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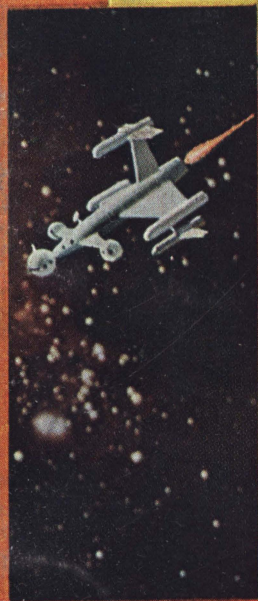
SCIENCE FICTION

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P. Wenzel

SUNBEAM CARESS

A Story of Dying Earth—
And Man's
Incredible Heirs!

by **DAVID REDD**

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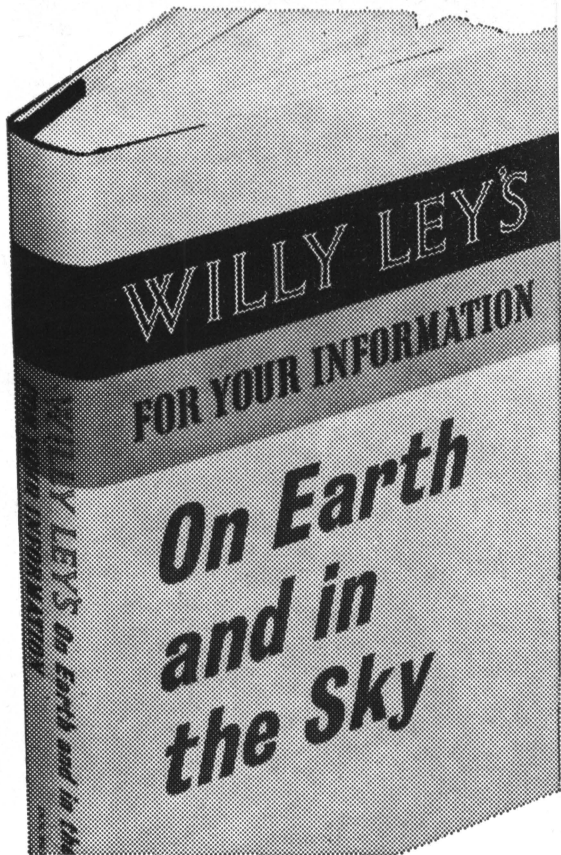
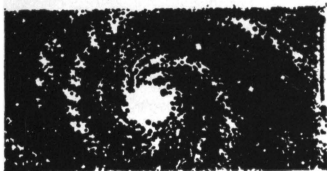
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SUNBEAM CARESS	6
by David Redd	
WORLDS TO KILL	48
by Harlan Ellison	
CATERPILLAR EXPRESS	76
by Robert E. Margroff	

SERIAL

SLOWBOAT CARGO	100
by Larry Niven	

SHORT STORIES

DEADLIER SERVICE	69
by David A. Kyle	
SQUATTER'S RIGHTS	95
by Hank Davis	

FEATURES

EDITORIAL	4
by Frederik Pohl	
SF CALENDAR	47
AT NYCON #3	90
by Lin Carter	
HUE AND CRY	161

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WHAT SCIENCE FICTION IS

A few months ago we discussed, not very enthusiastically, the so-called "New Wave" in science fiction. Since then a fair amount has seen print, much of it in the huge anthology edited by Harlan Ellison, *Dangerous Visions*. With all respect to Ellison, who graces our pages in this issue, has in the past and will again, we're still not particularly enthusiastic; and maybe we should be a little more specific about just why.

There are all kinds of science fiction — space opera and satire, gadget stories and Freudian stories, stories to please almost any taste — but it seems to us that there is one kind that is of special interest, if only because it is the only kind of science fiction whose essential features cannot be duplicated anywhere else.

That kind, of course, is the science fiction of *other worlds*. The kind in which some change of technology, social customs or whatever produces a change in the *environment of man*.

This is special to science fiction. No other kind of story can make this claim. Every other kind of writing starts with an established environment, and the characters move inside it. We can generate our own, and this makes possible the telling of *new kinds of stories*.

Take a historical case: The detective story is a *kind of story* that is essentially peculiar to our own time. It rests on certain environmental factors — that murder is universally considered a crime, and that every

caught murderer was to stand trial and, if convicted, be punished. But throughout most of history this was only partially true and sometimes not true at all; a murderer might make no attempt to hide his act; all his effort would be bent to avoiding the retribution that the relatives or guild-brothers of the deceased might try to inflict on him. Sherlock Holmes would have had no place in the Rome of the Borgias or in the Byzantine Empire. The Great Detective would have given way to, say, the Great Retaliator.

And just as our age has made possible the telling of that new kind of story, the detective story, actually only a century or so old, so the ages to come will make possible the telling of new kinds of stories; and one of the most interesting things science fiction can do is to guess at what they will be and write them now.

A shorter way to say all this is that fooling around with the *way* one writes a story seems to this reader, at least, to be inferior to inventing new things for a story to *say*. Nearly all of the New Wave concerns itself with style instead of content. Sometimes what a writer has to say affects the way he says it — an example might be David Redd's *Sunbeam Caress*, in this issue — and that seems reasonable to us. But that accounts for very little of the New Wave . . . and the rest seems to us to be an awful waste of inventiveness and ability.

— THE EDITOR

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SUNBEAM

by
DAVID REDD



CARESS

illustrated by
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The humans were the ones who reawakened the dormant fires of the sun. They ventured from the surface of their world and tried to subdue the sun, in their attempts to control the weather of Earth. They did not realize they had failed until it was too late.

After only a few decades, the inexorable streams of solar radiation had done their work. The genetic damage was irreversible. Many species became extinct; others, like the ants and the humans, survived in altered forms. New species ap-

peared in the changing landscapes, an appalling diversity of plants and animals bursting into life in the new tide of evolution. For the first time since the early days of creation, the distinction between plant and animal became meaningless. Was tumbleweed a plant or not? Was flitterdown a seed or an insect? The human biologists had a more urgent problem: survival of humanity.

Beneath the seas, humanity sought shelter from the radiation. Water-breathing seamen toiled in their submarine cities to save their race. The old air-breathing humans were beyond help, but their successors the seamen had not given up hope. The scientists discovered that the radiations came and went in cycles, warping the structure of Time and creating mirages of past and future. As the seamen too came under the pressures of evolution, they tried to project themselves into a future where they would have more chance of surviving until the radiation subsided. They vanished, leaving their homes empty, and no land human knew or cared whether they had succeeded or not. The air-breathing humans had forgotten that such things as seamen existed.

On the warm tropical plains of the land once known as South America, the ants grew in both size and intellect. Their race mind became intelligent and extended its telepathic control to other races — including the agile brown creatures called men. The humans became the Racemind's most valuable slaves, more important than even the dolphins swimming captive in the moats

and lakes. The ants bred the humans scientifically to produce a new, more versatile race with telekinetic powers such as levitation. The ants bred many animals on their farms, bringing back many creatures which had been extinct.

While the human cities crumbled away, the ants built cities of their own. The tunnels and underground chambers were lined with tinted glass, for the ants loved the bright colors of gem-stones and similar materials. The surface sections of their cities, the one-tenth built above ground, were constructed entirely of glass and gems, in every shade the glasswrights could produce in their roaring furnaces. The cities sparkled within their moats, gigantic jewels reflecting colored sunlight across the green plains.

At night, when the new moon rose in the warm black sky, the ant scientists brought out their telescopes to survey the marvel on the darkened disk — the tiny star shining in the lunar night. The ants could not know what it was, for their human slaves had forgotten. Up there on the moon, the lights were shining in the deserted atomic city. After twelve thousand years, the abandoned city was still waiting for its builders to return.

II

THE FIRST CONFRONTATION

As it awoke, the Racemind realized that it was not alone. After only two centuries, a serious crisis had developed. During this time the

Racemind had been building up a complex structure of philosophical thought on the subject of immortality; the entire central command had been engaged on the task, leaving the duties of running civilization to a small semi-automatic co-ordination center.

Transferring its musings to the dolphin memory cells, the Racemind reabsorbed the co-ordination center as the telepathic battle began. The record of the crisis was scanned instantly, and the Racemind took control as though it had handled the affair from the beginning.

In an outlying western district of Land South-West, some small human children had decided to spend their free day in the foothills of the barren mountains. The farm commandant did not object to this unusual request and let them go. The co-ordination center monitored the events without interfering. The Racemind had a clear picture from the records: a V-formation of chubby brown creatures, each twenty times longer than the largest ant, floating into the hot morning air and gliding on their way, laughing as they went. Flying up a desert valley, the children saw a patch of pinkish light on the orange-red stones in the distance. They chattered excitedly — humans still used vocal communication among themselves, despite the telepathic linkage imposed by the ants — and soared over the rocks to investigate the strange light. As the children approached, the color of the light became clearer. It was coming from a group of creatures unlike anything the Racemind had seen.

There were six of the creatures, six tapering columns of pale carmine light, each about four and a half feet tall. Their base diameter was one foot, but their domed summits were less than half that width. No internal features were visible at all, nothing but the soft carmine light of their semi-transparent bodies shimmering in the heat-haze. The columns were drifting slowly down from the high mountains; their bases were just touching the veins of red-brown ore over which they were traveling, and rolling around the six columns was a ragged mob of tumbleweed — plants which had pulled up their roots, curled their leaves into a rough sphere and become as mobile as any animal. The tumbleweed were circling the columns in a manner which suggested a definite relationship with them.

A strange mental static was emanating from the light columns. It was far worse than anything from the war flowers, and the co-ordination center could feel its control of the children slipping. Waiting a moment longer to confirm that the situation was indeed serious, the co-ordination center roused the bulk of the Racemind from its dreams of immortality. Then the Racemind took over.

Somehow the columns were breaking down the children's conditioning. The Racemind strengthened the telepathic linkage between itself and the children, bypassing their individual responses and taking full control of their bodies. The mental static continued. The columns were broadcasting strangely compelling thoughts of warmth and companionship,

THE QUEST BEGINS

tempting the children to exercise the independent powers possessed by all humans. Already the children were questioning that the Racemind was fitted to think for them — this despite the complete control the Racemind had imposed on them. The Racemind countered the effect of the deconditioning impulses, but it was too late. The children's brains had suffered permanent damage.

The children were insane. The Racemind could do no more than direct them away from the light columns. By this time the scene was indistinct — the distortions of the telepathic linkage were getting more severe — and it was almost a victory for the Racemind when the children began gliding back to their farm. Unexpectedly, the light columns made no attempt to follow up their success.

The Racemind disposed of the damaged children in the nearest dream caverns; in their deranged state they were a danger to any normal unit which approached them. The next logical steps were three in number. First, send an expendable unit into the hills to search for the origin of the light columns. Second, check through the accumulated memories of the past two centuries. These columns were an entirely new form of life, and the Racemind wanted to see what else evolution had produced in recent years. Third, prepare a fully equipped expedition to explore the mountains. The first of these three was relatively simple: the Racemind selected a young human mural-designer from the town near the children's farm. She was a sterile female who made a hobby of biology.

The humans were allowed a high degree of individuality by the ants. The designer, who called herself Rrengyara in the symbolic spoken language used by the humans among themselves, had spent much of her free time studying the creatures of her district. The information so gained was stored in her own brain without being absorbed in the Racemind's memory units. Only the humans could amass individual knowledge in this way. But now individuality had progressed too far. The children had begun to disobey the Racemind's conditioning. The gravity of the situation disturbed the Racemind, therefore it disturbed Rrengyara. She prayed to the distant ant queens that her mission might be successful. She did not pray for a safe return, for in this mission her death would be unimportant as long as the Racemind gained new information from her journey. And the Racemind had abolished fear of death long ago.

The first peril was entirely unexpected. Rrengyara was above the foothills, flying over the last of the farms, when she received an impression that something was wrong. She looked down.

The farm was busy this warm afternoon. Ant local-control observers and relay units stood on their pillars, supervising all that went on. Humans were harvesting the corn, pigs were plowing up some fallow fields, titanomoles were digging the



foundations for a new barn. Diplo-doci were grazing behind the lake. In their pens the gelatinous slumberers rolled about, like jellyfish searching for the sea. Opossums were picking fruit in the orchard, and a lean jaguar was watching over the herd of tiny struthomimi. All was as it should be.

The thoughts came whispering into her mind again. Down below, the farm workers paused. At that moment the ant observers sent out a message: "Local outbreak of war flowers. Request assistance."

In the hedges, sinister cobalt blue petals were unfolding. As the flowers appeared, Rrengyara's thoughts began dancing at random. The normally subdued irrational impulses in her mind were being intensified by the empathetic weeds springing up on the farm below. The workers fused their minds in a compulsive group-solidarity rhythm — the only defence against the war flowers. If they could not defeat the madness from the flowers, their conditioning would fail and they would start fighting each other. The animals not controlled by the Racemind were affected more severely.

This deadly empathy from the war flowers was a by-product of their reproductive process: their seeds were fertilized by telepathic impulses from other war flowers which initiated autosurgical operations on the reproductive cells. The Racemind could not predict where these plants would appear next, for they sent out sprays of tiny, almost weightless seeds which could remain dormant for centuries. All the seeds from one

plant germinated at the same time, regardless of external conditions.

Perhaps war flowers were responsible for the children's aberrations, thought Rrengyara. As she formed the idea, the Racemind took full control of her body and sent her speeding away from the farm and the war flowers. She had been more seriously affected by the flowers than she thought. The Racemind would not have sent her to hunt for the carmine light columns if the children's experience had any normal explanation.

Soaring over the sloping rocky ground, rising up to the high mountains, Rrengyara prayed to her deities — the ant queens — that the squads of rescue units would reach the farm in time. The Racemind was slowly winning the battle to exterminate the war flowers, but it had received many setbacks. Far too often the survivors of an outbreak were fit for nothing but the dream caverns. That was ironic, although the Racemind could not appreciate it, for in the caverns those who came to die were devoured by relatives of the war flowers. One of the earliest empathetic plants had been carnivorous, enveloping its prey in a crimson cloud of pleasure. The ants had taken this plant, adapted it to their own specifications and sown it in the cool gardens of the dream caverns; because the ants were determined that no unit should die in pain — without due cause.

Rrengyara glided on, higher and higher. Up here the rocks were almost bare of life, and the only things which moved were the ever-

present airborne fluffballs of flutter-down. These were little white spheres less than a finger's length in diameter, drifting about on the convection currents or darting to and fro around each other. She saw a round green tumbleweed, but it was pre-adolescent and still firmly rooted to the ground. Cacti could be seen through the heat-haze. This dry, almost lifeless valley, with no cultivated fields to break the monotony of its orange-red stones, was the place where the children had encountered the carmine light columns.

She started flying up towards the head of the valley, where it ended in a pass between two mountain walls. She moved from side to side in a standard search pattern.

At the pass she halted and hovered above the ridge, looking down into the new valley beyond. It was as arid and as empty as the valley she had just checked. On her right were the cliffs of the high plateau, a wind-swept desert region formed by the now-extinct volcanoes. No unit had been to the plateau since the earliest days of the ant civilization. However, the valley in front of her had been visited more recently. She had spent a free day there herself once, studying the plants. Her most interesting discovery had been the mountain glass poppies, which focused sunlight on the central seed boxes to hasten the ripening process.

She could go down to the valley, or up to the plateau. Much of the valley was visible from her present position, but no carmine light could be seen. The Racemind ordered her to search the plateau.

She rose up alongside the near-vertical cliff faces, watching the brown stones for any movement which might indicate a landslide. The sharp protruding edges, and the rubble on the valley floor, showed that these tall cliffs were not as firm as they appeared. Hundreds of feet above the pass, she reached the plateau. Here the landscape formed a scene as bizarre as any ruined human city. Brown, red, purple, orange, the crags sprang up from the featureless rock of the plateau floor. The outcrops had been eroded into fantastic shapes by constant weathering, sculptured into turrets and arches and ramparts of bright flame-colored stone. The heat-haze made everything indistinct to her vision, giving her the impression she was flying over a forest of living rocks that were breathing slowly in the hot sun. At the same time the scene had the strange clarity of a time-mirage.

If it had not been for the Racemind's control she would have become lost within minutes. The uncontrolled human brain was too inefficient to memorize the configurations of this landscape's red-brown battlements and towers. If the light columns were here, they could remain hidden from a ground army for years, as the Racemind had known when it selected a flying scout for the mission.

Rrengyara levitated forward, gaining height to take in a wider view of the ground. In the heat-haze, it seemed as though the rocks were arranged in lines like the wave-crests of a sea. But the real sea was blue, and the only blue in this jungle of

stone was that of the sky above. Even the cobalt blue of a war flower would have been welcome.

Gliding slowly above these natural fortifications, her naked brown body sweating in the heat of the afternoon calm, Rrengyara scanned the rocks for any living thing, light column or more familiar creature. Once she glimpsed a patch of dark green, and swooped down to see some cacti beneath a natural arch. A lone flutterdown bush grew out of a crevice, and a few lichens and stonecrops clung to the boulders. These and the occasional flutterdown ball were all she saw.

Presently she came to a region of higher ground, where the crags were so large as to be termed small hills. Here the rocks had black shadows in various places — the openings of caves. She descended to examine one. The Racemind informed her that the caves had been found before, when the early explorers were crossing the plateau. The caves were probably volcanic tunnels formed by escaping gases, although the explorers had not made any detailed studies to confirm this. If the light columns were hiding in the caves, Rrengyara could do nothing about it. The expedition now being prepared would bring suitable equipment for exploring the caves.

IV

SUNBEAM RITUAL

When she soared upwards from examining the cave openings, Rrengyara saw a small glowing point

in the heat-haze ahead. It had been hidden from her before by a curving shoulder of rock. She dropped down again and floated low over the ground, using the outcrops as cover. A point of light that did not belong here had to be artificial. If living creatures were over there, Rrengyara wanted to prevent them seeing her. She must not suffer the fate of the children too soon.

Floating round one of the last crags, she caught sight of a lime-green light near her destination. The quality of the light suggested that here was a being like those the children had encountered. From then on Rrengyara stopped levitating and covered the rest of the ground normally. Where possible she walked, but most of the time she crawled. After passing a large cave mouth she saw that green luminescence again. She ducked back behind the cave entrance, hoping the creature had not seen her. The Racemind did not know what perceptive senses the light columns possessed. She listened and heard nothing. She crawled from the cave towards a small outcrop. Hot air was rising beyond the crest of the rock, in some quantity. As she crawled over she looked forward, expecting to see a fire. Instead, she saw a huge transparent crystal with a ball of yellow fire at its center. A large tumbleweed rolled into view. She wriggled hastily on behind the cover of the outcrop and lay in the shadow, trying to think whether a crystal like that could exist naturally on this plateau. It had been four-sided, with flat top and bottom, and it was covered with small abrasions

and places where pieces had flaked off. Five feet high, and nearly two feet thick, it had been completely colorless except for that patch of yellow inside it — and that could have been a reflection of the sun.

The Racemind told her that the crystal had not been there when the original explorers visited the plateau. Furthermore, there had been no tumbleweed on the plateau in those days. The Racemind made Rrengyara stand up to look at the crystal, the tumbleweed and the light column.

The lime-green column was there, a pillar of light nine feet high with a base two feet across. It was transparent, but no internal organs were visible. Rrengyara only glanced at the light column, for before her was a circle of crystals. Each crystal was colorless, transparent and six-faced, the same size as the first she had seen. There were thirteen of them, spaced evenly round the circumference of a circle twenty feet in diameter. The crystals were leaning over at various angles, arranged so that they focused the sunlight on the circular patch of ground inside the ring of crystals. The glowing light Rrengyara had seen was at the center of the circle, where the ground was melting and bubbling in the concentrated sunlight. Rrengyara could feel the heat sinking into her face. Thirteen scorched grooves on the rock, along curved lines stretching from the crystals to the central furnace, showed that previously the crystals had been set to focus the sunlight on paths leading from each crystal to the center. The Racemind realized that the pattern being burnt into the

stone resembled the dancing grounds constructed by primitive peoples for religious ceremonies. The only primitives the Racemind knew had degenerated from more advanced states, but that did not affect the validity of the comparison.

Circling the ring of crystals was a shoal of whirling tumbleweed, rolling and bouncing through the heat-haze. Their frenzied movements contrasted with the complete stillness of the crystals. To one side stood the cool green column of light, watching over the tumbleweed and crystals like a benevolent child-guardian.

Rrengyara saw all this in an instant. She threw herself back down again behind the outcrop, hiding her dark body in the shadow. The heat-sensitive tumbleweed might have detected her, or the light column might have sensed her presence in some way. The feeling of peace, brotherhood and security from the light column was plucking at her mind and growing in intensity. The Racemind ordered her to remain in her present position, to test the column's reaction to an intruder.

When it became clear that Rrengyara had not been seen, the Racemind ordered her to stand up again. Her attention was caught by a familiar-looking patch of colored light far over to the right of the circle. This was what the children had seen. It was a group of carmine light columns, made small by distance, traveling on a course which would take them near the crystal circle. If they continued moving in this direction they would see her. She had to move

back, out of range. That cave she had seen earlier would make a good refuge.

She levitated hurriedly across the stretch of open ground, gliding less than a foot above the dusty stones. At the entrance to the cave she paused and looked back for any signs of pursuit. Nothing happened. Apparently the tumbleweed and the light column were absorbed in their own affairs.

Satisfied that she had not been sighted, Rrengyara floated into the dark mouth of the cave.

In the black depths before her she could see hundreds of tiny specks of light. The faintly greenish tinge to the white radiance indicated the presence of radioactive minerals. The objects came nearer. Rrengyara saw a moving cloud of small phosphorescent crystals, flying up out of the darkness. The luminous crystals were streaking towards her like male fireflies homing on a female. The horde was almost upon her —

Contact was broken, and the Racemind knew that it had lost Rrengyara. The crystals had killed her.

V

VISIONS IN THE HEAT-HAZE

The data from Rrengyara's last journey was integrated with the information the Racemind was gathering from its memories of the last two centuries. It was one more piece of evidence to show that the world had been changing while the Racemind was dreaming of immortality.

The most important change was

in the climate. Previously the world's mean temperature had been rising in what appeared to be a straight-forward linear progression. Now, however, the increase in temperature had departed sufficiently from the predicted values for the Racemind to see that the progression was in fact logarithmic. The steadily rising level of solar radiation was heating up the world more quickly than the Racemind had anticipated.

Evolution was also progressing. The pallid slumberers, creatures composed of gelatin within a tough chitinous hide, were diversifying rapidly. Several new species were now in regular use on the farms, having been domesticated without difficulty. The slumberers were not the only animals to evolve in this way. The mutation rate had not increased greatly, but the new mutations contained a far lower percentage of genetic undesirables than before. The work of the breeders had more than doubled in the efforts to adapt these new species for service under the Racemind. Also, unusually large numbers of fish were leaving the sea and attempting to live on the shore. Fish had been trying to recolonize the land since the last Ice Age, when the Racemind was still young, but there had never been this many before.

In the large island which had been one of the last outposts of human land civilization — the humans still called it by its old name, Malagash — a social evolution had taken place among a rare species of bird. Many centuries ago the breeders had re-created the extinct hummingbirds to

act as weavers. These birds were small, brightly colored and fast-moving. They used their long beaks to sew large leaves together to form edible plates and other utensils. The hummingbirds still served the ants, but now they were living in colonies of organized societies like communal insects. They were building intricate structures of leaves in the dense jungle, in imitation of the ant cities. Their numbers were increasing, so their work for the ants had not suffered even though nearly a quarter of the hummingbird population was working in the tree cities. The most interesting aspect of the change was the complex organization which now dealt with hatching the eggs and bringing up the young hummingbirds.

Other birds had changed too. The sandlings were small flightless birds living on the edge of the desert in Land North-East. They had started burrowing underground, in sand already stiffened by the concretelike trails of the brickworms, strengthening their tunnels with a mixture of sand and saliva. As yet these burrows were made by individuals and there was no indication that the sandlings might develop communal activities as the hummingbirds had done.

The isolated minor continent, known to the ancient humans as Australia, produced a phenomenon which had no rational explanation. The small scattered ant colonies there reported that within the last few years the annual migration of the various animals had included a new routine. Herds of sheep, kanga-

roos, stegosauri, humans, dogs and other animals were wandering in circles round the great boneyards where the uncontrolled creatures came to die. Each individual animal circled the boneyard several times, taking as long as a fortnight to do so, before it departed to resume its interrupted migration. This meant that at any given time there were several thousand creatures slowly travelling round each boneyard. This did not interfere with the program of transforming the deserts into fertile plains, but the ritual's absence of purpose was puzzling.

There was another problem on the island continent, one which had nearly caused the little co-ordination center to arouse the Racemind before it became clear there was no danger to the ant civilization. The humans of this near-desert territory were black-skinned giants who had lost the intelligence retained by the ants' other human slaves. However, the giants were now regaining the mental powers lost when they reverted to animals. They were clearing away the rubble over the old dancing grounds and once more bowing to sacred stones erected by the salt pans. The giants were becoming intelligent again.

Undersea expeditions continued uncovering the remains of the submarine cities buried in the ooze. These buildings were the homes of the now-extinct seamen, the water-breathers who had been the last independent intelligent humans. The Racemind had given priority to this archeological project because it want-

ed to study the differences between land and underwater civilizations. If it had been capable of emotion it would have been dismayed when the current situation reached its consciousness from the memory units. Conditions at the excavations were growing steadily worse, and one site had been abandoned. The ruined cities had been invaded by shapeless monsters feeding on the disturbed ooze and effluent from the living quarters. These monsters were complexes of cloudy white cells, resembling masses of sponge rubber or soap foam. Normally the cell complexes rested quietly on the sea bed, absorbing nourishment from the ooze beneath them and dividing in two on reaching a certain size. Now they too had changed, and when they invaded the archeological sites they were able to feed and grow without dividing. They smothered the excavations, and if some cells were torn loose from their sides the fragments started growing to form new cell complexes. As soon as an area was cleared of them, others drifted in and reinfested the area. The archeological work was slowing down, and far fewer relics were being brought to the surface.

The Racemind was accustomed to living in a world of change; its civilization was fluid, based on the principle that creatures did not always breed true. Genetics was the most important science to the ants. The Racemind's thought over the last two centuries had been, in fact, mainly concerned with the question of how adaptable an entity could afford to be, in order to retain its identity in

a constantly changing environment. But the present situation was clearly too much. The Racemind had examined less than half its accumulated memories, but already it knew that evolution, like the world's temperature, was progressing along a logarithmic curve. It was all due to the present solar radiation cycle, the worst since the Ice Age ended.

A minor by-product of the intense solar radiation was the series of time-mirages. These were scenes or objects from the past, visible through local distortions of the space-time continuum caused by interaction of the solar radiation with the earth's natural radiation field. The strangest objects seen through these warps were the giant flying disks or cross-és which the old humans had used for air transport. Units sometimes tried to fly up to the aircraft in the time-mirages, but it was no more successful than chasing a rainbow. The Racemind had found that a prolonged series of time-mirages invariably preceded another burst of evolutionary progress.

While Rrengyara was exploring the plateau, more units in Land South-West were falling away into individualism and pugnacity under the influence of the war flowers. Fresh outbreaks were occurring, but the Racemind could control them. Units stationed to keep watch for light columns were helping win the struggle against the deadly cobalt blue flowers.

As for the light columns themselves, they were obviously a completely new form of life which had evolved up on the plateau. Their



Virgil
Finlay

THE QUEST CONTINUES

appearance brought a whole new realm of uncertainty into the classification of living organisms. Previously the main difficulty had been in distinguishing between plant and animal. For instance, the foamlike cell complexes now invading the submarine excavations could fit into either category. Again, the flutter-down bush was definitely a plant, but its fluffy seed had an insectoidal body hidden inside whose long white hairs, although normally only the eyes were visible. The light columns, however, were neither plant nor animal. As far as the Racemind knew, the columns did not have a physical cellular structure at all.

The columns had destroyed the conditioning in several units and had established control over the tumbleweed. (The image of the tumbleweed circling the crystals resembled the image of the Australian animals circling a boneyard. Was this a coincidence? The Racemind did not possess enough data to decide.) Had the columns anything to do with the death of Rrengyara? Something had launched those tiny crystals at her inside the cave. Certainly there was a connection between the light columns, the tumbleweed and the large crystals — although the Racemind did not understand why the crystals had been set to scorch that thirteen-limbed pattern into the rock.

The killing of Rrengyara was another matter. Something had intended to silence the intruder, and for that reason alone the Racemind was justified in continuing its investigations.

The expedition consisted of fifty flying ants, twenty-two humans and twenty-four fruit bats — ninety-six units in all. It was entirely airborne, because flying units possessed greater mobility than ground forces. The ants were present in sufficient numbers to protect themselves and the other units from any deconditioning attempts the light columns might make. The humans were the pack animals, carrying the equipment, and they also provided force to counter any physical attack on the other units. The fruit bats, beautiful creatures with smooth black fur, were the scouts and would do most of the reconnaissance work.

As always, it was hot and sunny in the mountains. To the units in the expedition it seemed hotter than in the lowlands, despite the altitude. They soared up from the dry valley and reached the rocky plateau where Rrengyara had been lost. The strange outcrops stretched away before them in the heat-haze: brown and purple pillars, great orange-red rocks resembling the figures of plants or animals, purple crags like fangs biting into the sky, a natural arch with orange and brown curving across in lines like the colors of a rainbow, all these weird sculptures and thousands more were spread out all over the plateau.

The scout units of the expedition, the fruit bats, spread out to cover a wide stretch of territory as the expedition flew on towards the circle

of crystals. The Racemind was controlling all the units, allowing the humans no individuality. Rrengyara had been left partially controlled, a tempting target for any telepathic attack, but as yet there was no need to repeat the experiment.

They sighted the flutterdown bush Rrengyara had seen. Some balls of flutterdown, which had followed the expedition up from the lowlands, dived towards the bush with faint supersonic squeaks of delight.

A little further on, a fruit bat on the extreme left of the crescent formation saw something which had been hidden from Rrengyara by a high spur of rock. Some chameleon cacti were growing in a dusty hollow. They were not matching the orange-brown of their surroundings. Instead, each cactus was slowly changing color. The fruit bat dropped behind his companions to study the plants' unusual behavior. The color-cycle was the same for each cactus, but the plants were going through the cycle at different time rates. The effect was that the fruit bat could see all the stages in the cycle at the same time. Two of the colors were familiar to the Racemind: carmine and lime green. The rest of the series included two more citrus colors, orange and lemon yellow, and a very pale blue. White was in the cycle, but black was absent.

The Racemind sent the fruit bat flying on to rejoin the expedition. There was nothing more to see here at the moment. The incident was another illustration of the strange power the light columns possessed over lesser creatures. In some way

the columns had disrupted the normal protective-coloration mechanism of the cacti, substituting this rhythmic cycle of colors.

Before the fruit bat returned to its position in the formation, another fruit bat near the center of the crescent saw a lemon yellow column standing on the rocks ahead. The fruit bat sped forward ahead of the others, but the yellow column grew fainter and fainter. It faded away into nothing, leaving only the purple stones and the ever-present heat-haze. The expedition searched the area diligently without finding so much as a cave the yellow column could have slipped into. There was no explanation for its disappearance. Finally the Racemind abandoned the search and sent the expedition on to the point where Rrengyara had died. A flying ant was left to keep watch should the lemon-yellow column reappear.

The expedition arrived at the circle of tall transparent crystals discovered by Rrengyara. Changes had taken place in the circle, so a couple of units went forward to examine it while the rest descended to the ground near the cave. The expedition reached the dark cave mouth without trouble and sent in two scouts, a fruit bat carrying a normal torch followed by a flying ant seeing by infrared light. Should the fruit bat be attacked the ant behind him would see what happened even if telepathic contact with the victim was broken.

The fruit bat entered the cave, the white light from its luminous-

plankton torch seeming pale and dim in the blackness. The curved sides of the cave had cracked and split, sending little splinters of rock to the floor, so that the walls contained thousands of tiny ledges and the floor was strewn with stones resembling pine needles. Curiously enough the roof was still intact.

Rrengyara's body had gone, but the stone splinters were coated with blood at the spot where she had been standing. Beyond the brown stains, a faint milky glow was visible in the darkness. The faint greenish tinge to the light was familiar. The fruit bat glided on; the Racemind intended to trigger whatever weapons launched the attack on Rrengyara. Thousands of minute crystals, all flat and none larger than half an inch across, were resting on the ledges and cracks in the walls, like a flock of seabirds nesting on a cliff. Here the crystals covered the sides of the cave so thickly that their light was brighter than that of the fruit bat's torch. The flying ant reported that the cave crystals were radiating infrared light in addition to the normal visible spectrum. The attack never came. The crystals remained motionless on their ledges, glowing balefully, while the fruit bat passed through the zone of light.

After the region occupied by the phosphorescent crystals, the cave branched in two. Both openings were equally dark. The fruit bat flew along the left-hand tunnel and soon discovered a second greenish-white glow ahead. Turning a corner, he saw that the cave widened into a subterranean chamber and

then came to a dead end. The floor of the chamber was partially concealed by a shallow pool of milky liquid which appeared to be evaporating, judging by the white stain around the depression in the floor. The opaque luminous liquid was dripping slowly into the pool from a group of stalactites, the first such formations the Racemind had seen in these caves. The small pond was not the only source of the greenish-white light; clusters of crystals were huddled together on the ledges around the pool. These crystals were glistening as if damp. They had only just been formed, the Racemind realized. In its own laboratories the Racemind made crystals by this same process — evaporation of a saturated solution.

The fruit bat did not take specimens, because the cave would receive a thorough investigation from the rest of the expedition. He flew back along the tunnel to the junction, where the flying ant awaited him, and turned left to explore the other fork. Quite suddenly, the tunnel came to an end. The fruit bat shone his torch around and saw a pile of small colorless objects which looked like fish scales. He dropped to the floor to examine them. They were little diamond-shaped crystals, so flat as to be almost two-dimensional, identical to the others in the caves except that they were not glowing. The light had gone out of them, and they were transparent, like the little disks of horn the human children played with. The crystals were dead.

Meanwhile, the two flying ants studied the circle of large crystals. No light columns were present, and the shoal of tumbleweed had vanished, so the two units could approach the circle in safety.

The pattern scorched into the rock by the crystals was now complete and had cooled into solidity again. In shape it resembled an octopuslike creature with thirteen arms, or a symbolic representation of the sun. The circular central area, which Rrengyara had seen in the process of formation, was about four feet in diameter. The thirteen paths, curving from the center of the pattern out to the circumference, were each two feet wide and about nine feet long. The region where they overlapped enlarged the central area.

The huge colorless crystals were no longer at the outer rim of the circular pattern. Twelve of them were positioned at regular intervals along the grooved pathways leading to the center, and the thirteenth crystal was actually at the center. The twelve on the pathways were arranged in lines of four; in each group the innermost crystal was close to the center, the outermost was near the perimeter, and the two others occupied intermediate positions on their respective grooves. Each pathway was occupied by one crystal, except for the thirteenth which was empty.

The lone crystal in the middle was off-center. The Racemind continued watching, and presently it realized that the crystals were moving. They were gradually inching along the paths they had burnt into the stone.

The Racemind made an intuitive correlation. This scorch-pattern was a dancing ground, similar to the sites the giant black humans were rebuilding in Australia. This slow motion of the crystals was a religious ceremony. They were dragging themselves along the grooves for a definite purpose.

The Racemind knew that ordinary inanimate stones could wander across deserts by themselves, but this ritual was different. No inanimate object could think for itself in this way. These crystals were alive.

If this assumption was correct, it confirmed the Racemind's new theory that the cave crystals were living creatures. The Racemind's thought processes were such that it would not have reached this conclusion from only one set of data. However, the information from the cave and the circle formed two sets of data, and the knowledge that one entirely new life form — the light columns — had already appeared formed a third set. In the circumstances the Racemind had to assume — temporarily, at least — that the crystals were alive. Were the crystals subject to group-mentality control like other creatures? What was their relationship with the light columns? Had the large crystals made their dancing ground of their own volition, If the cave crystals had killed Rrengyara, why had they let the fruit bat explore the cave in safety? To these and other questions the Racemind conceived several possible answers, filing them away to be checked later when further data became available.

THE ZERO MOMENT

It was growing late, and the expedition had been travelling all day. The Racemind decided to make camp for the night now and start work early in the morning, rather than continue in the hour or so of sunlight that remained. The temperature had fallen considerably, and the units would work better tomorrow if the routine preparations were finished before sundown. If any scientific investigations were started now everything would be hurried, overstraining the units which would then be functioning below full efficiency. So the only other work done that evening was a thorough but fruitless search of the immediate vicinity for Rrengyara's body.

While all this was taking place, most of the Racemind's gigantic mental resources were still devoted to the incredible task of examining the memories of events which had occurred during the past two centuries. The Racemind had no equivalent of the concept "error" — to it, everything was classified in three categories: advantageous, non-advantageous and irrelevant — but the time spent dreaming of immortality had been decidedly non-advantageous, the Racemind realized, particularly when considered with other activities such as the way civilization had remained within its present borders for thousands of years. If the Racemind had possessed the ability to indulge in masochistic hindsight, it would have told itself it should

have sent regular exploring teams into unoccupied lands to see what new species were evolving there. As it was, the Racemind merely decided to send out such expeditions in future. Perhaps the crystals and light columns had their counterparts on other continents.

The units were bedding down for the night on the plateau when the Racemind discovered an extremely significant item of information in its memories. Included in an annual report from a museum — an archeological storehouse and study center — was the statement that the revolution-counters in a certain exhibit had reached zero.

The exhibit in question contained devices which had been found three thousand years ago in a well-preserved submarine city. The revolution-counters had been working perfectly, recording the passage of years towards a certain date in the future. That date had arrived three weeks ago, and it coincided with the greatest concentration of time-mirages recorded before or since.

The sea city in which the revolution-counters were found contained other items. In it the explorers gathered enough evidence to prove that the seamen had made a last desperate attempt to save their race. They had tried to project themselves into the future via the time-mirages.

The Racemind, knowing the current frequency of time-mirages and the weakened state of the space-time continuum, was certain that the revolution-counters had been program-

med to give the date of their arrival in the future. The revolution-counter was one of many electrometallic and mechanometallic devices found in the sea cities. Several other sea-human inventions were stored away where they could do no damage, but most of the large machines still in operation were left in position — the Racemind had once lost several million units when attempting to remove a machine from a deserted city. After some early disasters, the Racemind stopped all research into atomics, electrics and technology, permitting only simple and easily controlled devices to be used in its civilization. Thus the Racemind lacked sufficient information to take any action over the news about the revolution-counters. So now it had to obtain that information, quickly. Some seafarmers living near the site of the city in question were directed to investigate. The city had been closed for centuries, but the Racemind had no hesitation in opening it again. If the seamen had succeeded in transmitting themselves through time, or if the abandoned machines had been programmed to reactivate themselves when the revolution-counters reached zero, there would be tremendous consequences for civilization.

The zero moment had arrived, and new life forms were appearing from nowhere; the two facts might well be connected. The seamen were an ingenious race, and in many ways it was surprising that they were extinct. The Racemind sent the seafarmers toward the submarine city at maximum speed.

During the night, a tall, slender column of pure white light drifted past the sleeping units in their camp. The guards on duty received strange thought impressions similar to the first stages of war-flower madness. The Racemind roused the entire expedition to make a mental attack on the white column. The barrage of mental force had no effect on the column. The humans made a direct physical attack; this too failed. An invisible shield prevented the humans from reaching the intruder. The barrier genuinely existed; no conditioning had been imposed on the units. The white column had surrounded itself with an impenetrable cylinder of force. The Racemind sent some units after it, shadowing it to the cave entrance where it went into the opening. When they tried to follow the column they found another invisible barrier across the cave mouth. The white column had sealed up the cave.

Two units remained by the entrance all night, watching for the white column and periodically testing the barrier, but the situation was unchanged in the morning. The expedition could not enter the cave again, so the Racemind continued its exploration of the plateau. The scouts discovered several more plantations of chameleon cacti, and the Racemind noted that all the plants were bowing gently towards the northern hills as they went through their column-inspired rainbow color-

cycles. No light columns of any color were found.

A fruit bat on routine reconnaissance in the dull brown northern wastes was flying in the direction indicated by the chameleon cacti when he discovered the crater. Blue water sparkled within the great circular depression, but that huge volcanic cone had not contained a lake when the Racemind last visited the plateau. The fruit bat flew on, and approaching the crater he saw rows of cacti and tumbleweed, growing in straight lines which radiated outward from the crater lake like the spokes of a wheel. The arrangement was obviously artificial. Swooping low, the fruit bat saw that the brown rocks were covered in places by a thin layer of soil. The dusty earth had blown about in the wind and collected in drifts on which sparse grass and small weeds were establishing themselves. The ground around the cacti and tumbleweed was free of other plants. The lake was hidden from the ground by the high ramparts of the crater rim.

Rising again, the fruit bat soared towards the lake in the old extinct volcano. He was alone, for the other scout units had spread out in all directions searching for more crystal circles (two had been found already). If the unit came under the influence of the light columns there were no companions to rescue him.

Suddenly the fruit bat saw a momentary flash of red light on the brown rocks below. A large crimson crystal was there, a semi-transparent monolith fully five feet high, moving steadily away from the lake. It

had left a trail behind it, a barely perceptible line in the thin dust. The Racemind had an irrational liking for light seen through colored glass or similar substances, and it caused the fruit bat to glide within inches of the travelling monolith, merely to look through the crystal and see the sun transformed into a sphere of crimson fire. When the Racemind was satisfied, the fruit bat resumed his northward journey. Now that he knew what to look for, he saw many other trails in the dust. He also saw three more crystals, two blue and one yellow, all heading south.

Reaching the volcano, the fruit bat circled slowly above the crater to give the Racemind a complete picture. Warm steamy air was shimmering upward from the circular lake, and little puffs of misty vapor hung over the still surface of the sapphire-colored waters. Seeing the almost luminous intensity of that blue liquid, the Racemind judged that the water had been stained by minerals — probably by ores of some transition elements. The fruit bats glimpsed vague shadows below the mists, but they were too indistinct to be identified. Between the sapphire lake and the jagged edges of the vertical walls were two different types of ground. The higher zone, just below the crater rim, was a wide sloping band of soil in which several thousand tumbleweed were rooted. Their feathery green leaves were tall and straight, indicating that they were too immature to be mobile yet. The second and lower zone, between the young tumbleweed and

the lake, was the shore. When it realized what it was seeing, the Racemind sent the fruit bat down to perch on a shoreline boulder. It required a closer view of this unique beach.

