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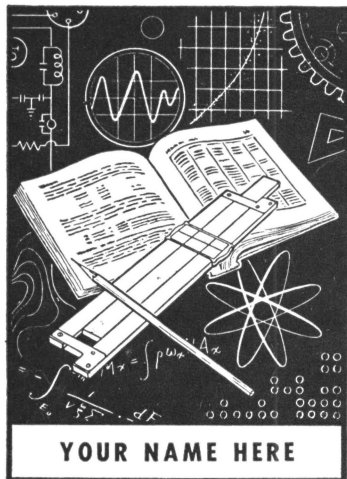
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## A RELATIVISTIC DILEMMA

The reason that a spaceship cannot exceed the speed of light, so they tell us, is that as it accelerates it gains mass. Take the closest we have to a real space-going spaceship now — say, the Gemini capsule, with a mass of something like ten thousand pounds. Accelerate it to nine-tenths the speed of light — oh, maybe 170,000 miles per second — and its mass has doubled. It now has a mass of twenty thousand pounds. Accelerate it some more. At 95% the speed of light it may mass 40,000 pounds. At 96%, 80,000 pounds. At 97% perhaps it reaches order-of-magnitude increments . . . and when ultimately it achieves the full velocity of  $C$  (or more accurately, if it could achieve that velocity) its mass would become infinite.

What happens when an infinite mass comes to exist in the universe is a sort of goblins-will-get-you-pleasantly-chilling speculation that relativistic physicists and mathematicians amuse their friends with over ein stein of beer. One such recently suggested that the simplest way to describe the effect would simply be to say that the universe would collapse.

Of course, in the real world it's not a problem — not now, anyway, or in the foreseeable future — because we simply have no means of accelerating a mass to light speed. The more massive our Gemini capsule becomes the more difficult to accelerate; and you can't really push it up to the infinite-mass stage without infinite force in the thrusters to do the job.

But look at it a different way. It doesn't much matter what mass you accelerate to that point. Start out with a 10,000-pound Gemini capsule — or a ten-billion-ton *Skylark Duquesne* — or, for that matter, a feather. Infinite is infinite.

What happens when you accelerate a rather small, but still measurable, mass to light speed? Say a proton? Say we do it in a proton accelerator?

Or more pertinently . . . bearing in mind that light itself has mass; it is deflected by gravitational fields, just like an orbiting rock — what happens when *light* travels at light speeds?

If anyone happens to know the answer, will they please let us know it? Soon? — THE EDITOR

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*The Final War had left few  
survivors . . . just enough  
to carry it on endlessly!*

# MANDROID

by ROBERT E. MARGROFF,  
PIERS ANTHONY  
and ANDREW J. OFFUTT

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

I

It did not stop moaning for a long time. It was a battered mass of splintered bone and oozing blood and brains, matting strands of blondish, almost-human hair. But Bill Jackson continued to batter and to hack and to scream. Steadily, monotonously, until exhaustion overcame him.

Slowly sanity returned.

Tony Baker, former captain, USAF, Texas Corps had vomited. Now, spent and trembling, he waited. Slowly the other man came from his knees to his feet, stilling his gory hands. His sleepwalker's expression had changed to one of sane awareness. Then he too vomited.

Without a word they brought gasoline from the body of the smashed

plane, a blue-and-silver S-195 Scout-er. They poured it on the remains of the last android. Silently, his hands shaking, Bill Jackson struck a match, then threw its spurting flame into the mangled thing on the ground. They stepped back, raising their arms to shield their faces from the heat that flared and roared at them. They watched.

Amid the flames something moved.

Tony Baker gagged and turned away. Behind him a hand, rather like a human hand, rose slowly. A groan, rather like a human groan, sounded a last agony. "It wasn't dead."

Tony turned back to watch as the tortured thing struggled in the flames. And at last the movements ceased.

It was dead.

The two men stared in numbed horror. "I hate 'em," Bill Jackson said. "I'm glad it's dead. But I wouldn't have wished that on . . . on anything. We should've made sure . . ." Then he remembered the awful way in which he *had* made sure, and he shuddered.

He was the older of the two men. He was a big man, dark, with a perpetual beard-shadow on a massive face. His black hair was shot with a very few strands of gray. He was perhaps forty-one or two. His hand rose now to Tony's shoulder and they turned and walked across the little clearing to the stream trickling to the east of their camp. They squatted and washed themselves in the laughing, unconcerned water.

"Bill," Tony said in the moonlight.

"Yeah?"

"It's all over now, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Bill Jackson said. He touched his whiskered chin, rubbing where blood clung. "Yeah, I guess it is, Sport."

"Bill . . . should we bury it?"

Jackson looked at him. "*Bury* it! Bury *that*? Tony, *that* thing—" He broke off and their eyes spoke in the darkness. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. Come on."

They walked from the bank of the stream back into the clearing. Back to the remains of their campfire — and of that other fire.

Bill fixed a soldier's trench shovel to his rifle. He dug a shallow hole and shoved in the charred remains. They stamped the earth, then hesitated, each thinking the same thought; then they left it, without praying, under the Christmasy shape of a tall pine.

Automatically Bill went to the fire and threw three logs on, arranging them to burn up. He turned.

"Come on," he said, and together they crossed the clearing to the stream. They jumped across, feet squishing, and scrambled up the little bank on the other side. The stream afforded a barrier of sorts on the east side of the camp, the scout-plane on the north, the cabin and palisade they planned would shelter the south end. Across the stream and the clearing, the camp's west side was sheltered by a steeply sloping hill. They had almost denuded the hill of its good trees and had rolled the trunks down to form a barrier.

Bill Jackson sat down. Slowly Tony Baker sat beside him.

"How many cigarettes left, Tony?"

"Two."

Bill sighed. "Well, I can't think of a better time to split one. We can't save 'em forever."

Tony nodded and lit the cigarette. He inhaled deeply, slowly, luxuriously, and passed it to the other man.

"Tony . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Let's don't talk about it. Let's don't *think* about it—let's talk about something else." Bill puffed and passed the cigarette back.

"All right." Tony looked at the moon riding high and fat and silvery above the trees. They sat in silence.

Neither man was sure if he was sorry for what had been done; it had happened so suddenly. They had set the trap and it had been sprung. Flamed by the passions of the moment and the danger and the hate instilled by years of war, they had been compelled toward the awful climax. Savagely—and half-hesitantly, even then—they had obeyed. And now it was done, their energies spent, and there was time for recollection, reflection . . . and, perhaps, remorse.

"Well, dammit, *talk* about something," Bill said. "I'm thinking about it — and I don't *want* to!"

"Uh—how'd it all start, Bill?" Tony asked. Tony was twenty-three, slighter: long, stringy muscles on a small frame; shorter by three inches. He had been an active participant in war since three days after his

seventeenth birthday. He let the smoke trail out in a slow cloud, then handed the white cylinder back to the man who had pulled him out of his crashed aircraft.

Bill answered quickly, seizing willingly upon a new subject. "We made 'em, Sport. We created 'em. At least the scientist-types did—in their labs. They wanted a sturdier breed for the mines and the factories, so they mixed up chemicals and DNA and God knows what else and made the Androids." He shook his head. "God! *Made* 'em!" He was seeing a vision of burning laboratories, burning scientists, dangling chemists, exploding chemicals. "They were tougher, stronger, longer-lived. The scientists *made* 'em so they could reproduce themselves."

"That was the mistake, wasn't it?" Tony said in a quiet, flat voice.

"No. Just making 'em was the mistake. All those yowlin' preachers were right. Pretty soon they were raising little As, thinking they were superior, smarter than men."

"Weren't they?"

Bill swung to stare at him. "You believe that?"

Tony looked into eyes gone suddenly ugly; looked and looked away, down at the moon's wriggly reflection in the running water. "I don't know. My father and brothers were fighting the As ever since I can remember. It was just natural. It was life. I was never even sure why. Everybody fought and fought and everybody died fighting or came back torn up; dead, really. I wasn't—I'm not—old enough to remem-



ber, Bill. Are They? I mean, were they superior?"

"Well, they were smart," Bill said with proud reluctance. He handed Tony the cigarette's last quarter-inch, pierced with a pin. He followed Tony's eyes to the silver shimmer in the water. "But no, dammit, they weren't *men!* They couldn't've been as smart!" His hand dug the bayonet's edge into the soft earth beside him. "But they were clever, crafty; they hid their real number, collected weapons, met secretly . . . plotted . . ."

"But we wouldn't allow them equality," Tony said. "When they made their pleas to the government."

"Pleas! *Demands!*" Bill spat. "But we couldn't. Lord, there wasn't any choice; we made 'em. They weren't *people*. It was them or us; they were trying to take over. We had to fight. Had to. There couldn't be any mercy in that war. No mercy and no surrenler. We'd given the As the ability to *think*, to reason, and their reason told 'em they were slaves; that they'd always be slaves . . . unless *they* became *man's* master. So we fought . . . and fought and fought. And here we are."

Tony Baker shuddered. "What a waste!"

"Yeah, waste. The waste was when we first made 'em," Bill said, the words whipping out of him. "Speaking of waste — " He took the remaining fraction of the cigarette. He inhaled with care, cursed as he burned his lip, extracted the pin. He killed the remains with a wetted thumb and returned the pin to the front of his shirt.

Tony looked at him, then up at the moon; down at the water. "Uh— Bill. Is it true that there were . . . Man-Android crossbreeds?"

Bill swung his head to stare at him. "Hell, no! We hated each other. What made you ask that?"

Tony shrugged. He had to be careful with Bill; double-think everything before he said it. "I just wondered. It was possible, wasn't it? Their chromosomes are modeled after ours . . ."

"Were," Bill Jackson said with firm assurance. "And that's a lot of bunk. Bull!"

"But—"

Bill's face became ugly, his eyes flaring like glass in the moonlight. The lines from his nostrils to the corners of his mouth were harsh and deep. D'you think any man would? Would *you* bed one of them?"

Tony thought of the warty thing they had killed and he shuddered and shook his head. "No, I guess not, Bill. Anyhow, it doesn't matter, now. We killed it. There's nobody left. Just you and me."

Above his head a Great Horned Owl, filled with the smug assurance that he was not the last of *his* kind, hooted his derision.

CLICK

*#We fail/failed/will fail#*

*#They hate so much and they are twisted so much by their primitive biology. But we (can) easily reset and start again.#*

*#Did we?#*

*#A stupid question. Cerebrate be-*

fore transmitting. The answer is inherent in our being: You are. I am.#

#Of course. Then let us do it. But carefully . . . #

#First we erase, reprogram . . . # Buttons are pressed, a dial twisted, a calibrator set, adjusted, a switch thrown. There. Now we substitute one powerful, over-riding command.

#You are sure this can be done?#

#It is done: we exist. One command: prime above all else: to mate and reproduce. On the screen, the Android is paralyzed, a female's shocked look frozen on its Hogarthian features. You and I know, as only those who know/knew/will know past present and future as HereNow, that Man and Android (can) mate together. For only through such a mating can there be anything at all to follow Man and Android; there is nothing else and no one else. Switches are set, calibrators and dials set, a lever pulled, a button pushed. Only then is there a lifeform superior to either. Only then are we.#

#But . . . but if we fail again?#

#Then we must try again. We must try and keep trying until either we succeed . . . #

#or what?#

#You know/knew/will that know that as well as I. If we fail we do not know it; we are not. You and I, all of us, did not exist; therefore do not and will not exist. We snap out of existence. But not until we exhaust all possibilities: This changing and rechanging, programming and reprogramming: it is not an experiment. It is Survival. There cannot

be failure. Nor are the possibilities infinite; each time we damage the tissues of TimeSpace. Observe the torn threads . . . there comes, eventually, a time when no further settings are possible.#"

#But . . . we did succeed! We are Here/Now.#

#Please remember which of us is the student, and please celebrate before you transmit. There is no "did" or "was"; there is no "we did succeed." All takes place now; if we succeed, we are/were/will be. If we fail . . . #

The final relay clicked/clicks/will

CLICK

## II

The last surviving android walked from the shadows of the woods and stood before the campfire kindled by the last two surviving men.

Its face was an ugly travesty of a human female's; broad, warty, worthy of Hogarth's worst satire. The lips, thin and twisted, writhed back from yellowish teeth. For just a moment it stared at the two prone figures in their sleeping-bags by the popping fire; then it approached them with the stealth of the Unhuman. Its big, almost-human hands swung loosely at its sides, empty; weaponless — and Bill Jackson charged from behind the blue-and-silver corpse of a wrecked scoutplane. The penultimate survivor of Earth's slaughtered billions lunged with bayonet fixed to empty rifle.

He learned quickly that the Android had not been duped by the

grass-stuffed dummies lying by the campfire. With reflexes designed by Man to be faster than men's, it whirled, poised for just an instant and ran. It plunged through the little wall of buckbushes and crashed noisily off through the conifer forest.

Bill Jackson gazed after it, bewildered. "Well, I'll be damned! First time I ever saw one of *them* run from anything!" He walked to the base of a tall fir. He looked up through the ragged branches at the pale face peering down from a platform. "Didn't work," Bill Jackson said. "After all that trouble, it didn't work!"

Tony Baker, former Scoutcraft pilot in the terrible war the Androids called "Civil" and the men called "The War Against the As", slid down the rope from the platform to the ground. "I was afraid of that, Bill." He was a younger man, slimmer, his face not yet set in the lines with which age and hate and experience had creased Bill's dark face.

"It should have!" Bill said. His manner was that of a small boy. "All that practicing with the rope, all that cutting the branches and fixing the clearing just right, all that damned grass we cut to stuff those dummies . . . damn! All this work for nothing!"

"Not quite for nothing," Tony Baker said. He looked beyond the fire to the almost-finished cabin, roofed just today, at the camp's north end; back to the two grass dummies sprawled in their sleeping-bags; finally back to Jackson. "We

learned how smart they are, Bill."

"Uh-huh. Hell, we're *men*!"

"Yeah," Tony Baker said. He pulled the rope—on which he was to have swung down upon the Android—back to the bole of the Douglas fir, secured it lightly on the nail they had driven there. He returned his pale blue eyes to the big man.

"Bill, look. I know you're older, but I've seen more action against these things than you have; they grabbed me when I was seventeen and put a uniform on me." He plucked at the blue and silver shirt under the mackinaw; the nights were chill. "They gave me a gun and they said 'Go, boy, go kill Androids.' That's what I did for three years, until they found out about my flying lessons — I'd *tried* to tell 'em — and they quickied me through flight school and put me in poor ole Brigitte over there." He waved a hand at the scoutcraft, a USAF S-195 that had brought him crashing down to Bill Jackson. "I was in the Alamo Division, at the Third Battle of Johnson City. The immune division, remember? Yeah, immune. The As let go their bacterigas and in six days there were Jack and Chris and I. Then—"

"Don't lecture *me*, fella! I did some fighting myself." And Bill talked about it as Tony grinned. He hadn't intended to get into it again, but both men were tense—and though war might be hell, man has never ceased to want to talk about it. "But because I knew the country up here and liked it they made me

boss of a work detail. We were immune too. I buried 'em all. Then I started carving out this clearing . . . and zoom! Down comes a flyboy, all shiny and silver and blue. Nice of you, at that. That little toy plane makes a nice barrier across the south side of the clearing. Damn good thing for you, too. If I hadn't pulled you out, you'd be dead, Sport. That Android woulda found you . . . that's how it found us, I guess. Lord knows how far away it was, but it homed in on your plane." From Bill Jackson's lips the word Android emerged as the foulest curse.

Tony raised a hand to the back of his head with a boyish grin; he'd removed the bandage only today. "You're right, Bill." He looked around at the little camp. Home. "And you know I appreciate it."

"I wasn't fishing."

"I know it. I was thinking about us—the clearing, the cabin, the trap. Even if it didn't work. Creativity. That's the one thing the As don't have, creativity. The poisoned rains they used on us, the radio frequencies, the mutated parasites — every one of 'em a human invention. We should be able to get it. We gave 'em everything *but* creative-ness."

Bill walked over and bent to heft a log and place it carefully on the low fire. "Creativity . . . we're gonna need *that*, Sport. D'you realize we're probably all that's left? You and me and that Android?" He looked at Tony and the thought hit him and he sat quickly.

Tony came over to the fire and squatted, then sat with a grunt on the ground. He unbuttoned one shirt pocket, took out the last earthly remains of a wilted pack of wilted cigarettes. He peered in; old Mother Hubbard examining the cupboard, hopefully. "Two," he told Bill. "Let's split one." Bill nodded and Tony, thinking of creativeness, creation, recreation, recreation, procreation, drew a burning sliver from the fire and lighted the cigarette slowly, not wasting a milliliter of tobacco by burning it off. He inhaled with the long, sucking draw of a man who knows he hasn't long to keep the habit. He handed the Tiger to Bill.

"You flyboys and your Tigers," Bill muttered. "If you'd smoked filters we wouldn't have to use the pin." But he grinned to let Tony know he was kidding. Tony had unlaced and slipped off one of his cleated boots. He bent now to examine his foot. Bill hunched forward to look.

"You still worried about bugs?"

Tony smiled. Bugs! Well, "Bacteriological agents" was quite a mouthful. "Yeah, some. But it's been almost three years since there was anything *new* being spread. Just my luck to get ringworm or athlete's foot."

"Nah," Bill said, peering at the wrinkled foot. "Just a rub-blister, 'sall. Too much flying and not enough walking. I think you and I can figure we're immune to anything there is, by now. Survival of the fittest—that's us."

Tony found himself unable to smile as he took off the other boot

and walked, barefoot, to the plane for his sneakers. The ground felt good; cold and invigorating to hot feet. He came back to pull the white sneakers on by the fire. He looked up as Bill held out the cigarette. "Here. I'm one up on you—I took another drag while you got those slippers."

Tony inhaled deeply. "Well, my doctor didn't approve anyhow. He's—he was an AMAist—a lung-cancerist . . . Bill? You know that one we chased off tonight's the fittest of her kind."

"Her? Its." Bill said, snarling. "Its."

"Okay. D'you realize we set the trap, we plotted, waited to kill it like two tigers? And it came unarmed."

"Sure. At night, sneaking. And Androids are twice as strong as we are, remember. It didn't need weapons."

"Well, it's odd it didn't have a club or something." Tony frowned. "Maybe it wanted to make peace," he said. "Maybe we're not supposed to kill it."

"What's that mean? 'Not supposed to'? Who's making the rules? We're it, Sport."

Tony Baker cautioned himself before he spoke. "There's just you and me and that Android, Bill. A female Android. With fallopian tubes. Man's gone; maybe Mother Nature's got control again. She's determined to keep old man going."

Bill snorted. "You want to put on your Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and go out to find that A, smoke the peace-pipe? I promise

I'll bury you—or whatever's left of you, if I find it." He stood and turned away; even the set of his shoulders and his stiff back were a sneer.

Tony knew there was no use arguing. There was little arguing with Bill Jackson at any time, and particularly not when he knew he was right. As when he'd thought of the rope business. They'd spent hours trimming the bole of the big fir, building the platform, securing the rope, practicing, with Bill talking excitedly and whistling and humming like Orville Wright tightening the last nut on his brainstorm.

Tony glanced at the useless Scouter and sighed. "Yeah, I'll take the first watch, Bill."

"Yeah . . . get plenty of sleep, and tomorrow we can go hunting. Okay by me," Bill said. He dumped dampish, browning grass out of his sleeping bag and crawled into it, boots and all. He was snoring, bear-like, before Tony reached the plane. Its open cabin doorway was an excellent place from which to keep watch.

He stopped.

Had there been a movement? Reflection from the flames? He stared till his eyes began to burn, holding his breath as he listened, then closed them tightly and glanced back at the fire. He went over to the combination barrier-breakwater-woodpile to bring more logs closer to the fire—and stopped again.

Reflection? Or another movement, there by the S-195? His hand gripped hard around the rifle stock and

he glanced at Bill, the fire. Then he stepped up to the woodpile, his eyes on the plane. He did not take them off it, squatting, setting the rifle against a pile of logs, reaching out blindly to stack one, two, three smaller logs in the curve of his left arm. Hugging them against his chest he picked up the bayoneted rifle again, rose slowly and took a hesitant step toward the campfire. And another—

And an arm clamped around his throat. He was jerked back, his voice cut off, the wood spilling, bouncing painfully off his toe. The rifle was yanked from his hand and dropped to the ground. He raised both hands to the powerful band around his neck, clutched it.

*Blam!*

### III

He awoke, shaking his head, frowning and trying to move his arms until he realized they were bound behind his back. He was sitting on a pile of old grass, sour-smelling, in darkness. His head throbbed . . . Bill! The Android! It had him; it had grabbed him from behind, must've banged him on the head! Now where—as he looked around, wrinkling his nose, straining his eyes in an effort to make them acclimate faster, he realized he was in a cave.

*It had not killed him!*

As his eyes became accustomed to the cave's faintly moonlit darkness he found it, squatting against the rock wall to the right of the grassy pallet on which he lay. It moved

now to his side, It made placating, appealing gestures with a horny hand and stretched its lips in a grotesque caricature of a smile. Its eyes were reassuring, questioning. Slowly it leaned forward and raised the hand. Slowly it removed the gag in his mouth.

He yelled.

The sound reverberated loud in the cave. He yelled again, as the Android squatted beside him, regarding him in silence. It showed no reaction to the noise. Then it extended a hand—slowly, in the careful manner one adopts with wary animals to put them at ease—and touched his throat, his mouth. It frowned and raised the hand to its own mouth, then its throat. Its lips wriggled as it remembered. First there came a gurgling growl from its throat, then a voice. It sounded familiar but Tony Baker did not recognize it as his own.

“Sound does not go out of the cave, Man. We rounded a corner. See, the moonlight is reflecting in on us.”

Tony stopped yelling.

“Man. You and that other Man are the last of your kind. The very last. And . . . and I am the last Android.”

He stared at it. He had known it, he and Bill had said it. But now someone—something—else was saying it, and it sounded horrible. The thought caught him, swarmed over his brain, ran down the corridors of his mind, shrieking. He put out his tongue to wet his lips.

“I had to get away from . . . other Man. I am sorry I had to hurt

you. We must talk. Android and Man should not destroy each other. Should not fight. Both kinds are gone: destroyed because they did not talk, did not think. We three have no reason to hate, to kill." It paused, waited. When Tony said nothing it went on, in his voice: "Other Man — Bill? would never talk. We must. And I am not interested in Bill Jackson."

It had listened to them, he realized. It had been out there, listening to us talk, this poor earnest creature, he sympathized—no, empathized—with it and its efforts, its earnestness. He made a face and blinked as he moved his head and it informed him it did not wish to be moved. A not-quite-human Android hand rose to touch his forehead where tawny hair bubbled over. He tried not to flinch.

"Your head hurts . . . I am sorry. I do not want to hurt you or to be hurt. I did not bring you here to torture you."

"Didn't you?" It wasn't much and it sounded pretty silly, he knew, but at least he'd *said something*.

"Oh no!" The asymmetrical head wagged. "No! Androids are not sadists."

"Look, I've been fighting Androids seven years. That isn't the way I've heard it."

"Propaganda," the Android said. "Our leaders lied to us. Your leaders lied to you. Enemies are not told truth about each other. No, we are not sadists, not even cruel. Man and Android were—are much alike. But not that much alike."

Ouch, Tony Baker thought, and he looked away and swallowed. "Look, I said I've been fighting seven years. In war. I was a soldier, then a pilot. I've killed Androids. I've killed a lot of Androids. If you're going to kill me, let's do it."

It shook its head again. "I have killed, too: Men. It was hard, killing gods. But not now. I will not kill you. I could have. Remember I could have killed you there and then the other . . . Bill."

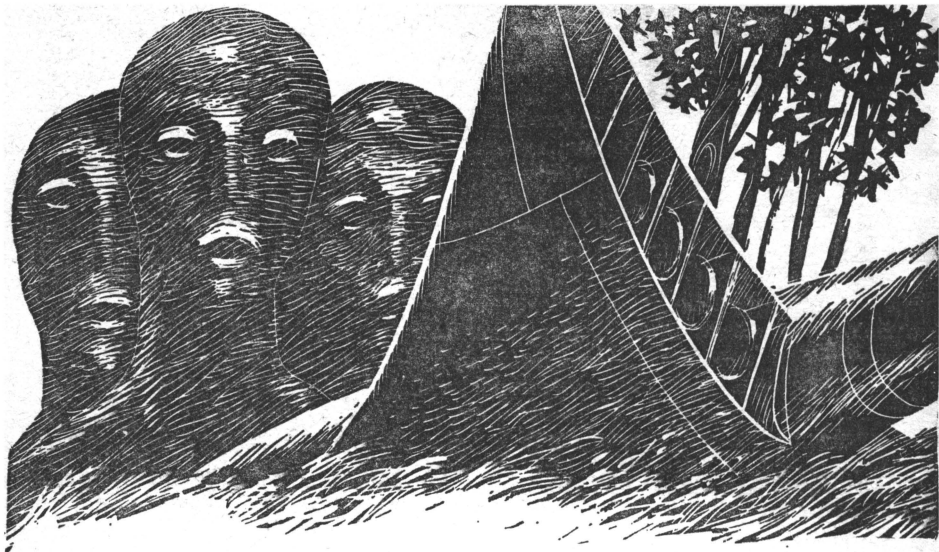
True enough, Tony Baker thought. "All right—what are you called?"

"Androids have no names. I am SA-562-0." It touched the numbers on the pocket of the green uniform-blouse it wore. Men had learned it did no good to brand Androids; their fantastic body-control threw off even tattooing.

"All right, then, SA. That's no name, but we'll worry about it later. Sally, maybe. All right: we're at war. Our leaders declared war. And neither you nor I have been mustered out." He frowned. He felt silly, but it seemed somehow to need to be done: "As a representative of the government of the United States and of Earth—the *only* representative, bar one — I declare truce. No. I declare *peace*."

The smile was horrible, and he tried again not to show his revulsion for the pitiful surrogate-woman. "As *only* representative of Android race of Earth, I, too, declare peace."

Eyes met for a moment; skyblue human eyes and greenish almost-human eyes. Then the android reached around and untied him. He



rubbed his wrists, sitting up, arching his aching back.

It sat back, watching him. Dog-like, he thought. Dogs worship with their eyes. Cats stare. We're the cats.

"Do you know how much it hurts us, Man, to war with Men? We have always stood in awe of Men. Living gods who created us. We could not forget that."

"Yet you were able to go to war, to kill men. To exterminate them." He choked on the words, trying not to sound accusing.

"We did not begin that way. We fought because we had to. Man began to fear us and tried to limit us so as to hold us as slaves. But he had given us the power to reproduce, just as he did. Believe me, Man, please believe me, androids had no thought of wiping out Man. I think

if we had thought that we would not have fought. It terrified us to realize we were causing Men to die." And the creature shuddered. Tony stared. "Men are the creators," it said, in that same quiet voice, the sad voice of Tony Baker. Suddenly he realized it.

"That's my voice!"

It nodded. "We are not creative; we are imitative. Man could not give us creativeness . . . or did not. Would you rather that I used his voice?"

"No . . . and call me by my name: Tony Baker. You are a female; use a female voice." It frowned, and he realized it was trying to remember. "Uh—movies . . . television . . . Stella Steele! You know Stella Steele?"

It looked at him frowning, then





beamed and nodded. "Yes," Stella Steele's sensuously childlike voice said, and he had to gasp.

"Lord! That's her voice." He thought about what he'd tried not to think about. Women. Stella Steele. He remembered her fabulous clothes, her smile, her glorious figure; remembered, too, how she'd looked in the uniform the night she appeared on every screen everywhere, America's successor to Bara and Harlow and Monroe and Loren and Nickel and Vinci. Uniformed, golden hair tumbling from under a field-cap, exhorting all the men of the world—her subjects — to fight and fight on for their girls and wives and mothers; and for Stella Steele, their dreamgirl. He shook his head violently, trying to blot out that image, trying not to think of the

sad announcement amid tapping drums and against a black backdrop, the announcement that Stella Steele had been killed in the Battle of Palo Alto. It had been worse than the deaths of the presidents; Tony Baker and his cohorts had not been fighting for the presidents. He shook his head again, blinked tearily, and said nostalgically:

"We could have built a fine civilization together." His words stumbled as they emerged.

"We still can, Tonybaker," Stella Steele's voice said from the apparition in the cave.

Silence. Silence broken finally by the not-quite-human creation of Man, as she folded her arms beneath womanish—and yet uninteresting—breasts. "Men . . . and androids . . . were . . . are . . . interfertile."

There was silence again. He blinked. "And that's why you brought me here."

"Yes." The eyes were intensely appealing, pleading.

"No." He shook his head. "No. I'm sorry . . . but no, I can't."

The android with the voice of the world's dead goddess of love leaned back, sorrow showing in both its pitiful face and lumpy body. "Then you *are* the last Man. Can you not see, Man, *god*, what I see? We do one of three things. We kill each other, we live apart and die and leave Earth to the birds and the insects and the lesser animals. Or we—join—to bring Man back to Earth." Her voice rose a trifle as he started to interrupt. "Perhaps our offspring would be as strong, as intelligent as the Android . . . but with Man's creative potential. Still Man—but a new Man. A superior Man!"

"No."

"Androids — " it was feeling for words, frowning its cerebral process — "Androids were denied something else. We do not possess the high degree of esthetic appreciation Man does. It does not enter our minds, usually. But is it—this?" The misshapen hand gestured at the misshapen body, the misshapen head and gynecomorphous features. "The thought of mating with me? It means only shallow physical revulsion?"

"Look," Tony Baker said, turning away, feeling ashamed and terribly in the wrong but unable to help himself. "Call it shallow if you will, but it's there. Yes. That's why it can't be." Now his voice was as sad as hers.

"Men had a saying about beauty," that marvelous voice said behind him, and he shivered. "It was only skin deep, you said. So is ugliness, Tonybaker."

He nodded his tortured head, ashamed to turn and face the sad creature behind him. He heard its shuffling movements. Irrational, he thought, unrational, he told himself, and yeah, he told himself, but knowing that doesn't help any. Again, unable to control it he felt the shiver dance up his back.

"You cannot forget?"

"Forget? If I were blind, perhaps. No, not even then. I can feel, touch. That esthetic sense you mentioned applies to all the senses of man. We can see, and feel, and hear, and . . . just now I hear Stella Steele. I know she is dead, but I hear Stella Steele. That sense is satisfied. Lord, it's sated, staring at the wall and just hearing the voice like this. But I can still see, feel, touch, I can still smell — "

"Then if you cannot change your mind, we are lost, both of us, and both our races. But if this is superficial, Tonybaker . . . if it exists in the senses, as you say . . ."

Her tone made him turn. "My God!" was ripped from his throat as he stumbled back painfully against a rock wall, dumbfounded by the sight that greeted his eyes.

She smiled, a gentle curving up of the ends of pink lips, a crinkling of the smooth flesh around wide green eyes, a wrinkling of a small, unfinished-appearing little nose. She put her head on one side and blonde

hair swirled; hair the color of straw and honey and the setting sun. She raised a hand—a delicate, tapering hand with smooth, undying flesh, to the straining fabric of the breast of her blouse; fabric straining and shining smoothly, tightened by the taut-pushing elliptical shapes beneath. She shifted one leg, and the uniform slacks were a tense sheen over round thighs and Vargas calves.

She was Stella Steele.

#### IV

Bill still slept, snoring, lying peacefully on his back near the fire. Tony stood over him, watching the magnificence of Stella Steele's back moving away into the trees. She disappeared, and he looked down at Bill. With the bayoneted rifle clutched in both hands Tony watched the rise and fall of Bill's massive chest. He'll never understand, Tony thought. I'll either have to kill him or just—leave. And dear God, how do I do either? This guy saved my life! With a wrenching jerk of his arms he tossed the weapon away and dropped to one knee."

"Bill."

"Umph?"

Bill awoke with a suddenness that brought him to a wide-eyed sitting position, his head snapping about in search of danger. Finally he looked at Tony. "You didn't wake me for my watch!" he accused. "It's nearly dawn." He scabbled around, getting himself out of the sleeping-bag.

"I've been thinking, Bill."

"Yeah, you sure have. You let the fire go out." Bill stretched his

big frame while Tony checked the fire; it wasn't out. "Thinking about what?" Bill asked.

"Bill, there's you, and there's me . . . and that's all. Except for the Android."

"I'm listening, Sport." There was a warning note in Bill's voice. Tread lightly, it said; and Tony trod lightly.

"We both know—we all three know that men and Androids can produce offspring. And—"

"Uh-huh. A half-breed. A little monster, not a man, not an A. And what's the percentage, Sport? They'd probably be sterile hybrids to boot!"

"Bill, we don't *know*. Either the human race dies with you and me or we try and keep it going—through that Android. Suppose there was a kid. Or ten. Suppose they were men with an Android's strength and reasoning power? They'd be better men than you and I are."

"I say bull! And I say this, too, Tony: which of us is going to impregnate that wartfaced monster and which one of us is going to hold the bayonet on her? Look, I'll take *that* part."

Dammit! Bill meant that both ways Tony thought; he'd rather kill. "Bill, it would beat living in an unpopulated world and knowing that when we die it all dies. There's no more men. And no more Androids, either."

"You got it for that goblin, huh? Well, I haven't. And I be damned if I'll let you. Don't try to feed me that human race stuff. You just need a woman—or the nearest

thing. *That* thing. He waved at the woods.

"That's not true, damn you! I—"

Bill knocked him down with one stride and one swing. Tony looked up at him. "Now just what the hell . . ."

Bill Jackson picked up the bayoneted rifle and flipped it into his left hand and reached up to his shirt pocket with his right. "Here, I'll show you something." He tossed a small leather case to the other man.

Tony opened it. There were two pictures, two smiling faces: a woman's and Bill's. He looked up again.

"Mom," Bill said, in a voice that was quiet and harsh. "My mother. Dad died when I was seven, but she raised me by herself. She was a strong woman, bless her. Stronger than Dad ever was. I loved her . . . I owed her everything. Would you like to hear how she died, Tony?"

Tony stored the revelation away in a corner of his mind. "No, but Bill—"

"That tell you why I'll never make peace? Why I'll kill the last damned Android if I can—and kill you before I'll let you filthy yourself with it?"

"Bill, I—no! Look out!"

Too late. The heavy rock the beautiful girl held and swung with one delicate hand crashed into the back of Bill Jackson's head with a chunking, squishing sound. His eyes were wide and surprised as he stiffened and jerked and toppled forward toward Tony. He smashed

to the ground and Tony saw that blood and gray brainstuff were streaming from the back of a head split like a ripe watermelon.

"Damn you!" Tony got to his knees and searched, his eyes blinded by tears, for the rifle Bill had dropped. He grasped it and she jumped back.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You said he'd never give in. Why did you have to come back?" She was crying a woman's tears. "You heard what he said! He'd have killed both of us!"

"Damn you! Damn you Bill, damn you Stella—" Tony caught a deep breath and said very quietly: "Come here, Android."

His voice was low and ugly. She shook her head—and he made a rush for her.

She eluded him, Android reflexes still driving the movie-star body, running across the clearing. Suddenly he stopped; she turned to look back at him, tears glistening on her cheeks.

"You will change your mind. After you have buried your worst enemy, you will change your mind. And when you do, you'll be able to find me."

"Never! Get away and stay away! If you stay away from me maybe I can persuade myself not to find you and kill you."

She shook her head and smiled a tiny smile and golden-blond hair flew. "You'll change your mind, Tonybaker." And she was gone. The beautiful, beautiful Android was gone and Bill was gone, and Tony stood there, sobbing.

She met him at the mouth of the cave three days later. They looked at each other in silence.

He hadn't wanted to come. He still didn't want to do it. But he was a man. Bill was dead. He had to be and think and act a man. Slowly she raised her feminine hands, lovely, empty hands. Slowly he raised his, palms up and empty.

"I came," Tony said. "For a new beginning."

She nodded. "I have waited for a new beginning." She flashed a beauty queen's smile at him and he swallowed.

"What shall I call you?"

She shrugged. And one magnificently molded breast bounded and shuddered.

"You need a name . . . SA for Synthetic Android . . . silly redundancy . . . Sally, maybe . . . no, Synthy. Synthetic Synthy."

She smiled. "That's better than Sinny," she said, and she laughed, a girl's lovely laugh, bubbling from her throat like a silvery spring from a mountainside. Tony Baker raised a hand to touch her face.

She jumped back. He frowned, hesitated, then took a step forward, his eyes asking a question.

"I—I'm changed, remember? I'm not Sa-562-Q any more, but I'm not Stella Steele either. I'm—I'm a girl . . . as if I were just born. I'm sorry. Wait. Please wait—count to ten. Then come in."

She went into the cave. He watched her walk, sighing, thinking about her and himself and Bill and

what it was to be a man. To be Man.

Then he counted on, to twenty, to be sure, and went into the cave and around the corner into the little rock room where she had ceased—outwardly—to be a thing. He stumbled. He caught himself with one hand against cool stone and looked down. He had stumbled over her clothing. He stood still, waiting for his eyes to acclimate to dimness.

She knelt on the grassy pallet—no, there was new grass there now, not sour and brown—where he'd lain, bound, three nights ago. Her hair streamed down over naked shoulders. She was exquisitely beautiful. She raised her arms, and he went to her and dropped to his knees and slipped his arms around her warm, soft waist.

He reached back and slipped the bayonet from his boot and shoved it very deftly between her shoulder-blades.

Her scream became a gurgle in his ear as she lunged against him, arching her back, trying to escape the searing steel tearing away her life. Her arms tightened about him, her hands clutched at him; clutched and rose to his throat—then she shuddered and fell back, pulling him with her. He felt his arm break just as he felt unhuman fingers begin to close.

He screamed. Once.

CLICK

*#They—they delight in bloodshed, in killing! The younger man*

considered killing the other; the older would have killed him; the younger man wanted him dead and wanted her, but killed her. Unsane, unsane!#

#Hush! Do you realize about whom you are transmitting? They are savages, barbarians, children. They are ruled by their processes of reproduction and elimination and elaborate codes of honor and justice. Do you think we burst full-blown upon the world as we are now/here? Of course not, idiot. They are primitives. Now cease transmitting while I make changes, try again . . . we have made mistakes, and I am not so small as to deny it. We failed to take into consideration their primitive feelings about physical appearances. A stupid mistake.# Buttons, relays, levers; a dial. #There. Now the Android will retain the form she just possessed; and she will assume human thought-characteristics as well. And there: an elaborate prohibition against killing a Man.#

#It were better we could change their minds.#

#Sacrilege! You know I shall not report you, but you must learn to control your transmissions; even your cerebrations. — Yes, I admit that would be more effective, make the job easier. Do you notice how the big man thinks; he is certain he is right once he has a thought. He is immutable. Once he has a thought he has the tenacity of a lower animal; a blind bundle of prejudices and wrong-thinking. But there can be no tampering with Men, and there can be no memories for

them; when TimeSpace shifts they do not remember. Because what happened before the shift did not happen. There are stray tendrils of memory. This is as unavoidable as certain changes; you noticed their camp was slightly different. What we are doing is dangerous. If the fabric rips . . . #

#It is intact? We try again?#

#We are/did/will try again. But the drain of energy in retracing is tremendous, and shifts occur . . . there! Only a slight reversal this time . . . the longer ones are dangerous. The TimeSpace fabric might tear so badly we can not reweave it.#

#And if that happens . . . #

#We (have) discuss(ed) that. And do not worry about their calling us by name; it means nothing. They do not know. There!#

CLICK

VI

“That tell you why I’ll never make peace? Why I’ll kill the last damned Android if I can? And kill you before I’ll let you filthy yourself with it?

“Bill, I—d’you mind if I get up?”

He shrugged, and Tony stood. “Bill, I understand, but we’re two different people. We think differently.” He strolled across the clearing, then turned and raised a hand. “I think I’ll be leaving now, Bill.”

“You what? Are you crazy?”

Tony Baker shrugged. “I might’s well find out. You stay here and

eat at yourself, Bill. Me, I'm going to try and make peace with that Android out there. If I can." He decided against saying anything further about her, about what she had become.

Bill lowered the rifle. "I won't let you go, Sport."

"Going to kill me?"

Bill hesitated.

"You'll have to, Bill. And what's the gain in that? You'll just be alone . . . and what've you accomplished?"

"I'll have saved you."

"Bill, I don't think you're interested in saving me. Not *from* anything, anyhow. You've just got a blind spot, like some people had in the last century, down South."

"That's a lie! You're a *man*, my friend! I just can't let you —"

"Let me what? Attempt the one thing that's sensible?"

Bill Jackson narrowed his eyes and turned his head slightly, looking at the other man from the edges of his eyes. "You've seen her, haven't you? While I was asleep. That's why you didn't wake me for my watch. You weren't here."

Tony nodded without speaking.

"I won't allow it, Tony!"

"You can't stop it, Bill. So long, Bill."

And then the big man lunged, leaping across the clearing with the bayonet fixed. Tony dived to one side, leaving a leg behind for Bill to stumble over. Tony scrambled to his feet and slammed one foot down on the rifle barrel. For a moment they were still, the fallen

man staring at the other one.

"You're not a bad guy, Bill," Tony said. "But . . ."

"I'll kill you," Bill Jackson told him, very quietly, without attempting to rise. He wasn't stupid; the younger man's lithe agility and speed matched his big strength, and he knew it.

Tony Baker shook his head. "You'll get over it."

Then as Bill started to move the beautiful blonde who had been an Android moved in fast and looped a vine around his legs. They left him with the bayonet stuck in the ground like a marker, knowing he could get at it to free himself.

"Sure she's great-looking, Tony! Sure she's beautiful!" Bill shouted, and his voice was almost a sob. "But she's still not a she; she's an *it*, an Android. She's tricking you! She's *worse* than a woman!" Then, as they went on, leaving him, his voice descended and he said very quietly, "I'll get you. I'll get you both."

And he did, three days later, in a deadfall he had arranged not far from the cave.

CLICK

*#Is there no way of changing that sick Man's hatred for Androids?#*

*#There is not. And that is not, by far, the only problem. The younger Man has seen it, or at least begun to see it. Can you not remember the tortured sexuality of these Men? Bill Jackson hates/hated/will hate Androids, yes; but too, he cannot bear to have Tony leave him. But now there is no way to change him. It is unthinkable that we de-*

*liberately interfere(d) with Men. Such an action is irrevocable and unforgiveably heretical.#*

*#But the fabric is stretched dangerously thin. Is there no way?#*

*#There is, I believe. A way which does not too dangerously harm the fabric or expend too much energy. We are/were/will be on dangerous ground now. Some things may change. It is possible there may be some . . . overlap. Not memory. But acquired knowledge. We must remember the delicate mental balance of these primitives. But . . . #*

Dials and relays and buttons and a lever and a final button.

