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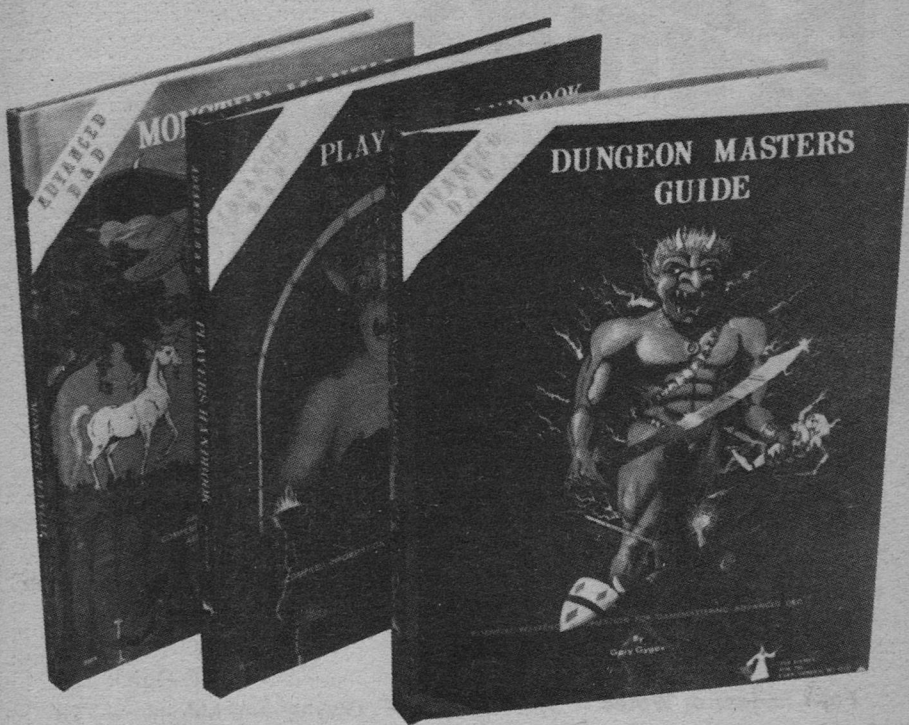
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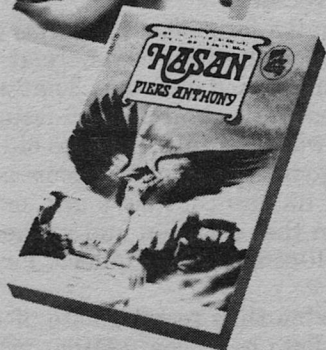
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EDITORIAL: ANNIVERSARIES

by Isaac Asimov

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Think of this: In all of history, right through the first quarter of this century, there was no such thing as a science fiction magazine.

There was science fiction, of course. If you want to be broad in your definition of science fiction, then it is as old as the *Odyssey* or even as old as the Epic of Gilgamesh. Perhaps it is even as old as the first tale of imaginary adventure grunted out over a Paleolithic campfire.

Coming farther toward the present, there were also science fiction stories in magazines. *Argosy* published some, as did *Science and Invention*, *Blue Book*, *Radio Experimenter*, *Weird Tales*, and so on.

There was never a magazine, however, that was devoted entirely and exclusively to science fiction until Hugo Gernsback published *Amazing Stories*. The first issue of that magazine was dated April 1926, and it has been published ever since.

In 1976, therefore, *Amazing Stories* (and magazine science fiction generally) celebrated its Golden Anniversary.

That meant something to me personally, for *Amazing Stories* was the first science fiction magazine, indeed the first commercial enterprise of any sort, to buy something I had written. That was "Marooned Off Vesta," which appeared in the March 1939 issue of *Amazing Stories*, when the magazine was not quite 13 years old.

Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine had not yet been born when magazine science fiction passed its half-century mark, or we would have hailed *Amazing Stories* on that occasion and wished it a healthy continuation for another half-century and, indeed, for all eternity.

It may seem strange for this magazine thus to take note of our "competitors," but we do not believe them to be competitors in the sense that their success is our failure and vice versa. We are all of us engaged in one task; we are all trying to encourage the production and dissemination of good science fiction. If we are successful, the



whole field profits and all the magazines have a chance to do better.

In fact, if but *one* of the magazines is notably successful in heightening the quality of the product and the quantity of the readership, it will, of necessity, encourage more writers to enter the field and to work harder to produce a still better product. Then *all* the magazines profit.

So we take joy over the successes of our "competitors" and we know they take equal joy over ours.

Nor is *Amazing Stories* the only magazine to enjoy a significant anniversary in the 1970s. With its October 1979 issue, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* celebrated its 30th anniversary.

Like *IA'sfm*, *F & SF* began life as a quarterly, progressed to bimonthly in its second year, and to monthly in its third year. It has remained monthly ever since.

Like *Amazing Stories*, *F & SF* has had important personal meaning to me. In its November 1958 issue, its 90th, when it was just passed its ninth birthday, it published an article of mine entitled "The Dust of Ages."

The blurb by Robert P. Mills read, in part, as follows: "*F & SF* announces delightedly that it has managed to retain . . . the good Dr. Asimov, and that the intriguing results of his restless curiosity about physical phenomena and related matters will appear regularly in this new column."

That was the first use of the phrase "the Good Doctor" as applied to myself. Bob Mills used it regularly and genial old-timers still use it today—and I have never objected.

Bob probably did not guess how "regularly" that column would appear. In the 30th anniversary issue of *F & SF*, its 341st issue, my 252nd essay appeared. In the twenty-one years that had passed since the first, neither the magazine nor myself had missed a month.

It's been a wonderful association and I hope it continues unflatteringly as long as we both live.

Again, the October 1980 issue of *Galaxy* will mark its 30th birthday. Those of us whose memories go back thirty years to the first few issues of *Galaxy* under the editorship of Horace L. Gold will remember the excitement they brought to the field.

They seemed to mark a rejuvenation, a new freshness in science fiction, that was the beginning of a great rocketing expansion in the field. For a few years, there were more different magazines than had ever been seen before—or since.

I was part of it, too. Of the first 13 issues of *Galaxy*, no less than seven contained fiction by myself.

But all of this is just by way of introduction. The most significant of the anniversaries of magazine science fiction comes this very month.

Not long after the great market crash of 1929 (a most unpropitious time for new business ventures) there appeared the first issue—January 1930—of a new science fiction magazine, *Astounding Stories*. It was the first pulp-size science fiction magazine; and it cost only 20¢ an issue as compared with 25¢ for the other (large size) magazines then in existence.

It was published by Clayton Publishers, and they put out 34 issues before the pressures of the Great Depression forced them to close down both the magazine (with its March 1933 issue) and the publishing house itself.

The magazine was not dead, however; it was but sleeping. Street & Smith Publications, Inc., bought it; and the October 1933 issue appeared with no break in its volume-issue numbering. It was still *Astounding Stories*.

Within a few issues, under the editorship of F. Orlin Tremaine, it came to be generally considered the leading magazine in the field, a position it has retained ever since (although *Galaxy* challenged it in the early 1950s, and *IA'sfm* is challenging it in the late 1970s).

At the close of 1937, John W. Campbell, Jr., took over the editorship of the magazine and the March 1938 issue was renamed *Astounding Science Fiction*. With that, the magazine and the whole field took a mighty leap forward. It was the Campbell Revolution, if I may coin a phrase; and by the July 1939 issue the "Golden Age" had begun.

Campbell discovered and trained (or in a few cases, re-trained) and encouraged and supported a group of science fiction writers the like of which had never before been seen and (with all apologies to you rotten kids who are crowding the portals this last couple of decades) has never been seen again.

There are now four Grand Masters of Science Fiction, as chosen by the Science Fiction Writers of America. These are: Robert A. Heinlein, Jack Williamson, Clifford D. Simak, and L. Sprague de Camp. The first of these was a Campbell discovery and creation; the last three had published material before Campbell, but were given a new birth by the man. I suspect it will be quite a while before a Grand Master will be chosen who was not, in one way or another,

involved with Campbell.

And of course, as everyone knows, there wasn't anyone as close to Campbell, as hovered over by Campbell, as molded by Campbell, as I myself was in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s.

Campbell remained editor of *Astounding* (the name of which he changed to *Analog* in 1960) for thirty-three years, and finally left his job in the only way it was possible for him to do so—by dying in 1971 at the too-early age of 61.

Ben Bova succeeded John as editor of *Analog*; and, after seven years, he stepped aside (voluntarily) for Stanley Schmidt, who now rules the domain. The spirit of John Campbell still hovers over the magazine, however, and over science fiction. It will continue to do so as long as any of those he developed remain alive.

And now, this month, with the January 1980 issue, its 590th, *Astounding/Analog* celebrates its 50th Anniversary.

All of us at *IA'sfm*, Joel, George, Shawna, myself, and everyone, raise a glass to it, to all its years, to all its issues, to all its editors, to all its writers, to all its stories.

Live long and prosper, competitor and friend!

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Tales of Nevèrÿon by Samuel R. Delany, Bantam Books, \$2.25 (paper).

Ambulance Ship by James White, Del Rey, \$1.95 (paper).

Urshurak created by the Brothers Hildebrandt and Jerry Nichols, Bantam Books, \$8.95.

Roadmarks by Roger Zelazny, Del Rey, \$8.95.

Shadow of Earth by Phyllis Eisenstein, Dell, \$2.25 (paper).

The Spirit of Dorsai by Gordon R. Dickson, Ace, \$5.95 (paper).

Who Goes There compiled by James R. Rock, James A. Rock & Co., \$23.95 (cloth), \$10.95 (paper).

The Fifth Book of Virgil Finlay edited and published by Gerry de la Ree, \$15.75.

Samuel R. Delany's *Tales of Nevèrÿon* is a problem. It's one of those books that needs a whole article to itself if you're feeling positive about it, or can be dismissed in a sentence if you're negative. But if you're fence sitting . . .

Which I am, because on the whole I have admired, if not warmed to, most of Delany's work; he is a more than interesting writer and an important one. But this latest one throws me. To begin with, it seems to be passing itself off as a fantasy, judging from the cover, the blurb, and the locale, which is Nevèrÿon (NeVAIRian), a country just a few generations out of barbarism. But aside from the exotic created locale, the only element of fantasy is a herd of rather sad dragons, who are kept on a sort of royal game preserve because they're so hopeless that they'd be extinct otherwise.

And in addition, Delany is handling this as a science-fiction

writer, not a fantasist. He has always been prone to display his extraordinary erudition in the hard and soft sciences in his science fiction, which is apropos, if digressive. But here, for instance, the heart of the second story, "The Tale of Old Venn," is an endless anthropological study of the effect of the introduction of the idea of money on a primitive tribe. In "The Tale of Potters and Dragons," we get a longish matriarchal creation myth, certainly convincing, but about as interesting as most creation myths whose value, in reality, is mostly what they tell us about the cultures from which they come. Delany is trying to do the same for a fictional culture, but using an incoherent fantasy to shore up a coherent fantasy just doesn't work. And I won't even go into the appendix, "Some Informal Remarks Towards the Modular Calculus, Part Three" (Part Two was an appendix to *Triton*; and I, for one, find these academic little games unamusing.)

The five tales share an approximate locale, quite a few characters (one of whom, Gorgik, is a sort of higher IQ Conan with some kinky sexual tastes), and various themes, such as rubber balls, inter- and intra-sexual relations, money, slavery, and political power. And there *are* rewards along the way, too. The Byzantine court of Nevèryon is fascinating with its subtle and devious hierarchy. There's an exciting bit where a young ex-slave routs a whole castle by himself, and nice little running gags, such as the reign of the current ruler, the Child Empress Ynelgo, which is always "peaceful and productive" or "just and generous" (the epithets constantly change, but the initial euphony is always there).

But the tales do not add up to a whole greater than themselves; and worse, each individual tale usually doesn't add up to a whole beyond its several digressive parts. And I felt that Delany was continually Trying To Tell Me Something which 1) I'm not sure I wanted to be told, and 2) I wasn't getting even if I did want to be told.

MEGO is an acronym currently in use in journalistic circles, which means My Eyes Glaze Over. Now judging by Delany's popularity, he's communicating to a lot of people. I'm afraid I'm not one of them, and my reaction to too much of *Tales of Nevèryon* was pure MEGO.

I have a high regard for the work of James White, based on only two novels. His first, *Second Ending*, was one of SF's more auspicious debuts; *The Watch Below* uses one of the most extraordinary ideas to be devised in the field—so extraordinary that I won't be specific about it here since it would sound ridiculous capsulized.

Due to a subliminal distaste for medical fiction brought on by

early exposure to Dr. Kildare, I had not read any of White's "Sector General" stories, which are about a hospital, built in space, that treats a multitude of races from the various inhabited worlds of the Galaxy. But due to my regard for White's other work, I took on the latest in the series, *Ambulance Ship*, with optimism despite Dr. Kildare.

The optimism was mostly rewarded. *Ambulance Ship* is really three novelettes centering about a new service of Sector General, one which answers distress calls from ships, often manned by races yet unknown. In "Contagion," the encounter is not with a new race, however, but an old one in a curious way. In "Quarantine," an entire hospital theater is sealed off by a condition stemming from an operation on a member of a new species. And "Recovery" starts off like a locked-room mystery, but in this case the puzzle is how to get *into* the alien ship, and ends up with one of the most complexly conceived forms of alien life I've ever run into.

They're all puzzle stories in the old fashioned sense of the classic mystery, with the difference that the reader is not necessarily given all the clues, and must wait until the leading character, Dr. Conway, pulls the answer out of a hat (or a space helmet, in this case). But they're intriguing, nevertheless.

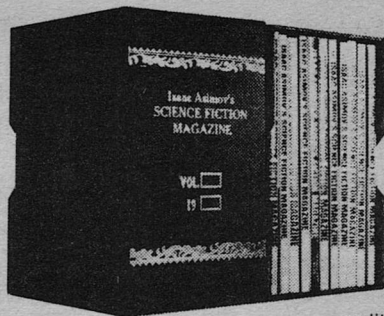
My only real quibble is that, despite the complexity of the concepts, the stories are simplistic as stories. The characters are pretty stock: the other doctor, a lavishly endowed female (who would have been a nurse for Dr. K.), the dour hospital head, the well meaning but quibbling ambulance ship's captain—though some alien physicians bring a little quirkiness to the cast. And all the characters are constantly irritating each other by overexplaining everything for the reader's benefit.

But what do I want from light reading, for heaven's sake? This is an enjoyable book.

We in this period of time are privileged (if that's the word) to observe an interesting phenomenon; interesting, that is, if one can remain objective about it. That is the emergence of a great and unique work, its influence and eventual exploitation.

The work in question will become obvious within a few lines. It has influenced such diverse writers, I would guess, as Marion Bradley, Joy Chant, Alan Garner, and Patricia McKillip; but each of those writers have their own, strong individual voices; and the works they have created have their own admirable integrity.

But beyond popularity with a (comparative) few sympathetic souls



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comes mass popularity, best-sellerdom (a first edition of a million copies, for instance), and the earning of a great deal of money. At this point, matters move beyond "influenced by" to imitations of. The work is analyzed, its most appealing ingredients are defined, and simulacra begin to be manufactured.

How to manufacture a (potential) best seller: First take some very familiar elements: an old wizard who blows smoke rings, dwarves and elves (white and brown, in this case), a quest, an ultimate confrontation between good and evil, a ruler who wants to stay uninvolved but has a wicked adviser, various magical objects which fall into a volcanic abyss at the finale, etc.

Add some familiar sounding nomenclature: Golgorath where the Death Lord rules, served by Borgs, a forest called Delvinor, and so on.

Then tack on some "new" elements calculated to appeal to "today's reader," not for those elements' intrinsic value but essentially as tokens. Such as: oblique references to drugs and sex; a warrior elf princess and a nation of Amazons led by Queen Azira of Zan-Dura; a nation of blacks with such names as Ali Ben Kara and Kor-Dada; determined pacificism; some mushy mysticism, such as the "spiritual energy" that powers the Amazons' Fire Crystals; and the philosophy of the old wizard, who sounds like one of the more simple-minded dropouts of the '60s.

Add a pinch of creations from other sources such as a cute semi-human character ("This is Oolu, a Gwarpy from Loamend") who adds comic relief with funny dialogue ("Oolu tells Zyra the straight stuff, yep").

Climax with a rousing, if familiar chorus ("So cheer, you White Elves of Alfandel, for the final hour of the Day of Fulfillment. . ."). Serve up in prose as awkward as any since *The Sword of Shanara*, and decorate lavishly with lots of drawings and paintings.

What have you got? You got *Urshurak* which, according to the cover, was not written, but "created by the Brothers Hildebrandt and Jerry Nichols."

Yep, as the Gwarpies say.

Roger Zelazny's *Roadmarks* is a short book on a long subject, a Road that passes through all time. Yes, a physical highway with rest stops, clover leaves, and turn-offs to various eras, not to mention alternate byways to alternate times.

But if you're expecting enthralling adventures in past or future periods, or in a world where the Trojans won at Troy, don't. Almost

all of the book's action takes place on the Road itself; and there are enough events on the Road to keep things hopping, such as murderous games supervised by a bunch from up in "C Twenty-five" on which bets are laid. The novel's major character is the intended victim in one of these.

We follow his adventures in a curious way, since *Roadmarks'* form is almost as convoluted as the Road. The alert reader will be non-plussed to find that the opening chapter is labelled TWO. The next is ONE, then TWO again, then ONE and so on, alternately. The "ONE" chapters are the continuing story of the character mentioned above. The "TWO" chapters are sidelights, not necessarily in chronological order (an almost meaningless phrase in this book anyhow) whose relevance may not become clear for quite a while (if ever).

I liked the two microdot computer arrays, i. e. sentient computers, disguised as books—one called Leaves for her cover (pun intended), Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*; the other Flowers, for *Flowers of Evil*. I was less taken with the dragons, not because they weren't impressive, but because there have been enough dragons in the literature of the past two or three years to keep China in silk robes for a century.

As you can see, there are a lot of disparate components here. Nevertheless, I feel about Zelazny's Road as I feel about Farmer's River, that they're grand ideas with which not enough has been done. Maybe they're both so big as concepts that they would overshadow *anything* done with them.

In Phyllis Eisenstein's *Shadow of Earth*, the Spanish Armada had won the day and conquered England. Therefore, the Protestant cause fails; Europe and the New World are dominated by a Spain in turn dominated by a backward and reactionary Catholicism; and there is no Industrial Revolution.

A woman from our world becomes stranded in this alternative universe; and as you might guess, has rather a hard time of it (luckily, she *does* speak Spanish).

There is often a problem with this kind of worlds-of-if story in that once you've gotten there and set up the variations, it can degenerate into what seems like a historical novel written by someone who doesn't know much about history. Eisenstein transcends this with a fast moving plot and a good deal of inventiveness—I liked the part where our heroine rewrites *Macbeth* in Spanish, for instance.

Eisenstein is an interesting writer, as demonstrated by her first

book, *Born To Exile*. This new one might not make history, but it plays with it nicely.

Gordon R. Dickson's *The Spirit of Dorsai* is really two novelettes and a linking narration; they are episodes from the history of the Dorsai, Dickson's planet of mercenary soldiers and its associated universe. Dorsai devotees will find them fascinating footnotes to the Dorsai epic at worst, but it will all seem pretty mysterious to non-initiates. Despite being one of those oversized paperbacks (and "magnificently illustrated" according to the cover), the publishers did not see fit to give any kind of introductory matter as, for instance, appeared in the abovementioned *Ambulance Ship*, which has a nice little rundown (by the author) on the previous Sector General stories for those who hadn't encountered them before.

Who Goes There (note: no question mark) is an odd little volume in an oversized way, meant for those folks who are dying to know that L. Ron Hubbard published works under the name of Winchester Remington Colt (Westerns, if you couldn't guess) and that Lester del Rey's real name is Ramon Felipe San Juan Mario Silvio Enrico Smith Heathcourt-Brace Sierra Y Alvarez-del Rey Y De Los Uerdes. It is "a bibliographic dictionary of pseudonymous literature in the fields of fantasy and science fiction," compiled by James A. Rock. It seems most thorough; will certainly be a help to collectors and historians; and has, as a sort of appendix, some helpful notes on collecting.

A few months back, while talking about the fourth volume devoted to the works of Virgil Finlay, I wished (facetiously, I thought) for a fifth. Well, as if by magic, there *is* now *The Fifth Book of Virgil Finlay*, again edited by Gerry de la Ree; and it is magic, as almost all the drawings of that wonderful artist are. This book is devoted to his word for *Weird Tales*, most of which appeared in the 1930s.

Issues from the period of *Weird Tales* are rare enough to be among those most eagerly sought after by collectors; and many of these drawings will be new to even the most ardent Finlay fan, as they were to me. How wonderful to have "new" Finlays to admire!



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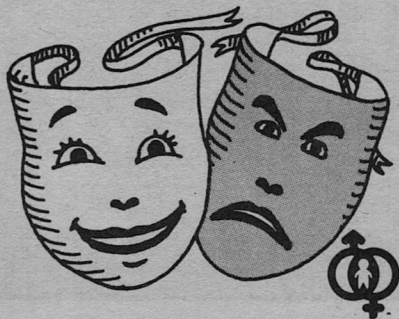
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MARCH OF DIMES**

THIS SPACE CONTRIBUTED BY THE PUBLISHER



DARKTOUCH
by Somtow Sucharitkul
art: Stephen E. Fabian



Mr. Sucharitkul commutes between this country and Thailand; in this country, he commutes between Washington DC and New York City. To complete this peripatetic progress, he writes both SF stories and avant-garde music.

The terms were not the best.

But these were harsh times, weren't they? A war with aliens that couldn't be seen or heard. Power struggles and civil wars within the heart of the Dispersal of Man itself.

But it wasn't the prospect of the fee. Or the fatal attraction of the overcosm, that space *beyond* and *between*, where light goes wild and tantalizes you and drives you crazy with strange yearnings. Or that promise that it would only be a one-way trip in realtime, with guaranteed return by tachyon bubble, so that he would lose at most two centuries of objective time.

Kail Kirian found these conditions satisfactory. But—for an astrogator of his ability—they were not overly tempting.

No.

It was the woman Darktouch.

The face, soft and proud, the hair jet-black, the eyes dark, the skin snow-pale as though it had never seen suns' light, the single piece of clingfire that hugged her and burned against the frail whiteness—

She was all white and black, a holosculpture of monochrome projected into a colorclashing chamber, a thing from another world.

"You'll take the offer?"

"Offer . . ."

Where am I? This was Lalaparalla, he remembered, the planet of warrior's rest, and he was rising from *f'ang*-drenched torpor, and tongues of solvent were licking the crusts from his eyes . . . the war ached in his bones still, and the *f'ang* mist rose once more to succor the deep hurt, to steep him in oblivion.

Ah yes. At the hostel. A message. "Request: for an astrogator of clan Kail, to take party of approximately fifty to destination Earth, terms negotiable. Whereto, Inquestral Seal." Why *request*? If an Inquestral mission were involved, why not just *requisition*?

"You'll take the offer?" A hard voice.

And then he saw her eyes through the parting mist.

"Let me know more," he said, baffled. *Such eyes! There can't be a woman like this. I'm still in a drugged dream.*

And then he saw who stood behind the woman.

Tall. A shimmercloak that glowed, pink and blue, through the dense mist. Sternfaced. *Old.*

Powers of powers! he thought. *An Inquestor!*

"Yours to command," he said automatically. He could hardly believe he was standing so close to one, sitting naked in a *f'ang* bath. And he one of the rulers of the Dispersal of Man. Practically a God.

"You're mistaken," said the Inquestor, and he laughed. He didn't speak with the deep-voiced authority that Inquestors had. Somehow . . . his voice was *tender*. "I cannot command you. I am no longer *Ton Davaryush*, Kingling of Gallendys, but merely Davaryush without-a-Clan. I am apostate. And all these people here with me . . . are dreamers. Refugees. They want to secede from the Dispersal of Man."

The *f'ang* . . . it must still be clouding his senses! "You aren't real," Kirian muttered. And he mindflicked for more solvent, to wash his eyes and clear his vision. *Inquestors don't lead groups of crazies on wild-goose chases. Inquestors—*

And then he saw the woman again.

There isn't such a woman.

But the dream stood there, defying him to blink her away.

"The money's good," Davaryush said. "Three thousand in tarn-crystal carat-equivalents."

"That'll sway you, if nothing else!" the woman hissed. "Merce-nary!"

What's behind this woman? I feel as if I ought to take her away from this obviously lunatic Inquestor, take her to a deserted planet and—

"I don't suppose you've ever heard of Earth," said the Inquestor. "It's an abandoned place, far beyond the worlds of the Dispersal. Our ancestors came from there once. We dream about it all the time, of building a utopia there, a perfect world."

"We don't want our children to be packed off to war at six," said the woman. "We think civilization is done for."

"The alien war out there . . ." Davaryush said. "Do you know how many planets they've burned? Of course not: the Inquest never reveals anything. . . ."

Kirian did not listen. He couldn't take his eyes off the woman, and her look of contempt never abated. Not once.

"Take this woman Darktouch," Davaryush said. "She is from Gallendys. Do you know of Gallendys?" Mist enveloped his face.

"No."

"You astrogators of the clan of Kail, you who mindlink with the delphinoid shipminds to guide the starships through the overcosm . . . you of all people should know. Do you really know of the delphinoid shipminds, the gigantic brains that are fused into the starships?"

"What is this?" said Kirian, uneasy. "I'm not a historian, not a philosopher. Just tell me the terms and let me decide. I'm a soldier, an overcosm flier, a man of action."

The woman laughed once, a warm laugh. Perhaps she was not solid rock to the core, then, like a dead planet.

"Listen, then," said Davaryush. "On Gallendys there is a gigantic volcanic crater, a hundred kilometers high, a thousand across. Within is a dense atmosphere, a relic from a previous epoch . . . in this dark land, above the Sunless Sound, the delphinoids float. They are creatures who are all brain. They perceive the overcosm directly, without instruments. It is this power that we use to travel between the stars.

"But listen more! These delphinoids sing, Kail Kirian. Their songs are holosculptures ten kilometers across, suspended over the perpetual darkness of the Sunless Sound. They are imagesongs, light-poems woven out of overcosm visions. And a strange music too, a harmony that makes men weep, even hardened soldiers like you. Even Inquestors. For every starship that flies the overcosm, a song must die."

The mist was dying now. Davaryush's intensity touched Kirian, made him nervous. And he glimpsed other people behind, other crazies. Davaryush continued. "No human who had once seen the light on the sound, and heard the songs of the ones whose minds were turned to the space beyond our space, to the utter beauty of the overcosm . . . no human who had once experienced this could willingly kill a delphinoid. The Inquest understood the need for space travel. They mutated a race that was deaf and blind, and gave them a mythos and a mission, and now they live in the darkness and silence of the crater-wall caverns. And they fly out on their airships and fling their forcenets over the delphinoids and bring them home. They do not know that it is to feed the shipyards, to glorify the Dispersal of Man.

"I was Kingling of Gallendys once. This woman was a girl, a genetic throwback; she could see and hear. At puberty she joined the holy hunt, and what she saw there made her flee, half-crazed, out of the dark country to the City of Effelkang where I held power. And later she took me to see for myself. An old man and a girl, we

saw the slaughter of joy. It changed us. . . .

"We have all had these experiences. All of us."

And Kirian saw the others now, behind them: an old man, a couple of child-soldiers with laser-irises, who could have killed him with a glance and a subvocalized command; a matron; a young hermaphrodite in a whore's robe; a princeling clad in lapis and iridium; a slaveboy with a chrysanthemum branded on his forehead; a girl-singer with a whisperlyre. . . .

They're shameless! he thought. *Look how they carry on, without regard for rank. Look how brazenly they flout the principle of degree.* The slaveboy and the princeling held hands and were close. The hermaphrodite leaned on a child-soldier's arm, defying all decency.

"You're shocking."

"Don't criticize," said Darktouch coldly. "Just take the money and help us."

The Inquestor motioned her to be quiet. With such a strange gentleness . . . "We are giving up anger. Remember that." With the same voice he said to Kirian: "We have all been through such experiences as Darktouch has. We have all turned our backs on the Dispersal. I say this so that you may see why I, an Inquestor, a former Kingling, a hunter of utopias once . . . have come begging to you."

Kirian was profoundly shocked. Only once before in his life—

And then he mouthed his deepest fear. "This Earth. Is the route well mapped? Are there any anomalies in spacetime, any tachyon whirlpools?"

"None are known to exist," said Davaryush. "And moreover, I have been able to requisition power enough for one tachyon bubble. When you have delivered us to Earth, you may use it to return to your homeworld."

Powers of powers! "You must have been a very important man," said Kirian, wondering at how low the Inquestor had fallen.

For the tachyon bubble's secret was known only to the Inquest. They were bubbles of realspace, held together by phenomenal power expenditure—the deaths of suns, it was sometimes said—that smashed their way through planes even higher than the overcosm, travelling instantaneously. . . . If Davaryush could really supply such a thing, Kirian's travel time would be halved, the problems of time dilation would not be nearly so bad.

Not that he cared about time dilation. Only a loner could be an astrogator: how could a sociable person stand it, coming home after every trip to find his friends grown old, dead?

"If it weren't for travelling with you lunatics," he said, "I wouldn't even hesitate."

The slaveboy and the princeling had moved closer to each other for reassurance, had their arms around each other's shoulders—intolerable!

Darktouch cried, "I told you, Daavye!" and Kirian cringed, that a clanless woman should dare to call an Inquestor by a diminutive. "He's a mercenary, and for what *we* want we'll never be able to pay him. We're trampling on all he believes in. He's a cog in a machine, a rat in a maze, and he'll never know it—"

"Hold it!" Kirian said.

She turned back to look at him. The mist had parted, and she was so *real* that no overdose of *f'ang* could have created her. He wanted to touch her so badly it hurt him . . . but he could not even reach out. The rift between them was complete. It was not her remoteness (he sensed it was insecurity as much as anything), not her beauty. But the fact that she would not acknowledge him as a person, only as a type. Was there a brittleness behind her scorn?

Davaryush was saying, "It has to be Earth, because it is so far away from people's minds, so that they will not search us out and kill us. And because it is the source, the place of beginning, a potent symbol out of the farthest past there can have been . . ."

"Don't go on talking," said Darktouch. "It's just wind to him, just noise." She was bitter; how many astrogators had they tried?

"I haven't said no yet, have I?" he said, feigning toughness.

They all edged forward like one man—

He heard their unison intake of breath, he saw the woman and the Inquestor exchange a quick look that shut him out of their topsyturvy world and their crazy philosophy—

And felt naked, suddenly.

It was a routine journey at first.

The passengers had all opted for stasis; they would only awake on Earth. Except for Davaryush: he was an Inquestor, who must always lead, even if dethroned; and also Darktouch. That he couldn't understand. Six months subjective, in the overcosm—but he brushed her from his mind.

Or tried to.

He reclined in the small room. Circular mirror walls gleamed around him. He was shielded. He was at the ship's heart. He closed his eyes and reached out with brain-implanted sensors. It was second nature; he had been doing it since puberty.

The delphinoid shipmind came alive, moving like an ocean in darkness. The sensation was soft, familiar. Endless darkness cushions swam by . . . he knew the ship was easing from its orbital anchor. But he saw nothing. He was alone in the room. It was so still. . . .

(What's it like, to be born in the dark country of Gallendys, to see the imagesongs of the delphinoids, and not to have words to protest, to understand? And how can something be so beautiful that you can't bring yourself to kill it? Killing was second nature to him, like touching the delphinoid shipmind. If commanded to, could I have killed the woman Darktouch?)

Kirian was no thinker. Thinking was for Inquestors. You couldn't afford to think. . . .

The delphinoid's warmth enveloped him.

Then a voice, tugging at the bottom of his mind—

Do you hear?

(An untried delphinoid. He would have to coax it, firmly, onto the right flight plan.)

I hear you, he mindwhispered. Are you ready?

I'm afraid. This route is poorly charted. . . .

Be still, be still, he mindspoke, as though to a pet animal. But he was frightened too.

There was always the split second of blinding terror that would come upon him, seconds before bursting into the *other* space where space and time go mad. A memory would come to him, a nightmare—

On his first war mission. He was seven years old. A newboy. Anyone could have ordered his death. A hundred starships packed into a shieldsphere, charging through the overcosm; and he was alone on a deck with the walls deopaqued and the overcosm light raging, and alarms blaring and sirens screeching and he was so alone, and—

One by one. The ships falling into darkness.

So strangely beautiful. . . .

They flew into gold-tinged scarlet nets of flame, vanished, a ship at a time, like beads of a cut necklace, slipping one by one into water.

And after, in another chamber, stripped and lined up and black mourning cloaks thrust over their shoulders, all the children standing stiff and frightened while the Inquestors paced and raged. Huge reflections of their shimmercloaks flapping, blushing the mirrorsilver walls. . . .

What's happened to the other ships?

Not looking at the other children. Obeying or dying.

"It was a tachyon whirlpool."

The Inquestor's voice rasping above his head. And Kirian could almost touch the silence. More pacing, and the floor humming eerily as the Inquestor's fursoles rubbed and whispered. A child burst out crying. He clenched his eyes. The boy would be returned to home-world in disgrace. Impassive. Make your face impassive.

Another Inquestor's voice: "Never forget this experience until the day you die! Tachyon whirlpools were made by men. During the first experiments in tachyon travel there were foolish errors. A thing that travels faster than light, like a tachyon, must have a negative timeflow relative to our universe! And the first experimenters were hurled into the past, twisting the local continuum, wrenching causality apart. And even now these tachyon whirlpools remain, symbols of their lust for knowledge! Repeat this! It is good that only the Inquest knows the secret of tachyon travel."

Unison chorus: *It is good that only the Inquest knows the secret of tachyon travel.*

"It is evil to question nature. Only the Inquest is wise."

It is evil—

Theirs was the only ship to survive.

And later they burst into realspace in the region of the star Keima, and they obliterated the planet Zelterkangh. It had been a simple punitive expedition, nothing a single starship couldn't handle. . . .

The terror lived again for a moment in the ship's darkness. Even after twenty years. More vividly this time than the other times. . . .

So it isn't a perfect universe. That much my lunatics have gotten right. But they're wrong to run away from it. They shouldn't question the way things are. Man is a fallen being after all, he thought.

Quickly he returned the memory to its cage.

You can't hurt me, he lied to himself.

The nightmare beat at the cage bars. This time it came mingled with the eyes of the woman Darktouch. He beat it back. And the darkness of the shipmind did take him, eventually, but not before he had gazed into the strange woman's eyes for a long time, puzzling himself. . . .

Some weeks later, he broke free from the shipmind and staggered up to the observatory.

She was alone there. All the walls were deopaqued. They stood on the metallic floordisk, floating in—

The overcosm raged. Oppressing him. No escape from it.

And she was a silhouette gazing out, not moving. Even her cling-fire garment was muted by comparison with it. She didn't acknowledge him, only stared out at the—

—vermilion hurricanes spattering whitepeaked wavecrests, the ochre lightpeaks tumbling crumbling over blindingwhite catherinewheel firevolleys—

"You mustn't expose yourself to the overcosm too long." She flinched from the words, startled. "You'll stare your eyes into cinders." He went on, not liking the silence, "People have gone mad, you know, from being unable to cope with the torrent of sensations—"

"It's beautiful." She turned her back on him.

—geysers of green flame gushing through scarlet walls, veils that ripped to reveal more veils—

"It's just nothing, just mass hallucinations, because we can't understand what we perceive." Damn it, why did she ignore him? "You spend all your interstellar trips like this?"

"Always. I am afraid of stasis." She was frail in the colorstorm.

"They're just lights."

"The world the delphinoids see, Kirian. Isn't it strange?" She turned and watched him; he wanted her then, and despised her too, and could think of nothing to say.

Finally he said, "You're so full of words. As though words could save the universe. Like this utopia of yours . . . more words."

"You poor mercenary . . ."

"Don't pity me! You reject reality, you dream hopeless dreams—"

"Of love, brotherhood, things like that . . ." She began to explain it all to him, and it was like a child's wishful thinkings, impractical, destructive. "Oh. I see you're not impressed. How could you be? They've lied to you so much you couldn't recognize a truth to save your own skin."

"To be so sure of something . . ." he said. He saw how her eyes shone, how she seemed to be looking straight through him, to some world she and the others had made up. "You're not perfect either," he said brusquely.

"Of course not! But—"

"Oh, you're so proud. You see not what I am, but what I'm supposed to be like in your eyes, and—"

She turned away sullenly. No, she was no angel.

—volcanohearts twisted inside out, lightfeathers fluffed out of prismpools fracturing into mosaics—

"Why shouldn't I hate your kind?" she burst out. "Don't you know

how you make the delphinoids suffer, how every moment of their lives from the moment they are mindsoldered into the ships is spent in excruciating agony, how you force them to live when they can't sing, which is agony beyond your understanding?"

