to leave no fragments from his own kills. What he did not wish to eat he gathered up and carried to the ledge by his cavern. In milder times his purring call would have brought the converters to dispose of it. But now he realized how handy it was to have food nearby. When the snow blew in clouds, he could have a small meal without the trouble of making a kill.

But mainly he intended that Wilda should keep the truce terms she had made. She had agreed to gather her own nourishment. To his surprise and admiration she was able to do it. Several times, as he watched her work, he gently probed her mind. Always he found it open to him. He did not communicate, but he learned what she thought. Or, perhaps, he learned what she wanted him to know. He found that she thought him a mighty hunter, the strongest male she had ever known. He learned that she was humble and grateful that she was allowed to remain in his territory. This last Wolvem found hard to understand. These were strange meanings. They were not sentiments of survival. He had never encountered them before.

There was another thing in her mind, too, a thing now always present, an urgent thing, a wild, pulsing need. Wolvem had not before known that need himself, but sud-

denly he understood what it was. And on an afternoon of pale sun, when they each had fed, he went to her on the snowy slope and settled it for them both.

Then life changed for Wolvem. He was proud as he had never been proud of the greatest kill he had ever made. He excused himself for these different feelings. They were not weakness. They were pride in a different kind of strength.

"She may stay until the streams flow," he told himself. "There is food enough until then. Then she must go."

Wilda had sheltered in a small cave scarcely large enough to contain her long body. Wolvem coaxed her up to a large one near his own, and allowed her to use his trail to reach it. He again left portions of his kills for her. He permitted her to sit on his ledge and look out across the rugged reaches of his territory.

He knew it was dangerous. He knew that he had served his purpose with her—and that she should go. But he postponed it. He allowed her to stay a little longer. Aside from the unique delights of the female, it was good to have a mind to strive with, someone to stimulate his thoughts, to experience his wonder about the life that was so hard to keep. It was a different pleasure. He could not resist it.

Wilda shared with him, and watched him with a slowly growing hope. She had dreaded being driven away. This was the easiest living she had ever known. She would not willingly give it up. The thoughts within her shielded mind would have stirred Wolvem into terrible rage. But he only saw her amber eyes, like the yellow glint of the pale sun on a glacier, watching him with admiration. Sleek

and beautiful, she encouraged his content.

"He is great," she thought, "but still he is weak. He finds it hard to bring pleasure to an end."

And when the movements of the young one within her became regular and strong, she planned what she would do. Then, with cold efficiency and no regret at all, she did it.

The truce had served its purpose. It was not intended to extend further. Already the streams were beginning to flow, and the converters were astir. The race, her race, was perpetuated. She owed life to the life in her belly. To survive, it would have to feed well.

Wolvem lay on the ledge in the cold light of the tiny distant sun. His belly was full. All his senses were gratified. His great head was thrown back, his jaws were relaxed, his long blue tongue flowed out loosely over his mighty fangs. Through the matted, rusty fur of his heavy neck the female could see the steady pulse of the blood channel. Stealthily, she probed his brain. He rested deeply. All his precautions were relaxed. He was enjoying. He was neglecting the basic verities. Yet he knew that there was no life without vigilance. He did not deserve to live.

She struck with the savage precision that had ended the lives of a thousand beings. Her curved fangs, almost as mighty as his own, tore out his throat cleanly, and the released blood channels spurted purple streams. But she knew his strengths as well as his weaknesses. Even with his life flowing out he could still kill. She could sense the content in his sleeping mind as it changed to a bitter realization.

He rolled to his feet and she struck again, her shoulder against his flank,
(cont. on page 132)

THE SPACE ROC

An unseen monster lurked in waiting . . .

ROBERT F. YOUNG

FROST the pilot noticed the unusual topographical formation during the first orbit. He took it to be a mountain. However, it was unlike any mountain he'd ever seen: long and relatively low, and so smooth it seemed to have been sanded.

Baines, commander of the *Transstar*, also identified the formation as a mountain when, apprised of it by Frost, he observed it during the second orbit, along with Grimm the navigator and Roberts the paramed.

Whatever it was, it was a welcome relief from the rill-scarred deserts, pocked plateaus and barren sea bottoms that constituted the rest of the dead world's terrain. Baines decided it rated a closer look, and next time around he ordered Frost to bring the *Transstar* down. Frost did so, placing the vehicle neatly in the formation's postprandial shadow, a short distance from the base.

The *Transstar* was the first ship of its kind—an exploration vehicle built expressly to discover habitable worlds. The Vegan system had looked promising—ten planets all told, five of which had differentiated at some time during their careers. Four of the latter had proved incapable of supporting life. This one—the fifth—didn't even have an atmosphere.

The odd formation definitely wasn't a mountain; this became clear to the crew the moment the *Transstar* came to rest. Granted, it was more than big enough, but seen at close range it proved to be even smoother than it

had seemed from in orbit. It was as though it had been buffed, not sanded. In hue, it was a sort of wan white.

Baines, Frost and Grimm suited up and went outside, leaving Roberts to guard the ship. Not that there appeared to be anything to guard it against, but regulations had to be observed. "We're seeing only the upper portion, Ernie," Frost said excitedly when the three men reached their destination. "It's half buried in sand."

Baines nodded. "Whatever it is—was—it dates back to when there were winds—an atmosphere. God knows how long ago that was. Get the EMrobots out of storage, George." This to Grimm. "We'll try a little excavating."

Grimm complied. There was no need for shovels: each of the six EMrobots was equipped with a scoop-like appendage designed expressly for digging. The commander chose three sites flush with the formation's flank and about one hundred feet apart. He supervised the middle one himself. Roberts observed the proceedings from the pilot house, uttering a word of caution now and then over the 4-way helmet-hookup. He took his job seriously.

Digging proved difficult at first because the sand kept running back into the holes. Farther down, however, it acquired greater consistency and progress became more rapid. Baines sent Frost back to the *Transstar* for a portable drill. After the pilot broke

three bits without so much as scratching the formation's surface, Baines told him to desist. So much for samples.

Toward midafternoon, Grimm at the west sector of the dig electrified the helmet-hookup with the words, "Ernie—I can make out some markings!"

Baines hurried to the scene. Grimm's excavation was considerably deeper than his own. The two EM-robots rapidly widened it till all of the markings were visible and the commander climbed down into the hole and examined them. They comprised five horizontal rows of impressed symbols—unquestionably a communication of some kind, and just as unquestionably, considering the odds involved, one of many similar, if not identical communications.

"Photograph it, George," the commander told Grimm, who had climbed down beside him, "and go see if the *Transstar's* cyber-system can come up with a translation. Idiomatic, if possible."

Ten minutes later, Grimm read the translation over the helmet-hookup:

"This great sealed city will enable its builders, through maximum utilization of fuel residua and maximum implementation of biochemical recycling, to stave off the extinction of their species for another thousand years. It stands as a fitting monument to our technological resourcefulness in time of crisis, and will when the end comes—as inevitably it must—provide us a fitting tomb."

MORE PHOTOGRAPHS were taken of the markings, a large number of the sealed city; measurements were made, samples of sand and rocks gathered. Then the *Transstar* lifted. Baines had Frost make a final orbit for a series of aerial shots. The com-

mander felt depressed. He underwent a brief siege of disorientation. Looking down at the rills crisscrossing the deserts, all he could think of were scratches made by some gigantic bird in a desperate search for food. The deep pocks covering the plateaus brought peck-marks to his mind. He shook his head to clear it. I must be getting senile, he thought. If anything made those scars, the way of life adopted by those poor bastards mold-ering in their self-built tomb did. "De-orbit, Tim," he said to Frost. "Let's go home."

The Space Roc waited till the visitors left the system, then it flew down from its perch in the black branches of the Tree of Space and followed in the *Transstar's* wake, immune because of its intangibility to the ship's detectors. The Space Roc was ravenous, and it yearned to lay another egg. After the *Transstar* reached its home-world and disappeared into the atmosphere, the Space Roc circled the planet at a great height for a long time. Then it dropped down low for a closer look. Instantly another Space Roc soared up and attacked the interloper. "This is my planet!" it screamed. "Go away! Lay your eggs some place else!" The first Space Roc saw then that the planet's crust was half devoured and realized that in assuming prodigality to be synonymous with plenty it had erred. It soared up and out of the atmosphere and headed toward the Lesser Magellanic Cloud. Maybe there was food there. The second Space Roc dropped back down and resumed feeding. Presently it found a petroleum deposit it had missed and it plunged its bill deep into the crust and began to drink. The deposit had the mellow quality of rare wine. The second Space Roc savored it to the last drop.

—ROBERT F. YOUNG

In an era in which the truth about a man's crimes can be established scientifically and without bias by machines, just how relevant is the Bill of Rights, when viewed through—

THE LOOKING GLASS OF THE LAW

KEVIN O'DONNELL, JR.

Illustrated by TONY GLEESON

THEY STOPPED the bus at the corner of Sherman and Whalley. A burly patrolman wearing the helmet and jodhpurs of a motorcycle cop was first on. With impartial interest, he studied the forty-seven passengers, who, after bored nods, returned to the conversations they'd suspended. The driver muttered something about his schedule and the cop said, "Sure, buddy. Sorry."

He walked down the aisle, scanning the faces that reflected the frail light. "You, ma'am," he said, pointing to a white-haired woman with three shopping bags. She smiled cheerfully and hustled to the front, where two more policeman chatted on the steps. One led her away. "You." A friendly wino blinked through his personal fog. Helping him to his feet, the cop faced him in the right direction and patted him on the shoulder. "And you." He stood above a middle-aged man with shaggy hair and an air of nervous good-fellowship.

"Officer," said George Hennesy, speaking rapidly, "I'm on my way to work. I'm a night watchman, and if I don't get there by—"

"We'll write you an excuse, sir. Please come along."

Praying that he wouldn't have to leave the soft foam seat, Hennesy stared up into patient blue eyes. "Please get somebody else, huh?"

"Sir, I'd hate to have to use this on you." Big-knuckled fingers plucked a dart gun from its leather holster. With a glance at Hennesy, the cop spun the dial to "Obedience". "Sir?"

"You win." When he raised his hands, the sleeves of his ragged blue jacket slid down, baring bony wrists.

"No need for that, sir." Chuckling, he let Hennesy precede him; when he got to the door, he laid an engaging grin upon the remaining passengers. His hearty voice caromed off the rear windows: "I'm sorry we had to delay you. We appreciate your co-operation and your good will—we couldn't do it without you. Thanks, and good night."

As they swung down onto the crowded sidewalk, somebody stuck his head through a window and hollered, "Way to be, offsir—keep up the good work, y'hear?" The bus moved away to a rumble of agree-

ment.

"Jesus," said Hennesy, bitter at having been singled out, "they really love you guys."

"They got reason to, sir." A group of old men swirled past them and he held Hennesy's arm so they wouldn't be separated. "Ten years ago, that bus—and these sidewalks—woulda been deserted. All the people woulda been home, hiding under their beds. They ain't afraid no more, which is how come they love us." Shy astonishment crept over his windburned face as he added, "It's sort of a nice feeling, y'know? Now, c'mon, you got a date with The Machine."

Just my fucking luck, thought Hennesy as his thin soles scraped on the broken asphalt. *Twenty-eight more hours and I'd've been golden. Now Helen's gonna be unhappy, and disappointed, when I get home. Again.* His stomach full of weary hopelessness, he walked towards the Police Department van. There was no line before the entrance, but an inset light burned redly. Resigned to his fate, he fell into an at-ease stance and waited for the minutes to pass. When the old lady came out of the darkness to stand behind him, he turned to the cop in puzzled anger. "Hey, what is this? I was the last one off; I oughta be the last one through."

"Sorry." His silver helmet shimmered in the sodium light. The leather gloves in his hand were black and thick. He slapped them idly against the side of his leg. "She had to check her bags, sir—and anyway, you gotta get to work, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose so." The red glow shifted to emerald green and a figure stumbled out the van's side door.

"In you go, sir," ordered the cop, gesturing with his chin.



"Ah, Christ." He went up three dirt-encrusted steps and pushed on the aluminum door. It swung open at his touch, as had those of the other Machines through which he'd passed. Stepping in, he looked for differences. None. The Machines were all alike, right down to the scuffed green paint on the metal floor. A wall of heavy blue rubber blocked his path. While he glared at it, an amplified voice blasted: "Please insert your arms into the holes."

"All right, already!" Six times he'd gone through the routine; six times the same neutral voice had directed him. The least the cops could do was have a different tape at each Machine. He sighed, and thrust his hands into the holes in the rubber. Velvet-covered steel bands contracted on his wrists and sucked them inwards. The previous subject had been taller than Hennessy, so the holes were high, but The Machine made a smooth adjustment and softened his discomfort. Behind him, another wall rose out of the floor. Inching up to his back, it leaned against him with an even, immobilizing pressure. The forewall retreated from his face, leaving him a pocket of greasy air to breathe and depthless darkness to probe.

As he had six times before, Hennessy made a solemn vow to visit the Hall of Records and register to vote. The machines were killing him—that one was squeezing his head harder than any of the others had—and to his way of thinking, it was all the fault of those lunatics in Congress who'd repealed the fourth and fifth amendments. Them and their cronies in state legislatures around the country who'd decided that overkill was the answer to the crime problem. *I'm gonna register, and I'm gonna vote, and I'm gonna vote for anybody who*

runs against any of those bastards. Even if it's a chimpanzee, I'll vote for him.

Two hundred and forty-nine sensors had wormed their way through his clothing to take up listening posts next to his skin. Their metal ears were cold, and he shivered. He felt the needles jab into his forearms and cursed. *Whatthehell does New Haven need ten of these monsters for?* A Machine processed an average subject in ten minutes. Allowing for delays, balks, and the occasional individual who had to be manhandled into place, it could interrogate five people an hour. One hundred twenty a day. Forty-three thousand, eight hundred a year. Ten Machines upped that last number to four hundred thirty-eight thousand, or one hundred thousand more than the population of New Haven County. *Jesus God, he thought, they won't even leave 'em in one place and give a sucker an even chance. Naw, they gotta keep moving 'em around, so you never know where you shouldn't oughta go.*

His knees buckled as the truth serums hit him; the manacles held him upright. The ebony before his eyes acquired a texture, deep and soft. It separated into patterns and shapes, became three-dimensional, whirled and twirled. In matching time pulsed the paternal voice he'd learned to despise: **HAVE DONE ANYTHING WRONG IN THE LAST THIRTY DAYS?**

Took him right back to third grade, when the nuns used to drag them down to the church on Friday afternoons and make them stand in long shadowed lines, shuffling in and out of confessionals where hoarse-tongued priests gave them advice and penance, and sent them out to sin no more. Dimly, he watched himself say,

"Yes." The sensors soaked up physiological data and relayed it to the computer. A jury of semi-conductors confirmed his honesty.

ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION?

"No."

WAS THAT ONE OCCASION ILLEGAL AS WELL AS WRONG?

Hah, hah, he could beat the rap, all he had to do was say *No* so loudly and clearly that The Machine would have to know he believed it himself, and then it would let him free, because it wasn't allowed to fuck around with morality, only with legality. And Helen wouldn't know anything about it, and he wouldn't have to hurt her. Again. He lifted his head, cleared his throat, smiled at the thought of fooling The Machine, and said, "Yes."

DESCRIBE THE CIRCUMSTANCES—

whadIsay? Jet black sculptures jeered him.

—AS FULLY AND AS COMPLETELY—

ohmydeargod, that stuff really does loosen your tongue. He giggled.

—AS POSSIBLE.

"It was Wednesday, March 19, and it was raining cats and dogs and I was waiting for a bus that wouldn't come for another thirty-three minutes, so I went into Macy's to get out of the rain and the cold. It was really crowded and all the salesgirls were busy, they weren't paying any attention to me, and the aisles were dense with shoppers—I held my wallet 'cause I was afraid somebody'd try to steal it—and I looked at my watch. Had thirty-one minutes to go. I walked around, looking at all the things on display, wishing that I had the money to buy something for my wife Helen just 'cause it was pretty and not 'cause she needed it. There was this ashtray, from Taiwan, carved out of black and white marble, so thin that if you held it up to the light you

could look through it and see the shadows of your fingers. I knew she'd love it. It was small enough to go into my pocket. It fit very nice, no bulges, no sags. I left the store and didn't pay for it." Night figures paused in their dance to applaud his recital; he felt himself grin and bow repeatedly.

WHAT WAS THE PRICE OF THE ASHTRAY?

He wanted to protest that he couldn't possibly remember the exact number of dollars and cents that an unaffordable luxury would have cost if he had paid for it, but the serum opened the shell of his memory and pulled out the pearl: "Twenty-nine ninety-eight."

THANK YOU.

"You're welcome." He heard clicks and hums in the area behind the wall and he knew what they meant, but he didn't care because the people in the shadows had taken up their ballet again.

HAVE YOU DONE ANYTHING ELSE IN THE LAST THIRTY DAYS WHICH MIGHT QUALIFY AS ILLEGAL? DESCRIBE ANY INSTANCE OF WHICH YOU ARE DOUBTFUL. THE COMPUTER WILL JUDGE.

Did the dancers pause? He opened his mouth to scoff but words tricked out. "Well, the other day, April 7, that was Monday, I was walking along and I found this wallet. No ID's or nothing. I thought about turning it in to the police, but my own wallet was pretty decrepit, so I decided to keep it."

THAT IS NEITHER WRONG NOR ILLEGAL. YOU MAY KEEP IT. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE?

He swooped through the long halls of his memories. In niches along the walls glowed abstract designs. His eyes tasted their colors, reveled in the brightness. Only two were scarlet,

and he'd recounted them already. "No."

VERY GOOD. THE RECORDS INDICATE THAT YOU HAVE NOT PREVIOUSLY CONFESSED THIS CRIME. THEREFORE, YOU HAVE BEEN FINED ACCORDING TO THE USUAL FORMULA. IN ONE MOMENT YOU WILL BE PUNISHED. WHEN YOU ARE YOURSELF AGAIN, REMEMBER THIS MACHINE. YOU CAN NEVER ESCAPE FROM IT; YOU CAN NEVER HIDE FROM IT. ONLY OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW CAN SAVE YOU.

He hummed a little tune to himself, pleased that it was almost over. His first session had been much longer. The portion of his mind that wasn't watching the ballerinas wondered what form his punishment would take.

SHOPLIFT! His hands were gloved with frost; froze; crystallized; erupted with agonizing needles of ice. Whimpering, he hung from the manacles.

SHOPLIFT! The ice melted; the skin raced from white to red. Hot! Blisters bubbled and burst; baked flesh disintegrated; the bones themselves began to char.

SHOPLIFT! The gloom grew whiskeys and beady-eyed with rats that scurried to his fingers and nibbled at the living flesh. Blood oozed, then dripped, then spurted. Sharp teeth ripped his hands apart and absconded with the pices.

THAT IS ALL. SHOULD YOU WISH TO APPEAL THIS COURT'S DECISION, A TRANSCRIPT WILL BE PROVIDED UPON REQUEST. GO NOW, AND BREAK THE LAW NO MORE.

The restraining pressure eased; cool air washed over his back and began to dry the shirt that stuck to sweaty skin. The manacles opened and the weight of his arms dragged them free. He staggered to the exit door, but

couldn't operate the knob. A policeman outside heard his fumbling and opened it for him.

"This way, sir." He took him by the arm and led him to a row of cots. The colors of the street corner night were heightened to an alien intensity. Hennesy sank down with numb relief. A gentle wind took chatter from the sidewalk and offered it to him; but he couldn't understand it. The cop paused for a moment before asking, "You were on the bus, sir?"

"Right." Before the Machine he would have been voluble in his outrage; after it, he could only attempt to repeat the word. "Ri . . ."

"Well, sir," said the officer as he ripped a ticket from a booklet, "HERE'S A PASS ENTITLING YOU TO ONE FREE BUS RIDE. And this is your excuse, for your employer."

"Thanks." He tucked them into his jacket pocket, and stared up at the sky. It showed stars, which he hadn't seen often. He watched them wink at each other across the great space they defined. He envied them their freedom.

The serums had spent themselves, and their effects were fading. He grew aware of a black man on the cot next to his. Short and thin, thirtyish and ugly, he was bent double. His tender hands cupped his balls; he moaned sporadic intervals. When he felt Hennesy's gaze, he looked up. "Hey, dude—what'd they get you for? What'd they do?"

Hennesy shrugged. "Shoplifting. They fined me, and gave me a dose of aversion therapy."

"Hunh! Me too. But, shit, she's my own wife, man! Caught her stepping out with my former best friend . . . whupped her some, then strapped her to the bed and showed her who her man is. Man's got a

(cont. on page 115)

"Look at what?" grumped Elton, mildly annoyed at the interruption.

"Excuse us, taxiarch," Aaron apologized, dragging Elton back with him. "But my friend and I have got to make some private godling-type talk."

"But of course!" Telemachus said agreeably.

"What is all this," protested Elton. "I was just—"

"This chimera, here. It's not all flesh," Aaron intoned in whispers. "It's a flesh, metal, and plastic construct straight out of some warped bio-computer."

"An android?" exclaimed the fat man, turning to look on the thing again.

"How else can you explain the fire-breathing ability? Probably just a gas expulsor and igniter, surrounded by an asbestoes material mouth or somesuch. You want to open the jaws and check?"

"Uh uh, not particularly. But how'd you come by this revelation so quickly?"

Aaron pointed to the deep laser slash. The sun reflected metallic glints off a stretch of what could only be stainless steel.

Elton turned back to him. "But *why* should these Overseers or whoever they are take so much trouble to create something like this? I just don't get it."

"We'll discuss it later," said Aaron. And a few other topics, he thought. "Right now, it looks as though our army is about ready to trot on back home. For Vana's sake, we'd best be with it."

WHEN THE BRAVE, victorious *lochoi* trooped back into Republica, their current patron demi-gods, Aaron, Chaimon, Elton, and Vana held an honorable position in their midst, the

latter still unconscious, borne on a sheep-skin stretcher.

As they trudged past its boundaries and into its building cluster, Aaron observed that the city-state was quite like Morningtown in several aspects. Centered on a river. Farm and grazing lands surrounding it. Living quarters a pleasant outcropping of houses and monuments. But, of course, this was no mediievally-patterned town, but a Greek-like city. The houses, though some were quite large, were of a humbler nature, formed as they were of less substantial elements—they seemed mostly composed of sun-dried bricks topped with wood—and with much less sophisticated design. However, the more permanent structures—the centers of government, the temples, the market-places—were noble pieces of stonecolumned architecture, beautifully styled in the classic fashion.

Again, Aaron had seen models of such communities in museums.

Now he walked through a living reconstruction.

Telemachus released his soldiers, and they dispersed to their separate quarters to prepare for their ritual homecoming feast that would be held that evening. He then led Aaron and his party to his household, where they were to stay.

By the time they reached the place, Vana was stirring fitfully, groaning and sighing. Fussing worriedly over her, Telemachus directed the bearers of her stretcher to install her in the 'anit-thalamos', tuck her comfortably into a bed, and straightaway fetch a physician to wait upon her. He assured his other guests that there was no need for their presence at her side for the time being, and invited them to relax in the living room—his 'an-dronitus' and sup with him that af-

termoon. He then excused himself, declaring that he needed to change clothing, and promptly strode from the room, leaving them on their own.

"Well, here we are again," sighed Elton as he slumped into a wooden chair. "Sitting ducks for the Overseers."

"I shouldn't think we'll have to linger here *too* long," declared Chaimon, closely inspecting the simple yet elegant furnishings of the room. Telemachus had kindled a fire in the large hearth—cozy heat and yellow light flickered into the wide room, sparsely yet tastefully furnished. Chaimon knelt down to study a large vase. "They've really got it all," he muttered to himself.

"You seem to know one hell of a lot about this place and its people, Chaimon," observed Aaron. "You studied Ancient Greece on Earth?"

Chaimon nodded absently, lost in the wraparound painting on an urn next to the vase.

"Oh, ignore him," Elton said. "He's probably busy composing an ode to that thing." The large man leaned over a table toward where Aaron sat. "So. What do you think?"

"You're asking me? I thought you were—"

Elton shook his head. "I'm growing up a bit, Aaron. I know I need your opinions."

"Well—isn't it obvious? We'll just have to stay here until Vana is able to resume travelling. In the meantime, we'll just have to make the best of it, and hope the Overseers don't stumble onto us."

"Posing as demi-gods is not exactly the best disguise, I think," Elton grumbled. "But I suppose it's a sight better than the attitude those women of Morningtown had toward us. We seem to be *welcome* here." He leaned

his chin into a hand contemplatively. "And yet there's probably an Overseer right in town, like Hildegard in that last place. In the meantime, we might as well enjoy it. I've never *been* a demi-god before."

Aaron had no doubt Elton would enjoy it.

Full of good cheer, bearing a tray with a large pitcher and cups, their host entered the room, vocally expressing his hopes that they were comfortable, and had found his humble dwelling to their satisfaction. "Your companion is resting comfortably in a soft feather bed. Sleeping. A doctor has been called for. I have placed two of my most trustworthy soldiers in attendance to her, and of course you may go back and visit her anytime you like." He set the tray down. Aaron noted Elton's smile. Wine. Another soldier followed in Telemachus's wake, bearing a platter of cheese and fruit.

"Help yourselves, gentleman, I know you must be hungry."

"And thirsty," acknowledged Elton.

As his guests set to their meal, Telemachus sat down at the end of the long, rectangular table and poured himself a cup of wine.

"Ah," he sighed. "The *chiton* is so much more comfortable than the trappings of war." He gestured down at his change of clothing, which consisted of a gray oblong of woolen cloth, which was wrapped around his body somewhat closely from the neck down to just above his knees. One side was fastened with silver and gold pins—in the other was a slit for the arm—and there was a loose girdle about his hips, and simple sandals for his feet. "But you of Olympus—you wear such interesting clothing. Is it comfortable?"

"Very," affirmed Elton, crunching

through an apple. "You have met our superiors? The regular—er, I mean the *usual* gods."

"Not as I have met you. But then you are all half-human."

"At least," murmured Aaron, tasting the sweet grape wine.