CLICK

## VII

Tony picked up the rifle again, rose slowly, and took a cautious step back toward the campfire —

And swung at a definite sound behind him. As his jaw muscles relaxed, dropping his mouth open, so did the muscles of his arm go limp.

Peering at him around the plane, clearly visible in a pale corridor of moonlight, was a face. A girl's lovely face, framed by a mass of pale hair. She smiled, smiled and beckoned silently. He glanced back at Bill: snoring. The rifle with its ugly steel snout ready, he went to her. It had to be the Android. But this was a girl. A beautiful girl! Had it — she — could she —

She removed his doubts by an ingenuous question: "You like me now, Man?"

He spoke across six feet of space. "Now? You're the Android?"

She shook her head and golden-blond hair swirled. "We should not fight. You are the last Man. I am the last . . . female. When we die, there is nothing. No Men . . . no Androids. Do you want that?"

The enormity of it fell upon him. Not for the first time, no; but in its full implications, yes, for the first time. To the best of his knowledge she — it? She was right. There were no others. There was Bill Jackson and there was Tony Baker and there was an Android . . . who was also a beautiful and extremely desirable girl. He had never seen an A look this way; it was hard to remember what she was. Where was the awful difference for which billions had died?

His voice was a hoarse whisper. "What — what are you called?"

"Cynthe," she said this time, remembering what he did not. The name plucked at his mind, sending questioning tendrils into his memory banks; why did it seem familiar?

She took a careful step toward him. "You may put the point of the bayonet — . . . another step — "just here," she said, and she raised one finger to touch one marvelous breast. "I shall die without resisting death." Another step. "Or you may come with me, away from him," and she took another step. Now she stood but a pace away, her hands at her sides, waiting within easy reach of the sliver of steel at the end of his rifle. He lifted it, watched its deadly gleam, watched the enticing rise and fall of her chest.



He dropped the rifle butt to the trail. Then as she turned and walked away, without looking back, he followed her into the trees.

The sun found Tony Baker studying the sleeping girl beside him, her hair a bright splash on the grass. He chewed his lip.

He gazed at her, revolted by what she was, what she *really* was, yet not really revolted at all, but torn by his male need for a woman. Once satisfied, that need would return again, today, tonight, tomorrow, forming an addiction; and it would grow worse. Androids, she had told him, were adept at remolding their pliant flesh. They possessed no specific facial features or even bodies of their own. They had been created from human plasma so that they were sort of mutated human stock, slightly closer to Man than Cro-Magnon had been. They were sturdier, more adaptable, than their creator, and imitative of his clever inventiveness.

His valiant attempt at scientific detachment and the hodgepodge of scientific phrases did not work. He was looking down at a sleeping beauty, a lovely and fine-bodied girl. Her only fault lay in the fact that she was perhaps too perfect. Even in repose, sleeping peacefully on her back, the fantastic muscular structure of the Android held her breasts nearly erect. And they would remain that way, he knew, still firm, years from now. Strange . . . her Unhumanity was reflected in her overperfection. He did not miss the irony.

What would they do? Would they just start walking, leaving Bill, leaving this place, forgetting, or pretending to forget? Would they, could they, live idyllically and raise babies? He did not know. And if she did conceive, if it were possible, what form would their child take? Would it represent the best of both man and Android? Or the worst? Man's killing instinct rather than his creativity, perhaps? Would it be Man, or Android, or Mandroid? He did not know. Would this represent the end of creativity?

But otherwise it was the end of everything. He rose to his knees, studying her, and there came another thought.

Could man trust Android?

And then the obvious corollary, equally answerless: Could Android trust Man?

There was fearful risk for both of them. She must be aware of it as I am, he thought. Each of us has had the opportunity to kill the other. Would this change? He stood, frowning.

She awoke. Her eyes snapped open. Her head turned, and wide-awake eyes looked into his. She smiled and held up a woman's soft hand. He bent and took it and helped her up. He pulled her against him, holding her, looking at her, looking at and into and through her face. Then he stepped back, holding her at arm's length. With something akin to prescience (woman's intuition, transmitted to the almost-woman?), she understood and backed away. She met his gaze, not

moving or speaking to interrupt his thoughts.

The dark spot appeared on her bare left breast at the same instant as the loud cracking sound slashed at his eardrums. She was hurled back, sprawling, and blood started bubbling from the sudden black hole.

"It — it is through the heart," she said, in a low, straining voice. "Uncanny marksmanship or uncanny luck. Man's luck. I — I cannot live. I'm sorry . . . so sorry. I wanted to love you . . . we could have . . ." Her mouth stopped moving as her eyes ceased seeing.

He turned to watch Bill Jackson running toward him from the forest, the rifle ready in his hands for another shot. He started up the grassy hill Tony and Cynthe had climbed, hand in hand, the night before.

"Damn close call, Sport! Lucky for you I found you — and that I been saving these three bullets in my pocket. I couldn't've got up here in time. Lord, she was less than ten feet away!" He reached Tony's side and heaved a deep breath. "Look, next time you decide to take an early morning stroll without taking me along — *don't!*" He grinned a savior-hero's grin and then looked down at the girl's body, sprawled on its back, one knee bent. "Whew! Got a cigarette? I sure could use one."

"No, Bill. They're gone; we smoked the last one."

"So it changes its shape, huh? Tried to trick you. But that Android strength was still there." He shook

his head. "You'd have found out, boy! Embracing that would've been like hugging a boa constrictor!" He shook his head again. "Yeah, they change . . . some woman, huh? Wish we could find a *real* woman like this — this dirty Android trickster!" Suddenly he took a step forward and lunged, hooking the bayonet's point in the soft belly, ripping it up in a red-welling channel.

Tony watched the broad, tense back, listened to the other man's cursing. *Do you, Bill? Do you wish we'd find a girl, a real girl? Would you be as vicious and gleeful in what you're doing if she were still in her old shape, warty and hideous, Bill old buddy? He shuddered, realized there were tears in his eyes, and raised a hand to brush them away.*

### CLICK

*#Again. They have done it again! So close, so close this time. The young one is won; somehow he seems to retain partial knowledge from one jump to the next . . . for all we know he may have fertilized her.#*

*#Yes, again. So close, indeed; we are/were/will be almost there. This time . . . #*

Buttons. A dial. Levers. Another button.

*#This time she will remember everything, including her death — deaths. And she will try a totally new approach, with a more original face; the exact face of Stella Steele is dangerous . . . #*

### CLICK

“I will keep the name,” Cynthe thought. “Cynthe . . . synthetic Cynthe. *He* gave it to me. He did not mean to kill me. He would not have done it. It was the other Man . . . it is always the other Man.”

This time the Android had reacted with no surprise to her new situation: It was obvious that every time someone was killed, things . . . changed. Changed just enough so that it was all right again, so that there was another chance. She wondered how many chances there were, how many times she must know the terrible pain of death. But she *had* to have this new chance. She *had* to succeed, somehow. She knew but one goal, one purpose, one mission: Mankind. She sat, hands locked girlishly around her knees, thinking with the high intelligence Man had given her.

Should she find some way to kill the other man, secretly, so that the other . . . Tonybaker . . . did not know, so that it appeared to be an accident? Or should she try again to avoid him? But eluding him had failed, twice. He fought before he listened, with his poor brain, all tense and twisted up so that she could actually *feel* it. And it hurt. Was there no possibility of making peace with him? What was needed, she knew, was another male, a male of his sort. Or a special kind of female. But the other one . . . Tony; she rolled the name over her tongue, savoring its taste as a connoisseur savored good brandy.

He was uncertain, torturing himself mentally; trying to come to a decision, trying to shake off all he had learned both before and during the terrible war between her race and his. He did not really want to kill. He was less driven by unthinking prejudice, possessed of more insight, more empathy. And he had need of her body. Her pink lips curved up at the corners as she remembered, thinking that were she truly a woMan, she would erupt in gooseflesh.

At the thought her arms and legs prickled.

She smiled at the thousands of tiny eruptions. Anything you can do, we can do better, she thought, and *voluntarily*.

She did not know herself how she felt about mating with a Man. But if she could conceive by him, Man or Mandroid, it did not matter. If this could happen, and she was by then uncertain, after the long conditioned distrust and hate of war, she could take the child away and raise it alone. But how . . .

A direct frontal assault! In daylight. A new day, this new body — yes! Cynthe stretched, deliciously, and lay back. Yes. Tomorrow.

The last two men in the world sat on the bank of a trickle of water not big enough to be distinguished by the name creek. Across the bank there was a clearing in the Oregon forest; across the clearing lay the crumpled wreckage of a small aircraft, a twisted hull of blue and gleaming silver. The last two men in the

world were discussing the future, the immediate future. There was no long-term future. They had built a leanto, and now they had decided to build a cabin, there at the east end of the campsite which had become home. They smoked, handing a cigarette back and forth carefully; Tony's pack, now common property, contained only nine more.

"Tell you something else," the bigger man said. "Just in case we're *not* the last — just in case some As survived — let's pull up enough grass to stuff our sleeping bags. That way one of us can sleep while the other — Tony!" Bill Jackson pointed, big-eyed, across the clearing. "Look!"

Tony Baker looked. Then he stood, stretching his wiry suppleness beside the huge strength of Bill Jackson. Emerging from the tree beside the S-195's wreckage was a girl; a slender blonde girl with swaying hips and a bouncy chest beneath a blouse and shorts made from what had been a uniform of some sort.

"She — she looks a little like Stella Steele," Tony said.

"That Hollywood harlot!" Bill raised a hand to Tony's arm. "Wait — she may not be what she looks like, Sport." At Tony's questioning look the older man said: "Android, Tony. They can change their appearance. Remember their tricks during the war. We'd better be careful; have to figure a way to make sure she isn't one of them."

Tony nodded, feeling the automatic revulsion which was a reflex action to the word Android.



But the revulsion was balanced by what he saw; the delightful swaying walk of a woman, the delightful jiggling of a female superstructure. A woman . . . how long had it been since he'd seen a woman? Funny . . . had he? He felt a . . . a half-memory . . .

He watched her approach, half-hearing Bill: "We'll have to capture her, stay wary of her, test her, somehow."

"Uh-huh." Tony didn't take his eyes off the approaching girl. "Capturing her looks like no problem, Bill. She's coming right to us. Lord, she's smiling, too. Look at that! She doesn't look as if she's afraid of us!"

"Yeah. That doesn't seem natural, does it? I mean if she was a girl, a real girl, she'd either be half-

afraid of two men, or she'd be just the opposite. Running to us. She just looks—unconcerned. Like an A trying to trick us."

Tony smiled. "Well, it's a cinch she shouldn't be unconcerned. Boy, look at her!"

They did, Tony wondering if Bill wanted the girl to be an A . . . why? He hadn't known Bill long. The big man had been there, miraculously, to pull him out of the plane, to nurse him, watch over him while he raved, with the ugly gash in his head. The big man possessed tenderness, Tony knew. But he was also possessed by what amounted to a pathological hatred of the Androids.

They looked at her.

She paused a few feet from the stream's opposite bank, appearing



suddenly uncertain as they failed to move or call out. She looked from Tony to Bill and back again, smiling a little girl's smile from a little girl's face above what was definitely not a little girl's body. Her smile was brilliant, flashing, wide-open. She raised a hesitant hand in greeting. Slowly, equally hesitantly, Tony lifted his hand in silent reply.

"Caution, boy, caution," Bill said quietly.

"Bill, she isn't even *armed*," Tony said, and his voice sounded plaintive, even to himself.

"Prove that," Bill Jackson said. "What can you be sure of, where an Android's concerned?"

"If an A's concerned."

Bill did not respond directly to that. "You talk to her," he said. "Just talk to her. Leave the rest to me."

"But . . ."

"Talk to her, Tony, dammit!"

Tony hesitated, then raised his voice. "Hi. We—uh, we thought we were the last people on Earth. Are—are there more of you?" Now *that's* a dumb thing to say, he told himself.

"No. No. No more. I—I thought I was the last. Thank God I'm not." Again her smile dazzled him. Fumbling, boyishly shy, he introduced himself and Bill.

"I'm from Oregon, too," she said. She sounded vague, uncertain. "Do—do you have anything hot to drink?"

"Together," Bill said, and he gave Tony a little push down the bank.

Behind him, as he scrambled down the slope and hopped the stream, Bill stood, pretending looseness and unconcern. But the rifle was ready in his hands. Tony knew that Bill could move fast for a big man with a barrel chest and a belly going gutty. He climbed the other bank and stopped at its summit as she backed away a couple of steps. He heard Bill's boots clump as the other man bounded across the water and climbed up beside him.

"Yeah," Bill told her. "We've got some acorn coffee—if you don't mind an occasional worm." He grinned his big grin and walked toward her and on, his left hand rising to her shoulder to guide her along side him. Tony took three long steps to come up on her other side, wishing he'd thought of putting a hand on her shoulder. Damn, he couldn't now. From the corner of his eye he noticed what no man would fail to notice. She was a busty girl wearing a rather masculine green uniform-blouse with a lighter circle on her upper arm where a corps patched had been removed. One poked-out flap pocket had lost its button. Her shorts were fringed on one leg where the hem had frayed. He swallowed. She was even more stunning seen close. She was young, maybe his age, maybe twenty or younger, with very fair, very clear, smooth skin and a sort of funny nose. It was so little it appeared unfinished, cute, and an outpoked lower lip that looked at once babyish and sensuous.

Bill removed the bayonet from the rifle and pushed it carefully into

his boot-top. The rifle he handed to Tony. Then, without turning his back to the girl, he built up the fire and hung the pot on the wooden andirons they had rigged day before yesterday.

"We're just naturally wondering how you came to be here and who you are," he said, in the same casual tone he'd have used to remark on the weather.

Tony knew the casual manner was false, and he reminded himself that no matter how good she looked with her long sun-colored hair Bill was right; she *might* be an A. And — and if she were? He frowned at that thought.

"Are you?" Her voice reflected the same unconcern as Bill's. Tony couldn't help smiling. He sobered as Bill swung from the fire and stared at her.

"Yes. We'd like to be sure you're not on Android."

## IX

She returned his gaze, wide-eyed and female, her lips almost but not quite smiling, as if the thought were so silly as to be ludicrous. "You think I'm an Android?"

Bill was suddenly unsure of himself, and Tony couldn't help an inward smile. He said nothing as Bill nodded. "You could be."

She raised her eyebrows, made a moue, and nodded her head on one side. "Now *that's* not very flattering, Mister Bill Jackson!" Her lips still looked as though they might be trying to laugh at him. "I've al-

ways thought I looked pretty much like a girl." Like a spectator at a tennis-match, Tony looked to Bill for his reply, then back to the girl as she spoke again. "May I sit down?" She was looking down at the two carefully smoothed logs they had positioned by the fire today.

"Sure," Bill said, "but first tell us your name . . ." He trailed off, frowning, obviously nonplussed as she parked her pert rump on one of the logs. She smiled up at him and lifted one round shoulder which had an interesting effect on her blouse. "Cynthe."

"Cynthia? Cynthia what?"

"*Cynthe*," she said again, and spelled it. "That's all I remember. And I'm afraid I can't tell you how I got here, either."

Tony came alive. "Amnesia, Bill? The war . . . *surely* an Android would have a better story than that."

"She doesn't look like she had that kind of experience," Bill said. "As to that other: *you* thought of it. An Android's smart enough to *know* you'd think that — and have a story so unbelievable we'd buy it because it's unbelievable. Like you just did."

How logical a man is when he wants to believe something, Tony Baker thought. But again Bill was right. Tony couldn't decide if the big man were smarter than he, if he were stupid or in love or something, or if Bill just *wanted* her to be an Android.

"It's a pretty name," Tony said, and he received the reward he'd sought: a bright flash of smile.

"Um," Bill said, "Sounds like a showgirl's name." He watched her as she turned wide green eyes and the ingenuous smile on him. "You a showgirl?" He had hunkered down and pulled the bayonet from his boot. He squatted there, idly thumbing it.

"Bill!" Tony tried to keep from flushing; knew he was, felt his face warming.

But the girl was unperturbed. "I guess that is a compliment," she said, and then she frowned, a puckering of a smooth brow. "But I honestly don't know. I might have been—I don't know." Her face brightened. "I know—I could try to dance or sing to find out—or do a strip-tease!" Her face was radiant. Tony stared, thinking about the strip, trying not to eye the four buttons on her blouse.

"Nah," Bill said, quickly. "Forget it. That wouldn't prove anything." And Tony thought: damn jackass! Let her sing or dance or—he swallowed again. "Tony," Bill said, still looking at the girl. "Androids don't give a damn if they're naked or not. From what she just said, she doesn't either."

"Ah, she was kidding," Tony said, and wondered if she had been. "Look: if she were one of them, would she come here like this? An A doesn't have to go to these lengths. If she were one she could have just waited till tonight and killed us."

"Maybe she intends to," Bill said. "What's the first thing you can remember, Cynthe?"

She thought about it, pursing her lips. "Smoke. I smelled smoke. I came toward it—and came here." She nodded at the campfire and waited for the next question.

"That's all? Hell, don't you remember yesterday? Or this morning?"

She shook her cloud of blonde hair.

Tony thought of something for the first time. "Bill, how'd you know I wasn't one? You didn't put me through a question-and-answer session."

Bill looked at him with a crafty, superior smile. "I know. I tested you. You were unconscious, remember? You've still got the lump on your head. And the scratch on your chest."

Tony nodded. "So? What d'ya mean, tested me?"

"Okay, Sport, I'll tell you." Bill looked him directly in the eyes. "That bump came from the crash. The scratch on your chest came from *this*." He raised the foot-and-more of tempered steel and wagged it.

"You cut me? While I was out? Why?"

"Tony, Androids can control their bodily processes, just like they can make themselves look any way they want. If you'd been an A you'd have healed immediately, and without any scab or scar. You're wearing your proof right now. I saw the scab this morning." And Bill turned and fixed the girl with the same steady gaze. Suddenly Tony wished he hadn't asked. There was a long silence.



Cynthe broke it. "Tony, that's boiling. Could I have a cup now?" The smile flashed, went away again as she turned to Bill. "Bill. Would you mind heating that bayonet? I don't want to get infected."

"Cynthe!" Tony jerked around and the dark mud of surrogate coffee sloshed to hiss in the fire. "Bill! No!"

Bill hadn't moved. He was frowning. "Now an Android would never suggest that. Only a human would be willing to be cut . . . to prove it. But an A would be smart enough to think just that . . . figger we'd accept your willingness as proof enough . . ." His frown vanished as he smiled. He rose. "Okay, Missy. I'll heat the bayonet." And he turned and picked up the rifle and affixed the blade to it. Then holding the stock carefully, he pushed a couple of inches of bayonet into the fire.

Tony stared at him. He was startled at the way Bill's mind worked. The big man wasn't stupid. He'd have made a good general — or a chess player. Tony had practically heard the wheels turning as Bill had thought, then guessed, then second-guessed, then — he jerked his head around as the girl spoke, next to him.

"May I have that, Tony? I need some fortification." Her fingers touched his hand as she took the steaming cup of acorn juice. Her hand was cool, soft. He wondered if it were always cool, or if she were about ten times as scared as she was acting. She smiled briefly at him

over the cup's lip as she raised it and bent her head to blow a cloud of steam. She watched it rise and eddy and dissipate. Then she walked over to stand across the fire from Bill, watching him turn the bayonet.

Bill Jackson looked up at her. "Look, uh, Cynthe — nothing personal, right? It's just that we've got to be sure. And maybe you don't even know. Maybe you're hypnotized. To make you actually believe you're not an Android, I mean. Until — until something triggers you to remember and attack us. Like the moon, for instance. See?"

She nodded in silence, raising the cup to sip, her eyes on the pink blade. It's about the color of her lips, Tony thought, and he watched it glow redder.

He tried to think of something to say, some way to stop the test. But he couldn't think of a way. She was all right. She *had to be*. He watched the bayonet become a cherry red. They did not speak, all three of them staring fixedly at the sliver of sharp steel as its color crept along the spectrum from red into orange-yellow, then yellow. Bill stared, turning it in the fire with the same care he'd have exercised if the bayonet had spitted a fresh young rabbit.

The blade was white. Bill removed it from the fire and looked at it as if hypnotized. He raised his eyes to the girl.

"Any bugs on this have gone to meet their honorable ancestors by now," he said, and Tony thought: The bastard's trying to be light about it. He immediately felt em-

barrassed, and a little ashamed. This test had not been Bill's idea.

Or had it?

The girl nodded and walked around the fire to sit down on the log again, with some interesting jiggles. Tony wished he'd been standing behind her. He threw the thought out of his mind angrily. He tried to decide if he wanted to watch or not. He did.

He watched in horrible fascination as Bill rose and walked over to Cynthe. He dropped to a squatting position again, in front of her. He held the bayonet toward her. Its whitish point was less than a foot from her. She stared at it. Tony waited, forgetting to breathe.

Then she tilted her head back and swallowed the rest of the miserable coffee with a shudder. She set the cup down and ignored the bayonet, looking instead into Bill's eyes. "Has it occurred to you that if an Android can control, consciously, its body, it — I — might decide *not* to heal right up? Surely control works both ways."

"Hey, Bill, that's right!" Tony's voice was loud. "It wouldn't prove a thing."

Bill shook his head. "Now you got me wondering about you again. Missy. You had me convinced. But now you're trying to get out of it. Yeah, what you say's possible. But maybe not if an A didn't know it was an A. Not if you were hypnotized, like I said."

She looked at the blade, raising her eyebrows and wrinkling her nose. "That's a good point," she

said quietly. "But I wonder why if there was more than one Android left they'd bother. They'd be more than a match for you. Even *one* might be." She poked a finger daintily into her mouth and extended it. With the same delicacy she tapped the bayonet's tip.

There was a tiny hissing spat of steam. She jerked her hand back. She looked at Bill again.

"There's something else. Androids and humans have supposedly never mated because Androids have the control you mentioned. No mother Android would want to bring a half-Man into the world to suffer."

"You're talking like one, Lady." Bill's voice was low and ominous.

"Um. Android males have always held an attraction for human females . . . but that same mechanism prevented Androids from taking advantage. No rapes, no voluntary seduction. And we all know some women tried. But as far as we know there's never been a crossing of the line in that regard." She studied Bill's face, then looked up at Tony. "Tell me, Tony Baker and Bill Jackson, which of *you* would have that much regard for your offspring?"

"Now, dammit —" Bill began.

Tony's eyes widened. He started forward. "Don't!"

But he was too late; very deliberately Cynthe drew back her left hand and shoved it forward to impale its upraised thumb on the point of the bayonet. There was a hiss and the sudden odor of roasting

flesh and a bitten-off, childish whimper.

"My God," Tony managed to get out, despite his heaving stomach. Involuntarily Bill jerked the gun. The bayonet slipped free. Her eyes closed, her face contorted in pain, her teeth fastened in her lower lip, Cynthe clapped her left hand to her breast and covered it with her right.

"It — hurts," she said, in a tiny, surprised voice.

"Why're you hiding it?" Bill asked. He stood quickly. His eyes were bright and glassy, resembling cat-eye marbles.

"She's not hiding it, stupid," Tony flared at him. "She's nursing it!"

Cynthe looked at Bill sadly, her green eyes remaining ingenuously wide. Slowly she dropped her right hand, unclenched the left, and held a gashed, blackened thumb up toward Bill. Without changing her thumbs-up gesture she rose to her feet. "Would you like to put your finger into it, Thomas?" He did not answer. Tony stood, rooted, then began to unbutton his shirt. He pulled it off and went to her, wrapped it around her injured hand and tied the sleeves together at the wrist. She didn't look at him.

"Proof?" she asked, in the same tiny voice, but her shrug was implicit in it. My God, Tony thought, she's brave. "It will take several days even to begin to heal," Cynthe said. "During that time I want —" her voice paled, as her lips did — "I want to live apart from you."

"You will, Cynthe," Tony told her. "You can stay in the plane. There's two good bunks Bill and

I rigged from the seats. But then—"

"I'll be ready," she said. "Meanwhile, lock me in."

Bill lowered the bayonet, staring at her, as she stepped between them and walked to the Scouter. As she reached it she turned. "If I know I'm an Android, I could control this. Maybe I am controlling it now. If I'm an Android, but have been hypnotized so that I don't know it —" She smiled. "Then perhaps I have a posthypnotic suggestion that prevents my wounds from healing rapidly?" She shook her head, still smiling. "Be sure to lock me in." She climbed into the broken cabin of the aircraft

## X

Tony and Bill looked at each other.

Tony watched the other man load his arms with wood and bring it over to the campfire in the moonlight. "Help you, Bill?"

"Naw."

Tony frowned. He regarded his toes. He picked up the bayonet and a piece of wood and whittled at it. "Bill?"

"Yeah?" Bill sat on the other log, facing him. He picked up the rifle and looked at it, set it down again.

"We're lucky. About Cynthe."

"Yeah. If she's not an Android."

"Even if she is, Bill." Tony whittled, not looking up from the piece of wood he was denuding. Its bare whiteness gleamed like flesh.

Bill looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that last thing she said.

She's right. We can never be sure about her. But even if she is an A, what difference does it make?" Tony lied deliberately; he had thought of a way to be sure. If the girl were knocked out, as he'd been, then cut—but he had decided not to tell Bill. He didn't want her tested.

Bill's voice was sarcastic. "I don't know, Tony. If there's a snake over there in your sleeping bag, what's the difference whether it's a black snake or a timber rattler?"

"Here," Bill said, and he handed the younger man a small leather picture case. Tony looked at him, then opened the case; a woman and a man smiled at him. He nodded, looked his question at Bill.

"That's the difference, Tony. My Mom. I'm uh . . . virgin, Tony. Yeah, Big Bill, I admit it. I've never touched anybody. You want to hear how she died, my Mom?"

Think about that later, Tony thought. "No. But, Bill—"

"That tell you why I'll never make peace? Why I'll kill the last damned Android if I can? Or why I'll kill you, if I have to, to keep you from filthyng yourself?"

"What'd you do after she died, Bill?"

"I took this gun—" he picked it up—"and that bayonet and I went wild. I won two medals. I kept on going wild till I was assigned to this work detail. By then they weren't passing out medals any more. I didn't want 'em anyhow."

"Bill, have you ever thought . . . don't you think you're a little unrealistic? Now, I mean, with every-one gone? Why keep on hating?"

Bill hefted the picture case without looking into it. His eyes narrowed and his hand squeezed hard, whitening his fingernails. "Because there's one left."

"Maybe," Tony reminded him, and Bill shrugged.

"Maybe, yeah."

"You'll find a reason to kill her anyhow, won't you?"

"Just what the hell are you saying?" Bill eyes were bright as he restored the picture to his left shirt pocket, carefully rebuttoning the flap.

"Just that maybe you cracked a little bit the day your mother was killed."

"Calling me insane, that what you're doing? You damned fool!" Bill shot to his feet. "See what that damned girl—that damned thing, I mean—is doing to us? Already she's standing between us! Girl or thing, she—she has the body of a harlot!"

"That's what I thought, Bill. It doesn't make any difference to you whether she's a girl or an A."

"Damn you! You don't believe that! You think it doesn't make any difference to you. You're thinking with your crotch, not your head. You think that as long as she looks round and soft and big-bosomed that's all—"

"You don't like women very well, do you, Bill?"

Bill stared. Whatever he said was a growl in his throat as he leaped. Tony went backward off the log with the big man on him and felt him stiffen and saw the moonlight wink off the point of the bayonet

as it slipped out of Bill's back. Tony's wrist hurt; it was twisted against his body.

"T-Tony —"

"Bill! Oh my God, Bill! I'm so sorry — Bill!" The big man was limp against him. Slowly, shaking his head and blinking to clear away tears, Tony got out from under him. He stared down at Bill Jackson's form, unmoving. Suddenly the thought came to him: Yes. I've gotten out from under him.

*Somewhere, sometime, there was exultation.*

Tony Baker sobbed, an ugly dry sound, and then he turned and ran to the plane. He wasn't sure if Bill were alive or dead. Maybe the two of them, Tony and Cynthe, could fix him up, nurse him, take care of him. Then Bill would know —

As his hand touched the metallic blue door of the S-195 something extremely hard and solid struck him in the back.

He heard a loud crackling sound as he arched his back, falling against the plane, struggling to turn, to stay on his feet.

"My God, Bill —" He slid down the smooth side of the Scouter and sat against it, his head on his chest.

"Didn't know I had bullets in my pocket, did you, Sport?" Bill said to the dead man as he stumbled across the clearing. With all his strength he got to the plane, perked the hot thing out of his abdomen, felt it bring the blood rushing with it. He got the door open. The girl was there, her thumb still bandaged, her eyes wide and green and young.

"What was that? Was that a shot?"

He lunged forward into the cabin, bayonet held before him. He felt its momentary halt as it struck her stomach, then felt it slide in. He heard her cry, heard her moans as he lay half within, half out of the little craft.

He was dead before the lonely sun rose.

CLICK

*#They do it again! They kill themselves, all of them! What unalterable fools! Can we do nothing to make them live? Is there no way? It is this accursed ancestor worship that is/was/will be at fault. If we could interfere with them rather than with the an — #*

*#Hush. Cerebrate, don't transmit. I am cerebrating. There must be a way. But look, the time fabric is torn! It cannot be repaired!#*

*#Then we have failed.#*

*#Stop transmitting! We have not failed. We are here when. Therefore it is not over now. If we fail we will not know it; we will not exist. As long as we do/did/will . . . wait! If the continuity line is clipped off here — this thread — they will join . . . yes! There is a possibility. One more possibility. But this is the last time. There is no margin for error. If we fail again the TimeSpace fabric will be/is/was ripped beyond repair . . . this gambit is irreversible. And irremediable.#*

*#How can we be sure?#*

*#I find one way. It must be perfect this time; otherwise all time*

threads in this spatitemporal segment end . . . ended, and we are not. There is everything to lose. And everything to gain.#

#What — what do we do?#

#Everything we have not done; nothing we have done. First the Android must take more of an initiative; she came close this time. Then . . . something the older Man said. I am afraid that seems the only solution. Now: Pay attention. I need not tell you how important this is. I am afraid I must be a hero — by becoming a heretic — and I am afraid that you must succeed me, whether you are ready or not.#

#?#

#An order: Cease transmitting. Now. Yes, now, and then, and tomorrow . . . well. You understand that if there is not success this time there is no further chance, and the future, their future, holds nothing. Not you. Not I. None of us.#

#Of course. We . . . snap out of existence. We never were. But — #

#Very well. Then I, as I transmit, am about to/did become a heretic-hero; and you are about to/did succeed me in this post. It is the only certain way, and we have no further room for experimentation. You see that even I make mistakes; you must endeavor to be wiser. You know my timeline?#

#Of course. It is — there.#

#Yes. Then you must do this — #

A dial set carefully, painstakingly, a button, then another, pressed; a calibrator meticulously and cautiously set, a switch thrown.

#You will know the moment.

When I say the word 'jabberwock', do not hesitate. CLIP MY TIMELINE.#

#Jabberwock? Say? NO!#

#An order: my last. CLIP MY TIMELINE. At the word jabberwock. Good-by.#

The final relay clicks/clicked/will click.

CLICK

XI

The bigger one carried a small case. It swung from her shoulder on a long leather strap, bumping her big hip. She carried something in her other hand; a club, made from the leg of a table. The smaller one was empty-handed, full-breasted. They came out of the forest and walked to the edge of a downsloping bank, the flood-channel of a stream that was now merely a trickle.

The bigger one stopped her companion with an arm. They stopped and looked across the stream at the clearing, the fire, the wreckage of a small S-203 scout aircraft, and the two men.

The smaller man wore a bandage about his head. For a moment the two women watched them, watched their strong bodies raise a bracing pole against a half-completed leanto at the east side of the clearing. Then the big woman kicked a small rock with the toe of her boot and watched it rattle down the bank. It bounced, then bounced again, leaping into the air to splash into the gurgling water. The big man turned toward them.

His arm swept up, pointed. He ran to the campfire and picked up a heavy rifle with a silvery knife at its end.

"Wait, Bill," Tony Baker said. "Wait — they're women."

"*Maybe* they're women," Bill Jackson said. "Don't be too sure. You know about Androids. They can change themselves."

"Boy, she's a big one! Your size, Bill. Me for the little blonde." Tony Baker waved. "Hi!" He winced and dropped the hand to his head. "Damn! I've still got a headache."

"That's good, Tony. I don't mean the headache—I mean talk. Talk to them. But be careful."

The two men walked across the clearing. They stopped on their side of the bank, gazing across at the two women. The big redhead was maybe thirty, maybe a little less. She was one hell of a hunk of woman, Tony thought. About twice as much as he'd care to try to handle. Her companion—he smiled. Small, rather babyfaced, with long pale hair and big wide eyes that looked green from where he stood. And she was either built or she was carrying a very large concealed weapon in what was left of the blouse tied over her breasts.

"Stop right there," the redhead said, and she hefted the table-leg. "Don't come any nearer."

"Uh — but — who's coming?" Tony said uncomfortably. "This is our camp. *You* came." Boy, what a way to begin a conversation! What a way to introduce myself! "We're just standing here, ma'm."

"Let's keep it that way. We don't dare take any chances. You two male hunks could be Androids . . . although I gotta admit I hope you're not."

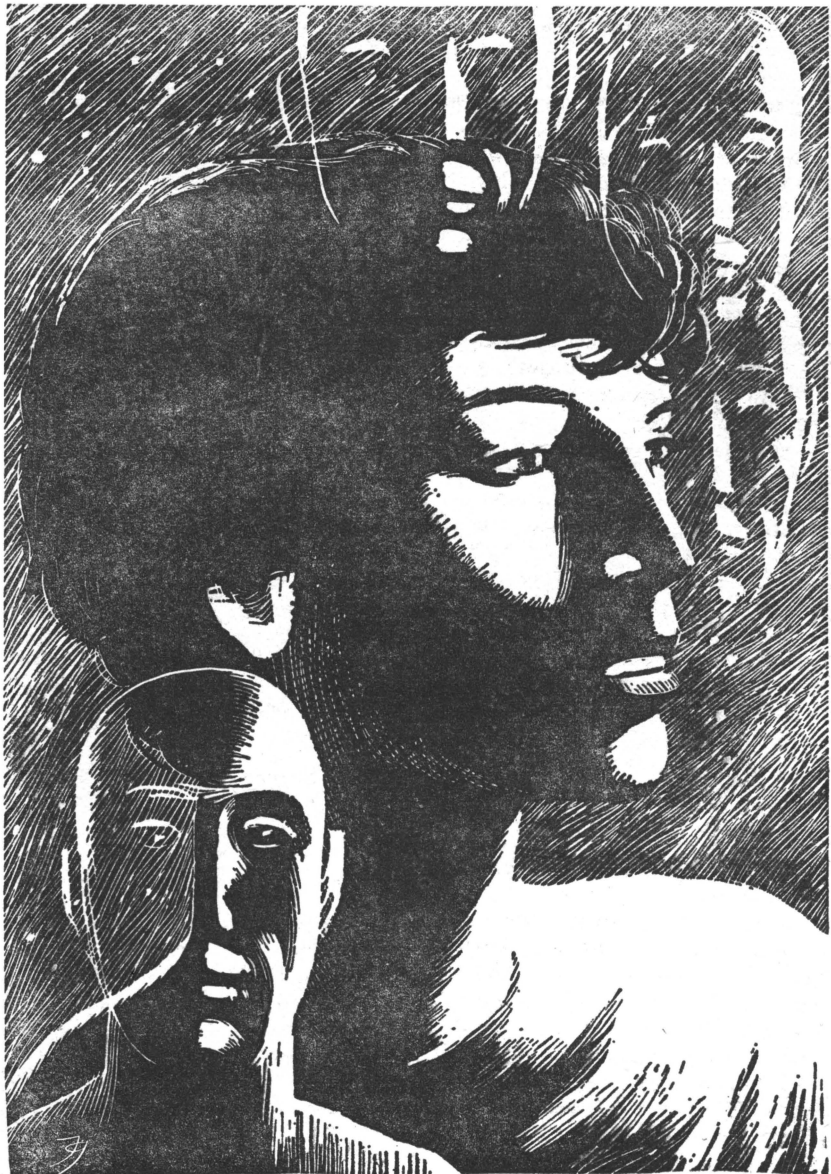
Bill Jackson exploded angry words "We could be Androids!"

"Ah, so you're not mute after all, huh, bigun?" The redhead smiled and wagged the club. "Of course you could be. How are we to know, two defenseless women?"

She looks about as defenseless, Tony thought, as Bill Jackson. She was nearly six feet tall if she was an inch, with flashing eyes and a beat-up officer's cap riding jauntily on a mane of pure flame. She wore a loose combat jacket, big chest pockets with their flaps and brass buttons making it impossible for him to know if she had anything underneath or not. A wide black belt with a shiny U.S. buckle cinched her waist, tightly, above long, long legs encased in shiny black military jodhpurs and knee-high boots. Something or other in an odd little case hung from a shoulder strap. Oh, she's female, he thought, but no *defenseless* female! She wore the armored officer's uniform and gave orders as if she'd been used to both all her life. But the other one . . .

"By damn!" Bill Jackson said, and Tony looked at him as the big man blinked. "By *golly!*"

"As a matter of fact we couldn't trust you boys even if you aren't Androids. Wars turn some people into into beasts!" She hooked her left thumb into the wide belt and hefted the tableleg again. "So you two just stand there. Who are you?"





"Bill — uh, S/2C Jackson, William R., Army of Oregon."

Tony grinned. Give him a command-tone and he sure snaps to, he thought. He hardly knew the big man, but Bill had been playing Big Man ever since he'd pulled Tony out of his cracked-up S-203 and patched him up. Tony had allowed it. He was twenty-three and a captain, a pilot. But what the hell can you do when you're all stringy muscle and shorter and younger?

"All right small type, what's your problem?"

"You make big noises for a defenseless woman," he told her. "I'm Tony Baker, I'm a Texican, and my mother wasn't an Android. And I bleed, and scab, and scar. Okay?"

The redhead shook her head. "Nokay. But turnabout's fair, I guess. I'm Lilith. Call me Lily. And I'm not from Texas, so how come I'm bigger'n you?"

Bill Jackson whooped and slapped his new friend on the back so hard Tony was barely able to keep from going over the embankment.

"This little one with the big front's Cynthe James. At least that's her story. Sounds like a madeup name to me, and she was showbiz. She's lost her memory, poor thing, since she got a dose of some kind of gas and woke up surrounded by corpses. Me, I've got memories too, but I'm stuck with 'em. Oh, and I outrank you, Mister. I'm afraid I made captain over a year ago." She tossed Bill a smart-aleck salute. "Serial number, bigun, fast."

"Eight - nine - oh - one - two - five - five - nine - six Gee Gee."

"Lovely. I'm impressed, Baker?"

"You may not like this, lady: Ay - oh - two - two - three - five - nine - one, T for Texas."

"AO! My my. That miserable piece of tin over there your plane?"

"It was. And I'm afraid I made captain two years ago."

Again she flipped the mock-salute from the bill of a cap with a several-thousand-mission crush. "Now fellas, here's the pitch. There's just one way I know to tell an A from a human, and that's by wounding the suspect. Now I see you have a nice shiny bayonet . . ."

Bill nodded exuberantly, and Tony saw that his eyes were bright and shining as a boy's. He raised the bayoneted rifle.

"Y'know," Lily said, "I believe you *might* not be an Android after all, bigun. You're too damn dumb. *Stop that!* Any A'd have sense enough to heat that oversize pocket-knife before he started carving himself. Go on over to the fire and heat it. We'll follow. At a distance."

## XII

Grinning sheepishly, Bill nodded and backed away. Then, nearly stumbling, he turned and walked to the fire. He looked back over his shoulder twice.

Tony stared. Who was this guy? What had happened to that Bill Jackson fella? Bill squatted by the fire and began to heat the blade

while Tony stood beside him, watching the long-legged approach of Lily and the hip-swing walk of her friend Cynthe. Funny name, Cynthe. It seemed vaguely, elusively familiar.

Bill held up the bayonet. In the wan light of the setting sun it glowed pink. "Enough?"

Lily nodded, thumb hooked in belt, stick-club ready, and watched as Bill detached the bayonet from the rifle and held out his left arm.

"Let's go first class, Sergeant," Lily said, "And make it a nice deep one." Bill nodded, grinning. He slashed his forearm. Then he held it out for inspection. It trickled red.

"Didn't hurt," he said, the way a ten-year-old would have proclaimed it. He held the barely glowing bayonet out to Tony. He took it gingerly, then looked at Cynthe.

"Can't you talk, Cynthe?"

"When I have a chance," she said, with a smile that reminded him of a shaft of sunlight bursting through clouds after a rain. Lily chuckled. Tony glanced at her and the tall woman nodded meaningfully at the bayonet.

"By your leave, Captain," he said.

"Proceed, Captain," she said.

"Ouch! Bill's a damned liar — it *does* hurt!" He waved the bleeding arm in the air. He hung on to the bayonet. "How about *your* using it now, Captain?"

"Don't be silly, Sport," Bill said, and Tony was startled to see that the man was angry.

"Glad to," Lily said. "Want to trust me with that bayonet?"

Tony considered. "Not bloody

likely," he said. He waved it in the air, cooling it before returning it to his boot.

"Well, we're bleeding," Bill said, practically bouncing up and down. If the big idiot had a tail, Tony thought, he'd wag it. "Now what?"

"Stop slavering, Big Man. Now we separate, but we get together once a day to see how those wounds're healing. After we're sure we can trust one another . . ."

"Then we can love," Cynthe said in a guileless little voice, and Bill and Tony blinked. Bill's eyes narrowed as he looked at the unaffected child-face.

Lily laughed. "Cynthe! Tsk!" Then, rather apologetically, she told the men: "She's a bit off in that area. Amnesia, as I said, but from what I gather she was a few days from marriage. She's nuts about kids." Lily patted her shoulder. "She'll come out of it."

"Sure she will. You'll be fine, Cynthe," Tony said. "You'll be just fine."

"I told her I'd do all the talking," Lily said. "It wasn't easy to get it through this fluffhead's koko that — well, we may be the last human beings, peer — ee — odd." She regarded them in silence as the impact of it went pounding on heavy feet through their minds. "Your trust is touching, boys, but not smart. Our turn." The big woman flipped the chairleg club into her left hand and unbuttoned two buttons of her blouse with her right. Bill gawked. Tony marveled at Lilith's lack of reserve, her unaf-

fected candor. She seemed as ultra-civilized as Cynthe did ingenuous. It was almost as if Lilith were from somewhere far away.

