WORLDS OF

IF

SCIENCE FICTION

combined with WORLDS OF TOMORROW

MAY
1968

Where The Subbs Go
by C. C. MACAPP

Dismal Light
by ROGER ZELAZNY

ROBERT SILVERBERG

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LIN CARTER

•

and many more

MAY, 1968
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WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

ALL NEW STORIES

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LIMITING FACTOR

by POUL ANDERSON

As long as science fiction keeps its vitality, it will never quite fit anyone's picture of what it is or should be. Only a fossil can be fully described; only an inanimate machine — of the very simplest kind, at that — will meekly obey every order given it. So in what follows, I do not wish either to define or prescribe, merely to suggest. However, the aspect of science fiction that we will deal with is an important one.

This is the theme, motif, procedure or what-have-you that is commonly called extrapolation. You go from the known to the unknown not at a single bound, but by taking what exists and reasoning out the consequences of its further development. Roughly speaking, the development may be either through space or time. The first approach is likely to generate physical settings, the latter to generate sociological backgrounds.

For example, suppose our planet were very muchlarger than it is. We want other things to remain as equal as possible — *e.g.*, Earth gravity — so our imaginary world must be of low density. With a population thinly strewn across immense distances, and chronically short of metals, you get Jack Vance's gorgeous novel *Big Planet.*

Or consider the fact that advertising is becoming a larger and larger part of the American economy. Let this tendency continue; let the industry use ever more effective techniques to sell itself — and you wind up with Pohl and Kornbluth's classic *The Space Merchants.*

Thus we have scale-up (or scale-down, or rearrangement) in space and projecting through time as the two basic modes of extrapolation. They are not inseparable. An expedition to Jupiter involves both a vast increase in our present space-flight capabilities and a future continuation of our technological progress to make this possible. But at least we can see differences in emphasis between different stories.

Extrapolation has been so basic to so much science fiction that some commentators have said science fiction is, or should be, nothing else. This is a mistake. There isn't any way to go from known physical

facts to such common motifs as time travel and faster-than-light travel. We get to these by a direct leap into the unknown; we postulate that radically new laws of nature will someday be found. Likewise, Wells's *The War of the Worlds* postulated a historical event, interplanetary invasion, for which there is no precedent in history.

But even when used in a strict sense, extrapolation has its limits. For one thing, it can be overdone. The deserved success of *The Space Merchants* and *1984* brought forth a host of dismal imitations that came near ruining science fiction some years ago. The formula was accurately characterized by Philip K. Dick: "You read in the paper that the number of people employed to collect garbage is increasing annually. So you write a story in which everyone is a garbage collector."

The good extrapolations take account of other elements than the one which they are primarily dealing with. Their authors recognize that a trend cannot be continued to infinity.

In fact, nothing can.

A mass of dust and gas in space, condensing to form a larger body, can only make so big a planet. After that, gravitational pressure kindles thermonuclear reactions, and the giant planet has become a dwarf star. Nor can stars become indefinitely large. At about fifty times the mass of Sol, interior conditions get so fierce that the body explodes with supernal violence. (It has been suggested that some such process accounts for quasars.)

Nor can a living organism grow bigger than the point at which the surface area — through which it ingests and excretes — is too small in proportion to the volume for metabolism to continue.

Nor can men build a skyscraper of any old height. Well before engineering limits are reached, the necessarily increasing number of elevator shafts will have absorbed all the floor space. Similar considerations restrict the length of a building (or a spaceship).

How about the population explosion? Thinking people agree that the number of humans the Earth can support is finite: that it is, in fact, far short of the number which would blanket the globe with flesh. We hope for a downward trend, leveling off at some optimum which permits everyone alive to enjoy a high standard of living. Given clean, smog-free, unlimited thermonuclear energy — given the technology to synthesize most materials directly and extract minerals from sea water and reprocess wastes — a world like that would seem able to supply each citizen with any amount of goods and services.

Sorry, it won't work.

The trouble is that released energy, no matter what kind, turns at last into heat. Sure, you can save iron and eliminate junkyards by melting down used cars. At present this is not economic, but the hydrogen-fusing future can be spendthrift with power. However . . . in melting the car, you warm up the environment. And *every* process, biological, chemical, electrical, tidal, nuclear, every process does this to the extent that it uses energy.

It has been conservatively estimated that, by 2000 A.D., industry in North America alone will have raised the average temperature of Earth by 3° C. While much of this

is due to the generation of carbon dioxide and water vapor — which adds to the atmospheric greenhouse effect — much is also due to the sheer radiation of everything from flashlights to blast furnaces. You needn't extrapolate far before you see the polar icecaps melting and the continental shores flooded. A little farther, and the entire planet swelters. (Air conditioners release heat too!) A little farther, and life itself is threatened.

Oh, no doubt you can keep going for a while longer by raising the albedo of the Earth. A cloud of sunlight-reflecting particles can be put in orbit.

But that won't let you increase your heat output forever. And besides, in my book, no matter how high its gross product, a world where you can't see sun, moon or stars has a lousy standard of living. Not to mention harm to the ecological basis of our whole existence.

No, even a rationally ordered, population-stabilized, nuclear-fueled Utopia can't progress physically without bounds. Extraterrestrial shipping may provide a safety valve; but sooner or later, man on Earth must learn to be content with what he has.

Content with his wordly goods, at any rate. There remain frontiers mental, emotional and spiritual. Perhaps the science fiction of tomorrow will be concerned largely with interpolation —*Poul Anderson*

WHERE THE SUBBS GO

He wasn't human any more. But he had been — and he still knew how to suffer like a human being!

by C. C. MacAPP

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

I

A BIT OF HISTORY: To observers in the solar system, the Beam appeared to originate — or terminate — in the neighborhood of Sirius. Fledgling Earth, already intoxicated with her unexpected invention of a Faster-Than-Light Drive, greeted the Beam's sudden blossoming across the heavens with mixed reactions. To many, it was God's bright beckoning sign. What else could it be? It was a rainbow, wasn't it? Even if it wasn't a bow, but a straight slender ribbon stretching away to visual infinity.

The unreligious had their turn eleven days later, when the Eje convoy landed on Pluto and broadcasted a short greeting in excellent English and other human languages.

Mankind, fairly well ensconced

throughout most of the solar system, milled, spewed words, mobilized and waited. Gradually, three things became clear: the Eje were making no moves to expand, on or off Pluto; they weren't going to communicate much, and they weren't going to display themselves at all. A fourth thing took longer to realize: the Eje weren't, for the time, offering Mankind anything except the use of the Beam and certain peculiar limited services on Pluto — and, later, at the far end of the Beam.

In time, people got used to that situation. People went out and used the Beam, which was a sort of rapid-transit highway (many times as fast as FTL) running fifteen thousand light-years out to the next galactic spiral arm. They colonized around the far end and, to some extent, in the Sparse Regions along the way. They accepted the services of the Pluto establishment, which was a sort of hospital offering a sort of survival to mortally ill or mortally injured people who could be gotten to it, or near it, in time.

After eighty-odd years, people in and out of the solar system took the enigmatic aliens more or less for granted. Most assumed, by then, that the Eje had no wicked designs upon mankind.

Of course, some had doubts. There was one man in particular. Or a sort of a man . . . .

"Johnny Subb! Johnny Subb!
Get out of here and crawl back
in your tub!"
— Children's taunt, Earth, circa 2060 A. D.

Beam Tramp was a small, unpretentious, moderately decrepit ship, of a type commonly found along the Beam, hauling oddments of freight and sometimes a few paying passengers. She was basically a squat cylinder, forty feet tall and half again as much in diameter. The ring around her middle that housed the drives and field-shapers wasn't faired off or otherwise prettified, so that from a distance she looked like a stub of iron bar with a single turn of heavy square wire soldered around her — plus, here and there, pocks and knobs that were external organs. Nothing identified her, or hinted that she belonged to the most potent single corporation between Sol and Far End.

The hour chron in her Main Control Room (aft as she flew, at ground level as she sat) read, 1806: 2919.

Seeing her crew as she settled on gravs through the uncontaminated atmosphere of Lenare (an unimportant world about a third of the way out along the Beam) you wouldn't have known Ralse Bukanan or his second in command, Leander White, from the rest. They were all male subbs. Their bodies were as alike as if they'd been grown in identical vats — which probably they *had* been, though the Eje didn't say. The blunt, immobile faces might have been masks. The hairless medium-brown skins didn't hold scars long enough to serve as identification — nor did the toneless labored voices help. Only when you'd lived with them a while, learned the individual gestures and idioms and the slight differences of posture, plumpness and such, could you have told them apart.

Ralse heard the ground-level lock rumble open. He left the control room and went out to stand in the opening, looking down at the clearing below and taking deep breaths of the clean cool air. It still had the tree-smell, a little spicier than pine. The town half-circling the packed-dirt field hadn't grown much, and a train of pack animals plodding along the road inland moved at the same unhurried pace.

He leaned out to look at the rows of one-story, rough-lumber warehouses at the other side of the field. The largest bore on its slanting shing roof the sign, "Port City. Leaare," and, in small letters, "Bukanan Enterprises Regional Hdqtrs." The sign was freshly painted. Nat Glover kept things up.

Beam Tramp was hovering now, shifting a little to pick a spot among the twenty-odd parked spacecraft. She settled and touched down. Ralse leaned toward the communicator grill. "Lee?"

"Yes, Ralse."

"I'm going aground. Fuel and provision, will you?" He stepped down and walked to the building that bore the sign.

There were several female subbs — dressed as unalike as possible — at work in the office, plus one male who sat at a desk adding up columns of figures. As he glanced up, Ralse said, "I'm off *Beam Tramp*. Verbal message for Nat Glover."

The other glanced at Ralse's boots with their swaged tops for sealing to spacesuits, at the thin snug-fitting white zipperall garment, at the belt and empty holster. Satisfied, he bent toward a crude-looking intercom box and spoke quietly. There was a pause, then a barely audible reply. The subb at the desk looked up and nodded toward a door at the rear. Ralse walked to it and entered, closing it behind him.

Nat Glover looked up from his desk, smiled and waved a hand toward a chair. "Do I know you?"

Ralse remained standing, eyeing his regional manager — and chief link to Earth — with what he knew would be an annoying stare if he let it last too long. Nat hadn't changed much. The lanky frame might be a trifle gaunter; the hair a little grayer; the tanned face — yes, the face was deeper-lined. But the gray eyes were as alert and clear as ever. Ralse waited until the lean face showed a touch of impatience. After two years with other subbs, he had a kind of hunger for human expressions.

He used one of their private jokes. "Nat; don't you recognize my distinctive face?"

Nat blinked, opened his mouth, grinned suddenly, reached out to make sure the intercom was off, untangled his legs from beneath the desk, hauled himself to his feet, and rushed forward, gnarled hand thrust out. "Ralse! I wasn't expecting you for a thousand hours at least!" He grabbed Ralse's hand, not glancing at it as most Normals would. "Ralse, it's sure — " His face went suddenly serious. "Oh, hell. I forgot for a moment. I don't suppose you got my message yet."

Ralse, a sudden tenseness in his

middle, studied Glover's face. "The last I heard from you, my son had quit college and insisted on coming into space. Out with it, Nat. What's happened?"

Nat looked down; looked at the closed door; met Ralse's eyes again. "He came, Ralse. Sooner than I expected. Paid his own way out somehow. And I didn't handle him right."

Ralse's pulse quickened with the feeling his face and voice couldn't show. "I asked you not to pamper him. What happened, Nat? He's not — ?"

Nat turned, walked to his desk, plumped a hand down on it aimlessly and looked at Ralse again. "I don't know whether he's dead or alive. He didn't like it here. I let him ride up to Irontown with a pack train so he could look for work he liked. He had his degree in metallurgy; I hadn't known that .... He got involved with a woman, an indentured girl just out from Earth. He bought her. To get money to pay for everything and to get married and set up housekeeping, he signed on with some space jackal who pretended to have a get-rich-quick gem-mining opportunity on some unnamed planet. And a few hours after they'd lifted, I got a ransom demand — addressed to you." Glover sat down slowly. "Damn it, Ralse, it was all my fault. I should have made it plainer to Kime that he could draw on me for whatever he wanted. But he's an independent young scamp. And besides ...."

Ralse watched him a moment. "What, besides?"

"Well — he doesn't like subbs. One of the first things he asked me when he got here was why we hired so many. And maybe I was a little abrupt with him about that."

Ralse walked to a chair and sat down. So, Kime was that way — like his dead mother. Not that she could have taught it to him — he'd have been too young when she died. And he couldn't know that his own father had become one. *She'd* never known; nor did anyone else, on, or near, Earth, outside confidential Government files. Ralse had been careful about that. Right or wrong, he'd been careful. "None of it's your fault, Nat. You handled the trust fund, and everything, as thoroughly as anybody could. Who's this space rat he signed on with?"

"I don't know him. He's called Pank Sunner."

Ralse's inner turmoil grew. "I know about Sunner. He works farther out along the Beam, mostly, picking up whatever dishonest dollar he can. But he's no one-ship scavenger. He's got ten ships, at least. And crews of cutthroats to go with them. He's got a good hideout somewhere — I haven't any idea where. You can bet he had ransom in mind from the start; gem-mining's too honest for him. What leads do you have? Are there ships out looking for more?"

"All I can divert, Ralse. The only lead I had was the girl. She remembered Sunner's name."

"Who is she? Some slut?"

"I wouldn't say so. She was stranded when Kime didn't come back, and I got her a job here in town as a waitress, so she'd be around. She seems decent. Maybe

you ought to talk to her. She . . . doesn't know about you, of course. Or about the ransom demand." Nat bent and scribbled on a notepad.

Ralse took the paper and read, "Annelle Travis. Earthside Cafe," then stuffed it in a pocket. "These ships aground here. How many are ours?"

"Only two, and they're loading consignments I haven't been able to cancel. The rest are independents."

Ralse said, "Lease or buy them. Or hire them to carry our own commitments. Pay what you have to. I'll want you to set up a network . . . but I'd better wait and see what I can find out from the girl. Will you get busy on those independents?" He got to his feet, started toward the door, turned. "Nat, what's he like?"

Glover, reaching for the telephone, paused and half smiled. "Green, of course. Stubborn. A couple inches shorter than I am, dark hair, light eyes. Not too muscular yet, but a good frame and fairly athletic. He looks like that old picture of you before your — your accident, that you showed me once."

Ralse nodded and left.

II

She was slight, brown-haired and brown-eyed, with a graceful rather than cutely pretty face that showed her feelings, but not too much. She didn't offer a hand, but she was polite. "I don't think there's anything beyond what I've told Mr. Glover."

Ralse, hating his flat voice, said, "If you'll indulge me, Miss Travis, any small detail might help. I've traveled the Beam a lot more than Nat Glover has."

She made a resigned gesture. "All right. I came out from Earth indentured. My parents . . . there was a traffic accident, and all of a sudden I was alone, and there was no money, and — well, I had to do something. And the advertisements — you have no idea how they lie, Mr. — I'm sorry. I don't know your name, do I?"

"Anything addressed to Leander White will reach me, Miss Travis."

"Mr. White. Well, it wasn't until I was standing on that auction block that I realized what 'indentured' means out here. I was about to cry. Then Kime pushed his way out of the crowd. His face was like murder. I saw that he was sorry for me, and he looked — looked civilized, so I . . . really, I guess, I tried to make an appeal to him without saying anything. Anyway, there was an argument, and he didn't have enough money to — to buy me. But when he told them his name, they accepted his credit.

"He had to rent a room for me on credit too. He made me take a little cash, all he had, I guess, then he went out to find work. And after a few days he found the gem-mining proposition, and he was all excited. He was supposed to be back in less than thirty days, and . . . well, we'd be married and have plenty of money for a start. The — the thirty days went by. I tried to find work, but there was nothing that — well, I guess you know Irontown. And the landlady got nasty. I didn't even have

money for food. If Mr. Glover hadn't found me, I'd have — " Her eyes were wild now.

Ralse said, "You thought about suicide? You should have come to Bukanan Enterprises, Miss Travis."

She colored a little. "By then, I wasn't sure about things."

He studied her face. "Please tell me what you mean."

She got redder. "I guess it would be cowardly to lie about it. He wouldn't have — have taken advantage of me, I guess, or at least I didn't think so then, but I was so grateful and . . . alone. And I really liked him. I, well, I guess I threw myself at him."

He was careful not to look at her too directly. "People aren't puritanical out here, Miss Travis. But what do you mean, later you weren't sure? Did he say anything that made you think he might be doubtful about getting back?"

"No." She faced him squarely. "It was just day after day went by, and I was getting desperate. I began to wonder if I'd been a fool. Maybe you can't understand that. You've never been a — " She caught herself.

After a moment he said, "No, I've never been a woman, but I was a man once, Miss Travis, and I can understand how you felt." He wondered how she'd react if he identified himself, told her about himself and Kime's mother on Earth — how he'd had to hide, or thought he had to hide, what happened to him, knowing that his wife would wait, day after day, for the message that said he was coming home rather than that there'd been another delay. There must have come a time when she, too, wondered if she weren't a castoff. But he'd sent money. There'd always been money, whatever that meant.

He tried to think of something reassuring to say to Annelle Travis that wouldn't sound stupid. He could not. "Miss Travis, tell me everything he said about Pank Sunner."

"Actually," she said, "it was almost nothing, except that they were going to a secret gem mine. He didn't even mention Mr. Sunner's name. I came to see him leave, and I knew the ship because it was the one that had just brought me to Lenare."

Ralse went tense. "Did you tell Nat Glover that?"

"Why . . . I don't know. I was almost out of my mind when I first talked to Mr. Glover." She looked suddenly startled. "I didn't think Captain Sunner had anything to do with my circumstances. The ship that brought me, and several others, out from Earth left the Beam just long enough to transfer us and some cargo to Captain Sunner's ship. I thought it was just a normal local transfer. Wasn't it? Captain Sunner was so courteous."

Ralse decided not to disillusion her about Sunner. "Wasn't there anything else Kime said that made you wonder?"

"No. He was so happy. He seemed to think it was a big adventure." She was silent a moment. "The landlady was always talking to me. She said she'd seen lots of young men go out like that and that very few of them would ever come back to a planet

like Lenare. She said he was — " She looked embarrassed again.

Ralse said, "'Gone where the subbs go?' Is that what she said?"

She met his eyes. "Yes. I'd heard the expression on Earth, of course. But I'd never truly realized how *big* space is. To think we can't even see Sol from here!" She hesitated. "You're the first — 'Substitue Body' is the origin of the word, isn't it? — I've ever really talked with. On Earth — "

He should have let that pass, but he was hungry for Normal faces and voices. "I know, Miss Travis. Not many subbs stay on Earth. We're more comfortable out here. We can stand exposure better than Normals, you know, and digest things a Normal couldn't. I hope you don't believe the stories that go around. We aren't slaves of the Eje, Miss Travis, and we don't plot war against the rest of mankind. We were all Normals once. Our brains weren't changed by the surgical transfer." He stopped, ashamed of his outburst, happy for once that his voice and face didn't reveal the feelings inside.

She smiled through her embarrassment. "I never believed the stories. Were you in the solar system when you had your . . . accident?"

"No, Miss Travis, I was out near Far End. The Eje have another hospital there, like the one on Pluto." He was anxious to leave the subject now.

But she wasn't. "You can't imagine how mysterious it all seems to people who've never been off Earth. Forgive me, but there's one question I have to ask. Are you really immortal?"

He sighed. "No, Miss Travis, I'm sure we're not. That's the thing that seems to worry Normals the most. Our bodies do regenerate themselves very well." He held out his left hand, palm down. "That thumb was mangled badly not long ago. You can't even find a scar now. But the oldest subbs say they feel they're aging. The oldest I've ever met — he was a surgeon in the hospital, out at Far End — is a little over eighty, I mean since his brain transplant. He definitely looks older. My own guess is we might live two hundred years. But not forever. And a bad accident kills us, like anyone else." He hurried to change the subject. "Miss Travis, what was the name of the ship that brought you out from Earth?"

"Why, it was called *Cetus*."

He felt eager to get back to Nat Glover now. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"I . . . don't remember anything. But do you mind if I ask you one more thing? Not about — "

"Go ahead, Miss Travis."

"What's Kime's father like? I'd heard of him, even on Earth. He's supposed to be very rich and powerful and very mysterious. Kime's never seen him, you know, and he doesn't . . . ."

After a moment he prompted slowly, "He doesn't approve of his father, you mean."

"Well — Kime's mother was deserted, it seems, and the letters weren't very — very personal. Cold and disinterested, Kime said. And there

was the matter of allowing people to be bought and sold, here on Lenare."

Ralse said, "Miss Travis, Bukanan Enterprises only owns a fraction of Lenare, not including Irontown. As on many Freehold worlds, there's no planet-wide law. Most of the owners here have reasons to keep Lenare backward. Kime's father spends most of his time farther out on the Beam; that's probably why he seems mysterious. As you said, space is big. Miss Travis, can you tell me where you transferred from *Cetus* to Pank Sunner's ship? Opposite here?"

"Why, no. We had to go back into the Beam again, to get opposite here."

He stared at her. "How far — how long was it, from the transfer until you left the Beam opposite Lenare? Did you keep track?"

"Yes, I did. About sixty hours."

"And was the transfer between here and Sol? Or farther out?"

"Why . . . I don't know. I assumed it was nearer Sol."

He asked, his slow voice a little shaky, "Do you know how long the trip was, from the time you entered the Beam near Sol, to the transfer? Did *Cetus* leave the Beam anywhere else?"

She glanced at his hands, which, he realized, were clenched. "No. We were in the Beam for over four hundred hours, then left it, and Captain Sunner's ship was waiting. Is it important?"

"It might be," he said. "I appreciate your talking to me, Miss Travis. *I'd better let you go now.*"

She put out a hand to restrain him, drew it back a little too fast. "Mr. White — all these questions. Have they something to do with Kime? Do you think he's in trouble?"

Glad again of his face and voice, he lied, "I'm just trying to get a hint of where Pank Sunner's gem mine might be. There are any number of things that may have delayed them. I wouldn't be surprised, Miss Travis, if he showed up tomorrow, with a trunk full of rubies."

III

Nat Glover put down the telephone and looked up as Ralse came in. "Learn anything?"

"Yes. I learned that Kime knows a good woman when he sees one. I also learned that Sunner has been dealing with a ship called *Cetus*."

Glover frowned over that. "*Cetus?* I thought she was legitimate. We've had freight for her, and from her, but I've never seen her."

Ralse said, "I knew she wasn't strictly legit. She makes the run clear to Far End, dropping out of the Beam along the way to meet local shipping, but seldom makes planetfall. She's an old ship, originally built just for the passenger run, when that was expected to be a paying proposition. Later, she was rebuilt to carry mostly freight, with only a hundred or so passengers. She's cautious. But she hauls 'Indentures,' among other things."

Glover blinked and sat up straighter. "And she brought the girl out from Earth? Ralse, I'm slipping! I should have learned that!"

Ralse said, "You didn't know Sunner or his habits. What we've got to do now is find *Cetus*. If we can find out where she meets Sunner — there'll be more than one place — we might get a hint of where his hideout is. We'll hardly be lucky enough to stumble right onto it, but if we can build up a picture of Sunner's movements and make a statistical analysis — "

He walked to a large wall-chart, showing, one above another, sections of the Beam; tapped a brown forefinger on one line. "*Cetus* met Sunner sixty hours out from us. Then he made the run back here to peddle the Indentures he'd bought. It must have been pure luck, his running into Kime." He stood thinking. "He's stayed clear of us, up until now, and he's no fool. He must want cash badly."

Glover said, "He's after a lot. Ten thousand millicreds."

Ralse grunted. "Plenty! Still, he must know careful he'll have to be, with us. How does he propose collecting?"

"He'll specify that later. I'm to get the word to you and gather negotiable metal here."

Ralse turned to the chart. "Sixty hours . . . seven or eight hundred light-years . . . ."

Glover squinted at the chart. "*Cetus* will be halfway to Far End by now."

"No," Ralse said. "She usually has cargo and passengers for Antietam Station."

Glover frowned. "Wouldn't she stop there first? Oh! I see! She'd unload anything illicit — like Indentures — then turn around and go back to the Station. Sixty hours . . . plus a hundred twenty from here back in . . . we might not be too far behind, if she did that. I've chartered fourteen of these ships that are here, and two more are coming from Irontown. Shall I start them out along the Beam, making inquiries?"

"No. *Cetus* is only one lead. I want you to concentrate on the stretch from here back to Antietam Station, and for only a hundred hours out toward Far End. I'll be going out to the Drowned Cluster, and I'll put a whole fleet out along the rest of the Beam. Keep picket ships at our own stops along the Beam, so I can get word without running clear back here."

Glover said unhappily, "With you clear out there — "

Ralse turned to face him. "This search will cost more than you can muster at this end. Then there's the ransom. We'll have to be ready to pay that. Right? So you'll need coin metal."

"Well, yes. A lot."

"And," Ralse said, "there's no place I can get it in a hurry except at the Cluster. I'll run out there — with one stop — get a fleet started searching, and bring back metal. Probably rhodium."

Glover sighed and nodded. "You're right. What's the one stop you'll make? Or is it any of my business?"

"New Eden. It's not far from where Sunner must have met *Cetus*."

Glover said slowly, "Ernesto Vasquez is no slave trader."

"No. But he's not entirely legit,

either, and I happen to know that he's dealt with Sunner. He and I have done business more than once, and he's obligated to me. Also, he knows I could upset his applecart." Ralse paused. "We've got a certain amount of time, while Sunner thinks you're still trying to get messages to me. Don't let anyone know I've been here. Sunner doesn't know much about me, and I want to keep it that way. He doesn't know I'm a subb, of course." Ralse turned toward the door. "I'll see you, Nat."

Beam Tramp's hour chron showed :2924.

The intercom chimed, announcing that they were out of Lenare's atmosphere and accelerating to the high velocity that would let them shift into FTL. Ralse, alone in Main Control, glanced at the figures scrolling across a computer screen. Leander White was handling the programming with his usual precision, from Aux Control in the other end of the ship, where he had banks of special instruments he'd tinkered up.

Ralse reached out and activated a forward telescreen. An image of the Beam leaped to life. He sat staring at the rainbow slash. From Lenare's distance — eight light-years, nearly a hundred hours' travel by FTL — it was an easily seen ribbon, even without magnification. Men knew, now, that the "rainbow" was only a side-effect, caused by a comparatively tiny spill of energy. (What kind of energy, they *didn't* know). Somehow charged particles were whirled helically around the Beam, spiralling billions of miles out, while something like a Doppler effect made one side look red and the other blue.

He glanced at a radar screen where a blip had been showing for a few minutes. That would be one of Nat's newly acquired ships starting out. Already the blip was fuzzy, as *Tramp's* velocity climbed.

He stood up and began to pace the control room. The long hours from any planet to the Beam were always tedious, but he hadn't felt this angry, rebellious discontent for a long time — not since that half-sane period when he'd first been a subb. Was it just a father's concern for a son he'd never seen? He hadn't thought much about Kime, through the years. There'd been so many things out here — building the Corporation, directing the blind probes into the forbidding dust cloud that hid the Drowned Cluster, setting up the furtive research projects that even Nat Glover didn't know about, the clandestine task — as wary of the Eje as of a baselessly suspicious Earth — of recruiting the right kind of subbs. "Where the subbs go." Bukanan Enterprises, especially in the Cluster, was where a lot of them went.

He half heard the intercom chime, warning of the leap into FTL. He braced himself by habit against the brief lurch as a different kind of artificial gravity took over and stepped to the console to turn off all external viewers. You saw nothing in FTL.

No, there was more bothering him now than worry about Kime. This new thing had been with him ever

since he talked to Annelle Travis. Partly, he supposed, it was a restirring of his guilt about his own dead wife. But there was more. Meeting her, hearing her talk about his son, brought it really home to him for the first time that Kime was a grown man now. And that made a father feel *old.*

A short harsh sound — the subb travesty of a laugh — came unexpectedly from him. *Hell,* he thought, *subbs don't worry about aging. Any Normal will tell you that.*

Only it wasn't true. Many subbs thought intensely, desperately, about eventual death.

He remembered reading somewhere once, when he was too young to understand it, that having a son was the only way a man could achieve a kind of immortality. That, he'd realized now for a long time, was why so many subbs threw themselves fiercely into his Bio projects that were trying to give subbs fertility. Subbs weren't fertile. So, unless a subb already had children he'd never have any. And so, if they weren't scientists or technicians, they'd do anything to help — work in mines, grow food, carry hods to build new laboratories.

It came to Ralse now, in a sort of unastonished surprise, that his own lack of fanaticism toward the Bio projects (even though he'd built them was quite simply explained by his already having a son.

And now that son was in serious danger, if not already dead.

Well, there was no way to hurry *Tramp* along. He snapped and ate and paced and toured the ship, as he always did, and repeated the dreary cycle.

Dead reckoning said they were nearing the Beam. Ralse sat at the console and punched two studs. The figures vanished from Maincomp's screen and were replaced by a mock-up representation of *Tramp's* position. A small green arrow crawled, at a forty-five degree angle, toward the nearer of two parallel lines. Forty-five degrees wasn't quite the optimum for entering the Beam with maximum speed along it, but it was a lot easier to compute exactly. And when travelling in the Beam, you didn't want to overshoot or undershoot your emergence point.

Another chime sounded. He waited, braced in his seat. The arrow suddenly stopped and turned blue. *Tramp* was now out of FTL — which you had to be to enter the Beam. Radar screens and televiewers came to life. There were no radar blips. The viewers showed the Beam itself.

They were far inside the rainbow now, of course. The images on the viewers were of spiralling, luminous lines of force. Because of *Tramp's* motion, they seemed to turn like a barber-pole, even while expanding. The shifting perspective was confusing, as always; Ralse didn't try to follow it. A secondary computer was recording it and analyzing it, anyway.

That was Ralse's real bent — trying to study the Eje technology. It was a frustrating pursuit.

The gaps between the bright bands of force seemed very wide now. There was a dizzying shift as the unknown forces seized *Tramp.* They gulped her

in and realigned her; and then they were inside.

There were no spiral bands now. If they existed from the viewpoint, they were telescoped together so tightly they became one solid luminous tube. He left the external viewers on. Sometimes there were things to see — the ghostly after-image of a Terran ship recently passed this way, or, very rarely, of an oval Eje ship. Several times, in his years of travelling the Beam, Ralse had seen aberrations in the Wall — gaping holes or irregular flickers, with tangled threads of force whipping about. You couldn't see, or photograph, anything through those holes. The stars outside the Beam might as well be in another universe.

They probably were.

Still, *Tramp* was packed with instruments, some of which would have puzzled Earth scientists. He'd never given up hoping the Eje would slip some time, and he'd learn something about them.

He got up to pace again. He'd endured the hundred hours from Lenare to the Beam. Now he'd have to endure the sixty hours along the Beam and the more-than-one-hundred hours from the Beam to New Eden.

IV

New Eden must have been named by someone fresh out from Luna of Mars. Rusty sand drifted across three-fourths the surface. Mountain ranges were old and worn down, the seas shrunken and resigned. Most of the rivers were dry except during rains, and even then all but a few hastily lost themselves in deserts, as if burrowing to escape the swollen red sun. Nevertheless there were polar ice caps, and, around them, temperate zones with a few live rivers and lakes. The only spaceport and the only town of any size were beside one of the lakes. As *Tramp* descended, Ralse saw only two rusty hulls parked on the field. Both of those belonged to the planet's proprietor.

Vasquez, blocky, with a broad face almost as brown as Ralse's, and with short-cropped erect white hair above still-black eyebrows, leaned in the doorway of a low spreading adobe building and watched Ralse approach. He spoke softly. "That is a Bukanan ship, no?"

"You know she is, Ernesto."

The tanned face split in a grin, showing perfect white teeth. "Ralse! Often I envy you your disguise."

Ralse glanced around. "I'd rather have it unpenetrated, this trip. I can use a few provisions, and information. I'll pay well for both."

Vasquez turned and called into the building, "Luis!" A slender dark boy of perhaps twelve, barefooted and nearly nude, appeared from the dark interior. He glanced at Ralse, then at *Beam Tramp*. His father told him, "Tell your mother we are not to be disturbed. Then go to the ship and see what they require."

Vasquez led the way into the building and to a shady central patio lined with flowers, into which windows looked from three sides. Vasquez placed chairs against the windowless side. "How may I help you, friend Ralse?"

Ralse said, "You sometimes do

business with a man named Pank Sunner."

Vasquez blinked once. "Since you know it, I will not bother to deny. Do you have a grudge with him?"

"A possibly deadly one."

Vasquez sighed and stared at a bed of yellow flowers. "He has brought me profit, at times. But you have brought me more. And I do not underestimate the power of Bukanan Enterprises. So . . . Sunner was here twenty days ago. Our days. They are long, you know."

Ralse calculated. Plenty of time for Sunner to have reached the Beam, made a short run to rendezvous with *Cetus*, and gotten to Lenare with his Indentures.

Vasquez was watching him. "Perhaps, Ralse, you will trade me information. You travel much and have many eyes and ears. Someone else was here asking about Sunner."

Ralse waited a moment, then asked, "The Patrol?"

"No, Ralse. I have not seen the Solcon Patrol in a long time. These were others. Peculiar-looking men — two brothers, I think. I did not see the rest of the crew. But what has me worried is that I knew the ship. It was not unlike this one of yours — and it used to belong to Pank Sunner." He watched Ralse for a moment. "Can you tell me what is going on?"

Ralse asked, "What did the men look like?"

"Light of skin, with pale gray eyes. They had very little hair, and it was white as paper. Broad of shoulder, but thin from front to back. Shorter than you or I. English very good, but not quite as you or I would speak it."

Ralse went taut. After a moment he realized he was holding his breath, let it out. "Ernesto — did they make you think of subbs?"

Vasquez's eyes widened for an instant. "They did not at the time. But now — forgive me — there was a certain lack of expression — "

Ralse was on his feet. "Ernesto! I've never seen such subbs — but I've talked to someone who has. Those *were* subbs. But the brains in their skulls were not human. They are Eje, Ernesto. Or something that serves the Eje!"

Vasquez stared for a moment. Then, slowly, he got to his feet, pulled a large bandana from a pocket and wiped his hands on it. Thought raced behind his brown eyes.

Ralse said, even more hoarsely than usual, "What did you tell them? When were they here?"

"I told them I had not seen Sunner for a long time. It was four days after he was here. Now I wish . . . . Ralse, I have more than profit to think about now. If I am frank with you, will you be frank with me? I am beyond my depth."

Ralse said, "I will."

Vasquez led the way indoors and around a corner into the windowless wing of the building. Padlocked doors lined a corridor. Vasquez stopped at one, pulled a ring of keys from beneath his loose white blouse and unlocked the padlock.

The storeroom looked commonplace. Vasquez took an electric lamp from a hook on the wall, turned it on and rehung it. Then he locked the

floor behind them. He began shifting bales of what seemed to be some local fiber bundled in burlap. Ralse helped him.

When the stack of bales was moved. Vasquez pulled aside a reed floormat, exposing a dirt floor. He took a large jackknife from his pocket and began digging at one spot. He uncovered a pull-ring, then began feeling with the knifeblade for the outline of a trapdoor.

Ralse helped pull the trapdoor open. The lamp, when Vasquez brought it to the opening, showed a steep flight of stairs into a subcellar. Ralse followed him down.

There was an assortment of goods: cased electronic gear doubtless looted from some cargo ship, small bombs and missiles of Solcon Patrol models, packets of what seemed to be blank official documents ready for forgery, smaller packages that were probably illicit drugs and various other things Ralse couldn't identify.

Stacked in one corner were six long cases that might hold trombones or rifles. The trader got the top one, laid it on a crate, and began working with thick fingers at buckles and clasps.

The thing inside looked like a bulky rifle. Ralse accepted it from Vasquez, looked it over and hefted it. Too heavy to use on a planet. He turned it over in his hands, examining it. The bore was quite small, with no rifling. The sight was a simple telescopic one, attached with two machine screws atop the massive chamberblock. There was a place under the latter to insert a magazine or clip. Ralse pushed at the cover, which gave but did not open. A wooden grip for the left hand extended under the barrel, half its length.

He lifted the stock to his shoulder. The balance — assuming low or no gravity — was tolerable. But there was something that felt a little odd; some indefinable difficulty in aiming the thing.

Vasquez said, "Sunner told me they were a new secret model the Patrol will have soon. Very powerful. He needed cash for provisions and fuel, but would not sell these weapons. I lent him more money on them than I really thought they might be worth. But now . . . ."

Ralse began looking the thing over more closely. He found screw-heads in strange places — under the tip of the barrel; along the edges of the block; wherever parts were joined. The tenseness in his middle grew. "Do you have a screwdriver?"

Vasquez got out the jackknife again. "This will do?" He unfolded a screwdriver blade.

"I think so." Ralse began removing screws.

A thin lining came out of the barrel. The outer barrel simply screwed out of the block. The stock came off; the block separated into halves. Ralse let the false covering drop to the dirt floor, piece by piece. In minutes he stood holding an alien weapon in shaky hands. He was aware of his host's heavy breathing.

The thing was so flimsy-looking it wouldn't even make a convincing toy — not with Terran construction materials. The "barrel" was a pencil-

thin cagework of spiraling threads, about fifteen inches long. Metal? Plastic? No. This wouldn't bend to the touch! He pressed harder. The hairlike strands were as rigid as girders!

At the tip, under the "muzzle," was a small tab — just big enough to grasp with left thumb and forefinger, with guards to prevent touching the barrel itself. The grip at the butt end was set at a slight angle, like that of an automatic pistol. It was no more than two and half inches wide, flat and thin except for a half-round ridge that ran from its base partway up the left side of it. Gingerly, Ralse closed his hand around it. His thumb rested naturally on a stud at the angled top of the ridge. He turned the bottom up. Something like a large machine screw, with a single slot in its head, screwed up into the grip. That would be the energy-unit. Considering the power the Eje must put into the Beam, this weapon might equal a nuclear bomb.

He saw no trigger except the stud, until he discovered that a welt along the upper half of the forward edge of the grip was hinged and could be swung down and held against the lower part by his second, third and fourth fingers. That left the trigger — a nearly flush bar — easily under his forefinger.

He looked up at Vasquez. "This stud under my thumb, I think, will be a safety or a selector of some kind." He let go carefully of the grip and held the thing out to Vasquez. "Notice the inertia, though the weight's almost nothing. You can't jerk this weapon easily. That would make for a steady aim. It's not metal. Nor any kind of matter I know."

Looking distressed, Vasquez handled the thing gingerly. "What does it do, Ralse Bukanan?"

"I have no idea. But my guess is, it would make a laser beam look like a flashlight by comparison." Ralse was shaky with eagerness. He wanted this weapon. So many long frustrated years, without learning one smidgin of Eje technology . . . . "I'm not inclined to try it here, or anywhere else I can't run fast. They may have some way of detecting it, if it's fired. Maybe that's how they captured one of Sunner's ships!"

Vasquez grinned nervously. "So. To possess these things is a great danger, eh? Already the Eje know Sunner had them, and they look for him. If they find him, they'll learn where he left them. They may be very angry that I lied. Yet there is great fortune here. Earth would pay much, no?"

Ralse said hoarsely, "*I* will pay much. If the Eje come back, you can tell them Sunner pawned six Patrol rifles with you and didn't come back, and you sold them to some tramp freighter."

Vasquez laid the weapon down carefully and wiped his hands again with the bandana. He stooped to pick up a piece of the disguise. "Sunner did this to hide them, eh? I wonder how he got them. And what if he returns? Perhaps neither you nor the Eje will catch him."

Ralse said, "Give him extra money and tell him some story — that the Eje came and demanded the things."

Vasquez grinned. "You are eager to possess them. It becomes, then, a matter of bargaining, eh? There is danger for me in any case. Danger for you also, but you are better able to hide."

Ralse demanded, "How much?"

"A hundred millicreds."

Ralse hardly hesitated. "I can give you a fourth that right now, in Solcon currency. I'll have to give you a note for the rest. All right?"

"A note," Vasquez asked softly, "which, by the time I try to collect it, may bear the signature of a dead man?"

Ralse picked up the weapon, impatiently began putting its disguise back on. "Every subb with business interests has a secret coding, registered with Solcon. Whether I'm alive or not, my note, with the coding electronically implanted, can be cashed on Earth. Or, for that matter, at Antietam Station. I keep an emergency fund there."

Vasquez smiled. "I would be a fool not to accept. I might sell for ten times as much on Earth, eh? But I am not on Earth. And I would not dare, now, to go there suddenly."

V

Tramp, safely in FTL, flashed toward the Beam. Lee White and Ralse sat in the control room with one of the weapons on the console bench before them. The parts of the disguise lay around it.

Lee said, "I guess he made it so bulky to cover up the inertia. But it wouldn't fool anybody who really knew rifles and looked at it close."

"Well," Ralse said, "you're the tinkerer of this crew. Can you shave it down and make it more convincing? All I want it to do is look right, on a rack in the ship's arsenal. I don't expect anyone to be waving it around."

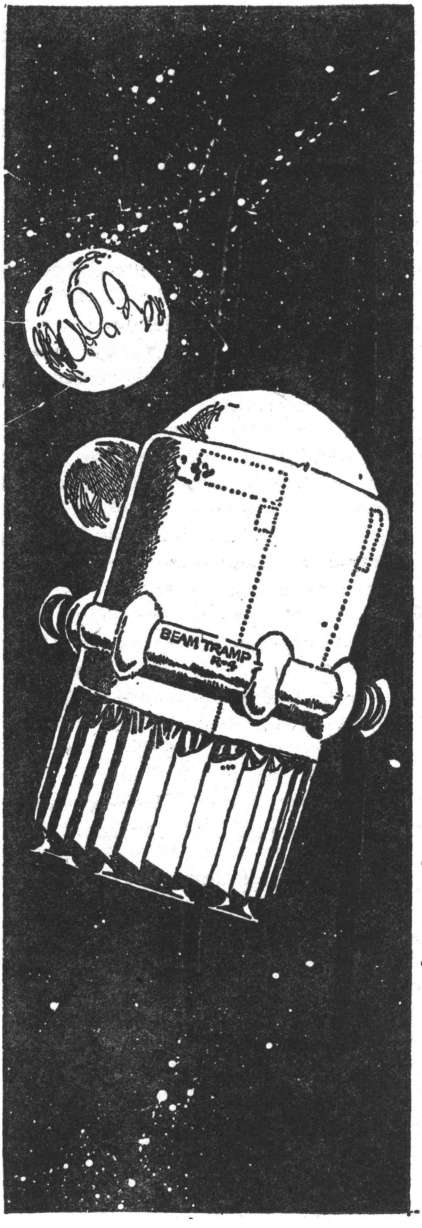
"I can sure do that, Ralse. I'll have it all convincing, with nicks and a little corrosion and everything, by the time we get to the Cluster. All six of them." He began gathering up the parts. "I don't guess we might drop out of the Beam somewhere along the line and test-fire one?"

"Don't think," Ralse said, "that I'm not as itchy as you are. But before we risk getting caught by the Eje, I want three or four of these things safe in the Cloud. Or however safe they'll be, even there. We'll test-fire one on the way back."

Lee left, carrying the weapon carefully. Ralse got up and began pacing the control room. This was going to be a long trip — over a hundred hours to the Beam, three hundred hours out it to a point over nine thousand light-years from Sol, then the ticklish hop to Bodega, in the Cloud. He wondered if he could stand it.

Somehow, he did.

The Beam lay far enough behind so the spiral bands weren't visible at zero magnification. *Tramp* drifted as nearly motionless as her sensors and computers could arrange, while Maincomp chittered away at the job of determining her exact position Ralse followed the figures dancing across the screen. A few billion miles error would mean death.



He glanced at the chron, calculated idly in his head. On Earth, it would be late in November of 2061. Lenare's northern hemisphere would still be in early spring; New Eden's long autumn (which gripped both hemispheres at the same time) would be wearing on. He wondered if Kime were alive on some planet and what the season might be.

