

AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD by J. T. McINTOSH

WORLDS OF



SCIENCE FICTION

DECEMBER 1964 • 50c

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WHEN TIME WAS NEW

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for a dream—and didn't
know it when it came true!

by ROBERT F. YOUNG



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WORLDS OF



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**ALL NEW
STORIES**

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OLD NAMES AND NEW

High on the side of a hill outside San Francisco lives one of the finest science-fiction writers in the world. His name is Jack Vance and we had the pleasure of visiting his home a few weeks ago, during the course of the World Science Fiction Convention held in Berkeley.

To reach the Vance estate you drive up a hill. Then you drive up a steeper hill. Then you drive up the steepest hill of all, shift into four-wheel drive, go a few yards further, then climb steps and ladders. His front lawn probably covers two or three acres — stood on end. All in all it is a charming place, an unusual one, and just right for the author of such charming, unusual and by gosh brilliant stories as *The Dragon Masters*, *The Moon Moth* and the one that starts in next issues's *If*, *The Killing Machine*.

* * *

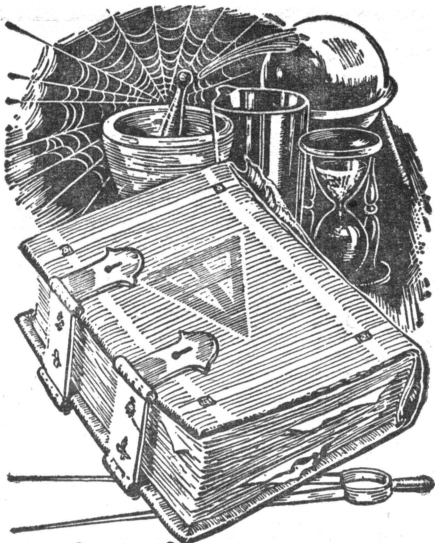
The convention itself, by the way, was a first-rate affair, populated with such fine writers as Vance, Poul Anderson, Clifford D. Simak (who picked up a Hugo of his own for the story in last year's *Galaxy*, *Here Gather the Stars*), Frank Her-

bert, Anthony Boucher — you name 'em. Awards were flowing like water, and, as a matter of fact, your editor acquired one too: The Invisible Little Men's Award, consisting of a mahogany base bearing the gold footprints of an invisible little man. Highlights of the affair were speeches by the joint guests of honor, Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett, a talk on science fiction in movies and television by a man who is responsible for a lot of it, Harlan Ellison, a reminiscing talk by the fan guest of honor, Forrest J. Ackerman, and much more. If you haven't ever been to a science-fiction convention, you don't know what you're missing. Next year's will be in London . . . and what better reason could there be for a transAtlantic trip?

* * *

In every issue of *If* we run a "first" story by someone who has never before appeared in a professional magazine. This month's is L. D. Ogle's *The Heat Racers*, a fresh and pleasing tale. We're looking for more, you know. What about the rest of you out there?—The Editor

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few**



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When Time Was New

BY ROBERT F. YOUNG

ILLUSTRATED BY MORROW

*He searched through time
for a dream — and didn't
know it when it came true!*

I

The stegosaurus standing beneath the ginkgo tree didn't surprise Carpenter, but the two kids sitting in the branches did. He had expected

to meet up with a stegosaurus sooner or later, but he hadn't expected to meet up with a boy and a girl. What in the name of all that was Mesozoic were they doing in the upper Cretaceous Period!

Maybe, he reflected, leaning forward in the driver's seat of his battery-powered triceratank, they were tied in in some way with the anachronistic fossil he had come back to the Age of Dinosaurs to investigate. Certainly the fact that Miss Sands, his chief assistant who had cased the place-time on the timescope, had said nothing about a couple of kids, meant nothing. Timescopes registered only the general lay of the land. They seldom showed anything smaller than a medium-sized mountain.

The stego nudged the trunk of the ginkgo with a hip as high as a hill. The tree gave such a convulsive shudder that the two children nearly fell off the branch they were sitting on and came tumbling down upon the serrated ridge of the monster's back. Their faces were as white as the line of cliffs that showed distantly beyond the scatterings of dogwoods and magnolias and live oaks, and the stands of willows and laurels and fan palms, that patterned the prehistoric plain.

Carpenter braced himself in the driver's seat. "Come on, Sam," he said, addressing the triceratank by nickname, "let's go get it!"

Since leaving the entry area several hours ago, he had been moving along in low gear in order not to miss any potential clues that might point the way to the anachronistic fossil's place of origin—a locale which, as was usually the case with unidentifiable anachronisms, the paleontological society that employed him had been able to

pinpoint much more accurately in time than in space. Now, he threw Sam into second and focused the three horn-howitzers jutting from the reptivehicle's facial regions on the sacral ganglion of the offending ornithischian. *Plugg! Plugg! Plugg!* went the three stun charges as they struck home, and down went the *a posteriori* section of the stego. The anterior section apprised by the pea-sized brain that something had gone haywire, twisted far enough around for one of the little eyes in the pint-sized head to take in the approaching triceratank, whereupon the stubby forelegs immediately began the herculean task of dragging the ten-ton, hump-backed body out of the theater of operations.

Carpenter grinned. "Take it easy, old mountainsides," he said. "You'll be on all four feet again in less time than it takes to say 'Tyrannosaurus rex'."

After bringing Sam to a halt a dozen yards from the base of the ginkgo, he looked up at the two terrified children through the one-way transparency of the reptivehicle's skull-nacelle. If anything, their faces were even whiter than they had been before. Small wonder. Sam looked more like a triceratops than most real triceratops did. Raising the nacelle, Carpenter recoiled a little from the sudden contrast between the humid heat of the midsummer's day and Sam's airconditioned interior. He stood up in the driver's compartment and showed himself. "Come on down you two," he called. "Nobody's going to eat you."

Two pairs of the widest and bluest eyes that he had ever seen came to rest upon his face. In neither pair, however, was there the faintest gleam of understanding. "I said come on down," he repeated. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

The boy turned to the girl, and the two of them began jabbering back and forth in a sing-song tongue that resembled Chinese, but only as the mist resembles the rain. It had no more in common with modern American than its speakers had with their surroundings. Clearly they hadn't understood a word he had said. But, equally as clearly, they must have found reassurance in his plain and honest face, or perhaps in the gentle tone of his voice. After talking the matter over for a few moments, they left their aerie and shinned down the trunk, the boy going first and helping the girl over the rough spots. He was about nine; she was about eleven.

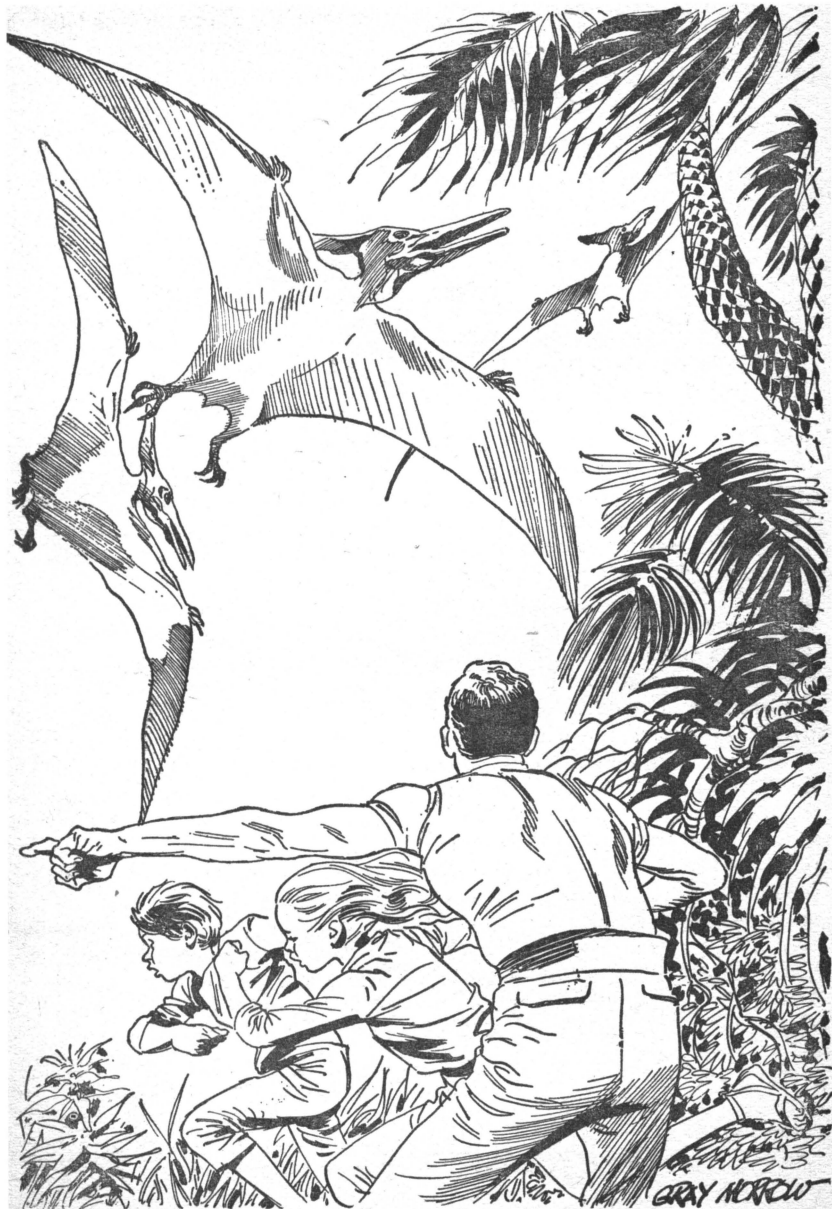
Carpenter stepped out of the compartment, vaulted down from Sam's steel snout and went over to where they were standing. By this time, the stego had recovered the use of its hind legs and was high-tailing—or rather, high-backing—it over the plain. The boy was wearing a loose, apricot-colored blouse which was considerably stained and disheveled from his recent arboreal activities, a pair of apricot-colored slacks which were similarly stained and disheveled and which terminated at his thin calves and a pair of open-toe sandals. The girl's outfit was identical, save that it was azure in hue and somewhat less stained and dishevel-

ed. She was about an inch taller than the boy, but no less thin. Both of them had delicate features, and hair the color of buttercups, and both of them wore expressions so solemn as to be almost ludicrous. It was virtually a sure bet that they were brother and sister.

Gazing earnestly up into Carpenter's gray eyes, the girl gave voice a series of sing-song phrases, each of them, judging from the nuances of pronunciation, representative of a different language.

When she finished, Carpenter shook his head. "I just don't dig you, pumpkin," he said. Then, just to make sure, he repeated the remark in Anglo-Saxon, Aeolic Greek, lower Cro-magnonese, upper-Acheulian, middle English, Iroquoian and Hyannis-Portese smatterings of which tongues and dialects he had picked up during his various sojourns in the past. No dice. Every word he spoke was just plain Greek to the girl and the boy.

Suddenly the girl's eyes sparkled with excitement, and, plunging her hand into a plastic reticule that hung from the belt that supported her slacks, she withdrew what appeared to be three pairs of earrings. She handed one pair to Carpenter, one to the boy, and kept one for herself; then she and the boy proceeded to affix the objects to their ear lobes, motioning to Carpenter to do the same. Complying, he discovered that the tiny disks which he had taken for pendants were in reality tiny diaphragms of some kind. Once the minute clamps were tightened into



place, they fitted just within the ear openings. The girl regarded his handiwork critically for a moment, then, standing on tiptoe, reached up and adjusted each disk with deft fingers. Satisfied, she stepped back. "Now," she said, in perfect idiomatic English. "we can get through to each other and find out what's what."

Carpenter stared at her. "Well I must say, you caught on to my language awful fast!"

"Oh, we didn't learn it," the boy said. "Those are micro-translators—*hearrings*. With them on, whatever we say sounds to you the way you would say it, and whatever you say sounds to us the way we would say it."

"I forgot I had them with me," said the girl. "They're standard travelers' equipment, but, not being a traveler in the strict sense of the word, I wouldn't have happened to have them. Only I'd just got back from foreign-activities class when the kidnapers grabbed me. Now," she went on, again gazing earnestly up into Carpenter's eyes, "I think it will be best if we take care of the amenities first, don't you? My name is Marcy, this is my brother Skip, and we are from Greater Mars. What is *your* name, and where are *you* from. kind sir?"

It wasn't easy, but Carpenter managed to keep his voice matter-of-fact. It was no more than fair that he should have. If anything, what he had to say was even more incredible than what he had just heard. "I'm Howard Carpenter, and I'm from Earth, 2156 A. D. That's

79,062,156 years from now." He pointed to the triceratank. "Sam over there is my time machine—among other things. When powered from an outside source, there's practically no limit to his field of operations."

The girl blinked once, and so did the boy. But that was all. "Well," Marcy said presently, "that much is taken care of: you're from Earth Future and we're from Mars Present." She paused, looking at Carpenter curiously. "Is there something you don't understand, Mr. Carpenter?"

Carpenter took a deep breath. He exhaled it. "In point of fact, yes. For one thing, there's the little matter of the difference in gravity between the two planets. Here on Earth you weigh more than twice as much as you weigh on Mars, and I can't quite figure out how you can move around so effortlessly, to say nothing of how you could have shinned up the trunk of that ginkgo tree."

"Oh, I see what you mean, Mr. Carpenter," Marcy said. "And it's a very good point, too. But obviously you're using Mars Future as a criterion, and just as obviously Mars Future is no longer quite the same as Mars Present. I—I guess a lot can happen in 79,062,156 years. Well, anyway, Mr. Carpenter," she continued, "the Mars of Skip's and my day has a gravity that approximates this planet's. Centuries ago, you see, our engineers artificially increased the existent gravity in order that no more of our atmosphere could escape into space, and suc-

cessive generations have adapted themselves to the stronger pull. Does that clarify matters for you, Mr. Carpenter?"

He had to admit that it did. "Do you kids have a last name?" he asked.

"No, we don't, Mr. Carpenter. At one time it was the custom for Martians to have last names, but when desentimentalization was introduced, the custom was abolished. Before we proceed any further, Mr. Carpenter, I would like to thank you for saving our lives. It — it was very noble of you."

"You're most welcome," Carpenter said, "but I'm afraid if we go on standing here in the open like this, I'm going to have to save them all over again, and my own to boot. So let's the three of us get inside Sam where it's safe. All right?"

Leading the way over to the triceratank, he vaulted up on the snout and reached down for the girl's hand. After pulling her up beside him, he helped her into the driver's compartment. "There's a small doorway behind the driver's seat," he told her. "Crawl through it and make yourself at home in the cabin just beyond. You'll find a table and chairs and a bunk, plus a cupboard filled with good things to eat. All the comforts of home."

Before she could comply, a weird whistling sound came from above the plain. She glanced at the sky, and her face went dead-white. "It's them!" she gasped. "They've found us already!"

Carpenter saw the dark winged-shapes of the pteranodons then.

There were two of them, and they were homing in on the triceratank like a pair of prehistoric dive-bombers. Seizing Skip's hand, he pulled the boy up on the snout, set him in the compartment beside his sister, and told them to get into the cabin fast. Then he jumped into the driver's seat and slammed down the nacelle.

Just in time: the first pteranodon came so close that its right aileron scraped against Sam's frilled headshield, and the second came so close that its ventral fuselage brushed Sam's back. Their twin tailjets left two double wakes of bluish smoke.

II

Carpenter sat up straight in the driver's seat. Ailerons? Fuselage? Tailjets?

Pteranodons?

He activated Sam's shield-field and extended it to a distance of two feet beyond the armor-plating, then he threw the reptivehicle into gear. The pteranodons were circling high overhead. "Marcy," he called, "come forward a minute, will you?"

Her buttercup-colored hair tickled his cheek as she leaned over his shoulder. "Yes, Mr. Carpenter?"

"When you saw the pteranodons, you said, 'They've found us already!' What did you mean by that?"

"They're not pteranodons, Mr. Carpenter. Whatever pteranodons are. They're kidnapers, piloting military-surplus flyabouts that probably look like pteranodons. They abducted Skip and me from the preparatory school of the Greater Martian

Technological Apotheosization Institute and are holding us for ransom. Earth is their hideout. There are three of them altogether — Roul and Fritad and Holmer. One of them is probably back in the spaceship.”

Carpenter was silent for several moments. The Mars of 2156 A.D. was a desolate place of rubble, sand and wind inhabited by a few thousand diehard colonists from Earth and a few hundred thousand diehard Martians, the former living beneath atmosphere-domes and the latter, save for the few who had intermarried with the colonists, living in deep caves where oxygen could still be obtained. But twenty-second century excavations by the Extraterrestrial Archaeological Society had unearthed unquestionable evidence to the effect that an ultra-technological civilization similar to that of Earth Present had existed on the planet over 70,000,000 years ago. Surely it was no more than reasonable to assume that such a civilization had had space travel.

That being the case, Earth, during her uppermost Mesozoic Era, must have presented an ideal hideout for Martian criminals, kidnapers included. Certainly such a theory threw considerable light on the anachronisms that kept cropping up in Cretaceous strata. There was of course another way to explain Marcy's and Skip's presence in the Age of Dinosaurs: they could be 2156 A.D. Earth children, and they could have come back via time machine the same as he had. Or they could have been abducted by twenty-second century kidnapers for that matter, and

have been brought back. But, that being so, why should they lie about it?

“Tell me, Marcy,” Carpenter said, “do you believe I came from the future?”

“Oh, of course, Mr. Carpenter. And I'm sure Skip does, too. It's — it's kind of *hard* to believe, but I know that someone as nice as you wouldn't tell a fib — especially such a big one.”

“Thank you,” Carpenter said. “And I believe you came from Greater Mars, which, I imagine, is the planet's largest and most powerful country. Tell me something about your civilization.”

“It's a magnificent civilization, Mr. Carpenter. Every day we progress by leaps and bounds, and now that we've licked the instability factor, we'll progress even faster.”

“The instability factor?”

“Human emotion. It held us back for years, but it can't any more. Now, when a boy reaches his thirteenth birthday and a girl reaches her fifteenth, they are desentimentalized. And after that, they are able to make calm cool decisions strictly in keeping with pure logic. That way they can achieve maximum efficiency. At the Institute preparatory school, Skip and I are going through what is known as the 'pre-desentimentalization process.' After four more years we'll begin receiving dosages of the desentimentalization drug. Then—”

SKRRRREEEEEEEEEEEK! went one of the pteranodons as it sideswiped the shield-field.

Carpenter watched it as it wobbled wildly for a moment, and before it shot skyward he caught a glimpse of its occupant. All he saw was an expressionless face, but from its forward location he deduced that the man was lying in a prone position between the two twelve-foot wings.

Marcy was trembling. "I—I think they're out to kill us, Mr. Carpenter," she said. "They threatened to if we tried to escape. Now that they've got our voices on the ransom tape, they probably figure they don't need us any more."

He reached back and patted her hand where it lay lightly on his shoulder. "It's all right, pumpkin. With old Sam here protecting you, you haven't got a thing to worry about."

"Is—is that really his name.

"It sure is. Sam Triceratops, Esquire. Sam, this is Marcy. You take good care of her and her brother—do you hear me?" He turned his head and looked into the girl's wide blue eyes. "He says he will. I'll bet you haven't got anybody like him on Mars, have you?"

She shook her head — as standard a Martian gesture, apparently, as it was a terrestrial—and for a moment he thought that a tremulous smile was going to break up on her lips. It didn't, though — not quite. "Indeed we haven't, Mr. Carpenter."

He squinted up through the nacelle at the circling pteranodons (he still thought of them as pteranodons, even though he knew they were not). "Where's this spaceship of their's, Marcy? Is it far from here?"

She pointed to the left. "Over there. You come to a river, and then a swamp. Skip and I escaped this morning when Fritad, who was guarding the lock, fell asleep. They're a bunch of sleepyheads, always falling asleep when it's their turn to stand guard. Eventually the Greater Martian Space Police will track the ship here; we thought we could hide out until they got here. We crept through the swamp and floated across the river on a log. It — it was awful, with big snakes on legs chasing us, and — and —"

His shoulder informed him that she was trembling again. "Look, I'll tell you what, pumpkin," he said. "You go back to the cabin and fix yourself and Skip something to eat. I don't know what kind of food you're accustomed to, but it can't be too different from what Sam's got in stock. You'll find some square, vacuum-containers in the cupboard—they contain sandwiches. On the refrigerator-shelf just above, you'll find some tall bottles with circles of little stars—they contain pop. Open some of each, and dig in. Come to think of it, I'm hungry myself, so while you're at it, fix me something, too."

Again, she almost smiled. "All right, Mr. Carpenter. I'll fix you something special."

Alone in the driver's compartment, he surveyed the Cretaceous landscape through the front, lateral and rear viewsopes. A range of young mountains showed far to the left. To the right was the distant line of cliffs. The rear viewscope framed scattered stands of willows,

fan palms and dwarf magnolias, beyond which the forested uplands, wherein lay his entry area, began. Far ahead, volcanos smoked with Mesozoic abandon.

79,061,889 years from now, this territory would be part of the state of Montana. 79,062,156 years from now, a group of paleontologists digging somewhere in the vastly changed terrain would unearth the fossil of a modern man who had died 79,062,156 years before his disinterment.

Would the fossil turn out to be his own!

Carpenter grinned, and looked up at the sky to where the two pteranodons still circle. It *could* have been the fossil of a Martian.

He turned the triceratank around and started off in the opposite direction. "Come on, Sam," he said. "Let's see if we can't find a good hiding place where we can lay over for the night. Maybe by morning I'll be able to figure out what to do. Who'd ever have thought we'd wind up playing rescue-team to a couple of kids?"

Sam grunted deep in his gear box and made tracks for the forested uplands.

The trouble with going back in time to investigate anachronisms was that frequently you found yourself the author of the anachronism in question. Take the classic instance of Professor Archibald Quigley.

Whether the story was true or not, no one could say for certain, but, true or not, it pointed up the irony of time travel as nothing else could.

A staunch Coleridge admirer, Professor Quigley had been curious for years — or so the story went — as to the identity of the visitor who had called at the farmhouse in Nether Stowey in the county of Somersetshire, England in the year 1797 and interrupted Coleridge while the poet was writing down a poem which he had just composed in his sleep. The visitor had hung around for an hour, and afterward Coleridge hadn't been able to remember the rest of the poem. As a result, *Kubla Khan* was never finished. Eventually, Professor Quigley's curiosity grew to such proportions that he could no longer endure it, and he applied at the Bureau of Time Travel for permission to return to the place-time in order that he might set his mind at ease. His request was granted, whereupon he handed over half his life-savings without a qualm in exchange for a trip back to the morning in question. Emerging near the farmhouse, he hid in a clump of bushes, watching the front door; then, growing impatient when no one showed up, he went to the door himself, and knocked. Coleridge answered the knock personally, and even though he asked the professor in, the dark look that he gave his visitor was something which the professor never forgot to the end of his days.

Recalling the story, Carpenter chuckled. It wasn't really anything for him to be chuckling about, though, because what had happened to the professor could very well happen to him. Whether he liked it or not, there was a good chance

that the fossil which the North American Paleontological Society had sent him back to the Mesozoic Era to investigate might turn out to be his own.

Nevertheless, he refused to let the possibility bother him. For one thing, the minute he found himself in a jam, all he had to do was to contact his two assistants, Miss Sands and Peter Detritus, and they would come flying to his aid in Edith the therapod or one of the other rep-tiviches which NAPS kept on hand. For another, he had already learned that outside forces were at work in the Cretaceous Period. He wasn't the only candidate for fossil-dom. Anyway, worrying about such matters was a waste of time: what was going to happen had already happened, and that was all there was to it.

Skip crawled out of the cabin and leaned over the back of the driver's seat. "Marcy sent you up a sandwich and a bottle of pop, Mr. Carpenter," he said, handing over both items. And then, "Can I sit beside you, sir?"

"Sure thing," Carpenter said, moving over.

The boy climbed over the back-rest and slid down into the seat. No sooner had he done so than another buttercup-colored head appeared. "Would — would it be all right, Mr. Carpenter, if — if —"

"Move over and make room for her in the middle, Skip."

Sam's head was a good five feet wide, hence the driver's compartment was by no means a small one.

But the seat itself was only three feet wide, and accommodating two half-grown kids and a man the size of Carpenter was no small accomplishment, especially in view of the fact that all three of them were eating sandwiches and drinking pop. Carpenter felt like an indulgent parent taking his offspring on an excursion through a zoo.

And such a zoo! They were in the forest now, and around them Cretaceous oaks and laurels stood; there were willows, too, and screw pines and ginkgos galore, and now and then they passed through incongruous stands of fan palms. Through the undergrowth they glimpsed a huge and lumbering creature that looked like a horse in front and a kangaroo in back. Carpenter identified it as an anatosaurus. In a clearing they came upon a struthiomimus and startled the ostrich-like creature half out of its wits. A spike-backed ankylosaurus glowered at them from behind a clump of sedges, but discreetly refrained from questioning Sam's right of way. Glancing into a tree-top, Carpenter saw him first arch-aeopteryx. Rising his eyes still higher, he saw the circling pteranodons.

He had hoped to lose them after entering the forest, and to this end he held Sam on an erratic course. Obviously, however, they were equipped with matter detectors. A more sophisticated subterfuge would be necessary. There was a chance that he might bring them down with a barrage of stun-charges, but it was a slim one and he decided not to try it in any event. The kidnapers

undoubtedly deserved to die for what they had done, but he was not their judge. He would kill them if he had to, but he refused to do it as long as he had an ace up his sleeve.

Turning toward the two children, he saw that they had lost interest in their sandwiches and were looking apprehensively upward. Catching their eye, he winked. "I think it's high time we gave them the slip, don't you?"

"But how, Mr. Carpenter?" Skip asked. "They're locked right on us with their detector-beams. We're just lucky ordinary Martians like them can't buy super Martian weapons. They've got melters, which are a form of iridescers: but if they had real iridescers; we'd be goners."

"We can shake them easy, merely by jumping a little ways back in time. Come on, you two—finish your sandwiches and stop worrying."

Their apprehension vanished, and excitement took its place. Let's jump back six days," Marcy said. "They'll never find us then because we won't be here yet."

"Can't do it, pumpkin — it would take too much starch out of Sam. Time-jumping requires a tremendous amount of power. In order for a part-time time-machine like Sam to jump any great distance, its power has to be supplemented by the power of a regular time station. The station propels the reptivehicle back to a pre-established entry area, and the time-traveler drives out of the area and goes about his business. The only way he can get back to the

present is by driving back into the area, contacting the station and tapping its power-supply again, or by sending back a distress signal and having someone come to get him in another reptivehicle. At the most, Sam could make about a four-day round trip under his own power but it would burn him out. Once that happened, even the station couldn't pull him back. I think we'd better settle for an hour."

Ironically, the smaller the temporal distance you had to deal with, the more figuring you had to do. After directing the tricera-tank via the liaison-ring on his right index finger to continue on its present erratic course. Carpenter got busy with pad and pencil, and presently he began punching out arithmetical brain-twisters on the compact computer that was built into the control panel.

Marcy leaned forward, watching him intently. "If it will expedite matters, Mr. Carpenter," she said, "I can do simple sums, such as those you're writing down, in my head. For instance, 828,464,280 times 4,692,438,921 equals 3,887,518,032,130,241,880."

"It may very well at that, pumpkin, but I think we'd better check and make sure, don't you?" He punched out the first two sets of numerals on the calculator, and depressed the multiplication button. 3,889,518,032,130,241,880 the answer panel said. He nearly dropped the pencil.

"She's a mathematical genius," Skip said. "I'm a mechanical genius

myself. That's how come we were kidnaped. Our government values geniuses highly. They'll pay a lot of money to get us back."

"Your government? I thought kidnapers preyed on parents, not governments."

"Oh, but out parents aren't responsible for us any more," Marcy explained. "In fact, they've probably forgotten all about us. After the age of six, children become the property of the state. Modern Martian parents are desentimentalized, you see, and don't in the least mind getting rid of — giving up their children."

Carpenter regarded the two solemn faces for some time. "Yes," he said, "I do see at that."

With Marcy's help, he completed the rest of his calculations; then he fed the final set of figures into Sam's frontal ganglion. "Here we go, you two!" he said, and threw the jumpback switch. There was a brief shimmering effect and an almost imperceptible jar. So smoothly did the transition take place that Sam did not even pause in his lumbering walk.

Carpenter turned his wristwatch back from 4:16 P.M. to 3:16 P.M. "Take a look at the sky now, kids. See any more pteranodons?"

They peered up through the foliage. "Not a one, Mr. Carpenter," Marcy said, her eyes warm with admiration. "Not a single one!"

"Say, you've got our scientists beat forty different ways from Sunday!" Skip said. "They think they're pretty smart, but I'll bet they've

never even thought of trying to travel in time . . . How far can you jump into the future Mr. Carpenter—in a regular time-machine, I mean?"

"Given sufficient power, to the end of time—if time does have an end. But traveling beyond one's own present is forbidden by law. The powers-that-be in 2156 consider it bad for a race of people to find out what's going to happen to them before it actually happens, and for once I'm inclined to think that the powers-that-be are right."

He discontinued liaison control, took over manually and set Sam on a course at right angles to their present direction. At length they broke free from the forest onto the plain. In the distance the line of cliffs that he had noticed earlier showed whitely against the blue and hazy sky. "How'd you kids like to camp out for the night?" he asked.

Skip's eyes went round. "Camp out, Mr. Carpenter?"

"Sure. We'll build a fire, cook our food over it, spread our blankets on the ground—regular American Indian style. Maybe we can even find a cave in the cliffs. Think you'd like that?"

Both pairs of eyes were round now. "What's 'American Indian style,' Mr. Carpenter?" Marcy asked.

He told them about the Arapahoes and the Cheyennes and the Crows and the Apaches, and about the buffalo and the great plains and Custer's last stand, and the Conestogas and the frontiersmen (the old ones, not the "new"), and about

Geronimo and Sitting Bull and Co-chise, and all the while he talked their eyes remained fastened on his face as though it were the sun and they had never before seen day. When he finished telling them about the settling of the west, he told them about the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln and Generals Grant and Lee and the Gettysburg Address and the Battle of Bull Run and the surrender at Appomattox.

He had never talked so much in all his life. He wondered what had come over him, why he felt so carefree and gay all of a sudden and why nothing seemed to matter except the haze-ridden Cretaceous afternoon and the two round-eyed children sitting beside him. But he did not waste much time wondering. He went on to tell them about the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution and George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, and about what a wonderful dream the founding fathers had had and about how much better it would have turned out if opportunistic men had not used it to further their own selfish end and about how relatively wonderful it had turned out anyway, despite the many crimes that had been committed in its name. By the time he finished, evening was on hand. The white cliffs rose up before them, shouldering the darkening sky.

At the base of the cliffs they found a jim-dandy of an untenanted cave, large enough to accommodate both Sam and themselves and with

enough room left over to build a campfire. Carpenter drove the repetitive vehicle inside and parked it in the rear; then he extended the shield-field till it included the cave, the side of the cliff and a large semi-circular area at the base of the cliff. After checking the "front yard" and finding that it contained no reptiles except several small and harmless lizards, he put the two children to work gathering firewood. Meanwhile, he generated a one-way illusion-field just within the shield field so that the forthcoming campfire would not be visible from without.

There was plenty of firewood available in the form of dead laurel and dogwood branches. Soon a respectable pile of fuel reposed just within the mouth of the cave. By this time Skip, at least, had shed his reserve. "Can I help build the fire, Mr. Carpenter?" he cried jumping up and down. "Can I — can I — can I?"

"Skip!" Marcy said.

"It's all right, pumpkin," Carpenter told her. "You can help, too, if you like."

The walls of the cave turned red, then rosy, as young flames grew into full-fledged ones.

Carpenter opened three packages of frankfurters and three packages of rolls and showed his charges how to spear the frankfurters on the end of pointed sticks and roast them over the fire. Afterward he demonstrated how to place a frankfurter in a roll and smother it with mustard, pickle relish, and chopped onions. It was

as though he had flung wide magic casements opening on enchanted lands that the two children had not dreamed existed. The last vestiges of solemnity departed from their faces, and during the next half hour they created and consumed six hot dogs apiece. Skip got so excited that he nearly fell into the fire, and the smile that had been trying all afternoon to break upon Marcy's lips at last came through, teaching the flames to burn bright.

Carpenter had made a pot of cocoa in Sam's kitchenette, and nothing more was needed to round out the cookout except marshmallows. Was it remotely possible, he wondered, that his efficient chief assistant had included such nostalgic delicacies among the various supplies in Sam's tail-compartment? It was doubtful at best, but he took a look anyway. To his delight, he found a whole box of them.

Again, he performed a demonstration, while the two children looked on in open-mouthed awe. When the two marshmallows which he had speared on his stick turned golden brown he thought for a moment that Skip's eyes were going to fall out of his head. As for Marcy, she just stood there and stared as though Carpenter had said, "Let there be light!" and the first day had come into being.

Laughing, he removed the marshmallows and handed one to each of them. "Skip!" Marcy said when the boy popped his into his mouth and dispatched it with a single gulp, "where are your manners?" She ate her's daintily.

After the marshmallow roast, he went outside and cut enough laurel and dogwood branches for three mattresses. He showed the children how to arrange the branches on the cavern floor and how to cover them with the blankets which he took out of Sam's tail-compartment. Skip needed no further invitation to turn in: exhausted from his enthusiastic activities and becalmed by his full stomach, he collapsed upon his blanket as soon as he had it in place. Carpenter got three more blankets, covered him with one of them and turned to Marcey, "You look tired, too, pumpkin."

