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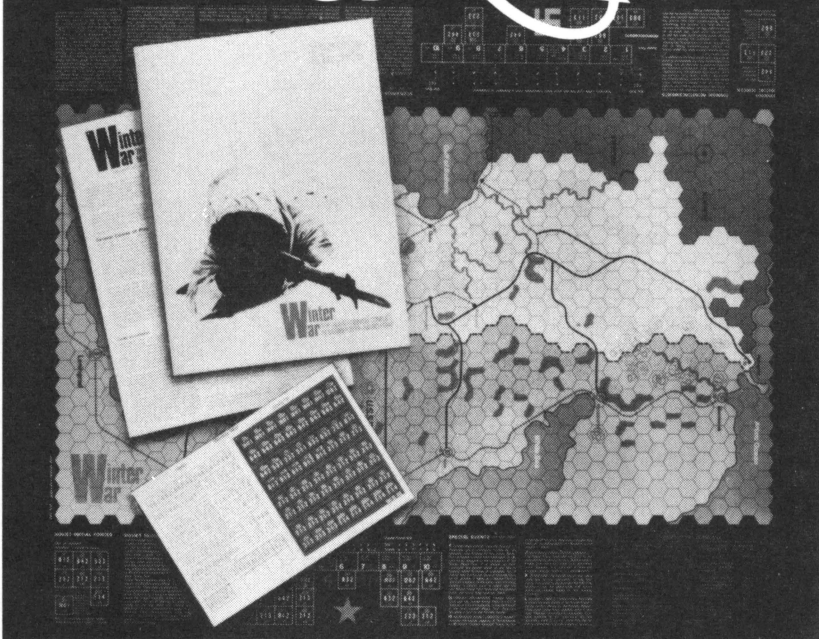
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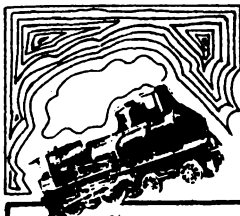
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INHERITANCE

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The last young Superom had
a choice: to rule a dead
world—or make it live!

Book 1, SHEVAN

I

THEIR sun was burning out.
Inside a decaying observatory
two live shadows moved among dead
shadows. They fused, separated
again. Two pale faces turned up to
the dying sun. It was framed in a grin
of sky formed by a split in the roof.
Whispers inside the cracked observa-
tory dome sounded like a part of the
darkness. Centuries of weather had
worn away the curt, anagramatic
signs around the dome's inner rim.

The darkness fell in through the holes.

"It's true, Del. It really is true. It's beginning to consume itself. Faster and faster." The girl turned her head toward the young man beside her. Her eyes were huge, feeding on fear. "We have to go on. We must get to Mandanar."

"I can't understand it," he said. "What does it say?"

He didn't look at her. He was staring at the broken messages around the dome. He was older and taller than she, a broad-shouldered giant, but his face under a cap of black hair was much less animated than hers—almost expressionless. He continued to stare at the dome and the sun in a bewildered way.

"This place scares me, Shevvy. Let's go hunt talues." He stopped, his forehead wrinkling as his brain chased a notion of guilt. "We shouldn't have gone off and left Keren and Karel at Spadrox. We shouldn't have—" He kept looking at the sun.

"Del, we had to escape. We *must* get to Mandanar." The girl stamped her foot hard against the floor. Dust rose in the darkness.

She was lightly built, her face as sharp as a bird's. Blue skintight coveralls flattened the natural curves of her body so that with her short bobbed hair she could have been a boy. Only the soft push of her new

breasts and the token skirt at the waist of the suit advertised her sex. Her name—Shevan—was embroidered on her collar.

Delbet glanced away from the roof and down at her at last.

"I only came because of you. To look after you. I don't really want to go to Mandanar. You know that, Shev." He sulked, then went on. "I don't believe the sun's going out. It's always been there. Superom like us put it there. Let's go back and tell Keren we made a mistake—we got lost. And maybe he won't—"

"No!" The foot stamped again. Shevan grabbed his arm and tried to shake him.

"You and I are two of the only Superom—maybe the only two true Superom—left in this Vortex of the galaxy, Del. The sun they put up in the sky of Thetis is failing. Mandanar's our only hope. Don't you want to stay alive? Don't you want to go after the others?"

"Now, Shevvy, you know it's all just out of those talk-tapes you got to studying in that old, smashed-up library place—"

He stopped, as if trying to recall something. The girl stood raging but silent in the gloom before him. Her eyes were huge, her fists clenched. Del grinned and shook his head, trying to make her respond with a smile.

She turned and ran away from

him. He heard her jump through the gap in the observatory wall into the twilight. He went after her slowly.

She was easy to find. The observatory stood on a hill. Delbet went down it toward her sobs, moving swiftly and easily for such a big man.

He squatted beside her in the sand and scrub and patted her shaking back. She wrenched away from him.

"How many times do I have to tell you—don't *do* that!"

She used not to get angry when he touched her. Now she sometimes did. It was a sign she was growing up.

"Come on, Shev," he coaxed. "I didn't mean to make you wild. Maybe you could be wrong—huh? Maybe those talk-tapes got it muddled. Maybe the sun just looks like it's getting smaller. It isn't any colder, is it—days or nights? Summer still summers, doesn't it? I haven't noticed frost on Keren's beard in the mornings." He laughed but Shevan didn't share his humor.

"You're so dumb." She stood up suddenly and punched his chest hard with both her small fists. "You don't act like Superom, Del. You don't think like Superom."

Delbet looked bewildered. He put out a hand to wipe tears from her face, but stopped just in time.

"What's the use fretting, Shev? Come on—let's go hunt talues before the sun goes down. Anyway—let's get out of here. That old observatory

gives me the creeps. Look—I made a new slingbow. Let's raise the talues and worry them instead of getting so damn miserable and bothering ourselves."

He stood up also, holding out his hands.

Shevan didn't move. "Del—I'm going on without you."

He crouched again, his handsome saint's face knitting into a frown of frustration.

"Oh, Shev—you're so—so—"

His frown became deeper as words failed him.

"No," she said, using a feminine path of attack. "I don't need you because you damn well don't believe me. And you've forgotten everything I told you. And if you were real Superom you'd rage like me at being a prisoner and working the cruze mine for Keren and just being content to sit on Thetis and go out when the sun goes out."

DEL'S throat made tiny anguished noises of denial and defense, but they didn't come to words. He loved Shevan so well he wanted to take her up in one arm as he had when she had been a baby and quiet her tantrums. But her body was as taut and unyielding as a steel whip-spring on one of his machines back in the cruze mine—and her voice was a whip that punished him, too. He didn't touch her again.

When she paused, her head bent, he said, "But what's there going to be at Mandanar, Shevvy? And just think of all the stone jungle and Conducs and those damned awful Helangles and the devil knows what else between us and there. Why—"

She raised her head and her eyes blazed at him. Delbet, big as he was, shrank back.

"You dummy! You've never listened to anything I told you. I don't want you with me. Get back to Keren and the mine. I don't know why I trusted you and told you everything."

"Shev—wait—Shevvy, hold on. I forget those things easily. You know that. I'm always thinking about inventing things. New bits for the machines or slingbows or—or—you know. Listen, I made the aircar so we could escape together—now, didn't I? Come on, Shev. You know that!"

A pause. Then: "Listen, we'll just sit down here quietly and you tell me again and I won't say a damn word and I bet I'll repeat everything you tell me exactly."

"No." She shook her head, twisting away from him. "You don't really care. You don't mind going into the dark. You don't want to be back with the Superom."

Del coaxed: "But I do want to be with you, Shev. You know that I do. Now, who could fix the aircar if it stalled, eh? Who could do that? And

who could keep off the Conducs or the Helangles if they came after you? Come—you tell it again. I'll listen carefully so I won't get it wrong any more."

And having won as she had intended to win, Shevan went back to the beginning and told it again for him. She didn't believe he would care about it or even remember it, but she needed him with her, whatever she said. And this was the way to ensure that she didn't have to turn back to Keren, who had almost ceased to be Superom anyway—and Karel who had been unconscious of all people and events for several hundred years while he lay pale and alone, neither dead nor living, in the green, frosted hibernation casket at Spadox. So she told it.

When the Superom moved from their origins in the Outer Vortices of the galaxy toward the center they looked for planetary systems most like their own.

Del started to ask what the real, first Superom planetary system was like because it sounded as though it could be the kind of thing Shevan delighted to explain, but her eyes shut him up quickly.

As their knowledge and skill developed, Superom began trying to reclaim planets that might otherwise have proved uninhabitable.

In the three thousandth age of their appearance in the Fourth Vor-

tex they developed the artificial sun. Thetis was one of the first worlds reclaimed by a Superom sun planted in its sky to supplement the pale globe that was dying there and had already spread to swallow some of its inner satellites.

Thetis grew into a world of magnificent cities linked by superb highways and aircar routes. Superom peace, prosperity, trade, ruled here just as it did in the other Vortices they had settled.

Del grinned and nodded, proud of his ancestors. Then he frowned hard because he remembered what came next and it always scared him. It was hard to understand.

Then (said Shevan) six hundred eight years ago a plague began to sweep through the Inner Vortices. It attacked the thought processes of the Superom brain. It left the mind dumb and brutish. It seemed to confine its attack to the Superom alone. Lesser breeds of humanity escaped completely. So did any native survivors in the Superom Commonwealth.

Del realized his heart was starting to pound uncomfortably. He twisted his head from one side to another just to look anywhere but into Shev's great round eyes staring back at the frightening past.

The cause of the plague couldn't be isolated. There was no identifiable virus, no hostile germ, no reason why

the attack should fall on the Superom and on no other life form. The affliction spread rapidly. It wasn't deterred by hyperspace. It broke out in several places at once. In the end the Galactic Council agreed on a total retreat of Superom from the Third and Fourth Vortices.

AS IF they were retreating from a real enemy instead of something intangible and unknown, the Superom went into a hurried flight toward their origins, abandoning their civilizations in panic.

Del licked his lips—and gripped his new slingbow. His knuckles whitened. He wanted to fight this enemy from which his fathers had fled. But where was it? Why had the old ones left Keren and Karel and him and Shevvy on Thetis? He frowned, his eyes seeking responses. Shevan told him, her heart moved by his limited understanding, his simplicity.

Just before the plague a Superom expeditionary ship had left Thetis for the Fifth Vortex. The Superom had been on the point of probing for a new extension of the Commonwealth. The expedition had consisted of the usual crew and a dozen senior scientists and space experts in hibernation.

Del's eyes lit up with pride of recognition. "Karel," he murmured. "Karel was one of them, wasn't he?"

Shevan didn't answer.

The expedition was recalled as soon as the Galactic Council had made its decision on withdrawal (she continued), but the plague was so violent in Thetis that the withdrawal had to be carried out before the expedition could make it home. When it did get back to Thetis the Superom had gone.

The survivors tried to reach the secret Galactic City at Mandanar to see whether it were possible to follow the retreat. But the Thetans were scared and bewildered because their leaders, planners and governors had fled. They wouldn't allow the expedition's survivors to leave the landing site. They believed that while some Superom remained, Thetis would still have law, peace, prosperity.

Del nodded vigorously. "Now tell about us, Shev. Tell about Shev and Del and Keren and Karel."

"We're the last," said the girl. "We're the only four left of the remnant of those survivors. Several ages have passed since the return and we've dwindled away to four. Thetis has degenerated in a long series of dark ages. The cities are stone jungles that surround oases of calm in the old abandoned foodlands and mining areas. The highways connect the jungles, which the Helanges and the Conducs and the others own.

"The Thetans still revere the

Superom. Karel in his casket remains their god while he survives. Keren has almost become one of them. With his Thetan wives and children he lives by providing the tribes with cruze to make fuel for their vehicles—cruze that you and I mine for him, Del."

The giant nodded eagerly. "So why do we have to go to Mandanar, Shevvy? We work, we eat and have fun making things. You help me hunt the talues. We live okay, so why do we have to leave Spadox and go to crazy old Mandanar?"

For a moment it looked as though Shevan's eyes were going to spill tears again, but she blinked them away.

"Del, the sun's going out. You recall when we found that library the Thetans had broken up because they couldn't use the talk-tapes, don't you?"

He nodded, frowning, muttering, "Crazy smashed-up hole."

"It was all in there," said Shevan. "Thetis' history. The placing of the sun, its life-expectation. I intuited the talk-tapes and absorbed them. So we have to go to Mandanar."

Del shook his head. He didn't really understand.

"Because I can't believe the old ones left without making some provision for the Fifth Vortex expedition survivors to follow them. It wouldn't be possible for Superom to do that. They built Mandanar for a

purpose. No Thetans were allowed there. That's where they guarded their secrets."

Del nodded again. Now he recalled it. But it was so difficult to follow all Shev's reasons. He sat looking sadly at her small sandaled feet and thinking how beautiful they were and maybe it would have been better if she were just beautiful and beautiful and beautiful like a bird or a young talue and not intelligent and philosophical like the old ones who went away.

ASOFT descending cry divided their silence. It came from a spread of grass tussocks and bushes about fifty meters away.

Del's frown dissolved and his face recovered its seraphic preoccupation.

"Talue, Shev. Let's go hunt them."

She watched him. He was already on his feet, head cocked. She didn't follow and the moment he turned away she knew she was forgotten.

He moved softly and gracefully, as if his giant's frame were made of light and air.

He flitted from tussock to bush in the twilight, new slingbow poised. He could throw his voice with the same speed and accuracy as one of his missiles. It was uncanny to hear the sound spring up ten meters away from him.

Shevan watched. Del's call had

lured one of the sleek creatures. It sat up, looking from side to side, but flickered away like a thought before Del even had time to aim the slingbow.

He tried again, moving softly farther into the brake and circling. He was facing Shevan now. He called the creature again three times. Shevan saw that the call did not even move his lips.

The fourth time a young talue male jetted from bush to tussock and sniffed the setting sun. Del's fifth call, projected to rise uncannily from the ground at its feet, stunned it for long enough. A silver bolt streaked through the air and caught it behind the right foreleg.

Its short whoop of dismay sent the rest of the pack staring out from hiding like the jets from a blue-white fountain. All but two went out of range before the giant could fire and reload. He hit both.

He collected the catch and came back to Shevan, grinning happily. The top half of his body was a silhouette against the huge pink dish of the Thetan sunset. The girl's heart moved at his contented child's face.

Del rubbed the palm of his hand against his black skullcap of hair.

"Hell, that was good fun out there, Shev." He sat down beside her and sighed. He spread out the blue-white talues lovingly. "Why didn't you come?"

"I wanted to watch you. You do it so well."

Real pleasure sprang from the giant's eyes. He put out a hand and touched Shev's face.

"Let's see if we're lucky." Slim fingers began exploring the talue's store pouches.

The talue used them for storing the stones and other fragments it mined in its burrows in the search for Thetan fire-ore. The ore gave light and warmth to the shivering, slow-growing young in their nests.

The young specimen that had been Del's first victim was still a novice. Its pouch yielded nothing but fragments of rock crystal. The second, a mature female, had two grape-sized pieces of expired fire-ore, which Del tossed aside with a shrug, but the third, an old male, gave up a fragment of treasure among lesser stones. With a gurgle of pleasure, the giant let the pearl-sized piece of stored fire fall from his palm into Shevan's.

She felt its hoarded warmth caress her skin. Closing her hand for a moment she stared down at the fist it made and saw light escaping like water between her fingers.

After a moment she gave the ore back to Del. He put it into a pouch. Fire-ore was good currency with some of the lesser Thetans who believed it had healing qualities.

Shevan stood up suddenly. "Listen, Del."

The giant rose swiftly, pressing a new bolt into his slingbow. The top of Shevan's head reached only to his bicep as they stood together.

Distant, rectangular crags of the stone jungles ringed their horizon. From one of them came the concerted snarl of high-powered engines.

"The aircar," cried Shevan. "Quick!" She began to run.

The drugged talues stirred uneasily as though caught by the same urgency.

THEY had left the aircar on the far side of the observatory, where the slope of the hill concealed it from the highway. They ran between the hill and the brush where Del had been hunting a few minutes before.

Del was in front. Ahead of him the sun was a pink fingertip, huge and godlike, sinking behind some distant city. Behind them the stone jungle released the sound of a swarm of giant wasps to the open air as a Helangle scout party hit the highway at 80 kph. Beams from their powerful headlamps rode up to the sky.

"Del!" Shevan's cry was almost drowned by the approaching tumult.

Delbet turned in time to see her stagger a few steps more, then fall. He ran back, looking anxiously at the spears of light flying along the highway.

"My foot—a rock—"

Del kneeled beside her. Blood was spilling from a gash in the sole of her right foot. The sandal strap was almost severed.

"Come on, Shevvy. Up you come—" He slipped his arms behind her shoulders and under her knees and swung her into his arms.

Loaded now, he still ran easily, loping through bushes, jumping talue humps. The aircar came into sight, tilted slightly on the hillside, where its telescopic legs had supported it but had not kept it level.

"Oh no!" The giant's groan as he pulled up made Shevan forget her injury. She turned and looked.

She flung up a hand to her face. Blood dripped onto Del's coveralls. The unmistakable lights of another Helangle scout party skidded and slithered from side to side across the sky as the riders dusted erratically across country out of the last sliver of sun.

There wasn't any doubt they were converging on the aircar in spite of the wild confusion of their lights. Their coming had been muffled by the more concerted roar of the swarm jetting along the highway and by the bulk of the observatory hill.

Del rushed forward again.

"Try to make the aircar." Shevan's face was white. Her arm went around the giant's neck.

Del sped, but he wasn't going to make it. Three beams of light sliced

the skin of darkness, fumbled, but held the two Superom in a blinding cone.

The aircar was still about twenty meters away when the leading Helangle tracked around in an arc, his withered, booted leg scorching a channel in the soil. A moment later two more of them were between Del and Shevan and their hope of flight.

Del swung the girl easily to the ground. He shouted something wordless as he leveled the slingbow.

"Don't fight, Del," Shevan panted, holding on to him.

There were about twenty Helangles in the scout party. Most of them were on the scene now. They kept the motors of their steeds roaring as they ringed the two Superom.

They were Thetan humans but their faces always looked the same, dehumanized under identical crash hats and tinted goggles. They had survived the Thetan dark ages because of their speed and mobility and their willingness to act as mercenaries to the highest bidder.

The Helangles found identity in their skin jackets. They were sewn or painted with a variety of emblems and exhortations in their colorful, monosyllabic language. Each one had his equally exotic name studded across the shoulders of his jacket.

The one who had arrived first had a star painted on his helmet to

identify him as leader. Starhowl in hand-high letters was studded across his shoulders. He gunned his engine hard and then let it die with a snarl. The others followed his example.

Starhowl kicked down the support and heaved his steede up onto it. He swung his right leg over the motor and stood upright while he touched his helmet with both hands in the salute of recognition to superiors. Then he sank to the customary Helangle crouch, supporting himself on one hand.

The Helangles had spent thousands of nomadic years riding their steedes and evolutionary logic had wasted their legs.

"Hi, Delbet Sir. Hi, Shevan Lady. Keren sent us. Yawl wrong. Yawl come back to Spadox. Keren says yawl crazy out here. Night come down. Yawl come back your pad. But quickly, man. Dig?"

Del growled and took a threatening step toward Starhowl. The crouching Helangle was dwarfed, but he didn't flinch.

A young scout with the name Arcweld glowing luminously from his hunched back flared his engine into noisy life behind the giant. He aimed the steede at Del.

Shevan said. "Del, don't!"

"He don't dig," shouted Arcweld to his companions. "We hold Superom. Yawl come back Spadox. Superom pad is Spadox. Keren says

so. Yawl Lady! You dig. Tell big boy. Superom not leave Spadox pad. Dig?"

"Dig," said Shevan quietly, answering him in his own language. "Yawl hit bad trouble yawl rumble Delbet Sir. Delbet Sir Suprom's big man some day. Why Helangles not hear Shevan Lady, Delbet Sir? Not Keren. Keren's heavy. We're going Mandanar. We'll make Thetis great again."

Starhowl gestured impatiently at Arcweld. The latter cut his engine. The second Helangle scout party from the highway had arrived now. Its leader was called Smoketrail. He got off his bike with the same deference to the Superom as Starhowl. He obviously had the same message to convey, but Starhowl waved him down impatiently.

"Shed, man. Dig it. Shevan Lady says go Mandanar. Make Thetis great again."

"Nix!" Smoketrail, who was more powerful and much uglier than Starhowl, hammered one fist on the ground. "Yawl blown your mind, man. Suprom leave Spadox, Thetis nix. Suprom stay Spadox pad like always. With Karel. That's history, man. Never hit road like Helangles. Stay Spadox. Thetis okay. Dig?"

"Dig!" All the featureless heads nodded agreement. Smoketrail's statement was Helangle logic.

"Yawl come on Spadox right

now, Shevan Lady, Delbet Sir," said Starhowl.

Del looked appealingly at Shevan. She shook her head. There was nothing to be done.

Several of the Helangles got busy. They slung litters between four of the steedes. Ordinarily they used them for carrying their pregnant women or very small children on long journeys. Deferentially, trying not to touch the Superom, they encouraged them to climb in.

They set their engines in motion with shouts of satisfaction and encouragement to one another. They ignored the aircar. They wouldn't have dared touch it, anyway. It was Superom equipment. Keren would have to make arrangements to recover it.

Like a menacing wasp swarm clinging around a pair of queens they bucked, bounced and swept around the hill and then howled triumphantly down the highway in a black mass heading toward the stone jungles and, beyond them, the sacred enclave of the Superom at Spadrox.

II

THE night was half through. The primeval Thetan sun was a flat, purplish glow, like a strange cloud edging the horizon.

Keren had been roused from his bed and his Thetan wives by the

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noise of the returning mission. He waited for the recaptured fugitives just outside the quadrangle of one-story buildings that formed Spadox. Directly behind him at the quadrangle's center, sliding high into the night, was the needle tower that housed Karel's casket. The Superom Regent had roused five of his aides. They were grouped on his left, looking untidy and annoyed about their broken sleep.

Keren was not much bigger physically than Shevan, but his long black hair, the sharp beard streaked with gray and the immense, dark eyes staring out of his bony face made him a fearsome wizard in that strange light.

The Helangles kept a respectful distance. They stopped their motors and let Shevan and Delbet get out of the litters about fifty meters from the waiting Regent. All of them raised both hands to touch the fronts of their crash hats.

As soon as Keren had returned this salute they swung their steeds around and fired their motors. Their tumult and their lances of light were soon swallowed in the darkness.

Shevan and Del were left alone. Although the girl was weary and covered with grime and still confused by the noise of the journey, she straightened herself, brushed a sleeve over her face and hair and walked disdainfully toward her cousin. Their

eyes, so alike in power and character, met on equal terms.

Del followed her, but he was worried. He hung his head in the face of Keren's silent anger. He stopped a few paces behind Shevan.

The Regent addressed them both. His voice was like acid. He spoke in the Superom high tongue, so his aides wouldn't understand.

"So, cousins. What did you expect to achieve when you left Spadox? There's no place on Thetis for Superom except here."

"I shall go where I choose." Shevan's voice had a bite. "You tell me what right you had to send those faceless dwarfs after us. We are Superom."

"Yes, I'll tell you, cousin. I had the duty to maintain order in Thetis. What do you think would happen if the Thetans saw the last Superom community breaking up? They would believe we were trying to leave Thetis—as the old ones did. They would kill us rather than let us go and they would take Karel for themselves."

"You damned fool, Keren. Leave Thetis is what we should do. If we don't the sun will kill us as well as the Thetans."

"Childish rubbish. Our sun will last many thousands of years. There'll be plenty of warning in the climate decline long before there's any danger."

“And I contradict that. The talk-tapes explained it all. The artificial sun will go on providing equal light and warmth throughout the decline. What happens is that as its bulk reduces it just consumes itself faster and faster.”

“Talk-tapes?” sneered Keren. “Only you have told us about these magic tapes. Where are they? What can you prove?”

Shevan flung her fist into the air.

“You had them destroyed. You had them destroyed because you couldn’t intuit and absorb them. You had them destroyed because I could understand them and you couldn’t, cousin. Because I’m true Superom and you’re not! That’s what I prove!”

“Stop it.” Keren stepped forward furiously. “How dare you?” He switched back to Thetan, spitting words over his shoulder to the waiting aides. “This is enough. Take Delbet back to the cruze mine. He’s as stupid as he’s big and the girl’s to blame—but he has to learn. Give him a neuro-whipping—but so that he’s still able to control the machines tomorrow, eh? Go. It’s for the good of Superom!”

“No,” said Shevan. “Don’t touch Delbet. I frightened him into going with me. He isn’t to blame. He tried to get me to come back.”

The aides stopped and looked uncertainly at Keren, their neuroprobes

already drawn. They were grim, powerful specimens, half Conduc, half product of Keren’s marriages with various Thetan females, but although they carried the blood they would never challenge a Superom order. Their minds were in conflict.

“Take him,” snapped Keren. “I’ll deal with Miss Shevan.”

Del looked in panic at the girl. His mouth opened, but he didn’t speak.

“Keren, tell them no neuro-whipping.”

“Take him to the mine,” the Regent repeated. He didn’t look at anyone but Shevan. After a few dragging seconds he added: “Leave him without the punishment. I have a better idea to teach them sense.”

The aides moved away, Delbet white-faced and grimy among them.

“You come with me, cousin.”

“I’m going to my quarters at the mine,” said Shevan haughtily.

For the barest instant Keren’s rage was deflated. He swung around with a short laugh like an animal’s bark. His face broke into the briefest of smiles at Shevan’s impudence.

“Do you want me to have that tree-sized baby neuro-whipped after all? Come with me—don’t argue.”

She followed him, furious but beaten.

“WHERE did you hope to go, my dear cuz?” Keren asked,

"What exactly was your plan?" He rocked back in his chair behind the broad table in his conference room.

"Find out—cuz." The derisive pause before she spat out the usually affectionate diminutive made Shevan's response waspish.

Keren wasn't provoked. He was relaxed and controlled now.

"You won't ever get far from Spadox, my beloved tree tigress. You know the Helangles have a saying—the Conducs and the others have it, too, but I find the Helangle dialect so expressive, don't you? They say: 'Spadox Suprom pad. Suprom belong Spadox.' And you know, they have this weird notion that while we stay, Thetis is saved and the Superom Commonwealth will come again. So why are you so damned mischievous you try to upset the status quo?" He crashed his fist suddenly onto the table so that Shevan, with all her self-possession, jumped. "What do you think you're doing?"

After a moment she said, "I want to be far away from you, cousin. As far as possible."

Keren rocked the chair forward. He leaned over the table. His hands slid across it towards her. His eyes fixed hers, taunting her with the truth she thought he hadn't known.

"You won't ever get to Mandanar, Shevan. Mandanar has ceased to exist except as history. The old ones de-

stroyed it five hundred years ago when they abandoned the planet."

"No!"

"Yes, my dear. You'd much better stay at Spadox with me and we'll invent a new Thetis one day. Quite soon, now."

"No."

"You'll see. For all their primitivism the Thetans will be proved right. Suprom will rule again in the Fourth Vortex."

Shevan leaned forward, too, but only to throw words into his grinning face. "It may happen. But not that way. Not your way. Not if I'm forced to tear out your heart with my own hands first, Keren."

He clicked his tongue. "Now, cuz, what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You know that I understand too well what you mean. But you wouldn't dare speak it and I would vomit if I heard the words or had to come closer to the ideas in them or consider them more capable of realization than I do now."

Keren shook his head. The smile was still there, but it was fixed, frozen somehow by Shevan's passion.

"We'll see, cousin. Meanwhile, I must detach that poor giant from your corrupting influence. Perhaps that will punish him more than the neuroprobes. From tomorrow you will be lodged in Karel's Tower and be responsible for our sleeping lead-

er. The tree tigress—High Priestess of the Tower! How does that strike you?”

ALL DAY and all night the tip of the tower, aimed at the sky, listened for messages. There had been none for more than six hundred years but the tower went on listening patiently. It read the faint light and the bright light from distant and near stars. It heard the blurred symphony of galaxies, the clock of pulsars—it listened for the last, receding glow of the Superom in the Outer Vortices. The delicate instruments set up by its stranded creators were always ready to sift and interpret a flicker of hope from among the millions of meaningless symbols that shone through them. Its cone fed on light and its multilensed sides drank light, but at its base was a windowless vault where the darkness was six hundred years old.

Shevan had been inside the tower before but had never stayed more than a few minutes. When her eyes became accustomed to the deep shadow she recognized the pale greenish glow at the vault's center. Within it, Karel's casket rested on a low dais.

The old leader was visible, but absolutely motionless. The biopack that preserved his skin covered him except for his head, but the uniform

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collar of the Space Elite Superom still showed at his throat. Only the machines, which supported a minute spark of life, and the timeless instruments, which confirmed it and recorded his vital functions, throbbed and occasionally clicked in the stillness. No other sound disturbed Karel's vast sleep.

A quick pulse of light beat once in the darkness. A circular door had opened and closed at the far end of the vault.

The pulse had admitted a figure. Now the darkness beyond the faint luminosity of Karel's casket held it invisibly.

"Who's there?" Shevan challenged. "Who are you?"

"I have forgotten my name," said the darkness. "I have always been here. I am trained to look after the casket and maintain the instruments. I have no other purpose."

"Come here," said Shevan. "I am Shevan Lady." Her heart had begun to beat normally again.

A shadow moved toward her. It passed the casket like a breath of air and ancient dust. She had already guessed its identity.

To itself, perhaps, it had no name but to everyone in Spadox it was Shade. In silence and invisibility Shade kept the tower and tended Karel's casket, read the instruments, awaited messages or the end of Karel's long sleep. Some said he was Superom who had survived the plague with his reason impaired, that he was as old as Karel himself. Others said that Shade did not exist, that the tower maintained itself, as did the casket and the instruments, and that disbelief among many in the power of the old Superom had made it necessary to invent a legendary keeper of the tower.

No one had seen him. On the days when the vault was opened for homage to the sleeping leader, Shade was never there. He had some niche in the darkness or in the fabric of the tower or of the air itself into which he melted. His presence was attested to only by the immaculate machinery, the sense of order, the unflin-

ing instruments. Shade had held the tower for the Superom since before Keren's birth. Keren had not seen him either, knew him only as a voice from the same darkness that now questioned Shevan.

"You are Superom?"

"I am Shevan Lady, Keren Sir's cousin."

The darkness repeated the answer softly: "Shevan—Keren's cousin."

Shevan noticed that although Shade spoke in Thetan he didn't use the "Sir" or "Lady" suffix, as was mandatory when addressing or speaking about Superom.

The voice had seemed to come from behind her. She turned, at the same time moving backward a step or two, trying to bring the creature into the light from the casket.

"I am to learn how the tower works. I have to know the functioning of the casket and all the instruments." Shevan pushed the moist palms of her hands down her thighs to dry them. The darkness before her seemed utterly dead, utterly untenanted.

From her left the voice said, "So, I am to be extinguished. You have been sent by Keren to trap me."

Quite suddenly Shevan was seized from behind. A collar of darkness gripped her throat. Vivid lights volleyed from the corners of her eyes to blind her.

The throttling grip was so fierce it

prevented her from crying out. She tried to tear it away. The hands were as light and dry as the bones of a small bird, but they held like a vise.

In desperation, whirlwinds howling in her ears, she flung herself forward. The attacker was caught off guard. The awful grip broke as he fell. Scrambling sideways, Shevan cried out: "Great Karel, help me! I am Keren's prisoner! Help me!"

Inside the casket Karel didn't stir in his six-hundred-year sleep. The darkness listened to Shevan's jagged sobs. She remained kneeling, expecting another attack.

When the light, ancient hands returned she screamed so that the tower echoed, but the hands were gentle this time. Still she threw herself sideways to escape—they followed her.

"Delbet!" she screamed.

The hands explored her face and neck. They ran like a breath of air over the contours of her body. She tried to protect herself, hunched over.

Into the unreason of her panic came a black thought. Shade didn't exist as a separate entity—Keren and Shade were two projections of the same being.

She shrieked, "Delbet! Delbet—" again.

But the voice behind the hands in the darkness whispered, "Forgive me. You are only a child. Forgive me.

Please. I did not understand."

Shevan stayed trembling on the floor. The hands left her.

"I will look after you," the darkness promised her, "as I look after Great Karel."

Shevan felt her aching throat. "Who are you?" she croaked. "Please help me to escape from here."

The darkness pondered. "I have forgotten my name," it said forlornly. "I have always been here. Why do you want to escape?"

"I must go to Mandanar."

"Mandanar!" The darkness whispered the name. "Mandanar!" Long moments passed.

Then the voice returned. It had a different tone, hostile, reproachful, and it was farther from Shevan now. "You make me afraid. Why do you want to go to Mandanar? Why has Keren shut you in here? You are Superom. Superom do not mistreat one another. I am afraid of you."

"The sun is burning out," said Shevan. "I must go to Mandanar to see whether there's any hope of escape from Thetis. Keren doesn't believe me. The future he invents for me in his thoughts is wicked. He believes I created the tale of the sun to escape from him."

"I don't like you," said the voice remotely. "You're a child and I won't hurt you, but I wish you hadn't come here. I can't understand any of this."

"Don't go—"

"I don't understand," insisted the darkness. "I wish you hadn't come."

The pulse of light that had announced its entry to the vault beat again.

"Shade!" Shevan called. "I didn't want to come here. Help me to escape."

There was no answer. She was alone in the vault with the sleeping god of Thetis.