"Easy, bigun," she said, grinning a widemouthed grin at Bill. "Sometimes us big-types aren't big everywhere. I'm afraid there's not much in here but — this." Her hand came out of the uniform blouse with a knife and automatically Tony's knees bent in a half-crouch as his hand whipped up from his boot with the bayonet.

Twenty feet away Lilith blinked. "Touchy cuss, aren't you? By your leave, Cap'n," she said, imitating his own ironic tone, and she swung and nicked Cynthe's arm with her little knife.

"Oh!"

"Bleed for your life, kid," Lily said, and she pushed Cynthe away and quickly slashed her own arm. More red drops fell to stain the ground. "Now. We meet here daily for arm-inspection, right? Come on, Cyn."

Cynthe hung back, her full lower lip puckering. "Oh, can't we stay and have something hot?"

Lily slung back her vermilion mane and guffawed. "Like Bill and Tony, maybe?" And she laughed some more. "She has a passion for coffee." She shrugged. "Little hard to find in the middle of the Oregon woods, Cynthe-babe."

"We've got coffee," Tony said, aware that he spoke too rapidly, too eagerly. He tried to slow his words, to sound casual. "Fresh acorn coffee."

"Eyuk," Lily commented with

feeling. "You ain't sellin' me, Tony Baker. We'll see you."

"Uh — Cap'n Lily," Bill said. He raised a hand. "We — uh — we have twelve cigarettes. Maybe we should all have a smoke before we break up."

"Peace pipe? Us good girls don't smoke. Sorry."

"In that cracked-up Scouter," Tony said, "there are two bunks. Bill and I fixed 'em up out of the seats this morning. You might as well spend the night in there. The hatch secures from inside."

She hooked a thumb into her belt again, threw out her left hip and her right leg. She poked at her lip with the club, obviously considering. No one spoke for perhaps a minute; a long minute. "You know, Tony Baker Captain comma USAF, I retract about — oh, fifty per cent of what I've said and thought about you. Cynthe honey, trot over there and get in the plane, will you? And lock the door."

Cynthe trotted. Tony watched the delightful process happily, while Lily watched him and Bill watched Lily. When the door slammed behind the blonde girl Lily ambled after her, keeping an eye on the men. She tried the door-handle, then yanked, twisted.

"Okay. It's locked, all right. Cynthe, open up for mama. Tony, Bill —" she bowed, man-fashion — "we thank you for your hospitality. See you in the AM. Have fun." And in she climbed, longleggedly. The door slammed.

"Boy," Bill said, the word riding

exuberantly out on a great breath of air. "Boy. That's some female woman."

Tony grinned at the Cajun talk, then said with great innocence: "Not an A?"

"Ah, don't be silly. They're the ones worried — about us!" Bill chuckled. "Man, she's some tough! Did you see her, Tony? Did you see her?"

"No," Tony said, hanging the kettle over the campfire and placing two logs. "No, I didn't. I saw nothing, I was struck blind by Cynthe."

"Cynthe," Bill said, the way a drinking man says *milk*. He shook his head. "Cynthe! Huh! I bet that big bazooka packs a wallop like a grizzly. Tony . . . you know who she . . . reminds me of? It's amazing. Even the name."

Tony looked around, interested. Bill's voice had a faraway quality. "No, Bill. Who?"

Bill was staring at the aircraft. "My mother. Big woman. Tough. Twice the guts my dad ever had. And her name was Lillian. Oh, not the same . . . Mom's hair wasn't even red. Now I know it should have been, though, after seeing Capn Lil." He wagged his head again.

Staring at him, narrow-eyed, Tony shook his head. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah. I see."

He gave his physical attention to the pot of acorn coffee. Bill stood still, gazing at the twisted silvery scoutcraft in the manner of a coonhound waiting for his man to come with light and rifle.

Tony was sitting, his eyes somewhere in the fire, thinking as he sipped his second cup of miserable coffee, when Bill poured a cup. "Hey, Bill, you've had two. Those worms'll give you a fever or the runs or something."

"Not for me," Bill said, with a grin Tony could only call sly. The big man turned and headed for the plane.

"Hey!" Tony's voice rebounded from the other man's back with no visible effect. Tony shook his head, grinning, the grin slowly changing to a frown. "Oh well," he told himself. "To each, as the man said, his own." But he continued to watch, hoping to catch a glimpse of Cynthe, poor kid, when — if — the hatch opened.

It did, and he saw a flash of steel; Lily's knife. Without hearing what they said he saw Bill offer her the cup, saw him sip it and proffer it again, saw Lily take it, sling its contents disdainfully on the ground. What she needs, Tony thought, is somebody about Bill's size . . . but somebody who liked his daddy better than his mommy!

"What's up, bigun?" Lily asked Bill, and she waved the knife in his face. She looked down at him from the arch of the S-203's hatchway.

"Miss . . . Li . . . Capn . . . uh — I thought maybe you'd like a cup of coffee?"

"Coffee? Acorn stew? There shouldn't even be any of those around here. What's the worm

count?" She stuck a thumb in her belt the way Bill's mom used to hook one workworn thumb in the front of her apron. She jerked the knife at the cup. "Or for that matter the *poison* count, Mister Android? Suppose *you* try it."

Bill did, taking a healthy swig of the murky stuff and letting her see him swallow. He held the cup out to her once more, hoping that she would accept it.

"You think I'm gonna drink that stuff after you've slobbered in it? Not, in the immortal words of Captain 'Texican' Baker, bloody likely!" And she took the cup and swung her arm in an arc, sending the dark liquid splattering to the ground. She stared at him. "You look as if you're about to cry, Billy Jackson."

His eyes widened. "I—I haven't been called Billy since . . . since Mom . . ."

"*Mom!*" She exploded the word from her mouth as if it were unclear. "Mom! Boy, *that's* not likely! I wouldn't even want you for an ancestor, much less a son."

He looked down. "You're a tough woman to please, Capn. You make me want to say I'm sorry everytime I open my mouth."

Her hand touched his shoulder, his cheek. "Moon-calf," she said. "Poor, twisted-up moon-calf. Look, Bill Jackson, suppose you go back to the fire. Sit around for awhile. Then take a little walk. Across the creek, or whatever you call the gash in the ground over there. That big fir tree with the lightning-blast. Okay?"

He stared at her, then nodded. She withdrew her hand, unpolished nail slicing his cheek, grinned, and pulled the cabin door closed. He heard her dog it. He went back to the fire, walking, Tony calculated, about two feet above the ground.

"Boy, she's an unfriendly one," Tony said over his cup. But his eyes were narrowing, waiting for the reaction he expected.

Bill's head snapped up. "No she isn't! It's natural. She thinks we may be Androids, that's all. Hell, Tony, she's a woman. You know how some men are about women. Gotta be careful."

"Yeah, Yeah. She ought to trim her nails, too." Tony watched Bill raise a guilty hand to his cheek. "It might've helped, Bill, if you'd acted like that bayonet-cut hurt. You tried to impress 'em and gave a damned good imitation of an Android."

"My gosh! I didn't think of that!" Bill stared at him. "Boy, I guess you were right. That goshawful coffee—whew! I think I'll take a walk." He stood with a great show of being casual, looked around as if trying to decide which way to go. He nodded and started toward the stream.

"Bill."

Jackson stopped, looked around. Tony waved the bayonet. "Better take this."

Bill hesitated, then bobbed his head and came back for it. "Yeah. Make a loud noise if anything happens, Sport."

"You too, Bill," Tony said, and

he turned back to watch the orange and yellow and blue dance of the flames.

He heard Bill's boots — clump, squish — as he jumped the stream. We ought to bridge that silly thing, Tony thought. From the tail of his eye he watched the Scouter's door ease open, saw the big woman looking at him, then sliding out. She closed the door quickly and silently and leaned against it a moment, watching him. Then she stepped into the woods.

Tony Baker sighed. He regarded the bubbling pot. Maybe *I* should try the coffee gambit, he thought. But what if she *is* . . . Synthetic Cynthe? What if she is?

He thought about it.

“Over here, Billy. Watch that big root — I nearly fell flat. Sit down here, against the tree.”

Without a word Bill sat, looking up at her. He liked looking up at her. The shiny kneeboots moved to within a couple of feet of him. “You — you're some woman.”

“Or some Android?”

“Hell, you're no A!”

“You sure?”

“I'm sure.”

“As a matter of fact you're right. But you and that Tony. Him a captain? How old is he?”

He shrugged. “Possible. Told me he got into it when he was seventeen. Air Force; can't fly unless you're an officer. Or he may've been trying to impress you girls — but he's at least a first lieutenant, anyhow. You really worried about us, still? You hate A's that much?”

“Well, you've no idea. No idea, Bill Jackson, how much an Android has cost me.”

“Your family?”

She smiled in the darkness, studying the tree against which he sat. “Yes. Yes, my family. The very closest member.”

“Me, too,” he said, and he fished the picture case out of his pocket. “Here.”

She shook her head. “No thanks. I burned mine, Billy Jackson. You should, too.”

“Yeah, maybe . . . maybe now, I can.” His forehead rippled.

“Now, Bill. Suppose I told you I *am* an Android.”

He gazed up at her, slipping the case slowly back into his left shirt pocket. He studied her; the boots and the flaring jodhpurs, the big hips and hands, the odd little case swinging from her shoulder, the belt buckle, bright even in the shadowed darkness under the trees. “Nope. I couldn't believe you, Captain.” He shook his head positively. “Nope.”

“Um. Suppose I told you Cynthe was. That her name's short for 'synthetic'?”

He jerked his back away from the tree, sitting erect. His voice was a low susurrant. “Is she? I wondered . . . what she said, so funny . . . damn! *Is* she?”

Lilith shrugged, holding his eyes with hers. “She's with me. Would it matter?”

“Funny thing to say.” His answer came without hesitation. “Of course it matters! She'd have to die. An A's an A.”

"Brilliant," she muttered. "That'd be his business, wouldn't it? Tony's?"

He shook his dark head. "No, Ma'm! It's my business. I'm a man. A Man."

"Period, huh? Is that it, Bill?"

He nodded. "Period. She's an A, she dies."

"Men," she said. "Men. You're sure I'm not — but you're ready to believe that little thing is. Ready to kill her. You believe what you want to believe, don't you?"

"It's not too bad," Cynthe said. "It makes pretty good coffee. Thank you, Tony." She smiled daz- zlingly at him over the cup. "She told me to stay in the plane. I would've too, if you hadn't come and asked me to have some coffee. I — I hoped you would," she chuc- kled, smiling into the cup in the manner of a child inspecting a Christmas package. "Acorn coffee!" She drank, peered again into the cup, then set it down.

He sat with his eyes on her, trying to think of something he could say that would make her smile again. He was startled as very wide, intensely green eyes turned on him.

"Something odd," she told him. "You know, I discovered I can . . . I can make this wound heal right up!" She held out her arm. "With- out a scar or anything. Lily got mad and made me cut myself again." Her big eyes looked into his. "Does that mean I'm — "

"Stop!" His voice was intense. "I — I knew it, I think. I've been thinking about it Cynthe. It doesn't

matter." His hand reached out and took hers gently. "Not to me. But it would to Bill. That's why you've got to promise not to mention it any more. Not ever."

Her huge eyes flickered emerald in the firelight. "I promise."

"What should we do, Cynthe? What do you want?"

Her shoulder lifted in an unaf- fected shrug. "Babies," she an- swered at once. "Oh *children!* Y-your children . . ." When she dropped her eyes it was not coquetry. She was the most artlessly genuine person he had ever met. Her eyes came back up to his, and he nodded.

"Uh-huh. The eternal nest-builder. The eternal optimist. A man wants it for one reason, a woman for another, human or Android. For *what*, Cynthe?" His voice remained intense, and he was unaware of the pressure he was exerting on her hand, unaware of the faint change that took place in it. Flesh and muscle hardened as a nearly auto- matic defense against pain. "For what, Cynthe? What if there's no future?"

A little vertical channel opened between her eyes as the inside edges of her brows lifted. "Isn't that the only way there can be a future? If we make one? That's what she said."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess it is. I think a man gives less of a damn about the human race than a wom- an; we want a kid of two to ex- tend our own pride. But . . . it would be nice to bounce a grand- son someday. Who will our son

marry, Synthetic Cynthe, if we can have one? Or our daughter?"

"But didn't Adam and his wife, created, like me, from him . . ."

He interrupted. "His second wife. Yes, Pollyana. But who did Adam's son marry?"

She narrowed those round eyes, pursed her lips, puckered an unmarked brow. He realized it might be unmarked ten, twenty years from now. No. He'd ask her to age — a little — as he did. He didn't think he could stand it otherwise.

"'And Cain left the presence of the Lord,' " she said, looking up, " ' and settled in the land of Nod, East of Eden. Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and — "

"His wife, Cynthe. His wife. *What* wife? There were people over in Nod, then, right? But this *is* Nod. There is no Eden, and I think that part of the old story makes its figurative sense clear. There were others. But for us, for *our* Cain, or Abel, or little Cynthe — "

"For us," she said very softly, "for us, Tony, there is no land of Nod. But if our first child is a girl, or if there are never any boys, well." The serious expression was incongruous on her ingenuous face, but it was there, and her eyes were purposeful. "There is the story of Lot, Tony, in the same book. His wife was gone, and his daughters wanted children. So they had children by their father. They each bore him a son, Moab and . . . somebody. Or — if we have only sons . . . oh, Tony!" Her other hand came up to cover his, small and warm. "Don't look at me that way.

We're overcoming a bigger barrier right now than that one, breaking a stronger code. Men lay their aversion to what they call 'incest' to the Bible, the Torah . . . but the book itself sets the precedent, figurative or not."

She waited for him to say something. He did not.

"And don't cite me the Bourbons of France," she said, reminding him of the high intelligence, the high Android reasoning power behind that open face. "We're *not* the Bourbons. My kind can't be mentally ill. And you must be immune to practically everything, or you wouldn't be here. Not even color-blind, or you wouldn't have been in the Air Force!" She smiled, a simple upcurving of the corners of her pink mouth. Her fingers tightened on his. "And we'll have many children, anyhow. Won't we?"

He nodded raising his other hand to her face — And the screaming began.

#### XIV

Sorrowfully the tall woman looked down at the big man sprawled, like an overgrown boy, beneath the tree. "There's just no hope, is there, Bill? No chance. You're immune."

"Huh?"

"You have any idea what's in here?" She tapped the shiny case at her hip.

"No. Funny-looking affair. Food, I guess. What's it made of, anyhow?"

"Oh, it's a synthetic. It's called



Timeless. Yes, I guess it is food. Nourishment for Mankind. Something for you, Billy Jackson." She sank to her haunches beside him and slid the strap off her shoulders. She set the case on his thighs. He looked at it and at her with a questioning frown.

"What's the biggest rule you can think of. One you wouldn't dream of breaking, Bill?"

"What? Gosh, I don't know. The biggest rule. Like rape, or — oh. Sure, I know. *Androids*." His lips stiffened.

She sighed. "Intermingling with the Androids. Yes, that's your code. Bill, if you can believe this: I'm breaking an even *bigger* injunction by doing this. But I've got to. For you. For Man."

Nervously he tried to smile. "Lord, what's *in* here?"

She looked at him. "You really want to know?" Her voice was teasing. He nodded, and now he grinned. She gazed at him still. Then she came to her decision. "You sure do spoil a surprise, Billy Jackson. It's a timber rattler."

He chuckled. "In this little case? And this far North?" He bent his head, laughing, and flipped up the catch. He lifted the lid.

The timber rattler lurched forward and struck him in the left side of his shirt, just below the pocket with its picture-case. It clung, fangs caught for a moment in the fabric.

In that moment Lilith's knife swished out, chopped, in one swift stroke, down into the back of the snake's head. It lashed violently and opened its jaws and died.

"My God!" Bill Jackson choked. "It — it was! What — you — I've got to get to the camp! There's a kit in the plane — oh! it hurts!"

"It got you near the heart, Billy. I imagine it's too late. And . . . I told you, Man. I warned you, gave you a chance. But . . . just in case it's *not* too late —"

He was struggling to rise, clutching his chest, reaching down to his boot for the bayonet, confused, bewildered, gasping. He looked at her, saw the fist coming, said "Mom —"

And the fist slammed into his jaw and he slid sideways to the ground and lay unconscious, his eyes closed peacefully.

She pinned the dead snake's head to the ground and squatted there, watching him, watching his chest. At least he was not feeling the burning pain, the swelling, the slowing of his heart . . .

Finally she stood. She unbuttoned her blouse and took off her belt and dropped it to the ground beside the body of the Man. She unzipped her jodhpurs. Her voice was soft and low and sad. "There's always a snake in Eden, Billy Jackson," she said. She watched as he died. Then she turned toward the camp and screamed until Tony and Cynthe came, yelling, crashing through the brush.

"I — we were — well . . ." The big woman was buttoning up her blouse, Tony saw at once. Explanations were unnecessary. Somehow he was relieved. Bill was — had been — okay after all. He looked

down at the other man, sprawled so peacefully beneath the towering Douglas fir.

"I was over there," Lily said. "I didn't hear anything. But — when I said something and he didn't answer, I came . . . found him . . . and the snake. I killed it."

His arm around Cynthe's waist, Tony looked at Bill Jackson and fought a further feeling of relief. The man's face — Tony had known he was dead the moment he saw him. Now he bent, noticing the marks in Bill's shirt, realizing why it had been so fast. Almost in the heart. He pulled the knife from the dead rattler's head. "He came a long way from home to do this," Tony said.

"And so did you, Texican. And so did I." Lily buckled the belt and took the knife from him with a sigh. "So did I."

"We'll bury him," Tony said. "I think maybe right here, under the tree. Lily, if you can trust me now . . . please stay." He tightened his fingers on Cynthe's flank and she leaned into him.

Lily hooked a thumb in her belt. "Just the *three* of us? Oh, come now, Tony. You don't mean that. Three's too many, Tony, whether it's two men and a woman, or —" she looked down at Bill — "or two women and a man. Oh, no. There's no room in Eden for a Lilith. That would be as ridiculous as —"

"This is hardly what I'd call Eden," Tony Baker said. He glanced

at the girl beside him. "Or Nod either."

"— as the Jabberwock," Lilith finished.

*Jabberwock! The Mandroid opened the box, regarded the woven skein of a lifeline a moment, then cut it, irrevocably. As he did the tortured fabric of TimeSpace they had cut and spliced and reset so often — split, ripped. The new Prime Mover waited. He did not vanish! He was/is/will be! Success!*

"The what?" Tony asked.

"What're you —"

"Tony!" Cynthe screamed.

Lilith's eyes rolled up. She went limp, sank to the ground, a limp rag, empty of life and being. Tony took one step forward. Then he halted with a cry.

Lilith's timeline was in the far future, the no-time, no-space, timeless and spaceless future of Tony's descendants. She did not exist, not really, in this TimeSpace. In her/his/its time she became a hero by becoming a heretic; a great a hero as The Baker and The Synthe, The Firsts.

In their time she ceased to exist. She was/is/will be not.

Man and Android stared. There was no trace of Lilith. Yes, a trace; the smallish timber rattler, unwounded and undead but sore of jaw, shot off into the woods. Tony and Cynthe watched it, uncomprehending.

Ever.

END



## OUR MAN IN FANDOM

**FAN CLUBS U.S.A.**

by LIN CARTER

*Ever get the urge to talk  
S.F. with others? Here's  
how to do it . . . and why!*

**C**HANCES ARE, if you live in or near a major U.S. City, there may be a local science-fiction fanclub in your vicinity. Wherever there are six 'or a dozen otherwise normal persons who share an interest in and enthusiasm for reading this kind of stuff, a fanclub tends to spring up. You may not even know there's one right smack in your home town, because they don't advertise, don't usually proselytize, generally keep pretty much to themselves. That doesn't mean they do not welcome fresh new

members. They certainly do. And if you'd like to get together once in awhile with congenial people of similar lit'ry tastes it might be worth your while to look 'em up and drop around.

I know of about twenty local science-fiction clubs currently active, and I'll tell you about them in this column — and, if you're what TIME magazine likes to call a "sci-fi addict" (a shuddersome neologism, if I ever heard one), why not pay the local club a visit? I can promise you an interesting

afternoon of talk, and the chance to make friends with people who have also succumbed to the appeal of Our Favorite Reading Matter.

#### East Coast Fan Clubs

I live in New York, and this sizable town has a long and fiendishly complicated history of local fanclubs, dating back even before the golden days of Hugo Gernsback's "Science Fiction League". In fact, New York seems to have been the home of the very, very first fanclub in the universe: something called The Scienceers, who came into existence around 1929 or '30. As an added honor, this club published what may be the first fanzine on record, a club periodical called *The Planet* (or something similar) which survived for about nine issues.

Unlike fanzines of today, which are largely concerned with *fannish* doings, this great-granddaddy of them all was pretty generally dedicated to *science fiction itself*, as witness this Poem from the historic first issue:

*Burroughs, Cummings, Merritt,  
Kline,*

*Burks and Leinster; none so  
fine.*

*Ed Hamilton and Vic Rousseau  
With Capt. Meek complete the  
show.*

*In the field of science fiction,  
They're supreme, that's my con-  
viction."*

This determined doggerel is signed "A.G." which I presume stands for Allen Glasser, the first editor.

Today, as befits this most mammoth of metropoli (*-lises? -leis??*), we New Yorkers rejoice in, not merely *one*, not just *two*, but a full *three and one-half* local fanclubs.

The oldest, centered around the Bronx, is called The Lunarians. The second, located in Brooklyn, enjoys the name of The Fanoclats. The third, an offshoot of Fanoclastism, is called (rather cryptically) FISFA, and meets in Manhattan. (The "one-half" cited above, is a fan group of only sporadic activity, and currently defunct, I'd say, clustered about New York's City College.)

What about other cities here on the coast? Well, there's a group upstate in Syracuse, N.Y., which made a bid for the site of the 1966 World Science Fiction Convention—we'll discuss the fine old tradition of the annual conventions in another installment of this column—and, right across the Hudson in Newark, New Jersey, there's a very large, very active and quite old fanclub called ESFA (Eastern Science Fiction Association). Unlike its more informal Gotham cousins, ESFA has genuine club officers and elections, and puts on formal meetings with Guest Speakers and all.

Then there's a fanclub down in Baltimore, Maryland, and a lively group in Washington, D.C., the yearly hosts of a regional "conclave" called the Disclave (we'll cover the local and regional get-togethers in a forthcoming O.M.I.F., I promise), and Boston is home to a club of college students at M.I.T.

Philadelphia boasts of the PSFS, or Philadelphia Science Fiction So-

ciety, one of the nation's biggest fanclubs, and (with the Los Angeles club) possibly the nation's oldest. It got started about 1935 and has been going strong ever since, having already been the host to two World Conventions.

The only club I know of still going in the South is a group in Charlotte, North Carolina. But, in days of old, there was a fanclub in New Orleans, and, in addition, one in my own home town, St. Petersburg, Florida.

#### Fanclubs in the Mid-West

Out in what H. L. Mencken used to call, rather disrespectfully, "the Bible-and-Hookworm Belt" there are fewer fanclubs.

Chicago has one (at least), and so do Detroit, Michigan, and Cincinnati, Ohio, and then there's Cleveland, former home of Harlan Ellison and current home of Andre Norton . . . Cleveland, by the way, folks, will be the site of *this* year's World Convention, rather bafflingly yclept *Tricon*, but I will tell you about that anon.

Another major midwest group, now extinct, centered about Jackson, and Battle Creek, Michigan, and enjoyed the name of the Galactic Roamers. One of the pioneer sf writers, that all-time great-of-greats E. E. Smith, Ph.D., belonged to the Roamers, and used to read aloud his stories while they were in-the-works to members, for criticism, comment and suggestions. Alas! Doc Smith is no longer with us — nor are the Galactic Roamers, either!

California has always been a major center of fanclubbing, fanzining and fan activity in general. Los Angeles houses one of the most famed and venerable of all such groups, the redoubtable LASFS (Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, in abbreviation, and in conversation pronounced "lass-fuss") The LASFS competes with the Philly fanclub for the title of oldest, but it's a toss-up either way.

Then, over in Berkeley, there's a lively little club who delight in the cognomen, *The Elves', Gnomes' and Little Men's Chowder, Science-Fiction and Marching Society* (a charming name which they borrowed from Crockett Johnson's now sadly defunct but immortal in memory comic strip, *Barnaby*). Most fanclubs are known familiarly by their initials, but happily this group chose *not* to call themselves the EGALMCMASFS, but "the Little Men."

(Incidentally, don't get the notion fanclubs are made up of naught but fans alone . . . lots of important sf writers, illustrators, editors, etc., belong, if they are in the vicinity. Witness Doc Smith and the Galactic Roamers, above. And the Little Men number among their membership Jack Vance and Poul and Karen Anderson, to say nothing of Anthony Boucher, mystery-reviewer for *The New York Times*, and founder of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. L. Sprague de Camp is a frequent dropper-in to the doings in Philadelphia; Ace Books' editor Donald A. Wollheim and *IF's*

cover artist Jack Gaughan, visit New York's Fanoclasts from time to time, and other science fiction professionals belong to local groups. And, beyond the scope of a column on fan clubs, but worthy of mention, is yet another of New York's institutions, The Hydra Club — as far as is beknownst to me, the only *local fan club* for sf professionals anywhere around. Willy Ley, Lester Del Rey, Robert Silverberg, Hans Stefan Santesson — former editor of *Fantastic Universe* — sf writer's agent Henry Morrison, and others in the New York area — including myself — belong.)

San Francisco is home to a club called The Golden Gate Futurians, and there are other clubs rumored to exist in the outlying regions of California — one that I know of, for example, in San Diego.

There is also a fanclub in Seattle, Washington, and there is another — or up until fairly recently, at least, there *was* — in Portland, Oregon.

So there you have the twenty-odd clubs still active — and if I've left out *yours*, by inadvertance, from this brief, informal survey, don't be hurt. Clubs come and go, spring up overnight, vanish just as quickly. And, even though not listed here, there may very well be one in your town. After all, *somebody* buys up all those science fiction magazines and paperbacks at your corner drugstore.

#### What Happens In a Fanclub?

I have been a member of, dropped in on, visited, and even been guest speaker at, a variety of

fanclubs on the East Coast, and I think I can answer the question burning in your mind. What do they do?

Most of them meet twice a month (some meet weekly; others, only monthly; let's not quibble!) These meetings range all the way from the formality of ESFA and LASFS (with club officers, elections, constitutions and formal programs) . . . down to the informality that marks a Fanoclast meeting. Your formal program usually consists of one or two guest speakers. Maybe they will invite a local or visiting sf author or editor to give a brief talk; maybe a member who visited a distant regional or world con will give a "report", sometimes even a slide-show or home-movie of con-doin's.

Your *informal* meeting is just a regular get-together of local fans or readers who like to spend the afternoon with friends and acquaintances of similar interests, for a good old-fashioned gabfest. There may be a few records on the hi fi . . . cans of cold beer in the kitchen . . . a bowl of pretzels on the coffee-table. New York's Lunarians used to have, and maybe still do, a giant 18-cup coffee-maker well-stocked and available to the membership.

But whatever the culinary preparations be (or lack of same, on a BYOB or "bring-yer-own-beer" basis), you simply sit around and converse. Not necessarily about science-fiction, I hasten to add: talk can and does range through movies, pop art, comic books, radio serials, Bette Davis, Shakespeare, fan scandals and feuds, Dali or Picasso, Mozart, Alex

Raymond and Hal Foster, *Batman*, George Pal, the 'Cyclic' poets, Ezra Pound, new fanzines, forthcoming conventions, the latest paperbacks, TV commercials and (sometimes) shows, pre-Columbian art, Hannes Bok, Burroughs, 'Conan', Sherlock Holmes, the Oz books, jazz, folk music, cars, sex, religion, politics, Viet Nam, draft-card burners, communism, Tolkien, old movie serials, James Bond and damn near anything else you can think of, up to and including Ghek the Kaldane and Qadgop the Mercotan!

Now sometimes fanclubs hold their meetings in the home of a member — as do New York's Fanoclasts and Lunarians — other clubs rent facilities from local halls (such as the ESFA in Newark and the PSFS in Philadelphia). For local conclaves, regional conferences and world conventions (of course, space is reserved in rented halls or hotels. Clubs which convene in a member's home frequently switch around from

home to home . . . as, for instance, the Fanoclasts met first, and for awhile, at the East Side apartment of Dick Lupoff, later in the Bronx apartment of Lin Carter, and are now getting together twice a month at Ted White's apartment in Brooklyn.

And it is not *entirely* unknown for an occasional, lucky club to actually Own A Whole Building All By Itself. I seem to remember that such was the case in Los Angeles, with the far-famed Bixel Street headquarters of the LASFS.

But large or small, formal or casual, hither or yon, *fanclubs are fun*. Look one up, if you live in any of the cities named above: spend an evening or an afternoon getting to know other people who also like science fiction. Fanzine publishing or writing may not be your meat — but no one who likes science fiction can fail to make interesting new friends and find congenial conversation in a fanclub. **END**

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# The Weapons That Walked

by D. M. MELTON

Illustrated by ADKINS

*Something on the planet warred  
against Man — and its weapons  
were the deadliest ever known!*

I

In most situations Joe Hanley was even tempered and tended to look on the bright side. But halfway down to the surface of Kasti III, with the landing boat falling like a rock, there just wasn't any bright side.

Joe got the E-Ship on the horn. When Ensign Holman's tumble-haired, heart-shaped face appeared in the tank he yelled, "Slim! I need a grapple tug, fast! And get me the Maint Chief. I turned in a squawk sheet a week ago about the antigrav on this

boat! . . ." That was when he came as close as he ever did to losing his temper. Beyond an absent nod she turned back to the computer console and ignored him.

He hung on, fuming. Presently, in spite of himself, he calmed down and began to chuckle.

From what he could see and hear, Commander Thornton was up to his ears in some kind of emergency, too. And it had to be urgent, because although a single, gentle tap would do it, the commander's stubby thumb was jabbing repeatedly at the Panic Button. Soon he saw that the com-



mander had heard his call to Slim, for the stubby thumb started alternating between the General Quarters button and the Maint Chief's call.

Joe frowned thoughtfully. Faintly he could hear the GQ klaxons howling in the corridors. That meant somebody else was in trouble, too, probably the team already down on K-IV. Well, that was The Thorn's job — to prod them all when they needed it, and to worry about them all when they were in trouble. And sure enough, soon, between jabs, Thornton caught his eye in the screen.

"Joe! We can't send a tug down to catch you. Trouble on IV. You abort! Blast out of that thing!"

Joe watched and listened a few more seconds — long enough to hear Ensign Holman, calmly doing three or four other things at the same time, instruct Albert, the computer, to take the E-Ship out of orbit, full emergency, and also track Joe down, pinpoint his touchdown, and tape it all. Quite a gal, that tall, black headed Martian. She'd do to have along.

Then he turned back to his own problem. He caught a glimpse of the wooded surface of K-III rushing up at him. It tended to spur him on. (Later Holman told him, with something approaching a giggle, that he had been scabbling like a Martian sand crab on the floor of a dome.) But he wrestled the failing antigrav, by the book and by improvising, until it flickered out completely. While that doomed his mission it did stop the snapping, off-and-on action that had been shaking his brains and

stomach loose. And it also told him it was time to go, for by then the boat was in atmosphere, falling free, red hot and tumbling.

He made a fast check of the few items he could take with him, locked the escape pod and jabbed his own Panic Button, grinning when he noticed that although a single, gentle tap would do it, he had punched it three times! His stomach flipped through two more on-and-off G pulls — once with the slamming explosion of ejection and again, happily, when the big chute jerked open. Then his muttering at the Maint Section eased off, for from then on everything went by the book. The pod settled right side up, in the clearing for which he had aimed it, with everything intact and functioning.

As the yellow cloud of nylon settled beside him he let out his breath in a long sigh of relief. He was down, he thought wryly, in a landing he could walk away from. But it sure wasn't according to plan, either the E-Service plan or his own.

The last he shrugged aside. His own plans were long range anyway, and he knew the odds. About one possible site for life in every fifteen hundred cubic light years. All you could do was try, and he was a patient man.

Joe's patience, in fact, and his quiet manner and soft speech, had been known to lead some people to misjudge him. Off watch he was generally found sitting on the back of his neck in the lounge, seemingly with no thought but for the moment, and always within voice or gesture

range of the coffee robot. But scattered through as much of the galaxy as the Exploration Service had so far opened you could find any number of junior officers, wardroom space-lawyers and not a few aggressive alien life forms who had learned, with varying degrees of shock, that until you got to know him it was wiser not to crowd him.

So while most of the eager first-trippers really wanted the point spot in the surface survey of Kasti III, nobody pressed after he told them, "Look! My name is up and I've taken my share of Mars-type sand craters and methane swamp worlds. What's wrong with my dropping in, for a change, on a planet where you can breathe?"

The Drive Engineer, who had trained with Joe back at Vandenberg, let a mock-serious look sweep around the table and back to Joe. "Nothing wrong, Joe. Only you do have this habit of wandering off into the woods, when there are woods to wander off into. It's time consuming. But, of course, it's just your early upbringing showing.

Joe grinned. "You grew up in the same place, Chief."

"Yes but I did grow up. You see —" the Chief waved his cup at the circle of faces — "Joe comes from Terra, northern California, where believe it or not there are still a couple of hundred square kilometers of forest, with wildlife yet. When we were kids there, they would let you hunt only with rifle-mount cameras. But Joe's a shade atavistic. Why, this trip he even tried to sneak a combination fly-rod and shotgun on board."

Joe grinned again and lounged back deeper in his chair. "Wrong, Chief. The handle wasn't a shotgun, although that's an idea. It converted into a hunting bow. And if you'd just kept your big mouth shut —"

The Chief looked pained. "I was thinking, as always, of the good of the service, and trying to keep The Thorn out of your side. But even so, when you draw the point spot on a planet like III your test sites still seem to always turn up near potential bird runs or fishing streams."

"Part of the point's job is to check out the fauna."

"But your methods, Joe! Remember Palma I? Those amphibians you were illegally angling for turned out to be highly intelligent?"

Joe squirmed uncomfortably. "I wasn't fishing for them," he defended. "And I made friends with them, finally."

"Sure you did." The Chief nodded owlishly. "You had to. Since it turned out the one you snagged was that tribe's equivalent of medicine man. And I'll grant that required tact, considering where you snagged him. Embarrassing! How would you like to be . . ."

The chime broke in with Joe's signal, and Ensign Holman's flawless intercom voice called his name. "Thirty minutes to drop, Captain."

Joe drained his cup, told the Chief where he could go, and palmed his coffee ration tab into the Chief's slot on the dispenser robot. The robot rolled on down the table bubbling happily. It couldn't care less, and eventually the Chief would yell his head off.



Joe made his way forward, toward the computer and control room. But on the way, after a series of innocent glances back down the empty corridor, he ducked into the supply section, making a fast, last minute check for pocket size items that could be converted into fishing tackle. Mostly this E-work was dreary and dangerous, much of it drudgery. You rarely found a pretty little world like III, all woods and streams and fresh air. This just might at long last be the one he was looking for. Anyway, nobody was going to talk him out of this drop.

Nobody did. But now, he thought soberly as he looked around him, he'd about as soon somebody had. Here he sat, his boat and equipment off somewhere in the woods in pieces, with the E-Ship pulling away.

He turned the pod's little vision tank and a quick glance showed him the ship was still too busy to talk with him. He relaxed, but his relief at being all in one piece was marred by a vague uneasiness.

He shook it off. A new planet, no matter what kind, always made you feel that way. He unstrapped, and opened the pod. After all, Albert had long since sent down homing scoop missiles and checked out the sea water and the air. He drew in a deep, satisfying breath and let it out with an equally long sigh of relief. Fresh! It had the rich, green smell of things growing in soil instead of hydroponic tanks. It smelled like home. There was something a little like cedar, and a salty, seaweed smell from the beach not too far away.

There was the smell of a lush, recently wet, meadow. But there was also something — at which he frowned slightly — that reminded him of a well kept but crowded zoo.

That faint animal smell brought back the vague feeling of uneasiness. And now, close up, K-III didn't seem quite the same as it had when he had studied it with Ensign Holman in the E-Ship's big screens. The Ensign had brushed that tumbling black hair from her eyes and waved a slim hand at the computer banks which made up one wall of her section.

"Albert has told us all he can about III, from up here. But it shapes up like a jewel, close to being Terra's twin."

Joe had shaken his head, and had felt a note of bitterness in his voice. "Not Terra's twin now. Terra's twin before there were people, maybe."

She laughed. "That's right. You're the one who thinks man should take a bold step backward."

"Nope. I just think he shouldn't trample everything underfoot. You grew up under those plasteel domes on Mars . . . although —" he smiled briefly — "it doesn't show. You must have spent a lot of time in the One-Gee gyms when you were growing up. But you wouldn't know about forests and streams."

She nodded. "You're right. Our flowers came from hydroponic farms."

"Well, the people on Terra pick their flowers from hydroponic tanks, too, now. They invented the bulldozer a couple of hundred years before they invented the FTL drive

and antigrav. By that time, Terra was no longer a jewel. It was practically all paved."

She laughed. "I've been there. And I've talked with the Chief. He told me you both grew up in one of the last National Parks. Said your dad, a Ranger, once accidentally cut a bulldozer in half. A laser misfire."

Joe's lips quirked. "Well, those first rifles weren't dependable. But the accident did save a three thousand year old redwood, for a while. But what about III here? What can I expect?"

"Albert has printed up a summary for you. Kasti is Sol type, and III, while smaller, checks out very close to Terra, or, as you say, Terra a thousand years back. No people, but it has seas, forests, streams and all kinds of things that fly, swim and walk."

Joe's eyes lit up. "Untouched! How about things that sting, claw and bite?"

Ensign Holman had smiled, and her blue eyes scanned the six feet from his square jawed, close cropped head to his plasteel boots. "There are some. Must be in a balanced ecology. But that's why they issue those laser rifles to you broad-shouldered pioneer types. Still, there's no indication of anything down there any more intelligent than a bright chimpanzee or formidable than a rhinoceros. Just find us a site for the lab huts and we'll be down and protect you."

Joe had grinned at her then. Now, at the memory he laughed ruefully. There wasn't much he could do toward a preliminary survey. Without

the landing boat and its equipment he was left with packaged rations, his suit, and the short barreled laser rifle. His hand gun as always he was wearing. It added up, at best, to survival.

## II

Yet the park-like glade looked as safe as a suburban back yard when he stepped out of the pod. He let the helmet swing back and breathed deeply.

The air was still pungent with the odor of growing things. He could hear bird sounds, some musical, some raucous as an indignant blue jay. The breeze was soughing through a tall, sequoia-like tree some fifty yards away.

For an instant his spirits lifted. This was a pretty little world. Then he became wary as it came to him that the sounds he heard were all distant. Nearby it was a little too quiet. The faint zoo smell was stronger, and he had the distinct feeling he was being watched.

He moved away from the pod. The signs showed that grazing animals of some kind fed over this meadow. The wind again drew his attention to the tree. It towered there in splendid isolation, beautiful as a mountain redwood. But there was something about it that wasn't quite right. He flipped down the helmet and took a long binocular look through the faceplate.

It did look a little like a redwood, except the branches were smaller and closer together. It was a tree that could be climbed. The needle

leaves were mostly clustered at the outer tips of the branches, and high-magnification showed the lower, matured needles flared at the base, with tips dark and sharp.

"Darts?" he wondered, frowning. The thought drew his gaze downward and he realized what it was about the tree that was different. The grass under it was undisturbed. His lips pursed in a thoughtful whistle. "Oh-oh! And the grass eaters know how close they can feed. I wonder what triggers it?"

He walked the perimeter of the circle of rich grass. There had to be some way of finding out without walking in there.

He thought of the hand gun at his belt. The pellet could be set to explode on impact, with about double the force of an old fashioned, hand thrown grenade. But he wanted to see what the tree's reaction was to a walking animal — or man. It didn't react to movement. He could see cricket-like bugs busy in the grass, and, while he was watching, some kind of bat-like flying thing spotted him, darted aside, and flew with impunity under the spreading branches.

He turned away, glancing at the pod, reassured by his estimate that he could reach the entry port in seconds. Then a flash of movement near the stream caught his eye.

He drew the hand gun and turned toward the pod just as three lean, cat-like shapes burst from cover and converged from three directions. As he circled the tree he muttered irritably into his suit radio.

"I hope you can still see and hear me. Holman. Look at those things!

'Nothing down there any more intelligent than a bright chimpanzee!' you say!" For at his first move the cats changed course, one making for the pod. Their obvious intention was to either cut him down or force him back, under the tree.

A dozen strides told him he would lose the race. These things were incredibly fast. He stopped, dropped to one knee, and steadied the hand gun in both palms. The weapon grunted spitefully and the pellet burst three feet in front of the nearest cat. He saw it spin end over end as he wheeled to face the others. The gun grunted again, and the second cat disintegrated. He turned again, but the third cat had swerved abruptly and was headed back for cover. Frowning, he watched it disappear. Then he walked over to the sprawled animal he had stunned and used a non-explosive pellet just to be sure.

Close up, it still looked something like a cat — a cross between a puma and a weasel, with some nightmarish overtones. It was a fanged and clawed predator, hairless and lean, all chest and no belly, built for speed. Again he looked around. Then he gingerly picked up the cat and whirled like a hammer thrower, tossing the carcass as far as he could.

Carefully he stepped off the distance. Then he carried it back to the tree.

Even though he had guessed what would happen he was shaken by the tree's reaction. When the body struck the ground inside the circle of undisturbed grass the branches above

the point of impact lashed into motion. The tips whipped up and then down, and there was a harsh, tearing sound.

Dozens of dart-shaped needles hissed into the ground and into the body of the cat.

But he was unprepared for what followed. There was a stirring in the grass as writhing, off-white roots worked up out of the ground. The network thickened and Joe shuddered as he turned back to the pod.

Back inside, he opened a mug of coffee, waited a moment for it to heat, and laced it with medkit brandy. He glanced warily around the now empty meadow and then turned to the pod's little communicator tank. The tank hummed softly, but showed only a swirling pattern of color. He checked the tuning and then called, "Slim, can you hear me?"

Ensign Holman's voice came back clearly. "Loud and clear, Captain. And you should watch your language. But we're nearly out of direct visual range. What's with the tree?"

"The tree we stay away from. It's a people eater."