The boulder must have fallen from the ramparts above, for there were no stones — or sand — on this beach. The entire shore was covered with fragments of colored glasslike material. The most common colors were sapphire, crimson, emerald and yellow. The fragments ranged in size from several inches down to microscopic splinter and dust specks. They were obviously the remains of crystals which had broken up beside the water. Many of these colored shards were moving, shifting painfully toward the sapphire water with feeble movements. One emerald flake pulled itself several inches before encountering a jagged crimson pebble too large to be slid over. The fruit bat watched a flat mauve fragment, a rough triangle in shape, rocking from side to side before sending itself slipping over its companions, most of which were also struggling to reach the lake. The mauve shard hit a more solid yellow fragment and split it in two. Both pieces of mauve crystal continued moving and managed to slide into the sapphire liquid; they immediately darted away like fish and vanished in the depths below the wisps of vapor.

Twenty yards along the shore, a giant scarlet crystal was emerging from the lake. Taller than a human being, it dragged itself clear of the

shallow blue liquid and stood upright on the shore. It was vibrating rapidly, and the fruit bat glided towards it to investigate. Without warning, the scarlet crystal leaned to one side, overbalanced and toppled onto the beach. It shattered into a thousand pieces; some of the debris fell back into the sapphire waters. Most of the bright red fragments began crawling back to the lake, sliding themselves over the older and weaker shards. A few of them were focusing sunlight on other pieces, and a canary-yellow crystal suddenly split open, releasing a cloud of fine dust which drifted over the lake. Still subject to the burning rays from the scarlet fragment, the remains of the yellow crystal began to melt.

All along the beach, colors were flashing out from the moving crystal flakes slowly returning to the sapphire liquid. In the distance the shore appeared to be a rich brown, but nearer the unit all the separate colors were distinguishable as the shards sparkled in the sunlight. It was a sight as fascinating as the forests of colored glass mobiles which hung in the transparent domes of the ant cities. The countless tiny motions of the fragments gave the impression that the whole shore was rippling like a tree in a breeze. In the shallow parts of the lake, near the beach where the blue water was low enough to be transparent, the Racemind saw dozens of giant crystals wandering slowly across the lake floor.

Another crystal came up through the shallows, a misshapen crimson

monolith with an opaque dark red growth on one side. It was moving through the last few inches of sapphire water when it began vibrating rapidly as the scarlet crystal had. It hesitated with its base in the water, then slowly retreated toward the deeper regions of the lake. Two feet of its height was still above the surface when it lurched to one side and disappeared in an explosion of spray. Concentric ripples spread out swiftly from the scene, interrupted by smaller ripples as crimson fragments splashed into the water.

The Racemind watched two more giant crystals, both sapphire-colored, emerge from the lake and smash themselves to jagged pieces on the beach. A fifth crystal, four feet high and bright emerald in color, did not destroy itself. Moving purposefully out of the water, it dragged itself over the beach, crushing many of the shattered fragments as it went. A trail of dampness glistened behind it, and a few small shards dissolved in the pools before the liquid drained away. The emerald green crystal reached the tumbleweed plantations on the slopes, and continued through the open fields towards the crater ramparts which enclosed the lake. As the crystal travelled upwards, some tumbleweed plants curled their leaves into rough spheres. Uprooting themselves, the tumbleweed began rolling up the slopes after the emerald crystal. The monolith was heading for a narrow gap in the ridge, where it could pass through the high crater walls. The fruit bat left its boulder by the shore and

ascended rapidly, shadowing the wanderer. Now accompanied by the tumbleweed, the emerald crystal proceeded through the small canyon and out onto the dusty brown plateau. It started off across the stone wilderness, travelling in a northwesterly direction. The Racemind sent the fruit bat gliding after the crystal.

IX

CITY OF DEATH

The pool in the cave and the lake in the crater both had the same function. Crystals, living crystals, were created in both. The process of evaporation in the cave was relatively simple, while crystal formation in the lake was a more advanced process, but the basic similarity was undeniable. Probably the crystals had other communal birthplaces somewhere on the plateau. The cave system would have to be explored thoroughly.

However fascinating the crystals might be, they were insignificant compared to the major problem — the light columns. The cave where Rrengyara had died was still sealed off by the force barrier created by the tall white column, and in the outlying districts of Land South-West more light columns were appearing, adding to the difficulties caused by the outbreaks of war flowers. The manifestations always took the same pattern. Light columns of various colors arrived at the hillside farms, accompanied by shoals of whirling tumbleweed, and the familiar sequence of mental disor-

ganization began in the farm units. Automatic group-solidarity rhythms sustained the units under attack until reinforcements arrived. Apparently realizing that superior mental forces opposed them, the light columns then retreated back into the mountains. Rescue units pursuing the light columns followed them into the high volcanic regions, where the columns glided into caves and disappeared behind invisible barriers. All these attacks had taken place either this morning or the previous evening, and the latest was not yet over.

The situation was static at present, with guard units waiting for the cave entrances to become clear again. Up on the plateau several crystals were seen, but the light columns remained absent until a fruit bat sighted a group of lime green columns near a crystal circle. The scout flew down to investigate further, and as he did this the Racemind began receiving information about the ancient city of seamen. The seafarmer units had arrived at the city.

Centuries ago, the Racemind had completed its researches here and prevented unauthorized exploration of this submarine city by simply insuring that the units did not think of entering it. No unit visited the city after that until the seafarmers swam up to the battlements of the outer perimeter. These old walls, now partially covered with ooze, encircled the entire city. The Racemind had never discovered the purpose of the bizarre fortifications. Beyond them, past the strip of clear

ground, light were burning where no lights had been before. Other machines besides the revolution-counters had been waiting for the zero moment.

The density of animal and plant life in the city was extremely high, and the waters were warmer than usual. The seafarmers smelt offal and decaying human flesh in the water ahead. As they approached the first of boxlike buildings, they saw predatory fish swimming along the radial interconnecting streets, wandering in mixed packs as though the creatures were not hereditary enemies. Little scraps of food matter were floating in the water, being eaten by scavengers of all sizes from jellyfish to webworms. The trained eyes of the plankton farmers reported the presence of innumerable unicellular objects feeding on matter too small to be seen. Crabs, bloodsponges, small squids and other creatures were moving about on the lower levels. None of the predators seemed interested in the seafarmers.

The city had been constructed on a hemispherical plan, with the tallest buildings in the middle and the lowest buildings on the outermost concentric circular streets. The structures on the outer rings were the best preserved, because many of the high central blocks had collapsed with age and destroyed numerous other buildings when they fell. The seafarmer units gained height and glided over the outer streets, surveying the remains below them. In the center of the city, where the buildings

were nothing more than heaps of age-darkened rubble under the coating of ooze, the great saucer-shaped depression within the tallest remaining buildings was filled with the bodies of dead humans. It was a submarine boneyard, and many of the bones still bore rotting flesh which trailed in long strips from the skeletons. The odor of decay hanging over the scene was overpowering. Fish were tearing away at the foul meat as the seafarmers watched. Many of the intact buildings contained more of the bodies, and by sending some units to peer through transparent window-panels into sealed lighted rooms the Racemind confirmed that it knew the identity of these dead humans. They were the seamen, and they had been extinct for thousands of years.

During its researches three thousand years ago, the Racemind had discovered numerous scientific instruments in these buildings. Some were removed, such as the revolution-counters, but most were replaced when the Racemind finished studying them. The units were sent to open up an old laboratory where they found some scientific equipment in good condition. Many of the strange mechano-electric devices had resumed functioning of their own accord, as the city public lighting and temperature control systems had done.

By direct experiment many, many years ago the Racemind had learned the numerical symbols and systems of calibration used by the seamen, so it could understand the readings on the instruments. It swiftly discover-

ed that the bodies of the seamen were slightly radioactive, checking a number of corpses to make sure. The radioactivity was on too low a level to affect the creatures feeding on the bodies, but it was definitely well above normal. The seafarmers dissected some corpses and found that all parts were equally radioactive. The Racemind accepted this latest news and made plans for a full-scale expedition to visit the city immediately.

The bodies had been in the water for approximately three weeks, and the revolution-counters had reached zero three weeks ago. Archeological evidence showed that the seamen had attempted to project themselves into the future, and the boneyard had materialized during a period of the most frequent and prolonged time-mirages ever recorded. This explained why the seamen became extinct so suddenly.

However, the actual relevance of this information to the current problem of the light columns was doubtful. (In particular, the appearance of that crystal-forming lake in the volcanic crater had most disturbing implications.) It was highly improbable that the seamen were concerned with events on the plateau in any way. The Racemind would have thought it impossible, considering the evidence, but for the fact that the advent of the light columns nearly coincided with the delayed extinction of the seamen. If there was no direct connection between the events, both might be linked to a third factor which was as yet unrecognized.

THE QUEST CONTINUES

The Racemind now knew the destination of the emerald crystals and its attendant shoal of tumbleweed. It was travelling in a perfectly straight line towards the crystal circle which had just been discovered by a fruit bat. At its present speed, which had not changed since the crystal emerged from the blue lake, it would reach the circle in approximately one hour. Modifying its plans to accommodate this new scheme of events, the Racemind made the scout near the circle land and watch from behind a purple outcrop just outside the effective range of the telepathic impulses from the light column. The other fruit bat in the vicinity continued following the emerald crystal.

The faint mental aberrations caused by the lime green columns did not prevent the Racemind maintaining full control over the fruit bat as he lay stretched out on the ledge. Eleven crystals, each about four feet high, were slowly dragging themselves around the rim of a circular area twenty feet across. The interior of the disk was smooth, unmarked ground; the crystals had done nothing to it so far. The eleven were spaced out evenly as they moved along their circular path, and at regular intervals the fruit bat saw the sun's reflection flashing out from the colored surface. The eleven crystals were identical in size and shape but not in color; five were blue, four were crimson and two were emerald green. Unlike the col-

orless crystals in the first circle, these were clear and unscarred. Their sides were smooth and straight, and obviously they were all relatively young. The air around them seemed clear and bright, for their outlines were sharp against the brown background blurring in the rising heat-haze.

The fruit bat watched from the ledge for over an hour without seeing any change in the rhythmic movements of the crystals. The lime green columns remain motionless, standing to one side of the circle.

At last the lone emerald crystal appeared, with the green tumbleweed rolling around it. As it approached the circle, the crystals already there began to move closer together along the perimeter, forming a widening gap for the newcomer. The crystal joined the others, and now there were twelve colored monoliths slowly circling the site of the new dancing ground. The tumbleweed left their crystal and rolled to a halt beside the stationary lime green columns.

The second fruit bat, following some distance behind the emerald crystal, was about to glide down to join the first scout on the outcrop when he saw a momentary flash of green light a short distance southeast of the circle. Maintaining height, he saw that another emerald crystal was coming towards the circle, accompanied by a number of other creatures including at least two varieties of light column: carmine and lemon yellow. The Racemind then brought the scout down to the outcrop and sent up the

other fruit bat, the one who had been resting on the ledge, to examine the group of new arrivals.

Besides the emerald crystal, the carmine and yellow light columns and the inevitable tumbleweed, the strange little company included several dozen sucker-studded wander-cacti. These unusual plants were over three feet high, only a few inches wide, and progressed over the rocks by hydralike somersaulting, using their terminal suckers to grip the stones. Three tall light columns of a pale turquoise color were accompanied by some white balls of flutterdown, the first time the Racemind had noticed flutterdown with the columns. A flock of tiny milk-white cave crystals were flying in diamond-formation above the wandercacti. This completed the group, except for a dark human female with peculiar skin coloration, walking beside the emerald crystal.

Studying the human, the Racemind realized that she was Rrengyara, the unit who had been killed in a cave.

A swift mental probe at maximum sensitivity revealed no trace of her thoughts. That, and her curious shuffling tread, showed that she was dead. The Racemind could not regard this as certain, because it had not recorded her death impulses, but there was little possibility of error. Something must be controlling her body, yet the zombiesnakes had been exterminated thousands of years ago, and nothing like them had arisen since. The obvious conclusion was that the light columns were respon-

sible. They were the only independent creatures with the potential intelligence and ability to perform the feat of controlling a dead body. The cats could sometimes control a live body, but their powers extended no further.

Rrengyara was walking like a somnambulist. Her arms hung limply, and her head was bent down. As the group passed near the fruit bat watching from near the circle, the Racemind obtained a close detailed picture of what should have been Rrengyara's skin. Her naked body, once smooth and brown, was covered with a black resinous substance in which white particles were gleaming. The crystals attacking her in the cave had embedded themselves in her flesh, causing thousands of tiny wounds, and they were still there. Her skin could not be seen, for the blood from her many wounds had flowed out over her and congealed into a black mass partially covering the crystals. Her nostrils were free, but her eyes and ears were completely blocked. The coating of blood and crystals had fused her hands and feet into forms resembling flippers; the digits were barely visible.

The emerald crystal, and the creatures around it, reached the dancing ground. The light columns glided silently over to the lime-green columns standing to one side, and the tumbleweed by the green columns rolled the other way to join the newcomers. Rrengyara collapsed on the ground, and the flying cave crystals piled themselves into a white pyramid beside her body. The other crea-

tures all came to a halt. Only the emerald crystal still moved. The crystals of the circle slowed down and stopped on the perimeter, all at regular intervals except for a double-sized gap which the new arrival entered. All motion ceased; even the tumbleweed and flutterdown were still. The thirteen crystals stood tall and shining on the circular line they had scratched on the stone.

Very slowly, the great crystals began to move. One after the other, they dragged themselves in a curving line towards the center of the circle. As they travelled along their separate paths, a pattern gradually took shape on the ground where the rock had been marked by their passage. The design was familiar: a thirteen-armed star, it was the basis for all the crystal circles the Racemind had found.

Presently the crystals ceased their ritual and returned to their positions on the perimeter. The assembled creatures broke into movement again. The tumbleweed rolled and whirled around the circle, the host of tiny crystals flew into the air, the wandercacti somersaulted in unison, Rrengyara stirred and rose to her feet, the flutterdown fluffballs emitted their supersonic squeaks, and all the light columns except the lime-green ones began to slide over the rock away from the circle. The pale turquoise columns led the way towards the mass of purple outcrops on the western side of the plateau, and only some tumbleweed and the lime green columns did not follow. The creatures streamed away from

the thirteen crystals — the enigmatic light columns and a dead human, a horde of leaping cacti and bouncing tumbleweed, and flutterdown and cave crystals swirling in chaotic patterns against the sky.

One fruit bat followed the departing multitude at a safe distance, leaving the other to continue the surveillance over the circle. The creatures had just disappeared behind a tall fanglike outcrop when the large crystals started to move again. They tilted themselves at different angles, and beams of colored light flashed into being: crimson, sapphire and emerald. The thirteen crystals were focusing the sunlight on one of the paths they had traced out to the center. As the rock began to soften, below a newly formed heat-haze, the tumbleweed arranged themselves into a circle surrounding the thirteen crystals. They rolled around the dancing ground, gaining speed as they circled the crystals, while the lime-green light columns watched impassively. Only the faint mental whispering indicated that the columns had any part in the ceremony.

The turquoise light columns led their army into a large cave mouth some distance away. The fruit bat remained outside.

When it became clear that the creatures would not reappear, the Racemind sent the fruit bat into the cave. Other members of the expedition were flying to the area, but at present the fruit bat was alone. He could not be regarded as expendable until the reinforcements arrived, so the Racemind was pre-

pared to remove him from the cave at the first hint of danger.

In the dark tunnel, the Racemind relied on the fruit bat's echolocation squeaks for a description of his surroundings. The picture so obtained was accurate enough, but it lacked a number of details which could only be gathered visually. The fruit bat glided silently into a small chamber from which three tunnels led further down into the rock. A faint milky light could just be seen in the middle opening, and the fruit bat headed toward the glow. The Racemind observed that the sides of the cave were straight and smooth. This part of the cave was obviously artificial. As the soft white glow grew stronger, alien emotions infiltrated the fruit bat's mental processes, arousing warm thoughts of peace, brotherhood and individualism, conflicting with their counterparts in the Racemind's conditioning. It was the first step in breaking the Racemind's control over the fruit bat, and it meant that at least one light column was in the cave ahead.

The Racemind let the unit continue toward the glow, ready to make him flee should the telepathic disturbance become too strong. However, the level of interference was still tolerable when the fruit bat came to the end of the tunnel. The scout hung from the ceiling, concealed among the shadows, and gazed at the strange little subterranean world before him. Tall crystals of various colors were everywhere, sending beams of colored light across the cave. A large pool of luminous

liquid down, at the far end cast its white radiance over a series of stone terraces and strips of green vegetation. The ceiling, ten feet above the highest terrace, bore clusters of minute milky crystals which gave off greenish-white phosphorescence. Light columns of many colors stood on the paved stone avenue between the strips of soil, and at intervals along the plantations were chameleon cacti ceaselessly imitating the colors of the columns. Other plants growing under the stone roof were tumbleweed, wandercacti, cracklebushes and several varieties of ferns. On the terraces, crawling between the light columns, were little brown animals which the Racemind had not seen before. The animals had no heads or tails, and their only limbs were four furry projections like starfish arms. Their bodies were featureless and extraordinarily mobile.

The effort of resisting the constant mental barrage was weakening the fruit bat. The scout was losing his powers of concentration, and his eyes were not scanning the cavern properly. The Racemind made him depart from the cavern, flying along the tunnel by which he had entered it. Next he could explore one of the other passages. There had been no trace of Rrengyara or any flitterdown in the cavern, so it was probable that the party from the crystal circle had taken another turning. The fruit bat glided into the small chamber where the cave divided into three.

At that moment the Racemind received information from two speedy flying ants travelling ahead

of the main expedition. Far to the north, they saw a group of light columns and tumbleweed heading rapidly towards the cave entrances. They would be here within minutes. Immediately the Racemind sent the fruit bat out of the cave back into the hot sunlight, where the unit took cover on top of a tall rock spire. From this vantage point the fruit bat watched three lemon-yellow columns and a shoal of tumbleweed approach and vanish into the cave mouth. The Racemind took no further action. It waited for the units of the expedition to arrive before it resumed the exploration of this cave.

XI

VISIONS IN THE HEAT-HAZE

The Racemind was now certain that there was no direct connection between the light columns and the extinct seamen. However, it had found a hypothetical third factor: the time-mirages. After that intense series of time-mirages three weeks ago, minute seismic disturbances had been recorded coming from the plateau area. The disturbances were continuing and fractionally increasing in strength. Similar phenomena were detected whenever new tunnels were being constructed, and the obvious implication was that the light columns were expanding the natural cave system.

Coincidence was a pattern of events which the Racemind always refused to accept until all other possibilities were exhausted; there

must be some reason why the light columns had started tunneling only a day after that zero moment three weeks ago. Perhaps the columns had succeeded where the seamen had failed, projecting themselves through the time-mirages from another age. That would explain the lack of any relationship between the columns and the normal protoplasmic forms of life. It would also mean assuming that the columns possessed powers far greater than those of any known creature or group of creatures. It meant that in a mere three weeks they had brought about all the changes on the plateau noted by the Racemind — including the conversion of the old crater into an evaporation-basin for the crystals. And the crystals themselves were a problem, being living creatures without any detectable mental processes. Had they been created on the plateau, or had they come through the time-mirages with the columns? Certainly they had not come into being through the normal processes of evolution.

A point of questionable importance, at this stage, was the series of attacks on the outlying farms. They were indecisive affairs, and the Racemind was not sure that they were intended to be attacks. The columns could mount a more vigorous campaign if they chose; as it was, the war flowers were doing more damage than the columns. Of course, this raised the question of what the light columns were trying to do at the farms. It might be worth sacrificing a small farm to see what happened.

The small brown animals on the subterranean terraces presented another problem. The Racemind had now finished going through its accumulated memories, and no such animals had been seen anywhere in the ant-controlled world. Also, they had no obvious ancestors. Like the crystals and light columns, they might have arisen spontaneously. There was a difference, of course, because the brown creatures were composed of protoplasm. As a working hypothesis, the Racemind assumed that the light columns had created the crystals — a relatively simple feat — but did their powers extend to the creation of living cells? There were too many unknown factors for an answer to be apparent. However, similar situations had occurred before and would occur again. The Racemind had encountered many strange animals just after the Ice Age, during its ill-fated northward expansion, and the intermediate stages in their evolution had remained obscure for centuries. Similarly, several parallels were recorded in the memories the Racemind had reviewed. As one example, Land South-East had recently suffered a plague of small tentacled insects which had swarmed in from the coast. The ancestors of these creatures would be discovered, given time. All things considered, the Racemind concluded that no final decision could be reached about the brown animals until further data were obtained. Soon the expedition would join the fruit bat waiting outside the cave, and then some units would explore the tunnel system

again. Guards were positioned by other caves where light columns had disappeared, but this was the only such entrance not sealed by an invisible barrier.

The appearance of the tentacled insects was another of the random evolutionary changes recorded in the memories the Racemind had been studying. Other changes were equally interesting. For instance, the streamerhags had altered in color, and their bodies no longer resembled a cluster of transparent white worms. The parasites were now flame-colored, and a bunch of streamerhags on a tree branch could easily be mistaken for a small fire when the long orange-red tails were being blown about by the breeze. Color changes were taking place in other creatures as well.

The dragonflies had become numerous under the ant civilization, and their brightly colored adult bodies were the subjects of many mobiles in the relaxation domes. Their larvae, the monstrous nymphs, were tolerated because the Racemind coveted their adult forms. After the new change the hideous larvae might become as popular as the adults, for their tough hides were bearing glossy metallic sheens which sparkled in the sunlight. A few weak-minded units had become hypnotized by the sight of these jewel-skinned monsters churning through the mud of the moat bottoms.

The cat warrens, deep in the uncultivated jungle, had changed little. The defenses were slightly more elaborate, and the rats were even

fewer in number, but that was all. The cats were still content to remain within their own territory, and they respected the ant units as long as there was no suspicion that the ants were hunting the cats' food animals. Because the ants took only plants from the jungle, no clashes had occurred since the last unsuccessful attempt to incorporate the cats into the Racemind. The ants now regarded the cats as a normally irrelevant natural hazard which was harmless unless provoked. The incredible mental and physical resistance which countered the ants' last attack would have ruined civilization if the Racemind had not withdrawn in time. The cats were the only race of intelligent independent individuals the ants had known — the seamen had become extinct before the Racemind learned of their existence. The rats which lived in association with the cats were not intelligent and were dying out. The cat population had not increased.

One constant feature of the reports was the appearance on the shores of mutated fish trying to conquer land, unaware that their efforts were too late. With the new increase in solar radiation more fish than ever were re-enacting this phase of evolutionary history, and in several places they were having an unexpected effect on the ecology of the coastal plains in Land South-East.

Quite early in the current radiation cycle, the wiry marram grass had undergone a spectacular change. Expanding rapidly over for-

merly bare sand dunes, the marram grass wove itself into a thick blanket which provided shelter for the small desert mice, sand martins, scorpions and other animals of the arid coast. The grass received scraps of decaying food matter, regular supplies of excretion and the dead bodies of the animals. The symbiotic partnership worked well for some time. Then the little fish with their crude lungs and stumpy legs began living in the grass, desperately eager to colonize the land. At first they occupied the grass nests by night, hunting food in the ocean by day, but when they returned from the sea they dripped salt water over the grass, gradually killing off the plants. When the grass near the shore died away, the fish moved further inland, the process continuing until the fish were unable to reach the sea in a single day. Some learned to live on land food, and the others died. The force of natural selection, acting on unstable genes, accelerated the pace of evolution still further. After a hundred years of this, strange amphibious creatures moved in great migratory herds from the plains to the coastal water and back, taking about a month for the whole journey. The entire ecology of the plains and the grass-covered dunes was now centered on these monthly migrations.

Another changing ecology was that of the atmosphere. The aerial plankton were one-celled microscopic plants and animals which spent their short lives drifting through the air like dust, never touching the ground. They were the sole diet of

many small insects and had existed in their present forms since well before the earliest days of the ant civilization. Now, for the first time in thousands of years, the myriad species of aerial plankton were undergoing mass mutations. Many were becoming flatter, and their bodies were covered with beautiful symmetrical patterns like snowflakes. Their numbers were increasing rapidly, because some of the insect predators could not adapt to feeding on the new species. To check this sudden population growth, the ants would have to breed new insects for the work of keeping down the aerial plankton.

In one of the desert regions, the wandercacti had started the plant counterpart of the animal boneyards. From all over the desert, the wandercacti arrived singly or in pairs, somersaulting over the sand in lithe imitation of a hydra. They planted themselves for the last time in a steep-sided waterless valley and remained there until they died of dehydration. The valley floor was covered with brittle green corpses. Other plants came to die as well, especially the round mobile tumbleweed and the graceful glitterbells. The Racemind knew, as the plants must know too, that the rocks of the valley included thick coal measures. One day the piled dead plants would catch fire, perhaps from the sun shining through a transparent glitterbell petal, and then the coal would be ignited. Once started, the death migrations would never cease. The aged plants would keep coming to their dying ground even though the

valley was a mass of flame. Some artist units, redecorating the cities, saw the possibilities and began designing murals to show the plants travelling over the yellow sands and immolating themselves in the valley of fire.

XII

BESIDE THE CIRCLE

The expedition joined the fruit bat on the stretch of open ground outside the cave. The purple outcrop towered high above them, its outline sharp and clear against the blue sky. Wasting no time, the Racemind sent a flying ant into the cave. Seeing by infrared light, the ant found nothing until it turned into the little chamber where the tunnel divided into three. The chamber was flooded with pale white radiance, and the ant came to a sudden halt. Before it were two tall figures: a slender white column and Rrengyara, her blackened body full of tiny points of light. Around them swirled a living cloud of cave crystals. No alien thoughts were audible, but this abnormal feature did not slow the reactions of the Racemind. It made the ant turn and retreat from the chamber at full speed. Abruptly, without any mental disturbance, contact was lost. It was a clean blank, identical to the death/capture of Rrengyara. The Racemind ordered three powerful humans into the cave, but they were stopped by another invisible barrier. The cave was closed.

Back at the crystal circle, the fruit bat watching the colored monoliths

was in danger. The lime-green columns were moving towards him, and he was powerless to flee. His limbs would not obey the Racemind's commands. His mind was filled with mental interference, the seductive thoughts of freedom, independence and brotherhood broadcast by the light columns. The contradictions in the various thoughts did not make them any less dangerous. The Racemind used all available methods of control, without effect. The fruit bat responded to nothing but the light columns. His thoughts were fainter, becoming cloudy and incoherent like those of a unit entering the dream caverns.

The Racemind sent the expedition speeding over the rocks to the trapped scout. If they were in time, their proximity would strengthen the mental group-solidarity patterns enough to save him. The attempt almost succeeded. The racing units were within sight of the circle when the fruit bat's thoughts ceased altogether. Hovering well above the thirteen crystals, the units saw the fruit bat glide from his ledge and land on the brown rocks by the lime-green columns. Telepathic impulses whispered in the minds of the expedition units, but they could resist the attack by combining their mental resources.

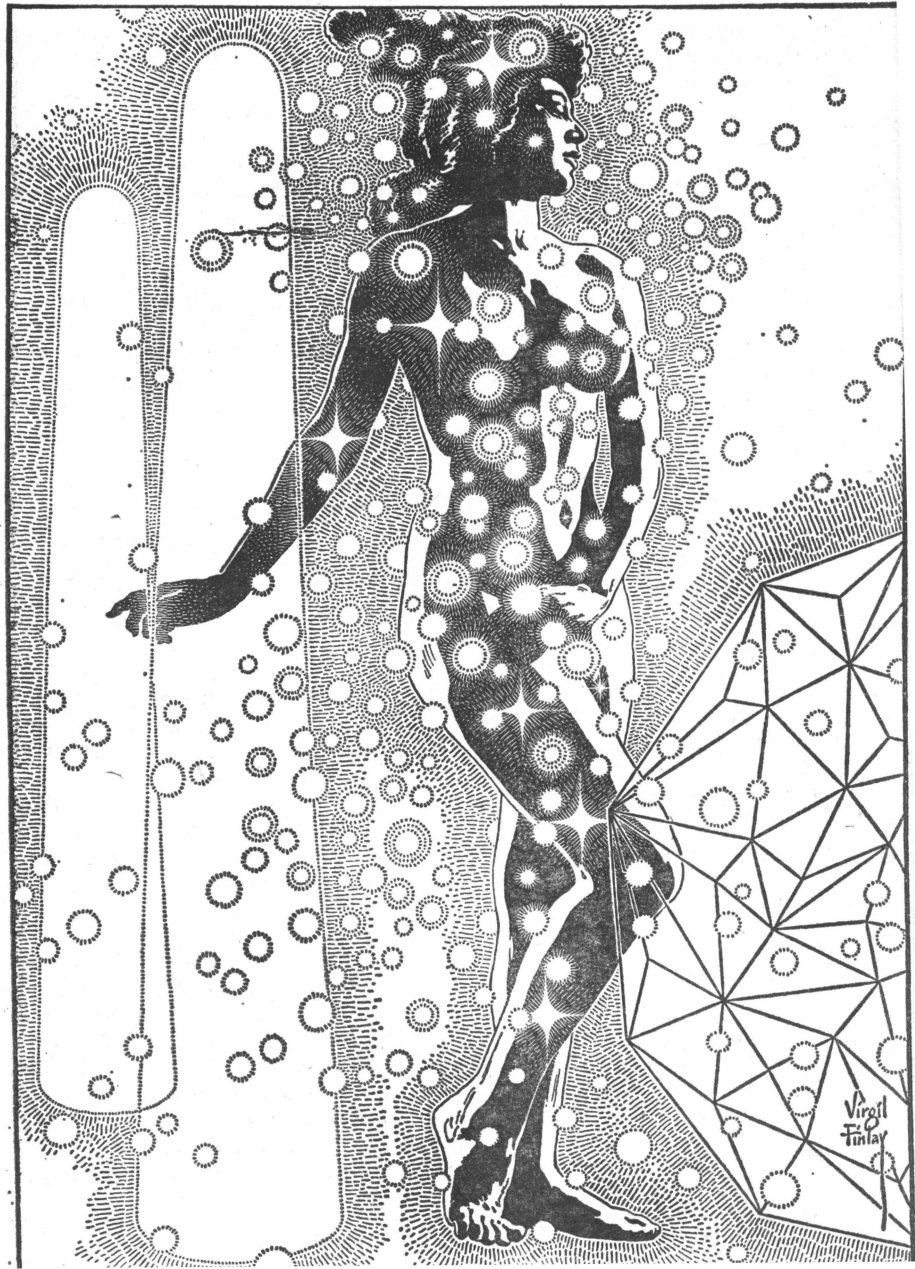
The fruit bat was not dead, it appeared. He clawed his way into the air, rising from the middle of the group of green columns, and with some difficulty he rose towards the eighty-odd units circling above. As Rrengyara had done, the fruit bat

was moving without thinking; the Racemind could detect no mental processes. The captured scout had no more thoughts than one of the crystals standing on the now dancing ground below. The Racemind made repeated unsuccessful telepathic probes as the fruit bat approached the hovering units. Finally the fruit bat reached the height of the expedition and glided slowly to and fro before the assembled units, moving sluggishly as if in pain. The Racemind waited for the scout to act.

Suddenly a great burst of mental force lashed out at the expedition — the thoughts of the light columns, amplified many times. The units' defences went into operation automatically, and the attack stopped after less than a second. The fruit bat drifted back down to the ground, returning to the light columns by the circle. The incident was over, leaving the Racemind wondering just what the columns had hoped to achieve. The Racemind was beginning to favor the hypothesis that the "attacks" were really attempts at communication. But it could not explain the capture/killing of Rrengyara and the other lost units.

A tall isolated outcrop of purple rock was situated to the south of the crystal circle. The expedition settled onto its ledges and looked down on the circle and the columns, waiting for the next attack. The Racemind was certain the light columns would continue their efforts to make mental contact, and it wanted its units fairly alert when the next move was made.

Nearly an hour went by. The crea-



tures below were motionless all the time, even the tumbleweed. The thirteen colored crystals — emerald, crimson and sapphire blue — were standing on the rim of their new dancing ground, waiting like the others.

Two moving objects appeared from behind a spur of purple-red stone. The Racemind identified them at once: Rrengyara and the tall white light column. Thousands of tiny white cave crystals darted to and fro above them. Faint mental static came from the column. Reaching the lime-green columns, they halted. Then Rrengyara went on alone, around the crystal circle, towards the outcrop where the expedition was gathered. The units watched her approach, with strange emotions from the humans in the party. Her dark body still had those little white crystals embedded in it.

Standing before the expedition, without looking up at the units covering the rock above her, Rrengyara said: "We must speak with you, Racemind of Earth."

Communication had begun.

XIII

THE QUEST ENDS

Rrengyara was using the vocal speech still current among the humans. Telepathic contact was as remote as ever, so the Racemind was forced to reply through one of its human units. The human left its ledge and stood before Rrengyara. Slowly, using the time-consuming spoken language, the Racemind

learned the facts about the light columns and their associated life forms.

The Racemind had a good knowledge of astronomy, and in addition to this its scientist units had continuously studied the sun to predict the effects of the variations in solar radiation. However, it had never considered using its knowledge of the solar system for other purposes. As Rrengyara spoke, items of hitherto unconnected information in the Racemind's memories began fitting together.

The ancient humans had travelled to other worlds, Rrengyara said. At the height of their powers, these humans reached the sun and attacked it with their machines. Badly wounded, the sun drove them off. It was still in the process of healing itself, and its radiations would not return to normal until it was well again. The radiation causing the evolutionary changes on Earth was characteristic of a sun-creature's growth stage and had caused the great leaps of evolution in the past until it became weaker in the sun's adolescence. This radiation was now stronger than it had been in any previous period of the sun's life, and this was the missing factor linking the light columns with the seamen. The seamen had travelled from the past, via the time-mirages, and the light columns had travelled from the sun, along the waves of solar radiation.

The sun was a living creature — what else but life could waste energy at such an appalling rate? — and it had parasites in its circulatory

system. The light columns lived in the Bright Ways, streams of living matter carrying complex energy systems to all parts of the atomic furnace which was the sun. The light columns, for all their vast experience and powers, were merely parasites which the sun did not even notice. After the arrival and retreat of the humans, several groups of light columns decided that life on Earth would be far more rewarding than life in the Bright Ways. Extrapolating the sun's recovery sequence and selecting the most powerful burst of radiation, these light columns left their fellow parasites and started the long hazardous journey to Earth. Ninety per cent of them died on the way.

On Earth, the light columns soon learned that the planet was a dead world, and that life belonged to a few weird objects of jellylike substance. The machines which had intrigued the solar parasites had disappeared centuries ago. Undismayed, the light columns started a new civilization centered on their own communal mind. The crater lake where the giant crystals were formed was created in five days, and the first cave crystals were made even sooner. The work of expanding the cave system had begun immediately. Tumbleweed came rolling to the plateau, from the fertile western valleys, accompanied by the little brown animals the Racemind had seen on the underground terraces. The crystals were taught sun worship as a first step towards developing their potential intelligence. The work went on without a break until some light

columns exploring the dry eastern valleys encountered a party of human children.

From that brief contact, the light columns knew that another and probably hostile group consciousness existed on this planet. While the columns were making plans for investigating this other intelligence, the human scout Rrengyara was found by some cave crystals. She was captured and incorporated into the group mind by force. Studying the mistakes made on Rrengyara, the columns learned how to take over controlled creatures without causing physical damage. However, when their emissaries visited some farms they were repulsed by seemingly impregnable mental defenses. More ant-controlled scouts were captured, but the problem of communication was not solved until the columns brought Rrengyara to make vocal contact with the Racemind.

As Rrengyara spoke, the Racemind learned that its own conditioning was responsible for the mental silence from the crystals, captured units and other life forms with the columns. The knowledge of its own impotence had caused an accidental mental block. Conflicting mental impulses had resulted in a disruption of the command channels, spreading to affect receptivity as well. Considering this point, the Racemind worked out a method of deconditioning a unit so that direct mental contact could be made with the light columns. That should remove the Racemind's self-induced mental blocks. The next step was

to take over the light columns, and it worked out a method for that too. The main unknown factor now was the strength of resistance from the columns. The Racemind partially deconditioned a flying ant and sent a thought probe through it into the nearest crystal.

Rrengyara broke off her speech. Through her, the light columns said, "Stop that!"

The crystal was an intelligent creature with a mental field similar to that of a human. The Racemind withdrew quickly and sent a probe into Rrengyara. Her mind was a void in which tiny pictorial thoughts hurtled through darkness, like meteors in the night. The columns' control stabbed the black emptiness as a cylindrical bar of burning matter. In those flames the Racemind saw the basic drive which motivated the light columns — an instinctive desire to extend life over every particle of inanimate substance that existed. The columns had a vision of an Earth in which every piece of matter was alive and knew its brotherhood with the rest of the living world. Even the rocks would have awareness and emotions of their own.

"This must cease," said Rrengyara. "We must control you."

"That will be decided when I possess the necessary data," the Racemind replied. Without hesitation it sent a probe into the nearest light column.

The result was chaos.

Now the Racemind learned how effective the light column's thoughts could be when used as a weapon. The wave of mental force almost en-

gulfed the units in that first instant before the automatic defenses went up. Immediately the entire expedition — including those stationed elsewhere — went into a form of cataleptic trance which enabled the Racemind to continue the battle without being forced to direct vital energy into the maintenance of the units' bodies. All perception of their surroundings ceased as their life energies were thrown into the defense. Within seconds the attack faltered, and the Racemind knew the light columns were unable to make a sustained effort on this level. It could master them. And as it realized this the failing attack died away altogether.

The light columns would be weakened now. The Racemind made a fleeting mental contact with the column it had probed. The parasite of the Bright Ways was capable of independent thought, like a human. Counterparts of the human emotions existed in the column's psychological structure. Over everything was the burning vision of the Bright Ways, the paradise which might yet be created here on Earth. The fierce desire to spread life to every atom of the world pounded out from the lime-green column, accompanied by the intense longing for all this uncreated life to be part of a single gigantic world-organism.

As the Racemind absorbed the column's thoughts, the alien mental rhythms set up disturbance patterns similar to those caused by the war flowers. The deconditioned unit through which the Racemind was working began dreaming of wild bat-

bles, striking out at enemies, seeing blood pouring from wounds Breaking off contact, the Racemind analyzed the brief skirmish. The column had been working on the weakness within the unit instead of trying to win by force.

XIV

THE FINAL CONFRONTATION

“You must stop,” said Rrengyara, and then the Racemind possessed her again. Her mind was scarred and broken, and as soon as the old conditioning returned she knew that she was destined for the dream caverns. Beside the motionless crystals, the lime-green columns sank slowly into the ground. A yellow column had disappeared in this way, the Racemind remembered. Rrengyara’s recapture and the movement of the columns occurred simultaneously. The Racemind chose that moment to begin its assault on the light columns.

The attack was concentrated on the tall white column which had accompanied Rrengyara. It was the most powerful column, and the most important as a captive. Overwhelmed by the multilevel barrage of mental force, the white column’s mind folded into nothingness, reappearing as a constituent of the Racemind. Directing its attack through the white column, the Racemind seized the seven lime-green columns, which were still partially above ground. Then it absorbed the thirteen crystals, and lastly it repossessed the fruit bat.

With every unit it gained, the Racemind increased its effective power on the plateau. Using its new strength, it reached out for further minds — and stopped. All the free light columns and their slave creatures were united against the new threat to their independent survival. It was a basic law of ecology that no two species with identical environmental characteristics could exist together in a stable relationship; sooner or later one of the competing species would exterminate the other, directly or indirectly. Adapting this law to the current situation, the Racemind knew that a conflict between the two group consciousnesses was inevitable. The light columns had known it too, when Rrengyara said, “We must control you.”

In every city of the ant civilization, millions of units went into the trance state which enabled the Racemind to make full use of their mental energies. Above the dusty plateau, a time mirage appeared in the sky: a flying cross-shaped object made by the ancient humans, a thing of the past made visible by a freak of nature. The mirage shimmered and vanished, and after that nothing moved save the timeless heat haze. The Racemind was ready for its final attack.

The Racemind’s consciousness cascaded out from the expedition and the other units, expanding across the plateau like a foaming wave sweeping over a beach. In its state of abnormal sensitivity the Racemind was contacting every living thing in the mountains as its sphere

of awareness washed over them. The minor creatures were swallowed up immediately, but the light columns resisted. Incredibly, they fought back. Without defending themselves, they assaulted the Racemind at the critical moment, tearing into it with great streams of energy. The Racemind merged itself with the group mind of the columns; the contact brought it into the sun. As waves of desperate madness roared out from the columns, the Racemind was buffeted by burning images of the Bright Ways. It had seen the memories in the columns it had taken, but now it was living them. It was surrounded by golden streams of dazzling fire, surging torrents swirling it into the flames. Emotions flashed through the Bright Ways, nourishing the pale parasites, creating currents and turbulence on other energy levels.

The vision faded slowly as the Racemind fought to regain control of itself. The light columns' counterattack had almost succeeded. Now even the essential workers were falling into the trance state, giving their energies to the titanic struggle. One by one, the columns succumbed to the Racemind. It grew stronger, and the enemy grew weaker. Burnt-out units were dying in the cities, but the battle was nearing its end. The Racemind engulfed the alien group consciousness, forcing it inward on itself, taking over its constituent creatures as it retreated.

Suddenly there were too few light columns to maintain their mass mind, and it disintegrated. The final

burst of agony mingled with despairing death-images of the Bright Ways. The Racemind would carry those last visions in its memories for all time.

It was over. Numbed by the violence of the conflict, the Racemind reawakened its units from the trance. Civilization began to function again as the units resumed their normal work. The light columns had been defeated, and the Racemind was alone once more.

As the changes continued, the world became more and more hostile to protoplasm. The ants attempted to create self-supporting subterranean cities, but all the underground colonies failed. The Racemind was forced to seek shelter in the oceans, as the seamen had done thousands of years before.