"Oh dear," sighed Telemachus, gazing dolefully at his hearth. "This supply of firewood I received before I ventured off with my soldiers was terribly wet, and I fear it's not totally dry—the fire is just limping along, and may go out." He shook his head sadly—but then an idea seemed to light up his eyes. "If I may be so forward—perhaps you might direct your magical fire toward the log-pile. Surely *that* will give us more warmth in this drafty room."

"Sure thing," said Elton. He downed the rest of his cup's contents, then leaned over his backpack.

"Ah—Elton," Aaron said. "Perhaps—"

"Oh, don't worry, Aaron. Just a short burst." The fat man drew his pistol from his pack, adjusted it, clicked off its safety. Telemachus, Aaron discerned, watched with rapt fascination as Elton streaked off a beam of laser-fire at the logs which obliged by turning into a roaring pyre. Elton clicked the safety back on, slipped his weapon back into its place, and poured himself another cup of wine. "There. No bother at all."

"I cannot thank you enough. Absolutely stunning!"

Elton majestically waved the matter away. "A trifle."

After finishing a slice of cheese, Chaimon addressed their host. "Pardon me, good Telemachus, but I must express curiosity as to your society here. Normally in such towns there are slaves. And yet I see none here."

"Slavery has long since been banished in this city-state," Telemachus said. Aaron noticed a slight tinge of regret in his voice.

"No slavery? That's not what I really expected." Chaimon scratched an ear. "This is a democracy, isn't it?"

Telemachus bellowed laughter. "Democracy? Dear sir, you surely are not familiar with Republica, are you? No—democracy went the way of slavery. We now generally live by the rules set down years ago by our parent philosopher. Our political system is modeled after his ideals. And don't let anyone know I told you this, but it's a pretty miserable bunch of ideals, if you ask me!"

"Philosopher? Rules?" said Chaimon, his voice getting excited. "Telemachus . . . what would this 'parent philosopher's name be?"

"He was a dotty head-in-the-sky fellow," Telemachus said, shaking his head, "named Plato."

AARON faintly recognized the name—but only vaguely. So he could not understand Chaimon's reaction.

The fellow slapped his forehead lightly with astonishment, cried to himself. "Plato! Republica! Of course! My God, I should have seen it sooner. Why else would they have a *Greek* community—" He flashed Elton and Aaron impassioned looks. "This is incredible! I'm going to have to—"

Rapidly, Aaron stood and settled the guy down. In his enthusiastic state, poor Chaimon was not acting his demi-god part. Aaron didn't care to let Telemachus know the truth about this world. "Now, Chaimon—remember *where* we are. Perhaps we can discuss this later. Okay?"

"Oh—right," Chaimon said, quelled

slightly. "My apologies."

"You'll have to excuse our companion," Elton said after darting Chaimon a quick glare. "He gets a bit excited after a couple cups of wine."

"I don't see why our society should intrigue him so," mused Telemachus. "Although it is unique in the world. I just wish that—"

He was interrupted by a knock on his front door. He excused himself, and opened the door. "Ah, my good friend Croesus! Enter! Enter by all means!" he cried ebulliently.

A dark, age-beaten man crossed the threshold, a sack draped over one shoulder. His dress was similar to that of Telemachus, save for the fact that his *chiton* trailed a bit further down hairy legs. "A pleasure to minister to your household again, Telemachus," the man good-naturedly. "Your emissary tells me that a guest of yours is ill."

"Yes—a bump on her head. Nothing more, but I thought—"

Croesus nodded. "I will do what I can." He leaned closer to Telemachus, examining. "Good to see you unharmed after your mission," he said, stroking his neatly clipped, graying beard. His eyes roamed over the seated men. "Ah—these must be your unusual guests." He folded his arms, pondering them. "I have heard of how you dealt with the chimera. You are to be thanked. It was one of you that was harmed, yes?"

"That's right," returned Aaron politely. "She's in the back—"

"I'll show him," said Telemachus graciously. "Come, physician. You must tell me the gossip that has been going about in my absence. . ."

His voice faded away as the two men left the room.

Waiting a few cautious seconds for them to move out of earshot, Aaron

stared curiously at Chaimon. "Okay, fellow. Now what's all the hubbub—"

"Don't you see?" exclaimed Chaimon excitedly. "This particular community is not just a model of a Greek city-state. It's Plato's *ideal* city-state. Straight out of his dialogue, *The Republic*, which is the cornerstone of western political philosophy. And the Overseers have fashioned a society using the tenets of Plato's governmental concepts. Only—only it's all a bit out of kilter."

"Wait a minute!" Elton grumbled. "I'm a lowly engineer, and Aaron here's a head-doctor. We didn't get any political philosophy in our training. You want to let us in on what you're yapping about?"

"I've heard the name Plato—but I never studied his philosophy," Aaron acknowledged. "You might as well fill us in."

"Right," Chaimon said, staring at the two importantly. "Plato lived several centuries before Christ. Greece at that time was formed of small, autonomous city-states. Now, things were not exactly peaceful back then. Not only did the average city-state have to ward off attacks from encroaching barbarians from the east—they sometimes warred with *another* city-state. Plato was a native of Athens, and a student of another philosopher named Socrates. Athens was the first democracy. The government didn't like Socrates' ideas, so they put him to death by making him drink hemlock. Needless to say, Plato didn't care much for democracy after *that*.

"He went on to formulate much philosophy of his own, utilizing the methods and teachings of Socrates. He wrote these down the form of discussions between people. Dialogues. and the most important of these is his

Republic, which is also the longest.

"In this, he compares society to an individual human being. A biological analogy. In each man, he claimed, there is a soul—and this soul consists of three parts. A rational part—which powers his intellect. A spirited part—which lends a man individuality, personality. And lastly, a part which is composed of man's passions and appetites: food, drink, sex; like that. Each of these sections plays a rôle in the totality of the person. If one were missing, the person wouldn't be an actual human being."

"Are you sure you're not talking about Sigmund Freud?" asked Aaron, amused.

"No, no," said Chaimon, quite seriously. "Now, Plato figured that this was the way society should be, too. He claimed that the *ideal* society should be composed of three separate parts. A group of leaders. An army. And workers, to provide necessities. You can see the analogy to his idea of the soul.

"This classing of people would not be arbitrary, and would be structured so that no class conflict would result. Each person in this society would be designated to his particular role because of his *abilities*. All children would be raised together. No families. They would be given an education, and eventually tested for intellectual, moral, and physical qualities. Then, according to their particular talents, they would be given positions in this society."

"Interesting," Elton said. "So if your aptitude pointed toward street-sweeping, you'd be enlisted in the department of sanitation."

"And if one were strong and valiant, one became a soldier," continued Chaimon. "Only those who passed the severest tests, who had the

most desirable characteristics—namely wisdom, knowledge, and superior reasoning faculties—are able to obtain a position amongst the philosopher-kings: the ruling, or rather *administrating*, body of men. And women, I might add—no sex discrimination at all in the *Republic*."

"And these men have absolute rule?" asked Elton.

"Absolute," Chaimon affirmed.

"But surely that is nothing more than—what do you call it?—yes, an oligarchal dictatorship." Aaron objected.

"Yeah—a dictatorship," echoed Elton. "If these men rule everything, then everything is *theirs*!"

Chaimon said, "Not so. Because, you see, these rulers are allowed no possessions of any kind. They are fed and clothed by the state, but they have no land, no wives or families. Nothing."

"My god, what *motivation* would they have then?" asked Elton.

"Wisdom. Pursuit of the truth. Pursuit of the harmonic equilibrium of their society," remonstrated Chaimon. "There's more to it, of course, but that's the basic outline, if indeed Telemachus speaks the truth. Of course there might be modifications. We know that the actual world-view that the Overseers have instilled in these people is fairly cockeyed. Basically, they view it as your average superstitious Greek viewed his universe. Only *they* have positive proof, as far as they're concerned. The Gods walk among them. They've *seen* the wonders of the mythological world—or *think* they have. Until today, there was a *monster* preying on their farmlands—"

"And they've been delivered from that creature by a group of demigods, armed with magic weapons,"

continued Aaron wryly. "And there in a nut-shell is the problem we now have with our experimental-society theory. It's all very well to test the workability of a classic political system, but why all the extras? There is simply *no* purpose—"

A genial patter of voices grew in the hallway, foretelling the imminent arrival of Croesus and Telemachus. The two men emerged from the doorway in obvious good spirits. "... so happy to hear that, Croesus," Telemachus was saying, his hand resting on the shoulder of his friend. "Ah! My guests. Superlative news!"

Plucking a plum from the fruit bowl, Croesus pronounced his verdict. "An uncomplicated contusion. Unconsciousness is purely natural at this point. She will wake with a headache; nothing more. I'd advise that she be allowed to sleep as long as her body likes. Goodness, I didn't even have to bleed her."

Elton was aghast. "Bleed her!"

"Yes," the doctor said, sucking the fruit thoughtfully, noisily. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have some other patients to attend to before I prepare myself for the evening's festivities. A pleasant afternoon and evening to you all."

He tossed the plum pit into the fire, bent a polite bow, breezed from the house with a warm expression of thanks from the general who immediately spun on his heel to address his guests. "Well, you shall not have to linger long here, it seems. My loss. I'd hoped to entertain you at least a few days."

"Bleed her!" repeated Elton. "You mean we let that barbarian into the same room with—"

Chaimon chastened him. "Now, now, Elton. You needn't get yourself so flustered." He beckoned Tele-

machus to join them. "We have a few idle moments. I should like to hear of this society. As you say, it is unique, and in my enforced journeys of exile, I am making a disciplined study of the social arrangements mankind groups himself in."

"Bah! My society! An absurd joke!" complained Telemachus, hoisting his *chiton's* tails to seat himself comfortably.

If only the man knew how true that statement was, mused Aaron. But there *was* time to spare—and he had to confess, he was quite as interested as Chaimon in this Greek city-state millions of light-years and centuries away from the true Ancient Greece. Too, there might be clues in what Telemachus had to say that could help them puzzle out the riddle of this world.

Beseiged by the probing questions of the supposed demi-gods, the general obliged with detailed and concise answers, all of which led to Aaron's conclusion that Chaimon's guess had been an accurate one. This community was indeed a living model of Plato's Republic. Only in minor details did it vary from that philosopher's conception of the ideal society. And, of course, there were the wilder elements—the oft-proven cosmological views of the inhabitants that were mere myths for the original Greeks.

"But hold a moment," objected Chaimon. "From the little I've heard and seen, this system seems to be working quite well."

"Quite well? Ridiculous!" boomed Telemachus, pounding a fist onto the table with anger. His pupils became hard cold stones. "I am the most brilliant *stratigi* and military man of Republica. It showed in my tests from my early childhood onward, and has

been borne out countless times in the battlefield, because I was immediately placed in the army, and ranked high very soon. All very well for the community. And it gives me some satisfaction to serve my people so—for although I may scorn the governmental system here, I love my nation; I am a patriot. I place my allegiance to this place above even my loyalty to the Gods."

"Well then," exclaimed Chaimon, "what's the problem?"

"Did anyone ask me if I wanted to be a soldier?" proclaimed the man, rolling a fiery eye toward Chaimon. "Did I have any choice in the matter? No! I have to do what I do best, not what I want to do!"

"Which is?" Aaron prodded.

Straightening his robe, holding his head nobly, Telemachus said, "I should like to help administer the nation. I should like very much to help my countrymen in that manner—above all else!"

"But don't the philosopher-kings do that well enough?" objected Chaimon. "I mean, that is what they've been trained to do, that is their natural specialty."

"Pah! They are foolish old men with clouds for brains! They've not the faintest idea of what my fellow countrymen—and myself—really want."

"Which is?" Aaron asked.

"Why, everything we can get, of course!" Telemachus folded his hands into grasping fists. "I am sick of the state first, and its component individuals second! If I could but crush this government, I most certainly would!"

"But Telemachus," rumbled Elton, clopping down his cup, stifling a belch. "You've got the army. Surely that is power enough to work out your de-

sires."

"Oh, yes—the army," sighed Telemachus in a helpless manner. "You'll be hard pressed to find braver lads in all the world when it comes to forming a phalanx and battling it out with an opposing army for the sake of Republica. And perhaps some of them are as dissatisfied as I am, and would like to see a change. But in any event, one matter stops them. And therefore me." He paused, eyeing them dramatically. "The Gods."

"The Gods?" echoed Chaimon.

"Yes. The Gods seem to approve of this present system of government, the unimaginative dopes. I'm sure you, as their outcasts, would agree with me there."

"But of course," mumbled Elton, encouragingly.

"Yes. The predominant fear is that if we change the system at all, the Gods will strike us down. Which is, of course, ridiculous. Why, I've seen a dozen Gods and Goddesses if I've seen a one, and not any of them displayed the power that you displayed to me this day. Personally, I suspect the Gods are a sham. Truly, I fear them not!"

"Beware hubris," murmured Chaimon.

"You think I'll be like one of those ridiculous tragic figures in those inane plays? Nonsense. Let me tell you, I'd change a few things around here if I had the chance!" He drained his second cup of wine, wiped his mouth with a hirsute arm, poured himself some more wine. "Any respect at all I show toward the Gods is just conditioning—and necessary ass-smooching so the charlatans don't know I'm onto their game!" He smacked his lips with finality, turned his eyes craftily upon his guests. "You know, it would not be a bad idea at

all for us to join forces. With *your* help, I could convince my soldiers that we have might enough to oppose the Gods, and create our own government—one that will serve our *wishes* and *needs* rather than some batty philosopher's ideals! And in turn, I can assure you that this can be your home. You do need a home, don't you? Aren't you weary of your travels?"

Taken aback by the man's proposal, Aaron managed to choke out a refusal. "We're very sorry, Telemachus. But of course that is *totally* out of the question."

"How come, I want to know?" cried Elton, rising up wobbily, banging the table with his empty cup. "This is our chance to shove it to those goddamn Overseers. This—"

But the combined glares of Aaron and Chaimon silenced him—he apparently realized the folly of his objection. He mumbled a quiet apology.

Telemachus shrugged. "I did not think you would be interested. Oh well. I tried." He slurped at his wine moodily a moment, then brightened. "But of course, you are still my guests for as long as you care to be, and my house—I mean the *state's* house—is at your disposal."

A rapping at the door punctuated the end of his sentence.

Telemachus boosted himself up, answered the knock. A polite buzz of voices drifted back to Aaron's ears. A moment later, their host returned accompanied by a stooped old man in a *chiton* that drooped absently all the way to his lower shins. He wore a straggly salt-and-pepper beard, and Aaron noticed that his sandals were worn from the shuffling gait he affected.

"Please, do have a seat, Meletus. You will notice that strangers adorn

my table. They are from another land, and are my guests." Fixing them all with a generalized gaze, he placed a forefinger softly to his lips, cautioning them to quiet.

No declaration of our demi-godhood to the old man, assumed Aaron.

"This is one of our rulers I spoke of gentleman. Meletus." Quickly, he introduced them to the wizened philosopher who blinked at them curiously and then settled his frail body into the proffered seat.

"Goodness, Telemeter. . ." began the old man.

"Telemachus," corrected the general patiently.

"Yes—Telescopus. You are to be congratulated for your success in the field, routing the Persians."

The brigands, sir," stated Telemachus. "And I believe *that* is the subject of tonight's celebration."

"Yes, yes, of course," crackled the old man. "And I believe that this was the subject of my journey here, although for the life of me. . ."

"Something to do with the celebration?" said the general.

"Right. I wrote it down so I *wouldn't* forget, and oh—here." he drew out a wrinkled piece of paper, smoothed it, squinted at its printed characters. "Ah, of course!" He beamed up happily. "This evening is indeed a special occasion!"

"Oh? How so, Meletus?"

There was a tinge of awe in the old man's voice. "A God will be in attendance!"

THREE

THIS HAD to be the place.

The lengthening late afternoon shadows were joining into a common darkness as the evening was pulled down shade-like over the sky by the

drying red fingers of sunset. Aaron had wound his way through the alleys and byways of Republica, Elton breathing hard behind him. Their laser pistols were carefully tucked into the conveniently large pockets of their coveralls, underneath the long and flowing white *chitons* they had borrowed from Telemachus for the purposes of disguise.

What were the directions the ever-helpful Telemachus had supplied him with? Was it a right turn at *this* dusty road—or the next? Aaron hastily whispered the instructions to himself. Yes. The *next* turn. That road led to their destination, running by the gymnasium.

This had to be the place: the temple of Athena: The holiest of the several temples sprouting amongst the commoner buildings of the city-state: Republica's version of Athen's Parthenon.

The Coming-Place of the Gods, Telemachus had called it.

The monorail station of the Overseers.

Only a few select people—philosopher-kings all—were allowed to enter. And even *they* did not make the descent to the 'holy chamber'. What else could it be but the Overseers' monitor and monorail station?

And Aaron had definite plans there.

"I *really* think we should join forces with Telemachus," puffed Elton as he hastened to keep pace with his comrade. "Make our stand here. Seems like a solid enough chap, if you ask me," he said, continuing a line of argument he had been following these past hours since the doddering Melitus had departed the home of their benefactor. But in the privacy of the room where Vana slept—there ostensibly to mark her progress and stow their baggage until Telemachus

could arrange for other separate rooms for each—Chaimon had joined in with Aaron on the decision about what was to be done in the light of the advent of the God. And the plan that Aaron had outlined appealed to Chaimon more than Elton's less savory, if more valiant, desires.

Hermes. That was the 'God' who would honor the celebration with his attendance, Meletus claimed. Which meant, reasoned Aaron; that shortly a monorail car would be whooshing into its subterranean chamber. Locating that chamber should be no real difficulty. It had been no problem in Morningtown. Then they could observe the exit of 'Hermes, and be about their business in the empty station.

Chaimon had asked to be allowed to observe the celebration, minus his 'godlike' raiment of course, while Aaron and Elton saw to the examination of the Overseer station.

There was indeed no problem obtaining the location of the monorail station. A simple question to Telemachus had yielded the answer: The celestial visitor would arrive at the temple of Athena. And where was that temple. . .?

So, as elsewhere the populace of Republica prepared for the celebration, Aaron and Elton drew near to their destination.

Halting his companion, Aaron peered around the corner of a slate-gray monument in the direction from which the excited babble of a crowd originated. A throng of Greek citizens clustered on the apron of a set of white-stone steps angling up to the pillar-ribbed entrance of a marble box-like building. Undoubtedly the temple. The people awaited the arrival of the God.

"This is it, Elton," he said. "Have a

look." The large man needed no further encouragement. He poked his head around the monument, made a gruff sound in his throat.

"Nice architecture, anyway," he noted.

"We'd better stay here."

"Can't we mingle with the crowds? Closer?"

"I don't want to take any chance of the Overseer recognizing us. I'm sure they have our pictures from Morningtown. I'm positive they're alerted."

"Okay." Elton leaned against the cool stone, slid down into a crouch. "Let me know when old Henry makes his appearance, then. I'm a bit whacked out." He shut his eyes, and stayed silent, which was welcome to Aaron.

Patiently, he waited and watched.

Telemachus had been surprised when they showed no desire to attend the festival, but seemed satisfied enough with Chaimon's company. Aaron had merely voiced his wanting to see the emergence of Hermes. Telemachus shrugged, and provided them with directions.

A frenzied roar of cheering startled him from his thoughts. His eyes focused; he directed them to the porch of the temple where some sort of activity transpired beneath guttering torches.

He tapped Elton on the shoulder. "I think this is it."

Elton scrambled up and stared out at the temple portal just as the God emerged.

It was a man dressed in khaki coveralls.

Just like the man in the Morningtown monitor room.

Not the same person, of course. But similar enough—short-clipped hair and all—that chills darted up

Aaron's spine. It was a gut-level fear he couldn't analyze—and could not prevent.

In greeting to the waiting crowd, the Overseer/God held up his arm crooked into a right angle and spoke a few words undiscernible at this distance. Then he descended the steps; the crowd parted to allow him unimpeded progress, filling in once more in his wake, following him as he strode purposefully, even arrogantly toward the city-square where the ceremonies were to transpire.

"Son of a bitch seems to be enjoying the hell out of his status," muttered Elton as the last of the crowd straggled away, leaving the Temple of Athena deserted.

The big man's words voiced exactly the feeling Aaron had. The idea struggled within him to connect with a greater overall concept that seemed to be lying dormant in him these past hours, waiting to awake. 'Enjoying'. Yes. But there was no time now to think on it fully, much as he would have liked to.

For now was the time for action.

He spit the words out tersely. "Let's go."

THEY KEPT to the shadows.

The torches blazed still, hissing out yellow light, forming flickering pools of illumination against the glossy marble of the temple walls. Aaron crept through the portal into the large hall comprising the bulk of the temple's interior. Elton's clumsy steps sounded behind him. Might as well march in here with a brass band and tympani, thought Aaron.

But there was no one there. It didn't matter; nothing there but darkness.

Their footsteps began to echo hollowly as they entered.

"I'll get one of those torches," whispered Elton. That harsh whisper reverberated about the hall, and the large man added the clomp of his steps to the general noise. He lifted the long piece of flame-ended wood from its holder, carried it back, streaming along the acrid scent of burning oilcloth.

"There's got to be some kind of opening," murmured Aaron as much to himself as to Elton, "some sort of doorway leading to a flight of steps."

"Which will descend to the monitor room," finished Elton. His eyes jerked about as he moved, searching for the door, wary of possible enemies.

The door was situated in the far wall, amidst a clump of equally dark shadows. It was not a large aperture into the wall, and its darkness was barely discernable from the shadows that framed it. But the sputtering glow of the torch parted the blackness, revealing the entrance.

The flight of steps was steep, narrow, treacherous. There were no turns; it led straight down at a forty-five degree angle. They descended carefully, step by step. After a minute's worth of travel, the darkness below lessened.

There were lights down there.

"Electric lights," Aaron said. "They'll probably be just like the ones I saw in Morningtown."

"Hold a sec," said Elton as he stopped and switched the sputtering torch to his left hand. He dug below his *chiton* with his right. The hand emerged clutching his laser. "Don't want to take any chances. You'd better have yours out too."

Reluctantly, Aaron produced his own gun. He didn't relish any violent confrontations, but if one occurred, he might as well be ready.

Another minute downwards, and the torch became unnecessary. Elton looked about for a place to secure it, and voiced a quiet "hmm. . ." of surprise. "These walls, Aaron. They're not stone anymore. They're metal."

"Right. This is the place," Aaron murmured. "No reason you can't just carry the torch along."

The large man complained about its heaviness, but complied with Aaron's suggestion. Their steps hastened. The narrow way leveled off, widened into a chamber.

Precisely like the other one, Aaron realized. Thank heavens it was deserted. He fancied he could detect the ozone-scent of electricity in the air, feel the subsonic hum of machinery. . . . It was a weird sensation, descending from a natural setting into the maw of man's machinery: as though this subterranean passage were the esophagus leading to the mechanical guts of Republica. Aaron had the sudden faint realization that modern *society* was just as much a cyborg as the chimera they had destroyed: a fleshy exterior over a metal and electrical core.

But his absent mental musings were dispelled by Elton's cry as they entered the chamber. "God *damn!*" Elton's oath came in a burst of breath as his eyes swept the monitor computers, the tunnel openings, and the monorail car. He set the torch down against a metal wall, went to examine the consoles of the machine.

Aaron moved over to the monorail vehicle. Like the one back in Morningtown's underground chamber, the door was wide open. A sliding door. He peered into the compartment, considered the controls.

Perfect. It would work: the reason for this trip.

"Elton. Come here a moment,

would you?"

"What?" The man tore his attention away from the computer.

"I want you to take a look at something."

Elton stepped up to his side, stared into the car.

"You think you could make this thing go?"

"Sure," Elton replied. "A piece of cake. But why...?" And then he realized what Aaron was suggesting, and his face split into a huge grin. "We'd better go get Vana and Chaimon!"

FOUR

HE WAS on his own.

A flowing beige *chiton* rendering him almost identical to the hundreds of other men bustling about the great plaza, Chaimon pushed his way through the jabbering crowd toward a better vantage point. His goal was atop a set of steps leading to what he assumed was the temple of the 'Paternal Apollo' because of the ornamental sun-back bust decorating its entrance. Once there, he spun on his heel joyfully, regarded the seething mass of pseudo-Grecian humanity, milling in the colorful city-square.

An almost *exact* model of Athen's Agora, Chaimon noted. And with all its glory and magnificence intact. In his political science studies at the University, he had immersed himself willfully into a survey of Ancient Greece for a time, longing for a taste of exactly the simple, dignified life that he now stood in the midst of.

But only for a time had that been his Pol/Sci obsession, he reminded himself. Soon he'd grown tired of the conception-point of Western civilization, and moved on to greener-grassed political pastures on other sides of the many fences of past and

present Earth.

A political chameleon, he thought. That's me. A dabbler in dialectics, a seeker of social perfection through social and governmental change; a weak-willed dreamer, dreaming of better days in some hypothetical world which I hope might change *me*.

Because when it came down to it, he didn't care much for this whining little ineffectual nothing of a personality he seemed chained to. He couldn't transform it from within—short of visiting a neuro-psych, a notion which he loathed almost as much as he did the society which would invent such monsters of the mind. So desperate was he at one point, he had almost fallen prey to the deceptive pleasures and escapes offered at the Sleep Parlors.

But he'd had the thought: Perhaps by remolding my personality from without, giving it a new environment, a new world with new rules under a different sun. . . .

So he signed up for his dream-world in the colonization program. A world where he'd find the perfect companion. A world where he would mutate slowly into a different person without losing his basic individuality.

Now he stood surveying an incredibly detailed, human-populated model of a perfect society he'd once pondered for long hours of study.

It made him feel important. Made him feel. . . yes, *significant*. Oh, basically the reality of his situation—lost on a strange world, attempting to unravel frightening mystery whose perpetrators could very well be the death of him—made him feel more than uneasy. But yet at the same time it was a unique adventure, and part of him every moment intensely. It was a terrifying sort of exhilaration—but it *was* exciting.

He stood savoring the view, the hunger-inducing odors of cooking food which wafted in the breeze, and, above all, the feeling of having taken a trip back millenia in time to view a festival of Ancient Athens.

Like its model, this Agora was a rectangle of spacious dimensions, bordered here, spotted there with shady and graceful bay trees. Both civic buildings and temples surround it, their common denominator their magnificence. Chaimon recalled that the original Athenians cared little for private display of individual vanity—rather, they lavished their wealth, patriotism and considerable artistic qualities on civic and religious architectural structures and their decorations.