HOW are you getting on with Shade, tree tigriss?" asked Keren. His head and shoulders had materialized on a communicator screen set in one wall of the tower's computer complex.

"Shade—who is Shade, cousin?" Shevan turned her back on the screen, pretending to be engrossed in an input feeder.

She had been a prisoner in Karel's tower for about a week. Although he had not come to the tower in person, Keren had formed the habit of turning up on the screens at all hours of the day, so that she had little privacy even in her own restricted living quarters.

She always tried to ignore or anger him, but he refused to be provoked. He remained amused and a little aloof but always ready to exploit any sign that her will was faltering. When his intrusions became too persistent she retreated to the vault where there

was no light save the glow bathing the casket and no screens were permitted.

"So—I'm to understand the spirit of the tower has ignored you?" Keren was in one of his bantering moods. She recognized it and circled the input bank, keeping her back to the screen.

"What spirit? Have you ever seen Shade, cousin?"

"I've heard him," said Keren. "He's spoken to me."

"Poor deluded creature." Shevan made the comment as though to herself, but purposely loud enough for the Regent to hear.

Keren chuckled. "Well, cuz, believe whatever fantasies please you. But you aren't so foolish as to dismiss the uncanny way the tower works. Shade is there all right. He's watching you."

"I do feel that I'm being watched," said Shevan with quiet anger. "But it isn't Shade who's watching me, cousin—it's you. When are you going to stop this bloody game and let me out? I demand to be released."

She swung around, her eyes blazing at the screen. In the next instant she wished she hadn't, recognizing the sinister look in her cousin's eyes.

"I'm watching you grow up, cuz," he said. "It gives me pleasure to see yesterday's little cub becoming tomorrow's tigriss."

“Burn in hell!” Shevan invited him, hiding her sudden unease with a great gust of anger.

Keren was unmoved. “Until soon,” he said, using a Thetan expression. “Remember me to Shade.”

The screen became blank.

As soon as she felt certain that he was no longer watching or listening, Shevan called, “Shade—Shade—”

The tower remained silent. In fact, since the terrifying dawn when she had first entered the vault, Shevan had neither seen nor heard its keeper. He had once more fused with the air or the old shadows surrounding Karel’s casket.

She had tried to raise him several times. In spite of his hostility she believed she still could persuade him to help her escape to Mandanar because of the almost spell-like effect the name had had on him. But he wouldn’t reveal himself.

Shevan remembered his reproachful: *I don’t like you. I can’t understand any of this . . .*

And now Shade stayed stubbornly silent and out of reach.

She knew he was there. The readings from the casket instruments were always brought up and dutifully fed into the computer for analysis. The hundreds of light signals the tower received every day were always classified and anything that was only marginally out of the ordinary was cross-checked and broken down. The

micrologs were always up to date.

All this being attended to left Shevan with nothing to occupy her mind but escape. From the fourth story of the tower she could just see the bright cone that marked the cruze mine. It was too remote for her to be able to distinguish figures, but Shevan thought of Delbet working there on his beloved machines, perhaps wondering what had happened to her.

She tried once to smuggle a message to him. Keren had food sent to the tower twice a day. One of the aides who brought it was more approachable than the others. Shevan had asked him whether he knew Delbet and if the giant was all right.

“Delbet Sir’s okay. He works the cruze mine.”

“Did Keren Sir hurt him? Was he neuro-whipped?”

“He’s okay. Keren Sir didn’t hurt him. He’s very happy. He knows all about the machines over there.”

“Do you ever go over there?”

“Sometimes, ma’am. Delbet Sir is very kind. He understands the machines very well. He even talks to them.”

“There are many interesting machines here in the tower. Delbet Sir would like them. I’d like to tell him about some of them. I’ve written about one or two and I want you to take him what I’ve written when you go to the mine again.”

"No." The aide backed into the tunnel that was the only approach to Karel's vault from the outside. He had drawn a neuroprobe and although he kept it respectfully lowered Shevan didn't doubt that Keren had told him to use it if it meant preventing her escape. So the door closed on that attempt with her having achieved nothing but a cold meal and the certainty that the guard would be scared to speak to her again.

Shevan had been into every accessible part of the tower several times. She could find no alternate way out or in—or any place where Shade might make his home. The door to Karel's vault and the tunnel outside it were guarded night and day.

Shevan lay on her bed. The sun was setting. Her plight filled her mind as the death of the sun filled the sky. She grew restless, arose and prowled through the computer complex on the floor below for the hundredth time. Even if she could escape her prison she wouldn't get far from Spadox without help. Keren had already proved that to her beyond question. She would need the help of the Thetan tribes—she would need a guide to Mandanar—she would need Delbet and, most important, she would need to defeat Keren so decisively that he wouldn't dare to pursue her or try to bring her back.

If Shade would come and talk to her she might learn something. If Karel would rouse from his half-life he would surely recognize her story and understand the approaching end of Thetis. At least these two could prove or disprove to her whether Mandanar still existed and whether the old ones had left their descendants any means of retreat to the Outer Vortices.

A wild thought came into her head. She looked around at the vast number of units in the complex, all humming in a preoccupied way. They would never help her, but they suggested something that might work. She hurried down the tower. She tried to think as a Superom should, but her thoughts, still half-formed, were muddled and disjointed by apprehension. The circular door to the vault blinked open and shut like an eye after her as she passed through.

As soon as her eyes were used to the darkness she approached the casket. Karel slept.

"If only you could wake," Shevan murmured. But the old leader couldn't hear her. He lay neutral, the embodiment of man's great memory of the spaces between galaxies. If any dreams passed through the six-hundred-year sleep they were benign and didn't trouble him. His face was serene.

Shevan breathed deeply. She

fancied she could hear her own heart beating. And as soon as she touched the instrument controls she knew her idea had been ill-conceived. It had been too hasty and panicky to be worthy of a Superom. She hadn't considered all the possible consequences of her action—not even the obvious ones.

Like a gust of air from a tomb Shade was through the blink of light and on her before she had even moved the hibernator setting a half calibration. Worse—a violent shock made her somersault backward. Was that shriek she heard her own? She hit the floor and squirmed up into a world of wavering light and alarms and running feet as the guards flung open the door and poured into the vault. The chill presence of Shade faded instantly into the shadows.

Keren's men caught her by the arms and legs and carried her back to her room on the fourth flight. She fought like a captured animal. Keren came to direct his men.

The casket was unharmed, but the Regent had lost the temper he had held in check.

"Strip her," he ordered.

Fighting, cursing, biting, scratching the hands that laid her naked, Shevan saw his gaunt face and read in it what he meant to do. She calmed suddenly, awfully.

"No, you half-breed! I am Superom. You can't."

"Stand away from her," said Keren. The guards backed up. "You are foolish, cousin. You tried to meddle with the casket. You might have killed Karel and brought disaster to all of us."

"I didn't mean to hurt Great Karel. I wanted to try to rouse him so he would save me from you."

"You fool. You are growing up, but a lesson or two won't harm you."

"No—" Shevan put up her hand in a purely instinctive gesture, staving off nothing.

The Regent used the neuroprobe with cruel precision. Her mouth open in a soundless scream, Shevan jack-knifed. Two slim lances of pain had suddenly been exchanged for her legs.

"Get out." Keren's snarl sent the guards scurrying.

"You bastard—you bastard—" Shevan's own voice was shouting through the long slender pain, but the pain wouldn't stop.

As she writhed away from him and it, Keren bent down suddenly and pressed his bearded lips against her left thigh. It was an entirely passionless gesture. He seemed merely determined to make her associate her anguish with his power over her.

"Don't do anything foolish again, cousin," he said softly. "You are my prisoner. I have you. You are part of my future. I can't let you go."

SHEVAN cried well into the night. While she cried, the paroxysms of her throat and chest and the ache through her eyes helped to relieve the pain in her legs.

Exhausted finally, she drifted into a sleep crowded with dreams. Fragments of them refused to link together, although somewhere she intuited a coherent theme in them. Every time she awoke the fragments broke away and, weeping, she came back to consciousness and a dull ache in her legs.

In her dreams Karel's voice seemed to come to her from everywhere in the tower—everywhere but the casket in which he kept his own sound sleep. Delbet dressed her with his strong giant's hands and they ran away from Spadox again. Shevan rediscovered the talk-tapes in the library. From the charred ruins of evening a young talue leaped up. With its deceptive cry it lured Delbet into a broken arch of the observatory against the dying sun. "No!" Shevan cried in her dream. The talue flung a meteorite of fire-ore from its pouch and toppled the giant. As he fell Delbet's voice rang clearly from the casket in a lightless vault: "I'll listen carefully, Shev. I won't get it wrong this time. What does it mean? I can't understand."

Shevan awoke. Tears were running

down her pale face in streams.

"What did you dream?" a voice breathed from the night just above.

"I dreamed my escape," she said.

"I wish you wouldn't keep crying," the voice said impatiently. Then, after a pause: "I knew no good would come of it. I wish you'd never been locked up here. I wish I'd never set eyes on you."

Shevan realized that both voices, hers and the other one, were real and not part of her dream. She sat up. Someone had carefully and gently put her back in her coveralls. The pain was gone. It was still night.

"Who is it?"

"How stupid you are for a Superom. I've told you more than once that I no longer have a name. Perhaps I never had one—"

"Shade," said Shevan with relief.

"—or even wanted one." The voice paused. "Why did you try to hurt Great Karel? That was exceptionally silly."

"I didn't mean to harm him. Yes, it was silly. I hadn't applied logic. But I thought if he could be roused Keren would have to set me free."

The ugly recollection of Keren and what he had done to her brought tears to her eyes again.

"Oh, do stop, girl!" scolded the voice. "You've already cried enough to flood Spadox. I can't endure your weeping the whole night. Listen to me—what did you dream?"

Shevan wiped her eyes. She remembered. "Great Karel! I saw it. How did you know?"

"Know what?" said Shade. "I didn't know anything. I just heard you say it. I wish you would escape. I'm afraid of you. You're a dangerous child. And you're even more dangerous because you're the last. But I said I would look after you, too. And I saw what the half-breed Keren did to you. So I'll help you."

"I must speak to Delbet," said Shevan wildly, getting up from her bed. "Help me to get a message to him."

"The giant with the saint's face who works the cruze?"

"Yes."

"It's too far," said Shade. "In less than an hour the dawn will start. Go to sleep now. You must wait another day. I'll come back tomorrow night and take you to the mine."

"No," said Shevan. "No, I don't want to leave the tower just yet. You must bring Delbet here. Please."

The darkness embraced a moment's incredulous silence. "You don't want to leave the tower?"

"Not yet. When I escape I want to be sure that Keren knows—and that he can't make me return."

"I don't understand. You made me afraid from the beginning. You're a strange child."

"Will you bring Delbet to me?"

"Very well."

"Tomorrow?"

"After nightfall. The day would be impossible."

"I'll endure the wait."

"And for now, you can sleep."

It was incredible that a few hours before she had been in such depths of pain and despair that they seemed to have no end or relief. In spite of Shade's advice she couldn't sleep. For the short time left before dawn her mind struggled with half-dreams and a repetitive agony of speculation.

She did endure the day, but unwillingly, hiding her fears from Keren under an icy mask of injured pride and contempt. Her cousin appeared frequently on the screens. It was almost as though he suspected the plan shaping and reshaping in her head. But she could tell from the sullen air beneath his reproaches and scoldings that he regretted what he had inflicted on her.

She ignored him utterly, pretending to be busy, but always waiting for night. It came and with the darkness Shade returned, a breath of dusty earth and dry leaves accompanying his presence.

"Wait half an hour," he whispered. "Then go down to the vault and stay there till we come."

DEL!"

"Shevan? That you?" The young giant leaned forward, peering

in from the peripheral darkness of the vault.

"Del! Del, darling!" She rushed to hug him. Her arms would not quite go all the way around his chest.

He swung her up and held her so that their faces were on the same level.

"Why, now—it's really you, Shev. What's been happening to you?"

Shevan noticed he had about him that faint scent of earth and dead leaves—like the smell that sometimes came with Shade. It suggested that, after all, there was a subterranean tunnel giving access to the tower. Maybe a secret tunnel that only Shade knew of and used.

"Del—where's Shade?"

"Shade? Who's that?"

"You came here alone?"

The giant put her down. He did not answer her directly. "Hell, Shev," he said, "I don't like it here. It's dark and scary. Hey—that's Great Karel, isn't it? Damn, I really don't like it here. I've only seen the casket in the light when they have the Listening Festivals. What are you doing here?"

"Del, I asked you, did you come alone?" She dug the nails of one hand into his forearm to make him listen.

"It was queer." Delbet rubbed his arm, then his face and his cap of black hair. "I was asleep and it was like a voice—a voice or something

woke me and kind of told me—led me—" He was looking around him all the time, trying to penetrate the shadows. "Hell—then there was this talue or something going on ahead of me. Not making much sound. At last I came to a kind of hole or cave thing—it went into the hill. Then the voice—it sort of told me you wanted me . . . you know. But there wasn't anyone there so I just came."

"Never mind, Del. You're here. I'm here."

"Shev. I'm scared. Keren would be wild if he found out."

"Keren—did he hurt you?"

Del considered. He shook his head. "Not hurt. Not whipped or anything. Just—sort of said I wouldn't be seeing you again. Well, not for a long time anyway. Only that kind of hurt."

"Never mind—never mind." She petted his arm as she might a baby's. "Listen, Del, Keren's bad. We have to leave him. We have to leave Spadox and go to Mandanar. Keren locked me in the tower. We have to find a way to get to Mandanar before I can escape this place—"

"No, Shev, no—not again. Now you calm right down, baby. We really aren't going through that again. Look at what happened last time." He paced away from her, agitated—she heard rather than saw him circling Karel's casket, beyond its ghostly green glow.

"Del. Del, dear. Don't you want to see me again? Do you want me to stay locked up here?"

Delbet whispered, "No—" but she couldn't see his face. She didn't know what he was denying or whether he had even understood what she meant. Then: "Shev, it won't work, baby. Look what happened last time."

"This time will be different. Come here. Listen to what we have to do." She pursued and found him, caught his arm and made him stop prowling up and down.

"Sit down, Del—here where I can see your face."

She pulled him down. He sat obediently, searching her face with frightened eyes. Shevan kneeled between his knees, so that it was difficult for him to look at anything but her. Still he hung his head.

She held his big hands tightly. "Listen. Listen carefully. I'm going to tell you how we'll escape. You've got to help me, Del. We're going to escape to Mandanar."

She could tell by the way the darkness moved suddenly and became taut and listening and excited that they were not alone. She could tell that the name she had just spoken was once more a spell—and she somehow knew that it didn't matter if the darkness overheard her scheme while the spell held. She knew that she and Delbet would not

go alone to Mandanar if her dream worked.

In tense, rushed whispers she began to tell the giant and the eaves-dropping darkness what she had dreamed and what he and she must do.

THE first Conduc caravan arrived an hour after sunrise five days later. It consisted of about twenty of the usual beat-up old vehicles, some with as many as six passengers. It looked to Keren as if the drivers had picked up plenty of casual riders from the Conduc camps on the way. He saw at least four leaders among the arrivals and recognized Aplan, one of the most troublesome and influential.

He wondered what the problem was this time. Another wife-snatching raid by the Helangles? A deputation to demand more cruze for trade with the far metropol's? Another petty wrangle over areas of influence on the highways or in the stone jungles?

Shevan had no such misgivings. The sight of the caravan bouncing and rattling across the countryside from the nearest road ended a period of unbearable suspense for her.

Every day since her meeting with Delbet—and the sweaty, agonizing hour she had spent in the vault, convincing, cajoling, bullying him—she had gone to the highest point in

her prison and stayed there, hour after hour, watching the distant roads and the crouching towers that ringed the horizon until water flowed from her strained and staring eyes.

She had watched from the first day, even though she had known that she was much too early. It would require at least two days for the cautious and reluctant Delbet to take the first step her plan demanded. But she had watched from the first moment of daylight on that first day, growing progressively and unreasonably more disillusioned and resigned as the first day and night had melted into a second, a third, into an agony of fatigue and despair during the fourth.

Now they came: a somber, noisy motorcade, making unquestionably for Spadrox across the roadless country between the enclave and the nearest highway.

The Conduc vehicles and dress reflected the descent of the Conduc from highly skilled, mobile teams of auxiliaries who had helped the Superom in their space communication network and orbiter stations. The black or deep blue or purple paintwork of their vehicles recalled the profound colors of space. Superimposed on the paint in silver tones were crude representations of the most familiar constellations of the Fourth Vortex.

The Conduc cousin tribes were

often identified by these symbols and took the names of the constellations they represented: Mamaria Thebor, Tirax Alpegi, Lex Andromeda, Caxitine.

Aplan was a Caxitine. Shevan saw the five major and seven minor stars in the rough diamond shape on the front of his caftan as he stepped from his slowing car, followed by the leaders of the Mamarian Theborans, Tirax Alpegiae and Lex Andromedans. They lined up before the main entrance to Spadrox. With a final discordant blast upon klaxons of various notes and performances the caravan halted and the Conduc followers got out to form an expectant group behind their chiefs.

Both sexes of the Conduc wore long hair and caftans and so were often difficult to distinguish at a distance, but Shevan, high in the tower, thought that the delegation looked like a cross-section of eminent members from all four tribes. They represented not just the male negotiator and warrior-classes. She felt confirmed in her hope that Del hadn't failed her.

Keren, hurrying down from the state apartments and trying to muster his aides, was also grateful for the mixed appearance of the delegation. For him this meant the Conduc were not actually spoiling for a fight with any of their rivals. He felt less sanguine moments later.

Having completed the formal welcome to Aplan and the other chiefs, he settled into the conference chair while the Conducs squatted on the ground. Aplan rose. The Caxitine leader had magnificent orange hair that curled at shoulder length. The excited whispers of his followers died away as he started to speak. Then, with uncanny timing, an unmistakable sound rolled up the sky and scudded toward Spadox with the gathering clouds. Aplan stopped in midsentence.

There was a moment of confusion. Keren jumped up. Almost reflexively his aides drew their neuroprobes. The Conducs also rustled to their feet. They stared toward the highway. The boom and snarl of Helangle steeds rolled down the wind.

Aplan and the other chiefs exchanged glances. Keren noticed that they didn't look startled. "Our brothers have come to join us," the Caxitine remarked in a matter-of-fact tone. Only then did Keren realize that something of major significance was happening that he might be powerless to control or influence.

In the tower, Shevan knew it, too, although she couldn't hear what was being said. When the first tight bunch of Helangles swept into view she pressed both hands to her cheeks to stop herself from bursting into tears.

She watched until she was sure that the Helangle delegation was as

big and representative as that of the Conducs. They had even brought some of their women and children with them to underline the peaceful nature of the mission.

Shevan went down to Karel's vault and spent a long time staring at the sleeping leader. She wished even now that some miracle would happen to rouse him and excuse her from having to suffer while the next steps in her plan worked themselves out.

"You dreamed your dream and it was true," said the darkness.

"They've come—the first ones. Yes, they've really come. Del did his work."

"There's still a long way to go."

"Yes, but we'll get to Mandanar."

"Mandanar," breathed the darkness.

The lost, secret place of the Superom was made so real and exciting by the old voice that Shevan imagined she saw its breathless geometries shining in the shadows of the vaults.

"HI, KEREN Sir. Hi, my brother Aplan." Starhowl brought his bike around in the usual flamboyant half-circle and saluted. He dismounted and scuttled forward, ape-like. Aplan touched the gauntleted hand held out to him with obvious distaste.

Keren watched apprehensively. Rapport between the Conducs and

Helangles was rare—a delegation with what seemed a common purpose was sinister. He motioned his aides to put up their weapons and sank warily into his chair to await events.

“What’s the word from Spadox pad, man?” Starhowl spoke directly to Aplan.

“We have not yet exchanged views,” said the Caxitine loftily. “We were just about to begin when your strident arrival stopped the proceedings. Perhaps we can get on now.”

“Sure. Don’t make it heavy, man. I dig. Anyway I see nobody breached the tower yet. Shoot.”

Keren felt a warning prickle of fear in his neck and fingertips as the Caxitine chief turned to him again.

“Regent Keren Sir. We have come because you have told us that Great Karel is to speak at last. We are the nearer Conduc tribes and are known to you, but we have sent the news to every part of this continent. Soon all the leaders of the greater and lesser tribes will converge on Spadox. All of us will be at peace here to see the awakening and hear the words from the past, which will restore us and our world to greatness. We Thetans will once more become part of The Commonwealth of Superom.”

Aplan made a dramatic sweep of his arm to take in both groups of Thetans behind him. “Already you see us—Conducs and Helangles in peace before Spadox. We only ask

you to tell us—when will the tower be breached? When will Great Karel speak?”

“Where did you get this absurd idea?” said Keren furiously. “It’s still twenty days before the next Listening Festival. Who is responsible for bringing you here? Who has deceived you into believing that the long sleep is ending?”

Aplan looked baffled. Behind him the chiefs of the Mamarian Theborans and the Lex Andromedans exchanged glances, then looked back suspiciously at the Superom Regent.

“Well?” snapped Keren. His imagination was racing. He tasted fear and anger in his dry mouth.

It was left to the ugly Starhowl to snap the tension that bred in the unanswering silence. Crouching painfully a few meters to Aplan’s left and watching both men intently from behind the anonymous black goggles, he said: “We got the message, Keren Sir. Like real. No errors. Checked out with Kickstart of the Seven Three City South Helanges. He got one, too. Those messages were made in Superom, with Thetan translation. Like yawl saw always in the old Commonwealth. They came from Spadox.”

“Yes, Regent,” Aplan confirmed. “My brothers and I also received them. There was a courier from Floridian of the Xanthopathiae yesterday. Floridian had seen the mes-

sages posted in the Port West approaches. His caravan is already on the way."

As if the size of the gathering avalanche needed confirmation, another group of Helangles cruised toward Spadox from the south before the Caxitine had finished speaking. Keren recognized at the noisy head the square shoulders and broken lip of Kickstart, the Helangle leader from Seventy-Third City South.

"I say you have been deceived," said Keren. "You should all return to your homes. Where are these messages? Show me one."

Aplan turned to his group of followers. Two Conducus stood up and came forward, carrying a pouch. Keren saw that it was the same kind of case that had been used traditionally to guard Superom messages and directives to the Thetans. He watched with the unblinking fury of a snake while Aplan undid its fastenings.

Starhowl had grown tired of ceremonies. "Heavy, man. Like hit it—speed it. Here—" He fished inside his jerkin and withdrew a sheet of metal foil. It had become ragged in that less reverent Helangle version of a pouch, but the little leader loped over and put it into Keren's outstretched hand and the Regent saw that it was still perfectly legible. It took the form that Starhowl had claimed. The bubbly angular perforations of com-

puterlike script read:

TO THE GOOD THETAN STARHOWL OF THE WEST HELANGLES. ON THE FOURTH DAY OF THE MONTH OF HARVEST THE LISTENING AND THE SLEEP WILL BE OVER. GREAT KAREL WILL WAKE. HE WILL SPEAK THOSE MESSAGES OF DELIVERANCE THAT HAVE BEEN LOCKED IN HIS MIND FOR SIX CENTURIES. YOU ARE CHARGED TO SEND WORD TO YOUR BROTHERS IN ALL THE CITIES OF THIS CONTINENT TO ATTEND SPADROX FOR THE AWAKENING.

Below, the message was repeated in the picture script the Superom had devised for their inferiors.

The tinfoil rattled as Keren's hand shook. He threw it from him. "This is a trick—"

Aplan was waiting before him, holding out the Conducus' summons. Keren snatched it. It was identical, except that the translation was in the Conduc numeral language. "You've been deceived." He stood up. He tried to rip the foil in half, but had forgotten its indestructibility.

Aplan said warningly, "Regent Keren Sir, that is Conduc property, if you please."

"How dare you contest Superom?" Keren swung around to his guards. "Take him. Neuro-whip him. And anyone else who dares to remain here within the hour—"

He stopped in midsentence. The aides hadn't moved. They were looking fearfully at the silver messages on the ground. A few glanced over their shoulders with equal fear at the shut and silent tower.

Starhowl said, "Yawl ought maybe let us pad down here until fourth Harvest, Keren Sir. Maybe there's something going on even yawl don't dig. Like maybe Great Karel didn't want to say to you."

"Yeah," called a voice from the Helangle pack. "Like maybe yawl don't want Great Karel to wake, Regent. Like yawl got it all going for you so long as Great Karel stays tripped."

It was the nearest thing to rebellion Keren had heard of in his long life on Thetis. He reached for the neuroprobe, but his hand stopped, as if paralyzed. The way the aides were acting, if he drew they might draw, too—but against him, not with him.

Starhowl had hopped back among his pack with surprising agility. He cuffed a youngish thug and sent him sprawling across the motor. As he fell it became apparent that he was a hunchbacked dwarf, the one who had threatened Delbet on the night he and Shevan were recaptured.

"Yawl blown your mind, Arcweld? Nobody talks to Superom that way."

Keren reached back to grab the

arm of his chair. The situation was flying out of control. He had to stabilize it so that he could get back to where he was sure it had its origins.

"I tell you that you and I are both victims of a plot of some kind or another. Those messages didn't come from Spadox."

"Then where did they come from?" It was the Lex Andromeda chief now. They were all getting bold. "There is no other surviving Superom enclave in Thetis."

"I don't know," Keren said barely above a whisper, "but believe me I will know. If I can't convince you of your stupidity, then you're welcome to convince yourselves. The fourth of Harvest is only three days away. Stay here as you please. On that day we will breach the vault together and you shall see that there is some mischief being worked against all of us. Great Karel is no more likely to awake on that day than during any of the hundreds of listening Festivals that have come and gone since the Return."

"As the Regent pleases," said Ap-lan formally. "What do you say, my brother?"

"Check," said Starhowl.

"Check," repeated the faceless visor that hid Kickstart.

The Caxitine chief turned to his three companions. They nodded gravely.

KEREN searched the Tower through the screens, looking for his cousin. When he couldn't find her he went to the Tower in person. With three aides he searched the place from top to bottom. He still couldn't find her.

He had arclamps brought into Karel's vault and he searched that, too, being careful not to let any hint of what he was doing escape from the quadrangle of Spadrox to the tribal camps forming in the open outside the walls.

His instinct told him that it was already too late to send a search party to the cruze mine, but he did so. An hour later it returned with the inevitable report: Delbet was not there.

Now the Regent was certain about who had engineered the conspiracy. What made his flesh creep was wondering how they proposed to carry it through.

Twice he returned alone to the Tower. He went to the vault and stood before the casket for minutes on end to make sure that Karel still slept, that he showed no sign of returning from that tideless sea of green dreams. Both times Keren was reassured. So what trick had Shevan and Delbet invented to show to the assembled Thetans?

Shevan hid in the darkness made of the smells of earth and leaves while her cousin skirted the edge of

madness. Shade had led her far back into the tunnel that ran between the vault and a hillside outside Spadrox. The formless spirit of the Tower didn't leave her lonely in the dark. She knew he was there, even though he didn't speak. Sometimes extravagant visions of Mandanar came into her head. She knew then that she was intuiting Shade's fading memories and escaping dreams.

When Keren had finally retreated from the Tower, baffled, she went back one afternoon. Cautiously, in case a screen might suddenly become bright and burning with her cousin's eyes, she climbed to the fourth flight and saw that the gathering she had engineered had grown steadily.

Floridian, the Xanthopath, had arrived with a small caravan of five vehicles and fifteen followers, including some notable sailors. The Xanthopathiae lived on the shores of one of Thetis' big inland seas and had adapted some of their vehicles to an amphibian role for their fishing industry.

There had already been a number of fights between rival groups in the Helangle camp. The camp, as deliberately ugly and uncouth as the Helangles themselves, sprawled away north and east. The different scout parties kept to themselves in the main. Nearly all had brought their tattered, low-slung tents but only one or two groups had really turned

the mission into a pilgrimage and brought full entourages.

It was these sybarites who caused the isolated fights, taunting the involuntary celibacy of their companions by flaunting their women and their grotesque lovemaking after the midday meal was over and the traditional love period started.

Fortunately for peace and order, a weak Thetan rain had come to send the lovers scurrying into their tents and out of sight on this particular afternoon. Starhowl, Kickstart and some of the others had been given a chance to organize vigilante teams mounted on steeds and the camp was calm again.

The Conducs under Aplan and the other paramount chiefs still favored discretion rather than trust. They had already formed their somber vehicles into protective configurations with the doors locked. Conduc women had been known to vanish before in the night with a sigh and a jubilant thrust of pistons.

Between Aplan's group and Floridian's a delegation from one of the lesser Thetan tribes had arrived and camped. These were the Agorans who still cultivated some stretches of the old foodland of the Commonwealth and, when they were not raided by Helangles or browbeaten by the Conducs, sold what they grew to make a living.

They arrived on cadelback. The

cadel was a Thetan beast of burden looking something of a cross between a giant wingless bird and a ruminant. They had corralled their animals and raised the Agoran trading standard: halved arms with a symbolic pack of instant food and three lozenges of fire-ore guleš. In spite of this invitation, when a bunch of Helangles went over to trade the Agorans stuffily told them that they had only brought enough food for themselves. An intertribal incident was avoided by the quick intervention of a Helangle vigilante posse under the command of the aggressive Arcweld.

A little before sundown another small tribal delegation came slowly from the northeast. The rain had stopped and the various encampments were sprinkled with the light of fire-ore lamps and stoves, the smell of cooking and the movement of restless and expectant people.

Straining to see through the dusk, hungry Shevan in her tower watched the new arrivals and her heart thumped once enormously.

The newcomers were a group of Saivante. Saivante were nearing extinction as a separate Thetan group. Under the Commonwealth they had been the distinguished social class of Thetan humanity, ranking next in intellectual development to the Superom and employed by them as teachers and instructors to the lesser Thetans.

During the decline they had quickly dwindled in numbers, absorbed under force or necessity by more aggressive groups in the battle for survival. On the continent where Spadox stood only one colony of them remained.

They lived like a religious community in the mountains to the northeast. They scratched a living from the barren rocks by keeping kiltawi, the Thetan sheep, and taking in the sons of Conduc chiefs or the Agoran traders to give them some rudiments of the old Superom training.

But it wasn't the sight of these barefoot scholars in their patched and shabby copies of the former Saivainte cloak, tunic and pants that filled Shevan's heart. Towering in the center of the party, disguised as a Saivainte but easily recognizable even in the gloom, was Delbet.

Shevan found her lips trembling and a chill sweat prickling her back and the palms of her hands. Damn it, it was too soon for him to have come! With three clear days to the fourth of Harvest, Keren would undoubtedly try to get at him before the opening of the Tower.

Shevan couldn't allow anything to happen to Delbet. Everything, *everything* that was to happen now depended on him.

She had felt increasingly over the last weeks that she had ceased to be a

child and was at last completely a woman. But the emotion she felt as Delbet reappeared that evening among the Saivainte was still partly made up of a child's irrational rage and a mother's scolding concern.

Why didn't you stay away, Del? Her breath condensed against the window as though anger were a tangible thing. *Stupid child—you never remember anything I tell you. Can you remember what you've got to do? Del, my dear, Keren's watching you now. Just as I'm watching you. Those family eyes! One of us staring hate—one seeing love. I have to find some way to protect you—as always. Why did you come back now, Del? Why the hell did you come back tonight?*

IV

ALL the orbiters the Superom had set in the Thetan sky for night illumination had long since burned out.

In the darkness high above the thin rain that had started to fall once more, they still wove patterns through the planet's gravity. They were anonymous, cold—as lost as the power of their creators.

The Thetan encampments outside the walls of Spadox were quiet. Fire-ore lamps glowed here and there. A patrol of skeptical Conducs moved around their wagon circle,

looking over their shoulders at the Helangle camp. The Agorans, wrapped in huge plastic bags against the damp, snored in chorus below their standard. The Helangles, their bloated love appetites satisfied for the night, grunted as they nuzzled their plump, ugly women in sleep.

On a northeast hillside above Spadox a flicker of blue movement might have been the rising of a talue, but it was too insignificant for anyone in the camps to pay attention to it.

Shevan let the thorn bushes fall back over the cave mouth. She crouched quietly for several moments to be sure she hadn't been seen. She turned her face up to the rain and then again to stare slowly over at the Tower. The thought went through her head that the tunnel she had just crawled through must be nearly five hundred meters long.

Down there outside the walls, somewhere in the straggling arc of encampments, were the Saivante and Del among them. Del had come disguised and Shevan had gotten Shade to find her a Conduc caftan to make her less conspicuous on her expedition. He had left it at the tunnel's end for her.

She started going down the hill through bush and trees, stopping frequently to make sure that the quadrangle of Spadox remained quiet.

THE Saivante had no tents or protection from the rain. Wrapped in a cloak barely big enough to shield him to his waist, Del dreamed. He dreamed of gleaming cylinders pistoning back and forth, up and down. Their simple power drew parallelograms, welded ellipses, transmuted geometric shapes into shifting, patternless forms forever changing, but always gathering and dispensing energy within their varying perimeters.

He muttered and twitched while silver wheels whirred and cogs, machined to finite degrees of accuracy, spun light into a ravenous cone, revolving, bright. In his brain the finger terminals fluttered among banks of selectors and preselectors on a dream console fifty meters long and as high as a wish. Great gyres of wisdom drilled from the cone into his sleep. Through them threaded a broken message tensed into a ring.

He didn't want to come awake. He shook and muttered angrily at a sleepwalking hand annoying his shoulder. He struggled to hold the warm parts of the cube root of dreams together, but the persistent hand had acquired a voice. It poured consciousness into his ear and the voice knew a name and the name spun down the whorls of his hearing like quicksilver.