Time drifted on, and slowly the land surfaces became completely devoid of protoplasm. The Racemind divided into two: a major segment for the submarine civilization, and a minor segment which controlled the land creatures. Eventually the two parted completely, and only the grotesque monsters which crawled up the beaches to die showed that marine life still existed.

The two intelligent land races, the crystals and the light columns, developed their characteristics of independence and individualism until the land Racemind ceased to exist. The minor creatures — sunbursts, rock hags, cave crystals, melters and so on — retained group minds in many instances, although life forms such as fireballs and dust-

devils had been independent from the beginning. The light columns never lost their desire to bring life to the inanimate materials of the Earth, and this was the main purpose of the civilization they founded. They worked to change their world into life.

The virtual disappearance of protoplasm life was of no consequence — if anything it was an advantage, because the new creatures were far less limited in their choice of environments. For instance, the dust devils could exist in any fluid medium, and sunbursts were even more adaptable. As conditions on Earth grew harsher, life evolved to fit the requirement for survival, and all the while the light columns went on with their patient work. Rocks were brought to awareness in the heat-haze, pools of liquid shielded themselves from evaporation with telekinetic barriers, and telepathic mountains called to each other across the burning deserts. Within the sleeping giants that were the oceans, protoplasm survived as a series of hideous parasites haunting the mud flats.

Long after the activation of the Earth's crust had started, the crystals began to die out. They were less stable than most creatures, and were either becoming sterile or changing into more adaptable allotropic forms. The light columns themselves had become sterile, but they rendered themselves immortal and continued their work without pause. No such alternative was open to the crystals, and their numbers grew ever smaller.

There was a legend about the death of the last crystal:

He was a lonely child, who never knew others of his kind. Brought up within the shield of a large copper sulphate polyhydrate pool, the last crystal was still immature when a block of pumice crashed through the shield to kill the pool. Adult in body, a child in experience, the crystal had gained his knowledge of the world from fanciful stories told by the pool. The last crystal questioned the pumice and learned that the block had been ejected by a volcano among the nearby mountains. The pool had told him about such things, saying that the lava streams were Earth's counterparts of the Bright Ways.

Leaving the fused mass which had been the pool, the crystal set off to find the volcano.

He was directed to the right place by a disinterested mountain which prophesied an early death for him. He disregarded the prophecy and traveled on. At the foot of the volcano he met a dust-devil which warned him against ascending the ash-covered slopes. Again he ignored the advice. And just below the summit, when he was looking ahead at the smoke and glowing cinders pouring from the crater, his way was barred by a yellow light column. He protested and explained that he wished to immerse himself in lava, reliving his ancestral memories of the Bright Ways. The light column only sighed, knowing that the columns had given their creatures this memory, and allowed the last crystal to pass.

Waves of heat pounded against the crystal as he dragged himself over the rim. Clouds of gray smoke were billowing up around him, but several hundred feet below they were lit up by a warm orange-yellow glow. The crystal went crashing down the steep sides into the depths of the crater, chipping off flakes from his sides against the boulders. The volcano spoke to him, welcoming him into its presence, bid-

ding him speed into the Bright Ways. He plunged into the orange lava, smoke swirling around him . . . and for a brief instant he achieved his goal.

Then the heat took him, and his crystalline structure collapsed. He became a fine powder, buried in the lava. The particles of his body were rapidly dispersed by the relentless currents. Soon there was nothing left at all. **END**



Want to meet your favorite author? See science-fiction fans in their native habitat? Talk about the stories you've liked and hated? Here are some of the upcoming science-fiction events. We'll try to keep it up-to-date and complete, month by month . . . so if you are running a conference, let us know!

February 9-11 1968: BALTICONFERENCE. At Lord Baltimore Hotel, Baltimore Md. For information: Jack L. Chalker, 5111 Liberty Heights Ave., Baltimore, Md. 21207. Membership \$1.50.

March 3, 1968: ESFA Annual Open Meeting. At YM-YWCA, 600 Broad Street, Newark, N.J.; for information, Allan Howard, 157 Grafton Ave., Newark, N.J. 07104. Membership \$1.25.

March 16, 1968. SFWA Awards Dinner. Speakers, presentation of annual "Nebula" awards for excellence. Simultaneous dinners in New York and Oakland, Calif. Open to members of Science Fiction Writers of America and guests only; for information (East Coast), Robert Silverberg, 5020 Goodridge Ave., NYC 10471; (West Coast), Poul Anderson, 3 Las Palomas, Orinda, Calif. 94563. An informal and unofficial conference is **SUNBEAM CARESS**

planned for the day of the banquet on the West Coast — SFWA members only.

March 23-24, 1968. BOSKONE-5. At Statler-Hilton Hotel, Boston; for information, Paul Galvin, 219 Harvard Street, Cambridge, Mass. 02139. Guest of Honor, Larry Niven; presentation of "Skylark" award; meeting of Tolkien Society, etc. Membership \$2.00.

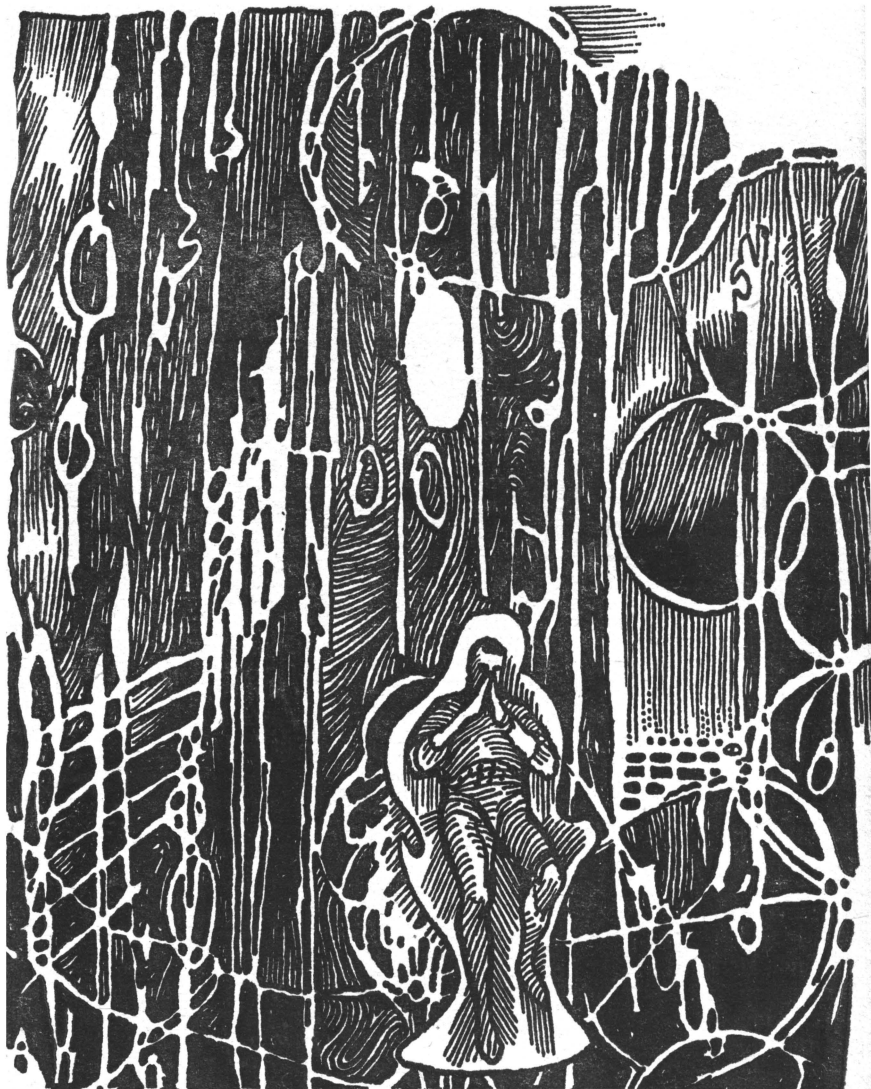
March 30-31, 1968, MARCON III. At Holiday Inn East, Columbus, Ohio. Guest of Honor, Frederik Pohl; panel discussions, talks, etc. For information: Larry Smith, 216 East Tibet Road, Columbus, Ohio 43202. Membership \$1.50.

April 12-15, 1968. THIRDMANCON. At St. Anne's Hotel, Buxton, Derbyshire, England. Guest of Honor, Kenneth Bulmer. For information: Harry Nadler, 5 South Mesnefield Road, Salford 7, Lancaster, England. Membership, \$1.00.

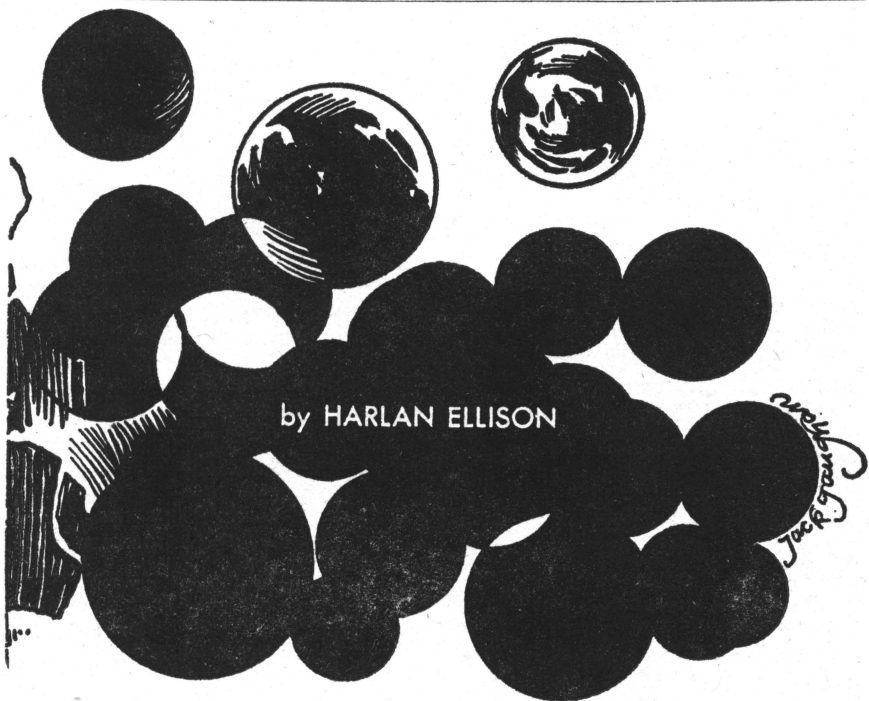
May 10-12, 1968: DISCLAVE. Washington D. C. Regency-Congress Motor Hotel. For information: Jack C. Halderman, 1244 Woodbourne Avenue, Baltimore, Md.

August 23-25, 1968. DEEP SOUTH SF CONFERENCE VI, New Orleans, Louisiana. Details to be announced. For information: John H. Guidry, 5 Fisch Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70124.

August 29-September 2, 1968. BAYCON: 26th World Science Fiction Convention. At Hotel Claremont, Oakland California. Philip José Farmer, Guest of Honor. More details later. For information: BAYCON, P.O. Box 261 Fairmont Station, El Cerrito, Calif. 94530. Membership: \$1.00 foreign, \$2.00 supporting, \$3.00 attending. Join now and receive Progress Reports.



WORLDS TO KILL



by HARLAN ELLISON

***He ranged the myriad planets of
the galaxy — and destroyed them!***

I

Clasping the jeweled hilt of the stone kris with both hands, the Rt. Rev. Mr. Push, exalted high priest of the One Authentic Temple of God, Inc., raised it slowly heavenward, point downward, perfectly straight and parallel to his naked and painted body. When his extended elbows formed the outside points of a dia-

mond, and the brown-stained blade was just above his head, he began to intone the sacred litany. The sound of it was picked up by the loud-speaker mike hanging around his neck and was thrown out across the great stadium.

Even so, it was difficult making out the words where the cripple sat, across the huge tiered bowl, in the 2.50 seats. A candy butcher was

shrieking, "Koola! Frynuts! Cold Koola! Hot Frynuts!" at the end of his row, and the high priest's sacred singsong was drowned out by the commercial.

Hunkered down, legless, on his rolling cart, the leather-tanned man lifted the binoculars to his eyes again and sighted across the bowl to the sacrificial altar, trying to lip-synch the few words he was able to make out, with the precise mouth movements of the high priest.

The litany came to an end, and the crowd shouted its responses with religious enthusiasm. The legless man on the cart tracked the binoculars rapidly across the crowd, and then brought their unblinking sight back to the high priest as he arched back slightly, rib cage suddenly becoming prominent with the effort, and drove straight down, hard, with the kris, into the red circle that had been painted over the naked girl's heart.

As the kris sank in to the jeweled hilt the crowd roared, leaping to its feet, throwing sacrificial roses aloft.

On his cart, the cripple holstered his binoculars and finished his popcorn. The crowd blocked off his view of everything but their straining bodies. The voices went up and seemed to become too shrill to have emanated from human throats.

When the bedlam quieted, the legless man asked two of the nearest enthusiasts if they would lift his cart down off the seat. When they had set him in the aisle, he propelled himself with difficulty up the aisle to the exit portal, and down the ramp. Behind him another virgin was being sacrificed.

Outside the stadium, scooting along smoothly with a pair of padded wooden blocks strapped over his hands, the cripple made for a freight expressway moving like quicksilver through the suburban stadium section.

Crates of goods, force-locked in position to avoid theft or spillage, hissed past him on the maximum-speed strip, as he came abreast of a checkloading station. The clocker, a man of indeterminate age chewing on a chocolate ring, did not bother to look up as the cripple propelled himself up the short metal ramp with a forceful rowing motion. But when the little cart stopped in front of the clocker's bubble — a pie-wedge that was opened in its force-field so he could get the dubious benefits of the sticky moist breeze blowing across the expressways — he looked down from his seat, and his eyes narrowed.

"Excuse me," the cripple asked politely, "would you do me a kind of a favor, please?"

The clocker did things with his mouth, cleaning out the bits of nuts the chocolate ring had deposited between his teeth. "What?"

A short, harsh syllable.

"I, uh, can't afford a passenger slipway, and I was wondering if you'd let me ride the freightway down to the 147th Street Oval . . .?"

The clocker was shaking his head. "No."

"You wouldn't have to lock me on," the cripple insisted. "I can do a thing with the wheels, they've got a vacuum base. It wouldn't be any bother."

Th clocker turned away abruptly. "I'd really appreciate it," the cripple pressed him.

The clocker turned back, eyes narrowed again, mouth hard. "Against the rules, bo, you know that. Don't wanna discuss't. Just slipaway."

The cripple's deeply tanned face grew tense, jaw muscles moved swiftly, and his anger extended itself through his features to his nose, which quivered like an animal's. "Some helluva way to treat a bo," he snapped. "How the hell you think I got shortn'd this way, you bastard! I worked the slips, same's you. Now I give both my legs and I come an' ask another workman same's I was, an' what I get? Dumped on, is what it is. You bastard, all I asked was for a ride down'ta the Oval, that such a big damn thing?"

The clocker looked shocked, and suddenly chagrined.

"Hey, I'm sorry, bo."

The cripple did not reply. He slipped the wooden blocks back on his hands and started to turn himself around. The clocker got down off his seat, which regained its original shape sighing softly. The clocker came and stood in front of the little cart. "No, hey, I'm really sorry, bo. It's, you know, they get you locked in with rules. Hell, I'll put you on a slip, just gimme a minute."

The cripple nodded brusquely, as though only now getting his due.

The clocker opened the access lock and walked ahead of the cart as the cripple rolled after him. The elevator dropped them down just below the level of the works, and they moved

across under the maximum-speed and mid-range slipways. They came up through the loading lock between the mid-range and slow-speed slips, and the clocker got down on his knees and made ready to shove the cart onto the slowest slipway.

"Thanks," the cripple smiled.

The clocker made a forget-it motion with his hand and nudged him onto the slipway. As the cripple slid away, the clocker stood up and called after him, "Hey, sorry, bo!"

Three miles down the slipway, the cripple shifted slips more adroitly than the clocker would have thought possible. He held his position on the mid-range slipway for a quarter mile, then shifted again. Now on the maximum-speed freightway, with the whining of the works making it impossible for any spy equipment of the priest's police to pick up his words, he rubbed back the flap of flesh on his right bicep that concealed the communications device, and began to report:

"Okay. Final stuff. Feed it directly to the machine. The preliminary judgments seemed to be accurate. They've reached a seven stage in technology, but socially they're doing maybe four. Strong myth and religious ties. Wide open for a crash-in tactic, I think. No, make that a certainty. Couch the attack in a religious way, maybe the fall of a sun god, or a second-coming kind of thing. That'll put them into a temporary panic, and first penetration can be effected with minimal losses. Now I'm going to feed you the coded stuff for precision, but the one thing

I couldn't code-up is the barbarism thing they've got going here. Really a bunch of animals, just under the surface. That may be our strongest weapon, so code what you can of it, and let the analyzer extrap the rest. You can get Arnak's troops ready, and tell Folger we'll need light to medium armor on the cruisers, probably nothing any heavier. Except I've got a long list of special stuff Nord'll have to rig up for particular jobs. Okay now I'll wait for your signal for clear on the machine. . . ."

He rode the express freightway another three miles, in silence, waiting.

When it came, it was a sharp jamming buzz, and he began to speak in a flat, emotionless voice into his bicep:

"Invasion ET commence ourtime five slant two five slant zero nine-er slant thirteen hundred hours. . . ."

He had long since passed the 147th Street Oval by the time he had finished transmitting; his words had gone out through the atmosphere, directed through space in a line as straight as a thought, which was by no means straight. Curlicued and doubled-back, the transmission had been picked up by doggie stations and boosted even further.

In another star-system altogether, the transmission had been received, and acknowledged.

On the freightway, the legless cripple rose from his cart, stretched his legs and changed his clothes quickly. When he shifted slips, back down to the low-speed strip, he was dressed as a kelp fisherman in from the

field, wearing country bumpkirkn clothing, and he had legs.

He disappeared without a trace into the amusement suburb. It was twelve days histime till the planet was scheduled to die.

II

Natives called the planet Reef. Its origins in slang went back to the first Terran explosion outward, when the immigrants, sick to death of space and wandering, had foundered on that bright planet of a blue-white star. Reef, on which they had built a world for themselves. Reef, on the verge of being invaded.

A manta was dropped down first. It sowed the winds with an alienation dust that drove every man from every other man, that sent husbands quivering from their wives and mothers from their children. The people of Reef broke into tiny communities of one frightened soul each. Then the fireballs came down, and the people trembled in fear and superstition.

Then came Folger's cruisers. The medium class stock took out the military installations and the railheads, the shipping ports and the single space center. The lightweights ranged up and down the planet slicing communications lines, blacking out television and radian, playing search-and-destroy with any pockets of possible organized resistance (as reported by the advance scout, the legless cripple, the man known as Jared). Then the troop platforms were skimmed in, and Arnak's comandos spun their spiderwebs down,

waiting for the word to downdrop. Through the early morning sky the great circular black platforms rode the winds, the cilia-thin spiderwebs hanging down like sensory-feelers of some gigantic sea creature.

The commandos waited.

The psycheprobe stations were dropped in seventy previously specified locations, hitting the planet at full acceleration and shucking their protective hulls on impact. They drove straight down through the crust of the planet linking up in a network of overriding thought-patterns, the broadcast went out, jamming normal brain-signals.

In varying intensities the psycheprobes washed the minds of the invaded with hopelessness, shame, cowardice, depression, terror, paranoia, nausea, weariness, hunger, a desire to return to the womb, a realization that there was never, ever any such return possible for them . . . and back through the cycle again.

The commandos dropped.

ET of Commencement was 5/25/-09/1300 hours.

In the flagship *Tempest*, Jared received the Planetary Secure signal on 5/27/09/0644 hours. It had taken forty-one hours and forty-four minutes to initiate, execute and complete the subjugation of the planet called Reef. It was the one hundred and seventy-fourth planet Jared had conquered for a client.

On the bridge of the *Tempest*, the circular hull was studded with two hundred highly sophisticated two-way viewing screens showing every phase of the operation.

Jared had been watching the screens; now he turned to the humanoid with the squid's head and said softly, "Pay me."

Ram, unquestioned ruler of thirty million squid humanoids existing on a dark planet of Reef's sun, a being who had lived his life in various kinds of darkness, turned to the leathery-tanned man, and his one great eye blinked quickly.

The tentacles that draped down over his chest and back twirled and fretted. "You do a magnificent job, Jared," his tentacle twined.

"Pay me," Jared repeated.

Ram twined, "The job is not completed."

"You heard the Secure signal. You owe me the final half of your payment. Make it, Ram."

The squid-creature's rear tentacles made a plaited statement to a second squid-being near the dropshaft. Ram's lieutenant saluted with a roil and stepped off into the dropshaft.

"He will return momentarily with the cases."

"Thank you, Ram." Jared turned back to his screens.

Ram watched him for long moments, then stepped up beside him. Jared was not a tall man; the squid-being stood a full head above him. Ram was barely capable of forming human speech, his vocal apparatus composed almost entirely of vibrating membranes. Yet he fancied himself a cosmopolite, and it pleased him to make the attempt. With a hideous parody of the speech of men, he ventured, "Yooo errr fummmm Earssss orrrrinnnyyy, hiiii mmmm towwww?"

Jared kept his eyes on screen 113, where commandos were separating women from men into force-screened compounds. "Yes. I'm an Earthman. Originally."

But his tone was not one to encourage conversation. Had Ram been of Earth, he would have recognized the tone. But as he was not, "Whudd-dizzidd lyggonnn Earsss?"

Jared turned slowly.

He stared at Ram until the alien's tentacles began a reflexive twining. He did not answer, and in a few moments Ram moved away, twining behind Jared's back, "Arrogant polyp! Mercenary!"

Ram's lieutenant lifted into view, followed by two alien squids carrying metal cases. They were set down at Ram's feet, and he was just looking up, focusing the great eye, when Jared came to him. "Open them," the leathery space said. Ram wagged to his lieutenant.

The lieutenant undulated the command to the two squid troopers with the caskets, at the same time handing an unscrambler to one of them. The instrument was used on the force-bead locks, and the caskets hissed open pneumatically.

Jared looked down into the cases, first one, then the other.

"Thank you, Ram," he said.

"One year's production of The Metal," Ram said softly, slowly, with movements like seaweed in a gentle, warm ocean current. "Enough of The Metal to light a planet for a thousand years. Enough to power a million cruisers to the edge of infinity. Enough to buy a world."

"It bought you Reef," Jared said.

"This half . . . and the other half . . . two year's production of my world. The most valuable export we have ever had. What will you do with all of it?"

Jared looked at him coldly. The silence grew. Ram turned away.

Jared took the unscrambler and thumbed in a new setting. Then without another look at The Metal within the cases, he sealed them, the lids lowering on their pneumatic rods. "Aren't you curious whether I short-changed you?" Ram wagged his interpretation tentacle signalling wry good humor.

Jared smiled at him with a noticeable lack of warmth. "You wouldn't cheat me, Ram. You want to hire me again. To conquer Signa II."

Ram's lieutenant made a frantic movement. A movement of consternation. Ram silenced him with a wave.

The squid creature took a step toward Jared.

"Yes. Yes, I do."

Jared turned back to the screens. He pointed to screen 50. "Look, Ram. The end is coming to Reef."

On the screen the sky of Reef had turned yellow with day. In the distance the red sun was a blur. Down out of that crimson sky Ram's chosen governor was dropping, his human body drawn up inside the soft ruff of its squid head. The one great eye, its central orb gleaming green and bright, the governor was dropping down from a squid cruiser riding safely within an attack wedge of Jared's invasion force.

The governor was descending to

take control of the conquered planet from Jared's mercenaries. His squid flesh gloyed with the black and red tints of joy.

Ram's tentacles touched Jared on the shoulder.

The man who conquered worlds for a price turned half to him. Ram spoke with the intentness pattern.

"Now I have two worlds in this system. Signa II is next. Then Gola, Karthes, Vale and Kalpurnika. My people will rule the system. We lie in the center of the hub of the trade lanes. Half of everything is yours as payment. Jared?"

The mercenary wore a garment very much like a tunic. His arms were bare. Now he rubbed one muscular forearm with the stiffened fingers of his other hand. He did not respond to Ram's words; there was something of unliving stone in his expression.

"I know you've done it for other worlds," Ram pressed on. "My reports on your work were thorough. That is why I came to you. I know you've done jobs for clients several times in the same system. I *need* the other five to strengthen my position in this galaxy. They'll take Reef back if —"

Jared spoke with no intonation, flat and final. "No."

"But why?"

Jared walked away from him, then.

Ram stared after him for a few moments, then stalked after him, suddenly lashing out with tentacles that encircled the mercenary's waist and chest. He spun him around and hissed, "Yooo doooo sissss forrrr meeee!"

Jared's movements were almost too quick to see; grasping the thick ropes of the tentacles circling his waist in one hand, and the tentacles around his chest with the other, he dipped and spun out of their encircling grasp. Then he planted himself firmly and contracted his body in a peculiar manner, literally lifting the squid creature off his feet, whirling and hurling him across the bridge. It was an unexpected and artful maneuver, and Ram careened through the air toward a bulkhead. At the beginning of the movement his legs and arms and tentacles had been a twisted mass, but instinctively he withdrew his body into the ruff of the squid head, and as he struck the wall his tentacles touched first, absorbing the shock. The humanoid body dropped down out of the squid head, and he touched down on the deck no more unsettled than he had been before Jared had thrown him.

Jared aimed a finger at the alien. "I took your commission for one job, one job only, Ram. I've done my job, you've paid me. The contract is fulfilled. Go take possession of your conquered province."

Ram betrayed no sign of fury at the Earthman's words. He walked quickly to the dropshaft and disappeared. The remaining squids stood immobile, as though waiting for a command from the Earthman. He did not speak.

Then the lieutenant signaled his men, and they went downship after Ram.

Not long after, Jared saw the shuttle ship of Ram and his group drop out of the *Tempest*. He followed it

down on screens 71-5, his face frozen without expression.

But much later, when Arnak's commandos had been withdrawn and Ram's governor had brought in his own holding forces, Jared's face was a field of emotions, watching the wholesale slaughter in the force-screened compounds.

In a matter of hours three-fourths of the population of Reef was dead. The remaining millions already being routed to work areas.

Jared fed the coursecomp a route back and went away from there.

He left the screens burning, showing space and not-space, showing stars and whirling pinwheels of galaxies.

He drenched himself in the loneliness of darkness.

The cases of The Metal remained unmoved on the bridge.

Jared took no calls on the bridge; alone, watching nothing as the *Tempest* stretched itself between the scene of his last commission and the return base.

Downship, the staff found it difficult to speak to one another. They were loyal, but there were times when their employer took on assignments they could not reconcile with even their basest motives.

It was night.

It was always night.

There was seldom anything but silence in the night.

III

Pocked, but faceless, the bulk of Jared's moon grew ever greater. Somehow, it was less a home than a

return base for him. He watched it empty, two hundred times in two hundred screens. He was compelled to close his eyes.

As they approached the snuff-out barrier that invisibly closed Jared's moon off from the rest of the universe, there on the dark edge of nowhere, he coded the signals for entry.

The crust of the blasted moon-surface rolled back, and the *Tempest* entered. The moon closed over the flagship. The rest of the rolling stock was already berthed. Jared left the ship, entered one of the dropshafts ranked to one side of the mooring docks and was sucked up to the city level.

The core of Jared's moon had been artificially hollowed. The machine had been planted in the center. Around the core of the machine Jared's city had been built. An impregnable fortress.

He went straight to his town house, where he tore off his clothes, bathed and let the mecks massage and relax him. Then he slept for twenty-six hours.

When he arose, he punched out breakfast, though it was artificial night in the city. All around him, above and below, the sound of the machine, vague and satisfied, hummed in the walls. The machine was thinking. He sat on the edge of a chair and ate breakfast.

Then he turned off the air-jets that had been his bed, bathed again and went downstairs to check what his staff had put on the memorycoders. There were six items, all coded priority.

One: a delegation from the Galactic Sodality had arrived two months previous with formal complaints to be lodged.

Two: a client from Kim. Commission: to conquer the sea-world Wahwhiting in the same solar system.

Three: a client from the Clan of Seven. Commission: to conquer the three remaining worlds in the String of Ten who would not join the Clan.

Four: an ex-client, the Ragish of Tymalle, seeking return of a portion of his payment due to an almost successful insurrection. Payment: the miracle drug Y-Kappa.

Five: a client from Bunyan IV. Commission: to conquer the woman-ruled world of Khaine in the nearby star-system.

Six: a representative of the conquered planet EElax. Commission: regain the planet for the deposed government.

He programmed them Four, Six, Three, Two, One, Five. The memory-corder assured him each of the delegations had been thoroughly searched and okayed; they had been billeted comfortably, waiting for Jared's return from the Reef job.

He sat in the office of his town house, amid the heavy oak furniture transhipped from Earth years before. He sat silently, smoking, thinking about Reef.

The slaughter had been ghastly, even greater than he had supposed — but not greater than the machine had predicted. Having fed Ram's nature, and the nature of the invasion rationale, into the machine;

the prediction had been on the decimal point. The machine was always right.

Jared remembered when he had begun organizing his invasion and conquest project. The first job, a small one, utilizing ancient (and nearly forgotten) guerilla techniques had netted him enough capital to begin the construction of the machine. It had purchased the services of the scientific staff he needed. The first prototype of the machine had been workable enough to provide plans for the second job. And from that conquest had come the first base and troops. The organization had expanded steadily, its reputation spreading throughout the star-groups. Ten years before, he had begun the core job on the moon of this dark star's only planet. Now, closed off and untouchable, he was sought out by hundreds of clients every year. Some he interviewed, most he turned away. Of the ones seen, only a handful ever had their propositions fed into the machine. And of those scant few, only one or two were ever taken as clients.

But when the bargain had been struck, Jared had carried off his end without failure. One hundred and seventy-four worlds had changed hands through the world-killing talents of Jared, his troops and his machine.

The city was now a large city; the machine had restructured itself and added to its own bulk; his equipment was the most advanced, his techniques the most effective. For hire: Jared, the world-killer. At first

his price had been staggering sums in Galactic Funds. But as the years passed, less and less he had accepted money.

One job might bring huge stores of an anti-death drug, another ownership of an ore planetoid, still another the placement of a certain government official. Random payments, random selection of clients, totally without form or direction. Only the name of Jared persisted, cloaked almost in legend, feared and hated.

Jared heard the sound of footsteps coming through the reception hall. He looked up as Denna Gill appeared at the head of the short flight of stairs leading down into the oak-beamed living room.

"Welcome back," the alien said.

He came down the stairs, his furball body atop its three long ostrich legs bobbing up and down. The two great, limpid eyes looked at Jared with concern. The alien's "face" was roughly humanoid in arrangement, but more closely approximated that of an intelligent bird in demeanor.

"You don't look well."

Jared slumped in the big armchair. He shoved the memorycorder pickup away from him. It rolled to its niche in the panelled wall, the wall opened, the machine rolled in, the panel closed. It was an Eighteenth Century living room again. "I'm just a little tired."

"How did it go?"

"Well enough, I suppose."

"I take it the machine was correct?"

"Ram brought it right out on the decimal point."

Gill settled down his legs till his perfectly round fuzzy head was on a level with Jared's. "You expected it."

"Doesn't mean I had to enjoy watching it."

"No. It doesn't mean that."

They sat in silence for a moment. Then Jared drew in a deep breath, shifted the conversation and asked, "This delegation from the Sodality. Who's on it?"

"Becker from Earth, Stieglitz from Alpha C Nine, that young one, what's his name, Mosey, Morrissey . . ."

"Mosier, French I think; from the Crab?"

"That's the one."

"Anyone else?"

"The usual. Representatives of frightened planets."

"You don't sound very worried."

"I fed it to the machine."

"And?"

Gill bobbed his head in a movement of dismissal. "Unimportant."

"I see we finally got Bunyan IV to come in."

"We've been pushing them for three years. When you bought the cake for Cooper they had to do something. It was a nice maneuver."

"Don't remind me of the cost."

"But they're here; that's what counts. Think we can get what we want from them?"

"They want Khaine. They have to have it. I think they'll bite. What does the machine say?"

"No extrap on it yet."

Jared rose. "Let's start the clownshow."

The human and his companion walked out through the living room. Down a passage behind a concealed panel, to a monorail whose single track vanished in the dimness of a tunnel carved from the dead heart of the moon. In the little car, Jared passed his hand across a glowing plate, and the monorail vehicle shot out of its berth. The trip lasted only seventy seconds, ending in a low cave.

Jared and Gill descended in the dropshaft and stepped off at the vacuum lock behind the reception chamber. They passed through the lock, and Jared swung the center-pin panel around. They entered the reception chamber.

A hundred million million reflections of themselves flooded back at them, washed in the silvery light of the incredible diamond that was the reception chamber.

In a position where every delegate or potential client might truly be an assassin sent by a conquered world to rid the universe of the man who hired himself out to kill worlds for a price, Jared had made it as difficult as possible for the dispensers of vengeance.

His payment for the conquest of Isopia had been the nearly impossible delivery of a diamond one-eighth of a mile in diameter. A diamond from the Glass Mountains of Isopia, selected by his geologists for this purpose. Who could kill a man when there were a hundred million million possibilities?

Jared and Gill seated themselves

behind the interview consoles, and Gill signaled for the first client to be dropped down.

The Ragish of Tymalle and his group entered from the far end of the diamond, through a panel similar to the one Jared and Gill had used. They were a long way off, but their images cascaded and slipped and bounced across the chamber. Inside a diamond, they faced Jared.

It took Jared three minutes to explain clearly why even a partial return of the payment for the conquest the Ragish had commissioned was impossible. Jared made it forcefully apparent that he took no responsibilities for the inability of a client to hold what had been won for him. The Ragish and his group departed.

He took one minute to turn down the commission of the EElaxian government-in-exile.

One minute to turn down the commission from the Clan of Seven. With a ray of hope: come see me again in four years Earthtime.

One minute to dispatch the delegation from Kim. A bogus client that had somehow passed inspection. The kill attempt was a clever one, but the three aliens were vaporized even as they released the search/seek/kill missiles from their ornate brocaded clothing.

Then the neatly-tailored group from the Galactic Sodality entered.

Becker, their spokesman, was a large-bodied man with a full white beard. He instinctively impelled thoughts of kindness, wisdom, honesty, Santa Claus.

Jared knew him and distrusted him.

Though they were at the far end of the diamond, pickups in the walls bounced their voices clearly to Jared.

"Good evening," Becker began.

"I understand you have a complaint to lodge, Mr. Becker." Jared spoke softly, but the dismissal of protocol obviously shocked Becker.

"Why, uh, that's why we've come."

"Then let's get to it."

Becker called for some files from a young man behind him, apparently Mosier of the Crab Nebula. He extended them toward Jared, far down the glimmering chamber. It was a ludicrous gesture, and Becker drew back his hand. "We have specifics enumerated herein."

"Say it, Mr. Becker. My time is short."

"This policy of conquest of yours must end. We of the Galactic Sodality have banded together in a spirit of peace and harmony. Our purpose is to bring unity to the known universe. There has been war and conquest since man left Earth"

"I know my history, Mr. Becker. Perhaps better than you. I've made so much of it, after all."

"Arrogance can be the death of you!"

"Hypocrisy can be yours!"

Becker stammered for a moment.

"Let me put it to you bluntly, Mr. Becker. You and your Sodality, from which in the past two years I've received applicants from nine worlds. Your spoken wish for peace is a laudable one. It may not be the best thing for me personally or com-

mercially, but I can sympathize with it intellectually. If you get what you say you want, I'm out of business. That doesn't appeal to me particularly. But it's still a lofty concept.

"Unfortunately, you're a fraud, Mr. Becker, as is your Galactic Sodality. The nomenclature doesn't matter. Galactic Sodality. United Worlds. Planetary Nexus. I've seen them come and go. Under stress, any one of the signatories to your pact would turn on the rest of you and employ me, if they thought they had a chance of taking over the starways. Not the least of them is Earth, for which we are all supposed to harbor a deep and instinctive affection. Your ball of mud is no more honest and valuable than any other, Becker. In fact, I've had feelers from clients on Earth as regards Alpha C Nine. Mr. Stieglitz, are you there in the group . . . ?"

A tall thin Niner stepped forward. His bright red flesh was pulsing with fury. "I'm here!"

"You might inquire of Mr. Becker about that. The most recent feeler was from President Spaak himself. It was done through a Swiss Neutrality Combine on Proxima C One."

There was an immediate and heated exchange between Becker and the Niner. Jared ordered them out of the diamond.

With the warning that any attempt at mounting an attack on Jared's moon would be greeted with the same enthusiasm Jared brought to any commission he undertook.

When they were gone, the Earthman sank back in his chair. Gill watched him closely.



"Do you want to break for a while?"

Jared shook his head. "Let's get to the meat."

The delegation from Bunyan IV was dropped in and made its application. Jared listened and when the delegate had concluded he fed the additional facts into the machine through the console. It came back, as he had hoped, affirmative.

"I'll take the job."

"At what cost?" the client asked.

"The highest possible, of course," Jared replied.

V

It was not that Khaine was an Amazon world, nor even that women dominated. It had been made obvious, however, centuries before, that women ruled better than men. Thus, the government of Khaine was almost entirely female, with "the High" a woman elected by a combination of popular vote and computer selection. The High Irina was the current ruler of the planet: part president, part queen, part spokesman of a senate; very much a woman.

She discovered the presence of Jared on Khaine only three months his-time after he had arrived.

They trapped him in the Park of Cats, there in the center of the capital city of Khaine, Jerusalem.

A mixed male and female unit of intelligence rangers staked out the park and began moving toward the center. Jared had been posing as a night-club comedian, a fat man with a fluffy ring of white hair that circled his head. The disguise deflated and

peeled easily. He was stripped down to a skinsuit, night-black and oiled by the time the first of the rangers found him. They were under orders to take him alive. He swung up into a tree, sending the Khainesque cats shrieking from the branches. He hurled himself forward, from tree to tree, as they tried to make out his direction in the dark.

Then they brought in the kliegs and the flamers, and burned down the trees in the direction he was heading. They had him trapped in the feather-topped trees, the lights on him, when he vanished.

High above them, against the night sky, a bright blue dot appeared, flickered for a moment, then winked out.

Jared reappeared on the left bank of the Ganges River that divided Jerusalem into two parts. He now wore a breathing apparatus over his face, and a weapons belt was slung around his waist.

He took a reading from an instrument on his wrist, then he dove into the river. Down into its polluted darkness he swam, the special light goggles allowing only the most inadequate view through the water.

Near the bottom of the river, one of the guards from the intelligence rangers caught him blipping on his screen and came up to meet him. Jared met the man with an extended trident-spear. The guard caught the steel in his chest and disappeared tumbling awkwardly into the darkness.

Jared found the waterlock to the chamber without difficulty and blew it with equal ease. When he

had pumped out the access chamber, he unshipped his weapon and undogged the entry portal. There was silence in the chamber. Jared consulted the instrument on his wrist and turned to his right, feeling along the solid metal wall. Suddenly, it slipped back, and he was looking into a control room floor-to-ceiling with dials and circuit indicators. The woman had her back to him.

"It can't do what my machine can do," Jared said. The woman turned suddenly, dropping a group of thin metal strips on a ring.

"You dropped your phasers."

The woman was lovelier than the dossier photo-block Jared had studied. Lovelier, but not prettier. Just lovelier, in a way no facsimile could capture. Hers was a face that had been pretty in youth, but as she had grown older the prettiness had fought a battle with the accumulation of wisdom, the encroachment of character. Merely pretty had lost. Now she was lovelier.

"Who are you . . . ?"

"The source that let you know I was on Khaine is the same source that told me where your control chamber was to be found." He added, after a moment, "I've always felt espionage was a two-edged sword. It usually cuts both ways at the same time. Jeopardy is the operable word, I believe."

She went for a button on a wall. He caught her before she had reached it. She spun him around as he grabbed her arm. He felt her apply the leverage and tried to check himself, but she used his inertia against him and he went up against the wall, and rebounded.

She went for the button again.

He fired, and the beam sizzled past her, blowing the button, the circuit, and half the wall out.

The concussion pitched her sideways and she struck her neck on the edge of a components cabinet. Her eyes rolled up, and she fell to the deck.

Jared rose slowly and went to her.

She was only unconscious.

He snapped a breather on her, hoisted her over his shoulder and left the control chamber.

Rising up through the river, he could not tell if she had stopped breathing. It was not till he had disassembled them, beamed them, and reassembled them in the observation center of the *Tempest* that he called in the surgeon and was told she would be all right.

They were three days out from Khaine, heading for the moon, when she came up from under the sedatives.

She looked around, instantly grasped where she was, and tried to escape. Jared had her put under again. It would not do to have the High Irina of Khaine die in the airless, colorless spaces of not-space.

Gil was waiting. He looked worried. It was not an expression a human would hold if he were worried, but Gil was a Mexla, and Jared knew his moods. He was worried.

"What if she won't cooperate?"

"I don't expect her to want to."

Gill sank and rose on his legs. "Then how the hell — "

"No, not a brainscan; and not

drugs. I've got to make her want to do it."

"How the hell —"

"You said that: if you haven't something constructive, pass off and let me get on with it."

"Jared, my God, what if . . . what if" He could not even frame the thought. It was much too dangerous, much too horrible a thought.

Jared touched the alien gently. "Gill, we've come this far. If we're wrong now, if all of your 'what ifs' are so . . . if somewhere along the way it went bad and we never knew it . . . then we are what they say we are. If we've done it right, then it'll work out all right."

Gill bobbed in a resigned manner. "You going to see the machine now?"

Jared nodded. "Is it programmed?"

Gill walked him to the dropshaft. "Up to the top."

Jared touched him again, gently ruffling his fur. "Be at peace, old friend." Then said, "No way back now."

He dropped down through the center of the moon, till he came to the force-locks that separated men from the machine. He unscrambled them, with the only unit that worked — a unit phased in with his brain-wave patterns.

The great port opened, and Jared passed in to speak to the machine. It had been many years since he had been summoned for a consultation.

Now he stood before it, as it rose up out of sight in the gut of the moon. He stood before the metal brain he had caused to be built, to serve him as he killed worlds for profit.

"Hello, Jared," the machine said.