"Intellectually one knows—"

"Every parsec we've advanced across the Dispersal of Man has given unconscionable agony to a sentient creature! How can you live with that? How can we all live with that? If you can live with it you must be—"

It was true. But it had always been the way. There were no alternatives.

In the end he said, "Are the imagesongs even more beautiful than this?"

Not looking at him, she said, "Of course. They are art, and this, though beautiful too, is random lightnoise. . . ."

She's the first woman ever to despise me! I'm not a rôle, I'm a human being! he thought. And she was so still. Like a holosculpture in a museum: untouchable.

You're proud, so proud it goes against all your fine talk about love and brotherhood. You're hypocritical as the rest of us.

Above them, the firestorm stretched to forever. Behind the stormshards, past the colorclouds, pale sinuous snakes of light darted from dark to dark.

And he was jealous of the certainty for which Darktouch had given up the whole galaxy. And jealous of the lunatics who had stolen her from him. . . .

So he fled and sought the comfort of the shipmind's darkness, and drew the darkness over his thoughts as a child retreats into a blanket heavy with familiar smells, retreats from the fear of night.

He even welcomed the recurring nightmare of the tachyon whirlpool . . . that at least was familiar.

Many months later, from out of the darkness—

—he burst blind through terror that didn't belong there at all, his mind screaming burning ANOMALY ANOMALY against the relentless logic of the shipmind, and he was crushed into darkness within darkness screaming falling burning ANOMALY ANOMALY—

(Memory: a hundred ships dropping into the net of flame.)

"Cut the connection!"

(Memory: alone on deck with the sirens bawling.)

The shipmind said, *Kail Kirian, we have navigated safely past the*

tachyon whirlpool. A toneless internal whisper.

"Identify the anomaly," he said, "for the last time."

It is a tachyon whirlpool, Kirian. What else can I say?

(A *f'ang* dream?) "If that's true, we're off course."

No.

"Yes! This should be the vicinity of Earth, and the failed tachyon experiments were millennia after the first Dispersal from First-world!"

I understand this. I understand the unlikelihood. Nevertheless, what I sense I sense.

"How can there be whirlpools in this uninhabited, abandoned sector? You're malfunctioning—"

No.

Kirian broke the connection finally. And passed through the force-curtain to the observatory. She was still there; it was almost as though minutes, not months, had elapsed.

—firebubbles foamed through lacelightcurtains lanced by liquid lightnings—

The old man was there too. His shimmercloak blushed softly against the patches of night.

Darktouch turned around—

He gaped at her. The light from the overcosm haloed over her face, the hair flowed dark and free, the clingfire kissed her slight body. He couldn't speak.

"Well?" Davaryush said. "We felt . . . disturbance."

"Tachyon whirlpool." *Mustn't sound frightened. Mustn't give anything away!*

"That's—" said Darktouch.

"I know! I know it's impossible!"

The Inquestor merely said, "Will it delay us much?"

Is that all they can think about, their fool mission? And Darktouch moved closer to him, and his desire embarrassed him. "Not long."

"Good," she said. Fanatic eyes, shining . . .

"I don't share your dream," he said angrily. "I just want to get to the bottom of this anomaly."

"Mercenary!"

"You should go into stasis!" he shouted. "The strain's getting to you—"

"Darktouch," the Inquestor interrupted, "scorn, hate, all the things we are giving up."

She subsided. Behind her, the lightveils parted—

—kaleidoscoped, dissolved—

Darkness fell without warning.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" he shouted.

Another whirlpool! said the ship. The mind connections closed all around him, the darkness breathed on him, mathematical figures danced and wavered in his head—

Afterwards, they burst out of the overcosm into a blackness of new stars. One in particular, a yellow dwarf of no importance. Real-space was dull, compared with the overcosm; so Kirian stayed in his wombchamber, assessing the damage. It was bad, very bad.

The utopians didn't have a chance.

The stasis-pod life-support systems had been thrown into dysfunction. They were all dead: the princeling, the slaveboy, the girl with the lyre, the hermaphrodite, all of them with their hope-fired eyes and their false, poignant dreams. . . .

The tachyon bubble system was dead too. He would have to use the delphinoid to return home. He would lose four centuries to time dilation, not two.

Before he went to the observatory he opaqued the walls. He felt more comfortable between the gray walls.

"You have to go back."

They looked blankly at him. They could have been holosculptures of the dead.

"Look, the last tachyon whirlpool—it wiped out all your chances. Even though I still can't believe it was there at all. The dormant passengers are permanently dead. You can't create a viable colony. You can't even propagate the species—you must be over three hundred years old, Davaryush."

"Four hundred and twelve."

He felt a sudden compassion for their shattered dream. But pushed it aside. "The shipmind can think us home readily enough," he said. "It's learned where the two anomalies are. . . ."

"No!" cried Darktouch. "Not while we still have one male left—" And she glared at Kirian, hostile.

Oh no! I desire her, but not like this—

"Now wait!" he said angrily. "I'm no head-in-the-clouds utopian like you and the Inquestor. I *know* where I belong. I've finished my part of the bargain. You've failed, and I'm sorry for you, and I can take you home at no extra charge. I can't leave an old man and a woman to fend for themselves on a dead planet—"

"Never! Not after the agony the delphinoid has been through to bring us here!" cried Darktouch, trembling. "We vowed to let it die,

to free it from its shipbonds!"

He saw that she was assessing him now, as genetic material, as a piece of meat, a pawn in her utopia . . . he wanted to help her so badly, in spite of her hate. She couldn't want to stay. It was beyond all reason, even a fanatic's.

"I want to go back to what I know," he said.

"With the war and the civil war," said Davaryush, "I think it's rather an ambiguous question as to whether there will *be* a Dispersal to return to. . . .

I can't accept that! "No!"

"All right," said Darktouch calmly. "We'll land on Earth. Then you can impregnate me and leave. You do desire me, don't you? I am beautiful, aren't I?" And then she began to weep, terribly, hysterically.

But he was afraid to comfort her.

"Delphinoids don't make mistakes. . . ." he said.

"Don't speak of delphinoids again!" she screamed.

"It will pass," said the Inquestor gently. "You will never understand what she has suffered on Gallendys."

"Blank out the walls!" she cried out. "I want to see Earth! I want to see the dream!"

Abruptly the starstream burned in darkness behind her. She turned and stared her eyes out at the tiny yellow disk. He tried to put his arms around her, but she was like a statue.

"Remember the delphinoid's pain," she said quietly. Her eyes said, *Animal!*

Davaryush's voice came from behind them: "You see the desperation that drove us, Kail Kirian. You *must* let us down on Earth; and then, if you choose to go, we will at least die on the ground that made us, on the planet untouched by the Inquest. . . ."

And he was moved, in spite of himself.

The inconvenience of it! He longed to be in battle where he belonged. Here they were as far from the center of things as it was possible to be, as far as the very primordial beginnings of Man. Even the stars were thin here, in this wisp of galactic arm; it was a bleak and desolate sky. Cold touched his spine.

"Very well," he heard himself say. "I'll land you there, then ship back to homeworld. Even though abandoning you goes against my conscience."

"Oh," said Darktouch, mocking him, "do you have one?"

But she thanked him with her eyes.

I cannot touch her he thought, *while she still hates me. But perhaps*

I can find a way. . . .

"Look, Earth," said Davaryush.

They smiled, both of them, falling into their dream. *How could they smile, when there was no hope? How could they—*

Earth hung in the blackness: opalescent, white-blue, beautiful, dead.

Desert. Rocky desert, hilly desert, dunes deserts, deserts of blasted glass that might have been cities fused together in some cataclysm . . . harsh polar caps made ice deserts. Millennia before, men had done a good job of killing Earth. . . .

In the north of one the great landmasses they found thin grassfields, yellow-gray and stubblestrewn, and the lander settled on a hill-fringed plain where a brook ran to merge beyond the horizon with a shallow river. The lander sprouted wheels—Kirian realized with a shock that here they could not travel from place to place by displacement plates—and waited.

The three of them stood by the stream. Why, they didn't even know how to set up a camp or forage for food, thought Kirian, any of the skills that a Kail learned from childhood.

"I'd better help you find food," he said, avoiding their eyes. But they were watching their new planet, enraptured.

Food they found readily enough. On the foothills were fruit-trees with reddish round fruit and soft yellow meat; and curious, fearless fish fairly leapt into their forcenets from the brook.

*They'll live an idyllic life, thought Kirian, without my help.
Until they die.*

He didn't want to admit that he feared the four-hundred-year time dilation and the tachyon whirlpools that didn't belong. . . . *I mustn't leave in unseemly haste, he thought.*

The next day they went exploring. They climbed the hills easily; Davaryush followed on a floater, because of his age and because the gravity was a shade higher than he was used to.

Darktouch was silent the first few hours.

He would look at her when she didn't know he was looking, and see her somehow at peace. She no longer groomed her hair, so it streamed free in the wind; the clingfire garment was worn threadbare. It gave off no fire but a pearly rainbow. She belonged here.

The ground was soft, yielding to his feet. It was a strange sensation, quite unlike the continual disruptions of displacement plates.

It would take days, months, to explore the world. But from what

they could see around them it was truly dead. Twenty millennia had rubbed the planet smooth. They saw no sunken cathedrals such as the sand acropolises of war-torn Kellendrang, no mile-high husks of skyscrapers such as bestrode the firesnowed horizons of Ont. . . .

At the summit he said, awkwardly, "I wish there was not this gulf between us."

"I pity you, Kail Kirian," she said, avoiding his eyes. "You belong to the old things, cruel and senseless. You've no pride in yourself—otherwise why would you have come here for mere money? If you could only see things as they are—"

"If only *you* could!" he retorted. "You're just as hypocritical as the rest of the human race. You took my help, didn't you? Help in running away. You're cowards. Running away—to die!"

They glared at each other. Her hair blew across her face—

How softly she glows, he thought, against the strange yellow light of this sun.

Davaryush, ahead of them, called out. Kirian eased himself over the hillcrest and rested his elbows on a flat boulder, and his field of vision telescoped abruptly to an endless brown plain spattered with smooth sand-carved rockshapes like sculpted bushes. Half-way to the horizon was a forest of brown trees . . . trees?

"What are they?" he said.

"Let's go and see," Darktouch answered. He felt an unbecoming curiosity in himself for a moment. "Well, don't you want to find out? Why, they look almost like . . . people, those trees."

"It's too far to walk," he said, and summoned two more floaters with a flick of his mind.

They rode the breeze, the two of them, down through the desert. It was so far . . . sand stretched until distance meant nothing any more. And the wind-etched sandstone sculptures . . . they were huge, bigger even than the delphinoid that orbited above them, waiting.

They were dwarfed by this one plain. And the thought that the huge world stretched around them forever. Kirian felt lonely. From ground level they could not see their objective at all, so they floated blindly, trusting the floater settings.

And then there were—

People.

Kirian stepped gingerly off his floater. He practically walked into a man. The man was quite cold and he didn't move.

There were other men standing nearby. Further off, some women. Many were naked; these had on nothing but a blue strap around

their wrists. Others had clothes: clingfire was one of the fabrics, but the fire was frozen. Others were in fantastical costumes, headdresses with pointed layers, extravagant codpieces.

They didn't move.

"What *is* this?" Kirian felt panic. "First the tachyon whirlpools, now this—holosculpture museum, on a planet with no people. This is the wrong planet!"

"Delphinoids don't lie," Davaryush mocked him, gently.

"You don't like mysteries, do you, mercenary?" said Darktouch and smiled a hard smile.

"No, I don't," said Kirian. "I like answers! We've got to get back now if we can. Obviously we had a warped shipmind and we're somewhere quite different from where we set out for. Maybe you plan to die here, but *I'm* leaving."

"Coward!" Darktouch shouted.

"I'm no coward! I've killed more men than you've ever seen! But I'm going to go back to what I *do* understand."

The statues never moved. He slammed his fist hard on a woman's shoulder; it was harder than a starship's hull.

"You're all alike," said Darktouch bitterly. "You want no mysteries. You've no pride in being humans. Inside, you hate yourselves!"

Her anger sounded small on the huge plain. Kirian looked around him. Perhaps a thousand humans, frozen hard and seemingly indestructible. Children, too. He touched a child near him; red-haired, the hair tousled but stiff as metal.

Red hair, like mine, he thought. The thought irritated him, obscurely . . . something oddly familiar about the child . . . he stared at the unseeing eyes. He *did* want to know what they were.

Maybe there's no harm in asking one question. . . .

"All right," he said. "I'll stay a few days more, we can run tests on the statues. Maybe this is a hall of fame, an ancient artifact, an Inquestral plot, a cunning mirage . . . when we've found the answer I'll leave."

And he surprised himself, that he was able to wonder . . . Were they humans somehow frozen out of time? Or imitations of humans, bait laid by some alien?

And why do they seem so familiar?

Afterwards he closed his eyes and used the delphinoid—whose orbit matched their position, monitoring them constantly—to move the landing craft to the edge of the forest of statues and set up the shelters.

But he found that the order to the delphinoid was not a simple reflex as it had always been; for the first time, a thought nagged at him:

This ship is in agony, and cannot die.

He woke to the dawn. The sands had shifted; the statues had not moved at all, and some were now knee-deep in little dunes.

The dawn—here it was like pink feathers of a pteratyger, speared and brought down over the gray sea on Keneg, Kirian's homeworld. The image chilled him; he did not think he could still be homesick.

This planet did have a magic then . . . it was the primal homeworld.

He shut the shelter door and approached the nearest statue. For they must be statues, if they didn't move—statues from a time of primitive technology that had stood the ravages of twenty millennia. Impossible.

He and Darktouch worked on the statues that morning. They wanted to saw off a piece—part of a garment, they had decided, just in case the statues were real people—and they were trying an old man's white tunic. A pretty tableau watched them, a young woman and two boys all in white. Their metal tools all broke on the cloth. It never gave so much as a micron, from what their instruments could tell them.

In one of the pauses she said to him: "Did you ever figure out why the tachyon whirlpools were there?"

"I suppose our history is wrong. The Dispersal of Man is too large for full records, perhaps. The abortive experiments were so long ago, and—"

"But the whirlpools are anomalies in space and *time*, aren't they? So they could be experimenters in the future?"

"Rather hypothetical, considering your sort think the future is pretty much done for."

"You've no imagination. What could I have expected." But the insult was automatic, not laced with spite as it might have been two days before. They worked on without talking.

It was hard to take his eyes off her. Long crimson-tinged shadows crossed her face . . . *If I don't leave, immediately, I'll . . . fall in love with her.* And the thought was like pain.

After the laser device had failed to chisel off a piece of the man's clothing, they rested, leaning against the hard statues. A light wind sprang up, sprinkling them with sand.

"You've never had any experience," Darktouch said, "to make you

doubt the universe you were taught to believe in?"

"No."

—but there were the hundred ships falling into the tachyon whirlpool—

"Not even war?"

"War is necessary! It keeps the children occupied, it purifies the human instincts, it keeps down the population. . . ."

—I blasted one of the revived corpses over and over and still he came barrelling towards me. I blew off his head and he collapsed a centimeter from my face . . . my first kill—

"You don't believe that."

"The Inquest told me!"

—and the headless torso of the kindled corpse, still groping towards me across the starship's silver floor, struggling without a mind, and me striking it over and over in my nine-year-old passion, yelling hot anger from my heart—

Kirian was in tears, suddenly.

—and the hundred starships falling—

—and after, on leave, going to Alykh the pleasure planet, riding the varigrav coasters until we were drunk with giddiness, and then on to the oblivion of f'ang and Lalaparalla . . . and then another war and another—

He didn't want to think of himself. He didn't know who he was, anymore. "Why are you called Darktouch," he said, "in the high-tongue, and not a pretty name from an archaic language?"

"Because," she said, "in the dark crater over the Sunless Sound there are no names. People speak with their hands. I did not know I could have a name, until I went on my first hunt and saw and heard . . ."

"They're not delphinoids to us, they're—" She did a fingerdance across his palm then. "Huge, sleek, streamlined creatures that are all brain. They talk by drawing patterns of light in the dark air above the Sound. And they leap and soar and sing, they sing!"

"We had netted one and were towing him home in the airship. Their bodies were twined around each other, singing of victory. And then he began to sing. The lightstrands tore the air apart. It was pure tragedy . . . of course you have to be deaf and blind to hunt them! At lightsend I ran away, crawling through the hidden tunnels till I reached the lightworld, struggling across the badlands of Zhneftikak until I reached the city where men could see and hear, Effelkang. . . ."

Kirian turned his back on her and began to laser the man's tunic

again. "I'm not responsible for the sins of the Inquest," he said. "You're just trying to make me feel guilty so I'll stay here and join with you in a loveless breeding plan and make your project come true."

"No!"

But he *was* feeling guilty.

"Look," he said at last, "they all have these blue bracelets in common . . . maybe if we lasered a bracelet."

By noon there was still no result. By then Kirian felt an overpowering need to find the answer to the riddle.

"How about this one?" He indicated a boy standing behind the old man. "His bracelet seems a little askew."

A red-haired boy, that odd familiar look, unnerving somehow . . . Kirian tugged at the bracelet.

The boy sprang to life. "Where is this?" he shrieked, looking wildly around him. "Where's the space station?"

Darktouch was beside him quickly, trying to calm him.

"What?" said Kirian. "He speaks the hightongue?" They took the boy to the shelter, kicking, screaming, and biting all the way.

The shelter: a circular silver wall around them. Like a room on the starship.

The boy: eleven or twelve. The age of a young warrior of the Dispersal. That familiar look—Kirian could almost put his finger on it. But no . . .

"Who are you?" he demanded.

The boy shrank back, still defiant. He tried to break free of the tranquilizer field—

"Let me out of here! This is the wrong planet I guess; there's no space station, and I didn't fasten my stasis bracelet tight enough—"

He stopped. He looked into Kirian's face. And then he said, "I'm dreaming." And then he smiled. The smile made Kirian uneasier than ever.

And then Davaryush smiled too. And Darktouch. They were all smiling, threatening Kirian with some secret knowledge—

"I'm getting out of here!" he said, trapped. "I'm calling the delphinoid now—"

The fear was gone from the boy. He looked at Kirian with a strange reverence . . . almost as if Kirian were some prince, some Inquestor even. "I'm not afraid now," the boy said. "This is the dawn time; I understand that I've accidentally triggered the bracelet thing by tying it wrong on Sirius. What a stroke of luck I've found you!"

Now you can do it up properly for me and bundle me off to the station and I can get home. Right?"

Kirian released the tranquilizer field. "Tell me what's happening, someone?" he said desperately.

The boy laughed, a silvery laugh that somehow made his throat catch. "Ha! Well . . . I guess you really wouldn't know. Would you? Davaryush, Darktouch, and Kirian?"

"Now, answers," Kirian said tightly. The boy had known his name. What next?

"Be gentle," said Darktouch. She moved closer to Kirian, and their hands touched and were warm together. "Where are you from?"

"Sirius."

"Where—?" Kirian said.

"It's a colony. My parents sent me back to Earth to go to school."

"To this empty planet?" said Kirian, more and more bewildered.

"Well, it is the dawn time. The stasis field—"

"All right," said Davaryush. The boy turned and stared at him, huge-eyed. "You recognize us."

The boy nodded slowly.

"So you must be from the future, from a time when Earth is populated again, with a colony or two even."

He nodded again.

"We're a little simple," Davaryush said, "to sophisticated people from the future like you. So why don't you tell us in easy language, what's happened, what you're doing here . . ."

"Simple!" the boy blurted out, awestruck. "You of all people, Davaryush, you, how can you possibly say that?" And he seemed moved.

"I'm old," Davaryush said; and Kirian saw that his face was not tired the way old men's faces are; it was aglow with wonder.

"If I tell you everything," said the boy, "will you take me back to the space station and do up my bracelet properly?"

"Of course."

"Well then—"

Kirian could not forget the story.

More than a thousand years ago, the fathers had come, fleeing an intolerable world: Davaryush, Kirian, Darktouch. Men filled the whole galaxy; but great wars decimated them, and broke the web of power that the Inquest had spun over the million worlds of the Dispersal of Man. . . .

Davaryush and Darktouch and Kirian came with their dream of a new humanity. They came and rekindled the Earth.

There were great secrets of science in the old days. Men knew how to compress a fragment of spacetime into a tachyon bubble, and send it flying instantaneously through space . . . it was a lost secret. The children of the utopians did not recover all the knowledge of the past. But they felt a longing for the stars, a longing common to all men. A way was found, without the tremendous energy of tachyon bubbles. Men were sent through space through the tachyon universe, with its negative time-flow, in a time-stasis shield which locked the traveller into the moment of his departure, preventing time paradoxes until reality could recapitulate to the same moment. . . .

The plain of statues was a gigantic space station, a harbor. But its walls and its machinery were not built yet, nor was the huge town of Kirian-Angkar beside the station. One day the domes would come, and the towers of a great city.

How had they known they would succeed? How had they picked the site of the space station? It was easy. For they had grown up seeing the passengers standing in the sand, in their millennial sleep. . . .

And how had the earliest people known who the travellers were? There was a legend of a young boy with his stasis-bracelet askew, who had accidentally awoken in the dawn time and spoken with the ancestors. . . .

"I'm the boy!" the boy was shouting. "And to think my parents named me after the boy in the myth. . . ."

Davaryush said, thoughtfully: "Science is strange. We had the technology to do all this in our own civilization. But it never occurred to them to use tachyon travel for mass journeys . . . because above all, the Inquest wanted power, exclusive power, over the Dispersal of Man. We didn't have tachyon travel for everyone because the Inquest could not bear to give up one iota of its terrible power!"

Darktouch added: "The rules of the universe don't change. But the uses to which they're put . . . our children *did* learn—*will* learn—from our dream, Davaryush! To work for the good of all. Our hopeless dreams of freedom and love—are vindicated, Kail Kirian!"

It was too much for Kirian to take. *Got to get home. . . .*

"You'll stay now, Kirian," said Darktouch.

"I can't, I can't!" He blacked out desperately and groped for the shipmind in the sky. *Homeworld! I want homeworld!*

And the three of them were roaring with laughter—"You're staying, Kirian. Not a doubt of it," said Davaryush.

"Of course not! You must have tricked me. . . ."

The silver walls returned to his vision.

"Tricked you, Kirian?" said Darktouch. "Just look at the boy, Kirian, just look at the boy!"

And he did.

The boy. Standing against the wall. A redhead with unkempt hair, a slight, insignificant sort of boy: there were a million boys like him, scrabbling in the ruins of burnt cities, hawking sweets in the bazaars of Alykh, staring wide-eyed at the delphinoid starships that streaked across the night skies of their homeworlds . . . he saw nothing remarkable.

Until he saw his own face, reflected in the wall beside the boy's. Distorted by the wall-curve, and yet so alike . . .

"You're my . . . I mean, I'm your—"

"Forefather," the boy whispered, and knelt down to kiss his hand. As though he were a visiting Inquestor . . .

He trembled with pride. Then he raised the child up and gazed at the face until he could see, behind the features that mimicked his own, traces of Darktouch's face, too.

Darktouch, who had despised him, who had accused him of hating himself, of being without pride, of being senseless and meaningless and cruel . . . but he knew now how to make her love him.

And thought of the delphinoid, orbiting above them, in its terrible pain.

Darkness, a terrible loneliness.

Kirian's mind was blank, joined to the shipmind. The darkness pressed against him, waiting.

"Shipmind," he called softly, "what is it you really feel? Can you not share it with me?"

And he felt pain. Like nails being driven into his head, over and over, into his spine, into his bones, his body rolling in a barrel of nails, pain beating burning blasting bursting him and more nails driving driving into him everywhere and screaming until he could never stop screaming until he screamed himself into silence—

Nails nails nails nails nails—

And behind the pain, a still grief. The grief of the Sunless Sound whispering under the hunters' airships. The grief of lost songs. Of unborn torrents of light in the thick dark sky. And Kirian wept until he was beyond tears—

Nails nails nails—

And pity behind the grief. Pity for a being so pitiless it would

torture a sentient creature. Compassion for him.

Kirian's mind whispered, "Shipmind, I'm sorry. I knew, but I tried not to know. Go free now."

He awoke to night. Darktouch was standing by the shelter under the strange thin starlight. He came to her. . . .

"I freed the shipmind," he said. "I think he's going to die now."

Darktouch said, "I tried to hate you so much! Because all soldiers were supposed to be mindless automata, slaves of the Inquest! But you do have compassion after all."

"Glimpsing the future has changed so much."

They were silent. The air was heavy with the tension of beginning relationships.

He said, suddenly, "I can't believe that everything I believe in, out there, is coming to an end!"

"We don't know."

"Maybe our children will burst out into the galaxy again. And find the worlds of the Inquestors. And heal the wounds, maybe."

She smiled at him in the alien moonlight. There was a moment of fierce, burning pride.

Then—

"Look!" she cried suddenly—

His eyes followed the curve of her arm, up into the blackness. A meteor flashed. Fireworks. The sand glittered silver for a moment. The hills glowed and faded.

"It's the ship," he said. "It's the past, burning up as it hits the atmosphere."

"Happy?"

"I suppose so. . . ."

The moon hid in a cloud, and in the darkness the only light was the cold clingfire of her dress. *We'll have to make our own warmth.*

They pressed closer together. Ahead, the plain was full of their unborn children, waiting to be created.

They held each other close, not only for the warmth now. The first step into the future waited to be taken. And then they took it.

The first step was a kiss, an embrace, an act of love.

LIES, ALL LIES

by Christine Watson

The author was 24 last Susan B. Anthony's birthday, will graduate with a B.A. degree in playwriting soon, and currently lives in La Mirada CA in the company of her husband, one very old dog, and one manic-depressive parakeet. Although she's sold newspaper features and radio scripts, this is her first fiction sale.

Quillar was a small, not overly attractive planet located a considerable distance from the galactic main drags. It did, however, have one drawing card which attracted visitors from all over: it was the only planet ever discovered to possess sentient caves.

Professors Wes Adams and Marcia Kapurjuwite, two of the many scientists attempting to study the Quillari caves, had finally secured the services of a native guide in order to locate one. It was more difficult than they had expected, since the tiny bipeds who were Quillar's second intelligent species had built up a powerful store of tales concerning the evil nature of the caves.

Even as he led them closer to their destination, the guide Adams and Kapurjuwite had hired tried to convince them not to go on. "Bad there, very bad there," he trilled, peering fearfully ahead. "Go inside, fall for always, never stop. Very, very bad."

Professor Adams turned to his companion, shaking his head. "You know," he said, "if he's really this frightened, it might be better to—"

He was interrupted by a sudden shrill cry from the guide, who pointed into the brush they were entering, then dashed off in the direction from which they had come. Without attempting to follow him, Kapurjuwite pushed on through the vegetation. After a few wasted shouts to their vanished guide, Adams followed her.

Immediately upon breaking through the brush, they spotted what the guide had seen earlier: the entrance to the cave they had been seeking. It was huge—several times their combined heights—and the interior was a forbidding inky-black.

Kapurjuwite was several meters nearer the entrance before she noticed that her colleague had stopped and was hanging back.

"What's the matter?" she called over her shoulder.

"Maybe we ought to take our time about this," Adams replied. "I mean, all these stories about bottomless pits and such might not be completely wrong. What if we take a few steps inside and find out it *is* bottomless?"

Before she could answer, Kapurjuwite heard the beginnings of a loud, throaty chuckle that seemed to be coming from inside the cave. It grew louder, almost painfully so, before being replaced by a friendly, booming voice.

"Greetings," the cave said. When neither of the visitors responded, it tried again. "Won't you come a bit closer?"

"Forgive us," Kapurjuwite managed after a pause, "but we've heard a great many stories since we arrived on your planet and—"

"Yes, I know," sighed the cave. "The rumors of my depth have been greatly exaggerated."



TO MAGAZINE RETAILERS:

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TITAN'S TITANIC SYMBOL

by Martin Gardner

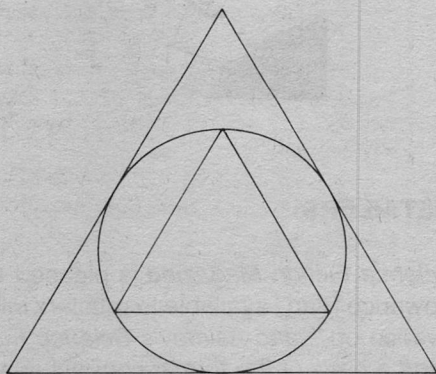
Mr. Gardner has a remarkable affinity for anagrams; these puzzles are often stuffed with them.

Larc Snaag, captain of the Bagel, maneuvered the mammoth spaceship closer and closer to Titan. It was Earth's first manned probe of this giant satellite of Saturn, a moon larger than Mercury and almost the size of Mars.

As Carl Sagan had predicted back in 1973, Titan was covered with thick reddish clouds of hydrogen, mixed with methane, ammonia, and water vapor.

"Great Isaac!" shouted Snaag's executive officer. "Look!"

A geometrical figure, made with glowing green lines, could be seen distinctly through Titan's swirling atmosphere. It was an equilateral triangle inscribed in a circle which in turn was inscribed in a larger equilateral triangle.



"It's . . . it's titanic!" bellowed the Captain. "What in Scitheration do you suppose it means?"

"Could be a religious symbol," said the exec. "Or maybe it's just a way of letting us aliens know that a brainy civilization is flourishing under those bloody clouds."

During chow, the mysterious symbol was, naturally, the topic of excited conversation among the Bagel's crew. Someone asked Ronald

SWITCH ON THE BULL RUN

by Sharon Webb

art: Alex Schomburg



The author claims that the devil came to her in the night and whispered in her ear; "Call it 'Switch on the Bull Run'," he said. And so she did. She has no other excuse.

Transcript of a deposition taken by the Royal Hyadean Police and Militia from T. Tarkington, RN, regarding the charges brought for and by the Hyadean Alliance against her; i.e., the capital offense of Mind Switch:

DEPUTY SERVO: *Please state your name, occupation, and place of residence.*

My name is Terra Tarkington. I am a registered nurse with the Interstellar Nurses' Corps. My permanent base is Satellite Hospital Outpost, Taurus 14, North Horn, Nath Orbit; and I'm temporarily on duty at MediStation Far Out, Hyades IV. And the charges are not true. They're simply not true.

If you want to claim that I am guilty of malpractice or even practicing veterinary medicine without a license, I could understand that. But you're accusing me of Mind Switch and—

DEPUTY SERVO: *Tell us now what transpired with the aggrieved and injured Honorable Kronto.*

How was I to know that the patient was the ambassador from Hyades II? I thought he was a family pet.

Nobody told me he was Ambassador Kronto. Nobody told me anything.

I was sent here to minister to the diseased and disadvantaged of the Hyades IV Far Out. You've got to admit these people need all the medical help they can get. They're virtual pariahs. If you don't live in the main hives of Hyades II, you're just a forgotten soul. Mired by life into a muddy existence. Sunk into a quagmire of adversity. Swallowed up by—

DEPUTY SERVO: *Would you please confine your remarks to the charge of Mind Switch, and to the patient in question?*

Well! Anyway, these Hyadeans from the Far Out came to the MediStation where I work. My position is Prime Clinician. I check out all the patients first and then teletape to Dr. Brian-Scott for anything I can't handle. And I want to tell you, it requires a lot of me. It's not easy giving first care to the poor and downtrodden of the Far Out. If I weren't the dedicated professional that I am, I could tell you stories that would curl your hair—if you had any hair. Why—

DEPUTY SERVO: *Could we please continue with your version of your encounter with the ambassador?*

You *don't* have to be rude.

DEPUTY SERVO: *Apologies. Please continue.*

Well, that morning a group of Far Outs came to the MediStation. They were really excited, but I didn't know what they were talking

about; none of them spoke Standard.

They were carrying the cutest little animal that you ever saw. He was just a *mop* of silvery wool, with an enormous gold medallion around his neck. I had no idea that he was Ambassador Kronto. I absolutely had no frame of reference. I have studied Alien Physiology and there was *nothing* like Ambassador Kronto on any of the tapes.

Besides, even if I *had* known, I would have done the same thing. Wouldn't you? The poor little thing was suffering. He had a sore paw.

I just can't bear to see animals suffer. I've always been that way, ever since I was a little girl. Once when I was eleven I—

DEPUTY SERVO: *You were telling us about Ambassador Kronto.*

He looked a lot like a long-haired kangaroo. I don't suppose you know what a kangaroo looks like. The ambassador was sitting on his haunches. He raised one of his front paws to me; it was almost like he was greeting me. That's when I noticed how swollen it was. The other paw looked normal. That is, I suppose it was normal, but the paw he raised—it was his right paw—was in awful shape. It hurt me to look at it.

He didn't whimper at all, not a sound. Well, I *had* to do something didn't I? So, I sprayed his paw with Edemalyse.

How was I supposed to know that the people of Hyades II are telepaths? I mean, it is a ridiculous assumption to expect me to know that his right paw was an hypertrophied esper organ. If I'd known that, I'd never have tried to bring down the swelling.

It wasn't until much later that I found out Ambassador Kronto was on a tour of inspection of the Far Out. But he *was* in pain. They told me later he had a frightful headache.

DEPUTY SERVO: *What happened then?*

It was awful. He started shaking his little paw—the fat one—and he stared at it in the most *intense* way. Then his mouth turned down at the corners and his chin began to quiver. He seemed so distressed that I wasn't sure what to do. So I patted him on the head and said, "There, boy."

DEPUTY SERVO: *You patted the ambassador on the head?*

I was trying to comfort him. I didn't know that he had a headache, then. I didn't know either that it was considered obscene to touch the ambassador's head.

After I patted him, his eyes got all squinty, and his chin worked up and down more than ever. Then—my heart bled—he took his paw, the one that wasn't swollen, and he rubbed the top of his head in

the most pitiful way. His little paws are short and he had to tuck his head down so he could reach it. It would make you weep to see it.

That's when I put him in the telescanner.

I punched the signal for Dr. Brian-Scott on board the Outpost. I knew I wasn't supposed to use the scanner for animals (I'm not supposed to treat animals at all), but it seemed like an emergency.

Dr. Brian-Scott's face came on the viewer and he said, "What have you got, Terra?"

And I said, "I know it's against all the rules, but please take a look at this little fellow."

Well, it was obvious that Dr. Brian-Scott had never seen anyone from Hyades II either, because when he saw him he said, "Isn't he cute. Turn on the scanner, Terra. I'll see what I can do."

So I turned it on. Then, in about twenty seconds, all the screens went blank. There sat the ambassador, but with the screens blank, there wasn't anything more to do, so I gave him back to the Far Outs.

Well, you never heard such a commotion. All the Far Outs got these awful expressions on their faces, and they had the most unpleasant curve to the creases where their noses ought to be.

Then they called the police and I was brought here. So, obviously that ridiculous charge of Mind Switch is untrue. All I did was spray his paw and pat his head.

DEPUTY SERVO: *Are you aware that Ambassador Kronto's mind now resides in the body of Dr. Brian-Scott?*

What?

What about Dr. Brian-Scott? Where is *his* mind? Where *is* it?

DEPUTY SERVO: *Dr. Brian-Scott's mind is now in the much-abused body of Ambassador Kronto.*

My beloved? In there? Oh. Oh, no. Oh, no it really can't be so. Tell me it can't be so.

DEPUTY SERVO: *It is so. Is there any further testimony that you wish to give at this time?*

. . . I think I'd better have a lawyer now.

DEPUTY SERVO: *Explain the term, please.*

Lawyer, advocate, counselor. Attorney, solicitor, barrister. Somebody to *help* me.

DEPUTY SERVO: *The terms do not scan. Somebody-to-help-me scans. Mind Switch is a capital offense. Are you requesting a priest?*

I want to see a lawyer. I want to see the Sol Ambassador. . . . I want to go home.

Sol Embassy
Central Hive
Hyades IV 875645333 Hyades

April 2

Terra Tarkington
Central Hive Incarceratum
Hyades IV 875645333 Hyades

Dear Miss Tarkington:

Ambassador Blasingame has asked me to answer your letter. The ambassador has also requested that I bring to your attention several things. Perhaps you are not aware of the delicate interstellar politics that are at stake in this matter.

Ambassador Kronto is the envoy of an emerging planet. Their ways are not our ways, Miss Tarkington. The people of Hyades II are warlike. As such, they must be treated with utmost diplomacy until they mature enough to learn that finesse is the better part of aggression.

It would seem that you, Miss Tarkington, have created an interstellar incident.

Although Ambassador Blasingame is sympathetic to your plight, he regrets that there is very little he can do to help you. Any intervention on his part would be interpreted as an affront to the people of Hyades II.

As to your request for defense council, it is obvious that you have little knowledge of the laws of the Hyadean Alliance. In a capital case, the Alliance brings all its forces to bear upon the defendant, while the defendant stands alone. If the defendant can convince the triumvirate of his or her innocence, all is well. If not—

I'm terribly sorry, Miss Tarkington.

With regrets, I remain

Sincerely yours,
Layton Chung, Embassy Aide

April 3
900 hours

Dear Diary,

The tragic and heroic figures of earth have always kept journals during their imprisonment, so I will too.