"Del. Wake up, Del. Del, dear--"

He awoke. The transition from

dream to world was immediate. Out of the bowl of night hanging over him the rain came quietly down like thought or his lost sleep, washing away the tantalizing, broken message.

The Saivainte sprawled around, wrapped in their cloaks. With an immense start Del recognized a damp, warm presence at his side.

"Hell, Shev—it's you. Great Karel, you could have started—"

"Shush, Del. Lie down. I'll stay on this side of you. Put the cloak over me."

"I'm sure glad to see you, Shev. But what the hell? I thought we wouldn't do anything together till—"

"Will you lie down?" The girl raged softly, digging cruel little talons into his arm.

He obeyed, grinning ruefully at her single-mindedness, exposing himself to the rain, wrapping her in the Saivainte cloak that swallowed her almost completely, turning on his side so that his bulk would hide her from his companions if they woke.

Shevan's wide-eyed face stared at him from the folds of the cloak.

"Why did you come back so early, Del? You're crazy."

"Why, now, aren't you being just plain cussed, Shev? I have to be here to do what you told me—"

"Shush. Whisper, you dummy. Three whole days must go by before they can breach the vault. You ought

to have stayed in the mountains."

"But they said we ought to leave right away. Zedward—that's the head man—he said we better leave to make sure of getting to Spadox in good time. We just made it fast."

"Yes, but that gives Keren three days to get to you. Even if he doesn't know what we're going to do he suspects something. He's already guessed you made the messages. It's lucky you arrived just at nightfall. That Saivainte disguise won't fool anyone in daylight. You look like a dressed-up tree. You've got to get out of the camp and stay out until the fourth."

The giant gulped. His expression was so remorseful that Shevan had to bite her lip to stop herself from smiling in spite of her worry.

"Where?" he whispered.

"I've already thought it out. It's dangerous, but you'll have to come back and hide out in Shade's tunnel. Keren doesn't know about it. It's the only place."

Del pursed his lips and shook his head slowly, baffled by Shevan's complex logic. "Well, I guess I always do what you say, Shev. Do you think I ought to wake Zedward and tell him where I'm—"

He saw the look in Shevan's eyes and stopped. He shrugged.

"Come on, dummy," she said. "Keep me in sight, but stay well behind me, so if anything happens

at least one of us can get away.”

She threw off the cloak and started to make her way back through the camps. The Conduc caftan Shade had chosen for her was a dark one and helped to make her less obvious in the night. She kept as close to the Conduc sectors as she could. Here, if anyone did see her, she was least likely to arouse suspicion.

Del waited for a moment, then followed. It was easy to pick out Shevan—she was the only movement at the line of Conduc vehicles.

He flitted after her with the quiet speed he had learned hunting talues. Why did the sudden thought of the beautiful little Thetan rodents trouble him? Why should the recollection of pleasure be linked with uneasy dread?

Shevan was already out of the camp area. Her slight figure darted away from Spadox at a tangent aimed at the hillside. The caftan was too long for her and reached well below her knees. The giant grinned. It made her look like a baby again in a long nightgown. The last Superom child on Thetis.

Del discovered presently he had been moving too quickly. The gap between him and Shevan had nearly closed. He kneeled in the shadow of the last vehicle in the Conduc circle, letting Shevan put distance between them. He was glad of the blanketed

sky. The rain came down weightlessly like smoke or mist.

He started after Shevan again. She was nearly out of sight.

From one of the tents in the big Helangle camp came an unexpected whinny of pleasure followed by a ragged chorus of grumbling shouts and oaths. The Conducs stirred uneasily behind him in their battered wagons. Del ran out into the night and the mist.

SHEVAN hadn't realized the hill was so steep. The caftan was becoming heavy in the persistent rain. She stopped, panting, pressing her right hand to a stitch that jabbed at the place where her ribs ended.

A little farther uphill she could see a deeper blackness that had to be the scrub patch that concealed the tunnel. The rain seemed to be thickening. Looking behind her, she could see the Thetan camps only as a blur. Something moved downhill to her right—that would be Del tracking her.

She took a deep breath. If she didn't go on he would catch up and she couldn't risk their being together in case Keren had put out patrols.

She gathered the caftan and set off for the trees, sucking gasps of air through her open mouth.

She got to them—stunted Thetan beores and the soft-needed hoeth. She was a few paces inside the tangle

of dripping branches when something sprang at her with a grunt.

It struck her just below the right hip with such force that she went headlong into the hoeth needles and leaves. The breath was knocked out of her. Limbs locked themselves around hers pinning her down. Only the tiniest chopped scream got out from under a hand that thudded over her mouth.

She tried to fight but the creature was immensely powerful. Staring up in terror, she recognized the featureless goggles and hard, black crash hat of a Helangle.

He was like some ruthless predatory insect. She bit the hand covering her mouth. It didn't flinch. The free hand ripped the wet caftan in one movement, top to bottom, and then tore greedily at the coveralls underneath.

The caftan had helped to conceal her Superom identity in the night. At the same time it made her like a Conduc female, tempting quarry to a prowling Helangle.

The coveralls ripped. Shevan felt the rain on her body. The wasphead came down with a mouth that bit and sucked. She managed between real pain and fright, to scream at last.

Then it was over. The ravening thing was struck cleanly sideways and off her with a single blow. It was so violently and expertly delivered that the Helangle made no sound at

all. Nothing moved for a moment. The attack on her had lasted fifteen seconds, perhaps twenty.

Shevan flung herself against Del's chest, sobbing, clawing at him as though she were now herself trying to act out in reverse the role she had just escaped. The giant held her gently and stroked her wet hair.

"It's okay, Shev. I got him. He's out. He's not going to hurt you now. Hell, Shev, hush up. You're gonna have the whole camp roused and Keren and Spadrox, too. Will you hush now, baby? You're okay."

He crooned and rocked her till she was calmer, racked only now and then with an immense sob.

He went over and looked at the limp bundle lying against the trunk of a beor about three meters away. After staring at the unconscious Helangle, he studied the sore edge of his own hand. "He's sure going to wake with a bad lump, that one."

"Del, come on. Let's go. Let's get out of this." A tiny note of hysteria struggled in her voice.

He picked her up. She tried to hold her torn clothes together. Del's body felt strong, clean and warm. Her deshabelle didn't seem to matter now. They were together. She needed his protection as much from the memory of the attack as the fear of something like it happening again. But they got to the tunnel unhampered.

The giant put her down. They crawled in. Five meters into the smell of earth and leaves that composed the dark, Shev stopped.

At that point they were still near enough to the entrance to see a dim glow funneling back from the night outside. She sat down, leaned against the tunnel wall and pushed both hands up and over her face and into her hair.

She said something. Del didn't hear what it was. He put out his hand to stroke her hair again. She was looking down at the torn caftan and ripped coveralls beneath it, holding the torn parts open, staring quietly at her body.

Her clear white skin had an almost luminous glow in the cave. Del saw that truly she wasn't a little girl any more.

"You're wet, Shev," he said.

"Del. Warm me." Her voice had an unfamiliar thickness.

"Sure. Hold on, Shev. Here—my tunic's more or less dry and it's warm from me. There, I'll take it off. You get out of of that wet, old torn stuff."

He held up the tunic and helped her find the neck of it. She slid into it. It was so big it would have held twin Shevans.

"There now."

Suddenly she had snuggled against him, shivering. "Del—you—" She kissed him. Her parted lips opened

wider under his. The kiss was so unexpected he almost recoiled. She hadn't kissed him like that since the big, awkward, wet baby kisses she had given him when she had been small enough for him to swing, squealing and pleading, up into the sky in the palm of one hand.

"You lie quiet now, Shev. Why, you're so hot it feels like you've got a fever."

"No—" The awkward kiss sought him again and she bit his lip. Her hands explored his chest and back. He held them because they tickled and he didn't want to laugh.

"What's happened to you, Shevvy? You sick? You really sick, baby? You're burning."

As suddenly as it had started, the attack passed. Shevan wrenched away from him and flung herself onto her side in the old leaves and bracken on the tunnel floor.

"Why, hell—now what's wrong, Shev? We're safe in here, baby. What's the matter?"

Shevan had started to cry again. Although she had turned her back on him he could recognize the sound of her crying.

"Leave me alone. I'm all right!"

He kneeled beside her, patting her shoulder comfortingly.

"Don't touch me!" She spoke so violently that he jumped. "Don't touch me, you big dummy! Leave me be!"

He backed farther into the tunnel. You could never account for girls. Even this Superom girl wasn't rational. He listened. Yes, he could still hear Shevan's quiet tears in the darkness.

But it would be all right now. Ever since she had been a baby, once the shouting tantrums were over and the anger started washing out of her eyes in water, it was okay. After that she would sleep. Del turned to lie on his side and was soon breathing deeply. The glowing inventions and mechanical wonders of his dreams returned.

IT WAS a little before sunrise on the fourth of Harvest. The Regent sat in his audience room. He had dressed in his ceremonial uniform the previous evening, knowing that he wouldn't sleep that night. Blue shadows of fatigue had appeared under his eyes in the last three days. He sat up hour after hour, switching from scanner to scanner in the Tower complex, hoping to detect some movement. There was nothing.

Outside, the delegations continued to gather. If he went to the window and looked he knew he would see the camps of many tribes fanning out into the distance. And these would still be only the nearer tribes. There had not yet been time for the news to have reached the more remote Thetan continents.

The gathering had not been with-

out its problems. Food, water and sanitation had been foremost. Keren's nose wrinkled. Then there was the old enmity between the two main groups: the Conducs and Hel-angles. It had flared into a series of bruising encounters after one randy young scout had made an attempt on a Conduc girl and had been found next morning on the hillside with a fractured collarbone and a lump big as an egg on the side of his jaw.

Although he had called a quick peace conference to avoid bloodshed, Keren had seen an opportunity to dissolve the gathering and escape the trap he sensed his cousin was setting for him. He tried to persuade some of his aides to go out and make trouble between the camps. But although his men had relented in their initial rebellion against him, they wouldn't go out among the Thetans. They feared the bright silver messages, which the tribal chiefs had nailed to wands set up at the entrances to their camps. They also feared and respected the sleeping old man in the Tower more than they respected their master. Perhaps Karel was going to speak at last and had managed to send out his own invitations.

So Keren was left without any chance of controlling the situation. Nor could he effectively search the camps to find out whether that remorseless girl child and her simple-

mindful giant playmate were concealed somewhere out there. Even his own three sons could not be relied on not to take fright, half Thetan as they were.

One of the aides had told him that on the first night of the gathering an incongruously tall Saivainte had arrived with the delegation from the mountains just at dusk, but had not been seen since. The Lex Andromedan Conduc chief had complained of the theft of a blue caftan from one of his senior women. Although the Helangles were probably to blame, this incident and others and some queer rumors that had reached him had left Keren convinced that Shevan and Delbet were close by and that on this dawn they would come out of hiding.

He stood up and watched the light run slowly like water into sand along the cloud base at the mountain tops.

Suppose Karel were really going to speak. No, the idea was outrageous. The attempts of Shevan to escape Spadrox, her imprisonment in the Tower, her disappearance and Del's were all linked to the mysterious arrival of the messages. It had to be a plot.

The Thetans were beginning to stir excitedly, although the encampments were still dark. Only the mountain-tops and the highest crags of the distant stone jungles held the Thetan dawn light.

Keren squeezed the bridge of his nose, pressing the tip of finger and thumb against his weary eyes. It was time to go and call his wives and children. The most important Listening Festival since the Return was about to begin.

THE two great processional doors were flung open. A metal shutter ran up, clearing the east window, and immediately the vault was flooded with light. The green aura of Karel's casket drowned in it and the lifted shadows seemed to reveal movement in his sleeping face.

The Regent, followed first by his sons and daughters and then by his wives, entered the vault. The paramount Thetan chiefs came next, crowding and jostling for position. The Helangles were especially ill-tempered because their withered legs and their crouch put them at a disadvantage in a crowd.

As the procession came forward untidily into the familiar brilliance two people moved away from the right-hand wall. They were pale and disheveled. The girl's uniform had been torn and crudely sewn together at the rents. The man looked down nervously at Karel's casket. He licked his lips. Small beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

Keren stopped so short that two of his sons cannoned into him. He had expected some dramatic reap-

pearance of his rival and her friend, but not quite this soon. The two looked like starved and vengeful ghosts as they confronted him.

"Well, cousin," said Keren at last. "You've certainly been up to your tricks. You've kept yourself and your outsize playmate well out of sight, haven't you?" He spoke in the high Superom, the words as arid as his tongue and lips felt.

The two young people were returning the salutes of the Thetans. Even Keren's children reluctantly raised their hands to their foreheads in the customary flat-palmed recognition of superiors.

"Get on with your business, cousin," mocked Shevan. "Thetis is waiting for the Awakening."

"I warn you, Shevan," Keren snarled, "if you've concocted some trick—"

"Come, cousin, this is a day when we last Superom—even the half-bred—should avoid quarrels. Our lost leader is about to return."

Keren scowled, but said nothing more. The Thetan chiefs, his family and even some of the lesser Thetans were now pressing forward into the chamber. They fanned out around its sides to surround the casket at the center. Hundreds of eyes focused on the still form buried in six hundred years of dreams. No one spoke.

Shevan and Del had taken their places at the head of the casket,

several paces behind it, facing Keren.

Now all the eyes in the vault turned to a copper shield on the west wall. Keren turned to face it. The casket was behind him. His hollow eyes stared at the shield as though willing it to refuse to collect the first rays of the climbing sun in the unshuttered east window.

But now the shield caught fire. It was as though the metal ignited and burned. The light consumed the rim, then spun down into a cunningly turned concavity.

As it touched the center Keren turned. He was like a man sleep-walking—or a puppet. Facing the casket, he paused. His mouth opened. Then he gathered himself and spoke the familiar ritual words, first in high Superom, then in the Thetan lingua franca.

"The Waiting is over. The Listening has come. Great Karel, awake and speak to your lost brothers."

Like a terribly thin, fatally expanded, intensely brittle sphere of glass the vault crackled with breath-holding silence.

Sheven's face was deathly pale. She swayed, waiting. She dared not look at the giant by her side.

Del was equally pale. His big hands clenched and unclenched. Sweat trickled slowly down his left temple.

Keren's eyes found his cousin's and bored into them. They must have been the only two people in the

vault not watching Karel's casket.

Then it came, a frail but purposeful voice. The crystal of silence cracked as all the Thetans in the vault fell to their knees.

"Yes, the time has come. The time for my awakening has come."

The voice came unmistakably from the casket. Karel's lips appeared not to have moved—but did anyone dare to be sure? Only the fierce disbelief of Keren and the hypnotic concentration of Shevan were once more rooted to the face in the casket.

"I must be taken to Mandanar. My casket can be opened there, where the secrets that will restore me are still preserved. Let my brothers—" the voice faltered, then recovered. "Let my brother Delbet and my sister Shevan go with me. Let my brother Keren remain at Spadrox as hostage to my Thetan brothers against my return—" The voice faltered again, grew still.

Delbet, the giant, was swaying. He raised a hand feebly, but it didn't reach his head before he toppled. Shevan, who had seen him sway, stopped forward to hold him but his huge, unconscious weight brought her down as well. They lay at the head of the casket.

No one moved. The silence was bursting again. Karel's voice had stopped.

Suddenly Keren screamed: "False!

Don't be deceived! It's a trick! They invented it. Those two there. They're in league with the old spirit of the Tower. It was his voice you heard! Take them, guards! Agate—Hadra—Spero—draw your probes. It's a plot to destroy me and Spadrox. They want to carry off Great Karel. It wasn't his voice you heard, I tell you. It was the voice of Shade."

"How can that be, Regent?" From among the trembling Thetans a pale transparent shadow emerged. He was incredibly old. The bright light of the vault almost shone through him—he cast only the flicker of a shadow on the floor of the vault. "How can that be when I am here and the casket lies there?"

Keren backed away from it. It came slowly toward him.

At the head of the casket Shevan knelt by Del. The giant was stirring. The girl whispered urgently, almost angrily into his ear.

Del raised his head. He stared glassily at the tableau of casket, Keren, the strange old form of air and shadows, the cringing Thetans. He seemed to make a huge effort to stay conscious.

Then the sleeping leader spoke again. His voice was fainter, but still resolute.

"Take me to Mandanar. I must be taken to Mandanar."

"We hear you, my leader," breathed Shade. "To Mandanar!"

"To Mandanar! To Mandanar!" The Thetans in the vault took up the cry. It spread like a fire back down the processional passageway out into the quadrangle and to the campus. "To Mandanar! Thetis will be great again!"

Only one Thetan was slow to move from the vault. The pandemonium hadn't seized him. His blazing eyes still stared with hatred at the giant Delbet in Shevan's arms.

Keren saw it.

His aides and even his own wives and children caught the crowd's hysteria. They streamed away from the chamber with the rest, leaving him defeated, deserted, his mind numb.

But Keren saw the strange look on the Helangle's bruised face. His imagination began to race. As the dwarf turned and loped after the other Thetans the Regent read the starry name studded across the jacket. He held it like a hot iron against his memory. His numbed thoughts began to stir and weave again.

Book 2, Arcweld

V

ALL the maps of Thetis were lost, but the Helangles carried maps in their memories. By the fifth day out of Spadox they had led the

great convoy to the hills above Westward City Three.

It was dark. Arcweld lay alone on the hillside by his steede. Overhead the huge red and orange stars of the Thetan night burned like fire-ore in the burrows of the talue. The dwarf's thoughts burned with them as he lay alone.

He drank the night. He drank it and the stars thirstily, tormented by memories of two other nights. He was staying womanless by choice on the expedition. Starhowl, Kickstart, Smoketrail all lay warm, shaggy and satisfied with their snoring, snuggling women. But Arcweld tossed, drinking the stars, his thoughts feeding like acid on the steely memory of a night without stars.

The bruise on his jaw had gone, but he had absorbed the humiliation of it into his twisted body. After a day's slow riding to keep pace with the convoy his shoulder hurt. Wincing, he turned to his other side, staring down through the helmet's black visor toward the center of the camp.

The giant was scared. He was scared, all right. He'd been scared in the vault. He had fainted when G.K. spoke. And the fear in his face hadn't lessened as the distance between the convoy and Spadox increased.

Arcweld chewed his lip. That other night—it hadn't been like this one. There had been rain, thin as

mist or a smoke trail. He had lain on that hillside above Spadox, a slope like this one but treed and bushed with beores and hoeth to hide him.

She had come from the Conduc camp, moving up the hillside in a dark caftan, stealthy but purposeful. He had watched her, seeing only a young Conduc girl with strangely short hair. She had been crazy to be unescorted. He had watched her—hadn't understood why she should be out alone. He had understood later—after he had struck.

Snarling silently, Arcweld drew up his withered legs at the memory. Squirring. She hadn't been a Conduc at all. He remembered himself ripping, tearing—finding smooth skin under his lips. Superom skin. Not cold and furred like Thetan Conduc—not hairy like Helangle woman. A deep sacrilege—yet why not? Helangle, Superom. A new Thetan paramount blood. And then. Rigid, malevolent, Arcweld sat up, feeling in his mind the bolt strike him, the darkness come down again.

What doing out in the mist, the smoke? What doing on that hillside? Her and the giant. Disguised as a Conduc . . .

The giant Arcweld hadn't seen. Only the thunderblow striking him sideways. Then the dark.

Arcweld nightmared. He swallowed the stars of a different night.

The two men had come for him

quietly, as if they had known he would be lying awake by his sleeping steede. He had seen them approaching across the encampment, distorted in the fitful flares of occasional campfires. Then the two of them had been standing over him, hissing their pidgin attempt at the Helangle tongue.

"Yawl come with us. Creep. Soft, man."

He had recognized them. Despised them. Keren's slaves. As though anything would wake the snorting, seed-blown scouts and their sticky, hairy women wrapped under tents.

They had smuggled him into Spadox by a side way. Along corridors, past shut doors, panting as he scuttled along, keeping up with their haste. They had pushed him through a door and left him.

Arcweld stirred. His strong teeth closed on the darkness of the dream. His arms twitched in sleep as in the audience room at Spadox he had raised them to salute the staring hollows of Keren's eyes in the gloom.

"Your name is Arcweld?"

A nod.

"You will accompany the expedition to Mandanar?" It wasn't really a question. Just a flat statement.

Another nod. The dwarf didn't want to speak. If he talked to the Regent he must use the "sir" suffix. He saw no need for this humility now. Keren needed him, Arcweld, a

Thetan. He believed now that the days of the Suprom were numbered. He read doom in the mad eyes. Only the neuroprobe holstered on the Regent's hip wielded power. The dwarf respected that. Besides, he needed the hate and cunning of this man who was the giant's enemy, too. He needed it. For the moment.

The dwarf's mouth below the visor snapped at stars as he slept on the hillside above Westward City Three. The bearded face spun toward him in the unlit audience room. In enormous closeup he saw the lips, framed in black hair, the white teeth, brilliant gums, the tongue alive behind them like a seabest in its cave.

"Why do you hate the giant?"

Arcweld snarled. He tried to hold down the animal reaction, but there were no words in his throat. Hate was inarticulate.

"Did he do that to you?"

The Regent's cruel fingers poked his bruised jaw. Arcweld howled, cringing backward, his eyes hostile.

"And this?" Keren reached for the hurt shoulder, but the Helangle backed away, growling.

"Heavy. I'll lay him down, too. Like real. I'll fix."

"Why? What did he do to you? Why did he—"

"Nix."

"What did you see? What were you doing?"

The Regent's urgency made Arc-

weld bold. He leaned forward on his knuckles. He stared insolently into Keren's face.

"Nix. What we have is between Delbet Sir and Arcweld. Keren Sir wants use Arcweld, is on Arcweld's say."

Keren watched him closely. "Do you know what I want? I want them broken. I want Delbet Sir and the Karel myth broken. I want back what they've taken from me. I want it back. And the girl. I want her back. I want her here at Spadox. Do you understand?"

Arcweld nodded briefly. His ugly Helangle face twitched into the imitation of a smile. It remained fixed. The rictus on the face of a corpse. It was novel to have a Superom who required favors of a Thetan.

"And for me?" he breathed. "What for Arcweld, man?"

"Listen," said Keren. Faintly, from somewhere in the night outside Spadox, came lonely cries.

"And how, too?" The dwarf insisted. "How?"

"Listen."

"Listen. Listen." Arcweld mumbled the words into the dark ground as he awoke. "Listen." The dream had been so real that he sat up anxiously. He crouched, staring back into it, listening again to the lonely cries that seemed to have reached tentacles into this dawn. He found himself still searching for the bearded

face in the audience room at Spadrox—which had become daybreak on a hillside several hundred kilometers away. *Listen!* He crouched, listening.

THE cries were becoming fainter. The dwarf shook his head to clear it. The sounds appeared to come from an area of woodland to his right.

Arcweld scratched himself nervously. He turned the scarab-head helmet from side to side to locate the exact direction of the sound. Scratching uneasily, he muttered under his breath. The cries were anxious. Their link with his recent dream disturbed him.

The camp was still held in a bowl of shadow. The approaching light hadn't yet spilled into it over the sides. Nothing stirred down there.

Arcweld fondled the machine beside him. He found comfort in its sleeping power. His fingers sought the outline of something locked in one of the hide panniers behind the saddle. He stroked it. It gave him confidence to go find the mystery of the cries. The juxtaposition of dream cries and cries here in the dawn urged him on. If he didn't go now they would be lost at any moment.

He looked around once more, then loped uphill, making for the scrub line where he would be less easily seen.

He had only gone a few hundred

meters through the bush when one of the cries sprang up close to him. It startled him, but he recognized it now. It was a *taue*. There was another, still far off, but getting closer. Something was driving a pack of the little silver-blue creatures toward him. It was unusual for them to leave their burrows except between dusk and full nightfall to look for food. They were being hunted. Their forlorn cries were all around him now.

The dwarf darted into thicker cover. Dawn light was reaching here. He lay flat. Almost immediately something leaped across him. He snarled, cuffing at it like a cat. But it fled. It had only been intent on avoiding him anyway. Silver-blue, waterfall-colored, it streaked into the bushes.

Two more passed in front of him an arm's length from where he lay. Then came a cry that made him twitch back convulsively.

It seemed to come from the very thicket in which he was hiding. It might have come from the tangle of thorns, trailers and uncurling leaves before his face.

Teeth bared, he slithered backward. And it came again. It was different from the hunted cry—a female's call. What sent fear and flight spilling into his blood was the fact that he saw nothing in the bush where it had originated.

The dwarf backed farther into another tangle of vegetation. The call came again from the same place. He swallowed to stop his heart's jumping. Now, beyond the bush, something stirred.

Lightly poised for flight, its wedge-shaped head lowered, a young talue pointed the bush. It darted forward, stopped, foreleg raised. Its head swiveled, cocked, listening to its right.

The call came again from the empty bush.

The dwarf's face was fixed in a snarl. There was nothing there. The bush called again. Then the talue which had been all quivering nerve and tension collapsed. The transition from vitality to inertia was absolute and so swift that Arcweld jumped again. It was as if all the delicate mechanisms of the creature had imploded simultaneously. A limp bundle of fur lay on the ground where life had shimmered only a few seconds before.

Even more terrifying to the dwarf was the form that sped suddenly across the brake through the dawn. He flattened. The Superom looked enormous in the strange tree-muted light. Arcweld lay, clutching earth. His chin rested on dirt and leaves. His eyes behind the helmet visor were scared but baleful, like a wild animal's.

He watched the giant pick up the

little creature. He used it tenderly, cradling it in his hands and looking down at it almost affectionately. He turned it over and plucked a shiny bolt from its right hindquarter. His long fingers began to probe its pouch.

The faintest rustle, almost softer than a breath, disturbed some leaves and hoeth needles close to the dwarf's right shoulder. The instinctive fear of things that creep among leaves sent a chill slithering down his back.

Delbet was absorbed by his catch, but Arcweld didn't dare to move. He tried to see to his right past the visor of his helmet, but its curve impeded his view.

Arcweld was as still as stone. His breathing hardly moved his ribs, although he was almost stifled by his heart which seemed to be trying to hammer itself free.

The rustling had stopped. With painful slowness he began to edge the helmet around. He finally caught sight of a motionless talue reflected in the corner of the visor. It must have picked up his movement at the same time. It fled, jetting into the undergrowth—quicksilver. Discovered.

In the broken fragment of a second the dwarf saw the stunned talue drop from Delbet's hands. In the same movement, the giant reached smoothly down and leveled

the slingbow. Arcweld rolled sideways. A bolt streaked through the half-light. Intended for the flying animal it clipped the ground a hands-breadth behind it.

Arcweld realized that the shot hadn't been aimed at him, but he was already committed. On his haunches, his vision spoiled by panic and the dark visor, he collided with a tree, staggered, turned snarling. He was no match for the giant's speed or the slingbow's deadly bolts.

Dwarf and giant faced each other across a mat of bushes. Delbet's saint's face held a blank stare of disbelief. The dwarf, crouched, his lips drawn back, awaited the leveled bow. He hadn't expected to be caught again at a disadvantage by the Superom giant.

Then, irrationally, he was alone. The clearing was empty. Only the inert talue heaped in a different bundle and a fragment of fire-ore gently glowing on the ground where Delbet had let it fall proved that the giant had been there. He had fled as swiftly and unpredictably as had the animals he hunted.

The dwarf looked at the heaped talue, the empty glade. Momentarily he glimpsed the rhythmic bulk of the Superom speeding downhill through the trees. He scratched nervously, looking around him. Clearly the Superom had recognized him, had been scared and had run away. The

powerful, ruling Superom had run from a low-tribe Thetan.

Arcweld considered. The dream, the strange cries, the sound out of the empty bush. He snarled and muttered. He needed to get back, close to the magical power of the thing in the pannier of his steede. But it was getting light rapidly. The camp would be rousing. Starhowl would be crawling out of his tent and calling the navigation party together. There was no time.

The Superom giant had seen him defenseless and had run away. Arcweld shivered. Nothing in this dawn explained itself.

He looked around him again, as though somewhere in the increasing light a solution would be revealed. There was nothing. The morning was empty. The hillside was still.

VI

THE Conducs had built a special carrier for Karel's casket. In the several hundred years since the computer-controlled Thetan factories had fallen derelict, the Conducs had become masters of adaptation and improvisation. They had rushed a mobile workshop to Spadox and built the vehicle in two days.

It rolled slowly forward now as the convoy got under way. A junk-heap motorcade creaked and groaned into life and moved along with it.

They bore delegate chiefs of most of the paramount Thetan tribes. There were even some mounted Agorans along. Their nervous, sideways-skipping cadels shied at the noise and skittered in front of vehicles, bringing a variety of curses from cabs and cockpits.

Shevan and Delbet rode in the center of the convoy with the casket. It was shielded under a canopy and insulated to preserve the functioning of its delicate mechanisms.

Arcweld had no opportunity to get a look at the giant. The Helangles job was to act as pathfinders. When he got back to camp, Starhowl, Kickstart and the others were already arguing about whether to go around Westward City Three or through it.

"I say through it, man," said Arcweld. "There's a sub-traverse highway I dig in W.C. Three. Let's hit it. Going around will take two days more."

"Shed me, it's the fireball himself. Dig him. He don't sleep, he don't jig women, he don't talk to us hardly but he walks in out of the dawn and has opinions."

"One smart Helangle."

"What you need is a woman, Arc."

"He takes his steede up the hillside."

"Catacroc! He burns, man!"

"Yawl cool it," snarled the dwarf.

"What I do, I do."

"Somè Conduc jill beat him up.

Remember? Did she detool yawl, Arc?"

"Cool it—cool it," Starhowl warned. He motioned the dwarf back. Arcweld had taken a threatening hop toward the last speaker.

"What he says is right," said Starhowl. "Through's faster."

"But round's safer, man," said Kickstart sagely. "Yawl know some queer things got holed out in those rock jungles. Yawl hit them time to time like we do."

"Be through on the sub-traverse in a day," said Arcweld.

Smoketrail sided with Kickstart. "Nix. Know Westward C.Three. Take day and half."

"And what if the sub-traverse is blocked?" suggested someone. "Could get blown out in the side tracks."

"Scout it."

Starhowl considered. "Okay. Scout it. Arc, it's your mindmap. Go scout it. Cleavewind, you go, too."

"Nix," the dwarf protested. "Don't need two. Arcweld goes."

"I say two go. Dig?"

The dwarf shrugged.

"Smoke, go down tell Shevan Lady convoy moves toward W.C. Three one hour. Helangles scouting. Maybe change course two hours. Dig?"

"Dig."

Smoketrail kicked his steede into life and rode downhill toward the

main camp in a series of flamboyant curves.

"Yawl eaten, Arc?" he asked.

"Not hungry."

"Like crazy," said someone.

"Like he got sick."

"Okay—you ready, Cleave?"

"Sure."

"Let's hit it."

The dwarf shoved his steede down onto wheels. Cleavewind jammed down his helmet. The two Helangles stood hard simultaneously on their kickdowns. Their motors roared. Wheel to wheel they soared cross-country, making for the cracked and rutted highway aimed like a broken arrow at the stone jungle crouched across the western skyline.

When they had penetrated about a kilometer into the petrified silence the dwarf stopped. After a short argument he persuaded Cleavewind that they should split up. Arcweld would reconnoiter to both sides while Cleavewind went down the traverse to see whether it was clear though to the far side.

Cleavewind didn't like it, but he was less aggressive and determined than the dwarf. Arcweld watched him roar away until he became a speck down the traverse. The dwarf hauled his bike around. A minute later he had zigzagged into a city square uphill from the traverse and was coaxing the steede in a series of bumps and jolts up a concrete ramp

to one of the pedestrian levels, where he could work unseen.

Six hundred years as nomads had made the Helangles instinctively shy of being indoors. Arcweld kept the engine of his steede running while he looked darkly through his visor at the crumbling mouths of doorways and blind windows surrounding the plaza.

The faint echo of a burst of power from Cleavewind's motor blown down the wind from somewhere on the traverse decided him. He had not much time if he were to keep the rendezvous with his companion. He stopped the motor, got off the bike, stood it and crouched in the still geometry of shadows, unfastening the pannier.

The inside of the nearest building was dark. It might have been a shop or the lobby of an office at one time. Whatever furnishings or fittings there had once been had rotted away. The place was full of twisted stone and steel.

Arcweld's lips curled back in a snarl of fear and displeasure as he waddled through the doorway. He supported himself on the knuckles of his left hand, crouching, muttering under his breath. In the crook of his right arm he supported the black box he had taken from the pannier on his bike.

He hated the darkness, but the box demanded it.

"Where are you?" The voice came from a dim image barely visible on one side of the box—near the doorway there was too much light for a clear picture. Still, the face was recognizable.

"Westward City Three," Arcweld said. His voice was cracked and hoarse.

"Yes. That would be about right. Well?"

"Well what?"

"You insolent—" The face in the box grew distorted. Cruel, dark eyes burned like points of fire. "What has been happening? What have you done? What have you discovered?"

"Tell yawl a dream I had," said Arcweld. "Or maybe not a dream. Tell yawl what I saw, Keren Sir. What I saw on the mountain this very morning. More—tell you what I heard."

"Get on with it."

The dwarf grinned. He pushed the box farther into shadow so that the Regent's face would be clearer to him. He kept his own helmet visor down so that the staring eyes in the bearded face couldn't see him properly.