"It's been a long time," Jared answered. He went to the formfit chair the machine kept for him. He sat down and oddly, for the first time in years, he was totally relaxed. Talking to the machine was exactly like talking to Gill, for the machine had selected the voiceprints of the little alien as his own. The gentle warmth of Gill's tones came from the air around Jared, but it was the voice of the machine, faintly oiled and cool in the caverns.

"Did you bring the High?"

"Yes, I brought her. You're certain it was a necessity for the invasion?"

"Have I ever been wrong?"

Jared chuckled softly. "If you have, I've no way of checking you."

The machine chattered to itself as though considering. "Is it that you think perhaps you've given too much power to a machine, mine creator?"

"It isn't seemly for a machine to mock its master."

"Sorry. Only asking."

"No, it's not that I think you have too much power, it's that I'm afraid if you blow a circuit somewhere, and reroute buggy, we may all wind up saying, 'Yes, massa' to the robots."

"I have no desire to rule men. I am content."

Jared let it lie. The machine could not lie, it could not obfuscate. But it might program itself for a specious truth.

"You're worried about the invasion of Khaine," the machine pinpointed Jared's problem.

"You haven't told me much this time."

"There are reasons. You set me only one chore, Jared. I am directed to the fulfillment of that chore. I have to do what is necessary. Till now we have been in the first phase of the program. Now we are about to enter the second, the most difficult phase. There was only one weak link."

"And that was . . .?"

The machine waited. "You."

Jared's eyes widened. Many things suddenly became clear to him. He sank down in the formfit, his mind a whirling cyclone of disorder.

Finally, he said, "So now we need the High Irina."

The machine answered quickly. "Yes. *We* need her, and *you* need her. Men often become too much like their machines, Jared. Then they blame the machines for dehumanizing them. For fifteen years I have worked on the program with you. And you worked on it alone for seven years before I was built. Twenty-two years, Jared, a large part of any man's life. Larger than most for yours, because the task you've set yourself is destined to kill you. You've become too much like me. Yes, we need the High."

They talked on, for many hours.

Then Jared dropped up to his city, where Gill met him, Jared looked exhausted. He was able to smile at the alien for a moment before he whispered, "Take me home, Gill. I need sleep."

Then he slumped down, and the Mexla took him through the tunnels to the town house, where he stripped him and sent him to sleep on the

restful jets of gentle warm air.

And then the alien went to his own home.

But he did not sleep.

VI

Gill could not understand it. After the machine had made it an imperative that Jared, himself, personally, run the recon mission to Khaine and personally capture the High Irina himself, there was no place in the incredibly simple invasion plan for her use.

The machine had only told them that much, at the outset of the commission. *Capture the High Irina*. So Jared had risked his life and had done it. Then Jared had gone down below and had his talk with the machine, and said nothing about it.

But the next day they had had their battle plan, and the High Irina's only place in it was that the machine insisted she be on board the *Tempest* to witness the invasion in all of its phases.

Gill was nervous, worried. It seemed wrong. There was something wrong, terribly wrong.

Now, as they watched the final stages of the mop-up, as the client from Bunyan IV chuckled like a madman beside them, Gill checked the force-bonds on the High and wished they had never accepted the commission.

She had not spoken throughout the campaign. It had been a one-day affair; Khaine was terribly vulnerable. Now it was killed, even as she watched.

Jared had paid no attention to her,

but had taken his position before the two hundred screens and supervised the slaughter. She had not spoken when they turned the skyline of Jerusalem glowing red, nor when the city winked out of existence. She had not spoken when they ran the strafing missions with the stukas across the plandar refineries, nor when they made a glass-sided crater of the mountain armaments base. She watched silently, and when the Planetary Secure signal came through, she closed her eyes and sank back against her bonds.

The client from Bunyan IV — tall and thin as something out of an Earth legend, with knobs at the joints, a nose sharp as a letter opener, eyes slitted and green — turned to Jared as the world-assassin said, "That's it, Seventeen. The job is done."

"Fine, just fine," said the alien, snapping his joints with delight. He had laughed hysterically throughout the operation. Jared despised him.

"One more tiny thing, though," Seventeen said, palming out a razor-disk. He turned to the High, where she sat force-shackled. "Good-by, my Irina."

He cracked back in three sharp stages cocking his arm to spin off the disk. Irina stared at him coldly. She was not frightened.

"No!"

The word cracked as sharply as had Seventeen's joints. Seventeen swiveled his long head in stages. Jared was staring at him evenly. The wire-thin arm with the razor disk did not lower.

"I said: no."

Seventeen laughed with the shrieking high sound of a lunatic. "This is the High Irina, assassin. She is the only one who could lead a counter-attack against me. It is that she must die. Now!" He jerked back.

"I haven't been paid yet, Seventeen."

"In good time, assassin."

"Now."

"First I attend myself to final things first."

"Don't make me kill you, Seventeen," Jared said, behind him. The client from Bunyan IV snapped back in stages and saw the weapon in Jared's hand.

"What this is it?"

"I want to be paid now. Right now."

Seventeen tried to keep his eyes on both Gill and Jared at the same time. The fuzzy alien was working his way around the bridge slowly. Seventeen could tell he was being stalked, but he did not know why.

"You never told me what it is that is payment."

Jared nodded toward the woman.

"No!" The word was Jared's word, said as loud and with as much imperativeness as the world-killer had said it, a moment before.

Jared moved closer, aiming the weapon and realigning himself so the beam would miss vital instruments behind Seventeen. "She's mine. That's my payment. Kill her, and I call back my units. In three days we can be at Bunyan IV; what you saw here can be repeated there."

Seventeen lowered the disk.

"She is yours."

Jared's reply was pleasant. "Thank

you, Seventeen. Now go take possession."

The client from Bunyan IV dropped out of sight, and in the screens a few minutes later the shuttleship dropped out of the *Tempest* in a similar manner. Then Jared spoke to Gill.

"Relay the transfer affirmative. Let them take it now."

Gill rose on his legs and went to pass ownership of Khaine to the Bunyan IV fleet hanging just outside the detector range of the conquered planet.

Irina watched as the alien ships dropped down through the atmosphere of her planet. Now . . . she averted her eyes.

Finally, when she looked up, Jared was watching her. "You should have let him kill me," she said in a low and level voice. "You'll never have a secure moment while I live." Jared put away his weapon.

"You'll talk to a friend of mine," Jared said.

And he turned away from her.

When they returned to Jared's moon, she tried to kill him as the force-bonds were removed. It was an abortive effort, and Gill managed to get the sedative spray into her skull without too much thrashing around.

When she woke, she was in the caverns, in the formfit, in the presence of the machine.

Then the machine proved to her that Jared paid a far higher price for his conquests than did any of his clients. The machine opened channels in her brain that had always been

blocked by environment and loyalties and age.

Then she knew who Jared really was and what he was doing

"It was a futile, noble idea," the machine said. "It was doomed from the start; until I was created. Then it stood a chance. Twenty-two years. Now it is a possibility. Order in the known universe. Worlds linked to worlds by mutual respect and mutual ethic. Now it is a possibility. We have conquered each world in a manner to give Jared's clients possession — but not permanent possession. When the time comes, because of the manner of conquest and because of the stresses we have set up in a master program, all the parts will fall into place. Each invader will fall, but in a way that will link the worlds in reliance upon one another. Cogs in a great galactic machine. Not like their petty Sodalities and Unions, but a great humanistic structure that will serve all men as individuals and all worlds as entities."

Irina, no longer the High, listened to it all, her mind absorbing the truth of the machine.

"Jared's loneliness is that he knows he must do this job alone, for it is the only way it *can* be done. And if he fails, or if he dies in the process, his name will live on in the memory of the million worlds as the greatest villain the universe ever spawned. It is now an additional part of my task to keep him sane, keep him honest, keep him alive, so the job can be done. Each payment he took was an aid to getting the master program implemented. Even you. Most importantly, you."

The machine added only, "Not just as his woman, if you decide to stay. But to learn all he knows, to take over for him if he dies. And if there is time, to give him children who can do the job after him. This is one secret that must be shared with silence. Only the alien Gill knows, and he cannot help Jared."

She left the chamber, dropped up, and was met by the fuzzy Mexla. "Will you stay?" he asked her.

"I'll stay," she said and then paused, as if she wanted to say something else. "Not now," she finally said. "Another time, when I can say what I have to say."

Gill took her to him, where he slept. And he left her there,

watching him as he turned in his sleep, thinking awful thoughts of death and futility. And she looked at him, not loving him, perhaps never loving him, not really liking him, for she could never like the man who had showed her the sights in the two hundred screens, but willing to stay; wondering in the silent words she had not been able to speak to Gill:

Why should this god be any more successful than all the other gods who have failed?

But across the empty reaches of space there was no answer, only silent attention from the million worlds that waited to become parts of a master universe, or to curse till eternity the names of those who killed planets for profit. END

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DEADLIER SPECIE

by DAVID A. KYLE

*The aliens had a foolproof way
of defeating Earth . . . almost!*

The secret was enormous, but it was well kept. That is why Gregory MacKenzie — listed as Marsman 87 of TEPEE and one of the thirty-seven Earth scientists on Mars — was, in his innocence, unprepared for his incredible confrontation.

MacKenzie had been on Mars for ten months as part of the slowly expanding Terrestrial Expeditionary Party, Exobiological Exploration (TEPEE). The five-month outward-bound trip with the two-man Frontier-Four-29 crew had cut him off from his home planet psychologically as well as physically. His horizons had narrowed, not broadened, and with his sense of isolation had come an acceptance of the routine.

The excitement had not left him, though. How could it, when he was 325 elliptical million miles from home? He was still a pioneer, prob-

ing the mysteries of the Solar System. That was why thoughts of dishonesty, deception and treachery had been left far behind in space on Earth. And why the aliens achieved complete success with him.

The "Injuns" kidnapped MacKenzie one evening just before darkness. The TEPEE standard operating procedure called for everyone to be inside when the Martian night came, except for specially planned assignments. The nighttime cold was inhospitable; there were plenty of things to keep the entire party busy indoors during the sleepless period. MacKenzie had completed his duties outside and was headed back to his solitary living capsule with some new geological samples to analyze before pushing back on the following day to the main base camp. The sun,

bright in light but feeble in warmth, had jumped down below the horizon suddenly, forcing MacKenzie to stop for a minute to uncloud his sunshade and allow his eyes to adjust. Phobos was off on the edge of the low hills and Deimos was just climbing into the fantastically starry sky.

The time was that moment, and the place was there, some two hundred meters from his personal capsule, that MacKenzie, half-blinded, tired and no longer alert, was grabbed by the aliens.

MacKenzie was not a big man, but he was wiry strong. Because he was one of the very few bachelors, he felt the social constraints, especially in the presence of the three women, working wives of the long-term explorers. So he divided his spare time between books and calisthenics, keeping himself in top physical form. Although his head was large and well formed, his neck was so long and scraggy that his head seemed somehow deformed and disjointed from his thick shoulders.

It was just at that prominent juncture of his neck and shoulders that the Injun hit him. The blow was on the unprotected fabricoid edging under his helmet. The sharp needle went through the material into his skin, to paralyze him in an instant. As well conditioned as he was, he had no chance to defend himself nor to resist the drug.

None of the TEPEE group had ever seen an Injun, or, for that matter, any alien at all. None, that is except the commandant, the remarkable veteran of the Moon and Mars, now almost fifty years old. One

month ago he had made a meticulously staged rendezvous with an Injun contact party under top-secret instructions brought to him by a courier from Earth. When dealing with unknowns, wireless communications were considered risky.

The written message which the commandant of TEPEE main base camp "Little Earth" had received two years earlier, five months before Gregory MacKenzie had even arrived on the planet, was the most flabbergasting governmental communication he had ever received. In the typical gobbledygook of governmental language the commandant was informed that an alien life form had contacted the Secretary General of the United Nations through the Lunar Investigation For Exobiology (LIFE) and had requested a conference to discuss the basis for a relationship between them and the Terrestrials. One conference had taken place eight months later at a Lunar LIFE site with a Special Assistant to the Secretary General, who was a brilliant young Japanese. He had been especially chosen and rushed through the training necessary to get him back and forth aboard a Russian Voskhod. The meeting was carried out and the young Japanese, Mr. Mithubi, prepared the diplomatic work for a second and final meeting.

The aliens would not agree to locating the meeting on Terran soil. Nor again on the Moon, which they considered as virtually part of Earth. In fact, they wanted it not even within the Solar System, which they considered the natural front yard

of the Earthmen. However, when it was pointed out that the farthest point at which mankind had succeeded in establishing himself, at this date, was Mars — why, then, the aliens agreed that the final meeting should be on Mars. They also insisted that someone in absolute authority should be sent to the conference to represent Earth, although a delegation of not more than three persons was to be permitted. The meeting was to be held within twelve to eighteen months.

Earth, or at least most of the governments there concerned who knew about it, took the full eighteen months to arrange the conference. In the first place, the Secretary General of the U.N. had made a very wise decision: he had informed only the permanent members of the Security Council of the overtures by a non-Earth civilization. This was his cautious attempt to develop the situation slowly, with a minimum of confusion and panic. Those Security Council members behaved in a remarkably restrained and intelligent manner; they kept the secret to themselves and sat down upon the situation with the tightest form of security. Only the immediate rulers of each of their countries were a party to the secret. They planned to negotiate the treaty and then throw the entire situation open to the world to consider, discuss and then accept or reject.

One of the treaty provisions, specifically made by the aliens, was that there would never be any fraternization between aliens and Earth-

men. Following the final personal contact of the treaty conference there would then be only radio or some such other contact. The aliens explained it simply by saying that the Earthmen weren't "psychologically ready" for galactic association. The treaty would provide how the two species would be kept apart; mathematical boundary lines would be calculated and agreed upon; each side would stay within its own territory until the treaty was negotiated.

Somebody tagged the aliens as "the Injuns." The allusion, of course, was to the ancient American problem with the opening of the New World. No one knew whether or not there would be "trouble" with the "Injuns." For that matter, no one knew yet if the aliens would turn out to be inferiors, equals or superiors to mankind.

The U.S. and Soviet governments agreed that the Secretary General could be relied upon to negotiate for both their interests, and, incidentally, for the interests of the rest of the world. However, the Secretary General was too old to make the trip. Others took his place.

The first assistant had arrived on a regular Frontier-Four shot three months ago. He was an American. The second had arrived six weeks ago in an extra Frontier-Four capsule which had been launched by a Soviet Vosnik rocket. He was a Russian. The actual negotiator, the Special Assistant to the Secretary General who had all the real power, was due to touch down in one day, the day after MacKenzie's undiscovered kidnapping.

Officially all of this had absolutely nothing to do with Marsman-34 Gregory MacKenzie.

Except that he was to be the aliens' secret weapon.

He found that out almost immediately upon being awakened from his drugged sleep. He had been pulled into what looked like the control room of a spacecraft, vaguely like the American Frontier-Four but without a single recognizable control switch. The room, about twelve feet in diameter, was pleasantly lit from an unknown source, and three aliens stood leaning over MacKenzie.

At first he thought they were human beings dressed up in a new kind of spacesuit, not quite lame fabric and not quite armor, in a sparkling though faint tint of lavender. They seemed very skinny with long slender arms and hands and fingers, and their heads were encased in a smooth, highly reflective ball of the same violet-purple metallic sheen. There were large opened visors, with gaping shadows which at first seemed occupied by standard human features but appeared to grow more strange and alien each time MacKenzie looked at them. There were eyes, glinting, all dark as though cornea and pupil were blended, with no whites showing. There was a nose for each, but only a small fleshy bump, with no nostrils, more suggestive than actual such as on a doll's face. From under the eyes, slashing down across the cheeks, reversing themselves around the thin mouths, were a se-

ries of Z-shaped wrinkles, graded from the first large and deep one to the smallest, faintest one. The top bar of the deepest Z-wrinkle gave each eye a serious, provocative squint, while the bottom bar seemed to suggest a controlled, determined grin.

MacKenzie was smart and imaginative. He very soon concluded that they were alien people. Not knowing that higher authorities on Earth already knew of their existence, MacKenzie felt a terrible burden of responsibility building upon him. What he did might be irrevocably good — or bad — for the existence of the human race.

"Can we communicate?" MacKenzie said, daring to hope for the best.

One of the creatures shook his helmet in a positive way and said, "We understand English. We can speak English. That is the very thing we desire — communicate." Before MacKenzie could ask a second question the central figure hung his hands on each shoulder, almost as a human would grasp his coat lapels or hook his thumbs in his vest while speaking, and delivered a quick lecture.

The aliens were friendly, were about to enter negotiations with the Terrestrials, would after their consultations release certain facts about themselves. Meanwhile they had invited MacKenzie into a preliminary conference with them; they needed twenty-four hours with a human being informally before spending days or weeks with the Official Human Being formally.

"In the first place," MacKenzie said, when there was an end to the lecture, "You didn't invite me — you took me here by force. That's the worst way to begin. It's not friendly. To be a friend one has to act friendly." Their voices sounded friendly enough, though, MacKenzie thought. Soft and vibrant, even warm, but unfortunately stilted, if not downright mechanical.

"We weren't unfriendly. Just practical. We wanted to avoid the emotional disturbance of our meeting. To save time." First one and then another seemed to be speaking these sentences in turn. MacKenzie wasn't certain. Perhaps the middle alien really was doing all the talking. "Now that we are here, we are inviting you to talk."

"In the second place," MacKenzie said, "this is no time to talk — if what you say is true. Start your introductions tomorrow without any preconceived notions. Discover each other tomorrow in all innocence." MacKenzie felt his eyebrows go up at the recognition of his own thought. Damn if it didn't ring the bell with solid truth! "It seems to me you think I can give you some information which will help your side against my side." MacKenzie didn't see any reaction to that. "I don't know what's going on. I'm not one of our planet's leaders. I can't be of any help."

All three aliens waggled their heads in unison, although MacKenzie was not clear as to what the movements meant. "But that's just why we want to talk to you. You're an average man. You represent the

true feelings of your race. You —"

MacKenzie listened.

MacKenzie talked.

MacKenzie listened.

MacKenzie talked.

MacKenzie suddenly realized that they had been talking for many, many minutes. For hours!

"I refuse to say anything more," he said. He felt exceedingly angry at the belief that he had been exploited without, somehow, being able to resist. "Take me back. Now!"

The three aliens looked at each other, nodding and making whispering noises.

"We have had a useful talk. You have proved extremely knowledgeable in the use of the techniques of dialectic and rhetoric. You will be returned this morning before the meeting."

"Why are you conducting this clandestine interrogation?" MacKenzie asked, being as calm and reasonable as he could be.

"You are the first human being with whom we have had personal contact," one of the aliens said. "Obviously we would be poorly prepared if we had not met and talked with at least one of you." The Z-wrinkles around all three mouths spread wider apart in awkward, grotesque imitation of large grins. "But even more important, frankly, we have been analyzing the human thought processes. We have been discovering how you think. For example —" the middle alien held up a slender metallic-sheathed hand and waggled it like the most prosaic of lecturers — "we have been able to gather some of your more inti-

mate resources upon which you build your wisdom and knowledge." The hand, with one extended finger, continued wagging. "You told us much, under questioning, which you do not now remember. But we also received much of what you didn't verbalize, more of ethos than of facts, through what you yourself use as an extrasensory perception or intuition."

"You don't think you can know the human race after just a few hours interrogating one human being?" MacKenzie blustered. He wasn't at all sure but what they could.

"Yes," said the alien. "At least for our purposes. We know how you think. Aristotelian logic, I believe you call it, with some tendency to lay out arguments in the more complex, more analytical, Toulminian form. Given a certain premise we believe it would be very easy to predict the course your thoughts would follow in the development of human logic. Because of this we should triumph at the conference beginning in six hours."

MacKenzie was distressed by the choice of the word "triumph," but he saw the validity of the alien philosophy — and also its implications. The secrecy confirmed their evaluation. Perhaps he might be able to get his enlightening experience to the attention of the Earth representatives before any harm was done. Or would the aliens kill him to prevent his talking?

"If you release me before the conference, what is to prevent me

telling of our meeting?" He kept his voice steady and friendly.

"We will burn out your memories."

"Burn out . . . ?" Despite his effort at self-control, MacKenzie was engulfed in a hot flash of terror and panic. They were quick to reassure him that it was neither painful nor dangerous.

"But you've told me you were seeking trust and understanding. Cooperation. You are practicing deceit."

"We are not immoral." The three heads each made several solemn negative shakes. "We are realists. We must use every weapon that we have."

MacKenzie's terror flooded back, stronger even than before. "Do you threaten war?"

All three aliens stiffened and recoiled slightly. "No!" the three voices simultaneously protested. "We do not use violence. Our power needs no war machines. We fight our battles with rhetoric. We rely on persuasion based upon psychological precepts. If we win, we have our way. If we lose, we simply accept co-existence. You yourself know that 'winning the peace' is the real test. And as we now know the human mind, because you are typical of the men with whom we will deal, it is inevitable that we shall gain our ends."

"Do you consider me — us — naive, stupid . . . ?"

"No, just mechanistic. Obsessed with computerized, scientific logic. Predictable. One day your race will recognize that we are — " the

spokesman groped for a term — "we are nonhuman syllogisticians."

MacKenzie was desperately looking for some reassuring flaw in the alien strategy. "Predictable." If only he were the half-witted brother in the story plot, they would themselves be deceived. Or if they had mistakenly interviewed a human pet or an ersatz-human servo-mech, thinking it was the true, intelligent life form of Earth. But there was no bizarre misrepresentation — he, MacKenzie, was indeed a truly representative man . . .

As his thoughts were racing, he saw a hypodermic-like instrument materialize in the hands of one of them. He had no chance to fight the sudden spray injection which burst upon his bare face, but the infallibility of the aliens' reasoning represented by the word "predictable!" was the last burning thought in his burning brain.

Gregory MacKenzie, minor member of the TEPEE group, was asleep in his capsule when the con-

ference began. He would be found later, unharmed, although suffering from a severe and incurable case of amnesia. He would not be able to report that they had kept him for another six hours, almost up to the time of the conference, talking to his drugged mind. Nor would he know or even guess at the important consequences of his interrogation. He had not been the unwitting betrayer of his own kind. Indeed it might be said he had betrayed the syllogisticians themselves by the irrefutable truth of his own predictability.

For on that fateful morning, when the future of space-conquering humanity and its Solar System was being dedicated, there arrived at the conference site the Chief Representative for Terra, the Special Assistant to the Secretary General of the United Nations of Earth. The dignified, middle-aged human being heading the delegation of three was the esteemed Suhawni Pachtow. She was very attractive — and all women. END

INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION

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CATERPILLAR EXPRESS

by ROBERT E. MARGROFF

Illustrated by BODE

War had sundered the nations of Earth. Only the crawlers could unite them — one way or another!



The loudspeaker blared, over the heads of the gaudily-dressed people moving about the station and crowding with their baggage into the boarding-chutes.

"Crawler Nine-0-five now loading from Chute Five. Destination: Chioria, Columbedo, Springapolis and

Lexiville. All aboard! We crawl in ten minutes."

Leaning against a pylon located a good hundred yards from Nine-0-five's mammoth cyclopean-eyed head, Bondman Y contemplated his mission, the surgically sealed jaws of the crawler and his fear that the living train might turn on him.

Y's quarry — the man with the

pointed beard and the radiation scar across his face — had gone through Chute Five. To Y this indicated that the intelligence network . . . of the West American States was right in at least some of their guesswork. Action on Bondman Y's part was vital before his query reached the Ameradian Republic.

Yet he could not simply arrest the Ameradian. This was Cefus territory: the Central Empire of the Former United States.

Considering the problem of a police force that would incarcerate a West American Bondman as quick as an Ameradian spy and possibly quicker, Y came to the conclusion he had been working up to for some time. He was going to need help.

Potential help went by in the form of a very nice shape. He admired the blonde hair above the white jersey and the smooth hip action beneath the tight green slacks. Yes, if his estimate of the situation was correct, there might be one of his allies. He tried concentrating on the rear view to the exclusion of all other distractions. It aroused more bearable dreams than did the other major item in his field of vision, the long sausage with pulsating greenish-gray sides and bulbous brown crocodilian head equipped with single yellow-glass eye and long-stilled mouth that it was said had clomped only foliage.

As usual, what he wanted most to exclude came up fully into his consciousness: the crawlers and his illogical aversion to them.

The crawlers had come from Venus. Between World Wars Three and

Four, just before Four. After Four there had of course been no manufacture of spacecraft — or a host of other once necessary things. Earth's resources were too exhausted.

Enter the crawlers.

The size of the creatures varied. Like fish, they grew indefinitely. Unlike fish, they had no natural life span. An amazing discovery . . . and the crawlers were not all! Co-discovered on Venus were the ruins of ancient cities. There had been an intelligent race on Venus — a race that left abundant wall carvings.

The intelligent Venusians had not been crawlers; rather they appeared to have been giant cockroaches. Studying pictographs of a particularly scabrous kind, a linguist remarked that while the Venusians had a nifty mode of conduct, it appeared that they became miffed when proper rituals were ignored. Thus from nifty and miffed came the name Earthmen applied to the vanished Venusians: Miffiti.

Had it not been for the Miffiti's pictographs, men would never have dreamed that crawlers would prove to be a solution to Earth's transportation problems. Yet the pictographs were very specific. Miffiti had grown crawlers to size and worked on them surgically. What the Miffiti could do, Man could do — if he wanted.

Man wanted. After World War the Fifth, he *needed*. There was no way out, even if the moralists had had a point or two. But the moralists had not. The pain centers in crawlers were on the order of those found in earthworms.

Thus had biocarpentry, bioelectronics, biomechanics, bioplumbing and a lot of other bios come into the language. The crawler flesh proved to be readily adaptable — for human needs as well as Miffiti. There was no big problem that the biotechnicians could not solve and the crawlers' flexible hides proved to be wonderfully adaptable shields for the human parasites. Thus areas of the planet befouled with radiation and other poisons were conveniently traversed, in comfort. Except by those who had their illogical aversions.

"Crawler Nine-0-Five will crawl in five minutes!"

Y mentally shook himself, took firm hold of his travel bag and moved from around the pylon. Chute Five was now empty. All the other passengers had gone aboard and it was too late for any to come out without his seeing them. There was now no reason to keep concealed from the transparent ports set in the crawler's side for the use of the passengers. Y went aboard.

Inside, Y chose a seat in a day coach section and looked back to see the portal closing like an enormous sphincter. It was a sphincter — adapted. Suddenly ill, he rose, got the nod from the conductor and headed for the relief of a washroom.

A little later, refreshed and almost used to the swaying motion beneath his feet, Y left the washroom, passed the heavy-set, ruddy-faced conductor with an apologetic smile, and took himself into the area where a few passengers had

private compartments. He went to the door, whose number he had learned from a bribed ticket-seller, and rapped.

The blonde answered. Behind her stood a hairy-faced gorilla of a blond man and a red-haired smaller man who more nearly resembled an orangutan. Y thought about the irradiated landscape they would be rippling through and wondered if the ancestors of these two had come from there.

"Yes?" the blonde said.

"Your name is Yvonne Bohne," Y said. "The big guy is your brother Barney. Neither you or your red-haired contact — Mr. Philips, I believe — are Cefus citizens. You see, I know who you are, and —"

"Come in," Philips said, uncovering a gun. It was one of those that fired small explosive shells that were nonrecoverable. Only government agents were supposed to have them.

Y entered. He stood calmly uncovering the compartment as Yvonne closed the door behind him. "I wondered why you got fresh," she said. "Now I know."

"You fail to flatter yourself," Y said. "On the hotel's sunroof you were quite enchanting."

"Thank you," she said, obviously flattered.

"What you want?" Barney said. "You a cop or —?"

"Just let's say I know about corbacco," Y said. "Mutated cornsilk has its qualities when added to mutated tobacco, but then every corbacco addict knows as much."

"You're no corbacco head!" Philips said.

"Quite correct," Y said. "I'm from West America. Our worries are crawlers, not traffic."

"So?" a reddish eyebrow rose.

"You may call me Y," Y said. "You may also save your question — no, I'm not interested in your operations in Lexiville. I am interested in enlisting your help."

"Help!" Barney was incredulous.

"Help in a matter that will concern you. Crawlers have disappeared into the dead zones — passenger crawlers from West America."

"So?" Philips seemed stuck with his one question.

Y studied the man's wizened face. "You mean you want your corbacco hijacked?"

"Hijacked? You think —"

"I think someone has gotten away with full crawlers. If it's not organized crime, then it's —"

"Ameradia!" Yvonne said.

"Exactly," Y said. "Ameradia if not organized crime. In either case, your operation as well as West America's can be a loser."

"It ain't organized crime," Philips said. "I'd know. So that's what happened to that shipment! Disappeared, and then the government of West America just kept shut about it?"

"So far," Y admitted. "Everyone knows it takes a long time to get word across country. The radio stations would be a help if they could be rebuilt. But with metal so valuable and the mail service so slow and unreliable —"

"We know," Philips said. "Cop," he added.

"Agent," Y corrected.

Y looked from face to face. Only on Yvonne's did he think he saw a spark of sympathy. He considered the orangutan, moderated his voice to its sincerest and said: "A man who has a pointed beard and a radiation scar across his face is on board. He's the master spy Ameradia had in West America."

"So?"

"He ransacked the files of the West American Crawler Corporation. Obviously he's involved in this. If I can get him and make him talk —"

"You think that you can end hijacking?"

"My government can. Even if there's war," he said. "No nation can interfere with the crawlers of other nations. This has got to be stopped. Don't you see?"

"Yeah," Philips said. "The syndicate can't afford to lose any more boys and any more cornsilk."

"Then you'll help me?" Y knew he must sound pathetically eager. "All I need is help in getting the guy before he reaches Ameradian territory. I need him alive and I may need professional help in getting him to talk and in getting the information back to West American authorities."

"Too tough for you, Y?" Philips said.

"Too clever?" Y admitted. "He knows I'm after him, and he's a wonder at staying hid and in finding disguises. If I'd had the help I needed he'd never have gotten aboard this crawler."

Philips considered the gun he held. "We'll get him," he said.

"Alive," Y warned. "It's best we break up in pairs so he doesn't suspect we're all searching for him. We'll have to check every compartment until we find him. There's a standard excuse — we're each looking for a friend we thought entered the compartment. When you find a male who seems to fit the description, one of you keep track of him and the other come and find Yvonne and me. We'll be searching the parts of the crawlers where you, Barney, and you, Philips, are not supposed to go. If I can, I will also enlist the aid of the crawler personnel. This man has got to be found. It still may be possible to save what there is of world peace if we can find him soon enough. If we don't find him soon enough, I suspect everyone aboard is going to end up working in the Ameradian petrified wood mines."

II

"I guess," Yvonne said cutely as she and Y neared the stomach passage, "that you cops don't get next to a real blonde too often?"

Y continued to hold tight to her hand and ignored the slur on Bondmen as well as the sign that read: *Crawler Personnel Only*. What seemed the amplified sound of a churning washing machine became louder as they neared the stomach proper. There was no excuse for a pair of bewildered passengers to be here, so regardless of whether his man was in the cavity, Y must reveal himself.

As they emerged, via the passage's muscular contractions, Y took a deep

breath of the stomach's putrid air and glanced quickly about at the maze of tubing and the giant reservoir connecting with the huge beast's digestive system.

"Hey, you!"

He turned to see a young man with a high-peaked stoker's cap on his head glaring at them. Then, as Yvonne also turned, the stoker's scowl vanished. As the crawler employee sought for words, Y congratulated himself on his astuteness in bringing Yvonne along. "Sorry, sir and madam, but unless you're crawler personnel, you're not allowed in here. It's a government safety regulation."

"Good!" Y said. "My credential." And he flipped his wallet open.

"Bureau of Bondmen. Western States of the Americas," the chief stoker read. He would, Y surmised, prefer to be known as a bio-maintenance engineer in charge of biofuel injection. "Well, I'm sorry, sir, but whatever your request, I can be of only slight assistance to you. Cefus neutrality policy."

"I know," Y said, knowing full well that if anything could penetrate this neutralist hide, it would be a show of interest on Yvonne's part. "You are not allowed to assist in any way either an agent from the West American States or from the Ameradian Republic. Yet this young lady is, in a sense, your country's."

"I've always heard you spies have no scruples about lying," the chief stoker said.

"But — but —" Yvonne said.

"Brad," the chief stoker said. "Brad Streeter."

Yvonne cast blue eyes on Brad

Streeter. "What this man says is true, Mr. Streeter. It's true, I've lived in the West American States for a number of years, but my brother Barney and I moved back to the Central Empire after our parents died. My name, by the way, is Yvonne Bohne."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Bohne," Streeter said. "Now this, eh, trouble?"

She smiled, just as though she had rehearsed it. "Well, Mr. Streeter, I could lie to you and say my life has been threatened, but what it really amounts to is that I've reason to believe that all our lives are threatened. All the lives of those aboard this crawler."

"Remarkable if true," Streeter said.

"But it is true," Yvonne said. "My brother and his business associate have information that a West American crawler never arrived at its destination. Now Mr. Jones — who I knew briefly under his real name while I lived in the Western States — has evidence that an Ameradian agent who knows what happened is aboard. And could be disguised as anyone — including crawler personnel."

Streeter looked at Y. "You want my help in finding your man? You know I can't give you much without violating my neutrality."

"That's the idea," Y said. "You can tell me about the crawler's personnel. If the Ameradian is one of them, I can maybe get him before he commits irreparable sabotage."

"Sabotage?" Streeter looked uneasily from beneath his cap brim.

"You really think there might be sabotage?"

"A desperate man," Y said, "may do anything. Besides, there's a West American crawler missing."

Streeter moved aside so they could see deeper into the stomach cavity. "All I know is who's here, sir. As you can see, there's my partner—" he nodded at a thick-bodied man checking some gauges — "and the new nutrition expert."

"This new man — " Y looked up at the catwalk — "he's there?"

"That's him," Streeter said. "Silent sort of fellow. Just came to work."

Y studied the man on the catwalk. The nutrition expert's back was turned, and Y saw clearly that the cap he wore was pulled down tight over the back of his skull. Was that just because of the occasional drops of water condensation falling from the nutrient pipes, he wondered — or was there something more? He waited until the man had turned from looking down into the vat that fed a large bag by hydraulic pressure. The eyes the man looked back with were clear and rather blank; far too small a man to be the master spy Y was after.

He turned to the chief stoker. "You know of a man who's built a lot like your partner but has a half-moon scar on the left side of his face and a nose that's a little flat? A man who might sometimes wear a beard?"

Streeter shrugged. "I don't know anyone who fits that description. Charlie, my partner, has been on

this crawler far longer than I have. I imagine from what you said that your man would have to be new on the job?"

"Or disguised as someone who's not new," Y said. "His disguises pass more than casual observation."

"I don't know anyone suspicious," Streeter said. "Not if this new man is all right."

"You keep your eye on this new man until we know," Y said. "The agent I'm after always works alone, but this could be a time when he's made an exception."

"I'll cooperate, sir. Within regulations, of course."

"One other thing I'd better warn you about," Y said. "If you notice anything different about the way the crawler is responding — anything at all — you must let me know immediately."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that, sir."

Y slapped the chief stoker lightly on the arm and pulled Yvonne back into the passageway. A little later, after a fruitless search of the crowded couches, they returned through the segments to her door. Y saw the conductor coming toward them down the hall but thought nothing of it. Then he saw that Yvonne was having difficulty with the door and helped her.

Inside, he saw her blue eyes widen and felt her clutch his hand. He didn't blame her: there was a streak of blood running right across the compartment to a makeup bed. On the bed, face staring upwards, was a man Y thought a complete stranger. The man was dead — very dead. There was a small leaky hole in the stranger's forehead.

Y clicked the lock on the door and went forward to examine the dead man. He was, Y quickly determined, shot twice with explosive shells: the first shot had gone in the lungs and the second had entered the forehead. The man was approximately the same size as the spy he was after, but there was no cheek scar and no sign that there had ever been either scar or beard.

Someone rapped gently at the door. Y stood aside, pulled Yvonne into the circle of his arm. He listened, breathing shallowly. He dipped for his gun as a key turned in the lock and the door opened. Facing them was the conductor.

"Greetings," said the conductor, and his eyes followed the blood.

Y saw no gun, motioned the man inside and shut the door. "You know what is going on?" he asked.

"Some," the conductor admitted. "What I don't know, I'm starting to guess."

"Well, start talking. Who's the dead man?"

The conductor sighed, most wearily. "Take a look at me, Y," he suggested. "At my face and my build."

Y did. At first he saw nothing and then, as the conductor rubbed a skin-tinted paste from his cheek with the back of his hand, Y knew at last. It seemed stupid to say it: "You're —"

"The man you were trailing. Yes. I'm the one burgled the Ministry of Transportation and the headquarters of the West American Crawler Corporation."

"But — " Y didn't like this at all. "If you're my man, then why — ?"

"Why the dead man and why am I here? Complicated. More than I fear you may appreciate."

"Try me," Y said.

The conductor walked over to the corpse. "This poor unfortunate is a crawler employee. Specifically, he was the rightful conductor. I had sought to obtain his cooperation, but he unfortunately resisted me."

"You shot him? Murdered him?" Y asked. Even for an Ameradian, it was a new low.

"Nothing else to do," the spy said. "Nothing at all. He was in the way and he wouldn't cooperate. Unfortunately he was also very strong and thought he knew a little about defense." The conductor's hand leaped suddenly out, and Y felt his wrist sting and saw his gun fly from his fingers; the Ameradian caught the gun in mid-flight and stood back, aiming it at them.

"Yes, my dear Y, I dare say that I acted exactly as you would under similar circumstances. The difference is that I'm a master spy. While you are — professionally speaking — not much better than an amateur."

Y held his throbbing wrist and scowled. "You tempt me to think you're right," he said.

"But you still want to know? Right, Y. My code name is three letters while yours is just one. D O X of the Ameradian Republic."

"A filthy spy!" Yvonne said, and spat in the master spy's direction.

"Also," D O X said, "an Ameradian. My parents were Toronto citizens, and my great-grandparents help-

ed in annexing of the old state territory."

"Filth!" Yvonne said. She spat again.

"Young lady," D O X said, "I must ask you not to do that on pain of getting your face slapped. I am, remember, not only a filthy spy but also a very unsanitary murderer."

"You're good, all right," Y acknowledged. "But my side is wiser than you think."

"Yes?" D O X's thick eyebrows rose.

"We knew the Ameradian Republic had their master spy at work. We also suspected why."

"Tell me, Y."

"You Ameradians are troubled by the same thing we are — crawlers disappearing with all passengers and cargo."

D O X nodded. "Very good. That is right to a point."

"A point?" Y still did not like it.

"The point is," D O X said, "that we Ameradians know nothing and you West Americans know nothing. If we knew, we'd have put a stop to it. But now, we know that it isn't smugglers or hijackers as we had assumed. There's no West American/Ameradian crime syndicate powerful enough. I *know*."

"Hmmm, you know, huh? And that's why you killed this real conductor and took his place?"

"Uh-huh," D O X said. "Bigger than that, I'm afraid. Also more incredible. Y, come over here and look at this corpse."

"I've looked," Y said.

"Come look again. At the back of

his head. Over here, if you please.”

Y moved, cautiously. He recognized a man of unusual proficiency who would not hesitate to take the life of an enemy counterspy.

“You’d better not look, young lady,” D O X said. “You look, Y.”

Y looked and then looked away quickly. He felt his gorge rise. “M-my God!” he said.

“Agreed,” D O X said. “Nasty, huh?”

Y swallowed and turned the head back the way it had been. “Just like the crawler,” he said. “A good-sized passage and — ”

“You noticed the slime too, I assume?”

Y nodded while he mentally cursed D O X. “I noticed something — greenish, pulpy, with some black hairs or filaments.”

“And you’re wondering what it means, aren’t you, Y? Outside of the fact that there was something there that my bullet hit.”

“I know what it means,” he said. “I’m afraid the officials at all levels have known — unconsciously — for quite some time. I knew, and yet—”

“Yet you wanted to deny it. Yes.”

“Will you two please tell me what you are talking about?” Yvonne demanded.

Y looked at her. “This man — the former conductor on this crawler — he was, uh, controlled by something. The way we, uh, control the crawler.”

“That’s not possible!” she said promptly.

“Isn’t it?” Y said. “Evidently you don’t know that the cerebellum and

brainstem are quite accessible from the back, and through them the basal ganglia. Walking, eating, all activities we perform automatically, are controlled from there. As for the cortex — a large part of it can be trimmed away and a man can live without and apparently function normally. Fibers can be cut that lead from the brainstem to the cortex and what’s left is a sort of non-thinking man who reasons and responds only on the most primitive level. It would be possible to control a man so that he even speaks, assuming the controller was bright enough.”

“You mean — little creatures — inside the head?”

“Miffiti,” Y said. “Very small Miffiti. Smaller than we ever believed possible.”

“About cockroach size,” D O X said.

Yvonne made a gagging noise.

“Which means,” said Y, “that there are more? More aboard, maybe, inside heads?”

D O X nodded. “The harboring heads wear bandages on the back. Or something as concealing as bandages. Toupees, maybe.”

“We’d better look,” Y said. “Search all the crawler personnel and all the passengers.”

“And we’d better hurry,” D O X said. “Before whatever happened to those other crawlers happens to this one. Oh, here, Y, here’s your gun back.”

Y took the weapon and tucked it away. He turned to see Barney and Philips. Both men were looking incredulously at the corpse. Y, taking charge as he felt he must,

quickly explained to the two and apologized on behalf of D O X for messing up the compartment. "But we've got to make a thorough check," he finished, "and that's where you two can help. Assuming — "

Philips yelped and so did Barney as Y reached out quickly and yanked their hair. Philips's came off; Barney's didn't. Underneath Philips's toupee a bald head gleamed.

"Give me that!" Philips demanded.

Y handed back the hair piece. "Had to make sure," he said. He glanced at D O X's heavy head of dark hair and Yvonne's blonde hairdo. "I believe that in this matter we can all trust one another."

"If they're all like this — " D O X indicated the corpse — "you can tell fairly quickly. This guy acted more like a sleepwalker than an alert crawler employee. Keep that in mind."

They broke up. Y and Yvonne returned, by devious route, to the stomach cavity. In the outside passageway Y pulled her close and whispered: "Now remember — don't blab if I capture this one. Your country's security is at stake and if I make a capture before D O X does — "

"I understand," she said. "Damned Ameradians! If they get the advantage of we West Americans — "

"Exactly!" he said, almost believing it. The truth was, of course, that he didn't want to be put down professionally. Yet there was, he eagerly accepted, great truth in what Yvonne had said. The contractions

carried them onto the solid flooring.