Future generations should know of the cruel fate of Terra Tarkington, unjustly accused, imprisoned, and separated from her lover

who is shackled in the body of a silver kangaroo.

Poor, beautiful Dr. Brian-Scott. My spleen throbs with grief. If only I could go to him. If only I could get out of here.

I'm going to try.

1100 hours

Do you know what you get when you try to escape from an Hyadean incarceration? Skinned knees.

April 4

1400 hours

Dear Diary,

My trial begins tomorrow. The deputy servo tells me that Ambassador Kronto doesn't have to be there. He's holed up in the Sol Embassy next door. They're keeping him there because the facilities are better for his bodily needs.

I can see the embassy through the power mesh cell window. And if I had wings and were no wider than 5 microns, I'd be out of here in a flash.

The deputy servo tells me that Ambassador Kronto hasn't spoken a word since the Mind Switch. He says that's probably because the ambassador didn't have any vocal cords in his own body and so doesn't know how to use them now.

Dr. Brian-Scott, my beloved, was brought down from the outpost. He's being kept at the Hyades II Embassy, and I don't know *where* that is. Will he ever forgive me?

He probably wouldn't speak to me, even if he *had* vocal cords. Oh, Diary, I couldn't bear his silent scorn. I couldn't stand to see his whiskers twitch with contempt when he looked at me.

Better . . . death.

EXCERPT FROM THE TRANSCRIPT OF THE TRIAL OF TERRA TARKINGTON:

PROSECUTOR: Let us consider the plight of the aggrieved Ambassador Kronto. He, on a good-will mission to our planet, innocently arrives to inspect the Far Out MediStation, when he is wantonly attacked by this person (indicating the defendant).

TARKINGTON: I did *not* attack him. You (indicating the prosecutor) are lying. I—

PROSECUTOR: This person (indicating the defendant) did seize the

ambassador, whereupon she sprayed a dangerous chemical on his esper organ, thereby causing an immediate malfunction.

TARKINGTON: It was for swelling. I thought he had swelling. I-

PROSECUTOR: Not content with the assault on Ambassador Kronto's esper organ, this person (indicating the defendant) maliciously and obscenely stroked the ambassador's head, thus aggravating his headache and causing him no end of public shame. Knowing Ambassador Kronto to be at a serious disadvantage due to his crippled esper organ and his incapacitating headache, this person (indicating the defendant) thrust the helpless ambassador into a dangerous machine.

We can only guess what diabolical thoughts ran through her mind at that time, but one thing is certain—this person (indicating the defendant) was possessed by malice . . . Malice that drove her to commit upon the vulnerable and injured Ambassador Kronto, *Mind Switch*.

April 6

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF TERRA TARKINGTON:

I, being of sound mind, do hereby declare the following disposition of my belongings in expectation of my imminent, tragic, and unfair demise.

To my dearest friend and confidant, Carmelita O'Hare-Mbotu, I leave my nursing library, my new make-up set, my Hyadean Snuggie, and all the rest of my clothes (except for my new green slither which I look especially good in, and which is to be my burial outfit). These I leave to her on the condition that she never, *ever* join the Interstellar Nurses' Corps and go among aliens where she will be accused and insulted and probably executed.

To my beloved mother, Gladiola Tarkington, I leave the proceeds of my insurance policy (payable upon my death), and my locket that Daddy gave me, and my journal which is to be published immediately to tell the peoples of Earth of the tragic demise of Terra Tarkington and the grossly unfair and horrendous events leading up to it.

To Dr. Brian-Scott, I leave my love, and my apologies for the fix he is in, and my surro-wool mittens to keep his little paws warm.

To all my other friends, I leave my love and kind thoughts, and my hope that they will remember the unfortunate Terra Tarkington.

Signed: *Terra Tarkington*

Witness: 0080924 Deputy Servo

April 7
900 hours

Dear Diary,

I am to be executed at 600 hours tomorrow. This is really unbelievable. Somehow, I know that Fate will intervene in my darkest hour.

The Deputy Servo isn't as sure. What he said was, "Impossible."

The Deputy Servo also told me I have one last request. The last request doesn't include release.

Everybody from the ship has been trying to help, but they're not allowed to see me. The Deputy Servo says there isn't anything they can do.

Layton Chung, the Sol Embassy aide, came awhile ago though. It was an absolutely grotesque scene. He said he had come to give me comfort and then he read *poetry* to me! He said, ". . . *any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.*"

I was furious. If my death diminishes *him*, what does he think it does to *me*? I called the Deputy Servo and had him put out. He kept on reading as he left, ". . . *never send to know for whom the bell tolls.*" When the door clanged shut, I could still hear him say, ". . . *It tolls for thee-e-e.*"

I hope no one else tries to comfort me.

I have decided on my last request. I want to see beautiful Dr. Brian-Scott one more time. I know he doesn't look like himself, but I've got to see him.

One more time, my beloved. Then—into the gaping jaws of death.

April 8
600 hours

Dear Diary,

When Dr. Brian-Scott came hopping in to see me on my eve of destruction, my heart swelled—it became literally edematous with emotion, and I began to cry.

He hopped up to me, and I leaned over and picked him up and sat him on my lap. He patted my face with his little paw and then he laid his long ears against my cheek and snuggled closer, with his big gold medallion pressing against my chest.

I had been so sure that he could help me, but seeing him there, so little and helpless looking, shredded my last hope.

If only he could talk to me. If only we could put our heads together

for a few minutes.

I touched his paw—the swollen one. I realized that in among the silver hairs were little tendrils. The esper organ—

Before I could even think about it, I fell in! I mean, in one moment the “me” who was holding Dr. Brian-Scott on her lap became the “me” who was floating around in an enormous place like a cavern.

And somebody else was in there—beautiful Dr. Brian-Scott.

Well, you talk about a meeting of the minds!

And then something happened that I can only dimly describe—we merged. We flowed in and out and then *merged* for a second or two. At first it was music, and then it was vanilla, and after that it was warm water and roses. And it was so intimate, so delicious, that I wanted to stay there forever. It was altogether the nicest thing that had ever happened to me.

But it didn't last.

We floated apart, and gradually I realized that I was in the ambassador's kangaroo body, but Dr. Brian-Scott was in there too and there wasn't room enough for both of us

Suddenly, I remembered my upcoming execution. I guess I panicked. I know it was wicked and vile of me, but I couldn't help it. I pushed. I pushed Dr. Brian-Scott clean out, and into my own body.

I had only one thought at the time. I thought, “Now I've done it! I really *have* committed Mind Switch.”

Dr. Brian-Scott gave out one little shriek and subsided into shocked silence.

I looked out of the ambassador's eyes at Dr. Brian-Scott. There he sat, hair all tousled, tears running down, prison pallor, skinned knees. I wondered what he ever saw in me.

But I didn't have any time to stand around wondering. I had to do something, and quick, to get us out of this mess. And the best way to do that, it seemed to me, was to throw myself on the mercy of Ambassador Kronto.

I tried to tell Dr. Brian-Scott not to worry, but nothing happened. I felt my throat work up and down and my mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out, so I winked at him. Then I put my paw on the button that called the Deputy Servo.

Dr. Brian-Scott never said a word when the Servo came. I guess he was being chivalrous; it broke my heart.

I hopped out behind the Servo. In a minute, I was outside.

It's hard to describe hopping. It's a little like being on springs. I think it might have been fun except for the seriousness of the oc-

casation and the awful headache I had. Every leap I took jarred my head—or rather the ambassador's head—into a lump of pain. And that ridiculous heavy medallion didn't help at all. It thudded against my chest until I felt bruised.

I hopped onto the Sol Embassy grounds and stopped for a minute. I suppose the lights of the Terran display were beautiful, but I had other things on my mind, and my head was splitting.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that maybe that huge gold medallion was the cause of the headache. I don't know a thing about the ambassador's internal anatomy, but it was obvious that I had bones; and where there are bones, there must be one or more spines. I was willing to bet that the ambassador's medallion was putting traction on his cervical spine and causing irritation to the nerves in his neck.

No wonder I had a headache.

I tried to pull the necklace off, but I couldn't, my paws were too short. I tugged and tugged at it with the little stubby digits that oozed out of the paws when they were needed, but it was no use.

Finally, I tried standing on my head. The idea was to let it slip off by gravity, which is all very well and good, but did you ever try standing on your head when your paws are too short to reach the ground? Well, I got around it by digging a little hole. I hung my head in it, pushed off with my hind feet, and hoisted my haunches in the air. After some determined wiggling, the medallion fell off.

I didn't know what to do with it; I didn't have any pockets in my fur. So, I buried it.

Then, I hopped into the embassy. Nobody paid any attention to me. (I guess they're used to seeing all kinds in embassies.)

I punched info, located the guest suite, and went up. Already my headache was beginning to fade.

When I got outside Ambassador Kronto's room, I heard voices. One of them was the unmistakable voice of Dr. Brian-Scott. The other one was female—and it was giggling.

The little digits came out of my paw and closed on the door catch. I pushed and the door slid noiselessly open.

I was shocked!

There was the ambassador, wearing Dr. Brian-Scott's body, whispering lewd suggestions into this human girl's ear.

He'd known how to use those vocal cords all along! And from the looks of things, that wasn't the only part of Dr. Brian-Scott that the ambassador knew how to use.

I hopped into the room. The girl saw me first. She gave a little breathy shriek and ran out trailing her clothes behind her.

The ambassador looked sheepish.

I held up my paw—the one with the esper organ. I tried to talk through it, but Dr. Brian-Scott's body just didn't have the apparatus to receive.

Well, there was no help for it. I hopped closer and held up my esper organ again. I didn't know how to do that "meeting of the minds" thing exactly, but in the absence of electrical amplification, it seemed necessary to be close.

We fell in together.

It was the cavern again, but so *different*. I'd never *ever* come that close to an alien mind before. It had *tendrils*. And they wrapped all around my "me." And they *sucked* . . .

Then it was over. Somehow, the ambassador knew all about me, and about how I am basically good and kind and well-intentioned. And about how I only wanted to help his swollen paw. And how I had cured his headache.

And I knew all about him! About how when he switched with Dr. Brian-Scott he could have switched back easily, but it was the first time he had been without a headache in years. About how it was his first *real* vacation in ages. And how he had grown to simply *love* being in Dr. Brian-Scott's body. And how he used it in a *most* immoral fashion. And how he liked things exactly as they were now.

Well, I was furious. I made little tendrils with *my* mind and I grabbed hold of the ambassador and I *pinched*. I told him what I thought of him until he cringed. "How would *you* like to be awaiting execution knowing that you were innocent and wronged?"

I pinched harder. "Aren't you ashamed, Ambassador? Aren't you? I even cured your headache and that's the thanks I get. You are a low, unprincipled body snatcher. A murderer! A thief . . ."

It worked.

The ambassador was actually ashamed of himself.

He said since I had cured his headache, he'd agree to switch us all back on one condition, so he zapped back into his kangaroo body and I slid into Dr. Brian-Scott's—which was a very weird sensation—and we went back to the prison.

In the cell, Ambassador Kronto held up his paw and Dr. Brian-Scott and the ambassador and I jostled around together for a moment and then we fell back into our proper bodies.

As I write this, Dr. Brian-Scott and the ambassador have gone off to effect my release. So there's nothing more to tell you, Diary.

Except for one thing—the condition the ambassador insisted on. He wants to switch again sometime. He liked it.

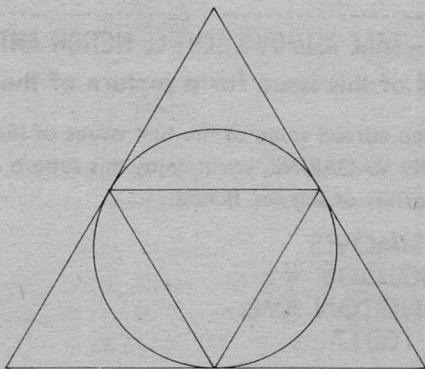
If we do, that means that Dr. Brian-Scott and I will get to mind-merge again.

And I don't think I'd mind that at all.



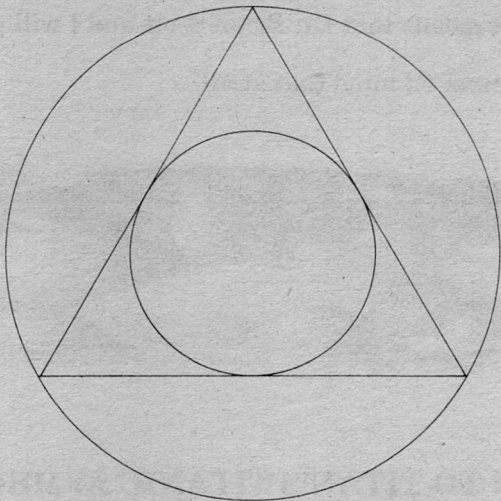
SOLUTION TO TITAN'S TITANIC SYMBOL (from page 45)

In her mind, Tanya just turned the small triangle upside down:



It was obvious at once that the large triangle consisted of four of the small ones, therefore its area was four times that of the small triangle.

Now for a slightly more confusing problem. Suppose the figure had been a circle inscribed in an equilateral triangle, and the triangle in turn inscribed in a larger circle:



What is the ratio between the areas of the two circles? Turn to page 88 for the solution.

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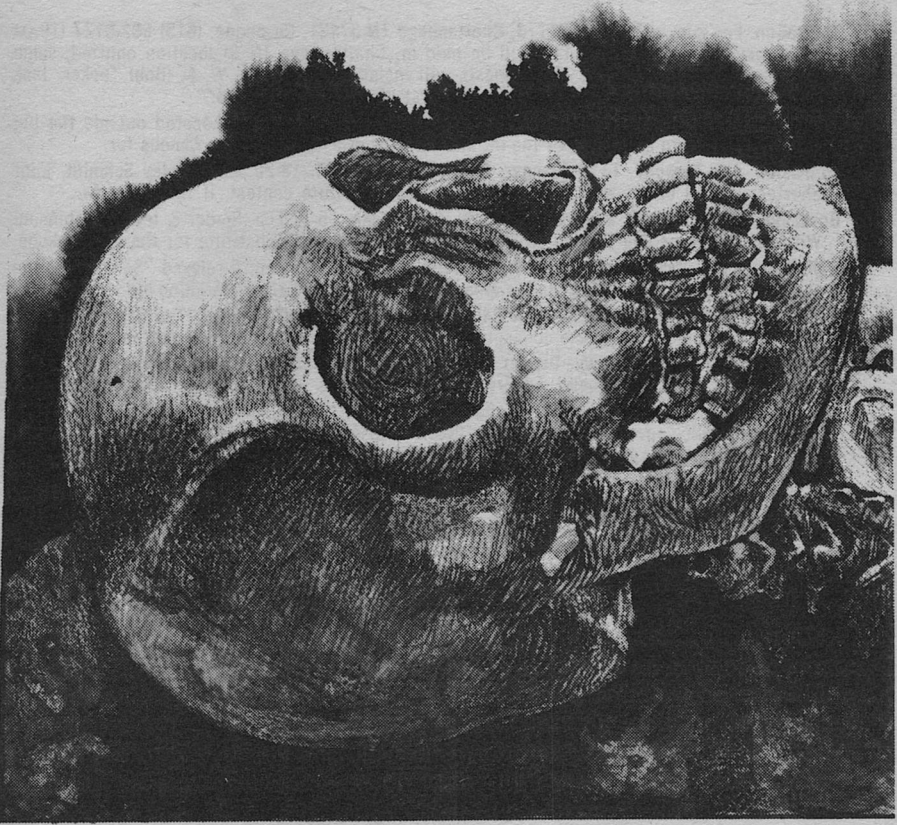
THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

This Spring con(vention) rush starts in a couple of months, so start making your plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an addressed, stamped envelope at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. The Hot Line is (703) 273-6111—if the machine answers, leave your number CLEARLY and I'll call back. Special greetings to all I met as Filthy Pierre at SeaCon and NorthAmeriCon. If you're planning a con, let me know—there's no charge for listing here.

- ChattaCon.** For info, write: **Box 21173, Chattanooga TN 37421.** On phone: **(615) 892-5127** (10AM to 10 PM only, not collect). Con will be held in: Chattanooga TN (if location omitted, same as in address) on: 4-6 Jan., 1980. Guests will include: Joan Vigne, W. A. (Bob) Tucker, Jack Chalker, P. Chapdelaine, Sharon Webb. "The 1st SF con of the 1980's."
- HexaCon, (201) 996-4513.** Lancaster PA, 11-13 Jan. Donald R. Benson. Located outside the big cities, this Eastern con captures the intimacy that Midwestern cons are famous for.
- ConFusion, c/o Persello, 1115 Granger, Ann Arbor MI 48104.** 18-20 Jan. Stanley Schmidt, Eliot Shorter. Typical of relaxed Midwestern cons. Snowcreature contest, if there's snow.
- BoskLone, Box G, MIT PO, Boston MA 02139.** Danvers MA, 15-17 Feb. Spider & Jeanne Robinson. With the NESFA people tied up on NorEasCon II, a low-keyed substitute for the big Boskone.
- Rain, Box 48478, Vancouver BC V7X 1A2. (604) 732-6356.** 15-17 Feb. A relaxed "Science Fiction weekend," in counterpoint to the big annual V-Con, to support their WorldCon bid.
- DunDraCon, 386 Alcatraz, Oakland CA 94618.** San Mateo CA, 16-18 Feb. "The science fiction, fantasy, and role-playing game convention." Could be a good place to learn these games.
- PenultiCon, 4430 W. 36th Ave., Denver CO 80212. (303) 433-9774.** 22-24 Feb. Vonda McIntyre, Hal Clement, Marty Massoglia, Ed Bryant. From the folks who'll bring you Denvention.
- HoosierCon, c/o Parrotte, Box 354, Mishawaka IN 46544. (219) 232-1685.** South Bend IN, Feb. 29-March 2. Bob Asprin, Juanita & Robert (Buck) Coulson. Filksinging is advertised.
- WisCon, c/o SF3, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 233-0326.** 7-9 March. Octavia Butler, Joan Vinge, Dave Hartwell, and Bev DeWeese. The leading feminist-oriented SF convention.
- HalCon, Box 3174 South, Halifax NS B3J 3H5.** 7-9 March. A. E. (Slan, Null-A) Van Vogt, Alfred (Demolished Man) Bester. A chance to see some beautiful country along the way.
- UpperSouthClave, Box 8423, Louisville KY 40208.** Bowling Green KY, 14-16 March. P. L. Caruthers. A small con, patterned in counterpoint to the larger DeepSouthCon in summer.
- CoastCon, Box 6025, Biloxi MS 39532. (601) 392-4176.** 14-16 March. Big weekend down South.
- MonCon, Mountainlair SOW, WV U., Morgantown WV 26505.** 14-16 March. Accent on visual media.
- MidWesterCon, c/o Russell, 50 Capri Dr., Florissant MO 63033.** St. Louis MO, 14-16 March.
- LunaCon, c/o Cole, 1171 E. 8th, Brooklyn NY 11230.** Hasbrouck Heights NJ, 14-16 March.
- NorEasCon II, Box 46, MIT PO, Boston MA 02139.** 29 Aug-1 Sept., 1980. Knight, Wilhelm, and Pelz. The 1980 WorldCon. Go to a few smaller cons first to prepare yourself for this.
- Denvention II, Box 11545, Denver CO 80211.** 2-7 Sept., 1981. C. L. Moore, Clifford D. Simak, Rusty Hevelin, Ed Bryant. The 1981 WorldCon. Save \$10 by joining in 1979 for \$15.

The 87th anniversary of the first atomic bomb is a somber occasion. It is a day when we remember the horrors of nuclear war and the need for peace. The anniversary is a reminder of the power of the atom and the potential for destruction. It is a day when we must reflect on the choices we have made and the path we have taken. The anniversary is a call to action, a call to work for a world free of nuclear weapons. It is a day when we must stand for peace and justice for all.



PROJECT FEAR
by Barry B. Longyear
art: Val and John Lakey



*The most dangerous planets are,
of course, the ones that look
the safest. Sometimes this
applies to people as
well; other times
—well, not.*

The blood streams down my face, drips from my hands as though they had been dipped into scarlet paint. "This is not real!" Why can't I hear myself? These dark, twisted trees, that sky of boiling fire, where is the beautiful planet? "Is anyone alive?"

Arango's uniform is slumped up against a slime-covered rock, the naked skull above it grinning while a finger-thick worm crawls into one eye socket and out the other. Parks' remains lay scattered upon the spongy soil. The creatures had eaten their fill while Parks still lived. Gorged, the things then played with Parks, tearing at him until he died, ending the creatures' interest. Jerzi Niven sat, watching his legs dissolve. "The real," I shrieked, "show me the real!"

"Dean!" came a yell. I turned, wiped the blood from my eyes, and saw Miklynn. He wrung his hands as the tears dribbled down his cheeks. "Dean, for God's sake! Stop this! Stop it!"

"No!" I stumbled toward the pool, then stopped at its edge. The image of the surface swam before my eyes as I concentrated on what I knew had to be. I drove time back, swearing, hoping, praying. Miklynn . . . got to . . . think. Got to concentrate on Miklynn . . . Miklynn . . .

My first impression of the legendary Red Miklynn was that he was a throwback to the Stone Age who would have looked more appropriate wearing a loin cloth and swinging a club rather than wearing terraform greens and group leader's boards. We were in the Terraform Academy's Office of the Commandant. While Commandant Savarat frowned at a pile of papers on his desk, I sat fidgeting in my chair wondering why the Commandant had called me in. Miklynn slouched in another chair, legs crossed, chewing on the unlit stub of a cigar and cleaning his fingernails with the fifteen-centimeter blade of a switchblade knife.

Commandant Savarat looked up at Miklynn, glared for a moment, then returned his attention to his papers. Although Miklynn never looked up from his fingernails, I saw him grin around his cigar. "Is it gonna be much longer, Savarat?"

He called him "Savarat." Not "Commandant," not "sir," just "Sa-

varat." The Commandant's cheek muscles twitched. He took two deep breaths, then turned in my direction, as if by speaking to me he would avoid answering Miklynn. "Mr. Dean, Mr. Lua of the Arapeth Department of State will be here any moment."

I half-opened my mouth to reply, but Miklynn folded his knife, stuck it up his sleeve, then grinned at the Commandant. "No hurry. Just curious." He turned his short-cropped bullet head in my direction. "What year're you in, kid?"

I looked at the Commandant, then turned back to look at Miklynn. "I'm a senior."

"Specialty?"

"Alien psych."

Miklynn nodded, then fixed me with the brightest blue eyes I had ever seen. I noticed that his lashes were white. "You're not a garry or a Christer, are you?"

My mouth fell open as I looked at the Commandant, his face now buried in his papers. I looked back at Miklynn. Behind him, on the wall, was a two-meter-high poster proclaiming the eternal non-discrimination of the Terraform Corps, and this beer-gutted pig had just asked me whether I was a homosexual or a religionist. My mouth was still hanging open when the Commandant's door opened behind us. I turned and saw an unimpressively-built creature, one and a half meters tall and almost completely covered with long blond hair. "Commandant Savarat, your aide told me to go right in."

The Commandant and I came to our feet while Miklynn turned his head and faced the creature with a bland expression. "Mr. Lua. So good to see you." He held out his hand in my direction. "This is Kevin Dean, a senior here at the Academy." He moved his hand to point at Miklynn. "And this is Group Leader—"

Miklynn held a hand up. "No need to introduce us, Savarat. Lua and I are old friends." Miklynn lowered his hand, spat a flake of tobacco on the Commandant's spotlessly polished floor, then looked at Mr. Lua with narrowed eyes. "How's it hanging, Lua?"

The creature tossed a mass of hair aside, exposing a reddish face with solid black eyes. He looked at the Commandant. "Commandant Savarat, I have agreed to the employment of Group Leader Miklynn, but I fail to see the need for us to meet!"

Miklynn turned toward me and raised his brows. "You see, kid, after I completed the troubleshooting on one of Lua's planets, this hairball told the Corps that he never wanted to see me again." He looked back to Lua. "In fact, he demanded my discharge from the Corps. Got it, too." Miklynn reached up a beefy hand and brushed

imaginary dust from his group leader's boards.

Commandant Savarat cleared his throat. "I'm certain that your little . . . misunderstanding with Mr. Lua has been cleared up."

Miklynn's eyes never left Lua. "How about it, hairball? Is our little misunderstanding cleared up?"

Lua's dark eyes flashed. "Miklynn, I realize that—for the moment—I am in need of your peculiar skills. But there will come a time. . . ."

The Commandant cleared his throat again. "Gentlemen, if we could be seated?" Mr. Lua walked behind me and took a chair to the left of the Commandant's desk. "Now, gentlemen, please forgive me if I conduct these negotiations with an unusual degree of clumsiness. Usually Marshal Decker would conduct them, but it seems—"

Miklynn chuckled and shook his head.

"—it seems that the Marshal had another commitment."

Lua snorted. "You mean that Decker cannot stand the sight of Miklynn any more than can I."

Savarat's lips twitched as his face grew red. He cleared his throat, then picked up a sheaf of papers and handed them to Mr. Lua. "This is the contract. Read it and sign it."

Lua reached out a hairy, clawed hand, snatched the papers from Savarat, then began working his way through the pages. Miklynn held out an open hand toward the Commandant. Savarat raised his brows. "What is it, Miklynn?"

Miklynn grinned. "The contract. Let me see a copy."

"You are an employee, Miklynn. The Arapeth Council, whom Mr. Lua represents, has contracted with the Corps—not with you."

Miklynn's hand remained out. "Thanks to Lua—and a few of your armchair pilots in the Corps—it's been a long time since I've seen a Terraform Corps contract." He snapped his fingers. Savarat drummed his fingers upon another sheaf of papers, then lifted the contract copy and handed it to Miklynn, who immediately began scanning the sheets. I turned to face the Commandant.

"Sir?"

"What!?" Savarat's face again turned red. "I apologize, Dean. What do you want?"

I swallowed. "Sir, . . . why am I here?"

The Commandant slumped back in his chair. "Alien psych specialists are fairly scarce, and . . . Miklynn requested one from the Academy for the D'Maan job. If you and Miklynn find each other acceptable—" he snorted "—the Academy will graduate you early."

I turned and looked at Miklynn. The lard bucket had reached a

page of the contract that seemed to hold his attention. Miklynn glanced at Lua, then faced Savarat. "Why isn't the troubleshooting team doing the followup?"

Lua cackled. "If you will recall, Miklynn, that is where our troubles began the last time. For this contract I demanded that once you resolve the situation on D'Maan, you are to leave."

Miklynn scratched his head. "Savarat, nobody is going to be better qualified to do the followup than the troubleshooters. Are you sure the Corps knows what it's doing?"

Savarat nodded. "The Corps won't do the D'Maan followup. That will be the responsibility of the Arapeth Council."

Miklynn burst out in laughter. "*That* collection of hairballs?" He took a deep breath, shook his head, then looked at Savarat. "You know as well as I know that the followup on one of those hostile rocks can be ten times more difficult than troubleshooting the original problem."

Savarat drummed his fingers on his desk. "Nevertheless."

Miklynn shrugged, flipped through the remaining pages, then tossed the contract onto the Commandant's desk. He stood, grabbed my shoulder and pulled me to my feet. "C'mon, schoolboy. We're not needed here, and it's about time you and me got to know each other."

I looked up from the surface of the pool. The sky was grey, the fire gone. The blood still covered my hands. Arango's uniform-clad skeleton became animated, pushing itself to its feet, then clattering as it walked to the edge of the pool and stood beside me. The worm slithered from the skull's left eye socket, down the front of the uniform, then into the pool. It caused no ripples as it entered the water. "This is not real!" I heard my shout echo from the hills beyond.

The skeleton beside me nodded. "No. It is not real."

I turned from the pool and shouted at the scraps of flesh littering the ground. "Parks! Say it, Parks!"

No movement. Parks . . . I looked back at the pool . . .

As I followed Miklynn's hulk through the Administration building, I was ready to quit. I didn't know anything about the D'Maan job, except that Miklynn was going to be in charge. I didn't need to know more than that. As we stepped outside, a lanky figure pushed away from one of the gleaming white columns lining the Administration Building Mall. He ambled over and came to a stop in front of Miklynn. He wore Corps staff boards. Miklynn tossed the stub of his cigar away, then pointed his thumb at me. "Parks, this is the

schoolboy the Corps nabbed to fill the psych slot on the D'Maan mission."

The tall fellow smiled with a kind, but weary, face, then he nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Dean."

Miklynn turned to me. "Now I want the answer to my question."

I frowned. "What . . . what question?"

"You a garry or a Christer?"

I felt my face grow hot. "I don't think that's any of your business!"

Miklynn stabbed a forefinger into my chest. "It's my business, schoolboy. Now answer the question or take a hike."

"Miklynn, I'll go or stay as I damn well please!"

He studied me with his tiny eyes. "Hit the bricks, schoolboy. I don't need you."

I thrust out my chin. "You don't own this place. If I feel like going, I'll go. Right now I don't feel like it."

Miklynn stabbed his finger in my chest again. "Get going, schoolboy, before I get mean."

"Hell no, you tub of guts!" Perhaps insanity runs in my family. Nevertheless, I hauled off and drove my fist into Miklynn's big belly. It sunk in six centimeters, then met a hard wall of muscle. I don't even think Miklynn blinked. Then, just swinging his fist from where his arm was at his side, he drove it into my stomach. When my head cleared, I was flat on my back clutching my middle.

Miklynn looked at Parks. "I finally tracked down Arango. I have to go get him."

"Where was he? In jail?"

"Where else?" Miklynn turned to leave.

Parks pointed a finger at me. "What about this one?"

Miklynn stopped, looked at me, then rubbed his chin. He turned and talked over his shoulder as he left. "Sign him up, Parks. We can always use a clown with a deathwish."

I see it—I see his . . . his fear. Miklynn has fear, too. A young child, poor, father unemployed, mother drinking, brother in prison—failures all. Failure. Miklynn—his fear is failure. He takes them on in the reformatory, boys older, stronger, and whips them. Always a larger, more difficult challenge, to prove something—that he is no failure, and he always wins. He never fails, yet the fear is failure. Does he see his own soul the way I see it? Tears stream down Miklynn's face, he holds out his hands. "Oh, stop it! Stop it!"

I pull my glance away, cowering from the flames, then Parks—his

living soul spread on the ground. A life of God, ordination, a Corps chaplain—then he rejects it all. The guilt. Have mercy, the guilt! He believes this . . . this is his due. His proper punishment. His fear—that he was wrong. I feel the hot breath of the sky on my face. "Parks! Parks!"

That afternoon, soon after I had completed my out-processing and had been issued my diploma, Parks and I sat on a pile of equipment at the Ninth Quadrant Base adjoining the Academy complex. Mass-tone's sun sizzled everything in sight, save Parks, who appeared not to notice the heat. Parks studied me for a moment, looked around, then returned his gaze in my direction. "That business about the garries and Christers . . . it's not what it seems."

I snorted and folded my arms. "You mean that Miklynn is really an enlightened person at heart."

Parks broke into a grin, then shook his head. "No, nossir. I suppose Miklynn's the most bigoted man I ever met. But he doesn't let it interfere with the job. D'Maan is a special type of problem. You won't find any women in the team either."

I shook my head. "Miklynn ought to be in a zoo. Where'd the Corps ever dig him up?"

Park's smile disappeared as his eyes narrowed. "Red Miklynn dates back to the founding of the Terraform Corps twenty-three years ago when the Corps was still under the control of the United States of Earth." Parks shrugged. "Ever since the Corps was made part of the Ninth Quadrant, Red's had a bit of a rough time. He's a free spirit in an organization that is allergic to initiative."

I snorted again. "Free spirit." I looked at Parks. "Just what is so special about D'Maan that it makes Miklynn's biases SOP?"

Parks nodded. "Simple. He doesn't want anyone's mind on anything but the job—a very special job. He doesn't want team members engaging in jealousies, superstitions, or feelings that can be exploited. Anyway, that's the way I understand it."

"Exploited by what?"

Parks shook his head. "We don't know. Dean, the Corps has taken on several terraforming jobs for the Arapeth Council, turning hell-holes and iceboxes into livable worlds. Miklynn was the trouble-shooter on three of those planets. But D'Maan is something different. You see, from orbital survey, there is nothing to indicate that it is a hostile environment. Beautiful oceans, countless crystal clear lakes, great carpets of forest, rich grasslands—Promised Land. That's what D'Maan means in Arapeth: Promised Land. The Ara-

peths have, with our help, settled eight planets in five solar systems, but the planet closest to Arapeth is D'Maan, and they've never been able even to establish a camp."

I frowned. "What's so special about the place?"

Parks shrugged. "Every Arapeth mission that has gone down has been wiped out. Orbiting stations report a few minutes of communication with the ground, then nothing. Finally, the Arapeth called in the Corps. That was about two years ago. All of the team members on the Corps mission were wiped out except one. They used an automatic-return lander for their base station, and when it returned, the orbiting members of the team found the group leader of the surface mission. He was alive, but out of his mind. He still is, by the way."

I held out my hands. "But then, why Miklynn?"

"He agreed to take on the job when no one else would."

At the far edge of the field, a Corps staff car pulled onto the ramp and headed in our direction. As it approached, I saw that Miklynn was driving. Next to him was an enormous brute with a long, black, drooping moustache and a week-old beard. The car pulled to a halt, Miklynn reached across and opened the passenger door, then shoved the man out with his foot. He stood on the tarmac, tall and heavy, clad in filthy civvies. A package sailed out of the car and landed at the man's feet. The man raised an arm and extended a finger in Miklynn's direction. Miklynn's laughter exploded from the car, then he pulled the car around and left the field. The man who had been dumped stooped over, picked up his package and walked toward us, stopping in front of Parks. "You know about this, Parks?"

Parks nodded. "How are you doing, Max?" He cocked his head in my direction. "This is Kevin Dean. Dean, may I present the team's second-in-command, Maximiliano Arango."

Arango spat on the tarmac. "What makes Miklynn think I'll work for him again?"

Parks smiled. "Red wants you. That's all he needs to know."

"It was because of that big-mouthed sonofabitch that I got canned from the Corps! I'll be damned."

Parks nodded at Arango's package. "You just might, unless you get your greens on before Miklynn gets back." He cocked his head toward the nearest building. "You can change in there."

Arango stared at Parks for a moment, then removed his civvies and stood stark naked on the tarmac. He leaned over his package and slowly began opening it. After opening the package, he spread out his uniform, then picked up his blouse. It sported shining new

green-and-gold group sub-leader's boards. Arango grinned at Parks. "Well, look at that. Old Red got me back my boards."

"You know Red loves you."

Arango began slipping on his underwear. "And I love him too, the big-mouthed sonofabitch."

All of them—Arango, fear born from rage. Son of a bordertown prostitute, brown and dirty, never really ever whipping the one planet he feels owes him: Earth. Nivin, small, weak, ill. A life cursing his own body, then his own mind.

My . . . my own fear! Fire, always fire; but deeper is some . . . something dark and crawling. It—I see it, kneeling next to Miklynn! Failure? Me wringing my hands next to Miklynn? Is it . . . is this my fear too? Laughter bursts upon my ears! . . . foul, rotten breath. Is that me? Screaming?

After Arango came a number of other pirates flushed from various jails and warrens in the city, one even hailing from Masstone's lone mental institution. Jerzi Nivin, the crazy, was the team's specialist in alien communications. Tashi Yamada, our site-planning and strategy officer, was delivered practically paralyzed and reeking of happyhaze, while it took four Masstone police officers, in addition to Miklynn, to drag in a black monster named Mustafa Assir. Mustafa turned out to be our weather specialist and science officer. The lander/base crew was composed of pilot Fu-sheng Li, co-pilot Elmer Boner, and engineer Felix Konigsberg—all three sprung from the Ninth Quadrant Detention Center on Masstone, where they were being held on charges of smuggling.

From the bits and snatches that I overheard, I learned that all of them had been canned from the Corps when Miklynn had gotten into difficulties with Lua four years before. Since then they had been either hanging around the Masstone base trying to pick up civilian terraforming positions, or engaging in various and sundry forms of private enterprise. To come back to the Corps for the D'Maan job, Miklynn demanded that his old team be reinstated at their former ranks. I filled the alien psych slot simply because Miklynn's old AP man was dead.

The equipment was loaded onto a shuttle, the shuttle docked with a freighter, and while we were enroute to pick up our orbiting station at Arapeth, I spent much of my time wondering where it had all gone wrong. When I had enlisted in the Corps and applied for the Academy, I had imagined my first mission with a different cast of

characters for comrades. Halfway to Arapeth, we were all ordered to report to the freighter's cramped lounge for a meeting.

Miklynn relit his half-smoked cigar, blew out a blue cloud of smoke, then looked around at his assembled crew. "Any questions?"

Mustafa Assir nodded his massive, dark head. "Miklynn, why should we not tear you to pieces?" He flexed fingers that looked capable of kneading cast iron.

Miklynn snorted. "Try it and I'll stuff your turban down your throat." He looked at the others, then looked back at Mustafa. "I didn't tell you bums to stick out your necks for me. You did that on your own."