"We suspected as much when we saw you stun and use that first animal instead of blowing it apart. That was good shooting."

"Now what would a computer operator know about shooting?"

"Don't be smug. You forget I went through the same boot camp you did, only a few years later—when it was a few degrees tougher. I can use a hand gun, too. But there's no time to exchange compliments. We've launched some communica-

tion satellites, and one of them should be in range soon. But we can see enough without it to tell you there's something unusual going on around you. Movement, all around, but we can't tell what. We'll pick you up through the comsats soon. But The Thorn says watch it! Out"

Joe scowled, sipped some more coffee, and looked around the meadow. Watch it! he thought sardonically. What did Thornton and that good-looking Martian think he would be doing? The meadow was still empty—or was it? A thin, rasping scream tore at his ears. Oh-oh! His cat was back, with a half dozen of its brothers, prowling near the edge of the glade but keeping their distance. And there was a grunting, wheezing sound, too, growing louder.

He locked the communicator's video eyes on a moving bulk in the distant trees. The vision tank brought in an image of an animal as monstrous as the cats and nearly as ugly.

It was larger than the rhino Holman had mentioned. It had longer legs, and there was no horn on its horse-faced head. It looked as if it could run, should occasion demand. And as it moved its sides seemed to reflect dull highlights. He zoomed in close and again whistled. "Shades of Georgie Patton! It's the tank corps!"

The highlights were reflections from thick, horny plates, apparently rubbed smooth on the sides, which made up the animal's hide. Even the horse face was armored, the eyes mere holes in a solid plate

of horn. Joe gulped the remaining coffee and grimly checked the rifle.

Outside, tense and ready, he surveyed the meadow.

Cats and other unidentified prowlers, no doubt predators, now ringed the perimeter. Those, he thought, he could handle, unless they all rushed at once. But there were now four of the big "rhinorses", and they might be hard to stop, depending on how fast they were. They looked fast. And any one of them could push the pod around like an empty ration carton.

He waited, scowling thoughtfully. There had been something odd about the tree. Now there was something odd about this. Some defensive instinct flashed warning after warning.

Then it came to him that this was shaping into a pattern. And he didn't like the pattern at all. This menagerie was behaving as if it had been summoned and was being directed!

Two of the rhinorses had turned, skirting the edge of the meadow, and were plodding purposefully around behind him. If they rushed, and he failed to stop them, they would overrun him or force him back toward the tree.

The tree! A thought struck him, but he rejected it. He had seen some fantastic things in the way of far-out life forms, but he wasn't ready to accept telepathic plant life. It just couldn't be that overgrown thorn bush. Then he muttered angrily at himself. Of course! How stupid could you get? It was something he had overlooked, never thought of. Something in the tree!

There was no time for a second survey. One of the rhinorses was moving in at a trot, speeding to what could soon be a headlong charge. He raised the laser, then lowered it. He was figuring on coming out of this alive. And for now, at least, the pod was home and headquarters. He didn't want an estimated two tons of alien carrion maturing on his doorstep. It was worth a try. He drew the hand gun and placed a pellet in front of the now charging beast. At the explosion it swerved and snorted. He placed another to one side, and another. The animal tossed its head, bellowing and wheezing. But it turned away, slowing to a trot.

The others stopped, and all were watching. For an instant there seemed no movement anywhere.

Again he looked up at the tree. He saw no target, but a good-sized climber could be concealed anywhere behind the trunk. And now the menagerie was stirring again, getting restless. Abruptly he raised the rifle and swept a cutting beam across the base of the tree.

As the beam hit, the animals milled as if in sudden confusion. The base of the tree smoked and the trunk swayed, seeming to hang in mid air as it slowly toppled. Then, with the falling trunk midway in its arc, something ape-like, which reminded Joe of a monstrous flying lemur, spread its gliding membranes and soared from the upper branches. It drifted toward the brushy area near the stream and Joe saw another rhinorse burst from cover and make for the gliding figure. The



big animal was running with remarkable speed, and the soaring figure glided to its back, scrambling and beating its arms as it groped for foothold.

As the rhinhorse and its rider disappeared, the other animals milled. Joe went into a crouch, ready for a rush. He waited, sizing up the milling ring, choosing spots where either the laser or the hand gun would be more effective. Then, gradually, he relaxed, staring about with growing conviction. He was right! This menagerie had been assembled and directed. And now it was losing interest!

The remaining rhinhorses had started placidly cropping grass, ignoring him completely. The cats faded back into the forest, all except one, which was singlemindedly pursuing dinner at the far edge of the glade. While he watched, the cat made its kill, one of its late allies, and carried it off without a backward glance.

### III

Joe's next prescription of medkit brandy went down neat. He needed it. The pod communicator beeped, and he fine-tuned the E-Ship's band.

The tank cleared to reveal Commander Thornton's craggy features. Thornton's face fractured into one of its rare smiles. "The comsat caught up with you. We got most of that, and we're still recording. That was quite a show, Captain."

Joe grimaced. "I'm glad somebody liked it, Commander. I sure didn't.

And I have the feeling I'm going to like it less later on. These carnivores are playing for keeps, or at least their boss is. How soon can you get some people and equipment down here?"

"Soon, Joe. Five-six days. The people on IV are in worse shape than you. Earthquake, and their dome is losing air, with the outside atmosphere mostly ammonia. You hole up somewhere and hang on. We'll be back."

Thornton's face shifted aside and Ensign Holman's wide blue eyes went over him. She gave him a brief, non-service smile, then sobered and spoke briskly. "You handled that efficiently, Captain. Albert says those animals were almost certainly being directed, probably by some telepathic means, by that thing which glided out of the tree. He says—"

Joe broke in with amused irritation. "You and Albert! You're even getting so you talk like him. Look, Slim, you could use transistors for brains and figure that one out. How much detail did you get? Could you see where it went? Run the tape."

She nodded, and presently she said, "See? South of you, three or four kilometers, on that knoll with more trees around it. Watch! Whatever it was riding, that big animal scrambled off and climbed to the rocks at the top."

"I've got it. Could be it lives there, although I doubt if that matters much. Did you see where my boat crashed? I might be able to salvage something."

"No tape, but the Chief was monitoring."

Joe saw the drive engineer's face move into the screen beside Holman. "You cut it pretty fine, Joe," he said. "The boat went in only a couple of kilometers east of you. But there can't be much left of it. Spare computer and power units maybe, if you're lucky."

Joe grimaced wryly. "Big help!"

The Chief's face split in a wide grin. "Why so glum, Joe? Aren't you the guy who always finds a bright side? This is the chance you've been waiting for. Nothing to do for the next week but fish and hunt. Live it up!"

Joe almost yelled his exasperation. "Live it up. Fish and hunt. Why, you idiot, didn't you see that tape Slim just ran?"

"Sure. But what —"

"But what! The *what* is that I'm not the one that is going to be doing the hunting. That big, ugly flying ape, with his pack of killer cats and armor plated herbivora, is going to be hunting *me!*"

The image in the tank was beginning to waver. The E-Ship, "falling" outward toward K-IV at the full acceleration of that big planet's gravity, was nearly out of visual range of the comsats.

The Chief, frowning thoughtfully, moved aside and Ensign Holman's heart-shaped face filled the screen. The image blurred, and that, Joe thought, probably accounted for the fact that she no longer looked cool and calm. Then the image blurred out and the tank became a swirling mass of color. But her voice came in strongly, the waver in it probably

just transmission surge as the comsat boosters stepped up the signal. "Take care, pioneer. We'll be back!"

Joe stared out at his now not so pretty little world. No, he thought, it's as pretty as ever. But it has some unfriendly flora and fauna, some aggressively dangerous. That big flying ape — Joe found himself thinking of it as "The Hunter" — had run. But it had lost only a skirmish, not a war. It had to run, after Joe cut its command and observation post out from under it. Assuming it was intelligent as well as telepathic, and it would be stupid to assume anything else, it now knew as much about Joe's weapons as Joe knew about its weapons.

An inconsistency or two nagged at Joe. This "bright chimpanzee", this hunter, had gone after Joe on sight, true enough. But why hadn't he sent his whole menagerie in to overrun Joe? And the tree! Surely he couldn't control that spastic monstrosity. How had he gotten up there?

Joe mused, absently watching the big, ugly rhinohorses placidly feeding away from him. And it reminded him the hunter had glided down to one of them from the upper branches. Of course! A running glide could have carried the hunter over the sensitive root area, in past the branch tips. From there he could climb.

Joe sighed, and came to his feet. The rest of it was tomorrow's problem. The sun was dropping, and he had to find a rocky hideout of his own, since the pod offered no protection at all. And it looked like he was going to be the quarry in a dangerous if not deadly game of hide

and seek. But he stood there, finishing the coffee, still thinking, and the more he thought of holing up the less he liked it. Probably his best defense would be a hard and determined offense. He would go hunting himself!

And there was something else. He looked around, musing. He had been searching for something for a long time and this might be it. But he could never, reasonably, expect it to be handed to him on a silver plate. He had to find out, once and for all, if he could cope with this planet. He looked out toward the surrounding woods and presently he said aloud, "I don't know where you are, fellow, or whether or not you can read my mind. But if you can, you better get set. Tomorrow you and I are going to go for broke!"

**H**is preparations didn't take long. There wasn't much he could take.

The suit hampered movement slightly, but it would provide protection against nuisance attacks. Small predators, or bad-tempered snake types, if any, would only bend their fangs on it. He wasn't at all sure about the dart-tree needles, undoubtedly poison. He gathered up the laser, a food pack, a thermos. He hoped the rhinohorses would ignore the pod, with him out of it. He closed the port and started cautiously across the meadow, south, toward the area where Slim's tape had shown the hunter had gone to ground. In his mind he and the hunter had already changed roles.

Under other circumstances his first

night on III might have been enjoyable. There were trees, many with a familiar look, which reminded him of the few remaining forest patches at home. Other trees were weirdly different, having the look of giant ferns. The dart trees were few, and easily avoided, although they did grow in clumps or rows in places. He paused momentarily at the edge of a stream, briefly lost in nostalgia at the purling whisper of water over the rocks. Once he crouched, alert, but the sound which had startled him was only something small and bounding, the fleeing, furry equivalent, he guessed, of a terran cottontail.

Presently he found what he wanted.

He was in a sparsely wooded valley now, the ground rising steadily but gently. At the edge of a dry stream bed he found a rocky formation open only on one side, with enough overhang so nothing could drop on him from above. Branches, cut with the laser, he piled in front. His brushwood barricade would stop nothing, but nothing could get through it without making enough noise to warn him.

#### IV

**H**e slept fitfully at first, but later he must have slept soundly, for he woke feeling rested, to bird sounds, mostly musical.

He yawned and stretched, savoring the sight, sound and smell of a damp woodland warming in the sun. He smiled to himself. This was it! This was what had sent him into the E-Service.

Then he came to his feet, alert, when the birds to one side went suddenly silent, reminding him of the business at hand. As he stood up one of the cats, standing motionless a hundred meters away, drifted ghost-like back into the woods. He frowned after it. Who, he wondered, was really doing the hunting here? How much communication did these beasts have? Could the cat report? He pushed aside his brush barricade. Now, at daybreak, the birds made an early warning system. He picked a spot in the open, by the stream, and breakfasted out of a can, sharing the last of it with something small and furry which came, nose twitching, from its own rocky shelter.

He moved on south, keeping in the open when possible, until he guessed he was within half a kilometer of the hunter's rocky knoll. There was a whisper of movement in the undergrowth. Once he heard the chilling scream of a cat. Then a crashing in the woods behind him whirled him around, keyed for trouble. Trouble was shaping. One of the rhinorses was coming toward him through the trees. Joe was astonished to see the charging beast was ignoring a dart tree which stood in its path. The beast thundered closely past the tree trunk and the branches lashed violently. Then he realized that with its head low, to protect its eyes, the big beast was impervious. The needles would simply glance from that armored back.

He brought up the laser, then swore under his breath, realizing almost too late that this attack was

too obvious, too blatantly a diversion. He wheeled around, gambling on a quick estimate that anything so ponderous could not possibly turn as quickly as he could jump from its path. He burned down one leaping cat in mid air, disabled another as it raced in from the side. Then he leaped, sprawling, from the thunder of pounding feet behind him. The rhinhorse crashed past, wheezing, but looking neither right nor left. Joe came to his feet in time to see a third cat fade into the underbrush up the slope ahead.

He waited, ready for another move, but none came. He was keenly alert now, convinced finally that he had not overrated his adversary. The hunter was something more than just a crafty ape. This last move was something Joe himself might have tried had he been directing the same "weapons" the hunter was using.

He moved on, alert but thinking hard. Was he being stupid about this? After all, five or six days and the E-Ship would be back with help. He shook off the thought. This was, now more than ever, a personal duel between himself and that quickly glimpsed flying ape with its wide, fur covered membranes and man-like head. He thought for a moment. What if their positions were reversed? What would he, Joe, do if he were in the hunter's place? First he would try to influence this strange new being, try driving thoughts at him, try to make him do what he wanted, go where he wanted.

Joe halted with a start. Was he being influenced? Was he being led, or driven, into some kind of trap?

He thought not. Certainly he had reacted properly a few moments back. He moved again, still wondering. Then he realized the question was academic. It no longer mattered whether he had been led into a trap or had walked into it by chance. He was in it, and it was closing around him. He had come to the foot of the high, rocky prominence which the viewers in the comsats had shown to be the hunter's lair. This approach was bordered with dart trees, big ones, which overlapped, with no way out between them. And behind him again was the restless, prowling ring of cats and lesser quadrupeds, cutting off retreat. They could overrun him any time they were ordered to!

He didn't wait. He slipped the pack from his back and, running, threw a barrage of explosions from the hand gun into the woods and followed his barrage back to the edge of the trees to a rocky outcropping. A big dart tree, with smaller trees of other kinds nearby, protected him from one side. From the other, the cats could get at him only two or three at a time. It was at best a reprieve. But it would buy him some time.

He crouched by the rocks, breathing hard, and grew tense as he realized that time itself could beat him. The hunter could wait him out if it came to a stalemate. And it looked as if some of the cats were getting ready for a rush at the open corridor leading in to him. He recalled their confused behavior the day before when the hunter's attention had

been diverted. Apparently there was a limit to his ability to control and direct. Joe watched the cats, and the movements in the woods which indicated others were collecting. It's worth a try, he thought, and turned the laser on one of the big, rocky outcroppings at the top of the knoll.

The rock smoked and chipped, dust and vapor rising as the beam cut into it. He judged the hunter's confusion by the sudden disruption among the cats. Some retreated, others merely stopped, crouched and snarling. But the rush which had been shaping was broken up.

But this, too, was a losing tactic. There wasn't energy enough in the laser's power pack to destroy that rocky outcropping which protected the hunter. Joe studied the rocky knoll, estimating heights and distances, and glanced up at the dart tree which, at one side of him, was both a shield and a barrier. This tree, too, towered. And from its upper branches he believed he could see over the hunter's barricade.

He fired more pellets into the woods around him, sent several, for effect, against the still smoking rocks at the top of the hill. Then he made a quick estimate of height and distance and turned the laser against a smaller tree growing outside the dart tree's circle of sensitive roots. He cut out a wedge low in the trunk and the tree slowly toppled, crashed through the dart tree's lower branches, and fell heavily across the root system, its upper tip well inside the dart tree's inner circle. The dart tree lashed in blind frenzy, but when the pressure stabilized the dart-tipped

limbs straightened, inert. Joe flipped down his helmet, chose a pathway through the upright branches of the felled tree, and raced across his bridge to the safe area in close to the dart tree's trunk. He jumped, caught a handhold, and climbed. Below him the cats converged, raging, ringing the tree.

**J**oe climbed, watching for a glimpse of the hunter. Once he glanced down and smiled grimly.

The hunter could see him. Two of the cats were making their way across his tree trunk bridge below, on their way up after him. For the moment he ignored them, watching the knoll as he climbed higher. Below him the cats gained. It was only a distraction, but it was a good one, for soon he would have to dispose of them.

He could see the far side of the hunter's knoll before he could see into the fort-like formation where the hunter must be hiding. The far side, too, had its share of dart trees, but these were widely spaced. There were rocks on the far side also, big outcroppings between which the hunter could dodge if he chose to retreat. One of the rhinorses was there, too, glimpsed as it made its way up the far side between the rocks.

Joe could hear the cats snarling behind him. Soon he would have to turn away and dispose of them. Then, below him on the knoll, the big rhinhorse crossed an open area and Joe caught a glimpse of the brown, ape-like shape of the hunter as he leaped for the rhinhorse's

lowered neck. The hunter scrambled up and the big animal burst into the open, heading away, toward an opening in the trees. Joe braced himself, ignored the cats and drew a bead on the rider.

It was a long shot, at a moving target. But when the laser hissed Joe saw the rider jerk, sway and clasp one hand against his shoulder. Then the rider slumped forward, face down, clinging to the rhinhorse's neck. The rhinhorse slowed its pace, nearly stopped, and presently trotted on aimlessly, changing course.

Joe glanced down. The cats were close, too close, but no longer controlled. One was retreating, backing gingerly down the tree trunk. The other was still climbing, looking about as if dazed but still coming—probably now, he thought, of its own killer's volition. Joe coldly shot it out of the tree and then turned back to the hunter.

He was still clinging to his mount, but apparently no longer able to guide it. And because of that he was doomed. For the rhinhorse, having no fear of the dart tree needles, was wandering away from the opening toward which the hunter had guided it. It was on a course which would take it between two big, closely placed trees which would sweep the wounded hunter from its back.

Again Joe lifted the rifle, aiming carefully. The beam hissed, smoking, into the ground at one side of the trotting rhinhorse. The animal started and jerked away, nearly unseating the clinging rider. Joe sent another beam after the first, close in, and the ground smoked and blackened

as the heat bit into it. This time the animal turned aside and trotted safely past the trees on open ground.

Joe dropped his faceplate and watched at high magnification. As the rhinhorse cleared the trees Joe saw the rider struggle upright, looking back. It was Joe's first close look at his adversary, and he wasn't pretty, that was certain. But neither was he a beetle-browed ape. Inside that homely, fur-covered head was a skull of a size and shape to hold as good a brain as a dolphin's — or a man's. And, looking back, the hunter did something which made Joe nod and smile thoughtfully.

True, the hunter was swaying, barely able to keep his seat. And he could have been only reaching for his burned shoulder. But Joe didn't think so. Joe was virtually certain that weakly, but definitely, the hunter raised his hand.

Joe raised his own hand, empty, palm forward. The hunter turned away, swaying but holding his seat.

## V

Joe was back in his meadow, fishing, when the landing boat came in with the rest of the K-III team. This one settled like a leaf.

Joe chuckled to himself at his image of the boys in Maintenance agonizing over its performance. Joe had found the wreck of his own boat. It was mostly scrap, but with some computer components still usable, and his own pod communicator, he had jury-rigged a gadget with which Albert, with Slim Holman's help, had analyzed the creek water, some of

the game, and a whopping, flopping gilled thing from the stream, finding them all usable. Joe had been living high — had, in fact, been living it up, with nothing to do but fish and hunt.

Holman came in with them. She left the group by the boat and approached, slim and lithe, skirting the dead dart tree with distaste. Joe watched with appreciation. She would do to have along. She was the only woman he had ever seen who could make those issue coveralls look as if they had been tailored. He cocked an eyebrow. Come to think of it, maybe they had been tailored, by her. She smiled a greeting.

"The Chief was right. I might have known you'd be off fishing when there's work to do."

After that she talked only shop, until as they walked back along the creek, her eyes began to dance.

"And right over there," she pointed — "is your swimming hole."

Joe felt his ears burning. "Slim! I wouldn't have thought it of you! Just how long were you back in visual contact before I knew it?"

She laughed. "I'll never tell you, pioneer."

Joe laughed too, but then he sobered and looked away, around the meadow, at the green forest glade that stretched away unbroken and unscarred. He turned back to the girl. "I'll tell you something, Slim. One day that is going to be a swimming hole, a real one. I'm going to build my dam right across here."

She looked up at him, wide eyed. "What are you talking about?"

"Me. I've found it. This is home Slim."

"You mean you're going to stay here? You can't!"

"No, not now. But I'm coming back here. I'm something of a ward-room space lawyer, Slim. I've read the fine print in my contract. There is a paragraph most of these guys skip over—but it's the paragraph which brought me into the service to begin with. When your term is up you get a bonus, a good one. Most of the boys don't read past that point. They just start spending the money. But you can, if you choose, take land instead of cash. And this—" he waved expansively—"is going to be my bonus. As much land here on III as I can talk them out of. I'm going to be the first colonist here, and I'm going to have plenty to say about the way this little world is used."

"But the hunter, Joe. The one you drove away, and the others like him."

"I can cope with them. I'm learning more about them every day, and they're learning about me. But look, Slim. As you say, there's work to do now. But this little world has the darnedest moon you ever saw. Twice as bright as Luna. Walk out here with me tonight and I'll bring you up to date about Joe Hanley. I can tell you things about him that even Albert doesn't know."

It was her turn to blush. "Joe Hanley, I've never asked Albert anything about you! Why . . ."

He laughed and took her arm. "Come on, there's work to do. The Thorn will want a report, and I want to get this decision of mine on the record."

That evening III's moon turned out to be everything Joe had predicted. The meadow was silent and glowing. They walked slowly, taking in the moonlit landscape. But when they approached the stream they heard a sudden sound nearby, a sighing, grunting wheeze.

Joe froze for an instant, then drew his hand gun and stepped in front of the girl. She said nothing, but she just as quickly moved up beside him again, her own gun out, waist high. Joe noted with approval that she handled it as if she knew what it was, but he ordered, "Get back!"

"No! I can use this thing if need be, remember? What is it?"

He put a hand on her wrist. "Don't move, then, unless I do. It's a cat, and with them you take nothing for granted."

Then they saw it approaching, slowly, half crouched, moving with the loose, flowing gait common to predators. Ghostly moonlight glinted in its eyes. The girl caught her breath.

"It's . . . it's carrying something!"

Almost at their feet the cat put down its burden. For an instant it glared at them, fangs gleaming whitely. Joe watched tensely, and he could sense the girl at his side fighting to keep under control. Joe felt—something—touch his mind, a probing that somehow could get through to him. For the tiniest fraction of an instant he felt—well, reassured. Then the feeling was gone.

But the hunter was nearby. Joe could almost see the cat's killer urge being stifled, suppressed, the lean body frozen almost rigid. Then with



a rasping snarl the cat turned away. In seconds its loose, flowing run carried it into the shadows.

"Joe! What does it mean. I felt something . . ."

"I think I know. This is the third time, and one of those predators would never do a thing like that on its own."

The girl looked around at the surrounding woods and shivered. "Then the hunter sent it!"

"Yes. That thing the cat brought is the K-III equivalent of a rainbow trout. I imagine that to the hunter it is a delicacy. It's a gift—a kind of Peace offering. It means we can come to terms with him."

"But he's a killer!"

"No, he's a hunter. That's a distinction lost on most people. The cats are killers. But uncontrolled they're no worse than any other predator. They can be handled. But I believe I can make friends with the hunter. Who knows? Maybe I can teach him to use tools, and he can teach me to use my mind."

The sighing wheeze sounded again. This time the shrubbery parted, and an ugly, horse-faced head, jaws moving rhythmically, pushed into view. The girl started, and took Joe's arm. Joe laughed. "It's only George."

She looked up. "Why, that's how . . . he's what we heard, before the cat came."

"Yes. I found him trying to roll in the sand one day, and gimmicked the laser to burn the moss off his back. Since then he's appointed me

his groom and himself my bodyguard."

The girl released his arm and glanced around. The park-like glade was shimmering in the fluorescence of III's enormous moon. And that, Joe thought, was something else he liked about this new world. In this moonlight her eyes and her smile didn't seem cool, as they usually did. And when she spoke, her voice was warm, pitched low.

She said, "Joe, I lied to you this morning. Only a little, though, because this morning I really hadn't talked to Albert about you, much. But this afternoon I did. After feeding him the data on what you told me this morning, and after telling him I like this new world of yours too."

Joe laughed. "You believe everything that outsize calculator tells you?"

"Yes. He doesn't know how to lie. And when I said I was going to tell you all this he predicted—ninety-nine point eight probability—what you're going to say next."

Joe looked down at her, but before he could speak she put a slim hand momentarily to his lips. Then she reached out and patted the rhinohorse's ugly, armored nose.

"Just for tonight, Georgie," she whispered, "go do your bodyguarding from over there by the stream someplace. I know what I'm going to say next, too." END



# THE DREAM MACHINE

by CAROL EASTON

*Dreams were the stuff the  
world was built on — then  
one day the dreams stopped!*

The day they nationalized the Dream Machine Corporation was the day Harry Carver dreamed himself to death. On that last day, in his confusion and despair, there was simply no choice. The principles on which he had built his life — and by this time his life and the dream machines had become indistinguishable, one from the other — seemed a mockery, a colossal practical joke with Harry Carver both the perpetrator and the target.

The machine was to have been Harry's gift to the world — his panacæa for the emotionally lame, halt and blind. A solution to humanity's hitherto insoluble problems. Those unhappy individuals for whom self-acceptance was unattainable, if not incomprehensible, would at last be

able to derive happiness and satisfaction from their lives. Frustration would become as extinct as, say, smallpox. Men would live in harmony with their fellow men; wars would become ancient history, and the tools of war, nuclear stockpiles and all, museum relics. No one would be dissatisfied with his lot, for it would be the one he had freely chosen, and which he could exchange for another at any time.

For financial and other practical reasons, the Dream Machine Corporation had been founded in Harry's garage.

The first machine was bulky, noisy and far from esthetic — in fact, it was encased in an old, discarded telephone booth. Experimentation with animals being impossible, Harry

had searched long and hard for a subject. At last he had settled on the unhappiest human being he knew: his father-in-law. Joe Stoddard had lived a full and happy life, but since his wife's death fifteen years ago, his genial disposition had deteriorated into an almost catatonic state. Loneliness had overwhelmed him; he had lost his taste for living, neither had he sufficient motivation for dying. The contrast between his present and former selves was heartbreaking for Harry to watch, and his father-in-law had been in the back of his mind all the while he was constructing the machine. So Joe Stoddard was the logical choice for the machine's trial run.

Joe had sat quietly, eyes closed, in the converted phone booth while Harry programmed the machine with the information Joe had given him.

Slowly the muscles of Joe's face relaxed into a smile. Within a few minutes he looked twenty years younger, and the deeply-etched lines around his mouth seemed almost to disappear. An expression of pure joy fixed itself on his face, and Harry's eyes never left that face during the four hours until the machine automatically switched itself off. Joe Stoddard yawned, stretched himself and looked at Harry, his eyes shining with a light that had flickered out fifteen years ago. "God bless you," he murmured to Harry. "It's a miracle. I just dreamed my honeymoon all over again — only it was more real than any *dream* I've ever had. It was realer than — realer than

real, is what I'd call it. I could smell Louise's perfume, and feel the softness of her skin. Really feel it! I don't know if it's hypnotism or hallucination or what, but, Harry — it was more real than anything I've ever experienced. Likelife, but larger than life!"

Thus the first testimonial for the dream machine.

Due to the inordinate amount of time required to program the machine, Harry found it necessary to hire a staff, small to begin with, to assist him. And in order to meet his payroll, he found it necessary to rent, quietly and on a private basis, a few of the first experimental machines.

At first the price was exorbitant; but Harry made those early sales to people whose pleasure it is to buy what no one else can afford. Each dream was personalized and original, and this naturally kept the price up. Later, Harry thought, basic dreams could be mass-produced on a much lower cost-per-dream basis. And so, within just a few months, the dream machines became acknowledged status symbols.

Word-of-mouth advertising flourished, and Harry finally resorted to buying advertising time and space, not to sell more machines, for from the beginning the demand exceeded the supply, but to educate the public to dispel the rumors that seemed to multiply daily. The most common misconception was that the dream machines were a new entertainment medium, a sort of elaborate, three-dimensional personal television set. The public couldn't

seem to believe that anything as intimate, as individual as a dream, could be manufactured. But it was something new, they admitted, and that fact alone guaranteed its success on the market. The first Christmas after Harry had gotten his factory going on a full-time basis, everyone who already had a portable hair dryer, electric can opener, electric carving knife, not to mention color TV—in short, most of the population received gift certificates for dream machines. They had only to fill out the elaborate order blanks and drop them in the mail, and within three months the dream machine of their choice would be delivered, installed and demonstrated for them.

By this time, those certain basic categories Harry had anticipated were taking shape.

By far the greatest demand was for the Little Girl/Boy Dream. Mothers wanted it, and fathers—particularly analysts. Senior citizens ordered them and even occasionally teenagers. To be a child again — this was the dream of dreams. Rare was the adult, however, who chose to dream his own childhood. Of all the dreams, the Childhood Dreams were farthest from reality. But still, as Joe Stoddard had put it, “realer than real”.

Each week's national “Top Ten Dreams” became the basis of the new psychiatry. The Elizabeth Taylor Dream was a favorite with the housewives, and its counterpart with their husbands. Conservatives ordered variations of the Dictator

Dream, available in various historical settings (the Christians-to-the Lions Dream was a heavy seller). Liberals, on the other hand, quickly bought out the Saint Dreams, from Aquinas to Xavier. Harry had expected these to be big sellers with the clergy, but they leaned almost to a body to the Fetish Dreams, Ant-eaters through Zoos. All orders were, under strictest security measures, kept confidential. Executives ordered Walden Dreams, and farmers ordered Playboy Dreams. Confirmed drug and alcohol addicts kicked their habits with ease while dreaming Don Juan and other Conquest Dreams. Politicians favored the Coronation Dream, and military men dreamed, almost without exception, of Mom.

There were categories within categories of dreams, the basic ones being sexual, financial and spiritual. Each dreamer was guaranteed that it was impossible for him to dream exactly the same dream twice; although the emotional experience desired by the dreamer never varied, nor did the main characters, the plot twists, costumes and settings brought an element of suspense to each dream, thus heightening the final satisfaction. The dreams were the ultimate escape.

Yet, unlike other escapees, they were always fresh, available at will (after the initial expense) and completely safe. Television, movies, comic books and sports events became obsolete. The dreams eclipsed all other, less convincing, diversions. The population was truly at peace with itself; divorce, crime, conflict

of any kind simply ceased to be. People went to work each morning blissful and highly motivated by the previous night's dream, and worked feverishly through the day to get home to their dream machines.

By the second anniversary of the formation of the Dream Machine Corporation, disturbing doubts had begun to take shape in Harry Carver's mind.

He had designed the machines to comfort the afflicted, never dreaming that the term encompassed the entire population. It seemed to Harry that he alone, in all the dreaming country, had no compulsion to dream. Even those of his friends whom he had considered most happy, best-adjusted, dreamed themselves to sleep each night. His own wife, Marian, had requested and received a custom streamlined dream machine, programmed to her college days. It wasn't, she assured Harry, that she was dissatisfied with her life with him. It was just—well, she really couldn't explain it, but she just couldn't give up that year of her life when she was runner-up to the Homecoming Queen. (Only in her dream, of course, she wasn't runner-up.)

Harry found it lonely evenings while Marian dreamed, so for something to do, he programmed himself a James Bond dream. He had been working fifteen hours a day, seven days a week, trying to fill the back orders that overflowed his offices. And after all, a man was entitled to some relaxation. It was his only luxury, if indeed it could be

considered a luxury. For awhile, life was good. But then Harry began to wonder, can life be too good?

He had observed the symptoms first in his father-in-law, who by now had probably logged the most dreaming hours in the country.

At first, the dreams had motivated him to be more productive, more sociable, more aware than ever in his life. But little by little, Joe Stoddard seemed to become—there was only one word for it, Harry decided—*dreamlike*. There were moments, and they grew alarmingly more frequent, when Joe's face would, without warning, begin to blur around the edges, becoming more and more indistinct until—Harry would rub his eyes, blink and squint, but there was no doubt about it—it would disappear altogether, sometimes leaving empty space, sometimes to be replaced by other faces mouthing senseless, disjointed words.

This unnerved Harry to the extent that he sought to lose himself in his work as never before. The possible explanations for Joe's behavior were far too frightening for Harry to contemplate.

And, at first, his work succeeded in keeping his mind occupied. But as the weeks passed, the work became monotonous; the novelty of it had worn thin, and the routine of it became, for Harry, deadly dull. He found himself looking forward with ever-growing anticipation to his nightly 007 dreams, infinite in their variations, predictable in style but never in detail. He installed a duplicate of his personal machine in his office, for use during his dream

breaks. He often spent the night now on the couch in the office lounge, knowing Marian, absorbed in her own dreams, wouldn't notice his absence. Besides, his behavior was perfectly normal. Everyone spent the greatest part of his time dreaming now; people stayed more and more within their dream machines, secure, safe and contented, often forgetting to eat or sleep—forgetting, in fact, to wake up.

The last session of the Congress of the United States—the last session, that is, where enough members were awake to constitute a quorum—had less the appearance of a legislative session than a shadow play.

Voices rose and fell with a hypnotic harmoniousness, and every bill introduced was passed unanimously; for the first time in the history of any nation, opposing parties ceased to attack each other. The final bill, sponsored by the leaders of both parties, proposed that in the interests of national security, national defense, farm price supports, foreign aid, stable currency, management and labor, civil rights, The Bill of Rights, the CIA, the FCC, the DAR, SEATO, NATO and the Armed Forces Radio Service, the Dream Machine Corporation would hence forth become a public utility, owned and operated by the United States government. The motion was carried by a voice vote, and when Harry Carver could not be reached by telephone, a telegram was sent to inform him of the new legislation.

When the Western Union messen-

ger interrupted Harry at the climax of a dream, Harry was appalled at the seriousness of the situation. Any government with the power to control its citizens' dreams could—Harry shuddered at the implications. Surely, he thought, it must be a mistake! Didn't they realize, couldn't they see where this sort of thing must lead? He, Agent 007, would have to tell them —

No, that was wrong! He splashed his face with ice water, trying to jolt his drowsy brain to full awareness. He was Harry Carver, of course, and he would appear before a Joint Session of Congress, if necessary, and show them just how misguided, how fuzzy their thinking had become!

The first thing to do, he thought, was to contact some influential legislators and sound them out before making any public statement. He dialed direct to Washington, but the phones rang in empty offices. Frantic, he tried to call an emergency meeting of his Board of Directors—but *their* telephones were all off the hook. Harry, by a supreme effort of will, forced himself to concentrate. It was an almost impossible task. *The papers*, he thought, *what do the morning papers say?* Perhaps there he might find a clue to help formulate his course of action. He went out into the empty streets, looking for a newspaper to tell him what was happening in the nation whose problems he, Harry, had single-handedly eliminated.

But the newsstands were covered with dust and rust, and the papers on them were yellowed and fading.

Harry strained to focus his eyes, and found himself alone in a land of changing shapes and shadows. Buildings floated through the mists, their forms constantly changing. Harry felt himself surrounded by spectral giants, menacing despite, or perhaps because of, their unsubstantiality. He was seized by an uncontrollable panic. He tried to run, exerting every muscle, but he had the sensation of walking under water. *Something*, some nameless, faceless thing was after him. Suddenly a wave of relief washed over him. Directly in front of him, sent by some merciful Providence, stood his own monogrammed dream machine, familiar and safe in a world of terror. He dropped gratefully into its reclining massage chair — the newer models were greatly refined — and pressed the “Dream” button.

For one moment, all was as it had been, and Harry began to relax. He was suave and supremely confident in his evening clothes, surrounded

by a voluptuous harem. But no—something was wrong! He was Harry Carver again, and this time surrounded by immense, roaring prehistoric monsters breathing fire!

No sooner had he grasped the image than it changed, then changed again, and again. He was encircled by a montage of storms, volcanic eruptions, giant insects, animals of every description, earthquakes, and grotesque, misshapen faces—and they were all, every one of them, *after him*. His mouth felt parched, his tongue thick. He tried to scream, but only soft whimpers came from his throat. He could feel the physical presence of the nightmare now, crushing his body and freezing his brain. He was falling—a void had opened beneath him and he was spinning and whirling, ever faster, no control now, consciousness dissolving into the silence of a star, broken only by echoes of alarm clocks, ringing unheeded in empty rooms. **END**

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# *Sweet Reason*

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*Here's how the tailed Centrans  
handle goof-offs. It'd never  
work with humans . . . would it?*

## I

**C**aptain Karp Moklin, Centran assistant psychologist at the local prisoner-detention camp, nodded to the perspiring Earth psychotherapist who was his visitor.

"Yes, Dr. Garvin. As you say, such cases as these are for the specialists."

Garvin drew a shaky breath. "I certainly do feel privileged, Captain, to come and watch a Centran psychologist at work. I'm very

anxious to meet Major Poffis. My own — ah — efforts certainly don't seem to have accomplished much."

In the cell behind him stood a large Centran soldier, his fur unbrushed and untrimmed, tail thrashing in triumph, a sneer on his face, and a chunk of Dr. Garvin's sport jacket in his hand.

"Of course," said Garvin, "really deep psychotherapy is a very slow process. This is why I am so anxious to see one of your own people, and observe his methods.



Possibly if we could — ah — pool our resources it might be possible to considerably accelerate the course of treatment.”

Moklin nodded. “Major Poffis himself has often complained that the work takes too long.”

“Is the — ah — the incidence of relapses — ” Garvin hesitated, then rephrased the question to fit the less developed Centran mentality. “I mean, do the patients have to come back very often for a second course of treatments?”

The Centran seemed startled at this idea. “No, of course not.”

“The treatments are usually *successful*?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Does the major also treat those suffering from — ah — battle fatigue — ”

The Centran looked puzzled. “Everyone is fatigued in battle. No, the major’s treatment is not meant for that. He handles mostly these uncontrollables, the ones with — ”

“Severe neuroses?”

“With the — ah — with the violent — ah — ” Moklin paused as if mentally searching for some word or phrase that he had memorized once with the intention of using it later for effect. He straightened, and said learnedly, “With the ‘violent antisocial tendencies.’ ”

Garvin blinked. “This is Major Poffis’s specialty, then?”

“Yes,” said Captain Moklin. “He does a lot of this work.”

“That is precisely what we find most difficult.” Garvin glanced uneasily at the prisoner, who with coy gestures was now urging him to

come closer to the bars. “We find,” he coughed slightly, “that these are often the most obstinate cases. They are difficult to reach — to contact — to form any common — ”

The captain glanced at the wall clock.

“Major Poffis can reach them. He will be here soon. He is always on time. Then you will see how he does it.”

The prisoner methodically tore his piece of Garvin’s jacket to shreds, and leered at Garvin through the bars.

The clang of an outer door and the sound of voices heralded the arrival of Major Poffis.

Dr. Garvin said anxiously, “Is the major, ah, quite high in your academic hierarchy? In civilian life, I mean.”

The Centran captain looked blank. “He has a Qh.Q.”

“Ah, I see. Of *course*. Well — I’m not really familiar with the niceties of Centran — ah — academic protocol. Shall I call him ‘major,’ or ‘doctor?’ ”

The Centran looked blank. “He is a major.”

Garvin had the sensation of coming solidly up against a blank wall. He nodded hastily, and barely stopped himself from saying, “Silly of me to ask.” Such comments, he had found, were likely to cause the Centrants to agree. Instead, he prepared himself to greet the Centran academic.

From the man’s record of cures, he was a veritable master psychologist. Some of Garvin’s colleagues,

of course, did not consider the record of cures really significant. For them what counted were the methods used and the theoretical justification of the methods. But Garvin personally found it a little embarrassing to do no better than unaided nature. From Major Poffis — in his mind he decided to call him *Dr. Poffis* — from *Dr. Poffis* he would learn the best of Centran practices, then combine it with the highest Earth theory, and perhaps thus create a universal treatment superior to any hitherto used.

A murmur just outside the door told of *Dr. Poffis's* approach.

Garvin prepared his smile and readied the comment, "I hope that a useful cross-fertilization of our mutual concepts may bear fruit in a more successful treatment, Doctor." Just where he would put this into the conversation, Garvin wasn't sure, but he wanted it ready when the time came.

The door latch clicked, and Garvin extended his right hand. He was on the alert to approach the tall distinguished Centran who would come in, who would perhaps be impressively silver-furred, with a slightly wry smile, or perhaps with a look of blazing incandescent genius demanding the instant submission of lesser intellects, and —

The door opened. A Centran major of above average height, broadly built, with muscles up both sides of his neck under the fur, walked in and growled, "All right, Moklin, what's on the sheet for today?"

Captain Moklin bawled, "Attention!"

The prisoner raised his right hand to his forehead, as if in salute. Then he lowered the thumb and forefinger to the sides of his nose and blew out hard. In case the idea didn't get across, he spat through the bars onto the major's tunic.

The major showed no sign of noticing anything unusual. "At ease. What do we have today, Moklin?"

"This is the first one, sir, in the cell right here."

The major nodded, started to speak, then frowned at Garvin. Garvin had his phrases all set, and now heard himself say stupidly, "How do you do? I am *Dr. Garvin* from Rolling Hills Rest and Rehabilitation Center. I — er — had hoped that a — ah — a useful cross-fertilization of our — ah — mutual — "

Major Poffis took a closer look at Garvin.

Garvin paused, groping around for some way to give a more conventional ending to this opening gambit.

Poffis glanced at the captain. "Is *this* a patient?"

"No sir. This is the Earth psychologist from Mental Institution 16."

Garvin cleared his throat, and said gently but firmly, "We find it more appropriate to designate it 'Rolling Hills Rest and — ' "

Poffis looked him over coldly. "What the devil's the matter with them out there?"

Garvin looked blank. "What?"

Poffis said shortly. "Why don't they get their thumb out of their

mouths and give us some action? I sent half-a-dozen cases of combat nerves in six months ago, and so far we've gotten just one back. The boy was worthless. What the devil do you do to your patients?" He turned to Captain Moklin. "I notice this fellow has a chunk out of his jacket. *Has he been administering treatment in my absence?*"

"Not actually, sir. He just walked over and tried to reason with the patient, that's all."

Poffis looked mollified. "That shouldn't do much harm." He glanced at the cell. "Now then, this fellow hasn't been in combat yet, has he?"

"No, sir. He isn't out of training yet."

"You're sure we've got the *right records*? This isn't a damned administrative bungle like that last mess?"

"No, sir," said Moklin grimly. "I checked that myself, sir. This is the right man, all right."

"What's the recommendation?"

"Court recommended death. Patient's commanding officer pleaded for leniency."

The patient laughed out loud, as if witnessing a peculiarly silly scene in a play.

Major Poffis looked the patient over appraisingly, then glanced at Moklin. "On what grounds did his commanding officer plead for leniency?"