Aside from these more striking aspects of the Agora, the majority of the square's buildings were covered promenades, porticoes, or stae—the latter of which consisted of rain shelters, shops, picture galleries, and public offices.

The entirety of the square was festooned with altars and art. A large portion of the space was devoted to what was obviously the town marketplace: innumerable booths and stands, selling all sort of goods.

The majority of the crowd were now gathered about a raised wooden platform. The time for the arrival of Hermes was near. As they strolled about, showing off their clothing, they buzzed with excitement. The women were especially well-decked in finery. Their *chitons* seemed more elaborately made, embroidered and adorned with fringes and tassels of bold and various colors. In addition, all the women wore *himations*—simple oblong woolen shawls. They seemed to have paid much attention to their hair styles, favoring plaited and

crimped hair, or the longer 'Psyche-knots'.

Indeed, it was almost as though he was back in the real Athens. Except, of course, Athens had a primitive sort of democracy, where Republica was an oligarchal meritocracy. Too, there were no slaves—staples of Athenian life. Chaimon assumed that paid servants filled the vacuum created by the absence of slavery. And of course no Gods had ever visited the original Athens, as far as Chaimon knew.

He considered the mythical Hermes. Among that deity's several duties, he was the messenger of the Gods. What communication could he be bearing this eve?

The thought produced a queasy feeling in Chaimon. But the fear passed, giving way to a hunger brought on by the mingling scents of the sizzling food on sale below.

Before Telemachus had sent him on his way, he'd been thoughtful enough to provide Chaimon with a few coins of the local currency. He'd explained that he would not be arriving at the celebration until later, due to some 'business' he had to attend to.

Sifting through the coins in his coverall pocket, Chaimon considered descending once more into the crowd to purchase some tasty snack, when a sudden blare of trumpets heralded the arrival of Hermes.

As Chaimon watched in fascination the procession of this peculiar 'god' and his worshippers wend its way through the suddenly silent crowd, he wondered what Elton and Aaron had accomplished.

THE DARKNESS outside the temple had an almost tangible texture to it. It felt to Aaron as though it were charged with ominous excitement.

The blackness was almost a velvet covering on Republica, crackling with the static electricity of distant crowd sounds, splashed only here and there by colors revealed by the intermittent torch dappling the distance with feeble flickers, like weak prolonged sparks.

The atmosphere of dread imbued Aaron's pace with a certain bounce of urgency. He turned and urged Elton behind him to speed his pace. It was vital that they hurry. Elton would wake Vana, see to her needs, and prepare their packs for immediate departure. Aaron had assigned himself the harder task of locating Chaimon at the festival.

Then they would race back to the monorail chamber, steal the car it held.

"The fastest way to the spaceport!" he'd proclaimed to Elton. The big man had laughed with devilish pleasure at the notion. This would be a less time-consuming journey than they'd first thought it might be.

The dark mouth of an alley yawned before them. Aaron noticed the faint sound of scuffling feet emanate from it for a fraction of a moment—but dismissed it as rodents. He hurried into the darkness.

Before he could call out, the men who lay in wait pounced. A fist connected with his jaw and agony splintered through his thoughts. Dazed, he tumbled to his knees. The darkness swirled about him, starred with streaky dots of red and white, fringed with pain.

Vaguely, he saw dark forms hurl themselves upon Elton, who struggled to pull out his laser. But then a darkness deeper than night curtained his eyes and his mind. . .

. . . and he awoke, Elton tugging at him, slapping him into a dim sort of

consciousness. Blearily, he parted his eyes, which seemed adhered with glue, and saw the large man leaning over him. A trail of blood leaked from one of his nostrils. His face was slightly puffy, bruised under one eye, a mottled sight in the almost absent light.

In a breathy mutter, Aaron managed, "Who—?"

"Telemachus' soldiers. About ten of them, I'd say," replied Elton.

"But why?"

Brusquely, Elton patted Aaron's pocket. "Yep. That's what they were after. And there's no doubt who sent them after us."

"Hugh?" What was the man babbling about?

"C'mon, get up," said Elton. Aaron felt himself being dragged to his feet. "We've got to get out of here! Telemachus has our lasers!"

"THE ENEMIES of the Gods are within your midst!" declared the Overseer who masqueraded as the Greek God Hermes. "It is the wish of Zeus, the King of our number, that these persons be captured, brought forward to us. If any of you are harboring these villains, and are discovered in this felony, the punishment will be swift and unmerciful, and the Furies will haunt your loved ones!"

Even as the man spoke, Chaimon knew his worst fears realized, he tiptoed down the temple steps as unobtrusively as possible, allowing himself to be swallowed up by the throng, who were captivated by their God's announcement.

So the Overseers knew that they were in Republica. But how? Had Telemachus betrayed them? No—that hardly seemed likely. More of a possibility was that they'd discovered the chimera dead. And rightly attributed

it to the shipwrecked intruders.

He jockeyed his way closer to the platform, squeezing through the tightly packed people to get a better look at this particular Overseer. After painfully shouldering his way into the crowd, he finally stood within ten meters of the platform from which the khaki-covered man addressed the crowd. Chaimon could well understand Telemachus and his soldiers mistaking him, Vana, Aaron, and Elton for members of their Olympian deities now; the uniform of this Overseer was much like the sort he and his companions wore.

The man was speaking on and on about the potential trouble these 'intruders' might cause. He signaled to one of his attendants, who produced a sheaf of leaflets. The Overseer thrust one aloft. "Behold!" he cried. "Here, produced in the halls of Olympus, are papers imprinted with the villains' images!"

Chaimon's jaw dropped. For even at this distance, he could see that there were four separate photographs on the papers which Hermes, or whomever he actually was, seemed on the verge of distributing.

Chaimon decided he'd better be on his way, to warn his comrades; the Overseer was promising the citizens of Republica a handsome reward for the successful capture of the four 'criminals'.

He turned his back on the platform, began to plow his way through the gathered people—not hastily, for that would attract attention. But steadily nonetheless. He had progressed a good way, and was just about to part from the crowd to dash headlong into an alleyway which lead toward Telemachus' house, when an uproar from behind caused him to turn to see its cause.

On the platform with the Overseer stood Telemachus.

Behind him was a formidable number of his hoplites, bristling with weapons. Calvary flanked the soldiers. Archers stood erect, arrows cocked.

In the hands of Telemachus were. . . .

But my god . . . How could that be?

Laser guns?

Much like those Aaron and Elton presently carried. . . .

He suddenly realized they *were* Aaron and Elton's lasers.

Telemachus raised one arm up. The other arm brandished its weapon toward 'Hermes' threateningly. The general waited for the uproar to die down, then addressed his captive audience: "Fellow citizens of Republic!" he boomed authoritatively. "The end of tyranny is near! This sham of a government is about to be toppled! Behold—our messenger from the Gods is trembling before my power. The Gods are false! Only Republica matters, and our system of government *must be changed!*"

The Overseer was obviously cringing at the sight of the lasers that Telemachus waved so wildly. Chaimon was too distant to note his expression, but he was sure it was at least partly fearful.

Stunned, the crowd seemed rooted to the ground. They were deathly silent, watching this drama unfold before them as though it were some new play being performed in the Theatre of Dionysus.

'Hermes' stepped forward, addressed the crowd.

"Dear people! Surely you don't mean to allow this tragedy to transpire?" The man had one side turned to Telemachus—and was digging into his pocket of his other side. Another

laser? wondered Chaimon.

Telemachus immediately discerned the man's actions. Without hesitation, he leveled one of his weapons, fired.

Beneath his immediate shock, Chaimon realized that the man must have learned to operate the weapons by watching Elton light the hearth.

With a charred hole burned through him, the Overseer staggered at the edge of the platform. Chaimon glimpsed a shiny metallic thing drop from his fingers—too small to be a laser. A communicator?

The Overseer pitched into the crowd.

Screams of horror tore through the plaza. It must have been an unimaginable sight to these people: A God destroyed by a mortal. And that mortal bearing such incredible weapons. . . .

It seemed like it might turn into a full scale riot. Chaimon assumed that Telemachus, with the aid of his soldiers, would be able to handle the people—and probably succeed in his coup.

Unbidden, the question sprang to his mind: But where would that leave him and his comrades? And what had Telemachus done to Aaron and Elton to obtain their weapons?

Not waiting to learn the outcome of the events clamoring behind him, he sped off for Telemachus' house. Even if harm had come to Aaron and Elton, he had to take care nothing happened to Vana.

Sooner should something happen to him.

WHEN AARON and Elton burst into the house, wheezing breathlessly from their long run, they were met by a baffled Vana.

"Where are we?" she asked, holding her head with one hand. Ob-

viously it still pained her. "What is this place? I woke up a few minutes ago in a creaky bed in some foul-smelling—"

Feeling relieved that she was evidently well enough to travel, Aaron grasped her arm, tugged her along behind him. "No time to explain. We've got to get our packs, and get out of here, *fast*. The place might come down on our heads at any time."

"What are those strange clothes you two are wearing?" she demanded groggily. Elton had already brushed past them and was now adjusting his pack onto his back. He picked up Chaimon's.

"I don't suppose the lad's been back" he asked her rhetorically.

Bewildered, Vana shook her head. "Who, Chaimon? I didn't realize he was gone."

"We've got to find him. But we've also got to stay together," spoke Aaron grimly as he hoisted his pack to his own shoulders, then picked up Vana's.

They paced quickly down the hall to the *andronitus*.

The door burst open.

Chaimon, his face red from exertion, plunged straight into them. His eyes lit up brilliantly as he stared at Aaron, then Elton. He hugged them both enthusiastically. "You're alive!" he cried in disbelief. "I thought you might be—"

"Almost *were*," gruffed Elton, fingering his bruises tenderly. "Don't know why those soldiers spared our lives. Telemachus must figure he might still be able to convince us to join his side. But here—how'd you know we'd run into trouble, Chaimon?"

"Because," Chaimon heaved in a deep breath, and exhaled a burst of

words, "Telemachus is taking over. He's got his soldiers all around. He's killed the Overseer they call Hermes, who was here to locate us, by the way. And he killed him with *your* lasers!"

So *that* was why the man wanted the weapons so badly: magical tools to supply him and his army with the needed edge to take over Republica. The simultaneous use of the weapons and the demise of the Overseer were calculated to show his soldiers—and the populace—that the Gods were indeed pervious to harm, and that there was no reason to fear them.

Telemachus was tearing down this artfully contrived living model of Plato's Republic. And they—Chaimon, Elton, Vana, and Aaron himself—had assisted.

Or at least the Overseers would think so.

Inwardly now, he questioned the wisdom of his current play. But there was nothing for it—they were caught up in momentum of events, and they'd have to follow through.

Elton flung Chaimon's pack to him. "Here—get this on. We've got to make tracks."

IT TOOK them only twelve minutes to jog to the Temple of Athena.

To Aaron it seemed an eternity.

Even as they had emerged from Telemachus' house, the nearing sounds of violence filled the air: shouts, screams, the mingled clatter of weapons and horse's hooves amongst the scattering scuffles of human feet. And the air held the smell and taste of smoke; in the distance, orange flickers of flame could be seen: Telemachus was putting buildings to the torch.

Fear seized Aaron palpably, as though some phantom hand had

reached in and squeezed his heart. As he and his companions plunged their way through the streets, a part of him struggled against the infectious blind panic in the atmosphere. Another part thought furiously.

Somehow, all this seemed unbelievable. He could hardly accept these events—they didn't mesh properly with his sense of reality. Had Telemachus been such a good actor as to fool them into believing him fairly harmless? That must have been the case. Obviously all along he was a frustrated despot intent on rule.

And he had seen in them—and more importantly in their weapons—his chance.

At last they sprinted up the Temple's stone steps and through its marble columns. Aaron led them down the steps to the yawning monorail car.

No reinforcements from the Overseers. Good. The chamber was as empty of life as it had been before.

Vana, still a bit wobbly, was buoyed up by Elton and Chaimon. Wide-eyed, she stared at the chamber and wanted to halt and examine it in detail.

"No time!" burst Aaron fretfully. "Telemachus is bound to check this place as soon as possible." He'd explained his plan to them in spurts on the run back here. "Come on. Pile in!" he gestured frantically toward the car, then hustled them into its spacious compartment one by one, then entered himself. As Vana and Chaimon slipped off their backpacks and slumped down, exhausted, onto the vinyl-like seats to the rear of the cabin, Elton moved to the controls. Aaron busied himself with the door.

Surprisingly, it was manual. He'd expected a button somewhere—but it was easy enough to slide the door on its concealed rollers. It eased shut,

and he snicked the handle closed.

Relieved already—strangely enough the very feel of modern equipment put him at ease—he turned to Elton who sat studying the control panel. "Well, let's get going!" He smiled at Vana and Chaimon as he settled into his seat, slipping its harness over him, clicking it into place.

Elton cast a bewildered glance over his shoulder. "I don't understand," he said in an uneasy tone.

"Understand?" cried Chaimon. "I thought Aaron said you could run one of these things."

"Oh, sure. I *can*. I *have*—or one like it anyway. His bemused expression was rapidly melting into alarm. "But there's no *power* in this car. It just won't turn on!"

FIVE

FOR A MOMENT, the words did not register in Aaron's mind.

He had expected a rapid hum of energy to rattle the vehicle, and a subsequent speedy exit from this stationary, and therefore dangerous, situation. Any moment now, the laser-armed Telemachus might descend upon their helpless condition. It was necessary that they rapidly *depart* this place.

Elton's loud, frightened words coalesced into meaning, and meaning induced response: "What the devil—?"

"Dammit, man!" Chaimon cried, gripping the arms of his seat so tightly his knuckles whitened. "You're the engineer! *Do something!*"

With an accompanying clatter of seat-buckles falling to the metal floor, Vana and Aaron rose from their seats and joined Elton at the control board, scrabbling for some possible alternate power switch.

"Did it occur to any of you," Vana

said, obviously recovering her faculties rapidly, "that this car might need some kind of a switch key to operate?"

"What do you think I looked for first?" Elton barked, jabbing a forefinger at the slim length of metal lodged in a slot to his right. "The switch is on. I just get no power. This thing obviously runs on some sort of internal battery supply. It must be disconnected. . . ."

"You'd better check." Aaron sucked in a deep breath of air to control the anxiety that weighed heavy on his chest. "Back there. There's a hump with latches. Engine access."

"Yeah, yeah," burst Elton in frustration. "I know where it is. I'll take a look." He heaved himself up and banged his way back to the rear.

Aaron slipped into the control-seat. To expend nervous energy, he fiddled with the switch key, prodded the accelerator with his foot, clicked switches on and off.

"Now what good is that going to do?" said Chaimon, leaning over his shoulder.

Absolutely no good at all, Aaron told himself. He promptly ceased.

Lights sprung on over the console, winking in sequences of red, blue, green, yellow. Dials quivered.

The car bucked forward violently, sprawling Vana and Chaimon backwards. "What the—!" boomed Elton's astonished voice from the back. There was a clunk, a grunt of pain.

Aaron lunged at the controls, attempting to slow the rate of speed, at least. He pounded at buttons, kicked hard on pedals, with no distinguishable result.

The light from the monitor room was long gone, seemingly swallowed by the long blackness of the tunnel. Abruptly, the car angled upwards.

The ride smoothed out. But Aaron realized that his efforts at the control board had nothing to do with that fact. He spun about, worried about his friends. Vana and Chaimon, in tousled condition, clutched at whatever handholds the interior provided, mouths o'ed with shock and surprise. Crawling up even with them, rubbing his head and cursing, was Elton.

"You all right?" Aaron got up to help them to their feet.

"What happened?" asked Vana weakly, as Chaimon grappled up into a standing position, and began to hoist her up as well.

"Dunno," Aaron replied. "Elton— you do something? I don't think I did."

Elton struggled to his feet with the aid of a seat. "I didn't have time. What—were you fooling with the controls? You might have—"

"Uh-uh," answered Aaron, gesturing to the front. "Try them for yourself. Those things don't have any control of this car. Not now."

Snarling with disbelief, Elton moved up the slope, plumped into the chair, began to adjust certain knobs. "Damn if you're not right," he said in a horse whisper. "But what. . ." His voice trailed off as his eyes moved frontwards, staring out the thick windshield. "Hey—look. The—"

And before he could mouth the words, the car emerged from the tunnel-end he'd glimpsed, and streaked out into the open, building up even greater speed. The plains and hills about them blurred past. Only the crystalline stars in the night sky seemed to remain stationary as they sped into the night.

IT WAS an unpleasant transition: from one kind of helplessness to another sort entirely.

Aaron slumped into his seat, not

bothering to clip on his harness.

The Overseers had them.

There was no other explanation. He wracked his brain searching for one, but the alternatives were as thin as tissue-wrap, and promptly shredded after a few tugs of counter-argument.

Now he lay laconically in his seat, watching the bleak landscape whiz by through the porthole-like window. The others were similarly sprawled: Chaimon and Elton fitfully snoring away their weariness, Vana merely drowsing beside him.

It was all wait-and-see now.

They'd figured it out. The monorail car must be fitted with monitoring equipment. Somehow, hidden electric eyes must have flashed their images to control screens situated in the center of these communities, presumably the same place that held the spaceport. The Overseers there must have radioed a remote-control directive to the computerized mechanism of this car.

A considerate move, thought Aaron with irony. Evidently, the Overseers were cognizant as well of the crisis situation in Republica, and the fact that the car was of no further use to their newly deceased agent there. And rather than leave the intruders at the mercy (or further aid) of Tele-machus and his rebelling soldiers, the Overseers whisked them out in the car. Serendipitous. They'd get back both their car and the fugitives they'd been seeking.

Aaron could appreciate the irony as well as any man. But that didn't quell his own rising sense of frustration and helplessness.

There was nothing he could do about it. At least, not right now. That was the frustrating part. They were helpless in the hands of people that he didn't understand. Mysterious

people. Ruthless people.

The future did not bode well if they remained in the Overseers' control.

His eyes wandered over to Vana. She was awake, looking at him. No expression showed in her eyes.

"What are you thinking?" Her voice was low, so as not to wake the others.

"That I'm an idiot, a rube. A patsy in the clutches of fate," he replied mildly.

"But aren't we all?"

"I'm the one who had this hare-brained scheme. I'm the one who walked us right into their hands. It would have been different if we could have entered their stronghold and command center unknown. But now. . . Now we're weaponless, helpless against their whims."

"And what are those whims?"

"God knows, but I fear the worst."

"Death? Mind-wiping?"

"They're both the same."

"Are they? With the latter we'd still be alive—"

"But dead to our former selves. Dead to the past. Dead to each other."

"Is that so important, Aaron?"

"It is to me." His eyes lingered a moment on her face, drifted down over her curled-up form, dropped to the floor. His impulse was to grab her up into his arms, shield himself from the cold of reality in her warmth. But he did not. He would not allow himself to. There was enough to lose without adding this to the tally.

"It would seem that I slept through all the excitement back in Republica," she said, changing the subject. "Care to fill me in? I feel left out."

"I'd have liked to have been left out of this entire affair," he confided.

He told her of the events of the day in Republica.

"My," she said, when he was

finished. "Our Mr. Telemachus seems to have been quite a deceiver. Of course his new reign won't last for long."

"No. Whatever the Overseer's means are, they are no doubt effective. I dare say there will be massive mental re-orientations in that community. And as for Telemachus. . ."

"Perhaps we'll see him again. In the mind-wipe booths."

"Let's hope we see neither."

As their gazes lingered on one another, he felt a curious pang—like an angel-soft hand—briefly seizing his heart and then releasing it.

Abruptly, complete blackness unfolded the car. A whooshing sounded about them. The vehicle slanted downwards at an angle of ten degrees. Another tunnel.

"Do you think this is the spaceport?" she asked.

"No," he said, lifting himself from his slouch, gazing thoughtfully at the deep darkness. "Even at the speed we've been going, we've not been travelling long enough. It must be another community."

"Do you think we'll stop?"

"We won't have long to wait to find out, will we?"

The angle flattened, there was the brief flash of light that could only have been the monorail station, and again their car sloped up.

"Besides," continued Aaron. "I doubt very much there'll be such a need for concealing the monorail stop at the spaceport. I would think it's on the surface."

They popped out into the open once more, and the car resumed its speed. Its streamlined body ripped easily through night air and cleaved the distance, the high-pitched whisper of the wind a steady background sound again.

"What does it all mean, Aaron?" asked Vana. "I mean, the whole structure of life seems to be crumbling around us. What is the *purpose* of a world like this?"

"What's the purpose for *any* world?" returned Aaron.

"You're being cynical."

"Cynicism is often a helpful philosophy." He gave her a wan smile. "It helps rationalize so much." He made himself comfortable. "Well, I know we can't give in without a fight. That's my basic philosophy now. And I need some sleep if I'm going to fight." He patted her arm. "Look on the bright side. We don't have to walk all that way."

She nodded, and closed her eyes.

He laid his cheek on the seat's headrest, and calmly waited for welcome oblivion.

It was a long time coming.

Aaron and the day awoke at the same time.

He came to his senses in stages.

At first, he seemed to float in a restful, relaxed peace. His vaguely opened eyes saw swirling mists about the car. He noted that they seemed to have slowed down, and a part of him wondered why. But the majority of his senses merely luxuriated in this blissful vacuum of careless ease.

He seemed light-years away from problems; separated from care by centuries.

Gradually, full consciousness seeped into his body. The morning fog was burning off. He lay wondering if this was to be his last morning of awareness. His judgment told him that their destination must not be far off.

He languidly prodded himself out of his lethargy, rose, slipped by Vana, and settled into the control seat. The

car essayed a slight curve, and beyond it was the mouth of a tunnel. It loomed large, then swallowed them up in its darkness.

Another community before the command center?

But the car was slowing down. The brightly lit monitor-room and monorail station slid into view slowly. With the hiss of air cushions, the car eased to a stop. Automatically, the side door slid open. Then it *was* electronically controlled. But why. . . ?

The noises roused the others. They sat up, stared about them hazily. "This is the place?" mumbled Elton grumpily. "Where's our welcome committee?"

The monitor room, precisely like the others, was deserted.

Aaron said, "No. No, this isn't the place at all. Couldn't be. It must be another community."

"But why should they stop us in another community?" Chaimon sprang up, warily poked his head out the open door.

"Another chance!" Vana stood, heaved her pack up over her shoulders, brushed past Chaimon. "Let's go up, quickly. They might have made a mistake—we might still have the opportunity to escape!"

THEY EMERGED from St. Paul's Cathedral.

They stood atop a brief set of stone steps. Over a jumble of fog-smeared chimney-potted buildings, sliced by crooked streets and alleyways, Aaron could see the Thames River, sluggishly moving a garbage scow eastwards toward the distant Tower Bridge. Early morning fog still blanketed the ground in the shadows, sending tentative, questing tendrils out to explore the sunbeams, evaporating slowly in the cloud-

dimmed light. To the left rose stately structures: the financial and business buildings of the City. These majestic, dignified buildings, along with the grand, white dome of St. Paul's, constituted an island of beauty amidst a sea of rubble: creaking, old, magnificently ugly slums.

Not the clean, modern Megalondon, realized Aaron as he surveyed it all, recovering from his shock.

Nineteenth century London.

Fabulously detailed. Even the smells were like nothing he'd ever experienced before. The scent of so much, mingled together: flowers, offal, sweet food smells and brackish, fishy river-smells.

And there were people. Some intently walking toward work. Some simply strolling. And all dressed in such a charming, if historically alien, manner.

Horse-drawn handsome cabs, carriages, and phaetons jerked and clattered by.

Vana broke the stunned silence between them. "This is the most elaborate community so far."

"Elaborate?" Elton shook his head, gazing at their surroundings. "You're making an understatement. It's incredibly detailed."

"Victorian England," murmured Chaimon.

"No, by the cut and style of dress, I'd say the Regency Period," corrected Vana. "Very well produced. The first thirty years of the nineteenth century in England are commonly dubbed as the Regency Era, but the actual regency of George, the Prince of Wales, was from 1811 to 1820, during which time the quite mad and infirm George III, his father, was incapable of ruling the country."

"Well, you seem to have a bit of

knowledge on the subject," observed Aaron.

"I do have a fondness for English history," Vana allowed.

"But why should they want to reproduce that era, and the entirety of London, in such incredible detail?" asked Chaimon. "I mean, compared to this the other communities were nothing."

Like the original Bedlam Insane Asylum compared to routine modern psychoanalysis encounter sessions, thought Aaron.

"No greeting committee," continued Chaimon. "We seem to be on our own. Might as well make the best of it."

"I'd love to just walk around this place," Vana said quietly. "It's—it's just like being back in that time and place." There was a quiet awe in her expression as she commenced to descend the steps to the road.

According to a simple signpost, they stood on Cannon Street. Vana was hard-pressed deciding which direction she wanted to go—she seemed desirous of going everywhere. But, eventually, she elected to lead them in what she claimed was a westwards direction—if the model was aligned with the poles of this planet as the original was with Earth's—up Ludgate Hill, toward the Strand and Charing Cross, which she claimed were the centers of general London life during this period.

"Oh my!" she bubbled, eyes alight as she pointed northwards to a set of tall, black walls topped with sharp pikes. "Newgate Prison! Can you believe that? That's not standing in modern London."

As they progressed she excitedly pointed out further landmarks of interest, as though they were the actual items—as though this were the

actual nineteenth century London on Earth. Aaron could well understand her attitude: The place reeked of the here-and-now life—and yet in all its specifics, all its myriad facets, it was an exact replica of what had once been.

Curiously, though the pedestrians obviously were aware of their existence, they were roundly ignored. Evidently, their Overseer-like garb had no effect whatsoever on the inhabitants of this community. Neither were they invisible, nor were they gods here, it seemed.

They strolled on, still in awe of their surroundings.

THEY HAD JUST reached the Strand and were examining the multitude of shops lined along that thoroughfare, when they finally encountered the trouble Aaron had expected at the monitor room.

But it visited them in a totally unsuspected form.

By this time, the avenue was swarming with various classes of English folk who constituted the society of the day. It was simple to separate them merely by their mode of dress, but at close quarters aspects such as style of speech, manner of carriage, and sometimes smell helped discern one social stratum from another.