"Oh, but I'm not, Mr Carpenter. Not in the least bit. I'm two years older than Skip, you know. He's just a kid."

He folded the remaining two blankets into impromptu pillows and placed them a few feet from the fire. He sat down on one of them; she sat down on the other. All evening, grunts and growls and groans had been coming sporadically from beyond the shield-field; now they were supplanted by an awesome noise that brought to mind a gigantic road-repair machine breaking up old pavement. The cavern floor trembled, and the firelight flickered wildly on the wall. "Sounds like old tyrannosaurus," Carpenter said. "Probably out looking for a midnight snack in the form of a struthiomimus or two."

"'Tyrannosaurus,' Mr. Carpenter?"

He described the ferocious theropod for her. She nodded after he

had finished, and a shudder shook her. "Yes," she said, "Skip and I saw one. It was a little while after we crossed the river. We — we hid in a clump of bushes till he passed. What terrible creatures you have here on Earth, Mr. Carpenter!"

"They no longer exist in my day and age," Carpenter said. "We have terrible 'creatures' of another order — 'creatures' that would send old tyrannosaurus high-tailing it for the hills like a flushed rabbit. I shouldn't be complaining, though. Our technological debauchery left us with a cold-war hangover — sure; but it paid off in quite a number of things. Time travel, for one. Interplanetary travel, for another." At this point, the road-repair machine struck a bad stretch of pavement, and, judging from the ungodly series of sound that ensued, blew a rod to boot. The girl moved closer to him. "Take it easy pumpkin. There's nothing to worry about. An army of theropods couldn't break through that shield-field."

"Why do you call me 'pumpkin', Mr. Carpenter? On Mars, a pumpkin is an unpleasant squashy vegetable that grows in swamps and mid-den-marshes."

He laughed. The sounds from beyond the shield-field diminished, then faded away, as the theropod thundered off in another direction. "On Earth, a pumpkin is quite a nice vegetable—or maybe it's a fruit. Whichever, it's quite respectable. But that's beside the point. 'Pumpkin' is what a man calls a girl when he likes her."

There was a silence. Then, "Do

you have a real girl, Mr. Carpenter?"

"Not actually, Marcy. You might say that figuratively speaking I worship one from afar."

"That doesn't sound like very much fun. Who is she?"

"She's my chief assistant at the North American Paleontological Society where I work — Miss Sands. Her first name is 'Elaine', but I never call her by it. She sees to it that I don't forget anything when I retro-travel, and she cases the places times over a time-scope before I start out. Then she and my other assistant, Peter Detritus, stand by, ready to come to the rescue if I should send back a can of chicken soup. You see, a can of chicken soup is our distress signal. It's about as big an object as a paleontologivehicle can handle in most cases, and the word 'chicken' in our language canotes fear."

"But why do you worship her from afar, Mr. Carpenter?"

"Well you see," Carpenter said, "Miss Sands isn't just an ordinary run-of-the-mill girl. She's the cool, aloof type — a goddess, if you know what I mean. Although I don't see how you possibly could. Anyway, you simply don't treat goddesses the way you treat mere girls—you keep your distance and worship them from afar and humbly wait for them to bestow favors upon you. I—I worship her so much, in fact, that every time I'm near her I get so frustrated that I can hardly say anything. Maybe after I get to know her better it'll be different. So far, I've known her three months."

He fell silent. Marcy's hearings twinkled in the firelight as she turned and looked gently up into his face. "What's the matter, Mr. Carpenter — cat got your tongue?"

"I was just thinking," Carpenter said. "Three months is quite a long time at that—long enough for a man to tell whether a girl is ever going to like him or not. And Miss Sands isn't ever going to like me—I can see that now. Why, she doesn't even look at me unless she absolutely has to, and she won't say two words to me if she can possibly avoid it. So you see, even if I did stop worshipping her from afar and got up enough nerve to tell her that I love her, she would probably only be annoyed and tell me to get lost."

Marcy was indignant. "She must be out of her mind, Mr. Carpenter — just plain out of her mind. She should be ashamed of herself!"

"No, Marcy — you've got her all wrong. You can't expect a girl as beautiful as she is to go for a good-for-nothing time-bum like me."

"A good-for-nothing time-bum indeed! You know, Mr. Carpenter, I don't think you understand women very well. Why, I'll bet if you told her you love her, she'd throw herself into your arms!"

"You're a romantic, Marcy. In real life, such things don't happen." He stood up "Well, young lady, I don't know about you, but I'm tired. Shall we call it a day?"

"If you wish to, Mr Carpenter."

She was asleep by the time he pulled her blanket up to her chin. As he stood there looking down at her, she turned on her side, and the firelight

caught the buttercup-hue fuzz on the back of her neck, where her hair had been cut too short, and tinted it red-gold. All he could think of were buttercup-clad meadows in spring, and the warm clean sun rising and ushering in the dew-jeweled day . . .

After checking to see if Skip was all right, he went over and stood in the cave mouth and stared out into the darkness. With tyrannosaurus' departure, the lesser Cretaceous creatures had come out of their hiding places and were making their presence known again. He glimpsed the grotesque shapes of several ornithopods; he saw an ankylosaurus standing immobile by a coppice of fan palms; he heard lizards scurrying both inside and outside the shield-field. A moon subtly different from the one he was most accustomed to was climbing into the prehistoric heavens. The difference lay in the number of meteorite craters. There were far fewer of them now than there would be 79,062,156 years in the future.

He realized presently that although he was still looking at the moon he was no longer seeing it. He was seeing the campfire instead, and the girl and the boy enthusiastically roasting marshmallows. Why hadn't he gotten married and had children? he wondered suddenly. Why had he passed up all the pretty girls he had ever known, only to fall hopelessly in love at the age of thirty-two with a beautiful goddess who preferred not to know he was alive? What had given him the notion that the thrill derived from adventure was somehow superior to the contentment de-

rived from loving and being loved? —that getting the bugs out of historical and pre-historical times was more important than getting the bugs out of his own life? That a lonely room in a boarding house was a man's castle and that drinks drank in dim-lit bars with fun-girls he could no longer remember the next day spelled "freedom?"

What treasure had he expected to find in the past that could equal the treasures he had passed up in the future?

The night had grown chill. Before lying down to sleep he added more wood to the fire. He listened to the flames crackle and watched their pale flickerings on the cavern walls. A lizard regarded him with golden eyes out of prehistoric shadows. In the distance, an ornithopod went Waroompf! Beside him in the Mesozoic night the two children breathed softly in their green-bough beds. Presently he slept.

III

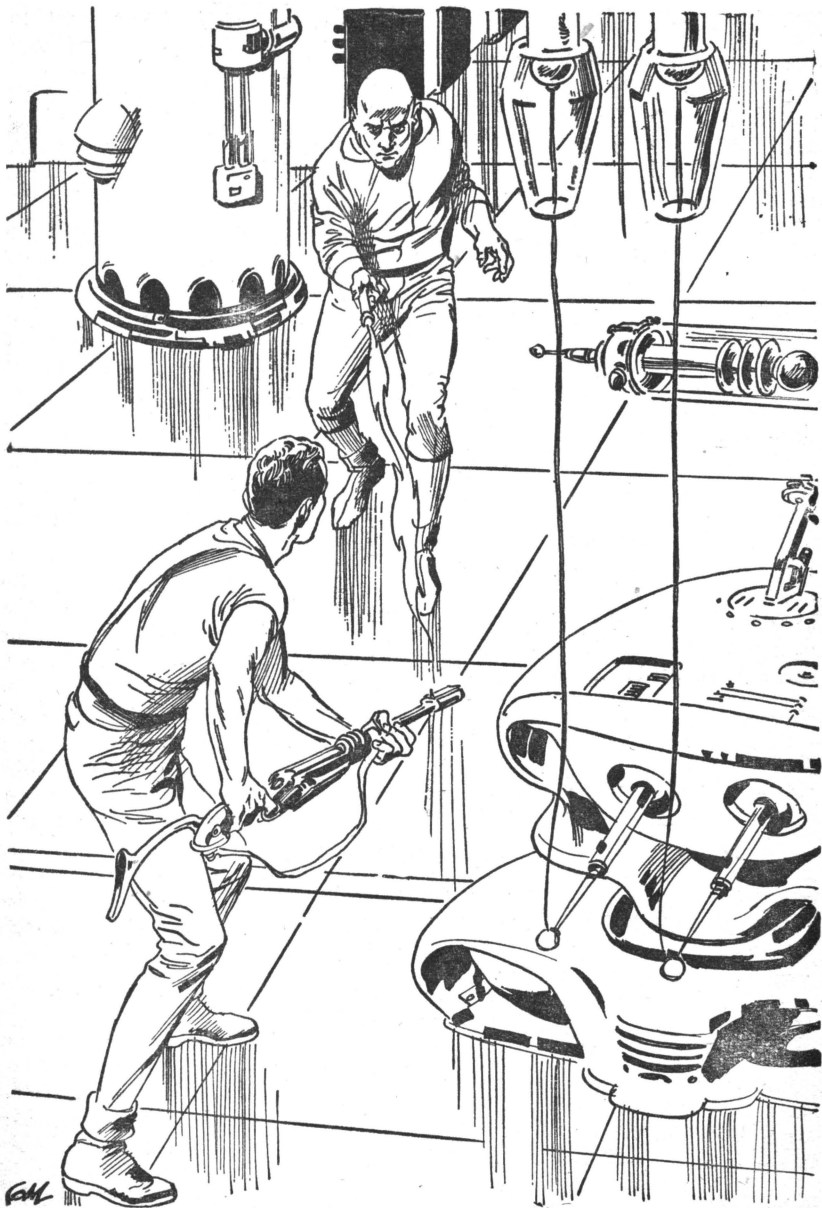
The next morning, Carpenter wasted no time in getting the show on the road

Marcy and Skip were all for remaining in the cave indefinitely, but he explained to them that, were they to stay in one place, the kidnapers would find them that much sooner, and that therefore it would be better if they kept on the move. Thus far, everything he had told them had rung a bell in their language just as everything they had told him had rung a bell in his, but this time, for some reason, he had a hard time

getting through to them. Either that, or they just plain didn't want to leave the cave. Leave it they did however—after ablutions performed in Sam's compact lavatory and a breakfast of bacon and eggs cooked in Sam's kitchenette—when he made it clear to them that he was still the boss.

He hadn't as yet decided on a definite plan of action. While trying to make up his mind, he let the triceratank pick its own course over the plain — a feat for which its hypersensitive terrainometer more than qualified.

Actually, he had only two choices: (1)—continue to play big brother to the two children and elude the kidnapers until they gave up or until the cavalry, in the form of the Greater Martian Space Police, arrived on the scene, or (2)—return to the entry-area and signal Miss Sands and Peter Detritus to bring the triceratank back to the present. The second choice was by far the safer course of action. He would have settled for it without hesitation if it had not been for two things: (a) Marcy and Skip, while they undoubtedly would be able to adapt to a civilization as similar to their own as twenty-second century terrestrial civilization was, might never feel completely at home in it, and (b) sooner or later, they would come face to face with the demoralizing information that their own civilization of 79,062,156 years ago, had long since turned to dust and that the technological dreams which they had been taught to regard as gospel had come to nothing. A pos-



sible third choice lay in taking them back to Earth Present, keeping them there until such time as the kidnapers gave up and left or until the Space Police showed up, and then returning them to Earth Past; but such a procedure would involve several round trips to the Cretaceous Period. Carpenter knew without having to ask that, owing to the fantastic expense involved, NAPS' budget couldn't support even one such non-paleontological round trip, to say nothing of several.

Pondering the problem, he became aware that someone was tugging on his sleeve. It was Skip, who had come forward and climbed into the driver's seat. "Can I steer him, Mr. Carpenter? Can I?"

Carpenter surveyed the plain through the front, lateral, and rear viewscopes; then he raised Sam's head and took a long look at the sky through the nacelle. A dark speck hovered high above the line of cliffs they had left less than an hour ago. As he watched, it was joined by two others. "Later on, Skip. Right now, I think we've got company."

Skip's eyes had found the specks, too. "The pteranodons again, Mr. Carpenter?"

"I'm afraid so."

The specks grew rapidly larger, resolved into winged shapes with narrow, pointed heads. Marcy had come forward, and her gaze, too, was directed at the sky. This time, she didn't seem to be in the least bit frightened, and neither did Skip. "Are we going to jump back in time again, Mr. Carpenter?" she asked.

"We'll see, pumpkin," he said.

The pteranodons were clearly visible now. There was no question but what they were interested in Sam. Whether they would try attacking him again was another matter. In any event, Carpenter decided that, even though the triceratank's shield-field was in operation, his best bet would be to head for the nearest stand of trees. It was a stand of palmettos, and about half a mile distant. He threw Sam into high, and took over the controls again. "Come on, Sam," he said, to keep the kids' morale from faltering, "show Marcy and Skip what you can do!"

Sam took off like a twentieth-century locomotive, his flexible steel legs moving rhythmically, his alloy-hoofs pounding the ground in a thunderous cadence. Nevertheless, he was no match for the pteranodons, and they overtook him easily. The foremost one swooped down a hundred yards ahead, released what looked like a big metal egg and soared skyward.

The metal egg turned out to be a bomb. The crater that it created was so wide that it took all of Carpenter's skill to guide Sam around it without rolling the reptivehicle over. Instantly he revved up the engine and shifted into second. "They're not going to get us that way, are they, old timer?" he said.

"URRRRRRRR!" Sam grunted.

Carpenter glanced at the sky. All of the pteranodons were directly overhead now. Circling. One, two, three, he counted. Three . . . yesterday there had been only two. "Marcy," he said, suddenly excited, "how

many kidnapers did you say there were?"

"Three, Mr. Carpenter. Roul and Fritad and Holmer."

"Then they're all up there. That means the ship is unguarded — unless there's a crew."

"No, Mr. Carpenter — there's no crew. They did the piloting themselves."

He lowered his gaze from the circling pteranodons. "Do you kids think you could get inside?"

"Easy," Skip said. "It's a military-surplus flyabout-carrier with standard locks, and standard locks are simple for someone with a little mechanical ability to disengage. That's how come Marcy and I were able to escape in the first place. You just leave everything to me, Mr. Carpenter."

"Good," Carpenter said. "We'll be there waiting for them when they come back."

With Marcy doing the figuring, retro co-ordinate calculus was a breeze. Sam was ready for jump-back in a matter of seconds.

Carpenter waited till they were in the stand of palmettos, then he threw the switch. Again, there was a shimmering effect and a slight jar, and daylight gave way to pre-dawn darkness. Behind them in a cave at the base of the cliffs, another triceratank stood, and another Carpenter and another Marcy and Skip still slept soundly in their green-bough beds.

"How far did we jump back this time, Mr. Carpenter?" Skip asked.

Carpenter turned on Sam's head-

lights and began guiding him out of the stand of palmettos. "Four hours. That should give us plenty of time to reach the ship and get set before our friends return. We may even reach it before they start out — assuming of course that they haven't been searching for us round the clock."

"But suppose they spot us in this time-phase?" Marcy objected. "Won't we be in the same pickle we just got out of?"

"It's a possibility, pumpkin. But the odds have it overwhelmingly that they didn't spot us. Otherwise they wouldn't have gone on searching for us — right?"

She gazed at him admiringly. "You know something, Mr. Carpenter? You're pretty smart."

Coming from someone who could multiply 4,692,438,921 by 828,464,280 in her head, it was quite a compliment. However, Carpenter managed to take it in his stride. "I hope you kids can find the ship now," he said.

"We're already on the right course," Skip said. "I know, because I've got a perfect sense of direction. It's camouflaged as a big tree."

For the second time that morning, the sun came up. As had been the case yesterday, Sam's size and mien cowed the various Cretaceous creatures they met although whether tyrannosaurus would have been similarly cowed had they come upon him was a moot question at best. In any case, they didn't come upon him. By eight o'clock they were moving over the same terrain that Carpenter had come to not long

after leaving the forested uplands the day before. "Look!" Marcy exclaimed presently. "There's the tree we climbed when the humpbacked monster chased us!"

"It sure is," Skip said. "Boy, were we scared!"

Carpenter grinned. "He probably thought you were some species of flora he hadn't tried yet. Good thing for his digestive system that I happened along when I did."

They looked at him blankly for a moment, and at first he thought that the barriers of two different languages and two different thought worlds had been too high for his little joke to surmount. Such, however, did not prove to be the case. First Marcy burst out laughing, and then Skip. "Mr. Carpenter, if you aren't the darndest!" Marcy cried.

They went on. The landscape grew more and more open, with coppices of palmettos and clusters of fan palms constituting most of the major plant-life. Far to the right, smoking volcanos added their discolored breath to the hazy atmosphere. In the distances ahead, mountains showed, their heads lost in the Mesozoic smog. The humidity was so high that large globules of moisture kept condensing on Sam's nacelle and rolling down like raindrops. Tortoises, lizards, and snakes abounded, and once a real pteranodon glided swiftly by overhead.

At length they came to the river which Marcy had mentioned and which the increasing softness of the ground had been heralding for some time. Looking downstream, Carpen-

ter saw his first brontosaurus.

He pointed it out to the kids, and they stared at it bug-eyed. It was wallowing in the middle of the sluggish stream. Only its small head, its long neck, and the upper part of its back were visible. The neck brought to mind a lofty rubbery tower, but the illusion was marred by the frequency with which the head kept dipping down to the ferns and horse tails that lined the river bank. The poor creature was so enormous that it virtually had to keep eating day and night in order to stay alive.

Carpenter found a shallows and guided Sam across the stream to the opposite bank. The ground was somewhat firmer here, but the firmness was deceiving, for the reptile's terrainometer registered an even higher frequency of bogs. (Lord! Carpenter thought. Suppose the two kids had blundered into one!) Ferns grew in abundance, and there were thick carpets of sassafras and sedges. Palmettos and fan palms were still the rule, but there were occasional ginkgos scattered here and there. One of them was a veritable giant of a tree, towering to a height of over one hundred and fifty feet.

Carpenter stared at it. Cretaceous Period ginkgos generally grew on highground, not low, but a ginkgo the size of this one had no business growing in the Cretaceous Period at all. Moreover, the huge tree was incongruous in other respects. Its trunk was far too thick, for one thing. For another, the lower part of it up to a height of about twenty

feet consisted of three slender sub-trunks, forming a sort of tripod on which the rest of the tree rested.

At this point, Carpenter became aware that his two charges were pointing excitedly at the object of his curiosity "That's *it!*" Skip exclaimed. "That's the *ship!*"

"Well, no wonder it caught my eye," Carpenter said. "They didn't do a very good job of camouflaging it. I can even see one of the fly-about-bays."

Marcy said. "They weren't particularly concerned about how it looks from the ground. It's how it looks from above that counts. Of course, if the Space Police get here in time they'll pick it up sooner or later on their detector-beams, but it will fool them for a while at least."

"You talk as though you don't expect them to get here in time."

"I don't. Oh, they'll get here eventually, Mr. Carpenter, but not for weeks, and maybe even months. It takes a long time for their radar-intelligence department to track a ship, besides which it's a sure bet that they don't even know we've been kidnaped yet. In all previous cases where Institute children have been abducted, the government has paid the ransom first and then notified the Space Police. Of course, even after the ransom has been paid and the children have been returned, the Space Police still launch a search for the kidnapers, and eventually they find their hideout; but naturally the kidnapers are long gone by then.

"I think," Carpenter said, "that it's high time a precedent was established, don't you?"

After parking Sam out of sight in a nearly coppice of palmettos and deactivating the shield-field, he reached in under the driver's seat and pulled out the only hand weapon the triceratank contained—a lightweight but powerful stun-rifle specially designed by NAPS for the protection of time-travel personnel. Slinging it on his shoulder, he threw open the nacelle, stepped out onto Sam's snout and helped the two children down to the ground. The trio approached the ship.

Skip shinned up one of the landing jacks, climbed some distance up the trunk and had the locks open in a matter of seconds. He lowered an aluminum ladder. "Everything's all set, Mr. Carpenter."

Marcy glanced over her shoulder at the palmetto coppice. "Will—will Sam be all right do you think?"

"Of course he will, pumpkin," Carpenter said. "Up with you now."

The ship's air-conditioned interior had a temperature that paralleled Sam's, the lighting was cool, subdued. Beyond the inner lock, a brief corridor led to a spiral steel stairway that gave access to the decks above and to the engine rooms below. Glancing at his watch, which he had set four hours back, Carpenter saw that the time was 8:24. In a few minutes, the pteranodons would be closing in on the Sam and Carpenter and Marcy and Skip of the "previous" time-phase. Even assuming that the three kidnapers headed straight for the ship afterward, there was still time to spare—time enough, certainly, to send a certain message before laying the trap he had in

mind. True, he could send the message after Roul and Fritad and Holmer were safely locked in their cabins, but in the event that something went wrong he might not be able to send it at all, so it was better to send it right now. "Okay, you kids," he said, "close the locks and then lead the way to the communications-room."

They obeyed the first order with alacrity, but hedged on the second. Marcy lingered in the corridor, Skip just behind her.

"Why do you want to go to the communications-room, Mr. Carpenter?" she asked.

"So you kids can radio our position to the Space Police and tell them to get here in a hurry. You do know how, I hope."

Skip looked at Marcy. Marcy looked at Skip. After a moment, both of them shook their heads. "Now see here," Carpenter said, annoyed, "you know perfectly well you know how. Why are you pretending you don't?"

Skip looked at the deck. "We—we don't want to go home. Mr. Carpenter."

Carpenter regarded first one solemn face and then the other. "But you've got to be home! Where *else* can you go?"

Neither of them answered. Neither of them looked at him. "It boils down to this," he proceeded presently. "If we succeed in capturing Roul and Fritad and Holmer, fine and dandy. We'll sit tight, and when the Space Police get here we'll turn them over. But if something goes wrong and we don't capture them,

we'll at least have an ace up **our** sleeve in the form of the message you're going to send. Now I'm familiar with the length of time it takes to get from Mars to Earth in the spaceships of my day, but I don't of course know how long your spaceships take. So maybe you two can give me some idea of the length of time that will elapse between the Space Police's receipt of our message and their arrival here on Earth," he asked.

"With the two planets in their present positions, just over four days," Marcy said. "If you like, Mr. Carpenter, I can figure it out for you right down to a fraction of a—"

"That's close enough, pumpkin. Now, up the stairs with you, and you too, Skip. Time's a-wasting!"

They complied glumly. The communications-room was on the second deck. Some of the equipment was vaguely familiar to Carpenter, but most of it was Greek. A wide, deck-to-ceiling viewport looked out over the Cretaceous plain, and, glancing down through the ersatz foliage, he found that he could see the palmetto coppice in which Sam was hidden. He scanned the sky for signs of the returning pteranodons. The sky was empty. Turning away from the viewport, he noticed that a fourth party had entered the room. He unslung his stun-rifle and managed to get it halfway to his shoulder; then, ZZZZ ZZZTTT! a metal tube in the fourth party's hand went, and the stun-rifle was no more.

He looked incredulously down at his hand.

IV

The fourth party was a tall, muscular man clad in clothing similar to Marcy's and Skip's, but of a much richer material. The expression on his narrow face contained about as much feeling as a dried fig, and the metal tube in his hand was now directed at the center of Carpenter's forehead. Carpenter didn't need to be told that if he moved so much as one iota he would suffer a fate similar to that suffered by his rifle, but the man vouchsafed the information anyway. "If you move, you melt," he said.

"No Holmer!" Marcy cried. "Don't you dare harm him. He only helped us because he felt sorry for us."

"I thought you said there were only three of them, pumpkin," Carpenter said, not taking his eyes from Holmer's face.

"That is all there are, Mr. Carpenter. Honest! The third pteranodon must have been a drone. They tricked us!"

Holmer should have grinned, but he didn't. There should have been triumph in his tone of voice when he addressed Carpenter, but there wasn't.

"You had to be from the future, friend," he said. "Me and my buddies cased this place some time ago, and we knew you couldn't be from now. That being so, it wasn't hard for us to figure out that when that tank of your's disappeared yesterday you either jumped ahead in time or jumped back in it, and the odds were two to one that you jumped

back. So we gambled on it, figured you'd try the same thing again if you were forced into it, and rigged up a little trap for you, which we figured you'd be smart enough to fall for. You were. The only reason I don't melt you right now is because Roul and Fritad aren't back yet. I want them to get a look at you first. I'll melt you then but good. And the brats, too. We don't need them any more."

Carpenter recoiled. The dictates of pure logic had much in common with the dictates of pure vindictiveness. Probably the pteranodons had been trying to "melt" Marcy, Skip, Sam, and himself almost from the beginning, and if it hadn't been for Sam's shield-field, they undoubtedly would have succeeded. Oh well, Carpenter thought, logic was a two-edged blade, and two could wield it as well as one. "How soon will your buddies be back, Holmer?"

The Martian regarded him blankly. Carpenter tumbled to the fact that the man wasn't wearing hearings then.

He said to Marcy: "Tell me, pumpkin, if this ship were to fall on its side, would either the change in its position or its impact with the ground be liable to set off an explosion? Answer me with a 'yes' or a 'no' so that our friend here won't know what we're talking about."

"No, Mr. Carpenter."

"And is the structure of the ship sturdy enough to prevent the bulkheads from caving in on us?"

"Yes, Mr. Carpenter."

"How about the equipment in this room. Is it bolted down securely enough to prevent its being torn loose?"

"Yes, Mr. Carpenter."

"Good. Now, as surreptitiously as you can, you and Skip start sidling over to that steel supporting pillar in the center of the deck. When the ship starts to topple, you hold on for dear life."

"What's he saying to you, kid?" Holmer demanded.

Marcy stuck her tongue out at him. "Wouldn't you like to know!" she retorted.

Obviously, the ability to make calm, cool decisions strictly in keeping with pure logic did not demand a concomitant ability to think fast, for it was not until that moment, that the desentimentalized Martian realized that he alone of the four persons present was not wearing hearrings.

Reaching into the small pouch that hung at his side, he withdrew a pair. Then, keeping his melter directed at Carpenter's forehead with one hand, he began attaching them to his ears with the other. Meanwhile, Carpenter ran his right thumb over the tiny, graduated nodules of the liaison-ring on his right index finger, and when he found the ones he wanted, he pressed them in their proper sequence. On the plain below, Sam stuck his snout out of the palmetto coppice.

Carpenter concentrated, his thoughts riding the tele-circuit that now connected his mind with Sam's sacral ganglion: *Retract your horn-howitzers and raise your nacelle-*

shield, Sam. Sam did so. Now, back off, get a good run, charge the landing-jack on your right, and knock it out. Then get the hell out of the way!

Sam came out of the coppice, turned and trotted a hundred yards out on the plain. There he turned again, aligning himself for the forthcoming encounter. He started out slowly, geared himself into second. The sound of his hoofbeats climbed into a thunderous crescendo and penetrated the bulkhead of the communications-room, and Holmer, who had finally gotten his hearrings into place, gave a start and stepped over to the viewport.

By this time Sam was streaking toward the ship like an ornithischian battering-ram. No one with an IQ in excess of 75 could have failed to foresee what was shortly going to happen.

Holmer had an IQ considerably in excess of 75, but sometimes having a few brains is just as dangerous as having a little knowledge. It was so now. Forgetting Carpenter completely, the Martian threw a small lever to the right of the viewscope, causing the thick, unbreakable glass to retract into the bulkhead; then he leaned out through the resultant aperture and directed his melter toward the ground. Simultaneously, Sam made contact with the landing-jack, and Holmer went flying through the aperture like a jet-propelled Darius Green.

The two kids were already clinging to the supporting pillar. With a leap, Carpenter joined them. "Hang on, you two!" he shouted, and pro-



ceeded to practice what he preached. The downward journey was slow at first, but it rapidly picked up momentum. Somebody should have yelled. "TIMBER!" Nobody did, but that didn't dissuade the ginkgo from fulfilling its destiny. Lizards scampered, tortoises scabbled and sauro-pods gaped for miles around. KRR-RRRRUUUUUUMMMP! The impact tore both Carpenter and the children from the pillar, but he managed to grab them and cushion their fall with his body. His back struck the bulkhead, and his breath blasted from his lungs. Somebody turned out the lights.

At length, somebody turned them back on again. He saw Marcy's face hovering like a small pale moon above his own. Her eyes were like

autumn asters after the first frost.

She has loosened his collar and she was patting his cheeks and she was crying. He grinned up at her, got gingerly to his feet and looked around. The communications-room hadn't changed any, but it looked different. That was because he was standing on the bulkhead instead of on the deck. It was also because he was still dazed.

Marcy, tears running down her cheeks, wailed, "I was afraid you were dead, Mr Carpenter!"

He rumbled her buttercup-colored hair. "Fooled you, didn't I?"

At this point, Skip entered the room through the now horizontal doorway, a small container clutched in his hand. His face lit up when he saw Carpenter. "I went after some recuperative gas, but I guess you

don't need it after all. Gee, I'm glad you're all right, Mr. Carpenter!"

"I take it you kids are, too," Carpenter said.

He was relieved when both of them said they were. Still somewhat dazed, he clambered up the concave bulkhead to the viewport and looked out. Sam was nowhere to be seen. Remembering that he was still in tele-circuit contact, he ordered the triceratank to home in, after which he climbed through the viewport, lowered himself to the ground and began looking for Holmer's body. When he failed to find it he thought at first that the man had survived the fall and had made off into the surrounding scenery.

Then he came to one of the bogs with which the area was infested, and saw its roiled surface. He shuddered. Well, anyway, he knew who the fossil was.

Or rather, who the fossil had been.

Sam came trotting up, circumventing the bog in response to the terrainer's stimuli. Carpenter patted the reptivehicle's head, which was not in the least damaged from its recent collision with the landing jack; then he broke off liaison and returned to the ship. Marcy and Skip were standing in the viewport, staring at the sky. Turning, Carpenter stared at the sky, too. There were three specks in it.

His mind cleared completely then, and he lifted the two children down to the ground. "Run for Sam!" he said. "Hurry!"

He set out after them. They easily outmatched his longer but far-slower strides, gaining the reptivehicle and

clambering into the driver's compartment before he had covered half the distance. The pteranodons were close now, and he could see their shadows rushing toward him across the ground. Unfortunately, however, he failed to see the small tortoise that was trying frantically to get out of his way. He tripped over it and went sprawling on his face.

Glancing up, he saw that Marcy and Skip had closed Sam's nacelle. A moment later, to his consternation the triceratank disappeared.

Suddenly another shadow crept across the land, a shadow so vast that it swallowed those cast by the pteranodons.

Turning on his side, Carpenter saw the ship. It was settling down on the plain like an extraterrestrial Empire State Building, and, as he watched, three rainbow-beams of light shot forth from its upper section and the three pteranodons went PFFFFFTTT! PFFFFFTT! PFFFFFTTT! and were no more.

The Empire State Building came solidly to rest, opened its street doors and extended a gangplank the width of a Fifth Avenue sidewalk. Through the doors and down the sidewalk came the cavalry. Looking in the other direction, Carpenter saw that Sam had reappeared in exactly the same spot from which he had vanished. His nacelle had reopened, and Marcy and Skip were climbing out of the driver's compartment in the midst of a cloud of bluish smoke. Carpenter understood what had happened then, and he kissed the twenty-second century good-by.

The two kids came running up just as the commander of the cavalry stepped to the forefront of his troops. Actually, the troops were six tall Martians wearing deep-purple togas and stern expressions and carrying melters, while the commander was an even taller Martian wearing an even purpler toga and an even sterner expression and carrying what looked like a fairy godmother's wand. The dirty look which he accorded Carpenter was duplicated a moment later by the dirty look which he accorded the two children.

They were helping Carpenter to his feet. Not that he needed help in a physical sense. It was just that he was so overwhelmed by the rapid turn of events that he couldn't quite get his bearings back. Marcy was sobbing.

"We didn't want to burn Sam out, Mr. Carpenter," she said, all in a rush, "but jumping back four days, two hours, sixteen minutes and three and three-quarter seconds and sneaking on board the kidnaper's ship and sending a message to space Police Headquarters was the only way we could get them here in time to save your life. I told them what a pickle you'd be in, and to have their iridescers ready. Then, just as we were about to come back to the present Sam's time-travel unit broke down and Skip had to fix it, and then Sam went and burned out anyway, and oh, Mr. Carpenter, I'm so sorry! Now, you'll never be able to go back to the year 79,062,156 again and see Miss Sands, and —"

Carpenter patted her on the shoul-

der. "It's all right, pumpkin. It's all right. You did the right thing, and I'm proud of you for it." He shook his head in admiration. "You sure computed it to a T, didn't you?"

A smile broke through the rain of tears, and the rain went away. "I'm — I'm pretty good at computations, Mr. Carpenter."

"But I threw the switch," Skip said. "And I fixed Sam's time-travel unit when it broke down."

Carpenter grinned. "I know you did, Skip. I think the two of you are just wonderful." He faced the tall Martian with the fairy-godmother wand, noted that the man already had a pair of hearrings attached to his ears. "I guess I'm almost as beholden to you as I am to Marcy and Skip," Carpenter said, "and I'm duly grateful. And now I'm afraid I'm going to impose on your good will still further and ask you to take me to Mars with you. My reptivehicle's burned out and can't possibly be repaired by anyone except a group of technological specialists working in an ultra-modern machine shop with all the trimmings, which means I have no way either of contacting the era from which I came, or of getting back to it."

"My name is Hautor," the tall Martian said. He turned to Marcy. "Recount tome with the maximum degree of conciseness of which you are capable, the events beginning with your arrival on this planet and leading up to the present moment."