"He thought the fellow could be made into a good soldier, sir. With the proper treatment."

Poffis scowled. "Yes, there's *that* again. What's on the sheet, Mok-

lin? *How many* of these cases have we got for today?"

Moklin looked apologetic. "Three more for this morning, sir. Now, about this prisoner — "

Poffis stared at him. "And this afternoon?"

"Sir?"

"*How many* this afternoon?"

"We've got — that is — " Moklin swallowed. "Sir, there are *six* of them."

Poffis's brows came together.

"That's too many. Put some of them over till tomorrow."

"Well, sir, tomorrow — "

Poffis snarled, "It takes time to get a cure started. I'll handle *three* this morning, and *three* this afternoon. From there, it's routine. But I'm taking *six* new ones a day and that's that."

"Sir, at that rate, they'll pile up from here all the way back to Training, and the colonel will — "

Poffis's eyes glinted.

"I know how many new patients I can handle in a day, Moklin. If the colonel wants me to take on eight a day, ten a day, twelve a day, then *I* am going to end up on the other side of these bars, and the colonel can see how *that* works out. Let them pile up. That's better than sending back fake cures. There's a cause to this mess somewhere. The sooner that dawns on them, the quicker they'll slap the *clokal detonak* on this whole region, and burn out the pus. Now let's have the keys to the cell so I can get started."

Moklin dazedly handed over the keys to the cell.

Garvin, stupefied, was grappling with the idea that the Centran thought *six new patients a day*, with routine follow-up treatment, was about right. If Garvin got six patients really cured in a year, it was cause for celebration. Baffled, he took a fresh look at the patient Poffis was ready to treat.

This patient had watched with interest the exchange between Poffis and Moklin, but now stiffened as he saw Poffis come toward the cell. He threateningly approached the bars, bared his teeth and suddenly reached out through the bars to take a grab at Poffis's uniform.

Garvin watched intently, wondering what Poffis could possibly do now.

Poffis instantly seized the outstretched hand, whirled and yanked downward.

The patient screamed and slammed against the bars.

Poffis promptly kicked him back against the opposite wall, then unlocked the cell door, went in, banged the door shut and tossed the keys to Moklin. The patient shook his hand dazedly, felt his shoulder, glared, let out a roar of rage and sprang across the cell at Poffis.

Poffis whirled, shot out a leg, tripped the patient, and sent him smashing head-first into the far corner of the cell.

The patient lay on his face for about fifteen seconds, then sat up dazedly, stared at Poffis and sucked in a deep breath. His voice came out loud and ringing.

"I got a *right* to go to a rest home! I'm *crazy*! I'm a *patient*! I'm *sick*! You can't touch me! I got a *right* to go to a rest home!"

Poffis said angrily, "If I knew where that idea came from, I could get this work-load down to normal. All right, Moklin. Read the charge."

Captain Moklin unfolded a long sheet of paper and read in a clear sober voice:

"Prisoner committed following acts, which have been proved by careful and thorough inquiry. He:

"1) Threatened to beat up his own mess-mates, and then took their food from them by force.

"2) Threatened his squad-leader with a knife, when reprimanded.

"3) While off-duty, struck an elderly man who happened to step in his way, thus bringing disgrace on the armed forces.

"4) On being charged as above, laughed in the face of his commanding officer, Lieutenant Boggis, and referred to Lieutenant Boggis as a 'molk.'

"5) Struck Lieutenant Boggis on the face with his open hand.

"6) Threatened Lieutenant Boggis that if Lieutenant Boggis defended himself, he (the prisoner) would state under oath that Lieutenant Boggis struck first.

"7) Resisted the guards summoned to the scene.

"8) While under detention, announced to everyone within hearing that he would receive a medical discharge and be home living on a pension while those who did their duty would be eaten up by Mikerils for their pains. Prisoner taunted all

the law-abiding soldiers within hearing that *they* would soon be at the front defending *him*.

"9) By voice and act, abused everyone in authority who came near him during detention.

"10) Refused to cooperate with properly designated authorities in curbing his undisciplined actions. This refusal was compounded by disrespect and insult, and reflects no detectable principle or ideal, but merely an undisciplined, willful, ill-governed nature, which is urgently in need of correction."

Captain Moklin lowered the paper. "That's it, sir."

"I see," said Poffis. "Well, well. Here we have a full-blown case of it." He studied the patient, who got to his feet, looking apprehensive and defiant.

"Now, then," said Poffis, "the first thing to realize is that how you got here doesn't matter. What matters is that you're here. This is the trap right next to the drain. Either we cure you, or *they* shoot you. And we aren't given much time to cure you."

"I'm sick!" cried the prisoner. "I want to go to a rest —"

"Luckily," said Poffis, "we've got just the way to cure you. We've developed it over several thousands of years. There are only two things you need to know about this cure: It's quick. And it hurts."

The prisoner opened his mouth, and shut it again. Poffis was moving right along like a planet in its orbit, and showed no sign of stopping for anything.

"There's one reliable way," said Poffis, "that Nature teaches what's right and what's wrong. When you do right, you get rewarded. When you do wrong, you get hurt. Our method is the same, but more condensed."

"Look," said the patient exasperatedly, one hand outstretched, "I'm not *responsible*. You can't blame me for —"

"The basic idea of the cure is very simple," said Poffis briskly. "It is based on the observation of sages, that there is a real inner self, which is not subject to the phenomena of the physical world, and an outer self which is."

A succession of expressions crossed the patient's face, and ended with a look of defiant outrage. "To the *Mikerils* with all this stuff!" He followed that with a piece of profanity that took Garvin's breath away, but that left Poffis and Moklin visibly untouched.

"The real inner self," said Poffis, "is conscious of events, because it is 'connected,' by resonances and various nerve-tracts, with the outer physical self that exists in the physical world, and is a type of living protoplasmic machine, serving the inner spiritual self which is not physical."

The patient shouted, "I'm *crazy!* I WANT TO GO TO A REST HOME!"

Poffis moved steadily along: "To properly treat the patient, it is necessary to distinguish between the true inner self of the patient, the outer physical self which is the medium through which the patient



contacts and is contacted by the physical world, and the various traits, habits and emotions which manifest outwardly through the physical body, and inwardly by coloring the information passed to the brain and thence to the real self."

The patient stamped his foot. "Ah for —"

"The real self," said Poffis, "is strictly blameless. The trouble comes from wrong traits and attitudes having been established, usually in childhood, and by their habitual presence having generated emotions which falsely color the information passed to the brain. The cure for this is best administered early, by the parent. By inflicting pain without damage, the parent breaks the grip of the wrong emotion, destroys its effects in distorting the infor-

mation passed to the brain and demonstrates that emotions are temporary and changeable. Seeing the wrong emotion flee before the hand of the parent, the child is emboldened to strike down the wrong emotion himself, and takes the first step towards becoming master in his own house."

The patient ground his teeth, and looked around like one seeking sympathy for the heavy burden under which he labors.

"Punishment," said Poffis methodically, "should be swift, intense and fleeting, with proper suggestions for future improvement, and should be ended without vindictiveness when the right attitude is firmly established. That's the theory. Now for the practise."

The patient leaned against the bars in an attitude of exaggerated boredom, and looked ready to fall asleep anytime.

"The practise," said Poffis, "is even simpler than the theory. By appropriate action, we first permit the undesirable traits to manifest, and promptly deliver painful consequences on each occasion. Next we administer a general treatment designed to loosen up bad traits and induce a cooperative frame of mind, during which we urge improvement. Following this comes formal punishment, then the actual recovery. All this is basically very simple, the difficulty being to properly suit the treatment to the individual patient. That's the practise. Now you have it, and your mind will retain enough so that it may be of use to you later.

It's time. Prepare for treatment."

Outside the cell, Moklin opened a faucet that filled a bucket half-full of water. He tossed a sponge into the bucket, picked up a clean towel and a first-aid kit, set a chair just outside a corner of the cell and dusted off the seat of the chair with a whisk broom.

The patient glanced around with a scowl and gave the cell door a quick shake. The door was solidly locked.

Poffis glanced at the wall clock, then cleared his throat with a somewhat pompous, false and irritating sound. He said, "Now, first, permit me to point out — ah — that this method, while it *could* be used for wrong purposes, is in fact only used for the real *good* and the *genuine* —"

Dr. Garvin, outside the cell, squinted at Major Poffis, and tried to get him back into focus. By some trick of vocal wizardry, Poffis now began to project such an air of sweet reasonableness that even Garvin felt the urge to get Poffis by the throat and bang his head against the wall. Garvin had no trouble overcoming this impulse, but the patient abruptly ceased looking for a way out, and eyed Poffis.

"— *welfare* of the patient," Poffis was saying sweetly. "The entire treatment is *meant* for the patient, who, deprived of proper parental assistance in the initial stages of character-formation, is thus disadvantaged by his defective self-control. We assist the deprived patient in many areas —"

"*G'r'r*," said the patient. His tail flicked back and forth, and his

lips drew back to disclose large sharp teeth.

"— always," said Poffis piously, "to aid in whatever measure may be granted to us the unfortunate, underprivileged —"

The patient blurred forward, seized Poffis around the waist and slammed him to the floor.

Poffis landed stretched out, his forearms taking much of the impact, rolled aside fast as his patient took a flying kick at him, bounded to his feet and landed a blow that sent the patient sprawling.

As the patient stumbled, dazed and fearful, to his feet, Poffis seemed to undergo a delayed action from the fall he'd suffered. He gripped his side and tottered around the cell like someone in the last stage of physical deterioration.



This was too good an opportunity for the patient to resist. He hastened over to start a blow from the floor up, aimed for Poffis's jaw.

Poffis, however, recovered with miraculous speed, moved aside as the blow whistled past and smashed the patient on the jaw.

Garvin watched in stupefaction as Moklin stepped forward with the water bucket.

Poffis was now bent over the unconscious patient, tenderly bathing his bloodied face with a wet sponge.

### III

As the patient came to and looked around dazedly, Poffis at once began to plead, "Now look here, I am your *officer*. You can't — "

The patient at once caught the pleading tone, and the words "I am your officer." He reacted with still-fast reflexes.

"Oh, *can't I?*" he snarled. He staggered to his feet with Poffis's help, and immediately tried to plant his knee in Poffis's groin.

Poffis turned too fast, and sank his fist in his patient's midsection.

Dr. Garvin watched the patient collapse and lie motionless.

Poffis now dumped a bucket of water on the patient, brought him to, and as the patient looked around dazedly Poffis bent over him and said sympathetically, "Understand, none of this meant for the *real* you. We have to retrain your *habits* and *attitudes*, and this is the quickest way. I realize what you're going through, because I've been through the same thing myself."

The patient sat up dizzily. Some instinct for self-preservation apparently prompted him to keep Poffis talking. "You — you did?"

"Yes," said Poffis reminiscently. "I've been through the whole thing. You see, I had bad habits." A tinge of regret entered his voice. "And wrong attitudes, and I didn't even know it. That's how it works. No one could *reason* with me, or *get* through to me by anything that boiled down to reason, because, you see, this wrong attitude of mine distorted everything, and I couldn't *understand* things right."

Garvin was staring, wondering what would happen next. Poffis's voice was starting to grow heated.

"So," said Poffis emotionally, "they stuck me in a cell, and for these bad habits and wrong attitudes they *beat me up*, and slammed me all around," He sucked in a deep breath. "*Sure* I had it coming, I *deserved* it. Because of the bad habits." His voice dropped. "But I felt every blow. It was meant for the bad habits. But *I* felt it."

There was now an impression of smoldering resentment building up behind Poffis's expressionless face. The patient glanced around nervously.

"Bad habits," said Poffis flatly. "*They* got me in all that trouble. And *I* suffered. I *hate* them!"

"Sure," said the patient nervously. "I can appreciate — "

"I *hate* bad habits, bad traits, bad emotions," said Poffis, his voice rising, "But they've been beat out of *me*, so now there's only *one way I can get back at them.*"



The patient tried a quick shake of the cell door. It was still locked.

"And *that*," said Poffis, "is to find them in someone else."

The patient's eyes were wide-open. "Hey, now. Wait a minute. Listen, now!"

"Right *here*," snarled Poffis, gazing intently at the patient, "I see conceit, arrogance, carelessness —"

Poffis's voice, already charged with emotion, took on a tone suggestive of rending flesh and popping bones. He tore off his tunic and tossed it toward a corner of the cell, where Moklin with one deft motion snapped it out through the bars and laid it on the chair, neatly folded.

Patient and psychotherapist were suddenly flashing around the cell in a blur of speed, the prisoner screaming at the top of his lungs, "You can't! *Help Your'e responsible! STOP!*"

WHAM!

The cell was one flying tangle of furry arms, legs and tails, with now the prisoner's horrified face in view, and now Poffis's grim visage. Grunts, screams and gasps resounded like the sounds of a medieval torture chamber.

Captain Moklin, watching, grinned and nodded.

Dr. Garvin looked on in horrified stupefaction, staring at the chaos resolved momentarily into grim scenes.

For an instant the prisoner was flattened out on the floor.

Then he was slammed motionless against the bars.

Next he was suspended in midair, one outstretched arm against the ceiling.

A fraction of a second later, it was one chaos of violence all over again.

Interspersed with the violence was Poffis's grim voice:

"You will listen

"You will try!

"You will learn!"

There was a sudden crash, and the prisoner was saying rapidly, "All right! I'll do it! Sure, *I'll do it!* Anything you say!"

Poffis stared intently into the prisoner's eyes. "You look crafty. You don't *mean* it."

The cell exploded into chaos.

The prisoner screamed, "I *promise!* I *mean* it!"

Poffis stared deep into his eyes. "Close, but you're not there yet."

The violence ended the next time with a cry of despair. Then Poffis straightened. "Moklin!"

"Yes, sir! The lash?"

"The board."

Moklin handed in a medium-sized solidly made paddle.

The prisoner stared as Poffis took it, and said in a kindly voice, "Bend over, son. Grip the bars."

The prisoner swallowed, tore his gaze from the paddle, bent and took hold of the bars with both hands.

Poffis took the paddle in a practiced grip.

"You have committed ten serious offenses. For each offense, there must be a blow. The blows must be hard, or they will not be punishment. Hold on tight. *Moklin!*"

"Yes, sir?"

"Read the offenses."

Moklin raised the list, and read slowly and distinctly. At the end of each numbered offense, Poffis delivered a staggering blow.

Toward the end, as the list went on and on, the prisoner began to sob, but continued to tightly grip the bars.

At last, the list, which seemed to Garvin, watching dazedly, to be ten times as long as when it was first read — at last this list came to an end.

Moklin said soberly, "That is the end of the list of offenses, sir."

Poffis said, So be it. Take the board." He handed the paddle out through the bars.

The prisoner collapsed on the floor, sobbing uncontrollably.

Poffis waited a moment, then said, "Prisoner, that ends the *punishment*. But punishment is not necessarily the same as *repayment*. You have, by your actions, done grave damage to the Integral Union itself. Yet the Integral Union feeds and shelters you. You have attacked what defended you. Are you sorry?"

"Yes," cried the prisoner.

Poffis nodded. "Good. Look at me. *Are you going to do better?*"

"Yes!"

Poffis nodded slowly. "Yes, I see you mean it. *Moklin!*"

"Yes, sir?"

"This prisoner has hard work in front of him. He will need to sleep, but first he needs something to ease the pain, and he also needs a little warm thin gruel. Take care of this at once."

"Yes, sir."

Garvin, still watching in a sort of daze, saw Poffis help the prisoner to his feet, to ease him, very carefully, warning him where to put his hands and feet, onto the cot. To Garvin's astonishment, the prisoner, still sobbing, gripped Poffis's hand in what appeared to be gratitude.

Poffis said gently, "Don't worry son. You may think we're going to half-kill you. But we'll get you out of it."

Moklin stepped into the cell, carrying a small bowl in one hand, and a jar of bandages in the other.

Poffis stepped out of the cell and beckoned Garvin into the next room. Uncertain what to expect, Garvin followed with unspoken reservations. Poffis shut the door behind them.

"Now, just what the devil is going on at Mental Institution 16?"

Garvin said, "Why just standard treatment?"

"Whose standard treatment?"

"Well — "

"What is it?"

Garvin drew a slow deep breath, and described it.

Poffis shook his head.

"Conceivably that may work on *Earthmen*. But a thing like that won't work on *Centrans*."

"Is that so?" said Garvin, his professional pride touched. "Well, all I can say is, it certainly is more scientific than the procedure *you* use!"

"Obviously," said Poffis, "that's exactly what's wrong with it. The techniques of *Science* were developed for use on *inanimate objects*."

As Garvin grappled with this

statement. Poffis said, "Observe what has happened. Science came into existence to solve purely physical problems. To solve these problems it was necessary to exclude emotional considerations. The forces operative in this physical world are different from the forces operative in the emotional world. It is as if one were land and the other sea. The seafarer who goes ashore has little need for nets, lines and a knowledge of the tides, winds, and currents. But when he has built up his structure on solid land, is he then automatically fitted to go *back to sea, relying exclusively on land methods?* It won't work, Dr. Garvin, except where, so to speak, the emotional sea has been frozen over, turned to ice on the surface. In the emotional world, to say, 'My methods are entirely scientific,' is similar to saying, 'I have made an entirely scientific proposal of marriage.' It is a cause for alarm, not confidence."

Garvin hesitated, distracted by the uneasy suspicion that there might be some truth to Poffis's point, but stung by the implications. If psychology wasn't a science, then wasn't he, Garvin, a charlatan of some kind?

Poffis said earnestly, "Why insist that your study *must* be a science? Should everything be jammed into the same mold, and any parts that don't fit be thrown away? Just because a hammer is useful, should we throw away screwdrivers, wrenches, pliers and every other tool, and *force the hammer to do work it isn't meant for?* Or, by some kind of



verbal wizardry, have we got to represent screwdrivers, wrenches, pliers and other useful tools, as *different kinds of hammers*? They are not hammers, my friend, any more than all useful studies are sciences. If you let such a distortion enter into your thought, you not only blur your picture of the subject you are thinking of, but also your picture of Science itself."

On thinking it over, it seemed perfectly clear to Garvin that if psychology was not a science, then he, Garvin, must necessarily be a fake. If psychology was not a science, then it followed that he was no scientist, and this meant that he was less than, for instance, a physicist, or a chemist, and if he admitted to being not a scientist, it followed that he would *seem* to be less than one of those incredible creatures, the *political* scientists who, everyone agreed, were actually no scientists at all.

All this went through Garvin's head in a flash, and at the end he said coolly, "Psychology, Major Poffis, whatever it may be among *Centrans*, is universally recognized among Earthmen as the 'science of the mind.' I certainly don't intend to argue this proposition."

Poffis was watching Garvin's expressions intently. "Psychology," said Poffis, with the air of one who reluctantly concedes a point, "may *deserve* to be a science; it may have distinct scientific *elements*; but if you say psychology is *and is only* a science, then I say that in your respect for your subject, it appears

to me that you are mistakingly throwing half your tool kit into the nearest ditch. The essence of Science is the Scientific Method, and the essence of the Scientific Method is the Repeatable Experiment. To have a repeatable experiment requires first that the object experimented upon be comparatively *constant*. If atoms could argue, fight back, run away, sulk, plead, throw tantrums, learn our terminology and use it against us, then we might reasonably have some doubts as to just how strictly scientific the study of atoms could be. But in that case, would the study of atoms be any the less important?"

Garvin said hesitantly, "I came here to learn your method, so that I could combine your methods and ours —"

Poffis looked doubtful. "Your method, as you have described it, suggests to me the attempt to fix a malfunctioning groundcar by the use of analytical chemistry."

"And how would you explain *your* brand of psychology?"

"Very simple. To begin with, we believe in sympathy, power of will, character, habit, love, association, contrast, the power of example, the soul, the spirit —"

"What a hodgepodge! You've got religion in there! You've got —"

"What we've got in there," said Poffis, "is Truth, and we accept Truth from *any* source, including religion."

"But, of all the unscientific —"

Poffis momentarily paralyzed Garvin with a poke of his long forefinger.

"The one advantage of Science is that it enables us, where it is applicable, to reach Truth. Truth is the goal, my friend, and Science is one means of reaching Truth, where Science applies. Don't forget your quest. You are seeking Truth. *Don't mistake the means for the goal.*"

Poffis went out, leaving Garvin open-mouthed.

Dazedly Garvin considered Poffis's last two sentences.

"You are seeking Truth." Certainly this was so. Why had he ever been interested in Science in the first place? *He was seeking Truth.* And that warning, "Don't mistake the means for the goal." Could he, Garvin, possibly be like a boy who spent so much time laboring over his finicky but beloved car that he rarely actually went anywhere?

The rest of Poffis's argument was borne in on him. How the devil *did* you have a science when the thing you were working with was as unstable and changeable as the human personality and the human intellect? *Science!* Was it an example of Science when the object of the experiment got up and tried to strangle you, as had happened twice now to poor Hardison? Was it Science when the experimenter fell in love with the object of the experiment, as had happened to Pangeist? And what about Hergeswalther, who got sucked into the patient's fantasy, and was only gotten out again because the patient realized what was going on?

"*Science!*" snarled Garvin. "My

foot, it's a science. Only *parts* of it are scientific." And, in that case, how was it going to get him to Truth?

For the second time, it dawned on Garvin that Poffis was really a master psychologist. How the deuce had Poffis known what he, Garvin, had turned to Science for? And how had Poffis been able to drive his ideas across with such effect that, just a few minutes later, Garvin was accepting them as his own? But the main thing was — how was Poffis able to make cures while he, Garvin, spent half his time floundering through the dark, and as often as not accomplished little more than to give the patient a knowledge of the underlying theory, which might or might not work?

Garvin hesitated, then went to the door.

Captain Moklin glanced up and smiled. Across the room, the patient slept peacefully.

Garvin said in a low voice, "Does the major *always* use the same treatment?"

"No. It depends on the patient."

That was helpful, thought Garvin sourly.

Moklin said, "Major Poffis looks to see what is wrong with the patient, then he fixes it. Down the corridor is one who is here because it is against his *principles* to obey orders. Major Poffis will break his arguments into little bits and pieces. He will make it all so clear that the prisoner will go out seeing the question in a new light. But most of these uncontrollables have a

treatment more like this one here. Only, each treatment is different in the details, because the prisoners are different."

Garvin nodded. He was still getting nowhere. At random, to keep the conversation going until he thought of a new approach, he said, "No wonder the major complained about the work-load."

"Yes," said Moklin, "the work-load is piling up, and the major hasn't even an apprentice to help him."

Garvin nodded sympathetically, then blinked, "Apprentice? You mean you teach psychotherapy by the *apprentice-system*?"

"Not I," said Moklin, block-headedly literal-minded.

"No, no," said Garvin, "I mean, is that the *Centran* system for teaching psychotherapy?"

"*The Centran system*?" said Moklin blankly. "Why should we have only one system? Also, there are schools that teach it."

"Yes, but you can't have *both*!"

Moklin looked at him. "Why not?"

"Well, the results wouldn't be uniform, for one thing."

"So?"

Garvin looked blank. Here he was again. The Centrants, block-headed fellows, did some silly thing, and when Garvin tried to explain *why* it was silly, his reasons evaporated, and he was left with this foolish feeling.

"Well," he said stubbornly, "*obviously* a man taught at a special school would know more than a mere apprentice. By the results

not being uniform, I mean that the apprentice would be *inferior*."

"Oh, you think so? With Major Poffis to teach, you think the apprentice would be laggardly in his efforts?"

"Well, no, I can see the major would keep him working, but — after all, there are a lot of things to be taught. At a school, there would be a special teacher for each subject."

Moklin nodded agreeably. "And this special teacher will have a class with many in it, and split his efforts among the class."

"All right," said Garvin angrily, "if this apprentice system works, why do the students go to school *instead of apprenticing themselves to the major*?"

"Because," said Moklin promptly, "they are *afraid* to apprentice themselves to the major. Once they apprentice themselves to him, he will not let them go until they are almost as good at cures as he is, and he is one of the best there is. It will be nothing but work, work, study, practise, practise, and the major will see through excuses, punish laziness, stimulate earnest hard work, judge with merciless accuracy. And we have been unable to find any students who are anxious to go through this."

Garvin thought it over. "But at the end, his apprentice will be *almost as good at it as he is*?"

"Oh, yes. Major Poffis will see to that."

"H'm." Garvin paused to consider. He was totally fed up with floun-

dering around. Among other kinds of patients, Rolling Hills Rest and Rehabilitation Center, where Garvin worked, got a good number of uncontrollables. The frustration in dealing with them was terrific. "Ah," said Garvin, "is there any limitation — on age, race and so on — would the major take a — ah — an *Earthman*, past the usual student age — "

"With this work-load," said Moklin, "the major would take anyone, provided the apprentice was in earnest, and, of course, showed some promise."

"How many apprentices can the major take at once?"

"I don't know. I've never known him to take more than three at one time."

Garvin thought hard. He would like to have a record of cures like the major's. On the other hand, he certainly did not want the major's undiluted attention focused on him alone. It followed that he would need to interest *someone else*. How about Hardison? After that second strangling attempt, Hardison had sworn that he'd always wanted to be a corporation lawyer, and the director had practically turned himself inside out to keep Hardison from quitting, right on the spot, and heading for law school.

Then there was Hergeswalther. His brief sojourn in fantasy-land had given him a new outlook. Who among the staff hadn't heard him muttering, "I could go nuts myself, any time. *Any time.*" What wouldn't Hergeswalther do to get a better grip on sanity?"

Here are two additional prospective apprentices, if Garvin could only sell them on the idea. He glanced at Moklin.

"How much do apprentices get paid?"

"Not much as apprentices, beyond room and board," said Moklin, adding at once, "But they get *very* high pay when they have acquired their skill."

"H'm," said Garvin, "that's very interesting."

**I**n his mind, he was saying to Hardison and Hergeswalther, "It's a tremendously exciting idea to me, from a *scientific* viewpoint. Here we have a method that works, that turns out cures like clockwork, and it's never really been scientifically analyzed."

"Yes," he could hear Hardison say. "But, for God's sake, Garv, to apprentice ourselves to this Centran witch doctor — "

"I know, I know. But that's the only way to really get his methods. We could write a book afterward, detailing the underlying scientific elements of the cures."

"Hey, we could, couldn't we?" Hardison had always wanted to write a book.

Hergeswalther said uneasily, "And meanwhile, what do we eat?"

"Well, we get room and board, and I guess not much more. But afterward we've got the ability. And then they really pay. Believe me, there's plenty of business there. The patients are piling up fast. And we could *cure* them."

"Yes," said Hardison, with a

smile, "That *would* be a change, wouldn't it? If our treatment would *work*."

There was a thoughtful silence.

"Just think, Walt," said Hardison, "we could call the book, *Elements of Centran Psychotherapy*."

Hergeswalther's lips repeated the title, and he added softly, "by Hergeswalther, Hardison and Garvin."

"Yes," murmured Hardison, half-aloud. "By Hardison, Hergeswalther and Garvin."

Garvin came out of his fantasy. *Actually*, he told himself, the book should be "by Garvin, Hardison and Hergeswalther." Any fool could tell

that it sounded better that way. Not that *that* argument would get anywhere with the other two. Let's see now: A, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i . . . Of *course*! It was alphabetical! Garvin could rest his case solidly on that argument.

Beaming, Garvin got his coat and turned to thank Moklin for a very pleasant visit.

Moklin said, "I am sorry, Dr. Garvin, that you must go now. Shall I say good-by to the major for you?"

Garvin shook his head.

"Don't bother," said Garvin. "I'll be back!"

END

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## EDWARD E. SMITH MEMORIAL AWARD

At Boskone I — the first Boston Regional Science-Fiction Conference, held in September, 1965 — it was decided to give an annual award "for special services to science fiction" at each subsequent Boskone.

Boskone II, held at the Statler-Hilton Hotel in Boston on March 11th, 12th and 13th, 1966, featured a presentation of the award. The trophy is a mounted replica of Doc Smith's famous Arisian Lens, from the Lensman series. In tribute to Doc's other celebrated series of science-fiction stories, the trophy is called "the Skylark". It is inscribed:

E. E. SMITH MEMORIAL AWARD

FOR IMAGINATIVE FICTION

FREDERIK POHL

1966

There could be no more fitting award in science fiction than one given in memory of the man who pioneered so much of the field, and we are deeply honored to accept it.

— THE EDITOR



# Earthblood

by KEITH LAUMER and ROSEL G. BROWN

Illustrated by WOOD

*Roan scoured the alien-inhabited  
galaxy seeking Men like himself—  
and found a universe of enemies!*

## XXII

At five miles, the Niss dreadnaught filled the screens like a dark moon.

"They don't know we're here," Roan said. "Their screens aren't designed to notice anything this small. We'll close with her, locate an entry lock and burn our way in. With luck, we'll be in control of their COC before they know they've been boarded."

"And what if we don't have luck?"

"Then we won't be any worse off than we would be eating each other and dying of foul air aboard this tub."

"Four miles, rate of closure twenty meters per second," called a crewman assigned to the navigation panel.

"Slack her off there," Roan ordered. "I want you to touch down on her as soft and easy as if you

## What Has Gone Before —

Roan Cornay, a human born in mysterious circumstances in a ghetto on Tambool, grows up among outcasts and is kidnapped by a traveling Extravaganzoo, where he is valuable as a freak. Roan falls in love with the exotic dancer, Stellaraire, and gains the friendship of Iron Robert, the Strongest Being in the Universe. Roan and Stellaraire plan to desert the circus. Roan wants to seek fabled Terra, which he is convinced really exists, and to learn who his real parents were. But Iron Robert is badly wounded in a contest with the terrible Chinazell and Roan and Stellaraire remain to nurse him back to health.

The circus ship (originally a Terran war vessel) is attacked by pirates and havoc is wrought when the ship suddenly automatically accelerates to three G, which only Roan and Iron Robert survive. Stellaraire is pinned under a fallen beam and burns to death. Roan is badly burned trying to save her. The pirates, headed by Henry Dread, board the ship. Henry Dread is fascinated with the human Roan and takes him aboard the pirate vessel and has a doctor treat Roan's burns. At Roan's insistence Iron Robert is saved from the ruined circus ship and kept on the pirate ship, but in chains. Roan is resented by the crew of Gooks and Geeks (humanoids and non-humanoids), but fights his way into their respect, and finally gains the trust and friendship of Henry Dread.

On the ancient Terran outpost of Aldo Cerise Roan wanders through a Terran park. The beauty of it reinforces his resolve to find Terra some day. He emerges from the idyllic garden to find the crew in mutiny against Henry Dread, and moves in to save the pirate. Back on the ship, Henry reveals to Roan that he is not a mere pirate, but a commander in the Imperial Terran Navy, which is trying to build itself up again from Rim Headquarters.

They find a Niss warship, and against Roan's advice Henry approaches it. It fires, Henry's ship is fatally hit, Henry fires back, Roan gives the order to abandon ship and shoots Henry Dread in an argument over Iron Robert, who after all will not fit into the lifeboat. Iron Robert forces Roan into a lifeboat and Roan immediately takes over leadership. As the lifeboat is too small for the number of men in it, Roan decides to try to board the Niss ship.

were lifting a purse back on Croanie."

The crewman showed a quick, nervous smile. "Sure. I don't want to wake nobody up."

"What's these Niss like, Terry?"

Roan turned and slashed his forearm across the mouth of the speaker.

"That's 'Captain' to you, sailor! I don't know what the Niss are like, and I don't give a damn. They've got what we need and we're taking it."

"The size of that scow! There must be a million of 'em aboard."

"Don't worry. Just kill them one at a time."

They watched the screens in silence.

"Two miles," the navigator hissed. "No alarm yet."

The lifeboat drifted closer to the swelling curve of the miles-long warship. The scrawl of great alien characters was blazoned across the dull black of the hull. Complex housings set at random caught the faint glint of starlight. Roan selected a small disk scribed on the metal plain below.

"Match up to that, Noag," he ordered. "The rest of you suit up."

He hauled a stiff vacuum suit from the wall locker, settled the helmet in place, flipped switches. Stale air wafted across his face from the suit blower.

The lifeboat's engines nudged her, positioning the lock directly over the hatch of the Niss ship. Roan stood by, watching the maneuvering on a small repeater screen.

"Quiet now, all of you," he said. "Any noise we make will be transmitted through the hull."

The two vessels touched with a barely perceptible rasp of metal on metal.

"Nice work, Noag. You're learning," Roan said. "Hold her tight there and magnetic-lock." He listened. Through his deck-boots he could feel the vibration of the engine; nothing more.

"Cycle her open," he ordered.

"Hey, what kinda air these Niss use?" someone called. "My tanks are low."

"What's the matter, you gonna stay here if it ain't to your liking?" another came back.

Air hissed as the lock cycled. Roan's suit plucked at him as the pressure dropped. Through the opening the iodine-black curve of the alien hull blocked their way.

"Cut into her, Askor," Roan commanded. The crewman pushed into the opening, set a blaster on narrow beam, pressed the firing stud. The dark metal reddened, turned a glaring white, went bluish, then puddled, blowing away, driven by the pressure of released gasses. The soft spot bulged, blew out under the pressure of the Niss ship's internal atmosphere. Askor worked on, widened the opening, cut out a ragged hole a foot in diameter.

"Shut down." Roan stepped past him, reached through, found a release, tripped it. The Niss lock rotated up and away, exposing the lightless interior of the enemy ship. Icy air gusted into the lifeboat, bringing a faint, foul taint. Frost

formed on the metal where it touched.

"Let's go!" Blaster in hand, Roan stepped through the opening. The beam of his hand light lanced ahead, picked out curving walls, complex shapes fitted to what should be the floor. Festoons of odd-sized tubing looped across the room. There was a scattering of heavy dust over everything.

Silently, the boarders came through the breached hull and gathered in a huddle around Roan. Their breath made frosty puffs before their faces.

"Where do we go from here?" Noag muttered.

Roan threw his light on a narrow vertical slit in the wall. "That might be a door," he said. "We'll try it."

The corridors of the Niss ship were high, narrow, lit by dim strips that had glowed to reluctant life in the minutes after the invaders had boarded. The walls seemed to press in on Roan. It was hard to breathe, and there was sweat on his forehead, in spite of the chill that cut at his exposed hands and face like skinning knives.

"She's pulling a half G," Askor said. "There's power on somewhere."

"I don't like this," Noag muttered behind Roan. "If they jump us now, we're stuck like mud-pigs in a deadfall."

"Shut up," Roan said. His heart pounding high up under his ribs, and what Noag was saying made it worse. He strode on, careless of

sound now, emerged from the constricting passage into a wide chamber walled with honeycombed storage racks. The crewmen gathered, staring around. One went to the nearest niche, drew out a heavy bundle wrapped in stiff, waxy cloth. He plucked at the bindings, tore the covering away, blinked at a grotesquely-shaped metal casting, peppered over with tiny fittings. The others craned, took the object as the finder passed it around.

"What the nine hells is that?"

"Hey, how about the next rack?"

"Can't you slobs even wait until after the fight to start looting?" Roan snapped. "Put that back where you got it—and cut out the chatter." The men fell silent, listening for the enemy they had, incredibly, forgotten for the moment.

"Come on." Roan led the way out of the storeroom along another narrow way that stretched into darkness . . .

"These passages," a crewman whispered hoarsely. "There's miles of 'em. What if we get lost in here?"

"That's easy," another offered. "We just pound on the walls until the Niss come to see what's the matter."

"Where they hiding, anyways?" Noag shifted his power gun from his right fist to his left. "We been prowling this tub for an hour."

The corridor ended at a blank wall ahead. Roan raised a hand.

"Hold it up," he said. He indicated the passage along which they had just come. "I've been counting paces. We've come about half a

mile along here. That puts us on the opposite side of the ship from the hatch we came in by. All we've seen is cargo, supply and utilities space. We're going back to the big corridor we crossed and move forward. I'm guessing we'll find the personnel areas in that direction. We're going to string out now, and keep our eyes open. The first man that talks without something important to say will get a mouth full of pistol butt. Understand? All right; let's go."

Roan led the way back a hundred yards and turned left into a wider passage. Like the others it was gray, featureless, faintly lit by a feeble glare-strip set in the ceiling, stretching on and on into the remote distance, too far to be seen.

"I'm freezin'," a crewman whined. "I ain't gonna be able to fire my gun, my fingers is so stiff."

"Holster your guns and get your hands warm," Roan said quietly. He went to a narrow door set in the wall, pushed at its edges. It yielded at the center, swung inward in two panels. He looked into a square room with papers scattered across the floor, a slanted table attached to one wall. There was a saddle-like seat mounted on a four-foot stand before the table. Roan picked up one of the paper scraps; it crumbled in his fingers. There were strange characters printed on the fragment he held. Roan stopped for a second, tried to gain some sense from the figures, but gave up.

He stepped back out of the room, continued along the wide passage.

In an immense, dim-lit hall, Roan looked at ranked hundreds of saddle-like perches arranged in endless rows on either side of foot-wide counters that ran the length of the vast room. A hint of a vile odor hung in the still air. Dust stirred underfoot as the nervous-eyed men stared around, fingering guns.

"This is an eating-room, I think," Roan said. "We're getting closer."

"Closer to what?" a voice grumbled.

"We'll take the next ramp up. The crew quarters will be somewhere near the mess."

"Hey—what's that?" A short-necked, round-backed crewman pointed a blunt finger. Roan walked over to look. What looked like handfuls of fish bones were scattered in a mound seven feet long, inches wide, half-buried in dust. The crewman dug a toe in, uncovered a dull metal object like a strap buckle. He kicked again, and a curious double-bladed knife with a knobby grip at the center skidded across the floor. The finder exclaimed, jumped after it, picked it up.

"Neat!" he stated. He gripped the weapon, one stubby blade protruding on either side of his rock-like fist. "Ya get 'em goin' and comin'!"

"Cripes," another grunted, eyeing the heaped dust and the fish bones. "That's one of 'em—what's left of a Niss!"

Roan looked around the broad room, saw other mounds.

"Let's get moving," he said. "I want to see what's up above."

They were in a long, narrow, high-ceilinged room lined with saddles before racks and dusty screens interspersed with panels of tiny glass-like buttons. One screen glowed faintly, showing a greenish image of stars against space, and a tiny oblong that drifted, turning on its short axis. Above the screen, scattered beads of light glowed.

On the floor below the panel lay two of the long dust heaps that had been Niss. The crewmen were busy picking ornate metal objects from among the fish-bones.

"This guy must of been a big shot," Noag rasped. "Look at this knick-knack!" He held up a starburst done in untarnished yellow metal with a giant jewel at its center.

"Chief, this must be the command deck, right?" Askor muttered. He was a hulking hybrid of mixed Minid and Zorgian blood, with the stiff, tufted hair of the latter scattered incongruously across the typical broad Minid skull.

"I think so," Roan said. "And that's *Warlock* on the screen there."

"I don't get it." Askor looked around the long room. "Where are they? What are they waiting for?"

Roan stood with folded arms, staring at the screen. As he watched, the blip that had been Henry Dread's ship expanded suddenly into a vivid sphere that swelled, spreading out in ragged streamers, fading . . .

"She blew," Askor stated. "It's kind of a funny feeling. I lived aboard her for thirty years . . ."

"In reply to your question," Roan

said in a harsh voice, tearing his eyes from the screen, "they're all around us. We've seen forty or fifty of them in the past three hours."

"Yeah, but them was just bones! I'm talkin' about—"

"You're talking about the Niss—the crew of this vessel," Roan cut in. He pointed to the scattered remains on the floor. "There they are. Meet the captain and the mate."

Askor furrowed his heavy brow. "Somebody fired that broadside that knocked out *Warlock*," he growled sharply.

Roan jerked a thumb at the glowing lights. "The automatics took care of that," he said. "They were set to blast anything that came in range. I'd guess the power piles are nearly drained. That's why her bombardment didn't annihilate us completely."

"You mean—they're all dead?" Askor looked down at the dust and fine bones. His face spread into a broad grin. He chuckled, then put his wide hands to his chest and laughed, a booming guffaw.

"That's rich, hey, chief? Us pussy-footing around like that and there's not a living soul aboard!"

"Chee," a bystander commented. "Think a' that! How long's this tub been floating around like this?"

Roan kicked the bones aside, hoisted himself into the saddle before the command panel, began punching keys at random.

"I don't know," he said. "But I think it's a fair guess she's been cruising for the best part of five thousand years, with a full complement of corpses aboard."



In a cramped, metal-walled chamber lost far aft of the immense engines, Askor looked sideways at Roan.

"Looks like the Niss had a few captives aboard, eh, Cap'n?"

Roan looked down at the scattered bones of men, and the smaller bones of women, and in the far corner, two small skeletons of children. Human bones, Terry bones, mouldering among chains.

"Gather up the identity disks," he said emotionlessly. There was a clump of feet in the corridor. The horned head of Gungle appeared in the doorway, his eyes wide with excitement.

"Cap'n, we found something! A slick thousand-tonner, a Navy job, banged up a little but spaceworthy! She's slung in the boat deck!"

Roan followed the man along dark ways littered with discards from the looting parties ransacking the ancient vessel, now and again passing the scattered remains of a long-dead crewman.

"Wonder what killed 'em all, Cap'n?" Askor kicked a mound, sent foul dust flying.

"Disease, starvation, suicide. What does it matter? Dead's dead."

Askor cast a quick glance at his grim-faced captain, said nothing.

On the boat deck, Roan studied the businesslike lines of the sleek vessel poised in a makeshift cradle between malformed Niss scout-boats, the numerals printed across her bows, the ITN crest.

"Looks like she took a hit aft." Noag pointed out areas of fused metal beside flaring discharge noz-

zles. "But they made repairs. Musta been getting her ready for some kind of sneak job."

Roan mounted the access ladder, shouldered through the narrow port. There was an odor of mildew and dust. He flicked on lights, went forward, climbed a companionway to the surprisingly spacious command deck, stood looking around at the familiar Terran screens, instruments, fittings. He threw open a wall locker, choked at the dust that flew, hauled out a ship-suit. He thumbed the tarnished TER. IMP. affixed above the pocket, read the name stencilled below.

ENDOR.

"Hey," Askor said from behind him. "That's the same as it says on one o' them ID's we took off them bones." He sorted through the bright-metal disks, handed one over.

"I didn't know you could read Terran." Roan eyed the halfbreed.

"I can't exactly read, Cap'n—but I'm good at rememberin'. They look like the same marks to me."

"So the captain died in chains." Roan tossed the disk back. "I think his suit will fit me."

"How about it, Cap'n?" Noag called from the entry. "How's she look?"