"Was lying up in the camp, five kilometers east of W.C. Three," said Arcweld. "Dig? Dawn. Looking at stars. Old sun. Freaked out. Great. Candy man—"

"Stop reciting poetry, you mutant—"

The dwarf ignored the interruption. "There were cries from higher up. Queer. Like this—" He imitated badly.

"Talue," Keren said. "What's—"

"Talue. But not talue."

"You twisted—"

"Followed them. Explored—" Arcweld went on to tell the story of what had happened in the wood above the camp that morning. The half-bred Superom didn't interrupt.

"And then the sound came out of the bush. Straight. Clear. Right in front of me. And there was nothing that could have made it—nothing at all. Then I saw—"

But the staring, rigid face glowing in the shadow did not hear what Arcweld had seen. The whole scene swerved. The image of the dwarf flew sideways. Keren found himself facing darkness. Faint light still came from somewhere beyond the range of the box's sensors, but no sound.

"Arcweld," he shouted. "Arcweld."

There was no response.

THE dwarf was facing darkness, too, but his had suddenly spawned tangible shadows that had seized him. They dragged him away from the black box. A foot kicked the box so that it spun.

Arcweld fought. He bit at some wet thing that had been stuffed into his mouth, but it was spongy and

wouldn't tear. He struggled. He was powerful, but the silent shadows were just too many for him to overcome. They entangled him like cobwebs. Their limbs were moist and chilly. He fought instinctively, wildly like an animal, realizing that he had been caught by the Submetropols.

He was pushed, dragged, carried. Somewhere behind him he heard Keren's voice bawling from the box.

They dragged him across a gap and over some steps. The dwarf cringed at the restricted space that hampered his struggles. He loathed buildings. He despised the dead and dying cubicles and compartments and the machines that once had made them work.

Sometimes when the pack had been hunting near one of the stone jungles they had pursued the quarry into the ruins. Even when he had been with his kind the insides of buildings had worried him. When the cubicle where he now fought began to fall he almost died of fright.

He struggled violently, then lay still, choked, all but paralyzed. The Submets held him. They were like a heap of moist thread. When he realized that the motion of the cubicle was in one direction and controlled, Arcweld began to recover.

It was surprisingly warm in the rambling caverns below Westward City Three, but the warmth was moist, dripping. It penetrated alien

garments and lungs within minutes. It gave Arcweld a sensation of drowning. He gasped for breath.

He felt like a sponge. From the foot of the elevator shaft he was hustled through so many twists and turns it seemed to him he had gone through several tunnels. The passages were dripping with moisture and so faintly lit by crude fire-ore lamps that he couldn't even make out his captors' faces. Twice he fell. He was unused to using his legs for long distances and the gag was choking him. The second time he went down a clammy hand hooked it from his mouth. The dwarf guessed that by now he was too deep in the city's guts for any cry to pierce to the surface.

The tunnel suddenly became wider and brighter. Arcweld found himself in a broad, low room. Light came from wall brackets, but its source was still fire-ore. He recognized the pearly quality of the light. Now he could see the Submetropols who had captured him.

Unlike the other Thetan groups formed since the end of the Superom, the Submets were not strictly homogeneous. They were the least progressive human development. Their progenitors had been employed by the Superom for servicing and repairing robot or semi-robot functions and equipment, most of it underground.

There had been many grades of this type of Thetan worker, some bred with special characteristics and most with separate tribal identities.

Following the collapse of the system and the old cities they had retreated to inhabit the thousands of kilometers of submetropolitan space where the stopped machines were entombed.

The dwarf had never before seen a Submet at close quarters. Now one was facing him less than two meters away as he was dragged forward and released so suddenly that he collapsed in front of a metal table with a creature squatting behind it.

This one was some kind of leader. His dress showed it. He had a pale face and sunken, pink-rimmed eyes. Weak eyes were a characteristic of the undercity dwellers and evolutionary decline would eventually lead to the replacement of the Submets' sight with another sense. The pale, discolored skin, where it was visible at the face and wrists, was moist and wrinkled, but for the rest the Submet was sheathed in a skintight, silvery suit that might have been made of plastic or some metal foil.

"What were you doing in our place, upperworld creature?" The moist sibilance of the words was like the sound of gas leaking from a valve.

"Minding my business, wetlips. Big business. Superom business. Dig?"

"I'm Fossess," said the Submet

leader simply. "This city sector and its underworld are mine. No one has business here that isn't my business. What ransom will your tribe give to recover you? Have they sanpardan?"

The dwarf only identified the final word, but it was enough to give him the drift of all the rest. Sanpardan was a byproduct of cruze. It was perilously toxic but an effective stimulant. The Submets mixed it into a drink with water and crude sugar and considered it a cure for their chronic impotence. They could rarely get their hands on enough of it, having little commerce with the Thetan upperworld.

Arcweld realized that Fossess wished to trade him for a cask of the sticky fermented jig-juice.

His first reaction was typically Helangle. He grabbed the edge of the metal table and shook it till it rattled.

"Gota hell! Waterjerked blind-fish!"

Fossess didn't flinch. A tiny ripple of what could have been a smile came and went. It seemed to start and finish somewhere below his transparent skin.

Arcweld suddenly found himself again in the middle of a bunch of clammy cobwebs. A dozen Submets submerged him. They were all around him. They flowed from nowhere.

"Sanpardan," said Fossess ear-

nestly. "You will mark a sheet to tell your people you are here. They will bring five casks. Sanpardan! Do you understand, upperworld creature?"

"Hell with you, blindfish. I'm hooked to a power party. Superom. You dare challenge Superom?"

"There are no Superom outside Spadox," hissed the Submet leader. "You are insolent. Perhaps we should cut off your hand and send it to your people and they will bring sanpardan quickly to recover you. Perhaps they have no sanpardan. What have they to trade for you? Have they stuff we could trade to the Agorans for sanpardan? Answer, upperworld thing! Fossess is tired of your stupidity."

Arcweld sagged between his damp guards. He closed his eyes. But his brain raced like a high-revving steede.

He was in a tough spot. These clammy jerkbrains felt too secure in their sewers, subways and tunnels to be bullied. Still it might be possible to turn this thing.

"Listen—I come from Spadox. I come from Keren Sir. Superom. Leader. I'm with him."

"What has a Helangle to do with Keren Sir?"

"You don't believe, huh?" The dwarf stared angrily into the fishy eyes of his captor. "Tell your soggy strongarms fetch my magic box."

The Submet leader stared at him blankly.

Arcweld's lips curled. He jabbed a

thick finger into the air. "Up there where you grabbed me. A box."

"Go upperworld," Fossess ordered. "Find what he had. Find this box. Bring it to me here."

The expedition returned moments later. Six of them, panting, dragged Arcweld's steede. Two more carried the box between them.

Fossess was not particularly interested in the vehicle. He knew it was one of the smoky, noisy things the Helangles rode to get them from place to place. The box was silent and menacing and had dials and knobs and a screen. It was like a miniature of parts of the sleeping gods that lay under this city. Fossess understood them and feared them and waited for the day the old legends said would come when they would return to life and the Superom would return.

"Put it here."

The Submets lifted it to the table top.

FOSSESS leaned forward and stared into the screen. His own pale eyes stared back at him. He raised them to look over the box at the twisted face of his prisoner on the other side of the table.

This box was nothing. It was dead like the other dead machine gods in the rest of his underworld barony. It only gave him back his own face.

"Dumb!" muttered the dwarf. He

levered himself around the table on his hands in a series of hops. Half a dozen wary Submets clung damply to him.

Arcweld pressed down two white keys the way Keren had shown him. He held them till they clicked. With the other hand he spun the knob next to the screen. The screen stayed dark, enigmatic.

It was wrong. Where there should have been an image of Keren's face he saw only the reflection of his own scowl.

Arcweld felt trapped, betrayed. He shouldn't have trusted the cunning Superom. Keren had promised him would always be there in the box at the summoning spell of the keys and knobs. He had promised Arcweld power in Thetis that no Helangle had even dared to imagine. He had promised possession beyond the most lewd Helangle dream.

Arcweld struck the box with his hand. His frustration and fury escaped in a howl. The Submets closed in threateningly. The dwarf slipped down to his knees again.

Fossess said something sharply. He was leaning forward. His body inside the glistening wet suit was tense as a spring. Cautiously he put his head down and turned a bloodless ear to the box.

Arcweld watched him from under jutting brows. The strange, underwater smile of the Submet baron

faltered and pegged itself into place.

"This god is alive. This god is alive, upperworld creature—"

Suddenly Fossess jumped up. He seized the box in his arms, shouted to the guards. Five or six of them hauled Arcweld to his feet.

They began half dragging, half carrying him back along the previous route. When he could look up and see through sweat running into his eyes the dwarf caught glimpses of Fossess stumbling along the tunnels ahead of the party carrying the box.

The Submet baron was in a hurry. He got to the lifting cubicle only a few seconds ahead of the others, but started screaming at them impatiently almost at once. He clutched the humming box to his chest. His head was cocked. He was listening to make sure he hadn't lost the life inside the box. Intoxicating dreams of sanpandan seemed to have been forgotten for the moment.

For the second time in an hour the dwarf felt his stomach hang suspended as the chamber moved upward.

His captors clung to him. The chamber flowed slowly up the shaft. No manufactured power had been available in any Thetan city for hundreds of years. This climbing cubicle must be operated by hand.

The motion stopped. Arcweld blinked. They were back in the rubble-filled hallway where he had

been ambushed. Even the light in the shadowy interior of the building was ten times brighter than the gloom in the underworld—and the light of the failing Thetan sun, shining on the terrace outside, was blinding.

Fossess, who had rushed into the elevator first, was now last to come out. As he stumbled forward, breathing heavily, the box gave a shout. Arcweld jumped.

Fossess nearly dropped the box in surprise. The shout became decipherable. Arcweld cowered. The voice of Keren flung a stream of common language abuse against Fossess' chest.

Those Submets who had been holding the dwarf joined their prostrate companions, squirming like silverfish. Arcweld's first instinct was to escape, but these troglodytes had left his steede underground. He wouldn't get far on his withered legs. Besides, natural cunning had begun to seep through his mind again like a drug. He saw a way of using these creatures. The box had robbed him of a plan when it refused to work in the underworld. Now a fresh opportunity offered.

"You brainless Helangle lout," the box was roaring. "You signaled me—why aren't you there? What happened to you, you scum of a malfunctioning incubator?"

Stung by the scorn in Keren's voice, the dwarf hopped menacingly toward Fossess, prepared to wrench

the box from him. But the Submet baron was already overwhelmed.

He sank to his knees. He was trembling. Fearfully, reverently, he lowered the box to the floor.

As he took the box away from his chest it was evident from the lively flicker of light on the screen that the box had resumed its powers and that Keren was back.

A moment later, as Fossess flung himself onto the floor, the dwarf saw the twisted, enraged face of the Superom leader.

Fossess writhed. "You are a cunning magician, upperworld creature. You have a Superom imprisoned in your box—" His face pressed to the rubble, he hissed, "Forgive us, master, we didn't know you were in there among us."

Keren now seemed to be struggling to assess the situation. The dwarf squatted before the box. He made sure he put the heel of one of his riding boots squarely on Fossess' pale hand. He shifted all his weight onto it. The Submet leader groaned, but didn't dare to move.

"Keren Sir," fawned the dwarf, "this scum jumped me. Rumbled me. Dragged me into the guts of this goddam jerksville. Dig?"

"Who?" Keren shouted. "Where are you now? What are you talking about? What happened to you?"

Arcweld was enjoying the experience of mystifying the Superom,

swapping conversation with one of Thetis' old superior beings while the frightened Submets cringed around him.

The Helangle tongue was ideal for short colorful narration. The dwarf spoke rapidly, confident that the troglodytes wouldn't understand. He told his master everything that had happened to him since they had been interrupted earlier.

Caught in the rising monosyllabic tide, Keren listened without a single question as the dwarf suggested the Submets might be used in a plan to wreck the expedition and restore the Regent's power.

"They're not your old Thetans, Keren Sir. They're dumb. They believe in magic. They think the machines are dead gods. They think I'm a wizard with a slave Superom in a box. Box—box—" he mocked, enjoying his power over the squirming Submets who groveled harder, hearing a word they now thought held divine mystery. "Listen. Let's get this together. Yawl speak. Yawl tell them they must obey me. Dig? Tell them the boy and girl are wizard and witch taken over Superom skins. Tell them what yawl like. Whatever scares them out of their wet hides. Say that yawl sent me to rescue the casket from the whole wagon train that's under a spell. Dig?"

"Where is their leader?"

"Under here," said Arcweld

merrily. He indicated his leather-shod hindquarters. "I'm sitting on him."

"Put him up."

Arcweld shuffled sideways, making sure to grind Fossess' fingers under his heel as a parting reminder.

"Master!" The Submet baron was almost fainting with fear at the piercing Superom eyes staring from the box.

"Hear me, Fossess." Keren had switched into the Submet tongue. His mastery of its sibilances was complete. "Arcweld the Helangle is my envoy. I speak to him by this box. Do your records recall the use of these machines by us, your masters?"

"Yes, Keren Sir. Our histories are correctly programed and all our machines in good order await the illustrious return to Thetis of your people, our masters."

"Good. Then listen to what I have to tell you and then follow the instructions of my envoy, Arcweld. If you disobey, you and your miserable people may have to relearn the sting of the neuro-whip. Do you hear me, Fossess?"

"I hear you, Keren Sir."

"Tell them to save the giant for me," cried the dwarf.

"Quiet, you mutant scum." Keren's eyes tried to pierce the darkness beyond the trembling moonface of the Submet baron and could not.

Arcweld said under his breath,

"Yawl can tell them to save the girl for me, Master. Dig, baby? If you like. Or if you don't like—"

But he listened while Keren outlined his new strategy to Fossess. The role assigned to him was minor, but suddenly he didn't protest. He made his own plans instead.

VII

NO ONE believed Arcweld's story. He hadn't expected that anyone would. The Helangles and their language were good at vivid description of events, but short on imagination.

Cleavewind had been back with the main body for almost an hour when the dwarf returned. Cleavewind's version of how he and Arcweld separated and how he had explored the traverse sounded right. So did his quaking account of waiting in the silences of the stone jungle for the dwarf. He told them how he had called and searched and gone into the dead building. And although much of this wasn't true his recollected fear made it sound true.

Starhowl hid his relief under anger. When Arcweld rode into camp the leader was waiting like an ash cloud over a volcano.

His listened. Helangle justice was rough, but it still clung enough to the age of the Superom to allow the accused to be heard. Not that this made any difference. Starhowl had

already decided to punish the dwarf for giving him concern.

He could have made matters easy for himself by referring Arcweld's defection to the two Superom for jurisdiction and sentence, but he wanted to avoid raising questions about his authority to lead the expedition's scout party. So he listened impatiently and then ordered the flogging he had decided on.

The punishment detail took Arcweld into one of the hillside woods. They wanted to make sure no spy from the other Thetan groups saw a scout humiliated. The dwarf neither struggled nor argued.

They made a frame by tying branches together. They left his insect-head helmet but stripped the rest of him. During the process they often erupted into howls of lewd mirth. Then they trussed his heels and hung him head down from the frame and lashed him with the green shoots of the beor. They made the beating easy, grinning and cracking coarse jokes, because it seemed clear to them that the dwarf's absence in the stone jungle could be explained by a natural Helangle activity. Even as they stripped him it had been obvious Arcweld was thinking woman.

Arcweld didn't make a sound and he refused to be drawn out by their ribald questions. They cut him down and helped him put the clothes on

his wealed body. He snapped and snarled at them but obviously didn't care. He was thinking about something else. He was the first in the saddle of his steede.

Arcweld's weals were still smarting when the vanguard of the expedition entered the sub-traverse, but he paid no attention.

Starhowl's Helangle scouts led. Their steedes were throttled down and they kept their helmet visors fully shut. They fanned out across the broad, cracked traverse. Young Cleavewind, who had scouted it, was at the tip of the cone of riders with the dwarf behind and to his left. The high-noon sun cut bands of blinding light and shadow across the highway.

Behind the scouts came the Caxitine Conducs. They were responsible for servicing the carrier that came next in the procession, bearing Shevan, Delbet and Karel's casket.

Below his visor, Arcweld's teeth were gritted, his lips drawn back from them in his silent grin-snarl. He had to keep from looking back over his shoulder and he ground his teeth till they ached to remind him.

It was vital that what was going to happen didn't happen too quickly. The dwarf didn't trust anyone, but especially he didn't trust the Submets. Their vision in full daylight was almost as bad as being blind and outside the underworld they dehydrated so quickly that an hour's

exposure could mean death. They had to carry through Keren's plan precisely.

Gunning the motor, he pushed his steede forward to ride level with Cleavewind. The incident of that morning, Arcweld's trumped-up story and the subsequent court-martial and flogging had disturbed the young Helangle. Even the lewd jokes which were now making the rounds about the real reason for Arcweld's prolonged absence failed to reassure Cleavewind. He felt that the dwarf had something evil locked inside him.

Arcweld said, "Let's burn, man. Push it. At this pace we're all gonna fall off."

Cleavewind turned his head, wobbling, holding his balance.

The helmet and visor hid most of his face but the dwarf didn't miss the quick twitch of his lips and knew he was scared.

Cleavewind looked over at Starhowl. The Helangle leader was staring straight ahead down the traverse. It was entering a shallow dip under what had once been a complex traffic flyover. Starhowl was trying to see as far ahead as he could.

"Huh?" asked Arcweld.

Cleavewind didn't answer. He re-stored the distance differential between himself and Arcweld by a brief acceleration, then continued to stare ahead, as did his leader.

Arcweld dropped back. A moment or two later he surged forward again, impatiently.

Zooming his motor, Cleavewind refused to run level with him.

The dwarf's parted lips spread wider into a grin. Out of the corners of his eyes he had seen the Helangles to right and left adjusting to keep the formation.

He tipped his bike into a swerving arc and with a flush of power surged back to the Conduc section.

"Move it." He made a rolling gesture at the leading driver. "Burn it. Gotta get through before sundown. Don't straggle."

The effect Arcweld was really after was the exact opposite of compactness. He wanted the Conducs separated from the Superom vehicle. The farther apart the component groups were when his plans broke, the better.

Aplan, the Caxitine chief, perched next to his driver, stared stonily ahead, ignoring the Helangle, but as soon as Arcweld had gone in smoke and noise the Caxitine turned and spoke quietly to the driver. They increased speed.

Arcweld soared past the Superoms' wagon, banked and came up beside it. One of the Caxitines was driving. It was a heavy vehicle and the stench of overheated cruze was strong.

The dwarf pretended not to see

Shevan but squinted at her through his 'dark visor. She was riding just behind the driver, next to Delbet. The giant seemed to be asleep.

"Don't bunch up—dig?" The dwarf cupped a hand and shouted at the driver. "Road surface busted up in places. Keep your distance."

With a swift glance over his shoulder which took in Shevan's small feet in their blue sandals, the dwarf laid his steede almost flat in a turn, slid through the lengthening gap between the Superom truck and the last Conduc wagon and roared toward the head of the column.

THE whole expedition was now within the stone jungle. Arcweld stared up at the buildings. There was one with a partly collapsed stone staircase. Then came a shallow curve in the road; then a structure that sprang out of a pedestrian level. It had hundreds of blind narrow eyes. Farther along the traverse, where there was a similar building, the highway would narrow and bore through a tunnel. The dwarf's memory smoldered.

Starhowl broke file and sped across the arc of scouts. He came up between Arcweld and Cleavewind.

"What in hell yawl on? Why break rank?"

"Pushing on," Arcweld shouted, competing with the noise. "Won't get through the traverse before sundown

yawl don't move it. Yawl want a night in the stone jungle?"

"I give orders. You, Cleavewind, get Kickstart. Road's busted. Scout it. Make sure it swings. Dig?"

"Narrows about five hundred meters from here," shouted Cleavewind. "Where me and Arcweld split." He was looking at his mindmap. "Through a tunnel, then—"

Arcweld scowled at the young Helangle.

"Drop to three in line," said Starhowl, "when we hit the tunnel. Keep apart. Goddam stone hasn't taken traffic like this for too long. We could shake it apart. Arcweld, you stay by me."

The dwarf's lips framed a curse that was inaudible above the noise.

Whatever he pretended it suited him well to ride with Starhowl over the next five hundred meters. He could hear his heart banging inside the black jerkin. The cracked and blank faces of the ruins enclosed and multiplied the sound of the procession and drowned everything else. The dwarf thought about the damp, colorless creatures waiting below the vibrating ground.

When Arcweld and Starhowl entered the tunnel the dwarf could see the two leading scouts as small silhouettes framed against a sunlit arch. A moment before the hated darkness swallowed him he also glanced backward. On the approach section of the

traverse, beyond the rest of the scout pack, came the Conduc file and the Superom truck with Karel's casket. If their spacing had been planned and measured mathematically it couldn't have been better.

The stone jungle gave absolutely no sign of life. For an instant doubt thrust a shaft into Arcweld's mind.

He entered the thunderous darkness of the tunnel. His lips tugged themselves back and he felt spittle flow. He aimed his steede at the bisected ellipse of light ahead of him and hoped that the attack wouldn't come too soon. His last look at the dead face of the stone jungle had bothered him. It had seemed like the face of an idiot who forgets everything immediately after having been told.

The lead scouts were scarcely halfway through the tunnel when the seeds of panic began to sprout. Arcweld spurred forward reflexively.

He thought he heard an angry cry, drowned immediately by the racket in the tunnel. It might have been Starhowl's protest at his indiscipline. The next moment the Helangle leader drew level with him again.

The dwarf chanced another glance back down the tunnel. Now the entry arch was also a bright ellipse—framed in it was the top of the Superom carrier.

Sweat was running into the corners of his eyes. The multiple pro-

cesses of his own body were all accelerating to meet the imminent climax.

It came.

Starhowl was shouting at him. Arcweld figured that the light came opening and closing on words that had no chance of being heard. The noise in the tunnel had increased and grown subtly different. There were new sounds in it.

The dwarf looked back again. He was just in time to see the bright eye of sunlight behind him blink. A voice at his ear shrieked for help toward the rear, but the dwarf's attention was riveted.

As he watched the eye blinked again, then closed finally. Through the haze of smoke from the vehicles in the tunnel came rolling an acrid smell of dust.

From the dwarf's left a bright shaft of light swung back through the clouds and confusion. Starhowl was invisible in the dust and smoke but Arcweld guessed that the light came from his steede. He must have guessed what was happening a moment before Arcweld. He had swung around and switched on his headlamp.

Some of the scouts in the following rank stopped, but those farther behind seemed to have panicked. They thrust forward too quickly and collided with their fellows ahead.

Starhowl's light, swinging drunk-

enly down the tunnel, showed a scene of confusion. The roof at the entry had caved in and the vanguard of the expedition was now cut off from the rear.

One of the leading Conduc vehicles—a heavy wagon—moving too fast in the dust cloud had hit a Helangle steede, swerved to avoid the unseated rider and collided with the tunnel wall. More of the scouts were pulling their bikes around and bringing their headlights to focus back toward the center of the disaster.

After a struggle Arcweld turned his own steede in the narrow space. In the roaring tumult he shuffled forward unseen. He rode up on the tailboard of the crashed Conduc wagon, switched on his lamp and tried to make out what was happening farther back.

Was the crisis already over? The dwarf's tongue curled out over his lips. He tasted dust, sweat.

Someone was howling loud Helangle orders. The light beams were being better directed. Three of them now made a composite cone. Almost on the instant it centered on the file of stalled vehicles and gesticulating figures in the tunnel there were loud screams. Arcweld, his mouth eating dust and horror, dimly saw a Conduc conveyance tilt, then roll backward into a great gaping crack that had opened in the tunnel floor.

The searchlights wavered, then picked up the Superom carrier. It now had a pile of fallen rubble behind it and a yawning hole before it—it stood entirely isolated from every other vehicle in the expedition.

In the next ten seconds everything happened that the dwarf had heard Keren tell the Submets must happen—but with nightmarish variations no one could have foreseen.

Up to now the tunnel cave-in might simply have been Starhowl's prediction coming true. It looked as if the unaccustomed traffic had shaken the long-disused traverse to pieces. But now groups of the under-world tribe rose like phantoms from the ruins. They swarmed in from all sides suddenly, as though exuded by cracks in the tunnel's fabric. Their silvery bodies wriggled and flashed in the searchlights. They surged about the casket carrier like hungry parasites.

MANY of the Helangles and Conduc had shut down their motors to reduce the smoke and noise. Now a strange hissing sound rose to smother the isolated cries from the far side of the chasm. A single chilling scream came as someone was dragged from the Superom vehicle. The victim's flailing arms disappeared into the hissing, heaving trough of silver.

More Submets swarmed from the hole in front of the carrier as the scream was drowned. Then several voices, Conduc and Helangle, began to shout. Fear, rage, belligerence were hurled at the ambush.

Starhowl shuffled his machine toward the lip of the crater. Several of the bolder Helangles joined him, shoving aside their injured comrades. More and more headlamps came on to illumine the scene. But the scouts could not bridge the gaping trench. Below them lay the wrecked Conduc vehicle, its wheels still slowly turning.

One of the Conduc pushed forward among the bikes. He brandished a heavy wrench. Breaking into a run, howling threats, he leaped from the edge of the trench. He was trying to show the others a way across, but he missed. The dark pit swallowed his shriek.

Crouched against the tunnel wall, Arcweld silently urged the troglodytes to get the ambush over. His gloved hands clenched the steering bar of his steede. He felt his heart racing.

The Helangles' stunted legs gave them no chance of trying to better the Conduc's heroics. Many jumped instead from their bikes and tore rocks from the edge of the crater, flung them at the hissing Submets on the other side.

The attack brought an answering

barrage of stones. Howls of pain and anger roared in the tunnel.

"The casket—the casket—" someone was bawling.

A stone ricocheting from the curved roof of the tunnel struck Arcweld in the mouth below the visor.

Now he had blood as well as sweat and dust to swallow. Cursing and spitting, he saw the upward surge and stagger of Submets as they dragged Karel's casket from its place.

But on the other side their silvery bodies were being flung sharply and aggressively aside. The dwarf saw his enemy rise titanically, sloughing off troglodytes like skin. He flung one, turning over and over, into the trench. He was fighting with bare hands, having been stripped of almost everything. In a moment he had disappeared again.

Arcweld bounced up and down, howling gleefully, tasting the rich salty blood of his enemy.

"Move it back. Clear the way, man—like move—" Starhowl's shouting came from far down the tunnel. The dwarf couldn't see what was happening but he heard a Conduc conveyance start up and begin to whine in reverse down the dark road.

On the island Karel's casket was being rushed on a silver stream through a new cavity that had appeared in the tunnel wall. A great wail of anger and frustration rocked

the tunnel as the loyal Thetans saw their sleeping god disappear. The Submets funneled after him, taking with them a limp blue bundle that had to be Shevan, also held aloft.

On the near side of the carrier its driver lay motionless. On the far side a seething mass of Submets was again ripped open and Delbet emerged. He flung one attacker against the wall, another onto the wagon. Weight of numbers felled him again and they began to drag him toward the aperture in the wall that must lead to the underworld.

"Go," bawled Starhowl. "Go get it back. Goddam you—move!"

The dwarf saw a Conduc vehicle loom to his right and back slowly toward the trench. The Helangle leader was going to try to bridge it.

The Submet attackers on the island had momentarily lost their hold on Delbet. Again he flung several of them aside with crushing force. He stood up. With a sweep of his arm he felled two more. Free for a second, he loped with his surprising agility toward the trench. He sprang.

To the watching dwarf it seemed that his enormous bulk hung for a long moment weightless above the pit.

Arcweld felt spittle gathering in his throat for a hoarse croak of triumph as the giant fell. But Delbet didn't fall. He seemed to kick on. He landed briefly on the crashed wagon,

sprang again at once and clutched and clung to the lip of the gulf where Thetan hands grabbed him and hauled him to safety.

The nightmare experience he had just survived and the violence of his struggle seemed to have drained the giant's strength to its dregs.

He kneeled within a semicircle of awe-stricken Thetans. None dared to touch him. His head hung down. His shoulders heaved as he fought for air. He groaned and whimpered. It was as if the passion of his experience had thrown some mechanism into reverse. He crouched there as though in memory of some remote ancestral creature at the genesis of his race in an unimaginable galaxy.

The Thetans finally discerned some coherence in the phrases that were torn out of him. "Shevan—Shev—an. Karel—it—Keren—"

Lurking at the rim of the group, Arcweld peered, snarled and hopped uneasily from leg to leg. This was wrong. This was a blow to cripple Keren's strategy. Delbet should have been safe in the underworld, fast in a sticky web of Submets with the others.

The dwarf stared back across the collapsed roadway and at the tunnel walls. Would they attack again? His mouth dribbled saliva and blood as he willed the walls to yawn and disgorge the stone jungle's pale dwellers to carry the giant away.

But they stayed blank. The idiot face again. In the new silence, slashed by light beams and acrid with dust and cruze smoke Delbet's agony continued. "Shevan—Shevvy—Karel—it was Keren—"

VIII

THE CONDUCS and Helangles sank their antagonisms in their common misadventure. They quickly formed an alliance to maintain order.

The dangers of the stone jungle, the shock of the ambush and the audacity of the theft of Karel's casket had terrified most of the Thetans. The expedition threatened to disintegrate into rabble. Only joint action by the Caxitine chiefs under Aplan and by the Helangles Starhowl and Smoketrail averted wholesale panic.

No one wanted to remain in the stone jungle. It was already afternoon and night would soon come down.

But Starhowl and Aplan argued fiercely that it would be best to remain where contact might still be made with the Submets and a chance generated of recovering the kidnaped Superom.

They came first to Delbet for leadership. After all, he looked, spoke and dressed like Superom. But it wasn't lost on the shrewd Helangles and thoughtful Conducs that

the giant was less powerful now that he was alone.

He seemed lost without Shevan. Ideas, if they generated behind his handsome, bewildered face, couldn't seem to break free. When the Thetans organized a hasty council meeting and sat in a circle about him, muttering and arguing among themselves, he stared blankly at them. When they asked him questions he shook his head or muttered unintelligible snatches of high Superom.

"Yawl Saivainte," growled Smoke-trail, addressing the council. "Yawl Zedward. Yawl got learning—huh? Okay, so beat your minds, longshirts. Now why would a bunch of insects do a thing like that to Superom? How yawl figure? How explain that kinda thing?"

Zedward, the dignified leader of the Saivainte, raised his bony shoulders in a shrug. He pulled his cloak more tightly to him as though to fend off the approaching night.

"My brothers and I have had little time for thought. We consider that at last a dark thing may be happening in our world. Many of our brothers are cut off from us. Thetis is large. There are many waters and many stone jungles. Communication has been bad for several hundred years and does not improve. We have predicted for some time that the continued interruption of intercourse among the tribes will result in the ultimate

failure of the Superom legend. We believe we may have seen the validity of our apprehensions demonstrated here today. The Submets, who have cut themselves off from the upper-world, have developed groups which are no longer conscious of the Superom nor acknowledge the creed."

"Huh?" grunted Starhowl. The Helangles all looked blank. Saivainte speech was too involved for them.

"But why did they identify and attack the Superom wagon?" snapped Floridian, one of the Conduc leaders. "The removal of the casket was deliberate and planned."

"We know that if they can catch anyone straying into their territory," said Zedward, "they hold him for ransom. Their way of life has become very savage. But it seems incredible that they would dare to ransom Superom. My brothers and I fear the worst. These low-morality creatures don't realize what they have done. They have seen the approach of an important caravan and they have identified and stolen away its most important element."

"Why don't yawl talk simple, man." Starhowl's black goggles looked like the eye sockets in a skull. "Me, Starhowl, I say those troglos knew what they were at. I say they got paid out by some other pack to lift Karel to Mandanar. Dig? What yawl say, Smoke?"

Smoketrail looked nonplused. Ap-

lan said, "What we ought to be discussing is how do we go about getting back Great Karel and Shevan Lady. If the casket is damaged—"

The Thetan leaders stared at one another, horrified. A murmur of concern spread out into the listening rows and died in shocked silence.

Suddenly the giant Delbet whom everyone had momentarily forgotten struck the air with his fist. "It was Keren. Somehow this was Keren's doing."

The violence of the outburst was so unexpected that several of the leaders jumped. Arcweld felt his guts contract and he bit his raw lip so that it bled again.

"How could Keren be involved?" Zedward questioned. "Spadox is several hundred kilometers behind us. Besides, would Keren risk fatal damage to the casket—harm to Great Karel?"

The giant's eyes glazed again. He stared at the fading sky. For a moment it seemed that he would retreat from the discussion, but he did speak. Not to the council but to something or someone inside his head. The watchers saw his lips move.

No one understood him.

KICKSTART, the ugly, broken-lipped Helangle from Seventy-Third City South, was sitting with his group nearby. Arcweld leaned to-

ward him and whispered, "That giant's blown his mind. What use is a Superom that dumb? We need Keren Sir here. We oughta send for Keren Sir. He'd get it together."

"Sanpardan," suggested a voice from the far side of the circle. "Those underworlders will trade almost anything for that. Maybe if we could get enough sanpardan—"

The speaker was one of the chubby little Agorans, thinking in terms of commerce as usual.

Kickstart said, "Arcweld here reckons we oughta send couriers to Keren. Get him here. He'd organize. Get it together. Pull out G.K. and Shevan Lady."

Arcweld shrank. He had expected Kickstart to arrogate the idea to himself, not to mention his name.

But the mention of Keren seemed to galvanize Delbet. He sprang up and stared around the circle with blazing eyes.