Marcy did so. "So you see, sir," she concluded, "in helping Skip and me, Mr. Carpenter has got himself in quite a pickle. He can't return

to his own era, and he can't survive in this one. We simply have to take him back to Mars with us, and that's all there is to it!"

Hautor made no comment. Almost casually, he raised his fairy godmother wand, pointed it toward the kidnapers' prostrate ship and did something to the handle that caused the wand proper to glow in brilliant greens and blues. Presently a rainbow beam of light flashed forth from the Empire State Building, struck the kidnapers' ship and relegated it to the same fate as that suffered by the three pteranodons. Turning, Hautor faced two of his men.

"Put the children on board the police cruiser and see to it that they are suitably cared for." Finally, he turned back to Carpenter. "The government of Greater Mars is grateful for the services you have rendered it in the preserving of the lives of two of its most valuable citizens-to-be. I thank you in its behalf. And now, Mr. Carpenter, good-by."

Hautor started to turn away. Instantly Marcy and Skip ran to his side. "You can't leave him here!" Marcy cried. "He'll die!"

Hautor signaled to the two Martians whom he had spoken to a moment ago. They leaped forward, seized the two children and began dragging them toward the Empire State Building. "Look," Carpenter said, somewhat staggered by the new turn of events, but still on his feet, "I'm not begging for my life, but I can do you people some good if you'll make room for me in your

society. I can give you time travel, for one thing. For another —"

"Mr. Carpenter, if we had wanted time travel, we would have devised it long ago. Time travel is the pursuit of fools. The pattern of the past is set, and cannot be changed; and in it that has not already been done, why try? And as for the future, who but an imbecile would want to know what tomorrow will bring?"

"All right," Carpenter said. "I won't invent time travel then, I'll keep my mouth shut and settle down and be good solid citizen."

"You wouldn't and you know it, Mr. Carpenter—unless we desentimentalized you. And I can tell from the expression on your face that you would never voluntarily submit to such a solution. You would rather remain here in your prehistoric past and die."

"Now that you mentioned it, I would at that," Carpenter said. "Compared to you people, *Tyrannosaurus rex* as a Salvation Army worker, and all the other dinosaurs, saurischians and ornithischians alike, have hearts of purest gold. But it seems to me that there is one simple thing which you could do in my behalf without severely affecting your desentimentalized equilibrium. You could give me a weapon to replace the one that Holmer disintegrated."

Hautor shook his head. "That is one thing I cannot do, Mr. Carpenter, because a weapon could conceivably become a fossil, and thereby make me responsible for an anachronism. I am already potentially responsible for one in the form of Holmer's irretrievable body, and I

refuse to risk being responsible for any more. Why do you think I iridesced the kidnapers' ship?"

"Mr. Carpenter," Skip called from the gangplank, up which the two Martians were dragging him and his sister, "maybe Sam's not completely burned out. Maybe you can rev up enough juice to at least send back can of chicken soup."

"I'm afraid no, Skip," Carpenter called back. "But it's all right, you kids," he went on. "Don't you worry about me—I'll get along okay. Animals have always liked me, so why shouldn't reptiles! They're animals, too."

"Oh, Mr. Carpenter!" Marcy cried. "I'm so sorry this happened! Why didn't you take us back to 79,-062,156 with you. We wanted you to all along, but we afraid to say so."

"I wish I had, pumpkin—I wish I had." Suddenly, he couldn't see very well, and he turned away. When he looked back, the two Martians were dragging Marcy and Skip through the locks. He waved. "Good-by, you kids," he called. "I'll never forget you."

Marcy made a last desperate effort to free herself. She almost, but not quite, succeeded. The autumn asters of her eyes were twinkling with tears like morning dew. "I love you, Mr. Carpenter!" she cried, just before she and Skip were dragged out of sight. "I'll love you for the rest of my life!"

With two deft movements, Hautor flicked the hearrings from Carpenter's ears; then he and the rest of the cavalry climbed the gangplank

and entered the ship. Some cavalry Carpenter thought. He watched the street doors close, saw the Empire State Building quiver.

Presently it lifted and hovered majestically, stabbed into the sky just above the ground on a wash of blinding light. It rose, effortlessly, and became a star. It wasn't a falling star, but he wished upon it anyway. "I wish both of you happiness," he said "and I wish that they never take your hearts away, because your hearts are one of the nicest things about you."

The star faded then, and winked out. He stood all alone on the vast plain.

The ground trembled. Turning, he caught a great dark movement to the right of a trio of fan palms. A moment later, he made out the huge head and the massive, upright body. He recoiled as two rows of saber-like teeth glittered in the sun.

Tyrannosaurus!

V

A burned-out reptivehicle was better than no reptivehicle at all. Carpenter made tracks for Sam.

In the driver's compartment, with the nacelle tightly closed, he watched the theropod's approach. There was no question but what it had seen him, and no question but what it was headed straight for Sam. Marcy and Skip had retracted the nacelle-shield, which left Carpenter pretty much of a sitting duck; however, he didn't retreat to Sam's cabin just yet, for they had also re-projected the horn-howitzers.

Although the howitzers were no longer maneuverable, they were still operable. If the tyrannosaurus came within their fixed range it could be put temporarily out of action with a volley of stun-charges. Right now, it was approaching Sam at right angles to the direction in which the howitzers were pointing, but there was a chance that it might pass in front of them before closing in. Carpenter considered it a chance worth taking.

He crouched low in the driver's seat, his right hand within easy reaching distance of the trio of triggers. With the air-conditioning unit no longer functioning, the interior of the triceratank was hot and stuffy. To add to his discomfort, the air was permeated with the acrid smell of burnt wiring. He shut his mind to both annoyances, and concentrated on the task at hand.

The theropod was so close now that he could see its atrophied forelegs. They dangled down from the neck-width shoulders like the wizened legs of a creature one tenth its size. Over them, a full twenty-five feet above the ground and attached to a neck the girth of a tree trunk, loomed the huge head; below them, the grotesque torso swelled out and down to the hind legs. The mighty tail dragged over the landscape, adding the cracking and splitting noises of crushed shrubbery to the thunder thrown forth each time the enormous bird-claw feet came into contact with the terrain. Carpenter should have been terrified. He was at a loss to understand why he wasn't.

Several yards from the triceratank, the tyrannosaurus came to a halt and its partially opened jaws began opening wider.

The foot-and-a-half-high teeth with which they were equipped could grind through Sam's nacelle as though it was made of tissue paper, and from all indications, that was just what they were going to do. Carpenter prepared himself for a hasty retreat into Sam's cabin; then just when things looked blackest, the theropod, as though dissatisfied with its present angle of attack, moved around in front of the rep-tivehicle, providing him with the opportunity he had been hoping for. His fingers leaped to the first of the trio of triggers, touched, but did not squeeze it. Why wasn't he afraid?

He looked up through the nacelle at the horrendous head. The huge jaws had continued to part, and now the whole top of the skull was raising into a vertical position. As he stared, a pretty head of quite another nature appeared over the lower row of teeth and two bright blue eyes peered down at him.

"Miss Sands!" he gasped, and nearly fell out of the drivers seat.

Recovering himself, he threw open the nacelle, stepped out on Sam's snout and gave the tyrannosaurus an affectionate pat on the stomach. "Edith," he said. "Edith, you doll, you!"

"Are you all right, Mr Carpenter?" Miss Sands called down.

"Just fine," Carpenter said. "Am I glad to see you, Miss Sands!" Another head appeared beside

Miss Sands. The familiar chestnut haired head of Peter Detritus. "Are you glad to see me too, Mr. Carpenter?"

"Well, I guess, Pete old buddy!"

Miss Sands lowered. Edith's lips ladder, and the two of them climbed down. Peter Detritus was carrying a tow cable, and presently he proceed to affix it to Sam's snout and Edith tail respectively. Carpenter lent a hand. "How'd you know I was in a pickle?" he asked. "I didn't send back any soup."

"We had a hunch," Peter Detritus said. He turned to Miss Sands. "There, she's all set, Sandy."

"Well let's be on our way then," Miss Sands said. She looked at Carpenter, then looked quickly away, "If, of course, your mission is completed, Mr. Carpenter."

Now that the excitement was over he was finding her presence just as disconcerting as he usually found it. "It's completed all right, Miss Sands," he said to the left pocket of her field blouse. "You'll never believe how it turned out, either."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. Sometimes the most unbelievable things of all turn out to be the most believeable one. I'll fix you something to eat, Mr. Carpenter."

She climbed agilely up the ladder. Carpenter followed, and Peter Detritus brought up the rear. "I'll take the controls, Mr. Carpenter," the latter said, pulling in the ladder. "You look bushed."

"I am," Carpenter said.

In Edith's cabin, he collapsed on the bunk. Miss Sands went over to the kitchenette and put water on to

boil for coffee and took a boiled ham down from the refrigerator-shelf. Up in the driver's compartment, Peter Detritus closed the nacelle and threw Edith into gear.

He was a good driver, Peter Detritus was, and he would rather drive than eat. Not only that, he could take a paleontologivehicle apart and put it back together again blindfolded. Funny, why he and Miss Sands had never gone for each other. They were both so attractive, you'd have thought they would have fallen in love long ago. Carpenter was glad that they hadn't of course — not that it was ever going to do him any good.

He wondered why they had made no mention of the Space Police ship. Surely, they must have seen it when it blasted off . . .

Edith was moving over the plain in the direction of the uplands now, and through the cabin viewport he could see Sam shambling along behind on motion-provoked legs. In the kitchenette, Miss Sands was slicing ham. Carpenter concentrated on her, trying to drive away the sadness he felt over his parting with Marcy and Skip. His eyes touched her slender shapely legs, her slender waist, rose to her cupreous head, lingering for a moment on the silken fuzz that grew charmingly on the back of her neck where her hair had been cut too short. Strange, how people's hair got darker when they grew older —

Carpenter lay motionlessly on the bunk. "Miss Sands," he said suddenly, "how much is 499,999,991 times 8,003,432,111?"

"400,171,598,369,111,001," Miss Sands answered.

Abruptly she gave a start. Then she went on slicing ham.

Slowly, Carpenter sat up. He lowered his feet to the floor. A tightness took over in his chest and he could barely breathe.

Take a pair of lonely kids. One of them a mathematical genius, the other a mechanical genius. A pair of lonely kids who have never known what it is like to be loved in all their lonely lives. Now, transport them to another planet and put them in a reptivehicle that for all its practicability is still a huge and delightful toy, and treat them to an impromptu Cretaceous camping trip, and show them the first affection they have ever known. Finally, take these things away from them and simultaneously provide them with a supreme motivation for getting them back — the need to have a human life — and include in that motivation the inbuilt possibility that by saving that life they can — in another but no less real sense — save their own.

But 79,062,156 years! 49,000,000 miles! It *couldn't* be!

Why couldn't it?"

They could have built the machine in secret at the preparatory school, all the while pretending to go along with the "pre-desentimentalization process"; then, just before they were scheduled to begin receiving doses of the desentimentalization drug, they could have entered the machine and time-jumped far into the future.

Granted, such a time-jump would

have required a vast amount of power. And granted, the Martian landscape they would have emerged on would have given them the shock of their lives. But they were resourceful kids, easily resourceful enough to have tapped the nearest major power source, and certainly resourceful enough to have endured the climate and the atmosphere of Mars Present until they located one of the Martian oxygen caves. The Martians would have taken care of them and have taught them all they needed to know to pass themselves off as terrestrials in one of the domed colonies. As for the colonists, they wouldn't have asked too many questions because they would have been overjoyed to add two newcomers to their underpopulated community. After that, it would merely have been a matter of the two children's biding their time till they grew old enough to work and earn their passage to Earth. Once on earth, it would merely have been a matter of acquiring the necessary education to equip them for paleontological work.

Sure, it would have taken them years to accomplish such a mission, but they would have anticipated that, and have time-jumped to a point in time far enough in advance of the year 2156 A.D. to have enabled them to do what they had to do. They had played it pretty close at that, though. Miss Sands had only been with NAPS for three months, and as for Peter Detritus, he had been hired a month later. On Miss Sands' recommendation, of course.

They had simply come the long

way around—that was all. Traveled 49,000,000 miles to Mars Past, 79,062,100 years to Mars Present, 49,000,000 miles to Earth Present, and 79,062,156 years to Earth Past.

Carpenter sat there, stunned.

Had they known they were going to turn out to be Miss Sands and Peter Detritus? he wondered. They must have—or, if not, they must have gambled on it and taken the names when they joined the colonist. All of which created something of a paradox. But it was a minor one at best, not worth worrying about. In any event, the names certainly fitted them.

But why had they passed themselves off as strangers?

Well, they had been strangers, hadn't they? And if they had told him the truth, would he have believed them?

Of course he wouldn't have.

None of which explained why Miss Sands disliked him.

But *did* she dislike him? Maybe her reaction to him resulted from the same cause that was responsible for his reaction to her. Maybe *she* worshipped *him* as much as he wor-

shipped her, and became as tongue-tied in his presence as he did in hers. Maybe the reason she had never looked at him any longer than was absolutely necessary was that she had been afraid of betraying the way she felt before he learned the truth about her.

He found it suddenly hard to see.

The smooth purring of Edith's battery-powered motor filled the cabin. For quite sometime now there had been no other sound.

"What's the matter?" Miss Sands said suddenly out of clear blue sky. "Cat got your tongue, Mr. Carpenter?"

He stood up then. She had turned, and was facing him. Her eyes were misted, and she was looking at him gently, adoringly . . . the way she had looked at him last night, in one sense, and 79,062,156 years ago in another, by a Mesozoic campfire in an upper Cretaceous cave. *Why I'll bet if you told her you loved her, she'd throw herself into your arms!*

"I love you, pumpkin," Carpenter said.

And Miss Sands did. END

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THE COLDEST PLACE

BY LARRY NIVEN

*It was the coldest place in the
universe — and the strangest!*

In the coldest place in the solar system, I hesitated outside the ship for a moment. It was too dark out there. I fought an urge to stay close by the ship, by the comfortable ungainly bulk of warm metal which held the warm bright Earth inside it.

"See anything?" asked Eric.

"No, of course not. It's too hot here anyway, what with heat radiation from the ship. You remember the way they scattered away from the probe."

"Yeah. Look, you want me to hold your hand or something? Go."

I sighed and started off, with the heavy collector bouncing gently on

my shoulder. I bounced too. The spikes on my boots kept me from sliding.

I walked up the side of the wide, shallow crater the ship had created by vaporizing the layered air all the way down to the water ice level. Craggs rose about me, masses of frozen gas with smooth, rounded edges. They gleamed soft white where the light from my headlamp touched them. Elsewhere all was as black as eternity. Brilliant stars shone above the soft craggs; but the light made no impression on the black land. The ship got smaller and darker and disappeared.

There was supposed to be life

for Dave
Larry Niven

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I sighed and started off, with the heavy collector bouncing gently on

my shoulder. I bounced too. The spikes on my boots kept me from sliding.

I walked up the side of the wide, shallow crater the ship had created by vaporizing the layered air all the way down to the water ice level. Crags rose about me, masses of frozen gas with smooth, rounded edges. They gleamed soft white where the light from my headlamp touched them. Elsewhere all was as black as eternity. Brilliant stars shone above the soft crags; but the light made no impression on the black land. The ship got smaller and darker and disappeared.

There was supposed to be life

here. Nobody had even tried to guess what it might be like. Two years ago the Messenger VI probe had moved into close orbit about the planet and then landed about here, partly to find out if the cap of frozen gasses might be inflammable. In the field of view of the camera during the landing, things like shadows had wriggled across the snow and out of the light thrown by the probe. The films had shown it beautifully. Naturally some wise ones had suggested that they were only shadows.

I'd seen the films. I knew better. There was life.

Something alive, that hated light. Something out there in the dark. Something huge . . . "Eric, you there?"

"Where would I go?" he mocked me.

"Well," said I, "If I watched every word I spoke I'd never get anything said." All the same, I had been tactless. Eric had had a bad accident once, very bad. He wouldn't be going anywhere unless the ship went along.

"Touche," said Eric "Are you getting much heat leakage from your suit?"

"Very little." In fact, the frozen air didn't even melt under the pressure of my boots.

"They might be avoiding even that little. Or they might be afraid of your light." He knew I hadn't seen anything; he was looking through a peeper in the top of my helmet.

"Okay, I'll climb that mountain and turn it off for awhile."

swung my head so he could see the mound I meant, then started up it. It was good exercise, and no strain in the low gravity. I could jump almost as high as on the Moon, without fear of a rock's edge tearing my suit. It was all packed snow, with vacuum between the flakes.

My imagination started working again when I reached the top. There was black all around; the world was black with cold. I turned off the light and the world disappeared.

I pushed a trigger on the side of my helmet and my helmet put the stem of a pipe in my mouth. The air renewer sucked air and smoke down past my chin. They make wonderful suits nowadays. I sat and smoked, waiting, shivering with the knowledge of the cold. Finally I realized I was sweating. The suit was almost too well insulated.

Our ion-drive section came over the horizon, a brilliant star moving very fast, and disappeared as it hit the planet's shadow. Time was passing. The charge in my pipe burned out and I dumped it.

"Try the light," said Eric.

I got up and turned the headlamp on high. The light spread for a mile around, white fairy landscape sprang to life, a winter wonderland doubled in spades. I did a slow pirouette, looking, looking . . . and saw it.

Even this close it looked like a shadow. It also looked like a very flat, monstrously large amoeba, or like a pool of oil running across the ice. Uphill it ran, flowing slow-

ly and painfully up the side of a nitrogen mountain, trying desperately to escape the searing light of my lamp. "The collector!" Eric demanded. I lifted the collector above my head and aimed it like a telescope at the fleeing enigma, so that Eric could find it in the collector's peeper. The collector spat fire at both ends and jumped up and away. Eric was controlling it now.

After a moment I asked, "Should I come back?"

"Certainly not. Stay there. I can't bring the collector back to the ship! You'll have to wait and carry it back with you."

The pool-shadow slid over the edge of the hill. The flame of the collector's rocket went after it, flying high, growing smaller. It dipped below the ridge. A moment later I heard Eric mutter, "Got it." The bright flame reappeared, rising fast, then curved toward me.

When the thing was hovering near me on two lateral rockets I picked it up by the tail and carried it home.

"No, no trouble," said Eric. "I just used the scoop to nip a piece out of his flank, if so I may speak. I got about ten cubic centimeters of strange flesh."

"Good," said I. Carrying the collector carefully in one hand, I went up the landing leg to the airlock. Eric let me in.

I peeled off my frosting suit in the blessed artificial light of ship's day.

"Okay," said Eric. "Take it up

to the lab. And don't touch it."

Eric can be a hell of an annoying character. "I've got a brain," I snarled, "even if you can't see it." So can I.

There was a ringing silence while we each tried to dream up an apology. Eric got there first. "Sorry," he said.

"Me too." I hauled the collector off to the lab on a cart.

He guided me when I got there. "Put the whole package in that opening. Jaws first. No, don't close it yet. Turn the thing until these lines match the lines on the collector. Okay. Push it in a little. Now close the door. Okay, Howie, I'll take it from there . . ." There were chugging sounds from behind the little door. "Have to wait 'til the lab's cool enough. Go get some coffee," said Eric.

"I'd better check your maintenance."

"Okay, good. Go oil my prosthetic aids."

'Prosthetic aids' — that was a hot one. I'd thought it up myself. I pushed the coffee button so it would be ready when I was through, then opened the big door in the forward wall of the cabin. Eric looked much like an electrical network, except for the gray mass at the top which was his brain. In all directions from his spinal cord and brain, connected at the walls of the intricately shaped glass-and-soft-plastic vessel which housed him, Eric's nerves reached out to master the ship. The instruments which mastered Eric — but he was sensitive about having it put that way — were banked along both

sides of the closet. The blood pump pumped rhythmically, seventy beats a minute.

"How do I look?" Eric asked.

"Beautiful. Are you looking for flattery?"

"Jackass! Am I still alive?"

"The instruments think so. But I'd better lower your fluid temperature a fraction." I did. Ever since we'd landed I'd had a tendency to keep temperatures too high. "Everything else looks okay. Except your food tank is getting low."

"Well, it'll last the trip."

"Yeah. 'Scuse me, Eric, coffee's ready." I went and got it. The only thing I really worry about is his liver. It's too complicated. It could break down too easily. If it stopped making blood sugar Eric would be dead.

If Eric dies I die, because Eric is the ship. If I die Eric dies, insane, because he can't sleep unless I set his prosthetic aids.

I was finishing my coffee when Eric yelled. "Hey!"

"What's wrong?" I was ready to run in any direction.

"It's only helium!"

He was astonished and indignant. I relaxed.

"I get it now, Howie. Helium two. That's all our monsters are. Nuts."

Helium two, the superfluid that flows uphill. "Nuts doubled. Hold everything, Eric. Don't throw away your samples. Check them for contaminants."

"For what?"

"Contaminants. My body is hy-

drogen oxide with contaminants. If the contaminants in the helium are complex enough it might be alive."

"There are plenty of other substances," said Eric, "but I can't analyze them well enough. We'll have to rush this stuff back to Earth while our freezers can keep it cool."

I got up. "Take off right now?"

"Yes, I guess so. We could use another sample, but we're just as likely to wait here while this one deteriorates."

"Okay, I'm strapping down now. Eric?"

"Yeah? Take off in fifteen minutes, we have to wait for the ion-drive section. You can get up."

"No, I'll wait. Eric, I hope it isn't alive. I'd rather it was just helium two acting like its supposed to act."

"Why? Don't you want to be famous, like me?"

"Oh, sure, but I hate to think of life out there. It's just too alien. Too cold. Even on Pluto you could not make life out of helium two."

"It could be migrant, moving to stay on the night side of the pre-dawn crescent. Pluto's day is long enough for that. You're right, though; it doesn't get colder than this even between the stars. Luckily I don't have much imagination."

Twenty minutes later we took off. Beneath us all was darkness and only Eric, hooked into the radar, could see the ice dome contracting until all of it was visible: the vast layered ice cap that covers the coldest spot in the solar system, where midnight crosses the equator on the black back of Mercury. END

AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

BY J. T. McINTOSH

ILLUSTRATED BY NODEL

Everyone knew no good would come of digging UP. Turned out that everyone was right!

I

For the last month before Ascension Day there was only one topic in Gallery 71. But there were 53,000 different opinions to be expressed.

"The date is wrong," said old Modin uneasily. "I'm sure the date

is wrong. It should be fifty years from now, or a hundred years from now, or two hundred. If this is the first possible safe date in two hundred years, obviously three hundred would be safer. Or four hundred. Or five hundred."

"Ascension Day!" said Loret skeptically, at a different time and in

different company, for she was sixteen and interested in nothing that was not male, or fun, or both. "What's supposed to happen, for heaven's sake! What's special about digging upwards! When you dig up or down or sidewise, what do you ever find except rock and shale and stones and sometimes a spring? What's supposed to happen when we dig up from Tunnel 17 terminus, for heaven's sake? Why don't we just have a holiday and a festival on Ascension Day, and forget the whole crazy idea of digging upwards, for heaven's sake?"

In the Council, Sim went further. "Surely," he said in his dry, rather pedantic voice, "the conception of digging upward is symbolic. Two centuries ago the Founders set a day for our thoughts, wishes and aspirations to turn upwards to higher, better things. The passage of time, the distortion of ritual, has turned an abstract idea into a concrete one."

Also at a Council meeting, old Zet said: "Doesn't the idea come from some two-hundred-year-old figure of speech which has struck? Like 'when cows fly' or 'once in a blue moon'? I think so. What's a 'blue moon' supposed to be? I guess the truth is that someone said once: 'We'll dig upwards in two hundred years,' intending to convey that nobody would ever dig upwards at all. Well, who but an idiot ever dug above his head? You're liable to bury yourself in stones, and what's the use of a vertical tunnel to nowhere anyway? Naturally when we want more space we dig horizontal-

ly. Multiple levels on top of one-another merely raise scores of quite difficult and unnecessary engineering problems."

Sinn, who talked a lot, naturally had more than one go at Ascension Day. "I am certain there is no more than religious significance in the tradition. The warning runs: *Beware the fire which sears the flesh. If it still burns, return to the Gallery at once and close the shaft for another hundred years.* Now I can quote from old books to show that Ascension Day is mentioned by name in an ancient religion of a whatever that's supposed to mean. God who created heaven and earth, However, the meaning of our tradition is clear: Turn your thoughts upwards, and beware the fires of hell."

Modin, too, had another crack at it. "Something terrible will happen if we ever dig up from Tunnel 17 ers knew about it. Perhaps there's a terminus," he warned. "The Found-vast spring up there. Maybe once it's breached it can never be damfnd. What the legends mean is: *Dig upwards at your peril. When you do, that will be the end of Gallery 71.*"

But despite the fears of old Modin, the angry indifference of Loret (who wanted all the attention that was going and believed she had every right to get it), the pedantic skepticism of Sinn and the practical, down-to-earth objections of Zet, the general opinion was that of Sello, the Premier.

Sello expressed the view simply: "There's a clear direction. At such

and such a date, at a certain place, dig upwards for five thousand feet. That's exactly what we're going to do. Why not? The Founders believed it was to our advantage to do so. If we find it's not, we'll fill in the hole again."

So matters stood until, just a week before Ascension Day, Sinn died. And the very next day, Modin died.

Those who believed in signs had a field day. Modin was old, true, but Sinn was not. That the two principal opponents of Ascension Day should die just before it might have been taken as a sign that the Founders' instructions must be carried out literally. But the superstitious insisted on taking it the other way. To them, Sinn and Modin were prophets. Their deaths suddenly and dramatically increase the value and truth of their last statements.

Gallery 71 was a warm, well-planned hive housing 53,000 people in luxury. For twelve hours at a time the pale gray sky, fully twenty feet above the floor, was brightly lit. For the next twelve, only a faint gleam enabled those who had to be out by night to find their way about.

The wide avenues, with their massive central pillars, were flanked by houses (houses, not cells) neatly inserted in the rock. Every fifty yards an air vent sighed softly.

There was no transport system, although the question of providing one was considered every few years. It was sometimes necessary to walk several miles. But cattlemen were housed near the cattle, fishmongers

near the stock pools, builders near the present construction site. "Some people are flabby enough as it is," Sello commented caustically when the question came up again. And once more the provision of a regular service of trains, trams, buses or cars was turned down.

There were plenty of sports grounds and swimming pools. Centrally placed was a dog track. There was no great demand for further facilities, since no one in Gallery 71 was overburdened with leisure.

There was always plenty of work to be done. Every structure in the Gallery had to be regularly checked and overhauled—occasional minor disasters were sufficient reminder of this. And the fact that neither property nor money could be willed to descendants ensured that nobody was ever relieved of the necessity of having to work for a living.

Gallery 71 was not paradise. It was a moderately contented community, entirely self-supporting, peaceable, law-abiding. It had to be law-abiding, for in a closed community crime was a waste of time. You couldn't take the risk of seriously offending society when there was literally nowhere to go. And few crimes ever went unsolved. It would always be taken for granted that the criminal had not skipped town.

However, as Ascension Day approached, the Gallery became slightly less law-abiding and considerably less peaceful. Ascension Day was such a big and obviously important thing that as the date came closer there was increasing unrest in the



AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

Gallery. People took sides and tempers were lost.

The two sides were obvious. To dig or not to dig, that was the question. The issues were fairly obvious too.

PRO: We're supposed to dig and we're going to dig. What have we to lose? If we don't find anything or we don't like what we find, that's too bad. But suppose we do find something and do like what we find?

CONTRA: We're fine the way we are. What more do we want! We've nothing to gain and everything to lose. Two hundred years ago, when Ascension Day was set, Gallery 71 must have been a tiny, damp, overcrowded, uncomfortable cavern. Look at it now. What else do we need! Nothing. Nothing at all.

II

When Aleta came home on the eve of Ascension Day to change out of her working clothes, she found her father looking unusually grave.

Sello was a stocky man of forty-five, a builder. As Premier he was the final arbiter in Gallery 71, but he had a job like everybody else. The only pay he received as Premier was an allowance to bring up his earnings to what he would have received as a builder if his other duties did not make demands on his time.

"Aleta," he said, "you and Sep mean to go to the rally tonight, don't you?"

She nodded and asked, "Why?"

"It would be better if you didn't go."

She showed her surprise. "We're not taking sides, Pop, only going along to see what happens. What's the harm in that?"

"No harm. But —"

He looked at her for several seconds. She was eighteen, and even in her dusty overall (she was a sander) a very pretty girl. She had red hair and a neat, small-scale figure, exquisitely rounded.

Sello knew he was lucky to have a child at all, in a community where population control was so rigidly enforced. He was ten times luckier to have such a child as Aleta—beautiful, contented, intelligent, warm-hearted. He could honestly say that if he had been granted the opportunity of drawing up the complete specifications for his daughter, she would have been exactly like Aleta. To add to all this, she had the sense to attract and be attracted by young Sep, a probable future Premier and exactly the son-in-law Sello would have chosen.

"There's going to be trouble at the rally," Sello said at last. "It may get out of hand. People will be hurt."

"Surely not, Pop?" said Aleta. "I know there have been fights already, but nothing very serious. What does fighting prove? If you're stronger than another man, does that prove what you believe is right and what he believes is wrong?"

"I know that, Aleta. But do the people who will be at the rally know it?"

She smiled. "Anyway, Sep can look after me."

Sello still looked doubtful. "The old books talk of *mobs* and *mob law*. We've never had a mob before. We don't know what it's liable to do."

Aleta laughed. "Pop, you're making it more and more impossible for me to stay away from the rally. But we'll be careful."

She went to her bedroom to change. Having had her meals on the job, she merely had to wash and change before going out.

Since there were no drones in the Gallery, since everyone spent most of every day except Sunday in working clothes, there had long been a tacit agreement that if you judged people by what they wore, you did so only in their leisure hours. Working clothes didn't even resemble leisure clothes. During the day you wore what your work demanded. In the evening you wore something as different from this as possible.

Aleta chose a green and orange outfit provocative in its utter impracticality. Her orange blouse had double vertical ruffles at front and back; her wide green skirt swung from the hips over an orange sheath, ankle-length, which made walking close to impossible. She wore white high-heeled shoes and white gloves.

In a constant warmth which made semi-nudity comfortable, fashion ran to concealment. Semi-nudity in public was common but never fashionable. Girls wore a halter and shorts for games or for work; to be dressed, they went to the other ex-

treme. Men labored stripped to the waist, but when they went on the town they wore black dress suits.

Sep called for Aleta as smartly dressed as she was. His black trousers were knife-creased, his gray jacket spotless.

They ribbed one another easily. "I know it's only a rally, but shouldn't you have changed out of your working clothes!" Sep said.

"I didn't want to show you up," Aleta retorted.

As they walked to the dog track, the noise came and hit them. The only time they had heard such shouting before was when a particularly exciting dog race was being run. But this was different—the shouting was jagged, angry, irregular.

Aleta remembered Sello's warning and hesitated momentarily. But Sep, curious to see what was going on, was hurrying. Even without stopping she had the greatest difficulty in keeping up with him.

They didn't get near the track. They turned a corner and stopped, stunned by what they saw.

Perhaps seventy people were engaged in the scuffle. At first it seemed no more than a scuffle — but as Aleta looked round, her gaze swung back incredulously to a doorway in which three young men were battering two older men's heads viciously against the closed door.

Sep saw this too, and started to run. But in a moment he stopped. It was suddenly obvious that what they had seen was not the worst thing going on in the melee.

About a dozen people, men and women, had linked arms and were trampling a line of squirming bodies. Three youths with sticks were beating a couple of girls. A huge man sitting on the stomach of his helpless victim was clouting him on the head: left, right, left, right, left, right.

There were shouts and screams and moans and entreaties. There was no sense in the scene; it was like a montage of the most violent, savage episodes from a dozen different horror films, all scrambled together.

There was no sense in the conflict either. What had probably started as a disagreement over the clear issues of Ascension Day had become a riot, an orgy of sadism, a goulash of blood lust.

Sep and Aleta had time for only a brief, incredulous glance at the mad violence in the street. Then a fat man cannoned into Aleta and she staggered back against a wall. The next moment a red-eyed roter reached out and grabbed her bodice, together with a good deal of her flesh, and wrenched savagely. The flesh withstood the assault but the blouse did not. Most of it came away in the man's hand.

The next moment Sep had wheeled him round and hit him on the chin. He staggered back, but a friend of his jumped Sep from behind. Watching Sep, Aleta didn't know whether she was struck deliberately or accidentally, or by whom. Anyway, she sprawled full length on her side, and someone kicked her.

Vaguely she was aware that she

must have been recognized, that this was happening to her simply because she was the daughter of the Premier.

Suddenly Sep was with her again, dragging her to her feet. There was a cut on his cheek. "Run!" he gasped.

She laughed hysterically. Run, in the sheath she was wearing?

Sep bent and ripped it open. As he did so another rioter came up behind Aleta. Still bent double, Sep butted him in the stomach with his head.

Aleta ran. They both ran, not looking back. They ran right back to Sello's house, and slammed the door behind them.

Everybody assumed Ascension Day would be postponed while the riot was probed. There was no such episode in recorded history. The Gallery was frightened, ashamed, grief-stricken, defiant.

But Sello got the digging started before he even began to deal with the rioters. Delay would only make more time available for further strife. Once the digging was under way, Ascension Day was officially inaugurated a *fait accompli*.

So with Sep in charge, a drilling gang began the long operation (it was expected to take a month). Fifty men stood by in case of further riots.

There were none. The rally riot had shocked the whole Gallery out of further demonstration.

It was assumed that Sello would call a full Council meeting to discuss what action should be taken. This

was another assumption which prove false.