Arango pointed at Miklynn. "We did the right thing, Red. We just didn't count on you acting like a jerk in front of the board when you came up for the hearing."

Miklynn frowned. "Jerk? I told the board what those Arapeth hairballs would do to Lujock's Planet without proper followup. And it happened—"

Parks laughed. "Red, we aren't arguing about the facts; just the way you presented them." Parks faced the others. "Didn't he call the members of the board morons?"

Jerzi Nivin nodded. "Then he said that they were walking around with their heads stuck up each other's—"

"All right!" Miklynn frowned. "I got you back in the Corps. What more do you crybabies want?"

Arango looked up at the overhead, then back at Miklynn. "Red, I figure you owe me and the others about four years in back pay. Since I don't figure we'll get it, I'd just as soon take it out of your hide."

Miklynn snorted. "You and what army, Arango?" He nodded. "Well, now that we're a tight-knit team again, I'll let you in on a secret. If we pull off the D'Maan job, you'll get your back pay. That's the agreement I made with Decker." Miklynn reached behind his couch, picked up a roll of papers that was leaning against the bulkhead, then turned back and began spreading the sheets on the deck. "Now that you idiots know that I've been thinking of you, let's look at the job." He pushed the roll out with his hand. "Parks, stick a foot on that corner." He looked at the lander's engineer. "Boner, hold down that one." Konigsberg knelt down to hold down the unrolled portion. "Don't squash the overlay, Felix." The big sheet was a sinusoidal projection of the planet D'Maan. Marked on the map's land masses were nine black crosses and three blue crosses.

Mustafa Assir pointed. "Red, what are the crosses?"

"Those are where the landers from the previous nine missions put down. Eight of them were hairball attempts, and this one"—he tapped one of the crosses—"was a Terraform Corps try." He pointed at the three blue crosses in turn. "These were robot missions put down by the Corps team. Worse story than the manned missions: they said Hello, and not one blip more."

Mustafa frowned. "So, we go in."

"We go in."

Parks leaned his elbows on his knees as he studied the map, then he looked at Miklynn. "Red, who was the group leader on the Corps mission?"

"Jadduk. You don't know him. Alien from Nuumiia." Miklynn rubbed his chin, then looked at Parks. "Jadduk was a good hand at the job; he was no jerk." He turned back and pointed at the map. "See those shaded areas?" I looked and saw loops and whorls lightly drawn in and shaded.

Mustafa Assir nodded. "What are they?"

"Orbital surveys picked them up. They're some kind of electrical disturbance."

"Part of the planet's magnetic field?"

Miklynn shook his head. "No relation to it at all. But look at those crosses. Every single one of them is inside one of those shaded areas." He turned to Konigsberg. "Felix, pull out the first overlay." The engineer did so. The clear plastic sheet was covered with more shaded loops and whorls. They did not quite match the ones drawn on the map. "This is the orbital survey done by Jadduk's team. See: those fields move."

Mustafa frowned. "How much time between the two charts, Red?"

"Almost exactly one of D'Maan's years. Ten Earth months." Miklynn pushed himself off of the couch and squatted next to the map. He tapped a point close to one of the loops. "We'll check to make certain, but this part of this loop should have moved to about here by now." He moved his finger two centimeters where it pointed at a red cross. "This is where we're putting down. Those fields are the key. But I'm going to let it creep up on us instead of jumping in the middle of it." He looked at Mustafa. "We'll be using Jadduk's orbiter station, and as soon as we get our hands on it, I want you to start working through its data banks." He looked back at the map, his eyes glittering. "No one else has been able to lick this bastard. So we're going to do it."

Still wringing his hands, Miklynn whined and cried, sitting curled

into a fetal ball. I looked at him, then shook my bloody fist in his direction. "Stop it, Miklynn! Stop it! It's beating you, can't you see that?"

A voice came from the sky around me. "That's not me, Dean. I'm here. In the pool."

"Red?" I whirled around, looked past the skeleton to the pool's still waters. In the center of the pool stood Miklynn, up to his waist in water. The palms of his hands just touched the surface. I turned back in time to see the crying image of Miklynn fade and disappear. Jerzi Nivin screamed as he watched the melting of his legs. . . .

After picking up the orbiter around Arapeth, stocking it, attaching the mule that would bring us to D'Maan, and docking the new lander, Jerzi Nivin and I hit the data banks, while, on another terminal, Mustafa Assir did the same. While we worked, Miklynn, Arango, and Parks went down to the surface of Arapeth to clear up a few remaining details with the Arapeth Council. Jerzi and I had been at it for hours, when he pushed himself away from the screen, shaking his head. "Not a thing. Not a damned thing."

I raised my brows and studied the screenload of numbers. "Jerzi, there's plenty here; we just don't understand it."

He shook his head. "By now we should have at least sieved out some communications between lower-order species. But this," he held out his hand toward the screen, "this is nothing but amplified background noise."

I shrugged. "If that's the case, then D'Maan is a dead planet, which we know it isn't."

Jerzi slapped his hand against his thigh. "That's just it! We should at least have established characteristic patterns for the plants we can see with our own eyes from orbit—but there's nothing."

Mustafa pushed himself away from his terminal, then stood and walked over to where Jerzi and I were sitting. He looked at our screen, then rubbed his chin. "Jerzi, what areas have you checked?"

Jerzi coded in for a map, which appeared on the screen, showing the overlapping squares from which earlier missions had taken readings. He pointed at three lines of squares. "We've done the first three sequences. Either there's nothing alive down there, or whatever it is happens to be a couple of parsecs away from anything we've experienced before."

Mustafa raised his heavy black brows. "You think this not possible?"

Jerzi shrugged. "A really new type of life population might reg-

ister as gibberish—but this is random noise.”

Mustafa studied the screen. “About all the survey readings have been done within the disturbance fields. Have you tried one of these squares outside of the fields?”

Jerzi shook his head. “What’s the point? We’re all agreed that our problem is that field, or something within that field, aren’t we?”

Mustafa sneered. “Some scientist you are, Jerzi. The lander’s putting down outside of the field. I’m sure Red will want to know what he’ll find there.”

Jerzi punched in the code for a square in the center of a nonfield area. He looked up at the screen. Columns of identified lifeform patterns began appearing. I poked the man in the arm. “Jerzi, give us unit quantity readings, as well.”

Jerzi held out his hands. “Typical readings for this class of planet. So all we know is that the disturbance field interferes with our readings.”

Mustafa rubbed his chin, then pointed at the screen. “Let me see the survey index again.” Jerzi punched the appropriate buttons. Mustafa leaned forward and tapped a square close to one of the disturbance fields, but still completely out of it. “Pull readings on that one.”

Jerzi punched away, then looked at the screen. He frowned, then punched in a comparison check. “Look. In the square closer to the field there is a significant decrease in unit quantity—and over forty basic patterns missing.” He sat back, shook his head, then stared at the screen.

Mustafa stood up. “Jerzi, what is it?”

“I don’t know—I mean, I don’t want to say until I’m sure.” He looked up at Mustafa. “If it’s what I think it is, we’ve got problems.”

Still the twisted trees, the blood on my hands. The sky! The fire in the sky returns! I feel it, the tightening in my chest, the constriction of my throat, the dryness of my tongue. The nausea. God help me, I’m losing it—losing my contact. If it just . . . if it just wasn’t for the fire! Miklynn—where is he? Is that Yamada in the water? The water? The water—it climbs over him! Miklynn. Where’s Mik—There! There he is, deep, under the water. “Miklynn! Miklynn!”

His voice. “You’re losing it, Dean. Fight, dammit. Fight!”

The mule pushed the orbiter/lander toward D’Maan and we gathered in the tiny wardroom. Arango chuckled while we waited for Miklynn to appear. “You should’ve seen him. I swear Red was going

to pop his buttons." He shook his head. "No go, though. The Arapeths want to do the followup."

Parks leaned back against the curved bulkhead. "Nine missions have been blown away on that rock. Nine missions, yet they still think it's a no-problem planet. They look through their little telescopes and see nothing but the promised land."

I rubbed my chin, then looked at Parks. "Why won't they go for the Corps doing the followup? The troubleshooters don't have to do it, if Miklynn is what they can't stand. Another team could be called in."

Miklynn pushed into the compartment, stepped over Yamada's legs, then squeezed his hulk between Yamada and Nivin. "It's simple, schoolboy. The Arapeths don't want to pay for the followup. A troubleshooting mission is expensive, but followup really costs a bundle. The amounts involved are such backbreakers that the Ninth Quadrant defers plain cash payment. Instead, they take a healthy cut of the whole payoff from the planet." He grinned. "The Arapeths have been hot for D'Maan since they ground their first lens and got a look at the place. They don't want to share it." He looked around at the circle of faces. "Did you wizards come up with anything?"

Mustafa pointed at Nivin. "Jerzi's got something."

We all looked at him. He frowned, then picked up a folder from his lap. "A couple of things." He looked at me. "Dean, if you agree with what I've found, we'll have to work together on this." I nodded. He opened the folder and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. Putting the folder aside, he spread the sheet out on the table. It was a reduced version of Miklynn's map showing the disturbance areas on D'Maan. "I've examined the patterns in these areas. There's nothing in the banks to associate with them as far as communications go. But the patterns are uniform from one area to the next."

Miklynn. "And?"

Mustafa tapped the map. "Jerzi thinks all of these areas are connected."

Miklynn frowned. "How? Below the surface?"

Jerzi nodded. "It's just that where—whatever it is—nears the surface, the disturbances are strong enough to be picked up by our instruments."

Miklynn studied the map, then looked at Jerzi. "So, what is it?"

"The patterns I've examined—they're too uniform to be readings from a life population."

"You mean it's nonbiological?"

Jerzi shook his head. "No. It's biological. I couldn't get commu-

nication readings because this is just one thing, one living entity.”

I whistled, then looked at the map. “That’s why the bank couldn’t come up with lifeform patterns for these areas. We were trying to establish population norms by examining a single unit.”

Jerzi nodded. “We couldn’t see it because every time we took a reading we were too close. It was like trying to determine human population norms by examining one cell from one individual. I took it all, boiled it down, then had the computer stand back and take a look. The results are similar to the data produced by any individual organism.”

Mustafa raised his brows. “Most of the fields cover the planet’s water bodies. Are you saying the oceans are this creature?”

“No. Several areas,” he pointed at the map, “here, and here, are free from disturbances even though they are large bodies of water and connected with water bodies that contain disturbance areas. But it moves through water.”

Miklynn studied the map. “What about the land areas?”

“My guess is groundwater.”

Mustafa frowned. “Which means that this thing can divide and work its way through porous rock?”

Jerzi nodded. “Yet it’s all one creature.” He looked at me. “Something puzzles me, Dean. If my theory is correct, it doesn’t explain the readings the bank has on the border areas.”

“You mean the decrease in basic patterns and population units?”

He nodded. “The decrease in population units is explainable. If that thing started getting close to me, I’d make myself scarce too. But entire patterns are missing.” He pointed at one of the border areas. “The closer you get to the edge of the thing, the fewer patterns there are until right next to it, nothing.”

“Not even plants? Insects? Bacteria?”

“Not a living thing.” Jerzi rubbed his eyes, then pointed at the map. “I don’t see plants getting up and running; not all of them at any rate. It would be easier to explain if this creature killed everything it came near, but if that were the case, when it leaves an area the ground should be sterile. Here, in this area where the thing has recently left, the patterns are back, and in the same ratio. Five kilometers in front and in back of that thing, the patterns are the same.”

Miklynn looked at me. “How does it work, schoolboy?”

I scratched my head, then shrugged. “I’m going to have to stuff Jerzi’s data back through the machine. At this point I can’t even guess.”

Jerzi screamed it out. "It's a mind! It's all mind! It's my . . . it's my mind!"

I turned from the pool and looked at where Jerzi had been. He was gone. "Jerzi! Quit fighting, Jerzi! Go with it; flow with it and concentrate on the real!"

Jerzi's screams died. Arango—the skeleton now had skin. He held his head back a bit, then stepped into the pool. Miklynn called from the bottom, "Dean. Come in. It wants you, Dean. You are the one it wants."

In orbit around D'Maan, I performed pattern comparisons on the entire mission complement. Even in orbit, we were being affected. There were enough of us that a norm pattern could be established for the newcomer: it was anxiety. And our anxiety was identical with certain patterns within the disturbance fields. We began calling the thing Neptune—after the god. Jerzi looked over my analysis and shook his head. "Don't be stupid, Dean! We're about to put down on a planet where nine previous missions have been blown away. Of course we're anxious!"

I looked at him. "The same way?" I pointed at the screen. "Watch." I isolated the patterns from each team member, then combined them on the screen. "Identical. Not similar, Jerzi, but identical!"

Jerzi studied the screen, then closed his eyes and nodded. "An outside source. It has to be."

Miklynn cocked his head to one side, then moved the fresh cigar to the corner of his mouth. "Okay, xenoshrink, what's the drill?"

"We go down. The spot you picked is just fine. Then I have to make contact with it. I can't think of any other way."

"What does Jerzi say?"

"He says the same thing that I say. He can't talk with Neptune until I figure out how it works."

Miklynn studied me. "How are you in the guts department?"

I looked at Miklynn's eyes for a moment, then averted my glance. "I'll do my job."

He stood silently for a few moments, then turned and left.

Fear it was then; fear it is now. Think. Think! That thread Jerzi found on our first attempt at contact. Yes. The fear. It is mind; it is fear. Jerzi is all dissolved now—no! That's . . . that's him, beneath the water with Miklynn, Arango, and Yamada. "Jerzi. What are you doing down there? You should be here, helping me."

"Come into the water, Dean. You are the one it wants."



Yamada concluded his site planning and strategy session. Our plan? Be prepared for a quick getaway. Assir, Li, Boner, and Konigsberg would remain in the lander. Miklynn, Arango, Yamada, and Parks were to establish a post five kilometers from the edge of the disturbance field, while Jerzi Nivin and I went as far as we could with our instruments. Touchdown was without event. No change in anxiety readings. While the lander crew unloaded and rigged our land transportation, the rest of us looked at the promised land. We had put down in tall, sweet grass, dotted with tiny lavender and white flowers. Toward the east, the gently rolling grasshills gradually flattened out, becoming the pure white sand of a beach bordering the bluest ocean I ever saw. North and west, the grass ended at the edge of a virgin forest of tall, straight trees hung with green and gold spangles of leaves. South, the grasshills extended to the horizon, and in that direction was Neptune—waiting for us.

As we studied the landscape, Fu-sheng Li walked up and poked Miklynn in the arm. "The cart's ready."

Miklynn turned and nodded, then waved a hand at the rest of us.

"Okay, kiddies, load up." He turned to Mustafa. "I want you to stay on those instruments and follow us for every step we take, understand?"

Mustafa nodded. "If you run into a snag, do we come after you?"

"No. And you keep that lander crew inside, too. If you people have to scram, I want you to be ready. And make sure your recorders are on. If we buy it, I don't want it to be for nothing."

Mustafa grinned. "If you buy it, Red, it won't have been for nothing."

I entered the cart door, dropped into a seat next to Jerzi, then looked out of the door at Miklynn. He studied the horizon, looked up at the sky, then turned toward the door shaking his head. "Damn, but this is a beautiful place."

Beautiful. How much of this beauty—how much of this horror—is real? I look into the pool. All of them have been sucked under, absorbed. They have become one with the thing. All except me, and Parks. It's winning, and . . . it knows it's winning!

We watched through the cart's windows, marveling at the giant trees, the pristine beaches, the clear blue sky. A break in the trees came, a riverbed that extended to the sea. Miklynn, Parks, Yamada, and Arango broke out equipment to test water and mineral samples, while Jerzi remained behind to monitor the radio. I broke out my own equipment and began monitoring team-member anxiety levels. On the first cycle I detected no changes. But the closer we came to Neptune's border, the higher should be the readings. I began the cycle again. Then, while monitoring Yamada, the reading took a sharp increase. I rose and stepped outside. Yamada and Arango were standing by the stream bed before an exposed face of rock where they had been taking samples. Miklynn, squatting next to the trickle of water that moistened the stream bed, stood and looked around. As Parks raced toward the cart from where he had been examining plant life near the trees, the feeling washed over me. I felt my chest muscles constrict while a prickle of fear danced on the surface of my skin.

Parks jumped up on the step and looked through the door at Jerzi. "Call the lander."

Jerzi's eyes were wide and he held a hand in front of his face as though to ward off a blow. "Why? Why should I?"

Parks's eyes narrowed. "Just do it!" Jerzi backed away from the radio, against the side of the cart. Parks entered, pushed Jerzi the

rest of the way from the radio, then put in a call for the lander. Miklynn and the others came to the door as Mustafa answered.

"Lander."

"Assir, this is Parks. We need a position update on Neptune—fast."

"Stand by."

Parks turned toward me. "Dean, did you get any changes in readings?"

I nodded. "Anxiety. Maybe double earlier readings—"

"Parks!" crackled the radio. "Whatever you jerks are doing out there, knock it off! Orbital survey shows a distinct bulge in the field border closest to you, and heading in your direction!"

Parks looked at me, then turned to Miklynn. Miklynn rubbed his chin, looked around, then turned back toward the cart. He looked down for an instant, then climbed into the cart and dropped into the driver's seat. Reaching out a hand, he killed the power to the cart's motor. He looked around at Parks. "How about now?"

Parks keyed the radio. "Assir, what's it look like now?"

There was a long moment of static-filled silence, then the radio came to life. "The bulge is still there . . . it's not advancing." Another silence. "It's stable. What'd you do?"

Parks keyed the radio. "Turned off the cart. Radio fields must attract the thing." He licked his lips. "What about the radio itself? Will our communications attract the things?"

Silence. "Don't know. Key your transmitter and leave it down for five minutes."

While he held down the key, Parks turned toward Miklynn. "You know what this means?"

Miklynn nodded. "This is as far as the cart goes." He looked at me. "You and Nivin will go on from here." He looked out of the door. "Arango!"

Arango stuck his head in the door. "Yeah?"

"I want you to go with Dean and Nivin to make contact with old Neptune. You'll be on foot instead of scooters. The thing is sensitive to radio fields."

Arango nodded. "What about communications?"

Miklynn nodded toward Parks. "Checking that now."

We waited for long moments, then Parks lifted the key. Another moment of silence, then Mustafa's voice came through the speaker. "No change, Parks. Either Neptune isn't sensitive to the frequency we've been using, or it's too weak at this range."

Parks signed off and Miklynn looked at me. "Okay, schoolboy. Get your act together. We'll be waiting for you."

Waiting. How could they be here? How could they be beneath the water? They aren't even here. As Parks's pieces begin pulling themselves together, Miklynn looks at me from beneath the ripples of the pool. "Come into the pool, Dean. Come in. It's you that it wants. It wants you." I search for the thoughts that are mine—only mine. They are there . . . if I can only see them, hold them. . . .

Arango led off, Jerzi was next and I brought up the rear. We walked the high, steep bank of the stream bed for over two hours. Arango waved an arm, then slumped down against a tree. Jerzi removed his radio and slid down a tree opposite Arango. I removed my pack, and using it for a pillow, stretched out on the sweet grass. Between the tops of the trees, the sky was still bell-clear. Arango shucked his pack, tossed his ration cube into his mouth, then pointed upstream. "I'm going on ahead to look around. You two stay put."

I watched as he moved off, then turned to Jerzi. "Arango's kind of antsy, isn't he?"

Jerzi unwrapped his ration cube, popped it into his mouth and talked around it. "It's his job. He's okay."

I unwrapped a cube and began chewing on it as Jerzi pulled his radio to his lap and began taking reception readings. "Anything?"

Jerzi shook his head. "Same noise. If we're going to tune in on that thing we're going to need more data." He changed the set to the frequency we were maintaining with the cart crew, keyed the transmitter twice, listened until he heard two clicks in return, then he turned off the radio and put it aside. He leaned back against his tree then looked at me. "What are you staring at?"

"You." I sat up.

"Why?"

"I'm curious. Why were you in the laughing academy back on Masstone?"

One side of Jerzi's mouth worked itself into a grin. "Does it bother you?"

"Just curious. You don't seem like the others."

Jerzi chuckled and shook his head. "I'm like them, but even more so." He leaned his head back against the tree trunk and looked up at the sky. "You aren't part of this team yet, Dean. Not really. So you don't know what drives us." He turned his head and looked at me. "You people coming out of the academy, you look at the Corps a different way."

"Different how?"

Jerzi shrugged. "I've worked with some of you people before. It's

like all you think this is is a job, a place to put in your twenty and pull down a fat pension. I guess some of you even find the work interesting." He looked toward the stream bed. "But you don't have it." His breathing grew more rapid.

"We don't have what?"

He closed his eyes, then opened them. "The need. The need to pit yourself against a planet and whip it." He looked at me and pointed at me with his finger. "We all have it one way or the other. Me? If I don't have the pressure on me, I unravel a little." He shrugged again. "So do the others in different ways. We feed on this job; without it we go a little bit crazy."

I thought for a moment. "Miklynn?"

Jerzi laughed. "Yeah, Miklynn. He's worse than any of us. Without a planet to lick he'd probably curl up and die."

"What about him getting kicked out of the Corps?"

Jerzi nodded thoughtfully. "You can bet that Miklynn spent the past four years treating the Corps just like another planet he had to whip. And he did it, too. We're all back in greens." He smiled. "And I figure that Lua and that bunch back on Arapeth . . . well, there's a score there that Red hasn't settled yet."

"That was about Lujock's Planet?"

Jerzi nodded. "A real stinkhole. I guess Lujock's had more poisonous lifeforms per square centimeter than any other place in the quadrant. The troubleshooters had to figure out a way to survive on the surface long enough to settle and develop the place. There was a lot of things—developing anti-toxins, purging techniques for airborne lifeforms, working up combat and defense tactics for some of the nastier forms of vegetation—all in all, not even a nice place to visit." Jerzi looked at me. "Kurt Messer, our old alien psych man. That's where we lost him."

I had to ask. "What happened?"

"He tuned in on something that sent him off the deep end, I guess. One day he just walked out of the safe area—no suit, no filters, no nothing—right into all those cute little plants. He didn't last more than a couple of seconds." Jerzi raised his eyebrows and nodded. "Hit Red hard. Red doesn't like to lose team members. Anyway, in doing the followup, we found that the lifeforms were pretty delicately balanced. The Arapeths wanted to process several of the plantforms there that were rich in Disogen."

"What's that?"

"A drug. The Arapeths have a brand of cancer—pretty widespread—that, in most cases, can be treated with Disogen. But you

have to wash down a lot of those plants with acid to get a commercial quantity of the drug." He shrugged. "To make a long story short, we began our followup designing a means for obtaining the drug and processing it in a manner that would affect the lifeform balance as little as possible. Lua and company didn't go for it. We figured out how to survive on the planet, and that's all they were interested in. They wanted to pile in, clear-cut and process vast swaths at a time; then just dump the waste products. Red locked horns with Lua over it, and you know what happened."

"I know what happened to Miklynn and you people. What happened to the planet?"

Jerzi stood and hefted the radio, strapping it to his back. "Here comes Arango." He turned back to me. "Right now Lujock's Planet has fewer Disogen-making plant forms than Arapeth. What's more, the acid residue from the processing has mutated a lifeform into a super-monster; no other lifeform can compete with it. Mustafa says Lujock's will be dead inside of thirty years, and with an unbreathable atmosphere not long after that."

Arango stopped in front of Jerzi and I got to my feet, looping on my pack. "You two gumming over the Lujock job?"

Jerzi pointed a thumb at me. "Dean wanted to know why Miklynn got kicked out of the Corps."

Arango frowned and shook his head. "Red hates to give a planet back after he's licked it." He pointed upstream. "I walked until I came to a position overlooking where old Neptune was supposed to be. I didn't see anything unusual. You two ready?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you going to rest?"

Arango laughed, then turned and headed upstream. Jerzi hunched the radio up on his back and followed. As I fell in behind, Jerzi turned and grinned at me. "Like I said, we feed on it. Once we get there it's going to take both of us to keep Arango from trying to hand-wrestle it."

What is it? It. I feel its . . . thoughts? Is that what I feel? Or does it simply lower the barriers to my own thoughts? The things I fear most—the fire, the death and dismemberment—it knows about them? How? Or is it just me? Is it my own mind that I'm seeing? But the worm crawling through Arango's skull; I have no fear of worms, or skeletons. But . . . but Arango must. Am I . . . am I seeing all of our fears? Theirs and my own?

We stood on the top of the low hill looking out over a dense forest.

Arango looked around, then shrugged. "It's a shame to have to turn this place over to the Arapeth."

Jerzi pulled off his radio and lowered it to the ground. "Shall I get a position check?" Arango nodded and Jerzi squatted next to the set and keyed the transmitter. "Parks, give me a reading on Neptune. We should be close."

The set crackled, the static very heavy. "It's hard to tell. Hold down your key . . . things look now, you're right on top of . . ."

Jerzi frowned, then depressed the key. Arango surveyed the terrain. "I don't see anything different." He turned to Jerzi. "As long as you have the key down, have the lander give us a reading on lifeform patterns and unit quantities."

As Jerzi nodded, the ground opened up and swallowed him. As the dirt closed over his head, cutting off his screams, I ran to the spot, dropped to my knees, then looked up at Arango. His face! The skin was falling—the skin was falling from his face! He screamed, then ran down the hill toward the edge of the forest. "Arango! Arango, wait!"

I got to my feet and ran after him. Suddenly the blue sky exploded into flame as the landscape went black. Horrible, gnarled plants sprang from the ground, their twisted black limbs and tendrils silhouetted against the red sky. Before me, water began filling a slight depression, forming a pool. Arango staggered back from it, then collapsed against a tree. I ran to his side, then recoiled in horror. His naked skull grinned back at me. I turned to run, then saw the ground eroding away from a small rise. A clenched fist, a kicking leg, then Jerzi was exposed. He rose to his knees, then fell to the ground, breathing hard. "Jerzi, we've got to get out of here! Where's the radio?"

Jerzi's head lifted from the ground, then he began screaming as he saw his feet beginning to dissolve. "The radio! Turn off the radio!"

I closed my eyes. How far did I run after Arango? The radio still has to be where Jerzi dropped it . . . *I turn deaf ears to the cries coming from the pool. I turn away and walk back toward the rise. The rise is gone—nothing but black trees choking my path, then fire! The trees! They burn!* "It's not real! It's not real!" *I walk into the fire, feeling my clothes scorching, then falling from my body in flames. I keep walking, walking . . .*

I trip, putting out my hands to fall into a sea of burning oil. "Not real, not real, not real . . ." I reach back to find the thing I tripped over. It wriggles, then bites my hand. Still I hold it, feeling for the switch. It bites through my hand, yet the fingers still search for the

key. The key. I lift the switch and . . . it is all—all black. . . .

No good. No good . . . what? What? "Jerzi, is that you?"

"Dean . . . not radio, Dean . . . patterns—" Screaming.

Run. Have to run. Run. Run. The grass writhing before me, but it's grass again! Run, run, run. No . . . no fire. No fire in the sky . . . the blue sky . . .

I collapsed on the top of the rise, my face buried in the cool grass. My breath came in short gasps. I opened my eyes, pushed myself to my elbows, and looked at the sunlight on my shaking hands. Rolling over on my back and sitting up, I looked back down the hill. Still in the open, before the treeline, Arango and Jerzi were stretched out, writhing on the grass. Next to them lay the radio. There were sounds of crashing behind me, sticks breaking, hard breathing. A rough hand grabbed my shoulder and Miklynn's face filled my vision. "What? Why . . . aren't you back with the cart. . ." Parks was behind Miklynn. "What . . . what're you . . . how? Just talked to you on the radio."

Miklynn shook my shoulder. "Dean! Snap out of it! That was four hours ago!"

"What . . . four?"

Parks started moving toward Jerzi and Arango. I got to my feet. "No! Parks! No!"

Parks looked back at me. "What is it?"

"The thing . . . it's there. You aren't prepared for it; for how it works. I . . . I wasn't either." I sat back down on the grass. Miklynn squatted beside me.

"What is it, Dean? How does it work?"

I shook my head. "Wait. Got to think." I looked at the ground under which the thing—Neptune—rested. Avions flew in and out of the disturbance field; a hyena-looking thing loped over to Jerzi, sniffed at him, then moved over to Arango. Again it sniffed, then loped off into the trees. "Patterns, Miklynn. That's why . . . those lifeform patterns disappeared. They take on the same pattern as the thing."

"What're you talking about?"

I looked at Miklynn. "A foreign pattern—a different electromagnetic field—is a threat. Neptune sees the difference as a threat. The lifeforms around here have adapted—they take on Neptune's patterns." I shook my head. "Think! Got to think!"

Miklynn stood. "We've got to get Nivin and Arango out of there." He looked down at me. "How do we do it?"

I pushed myself to my feet. "If you try to fight it, if you try to keep your own thoughts . . . it's a nightmare. But the patterns—Jerzi said something about it—we . . . we have to give in to it . . . trust it . . . let it do whatever it wants with us." I grabbed Miklynn's arm. "That's it! If our patterns conform to whatever its patterns are, then we won't be a threat. Then it'll leave us alone."

Miklynn looked down the slope. "What do we do, Dean?"

I looked at Jerzi mouthing a soundless scream. "Whatever happens, give in to it. Don't fight. It'll push your thoughts around. Let it."

Miklynn frowned at me. "You better stay here."

I felt my eyes widen, then I shoved Miklynn in the chest. "Like hell, lardbucket! I'm going to lick that damned thing! If you want to come along, fine!" I stepped forward and began walking down the slope. At the first sign that my fears were climbing to my throat, I stopped and gave in to them—accepted them. I saw Miklynn in the grip of it, then I shouted at him. "It won't hurt you! Let it do what it wants with your emotions."

Miklynn swayed for a moment, eyes closed, then he nodded. "Yeah. I got it now." He opened his eyes and looked at Parks, Yamada, then me. He cocked his head toward Jerzi and Arango. "Okay. Let's move in closer."

Screams . . . the power of the damned thing! All of them now, in the pool. I can see . . . Miklynn's eyes staring at me from under the water. "It wants you, Dean." The water . . . it washes my boots, then rises up . . . up my legs. I relax, drive fear behind me, open up my mind—my heart—letting the thing have its way. I step forward, into the pool. The water . . . closes over my head. . . .

My eyes open. The others stand about me, blinking. All around us are green fields and blue skies. Parks looks at me and smiles. "It's accepted us. It's accepted us, hasn't it, Dean?"

I look around, Jerzi and Arango unconscious on the ground, Parks, Miklynn, and Yamada looking around in wonder at the normality of everything. Yamada walks over and stands in front of me. "Dean, has it gone?"

"No. It has accepted us; it trusts us." I look at them. "But its guard is down— Now fight it!"

Blinding white light—sound beyond sound—sensation gone riot.

Something I cannot feel grapples with something I cannot see. Then. Darkness.

... Sour smells in my nose ... smoke, disinfectant. I feel myself ... in bed.

I opened my eyes and found myself looking at a white ceiling, the grey shadows of blinds across it. My head on a pillow. I turn my head to the right and there is Jerzi sleeping in a chair, his feet up and crossed on another chair. "Jerzi?" I coughed, then spoke louder. "Jerzi?"

Jerzi sprang to his feet. "Dean? You all right?"

"Where am I?"

Jerzi smiled, then laughed. "Gee, I wish I'd said that."

"Knock off the crap, Jerzi. Where am I?"

"Arapeth. You're in the Ninth Quadrant Base Hospital. Thought we were going to lose you for awhile." He sat back in the chair, stretched, then yawned.

"What about D'Maan?"

Jerzi shrugged. "Troubleshooting's all done, thanks to you. You gave old Neptune quite a start by fighting it after it figured it was all right." He leaned forward in the chair. "Those areas where Neptune isn't, the lifeforms in them do the same thing—that's how they keep it out. Everyplace else, they just go along for the magnetic ride. Mustafa figures that the followup team can survive by wearing a blanking field that will neutralize an individual's own field. But that won't take care of Neptune's real threats."

"Real threats?"

Jerzi nodded. "I meant threats to Neptune. It isn't intelligent, but it isn't altogether stupid. The fields we tangled with were its first line of defense. If your patterns don't match, then it turns your own fears loose on you. But there's more. While you were on your way to the hospital, we tried out a few things. Right now the lander is a solidified puddle of molten metal."

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"Neptune reacts automatically with the fear field—that's what we're calling it. Anyway, everything on D'Maan has adjusted to it. So it has other defenses. Intense heat is one; the transformation of matter is another. Robot probes don't get scared, so they got melted."

I nodded. "That's going to be one helluva followup."

Jerzi shrugged. "Not our problem."

The door to the room opened, and Miklynn entered followed by a redfaced Parks. Miklynn looked at me and smiled. "I see you're

back among the living."

I nodded. "And how's yourself?"

"Fair. Fair."

Parks snorted. "Red, those damned hairballs won't listen to a thing about followup."

Miklyn shrugged. "Well, we're under orders, Parks, and the orders say that we make ourselves scarce once we make it possible for a followup team to go down there and survive. We've done that."

Parks frowned. "Once Lua and his crew make it down there, you know exactly what they'll do."

Miklynn raised his brows. "Well, I did try to make a suggestion or two, didn't I?" He shrugged. "It's not my fault if they don't want to listen."

Parks studied Miklynn for a moment, then he threw his head back, laughed, and left the room. I pulled myself to a sitting position. "What happens now?"

Miklynn rubbed his chin. "Well, as soon as you can get on your feet, we have another assignment. Think you'll sign up?"

"With you?"

"With me."

I pursed my lips, then closed my eyes and nodded. "I guess there are harder ways to die."

Jerzi laughed. "Not many."

Miklynn reached out and punched Jerzi in the arm. "I want any crap out of you, I'll step on your head and squirt it out your ears."

I held up my head. "Miklynn, what about the followup, and what was Parks laughing at?"

Miklynn held out his hands, shrugged, then let his hands drop to his sides. "Lua and his combine will be the so-called followup on D'Maan. Understand about Lua, he's the Arapeth equivalent of a robber baron. He's been smacking his hairy lips over D'Maan ever since he heard of the place. As soon as he puts down, he'll have his crews out stripping the planet bare for anything and everything he can get his grubby claws on." Miklynn grinned, and I swear canary feathers were sticking out of the corners of his mouth. "Those blanking fields will work fine as long as they don't do anything but walk around. But when they begin processing materials—" he shrugged, then chuckled. "I had a few suggestions for the followup regarding water pollution, but Lua wasn't interested." He stood, nodded, then left, followed by Jerzi.

I folded my hands and pondered the confrontation between the environmentally ignorant Arapeth and water that could fight back.

I nodded. Red Miklynn had licked the planet that he was after: Arapeth.

Some months later, up to our ears in another project, I asked Red if he thought revenge was a proper way for someone of his talents to spend his time. He thought upon it a moment, then looked at me. "How else do you get back at somebody?"

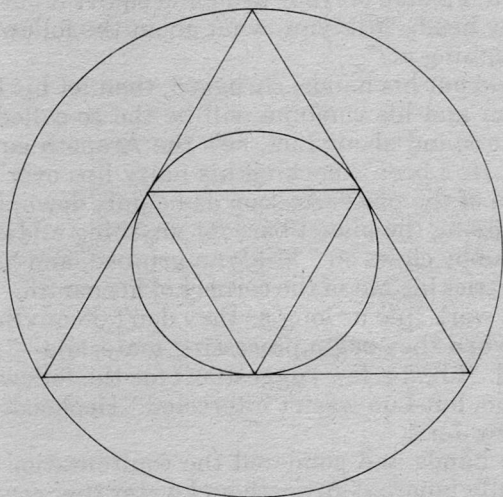
I'm still looking for an answer.



SECOND SOLUTION TO TITAN'S TITANIC SYMBOL

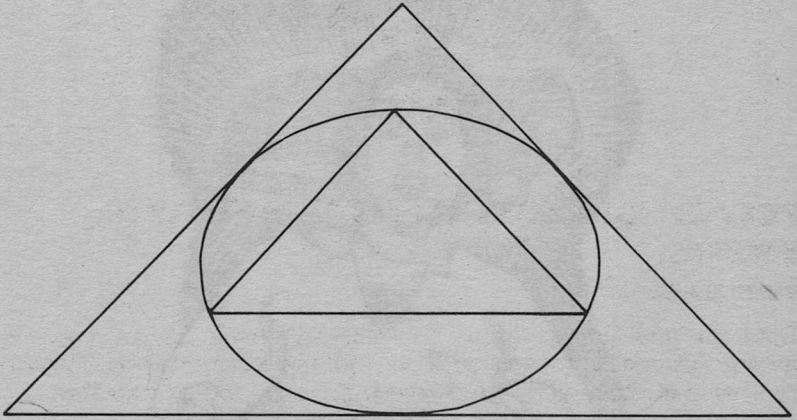
(from page 57)

Like the previous problem, this can be solved the hard way by drawing internal construction lines and applying algebra. The aha! way is to inscribe another equilateral triangle as shown below:

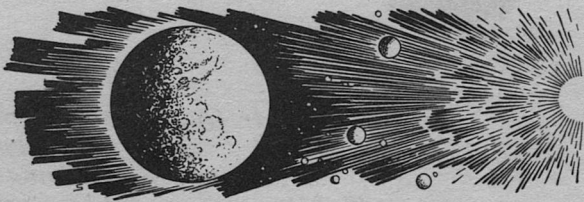


You see at once that the small triangle's area is one-fourth that of the large triangle. Since the small circle and its inscribed triangle is simply the large circle and its triangle reduced in size, the circles must be reduced by the same proportion as the triangles. Therefore the small circle's area is one-fourth that of the large circle. (Thanks to Daniel R. Royalty, of Ames, Iowa, for sending this problem.)