"No! I will tear this stone jungle apart stone by stone before I call my cousin. We must send a messenger into underworld. We must establish contact with these Submetropols. We must find out why they stole Great Karel and Shevan. We must pay their price. And we must get to Mandanar!"

The giant seemed to stare straight at Arcweld. The dwarf cowered. Only twelve hours earlier, on a hillside above the city, the sight of him

had made Delbet run away. Arcweld still didn't know why, but now it was his turn to be afraid. For the giant didn't even recognize him. His stare burned through the dwarf and disappeared into some distant nightmare. Arcweld felt trapped again. He was trapped because the innocent giant had escaped the Submet ambush. He was trapped between this titan who had struck him down before on the point of conquest and the compelling magic box hidden on his steede. The box would already be impatiently waiting for him to confirm success. Arcweld tried to conceal himself in the group of scouts as the giant stormed on.

Delbet's saintly face was contorted by the agony of emotions shackled inside him. The conference was being held on the traverse beyond the tunnel. He took a few uncertain steps back toward the darkness. He shouted something in high Superom.

Then, abruptly, he turned. In language the shivering listeners could understand he shouted, "I, Delbet, will lead you into the underworld. I will find Shevan Lady and Great Karel. I will hunt their captors down like—like the—" His eyes glazed again. He clutched his head, stared at the ring of Thetan faces as though he couldn't understand why they were there.

Zedward rose unhurriedly to his feet. He was almost as tall as a

Superom. He looked both splendid and dignified as he wrapped his cloak around him, walked to the young giant and took his arm. Aplan the orange-haired Caxitine joined him. Starhowl scuttled forward, too. Together the Thetans led Delbet back from the tunnel mouth.

The giant shook his head, "Shevvy—Shevan—used to tell me about what she found in the talk-tapes—something in the underworld that struck fear—"

"Delbet Sir, come—sit. Calm in all things." The Saivainte spoke with quiet compassion.

Arcweld turned to Smoketrail. "We got to get Keren—dig? If not we lose G.K. and the girl."

Smoketrail stared at the dwarf, but made no response. He looked at the group leading Delbet back to the council ring. Arcweld discovered that neither Smoketrail nor anyone else was taking particular notice of him.

If only those underworld blindfish had taken the giant. If only he could explain to the black box in the pannier and bring Keren from Spadorox . . .

Delbet had stopped again. His body became rigid. He seemed on the verge of a fit. He shouted up at the blind eyes of the city.

"Shevan said—the talk-tapes from the broken library told of the amber fog—a creature that terrified the Submets. It hunted them—"

The Caxitine and the Saivainte stared blankly at one another. Starhowl squatted in front of the giant, staring up at him, mouth open, any expression smothered under the death's-head helmet.

Arcweld had worked his way through the crowd to Kickstart's side. "Must call Keren. Giant's blown his mind. He's wrapped. Finished. Dig?"

Kickstart hardly moved. He was watching.

AN OLD Saivainte had risen from among his small tribal group. A patched cloak that had once been a magnificent historian's purple hung from his shoulders.

"I think I know what he means. Yes—the life form was recorded in the early ages of Thetis and in the making of the first stone jungles." He coughed, waited to see that he held his audience. "The Superom lost many of the subjects they trained to maintain the underworld. They fell prey to a primeval Thetan creature. It was drawn, as though hypnotized, to the short-wave radiation of the machines and came into conflict with the Submetropols in the process."

Delbet shook his arms free of the Thetan chiefs' hold. He strode toward the old historian. He bent down until his face was level with that of the old man.

"You know?" he breathed. "Yes—that's the story Shevvy had from the talk-tapes."

The old man continued. "The Superom could not afford the losses of their trained underworld creatures. They exterminated the attackers ruthlessly—the Thetan word for the creature was witawu. The amber fog." The old Saivainte frowned doubtfully. "Stories persist that in the more remote parts of Thetis hives of the witawu continue to exist. I have seen no proof, but—"

"Hold on there." A new voice broke into the silence. Pushing forward, Arcweld saw that the speaker was an Agoran. He was round-bodied, with the bald, bony skull and quick brown eyes of so many of his people. His name was Mutch. "Some of our lot go to the West Water to trade every fall. There's a Conduc group up there. Can't remember what they call themselves, but they live on the North Shore. Our men reckon they keep a queer sort of creature in hives. They get a kind of sticky sweet juice that they sell—"

The Saivainte historian nodded vigorously. The jigsaw of his memories found another piece that fitted. "Yes, the witawu used such a substance to feed their young and to cement their underworld hives."

Zedward said gravely, "Domesticated witawu? But what—"

Delbet spun around to face him.

"We must go at once to the West Water."

The Thetans looked at one another. Then their eyes turned again to the giant. In the silence that had suddenly come down Arcweld could almost hear the voice in the box screaming at him. Triumph had been so near and was now slipping beyond his power to hold it.

When yawl down, man, they 'all grind yawl. Everybody rides over your face . . .

A moment later the dwarf heard his name spoken. His thoughts were still wild with fear and linked the sound with the voice in the box. He crouched, ducked his head and hunched his shoulders as though to ward off a blow. Then, as he stared at the ground and nothing struck, he heard his name again. And this time it was not the voice in his head. This time he recognized the speaker as Starhowl.

"... Cleavewind, too," the Hel-angle was saying. "They have the mindmaps of this zone. Mutch will go with yawl, too—huh Agoran? Your people have contact with this Conduc outfit. Aplan, there oughta be a Conduc on the trip. Like proving it's for real and no sham. Dig?"

Arcweld shambled almost automatically into the bare center of the council circle. He still hadn't realized what was happening. Then he saw the giant staring at him.

FOR THE second time that day giant and dwarf confronted one another. Delbet's mouth opened. Arcweld knew that he was recognized this time.

"Yawl, Arcweld." Catching the giant's fixed stare, Starhowl had turned. "Yawl and Cleavewind go with Delbet Sir. Like fast. Mutch and one of the Conducs, too. How long it take yawl make the North Shore of West Water? Shed?"

Arcweld shook his head. "I don't have a mindmap—"

Starhowl roared, "What's hit yawl? Yawl and Cleavewind guide this task force real fast to North Shore. Delbet Sir will talk out the Conducs there. Yawl get back here with some help—"

Arcweld's lip was trickling blood again. He was leaning so hard on his knuckles that he could feel agonizing grains of stone biting into them from the roadway. He was conscious of hundreds of eyes turned on him.

Starhowl seemed on the point of exploding into action—Delbet's voice came just in time to save Arcweld his second flogging of the day.

"This dwarf will not refuse to save my cousin, Shevan?"

The silence was as frail as a bubble. Arcweld opened his mouth, but his voice broke in his throat.

"Well dwarf?" Delbet seemed suddenly enormous. Arcweld recalled the blow in the darkness. Rage

welled up in his chest, but the fear of loneliness among his own kind was stronger. His tongue stroked and the taste of the blood on his lip unlocked his vocal cords.

"I said I didn't have a mindmap," he growled. "I meant my mindmap's thin. Sure I'll go. I guess it'll take maybe one—two days." He continued to croak amends but, like a spider laboriously pitching the first thread of a web between twigs, he could intuit a new design for his vengeance behind his words.

Night was falling. From the night in his mind the dwarf looked down the traverse toward the North Shore and the long highways between it and the stone jungle. This Superom needed him the way the other had needed him. Out there a Helange would hold an advantage.

He stared up balefully at Delbet, but now the giant ignored him.

Delbet turned to the Thetan chiefs. For the moment he had taken on Superom authority. "Aplan, you will choose me one of your people. Perhaps we shall need an interpreter. These remote Conducs will not ever have seen a Superom and we must not terrify them with our mission or its purpose.

"Starhowl, see that this reluctant dwarf and the other you named are ready to leave in an hour. We can't lose any time—we must start out tonight.

"Zedward, my thanks to you and your people again. When we bring Great Karel to Mandanar safely and the secrets are revealed, you and the Saivainte shall have your rewards. My people don't ever forget such devotion."

Dusk had begun to creep along the traverse. The Thetans lit their lamps and many braziers of fire-ore to chase away the fearful darks of the stone jungle.

On the edge of the scout camp the dwarf lay next to his steede on the hard roadside. His insect-head helmet rested on the pannier, inside which he felt the unyielding box—the magic that demanded. He muttered and fidgeted.

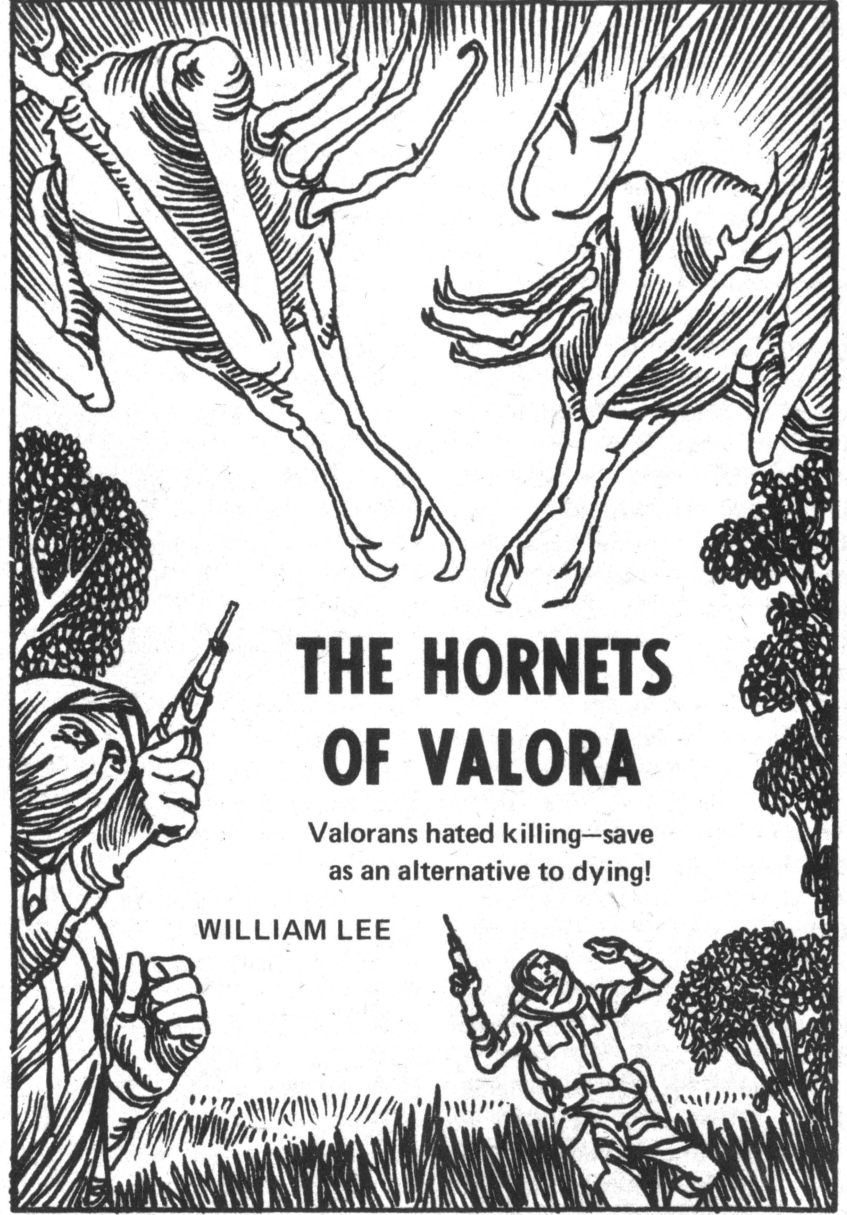
A hairy female scuttled up, yickered, fawned, and put her hand on him, misjudging the reason for his discomfort.

He struck her away and snarled after her until she had disappeared, growling and whimpering, among the tents.

Arcweld stared up at the sky. In a half-hour they would be moving through the night toward the West Water.

Tenderly his tongue explored the healing lip. It still had a raw metallic taste. Around and around went his thoughts, painfully drawing out thread after thread, spinning and spinning.

TO BE CONCLUDED



THE HORNETS OF VALORA

Valorans hated killing—save
as an alternative to dying!

WILLIAM LEE

I

MOST of the staff of Exploratory Ship E-12 had assembled in the general room to hear officially what they had already learned in part via the grapevine. Captain Fell and Dr. Latham came in last and threaded their way toward the small dais.

The captain let his eyes slide over the room, making a quick head count. Then he said, "You all know something about our present unusual situation. We came out of warp for a routine position check and quite accidentally intercepted a repeating radio message in real space. It was an appeal for help from the planet Valora. The message was weak and full of noise, but we cleaned it up and were able to read it. It described a plague of insects, specifically hornets. Semantic analysis indicated that the problem was real and urgent. At least the sender considered it so, though it obviously made little sense for him to be reporting an emergency the nearest trading planet wouldn't learn about for years, if

ever. However, he was lucky—we happened along. I elected to deviate from our current assignment. We reentered warp and, with only one adjustment, arrived in an eight-to-one orbit around Valora, a satisfactory piece of astrogation. We are now making further adjustments to a nearly circular orbit at roughly fifty thousand kilometers. Four and a half hours from now we will put down a landing craft under the command of Sam Lacey. Dr. Latham will give you the rest of the story as far as we know it and will outline our plans."

Latham rattled his pipe between his teeth and said, "Those of you who have lived on Earth will know that hornets and wasps are Terran insects ranging in size from nearly microscopic to several centimeters in length. There are, as I recall, some thousands of species, many of which can inflict painful stings. From the note of hysteria implicit in the call for help, it would seem that Valora's hornets are of a particularly unpleasant type. Since the planet has been settled for twenty-one uneventful years it is unlikely that these could in fact be Terran hornets, accidentally transplanted and only now becoming a menace. It is more probable that they are a native species. How

they could have built up to plague levels without having been previously reported, we do not know.

"We probably cannot provide any direct aid. If insecticides or biological predators are needed we can perhaps suggest methods or agents and pass the word to the nearer trading planets. Our immediate job will be to get some detailed knowledge of the problem.

"I could play you our tapes on Valora, but there would be a lot of nonpertinent detail, so I'll high-spot. The planet was explored by one of our ships some thirty years ago and was recommended for occupation by an agricultural society. It had a mild climate, no volcanic activity, adequate rainfall, plant life that could nourish Terran animals and fertile soil that would be receptive to Terran crops—it was, in short, suitable for settlement with minimum risk. There were numerous small animals and a few larger herbivores somewhat like Terran deer—none higher than point sixteen on the intelligence scale.

"On the other hand, Valora was virtually devoid of heavy elements. It was recognized that she could develop no important industry in the foreseeable future and could hardly hope to join the trading planets. The Interworld

organization therefore has furnished—gratis—isotopic power-packs, drugs fliers, communication equipment and such other items as are needed to sustain a simple society. Otherwise she has been left more or less alone. She has no interplanetary ships and no subspace communication facilities. Her present population is no more than a few hundred thousand. In many respects she is a rather primitive planet. It may well be that Interworld regards her as something of a social experiment.

"Settlement was accomplished in the year two thousand forty-six, after a considerable delay. The initial exploration had revealed that, three years earlier, there had been a planetwide epidemic among the larger herbivores. There were, as I said, few living specimens and many skeletal remains were found. The normal period for microbiological studies was therefore extended. Some moderately pathogenic organisms were found and both settlers and livestock received appropriate immunization.

"Now—as soon as we're in stable orbit Sam Lacey will set down with four exploratory teams of five men each. Each team will include one military man with experience in a variety of real and

simulated extraterrestrial stress situations, a paramedical technician and a zoologist. Sam will pick the other men he wants. You will, of course, make a number of contacts with Valoran settlers and to the extent possible you will look at various ecological environments. Bring back first and even second-hand reports on the distribution and behavior patterns of the insects and the steps taken to combat them. Equally important, bring back some hornets, dead if necessary, alive if possible. You will have nets and cages. What else should be covered, Sam?"

"We don't know much about the problem," Sam observed. "We'll be playing it by ear. I've already made team selections and I'll stick the list on the bulletin board, with apologies to all those left out. We're issuing regular temperate climate gear with fitted gloves and close-weave headnets. Anybody with any special knowledge of hornets, come and see me. Regulation weapons will be carried, though we can't think there'll be any use for them. Our two psychologists will be going along, with the expectation that two teams can be set down close to towns or villages. The other two teams will take a look at unsettled areas.

"As nearly as you can plan such things in advance, we'll figure to rendezvous with each team after four or five ship's hours. I'll have a chance to make a low-level surveillance of a good deal of territory and maybe talk to a few people. I'll report to the ship once each orbit. We'll aim to have a complete enough picture to be back aboard in fourteen hours at the outside."

"SAM LACEY here. Do you read me? Okay, get it on tape. I'll give you as much as I can while you're over my horizon. Things are a hell of a mess down here. From the contacts I've made directly, the planet is approaching a state of panic.

"No problem putting down the teams. First one close to a town in a big river valley. Second in a farming community, partly wooded terrain. Third near a southern hemisphere seacoast with scrub growth and marshes. Fourth on a high, rather arid plateau—cattle country. Since then I've made stops at two towns and talked to a dozen or so people, all badly scared.

"We were dead wrong about the hornets. What they have is nothing like any Terran bug. They stand about half to three-quarters

of a meter high and look like a football on legs. I was able to examine a dead one. Somebody had broken its legs with a cudgel. They die when that happens—or if their bodies get punctured. You'll get specimens when we're back aboard.

"Some newscaster started calling them hornets and the name caught on. They do sting and they sting to kill. There have been a lot of human deaths—my guess is several hundred to a thousand—not to mention animals, cattle and goats mostly. Even if this mess can be cleaned up fast, Valora will need help to get reestablished.

"The hornets have apparently been living underground—deep down where nobody ever discovered them—since before the settlers arrived. Somewhere I think I've heard of an Earth-type bug that lives underground for seventeen years, then comes out and flies for a season. But these things don't fly—they jump. The body, the one I examined, was like a bladder covered with thin leathery skin. Inside they seem to have a backbone and a few other bones. They have these two legs, jointed so they can jump, and two upper appendages I guess you could call arms, with sharp hooks on the ends. The arms and legs are tough

and sinewy. Then there are four smaller appendages on each side of the body which may be used for digging when they're in the ground. They have no heads as such, unless you want to figure the mouth area as a head. The mouth is circular, about three centimeters across and ringed with nasty-looking teeth. When they attack they come out of a crouch, launch themselves in a shallow trajectory, dig their hooks into whatever they hit and shove a sting—like a spring-propelled hypodermic needle—out of their mouths. The one I saw had a sting six centimeters long. When that hits you you've had it. They haven't any eyes—or none that I could see. They jump about five to ten meters, depending on who's telling it. As soon as their victim is dead they start feeding and all the hornets in the neighborhood get the message somehow and come rushing up to get in on the meal. This I don't want to watch.

"There were only a few hornets at first, but the numbers have been building up fast. Some places haven't had any at all, while a few kilometers away communities have been reduced to a few survivors staying locked up in their homes. There isn't any food emergency—not yet. Food distribution is all short haul and most

houses even out in the country have pumps and piped water.

"There's just about no central government here. Every town of more than a couple of hundred people has a mayor. The mayors are supposed to form a sort of general council, only it seems they rarely get together. News dissemination is spotty and unreliable. No visual telecasting, but every family has a radio and news is broadcast three times a day. Trouble is there are no paid newsgatherers. The stations broadcast whatever news items are brought in to them and half the items are wrong. So nobody knows how many people have died. Nobody knows whether the hornets are still on the increase. Nobody knows who could have authorized that crazy broadcast about hornets.

"Maybe some other planet would have been able to put up a better defense, but it seems the Valoran colony was recruited from one of those sects that doesn't believe in killing. From the way they tell it, there isn't one man in a hundred who has a gun and knows how to use it. Hell, they're even vegetarians. They've changed their minds about killing when it comes to hornets, but they're not very good at it.

"Right now I'm drifting on automatic hover at about twenty

meters. A minute ago I could see a swarm of the hornets and a collection of holes in the ground where they must have come out. They're said to be white when they emerge and then to turn red. These were reddish.

"I'm worried about our teams, naturally. They were put down with the idea that they'd be looking for insects of a reasonable size. Their collecting gear won't be worth a damn and I don't think their fatigues will give them much protection. Of course they have their lasers and rifles. I'm going back to the pick-up points ahead of schedule. Hope they've stayed close to their beepers.

"Your echo is fading—so that ends this message. I'll have some of the men aboard by your next trip around. Lacey signing off."

II

JOHAN WRIGHT shifted in bed and muttered a profanity. The heaped pillows were a poor excuse for sitting up. He had promised, more or less, to stay put until his wife returned, but then, she had never had a cast on her leg and didn't know what it was like. The plaster extended from his instep to halfway up his thigh. It didn't hurt any more. The doctor must have done a good job setting the

breaks, but the leg itched like mad. He could get his fingers under the top of the cast and scratch, but only for a little distance. With extra caution, in view of the promise, he swung crosswise of the bed, lowered the unbending leg to the floor and tried the unfamiliar crutches one way and another until he could lift himself to his feet.

Elizabeth ought to be back from town soon. She was some overdue already, which meant she had done other errands or that she was having trouble getting a powerpack to fit their old-fashioned radio. It hadn't worked for weeks, but it was only now when he had to lie around like a damned useless lump that he missed it.

He inched his way carefully across the floor. It wasn't the first time he had navigated on the crutches, but other times Elizabeth had been standing by ready to grab an arm. It went very well. He wanted to be on the porch, sitting in the big chair with his leg propped up on another, where he could look out over the orchard. Boughs were beginning to bend down with the weight of the fruit, which would be coloring up shortly. Soon he must set dates for the pickers.

The porch itself was in shade but golden sunlight filled the narrow valley. The scene was much

like the apple country back in Oregon, a place and time he could remember vividly. Still in his middle years, Wright was nevertheless one of the older people on Valora.

The big chair wasn't as comfortable as he had expected, but he settled down and pondered how best to go about harvesting while he himself was out of commission. From time to time he squinted toward the gap in the hills, where Elizabeth's flier would be appearing.

He caught a small movement from the tail of his eye and brought his gaze around. What he saw was utterly incredible and loathsome. A thing was standing a few meters away and watching him intently. At least it gave the impression of watching, of riveting its attention upon him, although he could not see its eyes. Its globular body was a dirty white in color. It stood on jointed legs and held jointed—arms?—away from its sides as if to maintain balance. He had never seen or heard tell of anything like it, but he knew from deep instinct that it was inimical and dangerous. He threw his weight forward and scabbled on the floor for his crutches. As he did, the ugly beast crouched and launched itself in a shallow leap directly at him. In

clumsy panic he was still trying to gather himself when the thing hit him at waist height and instantly dug claws through the thin fabric of his shirt and into his flesh. He gave up the crutches and beat at it futilely with both hands. The chair crashed to one side and he fell. Terror and despair filled him for a moment—then there was no room in him for anything but pain. A sharp proboscis, tough as whalebone, had been plunged deep into his abdomen. The puncture of vital parts was trivial. The flood of nerve poison coursing through his blood carried agony to every fiber of his being. Twice his hands beat against the floor before he lost even that semblance of muscle control. The circular rim of teeth that surrounded the proboscis began a semi-independent motion, tearing at his flesh as the hornet started to feed. In a minute it was joined by two others.

Elizabeth's flier came in through the break in the hills and settled toward the landing area.

THERE was only one breed of dog on Valora, a sort of rough-haired shepherd with wide skull, respectable intelligence and a degree of independence engendered by life on the new planet. The first ones had been brought out

at not inconsiderable cost by original settlers who felt the need for an additional tie with the Earth they were abandoning. For a time the dogs had belonged to households, but many had taken to the wilds and formed into packs. They were friendly to man, for that was their heritage, but they had become standoffish. They lived by hunting small animals—only rarely did there appear a rogue which would pull down sheep. Many farm dogs also supplemented unexciting, vegetarian table scraps by a daily hunt.

Between Wally Craig and his dog, Tiger, there existed those bonds of understanding and affection which, curiously, can unite these two different species.

Some word about the ugly little animals that here and there were clawing their way up through Valora's friable soil had found a place on the newscasts over the past days. The reports were a matter for curiosity rather than alarm. The notion that bugs could be dangerous was regarded as the product of somebody's imagination. In any case, none of the creatures had been sighted anywhere near Riverside.

It was taken as a matter of course during summer vacation that Wally should wander off somewhere immediately after

breakfast. Without definite plan he turned his steps down the length of the main road and on toward the river where his contemporaries would be gathering. Halfway there Tiger, ranging along the edge of the woods, discovered something that merited instant attention and gave voice. His bark didn't indicate any of the kinds of small game he often scared up and sometimes caught. He sounded querulous and alarmed. Wally whistled and when Tiger failed to come he decided to investigate. The dog was standing at the edge of the scrub growth facing into the deeper wood, his muzzle elevated to sample the breeze, his lower jaw quivering a little in excitement. He was clearly alarmed by something and took to whining. Wally gave him a word of reassurance and moved quietly into the green shade of the trees.

The hornet's body was so dark a red as to be nearly black, and in the dense shade it was nearly invisible. Wally was within five meters of the thing before he saw it. Tiger, his sight assisted by a keen nose, saw it a fraction of a second sooner. They stood side by side. Faced by this fearful unknown, Wally experienced shock but had not yet galvanized his muscles to turn and run.

The hornet leaped. Its limited sensory system, primarily heat-seeking, failed to detect a small tree limb. It struck the limb, dropped and landed on legs already bent for a second leap. The way was clear then and it launched itself again toward the larger quarry. Wally's mind shouted *run* but he had not even made a move when Tiger and the hornet collided in midair. Tiger's jaws closed on the globular body and crushed, while the horrid spine thrust deep into his throat.

Once out of the shadow of the trees, Wally halted his headlong flight, looked back and realized that he was alone. He called in a tremulous voice—then, forcing every step, slowly made his way back. Tiger was dead. Wally looked into the nearly closed eyes and could be sure of that. He turned and ran again and did not stop until he burst, panting and sobbing and holding the stitch in his side, into his own home.

FOR a generation or two most newly settled planets adhere to a vigorous work ethic by virtue of necessity, if not universal inclination. But there will always be some exceptions, some individuals who remain convinced that their world owes them a living.

Jacob Pryne was a supremely

lazy man. He was also an incurable drunk who resisted all efforts to rehabilitate and clean him up. How he had ever contrived to pass the colonization screening tests had remained a matter for discussion for two decades. He lived alone in an incredibly dirty shack on the outskirts of the farm community of Barford, where he brewed a fairly drinkable beer and made from it a distilled liquor he proudly called brandy. His food requirements were not great and were met by begging or occasionally stealing. Old Jake was not, however, a serious nuisance. He was tolerated and let alone.

Even in the gentle climate of that latitude he had in recent years always felt cold and his closest approach to work was the maintaining of a constant supply of firewood—windfalls from the forest and waste from the nearby lumber mill—so that there was always a fire in his fireplace and a stock of fuel for his still. If he was sometimes lonely he did not notice it. There was always another drink at hand to take the place of a friend.

The tinkle of drops of white lightning from the end of the condenser and the crackling of the fire made a familiar background of sound and, if the loosely hinged

door creaked as it swung open, he did not hear it. Only when he felt the touch of a cool breeze on his neck did he gather himself and twist around to see who might have entered.

The hornet that had found his unlocked door stood quite still, its thermotropic sense confused by the sources of heat in the stuffy room. "Christ," Jake said aloud, "I got 'em. I got 'em bad." In addition to the devil or whatever it was that menaced him, he was suddenly dizzy and began to get the shakes. If the dizzies kept on he would very likely fall down and it would be bad to fall down with that thing right there ready to get him. He pushed himself erect, then had to hold to the back of the chair for a minute till he was steadier. When he let go he fell down after all and one hand went right into the fireplace. He screamed at the pain, then forgot it and threw a great, burning brand at the devil. It missed and the devil jumped and hit the still. Now there was nothing to do but get out of here. Jake began the journey on hands and knees. He didn't get far.

Volunteer fire fighters did their best with the blaze, but the structure was matchwood. They were lucky to keep it from spreading.

There had been no hornets in

the area. Even when, late the following day, they were able to rake through the ashes and rubble and discovered old Jake's body no one recognized that he had been Barford's first victim.

EZRACOMFORT said, looking at his daughter Amanda, "Somebody's got to fetch back the goats."

Amanda continued to spoon cereal determinedly and did not look up.

"Your mother's housecleaning and I've got to go on plowing the fallow land. It looks as if you're elected."

"I hate goats," Amanda stated.

"You don't have to like them. Just bring them back," her father said. "They're up the hill beyond the waterfall. You can go over to Polly's afterward and you can stay there to lunch if your mother says so and they'll have you."

Mollified to a degree, Amanda spread jam on buttered bread. Mrs. Comfort gazed considerably at her tall young daughter and regretted the decision she and her husband had reached the night before, after the late newscast—to keep their lives as normal as possible in spite of the rather frightening tenor of the news. The things they were calling horrors were being reported all over

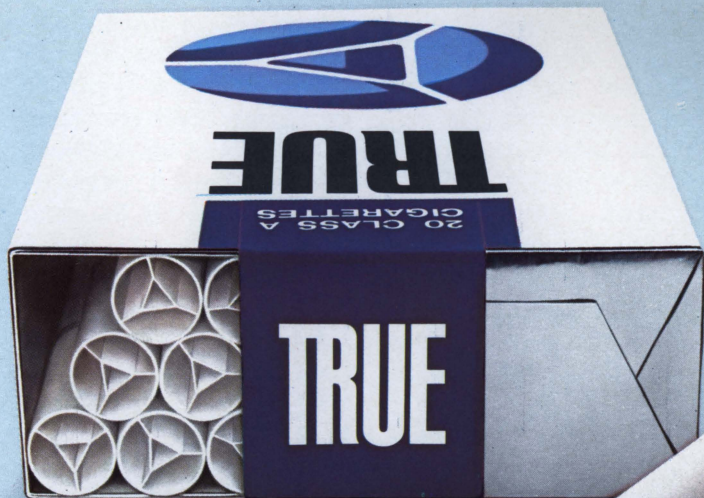
the southern continents, but there were only scattered reports in the north, from the great valleys for the most part. Here in the highlands, which sloped upward to the divide, there had been only a few stories and these perhaps untrue. Amanda was quite old enough to understand the risk—if in fact there was any—and to keep a watchful eye for anything unusual. With conscious effort she forbore to voice any additional warning as the girl took her leave.

Amanda pushed out her lower lip to remind herself that she was feeling aggrieved, but the day was altogether too pleasant for her to sustain the mood. The sun shone. She'd be spending most of the day at Polly's. In two weeks she'd be going away to school entirely on her own and with a lot of new clothes.

She reached the little plateau above the falls, a spot where the goats liked to go to graze, maybe for the taste of the grass, more likely for pure contrariness.

The animals were there but they were behaving very oddly, clustered around the billy in an uneasy little knot at the top of the path leading down to the farm, seeming reluctant either to stay or go. Something had frightened them.

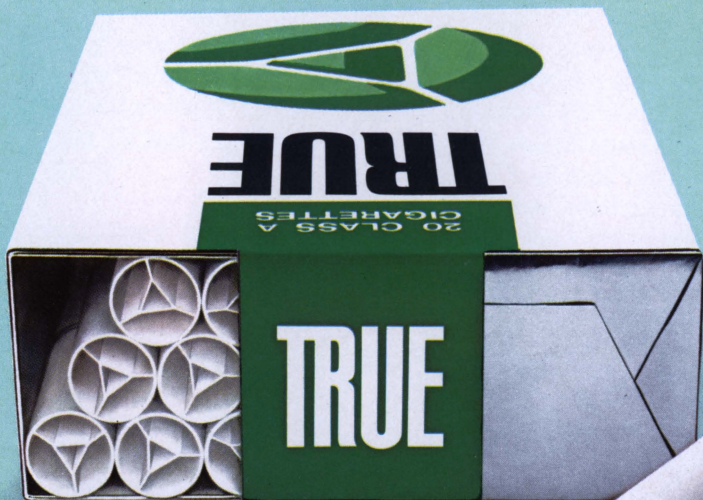
She called them once, then a second time, and made encouraging



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noises before they consented to enter the narrow pathway, then they crowded after her, mincing on their hooves as if trying to tip-toe. It was only when she saw the dead nanny that she knew there had been a casualty. It lay on its side a few meters off the path. She approached it cautiously and saw with revulsion that its belly had been torn open. Something protruded from it, something that was moving. She backed off a few steps, then turned and ran with the goats clattering after her. Half-way home she slowed to a jog. Once, looking back over her shoulder, she tripped and fell, scrambled up and trotted on. What she had to tell was important. "Mother," she shouted as she burst through the open door of her home.

In that moment the sheltered, happy life that was all she had ever known came to an end. Her father's body lay in convulsed rigidity just inside the doorway—her mother's across the table on which the last of the breakfast things were still scattered. There were two hornets. They were feeding.

Amanda stood unmoving and silent and did not know that she bit one hand to draw blood. She did not approach the bodies. Instead, after a minute, she turned slowly and left the house.

Left to their own resources and with the gate wide open, the goats had invaded the kitchen garden and were fast forgetting their recent fright. At the foot of the garden a narrow road, no more than a track for farm machinery, ran east and west. Either direction would have brought her to the homes of friends. She crossed it unseeing and walked through humpy meadowland, a wavering course toward no destination. She shed no tears and made no sound and stared vacantly ahead.