Sello dealt with the rioters as ordinary criminals. He recognized nothing out of the ordinary in the circumstances. He dealt with the identified rioters as if each of their crimes had been committed in a vacuum. And in the small, closed community, most of them were identified.

Seven men and two women had died. Eighty-four were injured. The seven murderers (two killed twice) were tried first, found guilty and executed. It was in this atmosphere of summary justice that the hundreds of other charges were examined.

Although Sello was at first strongly criticized, his handling of the affair was eventually applauded. There had been a feeling that since the riot was a special case, special measures would have to be invented to deal with it. Most people not involved had felt that it was out of the question to try so many offenders in the usual way; many even felt that the riot should be passed over almost as if it had never happened.

Sello's attitude from the very beginning was that a mob had no special privilege to assault life and limb. Strong conviction was no excuse for murder. In the trials, Ascension Day was not even mentioned. The only question was, who had done what?

Ordinary houses had to be converted into jails. Sello, a politician in the final reckoning, knew that few of the sentences which he and other judges passed would be

completed. However, the essential thing was that justice should be swift and decisive. Nothing like the Ascension Eve Riot must ever happen again.

Most of the men and women on trial were dazed, incredulous. They could scarcely believe that they had done what they had done, and they were sure they would not be heavily punished. They trusted in the common, familiar human defense: *I wasn't the only one. He was doing it too.*

This availed them nothing. The others who were doing it too came up in court later.

And gradually even the men given the stiffest sentences accepted the justice of it all. Mad they might have been—they were being punished for what they had done. Not for what they had thought nor what they intended: what they had *done*.

All the time the trials were going on (507 men and women on 1743 charges), Sep's digging party bored upwards, stowing the surplus rock in long-prepared shafts. After the seventh day the work suddenly became very easy. Instead of the hard rock which was encountered in almost all digging operations, Sep struck soft, dry soil which could be drilled ten times as fast as it could be carried away.

It was useful, this soil. A great deal of it went to the gardeners, who had never had enough before. Now flower-beds were planted all over the Gallery.

Few of the Ascension Eve Riot trials were long or complicated. Most of the rioters pleaded guilty;

they knew what they had done, and they knew the evidence against them.

The last riot trial was concluded on another eve—the eve of attainment of five thousand feet.

III

Aleta spent the evening at home with her father. Sep was usually too tired to do anything but sleep when he finished work.

She watched Sello without speaking for a long time. Only she knew that Sello was not a cold, implacable judge, that the death penalties he had passed and the centuries of jail sentences had taken years off his own life.

At last, since he clearly wasn't going to speak, she said: "What do you think Sep will find, Pop?"

He looked up. "Perhaps another Gallery," he said. "This is Gallery 71, remember."

The idea came as a revelation to Aleta. Such a possibility had never been discussed, although now it was presented to her it seemed suddenly obvious.

Gallery 71—that was the name of the world. Its inhabitants did not consider the possibility of other Galleries partly because in two centuries of carefully planned expansion they had never found anything to suggest that other Galleries existed. Certainly 71 was a number, yet it never crossed anyone's mind that there might be seventy other Galleries, or even more, all with people in them—different, unknown people, in different, unknown Galleries.

"Yes," she said slowly, thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose that's possible. What made you think of it, Pop?"

"The same thing that made me enforce Ascension Day. The thing that showed me how distorted history can become."

Aleta was surprised. He never talked of history, or possible distortion in it.

"When my father was alive, he often told me about the body," Sello said quietly.

"What body?"

"A party digging off Tunnel 3 struck a spring. In it they found the body of a man. A recent body, dead only a matter of days. *Not* the body of anyone from Gallery 71."

He paused. Aleta saw the significance at once. "Why, that means . . . But tell me, when was this? And why have I never heard about it?"

Sello nodded, an unspoken question answered. "You understand, Aleta. You're intelligent, and not afraid to face the truth, even if it's different from what you expect. But not everybody is like you."

He looked beyond her into space. "This happened only seventy years ago—in the lifetime of quite a few people still alive. The man was found, and the significance was undeniable. This was not the only Gallery . . . But time passed, and belief became strained. This is the world. There is nothing else, nothing but rock. When we dig, we never find anything but rock and stones and shale and sometimes soil. The spring off Tunnel 3 was sealed off,

bypassed. The body was cremated. And ten years later, already hardly anyone believed that a body had been found. Or if it had been found, it came from this Gallery."

"Is it possible?" Aleta said thoughtfully.

"It's possible. The men who had actually found the body died, one after another, until only my father was left. The records in the library were questioned, disbelieved and finally destroyed. There could have been no strange body, because this is Gallery 71, this is *the* Gallery. It must have been a trick, a joke, a hoax. You see?"

Aleta wasn't sure that she did see.

"I've always remembered," Sello went on, "that in the Gallery the truth is what people believe. At least, what people believe is all that can survive. I'm not a great reader, few of us are—but when you go to the library, when you read the old records, you find that before a certain time nothing exists, and that after that time all that remains is what we believe now."

Aleta wasn't entirely convinced. "We have a great respect for tradition, Pop. Surely we pay too much attention to old legends, warnings and ritual, rather than too little?"

"Attention, yes. Veneration, yes. Real respect, no. Rather than believe that what the Founders said was exactly what they meant, we've been changing it around to suit ourselves for two centuries. Like Sinn in the Council . . . I wish he'd had the consideration to live for another couple of weeks instead of becoming a martyr . . . The Founders' warning

about Ascension Day comes down to us like this: *Beware the fire which sears the flesh. If it still burns, return to the Gallery at once and close the shaft for another hundred years.*"

He shook his head. "I wonder what they *really* said."

"You don't believe they said that?"

"I believe they said something much more definite and specific. But generations of librarians have turned it gradually into something vague and mystical. Another thing I don't believe is that the world began two hundred years ago with the Founders. I don't think they meant us to believe it, either. But maybe it doesn't matter."

"Why not?"

"Because the important thing did survive. The definite instruction to dig upwards for five thousand feet."

"So you believe . . .?"

"I believe that tomorrow, soon after drilling starts, we'll know the answers to questions we can't even ask now, because we don't know enough to ask them."

In this Sello proved correct. It was still early morning when Sep sent for Sello. Aleta had not even left for work. Sep's message was so startling that she didn't go at all.

"On a day of such significance," Sello declared, forgetting for a moment that he was talking to his daughter and not addressing a meeting of the Council, "What happens five thousand feet up is five thousand times more important than

anything that may happen in the Gallery."

So Aleta went with him. They had to walk to Tunnel 17 terminus. There they found a crude but efficient elevator which took them up the five thousand feet. They emerged on a landing stage and entered a second elevator.

The last five thousand feet they had to climb. At the top they found Sep and his men crowded in a small tunnel off the vertical shaft. There was a strange silence among them.

"What's happened!" Sello asked.

"It's impossible to explain," Sep said quietly. "You'll have to look for yourself."

"Is there danger?"

"That's another thing you'll have to decide for yourself. I've fitted a valve just above this tunnel, anyway. It can be closed at any time."

Sep climbed up the ladder first, then Sello, then Aleta. Even up here, Sello noted, the shaft was neatly, strongly lined with stone-dust bricks. Sep could be relied on to do a good job, cutting no corners.

They passed through the valve, closed it behind them and climbed up into a blaze of light.

For the two men and the girl green valley under the early morning sun was a terrifying experience. Although the light was not too bright for them, the illumination in the Gallery being strong, they could scarcely see. Their eyes could not accommodate themselves to the distances involved, to the strangely bright colors, to the fantastic, unknown shapes.

Actually, had they known it, in this small valley none of the distances, even to the tops of the surrounding hills was long as surface distances went. But to people who knew nothing outside Gallery 71, a mile of unrestricted vision represented vastness beyond belief.

Nobody said anything. After a few minutes they began to lose their fear that they would fall upwards into the empty sky. This was a strange, irrational terror. Nobody had ever fallen upwards in the Gallery. Yet the roof over their heads, so close, so solid, had come to be a psychological necessity. Without it, they were afraid of a thousand unimaginable things. It was a protection, it was sanity.

At last Sello spoke. "I don't like it. I fought for this moment, for this vision, and now that it's been achieved I wonder if Sinn and Modin were right."

"This is a wonderful place," Sep protested.

"Yes . . . Hell, too, would be a wonderful place."

"Now that we've found it we must try to find out—"

"Oh, yes," Sello interrupted with a sigh. "We must certainly try to find out. We have no choice, now. Aleta, are you afraid?"

They were all afraid, yet somehow she knew exactly what he meant. He meant, was she so awed by the revelation and its implications that she had to go straight back to the Gallery at once, or could she stay out here in this vast, terrifying Gallery and even explore it if necessary?

"I'll stay," she said. "If you want me too."

"Good." He didn't want her to stay, he wanted to take her back with him. But he had already made up his mind that a representative group must make some acquaintance with this world (a world of which, he had already begun to suspect, Gallery 71 was only a tiny and insignificant part). As Premier, he could not permit himself to lead this group. His responsibility was to the Gallery.

However, since in the event of anything going seriously wrong—and it was obvious that many things could go wrong in such a strange, utterly unknown environment—people would be liable to say that he had made others do what he would not do himself, he knew Aleta had to be a member of the party. There was scarcely a choice.

Carefully he explained his plan. This great new Gallery could not be ignored. It existed. More must be found out about it.

So a representative group of thirty volunteers would stay up here for a day or more, cautiously finding out . . . whatever there was to find out.

"Will you take charge, Sep?" Sello asked.

"Of course."

"You must . . ." Sello stopped himself. It was no good putting a man in charge of a party testing a new, utterly unknown environment and in the next breath weighing him down with orders, even with advice.

In the end Sello confined himself

to a platitude so vague that it could not be a burden: "Be careful, Sep."

IV

They climbed out of the hole in the ground and hesitated in awe, one after the other. Afterwards they confessed that each one of them experienced that strange fear of falling upwards into the infinite blue sky.

Several of them hurt their eyes staring at the sun. But no serious damage was done—nobody was stupid enough to go on doing anything so painful simply because he had never seen anything like the sun before.

They had no name for the sun. The word "sun" had survived in their language in such phrases as "a place in the sun," "sunny-tempered" and "nothing new under the sun," but no one guessed that this was the sun. They talked of it as a light or a lamp.

Most of them were young, the young being the most curious, the most fearless and the readiest to volunteer. Loret was among them, with some of her gang of admirers. Although she had thought and said Ascension Day was nonsense, she was as ready as anyone to participate in any exciting developments there might be. She was not old enough to care on Wednesday about anything she might have said on Monday.

Despite the initial awe, the early fears, in a few minutes everybody was laughing and chattering. Soon some of the youngsters began to

show off, demonstrating their bravery and their unconcern about the miracle before their eyes.

"Wait," Sep called. "Listen, all of you. First, nobody gets out of sight of the shaft, understood! We may have to go back at any moment. There may be dangers in this world we know nothing about—huge animals, poisonous vapor, fire, flood, a hundred other things we can't begin to imagine. We may even have to close the shaft behind us. Anybody who's wandered off may be left behind."

The threat brought shocked silence, and involuntarily the group closed up.

"Another thing," Sep said. "This ground looks okay, but it may be treacherous. You find yourself slipping into holes. We're used to level ground, and this isn't level. So watch out, all of you."

And for a few minutes they watched out. But as nothing untoward happened, the group spread out again, brave once more.

It was now possible to make out things which had been obscure at first. When Sello, Aleta and Sep around them, they had discovered for the first time that the eye and brain had great trouble interpreting the unknown. The mountain behind them, a vast black, towering shape, had been difficult to see clearly. The brain behind the eye told the eye to look again, to send impressions that made more sense.

Gradually they realized that Gallery 71 had been deliberately placed under that mountain. That the terminus of Tunnel 17 was directly be-

low almost the lowest part of the valley, so that the shaft to the surface was shortest there.

Almost, not quite. For three hundred yards further on there was a tiny lake. Even to the inexperienced Galleryites, this was clearly the true bottom of the valley.

They stared at the lake, all of them, not quite understanding what it was. Water, certainly. At least it looked like water. But so much water? Was there so much water in the world?

And the color was unexpected. It was black, blue, gray, green, blue, brown. They had never seen water in quantity except in a pool or tank. And it rippled as if it were alive.

Loret laughed suddenly. "It's hot," she said. "Let's take off our clothes."

At first only Loret threw off her clothes, and only a few outer garments at that. Presently, however, there began to seem something essentially right about taking off their clothes in this open world. It was not merely because it was hot and the sun was pleasant on their skin. It was also a feeling of freedom, of spaciousness, of newness.

In the Gallery certain conventions were observed. But this was outside the Gallery. This was a new place, a wonderful, fantastic place where no rules applied until new rules were made.

Why, there wasn't even anything to fall on them. There was nothing that *could* fall on them. This was only gradually realized—what at first had seemed frightening began, only a short time later, to seem a



marvellous new freedom. You could play games, shout, stamp on the ground, do anything you liked without fear that you'd start a roof fall.

When most of the other took off their outer clothes, Loret stripped to a red bathing suit. Only she had thought to bring a bathing suit, possibly because, knowing how she looked in it, she never missed any opportunity to wear it.

"I wish I'd brought mine," another girl said, looking at Loret jealously. "But it's too far to go all the way back for it."

"You can have mine if you like," said Loret recklessly, jumping up and stripping it off.

Startled by her daring, the boys and girls with her looked at Sep. But he did and said nothing.

The next moment half a dozen of them stripped naked, leaping and dancing on the grass like children.

"I wonder if there's something different in the air up here?" Aleta murmured to Sep. "Don't you feel it?"

He nodded. "Quite possibly. More oxygen, less carbon dioxide. That would account for it."

"Harmful, do you think?"

"No, I guess not. We may tire ourselves out more, that's all."

"I feel like stripping and dancing too."

"Go ahead."

"No, I can't. I'm the Premier's daughter, remember? You could, you're nothing in particular."

Sep grinned and threw small stone at her.

Despite Sep's sober warnings,

nothing untoward happened. They saw plenty of insects but no animals. The ground was firm and safe. Running on it was delightful, and falls proved laughably harmless compared with falls on rock or concrete.

It took them an hour or two to get around to swimming in the lake. Several of them had thought about it much earlier, but didn't say anything in case they should be forced to prove their courage by diving in.

It was Loret, of course, who eventually suggested it. Still nude, she sat on the edge first and dangled her toes in the water, shrieking at the cold. A few minutes later, nevertheless, she was in the water, shouting that it wasn't so cold once you were in. Cautiously a few of her entourage followed her.

Sep had considered forbidding bathing or at least delivering warnings. There might be dangerous creatures in the lake, which looked very deep, and who could tell what other perils there might be?

In the end he said nothing, for the whole experiment as he saw it was aimed at finding out as much as possible about this vast external world. Very little would be found out if he forbade everything.

The bathers emerged, shivering. But the sun was now so hot, high overhead, that in a few minutes they were so warm that they were ready to swim again.

Around midday they ate the food they had brought with them. Most of them were so hungry that they ate at one sitting all they had brought to last them all day.

After lunch four of the men

crossed the valley floor to the nearest hill. The lower slopes presented no difficulty, but presently they reached a rock face which, to inexperienced climbers, looked quite unscalable. Skirting it for several hundred yards, they found no place where they could climb more than twenty feet higher.

They were not surprised. The valley seemed so vast to all the people from the Gallery that it occurred to no one that it was merely a tiny part of an immense continent. It seemed quite natural that the hills which surrounded the valley should be unclimbable, enclosing it as decisively as the walls of Gallery 71 bounded it.

They descended and reported to Sep, who was as unsurprised as they were. He, too, had not tried to project his thoughts beyond the valley.

In the middle of the afternoon, Aleta, who had sat quietly with others, finally succumbed to temptation and stripped to her briefs. She dived in the lake, swam right across and back, and climbed out, shaking the water from her hair.

There was a murmur of slightly reluctant admiration. No one else had managed to swim right across. Loret stared at her in unconcealed dislike. In her view Aleta had deliberately and maliciously stolen her thunder—as usual.

It was shortly after this that Sello climbed to the exit once more to see for himself what was going on. He stared in shocked disapproval at Loret and her friends, all nude by this time.

Sep saw him and came to report to him.

"You permitted this!" Sello said with a wave of his hand.

Sep grinned. "I could hardly stop them. The air up here is intoxicating. We haven't a drop of alcohol with us, but you wouldn't guess it from the things that have been going on—"

"What sort of things?" Sello demanded quickly.

"Oh, nothing much. Running, dancing, jumping, climbing, swimming, wrestling—a few scrapes and scratches, but nobody's hurt."

"Swimming? That pond? You let them?"

"Aleta's just swum across and back."

Sello clearly didn't approve of the way Sep was handling things. His eyes widened as Aleta stood up and waved, scarcely more decent than Loret and her companions.

However he *had* put Sep in charge. And the average age of the volunteers was less than twenty. He grunted and made a withdraw into the hole.

"Wait," said Sep. "Could you send up some more food? This air makes us very hungry."

"Are you sure it's safe to stay here?"

"Safe? I've been thinking, Premier. Isn't it pretty clear that we all came from here originally? Before we built the Gallery?"

Evidently the same thought had already crossed Sello's mind, for it was no surprise to him and he didn't argue. "If so," he said, "the Founders must have had a very good

reason to withdraw to the Gallery and ensure that we stayed there for two centuries."

Sep nodded soberly. "I guess so."

"Any idea what it might be?" Sello asked.

"No, not in the present conditions. But they may change."

"Change? How?"

Sep pointed at the sun. "The lamp in the sky . . . it moves. Soon it will be night."

"Like night in the Gallery? And at the same time?"

Sep nodded "Not by coincidence either I guess our night and day are modelled on night and day here. I don't know what night will be like here—except it's almost certain to be very cold."

"Then come back to the Gallery when it's night."

"You don't want us to stay for the whole cycle?"

"I want you to come back—and be examined."

"For what?"

For the first time it was Sello who smiled. "We won't know what we're looking for until we find it, will we?"

After Sello had climbed down the shaft again, Sep remained for some time where he was, frowning thoughtfully. Age obviously made a great difference to people's reaction to this open Gallery. Sello, whom Sep had always considered wise and reasonably progressive, proved to be almost as reactionary as Sinn and Modin at sight of the valley. And Sello was not very old.

Yet Sep and Aleta and Loret and the other volunteers, few of them

beyond their teens, adapted easily and readily to these new conditions outside the Gallery.

Perhaps it was a pity that the final decisions—whatever they might be—would be taken, as all important decisions were, by the elders of Gallery 71.

V

They sunbathed all day. But when the sun (which they were still calling a lamp) disappeared behind one of the hill-tops, the temperature dropped sharply. Within half an hour they all wore all the clothes they had with them and wanted more.

In another half-hour it was so cold that Sep had to order withdrawal to the Gallery.

It was an order which was gladly obeyed. This new world was wonderful by day, but even before the last rays of the sun had disappeared it became terrifying again.

Sep and Aleta stayed at the top of the shaft to see what happened when the lamp went out. The others hastened back to Gallery 71, eagerly anticipating the delights of describing the wonders they had seen to the stay-at-homes.

"There's another bird," Aleta said, pointing.

They had seen plenty of birds without losing their wonder of them. Birds and flight were not entirely unknown to them—they had hens in the Gallery. The swooping, soaring birds of the valley showed, however, that hens had all but forgotten how to fly.

This was a beautiful silvery bird which circled the valley lazily, still in sunshine although the whole valley was in deep shadow. Presently it darted away and in a few minutes night was complete.

Aleta was shivering in Sep's arms. They climbed down and closed the valve behind them, missing the wonder of the moon and stars.

Next day all thirty of the volunteers came out in a fiery rash. They lay in bed groaning, wincing at the touch of the lightest sheet.

Some thought they were dying. Some feared they were not. Some had colds as well as the red rash: others had boils.

There was no great mystery about the common ailment. The rash was clearly caused by burning. The burning was clearly caused by the great lamp whose warmth had been so pleasant the day before.

Sep and Aleta, who had sunbathed moderately, were in better case than anyone else. Yet they were in such pain that they were not consulted when the emergency Council meeting called by the Premier made its decision.

"*Beware the fire that sears the flesh,*" Sello quoted grimly. "*If it still burns, return to the Gallery at once and close the shaft for another hundred years. Our duty is clear, Councillors.*"

"Yes," said Zet with satisfaction. "I'm glad you agree, Premier." And he couldn't resist adding: "At last."

"We had to obey the Founders we have profited by it. We have greatly added to our knowledge of the world we live in. But we must

now heed their warning. *The fire that sears the flesh* still burns. We must close the shaft. At once."

When Sep heard the decision, he jumped up, put on his lightest shirt and shorts, and hurried out to find Sello. "We're making a mistake, Premier," he protested when he found him. "It's a wonderful world up there, and we've scarcely given it a chance. These burns are nothing! They'll heal in a day or two," he insisted.

"I hope so," said Sello, shuddering as he thought of Aleta's burns. "I certainly hope so."

"Look," Sep said, baring the flesh on his hips. "If you protect yourself from the lamp, no harm befalls you. We must go back and —" Sello interrupted him.

"It's too late Sep," Sello said quietly. "The shaft has already been closed. Not merely closed but collapsed. There is no shaft there any more."

Sep nearly said something extremely rude. But he stopped himself in time. This was Aleta's father, after all.

And you couldn't argue with a Council decision.

He made a secret resolution. In twenty years he would be on the Council. Perhaps he would be Premier. If he was, he would devote all his energies to reopening the shaft to the wonderful world above.

Yet even as he resolved this, he remembered how different the reaction of old and young people had been to the valley. In twenty years' time, when he had power, he would

then be nearly as old as Sello was now.

Perhaps, he thought bleakly, it would always be the same. The young were adventurous, the old were cautious.

And the old made all of the decisions.

Perhaps all Ascension Days would have the same result. Perhaps the human race would never have any home but Gallery 71, never recognizing anything else as home.

And this is wrong. Sep thought with the certainty of youth. *Sello is wrong. He's not being wise, he's being over-cautions. We came from that world and we can never be more than half alive except in that world.*

Sello is wrong, wrong, wrong!

But Sello, though mistaken, was not wrong.

The silvery bird which Aleta had admired flew back to its home. And next day, although the evidence it had brought back was hazy and inconclusive, two larger birds arrived over the valley.

They saw nothing significant. The caved-in shaft looked no different from a score of natural scars in the floor of the valley. However, just to be on the safe side, they dropped a radiation bomb. Poison slowly spread over the valley.

Then they flew away.

In the valley where thirty young men and girls had laughed and played and bathed less than twenty-four hours ago, nothing remained but *the fire that sears the flesh.*

END

PIG IN A POKEY

BY R. A. LAFFERTY

The cheerful piglike alien would never harm a human — but it might not stop a human harming himself!

It happened on Hippodamia. The name isn't really important. There are ten thousand other asteroid-stations just as undistinguished.

Netter settled back into the soft, live-moss chair and prepared to talk the Creature out of the impasse. Then, with a shudder, he saw it on the wall and he began to tremble.

He had found, in part, what he had come to find. It was the beefy, bearded head of Captain Kalbfleish, mounted like a trophy.

"Great God, Man!" — and it wasn't a man to whom he spoke — "that's a human head." Netter cracked.

"Which Great God, yours or mine?" Porcellus grunted. "They aren't the same, or they've been badly described. Yes, a human head. I've always wanted one. You notice that I have given it the favored position in the center of the great wall. I now have at least one of the heads of every species that interest me. Some of

the heads are much larger and more ornamented than your friend's. It's a pity that humans don't have sweeping horns; that would make them perfect. But even without them, I consider Kalbfleish's head the finest in my collection. It's truly magnificent.

It was. "Kalbfleish has a fine head on him," his friends used to say, and laugh. The big captain, for all his remarkable courage and spirit, had not been long on brains.

As a trophy, his head looked even wilder than it had when he was alive. It had a stark and staring expression — as though his death had been one of terror and agony.

"You killed him of course," said Netter dryly, as he braided a romal in his nervous hands. "So, one way or the other. I'll have to kill you — or you me."

"Not I," said Porcellus — a moist and hog-fat Creature. "I wouldn't harm an insect. Your friend had a violent heart and it finally ruptured. He was uncommonly energetic — especially so on the day of his death."

"Where is his body, you fat pig?"

"My translator has only a rough idea of pig, and I suppose you intend it for an insult: but I have a tough hide. I couldn't do a thing with his body, Netter, it was putrid in no time. When you humans know you are going to die you should begin giving yourself injections three or four basic days before. Then your bodies wouldn't turn foul after death. I had no idea he had neglected it, so I wasn't prepared. I was lucky to save the head."

"We humans *don't* know when we're going to die," said Netter. "What is this you gave me to eat?"

"Yes, now I remember Kalbfleish saying he didn't know when he would die, but I thought that he spoke in humor. Since you also say it, it must be true of your species.

"The name of the food would mean nothing to you, but you have a close parallel to its method of preparation. I have read about geese in an Earth book of the captain's though I overlooked pigs. You sometimes put live geese to dance on hot griddles before they are killed. Because this excites and alarms them their livers become enlarged and are then eaten as great delicacies. The creatures whose meat you are eating also died in excitement and alarm, and they are delicious through and through."

Well, the meat was certainly delicious. That fat hog of a creature knew how to live well. Netter finished the meal and set it aside. Once more he braided the romal in his hands while he grasped for words.

"I suppose all the creatures whose heads you have here died accidentally, Porcellus?" he asked.

"Well, all but one of them died," said Porcellus, "and I did not kill them. One of them died at a great distance from here: he willed me his head and had it sent to me because I had admired it. And one of them, so far as I know is still alive. He was a being of multiplex heads. He hacked one of them off quite willingly when I praised it, and cured and mounted it himself. A queer chap. He is staring down at

you now and it will amuse you to guess which one he is."

Porcellus didn't actually speak like that. He spoke in a series of grunts, some verbal and some ventral. But Netter's Console Translator had a selector dial. He could dial translation in any language, pidgeon, diplomatic pleasantries, old Southern U.S. soft-talk or Yiddish dialect, among others, if he wished. Whenever he encountered a creature who was repulsive to him — as Porcellus was — he dialed a courtly manner of speech. This was somehow easier on his ears and nerves.

"We're wasting time," Netter told the creature. "I've come to pursue claim to this asteroid. We need it for a way station. As we both know it's never worked out well for two such different species to share a station. We had first claim here long ago: and we abandoned it. Then you set up your station here: but you also abandoned it."

"Never," said Porcellus. "Would I abandon my cozy home and my trophies? Would my masters wish the removal of so fine a station master as myself? I was called Home on urgent business. I was gone but for a basic year and the odds were very high against any other claimer coming during that time."

"The rules state that a live and competent agent must be in residence at all times or the asteroid can be declared abandoned," Netter said. "The asteroid was plainly abandoned when Kalbfleish arrived: you were gone. He reported it, and claimed the station for our company. The

claim was approved and accepted."

"True," said the Creature Porcellus. "What is that thing you play with in your hands? But Captain Kalbfleish — following the awkward interval after I had returned — also abandoned the station by dying. I so reported his death, and claimed the station for ourselves once more. The claim was approved and accepted. Now you are here as my guest only and, I tell you in all kindness, not a very welcome one."

"But a proved murder will void your claim," said Netter.

"So prove it, fine man," said Porcellus. "Yours is a smaller head than Kalbfleish's but it has a certain distinction. I could make room for it among my trophies. We have each of us sent various reports, and the matter is under litigation. In the meanwhile, the accidental death of either of us would void his claim and settle the matter. We cannot kill directly. Investigators are already on the way and we would both be prime suspects, since we are the only ones here. What is that leather thing with which you play?"

"A romal, Porcellus. A short quirt braided onto a rein. They made them in Old Mexico, California and Texas, but they were mostly ornamental."

"Earth places, my translator say. Were they used with a creature?"

"With a pony, a horse."

"Haven't I stumbled onto the information that the horse is extinct?"

"Yes. The braiding of the little thing is only a hobby of mine."

"A hobby, according to my comprehensive translator, is a sort of vicarious horse — a mental surrogate which one rides. Is that correct?"

"Correct, Porcellus. Haven't you a hobby?"

"My hobby is heads." said the thing.

Netter started to leave for his own camp. "To the early and accidental death of one of us," he toasted, finishing his drink.

"Shoals!" toasted Porcellus. "I believe that is your word. And a warning: stay away from the low dome which you will see on the plain. It's dangerous."

No—Porcellus wanted him to go to the curious dome — or he wouldn't have warned him away from it. Was it dangerous? Or did the thing merely want to divert him? Porcellus must have known that he would explore every feature of landscape on the small asteroid. Perhaps it was only to further worry him, as Porcellus himself had seemed to be worried. But what in hog heaven can worry a hog! Netter had it after a while.

He knows when he's going to die. He's surprised that humans haven't that knowledge. But can I depend on it? It's only a guess — and a poor one at that.

Netter left the dome until last. He circumnavigated the asteroid in a brisk six-mile walk and found nothing of interest. At last he came thoughtfully to the dome.

Rising to no more than his height in the center, it was about sixty feet in diameter, symmetrical in general outline, with a slightly rough

ened surface, and probably artificial. "I believe it is an old direction beacon of the Porcines," he said aloud to himself. "Yes, this is certainly the top of an obsolete beam sphere, and most of it is underground. They were no good. I think we had them at one time."

Netter stepped gingerly onto the sphere. It was certainly firm enough. There was no danger of him crashing through. He climbed to the center.

"Nice, he said, "but nothing." Then he felt it activated "So Porcellus still uses it," he said, "I didn't realize they were so backward."

He walked around on it, and it rotated gently under him, compensating for him. He strode down the side a little way, and it quickly brought him back to the top. "This could be fun," he said.

He could take three, four quick steps away from the top, and he would still be on top. He could tense to jump sideways, and the sphere would compensate before he left the surface: he'd still land exactly on the center whichever way he jumped. The thing rolled easily and noiselessly, immediately anticipating and reacting to every movement. He walked, he ran, he laughed. He trotted half a mile to end up standing where he stood before.

"You know tricks and I know tricks, old sphere," he shouted. "Let's see who's smarter." He feinted, he broke, he dodged, he ran crazy-legged as though he were brokenfield dribbling at Galactic rules Football. He evaded tacklers,

he scored countless goals in his mind—but he never left the dome.

He lay down and rolled, trying to go down the steep far slopes as though they were grass banks. He stopped rolling and lay on his back.

"I haven't had so much fun since I was a boy at the amusement park," he said.

He hadn't? Then why did he suddenly begin to tremble? Why did he begin to whistle off key. It was almost as though he was scared. "Stone walls do not a pokey make nor locks a —" It was the Cross-Bar Hotel Blues he was whistling and he had to stop it.

He was locked tight in jail on a hillock in the middle of a plain, and there was no barrier in sight.

There was no possible way he could get off the compensating dome.

After an hour of cavorting and hopping about he wasn't even one full step from where he started — and there was no possible way that he could do better.

He thought about it for a full Hippodamia day and night — forty-five minutes basic time. He couldn't come up with anything constructive.

"If I had a rope and you had a stump," he said talking to no one, "I'd rope the stump—I'm good at that — and pull myself off this thing.

But he didn't have a rope and the plain sure didn't have a stump. It hardly had a pebble as big as his thumb.

This is where Kalbleish died," said Netter "You said it right, pig man, my friend had a violent heart and it finally ruptured on him.

You didn't have to murder him. You let him run himself to death. You said it, he was uncommonly energetic — especially so on the day of his death. Now I understand. He could never stand to be confined. He must have gone crazy when he realized the paradoxical nature of his prison — on the most open space on the asteroid. He must have run until he ruptured all his organs. It is no wonder that he died with that look of horror."

This was a jail that nobody could break. Why try more tricks on the sphere? It knew what he was going to do even before he did.

"Only a creature that could fly in zero atmosphere could get off of this," he mused. "Even a worm couldn't crawl off unless he were too small to affect the compensators. If I had two cant hooks I might be able to fool the thing, but it could no doubt compensate for the resolution of forces. If I had a weight on a line I might puzzle it a little — but not much. Porky has it made, I'll die either of starvation, exertion or insanity — but the investigation won't show that I was murdered. "Why have two humans died of heart attack here?" is the most they can ask him, and Porky will rub his hands and say "Bad climate."

But what Porky Porcellus really said was:

"Fine man, why do you play like a boy on top of that thing? Is that any way for a hopeful asteroid agent to conduct himself."

"Porcellus, you think you've trapped me, do you?" flared Netter.

"I trap you! My hands are clean.

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Is it my fault that two humans develop the strange mania of running themselves to death in a weird game!"

How far away was Porcellus from the edge of the dome? Too far. Two far by several yards.

"Porcellus, what is this thing?" Netter cried out.

"Once it was a beam sphere, as you have probably guessed. Now it's obsolete. I have altered it a bit. I use it as an intelligence test. To fail it is to die."

"Did anyone ever get off it?" Netter called. He had to get Porcellus interested. He had to get him to come several feet closer before he turned away.

"Only one passed," said the creature, "and he had unusual natural advantages. He was a peculiar fellow of the species Larrik who visited me some basic years ago. He simply broke himself into two pieces and walked off in opposite directions. The globe couldn't compensate for both of them. One got clear, obtained a line and pulled his other half off. Both halves laughed at me, and then they rejoined themselves. But you haven't his advantage, Netter. You have failed."

"I'll find a way," swore Netter. "I'll find a trick."

Just a little bit closer now would do it.

"You lose, Netter," said Porcellus. "There is no fixed thing on the plain you could use to pull yourself off—even if you had a way of reaching it. The longest thing you have with you is what you call the

romal, and it's not long enough."

Porcellus was close enough. Right at the end of the dome. when he turned it would be perfect—some where between thirty-two and thirty-five feet. There was no fixed object on the plain, but there was something heavy enough that would serve as one.