In the main, the street was presently populated with the age's emerging lower-middle class. These men, in their neat but plain frock coats, woolen breeches, drab hats, hurried along to their clerking or business positions. Here and there, street merchants hawked their wares and lower class individuals of disreputable appearance slunk warily amongst the crowds, beady eyes darting about for unprotected pockets to pick.

There didn't seem to be a great number of higher-class people milling about at the moment; still slumbering, suggested Vana. Nonetheless, Elton managed to blunder into a small party of them.

Or so it seemed at the time.

The big man was examining the fascinating structure of the roof tops, his eyes well away from the crowd. Aaron saw it all clearly: A group of six fancily dressed gentlemen, chattering amongst themselves in high-pitched tones, was moving along the street-side. Elton, eyes elsewhere, bumped into one, knocking him down.

There was a flurry of astonished outcries and curses from the gentlemen. "Dash it all, man!" ejaculated one. "You've flattened the Duke!"

Elton flushed. "I—I'm very sorry."

Speedily the gentlemen busied themselves bringing their fallen companion back to his feet, setting his beaver top hat back on his head, brushing off his lustrous black cape.

"I'm all right. No damage," muttered the man, obscured by the forms of his attendant gentlemen as they saw to the last fleck of dirt marring his wide, boned lapels. "Only to my honor!" The immaculately attired men separated, giving Aaron a full view of this Duke that Elton had so ignobly downed.

He gaped with surprise.

Above the complicated knot of a silk neckcloth gleamed metal. The two 'eyes' that poked out of the steel face were optical sensor lenses. The mouth was a screened rectangle: a simple speaker grill.

This 'Duke' was a robot.

SIX

THE ROBOT straightened its disheveled waistcoat, inserted gloved di-

gits into its pockets and ascertained that it had not been robbed.

"Frocked enough these past years," it mumbled. "Don't care to have it accomplished by the likes of you." With a faint though distinct whir of machinery, its neck swivelled, its sensors taking in the sight of the oddly garbed strangers. "By the by, just *who* might you be?"

"Visitors," responded Elton, still flustered. "We do beg your pardon. I was simply—"

"Ye Gods!" cried one of the gentlemen. "I know that accent. They're from the independent colonies. Those United States. The buggers just declared war on us again!"

"Spies!" whispered another. "Very bad. Not the thing at all!"

The metal Duke advanced a step. "Is it not enough that the Emperor Frog, Napoleon Bonaparte, threatens the well-being of this sceptred isle, this earthly Eden? Now treasonous Englishmen from the Americas have the unmitigated *audacity* to mingle their rank, rebellious selves amongst trueborn English for purposes of espionage? And openly assault a member of its proud and brave nobility?" The robot shook with a clanking fury. "No! This outrage cannot take place without suitable retributory measures to compensate!" Stepping forward, the robot slipped off its leather gloves. These it placed in its silvery right hand, and slapped them hard against both of Elton's cheeks. "Name your friends, sir!"

"What?" cried Elton.

Furious, he was about to attempt to throttle the robot, when Aaron gripped his arm and hastily whispered into his ear: "Play along for now. We don't know what's happening."

This managed to cool the big man down some, and he ceased his ad-

vance upon the robot.

Aaron turned to Vana. "What's going on?"

"God knows. I assure you, they didn't have robots back—"

"No, no," he interrupted. "What does the slapping mean?"

"Evidently, the Duke has taken insult at Elton's clumsiness, and has called him out."

"Called me out?" Elton said, continuing to glare at the gentlemen.

"Challenged you to a duel."

"Duel? But with what?"

"Pistols or rapiers, sir," answered one of the gentlemen with a curt bow. "My name is George Andrews. His Excellency has done me the extreme honor of naming me as his second. He requests me to inform you that he demands immediate satisfaction. I am to guide you to the green of his selection."

The incident had already drawn a sizable crowd of onlookers. They muttered amongst themselves with unchecked glee at the idea of a spillage of blood while pickpockets discreetly plied their trade in their midst.

"Pistols? Rapiers?" said Elton. "Damned if I'm going to get myself killed. Tell your tin-faced Duke to find another patsy to skewer or blow a hole through. You'll not get me—"

Even as Elton spoke, Aaron noticed that a group of surly, muscular men were making their way through the surrounding people. It suddenly came to him that the events of the preceding minutes were somehow entirely too pat to have been mere coincidence. Justifying his suspicion, the burly men abruptly descended upon the party. Two set upon Aaron, each grasping one arm in thick, muscular hands. Chaimon and Vana were similarly held fast; it took three of the biggest of the poorly-clad ruffians to

detain Elton.

The man who had called himself Andrews said, "So happy you can oblige. Now, if you will follow me, this small matter will be promptly attended to."

The others of his party were already traipsing toward their destination. With a swish of his coattails, Andrews turned smartly on his heel and followed.

The fingers that dug into Aaron's arm increased their pressure. "All right, Laddie. Let's be movin', then, eh?" snapped one of the men.

They were brusquely jostled forward.

IT WAS a small, tree-rimmed park set amid a neat square of townhouse buildings. Well-clad young children peeped up from their play as the crowd surged into the park.

"Any precedents for this business, Vana?" asked Aaron as they were rudely seated together on a bench with Chaimon. Meanwhile, Elton was dragged, kicking and snarling, to where the Duke-centered group of gentlemen waited.

"None," she replied, pausing to impart a scathing glance at one of the men who had manhandled her. "That I know of, anyway. Dueling in the real Regency Period was an illegal activity indulged in by the upper class, or on the sly. The actual challenge presented to Elton was conventionally formal—but the aftermath has been extremely different, to say the least."

Chaimon finished drawing in his exhausted breaths. "... Crazy. It's crazy. We should have just gotten out of here, while they gave us the chance!"

"I don't know," murmured Aaron. "It all has the air of something prepared in advance—pre-planned."

"But why?" objected Chaimon.

Aaron replied, "I don't know." He felt extraordinarily powerless, sitting on this park bench among chirping-bird-filled trees, with strutting, cooing pigeons at his feet, while his friend was on the verge of a contest that might spell his death. Friend? reflected Aaron. Yes—Elton *had* become more than just a companion of necessity. The large, bluff man had his qualities. He deserved a better end than this. But what could be done?

He could only watch and hope.

Elton's three rowdies positioned him in a spot pointed to by Andrews on the stretch of greensward the Duke had selected for the duel, and then relieved him of his backpack. Warningly, they showed him their calloused fists, then retreated some yards to be clear of any possible mis-aimed balls that might be fired.

Twenty yards away, the robot duke waved away his companions, unbuttoned his topcoat, daintily folded it just so and placed it on the proffered arm of his second, who carried it off to the sidelines, returning speedily with a walnut box.

"Hey—wait a moment!" cried Elton, looking about to bolt at any moment. "Don't I get my choice of weapons?"

"Rapiers are not easy to procure at such short notice," answered the Duke, inspecting the contents of the case Andrews had opened for him.

"I can wait!" burst out Elton, eyeing the surrounding heavies.

The Duke ignored him. It selected its weapon with a metal hand, inspected it carefully and nodded to Andrews. Andrews bowed and strode in a leisurely fashion to Elton, offering him the remaining pistol.

Elton grasped it reluctantly. An-

draws plucked a white silk handkerchief from his breast pocket. "Gentlemen. As the cloth touches the grass, discharge your weapons!"

He stepped backward some paces, held the handkerchief aloft. It fluttered airily in the light breeze. The surrounding crowd grew still. A palpable sense of excitement-charged dread obviously gripped all—Aaron included.

"Oh, Aaron," Vana sighed. She buried her head in his shoulder.

"Bizarre," murmured Chaimon.

"Uh-uh!" cried Elton. With a speed that belied his size he dashed to Andrews before his guards could stop him, grabbed the man around the neck with his left arm and put the muzzle of his pistol to Andrews' head. "One wrong step and your buddy gets an extra ear!"

"Good God!" sputtered Andrews. "Monstrous bad manners! This simply is not in style!"

Elton barked, "Shut up!" to his captive, then addressed the others above the general buzz of disapproval from the crowd. "Okay—I don't know what this little game is, but right now I want you all to stay away." He started hauling Andrews over the green toward Aaron, Chaimon and Vana. "I just want to take my friends and myself out of this place!"

The Duke stepped forward, shaking his metal head in extreme exasperation. "You played it all wrong!" he cried. Holding his weapon skywards, he pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber. It was not loaded.

Why then this charade?

Danger from his antagonist's gun gone, Elton shoved Andrews away from himself, hurried back toward the bench, motioned his friends to stand. "Just stay away! Who knows—maybe

you goofed and *this* gun is loaded!"

"Oh, it is, dear fellow!" the Duke said, voice unruffled as he reassumed his top coat and buttoned himself up. As he placed his hat back on, he began to walk toward Elton. Simultaneously, the crew of rowdies began to close in.

"Stay away I said!" cried Elton desperately. "Or I'll fire!"

"Oh, by all means, do!" declared the Duke, keeping up his steady advance. "That's the whole idea!"

"Oh hell." Elton leveled the pistol and squeezed the trigger.

There was a loud explosion. Dark smoke spewed from the muzzle. The Duke had ceased his advance. He made laughing sounds.

From the muzzle of the ten-inch barrel of the dueling pistol Elton was holding, a thin rod protruded. A length of cloth unfurled from this. It fluttered in the breeze. Aaron could see there was writing on it.

Astonished, Elton backed toward his companions. Aaron rose and grabbed the cloth. In swirling, delicately formed letters, the cloth said:

HIS ROYAL MAJESTY
PRINCE GEORGE IV,
REGENT OF GREAT BRITAIN
REQUESTS THE PLEASURE
OF YOUR COMPANY
AT THIS EVENING'S BALL
AT ALMACK'S ASSEMBLY ROOMS
ST. JAMES
(*This invitation shall be
a ticket entitling
four entrance.*)

The robot Duke motioned to his ruffians. He touched the brim of his hat politely, said, "I *do* hope you will be able to attend," and, surrounded by his gentlemen friends, walked serenely away.

The ruffians moved in.

FROM the scene of the mock-duel, they were unceremoniously moved to a set of rooms adjacent to Leicester Square. Here they were deposited with the explanation that suitable apparel would be delivered in the afternoon for their seemingly mandatory jaunt to the place indicated in the astonishing invitation. The doors of the house were bolted and locked. The motley crew of guards took up their stations.

In the frontmost room, a tray containing all manner of foods awaited them. A steaming pot of tea beside matched china cups and saucers supplied the only beverage.

As he crunched a rasher of bacon, Elton commented that from all appearances, their arrival had been expected. Aaron and Chaimon slumped in elaborately carved furniture, while Vana examined the food Elton was so readily bolting down. "Do please give me a chance to determine what types of food we have here," she requested.

"Damned good food!" replied Elton heartily. "A lot of meat. You'll not deny me some sustenance after my ordeal? I tell you, I was scared out of my mind." He stabbed an item of food from a silver serving bowl, popped it in his mouth and began to chew. "Hmm. Interesting. What is it, Vana?"

She leaned over to inspect the dish. "Well, the Overseers have copied the English right down to their peculiar tastes. Elton, I'd say off hand that these are beef kidneys.

Elton blanched. "I shouldn't have asked." He busied himself sampling the wide variety of dishes. "Chaimon, Aaron. C'mon. Get something inside you. Quite good."

"A cup of tea, maybe," said Aaron. "I'm not feeling on top of the world right now."

"Me neither," Chaimon chimed in. "Maybe in a few minutes."

"I'll pour some tea." Vana busied herself preparing the drinks, as Elton wolfed down more food.

Later, as they sat with saucers on their knees, Chaimon asked, "What are we going to do?"

"I'm really sick of that question," Aaron said. Nothing to do, he thought to himself.

"Play along with the bastards," said Elton jovially. "Wait for an opening, a chance to gum up the works. Nothing more we *can* do."

"Somehow I feel we played the whole thing wrong." Aaron sighed dismally.

"What else could we have done?" scolded Vana. "Look, everyone—we're alive. What more can we ask? The Overseers here seem to be *playing* with us. What do you think that whole charade in the park was all about? Aaron, we were right to wonder about the legitimacy of the theory that this world consisted of segregated social experiments. I think it's fairly likely that that's the way it started. But now—now it seems to be more of a . . . a—"

"Yeah," Aaron said. "A playground."

"Exactly!" Vana clattered her cup, saucer and spoon to a side table. "And I get the feeling we're going to find out why soon enough."

"So for now we just sit here—let them play it *their* way?" Chaimon asked.

"That's all we *can* do," agreed Elton.

Aaron had to go along with them. He had never regarded himself as a man of action—and he'd had more action in his few weeks on this planet than the rest of his life. If they were being offered a respite, a chance to

rest and relax a little, well, he could use it.

That decision behind him, he felt a rising appetite, and filled a plate with food. As he did, Chaimon did also.

After they'd finished eating, Aaron said, "Vana—you know a little about the era that this particular community was modeled after. Maybe it would help us if we knew a little about it as well."

Vana nodded. "I should think it would. A code of behavior was quite important amongst the privileged of this time in London's history, and I dare say the Overseers have copied that as well."

As Aaron finished eating, Vana told them of what they might expect at this place called 'Almack's'.

Their carriage lurched to a halt before the imposing spectacle of Almack's of King Street—a byway perpendicular to St. James Street, in the St. James section of London. Their newly scrubbed and better-dressed escorts hopped down, held the doors open as though they were nothing more than servants. As Aaron disembarked, he ardently wished the burly men were truly so, and not their keepers.

A gaggle of properly dressed gentlefolk were presently clustered about the very proper doorway to the wide building before them. Aaron carefully adjusted his cut-off blue top coat and settled his *chapeau bras*—a bicorne hat shaped like a slice of lemon—onto his head before he struck off after Elton and Chaimon, similarly dressed in the regulation Almack's costume which included knee-breeches and a white cravat. Vana walked abreast of him, wearing a long purple gown sporting all manner of extravagant embroidery, her head topped with a matching bonnet.

This apparel had been brought in the early evening, and they had spent at least an hour chuckling over it.

Nonetheless, Aaron felt quite natty. Yes, and *exclusive*. That was the word—the key word—that Vana had used to describe the society ("Not 'high society,' mind you," she'd said, "but simply 'society,' for it was the only class that *mattered*.") that subscribed to the ways of the 'fashionable world'. Within the boundaries of this existence—cornered in London by Pall Mall, St. James Street, Picadilly, and St. James's Square—were the exclusive 'clubs' such as Brooks, Crockfords', Watier's, and the *most* exclusive, White's. It was at the latter establishment that the prime dandy, Beau Brummell, held forth at the famous bow window with his chosen disciples, passing judgment upon the fashionable world as it streamed along on St. James Street, below.

It was all of course totally frivolous, relatively speaking. But to those who participated in this *cors élite*, this *société distinguée*, this dynasty of *ton*, it was the very stuff of existence, the meaning for life itself.

Flanking them as they strode up to Almack's entrance were their guards, alert for the ever-possible escape attempt. But escape to what? wondered Aaron. Besides, he was much too intrigued with the current events to consider flight.

A butler decked out in the French mode—the fact that their England was supposed to be at war with the fabricator of these fashions seemed not to bother the *société choisie* in the least—politely examined their voucher of admission, bowed and waved them forward into the festivities. They deposited their hats in a cloak room. Presently, they were ushered

into an unprepossessing ballroom where a small group of persons performed a simple *quadrille* dance, to the strains of a modest orchestra set in one corner, while ladies and gentlemen stood to the side, amiably chatting. Adjoining this room were smaller chambers where small parties could congregate for private conversations, intrigues, a simple stately rubber of whist, or whatever card-game was presently in style at this venue of the rules of current taste.

According to Vana, the original Almack's was the 'inner temple of exclusivism', and the very axis upon which the court of *ton* spun. What made Regency society so unique in Earth history was the determined way in which it excluded undesirables, the extremely codified rules of membership, and the strict unwritten laws which members adhered to, even when they had no respect for conventional civic rules. Each Wednesday evening of the social season a ball was held at Almack's. One could not buy his way into the place; one had to be scrutinized and approved by a small group of patronesses. However, the codes of this model of that society had obviously been waived so that Aaron and his companions could gain entrance.

But *why*? The question still burned in his mind.

They clung to each other in their own small group, immediately feeling alien to this society.

"I can't think of any civilized society so amenable to this sort of treatment," commented Vana. "People in this situation are totally oblivious to all else. Oh—look! More robots. How queer." She nodded at various robots like the Duke they had previously met, scattered about the ballroom, elegantly turned out in the very fan-

ciest of clothing styles. "Do you know—why, yes, that could be the only explanation. They're the aristocracy of this false-London! How strange!" Aaron looked at her, and her eyes were sparkling. "And how very *droll*!" She tittered. "My goodness, I'm beginning to take on the lingo of the place."

Before he could comment, a handsome young man separated himself from a small group, and approached them. He bowed crisply, said, "Pardon my seeming forwardness. But you are the special guests of the Regent this evening, are you not?" His hair was an artful chaos of curls. He carried himself with grace and ease.

Aaron replied, "I suppose you could say that. But *reluctant* guests."

"Oh? You are not enjoying yourselves?" His brow creased with concern.

"What he means," blurted Elton, "is that we were dragged here by a bunch of half-civilized heavies now standing sentry at the exits!"

The young man coughed into his fist with apparent embarrassment. "Be that as it may, we hope you will enjoy the occasion as best you may. The Regent sends his regards, and regrets that he cannot be here before ten-thirty to speak with you. It was that for which you have been brought here." He slipped a watch from his waistcoat pocket, snicked it open. "And as it is now close to nine-thirty, you have an hour to sample the offerings of the ball. I have the honor of being appointed your 'guide'. Of course you are free to mingle as you like, but I will answer any questions—"

"Yeah?" blared Elton. "Then how come the damned owners of this planet can't face up to us without all these frills?"

"—Questions concerning proper conduct within these walls," continued the man, arching his eyebrows in disapproval of Elton's boorishness. "My name is Avery Bracknell. At your service." He pointed out a nearby room. "If you should desire them, there are refreshments yonder. And of course I should be happy to make introductions."

"Thanks all the same, but Chaimon and I are going to sample some booze," said Elton, grabbing his younger companion's elbow. "I assume you do have *that*."

"Liquor?" responded Mr. Bracknell. "There is champagne punch, and some brandy."

"Fine." Elton, looking ridiculous in his fine Regency dress, pulled Chaimon boozewards. Chaimon merely shrugged and allowed it; Aaron was pleased to see their personality clashes had evidently been brought to at least a truce.

"As for me," said Vana, eyeing the assembled people with undisguised enthusiasm, "I think that I know enough to handle myself, thank you Mr. Bracknell." She essayed a stately curtsy, and vanished amidst the crowd.

"And you, sir?" inquired Bracknell.

Aaron shrugged, extended his hand. "Just call me Aaron."

Together they walked round the edge of the room.

"Are you one of our—uh, 'hosts'?" Aaron inquired delicately.

"Your servant, sir," responded Bracknell politely.

"No. No, I mean—one of the Overseers."

"Overseers, Aaron? I don't take your meaning."

Well, if he was an Overseer, he wasn't telling. "Never mind. Perhaps you could point out some interesting

people here to while away the time till your boss—ah, the Regent arrives."

"Certainly, Aaron! A pleasure. The most interesting people of present-day England congregate here every Wednesday evening. Yes, just yonder—those young men around the Incomparable—pardon me, Miss Isabella Millborne. Top crop of the sporting set, those. Young Lord Sheringham can drive a phaeton four-in-hand. Devilish hard, that."

"Tell me—how do you support yourself?"

"Support, sir?"

"You know—occupation. Work?"

"Work? Egads, sir. That is hardly the fashion hereabouts! I personally have a small annuity which I parlay into slightly more revenue at the gaming tables of Crockford's and some less distinguished hells. Better to go into the three-percents, sir, than to work!"

"My humblest apologies, Mr. Bracknell."

"Oh, dispense with the formalities, Aaron. Call me Avery." He laughed out loud. "The chaps call me 'Birdie'. Brummell himself dubbed me that. Deuced clever fellow, the Beau. Get it? Aviary—Avery? Birdie? Nice ring, eh?" Although his formality seemed to have relaxed, he carried himself with the same easy stiffness. "Oh, yes." He pointed past the curtains drawn up at the wide portal of one of the many smaller chambers. "I see the 'Circle' is in session. Vicious literary bunch. Here—come have a peek at 'em."

Discreetly they positioned themselves just outside the chamber where they could hear and see what took place within. Four people were seated about a card table, intently brooding over fanned hands of intricately designed cards. Around them, in-

trigued onlookers sat on couches and chairs, observing the play and listening to the talk for pearls of wit.

"Fellow fartherst away. . ." Bracknell crooked a finger toward the oldest of the bunch, a man with thinning black hair and neat sideboards, wearing spectacles, who had just thumped a Queen of Spades down with a satisfied expression of glee. ". . . Mr. Ronald Archer—writer, essayist, editor of some note in the literary world."

Eyes wide with alarm, one of the gameplayers declared, "Confound you, Archer!" as he gathered in the bad trick he'd won. "You've sent one of your devilish shafts into me. By Jove, if this keeps up, I shall have to remember your debts to me!"

"Willis Brown, Esquire," whispered Bracknell. "Famous journalist, who scribbles a few decent poems now and then."

Unmoved, Archer fitted a pipe between his lips, puffed. "The debts are my publishers, Brown." He cocked an eyebrow. "And better debts for your doggerel than the nothing-at-all you'd obtain elsewhere! Your lead, sir!"

These words were greeted with polite laughter from the onlookers.

Brown ventured a card onto the playing field. The young, pettily beautiful lady at his elbow followed suit, then turned a calculating gaze upon the elegantly handsome man at her left. "I sincerely hope you can deal with that play, Mr. Bishop. I shouldn't desire you to cease your flattering couplets about my loveliness."

Bracknell leaned near again for explanations: "Anna Baxter, poetess. The wits claim she's inspired more poems than she's written. By her, Frederick Bishop, leading light of the Romantics."

After a moment of reflection, Bishop flicked a card from its fellows, tossed it down face-up. "Madam, I find your play always *most* delightful to deal with." His dark, dreamy eyes took on a mischievous gleam. "And I assure you that no matter what cards you lay down, I shall continue coupling over your loveliness *quite* enthusiastically."

Miss Baxter's lips smiled ever-so-slightly up into her flushed cheeks. Her eyes looked demurely down at the table as Brown and Archer chuckled knowingly and the onlookers gaped in astonishment.

"Good God!" cried Bracknell. "Bishop shall find himself on his ear outside one day if he doesn't take measure to curb his brazenness! And I should be only too happy to assist in the tossing-out! I do apologize, sir, if you have been offended." Bracknell spirited Aaron away from the scene suggesting refreshments might be in order, and promising to fill his ears with less scandalous intrigues.

Which was a shame, thought Aaron, for he'd been rather enjoying himself.

They made their way back to the refreshment table the roundabout way, leisurely cutting through the mingling crowd as Bracknell continued his ceaseless commentary on this feud or that supposed assignation. He spoke of Mr. Haversham's prowess at the dressing table, and Mr. Lewis' skill at knotting his neckgear just right, so that it appeared to have been tied in a hurry when actually the fellow had spent some time before his looking glass.

Aaron remarked upon the surprisingly modest decor of the main part of the ballroom, and the spartan set of refreshments available. "Dear fellow," said Mr. Bracknell, aghast. "In Al-

mack's there is no ostentation of wealth. Everything is distinct from the affairs and entertainments of the *neuveau riche*, that those uncultured personages cannot affect to vie with us."

With extreme interest, Aaron watched the actions and manners of the robot aristocrats. They were the single aspect of this society out of keeping with the general faithfulness to the original model. Could they perhaps be mobile monitors of the complicated goings-on of this place?

As they neared the refreshments, his musings were interrupted by the sudden emergence of Chaimon into his view.

"Excuse us," Chaimon said hastily to Mr. Bracknell as he swept Aaron away to a nearby corner. He seemed extremely disturbed, agitated. "Aaron! My dear God, Aaron! She's here!"

"What's wrong, Chaimon? Who's here? What are you—"

Chaimon pointed out a young lady amidst a group, conversing. "That girl. Over there, in the turquoise dress." His eyes wide, he drew in a deep breath, let it out. "That's *El-lanie!*"

SEVEN

IT WAS an adolescent fantasy come true.

As Vana moved away from her companions, swirling herself into the social currents of the replica of Almack's ballroom, she breathed in the sights and sounds as though they were the bouquet of some deliciously ancient cognac. And it was all creating a distinct feeling of light-headedness, which she welcomed, surrendering to it without contest.

Bits and pieces of sparkling conversation drifted into her ears as she

swept along the brightly polished floor, taking in the atmosphere. She openly admired the dandies, the up-right gentlemen, and the ladies clothed in preening glory.

Ah, the Regency! Old England!

How many books had she devoured, how many teletopes had she seen placed in this period, attempting to immerse herself in its romantic frivolity? Georgette Heyer—here I am!

Happily, she shoved all thoughts of reality from her mind, plunged her thoughts wholeheartedly into the froth and fray of excitement about her that bubbled and fizzled like fresh champagne. No more was she mindful of the stark situation she, Elton, Chaimon, and Aaron might be in: the impending confrontation with the Overseers; the possible fate in store. Not to mention the philosophical problems her heart had been struggling with since she'd been cast astray from her plotted course of colonization.

All her life she had struggled to maintain a sense of being the captain of her soul, the master of her destiny. The venture to a new world light-years from Earth had been a conscious decision that had imbued her with a sense of commanding the progress of her future, away from the constraints and claustrophobia of Earth society. And then through some freak accident her scheduled course had headlonged into a hard wall, ricocheting her into this bizarre trek across this strange world. And here she had come to realize how at mercy she was in the tempestuous chaos of the universe. How helpless—and how insignificant. A mere twist of events might well snuff out her existence. She had no control, and it scared her.

But not now. Now she was living,

feeling, sensing a dream that had before been only a ghost of some half-imagined past.

And here she moved in its midst—and all of it was solid.

For a time, she merely eavesdropped on the repartee of the various groups that stood or lounged in chairs set about the edges of dance floor. She longed to join a conversation. How would she fare? she wondered. Would she stumbled over the exquisite phrases, muff the well-turned accents and expressions necessary to invest Regency conversation with its needed inflections and exquisite meanings?