Y looked about, saw the chief stoker and called to him: "Where's the nutrition expert?"

"Look out!" Yvonne said.

Almost too late, Y saw the steel bar hurtling at him. He ducked, pushed Yvonne back into the passageway and dropped flat, yanking his gun out. Steel rang on the flooring and sparks leaped. Above him, on the catwalk overlooking the large vat that fed nutrient to the crawler's digestive apparatus, the slightly built man with the tight cap on the back of his head prepared to hurl another missile.

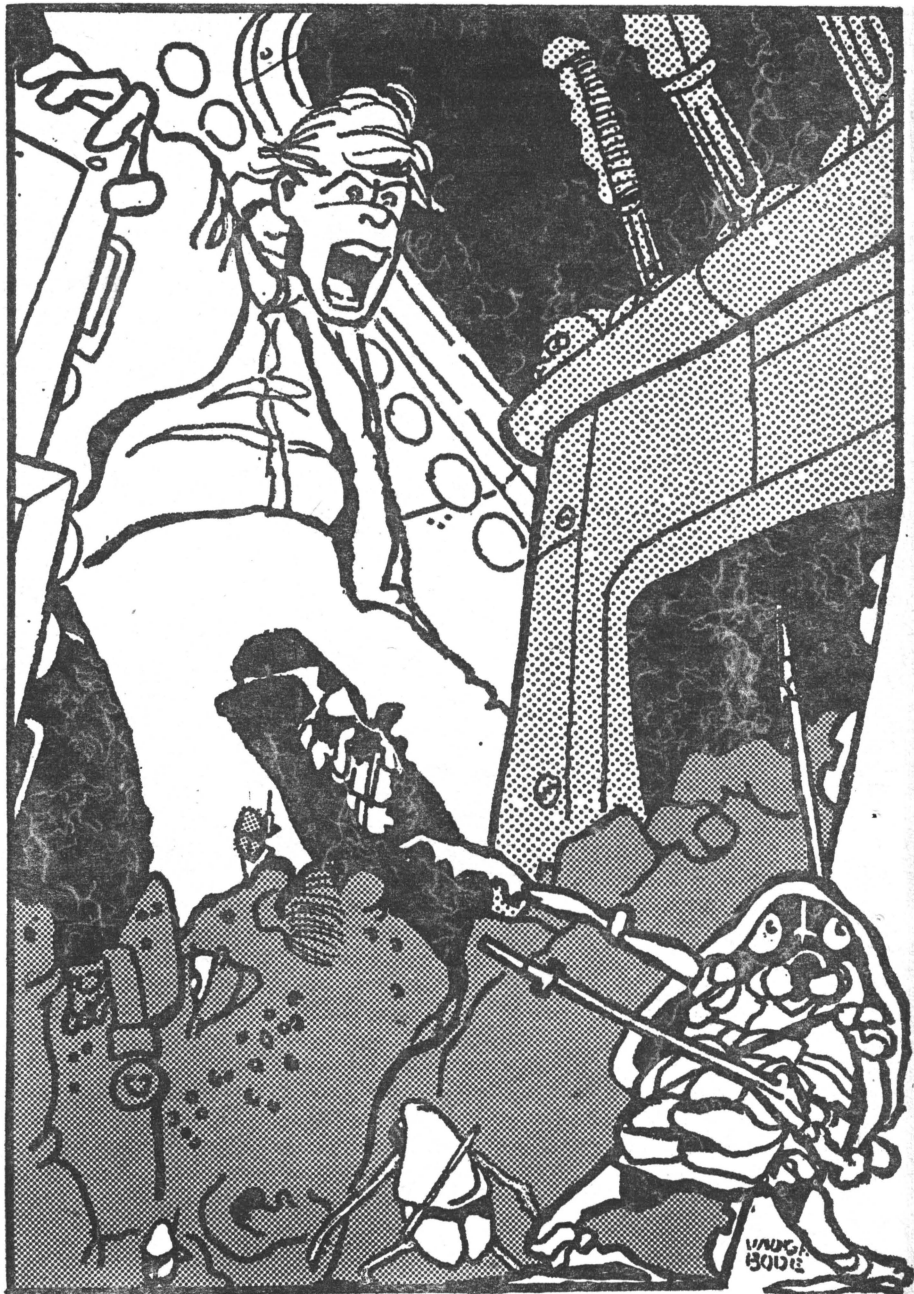
"Stop!" Y called, but the walking corpse moved stiffly and lifted a huge wrench. Y fired, knowing that otherwise the zombie would get the range with his second throw. He saw the bullet strike explosively, and the controlled body jerk as the slug tore its heart.

Y got to his feet and started up the stairs to the catwalk. He could see the zombie sinking to the walk and he knew he would have to get there fast. He hoped he could make it in time. If what was under that cap got out — Y didn't like to think about what might happen.

He reached the head of the stairs, crouched and approached the dead man with his gun ready. The dead man did not stir. Y wouldn't have been surprised if he had.

Then he saw it — the small dark thing of many legs crawling from beneath the too-tight cap. He raised the gun, put his sight on it; he tried not to think.

It moved, raising a claw and what



WING
BOON

was undeniably a tool or weapon. The action, in a man, would have been both desperate and hostile. Y's trigger finger tightened.

His gun roared and echoed. When the bits of pulp had finished settling, he saw what he had done and very cautiously moved to the railing and vomited off from the walkway.

IV

There were no more bandaged heads that the chief stoker and his assistant knew about. "Except. . ." the chief stoker said, looking at Yvonne and speaking to Y and the newly arrived D O X and Philips, "possibly in the head where the entire crawler is controlled by the crawler captain and his first and second mates. The captain *did* sound kind of funny over the inter-segment phone, come to think of it. I can't say there's not Miffiti in that compartment."

"That's where we go, then," D O X said.

"Whoa, D O X," Y said, "what's the plan? We can't just go busting in there if there's a Miffiti in control. No telling what would happen."

"There's just no telling, D O X said. "I was just looking out a window and I'd swear we've left the main track and are charging deeper into unreclaimed territory."

"Think so?" Y asked.

"I'm sure of it."

The stomach stoker went out the passageway. In a little bit he was back. "You're right, D O X. We have changed course. There's

nothing we can do about it, either, unless we can get at the head controls."

"We must," Y said. "Come on!"

Outside the head compartment the two smugglers and two spies conferred briefly and then hit the door. Things had become suddenly more urgent for them as the crawler had left the flat and begun ascending a hill. There was no certainty of what this portended other than something other than human hands in control.

The door burst open onto a death scene. Three men — the captain and his mates — lay sprawled on the floor. One mate had a hole in the back of his head the size of a large coin; the other two men had been killed with a weapon that burned holes through them not much thicker than an average gauge of wire; both the captain's and first mate's face were riddled with it; in addition, the captain's hands were riddled. It was easy to visualize the insect or insects trooping out of the second mate's skull when he took a bandage off; the first mate and the captain approaching, horrified, the first mate succumbing to the attacks of a tiny weapon and the captain vainly throwing his hands up.

"God!" Philips said, and throwing up his hands pitched forward. Barn-ey dropped a second later. D O X let out a quick hiss and slapped a hand to the back of Y's neck. Y ducked, saw the stain on D O X's hand, realized that the Ameradian had just saved his life. He saw D O X turn, stamping, kicking, slapping with

his hands. In a moment Y was following his lead. It was hard, exhausting work killing these things the size of cockroaches. Now and then something stung an arm or an ankle and without looking Y knew that the Miffiti were scoring nonfatal shots. He hoped that they were nonfatal; that the flesh-destroying capacities of the minute weapons were as limited as it now appeared.

Y stopped hitting and stomping. There were no more Miffiti in sight, but something else was. On the screen connected to the crawler's eye he could see the alarming sight of an approaching cliff edge. The Miffiti were driving the crawler up and over a precipice.

The crawler had to be stopped.

Y threw himself into the captain's seat and grabbed at levers that were supposed to control this thing. None responded.

The connections with the crawler's brain had been severed!

"Here, Y!" D O X was down on his hands and knees, prying at the transparent partition that separated the cab from the pulsing crawler-brain. It came loose with a pop, and a Miffiti came loose from a hold on one of the cables. It fell with a plop, rolled and shot a stream of light into D O X's left eye. The master spy gave a groan, said, "Carry on, Y!" and slapped a big hand down with sickening effect. Y found himself standing over a dead Ameradian and an open brain-conduct.

"Too bad," Y said, "he was a good man. The best!" Then, turning swiftly to the outside passageway he called to the young stoker: "Come in

here! See if you can stop this thing!"

The stoker complied. His hands flew frantically as he spliced wires leading to brain connections and repaired a cable that led to powerful batteries. "I think I can do it. I think — " he said.

"You'd better hurry!" Y said, holding his gun ready and watching the edge of the cliff coming closer and closer to them. Again he regretted his lack of expertise as a mechanic and electrician, bio or straight mechanical. Yet someone had to be on watch, he told himself.

"There! Back of the furthest cable. Yvonne said near his ear. "Oh, stop it, stop it quick!"

Y aimed his gun but held his fire. What a bullet would do in the brain conduct he did not know, but he was reasonably sure that it would not be wise to find out. Besides, West America — Earth, he mentally corrected himself — needed a prisoner.

The thing came out. Its forelegs were raised and it dropped something the size of a small pin that must have been its weapon. It came forward a few steps, its forelegs semaphoring in a way that was so human it should have been comical.

Y hardly remembered afterward, but somehow he got Yvonne to stop screaming. Somehow he applied the palm of his hand to either cheek of her face in rapid succession in a manner that drew a disapproving glare from the stoker, then ordered her to get him a container suitable for a prisoner. Somehow he made her understand; somehow she went back into the abandoned passenger com-

partment and returned with a box. It had been a face powder box and Y hoped briefly that there was nothing in the face powder to cause distress to his prisoner. Then he remembered the dead and his own throbbing ankles and decided comfort did not matter. He put the box down in the conduct, pointed at it and waited. Now if the Miffiti really were as intelligent as they seemed. . . .

The Miffiti got in the box. It bowed its head and clasped its tiny appendage over its head. In a creature of such diminutive size it was ridiculous; yet not ridiculous at all where human feelings are concerned. A wasp or a spider may arouse our most murderous instincts, but only while we are convinced of our own great superiority. Let the wasp and the spider show intelligence and display fear for the awesome human creature and something strange happens: the human can no longer think of the wasp or spider as merely an insect.

Y moved two fingers to the box lid and cautiously picked it up. Even more cautiously he put the lid on. Moving on sheer will power, he picked the box up and placed it gently beside the control panel.

"I think I've got it," the stoker said. "Hit the button!"

Y hit it, his heart all but stopped as he saw on the eye-screen that the crawler was poised right on the brink of a great precipice. The button depressed, the body they were

in shuddered along its great length, Y slammed a hand over the Miffiti's prison and held it closed even as he was thrown back several steps.

They stopped.

For a number of seconds which stretched interminably no one moved or spoke. Finally Y found his voice and took command: "Streeter," he said to the stoker, "do you think you can get this started and pilot us back to the station?"

Streeter frowned. "I think so," he said. Then he looked at Yvonne. "I'm sure I can, sir. But maybe not back to Cefus territory." He frowned as he looked at the box Y held. "Perhaps it would be best to make for the nearest settlement."

"I agree," Y said. "And that is —?"

"Detroit."

"Detroit!" The Bondman was momentarily incredulous. "But that's —"

"Yes, sir. Ameradian. My father was an, uh, emigrant from there."

Yvonne looked at the stoker with something close to horror. Then she looked at the corpses lying about and her blue eyes glazed with a different kind of horror. This — this was more important.

Y took stock of the situation. It looked, like it or not, as though there was going to have to be a united world. Pushing old prejudices aside, he slapped Streeter on the back.

"Detroit it is — Earthman!" END



At Nycon # 3

by LIN CARTER

*Our Man in Fandom gives us
the on-the-scene report of
the biggest worldcon ever!*

**So where were YOU over
the Labor Day weekend?**

This year, as you probably know, the 25th World Science Fiction Convention was held at New York's Statler-Hilton hotel at Seventh Avenue and 33rd Street, right across the street from what used to be Penn Station and is now in the process of being transmogrified into Madison Square Garden. The worldcon was under the joint chairmanship of Ted White and Dave Van Arnam and sponsored by New York's liveliest fan club, the Fanoclasts. It was called "Nycon 3," by the way, because two other world sf conventions have been previously held in this city, Nycon I, the first of all Worldcons, back in 1939, and Nycon II (which was

actually known as "the Newyorcon") in 1956.

You may never have attended one of the science-fiction world's annual shindigs . . . if so, here's one fan's casual description of the things that happened and the people he met and what they had to say.

The biggest Worldcon yet!

For me, the convention began about 6 o'clock Friday evening, September 1st. I left the offices of the ad agency where I work, met my wife and went straight to the convention hotel. We came into the convention hall during the dinner break when there was a lull in the program. We wandered around for a bit meeting old friends and making a few new

ones, perhaps. We spoke to Gray and Betty Morrow, and Jim and Judy Blish came over to say hello while we were exploring the hucksters' tables off the central rotunda.

Robert Silverberg was to auction Harlan Ellison to the high bidder. A young girl from somewhere around the Columbus, Ohio area bought him for \$40. (This sum, I am told, went to TAFF — The Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund, a worthy cause that tries to raise enough money each year to pay for a European fan's trip over here to the Worldcon — or vice versa, in case the convention happens to be in Europe, as occasionally happens.) Anyway, after this lucky girl bought Ellison, Silverberg then turned around and promptly auctioned her off. She went for \$2.00 more than Harlan. I noticed Harlan escorting the young lady, Jan Trenholm, around during the entire convention.

Nycon 3 was the most successful convention of all time, with the biggest attendance in science-fiction history — 1700 joined the con, and around 1500 actually turned up in person. This was a fantastic figure. Attendance at the annual sf Worldcon generally runs to just under five hundred, so in actual attendance figures, this convention was three times the average size. In fact, it was half again bigger than the previous record-holder, the Chicago convention of 1952 to which 1,000 came. By comparison with this year's Nycon, last year's convention in Cleveland only drew about 850 attendees.

Fans and pros came from all over. I talked with a genial fan named Waldemar Kumming from West

Germany (Munich, I believe), and people came from Canada, Sweden and Great Britain, as well as from all over the United States.

Celebrities Aplenty

After the dinner break, the program resumed its first day. (Actually, the convention had been open the day before, Thursday, August 31st, at four p.m., but that was just to register any early arrivers. The program did not get started until eleven-thirty Friday morning.) The first thing on after dinner was the second "Galaxy of Fashion" show, a modeling of futuristic fashions sponsored by *Galaxy* magazine and directed by Dave Van Arnam's sweet and hard-working wife, Cindy. I grabbed a seat in the section reserved for press, photographers and, I guess, stray celebrities. Harry Harrison was on my right, and we tried to out-ogle each other as Fritz Leiber, who emceed the show, would announce each new model and she would then sashay out in glamorous and skimpy garments. English science-fiction novelist John Brunner sat in front of me and we chatted during the lull between models. Flashbulbs and movie cameras were zapping and whirring all about us, and I understand that some of the fashions previewed on CBS Television earlier that day. In fact, I later caught a repeat of it on the Alan Burke show.

After this, my wife and I had dinner with Donald Wollheim of Ace Books and his wife and teen-aged daughter Betsy. Robert A.W. Lown-

des who edits hardcovers for Avalon, paperbacks for Airmont, as well as a string of prozines, ate with us as did the popular science-fantasy novelist, Emil Petaja. Willy and Olga Ley were at a nearby table. Since Emil Petaja was near me at my end of our table, we got to talking. I brought up the subject of his recent novels, such as *The Star Mill*, taken from Finnish mythology, and *Lord of the Green Planet*, taken from the Irish legends. I suggested that when he has worked these sources dry, he turn to something equally exotic and virtually untouched, such as Russian mythology. We also discussed our late mutual friend, the great fantasy artist Hannes Bok who died in his New York studio in April 1964.

After dinner, we went back to the convention hall and mingled with the swarms of people there. Michael Moorcock, author of the "Elric" stories and editor of England's only surviving science-fiction magazine, *New Worlds*, was there. So were Keith Laumer and Leigh Brackett and Clifford D. Simak and John W. Campbell, Jr. Hal Clement came over to say hello — we hadn't seen each other since the Lunacon some months before.

The husksters' tables were covered with books and paperbacks, sf magazines, and all sorts of other goodies like rare comic books, movie stills and posters, big little books. Also a mint copy of H.P. Lovecraft's *The Outsider and Others*, for sale to the highest bidder, and a drawing by Frank Frazetta. Browsing among the comicbookiana I ran into Otto Bin-

der, a real oldtimer in science fiction writing who used to collaborate with his late brother Earl Binder under the name "Eando Binder" — Eando meaning "E and O." Otto and I met a year or two ago when we were on a radio program together. He used to write continuity for Captain Marvel, and for many years now, he's been writing Superman for the comics.

In one of the rooms off the hucksters' hall, Bjo Trimble's International Science Fantasy Art Show was in full swing. The Art Show has become a fixture at Worldcons by now — anybody can enter his work, fan or pro, and art of any kind is welcome, from pen and ink, watercolors or pastels to oil paintings, photographs, etc. There was a lot of Tolkien stuff in the show this year and a fascinating group of paintings based on Robert E. Howard's stories by artist Jeff Jones. Coming out of the show, a charming young woman and gifted writer whom I haven't seen in many years came over to say hello — Katherine MacLean. And back in the rotunda just outside the convention hall I spoke to Fred Pohl, who was just back from a speaking tour of the the Deep South. Later in the week, Fred appeared on the Alan Burke show to comment on the clothes of the future from the Fashion Show.

Invaders from Dianetics

Saturday morning I got in early to attend the annual muster of the Hyborian Legion, the fanclub devoted to Robert E. Howard's Conan stories

in particular and to sword & sorcery in general. 25 or 30 Legionnaires were there when I came in, including Hal Clement and Jack Williamson. L. Sprague de Camp was in mid-speech as I took my seat; he was telling about his work editing the new editions of the Conan books for Lancer's paperback set. Then Fritz Leiber got up and spoke briefly about his Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser stories. The sword & sorcery news, speeches and all were nice, but what really made the muster for me was when George Scithers — the editor of *Amra*, the sword & sorcery fanzine — got up and proposed that Your Man In Fandom be elected by unanimous acclaim to the honorary title of "Royal Necromancer of Aquilonia." Makes a man feel quietly proud. Also makes a man wonder what happened to the Legion's last Royal Necromancer

Just before the muster broke up, a later-comer entered, pale and shaken, asking us if we knew that *right outside the door* some sort of World Dianetics congress was in full swing!?! "Like stepping into a weird and alien world, it was," he shuddered. We stepped out among the Dianetics people, and by Crom, he was right! A *very* alien world. We looked at them, and they looked at us. We Robert E. Howard fans thought *they* were a bunch of kooks, and they L. Ron Hubbard fans were doubtless entertaining the same opinion of us.

Sprague had invited Jack Williamson, Fritz Leiber, George Scithers and me up to his room for a drink. Over Sprague's scotch we talked about the brand-new Conan yarns

Sprague and I are now writing, then adjourned to the coffee shop for a late breakfast together. I really dug the chance to meet Jack Williamson, who has been one of my favorite adventure writers, for years, and having heard he would be there, I brought along copies of *Darker Than You Think* and *Legion of Time* for him to autograph for me.

A Meet-the-Pros Party

That evening, Larry and Noreen Shaw threw a mammoth get-together party in their suite, and the drinks were on Lancer Books for whom Larry is editor. There was quite a crush of people. I saw Isaac and Gertrude Asimov but couldn't get close enough to them to say hello. Terry Carr was talking to Roger Zelazny, and my wife and I managed to squeeze into a corner by the window with Sprague and his charming blonde wife, Catherine. We sat near Dick and Pat Lupoff. Dick kept sneaking off somewhere and re-appearing with bottles of chilled champagne which we shared. Dick's first novel, *One Million Centuries*, was just published by Lancer, so we toasted it. While Sprague and I took the opportunity to thrash out a few plot-problems on our new Conan yarns, another old-time favorite writer of mine came squeezing through the crush — George O. Smith. Spotting me, he grabbed my head and turned it to several different angles, exclaiming, "By golly, if you don't remind me of a young Fletcher Pratt!"

With unusual presence of mind, I

quipped, "In more ways than one, George — you've met my new collaborator, L. Sprague de Camp?" By this time the room was positively blue with cigarette smoke. Judith Merrill wove her way through the crowd to join us and thrust her head out the open window, drawing in huge breaths with gusto. "Mmm! Smell all that good fresh air pollution!" she said. I went into the other room to get another glass, but the log-jam of people was too much for me. Algis Budrys, who was wedged in next to me, took the opportunity to say he had given a good review in his *Galaxy* column to *King Kull*, a new Lancer book I wrote in post-humorous collaboration with Robert E. Howard.

"I liked it," he said, then mused thoughtfully, "which is kind of odd, because I *don't* much like the Conan stories. I'm afraid I took up most of the review trying to articulate just *why* I thought it was a good book"

After the party, we ran into another old favorite, Edmond Hamilton, or rather, two old favorites, for his wife, Leigh Brackett, was with him. We hadn't seen each other in ten years, and it was great to talk together again. I also got another chance to talk with Jack Williamson and was surprised and pleased when he told me that it was because of this column in *Worlds of If* that he had decided to attend the convention this year. That made me feel good. In all, exactly 26 people told me at one time or another during the convention that they were here because of my *If* column.

. . . Well, I didn't think I could cover the whole four days of the Nyon in one column, so I'll save the rest of the news for next time, when we'll talk about the Costume Ball, the Hugo Awards, the banquet, the Guest of Honor's speech and the plans for *next* year's world science fiction convention!

END

Next Month in IF -

THE MAN IN THE MAZE

A Thrilling New Science-Fiction Novel

by Robert Silverberg

THE RIM GODS

Complete Novelette of Galactic Adventure

by A. Bertram Chandler

THE PRODUCT OF THE MASSES

by John Brunner

And concluding —

SLOWBOAT CARGO

by Larry Niven

Don't miss the big April IF!



Squatter's Rights

by HANK DAVIS

Listen, insects! This is my world and if you don't like the way I run it . . . get off!

I didn't want to get here except in so far as I wanted to be anywhere but where I was. This isn't where I was, but it isn't anywhere, either. Anywhere is fuzzy gray; not an optical gray but a mental gray. The gray in the direction that you're not looking. For you insects, it's the gray behind your head. For me, it's the gray directly over my head. To each his own, as one of your songs says.

Anywhere is an all-around term — like anything. Just try and visualize an anything. It has no form; but it isn't formless, because formlessness is a specific characteristic, rather than a general one. You might say that

anything is formless. Yes, you might.

In fact, any characteristic that you can name is a specific one and is necessarily inapplicable to anything. Therefore, anything has no characteristics. Since nothing likewise has no characteristics, anything is the same thing as nothing. . . .

Dammit, I told you to just have one person talk to me. When all of you midgets start yelling at once, all I get is a gabble.

Oh, you think that what I've been saying is nonsense, eh? Well, shrimp, that nonsense took us hundreds of generations to develop. If you can't see it, it's your problem. You insects

are the ones who are in danger, not me. If you want to survive, you'll have to master any-valued logic and mathematics and drop the infantile nonsense that you've concocted — like that bunk about dialectics that so many of you think so much about.

Damn, damn, damn! Sweden is the only one who's supposed to be talking. Everybody else get off the air. If you insects don't stop trying to all talk at once, I'll knock out your communications for another twenty-four hours.

Getting back to my "nonsense," may I point out that even your rudimentary physique has reached the point where you know that the universe curves back on itself. Left to yourselves, you would probably have discovered that all phenomena in your universe are circular. Extreme opposites are identities.

Yes, Sweden, I guess I did mean physics instead of physique. English is very confusing with all those different symbols that sound alike.

Yes, I am way off the track. I haven't communicated with any other individuals for almost a hundred generations. Also, I had to learn your languages from watching — well, that's not quite the right word — perceiving your television broadcasts. And before I could do that, I had to crack the scanning code that you use. Besides, it isn't easy to hang onto a train of thought when you keep interrupting me.

I'll postpone the any-valued mathematics until I finish telling you why you are in danger. The only way

An IF First Story

In each issue of *If* we bring you a story by a brand-new writer, never before published. This month's is by Hank Davis, a 23-year-old senior at the University of Kentucky. Math major, singer in the University's Men's Glee Club, member of the Young Americans for Freedom, Davis read A. E. Van Vogt's *Slan* while he was in the second grade, got hooked and has never succeeded in unhooking himself. Davis defines his political status as "pragmatic anarchist" and lists as his twin heroes Dave Brubeck and Barry Goldwater.

to get you insects to do anything is to scare you.

As I was saying, I didn't intend to come here. Any old port in a storm, as you insects say, and there was a storm — a rather large one from my viewpoint, since it involved the eradication of yours truly. So I took a dust — or is that a powder?

I don't think that you can understand my crime. Too alien to your basic cultural matrix. It was very trivial. Rather like walking on the grass or keeping a library book overdue. For such trivial offenses, you have trivial penalties. Our system was much simpler. Every offense carried the death penalty.

This was cruel, but not unnecessarily so. There is a constant quantity of cruelty in the universe, and if it is put off at one time, circumstances will dictate that it be applied later. For generations, we hadn't applied such cruel measures as compulsory birth control or elimination of the unfit young so that there would be

room for the fit. We finally ran afoul of the law of conservation of cruelty and had to start stringing up the walkers-on-grass by their necks or be elbowed to death by each other.

I speak figuratively. We have neither necks nor elbows.

I recognized the necessity for this in general, but still didn't care for the idea of it being applied to me specifically, so I grabbed one of our ships and left.

This fleeing from punishment was fully in line with our ethical system, incidentally. Since extreme opposites are identities, the small is equivalent to the very large. Hence, the destruction of an individual is equivalent to the destruction of the universe — which is also the way that the individual's destruction appears from his viewpoint. Since the elimination of the universe is an obvious evil, every individual must survive at all cost. Not that this would have made any difference to the police who were out to get me, but, if I had been caught, there would have been no nonsense about "resisting arrest" — which would have been rather silly anyway, since I could only be executed once.

We could go anywhere in no time by means of our Anywhere Drive ships. I can't explain it to you until I've taught any-valued mathematics to you, but I can play word games so that you'll think you understand. By generating an Anywhere field, the illusory condition that the ship is at a specific somewhere in space is canceled, and the ship is anywhere — or nowhere; or everywhere, it's the same thing — in the universe.

SQUATTER'S RIGHTS

The universe curves back on itself, and its size is determined by the quantity of mass contained within it. We generate a — call it a capsule of curved space, but that's a lousy description — which fools the ship into thinking that the universe is no larger than the ship. Since the ship doesn't want to leave the universe — can't leave the universe, it stays put. We can shove the capsule of curved space anywhere in the universe at an infinite velocity, since it doesn't have mass. When the capsule moves, the ship follows, and finite distances are covered in zero time.

Right you are. I am talking nonsense, but it's as close to reality as I can get until I teach any-valued math to you, so shut up and learn. It's your funeral, not mine, as you insects like to say.

The trouble with my getaway was that anything I could do, the fuzz could also do. I could go anywhere in the universe, but so could they. My only chance was to lose myself. The universe is so big that all the stars in it could burn out before a random search found me. Unfortunately, the ship's navigation mechanism was rigged to prevent just such contingencies as lawbreakers' escaping. It automatically transmitted the destination of the ship to police headquarters before departure.

With the cops closing in, it was sink or swim, as you insects like to say, so I disconnected the navigation mechanism and said ready or not, here I come, and went.

Naturally I didn't know where I was when I arrived, but neither did

John Law. Where I was turned out to be here. Wherever that is. So I settled down on Earth, as you insects later named it. Not knowing where I was, I could never return home anyway.

If you don't like my vocabulary, don't blame me. It's derived from your TV and radio programs. Blame them! And shut up so that I can finish!

The earth was a lot hotter when I arrived than it is now, but I cooled it down in a hurry. We get our energy by absorbing heat from our surroundings, instead of oxidizing matter like you do. As long as I'm not damaged — and it would take a lot to damage me — I don't have to take in any solid matter.

Your astronomers have noticed — huh? Oh? What's the second law of thermodynamics?

You're putting me on. That's just a condition that holds as long as entropy is increasing. As soon as you've digested any-valued mathematics, you'll be able to see how it's possible.

As I was saying, you are aware that Venus is much hotter than the Earth. The reason for this is me. Or, rather, it isn't me. Venus doesn't have me to cool it off, like Earth does. Matter of fact, if I weren't here, Earth would heat up considerably, due to heat from the core which I absorb.

I've overdone it a few times. Ice ages, you know.

Yes, I've been here for a long time. I'm very long lived compared to you. I'm much bigger than you, also. I wasn't even aware of your existence until you started broadcasting. I'm sensitive to the entire electromagnetic

spectrum, instead of the narrow strip that you can see or feel.

Where am I hiding? I'm not hiding! You've known where I am for years. You've named me Antarctica. I thought that you would have guessed that by now. Since I absorb heat, I'm covered with ice, although absorption from the air is accidental. I get most of my heat from my planet's core.

Yes, my planet. After all, I was here before any of you were. What's more, you wouldn't have been here if I hadn't cooled the planet down so fast.

No, this isn't a hoax. Want me to drown out all your communications again?

You asked for it.

Anybody out there? Well, hello there again. It was rather silly of you to shoot those missiles at me. A fission reaction produces heat, mostly, so I just absorbed it.

No, I'm not mad. You don't get mad at viruses, do you? Now be quiet and let me pick up where I left off.

I've gotten in touch with you humans because you're going to have to leave. All of you.

Yes, I mean leave Earth. Where do you think I meant?

After I give you any-valued mathematics, you can build ships with Anywhere drives and find some other planet suitable for you. You'll have to have the drive because none of the other planets in the solar system besides this one are suitable for you; and soon this one won't be suitable for you.

Well, you see, I'm pregnant.

I *think* that's the right word. I don't know much about how you humans reproduce since you never have much about it on your broad-casts.

Anyway, I'll have to reproduce soon. We reproduce by dividing in two at regular intervals. Each new individual has the memories of the old one, but never mind that. It's involuntary, but we have drugs which can prevent it. I took all that I had when I came, but they've worn off now.

In about twenty years, I'll become very hungry for solid matter and I'll have to start absorbing material from the crust of the earth until I've doubled in size.

The trouble is that the shift in weight will cause earthquakes and volcanic eruptions everywhere on the earth. It may even cause the axis to shift, and that would really be messy.

I would leave in my ship, but that would be just as bad. I can't get to the ship — or the Moon, as you call it — and if it comes to me, the tidal effects could tear the Earth to pieces.

Get the picture? Whether I stay or go, the planet gets wrecked. The only way out is for you to build ships with Anywhere drives and pull up stakes.

Yes, I could tell you how to concoct the drug, but I'm too far along for that to help. I have been for about three hundred years.

You're awfully quiet out there. You haven't fainted, have you?

Are you recording this? Good. I'll give you the mathematics now. Sorry about running you off the planet, but you would have done it yourselves in a couple of centuries, since you obviously weren't going to limit your population. And, anyway, I was here first. **END**

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**He was as good as invisible —
which was useful, considering
how many people wanted his life!**

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Mount Lookitthat the planet is a Venus-sized world circling Tau Ceti. Its only habitable area is a not particularly flat Plateau half the size of California, set on top of Mount Lookitthat the mountain, forty miles above the hellish heat and pressure at the planet's true surface.

For three hundred years the colony on Mount Lookitthat has been a two-class system, dominated by the "crew," with the "colonists" underneath. The heart of the colony is the Hospital, an amorphous structure which incorporates the two slowboats that once carried men to the planet.

One function of the Hospital is Implementation, the army and police of Mount Lookitthat, led by JESUS PIETRO CASTRO as Head. CASTRO, who is half colonist, is supervised by MILLARD PARLETTE, nearly two hundred years old and pure crew.

Another function of the Hospital is the organ banks. Colonists accused of crimes go into the organ banks, which are used to cure the sick. Mainly they benefit the crew. Most medicine on Mount Lookitthat involves the organ banks.

So things stand when Ramrobot #143 leaves Earth . . . and when it arrives, twelve years later.

The Ramrobots come only when Earth's latest discovery is such that it cannot be sent as information in a laser beam. This holds in particular for items of biological engineering, of which Mount Lookitthat has many: indoor grass, housecleaners, architectural coral, altered citrus groves, and so forth.

The SONS of EARTH, a crewish rebel organization, correctly suspect that Ramrobot #143 is something special; though only MILLARD PARLETTE knows its full importance. Their attempt to capture it is foiled by CASTRO, but POLLY TOURNQUIST gets pictures. She plans to show them at the rebel meeting the next night. Cover for the meeting is a party at the house of HARRY KANE, leader of the rebels.

Through a chance meeting with JAYHAWK HOOD, MATTHEW LEIGH KELLER is invited to the party. MATT KELLER is a keeper of mining worms, unrelated to the

rebels, but he also has a special form of luck such that people generally ignore him when he wants them to. He believes his uncle went to the organ banks for treason.

He shortly realizes that the party must be a cover for the Sons of Earth, with people like himself invited for camouflage. It doesn't bother him. But his later pass at POLLY TOURNQUIST is refused, and this, for obscure reasons, plunges him into a black depression. He begins drinking.

Drunk and feeling sorry for himself, he tries to explain to LANEY MATTSON: at a certain point, women forget him completely. In kindness she seduces him. They are in a dark bedroom when Implementation raids the house.

The rebel group is broken. Most of the Sons of Earth are removed to the Hospital. MATT escapes, lucky as usual.

In the morning he returns to the wrecked house. Searching for food and clothing, he finds a car buried in the basement. His fiddling around blows the roof off, leaving clear sky above the car.

Two cliffs, with guarded bridges, stand between MATT and the Hospital. He'd never make it without a car. He considers the car an omen. But he has never flown a car.

Determined to make the best try he can to rescue Laney and the others, he tries it anyway.

Results are predictably spectacular; but he doesn't fall. After an unavoidable detour into the mist below the Plateau's void edge, MATT winds up on Alpha Plateau . . . the crew

plateau, the site of the Hospital. Hours later, after nightfall, he tries to get in.

The wall guard spots him almost instantly. But when he surrenders, stands up in a blaze of spotlights with his hands in the air, he is ignored and forgotten. Totally confused, he walks away.

Still confused, on the safe side of a hill, he tries to think it out. He might as well try again, because he can't leave; he's lost the car, and there are the two guarded bridges. His decisions if darkness doesn't hide him, but spotlights do, then he should be safe walking up the middle of a lighted road.

It works, up to the point where he has to pound on the gate with a rock to get in. The gate guard takes him in at gunpoint.

Once inside the Hospital's huge main doors, the gate guard tells him how wrong he's been. They are going to the vivarium, where MATT will be put to sleep with the other Sons of Earth. He will not wake. When the time comes, he will be taken apart for the organ banks, still asleep.

MATT turns, horrified. For a moment the guard, HOBART, seems ready to shoot. Then he goes mad. He runs off crying, "Mist Demons! I'm supposed to be on the gate!"

XI

At one-thirty another officer came to relieve Polly's guard.

The newcomer's uniform was not as well pressed, but he himself seemed in better condition. His muscles

were gymnasium muscles, and he was casually alert at one-thirty in the morning. He waited until the long-headed man had gone, then moved to inspect the dials along the edge of Polly's coffin.

He was more thorough than the other. He moved methodically down the line, in no hurry, jotting the settings in a notebook. Then he opened two big clamps at two corners of the coffin and swung the lid back, careful not to jar it.

The figure within did not move. She was wrapped like a mummy, a mummy with a snout, in soft, swaddling cloth. The snout was a bulge over her mouth and nose, the mouth pads and the arrangements for breathing. There were similar protrusions over her ears. Her arms were crossed at her waist, straight-jacket fashion.

The Implementation officer looked down at her for long moments. When he turned, he showed his first signs of furtiveness. But he was alone, and no footsteps sounded in the hall.

From the head end of the coffin protruded a padded tube with a cap even more heavily padded in sponge rubber. The officer opened the cap and spoke softly.

"Don't be afraid. I'm a friend. I'm going to put you to sleep."

He peeled the soft bandage from Polly's arm, drew his gun and fired at the skin. Half a dozen red beads formed there, but the girl did not move. He could not have been sure that she heard him, or that she felt the needles.

He closed the lid and the cap of the speaking tube.

He was perspiring freely as he

watched the dials change. Presently he produced a screwdriver and went to work at the backs of the dials. When he finished, all eight dials read as they had read when he came in.

They lied. They said that Polly Tournquist was awake but motionless, conscious but deprived of any sensory stimulus. They said she was going mad by increments. Whereas Polly Tournquist was asleep. She would be asleep for the eight hours of Loren's tour of duty.

Loren wiped his face and sat down. He did not enjoy taking such risks, but it was necessary. The girl must know something; else she wouldn't be here. Now she could hold out for eight hours longer.

The man they wheeled into the organ bank operating room was unconscious. He was the same man Jesus Pietro's squad had found resting on the dead man switch, one of those he had questioned that afternoon. Jesus Pietro was through with him; he had been tried and condemned, but in law he was still alive. It was a legal point, nothing more.

The operating room was big and busy. Against one long wall were twenty small suspended-animation tanks mounted on wheels, for moving medical supplies to and from the room next door. Doctors and internes worked quietly and skillfully at a multitude of operating tables. There were cold baths: open tanks of fluid kept at a constant 10° Fahrenheit. Beside the door was a twenty-gallon tank half full of a straw-colored fluid.

Two internes wheeled the convict

into the operating room, and one immediately injected a full pint of the straw-colored fluid into his arm. They moved the table next to one of the cold baths. A woman moved over to help, carefully fastened a breathing mask over the man's face. The internes tilted the table. The convict slid into the bath without a splash.

"That's the last," said one. "Oh, boy, I'm beat."

The woman looked at him with concern, a concern which might have showed in her mouth behind the mask but which could not show in her eyes. Eyes have no expression. The interne's voice had shown almost total exhaustion. "Take off, the both of you," she said. "Sleep late tomorrow. We won't need you."

When they finished with this convict, the organ banks would be full. In law he was still alive. But his body temperature fell fast, and his heartbeat was slowing. Eventually it stopped. The patient's temperature continued to fall. In two hours it was well below freezing, yet the straw-colored fluid in his veins kept any part of him from freezing.

In law he was still alive. Prisoners had been reprieved at this point and revived without medical ill effects, though they walked in terror for the rest of their days.

Now they lifted the convict onto an operating table. His skull was opened; an incision was made in his neck, cutting the spinal cord just below the brain stem. The brain was lifted out, carefully, for the membranes surrounding it must not be damaged. Though the doctors might

deny it, there was a kind of reverence attached to the human brain, and to this moment. At this moment the convict became legally dead.

In a New York hospital a cardiectomy would have been performed first, and the prisoner would have been dead when it was over. On We Made It he would have been dead the moment his body temperature reached 32° F. It was a legal point. You had to draw the line somewhere.

They flash-burned his brain and saved the ashes for urn burial. His skin came next, removed in one piece, still living. Machines did most of the work, but the machines of the Plateau were not advanced enough to work without human control. The doctors proceeded as if they were disassembling a delicate, very valuable, vastly complex jigsaw puzzle. Each unit went into a suspended-animation tank. Someone then took a tiny sample with a hypodermic and tested it for a wide variety of rejection reactions. A transplant operation was never cut-and-dried. A patient's body would reject foreign parts unless each rejection was balanced by complex biochemicals. When the tests were over each unit was labeled in full detail and wheeled next door, into the organ banks.

Matt was lost. He wandered through the halls looking for a door labeled "Vivarium." Some of the doors he passed had labels; some did not. The Hospital was huge. Chances were he could wander for days without finding the vivarium the gateman had mentioned.

Solitary individuals passed him in

the corridors, in police uniforms or in white gowns and white masks pulled down around their necks. If he saw someone coming Matt shrank against the wall and remained perfectly still until the intruder passed. Nobody noticed him. His strange invisibility protected him well.

But he wasn't getting anywhere.

A map, that's what he needed.

Some of these doors must lead to offices. Some or all offices must have maps in them, perhaps built into wall or desk. After all, the place was so complicated Matt nodded to himself. Here was a door now, with a strange symbol and some lettering: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. Maybe

He opened the door. And froze halfway through it.

Glass tanks filled the room like floor-to-ceiling aquarium tanks, each subdivided into compartments. They were arranged like a labyrinth, or like the bookcases in a public library. In the first moments Matt couldn't recognize anything he saw in those tanks; but in their asymmetrical shapes and in their infinite dark shades of red, their nature was unmistakable.

He stepped all the way inside. He had abandoned control of his legs, and they moved of themselves. These flattish dark red objects, those translucent membranes, the soft looking blobs of alien shapes, the great transparent cylindrical tanks filled with bright red fluid Yes, these had been human beings. And there were epitaphs:

Type AB, Rh+. Glucose content Rd Corp count

Thyroid gland, male. Rejection classes C, 2, pm, 31. Over-active for body weight less than

Left humerus, live. Marrow type O, Rh-, N, 02. Length **IMPORTANT:** test for fit in sockets before using.

Matt closed his eyes and rested his head against one of the tanks. The glass surface was cold. It felt good against his perspiring forehead. He had always had too much empathy. Now there was a grief in him, and he needed time to mourn these strangers. Mist Demons grant they were strangers.

Pancreas. Rejection classes F, 4, pr, 21. **DIABETIC TENDENCIES:** Use for pancreatic fluid secretion only. **DO NOT TRANSPLANT.**

A door opened.

Matt slid behind the tank and watched from around the corner. The woman wore gown and mask, and she pushed something on wheels. Matt watched her transfer things from the cart into various of the larger tanks.

Somebody had just died.

And the woman in the mask was a monster. If she'd taken off her mask to reveal foot-long poison-dripping fangs, Matt couldn't have feared her more.

Voices came through the door.

"We can't use any more muscle tissue." A woman's voice, high and querulous, with a crew lilt. The lilt didn't quite ring true, though Matt couldn't have said where it failed.

A sarcastic man's voice answered. "What shall we do, throw it away?"

"Why not?"