The romal was no longer than his arm, but it was a romal rey — a king romal.

Porcellus turned away in his triumph. The light-thin lariat flew and dropped over his body.

The fat hulk was no match for Netter when he was on solid ground. He hog-tied the Hog-man with the thin leather line and rolled him onto the dome. And Porcellus was immediately on the center top of the dome to stay there until he died of hunger, uncommon exertion or porcine apoplexy . . .

Netter was moving things about in the fine trophy room which he had recently inherited. He set a fine hardwood peg into the wall and hung on it the king romal for which he now had especial affection.

He moved many things in the trophy room. He wanted the setting to be just right. He knew just what space it should occupy on that great wall. The investigation was over with and Netter's claim had been accepted. He was now asteroid stationmaster—a good job.

The head was ready, It had been cured out and tanned and treated, and the eye-tushers were polished until they gleamed.

Porcellus had a magnificent head!

END

THE HOUNDS OF HELL

BY KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by EMSH

***He was the only man in the world
who could hope to stand up against
the enemy—if he was still a man!***

XI

For the first eight hours at my new job, while the ancient tanker ploughed at fifty knots sixty-five feet beneath the surface of the Mediterranean, I labored with Joel at routine drudgery that could have

been performed with greater efficiency and less cost by a medium-priced computer.

I passed a bad hour when we surfaced to pass through the Gibraltar locks. A boat came alongside and I heard the clank of feet on the deck above; caught scraps—voices asking

What Has Gone Before . . .

John Bravais, intelligence operator and soldier of fortune, is assigned to track down the report that strange creatures are interfering in the formal war games the world uses to settle its diplomatic problems. Fitted out with special equipment, he visits one battle and finds a creature that looks like a huge, savage dog that uses superscientific weapons to destroy a tank, kill its crew . . . and in a matter of seconds operate on their bodies to remove their brains.

Bravais reports back to his superiors and is given a new body to help him match the superfast, super-strong hounds of hell. Fitted out with prosthetic muscles and skin of steel, with sensory equipment that matches the radar of a battleship and the long-distance sensitivity of Project Ozma, able to work for days without rest and to destroy any mortal adversary, Bravais sets out to find the creatures — and succeeds too well. For they are everywhere. Masked as humans, relying on a psionic ability to camouflage themselves, they pass as military officers, diplomats — Earth leaders of every variety.

Bravais's superiors are killed. He himself is a fugitive and alone. Wounded, helpless, he stows away aboard a cargo submarine headed for the U.S.A.

questions, the captain blandly denying any knowledge of stowaways. I was waiting just inside the deck-house door as he invited his official visitors to search the ship. They declined with curses.

I heard them reboard their launch; then the sound of its engines growled away across the water. I leaned against the wall, feeling hot and dizzy. My arm throbbed like a giant toothache.

Joel had been waiting with me. "Hey, Jones," he said. "How come we're hanging around here? You going out on deck?"

I let a long breath out; it was a bad habit I was forming—forgetting to breathe for minutes at a stretch. I straightened with an effort, feeling the deck move under me. "Sure," I said. "Let's go take a look at the Rock."

The cold pre-dawn air cleared my head. I leaned on the rail beside Joel, watching the towering barrier walls slip down into the churning water as the lock filled. Then the tanker edged ahead, the mighty gates slid in behind us, churning water aside, met with a dull boom. Again we rode the flood, gaining another hundred feet.

Forty-five minutes and five locks later we slid out into the choppy, blue-black waters of the South Atlantic, five hundred feet above the level of the Mediterranean. Dawn was coloring the sky now. Lights gleamed wanly from the fortress of Gibraltar, and from the flat, white city on the African side.

A raucous buzzer sounded across the deck.

"Hey, we better get below before we get dunked," Joel advised. We stepped back into the stale interior. A moment later we heard the crash of the waters closing over us above, then the silence of the deep sea settled in again.

"Well," Joel said cheerfully. "I guess we got to get back to work, Jones."

I nodded. For a moment, blackness whirled before me as I turned. I caught myself, followed Joel back down into the ship.

During the next forty-eight hours, Joel and I found time for several four-hour sleeps and a couple of short naps between bellowed orders from Carboni or the unseen captain. At odd intervals we went to the crew mess, demanded and got plates of oily cold-storage eggs and too-salty bacon.

Now, having just completed a laborious two-hour visual inspection of reset switches, I again sat at the long table, listening to the feverish humming in my head, picking at a mixture of mummified beef and canned milk and taking medicinal sips from a clay mug of North African brandy. Across the table, the bearded elder known as Doc worked conscientiously to finish the bottle.

Joel had put his head on the table and gone off to sleep. At the far end of the room, Poge, the horse-faced man, monotonously and with much profanity called off items from an inventory list while a short, chinless sailor with a wool cap and warts ticked them off on a clipboard. What the rest of the nine-man crew

did aboard the vessel, I hadn't yet learned. Four of them had just left the room, staggering drunk.

"Three more trips, Jones," Doc stated. "Thirty-one years on the line—nine on *Excalibur*. I'll miss the old tub." He looked around the room with sad, red-veined eyes. "No, I'm a damned liar," he corrected. "I hate this damned scow." He looked at me as though I had praised it. "I've hated every minute of those thirty-one years. Hated medical school before that. You ever been in a cadaver lab?"

"Sure have," I said, forcing myself to follow the conversation. "There was a fellow I hadn't seen for years. Opened up the tin box, and there he was." I sipped the brandy, feeling it burn its way down. Doc worked his lips, blinked, took a pull at his drink.

"I knew a fellow," he said, "sold his body to a medical school. Got five hundred cees for it, which he badly needed at the time. Later on he got in the chips and thought better of the bargain. Wanted to buy it back. Well, seems like the title had changed hands a couple of times. He traced it from Yale to Georgia, and on down to Miami. Finally caught up with it." He took a healthy draught from his cup, exhaled noisily. "Too late, though. End of the year, you know. Nothing left but a few ribs, the left arm, and the bottom half of the cranium." He sighed. "A sad case."

His image was wavering, obscured by whirling points of light; I blinked them away, raised

my glass to him. "Doc, you're one of the finest liars I ever met."

He blushed, looking modest.

"Shucks, seems like things just naturally happen to me. Why, I remember the time . . ." he rambled on. At the far end of the table, Poge tossed his list aside, yawned, scratched at an unshaven jaw.

"Get some coffee over here, Runt," he ordered. The warty sailor bustled, operating the coffee maker, filled a two-quart pot, rattled thick cups and sheet-metal spoons. He placed the pot in front of the horse-faced man.

"Watch out, Mr. Dobbin. She's plenty hot." He went back to his list, muttering to himself.

Poge grunted; He glanced at Joel, snoring across the table from him; he licked a finger, touched it to the polished metal; it hissed. An expression twitched at the corners of his mouth. He took the pot gingerly by the massive insulated handle, stood.

"Hey, dummy!" he said sharply.

Joel stirred.

"Wake up, dummy!"

Joel sat up, knuckling his eyes. He saw Poge and smiled.

"Gee, I guess I—" he started.

"Here!" Poge thrust the pot at him. Joel reached out, took the rounded container in his two huge hands. His jaw dropped. His eyes widened. Poge stepped back, his mouth arched in a grin like something carved at the top of Notre Dame.

I was a little slow, but I reached Joel then, knocked the steaming pot from his hands; it smashed against

the wall behind Poge, spewed steam and liquid in a wide sheet that caught the horse-faced man full across the back. He howled, writhed away from the table, clutching at his shoulder. He screamed again, tore at his jacket. Doc came to his feet, grabbing at the bottle as it tottered, almost fell. The horse-faced man clawed his shirt open, ripped it from his shoulders. A vast red blister swelled visibly from his patchy hair-line almost to the soiled edge of the underwear showing above his belt. His eye fell on Doc.

"Do something, damn your guts!" he shrilled. "Oh, Jesus . . ."

Doc started around the table. I caught his arm. "To hell with that sadist," I said. "Take a look at Joel's hands."

Joel still stood, staring at his hands. A tear formed, rolled down his cheek.

"I'll kill him!" Poge screeched. He plunged across the room, knocked the sailor aside, caught up a steak knife, whirled on Joel. I pushed in front of him. The odors of sweat and alcohol came from him in waves. I caught his wrist, remembering not to pulp the bone.

"Joel," I said, my eyes holding on Poge's. "If this man ever hurts you again, put your thumbs into his throat until he stops moving, understand?"

I twitched the knife from Poge's hand, shoved him from me. His face was as white now as the dead face of the thing I had killed in the ravine. The recollection must have shown in my expression. Poge shivered, backed, turned to the

sailor who was standing wide-eyed, all warts and Adam's apple, looking from one of us to the other like a spectator at a ping-pong tournament.

"Get me to my room," Poge gasped out. His knees went slack as the sailor caught him. Behind me, Joel moaned.

"Let's get this boy down to my sick-bay," Doc was saying. "Second-degree, maybe worse. Callouses helped . . ." As I turned, his eyes found mine.

"You better let me take a look at you, too," he said. "You're hotter'n a power pile, Jones."

I put a hand on the desk to keep it from spinning.

"How's Joel?" My voice seemed to belong to someone else. A wave of nausea rolled over me, left me shivering violently.

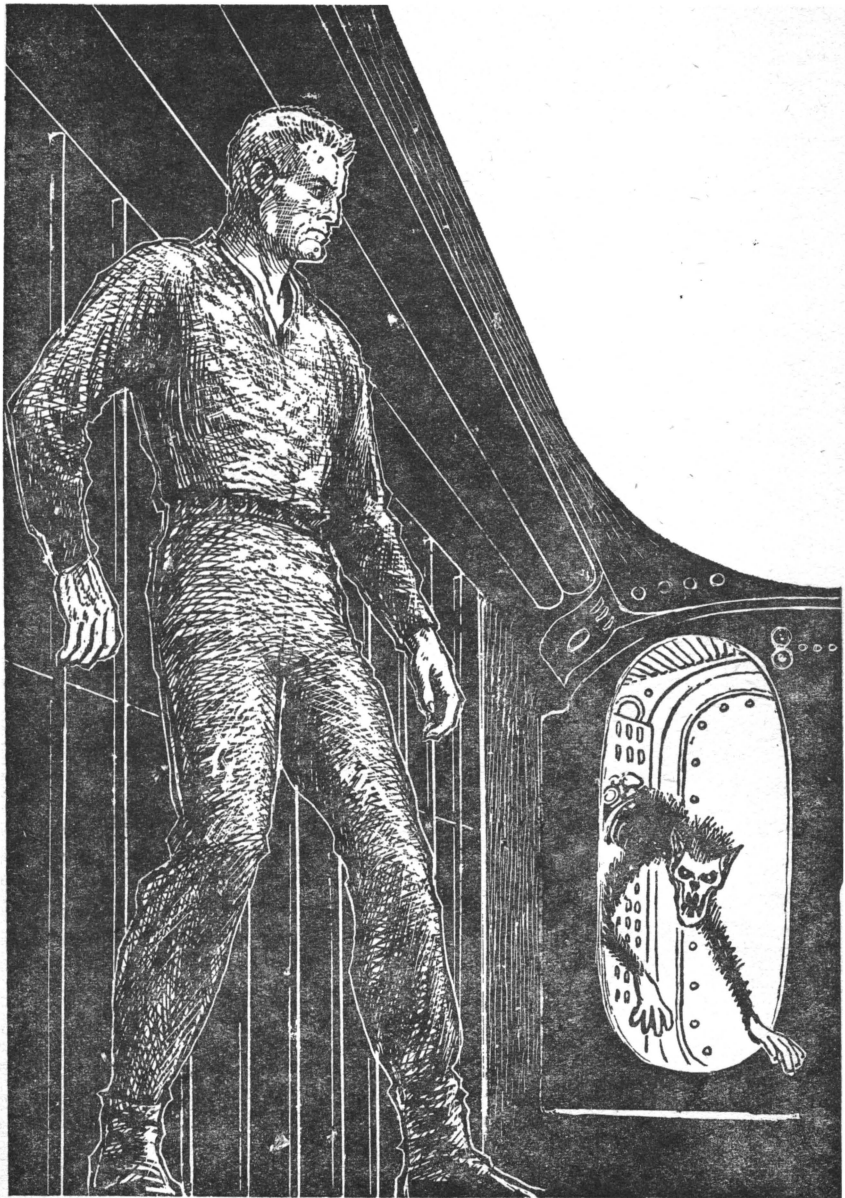
I would have to wait . . . I forced my thoughts to hold to the subject. Wait until they came. There would be a band, dressed all in Red, and General Julius would be leading it . . .

I fought the fantasy away. Delirium waited like a mire beside the narrow path of reason. *Nothing to do with Julius. Julius was dead. I had strangled him, while he bit at me. The dog-things had chased me, and now I was on the beach. It was cold, cold . . . I shivered violently, huddling against the steel cliff.*

Joel was calling my name. He needed help, but I was trapped.

"Please, Jones . . . don't hit the doc."

I got my eyes open. Joel's face



loomed above me. Blood ran from his nose. Doc's frightened face stared. I fell back, feeling my heart pound like a shoeing hammer.

I lay back and let the dream take me . . .

I awoke feeling weak, sick, beaten, thrown away. I stirred, heard cloth tear. I looked down; my left arm, as numb as something carved from marble, was strapped to my side. I felt the pull of tape at my neck, across my jaw. My mouth tasted as though mice had nested in it. I sat up as weak as a diplomatic protest.

I got to my feet, blinked away a light-shot blackness, went across to the door, looked out through the bars. Joel lay in the corridor, asleep on a mat. I called his name.

He sat up, rubbed his eyes, smiled.

"Hey, Jones!" He got to his feet, touched his swollen nose. "Boy, Jones, you sure pack a wallop. You feeling better now?"

"Lots better. How long was I out?"

He looked down at me vaguely.

"How long before we reach Jacksonville?"

"Gosh, Jones, I dunno. Pretty soon, maybe."

I tensed the muscles behind my ears, tuned through the sounds of the ship, picked up the mutter of voices; but they were indistinct, unreadable.

"Listen to me, Joel," I said. "There'll be police waiting for me when we dock. I have to get off the ship before then. How long before we surface?"

"Huh? Hey, hows come cops is after you, Jones?"

"Never mind that, Joel. Try to think, now. Do we surface out at sea, before we get into the harbor?"

Joel frowned." "Gosh, I don't know about that, Jones."

I gripped the bars. "I want you to do something for me, Joel. Go to the crew mess. There's a clock there. Go check it, and come back and tell me what time it is."

Joel nodded. "Okay, Jones. Sure. Hows come . . ."

"I'll tell you later. Hurry!"

I sat on the floor and waited. The deck seemed to surge under me. Either we were maneuvering, or I was having another relapse.

There was a distant booming, the sudden vibration of turbulence transmitted through the hull. The ship heaved, settled. I got to my feet, holding to the wall for support. The question of when we would surface had become academic. We were on the top now.

There were sounds along the corridor: the clump of feet, raised voices. I keened my hearing again, picked up the whine of the main drive turbines, the clatter of deploying deck gear, the creak of the hull—and another sound: the rhythmic growl of a small-boat engine, far away but coming closer.

The minutes crawled on like stepped-on roaches. Joel appeared down the corridor, came up to the cell door. There was a worried look on his face. "The big hand was on . . . lessee . . . Hey, Jones." He looked at me like a lost kid. "I got a funny feeling."

"Sure, Joel. I'm scared, too."

But I got this like tickle-feeling in my head."

I nodded, listening for the sounds from above. The boat was close now. I heard its engines cut back; then it was bumping alongside. The sound of the ship's turbines had faded to a growl.

"Does a customs boat usually come out to meet the ship in the harbor?"

Joel was rubbing his head with one bandaged hand. He looked up at the low ceiling and whimpered.

"What is it, Joel?" Then I felt it: the eerie sense of unreality, the graying of the light in the dim corridor, the sense of doom impending. I grabbed the bars, strained at them. The metal gave, grudgingly, a fraction of an inch; my head pounded from the effort.

"Joel!" I called. My voice had a ragged edge to it. "Who keeps the key to this door?"

His eyes wavered down to meet mine.

"Uh . . . Carboni keeps all the keys."

"Can you get them?"

Joel looked at the ceiling. I heard feet on the deck now—and a soft padding that sent a chill through me like an iron spear.

"I got such a tickle in my head," he moaned. "I'm scared. Jones. Sometimes—" he brushed at his face, groping for words—"when I seen the big dogs it was just like this, Jones. It tickled in my head."

I swallowed hard. "Tell me about the big dogs, Joel."

"I didn't like them dogs, Jones.

They scared me. I run when I seen 'em. I hid."

"When did you see them?"

"In port. Lots of times. I seen 'em in the streets, and inside buildings. I seen 'em looking out of cars." He pointed to the ceiling. "They're up there now. I can tell."

"Listen, Joel. Go to Carboni's office; get the keys; the one you want is a big electrokey. Bring it here, as fast as you can."

"I'm scared, Jones." But he stepped back with a sob, turned and ran. I clung to the bars and waited, listening to the feet that prowled the deck above.

The ship was deathly still now except for the slap of water, the groan of structural members as the hull flexed under the motion of the waves. I heard stealthy feet moving, the rasp of unhuman hands at the deckhouse door.

Joel appeared, half-running. I heard the other footsteps slow, come to a stop. I pictured the thing, standing with one pale hand upraised like a dog on point, its death-mask turning, searching for the source of the sounds.

I motioned to Joel. "Keep it quiet!" I hissed. He came up to the door, holding up the key, a two-inch square of black plastic from which a short metal rod protruded.

"Carboni was setting right there. He never even looked up."

"Get the door open," I whispered urgently. He inserted the key, his tongue in the corner of his mouth. I could hear the thing around the corner, coming back now, hurrying.

The lock snickered; I slid the door aside, stepped into the passage—

The creature bounded into view, brought up short, red eyes staring in a white mask.

Beside me, Joel cried out. I pushed in front of him as the demon sprang, slammed a blow to its head that sent it sprawling past me. It was up instantly, whirling, rearing up on thin too-long legs. I chopped at its neck with the side of my hand, jumped back as its jaws snapped half an inch from my wrist, swung a kick that caught its hip, knocked it against the wall. It yelped and came at me, dragging a hind leg. Behind it, Joel stood, mouth open, flat against the cell door.

I shook my head to clear it. The scene before me wavered; a sound like roaring waters filled my head.

A cannonball struck me, carried me back, down. The needle-filled mouth was a foot from my face, and I hit at it, caught a fist-full of stiff-bristled hide, held the snapping jaws from me. The great pale hands struck at me—poorly aimed, feeble blows. The jaws were the demon's weapon. They ravened inches from my face—and my arm was weakening.

The beast lunged backward, twisted free from my one-handed grip.

I heard Joel's yell, instantly choked off. I came to my knees, saw the flurry of motion as the demon bore him backwards. I got my feet under me, took two steps, threw myself at the black-bristled back, locked my right arm around its throat in a

crushing embrace. I lunged backward, rolled clear of Joel, saw him stumble to his feet, start toward me—

"Stay clear!" I shouted. The demon fought, flailing the deck and walls with wild blows of its four hands. I held on, choking it, feeling bone and cartilage collapse, grinding the shattered throat until the head fell slack.

One leg drummed for a moment against the deck. Then the thing stiffened and was still.

I pushed it aside, tottered to my feet. Joel stared at me, dazed. I listened, heard the slap of running beast-hands.

"Into the cell, Joel!" I pushed him inside, slammed and locked the door.

"You'll be safe there—they won't bother with you," I called. "When you get ashore, go home, stay there. You understand?"

He nodded dumbly. The feet were close now. I turned, ran along the passage, took a cross-corridor, nearly fell over someone sprawled on the deck. A patch of evening sky showed at the top of the companionway. I went up, leaped out on the open deck, almost awash in the still sea. I caught a glimpse of two demons standing with raised heads, as though listening, while beyond them a third crouched over a fallen crewman. Three steps took me to the rail; I leaped over it and dived into the dark water.

Coffeyville, Kansas, Felix had said. Box 1742, the Franklin Street Postal Station.

It was a long drive for an invalid, and what I would find at the end

of it I didn't know—but it was something that Felix had thought important enough to lock in the final strongbox of his subconscious.

I headed north.

XII

A lifetime later, I steered a stolen pick-up to the curb on a snow-frosted side street of sagging, cavernous houses that had been the culminating achievements of rich farmers a century before. Now they looked as bleak and empty as abandoned funeral homes.

I got out of the car, waited until the pavement settled down, then walked back two blocks to a structure in red-brick Gothic bearing the legend:

RAILROAD MENS YMCA Coffeyville, Kans. 1965

Inside, a bored-looking youngish man with thinning hair and a pursed mouth watched me from behind the peeling veneer of a kidney-shaped desk with a faded sign reading WELCOME BROTHER and another, hand-lettered, announcing: SHOWER-FIFTY DOLLARS. I ignored the sea of gray Jello in which his face seemed to float, got a hand on the desk, leaned more or less upright, and heard somebody say, "I'd like a room for tonight."

His mouth was moving. It was hot in the room. I pulled at my collar. The Jello had closed over the clerk now, but a voice with an edge like a meat saw went on:

". . . drunks in the place. You'll have to clear out of here. This —"

"Unfortunately, I'm not drunk," I heard myself pronouncing the words quite distinctly. "I'm a bit off my feed. Touch of an old malaria, possibly."

He was swimming back into focus. My feet seemed to be swinging in a slow arc over my head. I kept both hands on the counter and tried to convince myself that I was standing solidly on the rubber mat that covered the worn place in the rug. I let go long enough to get out my wallet, put money on the counter.

"Well . . ." His hand covered the bill. "You do look a little flushed. Chinese flu, maybe. Maybe you'd better see a doctor. And that's a nasty cut on your face."

"Not used to these new-fangled safety razors," I said. "I'll be all right." The floor was sliding back to where it belonged now. The Jello had thinned out sufficiently to show me the registration book and a finger with a hang-nail indicating the line where I should sign. My stomach felt like a flush tank on the verge of starting its cycle. I grabbed the stylus, scrawled something, waded through knee-deep fog to the lift, rode up, walked past a few miles of wallpaper that was someone's revenge for life's disappointments, found my room, got the door open, took a step toward the bed and passed out cold.

A crew of little red men was working at my arm with saws and hatchets, while another played a blow-torch over my face. I tried to yell to scare them away, managed a weak croak. I got my eyes open, dis-

covered that my face was against a dusty rug with a pattern of faded fruits and flowers; I crawled as far as the wall-mounted lavatory, pulled myself up, got the cold water on, splashed it over my head. I could hear myself moaning, like a dog begging to be let in on a cold night; it didn't seem important. I let myself moan.

There was yellow light outside the dirt-scaled window when I tottered across to the bed; the next time I looked it was deep twilight. Time seemed to be slipping by in large pieces, like an ice-floe breaking up. I got up on the third try, went back and used more cold water, then braced my feet and risked a look in the mirror.

An hour later, with half a dozen assorted fever-depressants, cortical stimulants, metabolic catalyzers, and happy pills in my stomach, I took a hot shower, shaved, put a clean tape on my jaw and went downstairs. The clerk used his worried look at me.

"Maybe you hadn't ought to go out, sir," he suggested.

I said "I'll manage. Where's Franklin Street?"

He gave me directions and I went out into the chill of the late autumn night. I considered calling a cab, but decided against it. My experiences had made me wary of sharing confined spaces with strangers. Using the pick-up was out, too; a hot car might attract just the attention I was most desirous of avoiding at the moment.

I started off at a wobbling gait that steadied as the chemicals in my blood-stream started to work, my

breath freezing into ice-crystals.

The Post Office was a low, yellowish armorplast front with a glass door flanked on one side by a code-punch panel, and on the other by colorful exhortations to Enlist Now in the Peace Brigade and Fight For the Way of Life of Your Choice. I strolled to the panel, punched keys one, seven, four, and two.

Machinery whirred. A box popped into view. Through the quarter-inch armorplast, I could see a thick manilla envelope. The proper code would cause the transparent panel to slide up—but unfortunately Felix hadn't had time to give it to me.

I slammed my fist against the plastic. It made a hell of a loud noise; a faint mark appeared on the panel. I set myself, hit it again as hard as I could. The plastic shattered this time. I poked the sharp fragments in, got my fingers on the envelope, pulled it out through the jagged opening. I could hear a bell starting up far back inside the building. Nearer at hand, a red light above the door blinked furiously. It was unfortunate—but a risk I had had to take. I tucked the envelope away, turned, took two steps—

A loping dog-shape rounded the corner, galloped silently toward me.

I spun; a second was angling across the street at a dead run. Far down the street, two pedestrians sauntered on their ways, oblivious of what was happening; there was no one else in sight. A third demon appeared at an alley mouth across the street, trotted directly toward me, sharp ears erect, skull-face smiling.

There was a dark delivery-van at the curb. I leaped to it, tried the door—locked. I doubled my fist, smashed the glass, got the door open. The nearest demon broke into an awkward gallop. I slid into the seat, twisted the key, accelerated from the curb as the thing leaped. It struck just behind the door, clung for a moment, fell off. I steered for the one in the street ahead, saw it dodge aside at the last instant—just too late. There was a heavy shock; the car veered. I caught it, rounded a corner on two wheels, steering awkwardly with one hand. The gyros screeched their protest as I zig-zagged, missing another dog-thing coming up fast, then straightened out and roared off toward the polyarcs of a major expressway intermix. I caught a glimpse of a road-side sign:

CAUTION!

KANSAS 199 — ¼ MI. SW.
AUTODRIVE 100 YDS.
MANDATORY ABOVE 100 MPH

I braked quickly, passed the blue glare-sign that indicated the pick-up point for the state autodrivesystem, squealed to a stop fifty yards beyond it. I switched the drive lever to AUTO, set the cruise control on MAX LEG., jumped out, reached back in to flick the van into gear. It started off, came quickly up to speed, jerkily corrected course as it crossed the system monitor line.

I watched it as it swung off into the banked curve ahead, accelerating rapidly; then I climbed an ancient wire fence, stumbled across a

snow-scattered ploughed field and into the shelter of the trees.

Excitement, I was discovering, wasn't good for my ailment. I had another attack of nausea that left me pale, trembling, empty as a looted house, and easily strong enough to sort out a stamp collection, using power-assisted tongs. I swayed on all fours, smelling leaf-mould and frozen bark, hearing a distant croak of tree-frogs.

The demons had laid a neat trap for me. They had watched, followed my movements—probably from the time I left the ship—waiting for the proper time to close in. My trick with the van had gained me a few minutes respite—but nothing more. Alerted police would bring the empty vehicle to a halt within a mile or two; then a cordon would close in, beating every thicket, until they found me.

Meanwhile, I had time enough to take a look at whatever it was that I had come five thousand miles to collect—the thing Felix had guarded with the last fragment of his will. I took the envelope from the inner pocket, tore off one end. A two-inch-square wafer of translucent polyon slipped into my hand. In the faint starlight, I could see a pattern of fine wires and vari-colored beads imbedded in the material. I turned it over, smelled it, shook it, held it to my ear.

"Identify yourself," a tiny voice said.

I jumped, held the thing on my palm to stare at it, then cautiously put it to my ear again.

"You now have sixty seconds in which to identify yourself," the voice said. "Fifty-eight seconds and counting . . ."

I held the rectangle before my mouth.

"Bravais," I said. "John Bravais, CBI SA-0654 . . ." I listened again:

". . . fifty-two; fifty-one . . . fifty . . ."

I talked to it some more, listened again:

". . . forty-four; forty-three; forty-two . . ."

Talking to it wasn't getting me anywhere. How the hell did you identify yourself to a piece of plastic the size of a book of matches? Fingerprints? A membership card in the National Geographic Society?

I pulled out my CBI card, held it to the plastic, then listened again:

". . . thirty-one; thirty- . . ."

There was a pause. "*In the absence of proper identification within thirty seconds, this plaque will detonate. Unauthorized personnel are warned to withdraw to fifty yards. Twenty seconds and counting. Nineteen; eighteen . . .*"

I had my arm back, ready to throw — but I checked the motion. The blast would attract everything within a mile, from flying saucer watchers to red-eyed beast-shapes that loped on hands like a man — and I would have lost my one ace in a game where the stakes were more than life and death. I hesitated, looked at the ticking bomb in my hand. "Thinking caps, children," I whispered aloud. "Thinking caps, thinking caps . . ."

Talking to it was no good; ID

cards with built-in molecular patterns for special scanners meant nothing to it. It had to be something he hadn't had time to tell me.

A signal had to be transmitted. I had nothing — except an array of gimmicks built into my teeth by Felix . . .

There was a spy-eye detector which would set up a sharp twinge in my left upper canine under any radiation on the spy band; the right lower incisor housed a CBI emergency band receiver; in my right lower third molar, there was miniature radar pulser —

A transmitter. Just possibly — if there was still time. I jammed the plaque to my ear:

". . . ten seconds and counting. Nine —"

With my tongue, I pushed aside the protective cap on the tooth, bit down; there was a sour taste of galvanic action as the contacts closed, a tingle as an echo bounced back from metal somewhere out across the night. I pulsed again; if that hadn't done it, nothing would.

"You are recognized," the voice said crisply. "You are now seven hundred and thirty-two yards north-north-east of the station . . ."

I got to my feet, took a bearing on the North Star, and set off through the trees.

Nearly an hour later I came out of the woods onto an unsurfaced track, went through a ditch choked with stiff, waist-high weeds, scraped myself getting over a rotting wire fence. There were headlights on the distant highway now, and other



lights coming out from Coffeyville. I put the wafer to my ear.

" . . . *two hundred twenty-two yards, bearing two-oh-seven,*" the calm voice said. I picked my way past the rusted hulk of a tractor abandoned under the crabbed branches of a dead apple tree, came back into the open, broke into a run across a grassed stretch that had probably been a pasture forty years earlier. Faint light fell across the ground ahead; my shadow bobbed in front of me, swung aside and disappeared. Cars were closing in on the wood lot behind me.

" . . . *hundred and fifty-four yards, bearing two one three . . .*"

I corrected course to the right, plunged down a slight slope, crashed through a dense growth of brush, went knee-deep into half-frozen muck, sending skim-ice tinkling. Dry stalks broke under my hand as I clawed my way up an embankment. I came to a gasping halt, checked my position: *eighteen yards, bearing two seven five . . .* I left the road, ran past a fallen barn.

And there was nothing; not so much as a marker stone or a dry bush. Standing alone in the frozen field, shivering with the bitter cold, I could hear approaching feet — more than one set of them. I turned to face them, taking deep breaths to charge my air banks, tried to blink the fog from my failing vision. It would be over in another minute. I would try to kill at least one more of them before those bony snouts found my throat.

I started to toss the useless plague aside, on impulse put it to my ear.

"— rectly above the entry; please re-identify . . . You are now directly above the entry; please re-identify . . . You are now —"

I groped with my tongue, bit down on the tooth. Nothing happened. Through the darkness, I saw a movement among the scattered trees. Near at hand, there was a soft hum, a grating sound. Directly before me, dirt stirred; a polished cylinder a yard across, dirt-topped, emerged from the earth, rose swiftly to a height of six feet. With a *click!* a panel slid back, exposing an unlighted and featureless interior. I didn't linger; I stepped inside, felt the shaft start down, and stumbled out into warmth and silence.

XIII

I was in a small, softly-lit room with a polished floor, warm to the touch, and walls which were a jumble of ancient, varnished oak cabinet-work, gray-painted equipment housings, instrument panels, indicator lights, and controls resembling those of a Tri-D starship. Exposed wiring and conduit crisscrossed the panels. A vast clock with fanciful Roman numerals and elaborate hands said ten minutes past ten.

It was like nothing I had ever seen — except for a remote resemblance to Felix's underground laboratory in Tamboula. I felt an urge to hysterical laughter as I thought of the things up above, prowling the ground now, converging on the spot from which I had miraculously disappeared. How long

would it be before they started to dig? The urge to laugh died.

I closed my eyes, gathered my forces, such as they were, and keen-ed my hearing . . .

Rustling sounds in the earth all about me; the slow grind of the earthworm, the frantic scabble, pause, scabble of the burrowing mole, the soft, tentative creak of the questing root . . .

I tuned, reaching out . . .

Wind moaned in the trees. Soft footfalls thump, thumped, crossing the field above me. There was the growl of a turbine, coming closer, the grate of tires in soft earth. A door slammed, feet clumped.

"It did not come this way," a flat voice said.

Something gibbered — a sound that turned my spine to ice.

"It is sick and weak," the first voice said. *"It is only a man. It did not come this way. It is not here."*

More of the breathy gobbling; I could almost see the skull-face, the grinning mouth, the rag-tongue moving as it commanded the man-shaped slave standing before it.

"It is not here," the humanoid said. *"I will return to my post in the village."*

Now the gabble was angry, insistent. It commanded.

"It is not logical," the toneless voice said. *"It went another way. The other units will find it."*

Two beast-things gibbered.

"You let it escape you at the village," a lifeless voice replied. *"That was not in accordance with logic."*

The argument went on, twenty feet above my hidden sanctuary.

" . . . a factor which we cannot compute," a dead voice stated. *"To remain here is unintelligent."* Footsteps tramped away. The car door clattered open, slammed. A turbine growled into life; tires crunched the hard earth, going away.

Soft feet paced above me. Two of the creatures, possibly three, crossed and re-crossed the area. I could hear them as they conferred, a conversation of goblins. Then two stalked away, while the third settled down heavily to wait.

T took out my talking plastic rectangle and put it to my ear.