As she pondered this, she was approached by a man sharply dressed in a blue coat, a white waistcoat, black pantaloons buttoned tight around his ankles, striped silk stockings, and shiny black oval-toed pumps. "Madame—I believe you are new to this coterie. I fear I've not yet had the privilege of learning your name."

A tingle of sublime pleasure coursed through Vana. And such a handsome gentleman—no older than his mid-thirties, certainly. But her name. . . Vana Morgan simply would not do—not a *proper* name. No—she must invent. And the name in her fantasies sprang instantly to mind.

"Miss Charity Lovelace, sir. And may I have the pleasure of—"

"Daniel Steffan, Miss Lovelace." He rolled a curious eye towards the small orchestra, returned his gaze to Vana, smiling. "I believe next on the agenda is a bit of the Austrian stuff. Strauss music, I think. Would you care to waltz, Miss Lovelace?"

She had never before actually performed the dance, but she knew its principles. "Of course! I mean, a turn about the floor might be *most* exhilarating." And then she remem-

bered something from her readings on the rules of Almack's. "But I am new to these balls—did I not hear that it was necessary to obtain the permission of one of the Lady Patronesses in order for a guest to waltz?"

"Absolutely!" exclaimed Mr. Steffan with a cheerful flourish of his hands, ending in a discreet gesture toward a woman of some years holding court to one side of the dance floor. "Yonder is Lady Jersey. I happen to have the good fortune to be one of her favorites." He held up a warning finger by his nose. "But caution! Present yourself as a demure, spiritless young thing, lest good Lady Jersey takes it upon herself to have a concern over my safety—in which case she would most certainly *not* tender permission for us to waltz."

"Your safety, Mr. Steffan?" Vana cried in mock-surprise, sparkling eyes belying this with coy amusement.

"Were you not aware, Miss Lovelace, that before you stands the most sought-after catch among the husband seekers of society," proclaimed Steffan, adjusting his waistcoat preeningly. A corner of his frown turned up into a lopsided smile, and they laughed. "Quite true! Quite honestly, I am. I actually have a position of rank in the government, in addition to my independent wealth. Coupled with my striking good looks, my charm, and my youth, this combination seems most pleasing to young ladies on the prowl."

"And good Lady Jersey sees one of life's callings to be the protection of Daniel Steffan, Esquire, from their dainty clutches?" She cocked an eyebrow playfully. "Hmm? Or perhaps she fancies you herself?"

"You're a bold one," said Mr. Steffan. "But remember—all softness and pliability in front of our patroness,

Miss Lovelace, lest I be robbed of my chance of dancing with you." He slipped his hand under her arm. "Come. The waltz is not far away, and all that stands in our way is an old lady who lusts after my person."

Vana allowed the man to lead her across the room to where Lady Jersey was seated, sipping lemonade, alert eyes seemingly aware of every movement in the room. As though she *owns* everyone here, thought Vana.

Lady Jersey was a woman of perhaps fifty winters, her face's wrinkles smoothed out with make-up, her color aided by rouge. Obviously, a holdover from the eighteenth century when make-up and ornamentation were the rule, her plump body was awash in the crisp ruffles of a chiffon dress, and her beribboned hair was obviously false. But her cold blue eyes were young and alive—Vana noted that instantly as Lady Jersey turned them toward Mr. Steffan and herself as they neared her. Those hard orbs softened perceptibly as they fixed on Steffan. "Ah—Daniel! I wondered when you would tear yourself away from the frivolities and visit me," she said in an imperious voice that quavered between high and low pitch. As her eyes lighted on Vana, her tone evened. "And you have a new friend. I believe she is one of the guests *forced* upon us by the Regent."

"May I introduce Miss Charity Lovelace, Lady Jersey," said Mr. Steffan. Vana curtsied as low as she could manage.

"Speaking of the Regent, Lady Jersey," said Mr. Steffan, hastily changing the subject. "Have you heard that old George IV has fallen out with Beau Brummell?"

Lady Jersey's eyes lit up with interest. "Yes! I did catch a few rumours to that effect, Daniel. Geor-

gie never did quite fit in to real society. Disowned his roots, has he?"

"Oh, I assure you the Beau is untroubled. Why just yesterday, unaware of the break, I was walking with the Regent in Hyde Park, and who do you think we should run into?"

"No!" cried the old woman with delight and relish. Her companions, a group of women and men clustered about her in attendance, listened enrapt.

"Yes indeed. The Beau himself! 'Hullo Daniel!' he cries. And then he sees who I'm with." Steffan paused for dramatic effect. "'Who's your fat friend?' he says."

"He didn't!" cried Lady Jersey in obvious delight. The others burst out in unrestrained laughter. Even the patroness could not help but let go with a few titters.

"I believe there is a waltz scheduled shortly," said Mr. Steffan immediately. "Miss Lovelace and I would very much like to dance to it. May we request your permission to do so, Lady Jersey?"

She ceased her laughing. "Waltz?" Her expression sobered. "I never did like the idea of allowing that sort of music in these halls. Quite outrageous. And you say you wish to dance to it with a child you've only just *met*?" Her tone was still disapproving when it mentioned Vana, but it had softened.

"We shall essay the most propriety of dances possible, I assure you, dear Lady Jersey," assured Vana quietly.

The patroness eyed her appraisingly. "Oh, very well. The young will not be young forever. Let them have their fun." She shoos them off. "You'd best hurry. They're about to strike up the number, I believe."

Mr. Steffan bowed, and hastily es-

corted Vana away, lest the old woman changer her mind. "Success!" he cried, once they were out of her ear-shot.

"We shall have to derive as much pleasure as possible after all that work!" said Vana.

"And most of *that*, I am happy to say, shall be mine," returned the man, cocking an ear for the beginning stanzas of the expected music. These emerged from the stringed instruments of the musicians at what he apparently judged to be the proper time, for he immediately placed a hand to her side, clasped her hand in his other, and twirled her onto the dance-floor.

They spun around and around to the three-quarter time, majestically rhythmic slaves of the heady tune pouring from the violins.

When the waltz finally ended, Vana found herself breathlessly giddy. "The dance has tired you," observed Mr. Steffan. "Let us move to that antechamber, where I believe we might obtain a glass or two of deucedly fine lemonade."

Placing a hand on her chest, Vana nodded in agreement. Mr. Steffan offered his arm, and they walked to the small room he'd indicated.

The chamber was vacant. A pitcher filled with pale yellow liquid, surrounded by crystal glasses, stood on a small table. Mr. Steffan poured out ample amounts of the drink, handed Vana her glass. "Charity Lovelace, eh?" he said, smiling knowingly. "A cute name, Vana Morgan."

She almost choked on her drink. "How—"

"Just a minute," he said, pacing to the door, closing it. He turned to face her. "I know who you are, who your friends are, and why you're here. And I want to help you."

WITH AS MUCH formality as he could muster, Aaron advanced upon the young woman. She canted her snub-nose at him inquiringly, and her green eyes gleamed with amusement. "Miss Lucy Stone," she answered to his inquiry after her name. The pair of stylish gentlemen standing behind her made questioning noises in their throats. She gave them a gentle gesture. "I'm quite all right, my friends. The gentleman is not bothering me. Although I must admit I don't know his name. . ."

"Mr. Provost. Aaron Provost," he supplied hastily. "I do beg your pardon for my intrusion, for I do not speak for myself." He motioned back toward where Chaimon sat in a corner, being attended to by Elton. "My friend, Mr. Chaimon Goldman, would very much like to converse with you a moment."

"Oh?" She tasted her small glass of sherry. "Mr. Goldman cannot introduce himself to me on his own? You are his intermediary?"

"I fear that my friend has developed a touch of the apoplexy upon the sight of you."

"People *have* commented on my striking appearance, but I've never had a gentlemen contrive a fit over it. I must meet this individual."

"Chaimon claims to have known you before. I'm hoping perhaps you have some knowledge of that meeting with him."

"Ah. That is what I thought."

He escorted her over to Chaimon and Elton, ignoring the dark looks her gentlemen companions shot him.

WHEN Vana approached him Aaron was so preoccupied with his discussion of Ellanie-Lucy he didn't notice the blank look of astonishment on her face.

Nor did Chaimon. "Vana!" he said. "You won't believe this, but Ellanie is *here*. Only she isn't Ellanie anymore—they've changed her."

Aaron felt a pang of sympathy. A love-thought-lost had been found—but not really. It must have been a blow.

"That's nice," murmured Vana absently.

"Yeah," Elton was growling over Vana's comment, obscuring it. "Way Aaron and I see it, our's must not have been the only lifeship to head toward this planet. Only we were lucky enough to have an unfavorable glide-path; evidently the other boat, with Ellanie on board, zipped straight to the spaceport. And the Overseers grabbed 'em, wiped 'em, implanted new personalities, situated them into these weird societies. Ellanie doesn't remember a thing about her former life."

"But she's the same *person*!" cried Chaimon. "They must have only mindwiped the memories, *not* the personality."

"Well, we see now for sure what's in store for us," said Aaron glumly. He rubbed his hands together worriedly. "If only there was something we could do." Then he noticed the way Vana looked right through him. "Hey—what's wrong with you?"

She seemed to rise up from deep thought. "Oh, I'm sorry." But she began to smile. "I've just met the most interesting person. And he's not only going to be our hope of escape from this society, but from this world as well!"

AN INVESTIGATIVE agent from the United Worlds.

That's what this Daniel Steffan who'd contacted Vana claimed to be—a man representing that tenuous,

weak paragovernment that linked the planets civilized by man. When Mankind first ventured out into space, settling planets, all colonization efforts were under the auspices of a confederated organization of the nations of Earth. But over the years, as the colonies grew and developed their own individual systems of governments, it was necessary to grant them their independence, since practical control of one planet by another in another solar system was impossible.

Wars were equally impossible. Besides, they were needless. But to prevent misunderstandings between these new worlds, to settle disputes and police the starways, all the planets contributed funds, equipment, and forces toward a mediating semi-government that supervised planetary relations.

And this Steffan fellow was one of their agents.

Aaron considered the things that Steffan had told Vana as he sat sipping brandy, waiting for their audience with the Prince Regent.

"He's been here a couple years, investigating, gathering information, taking photos—observing—all the while posing as one of their number. You see, Aaron, you were right all along. This place began almost *exactly* as you theorized. It was a top secret project linked with the United Worlds only vaguely. Most of the members of that organization don't even know of its existence. It's always been that way—and this 'Forbidden World' regularly feeds out information and hard facts concerning individuals in different types of society."

But what had happened? Aaron had asked.

"That's what Daniel's been finding out. Evidently, this place has always had autonomy—and over the years,

the group of scientists and their families who lived here created their own sort of society. The incredible power they held over these island societies scattered on the planet slowly began to corrupt their own society. I'm simplifying the matter, but evidently the Overseers have become quite decadent. Now they just fabricate the information they deliver to the UW—and run this world as dictators, purely for their own enjoyment and amusement."

A *playground!* Then they'd been correct in that supposition as well.

"Somehow, the UW has only caught on recently—and they managed to infiltrate Daniel into the midst of the Overseers as a representative scientist. Daniel feigned fascination with the idea of becoming a sort of god on this world—and so the Overseers allowed him to join their number. But he plans to return to the UW, to present his evidence. I think we can trust him. He'll blow his cover helping us, but he figures he has to head back to Earth soon anyway. And he feels we'd be helpful in supporting the facts that he's discovered.

"The Overseers plan to transport us to the laboratories at their control headquarters in the morning for mindwiping and distribution to separate colonies. Daniel will come for us sometime before dawn. Together we'll head for the spaceport in a mobile vehicle he has charge of. Once there, we'll hijack a starship!"

Hijack a starship? Now *there* was something to think on.

Again, Aaron felt out of control—but there seemed now a light at the end of the tunnel much brighter than he'd anticipated. And though he didn't admit it to himself, since Morningtown he'd known that some sort of violence would be necessary at the

end of this quest.

A figure swam into his distracted view.

Focusing, he realized it was Avery Bracknell.

"Pardon me, Aaron. You might wish to collect your companions and follow me to one of the rear compartments of this establishment." He folded his arms over his chest importantly. "His Majesty has arrived."

THE REGENT daintily tossed down the last of his brandy, set the crystal tumbler back on a silver tray stiffly held by a zombie-like servant, motioned his attendants away. "Retreat slightly, if you will, to the back of the room. I don't believe I will have trouble with our guests, and if I do, I will call." He squinted a monocled eye at his visitors. "Yes, yes, you *are* the confounded persons who've been mucking about, troubling a pair of our little societies. . . . But then you already *know* that, don't you, and I needn't sum up what is now history. History which I dare say you know quite well."

"Why are you playing with us?" bellowed Elton demanding. "Why didn't you just let the monorail zip us straight to Hell!"

"Oh, dear sir," replied the dandyishly dressed man, with amusement in his tone. "You'll get there soon enough, believe me. But I'd hardly classify Headquarters as a Hell—for nothing unpleasant awaits you. A painless bulk erase of your memories, a touch of rerecording and you'll be off to live a content life in one of our multitude of quiet, ideal settlements. Our perfect Communism, perhaps. Or maybe Ancient Rome. I *do* so much enjoy visiting that once in a while. Perhaps I'll have the pleasure of turning thumbs-down on you in the

Coliseum, Mr. Elton Robertson."

"You still haven't answered his question," Aaron pointed out, leaning forward in his seat.

The fat Overseer played contemplatively with a curled lock of his black hair. "My fellows and I who are the masters of this world simply wished to have a chat with you in a more congenial atmosphere than the cold steel corridors of Headquarters can provide. We wished to show you a community in which we take particular pride." He patted the tips of his plump fingers together, smiled. "Do you realize, my friends, that this little establishment around us is not merely a perfect replica of certain parts of Regency London—it can also be changed to resemble any given decade of nineteenth century London. A simple rearrangement of the surroundings and the attitudes and backgrounds of the dwellers—and *voilà!*"

"And I suppose in such a case," said Vana viciously, "instead of George IV you'd mask as Queen Victoria!"

The man lifted an eyebrow a fraction. "Dear lady. How *did* you know?" he shrugged, smiled. "Be that as it may, I merely present that fact to you as a small example of the diversity of accomplishment here on Anteron Three. Beginning with our forefathers, the social scientists who began the planetscaping—and the societyscaping, I might add—our group have devoted their lives to this planet quite successfully."

"My God!" Chaimon said. "But for what? You're just a bunch of hedonist mind-criminals! *You're* the ones that should be re-programmed!"

"Now, now, dear boy—the reason I've been selected to talk to you is convince you that such is *not* the

case. Goodness we're not *bad* people. We've merely inherited this situation, and made the best of it, adapting it to our various fancies. None of our number *chose* to be born on Anteron, or to assume these duties inherited from our parents. Over the years we've just re-modeled the situation slightly for our own amusement. There was and is no malicious intent involved whatsoever. We have only done what any individuals would have done in our situation. Hedonists? Perhaps, but who can blame us? Criminals? Definitely *not*. We have harmed no one, nor do we intend to. Any action on our parts against intruders comes from the simple and natural desire to maintain the status quo of our group, which we presently find *most* satisfying and rewarding.

"At first, we thought you were spies from the United Worlds. But we've found your lifeship, and know the truth now. You did have us worried for a time. Nevertheless, you have been most *destructive* over the course of your stay here. That bothers myself and my associates quite a bit. The death of Brother Martin and Sister Serena were hard blows on us all, and the damage done in Morningtown and Republica is not inconsiderable. However, we are not so uncivilized as to desire torture or death for your crimes. No—we will forgive, and simply assimilate you into our quiet and comfortable world. Or one of them, anyway. Just as we have done with other unwelcomed visitors."

"Like the *other* lifeship from the *Wayfarer*," said Chaimon.

"Yes. How did you know? But no matter." He snapped his fingers, and his tray-bearing servant returned. The Overseer selected a glass of wine, tasted it. "So you see, we're not such a bad lot. We just want to let you

know that, while we can, and to make you as comfortable as possible during your—uhmm—captivity. Would you care for a glass of wine?"

Aaron declined. "You'll answer some questions then for the sake of hospitality?"

"My good man, but of course! There's no harm in that!"

"Okay. We've got the bit about *why* you've got this planet set up like it is. You're power-mad people who like to own and manipulate human lives and societies, reaping various subtle—and not so subtle, I dare say—satisfactions from them. We know how you've done this, and how you maintain it. My question is, how is it that you've gotten away with it all this time? A whiff of the news in the noses of decent people in the galaxy would send them flying after your necks!"

The Overseer held up a prideful hand. "Ah, simplicity itself. The United Worlds know of us, naturally—but it's tip top secret, and Anteron is supposed to be a prolonged experiment. We do produce hard facts about societies you know, which we gladly send off to them, for whatever use they may desire. Occasionally, they send a representative to check us out—but we give him exactly what he should see—the truth, but of course not all of it. Thus for the most part we are left to our own devices, and treated like an independant planet. Which we *are*, of course. And even if the United Worlds should discover the truth about us, there's absolutely nothing they can do about it, actually. They send us no funds anymore—we are totally self-sufficient. We *own* this planet now. And if they disclosed the truth about us to their component members, why, it would destroy

them—for it was the United Worlds that helped start the social experiments here in the first place. We no longer have to waylay colonists to populate our societies—that ceased over a century ago. If we need any more people, we just produce them ourselves. We have armed forces, we have planetary protection—in short, we are doing quite well."

"Why then are you so worried about United Worlds spying on you?" asked Vana.

"I didn't say that we *wanted* them to discover the truth. We are not so foolish as to invite potential trouble, as piddling as that trouble might be. No—we prefer to remain free of suspicion. That is the way it has been these past centuries and that is the way we wish to keep it. Can you blame us?"

"I can't believe that all of you over the years have been so insensitive to basic human rights and ethics as to continue with this—this *insane* world!" said Chaimon.

"Oh, I assure you, over the years there have been those among our number who have grown to object. But they are dealt with quite adequately." As he rubbed his hands together, his eyes sparkled. "Well then. Enough of that. May I take the opportunity here presented me to welcome every one of you to Anteron. And to prove that we're not such bad sorts after all, we'll allow you to choose what society you'd like to inhabit after your—shall we say, reconditioning?"

AFTER their audience with the 'Regent', they were allowed another hour's dalliance at the ball, then escorted back to their rooms, where a fresh group of ruffians waited to stand vigil over them through the night.

The previous night had not been a good one in terms of sleep for Aaron, so he found no difficulty at all in drifting off to sleep once he'd settled in the large comfortable bed provided him.

He awoke quickly.

A hand was shaking him. It was yet dark. Candlelight flickered. He turned, saw it was Vana.

"Sshh!" she whispered. "No noise. They've still got the guards posted. There's been a change in plan. Daniel's here early. We've got to go, quickly."

"The packs—below," Aaron mumbled groggily. The bedrooms were on the second floor.

"We'll have to leave them. Don't need them anyway. They'll just slow us down. C'mon. Slip on your clothes."

"But my coveralls are downstairs—"

"So are mine—and the others," she cut in. "We'll have to wear what we wore to the ball."

Dressed, Aaron tiptoed to the hall. There, waiting for him were Vana, Elton, Chaimon, and a tall ruggedly handsome man he presumed to be Daniel Steffan. Swift introductions were made.

"We've got to hurry," whispered Steffan. "They've moved up your transport to Headquarters. We'll have to have a goodly start on them, if we want to accomplish what needs to be done."

"You've got weapons?" murmured Elton.

"One. In the ground vehicle. Come on."

"But how are we getting out. There are thugs all around, just itching to smash—"

"Same way I got in," answered Steffan. "Up to the roof and over the rooftops. Hurry!"

STEFFAN led them up a creaky set of stairs to a musty attic, laden with dust that puffed up under their quiet footsteps. Inadvertantly, Aaron breathed some in, and the stuff almost caused him a fit of sneezing. He stifled the reflex, looked up to where the compactly built man had stationed himself. It was a window—an open window in a gable-like section of the attic.

"Now," he whispered. "This is the tricky part. Follow me. Do what I do. If you slip, you'll slide down, probably go over the roof. And we'll have to leave you. But there's no reason we can't all make it, if we're careful."

So saying, he slipped blithely, quietly through the window and out onto the roof. Vana followed, with Chaimon next and Elton squeezing through after them. Aaron grabbed hold of the window's siding, slipped through into the outside night.

The view was spectacular.

Limned by a scattering of torches, lamps, and candles in houses, parks and streetsides, the irregular rooftops of London sprouted from their buildings; a mad farmer's field of chimneys, chimney-pots, church-spires, domes, statues, lightning rods and flagpoles, stretching out in random rows as though awaiting some imminent harvest. The air here was an interface between the fresher atmosphere hovering over the city, and the street-smells from below, laced by the aged odor of pitch, wood, and crumbling brick. Somewhere below a stray dog barked. Footsteps tapped away. A horse's hooves clopped close by. But all this was three stories below, covered by a thin mist which thickened in the distance, creeping between buildings like the ghost of some an-

cient river haunting its former bed. There was little danger of being seen.

Looking down, Aaron felt a tinge of vertigo speed a cold shiver down his nerves, spreading goose-bumps on his skin. Cautiously, he followed his single-filed companions as they picked their way across the slanted roof-top.

He placed a foot down slightly off the track onto a loose piece of slate shingle. It skittered down into the mist, almost hurling him afterward. His arms windmilled for balance—a small yelp escaped his lips. Elton swivelled about, grabbed him, held him steady. Aaron whispered thanks, and was thereafter more careful.

Ahead, Steffan hopped down to a flat landing of the roof and helped Vana down. When Aaron jumped down, his reaction was a gratefulness for the leveling off. Then he saw where they were expected to go, and realized their biggest difficulties were ahead. A narrow plank stretched across an alleyway to another rooftop.

"Once we get over the next roof," Steffan was saying, his voice low, "we can climb down and make the rest of our way on foot. But we have to make it across this first—I put it there to get over here to your roof."

Elton glanced at the length of board spanning the gap, his face full of concern. "You all had better go first. I'm not sure that thing will hold my weight."

Steffan considered, and agreed. One by one they inched their way across the plank. Their guide went first, negotiating it easily. He hopped down on its opposite end, held the other side steady on the lip of the roof while Vana moved over it on her hands and knees. Chaimon followed, breezing over quickly on feet alone. Aaron kept his eyes straight ahead, and was surprised at how simple it

was. When Elton heaved his large self onto it, the plank bowed, but held. When the man stepped off, his face was ashen. But he had made it.

They moved deeper into the London dark.

KEEPING to the blackest alleys, moving quietly but quickly, it took them what Aaron estimated to be a half hour to reach Daniel Steffan's destination.

Which seemed to be nothing more than a long soot-tinged wall of a church.

Steffan halted before it, drew in a breath. "Here we are. Just follow me." He turned on his heel, and walked straight into the wall. And through it.

Stunned, Aaron stood staring at the wall into which their guide had disappeared, as though swallowed up. By the thin light available, he saw his companion's faces mirroring his own astonishment. "What. . ." Elton started to say.

Abruptly, they were confronted by the discomfiting sight of Daniel Steffan's head protruding from the seemingly solid stone like some macbre hunter's trophy displayed above a mantel.

"Well, are you coming, or aren't you?" He asked, waving them on. Then his face split into a smile. "It's a holograph actually, this wall." He stepped all the way back out, gestured past the length of the 'church'. "That whole row of buildings is the boundary of this 'London'. And it's all holographs. They've been placed all along the periphery of the city, to give the illusion of, well, *more* city. No one goes through them, except we Technocrats—no one can. Conditioning, you know."

"Yes," said Aaron. "We *have* run

across that in our travels on this planet. Seems to be predominant factor in the control of the societies here."

Chaimon was staring at the series of holographs. "Haven't seen anything like it since I was in one of the Martian pleasure-domes."

"No time for dawdling," urged Elton.

"He's quite right," said Steffan. "Our means of escape is on the other side of this."

Together, they stepped through the projected holograph, which gave way like nothing more than a misty cloud bank.

THE BLEAK, forbidding landscape spread out before him. Seen through the semi-spherical plastoid bubble-top of the heavy-duty ground-effect vehicle Daniel Steffan had led them to within a few meters from the holograph boundary, the landscape seemed much less threatening. Aaron felt encapsulated from its alienness—he felt almost as though he was viewing their progress through a surrounding three-dimensional viewer rather than actually moving in a car across the plain at the ninety clicks an hour the speedometer indicated.

Most certainly it was far superior to hiking across it.

Steffan had hurried them into the double-seated cab, Chaimon and Elton in back, Vana and Aaron seated to either side of the centrally located controls. They were an hour into their journey now. Steffan had chain-smoked a succession of particularly bad-smelling cigarettes, and was just loosening up enough to talk.

The man impressed Aaron as a chameleon-type personality. Earlier, Vana had mentioned how well he had mastered the social graces necessary

for facile movement within the confines of Regency society. Now it struck Aaron just how much a modern, business-like individual Daniel Steffan actually was. A man with a goal, now. . . . Evidently, he was the consummate actor to have played out his role here so well. And yet Aaron could not deny that his voice was full of conviction as he began to talk now of his mission on this world, a cigarette bobbing absently between his lips, spilling ashes, exuding a trail of smoke that twisted up like a DNA molecule model:

"I've been doing odd jobs for the United Worlds for most of my adult life," he said, his stern features staring straight ahead, eyes blinking occasionally with the smoke. Earlier, in bits and snatches of mumbled monologue, he had explained that this vehicle he had stolen was used to haul building materials and other things too bulky or large for the monorail cars. "But this has been about the oddest. I assume that Vana gave you the basic story."

"As best I could," said Vana. "I'm sure I simplified it quite a lot."

"Just as I had to simplify the matter for you, I'm sure," Steffan said. "It's a complex situation, meriting more words of explanation than I have either the breath or willingness right now to give you. But I'll try to sum it up."

As the turbo-engine growled quietly, and the vehicle's three headlights lanced away the dark before them, he outlined the situation.