Suppose the symbol had been an ellipse with maximum-area isosceles triangles inscribed and circumscribed with parallel sides as shown below:



What is the ratio of the areas of the two triangles? The answer is on page 175.



REST IN PIECES

by W. T. Quick

art: Freff



Mr. Quick—most people call him "Bill"—is thirty-two and a midwesterner now living in Denver. Ted Cogswell started him writing about seventeen years ago; now he writes four hours a day, religiously. He's working on two novels; "Rest in Pieces" is his second sale.

Just as Jonny Calvert closed the door, the bomb popped out of thin air and said, "You didn't think it would be that easy, did you?"

Jonny's eyes bugged at the deadly titanium canister. It looked like an antique home-vac, but it wasn't. He froze for a moment. Then his brain clicked over and he tried a shaky smile. "You've got the wrong guy," he said.

"Are you Jonny Calvert?"

"No."

The bomb paused for a moment. "Yes, you are. Your brain waves match those given to me," it said matter-of-factly.

"Oh."

"Also, the money you stole from Bingle the Bookie is in that styrofoam container you're trying to hide."

"You mean this?" He raised the bag he'd been stuffing down his pants.

"Yes. Four hundred eighty-six thousand dollars. Yesterday's receipts."

Jonny shrugged. "Not quite. I spent the night in a hotel and had breakfast."

The bomb was silent. Jonny tried to remember everything he'd ever heard about robot killer-bombs. First, they were expensive. Bingle must've been really angry to go to such lengths. Unless—if Bingle was a syndicate front? Possible. The old Mafia was now a legal corporation. It paid its taxes as promptly as General Solar or U. S. Satellite, but it wasn't above hiding a bit of revenue like anybody else.

"Who hired you?" Jonny asked.

"I can't answer that," the bomb replied.

Jonny remembered something else. "Okay, how long do I have, and how much do I need?"

"I'm a four-hour bomb. My dismissal fee is five million dollars."

Jonny studied his reflection in the bomb's mirrored hide. A shade over six feet. Two hundred muscular pounds. A charming, little-boy face, the kind that made women instantly want to mother him. Dark, curly hair. Quavering hands and a tongue licking nervously over wet lips.

"Five million bucks? That's ten times what I stole."

"You admit it, then?"

He felt like a kid who'd made a stupid mistake at checkers. "Um—ah—well, yes. Sure I stole it. Bingle doesn't pay very well." He inhaled sharply. "Five *million*, you say? I couldn't raise that much if my life depended on it."

"It does," the bomb assured him.

A sour ball began to throb in Jonny's gut. It didn't seem real. Probably it wasn't. They just wanted their money back and that would be the end of it. And maybe not. The thought set his teeth jittering, but he managed to say, "Does the escape clause apply?"

"Of course." The bomb sounded offended. "If, in four hours, you find a way to survive, then the contract is void."

It wasn't a very hopeful ray. "How much time is left?"

"Three hours, fifty-two minutes, twenty seconds."

Jonny bolted for the door. The bomb didn't mind. Once keyed to his brain pattern, it could follow him anywhere.

"Binnie, you got to help me. Here's the money back, almost every cent. I'll pay the rest, I swear it. Now, *please*, call off your dogs."

Binnie Bingle looked at the pile of bills on his desk. Then he raised his sad brown eyes and stared into Jonny's terrified blue ones. Bingle's perfume smelled like lilies. "I'd like to, Jonny, but I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"It's out of my hands," he said gently.

"Oh, no, Binnie, you aren't saying—"

"Yes. I didn't contract the hit. The organization did. It doesn't like theft—at least when its money is involved."

"No. Binnie, call them. Tell them I brought it back. Something. Please, Binnie."

The older man blinked. He glanced at the bomb squatting next to Johnny's foot. "How much time is left on that thing?" he asked nervously.

"Three hours, one minute, seventeen seconds," the bomb said.

"Oh." Bingle sounded relieved. "Well, you're a pretty likable kid, for a thief," he said. "Okay, I'll call." He activated his desk hush-phone and punched buttons.

Jonny tried to read Bingle's lips, but had no luck. He waited, smelling the sourness of his own sweat, tasting salt on his chewed lips. The bookie finished talking and looked up.

"Well?" Jonny asked.

A film of moisture glinted on Bingle's shiny skull. "I'm sorry, kid. No luck. They said something about setting an example. I didn't push. You don't push people like them."

"Yeah. Murderers," Jonny said bitterly. "I don't suppose you've got five million you'd like to loan me, Binnie?"

"Son, I don't have five thousand. No, don't look at me that way.

I gave you a job and you stole from me. Nobody twisted your arm.”
Jonny bowed his head contritely. “I know, but I never thought—”
“That’s the problem. You never thought.” Bingle’s eyes twitched toward the bomb. “Look, I did what I could. But that thing gives me the shivers. How about you moving on?”

“You don’t even care!”

“Did you care when you robbed me?”

Jonny’s face twisted angrily. “I don’t know why I bothered to return the money!”

Bingle’s smile was knowing. “Because you thought you had to,” he said. He pointed at the door. “Goodby, Jonny. Been nice knowing you.”

Jonny sat near a port station and ticked off point after hopeless point. The bomb perched on the bench beside him. In less than three hours it would detonate an implosion-shielded blast that would destroy everything within four meters. There was no escape he could think of. The bomb was equipped with transporters, both personal and remote. It could hook into the brain pattern of a human and shift him out of danger. It could hook into Jonny and, though not allowed to port him, could follow him anywhere.

Jonny remembered a guy who thought he’d found a weakness in the primary injunction against damaging anybody but the intended victim. He managed to get himself locked in a bank vault with several innocent bystanders. When the time came, the bomb simply ported everybody else out of the vault and then blew up. Some of the bettors over at Bingle’s used to say they were spending “the old Fred,” who was the guy that hadn’t been so smart. He shuddered.

“You’re going to kill me,” he said wonderingly. He still couldn’t grasp it. “Over a lousy half-million, you’re going to blow me into bloody little pieces.”

“I am an efficient mechanism,” the bomb said proudly.

“It’s not fair!”

The bomb didn’t reply.

The police wouldn’t help. Since the mob was legal, the cops looked the other way at anything involving its internal affairs. Who cared what crooks, legal or not, did to each other? As long as nobody else got hurt, they wouldn’t interfere. Besides, the injunctions, as well as the escape clause with its implicit possibility of avoiding the blast, gave them a moral out as well. If somebody couldn’t buy or think his way out of the death sentence, maybe he deserved to die.

“I don’t suppose you can be destroyed?” Jonny asked.

"Of course I can," the bomb said.

"Mind telling me how?"

"Lasers. Concussion. Heat. Pressure."

"Would it do me any good?"

"Possibly," the bomb admitted. "You'd have to be very fast. In case of attack, my detonation reflex is in the low nanoseconds."

A nanosecond. One billionth of a second. "Well, fry that," Jonny said.

For a while he sat and stared into the middle distance. He tasted bile in his mouth. The heat of the sun on the pavement brought the smell of cooking asphalt. Unseeing, he listened to the scuff of transient footsteps as strollers swept past, saw the bomb and shied suddenly away. It made Jonny feel as if he was already dead, removed from human concern or help. He imagined the unpleasant sensation of dirt clods falling onto his face. Seconds dripped by.

Finally he looked up. "It's not fair," he said again.

The bomb gleamed noiselessly, metal blazing.

"I'm going to die." There was resignation in his voice, but something cold and dangerous grew there as well.

"How much time?" he asked.

"Two hours, fourteen minutes, nine seconds," the bomb told him.

"That's enough," Jonny said. He got up and stalked purposefully away.

Binnie Bingle's furry black eyebrows tried to crawl up his naked forehead like twin caterpillars when he recognized his visitor. Jonny almost laughed out loud.

"You!" Bingle blurted.

"Me," Jonny said, as he seated himself before Bingle's cluttered desk. His eyes glittered brightly.

Bingle licked thin, liverish lips. "What do you want? I already told you—"

"Shut up, Binnie," Jonny said.

"Shut up? Listen, you small-time—"

Jonny hauled out the antique .38-caliber revolver, a memento from his father. He pointed the ugly little weapon at the bookie's nose. "I said shut up."

Bingle shut up. A faint tic began to dance below his left eye.

"I got to thinking," Jonny said. "I'm pretty smart, you know. One of the best at the old con. That's how I've always made my living." He gestured at the bomb. "But I couldn't figure out how to con my way out of *that*."

Dark patches appeared on the armpits of Bingle's white lounge-suit. Usually dapper, he now looked as disheveled as his office. His jaw quivered. "And so . . . ?" he asked.

"I'm going to die, Binnie. I decided I'd like company. You got elected," Jonny said simply.

"You're crazy!"

"Maybe."

"That thing will port me out before it explodes. Remember Fred?"

"By that time you'll have several holes in you. It won't help. It can only port someone away from its own blast."

Bingle was sweating visibly. The astringent odor, mixed with the flowery sweetness of his perfume, was overwhelming. His sallow face leaped and jumped minutely. "Jonny, why me? You think I can help? Sure. I'll try. I'll call again." He reached for his phone.

"No, don't touch that!"

"Why? Maybe I can do some good." Bingle's eyes were pleading.

"You know better. You said those guys don't push. If they want me five million bucks worth of dead, the loss of a small-time bookie"—he relished returning the insult—"won't matter much. Will it?"

Bingle's narrow shoulders sagged. "No."

Jonny stared at the scrawny old man. Somehow this didn't feel right. He extended the pistol.

"Jonny, I got a wife. Two kids. I say again, why me?"

"Why not? You set me up for this."

"I didn't! Sure, I had to report it, but *they* let the contract. I got no control, you know that."

The gun wavered, then steadied again. "I can't get at them. You'll have to do."

Every trembling line of the bookie's body expressed abject terror. Still, his voice held the lingering taste of rebellion. "Yeah, you'll do it," he said bitterly. "You're rotten enough. But it still ain't fair."

Jonny's finger tightened on the trigger.

Not fair? For the very first time in his life Jonny knew what was going on in another man's mind. It sickened him.

He lowered the gun. Then he got up and placed it on Bingle's desk. "You're right, Binnie," he said. "It isn't fair. None of it is." He paused, searching Bingle's ravaged face. "I'm a liar, a cheat, a thief. I don't think becoming a murderer will help anything.

Bingle remained absolutely still.

Jonny smiled. "I'm sorry, Binnie. Goodby." Then he turned and walked out of the office.

The bookie stared at the closed door for several seconds. Then he said, "Goodby, Jonny. I'm sorry too."

For a while Jonny wandered in the sunlight. To his numbed mind, death seemed unavoidable. Something tickled his unconscious. Sure. Why not? Maybe he couldn't do anything for himself, but there might be a way to help the next victim. Perhaps his death, unlike his life, could mean something. He thought about it. Finally, he had a plan.

He ported out to the bay. He watched the choppy water for a few minutes. Then he walked onto the bridge. Fifty years before, it had carried thousands of cars in and out of the city. Now it held the homes and gardens of the rich. They liked the view. About half-way across he found what he was looking for. He had to pick two locks and climb a safety fence. Finally he reached the partially hidden ladder which ran straight up one of the mighty towers. He started to climb.

It was a simple plan. The top of the bridge was the highest, most visible place in the city. His climb would be noticed. Suicides often chose the bridge. At the top, in the eyes of thousands of people, the bomb would kill him. Perhaps the public would no longer tolerate murder if it had to watch the process.

He kept on climbing. The wind whipped at him. Far below, tiny figures gathered. Their upturned faces were indistinct white blobs. They waved and pointed. Good.

The top of the tower was about a meter square. A massive cable snaked up and over. Jonny sat down and looked out over the city, his back to the giant steel rope. He let his feet dangle over the edge. The breeze was cool and laden with salt.

"How much time?" he asked.

"Five minutes, twelve seconds," the bomb said.

Down below, someone began to climb the ladder after him. A heli-cam from one of the TV stations buzzed by, then hovered several meters away. Jonny ignored it all. For a space, he tilted his head up to the bright blue sky. Seagulls wheeled past, calling their forlorn, lost cries. The cable felt rough against his back. The air tasted sparkling and new. The sun shone warmly down.

"Ten seconds," the bomb said. "Nine . . . eight . . . seven—"

A worried face appeared at the top of the ladder. "Go away!" Jonny said urgently. He heard a sharp click from the bomb. The face disappeared.

"Five . . . four . . . three . . ."

How alive he felt! Every muscle in his body tensed in primal reflex.

Please, let it do some good, he prayed.

A timeless moment.

"Congratulations, Jonny Calvert," the bomb said.

Slowly, Jonny felt his muscles un-kink. "What?" he said after a while.

"I'm unable to detonate. You've survived. The contract is void."

Another pause. "I don't understand," Jonny said. He began to look around.

"I'm not allowed to damage any human but you. Yet, I can only port humans away from my own blast area, as I did a few moments ago. My analysis of the structure we are on indicates that my detonation would cut one of its main support cables. The structure would collapse and hundreds of humans would be damaged."

Jonny stared at the ugly little canister. If it had features, it would look puzzled. Helplessly, he began to laugh.

"My manufacturers will pay a sizable amount for your silence. There are other bombs. It will take time to switch production to a new device."

Jonny rose to shaky knees. "Stupid hunk of tin," he said. "There's no secret to keep. It's all on film." He gestured toward the hovering heli-cam. "But even if it weren't, you could keep your payoff. I don't need blood money. I'm not a killer."

As his feet touched the ladder he felt the wind on his face like a benediction, and realized he was no longer a lot of other things, either.

Whistling, he began the long climb down.

THE CURSE

Science fiction superstar

How I wonder what you are.

Up above on heights delirious

When will you write something serious?

—Fan D. Ango

FOR CHEDDAR OR WORSE

by F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

*The writer claims to be the only
science fiction writer in history
to grow longer sideburns
than Isaac Asimov's.
Which
may not be the shaggiest
thing about this story.*

The hatchway hissed open and all the Junior Space Cadets stopped throwing zero-gravity spitballs at each other and looked up as their Space Academy Instructor did a free-fall back stroke into the room. "We're approaching Gernsback Crater on the lunar surface now," he informed them, "and we'll be landing shortly. While I turn off the antigrav, everybody suit up and turn on your helmet radios so you can hear me."

A flurry of activity ensued as thirty eager boys and girls climbed into their space suits. "What I'm about to tell you cadets is classified information and not, I say again, *not* to be passed on to civilian personnel.

"Here in Gernsback, hidden beneath the shadow of a lunar rock formation, is a very curious piece of real estate. What makes this particular piece of the moon so interesting is that it really *is* made of green cheese. Our scientists can't explain it. It tastes horrible but it's unquestionably green and it's definitely cheese.

"Even more amazing is the fact that this lunar region we're visiting now is inhabited. . . ." An excited buzz ran all round the classroom, and the instructor had to zap the bulkhead with his disintegrator pistol to get attention. "Yes! There is life on the moon! Intelligent life, and friendly. We don't know what they eat or how they breathe; we've only discovered them recently. They've learnt a few words of English, and somehow or other they can pick up transmissions from our helmet radios. They even look humanoid . . . except that they're made out of cheese."

"I don't believe this," said one Junior Space Cadet. "A life form, made out of cheese? How could it have evolved?"

"We're not sure," the instructor admitted. "But it's not so strange when you think about it. Yogurt is alive, and that comes from the same things as cheese. Stilton cheese back on Earth is a life form

of a sort. The science lads have asked the Cheese People how their race originated, but they don't know either. It seems the Cheese People have an ancient legend about a cow jumping over the moon. She tripped over a crater and all the milk ran out of her udders and turned into primordial fondue."

"Sounds like udder confusion," murmured one cadet.

"Sounds more like the Milky Whey," said somebody else. Both cadets were promptly kicked in the prats by several of their classmates, and the instructor made a mental note to see to it that both would be assigned to permanent hardship duty on Pluto.

"Now then," continued the instructor as he led his pupils out the air lock and onto the pockmarked lunar surface. "You can see a few of the Cheese People running to greet us. As I said, they're friendly and they can hear our radio transmissions even if they don't understand English very well. Now who remembers the procedure for encountering an alien life form?"

"I do," offered a cadet. "When confronted by several aliens at once, the first thing to do is find out which one is in charge. May I demonstrate?" The instructor nodded and the cadet strode up to the crowd of cheese creatures. "Excuse me, but where do you keep the *head cheese*?"

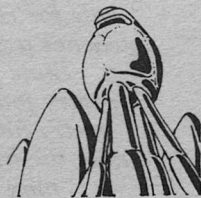
The creatures remained silent.

"Maybe you didn't phrase it correctly," suggested another cadet. She walked up to the nearest creature and asked: "Which one of you is the *big cheese* around here?"

Still no reply.

"Worse and worse," chided the instructor. Then, jabbing a finger at the smallest and youngest pupil in his class, he shouted: "You there! Feghootson! Your father was one of my most brilliant pupils. Let's see how you handle this!"

"Nothing to it, professor," said Feghootson. Tilting his space helmet at a jaunty angle over one ear, he stepped up to the creatures and said: "*Take me to your Liederkrantz!*"



A MATTER OF ETIQUETTE

by Jerry Craven

art: Janet Auliso



Although the author has had his fiction published before, this is his first sale for real money. Occasionally he teaches a course in SF at West Texas State University. He also edits a poetry journal and is now collecting poetry for an anthology that focuses upon the high plains; interested poets may obtain details from him at 2614 14th Ave., Canyon TX 79015.

The thief turned his head, bird-like, to look at Dolan, his eye flashing with anger. Salomites were gathering to watch, heads swinging from side to side, and Dolan began to wish he had thought the matter out a little better. "You stain my honor before my friends," the thief snarled. "You will give me satisfaction." He twisted his head around to look at Dolan with his other eye.

"I don't mind sharing some of my things," Dolan said, trying to be patient, "but I cannot get home without my directional lock—that little machine you took from my hopper. If you will return it, I will give you several tubes of my travel food." It seemed like a safe enough offer: the Salomites loved travel food and usually were eager to barter for it. Dolan had become so accustomed to the appearance of Salomites that he forgot for a moment that they were not actually human. The fellow standing before him wore the usual comb-like topnotch of flesh, had eyes on opposite sides of a hatchet-shaped face, and had hardly any chin at all. When Dolan had first set down on this planet, the natives reminded him of a rooster he had once seen in an animated holofilm cartoon. Now that he was accustomed to them, he found himself thinking of Salomites as creatures like him: thus his error in offering travel food. The offer offended both the thief and those who gathered to watch.

The thief surveyed the crowd in a series of quick jerks of his head, then clicked a dry laugh. "Listen," he said, "the stranger accuses me of stealing worthless trash from his metal tub. Me! Freeman the Younger!" He turned his face aside to eye Dolan. "You will give me satisfaction." He adjusted his robe, probably, Dolan thought, to better conceal the lock. Dolan had climbed to the main deck in time to see him pull it from the panel and thrust it into that robe, and Dolan had scrambled after him. But the thief was quick, and in spite of his studied slowness at the hatchway, he eluded Dolan's grasp, then ran to the village to gather an audience. And now Dolan had made the mistake he had been sure he would not make. It was too late to do anything about the challenge but set the time.

"Sundown," Dolan said with resignation. If he could have extended the time more, he would have. But that was the maximum. Maybe he could come up with something in that period of time, but it didn't seem likely, given the nature of the honor game.

Freeman smiled, though Dolan knew, from his predecessor's notes, that the gesture meant, depending upon the situation, either arrogance, aggression, or deliberate insult; and maybe several other things. Kyle Larkin had bared his teeth in a public grin twice, or so his sketchy notes had said, and the second time proved fatal. So

when Freeman drew his bluish lips over a set of pointed teeth in a Draculean grimace, the anthropologist in Dolan split away from Dolan-the-frightened-outsider long enough to analyze the hostility in the expression.

"Sundown," Freeman said, flashing his teeth again. "I will endure the insult until sundown, then I will kill you." He strode away, and the villagers drifted off in little groups, like covies of bipedal quail, talking about this new development with the stranger.

If it came to it, Dolan supposed that he could use a knife in each hand, which was the closest equivalent he could think of to the three steel spurs that would be strapped to the fingers of each of Freeman's hands. And Dolan might well win, in spite of having shorter arms, because he had the advantage of depth perception, whereas Freeman, having eyes on opposite sides near what might otherwise be called his temples, would be a poor judge of parrying distance.

Not that it would matter. If he did kill the thief, the action would extend his life only a few hours. The villagers would be honor-bound to avenge the death of one of their own, and Dolan knew that meant torture and death. So it had been either refuse to set a time, which meant Freeman would have attacked him immediately with steel spurs, or accept the challenge and try his luck in the honor game—which would hardly be luck since the villagers would be waiting with their ropes and irons in the event that Dolan won. Perhaps a third alternative would turn up before nightfall, but the chances for that looked slim.

Dolan went back to the hopper, secured the door against further intruders, and headed for the palace of the White. He hurried through the village toward a large adobe structure, determined not to be late for the regional banquet lest the White get angry with him. All he needed right then was another crisis.

He got there on time, barely, and went cautiously, slowly through the round hole that Salomites used for doors. Dolan had observed that they always crossed their thresholds with measured slowness, though he was unsure if the caution was born of the limitations of their vision—a fear of misjudging the position of the sides of the entrances and bruising themselves—or if the action were demanded by some obscure social custom. To be on the safe side, Dolan always mimicked their snail-like motions when entering one of their buildings.

The guest of honor arrived just after Dolan sat down at one of the long banquet tables. The White had not come in yet. Dolan looked

at those seated around the other four tables. Judging from the red marks on the sleeves of their robes, everyone present was a property-owning aristocrat. Freeman the Younger sat at another table, ignoring Dolan—as he should since the White had no patience with local rivalries intruding upon the regional banquet.

Dolan had witnessed a breach of etiquette during a previous banquet, the one given in his honor the day he had set the hopper down outside the village. A landholder, who apparently had not felt full restoration of his honor when Kyle Larkin had been killed, accused Dolan of being Kyle's brother. It seemed like a serious charge, but not one to make at a banquet given for a guest of the White. The landholder had interrupted Dolan's speech by shaking spurred fingers and talking incoherently about Kyle and honor lost. All it took was a quick sharp nod from the White and those surrounding the ranting landholder had dragged him out, his face blue with anger, where—Dolan found out later—he was strapped to a tree for a treatment with hot irons.

The White had apologized and instructed Dolan to finish his speech. Dolan had taken a calculated risk: he altered the text of his pre-planned statement to get in a disclaimer of kinship with Kyle Larkin, the last anthropologist to try studying this culture. Dolan made his point subtly: all terrestrials, he had said, looked alike. Which probably wasn't a lie. All of these creatures looked pretty much alike to him—except for the White—just as all Chanvorians, with their snaky tendrils and patches of red hair, looked alike to humans, as did the squat Baldanzans, and so on. When he had first arrived, Dolan could distinguish only social classes of Salomites, and that because of the colored caste marks on their sleeves. So it was logical to assume that humans looked alike to Salomites.

The village poet was sitting nearby, his three claw-like fingers wrapped around his cup of quid, a foul-smelling brew made from dung-fermented berry juice. The poet was the only one drinking; everyone else waited for the White to enter and pronounce the benediction. Dolan watched the poet pour another drink, but everyone else pretended not to notice. Apparently, Dolan decided, the poet had some special privileges, an observation worth putting into his notes—provided he survived the honor game.

The White came in, raised his arms and chanted, "Blessed be the food and quid for the health of our honored guest." The poet issued a deep, resonate belch, startling Dolan. The White was startled, too, but he quickly regained composure. "Now we dine," he continued as if nothing unusual had happened. Salomites immediately began

talking, pouring quid, and passing food around.

The "food" was, Dolan noted with a twinge in the pit of his stomach, more of the brown goop he had been served the last time the White had invited him to a meal. Cheap Salomite food, that is, the blue bread and unfermented berry juice that was their usual daily fare, was palatable to Dolan—even good. But banquet food, the expensive stuff, was twenty times worse than tubes of travel food. The taste was horrible—something like a cross between green persimmons and kerosene, though it was a delicacy by Salomite standards. But he had to eat it or risk whatever consequences came with being rude.

The poet ate voraciously and drank staggering quantities of quid. And he began to talk louder as the meal progressed. It was the first time Dolan had seen anyone on the planet drink too much, and he had assumed that there was a strong cultural stigma against getting drunk. "If I did what the poet is doing," Dolan told himself, "they would have me tied to a tree and be working me over with hot irons before the banquet was finished."

Professor Daniels had warned him that this was a very dangerous culture for an anthropologist to work with directly. Kyle Larkin had lasted only three days before being burned to death. In the few notes that he managed to record, Larkin had expressed a fear that he might inadvertently break some unwritten law and be asked to leave the planet. And the fear was more than justified: for a public smile, Larkin was escorted from the universe via torture and death. But Dolan had been convinced that he could survive. It was simply a matter of learning social rules in order to avoid fatal mistakes, and he would be very careful.

So he had thought. Now both he and the project on this planet seemed doomed, and along with it a small piece of a broader study of primitive cultures that practice capital punishment and public execution. Dolan toyed with the brown goop.

"The Minister of Education is our honored guest," the White said, standing up. Dolan looked at the albino leader. His skin was really more pink than white, but his hair was as white as the planet's nocturnal moon. From where Dolan sat, the village leader's eyes looked blue, though close up they would appear pink. "While we finish our meal," the White continued, "The Minister will talk to us about the condition of our schools." He sat down while everyone politely banged their cups on the table.

"Thank you," the Minister said, rising. "I am pleased to report to you that your schools are in good condition. In fact, I find the schools

here unsurpassed in all of our seven provinces." The poet staggered to his feet.

"You feed us lies," the poet said thickly, leaning against the table. Dolan was stunned. He looked around, expecting Salomites to swarm all over the poet and haul him to the nearest tree. But everyone was looking down—or maybe up, since Dolan couldn't tell which eye they were focusing through—and seeming embarrassed. "Our schools are rotten," the poet went on. "Our children have poor teachers, the buildings are in need of repairs, and no one in the ministry seems to know or care. The records might look nice, but after you are gone, it will be the same old thing. No teaching. No learning." The poet staggered toward the door. "I will not stay to hear how good a bad school is," he said, leaving.

"That . . . that," the White sputtered, "was inexcusable. I am sorry you were treated so at our banquet."

"Do not apologize for that drunkard," the Minister said. "I had but few words to say, and now that the drunk is gone, I will continue."

Dolan listened to a brief speech about the quality of the food and the delicacy of the local quid. There was not another word about education. As the banquet broke up, Dolan overheard one landholder say, "Now the Minister knows how we really feel about the schools here." Something strange was going on, something Dolan wanted more time to ponder. Not only were the poet's insults unpunished, but the group seemed secretly to approve of his actions, in spite of their supposed embarrassment.

Outside, the sun was going down, and Dolan calculated that he had less than an hour before Freeman the Younger would show up, spurs on his fingers, grinning for blood. Dolan hurried to the hopper, selected two large kitchen knives, put them and three tubes of travel food into his pocket, and made a quick entry in his notes. "It is possible," he spoke into the log, "that drunks on the planet Salom serve a social purpose." He glanced at his watch and switched the log off. There wasn't enough time to complete the observation about drunks, but even that much of a hint might be enough to help his replacement—should anyone be so foolhardy as to try this planet again. He secured the hopper and headed for the village quid house.

The old peasant in the quid house was delighted to trade quid for the tubes of food. Dolan forced almost seven cups down, trying against nearly impossible odds to keep from thinking about the excrement-laden vats he had seen used to brew the drink. He staggered out of the hut, remembering to pause in the circular doorway. The stagger,

he noted, was not entirely a fake, though he made an effort to seem drunker than he was. When he got to the center of the village, a crowd had already gathered. Freeman stood alone, Dolan thought, like a villain in the mainstreet show-down in an old space opera. He started to laugh at the comparison, checked himself because of the Salomite attitude toward smiles, then remembering Freeman's grin, he allowed himself a full smile. The smile felt good, both for the private humor and the irrational feeling of power it gave him when villagers shrank from the show of teeth. He pulled out the knives.

Freeman returned his smile. *If I hologrammed this scene for uninitiated terrestrials*, Dolan thought, *they would view us as a couple of morons or maybe lunatics grinning idiotically before mortal combat*. He stood still, waiting for Freeman to approach. The Salomite drew his hands from his robe, flexed steel-tipped fingers, and moved toward him.

When Freeman was fewer than four meters away, Dolan took a stumbling step forward and said, "You are a coward as well as a thief." Freeman stepped back, surprised. "You found me drinking travel quid," Dolan went on, "stole the machine from my space hopper, then lied about it and challenged me." He hoped his lie about travel quid would go unnoticed.

The villagers, who had flowed slowly and quietly around them, broke into a frenzy of movement. Several seized the thief. "Why did you?" several voices asked, though none pushed for an answer, and Dolan heard the word *drunkard* several times. Salomites worked with the single-mindedness of a colony of ants. Within seconds Freeman was strapped to a tree and several Salomites were building a fire. As the kindling leaped into a full blaze, several others laid iron rods partly in the flames. Dolan felt almost dizzy from watching the frantic activity.

He felt triumph and elation—and at the same time horror for the cold-blooded brutality he was about to witness. The White appeared beside him. "I just heard," the White said, hanging his head to indicate apology, "that one of my people stole from you while you were drunk with quid, and then had the arrogance to try to kill you in an honor game."

"Yes," Dolan said. "And he took a machine I need."

"He will be killed," the White declared. "Your honor will be restored."

"If he will return my machine," Dolan offered, "I will be glad to have his life spared."

"Spare him? After this insult? There would be no honor in that."

"If he dies, I might never recover my machine." The insight had just come to Dolan, and it made his stomach churn.

"A machine worth more than honor?" The White sounded disgusted. Dolan cursed himself and the alcohol for his slowness of thought. Some of the irons were beginning to glow.

"No," he said. "Not worth more than honor." He paused, trying to figure out how to save the situation. The White waited, looking at him suspiciously. "It would be greater honor for me if Freeman the Younger were forced to live so I could laugh at his defeat. That is great honor among my people."

"Greater honor than watching him suffer and die?" the White asked.

"Only if I had the machine he stole," Dolan said, trying to talk faster and yet still seem drunk. "I could wave the machine at him and gloat. That would give me much honor, and would shame him worse than death."

"That is strange, but it must be true," the White shrugged. He gave orders, and the execution activity stopped as quickly as it had begun. Within ten minutes Dolan had his directional lock in hand. He profusely thanked the White and staggered back to the hopper.

With the lock safely in place, he flipped on the note log. "The people here," he dictated, "regard the drunk not as a derelict, but in part as something of a child who is not responsible, and in part as one who does not lie. Apparently it is not acceptable to punish a person for what he does while drunk. And that, coupled with the notion that the drunk is truthful, is what allows the drunk to serve a social purpose." Dolan was about to continue with his analysis when a commotion outside interrupted him.

"Stranger! Stranger!" someone called. Dolan peered out the door. A whole crowd of Salomites was there in the same quiet, anticipatory mood Dolan had noted before the execution activity had started. In the dim light, he could see Freeman the Younger holding something in his hand. "Stranger," Freeman called. "Come out and talk with me."

Dolan watched Freeman raise his hand to his mouth. "Quid!" Dolan said. He slammed the door.

Operating a hopper while even slightly drunk could be tricky business: one wrong move, and he would be either lost or roasted in a star. But what choice was there? Dolan had no idea what the local etiquette was when two drunks clashed, but he had no intention of hanging around to find out.

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT ENGINEER

by Arlan Keith Andrews, Sr.

Far up on Mount Olympus at the smithy of the Gods,
Hephaestos, crippled Engineer, picked up His measuring rods.
He checked and rechecked carefully the sizes of His mold
Then quickly poured the melt inside and watched till it was cold.

And when He took the mold apart and brushed away the sand
He saw two dozen figures there He'd made by His Own hand:
Two dozen elves, immortals, just as specified by Zeus.

He'd program them with RNA and then He'd turn them loose.
Two dozen elves, on schedule, and exactly as designed—
Technicians skilled in systems, helping new worlds to unwind.
The nomenclature for the gnomes? "Some fragrance," Zeus
preferred.

Rose water wasn't apropos and so He called them *Myrrh*.

Myrrh-Alpha was the first one through; He programmed in its
duty:

"I've optimized your circuits for the great design of Beauty."

Myrrh-Beta He programmed for Love, *Myrrh-Gamma* for the
Arts

And so on through the alpha-bet each *Myrrh*-thing took a part.
But as He neared the final *Myrrhs*, a sound rang through His
shed:

The bell from Aphrodite's room was triggered by Her bed.
He thundered up Olympus' slopes and caught Her there with
Mars.

The fight They had made planets flip and supernovaed stars.

The battle reached a standstill and Hephaestos came back down.
He finished up the last four *Myrrhs*, His great face in a frown.
So thus from Mount Olympus flew two dozen *Myrrhs* in all
To aid Mankind and help the Earth. They had the wherewithal.

Myrrh-Alpha made the sunset red, *Myrrh-Beta* worked out Sex.

Myrrh-Gamma spelled out artists, *Myrrh-Delta*, architects.

Myrrh-Epsilon made Medicine, *Myrrh-Zet'*, Biology;

Myrrh-Eta, culinary arts, *Myrrh-Thet'*, Theology.

To every craft and pastime a deific *Myrrh* adhered

And everything went smoothly till it came to Engineers.
The *Myrrh* made when the Fight began had stayed too warm too
long,

Hephaestos' hate when finishing made other things go wrong.

For *this Myrrh*-thing began to think, and plan and analyze.

Its brethren *Myrrhs* went blindly on, but *this* one got too wise.

"I am," It said, "Therefore, I think. And that's a hellish note.

I'll formulate and specify." And this is what He wrote:

"No blindly-driven robot, I, though Gods Themselves may panic.

I'll institute Impedance here and that's *thermodynamics*.

Rule One: (I say, it must be so) What comes out, must go in.

Rule Two: You always lose a bit, no way to ever win.

And then I opt for Entropy so everything runs down.

You'll have to work to keep things up, or otherwise you'll lose
ground.

To maximize this well-run Earth and keep my good relations

I'll give Mankind a little hint: look for 'max-well' equations."

So on and on the Chaos came; a veritable fount

Until the other *Myrrh*-things called Hephaestos from the Mount.

Hephaestos, that sad crippled giant, He sighed at what He saw,

But said, "There's not a warranty, although I note the flaw.

I do not like this Thermo thing nor other Laws I see.

And Man will curse this *Myrrh*-thing to the end of Eternity.

But the race of Man and you other *Myrrhs* must pay the price
because

Of the Patron *Myrrh* of the Engineers: you're stuck with
Myrrh-Phi's Laws!"