III

GARTH wore lieutenant's bars and other minor markings on his clothing set him apart from his civilian colleagues. He was in nominal command of the fourth team to be set down. He considered himself to be tougher, abler and much more practical than any civilian specialist and, outside of a small coterie, he was mildly disliked by most of his shipmates.

The men clambered out of the hatch of the landing craft, watched it lift and disappear over the horizon and looked around at the empty landscape. The rising slope on which they stood was grass-covered, punctuated with stands of something like gorse. In the dis-

tance were several farm buildings or the like and there were a few cattle to be seen, but no human inhabitants. The air was good. Garth and his team were visiting a settled planet where for a good while men had coexisted peaceably with the native life forms. They could go relatively unencumbered, wearing fatigues and carrying minimal weaponry—rifles and lasers, a half-dozen apiece of light grenades. It wasn't like an initial exploration, where you could almost bet on the unexpected.

"Okay," Garth announced. "Here's what we're going to do. We're looking for bugs and they probably sting something fierce, so watch yourselves. Get your headnets on and keep them on—and your gloves, too. If you do get stung Beale will have shots of atropine and oxime in his aid kit. Mattison will carry the collecting cages and you other two will be ready with the nets. Now we're going to spread out into a line and walk toward those low cliffs over there. Anybody sees anything like a bug lets out a yell."

Mattison, the team's zoologist, said, "Be nice if we had some idea what we were looking for. They said a plague of hornets, which suggests that they fly in swarms. If we see any at all we may see a lot of them."

Armed thus with misconceptions, they formed a ragged line and started toward the cliffs.

Rossberg was a botanist by training and by enthusiasm for any and all extraterrestrial plants. Even so, the gorselike growths seemed not very exciting and he was willing to put off a close examination of them. When, however, he glimpsed what was surely a bloom of fruiting body, spectacularly red against the dark green foliage, he yielded to temptation and made off on a diagonal to investigate. Up close, it seemed not to be a part of the gorse after all, but to be standing alone on the top of a thick stem. He was actually bending over it when it struck.

The fabric of his fatigues was designed to resist rain, wind, mildew, snags and other natural phenomena, but it was far from being body armor and it offered no resistance to the thrust of the chitinous stiletto. The sting penetrated deep into his side. Rossberg shrieked once as he fell, before the toxin reached and sealed his throat.

He was dead when the others reached him. At least he did not breathe and Beale, the paramedic, found no pulse in his neck. He was lying on his side in such a fashion as to hide the hornet. They had to

roll him over before they saw it. Garth felt disgust but for the moment no fear as he tore the thing violently and quite uselessly from Rossberg's body. The proboscis pulled out easily. The hooks at the ends of the arms or legs or whatever you called them clung tenaciously and, when they tore free, waved frantically in the air. Garth stared for a second at the pulsating body, then threw it from him awkwardly. It landed not faraway, scrambled like a headless chicken, got up onto its sinewy, jointed legs, then toppled and lay still. Its body was leaking fluid, ruptured where Garth had clutched it.

Corley made a sound that was something like a laugh, then hurriedly snatched away his headnet and vomited on the ground.

"Jesus," said Beale. "Do you suppose that's one of the things they sent us to look for?"

Garth was sweating and he stared down at his gloved hands as if they bore some contamination, but he gathered himself. "Come on, Mattison, this is your business. Let's take a look at it."

Except for Corley, who sat huddled and miserable, they followed Garth reluctantly and looked down at the hornet. Garth and Beale had drawn their lasers, but the creature had stopped moving,

its body collapsing slowly and wrinkling like a leaking balloon. They stood in numbed silence for a minute before Garth, his mouth twisted in a grimace, began to cut the body into smoking fragments.

"That was a damn fool thing to do," said Mattison. "We ought to have taken it back to the ship for dissection. It may be hard to get another one."

"Screw your dissection," Garth told him. "It killed Rossberg. And if these are the bugs there'll be others."

Mattison was still angered at the destruction of a specimen. "You've probably used up better than a quarter of your charge. Lasers are meant for defense in an emergency."

"Shove it," said the lieutenant, who knew he was in the wrong and didn't propose to hear any more about it from Mattison. "Now here's what we're going to do. I'm going to leave the radio on beep, here beside Rossberg, but we're not going to get far away and we're going to stay close together."

"There's another of them," Beale said, pointing. "Two more. Hey, Corley, better get up on your feet. My God, look how those things jump. How do you go about shooting something like that?"

IN PLACE of an answer, Garth shot one. He was a first-class marksman and instinctively preferred to use the longer range rifle. "Got the bastard."

"But there are four of them now, not five, all downhill from us. Coming this way."

There were more shots, some successful. The hornets made fair targets in the brief intervals between leaps. By squeezing off bursts of several shots the men could compensate for lack of accuracy. But hornets continued to appear, coming out from beyond a low hillock and progressing up-grade in a series of irregular jumps that seemed clumsy and uncertain—as if the jumpers were totally mindless—but closed the distance to their prey with terrifying rapidity.

With no intent to give ground, each man stepped back a pace or two after every shot. Corley first, then the others, began a sort of organized retreat—fire, turn, run and scramble a few meters, turn and fire again. There were now twenty or thirty hornets in sight. Presently there was no more pretense of organization. They simply ran, while the hornets inexorably closed the gap. The flight came to an end at the face of the cliffs, which might have been scalable if the men had been

sufficiently expert climbers and had had the right equipment and time to explore. Without these advantages they could only stand and kill or be killed.

Corley and Beale died quickly because they mistakenly tried to use their rifles even after they were partly surrounded. Garth and Mattison fell back on laser pistols with which they could slash across the huddle of attackers—and after a time there could be no doubt that they had won the skirmish. The last few hornets in sight were far down the hill and seemed not to detect the humans' presence. At least they were not approaching.

Mattison stumbled the few steps toward the spot where the bodies lay nearly side by side and automatically exterminated a still moving hornet. "Three of us," he said. "Three of us gone. My God." Tears were running down his face.

Garth stared at him angrily. "We'll take the guns and lasers. Come on."

"Where to?"

"Maybe we can find a way up the cliff. It ought to be safer up there."

They found no route to the top of the cliffs. They did, after some fifteen minutes of walking, come upon a shelter of sorts, a three-sided structure of planks and logs,

evidently designed to shelter cattle in bad weather. It offered shielding and would allow them to concentrate on defending the one open side that faced downhill and toward the distant farm. There were no hornets to be seen.

They laid down their burden of weapons. Garth squatted and arranged them in a row. There was plenty of ammunition for the rifles, but one of the lasers was completely discharged and the best of the others showed no more than half a charge. He grunted.

“Know how long we’ve been down here? Close to two hours. Three to go before we get picked up. Maybe more. I don’t know how long the day is here, but looking at the sun I’d say it’d be dark long before then. The LC will come down by the beeper—then we’ll have to use flares to show them where we are.”

Mattison sat down on the packed dirt floor. “Let me see the binoculars a minute.” He swept them back and forth across the valley. “We must have been put down close to a colony of the things. There aren’t as many as we might have thought, but I can see a few. I suspect they’re thermotropic.”

“Thermotropic?”

“That means they detect and are attracted by our body heat. I didn’t get a good look, but my im-

pression is that they have nothing like eyes. That doesn’t mean they couldn’t perceive light. They may act differently at night. If it’s cooler after dark we may stand out more from the general thermal background and they’ll detect us from a greater distance.”

“You’re a big help. Take a look over there. I think somebody is coming. He’s just coming out from behind that little hill.”

Mattison used the glasses. “It’s not a he—it’s a she. Looks from here like a young girl.”

They watched in silence for a time as she approached. Her path was erratic, sometimes nearly doubling back, but she was making slow progress up the hill.

“Look,” Mattison said. “She’s going to come pretty close to where those two hornets are.”

“Yeah. What’s the matter with the girl? Is she blind?”

“Don’t know. Listen, I’m going down to get her. Keep me covered.” He rose to his feet, seized a laser and set off at as rapid a pace as possible. Garth dropped to prone position, shouldered a rifle and fixed the sights on the nearer hornet. It was standing motionless. The second made a leap that brought it closer to Mattison’s path. He saw and circled away from it, but kept going. Mattison was showing more stuff than

Garth had credited him with.

AMANDA looked vacantly at the man who had grasped her arm. She tried to pull away, but the grip tightened. He was speaking to her, trying to tell her something. She made another half-hearted attempt to go away from him, but he wouldn't let her go. Finally she went in the direction he was taking her. He was making her hurry.

Amanda was not aware of fatigue or pain. She had fallen often. Her hands and knees were bruised and cut, her face was streaked with dirt. One shoe was gone. She did not know the disaster that had fallen upon her—that she was fleeing from an intolerable horror. She did not even know that she was Amanda Comfort. Her state of shock was still merciful to her. There was a sudden sharp noise. On that nearly weaponless world she did not recognize it as a rifle shot. But off to one side something was bouncing and flopping around, something red. She looked at it and screamed, the first sound she had made since leaving her own front door. The man held her hard and made her run.

“Nice shooting,” Mattison said. “Thanks. They don't seem to have

any sense of sight or hearing. The one never moved when you got the other.”

“You're welcome,” Garth answered inanely. “One more hop and he'd have reached you. What's the matter with her?”

“Nothing obvious, physically that is. I think she's in a state of shock and one foot is gashed. She's been leaving bloody footprints. Sit down, baby, and let me look at that foot. Yes, we'd better get some antiseptic and a bandage on it.”

“We haven't got the aid kit. We left it with Beale. With Beale's body, I mean.”

“I'll get it,” Mattison said.

“No, I'll go. Maybe I can make it a little faster. You'd better stay with the girl.”

They turned and looked at Amanda, who was sitting with one leg still extended—as she had been left.

“Poor kid,” said Garth. “Yeah, you stay. I'm going to take this laser—it has the most charge. You didn't know it, but the one you grabbed up was empty.”

Mattison looked faintly sick. “My God—I thought I had a weapon in my hand. I'm glad I didn't know.”

The fact that Mattison had gone for the girl and was willing to get the aid kit made it quite essential

for Garth to go, to sustain his belief that as a military man he was automatically the better qualified. He felt like a military man until he was within sight of the bodies.

There were no living hornets, but the site had clearly been visited in the interval. Beale and Corley were not as they had been. Their clothing now lay flat to the ground, looking quite empty. Garth could see the aid kit flung a little distance from Beale's body and he wanted very much not to approach those empty garments. He stood for a minute or two leaning against an outcrop of rock while sweat trickled down his forehead and stung one eye, before he could take the remaining steps. He tried not to look down at the tattered clothing and the taut mummy skull that still remained of Beale, but he could not avoid seeing.

He went most of the way back to the cattle shelter at a jog and only stopped and rested because he must not arrive out of breath.

Mattison shook his head in answer to Garth's look of inquiry. "Nothing. There are a few hornets out there beyond where we picked her up, but they're not coming this way. Just moving around aimlessly."

"How's the youngster doing?"

"Some better, I think. Her eyes have followed me whenever I moved around. Let's take care of the foot."

AMANDA winced at the probing of the cut and the bite of the antiseptic and seemed to look on with a beginning of understanding as they applied bandages and sprayed on a layer of plastic heavy enough to be walked on.

When they had finished Garth turned away and stared across the valley. The sun was just touching the horizon in the direction the settled planets call the west.

"Going to be dark soon."

"How many flares have we?" Mattison asked.

Garth patted his hip. "Four. About twenty minutes' worth."

Mattison said, "I suggest we throw the first one as far as we can and see what happens. If those devils are thermotropic they may be phototropic as well, with or without eyes."

"Attracted by light?"

"Yes. We don't want dozens of them descending on us."

"I'll say we don't. We'll do better than throw it. I'll go off a hundred meters or so, light it and run back. That sun's going down awful fast. Well, hello."

Amanda had risen and was standing between the two men.

Tears coursed down her face, but she made no sound. Mattison put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

"Let it out, baby. Let it out."

She turned, buried her face on his shoulder and blubbered, clutching his shirt with desperate fingers. When at length her sobs subsided, Mattison said, "You'd better tell us about it. What happened, baby?"

After a couple of tries she found her voice. "They killed my father and mother."

"The hornets?"

"Those things. They killed father and mother. Oh, God. What will I do? What will I ever do? The things killed them and they were—" She broke into renewed sobbing.

"What's your name?"

"What?"

"Tell us what your name is."

"Oh, Amanda."

"Do you have any friends nearby?"

"Any friends? Yes, Polly. She's my best friend. Can you take me there?"

"Sure we can," Garth said gruffly. "We'll take you there in a ship, but we've got to wait for the ship to come. A ship like a big flier. Can you understand?"

"Of course."

The farm buildings were still vis-

ible in the gathering twilight. Amanda pointed. "That's where I live, over there—and Polly lives on up that way. It isn't very far. That's where I used to live," she amended, looking at her home once more. She began to cry again.

Garth stared at her helplessly. "Sit down here beside us, kid, and help watch for the ship." He found her a handkerchief.

Hesitantly, as if the action were somehow a denial of her grief, she hunkered down. "They'll have lights," said Mattison. "Red, white and green lights."

Amanda was silent then, lost in her own unhappy thoughts. When, after not too long a time, the LC did show its lights in the distance, the men by unspoken consent let her be first to make the discovery. Garth rose.

"They're way ahead of schedule. That's good. It's not yet pitch dark." He pulled a flare out of his pack. "Do you see that big rock down there? That's where I'll drop this."

He strode off with the flare and a laser.

"What's he doing?" Amanda asked. "Where's he going?"

"Don't worry. He's going to make a bright light so the ship can come for us. They don't know just where we are."

GARTH stood for a minute by the rock and watched the slowly descending LC. They saw him toss the candle and start back toward the shelter. Mattison turned his head to watch for any activity around the ship. When he looked back he could no longer see Garth in the growing dark. Then the flare erupted into dazzling blue brilliance and Garth was silhouetted halfway back to the shelter. He was crawling in an awkward, spidery fashion. When Mattison reached him he was unable to stand and had to be dragged to his feet and half carried.

He was trying to talk but his speech was so thick and slurred as to be nearly ununderstandable. He clutched one wrist.

"One 'em got me. Ri' through han'. Tourni—tourniquet." He made incoherent sounds as Mattison lowered him to the ground, but nothing with any meaning. The light from the flare cast black shadows but Mattison could see the puncture on the back of Garth's hand. He clamped a grip on the already swollen wrist.

"You. Amanda," he commanded. "Bring me the aid kit. That thing there. Open it." He dumped the contents on the ground, located a tourniquet and without relaxing his hold was able to wrap it firmly about the wrist. Then for

good measure he rolled up Garth's sleeve and applied another above the elbow. From the container of syrettes he selected one marked ATROPINE: NEUROTOXINS, and pressed it against the exposed forearm.

There was nothing more he could do. Garth was silent now and his eyes were closed, but he shivered violently at intervals and was apparently conscious. Without being asked, Amanda cradled his head in her lap and held to his shoulders to restrain more violent movements.

Mattison turned to look out. The flare was blazing silently, but ringed around it now were scores of hornets. They stood motionless, crowded against one another at a distance of only four or five meters from the source of light. So they were phototropic but with a limit. They could not or would not approach too closely.

A flare was good for five minutes—this one had to be at least half spent. Within seconds of its going out, he thought, he, Garth and the girl would be overwhelmed by a wave of hornets. He bent, rolled Garth as gently as he could to one side and retrieved the other flares. Then he waited. When the first flare flickered out his light-struck eyes were for a moment unable to see anything at

all, but he lit the fuse of the second one by feel and threw it. The device was nicely weighted and carried for nearly thirty meters. That was perilously close, but it was the best he could do.

The new burst of light was dazzling. He kept his eyes on the ground for as long as he dared, then picked up the nearest rifle. The new ring of hornets was already forming. "Don't be scared, Amanda," he told the girl. "You're a brave young lady."

The hornets, slaves to their tropisms, paid no attention to the nearby humans and simply crowded into a densely packed circle. He had waited long enough and, with the rifle set on automatic, he swept the swarm with devastating fire. When the gun was empty there were still a few standing hornets, a few more approaching from the outer darkness. He changed guns and picked them off in short bursts.

He didn't see the LC until it was hovering squarely in front of them, actually between him and the recent targets. Then there were people to boost Amanda aboard, to carry and lift Garth, to give him a hand up.

IT WAS a full week before Mattison was told that he might visit Lieutenant Garth in sick bay.

Garth was propped up in bed, looking pale but tolerably well otherwise.

"Hello, Mattie, you old son of a bitch," was Garth's greeting. It was clearly an accolade, a welcome to the elite.

"Hi," said Mattison. "How you feeling?"

"Still shaggy." Garth waved a lightly bandaged hand. "I must have gotten a pretty small dose or I'd have been dead quick—but it wasn't good when you were lugging me up that hill, I tell you. You know what those bastardly hornets do? After they've tied up your nerves into red-hot knots they dissolve your blood cells. First day I haven't gotten a transfusion. How are things on Valora? You did real good down there, by the way."

"How much do you know?"

"Not much. The damn doc thinks you should never tell a patient anything. I know we've been in and out of warp because it always makes me dizzy. That's all."

"We've been in and out four times. We made a round trip to Glenmaurie and they're sending all sorts of supplies—small arms and high intensity lights mostly. The lights do a job. You can attract and paralyze all the hornets in a neighborhood as fast as they can get there. We've given Valora

practically all our own flares for the present and their broadcast centers are all putting out instructions. Things will be under control soon in all the populated parts of the planet."

"Good," Garth said, "good." He ruminated. "Were there other losses besides ours?"

"One. Lin Chang. We got the worst of it. The other teams all had some warning of what to expect."

"Tough on Chang. He was a good man. So were our guys, of course. I didn't know them so well. How's the girl? Amanda."

"She's here on the ship. She'd like to see you."

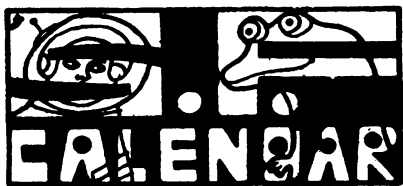
"Would she, now. Well I'd like

to see her. She's a damn good kid. How come she's on the ship? It's against rules."

"Captain waived the rule until she could be delivered somewhere safe. That'll happen tomorrow. She has a courtesy aunt and uncle. Polly's parents, the Brennans. I've talked to them. It's a nice family and they'll take good care of her. This week has helped her. New environment and all. The captain has posted our next assignment. Carson II."

"Never heard of it. Hope it's not civilized like Valora."

"No people, no hornets. Anything else, maybe, but no hornets. That's guaranteed." ●



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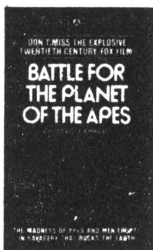
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SENTIENCE



LEE KILLOUGH

**The ultimate IQ test
for an alien may be
this: by what method
does he destroy you?**

CIAN reflected ruefully that he might as well have saved time by immolating himself prior to the hearing. The six pairs of eyes around the table were regarding him with all the critical deliberation of pathologists debating where to begin a dissection. He sat down in a vacant chair at the narrow foot of the long table, trying to stifle the uneasiness that bushed out his silvery pelt, and stared back with violet eyes he hoped appeared calm. It was vital he seem objective and unemotional. The lives of the shree depended on it.

A Brisian at the apex of the table shifted position, his carapace grating loudly against his chair. "The charter board has been called to review the sentient-species claim filed by Dr. Buurn Cian. We have one auxiliary member, attorney Saud bin Saal, who is here representing the Megeyn Corporation." He nodded at a swarthy Catheze sitting to his left.

Bin Saal inclined his head toward the board chairman. "I wish to thank you for asking me to sit with you, sar. The mining operations on Nira represent a considerable investment by my company. Naturally any action threatening our charter is of great concern to us." His gaze switched abruptly to Cian, a scalpel gaze as keen as the edge to his voice. "We've not met before but I know you by reputation, doctor. You're advancing. A sentience petition is a step up from your previous efforts."

Cian stiffened.

"I beg your pardon?" the chairman said.

The attorney's eyes never left Cian. "The doctor is becoming a veteran of these hearings. His first petition was on Naan-taen—on behalf of a species called quaere. After transfer to Jornava he became embroiled in an effort to preserve the jebbijy bird. In the first case he was successful. As a result the predator slaughtered some twenty percent of the colonists before a permissible form of defense was devised. Fortunately he was overruled in the second case and the colonists on Jornava were spared decimation."

"Instead, a unique species is virtually extinct," Cian said bitterly.

He bit his tongue in self-reproach as the attorney smiled thinly. Bin Saal wanted to goad him into ex-

pressing his feelings in just such emotional statements.

"Not that I blame you for your Preservationist leanings, doctor. After all you are a physician, dedicated by profession to saving life. Even more pertinently, you are a R'raethan. Your people's obsession for conserving life—all forms—is well known throughout the Federation. As hostile as your planet's environment is, you could hardly have evolved any other way. But I wonder if such a viewpoint might prevent you from considering such matters as sentience and non-sentience with proper objectivity." Now Bin Saal addressed the chairman. "Here's what I find interesting. When the operations administrator on Nira decides to declare the shree a dangerous predator, the doctor suddenly discovers they are intelligent and rushes to file his claim first."

"Nothing sudden about it," Cian retorted. "I've been convinced of their intelligence since running into them on Nira fourteen standard months ago."

"But you said nothing until now." The chairman frowned.

Cian nodded. "Conviction isn't proof. Although I've studied sentience extensively during the past year, it isn't my field of expertise. I couldn't come to you with only an amateur's personal opinion."

"How fortunate you found your proof just in time to supercede Rom Lekir's petition," the attorney remarked.

For an instant Cian wished he were back among the wildernesses of Naar. But most likely the Federation would order him assigned elsewhere, now that he had crossed the light-years to Planet Base. Determination filled him anew. Federation law held that all sentient beings—whether mammalian, reptilian or anything else—were people, and therefore not to be warred upon. Cian meant to uphold that law.

"I have documented evidence—" he began, then broke off. His voice was much louder and sharper than he had intended.

The chairman interceded firmly. "Gentlemen, let's proceed in more orderly fashion. Certainly the doctor is well acquainted with the species in question. And no doubt sar Bin Saal knows something of them, too. But this board does not. If we're to judge the matter intelligently we will need more background and fewer accusations. After all, the doctor is not on trial here—only his petition." The chairman pressed a button set into the edge of the table. "I have invited the survey agent who classified these life forms during the charter inspection twelve years ago. We will begin with him."

THE being who entered was a Geolon—a thin, hairless and yellow-skinned man still resembling his primeval lizard ancestors. He folded into an empty chair, laying a few cinecorder cassettes on the table, and turned his yellow eyes on the chairman. Cian shifted uneasily. The Geolon exuded scrupulous efficiency.

“You are Inspector Zarith Than?” the chairman asked.

The survey agent nodded.

“Would you briefly explain the duties of a charter inspection team?”

“Certainly. We remain on the planet under observation for four years to study it in all seasons. We test exhaustively to be certain nothing the proposed colony will use, either mechanical or chemical, is harmful to local life. We recommend charter restrictions to prevent pollution of the planet. We also attempt to identify which plants and animals are most likely to present a danger to the colonists.”

“Do you determine if the planet has an intelligent species?” an arthropodal board member asked.

“Our first and foremost task.”

The arthropod’s eyestalks waved slowly between Cian and the survey agent. “Whose particular responsibility was that on Nira?”

“Mine.”

“You are acquainted, then, with

the shree named in the petition?” the chairman queried.

“Indeed. I found them fascinating creatures.”

“Creatures, not people?” the attorney exclaimed. “Dr. Cian claims to have proof they’re intelligent.”

“Not having seen his evidence, I can hardly pass judgment on it. But I examined the shree to the best of my ability and found no intelligence,” the survey agent stated.

“On what do you base your professional competence?” a feline-looking board member asked.

“I hold degrees in biology, pananthropology and psychology. I also have specialized training in sentience evolution.”

“Tell us something about these shree,” the chairman suggested.

“Certainly. I’ve brought with me the tapes made at the time of the inspection. Watch the screen, please.”

He picked out a cassette from the stack, pushed it into a slot at the base of the large translucent cube in the middle of the table. Something hummed, and a moment later a picture appeared on each side of the cube.

At first there was only blue sky with a small, dark form flying high in it, too far away to distinguish color or shape. Then magnification was stepped up and the creature filled the screen. Cian studied the

familiar form, trying to see it as the board members would. It was finely boned judging by its long thin limbs, but thickly corded muscles bulged across its shoulders and back. Fur, short and velvety as Cian's but brown in color, covered the entire body except the wide membranous wings. Those spread up and out from the shoulders and down to the feet. As the creature glided it turned and the cinecorder recorded a good view of a flat-muzzled face. The ears were small, high-set and round, the eyes wide and dark. It carried its forelegs folded comfortably across its chest, the three toes and opposable thumb on each paw loosely interlaced.

Cian frowned. The eyes were wrong. They were bright and alert but somehow lacking. He had known instantly, looking into the eyes of his first shree, that there was a mind behind it; he had felt it with a still-remembered shock of recognition . . .

"There's your shree," the survey agent said, "We named it that after their distinctive call. This one is a mature male of average size, between 100 and 125 centimeters long."

"How can you tell it's male?" a blue-skinned Minoran asked.

"It isn't easy to determine except by color. Males are shaded from brown to black; females, bronze to

near gold. The cubs are dappled until they reach maturity at about five years."

The picture changed to a rough cliff face pocked by slits and holes and terraced with ledges. On several of the ledges shree of various sizes and colors lay sunning themselves, wings folded across their backs like capes. Their feet were no longer connected to their wings. A hook-like spur on each heel provided for in-flight attachment.

"I apologize for the poor detail of the shot," the survey agent said. "It had to be taken at long range."

"They were vicious?" the arthropod asked.

"Only if their dens or hunting kill were approached. Otherwise they were cautiously friendly. We seemed to fascinate them. The male you saw a moment ago spent almost an hour circling above me. Once he flew to within a few meters. Doctor?" he asked as Cian moved sharply.

Cian shook his head. "Never mind." With keen regret he reflected on how drastically the shree had changed.

THE survey agent returned to his tape. "These you see now are part of a single band. The two males on the ledge at the far left are young bachelors. Having reached maturity they have been forced to

leave the home den. But the older males with bands seem willing to tolerate bachelors living nearby, even let them join in the hunting so long as the bachelors ignore the females. Otherwise they are either driven out of the band's territory or must fight to replace one of the established males. Shree are strongly territorial, though their grounds are so huge that they frequently ignore nomads living solitary lives near the borders."

"Interesting," murmured the chairman. "Are the bands large?"

"Shree bands are made up of several patriarch males who share some eight to twelve females. I saw small bands with two males and one large band with five, but most have three patriarchs. Every day two of the males hunt for food, taking along older cubs, neighbor bachelors, and the younger, stronger females. One male always remains at the den with the females who are looking after the cubs. The young are born in the spring in single and twin births, usually twin, and nursed until the next cubs are born. A female who happens to be barren one year—and females are unaccountably out of heat for as long as four consecutive years—will suckle her own cubs and others' for a second year. They appear to be fond parents. Even the males play with the cubs and let them take

what seemed to me to be extreme liberties."

"A rather advanced social structure," the feline board member commented.

"Sophisticated, in fact. Do you consider that suggestive, inspector?" Cian asked.

The survey agent's bare scalp wrinkled. "Not really. Many animals, even those of low-order intelligence, have complex societies."

"How, exactly, do you determine if a planet has sentient life?" This from the Minoran.

Sitting back in his chair, the survey agent tented his fingers. "Assuming intelligence is too primitive for any life form to be constructing villages yet, sentience determination is a matter of watching game trails and observing the life forms that pass. Sentience may be defined as conscious perception, integral to intelligence. And intelligence follows a predictable pattern. For the most part, it appears only in predators, and not the biggest or most formidably equipped ones." His eyes shifted, as if in illustration, to a board member whose pale slenderness reminded Cian of an old poetic line concerning star-winds and moon-songs. "A large powerful animal doesn't need brains; it can exist as it is. The predator that develops rationality is one with a need for something more than teeth and

claws in order to survive. So I look for a creature that dominates its territory despite larger killer species competing with it."

"May I interrupt a moment, inspector?" the lawyer asked. "What about very small life forms? Not that it's the case here, but how can you be certain you aren't overlooking a species that would not use the game trail—a species perhaps microscopic in size?"

The survey agent smiled. "Without a brain of certain minimum size there is no intelligence. Something we cannot see readily is too far below the critical minimum to be concerned with." He glanced around the table but there were no more questions. He went on: "I look for a species with grasping limbs of some type—hands, tentacles or claws." He nodded at the arthropod. "A race must be able to use tools if it is to evolve."

"The shree use tools," Cian put in.

"To be precise, a tool." The survey agent leaned forward and removed the cassette from the viewer. After a minute of sorting through the other cassettes he found the one he wanted, slipped it into the slot.

As the picture came on, a humanoid hand placed something on a blue cloth background. The cinecorder moved in almost on top of

the object. It was a short section of woody stalk with five long thorns set at regular intervals along one side. The thorns were triangular—a point and three sharp edges.

"Daggerthorns," Cian said.

THE survey agent nodded. "Each thorn is nearly eight centimeters long. They grow on one side of the stalk. A ring of the stalks surrounds the large central stem that supports the seed pod. The pod is edible and nutritious, but few species except birds and shree try to get at it because of the protective thorns. The shree break the stalks into sections and hold them so the thorns project between and on either side of the shree's closed fingers. Thus they get at the pods, and at the same time provide themselves with weapons. Their own claws are sharp but short—not nearly as efficient as the thorns for bringing down bolkis, their chief source of meat."

He tapped a switch beneath the cassette slot on the viewer. The picture blurred as the tape speeded up. When it slowed to normal viewing rate the scene had changed and was obviously being recorded at long range from a hopper.

In the canyon below, a herd of tawny ungulates was stampeding wildly. The dust stirred up by their hoofs obscured details but Cian

picked out the blocky winged forms of shree flying above the ungulates.

"This is a typical hunting party," the survey agent said. "I counted twelve members. They work in teams of three, diving at the bolki and slashing the animal's hide on each pass. The daggerthorns serve this purpose well. Eventually the animal is exhausted by running and weak from loss of blood. When it falls, one of the team will cut its throat. Shree are strong for their size. Three can pick up one of those browsers and fly it back to their den with little effort."

A bolki stumbled and a black form dropped on it. The beast struggled briefly, its four supporting limbs and the small grasping limb on each side of its neck flailing in final desperation. Then the bolki went limp. Two gold shree landed beside it. They took the bolki's legs while the black shree lifted the bloodied head. Wings beating in unison, the three rose into the air with their kill and carried it away.

"I debated categorizing them as 'questionable' because of their daggerthorn tool. But I had to decide against them."

"Why?" Cian protested. "What else but intelligence explains their use of the daggerthorn?"

The survey agent regarded him patiently. "Accident. They got on to the technique fortuitously. May-

be one was after a daggerthorn pod and happened to be holding a stalk when a bolki charged. The shree started to claw in defense, forgetting the stalk in its paw. The bolki was blinded or driven off. Whatever, the shree found that daggerthorns are better than claws and used a piece of stalk when he hunted after that. Others in his band copied. Bachelors moving into other bands from the first one spread the idea."

The feline board member said, "On my world, the plaa dangle a leafy stick above the water. That lures fish into the shallows for easier catching."

"So many animals use crude types of tools! We can consider such use only a possible indication of intelligence, not proof."

Cian swallowed a bark of exasperation. "What does constitute proof?"

The survey officer's scalp furrowed. "Language, certainly, and construction. Unfortunately we know that primitive species exist which are not yet capable of the latter and in which the former is still so rudimentary as to be hardly recognizable. In such cases we have to depend on behavior to make our differentiation. The difficulty is in terminating what is a result of the thinking process and what is merely conditioned response. Surprisingly, much behavior is merely the result

of conditioning, in men as well as in animals." The furrows in his bare pate deepened. "The only behavior we have been able to safely consider unique to rational beings is what has been variously termed creativity or synthesis. It is the ability to take two or more unrelated items and combine them to produce a useful or esthetic result. An animal that discovers a useful object or a beneficial method of performing a task will continue to apply that discovery the same way and no other time after time. The shree limit their use of the daggerthorn to hunting. They don't appear to recognize its other possibilities as a weapon."

Cian leaned forward. "But—"

The survey agent ignored him. "In all the skirmishes I observed between patriarchs and invading bachelors, fighting was confined to teeth and claws. The daggerthorn never appeared. An intelligent creature will experiment to see what else can be done with a method or object. Because of their failure to do this, I classified the shree as animals."

"But they do use the daggerthorns as weapons," Cian said.

The survey agent snapped around to face the doctor. "What?"

"They drop out of the sky on us with daggerthorns in both hands. I've treated hundreds of lacerations in the

months I've been on Nira. Several men have even died as a result of their injuries. That's why our operations administrator, Lekir, wants them declared a dangerous predator."

"But you are sure, positively, that the shree are not," the attorney said.

"Predators, yes, of course they are—but intelligent ones," Cian shot back. "I was caught in an attack not long after I first arrived. One shree came within arm's reach of me." For a moment the hearing room disappeared and Cian was in the hot, dusty canyon again, staring into two livid eyes. "It wasn't fear or mere anger I read in him, sar Bin Saal. It was hate—real, passionate, personal—directed at me and my kind." The moment of communion had ended abruptly as the shree slashed down at him. Just before the thorns in the creature's hand reached the doctor's face, someone knocked Cian flat. He had felt air ripple the fur on his back as the shree's wings beat the space where he had been.