He pulled his mind away from that and stared at the view-screen showing the Cloud. He knew those convolutions, those luminosities and umbras, as well as he knew Maincomp's keyboard. He picked out the particular blackness that hid Bodega's modest sun. More than once, he'd regretted choosing that particular star for his headquarters — it was too hard to reach directly from the Beam. But that, of course, was part of its security. No one without very exact co-ordinates could FTL to a star in a dense dust cloud like this. Unless you hit the rarefaction around the star, you'd vaporize from friction before you could decelerate from drop-out speed. With more time, he'd have hopped closer first, now, to one of the other hidden worlds, where precise triangulation was maintained almost to the minute. But he didn't have more time. He activated Comp Two and began feeding in data from various external sensors and from his memory. Figures piled up.

Presently he reached for an intercom switch. "Lee. I check Maincomp within a billion and a half miles. I'm taking us in."

"Sure, Ralse."

Ralse punched studs. A vernier needle on a velocimeter dial began

to crawl around. He watched it idly for a few minutes. Some day, he thought, he'd push his luck too far. Meanwhile, a man did what he felt he must.

He got to his feet and paced. How had Sunner gotten the Eje weapons? There was no way of guessing. But the shrewd pirate must have jumped on a moment's opportunity, as he had with Kime. How did those two things fit together?

If Ralse had it figured right, the weapons must have fallen into Sunner's hands many hundreds of hours ago. He'd tested one, of course. Carefully. But not carefully enough to avoid losing at least one ship to the Eje, who must have appeared on the spot very quickly. Sunner himself had gotten away, but he'd been scared. The Eje simply crewed the captured ship and used it in a search, hoping a common-type freighter wouldn't scare people off. They must have squeezed the tip about New Eden out of a captured crewman who, obviously, didn't know any more than that Sunner sometimes landed there.

And Sunner, being scared with the weapons in his possession — and needing funds badly — had gambled on Vasquez's honor and gullibility. Ralse had been lucky enough to upset that gamble.

He turned and stared at screens. *Tramp* hadn't moved far enough yet to make the Cloud look any different.

It would be worth a lot to know what Sunner had learned about the weapons and about the Eje. Enough to scare him, obviously, and he didn't scare easily. Well, Ralse would probably have to learn it first-hand.

Sunner, with whatever scant funds he'd gotten from Vasquez, must have hurried to keep his rendezvous with *Cetus*, paid for the Indentures (including Annelle Travis) and taken them to Lenare. He'd have turned a little profit there, but not much. So Kime had been a real windfall for him.

And now he wanted a thousand millicreds. A lot of money. With it he could replace his lost ship or ships many times over pay his crews of cutthroats for a long time, buy a new hideout planet if he had to. Or lose himself on Earth or on one of the settled worlds out at Far End.

What did Sunner hope to do with the weapons? Given time and money to work with, he could undoubtedly contact the right buyers on Earth. Officially, the Solar Confederation had no project trying to study Eje technology. But Ralse was sure the nucleus of such a project existed somewhere. In any case, there were corporations that would pay fabulously just for one of those Eje power units, even without the weapons.

Or — Sunner might plan to keep the things and study them himself. He had guts enough, and imagination enough, for that. A thousand millicreds would build labs and pay scientists.

Ralse stared moodily at the hour chron. Time enough had passed, since he'd left New Eden, for a lot of things to happen. Sunner might already have returned there and learned that the weapons were gone. The Eje might have caught Sunner. In

that case — or if they'd returned to New Eden and sweated Vasquez — they'd be on the right track. Eventually, they'd probably know Ralse had the weapons.

He began to pace again, fists shoved deep in his pockets. Never had *Beam Tramp* felt so like a prison.

Dropout was very near. A chime began repeating on the intercom. Ralse, eyes on dials, felt for seatstraps and pulled them around him. A crewman came to buckle into another seat (no one was supposed to be alone during Emergency Quarters). Outside in the corridor, Ralse could hear others hurrying to their posts. A dial showed the countdown. Seven minutes . . . six . . . .

He wondered how swift death would be, if they missed the globe of relatively clear space around Bodega's sun. Certainly, not too swift to recognize. Alarms would scream; the ship would lurch. There'd be time to fight free of the seat and run aimlessly or crouch in terror, waiting for the blaze of heat as the hull forward vaporized.

The needle came straight up. Ralse was aware that the crewman was staring at it as fixedly as he was. A chime sounded. The instant of disorientation came. His heart thumped; his hands gripped the seat until they hurt.

On a viewscreen, a bright diffuse glow appeared. He went limp, let out his breath, turned to meet the crewman's blank subb stare and made a thumbs-up gesture. Then he reached for the intercom to tell the whole crew, 'We're okay; the star's in sight. We're a little short and to one side, so we'll get some heating, but the coolers can handle it. Lee. Will you program us in?"

"Sure, Ralse. And real glad to be doing it."

Now there was the wait as the glow brightened and became more compact and, finally, as *Tramp* emerged from the thinning dust, became the intense tiny disk of a star. It wasn't a large star, nor a particularly bright one — but it had enough gravity and radiation to clear a space around itself.

In half an hour the planets were visible. By that time, *Tramp's* velocity was down to a small fraction of C.

Ralse got on the radio. "Bodega. This is *Beam Tramp*. We'll be down in a few hours. Is Ted Merk on duty?"

He sat waiting for the reply. Minutes passed — too many minutes. He raised his eyes to a bank of dials and reached for the intercom. "Lee? I'm not getting anything in here. Are you?"

"No, Ralse. No radio, no radar scan on us. In fact — " Lee White paused, and Ralse could hear him speaking aside to someone else in Aux Control. Then, "Ralse, there's not one blip on a screen! And nothing on any wavelength! Something's wrong, sure as Satan. Shall I hold up?"

Ralse hesitated, skin prickly. "No. Go on in. Are you sure our gear is working? No heat damage?"

"It's all working, Ralse. I get bounces from the planets."

Bodega swelled in the viewers. Ralse reached for a switch. "Emer-

gency Quarters again! We can't raise anyone, and there are no ships aloft!" He leaned forward to open a panel under the console-bench, drew out a pistol and slipped it in his holster.

Now *Tramp* was slowing, swerving to match orbits with the planet. Seas and continents looked normal beneath the blue sky-scatter. Still nothing on the radio. Lee took them down, switched to gravs and let them settle into atmosphere. On the night side of the planet, cities glowed normally. *Tramp* slid sideways, away from the morning line toward midday, dropped toward a large spaceport in a modern-looking city.

And now the radio came to life — tersely, in a tight low-powered beam aimed at the ship. "*Beam Tramp.* This is Ted Merk. Sorry I couldn't reply. We've had a scare, and we're under radio silence. Did you see anything near the Beam? Do you have any word where Ralse Bukanan is?"

"Ted, this *is* Ralse. We didn't see anything before we went into FTL, but keep the radio silence. Are you at the field?"

"Yes."

Ralse stepped to the ground and stood for a moment staring about the empty field. There should have been dozens of ships and a lot of ground and air traffic.

He recognized the subb approaching him by the slight stiffness of the gait — a mentally induced quirk, not a physical one. "Ted! What happened?"

Ted Merk stopped and ran a hasty eye over *Tramp,* as if half expecting to see battle damage. "The Eje have turned hostile! They grabbed two ships just out of the Beam, without warning. Another got away and made it here to report. Five or six others are overdue from various places." Merk gestured at the empty field. "I scrambled what ships were around, with orders to hide in the cloud for a thousand hours or more, skipper's option of courses. I've sent word throughout the Cluster, but I don't know how many messages got through. So far, no Eje have found us here, but things are at a standstill." Merk shifted his feet nervously. "I didn't know whether I'd gotten word to you or not. I sent ships along the Beam looking, but . . . ."

Dalse realized his own fists were clenched. He forced them to relax. "Ted — you mean you sent everything into the Cloud at *low velocities*?"

"Why, yes. We've often discussed — what's wrong, Ralse? Have I goofed something?"

Ralse stood rigid until he could get his voice working. "You did just what you were supposed to do — get the ships to safety. But I need a lot of ships, fast! There's something — oh, hell. Come aboard, and I'll show you why the Eje are acting up!"

VI

One of the weapons, stripped of its trimmed-down disguise, lay on the console bench. Ted Merk stared at it for a while. "Then they're really after *you.*"

"I don't know," Ralse told him. "They were looking for a man named Pank Sunner, who got six of these

somehow. I happened to stumble across them. The Eje may know by now that I have them, or they may still be looking for Sunner. I'm looking for Sunner too." Ralse hesitated. "Ted, this is the situation. I have a son who came out from Earth not long ago. Sunner happened to meet him on Lenare and got him aboard ship and off-planet, and now Sunner's demanding ransom. I may have to pay it. But even if I do, I expect Sunner to hold my son as a hostage. I've got to hunt Sunner down."

Ted looked at him for a moment. "I never knew you had a son."

"Well, I do. I've never seen him, but he's grown now, and he's come into space and gotten into a jam. This other thing — " He stopped, alerted by something in Ted Mark's manner. "What is it?"

"Ralse . . . you mentioned ransom. I hope you're not expecting coin metal here."

Ralse felt a hollowness in his middle. He forced himself to relax into his seat. "I suppose you're going to tell me you sent it all into the Cloud."

Ted nodded slowly. "Most of it. I didn't want to know where it was. Ralse, I — "

Ralse cut him off with a savage gesture. "Damn it, let's not commiserate! You did what you were supposed to do! Will any of those ships be in radio range?"

Ted made a resigned gesture. "I told each skipper to use his own judgment. It's been several hundred hours. Even if they only moved at five per cent of light-speed . . . ."

Ralse stood up and jammed his fists into his pockets. "Of course. They'd have to come back just as slow. And we don't know what the Eje are doing. They could have probes of some kind all through the Cloud. How much metal do you have?"

"A couple hundred millicreds, in rhodium."

"How long will it take you to get it here? And whatever ships you can spare? You must have kept a few, for messenger service."

"Less than two dozen. I can get them and the metal here in four or five hours."

"Will you get on it right away?"

Ted Merk left. Ralse paced the control room for a while, then, because he had to occupy his hands, went to the bench and put the disguise back on the weapon. He stood holding the thing and trying to get his brain working. What could he do with the six of them now? The Cloud, it seemed, might no longer be safe.

Well, neither was any other place.

By the time Ted Merk got back, Ralse at least had a decision, if not a plan. "Do you have any of the physicists on-planet? A good man?"

Ted thought a moment. "Well, there's Oshima. He's been working with the Bio project, and he's pretty much disillusioned with it. No progress."

"Oshima's fine. Give him a good ship and a crew and a staff, and whatever apparatus he wants. I'll give you four of these weapons. Tell him to take them somewhere — lose himself — and begin studying them. Tell him to be careful. Just firing

one will probably bring the Eje down on him before he can move, if he's in the Cloud."

Ted digested that. "You mean that neither of us is to know where they are. Suppose something happens to him?"

"Then the word will just have to get to us however it can. In a few thousand hours, or less, things may be settled one way or another."

"All right," Merk said. "What are you going to do with the other two?"

"That," Ralse reminded him, "is something else you don't want to know."

Lee White's programming had brought *Tramp* out of FTL close to the Beam. There wasn't much problem hopping *out* of the Cloud, of course. You just accelerated and went into FTL within whatever rarefaction you occupied, and aimed for clear space. If you were in a rarefaction. Otherwise you crawled out, or died of old age trying.

Ralse forced his attention to the viewers. He'd half expected a fleet of Eje ships to be waiting, but evidently they weren't watching this stretch of the Beam just now. Maybe they were satisfied with whatever information they milked out of the captured crews. That, Ralse thought glumly, was one blessing — the subbs they'd seized knew nothing about the missing weapons, nor about Sunner.

The intercom crackled. "Ralse, as long as there's nothing on the screens, are we going to test that weapon before we go into the Beam? Or do you want to go along it a ways?"

Ralse pondered morosely. It really didn't matter how far they went, so long as it wasn't near any traffic or any populated worlds. "Take us about fifty hours toward Sol. You know the kind of place I want."

"Sure, Ralse."

Ralse sat watching the image of the Cloud. In there — crawling wormlike away from Bodega, or possibly about to turn back — were the ships he needed and the coin metal. He could mentally draw a circle upon the screen, representing the sphere which would include them all. It looked like such a small region on the screen — yet they were as unreachable, and as stranded for the moment, as if they'd been at the opposite side of the galaxy. As they began to trickle back to Bodega, Ted would send them along the Beam toward Lenare. Meanwhile, there were just fifteen ships available to make a few wild stabs along the way. He could have used fifteen hundred.

The chime sounded. They were in the Beam. He wished, now, that he'd asked Lee for a shorter trip than fifty hours.

Ralse, suited, walked into an airlock. The inner door scraped shut behind him. He stood holding the Eje weapon carefully, hoping his gloved hands wouldn't be too awkward. A pump began to throb, gulping air from the lock. Gradually his suit filled out and stiffened. Now he could no longer hear via the thinning air. The outer door slid open, and the last of the air went out in a rush he could feel. He stepped forward, braced himself.

The rainbow slash of the Beam, off astern, was fairly broad. One light-year, he'd asked for. The stars he could see were few and distant. Somewhere, far beyond the last faint thread he could see of the foreshortened Beam, was the small cluster called Far End. At six thousand light-years, he couldn't expect to see it.

His earphones came to life. "Nothing on the screens or scopes, Ralse. We're coming up on the target. It'll pass you level, about two hundred yards out. I can make it farther, if you want."

"No," Ralse said. "A weapon like this, without even a sight, can't be intended for long ranges." He leaned out to look forward.

The target — a standard Mark One cargo pod — was a tiny dot ahead, well enough illuminated by light from the Beam. He waited while it grew to a small disk, then showed itself as a cylinder about as long as wide, with a drive-housing flange around its middle. A Mark One — about eight feet across — wouldn't make a very fat target at two hundred yards. "Slow us a little, will you, Lee?"

The relative drift of the pod all but vanished. He could see the circle now, filling almost all the end, that was the hatch. The dot in the middle was a tiny glass porthole. He tried his thumb and forefinger against stud and trigger and brought the weapon up to sight along the spiderwork barrel. A hell of a poor weapon, unless it fanned out. Carefully, he pressed the stud under his thumb.

A glow appeared atop the barrel. He flinched. Then he saw that, somehow, the glow formed a ringsight! He relaxed his thumb, and the glow vanished; he pressed, and it reappeared. A ghost-image in empty space! He shifted his head, peered through the apparition. He saw the cargo pod, magnified about four times. He hesitated. It still didn't seem to him the weapon would be dangerous to use at two hundred yards. "Well, okay," he muttered, and centered the crosshairs on the pod. The weapon's odd ineritea helped hold the aim.

Slowly, he squeezed the trigger.

Instantly the pod glowed faintly rosy all over and vanished.

He jerked up his head, thinking he'd simply lost his aim. But the pod was gone! "Lee! Did you — "

"I saw it, Ralse! It just disappeared! We've got movies, but — " There was confused talk in Aux Control. "Ralse, are you completely clear of the door?"

"Huh? Oh — yes!" Ralse moved back as the outer door slammed shut. The inner door opened a crack, and air shot in.

Crewmen waited to help him unsuit. When he was free, he thrust the weapon at a crewman. "Get the disguise back on that, will you?" He ran for Aux Control. "Did the pod leave any track? Is it on radar now?"

Lee looked at him with a subb's lifeless face. "It just went off everything, Ralse. No squiggle on any of the instruments, like there was an explosion. It's just — gone."

Ralse said, "Pipe it all into Main Control, will you?" And he turned abruptly.

In Main Control, a crewman came once more to join him. They strapped in. He felt odd about the thing — not surprised and not really exhilarated. Just a little prickly, wondering how soon the Eje would appear. He was sure they would. He glanced at a dial. They'd have to hurry to catch him. Lee was pushing *Tramp* toward shift-speed, at a good angle relative to the Beam.

Suddenly Ralse reached for the intercom switch. "Lee, I'm altering program. A hunch." He jabbed at Maincomp's keyboard. The image of the Beam slid sideways across the screen. Stars wheeled. The intercom chimed warning to the crew. There were lurchings, as the artificial gravity strove to match *Tramp's* lateral surge.

Now she was headed away from the Beam at a sharp angle. "I'm going to stutter in and out of FTL a few times and change direction each time and hit the Beam somewhere else." He sat for a while, watching screens.

When a little group of blips appeared on a televiewer, he called out, "Lee, get a telescope and camera on that!"

"Got it, Ralse. Let me turn up mag . . . . They're oval, all right! Eje ships! God, they came out almost exactly where you fired that thing! Took them about two minutes!"

Ralse said, "Are we getting any radar scan?"

"Not yet. They won't need it, though — we're still lit enough by the Beam. They've seen us too, by now."

Ralse said, "Run an analysis and see what velocity they came out with."

Lee muttered. A moment later he reported slowly, "They came out with *no* velocity. Out of what, God knows. But they've got it all over us for maneuvering, that's sure. Huh! And now four of them are gone. I'm betting they intercept us!"

Ralse's spine crawled. But he said, "I'm not so sure. I expect, instead, that those four hopped to the Beam about where we'd try to enter, two in either direction. A wild effort to head us off. I think we've seen one of their limitations. Why did they all materialize at the exact spot? Why didn't some of them come out between there and the Beam? That would be the optimum chance to make an interception."

After a minute Lee said, "I see what you mean. What way do you figure it?"

"I think," Ralse said, "that they could see just where the weapon was fired — but they didn't know where that was *relative to the Beam.* In other words, they're forced to emerge at the spot, then look around and orient themselves."

Lee said, "All right, I'll believe that if they don't intercept us. If they do, you'd better come up with some real good theories. And you better do it fast!"

But the speed needle was nearing its mark — light-speed divided by the square root of two. The minutes crawled by, and the chime sounded. Lee's voice came over the intercom suddenly. "I guess your hunch was right."

VII

The Beam, which had been tedious as usual, was falling away slowly behind. Lenare's sun glittered distantly. Ralse, on the edge of his seat, watched a tight trio of radar blips. He'd had them for half a minute — which meant there'd been more than enough time for his identifying radio call to be heard and answered.

Suddenly the receiver crackled. "*Beam Tramp,* this is *Kestrel.* Nat Glover speaking. I want to board you."

Ralse stared at the speaker-grill. What had brought Nat Glover out here, almost to the Beam? "*Kestrel,* we're accelerating to meet you." He said for the intercom, "Got that, Lee?"

"Sure, Ralse. We're moving."

It took long minutes for the ships to draw together and decelerate. Ralse — still guarding his identity — did no more talking until he felt the locks couple. Then he went to meet Nat Glover.

The lanky man ducked his head through the inner door and stood for a moment looking from subb to subb, until he could pick out Ralse. His face was unsmiling, and he didn't offer a hand.

What now, Ralse thought. "Thanks for being out here, Nat. Let's go to the Control Room."

He got Glover seated, made sure the intercom was off and studied Glover's face for a minute. "What is it, Nat?"

Nat blurted out, "Did you kill Ernesto Vasquez?"

Ralse stiffened. He stared silently while his thoughts floundered and finally organized themselves, then he reached for the intercom switch. "Lee. Will you bring in one of those gadgets? And a screwdriver?"

Glover, face grim, sat motionless until Lee White arrived. Ralse told Lee, "I'm leaving the intercom to Aux Control open so you can listen while you watch your instruments. But chase everybody else out, okay?"

Lee looked at him, at Glover, then nodded and left. Ralse picked up the screwdriver and began removing the weapon's disguise once again. When it was exposed, he held the thing in front of Glover. "What does this look like to you?"

Glover, face pale, looked from the weapon to Ralse and back. He said quietly, "Eje."

Ralse told him, "Ernesto had six of these — disguised — that Sunner pawned with him. He already had reason to be worried, and when I found how to take the disguises off and he saw what they were, he was ready to sell them to me. So maybe I'm responsible if he's dead. It's the first I know about it. Sunner may have done it. Or the Eje may have. If they did, they're probably after me now." He held up a restraining hand as Nat started to say something. "Let me finish." He described the visit to New Eden of the peculiar strangers. "I'm guessing the same bunch may have gone back. But I swear to you, Nat, that I didn't kill Vasquez. Now give me what details you have."

Glover sighed. "I'm glad as hell you didn't. I don't know many de-

tails. Some small freighter landed, killed him and looted his place. The buildings were dynamited. There weren't any nearby witnesses left alive, but from the description the ship could have been this one. I owe you an apology, Ralse — but I could imagine all sorts of things. Ernesto apparently died shooting."

Ralse demanded, "Do you believe me now?"

Glover moistened his lips. "I have to. Because the same peculiar people came to Lenare, asking about Sunner. I thought they were just two brothers with poker-faces, but now I see . . . ." Glover stared at the floor for a moment. "They weren't hostile toward me. Do you think they killed Vasquez?"

Ralse said, "We have to consider it, don't we?"

Glover nodded slowly. "Yes. Especially since I've had another message from Sunner, and he doesn't seem to have anything new on his mind." Glover probed in a pocket and brought out four slender message-bars. "They're not scrambled, but they have to be used together. They came in four insured packets, separately, at different times. Play this one first."

Ralse slipped the bar into a slot in the console. There was an alerting click from the speaker-grill, then a pause during the time when, ordinarily, the date and origin of the message would be given. Then a medium-pitched, cultured voice said, "I assume that by the time Nat Glover receives this, Ralse Bukanan will either be present or will have authorized the transaction previously mentioned. I hope I'm not wrong in this assumption, for if I am I must consider the transaction impossible.

"Payment is to be put in a Mark One cargo pod set upon a specified course at a certain time and place, at a precise speed. The pod is to be equipped with a radio beacon of specified wavelength and wattage, transmitting a one-second pulse once per minute. The ship releasing the pod must leave via the Beam immediately.

"Obviously any boobytraps or other nonsense such as spies or attempts at ambush along the route will end the transaction.

"If these terms are sincerely met, delivery of the goods we hold will be made within a reasonable time. I guarantee goods to be in prime condition.

"Three other message-pods are being sent separately. When played in exact synchronization, they'll give the specifications here mentioned."

There was a brief high-pitched sound as Comp Two scanned the rest of the bar to make sure there was no more message, then the bar popped halfway out of the slot. Glover handed Ralse the other three bars. Ralse pushed each into a slot, then turned to the keyboard and punched studs to put Comp Two on the task of synchronizing the messages. He paused, punched another stud. "Lee, I'm piping this all to you for recording and analysis. See if you can figure out what apparatus Sunner used, will you? And anything else you can."

"Sure, Ralse."

The combined message started. "Go precisely twenty light-years out the Beam from Lenare, and move one-half light-year from the edge of the Beam, on the same vector as Lenare. For closer position, here are star triangulations." There followed a mass of data. Then, "Near that position will be a radio-buoy of the given wavelength. That is to be the starting-point."

The conditions went on, in Sunner's smooth voice. At the end, Ralse pushed studs to re-run the whole thing, trying to get it in his mind. At the end he said to the intercom, "Does it sound practical to you, Lee?"

"It sure does, and foolproof too. They can drop out of FTL anywhere along the pod's course, grab it and run."

Glover said, "All the same, an ambush *could* be set up. We could have ships popping out all along the way too."

"For what?" Ralse said irritably. "To throw a missile or an energy-beam at some flunky? Sunner won't be there. He'll let *us* worry about whether the payment gets to *him* safely." He looked at the chron. "We still have four hundred hours. Not much, but if we can get some breaks for a change . . . . What have you heard about *Cetus?*

Nat said, "That's a funny thing. She did put into Antietam Station. But it was later than we figured."

"When?"

Glover named a time. Ralse calculated. "It's about right if she made another stop or two somewhere. Is there any word since then?"

"No, but one of my ships may have found some, and not be back yet."

Ralse stood up and jammed his fists into his pockets. "I doubt it. *Cetus* would almost certainly be headed straight out from Antietam Station, if she'd already made her other stops near there. She'd be beyond your stretch by now. And that brings us to some bad news. There's been an Eje scare out near the Cloud, and I could only get a few ships. And only a fraction of the coin metal I expected. I guess that leaves you in a jam."

Glover made a face. "Bankrupt, if we don't do something fast. But that's not the thing — how about Kime? Do you have the ransom?"

"No. And if I did I wouldn't expect Sunner to let Kime go, once he got the money."

Glover stared at him. "What are we going to do, then?"

"That's the prize question, Nat. I've been wondering whether I could trade these weapons back to Sunner for Kime. Under our terms. Or whether I have the right to do that."

Glover's face slowly turned red, "If I understand you, you mean you might sacrifice your own son. Before I'd do that, I'd call the Eje and make a deal with *them.* Tell them all we know about Sunner and offer to return their weapons if they help us find him."

Ralse's feelings boiled over. He grabbed up the Eje weapon, thrust it into Glover's hands. Words piled up like a log-jam behind his labored voice. "Here. I hid four in the Cloud,

because I thought they'd be safest there. I was going to give you one to smuggle to Earth, however you could — for Mankind's scientists. Now, *you* decide! You've admitted the Eje may have killed Vasquez. They've just recently grabbed ships along the Beam, and we don't know what happened to the crews. Here's an Eje artifact — one of the first any human has ever touched, unless you count these damned brown bodies like I'm wearing. Go on. Suit up, go outside and fire the weapon; that'll bring the Eje fast. Then you can tell them how you trust them, and will they please be kind to your own race and will they help you get Ralse Bukanan's son back? Go on!"

Glover stared at Ralse, then down at the weapon. Slowly, he laid the weapon down. "I'm sorry, Ralse. I was wrong. We don't have the right to gamble Mankind, do we?" He was silent a while. "What are we going to do about Kime? What are we going to do?"

Ralse turned to stare at the chron. "I don't know. I want you to extend your search out along the Beam. *Cetus* may still be whatever faint chance we've got. As for money — I'll make a try at Antietam Station. I gave Vasquez a note against my fund there. If he didn't cash it, there'll be enough to keep you operating for a little while. Ernesto won't miss it now."

Tramp, already outside the Beam, sped parallel to it toward Antietam Station at one-tenth light speed. The voice on the beacon said, "Hours 4698, minutes twelve, seconds zero. Mark!" Ralse glanced at the chron. Just more than a minute fast, allowing twenty-eight seconds for the beacon's transmission to reach them. He He made no correction. His feelings toward Antietam Station were a little rebellious.

A chime announced deceleration. Lee White's voice said, "I'm sorry I brought us out short, Ralse."

Ralse, annoyed, said, "You did fine." This was no time for irony. Emergence only an hour's run from an exact point was more than good — it was almost reckless. He turned on a forward viewer. A telescope easily picked up the cluster of ships and larger structures that was the Solcon advanced base just short of the Sparse Regions. Some of those ships, though he couldn't pick them out yet, would be heavily armed scouts or cruisers of the Patrol. Others would be freighters from various Earth-controlled worlds closer in toward Sol, or from Freehold worlds scattered among them. Bukanan Enterprises had to deal there, no matter how Ralse felt. The vast collection of space warehouses, business offices, banks and such was the only place you could pop out of the Beam and do any significant amount of business without making the long run to some planet. Antietam itself — the planet — was over three hundred hours FTL from the Beam, and not important except to support the Station and serve as transfer point to a number of other worlds.

A challenge came in: "Ship approaching from Outward. Identify yourself."

Ralse sighed and reached for a

transmitting-switch. "This is *Beam Tramp*, a Bukanan Enterprises ship. We have financial transactions to handle. No cargo. No fixed armament. We don't intend to run out to Antietam."

The voice, when it came again, was colder. That, of course, was because the Traffic Controller knew he was talking to a subb. "*Beam Tramp*, continue present course, then follow blinker to parking spot. Stay there and don't initiate your business until you're boarded for inspection."

Ralse controlled the anger that stirred in him. "Can you ask them to make it quick? We're pressed for time."

The voice said impersonally, "I'll pass that fact along. Ends."

Ralse looked at the chron. There wasn't much time to spare, if he were to meet Sunner's schedule. He leaned forward in his seat, peering at the images of ships. He could pick out types now, but nothing that looked like long, wide-flanged *Cetus*. It would probably be useless anyway to find *Cetus* now — so far as the immediate situation was concerned. He'd have to make what payment he could to Sunner, hoping to temporize. Sunner's demand was pre-emptory, but a good fraction of the ransom and a promise of the rest might keep Kime alive. Certainly, Sunner would be suspicious — but he'd be that in any case, and he was too intelligent to do anything drastic and irreversible without thinking about it.

A point of intense light began blinking. Ralse thumbed the intercom. "Got that, Lee?"

"Sure. Shall I head straight for it?"

"Yes. It'll be a small Patrol craft. Pull close in case it wants to couple on right away."

Tramp slowed and stopped near a small cruiser. Ralse waited, the tenseness in his middle getting worse by the minute. He had no reason to fear inspection, except for the two disguised Eje weapons, but why an inspection at all? Inspections weren't unheard-of, when some contraband was being hunted, but they were rare. Had the Eje — conceivably — demanded that the Patrol help them in their search? Not likely. But why in the hell didn't they hurry?

VIII

It seemed forever, yet it was less than half an hour before a shuttleboat approached. The radio said, "Request permission to couple on."

Ralse reached jerkily for the transmitter switch. "Number Three Lock. We'll flash a green light."

He listened to the sounds of the coupling, started to meet them, stopped. Let them come to him. In a few minutes he heard an impatient Normal's voice. The Control Room door opened. One of Ralse's crew said, "Skipper, this is Lieutenant Fromm."

The lieutenant was about thirty; medium height, husky, a little overfed. He wore a pistol, and so did each of the two guardsmen with him. The white uniforms were mussed, as if their wearers were having a busy day. Fromm's face was a little less than friendly. "May I have your name, Captain?"

Ralse hesitated. He certainly didn't want to antagonize the Patrol if he could help it; still . . . . "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I'll give you an identification coding. I'm a Freeholder, with a confidential listing."

The officer didn't like it, but he said, "That's your right. Let's have the code." He turned slightly so the recorder-pickup in his left lapel aimed straight at Ralse.

When Ralse had recited the code-number, Formm glanced at Maincomp's screen. "I'd like a replay of your log for the last two thousand hours, Captain Confidential." One of the guardsmen chuckled and muttered, "Captain Johnny Subb."

Wordlessly, Ralse bent over the keyboard and punched studs. Times and places began rolling across the screen. Fromm read them off quietly, mouth near his recorder button. He stumbled a little over New Eden, glancing at Ralse in a startled way. When the log was up to the present, he said, "Let's see that New Eden visit again."

Ralse, glad of his subb face, played it over. Fromm asked, "Can you substantiate those other planet-falls?"

"Certainly," Ralse said. The fingers of anxiety jabbed at his midriff. Ordinarily, when he went to Bodega, there'd be a falsified record on some open planet, showing a visit. This time, it hadn't been possible to arrange that. If they checked . . . .

But Lieutenant Fromm was interested in New Eden. "Do you know Ernesto Vasquez, Captain?"

Ralse tried to act calm. "I knew him through trade, and freighting transactions."

Fromm raised his eyebrows. *"Knew?"*

"Lieutenant, I learned less than a hundred hours ago that Vasquez had been murdered. I can't tell you anything helpful about that. He was alive and well when I saw him."

"What was your business there?"

Ralse thought frantically. "He'd had Bukanan Enterprises handling goods on consignment — some kind of natural fiber, I think, with special properties — and we sold a bunch of it. I went to pay him."

"We're an all-subb crew, Lieutenant. The extra time doesn't mean much to us."

The officer grunted. "All right. Do you know where your boss is?"

"My boss? Mostly I work for a Mr. Glover on Lenare."

"I mean Ralse Bukanan."

"Oh. No, sir. I don't think Mr. Bukanan's near this end of the Beam."

Fromm looked satisfied with that. "The C. O. here would like to find him. I suppose they're questioning everyone who did business with Vasquez. Now, I'll have to search your ship."

"Certainly." Ralse let the lieutenant precede him from the room. The two guardsmen followed behind Ralse.

Tense as a cat, he led the trio through the ship. He had to fight the urge to try to bypass the arsenal. When he showed it to them, Fromm remarked, "You carry quite a few weapons."

Ralse said, "Sometimes we make planetfall in pretty rough places. And sometimes we hunt our own meat."

The lieutenant turned away without touching any of the racked guns. Ralse let out his breath and unclenched his fists.

Later, he didn't dare protest when the officer said, "You're clear. But I'm afraid we'll have to ask you to wait a while longer and maintain radio silence. You're the first skipper we've found who saw Vasquez recently. The C. O. may want to ask a few more questions."

Ralse furiously paced Aux Control. Lee White slumped in a seat, watching him. "Ralse, we've got almost two hours to spare."

"Two hours!" Ralse whirled toward Lee. "If I know the Patrol, it'll be more like ten! Anyway, that's not the worst of it. We're stalled on everything else. I can't make inquiries about *Cetus* — what she loaded or dropped, and so on — and I can't radio the bank and get money." He turned to stare glumly at a viewscreen. "What would you say our chances are of making a run for it? We could use some of these parked ships for cover."

White peered at him, then gestured at the screen. "With that cruiser standing off there? We'd have to move clear of the other ships to head toward the Beam. We'd get a hole melted in us before we could move a mile! Anyway, Ralse, what's the use of keeping that appointment without the money?"

"I don't know. But I've got to keep it! I'm going to Main Control and radio the C. O. If he wants to talk to me, he can talk now!"

It took half an hour to get as high as the C. O.'s adjutant, a Colonel Paige. He wasn't happy with Ralse's demand. "General Nalty isn't on duty. You can't expect him to sit at his desk around the clock, to answer every complaint that comes in."

Ralse said, "Are *you* on duty?"

"Yes."

"Well, then *you* can talk to me. I've been inspected and found clear, but told to wait for more questioning. I've got urgent business to handle. What are the questions? Ask them, and get it over with!"

An exasperated grunt came over the radio. "I haven't the damnedest idea what's involved. Who did you say you are, again?"

"I'm skipper of *Beam Tramp*. We're a Bukanan Enterprises ship. We landed on New Eden some time before the planet's Freeholder, Ernesto Vasquez, was murdered, and I talked with him. That's what the questions are about."

There was an "Oh," of surprise, and a pause. Then, "Let me get the file. It's on the general's desk." A wait. "Hello. I see there's a very new entry here, marked 'Confidential' I can't discuss that via radio without your permission. Do I have it?"

Ralse hesitated. Anyone listening might be curious enough to probe. "On two conditions: that we scramble and that you accept the responsibility personally of the confidential knowledge."

Ralse could hear the other swearing under his breath. Finally, "I'll call the general. He'll radio you within twenty minutes."

Ralse, feeling savage, sat staring at the chron.

But General Nalty was prompt. His voice was quiet, older than the adjutant's. "*Beam Tramp*? General Nalty calling."

"General, I'm sorry to make such a fuss. By now, I guess you've talked to your adjutant. In the file on your desk, there's a confidential identity coding. I suggest we use it as a key to set up a radio scramble."

"All right," the general said easily, "but if it's agreeable, let's make it video as well."

"Surely," Ralse said. Looking at him wasn't going to help the general any.

There was a short wait, while the Patrol's computers were linked in, then the scrambled circuit came through. General Nalty was a rather slight man; sixty at least, his scalp and face clean-shaven. He wore casual off-duty zipperalls. His sharp dark eyes peered from the screen at Ralse. "I've just looked up that confidential identity. I'm very much surprised, Mr. Bukanan. You've kept your secret well."

Ralse sighed. There were some people who had to know. "It's been necessary. General, there are things I have to do in a hurry. I'm sorry to be demanding about it, but if you want to talk about Ernesto Vasquez can we get on with it?"

Nalty smiled. "I'd have been on the air the minute you arrived, if I'd known. Mr. Bukanan, when you talked to him did he give you any hint that he feared for his life?"

Something in the general's sharp scrutiny warned Ralse he'd better stay as near the truth as he dared. "Well . . . I'd have to say he was nervous about something. I'd known him quite a while."

"And he knew who you were?"

Ralse hesitated. "Yes."

"I'm forced to be curious, Mr. Bukanan, as to why you paid him such an amount of money."

Ralse stared at the screen. All he could think of was, "What amount of money?"

Nalty smiled again. "The personal note you gave him. His wife cashed it here. She and their son arrived so promptly that I'm sure he must have sent them off-planet almost immediately after you left."

Ralse slumped back into his chair. Finally — with sincerity — he managed, "I'm glad they're safe. I hadn't heard."

Nalty said, "If you're reluctant to talk because you fear you're a suspect, let me put you at ease. In the first place, we naturally know a great deal about your corporation and its dealings. Murder, and the re-taking of a personal note, don't fit the pattern. Secondly, Mrs. Vasquez and the boy are able to tell us a little. We can pinpoint *Beam Tramp's* visit, at a time when they were practically alone. You could have used force on him then, if you'd wanted to. You left peacefully. Thirdly, they've told us Vasquez had shady dealings with other people." The general paused to watch Ralse, then resumed. "It's obvious from the use of dynamite that whoever killed him was looking for something. Sit in my chair for a minute, Mr. Bukanan. It will save me the trouble of asking a lot of questions."

Ralse sat silent for a while, mind churning. If the general only knew — if Ralse were to say bluntly, "I have strong reasons for suspecting the Eje may have killed Vasquez, and if you'll come aboard I'll show you," — what a volcano of activity would erupt at Antietam Station! But he couldn't do anything like that. He couldn't even name Sunner, if he wanted Kime to live. He pulled himself erect in his seat.

"General, a man — an outlaw — has something that's extremely important to me. I've been trying to find him. That's why I went to New Eden, and that's connected with the payment to Vasquez, and that's why I have to leave here now. If I could tell you anything, I would, but right now it would sink me. What's the Patrol's interest in this, anyway?"

Nalty said quietly, "Why, if Vasquez was handling contraband, most of it was undoubtedly from Solcon worlds. For that matter, we've had stuff pirated from the Patrol itself. And Mrs. Vasquez has asked us for protection."

Ralse darted a frantic look at the chron. "General, my crisis comes up in a few hours. You know who I am — you can hold that over me. I give you my word that as soon as things break, if I'm still alive, I'll name at least one man Vasquez was dealing with."

Nalty smiled. "And of course that's the man you're after now. Why don't you let me help you? I've handled things discreetly before."

"And some indiscreetly," Ralse said. "I've got to go now. Are you going to try to stop me?"

Nalty said, "I could, you know."

Ralse reached for the switch. "You'd have to shoot. All you would get would be a hull full of dead Johnny Subbs. Good-by, General."

"Good-by, Johnny Subb, and good luck. I hope you make it back to keep that promise."

IX

Tramp was almost ready to emerge from the Beam again. Ralse paced Aux Control, trying desperately to think of some gimmick that would force Sunner to give him more time. "The hell of it is," he told Lee White, "we don't know what Sunner knows by now. If he killed Vasquez, he may or may not think the weapons are still on the planet. He may know *I* have them. If he has spies in the right places, he could know about that personal note of mine."

Lee said, "Why would he want to pawn the things there, then go back after them before he got the ransom from us?"

Ralse stopped and stood, fists jammed into his pockets. "Maybe he got money some place else. Or maybe he's found a hiding place he thinks is secure enough."

"Well," Lee said, "what if he *didn't* kill Vasquez? Somebody did. If he knows about it, he'll be wondering hard."

"Of course," Ralse said. "Unless he knows about that note. Or he may know the Eje are around, and assume they got their property back. I can't begin to guess what he'd do in that case. Go on trying to collect from us, I guess. Hell, he may not even

know Vasquez is dead! How can I work out any kind of a story that will convince him, when I don't know what he knows?"

Lee asked, "What kind of story did you have in mind?"

"I thought I might say the Patrol has all my funds tied up temporarily. Or that the Eje have been following me around. That last, though, might scare him away completely." Ralse threw a glance at the chron. "Damn it!"

Lee said, "It'll take us a while outside, maybe, to find that radio buoy."

Ralse shook his head. "We'll come out close, you know that. He picked a stretch we could compute down to the second."

"One thing," Lee said, "as soon as we launch the pod, we can get to Nat Glover fast. He may have heard something by now. Anyway, with two, three more ships we might make a stab at something."

Ralse stared at him irritably. "The time for all that's gone. What I need right now is some story to convince Sunner I'm not just stalling. If I could have gotten money at Antietam — "

"We've got a little aboard," Lee said.

"Sure." Ralse went to a seat and threw himself into it. "Little enough to look like an insult. It might make him mad enough to chop a finger off Kime and send it to me. I don't want my son back a piece at a time."

"I can see that," Lee said. "What about your other idea? Telling him you've got the weapons and offering to trade them for Kime?"

Ralse said bitterly, "I've got myself crossed up there too. How can I send a message saying I don't have the money he wants, but I do have the weapons he's missing, but I can't get at them for a couple of thousand hours? If you were Sunner how would *you* react?"

Lee White sighed. "The only thing left, then, is just to offer the trade and pretend you've got all six right in your hands. At least, that'll gain a little time."

Ralse shot a look at the chron, and got compulsively to his feet. "Before I'll do that I'll go to Sunner myself and talk. I can take the weapon we've got, to convince him. And depending on where he is and various other things, I can play it by ear."

White stared at him. "I don't get you, Ralse. You mean you'll just put a note in the pod, offering to meet him?"

"I mean," Ralse said hoarsely, "I'll put myself in the pod. We can put in a full atmosphere, and some extra cannisters and a warmer, and some rations. I can wear a suit and only seal up when they come to get the pod. Whoever comes will be expendable, obviously, and therefore not able to make decisions. When I tell them Sunner will wait to see me and he'll be damned mad if they don't take me to him, they'll have to do it!"

Lee White sat up rigidly. "Ralse, you can't think of that! Why, hell — whoever else is, you're not expendable!"

"I'm not? Look at the shape the Corporation's in right now. If I can get Kime back, we'll have to go out

to the Cloud and try to salvage what we can. If I don't make it — well, the pieces will have to shift for themselves. And if the Eje bust things wide open, none of us will matter anyway."

"But Ralse — you couldn't just go and put yourself in his hands!"

Ralse stared at him in speculation. "I've been thinking that I can do just that, Lee. He doesn't know Ralse Bukanan's a subb, remember? And he won't expect any messenger who's important. He'll think I *am* expendable. Just another Johnny Subb with a message to deliver, and no other information worth the squeezing." He turned to the door. "Let's get to work on that pod!"

Ralse sat slumped in the pod. A dim glow-bulb was the only illumination. There was artificial gravity — a twentieth G; a cargo pod needed a little to keep its loads in place. Ralse had it directed so the aft end, as the pod now moved, was "down." His sleeping pad was rolled up so it didn't cover the tiny porthole in that end, but there wasn't much diversion in staring back at the Beam. It might as well have been a painting. At the pod's velocity — a twentieth light-speed — it would be a long time before the Beam receded noticeably.

He reached for a squeezer and took a sip of broth, more out of boredom than because he wanted it. After the first few hours he'd stopped looking out the forward porthole because the few remote stars only reminded him how alone he was. Nevertheless, of course, those two hand-sized portholes were indispensable. Without them his imprisonment would have been unbearable. The other objects in the pod helped a little. Every few hours he unrolled the sleeping pad and lay down on it, just for the change. Now and again he picked up the disguised Eje weapon and fondled it, or re-piled his provisions. Another thing that helped surprisingly was the radio beacon. As it sent out its periodic call, it buzzed faintly. He talked to it sometimes and waited for it to buzz in answer. All in all, he was calm except when he got to wondering if Sunner's men would ever come at all. If not — well, in a thousand hours Lee and *Beam Tramp* were supposed to try to find him. If the course and speed were accurate enough, and if nothing happened to Lee in the meantime, he might be found.

He'd have thought Sunner's move would have been made before now. He'd been in the pod almost fifty hours. There was really no need for the outlaws to wait so long — closer in, the pod would have deviated less, and been easier to find; and their danger was nil anyway. Maybe the Eje had caught Sunner.

He shifted his position. "Damn it, I've been all over that!" He got to his feet, brought his face close to the forward port to peer out. Stars. Brilliant, cold, remote. He sat down on the rolled-up pad and listened to the beacon's buzz.