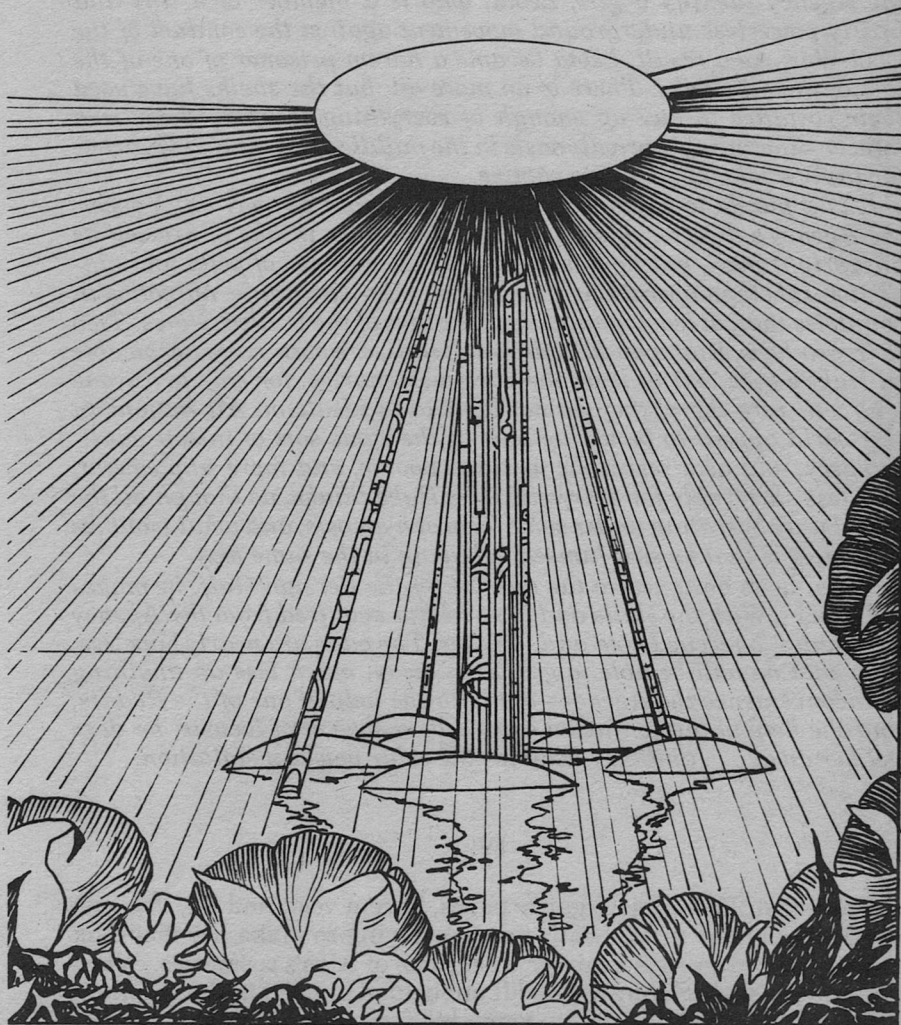


LIKE UNTO THE LOCUST

by Frederik Pohl

art: Jack Gaughan

Part II



The Reverend H. Hornswell Hake, finding himself an inadvertent cloak-and-dagger agent in the commercial and psychological Cool War that has replaced armed conflict in the world, is on his way to the Persian Gulf to help sabotage a mysterious solar-power installation. Hake has already participated in a project to spread an incapacitating, if non-lethal, disease through all of Europe, and to help the Agency identify a girl, Leota, who is a member of a tiny and nearly powerless underground movement against the conduct of the Cool War. As a result, Leota became a harem prisoner of one of the last of the oil sheiks. There is no more oil, but the sheiks have used their royalties to buy up enough of everything to make them rich forever—including a private oasis in the middle of the Empty Quarter, for the one who holds Leota captive.

It is a puzzle to Hake why the agents behave as they do. Yosper, the Agency's director of all European activities, thinks of himself as an upright man, but he has conducted all manner of petty and vindictive sabotage operations and worse; even spreading narcotics in countries that, at least nominally, are allies of the United States. Two twin brothers, Rama and Subirama Reddi, are even more despicable in Hake's eyes, but at least they are mercenaries, for sale to anyone who will hire them; they do not pretend to idealism. All nations in the world appear to be taking part in the same sort of insane skull-duggery, and as a result the world is poorer, and more unpleasant, and less survivable for everyone; it is, Hake thinks, as though all the world were operating under some form of hypnosis, and what troubles him most is that he sees himself behaving in the same way.

When he is assigned to the mission in the Persian Gulf, he makes a decision. With the skills and tools he has acquired from the Agency he decides to rescue Leota and join her. The odds are nearly hopeless, even that he will be able to get Leota away, much less do anything to inconvenience the Agency—but with the help of one of the Reddis, and the help of the confusion caused by a swarm of locusts, he does get her away . . . and they head for the solar power installation.

IV.

Having stuffed herself, gauze pants, harem vest, and all, into one of Alys's baggier suits, Leota was now trying to make her face look more civilized in Alys's mirror with some of Alys's cosmetics. When she had finished, Subirama Reddi unbuckled himself in the co-pilot's seat and turned, kneeling, to bring his face close to theirs. "On my

instructions," he bawled over the noise of the engines, "we are going to land at the private airfield in about ten minutes. We will discuss the reasons after landing," he added, inclining his head toward the obviously inquisitive Egyptian. He did not wait for a reply, but straightened up and fastened his seat belt again. Only the top of his head was visible over the seat-back, shiny black hair slicked straight back, and did not invite discussion.

Hake recognized the wisdom of at least part of what Reddi had said—the pilot had already had to be taken into their confidence far more than was reasonable, for what was supposed to be a super-secret operation. But he didn't like it. He leaned to Leota's ear. "Do you know the bit about Mahomet and the camel?"

She looked at him. "He let the camel's nose into his tent, and the rest of the camel followed? Yes, that's the way it is with the Reddis, Hake. I thought you found that out in Italy."

"Well, I did. But I didn't have much choice—"

She grinned suddenly, the first smile he had seen from her since her rescue. She leaned forward and kissed him quickly. "I'm not complaining!"

She dabbed at her face once more with a wet-packed tissue, then sighed and gave up. Putting the cosmetic case away, she said, "I was real ready to get out of there, Horny. Mean bugger, that old sheik. Do you know how he got me out of Rome? With one of his boys holding a knife at my throat as we went through the port at Ostia. He had me believing he would have used it, too." The smile was completely gone now. She said, "I hope Alys will be all right."

"She said she could handle any man alive, Leota."

The girl looked at him. "Yeah. That sounds like her."

The pilot looked around, scowling. "Effendi, you and the woman should now have your safety belts secured," he pointed out in Arabic. He did not wait to see that they complied, but slammed the plane into a tight turn.

Twisting to keep his seat while fastening the belt, Hake could get only glimpses out of the tiny window: sand and wide, empty roads; dunes, and the broad sea beyond them; a cluster of one-story buildings that looked as though they had been put together out of used gasoline tins. They bounced in to a rough and ill-kept runway, and the pilot swerved off it at high speed toward a small building next to the stilted control tower. He cut the engines and turned around. "Now what?" he demanded. "If you wish me to take off, we must do it within a half-hour. This pig-pen is not equipped for night operations."

"How lawful you are," Reddi commented. "Have the kindness to bring the luggage in—all but my own bag, the brown one." He opened the door and crawled out over the wing, gave one contemptuous glance at the airport structures and then ignored them. When the pilot was safely away on the far side of the nose of the plane, grumbling as he managed the baggage, Reddi said, "I will leave you here. I will take the plane; please pay the pilot whatever is necessary, including an extra three hours of flying time."

"For God's sake, why?" demanded Hake, managing not to add that it was, after all, his plane.

"You and Pauket will go to the city by ground according to your orders. There are buses, but perhaps you will want to walk; it should take you no more than a day, and you can purchase hiking equipment at the hostel there. This is best. First, because your objective is along the coastal road. Second, the customs will be far less thorough here than in the city airport, and I do not suppose Pauket's credentials are in very good order. Third, I have arranged to pick up my brother, and it is not desirable that you be present."

"And, fourth," said Leota, "you want a chance to conspire with him in private."

He glanced at her. "Do you blame me? I have done as I undertook, and I have not been paid. My brother and I must make arrangements to be sure that you do not cheat us."

He paused, as though waiting for Hake to protest that he had no such intention. Hake kept still, and the Indian nodded. "Very well. I will be in the Crash Pad tomorrow night—"

"Crash Pad?"

"The hotel," Reddi said impatiently. "The sign on it says 'Intercontinental,' but ask anyone for the Crash Pad and they will direct you to it. Do not ask for my room. Go to it. It will be high up, on the top floor if I can arrange it, otherwise as close as possible to the top. You will know the room because it will have a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door with the opposite corners bent back. Is that understood? Good, now pay the pilot."

Hake looked at Leota, who nodded. He shrugged and moved to intercept the Egyptian as he returned from dumping the luggage at the door marked, in several languages, **Customs and Passport Control**. They haggled for the obligatory three minutes, then returned to the plane. Hake was beginning to feel actively good. The desert afternoon air burned his lungs and throat; but it was a good heat, familiar from his childhood; and Leota was beginning to seem more at ease.

Reddi was already standing on the wing of the plane, impatient. He said, "Are you quite sure that the pilot understands he is paid in full and that there will be no gratuities?"

"He understands," snarled the pilot, adding a sentence in Arabic that Reddi did not comprehend and Hake tried not to. He had no desire to learn of the pilot's sudden and unfortuate death.

The hostel had probably once been something else; at least, it was not very good as a hostel. Its advantage was that neither the veiled Bedouin woman who pointed out their room nor anyone else seemed to care much about IDs. It had very few other advantages. Two cots with Army blankets. Bare walls. Two sand-frosted windows that did not open. Signs in ten languages—not all of them repeated in all the languages: **No Alcoholic Beverages** was only in three Near Eastern languages and, curiously, in German; **No Smoking in Bed** was only in English.

Leota gathered up an armful of clothes and headed for the showers, pausing only because Hake insisted on taking her photograph first. He heard the distant tinny rattle of the pipes as he laid out the rest of the contents of Jessie's do-it-yourself ID kit. Passport and visas, no problem; he sealed the photographs on them and added appropriate stamps. He assembled metal type to read JFK-CAI and CAI-KWI, added airline and flight indicia, tapped the type into alignment and pressed them onto a ticket form: result, a perfect ticket showing that one Millicent Anderson Selfridge had flown from New York to Kuwait; he then threw away the ticket itself and left the used carbon copy to add to Leota's documents. For the sake of completeness he made her a set of credit cards, a Massachusetts driver's license, a Blue Cross card and one for Social Security. It took three-quarters of an hour to do it.

And Leota was still in the shower, the water gurgling intermittently. What was taking her so long? Didn't she know the concierge would be raging at the waste of water—if, that is, the concierge was bothering to listen?

He rubbed the cards between his palms to age them, bent a few corners artistically and studied the result. They looked good to him, for a first effort; he hoped they would look as good to any inquiring official.

He had stowed away the blank cards and kit, undressed and lay back on one of the bunks, almost falling asleep, before Leota returned. Her hair was wrapped in a towel. She wore Alys's familiar long print housecoat and, queerly, heavy knee-length socks; as she

moved, he caught a glimpse of thigh and discovered that she still seemed to be wearing the embroidered stockings beneath them. He said, "Welcome back, Millicent."

"Millicent?" Her expression was calm and detached as she put the traveling bag down and began to dry her hair.

"That's your new ID," he said, getting up to show her the documents. She inspected them carefully, and then said: "You do good work, Horny. Horny? Alys must have a blow-dryer somewhere in those bags. See if you can find it. And tell me what we're doing now."

Hake did his best to fill her in, aware that he knew less than he needed to know. Leota listened abstractedly, her expression remote, as she dried her hair and brushed it, and began to sort out the contents of Alys's baggage. She asked a few questions, but did not press when his answers were unsatisfactory.

She seemed, in fact, to be moving in a dream. When she had all Alys's possessions laid out on the cots—two long dresses, five pounds of cosmetics, even a titanium-rutile tiara among them—Hake saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

He said awkwardly, "You've had a pretty hectic time. Maybe—maybe I should just think about getting you back to America, or wherever. I can deal with this alone—"

She looked up at him. "Hell you can, Hake."

"Well . . . I guess you're worried about Alys. But I think she'll be all right. She was looking for an adventure."

"Adventure!" she exploded. "What do you know about adventures?" Then she calmed, and the glacial, detached expression returned. "Well, actually," she said, "I suppose Alys is better suited to that life than I was. He's an interesting old bastard, the sheik. Very artistic. And very technological. And if it gets too bad, she can always get out of it, sooner or later—she's in a better position to yell for help than I was. But still—"

Hake was finding the conversation uncomfortable. He wanted to know. He did not want to ask. He could feel a queasy pelvic sensation that he did not like, and did not even want to allow himself—after all, he pointed out to himself, Leota's sexual activities were not any of his concern. As she herself had told him. He was, however, entitled to feel compassion, surely. He said, stumbling over the words, "Was it, ah, really bad?"

She looked at him in silence for a moment, and then said only, "Yes."

He could not think of a response, and after a moment she said,

"Or, actually, no. I haven't got it sorted out yet, Horny."

He nodded without saying anything—it did not signify understanding, only acceptance. He stood up, helped her repack Alys's bags, and began to get ready for bed, all in silence. And then, as he was taking off his shirt, Leota touched the great broad welts on his chest.

"Horny? Those are your scars, from something that almost killed you."

"Yes?"

She dropped her robe. What he had thought to be embroidered stockings were tracings in blue, green, and yellow on her legs, and they covered her entire body, an explosion of surreal color. She said. "These are mine."

Before dawn they were walking along the road, the rented A-frame awkward on Hake's shoulders. The "objective" was four miles down the road, and it would be hot, broad daylight before they reached it; now there was a faint slipperiness of dew on the paved road and the occasional greenery. For most of these plants, most of the year, that would be the only water they saw. Or needed.

Neither Hake nor Leota spoke much. For Hake, he had too much on his mind—or none of it really on his mind, because he could not keep his attention on any one question. There were a dozen trains of thought slithering inconclusively around his head: The Agency; what the Reddis were up to; the broad sand hillocks to one side of them and, now and then, a look at the sea to the other. And, over and over again, Leota. None of them came to a climax, and perhaps he did not want them to; they were not uncomfortable where they were.

When the oil sheiks owned this part of the world, they had climbed to the top of their mountain of petrodollars and looked toward the west. What they saw, they copied. Hospitals and libraries. Museums and shiny convention hotels. Beaches, with marinas that now rotted empty. Roads that would have done credit to Los Angeles, divided by parkway strips that would have graced Paris. The plantings along the parkway strips were dead now, because no one had chosen to spend the money to bring them water. But the long, wide, silent highway itself stretched endlessly along the sea.

It was not quite deserted. As it came near to daylight occasional traffic shared it with them. A bus like the Metro-Liner, whispering past a train of camels—not like the Metro-Liner, because its exhaust was only a thin plume of steam that disappeared almost at once in



the morning light. Hydrogen-powered. Reasonable enough, here where it came from. Hake felt a moment's envy. And some worry, too, because there were signs along the road with troublesome implications. Bleached old metal ones in Arabic, with messages like:

**Military Reservation
Keep to Road
Passage Prohibited After Dark**

And one in English, carelessly lettered on a painted-out road traffic sign, but quite new:

**HAUL ASS
If you can read this,
you don't belong here.**

No one challenged them. No one seemed to care. But Hake was glad when the sun was up, at least, even though the heat began at once.

They walked on in silence through the morning, the heat building up with every hour. When the sun was directly overhead they paused in the ruin of an old bus stop and drowsed for an hour or two, drinking sparingly from their canteens, and then moved on. A few minutes later Leota broke the silence. "Have you been thinking about my question?"

Hake had been thinking about everything but—more than anything else, about the implications of Leota's body paint. It took him a moment to remember what question she had asked him. "You mean about why I do all this? God," he said fervently, "have I not!" "And?"

He thought for a moment. "If you mean am I aware of ever being hypnotized into being a spook, no. I did some reading up on hypnotism, and none of it seems to fit how I feel." He remembered the microfiche packets The Incredible Art had sent him, still rattling unscanned in the bottom of his bag. "I have some more stuff on it that we can look over," he offered. "If we can ever get to a viewer."

"But you aren't convinced that anybody did this to you. You'd rather think you were a villain than a dupe."

He looked at her sharply, but her tone was not contentious, only thoughtful.

"I'd *rather*," he said, "know exactly what is going on. In my head, and in my life. Whichever way it came out. But I don't."

She nodded and was silent, eyes fixed on the empty road ahead. The highway was bending away from the coast now, and the dunes between them and the sea were higher.

Leota said something, so faintly he could not hear it against the hot on-shore wind and had to ask her to repeat it. "I said, do you know, I almost didn't go with you when you turned up?"

"For God's sake, why? Did you *like* it in the harem?"

She looked at him quickly—not with anger, he saw. She said placatingly, "I don't know why. But when you and Reddi and Alys turned up, you looked like—invaders. You didn't belong there. I did, and it felt wrong for me to let you capture me."

"Capture you!"

"I know, Horny. I'm telling you the way it was in my head. And I don't think I was hypnotized, either—just stuck with a knife-point," she said bitterly. "I don't know how I could have got away. But I didn't even try."

They drew off the road to let one of the tandem buses whine past, the passengers half asleep in the heat, paying no attention to them. Hake studied the map thoughtfully for a moment. "We've only got a couple of miles to go, near as I can figure it," he said.

"Well, shall we get on with it?"

"I've got a better idea. If we're going to snoop, I'd rather do it at night, and it'll be sundown in a couple of hours. Let's go for a swim."

"Swim?"

"Up there." He pointed to the now distant dunes, a few hundred yards ahead. There was a sand-covered side road leading between two of the larger ones. "Let's give it a shot!"

The quarter-mile of coast behind the dunes had once been developed as a beach; there were abandoned cabanas and dressing rooms and the wrecks of refreshment pavilions. And no human beings in sight. They dropped their packs and their clothes in the shade of what had once been a life-guard tower and ran down to the bright blue water. There was no surf to speak of, only gentle foot-high waves moving diagonally in from the sea, but they splashed the water into foam. Leota's painted skin made her look like a naiad in the crystal sea, and Hake could feel his parched tissues soaking up moisture as they floated and dove in the shallow water. They did not go out far, or stay in long. But when they returned to the lengthening shade and sprawled out, their bodies drying almost at once in the hot breeze, Hake felt a hundred times better and Leota dropped off to sleep.

He let her rest for an hour; and then they dressed, resumed their packs, and started off again, with the sun now low behind them. Before they had gone a mile it set, quickly and definitively; there was a minute when their shadows were long and clear before them, and another minute when the shadows had gone entirely. It did not hinder their walking. There was a more than half moon already in the sky, ample to see where they were going. As the dry earth gave up its heat the night wind began to blow toward the sea and the temperature dropped. They stopped to add sweaters to their covering, and pressed on, with the moon bright before them and the dunes interrupting the spread of stars to their right. There was no one else on the road now, not even the occasional bus or truck.

But when Leota spoke it was almost in a whisper. She tugged Hake's arm. "What's that up ahead?"

Hake had been more intent on her than on the road, but he saw at once what she was pointing to. The old road ended only a few hundred yards ahead. It seemed to be swallowed up in an immense dune; and before the dune there was a wall of waist-high concrete set with reflectors, leading to a newer, far less elaborate detour that struck off at an angle into the desert. The dunes that covered the old road did not seem to be there by accident. They were buttressed by cement and faced with stone. They had not blown there at the whim of the winds. Someone had put them there.

"I think that's it," he said.

"This place? I don't see any kind of generating plant."

"It's got to be on the far side of the dunes." He hesitated. "We're going to have to climb them. It'd be easier if we left the knapsacks here—"

"All right."

"—but we might want to take pictures or something when we get to the top."

Leota stopped, with the A-frame straps half off her shoulders. "Make up your mind, will you, Hake?"

"We'll take them," he decided. "But it's going to be a tough climb."

And it was, harder than any climb Hake had made in his post-invalid life. Even harder than the grueling exercises Under the Wire. The sand slipped away under their feet, so that they were constantly sliding back at almost every step, and where there was rock or concrete there were few footholds. To Hake's surprise, however, the going became easier as they neared the top. The sand was firmer and more cohesive, and there was even a growing scatter of vines and stunted plants. There was a smell in the air that Hake

could not identify. Partly it was the sea. But part of it was like the church lawn new-mown in the early spring: the smell of cut grass and stalks of wild scallions. And there was also a pungent, half-sweet floral odor that he had experienced somewhere before (but where?), which seemed to come from the scraggly volunteer growth. He did not understand these plants. They were oddly succulent for this arid part of the world. Parched and half-dead, they still seemed improbably frequent on the dune; were they some sort of planting designed to keep the dune from moving in on the road?

And then they topped the ridge and looked out on the moonlit sea.

Panting from the climb, Leota found breath enough to whisper, "What's *that*?" Hake did not have to ask what she meant. The same question was in his own mind. A quarter-mile out to sea, rising from the water and braced with three moon-glittered legs like one of H.G. Well's Martian fighting machines, a tall tower rose. Its head was a squashed sphere, and it shone with a sultry crimson, like the heart of a dying fire. It was not only light that came from it. Even at the top of the dune, they could feel its heat. Around its legs were a cluster of metal domes, awash in the sea, and what looked like barges moored to them.

Hake stood up for a better look around. Below him, the reverse slope of the dunes made an immense open bowl facing the sea. It could not have been all natural. Bulldozers and blasting had helped that shape along. It was more ovoid than spherical, and not entirely regular; but a mile-long bite had been taken out of dunes seventy feet high. And the seaward face of the dunes was no longer barren. It looked like an abandoned suburban yard, with the honeysuckle gone wild. Here and there along the slope, shrubs and bushes were scattered. Hake was no gardener, but he could not have identified them anyway. They were choked under coils of ropy vine. The vines were everywhere, glossy leaves, gray-green in the moonlight, furled flowers, vines that were thinner than wire or thicker than Hake's forearm. The mown-grass smell came from them. It was stronger now, and with a smoky aroma like marijuana burning, or candles that have just been blown out.

The logic of the design spoke for itself. As the Texas Wire sloped to face its geosynchronous satellite, this receptor cupped to confront the sea. "It has to be solar power," said Leota, and Hake nodded.

"Of course, But where are the mirrors?"

"Maybe they take them in at night? For cleaning?"

He shook his head. "Maybe," he said. "But look at the way this whole area is overgrown—it's almost as if they used to have some-

thing here, and then abandoned it."

Leota said simply, "That thing out there doesn't look abandoned."

Hake shrugged, and then came to a decision. "The best way to look at a solar power plant is when it's working. I'm going to stay here till sunrise and see what happens."

Leota turned to look at him. "Wrong, Hake. *We're* going to stay."

"What's the point? You'll be more comfortable down by the road. And maybe safer. If this thing is operational, there are bound to be crews putting up the mirrors and so on—it's easier for one person to stay out of sight than two."

She did not answer, only began pulling the thermal sleeping bag out of her pack. "It's too cold to argue," she said. "And this thing is big enough for two. Are you going to join me or not?"

Hake gave in. Leota was right—right that it was too cold to argue, and right that the sleeping bag was big enough for two. Inside the bag it was no longer cold at all, as soon as their combined body heat began to accumulate. They wriggled out of their sweaters, then squirmed out of their pants and then, without transition, found that they were beginning to make love. In the absolute silence of the Arabian shore, with the bright moon peering through the vines over their heads and an occasional star, it seemed a very good place for it. They remembered to be hungry, afterwards; and divided a couple of chocolate bars; and then rested, sleeping and waking, with no clear distinction made between the states.

The only way Hake was certain he had been sleeping was that he woke up, with Leota tense in his arms. She had said something. He was no longer warm. The bag was wet and chill, soaked with cold water; and the silence was gone, replaced by a distant thumping sound of a pump and a slithering, creeping sound like a forest in a gentle wind. He blinked and beheld Leota's face peering out toward the sea, lighted with a strange violet radiance. "It *hurts*," she complained, squinting.

It was almost dawn. The moon and stars were gone, and the sky had turned blue, with a rosy aurora toward the east. The sullen red glow from the top of the tower was almost gone now; obviously it had cooled through the night, and was now only a black ellipsoid, no longer radiating. But something new was in the sky. A poorly defined, purplish splotch of light hung above the horizon. It was not bright, but as Hake looked at it his eyes began to ache. "Don't look that way!" he ordered, clapping a hand to his eyes, then squinting between his fingers.

"What is it, Horny?"

"I don't know! But I think that's ultraviolet, and it'll blind you if you let it. Look around you, Leota!"

The slithering noise came from the myriad tangled vines. Their furred flowers were opening and turning themselves toward the sea. Amid the glossy, green-black leaves, pearly white flower cups were swelling and moving, new ones smaller than his thumbnail and huge old ones the size of inverted beach umbrellas, and each pearl-white cup, tiny or immense, was pointing the same way.

Hake and Leota stared at each other, then quickly crawled out of the sodden sleeping bag and began to dress, careful not to look toward the spectral violet glow. The reason for the wetness revealed itself; under the vines there was a tracery of plastic tubing, squeezing out a trickle of water to irrigate the plants. None of this was accidental. A great deal of design and an immense effort of work had done into it. "Good God," said Hake suddenly. "I know where I've smelled these flowers before! IPF had some of them in Eaton-town."

But Leota wasn't listening. "Look," she said, barreling her fingers to make a fish-telescope and peering out toward the sea. The sun had come up, as abruptly as it had set the night before, and it was blindingly bright. But it was not alone! It had two companions in the sky, the purplish glow, now comparatively fainter but no less painful to look at, and a tinier and fiercer sun atop the metal tower. Careful as he was, Hake could not avoid an occasional split-second glance at one or another of the three suns. Even with eyes closed the after-images were dazzling in green and purple.

"The flowers are the mirrors!" he cried. "Like morning-glories! They turn toward the sun, and reflect it to the tower!"

"But what's that purplish thing?" Leota demanded.

He shrugged. "Whatever it is, we'd better get away from it. But—but this is perfect! You hardly even need machines—just the tower, to generate electricity, or hydrogen, or whatever. Why is it secret?"

"Because we don't have it ourselves," Leota said bitterly. "Because your friends don't want to give foreigners credit for it. Because they're pathological liars. What difference does it make?" She squinted down toward the base of the tower. "Regardless," she said, "there are people working down there now. I move we get out of here and see if we can catch the morning bus to the city."

They made their way to the highway nearly blind, and even hours later, when they had succeeded in stopping a bus and were looking

for the hotel called The Crash Pad in the city, Hake could still see the after-images, now blue and yellow, inside his eyes. They had come within measurable distance of blindness, he realized. If Reddi had known where the installation was he had known enough to warn them of the danger, too. And he had not elected to do so. Which said something about their relationship with the Reddis.

The hotel was the only one available for transients in the city. It was set back from the roadway in a little park (now bare, because unwatered), and the entrance was behind a three-tiered fountain (now dry.). The lobby was a ten-story-high atrium, with its space filled with dangling ropes of golden lights (now dark) and with a pillar of outside elevators at one side, only one of which seemed to be working. They used their faked passports to register for a room, and were relieved to find that the desk clerk did not seem to care that they were in two different names. There was no bellboy to help them with their baggage, but as their baggage amounted only to the two knapsacks the problem was not severe.

Hake's notions of luxury had been formed in Germany and on Capri, and they added up to a really large room with an auto-bar. This was a suite. There was no soap in the bathroom, and the ring around the bidet suggested that someone, sometime, had mistaken its purpose. Against that, it had its own kitchen (not working) and dressing room; and if the bed was bare, it was also oval and a good ten feet across. Its sheets and covers were stacked on top of it, along with half a dozen huge towels, and when Hake knelt on it to reach them he was surprised to find that it gave gently under his weight in a fashion quite unlike anything he had ever experienced before. "Silicone foam," Leota explained. "Like Silly Putty. I've seen them, but I've never actually slept on one."

It was clear that the hotel was willing to allow them whatever luxury they liked, as long as they didn't expect any of the hotel staff to provide it. Hake carried towels to the bathroom and checked out the kitchen. A strange fermenting odor led him to the refrigerator which turned out to hold two half-gallon jugs of fresh orange juice, fresh no longer; he dumped them down the sink and discovered it was plugged up. The twin TV sets on either side of the immense bed didn't work, either, until he crawled behind the head of the bed to plug them in. The room had been neither dusted nor swept in recent times, but there was a vacuum cleaner with attachments at the bottom of one of the immense closets. There Leota drew the line. When she had finished making up the bed she said, "That's good enough. We're not going to be living here forever, after all. I saw

some shops in the lobby; are any of those credit cards good enough to get me some clothes of my own?"

"Let's hope so," Hake said grimly; and while Leota was re-outfitting herself he prowled the top three floors of the hotel, looking for the room with the bent **Do Not Disturb** sign on the door.

There wasn't any. The Reddis either had not yet arrived or did not choose to be contacted.

When Leota came back Hake was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching an old American private-eye movie on the television. "Are you having a good time?" she asked.

He looked up and switched the set off. It was no loss; he had not seen any of the last twenty minutes of it. "I've been thinking," he said. "I'm not sure I want to contact the Reddis. They're pure poison."

"And your friends in the Agency are better?"

"No. They're not. I should be applying for a job at Hydro Fuels right now, and I'm not sure I want to do that either. Do you want to know what I am sure of?"

She sat down and waited for him to answer his own question. "I'm sure I like *this*. Being here. With you. And I'd like it to go on."

He stood up and paced to the window. Over his shoulder, he said, "I'm willing to do what's right, Leota—my God, I want to. But I don't know where right is, any more; and I guess I understand how people give up. Take what they can get for themselves, and the hell with everybody. And we could do that, you know. We've got unlimited credit. Anywhere in the world. We can do anything we like, as long as the credit cards last. We could catch a plane to Paris tonight. Or Rio de Janeiro. Anywhere. We can milk the cards for a million dollars in cash and put it in a Swiss bank, so if they ever catch up with us we can go right on with real money."

She said thoughtfully, "The Reddis wouldn't let us. We owe them. They'd find us, even if your friends didn't."

"So we give the Reddis what they want. The Agency—" Hake shrugged. "I guess they would catch us, sooner or later," he admitted. "But what a great time we could have until they did!"

"Is that what you want to do?"

Hake said slowly, "Leota, I don't know what I want to do. I know what would be nice. That would be to marry you and take you back to Long Branch and get busy being minister of my church again. I don't see any way to do that."

She looked at him appraisingly, but did not speak.

"Even better. We could change the world. Get rid of all this crumminess. Expose the Agency, and put the Reddis out of business, and

make everything clean and decent again. I don't see any way to do that, either. I know how all that is supposed to go; I've seen it in the movies. We defeat the Bad Guys, and the town sees the error of its ways, and I become the new marshal and we live happily ever after. Only it doesn't work that way. The Bad Guys don't think they're bad, and I don't know how to defeat them. Mess them up a little bit, sure. But sooner or later they'll just wipe us out, you know. And everything will be the same as before."

"So what you're saying is we should have a good time and forget about principle?"

"Yes," he said, nodding, "that seems to be what it comes down to. Have you got any better ideas?"

Loeta sat up straight in the middle of the bed, legs curled under her in a half-lotus position, looking at him in silence. After a long time, she said, "I wish I did."

Hake waited, but she didn't add anything to what she had said. He felt cheated, and realized that he had expected more from her. He said belligerently, "So you're giving up too!"

"Shouldn't I?" She began to cry. "Horny," she sobbed, "I've been through a *lot*. I don't know how much more I can take."

"Was being in the harem that bad for you?"

"Not just that! I—I don't know. I thought I understood what was going on. I thought maybe you were all being hypnotized, and if I could prove that, then maybe I could stop it. Now—now I'm not so sure. Not since I found myself acting the same way."

Hake said. "Wait a minute! I almost forgot about Art's microfiches!"

"What good are they going to do?"

"Maybe none. But let's play them, and see what they say."

The TV set also possessed a fiche viewer—for, Hake thought, dirty postcards mostly; but it would work as well for information on hypnotism. He pulled them out of the bottom of his knapsack and stuck one at random into the scanner. The first panel was a page of a technical journal, with a paper by two people on the resemblances between sleep and hypnosis; it seemed that people who napped easily were, by and large, also easily hypnotizable.

Hake looked at Loeta. Loeta shrugged. "I don't take naps very often," she said. "I don't see what that has to do with anything, anyway."

"Let's try another," Hake said, flipping through the microfiche:

Body Morphology and Hypnotically Induced Relief from Ischemic Pain.

The Problem of Divided Consciousness: A Neodissociative Interpretation.

A Reevaluation of the Hypnotic Induction Profile (HIP).

Research Strategies in Evaluating the Coercive Power of Hypnosis—

"Hey, hold it there a minute," Leota said. "Let's look at that one."

Fortunately it was not very long, three panels, each a page from a journal paper. It was not very helpful. It presented an ethical protocol for investigating how hypnosis could cause behavior that went against the normal inclinations of a subject, but it didn't say anything about what those investigations might reveal. "We'll be all night reading this stuff," Leota said reluctantly.

Hake snapped his fingers. "The tape!" he said, and dumped the rest of the microfiches on the floor. Among them was a cassette, home-made by The Incredible Art. Hake clicked it into the player and turned it on, and Art's voice came to them.

"I don't know how much of this stuff is going to be useful to you, Horny," it said, "But here's the whole thing. What I started with was my own magic act. You remember how I did it. I get maybe thirty people to come up on the stage and I give them the usual 'you are getting sleepy-sleepy-sleepy' stuff. Most of them will act as if they're really going to sleep. The ones that don't I scoot right off stage, so I have maybe twenty left. Then I command them to try to raise their arms, but I tell them they can't. The ones that don't respond, off. So I have about a dozen. I keep going until I have maybe half a dozen that will do any damn thing I tell them to.

"Now, are they hypnotized? Beats me, Horny. I wondered about that, so I looked in the literature, and this is some of the stuff I found. The key papers are—hold your breath—*Hypnosis, Suggestion, and Altered States of Consciousness: Experimental Evaluation of the New Cognitive-Behavioral Theory and the Traditional Trance-State Theory of "Hypnosis"*—that's in quotes, quote hypnosis unquote—by Barber and Wilson, and *Hypnosis from the Standpoint of a Contextualist*, by Coe and Sarbin.

"Read them if you want to. I'll tell you what they say—or, anyway, what I think they say. The Barber and Wilson paper is about an experiment they did. They took a bunch of volunteers and divided them up into three parts. One third they did nothing special for; they were controls. One third they hypnotized, putting them into trance state in the good old-fashioned way and giving them suggestions. The last third they just talked to. They didn't hypnotize them. There was no trance state. They didn't even ask them to do

anything. They just said things like, 'Have you ever thought of what it would be like to not feel pain, or to remember your first day in school, or to be unable to raise your arm? If you want to, maybe you'll think about these things.' They call it 'thinking with.' So then they did the experiments. Arm heaviness, finger anesthesia, water hallucination—I think there were ten different things they tried. And then they matched the responses of the three groups, scoring them so that the highest response—the 'most hypnotized,' you would call it—would be 40, and the total bomb-outs, no response at all, would be zero. No group came out with zero, in fact no individual did. They took a score of 22 as the cut-off point, and this is what they found out:

"For the control group, 55 percent of the subjects scored 23 or better—so even if there isn't any preparation at all, a lot of people will act as though they're hypnotized anyway.

"For the hypnotized, trance-state group, 45 percent scored 23 or better. *Forty-five percent!* Less than the controls.

"And for the thinking-with group, you know how many scored 23 or better? A hundred percent. *All of them.*"

The voice on the tape paused for a moment, and then continued. "Ah, here it is. So then I did some more reading, and I came across the Coe and Sarbin piece. They have a theory about hypnotism. They call it the 'dramaturgic' view. I.e., hypnotic subjects are acting out a part. You ought to read the paper; but, here let me just read what it says at the end. 'We underscore the proposition (long overlooked) that the counterfactual statements in the hypnotist's induction are cues to the subject that a dramatic plot is in the making. The subject may respond to the cues as an invitation to join in the miniature drama. If he accepts the invitation, he will employ whatever skills he possesses in order to enhance his credibility in enacting the role of hypnotized person.'

"Get it? They're playing a part. And what makes me think there's something to it is, I know that's what I do when I get up on a stage. I play a part. I'm not me, the fellow who lives in Rumson, New Jersey, and keeps parakeets. I'm The Incredible Art. If you look at it in one way, I'm sort of hypnotizing myself into behaving, what do they call it, counterfactually. And not just me. All actors. They get up there night after night. The corns don't hurt, the cough doesn't hack, whether they're exhausted or not the step is spry—until the curtain comes down, and that glorious, radiant creature schlumps away to the dressing room and the Bromo-Seltzer and the Preparation H. Soldiers! Casualties come out of a firefight with wounds

they don't remember receiving. Somebody did a study—it isn't here, but I could find it for you if you wanted it—that showed that people with identical wounds, received on the one hand in wars and on the other in highway accidents, showed very different responses. The military casualties needed less anesthesia to handle pain. Why? My guess: They were acting out the part of soldiers, so they didn't *feel* as much pain. I'd call that 'thinking-with,' or self-hypnosis, or anything you like. But it fits! It fits with the dramaturgic view. And I even think I went through it myself once. A while ago, when I was a volunteer fireman, I noticed one winter night I couldn't get a cigarette to light. It just wouldn't burn. Why not? Because it was wet. What was it wet with? My own blood. I was bleeding like a stuck pig. I'd cut the hell out of my hand, shifting wreckage to check for live coals, and jammed it in my pocket without noticing it. The pocket was full of blood. And I hadn't felt a thing."

He was silent for a moment. Then, "Well, there it is. I hope you find it interesting. If you ever get through all of this, come by the house and have a drink and we'll talk it over."

"The more I try to understand what's really happening in the world," Hake said, getting up to click off the player, "the more I find out I don't know *anything*. The hell with it."

Leota curled her legs under her on the bed, straightened her back and stared him down. "What do you mean, the hell with it?"

"I mean I get lost in the complications. And I don't have time for them. I was supposed to apply for a job two hours ago."

She flared, "Do you think I'm going to marry a *nincompoop*?"

"Who said anything about getting married?"

"You did! Just a few minutes ago. And I even thought about it, but I made that mistake once and I'm not going to do it again."

Hake was getting angry, too. "I'm Hornswell Hake, minister," he snarled, "and I do the best I can. I can't do everything. I don't *know* everything. I wish Art were here—he know more about some of this stuff than I do. I wish I could see what's right and best—but I can't. If that makes me a *nincompoop* I'll just have to live with it."