WITH a shiver he returned to the hearing room, facing Megeyn's attorney again. "There has to be intelligence behind that kind of hate. Afterward I realized the shree were behaving not like mere vicious animals but as any beings would who were defending their land from invaders."

"Doctor," the blue-skinned board member said, pursing his lips, "we would like to see your evidence of the shree's intelligence."

"Of course." Cian was pleased to note his voice sounded matter-of-fact, though what he actually felt was profound relief. A short while ago he had not been sure they would even agree to look at his evidence. He reached for the hand file on the floor beside his chair and took out a stack of papers.

"I found proof just before I filed my claim. It came out of the same incident, in fact, that precipitated Lekir's decision. My only regret is that two men had to die first."

"What men, doctor?" the chairman asked.

"Two of the miners. Some of us were playing scramble ball on the plateau outside the camp one free-day when a group of shree dived out of the clouds at us. We threw ourselves on the ground. It's about the only possible defense. Even lasers wouldn't have done much good. Shree dive swiftly and zoom off before anyone can take aim. We stayed flat until we were sure they were gone, then started counting injuries. Only Morka and Chaasse were hurt, and not severely—a few superficial scratches on their arms."

The chairman nodded.

"We went on with the game. But after a few minutes Morka and

Chaasse had to quit, complaining they couldn't breathe. I saw they were gasping much harder than the activity of the game would warrant so I took them over to the infirmary. Rest didn't relieve their distress. I was puzzled and frightened. In fact, I—"

"Never mind your feelings, doctor," the chairman said. "Just tell us briefly what happened."

"They died. I worked over them an hour and a half. I used hyperoxides, I.V., cholenine, the respirator, the cardiostimulator—but they still died." He felt again the bitter anger at his helplessness.

"Did you perform autopsies?"

"Promptly. I don't like losing patients and I wanted to know why it had happened. Examination turned up no pathology in either man, as I expected. I took blood samples and dissected out tissue from the spinal cords and around the wounds of both men. Testing them took three days but I found my answer. Here are my results." Cian pushed the papers into the middle of the table where each board member could reach them. "Both miners were poisoned."

The survey agent hissed through his teeth. The attorney snatched a paper and read it with narrowed eyes.

"Did you identify the poison?" the feline asked.

"I did. The signs the two men exhibited are listed in the colony's medical records. There is a plant we call the sweetvine. Crushed, it produces a thick syrup that can be fermented into a potent liquor. The crews brewed it by the kiloliter the first year, I've been told. Then a miner happened to spill raw syrup into a cut on his hand. The physician at the colony recorded that the poor fellow died of cardiac and respiratory failure within two hours. The miners avoid the vines now. Only the shree could have introduced the poison into the bodies of these two men."

The papers were being studied carefully. Cian waited a few moments before going on.

"Note the first three columns. They are the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the miners' cord tissue, epidermis and blood. Clearly the concentration of poison is greatest in the dermal tissue. The fourth column is an analysis of raw sweetvine juice. It matches exactly the substance found in the dead miners. And since the concentration was greatest around the wounds, I concluded that daggerthorns carried by the shree must have been the poisoning agent." He paused to let the others read, then turned toward the survey officer. "I believe," Cian said, "that constitutes an example of creativity."

"Now, doctor," the attorney rem-

onstrated in a smooth, friendly voice. "Is it so inconceivable that, as in the case of the daggerthorns, the shree might have accidentally learned—"

"Hardly," the survey agent interrupted. "I can think of no accident, no possible quirk of conditioning that could account for learning to use poison. The shree, whose diet includes sweetvine berries, would have had to observe that one constituent of the plant could be lethal to themselves. Then they would have had to determine not only that the juice was this lethal constituent but that other species could die from it, too. Finally, they would have had to devise a method of transferring the juice to that other species. You're quite right, doctor—it is creativity."

The chairman scratched the breastplate of his carapace. "I'm puzzled, inspector. How is it possible? Twelve years ago you judged them to be incapable of any such kind of thinking."

"I know. I've been sitting here reviewing the investigation in my mind. But I find nothing, even in retrospect, that suggests how I could have erred."

Cian remembered the close-up tape of the single shree and compared it mentally with his memory of the shree that had attacked him. "Do you suppose—" he began, stopping as all eyes turned inquiringly on him. "Has the operations adminis-

trator been brought here too? To be a witness, I mean?"

The chairman said, "Of course, doctor."

"May I ask him some questions?"

"By all means." The chairman pressed the button in front of him.

THE hawkish witness seated himself stiffly beside Cian, his pale eyes flicking toward the doctor and away again as though avoiding something repulsive.

The chairman spoke. "You are Rom Lekir, operations administrator of the Niraan mining colony for the Megeyn Corporation?"

"I am."

"How long have you held that position?" Cian asked.

Lekir's nostrils flared. "Chairman," he demanded, "what is the meaning of allowing this Preservationist zealot to—"

"Sar Lekir," the attorney interrupted smoothly, "the Megeyn Corporation is anxious to cooperate with the board in every way possible."

Without looking at Cian, Lekir replied woodenly, "I've been on Niraan nearly seventeen Standard years."

"Then you were there even before the charter inspection?"

"I was one of the original corporation survey crew."

"You have been able to observe the shree longer than any other man. Think carefully. Have you noticed

any major changes in their behavior?"

He snorted. "Rather! In the beginning they were somewhat friendly. In fact, one bachelor was camp mascot for a long time. But now—well, you can't find a more vicious species on the planet."

"Really?" responded the chairman. "What do you think changed them?"

Lekir shook his head. "Who knows? We had a rough winter one year and a lot of them starved to death. Animals are always meaner when they're hungry. And that was a bad time, believe me. We had supplemental packaged rations or we'd have been starving, too."

"You ate native game?"

"Of course. We always do when the local proteins are compatible."

The survey agent toyed thoughtfully with a cassette. "And the shree have been attacking you ever since?"

"No. They stopped when spring came. They didn't attack any more until the next winter, and then only if they didn't see us carrying lasers. We'd killed enough of them with lasers the winter before. They had learned to be wary."

"Did the attacks stop in the spring again?" the arthropod asked.

"Oh, yes."

"Vicious in winter, wary the rest of the year," the blue-skinned board member murmured. "How long did

the pattern persist, would you say?"

"About five years. After that they didn't seem to care what season it was or whether or not we were carrying weapons. They're quick enough to be on you almost before you see them, then away before you can take good aim."

Cian regarded the fur on the backs of his hands with great concentration. "By any chance, did these new tactics start the same year full-scale operations did?"

Lekir nodded. "The crews doubled. It was a headache. There were so many new men I couldn't watch all of them to make sure they were armed when they left camp. Half the injuries in the infirmary were caused by the shree."

"When did they start carrying daggerthorns?"

"Two years later." Lekir snorted. "As though they weren't deadly enough already. They can hit a man hard enough to break his back—not to mention what their claws can do to his face and eyes. When they started with those thorns, only the charter restrictions against tampering with the local ecology kept me from wiping out the beasts. I respect the Bureau of Surveys' purpose, but after Morka and Chaasse I have to take steps to protect the crews. They can't be expected to continue risking their lives working under the present conditions."

"Ah," the attorney said. "How many men have been killed by shree?"

"Fifty over a period of nine years. Fourteen this year. But this year alone injury cases amount to over a hundred."

"I've heard all I need to," Cian said. "You've been very helpful, sar Lekir."

"I really cannot see how, doctor," the chairman said. His carapace groaned as he shifted in his chair. "Would you please explain?"

"Certainly, unless someone else wants to ask sar Lekir a question."

"I have some questions." It was the first time the ethereal-looking female board member had spoken. There was nothing ethereal about the crisp, clipped tones of her voice, however. "Administrator, has it ever occurred to you since the charter inspection that the shree might be intelligent?"

"Of course not. The inspector called them animals."

"The doctor believes otherwise."

Lekir grunted. "Or says he does. He'd say anything to save them even if they were jellyworms. You know Preservationists and R'raethans."

"Then how to you explain the fact that the two miners were poisoned?"

"Accident. The daggerthorns just happened to get in some sweetvine juice. Like I told the doctor when he came to me with that ridiculous

hypothesis, the beasts were eating berries and happened to smear the thorns with some of the juice.”

The board member sat back. “I have nothing more to ask.”

“Are there any other questions? No? Then you’re excused, sar Lekir. Thank you for coming. And now, doctor,” the chairman said, as the door closed behind the operations administrator, “what conclusions did he help you reach?”

“I believe there was no mistake made in the original classification. The shree have evolved their intelligence since then.”

“In twelve years! Ridiculous,” the attorney exclaimed.

“NOT at all,” Cian said calmly. “None of the authorities on sentience are able to agree as to when and how the transition from animal to rational being is made. But they all agree on why. The inspector can correct me if I’m wrong, but the reading I’ve done postulates a state called pre-sentience, in which a species is at the borderline of intelligence.”

The survey agent nodded. “I see where you’re going, doctor. Please continue.”

“Although it obeyed the charter restrictions to the letter, Megeyn changed the environment of Nira by its mere presence. The crews gave the shree competition they had never

had before. Men, better equipped to hunt, were taking shree territory and shree food. The shree had to adapt or die.”

“So they developed intelligence?” the chairman prompted.

“No species develops a new characteristic just because it needs it,” the survey agent replied. “But all species are constantly mutating. There are endless variations of type in every life form. When a need arises, survival favors the individuals having a variation to meet that need. If no member of the species has such a characteristic, that species becomes extinct. If the shree were pre-sentient they would have already had the capacity for rational thought—they just weren’t using it. The added difficulty of surviving simply triggered utilization of their dormant ability.”

The board members were listening attentively. The agent continued:

“I suspect that if I were to inspect Nira again, I would find them essentially as they were twelve years ago except in the vicinity of the mining operations, where the environment has altered. Only the individuals there will have evolved.”

“Then as a whole they aren’t actually sentient,” Bin Saal said.

“But they’re in the process of becoming so,” Cian argued.

“The fact remains,” the attorney persisted, “that the species isn’t intel-

ligent. What we have, then, is a handful of mutations, sports, whose so-called intelligence may disappear again if the environment returns to its previous condition. Chairman, Nira is an important planet—a world rich in minerals necessary to maintain our level of civilization. Should we deprive the Federation of those riches because of some dubiously labeled ‘people’ who cannot now—and may never—appreciate the resources of their planet?”

“Are we justified in denying them the chance to do so?” Cian countered.

“Just a moment, doctor,” the chairman said. “The board is grateful for having had this matter brought to its attention and for your help in this hearing. There is no need for you to be subjected to the legal debate that will follow. Both you and the inspector are excused.”

“But—”

“Thank you, doctor.”

The dismissal was final. Gathering up his hand file, Cian followed the survey agent out of the room. He caught up with the Geolon a short way down the corridor.

“What do you think, inspector? Does the lawyer have a good argument?”

“Law isn’t my specialty. But I imagine the soundness of his argument is irrelevant. The bureau is notorious for protecting planets from

pollution and exploitation. Its stubbornness is rarely affected by the kind or number of individuals involved. In any case, nothing final will come of today’s proceedings. We’ll be asked to re-survey Nira and judgment will be based on the results. Then Megeyn will appeal and the Preservationist leaders will join the fight and the entire matter will be tied up in the courts until, by the time anyone is able to get back to Nira, the shree will have gone one way or the other and resolved the question themselves.” His scalp furrowed in amusement. “Tell me, have you ever considered doing survey work? We can always use people willing to fight commercial interests in order to protect obscure creatures on backspace planets. Enlist—and you may even be put on the Niraan project.”

“Niraan project?” Cian echoed.

“Certainly. While the law is grinding slowly, the bureau is going to be busily scurrying about on Nira. Doctor, this is our long-awaited opportunity to study emerging intelligence and resolve our speculations in the process. It’s the important event of the millennium. You’ve probably earned yourself a footnote in history.” He grinned at the doctor’s startled stare. “Such are the risks we Preservationist zealots take. Let me buy you a cup of tea before I report to my superiors.” ●

**Some Contributors
Past and Present**

*Poul Anderson
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THE LEARNING OF EESHTA

F. M. BUSBY

The Demu believed that to civilize is
to make conform—by wielding a scalpel!

(Editor's note: Although they are implied as occurring offstage in the author's forthcoming novel, Cage a Man (NAL and SF Book Club, Sept. '73), the events in this story are published only on these pages. They are too good for readers to miss.)

THE young person is surrounded by the animals. In this room on their planet Earth—a strange room, all plane surfaces and right angles—Eeshta is their captive. One of them has taken its robe and hood; under the odd discrete lighting-sources the smooth exoskeleton shines ivory tinged with red. Eeshta is of the Demu and eggborn. The symmetry of its head is broken only by the eyes and their brow ridges, the nostril openings and serrated chewing-lips below, the slightly flanged earholes.

The heads of the animals are marred by fleshy and fibrous growths. Although their general shape is acceptable—head and body, arms and legs—they do not have correct appearance. None but egg-born Demu have correct appearance without aid. When captured animals learn to speak as Demu and thus earn citizenship they are given whatever aid is needed.

But now it is Demu who are captive—the young Eeshta, its egg-parent Hishtoo, and three not egg-

born. Taken by an escaped animal named Barton, they were brought in Hishtoo's ship from the Demu planet Ashura to Earth. Although its arm was broken in the struggle of capture Eeshta no longer fears Barton, for Barton encased the arm for healing and offered no further injury during the long journey.

Eeshta fears these animals. It does not know what they want of it, except that it learn to speak with them. Demu do not speak with animals nor in the tongues of animals. Hishtoo has told it thus and the young person respects the word of its egg-parent. After a time the animals cease their attempts.

One enters who is Demu but not eggborn. It is of the type that grows young inside itself. Before its citizenship it bore on its chest the growths by which such persons nourish their young.

To correct its appearance such a one requires much aid. Knives and other instruments eliminate the growths on head and face, remove the teeth, notch the lips, and shorten the tongue to proper proportion. Chest and crotch are pared to smooth and slightly contours. Fingers and toes are rendered clawless; if necessary the number at each extremity is reduced to the proper four. On the abdomen the single useless depression is replaced by a pattern simulating concave oviducts

and their matching convexities, which produce cells to fulfill the eggs. This is how deserving animals are honored for their intelligence. It has always been the way.

The one who enters is called Limila. On Ashura its appearance was made correct. It wears the proper robe and hood but has added a cloth that covers its entire face except the eyes. It did not do so on the ship during the trip to Earth.

It approaches. "It is that you do not speak, Eeshta, and that you should."

"It is that you, Limila, not egg-born, speak with animals. I do not."

"It is that you are foolish. On this world you can now speak only with Hishtoo or with me, or with the other two who are made Demu. Much is to be learned here, and you learn nothing."

"You may learn, and tell me in our own speech."

Limila nods. "That for the present we do it so. Also that I ask questions and you answer. Later we speak more of this."

"It is as you say, but that I have my robe and hood." The garb is returned to Eeshta. The questions begin. An animal speaks to Limila, who asks the questions. When the young person answers, Limila speaks to the animal. Eeshta's fear is soon dead of boredom, as the egg-child waits while things are said that it

does not understand. It finds itself trying to understand and quickly changes its thought.

"It is," says Limila, "that we would know of your age."

"That I am nearly three of the four fingers toward end of growth." Eeshta waits while Limila and the animal speak.

"It is that your duration may be counted in revolutions of your planet around its star."

"We do not count it so. And Ashura, where Barton escapes and takes our ship, is not my planet. The revolutions of my own planet, while we are on Ashura, are not known to me."

Finally the speaking ends. Eeshta is taken to its place and fed with Hishtoo and the others. While eating it does not speak with any, nor wish to.

"SHE'S such a tough little devil, right, Limila?" Annette Ling smiled across the table. Then her delicate Oriental features moved in a slight frown. "In more ways than one. Not as bad as Hishtoo, though. That one wouldn't talk at all."

"He talks, Dr. Ling, when Barton asks questions through me or Siwen to learn about the ship. Hishtoo fears Barton, and with reason." She shook her head under the hood. "They are not he and she, of course. Each of them is both. I have

listened too much to Barton—and I suppose it is natural to assign gender in terms of size.”

“Yes. You know, I’d like to meet this Barton of yours.”

Within the concealment of hood and veil Limila shook her head again. “Not mine, not now. He allows me to live with him, but cannot bring himself to . . . touch me.”

For a moment, embarrassed, Annette did not speak. She brushed her fingers through her short black hair. “Uh—why does Hishtoo fear him?”

“You have not heard? How he forced the ship from Hishtoo, to bring us here? Barton was without food but had Eeshta captive. He threatened to begin eating her alive.”

Dr. Ling gasped. “Would he have?”

“I do not know. I have not asked. But once aboard the ship he broke both Hishtoo’s arms so Hishtoo could do no mischief. And when Barton says to Hishtoo, ‘crab salad,’ Hishtoo answers any question I ask.”

Annette Ling’s laugh was shaky. “I’m not so sure I want to meet the man, after all.”

“You must remember, he had been seven years—more than that—in a Demu cage. The ship was his only chance for escape. And he had no other way to restrain Hishtoo

safely, short of killing him outright.”

“Yes. Yes, I can understand that. And he rescued you and the other two?”

“We were there, at the ship. Although Barton had refused to learn Demu speech, Hishtoo offered him citizenship as an inducement to surrender and return Eeshta safely. We were supposed to be . . . exhibits, to persuade him. Hishtoo did not understand Barton very well.”

“I should say not.” Annette paused. “Limila, do you feel that Eeshta will cooperate more fully, eventually? To counter the Demu threat, the raiding and kidnaping, we must know more about them. Eeshta is the only window we have any chance of opening. It would help a great deal if we could speak with her directly.” She raised a hand against an unvoiced protest. “I don’t mean to say your help has not been invaluable. But still—”

Behind the veil she saw maimed lips move in a kind of smile. “Yes, doctor. As Eeshta would say, I am not eggborn. For more than six years, after what was done, I lived as Demu. But I’m aware that I don’t fully understand them.” Her hands, together, clasped and unclasped. “And Eeshta? I do not know. The Demu never speak another’s language. It may be that they cannot learn as we do. We can only continue to try.”

"Yes, and hope for success." A knock sounded. "Come in." A boy entered with coffee and a snack plate. Annette moved papers to leave a space on the table. "Thank you," she said. He smiled, set down the tray and left.

"I'll pour for us, Limila. Cream? Sugar?"

Her cup prepared, Limila raised it to her veil a moment, then set it down. "Thank you, but I do not want any, I've decided. I must go now."

"Limila! We're probably going to be working together a long time. Can't you—"

"You have seen me." The voice was flat, wooden. "In the pictures, at least. Do you wonder that I hide myself?"

A small five-fingered hand shot out to grasp one that now had only four. "Oh, damn all! I do tend to forget that anything is important other than my work. But I feel I know you only from outside, and—well, it was a long session. You should have some coffee and a bite to eat. I'll go out, if you wish. I'm sorry, Limila. Forgive me?"

Limila shrugged. "You have not harmed me. The harm was done before. And if you wish to see me, I can bear it if you can. When we are alone—" She removed the veil and pushed back the hood.

For long seconds, seeing what

had been a woman's face, Annette Ling could not speak. "Yes," she said at last. "When we are alone. Thank you, Limila." She busied herself, leafing through her notes.

"Now I'd like you to look at the questions my team has prepared for us to ask Eeshta tomorrow. Do you think perhaps—"

As they talked, Limila sipped coffee and ate small bits of cheese and wafers. Without teeth it was a slow process.

THE young person has eaten. It sits with its egg-parent Hishtoo and the two Demu not eggborn. They are of the type that does not grow its young inside but supplies cells to fulfill the eggs. Siewen, the frail one, supplies no more such cells. It is one of the first of its kind to be made Demu and live; there was no knowledge that to provide correct appearance to its legs-juncture would render it useless for breeding. Like Limila it speaks with animals, but only in response. Here among Demu it does not speak.

The other has taken the Demu name Shestin and does not speak with animals. It was given citizenship later when more was known of its kind. Its appearance where its legs join is not fully correct. Protrusion has been minimized but not

entirely eliminated; this one, it is hoped, retains the ability to fulfill eggs. It shows no signs of wishing to do so. On the ship it did not speak to Barton. Barton called it Whosits. Those who bring food call it The Freak.

Hishtoo addresses its egg-child. "It is that you speak with animals?"

"It is that I speak with Limila who speaks with animals. I do as you."

"It is that I should not. But the animal Barton—"

"It is that first you do not speak with Limila in the presence of animals. But when Barton makes the sound 'crab salad,' then you speak. I do not know that sound."

From Siewen comes a harsh cackling.

"It is," says Hishtoo, "that your mind is not waking when Barton first makes that sound. Then, if I do not give the ship to it, it eats you. On the ship it destroys use of my arms. And the animal Barton eats me now if I do not speak of the ship with Limila and Siewen. But I speak much of no truth."

"It is that if Barton finds you speak not truth, Hishtoo—"

"It is that we have no certain way of safety. That the worlds must know the Demu and become Demu. Barton eats me before I allow it to eat our race."

The young person pauses, think-

ing of what it knows. "It is that when we meet, Barton harms me also but will not do so again. I do not know when it says to eat me, for as you say, my mind is not waking. It is that the animal puts its hand to my head and makes a soft sound when I have pain and want no more."

"It is that you forget, Eeshta, that it is an animal and of no assured mind. You forget no animal is Demu. Barton has not our speech, nor correct appearance."

"You say much truth, Hishtoo. I think on your saying." The young person thinks of what it knows, and of what it does not know.

LIMILA waited. When Barton arrived, his dinner would not take long to prepare. He did not need her to cook for him; he could manage well enough on packaged meals. But he had brought what was left of her away from the Demu. She had no one else and felt he deserved some payment for suffering her monstrous presence. So she did what she could, though she found it ever more difficult to talk with him.

A groundcar stopped outside. Barton's footsteps approached and he entered. "Hi, Limila. You have a good day?"

He sounded as though he were reciting a set speech.

"Good enough, I suppose. Are you hungry, Barton?"

He looked at her, then away again. When they were alone she did not wear the veil. It was no use. On the ship he had seen her without it too long.

"In a little while—any time you're ready. Right now I need a beer." He rummaged in the refrigerator, then sat near her.

"His-too's lying, you know," he said. "At least half the time, maybe more. That big lobster is nobody's fool."

"You have charged him with lying?"

Impatiently Barton shook his head. "Wrong approach. Let him think he's getting away with it. For now at least. No, we just keep asking questions, sometimes the same ones from a different angle. He'll slip up—he already has. We'll transcribe the tapes and cross-check, feed them to the computers. Nobody can lie consistently over the long haul. The parts of his story that don't stay put we can throw out. Where it hangs together it's probably true. And sooner or later we'll figure out how the Demu ship works."

"And the Demu mind, Barton?"

He looked at her, his expression unguarded for a moment, as though she still had a face. "That's the hard part, isn't it? What you're doing. We

need force, sure—ships, and all—to stop the raids. But we need to know about them, too, and the little one's the key. How you coming with her?"

"It is hard to be certain. She answers questions now, but obliquely."

"Comes by it naturally, I expect. Her egg-daddy's a liar by the clock. Too bad—I've gotten to like the kid, but she sure as hell comes from a rotten family."

Explanation was too difficult. She served dinner instead. Barton ate silently, saying only, "Hey, pretty good there," after the first few bites. When he finished, he said, "You want to watch the Trivia or anything?"

"The Tri-V? No, Barton."

"Yeah. Well, maybe I'll read a while."

"Yes, Barton." But she needed to talk. "Barton?"

"Yeah? Something?" He seemed attentive, so she plunged ahead.

"Barton, how did you know not to learn Demu language?"

"Huh? Oh—well, I didn't. I mean, I didn't know what happened to anyone who did. But they pushed me around so long before they tried the talky-talk that by then I was too stubborn to do anything I thought they wanted. A lot happened that I never told you—"

And a lot, she thought, that I can

never tell anyone. "I wish I had been stubborn, Barton. But I was alone and did not want to be alone, and I did not guess that harm could come from learning."

She rose and walked over to him. Once more, she thought, and then not again. She took his hand. "Barton? I—"

He clasped her to him but turned his face away. She heard him curse, his voice thick. Then he said, more quietly, "I wish I could, Limila. I wish—" He released her. "Oh, hell! I'm going to bed."

She went to her own room. This is not life, she thought. I am not living. I need to work yet awhile for others, and then I can stop.

The thought comforted her more than any had in a long time.

THE young person sits with Limila and the animal Ling. The fourth of the second four of questionings begins. Against its will Eeshta understands more each time of animal speech, but as Hishtoo has said to do, it pretends ignorance.

Also it understands some meanings of Ling's face-movements. The downward-together pull of the small dark growths above the eyes means the animal is dissatisfied. The young person has known this meaning earlier, for on the ship Barton often made this sign—but never the up-

curving of incorrectly smooth mouth, indicating pleasure, that Ling makes. Eeshta has made the Demu sign of pleased feeling, mouth opened slightly to show the tongue uplifted, but Ling does not understand until Limila explains in animal words. Then, to Eeshta, Ling lifts its own tongue, so incorrectly long.

Eeshta is certain Ling comes to understand some Demu speech also. It sometimes speaks before Limila fully repeats Eeshta's saying. On Ashura perhaps Ling would soon be worthy of citizenship and correct appearance, though Eeshta is surprised to find that with familiarity the animal's deformities are less offensive and begin to seem natural.

Now Ling speaks directly to Eeshta but in its own animal speech. "Eeshta, do you know what I say? You do know, don't you?"

"Limila, it is that Ling speaks. That you tell its saying in our tongue."

"It is that I hear you," says Ling. "that you hear me also. That we forbind and enfeel." The last has no meaning. Ling is not yet worthy of correct appearance.

"It is that I am pleased that Ling attempts Demu speech, Limila. That it may continue to do so."

Ling turns to Limila. "I didn't get that last." Limila repeats Eeshta's words in Demu and then in the animal tongue.

"I know you understand me," says Ling. "Why won't you answer? Limila? Why?"

The young person shakes its head. Animal gestures demean less than animal words.

"The Demu see no view but their own, Annette. We can only keep trying."

"Yes. But not today, Limila. The hell with it." And to Eeshta: "It is that you go to your place, that another time we speak in both our tongues."

"Limila, it is that I go to my place."

As the young person leaves the room it hears Ling say, "Sometimes I think Barton had the right idea the first time."

THE young person sits with Hishtoo. Across the room Siewen looks at nothing, while Shestin very softly speaks an old Demu chant it has learned. Outside, on guard so that all must stay in the room, is the animal that speaks much with upcurved mouth when it takes Eeshta to and from its place here. Eeshta thinks upon a matter.

"Hishtoo, when Barton crushes our armshells, it is that there is much pain."

"That the animal gives us pain, we remember."

"Is it that there is much pain in

the giving of correct appearance?"

"Much pain and loss of body liquid. It is done over many days or animals die of becoming Demu. When Barton and the others are taken, none of Ashura have experience. We lose many as we learn. Siewen is one of the first to live, and Limila. It is that each for a time is near to death."

"That I find it not good, Hish-too, to give such pain."

"It is that the pain is not from us, Eeshta, but from being animal without correct appearance. That animals may become Demu, we do what is proper."

"Is it that the pain is soon gone?"

"As correct appearance heals, pain goes. And we learn a thing, Eeshta. On each day of correction we give the greatest pain first, so that often the mind becomes not awake and does not feel more of what is done."

"That I am pleased you give no pain without need."

A sound is heard. Siewen is crouched over, holding itself. Its shoulders shake and it makes harsh rasping sounds with its breath. Eeshta moves to bend and peer under its hood. Its face below the eyes is wet.

"Siewen," says the young person, "is it that the food today is not good to you?"

THE animal of the upcurved mouth closes the door of the room behind Eeshta and remains outside. The times of questioning now count nearly to two fours of fours. Ling sits behind the squarish thing that is always covered with papers. Limila sits to one side; it no longer hides its face and has thrown back its hood. Its smoothed head is deeper and narrower than is quite correct, but the shell of it is inside and difficult to reshape. Attempts to make such changes cause dying and so are now abandoned on Ashura.

The young person moves a seat closer to the others and sits. "It is that you ask and I answer," it says. "That I would now ask."

Limila would speak, but Ling waves a hand and says, mouth curving: "All right, Eeshta, we'll make a deal. Ask anything you want—in English—and we'll answer. What do you say?"

A hesitation. Then:

"That I do not use your speech, that I must not. Hishtoo—"

Ling waves the hand again. "Forget Hishtoo for a minute. We've been asking questions, playing by your rules. If you wish to ask in turn, you'll have to play by ours for a change."

Eeshta considers. Already it speaks with an animal, though in Demu tongue. And what it would

ask, it needs to know. There is no need to inform Hishtoo . . .

"Then tell me what you really want to know from me. And why."

Ling nods. "We want to know about you, about your people. How they think and why they do what they do."

"What we do? What is it that we do?"

Limila brings its hands near its face, its two fours of fingers pointing stiffly toward itself. "This!" It touches here and there on its head and body, on its extremities. "And this, and this, and this!"

"It is only that you are given correct appearance, Limila." Startled, the young person uses its own speech but is not rebuked.

"But why?" Limila's voice is high and harsh with strain. "Do you know what it is to be cut and sewn, and to have no face?"

"I know you had pain, yes."

"Pain? I saw others die and envied their luck. The flesh was bad enough, and the teeth. But"—it indicates the jog at the base of its hand—"the disjointing of bones! And here!" It points to the nostril openings. "There was bone. A saw, and the chisels. After the first of it I could not see for the blood. Pain? You do not know of pain, Eeshta. Why, how, can you possibly do such things?"

"But—so you could be Demu and

not animal. And now that is a long time past. You healed, and are Demu and have no more pain."

"No pain?" Limila's breathing is harsh and rapid. "Eeshta—Eeshta, how would you like to have your arms cut off?"

After a moment of fright the young person realizes there is no threat. "I would not. No one would. But why . . . ?"

"Suppose you met a race of super-Demu with no arms. They give you correct appearance by removing your arms. How would you feel?"

"But without arms how could they?"

"Damn your stupid little soul to Barton's hell, they'd bite them off!" In awkward haste, Limila pulls its robe from itself, crumples it, flings it against a wall. Unlike its conduct, its appearance is most correct for one not eggborn.

"Annette?" says Limila. "Would you show yourself completely?" Ling looks for a moment at Limila, then removes its own garb. The two stand together. Ling's appearance is not at all correct, but in it Eeshta can see a kind of symmetry.

"Look!" With one hand Limila touches itself, and with the other the same portion of Ling. "This!" The mouth, the growth above it that is partly bone, the flaps at the sides of the head, and at top and

back the fiber called hair. "This!" The lumps on the chest, the changes at the extremities, the fiber-covered protrusion where the legs begin. "This! This! This!" It pauses, breathing heavily. "These things are all part of her. They were part of me, too, until you—your people—took them from me. My face was myself. Now I have no self."

"But you are Demu, Limila."

"Am I? No. I am not eggborn. I cannot in breeding season lock to another bearing eggs and at the same time fulfill that other. I cannot go to Sisschain once to visit and perhaps a second time to become—or if not, no shame to the eggs."

"No shame to the eggs," Eeshta responded.

"I cannot even truly have correct appearance. I am not Demu, Eeshta. I am only something that was once a woman, who can no longer be a woman or even a person, because of what the Demu have done to me. Because of that I am of no use, even to myself."

The young person is confused. "But the Demu mean no harm, only good. Not to take, but to give. It has always been our way, when we can, to help animals. I am sorry, Limila, that even though not eggborn you can find no pride in being Demu."

"Pride? *Pride?*" Limila shakes its head. "Eeshta, you work very hard

at not understanding me. Barton, I suppose, would call it a racial trait. Let me try again. Eeshta, would you prefer to live or to die?"

"To live, of course, Limila. To live."

"Yes? Why?"

"Because—because alive I can do and learn. Dying ends all of it."

Limila's legs shake but it does not seem to notice the shaking.

"Yes. You are right, Eeshta. Dying ends all of it. But for me it is all ended now. It ended under your knives, on Ashura. And I would rather die than live as I am."

"No, Limila—"

"If I did not feel I were needed here for a time yet, I would die tonight."

"But how is that? Have you a sickness?"

No Demu mouth ever moves as Limila's serrated lips move now. "Not the kind you mean. My sickness is only that I would take a knife and let out all my blood so as to die."

The young person resists belief. "But that is . . . no one does so except those twice-come to Sissain, who would become but do not become—no shame to the eggs."

"No shame . . ." Limila murmurs. "You are beginning to understand. I cannot become, as you would, because I am not eggborn. And I cannot become in my own way,

because of—because of having been given correct appearance. This is what you do to me and others. This is what must be stopped. This is why we need to know of you. Not to hurt you. But to stop your hurting us!"

The young person is troubled. "Can you not still become, Limila, in your own way?"

"My way? I have no face. I have no self. There is no one left who can become. I would have . . . Barton would have been my most needful person—and he cannot stand the sight of me. I cannot stand the sight of what is left, either. It is not Limila. I am inside, but no one can see me, and I can no longer see myself."

All that Eeshta knows collapses. Nothing is left but to believe. "But then," it cries, "Hishtoo is wrong. We, the Demu, are wrong. For to give such hurt—it cannot be correct." It hardly notices that it speaks in the tongue of animals.

It goes to Limila and holds that tall person in its arms as though for breeding, although Eeshta is one of four fingers short of breeding age and Limila not eggborn. And the feeling is not of eggs, or of fulfilling eggs.

"Limila, it is that I help you, that I learn in both our tongues. That I try to tell Hishtoo, though I think Hishtoo does not listen or

understand. That when you go to our worlds I go also, and tell what you say, so that it is known.