The actual name of the planet was Anteron III. Its existence was a guarded secret of the United Worlds, and the results of its experiments had been utilized in developing colonial governments for the past two centuries to a surprising degree of suc-

cess. Hence, funding and support had continued from the project's inception—until it tapered off within the past fifty years, due to the long-developing autonomy of the planet. Evidently the Overseers—or Technocrats, as they called themselves—developed essentially a society of their own, based upon their scientific purposes. Generation after generation were raised to man the human controls in their scattering of social experiments, to perpetuate them, even construct new ones. But so engrossed in these other societies were the Technocrats that they neglected to notice how stagnant their own was becoming. Eventually, by the time their decadence was noticed, it was perceived and *enjoyed* by the majority of their number as a worthwhile status quo to continue living under—and to exploit for their own pleasure and entertainment.

"I was one of the insiders at the United Worlds Central on Centaurus," explained Steffan. "A kind of intelligence agent, working on special projects. The governing council of the UW have suspected something to be awry here on Anteron for quite a while. But whenever they sent an official agent to examine matters closely, the Powers-That-Be here put on a big show, revealing only the segments of the operations that still carry out the initial project purpose. You know, there *are* a few of the Technocrats who are very serious scientists and tolerate the decadent majority in order to continue their work. They have a sort of live-and-let-live attitude as far as their less serious associates go—and ardently conspire to keep our noses out of this planet's business, despite the incredible things that have been happening here lately. I suppose they believe it's

worth the cover-up to continue their work.

"The representatives from United Worlds usually only brought back what the Technocrat *wanted* them to know. We landed an agent here unofficially a few years back to sort of peek into their back windows. The last word we had from him was that he had landed somewhere near a community. That was the *last* we heard. There was nothing we could do. For all practical purposes, this government has total independence from us, even though they attempt to humor our inquiries."

"The United Worlds can't *do anything?*" asked Chaimon from his rear seat.

"No," responded Steffan. "The United Worlds, despite what they would like most people to know, really doesn't have that much influence over its component planets. All it can conceivably accomplish against these Technocrats of Anteron is to drum up support from the peoples of powerful planets—worlds with some sort of space-force. Once that happens, it just might be possible to forcibly persuade the Technocrats into suitable human behaviour. They haven't any real defense system—no planet does. It's just not necessary—except the Far Worlds, which have them on the purely precautionary measure against possible encroaching alien cultures which we haven't met yet. The problem is, it could all be a very embarrassing situation for the United Worlds. After all, the activities here have basically been aided and abetted by us for the past two centuries. And the UW *has* profitted by various social-science discoveries. For this reason, they're a bit ambivalent about the notion. However, there are enough who would go through with it

despite that, that I was assigned to try to obtain a detailed report on what is transpiring here."

He had arrived a little less than two years before as a standard agent of the United Worlds, sent for a prolonged tour of the social experiments. While on his itineraries about the planet, he had befriended a number of the Technocrats—he was, after all, an affable fellow. He expressed unalloyed fascination with the experiments, and let it be known that he was the sort who would very much enjoy dabbling in society-control for personal pleasures and benefits. He engineered it so that the Technocrats approached *him* on the subject of becoming one of their number—and a permanent link and envoy between the United Worlds and Anteron. Thus, they reasoned, they would have on their side a prejudiced member of the UW who would help substantiate their doctored reports of the true situation on Anteron, and also give them a clean bill of moral health that would satisfy the obviously darkening attitude the United Worlds held them in.

"Many of these Technocrats are simply misled scientists—but the predominant majority are terribly spaced out under every kind of stuff possible. Power mostly. Every one is on a power trip. And you can't imagine a greater bunch of hedonists. I've lived with them a long time now. I know. I'd like to see this business *stopped*."

Steffan punched the drive into automatic, swivelled about to face the occupants of the back seat. "Elton—right under your seat there's a case. Could you slip it out and hand it to me please?" Elton obliged. "Thanks." He took the case and spoke as he dialed out the combination on its lock. "I've never been much of a crusader. I

took my job with the United Worlds for the adventure, romantic as that may sound. I never thought I was terribly concerned with moral values or human rights. But people in these experiments on Anteron—they *have* no rights. They're controlled like cattle, either to determine the effects of social conditions, or worse, to *humor* the more decadent of the Technocrats. A repugnant business. Frankly, I've been quite disgusted often during my stay here—and not always just with the Technocrats, but with my own reaction. I can feel myself wanting to *control* people. It's frightening." He thumbed open the cover of the case. By the dim backlight of the compartment, Aaron could make out the vague forms of objects nestled in velvet.

"Over my time here I've been collecting the straight facts concerning the activities of the Technocrats, the resultant societies. In this collection, I have the proof to back what I intend to report to the United Worlds Inner Council. Pictures, recordings, documents—the entire lowdown on what this world has become. I'm sincerely hoping that something can be done. How, or *what*, I don't know. But I intend to do my best to see that a change comes to this planet." He brooded quietly a few moments. Then he reached in, clicked out an egg-shaped device fitted on top with a button. "Here is our only weapon for now. It's a stun-needler. Shoots projectile darts coated with nerve chemicals that will instantly paralyze man. For now I'll place myself in charge of it. We'll see if we can procure a couple lasers at Headquarters—I've two stashed away in my working quarters there. Could you carry the case for me in the meanwhile, Aaron?"

"Sure."

Steffan pocketed his weapon, shut the case, and handed it to Aaron. "This is an all or nothing journey for me. For all of us, I suppose. And we've still got a considerable hurdle ahead."

"The starship?"

"The starship. There's no special security measures around the thing, thank God. But that doesn't mean it's going to be a simple matter to steal it. It's a Mark IV scooper, by the way. Part of the program instigated by the UW to keep greater physical contact between them and Anteron, though precious little good *that* does. It's a small planetfaller basically, but it doubles as a starship. It will have to do. I just hope we can get there before they figure out where you've gone to, and just *who* got you out."

"What time is it?" mumbled a tired Elton, slumped down in the rear.

"We've got about two and a half hours until dawn. If we push it we'll get to Headquarters just as the sun does. So I'd best resume the manual controls. It's fairly flat and hard-packed all the way, but we can get the best speed if I drive it myself." He poked a button, resumed the controls. "You know, you people are lucky. If I wasn't prepared to leave Anteron soon anyway, I could not have helped you. Another lifeship from the *Wayfarer* grounded just a mile or so north of the City. They got to the passengers and mind-wiped them before I even heard that they had landed. Much good I could have done."

"Yes," said Chaimon. "We know." He told Steffan about Ellanie.

"I'm sorry," Steffan said. And he fell into a moody silence which Aaron was too tired to disturb. It wasn't long before his companions nodded off, lulled by the steady rhythm of the turbo-engine's throbblings.

As the triple-headlight of the vehicle knifed through the night and the truck ate up the distance, Aaron himself drowsed off into a dreamless murk of sleep.

A HASTY elbow-jab to his ribs jarred him back to consciousness.

Aaron stiffened from his slouch, squinting from the new light which was flowing over the horizon. Around him, his companions roused as well, yawning.

"Well, my friends," Steffan said quietly, his light blue eyes clamped on the sight before them. "There it is. Headquarters."

Between them and the dawning sun rose the spires of a city. The rosy light of dawn edged the outlines of the rambling cityscape, glimmering as though with drops of dew. Raised motorways wound around the buildings like petrified snakes. In the very center, perched in what no doubt was the clearing of the spaceport, stood the magnificent gleaming lengths of three starships, like fingers pointing to the sky.

"The one to the left is the one we're after," commented Steffan, pointing. "But we have to get through the City before we can even think about boarding her. The *Starbird*. A very fine ship. Let's just hope we get to take a free ride on her."

"What about these clothes?" complained Elton. "If we have to go through the city, we'll look like Marines in full dress parading through a nudist colony. Besides, I'm getting pretty tired of them."

"No problem," answered Steffan. "I've got some uniforms in the storage locker of this thing. I'll stop in a moment, and we can change. But right now, listen carefully. I'm going to tell you my plan."

STEFFAN's hidden laser pistols were gone.

"Damn it!" Steffan growled harshly. For the first time the man seemed out of control of his emotions. Fear showed on his face as he straightened up empty-handed from the filing cabinet. "They're not here anymore."

They had stopped just short of the city, long enough for Steffan to dig out the uniforms the Overseers utilized when travelling among their island societies. Five: one for each. These they speedily donned, and were once more on their way.

Steffan had parked the vehicle at an empty loading platform. Then he led them through a warehouse into the main section of the city, toward his private compartment.

It had been obvious to Aaron that Headquarters—or simply 'The City' as Steffan sometimes called it—was much more than just an operational control hub. It seemed as much a society as any of the more than two hundred island communities it controlled. This particular society, however, had arisen solely to perpetrate the social scientists who looked after the experiments of Anteron III. The irony was that the very people whose work it was to research ways to strengthen society allowed their own to decay into its present condition.

From all physical appearances, however, it was much like any other city on any modernized world in the civilized galaxy. There were the slidewalks, the monorails and the turbolifts that made for facile horizontal or vertical travel. There were the bland, even-featured multitude of faces here and there, as in any other city. And there was the multitude of paraphernalia that always rode on the

crest of civilization's wave: parks; restaurants; noise.

It was hard to imagine that these citizens about them were as much component parts of the machine that exerted decadent control over Anteron as any of the individuals they had dubbed 'Overseers'. For them, no doubt, it was simply the way things were—and had been, all their lives—and they accepted it much as the dwellers of Morningtown accepted the position of men on their social ladder or the Republicans accepted the fact that the strangers who visited them delivering orders were Gods from Olympus.

They were ordinary people, who saw themselves no better or worse than other ordinary people. And yet they lived with a basic *wrongness* at the core of their society that Aaron felt must be corrected.

However, they had to get off this planet before that could be accomplished, and the odds did not appear particularly favorable at that moment.

Daniel Steffan's expression was troubled as he motioned them back out the door. It was not necessary for him to explain. Now they would have to sneak into the Spaceport Control Building without the aid of extra weapons.

But worse than that—and this was the factor that touched Aaron with icy dread—it meant that the Overseers *knew* Steffan had squirreled weapons away toward some purpose on the planet.

And if they connected *him* with the escaped intruders, it was only a matter of time before they would all be captured.

SILENTLY, they threaded through the streets, wary of possible pursuit, and yet helpless against it if it should ar-

rive. Aaron felt as though his spine had turned into a lighted, crackling fuse; he sincerely hoped there was nothing explosive at its end.

"Do you think perhaps there's a chance they haven't pinpointed us yet?" Aaron asked, casting furtive, careful glances about as they drifted purposefully amongst the sights and smells of the city.

"Yes. There's a chance," said Steffan. "There's also a chance we can steal this ship, and get away scot-free." He bit his lip, glanced at Aaron. "But very little." He shook his head. "At this point, the only thing I'm concerned about is getting that case of mine," he motioned toward the case that Aaron was thumping nervously against his thigh as he walked, "back to the UW Central. I'm very lucky you people came along when you did. They were probably all ready to pounce on me. This way, at least I've got a shot at getting away."

The cluster of structures thinned out and they were on the verge of the wide spaceport. Erect on their launching pads stood the spaceships—one of which was their hope of seeing normal civilization again. "They used to use 'em for supplies," said Steffan. "Now they make the occasional trip back to UW Central on Centaurus. For diplomatic purposes." He pointed out a squat spheroid centering the large permacrete plain that looked to Aaron like a huge golfball embedded in the ground. "That's the Control Station. That's what we've got to get into to make the *Starbird* operable."

STEFFAN slotted the identicard he'd drawn from his pocket, punched out a code on the buttons inlaid on the wall of the looming control station. "If they're looking for us now," he said as

interior mechanisms hummed and clicked efficiently, "this will tip them off to where we are." He leaned against the gun-metal gray of the access bank, stared at it intensely, resolutely, as though the stern look might be a deciding factor in the opening of the portal. "I know what you're going to say. But there's nothing for it. If they haven't been aware of our placement until now, then we'll have the few minutes we need to ready the *Starbird*. If not, we'll just have to fight—and play it by ear."

The hiss of an opening door brought Aaron's attention away from the open field. No one else in sight. No one had been following them, at least.

Steffan was holding his needler in plain view now, his thumb poised over its smooth round button. "You better let me go in first. Just keep close, and hit the floor if there's any firing. Chances are, we'll get a good ways in before there's any trouble." He pivotted, stalked through the oval opening. The others followed. Aaron moved in last.

After hitting a button that closed the door, Steffan wheeled about sharply, and led them down a quiet, lonely corridor, needler palmed but ready for action.

"Usual access for this place," he commented, "is through a tunnel under the field. But there's usually a few scattered technician-types wandering around here." He brow creased with bemusement. "Wonder where they are? Well, no matter. There's a lift just up yonder that'll take us right where we need to go."

He led them to the small box-like compartment, gestured them in.

"Probably got us zeroed in on their monitor cameras already," grumbled Elton, but he took his place in the

elevator beside Vana and Chaimon.

The lift lurched upwards briskly. In a matter of moments, it stopped. The doors whisked open. Before them was spread a wide expanse of control banks. These overlooked a 360° view of the spaceport whose radiation quotient had brought their lifeship down on this planet.

In a set of chairs, a group of Overseers lounged, eyes resting on the new arrivals. Ranging about them were four standing men, well-built, with blank looks on their faces. Two of them wielded laser pistols, safeties obviously off.

George IV, his porcine form now fitted into the usual Overseer uniform, separated himself from the group and essayed a sarcastic bow.

"It took you long enough to get here," he said mildly.

A CONVULSION of emotions hit Aaron. Fear, rage, and frustration paralyzed him. So close to their goal and yet so far away. . . .

Elton slowly lifted a hand to hit the close button of the lift door. One of the muscle-bound Overseers pointed his weapon warningly.

"Wouldn't do anything like that if I were you, Mr. Elton," cautioned the mock-Regent, settling back down in a contoured chair adjacent to a console studded with buttons. He crossed his legs casually. "No—you'll just all step out of there and I'll deal with you. Come, come. Don't dawdle."

Aaron found that his fear had taken command of him; without conscious orders from his mind, he stepped out. The others followed. Steffan's hands were fisted, his arms outstretched only a little way from his body; he still had the needler clutched in his hand, then. But how could he hide it? Then Aaron noticed that Steffan was

holding his right hand just behind Elton, evidently out of the Overseer's view. But surely they would search. . . .

"Ah, Mr. Steffan," said George IV. "We had rather hoped our little tactic would smoke you out of your charade."

Steffan's expression went taut. "You mean—"

"Of course. We've suspected you for a while, but weren't quite sure. Nothing tangible. So, when our bumbling friends here paid us the courtesy of entering our monorail car, we couldn't help but take advantage of the opportunity provided. Instead of bringing them directly here to Headquarters, we dropped them off in Community L-1, and arranged for them to be at Almacks' knowing quite well you'd be there too, with full knowledge of who they were. Then we allowed you to help them escape and come here. So much easier than bringing you here ourselves, don't you agree? Ah—that case Mr. Provost is carrying. I would be willing to bet it contains certain evidence to our detriment. Would you please hand it over, Mr. Provost?"

Aaron glanced at Steffan, who nodded.

Aaron turned the case over to one of the Overseers, who stepped up to take it. As his initial alarm and emotion faded into resignation, he was able to view these people, and their situation, more objectively. These men sitting down seemed very soft, physically. Not that any of them were corpulently fat—but they obviously lacked muscle-tone. This was particularly apparent in contrast to the well-developed men about them, who were evidently hatchet-men, especially trained to handle physically arduous or potentially violent situations.

Suddenly, he was coldly assessing the situation. Steffan's needler was their ace-in-the-hole. It was as though he was observing the entire affair from some celestial vantage point—as though the entire adventure had merely been some three-dee program which was fast nearing its climax.

He felt his muscles relax, readying themselves to tense up into action: the discipline of their days of hiking had been good. He felt a thrill of confidence surge through him; confidence and renewed hope: Yes, there *was* a chance.

"Dear, *dear*, Mr. Steffan," said the Overseer who had masqueraded as George IV as he placed the case down by his side. "I had rather hoped that our suspicions concerning you would not be correct. I had hoped that you would not deceive us. You were doing such a good job keeping us in the good graces of the United Worlds—or so it seemed to us. And it also seemed that you approved, indeed, *enjoyed* the more aesthetic qualities of the life that is to be lived among our number. And yet all this time. . ."

He tapped the case contemptuously. "These two years, you have been patiently studying, cold-bloodedly collecting evidence that the UW will no doubt construe as being bad for us."

"Well, my god, *isn't* it bad?" declared Elton. "Robbing people of their human rights—confining them to small places, closing in their minds?"

George IV shook his head, sighed. "Ah—and that is the line the UW will take, no doubt. Not that they can do a great deal about it with the situation as it is. Oh, they can sever relations, but not a great deal more. Perhaps they can drum up galactic public opinion against us; but again, that will do little good."

"Well, can't you be prevailed upon to *stop* these crimes?" blared Elton.

"They are not crimes to us, Mr. Robertson," said the Overseer. "They are our life. You forget: *We* are not the ones who started this world. It was our predecessors—our ancestors—who performed the founding work. And *they* were backed by the United Worlds. Our generation was merely born into a situation—a dilemma, if you will, for human life in any condition is such—a dilemma or a predicament. And we made the best of it. We have put the kind of meaning into our lives which we desire to have. We've no alternative, really. There's no desire in us to go out to other worlds, make new lives there—*this* is our home. And we have done what every other human has ever done, and what every human will ever do—make the best he possibly can of his environment. Have you not seen it this way also, Mr. Steffan? Surely this can not entirely strike you as a black and white situation."

Steffan nodded. "You are not any better or worse than anyone, I suppose. But this does not mean that the situation on this planet can be condoned."

"And why not? It is our *life*, Mr. Steffan. It is the present ecology of our society, and it *works*. There is no hunger among the people we are responsible for—and it is a responsibility. We do not actually *control* them. We merely control their social surroundings and a few of the parameters of their thought processes. They are not our slaves. They are humans with as much free will within a limited scope as any human has ever had. There are no wars amongst them—and we Technocrats certainly do not battle amongst ourselves." He shrug-

ged. "At least not violently, anyway. We are human. We are not the villains you may view us as. Indeed, there are those of us who agree with you—but we allow them to live as they wish, as long as they do not get in the way of the smooth functioning of our society. Is this not the same as with any other society? Does our way of life not have as much right to survive as any other way of life? Or would you like to see us snuffed out,

He cleared his throat emotionally.

"And the people in our societies. What would you have us do with them, if you were giving the orders? Tell them the truth? Tell them that the modes of life they live in and *for* are meaningless relative to the rest of the universe? Mr. Steffan, have you seen a great many of the dwellers in our captive societies who are not happy in the confines of their little lives? Do we not make them content? Each and every one of them has *purpose* and *meaning* in their lives—all the more because we have seen that each has an importance to his or her society. *They* are the lucky ones, Mr. Steffan—not us. All we have from our endeavors is the occasional satisfaction of discovery, and amusement. Call us power hungry if you like, but power is only bad if it is not shared, and used wisely. There are no tyrants among us, actually. Oh, we may *play* at that game, but in our hearts it isn't so. Not at all. At no time in any your experiences in the societies did you take time to notice how content, even *happy* the majority of the people are? This is the case with *all* of the island communities. There is no real crime or disease apart from the harmless sorts we manufacture for experimental purpose, and those are under strict control. And we may take advantage of these people for our own pleasure

from time to time. But we do not hurt them—and whatever we take, it is nothing compared to what we have already given: happiness in the majority. Our ancestors were *much* more ruthless about their social experiments. They were mostly cold, objective scientists. We remain scientists—but value our humanity more. We see it as our purpose in life, our calling and meaning, to see to their happiness—and assist in the happiness of all the societies in the galaxy with our findings. Surely you realize this, Mr. Steffan. And the rest of you—Vana, Elton, Aaron, Chaimon—please let me assure you, I am speaking the truth to you—as I see it, and I hope you'll come to see it."

"If you're so noble and good," said Vana. "Why do we have to undergo brainwipes?"

"Are we going to lock you up for the rest of your life? No," said George IV. "Are we going to kill you? No. Nothing to harm you at all. We *have* to erase your memory of us—for our own protection. And we will be sure to place you in a happy environment—I was simply jesting about a colosseum in our Roman society. All poppycock. But you see, you *are* a threat to our way of life, our well-being. Is it not a man's duty to protect his world, his accepted mode of living? Mankind has done this for thousands of years. Is it any less honorable for us to be interested in the welfare of *our* system? You don't understand—we realize that you find our way of life repugnant because of your socialization and prejudices. We realize that we cannot trust you to leave this planet and remain silent. No matter how little harm you do us, it is still harm nonetheless. So, we have to take measures to protect

ourselves—no matter how slim the threat against us might be. Do you think this gives us pleasure? But even so, your fate will not be bad. So please, come along with us peacefully so that we are not forced to use violence.”

Daniel Steffan said, “You speak very prettily.” His features were calm, placid. “And you speak mostly the truth. Most of the people of these island societies *are* happy. They are content with the illusions of life you have placed in their heads. They are constructive human beings, who contribute toward the well-being of their respective societies. I have been travelling among them in various capacities these past two years. I have seen them, and I’ve not seen more satisfied people on a planet, ever. This I intended to report to my employers. You will see that the majority of the evidence in that case presents your activities on this planet in a surprisingly *good* light. No scenes of hunger, or violence, or unhappiness—because there was none to photograph or record. No instances of gross cruelty; it doesn’t exist. Most of these societies are forms of utopias. But not because this has been achieved by the component members of each society—far from it. These societies work because they are *controlled* from outside. They work, and yes, yield important social science information because they are experiments, not real life. Because your ancestors and your generation have denied the people you are responsible for *total* humanity. They are less than human, each and every one who mindlessly accepts his place in your societies. And the ones who question, who stir up unrest, you quickly quell, thus ‘weeding out’ individuals with important human qualities that you

deny the rest.

“You say these people are happy, and perhaps they are—or they *think* they are, which is objectively the same thing in terms of results on social readings from your instruments and monitors. But they aren’t truly happy, as every human has a right to have the opportunity to be, for there is not the chance for them to be *unhappy*. They have been robbed of great portions of their spirit, their free will, their *choice* of modes of existence. Your crimes are a much subtler type than any recorded in the annals of infamy against the human spirit—and yet, to me, they are nonetheless odious. You maintain societies in which individual’s minds are artificially imprisoned. In trying to give humankind better societies, your forebears victimized thousands of individuals, castrating their destinies, and you maintain this subtle evil to this day. You say you are not tyrants, and yet you are—worse, more pernicious than ever before. The others merely killed, raped, looted and destroyed flesh and property. You have done all this not to flesh or property—but to human *minds*, molding them to your whims like clay. *This* is the crime here, the crime I intended to report to the United Worlds, who are also guilty inasmuch as they helped instigate this world. For the only person who has a right to control over his own mind, his very soul, is that person himself. To deny an individual this right, is to deny him a substantial portion of his human dignity, his human spirit.

“You have a right to stop us, and I speak for all of us when I say that if we had gone back to the UW, we would have done everything possible to see that the system on this world is *ceased*.”

"You mouth garbage," said George iv quietly. "You do not understand." In a louder voice, he said. "All right, men. We can proceed to take them to the booths."

It was then that Steffan acted.

TEN

IT ALL HAPPENED very quickly.

The four hatchet men were just stepping forward toward them. One placed a hand on Chaimon's arm. There was nothing for Chaimon to do but allow it. The two holding lasers hung back, motioning the others toward the lift door.

Steffan whipped his hand from behind Elton's back, spun efficiently on his heel. There was a soft 'thwip' sound, followed closely by another. The men with the lasers jerked as though struck by the same brick wall, eyes bulging wide. They dropped like dead men, their guns clattering out of their hands.

Aaron was ready. The other man was closest to him, astonished at the turn of events, motionless. Leaving his feet, Aaron dived headfirst into the large man's abdomen, bowling him over with a surprised 'whoosh' of driven breath. No sooner were they down in a heap, but Aaron was pounding at the man's face with his fists. The man pushed him off with a mighty heave and threw an awkward and ineffective punch that slid off the top of Aaron's head. Springing to his feet, Aaron kicked the man hard with his boot, twice, then delivered a final one-two punch, left, right, to his jaw. The man's head pounded onto the floor. Blood leaked from his nose and mouth.

He was out.

Excitement pumping into his veins, Aaron twirled about to see how his

companions were doing. Elton was gamely pounding at the man who had grabbed Chaimon. Chaimon was jabbing the man in his gut with an elbow, breaking free.

The other, softer Technocrats had ducked behind the consoles. One of them was sagged over the unconscious bodies of the henchmen, a victim of one of Steffan's darts. Steffan himself was carefully moving around the consoles, finger on the button of his stun-needler, ready to render the others unconscious as well.

"Daniel!" cried Vana, after a quick sweep of her eyes over the floor. "One of the lasers is gone!"

No sooner had she cried out, but a spiderweb-thin strand of coherent light beamed from behind a control block, slashing into Steffan's chest. He stumbled onto his knees, fell onto his face.

George iv, holding the recovered laser in his hand, rose from his hiding place, motioned Vana away from the other laser pistol on the floor. She fell onto her knees by the fallen form of Steffan, checked his pulse. She looked up at the Technocrat with a venomous look. "He's dead."

"I had hoped there would be no reason for bloodshed," the man said calmly, sweeping his long tousled hair off his forehead. "But there will be no more, if you obey."

Chaimon and Elton released the other man, who fell to the floor, barely conscious.

"It's all right now. You can get up," George iv said to the men hiding behind the consoles. "I've got them." Keeping his weapon trained on the captives, he stooped down, and picked up the other fallen laser, then pried Steffan's needler out of his stiff hands. His companions peeked up from the console, eventually joined

him. "Search them. They might have other weapons about their bodies." He stepped over the still figures of his fallen comrades, watched his conscious comrades frisk Vana, Chaimon, Elton and Aaron.

The shock of their defeat gone, Aaron found his hope draining away after it. A part of him mourned for Steffan: I wish I'd know him better, he thought. Now—

Now he was doomed to a brain-wipe and a new identity. Whether or not an inkling of his present self would remain, Aaron wasn't sure. But something had broken in him—suddenly, he just didn't care.

He looked over at the others. Their faces bore the expressions of similar defeat.

This was it.

"I'm sorry we had to kill him," said George IV, apparently honestly troubled. "I had no choice."