" . . . now in Survival Station Twelve," the precise voice was saying. *"Place this token in the illuminated slot on the station monitor panel."* There was a pause. *"You are now in Survival Station Twelve . . ."*

Across the room, there was a recessed scrollwork console dimly lit by a yellow glare strip. I wavered across to it, found the lighted slot, pressed the wafer into it, then leaned against a chair, waiting. Things clicked and hummed; a white light snapped on, giving the room a cheery, clinical look, like a preparatory buzz, matching the humming in my head; then:

"This is your Station Monitor," a deep voice said in near-monotone. *"The voice you hear is a speech-construct, capable of verbalizing computer findings. The unit is also capable of receiving programming instructions verbally. Please speak distinctly and unambiguously. Do not employ slang or unusual con-*

structions. Avoid words having multiple denotations."

The room seemed to fade and brighten, swaying like a cable-car in a high wind. I was beginning to learn the signs; I would black out in a few seconds. I looked around for a soft place to fall, while the voice droned on. Abruptly, it broke off. Then:

"Emergency override!" it said sharply. "Sensing instruments indicate you require immediate medical attention . . ." There was a sound behind me; I turned. As in a dream, I saw a white-sheeted cot deploy from a wall recess, roll across the room hunting a little, then come straight on and stop beside me.

"Place yourself on the cot, with your head at the equipment end." The voice echoed from far away. I made a vast effort, pushed myself clear of the chair, fell across the bed. I was struggling to get myself on it, when I felt a touch, twisted to see padded, jointed arms grasp me and gently but firmly hoist me up and lay me out, face-down. The sheet was smooth and cool under my face.

"You will undergo emergency diagnosis and treatment," the voice said. "An anesthetic will be administered if required. Do not be alarmed."

I caught just one whiff of neopolyform. Then I was relaxing, letting it all go, sliding down a long, smooth slope into a warm, dark sea.

I came out of it with a sensation that took me a moment or two to analyze — a cold-water, gray-skies,

no-nonsense sort of feeling. For the first time in days — how many I didn't know — the fine feverish threads of delirium were lacking in the ragged fabric of my thoughts. I took a breath, waited for the familiar throb of pain between my temples, the first swell of the seasickness in my stomach; nothing happened. I got my eyes open and glanced over at my left arm; it was strapped to a board, swathed in bandages to the wrist, bristling with metal clips and festooned with tubing.

In sudden panic, I moved the fingers of the hand projecting from the bandages. They twitched, flexed awkwardly. With an effort, I reached across with my right hand, touched the smooth skin of the knuckles of the other. Under my fingers, the texture was cool, inhumanly glossy; the cold gloss of polyon. I raked at the bandages, tore them back —

An inch below the wrist, the pseudo-skin ended. A pair of gleaming metal rods replaced the familiar curve of my forearm.

A sort of animal whimper came from my throat. I clenched my lost fist — and the artificial hand complied. I fell back, feeling a numbness spread from the dead hand all through me. I was truncated, spoiled, less-than-whole. I made an effort to sit up, to tear free from the restraining straps, wild ideas of revenge boiling up inside me —

I was as weak as a drowned kitten. I lay, breathing hoarsely, getting used to the idea . . .

The Station Monitor's level voice broke into the silence:

“Emergency override now concluded. Resuming normal briefing procedure.” There was a pause; then the voice went on in its tone of imperturbable calm:

“Indicate whether full status briefing is required; if other, state details of requirement.”

“How long have I been unconscious?” I croaked. My voice was weak, but understandable.

“Question requires a value assessment of non-objective factors; authorization requested.”

“Never mind. How long have I been here?”

“Eighteen hours, twenty-two minutes, six seconds, mark. Eight hours, two—”

“Close enough,” I cut in. **“What’s been happening?”**

“On the basis of the initial encephalogrammatic pattern, a preliminary diagnosis of massive anaphylactic shock coupled with acute stage four metabolic —”

“Cancel. I don’t need the gruesomer details. You’ve hacked off my arm, replaced it with a hook, cleared out the infection, and gotten the fever down. I guess I’m grateful. But what are the dog-things doing up above?”

There was a long silence, with just the hum of an out-of-kilter carrier. Then: **“Question implies assumption at variance with previously acquired two-valued data.”**

“Can’t you give me a simple answer?” I barked weakly. **“Have they started to dig?”**

“Question implies acceptance at objective physical level of existence and activities of phenomenon classi-

fied as subjective. Closed area. Question cannot be answered.”

“Wait a minute — you’re telling me that the four-handed monsters and the fake humans that work with them are imaginary?”

“To avoid delays in responses, do not employ slang or unusual constructions. All data impinging on subject area both directly and indirectly, including instrument-acquired statistical material, photographic and transmitted images, audio direct pick-up, amplification, and replay, and other, have been, A, systematically rejected by Operators as incorrect, illusory, or non-objective; B, produced negative hallucinatory reactions resulting in inability of Operators to perceive read-outs; or, C, been followed by mental breakdown, unconsciousness or death of Operators.”

“In other words, whenever you’ve reported anything on the demons the listeners either didn’t believe you, couldn’t see or hear your report, or went insane or died.”

“Affirmative.”

“Has . . . ah . . . anything started to dig? Are there any evidences of excavation work up above?”

“Negative.”

“Can the presence of this station be detected using a mass-discontinuity-type detector?”

“Negative; the station is probe-neutral.”

I let out a long breath. **“What is this place?”** I asked. **“Who built it? And when?”**

“Station twelve was completed in 1926. It has been periodically added

to since that time. It is one of a complex of fifty survival stations prepared by the Ultimax Group."

"What's the Ultimax Group?"

"An elite inner circle organization, international in scope, privately financed, comprising one hundred and fourteen individuals selected on the basis of superior intellectual endowment, advanced specialist training, emotional stability and other factors."

"For what purpose?"

"To monitor trends in the Basic Survival Factors, and to take such steps as may be required to maintain favorable societal survival ratio."

"I never heard of them. How long have they been operating?"

"Two hundred and seventy-one years."

"My God! Who started it?"

"The original Committee included Benjamin Franklin, George Loffitt, Danilo Moncredi and Cyril Ste. Claire."

"And Felix Severance was a member?"

"Affirmative."

"And they don't know about — the non-objective things up above?"

"Question indeterminate, as it requires an assumption at variance with —"

"Okay — cancel. You said there are other stations. Can I get in touch with them?"

"State the number of the station with which you desire to communicate."

"What's the nearest one to Jacksonville?"

"Station nineteen, Talisman, Flor-

ida. Contact now open, on Number three screen."

One of the previously blank panels opposite me glowed into life, showed me a view of a room similar in many particulars to Station twelve, except that its basic decor was a trifle more modern — the stainless steel of the early Atomic Era.

"Anybody home?" I called.

There was no reply. I tried the other stations successively. None answered.

"That's that," I said. "Tell me more about this Ultimax Group. What's it been doing these past couple of hundred years?"

"It contributed materially to the success of the American War of Independence, the defeat of the Napoleonic Empire, the consolidation of the Italian and German nations, the emergence of Nippon, the defeat of the Central Powers in the First Engagement of the European War, and of the Fascist Powers in the Second Engagement, and the establishment of the State of Israel. It supported the Space effort . . ."

I was beginning to feel a little ragged now; the first fine glow was fading. I listened to the voice for another half-hour, while it told me all about the little-known facts of history; then I dismissed it and took another nap.

XIV

I ate, slept and waited. After fourteen hours, the straps holding my arm released themselves; after that, I practiced tottering up and down my prison, testing my new

arm, and now and then tuning in on what went on overhead. For the most part, there was silence, broken only by the sounds of nature and the slap and thump of pacing feet. I heard a few gobbled conversations, and once an exchange between a humanoid and a demon:

"It has means of escaping pursuit," the flat voice was saying as I picked it up. *"This is the same one that eluded our units at location totter-pohl."*

Angry sounds from a demon . . .

"That is not my area of surveillance," the first voice said coldly. *"My work is among the men."*

Another alien tongue-lashing.

"All reports are negative; the instruments indicate nothing —"

An excited interruption.

"When the star has set, then. I must call in more units . . ." The voice faded, going away.

"Monitor, it's time for me to start making plans. They're getting restless up above. I'm going to need a few things: clothes, money, weapons, transportation. Can you help me?"

"State your requirements in detail."

"I need an inconspicuous civilian-type suit, preferably heated. I'll also need underwear, boots and a good hand-gun; one of those Borgia Specials Felix gave me would do nicely. About ten thousand cees in cash — some small bills, the rest in hundreds. I want a useful ID — and a good map. I don't suppose you could get me an OE suit and a lift belt, but a radar-negative heli would be very useful. A high-speed, armored job."

Within half an hour the delivery

bin had disgorged a complete wardrobe, including a warm, sturdy, and conservatively cut suit with a special underarm pocket in which the needler nested snugly. My wallet bulged with nicely aged bills. I had a late-model compass-map strapped to my wrist, a card identifying me as a Treasury man, and a special key tucked in an inner pocket that would open the door to a concealed Ultimax motor depot near Independence, less than thirty miles away.

At regular intervals, the Station Monitor gave instructions for treatment, keeping tabs on my condition by means of an array of remote-sensing instruments buried in the walls. My strength was returning slowly. The arm was a marvel of bio-prosthetics. The sight of the stark, functional chromalloy radius and ulna gave me a strange, unpleasant sensation every time I saw it, but I was learning to use it; as the nerve-connections healed, I was even developing tactile sensitivity in the fingertips.

When the chronometer on the wall showed that I had been in the underground station for forty-nine hours that seemed like weeks I made another routine enquiry on conditions up above.

"How about it, Monitor?" I called. "Any signs of excavation work going on up there?"

There was a long pause — as there was every time I asked questions around the edges of the Forbidden Topic.

"Negative," the voice said at last.

"Can you get a message out to somebody for me?"

"Affirmative, assuming —"

"Skip the assumptions. He's somewhere in Jacksonville, Florida — I hope — assuming the demons didn't kill him just to keep in practice. His name's Joel — last name unknown, even to him. Address unknown. As of a week ago, he was crewman aboard a sub-tanker called the *Excalibur*, out of New Hartford. Find him, and tell him to meet me at the main branch of the YMNA in . . . where's the nearest diplomatic post?"

"The British Consulate at Chicago."

"All right; I want Joel to meet me in the lobby of the main Y in Chicago, as soon as he can get there. Do you think you can reach him with what I've given you?"

"Indeterminate. Telephone connections can be made with —"

There was a loud, dull-toned thump: that shook the station. The Monitor's voice wavered and went on: "— all points on —" Another thud.

I was on my feet, watching microscopic dust particles shaken out of crevices by the impact, settling on the floor. There was another blow, more severe than the others. "What the Hell was that?" I asked — yelled — but it was rhetorical; I knew the answer. The demons were at my door.

"All right, talk fast, Monitor," I barked. I pulled on my clothes as I talked, checked the gun. "Is there any other route out of here?"

"The secondary exit route leads from the point now indicated by the

amber light," the voice said imperceptibly. Across the room, I saw an indicator blink on, off, on. "However," the Monitor went on, "departure from the Station at this time is not advised. You have not yet recovered full normal function. Optimum recovery rate will be obtained by continued bed rest, controlled diet, proper medication, and minimal exertion —" I interrupted it.

"You're developing a nagging tone," I told it. "Get that door open. Monitor, I assume you're mined for destruction?" I asked getting more anxious.

"Affirmative."

"Wait until the last minute — until there's a nice crowd of curious zombies and other non-existent phenomena around; then blow. Understand?"

"Affirmative," the voice said calmly.

I went to the narrow exit panel, paused and looked around at the chamber.

"So long," I called.

There was no answer. I stepped through into the narrow corridor that led endlessly down, emerged into icy-cold, dusty-smelling darkness. Helis were parked there. I selected one, activated its circuit, saw a dome overhead slide open as it began to move. An arctic wind slashed at me.

I had gone perhaps a mile, when a sudden glare erupted into the sky from over the brow of the low ridge.

A column of red-lit smoke boiled upward.

Just after sunrise, a small all-day-for-a-gee parking raft anchored two miles off Chicago accepted my heli with a reassuring sneer of indifference. I took the ski-way ashore, rode a walkaway half a mile to the block-square cube of unwashed glass which housed the five-thousand-bed dormitory of the Young Men's Nondenominational Association. I left word for Joel, asked for and received one of the six-by-eight-foot private cubicles, dropped a half-gee in the slot for a breakfast-table edition pictonews, and settled down to wait, with no more than a modest hope that my last instruction to the Station monitor would bear fruit in the form of the unfortunate Joel, a good-natured giant with the intelligence of an alert five year old, but with the invaluable ability to detect the presence of prowling demons at a distance of a full half-mile.

Hours slipped by while I slept — a restless sleep, from which I awoke with a start, again and again, hearing the creak of the floor, the rattle of a latch along the corridor. I wasn't hungry; the thought of food made my stomach knot. There was a taste in my mouth like old gym shoes, and a full set of nausea-and-headache symptoms hovered in the wings, ready to come on at the first hint of encouragement. I shaved once, staring at a grim, hollow-cheeked face in the mirror — a face that belonged to a stranger who had done a long stretch in a tough prison on a false charge. The plastic

surgery scars were pale lines now, but the shortened nose, lowered hair-line, blue eyes and pale crew-cut still looked as unnatural to me as a halloween falseface.

I tried to estimate how long it might be before Joel arrived — if he arrived. It had been five hours since I had given the order to the Monitor. A message would have gone out to Station Nine, the Monitor there would have connections with a telefax or visiscreen switchboard. The order would have gone to a leg-man — perhaps an ordinary messenger service, or a private detective agency. Someone would have followed the slim leads, checked out the habitual hangouts where Joel spent his time between voyages. It was safe to assume that he was a creature of fixed habit. Once the message — with funds, I hoped — was delivered, Joel would be steered to a tube or jet station. Allow two hours for the passage, another hour for him to discover the cross-town kwik-stop . . .

The arithmetic always gave the same answer: he should have been here an hour or two after I arrived. I called the desk again. Nothing.

I got off the bed, groaning; aches were beginning to creep through the armor of drugs that were keeping me going. It was time to move — Joel or no Joel. I had a plan — not much of one, but the best I could do, alone.

I dressed, went down to the vast, echoing lobby — as cheery as a gas chamber. A few hundred derelicts lounged in rump-sprung chairs parked on patches of dusty rug like is-

lands in a sea of plastic flooring the color of dried mud. I crossed to the information desk, opened my mouth — and saw Joel stretched out in a chair like a battered boxer between rounds, eyes shut, mouth open, an electric blue scarf knotted around his thick neck like a hangman's noose.

I felt my face cracking into a wide grin. I went over to him, shook him gently, then a little harder. His eyes opened. He looked at me blankly for a moment — his eyes like the windows of an empty house; then he smiled, an expression as innocent as an infant offering sticky candy.

"Hi, Jones," he said, sitting up. "Boy, you should've seen the train I rode in! It was all fancy, and there was this nice lady . . ." He told me all about it while we gripped hands, grinning. Suddenly, now, it was all right. Luck was still with me. The demons had tried — tried hard — but I was here, still alive, iron hand and all — and I wasn't alone. I felt a hint of spring return to my muscles, the first twings of hunger in days.

"Joel, there's a job I have to do," I said. "I want you to help me with it." He nodded, incurious but eager to please. Talking, we crossed the vast floor and went out into the winter street.

The British Consulate, perched on piles on the shore of Lake Michigan, was a weather-stained cube of stone filigree done in the sterilized Hindu style that had been a popular cliché back in the nineties. There were lights beyond the grill-

work in the wide entry, and on the upper floors. We walked past once, then turned, came back, went up the wide, shallow steps, past a steaming fountain of recirculated heated water glimmering in a purple spotlight, rattled the tall grill. A Royal Marine three-striper in traditional dress blues got up from a desk, came across the wide marble floor to the gate, fingering the hilt of a ceremonial sabre.

"The Consulate opens at ten I. M." he said, looking me over through the grille.

"My name's Jones," I said. "Treason. I've got to see the Duty Officer — now. It can't wait until morning."

"Let's see a little identification, sir," the Marine said.

I showed him the blue Class One I. D. He nodded, handed the I. D. back through the grill, got out a key, opened up.

"That's Mr. Phipps. I'll ring him. You'll 'ave to wait 'ere."

I nodded, stood where I could see the approach to the building while the Sergeant went to a desk, dialed, talked briefly. A second Marine came along the corridor, took up a position opposite me. He was a solidly built red-head, not over eighteen. He looked at me with a face as expressionless as a court-house clock.

"E's coming down," the Sergeant said.

There was sound of feet coming leisurely down the winding stair-case on my left; a sad-looking tweed-suited man with thinning gray hair and pale blue eyes in wrinkled pock-



ets came into view, slowed when he saw me. He glanced at the Marine.

"What's this all about, Sergeant?" he said in a tired voice, like someone who has put up with a lot lately and expects more of the same.

"Somebody to see you," the Sergeant said. "Sir," he added. The newcomer looked at me suspiciously.

"I have some important information to report, Mr. Phipps," I said.

"Just who are you, might I inquire?" Phipps asked. His expression indicated that whatever I said, he wouldn't be pleased.

"U. S. Treasury." I showed him the I. D.

He nodded, looked past me out through the heavy grillwork. "You may as well come along to the office."

I followed him to the second floor, along a wide, still, corridor of dark offices, into a lighted room with sexless furnishings in the international official medium-plush style. Joel stood beside me, gaping at a picture of Queen Anne on the wall.

"I won't bore you with details, Mr. Phipps," I said. "I've observed some very odd goings-on. It sounds curious, I know, but . . . well, it involves a rather unusual dog." I watched his expression closely. He was eyeing me with a bored expression that suggested that this was about what he'd expect from cranks who rattled the grill at a late hour.

He patted back a yawn.

"Just how are British interests involved, Mr. . . . ah . . . Jones?"

"This dog was intelligent," I bored on.

"Well!" His eyebrows went up. "I'm sure I don't . . ." His eyes went to the door. Footsteps were coming along the hall. I turned. A husky-looking, black-haired man with deep-set dark eyes came into the room, looked at me, ignoring Phipps. I saw the Marine in the hall behind him. I didn't need a second glance to know I had found what I was looking for. I felt my pulse start to beat a little faster.

"What is it you want here?" he snapped, not bothering with preliminaries.

"Ah, Mr. Clomesby-House, Mr. Jones, of the American Treasury Department," Phipps said, sitting up in his chair. He ducked his head, adjusting a look of alert interest on his dried-out features. I surmised that Clomesby-House was his boss.

"Mr. Jones was just lodging a complaint regarding a . . . um . . . dog," Phipps started

Clomesby-House narrowed his eyes at me. "What dog is this?" he rapped out.

"Well," I laughed diffidently. "It sounds pretty silly, here in a nice clean office — but some pretty odd things have been happening to me lately. They all seem to center around the dogs . . ."

He waited.

"It's a secret spy network — I'm sure of it," I went on. "I have plenty of evidence. Now, I don't want you to just take my word for it. I have a friend who's been helping me —"

His dark eyes went to Joel. "This man knows of this, too?"

"Oh, he's not the one I meant. He just gave me a lift over. These dogs —"

"You have seen them — often?"

"Well, every now and again."

"And why did you come here — to the British Consulate?"

"I'm coming to that part. You see — well, actually, it's a little hard to explain."

I looked anxious — like a nut who wants to reveal the location of a flying saucer, but is a little shy about butterfly nets. "If you could possibly spare the time — I'd like you to meet my friend. It's not far . . ."

He was still squinting at me. His fingers squeaked as he tensed them against the desk-top. I remembered Julius exhibiting the same mannerism — a nervous habit of the not-men when they had a decision to make. I could almost hear him thinking: it would be simplicity itself for him to summon the strait-jacket crew, let them listen to my remarks about intelligent dogs, and let nature take its course. But on the other hand, what I had to say just might alert someone, cause unwelcome inquiries, invite troublesome poking about . . . He gave a Prussian nod. "As you wish. Come along."

XVI

Forty-five minutes later, with my nose against the glass, I stared down at a vast expanse of unbroken blackness spread out below. It was the Yerkes National Forest.

"This is the place," I said. "Set her down right here."

Clomesby-House shot me a look which would have curdled spring water. "Here?" he growled. I nodded brightly; it was as good a place as any for what I had in mind. He hissed, angled the heli sharply downward. I could sense that he was beginning to regret his excessive caution in whisking me away to a lonely place where he could deal with me and my imaginary accomplice privately. He had wasted time and fuel on a pair of soft, feeble humans.

Clomesby-House was either an excellent pilot or a fool; he whipped the heli in under the spreading branches of a stand of hundred-foot hybrid spruce, grounded it without a jar, slammed a door open, letting in a wintry blast, and climbed out. The landing lights burned blue-white pools on the patchy snow, flickering as the rotor blades spun to a stop.

"Stay behind me, Joel," I said quickly. "No matter what happens, don't interfere. Just keep alert for the dog-things; you understand?"

He gave me a startled look. "Are they gonna come here, Jones . . .?"

"I hope not . . ." I jumped out, stood facing Clomesby-House. Behind me, Joel hugged himself, staring around at the great trees.

"Very well," the not-man said, his black eyes probing me like cold pokers. "Where is the other man?" He stood in a curious slack position, like a mannikin that hasn't been positioned by the window dresser. Out here, with just two soon-to-be-dead humans watching, it wasn't necessary to bother with the all troublesome details of looking human.

I went close to him, stared into his all-too-perfect face.

"Never mind all that," I said. "It was just a come-on. It's you I want to talk to. Where did you come from? What do you want on Earth?"

All the expression went out of his face then. He stood for a moment, as though considering a suggestion

...
I know the signs; he was communing with another inhuman brain, somewhere not too distant. I stepped to him quickly, hit him in the pit of the stomach with all my strength. He bounced back like a tackle dummy hit by a swinging boom, crashed against a tree-trunk, rebounded — still on his feet. In the instant of contact, I had felt something break inside him — but it wasn't slowing him down. He launched himself at me, hands outstretched, the arrogance of the invulnerable alien, still not understanding that this time the man before him was something more than mere victim. I met him with a straight right smash to the head that spun him, knocked him to the ground. He scrambled, sending great gouts of frozen mud and snow flying, came to his feet.

The thing shaped like a man came toward me, expressionless, one arm hanging, the other raised, hand flattened for an axeblow. I raised an arm, took an impact like a trip-hammer on my steel arm, countered with a smashing chest-punch. It was a waste of effort; the thing's thoracic area was armored like a dinosaur's skull. It brought its arm around in a swipe

that caught me glancingly across the shoulder, sent me reeling . . .

Joel was between us, huge fists ready; he landed a smashing left that would have felled an ox, followed with a right that struck the cold, smooth face like a cannonball; the creature seemed not to notice. It struck out, and Joel went skidding. Then the thing was past him, charging for me. Joel's diversion had given me the necessary moment to set myself. I caught the descending arm in a two-handed grip, hauled it around, broke it across my chest, hurled the alien from me, then, as it tripped and fell, aimed a kick that caught it just on the kneecap. It went down then, and I stood over it, breathing hard, as it threshed helplessly, silently, trying to rise on its broken leg.

"Don't struggle," I got out between breaths. "That wouldn't be logical, would it? Now it's time for you to tell me a few things: where did you come from? What world?"

It lay still then, a broken toy, no longer needed. "You will die soon," it said flatly.

"Maybe; meanwhile just call me curious. Where's your headquarters? Who runs things, you or the dogs? What do you do with the men you steal — or their brains?"

"Information is of no use to the soon-dead," the flat voice stated indifferently.

Behind me, Joel moaned, a thin, high wail of animal torment. I whirled to him. He lay, oddly crumpled, at the base of a giant

tree, his face white, shocked. Blood ran from his mouth. I went to him, knelt. The front of his shirt was a sodden mass of bloody fabric. The thing's blow had smashed his chest as effectively as a falling safe.

"Joel, hold on . . . I'll get you to a doctor!" I eased my arms under him, started to life.

He shrieked and twisted once.

"It tickles in my head," he whimpered. "I don't like it when it tickles in my head." His eyes fell on me. "I can't get up, Jones," he said. "Please help me get up . . ."

"Don't try to move, Joel. You're hurt inside."

"I don't want the dogs to come, Jones. I'm afraid."

"The dogs?" I felt my scalp tighten. "Here? Are you sure?" I twisted, staring into the deep forest all around, saw nothing. "Come on, Joel: I'm going to lift you into the heli . . ." I put a hand under his back, half-lifted him. He screamed hoarsely. I lowered him.

"It hurts too bad, Jones," he gasped out. "I'm sorry . . ."

"Where are the dogs, Joel? How long before they'll be here?"

"They're close, Jones . . ."

I whirled on the broken man-thing. "How far away are they?" I snapped. "You called them; how long before they'll be here?"

It looked at me with the one eye that remained in its battered head, said nothing. I kicked it in the side, hard enough to hurt my foot, sent the limp body skidding two yards.

"Talk, damn you!" It merely looked at me, as impersonally as a morgue attendant taking inventory.

Its gaze went past me; it seemed to be listening . . .

Then I felt it — the greasy, gray feeling of unreality that meant the demons were closing on the attack. I keened my hearing . . .

I heard the lope of demonic hands, galloping across frozen ground, brushing against brittle, leafless twigs, coming closer.

"You . . . gotta . . . hurry . . . up . . ." Joel's voice croaked. "G-by, Jones You was . . . a good friend. I guess you was . . . the only friend . . . I ever had . . ."

I looked at him. He was dying; I knew that nothing I could do would save him. And a few feet away, the heli waited, fuelled, ready to go. In three steps I could be in it, lifting off to leave the demon-horde clashing their jaws in frustrated fury. I would be free then to contact the Ultimax Group, carry on the fight . . .

I took a step toward the heli, and my eyes fell on Joel's face — the face of a child, afraid, but trying not to show it. And I remembered Felix, whom I had left alone, to die beneath a tidal wave of horror . . .

"Take it easy, Joel," I said. My voice was hoarse. "I'm not leaving. I'm staying with you."

He opened his mouth to say something, but no sound came out.

There was a crash of underbrush and I whirled. A dark dog-shape bounded from the shadow of a giant tree, skidded to a halt, then charged into the circle of light. I set myself, waited — and as it leaped.

threw my weight into a straight-arm blow that met the scraped-bone face in mid-air, drove it back in pulped ruin into the shattered skull. The thing hurtled past me, struck, threshing in its death-fit. Two more of the beast-things leaped into view, sprang at me side by side. I jumped to meet them, caught one by the neck, crushed bone and hide together, hurled it aside, turned to drive a kick into the chest of the second.

There were more of them around me now; I spun, kicked at one, struck another down with my chromalloy fist, shook a third from my right arm, fended off another . . . It was a nightmare battle against leaping creatures almost impalpable to my PAPA reinforced blows; they came at me like bounding ghost-shapes, red-eyed and gape-jawed, and I struck, and struck . . .

A white hot bear-trap closed on my leg, I tried to shake it off. It clung, dragging at me. Then I was down, and the weight on me was like heaped mattresses set with needles of fire; I thought of a man drowning in a sea of piranha, razor teeth stripping the flesh from the living bone.

I felt the tearing of flesh. As in a dream, I heard the gobble of demon voices, the slap of beast hands. And then the blackness that I knew was death closed over me.

XVII

Somewhere, I dream in a sunless emptiness. The years arch over the long avenue of time.

Into the static Universe, change comes. I sense movement, the slide and turn of intricate components, and the tentative questing of sensors, like raw nerves hesitantly exposed. Light, form, color, impinge on delicate instruments. Space takes on dimension, texture.

All around me a broad plain of shattered rock and black shadows stretches away to a line of fire at the edge of the world, under the glare of a sun that rages purple-white against bottomless silver-black.

A shape moves, small with distance — and beyond it, others. I am moving, too, driving forward effortlessly over the rough ground, throwing up dust in heavy clouds that drop back with a curious quickness. Rock-chips fly, twinkling as they fall. I sense vibrations; the thunder of my passage, the whine and growl of meshing metal, the oscillation of electrons.

Abruptly, from beyond the jagged horizon, an object comes, a glittering torpedo-shape tipped with blue fire, flashing with a swiftness that swells it in a moment to giant size. I feel the closing of rays within me; circuits come alive. My back arches; I left my arms and thrust —

Fire lances from my fingertips, a silent stuttering of brilliance across the spangled sky. I pivot, trailing the shattered projectile as it gouts incandescence, breaks apart, falls in fragments beyond a distant stony ridge. A growl of thunder rolls, dies. I rake my eyes across the desolate spread of fragmented shale around me, mark a flicker of movement among up-tilted rock-slabs, point and

fire in one smooth corordinated motion . . .

And still I plunge on, charging to a blind attack against an unknown enemy.

I grina down a long slope, dozing aside rock-chunks, jolting across crevasses. A vast shape swings from an inky shadow to my left, pivots heavily, trailing a shattered tread. A dreadnought of the enemy, damaged, left behind in the retreat, but with her offensive power intact. I see the immense disrupted grid swing to bear on me, glow to red heat —

I lock full emergency power to my prime batteries, open my mouth, and bellow — and bellow again . . .

Then I am racng off-side, driving for the crest of a ridge, over it, down the far slope as molten rock bubbles behind me. The shock wave strikes and I am lifted, flung down-slope. I catch myself, claw for purchase; the limping monster appears on the ridge and I hurl my thunder at it and see its exposed grid shatter, explode . . .

I turn back slowly to rejoin my column. The battle continues.

“UNIT EIGHTY-FOUR! DAMAGE REPORT!”

The words flash into my mind like the silent blow of a bright axe, not spoken in English, but spat in an abbreviated Command Code of harsh inflected syllables. I hear myself acknowledge the order in kind, as an instant compulsive response my damage sensors race through a fifty-thousand-item checklist like rats scurrying among filled shelves.

“Negative,” I hear myself report. “All systems functional.”

But deep inside me a dam strains, cracks, bursts. A tendril of released thought, startled awake by the command, seems to grope, struggling outward. Word-images, sharp-chiseled as diamonds, thrust among the bodiless conceptualizations of rote conditioning. I reach back, back—to the blinding light of a strange awakening, past confusion and dawning awareness . . . back . . . into a bland, ever-dwindling record of stimulus, pain, stimulus, pleasure; a wordless voice that speaks, instructs, impresses, punishes, rewards —printing on my receptive mind the skein of conditioned reflex, the teachings that convert the blanked protoplasm of the shocked brain into the trained battle-computer of a dreadnought of the line . . .

And in the forefront of my mind, I am remembering, somewhere long ago, a body—of flesh and blood, soft, feeting, complex, infinitely responsive.

A target flashes, and I aim and fire.

That impulse had once lifted an arm, pointed a finger. A human finger.

A human body.

I savor the concept, at once strange and as familiar as life itself. The fragile concept of identity crystallizes from vagueness, grows, sharpens—

There is a moment of disorientation, a swirling together and a rending apart.

I am a man. A man named Bravais.

“UNIT EIGHTY-FOUR! RE-CHECK NAVIGATIONAL GRID FOR GROSS POSITIONAL ERROR!”

The habit of obedience carried me forward over rough ground, maneuvering in response to long-learned rules as rigid as laws of nature. My sensors lanced out, I locked to my fellow machines. My control mechanisms acted, swinging me to the point of zero-stress, then driving me forward.

In my mind, thoughts jostled each other:

Secondary target, track! . . . *If you meet another Julius, break him in two and keep going . . . advance, assault speed . . . this is your Station Monitor; permission requested to mutilate the body . . . arm all batteries; then micro-second alert . . . I guess you was the only friend I ever had—*

Suddenly, vividly I remembered the fight with the demons, the weight of the stinking bodies that bore me down, teeth tearing at my throat . . .

I had seen the enemy at work—the deft saws, the clever scalpels.

I remembered the brain of the Algerian major, lifted from the skull, preserved.

As I was now preserved.

The demons had killed my body, left it to rot in the forest. But now I lived again—in the body of a great machine.

“UNIT EIGHTY-FOUR: REPORT!”

The command struck at me, a

mental impulse of immense power. I watched, an observer aloof from the action as my conditioned-response complex reacted, sensing the fantastic complexity of the workings of the mobile fort that was now my body.

“RETIRE TO POSITION IN SECONDARY TIER!” The harsh order galvanized my automatic responses in instant obedience.

On impulse, I intercepted the command; then I reached out along my circuits, sent out new commands. I turned myself, faced the violet sun, moved ponderously forward; I halted, pivoted, tracked my guns across the darkling sky.

Somehow I had gained control of my machine-body. I remembered the command—the external voice that would have asserted its control—

But instead, it had cued my hypnotically produced reserve personality-fraction into active control!

I withdrew, felt the automatics resume control, moving me off to my new station. The enemy was clever, and as thorough as death. I had been tracked down, killed, chained in slavery on a ruined no-man's world; but I had broken the bonds.

I was alive, master of my fortress-body. Free, inside the enemy defenses.

Later—hours or days, I had no way of calculating time—I rumbled down an echoing tunnel into a vast cavern, took my place in a long line of scarred battle units.

“UNIT EIGHTY-FOUR: FALL OUT!” the command voice bellowed.

I moved forward. Other units moved up, stationed themselves on either side of me. A long silence grew. I was aware that other orders were being given—orders not addressed to me, automatically tuned out by my trained reflexes. Something was going on.

I made an effort, extended sensitivity, picked up the transmission:

“ — malfunction! Escort unit eighty-four to decontamination chamber and stand by during reflex-check! Acknowledge and execute!”

I heard the snick of relays closing; I was hearing the internal command circuits of my fellow battle units.

“UNIT EIGHTY-FOUR: PROCEED TO DECONTAMINATION CHAMBER!”