Leota stood up for emphasis, moving toward the window. She said, "Anybody can do the right thing when it's perfectly clear what the right thing is! But how do you ever know that? You don't, and you have to act anyway."

"I know that."

"Then—"

"Then," he said, "I do what I can see I damn better do, which is

to get my tail over to the place I was supposed to be at two hours ago and apply for that job."

They stared at each other for a moment, then Leota broke eye contact. She turned and gazed out the window.

A sudden rigidity in her stance, the way she held her head, the set of her shoulders, alarmed Hake. "What's the matter?" he demanded.

She said, "Did I ever tell you how we left Rome?"

"What's that got to do with what we're talking about?"

"Hassabou wouldn't live in a hotel. Not him. He had his yacht at Ostia. One day we just went for a sail—and didn't come back. When the yacht got to Benghazi his boys took me to the airport. With a knife at my throat. Come look."

Hake peered out the window, past the bright gold mosque and the minarets toward the harbor. "See the sailing yacht out there, the big one? That's the *Sword of Islam*. It's Hassabou's yacht."

V.

One more complication was not even important in Hake's head; there were so many—too many—already that it didn't matter. Obviously Leota was at risk in one additional way. Hake had no way to solve the problem, but he could ease it. He left Leota in the room just long enough to buy her some new clothes. In cloak, ankle-length skirt and hatta w-'aqqal she was stifling in Al Halwani's noonday heat, but not recognizable.

They did not speak as they strolled toward the employment office of the hydrogen-power company. Leota walked a traditional two paces behind him, head demurely down. Hake, in burnoose and caftan, was almost as hot as she, but would have been no better in any other costume—the desert people, or the men among them anyway, had long since found that loose, enveloping garments were more protection against the heat than exposed skin. And there was no cultural prohibition against Hake's looking around him as they walked—for people from the Agency, for the sheik's men, for the Reddis, and even just to sightsee.

The surprising thing, once he saw it, was that Al Halwani had no fire hydrants. It had no sewers and no water pipes, either, though that was not as apparent. Fat electric tankers carried drinking water to each building's cisterns from the distillation plants outside the city, and the sewage went right into the thirsty ground. There were

spots of green near some of the older buildings, where the outflow from the plumbing nourished growth.

Three hundred years ago this whole part of the world had been uninhabited, bar an occasional wandering tribe or caravan of traders. Then the droughts and famines of central Arabia drove some of the nomads south, just in time to be on the scene when Europe bestirred itself and reached out for colonies. There were no national boundaries. There were no nations, or not until the British named them and drew lines on maps for the convenience of the file clerks in Whitehall. High Commissioners like Sir Percy Cox decreed this patch of sand for Kuwait, and that for Ibn Saud, and these arguable patches in between for no one, or for both neighbors in common; and so it was.

Then oil came, and those extemporized lines became intensely important. A quarter of an inch this way or that on a map meant a billion dollars in revenues.

Then the Israelis came, with their shaped nuclear charges. And no one cared any more.

The cities that had bloomed overnight into Chicagos and Parises became ghost towns. Abadan and Dubai, Kuwait and Basra began to dry up again. The shiny Western buildings with their plate-glass walls and ever-running air-conditioners stood empty and began to die. The traditional Moslem architecture, thick-walled, pierced with ventilating slits, survived. And the migrants from all over the Arab world began to move back. Or move on. What was left was a hodge-podge of tribes and nationalities; and then the Westerners began to move in, the hippies and the wanderers, the turned-off and the dissatisfied, the adventurous and the stoned. The American colonies had been built out of just such migrants two centuries before. Al Halwani was the Philadelphia or the Boston of the new frontier, crude, unruly, polyglot—and promising.

In order to get to the sand-colored headquarters of Al Halwani Hydro Fuels Ltd., Leota and Hake had to walk along the esplanade, with the narrow beach to one side and, beyond it, the indigo bay and the stately *Sword of Islam* at anchor a quarter of a mile out. Leota did not look up. Hake studied it carefully. Although it was a three-masted schooner, with gay flags in the rigging, he knew that inside the narrow hull were engines and enough technology to exempt it from any problems of wind or currents. He could see the big globe of hydrogen fuel. He could also see figures moving about on its decks, but there was no way of telling which was who. Whether they could see him was a whole other question. He did not really



think they could, or not well enough to identify either him or Leota under the headdresses. But he was glad enough to push through the revolving door and enter the Hydro Fuels waiting room.

The employment office was almost empty, and the elderly woman at the desk handed them applications. They sat down at a plastic writing desk and began to fill them out.

The questions on the forms were in four languages, and fortunately for Leota English was one of them. Hake took pride in filling his own in Arabic, drawing the flowing curlicues as neatly as the lettering on an engineering sketch. There were not very many questions. Hake copied the details of his fictitious biography out of the Xeroxed resume Jessie Tunman had made for him—how long ago was that? Only four *days*? And then the intercom on the receptionist's desk rattled. "Send them in, Sabika," said somebody's voice, and they got up to be interviewed.

The personnel director was male, young, and one-legged, and the nameplate on his desk said **Robling**. He hopped around to get them seated, grinned at them as he propped his crutch on the edge of his desk, and studied the forms. "Nice to see a couple of Americans here, Bill," he said, "but what are you doing in those getups?"

"We, uh, converted," Horny Hake said, after realizing that "Bill" referred to the name on his papers. "We're not real religious, though," he added.

"None of my business," Robling said cheerfully. "All I do is match people to jobs, and looks like you've got some good experience. Not too many people show up here with a hydrogen-cracking background."

"Uh-huh," Hake said, and recited the information on the documents. "That was in Iceland, three years ago. It's geothermal there, but I suppose it's pretty much like solar."

"Close enough. We have a lot of turnover here, of course. People come in, work a while, build up a stake. Then they take life easy for a while. But something ought to open up for you. Maybe in two, three weeks—"

"No sooner than that? I really need a job now," Hake said.

"Like that? Well—there's no job right this minute, but if you're short of money I could maybe help out."

"It's not the money. It's just that—" It's just that I have to start work on your project so I can wreck it for the Agency; but Hake couldn't say that. "It's just that I want to get to work."

The personnel director's eyebrows went up; evidently that was not a common attitude among the drifters. "Well, that's a good trait,

anyway up to a point. But the only vacancies we have at the moment are pushing a broom."

"I'll push a broom."

"No, no! You're overqualified. You wouldn't be happy, and then when something did open up it'd make trouble to jump you over the others. Still—" Struck by a thought, the man picked up Leota's questionnaire. He scanned it and nodded. "We could put your lady on the payroll for that. *She's* not overqualified." He glanced at the form again and snapped his fingers. "Penn," he said. "Yeah. Did you look at the bulletin board outside? Because I think there's a message for you."

"Who from?" Hake asked, off balance.

"Well, I don't know. We get all kinds of drif— all kinds of transients coming through here, and people leave messages. Only reason I noticed yours is that it's kind of a famous name. William Penn, I mean." He was nice enough not to smile. "So what do you say?"

Hake opened his mouth, but Leota was ahead of him. "I'll take it."

"Right. Uh, you said you weren't real religious, but does that mean you can take the veil off? Because we'll need a picture of you for the ID."

"That'll be fine," Leota said, loosening the headdress. "Do you want to take it in here? All right. Honey? Why don't you check the message board and wait for me outside?"

There was no one in the waiting room but the receptionist and a skinny old Yemeni, with crossed (but empty) cartridge belts across his blouse, absorbed in an Arabic-language crossword puzzle. Hake moved toward the pinboard behind the receptionist's desk and scanned the tacked-up messages. **Milt and Terri, Judy and Art were here and are heading for Goa. Patty from South Norwalk, call your mother.** The one that was meant for him was a small envelope with the name **William E. Penn** neatly typed on the outside. Inside, it said:

You are invited for cocktails aboard the *Sword of Islam*. The boatman will furnish you transportation as soon as you get this.

Hake folded the note back into its envelope, thinking grim thoughts. Whatever else might happen, he was not letting Leota back on that yacht.

He turned as the door to the personnel office opened, and there

was Leota, standing in the doorway. She stopped in the open door, hesitated and then beckoned to him. He could not see her expression through the headdress.

As he approached, she caught his arm, drew him inside and closed the door. "There's another exit past the camera room," she said. "I'm sure Mr. Robling won't mind if we use it?"

The personnel director looked them over for a moment, then shrugged. "Why not?"

Down a cement-tiled hall, out through a metal door, into the stark sunlight. "What's the matter?" Hake demanded.

"Don't linger, Horny. That fellow in there is one of the Reddis. I don't think you want to meet him."

"Christ." They hurried around a corner, then paused where they could see the Hydro Fuel building. "If we go back to the hotel he'll find us. He must have followed us from there." He handed her the note. "This was what was waiting for me." She read it quickly, and then said, "Wow."

"That's about the size of it, yes," he agreed. "We can't go back to the hotel because of the Reddis, and we can't go to the yacht because of the sheik. You know what, Leota? We don't have a lot of options."

She stared through the veil at the building. Apparently Reddi was still inside. "Horny?" she said.

"What?"

"You got your pronouns wrong. It isn't 'we.' It's *you* that can't go back to the hotel, and *me* that doesn't want to go to the yacht. The other way around, there's no problem."

"What do you mean, no problem? Those guys are mean, Leota. I'm not letting you face up to them by yourself."

Her eyes were on him, and once again he wished he could see her face. She said sharply, "I've told you before, Horny, I don't play this big, strong man and little, weak woman game. I was dealing with the Reddis when you were still running covered-dish dinners in New Jersey. You go on to the yacht. Call me at the hotel when you get a chance."

"And what do you think you're going to do?"

"I'm going back in the waiting room and talk to Reddi. And you can't stop me." And he couldn't, because she up picked her skirts and ran, the intricately decorated backs of her legs flashing under the flopping hem of her gown.

There wasn't just one boatman, there were five of them; and they were armed. Desert Arabs often carry rifles for decoration, like a

walking stick or rolled umbrella. Hake did not think these rifles were ornamental. He paused on the broad, dead esplanade, but there were no more alternatives in sight than there ever had been. He handed over his letter and got into the covered launch. None of the few strollers on the boulevard paid attention as the high whine of the inertial drive changed pitch when the helmsman clutched in the propellor. Two of the other boatman cast off the moorings, and they pulled away from the little floating dock.

As they approached the yacht, it began to look like a battleship. Its side towered twenty feet over them as they approached the gang-plank, the masts far higher still. Curmudgeon was standing at the rail and looking down, his face granite. Hake hesitated and looked back at the waves. These waters had a reputation for sharks. But what was he going to face on the yacht?

"Move him on," Curmudgeon called testily, and one of the boatmen prodded Hake with his rifle. "You took your time getting here," he said, as Hake came up level with him. Nothing could be read in his expression as he stood with one hand on the rail, open shirt, yachting cap, white slacks, rope sandals. Behind him two more crewmen stood, representing, with the five behind him, a great deal more overkill than Hake thought necessary. Their presence was a threat. But Curmudgeon didn't threaten. Or even reproach; all he said was, "The others are waiting for you below."

Hake had never before been on a centimillionaire's yacht. There was less opulence than he might have guessed, no swimming pool, not even a shuffleboard court on deck. But he could not see most of the deck, only a small portion, deck-chaired and awninged, at the stern, and the short foredeck with hoists and coiled cables; most of the deck space was out of sight on the levels above him. Inside there were no murals or carved panels, and the rails were only brass. But they passed an open doorway, with a sirocco of engine heat coming out of it, and Hake caught a glimpse of pipes and stacks going down, it seemed, indefinitely. *Sword of Islam* was a sailing yacht. But its auxiliaries looked big enough to drive an ocean liner.

Curmudgeon had told the truth: the others were waiting for him, in a lounge with windows looking out the stern of the yacht. There was more opulence here than in the passages—potted palms, a wall of tropical fish tanks, bean-bag pillows thrown about by the chairs and couches—but it looked more like some Short Hills playroom than a sheik's tent. Jessie Tunman looked up from a gin-rummy game with one of Yosper's youths—Mario?—and snapped, "You'll get yours, Horny. You had no right to take off with that chippy!"

"Hello, Jessie." There were a dozen people in the lounge, and he recognized most of them—Yosper and his boys, the young Hispanic called Tigrito, and one of the instructors from Under the Wire. They did not look welcoming.

Yosper hopped off a chair and advanced, his bright blue eyes regarding Hake steadily. Then the old man laughed. "You always were a ballsy boy, Hake. Remind me of myself, before I discovered our Lord Savior—and the Agency."

Hake nodded and sat down, trying to look relaxed as Yosper studied him. "What's it going to be, Hake?" the old man demanded. "You part of the operation, or are you going to go on being a pain in the ass?"

"I've carried out my assignment," Hake said.

"Oh, sure, Hake, I expect you have. And we're going to take your report, and then we'll know for sure. I was asking about from now on."

Hake hesitated. "If I complete this operation, can I retire?"

"That what you want, boy? Why," Yosper said easily, "that's not up to me, but we all got to retire sometime, so why not? I guess it depends on how good your report is, and what you do over the next couple of days. Where's your lady friend?"

"Leota's out of it!"

"No, Hake," the old man said earnestly, "I have to disagree with you on that. She's not out of it, unless old Hassabou says she is. Right at the moment I think he considers her a piece of his property that got, uh, misplaced; and he's not too fond of you about it."

"Why do you care what he thinks, for God's said?"

Yosper said, "Watch your language. We care a lot, dummy. Hassabou used to own this whole country. And after they're in bankruptcy he's going to sell it to us. You going to tell us where she is?"

"No!"

Yosper grinned. "Didn't actually think you would, but that's no problem. Al Halwani's not that big a place. Jessie? Give us those maps, will you? And now we want your report, Hake, starting with reconnoitering the solar-power plant."

Jessie picked up the cards and slid the cover off the table, revealing a back-projected screen. As she manipulated the keyboard at the side of the table it displayed a satellite-reconnaissance photograph of the coastline, with map outlines superimposed on it in red. She zoomed it up to a close view of the tower and the ridge of flowering dunes, and then handed Hake a light-pencil.

"Pull back a little," he said. "It doesn't show the roads." Greenish

dots flickered and swarmed into a new focus, and he nodded. The squat, rectangular spot in the middle of the bay was the solar tower itself. The crescent beach was a mosaic of green and white, the sunplants half open and facing an afternoon sunset. The roads were darkened by shadow, but they could be made out.

"That's the main guard shack," he said, pointing the arrow of the light-pencil to a blotch atop the dunes. "They were in there all night. I don't think they patrol—anyway, we didn't see any signs of them along the road. There's a path up from the highway. There's cover most of the way, but not much right around the shack."

"You listening, Tiger?" Yosper demanded. "That's your job. Take your position; then when we move out you cut communication and immobilize the guards. What about the beach side of the dunes, Hake?"

"They're completely covered with the plants, all the way down to water's edge. There's something down there that looks like a building—" he pointed with the pencil—"but I don't know what it is."

"Control center for the tower. Keep going, Hake."

"That's about it, as much as I could see. I don't know why they're so important—they could just use mirrors."

"You don't know cowflops from custard, boy," Yosper explained kindly. "You use live plants, you don't any any problem of guidance for mirrors—the plants aim themselves. Keep themselves clean, too, as you ought to know. Or didn't I read your 201 file right?"

"I did clean mirrors one year in New Jersey, yes."

"So why don't you understand more of what you see? What about the tower?"

"It's tall and isolated. A few boats around it. No connection to the land that I could see."

Impatiently, "There's a tunnel. Keep going."

"That's it. I couldn't see much—except that purple light. That I don't understand at all. It hurt my eyes to look at it. It just appeared in the sky."

"Hellfire, Hake, that's a hologram. That's the beauty part of the whole scheme. Didn't they teach you any geometry in school? If they bred the flowers to point directly at the sun, they'd reflect directly right back *at* the sun, and what would be the good of that? So they breed them to respond to high UV—good thing you didn't stare at it real long, because most of the radiation's out of the visible spectrum. Then they generate a spinflip laser hologram in the right UV frequencies and just move it where they want it in the sky, halfway between the sun and tower. Draw yourself a diagram when you get

a chance, and you'll see that all the reflectance has to go right to the tower every time."

Hake stared at the tabletop, calculating angles in his mind. "Why, that's brilliant, Yosper." He shook his head. "Damn it! Why kill them off? Why don't we just let them go ahead and make hydrogen for us?"

Yosper was scandalized. "Are you crazy, Hake? Do you know how much of a drain on the balance of payments you're talking about? We'll make a deal, all right, but we'll make it with the sheik. *After* we take these hippies out. Blow up the tower. Kill off the plants—we've got a great little fungus specially bred by our good friends in Eantontown. They've borrowed beyond their means to get this thing going, and when we're finished with them they'll be bankrupt. Then old Hassabou comes back to power, and we make a deal."

"Let's get on with it," Jessie Tunman complained. "Did Horny get the job on the tower so he can let us in?"

Hake glared at her, then admitted, "Well, actually, no. I mean, they'll give me a job, but not for a couple of weeks. They hired Leota right away."

"Hake!" Yosper exploded. "You failed your assignment!"

"I couldn't help it! They said I was overqualified—whose fault is that? I didn't make up the cover identity!"

"Boy," said Yosper, "you just lost most of your bargaining power, you know that? We spent an effing year getting you ready for this because you spoke the languages, could get by with the locals—and now you're no place!"

Jessie Tunman looked up. "Maybe it's not so bad," she said.

"Don't talk foolish, Jessie! If we wanted to storm the tower we wouldn't have bothered with lover-boy in the first place."

"He's still here. He just doesn't have an ID to get into the tower."

"That's right, but— Oh," Yosper said. "I see what you mean. All we have to do is get him an ID." He beamed at Hake. "That shouldn't be too hard, considering our resources, at that. You got anything else to say, boy? No? Any more questions about what this mission is all about?"

"I do have one. Why do we have to destroy it? Why don't we just steal the plants and build our own?"

Yosper shook his head. "Boy, don't think. Just do what you're told. We've had the plants for three years. They're no good to us."

"Sure they are. That coast looks a lot like Florida."

"Hake," the old man said kindly, "Miami Beach is in Florida. All that land's built up, or didn't you notice? God has chosen to give

these creeps just what you need for this kind of installation—sunlight, water, port facilities. Most of the U. S. of A's too far north. Even around Miami you'd only be getting forty or forty-five percent yield in the winter. Get it up to where you really need it, around New York or Chicago, not to even think about Boston or Seattle or Detroit, and you just don't have power to speak of at all for three of four months of the year."

Hake said, "Yosper? Doesn't that suggest to you that maybe God is telling you something?"

The old man cackled. "Bet your ass, boy. He's telling me that we've got to use the gifts He gave us to do His will! And that's just what we're doing. If God wanted the Persian Gulf to have our power, he would have put Pittsburgh there. Oh, maybe we could use it around Hawaii—or even better, like Okinawa or the Canal Zone, if we hadn't given them away when we didn't have to. You got to figure the useful areas are between twenty-five north and twenty-five south, and in God's wisdom He has seen fit to put nothing but savages there. Switch that thing off, Jessie." He stood up. "I got to go talk to Curmudgeon and the sheik," he said. "You people just take it easy for a while. You, Hake? I think you better stay in your stateroom till we need you. Tiger'll show you where it is."

As it began to grow dark they fed him. A very young black man in a tarboosh knocked on the door and passed in a tray. "*Bismi llahi r-rahmani r-rahim,*" he piped politely. Hake thanked him and closed the door. The polite form was an invocation of the compassionate and merciful Allah, and Hake could only hope that the sentiments were shared by the members of the crew whose voices had finished changing. The food was lamb, rice, and a salad, all excellent. Hake ate cheerfully enough. He was getting used to the patterns of working in the cloak and dagger business, long periods of waiting for something to happen without knowing what it was going to be, long periods of doing something without quite knowing what it was for. And now and then, for punctuation, somebody hitting him or blowing up his car.

He had not only got used to it, he was almost coming to accept it. At least for himself. For Leota— That was something else, and worrisome. Neither Yosper nor Jessie Tunman had said where they proposed to get an ID to copy, but Hake was far from sure they would not think the one Leota had been given a good source.

No one had told him he was a prisoner, and nothing stopped him from opening the door and joining the others. He didn't want to.

Watching them play their silly spy games was unappealing. They acted like—

They acted like half the world, he told himself, playing a role. Dramaturgy. "Thinking with."

As The Incredible Art had said, if you looked with open eyes that explained so many of the fads, lunacies, causes, passions, meannesses, and incongruities of human behavior! It even explained Hake himself. It explained why he had played the game of being a minister so long . . . and then the game of cloak-and-dagger spook . . . and then the game of rebel against the skullduggery. It explained why Yosper played Christian and criminal at the same time, why Leota played revolutionary and harem slave; and it explained how the world got into such a mess to begin with. Because we all play rôles and games! And when enough of us play the same game, act the same dramaturgic rôle, at one time—then the game becomes a mass movement. A revolution. A cult. A religion. A fad.

Or a war.

He put his tray outside the door and leaned back on the neat, narrow bunk. There was an important piece missing in all of this. The cause. How did all these things get started?

The question was wrong. It was like asking why the locusts came to Abu Magnah. No individual locust had made the decision to attack the city, there was no plan, there was not even a shared genetic intent. If one examines the fringes of a locust swarm, what one sees is a scattering of individual insects flying blindly out, twisting around in confusion and then flying back in to join the cloud. What moves the locust swarm from one place to another is the chance thrust of wind. It has no more volition than a tumbleweed.

And Hake, and Yosper, and Leota, and everyone else—what were they doing, if not devoting all their strength to being a part of their particular swarm? Causes and nations moved where chance pushed them—even, sometimes, into a war of mutual suicide, when both sides knew in advance that neither winner nor loser could gain.

Exactly like locusts—

Someone tapped at his door.

Hake sat up. "Yes?" he called.

It opened on the child who had brought his dinner, looking fearful. In barbarous English he said, "Sir, I have brought you tea, if God wills it."

Hake took the tray, puzzled. "It's all right," he said kindly, but the boy's fright did not diminish. He turned and bolted. Hake sat down and put the tea on the night table, his train of thought shat-

tered. Not that it mattered. None of it was really relevant to the present problem, which was pure survival, his own and Leota's.

Something rolled across the floor as he shook the napkin open. When he retrieved it, it was a double golden finger-ring.

There was no note, no word of any kind, but he didn't need one. On this yacht at this time it was not likely that there was more than one person with the double-ring of an American group marriage. So Alys was aboard.

"Wake up now, Mr. Hake. There is to be a briefing."

Hake staggered to the door and opened it on Mario, looking sleepy but oddly pleased with himself. "Now? It isn't even five A.M.!"

"Not just at this minute, no, but soon. Immediately after the sheik's morning devotions. However," he smirked, "there is an interesting development which I think you will wish to see."

Hake groggily pulled on his shoes. "What is it?"

"Hurry, Mr. Hake. See for yourself." The youth led the way back as they had come, to the aft deck. It was just sunrise, and the slanting light laid long shadows across the city of Al Halwani, and on the launch that was whining toward them. "They radioed that they were bringing someone," Mario said over Hake's shoulder. "There, do you see? She is sitting by herself, just inside the canopy."

"Leota!"

"Yes, Mr. Hake, your dear friend, for whom you risked so much. So now you will be together again—or, at any rate, not more than a few hundred feet apart. I don't suppose Sheik Hassabou will invite you to his harem."

"How did you catch her?"

Mario frowned. "It was not difficult at the end," he said. "She was simply strolling down the esplanade by herself. The boatmen recognized her, and she made no resistance."

Hake leaned over the rail to watch, as the launch came up to the float. A woman in veil and headdress was waiting; it was only from her wrinkled and age-spotted hands that Hake could tell she was ancient. As Leota came aboard she shrank from her, and the woman impatiently thrust her inside.

"Mario— Mario, I want to talk to her. Just for a minute."

"Why, Mr. Hake! What a ridiculous request! Of course that is impossible—and now," the youth said merrily, "if you do not come quickly you will miss your breakfast." The confused baying from across the water was the muezzins' calling for five-o'clock prayers, and on the landing stage the boatmen were dropping to their knees.

Blankly, Hake followed Mario to the dining salon. He did not eat, did not join in the conversation, accepted only coffee. His mind was full of quick plans and instant dismissals, and when the Agency crew got up for their briefing he trailed after them silently. Only when they passed an arms locker, with one of the armed boatmen standing silent before it, did he hesitate. For just a second. He could overpower the guard. Seize a couple of the rapid-fire carbines and a dozen clips of cartridges. Shoot up Yosper, Tiger, the crewmen, and everyone else. Find the harem. Arm Leota. Make a run for the launch.

And what were the chances of getting away with it? At the most hopeful estimate, one in a million? Something in Hake's upbringing had taught him to risk anything to save a woman from debauchery . . . but did Leota share his view?

A crewman with an actual scimitar pulled back a gold cloth curtain, and they were in the sheik's private salon.

If opulence had been missing below decks, it was all concentrated here. Iced fruits in crystal bowls, tiny coffee cups and squares of sweetmeats on hammered silver trays; chests of glazed tile, covered with rugs that had not been woven to rest on any floor. Even the gold cloth drapes were not cloth at all; as the yacht moved, the way they swung showed that they were actual gold.

The sheik was already present, sitting above the others in a cushioned chair. He was older than Hake had remembered, and better looking: olive skin and nose like a bird of prey, the eyes brilliant within their circle of black kohl. Next to him, half a foot lower down, Curmudgeon was sitting erect and impatient. The meeting was short. There was little discussion and, to Hake's surprise, not even any recrimination. Even Jessie Tunman confined herself to glaring poisonously at him from time to time. Curmudgeon spelled out the plan, pausing to defer to the sheik every time Hassabou stirred or cleared his throat, and it was all over in fifteen minutes.

Hake's part was simple. He was to report to the control shack with his fake ID and the story that he had been assigned as a sweeper. It would be too late for them to bother checking up at night, even if they became suspicious; and by the time the personnel office opened in the morning it would be all over. Hake would remain in the tower at sunrise—there was some danger there, Curmudgeon noted grudgingly, but he would simply have to take his chances. Yosper, his boys and others would come to the tower in scuba gear, and he would let them in. They would be armed with sleep gas, missile weapons and canisters of fungus spores. The sleep gas was

to knock out the people in the control shack when they came to it through the tunnel under the bay. The guns were in case the sleep gas didn't work. The fungus was to destroy the sunflowers. Another party was to take out the guard shack on the dunes, and when all was secure they would blow up control shack and tower—having first photographed everything and taken any interesting looking equipment. The yacht would pick them all up, and then—

No one said anything about "then" as far as Hake was concerned. It was as though his life were programmed to stop when the tower was destroyed.

And ten minutes after he was back in his cabin the twelve-year-old, trembling, brought him an unordered bottle of mineral water. "I will be back in half an hour," he whispered, and disappeared; and when Hake picked up the napkin, he found a tiny cassette recorder, with a tape in place.

Leota!

But it was Alys's voice that came to him from the tape. "Keep the volume down!" it ordered at once. Then, "Horny, Leota came aboard wired. God knows how long it will be before they find the radio, so don't waste time. Tape all the information you can, put the recorder under your pillow and go for a walk. Jumblatt will get it when he cleans up your room. Don't talk to him. Don't try to see either of us." Then, incredibly, a giggle. "Isn't this *fun*?"

An hour later, shooting a sullenly silent game of pool with Tigrito in the lounge, Hake became aware of stirrings outside. During Tigrito's shot he peered out on deck, then leaned over the railing. The landing stage was packed with penguins, the women of the harem, all in the long black gowns and headdresses, stepping clumsily into the launch. One looked up toward him, but he had no way of telling who it was.

From behind him Tigrito said irritably, "Come on, man, take your shot!"

"Sure. What's happening?"

Tigrito glanced casually over the side, then grinned. "Going into battle, you know? They send the women and children to the hotel, get them out of the way. Don' worry, old Hassabou bring them back tomorrow morning."

"I wasn't worried," said Hake, coming back into the lounge to take his shot, but it was a lie. He was worried about a great many things, not the least of them whether the tape had had time to reach Leota.

Hake took the afternoon bus back along the coast, got out at the path to the guard shack, climbed the dune and presented himself to the guards. The sound of the solar tower was immense, even at this distance, rumble of pumps, roar of gas and steam, scream of tortured molecules riven apart. The rifleman sitting on a canvas chair outside the shack took a plug out of his ear, glanced disinterestedly at Hake's forged identification badge, and made a coarse remark about male scrubwomen. "Too bad you're a man," he said. "You can't go down for an hour yet, and if you were a women we could pass the time more interestingly."

"Not very many trespassers to keep you busy?" Hake offered conversationally.

"Trespassers? Why would anyone trespass? All we do is keep silly people in boats from coming too near the tower. Go, sit in the shade. When the noise stops, you can go down to the control dugout."

So Hake sprawled out under a clump of sunflowers, fingering the badge that had once been Leota's, his mind clear and almost blank. He could not plan very far. All he could do was go through with his orders until he saw a chance to do something else. When the sun set the guard waved him down; but, actually, the noise had not stopped; there was still plenty of heat in the receptor cavity at the top of the tower, and the turbines continued to roar.

Scrambling down the path in the dusk, Hake remembered one summer's moonlighting—he had still been in the wheelchair—when he held a part-time job cleaning heliostats for Jersey Central Power & Light. The big, jointed mirrors were stowed shiny side down to keep dust from coating and salt spray from pitting their surfaces. Even so, Hake, or someone like him, had to get out and spray them clean once a month—a job that never ended, because the time the last sector was detergented the first was beginning to cloud up again. But the sunplants cleaned themselves.

Going inside the control dugout was like entering the bridge of a ship. CRTs glowed in a rainbow of colors at half a dozen monitoring stations, displaying a hundred different kinds of data about temperature, pressure and every other transient state at every point in the process. One set monitored the air as it was forced through its tiny pipes across the heat receptor. Another tracked the expanded air as it turned gas turbines to generate electricity. Others reported on the sea-water as it was boiled into steam, the exhaust of waste brine back into the ocean, the pumping of hydrogen and oxygen to

the liquefaction plants beyond the end of the cove. Hake knew this was so, from knowing how the plant worked, but he could read none of the indicia. They were only glowing masses of colors and symbols to him.

A short, dark woman looked up from one of the screens to glance at his credentials. "You're not our standard brand of cleaner," she said.

"I needed the job. Later on I might get something better, they said."

"Be nice having you around," she said, looking with more interest at Hake himself than at his badge. "The rest of the crew'll be here by boat any minute. They'll show you what to do."

Between the dugout and the tower was a long, underwater tunnel. The night crew leader, an Egyptian engineer named Boutros, took his gang through it at a brisk walk. They had seen the tunnel a hundred times, and it was of no more interest to them that his driveway to a suburbanite. But for Hake it was something to see. Half a mile of nothing but distance. It was like being in a long birth canal, a ten-minute half-trot with spaced red lights before and after always seeming to stretch out to the same indefinite, maybe infinite, length.

The sunflowers had long since folded themselves into buds for the night. No more energy was coming to the receptor. It was safe for the maintenance crew to come in and start their work. But the generators were still turning, the pumps were thudding, the compressed air was screaming through the criss-cross of thin pipes. Boutros had a spare set of ear-plugs for Hake. Without them, he would be deafened.

The tower was tightly sealed most of the time; but sealed or not, fine sand from the dunes and salt spray from the water found its way inside. That was Hake's job. While the skilled mechanics split off to check and repair the brains and entrails of the system, Hake and a couple of others were set to sweeping and polishing. The first job was the brass railings that surrounded the open central shaft at every level. Hake, following the finger of the woman working with him, could see where to start. The rails on the three lowest levels, looking up from the base of the heat-exchanger column, were bright and clean. What looked like a sudden change to green-black iron in the railings of the fourth was only the dirt they had to clean. Far, far up—near the hundred-meter level at the top of the tower—he could see that the rails brightened and gleamed again.

Cleaning corrosion inside the tower was like painting an immense bridge. By the time you completed the job it was time to begin at the other end.

That part of the job was only make-work and fussiness; Hake and his co-workers scraped and polished to complete the fourth level, then Hake was actually sent to push a broom for a while until it was time to do the more important jobs. The solar collector retained enough heat to generate power for several hours after sunset. Then, with a suddenness like a crash, everything shut down—the pumps, the valve motors, the yell and whistle of fluids forced through tubes—and everyone took earplugs out. There was a total silence for a minute before the pumps started again, this time at low pressure, and Boutros appeared to wave his crews toward the stairs.

It was a long climb. A hundred meters of climbing.

When the generator was going and sunpower was pouring in, the pumped air swallowed energy to turn into electricity in the generators. At the same time it kept the pipes from burning through. The critical time was only a matter of seconds at full power. The cavity was *hot*—could, in theory, be as hot as the surface of the sun, some 9000 Fahrenheit; was, in practice, only about half that. But hotter than anything Hake had ever encountered. If the pumps failed, the reflected heat from the sunplants would convert that delicate grid into slag unless they were deflected away at once. Now that was not the problem, because the sunplants slept. But the pumps were cooling the pipes for Hake's crew, so that they could chip them free of the thin, tough corrosion of sea-scale that reduced the heat conductivity of the pipes and wasted energy.

To do that, they had to go up where the heat receptor was.

A hundred meters is not a great distance, when it is stretched out flat. An Olympic runner can cover it in a matter of seconds. But a hundred meters straight up from the nearest flat surface is something quite different. The physical exertion was the least of it, although Hake reached the top deck panting and shaking. Worse. The wind blew. Clinging to the safety rails, Hake thought his hair would fly off. The tower shook—not entirely in his imagination; there was a bass organ-pipe thrumming that he could feel through the handholds. And, although the pumps had swept most of the 4000° heat out of the piping, it blistered his fingers at a touch.

The Arab next to him laughed, spreading his own fingers and pointing to the gloves Hake carried on his belt. Hake set his jaw. They could have reminded him! But he conceded to himself that no reminder would have worked as well to impress the need on him as

that one sizzling touch.

But out over the dunes Cassiopeia wheeled down toward the end of the night. Cool, dry air from the desert smelled of salt, camels, and old petroleum. Once he learned to forget the great depth beneath him and get on with the job, it was far from unpleasant to be a hundred meters up in the Arabian night sky.

The job was not difficult. As it was done every night, the salt had little chance to build up. It took only a firm slow rub along each wire-thin pipe, front and back, with the chemically treated cleaning wads. They broke for mint tea and peppery coffee, hoisted up from the surface level in buckets; and by the time the sky began to turn cobalt in the east they were done.

Hake went down with the others, excused himself to go to the men's room, and waited there until there were no more sounds from inside the tower. Then he peeped out.

Most of the crew had returned through the tunnel. Some had left by boats tied to the tower's base. He did not think anyone would care much about not seeing him in one place or the other. He had marked TV monitors that scanned the interior space of the tower and was careful to avoid their fields of view. And he sat down and waited, three levels up from the gentle waves, with a clear view of the shore through one spray-splashed window and a panorama of the sea's horizons through the others.

The fact that he could see nothing but water in that direction did not mean there was nothing there; they would be on their way by now. And on land as well. Peering cautiously over the squat dugout at water's edge, he saw the pink roof of the guard shack. Tigrito and his goons would be there by now, checking their watches. It all looked peaceful, even the tangle of bright plumbing that projected above the eastern headland, the gas-cooling plant and the radar mast of an LH₂ tanker waiting to be loaded.

It would be *sinful* to destroy this. So thought Hake, minister of a church that never used the word "sin," veteran of a quarter century of New Jersey's brownouts and freezeouts and sooty grime. Clean hydrogen was a good. What madness were Curmudgeon and the others engaged in? What madness the world?

The sky beyond the headlands was orange, ready for the sun's entrance on the stage, the color picked up by the plumbing of the LH₂ plant. So many megawatt-hours from this array; and this only one tiny cove, invisible on a map, duplicated a hundred times along this coast alone. No wonder the fight was so intense. The stakes were fantastic.

The pumps throbbed suddenly, and the TV cameras began to swing back and forth in their scan.

Hake jumped. It was time. The sunflowers were beginning to open. The sun was not yet high enough to produce much energy, but he could see the violet ghost image spring into being, halfway up the sky. It laid a trail of oily glitter along the surface of the sea—

And in the middle of that shining trail, unseen until he squinted to look for it, a sprinkle of pockmarks.

Bubbles. The invaders were approaching.

The first one up the ladder was Mario, wet suit gleaming in the long slants of sunrise, waterproof tote lashed to his back. He did not speak to Hake, just stripped off his suit and opened the bag to lay out the tools of his trade. Speaking would not have been easy. The pumps were roaring at full force now, and the whole tower thrummed with their noise and the scream of gas through piping. The underwater tug bobbed up to the lowest rung of the ladder; and one, two, three more persons pulled themselves up.

"Stay in this corner!" Hake shouted in Mario's ear. "I rolled a screen over the doorway. You can get to the tunnel without the camera picking you up."