Seconds of silence. The woman with the cart finished her work and moved toward the door. Then: "I've never liked the idea. A man died to give us healthy, living tissue, and you want to throw it away like — " The closing door cut him off rather abruptly.

Like the remnants of a ghoul's feast, Matt finished for him.

He was turning toward the hall door when his eye caught something else. Four of the tanks were different from the others. They sat near the hall door, on flooring whose scars showed where there had once been suspended-animation tanks; these did not have heavy, machinery-filled bases. Instead, machinery rested in the tanks themselves, behind the transparent walls. It might have been aerating machinery. The nearest tank contained six small human hearts.

Unmistakably they were hearts. They beat. But they were tiny, no bigger than a child's fist. Matt touched the surface of the tank, and it was blood warm. The tank next to it held three-lobed objects which had to be livers; but they were small, small.

That did it. In what seemed one leap, Matt was out in the hall. He leaned against the wall, gasping, his shoulders heaving, his eyes unable to see anything but those clusters of small hearts and livers.

Someone rounded the corner and came to an abrupt stop.

Matt turned and saw him, a big soft man in an Implementation police uniform. Matt tried his voice. It came out blurred but comprehensible: "Where's the vivarium?"

The man stared, then pointed. "Take a right and you'll find a flight of stairs. Up one flight, take a right, then a left, and watch for the sign. It's a big door with an alarm light, but you can't miss it."

"Thanks." Matt turned toward the stairs. His stomach hurt, and there was a shivering in his hands. He'd have liked to drop where he was, but he had to keep going.

Something stung his arm.

Matt turned and raised his arm in the same instant. Already the sting was gone; his arm was as numb as a haunch of meat. Half a dozen tiny red drops bedewed his wrist.

The big, soft man regarded Matt with a puzzled frown. His gun was in his hand.

The galaxy spun madly, receding.

Corporal Halley Fox watched the colonist fall, then holstered his gun. What was the world coming to? First the ridiculous secrecy about the ramrobot. Then, two hundred prisoners swept up in one night, and the whole Hospital going crazy trying to cope. And now! A colonist wandering the Hospital corridors, actually asking for the Vivarium!

Well, he'd get it. Halley Fox lifted the man and slung him over his shoulder, grunting with the effort. Only his face was soft. *Report it and forget it.* He shifted his burden and staggered toward the stairs.

XII

At dawn the graded peak of Mount Lookitthat swam beneath a sea of fog. For those few who were al-

ready aboard, the sky merely turned from black to gray. This was not the poison mist below the void edge, but a continuous cloud of water vapor, thick enough to let a blind man win a shooting match. Crew and colonists, one and all, as they stepped outside their homes their homes vanished behind them. They walked and worked in a universe ten yards in diameter.

At seven o'clock Implementation police moved into the trapped forest, a squad at each end. Yellow fog lights swept the tongue of forest from the nearest sections of wall. The light barely reached the trees. Since the men who had been on watch that night had gone home, the searchers had no idea what animal they were searching for. Some thought it must be colonists.

At nine they met in the middle, shrugged at each other and left. Nothing human or animal lived in the trapped woods, nothing bigger than a big insect. Four aircars nevertheless rose into the fog and sprayed the wood from end to end.

At nine-thirty

Jesus Pietro cut the grapefruit in half and held one half upside down. The grapefruit meat dropped in sections into his bowl. He asked, "Did they ever find that rabbit?"

Major Jansen stopped with his first sip of coffee halfway to his lips. "No, sir, but they did find a prisoner."

"In the woods?"

"No, sir. He was pounding on the gate with a rock. The gateman took him inside the Hospital, but from there it becomes a little unclear —"

"Jansen, it's already nuclear. What

was this man doing pounding on the gate?" A horrible thought struck him. "Was he a crew?"

"No, sir. He was Matthew Keller. Positive identification."

Grapefruit juice spilled on the breakfast rack. "Keller?"

"The same."

"Then who was in the car?"

"I doubt we'll ever know, sir. Shall I ask for volunteers to examine the body?"

Jesus Pietro laughed long and loud. Jansen was pure colonist, though he and his ancestors had been in service so long that their accents and manners were almost pure crew. It would never do for him to joke with his superiors in public. But in private he could be amusing . . . and he had the sense to know the difference.

"I've been trying to think of a way to shake up Implementation," said Jesus Pietro. "That might do it. Well. Keller came up to the gate and began pounding on it with a rock?"

"Yes, sir. The gateman took him in charge after calling Watts. Watts waited half an hour before he called the gatehouse again. The gateman couldn't remember what happened after he and the prisoner reached the Hopsital. He was back on duty, and he couldn't explain that either. He should have reported to Watts, of course. Watts put him under arrest."

"Watts shouldn't have waited half an hour. Where was Keller all this time?"

"A Corporal Fox found him outside the door to the organ banks, shot him and carted him off to the vivarium."

"Then he and the gateman are

both waiting for us. Good. I'll never sleep again until I get this straightened out." Jesus Pietro finished his breakfast in a remarkable hurry.

Then it occurred to him that the mystery was deeper than that. How had Keller reached Alpha Plateau at all? The guards wouldn't have let him past the bridge.

By car? But the only car involved —

Hobart was scared. He was as frightened as any suspect Jesus Pietro had seen, and he took no interest in hiding it. "I don't know! I took him through the door, the big door. I made him walk ahead so he couldn't jump me — "

"And did he?"

"I can't remember anything like that."

"A bump on the head might have given you amnesia. Sit still. Jesus Pietro walked around the chair to examine Hobart's scalp. His impersonal gentleness was frightening in itself. "No bumps, no bruises. Does your head hurt?"

"I feel fine."

"Now, you walked in the door. Were you talking to him?"

The man bobbed his graying head. "Uh-huh. I wanted to know what he was doing banging on the gate. He wouldn't say."

"And then?"

"All of a sudden I — " Hobart stopped, swallowed convulsively.

Jesus Pietro put an edge in his voice. "Go on."

Hobart started to cry.

"Stop that. You started to say something. What was it?"

"All of a sudden I — gulp — remembered I was s'posed t'be at the gate."

"But what about Keller?"

"Who?"

"What about your prisoner?"

"I can't remember!"

"Oh, get out of here." Jesus Pietro thumbed a button. "Take him back to the vivarium. Get me Keller."

Up a flight of stairs, take a right, then a left —

VIVARIUM

Behind the big door were rows of contour couches, skimpily padded. All but two couches had occupants. There were ninety-eight prisoners here, of all ages from fifteen to fifty-eight, and all were asleep. Each was wearing a headset. They slept quietly, more than the usual sleeper, breathing shallowly, their peaceful expressions untroubled by bad dreams. It was a strangely restful place. They slept in rows of ten, some snoring gently, the rest silent.

Even the guard looked sleepy. He sat in a more conventional chair to one side of the door, with his double chin drooping on his chest, with his arms folded in his lap.

More than four centuries ago, at some time near the middle of the nineteen hundreds, a group of Russian scientists came up with a gadget that might have made sleep obsolete. In some places, it did. By the twenty-fourth century it was a rare corner of the known universe that did not know of the sleepmaker.

Take three electrodes, light elec-

trodes. Now pick a guinea pig, human, and get him to lie down with his eyes closed. Put two electrodes on his eyelids and tape the third to the nape of his neck. Run a gentle, rhythmic electric current from eyelids to nape, through the brain. Your guinea pig will drop off immediately. Turn the current off in a couple of hours, and he will have had the equivalent of eight-hours sleep.

You'd rather not turn off the current? Fine. It won't hurt him. He'll just go on sleeping. He'll sleep through a hurricane. You'll have to wake him occasionally to eat, drink, evacuate, exercise. If you don't plan to keep him long you can skip the exercise.

Suspects weren't kept long in the vivarium.

Heavy footsteps sounded outside the door. The vivarium guard jerked alert. When the door opened he was at attention.

"Sit down there," said one of Hobart's escorts. Hobart sat. Tears had streaked his sunken cheeks. He donned his own headset, dropped his head back and was asleep. Peace spread across his face. The bigger guard asked, "Which one is Keller?"

The vivarium guard consulted a chart. "Ninety-eight."

"Okay." Instead of taking off Keller's headset, the man moved to a panel of one hundred buttons. He pushed #98. As Keller began to stir, they both moved in to attach handcuffs. Then they lifted the headset.

Matt Keller's eyes opened.

His new escorts lifted him to his feet with a practiced motion.

"On our way," one said cheerfully. Bewildered, Matt followed the pull on his arms. In a moment they were in the hall. Matt snatched one look behind him before the door closed.

"Wait a minute," he protested, predictably jerking back against the handcuffs.

"Man wants to ask you a few questions. Look, I'd rather carry you than do this. You want to walk?"

The threat usually quieted them down — as it did now. Matt stopped pulling. He'd expected to wake up dead; these moments of consciousness were a free bonus. Someone must have gotten curious.

"Who wants to see me?"

"A gentleman named Castro," the bigger guard tossed off. The dialogue was following its usual pattern. If Keller was an average suspect, the Head's dread name would paralyze his brain. If he kept his wits, he'd still choose to use this time in preparation for his interview, rather than risk a sonic now. Both guards had been doing this for so long that they'd come to see prisoners as faceless, interchangeable.

Castro. The name echoed between Matt's ears.

What did you think you were doing, Keller? You came in here like you had an engraved invitation. Thought you had a secret weapon, did you Keller? What did you think you were doing, Keller? WHAT DID YOU THINK YOU —

One instant the suspect was walking between them, lost in his own fears. The next, he had jerked back like a fish hooked on two lines. The

guards instantly pulled apart to string him between them, then regarded him in sheer disgust. One said, "Stupid!" The other pulled out his gun.

They stood there, one with a sonic loose in his hand, looking about them in apparent bewilderment. Matt jerked again, and the smaller guard looked in shocked surprise at his own wrist. He fumbled in his belt, got out a key and unlocked the handcuff.

Matt threw all his weight on the other steel chain. The bigger guard yelled in anger and pulled back. Matt flew into him, inadvertently butting him in the stomach. The guard hit him across the jaw with a backhand swing of his arm. Momentarily unable to move, Matt watched the guard take a key from his pocket and unlock the remaining handcuff from his own wrist. The guard's eyes were strange.

Matt backed away with two sets of handcuffs dangling from his arms. The guards looked after him, not at him but in his general direction. Something was very wrong with their eyes. Fruitlessly Matt tried to remember where he'd seen that look before. The gateman, last night?

The guards turned and sauntered away.

Matt shook his head, more baffled than relieved, and turned back the way he had come. There was the vivarium door. He'd had only one backward glimpse, but he was sure he'd seen Harry Kane in there.

The door was locked.

Mist Demons, here we go again. Matt raised his hand, changed his

mind, changed it again and slapped the palm three times against the door. It opened at once. A round, expressionless face looked through and suddenly acquired an expression. The door started to close. Matt pulled it open and went in.

The round guard with the round face genuinely didn't know what to do. At least he hadn't forgotten that Matt was here. Matt was grateful. He swung joyfully at the guard's double chin. When the guard didn't fold, Matt hit him again. The man finally reached for his gun, and Matt took a firm grip on the appropriate wrist, holding the gun in its holster, and swung once more. The guard slid to the floor.

Matt took the guard's sonic and put it in his pants pocket. His hand hurt. He rubbed it against his cheek, which also hurt, and ran his eyes down the row of sleepers. There was Laney! Laney, her face pale, with one thin scratch from temple to chin, her auburn hair concealing the three-pronged headset, her deep breasts hardly moving as she slept. And there was Hood, looking like a sleeping child Something began to unwind inside Matt Keller, a warmth uncoiling to spread through his limbs. For hours he had been all alone with death. There was the tall man who'd spelled him for bartender that night. *Night before last!* There was Harry Kane, a cube of a man, strong even in sleep

Polly wasn't there.

He looked again, carefully, and she still wasn't there.

Where was she? Instantly the aquarium tanks of the organ bank

flashed into his mind's eye. One tank had held skins, whole human skins with barely room between them for the clear conducting/nutrient fluid. The scalps had borne hair, short and long, blond and black and red, hair that waved in a cold fluid breeze. *Rejection classes C, 2, nr, 34.* He couldn't remember seeing the space-blackness of Polly's hair. It might or might not have been waving in the aquarium tank. He hadn't been looking for it.

Convulsively he made himself look about him. That bank of buttons? He pushed one. It popped out at the touch of a finger. Nothing else happened.

Oh, well, what the hell He started pushing them all, letting his forefinger run down a row of ten, down the next row, and the next. He had released sixty when he heard motion. The sleepers were waking.

He released the rest of the buttons. The murmur of awakening grew louder. Stretching, yawning, confused voices, clatterings, gasps of dismayed shock when prisoners suddenly realized where they were. A clear voice calling, "Matt? Matt!"

"Here, Laney!"

She wove her way toward him through people climbing groggily out of their contour couches. Then she was in his arms, and they clung to each other as if a tornado were trying to pluck them apart and whirl them away. Matt felt suddenly weak, as if he could afford weakness now. "So you didn't make it," he said.

"Matt, where are we? I tried to get to the void edge — "

Somebody bellowed, "We are in the Hospital vivarium!" The voice cut like an axe through the rising pandemonium. Harry Kane, Leader, assumed his proper role.

"That's right," Matt said gently.

Her eyes were two inches from his, dead level. "Oh. Then you didn't make it either."

"Yes I did. I had to get here on my own."

"What — *How?*"

"Good question. I don't know exactly."

Laney began to chuckle.

Shouting from the back of the room. Somebody had noticed an Implementation uniform on one of the newly awakened. A scream of pure terror changed to a yell of agony and died abruptly. Matt saw jerking heads, heard sounds he tried to ignore. Laney wasn't laughing any more. The disturbance subsided.

Harry Kane had mounted a chair. He cupped his hands and bellowed, "Shut up, all of you! Everyone who knows the map of the Hospital, get over here! Gather round me!" There was a shifting in the mass. Laney and Matt still clung to each other, but not desperately now. Their heads turned to watch Harry, acknowledging his leadership. "Take a look, the rest of you!" Harry shouted. "There are the people who can lead you out of here. In a minute we're going to have to make our break. Keep your eyes on — " He named eight names. Hood's was one. "Some of us are going to get shot. As long as one of these eight is still moving, follow him! Or her. If all eight are down, and I am too — " He paused

for emphasis. "Scatter! Make as much trouble as you can! Sometimes the only sensible thing to do is panic!

"Now, who got us out of this? Who woke us up? Anyone?"

"Me," said Matt.

A last buzz of noise died. Suddenly everyone was looking at him. Harry said, "How?"

"I'm not sure how I got in here. I'd like to talk to Hood about it."

"Okay, stick with Jay. Keller, isn't it? We're grateful, Keller. What do those buttons do? I saw you fooling with them."

"They turn off whatever it is that makes you go to sleep."

"Is anyone still in his couch? If so, get out of it *now*. Now, somebody push those buttons back in so it'll look like there was a power failure. Was that it, Keller? Did you just accidentally wake up?"

"No."

Harry Kane looked puzzled, but when Matt didn't elaborate he shrugged. "Watson, Chek, start pushing those buttons in. Jay, make sure you stick with Keller. The rest of you, are you ready to move?"

There was a shout of assent. As it died, a lone voice asked, "Where to?"

"Good point. If you get free, make for the coral houses around the south void and Alpha-Beta cliffs. Anything else?"

Nobody spoke, including Matt. Why ask questions to which nobody knew the answers? Matt was unutterably relieved to let someone else make the decisions for awhile. They might be just as wrong, but ninety-eight rebels could be a mighty

force, even moving in the wrong direction. And Harry Kane was a born leader.

Laney moved out of his arms, but kept a grip on one hand. Matt became conscious of the handcuffs dangling from his wrists. They might hamper him. Jay Hood moved up beside him, looking rumpled. He shook hands, grinning, but the grin didn't match the fear in his eyes, and he seemed reluctant to let go. Was there one person in this room who wasn't terrified? If there was, it wasn't Matt. He pulled the sonic loose from his pants pocket.

"All out," said Harry Kane, and butted the door open with a wide shoulder. They streamed into the hall.

XIII

"I'll take only a minute of your time, Watts." Jesus Pietro relaxed indolently in his chair. He loved mysteries and proposed to enjoy this one. "I want you to describe in detail what happened last night, starting with the call from Hobart."

"But there *aren't* any details, sir." Master Sergeant Watts was tired of repeating himself. His voice was turning querulous. "Five minutes after your call, Hobart called and said he had a prisoner. I told him to bring him to my office. He never came. Finally I called the *gate*. He was *there*, all right, without his prisoner, and he couldn't explain what had happened. I had to put him under arrest."

"His behavior has been puzzling in other ways. That is why I ask, why

didn't you call the gate earlier?"

"Sir?"

"Your behavior is as puzzling as Hobart's, Watts. Why did you assume it would take Hobart half an hour to reach your office?"

"Oh." Watts fidgeted. "Well, Hobart said this bird came right up to the gate and started banging on it with a rock. When Hobart didn't show right away I thought he must have stopped off to question the prisoner, find out why he did it. After all," he explained hastily, if he brought the bird straight to me he'd likely never find out what he was doing banging on the gate."

"Very logical. Did it occur to you at any point that the 'bird' might have overpowered Hobart?"

"But Hobart had a sonic!"

"Watts, have you ever been on a raid?"

"No, sir. How could I?"

"A man came back from the raid of night before last with the bones of his nose spread all over his face. He, too, had a sonic."

"Yessir, but that was a *raid*, sir."

Jesus Pietro sighed. "Thank you, Master Sergeant. Will you step outside, please? Your bird should be arriving any minute."

Watts left, his relief showing.

He'd made a good point, thought Jesus Pietro, though not the one he'd intended. Probably all the Hospital guards had the same idea: that a gun was, *ipso facto*, invincible. Why not? The Hospital guards had never been on a raid in the colonist regions. Few had ever seen a colonist who wasn't unconscious. Occasionally Jesus Pietro staged mock raids with

guards playing the part of colonists. They didn't mind, particularly; mercy-weapons were not unpleasant. But the men with the guns always won. All the guards' experience told them that the gun was king, that a man who had a gun need fear nothing but a gun.

What to do? Interchange guards and raiders long enough to give the guards some experience? No, the elite raiders would never stand for that.

Why was he worrying about Implementation?

Had the Hospital ever been attacked? Never, on Alpha Plateau. A colonist force had no way to get here.

But Keller had.

He used the phone. "Jansen, find out who was on guard at the Alpha-Beta bridge last night. Wake them up and send them here."

"It will be at least fifteen minutes, sir."

"Fine."

How had Keller gotten past them? There had been one aircar on Gamma Plateau, but it had been destroyed here. With the pilot still in it? Had Keller had a chauffeur? Or . . . would a colonist know how to use the autopilot?

Where the Mist Demons was, Keller?

Jesus Pietro began to pace the room. He had no cause for worry, yet he worried. Instinct? He didn't believe he had instincts. The phone spoke in his secretary's voice. "Sir, did you order two guards?"

"Bridge guards?"

"No. Some intrahospital guards."

"No."

"Thank you." Click.

Something had set off the grounds alarms last night. Not a rabbit. Keller might have tried the wall first. If the grounds guards had let a prisoner escape, then faked a report — he'd have their hides!

"Sir, these guards insist you sent for them."

"Well, I damn well didn't. Tell them — just a minute. Send them in."

They came, two burly men whose submissive countenances unsuccessfully hid their ire at being made to wait.

"When did I send for you?" asked Jesus Pietro.

The big one said, "Twenty minutes ago," daring Jesus Pietro to call him a liar.

"Were you supposed to pick up a prisoner first?"

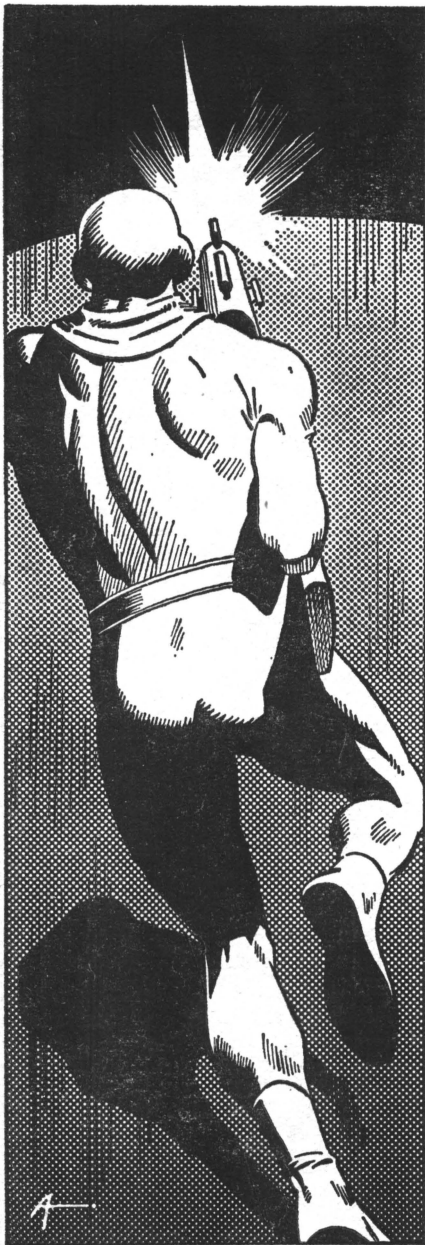
"No, sir. We took Hobart to the vivarium, put him to beddybye and came straight back."

"You don't remember being —"

The smaller guard went white. "D-dave! We *were* supposed to p-pick up someone. Keeler. Something Keeler."

Jesus Pietro regarded them for a full twenty seconds. His face was curiously immobile. Then he opened the intercom. "Major Jansen. Sound 'Prisoners Loose.'"

"Wait a minute," said Matt. The tail end of the colonist swarm was leaving them behind. Hood brought himself up short. "What are you doing?"



Matt dodged back into the vivarium. One man lay on his face with his headset on. Probably he'd thought he was safe once he was out of the couch. Matt snatched the headset off and slapped him twice, hard, and when his eyelids fluttered Matt pulled him to his feet and pushed him at the door.

Watson and Chek finished pushing buttons and left, running, shoving around Hood.

"Come on!" Hood yelled from the doorway. Panic was in his voice. But Matt stood rooted by the thing on the floor.

The guard. They'd torn him to pieces!

Matt was back in the organ banks, frozen rigid by horror.

"Keller!"

Matt stooped, picked up something soft and wet. His expression was very strange. He stepped to the door, hesitated a moment, then drew two sweeping arcs and three small closed curves on its gleaming metal surface. He hurled the warm thing backhand, turned and ran. The two men and Laney charged down the hall, trying to catch the swarm.

The swarm poured down the stairs like a waterfall: a closepacked mass, running and stumbling against each other and brushing against walls and bannisters and generally making a hell of a lot of noise. Harry Kane led. A cold certainty was in his heart, the knowledge that he would be first to fall when they met the first armed guard. But by then the swarm should have unstoppable momentum.

The first armed guard was several

yards beyond the first corner. He turned and stared as if his eyes beheld a miracle. He hadn't moved when the mob reached him. Someone actually had the sense to take his gun. A tall blond man got it and immediately forced his way to the front, waving it and yelling for room. The swarm flowed around and over the limp Implementation policeman.

This hallway was long, lined with doors on both sides. Every door seemed to be swinging open at once. The man with the gun closed his fist on the trigger and waved it slowly up and down the hall. Heads peered out the doors, paused and were followed by falling bodies. The colonist swarm slowed to pick their way around the crewish and half-crewish fallen. Nonetheless, the fallen were all badly or mortally injured when the swarm passed. Implementation used mercy weapons because they needed their prisoners intact. The swarm had no such motive for mercy.

The swarm was stretching now, dividing the fast from the slow, as Kane reached the end of the hall. He rounded the turn in a clump of six

Two police were parked indolently against opposite walls, steaming cups in their hands, their heads turned to see where the noise was coming from. For a magic moment they stayed that way . . . and then their cups flew wide, trailing spiral nebulae of brown fluid, and their guns came up like flowing light. Harry Kane fell with a buzzing in his ears. But his last glimpse of the corridor showed him that the police were falling too.

He lay like a broken doll, with his head swimming and his eyes blurring and his body as numb as a frozen plucked chicken. Feet pounded past and over him. Through the blanketing numbness he dimly sensed himself being kicked.

Abruptly four hands gripped his wrists and ankles, and he was off again, swaying and jouncing between his rescuers. Harry Kane was pleased. His opinion of mobs was low. This mob was behaving better than he had expected. Through the buzzing in his ears he heard a siren.

At the bottom of the stairs they reached the tail of the swarm: Laney in the lead, Matt and Jay Hood following. Matt panted, "Stay! Got . . . gun."

Laney saw the point and slowed. Matt could guard the rear. If they tried to reach the front of the swarm they'd be stuck in the middle, and the sonic would be useless.

But nobody came to them from the rear. There were noises ahead, and they passed sprawled bodies: one policeman, then a string of men and women in lab smocks. Matt found his stomach trying to turn inside out. The rebels' viciousness was appalling. So was Hood's grin: a tight killer's grin, making a lie of his scholar's face.

Ahead, more commotion. Two men stopped to lift a heavy, sprawled figure and continued running. Harry Kane was out of the action. "Hope somebody's leading them!" Hood shouted.

A siren blared in the corridors. It was loud enough to wake the

Mist Demons, to send them screaming into the sky for a little peace. It jarred the concrete, it shook the very bones of a man. There was a rattling clang, barely heard above the siren. An iron door had dropped into the swarm, cutting it in two. One man was emphatically dead beneath it. The tail of the swarm, including perhaps a dozen men and women, washed against the steel door and rebounded.

Trapped. The other end of the corridor was also blocked. But doors lined both sides. One man took off, running down the hallway toward the far end, swiveling his head back and forth to look briefly through the open doors, ignoring the closed ones. "Here!" he shouted, waving an arm. Wordlessly the others followed.

It was a lounge, a relaxation room, furnished with four wide couches, scattered chairs, two card tables and a huge coffee dispenser. And a picture window. As Matt reached the door the window already gaped wide, showing sharp glass teeth. The man who'd found the room was using a chair to clean the glass away.

An almost soundless hum . . . and Matt felt the numbness of a sonic beamer. From the doorway! He slammed the door, and it stopped.

Automatics?

"Benny!" Laney shouted, picking up one end of a couch. The man at the window dropped his chair and ran to take the other end. He'd been one of Laney's escorts, that night. Together they dropped the couch across the window sill, over the broken glass. Colonists began to climb over it.

Hood had found a closet and opened it. It was like opening Pandora's box. Matt saw half a dozen men in white smocks swarm over Hood. In seconds they would have torn him to ribbons. Matt used his sonic. They all went down in a lump, including Hood. Matt pulled him out, draped him over a shoulder and followed the others over the couch. Hood was heavier than he looked.

He had to drop Hood on the grass and follow him down. Far across the lawn was the Hospital wall, leaning outward, the top laced with wires that leaned inward. Very thin wire, just barely visible through the thin fog. Matt picked Hood up, glanced around, saw the others running alongside the building with the tall man named Benny in the lead. He staggered after them.

They reached a corner — the Hospital seemed to have a million corners — stopped sharply and backed up, milling. Guards coming? Matt put Hood down, hefted his sonic —

A gun and hand emerged questing from the broken picture window. Matt fired, and the man slumped. But there must be others in there. Matt ducked beneath the window, rose suddenly and fired in. Half a dozen police fired back. Matt's right side and arm went numb; he dropped the gun, then he himself dropped below the sill. In a moment they'd be peering over — The man named Benny was running toward him. Matt threw the first policeman's sonic to him and picked up his own with his left hand.

The men inside hadn't expected Benny. They were trying to fire over the sill at Matt, and to do that

they had to lean out. In half a minute it was over.

Benny said, "There's a carport just beyond that corner. Guarded."

"Do they know we're here?"

"I don't think so. The Mist Demons have given us a mist." Benny smiled at his own pun.

"Good. We can use these guns. You'll have to carry Jay, my arm's out."

"Jay's the only one who can fly."

"I can," said Matt.

“Major Jansen. Sound ‘Prisoners Loose.’”

The sound of the siren came instantly, even before Jesus Pietro could change his mind. For a moment he was sure, preternaturally sure that he'd made a fool of himself. This could cost him much face

But no. Keller *must* be freeing the prisoners. Keller wasn't here; therefore Keller was free; his first move would be to free the other Sons of Earth; if the vivarium guard had stopped him he would then have called here; he hadn't called; hence Keller had succeeded.

But if Keller were harmlessly asleep in the vivarium? Nonsense. Why had the guards forgotten about him? They were behaving too much like Hobart had behaved last night. A miracle had been worked, a miracle of the kind Jesus Pietro was beginning to associate with Keller. There must be some purpose to it.

It must have been used to free Keller.

And the halls must be full of angry rebels.

That was very bad. Implementation had motives for using mercy weapons. Rebels had none — neither mercy-weapons nor mercy-motives. They'd kill whoever got in their way.

The steel doors would be in place now, vibrating in sleep-producing frequencies. By now the danger would be over — almost certainly. Unless the rebels had first gotten out of the halls.

But what damage had they done already?

"Come with me," Jesus Pietro told the two guards. He marched toward the door. "Keep your guns drawn," he added over his shoulder.

The guards snapped out of their stupor and ran to catch up. They had not the least idea what was going on, but Jesus Pietro was sure they'd recognize a colonist in time to down him. They'd be adequate protection.

One dozen colonists, two stunned. Seven captured guns.

Matt stayed hidden behind the corner, reluctantly obeying Benny's orders. With him were the two women, Laney and a deep-voiced middle-aged tigress named Lydia Hancock, and the two fallen: Jay Hood and Harry Kane.

Matt would have fought the carport guards, but he couldn't fight the logic. Because he was the only one who could fly a car, he had to stay behind while the others charged out onto the field with their sonics going.

The carport was a big, flat expanse of lawn, a variant of mutant grass, which could take an infinite amount of trampling. Lines of near-

white crossed the green, outlining landing targets. The white too was grass. Cars rested near the centers of two of the targets. Men moved about the cars, servicing them and removing metal cannisters from the underbellies. The mist hung four feet above the grass under diffuse sunlight, curling about the rebels as they ran.

They were halfway to the cars when someone on the Hospital wall swung a spotlight-sized sonic toward them. The rebels dropped immediately, like hay before a scythe. So did the mechanics around the cars. Unconscious men lay scattered across the carport field with the mist curling around them.

Matt pulled his head back as the big sonic swung toward the corner. Even so, he felt the numbness, faint and far-off, matching the deadwood feeling in his right arm. "Shall we wait 'til they turn it off, then run for it?"

"I think they've got us," said Laney.

"Stop that!" Mrs. Hancock rapped savagely. Matt had first met her fifteen minutes ago and had never seen her without her present enraged expression. She was a fierce one, bulky and homely, a natural for any cause. "They haven't got us until they take us!"

"Something keeps people from seeing me sometimes," said Matt. "If you want to risk it, and if you all stay close to me, it may protect us all."

"'Crack' under strain." Hood's voice was slurred, barely comprehensible. Only his eyes moved to watch Matt. Harry too was awake.

"It's true, Hood. I don't know why, but it's true. I think it must be a psi power."

"Wreebody who believes in psi things hees psychic."

"The sonic's off us," said Laney.

"My arm's dead. Laney, you and Mrs. —"

"Call me Lydia."

"You and Lydia put Hood over my left shoulder, then pick up Harry. Stay right by me. We'll be *walking*, remember. Don't try to hide. If we get shot, I'll apologize when I get the chance."

"'Pologize now.'"

"Okay, Hood. I'm sorry I got us all killed."

"'Sawright.'"

XIV

When they see this Jesus Pietro shuddered. He watched his own guards shrink back, unwilling to enter, unable to look away. *They'll think a little less of their guns, when they see this!*

The vivarium guard had certainly had a gun. Probably he hadn't thought to draw it in time.

He'd get no second chance.

He was like something spilled from an organ bank conveyor tank.

Hobart, dead near the back of the vivarium, was no prettier. Jesus Pietro felt a stab of guilt. He hadn't meant Hobart for such a fate.

Aside from the bodies, the vivarium was empty. Naturally.

Jesus Pietro looked once more around him . . . and his eyes found the door, and the dark scrawl on its bright steel surface.

It was a symbol of some kind, he was sure of that. But of what? The symbol of the Sons of Earth was a circle containing a streamlined outline of the American supercontinent. This was nothing like it, nor was it like anything he knew of. But it had unmistakably been drawn in human blood.

Two wide arcs, bilaterally symmetrical. Three small closed curves underneath, like circles with tails. Tadpoles? Some micro-organism?

Jesus Pietro rubbed the heels of his hands into his eyes. Later he'd ask the prisoners. Best forget it for now.

"Assume they took the fastest route to the main entrance," he said aloud. If the guards were surprised to hear him thus lecture himself, they reacted as Major Jansen had learned long since. They said nothing. "Come," said Jesus Pietro.

Left, right, down the stairs . . . a dead policeman sprawled in the hall, his Implementation uniform as torn and ruined as himself. Jesus Pietro passed him without breaking his juggernaut stride. He reached steel emergency doors and used his ultrasonic whistle. As the doors went up his guards tensed.

Two pitiful rows of maimed and dead, and another steel door at the other end. The dead were like an explosion in the organ banks. That was definitely the way to think of them. It would not do to consider that these had been human beings under Jesus Pietro's protection. Most had not even been police, but civilians: doctors and electricians.

What a valuable lesson the Hos-

pital guards would learn from this! Jesus Pietro felt sick. It showed only in his unusual pallor; but that he could not control. He marched down the corridor with his expression held remotely aloof. The steel doors went up as he approached.

Colonists were piled against the steel doors at both ends, as if trying to escape the trap even while unconscious. One of the policemen spoke into a handpone, asking for stretchers.

Jesus Pietro stood over the piled rebels. "I never really hated them before," he said.

"K'llr, use gyrsco'." "What?" Matt couldn't spare the attention. He was trying to fly with one hand, the wrong hand: his car bucked and weaved.

"Gy rro skko'!" Hood enunciated painfully.

"I see it. What do I do with it?"

"Turr on."

Matt flipped the Gyroscope switch to On. Something hummed below him. The car trembled, then righted itself, going straight up.

"Shlatsh."

Matt used the knob. The car began to accelerate.

"Hel' me see ow', Laney." Hood was propped upright beside the left front window, with Harry Kane in the middle and Matt on the right. Laney reached from the back seat to hold Hood's head out the window.

"Turn ri'."

"How?"

"Shtee ring nog."

"Knob? Like this thing?"

"Ye-ss i'iot."

"For the record," Matt said icily, "I flew a car all the way from Harry's basement to Alpha Plateau. It was the first time I'd ever been in a car. Naturally I don't know what all these gadgets do."

"Thass ri'. Now go strray' till I tell you."

Matt released the knob. The car flew on by itself. "We aren't going toward the coral houses," he said.

"No." Harry Kane spoke slowly but understandably. "The coral houses are the first place Implementation will look. I couldn't drag a hundred men where we're going."

"Where's that?"

"A large, unoccupied mansion owned by Geoffrey Eustace Parlette and his family."

"And where will Geoffrey Eustace Parlette be all this time?"

"He and his family are swimming and gambling in a small public resort on Iota. I've got contacts on Alpha Plateau, Keller."

"Parlette. Any —"

"His grandson. Millard Parlette was staying with them, but he's making a speech. He should be starting about now. The sending station on Nob Hill is far enough away, and his hosts here are gone, so he'll probably be staying with a relative."

"It still sounds dangerous."

"You should talk."

The left-handed compliment hit Matt like six dry martinis. He'd done it! He'd walked into the Hospital, freed prisoners, raised merry hell, left his mark and walked out free and untouched! "We can hide the car till the furor dies down," he said. "Then, back to Gamma —"

"And leave my men in the vivarium? I can't do that. And there's Polly Tournquist."

Polly. The girl who'd — Yes. "I'm not a rebel, Harry. The grand rescue's over. Frankly, I only came here to get Laney if I could. I can drop this crusade any time."

"You think Castro will just let you go, Keller? He must know you were one of the prisoners. He'll hunt you down wherever you hide. Besides, I can't let you have the car. I'll need it for my grand rescue."

Matt grimaced. It was his car, wasn't it? He'd stolen it himself. But they could fight that out later. "Why did you mention Polly?"

"She saw the ramrobot come down. Castro probably found the films on her. He may be questioning her to find out who else knows."

"Knows what?"

"I don't know either. Polly's the only one. But it must be pretty damn important. Polly thought so, and apparently so did Castro. You didn't know there was a ramrobot coming, did you?"

"No."

"They kept it secret. They've never done that before."

Laney said, "Polly acted like she'd found something vastly important. She insisted on telling us all at once, night before last. But Castro didn't give her the chance. Now I'm wondering whether it wasn't the ramrobot that brought on the raid."

"She could be in the organ banks," said Matt.

"Not yet," said Harry. "Not if Castro found the films. She wouldn't

have talked yet. He'll be using the coffin cure, and that takes time."

"Coffin cure?"

"It's not important."

Important or not, Matt didn't like the sound of it. "How are you planning to mount your rescue?"

"I don't know yet."

"Angle left," said Hood.

Houses and greenery rolled beneath them. Flying a car was infinitely easier with the gyroscopes going. Matt could see no cars around, police or otherwise. Had something grounded them?

"So," said Laney. "You came all the way to the Hospital to get me."

"In a stolen car," said Matt. "With a small detour into the void mist."

Laney's wide mouth formed half a smile and half a grin, half joy and half amusement. "Naturally I'm flattered."

"Naturally."

Mrs. Hancock spoke from the back seat. "I'd like to know why they didn't beam us down, back there at the carport."

"And you knew they wouldn't," said Laney. "How did you know, Matt?"

"Second the motion," said Harry Kane.

"I don't know," said Matt.

"But you knew it might work."

"Yah."

"Why?"

"Okay. Hood, you listening?"

"Ye ss."

"It's a long story. I'll start with the morning after the party — "

"Start with the party," said Laney.

"Everything?"

"Everything." Laney gave the

word undue emphasis. "I think it might be important, Matt."

Matt shrugged an uncomfortable surrender. "It might at that. Okay. I met Hood in a bar for the first time in eight years"

Jesus Pietro and Major Jansen stood well out of the way as a stream of stretchers moved into the vivarium to deposit their charges in contour couches. In another part of the Hospital, other stretchers carried dead and wounded into the operating rooms, some to be restored to life and health and usefulness, others to be pirated for undamaged body parts.

"What is it?" Jesus Pietro asked.

"I don't know," said Major Jansen. He stepped back from the door. "It seems almost familiar."

"That's no help."

"I assume a colonist drew it?"

"You might as well. Nobody else was left alive."

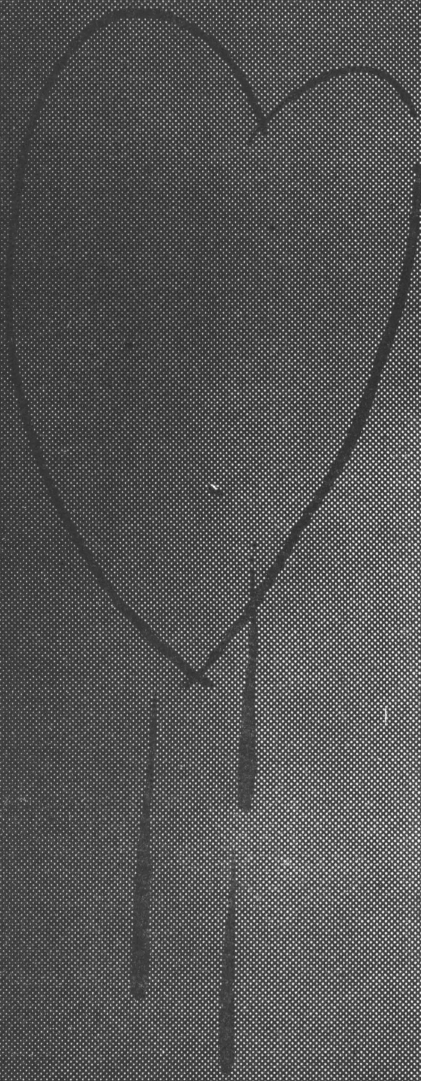
Major Jansen drew even further back, stood bouncing lightly on his toes, hands on hips. Finally he said, "It's a valentine, sir."

"A valentine." Jesus Pietro glared intense irritation at his aide. He looked back at the door. "I'll be damned. It is a valentine."

"With teardrops."

"A valentine with teardrops. Whoever drew that wasn't sane. Valentine, valentine Why would the Sons of Earth leave us a valentine drawn in human blood?"

"Blood. A bleeding . . . oh, I see. That's what it is, sir. It's a bleeding heart. They're telling us they're against the practice of executing felons for the organ banks."



ADKINS

"A reasonable attitude for them to take." Jesus Pietro looked once more into the vivarium. The bodies of Hobart and the vivarium guard had been removed, but the stains of carnage remained. He said, "They don't act like the usual sort of bleeding heart."

Thirty thousand pairs of eyes waited behind the teedee lenses.

Four teedee cameras circled him. They were blank now and untended, as cameramen moved casually about the room, doing things and saying things Millard Parlette made no effort to understand. In fifteen minutes those those tedee lenses would be peepholes for sixty thousand eyes.

XV

Millard Parlette began leafing through his notes. If there were any changes to be made, the time was Now.

I Lead-In

A Stress genuine emergency.

B Mention ramrobot package.

C "What follows is background."

How real would an emergency seem to these people? The last emergency session Millard Parlette could recall was the Great Plague of 2290, more than a century ago. Most of his audience would not have been born then.

Hence the lead-in, to grab their attention.

II The organ bank problem — exposition

A Earth calls it a problem; we do not. Therefore Earth knows considerably more about it.

B Any citizen, with the help of the organ banks, can live as

long as it take his central nervous system to wear out. This can be a very long time, if his circulatory system is kept functioning.

C But the citizen cannot take more out of the organ banks than goes into them. He must do his utmost to see that they are supplied.

D The only feasible method of supplying the organ banks is through execution of criminals. (Demonstrate this, show why other methods are inadequate.)

E A criminal's pirated body can save a dozen lives. There is now no valid argument against capital punishment for any given crime; for all such argument seeks to prove that killing a man does society no good. Hence the citizen, who wants to live as long and as healthily as possible, will vote any crime into a capital crime if the organ banks are short of material.