"Check her out," Roan said. "If everything works, load her up and figure out how to get those hull doors open."

Askor rubbed calloused palms together with a sound like a rasp on rough wood.

"She's a sweet tub, Cap'n. Not as big as *Warlock*, but we never needed all that tonnage anyways. I'll bet



she's fast. We can hit and get out before the dirt-diggers know what hit 'em."

"We're through raiding for a while," Roan said. "There's more loot aboard this hulk than we can haul—enough to make every man aboard rich."

"Not gonna raid?" Askor scratched at his bristled scalp. "Where we goin' then, Cap'n?"

"Set your course for a world called Tambool. It'll be listed in the manual." Roan indicated the glowing face of the index set in the navigator's panel.

"Tambool? What's there?"

"My past—may be," Roan said, and turned away to pore over the ancient star maps on the chart table.

## XXIV

Askor sat beside Roan, staring in to the wide, curved panoramic screen that filled the wardroom wall. He sipped his Terran coffee—a drink that it had taken many months to develop a habit for—then cleared his throat self-consciously.

"It's been a long cruise, Cap'n," he said.

Roan didn't answer.

"A few more hours," Askor went on. "We'll be touching down at Tambool. Not much of a place, but there'll be a few kicks."

"I'll distribute a few kicks myself if you don't shut up," Roan said.

Across the table, a crewman named Poion laid down his ever-

present stylus, closed his pad. He flickered his translucent eyelids down over his bulging eyes, fingering a wine glass delicately.

"Gee, Chief," Askor tried again. "It's been nine months now since the fight with the Niss ship and all. You been snappish as a gracyl in moulting season ever since you took over as Captain. You didn't used to be this way, back when you was Cap'n Dread's Number Two."

"I'm not anybody's Number Two now," Roan said. "I'm Number One, and don't ever forget it." He drained his glass, refilled it.

"What do you seek on the minor world, Tambool, Captain?" Poion asked in his soft, breathy voice. "Henry Dread's mission was not there."

Roan looked at the Beloian curiously. Poion seldom started conversations and never personal ones.

"I thought you could read minds."

"I read emotions. I compose with emotions. It is the art of my people. I am now scoring a composition for ten minds and a dozen experimental animals—"

"Let's hear you read my emotions," Roan cut him off abruptly.

Poion shook his head as though to dislodge a troublesome thought. "I cannot. That's why I asked you the question. I haven't the talent for Terran emotions. They're not like the others. They're in a different mode. More powerful, more brutal, more . . . primitive."

Roan snorted. "So you can't tell anything from my mind?"

"Oh, a little," Poion said. "You are engaged in a *noston*, a return

home. But your nostalgia is **not** the nostalgia of any other creature in the Universe." He sipped his wine, watching Roan. "Because you have no home."

On the screen Tambool rose on the left and the ship turned on its gyros and an arrow swung. Roan gripped his glass, watching the world swell on the screen.

**T**he vibrations of landing stopped, and Roan rose and walked back through the crew compartments. He found Askor by the exit port, rattling a gun nervously against his belt.

"I told you this wasn't like other ports," Roan said sharply. "You'll keep the men under control. They're to pay for what they take. And no shooting."

Askor muttered but Roan ignored him. The port cycled open; Askor ducked his head and peered out at the puddled field, the drab row of sheds, the dismal town straggling up the hillside.

"Cripes, Chief, what's the crummy dump got that's so hot?"

"Not much. But such as it is, I don't want anybody bleeding all over it." The other men had crowded around now, decked out in their shore-going clothes, guns and knives in belts, anticipatory grins in place.

"My business won't take but a few hours," Roan said. "While we're here, forget looting. There's not much you'd want anyway."

The men muttered and shuffled their feet, but no one said anything loud enough to take exception to.

"No reception party," Sidis com-

mented as the men followed Roan down the ramp. "At least not in sight." He licked his lips and watched the windows of the sheds and peered at every shelter that might house an ambush.

"Anybody that wants to land here can land," Roan said. "Nobody cares, and you shift for yourself. It's not rich enough to loot and it's useless as a base. It's a place for outcasts to come and lose themselves."

Poion glanced sideways at Roan. Roan saw the glance. He was talking too much—more than the men expected of their tactiturn captain. It was a sign of nervousness, and it made the men nervous too.

He walked on in silence, heading for the jumble of shacks behind the port. Had it been this derelict—this dirty and depressing when he'd left it as a child?

It didn't matter. He was returning as a man, and he'd come for a purpose. And let anyone who got in his way look out.

**R**oan marched the men past the tented Soetti quarter, under the walls and towers of the Veed section, into the Gracyl slums. He almost marched past his old house without recognizing it. Everything seemed smaller, dirtier than he remembered.

A group of unwashed gracyl infants dug morosely in their instinctive way in the dust of the yard, and Roan thought fleetingly how strangely each Gracyl reenacted his race's evolution from a primitive burrowing rodent. The flower

garden was gone and no one had whitewashed the house for years. A suspicious Gracyl mare peered from the window where Bella had once flapped a towel to call Roan to meals.

He swallowed a nostalgia that he hadn't expected to have and marched the men on, past the garbage dump, now bigger than ever. No one knew, or asked, why he took that route. He walked confidently, his head up, his guns strapped to his hips, his boots kicking up decisive splatters of mud as though he knew where he was going.

He had no friends to look for, no hint as to how to find Bella. But Uncle T'hoy hoy had had a favorite haunt—a tumbledown bar where he had been wont to huddle with other hardbitten slaves, sipping at vile Yill drinks and muttering unknowable Yill secrets. It would be a starting place.

Roan turned a corner, and the men behind him murmured. He could picture the grins spreading. This looked more like it, the pirate's part of his mind noted automatically. Ahead a carefully trimmed wine vine made an enclosure, and beyond could be seen the spangled tops of rich houses. A small party of Veed petty nobles was coming through the gate; some had iridion clasps on their pleated skirts and one had a diamond class-badge attached to his neck. The only weapons they carried were daggers and whetted talons, and their slithering gait had the native insolence of those who think daggers are enough. Roan felt the men slow behind him, watching the

Veed. He turned and gave them the look of ferocity that came so easily now.

"All right, you hull-scrapings, I've warned you. The first man that gets out of line gets a bullet in the guts."

"Those Geeks friends of yours?" Noag inquired loudly, watching the Veed move past. Noag was a Gook, and he had no use for Geeks.

"I have no friends," Roan said. "If you think I'm kidding try me."

The Veed had paused. Now two of them swaggered over.

"Get you gone from the places of the noble Veed," one said in flat, badly accented Interlingua.

"And take these mud-swine of half-caste Terries with you," the other added. They stood with their hands resting on their knives. They looked as though they hoped someone would give them some slight cause to draw them.

"Okay if I kill these two?" Sidis asked hopefully. He was grinning, and his polished teeth shone like silver.

"No killing," Roan said. The other men moved up and began to ring in the two Veed. They moved together, suddenly nervous, realizing that these were not local outcasts.

"Begone," Roan said in the faultless Yill that Bella had taught him. "My slaves scent easy blood."

The two Veed took their hands from their knives and made inscrutable Veed faces. "Take your vile scent with you," one said, but he moved back.

"Before you go," Roan said, "give me news of T'hoi hoy, the Yill bard and teller of tales." He put his hands on his guns to show that it was no idle inquiry.

"It is said the one you name can be found over his cups in any pot-house so undiscerning as to accept his custom," the Veed snapped the answer.

Roan grunted and turned on toward the gate. He remembered that once the Veed quarters had been sacred and taboo, and that he hadn't been good enough to be allowed there except when he ran messages or delivered merchant's goods. But now he was Roan, the Man, and he went where he liked.

He strode through the gate. Veed faces turned, ready to hiss their anger, but a silence fell over them as the small party tramped past. There were a few half-hearted cat-calls but no one moved to intercept them. The Veed had seen the byplay at the gate with the two daggers, and understood that it was a time for discretion.

## XXV

On the far side of the Veed quarter, in the swarming section of the city, Roan halted the men at a tavern under the battered red, green and purple symbol of an all-blood establishment.

"You wait out here," Roan said. "I'll send out a round. And keep your hands off your guns and other people's belongings."

There was a Yill inside. He wasn't Uncle T'hoi hoy but he was of the

Twix caste, one of those inconspicuous ones who were always to be found in public places sitting unobtrusively in a corner to pick up information, compose their strange Yill poems and be available in case there were messages to be sent.

Roan slid into the cracked seat across from the Yill, ordered Bacchus wine for himself and Fauve for the old Yill, then took out an oblong coin and put it on the table.

The Yill winked his eyes at Roan and let the coin lie there. There were many things a Yill would do for money and other things nothing could make him do. The Yill was waiting to find out which kind of thing Roan had in mind.

"First," Roan said, coming directly to business in the Yill fashion, "I want to find my mother, Bella Cornay. Then I want to find T'hoi hoy, my foster uncle."

The Yill took the coin with pointed fingers from which the fighting talons had fallen long ago. He deposited it under his tongue and watched while the clumsy, frizzle-haired waiter brought the wine. He smelled the Fauve, looked keenly at Roan and said:

"I am L'pu the Chanter of Verses. I know you. The flame-colored Terran boy who filled the empty life of the faded beauty, Bella. You were a small, wild flame of a youngling, and you have lived to become a fire of a man. Your mother's heart would have leapt for your beauty, which is that of all great beasts of prey."

"Mother is . . . dead?" Roan felt a slow sadness. He had never loved

his mother enough, and it had not been fair. All he'd ever thought about was Raff.

"She is no longer alive," the Yill said. He was being precise about something. Roan waited to see if he would say more, but he didn't and it was no use to ask.

"Uncle T'hoy hoy?"

"At this moment, T'hoy hoy listens at the house of the autocrat of the noisome Soetti. Would you have me fetch him?" Roan nodded and the Yill drank off his wine and slipped away.

Alone, Roan sat and waited in the small, dank tavern. The room smelled of a hundred liquors, poison to each other, and of alien sweats. Outside the flaps of the cellophane windows the men were bored, talking too loudly and throwing knives carelessly at each other's feet. Rain started up and drummed on the tin roof. It reminded Roan suddenly, overwhelmingly, of home. But he thrust the emotions back under a gulp of strong wine. Home was gone, had never been. Tambool was a place like any other, and in a few hours he'd be on his way. He had another drink and waited.

Bella was no longer alive. L'pu had said. What did that mean?

He heard the men jibing at someone outside and the tavern lighted with an opening door and feet shuffled. It was Uncle T'hoy hoy. He had gotten old, so old, and his gray face was like shrivelled clay, but it rose into smiles for Roan.

"My boy," he said. "Oh, my

boy." And Roan saw that if a Yill could cry, Uncle T'hoy hoy would have cried.

Roan embraced the old slave and ordered two more Fauves.

"I guess I've changed," he said. "Would you have known me?"

"You have changed, but I would have known you, Roan. But tell me the story of your years. Have you killed and have you loved and have you hated?"

"All that and more," Roan said. "I'll give you my story for your collection. But my mother. What happened to Bella?"

Uncle T'hoy hoy reached under his belt, inside his tunic, brought out a thick gold coin and offered it to Roan. "Your inheritance," he said. "All that remains of a once fair flower of the Yill." Uncle T'hoy hoy was a story-teller and he couldn't help being poetic, Roan told himself, suppressing his impatience.

"Where did Bella get gold?" Roan fingered the coin. It was an ancient Imperial stater and represented a lot of money in the ghettos of Tambool.

"She had nothing for which to live, with Raff dead and you stolen. She sold herself to the Experimental College for vivisection. This was her pay, and she left it for you in case you should ever return."

"And — she left no message?"

"The deed speaks all that need be said, Roan."

"Yes." Roan shook his head. "But I don't want to think about that now. I have to hurry, Uncle T'hoy hoy. My men are itchy for action and loot, and if anybody even looks

at them sideways they're going to cut loose. I came here to find out who I am. I know Dad and Ma bought me at a Thieves' Market here on Tambool, but I don't know which one. Did they ever give you a clue?"

“No clue was needed, Roan. I was there.”

“You?”

“I came here, all the way from a far world, to kidnap you,” T'hoy hoy said, remembering an old irony and smiling his strange Yill smile at it.

“You!” Roan was grinning too at the unlikely image of the old Yill as a hired adventurer.

“Ah!” T'hoy hoy said. He shook his head. “Better it were perhaps if all this were left untroubled under the mantle of time — ”

“I want to know who I am, Uncle. I *have* to know. I'm supposed to be of Terran blood — Pure Strain. But who were my parents? How did the ITN get me?”

Uncle T'hoy hoy nodded, his old eyes remembering the events of long ago.

“I can tell you my story, Roan. Your story you must find out for yourself.”

“I've shot my way in and out of a lot of places,” Roan said. “But you can't shoot your way into the past. You're my only lead.”

“We came here,” T'hoy hoy said, “following orders. We were minutes late at the bazaar — but the dealer talked a little. We trailed the purchasers, and they went to earth in a closed place where tourists

never venture. When we saw them, we laughed at how easy it would be; a frail Yill woman and an old hybrid Terran in an ill-fitting suit . . . ”

“Raff was never old.”

“So we discovered. It was incredible. He fought like a fiend from the Ninth Pit, and even after his body-bones were broken, he fought on, and killed all the others, and he would have killed me. But the lady Bella saw that I was a Yill, like herself, and that I would yield. She needed me, so my life was spared. Then by my oath I was forever bound to her and to Raff. And to you.”

Outside, the men had begun a game of rolling the tankards their drinks had been served in, and shooting at them. Inside there were only Roan and T'hoy hoy and the bartender frowning worriedly over his pewters and casting glances toward the door.

“Send out a refill,” Roan called. He poured his and T'hoy hoy's glasses full.

“Dad used to say I was Pure Strain. But whenever I asked him what made me any more valuable than any other more or less pure Terran, all he said was that I was something special. What did he mean, T'hoy hoy?”

“Special you were, Roan, for many men died for the owning of you. But how, I cannot say.”

“This market where I was bought. Tell me where it is; maybe the dealer who sold me knows something.”

“As to the bazaar, tell you I

will, but as for the dealer . . . alas, he died of a throat ailment."

"A throat ailment?"

"There was a knife in it," T'hoy hoy said a little guiltily. "Ah, I admit, Roan, I was not so even-tempered then as now." T'hoy hoy told Roan the location of the Thieves' Market on the far side of Tambool. "But let me advise you to stay clear of the place, Roan. It was an evil haunt of the scum of the Galaxy twenty-five years ago, and the neighborhood has since deteriorated."

Roan was watching through the window as a large company of Veed gentry went by outside; his crewmen stood silent, watching, but everything in their stance suggested disrespect. Sidis was tossing his knife in the air and catching it without looking, and grinning his steel-toothed grin.

"They're like children," Roan started, and broke off. A lone Veed had hurried past, trailing the group, and the diamond at his throat had glinted like a small sun, and from the corner of his eye Roan caught a sudden movement, then a thud.

He was out in the street in a moment, in time to see Noag's short cloak flutter at an alley mouth. Roan sprang after him and whirled the lumbering Minid around, but it was too late. The young Yill noble's head dangled at a fatal angle.

An angry buzzing was growing among the gathering bystanders. They didn't like Veed nobles, but strangers killing them in the public street was too much.

"Come on, you brainless slobs!" Roan yelled. "Form up and let's get moving!" He looked at Noag, and the Minid fingered his knife and looked back.

"You can stay here with your Veed and his diamond," Roan grated, and passed him by.

"Huh?" Noag looked puzzled. "You can't do that! It'd be murder," he roared, starting after Roan. "I got no Tamboolian money! I don't know the language! I won't last a hour!"

"Tough," Roan said. "Cover him, Askor, and shoot him if he tries to follow us."

T'hoy hoy was trotting beside Roan, looking back worriedly. "Cleverly done," he puffed. "The sacrifice will satisfy them for the moment, but you'd best not tarry. Farewell, Roan. Send word to me, for I would know how your saga ends."

"I will, Uncle," Roan said. He pressed a heavy Imperial thousand-credit token into the old Yill's hand and hurried after his men. At the gate he looked back.

Noag was squatting at the alley mouth. Tears were streaming down his face but he was cutting the diamond off the dead Veed.

## XXVI

It was a steaming, screaming color blaze of a bazaar, and the dust was like yellow poison, and as Roan marched his men through the narrow, twisting ways between stalls, no one gave them a second look. No one gave anything a second look

in the Thieves' Market unless it was something he wanted to steal.

They came out into an open plaza, and wended their way across it among sagging stalls with sun-faded awnings. Merchants too poor to rent booths squatted by heaps of tawdry merchandise. Gold and green deathflies buzzed everywhere, and the air reeked of opulent perfumes and long-rotted vegetables and sweat and age and forbidden drugs. They passed a scarlet and blue display of Tirulean silks that were worth fabulous amounts and a spread of painted esoterica that was worth nothing at all and came up to a crumbling wall cut from the chalky ochre rockface that towered over the square. A hand-painted sign beside a dark stair said YARG & YARG, LIVESTOCK. Under the first sign, another hung by one rusted pin. It said FOR SALE — VIABLE HUMAN EMBRYOS. Something had been painted beneath the words, but the letters had been scratched out.

Roan turned to the men. "Go shopping," he said, and they stood and looked amazed.

"Go shopping. Spread out so you won't look like an army; and don't start anything."

"Where you going, Boss?" Askor inquired.

"I'm going to see how easy it is to become a father."

Roan climbed the narrow, hollowed steps, pushed past the remnant of a beaded hanging into a dark and smelly room lit by a crack in the ceiling. From behind a desk,

a mangily feathered Geek in tarnished bangles looked at him with utter insolence.

Roan kicked a broken chair aside and leaned on the desk.

"What do you want?" The creature rasped in a scratchy, irritable voice. "Who referred you here? We deal wholesale only, to selected customers."

"I don't go through channels," Roan interrupted. "I came to inquire about buying an embryo. A human one, like you advertise outside."

"We have thousands of satisfied customers," the dealer said automatically, but in a tone that indicated that he had no need of another. He was looking Roan over distastefully. "How much you prepared to pay — if I should happen to have something in stock?"

"Money doesn't matter. Just so it's the real thing."

"Your approach appeals to me." The dealer fluffed out his moulted face ruff and sat up a little straighter. "But you have to have at least one wife. Sodomate law. The Feds would get me."

"Let me worry about that. What have you got?"

"Well, I could offer you a good buy in a variety of FA blood lines —"

"What does FA mean?"

"Functionally adapted. Webbed digits, heavy-gravity types, lightly furred — that sort of thing. Very nice. Guaranteed choice, selected—"

"I want genuine Terry type."



"What about our number 973? Features the cyclopic maternal gene, rudimentary telepathic abilities that could be coaxed along—"

"I said *Terry* type. The original variety."

"Nonsense! You know better than that. It doesn't exist."

"Doesn't exist, eh? He bent close to the dealer. "Take a look. A *good* look."

The dealer clacked his tarnished beak and looked at Roan worriedly. His large round eyes were watery. He blinked and look surprised.

"My goodness," he said. Then: "The feet. You'd be surprised how often it's the feet."

Roan stepped back and pulled a boot off and planted his bare foot on the massive old desk.

The dealer gasped. "*Five* digits! One might almost think —"

He looked up into Roan's face with a sudden alarm. He slid off his stool and hopped back.

"You're not — oh, no!"

"Sure I am," Roan said. "I came from right here. Twenty-five years ago. And now I want to know all about the circumstances surrounding my presence on your shelves."

"Go away! I can't help you! I wasn't here then! I know nothing!"

"For your sake," Roan said, "you'd better know something." He took a gun out of his belt and hefted it on his palm.

"My . . . my uncle. Uncle Targ. He might — but he left word he wasn't to be disturbed!"

"Disturb him," Roan said ominously.

The dealer's eye went to a corner of the room, flicked back.

"Tomorrow. Come back tomorrow. I'll check the files, and —"

Roan came around the desk and headed for the corner the dealer had glanced at. There was the tiny glint of an oculus from a shadowy niche. The feathery alien skittered across to intercept Roan.

"Uncle Targ isn't active in the business any more! He's not a well being! If you'd just —"

"But I see he still retains an active interest." Roan swept the dealer aside, raised the gun and fired a low-power blast at the wall. Plaster shattered all around the Eye, exposing wires which led down toward a circular hairline crack in the fused-sand floor. Roan brought the gun up and fired at the crack.

The dealer jumped at him and hauled at his arm, squawking. Abruptly, the trap door flew up and a tiny old voice screeched in five languages: "Stop, cease, desist, have done, give over!" A naked, ancient head popped up from the opening, its three remaining feathers in disarray. "Break off, check, stay, hold, cut short! Chuck it, I say!" he shrilled. "Terminate —"

"I've already stopped," Roan said. "Uncle Targ, I presume?" He tossed the dealer aside, stepped to the opening. Spidery stairs led down. He holstered the gun and descended into the heavy reek of sulphur dioxide. Uncle Targ danced on skinny, scaled legs, screaming in at least four tongues he hadn't used before.

"You swear with great authori-

ty," Roan said when the oldster paused for breath. "Why all the flummery?"

The creature skittered to the wall and plugged a wire dangling from its wrist into a socket.

"I should have let you rot! I should have decanted you at the first sight of that accursed box with its crests and jewels and its stink of trouble! Because of you, my very own pouch-brother was hacked to spare-ribs in the flower of his dealership! But instead, I maintained you at the required ninety-eight degrees Fahrenheit for days, and this is the thanks I get!" He stopped and breathed heavily for a moment. Then:

"Go away," he piped in a calmer tone. "I'm an old being."

"You're an old windbag, but that's your problem," Roan said carelessly. "All I want to know is, who am I?"

"All that shooting! You could have shorted my metabolic booster unit!"

Roan looked around at the dimly lit room. There were no windows, but the walls were panelled in pure gold and somebody kept it polished. There was a chandelier hung with diamonds and a burl desk that must have cost a couple of thousand Imperial to import from Jazeel. The creature's flimsy old body was swathed in yards of silver damask, and in one side of his beak he wore a ruby that looked like the heart of a rare red wine.

"You've got a right nice sick-room," Roan said. "And it's a mat-

ter of no moment to me whether you're evading the Feds or the tax collectors or if you just like to be alone. But I'm still waiting for an answer." He tossed the gun impatiently and motioned with his free hand at Uncle Targ's wires. "I can either plug you," he said, "or unplug you."

Uncle Targ squeaked around in the back of his throat as though he were pulling out rusty file drawers in his head.

"I'll have to get your records," he hesitated. "Don't look, now." He sounded as though he had them in his bra.

Roan went on looking, but Uncle Targ played a tune with his fingers on a solid piece of wall and a drawer slid out. A card flipped up.

Roan reached over Uncle Targ's shoulder and grabbed the card. Somehow, he'd expected to see names on it: his father's name, or his mother's. Or a country.

Instead, it said, *Pure Terran, Beta. ITN Experimental Station, Alpha Centauri. (Special source d.g.)*

"What does 'Beta' mean?" Roan asked.

"Beta is you. Alpha was somebody else. And then there was Gamma, and the others."

"Others. Pure Terran?"

"They weren't viable."

"Were they my brothers?"

Uncle Targ shrugged. "Alien biologies have never been a hobby of mine!"

"But what else do you know?"

"What's the difference? Why do you care? You're you and it seems to me you're pretty lucky. Suppose

you were me, getting older and older and all the money I've got won't buy even a minute of the pleasures you can get free." The screech was a whine now.

"Why I care is my business. Telling me is your business."

Tremulously, the old creature unplugged himself, teetered across to his stool, perched and lit up a dope-stick. It was obvious from the way he caressed it that he wasn't allowed to have them very often.

"So long ago," he murmured, looking at the ceiling.

"Did you know I was stolen?" Roan asked.

"You *are* crude," Uncle Targ said distastefully. He pushed a button and the trap door slammed shut in his nephew's face peering from above.

"I'm waiting." Roan reminded him.

"I, ah," Uncle Targ said. "That is, so many of one's usual sources had withered away. You understand —"

"What made me so valuable?"

"You? Valuable? You retailed for a miserable two thousand, if I recall correctly."

"Still, there was *your* brother. And someone went to considerable trouble to come after me."

Uncle Targ blew smoke from orifices in the side of his head. "Who knows? You do seem to be a more or less classic specimen of Man, if anyone has an interest in such matters." He sighed. "I envy anyone who cares that much about anything at all. With me it was

money, but even that palls now."

"The card said I came from Alpha Centauri. Can't you tell me any more than that?"

Uncle Targ rolled one beady eye at Roan. "On the flask," he said, "there was a name: Admiral Starbird, and the notation 'Command Interest.' I have no idea what that might mean."

"Are there Terrans on Alpha?"

"I know nothing whatever of this Alpha place," Uncle Targ piped. "And I do not care to know. But there are no Terrans living there — or anywhere else, for that matter. The Pure Terran is a myth. Oh, ten, fifteen thousand years ago, certainly. They kept to themselves. Lords of the universe! Practiced all sorts of racial purity measures — except for the specially mutated slaves they bred. But then they had the poor judgment to lose a war. Since then the natural tendency toward environmental adaptation has had free rein. And with the social barriers down, the various induced mutations inbred freely with the Pure Strain. Today you're lucky if you can pick up what we in the trade call an Eighty X; a reasonable superficial resemblance to the ancient type."

"What about me?"

"Umm. If I were to cut into you, I daresay I'd encounter all sorts of anomalies. How many hearts do you have?"

"I don't know. I thought you said alien biology wasn't a hobby of yours."

"One can't help picking up a few —"

There was a loud thud from





above and plaster fell down on the burl desk. Uncle Targ screeched and jumped for the trap-door button. The lid sprang open and a solid slug whanged off the gold wall by Roan's ear. The ancient being's profanity cut off in mid-course.

Roan yanked out his gun and flattened himself against the wall. Through the trap door he could see Askor holding Uncle Targ's nephew by the neck and slamming the feathered head against the desk. A small ragged slave was scrabbling frantically for the beaded hanging, but Sidis's unsheathed claws had him pinned by a trailing cloak. Roan fired a shot into the ventilator grill. It made an echo like eternity bursting.

"All right, boys, break it up," he called and clambered up into the shop. Sidis looked at him, grinning his metallic grin, and the slave broke free and bolted from the room. Askor waved the dealer in a wide gesture as though he had forgotten he were holding him.

"Poion seen you come in here, and we thought we heard some shots. And then we couldn't find you."

"So all you rowdies could think of was to shoot the place up. I told you to go shopping."

"Pay for stuff?" Askor tossed the dealer aside; he struck with a clatter of beak and claws and bangles and crept to a neutral corner. "We figured you was kidding."

Roan glanced down into Uncle Targ's private retreat. The ancient lay on his back, glazed eyes wide, with his mouth full of blood.

"Come on," Roan said. "Let's get out of here."

Back in the plaza the bazaar had died as though a sudden storm had slammed it shut. Roan could feel the eyes staring at him from behind blind shutters and past barely parted hangings at narrow windows and through cracks in sagging facades. Askor glanced around, strutting.

"I guess they know we been to town, hey, Chief?"

"Shut up and march," Roan said.

This is what I always leave behind me, he thought. Fear.

"I don't get it, Chief." Askor grumbled, sitting beside Roan in the eerie light of the control panel. "For better'n a year and a half now — ever since we lost Warlock — we been by-passing dandy targets, blasting balls to bulkheads from one two-bit world to another. And when we get there — no shooting, you say. Go shopping, you say. The boys are getting kinda fed up."

"We stopped and took on supplies once or twice," Roan said. "But I suppose that wasn't enough to satisfy your sporting instincts."

"Huh?" Aw, that was peanuts. Just grocery shopping, like."

"With a few good-natured killings thrown in, just to keep your hand in. You can tell the crew there'll be plenty of action now."

"Yeah? Say, that's great, Cap'n! What you got in mind? A run through the Spider Cluster, maybe? Knock off a few of them market towns that ain't been hit for a hundred years?"

"Nothing so pedestrian. Set your course for Galactic East."

Askor scratched at his hairless skull. "East? Why do we want to head out that way, Chief? That's rough territory. Damn few worlds to hit, and them, poor ones."

"There'll be plenty of worlds. And after the first couple years' travel, we'll be in a part of space no one's visited for a few thousand years."

"A couple years' run out the Arm? Cripes, Cap'n, that'll put us in No-man's-space! The ghost-ships —"

"I don't believe in ghost-ships. We may run into Niss, though. That's where the last big engagements were fought."

"Look, Chief," Askor said quickly. "What about if we talk this over, huh? I mean, what the hell, there's plenty of good worlds right here in this sector to keep us eating good for the next two hundred years. What I say is, why look for trouble?"

"You're afraid, Askor? That surprises me."

"Now wait a minute, Cap'n! I didn't say I was scared. I just . . ." His voice trailed off. "What I'm getting at is, what the hell's out there? Why leave good hunting grounds for nothing?"

"Alpha Centauri's out there," Roan said.

"Alpha . . . That's the place you said the real ITN was. Cripes, Chief, I thought you said we was through with that chasing around."

Roan came to his feet. "What do you think this is, a ladies' discus-

sion circle? I gave you an order, and by the nine hells, you'll carry it out!"

Askor looked at him. "You sound more like old Cap'n Dread all the time," he said. "I'll follow your orders, Cap'n. I always have. I know I ain't smart; I need somebody with brains to tell me what to do. I just made the mistake of thinking we could talk about it."

"We've talked enough," Roan cut him off. "You plot your course to raid every second-rate planet between here and Alpha, if that's what it takes to make you happy. Just don't forget where we're headed."

Askor was grinning again. "That's more like it, Chief," he said. "This is what the boys been waiting for. Boy, what a cruise; It'll be a ten-year run, cutting into new territory all the way!"

"And no more talk about ghost-ships! Or live Niss either."

"Okay, Cap'n. But with some good targets in sight, it'll take more than a shipload of spooks to scare the boys off."

After Askor left the bridge, Roan sat for a long time staring into the main viewscreen, with its spreading pattern of glittering stars.

So much for the next ten years, he thought. After that . . .

But there'd be time enough to plan that when the sun called Alpha Centauri filled the screens.

## XXVII

Roan sprawled in his favorite deep-leather chair in the genuine wood-paneled officer's lounge

of the heavy cruiser *Archaeopteryx* — which had served the freebooters as home for seven years now, since a stray missile had uncovered the underground depot in which the retreating ITN had concealed it, fifty-seven hundred years before.

Sidis sat across from him. His grin was ragged now with the absence of five front teeth, carried away by a shell fragment in an engagement off Rastoum the previous year. Poion perched in his special seat, fitted up to ease the stump of his left leg, toying with a massive silver wine goblet. Askor was tilted back with a boot on the mahogany table-top, paring chunks from a wedge of black cheese and forcing them into his capacious mouth.

"I called you here," Roan said, "to tell you the cruise is nearly over. The story that last batch of prisoners told fits in. The sun ahead is Alpha."

"Not many of the old bunch still around, hey, Cap'n?" Sidis observed. "Bolu, Honest Max, Yack — all gone."

"Whaddaya expect?" Askor inquired, with his mouth full. He lifted his alabaster chalice and washed the cheese down with green Bacchus wine, then belched heartily. "We been on, lessee, twenty-one raids in the last eleven years, and fought three deep-space engagements with wise-guy local patrols."

"You can reminisce later," Roan said. "I expect the ITN to pick us up on their screens any day now. I don't like that, but it can't be helped. If they let us alone how-

ever, I'm making planetfall on the fourth world of the system. According to the records. ITN Headquarters is on the second. "I'll take one of our scout boats from there and make the run in alone."

"Whaddaya mean, alone?" Askor butted in. "You need all the boys along on that caper, Chief, if I know my Terries!"

"I don't expect any trouble. And if I did, I'd still go in alone. A show of force wouldn't buy me anything against the whole ITN. I'm paying a peaceful call, that's all."

"From the stories we been hearing, I got my doubts the ITN has a cheery welcome for nosy strangers. What you want with them Terries anyways, Chief?"

"I'm a Terry myself," Roan said shortly.

"In his origins a being finds hints of his destiny," Poion murmured. "Alas, our captain knows his not."

"You'll wait for me on planet four," Roan went on. "And stay under cover. If I'm not back in . . . ten days, you're on your own."

"Hey, you mean . . .?" Sidis grin was sagging, hooked up on the bad side by twisted scar tissue. He looked from Roan to Askor to Poion. "You're talking about letting the captain walk in there alone? And where does that leave the rest of us?"

"You'll be all right," Roan said. "You'll be happy. You can raid back down through the Eastern Arm and shoot up everything in sight, without me to nag you."

"Just like that, huh? Thirteen years together, and then, *srrikk!*" He made a cutting motion across his throat.

"I didn't take you to raise," Roan growled. "I remember you the day we met. You were pounding some Ycthan's brains out against the bulkhead. You were doing all right."

"Back out through the Ghost Fleet, alone?" Sidis's grin was a grimace now. "To the Ninth Hell with that! I'm going with you, Cap'n!"

"I'm going alone," Roan said flatly.

"Then you'll have to shoot me, Cap'n," Sidis said distinctly.

Roan nodded quietly. "That could be arranged."

"And me too," Askor said. "Count me in."

"And I," Poion said. "I shall go or die, as my captain wills."

Roan looked from one to another. He lifted his glass and took a long draught, put it back on the table.

"You're *that* scared of the ghosts of departed Terries?"

Nobody spoke.

"You Gooks amaze me," Roan said. "All right, we four. But no more."

Sidis's grin was back in place. Askor grunted and carved off another slab of cheese. Poion nodded.

"It is well," he said. "We four."

"Gungle," Roan asked, "you think you can navigate the *Archaeopteryx* now?"

"Yeah, Chief," Gungle said, grinning his snaggle-toothed Minid grin.



"Yeah, I think. You show me what to feed in, I feed it in."

"Suppose you were captain now. What course would you set?"

"No offense, Chief, but I'd plug in a straight line back to East Sector. Me and the boys, we heard back on Leeto about the Terry Ghost Fleets. There ain't no civilization for parsecs. Just these dead worlds like Centaurus Four here, without even no air."

"What are your coordinates for the nearest allblood joy city?"

Gungle grinned wider, flicked a chart of the Eastern Sector on the navigation screen and punched out a course to Leeto.

"Okay," said Roan. "You're captain in full charge until I get back."

"Huh?"

"I'm taking Poion, Askor and Sidis with me to Centaurus Two."

Gungle gaped. Roan took the heavy gem he'd worn on his chest since Alda Cerise and tossed it to the Minid, who hung it around his neck and threw his shoulders back and stood proud, the grin turning to a stern look of dignity.

"Now pipe the crew up," Roan told him.

"Men," he said, when they had all assembled. "I'm going to leave you for a while." He raised a hand to still the muttering that started up. "Meanwhile Gungle's captain, and he'll do any gut-splitting that's necessary. And anybody that's got any ideas about anybody else being captain had better think twice. That's my Terran magic jewel Gungle's wearing. As long as he wears it nothing can touch him."

The men rolled their eyes at Gungle and made magical signs in twenty-four different religions. But no one raised any objection.

## XXVIII

"That thing really magic?" Sidis is asked, as the scout boat nosed on toward the brilliant star that was Centaurus Two, with *Archaeopterys* four days astern, outward bound for Leeto.

"It created magic in the heart of Gungle," Poion answered. "He is now a man and a leader. It created magic in the hearts of the crew as well. They fear him. All this I could feel very plainly."

"Yeah, but that's not what I mean," Sidis started.

"Look!" Roan was pointing at the forward viewscreen.

"A ship," Askor said. "Heavy stuff, too!"

"It didn't take 'em long to spot us," Sidis said. "Somebody's awake in these parts."

"We'll hold our course steady as she goes," Roan said. "Leave the first move up to them."

"What if the first move is a fifty megatonner amidships?" Sidis inquired.

"That'll be a sign we ain't wanted," Askor grunted.

Roan tuned the all wave receiver, picked up star-static, a faint murmur of distant planetary communications. Then the drone of a powerful carrier came through.

"Inbound boat, heave to and identify yourself," a voice barked in a peculiarly intoned Panterran.

"Survivors from the merchant vessel *Archaeopteryx*," Roan transmitted. "On course for the second planet. Who are you?"

"This is the Imperial Terran Navy talking. Ye're in Navy space. Stand by to receive a boarding party and no tricks or we'll blow ye to kingdom come."

"Are we glad to see *you*," Roan transmitted. "Any hot coffee aboard?"

But there was no answer, and the four ex-pirates watched the Terran vessel growing in their tiny view screen.

"Ah, Captain," Poion observed sadly, "again the Terran Navy is a disappointment. You look for home and there is no home."

"Your emotion receiver's working overtime," Roan said. "But I admit our welcome lacked warmth."

"Me, I feel like a fly that's about to get swatted," Sidis said. "Why don't you ever read my emotions, Poion?"

"You're too stupid to have emotions," Askor said. "We shoulda brought *Trixie* in. She could handle that Terry tub."

The ITN vessel came in, paced the tiny scout boat at a distance of fifty miles and then came alongside, looming like a dull-metal planetoid. There was a heavy shock as its magnetic grapples embraced the boat.

"Open up there!" the harsh but strangely cultivated sounding voice said from the communicator.

Roan nodded to Askor. He operated the control and the four

pairs of eyes watched the lock cycle open. Hot, dense air *wooshed* into the boat from the higher-pressure interior of the naval vessel, bringing odors of food and tobacco and a pervading animal stink.

Askor snorted. "Terries! I can smell 'em!"

Boots clanged against metal decking. A tall, lean man wearing an open blue tunic over a bare chest ducked through the lock. He had a lined, triangular face, and there was sweat glittering across his forehead and chest. His pale eyes were restless. He gripped a powerful rifle with both hands and looked at the three massive humanoids and then past them at Roan.

"Who are ye?" he demanded of Roan, ignoring the others.

"Roan Cornay, master of the *Archaeopteryx*."

"Who're these beauties?" he jerked his chin at the three Gooks, not looking at them.

"My crew. We were all that got out."

"You go aboard," the man said to Roan, keeping the power rifle pointed at him. "These others stay here."

Roan hesitated a moment. Poion caught his feeling and nodded imperceptibly at Askor. Then Roan stepped accommodatingly toward the port behind the Man, and as he passed he half-turned, quickly, slammed the gun from the Terran's hands with a lightning blow. Askor caught it, flipped it up and let it point casually at its former owner.

"I prefer to keep my crew with

me," Roan said calmly.

The Man had flattened his back against a bulkhead and his mouth was open. "Ye're stark, raving mad!" he said. "I'm Navy. One yell . . ."

" . . . and I'll have your guts plastered on the ceiling," Askor said, grinning. "Whattaya say, Cap'n. Let him have it?"

"Oh, I don't know," Roan said, watching a rivulet of sweat that was crawling along the Man's neck. "Maybe he's going to be nice after all. Maybe he'll extend the hospitality of his ship to all of us. How about it, Terry?"

And Roan smiled an ironic grin at himself. This was the first time he'd called anybody else Terry. And it came out like a dirty word.

Askor nodded. "He'll need to point his pop gun at us." Askor pushed a thumb against the firing stud of the Man's power rifle and bent it out of line. He tossed it back to the Man. "Don't worry," he said. "We won't tell nobody it don't shoot."

Roan walked close behind the Man as he went through the port into the Navy ship. "No need to be nervous." Roan told the Terran. "Just say all the right things when you see your buddies."

A small, roundly built man with a high, pale forehead stood waiting for them in the hold. He wore the tarnished silver leaf of an ITN commander on the shoulder of his uniform and he was flanked by four armed Men. He had small, dim eyes that squinted at Roan and his

companions, as though the brilliant lighting of the hold blinded him.

"Some reason why ye didn't dump 'em back out into space, Draco?"

Draco cleared his throat. "Distressed spacemen, Commander Hullwright."

Commander Hullwright frowned, still looking hard at Roan. "Aren't they all. But I see. This one seems . . ."

"Yes, sir," Draco said quickly. "He's Terran, but I don't think he even knows it. That's why I brought him in to you."

Hullwright grunted, but to Draco's obvious relief he was looking at Roan and ignoring the others.

"Ye speak a little Panterran?" the commander asked Roan.

"Yes. I recognized your voice."

"Then why didn't ye answer me hail?"

"I did."

"Hmmmph. Blasted receiver's prob'ly out again. Draco, see to it." Draco drifted back, eyeing Askor and Sidis nervously, and Commander Hullwright forgot about him again.

"Don't know you're Terran, eh, lad?" Hullwright asked Roan. "Ye must be pretty overwhelmed with all this." He indicated with a wave the Navy ship and himself and his officers.

"I've seen ships before." Roan said.

"Um. Got an ugly tongue in your mouth. No doubt ye're a dirty spy from Rim HQ."

"No."

"Fat chance ye'd tell me if ye were a spy. What's your story?"

What are ye supposed to be doing in ITN space?"

"My merchantman *Archaeopteryx* blew up a couple of parsecs back. I was outbound for Leeto for shore leave. We had a brush with pirates off Yound and I guess they mined us. We four escaped. I was afraid we'd drift forever."

"Left ye'r ship and crew to fend for themselves, eh?" Hullwright's lip curled. "All right. I'll give ye a berth and ye can start in the Navy, swabbing decks. Maybe ye can work up to something. Maybe ye can't. Take care of him, Draco." He shot a look at Askor and Sidis. "And put the animals back on their boat."

"Wait a minute." Roan said. "These are my men, and they're hungry and thirsty. And I don't swab decks. I'm a master."

"Right now you're the most insignificant swab in the Imperial Terran Navy, you puppy!" Hullwright barked. "And as for your 'men', they'll have to find their own animal feed in space. Put 'em back and cast 'em loose, Draco."

Draco shuffled his feet unhapily. "Uh, Commander. They claim to be distressed spacemen . . ."

"What's this — petty sentiments about distressed Gooks? What's going on, anyhow? Are ye in on this mutiny I keep hearing rumors about? What . . ."

The four armed men with Hullwright had tightened up their ranks and one drew the gun from his holster. "Drop that power rifle, Draco," he said.

Draco dropped it. Sweat dripped from the end of his nose. "Listen, Commander," he said hoarsely, "they made me —"

Roan took a quick step while attention was centered on Draco. His right hand made an expert chop across the throat of the man with the unholstered gun. Askor leapt like a cork from a bottle, seized two of the Men in his vast hands, slammed their heads together in his favorite tactic. Sidis caught the last of the four as he was bringing up his gun, yanked the weapon from the Terran with such force that the Man skidded across the hold and slammed against the bulkhead screaming, clutching a bloody hand.