What was he going to say when they picked him up? That would be the easiest part. What would he say to Sunner, if he ever reached him? The fact was, he hadn't been able to think that through. "Damn it!

I've had plenty of time to think!"

He twisted to pick up a cannister, turned the valve and let oxygen hiss out. The sound seemed very loud. Before long, he'd have to do more than valve oxygen. Already his breathing was a little forced because of the excess carbon dioxide. In the pile of provisions was a small reconditioning pump that would cycle the air through a solution of lime-water. He'd been almost sure, though, he wouldn't have to drift long enough to need that.

What was he going to say to Sunner? Hell; he was never going to get to Sunner.

His lungs ached a little from breathing unnecessarily hard. "Got to do something about this air." He bent forward, began to look for the reconditioning pump — and went rigid.

A dim shifting light gleamed off the edge of the forward porthole. He stared at it for a moment, then reached frantically for the plastic suit's detachable helmet. He fumbled at the sealing-grooves hastily; realized he was being stupid. "Plenty of time!" More calmly, he got the helmet over his head and sealed on. Then he pressed his fingertips on a spot at the waistband. Oxygen hissed from the cannister at the small of his back. He let the pressure build up enough to round out the helmet, then let the valve close. A few breaths of the rich mixture cleared his wits. He stood tensely, looking up while the light grew stronger and shone into the pod so that he had to blink. He could picture a ship, already at nearly matched velocity,

maneuvering to couple end-on. The jar came. He had to take two quick steps to catch his balance. Then he waited, gloved hands clasped atop his helmet in the gesture of surrender. He heard air slam into the ship's lock, then there were clumping sounds, and someone began to work at the fastenings of the hatch on that end of the pod.

They left the hinge-catch on one side attached, and swung the hatch aside. Light spilled into the pod. He stared up at two men — standing at right-angles to him, since their gravity was set that way. They stared back.

One was big and burly, with blond hair, beard and mustache all cropped half an inch long. The other was smaller and wiry, clean-shaven, including his scalp. Both wore zipper-alls, gray and not too clean, and carried old-fashioned revolvers on their hips. It was the wiry one who uttered a sudden oath and grabbed for his gun.

The big one moved fast and knocked the gun aside. "Hold on!" To Ralse he said in a flat voice, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Ralse spoke loudly so his voice would carry through the helmet. "I have messages for Pank Sunner."

The wiry one snarled, "We don't know any Pank Sunner!"

Ralse didn't have to put on any acts. He simply said, "All I know is Ralse Bukanan said whoever picked up this pod would take me to Pank Sunner."

The wiry one swore again. "Any money in that pile of stuff?"

"No," Ralse said.

The big one said, "Let's have the message. I'm Pank Sunner."

Ralse said woodenly, "I've seen Pank Sunner. That was why Mr. Bukanan picked me."

The blond man grinned. "All right, Johnny Subb, maybe you're telling the truth. Climb out of there." He stood back.

Ralse climbed out carefully and got to his feet in the lock. "There's a rifle in there that's supposed to prove something to Mr. Sunner. I don't know what."

The burly spaceman looked at Ralse, then into the pod. "Get it," he said to the other.

Ralse watched tensely while they examined the 'rifle.' It didn't seem to mean anything to them. The big one asked, "Anything else in there you need?"

"No."

The blond man told the other, "Close it up and cut loose and let it drift. It may be bugged some way. I'll take Johnny Subb inside."

After that the time on the pick-up ship was uneventful. She was a type not too different from *Beam Tramp,* manned by fifteen very professional thugs — more than were needed to handle the ship. She had an arsenal in which were locked whatever weapons she carried other than the pistols the crew wore. They treated Ralse in various ways, ranging from tolerant contempt (that from the big blond man, who was skipper and who was called Briney) to surly resentment. He slept alone, locked in a small compartment, and ate alone in the galley, washing

his own dishes. They took his wristwatch, of course, and didn't let him see any chrons. Most of the ship was off limits to him.

Still, he could tell when they shifted in and out of FTL and when they entered and left the Beam. He judged the trip was enough to take them halfway to New Eden, if they were headed outward from Sol. That wasn't much information. He could be off by two hundred light-years, and of course they might be headed any direction away from the Beam once they emerged.

The time came when big Briney told him, "Suit up. We're taking a shuttleboat."

Briney and the wiry man, with one other crewman, escorted him. There were four other ships adrift in lonely space. He didn't get a good look at them until the boat approached one, then he sat staring through the forward porthole.

The ship was the huge *Cetus.*

Of course! Given other ships to run errands, *Cetus* would be a comfortable, ideal hideout! She needn't make planetfall nor even go near the Beam, and she could move about as Sunner thought prudent. And — with some equipment — she'd be a perfectly good lab for studying the Eje weapons!

All Sunner was waiting for, probably, was the ransom money. (And — of course — the weapons). Ralse grinned inwardly. If Sunner didn't know yet that he'd lost them, this visit would be a shock. And if he did know, having one suddenly placed in his hands should jolt him.

The amusement didn't last long. Ralse suddenly realized that *Beam Tramp,* Glover's ships, the few from Bodega — all were on a wild goose chase, looking for *Cetus* and for hints of a planet where Sunner might be hiding out. They weren't going to get any recent word of *Cetus.* Almost certainly, Sunner had pirated her shortly after she left Antietam Station. No doubt he'd had a rendezvous set up with her.

Where did this leave Ralse? A little more on his own. It would be fitting, he thought, if *Cetus* were named instead *Moby Dick.* He'd pawned everything to find her. And now that — unexpectedly — he'd found her himself, he might not survive the encounter.

Suddenly, though, he had the first glimmering of how he might bargain with Sunner.

X

Sunner, Ralse saw, had a clean, orderly, almost luxurious office fixed up for himself aboard *Cetus.* The big desk, with a few books neatly piled atop it, might have belonged to some executive on Earth.

Sunner was neat, too. The even shade of his Latin skin suggested regular use of tan-lotion. He was clean-shaven except for two fore-and-aft strips of short black hair on his head, in what Ralse guessed might be a current Earth fashion. His white zipperalls were immaculate and fit his slight body well. He wore a scarf of soft white material around his throat (hiding, Ralse knew, an ugly knife-scar) secured with a small plain clasp of what might be plati-

num. On the breast pocket of the zipperalls, over his heart, were embroidered the initials P. A. S.

Just now, the manicured hands held the disguised Eje weapon. They handled it deftly, but with a certain greed. Ralse could see in Sunner's face the urge to look inside the disguise, but the pirate controlled it. Slowly he laid the thing on his desk. His dark eyes, fixed on Ralse, were intense. His right hand dipped below the desk, and Ralse presumed it now held a handgun. A needle-pistol — that was supposed to be Sunner's preference. The black eyes flicked toward the guard standing behind Ralse; the neat head inclined just slightly. The guard left and closed the door behind him.

Sunner eyed Ralse thoughtfully. "Where did your boss get this?"

"I don't know." Ralse knew Sunner had recognized the falsework on the weapon, slimmed down as it was. The instant's spasm of the dark face had revealed that.

The dark eyes narrowed with anger. "Don't play coy with me, Johnny Subb. What did Bukanan tell you? What are you supposed to say to me?"

Ralse forced his body to stay relaxed. "There's some gadget inside that rifle that you're supposed to know about. I've seen it but I don't know what it is. Mr. Bukanan's message is this: he has five more, in a place where he can't get at them for two thousand hours. He's willing to give you this one as down payment. When he gets the others back, he'll give you two more. You are to hold his son in the meantime. When you have the three, you're to let his son go. Then Mr. Bukanan will give you a complete partnership in the investigation of the things."

Sunner looked startled, then laughed tightly. "You must have left out something. That sounds as if he thought I were a complete fool."

Ralse said, "He offers a lot. He'll equip you with whatever apparatus you want, so that you won't have to run the risks of acquiring it yourself. He'll give you money to operate on. Then, at regular intervals or whenever you like, one of your ships can meet one of his and exchange information. He doesn't care that you'll be getting the best of the exchange. You can use the weapons or whatever you develop from them in any way you wish so long as you don't bother Bukanan ships or property, and he won't bother you. He says Space is big enough for both of you."

Sunner sat staring at him. Suspicion and greed flickered across the well kept face. "Why," the pirate asked finally, "should I let him have three of the weapons? I have his son. And why does he offer this proposition in the first place? Why didn't he simply pay the ransom and say nothing about the weapons?"

"Because his cash position's tight just now." Ralse hesitated. Maybe he could fish a little. "A man named Vasquez demanded a lot of money that Bukanan Enterprises owed him. The talk is that it took everything we had in the way of coin metal just now."

Sunner's face twitched, then rippled

with thought. "So," he said presently, his voice a little shaky. "That's how it happened." He seemed to be talking to himself, for he looked quickly at Ralse and shut up.

Ralse's pulse leaped. He was almost sure Sunner was thinking about the weapons. And there was a trace of guilt in Sunner's manner. Did that mean *he'd* killed Vasquez? Maybe.

Sunner's face was guarded now. "What if I refuse? I've got money and ways of getting scientific equipment. And I have one of the weapons, now."

Ralse took a breath. Sooner or later he'd have to make the bluff. "Mr. Bukanan has five, and much better facilities. I'm to tell you he wants his son back, but not badly enough to risk bankruptcy. They weren't close, and Mr. Bukanan's angry with him for getting himself into this jam. If you don't agree to the partnership, everything's off. He'll hunt you down and kill you, as a matter of principle. But he won't bargain."

Sunner's eyes were deadly. "Did he think I'd bargain with *you*?"

"I have no authority to bargain, Mr. Sunner. I'm to deliver the message and do one other chore and report back. That's all."

"Oh?" Sunner looked at him for a moment. "What was the other chore?"

"You're to show me Kime Bukanan. I saw him on Lenare, so I'll recognize him. If I don't return and report that Kime's all right, Mr. Bukanan will assume he's dead."

Sunner snarled; half raised the hand holding the gun. Then he asked, voice full of fury, "How are you supposed to get back?"

Ralse tried to sound humble and unimportant. "He assumed you'd deliver me back to Lenare or some Bukanan holding near it."

There was a minute when Ralse thought Sunner's rage would get the upper hand. Then, abruptly, the pirate had control of it. He smiled. "Was Bukanan on Lenare?"

"No, sir. He talked to me out at the Beam."

Slowly, Sunner got to his feet. Without taking his eyes off Ralse for more than a moment at a time, he picked up the weapon, walked to what looked like a spacesuit cabinet, thrust the weapon in, took a key from inside the cabinet, locked that and slipped the key in his pocket. Then he came to sit down at his desk again, and leaned toward an intercom grill. "Briney."

"Yes, sir," came from the intercom.

"Bring in that special guest."

Briney and his wiry companion herded Kime in, then locked the door and stood just inside it.

Ralse stood looking at his son, glad his face showed none of the turmoil inside him. Kime had the same kind of bridged nose Ralse had had, once. He couldn't remember whether his own cheekbones had been that prominent, or whether his chin had thrust out so — but of course Kime was sullen now, and gaunt. As Nat Glover had said, his frame was good, but he needed hard work and solid food to bulk it out. Not that his hands — clenched now at his sides — looked

as if they were total strangers to work.

Ralse's middle felt hollow. Now that he'd seen Kime, it was going to be very hard to leave, acting calm. He watched Kime's eyes. So far, they'd only glanced at him. They were the only features, really, that reminded him of Kime's mother. There was a dignity in them, as well as the smoldering anger. He was glad to see both.

Sunner was watching Kime blandly. "Johnny Subb here is from your father. He's supposed to report back that you're all in one piece."

Kime looked at Ralse again, and Ralse saw, behind the cool look, the desperate question. Sunner must have seen it too. He smiled. "We're not releasing you yet. Your father seems to be more anxious to get Johnny Subb back, to report on some business we're discussing."

Kime flushed. "You can go to hell!"

Sunner laughed. "Lock him up again."

Briney turned to unlock the door, stepped out and beckoned to Kime. Kime made a move to obey, then stopped. He looked back at Sunner, then at Ralse. There was a hopelessness in his eyes now. But the anger was still there, and it was growing. Ralse saw the explosion starting. He took a step forward, said hoarsely, "No!"

But Kime was beyond listening. With an inarticulate sound, he hurled himself toward Sunner.

Ralse leaped to stop him, was too far away, saw Sunner's pistol come up, heard the sharp, "Spat! Spat!" as the slim high-velocity missiles left it. Kime, hit in both thighs, stumbled, caught the edge of the desk, lunged across it. Ralse was already around it, diving toward Sunner. A coarser gun — the wiry guard's — roared. Kime jerked violently. Briney roared, "You fool!" and flattened the other guard with a blow of a gun-butt. Sunner was confused for just an instant — maybe he thought Ralse was still trying to stop Kime — and that gave Ralse the time he needed. He was upon the pirate, jabbing hard at the throat with the knuckles of his left hand. The man reeled back, and Ralse grabbed at the needle-gun. Before he could wrest it away he had to swing a fist hard at the temple. Sunner went limp and fell. A slug from Briney's gun slammed into Ralse's left shoulder. That didn't matter — a subb body could take a lot. He spun, getting his finger on the pistol's trigger, brought it up above the level of the desk. A slug tore into his chest, knocking him backward. But he aimed and pulled the trigger, and the needles laced into Briney. The big blond man grunted, clutched at himself and went down. Ralse stumbled around the desk. Kime lay face up, chest jerking. There were shouts. Ralse staggered to the door, pulled it shut and locked it.

The intercom was calling, "Mr. Sunner? Mr. Sunner?" Ralse reeled back and leaned on the desk while a spasm of coughing racked him, then went to his knees beside Kime. Kime's blood was spilling out fast, and he too was coughing some up. Ralse thought dazedly, *We're both* dying — *but I'm*

a subb; I'll last long enough to see him go. He stared around desperately. There must be a first-aid room aboard. If Sunner could be forced to . . . . He raised himself to stare at Sunner.

Sunner looked dead.

Someone was pounding at the door. Ralse lifted his head — it felt very heavy now — to peer that way. Briney and the other guard lay motionless, and the door was holding.

Kime's eyes were open now, but dull. "Tell my father I . . . didn't want to . . . be a . . . . " He shuddered, and his eyes closed. His breathing was very ragged now.

Ralse snarled in desperation. If he could shoot his way to . . . .

Shoot. Something gnawled at his mind.

The Eje weapon!

Frantically he struggled to his feet, lurched to Sunner's body and fumbled in pockets for the key, then forced his feet to carry him to the cabinet. He had trouble getting the key in the slot. He finally got the cabinet open, grasped at the weapon. Would the Eje come in time to save Kime's life? He got the weapon out, staggered to the desk with it, laid it down and felt clumsily in his pockets for the screwdriver he had.

There was a loud clang. Someone was using a sledgehammer on the door. He ignored that, found the screwdriver, began working with terrible awkwardness at the weapon's disguise.

Suddenly he stopped. What if the Eje came in time . . . but made Kime a subb?

He crouched there in agony of indecision. Did he have the right to bring the Eje anyway — even if he could? If the weapon worked inside *Cetus,* and they got here, they'd know too much. They'd be able to identify Kime, at least.

He thought of Annelle Travis, waiting, not knowing.

Desperately, he resumed work. The disguise came apart. The sledgehammer slammed at the door, which shuddered. The top hinge was off now. He got his hand around the grip of the alien weapon; concentrated hard to get the trigger guard swung clear. He was nearly gone now, he knew. He lifted the weapon as nearly upward as his feeble arms would allow and squeezed the trigger.

He knew that the room filled with a rosy glow; then there was something like death.

Yet not quite death. Somewhere, within his brain or out, there was a kind of awareness — a dim primordial awareness that he *was,* and that was passing.

XI

Smells were the first real thing he recognized as consciousness slowly returned — isopropanol, ether, some phenol-like odor, and subtler, more exotic medicine-smells. He pondered fuzzily. Where had he smelled those combined smells before?

In the Eje hospital at Far End, of course.

He squirmed and tried to fight his way out of the lassitude. His own voice mumbled disjointedly. A throb began in his chest. A voice — not his

own — said something, and a sharpness tingled in his nostrils, making him swirl dizzily for a moment. When the dizziness left, he was calmer and the pains in his chest were mere twinges. He willed himself awake. Finally, miraculously, the leaden slabs that were his eyelids loosened, lightened, rose.

"How do you feel, Ralse Bukanan?"

The voice was not as toneless as a subb's, nor as inflected as a Normal's. The English was only faintly odd — a touch too precise, as if the speaker had to concentrate on it. The face was as Ralse had heard them described — smooth, light-skinned, with very pale gray eyes and traces of paper-white eyebrows. The Eje was seated beside the hospital bed, so Ralse couldn't judge his height, but the shoulders were wide and thin from front to back. The mouth was thin-lipped and broad, the ears small and round. The teeth were as even as Ralse's. All in all, the face suggested a subtly deformed man who was almost an albino and who suffered from a slight facial paralysis.

Something elusive was bothering Ralse. He grasped it, suddenly tried to sit up. "Kime! My son!"

"Your son is convalescing rapidly."

Ralse lay back with a tired exhalation and let the new pains in his chest subside. He hesitated, fearful of the answer to his next question. "Is he . . . a . . .?"

The Eje — or Eje servant — smiled a minimal smile. "He is still a Normal. He needed bone surgery and tissue grafts in both thighs and delicate work on his spine and internal organs. He may limp for a year or so."

"Oh." Ralse closed his eyes and waited for the emotion to let go of his throat. No need to ask about his own body. It was the same one — the pains where he'd been shot told him that. After a while he asked, "Far End?"

"Yes. In these circumstances we thought it necessary to bring you far from Sol. Do not worry about your organization. We have told Nat Glover that you and Kime are safe. And we lent him enough of the metal you use for coin so that he is not bankrupt. He has surrendered one of the tools. What remains now is for you to help us recover the other four."

Ralse stared at the alien. *"Tools?"*

The small smile returned. "Tools, or weapons, according to the use. They are the devices with which we keep injured people alive until they can be brought here or to Pluto. We were so using them when Pank Sunner ambushed one of our ships and stole them."

Ralse lay pondering glumly. He and Kime were captives, apparently. How could he defy them now? Must he try?

The same old question.

The being beside him must have guessed his thoughts. "Maybe you will trust us when you know more about us, Ralse Bukanan. We have decided we must rely upon your discretion. We would have to reveal the truth to a few subbs eventually, in any case. You think of us, you

humans, as a race with vast power, who may enslave you or who may continue to be mysterious and benevolent. It is not so." The being watched Ralse for a minute. "We are not a race. Those of us who built the Beam and the hospitals, and who maintain them, are only a . . . what is an English word? An echo? A remainder? There are only a few of us — and that is why you see so little of us. There is another reason, of course. We are not yet ready to let Mankind know how few we are. We have machines, yes, and control great forces. But those are mere tools." The being touched his own chest. "You understand, this is a subb body too."

"I supposed it was."

"It is. When I first wore it, the color was as yours, and the face and voice were as awkward. I have worn it for more than thirty thousand of your Terran years. For nearly all that time, I was in stasis. Recently, when our probes discovered an advanced biped race — yours — I was brought out of stasis, along with the rest, to construct the Beam and the hospitals. Now do you know, Ralse Bukanan, how the tool you used operates?"

Ralse tried to make his thoughts stop whirling. "Stasis . . ."

The Eje smiled again. "I will try to put it in simple terms. I have rehearsed so often, in my mind . . . there is a condition or realm which I will call Non-Time. That which is in it, has no motion, not even of atomic particles nor of energies. Therefore, it does not exist in the Space we call normal. Perhaps it is better to say it does not exist in normal Time. Does that make sense?

"The tools are made for transferring an object into that condition of Non-Time. They will work upon any coherent mass, within certain limits of size and consistency.

"An object transferred to Non-Time is as suddenly prominent there as a nova in your sky. We have only to be near enough to see it and reach it. Yes, there are ways we can move about in Non-Time. That does not constitute time-travel in normal space; you comprehend? And since Time and Space do move, we can not tell instantly where we are when we go to a new object in Non-Time." The Eje frowned delicately. "I am too involved. In essence, when something appears in Non-Time — an injured spaceman, for instance, put there by one of our tools — we may see it and reach it in time. Emergency treatment can be given while we travel in Non-Time to one of the hospitals. That is how you have survived twice now."

Ralse struggled with the concepts. "I . . . tested one of the things on a cargo pod. It seemed to disappear. Then . . . ."

"Of course. It went into Non-Time. We were not far away, but by the time we spaced out, you were escaping. Later, when you used the tool aboard *Cetus*, you put the whole ship into Non-Time, so that nothing moved before we arrived. Distances, by the way, are much shrunken in Non-Time. Do you understand?"

"I begin to." Ralse lay thinking for a while. "I suppose I may as well just ask bluntly what your intentions are toward my race."

"Intentions?" The Eje sighed. "I do not think the word is right. Consider, Ralse Bukanan. If you were the last of your race, and you found another very much like it — but younger — what would your 'intentions' be?"

Ralse floundered mentally. "Why, I'd teach them, I guess. Guide them, help them, if I could. Or maybe I'd just watch for a while. I guess I wouldn't really have 'intentions.' Is that what you mean?"

"That is what I mean. We have hopes. But you are, after all, not our race. Our race is dead, Ralse Bukanan. We do not want to go to our own individual deaths feeling that our history, our accomplishments — even our crimes — will be forgotten by the universe, will vanish as if we had never existed. You are much like ourselves: your arts, your laughter, your tragedies. We make it possible for you to reach the part of the galaxy where we once lived. You will find our ruins, when you spread farther from Far End." The being sat brooding for a while. "We do not try to offer you wisdom. That, perhaps, you may learn from our history, as you dig it out. We offer only the opportunity. Especially to you subbs we offer that."

Ralse said, "But you have such science! How could your race — "

"How did it die? A question. Some say we let too many of our weaklings survive, through our medicine. Some say we did not weed out our savages. Perhaps it was neither — there may be a natural senescence of races. In any case, we bred ourselves back to the jungle. Not a physical jungle — a jungle of the soul. It is as well that we became sterile. We had become a blight upon Nature. Perhaps Nature is sentient and acted."

A thought stirred in Ralse. "Then you few who remain — you are not sterile because — and you say that you've changed."

The Eje smiled. "When I was brought out of stasis, I began to change. This is the lifeline of a subb, Ralse Bukanan. At first you are brown and identical, without facial expression and with poor voices. Gradually, each individual regenerates to his original self. The original body is gone, but the brain remembers. You see me part way along the process which you yourself will undergo. I will be my original self again in fifty years or a hundred. Then I will age and die normally, as if I had never been a subb. I will never be fertile, but not because I have been a subb. There is no fertility in any of us. But you . . . ."

Ralse sighed. "How long? How long?"

"We do not know the time-schedule of a human subb, Ralse Bukanan. It may be two centuries, your time, before you are once again ready to age and die. In the meantime, you and the others will be the nearest thing to Caretakers the human race has. *We* will be gone. There are no more of us in stasis — we've gambled on you. We are tired of the search, of the memories that slept in our brains thirty thousand years and now seem fresh though we know they are not. The few of us who were awake in relays, through the long milleniums, were always glad to be relieved, and

to die. They did not enjoy watching the ruins of our raçe crumble and disappear into the soil. And now *I* am happy that, soon, human subbs will be handed the responsibility." The being got to his feet. "You need sleep. But first I would like your decision. Will you help us recover the other four tools? We are not ready yet to let Mankind have them; we must watch a little longer. We can find them without your help. But that would involve trouble for your organization, and bloodshed."

Ralse held out a moment longer. "Did you kill Ernesto Vasquez?"

"Of course not. Pank Sunner did."

Ralse sighed. "I'll help. And cooperate with you in every other way I can."

Beam Tramp, leaving Lenare's atmosphere, accelerated toward FTL. Ralse sat with Lee White in Aux Control, watching the blue-green planet recede.

Lee said, "They seemed like a real happy bride and groom, Ralse. Too bad you had to attend incognito."

Ralse said, "It'll be a while before he's ready to hear that his father's a subb. I'm trying to think how to keep it from him a while. He doesn't know exactly what happened aboard *Cetus*, but he's thinking hard. Nat told him the subb who came to see Sunner wasn't badly hurt and is out somewhere near Far End."

Lee asked, "Has it come to you, Ralse, that you'll live to see the two of them get old and die? And their kids, and *their* kids?"

"It's come to me." Ralse thought back to the wedding. With what unthinking raptness young people said, "Forever."

Lee was silent a while, with his own thoughts. Then he asked, "Where we going now?"

"First, I have to go see General Nalty and explain enough to convince him Pank Sunner killed Ernesto Vasquez. I'm not going to mention the Eje, or any of that, of course. I'll just talk about the kidnapping and contraband. I think I can give him a good story. Then we're going out to the Cloud. We'll be reorganizing the Cluster."

"We going to kill the fertility project?"

"Not for a while. It would be too hard to explain to the younger subbs. We can shift the emphasis gradually toward speeding up our regeneration. The Eje will help, I think."

Lee said, "Whether we can speed it up or not, it's going to be a long wait. If you don't object, I'm going to bring a mirror aboard and look in it every few hours. And as soon as I'm able, I'll stand in front of it and laugh like a fool. I'll laugh myself sick, Ralse. Think of it! We'll be able to laugh again!"

Ralse said, "You'd better bring a dozen mirrors aboard. We'll all be looking in them from now on."

He wondered, though, whether, by the time they could laugh again, there'd be much laughter left in them.

END

NEW CURRENTS IN FANDOM

by LIN CARTER

Our Man in Fandom shows us some New Fandoms — and a tribute to a late, great man!

WHILE walking around during Nycon 3, meeting and talking with old friends and making new ones, I heard of some interesting new developments, ideas and projects now stirring in the ferment of science-fiction fandom, which I thought I would pass along to you.

The first of these is the fan achievement awards. Now, as you know, every year the annual convention hands out a number of science fiction achievement awards in varying categories, called "Hugoes." These awards, while they differ from one convention to another, because each Worldcon is organized by a different fanclub made up of a different group of people, who often have some new ideas on convention-hosting, generally follow a *basic* system of awarding the best science-fiction novel, novelette, short story, prozine, fanzine and professional artist of the past year. But sometimes somebody comes up with an exciting new idea, like —

The Pongs

This year, the Nycon was sponsored by New York City's liveliest fanclub, the Fanoclasts, and the co-chairmen were Ted White and Dave Van Arnam. Ted came up with some new ideas on the achievement awards: why just give *one* award to a fan (that is, for the best fanzine for the year)? If you're going to include an award to Best Fanzine to stand beside the award to Best Prozine, then why not have a Best Fan Writer and Best Fan Artist to set beside comparable professional classifications?

Now the *professional* science-fic-

tion achievement awards are called the Hugo Awards — named in honor of Hugo Gernsback, the great pioneer of science fiction and founder of the first sf magazine. Why not name the *fan* achievement awards after some famous fan celebrity? He proposed to call these fan awards *Pongs,* after the well-known fannish pseudonym used by old-time fan Bob Tucker, who used to write hilarious lampoons of fandom, pretending to be a Chinese fan named Hoy Ping Pong.

Well, this idea didn't sit too well with a lot of people in fandom, and the Pongs came in for so much diverse criticism that the convention committee decided to drop the controversial nickname of Pong, and to award the Best Fan Artist and Writer with the traditional Hugoes.

Still . . . it sounded like a good idea to a lot of people, including this writer, and maybe a later convention will revive the notion. Ted's suggestion was influential at least in establishing the idea of giving annual achievement awards for fan writer and artist, and also set the innovation by having a Fan Guest of Honor at this year's Nycon 3, namely Bob Tucker himself. So maybe the idea of parallel achievement awards for members of the fan ranks will catch on after all.

Pulp Magazine Fandom

As always happens at the Worldcon, the most interesting things that happen are the people you meet and talk with. For example, I ran into a fascinating chap named Fred S. Cook from Sylvania, Ohio, who came up and introduced himself to me because he knows I am a great fan and booster of the wonderful old Doc Savage novels originally issued by Street & Smith in the old pulps, now coming back in print from Bantam Books.

Fred is a great Doc Savage fan and has begun publishing a new fanzine called *Bronze Shadows* for enthusiasts of pulp magazine superheroes. (I say he's just "begun" publishing *Bronze Shadows,* . . . actually the magazine is going strong, and he gave me a copy of the latest issue, which is the *eleventh!*) This excellent fanzine is loaded with interesting articles on the golden age of the pulps. For example, in No. 11 is a complete checklist of the titles of novels which ran in *The Phantom Detective* magazine from 1933 to 1953, when it went under.

Also in the same issue is Part 10 of an exhaustive critical analysis of the Doc Savage novels by Herman S. MacSeegar and a rare reprint of a fascinating article on the pulp fiction "master-plot" written by Lester Dent, who created Doc Savage under the pen name of Kenneth Robson. This article was originally written for a writers' magazine back in 1939, and few Doc Savage fans even knew of its existence until Fred Cook dug it up and reprinted it.

Fred hopes the magazine will serve to enlist a sufficient number of old-time pulp fans, so that he can start a club going. This would make another of those "Little Fandoms Inside Fandom" I talked about in this column back in 1966 and 1967.

Weird Horror Fans Unite!

Another interesting new movement in fan circles today is the revival of interest in horror fiction which has stimulated all sorts of fanzines and brochures and new clubs into existence. Take for example the excellent and very professional-looking fan publication, *Anubis,* edited by Paul J. Willis. *Anubis* is devoted to the literature of the macabre and the terrifying, and the magazine is loaded with interesting bits of verse and fiction plus handsome art and items of Lovecraftian scholarship. The latest issue I have seen, No. 2, for example, features some sample pages from *The Necronomicon,* that imaginary book H. P. Lovecraft was always quoting from in his famous horror tales.

If the loathsome and the horrific is your meat, you may be interested to learn there is now a club-full of fans interested in the same fare. It's recently been launched under the name of the National Horror and Fantasy Association (or "the NHFFA," for short). I met a chap at the Worldcon named Fred Phillips, who tells me the club is now going strong, meets irregularly and has over 50 members. If the NHFFA gets going with enough members so they reach the point they can put on a horror-fans' convention of their own like the Nycon, they could call it "the Necronomi-Con."

The Hannes Bok Memorial

One of the most interesting new friends I made at the Worldcon is Emil Petaja of San Francisco, the popular author of a number of exciting science-fantasy adventure novels and one of the closest friends of the late fantasy artist, Hannes Bok. Bok was one of the greatest geniuses of illustration ever to enter the fantasy or science-fiction field. and his death in 1964 was a tremendous loss. Emil and others among Bok's friends have created an organization called The Bokanalia Foundation as a sort of memorial to his magnificent talent; they are striving to keep his memory (and his work) alive through the Foundation's efforts in publishing and distributing his gorgeous drawings and paintings in excellent portfolios of well-printed reproductions.

I have a copy of the first folio, and it contains 15 black and white drawings, size 9"x12", superbly and beautifully produced on heavy stock, just right for framing to hang in your library or den. Folio No. 2 also offers 15 full-page drawings, including *six* which have never been published anywhere, plus a brilliant *Remembrance of Hannes Bok* by Ray Bradbury. The third folio has 12 more prints of Bok's work, including five new ones never in print in any form.

The Bokanalia Foundation also has (called "Special A") an original color painting of Hannes Bok's, unpublished and previously unknown, reproduced on heavy stock in an edition limited to 100 copies, and "Special B" which is a magical Mandala, or occult talisman representing "good swirling into evil, evil swirling into good." Bok was something of a

mystic and a lifelong adherent to astrology. And coming up soon is a fifty-page *Biography of Hannes Bok* written by his many friends and illustrated with unpublished sketches taken from his letters and notebooks. The *Biography* will include photographs of Bok, pungent excerpts from his letters, and the first bibliography of his published work ever compiled. This *Biography* is only one of several exciting new projects the Foundation is currently working on.

This is a worthy cause, and a beautiful memorial to one of the wisest and finest men ever. Contact Emil Petaja, P.O. Box 14126, San Francisco, California 94114.

Anyone for a Tournament?

But the wackiest and most curious of all these new fannish currents, is the rising craze for (of all things!) *medieval tournaments.* That's right, gang, real tournaments, with jongleurs, costumes, medieval music played on ancient instruments of reasonable facsimiles thereof, featuring samples of food and drink from the Middle Ages and knightly contests of arms and all like that there.

I suspect this new Thing sweeping through fandom is a sort of echo or by-blow of the enormous interest in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings,* which seems to have sparked a revival of enthusiasm for medieval art, literature, customs and Medievalism in general. Anyway, fans on the West Coast are going whole hog for Tournaments now, and remember, you read it here *first.*

At this year's Westercon, a regional conference held every July Fourth weekend at a different town in the West (usually in California), they had a full-fledged Tournament, by golly, where if you wanted to play music, you had to leave your guitar at home and drum up a lute or something. People went so far as to avoid modern dress, wherever possible, although I believe you *could* wear glasses if needs thou must.

The guiding hand in all this is a group called The Society for Contemporary Anachronisms. They go to vast lengths to serve snacks from the Dark Ages and to make certain nobody is (shudder!) wearing zippers, or other such Inventions of the Devil. Actually, the whole thing is for fun and not so deadly serious as I am describing it, and it sounds kind of cute.

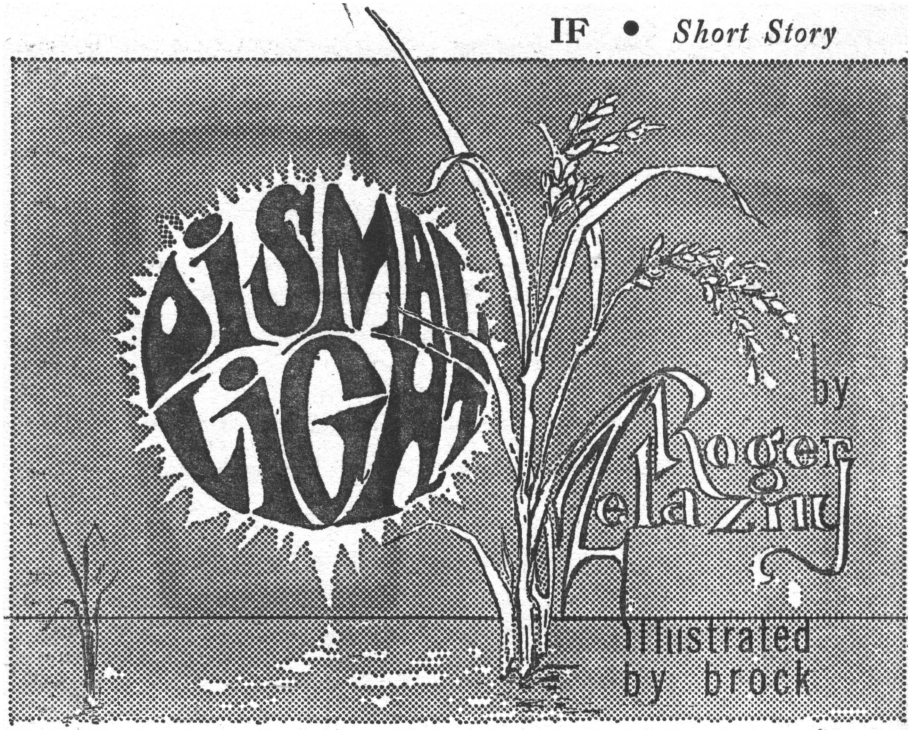
It might seem to elaborate and contrived and difficult and expensive to catch on all across the fannish world, and perhaps it is, but anyway those of you who plan to attend the 1968 Baycon — the 26th World Science Fiction Convention, to be held over the Labor Day weekend at the Hotel Claremont in the Oakland/Berkeley area in California, will have a chance to see just what a real fannish Tournament is all about.

The Baycon will convene on Friday, August 30th, and will go on its merry way until at least Monday, September 2nd, and on Monday afternoon, at 3:30 P.M., right after the usual, traditional Auction, the Medieval Tournament will be held under the stern hand of Dave Thew-

lis, Tournament Master, with live music furnished by the Concertium del Arte.

All participants are asked to wear medieval garments. There will be broadsword duels, fencing matches, and the gore of combat will stain the hotel's greensward with reeking crimson (well, not really, but it *sounds* better that way . . . actually, these are mock duels in slow-motion.) The Baycon invites you to come armed to defend your honor and to fight for your lady's favor. Doubtless there will be prizes given to various categories such as most convincing and authentic costume, etc.

So, remember, if you're coming to the Baycon in 1968, don't leave your broadsword at home. END



It was a prison world, but you could get to like it. You could even get so you hated to leave!

Right there on his right shoulder, like a general, Orion wears a star. (He wears another in his left armpit; but, for the sake of wholesome similies, forget it.)

Magnitude 0.7 as seen from the Earth, with an absolute magnitude -4.1, it was red and variable and a supergiant of an insignia; a class M job approximately 270 light-years removed from Earth, with a surface temperature of around 5,500 degrees Fahrenheit; and if you'd looked closely, through one of those little glass tents, you'd have seen that there was some titanium oxide present.

It must have been with a certain pride that General Orion wore the

thing, because it had left the main sequence so long ago and because it was such a very, very big star, and because the military mind is like that.

Betelguese, that's the name of the star.

Now, once upon a time, circling at a great distance about that monstrous red pride of Orion, moving through a year much longer than a human lifetime, there was a dirty, dead hunk of rock that hardly anyone cared to dignify to the extent of calling it a world. Hardly anyone, I say. Governments move and think in strange ways, though. Take Earth for an example . . .

It was decided whenever they don't want to blame a particular person big organizations tend to get all objective and throw "it" around like mad — it was decided that because of the shortage of useful worlds, maybe that hunk of rock could be made to pay off somehow.

So they got in touch with Francis Sandow and asked him if it could be done, and he told them, "Yes."

Then they asked him how much it would cost, and he told them that too, and they threw up their hands, then reached to close their briefcases.

But, aside from being the only human worldscraper in the business, Sandow did not become one of the wealthiest men around because of inheritance or luck. He made them a proposal, and they bought it, and that's how Dismal was born.

Now let me tell you about Dismal, the only habitable world in the Betelgeuse system.

A scant improvement over the bare hunk of rock, that's Dismal. Sandow forced an atmosphere upon it, against its dead will, an atmosphere full of ammonia and methane. Then he did frightening things to it, involving hydrogen and carbon; and the storms began. He had a way of accelerating things, and Earth's physicists warned him that if he didn't watch it, he'd have an asteroid belt on his hands. He told them, I understand, that if that happened, he'd put them back together again and start over — but that it wouldn't happen.

He was right of course.

When the storms subsided, he had seas. Then he stoked the world's interior, and amidst cataclysms he shaped the land masses. He did various things to the land and the seas, purged the atmosphere, turned off the Krakatoas, calmed the earthquakes. Then he imported and mutated plants and animals that grew and bred like mad, gave them a few years, tampered again with the atmosphere, gave them a few more, tampered again, and so on — maybe a dozen times. Then he set about screwing up the weather.

Then one day, he took some officials down to the surface of the world, whipped off his oxygen helmet, raised an umbrella above him, took a deep breath and said, "This is good. Pay me," before he started coughing.

And they agreed that it was good, and this thing was done, and the government was happy for a time. So was Sandow.

Why was everybody happy, for a time? Because Sandow had made

them a mean sonofabitch of a world, which was what they'd both wanted, for various reasons, that's why.

Why only for a time? There's the rub, as you'll see by and by.

On most habitable worlds, there are some places that are somewhat pleasant. There are some small islands of relief from bitter winters, stifling summers, hurricanes, hail, tidal waves, terrific electrical storms, mosquitos, mud, ice, and all the rest of those little things that have prompted philosophers to concede that life is not without a certain measure of misery.

Not so Dismal.

You'd hardly ever see Betelgeuse, because of the cloud cover; and when you did see it you'd wish you didn't, because of the heat. Deserts, icefields and jungles, perpetual storms, temperature extremes and bad winds — you faced various combinations of these wherever you went on Dismal, which is the reason for its name. There was no island of relief, no place that was pleasant.

Why had Earth hired Sandow to create this hell?

Well, criminals must be rehabilitated, granted. But there has always been a certain punitive tenor to the thing, also. A convicted felon is presently granted a certain measure of distasteful experience along with his therapy, to make it stick — I guess — to the hide as well as the psyche.

Dismal was a prison world.

Five years was the maximum sentence on Dismal. Mine was three. Despite everything I've just said, you could get used to the place. I mean, the housing was good — air-conditioned or well insulated and heated, as necessary — and you were free to come and go as you would; you were welcome to bring your family along, or acquire one; and you could even make money. There were plenty jobs available, and there were stores, theaters, churches and just about anything else you could find on any other world, though a lot sturdier in structure and often even underground. Or you could just sit around and brood if you wanted. You'd still be fed. The only difference between Dismal and any other world was that you couldn't leave until your sentence was up. There were approximately three hundred thousand persons on the entire planet, of which probably ninety-seven percent were prisoners and their families. I didn't have a family, but that's beside the point. Or maybe it isn't. I don't know. I was part of one once.

There was a garden where I worked, all alone except for the robots. It was half underwater all the time and all underwater half the time. It was down in a valley, high trees on the crests of the hills above, and I lived there in a shiny watertight quonset with a small lab and a computer, and I'd go out barefoot and in shorts or in underwater gear, depending on the time, and I'd random harvest my crops or reseed the garden, and I hated it at first.

In the morning it would sometimes look as if the world had gone away and I was adrift in Limbo. Then the emptiness would resolve itself into simple fog, then into reptiles of mist which would slither away and leave me with another day. Like I

said, I hated it at first; but like I also said, you could get used to the place. I did, maybe because I got interested in my project.

That's why I didn't give a damn about the cry, "Iron!" when I heard it, partly.

I had a project.

Earth couldn't — strike that — wouldn't pay Sandow's rates when it came to building them a world miserable enough to serve either as a prison or a basic training site for the military. So Sandow made his proposal, and that was what decided the destiny of Dismal. He gave them a cut rate and guaranteed plenty of therapeutic employment. He controlled so many of the industries, you see.

Laboratories are all right, I guess, for just simply testing equipment. You get all sorts of interesting figures concerning stress limits, temperature resistance, things like that. Then you turn a product loose in the field, and something you hadn't thought to test for goes wrong. I guess Sandow had had this happen to him lots of times, which is why he'd decided to pick up a piece of the field and add it to his lab facilities.

Dismal, all full of vicissitudes, was the testing ground for countless things. Some guys just drove vehicles back and forth through different climate belts, listing everything that went wrong. All the fancy, sturdy dwellings I mentioned were test-items also, and their counterparts will doubtless one day spring up on other worlds. You name it, and somebody was living with it on Dismal. Mine was food.

And one day there came the cry, "Iron!" I ignored it, of course. I'd heard the rumors, back before I'd asked to serve out my sentence on Dismal, even.

My sentence had been up almost a year before, but I'd stayed on. I could leave any time I wanted, but I didn't. There had been something I'd wanted to prove, I guess, and then I'd gotten wrapped up in the project.

Francis Sandow had been testing lots of things on Dismal, but so far as I was concerned the most interesting was a by-product of the local ecology. There was something peculiar to my valley, something that made rice grow so fast you could see it growing. In the higher, drier places, it did the same with other grains. Just in my valley, though. Sandow himself didn't know what it was, and the project for which I'd volunteered was one designed to find out. If there was anything edible that could be ready for harvest two weeks after it was planted, it represented such a boon to the growing population of the galaxy that its secret was worth almost any price. So I went armed against the serpents and the water-tigers; I harvested, analyzed, fed the computer. The facts accumulated slowly, over the years, as I tested first one thing, then another; and I was within a couple harvests of having an answer, I felt, when someone yelled, "Iron!" Nuts!

I'd half-dismissed what it was that I'd wanted to prove as unprovable, and all I wanted to do at that moment of time was to come up with the final answer, turn it over to the universe and say, "Here I've done

something to pay back for what I've taken. Let's call it square, huh?"