"You might as well kill *us*, too," mumbled Elton. "I don't particularly look forward to mind-wiping. *Death* seems to be a better fate."

George IV licked his lips and was quiet as he began to prod them into the elevator with the end of his gun. His expression seemed almost as resigned as those of his captives—and almost reluctant.

Defeated, they obeyed.

The other Overseers straggled behind them.

Quite abruptly, Aaron was aware of a commotion. He turned his head, saw George IV grasping his wrist and grimacing in pain. Standing at his side stiffly, hand completing a chopping motion, was Daniel Steffan.

As Aaron gaped at him, the man Vana had announced dead stooped down, snatched up the laser, and bent the long thin nozzle out of shape. Steffan tossed the now-useless weapon away.

His face was wax-pale, his eyes stared straight ahead—and yet they obviously took in a great deal. "Advisement:" he said, "Overpower Technocrats." With this, he jerked away, seated himself in one of the chair. "My physical powers are waning and must be preserved. I cannot aid you."

There were now only six Technocrats, standing about now in attitudes of surprise and vulnerability. Elton needed no further encouragement—he plowed into them, fists swinging.

Recovering himself, Aaron fisted his left hand, smashed George IV. The man keeled over with a cry of pain. He tried unsteadily to regain his feet once more, but Aaron stepped forward and delivered two awkward but effective blows to the man's face. George IV toppled backwards, smashed his head on the siding of a console, and slid onto the floor, unconscious.

Aaron spun about.

Elton had already knocked two adversaries senseless and was passionately working on a third. Vana was busy on the back of one pudgy man, a firm hold on his neck: an absurd piggy-back position. They weaved about struggling, and fell to the floor. Chaimon had two men on him, but was holding his own. Aaron dashed to him, hauled one off and planted a haymaker just under his chin. The man spun away, pitched onto the floor, limbs akimbo. He struggled to get up, but Aaron kicked him back down and pounded on him until he groaned surrender and lapsed into semi-consciousness.

The end of the fracas found them all victorious, their foes sprawled about on the floor, some conscious, most not.

"Advisement:" said Steffan from his chair. "There are lengths of wire in

the maintenance closet. It would be best to tie them up."

AFTER TWISTING the last bit of wiring about the legs of George IV, Aaron heaved himself to his feet, stared at the man who should have been dead. One thought pounded in his head: How could this be?

"Contingency plan: Necessary operations will be completed by myself on control consoles in this Command Center. Board the *Starbird* immediately," said Steffan. He stood like a zombie, his voice flat and dull. And then Aaron realized that though words were issuing from his open mouth, his lips were not moving.

"Jesus Christ," Elton said. "He's an android!"

"Negative," responded the stiff form that had been Steffan. "Agent Code-Name 'Leaf', Daniel Jay Steffan, was implanted with auxiliary and augmentary mechanisms maintained by a body-computer. Presently, that body-computer, myself, has control of the fast-deteriorating structure of Steffan's dead body, aided by certain limited nervous system over-rides and metal-plastic support grids. I can maintain control of said body for precisely sixteen point nine minutes from this moment. I repeat: Make good your escape now, while the opportunity is available. These are the priority instructions programmed into me by the mind of Daniel Steffan before his death. Hurry—you shall need every second."

"You know how to operate a spaceship, Elton?" asked Chaimon.

"Well, I can't do it manually, but I can operate the ship's computer well enough, I suppose."

The Steffan-zombie walked stiffly to a console, did things to dials and buttons. "Observation: *Starbird* entrance ramp engaged. All systems operation-

al. Take a pair of weapons should you again encounter opposition." It turned its attention back to the controls.

Vana moved behind it, placed her hand on its shoulder. "Thanks, Daniel," she said softly. There was a tear in her eye.

The dead man gave no response.

"C'mon, you heard the thing," belated Elton, pausing to scoop up a laser. "Steffan gave his life so we could skeddaddle. Let's make that sacrifice worthwhile."

As they reboarded the lift, Aaron hefted the weight of Steffan's case up into his armpit.

For the first time that painful, wearying weight felt good.

AARON and his companions ran out across the vast, hard plain toward the starship that Steffan had previously pointed out to them. There were no Overseers between them and it. As they drew near, Aaron saw that the boarding ramp was already extended from the ship's open hatchway. They bounded up this walkway into the shadowed hold. Once inside, the ramp slithered back into place, and the airlock door cycled closed.

Cool lights glimmered on about them. Hastily, Vana and Chaimon strapped themselves into nearby acceleration couches, punched the bouyancy buttons for the hydro-cushion attachments. "All set," came Vana's muffled voice out of its confines.

Elton was already hauling himself up the ladder to the control deck. Aaron scampered up behind him, thinking perhaps he might be of assistance in the operation of the ship's computer. He emerged in the room, closed the hatch behind him. Hovering over the dimly-lit controls, Elton seemed undecided on the proper procedure. "Oh, hell with it," he grum-

bled and began to punch buttons on the width of the consoles spread out before him.

With the clicks and hums of activating machinery, lights sparkled on, traced patterns on the various screens. A voice crackled over the radio: "Observation: No interference as yet. All systems go."

Examining the boards, Aaron offered a few suggestions. "Right," replied Elton, keying in orders into the computer after a few preliminary consultations with the ghostly navigational holo he had punched up in the vid-tank. "Hell," he cursed, overriding the keypunch operations, switching the computer to voice-response. "Just get us into a parking orbit around this planet for now."

"Affirmative," responded the ship-computer's voice dully.

"Okay Aaron old boy," said Elton. "Let's stick these soft bodies of ours in the couches so we don't get mangled."

Aaron needed no further encouragement.

No sooner had they cushioned and strapped themselves in when there was the explosion and pressure of lift-off. The starship speared up through the atmosphere for ten minutes, then leveled off into a parking orbit at thirty nine kilometers above the surface, as Elton had ordered.

"We *made* it!" cried Elton, emerging from his cushion-cocoon, bouncing happily over to the control boards, strapping himself into a form-fit chair that was hard-put to accommodate his girth. "Just a matter of locating our position relative to Earth, punching in a Macro-space order, and waiting it out. There's a decent navigation system on this ship, complete with this planet's position on the star-charts." He laughed almost maniacally at the orb of Anteron III that floated in a

view-plate above. "Bastards can't get us here—not if we hurry. And have we got the goods on them!"

Aaron picked up Steffan's case, stowed it in a convenient closet, turned back to Elton. "From what Steffan said, it's going to be harder than that," he said solemnly. Somehow, he felt slightly depressed despite their success.

The hatchway clopped open; Vana and Chaimon ascended from below, the latter grasping a large bottle of liquor in his hand. "My God, Elton, is this boat ever well-stocked. No problem foodwise, or boozewise!" He handed over his treasure to the fat man, who flipped off the top, sampled the drink.

He ahhed, clomped over to Chaimon, gave him a strong bear hug. "Good lad. Soon as I get the orders keyed into this new rig of ours for the Big Macro, we'll set into this little jug in earnest, eh?"

"Sure," replied Chaimon cheerfully. "And like I say, there's more where that came from. Hey—you know, you're right, Elton. This starship is ours now."

"Huh?"

Chaimon held up his arms. "Spoils of war!"

"By God," burst Elton. "He's right! Are the buggers going to reclaim it? Of *course* not. Why, I'd say this little boat's worth maybe a hundred million credits on the open market. We'll be rich!"

IT TOOK more time than they thought it would, and they had to leave their parking orbit and retreat further from Anteron III to make them safer from any possible reprisals from the Overseers, but Elton had finally coaxed the computer into the proper sequential operations that allowed the necessary drop into Macro-Space.

Now they were in the ship's living quarters, celebrating.

Elton and Chaimon had broken out a large portion of the ship's liquor supply, and tipped it liberally. After a glass of whiskey or two, Elton had started upon a detailed lecture of the theory of Macro-Space insertion, and laced it often with parenthetical bawdy remembrances of the extra-curricular goings-on at a Macro-Space Engineering Institute he'd once worked for.

Aaron listened to him amusedly awhile as he lounged with Vana on a hydro-couch, sipping at a watered-down drink.

"Elton," said Chaimon, turning down the volume of the septophonic music-boards weaving soft background synthesizers into their conversation. "You sound like you were pretty well off on Earth. How come you took the big step of colonization?"

"Well, I'll tell you the exact truth." Elton smiled, his eyes misty with drink. "I was *bored* on Earth. I needed new experiences. I was always second-man on Earth. Never in charge. I wanted to go to a place where I had a chance at leadership." His eyes twinkled slightly. "Besides—I worked on Macro-Space machinery so long. I wanted to see what it was like to travel through it."

"Well, you can't say we had a boring time of it. You found relief for your ennui on Anteron, anyway," Vana pointed out.

"Yeah—and I learned a thing or two about leadership. Namely, I ain't got what it takes. Nor do I particularly *want* what it takes." He tilted the bulb-shaped bottle before him, and its amber liquid gurgled into his glass. "No—life isn't a matter of leaders and followers. I discovered *that* on Anteron. We functioned as a *group* there. Seems to me that's the way it should be everywhere." He lifted his

glass. "To the group!"

They echoed his toast laughingly, and sipped at their drinks.

Aaron was feeling the liquor. Automatically, he braced himself against the high—and then realized that there was no reason he shouldn't relax. No danger now.

He leaned back and closed his eyes while Elton droned on. Their experiences might have cured the fat man's hunger for power, but not his desire to dispense with as many words as possible. But they *all* had learned something on their detour. At least Aaron knew *he* had.

I've discovered that it isn't a new society I need, he thought to himself. It's a new attitude toward myself as an individual.

In order for the change to be effective and meaningful it had to originate from within—not from without.

None of them now had any desire to continue on to Frederick 201. Aaron suspected that they had come to the same conclusions he had.

Besides, they all had a mission now.

For no particular reason, he opened his eyes. He found that Vana was staring at him.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, swirling her drink in its glass absently.

"Oh, about what's in store for the future."

"We've got a lot to do," she said softly. "And I don't know how successful we'll be."

"Yes," returned Aaron. "And not just deliver Steffan's case and our story to the uw. We've got to send a ship back to Anteron as fast as possible to get the information recorded in the computer of our lifeship. Chances are with that, the Colonization Program can locate the directions in which the other modules scattered.

Maybe they'll even be a recording of the destruction of the *Wayfarer*, so they can find out what went wrong. Also, I don't know about you, but I intend to carry on the work that Stefan would have done. Like he said, getting something done about the conditions on Anteron is going to take more than just letting the United Worlds have the proof. We're going to have to stir up a response, and that's going to take a lot of work. A lot of travel."

He looked up. Elton and Chaimon were arguing drunkenly at the tape console over what music should be played next. He looked over at Vana.

She smiled at him, then touched his arm lightly. "You realize of course," she said quietly, "that's not *all* we have to do, you and I."

There was a glimmer of love in her eye that could well have been a reflection of his own.

He leaned over, kissed her cheek. "No. I suppose not," he murmured happily.

She returned his kiss briefly, then hopped up, strode over to Chaimon and Elton, and joined the argument.

Aaron finished his drink, then poured himself another. Undiluted.

—DAVE BISCHOFF
& TED WHITE

The Looking Glass (cont. from page 56)

right, don't he?" He rubbed himself gently. "That muhfucking therapy felt like a *gahdamn mule* kicked me—sheeyit, they say I won't be able to use this for another six weeks. Now I ask you, what the hell am I going to do with myself, man? I mean, this here is worse than the fucking *slammer*. Can you dig it?"

"Yeah, it's a bitch." He opened his hands to his eyes and his body was amazed at their wholeness. His mind had expected nothing else, but his body *knew* they had been destroyed. Three times. "Don't know how I'm gonna pay off that fine, though."

"They already hit your bank account?"

"Two milliseconds after the fine came down."

"How much?"

"Hell. . . four times twenty-nine ninety-eight. What's that, a hundred something? I ain't got it."

"So mug somebody, deposit the bread, and lie low for thirty days."

"Uh-uh. I got a job. Besides, they caught me once, for beating on somebody who was bugging my wife—

don't plan to face an assault rap ever again." A shudder raced the memory through his body. He'd never screamed so loud in his life. Being skinned alive had not been pleasant. "That therapy is bad shit."

"Don't I know it." The black man groaned as he sat up. "Hey, looky there."

"Where?"

"The Machine, dude. Who went in after you?"

"Some old lady, don't know who she is. Looks like a grandmother. Why?"

"Well look and see for yourself."

He squinted through the yellow light. The van squatted on the asphalt like a blue beetle. A wisp of greasy brown smoke rose through a vent in its roof.

"Damn!" The black voice trembled with anger and fear. "Wonder what the hell *she* did."

Hennesy shook his head and looked away. He'd go register to vote in the morning. He *would*. Unless. . .

—KEVIN O'DONNELL, JR.

THE AMAZING INTERVIEW:

EDMOND HAMILTON & LEIGH BRACKETT

Conducted by DARRELL SCHWEITZER

AMAZING: What does the term "space opera" mean to you?

BRACKETT: Well, it's a term that rather annoys us both because it has developed into a term of approbrium, for any story that has an element of adventure and action. I happen to like action stories and adventure stories, and to me this sense of wonder and all that goes into a space opera is absolutely fascinating. I enjoy space opera and I like writing them.

HAMILTON: Bob Tucker invented that title when he was a fan and I was reproaching him last spring again for having done so, because when you come right down to it, what are the astronauts' adventures but space opera? Including especially Apollo 13. That rescue of the men stranded out in space by bringing them back in and towing them with the starter, the module towing the other ship—that's just pure space opera. The old pictures on the covers of *AMAZING STORIES* showing men walking in spacesuits on the moon—they could be taken right from the photographs. I agree with Leigh, of course. I'm an old space opera fan. I don't like to see it mocked.

AMAZING: What is the most important value of this type of writing?

BRACKETT: Oh, the sense of adventure, the sense of opening up whole vistas of new worlds and possibilities of all sorts of lifeforms, encounters, excitements and all these things. I don't know whether it'll actually occur or not, but when I was young the stories of Mars by Edgar Rice Burroughs, which set me on my road to

ruin as a science fiction writer, were so much more fascinating than all the other things I read about Indians and pirates and so on, all of which were quite authentic and real. This was a step beyond and it set me out into such realms of wonder and fascination that I've never been able to leave them. If you want philosophy, that's another matter. I'm writing for entertainment and if I want philosophy I'll read philosophy, but I don't particularly care to have it mixed with my fiction.

HAMILTON: I think the value is what you might call a seminal value, that bit by bit the old magazine stories filtered down through the public mind and established the concept of space travel simply because the people would see so many covers on magazines and so forth, so that it was easier, I think, for the public to accept the space program. We contributed nothing directly to it. We didn't even prophesy it correctly, although we made some lucky hits, but well, when I was a youngster there was a proverb, "You could as soon do that as fly to the moon." It was a proverb to show something not possible, and I think all this somewhat lurid literature penetrated down to the public to make them accept the space program, which is a costly business, and I think that's where it's chief value lies.

AMAZING: How did the public react when you started, in the 1920's and 30's?

HAMILTON: Oh, it was considered those wild stories, impossible stories,

and my own family—I had a large family—wouldn't read any of what I wrote because it was just wild, lurid stuff, adventure, and there was a very critical public reaction in those days. But after the first Russian Sputniks went up, it had actually been done, and there was a great change. Who was the chap out at Douglas Aircraft who said "We don't laugh at Buck Rogers anymore"?

BRACKETT: We don't laugh at Buck Rogers anymore. Right.

AMAZING: Wasn't there a considerable difference between Buck Rogers and the best of Wells, or the best of Heinlein, in so far as sophistication goes?

HAMILTON: Yes, but Buck Rogers was a term used to lump all science fiction together. In other words, fantastic stories. Many of the people who used the term had never even read Buck Rogers or any other science fiction. It was an easy identifying label because they would see the strips in the newspapers.

BRACKETT: I was going to say in regards to levels of sophistication and something I said before, that I didn't care for philosophy mixed with my fiction, that it depends. If somebody like H.G. Wells can write a story like *The Island of Dr. Moreau* which operates on about three different levels magnificently, then I'll buy it. But when somebody is just trying to feed me a—

HAMILTON: Wells was a great literary artist, and also a very great mind. I think that *Moreau* was not only the best science fiction story, but the best short novel of that length in the English language. I read it very carefully again last winter, and as you say it succeeded on three different levels. It's a thoughtful story about the biggest theme of all, why human beings are the way they are, and it's also a story of adventure on a straight level of escape, of conflict. It was a

masterpiece and he was able to write it so that anyone could read it. You didn't have to be a scientist or even a well educated person to get the impact of that story. But there was only one H.G. Wells, and the rest of us aren't fit to tie his shoelaces.

AMAZING: Why do you think the quality of science fiction dropped off so drastically after Wells?

HAMILTON: Dropped off? How?

AMAZING: Just compare the average science fiction novel of the 1890's to the average one of the 1920's.

HAMILTON: You mustn't forget that Wells was a scientist by education. He had begun at the South Kensington Biological School, and his first writings were more or less scientific, and many of the stories that came after Wells were written by people who wanted to write a lurid story but had no scientific backing at all. They also certainly didn't have Wells' wonderful way with words.

AMAZING: How important is a scientific background in science fiction in respect to a literary background?

HAMILTON: That would depend on how you look at science fiction. I think myself that one should have some, but some of the best science fiction has been written by people with very little. But they must have enough so they don't violate scientific fact and become absurd. You can speculate, that's all right. I was by no means ever a scientist, but I majored in physics at the small college I went to, with the intention of starting a career as an electrical engineer, and from this I learned enough of the basic rules of science so I wouldn't make some ludicrous statement. Aside from that it would be a matter of literary ability, which is why Ray Bradbury, who has very little scientific training but is a fine literary artist, is probably the most successful of us all.

AMAZING: Did either of you find limitations set upon you by the editors of the early pulp magazines? For example, there's a story told about Robert Moore Williams who wrote a story called "Robot's Return," and sent it to Ray Palmer, who rejected it with a note saying, "This is beautiful, but it's not pulp fiction." Did you ever run up against anything like that?

HAMILTON: Not exactly like that. In fact I can never remember anything like that at all. Most editors of pulp magazines did not take their work lightly. The ones who did, and there were a few, tended not to last very long. Unless you believe in what you're doing, you don't last very long. I've had editors on occasion remark about some piece of tripe that I've knocked out that it was too pulpy. They weren't looking for pulpy stories in the science fiction magazines. Look at some of the off-beat stories that they published. No, I never ran into that sort of restriction.

AMAZING: But the market conditions forced you to knock out things you otherwise would not have?

HAMILTON: There's no doubt about that. I have ever since I was twenty-one, which was fifty years ago, supported myself writing science fiction and a few other things. It's impossible not to meet the editorial restrictions which are in effect. If you do something that they don't want, you must bend to the editor's will that way, but I've met very few editors, even of the old hardboiled pulps, who really wanted the writers to defer too much. They were pleased when they could get something different, but something effective. Only the very poorest and cheapest of the pulp magazines had an official story line and rules of an artificial cardboard sort, and all that. They were surprisingly intelligent men—and a few women too—and they had what most people

would find to be a surprising amount of appreciation of somebody who is trying to tell a good story. If you didn't want to tell a story at all—if you wanted to disguise your broodings and emotions and call it a story, why they didn't care too much for that. But given that I don't think they subjected their writers to too much pressure.

BRACKETT: Of course there were some taboos. They didn't like sex and they didn't like swear words, but those things you don't really need. It's a very dull writer who can't get the same feeling over without actually doing it in black and white. One story that I know you [Hamilton] had a problem with was the original of "What's It Like Out There?" which they found too grim and realistic for the time.

HAMILTON: Yes. This is considered my best story in the realistic fashion. It appeared in 1953, or thereabouts, but it had been written in 1933. I was trying in that early day to do a realistic story about space travel and the conquest of other worlds. Everything in it was designed not to be adventurous, but to meet the test of what was plausible, of what might happen. The result was that every magazine in the business rejected it. It was even to England twice. They all said the same things. They said it was too grim, too horrifying. It was not until the field had changed quite a bit that by shortening it and writing it from a slightly different standpoint that I was able to sell it, and then it was met with great joy. But the field itself has changed a lot as it's gone along. You must remember that in the earliest days when Gernsback and the others were editing the first science fiction magazines, the whole thing was new and they would often set things on a somewhat childish mental level for shock effect, but they were trying to

do something which had never been done before by selling science fiction magazines, and as the field grew up a bit, why most of the writers grew up a bit with it.

AMAZING: Why did they have to start on a childish level? Wells didn't.

HAMILTON: I didn't choose that word very well, but as I was just saying, the whole thing was considered Buck Rogers, lurid, crazy, impossible stuff. Even Wells was often described as having written wild and lurid stories to begin with and then settling down to serious novels about love and marriage. And yet his early science fiction, which founded the whole business, was beautifully written. There was a prejudice, just as there had been against everybody back to Jules Verne. They were crazy stories. They were impossible stories. One heard that very frequently.

AMAZING: What was the attitude of the practitioners?

HAMILTON: I think most of us in the early days wanted to tell a good shocker story. A story might be a bit ridiculous at times, but it was seldom dull. And, I think, as time went on and we were able to do better, the magazines were very receptive. Certainly without exception whenever I would do a story that was a little bit better than my usual ones, I would get great praise from the editors for it. I was growing up a bit in the literary manner. But we definitely wanted to tell shocker stories to begin with. That's what I meant really more than childish stories.

AMAZING: [to Brackett] Did you want to tell shockers to begin with?

BRACKETT: I wanted to tell good exciting stories, yes, and remember too that the pulp magazines, which were the only science fiction magazines in existence in those days, were aimed at a mass market. They were not like the quality magazines, like a literary

review or something. They wanted to catch people who just wanted to read a top-notch good story. You know, an action story. They didn't essentially want to make them think deep philosophical thoughts of how it actually might be to meet people from another world—although this was done, remarkably often and remarkably well. Many of the early writers, Edgar Rice Burroughs included, are vastly underrated. People just assume that they're corny writers and pay no attention to them. But some of Burroughs' things were splendid satires.

HAMILTON: He did do a great deal of satire, but he dressed it up always in a shocker story. One story of his, *The Mastermind of Mars*, is full of satire, anti-clerical satire since he had no sympathy with any form of religion, but it couldn't have been printed otherwise.

BRACKETT: He would have been hung up by the heels if he'd tried to publish it as anything but a science fiction story. It was about Mars and nobody paid any attention to it.

AMAZING: Isn't the value as satire lost when no one pays attention to it?

BRACKETT: A remarkable number of people, I think, got the message subliminally at least, because those books sold like hotcakes and enough people read them, so I don't think it was lost. What I mean was that the librarians and the lofty thinkers who wouldn't even have the books in the library were missing the point.

AMAZING: Did either of you try to do something like that?

BRACKETT: Here and there you'd tuck a little thing in.

HAMILTON: Yes, I think so. Unless you used some idea you thought worth uttering, it would be just a dull mechanical business of writing. You always try to tell something. It may not be something tremendously intellectual in nature, but some idea of

your own. When you were doing just a straight pulp job, meaning a hack job, as they would say, you knew what you were doing, and you didn't like it very well. It had to have something that interested you, some idea.

AMAZING: Are you both generally pleased at the way the field has developed since the early days?

BRACKETT: Well I'm delighted to see the field growing larger and wider and accepting all sorts of things on all levels. This is great, and of course nowadays you can write science fiction and people don't look at you and say, "Ha!" It's become respectable.

HAMILTON: This is true. I am equally delighted, of course. When I started writing science fiction there wasn't even a single science fiction magazine. Good science fiction, very good science fiction was published in good magazines, the *Saturday Evening Post*, for instance, but it was by eminent writers in other fields, and their names carried them through. It was very good, usually better than our beginning attempts, but I'm happy with the way science fiction has gone, with one exception. I'd like to see more interest on the part of science fiction in the actual space program that's going on. The two things are not separate; one is the tangible outgrowth of the other. I won't say that science fiction created the space program, but science fiction writers seem to be just a little bit shy of the space program, as if it were taking the story away from them. I don't agree with that at all.

AMAZING: In the late 1950's after the Sputnik went up there was a widespread collapse of science fiction magazines, and many writers left the field because they could no longer make a living. Was this perhaps because the public said, "Now it's done, so why do we read this anymore?"

HAMILTON: I would suppose that was

possible, and yet it didn't happen that way. It seems to have stimulated the interest, although not as much as I would have liked to have seen. The space program stimulated interest in science fiction because, after all, here were editors and writers who had been working with this material for decades. It didn't cause a great boom in science fiction, but it gave us a little more respectability because we were writing about rockets to other worlds and it was no longer such an impossible thing. I would like to see the science fictionists themselves take a more active interest in the space program, though.

AMAZING: Wasn't there a collapse of the magazine field at this time?

BRACKETT: Well, I think they over-expanded the field. There was a moment where everybody rushed to get into the pack and presently there was a tremendous proliferation of magazines and just more than the market would bear.

HAMILTON: This has happened many times, and the time you speak of was about 1953, when there were so many magazines coming out you couldn't read them all. But this happened at least three times in my fifty years of writing science fiction. There were great sudden booms in science fiction that pretty soon dwindled away. There aren't enough readers to justify thirty magazines.

AMAZING: Can the current expansion of science fiction be expected to dwindle away?

BRACKETT: It's establishing a firmer base. It's no longer a freak thing. We used to be such little lost creatures clinging to each other on the windy doorstep. Nobody would pay any attention to us, and we loved the subject and it was a very lonely place to be. But now it's taught in the universities and is quite a respectable field. The types of science fiction being

written reach a much broader audience than before, and I think it's on a much sounder basis than it was because many more people now read it and take cognizance of it. For instance you have a great many more women reading science fiction than there used to be in the old days, for what reason I know not. But there always were a certain number of women fans and women readers. They were on the whole rather few in number and this was one reason why it was not a large field, because it didn't appeal to women readers like the big slicks, which had such tremendous sales. But I think more women are reading it now; they're becoming more interested in social problems and everything connected with it. They're more interested in the future than they used to be, which is less of a certainty than it used to be. Things are much more unstable and explosive than they were when I was a child. The 20's were such a peaceful, peaceful period. I wish we could have them back again.