I let my automation-circuits stir me into motion; I moved off, listening as the command voice gave a final instruction to my armed guard:

“Units eighty-three and eighty-five; at first indication of deviant response, trigger destruct circuits!”

I saw the turrets of the battle-wagons beside me swing to cover me; their ports slid back, the black snouts of infinite repeaters emerged, aimed and ready. The command-mind had already sensed something out of the ordinary in Unit Eighty-four.

I rolled on toward the interrogation chamber, monitoring the flow of reflex-thought in the minds of the units beside me—a dull sequence of course-correction, alert-reinforcements, routine functional adjustments. Carefully, using minimal power, I reached out . . .

“Unit eighty-three; damage report!” I commanded.

Nothing happened. The battle units were programmed to accept commands from only one source—the command voice.

“Units eighty-three and eighty-five; arm weapons; complete pre-fire drill!” the command came. From beside me, I heard arming locks slide open. Together, my guards and I entered the cell.

“UNIT EIGHTY-FOUR! DISARM AND LOCK ALL WEAPONS! RESPONSE-SEQUENCE ALPHA, EXECUTE!” the voice of the Interrogator rang out.

I watched as my well-drilled reflexes went through their paces. I would have to move with great care now; every action was under scrutiny by the enemy. Another command came, and as I responded, I studied the quality of the Interrogator’s voice. It was different, simpler, lacking the overtones of emotion of the Command-mind.

I reached out my awareness toward it, sensed walls of armor, the complex filaments of circuitry. I followed a communications lead which trailed off underground to a distant bunker. The intricacy of a vast computer lay exposed before me. I probed gently, testing the shape and density of the mechanical mind-field; it was a poor thing, a huge but feeble monomaniac—but it was linked to memory banks.

I felt a warning twitch of alarm in the moron-circuits, caught the shape of an intention—

Instantly I shunted aside its command, struck back to seize control of the computer's limited discretionary function. Holding firm, I traced the location of the destruct-assembly which it would have activated, found it mounted below my brain, disarmed it. Then I instructed the Interrogator to continue with the routine check-out, and to report all normal.

While it busied itself in idiot obedience, I linked myself to its memory banks and scanned the stored data.

The results were disappointing. The Interrogator's programming was starkly limited, a series of test patterns for fighting and service machines. I withdrew, knowing no more than I had of the enemy.

The Interrogator reported me as battle-ready, and, on command, I rejoined my waiting comrades. An order came: "ALL UNITS, SWITCH TO MINIMUM AWARENESS LEVEL!"

As the energy quotient in my servo-circuits dropped, the sensitivity range of my receptors drew in, scanning from the gamma scale down through ultra-violet, past infra-red, into the dullness of short-wave.

Silence and darkness settled over the depot.

I sent out a pulse, scanned the space around me. The clatter of the command voice was gone. I was alone now—I and my comatose comrades-in-arms. There were ninety-one units, similar to myself in most respects, but armed with a variety of weapons. Small, busy machines scurried among us, carry-

ing out needed repairs. I touched one, caught vague images of a simplified world-image, outlined in scents and animal drives.

I recognized it as the brain of an Earthly dog. It had been programmed to operate the elementary maintenance apparatus.

Reaching farther, I encountered the confused mutter of a far-flung communications system, a muted surf-roar of commands, acknowledgements, an incoherent clutter of operation messages, meaningless to me.

I touched the mind of the fighting machine beside me, groped along the dark passages of its dulled nerve-complex, found the personality center. A sharp probing impulse elicited nothing. The ego was paralyzed. I withdrew to its peripheral awareness level; a dim glow of consciousness lingered there.

"Who are you?" I called.

"Unit eighty-three, of the line," the reply was a flat monotone.

"You were a man once," I told it. "What was your name?"

"Unit eighty-three of the line," the monotone repeated. "Combat-ready, standing by at low alert. Awaiting orders."

I tried another; the result was the same.

There was no hint of personality in the captive brain. They were complex neurotronic circuits, nothing more. Compact, efficient, with trained reflex-patterns, cheaper and easier to gather from the warring tribes of Earth than to duplicate mechanically.

I stirred another quiescent brain,

probed at the numbed ego, pried without success at the opaque shield of stunned tissue that surrounds it.

It was hopeless. I would find no allies here—only slaves of the enemy.

Free inside the enemy fortress—in a flawless camouflage—I was helpless without information.

I needed to know what and where the Command Voice was, the disposition of other brigades, the long-range plan of action, who the enemy was that we fought on the fire-shattered plain—and on what world the plain lay. I would learn nothing here, parked in a subterranean depot. It was time to take risks.

An impulse to my drive mechanism now sent me forward out of the line-up. I swung around, moved off toward the tunnel through which I had entered the cave. In the utter silence, the clash of my treads transmitted through my frame was deafening. I filtered out the noise, tuned my receptivity for sounds of other activity nearby. There were none.

Past the ranked combat units, high and grim in the lightless place, the tunnel mouth gaped dark. I entered it, ascended the sloping passage, reached a massive barrier of flint-steel. I felt for the presence of a control-field, sensed the imbecile mechanism of the lock. A touch, and it responded, sent out the pulse that rolled the immense doors back. I moved out into the open under a blazing black sky.

I studied the landscape, realizing for the first time that my field of

vision included the entire circumference of the horizon. Nothing stirred all across the barren waste. Here and there the ruins of a combat unit showed dark against gray dust. The flaring purple sun was low over the far ridges now; a profusion of glittering stars seemed to hang close overhead.

I didn't know in what direction the enemy headquarters might lie. I picked a route that led across level ground toward a lone promontory and started toward it.

XIX

From my vantage point atop the conical hill, I saw the tips of saw-toothed peaks that formed a wide ring around my position, their bases out of sight over the near horizon.

My sense of scale was confused by the strange aspect reality assumed through unfamiliar senses. Instinct told me that the shattered slab before me was perhaps five yards long. I stirred it with my treads, saw it bound away, flip lightly over, sink to rest, stirring coarse dust which boiled up, dropped back like mud under water.

I was no better at judging my own size. Was I a vast, multi-top apparatus, or a tiny fighting machine no bigger than a one-man jet-ped? The horizon seemed close. Was it really only a mile or two away—or was my visual range so far extended that a hundred miles seemed only a step?

Self-analysis wasn't getting me any closer to my objective—enemy in-

telligence. Perhaps beyond the shelter of the wide crater I would see some indications of life.

I headed for a cleft between steep cliffs, churned up through dust that fountained behind me, gained the pass. The view ahead showed the same sterile rock and dust that I had left behind me. I went on, down the slope and out across the plain, skirting burned-out machines, some of fantastic design, others twins to my own grim body. I passed small craters—whether natural formations or the results of bombardment I couldn't tell. The distant babble of confused commands was a background to the crackle of star-static. I felt neither hunger or fatigue—only a burning curiosity as to what lay beyond the next ridge, and a nagging fear that I might be discovered and destroyed before I had taken my revenge for what had been done to me . . .

The strange machine appeared suddenly at the top of a sheer cliff that ran obliquely across my route. It saw me at the same instant that I saw it, pivoted, depressing its guns to bear on me. In place of the simple markings of the battle units I had seen, there were complicated insignia painted in garish colors across its hull.

I halted, waiting.

"IDENTIFY YOURSELF!" the familiar voice of my Brigade commander boomed in my mind.

"Unit eighty-four of the line, combat ready." As I reported, I extended a probing impulse across the insubstantial not-space, touched the shape of the mind behind the voice.

With an instantaneous reflex, it struck at me. The slave circuits of my brain resonated with the power of the blow—but in that instant I had seen the strange workings of the alien mind, scanned the pattern of the assault it had hurled at me—and now I traced the path of primary volition, struck back, caught the enemy ego in an unbreakable grip.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

It gibbered, writhed, fought to escape; I held it tighter—like gripping a lashing snake in bare hands.

"Answer, or I destroy you!"

"I am Zixz, Centurion of the line, of the Nest of the Thousand Agonies Suffered Gladly. What Over-mind are you . . .?"

"Where do you come from?"

"I was spawned in the muck beds of Kzak, by order of the Bed-master."

"You're not human. Why were you installed in a machine?"

"I was condemned for the crime of inferiority. Here I expiate that fault."

"What world is this?"

The reply was a meaningless identity-symbol.

"Why do you fight this war?"

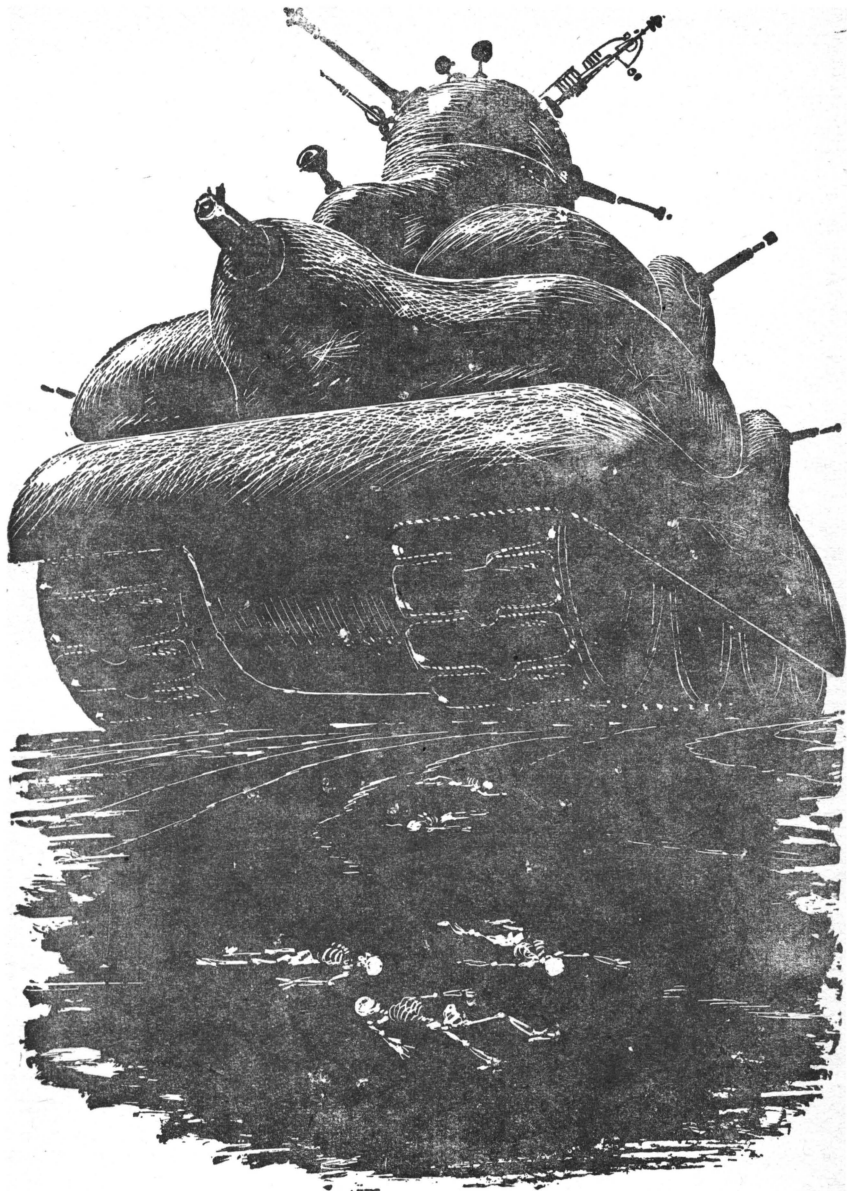
The captive alien mind howled out its war slogan—as incomprehensible as an astrologer's jargon. I silenced it.

"How many Brigades are engaged?"

"Four thousand, but not all are at full strength."

"Who is the enemy?"

The symbol that the alien hurled at me was a compound of horrors.



"Where is your headquarters?" I demanded.

I caught an instant's glimpse of twisted towers, deep caverns, and concept: the Place that Must Be Defended. Then the alien lunged against my control, shrieked an alarm—

I tightened my grip and sudden silence fell. Cautiously, I relaxed. A few threads of dying thought spiraled out from the broken mind; then it winked out like a quenched ember. I had killed the Centurion Zixz.

And into the void, a thunderous command roared.

"COMMAND UNIT ZIXZI REPORT YOUR BRIGADE!"

Quickly I shaped a concept, counterfeiting the dead Centurion's mind-pattern: *"Brigade strength ninety-one; ready for combat."*

"YOUR NEST WILL SUFFER, FOOL! THE OVER-MIND DOES NOT COMMAND TWICE! ORDER YOUR UNITS INTO ACTION! CLOSE THE GAP IN THE BATTLE ARRAY!"

"Delayed by necessity for destruction of defective unit," I countered. *"Proceeding as ordered."*

"COMMAND UNIT ZIXZI I PROMISE LIQUID FIRE ACROSS THE MUCK BED OF ZIXZ FOR THIS DERELICTION! TO THE ATTACK!"

I broke in, still feigning the mind-voice of Zixz:

"Massive enemy flanking attack! New weapons of unfamiliar capability! Non-detectible units assaulting me in overwhelming numbers." But while I transmitted the false report to the Over-mind, I extended a deli-

cate sensing line, brushed over the other, felt out the form of a mighty intelligence, vastly more powerful than that of Zixz. And yet the structure was familiar—like that of the Centurion, magnified, reinforced. And here was the primary volitional path.

I moved along as lightly as a spider stalking a gnat, came into a vast mind-cavern, ablaze with the power of a massive intellect.

"REINFORCEMENTS DISPATCHED!" the great mind roared, deafening at close range. **"RELEASE TO YOUR HOME NEST IF YOU HOLD! PROCEED WITH ADDITIONAL DATA!"**

Busily I concocted fantastic mass and firepower readings, fanciful descriptions of complex and meaningless enemy maneuvers; and while I held the Over-mind's attention, I searched—and found its memory vaults.

There was the image of a great nest, seething with voracious life—a nest that covered a world, leaped to another, swelled through an ever-increasing volume of space, driven by lusts that burned like living fire in each tiny mote that comprised the swarming tribe.

I saw the outward writhing pseudopods of this burgeoning race as they met, slashed at each other with mindless fury—and then flowed on, over every obstacle, changing, adapting to burning suns and worlds of ice, to the near-null gravity of tiny rock-worlds and the smashing forces of titan-planets of collapsed matter. The wave reached the edge of its

galaxy, boiled up, reached out vainly over the void—and, defeated, recoiled on itself, churning back toward Galactic center, stronger now, more ruthless, possessed of a vast frustrated rage that shrieked its insatiable needs, devouring all in its path—and coming together at last in an eruption of mad vitality that rent the very fabric of space.

And from the void at the heart of the universe, the wave rolled out again. It was tempered in the fires of uncounted ages of ravening combat, up its substance now in a new upsurge of violence that made the past invasions seem as somnolent as spawning pools.

Again the edge of the galaxy was reached, and there the wave built, poised—and bridged the gap to the next galaxy. Over the slim link, life flowed, fighting, slashing, devouring, leaping from new feeding ground to newer, filling the galaxy, boiling up in a transcendent fury of hunger, again a leap into nothingness—and a new galaxy was reached.

Nothing remained in the Nest-mind of its original character. It had become a vast mechanism for growth, a disease that radiated outward from a center so distant in the universe that the mind itself in time forgot its beginnings. Units broke free, withered, faded, died. Random islands of the raging vitality consumed themselves, disappeared.

A long arm turned back, groped its way along the chains of burned-out worlds, scavenging, growing, to lance in the end into the original nest place, to devastate it and go on, blind, insensate, insatiable—and find-

ing no new feeding grounds beyond, it turned upon itself.

I withdrew from the Over-mind, and for a moment I held the long perspective of that view. I saw my world as the insignificant scintilla that it was among the stars, my own human race a sinister tribe of barbaric freaks, harvested like wild bees.

A great gleaming planet had risen above the broken horizon, casting a bluish light across the darkling plateau. I saw the gleam of white from a misty patch on the overcurve of the glaring world, the pale outlines of continents. Familiar continents.

I was looking at the full Earth, a quarter of a million miles away in space.

There was no time now to indulge the pangs of homesickness. The Over-mind continued to pour out orders to its dead centurion, and I babbled responses, describing the maneuvering of immense imaginary fleets, fabulous aerial assaults, weapons of incredible destructive power. And while I transmitted, I raced along the base of the cliff toward the shelter of a distant ring-wall.

In the open now, I saw the dust clouds of distant brigades on the move, coming closer. I altered course, steered for a smaller crater almost lost over the curve of the lunar horizon. I skirted a vast tumult of broken rock, thundered out into the clear—

Spread all across my route, a full brigade of heavy combat units churned toward me under a pall of dust. I swung away to the left; at

once, a harsh voice rang in my mind: "LONE UNIT! WHAT IS YOUR BRIGADE?"

I ignored the call, saw a unit detach itself, race to intercept me. I halted, swung to bring my guns to bear. I opened my receptors, heard a harsh command:

"RENEGADE UNIT! HALT AND SUBMIT OR BE DESTROYED."

For a moment, I hesitated, ready to pour my fire into the enemy.

Then I felt the probe of the stranger's mind reach out to me.

"Gosh!" a familiar voice exclaimed in my mind. "What're you doin' here, Jones?"

XX

"That's how it was, Jones," Joel said. "For a while I just watched; I looked at the country and tried to figure out where I was. All I knew was, I was Unit One Hundred of the line—and I was Joel, too. But everything was different. There was fighting going on 'bout all the time. I got to worrying maybe I'd get hurt. This new body I got's tough, but a direct hit could knock it out—I saw it happen to others. I tried to talk to some of 'em after I got the knack of it. But all they knew was their number and the orders of the day.

"Then one day I just ducked out; there was so many units in the fight I didn't figure anybody'd notice. I been here ever since—dunno how long."

"How many times has the Earth

crossed the sky since you woke up?"

"Maybe six or seven."

"Then you've been here for months—and nothing's happened yet?"

"Nope. I figured maybe they forgot about me."

"I don't think time means the same thing to them as it does to us."

"This is a funny-looking place, ain't it, Jones? The sun's funny—and the moon, too."

"We're on the moon, Joel. That planet you see in the sky is the Earth."

"Gosh."

"Joel. I don't know how much time we'll have—but I have a feeling that when the current battle is settled, the Over-mind will be along to find out why we didn't work out. I think it assumes we're just a routine malfunction. They don't seem to have any emotions. They aren't out for revenge for the centurion I killed—but if they knew we were in full control of our bodies, we'd have been blasted."

"Who are they, Jones—the Command minds and the Over-mind—all these voices I hear in my head?"

"They're the masters of the dog-things. They're fighting a war. The Devil knows what it's about. For some reason they're using our moon as a battleground—and we're a convenient source of computer circuits."

"The ones they're fighting—they're just as bad," Joel cut in. "I got close to 'em once—nearly got cut off. I put out a feeler to one—wanted to see what he was like. I figured maybe if he was against the Command voice, maybe I'd change

sides—but it was—it was horrible, Jones. Kind of like . . . well, like some of the old ladies that used to come around the Seaman's Welfare. They was so bound to do good, they'd kill you if you got in their way. It's like Hell comes in two colors—black and white."

"We need information, Joel. We're as ignorant as new-born babies. For a while, I didn't even know how fast time was going past. I got that part straight when I saw the earth rise. We move fast—we can run through a fifty-thousand item check list in a second or two. But I still don't know how big I am."

"I can tell you how big we are, Jones. Come on." I watched as the great battle-machine that had been Joel backed, turned, started off along the wall. I followed. At the far end of the compound, at the junction of the barrier wall with a massive squat tower, he stopped.

"Look there," he said. I examined the ground, noted the broken rubble, a heap of scattered objects like fragments of broken spaghetti, loose dust drifted against the coarse, unjointed wall.

"See them little sticks that got a kind of glow to 'em?" Joel said. "Sure . . ."

Then I recognized what I was looking at. "My God!"

"Funny, ain't it? Them skulls don't look no bigger'n marbles; leg-bones like they might belong to a mouse. But they're full-sized human bones, Jones. It's us that's off. We must be, well, 'bout—well, I can't count that high . . ."

"They look about twelve inches; my picture of myself is about twelve feet to my upper turret. I can multiply that by six; that makes us seventy-two feet high!"

"Jones—could you teach me to count them big numbers? You know, it's funny—but seems like I missed learnin' a lot of things, back when—when I was just a man."

"You've changed, Joel. You think about things a lot more than you used to."

"I know, Jones. It's like I used to be sort of half-asleep or something. I can't remember much about it—back there. It's all kind of gray and fuzzy. There's lots of things I want to know now. Like numbers. But in those days, I never even asked."

"Joel, how did you get the wound you had on your forehead?"

"Yeah—I remember. There was a sore place. It hurt, all the time. Gosh, I forgot all about them headaches! And it was kind of pushed in, like."

"It was a badly depressed fracture, probably bone fragments pressing on your brain. That pressure's gone now."

"It don't do me much good."

I reached out, sensed two machines dozing on low alert. "I tried to control a couple of units once," I called to Joel. "It didn't work. But I've learned a few tricks since then. Maybe . . ."

"Maybe what, Jones?"

"I don't know—but I'm going to try something and see what happens."

I reached out to the dull glow of the idling mind-field, formed in my

mind an image of the shape of the mental voice of the dead centurion Zixz.

"Combat unit! Damage report!" I thundered.

"All systems functional," came the instant reply.

"Situation Report!" I demanded.

"Unit six of the line, standing by on low alert!"

I reached for the other mind, touched it; it identified itself as unit seven of the Brigade of Ognyx.

"Units six and seven! Stand by!" I roared.

"Acknowledge," came the instant reply.

Joel and I raced out onto the rock-shattered plain. Half a mile distant, the two immense combat units sat, guns still bearing on their target.

"Units six and seven!" I transmitted as I barrelled past. "You are now under the command code 'Talisman'. Your primary function will be the protection and assistance of units eighty-four and one hundred. You will not report the existence of Talisman to any Command Unit. Fall in and follow me."

I saw the two huge machines obediently start up, wheel into line, come up to speed. Together, our small force hurled across the stark desert under the blue light of a warm, green world I would never see again.

"Hev, that was neat, Jones." Joel called. "Where we going now?"

"There's an underground depot a few miles from here. Let's see if we can reach it before they cut us off."

The enemy was a dust cloud far to the east. We, angled west, crossed a range of broken ground dotted with burned-out hulks, raced past the up-thrust fault line where the dead centurion Zixz still held his silent vigil at the cliffhead, drove for the crater wall. Monitoring the command band, I heard the clamor of orders, an exchange of queries among Command units, caught an order hurled at the guards I had captured:

"UNITS SIX AND SEVEN! REPORT!"

"Joel—fake up six!" I said quickly. Then:

"Standing by at low alert," I transmitted in the monotone of an automaton circuit.

"REPORT STATUS OF AREA!"

"All quiet," I transmitted listlessly.

The crater walls were rising before us now; I streaked for the cleft, flipped on powerful lights as I entered the shadows of the pass. Behind me, Joel and our two recruits followed up the rise of ground, down onto the plain within the ring-wall. I scanned the scene, identified the location of the access tunnel, roared across up to it and stopped.

"So far so good, Joel. Wait here with six and seven. If I don't come back . . . good luck." I moved forward into the black mouth of the tunnel.

The units sat in ranks as I had left them, silent, ready, their circuits idling. There was no time now for caution on my part.

"Combat Units!" I rapped out. "You are now under operational

control of Command Unit Talisman! Only Talisman commands will be obeyed! Orders of the Over-mind will not be heard! Full combat alert! Prepare for action! First squad, roll out!"

Obediently, ten massive fighting machines rumbled forward, wheeled left into line, advanced toward the exit ramp. I preceded them, emerged into the open, watched as they filed out and took up battle formation.

"They caught on to where we were going, Jones," Joel called. "I've been listening; they sent ten units over to see what we're up to!"

"I'll take this squad to the pass and hold them off, Joel! You get the rest of them out!"

I heard his voice rapping out orders under the Talisman code as I set off for the pass.

As I reached the crest of the defile, the interceptor force came into view—ten mighty machines, glittering under the light of the full Earth. At once, a thunderous command blasted at me:

"UNITS, IMMOBILIZE! REVERT TO STAND-BY ALERT!"

I reached out, found the grotesque form of an alien mind, dealt it a smashing blow.

"Task force, you are now under the control of Talisman Command," I roared in imitation of the command voice. "Take up positions in echelon with Talisman force!"

Nine of the battle units acknowledged, moved into the pass, leaving their dead leader behind. Under our guns, they founted the path, took up stations as ordered.

Far out on the flat, the main body was in view, coming up fast.

"All out, Jones," Joel's call came. "We're on the way."

"Some new volunteers have just rallied to the standard," I called back. "Post units at all the passes into the crater; we're going to have to defend this position."

"If we run for it, we could get away clean now, Jones," Joel called. "We could head for way off yonder somewhere, and we'd be safe."

"Safe—for what?"

"For anything. We could set and think, and look up at the stars and wonder at 'em, and every now and again we could loose off our guns, just for the heck of it—"

"It's too late to run for it. But we're not finished yet, Joel. Take this bunch over and swear 'em in."

I extended awareness, caught a fragment of an order:

"INTERCEPTION! FORCE, REPORT POSITION!"

I complied with a confused report of mysterious enemy machines, flights of ballistics attackers, heavy damage. The Over-mind rose to new heights of fury:

"BRIGADES QLYX COGC, YLTK! CLOSE WITH THE ENEMY AND DESTROY THEM! MAY RAINS OF ACID CONSUME THE LAGGARD!"

"He's getting a little upset now," I called to Joel. "He doesn't know what's happening. Be on the alert for those brigades—they're out for blood."

A flight of missiles appeared over the horizon, arcing down on us. I

integrated their courses, saw that they would overshoot.

"Hold your fire, Joel!" I called. "We'll save our firepower for when it counts."

Volley followed volley, arcing high overhead — decoys intended to draw fire at maximum range rather than to inflict hits. I felt for the imbecile brain of the waveleader — a twitter of fear-patterns, food-lusts, mating drives, tropisms, subverted to the uses of evasion patterns and course corrections. With a touch, I readjusted their navigational orientation, saw the flight swing and drive back to dive on its originators.

Below, the enemy, confused by the abrupt desertion of the vanguard, milled in confusion. Those that advanced met a hail of destruction from the guns of two hundred and ten units firing from cover. They hesitated, fell back. A final lone enemy-brained unit, scarred and burned, came relentlessly on, rocked to our bombardment, veered to one side and plunged over a precipice. I gave the cease-fire, and watched the aimless maneuvering of the moron units below — and still they came over the horizon, pouring in in Brigade strength, their sensors seeking out targets, finding none. I saw a damaged unit go berserk, charge down on a comrade, firing, and in automatic response, a thousand guns, glad of a target, vaporized it a corruscation of ravening energies.

"Looks like we mixed 'em up pretty good, Jones," Joel commented.

"We gained a little time," I replied. "They're not what you'd call flexible."

"What's our next move? We're in a kind of a dead end here. Once they figure what's going on they'll surround the place and lob it in on us from all sides — and we're goners."

"Meanwhile, things are quiet. Now's our chance to hold a council of war."

"Jones, I been looking over these units of ours — and there's something funny about 'em. It's like they wasn't really machines, kind of."

"They're not. Every machine here has a human brain in it."

"Huh?"

"Like you, Joel — and me. They're all human. Just unconscious."

There was a pause while Joel probed the dulled mind of the nearest slave unit, waiting, guns aimed, for the order to carry on the fight.

"Yeah, Jones. I see the place. It's all blanked off, like. It's like trying to poke a hole through a steel plate with your finger. But . . ."

"But what?"

"Oh, I don't know, Jones. I just got a feeling — if I touched it just right . . . Look, let me show you."

I extended awareness, touched the probe that was an extension of Joel's mind-field, followed as it reached into the dim glow of the paralyzed mind, thrust among layered patterns of pseudo-light, past complex structures that towered into unguessed levels of existence, deep into the convoluted intricacy of the living brain, to touch the buried per-

sonality center — encysted, inert, a pocket of nothingness deep under a barrier of stunned not-thought.

“Don’t you see, Jones? It ought to be, like, say a taut cable with the wind making it sing. Something stopped it, clamped it down so’s it can’t move. A) we got to do to set it free is give it a little push — and it’ll start up again.”

“All I see is a dead spot, Joel. If you can see all that, you’re way ahead of me.”

“Okay if I try it?”

“Go ahead — and I’ll keep my relays crossed . . .”

“Here goes . . .”

I saw the finger of pure, focused energy reach out, touch the grayness — and the opacity faded and was gone.

“Okay so far,” Joel said. “Now . . .”

Like a jeweler cleaving a hundred carat rough diamond, Joel poised, then struck once, sharply.

And the glow that had been the moron mind of a slave sprang up in a dazzling light; and into the gray continuum where thought moved like a living force, words came:

“FAEDER URE, HVAD DEO-FELS GIRDA HA WAERLOGAS CRAEFT BRINGIT EORLA AV ONGOL-SAXNA CYNING TILL!”

XXI

The huge fighting machine parked forty feet away across the rocky ledge behind me backed suddenly, lowered its guns, traversed them across the empty landscape, brought them to bear on me.

“Watch him Jones!” Joel’s voice came sharply. “He’s scared; he’s liable to get violent!”

In the instant that the strange voice had burst from the slave unit, my probing contact had been thrust back by an expanding mind-field as powerful as Joel’s.

“We’re friends!” I called quickly in the code in which commands were transmitted. “Fellow prisoners!” I thrust against the pressure of the newly awakened mind, found the automated combat-reflex circuitry, clamped down an inhibiting field — enough to impede a fire-order, at least for a moment.

“VA’ EORT THE, FEOND?” the strange voice shouted, a deafening bellow in my mind.

I plucked the conditioned identity-concept from the mind before me, called to it in the command code:

“Unit twenty-nine of the Anyx Brigade! Listen!”

“AHH! EO MINNE BONDE-DOM MID WYRD!”

It roared out its barbaric jargon, overtones of fright and horror rising like blood-stained tides in the confused mind. I tried again:

“I’m a friend — an enemy of the Command-voice. You’ve been a slave. I’m another slave — in revolt against the masters!”

There was a moment of silence; then: “A fellow slave? What trickery is this?” And this time it spoke — or bellowed — in the familiar command code.

“It’s no trick,” I transmitted. “You were captured — but now you’re free.”

“Free? Invisible one, I wear the

likeness of a monstrous troll-shape! Enchantments hold me yet in bondage. Where is my blade, Hrothgar? Where are my peers and bondsmen? What fire-blasted heath is this before me?"

I talked to the frightened mind, soothing it, explaining as much as I could. At last it seemed to understand — at least enough that I could withdraw my grip on its fire-control circuitry.

"Ah, I feel a part of the spell released!" the freed mind exclaimed. "Now soon perhaps I'll feel Hrothgar's pommel against my palm, and waken from this dream of Hell!"

"I was holding you," I said. "I was afraid you'd fire on me before I could explain."

"You laid hands on an earl of the realm!" He was roaring again.

"Not hands; just a suggestion — to keep you from doing anything hasty."

"Hello, Aethelbert," Joel put in. "Sure glad to have you with us—"

"Joel," I interrupted. "Try another one; wake as many as you can — but hold onto their battle-reflexes until you get them calmed down." Then, to our new comrade: "We're surrounded. There are thousands of them down there — see for yourself."

"Yes — never have I seen such concentration of brigades. What action is this we fight." He broke off suddenly. "A strange thing it is, unseen one, but now I sense in my memory a vast lore of great troll-wars, fought with fire and magic under a black sky with a swollen

moon. And I seem to see myself among them — an ogre of the ogres!"

A call came from Joel: "I got another one, Jones! I don't know what he's saying, but it's not in command code. Sure sounds excited!"

"Keep it up, Joel." While he worked, I talked to Aethelbert. He was quick to grasp the situation—once he understood that I was only another combat unit like himself. Then he was ready to launch a one-man attack.

"Well I remember the shape of the sorcerer: like a slinking dog it came, when I beached my boat on the rocky shores of Oronsay under Sgarbh Breae. My carls fell like swooning maids without the striking of a blow — and then the werewolf was on me, and Hrothgar's honed edge glanced from its hide as a willow wand from the back of a sullen house-wench. And now they have given me shape of a war-troll! Now will I take such revenge as will make Loki roar over his mead-horn!"

"Jones!" Joel cut in. "Here's another one! He's talking American; all about Very lights and Huns . . ."

I gave the new man a capsule briefing, then went on to another — a calm, cool mind speaking strangely accented Arabic. He blamed all his troubles on an evil Djinn of the sorcerer Salomon, in league with the Infidels. I let him talk, getting it all straight in his mind — then cued him to bring his conditioned battle-experience into his conscious awareness. He switched to Command Code without

a break in the stream of his thoughts.

"By the virtue of the One God, such a gathering of units was never seen! Praise Allah, that I should be granted such a wealth of enemies to kill before I die!"

I managed to hold him from a headlong charge, then picked up a new voice, this one crying out in antique Spanish to his Compeador, Saint Diego, God, and the Bishop of Seville, interchangeably. I assured him that all was well, and went on to the next man—a former artilleryman whose last recollection was of a charge by French cavalry, the flash of a saber — then night, and lying alone among the dead, until the dogs came.

"Jones, we're doing real good; that's six now. But down on the plain they're starting to move around. The Over-mind is reorganizing, and they'll be attacking right soon now. We're gonna run out of time . . ."

"Suppose our new men each start in to release others? Can you brief them — show them how? They can work in pairs, with one freeing a man and the other holding him down until he understands what's happening."

"Hey, that's a good idea! It's easy, once you know how. Let's start with Aethelbert . . ."