On one of the infrequent occasions when I went into the town, that was all they were talking about, the iron. I didn't like them too much — people, I mean — which was why I'd initially requested a project where I could work alone. They were speculating as to whether there'd be an exodus, and a couple comments were made about people like me being able to leave whenever they wanted. I didn't answer them, of course. My therapist, who hadn't wanted me to take a job off by myself, all alone, also didn't want me being belligerant and argumentative, and I'd followed her advice. Once my sentence was up. I stopped seeing her.

I was surprised therefore, when the visitor-bell rang and I opened the door and she almost fell in, a forty-mile wind at her back and wet machine-gun fire from the heavens strafing her, to boot.

"Susan! . . . Come in," I said.

"I guess I already am," she said, and I closed the door behind her.

"Let me hang your stuff up."

"Thanks," and I helped her out of a thing that felt like a dead eel and hung it on a peg in the hallway.

"Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

"Yes."

She followed me into the lab, which also doubles as a kitchen.

"Do you listen to your radio?" she asked, as I presented her with a cup.

"No. It went out on me around a month ago, and I never bothered fixing it." "

"Well, it's official," she said. "We're pulling out."

I studied her wet red bangs and gray eyes beneath matching brows and remembered what she'd told me about transference back when I was her patient.

"I'm still transferring," I said, to see her blush behind the freckles; and then, "when?"

"Beginning the day after tomorrow," she said, losing the blush rapidly. "They're rushing ships from all over."

"I see."

" . . . So I thought you'd better know. The sooner you register at the port, the earlier the passage you'll probably be assigned."

I sipped my coffee.

"Thanks, Any idea how long?"

"Two to six weeks is the estimate."

" 'Rough guess' is what you mean."

"Yes."

"Where're they taking everybody?"

"Local pokeys on thirty-two different worlds, for the time being. Of course, this wouldn't apply to you."

I chuckled.

"What's funny?"

"Life," I said. "I'll bet Earth is mad at Sandow."

"They're suing him for breach of contract. He'd warrantied the world, you know."

"I doubt this would be covered by the warranty. How could it?"

She shrugged, then sipped her coffee.

"I don't know. All I know is what I hear. You'd better close up shop and go register, if you want to get out early."

"I don't," I said. "I'm getting near

to an answer. I'm going to finish the project, I hope. Six weeks might do it."

Her eyes widened, and she lowered the cup.

"That's ridiculous!" she said. "What good will it be if you're dead and nobody knows the answer you find?"

"I'll make it," I said, returning in my mind to the point I had one time wanted to prove. "I think I'll make it?"

She stood.

"You get down there and register!"

"That's very direct therapy, isn't it?"

"I wished you'd stayed in therapy."

"I'm sane and stable now," I said.

"Maybe so. But if I have to say you're not, to get you probated and shipped off-world, I will!"

I hit a button on the box on the table, waited perhaps three seconds, hit another.

". . . to say you're not, to get you probated and shipped off-world, I will!" said the shrill, recorded voice behind the speaker.

"Thanks," I said. "Try it."

She sat down again.

"Okay, you win. But what are you trying to prove?"

I shrugged and drank coffee.

"That everybody's wrong but me," I said, after a time.

"It shouldn't matter," she said, "and if you were a mature adult it wouldn't matter, either way. Also, I think you're wrong."

"Get out," I said softly.

"I've listened to your adolescent fantasies, over and over," she said. "I know you. I'm beginning to think you've got an unnatural death-wish as well as that unresolved family problem we — "

I laughed, because it was the only alternative to saying, "Get out" again, in a louder voice.

"Okay," I said. "I'll agree with anything you say about me, but I won't do anything you tell me to do. So consider it a moral victory or something."

"When the time comes, you'll run."

"Sure."

She returned to her coffee.

"You're really getting near to an answer?" she finally said.

"Yes, I really am."

"I'm sorry that it had to happen, at just this time."

"I'm not," I said.

She looked about the lab, then out through the quartz windows at the slushy field beyond.

"How can you be happy out here, all alone?"

"I'm not," I said, "But it's better than being in town."

She shook her head, and I watched her hair.

"You're wrong. They don't care as much as you think they do."

I filled my pipe and lit it.

"Marry me," I said softly, "and I'll build you a palace, and I'll buy you a dress for every day of the year — no matter how long the years are in whatever system we pick."

She smiled then.

"You mean that."

"Yes."

"Yet you stole, you . . . "

"Will you?"

"No. Thanks. You knew I'd say that."

"Yes."

We finished our coffee, and I saw her to the door and didn't try to kiss her. Hell, I had a pipe in my mouth, and that's what it was there for.

I killed a forty-three foot water snake that afternoon, who had thought the shiny instrument I was carrying in my left hand looked awfully appetizing, as well as my left hand and the arm attached to it and the rest of me. I put three splints into him from my dart gun, and he died, thrashing around too much, so that he ruined some important things I had growing. The robots kept right on about their business, and so did I, after that. I measured him later, which is how I know he was a forty-three-footer. Robots are nice to work with. They mind their own business, and they never have anything to say.

I fixed the radio that night, but they were worried about iron on all frequencies, so I turned it off and smoked my pipe. If she had said yes, you know, I would have done it.

In the week that followed, I learned that Sandow was diverting all of his commercial vessels in the area to aid in the evacuation, and he'd sent for others from further away. I could have guessed that without hearing it. I could guess what they were saying about Sandow, the same things they always say about Sandow: here is a man who has lived so long that he's afraid of his own shadow. Here is one of the wealthiest men in the galaxy, a paranoid, an hypochondriac, holed-up on a fortress world all his own, going out only after taking the most elaborate precautions — rich and powerful and a coward. He is talented beyond his own kind. God-like, he can build worlds and feature them and populate them as he would. But there is really only one thing that he loves: the life of Francis Sandow. Statistics tell him that he should have died long ago, and he burns incense before the shrine of statistics. I guess all legends have unshined shoes. Too bad, they say that once he was quite a man.

And that's what they say whenever his name comes up.

The evacuation was methodical and impressive. At the end of two weeks there were a quarter million people on Dismal. Then the big ships began to arrive, and at the end of the third week there were a hundred-fifty thousand remaining. The rest of the big vessels showed up then, and some of the first ones made it back for a second load. By the middle of the fourth week, there were seventy-five thousand, and by the end of it, there was hardly anybody left. Vehicles stood empty in the streets, tools lay where they had been dropped. Abandoned projects hummed and rumbled in the wilderness. The doors of all the shops were unlocked and merchandise still lay upon the counters, filled the shelves. The local fauna grew restless, and I found myself shooting at something every day. Vehicle after vehicle tore at the air and sunk within the cloud-cover, transporting the waiting people to the big unseen vessels that circled the world.

Homes stood abandoned, the remains of meals still upon their tables. All the churches had been hastily deconsecrated and their relics shipped offworld. We sampled day and night, the robots and I, and I analyzed and drank coffee and fed the data to the computer and waited for it to give me the answer, but it didn't. It always seemed to need just another scintilla of information.

Maybe I was crazy. My time was, technically, borrowed. But to be so close and then to see the whole thing go up in flames — it was worth the gamble. After all, it would take years to duplicate the setup I had there, assuming it could be duplicated. The valley was, somehow, a freak, an accidental place that had occurred during millions of years of evolution compressed into a decade or so by a science I couldn't even begin to understand. I worked and I waited.

The visitor-bell rang.

It wasn't raining this time, in fact the cloud-cover showed signs of breaking up for the first time in months. But she blew in as though there was a storm at her back again, anyway.

"You've got to get out," she said. "It's imminent! Any second now it could — "

I slapped her.

She covered her face and stood there and shook for a minute.

"Okay, I was hysterical," she said, "but it's true."

"I realized that the first time you told me. Why are you still around?"

"Don't you know, damn you?"

"Say it," I said, listening attentively.

"Because of you, of course! Come away! Now!"

"I've almost got it," I said. "Tonight or tomorrow, possibly. I'm too close now to give up."

"You asked me to marry you," she said. "All right, I will — if you'll grab your toothbrush right now and get out of here."

"Maybe a week ago I would have said yes. No, now, though."

"The last ships are leaving. There are less than a hundred people on Dismal right now, and they'll be gone before sundown. How will you get away after that, even if you decide to go?"

"I won't be forgotten," I said.

"No, that's true." She smiled, slightly, crookedly. "The last vessel will run a last-minute check. Their computer will match the list of the evacuees with the Dismal Directory. Your name will show up, and they'll send a special search vessel down, just for you. That'll make you feel important, won't it? Really *wanted*. Then they'll haul you away, whether you're ready or not, and that'll be it."

"By then I might have the answer."

"And if not?"

"We'll see."

I handed her my handerchief then and kissed her when she least expected it — while she was blowing her nose — which made her stamp her foot and say an unladylike word.

Then, "Okay. I'll stay with you until they come for you," she said. "Somebody's got to look after you until a guardian can be appointed."

"I've got to check some seedlings

now," I said. "Excuse me," and I pulled on my hip boots and went out the back way, strapping on my dart gun as I went.

I shot two snakes and a water-tiger — two beasts before and one after the seedlings. The clouds fell apart while I was out there, and pieces of bloody Betelgeuse began to show among them. The robots bore the carcasses away, and I didn't stop to measure them this time.

Susan watched me in the lab, keeping silent for almost an entire hour, until I told her, "Perhaps tomorrow's sample . . . "

She looked out through the window and up into the burning heavens.

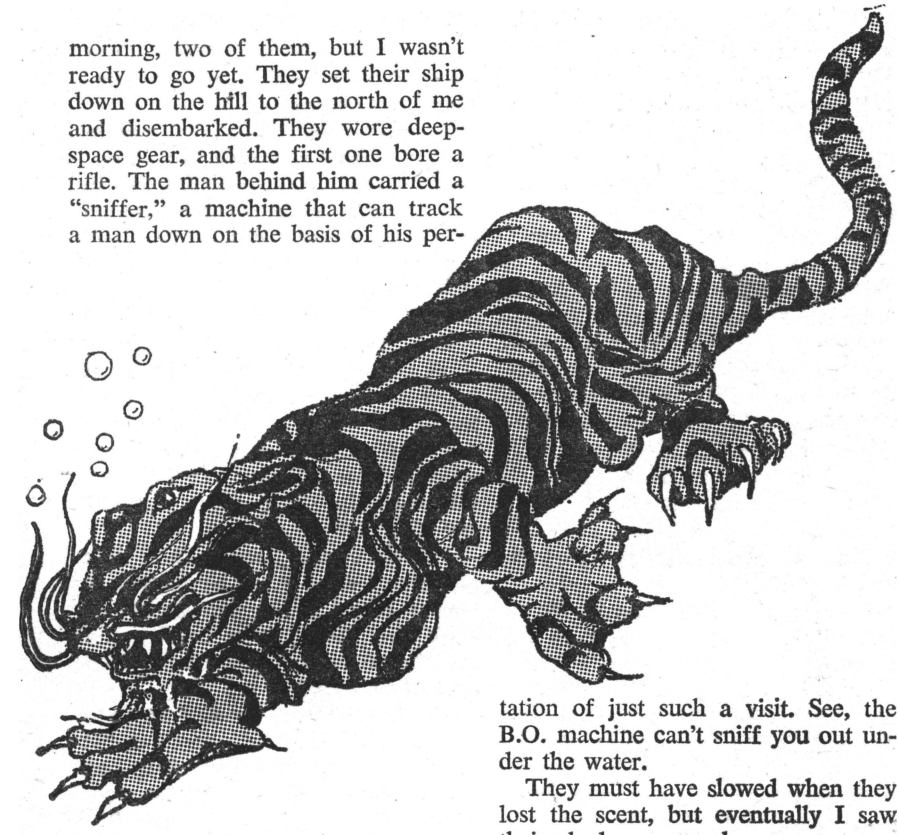
"Iron," she said, and there were tears on her cheeks.

Iron. Well, it's something you can't just laugh off. You can't make it go away by ignoring it. It only goes away after its own fashion.

For ages upon ages, Orion's insignia had burned hydrogen in its interior, converting it to helium, accumulating that helium. After a time the helium core began to contract, and the helium nuclei fused, formed carbon, produced the extra energy Orion had wanted to keep his uniform looking snappy. Then, to keep up a good front when that trick began to slip, he built up oxygen and neon from the carbon, increasing the temperature of the core. Afraid that would fail him, he moved on to magnesium and silicon. Then iron. Certain spectroscopy techniques had let us see what was going on at the center. General Orion had used up all his tricks but one. Now he had no recourse but to convert the iron back into helium by drawing upon the gravitational field of his star. This would require a rather drastic and rapid shrinking process. It would give him a blaze of glory all right, and then a white dwarf of an insignia to wear forevermore. Two hundred seventy years later the nova would become visible on Earth, and he'd still look pretty good for a little while, which I guess meant something. The military mind is funny that way.

"Iron," I repeated.

They came for me the following



morning, two of them, but I wasn't ready to go yet. They set their ship down on the hill to the north of me and disembarked. They wore deep-space gear, and the first one bore a rifle. The man behind him carried a "sniffer," a machine that can track a man down on the basis of his personal body-chemistry. It was effective for a range of about a mile. It indicated the direction of the quonset, because I was between them and it.

I lowered my binoculars and waited. I drew my splinter gun. Susan thought I was in the garden. Well, I had been. But the minute that thing came down and settled between the blaze and the mists, I headed toward it. I took cover at the end of the field and waited.

I had my gear with me, in expectation of just such a visit. See, the B.O. machine can't sniff you out under the water.

They must have slowed when they lost the scent, but eventually I saw their shadows pass above me.

I surfaced, there in the canal, pushed back my mask, drew a bead and said, "Stop! Drop the gun or I'll shoot!"

The man with the rifle turned quickly, raising it, and I shot him in the arm.

"I warned you," I said, as the rifle fell to the trail and he clutched at his arm. "Now kick it over the edge into the water!"

"Mister, you've got to get out of

here!" he said. "Betelguese could blow any minute! We came to get you!"

"I know it. I'm not ready to go."

"You won't be safe till you're in hyperspace."

"I know that, too. Thanks for the advice, but I'm not taking it. Kick that damn rifle into the water! Now!"

He did.

"Okay, that's better. If you're so hot on taking someone back with you, there's a girl named Susan Lennert down in the quonset. Her you can push around. Go get her and take her away with you. Forget about me."

The man holding his arm looked to the other who nodded.

"She's on the list," he said.

"What's wrong with you, mister?" the first one asked. "We're trying to save your life."

"I know it, I appreciate it. Don't bother."

"Why?"

"That's my business. You'd better get moving." I gestured toward Betelguese with the barrel of my pistol.

The second man licked his lips, and the first one nodded. Then they turned and headed toward the quonset. I followed all the way, since they were now unarmed and the garden pests weren't.

She must have put up a fuss, because they had to drag her off, between them. I stayed out of sight, but I covered them all the way back to the ship and watched until it lifted off and vanished in the bright sky.

Then I went inside, gathered up the records, changed my clothes, went back outside and waited.

Were my eyes playing tricks on me, or did Betelgeuse flicker for just a second Perhaps it was an atmospheric disturbance . . .

A water-tiger broke the surface and cut a furrow straight toward me, where I stood upon the trail. I shot it, and a snake appeared from somewhere and began eating it. Then two more snakes showed up, and there was a fight. I had to shoot one of them.

Betelguese seemed to brighten above me, but apprehension could account for that seeming. I stood right there and waited. Now my point would either be proved or disproved, once and for all time, so far as I was concerned; and, either way, I'd rest afterwards.

It wasn't until, much later that afternoon, as I drew bead upon a rearing water snake and heard his voice say, "Hold your fire," and I did, that I realized just how petty I might have been.

The snake slowly lowered its great bulk and slithered past me. I didn't turn. I couldn't. It was so long and kept slithering by, and I kept wondering, but I couldn't turn around.

Then a hand fell upon my shoulder, and I had to; and there he was, and I felt about three inches tall as I stood there before him.

The snake kept rubbing up against his boots and turning to do it again.

"Hello," I said, and, "I'm sorry." He was smoking a cigar and was maybe five feet eight inches tall, with nondescript hair and dark eyes, when I finally brought myself to look into them. I'd almost forgot-

ten. It had been so long. I could never forget his voice, though.

"Don't be sorry. There's no need. You had to prove something."

"Yes. She was right, though — "

"Have you proven it?"

"Yes. You're not what they say you are, and you came here for one reason — me."

"That's right."

"I shouldn't have done it. I shouldn't have expected it of you. I had to know, though, I just had to — but I shouldn't have."

"Of course you should. Maybe I needed it, too, to prove it to myself, as much as you needed to see it. There are some things that should mean more than life to a man. Did you find what you were looking for in your garden?"

"Days ago, sir."

" 'Sir' isn't what you used to call me."

"I know . . . "

"You had to see how much Francis Sandow cared for his son. Okay, I spit on Betelguese. I blow smoke rings back at it. Now I'm going to leave it. The *Model T* is parked on the other side of the hill. Come on, we're going to make it."

"I know that, Dad."

"Thanks."

I picked up my luggage.

"I met a nice girl I'd like to tell you about . . . " I said, and I did, while we walked.

And the snake followed after, and he wouldn't turn it away. He brought it aboard, its bulk coiled about the cabin, and he took it along, out of that lopsided Eden. I'll never forget that he did that, either. END

Past Touch-the-Sky Mountain

by BARRY ALAN WEISSMAN

I've driven this road a hundred times — but why did you put this whole new country around it?

"Imagine if you will, or if you can, a world in which Marco Polo did not discover the New World.

"Oh, my! You still don't understand; well, let me explain further.

"First, my Christian name is Sommerfield, John (the Chinese call me by a different name, but to you, apparently, that is just a number of meaningless syllables). I'm a merchant in trinkets. You know, beads, diamonds, things of that sort. Anyway, about one month ago, I decided to go on a trip down the new Straight-as-an-Arrow Roadway to Standish just across the British border. (Why, yes, that's it. On that big river where it meets the smaller one from the east. I see you have them labeled "Ohio" and "Miss Sippi"). I was going to combine business with pleasure, as my sales representative there is a dunce, especially to handle the Royal contract upon which we are bidding. The pleasure was for my wives, as Numbers Four and Twelve had been pestering me about a vacation since a month after Twelve's honeymoon. I

wouldn't have given in to Four but Twelve — yes, that's her, over there by that fellow in the blue uniform and big eyes — is still fairly new, and I was in a good humor. Yesterday we all bundled into the Chang Wagon and off we went.

"Oh, yes, I'm terribly sorry. My home office is, of course, in Bay-of-Fires. . . . Where? Oh, on the map. . . . Now let me see. . . . Ah, yes, here it is. You have it labeled Son Deego. Now where was I? Yes, well, once we were past the Touch-the-Sky Mountains, everything went smoothly. I am, as you can see, unfortunately of British stock, as you are yourselves, although I am now proudly a full citizen of the Empire (why, Chinese, of course!). These features naturally lead to occasional stops and inspections by army units. But they soon let us continue, after seeing my papers . . . including some of the folded red ones not in the official packet. After all, one must occasionally grease the wheels, and I am a businessman.

"Now here, about where this map is marked Son Anthano, the first problems arose. I was driving, naturally, but it couldn't have been more than an hour since the girls had folded our night pavillion back onto the roof, so I couldn't have been very tired. Anyway, I suddenly noticed my vision blur for a moment, and then it cleared. But everything had changed.

"The Emperor's packed earth and granite road was no more. Instead we were traveling at an outrageous speed down a hard cement strip with painted lines on it. All the toiling coolies, and their green fields, had surprisingly been suddenly replaced by brown dirt and brush. Both I and the girls were astonished. It was at this point that that fellow over there, the one in blue — "

(*Let the record indicate that the Defendant is pointing to Officer O'Connell.*)

"— came by on his little biwheel and literally forced us over to the side of the road.

"Despite his rudeness, I was going to ask him to join us for tea, for I was anxious for information to explain my strange surroundings. But he didn't give me a chance.

" 'Where do you think you're going, Buddy?' he rudely inquired, 'to a fire?' I immediately replied that I had not been informed of the calamity. Thinking that it must have been this fire which had destroyed the surrounding countryside, and that it must still be raging up ahead, I inquired of him if I should make a detour, or if the assistance of myself

An IF First

In each issue *If* brings you a first story by a writer never published in science fiction before. This month's debut is by Barry Alan Weissman, a young Californian, who is a student and a member of the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society.

The L.A.S.F.S. is one of the oldest existing sf clubs in the world, and one of its most cherished traditions is a celebration dinner given for each member who succeeds in selling a science-fiction story to a professional magazine. Last previous L.A.S.F.S. member to get the dinner was Larry Niven.

and my wives might be required or helpful at the front.

"'Wives?' he asked, and then I think he noticed them for the first time. His eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped in quite a pronounced manner. Then he began to write in this little notebook which he had removed from his shirt pocket. He spoke to himself as he did this. 'Speeding — a hundred an' fifty,' and then scribbled something; and then he mumbled 'Driving without registration and — ' he turned to me with — 'you got a license?'

"I replied by displaying the green Pass-through-All issued personally to me by the Emperor's Hand itself. But the fellow merely smiled and turned back to his notebook. 'No License.' And then, 'driving an experimental vehicle on a public highway, and . . . bigamy?' I nodded, thinking that he realized my station, and I added, smiling, 'No, polygamy.' Then coming closer, he looked in the window once more, smiling and nodding, 'indecent exposure,' as he continued writing. This last comment rather riled me because I have always prided my wives as the best-dressed in Bay-of-Fires — business-wise, you know. But I maintained my temper.

"He finished his writing with a flourish and then said, 'I should put down "Coming out without a keeper," but then they'd think that I was crazy.' He then turned and walked back to his biwheel, removed a plastic doohicky attached by a wire cord to the vehicle, and talked to it for a time. After moving the biwheel off the road, he returned to me saying, 'Move over, Pop. I'll drive you in.' I thanked him for the courtesy, and slid over. He sat down, turned the magnetokey and started off — backwards. By the time he recovered sufficiently to stop my car, we were ten feet off the road and hub deep in dirt. The Changs, you know, make up for their speed and roominess by their added weight, and mine was well loaded. Number Seven ended up on my lap, and Number Ten was holding onto my neck in a most uncomfortable manner. I'm afraid I lost my temper then. An Oriental wouldn't have, I'm sure, but I am still a Caucasian and I have their weaknesses — and at this point my White patience reached its limit.

"I'm afraid that I threw him physically from my car. He landed near his own vehicle, shook his head and then smiled again. He again removed the notebook from his pocket and said as he scribbled, 'assaulting an officer.'

"I meanwhile, got back into my vehicle and had Number Five, who always acted as my secretary on these trips, take a letter which I dictated to the local Hand. I was too involved in this to notice what that rude fellow did for the next few minutes.

"Eventually, others in uniform like his arrived and offered us transportation, which I gratefully accepted. Obviously to make up for their companion's rudeness, they promised to have my car repaired and returned to me. They then kindly gave us food and lodging, but refused us communication with the local Hand. Although

they did promise to post my letter.

"Yes, sir. They promised that you would take me to the Hand if I told you my story. Why, I assure you, sir, it is the absolute truth to the best of my knowledge.

"I'm afraid that I must now insist that you immediately take me to the Emperor's Hand! This unwarranted delay weakens my Occidental patience, sir. I warn you! I know Lords in high places, some at the Emperor's Court at Shangtu!"

(*At this point the Defendant is informed and reminded that his fate is totally dependent on the mercy of the Court, the patience of which he is trying with his fanciful tales. His ravings, increase, going into a foreign tongue, presumably Chinese. When he is calmed down, questioning continues.*)

"No, I never heard of the Japanese League! Isn't Japan a province? No, I haven't heard of the United States, or the Confederacy, or the War of Secession, or even the Lone Star State. Sir, I am a student of history. It is my favorite hobby. Why, my study is filled with scrolls of the highest quality including some original manuscripts of the Third Dynasty. . . .

"No, I'm sorry, I've never heard of any of those places. . . .

"What? Didn't Marco Polo discover. . . But I thought that was a joke!"

END OF RECORD

Judgment: Defendent and "wives" were declared wards of the Court, and since no relatives could be located in either the C.S.A., or the U.S.A. Protectorate, or through the British Council in Washington-Lee, they were placed under the care of the Staff of the San Antonio Mental Institution.

Respectfully submitted,
Sam Houston Smith, Court Recorder for
Presiding Judge
Robert Lee Polk
Municipal Court of San Antonio, Texas Confererate States of America

END

CENOTAPH

by D. M. MELTON

Illustrated by Eddie Jones

I

When we fell away from the orbiting liner, I wondered if after all these years they had abandoned the flyboy. But the shuttleboat canted, and the pilot swung into a wide curve. Beside me, a civilian blurted, "What the hell!"

My reflex was to glare him down, but I stifled it. After all, how could this jerk know? I said, "Relax! Local custom. The timing is right for a swing past the Cenotaph." He looked confused so I added, "It started when they ferried down the first colonists. You don't have to salute."

But I was going to — with a little extra snap for Henry Mercer, who had fought it as best he could, screaming with his eyes at what he was doing and what was being done to him. And who said, "Thanks, Steve!" when I shot him.

The civilian frowned at the E on my collar and the initials on my bag. I looked out the port, feeling his eyes on the back of my neck. And presently I thought, *there, you megajerk! You could read it if you'd bother to look! Jasan MacKenzie, Henry Mercer, Walter Kirby. Three guys who died, buying that shipload of colonists!*

He was blurting again. "Of course! The Cenotaph Satellite! There was an engineer, too, who nearly died. Lindsay! Frank Lindsay! And a Doctor, June Logan! And a pilot . . . . Holt . . . . now in your, in E-Service. And the C P . . . ."

I felt a temper storm start to flicker. *So! You've seen tapes! You*

know the whole story! But the flicker died when I felt my hand reach up and brush my shoulder. Yes, there was a Doctor Logan. She spotted that brush-off gesture before I did. She says I'm reminding myself not to carry a chip on that shoulder. But in spite of the brush-off there was temper enough left to make me cut off his question when he glanced again at the bag. I growled, "Yes. There was the Command Pilot, name of Mendes. Steve Mendes." *And don't judge me, jerk! You weren't there!*

I don't believe I said that out loud. I don't much, any more. Little Doc Logan tells me I'm the only one who ever *did* do any judging and to cut it out! And the civilian blurted on, friendly, well meaning, interested — not curious, there's a difference. Presently I brushed the shoulder again and leaned back, nodding. Okay, Mister. So maybe you aren't a jerk. Not a megajerk anyway. But you'll have to owe me that drink until tomorrow. I've a date tonight, and we don't talk much even among ourselves, at first, on those rare times when we can get together. No need. We're close, and for twenty-four nightmare hours we were closer than it's safe for humans to be.

But your mind covers up horror, or else how could you live? I'm the only one with a residual touch of guilt. I took them blundering into it.

No help for that. Everybody, from the Coordinator of Colonization on down, shares the blame. Which means, in effect, nobody. But once in, I might have gotten them out — all of them — if I hadn't been wearing that chip. By the time I lost it, we had all started screaming. And I was standing over Henry Mercer, with a gun in my hand, and he was saying, "Thanks, Steve!" You know what it's like, having a man thank you for that?

So Okay you — probably not a — jerk! So I growl because I see Henry Mercer's eyes every time I skip down here. But wait until those wing retros stop flaring, so you can see, and *look* down! Would you pick Mora II as a setting for sun-lit nightmares? Well, neither did we. Our first view was the one you have now, that same frothy coastline with the green-bordered bays. That day the sun was low and gleaming and to the west the wind was sweeping with a mile-wide brush of feather nimbus, painting the sea a shimmering orange and spattering great splashes of gold back over the green where the forest walks into the sand. Beautiful? As beautiful as it is now. Dangerous? What isn't, if you're careless.

But I wasn't careless. I had been in space five years, and I was still alive. Ergo, I wasn't careless. But one of my shoulders was heavy, with bright, new command bars and that chip. I was being watched. Exploration Department — the fabulous, infallible, sacrosanct BIG-E — was looking over my shoulder. A crag-faced, cold-eyed captain, with the Big E on his collar, kept repeating in one carefully tactful way after another, "Easy, Captain Men-

des. We don't yet know what happened to MacKenzie!"

Nuts! Jason MacKenzie was a ghost, a scratchy voice on a spool of wire!

So I took them in! And I didn't get them out!

Still, for the first hour, to come out of that Eden was the last thing we wanted. We touched down in a meadow that Jason MacKenzie's ghost-voice had described, and it matched his description, lush with low grass that smelled like new hay. We were laughing, all except crag-faced E-Captain Kirby, and it was my belief he had never laughed. Ellen Holt and I were pacing off an area for a prefab and breathing in that strange, heady new-hay aroma, acting like kids on a picnic, when the first of those sunlit nightmares hit me.

There was no warning, that time. One minute I was pacing and counting and watching the swing of Ellen's dancer's walk beside me. The next, I was stretched out on the grass, aware I'd been in a bad dream and relieved it was only a dream. I was squirming, too, for big Frank Lindsay was putting his weight into an arm lock.

I hadn't been out long; the sun was still gleaming, and our meadow still looked liked Eden before the snake. But something faceless was lurking just under the threshold of memory, scuttling back when I looked at it. Ever tense up at, well, "the quiet contemplation of beauty," when something unwanted leered at you? You ask how the hell did *that* get out and you push it back. I pushed this faceless thing, whatever it was, back and covered by growling, "Okay, Frank! Okay! I'll need the arm!"

Ellen Holt took the other arm and helped me up. That much, at least, I liked. But her indigo eyes were big, and she asked, "Steve, what happened?"

I frowned at her and they exchanged glances and she said, "You . . . . stopped counting and your face went blank and you started off toward that swamp area we saw coming down, north of us."

I remembered, then, and I asked, "How did you know where I was going?"

Crag-faced Captain Kirby, rubbing his jaw, grinned at me. "You were sure headed *somewhere*, Captain. It took Frank and me both to stop you."

I glanced down at a freshly skinned pair of knuckles. It was the first time I'd seen a grin on his craggy face and in spite of myself I grinned back. "You know, I've always wanted to punch an E-Man. But when I do, I can't remember it!"

He came back with a right, light answer. "We like the Navy, too. Our best people are the ones we steal from them."

Sometimes trivial things tilt the scale. That exchange might have eased the tension, saved some lives, except that when he spoke his left eyebrow arched. For that was when I should have hit the panic button. We could have made it then, probably. I felt in my bones that

something was wrong. But I just didn't like Walt Kirby, and I knew that's what he would want to do.

I wouldn't have liked him, of course, under any circumstances, not at first. We're all competitive. Why is it you look a guy in the eye and put muscle into your grip when you first meet him? You're being friendly? Nuts! The ape in you is wondering if you can take him. And Walter Kirby was a lot of things I wasn't. He was E-Service, to begin with. And he was six-one to my five-eleven. He had acquired that lean look you get living in one of those half-alive E-Ships out on the periphery while I had been "Moon-face" at the Academy. I lost the name, and my knuckles healed before I ran out of demerits; but it was touch and go. But Kirby had been out — away out and back — and this was my first deep jump in the Command Chair.

And the Co-Pilot's chair was on my mind, too. It had been assigned, with my conniving, to Ellen Holt. She was another of those slim, rangy types, with a face anything but craggy but a type much like — I often thought sourly — Walt Kirby. Even in flat heels, which she was always thoughtful enough to wear when she went to dinner with me, she walked like a dancer. She could zip herself into one of those floppy EVA suits without an ungraceful movement, which takes some doing. Ever have to turn your back on a Vice-Admiral who was hopping around trying to get the other foot started?

But I'd seen her watching Kirby in the mirror over the Command Boards, her indigo eyes warm in a way they had never warmed for me. Oh, he was the competition, all right!

And I'd been aware of him every second of the month he had been with us, except for a couple of minutes a week back, at planetfall. I had done an astrogation job I was pleased with, and when we winked out I had the warm feeling it was right. Ellen took a fast fix on the key stars and smiled, nodding. I checked the board to her, feeling smug, and called, "Well, there she is, Pioneers. MacKenzie's World. And right where he said to look."

II

All four of them crowded forward, but nobody spoke over a murmur until we were down to where Mora II hung in the screen like a fire and opal on black velvet. They gathered around a survey scanner, zooming in segments of the image for detail. Big Frank Lindsay, a six-two, shaggy-bear of an engineer, was checking watersheds and rivers. Standing as close as possible to him, as usual, was tiny, pert, straw-haired June Logan, MD, who was among other things doubling with us as a naturalist.

She touched Henry Mercer on the arm and pointed to a plateau area. Henry smiled like a shy gnome. He called himself a dirt farmer in search of dirt to farm, since there's sure none left on Terra. The little agron-

omist grinned. "You'll have to lift me some water into the high flatland, Frank."

I was grinning with them. This looked good. But I felt my face freeze again as my eyes caught the speculative look on E-Captain Kirby's face. He was frowning at our purple jewel as if he expected the colors to flow and take the shape of a hooded cobra. I felt my face flush.

"Well, Captain? Matches MacKenzie's log so far, doesn't it?"

The chip on my shoulder weighed heavy, for needling never reached him. He had the kind of confident air some men are born with, and it had been firmed to an aura by years of giving more orders than he took. He nodded courteously.

"That's not the point, Captain. The log is incomplete. It's what MacKenzie did *not* record that worries us."

I felt Ellen's slim fingers on my arm, but I was resentful enough that when big Frank turned to him I didn't stop it. Frank growled, "Come off it, Captain. Colonization is doing its own preliminary work this time, remember? That's why we're here, three months ahead of the big ship. And look at that planet. What could be wrong with it?

Kirby's left eyebrow arched. "Perhaps nothing. We just don't know. We didn't get a chance to check it out."

"Exactly! And that's what's griping your bosses. You know what? I think they're just being touchy about precious prerogatives, piqued purple because Mora II was snatched out of their hot little hands. When word got out, Colonization grabbed Mora."

That had been about the way of it. A ship, a scarred and pitted museum piece of a ship, had drifted into Sol's system, pulsing faint identification signals which took a shook-up sentry network thirty frantic minutes to identify. Even then, they didn't believe it. For the ship was a ghost, a flying Dutchman, an E-Ship long since recorded as lost without trace. It was checking in, with a survey report on an unnamed planet, a jewel of a planet as we now could see.

But, the survey was incomplete, the ship had crept home on atomics only, and to the wrong port. E-Service had long since moved out toward the fringe, and the pilot, Jason MacKenzie, had never heard of it. He had been sprawled on the deck, a recorder mike in one hand and an empty machine pistol in the other, for a little over a hundred years.

Everybody knew that story. And Kirby nodded agreeably to Frank. "You may be right. Every Department has its quota of stuffed shirts. I rate as one of the stuffiest, in some circles. But the fact remains we didn't get to check this one out. We didn't get his ship or his tapes until they had been handled."

"But what could the Terran Inspectors have missed?"

Kirby's eyebrow arched again. "We just don't know. There was dust, of a cell structure nobody had even seen, in the air filters. The cleanup

units must have functioned for a half century. And the ship was never phased into high drive. MacKenzie died on the deck, shooting at something. There were lead scars on the lock."

I had been intrigued by those marks. I had an old gun, newer by a century but similar to the one that made them. Mine was a good-luck piece, but I was diffident about it; I didn't show it around. It was clipped under my chair, and I was thinking about it when Frank voiced the old argument, the clincher.

"But the lead smears showed he was shooting after the lock had closed. And there was nothing there. He was ship-happy. The last of his tape was garbled!"

I put a stop to it then. It had all been hashed over on far higher levels than this. It had been decided to divert Voyager II, send an advance party — us — and if Mora II checked, bring in the colonists. The best the by-passed Exploration Department had been able to get was permission to ferry out an observer — Kirby — to go with the point barge.

So I cut it off. "Okay! Okay! We're going in!"

And Kirby helped. He wasn't above record monitoring and lab work. We did it right, by the book. For forty hours we orbited the troposphere, mapping and sending down homing scoop missiles which brought back air, water, soil and shreds of vegetation. And Mora II invited us in. We couldn't even find micro-organisms we couldn't cope with. Little Doctor Logan scoffed at us as babies and for every bug that looked doubtful punched a hole in an arm. "You're eager to get down, aren't you? Want to wait for a hypospray mix?" We grounded in that flaring orange sunset, and I put them to work.

And within an hour the first of those sunlit nightmares started me off on a zombie walk toward the swamp and left me feeling brain-washed.

We laughed that one off, put it down to strain, tension, the adjustment you have to make to any new landfall mega-years from home. You can get to feeling insecure when you realize how far from home you can get just within our own little dust-mote galaxy. By dinner we were a little on the ribald side with Henry Mercer's shy-gnome grin beaming as he boasted how he had slipped the bottle of Cabernet past me and my loading check list. I was glad he had. It was good wine. And when the glass fell out of my hand my last clear, if idiotic, thought was "What a waste!"

This time I didn't black out. I found I could fight it, pulling myself back by sheer will power, the way you can sometimes come out of a normal bad dream when you know you are dreaming and have to force your eyes open, concentrating every bit of will you have on the flexing of just one little muscle. The room gradually came back into focus, and suddenly I broke free. I surged to my feet when I saw it had also hit, and was holding, Ellen Holt and Henry Mercer.

They sat staring, but little Henry's eyes were screaming. Ellen fought it off and her eyes went to me and then to Walt Kirby. Her hands gripped the table, knuckles white; and she shook her head savagely, her cloud of black hair swirling and settling. When her eyes met mine again, they were sane and held recognition, touched with wonder and stark disbelief. But Henry couldn't handle it.

As I lunged around the table I heard Ellen's voice, speaking to Kirby, "I'm all right. Help Henry!" Then June Logan brushed past me, no longer a straw-haired bit of fluff looking up at her big engineer, but a doctor going about her work and get the hell out of my way, Captain Sir! She slammed the bell of a hypospray over an artery in Henry's neck; and the little man jerked, trying to pull away. Frank Lindsay tilted the table and spilled the trays to the floor as I lifted the little man and held him down. In a moment he quieted, his eyes stopped screaming and then closed as the drug hit.

I looked a question at June, and she said, "Deepsleep, Captain. He'll be comatose until dawn or later. I hit him pretty hard."

I had no chip on my shoulder for this little trooper, or for anyone else, now. And there was a look on her face. I said, "Don't go formal on me, June. We all know this isn't what we thought it might be when it hit me — a green commander's retreat from responsibility. That stuff you used is dangerous, so you had a reason" Do you know what this is?"

Her eyes grew dark. "No. But I've seen lab animals, harmless, friendly little fellows, and big, intelligent chimps, with that kind of look in their eyes. It happend during limbic system experiments, cortex imprint attempts. They went comatose, or they died."

I turned to Ellen Holt. Her eyes were wide and sober, too, but normal. She was another tough one. Survive to adulthood on Titan and then claw your way through the competition getting into and through the Academy on Terra, and you come out steady. I asked, "Can you remember anything?"

She turned to Kirby, and again I felt a flare from the newly lowered boiling point I had acquired. But she had a question for him, not a report. She asked, "Captain Kirby, did Jason MacKenzie have a wife?"

His eyes lit with interest, and his tongue touched his upper lip. I found my own lips were dry, too. He wasn't such a damn superman! I gritted my teeth in annoyance at myself as he answered, "Yes. Why?"

"I. . . . I must have read something about her or have seen a tape." There was a question in her tone, as if she were hoping he would agree. But he shook his head. "No photographs we know of. And nothing from his personal file has ever been published."

She turned to me then. "I. . . . I was afraid of that. In fact, Steve, I'm a little afraid, period. Hallucination is one thing, but I. . . . *remembered* her, his wife. And I . . . saw-felt-remembered . . . . myself on the deck of a ship, his ship. I've

seen it, but I've never seen one of those old machine pistols. But I was using one. I was shooting at something that was flowing and shapeless, but changing shape. The gun jammed, and I slapped it and cleared it. *I knew how to clear it!*"

"You would in a dream or hallucination."

"I suppose so. But I was shooting at . . . . myself. I could feel the slugs hitting *me*! It hurt, and I was fearful and enraged. And then there were flashes which I simply couldn't understand. Then you, Steve, seemed to be with me, too; and I found I could pull away, and I sould see the room again."

The five of us stood silently, staring at each other, glancing now and then at the deeply unconscious Henry Mercer. Did I say it's pointless to second-guess? It is. But that was when I should have picked up the ninetenths dead Henry Mercer, yelled for the rest to follow and then yelled at the autopilot for three G's straight up and ignored countermands! We might still have made it.

But I waited. I turned to Kirby and asked, "Do you people in Exploration know anything about this planet we don't know?"

He shook his head firmly. "No, Captain. Except for Jason MacKenzie, a hundred years ago, no Exploration people have been here to our knowledge. Anld since this . . . . hallucination, or whatever it is . . . . has not hit me as yet, you know more about it than I do. But I believe we should pull out."

"I thought so, too. But I was proud. I walked, I did not run, to the nearest exit. I said, "So do I. Daylight, we'll load the essentials back into the barge and get back to Voyager and the hospital. Henry needs help, and this place needs a going over by some of your experts."

Understatement of the century. Long before daylight we had all gone into that nightmare state — some helpless, unable to move, some of us walking, silently screaming zombies.

For very soon we were past screaming aloud. Did you ever dream of falling? Knowing, in that half-awake state, that if you don't wake yourself up before you hit you will die? You can live with that. You *know* you will wake up. All those people who die in their sleep die from other causes. Your own nightmares, the kind that psychiatry scrubs clean and hangs out in the sun for you to contemplate at leisure, you can live with. They're made up of your own fears and memories, distorted, twisted into horror, but horror that is expressed in symbols which are also yours, of your own imagining.

These symbols were not ours and were not imaginable. They weren't the vaporings of the hydrogen cyanide scum of our own seething, lightning slashed little mud-ball. These symbols had their genesis in some unspeakably alien kind of primordial slime.

I came out of it, partially, at daylight and found I was dumbly watching another nightmare being

acted out, found myself watching a shaky, shambling Henry Mercer and then following him. He shuffled blindly, to and into the barge, and I stood in a sweating, trembling state of ambivalence, knowing I should stop him but stomething in my mind approving every move he made, urging him on.

He was slow, still burdened I suppose by the drug left in his bloodstream and certainly burdened by the horrors in his mind. And he was disarming us. Methodically, he gathered up every weapon we had, one by one, even to June Logan's anesthetic dart gun she used to collect lab animals. One by one he made a pile of them, on top of the barge autopilot. Then he came to me and lifted the ruby jewel light-beam chopper from its holster.

I did scream, then, and nearly blacked out trying to move first an arm and then a finger to stop him. Kirby was beside me by then, his own eyes haunted, no longer the cold-eyed, calm-faced, deep-jump pilot. I found I knew a great deal about Kirby, what he had seen and done, what he was capable of doing, what kind of a man he was — quite a man, I thought. It was being. . . . reflected. . . . back to me from. . . . somewhere. Ellen Holt was there, somewhere in the boat, approaching. I seemed to know a great many things about her, too. June Logan was somewhere. . . . not near. . . . with Frank Lindsay. Lindsay was a . . . . blank. . . . gray. . . . and Logan was part woman, part doctor, trying to help him.

But I also found I could move. I couldn't move toward the still shambling Henry Mercer. I had to watch him, with even an occasional sickening flash of something like approval, as he carefully set the chopper he had taken from me and turned it against the pile of weapons, methodically cutting them and the autopilot and the subspace radio beside it, to smoking slag.

But I could move back, away from him. I found I could make my hands do as I told them, although the effort made cold sweat break out over my body. I concentrated on one hand and made it slide under the pilot chair and grip the old weapon, my museum piece, good-luck charm and bring it up.

I called, "Henry! Drop it!" He looked around, a flicker of recognition in his eyes. My own mind reeled suddenly, but I found I could grind my teeth and keep my vision clear. I saw recognition fade from the little man's eyes and saw his eyes slide past me and focus on Ellen, who was standing beside me. Then he looked at me, and his voice was hoarse, barely over a whisper.