1) Cite Earth's capital punishment for false advertising, income-tax evasion, air pollution, having children without a license.

The wonder was that it had taken so long to pass these laws.

The organ bank problem could have started in the year 1900, when Carl Landsteiner separated human blood into four types, A, B, AB, and O. Or in 1914, when Albert Hustin found that sodium citrate would prevent blood from clotting. Or in 1940, when Landsteiner and Weiner found the Rh factor. Blood banks could so

easily have been supplied by condemned criminals; but apparently nobody had realized it.

And there was Hamburger's work in the 1960's and 1970's, in a Parisian hospital where the first kidney transplants were made from donors who were not identical twins. There were the antirejection serums discovered by Mostel and Granovich in the 2010's

Nobody seemed to have noticed the implications. Until the middle of the twenty-first century.

There were organ banks all over the world, inadequately supplied by people kind enough to leave their bodies to medical science in their wills. How useful is the body of a man who dies of old age? How fast can you reach a car accident? And in 2043 Arkansas, which had never rescinded the death penalty, made the organ banks the official state method of execution.

The idea had spread like wildfire . . . like a moral plague, as one critic of the time had put it. Millard Parlette had researched it very thoroughly, then cut all of the historical matter out of his speech, afraid it would lose him his audience. People, especially crew, did not like to be lectured.

F Thus the government which controls the organ banks is more powerful than any dictator in history. Many dictators have had the power of death; but organ banks give a government power of life and death.

1) *Life. The organ banks can*

cure nearly anything, and the government can regulate which citizens shall benefit, on grounds that materials are running short. Priorities become vital.

2) *Death. No citizen will protest when the government condemns a man to die, not when his death gives the citizen his chance to live.*

Untrue and unfair. There were always altruists. But let it stand.

III *The organ bank problem — colonies*

A Alloplasty: the science of putting foreign materials in the human body for medical purposes.

B Examples

1) *Implanted hearing aids*

2) *Heart pacemakers and artificial hearts*

3) *Plastic tubing for veins, arteries*

C Alloplasty in use on Earth for half a thousand years.

D No alloplasty for a colony world. Alloplasty needs a high technology.

E Every colony world has organ bank facilities. The stasis room of a slowboat is designed to freeze organs. The ships themselves thus become the center of an organ bank.

F Thus the organ bank "problem" is unrelieved even by the alternative of alloplasty, on any colony world.

IV *The organ bank problem — as it relates to the power politics of Mount Lookitthat.*

A The Covenant of Planetfall.

Millard Parlette frowned. How would the average crew react to the truth about the Covenant of Planetfall?

What they were taught in school was true, in the main. The Covenant of Planetfall, the agreement which gave the crew authority over the colonists, had existed since the Planck landing. The colonists had agreed to it, all of them.

The rationale held, too. The crew had taken all the risks, done all the work of decades, suffered and slaved through years of training, to reach a target which *might* be habitable. The colonists had slept peacefully through all those weary years in space. It was right that the crew should rule.

But — how many crew knew that those first colonists had signed the covenant at gunpoint? That eight had died rather than sign away their freedom?

Was it Millard Parlette's place to tell them?

Yes, it was. They had to understand the nature of power politics. He left the notation unchanged.

B The Hospital.

- 1) *Control of electric power.*
- 2) *Control of news media.*
- 3) *Control of justice: of the police, of trials, of executions.*
- 4) *Control of medicine and the organ banks: the positive side of justice.*

C Organ replacement for colonists? Yes!

- 1) *Colonists in good standing are obviously entitled to medical care.*

2) *Justice must have a positive side.*

3) *The organ bank "problem" implies that the colonists who can hope for medical treatment will support the government.*

V The ramrobot capsule.

(Show pictures. Give 'em the full tour. Use #1 for visual impact, but concentrate on implications of rotifer.)

There was something he could add to that! Millard Parlette looked down at his right hand. It was coming along nicely. Already the contrast with his untreated left hand was dramatic.

That'd make 'em sit up!

VI The danger of the ramrobot capsule.

A It does not make the organ banks obsolete. The capsule held only four items. To replace the organ banks would require hundreds, or thousands, each a separate project.

B But any colonist report would blow it out of all proportion. Colonists would assume that capital punishment would stop now.

Millard Parlette glanced behind him . . . and shuddered. You couldn't be rational about Ramrobot Capsule #143. The visual impact was too great.

If his speech got dull at any point, he could get their attention back by simply cutting to a shot of the ramrobot packages.

C Capital punishment cannot stop at any case.

- 1) *Decrease the severity of*

punishment, and crime increases drastically. (Cite examples from Earth history. Unfortunate that Mount Lookitthat has none.)

- 2) *What punishment to substitute for capital punishment? No prisons on Mount Lookitthat. Warning notes and jottings on one's record hold power only through threat of the organ banks.*

VIII. Conclusion:

Violently or peaceably, the rule of the crew ends when the colonists learn of Ramrobot Capsule #143.

Three minutes to go. No question of changing the speech now.

The question was, and had always been, the speech itself. Should thirty thousand crew be told what had arrived in Ramrobot Capsule #143? Could they be made to understand its importance? And — could such a secret be kept by that many?

Members of the Council had fought bitterly to prevent this event. Only Millard Parlette's sure control, his knowledge of the ways of power and the weaknesses of his fellow Council members, even his own striking authority-figure appearance, which he used ruthlessly — only Millard Parlette's determination had brought the Council to issue their declaration of emergency.

And now every crew on Alpha Plateau, and elsewhere, was before his teedee set. No cars flew above Alpha Plateau; no skiers glided down the snows of the northern glacier;

the lake and the hot springs and the gambling halls of Iota were empty.

One minute to go. Too late to call off the speech.

Could thirty thousand people keep such a secret?

Why, no, of course they couldn't.

XVI

“That big house with the flat roof,” said Harry Kane.

Matt tilted the car to the right. He continued, “I waited 'til the guards were out of sight, then went back to the vivarium. The man inside opened the door for me. I knocked him down and took his gun, found that bank of buttons and started pushing them.”

“Land in the garden, not on the roof. Did you ever figure out what was wrong with their eyes?”

“No.” Matt worked the slats and the steering knob, trying to get above the garden. It was big, and it ran to the void edge: a formal garden in a style a thousand years old, a symmetrical maze of right-angle hedges enclosing rectangles of brilliant color. The house too was all rectangles, an oversized version of the small identical development houses of the ninetens. Flat-roofed, flat-sided, nearly undecorated, the size of a motel but so wide it seemed low, the house seemed to have been built from prefabricated parts and then added to over the years. Geoffrey Eustace Parlette had evidently imitated ancient bad taste in hopes of getting something new and different.

Matt didn't see it that way, naturally. To him all the houses of

Alpha appeared equally strange.

He brought the car down on the strip of grass at the void edge. The car landed, bounced, landed again. At what he judged was the proper moment Matt pushed in all four fan levers. The car dropped jarringly. The levers tried to come out again, and Matt held them in with his hand, looking despairingly at Hood for help.

"Gyroscope," said Hood.

Matt forced his numb right arm to cross his torso and flick the Gyroscope switch.

"You need a little training in how to fly," Harry Kane said with admirable restraint. "You finished your story?" He had insisted that Matt talk without interruption.

"I may have forgotten some things."

"We can save the question-and-answer period until we get established. Matt, Laney, Lydia, get me out of here and move Jay in front of the dashboard. Jay, can you move your arms?"

"Yah. The stunner's pretty well worn off."

They piled out, Matt and the two women. Harry came out on his feet, moving in jerks and twitches but managing to stay upright. He brushed away offers of help and stood watching Hood. Hood had opened a panel in the dash and was doing things inside.

"Matt!" Laney called over her shoulder. She was standing inches from the void.

"Get back from there!"

"No! Come here!"

Matt went. So did Mrs. Hancock.

The three of them stood at the edge of the grass, looking down into their shadows.

The sun was at their backs, shining down at forty-five degrees. The water-vapor mist which had covered the southern end of the Plateau that morning now lay just beyond the void edge, almost at their feet. And they looked into their shadows . . . three shadows reaching down into infinity, three contoured black tunnels growing smaller and narrower as they bored through the lighted mist, until they reached their blurred vanishing points. But for each of the three it seemed that only his own shadow was surrounded by a small, vivid, perfectly circular rainbow.

A fourth shadow joined them, moving slowly and painfully. "Oh, for a camera," mourned Harry Kane.

"I never saw it like that before," said Matt.

"I did, once, a long time ago. It was like I'd had a vision. Myself, the representative of Man, standing at the edge of the world with a rainbow about his head. I joined the Sons of Earth that night."

A muted whirr sounded behind them. Matt turned to see the car slide toward him across the lawn, pause at the edge, go over. It hovered over the mist and then settled into it, fading like a porpoise submerging.

Harry turned and called, "All set?"

Hood knelt on the grass where the car had rested. "Right. It'll come back at midnight, wait fifteen minutes, then go back down. It'll do that for

the next three nights. Would someone help me into the house?"

Matt half-carried him through the formal garden. Hood was heavy; his legs would move, but they would not carry him. As they walked, he lowered his voice to ask, "Matt, what was that thing you drew on the door?"

"A bleeding heart."

"Oh. Why?"

"I'm not really sure. When I saw what they'd done to the guard it was like being back in the organ banks. I remembered my Uncle Matt." His grip tightened in reflex on Hood's arm. "They took him away when I was eight. I never found out why. I had to leave something to show I was there . . . me, Matt Keller, walking-in alone and out with an army. One for Uncle Matt! I was a little crazy, Hood; I saw something in the organ banks that would shake anyone's mind. I didn't know your symbol, so I had to make up my own."

"Not a bad one. I'll show you ours later. Was it bad, the organ banks?"

"Horrible. But the worst was those tiny hearts and livers. Children, Jay! I never knew they took children."

Hood looked up questioningly. Then Lydia Hancock pushed the big front door open for them, and they had to concentrate on getting up the steps.

Jesus Pietro was furious.

He'd spent some time in his office, knowing he would be most useful there, but he'd felt cramped. Now he was at the edge of the carport watching the last of the sonic vic-

tims being carried away. He wore a belt phone; his secretary could reach him through that.

He'd never hated colonists before.

To Jesus Pietro human beings came in two varieties: crew and colonist. On other worlds other conditions might apply, but other worlds did not intrude on Mount Lookitthat. The crew were masters, wise and benevolent, at least in the aggregate. The colonists were ordained to serve.

Both groups had exceptions. There were crew who were in no way wise, and who did not work at being benevolent; who accepted the benefits of their world and ignored the responsibilities. There were colonists who would overthrow the established order of things, and others who preferred to turn criminal rather than serve. When brought into contact with crew he did not admire, Jesus Pietro treated them with the respect due their station. The renegade colonists he hunted down and punished.

But he didn't hate them, any more than Matt Keller really hated mining worms. They were part of his job, part of his working day. They behaved as they did because they were colonists, and Jesus Pietro studied them as biology students studied bacteria. When his working day ended so did his interest in colonists, unless something unusual was going on.

Now that was over. In running amok through the Hospital, the rebels had spilled over from his working day into his very home. He couldn't have been angrier if they'd been in his house, smashing furniture and killing servants and setting poison

for the housecleaners and pouring salt on the rugs.

The intercom buzzed. Jesus Pietro unhooked it from his belt and said, "Castro."

"Jansen, sir. I'm calling from the vivarium."

"Well?"

"There are six rebels missing. Do you want their names?"

Jesus Pietro glanced around him. They'd carried the last unconscious colonist away ten minutes ago. These last stretcher passengers were carport personnel.

"You should have them all. Have you checked with the operating room? I saw at least one dead under a door."

"I'll check, sir."

The carport was back to normal. The rebels hadn't had time to mess it up, as they'd messed up the halls and the electricians' rec room. Jesus Pietro debated whether to return to his office or to trace the rebels' charge back through the rec room. Then he happened to notice two men arguing by the garages. He strolled over.

"You had no right to send Bessie out!" one was shouting. He wore a raider's uniform, and he was tall, very dark, enlistment-poster handsome.

"You bloody raiders think you own these cars," the mechanic said contemptuously.

Jesus Pietro smiled, for the mechanics felt exactly the same. "What's the trouble?" he asked.

"This idiot can't find my car! Sorry, sir."

"And which car is yours, Captain?"

"Bessie. I've been using Bessie for three years, and this morning some idiot took it out to spray the woods. Now look! They've lost her, sir!" The man's voice turned plaintive.

Jesus Pietro turned cold blue eyes on the mechanic. "You've lost a car?"

"Nossir. I just don't happen to know where they've put it."

"Where are the cars that came back from spraying the woods?"

"That's one of them." The mechanic pointed across the carport. "We were half finished unloading her when those fiends came at us. Matter of fact we were unloading both of them." The mechanic scratched his head. He met Jesus Pietro's eyes with the utmost reluctance. "I haven't seen the other one since."

"There are prisoners missing. You know that?" He didn't wait for the mechanic's answer. "Find Bessie's serial number and description and give them to my secretary. If you find Bessie call my office. For the moment I'm going to assume the car is stolen."

The mechanic turned and ran toward an office. Jesus Pietro used his handphoned to issue instructions regarding a possible stolen car.

Jansen came back on the line. "One rebel dead, sir. That leaves five missing." He listed them.

"All right. It's beginning to look like they took a car. See if the wall guards saw one leaving."

"They'd have reported it, sir."

"I'm not so certain. Find out."

"Sir, the carport was attacked. The guards had to report five prison-

ers stealing an aircar during a mob attack!"

"Jansen, I think they might have forgotten to. You understand me?" There was steel in his voice. Jansen signed off without further protest.

Jesus Pietro looked up at the sky, rubbing his mustache with two fingers. A stolen car would be easy to find. There were no crew pleasure cars aboard now, not in the middle of Millard Parlette's speech. But they might have landed it. And if a car had been stolen in full view of the wall guards, it had been stolen by ghosts.

That would fit admirably with the other things which had been happening at the Hospital.

XVII

Geoffrey Eustace Parlette's house was different inside. The rooms were big and comfortable, furnished in soft good taste. They were innumerable. Toward the back were a pool table, a small bowling alley, an auditorium and stage with pull-down movie screen. The kitchen was the size of Harry Kane's living room. Matt and Laney and Lydia Hancock had moved through the entire house with stun guns at ready. They had found no living thing, barring the rugs and the no less than six house-cleaner nests.

Lydia had threatened force to get Matt to return to the living room. He wanted to explore. He'd seen incredible bedrooms. Hobbyists' bedrooms . . .

In a living room two stories tall, before a vast false fireplace whose

stone logs showed red electrical heat where they touched, the five survivors dropped into couches. Harry Kane still moved carefully, but he seemed almost recovered from the stunner which had caught him in the Hospital. Hood had his voice back, but not his strength.

Matt slumped in the couch. He wriggled, adjusting his position, and finally put his feet up. It was good to feel safe.

"Tiny hearts and livers," said Hood.

"Yah," said Matt.

"That's impossible."

Harry Kane made a questioning noise.

"I saw them," said Matt. "The rest of it was pretty horrible, but that was the worst."

Harry Kane was sitting upright. "In the organ banks?"

"Yes, dammit, in the organ banks. Don't you believe me? They were in special tanks of their own, make-shift-looking, with the motors sitting in the water next to the organs. The glass was warm."

"Stasis tanks aren't warm," said Hood.

"And Implementation doesn't take children," said Harry Kane. "If they did I'd know it."

Matt merely glared.

"Hearts and livers," said Harry. "Just those? Nothing else?"

"Nothing I noticed," said Matt. "No, wait. There were a couple of tanks just like them. One was empty. One looked . . . polluted, I think."

"How long were you in there?"

"Just long enough to get sick to my stomach. Mist Demons, I

wasn't investigating anything! I was looking for a map!"

"In the organ banks?"

"Lay off," said Laney. "Relax, Matt. It doesn't matter."

Mrs. Hancock had gone to find the kitchen. She returned now, with a pitcher and five glasses. "Found this. No reason we shouldn't mess up the place, is there?"

They assured her there wasn't, and she poured for them.

Hood said, "I'm more interested in your alleged psychic powers. I've never read of anything like you've got. It must be something new."

Matt grunted.

"I should tell you that anyone who believes in the so-called psi powers at all usually thinks he's psychic himself." Hood's tone was dry, professorial. "We may find nothing at all."

"Then how did we get here?"

"We may never know. Some new Implementation policy? Or maybe the Mist Demons love you, Matt."

"I thought of that, too."

Mrs. Hancock returned inside.

"When you tried to sneak up to the Hospital," Hood continued, "you were spotted right away. You must have run through the electric eye net. You didn't attempt to run?"

"They had four spotlights on me. I just stood up."

"Then they ignored you? They let you walk away?"

"That's right. I kept looking back, waiting for that loudspeaker to say something. It never did. Then I ran."

"And the man who took you into the Hospital. Did anything happen just before he went insane and ran back to the gatehouse?"

"Like what. What are you thinking?"

"Anything involving light."

"No."

Hood looked disappointed. Laney said, "People seem to forget about you."

"Yah. It's been like that all my life. In school the teacher wouldn't call on me unless I knew the answer. Bullies never bothered me."

"I should have been so lucky," said Hood.

Laney wore the abstracted look of one tracing an idea.

"The eyes," said Harry Kane, and paused for thought. He had been listening without comment, in the attitude of the Thinker, jaw on first, elbow on knee. "You said there was something strange about the guards' eyes."

"Yah. I don't know what. I've seen that look before, I think, but I can't remember . . ."

"What about the one who finally shot you? Anything odd about his eyes?"

"No."

Laney came out of her abstraction with a startled look. "Matt. Do you think Polly would have gone home with you?"

"What the Mist Demons does *that* have to do with anything?"

"Don't get mad, Matt. I've got a reason for asking."

"I can't imagine —"

"That's why you called in the experts."

"All right, yes. I thought she was going home with me."

"Then she suddenly walked away."

"Yah. The bitch just — " Matt swallowed the rest of it. Not until now, when he could feel his pain and rage and humiliation in bearable retrospect, did he realize how badly she'd stung him. "She walked away like she'd remembered something. Something more important than me, but not particularly important for all that. Laney, could it have been her hearing aid?"

"The radio? No, not that early. Harry, did you tell Polly anything by radio that you didn't tell the rest of us?"

"I told her I'd call for her speech at midnight, after everyone had gone home. They could hear it through the radios. Otherwise, nothing."

"So she had no reason to drop me," said Matt. "I still don't see why we have to dig into this."

"It's strange," said Hood. "It can't hurt to look at anything strange in your young life."

Laney said, "Did you resent it?"

"Damn right I did. I hate being left flat like that, toyed with and then dropped."

"You didn't offend her?"

"I don't see how I could have. I didn't get drunk till afterward."

"You told me it's happened before like that."

"Every time. Every damn time, until you. I was virgin until Friday night." Matt looked belligerently around him. Nobody said anything. "That's why I can't see how it helps to talk about it. Dammit, it *isn't* unusual in my young life."

Hood said, "It's unusual in Polly's young life. Polly's not a tease. Am I wrong, Laney?"

"No. She takes her sex seriously. She wouldn't make a play for someone she didn't want. I wonder . . ."

"I don't think I was kidding myself, Laney."

"Neither do I. You keep saying something was strange about the guards' eyes. Was there anything strange about Polly's eyes?"

“What are you getting at?”
“You claim every time you're getting ready to lose your virginity to a girl, she drops you. Why? You aren't ugly. You probably don't have the habit of being grossly impolite; you weren't with me. You bathe often enough. Was there something about Polly's eyes?”

“Dammit, Laney, . . . Eyes.” *Something changed in Polly's face. She seemed to be listening to something only she could hear. She certainly wasn't looking at anything; her eyes went past him and through him, and they looked blind . . .*

“She looked abstracted. What do you want me to say? She looked like she was thinking of something else, and then she walked away.”

“Was it sudden, this loss of interest? Did she — ”

“Laney, what *do* you think? I drove her away deliberately?” Matt jumped to his feet. He couldn't take any more; he was wires stressed on a bone frame, every wire about to break. Nobody had ever so assaulted his privacy! He had never imagined that a woman could share his bed, listen in sympathy to all the agony of the secrets that had shaped his soul, and then spilled everything she knew into a detailed clinical round-

table discussion! He felt like one who has been disassembled for the organ banks, who, still aware, watches a host of doctors probing and prodding his separated innards with none-too-clean hands, hears them making ribald comments about his probable medical and social history.

And he was about to say so, in no mild terms, when he saw that nobody was looking at him.

Nobody was looking at him.

Laney was staring into the artificial fire; Hood was looking at Laney; Harry Kane was in his Thinker position. None of them were really seeing anything; at least anything here in this room. They had an abstracted look.

"One problem," Harry Kane said dreamily. "How the blazes are we going to free the rest of us, when only four of us escaped?" He glanced around at his inattentive audience, then went back to contemplating his navel from the inside.

Matt felt the hair stir on his head. Harry Kane had looked right at him, but he certainly hadn't seen Matt Keller. And there was something very peculiar about his eyes.

Like a man in a wax museum, Matt bent to look into Harry Kane's eyes.

Harry jumped like he'd been shot. "Where the blazes did you come from?" He stared as if Matt had dropped from the ceiling. Then he said, "Umm . . . oh! You did it."

There wasn't a doubt of it. Matt nodded. "You all suddenly lost interest in me."

"What about our eyes?" Hood

seemed about to spring at him, he was so intense.

"Something. I don't know. I was bending down to see when — " Matt shrugged. "It wore off."

Harry Kane used a word.

Hood said, "Suddenly? I don't remember its being sudden."

"What do you remember?" Matt asked.

"Well, nothing, really. We were talking about eyes . . . or was it about Polly? Sure, Polly. Matt, did it bother you to talk about it?"

Matt growled in his throat.

"Then that's why you did whatever you did. You didn't want to be noticed."

"Probably."

Hood rubbed his hands briskly together. "So. We know you've got something, anyway, and it's under your control. Your subconscious control. Well!" Hood became a professor looking around at his not-too-bright class. "What questions are still unanswered?"

"For one, what do the eyes have to do with anything? For another, why was a guard eventually able to shoot you and store you away? For a third, why would you use your ability to drive girls away?"

"Mist Demons, Hood! There's no conceivable reason — "

"Keller."

The voice was a quiet command. Harry Kane was back in Thinker position on the couch, staring off into space. "You said Polly looked abstracted. Did we look abstracted a moment ago?"

"When you forgot about me? Yah."

"Do I look at all abstracted now?"

"Yah. Wait a minute." Matt stood up and walked around Harry, examining him from different sides. He should have looked like a man deep in thought. Thinker position, chin on fist on elbow on knee; face lowered, almost scowling; motionless; eyes hooded . . . Hooded? But clearly visible.

"No, you don't. There's something wrong."

"What?"

"Your eyes."

"Round and round we go," Harry said disgustedly. "Well, get down and look at my eyes, for the Mist Demons' sake!"

Matt knelt on the indoor grass and looked up into Harry's eyes. No inspiration came. A wrongness there; but where? He thought of Polly on Friday night, when they stood immersed in noise and elbows and talked nose to nose. They'd touched from time to time, half-accidentally, hands and shoulders brushing . . . he'd felt the warm blood beating in his neck . . . and suddenly —

"Too big," said Matt. "Your pupils are too big. When somebody really isn't interested in what's going on around him, the pupils are smaller."

"What about Polly's eyes?" Hood probed. "Distended or contracted?"

"Contracted. Very small. And so were the guards' eyes, the ones who came for me this morning." He remembered how surprised they'd been when he yanked on the handcuffs, the handcuffs which still dangled from his wrists. They hadn't been interested in him; they'd merely un-

locked the chains from their own wrists. And when they looked at him . . . "That's it. That's why their eyes looked so funny. The pupils were pinpoints."

Hood sighed in relief. "Then that's all of it," he said, and got up. "Well, I think I'll see how Lydia's doing with dinner."

"Come back here." Harry Kane's voice was low and murderous. Hood burst out laughing.

"Stop that cackling," said Harry Kane. "Whatever Keller's got, we need it. Talk!"

Whatever Keller's got, we need it Matt felt he ought to protest. He didn't intend to be used by the Sons of Earth. But he couldn't interrupt now.

"It's a very limited form of telepathy," said Jay Hood. "And because it is so very limited, it's probably more dependable than more general forms. Its target is so much less ambiguous." He smiled. "We really ought to have a new name for it. Telepathy doesn't apply, not quite."

Three people waited patiently but implacably.

"Matt's mind," said Hood, "is capable of controlling the nerves and muscles which dilate and contract the iris of another man's eye."

And he smiled, waiting for their response.

"So what?" asked Harry Kane. "What good is that?"

"You don't understand? No, I suppose you don't. It's more in my field. Do you know anything about motivational research?"

Three heads wagged No.

"The science was banned on Earth long, long ago, because its results were being used for immoral advertising purposes. But they found out some interesting things first. One of them involved dilation and contraction of the pupil of the eye.

"It turns out that if you show a man something and measure his pupil with a camera, you can tell whether it interests him. You can show him pictures of his country's political leaders, in places where there are two or more factions, and his eyes will dilate for the leader of his own. Take him aside for an hour and talk to him, persuade him to change his political views, and his pupils will dilate for the other guy. Show him pictures of pretty girls, and the girl he calls prettiest will have dilated pupils. He doesn't know it. He only knows she looks interested. In him.

"I wonder," said Hood, smiling dreamily at himself. Some people love to lecture. Hood was one. "Could that be the reason the most expensive restaurants are always dark? A couple comes in, they look at each other across a dinner table, and they both look interested: What do you think?"

Harry Kane said, "I think you'd better finish telling us about Keller."

"He has," said Laney. "Don't you see? Matt's afraid of being seen by someone. So he reaches out with his mind and contracts the man's pupils whenever he looks at Matt. Naturally the man can't get interested in Matt."

"Exactly." Hood beamed at Laney. "Matt takes a reflex and works it in

reverse to make it a conditioned reflex. I *knew* light had something to do with it. You see, Matt? It can't work unless your victim sees you. If he hears you, or if he gets a blip when you cross an electric-eye beam —"

"Or if I'm not concentrating on being scared. That's why the guard shot me."

"I still don't see how it's possible," said Laney. "I helped you do your research on this, Jay. Telepathy is reading minds. It operates on the brain, doesn't it?"

"We don't know. But the optic nerve is brain tissue, not ordinary nerve tissue."

Harry Kane stood up and stretched. "That doesn't matter. It's better than anything the Sons of Earth have put together. It's like a cloak of invisibility. Now we have to figure out how to use it."

XVIII

The missing car was still missing. It was nowhere in the Implementation garages; it had not been found by the search squad, neither in the air nor on the ground. If a policeman had taken it out for legitimate purposes, it would have been visible; if it had not been visible, it would have been in trouble of some kind, and the pilot would have phoned a Mayday. Apparently it really had been stolen.

To Jesus Pietro, it was disturbing. A stolen car was one thing; an impossible stolen car was another.

He had associated Keller with miracles: with the miracle that had

left him unhurt when his car fell into the void, with the miracle which had affected Hobart's memory last night. On that assumption he had sounded the Prisoners Loose. And, Lo! there were prisoners running amok.

He had associated missing prisoners with a missing car with the miracles of Keller. Thus he had assumed a stolen car where no car could have been stolen. And, Lo! a car had indeed been stolen.

Then Major Jansen had called from the vivarium. Nobody had noticed, until now, that the sleeper helmets were still running. How, then, had ninety-eight prisoners walked away?

Miracles! What the blazes was he fighting? One man, or many? Had Keller been passenger or driver of that car? Had there been other passengers? Had the Sons of Earth discovered something new, or was it Keller alone?

That was an evil thought. Matthew Keller, come back from the void in the person of his nephew, to haunt his murderer . . . Jesus Pietro snorted.

He'd doubled the guard at the Alpha-Beta bridge. Knowing that the bridge was the only way off the cliff and across the Long Fall River at the bottom, he had nonetheless set guards along the cliff edge. No normal colonist could leave Alpha Plateau without a car. (But could something abnormal walk unseen past the guards?)

And no fugitive would leave in a police car. Jesus Pietro had ordered all police cars to fly in pairs for the duration. The fugitives would be flying alone.

As part colonist Jesus Pietro had not been allowed to hear Millard Parlette's speech; but he knew it was over. Crew cars were flying again. If the fugitives stole a crew car they might have a chance. But the Hospital would be informed immediately if a crew car were stolen. (Really? A police car had been stolen, and he'd had to find out for himself.)

Nobody and nothing had been found in the abandoned coral houses. (But would anything important have been seen?)

Most of the escaped prisoners were safe in the vivarium. (From which they had escaped before, without bothering to turn off their sleeper helmets.)

Jesus Pietro wasn't used to dealing with ghosts.

It would require brand new techniques.

Grimly he set out to evolve them.

The arguments began during dinner.

Dinner took place at the unconventional hour of three o'clock. It was good, very good. Lydia Hancock still looked like a sour old harridan, but to Matt anyone who could cook like her deserved the benefit of the doubt. They had finished the mutton chops when Harry Kane turned to business.

"There are five of us left," he said. "What can we do to get the rest of us loose?"

"We could blow the pumping station," Hood suggested. It developed that the pumping station at the base of the Alpha-Beta cliff, which sup-

plied Alpha Plateau with water from the Long Fall, was the crew's only source of water. The Sons of Earth had long ago planted mines to blow it apart. "It'd give us a diversion."

"And cut off the power too," said Matt, remembering that hydrogen for fusion can be taken from water.

"Oh, no. The power plants only use a few bucketfuls of water in a year, Keller. A diversion for what, Jay? Any suggestions?"

"Matt. He got us out once. He can do it again, now that he knows. —"

"Oh, no you don't. I am not a revolutionary. I told you why I went to the Hospital, and I won't go there again."

Thus, the arguments.

On Matt's side there was little said. He wasn't going back to the Hospital. If he could, he would return to Gamma and live out his life there, trusting his psi power to protect him. If he had to live elsewhere — even if he had to spend the rest of his life in hiding on Alpha Plateau — so be it. His life might be disrupted now, but it was not worthless enough to throw away.

He got no sympathy from anyone, not even from Laney. On their part the arguments ranged from appeals to his patriotism or to his love of admiration, to attacks on his personality, to threats of bodily harm to himself and his family. Jay Hood was the most vituperative. You would have thought he had invented "the luck of Matt Keller", that Matt had stolen it. He seemed genuinely convinced that he held a patent on psi power on the Plateau.

In a way it was ludicrous. They begged him, they browbeat him, they threatened him; and with never a chance of succeeding. Once they actually succeeded in frightening him, and once their personal comments annoyed him beyond the limits of patience. Both times the arguments ended abruptly, and Matt was left alone in his irritation while the Sons of Earth discussed whatever came to mind, their pupils contracting to pinpoints whenever they looked at him.

After the second such episode Harry Kane realized what was happening and ordered the others to lay off. It was interfering with their ability to make plans, he said.

"Go somewhere else," he told Matt. "If you're not going to help us, at least don't listen to our plans. Feeble though they'll probably be, there's no reason we should risk your hearing them. You might use the information to buy your way back into Castro's good graces."

"You're an ungrateful son of a bitch," said Matt, "and I demand an apology."

"Okay, I apologize. Now go somewhere else."

Matt went out into the garden. The mist was back, but it was an overhanging mist now, turning the sky steel gray, bleaching colors out of the garden, turning the void from a fuzzy flat plain into a dome around the universe. Matt found a stone bench and sat down and put his head in his hands.

He was shaking. A mass verbal attack can do that to a man, can smash his self-respect and set up

doubts which remain for hours or days or forever. There are well developed verbal techniques for many to use against one. You never let the victim speak without interruption; never let him finish a sentence. You interrupt each other so that he can't quite catch the drift of your arguments, and then he can't find the flaws. He forgets his rebuttal points because he's not allowed to put them into words. His only defense is to walk out. If, instead, you throw him out

Gradually his confusion gave way to a kind of sick, curled anger. The ungrateful —! He'd saved their worthless lives twice, and where was their thanks? Well, he didn't need them. He'd never needed them for a moment.

He knew what he was now. Hood had given him that much. He knew, and he could take advantage of it.

He could become the world's first invulnerable thief. If Implementation would not let him resume his mining career, he would do just that. Weaponless, he could rob storehouses in broad daylight. He could pass guarded bridges unnoticed, be at work on Gamma while they were searching him out in every corner of Eta. Eta, now . . . a nice place to rob, if he couldn't return to his old life. The crew gambling resort must see half the wealth of Plateau at one time or another.

He'd have a long walk to the Alpha-Beta bridge, and a longer walk afterward. A car would be useful. Serve the Sons of Earth right if he took their car . . . but he'd have to wait till midnight. Did he want to?

His daydreams had calmed him still further. His shaking had stopped, and he wasn't as angry now. Now he could begin to see what had moved the four inside to attack him so; though he saw no justice in it, for there was none. Laney, Hood, Harry Kane, Lydia . . . they must be fanatics, or why would they sell their lives for a hopeless revolution? Being fanatics they would have only one ethic: to do anything in their power to advance their cause, no matter whom it might hurt.

He still didn't know where he went from here. One thing he knew: it would not involve the Sons of Earth. Otherwise he had plenty of time for decisions.

A chill, thin breeze blew from the north. Gradually the fog was thickening.

The electric fire inside would be welcome.

But the thick hostility would not. He stayed where he was, hunching his back to the wind.

Why in blazes would Hood assume he drove away women? Did Hood think he was crazy? Or deficient? No; he'd have used that during the arguments. Why, then?

He hadn't driven away Laney.

That memory warmed him. She was lost for good now; their paths would diverge, and someday she'd end in the organ banks. But Friday night had happened; Friday night was permanent

Polly's eyes. Her pupils had contracted, sure enough. Like the gatekeeper's eyes, like Harry's and Hood's and Laney's eyes when Matt had tired of their verbal onslaughts. Why?

Matt nibbled gently at his lower lip.

And if he'd driven Polly away (never mind why; there was no answer) then it was not her fault that she had gone.

But Laney had stayed.

Matt jumped to his feet. They'd have to tell him. He had a lever on them: they couldn't know how sure he was that he'd have nothing to do with their cause. And he had to know

He turned toward the house and saw the cars.

Three of them, way up there in the gray sky, disappearing and reappearing behind the mist. Dropping.

XIX

He stood perfectly still. He wasn't really convinced that they were landing *here*, though they grew bigger and closer every second.

Finally they were just overhead and settling. And still he stood; for by then there was no place to run to, and he knew that only "the luck of Matt Keller" could protect him. It should work. He was certainly scared enough.

One of the cars almost landed on him. He was invisible, all right.

A tall, spare man got out of the car, moved his hands briefly inside the dashboard, stepped back to avoid the wind as the car rose again and settled on the roof. The other cars had landed, and they were Implementation. A man disembarked and moved toward the tall civilian. They spoke briefly. The tall man's voice was high, almost squeaky, and it had

the crew lilt. He was thanking the policeman for his escort. The policeman got back in the car, and both Implementation cars rose into the fog.

The tall man sighed and let himself slump. Matt's fear ebbed. This crew was no danger; he was a tired old man, worn out with years and with some recent toil. But what a fool Harry Kane had been, to think nobody would come!

The man moved toward the house. Tired he might have been, but he walked straight, like a policeman on parade. Matt cursed softly and moved in behind him.

When the oldster saw the living room he'd know someone had been here. He'd call for help unless Matt stopped him.

The old man open the big wooden door and walked in. Matt was right behind him.

He saw the old man go rigid.

The ancient didn't try to scream. If he had a handphone he didn't reach for it. His head turned from side to side, studying the living room from where he stood, taking in the abandoned glasses and pitcher and the glowing false fire. When his profile turned to Matt he looked thoughtful. Not frightened, not angry.

And when the old man smiled, it was a slow, tense smile, the smile of a chess player who sees victory almost within his grasp . . . or defeat, for his opponent might have set an unsuspected trap. The old man smiled, but the muscles of his face stood out iron-hard under the loose, wrinkled skin, and his fists tightened at his sides. He cocked his head to one side, listening.

He turned abruptly toward the dining room, and was face to face with Matt.

Matt said, "What are you grinning at?"

The crew batted an eyelash; he was discomposed for just that long. Speaking low, he asked, "Are you one of the Sons of Earth?"

Matt shook his head.

Consternation! And why *that* reaction? Matt held up a hand. "Don't do anything rash," he said. He'd wrapped a handcuff chain around that hand to make it a better weapon. The old man settled back on his heels. Three of him would have been no physical match for Matt.

"I'm going to search you," said Matt. "Raise your hands." He moved behind the old man and ran his hands over various pockets. He found some bulky objects, but no handphone.

He stood back, considering. He had never searched anyone; there might be tricks a man could use to fool him.

"What do you want with the Sons of Earth?"

"I'll tell them when I see them." The baritone lilt was not hard to understand, though Matt could never have imitated it.

"That won't do."

"Something very important has happened." The old man seemed to make a difficult decision. "I want to tell them about the ramrobot."

"All right. Go ahead of me. That way."

They moved toward the dining room with Matt trailing.

Matt was about to yell when the door suddenly opened. Lydia Hancock had her nose and a sonic showing around the edge. It took her a second to realize that the man in the lead was not Matt; and then she fired.

Matt caught the old man as he fell. "Stupid," he said. "He wanted to talk to you."

"He can talk to us when he wakes up," said Lydia.

Harry Kane emerged warily, holding the other stolen sonic ready in his hand. "Any others?"

"Just him. He had a police escort, but they left. Better search him, there might be a radio on him somewhere."

"Mist Demons! It's Millard Parlette!"

"Oh!" Matt knew the name, but he hadn't recognized the man. "I think he really wanted to see you. When he realized someone was here, he acted sneaky. He didn't panic until I told him I wasn't one of you. He said he wanted to talk about the ramrobot."

Harry Kane grunted. "He won't wake up for hours. Lydia, you're on guard duty. I'm going for a shower; I'll relieve you when I come down."

He went upstairs. Lydia and Hood picked up Millard Parlette, moved him into the front entrance and sat him up against a wall. The old man had gone loose, like a puppet without strings.

"A shower sounds wonderful," said Laney.

Matt said, "May I talk to you first? Hood too."

They got Jay Hood and went into the living room. Hood and Laney flopped in front of the fire, but Matt

was too restless to sit. "Hood, I've got to know. What makes you think I've been using my psi power to drive away women?"

"You'll recall it was Laney's idea first. But the evidence seems good. Do you doubt that Polly left because you contracted her irises?"

Of course he doubted it. But he couldn't back it up. He looked at Laney, waiting.

"It's important, isn't it, Matt?"

"Yah."

"You remember, just before the raid, when you asked me if everyone was as nervous as you were."

"Mmm . . . Yah, I remember. You said not that nervous, but still nervous."

"What are you two talking about?"

"Jay, do you remember your first — mmm. Do you remember when you stopped being a virgin?"

Hood threw back his head and laughed. "What a question, Laney! Nobody ever forgets the first time! It was —"

"Right. Were you nervous?"

Hood sobered. "At one point, I was. There was so much I didn't know. I was afraid I'd make a fool of myself."

Laney nodded. "I'll bet everyone's nervous the first time. Including you, Matt. You suddenly realize This Is It, and you get all tensed up. Then your girl's eyes go funny."

Matt said a bad word. This was exactly what he hadn't wanted to hear. "But what about us? Laney, why didn't I defend myself against you?"

"I don't know."

Hood snapped, "What difference does it make? Whatever you've got, you're not going to use it."

"I have to know!"

Hood shrugged and went to stand before the fire.

"You were pretty sloshed," said Laney. "Could that have had anything to do with it?"

"Maybe."

She couldn't have known why it was important, but she was trying to help. "Maybe it's because I'm older than you. Maybe you decided I knew what I was doing."

"I didn't decide anything. I was too drunk. And too bitter."

She turned restlessly, her wrinkled party dress swirling out around her. She stopped. "Matt! I remember! It was pitch dark in there!"

Matt closed his eyes. Why, so it was. He'd stumbled unseeing across the bed; he'd had to turn on a light to see Laney at all . . . "That's it. I didn't even realize what was going on until the door was closed. Oookay," he sighed, letting all his breath rush out with the word.

Hood said, "That's great. Are you finished with us?"

"Yah."

Hood left without looking back. Laney, on the verge of leaving, hesitated. Matt looked half dead, as if every erg of energy had been drained out of him.

She touched his arm. "What's wrong, Matt?"

"I drove her away! It wasn't her fault!"

"Polly?" She grinned into his eyes. "Why let it bother you? You got me the same night!"

"Oh, Laney, Laney. She could be in the organ banks! She could be in the coffin cure, whateverthehell that is."

"It's not your fault. If you'd found her in the vivarium —"

"Is it my fault that I was glad? She dropped me like a sick house-cleaner, and an hour later Implementation took her away! And when I found out, I was glad! I had revenge!" His hands were on her upper arms, squeezing, almost hard enough to hurt.

"It wasn't your fault," she repeated. "You'd have saved her if you could."

"Sure." But he wasn't hearing her. He let go of her arms. "I've got to go after her," he muttered, saying the words aloud, trying to taste of them. "Yah. I've got to go after her."

He turned and made for the entrance.

XX

"Come back here, you idiot!" Matt stopped halfway to the door. "Huh? Isn't this what you all want?"

"Come back here! How are you going to get over the wall? You can't pound on the gate again!"

Matt turned back. He felt feverish, unable to think. "Castro'd be ready for that, wouldn't he? He may not know what happened last night, but he must know *something's* wrong."

"We tried hard enough to tell him! Come here, sit down. Don't underestimate that man, Matt. We've got to think this through."

"That wall. How am I going to

get over? Oh, damn, damn, damn!"

"You're tired. Why not wait 'til Harry comes down? Then we can get things organized."

"Oh, no. I'm not taking help from the Sons of Earth. This has nothing to do with them."

"How about me? Will you take my help?"

"Sure, Laney."

She decided not to question the illogic of this. "All right, let's start at the beginning. How are you going to reach the Hospital?"

"Yah. Too far to walk. Mmm . . . Parlette's car. It's on the roof."

"But if Castro gets it it'll lead him straight here."

"I'd have to wait 'til midnight to get the other car."

"That may be the only way." Laney wasn't tired; she'd had twice as much sleep as she needed in the vivarium. But she felt used, ready for the laundry. A hot bath would help She put it out of her mind. "Maybe we can raid a crew house for another car. Then we set the autopilot to take Parlette's car back here."