Mario looked at him scornfully, then repeated the orders to the others. It wasn't necessary to say that, except to reinforce the fact that it was he, not Hake, who was running things. He spoke into a radio, listened and nodded. "The others are on their way," he said. "Let's move it!"

Yosper's bully-boy quartet were reassembled here in Al Halwani, rapidly getting out of their wet suits, spreading their treasures on the steel deck. Mario's gear was nose-masks, sleep-gas canisters, slabs of gray-pink plastic explosive. Sven (or Carlos) had his own tools: the camera to photograph the machinery, the kit to take apart any equipment interesting enough to carry away, the detonators to explode Mario's plastic and bring the tower down, when he had looted it of everything worth while. Dieter (or Sven, or Carlos) carried the biocans of fungus spores. They were to go into the trickle-irrigation system, infecting the sunplants with the wilt. Carlos (or whoever) carried the guns. Bulgarian Brollies and Peruvian Pens with green-tipped darts, like hypodermic needles; one touch, and the victim was anesthetized, in case the sleep-gas failed. And a clutch of machine-pistols. They were not non-lethal. Any person who took their thousand-round-a-minute blast would sleep forever, in blood.

The second crew arrived, three persons. Two turned out to be the sheik's men and the third, a-hop with excitement, was Yosper himself. "Going like crazy!" he cackled, skinning out of his suit. "We ready, Mario? Get on with it, Hake, lead the way!"

Hake climbed down the ladder and crouched at the door to the tunnel as the others came behind him. Yosper raised himself on tiptoes to peer through the little window, then turned, scowling. "You didn't cover the TV cameras," he accused.

"How could I? They just would have fixed them." It was a true reason, if not a real one, but it didn't solve the problem for Hake. Dieter (or Sven) said cheerfully:

"Not to worry. Give me a minute with the wires." He located and opened a junction-box, and in a moment all the dim red lights beyond the door winked out. "We better move it, Yosper," he said. "They'll be checking that in a minute."

"Then let's go!" Yosper grabbed machine-pistol and sleep-dart projector from the pile and started off at a trot, the others following. Hake lagged, slipped on a nose-mask, and tossed two of the sleep-gas canisters into the darkness behind them.

They did not have time to turn around. He heard the clatter of the canisters, the puff of their explosion, a few grunts and gasps, and then the sound of bodies falling.

When he was sure they were all out cold for at least an hour, Hake re-climbed the ladder, picked up the rubbery wads of plastic and the fitted box of detonators and pushed them into the sea, along with as many machine-pistols as he could collect. Then he descended the ladder again, stepping on a thigh here, a back there, and stumbled through the black tunnel to the control dugout. What he would do when he got to the dugout he was not sure, but at least he could dump the problem on whoever was there. He tripped over a body just before the end—how had anyone managed to get that far?—and reached for the door.

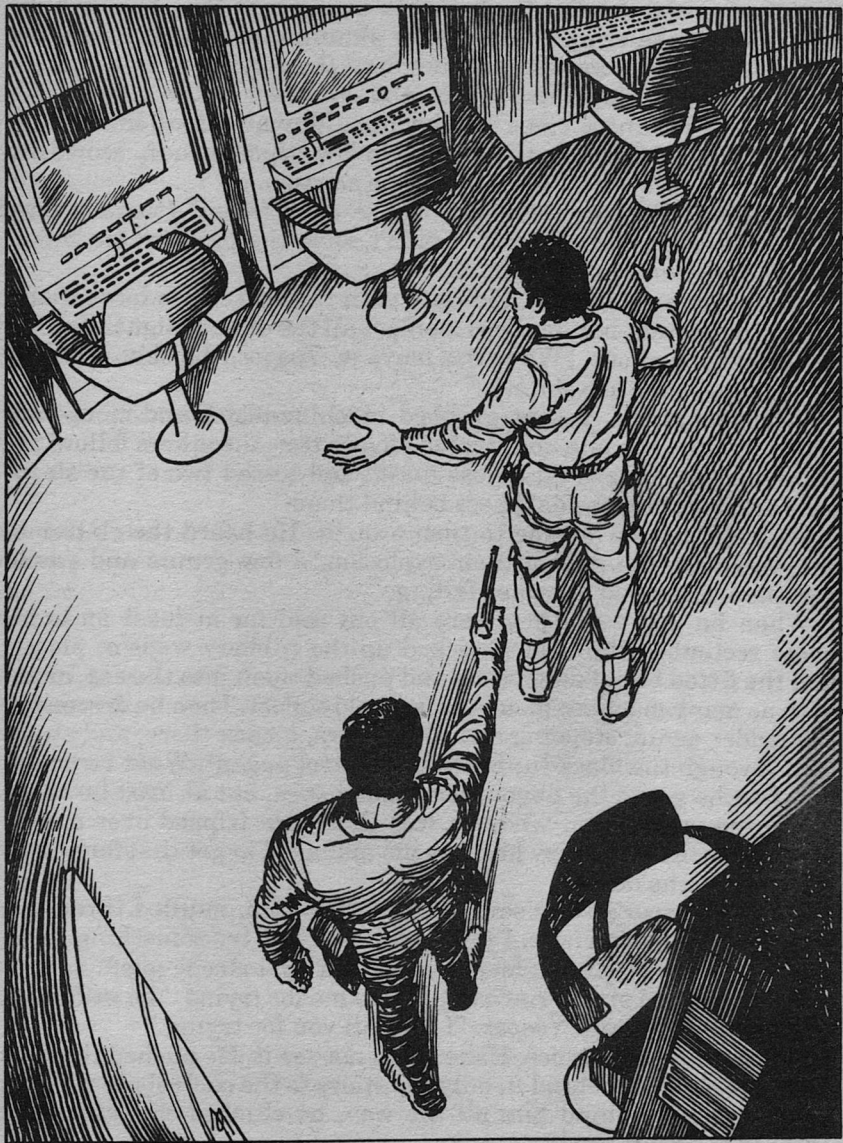
Just as Yosper's voice said softly behind him, muffled through a mask, "You know, Hake, I thought you might try something. Now open the door. What you feel in your back isn't sleepy-gas."

Hake stopped still. "You can't blame me for trying," he said.

"Wrong, boy," said Yosper. "I can kill you for trying."

If there was any choice, Hake could not see it. He pushed the door open. No one was behind it, only the stairs to the control room. With Yosper inches behind him all the way, he climbed the stairs and entered the room itself.

No one was there.



The monitors were untended, the seats empty. Apart from the sound of a fan and the dusty faint crackle of electronics, there was no sound. Hake moved out into the room, marveling. Behind him. Yosper snarled, "What the hell? Hake, if you've done something—This is a real gun I've got on you!"

And then from behind one of the monitor's, a familiar voice "So is this one," said Rama Reddi, rising into sight, "and so is my brother's, and so are all the others." And all around the room armed men and women were standing up, and all the guns were pointed precisely at Yosper's head.

One of the women was Leota, dropping her gun, running to Hake's arms, starry-eyed with pleasure. "You're okay?" she demanded. "Of course you are! Great work, Horny, even if you didn't know exactly what you were doing!"

He kissed her absent-mindedly, still trying to catch up with events. The one-legged man from the personnel office, Robling, was hopping toward him, grinning. "How'd you get out?" Hake demanded.

"We had a fire at the hotel," the man chortled. "Nothing serious. Just enough to make everybody evacuate, and we sorted your friends out in the confusion. Leota and Mr. Reddi set the whole thing up, in my office—it's not my line of work, you know. But it looks like they knew what they were doing."

"Only don't let's fool around," Leota urged, slipping out of Hake's arms. "Somebody's got to call the yacht in, tell them everything's okay."

Yosper's mask of fury cleared and he reached for his radio, but Hake was ahead of him. "Not you, Yosper. You're a staunch old spook, and God knows what you'd say to them. I'll do it."

He took the radio from Yosper's belt, extended the antenna and looked around. "Now?"

"Yes, now!" snarled Rama Reddi. "Let us complete this and get to the matter of payment!"

Hake frowned, then shrugged. He turned on the radio and, banging it gently as he spoke, called. "Curmudgeon? Hassabou? Somebody! Come in, Curmudgeon, we're ready for you."

Curmudgeon responded immediately. "Is that you, Hake? What the devil's wrong with your radio? Where's Yosper?"

Hake grinned and repeated, "Curmedgeon, come in!" And, aside, "Have I got this damn thing turned on? Curmudgeon, listen. Yosper and Mario got in the way of the sleep gas, but we're all ready for

you. I'm calling from the control dugout and it's all secured."

Then he turned off the transmitter, and they all listened to Curmudgeon fume.

"Is he going to do it?" Robling demanded. Hake shrugged. "I can't answer too many questions," he said. "We'll just have to wait and see."

Leota, eyes on the radar scan, said, "Look here." In the CRT they could see the green shadow of the tower, the headlands, the barges waiting with their globular tanks for their cargoes of LH_2 —and, yes, cautiously nosing around the headland, the sharp, slim shape of the yacht.

"He's coming," breathed the one-legged man. "Now it's up to you tower operators. Do your stuff."

The dark woman at the hologram monitor nodded and moved controls. Out of the heavily screened slit at the front of the dugout Hake could see the violet target hologram skid across the sky. Through the clear-glass clerestory panes on the dune side he could see the sunplants seem to rustle and ripple in slow motion as they nodded toward a new focus. Their response time was slow—minutes, at least, for perfect collimation. But they were moving.

It all seemed to happen very slowly. The woman was explaining the geometry and mechanics, but Hake caught only fragments. The solar disk subtended ten milliradians; at best, the sunplants could keep ninety-nine percent of the energies they reflected in a target ten times that diameter—but not all at once. For the next few minutes they would be tracking in, first creating a wide patch of warmth, then a swath hundreds of yards wide of discomfort, then a spot smaller than the side of the yacht in which no unprotected thing could survive.

The brilliant star of white at the top of the tower began to blur and darken.

The one-legged man and the controller whispered anxiously to each other. This was a critical time. The cavity receptor was designed to handle intense heat. The structure around it was not. As the spot defocused, thousands, then millions, of watts of heat struck at the polished Fresnel shapes of reflecting steel. The energy of ten thousand horses assaulted each metal vane. But the defocusing was fast enough. By the time the temperature monitor began to redline, the spot had spread. The graph on the CRT wobbled, held steady, then began to decline.

And the yacht stopped and dropped its anchors. The woman at the hologram control made final adjustments, then nodded to Hake.

"Go ahead, Horny," said Leota. "You can be the one to tell them what's happening."

"My pleasure," Hake grinned. Then, into the transmitter, "Curmudgeon! Put your sun glasses on!"

A startled grunt from the radio. Then silence. Then Curmudgeon's voice, thick and nasty, "Hake, your last chance. What the hell's going on?"

"We're zeroing in on you, Curmudgeon. You have one minute to abandon ship." The yacht was growing brighter every second, as though stage-hands were switching Kliegs on it from some invisible rafters. "Jump off on the far side," Hake added. "Our aim might not be too good."

The one-legged man scowled and motioned fiercely for Hake to turn off the transmitter. "Watch what you tell them!" he snapped. "If they get up steam right away they can still miss the beam—" He stared anxiously out the darkened slit, then began to smile. "I think they missed their chance," he said. "They've left it too long. That ship's as good as sunk. Go ahead, tell them to get off it."

The receiver was rattling with Curmudgeon's voice. "Hake, I don't know what you think you're doing, but if you think you're going to—"

"Not going to, Curmudgeon. It's already done. You have maybe thirty seconds, then I think your hydrogen tank may blow." The sunbeam was contracting and brightening now. Individual shafts of merged beams dipped and wobbled across the surface of the sea, and a palest plume of steam shimmered off some wave-tops. "Fifteen seconds!"

From the corner where he was roped to a chair, Yosper's voice, turgid with rage, "Hake, you bastard, you're going to wish you were never born."

There was a confused babble of voices from the radio, and then it clicked off. Even through the grayed glass it was becoming painful to look at the ship. Smoke rose from its side as the paint scorched away. Glass was shattering in the portholes, and the gay line of flags at its masts blew away as ash. The ninety-per-cent concentration disk shrank to a thousand milliradians, five hundred, three hundred—

The globe of liquid hydrogen on the afterdeck never did blow. It did not have time. Before the heat of its shell boiled off enough of the LH_2 within to shatter the valves, the ninety-per-cent disk had shrunk away from it, narrowing in on the center of the hull, just above the waterline. Hake could not see that the metal was glowing.

The reflectance from the dot of light far overpowered the mere incandescence of steel. But suddenly a dollop of softened metal slid away and splashed into the sea, with an immense production of steam. The vessel rocked wildly and began to settle in the water.

Standing at the darkened window, Hake had a sudden stab of concern. "When it sinks, what'll happen to the people in the water?"

Robling grinned and pointed to the hologram monitor. Already the purple crosshairs were climbing in the sky, up and away from the ship itself, and the spot was defocusing again. "It won't go down for a half an hour," he said.

The woman at the control board snapped, "And about time! Do you know what this little game is costing? We do fifteen million dollars a day, and we've already lost an hour's production—"

"Cheap at the price," said the one-legged man. "Let's call the cavalry in."

"I already have," she said. The long-range screen picked them up first, but as soon as Hake's eyes recovered from staring at the bright spot on the side of the dying ship he could see them. A destroyer and two gunboats of the Al Halwani "navy"—probably they *were* the Al Halwani navy—coming in over the horizon, with white bow-waves to show their racing speed.

Hake put his arm around Leota, beside him at the window, and said wonderingly, "We've done it."

"Not quite," said Rama Reddi, cradling a machine-pistol in his arm; and from the other side of the control room, his brother said:

"That is so, Hake. You have still to settle with us."

Hake turned toward them, but before he could speak Leota cut in. "That's right, Horny. I promised them you'd come across with the codes and keys. I want you to do it."

"Do what you want," said Robling, "but don't do it right now. Let's get those people out of the water and get back in production."

Even in rubber boats or in the water itself, the crew of the ship were far from toothless. But Al Halwani's naval might lobbed vomit-gas grenades at them. Power launches fished them out of the water one by one, weak and without fight; some they had to scoop out with nets, like guppies in a breeding tank. Then one launch sped in toward the dugout, while the others returned to the ships.

It deposited Curmudgeon and Sheik Badawey Al-Nadim Abd Has-sabou, bound and miserable, on the beach; and armed sailors brought them inside as the launch sped off along the coast.

The one-legged man gave orders. "Sit them down by the wall.

Omayya, start the refocusing on the tower; those ship'll be out of range before the beam gets tight, and it's about time we got back in production."

Yosper shrilled venomously, "You're all dead, you know that? You're screwing around with the most muscle in the world!"

"Put a gag in that one, too," Robling said over his shoulder, watching the purple hologram slide into its proper place. "And now, far as I'm concerned, you people can get on with your private business."

"Here? At this place, with all these witnesses?" Subirama Reddi demanded. "Are you trying to cheat us?"

Leota said firmly, "The deal was that Hake would give you the information, that's all. Said nothing about when or where."

"But—these men are from the Agency! In one minute they can change all the codes, and it will be worthless!"

Leota shook her head. "Tell you what. As soon as you've got what you want you can take off. Nobody else will leave here for an hour. Anyway, the prisoners aren't going to be talking to anyone for a while—they'll be in jail in Al Halwani, and I don't think they'll have any visitors."

"Not for twenty-four hours," the one-legged man said, grinning. "I can promise that."

The brother looked at each other, then shrugged. "He may proceed," Rama Reddi said grudgingly.

"How come nobody asks me if I *want* to proceed?" Hake demanded.

Leota put her head on his arm. "Because we made a deal," she said. "Go ahead, Horny. The whole thing. Even tell them about your thumbprint, I promise that part's going to be all right."

Hake took a deep breath. Everybody was looking at him, but, for the center of attention, he seemed to have very little free will about what he did. And very little time to decide what he wanted. Trading with the Reddis was not the kind of thing he could take pride in. Thwarting one little plan of the Agency's was too tiny a victory to last, and the future beyond this moment looked unpromising—"Do it, Hake!" snarled Leota, and her eyes were urgent.

"Oh, all right," he said. "Well. We finance our operations by tapping into other people's bank accounts—mostly cloak-and-dagger fronts for the other sides. To open a line, the first thing I do is present my thumbprint for ID. Then there are some code words." He went on in detail, naming all the bank accounts they were looting, reciting the codes, omitting nothing, while Subirama Reddi took notes and his brother asked questions. Finally Subirama looked up.

"I think we have the procedure, yes. Remains the question of your thumb."

"I'll help out there," Leota said quickly, producing a flat metal box. It contained plastic. "Press your thumb in this, will you, Horny?"

He shrugged and did as he was told. Leota offered the box to the Reddis. "You can make your own thumbprint from that," she said.

Subirama Reddi took it, studied it carefully, and then nodded at his brother. "The payment is complete," he said, "apart from our one-hour lead before anyone else leaves this place."

"Then you better get moving," grumbled Robling.

"I want to get all these people out of our plant. Take the gags off those three while we figure out what to do with them."

As the Reddis disappeared, Yosper began to rage: "Traitor!" he yelled. "Boy, you've betrayed the Agency, the U. S. of A. and the Lord God, and I pity you when we get through with you! Spreading a few disease germs in Europe, that was all you were good for."

Leota put in, "You mean last spring, when he was a germ carrier for you?"

Yosper glared at her. "Shut up, slut. The sheik'll take care of you, don't worry about that."

"Not unless he wants to kidnap me again. That's a crime, and the Italian government won't put up with it."

The sheik, disdainfully allowing one of the Al Halwani sailors to remove his gag, said in accented English, "My friend the Minister of Justice will not listen to your ravings." He was almost a comic figure, the kohl around his eyes smeared from immersion in the water; but there was nothing comic in his expression.

"What about you, Curmudgeon?" Hake asked. "Have you got anything to contribute to this?"

The Agency chief said with dignity, "It doesn't matter, Hake. You're finished. So is Al Halwani."

Robling cut in, "You don't seem to realize that you're through, Curmudgeon. We're on to you now."

"And what good will that do you? We don't need to blow up your tower to put you out of business. We've got the stuff to kill off your plants—and a new breed of sunplants of our own resistant to the disease. You think you can stop one of our choppers from spraying your whole setup, some dark night? Forget it!"

Hake flared, "You can't get away with it. I'll—I'll talk to the President!"

Curmudgeon laughed. "That pipsqueak! He doesn't know about

this, and he won't believe you; the Attorney General runs this show, and he has the President's ear."

Hake stared at them, helpless captives, still belligerent. "You know," he said wonderingly, "you people are crazy." And so they were, there could be no doubt, crazy people running a crazy game of sabotage and destruction. They were so *secure!* Curmudgeon and Yosper even seemed to be enjoying it! He detached himself from the surroundings, trying to reason it all out. Was there any way, ever, to put a stop to this endless cycle of mad violence?

Vaguely he heard Leota say to the one-legged man, "I think we've got it all," and saw the one-legged man nod and pick up a telephone. He waited, watching Yosper and Curmudgeon as though they were specimens in a cage, and then spoke into the phone.

Then—"Everybody shut up," he called. "Hake, you might want to take this call." He switched on a loudspeaker extension.

The voice on the other end, cackling with delight, was The Incredible Art.

"Horny? Oh, Horny!" he cried. "It came in just fine! Somebody started jamming about two minutes ago, but it was too late—What?"

The half-second delay made him miss Hake's words. Hake repeated them, staring around at the others. "Art! What are you talking about?"

Half a second. Then—"You mean you don't know? Why, Horny, that's *funny!* You've been on the air! All of you! For the last half hour, by satellite, all over the world!"

VII.

On the way back to the Crash Pad, Leota insisted on stopping for a swim. The notion was ludicrously inappropriate to what they had been doing. Which made it seem just right. Hake parked their borrowed hydrogen buggy and they ran down to the child-sized waves, shedding clothes as they went.

He was first out, dragged himself up the sand, and flopped on his back, staring under the back of his hand at the sky. Somewhere up there was the geostationary communications satellite that had taken the pictures from the monitoring cameras and the Al Halwani communications center and sprayed them all over the world. Of course, it could not be seen. At twenty-two thousand miles a chunk of metal no bigger than a piano cannot be seen. But it was there and it had worked. The Incredible Art had alerted all three TV

networks in the U.S., and two of them had already broadcast excerpts. Complete with names and faces.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, it felt safe to relax. He closed his eyes and let the sun heal him.

Cold drops on his body made him open them again. Leota was kneeling beside him, looking down as she squeezed water out of her hair. "I wasn't asleep," he said.

She laughed, leaned forward and kissed him. "I didn't say you were. But you sure looked as though you were having one sweet self-satisfied dream."

He sat up, to watch her better. "I've got a lot to be self-satisfied about," he said. "I figured out what it is I have to do."

"Oh, really?" she said in amusement. Then, looking at him more carefully: "Oh. Really."

"I think so, Leota. I really do think so," he grinned. "It all comes out pretty simple—except for a couple of little details. For instance, I was worrying about whether the boys might just kill off the sun-plants anyway, out of meanness, with their disease. But I think I know the answer to that. We'll call Art up and tell him to scrounge around my house for the flower I picked at IPF; I think that's their resistant strain." He broke off, and then added, "You were expecting something more?"

"Well—"

"That's all right, Leota. That was only one of the details. Next thing, I think I want to go back to being a minister in Long Branch. Do you think you'd like it there?"

"I might give it a try," she said cautiously. "Alys didn't make it sound too great. And, well, are you sure that's healthy?"

"Well, that was another of the details," Hake admitted. "But I do think so. This is a nice, big scandal. I don't think they'll want another one, and besides, the church is a good home base. The other thing I want to talk to Art about is getting on TV. I want to talk about this thing of people acting hypnotized. I don't know how to stop it. But I'd at least like to suggest that it's happening."

Leota thought for a moment, frowning. Then her expression cleared. "All right. I go along with that, at least for openers. Then what do we do?"

Hake grinned and put his arm around her. "That's easy," he said. "That's the part I figured out, the rest was just detail. The *big* thing we do, for the rest of our lives, is: We do the best we can."

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I feel both ashamed and stupid. Stupid because it took ten months of constant searching every time an issue was put out to find the magazine (a situation I remedied by sending in my subscription). Ashamed because it took the same ten months to write this letter and mail it in.

Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine is the best mag I have ever encountered. It is always full of good stories (all of which I read) in every issue and I consider none as "bad."

Obviously, if a story gets published it must be good. However, all stories cannot satisfy all people. I happen to be an exception because all stories in your mag I do enjoy. But you want to know what I like best and what I think you could do to improve the mag. Well, this is what I think.

What I like about the magazine is that you do not put in stories in series, or serials. I like the continuous good quality, and quantity, of the stories. I like the magazine even more now that it has gone monthly. But most of all, I like the fact that you encourage new writers to send in for your wants and needs so that they could send in manuscripts. By the way, could you send me a description of your needs and wants? [Yes.] Thank you.

What I dislike about your magazine is something that cannot be remedied. It is something that is essential to the continuous publication of the magazine even though they rudely interrupt stories, cause room to be taken that could be used for another story, and are ugly. Yes, I am talking about the advertisements.

Another thing I like about the magazine is that you can always tell who your devout followers are by reading the letters. In the June issue, someone wrote a letter saying that the good Doctor never smiled on any of the covers. Well, I would like to point out that the good Doctor was smiling proudly on the cover of the February '79 issue. However, it was the only issue which he did have a smile on. I wonder why?

I would like to finish by giving my congratulations to you, Mr. Scithers, for being awarded the Hugo as editor of *IASF*M. I know this letter is a little long and, if you want to publish it, you can edit it as much as you please. After all, if you can win the Hugo for

editing a magazine you can edit my humble letter any way you want.

Respectfully yours,

Mark Fernandez

I'm sorry, my friend, but in this world there are some things that are sacred. In the magazines of our capitalistic society one of those sacred things is the advertisement.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor,

Every SF fan in Sydney is simultaneously praising and cursing your magazine. Praising it for its interesting and entertaining content, cursing it because it is only available on nights displaying a blue moon. The two issues I brought in from the States were wrenched from my hand at the airport and I haven't seen them in six weeks! In the interest of less violence amongst Australian SFers could you please step up your circulation?

Second request is for your story information. Its about time the Antipodes were represented! (If they haven't been already.)

Thanks very much,

Yours sincerely,

Laurence Parslow
Panania, N.S.W.
Australia

Hey, George, why don't we get more magazines into Australia. It's a nice place.

—Isaac Asimov

Sirs:

Having taken into consideration the following facts: 1) I am up to my pierced earlobes in manuscripts in various states of finish; 2) last night, for no apparent reason (and certainly through no provocation on my part), one jumped out of its folder and threatened me; and 3) I have in the neighborhood of four already going down for the count in your slush pile (always pays to read the instructions first, right?), I have been forced to the conclusion that it is high time I sent a SASE (*an SASE?*) (*the SASE*) and found out where to, when to, how to, and so on. Enclosed, please find one.

To George Scithers: The magazine is terrific. The latest edition cost me \$6.75. I went to a drug store, a book store, a grocery store, and, finally, in desperation, a liquor store. Where I also, fortunately, found a copy of the magazine. Unfortunately, I also went by a gas station on the way! Further, the damage done to my reputation as a stable, solid citizen of this community is something I would rather not discuss. I've become known as the Madwoman With The Magazine Fetish! Aside from these small problems of expense and raised eyebrows, I have no complaint (the matter of the threatening manuscripts notwithstanding). However, while I may be a slow learner, I'm not a complete moron and, eventually, I do manage to see the light. So, also enclosed, please find a subscription.

To the Good Doctor: For God's sake, don't let anyone talk you into anything—least of all removing your picture from the little "O" on the cover! It *belongs* there! Furthermore, I figure that, if you send me a rejection slip right off the bat, it will also fit nicely into the little center circle on my dartboard as if it also belonged *there!* I recently picked up a copy of *Asimov's Guide to Science*. It's a magnificent piece of writing on a scale that leaves me boggle-eyed—taking the entire range of scientific knowledge, darn near, and reducing it and explaining it in terms even us dummies can understand. Congratulations on a terrific job—a little late, maybe, but then back when you wrote it, I had my mind on things other than trying to gain a little knowledge. Also, may I say I highly recommend *Asimov on Physics* for any of you out there with an itch for some smarts and neither the time nor inclination to sit through those interminable, boring classes. You, sir, are not merely a writer—you are a damned *phenomenon!*

I do wish, however, that you would stop making reference to Harlan Ellison's "brilliance" and "genius." You already have half the civilized world believing it, and what frightens me is that one of these days you're going to have *him* believing it!

To Teresa McCullough: Regarding your letter in the May issue wherein you are complaining (making mention of the fact?) that the letter column doesn't quite measure up to the one in *Analog* because there are no debates going on—point well taken. My first inclination is to state that most of those "debates" are about as interesting and exciting to those not taking part as boiled rutabagas. To those taking part, we may elevate that analogy to that of three-week-old bread. It may be something to chew on, but it usually only serves to prove to outsiders that our brain is lodged somewhere in the vicinity of our left big toe. Normally I would say that. However, as the tem-

perature here in southern California has been climbing past the 105 degree mark for the past four days, I'm a bit cranky—so—now, what do you want to argue about?

I have loved the magazine for the past eighteen months. I have loved science fiction for the past lifetime. I have loved Isaac Asimov for the past twenty-five years. And I would love for someone to someday retrieve me from the slush pile!

Sincerely,

Delarishka Borravich
950 Spinel Avenue
El Cajon CA 92021

Frankly, I'm not the one who decides about the contents of the O, but I wouldn't mind having it there permanently. It is a not-too-obtrusive trademark. I can't help noticing that all those women who openly confess their passion for me are always from California and they know I don't fly.

—Isaac Asimov

Gentlemen:

I have been reading this magazine for well over a year now, and can count it as one of the primary factors initiating my ascendancy into the ranks of SF fandom. I had read a great deal of it previously but had failed to perceive it as a living, growing branch of literature. What *IA'sfm* did, in effect, was to alert me to the fact that SF was still in the process of developing, as opposed to almost every level of personal expression one could imagine. It was also rather fun. Though the authors I had read previously were nothing short of superlative (Welles, Verne, Clarke, Bradbury, Heinlein, and the Doctor himself being among them) they were all so established, so ingrained within the realm of literature (it should hardly come as a shock to learn that Bradbury, along with others, is an essential factor in high school reading lists), that I felt no degree of personal enthusiasm in reading them.

IA'sfm, in my own humble opinion, fills a necessary niche in SF publication, in that it provides that degree of personalization which the book industry fails to bring across. By publishing letters and new authors, it allows you to become enthusiastic about the whole thing, instead of mildly appreciative.

As to specific criticisms, the prolonged storylines seem to be working well. Barry Longyear's and Jo Clayton's respective worlds are developing nicely. It would be nice to see more of Gary Osgood's

pieces. His appreciation of plot and structure is awesome and his heroes bear an interesting resemblance to a mathematically inclined Zelazny character. Try to have this remain a functional publication; if Dr. Asimov is correct and a new golden age is dawning, we will decidedly need one. To insure that it remains functional and also to take advantage of it, I am enclosing the customary SASE. Be kind.

Sincerely

Christopher J. Lyons
Holmdel NJ

As to personalization, that's where I come in. In fact, personalization is just about my invention in science fiction. At least I discovered that talking directly to the reader in my collections and anthologies paid off. (You should have seen the editor's face the first time.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers & Dr. Asimov:

Like most others, I write in praise of your magazine. Although SF is not my major literary interest (medieval romances and their descendents in the form of fantasy are), it comes a close second. Just a few points I would like to make:

First: don't fall into the trap of printing only escapist stories. Many of us like to *think!* Also: don't adhere too rigidly to the science half of SF, or we'll wind up with another *Analog*. Your policy of bending the rules just enough to admit stories such as "Sanctuary" and "Places to Crawl Through" is both excellent and admirable.

While we all like to read stories by new writers, try not to publish too many of an author's works in rapid succession. After a while, even the best author becomes boring. For example, the Momus series was good at the beginning, but it should have stopped sooner. I became horribly sick of Jesse Peel's name, and Haldeman's stories were unreadable to begin with and only wasted space.

I thoroughly enjoy the nonfiction articles, and especially liked "Will Academe Kill SF?" I think many English majors (like myself) would enjoy seeing some analyses of different SF authors, as a parallel to the artists' series. How about it? Are there any professors out there willing to give it a try?

All in all, though, you're doing wonderfully. Keep it up!

Sincerely,

Kathleen Lehman
Itasca IL

If any of you wonder about it, we are always glad to get advice. We listen carefully, but must then use our own judgement.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I'm writing this letter mainly about Frederik Pohl's excellent novelette "The Cool War". I enjoyed his story "Mars Masked" in the March 1979 issue. It seems very realistic, with all the PCP going around. In the hour I've been writing (I had to study letter-writing form), I've heard about a group that exposes CIA identities, a fireman's strike, and raw sewage backing into homes in Fairborn. I hope Fred combines both stories (and a sequel) into a novel.

I liked "Itch on the Bull Run." I hope you have some more Terra Tarkington stories in the future.

"On What Really Goes on at a Science Fiction Convention" will be of great use to me when I do go to a SF Convention. Since I'm 14, that's something of a problem.

I was disappointed when the Barry B. Longyear story wasn't about Momus. It was good, but it couldn't match Lord Allenby & Company.

I know someone who is such a fan of yours that he steals your books out of libraries. And I lent him MY Asimov collection, which he still hasn't returned as of this date.

Cordially yours,

James Burdo
New Carlisle OH

If you're going to lend your books to a known thief, you had better get to be 15 fast and grow wiser.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Scithers:

Although I enjoyed the July 1979 issue of *IA'sfm* very much, there are a few things about it that bother me. For one, the "Letters" column. It's wonderful that you receive so many letters of praise. But that's no reason to inflict them upon your readers. We're happy for you, but the "Letters" column is dull, dull, dull.

I was also upset by the lead story, "Priest of the Baraboo," by Barry B. Longyear. I gather from the letters that this is a part of a series about Allenby's circus from the planet Momus. That's fine, but a series of stories written like "Priest . . ." would be very weak. (Of course, I haven't read the others. Even if all were much better

than the present story, "Priest . . ." adds a weak spot.) In a series, each story takes place at a certain point in time, and they generally follow one another. Prequels are the exceptions to this rule. Unfortunately, "Priest of the Baraboo" is two different stories in one. At first it seems to be about the difficulties faced by the circus on Pyroel. But when Bunsome begins to read the quotation from Shelem's book, we are plunged into a sort of long-distance flashback, to the time of the war on Momus. This narrative is completed, and we are back to Bunsome and the circus on Pyroel. The story ends with Bunsome thinking "We will succeed; we cannot fail," and thanking the late Shelem. Very hopeful, but something unforeseen can still happen. It is an ending, of sorts, but very weak.

Otherwise, I enjoyed the magazine, especially the two articles and the story by Martin Gardner. "On the Shadow of a Phosphor Sheen," by William F. Wu is one of the best novelettes I have read in a long while. Finally, will you please send me the information about your story needs and manuscript format? Enclosed is an SASE.

Very truly yours,

John M. Whiteside
Stratford CT

Alas, "dull" is so subjective a word. I'll take the chance though, that including your letter will make the column bright, bright, bright.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs:

I haven't read a sci-fi magazine in years. I thought I outgrew them. But when I returned to the magazine stands to see what sci-fi 'zines were doing these days, I saw very clearly that at least in one case, sci-fi magazines had outgrown me. I should have known before I even read Isaac Asimov's Sci-Fi Magazine that it would win me over, because anything that Asimov ever signs his name to usually turns out to be good.

But still, something more than intuition tells me that Asimov shouldn't get all the credit. George Scithers deserves a lot of it. (Although I bet Asimov picked him—am I wrong?) I saw Scithers taking two courageous steps: 1) publishing heretofore unknown, unpublished writers, and 2) printing poetry. It takes an editor with a strong sense of what's good to be able to get away with that, especially so smoothly.

So naturally, I sent Scithers a story of my own. When it was returned in a mere six days, I learned that it also took an editor

with a clear sense of what's bad. But just as I'm not gonna give up on reading *IA'sfm*, I'm not gonna stop trying to get printed in it, because I'm convinced that if a young writer can make it into this magazine, he can make it into science-fiction.

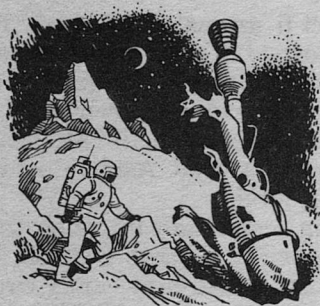
Your new-found fan,

Mark A. Valco
Lansing IL

Yes, sir, I picked George, but it wasn't hard. We are both members of the Trap Door Spiders—the organization on which my "Black Widowers" is based—so I knew his virtues. I was not disappointed.

—Isaac Asimov

Important Notice: Our address for subscription correspondence has changed. The new address is: Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Box 7350, Greenwich, CT 06830. This address is *only* for subscription matters. Our editorial address remains the same: *IA'sfm*, P.O. Box 13116, Philadelphia PA 19101.



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Entries are arranged alphabetically by author. When there is more than one entry for one author, they are arranged chronologically, in order of appearance in the magazine. The editorials are grouped at the end of Dr. Asimov's other entries, with titles of editorials in quotes and the subjects of the first five, untitled editorials within parentheses.

All entries without a parenthetical, descriptive note such as (article), (poem), (limerick), (announcement), or (non-fact article) are stories. Collaborations are listed under both authors, with cross references. When the author's name or the item's title is omitted, it is the same as that of the previous entry.

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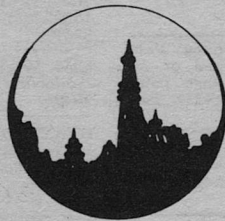
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THIRD SOLUTION TO TITAN'S TITANIC SYMBOL

(from page 88)

Tanya's trick of inverting the inside triangle works here, too, although it is not obvious that the upper corners of the inverted triangle will touch the ellipse at spots where the curve is tangent to the large triangle's two sides.

However, if you are familiar with affine geometry you will recall that affine "stretching" or "shrinking" of a figure preserves all area ratios. Shrinking the ellipse horizontally until its two foci merge will change it to a circle with inscribed and circumscribed equilateral triangles. This is the original Titan symbol. Since area ratios are preserved by stretching the circle to an ellipse, the ratio of the areas of the two isosceles triangles is 1 to 4 as before.

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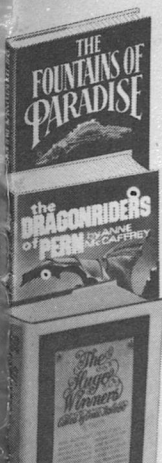
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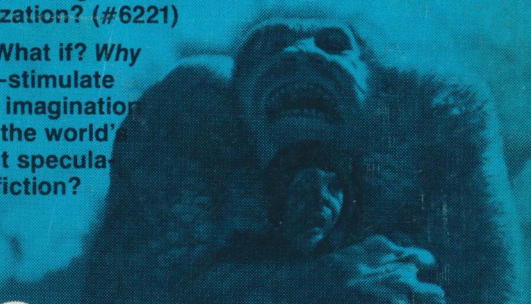
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