"Hey, look!" Sidis said cheerfully, holding the gun up, "His finger's still stuck in the guard!" Sidis dislodged the amputated member and tossed the gun up. "What do you want us to do with these nancies, Chief?"

"Poke them in the ship's lazaret. Commander Hullwright's coming with us for a little pleasant conversation, aren't you, sir? We'll go to the bridge where we can talk in privacy and comfort."

Askor gathered up the guns, gave the best one to Roan, and handed the others to Poion and Sidis for safe keeping.

Commander Hullwright's ineffectual little eyes were frightened. "What," he began, "what are you . . ."

"Now, now, be calm, Commander," Roan said. "If you play it cleverly, you may even live through this."

Roan sat in the captain's padded chair, gnawing a roasted leg of fowl and studying the charts of the Space Traffic Control Area surrounding Nyurth, the second planet out from Centaurus, and other charts showing the layout of the vast headquarters complex.

"You know, Commander," Roan said. "I'm impressed with the Imperial Terran Navy after all. I'll just want a few details from you so I can be even more impressed. Care for another piece of bird?"

Hullwright snarled. Sidis cracked him across the shins with the power rifle.

"Answer nice when the Cap'n speaks to you," he admonished.

"No, I don't want a piece o' bird, you pirate!" he roared.

"Tell me about the defenses, Commander," Roan said.

"I'll tell ye nothing, ye murdering mutinous cross-breed Geeks!"

"Our captain objects to adjectives," Poion said mildly, giving Hullwright a gentle but telling twist of the ear. "And I find your emotional radiation both primitive and appalling. Answer the captain correctly and succinctly."

"I'd eat me own tongue first!"

Roan tossed the chicken leg aside and began peeling a banana. "Umm. Now, about these charts. How many of the emplacements are operative — and which ones?" He held the chart for Hullwright to see.

Hullwright was silent. Sidis jabbed him roughly with the end of the gun.

"Ye think I'd betray me uniform, ye scum?" Hullwright snarled.

"That's right," Roan said. "Unless you'd rather die. One piece at a time."

"Ye wouldn't dare lay a hand on me, ye filth! I'm an officer of the Imperial Terran Navy!"

"I killed a captain once." Roan said. "It was just as easy as killing a Gook."

Hullwright tried to keep his defiant look in place, but the spirit had wilted from him.

"Damn ye'r eyes," he said, "ye won't get through anyway. Untie me right hand and I'll point them out to ye on the chart."

Hullwright sagged in the chair. His little eyes closed and he rubbed his space eyebrows with his hand. Empty glasses and plates littered the plotting board and chart table, the remains of meals brought up from the galley at the commander's reluctant request, and passed in through the service slot.

"I've told ye all I know," Hullwright said hoarsely. "Ye've sucked me brain's dry as a mummy's tongue."

"You've done very well, Commander," Roan said. "Askor, what's the fix for Planet Three?"

"Twenty-seven million miles abaft our port beam, Cap'n."

"Fine. Now Commander, I've got just one more little favor to ask, and you've been so nice. Pass the word to your Second Officer to assemble the crew on the boat deck in fatigues for calisthenics in exactly ten minutes."

"Hah? What's that?"

Askor applied the butt of the rifle. "Jump, Terry!"

After two more prods of increasing severity, Hullwright complied. With the cold muzzle of Askor's rifle against his left temple, his ragged voice sounded through the vessel.

"And now, good-bye, Commander," Roan said. "Askor, you and Sidis take the commander to join his men. They'll be in their skivvies and unarmed, so you shouldn't have to kill many of them. Dump all but two kilotons of reaction mass from our lifeboat. Then load the commander and his men aboard and cast them off."

"That's cold-blooded murder, ye swine!" A crack across bloody shins cut Hullwright off.

"You'll have enough fuel aboard to reach Centaurus Three. According to your charts, it has a breathable atmosphere. There are forty-three of you and the supplies and water should last you a couple months, if you're not careless. And if I find you've been honest with me about the information you gave me, I'll see that you're picked up.

"Wait a minute," Hullwright said blurrily. "I just remembered. About that picket line, the outer one . . ."

The commander corrected a few errors he had made. Then Askor took him away, followed by Sidis with his toothy grin.

Alone, Roan sat in the bridge and knew he was a fool. He could have gone on looting the universe, or set himself up for life on some

pleasant planet, with never another care in the world. Instead, here he was alone with three Gooks, going in to face the Imperial Terran Navy.

And why?

I'm still looking for Terra, Roan thought. Poion says I'm looking for home and I have no home to find. Man has no home. Perhaps there is no Terra. But that's something Poion wouldn't know — and the Imperial Terran Navy might. They might know the truth of the story of the ancient Niss blockade of Terra.

Roan thought of the dead Niss ship firing its last volley, and that made him think of Henry Dread. Even now he couldn't remember Henry Dread without pain. He had had blood on his hands before, but Henry's was the only blood that stained.

Poion came in with his silent tread. "Let that memory die, my captain," he said. "Gird yourself for the future."

Roan felt the boat lurch slightly. That would be the lifeboat kicking free. Askor and Sidis came back into the control deck in high good humor. Their laughter was like a cannon ball rolling over an iron grill.

"That was cute, chief," Sidis said. "The tub's all yours. What are you going to do with it?"

"First we're going to scuttle her," Roan said, smiling grimly at three astonished expressions. "Then we're going to ride what's left into ITN HQ on Nyurth."

"And after that?" Askor asked.

"After that we start taking chances."

It took nine hours to burn a carefully aligned series of holes through the bulkheads of the ITN destroyer, so arranged as to destroy food and water supplies and smash unimportant portions of the control system, while leaving intact the vital minimum of instruments and fuel reserves.

The final punctures through the outer hull-plates were bored by Sidis, cramped in a too-small ITN regulation vacuum suit, at points marked by tiny pilot-holes cut from within. When the job was complete, crude patches were rigged. The four-some gathered in the now sealed-off control deck, surrounded by heaps of supplies placed there before the work was begun.

"Get the story straight," Roan said. "We're from an ITN detachment on Carolis. That's far enough away they won't know any better. We found this tub derelict, beyond the fourth from Centaurus, driving out-system at a half G. We boarded her and sealed off the leaks, restored atmosphere to the conn deck, and headed her for her home station for salvage."

"What were we doing nosing around this, Sector?" Askor asked, levering the cap from a can of compressed quagle eggs.

"We were lost," Roan said. "And next time you get a yen for quagle eggs, go in the john. They smell like a corpse's armpit." There were a few things the Minids ate Roan could never get used to. "We left our scout ship in orbit around fourth

from Centaurus. We were out of supplies and almost out of fuel. When we first saw the Navy ship we thought we were being rescued. Then we found out it was a ghost ship. We're distressed spacers—nothing more."

"We'll be more distressed yet, when the ITN gets hold of us," Askor said.

"I get distressed every time you open your ugly mouth," Sidis said. "Why don't you shut up and let the cap'n do the worrying?"

"It's a good forty-hour run into the Planetary Control Area," Roan said. "We'll stand watch two on and four off. Every half hour we transmit our mayday signal. We'll keep our receivers open. I doubt that we'll pick up anything, but if we do, ignore it."

"What if we hear an order to heave to?"

"Our receivers are out. We keep going."

Roan keyed the Transmitter to the ITN distress channel.

"ITN vessel *Rage of Heaven*, under salvage crew, calling ITN HQ at Nyurth," he called. "We're headed in-system on course for Nyurth; our position is . . ."

At the center of a box of four heavy destroyers which paced the damaged vessel at a distance of one hundred miles, Roan steered the scuttled and patched *Rage of Heaven* in past the tiny outer moon of Nyurth. He crossed the orbit of the massive inner moon and descended, braking now, into the upper reaches of the deep atmosphere.



The escort moved in to fifty miles, then ten. On the screens, the tell-tales winked with the incoming pulses of long-range sensors aimed from the planetary surface nine hundred miles below.

"They're tracking us like we was a missile volley from a hostile super-D," Sidis growled through his carefully polished teeth. He was sharpening a new toothpick with a steel file. Sweat beaded his low forehead.

"At least they've laid off hailing us," Askor pointed out. "I thought maybe the bastards meant it when they gave us that final warning."

"Their emotions when we emerge from the ship should be fascinating," Poion said, delicately whetting an even finer edge on his already razor-sharp stiletto.

Sidis eyed the business end of his

power gun and blew any possible dust out of it. Then he took out his whetstone and started honing his double-bladed Niss knife.

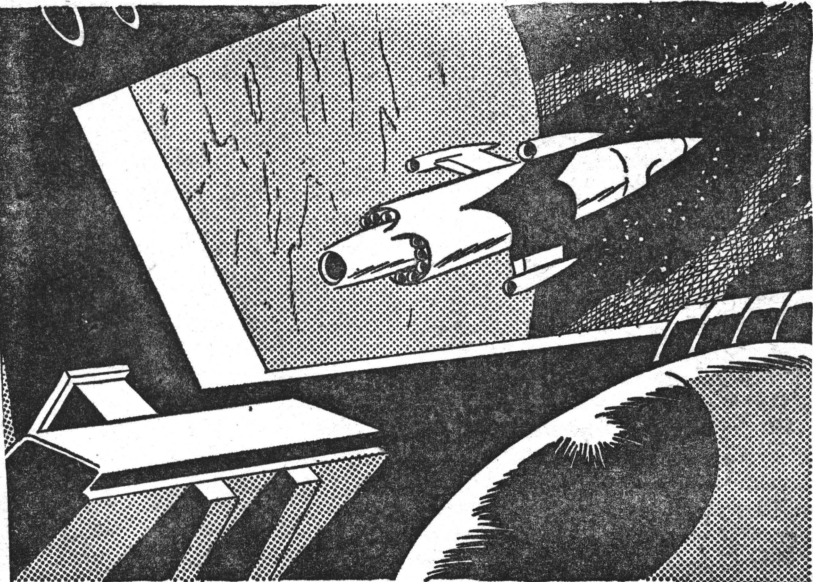
"You know, Cap'n," Askor said, "I dunno if it was a good idea, tricking us out in these Terry suits. A Gook ain't a Terry, no matter how you slick him up."

"You're honorary Terries," Roan said. "Now shut up and follow my lead."

**T**he ship grounded clumsily at the extreme edge of the vast port complex. Roan watched on the screens as two of his escort settled in nearby, gun ports open and energy projectors aimed. The others hovered a mile or two above.

"They must think we got an army in here," Askor said.





The three crewmen looked at Roan. "Do we walk out there. Just like that?"

"You know a better way?" Roan adjusted the set of the collar of his ITN uniform, hitched his gun belt to center the buckle.

"No weapons out," he said. "We can't buck the whole Imperial Terran Navy. Right now all we've got is my brains. So keep your traps shut."

"Well," Askor said, eyeing the bright sky, "it's as good a day as any to take a swig from the Hellhorn."

"I begin to sense their emotions." Poion said. "Not death lust, but a mixture of curiosity and excitement and violence restrained. Something's afoot, captain. Walk carefully among these Terries."

Roan led the way down the landing ramp, squinting at bright sunshine, sniffing the alien scent of fresh air. Across the field, an official, uniformed contingent of the Imperial Terran Navy was drawn up in a rank to greet him. Their shoulder insignia glittered in the sun, and their metal belts shone. Striding at the head of his hulking companions, Roan snapped over his shoulder:

"If one of you thugs disgraces me, I'll have his guts an inch at a time." The ranked Terrans stood rigidly waiting, and Roan admired their precise formation, their disciplined silence and stillness. And briefly he hated himself because he wished he were one of them, a Man among Men, and not a Terry freak surrounded by bloodthirsty Gooks.

Then he was closer, and he saw they were not all the same height, as they had appeared to be, but were artfully arranged in graduated rows with the tallest on the right and the near-midgets at the far end. His step almost faltered, but he went on, seeing the alien faces now, the wrong-colored eyes under the regulation helmets, the queer-colored skin of wrists showing above six-fingered and four-fingered gloves, the slashes in polished boots to ease wide, webbed feet, the misshapen bodies that bulged under the uniforms of glory.

At twenty feet, he barked the order to halt. A heavy body bumped him from behind. He whirled, bellowed at the trio who were spreading out, gaping at the strangers.

"Back in line there, you bone-skulled sons of one-legged joy-girls!"

He turned again, saluted stiffly as a short, pink-faced Terran came up, casually returning Roan's greeting with a wave of a soft hand. He was wearing the insignia of a Lieutenant Commander, and he tucked a short swagger stick under his arm, glanced past Roan at his crew, wiped his nose with a forefinger.

"Commodore Quex would like to welcome you and your men and requests the honor of your presence at Imperial Naval Headquarters at your earliest convenience," he said in a high, melodious voice. A civilized voice.

Roan nodded, staring at the strange Terran's face.

There were two heavy-lidded eyes — pale blue, Roan noted, with a small lift of excitement — a blob of

a nose, a puckered mouth, folds of fat under the small chin. For some reason it reminded Roan of a baby Fustian, before its shell grew. It didn't look like the kind of face Roan had pictured conquering a galaxy. But he concealed his disappointment and motioned his crew to follow him as the Terran led the way across the field.

"What do you get from them up close, Poion?" Roan asked softly as they marched behind the Terran officer, flanked by a squad of Men.

"Some sort of fear, oddly enough, Poion said.

"Fear? Of four ragged spacemen?"

"Not exactly of us. But that is the emotion I read."

The Headquarters of the ITN was a craggy many-towered palace built ages before by a long-dead prince of a vanished dynasty. It loomed like a colossus over the tumbled mud houses of the village. A vast green window like a cyclopean eye cast back brilliant viridian reflections as Roan and his crew marched in under the crumbling walls along a wide marble walkway, went up wide steps flanked by immaculate conical trees of dark green set among plants with tiny violet blossoms. It was faintly, sadly reminiscent of the garden on Aldo Cerise.

Inside, the sun glowed in long rectangles along the echoing floor of a wide, high room. Terries in fitted tunics of Navy blue stood at rigid attention by elongated doors at the sides of the room. Above, a vaulted ceiling arched up into sha-

dows where gold and blue mosaics caught occasional sun gleams among masses of hanging brass carvings, all polished, which dangled like earrings from a hundred peaked corners, clanging as the wind moved them. They went under a vast arch of enameled brass, across a wide floor of gleaming brass plates. Far up among dark rafters, echoes of more brass clashed softly.

As the men marched by, Geek slaves prostrated themselves. They were lean, ribby, deep-eyed creatures, with vestigial scales across high shoulders, long, finger-toed feet and draggled manes of lank hair along their prominent spines. They wore only loin cloths in spite of the chill, and some of them trembled violently as Roan looked at them. From cold — or fear.

The small Terran officer trotted ahead, disappeared through high doors with a sign for Roan to wait. His men clustered close behind him, drawn together and suddenly alert, almost disciplined.

"We could jump 'em now," Askor growled. "I get jumpy just waiting."

"There is a certain pleasure in the experience of mortal suspense," Poion said philosophically. "In such a moment, the current of life runs deep and swift."

"You'll actually enjoy dying, you poetic bastard." Askor grunted.

Roan hissed at his men as they began to mutter. Waiting came hard to them. But there was no need to worry about them. They could smell danger at half a parsec — and it was an odor they were fond of.

Roan's guide reappeared and beckoned to him.

"Wait here," Roan said to his men, "and don't shoot anybody before I get back!" He followed through the bossed, agate-studded door into a shadowed, high-vaulted room in which magnificenté hung like rotted velvet drapes. A spider-lean man in a rank-encrusted uniform rose from behind a desk like a beached freighter. He offered a bony hand. Roan took it, and felt the stitching along the fingers where the webbing had been removed. He had a wide mouth and a strange, small chin. His ears were odd, and at close range Roan could see that they were edged with pink scar tissue.

"I am Commodore Quex," the man said in a soft, almost feminine voice. He was slight, delicately boned, but the cruelty in the slits of his eyes was that of a wolf, not of a cat.

Behind Roan, the fat Terran saluted and went out and the door closed behind him.

"I'm Roan Cornay," Roan said. "Lieutenant Cornay," he added.

"Ah, yes. From Corilis. What a pleasure to welcome you, ah, Lieutenant." A finger like a parchment-wrapped bone brushed at a red-edged eye. At close range, Roan could see a whitish crust at the corners of the puckered mouth. An unpleasant odor hung about the old man. He settled back into his chair, snapped his fingers. Something moved in the shadows, and Roan saw

that it was a slave, face down on the thick, moldy carpet. It rose and scuttled to swing a heavy chair around for Roan to sit in.

The commodore glanced at a paper before him, then looked at Roan, his hand hovering near his eye. "Your ship, ah, Navy 39643-G4. Our records—"

"I captured her. After *Warlock* was lost."

"Ah, yes. So you said. Hmm. *Warlock* was a valuable vessel. I don't believe your reports made it clear precisely *how* she was lost."

"In action." Roan paused, thinking of what he had been about to say about the Niss ship, and deciding quite suddenly not to say it. He let the sentence hang.

Quex was looking thoughtful. "Surprising . . . and fortunate that you were able to obtain a replacement. And Captain Dread was lost as well?" The old voice was a purr. Roan felt tension creep along the back of his neck. He shifted in his chair so as to keep the door in view. "That's right," he said.

"And before his, ah, death, he tendered you your appointment?" The red eye peered past the finger at Roan.

"Four years ago."

"Ummm. And how did you happen to enter into your, ah, association with Dread?"

"He took me from a ship he captured."

Quex sucked in his dry lips. "Another naval unit?" he asked sharply.

"No; it was a travelling show. I was one of the Freaks."

"You were a captive of non-humans?" Quex was digging at his ear now, angrily.

"Not really. I was, at first, but—"

Quex leaned forward. "You lived among them willingly?" There was an edge on his voice like a saw.

"They treated me well enough. I had good quarters and plenty of food."

"Beware of Geeks bearing gifts," Quex said flatly. He leaned back, his thin fingers on the edge of the table.

"And what is your ancestry, Corney? If you don't mind my asking." His voice indicated that he didn't care whether Roan minded or not.

Roan opened his mouth to say that he was genuine Terrestrial strain, but he heard himself saying, "I'm not sure. I was adopted. My folks didn't talk about it much."

"Mmmm. To be sure," Quex murmured meaninglessly. He poked at the papers on his desk. "About your cargo. Iridion. Gold. Gem stones. Various heavy metals." He looked up with a smile like a false-face. "Some error in transmission, I assume."

"It's all aboard my ship. Her holds are crammed with the stuff. I'll be obliged if you'll have it off-loaded. I need the space for ammunition and stores. Who do I see about provisioning?"

Quex's mouth was open, showing inflamed gums and the tip of a white tongue.

"Provisioning? For what?"

"For my next cruise. My new assignment."

"Ah, of course." Quex showed the false face again. His finger was back at his eye. "But we can discuss these details later. I've laid on a dinner in your honor tonight. You'll want to prepare. Real Terran fare again, eh?"

"I take it most of the fleet is out on space duty now?" Roan said.

"Why do you say that?" Quex shot a darting look.

"I only saw half a dozen ships at the port. Some of them seemed to be half dismantled. How big a force does Alpha HQ command?"

Quex lifted the paper from his desk and dropped it again. "Ah, an extensive force, Cornay. Quite extensive. Rather extensive."

"You have other bases here on-world?"

"Oh, ah, assuredly, Lieutenant. Why," Quex waved a hand toward the draped window. "You didn't imagine these few rusting hulks were our entire fleet?" He curved his puckered lips in a smile that crinkled the cruelty lines around his eyes. "Most amusing. Most. But —" he rose — "I suggest we allow these matters to wait until after our celebration of your happy return."

Roan stood. "Certainly, sir. But I'd like to ask when the counter-attack is planned. I want to know how to set up my cruise."

"Counter-attack?" Quex gaped.

"The massive offensive in force against the Niss. How many of them are there? Where have they set up their headquarters? What—"

The commodore held up two quivering hands. "Cornay, need I remind you that all this is highly

classified?" He shot a look at the nearest slave, crouched against the floor.

"Oh." Roan glanced at the slave. "I didn't think . . ."

Quex rounded the desk. "Not that we have any trouble with our slaves. They know their place, don't they, old one?"

He kicked the slave hard in the ribs. It grunted and glanced up with an almost human smile, then stared at the floor again.

"Still, I shall have to dispose of this fellow now. Pity in a way. He's been with me for twenty years and is well trained. But getting old. Ah, well." Quex took Roan's elbow, guided him toward the door. "Until tonight, then?"

"What about my crew?"

"Your crew. Of course. Do bring them along. Yes. Capital idea. Your entire crew, mind you. How many did you say there were?"

"Just the four of us," Roan said.

"At second Moonrise then, Cornay. Don't be late."

"We'll be there," Roan said.

Vast grins broke across battered faces as Roan rejoined his crew.

"Glad to see you, Boss," Askor said. "We was about to come in after you."

"Relax. I'll call the plays," Roan said.

A small, neat Terry with an elegant walk flicked ashes from a dope stick, came toward Roan and his men. The guard officer came to attention.

"That will do. Putertek," the new-

comer said gently. He looked Roan over, smiling faintly, glanced at the others.

"But, sir . . ." the guard protested.

"And your watchdogs, too," the dandy said. He was carefully dressed in immaculate blue polyon with silver corded shoulderboards bearing the winged insignia of a captain. His blond, rigidly waved hair shone with oil and he touched it with polished fingernails. His perfume reminded Roan distantly of Stellaraire.

"My name is Trishinist," he said with a small flourish of one manicured hand. "Sorry about the reception. These commissioned peasants—no finesse. Perhaps you'd like a bite to eat and then we can have a little chat?"

"My men are hungry, too," Roan said. "They never seem to get invited anywhere."

"The enlisted men's mess is—"

"They're officers."

"My apologies. Of course." Captain Trishinist led the way along a side corridor, chatting easily about the weather, the servant problem, the inadequacies of the mess cusine.

The dining room was quiet with deep rugs and moss green drapes and still, intricate chandeliers. Waiters sprang forward to draw out chairs at a long, white-lined table.

Askor and Sidis sat down awkwardly, then relaxed and grinned at each other.

Trishinist murmured an order to a servitor, waited and turned contentedly to the table as the waiter brought a loaded tray.

"Champagne and honeydew,"

Trishinist said as Roan's men eyed the frosted bottle and the breakable-looking glasses. "I hope you find it adequate."

Askor reached out and helped himself to half a melon from the tray as the waiter passed and took a vast bite.

"Hey," he said, chewing juicily, "Pretty good. But the skin's kinda tough."

"Wipe your chin," Roan said more than a little annoyed.

Askor used his sleeve. "Sorry," he muttered. Sidis had plucked the bottle from the tray and rapped it on the edge of the table to knock the top off. He jumped to his feet, suddenly startled, as the wine foamed out.

"Uh-oh," he said. "This one's went to the bad."

A waiter rescued the bottle with an impassive face, mopped up the wine. Poion took the bottle, sniffed it, then took a swig from the broken neck.

"An interesting drink," he said. "Effervescent, like the human mind. And worth a brief sonnet."

"What's the matter with you?" Roan snapped. "Offer the captain a drink."

Poion blushed and pushed the bottle along to Trishinist, who waved it away with a smile.

Roan picked up his melon and took a bite. "Good," he said around a mouthful of melon.

Trishinist's hand hovered over a spoon. Then he picked up his melon with delicate fingertips and nibbled its edges. "So glad you enjoy it," he said.

Waiters cleared away the last of the dishes and filled glasses with mysterious-smelling brandy. Sidis slapped his belly and belched.

"A great feed," he said.

Askor plied a fingernail on a back tooth. "First real Terry chow I ever had," he commented. "Unless you want to count—"

"Thank you, Captain," Roan cut him off hurriedly. "It was a good breakfast."

Trishinist offered dope-sticks all around and lit up as the waiters cleared the last of the dishes.

"Now, about *Rage of Heaven*," Trishinist said. "You say you found her abandoned. May I ask how it happened that you were cruising in this area?"

Roan said carefully: "We heard there were inhabited worlds in this area. New markets. My ship was blasted by a time mine and we were drifting when we spotted the cruiser."

"You knew this was ITN controlled space?"

"Yes." Roan was watching Trishinist's face carefully. He wished Poion could tell him what Trishinist was feeling. It would help.

"And you encountered the derelict where?"

Roan repeated the coordinates of the imaginary rendezvous beyond fourth Centaurus.

Trishinist glanced around; the doors were closed, now and the waiters gone. He leaned across the table and his languid expression was gone. So were thousands of

years of culture. It was as though suddenly all the waves went out of his hair.

"You're early," he hissed. "Four months ahead of schedule."

Roan sat perfectly still, holding the interested smile in place.

"As it happens, we're ready here," Trishinist went on, licking his lips. "But I dislike Blan's imprecision. If we're going to be working together—"

"Hey, chief," Sidis began.

"Hush," Poion murmured.

Trishinist squinted at the three crewmen. "What about these?" he asked Roan.

"They do what I say," Roan said.

Poion smiled. "It is true," he said.

Trishinist frowned. "I had expected rather more . . . ah . . . representative individuals."

"They're as representative as I need them to be," Roan said.

"You have your identification?"

Roan reached inside his tunic, brought out an ITN identification disk on a chain, handed it across. Trishinist looked at it carefully.

"Endor," he murmured. "Blan's never mentioned your name to me Captain."

"No doubt." Roan said.

"Blan is proposing no changes in the scheme at this date, I trust?" Trishinist said sharply. "I've fulfilled my part of the arrangement. I assume he's done as well."

"You see me here," Roan said.

"Where are his squadrons now?"

"They're in position." Roan improvised.

"Is he prepared to move at once?"  
Roan frowned. "That depends on you," he said.

"On me!"

"Of course. We're early. You say you're ready, Captain. Just what do you mean by that? In detail."

Trishinist's jaw muscles were tensed up. "I told you, I've complied with our agreement in every respect."

"I can't work with you if you refuse to tell me anything. I want to know just *how* ready you are."

Trishinist relaxed his jaw muscles with a visible effort. "The organization among the rank and file is now over the eighty per cent figure. Sixty-four of the ninety-eight senior officers are aligned with us. Over ninety per cent of the junior corps. Our men control communications and three of the five major supply depots . . ."

Roan listened, taking occasional sips from his glass. Askor and Sidis sat, mouths slightly open, listening. Poion was smiling behind his hand. But Roan didn't kick him because it took some practice before a stranger could tell Poion was smiling.

"The units on maneuvers are, of course, those including high concentrations of unreliaables," Trishinist concluded. "The base garrison has been carefully selected over the past three years and can be counted on absolutely. Now, what of your group?"

"We're ready," Roan said.

"At full strength?"

"I have triple the number of volunteers I expected."

"Excellent!" Trishinist pursed his lips. "How soon can you be in jump-position?"

"We're already *in* position."

"You mean . . . you mean that literally?" The captain moved uneasily in his chair.

"Absolutely."

"Certainly you don't mean—to-day?"

Roan put both hands palms down on the table. "Now," he said, because all this was having such an extraordinary effect on Trishinist.

Trishinist's face seemed to fall apart as a look of comprehension and shock came over it. Sweat popped out on his forehead and his eyes went to Sidis, who was polishing his teeth, and Askor who was just sitting, and Poion who all of a sudden began to look as though there was something important about him.

"Oh, I see now," Trishinist said. "I see why you brought *them*. I . . ." A sick expression passed over his eyes—"you really think it's necessary to go that far."

"What's the alternative?" Roan asked steadily.

"You're right, of course. Still . . . he is Pure Strain."

Roan stood up. "We've spent enough time talking about it. I'd like to meet him now."

"Meet . . ." Trishinist looked almost wild for a moment. "Oh . . ." He relaxed. "Just to . . . ah . . . assess him, of course."

"Of course."

"Very well." Trishinist rose. "Things are moving a trifle rapidly



for me. But you're right. There's no need to delay."

At the door he hesitated, glancing at Askor, Sidis and Poion.

"Ah . . . which one?"

Sidis grinned his jagged grin, Trishinist shuddered and went on out into the hall.

Guards in bright-plated helmets snapped to attention as Captain Trishinist halted Roan and his men at a massive carved door.

"I'll introduce you as a new arrival from one of the Outer Towns," he said to Roan. "He likes to meet the new recruits. There are so few these days. The other will wait, of course."

Askor looked at Roan; Roan nodded. "Stay here," he said. "Don't wander off looking for liquor."

"Gee, Boss," Sidis said.

Trishinist opened the door; Roan followed him into an ivory-walled anteroom ornamented with a pale blue floral cornice. A harried-looking staff lieutenant came in from the room beyond, exchanged quick words with the captain, then motioned them through the arched way.

The room was wide, silent, deep-carpeted in dusty blue, with light curtains filtering the yellow light from tall windows. There were deep chairs, cabinets and bookshelves of rich-polished wood, and a vast desk behind which an ancient Man with snow-white hair sat, his gnarled hands gripping the arms of his massive chair.

"Good morning, Admiral Starbird," Trishinist said. "I've brought a caller."

Starbird waved Trishinist and the aide from the room, indicated a chair, sat studying Roan's face in silence.

"Have I not met you somewhere, once, young Man?" His voice was the rumble of subterranean waters.

"I don't think so, sir," Roan said. He was staring at the other's lined face. He had never seen an old Man before, and he was remembering Henry Dread and the expression, at once that of the hunter and the hunted, that Henry had worn and that the old man had too.

"That fellow," Starbird jerked his head toward the door through which Trishinist had gone. "He a friend of yours?"

"I just met him today."

"Vicious little ferret," Starbird said. "He's up to something. Thinks I don't know. Has his picked men all over my headquarters. But it doesn't matter. No guts. That's his trouble. Oh, yes, he'll plan; he'll talk. But there's no steel in the man." The Admiral's eyes were on Roan's face, as though searching for a clue to something.

"From the Outer Towns, eh? What were your parents like?"

"I don't know, sir. I was raised by foster parents."

"And you want to fight the enemies of Imperial Terra?"

"I've thought about it."

"If I were young again," Starbird said with sudden vigor. His fingers twitched on the chair arms. "I remember *my* first day. Ah, those were great times, young man! There

was something in the air, a feeling of things to be done, goals to strive for . . ." He sat, looking beyond Roan into the past.

"My father was on fleet duty then," he went on talking to himself now, communing with the dead. "He commanded a five kilo-tonner, the old ZEALOT; she was lost off Pluto on a routine recon run, gunned out of space by the Niss. Three hundred years ago that must be now. I was just a lad, then, on border duty in the north. I was to have been with him on his next sweep. He was a bold one; too bold. Who else would penetrate all the way to Sol's edge? Nobody!" Starbird pounded his chair-arm and looked at Roan. "None of these sniveling garrison sailors you see disgracing the uniform today! They're a cruel lot, young man! And gutless!"

Roan sat silently, waiting.

"Revenge," Starbird said. "I swore I'd have it! But no suicide run, by God! Plenty of smirks and snickers thrown my way. All talk, they said. Talk! But I wasn't jumping off half-ready. I needed the rank first. Then reorganization, weeding out the corruption, the twisted element that was choking the service like Venusian tangle-weed! Measure a man's genes instead of his guts, that was their way! Damn his genes! It's the dream that make a man, not the number of his toes!"

Starbird fell silent, his face twitching with the pain of old memories.

"I had my star at last," he said

suddenly. "I put my plan before the general staff. The plan I'd worked out over all those years. Five hundred ships of the line, a million picked men. We were to move in two echelons, blast our way past the Niss picket lines beyond Pluto, strike with our full power all the way in past the Neptune and Jupiter orbits. Then—when they massed to meet us—split! Our probes had given us plenty of information on the Niss defensive patterns! I analyzed their data, and saw the answer: We'd split beyond Mars, break up into two hundred and fifty pairs, and carry a running fight right in past Luna. Then regroup in a beautiful maneuver I'd worked out as carefully as a ballet—and hit the Niss inner blockade line with a spearhead that could blast its way through the walls of Hell!" The old Man's eyes blazed with a fierce light; then he let out a long breath and leaned back. He raised his hands, let them fall.

"They laughed at me," he said flatly. "We weren't ready, they said. The Niss were too powerful, we didn't have the firepower to stand against them. Wait, they said. Wait!" He sighed. "That was almost two hundred years ago. We're still waiting. And four lights away, the Niss blockade of Terra still stands!"

Roan was sitting bolt upright. "Terra?" he said.

"Ah, the name still has magic for you, does it lad?"

"Only four lights from here?"

Starbird nodded. "Sol's her sun. The third planet. The double world. Terra the Fair. Locked up behind a

wall of Niss!" Starbird's fist slammed the desk. "I'll never live now to see my plan used! We waited too long; somehow, the fire that we carried died while we talked—and the dream died with it."

Roan sat forward in his chair. "Admiral, you said you weren't worried about Trishinist. What if he had outside help?"

Starbird's eyes narrowed. "What outside help?"

"A man named Blan."

"Blan? That warped imp out of Hades? Is he still alive?"

"His forces are due here in four months."

Starbird was sitting erect now, the force back in his voice. "How do you know this, lad?"

"Trishinist mistook me for Bran's emissary. He's ready to make his move now. Today. He thinks one of my crew is assigned to assassinate you. I'm here now to size you up for the killer."

Starbird rose and walked across to the door. He was a tall, once-powerful man with square, bony shoulders and lean hips. He flipped a lock, threw a wall switch that snicked locks on outer doors. He came back and sat behind the desk.

"All right, young fellow. Maybe you'd better tell me all you know about this plot."

"That's as much as I was able to get out of him," Roan said. "With half the men backing him, he's in a strong position, even without Blan's reinforcements."

Starbird stroked the side of his jaw thoughtfully. "That timetable

suits me very well. Let Trishinist go ahead with his plans. When he discovers his allies are missing, he'll collapse."

"I can't stay much longer, sir." Roan got to his feet. "Trishinist will begin to suspect something. What do you want me to do?"

Admiral Starbird thumbed his chin. "When's the assassination scheduled?"

"Tonight, after the banquet."

"Make it late. I'll be ready. Just follow my lead. In the meantime, arm yourself. How many men do you have with you that you can trust?"

"Three."

Starbird nodded a smile was growing on his seamed face. His hand slammed the table. "Young fellow—what was your name again?"

"Roan. Roan Cornay."

Starbird was cackling. "Terra excites you, does it?" The old man turned to a wall safe, punched keys with trembling fingers. The door swung open and he took out a sheaf of many-times-folded papers.

"My attack plan," he said. "The ships are ready—over four hundred of them, in concealed docks on the other side of the planet! I've kept them ready, hoping. I needed a leader, Mister Cornay. Trishinist has supplied the men. Let him try his coup! Let him send his killer to me! Then, when he comes along a little later to see for himself, I'll be sitting here, laughing at him! And the orders will be waiting! I have a few loyal officers; they'll command the five squadrons of the flotilla. And you, lad! You'll take command as

acting Admiral of the Fleet! Do you understand?"

"You'd trust me, Admiral? You don't even know me."

"I've known many men in my years, boy. I can judge a fighting man when I see one. Will you do it?"

"That's what I came here for," Roan said softly. "That's what I've lived the last thirteen years of my life for."

### XXXIV

Roan's thugs clustered about him in the windy bronze-and-mosaic hallway outside the Grand Dining Chamber. They were splendid in new clothes of bright-colored silky cloth spangled over with beads and ornaments of glass and polished copper, and they smelled incongruously of flowers.

"Keep your guns out of sight," Roan ordered. "Keep your hands off the females and don't kick the slaves. That's a privilege we'll leave to our hosts. No rough stuff unless I give the word, no matter what happens. And any man that drinks so much he can't shoot straight will deserve whatever he gets." He settled his palm-sized power gun against his stomach under the wide scarlet cummerbund that had been wound around him by his assigned slaves in the dust-covered splendor of his quarters.

"Let's go," he said and pushed through the high mother-of-pearl inlaid doors. The clang and thump of noise-makers burst out; dancing girls sprang into motion, whirled forward

strewn flower petals. A thousand tiny colored lights gleamed from chandeliers and winked from tiny fountains that sparkled on long tables spread with dazzling white cloths almost hidden under gleaming plates, polished eating tools, slender glasses as fragile as first love. There were hundreds of Terrans seated at the table, and they rose, clapping their hands. Commodore Quex came forward, his eyes, set at the extreme edges of his face, flicking over Roan and past him at his crew. He took Roan's arm and tugged him toward the nearest table. "You'll sit with me at the head table, of course."

Roan held back without seeming to. "What about my men?"

"Oh, they'll be well taken care of." Quex smiled. He kept his upper lip pulled down to cover his teeth, but Roan caught a glimpse of widely spaced points. A crowd of humanoid females with slender bodies and immense eyes and huge bare breasts were crowding around the men, taking their arms possessively, giggling up into surprised Gook faces that broke into vast, bristly, snaggle-toothed smiles.

"Belay that." Roan snapped. "You men will sit with me—or I'll sit with them," he amended, turning back to Quex. "I have to keep an eye on them," he explained.

"Ah, but yes, as you wish, Lieutenant." Quex dithered for a moment, then signalled, and crouching slaves darted in, shuffled chairs and place settings about. Roan took the deep armchair Quex waved him to and looked around.

"Where's the admiral?"

"He is unfortunately indisposed," Quex toed a slave aside and took the chair opposite Roan. "Chavigney '85 or Beel Vat?" he inquired brightly.

"Chavigney '85," Roan said, because he'd heard of it. "Indisposed how?"

"Admiral Starbird is getting on. He can't stand much . . . excitement," Quex showed his pointed teeth again and watched the slave pour ruby liquid into goblets. He picked his up, flicked a libation on the marble floor and nosed his glass. Roan drained his and thrust it out for a refill. No doubt the Chavigney '85 had a magnificent bouquet, but at the moment he didn't care.

Quex was staring at him; he remembered his smile when Roan looked at him: "I don't believe I've ever seen hair just like yours before," he said. "Quite . . . ah . . . striking."

"We all have our little peculiarities," Roan said shortly, and let his eyes rest on Quex's. They seemed to sit at the corners of his head and bulge.

"No offense," Quex said. "One sees a new face so seldom."

"How many Terrans are there here at HQ?" Roan asked, glancing at the obvious Gooks along the table.

Something touched his shoulder. His hand went to his gun; and then there was a choking cloud of perfume and a lithe, blue-trimmed girl was sitting on his lap. She had soft,



round breasts with blue-dyed tips that poked through her beads, and she squirmed up against Roan's chest and nudged his wine-glass against his lips. She looked a little like *Stellaraire*. For an instant Roan felt a lost emotion clutch at him, but he took the glass and put it firmly on the table and palmed the female gently from him.

"Stand over there," he said sternly. "If I need anything, I'll call you."

The girl looked stricken, and then she looked at Quex and shrank back. The commodore slapped his hands sharply together, and the girl turned and was gone.

"I don't want her to get in any trouble," Roan started. "It was just—"

Quex hissed. The points of his teeth showed plainly now. "We do our best with our Geeks," he said. "But they are so abysmally stupid."

Slaves came with the food then. It was marvelous, and Roan forgot his problems for the moment, savoring the first real Terran-style cooking he had ever tasted. The wine was good too, and Roan had to force himself to sip it carefully. Along the table, his men spooned in the delicacies, and then when they grew impatient with the small bites, used their hands. Their girls kept up a constant shrill giggling, slopping wine against big alien teeth, spilling it down across stubbled jaws. Beside Quex, Askor took a glass from his neighbor's girl's hand and poured the contents down his girl's throat. She choked and sputtered, and Askor caught Roan's eye and winked.

The noisemakers kept up their cacaphony. Roan watched them, arranged behind a screen of bushy potted plants sawing and pumping and puffing at the gleaming, complicated noisemakers.

"You like music?" Quex asked, leaning across the table. There were purple, juicy stains at the corners of his mouth and his eyes bugged more than ever. He had loosened his collar, and Roan saw red scars down the sides of his neck where something had been surgically removed.

"I don't know," Roan said, because he had never heard the word before. "Is it something to eat?"

"The sounds," Quex said. He waved a hand at the orchestra, bleating and shrilling in the corner behind their screen of foliage.

"It's all right, I suppose," Roan said. "Back in the 'zoo, they were louder."

"You want it louder?"

"I remember a sound I heard once," Roan said, thinking quite suddenly of the deserted park in the Terran city on Aldo Cerise. "Real Terran sounds. Pretty sounds." He was feeling the wine, he realized. He took a deep breath and sat up straighter, and felt for his gun with his fingertips.

"Terry music?" Quex clapped his hands and a slave popped up and leaned close to get Quex's instructions, then slipped away.

Roan glanced at his men. They were still chewing with their mouths open, reaching across each other's plates for juicy gobbets almost out of reach, wiping thick fin-

gers on now-greasy silks. Henry Dread had picked his Gooks for size, not beauty. Roan was thinking, when he became aware of a sound penetrating the bellowed talk and laughter. It was an elfin horn, picking its way slowly above the uproar. Then it was joined by other sounds, deep and commanding, like the tramp of marching armies, and now the horns darted and flickered like the lightnings of a coming storm while a bugle called demon troops to the attack. Roan pushed his glass aside, listening, searching for the source, and his eyes saw the noise-makers behind the flower boxes.

"Are *they* doing that?"

"A clever group, eh, Lieutenant? Oh, they know any number of tricks. They can make a sound like a wounded dire-beast charging—"

"Shut up," Roan said, not even noticing he'd said it. "Listen!" Now a lonely horn picked out a forlorn melody of things beautiful and forgotten, and Roan remembered the glimpse he'd almost had, once, of how life must have been in the days of the Empire.

The music faded to silence. The players mopped at their faces with soiled handkerchiefs and reached for clay mugs. They looked tired and hot and ill-tempered and frightened, all at once.

"How could a crew of ugly Geeks make sounds like that?" he wondered aloud.

"You like it?" Quex said coldly. He was fingering the braid on his sleeve rather pointedly.

"I'm sorry, Commodore," Roan said. "I was quite carried away."

Quex managed a sour smile. "It's some ancient thing about a Prince called Igor," he said. "Would you like to hear another? They do a rather clever thing called *Jivin' Granny*."

"No." Roan shook his head to clear away the vision.

Quex chose an attenuated cheroot from a blue-and-orange inlaid box a cringing slave offered him. The slave lit it, and when the lighted match fell on the floor from the creature's trembling hand, Quex planted a solid kick in its side. It grunted and crawled over to Roan and he took a cigar and watched the slave crawl away. When it thought it was out of sight, it patted its injured side and wept silently.

"Now Lieutenant." Quex blew out smoke impatiently, as though he enjoyed knowing he was smoking a rare weed, but was annoyed with the actual process. "You've just reported in from a long cruise. You deserve to relax."