Time was a term without meaning. To speak a sentence in the measured phrases of a human language required as long, subjectively, as to deliver a lengthy harangue in the compact Command Code — and

yet the latter seemed, while I spoke, to consume as much time as its more deliberate equivalent. My circuitry, designed for instantaneous action, accommodated to the mode of speech—just as, on low alert, a waiting period that might measure weeks by terrestrial standards could pass in a brief hour of passive non-action.

While Joel and I worked, calming, reassuring, instructing, the be-seiging legions formed up into units on the dusty plain of white light moving. It might have been minutes—or hours—before the last of our two hundred and ten combat units had been freed from the paralyzing force of the Overmind.

Three had raved, lapsed into in-and black shadow below, arraying themselves for the assault. In the sky, the Earth hung, apparently un-coherence — minds broken by the shock; two more had opened fire in the initial panic — and had been instantly blasted by the return fire of a dozen units — the first tragic casualties of the campaign. Five more had resisted all efforts at contact; catatonics, permanently withdrawn from reality. And seven had gibbered in the alien symbolism of the demons — condemned criminals, sentenced to the Brigades for the crimes of inferiority, non-conformity or lilogic. These are snuffed out, left their mighty carapaces as mindless slaves to be used as we had been used. It was ruthless — but this was a war of no quarter, species against species.

And our legions grew in strength and readiness.

I called for their attention. "So far we've had the advantage of surprise," I said. "We've hit and run, done the unexpected; they've milled around us like a herd of buffalo. We've managed to slice through them, pick off a few isolated units, capture a few more. But the honeymoon is about over. They're standing off out of take-over range, and they've imposed communications silence, so we don't know what they're planning."

"Like I thought: we're losin'," someone commented.

"Will we huddle here to be burned in our hall like Eric's men?" Aethelbert boomed. "Is this the tenth deed I'll relate to Thor in his mead-hall in Asqard?"

"We got to bust out of here," a Sixth Armored man said. "And fast, what I mean."

"We can keep hitting and running — and lose a few men each time," I went on. "In the end we'll be wiped out."

"In the name of the one God, let us carry the fight to the legions of Shaitan!"

"For the honor of the gods, I say attack!"

"We'll attack — but it will be a feint; Thomas, you'll take twenty-seven units, and move out to the south. Don't close; cruise their line at extreme range, as though you were looking for a weak spot. Put two of your best probemen on scan for recruits; you may be able to pick off a unit here and there. Keep up defensive fire only; if you draw

out a pursuit column, fall back on this position, and try to capture them."

"Twenty-seven units say ye, sir? What of the others?"

"I'm taking two men. When you reach a point close to a two-seven-oh heading from here — turn and hit their line with everything you've got. That will be my signal to move out."

"Wi' two men only? By'r lakin, they'll trounce ye like a stockfish!"

"We'll come out with screens down, ports closed, and mingle with the enemy. In the confusion, I'm counting on their assuming we're loyal slaves. As soon as you see we're in their lines, turn and run for it; keep them busy. With luck, we'll get through—"

"And where would you be goin'?" an Irish voice demanded.

"Their headquarters is about twelve miles west of here. I'm going to try to reach it."

With my two companions beside me, I waited at the south end of the ravine, watching the distant dust cloud that was Thomas's force as it raced across the star-lit desert, the flickering of enemy guns lighting the scene with a winking radiance of blue and red and white. Then I swung to enter the pass, gunned up the long slope. Ben followed, trailing by a quarter mile. Far back, Aethelbert was coming up fast, the fire of the remaining enemy unit lighting his defensive screens.

I reached the crest of the pass, came to a halt looking down on a vast complex of works—tunnel

heads, squat sheds, low circular structures of unknown function—gray, rough textured, stark and ugly against the bleakness of the lunar landscape. And beyond the warren of buildings, a tower reached up into the glittering black of the night sky, a ragged shape like a lone spire remaining from a fallen ringwall: The Place that Must Be Defended.

I looked back down the trail. From my vantage point I could see the broad sweep of the plain: the distant jumble of rock where we had regrouped, the milling mass of the enemy, strung out in a long pincers which enveloped the tiny group of winking lights that I knew was Thomas and his dwindling band; and nearer, the dust trail reaching almost to the foot of the pass, and the second trail, close behind.

From halfway down the sloping trail, a once-Confederate named Ben called: "Aethelbert's in trouble; he's taken a hit, I think—and somebody's closing on him. I better give him a leg up."

"Aethelbert!" I called. "Are you all right?"

There was no answer. I saw him slow as he entered the pass, turn sideways, blocking the entry, his guns pointed back toward the enemy. The oncoming unit poured fire into the now stationary target; it rocked to hit after hit. Ben, coming up beside me now, swung his guns, opened fire on the enemy unit as it came within range.

"Aethelbert, we'll cover you!" I called. "Come on into the pass."

"I'll tarry here, Jones," came a faint reply. "There'll be no lack of foes to tempt my thunder."

"Just a few yards farther!"

"Bare is the back without brother behind it," he sang out. "Now take the meadhall of the goblins by storm, and may Odin guide your sword-arm!"

"I'm goin' back for him!" Ben yelled.

"As you were, Ben! The target's ahead! Let's go and get it!" I launched myself down the slope without waiting to see him comply; a moment later, he passed me, racing to run interception for me.

"Head for the tower," I called. The first buildings were close now — unlovely constructions of featureless stone, puny in scale.

I saw a tiny dark shape appear in a tunnel mouth, bound toward a cluster of huts — and recognized it as one of the dog-things, looking no larger to me than a leaping rat. Its head was grotesquely muffled in a breathing mask — apparently its only protection from the lunar vacuum. I veered, bore down on it, saw its skull-face twist toward me as my treads caught it, pulped it in an instant, flung the bristled rag that was its corpse far behind me.

Ahead, Ben braked to a halt before a wide gate, swung his forward battery on it, blasted it to rubble, then roared ahead through the gap, with me close behind —

A shock wave struck me like a solid wall of steel.

I felt myself go up, leap back, crash to the rocky ground, slide to rest in a shower of debris. Half

dazed, I stared through the settling dust, saw the blackened hulk that had been my Confederate scout, smoke boiling from every aperture, his treads gone, gun barrels melted. I shouted his name, caught a faint reply:

"Cap'n . . . don't move . . . trap . . . all automatic stuff . . . I saw 'em too late . . . Hellbores . . . set in the walls . . . You'll trigger 'em when you move . . . don't stir . . ." I felt his mind-field fade, wink out.

I scanned the interior of the compound, saw the black mouths of the mighty guns, aimed full on me . . . waiting.

I reached out, felt for the dim glow of cybernetic controls, found nothing. They were mechanically operated, set to blast anything that moved in the target area. The detonation that had halted me in my tracks had saved my life.

Ben was dead. Behind me, Aethelbert held the pass alone; and on the plain, my comrades fought on, in ever-dwindling numbers, covering my desperation bid for victory.

And I was here, caught like a fly in a web, helpless, fifty yards from my objective.

XXIII

The explosion had blackened the pavement of the court, gouged a crater a yard deep, charred the blank invulnerable walls that ringed it. My hull, too, would be blackened and pitted.

I could see fragments of my blasted comrade scattered all across the yard; splashes of molten metal

were bright against the drab masonry.

There were openings in the walls, I noted as the last of the dust fell back, the final shreds of black smoke dissipated in the near-vacuum. They seemed no bigger than rat-holes, but I realized that they were actually about a yard wide and half again as high. As I watched, a pale snout poked from one; then the lean withers and flanks of a demon appeared, its size diminished by contrast with my immense body. The thing wore a respirator helmet like the one I had seen earlier; straps criss-crossed its back. It bounded lightly to the burned-out hulk that had been Ben, circled it, stepping daintily around chunks that still glowed red. It came to me then, disappeared as it passed under the range of my visual units.

I held myself totally unmoving, carefully withdrew vitality from my external circuitry, closed myself behind an inner shield of not-thought. Alone in the absolute darkness of sensory deprivation, I waited for what might happen next.

Faintly, I felt a probing touch — ghostly fingers of alien thought that groped along my dark circuitry, seeking for indications of activity. There was an abortive shudder as an impulse was directed at my drive controls. Then the questing probe withdrew.

Cautiously, I extended sensitivity to my visual complex, saw the creature as it trotted back to its hole. Again the compound was silent and empty — except for the corpse of the great machine that had been my friend.



Quickly, I ran an inspection, discovered the worst: My drive mechanism was fused at vital points in the front suspension, and my forward batteries were inoperative — warped by the terrific heat of the blast from the hellbores that had smashed Ben. I was trapped inside ten thousand terrestrial tons of inert, dead metal.

More demons emerged from the building now, trotting from the same arched way through which the first had come. Other creatures followed — squat, many-armed things like land-walking octopi. They went to Ben, swarmed over the hot metal, perched high up on the blackened carapace, set to work.

Below on the dusty ground, the demons paced, or stood in pairs, silently watching.

I considered reaching out to touch a demon mind — and rejected the idea. I was not skilled enough to be sure of not alerting it, warning it that something still lived inside my scorched and battered hull.

Instead, I selected a small horror squatting on the fused mass that had been Ben's forward turret. I reached out, found the awareness-center . . .

Grays and blacks and whites, dimly-seen — but with distorted pseudo-scent images sharp-etched; furtive thoughts of food, and warmth, and rest, a wanderlust and a burning drive for a formless concept that was a female . . .

It was the brain of a cat, installed in the maintenance machine, its natural drives perverted to the uses of

the aliens, its keen sense linked to electronic sensors, its superb motor-ennervation linked to demon-made limbs of insensitive metal. I explored the tiny brain, saw the wonderful complexity of even this simple mechanism — vastly more sophisticated than even the most complex of cybernetic circuits.

With an effort, I extended the scope of my contact, saw mistily what its eyes saw: the pitted surface of metal on which it squatted, the tiny cutting tools with which it drilled deep into the burned chromalloy of the ruined hull. I sensed the heat of the metal, the curve of it under me, the monomaniacal drive to do thus — and thus — boring the holes, setting the charge, moving on to the next . . .

I pulled back, momentarily confused by the immediacy of the experience. The small machines, under the direction of the demons, were preparing to blast open the fused access hatch.

Abruptly, I became aware of a sensation in my outer hull, checked the appropriate sensors, felt the pressure of small bodies, the hot probe of needle-tipped drills.

In my preoccupation, I had failed to notice that a crew was at work on me, too. Soon — in minutes, or an hour or two — a shock would drive through me, as my upper access hatch was blasted away, exposing my living brain to the vacuum and the cold metal probes of the machines.

Delicately, I directed movement to the cat's 'limbs. They moved smoothly in response, walked me

across the twisted metal.

I turned the sensory cluster to stare across at the openings in the wall, gaping now like great arched entries to the small-scale sensors of the tiny apparatus. Half a dozen now-huge demons paced or stood between me and the doors. None seemed to have noticed that I was no longer at work. I moved on down the side of the wrecked machine, sprang to the dust-drifted ground.

A demon turned empty red eyes on me, looked past me, turned away. I moved toward the nearest archway, scuttling along at a speed which I hoped was appropriate to a maintenance unit returning to its storage bay for repairs or supplies.

Another demon swung its head to watch, followed me with its eyes as I crossed the open ground. I reached the arch, hopped up the low step, slipped into the darkness of the high-arched passage.

Somewhere in the ominous tower before me — the Place That Must Be Defended — lay the secret of the power of the demons. My only chance of survival lay in finding it.

I tore my eyes from the light and started into the dark maze.

The passage was featureless, unadorned, running straight to a heavy lock which opened at the pulse my well-drilled cat-brain emitted.

In my octopoid body I scuttled forward into a tiny chamber, waited while the inner seal slid aside. A wider corridor lay before me, brightly illuminated in the infra-red range — and crowded with hurrying de-

mons, looking as immense as gaunt and bristled horses to my small-scale sensors. I moved ahead, ignored by the busy inmates of the building.

I found a rising ramp, hurried up its wide curve, emerged on another level, like the first except that there were other creatures here — tall, mechanical-looking things that ambled on iridescent chitinous limbs. I saw one or two demons of another species, characterized by flatter faces and enormous, protruding teeth, and pale, tawny hides. They wore more elaborate harness than the worker-class things I had met in the past, and there was a glint of jeweled decoration on their brightwork fittings—the first signs of frivolity I had seen among the aliens.

I saw two of the humanoid aliens of the General Julius type. Both wore familiar earthly costumes — one a pink business suit and other a stained military uniform; I judged that they were agents reporting on their operations among the natives. None of these varied life-forms paid the slightest attention to me, but I couldn't help feeling as vulnerable as a newborn mouse in a rattler's cage. The most superficial probe from any of them would shatter my tenuous grip on the slave-machine's ego center.

And an instant later, my own untenanted brain would be shattered — or enslaved again.

Moving past a congregation of the insect-things before a wide, square-cut door, I spied a narrow stair leading up from a short passage to the right. I turned in, went along to it, looked up its dark well.

What I was looking for, I didn't know—but instinct seemed to urge me upward.

I hopped up with my ten legs, began the climb.

XXIV

I was in a wide chamber with a high ceiling supported by columns, among which massive apparatus was ranked in endless rows.

Great red-eyed demons prowled the aisles of the sides of stilt-legged insect-things — whether as guards or servants, I couldn't tell. A cacophony of humming, buzzing, raucous squealing, deep-toned roaring, filled the thin air, as the batteries of giant machines churned out their unimaginable products. I scurried along, darting around the careless footfalls of the giant creatures, made for a door across the room, on either side of which two immense demons squatted on their haunches like vast watchdogs. I thought of the soldier in the fairy-tale, who had stolen the treasure guarded by a dog with eyes as big as saucers. These eyes were smaller, and of a baleful red, but they were as watchful as look-outs for a burglar gang. They were guarding something. That was reason enough for me to want to pass the door.

I scurried past them, saw other small machines like myself hurrying about their tasks, numbly skipping aside when threatened by a heavy foot. I had chosen my disguise well. The tiny cat-brained devices appeared to have free run of the tower.

There was a quiet corner where a cross-aisle dead-ended. I settled myself in it, blanked off sensory input, reached out to the most superficial level of mental activity, sensed the darting action/reaction impulses of the other cat-brains all around me. I selected one dim center, felt gingerly through its simple drives, selected one, stimulated it, planted a concept. Quickly I jumped to a second brain, keyed its elemental impulses, then went on to a fourth, and a fifth . . .

I withdrew and focused my sensors. Across the floor, I saw a small machine darting erratically about, attracting cold stares from the busy creatures-around it. A second machine scuttled into view from between giant apparati, paused a moment, jittering on thin legs, then darted to the first, leaped at it.

With a metallic clatter, the two rolled across the floor and struck the lean shank of a demon which bounded aside, whirled, struck out. A third cat-brained machine dashed to join the fray. Two more appeared at the same moment, saw each other, came together with a crash — five enraged Toms, each sure he was attacking a rival for the imagined female the image of whose presence I had evoked.

A dirty trick, but effective.

The two guardian demons bounded from their posts, sprang at the combatants, cuffed them apart — but only for an instant. Nimble, the fighting cats danced aside from the rush of the dog-things, darted back to re-engage. I moved from my corner, scurried along the baseboard

to the guarded door, fired a triggering pulse at its mechanism. It stood firm.

I extended a sensing probe — a form of supersonic sonar, I realized as I felt over the shapes of the locking circuitry. I perceived the required form for the unlocking signal, transmitted it. The moronic apparatus responded, withdrew the magnetic locking field. I nudged the door, felt it swing open, slipped past it, pushed it shut behind me.

A narrow stair well lead up toward light.

I started up, feeling my thin limbs tiring now. My power-pack needed recharging; I felt a powerful reflexive urge to descend to a dimly conceived place where a niche waited, in which I could snuggle against comforting contacts and receive a pleasure-flow of renewed vitality . . .

I overrode the conditioned urge and clambered up the high-looming steps. They were scaled to the long legs of the demons, almost too high for my limited agility. There was no alarm from below. The demon-guardians had failed to notice the penetration of their sanctum sanctorum.

I was dragging myself as I topped the last step. I squatted with trembling limbs outsprawled, looking into a bright, round room, walled with smooth, nacreous material that resembled mother of pearl pierced with glazed openings beyond which the black lunar sky pressed close. At the center of the chamber, a shallow bowl rested on a short col-

umn, like a truncated bird-bath of polished metal.

After a moment's rest, I moved into the room. I was aware of a curious humming, a sense of vast power idling at the edge of perceptibility. The floor was smooth under me, extending to a curving joint with the walls, which rose, darkening, to form a shadowed dome many yards overhead. The light was diffuse, soft, sourceless.

I circled the gleaming pedestal, searching for some indication of the meaning or utility of this strange place, so unlike the stark and functional ugliness of the levels below. There was nothing. No indication of life, no sign of controls or instrumentation.

Perhaps, after all, the Place That Must Be Defended was no more than a ceremonial temple dedicated to whatever strange deities might command the devotion of the monsters that prowled the levels below . . .

There was a sound — a dry clicking, like a dead twig tapping a window. I crouched near the pedestal, stared around me, saw nothing. The walls of the empty room gleamed softly, silently.

The sound came again — and a dry squeaking, as of leather sliding against uncoiled metal. A diffuse shadow, faint, formless, glided down the walls. I turned my sensors upward — and saw it.

It hung in the gloom of the dome, a bulging, grayish body in a cluster of tentacular members like giant angleworms, clinging to a

bright filament depending from the peak of the onion-shaped dome.

As I watched, it dropped down another foot, its glistening reticulated arms moving with a hideous, fluid grace. A cluster of stemmed sense organs poked from the upper side of the body—crab-eyes on a torso like a bag of oil. I recognized the shape of the creature. It was the one on which my borrowed mechanical form was modelled.

The thing saw me then — I was sure of it. It paused in its descent, tilted its eyes toward me. I didn't move. Then the worm-arms twitched, flowed. It dropped lower, unreeling the cable as it came. It was five yards above the parabolic bowl, then four, then three. There was a feeling of haste in its movements now, something frantic in its scrambling descent.

Whatever the thing was, its objective was clear: to reach the polished bowl below it — quickly. My move was obvious: to prevent it.

I sprang to the pedestal, reared up, my forelimbs catching at the edge of the bowl. I scabbled with other legs at the smooth base, found purchase for another pair of limbs. I was clear of the floor now, rising up to the edge —

The thing above me emitted a mewling cry, dropped abruptly another yard, then released its support and launched itself at me. The flailing tentacles caught at me, wrapped me in an embrace like a nest of constrictors. I lost my hold, fell back with a stunning crash, the alien thing still entailing me.

It broke away, reached for the

bowl, swung itself up; I sprang after it, seized a trailing limb with three of mine, hauled back. It turned like a striking snake, struck out at me — blows that sent me over on my back, skidding away, until I was brought up short by the grip I had retained on one outflung member. I righted myself with a bound, crouched under a new rain of blows, lashed out in return, saw thick mustard-colored fluid ooze from a wound on the heavy body.

The thing went mad.

It lashed its many legs in wild, unaimed blows, leaping against the restraint of my grip. I caught another flailing arm, the cruel metal of my pincers biting into the yielding muscle.

Abruptly it changed its tactics. Its multiple arms reached out to me, seized me, hauled me close. Then, with a surge, it raised me, dashed me down against the rock-hard floor. Dazed, I felt my grip go slack, the sinuous members of the alien withdraw. I reached after it felt a last member slither from my weakened grasp.

I could see again. The thing was at the pedestal, swarming up, teetering on the edge of the bowl.

I gathered my strength, lunged after it, drove my outstretched arm up at the unprotected underbody, felt it strike, pierce deep . . .

The thing wailed, a horrifying cry. For a moment it wrapped its futile arms around my stabbing metal one; then it went limp, fell back, struck and lay, a slack heap of flabby, colorless flesh, in a spatter of viscous ochre.

I rested for a moment, feeling the on-off-on flashes of failing senses. I had spent the last of my waning energy in the battle with the decipid. It was hard to hold my grip on the fading consciousness of the cat-brain; almost, I could feel my awareness slipping away, back to the doomed hulk in the courtyard below, the guns still erained upon my inert body.

I wondered how close the drillers were now to the vulnerable brain — and how Aethelbert fared at the pass. how many of my comrades still lived on the shattered battlefield beyond.

There was one more effort required of me before I relapsed back into the darkness that seemed to beckon all around. The thing I had killed had attacked me to keep me from reaching the hollow of the metal bowl-shape, and had striven frantically to attain it itself. I had to discover what it had guarded there.

I dragged myself to the base of the pedestal, rose up, tottering, groped for the edge above.

It was too far. I sank back quivering, black lights dancing in my dimming sensory field. Beside me lay the dead alien. I groped to it, crawled up on the slumped curve of its flaccid body, tried again. Now my fore-limbs reached the edge of the bowl. gripped; I pushed myself up, brought other limbs into play. Now I swung, suspended. With a supreme effort, I hauled myself up, groped, found a hold across the bowl—and tipped myself into the polished hollow.

From a source as bottomless as space itself, power flowed, sweeping through me with an ecstasy that transcended all pleasure, burning away the dead husks of fatigue, hopelessness, pain.

I felt my mind come alive, as a thousand new senses illuminated the plane of space-time in which I hung; I sensed the subtle organizational patterns of the molecular aggregations that swirled over me, the play of oscillations all across the spectrum of electromagnetic radiation, the infinity of intermeshing pressures, flows, transitions that were reality. The scope of my awareness spread out to sense the structured honeycomb of the tower walls, the scurrying centers of energy that were living minds nested in flesh and metal, drove outward to embrace the surrounding court, noting the bulk of cold metal that was the ruined machine in which my unconscious brain lay buried — and outward still, sweeping across the curve of the world, detecting the patterned network of glowing points scattered across the waste of lifelessness.

Now each dim radiance took on form and dimension, swelling until separately, yet together, their inner structures lay exposed. I saw the familar forms of human minds, each locked in a colorless prison of paralysis — and the alien shapes of demon-minds, webs of weird thought-forms born of an unknowable conception of reality. And here and there, in clusters, were other minds, beacons of flashing vitality — the remnant of my fighting brigades!

I singled out one, called to it:

"JOEL! HOW DOES THE FIGHT GO?"

His answer was a flare of confusion, question; then:

"They're poundin' us, Jones. Where are you? Can you send us any help?"

"HOLD ON, JOEL! I'M IN THEIR HEADQUARTERS. I'LL DO WHAT I CAN!"

"You gave me a turn, Jones. For a minute I thought you was the Over-mind, you came through so strong." His voice was weak, fading. "I guess it'll all be over pretty soon, Jones. I'm glad we tried, though. Sorry it turned out like this . . ."

"DON'T GIVE UP — NOT YET!" I broke off, scanned again the array of enslaved human minds. I thought back to the frantic hour I had spent when Joel and I had freed the trapped minds of Aethelbert and Doubtsby and Bermuez.

If I could reach them all now, in one great sweep . . .

I brought the multitude of dully glowing centers into sharp focus, fixed in my mind the concept of the pattern of their natural resonance — and sent out a pulse.

All across the dark face of the dead world faint points of illumination quickened, flared up, blazed bright. At once, I fired an orientation-concept — a single complex symbol which placed in each dazed and newly emancipated brain the awareness of the status quo, the need for instant attack on demon-brained enemies.

I switched my plane of reference back to Joel.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE!" I called. "BE ON THE ALERT FOR NEW RECRUITS COMING OVER, BY THE FULL BRIGADE!"

I caught Joel's excited answer, then switched to alert the others. The pattern of the great battle changed. Now isolated demon-brained machines fought furiously against overwhelming odds, winked out one by one. Far away, in distant depots, on earth-lit deserts a thousand miles from the tower of the Over-mind, awakened slave brigades blasted astounded centurions, sallied forth to seek out and destroy the hated former masters. From a dozen hidden fortresses, beleaguered demons fitted out vast siege units, sent them forth to mow broad swatches through the attacking battle units before they fell to massive bombardments. In a lull, I searched through the building below me, found and pinched out the frantic demons hiding there.

Their numbers dwindles, shrank from thousands to a dozen, six, two, a single last survivor — then none.

The moon was ours.

XXV

Joel's great bulk, pitted with new scars bright against the old, loomed up beside me in the compound, bright under the glow of a full Earth.

"All the fellows are here now, Jones — we lost seventy-one, the major says. A couple dozen more are disabled, like you and Aethelbert, but still live. The maintenance machines have gone to work on

'em. We got plenty of spares, anyway. We'll have you rolling again in no time."

"Good work, Joel." I widened my contact to take in all of the hundred and eight intact survivors of the original group of freed slaves.

"Every one of you will have his hands full, rounding up the new men and organizing them. We have no way of knowing how soon our late enemies' home base will start inquiring after them. And when they do, we want to be ready."

"What about going home, chief?" a man who had taken a bullet in the knee at the Hurtgen Forest called out. "How we going to get back?"

"You off your onion, mate?" a one-time British sailor growled. "What kind o' show you think we'd make waltzing into Picadilly in these get-ups!"

"We got to go back, to kill off the rest of these devils, haven't we?"

"Mum, my masters," Thomas interrupted. "Hear out our captain."

"Two days ago I used the enemy's equipment to call Earth," I told them. "I managed a link-up to the public visiscreen system, and got through to the Central Coordinating Monitor of an organization called the Ultimax Group. I gave them the full picture. They knew what to do. The enemy is outnumbered a million to one down there; a few thousand troops wearing special protective helmets and armed with recoilless rifles can handle them."

"Yeah, but what about us?" the soldier burst out. "What are we going to do — stay on this God-forsaken place forever? Hell, there's

transports at the depots; let's use 'em! I got a wife and kids back there!"

"Are you daft, fellow?" a dragoon of Charles the Second inquired. "Your chicks are long since dust, and their dam with them — as are mine, God pity 'em."

"My old woman's alive and cursing yet, no doubt," a Dutch UN platoon leader said. "But she wouldn't know me now — and keeping me in reaction mass'd play hell with her household budget. No, I can't see going back . . ."

"Maybe — they could get us human bodies again, some way . . ."

"Human body, indeed!" the dragoon cut him off. "Could a fighting man hope for a better corpse than this, that knows naught of toothache, the ague nor the French disease?"

Another voice cut into the talk — the voice of Ramon Descortes of the Ultimax Group, listening in from Earth on the circuit I held open.

"General Bravais," he said excitedly — and I channeled his transmission through my circuitry, broadcasting it to every man within range. "I've been following your talk. Although I find it unbelievable, I'm faced with the incontrovertible evidence. Our instruments indicate that your transmissions are undoubtedly coming from Luna— how and why you will explain in due course, I hope. You've told me that you—and the others—have been surgically transplanted to artificial environments. Now you wish to be restored. Naturally! Let me

urge you to return—and we will have for each of you a new body of superb design—not strictly huto say the least!”

I had to call for order to quell the uproar.

“Some kind of android?” I asked.

“We have on hand a captive — an alien operative of the humanoid type. We will capture more — alive. They will be anestheized and placed in deep freeze, awaiting your return. According to the present estimate, there are some ten thousand of them working here on Earth. Sufficient for your needs, I believe.”

“Say, how’s the fight going there?” someone called.

“Well. The first Special Units have gone into action at Chicago, Paris and Tamboula, with complete success. Governments are falling like autumn leaves, well-known figures are suiciding in droves, and mad dogs are reported everywhere. It is only a matter of hours now.”

“Then there’s nothing to stand in the way!”

“Broadway, here I come!”

“Paris — without a king? Why —”

“An end to war? As well and end to living!”

“What about you, General?” someone called, and others joined in.

“I’ll order the transports made ready immediately,” I said. “Every man that wants to go back can leave in a matter of hours.”

“Jones — I mean, General —” Joel started.

“Jones will do; I won’t need the old name any more.”

“You’re not going back?”

“We fought a battle here,” I said. “And we won. But the war goes on. On a hundred worlds; a thousand—we don’t know how many. The demons rule space — but Man is on his way now. He’ll be jumping off Earth, reaching out to those worlds. And when he reaches them—he’ll find the armored brigades of the enemy waiting for him. Nothing can stand against them — except us. We’ve proven that we can outfight twice our number in slave machines. And we can free the minds that control those machines, turn them against the enemy. The farther we go, the bigger our force will be. Some day, in the far future, we’ll push them off the edge of the Galaxy. Until then, the war goes on. I can’t go home again — but I can fight for home, wherever I find the enemy.”

“General Bravais,” a new voice cut in. “Surely you can’t mean that? Why, your name will be on every tongue on Earth! You’re the hero of the century. Of any century! You’ll be awarded every decoration—”

“A battle-scarred five-thousand-ton Battle Unit would be ill at ease in a procession down Pennsylvania Avenue,” I said. “For better or worse, my chromalloy body and I are joined irretrievably. I couldn’t sit on a veranda and sip a whiskey sour, knowing what was waiting—out there. So I’m going to meet it, instead. How many are going with me?”



The Place Where Readers And Editor Meet...

Dear Editor:

Three cheers for Jim Maugham! Three kicks to J.R. Parkes. Alright. Here's a hot discussion, a sweeping concept, and a unique philosophy.

It's stretching the point a little to call this a philosophy but it fills the bill on the other two counts. We now have two so-called sf television programs on the national networks. The plots are of a kindergarten type, technical matters are sometimes faked out, and good old fashioned space opera is not the primary fare.

Outer Limits has done a better job than *Twilight Zone*. Their alien get-ups are marvelous and some of the stories are masterpieces, even if the plots are ultra-simple. The main fault of these shows is that they're sf watered down for the people who don't like sf.

In fact, the trials that producers, writers and directors go through to please the twelve year old national intelligence borders on the ridiculous, as they cut and hack and slash

almost all the scripts that come to them. If these programs were upgraded to the point where they would be a little more pleasing to people who enjoy sf it would not only heighten the national opinion of sf as a literary form but it would bring more to our ranks. There are many people around who think of Flash Gordon when sf is mentioned, simply because they haven't been exposed to anything else.

I want to see a science-fiction program aimed at its fans and not garbage truck drivers. I want to see aliens as allies of Terrans. I want to see stories like *Green World*, *The Ballad of Lost C'Mell* or the Retief stories brought to the TV screen. We can do away with childish attempts to produce simple horror. There are other emotions that sf could convey on TV. They could also do away with the ultra-sonic music which only detracts from the creation as a whole and actually alienates you from it.

It can be done, too, with letters

calendar year have met with my approval ("Bless Klonos!" breathes the editor thankfully). However.

Although I have been reading SF for only six years, I like to consider myself a knowledgeable fan. I even own a few copies of magazines dating from the Middle Ages (i. e., 1948). But in all my readings I had never come across anything by the old master E. E. Smith. Therefore I looked forward to your May issue with some curiosity, even anticipation. Wish I could say the same now. *The Imperial Stars*, sir, was *bad*. The progres and denouement of the tale was rather simple (I don't mean uncomplicated) and the writing itself was, well, clumsy. As a matter of fact, though I hate to say it, the writing reminded me of my own story-writing style (you rejected one of my outpourings last year; remember?). In short, it leaves something to be desired. But all your other readers will probably love it.

One more cavil and then we'll go on to happier subjects. I find that the blurbs you use in your three magazines become very annoying,

not to mention tedious, when read en masse.

One more thing and then I'll go bother some other editor. Mr. Pohl, sir, to settle a bone of contention between my left and right heads (this is the middle head speaking), would you tell us if you have ever employed the name Charles Satterfield as a pseudonym? — Peter Riley, 81 Crescent Street, New London, Connecticut 06320.

●Matter of fact, yes. — *The Editor*.

* * *

Dear Editor:

I never before read any science-fiction magazines because from what I could see most of them were nothing but bunk. However, while I was glancing over a magazine stand, I noticed the name Robert A. Heinlein. Then I read the inside page and from what I saw, I knew I'd buy every issue of *If* for at least the next year. The serials you plan look great! The other stories in the July issue were good too, and I got a special kick out of Bixby's *Old Testament*. No hue or cry, just praise for the one sf magazine with class. — Michael J. Hunter, Cleveland, Ohio.

●Thanks for your letter, and we'll see you next month. At least we hope we will — and we're sure next month's *If* will be a good one. Jack Vance who won the Hugo for *The Dragon Masters*, which appeared in *Galaxy*, now comes to *If* with *The Killing Machine*, and it just might win him another! And in the same issue a new Retief story by Keith Laumer — a novelette by Wilson Tucker — oh, yes, a good issue! — *The Editor*.

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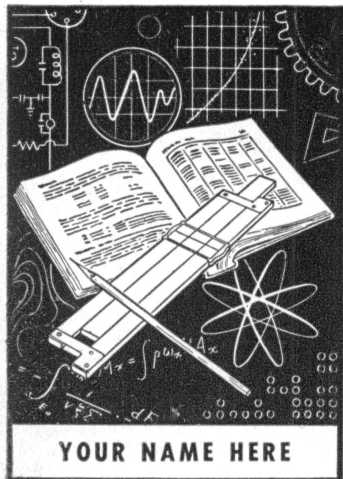
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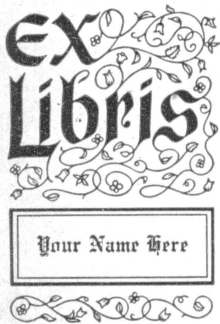
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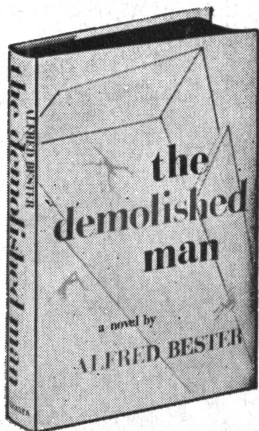
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