"That'll take time."

"We'll have to take it. We'll also have to wait 'til after sunset."

"Will we need darkness that early?"

"It would help. And suppose the fog cleared while we were over the yoid?"

"Oh." Colonist and crew alike, the people of Plateau loved to watch the sun setting over the void mist. The colors were never the same twice. Land along the void edge always cost three times as much as land anywhere else.

"Suddenly we'd have a thousand crew looking down at us. It might be a mistake to use the void all. Castro may have thought of that. We'll be safe if the fog holds. But whatever we do, we'll have to wait 'til dark."

Matt stood up and stretched muscles which felt knotted. "Okay. So we get to the Hospital. How do we get in? Laney, what's an electric eye?"

She told him.

"Oh. I didn't see any light. Ultra-violet, of course, or infrared. I should be able to get over that."

"We."

"You're not invisible, Laney."

"I am if I stick close to you."

"Phut."

"I'll have to come that far with you anyway. You can't program an autopilot."

Matt got up to pace. "Leave that a moment. How do we get over the wall?"

"I don't," said Laney, and stopped. "There may be a way," she said. "Leave it to me."

"Tell me."

"I can't."

The cold breeze outside had become a wind, audible through the walls. Laney shivered, though the electric fire was hot enough. The fog beyond the south windows was growing dark.

"We'll need guns," she said.

"I don't want to take one of yours. You've only got the two we picked upon the way to the car."

"Matt, I know more than you do about crew. They all go in for sports of one kind or another."

"So?"

"Some of them hunt. A long time ago Earth sent us some frozen fertilized deer and caribou ova in a cargo ramrobot. The Hospital hatched them out, grew 'em to adulthood and scattered them around the bottom edge of the glacier, north of here. There's enough grass there to keep them happy."

"Then we might find guns here."

"It's a good bet. The richer a crew is, the more sports equipment he buys. Even if he never uses it."

The gun rack was in a room in the upper story, a room lined with paintings of more or less wild animals and with heads and hooves of deer and caribou. The rack held a dozen air-powered rifles. They searched the room, and eventually Laney found a drawer containing several boxes of crystal slivers, each sliver two inches long.

"They look like they'd stop a bandersnatch," said Matt. He'd never seen a bandersnatch, except in filmed maser messages from Jinx, but he knew they were big.

"They'll stop an elk cold. But the guns only fire one at a time. You have to be accurate."

"Makes it more sporting?"

"I guess so."

Implementation mercy guns fired a steady stream of tiny slivers. One would make the victim woozy; it took half a dozen to drop him in his tracks.

Matt closed and pocketed the box of oversized mercy slivers. "Getting hit with one of these would be like being stabbed with an ice pick, even without the knockout effect. Will they kill a man?"

"I don't know," said Laney: She chose two guns from the rack. "We'll take these."

"Jay!"

Hood stopped halfway to the living room, turned and made for the entrance hall. "Yes, Lydia."

Lydia Hancock was bending over Millard Parlette. She had folded his flaccid hands neatly in his lap. "Come here and have a look at this."

Hood looked down at the stunned crew. Millard Parlette was coming around. His eyes didn't track and wouldn't focus, but they were open. Hood saw something else, and he bent for a closer look.

The crew's hands didn't match. The skin of one was mottled with age. It couldn't be as old as Parlette must be, but he hadn't replaced the skin in a good long time. From fingertips to elbow the arm showed a curious lack of personality, of what Hood finally decided was artistic continuity. Part of that might have been imagination. Hood knew in advance that Parlette must have used the organ banks continuously during his lifetime. But no imagination was needed to see that the left hand was dry and mottled and faintly callused, with cracked fingernails and receding quick.

Whereas the skin of the right hand was like a baby's, smooth and pink, untanned, almost translucent. The quick of the fingernails ran all the way to the tips of the fingers. Many high school students could not have said the same.

"The old love-child just got a transplant job," said Hood.

"No. Look here." Lydia pointed to the wrist. There was a ragged band of color, something less than an inch wide, running round Parlette's wrist. It was a dead, milky white such as Hood had never seen in human skin.

"Here too." A similar ring circled the first joint of Parlette's thumb. The thumbnail was cracked and dry, with a badly receding quick.

"Right, Lydia. But what is it? An artificial hand?"

"With a gun inside, maybe. Or a radio."

"Not a radio. They'd be all over us by now." Hood took Parlette's right hand and rolled the joints in his fingers. He felt old bone and muscle under the baby skin, and joints which would be arthritic someday soon. "This a real human hand. But why didn't he get the whole thing replaced?"

"We'll have to let him tell us."

Hood stood up. He felt clean and rested and well fed. If they had to wait for Parlette to talk, they'd picked a nice place to wait.

Lydia asked, "How's Laney doing with Keller?"

"I don't know. I'm not going to try to find out."

"That must be tough, Jay." Lydia laughed a barking laugh. "You've spent half your life trying to find psychic powers on Plateau. Now one finally shows up, and he doesn't want to play with us."

"I'll tell you what really bothers me about Matt Keller. I grew up with him. In school I never noticed him, except one time when he got me mad at him." Absently he rubbed a point on his chest with two fingertips. "He

was right under my nose all the time. But I was right, wasn't I? Psi powers exist, and we can use them against the Hospital."

"Can we?"

"Laney's persuasive. If she can't talk him around, I sure can't."

"You're not pretty enough."

"I'm prettier than you."

The barking laugh rang again. "*Touche!*"

"I knew it," said Laney. "It had to be the basement."

Two walls were covered with various kinds of small tools. Tables held an electric drill and a bandsaw. There were drawers of nails, screws, nuts

Matt said, "Parlette the Younger must have done a lot of building."

"Not necessarily. It may be just a hobby. Come on, Matt, get your wrists down here. I think I see the saw we want."

Twenty minutes later he was rubbing bare wrists, scratching furiously where he'd been unable to scratch before. His arms felt ten pounds lighter without the handcuffs.

The time of waiting sat heavily on Jesus Pietro.

It was long past quitting time. From the windows of his office he could see the trapped forest as a darker blur in a darkening gray mist. He'd called Nadia and told her not to expect him home tonight. The night shift was in charge of the Hospital, reinforced at Jesus Pietro's orders with scores of extra guards.

Soon he'd have to alert them for what he expected. Right now he was

trying to decide what to say to them.

He wasn't about to impress them with the startling news that all of five prisoners were loose somewhere on Alpha Plateau. They would already have heard about the escape. They'd leave the mop-up job to the hunting squads.

Jesus Pietro activated the intercom. "Miss Laussen, please connect me with all of the Hospital intercoms."

"Will do." She didn't always call him Sir. Miss Laussen had more crew blood than Jesus Pietro — she was nearly pure — and she had powerful protectors. Fortunately she was a pleasant person and a good worker. If she ever became a disciplinary problem —!

"You're on, sir."

"This is the Head," said Jesus Pietro. "You all know of the man captured last night infiltrating the Hospital. He and several others escaped this morning. I have information that he was scouting the Hospital defenses in preparation for an attack to take place tonight.

"Sometime between now and dawn, the Sons of Earth will almost certainly attack the Hospital. You have all been issued maps of the Hospital showing the locations of automatic protective devices installed today. Memorize them, and don't stumble into any of the traps, and they can kill. Repeat, they can kill.

"I think it unlikely that the rebels will make any kind of frontal attack." Unlikely, indeed! Jesus Pietro smiled at the understatement. "You should be alert for attempts to infiltrate the Hospital, possibly by us-

ing our own uniforms. Keep your identification handy. If you see someone you do not recognize, ask for his ident. Compare him with the photo. The rebels have not had time to forge identis.

"One last word. Don't be reluctant to shoot each other."

He signed off, waited for Miss Laussen to clear the lines, then had her contact the Power Sections. "Cut off all power to the colonist regions of the Plateau until dawn," he told them.

The men of Power took pride in their work, and their work was to keep the power running. There were loud protests. "Do it," said Jesus Pietro, and cut them off.

Once again he thought longingly of issuing death darts to his men. But then they *would* be afraid to shoot each other. Worse, they'd fear their own weapons. Never since the Covenant of Planetfall had Implementation used deadly weapons. In any case the poison slivers had been stored so long that they'd probably lost their effectiveness.

He'd raised hell with tradition tonight; there'd be hell to pay if nothing happened. But he knew something would. It wasn't just the fact that this was the last chance for the rebels to get their prisoners out of the vivarium. It was the cold certainty in Jesus Pietro's viscera. *Something would happen.*

A vague red line divided black sky from black land. It faded gradually, and suddenly the Hospital lights came on outside, making the night white. Somebody brought Jesus Pietro dinner, and he ate hurriedly and

kept the coffeepot when the tray was gone.

XXI

"Down there," said Laney. Mat nodded and pushed in the fan levers. They dropped toward a medium-sized dwelling which at first glance looked like a large, flat haystack. There were windows in the haystack, and on one side was a porchlike platform. Under the porch was an oddly curved swimming pool. Lights showed at the windows, and the swimming pool area blazed with light. The water itself was lit from underneath. There was no rooftop landing zone, but on the other side of the house were two cars.

"I'd have picked an empty house, myself." Matt was commenting, not criticizing. He'd decided hours ago that Laney was the expert in rebellion.

"Then what? Even if you found a car, where would you get the keys? I picked this one because most of them will be out in plain sight by the pool. There, see them? Hover the car, and I'll see how many I can pick off."

They'd flown east along the void, flying blind in the fog, staying far from the edge so that even the sound of their fans would not carry. Finally, miles east of the Parlette mansion, they'd turned inland. Matt flew with the gun balanced beside him on the seat. He'd never owned anything with such power in it. It gave him a warm feeling of security and invulnerability.

Laney was in the back seat, where she could fire from either window. Matt couldn't tell how many people



were down around the swimming pool. But the guns had telescopic sights.

There were pops like balloons exploding. "One," said Laney. "Two. Oop, here comes another . . . Three, and out. Okay, Matt, drop her fast. Yeeee! Not that fast, Matt."

"Listen, did I get us down or didn't I?"

But she was out and running for the house. Matt followed more slowly. The swimming pool steamed like a huge bathtub. He saw two fallen crew near the pool and a third near the glass doors to the house, and he blushed, for they were naked. Nobody had ever told him that crew threw nude swimming parties. Then he noticed blood pooling under a woman's neck, and he stopped blushing. Clothing was trivia here.

From the pool area the house still looked like a haystack, but with more normal solid structures showing through the grassy yellow sides. Inside it was vastly different from Geoffrey Eustace Parlette's house; the walls were all curved, and a conical false fireplace occupied the center of the living room. But there was the same air of luxury.

Matt heard a pop like a balloon exploding, and he ran.

He rounded a door jamb as he heard the second Pop. A man stood behind a polished table dialing a handpone. He was beginning to fall as Matt saw him: a brawny middle-aged crew wearing nothing but a few drops of water and an expression of ultimate terror. He was looking straight at Laney. One hand pawed

at a blood spot on his ribs. His terror seemed to fade as he fell, but Matt remembered it. Being hunted was bad in itself, but being hunted naked must be far worse. Naked had always been synonymous with "unprotected."

"Try the upstairs," said Laney. She was reloading the gun. "We'll have to find where they changed. If you find a pair of pants, search the pockets for keys. Hurry, we can't stay here long."

He came down a few minutes later with a bunch of keys dangling from his finger. "They were in the bedroom," he said.

"Good. Throw 'em away."

"Was that a funny?"

"I found these." She too had a key ring. "Think it through. Those clothes upstairs must belong to the owner of the house. If we take his car, Implementation can trace it back here. It may not matter; I can't think of any way they could trace us from here back to Parlette's. But if we take a visitor's car they can't trace us anywhere. So these are the ones we want. You can ditch yours."

They went back to the pool area for Parlette's car. Laney opened the dash and fiddled inside. "I don't dare send it back," she muttered. "Harry'll have to use the other one. Ah . . . So I'll just send it ten miles up and tell it to head south forever. Okay, Matt, let's go."

They found a key to fit one of the cars on the roof. Matt flew east and north, directly toward the Hospital.

The fog had not been abnormally thick on the ground, but at this height it was the edge of Creation.

Matt flew for an hour before he saw a faint yellow blur to the left.

"The Hospital," Laney agreed. They turned.

A faint yellow blur on the left . . . and white lights forming and clarifying all around them.

Matt dropped the car instantly.

They came down hard on water. As the car bobbed to the surface they dived out opposite doors. Matt came up gasping with the cold. The fans washed spray over him, and he turned his face to avoid it. Ducks quacked in panic.

The white lights were dropping toward them. Matt called, "Where are we?"

"Parlette Park, I think."

Matt stood up in the water, waist deep, holding his gun high. The car skidded across the duck pond, hesitated at the edge and then continued on until it nudged into a hedge. The fog was turning yellowish-gray as car lights dropped toward the pond.

A thought struck him. "Laney. Got your gun?"

"Yah."

"Test it."

He heard it puff. "Good," he said, and pitched his own gun away. He heard it splash.

Car lights were settling all around them. Matt swam toward the sound of Laney's shot until he bumped into her. He took her arm and whispered, "Stay close." They waded toward shore. He could feel her shivering. The water was cold, but when they stood up the wind was colder.

"What happened to your gun?"

"I threw it away. My whole purpose in life is being scared, isn't it?"

Well, I can't get scared with a gun in my hand."

They stumbled onto the grass. White lights surrounded them at ground level, faintly blurred by the lifting mist. Others hovered overhead, spotlights casting a universal glow over the park. In that light men showed as running black silhouettes. A car settled on the water behind them, gently as a leaf.

"Put me through to the Head," said Major Chin. He rested at ease in the back seat of his car. The car sat a foot above the water on a small duck pond in Parlette Park, supported on its ground-effect air cushion. In such a position it was nearly invulnerable to attack.

"Sir? We've caught a stolen car Yes sir, it must have been stolen, it landed the moment we flew over to investigate. Went down like a falling elevator It was flying straight toward the Hospital. I imagine we're about two miles southwest of you. They must have abandoned the car immediately after landing it on a duck pond Yes, sir, very professional. The car ran into a hedge and just stayed there, trying to butt its way through on autopilot. License number B-R-G-Y No sir, nobody in it, but we've surrounded the area. They won't get through no sir, nobody's seen them yet. They may be in the trees. But we'll smoke them out."

A puzzled expression chased itself across his smooth round face. "Yes, sir," he said, and signed off. He thought about directing the search by beltphone, but he had no further or-

ders to give. All around him were the lights of police cars. The search pattern was fixed. When someone found something, he'd call.

But what had the Head meant by that last remark?

"Don't be surprised if you don't find anyone."

His eyes narrowed. The car a decoy, on autopilot? But what would that accomplish?

Another car flying in above him. This empty car to hold his attention while the other got through.

He used the beltphone. "Carson, you there? Lift your car out of there. Up to a thousand feet. Turn off your lights and hover and see what you can pick up on infrared. Stay there until we call off the search."

It was some time before he found out how badly he'd missed the mark.

"Calling Major Chin," said Doheny, hovering one hundred feet above Parlette Park. Controlled excitement tinged his voice with the thrill of the chase.

"Sir? I've got an infrared spot just leaving the pond. Could be two people; this fog is messing up my image Western shore. They're out now, moving toward where all the men are milling around You don't? They're there, I swear it Okay okay, but if they aren't there then something's wrong with my infra-scope — sir Yes, sir."

Annoyed but obedient, Doheny settled back and watched the dim red spot merge with the bigger spot that was a car motor. That tears it, he thought; that makes them police,

whether they happen to be real or not.

He saw the larger infrared source move away, leaving behind a second source smaller than a car but comfortably bigger than one man. That jerked him alert, and he moved to the window to check. It was there, all right, and —

He lost interest and returned to the intrascope. The cloverleaf-shaped source was still there, not moving, the right color to be four unconscious men. A man-sized source separated itself from the milling mass around the abandoned car, moved toward the cloverleaf source. Seconds later there was pandemonium.

XXII

Gasping, wheezing, running for their lives, they pelted out of Parlette Park and into a wide, well lighted village walk. Matt gripped Laney's wrist as they ran, so that she couldn't "forget about him" and wander off on her own. As they reached the walk Laney pulled back on his arm.

"Okay. We can — relax now."

"How far — to the Hospital?"

"'Bout — two miles."

Ahead of them the white lights of Implementation cars faded behind a lighted dome of fog as they chased an empty car on autopilot. A yellow glow touched the fading far end of the walk: the lights of the Hospital.

The walk was a rectangular pattern of red brick, luxuriously wide, with great spreading chestnut trees planted down the middle in a pleasantly uneven row. Street lights along the sides illuminated old and individu-

alistic houses. The chestnuts swayed and sang shrilly in the wind. The wind blew the still-thinning fog into curls and streamers; it cut steel-cold through wet clothes and wet skin to reach meat and marrow.

"We've got to get some clothes," said Matt.

"We'll meet someone. We're bound to. It's only nine."

"How could those crew stand it? Swimming!"

"The water was hot. Probably they had a sauna bath waiting somewhere. I wish we did."

"We should have taken that car."

"Your power wouldn't have hidden us. At night they couldn't see your face in a car window. They'd have seen a stolen car, and they'd have bathed it in sonics, which is just what they must be doing now."

"And why did you insist on stripping that policeman? And having got the damn suit, why did you throw it away?"

"For the Mist Demons' sake, Matt! Will you *trust* me?"

"Sorry. We could either of us use that coat."

"It's worth it. Now they'll be looking for one man in an Implementation uniform. Hey! In front of me, quick!"

A square of light had appeared several houses down. Matt stepped in front of her and stooped, hands on knees, so she could use his shoulder as a gun rest.

It had worked on four police in Parlette Park. It worked now. A crew couple appeared in the light. They turned and waved to their hosts, turned again and moved down the steps,

hunching slightly against the wind. The closing door cut the light from them and left them as dim moving shadows. As they touched the brick they crossed the flat trajectories of two hunting slivers.

Matt and Laney stripped them and left them propped against a garden hedge for the sun to find.

"Thank the Mist Demons," said Matt. He was still shivering inside the dry clothes.

Laney was already thinking ahead. "We'll stick with the houses as far as we can. These houses give off a lot of infrared. They'll screen us. Even if a car does spot us, he'll have to drop and question us to be sure we're not crew."

"Good. What happens when we run out of houses?"

Laney didn't answer for a long time. Matt didn't press her. Finally she said, "Matt, there's something I'd better tell you."

Again he didn't press her.

"As soon as we get through the wall . . . if we get through the wall . . . I'm going to the vivarium. You don't have to come along, but I've got to go."

"Won't that be the first thing they expect?"

"Probably."

"Then we'd better not. Let's hunt down Polly first. We ought to keep the noise down as long as possible. Once your Sons of Earth come charging out, assuming we get that far, those doors will drop right away. In fact, if we — " At this point he glanced over at her and stopped.

Laney was looking straight ahead.

Her face was hard and masklike. So was her voice, deliberately hard.

"That's why I'm telling you now. I'm going to the vivarium. That's why I'm here." She seemed about to break off; then she went on in a rush. "That's why I'm here, because the Sons of Earth are in there and I'm one of them. Not because you need me, but because they need me. I need you to get me in. Otherwise I'd be trying it alone."

"I see," said Matt. He was about to go on, but — no, he couldn't say that. He'd leave himself wide open to be slapped down, and in her mood Laney would do it. Instead he said, "What about Polly's big secret?"

"Millard Parlette knows it too. He seemed eager to talk. If he isn't, Lydia will get it out of him anyway."

"So you don't need Polly any more."

"That's right. And if you've got the idea I'm here for love of you, you can forget that too. I'm not trying to be boorish, Matt, or cruel either. I just want you to know where you stand. Otherwise you'll be counting on me to make intelligent decisions."

"You're transportation, Matt. We need each other to get in. Once we're inside I'll go straight to the vivarium, and you can do whatever you have to to stay alive."

For some time they walked in silence, arm in arm, a crew couple strolling home along a distance too short to use a car. Other crew appeared from time to time. Mostly they walked quickly, bent against the wind, and they ignored Matt and Laney and each other in their hurry

to get out of the cold. Once a good dozen men and women, varying from merely high to falling-down drunk, poured into the street ahead of them, marched four houses down and began banging on the door. Matt and Laney watched as the door opened and the partygoers poured in. And suddenly Matt felt intensely lonely. He gripped Laney's arm a little tighter, and they went on.

The brick walk swung away to the left, and they followed it around. Now there were no houses on the right. Just trees, high and thick, screening the Hospital from view. The barren defense perimeter must be just the other side.

"Now what?"

"We follow it," said Laney. "I think we ought to go in along the trapped forest."

She waited for him to ask why, but he didn't. She told him anyway. "The Sons of Earth have been planning an attack on the Hospital for decades. We've been waiting for the right time, and it never came. One of the things we planned was to go in along the edge of the trapped woods. The woods themselves are so full of clever widgets that the guards on that side probably never notice it."

"You hope."

"You bet."

"What do you know about the Hospital defenses?"

"Well, you ran into most of them last night. A good thing you had the sense to stay out of the trapped woods. There are two electric-eye rings. You saw the wall; guns and spotlights all over it. Castro probably put extra

men on it tonight, and we can bet he closed off the access road. Usually they leave it open, but it's easy enough to close the electric-eye ring and shut off power to the gate."

"And inside the wall?"

"Guards. Matt, we've been assuming that all these men will be badly trained. The Hospital's never been under direct attack. We're out numbered —"

"Yes, we are, aren't we?"

"But we'll be dealing with guards who don't really believe there's anything to guard against."

"What about traps? We can't fight machinery."

"Practically none in the Hospital — at least, not usually. There are things Castro could set up in an emergency. In the slowboats there could be anything; we just don't know. But we won't be going near the slowboats. Then there are those damn vibrating doors."

Matt nodded, a swift vicious jerk of his chin.

"Those doors surprised us all. We should have been warned."

"By who?"

"Never you mind. Stop a second . . . Right. This is the place. We go through here."

"Laney."

"Yah? There are pressure wires in the dirt. Step on the roots only as we go through."

"What happened Friday night?"

She turned back to look at his face, trying to read what he meant. She said, "I happened to think you needed me."

Matt nodded slowly. "You happened to think right."

"Okay. That's what I'm here for. The Sons of Earth are mostly men. Sometimes they get horribly depressed. Always planning, never actually fighting, never winning when they do, and always wondering if they aren't doing just what Implementation wants. They can't even brag except to each other, because not all the colonists are in our side. Then, sometimes, I can make them feel like men again."

"I think I need my ego boosted about now."

"What you need right now, brother, is a good scare. Just keep thinking scared and you'll be all right. We go through here . . ."

"I just thought of something."

"What's that?"

"If we'd stayed here this afternoon we'd have saved all this trouble."

"Will you come on? And don't forget to step on the roots!"

XXIII

Darkness covered most of Mount Lookitthat.

The crew never knew it. The lights of Alpha Plateau burned undimmed. Even in the houses along the Alpha-Beta cliff, with a view across Beta Plateau toward the distant, clustered town lights of Gamma and Iota . . . tonight that view was blanked by fog, and who was to know that the clustered lights were dark?

In the colonist regions there was fear and fury, but it couldn't touch Alpha Plateau.

No real danger threatened. On Gamma and Iota there were no hos-

pitals where patients might die in dark operating theaters. No cars would crash without street lights. Spoiling meat in butcher-shop freezers would cause no famine; there were the fruit and nut forests, the crops, the herds.

But there was fear and fury. Was something wrong, up there where all power originated? Or was it a prank, a punishment, an experiment . . . some deliberate act of Implementation?

You couldn't travel without lights. Most people stayed where they were, wherever they were. They bedded down where they could; for colonists it was near bedtime anyway. And they waited for the lights to come back.

They would give no trouble, Jesus Pietro thought. If danger came tonight, it would not come from down there.

Equally certain, the Sons of Earth would attack, though they only numbered five. Harry Kane would not leave most of his men to die. Whatever he could do, he would do it, regardless of risk.

And Major Chin's fugitive had escaped, was loose two miles from the Hospital, wearing a police uniform. And because he had escaped, because he was alone, because no man had seen him clearly . . . it had to be Matt Keller.

Five dossiers to match five fugitives. Harry Kane and Jayhawk Hood, these were old friends, the most dangerous of the Sons of Earth. Elaine Mattson and Lydia Hancock and Matthew Keller, these he had come

to know by heart during the long hours following the break this afternoon. He could have recognized any of them a mile away, or told them their life stories.

The slimmest dossier was Matt Keller's: two and a half skimpy pages. Mining engineer . . . not much of a family man . . . few love affairs . . . no evidence he had ever joined the Sons of Earth.

Jesus Pietro was worried. The Sons of Earth, if they got this far, would go straight to the vivarium to free their compatriots. But if Matthew Keller was his own agent . . .

If the ghost of Alpha Plateau was not a rebel, but a thing with its own unpredictable purpose . . .

Jesus Pietro worried. His last sip of coffee suddenly tasted horrible, and he pushed the cup away. He noted with relief that the mist seemed to be clearing. On his desk were a stack of five dossiers, and a sixth all alone, and a mercy-bullet gun.

In the lights of the Hospital the sky glowed pearl gray. The wall was a monstrous mass above them, a sharp black shadow cutting across the lighted sky. They heard regular footsteps overhead.

They'd crawled here side by side, close enough to get in each others' way. They'd broad-jumped the electric eye barriers, Matt first, then Laney making her move while Matt stared up at the wall and willed nobody to see her. So far nobody had.

"We could get around to the gate," said Matt.

"But if Castro's cut off the power we can't get it open. No, there's a better way."

"Show me."

"We may have to risk a little excitement . . . Here it is."

"What?"

"The fuse. I wasn't sure it'd be here."

"Fuse?"

"See, a lot of Implementation is pure colonist. We have to be careful who we approach, and we've lost good men who talked to the wrong person, but it paid off. I hope."

"Someone planted a bomb for you?"

"I hope so. There are only two Sons of Earth in Implementation, and either or both of them could be ringers." She fumbled in the big, loose pockets of her mud-spattered crewish finery. "Bitch didn't carry a lighter. Matt?"

"Lessee. Here."

She took the lighter, then spoke deliberately. "If they see the light we're done for." She crouched over the wire.

Matt crouched over her, to shield the light with his body. As he did so he looked up. Two bumps showed on the straight black shadow of the wall. They moved. Matt started to whisper, Stop! Yellow light flared under him, and it was too late.

The heads withdrew.

Laney shook his arm. "Run! Along the wall!" He followed the pull.

"Now flat!" He landed beside her on his belly. There was a tremendous blast. Metal bits sang around them, raising tiny pings against the wall. Something bit a piece from Matt's

ear, and he slapped at it like a wasp stinging.

He didn't have time to curse. Laney jerked him to his feet, and they ran back the way they had come. There was confused shouting on the wall, and Matt looked up to meet a hundred eyes looking down. Then suddenly the area was bright as hell.

"Here!" Laney dropped to her knees, slapped his hand onto her ankle and crawled. Matt heard mercy-bullets spattering around his ankles as he went in after her.

On the outside the hole was just big enough to crawl through on hands and knees. The bomb must have been a shaped charge. But the wall was thick, and the hole was smaller on the inside. They emerged on their bellies, with scratches. Here too was light, too bright, making Matt's eyes water. Startlingly, there were pits all in a row in the dirt along this side of the wall, and over the cordite stink was the smell of rich moist new earth.

"Bombs," he said wonderingly. Pressure bombs, set off by the explosion, originally intended to explode under an invader dropping from the top of the wall. Bombs, meant to kill. "I'm flattered," he whispered.

"Shut up!" Laney turned to glare, and in the lurid artificial light he saw her eyes change. Then she turned and ran. She was beyond reach before Matt had time to react.

Feet pounded all around them, all running at top speed toward the hole in the wall. They were surrounded! Amazingly, nobody tried to stop Laney. But he saw one jerk to a stop, then go pelting after her.

And nobody tried to stop Matt. He was invisible enough, but he'd lost Laney. Without him she had nothing but the gun . . . and he didn't know how to reach Polly. He stood there, lost.

XXIV

Frowning, Harry Kane inspected hands which didn't match. He'd seen transplantees before, but never such a patchwork man as Millard Parlette.

Lydia said, "It isn't artificial, is it?"

"No. But it's not a normal transplant job either."

"He should be coming around."

"I am," said Millard Parlette.

Harry started. "You can talk?"

"Yes." Parlette had a voice like a squeaky door, altered by a would-be-musical crew lilt, slurred by the effects of a sonic stunner. He spoke slowly, consciously enunciating. "May I have a glass of water?"

"Lydia, get him some water."

"Here." The stocky virago supported the old man's head with her arm and fed him the water in small sips.

Harry studied the man. They'd propped him against a wall in the vestibule. He hadn't moved since then and probably couldn't; but the muscles of his face, which had been slack and rubbery, now reflected a personality.

"Thank you," he said in a stronger voice. "You shouldn't have shot me, you know."

"You have things to tell us, Mr. Parlette."

"You're Harry Kane. Yes, I have things to tell you. And then I'll want to make a deal of sorts with you."

"I'm open to deals. What do you have in mind?"

"You'll understand when I finish. May I start with the recent ram-robot package? This will be somewhat technical —"

"Lydia, get Jay." Lydia Hancock quietly withdrew. "I'll want him to hear anything technical. Jay is our genius."

"Jayhawk Hood? Don't tell me he's here too?"

"You seem to know a good deal about us."

"I do. I've been studying the Sons of Earth for longer than you've been alive. Jayhawk Hood has a fine mind. By all means let us wait for him."

"You've been studying us, have you? Why?"

"I'll try to make that clear to you, Kane. It will take time. Has the situation on Mount Lookitthat ever struck you as being very artificial, fragile?"

"Phut. If you'd been trying to change it as long as I have, you wouldn't think so."

"Seriously, Kane. Our society depends entirely on its technology. Change the technology and you change the society. Most especially you change the ethics."

"That's ridiculous. Ethics are ethics."

The old man's hand twitched. "Let me speak, Kane."

Harry Kane was silent.

"Consider the cotton gin," said

Millard Parlette. "That invention made it economically feasible to grow cotton in quantity in the southern United States, but not in the northern states. It brought slaves in great numbers to one section of that nation while slavery died out in another. The result was a problem in racial tolerance which lasted for centuries."

"Consider feudal armor. The ethics of chivalry were based on the fact that armor was a total defense against anything which wasn't similarly armored. The clothyard arrow, and later gunpowder, ended chivalry and made a new ethic absolutely necessary."

"Consider war as a tool of diplomacy." Millard Parlette stopped to gasp for breath. After a moment he went on.

"It was, as you know. Then came poison gas, and fission bombs, and fission-fusion bombs, and a possible fission-fusion-radiocobalt bomb. Each invention made war less and less useful for imposing one's will, more and more randomly destructive, until nationalism itself became too dangerous to be tolerated, and the United Nations on Earth became more powerful than any possible minority alliance of nations could ever possibly be."

"Consider the settling of the Belt. A solely technological development, yet it created the wealthiest population in the system in a region which absolutely required new ethics, where stupidity automatically carries its own death penalty."

The old man stopped again; he was exhausted.

"I'm no historian," said Harry. "But morals are morals. What's unethical here and now is unethical anywhere, any time."

"Kane, you're wrong. Is it ethical to execute a man for theft?"

"Of course."

"Did you know that there was once a vastly detailed science of rehabilitation for criminals? It was a branch of psychology, naturally, but it was by far the largest such branch. By the middle of century twenty-one, nearly two-thirds of all criminals could eventually be released as cured."

"That's silly. Why go to all that trouble when the organ banks must have been *crying* for — oh, I see. No organ banks."

The old man was finally smiling, showing perfect new white teeth. Sparkling teeth and keen gray eyes: the real Millard Parlette showed behind the cracked, wrinkled, loose rubber mask of his face.

Except that the teeth couldn't be his, thought Harry. Nuts to that. "Go on," he said.

"One day a long time ago, I realized that the ethical situation on Mount Lookitthat was fragile. It was bound to change some day, and *suddenly*, what with Earth constantly bombarding us with new discoveries. I decided to be ready."

There were footsteps on the stairs, running; Lydia and Hood burst in.

Harry Kane introduced Hood to Millard Parlette as if they were already allies. Hood took his cue and shook hands formally, wincing inside himself because Parlette's hand still felt like something dead.

"Keep that hand," said Millard Parlette. "Examine it."

"We already did."

"Your conclusions?"

"Ask you about it."

"Apparently Earth is using biological engineering for medical purposes. There were four gifts in the ram-robot package, along with complete instructions for their care and use. One was a kind of fungus-virus symbiot. I dipped my little finger in it. Now the muck is replacing my skin."

"Replacing — ? Sorry," said Hood. It was difficult *not* to interrupt Parlette, his speech was so irritatingly slow.

"That's right. First it dissolves the epidermis, leaving only the living cells beneath. Then it somehow stimulates the DNA memory in the derma. Probably the virus component does that. You may know that a virus does not reproduce; it compels its host to produce more virus, by inserting its own reproductive chains into the host cells."

"You may have a permanent guest," said Hood.

"No. The virus dies after a short time. Any virus does that. Then the fungus starves."

"Wonderful! The muck moves in a ring, leaving new skin behind!" Hood considered. "Earth really came through this time. But what happens when it reaches your eyes?"

"I don't know. But there were no special instructions. I offered myself as a test subject because I could use a new pelt. It's even supposed to get rid of scar tissue. It does."

"That's quite an advance," said Harry.

"But you don't see why it's important. Kane, I showed you this first because I happened to bring it along. The others will jolt you." Parlette let his head droop to relieve the strain on his neck. "I don't know what animal gave birth to the second gift, but it now resembles a human liver. In the proper environment it will behave like a human liver."

Harry's eyes went wide and blank. Lydia made a startled hissing sound. And Millard Parlette added, "The proper environment is, of course, the environment of a human liver. They have not been tested because they are not fully grown. We can expect disadvantages due to the lack of nervous connections —"

"Keller told the truth. Little hearts and livers!" Harry exclaimed. "Parlette, was the third gift an animal to replace the human heart?"

"Yes. Nearly all muscle. It reacts to adrenalin by speeding up, but once again the lack of nervous —"

"Yee HAH!" Harry Kane began to dance. He grabbed Lydia Hancock, spun her around and around. Hood watched, grinning foolishly. Kane abruptly released her and dropped to his knees in front of Parlette. "What's the fourth?"

"A rotifer."

"A . . . rotifer?"

"It lives as a symbiot in the human bloodstream. It does things the human body will not do for itself. Kane, it has often struck me that evolution as a process leaves something to be desired. Evolution is finished with a man once he is too

old to reproduce. Thus there is no genetic program to keep him alive longer than that. Only inertia. It takes enormous medical knowledge to compen —"

"What does it do, this rotifer?"

"It fights disease. It cleans fatty deposits from the veins and arteries. It dissolves blood clots. It is too big to move into the small capillaries, and it dies on contact with air. Thus it will not impede necessary clotting. It secretes a kind of gum to patch weak points in the walls of the arteries and larger capillaries, which is very, very reassuring to a man of my age.

"But it does more than that. It acts as a kind of catch-all gland, a supplementary pituitary. It tends to maintain the same glandular balance a man is supposed to have at around age thirty. It will not produce male and female hormones, and it takes its own good time disposing of excess adrenalin, but otherwise it maintains the balance. Or so say the instructions."

Harry Kane sank back on his heels. "Then the organ banks are done. Obsolete. No wonder you tried to keep it secret."

"Don't be silly."

"What?" Parlette opened his mouth, but Harry rode him down. "I tell you the organ banks are done for! Listen, Parlette. The skin mold replaces skin grafting and does it better. The heart animal and the liver animal replace heart and liver transplants. And the rotifer keeps everything else from getting sick in the first place! What more do you want?"

"Several things. A kidney beast, for example. Or —"

"Quibbling."

"How would you replace a lung? A lung destroyed by nicotine addiction?"

Hood said, "He's right. Those four ramrobot gifts are nothing but a signpost. How do you repair a smashed foot, a bad eye, a baseball finger?" He was pacing now, in short jerky steps.

"You would need several hundred different artifacts of genetic engineering to make the organ banks really obsolete. All the same —"

"All right, cut," said Harry Kane,

and Hood was silent. "Parlette, I jumped the gun. You're right. But I'll give you something to think about. Suppose every colonist on Mount Lookitthat knew only the facts about the ramrobot package. Not Hood's analysis, and not yours; just the truth. What then?"

Parlette was smiling. He shouldn't have been, but his white teeth gleamed evenly in the light, and the smile was not forced. "They would assume the organ banks were obsolete. They would confidently expect Implementation to disband."

"And when Implementation showed no sign of disbanding, they'd revolt! Every colonist on Mount Lookitthat! Could the Hospital stand against that?"

"You see the point, Kane. I am inclined to think the Hospital could stand against any such attack, though I would not like to gamble on it. But I am sure we could lose half the population of this planet in the blood bath, win or lose."

"Then — you've already thought of this."

Parlette's face twisted. His hands fluttered aimlessly, and his feet jumped against the floor, as the effects of the sonic gave up their hold on him. "Do you think me a fool, Harry Kane? I never made that mistake about you. I first heard of the ramrobot package six months ago, when the ramrobot sent out its maser message. I knew immediately that the present crew rule over the Plateau was doomed."



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TO BE CONCLUDED



Dear Editor:

I notice that many of the letters to the editor are sent in by teenagers. I don't know if this is how it is all of the time or not, but I would imagine you have quite a number of young readers. I am interested in knowing what your goals are in publishing this particular magazine, To teach, (What?) To make people think? (About what?) I have been acquainted with some science fiction in the past, but I had no idea there was so much ridiculous fantasy. There is such a thing as a *perverted* imagination, and I believe your October 67 issue (which my son retrieved from someone's trash can) is an unqualified example.

Someone wrote you, "Make us think . . . Teach us." This seems to me to be a tremendous challenge. If that is your goal, perhaps you should reconsider *what* you are teaching, how are you shaping young minds to think? I refer specifically to a story entitled "Conqueror" by Eisenberg. There is nothing in this story even remotely connected to good strong positive thinking — the type that would help a young person adopt worthwhile values. In fact, I am sure it would push him the other way.

In reference to some of the other

articles I would say that no alert teen-ager who is eager to improve his knowledge needs hairy monsters to encourage him to think straight — even about *possible* events; why waste valuable time on the impossibly fantastic?

I find it hard to believe that any intelligent, educated person who is aware of the problems already existing in our world today would deliberately set out to weaken and demoralize our youth. They happen to be up-coming leaders, many of them. Parents who are interested in bringing up good strong Americans are having a tough time of it, and you fellows are not helping by publishing this kind of material. Is it the money you need? It isn't worth it, believe me. Why don't you try to think of something that will help young people use their imaginations to face some of the *realities* of life. I don't know of any true scientists or educators who would uphold you in what you are printing. Of course, you attract a certain kind of audience besides inexperienced teenagers, and if you did change your format, a dozen other publishers would take your place. Maybe that's the way you look at it. You're thinking all right enough — negatively.

In your *Foundation Trilogy* which

was advertised on the back cover I note a faint parallel of characters to those found in a great book entitled *The Holy Bible*. (It has been said that every worthwhile thing known to the human race has its counterfeit.) However, the solution to the problem of the brilliant, yet dangerous power-monger spoken of in the Bible is an absorbing one and will make you think. *Positively*. — Mrs. Rhoda Wills, Box 112, College Station, Berrien Springs, Michigan 49104.

● We're pretty sure we do make some of the young minds think. Not quite so sure about some of the old ones. — *Editor*.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Just finished reading *To Serve the Masters* in the September issue of *Worlds of If* magazine. It's hard to believe that this is a first time for this author. Hope to see more work by Mr. Chapelaine. SF can sure use some new writers.

Please continue the fantasy type stories. There are not too many of these any more — Vance E. James, 328 24th St., Mason City, Iowa 50401.

* * *

Dear Editor:

This is my first letter to a science-fiction magazine, and I'd appreciate you reading it as I think it contains some worthwhile comments, both in complimentary and critical forms.

Your October issue was superb; better than that, it was uniquely original, and that's difficult for anybody to say about anything in today's copy-cat society. Why do I think it so worthy of such compliments? Because of the short-stories *Conqueror* and *Mu Panther*, mainly. They were,

in every visual and emotional sense, stories about real men whose rugged actions and keen thinking bring back a genuine feeling of masculinity, a thing sorely missed by the long-haired and soft-eyed generation of my time, of which I am a part.

Whether you know it or not, aiming entertainment at the virile and imaginative male today is the very best kind of business, and you will reap the greater because of it. I sincerely hope you keep your man-versus-animal type format going, especially with stories like *Mu Panther*. That was exceptionally unique. Enough compliments, though.

Complaints? Several, one being in the form of a suggestion, the other an outright jab at your already bursting pride. 1.) Go bi-monthly (please, no groans from the audience; I meant this as a suggestion, not as criticism). I feel you're prone to printing junk as well as riches, as September's issue will amply testify. Maybe this way, going bi-monthly, you'll be able to print just the good stuff. Please think about it. 2.) What has already been stated, that of September's lousy contents, and I mean all of it. If you thought I'd spend sixty cents on that #&%*c\$, then you're out of your gurple-tree! What a waste, and I am forced to swallow some choice but reluctant words.

So you see, going bi-monthly isn't so bad. I'm sure you'd be much better off. Maybe you'd lose a few subscribers which is almost certain. On the other hand, think of all the man/animal/nuts you'd be gaining in return — like me for instance! — James Koval, 7626 Balfour St., Allen Park, Mich. 48101.

● GROAN! — *Editor*.



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Cordwainer Smith

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Fritz Leiber

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Isaac Asimov

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Poul Anderson

The Demolished Man
Alfred Bester

Do I Wake or Dream?
Frank Herbert

The Dragon Masters
Jack Vance

*The Fireman
(Fahrenheit 451)*
Ray Bradbury

*Gravy Planet
(The Space Merchants)*
Pohl & Kornbluth

*Here Gather the Stars
(Way Station)*
Clifford D. Simak

Home from the Shore
Gordon R. Dickson

Hot Planet
Hal Clement

King of the City
Keith Laumer

Mindswap
Robert Shekley

Med Ship Man
Murray Leinster

The Men in the Walls
William Tenn

The Old Die Rich
H. L. Gold

The Puppet Masters
Robert A. Heinlein

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