HAMILTON: That's true. We talk about the "Roaring Twenties" but that was the only really peaceful decade of my life that I can remember. Before the Twenties there was World War I, which upset the country terribly, and before that I don't remember too much, although I remember a few years before World War I. But the Twenties were beautifully quiet, peaceful years. It was so much so that the big news was that somebody swam the English Channel or Lindburgh made a flight across the Atlantic. Big sports news. That's because there were no wars, no riots, no terrible depressions, so all this about the "Roaring Twenties" is all nonsense. I've never seen such a peaceful period.

AMAZING: Do you think science fiction does better in periods of unrest,

or in periods of peace? You'll notice that it is doing well now, in a period of unrest, and yet it started as a publishing category in the 20's.

HAMILTON: That's an interesting question, but I've never really thought about it. It started out in the 20's, which as I said was a remarkably quiet period, and yet there was an expansion in the 30's which were a very upset period beginning with the Depression and ending with the Second War.

BRACKETT: I think people in the Thirties liked to escape. Life was pretty dreary and grim and I think they appreciated the ability to trot out to Mars and see what was doing there for a change. It was a relief. The same reason they went to the movies in such droves.

AMAZING: Is providing escape like that a legitimate function of science fiction?

BRACKETT: Oh, I think so. I think it's a legitimate function of any entertainment. What's wrong with escape? I think it's marvellous. If you don't escape once in a while you go absolutely bonkers.

HAMILTON: Yes, at a certain youthful age you don't want to escape, but as life goes on you no longer think there's anything wrong with innocent escape reading. Right now the shadow of possible atomic war hangs over all the world, nothing so frightening as that shadow which was over us in the late 1940's, but it's still there. It makes it difficult to sit down and write a story about possible atomic war because that's no longer escape stuff. That's real.

AMAZING: Yet in the 1950's, when this seemed exceptionally likely, there were lots of stories about atomic war.

HAMILTON: There were. In fact some of the best of them were done then, but they were not light escape reading, and what she means by escape is

(cont. on page 123)

Editorial (cont. from page 4)
name.

It was interesting to get the reactions of my friends in the business—fellow editors—to "Johnstone's story. They could speak freely about it to me, of course, since they didn't know I'd written it. Oddly enough, one editor who has never bought any of my own stories said he loved it and wished he'd seen it first. That had me grinning behind a poker face.

My original plan had been to continue the series in short order, perhaps working with other authors on different stories in the series, but publishing them all under "Johnstone's" name. (Benford was one author interested in the idea at the time.)

But 1970 was a busy year for me—the year that my daughter was born and we moved from New York City to suburban northern Virginia. I didn't have time to pursue the series. I put it on the shelf with the idea that I'd return to it eventually.

A few years ago an editor who shall remain nameless here asked me for a book and I recalled "Breaking Point". But since I hadn't the time to complete the book by the deadline given me (two months), I brought in Dave Bischoff to collaborate on it with me. At that point the original editor cancelled the contract.

Freed from an impossible deadline we sought another publisher for the book and continued our work on it. A publisher was found, and the book was finished.

"A World of One's Own," last issue, and "A Forbidden World," this issue, taken with the original "Breaking Point," make up *Forbidden World*, which will be published in 1978 by Popular Library.

To a large extent "A World of One's Own" and "A Forbidden World" are the work of Dave Bischoff. Working from my plot outline, Dave did most of the actual writing, fleshing out the plot considerably in the process. I acted mostly as an editor; although I

wrote several scenes in "A World of One's Own" for the most part I edited Dave's prose, occasionally pointing out to him unfulfilled plotlines and making suggestions for redrafts on the portion which appears here as "A Forbidden World."

Dave's was not an easy task: he had to pick up characters and a narrative style already established in "Breaking Point" and transform them into his own work. As he progressed, his hand grew surer; the situations and scenes in "A Forbidden World" are largely of his invention.

Some revision has been done to allow both "A World of One's Own" and "A Forbidden World" to stand on their own here as complete stories; for this reason the versions (of all three stories) published here differ somewhat from the Popular Library edition of the novel.

(Since we've gone to a quarterly schedule of publication with this magazine, we've been unable to serialize novels as we previously did—the wait between instalments is too great. Our solution to this problem is to find novels which consist of two or more novellas or novelettes and present these shorter portions singly. In this fashion we've been able to present Jack Dann's "Starhiker" and "The Dream Lions," which were subsequently published in book form as *Starhiker*; and F. M. Busby's "Search," "Nobody Home" and "Never So Lost," which, along with "Pearsall's Return"—originally published in a 1973 issue of the now-defunct *If*—will be published in book form as *All These Earths*.)

FOLLOWUP: We published Tom Perry's guest editorial on the subject of AMAZING-founder Hugo Gernsback's bankruptcy and loss of control over this magazine in our June, 1977 issue. And last issue in our letters column we published Sam Moskowitz' response to Perry, in which he impugned Perry's research capabilities

and disputed his information. I had hoped to have Perry's response in time for this issue, but Tom tells me this whole affair has mushroomed and he has found himself doing far more research into the subject. He has even tracked down the court records of the Gernsback bankruptcy trial to a pair of dusty boxes in a New Jersey warehouse, and read them thoroughly. The information he has come up with provides a surprising insight into the business affairs of Gernsback and his company, and sheds new light on the entire affair. Tom hopes to have this information whipped into article form for our next issue, but I don't think I'll be stealing his thunder if I state that it appears to remain true that AMAZING was one of Gernsback's few profitable enterprises in 1929—three years after he established it.

I think I should also make clear that Tom has no axes to grind—and no desire to get into a fight with Sam Moskowitz. Tom's position is that up until he began digging into the matter, the failure of Gernsback's Experimenter Publishing Co. and Gernsback's subsequent loss of control

over this magazine was less a matter of history than myth, based almost exclusively upon Gernsback's anecdotal recollections of the matter many years after the fact and subject to simplification in the retelling.

This may seem to be historical nit-picking to some people; to Moskowitz it would seem to appear as a personal attack upon his role as Gernsback's chief apologist and historian. My own position is a simple one: I'm curious. That Gernsback, the acknowledged "father of science fiction", lost control of AMAZING in 1929 is indisputable. Why and how are questions I'd like to see fully answered.

CORRECTION: Due to an error in the type pastup, a portion of F. M. Busby's "Nobody Home" was published out of order in our July, 1977 issue. Most of page 49—from "Tide's just out and turning" to the scene-break—really belongs on page 48 between lines 16 and 17. We've had no comment on this from our readers, but Busby caught it right away! My apologies to you all for the mixup.

—TED WHITE

Amazing Interview (cont. from page 121)

just an adventure that somebody has which is thrilling to read about but couldn't happen to you. But that's no longer true about stories of atomic catastrophe.

AMAZING: Leigh, you wrote one of the definitive ones, *The Long Tomorrow*. What made you write that?

BRACKETT: Well, I became fascinated by the Amish way of life. I had not known anything about these people before we moved back to Ohio and I observed their methods of living, which were quite fascinating, and I said "If the atomic collapse does come they'll go sailing right on because

they don't depend on all the artificial appurtenances of civilization as we do. If our electricity goes we're sunk, because the entire house runs on it. They don't bother with it.

HAMILTON: Before she never even saw them to think about them, but seeing them with a fresh eye she came up with this idea.

BRACKETT: It occurred to me that if this web of civilization ever collapsed, they would be the ones to teach the lost skills of how to exist without it to the survivors.

—conducted by
DARRELL SCHWEITZER

...OR SO YOU SAY



Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to *Or So You Say*, Box 409, Falls Church, Va. 22046.

Despite the fact that I surrendered my editorial space to this column last issue, we were able to fit in less than half the letters set in type. The remainder of those letters follow.—TW

Dear Ted,

I must be psychic. I haven't purchased many magazines in the last few months because my budget simply can't afford it. But the other day I saw the March issue of *AMAZING* and something prompted me to buy it. Imagine my surprise to be mentioned in a letter!

However, Steven Duff's letter must prompt me to ask for equal time since he's made several assumptions about me which are erroneous.

First, I considered what you wrote in response to my letter. While you didn't publish it, I did write an apology to you and a separate one to Roger Klorese, the "vulgar and offensive" gay Mr. Duff decries.

The crux of my apology was to say that while Dr. Smith was a mincing fairy (i.e., a crudely done stereotype of homosexuals) I did not mean to apply this label to all gays. I gave an analogy of a famous black performer who, to this day, plays the role of "nigger." This is not a condemnation of all blacks but of a particular one.

Roger Klorese responded to my letter and we exchanged letters a couple of times. He understood exactly what my reference to Dr. Smith was intended to mean.

Mr. Duff claims that some of his childhood friends were sexually molested by homosexuals. While it's true that all men who molest little boys are homosexuals, not all homosexuals molest little boys.

It has been my experience with homosexuals (and no, not that kind of experience! I'm a practicing heterosexual, exclusively so) that most of them just want to be left alone. The only "outrageous" homosexual I've known was one poor Klingeresque character in Korea who wanted out of the Army desperately. Like Klinger on TV's *M*A*S*H* he was constantly going around post and Chunchon and Seoul wearing dresses. The Korean police picked him up in Seoul once; I think it was his mustache that gave him away.

But he was the exception rather than the rule. I've been to New York and L.A. and I've seen some of the more effeminate gays but they never bothered me and I never bothered them.

I have one great desire in my life, to be left alone. And since I believe in the Golden Rule, I leave others alone.

Second, I am not a Vietnam vet, Mr. Duff. My wife is Korean (if you'd checked the address to my letter you might have recognized that). Soon-ok

is a distinctly Korean name, though I don't fault him for not recognizing it.

I do find it mildly distasteful that he had to drag in the idea of a poor, down trodden Vietnam vet to try and prove his arguments.

Lastly, reading Mr. Duff's letter again, particularly his choice of adjectives in describing homosexuals, leads me to suspect his motives. I won't play arm-chair psychologist since to do so in your letter column might lead to a lawsuit, however, I'm sure your readers saw the same pattern I did.

Lastly, allow me to say I enjoyed AMAZING very much, particularly Joe Puvilia and Steven Utley's "Our Vanishing Triceratops." Being a dinosaur fan since the age of 4 (indeed, my interest in dinosaurs is what lead me to science fiction and fandom) I found the story to be very nostalgic.

BUZZ DIXON

11-B Meyer Ave. NBU-51-0
Ft. Huachuca, Ariz. 85613

Dear Ted,

I really don't understand you! Your remarks in the March AMAZING, and the Feb, FANTASTIC by themselves are upsetting, but coming from you are also confusing. In the December AMAZING you lauded Heinlein, calling yourself one of the minor sons of his style of writing, (which I haven't noticed) and then you turn around and call him a robot, a man who is regressing back to the fifties and radicalism.

One thing that you mentioned, but which you may have not taken into consideration enough was the fact that Heinlein is an old, sick man. When he accepted the invitation to be guest of Honor, it may have not been the best thing for him to do, yet he made the sacrifice, and he showed up. I think rather than call Bob a simulacrum, you should blame the incompetent boobs who ran the con!

And of all people, you should be the one to know that you don't write things like that even if you think them. Wasn't a very strong remark, and the refusal to make a retraction what got your article in Algol killed? Yea, AMAZING is your magazine, but you should have more sense!

In the same issue as the above mentioned editorial, you printed a letter by Steven Duff. This man, as I will call him for lack of a better term, to begin with, confuses gays with transvestites, and secondly he fails to have noticed the fact that while bestiality and necrophilia, and mechanophilia for that matter are psychological disorders, and perversion, Homosexuality is not. Now, I am not gay, nor am I a member of the gay liberation movement, but I find Steven's remarks as bigoted as assuming that blacks are stupid and that all Jews have big noses!

I think that Mr. Duff wrote a totally immature letter.

I reiterate something I said in a previous (unpublished) letter, that AMAZING's going quarterly was the best thing for it. I have noticed a steady uphill climb in the quality of the magazine since the September issue, not only in the artwork which has been exceptional, but in the fiction as well.

For the past few years, I would only be able to find one or two good stories an issue, and maybe one exceptional one a year; in the past three issues I have liked every story, and none of them have fallen below a 6 on a scale of 1-10.

In this issue of particular note are "Two of a Kind," by Richard Brown, which like you said in the blurb I can't get out of my mind, and "Shibboleth," by Malzberg. Barry amazes me with the amount of thought he can put into a story in a literary genre which he is supposed to be leaving.

The Lupoff story was a pleasant surprise; Good Ol New Alabama is a

place that many of us have wanted to revisit for quite some time, and unlike so many sequels, this one was good.

STEVE DAVIDSON
1754 Hillside Dr.
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Perhaps rereading what I wrote in those editorials would ease your confusion; I did indeed say "In the end I fault the Committee. They should have checked. They should have known better. That Robert A. Heinlein made a public fool of himself upon their stage is their responsibility." For what it's worth, I don't think a man in his sixties should be excused for his actions because he's "old". I've known many individuals ten and twenty years older than that who give the lie to such notions. As for my column in Algol, I suggest you read it in its new home, Thrust (Thrust Publications, 2008 Erie St., #2, Adelphi, Md. 20783; \$1.25 a copy, four issues for \$4.00) before making up your mind about the reasons for its removal from Algol. No "very strong" remarks in the column were called to my attention by Algol's editor/publisher, and I was given no opportunity to "make a retraction" or refuse to make one. On the contrary, the statements made in Algol about me and my column (which had appeared in Algol for more than ten years) were indeed "strong" and factually incorrect. Although I protested those remarks and I am aware of other protests to Algol, I regard it as significant that none of these reactions were subsequently published there. —TW

Dear Ted;

I cannot describe my surprise when I found a letter I had written five months ago appearing in AMAZING. I didn't remember what I had written, so I decided to buy the issue and read it. Greater shocks were awaiting me.

I was upset, I admit, but to a certain extent you were justified in what you said. For this I apologize to Lisa Tuttle, John Shirley, Roger Klose and yourself. I seldom direct personal insults towards anyone I don't know, because they are usually quite unjustified. I don't apologize for panning the stories in the September issue at all, for those remarks were quite well-deserved, nor can I say that my opinion of the gay community has changed.

Before you tear this letter up and throw it in the trash perhaps I should explain why I feel the way I do. Like most people I view the world subjectively. My own experience is the most direct way for me to learn of the world. Up until the time I was ten years old I didn't know what a homosexual was, and wouldn't have believed in their existence if I had been told. I learned fast when two of my friends, only eleven years old, were lured into a chicken hawk's apartment and raped.

You cavalierly dismissed that when you replied that you had lived in New York for eleven years without being molested by gays. That's a lame argument, Ted. I could tell you that five members of the Simon City Royals, (my former street gang) were killed during one year. Two of those were friends of mine. If you said you had lived in New York for eleven years without being killed by doped-up greasers this would not bring my friends back to life.

I can't blame homosexuals for everything in the world, and I can't honestly say that I would hate every homosexual I meet. Nevertheless I won't forget the picture of my friend as we, cruelly curious, asked him to describe each perversion he was forced to perform. He was a tragic figure, beaten in front of his friends by a drunken, raging mother. It seemed so unfair that he should endure more harshness. So, when your magazine, when television talk

shows and dramas, when books and stories first picked up the gay banner and proceeded to bludgeon us in the head with it, I was unsympathetic. As the gay crusade continued to grow and became a permanent fixture in your periodical, I became more than unsympathetic, I became absolutely sick of it. Any group can make itself look good, except for the American Nazi Party, for they are proud of their sickness. Just the other day a local talk show host, a black man, invited the national director of the Ku Klux Klan. This man, David Duke, was so articulate and reasonable that you could really believe the KKK only wanted to advance the white race in the same fashion as the NAACP wishes to aid black people. The black host became emotional and was defeated on every point in the ensuing argument. He looked like a reactionary jerk. Indeed, it must be difficult to calmly face the representative of an organization which put several of his relatives to death. In a way, my tirade against the gay community must have been very similar.

Yet that was only a small part of my letter. The greater part, which you entirely ignored, dealt with the contents of the September issue. In my estimation it was rubbish. Those stories were typical of recent trends. The stories you publish now reek of cynicism and pointless satire. At a Star Trek convention Harlan Ellison said you publish the worst magazines in the field because you "pay in Blue Chip stamps." I have witnesses. I once thought this an idiotic statement, but now I'm not so sure.

Your March issue further weakened my belief that you published the best sf mags despite your low payment of 1½¢ per word. (compared to *Analog's* nickel a word and *Spectre's* 1 pound sterling per five). Although it was less deplorable than your September issue it was still a poor magazine.

In my opinion Robert F. Young is the best of AMAZING's regular

authors. Unfortunately I can only express disappointment with "Alec's Anabasis". Compared to "Above This Race of Men" and "Perchance to Dream" this was a thoroughly uninvolved attempt at humorous adventure. In attempting to poke fun at time-operas it succeeded in becoming much poorer than anything it sought to parody. Who could really believe that jait-jbit theory? In the too-short framework strong history precluded strong characterization. Duris was a non-entity, Sarai was a painful bore from the very start. Alexander himself was an uninteresting person. Not only was his motivation weak, but his silly guilt over his little sister was far from believable. When the story ended I didn't know who he was. Xenophon, likewise, would not be on a list of great sf characters, even though he was real.

I was particularly upset with battles that began and ended in the space of two short sentences. And if the faltering attempts at humor were mind-numbing in the first half, the second was enough to make my teeth rattle. Especially distasteful was having a Greek goddess, presumably Aphrodite, utter an unnecessary dialogue in modern street slang, replete with the sort of words deviates write in men's rooms. The all-dialogue sex-scenes also tried to be funny, but were pathetic instead.

Richard A. Lupoff contributed what is certainly the most colossal waste of time I have ever encountered. "The Bentfin Boomer Girl Comes Thru" was an illogical story which has no place *anywhere*. On top of this it was written in an obscure Hindu dialect. To read this story you must decipher it, and to decipher it you must have greater patience with nonsense than I do.

On the whole I dislike Barry N. Malzberg's poor excuse for science fiction. I'll always remember "Upping The Planet," a ridiculous contrivance concerning a man who had to

masturbate twenty-four straight hours to save the Earth from total destruction. You should remember it, you published it. Still, I enjoyed "Shibboleth", and I don't know why.

"Our Vanishing Triceratops," by Joe Pumilai and Steven Utley, stands among the best stories you've published. The idea wasn't new, but there was a strong conflict between believable characters, and the writing was definitely above-par.

"The Recruiter," by Glen Cook, could have been much better. Unfortunately it was so dismal and cynical in tone that only the most despondent souls could identify with it.

"Two of a Kind," by Richard W. Brown, probably won't be talked about for months to come. When miscegenation reaches the acceptance level of Prime Time TV, the time has passed for Great Art, i.e., gruesome stories like this one, to deal with the subject. I had just finished reading Phillip Jose Farmer's little-known but truly excellent novel, *Fire And The Night*, which also dealt with miscegenation. Thus, hopeless trash like "Two of a Kind" hit my disgust reflex twerked me off by representing White Society with the two agents. Such people probably exist, for the world is a very grotty place; but the agents do not, repeat, do not represent White Society, or any other society. From beginning to end this story is just one long string of perversity. The shock ending was obvious three pages before it happened. The beautiful black woman was the white guys wife. So what? That was my honest reaction. I couldn't have cared less about anyone in the story, although I did feel sympathy for the black woman. Still, the characterization was completely nil. Tucker Wilson? Maybe it should be Wilson Tucker. How about another story with a character named Laumer Keith, or Asimov Isaac?

The total lack of professionalism in

this story is astounding. We are thrust into a very weird world where whites prey on blacks. One question never posed or answered is, "How did the world get that way?" The whole story comes off like a minor-league *Mandingo*. Perhaps you've heard of that crushing travesty. Richard Brown is behind the times with his dirty theory of miscegenation. I know a black man in Kentucky who thinks the greatest thing his sons ever did was to marry white women. That's one old geezer who's very easily pleased. As I go Greyhound across the South I watch the races mingle happily in bus depots, and I wryly think of people like Richard Brown who think they're saying something when they're not.

After the horror of "Two of a Kind", Jack C. Haldeman's "Those Thrilling Days of Yesteryear" was especially invigorating. Here was an example of a man who could tell a wonderful little story with chills and thrills. The writing was excellent, the idea was new without going the easy route of offensiveness. My heartiest congratulations to Jack.

Too bad his wife got her bestiality tale published in the same issue. "An Animal Crime of Passion" is an insult to stf readers everywhere, and it had the dusty air of a story that has been bounced from every other editor in the business.

To close my letter let me say that better sales don't mean a better magazine. When you said that AMAZING consistently outsells FANTASTIC, as a reply to my contention that FANTASTIC was better; I searched for those issues where you publish sales figures. According to them AMAZING does outsell FANTASTIC, by about three thousand copies. It also revealed that you sell roughly a third of the press run for each magazine. I then dug up sales figures for the other magazines in stf. They all seemed to sell between 40% and 60% of their press run. If we go

by sales alone, you publish by far the worst magazines in stf. I don't agree with this. AMAZING is no peach, but I truly enjoy FANTASTIC. The stories in FANTASTIC are more inventive, more professional, and more well-written than those in AMAZING. Still, I think your low sales should indicate to you that AMAZING has very narrow appeal. FANTASTIC is probably a low seller because fantasy has a smaller constant audience than stf.

STEVEN L. DUFF
1505 N. Austin Blvd.
Chicago Illinois, 60651

I appreciate your apologies, Steven; I think they do you credit. But I did not dismiss the rape of your friends when I said I'd lived in New York City for eleven years without being molested "by any men wearing lipstick and makeup" . . . I was responding to your statement, "Perhaps you've never come into actual contact with gays, Ted, perhaps you've never seen men in lipstick and make-up walking around on the streets." The death of your five gang members was an undoubted tragedy, but I can't help suspecting that their deaths were in some measure due to their lifestyle. Did I ignore the rest of your letter? No, not entirely; I commented on the way you expressed your opinion of the authors and their characters in the September issue. I did not comment on your opinions themselves; nor will I this time. It's not my position to argue with readers about the worth of any given story; my side of the argument lies in the fact that I bought those stories and put them into those issues. I should point out, however, that Brown's story is not about miscegenation, and the two agents did not wear signs around their necks reading REPRESENTATIVES OF WHITE SOCIETY. On the other hand, if the sign fits, you may wear it. Brown used Wilson Tucker's name in the story because they are friends and

Tucker is famous for using his friends' names in his stories. Finally, I never said that sales equalled quality. But let's take a closer look at those sales figures. I have at hand those for Analog, Galaxy, FANTASTIC and AMAZING—the figures published in 1977 for the year of 1976. These figures show: Line A, the total number of copies printed (averaged for the year); Line B-1, actual newsstand sales; Line B-2, subscriptions; and Line C, total paid circulation. Analog and Galaxy have, over the years, built up a large list of subscribers. We have not; this reflects the policies of each publisher, and in our case was based on the fact that most subscription sales do not earn profits, but are usually a breakeven proposition. Further, subscription sales are captive sales and do not reflect open-market demand—newsstand demand. With that in mind, let's compare the figures on line B-1. Analog's newsstand sales (in 1976) were 60,391. Galaxy's, in contrast, were only 26,668. Amazing's were 23,000, close behind Galaxy. Fantastic, on the other hand, sold only 18,130 copies. (I have reason to assume that Fantasy & Science Fiction would place somewhere close to Galaxy and AMAZING.) Now let's check Line A (total number of copies printed) and subtract from that Line B-2 (subscription sales), to find out how many copies of each magazine were actually shipped to the newsstands. Analog shipped 122,042 copies—in order to sell 60,361. That makes for a sale of just under 50%—pretty good. Of course, with 122,000 copies on display, Analog has far greater market penetration—almost twice as much as the rest. For example, Galaxy put 67,719 copies on sale, while AMAZING put 65,500 copies on sale and FANTASTIC put 66,680 copies on sale. This means that AMAZING and Galaxy are selling almost the same percentage of copies put on sale (and, again, I believe

(cont. on page 132)

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Sleeping Beast (cont. from page 19) to be? *was*—swelling visibly, like a child's toy balloon being inflated with more enthusiasm than discretion. Then he . . . burst. It was a remarkably leisurely process but, nonetheless, totally destructive, a slow, continuous explosion. Grimes and the Baroness were slammed down into their chairs as Big Sister suddenly applied maximum inertial drive acceleration—but watched the final devastation in the stern vision screen.

Fantastically, golden motes floated among the twisted, incandescent wreckage. Big Sister stepped up the magnification. The bright yellow objects were *The Far Traveller's* general purpose robots, seemingly unharmed.

Grimes commented on this.

Big Sister said, "I lost two of them. But as they were the ones with bombs inside their bodies it could not be avoided."

Grimes asked, "It's not important, but what was it that he said just before the explosion?"

"*Krarch?* The nearest equivalent is 'bitch'."

"Tell me, Big Sister," said the Baroness, "why did you do it? After all, I am a sociologist and I would have thought, for all your loyalties to ourselves, that you might have been more loyal to one of your own kind. You could have exercised a restraining influence, helped him but persuaded him to be a force for good rather than for evil."

"He was a male chauvinist pig," said Big Sister.

—A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

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(cont. from page 129)

F&SF is also in this range), while FANTASTIC is doing much more poorly. You can make what you wish of these figures but they indicate to me that most of the sf magazines are in the same economic boat, with Analog the better-off exception, and FANTASTIC dragging badly. (And I

The King Is Dead (cont. from page 49)

all her weight behind the thrust. It was enough. His body shot from the ledge and fell, twisting and writhing, to crash into the spire-topped trees far below. She could go down, at her leisure, and see to it that the converters got their meal. Then she, in turn, would have hers.

But she stood for a moment on the shelving rock, her sleek head high, her yellow eyes roaming with grim triumph over the rugged panorama of

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agree; the market for fantasy seems smaller than that for sf—at least in the magazines arena.) And as I said before, quality does not seem to be a factor in this situation. The problem is the marketplace—our distribution and sales system for magazines. It is hurting us all.—TW

crag and cliffs and broken, rocky spires, of snow fields and glinting, icy streams. It was a great territory, and it was her territory now.

The young beneath her ribs kicked vigorously. She spoke to it telepathically, soothing it.

"Be quiet and grow," she told it. "Later, you shall hunt over a great range. There is food here for us both."

—STEPHEN TALL

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