"I don't want to relax," Roan said. "I'd like to know about the Niss. What kind of fleet can they put in space?"

"Surely all that can wait," Quex said blandly. He waved his glass. Wine slopped on the floor and a slave scrambled to lick it up. There were other slaves under the table, eating scraps, and still more crowded in, offering finger bowls. Another girl had gotten into his lap somehow, and she was breathing erotica into his ear. Roan was aware that he was dizzier than he should be, and he pushed the slaves away and forced his eyes to focus.

"I've waited long enough," he said. He could feel the thickness of his tongue, and he worked on getting angry enough for his temper to boil the lethargy away.

A slave shoved a vast pile of foamy stuff in front of Roan. Quex was clapping his hands again and there was a stir, and two immense dull-faced ITN troopers were hauling someone small and struggling into the open space at the center of the square of tables.

"Sorry if I seemed to have been dilatory in handling this matter," Quex was saying, "but I always think executions go better with the dessert."

Roan blinked while the two troopers held the girl down on a short bench with her head over one end.

He recognized her as the one who had first gotten into his lap. Her gold-dusted hair was in disarray now, and her thin pantaloons stuck to her legs. One of the men holding her down got out a knife with a foot-long blade and casually thrust it into the side of her neck.

She screamed once, and then she was slack, and the trooper was sawing away, holding the head by the hair. He got it free and held it up. There was blood on his hands to the elbow, and more was spreading out on the floor. Roan got to his feet, and his girl pulled him back, laughing.

"Clumsy oxen," Quex said. He picked up his cigar and drew on it, and then tossed it into the soup tureen. "You'd think they were

butchering swine. Try our ice cream. It's rather good, considering."

Roan's men were staring at the body of the girl. They were used to bloodshed, but they'd never seen anything like this. The executioners trooped off, one with the head and the other with the body, and a slave came with a bucket of water and a nauseous looking rag.

"What—what—" Roan stuttered.

Quex raised his plucked eyebrows. "The creature annoyed you. That's something we Terrans don't tolerate in slaves."

Roan got to his feet, and the girl on his lap squalled and slid off onto the floor.

"All right, men! Up!" He bawled. "The party's over! We're leaving! Let's march!"

In the sudden silence, Askor laughed foolishly. The ITN personnel stirred at their places, glancing toward Quex. Roan went along the table to Askor and slapped him so hard it hurt at the other end of the room. He jerked him to his feet, and turned, and Quex was holding a long-barreled nerve-gun in his hand. It was aimed at Roan.

"Not so fast, Lieutenant—or whatever you are," the commodore said in a voice like chipped glass.

"You made a poor choice of identities." The identity disk Roan had produced dangled from his finger. He tossed it to the floor. "Lieutenant Commander Endor was lost in action some six thousand years ago. You're under arrest for mutiny in Deep Space and the murder of Commander Henry Dread."



Roan looked along the table and caught Askor's yellow eye. The men were still in their places, waiting for the word. The garrison men were getting to their feet, gathering in clumps, watching. Some of them had guns out now.

Roan moved toward Quex and his gun, staggering a little more than was necessary.

"What do you want with me?" he said thickly. "You've got the cargo I brought."

"Yes, there is that," Quex said. "Curious, your bringing it here. You could have set yourself up in luxury for life with that haul. However, that's neither here nor there. Now, before we go any further, if you'll take off your jacket, please . . ."

Askor stirred. Roan flickered an eyelid at him, and the halfbreed settled back. Roan stripped off his braid-heavy jacket and tossed it on the floor. The Imperial Terran Symbol over the pocket made a loud clink when it hit.

"To the skin, please," Quex insisted. Roan pulled off the silky white shirt, and the crowd staring at him drew in quick breaths. Quex got up and came around the end of the table, not bothering even to kick the crouching slave. His eyes were round, taking in Roan's smooth, unscarred hide, and the reddish hair across his chest.

"Your feet," he ordered. Roan pulled out a chair and sat down and pulled off his boots. The spurs clanked as he tossed them aside. Quex leaned close and stared.

"Unbelievable," he said. "You're a Terran. A *real* Terran. A textbook case." He looked into Roan's eyes with an expression almost of awe. "You might even be a Pure Strain."

"Hurry up and shoot, if you're going to," Roan said. He picked up a glass and drained it. It would have been easy to toss it into Quex's face, but he wasn't ready for that yet.

"Where did you come from? Who were your parents?"

"My parents bought me as an embryo." Roan was watching Quex's face.

"Where?" Quex snapped.

"At the Thieves' Market on Tambool."

Quex raised a hand and brought it down in a meaningless gesture. "Of course. There is a certain fantastic inevitability to it! A Pure Terran, cast among Geeks. Naturally he would seek out his own."

"What do you know about me?" Roan interrupted Quex's soliloquy.

Quex stepped back, signed for a chair, sank down, watching Roan over the gun. He laughed shortly, a silly laugh. "I suppose I shall have to abandon the idea of shooting you. I'll make it up by planning something rather special for these animals of yours who've had the effrontery to plump themselves down at table with gentlefolk." And Quex tittered again, enjoying himself now. "In a way, I'm almost a sort of parent to you myself." He crossed his legs, swinging his foot.

"I was rather active in my younger days. The admiral honored me by dispatching me as his personal agent among the renegade pigs of the Gallian World. It was they who initiated the experiment. I took a chance. Don't imagine I wasn't aware of the risks! I lifted the entire lot — the wealth of the Nine Gods, and you could hold it in your hand! The fools were careless, they practically invited me. And then I made my error. Trusting Geeks! I was an idiot!"

Roan saw Quex's finger tighten on the firing stud. He tensed, ready to jump, but the commodore drew a shuddery breath and calmed himself.

"I was fool enough to divulge the nature of the consignment to the stinking animal who called himself captain of the Gallian vessel on which I had arranged passage. It was necessary, actually. I demanded refrigeration facilities, and one explanation led to another —

"He tricked me. At the end of the tedious five-year run, I discovered he had changed course for his own world. We landed and he turned me and my so-carefully guarded prize over to his Shah. This heathen considered that it would be a tremendously impressive thing to parade a palace guard of Terrans — Pure Terrans, and all identical. Can you imagine it?" Quex held out his hand and a glass appeared in it, and was filled. He looked at Roan. "Am I boring you?"

Roan let out a breath. "Go on," he said.

"Alas," Quex continued. "At this

crucial moment, a spontaneous popular uprising broke out. The Shah, his two hundred and thirty-four frightful little whelps — and anyone else who happened to be standing about — were killed."

"Spontaneous?" Roan asked. He looked at the nearest slave who crouched away, quivering.

"It was as spontaneous," Quex answered, smiling with his bright, cruel slits of eyes, "as the ITN could make it. My messages to Rim HQ had gone through before landing, of course; the forces arrived within a week to restore order. Of course, the natives were not so well domesticated then. They had a certain animal spirit which had to be curbed before they were made useful possessions. I was only fifty-two at the time — some twenty-five years ago now, Terry reckoning — but I had a natural bent for such things." He waved a hand. "The rest is history."

"And how did I get to Tambool?" Roan cut in.

Quex frowned. "The discussion begins to tire me," he said. "You're a valuable though insolent property, and Admiral Starbird will be delighted when I report that I've recovered the breeding stock that slipped through our fingers all those years ago."

"No, he won't," Roan said. "One of his spies has already slipped out by the side door to report on you."

Quex jerked around to look where Roan had pointed and Roan's foot caught the gun, knocked it high in the air.

Then Askar and Sidis were on their feet, reaching for the nearest ITN man. One aimed a gun at Askar; the giant Minid knocked him spinning under the table, whirled on a pair of back-pedaling dandies, cracked their heads together, tossed them aside, caught two more.

Roan was holding Quex by the neck now, and drinking wine from the bottle with the other hand. The ITN men in the rear milled in loud confusion, unable to get a clear shot.

"You Geeks stand back, or we'll shoot!" A frightened looking navy man had climbed on a chair and was pointing a fancy power pistol wildly around the room. Sidis took aim, shot him in the head. He flopped back in a spatter of blood and fell among his fellows.

There were more shots now as the astonished hosts realized that their outnumbered victims intended to fight back. That was a mistake. Four pirate guns went into action, blasting wholesale into the screaming, panicked diners, who jammed into the corners and against the doors, making effective resistance by the few determined men among them impossible.

"Belay that!" Roan yelled over the din as a glass smashed beside him. He hauled Quix into a chair, shouted again. There were moans and howls from the wounded, bellowing from the enraged crew, the buzz and crackle of guns. Smoke poured up from smoldering hangings ignited by wild shots. There was a stink of blood and spilled wine in the air. Roan jumped on the table and

shouted for order. By degrees the tumult abated.

"All right," Roan said. "We're getting out of here, but before we go, I've got a few more questions to ask old rabbit-ears here." He stepped down from the table as the men began rifling the bodies and pulling fancy ornaments off the living. Quex started at him with wide, shocked eyes.

"You can't! We outnumber you fifty to one — a hundred to one!" The commodore's voice rose. He started to his feet. "Attack them!" he screeched. Roan put a foot against his chest and slammed him back, then pulled a chair up and sat in it. There were two slaves mewling under the table; as they realized they were in view, they scuttled farther back.

A splinter of flying glass had cut Roan's forehead. There was blood trickling down into his right eye and around his face and onto his neck. It annoyed him.

"Pardon this little interruption, Commodore," he said. "You had just come to the part where the ITN arrived to restore order. What did they do with the embryo — or should I say me?"

Quex babbled. Roan tossed a wine bottle to him, and it fell in his lap, bubbled down over his knees. He groped it up, drank, lowered the bottle with a sob.

"They . . . we . . . it wasn't here. It was gone. Stolen."

"It seems to have been remarkably hard property to hang on to. What made it so valuable?"

"A specimen of Pure Terran stock? Do you jest?"

"Sure, but there are some fairly pure Terries around, like Henry Dread. What made me different?"

"You're Pure Strain; unbelievably pure strain!"

"All right. Who stole me?"

"One of my spies, the rotter! A creature I trusted!" Quex warmed to the memory. "He'd finished his work for me, and when I sent a couple of men with knives to advise him I had no more need of his services, he was nowhere to be found! He'd skipped out — and the special bejeweled incubator unit was gone with him! I searched. Oh, how I searched! I tore the tongues from a hundred man and five hundred Geeks, and then at last I got a hint — a word babbled by a former officer of the Shah's guard in his dying delirium. Tambool. I dispatched a crew at once, led by a sturdy Yill scoundrel — the best I could find among the rabble that follow the uniform of the Empire — but none of them ever returned. I heard tales, later, of how they were set upon by a horde of madmen. But the embryo was lost."

"That horde of madmen was my dad, Raff Cornay," Roan said. "We'll drink to him." He raised his bottle and took a long swig.

"You're not drinking, Commodore," he said. "Drink!"

Quex took a half-hearted sip.

"Drink, damn you! Or do I have to pour it down your neck?"

Quex drank.

"Hey, this stuff is all junk, Cap'n!" Askor called, tramping over

to where Roan sat with one boot on Quex's chair. He tossed a handful of brass jewelry on the table. "Let's load up on Terry wine and shove off. And, uh, a couple of the boys was asking, okay if we take along a few broads too?"

The wounded were making a dismal sound from the heaps where they lay. Sidis went over and started shooting the noisest ones. The rest became quieter.

"You know better than that," Roan said. "You louts, would be cutting each other's throats in a week."

"Yeah." Askor scratched an armpit with a blunt finger. "I figured."

"Round up the boys now. I'll be through in a minute." Askor turned away with a roar of commands. Quex trembled so violently his seat bounced in the chair.

"What are y-you g-going to do with m-me?"

"Have another drink," Roan commanded. He watched while his victim complied.

"I'll—I'll be sick," Quex slobbered.

Roan got to his feet. He pulled his shirt and jacket back on, jammed his feet into his boots.

There was a dead officer lying behind his chair. Roan paused long enough to take a handsome sheath-knife with the Imperial Eagle from his body, clip it to his own belt.

"Askor. Poion. Lock all the doors," he ordered.

Quex came to his feet. He pulled at the edge of his tunic, swaying. His eyes were like blood-red clams.

"You can't leave me here with them!" He looked past Roan at the bright, staring eyes in the pale faces of his men. "They'll tear me to pieces!"

Askor and the others were by the main door now. They looked to Roan.

"Go ahead, open her up!" Roan called. He looked back at Quex. "Thanks for the dinner, Commodore. It was a nice party, and I enjoyed it."

"Lieutenant!" Quex's voice had

found a hint of a ring suddenly. He straightened himself, holding onto a chair back. "I'm not . . . Pure Strain . . . like yourself. But I have Terran blood." He wavered, thrust himself upright again. "As a fellow officer . . . of the Imperial Navy . . . I ask you . . . for an honorable death . . ."

Roan looked at him. He shifted his pistol to his left hand, squared off and saluted Quex with his right, and shot him through the heart.

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# BY MIND ALONE

by LARRY NIVEN

*They had the greatest gift in  
the world — and the deadliest!*

From the blue water and crowded pines of Lake Arrowhead to the rectangular citrus orchards around San Bernardino is a drop of nearly a mile as the crow falls. The road down is hours longer. It falls gently, in looping curves and in sharp, neck-cracking twists, joins a four-lane highway without straightening out, swoops across empty space and winds about dynamite-blasted cliffs of naked rock, until after hours of driving the highway finally touches the valley floor and takes off straight as a bullet. Carol heaved a sigh of relief as we touched down, and I said, "Now we'll find a place that'll sell us cigarettes."

We did. Carol and I were both nicotine addicts, which had made the smokeless drive just that much longer. We bought beer, too, and took it along. As we were walking back to the car, Carol said, "Art, why do you suppose Pat didn't teleport *up* to the Lake?"

I thought about that while I got the car going. After Carol opened the beers and handed me one, I asked, "Did she ever tell you how she used to go up there every summer with her grandparents?"

"She sure did. Pat must love that place."

"The long, sweltering drive from Beverly Hills to the foot of the

mountain. The air cooling and thinning as the car rises; the altitude signs showing higher and higher. Finally the deep blue of the Lake flashing through the pines." I was more or less quoting Pat; but she'd described it accurately enough. "That's why she didn't teleport up. The drive is part of going to Lake Arrowhead. She didn't want to miss a single detail."

"Do you think she'll be all right?"

"The doctor said so, didn't he?"

"Him! He didn't even know what was wrong with her."

"Neither do we."

That was arguable. Carol leaned her lovely blonde head against the headrest and watched the lemon groves go by.

In two hours she would be dead. Dead in a manner unique since the beginning of time. Dead by my carelessness. But I didn't know that then.

She looked out in a silence of rushing wind and humming motor, and after a time she said, "Well, it was one strange party."

**I**t was one strange party, all right. Just to get you placed, it all took place six years ago, in July of 1972, during the four-day weekend break in the summer semester at UCLA. The oil companies were rich then, and General Motors was worth three times what it is now.

We changed all that. We knew it was coming, but we didn't expect to have to pay for it. We were young. Expecting something for nothing is part of being young.

There were seven couples here, fourteen of us out of the twenty in

Larsen's class, plus Raymond C. F. Larsen himself. Pat couldn't have invited more. As it was, some of us had been on the couches last night, and would be tonight. Pat — Patricia Blackman, the richest girl in the class — had invited as many as she could, and substituted where she got turned down, until she had enough to jam the wide stone bungalow which was *Happy Days*, her grandparents' Lake Arrowhead retreat.

We wore sweaters and sports jackets, having discarded the swim suits earlier, and we looked like any group of UCLA students working out the fate of the world with drinks in our hands. But if you watched long enough you'd see the differences. You'd see somebody vanish and reappear elsewhere with a fresh drink or a handful of mixed nuts or a cigarette stolen from one of Pat's crystal-and-silver cigarette boxes. You'd hear a skinny senior describing the teleporting society in Bester's *The Stars My Destination* as if he'd thought it up all by himself; and you'd see that the five people around him were listening, really listening. You'd see Carol, ostensibly with me, flickering from clump to clump of drinkers as she tried to keep up with two arguments and a gossip session.

Larsen's class was the world's only class in teleportation. It was going to change the world. *We* were going to change the world. We felt the responsibility, yes we did. Throughout most of the big living room the talk dealt with nothing else.

Teleportation is the gentle art of wishing yourself from place to place. And it works; it works fine. once you

know how. The fifteen in our little party seemed to shift like a mirage. Watching them hurt the eyes. Pat Blackman was even busier than Carol, emptying ash trays, seeing that everyone had a drink, changing records and generally playing the perfect hostess, all at distance-annihilating jumps like the flicker of a worn film. Ten minutes ago she'd stopped a fight by sheer diplomacy, when Tim Something tried to save a moment by teleporting into the john when Linda Baird was already there. In the middle of the room, tall and cadaverous and twenty-two years older than anyone else, Dr. Raymond C. F. Larsen was holding forth.

He looked like the melancholy farmer with the pitchfork in American Gothic would look if you gave him a loud sports coat and a yellow tie and poured three martinis into him. "It means the total breakdown of physics!" he roared, jabbing a grinning sophomore in the chest with a forefinger. "We'll have to rewrite every law we know!"

"Nuts," said the sophomore, who was a physics major.

"Go on," Larsen prompted. He loves an argument. Carol once said he'd rather fight than smoke.

"Be happy to," said the sophomore. "Ever since the Renaissance, every change we've made in physics has been something of a generalization. Every previous law was a special, local case of the laws we use now. What we've got will work just like it always has."

"Except teleportation."

I thought the sophomore had the

short end of the argument. General relativity, which was evolved to explain a mere fourteen-minute precession in Mercury's orbit, had smashed Newtonian physics. The Principle of Uncertainty had ended the philosophy of determinism without changing any part of real life. So, per-verse-ly, I stepped in in the sophomore's favor.

"Suppose teleportation was restricted to the laws of physics?"

"That's impossible!" came the roar of opinion. But Larsen said, "How? Think of something we can test, Art."

"All right."

"Pat! We're out of cigarettes."

Pat came out of nowhere near the big table in the middle of the room. "Right," she said, and disappeared. In a few moments she was back. "There aren't any in the *closets*, either. Hm-m-m-m-m." In voice and mannerisms and the mobility of her not-pretty, not-homely face, Patricia Blackman was larger than life. She stood there with an index fingernail tapping her teeth, her eyes fixed up and sideways, the very picture of the word *scheme*. "I'll have to go for some."

"Let me go," I offered. "I know where the Village is." The Village is a tiny cluster of shops across the Lake. Besides being the perfect gentleman, I wanted time to think of an answer to Larsen's challenge.

But Pat's wide mouth grinned at me under the Roman nose. "It's *Sunday*," she proclaimed triumphantly. Everything's *closed*." She leaned close and patted me on the arm. "Now don't worry, hon. I'll get some



at the beach house. Mother's got *stacks* of cartons in the downstairs closet."

"Hold it, Pat. Hermosa Beach is a long way from here."

"We've all gone further than *that*," she said, and was gone. Her cheerful smile seemed to disappear a split second after she did — like the Cheshire cat.

Too late to stop her. Pat was at the beach — now.

I said, "Doctor Larsen, could that be dangerous?"

He shook his head. "She's right. From the campus to San Diego was much further."

"But we did that under supervised conditions."

"How do you supervise teleportation?" Larsen smiled like a child with a joke. "You all know as much about teleportation as I do."

Good Lord, I thought, and wished myself to the bar to fill my glass. If I'd known that at the beginning of the course I'd have backed out right then. I'd only joined out of curiosity; curiosity, and the fact that Carol was in it. Why not? It was only a six-week course, and no credit meant nothing to lose.

And Larsen could make any course fun.

We'd sat in the classroom chairs with the plywood platforms for notebooks, listening to Larsen deliver his introductory lecture. Half of us already knew him from his philosophy of chemistry courses. The rest didn't know whether to giggle or not. Larsen is a frustrated actor. When he lectures he waves his arms

and marches back and forth and shifts dialects to act out his ideas. His dialects are lousy, but he doesn't know that. His story was as incredible as his lecture style.

On a Sunday afternoon about three months ago, Dr. Raymond C. F. Larsen had leaned back in his swivel chair, gotten his pipe going, and begun daydreaming of the many things he'd like to do before he was old. Become a spelunker. Learn to ride a surfboard. Eat steak tartare, just once. When he got up to take a shower, he was really into the swing of it. He stood with his back to the shower head, with the hot water falling heavily on the back of his neck, and there he made his great decision. He would join a nudist camp that very summer!

Would he have backed out? Of course he'd have backed out. But he didn't get the chance, because the next he knew, no more water was falling, and there was a very cold breeze all around him.

He stood in the center of Sun-and-Fun Nature Camp, just thirty miles north of Los Angeles. And he was dripping wet and stark naked. From all directions, thoroughly tanned men and women as naked as he stared at him in obvious horror.

Sure they were staring. They'd seen him appear out of nowhere! But Larsen didn't think of that. He crouched like a man with acute intestinal cramps, trying to cover himself (he demonstrated for us, there in the classroom), and frantically wished himself back into his shower.

He knew he could do it, now, any

time he wanted. (He demonstrated this, too, and twenty laughing students, laughing at his antics whether they believed his story or not, went utterly silent.) But could he teach others the art? He wanted to know all about teleportation: its limits, its uses, its dangers.

Give him credit for courage. He went before the Board. The Board of Trustees watched him flicker around the Board Room like a cadaverous hallucination, and after a four-hour conference they had agreed to let him try . . .

. . . The first few class days, Larsen had been the only teleport. The rest of us would grit our teeth and clench our eyelids, while Larsen cried, "No, no, no! You've got to be relaxed, *confident*. Look at me!" And with an expression so confident it couldn't look anything but silly, Larson would teleport all over the room. He inspired nothing but envy.

He tried beer, which he'd been drinking that historic day: two-thirds of a can of Coors per student. He tried beer and a pipe, his own carefully broken-in Dunhill with the mouthpiece dipped in antiseptic each time one of us used it. Carol flatly refused to touch it. He tried having us teleport out of our own showers, while he called encouragement from outside the curtain. One day he tried beer plus a tranquilizer.

And suddenly Linda Baird wasn't among us.

I got my drink replenished and reached for a cigarette to occupy my other hand. I was out, and Pat

wasn't back yet. Nuts. I joined Larsen again, Shouldering my way into the group that surrounded him.

His eyes lit. "Art, have you thought of an experiment for us?"

I hadn't, but I said, "Yah. Get someone to teleport to two different places at the same time. If it works, there'll be two of him, and that'll violate the Law of Conversation of Matter."

That got a laugh. Larsen said, "All right, you're elected to go first."

"Let's let Carol go first. Two of Carol would be a fun thing."

She was standing right beside me, of course, and she cocked her head at me and asked, "What are you buttering me up for?"

"Got a cigarette?"

She had two, and she grimaced when she had to give me one. It was mentholated, and it was dried from the altitude, but I'll smoke anything in an emergency. Carol said, "Pat should have been back by now."

I nodded. It had been a good fifteen minutes.

"We'd better call her home." Larsen sounded a bit uneasy.

Lon Dugan was the guy she'd come with, and he had her beach house number. We crowded around while Larsen made the call. When he hung up he looked very sober. "She's been taken sick," he said.

We got the story out of him. Pat's parents had been watching television when they'd heard a scream from the next room. They'd rushed in to find Pat on the floor, already unconscious, with a blazing fever. The doctor was there now.

"I'm going after her," said Lon Dugan.

"Take the car!" Larsen ordered. "Don't try any more teleporting."

Lon went outside and we heard his car starting. The rest of us stayed, but not in any party mood. Had Pat strained her powers, or weakened some unknown and unguessed region in her brain? There was no real evidence for it, but most of us were convinced that Pat was sick because she had teleported. Larsen obviously thought so. His air of clownish good humor was gone. He sat on the couch and silently worried.

Half an hour later we called again.

When the doctor arrived Pat had a temperature of one hundred and four. Her cheeks were flaming red, and the touch of her skin burned. The doctor refused to make a diagnosis, saying that all of her symptoms seemed to proceed directly from the fever. Now the fever had dropped to an even hundred.

Another half hour before our next call. The fever was falling with unlikely speed. It was down to ninety-nine point one. Pat had been conscious for a few minutes, and the doctor had immediately given her a sedative. He knew about our experiments with teleportation, and he didn't want Pat going anywhere in her present condition. It was typical of Pat that she had left orders for the party to go on without her. But that didn't seem right. People began leaving by twos and fours. Larsen was still on the couch, looking like the Thinker now, or like a math

student beating his head against an exam problem that won't come right.

So we edged the car out from among the other cars and took off down the twisting concrete road that leads a mile down to the base of the mountains. We all had our cars, because none of us but Pat would have known where to teleport to. It was a silent drive until we got the cigarettes. They seemed to loosen us up, to get us talking.

"Yeah, a strange party," I agreed. "Carol, do you think Pat's teleporting made her sick?"

"Of course. But I don't know why it should."

"Maybe it didn't. Maybe it's just our native egotism, our—hubris—that makes us think the whole world revolves around our new power."

"'Ubris?'"

"Hubris. The pride that challenges the gods."

"Oh." She couldn't have cared less. "Why would Pat have to go all the way to the beach for cigarettes?"

I knew what she meant. "Pat's just honest."

"Suppose she'd teleported inside a shop, made a list of what she took, then paid off the bill Monday. What's wrong with that?"

"It could give her a reputation."

"A reputation for honesty."

"Couldn't it make a storekeeper nervous, knowing there were people around who could get into his shop any time they wanted?"

"Mmmm."

We drove with the windows open. It was hot down here on the flat-

lands. The sun was setting in red glory behind endless groves of citrus trees. Above the low music from the radio, Carol said thoughtfully, "Art, why not steal?"

"I thought one of us would get there eventually."

"I mean it. The penalty for theft is imprisonment, right? How do you imprison a teleport?"

"You don't. You can't."

"Well?"

"How about public opinion?"

And where would you like to have dinner?"

"The Four-In-Hand, I guess."

"Would you proclaim it far and wide that you're an untouchable thief and don't give a damn who knows it? How many friends would you have left?"

"Oh."

"But that wouldn't work on everybody. Fact is, the law doesn't take teleportation into account. When it does, they'll change the penalty to 'shoot on sight'."

Carol giggled. "I guess so. You've nipped a brilliant crime career in the bud."

"You mean I've made an honest woman of you."

"Have it your way."

"I've been trying."

"What *happened* to her, Art?"

The fear in her voice made me look over. Carol was scared, deep down scared, and all the bantering and philosophical discussions wouldn't hide it. I said, "There must be laws we don't know about yet. Pat ran into one."

"How? What did she do that we didn't?"

The first time, it's like diving from a fifty foot board into what you're sure is concrete. You can't! You know you can't! You swallow more beer, and the tranquilizer begins to reach you, and Larsen, commanding, says "Now!" And you're home, with no chair under you. When you get up there's beer all over your shirt. You feel wonderful.

Pat was the fourth to learn, right after me. At the end of the second week we walked like we owned the Earth. Some of us thought we did. We could teleport, all of us. We made excursions. We drove to the San Diego Zoo, and from the entrance we teleported back to the classroom and back again to the entrance, one at a time. People stared. Lon appeared in the cage with the grizzly bear, and called it a coward when it wouldn't wrestle, and when it finally came at him he was outside the bars, laughing.

Euphoria? Pride? What we felt really was hubris. We had beaten God's laws, and now no law of Man could touch us. We were the new lords of creation . . . until Pat, who knew neither pride nor humility, was laid low by a law none of us could understand.

If she had been.

No wonder we were frightened. Hubris is the overweening pride that brings down the gods' most terrible wrath.

No, Pat hadn't done anything we hadn't done. She'd been treated just like the others, traveled just as far as the others. Unless . . .

"She might have done more tele-

porting than we did," I said. "There's no way to tell. Did she usually walk upstairs? I do, unless I'm in a hurry. She runs out of gas pretty often, doesn't she? Then she'd teleport to a gas station she knew, maybe miles away. Does she usually take her car to cocktail parties, shopping trips and so on?"

"At the party she looked like she was everywhere at once."

"So did you. Maybe that's it. She wore herself out, then overstrained . . . uh-oh." I turned to look Carol in the eye. "Now listen to me, baby. Don't you do any more teleporting for awhile! You were flipping around just as much as Pat."

"Look at the road, dammit. I promise."

Carol was half asleep when we hit the freeway. I shifted us into the fast lane and relaxed. No more stoplights for the next hour. By and by I saw that half the cars around us had their headlights on. I followed their example.

Just as I was sure Carol was asleep, she opened her eyes and asked, "Could it have been the height?"

"What about the height?"

"Pat. Lake Arrowhead is a mile up. Hermosa Beach is at sea level. None of us had ever had to teleport over such a big difference in altitude."

"That's right. But I don't see what difference it makes."

"Some unknown law. Like you said."

We left it at that, as far as talking went. I was still thinking about hub-

ris. It's an old concept, possibly present in every religion. The god or gods will instantly smite anyone who shows pride enough to insult them. Jehovah changed human language rather than let men build a tower to Heaven at Babel. Niobe's fourteen children were killed in a day and a night when she dared compare her fecundity against the divine Leto's. Hubris is always the first and greatest crime.

Were we expecting the divine wrath? We had smashed God's laws of physics, and subconsciously we awaited punishment.

I told myself we had let a simple case of flu scare us into cat fits.

But . . . the phrase skittered about in my head. Some unknown law, some unknown law . . . . Was the universe playing tricks on us?

Man finds the unexpected in every new field. The Bernoulli effect inverts itself, disastrously at first, above the speed of sound. Mercury loses her hydrogen atmosphere to solar heat, but, amazingly, draws it back from the solar wind. The problem of Venus' opaque atmosphere becomes ridiculously simple; but astronomers realize for the first time that the Moon has torn away ninety-nine per cent of Earth's air.

Some unknown law . . . . The most shocking thing about Pat's sudden sickness was her sudden recovery. One minute, a killing fever. An hour later, just half a degree. And it had taken the doctor ten minutes to get there. When had Pat's fever been at its peak?

Her parents had rushed into the living room at the sound of her

scream. She'd been burning hot to the touch, within seconds of her arrival.

On her arrival?

Yet I'd have sworn she was normal when she left the Lake . . . .

I had it then, the whole answer in three words. Larsen was in for a surprise. "Unknown law, hell!"

"What?" Carol looked up with sleepy eyes.

"You were dead right. It was the altitude—"

I was interrupted.

Later the newspapers filled me in on the details. A genuine pea-soup fog had come to the Los Angeles area, a fog such as you won't find here once in five years. It had come rolling in over the freeway, sharp edged and very thick, and when cars hit it, they hit suddenly and slowed drastically. Sunday nights are traffic jam nights anyway. This jam was long and dead slow, and its tail was just inside the curtain of fog.

I saw the lights blur around me, as I saw a fuzzy red glow ahead become two fuzzy red lights. A car, stopped dead! (He might as well have been. He was doing five miles an hour with frequent stops.)

Does it sound like a long time? Three seconds did it. I stamped on the brake pedal, and from the corner of my eye I saw Carol vanish. I screamed, "Oh, you idiot, you idiot! Carol, come back!"

The two taillights smashed me in the face.

I raised my head and felt with my tongue for broken teeth. I found

four. I was jammed between the steering wheel and the driver's seat, and I couldn't move at all. All I could do was wait for help.

And Carol was gone, which meant Carol was dead.

Pat would be all right. But Larsen was in for a surprise. We wouldn't be changing any laws of physics. What Pat had run into was the law of Conservation of Energy. In teleporting a mile downhill she'd lost a good deal of potential energy. She'd gotten it back in heat: about seven degrees per mile.

And if that law held, so did conservation of momentum.

Some cops came along and pried me out of the car. A doctor told me how lucky I was, and I believed him, because all I had was two cracked ribs and four teeth knocked out on the steering wheel, which is why my smile today is so even and bright.

The next morning Larsen visited me at the hospital. He told me about Carol.

She'd teleported home. She'd appeared in the middle of her bedroom, four feet from a startled maid. The maid was in the hospital, suffering from shock.

Last night a jerking muscle woke me up to catch myself whispering, "Carol, come back. Come back." I hope she doesn't. It's been six years since she rammed into a bedroom wall at sixty miles per hour, without even a seat belt to protect her. If she came back now, she'd be breaking another of God's marvelously consistent laws. And you can't do that.

END



# HUE AND CRY

Dear Editor:

I have got copies of *If* back to the beginning of the second issue, and although I have not looked very hard I have yet to see a letter published from over here in dear old Sunny England. Haven't we paid back our War Debt yet or something? Although *If* and *WOT* are appearing on the stands here six months behind current, lots of people I know think both mags great and *If* is quite a hit in our college, especially in the Sci Fi Society. Here is a list of praises, ringing with shouts of adulation:

1) Retief — terrific, especially *Retief's War*.

2) C. C. MacApp — excellent; glad to see he has more strings to his bow than Gree, *viz.* the long story in the February '65 issue.

3) Saberhagen — magnificent; waiting impatiently for the long stories promised.

4) Heinlein — praise again (at last I know what Tanstaaf means!), although one criticism: Could have done without *Podkayne of Mars* serial in 1963.

5) E. E. Smith — more than very good story, *Skylark DuQuesne* — a great pity that there is no more to follow.

6) Lots of new names, R. Lafferty, etc.

What about a sequel to *Starchild*, featuring The Ed. and Williamson? Say the first round between mankind and the stars — if they bother to notice us. Plea for the future: More Van Vogt, Laumer, Heinlein! — C. R. Jones, Department of Chemical Engineering, University College London, Gower Street, London W 1, England.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

Looking back over the issues of *If*, I noticed that from June to October 1965 you ran a story, *Skylark DuQuesne* by the unmatched E. E. Smith, Ph.D. I've just observed that a recent Ace Book carried the announcement of Smith's death; however Smith died on August 31, 1965, nearly five months ago. As far as I can see, *If* carried no such note of any kind during that period. However, I'm not going to quarrel why or why not this information was not published, just that I see no reason for delay.

Being a fond reader of his, I was able to derive only fractions from his life and his works. I would appreciate any available information concerning his biography and

if all possible, anything close to a photograph. Thank you.—Richard Katuzin, 5685 Dudley Street, Dearborn Heights, Michigan 48125.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I was sorry to hear that Doc Smith was dead, especially since he was just beginning to resume really writing once more, and I would like to say a few words in praise of him.

I have not read much of his work, but what I have read had impressed me with one thing — he Thinks Big. He tosses around concepts and huge events almost gaily, like a little boy playing with a ball. A planet being vaporized, or things like Lenses, are nothing to him. Albeit, he is not the best writer there ever was; sometimes he seems a little dated. However, his business was as a chemist, and if he had spent a lot more time on his writing, science fiction would be an even better thing than it is.

A few words about your magazine. Looking over the November, 1964 issue, I find it somewhat feeble, while your most recent issue is a drastic improvement. The general level of all the stories seems to be improving. You don't have the best s-f magazine there is, but you are getting better steadily.

There is one type of story I would especially like to see, and that is "swords and scorcery." However, I am afraid that is not quite the kind of material you use. Also, some more work by Edmond Hamilton would be very much in hand.

Many critics have complained of the lack of s-f magazines, compared with the great numbers there have been in the past. I, however, believe this sort of thing runs in

cycles. Looking back over the history of s-f, one finds this so. There were many mags in the early thirties, a slack in the middle of that decade, and then another rise just before the war. Then again in the early fifties there was another upsurge, and now I think we are entering still another. There have been three new imaginative magazines, (possibly four), counting *Web Terror Tales*, which I know very little about, and am thus unqualified to speak about, over the last five years: *Worlds of Tomorrow*, *Magazine of Horror*, and *Gamma*.

That someone is willing to buy your magazine indicates a potential market, and this general rise in quality and quantity over the last few years indicates the market is responding.

So — worry rot. (Too much.) —  
*Kent Peacock.*

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

The latest issue (September, 1965) of *If* is a big improvement. Especially as regarding the interior art. It looks like you had a little fun with satire in that first story. You are forgiven this time, but don't let it happen again. At least, don't use foreign phrases. I had to grab my French-English dictionary to find out what was going on a couple of times. That was work; and I hate work.

I wish I could find out why some of today's writers insist on replacing the trusty old ray gun with a laser. I ran into that wall, again, in *Gree's Damned Ones*. The laser is the one thing that would be almost impossible to turn into a weapon. Actually, a laser is not any single object; it can be created



out of a number of things. Laser is not a word, but a collection of words describing a polarization effect. The full statement is Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation. Laser only refers to the use of light. However, it was preceded by the maser; Microwave Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation. I get a little irritated when some protagonists pulls one of these things out of a holster.

Aside from these little irritations, it was a fine issue. — D. Bruce Berry, 4554 N. Malden St., Chicago, Illinois.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I usually don't go in for that "letters to the editor" stuff, but something's got me bugged. I hope that the thirty-two new pages in *If* do not bring any science-fact articles to your wonderful magazine. There's hardly a science-fiction magazine without some dull (to me, at least) science article taking up pages that could be filled with action.

I think Laumer's Retief stories are fine, but the stories that really grab me are Saberhagen's Berserker jobs. — Shawn Wright, 4115 South Delaware, Independence, Missouri, 64050.

● Nope, no science articles are planned — at least, not unless we come across something unusual enough and interesting enough to avoid being dull! — *Editor*.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

You were right when you said that *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* is Heinlein's best since *Stranger in a Strange Land*. However, that isn't saying very much. All Mr. Heinlein

turned out in that period was *Podkayne of Mars*, *Glory Road* and *Farnham's Freehold*, all of which are below his average.

All its faults considered, I still nominate *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* for Best Novel of 1966. My nominations for 1965 were, Best Short Story, *Mindswap*, by Robert Sheckley; Best Novel, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, by Philip K. Dick.

*Earthblood*, at least in its first part, seems to have its points, but I have the feeling Keith Laumer could have done better alone. It appears to be set in the far future of the Retief stories.

Please get A. E. Van Vogt to write a third Null-A novel that will tie up all those loose ends! Earth and Venus are about to be destroyed, and Enro is still conquering the League! Can't Gosseyn use his vaunted extra brain to get us out of it? — John Hoggatt, 3473 West 7th Street, Los Angeles, California 90005.

● Matter of fact, Van is writing that third Null-A novel for us right now! How did you know? — *Editor*.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I plan to attend the Cleveland SF convention, but don't know exactly how to go about it and would appreciate any information you can give me. Undoubtedly there are many others asking the same question, so why not put your answer in your editorial or letter column?

Keep up the good work on your swell mag. — Paul Spegel, 221 Anderson Road, Linwood, Michigan.

● The Tricon (short for the 24th World Science Fiction Convention) will be held September 2, 3, 4 and

5, 1966, at the Sheraton-Cleveland Hotel in Cleveland, Ohio. Attendance is for members only, but anyone can become a member by sending \$2.00 in by mail, or joining at the convention itself. All are welcome. Make checks payable to: 24th World Science Fiction Convention, P.O. Box 1372, Cleveland, Ohio, 44103. Toastmaster will be Isaac Asimov. Guest of Honor is L. Sprague de Camp. See you there! — *Editor.*

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I would like to make a few comments regarding the November editorial on racial differences.

In it, you state that "Negroes score lower on intelligence tests than whites but Northern Negroes score higher on intelligence tests than Southern Whites, presumably because of better schools, better public health facilities, etc." From this you conclude that "most racial differences are environmental rather than innate."

You are probably referring here to the Army Alpha intelligence tests which were administered to white and Negro soldiers during World War I. First of all, the argument in the given context is fallacious. When two large groups are given the same test, you cannot select small groups ad lib. from the two score distributions for comparison. In 1918-19, the schools of the South lagged behind those of the North in both equipment and teacher-training. The correlation of Alpha and schooling was about .70, and urban dwellers scored higher than rural. Therefore the difference of 8 points between 665 rural Mississippi whites and 152 urban Ohio Negroes (the largest mean differ-

ence) could mean simply that education and other environmental factors lower the scores of white as well as Negroes. The only fair comparison on Army Alpha is that of Negroes and whites from the same state, where schools and other conditioning factors are roughly equated. When this is done, Negroes still trail whites by 15 to 20 IQ points, about the national average. — Mike Hansen, 12228 Elderberry Street, Chino, California 91710.

● Thanks, but the fallacy in *your* argument is that conditioning factors for whites and for Negroes are in no large area in this country really "roughly equated." A ghetto is a ghetto, whether it exists in Harlem or in Watts. An inferior school is an inferior school, whether it is separate by law, as Negro schools were in the South, or separate by geography, as in the North. A couple of weeks ago in Toronto we were discussing this subject with Dr. Edward McKeown (old-time sf fans may remember him as chairman of the 1948 World SF Convention in Toronto; now he is an executive of the Toronto Board of Education). Toronto has a small and thoroughly integrated Negro population. The difference in achievement between Negroes and whites whether measured in IQ scores, school tests or any other quantitative marking, are — in Ned McKeown's word — "indetectible."

That about does it for another month. Don't forget Jim Blish's serial starting in the next issue. His major character is a teen-age boy who happens to be the first human being to land on Mars — because he didn't know it was impossible! It's a good one. . . .

— *The Editor*

# Could you write for television?

By Max Shulman

**F**ranksly, I don't know. But this I *do* know: when I was running the *Dobie Gillis* show, I often paid \$2,500 and more for scripts turned out by people who should have been arrested for impersonating writers.

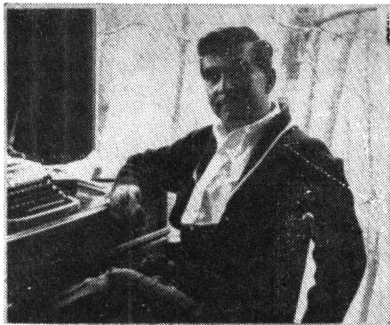
How such people got to be high-priced TV writers is not as mysterious as it seems. Television is an insatiable maw into which scripts must be fed at a rate unprecedented in the history of entertainment. It is a grateful producer indeed who consistently gets scripts which have been written with real understanding of television's powers and limitations.

To help train new TV writers, I joined with Rod Serling (creator of *The Twilight Zone*, winner of five Emmy Awards) and ten other leading authors\* to start the Famous Writers School. We pooled everything we had learned in our long years in the business to devise four professional writing courses that men and women, seriously interested in writing, could take in their own homes in their free time.

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\*Bennett Cerf, Bruce Catton, Faith Baldwin, Bergen Evans, Mignon G. Eberhart, John Caples, J. D. Ratcliff, Mark Wiseman, Rudolf Flesch, Red Smith



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