"Useless. . . . all but one. The others are. . . . weak. . . . mad. . . . hold back. . . . "

He brought up the chopper, its glittering jewel centering on Ellen at my side, while I kept shouting, "Henry! Stop it! Drop it!" His eyes were screaming again, and his thin hand was tightening on the grip when I shot him.

My mind reeled again, and I thought I felt the lead slug slam

•EDDIE JONES•

into my own chest. Then I was standing clear headed and breathing hard, watching the little man, slumped against the wall where the slug had driven him. His thin body tensed, and I called to him again when he used what must have been the last of his strength to lift one arm and drop the chopper into the heap of smoking slag. Then his face crumpled, and he looked like a child who has been slapped for something it doesn't understand. That look passed as Ellen choked a sob and dropped to her knees beside him. He looked up as she took his hand, and then he looked at me.

He was Henry Mercer again, the little farmer with the shy-gnome face who had grinned because he had slipped an over-weight bottle of wine past me. He said, "You held out a gun, Steve. Good boy." He coughed lightly and raised a hand to wipe his lips. Then he smiled again. "Thanks, Steve."

Ellen looked up, her face broken, and whispered, "He's dead." I looked down at the gun, and she must have seen on my face what was in my mind for she cried, "Steve! You didn't kill Henry Mercer. You killed a. . . . fragment. . . . of something else."

Her eyes held mine for an instant. Then they slid past me and widened with fear. But this time it was sane, normal human fright and disbelief. Her scream, when it came, was not from a nightmare but was a full-throated cry of protest and warning. "Walt! No! Steve, look out!"

I was slow. Kirby, his craggy face all cold purpose and completely void of the nightmare look, chopped my wrist with one hand and with the other grasped the old pistol. I wheeled and aimed stiffened fingers at his solar plexis, missed and went for his eyes. I brought up an arm to ward off a chop at my neck, caught his throat with the edge of my hand and saw him grimace and choke. But it was a wrong move. It left me open, and he threw me off balance with a swing of his hip. Something, the barrels of the old gun, the edge of his hand, took me across the temple; and lights flared and then went out.

I came out of it with a throbbing headache which faded and a crimson rage which pulsed and flared. The scuttling half-memories were no longer leering at me. I started to surge up from the table and found June Logan, all doctor and no damn nonsense, had a hand on my shoulder. She ordered, "Stay put, patient. I'm in command in this little area. Captain Kirby seems to be in command elsewhere. He's been in touch with the source of our trouble, too. But he has learned its language — or it has learned his!"

There was contempt in her tone. Kirby was sitting alone at the other end of the room, his face more cold and craggy than ever, with my gun on his knee. He said, "She's right, Captain. How much can you remember?"

"Enough to know you weren't in any zombie state when you took

me. I'll see you in court for that, if I don't kill you first myself!"

His eyebrows arched again. "Good! I hope you're intelligent enough to see that that last is what you may have to do. Not that I have any intention of permitting it. But it would show you are bright enough to be useful."

The rage simmered down, leaving me cold and wary. "Useful to *us,* you imply. You've thrown in with that. . . . that. . . ."

"That what, Captain?"

I felt Logan's hand grip my shoulder, and I heard Ellen say, "Don't Steve!" My eyes must have screamed like Henry's for an instant. But it was from finally acknowledged awareness. I heard myself whisper, "I don't believe it!"

"You'd better believe it, Captain. It's as real as a Prycon Plague virus, blown up a thousand times. It's a bug-eyed monster without eyes. It doesn't need them. It is all eye, all brain, all body, as needed. Effective form."

I heard him, but it didn't register. I said stupidly, "There's something out. . . . in that swamp."

I could see-sense-feel-remember—there was no one word. I had been a *part* of something. . . . alien. Something that had been here for — there was no way of measuring the time. There were fragments of some kind of — ship? — something that had . . . . encysted . . . . it, at the bottom of that swamp.

Kirby smiled coldly. "Shakes you, doesn't it? But we had to meet alien life somewhere, sometime, Captain. It happened to be here. Doctor Logan agrees with me that any kind of life than *can* evolve sooner or later *will* evolve, somewhere. This form came into being in another galaxy, before our own galaxy was formed."

I forced myself so calm down, and I looked around at June. She nodded. "You'll remember it, Steve, if you let yourself. It 'sees' — that's not strictly accurate — whenever it needs to with its whole body. In its natural state its mind is part of a communal mind, aware of everything any one individual comes in contact with, sharing everything with all other individuals."

"What is it doing to us?"

She removed her restraining hand. "Experimenting, I think. There were two, originally, and this one learned something when MacKenzie found them. Learned that ants can bite. Our Captain there points out, and I agree, that nobody except a madman deliberately steps on ants. But this thing wants to get home. And the Captain also points out that if *we* had to climb up an anthill to an escape capsule, we wouldn't concern ourselves much about how many ants we crushed."

I was thinking again, and this time I did surge up off the table. Kirby's fingers tightened on the pistol, and he grated coldly, "I know! I'll have to kill you first! I can, you know. But not first. I need you, and to keep you under control I'll start with Doctor Logan. Anyway, you last!"

I didn't want to believe it. I said,

"Kirby, it has *you* under some kind of control. Like Henry."

June said, "No, Steve. It doesn't control us. But when it shares its thinking, its motivation, with us, some — Henry for one — aren't strong enough to override it."

"The effect is the same."

"In a way, to some degree. It is a multiple body with a communal mind. But with us the result is a sort of confused paralogia. We turn — autistic — confuse fantasy with reality. Henry wasn't able to keep from following its motivations. And Frank. . . . fought it so hard he. . . . well, Frank is insane, I hope not permanently. Apparently the rest of us are in some way stronger."

I turned to Kirby, who was still smiling coldly. I grated, "And you, Captain, seem strongest of us all. You made some kind of deal with it, in the hope of saving your skin."

"Let's say I appear to have more resistance than any of us. And I'm certainly not confusing fantasy with reality. I have a trait it believes will be useful. It has no feeling at all, naturally, about the loss of an individual. It has noted that I, too, am willing to sacrifice an individual."

I felt myself frowning at him, no longer clouded by anger. He was being wary of his words, and it followed the thoughts behind them. This just wasn't right. I found I was myself being careful, too. "What are you going to do, Kirby?"

"I'm going to try to help it get home."

"How? That barge out there wouldn't even get back to Terra, much the less to another galaxy."

"True. But the barge could be rigged to move under manual controls, out far enough to intercept the colony ship. *That* drive might do it."

The Colony Ship! Five thousand people, some of them children! A surge of adrenalin turned the room crimson, and I came up out of the chair.

Kirby called sharply, "Watch it, Captain!" I lunged toward him, and he flicked a hand and loosed an echoing shot. Horrified, I whirled around to see Ellen Holt standing pale but unhurt against the wall, the mark of the slug making a gray smear by her head. Kirby repeated, "Watch it, Captain. The bolts from this old crossbow of yours ricochet."

I was still peering through a red mist. "Kirby, you can't do that! The 'anthill' you're going to help that thing climb has five thousand people in it. Half of them will go insane at first contact. They'll all die, eventually! No! Somehow, some of us will wreck the barge!"

"Precisely. They all die, eventually. What's the alternative? You force me to kill all of you, and I wait until the big ship sends someone down to investigate. I use that barge. It might even be simpler. In any event, that thing will get aboard."

The crimson mist dissipated, and I felt wary again. "Maybe not, Kirby. Somehow I'll wreck the drive on this barge."

He laughed then, the first time I had ever heard him. "Watching

you and Holt on the way out here, I thought you might possibly be potential recruits. Now I wonder. Use your head, Captain. You can't disable that drive unit and you know it. You haven't the tools for it. The worst you could do would be to booby trap it, disconnect and bypass the dampers, so the drive would surge. I'll be on guard against that. Any rewiring you could do I could undo."

Then he gave us a cold, mirthless smile and backed out of the room. We watched as he walked purposefully north, toward the swamp. There was a moan from the drugged Frank Lindsay, and June hurried to him. I sat down weakly, feeling wrung out, and turned to Ellen Holt. She, too, looked done in, with sick disappointment showing on her face. I said dumbly, "He just walked away. As if. . . . as if . . . . hell's chiming bells, Ellen, I learned a lot about that guy while we were all drowning in that cerebral slime. This isn't like him!"

Ellen smiled sadly, shaking her head. "No, it isn't. Or like any of us." I guess we were both on the edge of hysteria and trying to escape from this dead-end trap, for when she smiled faintly and said, "I learned quite a lot about you, too, Steve." I blushed. She went on, "I take it as a compliment, Steve. What woman wouldn't? You're something of a man yourself. You wouldn't do what he says he intends to do, and neither — a paradox, Steve — neither could he!"

I looked around at her. "Let's go over it, Ellen. There's a piece missing. He was needling me — something he never did even when I was trying my best to puncture him. He kept telling me to smarten up, use my head."

She caught her breath, and I believe she thought of it at that instant, as I did. My voice dropped. "Why did he point out that we couldn't wreck the barge — that the worst we could do was booby trap it?"

She met my eyes. "Why did he point out that he was of one mind with that thing in at least one way — a willingness to sacrifice an individual. Is that what you mean, Steve?"

I came to my feet, feeling cold. "Yes. He couldn't do it himself and he didn't dare tell us directly. He *wants* us to booby trap that drive! Come on!"

We went at it, with dragging feet and reluctant minds. June stayed with the drugged and incoherent wreck that had been big Frank Lindsay, and Ellen went with me to the barge. We cleared away the now cold fragments of slag which had been the autopilot, and the communicator and our weapons. The drive would lift, on manual. And we rigged a manual, one that would allow low level manuevering and would even let the barge lift to perhaps a fiftieth of a diameter. But when the main drive cut it it would surge — spend itself in one gigantic shove — more G's than had ever been tested.

We worked carefully, our fingers and palms damp, watching each

other for telltale signs that the. . . . thing. . . . might be moving in on one of us again. Once Ellen whispered, "He. . . . must be keeping it . . . . busy." She kept under control, her fingers reluctant but sure, until the last plate had been brazed back in place. Then she dropped the torch and buried her face in her hands. She said tautly, "Steve do you realize exactly what we're doing?"

I yelled at her, for I had to convince myself, too. "We're saving five thousand people. We're keeping that thing from any possible chance of getting home with knowledge of where and what we are. We're making it possible for him to do his job!"

She stood up and carefully put away the torch. She looked around the control room until her hands steadied. Then she took my arm with both her hands and started toward the port. Outside, she said, faltering, low voiced, "Steve, I'm not as strong as I thought. I'm going to have to blame somebody else for my part in this or lose my mind. I'm going to have to hate you, Steve, for a while. Hate you like fury."

But she held on tightly while we walked back to the prefab. And she took my arm again when we saw him stride out of the woods and across the meadow toward the barge.

She then whispered, "Look! He's thrown away the gun. He would have to. It wouldn't have let him near. It. . . . remembers MacKenzie."

The barge lifted, hovered and then swung away over the woods. Presently it returned, still low. It tilted, as if in salute, and then lifted, straight up, gathering speed. We waited, tense, the tension growing. And there was one more nightmare.

It was merely reflection at first, as if the alien had casually flicked us a "glance" in passing. I could feel a query, a speculation, and could sense the reassurance of Kirby's thought that there was danger in the barge, but that he knew of it and could cope with it. But soon there was a stronger probing as the thing, suspicious, flared at us. Ellen gripped my arm and cried out, "No!" But it had touched us, enough to learn, even though we tried to hide it, that what he had done to the barge was done because we believed Kirby had wanted it.

There was rage then, in the alien's mind, and there was the real, almost tangible, awareness of Kirby fighting back, trying to make his hands move to the drive switch. It went on . . . . endlessly. . . . with Kirby's struggle raging and faltering and the alien's mind a maelstrom of rage. We tried, our futile best, to help, and I found my nails cutting into my palms as my hands clenched.

Then, incredibly, there was a weakening in the storm of alien rage, a faltering, a dilution. Awestruck, physically sick and trembling, we sensed that some of the alien patterns were blurring, taking a different form, shaping into new paths. There was something

from another will, another entity, two others, interfering. But they were not ours!

We asked ourselves, later on, if we imagined it. I don't know. But there came an instant when we seemed linked together, and we could sense triumph and when we sensed or felt or imagined the same words, subtly archaic, a "voice" with a ring in it: *"You were a long time on the way, Captain! You guys going soft? Let's you and I and this gutsy little farmer here take this thing! On the count! NOW!"*

And on the pulse of that exultant, "NOW!" we *felt* Kirby's fingers move — that final fractional inch — and there was a flare in the darkening sky. A flare — and then nothing.

I found I was alone, more alone than I had even been, anywhere, with a sobbing girl at my side who released my arm and crumpled like a doll. I sat down beside her and pulled her head over against my shoulder, and we waited there in the growing starlight and listened, after a while, to the night sounds in the empty meadow. After a long time she drew in a great, shuddering breath and whispered, "I'm all right now, Steve. I don't need to hate you any longer."

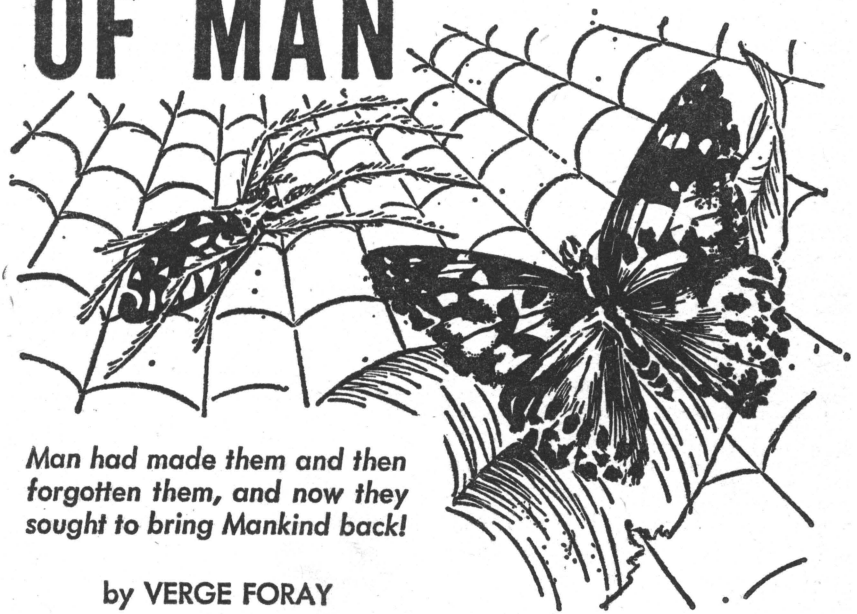
We waited a month for the Colony ship barge, and another for the big ship itself to go into orbit. Then an E-Ship settled in the meadow and a grim-faced Commodore took our reports and questioned us, at our insistence, under drugs which gave us total recall. It left the Commodore pale and the technicians shuddering. They found and raised the — ship — that had incysted the — thing. And it was an unprecedented *second* satellite, tossed out by the colony ship, which carried communications.

The first was the small one we just passed, a golden sphere with three names engraved on it. It rates a salute, from any who pass this way.

What? Sure. Sure. But not tonight. Tomorrow. You'll know us, a big engineer with snow white hair and a haunted look in his eyes. There'll be a straw-haired woman who doesn't look in the least like a doctor clinging to his arm. You'll know the other woman, too, black hair, blacker eyes. She's thinned out now — as I have — from living in one of those half-alive E-Ships out on the fringe. She walks like a dancer, and she'll be about my height because she'll be wearing low heels. We'll have that drink with you.

END

THE CREATURES OF MAN



Man had made them and then forgotten them, and now they sought to bring Mankind back!

by VERGE FORAY

Illustrated by WEHRLE

I

The butterfly with a wounded wing glided clumsily down to settle on a leaf by the spider's web. The spider knew he was there, but she was drowsy and ignored him for a time. The butterfly waited patiently, knowing that a hastily aroused spider tends to be bad tempered. Patience was often desirable in mingling with the lesser creatures of Man, and the butterfly was, after all, in no hurry.

At last she turned to regard him with her principal eyes. Her dark mind spoke: "Was that your caterpillar that fell in my web near dusk yesterday?"

"Yes, I was its sire," he replied.

"Delicious," she commented lazily.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," he said.

She moved across her web to study him more closely. "Your left hind wing has a fracture in it," he said. "How did that happen?"

"I was watching the metal-secreters being attacked by the bees. One of them ejected at me and hit the wing."

"Hold it out," she directed. He lowered his wings, and she examined the broken area with her feet and mandibles. "I can taste the metal," she remarked. "This won't be hard to fix so it will mend straight. Who won the fight?"

"The metal-secreters retreated into their flying hive, but then they destroyed many flowers, along with some of the bees and other insects, by ejecting flaming poison from their hive." He could feel and observe the spider's repair work on his injured wing while he conversed with her. The pain was a minor annoyance.

"Are the metal-secreters creatures of Man?" she asked.

He hesitated — unusually — before answering: "That is beyond my knowing. Whatever they are, they are outside my knowing of the now-moment. I'm trying to learn more about them."

"So am I," she replied snappishly, "but hardly anybody bothers to tell me anything. They seem to think I can sit here all day and have as big a knowing as any creature that flies. All I get is bits and snatches when somebody thinks past me. Man himself could return, and I wouldn't know it unless he lit in my web!"

"I'll tell you about the metal-secreters, then, while you fix my wing," said the butterfly. In a way he felt sorry for the spider, because her complaints were largely justified. Man had favored her with some intelligence, but far too little for her to achieve a real knowing of the now-moment. In fact, she had only a vague notion of what the phrase really meant.

Butterflies, the most favored of the creatures of Man, had the fullest knowing, thanks in part to their varied and highly developed sensing abilities and to the routine thought-sharing which took place between all members of the order of Lepidoptera. Too, the central nervous system of butterflies was organized for extreme efficiency in the use of stored knowledge — not for remembering, which any of the favored creatures, including the spider, could do very well, but for defining the now-moment. The butterfly had a clear conception of what was taking place, from instant to instant, at all points in the populated portion of the world. It knew the now-moment.

Perhaps the prime contributor to the butterfly's knowing was its long period of development as a caterpillar.

This period lasted most of the seventy-four days — each day five hundred hours in length — of the warm season of the world's year. During that period the caterpillar was a passive receiver of all the traffic of thought taking place around it. It read and stored the knowing not only of butterflies and moths but of

bees and even ants. The caterpillar could not act upon any of this knowledge. Indeed the central nervous system contained within the larva was actually two separate systems — one listening detachedly while waiting to serve the adult butterfly, and the other a primitive system guiding the caterpillar through its mindless life of eating and growing. This latter system vanished completely later, during the world's long winter of utter cold, to serve as one more morsel of warming fuel while the encapsulated insect was in the pupa stage. When warmth returned and the world sprang alive with soaring flowers, the adult butterfly emerged from its wrappings, fully grown and educated.

Only the moth shared so favorable a life cycle, and the moth's need for special sensory perception for night flying apparently left less room for intellectual development. In any event, the moth's knowing was less full than the butterfly's. Third in knowing were the bees, and fourth the ants. The spiders ran a poor fifth, but were certainly far superior to the many unfavored creatures needed to complete the world's ecology — the aphids, beetles, termites and various others. And since knowing the now-moment was beyond the spiders' abilities, they used their knowledge for the lesser function of remembering. They took considerable pride in their memories, which they claimed were superior to those of more favored creatures, but the truth was that the higher insects seldom bothered with remembering. The now-moment, to a butterfly, was sufficient.

But, to please the curiosity of the spider, who was repairing his wing, the wounded butterfly exercised his memory of the day's now-moments sufficiently to recount the story of the metal-secreters.

"Their hive flies, you know," he told her, "and is made of a hard metal. I have no knowing of how it is organized inside, or of how it flies without wings. It came down shortly after sunrise today and settled on top of the Rock Hill."

"How far from here is that?" she asked.

"About half a mile west," he said. "It's a small mountain of solid rock in my hunting ground." He was trying to keep the story simple for her, not going into detail about the kind of metal used in the flying hive or the geological nature of the Rock Hill. "The ants saw it land. When the creatures in it unplugged its door, the ants tried to go in and know what was there. But the creatures ejected metal at the ants and killed several, so the ants retreated. When they did, some of the creatures came out of the hive, still ejecting metal at the particular ants who were carrying the bodies of those already killed. Well, you know how ants are when somebody tries to take food away from them . . . ."

"I'm the same way," she interrupted.

"They swarmed back, and the creatures retreated into their hive and plugged the door. The ants were then able to carry away their meat."

"What are those creatures like? Would they be good meat?" the spider asked with considerable interest.

"They are hard to describe to you, since I can't make you see pictures. They are big. Their bodies are almost six times as long as an ant's — twice as long as mine. They move about in a very peculiar manner. They have no wings, so of course they crawl on their legs, which they have too few of . . . ."

"So do you, for that matter," sniffed the spider.

"They crawl somewhat like a mantis, or at least more like a mantis than like us. Their bodies are thicker than the mantis, though. And I suppose they would be good meat, unless they contain poison metal salts."

"I'd like to try one," she murmured half to herself. "If I wasn't in such a good location right here, I would go hang a new web close to their hive and try my luck."

"They may be intelligent," the butterfly reminded her.

"If they are they wouldn't get caught in the web," she answered; and added rather gloatingly, "And for all your *knowing* you don't know if they are even creatures of Man."

"That's true," he conceded.

"What happened after the ants left?"

"The bees came. They are more disturbed than the ants were, because it is a hive as well as an emptiness in their knowing. It could mean competition for the bees. They swarmed around the hive for a while, until it began ejecting metal at them. They flew some distance away and concealed themselves among the flowers. Nothing more happened for perhaps twenty hours, and the sun

was well above the horizon when some ants who were keeping watch saw the hole in the hive unplugged again.

"This time the ants and the bees stayed off the Rock Hill and kept their bodies hidden when five of the creatures came out."

"What good did they think hiding their bodies could do?" asked the spider. "Didn't they think the creatures have good senses?"

"That's what they did think," the butterfly answered, "and seemingly they are right. The metal-secreters never seem to eject at anything that cannot be sensed by vision. The bees and ants stayed hidden among the flowers while the creatures crawled down from the hill and began exploring the edge of the foliage. That was when I decided to fly over there and observe the creatures directly.

"When I arrived, the creatures had moved a short distance away from the hill, using some sharp metal extrusion from their upper legs to cut a path through the flowers. If they are knowing creatures, then our world is as concealed from them as the inside of their hive is from me, because they obviously did not know the bees were concealed all along one side of the trail, waiting for the creatures to get deep enough in the flowers for their retreat to be cut off. Some ants were waiting, too, hoping to get some meat for themselves.

"I approached from the side of the trail opposite from where the bees were hiding and arrived just as the bees moved in to attack. The creatures saw me first and kept looking up at me until the bees almost had them. Then they turned and started ejecting at the bees. I saw several bees go down, but only one of the creatures got stung. Evidently the creatures have very tough exoskeletons, made mostly of metal, and the bees could not find weak spots into which the sting could be inserted. Nevertheless, the creatures started back to their hive, dragging the stung one with them, and they finally made it — with bees and ants snapping and punching at them all the way back to the Rock Hill. I was still flying about observing, and as soon as the creatures were out of the flowers one of them ejected at me and hit my wing. I came here, and the creatures are all in their hive now. As soon as they were in, the hive ejected a flaming mass of poisonous substance onto the area where they had cut the trail. Luckily, the bees had scattered by then, and the ants were most of the way back to their nests loaded with ant and bee meat, so the fire did not kill very many."

The spider was almost through repairing his wing as the butterfly ended his account. With a delicate touch, she smoothed the surface of the hard-setting modification of web-stuff with which she had encased the major vein-fracture.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"Now?" he asked. "In the next now-moments? As soon as you say my wing is ready to be used, I'll take nourishment."

"That's not what I mean," she snapped impatiently. "I mean what about the metal-secreters."

A strange question, thought the butterfly. He queried the other butterflies, and they too agreed it was a strange thing to ask. So did the moths who, living on the night half of the world, were awake at the moment. One moth remarked that it was just the kind of question one might expect from a spider, whose life was one long introspection with insufficient introspecting equipment.

"Nothing," he answered at last. "Of course, I will continue trying to fit them into my knowing of the now-moment."

"If you could ever fit them in," she asked, "don't you think you could have done so by now?"

That "ever" was a meaningless, spiderish term. What personal significance could "ever" have to the butterfly, who had awakened and climbed from his pupa enclosure seventeen days before and who knew he would die fifty-five days from this particular now-moment, when the winter cold returned? "Ever" to a butterfly is one summer season; it is the same to a spider, but perhaps engrossed in her legends of memory she would not agree with that.

He answered her question: "Perhaps."

"In case of emergency," she recited, "a butterfly may call Man."

"That is true," he said.

"Then why don't you?" she urged. "This is an emergency, and you're a butterfly."

"Why is this an emergency?" he countered. "A few bees and ants have died before their normal time, and a few flowers have been destroyed in one tiny area. For the world as a whole, life continues as always for the creatures of Man."

The truth was that the butterfly — all butterflies — regarded Man as a rather mythic being. Man had doubtless once existed, but an accurate definition of his attributes was no longer available to his creatures. The clear picture of Man had been lost with the passage of thousands of years and thousands of generations. The act of calling Man, the butterfly felt, could not be integrated into his knowing of the now-moment.

"This is an emergency," the spider told him, "because you admit those metal-secreters are a blank spot in your knowing. When a butterfly admits something like that, it's an emergency!"

"If I called Man and he came," said the butterfly, "he would be another such blank spot. How do you know these two blanks would be mutually eliminating?"

"All I know is that we are creatures of Man," she huffed rather piously, "and we are supposed to call him in need. He brought us to this world and remade us and the flowers so that we could live here alone from him, because this world is not suited for Man's needs, and Man does not remake himself. The gravity of this world was too slight, and the air much too thick, for Man to dwell here in comfort, nor were the seasons suited to beings such as he, who may endure for a hundred years." (She was reciting again, the butterfly noted.) "He fitted us for this world, and gave it to us, but kept us for himself, as his creatures, to live for Man as well as for ourselves. We

have a responsibility to Man. You should call him."

"The old knowledge says we 'may' call him," retorted the butterfly.

"Yes, and we 'may' disappoint him, if he returns some day to find his creatures gone and the world filled with metal-secreting monsters!"

"The creatures in that hive won't find much metal to secrete if they try to live here," the butterfly responded. "Our stones contain mere traces of the heavy elements."

Though he was arguing with the spider, the butterfly was not at all sure he was right. The calling of Man was an event that had never occurred; thus it was difficult to fit into his knowing of the now-moment. But perhaps it was the appropriate action to take under the present circumstances. As the spider had reminded him, it was a recourse suggested by Man himself.

"I will go feed while I think about it," the butterfly agreed at last.

"Will you let me know what you decide?" she asked.

"Yes."

II

He took to the air and found his mended wing was as sturdy as ever — as he had known it would be. Flying to a group of flowers he had not yet visited, he lit on a tall, deep-cupped blossom and unrolled his proboscis. As he sipped the sweet nectar from the bottom of the cup he realized that he had made his decision.

There was no question about it being his decision to make. Butterflies do not vote. The others were, certainly, interested in what his decision would be, but he was the individual directly involved in the matter of the metal-secreters.

The strange hive was on his hunting ground. He had seen it himself and had been attacked by one of the creatures. He had discussed the situation with the spider. In short, this was his affair, and his ability to decide how to conduct it was as good as any other butterfly's.

He would call Man. The other favored creatures would assist him if he requested their help.

Having decided, he continued to feed for two hours. Man could not be called from his hunting ground — that had to be done at a special place hundreds of miles away. It was best to be well nourished before beginning such a journey. When his feeding took him close to the spider's web, he kept his promise to tell her what he was going to do. She haughtily approved.

The day was still younger than mid-morning when he took a last sip, climbed higher in the air than usual and began the long flight westward. He had never come this way before — in fact, he had never traveled far from his hunting ground in any direction. But he found nothing strange in the countryside below him, no wonderful new sights to see. He knew the now-moment, and what he saw was what he had known was there to see.

When he grew hungry after several hours of flight, another butterfly, a Swallowtail like himself, called invitingly: "Come down and feast

and rest. My flowers are suitable, sweet and plentiful." He accepted the offer and lighted in the other's hunting ground where he fed, napped and fed again until mid-morning. Then he resumed his journey.

He made five more such stops before the terrain began to change from the lush, slightly undulating plain into a more rugged and elevated landscape where the flowers grew in less abundance. He was approaching a towering range of mountains. As he climbed with the land, the atmosphere grew noticably thinner; breathing and flying required increased vigor, and his periods of rest became longer and more frequent. But he was nearing his goal.

He reached a spot near the upper end of a high valley, with only one more tremendous barren ridge to fly over. He had left the area in which butterflies lived and hunted far behind; at this elevation the flowers were too small and sparse to support the likes of himself in comfort.

He fluttered down to light on a rock near a beehive. Several bees came out and examined him with wonder. To their limited knowing he was a sight at which to marvel, gigantic in size and with wings the colors of many flowers. And he was a butterfly, which meant he was wise.

"You are welcome here, butterfly-who-is-going-to-call-Man," they told him, "though you will eat so much, doubtless, that you will set our population expansion program back at least a year. Never has a butterfly visited our hive before. It will please us to serve you well."

"I am grateful," he responded, "especially since you do not have plenty."

"What we have you will find good," they replied.

And he did. The bees fed him honey, and his knowing was shocked most pleasantly by its heavy richness and almost overwhelming sweetness. Never before, he realized, had a butterfly been so hungry and fed so deliciously. It was a wonderful and novel now-moment to know.

After he had been fed and had drunk from a shaded, icy spring, he napped by the water for several hours. Then the bees fed him more honey and, thoroughly invigorated, he began the last segment of his journey.

He needed all the strength the honey gave him. As he made his way up the steep final slope, the thinning air became hardly sufficient to sustain him, no matter how hard he worked his wings, and it seemed all but impossible to pump his abdomen fast enough to bring as much oxygen as he needed into his body. Long before he reached the summit he was reduced to making short, hopping flights of only a few yards at a time, from one ledge to the next, interspersed with rests for breathing.

The last fifty yards of the ascent he did not fly at all, but crawled. When he came in sight of the Nest That Man Left he was tempted to stop where he stood and sleep, but the chill in the air told his knowing that this would be unwise. He made his way clumsily over the leveled ground of the mountaintop toward the entrance of the rambling metal structure.

As he did so he realized that the Nest That Man Left was another emptiness in his knowing. That was not surprising, though, since it was at an unpopulated, unvisited location. His knowing told him only what the outer appearance of the Nest would be, and where it was to be entered. The inside was as blank as that of the metal-secreters' hive. With a sense of uneasiness in the face of the unknown, intensified by the strained condition of his body, the butterfly crawled to the entrance.

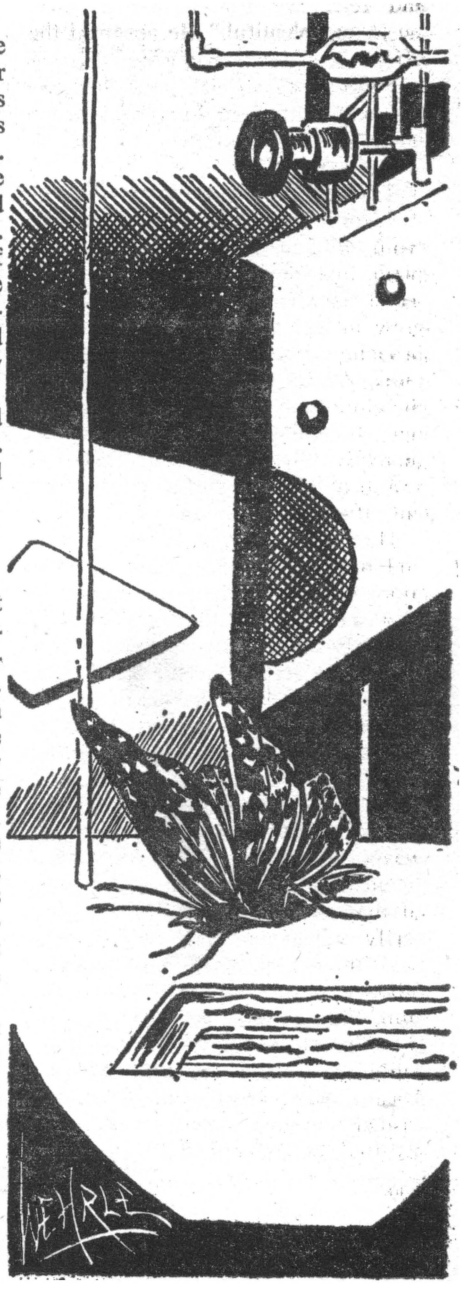
The Nest sensed his presence and opened the door as he approached. He went inside without a pause, and the door slid closed behind him.

III

The interior was dark at first but brightened immediately as overhead panels shifted to let in sunlight through a wide expanse of glass. The walls hissed as an oxygen-rich flood of air pressed in to bring the thickness up to a level the butterfly found comfortable. A trough in the floor gurgled and filled with water, and he drank gratefully. These events were all unexpected, of course, but there was a definite rightness about them. This was the way a butterfly should be received in the Nest That Man Left, and it was not difficult to place in his knowing.

The Nest addressed him: "You are a butterfly, and you are here to call Man." The mind of the Nest was shrouded, somewhat like that of the spider except for an absence of personality.

"Yes," the butterfly responded.



"I am the voice of the Nest, a contrivance that does not live but that can converse with you to a limited extent. Do you have injuries or unmet needs that are an immediate danger to you?"

"No." The butterfly's senses searched his surroundings while the voice addressed him, and he gained a partial knowing of the nature of the voice contrivance. Man had to be wise, indeed, to construct such a complex dead device and to shelter it so perfectly that, after untold thousands of years, it could still awaken and engage in a conversation of minds.

"Do butterflies continue to know the now-moment?" the Nest asked.

"Yes."

"That is an ability Man did not give me, and one that he lacks himself," the Nest told him. "Thus I do not know the nature of the emergency that brings you here. Nor do I know where Man is, nor what he may have become during the centuries since he made me, mutated your ancestors and departed."

"Man does not change himself, according to my knowing," commented the butterfly.

"Not intentionally, perhaps, but he changes nevertheless. He is a discontented being who, not knowing the now-moment, wanders and searches for new things to know. What he finds changes him, not in the orderly manner in which he fitted you for conditions on this world, but in ways that are unplanned and sometimes undesirable. Occasionally he finds something very damaging to him, something that darkens his intelligence and causes him to forget much of his learning from previous findings."

The butterfly struggled with this information. His difficulty was not that what the Nest told him was new. On the contrary, it was ancient; so ancient that it had been all but forgotten — dismissed as having no meaning to current knowing. It occurred to the butterfly that perhaps the creatures of Man had *wanted* to forget that Man could not know the now-moment, which implied that Man was inferior to themselves. But then, he quickly reassured himself, Man must have completely different abilities that made him superior — abilities so far beyond a butterfly's comprehension that the Nest would not attempt to describe them.

At last he addressed the Nest: "Then if I call Man, the being who responds may be unlike the beings who established the creatures of Man on this world. He may even have forgotten that he has such creatures as us."

"That is correct," the Nest responded. "Man instructed me to be sure you understood that before he was called. If he comes, the results will be unpredictable. You are to reconsider the nature of your emergency with this in mind and decide if your need for Man is sufficient for you to accept the uncertainties of his present nature."

This was a difficult decision indeed. The butterfly thought about it for several minutes before saying, "In essence, the emergency is an intellectural one. An area of blankness

has entered our knowing. Since Man does not know the now-moment, it is possible that we could not explain to him the nature of the emergency."

"That is possible," agreed the Nest. "In any event, unless Man has changed greatly, you will be unable to communicate with him directly. Man does not speak mind-to-mind, the way you and I are conversing, but through the use of special sounds he can emit, each sound being a symbol of a fragment of thought."

"Then how could we have ever communicated?" asked the astonished butterfly.

"Through intermediary devices such as myself," said the Nest. "You can talk to me and I can put your thoughts into the words of Man, like this." The Nest emitted, from a wall cavity, a complex series of noises.

The butterfly listened in stunned recognition. He had never heard such sounds before today, but as he had hovered over the metal-secreters earlier that morning just such noises, though dim and muffled, had struck his sensors. But Man was supposed to be ten-fingered — more manipulatory members than even the spider! And the metal-secreters had clearly been deficient in this respect, having only two pairs of legs.

The Nest was continuing: "Communication is rendered more complex by the use of differing sets of sound-symbols, called languages and by the fact that a given set of symbols tends to change with the passage of years to become an entirely new language. I probably would not know the sounds man uses today, but would have to communicate your thoughts, with some explanation, to a device similar to myself that Man brought with him, and that device in turn would speak to Man."

"Man uses metal extensively, does he not?" asked the butterfly.

"Yes. Metals were abundant on his, and your, original planet. He built his nests of them and other dead materials, and also his flying shelters in which he journeyed here and to many other worlds."

"What are fingers?"

"They are relatively small, slender extensions of Man's arms, his upper legs. They are useful for gripping and manipulating. He has ten of them, normally."

"I wish to call him," said the butterfly.

"Very well . . . The call is now being emitted. I do not know when he will arrive. He may have to come far, a journey of more than a day for his fastest shelter. Certainly, he cannot be expected to arrive within a hundred hours at best. As there is no food stored for you here, I suggest you return to your hunting ground to await him."

"My knowing is unsure," replied the butterfly, "but I believe Man to be quite close. I will wait outside, at least for a while. It is certain he will respond to the call?"

"If he does not," the Nest said, "he will have changed too greatly to be of any assistance to you. I am preparing to open the door."

The air thinned; the door opened, and the butterfly went out onto the mountaintop. This was the kind of

air Man could breathe without the protection of an artificial exoskeleton, the butterfly reasoned. Thus this mountaintop was the place where Man should be met by his creatures.

IV

He was hardly outside when the knowing came that the flying hive of the "metal-secreters" had lifted from the Rock Hill back in his hunting ground. It was hurtling toward him almost with the speed of a meteorite, but when it arrived it landed as gently as the butterfly could have descended onto a flower.

The Nest commented: "So your emergency was Man himself . . . They have a device with them to permit communication." Nearly an hour passed before the butterfly was addressed again: "A Man is coming out now. I have told him about this world."

The butterfly watched with a touch of awe as the Man came out of the unplugged hole in the flying hive. Without his artificial exoskeleton, but with most of his body covered with brightly colored woven material, he still looked very odd — but not like some freakish creature who could secrete metal. The butterfly's senses informed him that, without his woven coverings, Man would appear rather drab: pink all over except for a scattering of dark hair and for the eyes which were small and one-faceted.

Still, there was an austere attractiveness in the Man's appearance and a startling grace in the way he crawled, precariously balanced on his rear legs. The Men had looked less graceful earlier in the morning, using all four legs to push their way through the flowers and the attacking bees, or to climb the steep side of Rock Hill. Apparently Man was designed to crawl best over level, unobstructed ground.

The Man advanced to stand before the butterfly, his small eyes studying the insect as the insect studied the Man. The wings seemed to fascinate the Man. When held in a resting, vertical position their tips were approximately a third as high off the ground as the top of the Man's head.

A series of sounds came from the Man's mouth.

"He is asking your name," explained the Nest. "That is an abstract symbol you would use to identify yourself, as an individual, from the other butterflies. I have explained that, while butterflies have individuality, you have no use for names because of the way you communicate."

"You (Man) may give me a name if you wish," said the butterfly.

"No," said the Man. "If you need no name, you should not have one. How can I serve you in a manner that suits your need?"

"I do not know. I came to the Nest to call you because the flying hive was a blank in my knowing of the now-moment. Perhaps I expected you to destroy the hive, or cause it to go elsewhere. But the hive is your contrivance, and this is your world. Thus I have nothing to ask."

"This is *your* world, butterfly," contradicted the Man. "Long ago, men gave it to you and left. I'm beginning to realize why they went away, even though there must be

many mountains such as this on which men could live in comfort. We too must depart soon, for the same reason. And we will take our flying hive with us."

"The seasons of this world are not suited," the butterfly quoted, "for beings who live a hundred years."

"That is a minor problem," the man said. "Men are not as long-lived as you believe. Our hundred years, or season cycles, are very brief years compared to your own. This planet turns much more slowly on its axis and takes much longer to circle its sun than the planet that gave birth to both our species. Also, this planet's orbit is far more eccentric than that of our birth-planet, giving you brief, warm summers and very long, cold winters. Men restructured you genetically to fit in this environment as intelligent life. The ancient geneticists must have chosen you for this world because you metemorphose. You can survive the winter as a pupa or, in the case of spiders and some of the other insects, as an egg. That was long ago, according to the way man experiences time. We have lost all records of having populated this planet. Before our flying hive leaves, there is much about your life cycles we would like to re-learn."

"It will please us to tell you," said the butterfly. "There is a spider at my hunting ground who, I am certain, will delight in talking to you for a whole day." The butterfly was somewhat puzzled by the workings of the Man's mind. Evidently the Man had started to tell him the reason why the Men who had shaped the creatures had not stayed, and why now these Men would have to depart quickly. However, the Man had strayed from the subject. But perhaps the butterfly knew the reason without being told.

"Now that we know what the flying hive is," he said, "its blankness is far less disturbing. It is quite tolerable, in fact. You need not go quickly on that account."

"That is not why we must leave," said the Man. "If it were, we could solve our problem quite easily by allowing you to enter the flying hive and investigate its contents until it ceased to be a blank. You may do that, anyway, for that matter."

"Then why must you go?" the butterfly asked.

The Man replied hesitantly. "Because it may not be good for men to associate too much with you. Not bad for you, but bad for men. Tell me, butterfly, do you know that on the birth-planet men regarded you as the most beautiful creature in existence?"

"No."

"Neither did I — since I had never seen a butterfly until today. Nor even a picture of one. That is the reason for the incidents earlier this morning. I wish to apologize for not recognizing you and the ants and bees."

"That's all right," replied the butterfly. "We didn't recognize you either."

"Anyway, you are the most beautiful creature that I've ever seen on any world, excepting of course certain females of my own kind," the Man went on. "And in your mutated form, which has increased your

size and given you a unique intelligence, you impress us as being — totally admirable. Man sees no other creature that way. And what men admire, they try to imitate in themselves."

He hesitated then finished hurriedly and almost angrily: "If men stayed here, they would wind up being fake butterflies, trying to look and think like you when they can do neither. It's best for us to stay away from your world and continue being men, whatever that may be."

The butterfly found this speech astonishing to the point of incomprehensibility, the final words no less than what came before. "But you made us as we are," he protested. "Surely you know your superiority to us."

"No."

"You do not know the now-moment," the butterfly persisted, "but isn't that for a reason similar to my not remembering in the manner of the spider? The thought comes to me that perhaps you combine remembering and knowing in a way I cannot comprehend, to know all moments that have been or will be."

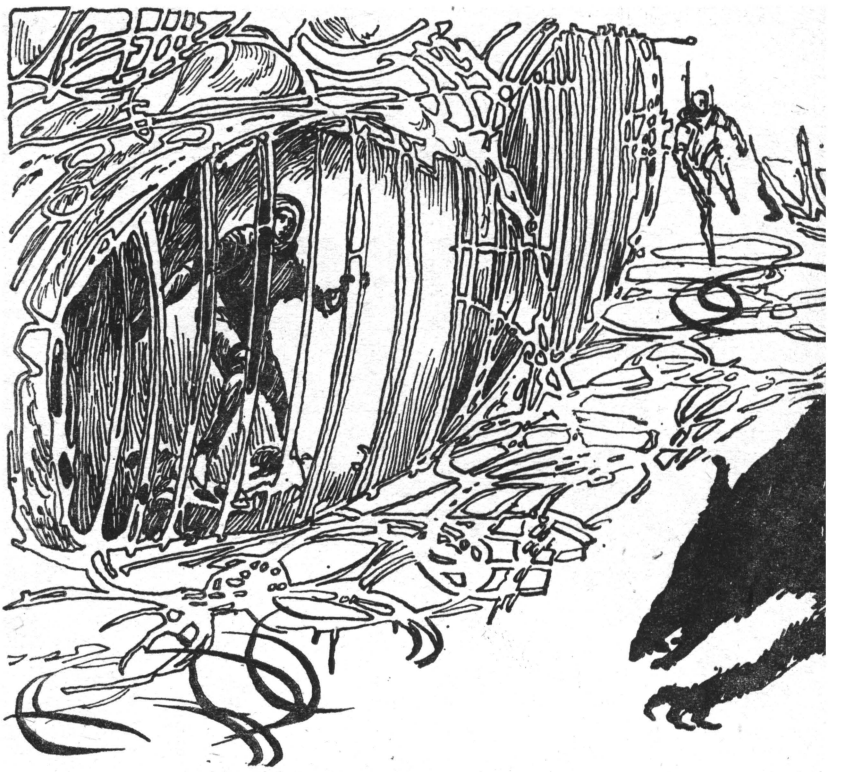
The man made a sound signifying amusement. "That is a flattering thought. It attributes to us the supreme knowledge we sometimes imagine in our own gods — the hypothetical beings who created all life. No, we don't have that kind of knowing. And the fact that you have part of it is a reason why men must avoid you. They would tend to consider you half-gods."

This, to the butterfly, was monstrous. "But surely you must have some form of knowing . . . " he began.

The Man was shaking his head. "Men have seen much and learned much. And we know much. But not as you know."

Suddenly the butterfly understood and gazed at the Man with awe. To know the now-moment, he realized dimly, was a complete thing, and what was complete was limited to its totality. Man's knowing had no completeness — no limits — because Man did not even know himself.

Breathing hard in the thin mountain air, the butterfly marveled at the boundless wonder of Man. END



The Man in the Maze

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

No one could winkle Muller out of his maze — but worlds would crumble if they failed!

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

On the planet Lemnos is the abandoned city, millions of years old, of a long-vanished alien race. The city is in the form of an eight-zoned maze, and the outer zones of the maze are studded with boobytraps so ingenious that only one human being has ever penetrated them. He is Richard Muller, formerly a troubleshooter for Earth's government, now a bitter self-exiled man huddling alone in the heart of the maze. More than a decade earlier, Muller went as man's first ambassador to the in-

habitants of Beta Hydri IV — the only other intelligent aliens known to exist in the galaxy. Muller went and came home mysteriously altered by the Hydrans so that no member of his own kind could bear to be close to him. Those who came within range got an agonizing dose of Muller's involuntary telepathic radiation. When he realized what he had become, Muller took refuge in the maze of Lemnos.

Now Earth has need of him again. A ship landed on Lemnos, breaking nine years of solitude for Muller. It carries Charles Boardman, an elderly, crafty diplomat, and young Ned Rawlins, naive and ambitious. Rawlins, who knows very little of what Boardman wants Muller for, has been picked as the older man's catspaw. His job is to get inside the maze, make contact with the misanthropic Muller and persuade him to come out. Entering the maze proves difficult and hazardous; but with the aid of a computer and a supply of expendable robots, they get inside. Boardman settles down in one of the middle zones; Rawlins goes forward, hunting for Muller; he's vaguely aware that the fate of mankind may depend on how well he carries out his assignment.

VII

Muller had often been alone for long periods. He had enough cubes to keep him diverted here and enough challenges surviving in this maze. And memories.

He could summon remembered scenes from a hundred worlds. Men sprawled everywhere. Delta Pavonis VI, for example: twenty light-years out and rapidly going strange. They called the planet Loki, which struck Muller as a whopping misnomer, for Loki was agile, shrewd, slight of build, and the settlers on Loki, fifty years isolated from Earth, went in for a cult of artificial obesity through glucostatic regulation. Muller had visited them a decade before his ill-starred Beta Hydri journey. He remembered a warm planet, habitable only in a narrow temperate belt. Sweaty Buddhas weighing a few hundred kilograms apiece sat in stately meditation before thatched huts; he had never seen so much flesh per cubic meter before. The Lokites meddled with their peripheral glucoreceptors to induce accumulation of body fat. It was useless adaptation, unrelated to any problem of their environment; they simply liked to be huge. Muller recalled arms that looked like thighs, thighs that looked like pillars, bellies that curved and recurved in triumphant excess.

They had hospitably offered the spy from Earth a woman. For Muller it was a lesson in cultural relativity; for there were in the village two or three women who, although bulky enough, were scrawny by local standards and so approximated the norm of Muller's own background. The Lokites did not give him any of these women, these pitiful underdeveloped hundred-kilogram wrecks, for it would have been a breach of manners to let a guest have a subpar companion. So they treated him instead to a blonde colossus with breasts like cannonballs and buttocks

that were continents of quivering meat.

It was, at any rate, unforgettable.

There were so many other worlds. He had been a tireless voyager. He had shivered in methane lakes, had fried in post-Saharan deserts, had followed nomadic settlers across a purple plain in quest of their strayed arthropodic cattle. He had been shipwrecked by computer failure on airless worlds. He had seen the coppery cliffs of Damballa, ninety kilometers high. He had taken a swim in the gravity lake of Mordred. He had slept beside a multicolored brook under a sky blazing with a trio of suns. He had walked the crystal bridges of Procyon XIV. He had few regrets.

Now, huddled at the heart of his maze, he watched the screens and waited for the stranger to find him. A weapon, small and cool, nestled in his hand.

The afternoon unrolled swiftly. Rawlins began to think he would have done better to listen to Boardman and spend a night in camp before going to seek Muller. At least three hours of deepsleep to comb his mind of tension — a quick dip under the sleep wire, always useful. Well, he hadn't bothered. Now there was no opportunity. His sensors told him that Muller was just ahead.

He had never done anything significant before. He had studied, he had performed routine tasks in Boardman's office, he had now and then handled a slightly sensitive matter. But he had always believed that his real career still was yet to open, that all this was preliminary. But this was no training simulation. Here he stood, tall and blond and young and stubborn and ambitious, at the verge of an action which — and Charles Boardman had not been altogether hypocritical about that — might well influence the course of coming history.

Ping.

He looked about. The sensors had spoken. Out of the shadows ahead emerged the figure of a man. Muller. They faced each other across a gap of twenty meters. Rawlins had remembered Muller as a giant and was surprised to see now that they were about the same height, both of them just over two meters high. Muller was dressed in a dark glossy wrap, and in this light at this hour his face was a study in conflicting planes and jutting prominences, all peaks and valleys. In Muller's hand lay the apple-sized device with which he had destroyed the probe.

Boardman's voice buzzed in Rawlin's ear. "Get closer to him. Smile. Look shy and uncertain and friendly, and *very* concerned. And keep your hands where he can see them at all times."

Rawlins obeyed. He wondered when he would begin to feel the effects of being this close to Muller. He found it hard to take his eyes from the shiny globe that rested like a grenade in Muller's hand. When he was ten meters away he started to pick up the emanation from Muller.

Muller said, *"What do you — "*

The words came out as a raucous shriek. Muller stopped, cheeks flaming, and seemed to be adjusting the gears of his larynx. He began again.

"What do you want from me?" he said, this time in his true voice, deep, crackling with suppressed rage.

"Just to talk. Honestly. I don't want to cause any trouble for you, Mr. Muller."

"You know me!"

"Of course I do. Everyone knows Richard Muller. I mean, you were *the* galactic hero when I was going to school. We did reports on you. Essays about you. We — "

"Get out of here!" The shriek again.

" — and Stephen Rawlins was my father. I knew you, Mr. Muller."

The dark apple was rising. The small square window was facing him. Rawlins remembered how the relay from the drone probe had suddenly ceased.

"Stephen Rawlins?" The apple descended.

"My father." Rawlins's left leg seemed to be turning to water. He was getting the outpouring from Muller more strongly now, as though it took a few minutes to tune to his wavelength. Now Rawlins felt the torrent of anguish, the sadness. "I met you long ago," he said. "You had just come back from — let's see, it was 82 Eridani, I think. You were all tanned and windburned. I think I was eight years old, and you picked me up and threw me, only you were not used to Earthnorm gravity and you threw me too hard, and I hit the ceiling and began to cry, and you gave me something to make me stop, a little bead that changed colors."

Muller's hands were limp at his sides. The apple had disappeared into his garment.

He said tautly, "What was your name? Fred, Ted, Ed — that's it. Yes. Ed. Edward Rawlins."

"They started calling me Ned a little later on."

Muller turned away and coughed. His hand slipped into his pocket. He raised his head, and the descending sun glittered weirdly against his face, staining it deep orange. He made a quick edgy gesture with one finger. "Go away, Ned. Tell your friends that I don't want to be bothered. I'm a very sick man and I want to be alone."

"Sick?"

"Sick with a mysterious inward rot of the soul. Look, Ned, you're a fine handsome boy, and I love your father dearly, if any of this is true, and I don't want you hanging around me. You'll regret it. I don't mean that as a threat, just as a statement of fact. Go away."

"Stand your ground," Boardman told him. "Get closer. Right in where it hurts."

Rawlins took a wary step. He diminished the distance between them by ten per cent. The impact of the emanation seemed to double.

He said, "Please don't chase me away. Mr. Muller. I just want to be friendly. My father would never have forgiven me if he could have found out that I met you here, like this, and didn't try to help you at all."

"Would have? Could have? What happened to your father?"

"Dead. Four years ago, Rigel XXII. He was helping to set up a tightbeam network connecting the Ri-

gel worlds. There was an amplifier accident. The focus was inverted; he got the whole beam."

"Jesus. He was still young!"

"He would have been fifty in a month."

Muller's face softened. Some of the torment ebbed from the eyes. His lips became more mobile. It was as though someone else's grief had taken him momentarily from his own.

"Get closer to him," Boardman ordered.

Another step, and then since Muller did not seem to notice, another. Rawlins sensed heat: not real but psychical, a furnace-blast of directionless emotion. He shivered in awe.

Muller said, "What are you doing on Lemnos, boy?"

"I'm an archeologist." The lie came awkwardly. "This is my first field trip. We're trying to carry out a thorough examination of the maze."

"The maze happens to be someone's home. You're intruding."

Rawlins faltered.

"Tell him you didn't know he was here," Boardman prompted.

"We didn't realize that anyone was here," said Rawlins. "We had no way of knowing that — "

"You sent your damned robots in, didn't you? Once you found someone here — someone you knew damned well wouldn't want any company —"

"I don't understand," Rawlins said. "We had the impression you were wrecked here. We wanted to offer our help."

How easily I do this, he told himself!

Muller scowled. "You don't know why I'm here?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You wouldn't, I guess. You were too young. But the others — once they saw my face, they should have known. Why didn't they tell you?"

"I really don't understand — "

"Come close!" Muller bellowed.

Rawlins felt himself gliding forward. Abruptly he was face to face with Muller, conscious of the man's massive frame, his furrowed brow, his fixed, staring, angry eyes. Muller's immense hand pounced on Rawlins's wrist. Rawlins rocked, stunned by the impact, drenched with a despair so vast that it seemed to engulf whole universes. He tried not to stagger.

"Now get away from me!" Mulled cried harshly. "Go on! Out of here! Out!"

Rawlins did not move.

Muller howled a curse and ran ponderously into a low glassy-walled building. The door closed, sealing without a perceptible opening. Rawlins sucked in breath and fought for his balance.

"Stay where you are," said Boardman. "Let him get over his tantrum. Everything's going well."

VIII

Muller crouched behind the door. Sweat rolled down his sides. A chill swept him. He wrapped his arms about himself so tightly that his ribs complained.

He had not meant to handle the intruder that way at all.

A few words of conversation, a

blunt request for privacy; then, if the man would not go away, the destructor globe. So Muller had planned. But he had hesitated. He had spoken too much and learned too much. Stephen Rawlins's son? A party of archeologists out there? The boy had hardly seemed affected by the radiation, except at very close range. Was it losing its power with the years?

Muller fought to collect himself and to analyze his hostility. Why so fearful? Why so eager to cling to solitude? He had nothing to fear from Earthmen; they and not he were the sufferers in any contact he had with them. His original pretense was that he had come here out of consideration for his fellow man, that he was unwilling to inflict the painful ugliness that was himself upon them. But the boy had wanted to be friendly and helpful. Why flee?

Slowly Muller rose and undid the door. He stepped outside. Night had fallen with winter's swiftness; the sky was black, and the moons seared across it. The boy still stood in the plaza, looking a little dazed. The biggest moon, Clotho, bathed him in golden light, so that his curling hair seemed to sparkle with inner flame. His face was very pale, with sharply accentuated cheekbones. His blue eyes gleamed in shock.

Muller felt like some great half-rusted machine called into action after too many years of neglect. "Ned?" he said. "Look, Ned, I want to tell you that I'm sorry. You've got to understand, I'm not used to people. Not — used — to — *people*."

"It's all right, Mr. Muller. I realize it's been rough for you."

"Call me Dick." Muller raised both hands and spread them as if trying to cup moonbeams. On the wall beyond the plaza small animal shapes leaped and danced. Muller said, "I've come to love my privacy. You can even cherish cancer if you get into the right frame of mind. Look, you ought to realize something. I came here deliberately. It wasn't any shipwreck. I picked out the one place in the universe where I was least likely to be disturbed and hid myself inside it. But of course you had to come with your tricky robots and find the way in."

"If you don't want me here, I'll go," Rawlins said.

"Maybe that's best for both of us. No. Wait. Stay. Is it very bad, being this close to me?"

"It isn't exactly comfortable," said Rawlins. "But it isn't as bad as — as — well, I don't know. From this distance I just feel a little depressed."

"You know why?" Muller asked. "From the way you talk, I think you do, Ned. You're only pretending not to know what happened to me on Beta Hydri IV."

Rawlins colored. "Well, I remember a little bit, I guess. They operated on your mind?"

"Yes, that's right. What you're feeling, Ned, that's me, my goddamn soul leaking into the air. You're picking up the flow of neural current, straight from the top of my skull. Isn't it lovely? Try coming a little closer. That's it." Rawlins halted. "There," Muller said. "Now it's stronger. You're getting a better dose.

Now recall what it was like when you were standing right here. That wasn't so pleasant, was it? From ten meters away you can take it. From one meter away it's intolerable. Can you imagine holding a woman in your arms while you give off a mental stink like that? You can't make love from ten meters away." Muller said, "Let's sit down, Ned. It's safe here. I've got detectors rigged in case any of the nastier animals come in, and there aren't any traps in this zone. Sit." He lowered himself to the smooth milky-white stone floor, the alien marble that made this plaza so sleek. Rawlins, after an instant of deliberation, slipped lithely into the lotus position a dozen meters away.

Muller said, "How old are you, Ned?"

"Twenty-three."

"Married?"

A shy grin. "Afraid not."

"Got a girl?"

"There was one, a liaison contract. We voided it when I took on this job." "

"How many men have you lost here so far?" Muller asked.

"Five, I think. I'd like to know the sort of people who'd build a thing like this."

Muller said, "This was the grand creative triumph of their race, I believe. Their masterpiece, their monument. They must have been proud of this murderous place. It summed up the whole essence of their philosophy: kill the stranger."

"Are you just speculating, or have you found some clues to their cultural outlook?"

"The only clue I have to their cultural outlook is all around us. But I'm an expert on alien psychology, Ned. I know more about it than any other human being, because I'm the only one who ever said hello to an alien race. Kill the stranger: it's the law of the universe. And if you don't kill him, at least screw him up a little."

"We aren't like that," Rawlins said. "We don't show instinctive hostility to — "

"Crap."

"But — "

Muller said, "If an alien starship ever landed on one of our planets, we'd quarantine it and imprison the crew and interrogate them to destruction. We pretend that we're too noble to hate strangers, but we have the politeness of weakness. Take the Hydrans. A substantial faction within our government was in favor of generating fusion in their cloud layer and giving them an extra sun. *Before* sending an emissary to scout them."

"No."

"They were overruled, and an emissary was sent, and the Hydrans wasted him. Me." An idea struck Muller suddenly. Appalled, he said, "What's happened between us and the Hydrans in the last nine years? Any contact? War?"

"Nothing," said Rawlins. "We've kept away."

"Are you telling me the truth? Or did we wipe the bastards out? God knows I wouldn't mind that, but yet it wasn't their fault they did this to me. They were reacting in a standard xenophobic way. Ned, has there been a war with them?"

"No, there really hasn't. I swear."

Muller relayed. After a moment he said, "All right. I won't ask you to fill me in on all the other news developments. I don't really give a damn. How long are you people staying on Lemnos?"

"We don't know yet. A few weeks, I suppose. We haven't even really begun to explore the maze. And then there's the area outside. We want to run correlations on the work of earlier archeologists, and — "

"Are the others going to come into the center of the maze?"

Rawlins moistened his lips. "We don't have any plan yet. It all depends on you. We don't want to impose on you. So if you don't want us to work here — "

"I don't," Muller said crisply. "Tell that to your friends. In fifty or sixty years I'll be dead, and they can sniff around here then. But while I'm here I don't want them bothering me. Let them work in the outer four or five zones. If any of them sets foot in A, B or C, I'll kill him."

"What about me? Am I welcome?"

"Occasionally. I can't predict my moods. If you want to talk to me, come around and see. And if I tell you to get the hell out, Ned, then get the hell out. Clear?"

Rawlins grinned sunnily. "Clear." He got to his feet. Muller, unwilling to have the boy standing over him, rose also. Rawlins took a few steps toward him.

Muller said, "Where are you going?"

"I hate having to talk at this distance. To shout like this. I can get a little closer to you, can't I?"

Instantly suspicious, Muller replied, "Are you some kind of masochist?"

"Sorry, no."

"Well, I'm no sadist, either. I don't want you near me."

"It's really not that unpleasant — Dick."

"You're lying. You hate it like all the others. I'm like a leper, boy, and if you're queer for leprosy I feel sorry for you, but don't come any closer. It embarrasses me to see other people suffer on my account."

Rawlins stopped. "Whatever you say. Look, Dick, I don't want to cause troubles for you. I'm just trying to be friendly and helpful. If doing that in some way makes you uncomfortable, well, just say so and I'll do something else."

"That came out pretty muddled, boy. What is it you want from me, anyhow?"

"Nothing."

"Why not leave me alone?"

"You're a human being and you've been alone here for a long time. It's my natural impulse to offer companionship."

Muller shrugged. "I'm not much of a companion. Maybe you ought to take all your sweet Christian impulses and go away. There's no way you can help me, Ned. You can only hurt me by reminding me of all I can no longer have or know." Stiffening, Muller looked past the tall young man toward the shadowy figures cavorting along the walls. He was hungry, and this was the hour to begin hunting for his dinner. He said brusquely, "Son, I think my patience is running out. Leave."

"All right. Can I come back tomorrow?"

"Maybe."

The boy smiled ingenuously. "Thanks for letting me talk to you, Dick. I'll be back."

By troublesome moonlight Rawlins made his way out of Zone A. He edged over a spring-loaded stone block that was capable of hurling him from a precipice if he applied his weight the wrong way. A small toothy animal snickered at him as he crossed. On the far side Rawlins prodded the wall in a yielding place and won admission to Zone B.

Rawlins still throbbed with the impact of that brief moment of direct contact with Muller. For an instant he had received a formless incoherent emanation of raw emotion, the inner self spilling out involuntarily and wordlessly. The flow of uncontrollable innerness was painful and depressing to receive.

It was not true telepathy that the Hydrans had given him. Muller could not "read" minds, nor could he communicate his thoughts to others. What came forth was this gush of self. A torrent of raw despair, a river of regrets and sorrows, all the sewage of a soul. He could not hold it back. For that eternal moment Rawlins had been bathed in it; the rest of the time he had merely picked up a vague and general sense of distress. Rawlins had felt that he was tuned to every discord in creation: the missed chances, the failed loves, the hasty words, the unfair griefs, the hungers, the greeds, the lusts, the knife of envy, the acid of frustration, the fang of time, the death of small insects in winter, the tears of things. He had known aging, loss, mortality, impotence, fury, helplessness, loneliness, desolation, self-contempt, and madness. It was a silent shriek of cosmic anger.

Are we all like that, he wondered? Is the same broadcast coming from me, and from Boardman, and from my mother, and from the girl I used to love? Do we walk about like beacons fixed to a frequency we can't receive? Thank God, then. That's a song too painful to hear.

Boardman said, "Wake up, Ned. Stop brooding and watch out for trouble. You're almost in Zone C now."

"Charles, how did you feel the first time you came close to Muller?"

"We'll discuss that later."

"Did you feel as if you knew what human beings were all about for the first time?"

"I said we'd discuss — "

"Let me say what I want to say, Charles. I'm not in any danger here. I just looked into a man's soul, and I'm shaken by it. But — listen, Charles — he isn't really like that. He's a *good* man. That stuff he radiates, it's just noise, it's a kind of sludge that doesn't tell you a real thing about Dick Muller."

"*Ned.* Get back to camp. We all agree that Dick Muller's a fine human being. That's why we need him."

IX

When they met again the next morning it was easier for both of them. Rawlins, having slept well under the sleep wire, went to the

heart of the maze and found Muller standing beside a tall flat-sided spike of dark metal at the edge of the great plaza.

"What do you make of this?" Muller asked conversationally as Rawlins approached. "There are eight of them, one at each corner. I've been watching them for years. They turn. Look here." Muller pointed to one face of the pylon. Rawlins came close, and when he was ten meters away he picked up Muller's emanation. Nevertheless he forced himself closer.

"You see this?" Muller asked, tapping the spike.

"A mark."

"It took me close to six months to cut it. I used a sliver from the crystalline outcropping set in that wall yonder. Every day for an hour or two I'd scrape away, until there was a visible mark in the metal. I've been watching that mark. In the course of one local year it turns all the way round. So the spikes are moving. You can't see it, but they move. They are some kind of calendars."

"Do — they — can — have you ever — "

"You aren't making sense, boy."

"I'm sorry." Rawlins backed away, trying hard to hide the impact of Muller's nearness. He was flushed and shaken. At five meters the effect was not so agonizing, and he stayed there making an effort, telling himself that he was developing a tolerance for it.

"You were saying?"

"Is this the only one you've been watching?"

"I've scratched a few of the others. I'm convinced that they all turn. I haven't found the mechanism. Underneath this city, you know, there's some kind of fantastic brain. It's millions of years old, but it still works, so it's probably some sort of liquid metal with cognition elements floating in it. It turns these pylons and runs the water supply and cleans the streets."

"And operates the traps."

"And operates the traps," Muller said. "But I haven't been able to find a sign of it. I've done some digging here and there, but I find only dirt below. Maybe you archeologist bastards will locate the city's brain. Eh? Any clues?"

"I don't think so," said Rawlins. "Most of the time I go outside the city, directing the entry operations. And then when I got in, I came right in here. So I don't know what the others may have discovered so far. If anything."

"Are they going to rip up the streets?" Muller asked.

"I don't think so. We don't dig so much, any more. We use scanners and sensors and probe beams." Glibly, impressed with his own improvisations, he went on headlong. "Archeology used to be destructive, of course. To find out what was under a pyramid we had to take the pyramid apart. But now we can do a lot with probes. That's the new school, you understand, looking into the ground without digging, and thus preserving the monuments of the past for — "

"On one of the planets of Epsilon Indi," said Muller, "a team of archeologists completely dismantled an ancient alien burial pavilion about fifteen years ago, and then found it im-

possible to put the thing back together because they couldn't comprehend the structural integrity of the building. When they tried, it fell apart and was a total loss. I happened to see the ruins a few months later. You know the case, of course."

Rawlins didn't. He said, reddening, "Well there are always bunglers in any discipline — "

"I hope there are none here. I don't want the maze damaged. Not that there's much chance of that. The maze defends itself quite well." Mulled strolled casually away from the pylon. He said, half to himself, "The cages are closed again."

"Cages?"

"Look down there. Into that street branching out of the plaza."

Rawlins saw an alcove against a building wall. Rising from the ground were a dozen or more curving bars of white stone that disappeared into the wall at a height of about four meters, forming a kind of cage. He could see a second such cage farther down the street.

Muller said, "There are about twenty of them arranged symmetrically in the streets off the plaza. Three times since I've been here the cages have opened. Those bars slide into the street, somehow, and disappear. The third time was two nights ago. I've never seen the cages either open or close, and I've missed it again."

"What do you think the cages were used for?" Rawlins asked.

"To hold dangerous beasts. Or captured enemies."

"And when they open now — "

"The city's still trying to serve its people. There are enemies in the outer zones. The cages are ready in case any of the enemies are captured."

"You mean us?"

"Yes. Enemies." Muller's eyes glittered with sudden paranoid fury; it was alarming how easily he slipped from rational discourse to that cold blaze. "*Homo sapiens*. The most dangerous, the most ruthless, the most despicable beast in the universe!"

"You say it as if you believe it."

"I do."

"Come on," Rawlins said. "You devoted your life to serving mankind. You can't possibly believe — "

"I devoted my life," said Muller slowly, "to serving Richard Muller." He swung around so that he faced Rawlins squarely. They were only six or seven meters apart. The emanation seemed almost as strong as though they were nose to nose. Muller said, "I gave less of a damn for humanity than you might think, boy. I saw the stars and I wanted them. I aspired after the condition of a deity. One world wasn't enough for me; I was hungry to have them all. So I built a career that would take me to the stars. I risked my life a thousand times. I endured fantastic extremes of temperature. I rotted my lungs with crazy gases and had to be rebuilt from the inside out. I ate foods that would sicken you to hear about. Kids like you worshiped me and wrote essays about my selfless dedication to man, my tireless quest for knowledge. Let me get you straight on that. I'm about as selfless as Columbus and Magellan and Marco Polo. They were great explorers, yes, but they also

looked for a fat profit. The profit I wanted was in here. I wanted to stand a hundred kilometers high. I wanted golden statues of me on a thousand worlds. You know poetry? Fame is the spur. That last infirmity of noble mind. Milton. Do you know your Greeks, too? When a man overreaches himself, the gods cast him down. It's called *hybris*. I had a bad case of it. When I dropped through the clouds to visit the Hydrans, I felt like a god. Christ, I *was* a god. And when I left, up through the clouds again. To the Hydrans I'm a god, all right. I thought it then: I'm in their myths, they'll always tell my story."

"The cage — "

"Let me finish," Muller rapped. "You see, the truth is, I wasn't a god, only a rotten mortal human being who had delusions of godhood, and the real gods saw to it that I learned my lesson. They decided to remind me of the hairy beast inside the plastic clothing. So they arranged it for the Hydrans to perform a clever little surgical trick on my brain, one of their specialties, I guess. I don't know if the Hydrans were being malicious for the hell of it or whether they were genuinely trying to cure me of a defect, my inability to let my emotions get out to them. But they did their little job. And then I came back to Earth. Hero and leper all at once. Stand near me and you get sick. Why? It reminds you that *you're* an animal, too, because you get a full dose of me. So we go round and round in our endless feedback. You hate me because you learn things about your own soul by getting near me. And I hate you because you must draw back from me. What I am, you see, is a plague carrier, and the plaque I carry is the truth. My message is that it's a lucky thing for humanity that we're shut up each in our own skulls, because if we had even a little drop of telepathy, even the blurry non-verbal thing I've got, we'd be unable to stand each other. The Hydrans can reach right into each other's minds, and they seem to like it, but we can't. And that's why I say that man must be the most despicable beast in the whole universe. He can't even take the reek of his own kind, soul to soul!"

Rawlins said, "The cage seems to be opening."

"What? Let me look!" Muller came jostling forward. Unable to step aside rapidly enough, Rawlins received the brunt of the emanation. It was not as painful this time. Images of autumn came to him: withered leaves, dying flowers, a dusty wind, early twilight. More regret than anguish over the shortness of life, the necessity of the condition.

"It's withdrawn by several centimeters already. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I tried to. But you weren't listening."

"No. No. My damned soliloquizing." Muller chuckled. "Ned, I've been waiting years to see this. The cage actually in motion. Look how smoothly it moves, gliding into the ground. This is strange, Ned. It's never opened twice the same year before, and here's it's opening for the second time this week."

The cage was fully open now.

There was no sign of the bars except the row of small openings in the pavement.

Rawlins said, "Have you ever tried to put anything in the cages? Animals?"

"Yes. I dragged a big dead beast inside one. Nothing happened. Then I caught some live little ones. Nothing happened." He frowned. I once thought of stepping into the cage myself to see if it would close automatically when it sensed a live human being. But I didn't. When you're alone you don't try experiments like that." He paused a moment. "How would *you* like to help me in a little experiment right now, eh, Ned? Just step across into the alcove and wait a minute or so. See if the cage closes on you."

"And if it does," Rawlins said, not taking him seriously, "do you have a key to let me out?"

"I have a few weapons. We can always blast you out by lasing the bars."

"That's destructive. You warned me not to destroy anything here."

"Sometimes you destroy in order to learn. Go on, Ned. Step in."

Muller's voice grew flat and strange. He was standing in an odd expectant half-crouch, hands at his sides, fingertips bent inward toward his thighs. As though he's going to throw me into the cage himself, Rawlins thought.

Boardman said quietly in Rawlin's ear, "Do as he says, Ned. Get into the cage. Show him that you trust him."

I trust *him,* Rawlins told himself. But I don't trust that cage.

He had uncomfortable visions of the floor of the cage dropping out as soon as the bars were in place. Of himself dumped into some underground vat of acid or lake of fire. The disposal pit for trapped enemies.

"Do it, Ned," Boardman murmured.

It was a grand crazy gesture. Rawlins stepped over the row of small openings and stood with his back to the wall. Almost at once the curving bars rose from the ground and locked themselves seamlessly into place above his head. The floor seemed stable. No death-rays lashed out at him.

"Fascinating," Muller said. "It must scan for intelligence. When I tried with animals, nothing happened. Dead or alive. What do you make of that, Ned?"

"I'm very glad to have your research. I'd be happier if you'd let me out now."

"I can't control the movements of the bars."

"You said you'd laser them open."

"But why be destructive so fast? Let's wait, shall we? Perhaps the bars will open again of their own accord. You're perfectly safe in there. I'll bring you food, if you have to eat."

"Stay cool," Boardman advised. "If necessary, we can get you out of that ourselves. It's important to humor Muller in everything you can until you've got real rapport with him."

Muller said, "That was pretty brave of you, Ned. Or stupid. I'm sometimes not sure if there's a distinction. But I'm grateful, anyway. I

had to know about those cages."

"Glad to have been of assistance. You see, human beings aren't all that monstrous."

"Not consciously. It's the sludge inside that's ugly, Rawlins." He sat down crosslegged.

"Did you make any attempt at all to get yourself fixed when you returned to Earth?"

"I talked to the shapeup boys. They couldn't begin to figure out what changes had been made in my neural flow, and so they couldn't begin to figure out how to fix things."

"How long did you stay?"

"A few months. Long enough to discover that there wasn't one human being I knew who didn't turn green after a few minutes of close exposure to me. I tried some fancy drugs, and then I tried drink, and then I tried living dangerously. And at the end of it I was still alive. I was in and out of four neuropsychiatric wards in a single month. I tried wearing a padded lead helmet to shield the thought radiations. It was like trying to catch neutrinos in a bucket," Muller spat. "You know, I could always take society or leave it. When I was among people I was happy. I was cordial; I had the social graces. I wasn't a slick, sunny article like you, all overflowing with kindness and nobility, but I interacted with others, I related, I got along. Then I could go on a trip for a year and a half and not see or speak to anyone, and that was all right too. But once I found out that I was shut off from society for good, I discovered that I had needed it after all. But that's over. I outgrew the need, boy. I can spend a hundred years alone and never miss one soul. I trained myself to see humanity as humanity sees me: something sickening, a damp hunkering crippled thing best avoided. To hell with you all. I don't owe any of you anything, love included. I have no obligations. I could leave you to rot in that cage, Ned, and never feel upset about it. I could pass that cage twice a day and smile at your skull."

"You speak as if you belong to an alien race," Rawlins said in wonder.

"No. I belong to the human race. I'm the most human being there is, because I'm the only one who can't hide his humanity. What's inside me is also inside you. I speak for man I tell the truth. I'm the skull beneath the face, boy. I'm the hidden intestines. I'm all the garbage we pretend isn't there, all the filthy animal stuff, the lusts, the little hates, the sicknesses, the envies."

Rawlins said quietly, "Why did you decide to come to Lemnos?"

"A man named Charles Boardman put the idea into my head."

X

Rawlins recoiled in surprise at the mention of the name.

Muller said, "You know him?"

"Well, yes. Of course. He — he's a very important man in the government."

"It was Boardman who sent me to Beta Hydri IV. Oh, he didn't trick me into it, he didn't have to persuade me in any of his slippery ways. He simply played on my ambitions. There's a world there with aliens on

it, he said, and we want a man to visit it. Probably a suicide mission, but it would be man's first contact with another intelligent species, and are you interested? So of course I went. And afterward, when I came back *this* way, he tried to duck me a while, either because he couldn't abide being near me or because he couldn't abide his own guilt, and finally I caught up with him and I said, look at me, Charles, this is how I am now, where can I go, what shall I do? I got close to him. His face changed color. I could see the nausea in his eyes. And he reminded me about the maze on Lemnos."

"Why?"

"He offered it as a place to hide. I suppose he thought I'd be killed on my way into the maze. But I told Boardman I wouldn't think of it. I wanted to cover my trail. I blew up and insisted that the last thing in the world I'd do was come here. Then I spent the month on skids in Under New Orleans, and when I surfaced again I rented a ship and came here, using maximum diversionary tactics to insure that nobody found out my true destination."

Rawlins said, "How did you get inside the maze?"

"Through sheer bad luck."

"*Bad* luck?"

"I was trying to die in a blaze of glory," said Muller. "I didn't give a damn if I survived the maze or not. I just plunged right in and headed for the middle. The trouble was, Ned, I'm a survival type. It's an innate gift, maybe even something paranormal. I have unusual reflexes. Also my urge to stay alive is well developed. Besides that, I had mass detectors and some other useful equipment. So I came into the maze, and whenever I saw a corpse lying about I looked a little sharper than usual, and I stopped and rested when I felt my visualization of the place beginning to waver. I fully expected to be killed in Zone H. I *wanted* it. But it was my luck to make it where everybody failed." He said, "Are you getting hungry, boy?"

"A little."

"Don't go away. I'll bring you some lunch."

Muller strode toward the nearby buildings and disappeared. Rawlins said quietly, "This is awful, Charles. He's obviously out of his mind."

"Don't be sure of it," Boardman replied. "He may be playing a game with you, pretending to be crazy to test your good faith."

Muller returned, carrying a platter of meat and a handsome crystal beaker of water. "Best I can offer," he said.

The water had an agreeable flavor, or lack of flavor. Muller sat quietly before the cage, eating. Rawlins noticed that the effect of his emanation no longer seemed so disturbing, even at a range of less than five meters. Obviously one builds a tolerance to it, he thought.

Rawlins said after a while, "Would you come out and meet my companions in a few days?"

"Absolutely not."

"They'd be eager to talk to you."

"I have no interest in talking to them. I'd sooner talk to wild beasts."

"You talk to me," Rawlins pointed out.

"For the novelty of it. And because your father was a good friend. And because as human beings go, boy, you're reasonably acceptable. But I don't want to be thrust into any miscellaneous mass of bug-eyed archeologists."

Possibly meet two or three of them," Rawlins suggested. "Get used to the idea of being among people again."

"*Why* should I get used to the idea of being among people again?"

Rawlins said uneasily, "Well, because there are people here, because it's not a good idea to get too isolated from — "

"Are you planning some sort of trick? Are you going to catch me and pull me out of this maze? Come on, come on, boy, what's in back of that little mind of yours? What motive do you have for softening me up for human contact?"

Rawlins faltered. In the awkward silence Boardman spoke quickly, supplying the guile he lacked, prompting him. Rawlins listened and did his best.

He said, "You're making me out to be a real schemer, Dick. But I swear to you I've got nothing sinister in mind. I admit I've been softening you up a little, jollying you, trying to make friends with you, and I guess I'd better tell you why."

"I guess you'd better."

It's for the archeological survey's sake. We can spend only a few weeks here. You've been here — what is it, nine years? You know so much about this place, Dick, and I think it's unfair of you to keep it to yourself. So what I was hoping, I guess, was that I could get you to ease up, then maybe come to Zone E, talk to the others, answer their questions, explain what you know about the maze — "

"Unfair to keep it to myself?"

"Well, yes. To hide knowledge is a sin."

"Is it fair to mankind to call me unclean and run away from me?"

"That's a different matter," Rawlins said. "It's beyond all fairness. It's a condition you have, an unfortunate condition that you didn't deserve, and everyone is quite sorry that it came upon you, but on the other hand you surely must realize that from the viewpoint of other human beings it's rather difficult to take a detached attitude toward your — your — "

"Toward my stink," Muller supplied. "All right. It's rather difficult to stand my presence. Therefore I willingly refrain from inflicting it upon your friends. Get it out of your head that I'm going to speak to them or sip tea with them or have anything at all to do with them. I have separated myself from the human race and I stay separated, and it's irrelevant that I've granted you the privilege of bothering me."

Boardman continued to instruct him. Rawlins, with the sour taste of lies on his tongue, went on, "I can't blame you for being bitter, Dick. But I still think it isn't right for you to withhold information from us. I mean, look back on your exploring days. If you landed on a planet, and someone had vital information you

had come to find, wouldn't you make every effort to get that information, even though the other person had certain private problems which — "

"I'm sorry," said Muller frostily. "I'm beyond caring."

He walked away, leaving Rawlins alone in the cage with two chunks of meat and the beaker of water, nearly empty.

When Muller was out of sight Boardman said, "He's a touchy one, all right. But I didn't expect sweetness from him. You're getting to him, Ned. You're just the right mixture of guile and naivete."

"And I'm in a cage."

"That's no problem. We can send a drone to release you if the cage doesn't open by itself soon."

"Muller isn't going to work out," Rawlins murmured. "He's full of hate. It trickles out of him everywhere. We'll never get him to cooperate. I've never seen such hate in one man."

"You don't know what hate is," said Boardman. "And neither does he. I tell you everything is moving well. There are bound to be some setbacks, but the fact that he's talking to you at all is the important thing. He doesn't *want* to be full of hate. Give him half a chance to get off his frozen position, and he will."

Muller did not return. The afternoon grew darker and the air became chilly. Rawlins huddled uncomfortably in the cage. He tried to imagine this city when it had been alive, when this cage had been used to display prisoners captured in the maze. In the eye of his mind he saw a throng of the city-builders, short and thick, with dense coppery fur and greenish skin, swinging their long arms and pointing toward the cage. And in the cage huddled a thing like a giant scorpion, with waxy claws that scratched at the stone paving blocks, and fiery eyes, and a savage tail that awaited anyone who came to close. Harsh music sounded through the city. Alien laughter. The warm musky reek of the city-builders. Children spitting at the thing in the cage. A trapped creature, hideous and malevolent, lonely for its own kind, its hive on a world of Alphecca or Markab, where waxy tailed things moved in shining tunnels. For days the city-builders came, mocked reproached. He grew sick of their massive bodies and their intertwining spidery fingers, of their flat faces and ugly tusks. And a day came when the floor of the maze gave way, for they were tired of the outworlder captive, and down he went, tail lashing furiously, down into a pit of knives.

It was night. Rawlins had not heard from Boardman for several hours. He had not seen Muller since early afternoon. Animals were prowling the plaza, mostly small ones, all teeth and claws. Rawlins had come unarmed today.

Hunger and cold assailed him. He searched the darkness for Muller. This had ceased to be a joke.

"Can you hear me?" he said to Boardman.

"We're going to get you out soon."

"Yes, but *when?*"

"We sent a probe in, Ned."

"It shouldn't take more than fif-

teen minutes for a probe to reach me. These zones aren't really hazardous."

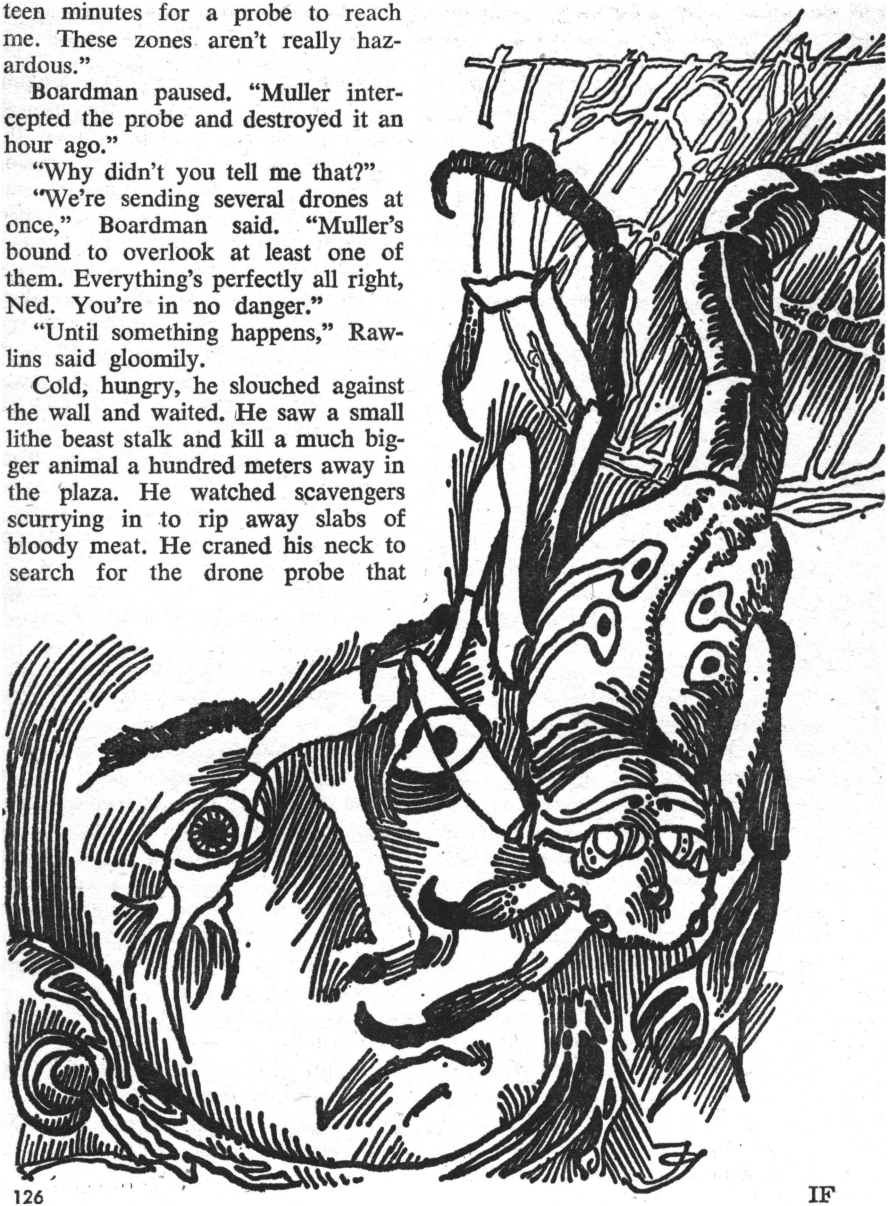
Boardman paused. "Muller intercepted the probe and destroyed it an hour ago."

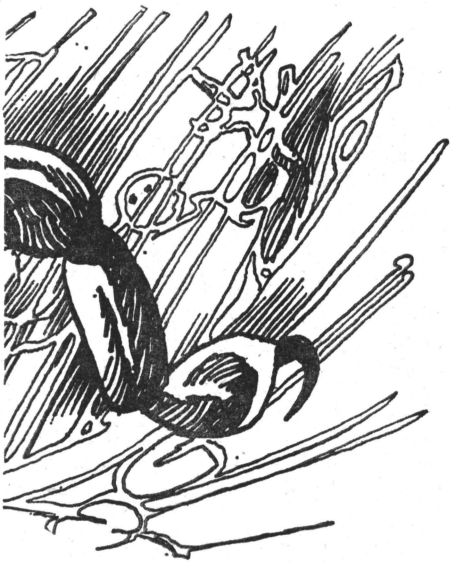
"Why didn't you tell me that?"

"We're sending several drones at once," Boardman said. "Muller's bound to overlook at least one of them. Everything's perfectly all right, Ned. You're in no danger."

"Until something happens," Rawlins said gloomily.

Cold, hungry, he slouched against the wall and waited. He saw a small lithe beast stalk and kill a much bigger animal a hundred meters away in the plaza. He watched scavengers scurrying in to rip away slabs of bloody meat. He craned his neck to search for the drone probe that





would set him free. No probe appeared.

He felt like a sacrificial victim, staked out for the kill.

The scavengers had finished their work. They came padding across the plaza toward him — little weasel-shaped beasts with big tapering heads and paddle-shaped paws from which yellow recurving claws protruded. Their eyes were red in yellow fields. They studied him with interest, solemnly, thoughtfully. Blood, thick and purplish, was smeared over their muzzles.

A long narrow snout intruded between two bars of his cage. Rawlins kicked at it. The snout withdrew. To his left, another jutted through. Then there were three snouts.

And then the scavengers began slipping into the cage on all sides.

XI

Boardman had established a comfortable little nest for himself in the Zone F camp. Under the milky-white curve of the extrusion dome he had carved a private sector with radiant heating, glow-drapes, a gravity suppressor, and even a liquor console. Brandy and other delights were never far away. He slept on a soft inflatable mattress covered with a thick red quilt inlaid with heater strands.

Greenfield entered. "We've lost another drone, sir," he said crisply. "That leaves three in the inner zones."

Boardman flipped the ignition cap on a cigar. "Is Muller going to get those too?"

"I'm afraid so. He knows the access routes better than we do. He's covering them all."

"And you haven't sent any drones in through routes we haven't charted?"

"Two, sir. Lost them both."

"Umm. We'd better send out a great many probes at once, then, and hope we can slip at least one of them past Muller. That boy is getting annoyed at being caged. Change the program, will you? The brain can manage diversionary tactics if it's told. Say, twenty probes entering simultaneously."

"We have only three left," Greenfield said.

"Who allowed this to happen? Call Hosteen! Get those templates working! I want fifty drones built by morning! No, make it eighty! Of all the stupidity, Greenfield!"

Boardman puffed furiously. He dialed for brandy, the thick, rich, viscous stuff made by Prolepticalist fathers on Deneb XIII. The situation was growing infuriating. He knew that he was in danger of losing his perspective — the worst of sins. The delicacy of this assignment was getting to him. All these mincing steps, the tiny complications, the painstaking edgings toward and away from the goal. Rawlins in the cage. Rawlins and his moral qualms. Muller and his neurotic world-outlook. The little beasts that nipped at your heels here and thoughtfully eyed your throat. The traps these demons had built. And the waiting extragalactics, saucer-eyed, radio-sensed, to whom even a Charles Boardman was no more than an insensate vegetable. Doom overhanging all.

With a petulant gesture of his hand Boardman reactivated his communication link with Ned Rawlins. The screen showed him moonlight, curving bars and small furry snouts bristling with teeth.

"Ned?" he said. "Charles here. We're getting you those drones, boy. We'll have you out of that stupid cage in five minutes, do you hear, five minutes."

Rawlins was very busy.

It seemed almost funny. There was no end to the supply of the little beasts. They came nosing through the bars two and three at a time, weasels, ferrets, minks, stoats, whatever they were, all teeth and eyes. But they were scavengers, not killers. They clustered about him, brushing his ankles with their coarse fur, pawing him, slicing through his skin with their claws, biting his shins.

He trampled them. He learned very quickly that a booted foot placed just behind the head could snap a spinal column quickly and effectively. Then, with a swift kick, he could sweep his victim into a corner of the cage, where others would pounce upon it at once. Cannibals, too. Rawlins developed a rhythm of it. Turn, stomp, kick. Turn, stomp, kick. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

They were cutting him up badly.

For the first five minutes he scarcely had time to pause for breath. He took care of at least twenty of them in that time. Against the far side of the cage a heap of ragged little corpses had risen, with their comrades nosing around hunting for the tender morsels. At last a moment came when all the scavengers currently inside the cage were busy with their fallen cohorts, and no more lurked outside. Rawlins had a momentary respite. He seized a bar with one hand and lifted his left leg to examine the miscellany of cuts, scratches and bites. Do they give a posthumous Stellar Cross if you die of galactic rabies, he wondered? His leg was bloody from the knee down, and the wounds, though not deep, were hot and painful. Suddenly he discovered why the scavengers had come to him. While he paused he had time to inhale, and he smelled the ripe fragrance of rotting meat. He could almost visualize it: a great bestial corpse, split open at the belly to expose red sticky organs, perhaps a maggot or two circumnavigating the mound of flesh —

Nothing was rotting here. Rawlins realized that it must be some sensory delusion: an olfactory trap touched off by the cage, evidently. The cage was broadcasting the stink of decay. Why? Obviously to lure that pack of little weasels inside. A refined form of torture. He wondered if Muller had somehow seen behind it, going off to a nearby control center to set up the scent.

A fresh battalion of beasts was scurrying across the plaza toward the cage. These looked slightly larger, although not so large that they would not fit between the bars, and their fangs had an ugly gleam in the moonlight. Rawlins hastily stomped three of the snuffling, gorging cannibals still alive in his cage and stuffed them through the bars, giving them a wrist-flip that tossed them eight or ten meters outside the cage. Good. The newcomers halted skiddingly and began at once to pounce on the twitching, not quite dead bodies that landed before them. Only a few of the scavengers bothered to enter the cage, and these came spaced widely enough so that Rawlins had a chance to trample each in turn and toss it meters. The last few survivors, stuffout to feed the onrushing horde. At that rate, he thought, he could get rid of them all, if only new ones would stop coming.

New ones finally did stop coming. He had killed seventy or eighty by this time; the stink of raw blood overlaid the synthetic stench of rot; his legs ached from all the carnage and his brain was orbiting dizzyingly. But at length the night grew peaceful once more. Bodies, some clad in fur, some just frameworks of bone, lay strewn in a wide arc before the cage. A thick deep-hued puddle of mingled bloods spread over a dozen square meters. The last few survivors, stuffed on their gluttony, had gone slinking away without even trying to harass the occupant of the cage. Weary, drained, close to laughter and close to tears, Rawlins clung to the bars and did not look down at his throbbing, blood-soaked legs. He felt the fire rising in him. He imagined alien microorganisms launching their argosies in his bloodstream.

Three bulky brutes paraded toward him from different directions. They had the stride of lions, but the swinishness of boars: low-slung, sharp-backed creatures, 100 kilograms or so, with long pyramidal heads, slavering thin-lipped mouths, and tiny squinting eyes arranged, two sets of two on either side, just before their ragged droopy ears. Curving tusks jutted down and intersected smaller and sharper canine teeth that rose from powerful jaws. They rooted about a bit in the heap of scavenger corpses. But clearly they were no scavengers themselves; they were looking for living meat, and their disdain for the broken cannibalized little bodies was evident. When they had completed their inspection, they swung about to stare at Rawlins. Rawlins felt grateful for the security of his cage. He would not care to be outside, unprotected and exhausted, with these three cruising the city for their dinner.

At that moment, of course, the bars of the cage began to retract.

XII

Muller, arriving just then, took in the whole scene. "Get down!" he yelled.

Rawlins got down by taking four running steps to the left, slipping on the blood-slicked pavement, and skidding into a heap of small cadavers at the edge of the street. In the same moment Muller fired. Three quick bolts brought the pigs down. Muller started to go to Rawlins, but then one of the robots from the camp in Zone F appeared, gliding cheerfullly toward them. Muller cursed softly. He pulled the destructor globe from his pocket and aimed the window at the robot.

The robot disintegrated. Rawlins had managed to get up. "You should not have blasted it," he said woozily. "It was just coming to help."

"No help was needed," said Muller. "Can you walk?"

"I think so."

"How badly are you hurt?"

"I've been chewed on, that's all. It isn't as bad as it looks."

"Come with me," Muller said. Already more scavengers were filing through the plaza, drawn by the mysterious telegraphy of blood. Small toothy things were getting down to serious work on the trio of fallen boars. Forgetting his own emanation, Muller seized him by the arm. Rawlins winced and twitched away, and then, as if repenting the appearance of rudeness, gave Muller his arm again. They crossed the plaza together.

"In here," Muller said roughly.

They stepped into the hexagonal cell where he kept his diagnostat. Muller sealed the door, and Rawlins sank down limply on the bare floor.

Muller said, "How long were you under attack?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes. I don't know. There must have been fifty or a hundred of them. I kept breaking their backs. And then the cage went away." Rawlins laughed wildly. "That was the best part. I had just finished smashing up all those little bastards, and I was catching my breath, and then the three big monsters came along, and so naturally the cage vanished and — "

"Easy," Muller said. "You're talking so fast I can't follow everything. Get those boots off, and we'll patch those legs of yours."

Rawlins picked at the catches. "Can you help me? I'm afraid that I can't — "

"You won't like it if I come any closer," Muller warned.

"To hell with that!"

Muller shrugged. He approached Rawlins and manipulated the broken and bent snaps of his boots. The metal chasing was scarred by tiny teeth; so were the boots themselves, and so were the legs. In a few moments Rawlins was out of his boots and leggings. His legs were in bad shape, though none of the wounds seemed really serious; it was just that there were so many of them. Muller got the diagnostat going. The lamps glowed, and the receptor slot beckoned. A blue light played on his wounds. In the bowels of the diagnostat things chuttered and clicked. A swab came forth on a jointed arm

and ran deftly and lightly up his left leg to a point just above the knee. The machine engulfed the bloody swab and began to digest it back to its component molecules while a second swab emerged to clean up his other leg. Rawlins bit his lip. He was getting a coagulant as well as a cleanser, so that when the swabs had done their work all blood was gone and the shallow gouges and rips were revealed. It still looked pretty bad, Muller thought, though not as grim as before.

The diagnostat produced an ultrasonic node and injected a golden fluid into Rawlin's rump. Pain-damper. A second injection, deep amber, was probably some kind of all-purpose antibiotic to ward off infection. Rawlins grew visibly less tense. Now arms sprang forward from various sectors of the device, inspecting Rawlins's lesions in detail scanning them for necessary repairs. There was a humming sound and three sharp clicks. Then the diagnostat began to seal the wounds, clamping them firmly.

"You shouldn't be doing this," said Rawlins. "We have our own medical supplies back in camp. You must be running short on necessities. All you had to do was let the drone probe take me back to my camp, and — "

"I don't want those robots crawling around in here. And the diagnostat has at least a fifty-year supply of usefuls. I don't get sick often."

The machine released Rawlins, who swung away from it and looked up at Muller. The wildness was gone from the boy's face now. Muller said, "I didn't think that you'd be attacked by beasts or I wouldn't have left you alone so long. You aren't armed?"

"No."

"Scavengers don't bother living things. What made them go after you?"

"The cage did," Rawlins said. "It began to broadcast the smell of rotting flesh. A lure. Suddenly they were crawling all over me. I thought they'd eat me alive."

Muller grinned. "Interesting. So the cage is programmed as a trap too. We got some useful information out of your little predicament, then."

Rawlins laughed. "I'm glad to have helped you learn something. Am I excused from the next round?"

"I suppose," Muller said. An odd feeling of good will had come over him, somehow. He almost forgotten how pleasant it was to be able to help another person. He said, "Do you drink, Ned?"

"In moderation."

"This is our local liquer," said Muller. "It's produced by gnomes somewhere in the bowels of the planet." He produced a delicate flask and two wide-mouthed goblets. Carefully he tipped about twenty centiliters into each goblet. "I get this in Zone C," he explained, handing Rawlins his drink.

Gingerly Rawlins tasted it. "Strong!"

"About 60% alcohol, yes. Lord knows what the rest of it is, or how it's synthesized, or why. I simply accept it. I like the way it manages to be both sweet and gingery at the same time. It's terribly intoxicating, of

course. It's intended as another trap, I suppose. You get happily drunk, and then the maze gets you." He raised his goblet amiably. "Cheers."

"Cheers."

They laughed at the archaic toast and drank.

Careful, Dickie, he told himself. You're getting downright sociable, with this boy. Remember where you are. And why.

"May I take some of this back to camp with me?" Rawlins asked. "There's a man there who'd appreciate it. He's a gourmet of sorts. He's traveling with a liquor console that dispenses a hundred different drinks, I imagine, from about forty different worlds."

"Anything from Marduk?" Muller asked. "The Deneb worlds? Rigel?"

"I really can't be sure. I'm no connoisseur."

"Perhaps this friend of yours would be willing to exchange — " Muller stopped. "No. No. Forget I said that. I'm not getting into any deals."

"You could come back to camp with me," said Rawlins. "He'd give you the run of the console, I'm sure."

"Very subtle of you. No." Muller glowered at his liqueur. "I won't be eased into it, Ned. I don't want anything to do with them."

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

"Another drink?"

"No. I'll have to start getting back to camp now. It's late." Rawlins finished his drink and got to his feet, grunting a little. He looked down at his bare legs. The diagnostat had covered the wounds with a nutrient spray, flesh-colored; it was almost impossible to tell that his skin had been broken anywhere. Stiffly he pulled his tattered leggings on. "You'll give me some of that liqueur for my friend?"

Silently Muller extended the flask, half full.

Rawlins clipped it to his belt. "It was an interesting day. I hope I can come again."

Boardman said, as Rawlins limped back toward Zone E, "How are your legs?"

"Tired. They're healing fast. I'll be all right."

"Ned, listen to me, we did try to get the drones to you. I was watching every terrible minute of it, when those animals were attacking you. But there was nothing we could do. Muller was intercepting our probes and knocking them out."

"All right," Rawlins said.

"He's clearly unstable. He wasn't going to let one of those drones into the inner zones."

"All right, Charles. I survived."

Boardman said after a long while, "It seems you and Muller are quite good friends now. I'm pleased. It's coming to be time for you to tempt him out."

"How do I do that?"

"Promise him a cure," Boardman said.

XIII

They met again on the third day afterward, at midday in Zone B. Rawlins came diagonally across the oval ball court, or whatever it was, that lay between two snub-nosed dark

blue towers, and Muller nodded. "How are your legs?"

"Doing fine."

"And your friend? He liked the liqueur?"

"He loved it," Rawlins said, thinking of the glow in Boardman's foxy eyes. "He sends back your flask with some special brandy in it and hopes you'll treat him to a second round."

Muller eyed the flask as Rawlins held it forth. "He can go to hell," Muller said coolly. "I won't get into any trades. If you give me that flask I'll smash it."

"Why?"

"Give it here, and I'll show you. No. Wait. Wait. I won't. Here, let me have it."

Rawlins surrendered it. Muller cradled the lovely flask tenderly in both hands, activated the cap, and put it to his lips. "You devils," he said in a soft voice. "What is this, from the monastery on Deneb XIII?"

"He didn't say. He just said you'd like it."

"Devils. Temptations. It's a trade, damn you! But only this once. Where have you been all week, anyway?"

"Working."

"Where are they excavating?"

"They aren't excavating at all. They're using sonic probes at the border between Zone E and F. Trying to determine the chronology, whether the whole maze was built at once, or in accretive layers out from the middle. What's your opinion, Dick?"

"Go to hell. No free archeology out of me!" Muller sipped the brandy again. "You're standing pretty close to me, aren't you?"

"Four or five meters, I'd guess."

"You were closer when you gave me the brandy. Why didn't you look sick? Didn't you feel the effect?"

"I felt it, yes."

"And hid your feelings like the good stoic you are?"

Shrugging, Rawlins said genially, "I guess the effect loses impact on repeated exposure. Have you ever noticed that happening with someone else?"

"There were no repeated exposures with anyone else," said Muller. "Come over here, boy. See the sights. This is my water supply. Quite elegant. This black pipe runs right around Zone B." Muller knelt and stroked the aqueduct. "There's a pumping system. Brings water up from some underground aquifer, maybe a thousand kilometers down. Over here, you see, here's one of the spigots. Every fifty meters. As far as I can tell, it's the water supply for the entire city, right here, and so perhaps the builders didn't need much water. No conduits that I've found. No real plumbing."

Muller cupped his hand under the ornately engraved spigot, a thing of concentric ridges. Water gushed. Muller took a few quick gulps; the flow ceased the moment the hand was taken from the area below the spigot. A scanning system of some kind, Rawlins thought. Clever. How had it lasted all these millions of years?

They went into Zone A, an easy stroll. Muller was in a talkative mood. The conversation was fitful, dissolving every now and then into an acid spray of anger or self-pity,

but most of the time Muller remained calm and even charming, an older man clearly enjoying the company of a younger one, the two of them exchanging opinions, experiences, scraps of philosophy. Muller spoke a good deal about his early career, the planets he had seen, the delicate negotations on behalf of Earth with the frequently prickly colony worlds. He mentioned Boardman's name quite often; Rawlins kept his face studiously blank.

"And what about you?" Muller said finally. "You're brighter than you pretend to be. Hampered a little by your shyness, but plenty of brains, carefully hidden behind college-boy virtues. What do you want for yourself, Ned? What does archeology give you?"

Rawlins looked him straight in the eyes. "A chance to recapture a million pasts. I'm as greedy as you are. I want to know how things happened, how they got this way. Not just on Earth or in the System. Everywhere."

"Well spoken!"

Rawlins said, "I suppose I could have gone in for diplomatic service, the way you did. Instead I chose this. I think it'll work out. There's so much to discover, here and everywhere else. We've only begun to look."

"The ring of dedication is in your voice. I like to hear that sound. It reminds me of the way I used to talk."

Rawlins said, "Just so you don't think I'm hopelessly pure, I ought to say that it's personal curiosity that moves me on, more than abstract love of knowledge."

"Understandable. Forgiveable. We are not too different, really. Allowing for forty-odd years between us. Don't worry so much about your motives, Ned. Go to the stars, see, do. Enjoy. Eventually life will smash you, the way it's smashed me, but that's far off."

Rawlins felt the warmth of the man now, the reaching out of genuine sympathies. There was still that carrier wave of nightmare, though, the unending broadcast out of the mucky depths of the soul, attenuated at this distance but unmistakeable. Imprisoned by his pity, Rawlins hesitated to say what it now was time to say. Boardman prodded him irritably. "Go *on*, boy! Slip it in!"

"You look very far away," Muller said.

"Just thinking how — how sad it is that you won't trust us at all. That you have such a negative attitude toward humanity."

"I come by it honestly."

"You don't need to spend the rest of your life in this maze, though. There's a way out."

"Garbage."

"Listen to me," Rawlins said. He took a deep breath and flashed his quick, transparent grin. "I talked about your case to our expedition medic. He's studied neurosurgery. He says there's a way to fix what you have, now. Recently developed, the last couple of years. It — shuts off the broadcast, Dick. We'll take you back to Earth. For the operation, Dick. The cure."

The sharp glittering barbed word came swimming along on the

breast of a torrent of bland sounds and speared him in the gut. *Cure.* He stared. There was reverberation from the looming dark buildings. *Cure. Cure. Cure.* Muller felt the poisonous temptation gnawing at his liver. "No," he said. "That's garbage. A cure's impossible."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I know."

"Science progresses in nine years. They understand how the brain works, now. Its electrical nature. What they did, they built a tremendous simulation in one of the lunar labs, and they ran it all through from start to finish."

"You look so angelic," Muller said. "Those sweet blue eyes and that golden hair. What's your game, Ned? Why are you reeling off all this nonsense."

Rawlins reddened. "It isn't nonsense!"

"I don't believe you. And I don't believe in your cure."

There was a long sticky silence.

Muller revolved a maze of thoughts. To leave Lemnos? To have the curse lifted? To hold a woman in his arms again? Breasts like fire against his skin? Lips? Thighs? To rebuild his career? To reach across the heavens once more? To shuck nine years of anguish? To believe? To go? To submit?

"*Is* there a cure?"

"The medic says there is."

"I think you're lying to me, boy."

Rawlins glanced away. "What do I have to gain by lying?"

"I can't guess."

"All right, I'm lying," Rawlins said brusquely. "There's no way to help you. Let's talk about something else."

"Why did you tell me that story if it wasn't true?"

"I said we'd change the subject."

"Let's assume for the moment that it *is* true," Muller persisted. "That if I go back to Earth I can be cured. I want to let you know that I'm just not interested, not even with a guarantee. I've seen Earthmen in their true natures. They kicked me when I was down. Not sporting, Ned. They stink. They reek, They gloried in what had happened to me."

"That isn't so!"

"What do you know? You were a child. Even more then than now. They treated me as filth because I showed them what was inside themselves. A mirror for their dirty souls. Why should I go back to them now? I saw them as they really are, those few months I was on Earth after Beta Hydri IV. The look in the eyes, the nervous smile as they back away from me. Yes, Mr. Muller. Of course, Mr. Muller. Just don't come too close, Mr. Muller. Boy, come by here some time at night and let me show you the constellations as seen from Lemnos. I've given them my own names. There's the Dagger, a long keen one. It's about to be thrust into the Back. Then there's the Shaft. And you can see the Ape, too, and the Toad. They interlock. The same star is in the forehead of the Ape and the left eye of the Toad. That star is Sol, my friend. An ugly little yellow star, the color of thin vomit. Whose planets are populated by ugly little people who have spread through the universe."

"Can I say something that might offend you?" Rawlins asked.

"You can't offend me. But you can try."

"I think your outlook is distorted. You've lost your perspective, all these years. You're blaming humanity for being human. It's not easy to accept someone like you. If you were sitting here in my place, and I in yours, you'd understand that. It hurts to be near you. *It hurts.* Right now I feel pain in every nerve. If I came closer I'd feel like crying. You can't expect people to adjust quickly to somebody like that. Not even your loved ones could — "

"I had no loved ones."

"You were married."

"Terminated."

"Friends?"

"They ran," Muller said. "On all six legs they scuttled away from me."

"You didn't give them time."

"Time enough."

"No," Rawlins said. He shifted about uneasily on the chair. "Now I'm going to say something that will really hurt you, Dick. I'm sorry, but I have to. What you're telling me is the kind of stuff I heard in college. Sophomore cynicism. The world is despicable, you say. Evil evil evil. You've seen the true nature of mankind and you don't want anything to do with mankind ever again. Everybody talks that way at eighteen. But it's a phase that passes. We get over the confusions of being eighteen, and we see that the world is a pretty decent place, that people try to do their best, that we're imperfect but not loathsome — "

"An eighteen-year-old has no right to those opinions. I do. I come by my hatreds the hard way."

"But why cling to them? You seem to be glorying in your own misery. Break loose! Shake it off! Come back to Earth with us and forget the past. Or at least forgive."

"No forgetting. No forgiving." Muller scowled. A tremor of fear shook him, and he shivered. What if this were true? A genuine cure? Leave Lemnos? He felt a trifle embarrassed. The boy had scored a palpable hit with that line about sophomore cynicism. It was. Am I really such a misanthrope? A pose. He forced me to adopt it. Now I choke on my own stubbornness. But there's no cure. The boy's transparent; he's lying, though I don't know why, wants to trap me, to get me aboard that ship of theirs. What if it's true? Why not go back? Muller could supply his own answers. It was the fear that held him. To see Earth's billions. To enter the stream of life. Nine years on a desert island and he dreaded to return.

Rawlins said, "I can feel the flavor of your thoughts changing."

"You *can?*"

"Nothing specific. But you were angry and bitter before. Now I'm getting something — wistful."

"No one ever told me he could detect meanings," Muller said in wonder.

"Why did you go wistful just then, though? If you did. Thinking of Earth?"

"Maybe I was." Muller hastily patched the sudden gap in his armor. His face darkened. He clenched his jaws. He stood up and deliberately

approached Rawlins, watching the young man struggling to hide his real feelings of discomfort. Muller said, "I think you'd better get about your archeologizing now, Ned."

"I still have some time."

"No you don't. Go."

XVI

Against Charles Boardman's express orders, Rawlins insisted on returning all the way to the Zone F camp that evening. He found Boardman at dinner. A polished dining-board of dark wood mortised with light woods set before him. Out of elegant stoneware he ate candied fruits, brandied vegetables, meat extracts, pungent juices. A carafe of wine of a deep olive hue was near his fleshy hand. Mysterious pills of several types rested in the shallow pits of an oblong block of black glass; from time to time Boardman popped one into his mouth. Rawlins stood at the sector opening for a long while before Boardman appeared to notice him.

"I told you not to come here, Ned," the old man said finally.

"Muller sends you this." Rawlins put the flask down beside the carafe of wine.

"We could have talked without this visit."

"I'm tired of that. I needed to see you." Boardman left him standing and did not interrupt his meal. "Charles, I don't think I can keep up the pretense with him."

"You did an excellent job today," said Boardman, sipping his wine. "Quite convincing."

"Yes, I'm learning how to tell lies. But what's the use? You heard him. Mankind disgusts him. He's not going to cooperate once we get him out of the maze."

"He isn't sincere. You said it yourself, Ned. Cheap sophomore cynicism. The man loves mankind. That's why he's so bitter: because his love has turned sour in his mouth. But it hasn't turned to hate."

Rawlins bent into a crouch to get on Boardman's level. Boardman nudged a candied pear onto his fork, equalized gravity, and flipped it idly toward his mouth. He's intentionally ignoring me, Rawlins thought. He said, "Charles be serious. I've gone in there and told Muller some monstrous lies. I've offered him a completely fraudulent cure, and he threw it back in my face."

"Saying he didn't believe it existed. But he *does* believe, Ned. He's simply afraid to come out of hiding."

"Please. Listen. Assume he does come to believe me. Assume he leaves the maze and puts himself in our hands. Then what? Who gets the job of telling him that there isn't any cure, that we've tricked him shamelessly, that we merely want him to be our ambassador again, to visit a bunch of aliens twenty times as strange and fifty times as deadly as the ones that ruined his life? *I'm* not going to break that news to him!"

"You won't have to, Ned. I will."

"And how will he react? Are you simply expecting him to smile and bow and say, very clever, Charles, you've done it again? To yield and do whatever you want? No. He couldn't possibly."

"That isn't necessarily true," said Boardman calmly.

"Will you explain the tactics you propose to use, then, once you've informed him that the cure is a lie and that there's a dangerous new job he has to undertake?"

"I prefer not to discuss future strategy now."

"I resign," Rawlins said.

Boardman had been expecting something like that. A noble gesture; a moment of headstrong defiance; a rush of virtue to the brain. Abandoning now his studied detachment, he looked up, his eyes locking firmly on Rawlins's.

Quietly Boardman said, "You resign? After all your talk of service to mankind? We need you, Ned."

"My dedication to mankind includes a dedication to Dick Muller," Rawlins said stiffly. "I've already committed a considerable crime against him. If you won't let me in on the rest of this scheme, I'm damned if I'll have any part in it."

"I admire your convictions."

"My resignation still stands."

"I even agree with your position," said Boardman. "I'm not proud of what we must do here."

"How are you going to get Muller to cooperate? Drug him? Torture him? Brainblast him?"

"None of those."

"What, then? I'm serious, Charles. My role in this job ends right here, unless I know what's ahead."

Boardman coughed, drained his wine, ate a peach, took three pills in quick succession. Rawlins's rebellion had been inevitable, and he was prepared for it, and yet he was annoyed that it had come. Now was the time for calculated risks. He said, "I see that it's time to drop the pretenses, then, Ned. I'll tell you what's in store for Dick Muller — but I want you to consider it within the framework of the larger position. Don't forget that the little game we've been playing on this planet isn't simply a matter of private moral postures."

"I'm listening, Charles."

"Very well. Dick Muller must go to our extragalactic friends and convince them that human beings are indeed an intelligent species. Agreed? He alone is capable of doing this, because of his unique inability to cloak his thoughts."

"Agreed."

"Now, it isn't necessary to convince the aliens that we're good people, or that we're honorable people, or that we're lovable people. Simply that we have minds and can think. That we feel, that we sense, that we are something other than clever machines. For our purposes it doesn't matter *what* emotions Dick Muller is radiating, so long as he's radiating something."

"I begin to see."

"Therefore, once he's out of the maze, we can tell him what his assignment is to be. No doubt he'll get angry at our trickery. But beyond his anger he may see where his duty lies. I hope so. You seem to think he won't. But it makes no difference, Ned. He won't be given an option once he leaves his sanctuary. He'll be taken to the aliens and handed over to them to make contact."

"His cooperation is irrelevant,

then," said Rawlins slowly. "He'll just be dumped. Like a sack."

"A *thinking* sack. As our friends out there will learn."

"I — "

"No, Ned. Don't say anything now. I know what you're thinking. You hate the scheme. You have to. I hate it myself. Just go off, now, and think it over. Examine it from all sides before you come to a decision. If you want out tomorrow, let me know and we'll carry on somehow without you, but promise me you'll sleep on it, first."

Rawlins's face was pale a moment. Then color flooded into it. He clamped his lips. Boardman smiled benignly. Rawlins clenched his fists, squinted, turned, went hastily out.

A calculated risk.

Boardman took another pill. Then he reached for the flask Muller had sent him. He poured a little. Sweet, gingery, strong. An excellent liqueur.

XV

Muller had almost come to like the Hydrans. What he remembered most clearly and most favorably about them was their grace of motion.

He had landed in a damp, dreary part of the planet, a little to the north of its equator, on an amoeboid continent occupied by a dozen large quasi-cities, each spread out over several thousand square kilometers. His life-support system, specially designed for this mission, was little more than a thin filtration sheet clinging to him like a second skin. It fed air to him through a thousand dialysis plaques. He moved easily if not comfortably within it.

He walked for an hour through a forest of the giant toadstool-like trees before he came upon any of the natives. The trees ran to heights of several hundred meters; perhaps the gravity, five-eighth Earthnorm, had something to do with that. Their curving trunks did not look sturdy. He suspected that an external woody layer no thicker than a fingertip surrounded a broad core of soggy pulp. The cap-like crowns of the trees met in a nearly continuous canopy overhead, cutting almost all light from the forest floor. Since the planet's cloud layer permitted only a hazy pearl-colored glow to come through, and even that was intercepted by the trees, a maroon darkness prevailed below.

When he encountered the aliens he was surprised to find that they were about three meters tall. He stood ringed by them, straining upward to meet their many eyes. In a quiet voice he said, "My name is Richard Muller. I come in friendship from the peoples of the Terran Cultural Sphere."

Dropping to his knees, Muller traced the Pythagorean Theorem in the soft moist soil.

He looked up. He smiled. "A basic concept of geometry. A universal pattern of thought."

Their vertical slitlike nostrils flickered slightly. They inclined their heads. He imagined that they were exchanging thoughtful glances. With eyes in a circlet entirely around their heads, they did not need to change posture to do that.

He sketched a line on the ground. A short distance from it he sketched a pair of lines. At a greater distance he drew three lines. He filled in the signs, 1+ plus 11 equals 111.

"Yes?" he said. "We call it addition."

The jointed limbs swayed. Two of his listeners touched arms. Muller remembered how they had obliterated the spying eye as soon as they had discovered it, not hesitating even to examine it. He had been prepared for the same reaction. Instead they were listening. A promising sign. He stood up and pointed to his marks on the ground.

"Your turn," he said. He spoke quite loudly. He smiled quite broadly. "Show me that you understand. Speak to me in the universal language of mathematics."

After a long pause one of the Hydrans moved fluidly forward and let one of its globe-like foot-pedestals hover over the lines in the soil. The leg moved lightly, and the lines vanished as the alien smoothed the soil.

"All right," said Muller. "Now you draw something."

The Hydran returned to its place in the circle.

"Very well," Muller said. "There's another universal language. I hope this doesn't offend your ears." He drew a soprano recorder from his pocket and put it between his lips. Playing through the filtration sheet was cumbersome. He caught breath and played a diatonic scale. Their limbs fluttered a bit. They could hear, then, or at any rate could sense vibrations.

"Does that get to you?" he asked.

They appeared to be conferring. They walked away from him.

He tried to follow. He was unable to keep up, and soon he lost sight of them in the dark, misty forest; but he persevered and found them clustered as if waiting for him, farther on. When he neared them they began to move again. In this way they led him, by fits and starts, into their city.

He subsisted on synthetics. Chemical analysis showed that it would be unwise to try local foods.

He drew the Pythagorean Theorem many times. He sketched a variety of arithmetical processes. He played Schonberg and Bach. He constructed equilateral triangles. He ventured into solid geometry. He sang. He spoke French, Russian and Mandarin, as well as English, to show them the diversity of human tongues. He displayed a chart of the periodic table. After six months he still knew nothing more about the workings of their minds than he had an hour before landing. They tolerated his presence, but they said nothing to him.

Eventually they wearied of him and came for him.

He slept.

He did not discover until much later what had been done to him while he slept.

He had had nine years to sharpen his memories. He had filled a few cubes with reminiscences, but that had mainly been in the early years of his exile, when he worried about having his past drift away to be lost in fog. He discovered that the memories grew keener with age. Perhaps it was training. He could

summon sights, sounds, tastes, odors. He could reconstruct whole conversations convincingly. He was able to quote the full texts of several treaties he had negotiated.

He admitted to himself that, given the chance, he would go back. Everything else had been pretense and bluster. He had fooled neither Ned Rawlins nor himself, he knew. The contempt he felt for mankind was real, but not the wish to remain isolated. He waited eagerly for Rawlins to return. While he waited, he drank several goblets of the city's liqueur; he went on a killing spree, nervously gunning down animals he could not possibly consume in a year's time; he conducted intricate dialogues with himself; he dreamed of Earth.

Rawlins was running. Muller, standing a hundred meters deep in Zone C, saw him come striding through the entrance, breathless, flushed.

"You shouldn't run in here," Muller said. "Even in the safer zones. There's absolutely no telling — "

Rawlins sprawled down beside a flanged limestone tub, gripping its sides and sucking air. "Get me a drink, will you?" he gasped. "That liqueur of yours — "

Muller went to the fountain nearby and filled a handy flask with the sharp liqueur. Rawlins did not wince at all as Muller drew near to give it to him. He seemed altogether unaware of Muller's emanation. Greedily, sloppily, he emptied the flask, letting driblets of the gleaming fluid roll down his chin and onto his clothes. Then he closed his eyes.

"Wait. Let me get my breath. I ran all the way from Zone F."

"You're lucky to be alive, then."

Muller studied him, perplexed. The change was striking and unsettling, and mere fatigue could not account for it all. Rawlins was bloodshot, flushed, puffy-faced; his facial muscles were tightly knit; his eyes moved randomly, seeking and not finding. Drunk? Sick? Drugged?

After a long moment Muller said, "I've done a lot of thinking about our last conversation. I've decided that I was acting like a damned fool. All that cheap misanthropy I was dishing up." Muller knelt and tried to peer into the younger man's shifting eyes. "Look here, Ned, I want to take it all back. I'm willing to return to Earth for treatment. Even if the treatment's experimental, I'll chance it."

"There's no treatment," said Rawlins dully.

"No Treatment."

"No treatment. None. It was all a lie."

"Yes. Of course."

"You said so yourself," Rawlins reminded him. "You didn't believe a word of what I was saying. Remember?"

"A lie."

"You didn't understand why I was saying it, but you said it was nonsense. You told me I was lying. You wondered what I had to gain by lying. I was lying, Dick."

"Lying."

"Yes."

"But I changed my mind," said Muller softly. "I was ready to go back to Earth."

"There's no hope of a cure," Rawlins said.

He got slowly to his feet and ran his hand through his long golden hair. He arranged his disarrayed clothing. He picked up the flask, went to the liqueur fountain and filled it. Returning, he handed the flask to Muller, who drank from it.

Muller said finally, "Do you want to explain some of this?"

"We aren't archeologists. We came here looking especially for you. It wasn't any accident. We knew where you were all along. You were tracked from the time you left Earth nine years ago."

"I took precautions."

"They weren't any use. Boardman knew where you were going, and he had you tracked. He left you in peace because he had no use for you. But when a use developed, he had to come after you."

"Charles Boardman sent you to fetch me?" Muller asked.

"That's why we're here, yes. That's the whole purpose of this expedition," said Rawlins tonelessly. "I was picked to make contact with you because you knew my father and might trust me. All the time Boardman was directing me, telling me what to say, coaching me, even telling me what mistakes to make, how to blunder successfully. He told me to get into that cage, for instance. He thought it would help win your sympathy."

"Boardman is here? Here on Lemnos?"

"In Zone F. He's got a camp there."

Muller's face was stony. Within, all was turmoil. "Why did he do all this? What does he want with me?"

Rawlins said, "You know that there's a third intelligent race in the universe, beside us and the Hydrans."

"Yes. They had just been discovered when I left. That was why I went to visit the Hydrans. I was supposed to arrange a defensive alliance with them, before these other people, these extragalactics, came in contact with us. It didn't work. But — "

"How much do you know about these extragalactics?"

"Very little," Muller admitted. "Essentially, nothing but what I've just told you. The day I agreed to go to Beta Hydri IV was the first time I heard about them. Boardman told us. All he said was that they were extremely intelligent — a superior species, he said — and that they lived in a neighboring cluster. And that they had a galactic drive and might visit us some day."

"We know more about them now," Rawlins said.

"First tell me what Boardman wants with me."

"Everything in order and it'll be easier." Rawlins grinned, perhaps a bit tipsily. He said, "We don't actually know a great deal about the extragalactics. What we did was send a ramjet out, throw it into warp, and bring it out a few thousand light-years away. Or a few million light-years. Anyway, it was a drone ship with all sorts of eyes. The place it went to was one of the X-ray galaxies, classified information, but I've heard it was either in Cygnus A or Scorpius II. We found that one planet of the galactic system was in-

habited by an advanced race of very alien aliens."

"How alien?"

"They see all up and down the spectrum," Rawlins said. "Their basic visual range is in the high frequencies. They see by the light of X rays. They also seem to be able to make use of the radio frequencies to see, or at least to get some kind of sensory information. And they pick up most wavelengths in between, except that they don't have a great deal of interest in the stuff between infrared and ultraviolet. What we like to call the visible spectrum."

"Wait a minute. Radio senses? Do you have any idea how long radio waves are? If they're going to get any information out of a single wave, they'll need eyes, or receptors or whatever of gigantic size. How big are these being supposed to be?"

"They could eat elephants for breakfast," said Rawlins.

"Intelligent life doesn't come that big."

"What's the limitation? This is a gas giant planet, all ocean, no gravity to speak of. They float. They have no square-cube problems."

"And a bunch of superwhales has developed a technological culture?" Muller asked. "You won't get me to believe — "

"They have," said Rawlins. "I told you, these were very alien aliens. They can't build machinery themselves. But they have slaves."

"Oh," said Muller quietly.

"We're only beginning to understand this, and of course I don't have much of the inside information myself, but it seems that these beings make use of lower life-forms, turning them essentially into radio-controlled robots. They'll use anything with limbs and mobility. They started with certain animals of their own planet, a small dolphin-like form perhaps on the threshold of intelligence, and worked through them to achieve a space-drive. Then they got to neighboring planets, land planets, and took control of pseudo-primates, protochimps of some kind. They look for fingers. Manual dexterity counts a great deal to them. At present their sphere of influence covers some eighty light-years, and it appears to be spreading at an exponential rate."

Muller shook his head. "This is worse nonsense than the stuff you were handing me about a cure. Look, there's a limiting velocity for radio transmission, right? If they're controlling flunkeys from eighty light-years away, it'll take eighty years for any command to reach its destination. Every twitch of a muscle, every trifling movement — "

"They can leave their home world," said Rawlins.

"But if they're so big — "

"They've used their slave beings to build gravity tanks. They also have a star drive. All colonies are run by overseers in orbit a few thousand kilometers up, floating in a simulated home-world environment. It takes one overseer to run one planet."

Muller closed his eyes a moment. The image came to him of these colossal, unimaginable beasts spreading through their distant galaxy, impressing animals of all sorts into service, forging a captive society, vicariously

technological, and drifting in orbit like spaceborne whales to direct and coordinate the grandiose improbable enterprise, while masses of glossy pink protoplasm, fresh from the sea, bristling with perceptors functioning at both ends of the spectrum. Whispering to one another in pulses of X rays. Sending out orders via radio. No, he thought. No.

"Well," he said at length, "what of it? They're in another galaxy."

Not any longer. They've impinged on a few of our outlying colonies. Do you know what they do when they find a human world? They station an orbiting overseer above it and take control of the colonists. They find that humans make outstanding slaves. At the moment they have six of our worlds. They had a seventh, but we shot up their overseer. Now they make it much harder to do that. They just take control of our missiles as they home in, and throw them back."

"If you're inventing this," said Muller, "I'll kill you!"

"It's true. I swear."

"When did this begin?"

"Within the past year."

"And what happens? Do they just march right through our galaxy and turn us all into zombies?"

"Boardman thinks we have one chance to prevent that."

"Which is?"

Rawlins said, "The aliens don't appear to realize that we're intelligent beings. We can't communicate with them, you see. They function on a completely non-verbal level, some kind of telepathic system, and we've tried all sorts of ways to reach them, bombarding them with messages at every wavelength, without any flicker of a sign that they're receiving us. Boardman believes that if we could persuade them that we have — well, souls — they might leave us alone. God knows why he thinks so. It's some kind of computer prediction. He feels that these aliens work on a consistent moral scheme, that they're willing to grab any animals that look useful, but that they wouldn't touch a species that's on the same side of the intelligence boundary as they are. And if we could show them somehow — "

"They see that we have cities. That we have a star drive. Doesn't that prove intelligence?"

"Beavers make dams," said Rawlins. "But we don't make treaties with beavers. We don't pay reparations when we drain their marshes. We know that in some way a beaver's feelings don't count."

"Do we?"

"I don't want to argue philosophy with you," Rawlins said hoarsely. "I'm trying to tell you what the situation is. Boardman thinks that we really can get the radio beasts to leave our galaxy alone, if we show them that we're closer to them in intelligence than we are to their other slaves. If we get across to them that we have emotions, needs, ambitions, dreams."

Muller spat. "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? If you prick us, do we not bleed?"

"Like that, yes."

"How do we get this across to

them if they don't speak a verbal language?"

"Don't you see?" Rawlins asked.

"No, I — *yes*. Yes. God, yes!"

"We have one man, out of all our billions, who doesn't need words to communicate. He broadcasts his inner feelings. His soul. We don't know what frequency he uses, but *they* might."

"Yes. Yes."

"And so Boardman wanted to ask you to do one more thing for mankind. To go to these aliens."

"What makes you think I would lift a finger to keep all of man's worlds from being swallowed up?"

"Your help wouldn't have to be voluntary," Rawlins said.

Now it came flooding forth, the hatred, the anguish, the fear, the jealousy, the torment, the bitterness, the mockery, the loathing, the contempt, the despair, the viciousness, the fury, the desperation, the vehemence, the agitation, the grief, the pangs, the agony, the furor, the fire. Rawlins pulled back as though depths of desolation. A trick, a trick, all a trick! Used again. Boardman's tool. Muller blazed. He spoke only a few words aloud; the rest came from within, pouring out, the gates wide, nothing penned back, a torrent of anger.

When the wild spasm passed Muller said, "Boardman would dump me onto the aliens whether I was willing to go or not?"

"Yes. He said this was too important to allow you free choice. Your wishes were irrelevant. The many against the one."

With deadly calm Muller said, "You're part of this conspiracy. Why have you been telling me this?"

"I resigned."

"Of course."

"No, I mean it. Oh, I was part of it; I was going along with Boardman; yes, I was lying in everything I said to you. But I didn't know the last part: that you wouldn't be given any choice. I had to pull out there. I couldn't let them do this to you."

"Very thoughtful. I now have two options, eh, Ned? I can let myself be dragged out of here to play catspaw for Boardman again — or I can kill myself a minute from now and let mankind go to hell. Yes?"

"Don't talk like that," Rawlins said edgily.

"Why not? Those are my options. You were kind enough to tell me the real situation, and now I can react as I choose. You've handed me a death sentence, Ned."

"No."

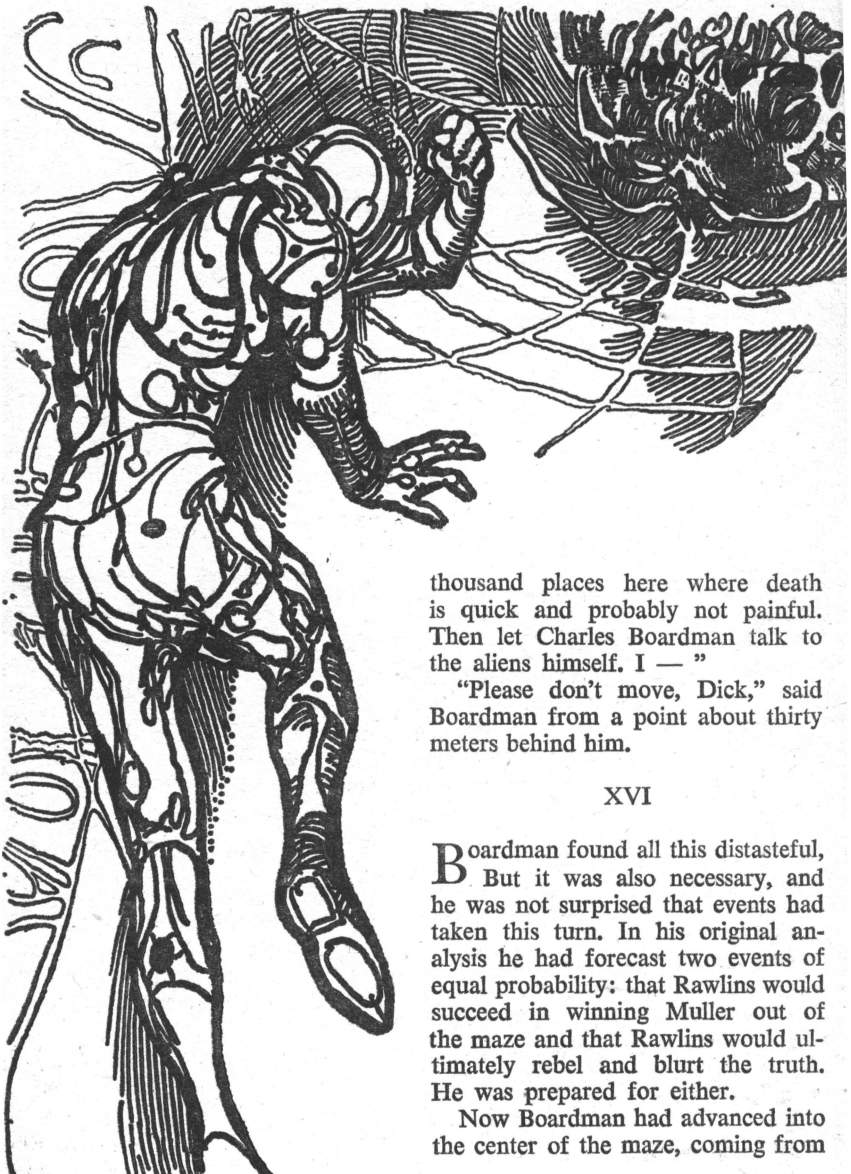
"What else is there? To let myself be used again?"

"You could — cooperate with Boardman," Rawlins said. He licked his lips.

"No!"

"You aren't being rational."

"No, I'm not. And I don't intend to start now. Assuming that it could affect humanity's destiny in the slightest if I became ambassador to these radio people — and I don't buy the idea at all — it would give me great pleasure to shirk my duty. I'm grateful to you for your warning. Now that at last I know what's going on here, I have the excuse I've been looking for all along. I know a



thousand places here where death is quick and probably not painful. Then let Charles Boardman talk to the aliens himself. I — "

"Please don't move, Dick," said Boardman from a point about thirty meters behind him.

XVI

Boardman found all this distasteful, But it was also necessary, and he was not surprised that events had taken this turn. In his original analysis he had forecast two events of equal probability: that Rawlins would succeed in winning Muller out of the maze and that Rawlins would ultimately rebel and blurt the truth. He was prepared for either.

Now Boardman had advanced into the center of the maze, coming from

Zone F to follow Rawlins before the damage became irreparable. He could predict one of Muller's likely responses: suicide. Muller would never commit suicide out of despair, but he might do it by way of a vengeance. With Boardman were Ottavio, Davis, Reynolds, and Greenfield. Hosteen and the others were monitoring from outer zones.

Muller turned. The look on his face was not easy to behold.

"I'm sorry, Dick," Boardman said. "We had to do this."

"You have no shame at all, do you?" Muller asked.

"Not where Earth is concerned."

"I realized that a long time ago. But I thought you were human, Charles. I didn't comprehend your depths."

"I wish we didn't have to do any of this, Dick. But we do. Come with us."

"No."

"You can't refuse. The boy's told you what's at stake. We owe you more already than we can repay, Dick, but run the debt a little higher. Please."

"I'm not leaving Lemnos. I feel no sense of obligation to humanity. I won't do your work."

"Dick — "

Muller said, "Fifty meters to the northwest of where I stand is a flame pit. I'm going to walk over and step into it. Within ten seconds there will be no more Richard Muller. One unfortunate calamity will cancel out another, and Earth will be no worse off than it was before I acquired my special ability."

"That's childish. The last sin I'd ever imagine you committing."

"It was childish of me to dream of stars," Muller said. "I'm simply being consistent. The galactics can eat you alive, Charles. I don't care if they do. Won't you fancy being a slave? Somewhere under your skull you'll still be there, screaming to be released, and the radio messages will tell you which arm to life, which leg to move. I wish I could last long enough to see that. But I'm going to walk into that flame pit."

Boardman said, "At least come out to Zone F with me. Let's sit down quietly and discuss this over brandy."

"Side by side?" Muller laughed. "You'd vomit. You couldn't bear it." He took a shaky step toward the northwest. His big powerful body seemed shrunken and withered, noth-

ing but sinew stretching tighter over a yielding armature. He took another step. Boardman watched.

Casually, Boardman gestured with two flicking fingers. Greenfield and Reynolds pounced.

Catlike they darted forth, ready for this, and caught Muller by the inner forearms. Boardman saw the grayness sweep over their faces as the impact of Muller's field got to them. Muller struggled, heaved, tried to break loose. Davis and Ottavio were upon him now too. A stungun would have been easier, Boardman reflected. But stunguns were risky, sometimes, on humans. They had been known to send hearts into wild runaways. They had no defibrillator here.

A moment more and Muller was forced to his knees.

"Disarm him," Boardman said.

Ottavio and Davis held him. Reynolds and Greenfield searched him. From a pocket Greenfield pulled forth the deadly little windowed globe. "That's all he seems to be carrying," Greenfield said.

"Check carefully."

They checked. Meanwhile Muller remained motionless, his face frozen, his eyes stony. It was the posture and the expression of a man at the headsman's block. At length Greenfield looked up again. "Nothing."

Muller said, "One of my left upper molars contains a secret compartment full of carriphage. I'll count to ten and bite hard, and I'll melt away before your eyes."

Greenfield swung around and grabbed Muller's jaws.

Boardman said, "Leave him alone. He's joking."

"But how do we knew — " Greenfield began.

"Let him be. Step back." Boardman gestured. "Stand five meters away from him. Don't go near him unless he moves."

They stepped away, obviously grateful to get back from the full thrust of Muller's field. Boardman, fifteen meters from him, could feel faint strands of pain. He went no closer.

"You can stand up now," Boardman said. "But please don't try to move. I regret this, Dick."

Muller got to his feet. His face was black with hatred, but he said nothing, nor did he move.

"If we have to," Boardman said, we'll tape you in a webfoam cradle and carry you out of the maze to the ship. We'll keep you in foam from then on. You'll be in foam when you meet the aliens. You'll be absolutely helpless. I would hate to do that to you, Dick. The other choice is willing cooperation. Go with us of your own free will to the ship. Do what we ask of you. Help us this last time."

"May your intestines rust," said Muller almost casually. "May you live a thousand years with worms eating you. May you choke on your own smugness and never die."

"Help us. Willingly."

Muller's reply was close to a snarl.

Boardman sighed. This was an embarrassment. He looked toward Ottavio.

"The webfoam," he said.

Rawlins, who had been standing as

though in a trance, burst into sudden activity. He darted forward, seized Reynold's gun from its holster, ran toward Muller and pressed the weapon into his hand. "There," he said thickly. "Now you're in charge."

Muller studied the gun as though he had never seen one before, but his surprise lasted only a fraction of a second. He slipped his hand around its comfortable butt and fingered the firing stud. It was a familiar model, only slightly changed from the ones he had known. In a quick flaring burst he could kill them all. Or himself.

He stepped back so they could not come upon him from the rear. Then he moved the gun in an arc of some 270 degrees, taking them all in.

"Stand close together," he said. "The six of you. Stand one meter apart in a straight row and keep your hands out where I can see them at all times."

He enjoyed the black glowering look that Boardman threw at Ned Rawlins. The boy seemed dazed, flushed, confused, a figure in a dream. Muller waited patiently as the six men arranged themselves according to his orders. He was surprised at his own calmness.

"You look unhappy, Charles," he said. "How old are you now, eighty years? You'd like to live that other seventy, eighty, ninety, I guess. You have your career planned, and the plan doesn't include dying on Lemnos. Stand still, Charles. And stand straight. You won't win any pity from me by trying to look old and sagging. I know that dodge. You're as healthy as I am, beneath the phony flab."

Boardman said raggedly, "If it'll make you feel better, Dick, kill me. And then go aboard the ship and do what we want you to do. I'm expendable."

"I almost think you mean that," Muller said wonderingly. "You crafty old bastard, you're offering a trade. Your life for my cooperation! But where's the *quid pro quo?* I don't enjoy killing. It won't soothe me at all to burn you down. I'll still have my curse."

"The offer stands."

"Rejected," Muller said. "If I kill you, it won't be as part of any deal. But I'm much more likely to kill myself. You know, I'm a decent man at heart. Somewhat unstable, yes, and who's to blame me for that? But decent. I'd rather use this gun on me than on you. I'm the one who's suffering. I can end it."

"You could have ended it at any time in the past nine years," Boardman pointed out. "But you survived. You devoted all your ingenuity to staying alive in this murderous place."

"Ah. Yes. But that was different! An abstract challenge: man against the maze. But if I kill myself now, thwart you. I put the thumb to the nose with all of mankind watching. I'm the indispensable man, you say? What better way, then, to pay, mankind back for my pain?"

"We regretted your suffering," said Boardman.

"I'm sure you wept bitterly for me. But that was all you did. You let me go creeping away, diseased, corrupt,

unclean. Now comes the release. Not really suicide: revenge." Muller smiled. He turned the gun to finest beam and let its muzzle rest against his chest. A touch of the finger, now. His eyes raked their faces. Rawlins looked deep in shock. Only Boardman was animated with concern and fright. "I could kill you first, I suppose, Charles. As a lesson to our young friend: the wages of deceit is death. But no. That would spoil everything. You have to live, Charles. To go back to Earth and admit that you let the indispensable man slip through your grasp. What a blotch on your career!"

His finger tightened on the stud.

"Now," he said. "Quickly."

"*No!*" Boardman screamed. "For the love of — "

"Man," said Muller, and laughed, and did not fire. His arm relaxed. He tossed the weapon contemptuously toward Boardman. It landed almost at his feet.

"Foam!" Boardman cried. "Quick!"

"Don't bother," said Muller. "I'm yours."

XVII

Feeling that he was in disgrace, Rawlins kept away from the others on the nearly silent outward march. He considered his career in ruins. He had jeopardized the lives of his companions and the success of the mission. Yet it had been worth it, he felt. A time comes when a man takes his stand against what he believes to be wrong.

The simple moral pleasure that he took in that was balanced and overbalanced by the knowledge that he had acted naively, romantically, foolishly. He could not bear to face Boardman now. He thought more than once of letting one of the deadly traps of these outer zones have him. But that too, he decided, would be naive, romantic, and foolish.

He watched Muller striding ahead, tall, proud, all tensions resolved, all doubts crystallized. And he wondered a thousand times why Muller had given back the gun.

Boardman finally explained it to him as they camped for the night in a precarious plaza near the outward side of Zone G.

"Look at me," Boardman said. "What's the matter? Why can't you look at me?"

"Don't toy with me, Charles. Get it over with. The tonguelashing. The sentence."

"It's all right, Ned. You helped us get what we wanted. Why should I be angry?"

"But the gun — I gave him the gun — "

"Confusion of ends and means again. He's coming with us. He's doing what we wanted him to do. That's what counts."

Floundering, Rawlins said, "And if he had killed himself? Or us?"

"He wouldn't have done either."

"You can say that, now. But for the first moment, when he held the gun — "

"No," Boardman said. "I told you earlier: we'd work on his sense of honor. Which we had to reawaken. You did that. Look, here I am, the brutal agent of a brutal and amoral society, right? And I confirm all of

Muller's worst thoughts about mankind. Why should he help a tribe of wolves? And here you are: young and innocent, full of hope and dreams. You remind him of the mankind he once served, before the cynicism corroded him. You demonstrate sympathy, love for a fellow man, the willingness to make a dramatic gesture for the sake of righteousness. You show Muller that there's small hope in humanity. See? You defy me and give him a gun and make him master of the situation. He could do the obvious and burn us down. He could do the slightly less obvious, and burn himself. Or he could match your gesture with one of his own, top it, commit a deliberate act of renunciation, express his revived sense of moral superiority. He does it. He tosses away the gun. You were vital, Ned. You were the instrument through which we won him."

Rawlins said, "You make it sound so ugly when you spell it out that way. As if you had planned even this."

Boardman smiled.

"Did you?" Rawlins demanded suddenly. "No. You couldn't have calculated all those twists and turns. Now, after the fact, you're trying to claim credit for having engineered it all. But I saw you in the moment I handed him the gun. There was fear on your face, and anger. You weren't at all sure what he was going to do. Only when everything worked out could you claim it went according to plan. I can see right through you, Charles!"

"How delightful to be transparent," Boardman said gaily.

Carefully they traced their outward path, but they met few challenges and no serious dangers. Quickly they went toward the ship.

They gave Muller a forward cabin, well apart from the quarters of the crew. He was withdrawn, subdued, self-contained; an ironic smile often played on his lips, and his eyes displayed a glint of contempt much of the time. But he was willing to do as they directed. He had had his moment of supremacy; now he was theirs.

Hosteen and his men bustled through the liftoff preparations. Muller remained in his cabin. Boardman went to him, alone, unarmed. He could make noble gestures too.

They faced each other across a low table. Muller waited, silent, his face cleansed of emotion. Boardman said after a long moment, "I'm grateful to you, Dick."

"Save it."

"I don't mind if you despise me. I did what I had to do. So did the boy. And now so will you."

He sat quite close to Muller. The emanation hit him broadside, but he deliberately remained in place. That wave of despair welling out to him made him feel a thousand years old. The decay of the body, the crumbling of the soul, the heat-death of the galaxy . . . the coming of winter . . . emptiness . . . ashes. . . .

"When we reach Earth," said Boardman crisply, "I'll put you through a detailed briefing. You'll come out of it knowing as much about the radio people as we do, which isn't saying a great deal. After that you'll be on your own. "Is there

anyone you'd like me to have waiting for you when we dock Earthside?"

"No."

"I can send word ahead. There are people who've never stopped loving you, Dick. They'll be there if I ask them."

Muller said slowly, "I see the strain in your eyes, Charles. You feel the nearness of me, and it's ripping you apart. You feel it in your gut. In your forehead. Back of your breastbone. Your face is going gray. Your cheeks are sagging. You'll sit here if it kills you, yes, because that's your style, but it's hell for you. If there's anyone on Earth who never stopped loving me, Charles, the least I can do is spare her from hell. I don't want to meet anyone. I don't want to see anyone. I don't want to talk to anyone."

"As you wish," said Boardman. Beads of sweat hung from his bushy brows and dropped to his cheeks. "Perhaps you'll change your mind when you're close to Earth."

"I'll never be close to Earth again," Muller said.

XVIII

He spent three weeks absorbing all that was known of the giant extragalactic beings. They gave him quarters in a bunker on Luna and he lived quietly beneath Copernicus, moving like a robot through steely gray corridors lit by warm glowing torches. They showed him all the cubes. They ran off a variety of reconstructs in every sensory mode. Muller listened. He absorbed. He said very little.

They kept well away from him, as they had on the voyage from Lemnos. Whole days passed in which he saw no human being. When they came to him, they remained at distances of ten meters and more.

The exception was Boardman, who visited him three times a week, and made a point always of coming well within the pain range. Muller found that contemptible. Boardman seemed to be patronizing him with this voluntary and wholly unnecessary submission to discomfort. "I wish you'd keep away," Muller said to him on the fifth visit. "We can talk by screen. Or you could stay by the door."

"I don't mind the close contact."

"I do," said Muller. "Has it ever occurred to you that I've begun to find mankind as odious as mankind finds me? The reek of your meaty body, Charles — it goes into my nostrils like a spike. Not just you, all the others. Sickening. Hideous. Even the look of your faces. The pores. The stupid gaping mouths. The ears. Look at a human ear closely some time, Charles. Have you ever seen anything more repulsive than that pink wrinkled cup? You all disgust me!"

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Boardman said.

The briefing went on and on. Muller was ready after the first week to undertake his assignment, but no, they had to feed him all the data in the bank, first. He absorbed the information with twitchy impatience. A shadow of his old self remained to find it fascinating, a challenge worth accepting. He would go. He

would serve as before. He would honor his obligation.

At last they said he could depart.

From Luna they took him by ion-drive to a point outside the orbit of Mars, where they transferred him to a warp-drive ship already programmed to kick him to the edge of the galaxy. Alone.

From the cabin of his small sleek ship he watched the technicians drifting in space, getting ready to sever the transfer line. Then they were returning to their own ship. Now he heard from Boardman, a final message, a Boardman special, inspirational, go forth and do your duty for mankind, et cetera, et cetera. Muller thanked him graciously for his words.

The communications channel was cut.

Moments later Muller entered warp.

The aliens had taken possession of three solar systems on the fringes of the galactic lens, each star having two Earth-settled planets. Muller's ship was aimed at a greenish-gold star whose worlds had been colonized only forty years before. The fifth planet, dry as iron, belonged to a Central Asian colonization society that was trying to establish a series of pastoral cultures where nomad virtues could be practiced. The sixth, with a more typically Earthlike mixture of climates and environments, was occupied by representatives of half a dozen colonization societies, each on its own continent. The relations between these groups, often intricate and touchy, had ceased to matter within the past twelve months, for both planets now were under control of extragalactic overseers.

Muller emerged from warp twenty light-seconds from the sixth planet. His ship automatically went into an observation orbit, and the scanners began to report. Screens showed him the surface picture; via template overlay he was able to compare the configurations of the outposts below with the pattern as it had been prior to the alien conquest. The amplified images were quite interesting. The original settlements appeared on his screen in violet, and the recent extensions in red; Muller observed that about each of the colonies, regardless of its original ground plan, there had sprouted a network of angular streets and jagged avenues. Instinctively he recognized the geometries as alien.

In orbit, seven thousand kilometers above the sixth planet, was a glistening capsule, slightly longer on one axis than on the other, which had about the mass of a large interstellar transport ship. Muller found a similar capsule in orbit about the fifth world. The overseers.

It was impossible for him to open communications with either of these capsules, or with the planets beyond. All channels were blocked. He twisted dials fitfully for more than an hour, ignoring the irritable responses of the ship's brain, which kept telling him to give up the idea. At last he conceded.

He brought his ship close to the nearer orbiting capsule. To his surprise the ship remained under his control. Destructive missiles that had come this close to alien overseers had

been commandeered; but he was able to navigate. A hopeful sign? Was he under scan, and was the alien able to distinguish him from a hostile weapon? Or was he being ignored?

At a distance of one million kilometers he matched velocities with the alien satellite and put his ship in a parking orbit around it. He entered his drop-capsule. He ejected himself and slid from his ship into darkness.

Now the alien seized him. There was no doubt. The drop-capsule was programmed for a minimum-expenditure orbit that would bring it skimming past the alien in due time, but Muller swiftly discovered that he was deviating from that orbit. Deviations are never accidental. His capsule was accelerating beyond the program, which meant that it had been grasped and was being drawn forward. He accepted that. He was icily calm, expecting nothing and prepared for everything. The drop-capsule eased down. He saw the gleaming bulk of the alien satellite show.

Skin to metal skin, the vehicles met and touched and joined.

A hatch slid open.

He drifted within.

His capsule came to rest on a broad platform in an immense cavernous room hundreds of meters long, high, and broad. Fully suited, Muller stepped from it. He activated his gravity pads; for, as he anticipated, gravity in here was so close to null that the pull was imperceptible. In the blackness he saw only a faint purplish glow. Against a backdrop of utter silence he heard a resonant booming sound, like an enormously amplified sigh, shuddering through the struts and trusses of the satellite. Despite his gravity pads he felt dizzy; beneath him the floor rolled. Through his mind went a sensation like the throbbing of the sea; great waves slammed ragged beaches; a mass of water stirred and groaned in its global cavity; the world shivered beneath the burden. Muller felt a chill that his suit could not counteract. An irresistible force drew him. Hesitantly he moved, relieved and surprised to see that his limbs still obeyed his commands, though he was not entirely their master. The awareness of something vast nearby, something heaving and pulsating and sighing, remained with him.

He walked down a night-drowned boulevard. He came to a low railing, a dull red line against the deep darkness, and pressed his leg against it, keeping contact with it as he moved forward. At one point he slipped and hit the railing with his elbow and heard the clang of metal traveling through the entire structure. Blurred echoes drifted back to him. As though walking the maze he passed through corridors and hatches, across interlocking compartments, over bridges that spanned dark abysses, down sloping ramplike debouchments into lofty chambers whose ceilings were dimly visible. Here he moved in blind confidence, fearing nothing. He could barely see. He had no vision of the total structure of this satellite. He could scarcely imagine the purpose of these inner partitions.

From that hidden giant presence came silent waves, an ever-intensifying pressure. He trembled in its grip.

Still he moved on, until now he was in some central gallery, and by a thin blue glow he was able to discern levels dwindling below him, and far beneath his balcony a broad tank, and within the tank something sparkling, something huge.

"Here I am," he said. "Richard Muller. Earthman."

He gripped the railing and peered downward. Did the great beast stir and shift? Did it grunt? Did it call to him in a language he understood? He heard nothing. But he felt a great deal.

He felt his soul escaping through his pores.

The drain was unrelenting. Down in the pit the monster tapped his spirit, opened petcocks of neural energy, drew forth, demanded more, drew that too.

"Go on," Muller said, and the echoes of his voice danced around him. "Drink! What's it like? A bitter brew? Drink!"

His knees buckled. He sagged forward. He pressed his forehead to the cold railing. He yielded himself in glittering droplets. He gave up first love and first disappointment, April rain, fever and ache, pride and hope, the scent of sweat and the touch of flesh, warmth and cold, sweet and sour, the thunder of music, the music of thunder, silken hair knotted between his fingers, lines scratched in spongy soil, snorting stallions, glittering schools of tiny fish, the towers of Newer Chicago, the brothels of Under New Orleans, snow, milk, wine, hunger, fire, pain, sleep, sorrow, apples, dawn, tears, Bach, sizzling grease, the laughter of old men, the sun on the horizon, the moon on the sea, ecstasy, grief, salt, artichokes, green fields, the light of other stars, soft thighs, whirling dancers, vision cubes, transportation pods, cold gin, crumbling books, Sunday mornings, the fumes of rocket fuel, summer flowers on a glacier's flank, and much more. He gave it all. He waited for an answer, and none came to him, and when he was wholly empty he lay face downward, drained, hollow, staring blindly into the abyss.

XIX

When he was able to leave, he left. The hatch opened to pass his drop-capsule, and it rose toward his ship. Shortly he was in warp. He slept most of the way. In the vicinity of Antares he cut in the override, took command of the ship, and filed for a change of course. There was no need to return to Earth. The monitor station recorded his request, checked routinely to see that the channel was clear, and allowed him to proceed at once to Lemnos. Muller entered warp again instantly.

When he emerged, not far from Lemnos, he found another ship already in orbit and waiting for him. He started to go about his business anyway, but the other ship insisted on making contact. Muller accepted the communication.

"This is Ned Rawlins," a strangely quiet voice said. "Why have you changed your flight plans?"

"Does it matter? I've done my job."

"You haven't filed a report."

"I'm reporting now, then. I visited

the alien. We had a pleasant, friendly chat. Then it let me go home. Now I'm almost home. End of report."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Go home," I said. "This is home."

"Lemnos?"

"Lemnos."

"Dick, let me come aboard. Give me ten minutes with you — in person. Please don't say no."

"I don't say no," Muller replied.

Soon a small craft detached itself from the other ship and matched velocities with his. Patiently Muller allowed the rendezvous to take place. Rawlins stepped into his ship and shed his helmet. He looked pale, drawn, older. They faced one another for a long silent moment. Rawlins advanced and took Muller's wrist in greeting.

"I never thought I'd see you again, Dick," he began. "And I wanted to tell you — "

He stopped.

"Yes?" Muller asked.

"I don't feel it," said Rawlins. *"I don't feel it!"*

"What?"

"You. Your field. Look, I'm right next to you. I don't feel a thing. All that nastiness, the pain, the despair — it isn't coming through!"

"The alien drank it all," said Muller calmly. "I'm not surprised. My soul left my body. Not all of it was put back."

"What are you talking about?"

"I could feel it soaking up everything that was within me. I knew it was changing me. Not deliberately. It was just an incidental alteration. A byproduct."

Rawlins said slowly, "You knew it, then. Even before I came on board. And yet you want to return to the maze. Why?"

"It's home."

"Earth's your home, Dick. There's no reason why you shouldn't go back. You've been cured."

"Yes," said Muller. "A happy ending to my doleful story. I'm fit to consort with humanity again. My reward for nobly risking my life a second time among aliens. How neatly done! But is humanity fit to consort with me?"

"Don't go down there, Dick. You're being irrational now. Charles sent me to get you. He's terribly proud of you. We all are. It would be a big mistake to lock yourself away in the maze now."

"Go back to your own ship, Ned," Muller said.

"If you go into the maze, so will I."

"I'll kill you if you do. I want to be left alone, Ned, do you understand that? I've done my job. My last job. Now I retire. Purged of my nightmares." Muller forced a thin smile. "Don't come after me, Ned. I trusted you, and you would have betrayed me. Everything else is incidental. Leave my ship now. We've said all that we need to say to each other, I think, except good-bye. Remember me to Charles."

"Don't do this!"

"There's something down there I don't want to lose," Muller said. "I'm going to claim it now. Stay away. All of you. Stay away. I've learned the truth about Earthmen. Will you go now?"

Silently Rawlins suited up. As he stepped through the hatch, Muller said, "I'm glad you were the last one I saw. Somehow it was easier that way."

Rawlins vanished through the hatch.

A short while later Muller programmed his ship for a hyperbolic orbit on a twenty-minute delay, got into his drop-capsule, and readied himself for the descent to Lemnos. It was a quick drop and a good landing. He came down right in the impact area, two kilometers from the gateway to the maze. The sun was high and bright. Muller walked briskly toward the maze.

He had done what they wanted.

Now he was going home.

"He's still making gestures," Boardman said. "He'll come out of there."

"I don't think so," replied Rawlins. "He meant that."

"You stood next to him, and you felt nothing?"

"Nothing. He doesn't have it any more."

"He'll come out, then," Boardman said. "We'll watch him, and when he asks to be taken off Lemnos, we'll take him off. Sooner or later he'll need other people again. He's been through so much that he needs to think everything through, and I guess he sees the maze as the best place for that. He isn't ready to plunge back into normal life again. Give him two years, three, four. He'll come out. The two sets of aliens have canceled each other's work on him, and he's fit to rejoin society."

"I don't think so," Rawlins said quietly. "I don't think it canceled out so evenly. Charles, I don't think he's human at all, any more."

Boardman laughed. "Shall we bet? I'll offer five to one that Muller comes out of the maze voluntarily within five years."

"Well — "

"It's a bet, then."

Rawlins left the older man's office. Night had fallen. He crossed the bridge outside the building. In an hour he'd be dining with someone warm and soft and willing, who was awed beyond measure by her liaison with the famous Ned Rawlins. She was a good listener, who coaxed him for tales of daring deeds and nodded gravely as he spoke of the challenges ahead. She was also good in bed.

He paused on the bridge to look upward at the stars.

A million million blazing points of light shimmered in the sky. Out there lay Lemnos, and Beta Hydri IV, and the worlds occupied by the radio beings, and all man's dominion, and even, invisible but real, the home galaxy of the *others*. Out there lay a labyrinth in a broad plain, and a forest of spongy trees hundreds of meters high, and a thousand planets planted with the young cities of Earthmen, and a tank of strangeness orbiting a conquered world. In the tank lay something unbearably alien. On the thousand planets lived worried men fearing the future. Under the spongy trees walked graceful silent creatures with many arms. In the maze dwelled a . . . man.

Perhaps, Rawlins thought, I'll visit Muller in a year or two.

It was too early to tell how the patterns would form. No one yet knew how the radio people were reacting, if at all, to the things they had learned from Richard Muller. The role of the Hydrans, the efforts of men in their own defense, the coming forth of Muller from the maze, these were mysteries, shifting, variable. It was exciting and a little frightening to think that he would live through the time of testing that lay ahead.

He crossed the bridge. He watched starships shattering the darkness overhead. He stood motionless, feeling the pull of the stars. All the universe tugged at him, each star exerting its finite power. The glow of the heavens dazzled him. Beckoning pathways lay open. He thought of the man in the maze. He thought too of the girl awaiting him.

Suddenly he was Dick Muller, once also twenty-four years old, with the galaxy his for the asking. Was it any different for you, he wondered? What did you feel when you looked up at the stars? Where did it hit you? Here. Here. Just where it hits me. And you went out there. And found. And lost. And found something else. Do you remember, Dick, the way you once felt? Tonight in your windy maze, what will you think about? Will you remember?

Why did you turn away from us, Dick?

What have you become?

He hurried to the girl who waited for him. They sipped young wine, tart, electric. They smiled through a candle's flickering glow. Later her softness yielded to him, and still later they stood close together on a balcony looking out over the greatest of all men's cities. Lights stretched toward infinity, rising to meet those other lights above. He slipped his arm around her, put his hand on her bare flank, held her against him.

She said, "How long do you stay this time?"

"Four more days."

"And when will you come back?"

"When the job's done."

"Ned, will you ever rest? Will you ever say you've had enough, that you won't go out any longer, that you'll take one planet and stick to it?"

"Yes," he said vaguely. "I suppose. After a while."

"You don't mean it. You're just saying it. None of you ever settle down."

"We can't," he murmured. "We keep going. There are always more worlds . . . new suns. . . . "

"You want too much. You want the whole universe. It's a sin, Ned. You have to accept limits."

"Yes," he said. "You're right. I know you're right." His fingers traveled over satin-smooth flesh. She trembled. He said, "We do what we have to do. We try to learn from the mistakes of others. We serve our cause. We attempt to be honest with ourselves. How else can it be?"

"The man who went back into the maze — "

" — is happy," Rawlins said. "He's following his chosen course."

""He must hate us terribly to turn his back on the whole universe like that."

"He's beyond hate," Rawlins said. "Somehow. He's at peace. Whatever he is."

"Whatever?"

"Yes," he said gently. *When I see you again, Dick, I have much to tell you,* he thought.

She said, "Why did he lock himself into the maze again, Ned?"

"For the same reason that he went among aliens in the first place. For the reason that it all happened."

"And that reason was?"

"He loved mankind," Rawlins said. It was as good an epitaph as any. He held the girl tightly. But he left before dawn. END

April 19-21, 1968. LUNACON/Eastercon. At Park-Sheraton Hotel, 56th St. and 7th Ave., New York City. Guest of Honor: Donald A. Wollheim. For information: Franklin M. Dietz, 1750 Walton Avenue, Bronx, N.Y. 10453. Membership: $2.00.

May 10-11, 1968. THE SECONDARY UNIVERSE: A conference devoted to science fiction, fantasy, science in literature, etc. At University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Luncheon speaker Judith Merril. No fee for the conference. For luncheon reservations and information: Ivor A. Rogers, c/o Kay Ettla, Student Union, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201.

May 10-12, 1968. DISCLAVE. Washington D. C. Regency-Congress Motor Hotel. For information: Jack C. Haldeman, 1244 Woodbourne Avenue, Baltimore, Md. Featuring a lively slide show "The Decline and Fall of Practically Everybody" narrated by J. K. Klein and based on his photos of many past conventions. Guest of Honor: Robert Silverberg.

June 21-23, 1968. DALLAS CON. At Hotel Southland, Dallas, Texas. For information: Con Committee '68, 1830 Highland Drive, Carrollton, Texas 75006. Membership $2.50.

June 24-*August* 2, 1968. WRITERS' WORKSHOP IN SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY. Participants may enroll for 2, 4, or 6 weeks; college credits will be given. Visiting staff will be: Judith Merril, Fritz Leiber, Harlan Ellison, Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm. For information: Robin Scott Wilson, Clarion State College, Clarion, Pa. 16214.

June 28-30, 1968. MIDWESTCON. At North Plaza Motel, 7911 Reading Road, Cincinnati, Ohio. Program includes a banquet, cost $3.50. For information: Lou Tabakow, 3953 St. John's Terrace, Cincinnati, Ohio 45236. Membership: $1.00.

July 4-7, 1968. F-UN CON. In Los Angeles: at Statler-Hilton Hotel. For information: Charles A. Crayne, 1050 N. Ridgewood Place, Hollywood, California 90038. Advance membership: $2.00: supporting membership: $1.00.

July 26-28, 1968. OZARKON III. At Ben Franklin Motor Hotel, 825 Washington, St. Louis, Missouri. Guest of Honor: Harlan Ellison. For information: Norbert Couch, Route 2, Box 889, Arnold, Missouri 63010. Membership: $2.00.

August 23-25, 1968. DEEP SOUTH SF CONFERENCE VI, New Orleans, Louisiana. Details to be announced. For information: John H. Guidry, 5 Finch Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70124. Guest of Honor: Daniel F. Galouye. Membership: $1.00.

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, California 94530. Membership: $1.00 foreign, $2.00 supporting, $3.00 attending. Join now and receive Progress Reports.

Dear Editor:

In reply to your query concerning the reaction to occasionally printing a bit of fantasy, I would like to cast an affirmative vote. The reason, I think, that pure fantasy magazines such as *Beyond* and *Unknown* failed was that there were too few of us who enjoyed or could appreciate fine fantasy writing. Now I believe there is a new type of readership, brought about by the Ring trilogy and the Conan tales published in pocketbook form, that would certainly welcome more fantasy writing. After all, we've had fine science-fiction writers turn out great fantasy; people like Robert Bloch (*That Hell-Bound Train*), Jack Sharkey (*It's Magic, You Dope!*), and Fritz Leiber (the Grey Mouser series). Really, we've had fantasy with us in the guise of science fiction, in the form of Sturgeon, R. A. Lafferty and the recent Harlan Ellison. Perhaps you could print Michael Moorcock's Elric stories in the up-coming *International Science Fiction* (and Fantasy?) *Magazine.* I've enjoyed reading *If* for many years and the addition of fantasy will make *If* a better magazine by expanding the subjects that your writers can write about. More fantasy and more James Blish. — George Kelley, 24D 69th Street, Niagara Falls, New York, 14304.

Dear Editor:

I am not a constant reader of science-fiction magazines, but sometimes while in a bookshop I occasionally buy one or two from the paperback counter. Likewise, I sometimes get them from abroad from England. The other day I picked up the December 1967 issue of *If* and liked some of the stories. One thing I did not like was the first paragraph of the article by your man Lin Carter, presumably in Europe. Writing about the popularity of science-fiction in various countries he mentions Russia . . . which word for some obscure reason (or is it) is printed in italics, though the names of the other countries are printed in other type. It should of course be the Soviet Union. He uses the term Iron Curtain and by doing so is obviously very prejudiced against that country. If Carter has a bias either from religious or political reason, then that is his own affair and I don't think that it should intrude into your magazine. New Zealand is many thousands of miles away from the Soviet Union but even so, I'll give him a few facts to bring him up-to-date. Please forward them on to him in Europe.

The Soviet Union has Intourist offices in many of the big cities in

Europe and these specifically cater for foreigners wanting to enter that country. If he had been in London say, he could have gone along to the Intourist office there and booked a passage, either a Baltic line ship which operates between London and Leningrad or flown in one of the big Soviet jets from London airport to Leningrad or Moscow. He would have had very little trouble with his visa, always providing of course, "that his nose was clean". Many hundreds of thousands of foreigners (including some thousands of Americans) visit the Soviet Union throughout the year; and the trend is growing. The main problem is hotel accommodation. Some thousands of Soviet citizens visit other countries as well. Some few weeks ago I saw on television a British documentary made in conjunction with the Soviet television people, a hour long program on Siberia and particularly about "science city," Novosibirsk. And very informative it was; no "Iron Curtain" there, brother.

Even in little New Zealand we have seen the Bolshoi ballet and the Georgian dancers and others. And we, are so far away from the main spring of world culture . . . except of course, the American effort in Vietnam . . . that surely you must have seen far more of Soviet art and culture in the United States than we have seen in New Zealand. One point comes to mind as regards an iron curtain; some years ago arrangements had been made between an American entrepreneur and a Soviet cultural organization to visit the United States and perform in the major cities, of the Red Army choir. Everything had been settled and then Washington intervened and although the concert tickets had been sold out in the places where the choir were to sing, it all had to be canceled. The reason? The American government didn't want the choir to sing in their Red Army uniforms as they had done in every other country they had sung in, and that the Red Army could say that they'd been on American soil. Tut, tut, how childish can they be?

As implied in my opening paragraph, I am not an addict of science-fiction but very interested in space research and its disciplines and I am a senior member of the British Interplanetary Society, London and also a member of two local (NZ) societies who publish technical reports.

As a tail end. Just remember one thing; Science of any discipline is universal and for all mankind, and knows no boundaries, politics or religion. So cut out the "Iron Curtain" prejudice and propaganda. — William Hope Fenn, P.O. Box 127, Auckland, C. I., New Zealand.

● Prejudice does exist all over. It exists in many countries, including some which do not permit members of "colored" races or non-Christian religions to immigrate, rather closer to your home than the U. S. A., Mr. Fenn. But it is quite rare among science-ficion writers, readers — and editors! — in *any* country. — *The Editor.*

* * *

Dear Editor:

I started reading *Galaxy* and *If* about the same time I began trailing girls home at a timorous two blocks' distance. All this occurred during the inquistorial gloom of the early nineteen-fifties, when Howard Fast disappeared overnight from school

library shelves and you wondered if you'd be court-martialed from ROTC when they found your Aunt Elsa had chairwomaned the Spanish Republican War Relief Committee in Dubuque. (Even the Finnish War Relief Committee was suspect. One thing about the book- and heretic-burning set, their fear of the future is exceeded only by their ignorance of the past.)

For those of us who suffered through the obstacle course of adolescence during that era of chrome-plated Stalinism, science-fiction was our new left, our underground, our movement. Perhaps we were merely being pragmatic. Where else but in a sf magazine could be we obtain practical information on how to survive in Year One after Armageddon? (Round up all the nubile wenches you could lay hands on and put them to studying agronomy texts and Alfred Korzybski.) Or how to carry on a one-man war of patriotic banditry against some Orwellian nightmare of a super-state that was sure to come if the Bomb didn't.

So thanks to Galaxy and If, and best of luck in the coming year! — Jerry L. Watkins, 211 North 25th Street, Apartment 16, Omaha, Nebraska.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Apparently there aren't any "good newsstands" in Parkersburg — I've been looking for months now and still haven't found a copy of *International Science Fiction.* Are you sure it's newsstand only? I'd be more than happy to have an issue of *If* or *Galaxy* taken off my subscription and be sent a copy of *International* instead. It may be the only way I'll ever get a copy.

"He That Moves" was a fine story, but not nearly long enough to satisfy my hunger for Zelazny stories. More, please. Another story like "This Mortal Mountain" and "I'll subscribe for life. I'd like to see Harlan Ellison in your pages more often. And how about coaxing Theodore Sturgeon back into *If?*

When are we going to get *Rogue Star?* You've been promising it to us ever since the November, 1965, issue. The other serials have been fine, but I'm getting tired of waiting.

So you want a more active letter column, eh? And the readers should do their share, eh? All right, but we can't do it all, you know. You'll have to help us out, and there are two ways you can do it.

First, speed things up. I've had two letters printed in *If* so far, and neither has seen print less than five or six months after I wrote it. I realize you work several issues ahead, but surely you can do something to get letters into print faster.

Second, comment on the letters. Agree or disagree, praise our intelligence or tell us we don't know what we're talking about, it doesn't really matter as long as you say *something.*

I mean, a lot of thought went into my proposal in my January letter, and the least you could have done was to print a small editorial guffaw to show you thought it was funny. Discussions have to have two sides.

But don't let any of the above make you think I don't like *If.* Quite the contrary. I'd just like to see a livelier "Hue and Cry." — John P. Borger, Route #4, Box 66, Parkersburg, West Virginia 26101.

● *Rogue Star* upcoming starting in July issue. *Positively.* (We think.) —*Editor.*

Forgotten road to success in writing

By J. D. Ratcliff

I can't imagine why more beginners don't take the short road to publication — by writing magazine and newspaper articles.

I've made a good living for 25 years writing articles, and I've enjoyed every minute of it. I've interviewed Nobel Prize winners and heads of state. I've covered stories from Basel to Bangkok to Buffalo.

It's a great life. No commuter trains to catch, no office routine. Whether I'm at home or abroad on assignment, I write from eight to noon every day — no more, no less. My afternoons are my own.

The market for articles is vast and hungry. Over 350,000 were sold last year to magazines alone. Editors want pieces on almost any subject that comes natural to you — but they demand that your writing be sound and professional.

To teach professional writing techniques to serious beginners, I joined with Rod Serling, Faith Baldwin, Bennett Cerf, and eight other leading authors to start the Famous Writers School.

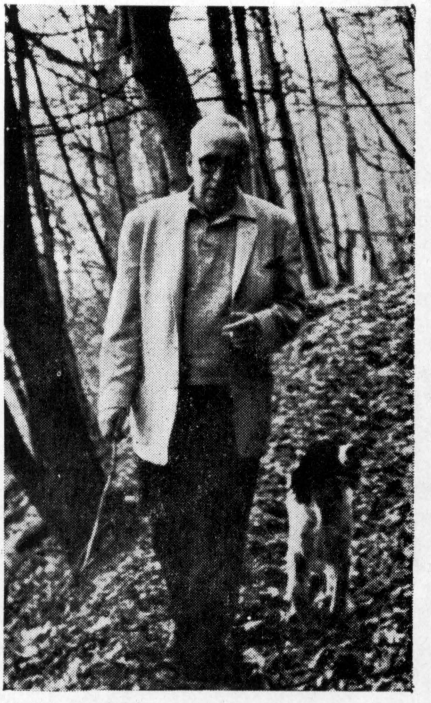
We poured everything we know about successful writing into a new kind of course which trains you at home, in spare time. You begin with the fundamentals of *all* good writing. Then, you specialize in articles and other non-fiction. (Or in Fiction, Advertising or Business Writing.)

You learn to write *by writing*. Our instructors, themselves all published authors, work with you by mail much as editors do with established writers.

Our School is young. Yet students, many still in training, have broken into print in more than 100 publications. Several sold pieces they wrote as School assignments.

Writing Aptitude Test offered

To find out if you too can be a published writer, send for the School's revealing Aptitude Test. If you test well — or offer other evidence of writing ability — you may enroll. However, there is no obligation to do so.



"Jack" Ratcliff is one of America's highest paid free-lance writers. Although he works only four hours a day, he has had hundreds of articles published in top magazines, including over 100 in *Reader's Digest* alone.

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