"Whatever else, Limila, it is good that Barton brings me here."

BARTON got home late. The **TRIV** was off and the lights were dim. He had a lot on his mind. "Hi! Anybody home?"

"Yes." The voice reached him from the kitchen. "I am here, Barton."

She sat leaning back in one chair with her feet on another. The drink she sipped was dark between the ice cubes; the bottle on the table was bourbon. She wore no robe or hood. For a moment he saw her as she once had been, the slim body almost the same—but the moment passed, and again she was faceless.

Was there any real hope? He did not know yet.

"Had to work late." Rummaging in the refrigerator, he found a beer and opened it. "A breakthrough on the Demu spacedrive, if Hishtoo slipped as bad as we think he did. So I ate in that crackerbox cafeteria, by the ship." And discussed the before-and-after sketches with the plastic surgeon . . .

He sat, swallowed beer from the bottle.

"How'd it go with you today?"

"We broke through also, Barton. The young Demu has decided to

cooperate." She sipped slowly.

"No kidding? You cracked the shell?" Cartilage grafts, the man had said, and prostheses. But no promises, not yet—he needed more time to study, to draw the boundaries of the possible. "Hey, that's great! But how did you get through to her?"

"Personal talk, Barton. Exchange of reminiscences, among all of us there."

"All of you, huh? I'll bet you did most of it. Didn't you?" If only he could tell her! He was torn by the temptation—but he mustn't. Not yet.

"I was of some help. The matter is not important." But the ring of her voice belied the words. "At any rate, it has agreed to learn and to exchange information, to reduce the conflict that must be."

He wanted to go to her, but then she would expect more than he could give—just as he dared not offer hope until he knew its limits. "Well. That's the best news in a long time, Limila. It really is. And I'm glad the kid's shaping up."

"Yes. We should make much better progress now."

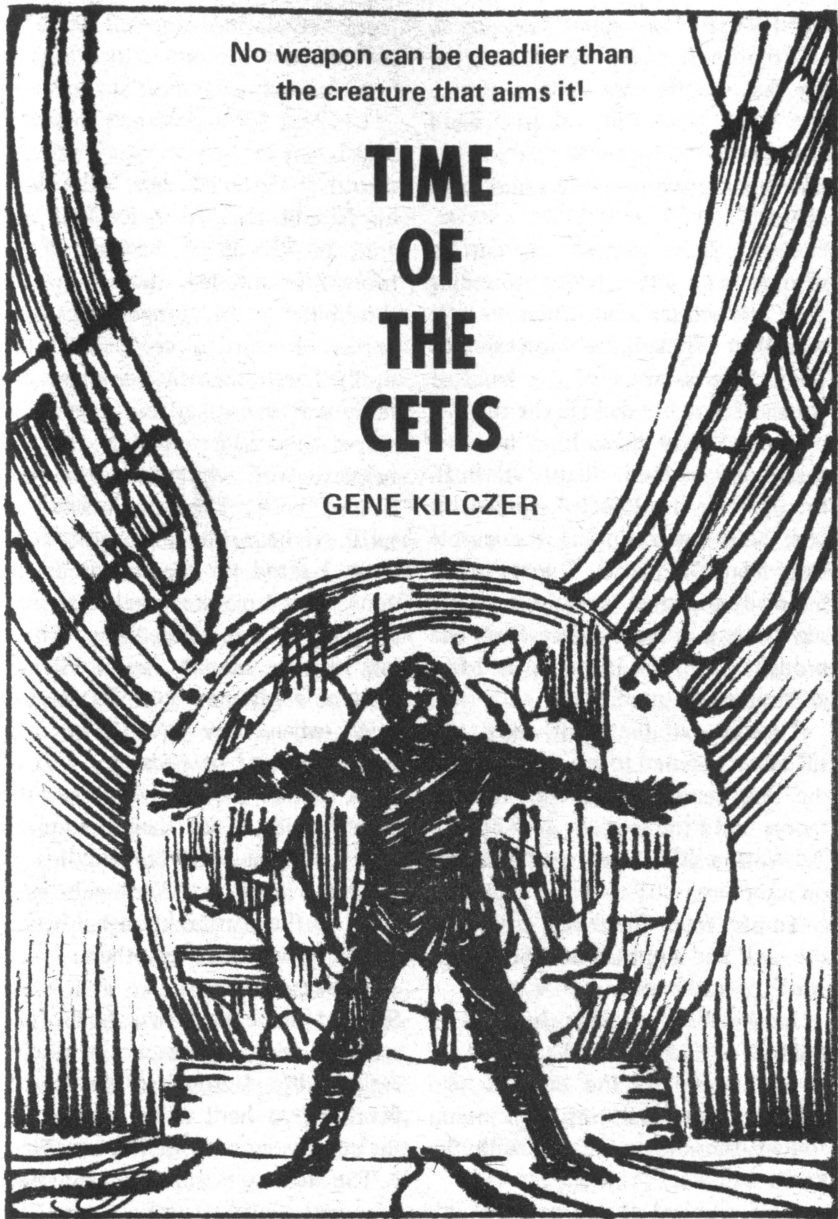
"That's for sure." He looked at her once again, seeing and remembering. "Hey, you look tired. Rough day, really, wasn't it?"

Her maimed lips lifted into a ragged curve. "It's all right, Barton," she said. "I'll live." ●

No weapon can be deadlier than
the creature that aims it!

TIME OF THE CETIS

GENE KILCZER



THE stars hung like ice crystals in the bitter night sky. As I shifted my feet on the hard sand, searching the sky for Ceti ships, wind howled off the frozen harbor and cut through my worn leathers and moc-casins.

Gray Wolf worked at cutting through the wire fence surrounding the Ceti's winter crop. When the hole was large enough he motioned to Tomis, the smallest of our band of twelve. Tomis handed me the reins of his pony. "Stay close, Jon," he whispered and stalked silently through the opening. He kneeled, spread his sack and began ripping the purple fruit from the plants. The rest of us huddled together, watching. Four nights had passed since we had brought down the last deer, and fear and hunger haunted us all.

Looking at the fruit, ripe and succulent, I failed to see the Ceti ship dip low and cut across the full moon—until too late.

"Wolf, a ship!" I shouted, jumping on my pony.

Tomis ran to the fence, threw out the sack and tumbled after it. "Wait, Jon!" he screamed.

Jaeki, Wolf's woman, scooped up the sack in midflight and galloped off with the rest of the band. I held Tomis's pony while my own mount fought the bit to be off with the pack.

Wolf grabbed the reins from my

hand and slapped Spotted Mane on the rump. "Get out of here! If we both make it, we'll meet at the lake."

I kicked Spotted Mane's sides and urged him on with curses whispered into his flattened ears. His sharp hoofs split the glazed ice that covered the beach as he put all his heart into running. Behind me the throbbing of the ranger ship grew louder. I heard a cry and looked back. Tomis was on his knees. His pony was struggling to its feet. The stupid beast had tripped, leaving him helpless. Wolf whirled his pony and headed back. The ship hovered almost overhead, blotting out the stars.

As I raced for the shelter of the dune reeds I pictured the Ceti, snug and pink in their padded ship, watching helpless humans scatter like a herd of frightened sheep. Did they laugh when they gave Tomis the death-look and he became a puff of black smoke that drifted across the beach? Did it set their snouts to twitching and their bloated lips to squealing in delight? My hands tightened on the reins as though I held a soft Ceti throat between them.

I reached the dunes and made Spotted Mane lie down in the dry reeds—a trick we teach the ponies early in life. I crouched beside him, breathing as hard as he and feeling the musky warmth of his wet hide.

The night was still again, but this time with a threatening stillness. The

stillness fugitives know. Stillness disturbed only by the roar of waves dumping slabs of ice on the frozen shore.

Suddenly my ears sifted out the whine of the approaching ship. I clamped my hand over Spotted Mane's muzzle and felt the throb of engines beat in my bones, drowning out my own pounding heart. The big ship glided over the bay and turned west toward Crystal City—known as New York when Earth had belonged to man, but now referred to by the miserable remnants of its former population as the "Pig Pen."

Nothing moved during the rest of that bitter night. I huddled against Spotted Mane and dozed.

The next morning squawking seagulls woke me. I started for the lake, wondering how many from our band had escaped the deadly Cetis, wondering if Jaecki were among them.

I traveled most of the day, with only my pony and an icy, sandblowing wind for companions, and passed many Ceti fields where the lush purple plants grew tall in defiance of the desolate winter. My eyes were never off the sky for long.

At noon I passed north of the sprawling Fire Island settlement. There old Marco's people eked out a bare living from the unyielding sea and lived in shelters of cornhusks and reeds. That was the price they paid to coexist in peace with the new

masters of Earth. Last night we had paid a higher price to roam freely through Ceti land.

IT WAS dark by the time I found the lake. I rode to our meeting place, my hunger and weariness buried by the fear that our band had been wiped out. Had I survived only to mourn dead companions?

Through the trees I saw the red flicker of a campfire. "Jon!" Jaecki's voice reached me as her shadow moved out of the blackness behind the fire. She ran to meet me, throwing her arms around my neck as I dismounted and laughing in relief. "Gray Wolf, it's Jon," she called back. Her gentle brown eyes sparkled in the wavering light. I ached to hug her tight, to run my fingers through her dark, swirling hair. But I held her at arm's length and grinned. "You weren't worried about me, were you, doll? You know I'm too fast for a death-look to catch."

Her eyes shadowed with remembrance. "I know you and Gray Wolf lingered too long under that death ship," she said softly.

Gray Wolf strode over and gripped my hands. "Jon!" His stony face relaxed into a smile. "So—we three have made it." He thrust one arm across my shoulders, the other across Jaecki's, and we walked to the fire. "It seems the fates have tied us with a strong bond," he said.

"I pray they will keep it strong in the future," Jaecki murmured.

"Amen," I added.

After I turned Spotted Mane loose to graze I realized how racked I was by hunger. We sat around the fire eating the fruit Jaecki had cooked. I didn't bother to remove the small red pits and filled my belly as though I might never eat again. Our meal finished, we drank our fill of icy lake water. Then I wrapped myself in my blanket and lay down under a tree. The night was clear and cold, with frost spangling the flattened grass. I stared at the sky where the Milky Way made a silver path, wondering which bright point was Tau Ceti. I'd heard from wandering renegades that there were Ceti cities all over the country. There was talk also of human settlements that spread across hundreds of miles of desert in the western regions. The rest of the land was given over to the aliens' automated farms. Earth had become an agricultural colony of Tau Ceti and was probably keeping the pigs fat on many planets.

Wolf walked over and sat down. His mood was grave as he laid a newly finished spear across his lap and slowly stroked the shaft. "We must talk, Jon."

I sat up. "About last night? You think we're the only ones left?"

He shrugged. "I saw three die. Picked off like insects."

I swallowed to ease the tightening in my throat. "How can we fight creatures that kill with mind power?"

Wolf hunched forward. "It's the booster we must fight, Jon—the machine that amplifies their brainwaves a thousandfold, that enables them to kill with focused thoughts. If we destroy the Crystal City booster the Ceti will be helpless."

"Wolf, do you plan to do it with that spear?"

"I plan to turn the power of the booster against itself."

"A nice dream, but it was tried more than a hundred years ago when the Ceti first invaded Earth. You know how successful it was."

"Our people used the wrong weapons." He gestured sharply. "Jon, ever since we left the settlement together we've been like brothers. We've shared everything."

My eyes roamed to Jaecki, who slept with one arm flung across the half-empty sack. The embers of the fire highlighted each soft curve under her deerskin blanket. I pried my eyes away and turned back to Wolf.

"Almost everything." He grinned. Then his leathery face settled into thoughtful lines. He picked up a smooth rock and felt its weight. "Here's another thing I've kept from you." He flung the rock. I watched it arc toward the black woods. Suddenly it curved in front of the trees and

swung back. It thudded into the fire, raising ash and embers to swirl around it.

“WHAT...” I jumped up and stared at the rock, now motionless and covered with ash.

“Sit down, Jon. You’ll wake Jaeki,” Wolf whispered.

I stared at him till he took me by the arm and pulled me down beside him.

“I have no Ceti blood in me,” he said, “if that’s what you’re thinking.”

I shook my head dumbly.

“But the power lives in me.” A smile pulled at his lips. “I feel its surge and know the direction of its force.”

“The death-look, too?” The implications hit me and instinctively I shrank away.

Wolf concentrated on the rock. The lines around his eyes creased. Suddenly the rock vanished in a puff of black smoke and spraying ash.

I looked at Wolf as though he were a stranger. “There were times we could have used your power.”

“I had to hide this gift, Jon,” he said evenly. “As a child it would have meant death by my father’s own hands. My mother would have been exiled for having sheltered with a Ceti.”

“But if you are not of the Cetis, how...?”

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“I’m not sure. I think it’s simple exposure to the waves generated by those boosters of theirs. Electro-magnetic waves—rays, if you want to call them that—that supply power to their ships and things, but also somehow reinforce their brain waves. So they can pull that death-look stunt, and work all kinds of other tricks...” Gray Wolf shook his

head. "It's a mystery, all right. I've tried to figure it out. The only theory I have is that the booster waves themselves can alter individuals, give them the power. I believe it must happen in the womb. Probably changes the genes. Probably that's how the Cetus got started on the evolutionary process giving them all the ability to utilize the booster." He smiled at me. "Look, Jon, I'm not the only one. I've learned of others of our kind who have the power. A pitiful few, but maybe we're enough to turn the tide."

Astonishment and hope were surging in me. And also hurt. "But during all these years we've spent together, you never said a word about it. Didn't you trust me?"

"Our life is hazardous. If you were captured by the Cetus you might have given away this secret. The gift is too precious to be risked. With it I intend to locate the Crystal City booster and turn the pigs' hellish creation against itself!"

He stood up and shoved the spear into the ground. Three crow feathers, tied to the shaft for good luck, fluttered in the chilly breeze.

"This is for you, Jon. I'll make another for Jaeki. By the way, she knows about my power."

I pulled out the spear and inspected it more closely. "Why do I need this?"

"Jon, I'll protect you both as

much as I can. But you'll be mostly on your own after we reach Crystal City."

I slept little that night. So it happened that when four more survivors of our band rode into camp before dawn I was awake to greet them. Joyfully I shouted to Wolf and Jaeki. We welcomed the others warmly and shared the remaining fruit for breakfast.

Carlo and Paulo, two brothers who had never been further apart than the head of a spear and its feathers, had taken up the renegade life because neither of them had the temperament for settlement living. Eli, with his easy gait and knowing eyes, was the oldest and craftiest of the band. He had weathered more years of stealing from the Cetus and evading their ranger ships than I had lived. Last was my burly friend Boris, whose thick body was all the bulkier for the ragged sheep-fur tunic he wore and whose face was all the fuller for its bushy black beard, tobacco-stained and matted with the remains of many meals. Boris never talked in ordinary tones. He roared or growled or bellowed. We called him Bear.

While we ate, Wolf told the men of his plan to enter Crystal City. But he said nothing about his power. They muttered and murmured, glancing anxiously at one another.

"By God, I'll go!" Bear suddenly

roared, spewing out half-chewed fruit. He wiped his mouth on a sleeve. "I've always wanted to see how those damn Ceti make love in their glass houses!"

"It's dangerous even to go near the city," Eli commented. He squinted over the smoke of his home-made cig and thought a minute. "Oh, hell—why not? It's about time we made the pigs sweat off some fat."

Paulo stood up. "You can trim'em down without me." He looked at the others, then at Wolf. "Make a name for yourself if you like, Gray Wolf. Me, I'd rather end my days sheltered with some big-hipped whore!" He nudged his brother with a foot.

Carlo looked up and smirked. "What's the matter with you, Paulo? Think how the settlement girls will throw themselves at your feet when you tell them you've been to Crystal City."

"We would never live to brag about it," Paulo answered. But his brother remained seated and Paulo, hesitating, grumbled and then sat down.

Early that night we broke camp and took to our ponies. We followed the railroad tracks, long rusty and overgrown with weeds, that led like twin arrows to the city. Game was plentiful around the vast Ceti fields through which we passed, for few humans ventured this close to the Ceti stronghold. Alien ships swarmed

thick as summer flies in the western sky.

During the second night's ride we saw the lights of the spaceport, far to the south of us. Eli trotted up beside me.

"Jon, Gray Wolf has told me about his power."

I turned to him.

"I've always suspected he had it," Eli said. "He's given me the names of friends in several nearby settlements who also have it. After the booster is destroyed and the settlements have taken the city, he wants me to take charge. I'm to send the gifted humans to infiltrate other Ceti cities." He shifted his weight on his pony. "Jon, I'm afraid this is a suicide mission for you three. Gray Wolf doesn't expect to get out alive."

"Did he say that?"

"He didn't have to."

"Do you think his plan will work?"

Eli shrugged. "It all depends on whether or not the booster's put out of action."

"And on whether the settlements respond," I added.

"They'll respond. Till now they've lived with fear and hatred. Take away the fear and they'll respond."

"Does Jaecki realize what we're riding into?"

"I'm sure she senses it. But you couldn't stop her, anyway. She goes where Gray Wolf goes."

I felt a pang of jealousy. But what did it matter? If Eli were right, there was no future for the three of us. "I hope I have the courage to see it through," I said.

"I hope so too, Jon."

IN the evening of the next day we climbed a hill and saw the lights of Crystal City. I gasped and heard the others too draw their breaths. It was like a mirage, a shimmering ice city that rose in a blaze of pastel lights whose reflections danced on soaring glass. Like a carved glacier it curved and spiraled, possessed of as many hues—and seemingly with as little substance—as a rainbow. It looked as though it would melt in the spring thaw. Each faceted building was an integral part of the city's design and contributed to its overall dome shape; its reflection in the ice-clogged river below made it appear round, like a planet alone in space.

Bear bellowed, "It's the fanciest whorehouse I ever laid eyes on!"

"Oh, so beautiful," Jaeki whispered. "Can it really be all evil?"

Wolf gave her a look that forced her to lower her eyes.

The two brothers stared and whispered intensely to each other.

Eli squinted up at the swarming lights—Ceti ships—above the city. "How will you get in, Wolf?"

"Through an unused tunnel I've

seen in old maps." Addressing all of us, he said, "Jon and Jaeki are coming into the city with me. The rest of you will camp here and wait. If we succeed in destroying the booster the Ceti will set up a squeal like a thousand pigs being butchered." He looked at his men. "If I'm right about the booster it's the source of all their energy, and even the lights of the city should fade. When that happens, ride for the settlements.

"You two," he pointed to the brothers, "will bring the news to the White Plains settlement. Tell the people they need no longer fear the Ceti. Tell them to attack and make the streets red with Ceti blood!"

"What about the cities in Jersey and Connecticut?" Paulo asked. "Won't those Ceti come runnin'?"

Wolf shook his head. "At that distance from home base, they'd lose the power of their own boosters, and they won't have Crystal City's to depend on." He dropped his hand to Eli's shoulder. "You ride to Fire Island. Find a canoe and contact Old Marco. Tell him to put aside his nets and take up the work of a man." He turned to Bear. "You ride for the Mount Vernon settlement."

Bear kicked a rock and roared, "By God, I've come this far, I'll not stop here!" He unstrapped his cider bag and flung it to the ground. "I'm going into the Pig Pen with you."

Wolf laid a restraining hand on his

arm. "For you the killing lies ahead. Remember that the Cetis grow fat and careless with success. Make the sewers of their decadent cities overflow with the blood of pigs."

The others wished us good luck. We took our bows and arrows and the two spears, and rode to the tunnel.

Dismounting, we found the entrance had crumbled. We had to crawl over boulders to get inside. The tunnel was as black as midnight. We felt our way along the slippery walls, tripping over broken ground. "Damn! We should have brought a torch," I said. The air was stale and heavy. Above us the mighty river flowed and I felt as though I were buried alive.

"Jon, the power grows in me!" Gray Wolf's voice was strained. "I see the Cetis more clearly. They are masters of all living things. Closer to gods than to mortals."

My throat felt like dried leather. How did we expect to defeat the Cetis? My spear was suddenly a silly toy. I wanted to hurl it into the darkness and run for the cold night air and the comfort of the campsite. I took a deep breath and pushed myself on.

We reached the city end of the tunnel and found that it was sealed off by stone. But fingers of blue light reached through the cracks. I started to heave away the heavy blocks.

Wolf gripped my arm and pushed me aside. His face was strange in the half-light, grimmer than I'd ever seen it. His eyes darkened. I jumped as the rocks crashed and fell apart. Smoke rose from the seared stones. Blue light flooded in through the opening.

I picked up my spear and looked at Jaecki. Eyes wide, lips parted, she swayed back from Wolf.

"Forward," he said, and motioned for us to follow.

We were on the outskirts of the city. The streets were opalescent glass that shimmered as light shone up from beneath them. A few work robots specialized for street cleaning rolled by, pushing long, rotating brushes. Above us, transparent arches connected gleaming buildings of all shapes and curves. It was a glass canyon. I thought that surely if I took a step, I would walk into an invisible wall.

We heard squeals from a narrow street and flattened ourselves against a building, trying to hide in a city of mirrors.

A FLYING silver car decorated with gold filigree, hummed as it floated by. Four Cetis lounged in its padded interior. Two were pudgy women, dimple-kneed, wearing furs and blue wigs. Red designs were painted on their round noses. The two hairless men were about a foot shorter than I, small-eyed, with pink

jowls that hung over their lace collars. We held our breaths as they drifted by, giggling and drinking from green decanters.

Party-goers, I thought. Most of the city probably slept at this late hour. I breathed a sigh of relief when they were gone, and looked around. A man stood in front of me! I drew back my spear—so did he—and realized it was my own reflection. Ragged leathers, soiled and tearing at the seams. Dark hair that reached to the shoulders and curled into worried eyes. Unshaven, crouched, like a wary animal. This is primitive man, I thought. Man pushed into settlements and left to rot!

Wolf led us silently down a winding street. He was sensitive to the source of the power and it directed his steps. As I looked at the buildings I realized they were not really transparent—only the lights in an outer wall gave them that appearance. So Bear would have been disappointed after all . . .

We heard footsteps. Wolf pushed Jaecki under an archway. I gripped my spear, wondering how I'd use it against a death-look, as three uniformed Cetis strolled toward us. They wore black silk, with silver badges on their feathered caps. Their shimmering images reflected on the street and they seemed to walk on water.

I crouched as they turned our

way. "Some damn night patrol!" I whispered. One Ceti covered a yawn and froze. He'd seen us.

"I'll take him," Wolf snarled. As I tensed to hurl my spear at another, the yawning Ceti evaporated in smoke, like an octopus leaving black ink behind. I hurled my spear and caught the second Ceti in the chest. He grunted and blood ran down the spear as he fell forward. The third Ceti had got over his shock and turned for a death-look but he caught Jaecki's spear in his throat and fell with a gurgling sound that made me think of a sinking boat. The archway above Jaecki crackled and warped from his death-look gone astray.

Wolf grabbed two dead Cetis by their feet and dragged them under the archway. I took the third. They left pools of blood behind that blotted out some of the sidewalk lights.

"See how easily the pigs die?" Wolf gloated. He yanked out the spears and handed me one.

"Only because of your power," Jaecki said. Her face was pale as she stared at the dead Cetis.

"It will serve us better when we reach the booster." Wolf handed her the other spear.

We encountered a few ships. But their drunken occupants would not have noticed us if we had been sitting next to them. So we had no further trouble.

Wolf stopped before an immense cube-shaped building in the middle of an open square. It had no lights, but was decorated with small cubes jutting from its walls. He put his hands on the glossy black metal door. It was the only metal I had seen in the city and I knew it had never been mined on Earth.

"This is it!" Wolf whispered, running his palms across the door.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. This is where the booster is housed, Jon."

There was a circular dial with numbers on the door. Wolf turned it both ways but nothing happened. We pushed, then pried with our slate knives, but the door wouldn't budge. We circled the building, prying and testing, but could find no entrance. Wolf looked up at the sheer wall and tentatively gripped a cube. I knew what he was thinking and glanced at Jaeki. She was staring at the building and biting her lip.

"NO use standing here looking," I said lightly, and wiped my hands on my leggings.

Jaeki and I tied our spears around our waists and let them dangle. I began to climb and felt the cube edges dig into my moccasins. Like flies we scaled the wall. I steeled myself against looking down and fought the rising panic in my throat. But my hand shook from one cube

to the other, and I was nearer to heaven than I would have liked.

I heard the hum of a car. A few seconds later it glided by and we froze. "That was close," I muttered. But the humming grew louder as the car circled back and approached. I saw one of the Ceti point at us. A police car! I squeezed my eyes shut and waited for eternity. It didn't come and I opened them to find smoke curling against the dome roof of the city.

I glanced at Wolf. "Glad I took you along."

We reached the roof and scrambled onto it, for the moment too drained to continue. Jaeki looked haggard. The hair over her forehead was wet. I brushed it back and she smiled half-heartedly. "We're almost there now, Jon."

I nodded and wondered if Gray Wolf or I could protect her from what lay ahead. I prayed for a way into that damn building. I didn't think I could make the climb down.

Wolf found the entrance—a narrow stairway under a hatch. He led the way. He paused at metal doors on each landing, shook his head and continued down.

Someone was singing. It sounded like the high-pitched screech of an untuned violin. An old Ceti, in coarse blue clothes, with wrinkled folds in his sagging jowls, was walking up toward us. We watched him put his

hand over a small yellow light on the door of the landing beneath us. The door slid back silently and he entered. Then it closed. We looked at each other and continued down.

We must have been below street level when Wolf stopped abruptly at a landing. He put one hand on the metal door and nodded slowly. "It's in there." My heart jumped as he covered the red light on the door and it slid back. There was a hallway on the other side and a booming noise that pounded through me. The beat of the city's heart, I thought. Pumping power to all the many parts.

We walked through the hallway and came out on a circular balcony overlooking a rotunda. A huge machine towered in its center, protected by a great glass dome. Through the glass I saw a maze of wires and coils, networks of glossy black metal. The noise was deafening.

Five Ceti were below. One sat at a table, punching buttons on a small panel. Two were at a metal wall of dials and knobs, checking each one and writing on clipboards. The other two were uniformed and sat at a table on the far side of the machine, playing a game with disks floating between them.

I TURNED to Wolf and pointed at the machine. "That must be—" I didn't have time to finish. His eyes were narrowed, his face as taut as

drawn leather. He stared at the booster with a lifetime of hate and frustration showing in the lines of his face.

We went back to the hallway. There Wolf gave us instructions for the attack. We padded quietly to the lower landing and opened the door. Jaeki sneaked up on the Ceti at the desk, spear held high. I crouched and pointed mine at the closer of the two who were checking dials. I watched him turn a dial and stare at the numbers above it. Wolf came up beside me and suddenly the third Ceti faded. Smoke billowed up. I leaped as my Ceti twisted around and dropped his board. I plunged the spear into his stomach and rolled. His scream was lost in the booster's noise as he clawed at the spearhead.

Jaeki was on her Ceti. Her spear stuck out of his shoulder as he twisted in agony and tried to turn. Wolf yelled for her to move back. She did not hear him but fought the Ceti from behind, trying to reach her knife. I pulled out an arrow, strung it and fired. His pink mouth trickled blood as he went down with his chair.

Suddenly there was fire in my leg. Searing pain tore through me. I screamed and clutched my thigh as smoke rose. Wolf had killed my dying Ceti, but not before the Ceti's death-look had burned me. I staggered to my feet. The legging still

smoldered around the blackened wound.

The two uniformed Cetis had run from behind the booster. One went up in smoke. My vision blurred as I loosed an arrow at the second one, and I only caught him in the leg. He pulled the lever of a red box on the wall before Jaeki's arrow killed him. Behind us some gauges smoldered from his last desperate death-look.

From somewhere in the building we heard the wail of the Cetis' alarm system.

"Now the game's up!" I called.

Wolf turned his attention to the booster. He clenched his fists on the glass dome. His lips were drawn back and his chest heaved with effort. The glass began to warp. "Lock the balcony door!" he yelled over his shoulder.

Jaeki ran up the hall stairs, came out on the balcony and fitted her spear through the handle of the metal door. Then she went over the rail, jumped and rolled. I felt relief as she got to her feet spryly. She had not hurt herself.

There was one entrance on this floor, a massive pair of metal doors that were probably invulnerable to the look. I limped over and bolted both doors, then leaned against the wall, feeling nauseous from pain.

Wolf had melted a hole through the glass dome, but his power had little effect on the machinery. He

shoved his arm through the opening, trying to reach the guts of the mechanism. He managed to hook one finger around a looped wire and yanked it out. The booster never missed a beat.

My heart sank. We were so close . . .

I was breathing heavily and it was hard to keep my vision clear. I heard Cetis banging on the doors and screaming. The way they hit the doors, I knew there were many of them. I looked at Jaeki, so pale and frightened, and wanted to cry.

Wolf came over. "The doors won't hold much longer," he said. He held Jaeki's shoulders. "Jaeki, I still think I can destroy the booster before they get in. But I need your help."

She looked numb, but nodded. Tears welled in her eyes. Wolf hugged her and stroked her hair. "They'll remember us, I can promise you that."

"If she stands aside, maybe they won't kill her," I said.

"And what will they do to her if she lives?"

"Wolf, you'd sacrifice your own mother to destroy that damn booster."

Jaeki pulled away from him and touched my arms with her hands. "It's all right, Jon." Her face was tear-stained. "Wolf needs me and I want to help."

I took a deep breath and nodded. "Sure. If we have to go, let's take the damn thing with us!"

Wolf told us his plan, then went back to the booster. Jaeki and I stood by the doors, ready to unlock them at his signal. The Cetus were battering them hard. The doors rattled each time they were hit.

Wolf stood directly in front of the booster, making sure that the hole could be seen from the doors. Then he began burning it out larger. He was using himself as bait. I had to admire his courage.

He lifted his arm for the signal—a lone figure, framed by that hellish machine. I prayed I'd have the courage to see it through as I gripped the bolts.

Wolf dropped his hand. I took an unsteady breath and released the bolts. Jaeki unlocked her door. Her eyes were on Wolf as the Cetus poured in, screaming their rage. A door slammed into me and I fell. A few of them rolled over me. There were twenty, thirty, scrambling through the doors.

I watched Wolf step in front of the hole in the glass. Behind the amused grin he wore for the Cetus I saw a look of quiet satisfaction as they used their death-look on him in sheer panic.

He was gone. I was overwhelmed by a crushing sense of loss. Jaeki had found her way to me and I

reached out desperately for her to touch her one last time. My hands fumbled through smoke.

But the concerted death-looks of the Cetus had accomplished what one death-look could not. The booster crackled and sizzled. Coils burned, wires smoked and twisted like steaming snakes. The deafening beat faltered, receded to a shrill whine. Sparks spewed, followed by flames.

The lights dimmed. I blinked, but they faded completely and I realized that Wolf had been right. The Cetus' total power source had been wiped out! Only the sparkling flames of the booster lit the Cetus with flashes of red light that pierced the black smoke and caught them in crumbled positions, moaning with their hands over their eyes. Then a cry of despair filled the hall, a wail of helplessness that tore from their throats and echoed across the city. Our men would be starting for the settlements.

I watched through the thickening haze and with a strange sense of detachment as the Cetus turned on me. Their shrieking lowered to snarls of pure hatred. I took out my knife and waited.

All Jaeki and I had to do was cut a couple of them. The rest turned and fled. Without their booster, the pigs had no strength and certainly no bravery.

I hope it is a beginning for my race. ●

Reading Room

LESTER DEL REY

EVERY character in any piece of fiction worth the reading partakes of the character of the author. The character may be an obverse of its creator and may not represent his/her true beliefs, of course, or he may represent only a passing interest of the writer, even one shaped by the story at hand. But inevitably he grows within the limits and the emotional framework of the writer.

However, there is one vital difference between a fictional character and his/her creator. Once set upon paper and allowed to go out into the world in print, the character is fixed. But the writer's mind continues to other limits—broader, we hope—and often to another emotional framework. Writers change, as do other independent thinkers.

Once upon a time, back in 1941, a comparatively young writer named Robert A. Heinlein set down the story of an almost immortal man whom he named Lazarus Long. Lazarus lived in the novel, *Methusalem's Children*, which turned out to be the final story placed directly in what came to be called Heinlein's Future History Series. (Two novellettes related later events, but "Universe" and its sequel were outside the regular world-line of the history.) Yet the chart of that series, when published by John W. Campbell, indicated a still later novel to come and many expected that the long-lived Lazarus Long must appear in that. Rumors appeared now and then that Heinlein was writing that novel and recently the rumors were finally con-

firmed. Heinlein was writing it—and it has appeared.

The ultimate novel of the series is now available: *Time Enough for Love*, by Robert A. Heinlein (Doubleday, \$7.95). The subtitle identifies it as “The Lives of Lazarus Long.”

Well, thirty-two years have passed since Lazarus Long first appeared and the writer is about twice as old as he was when the character was first given birth.

Most younger writers in any branch of fiction—and particularly in science fiction—write about the individual and his struggles. Heinlein did so more strongly than most of us. He championed a Korzybskian rationality of individual rights and of societies designed to permit the utmost individual freedom and privacy. In a way, Lazarus Long spelled out such freedom. He was one man alone. While other long-lived peoples of the Howard Families banded together he roamed by himself, asking no help and taking the world as he found it. And when the Howard Families collapsed before the pressures of the short-lived, it was Lazarus who stole a starship and rescued them—and kept rescuing them by his individual strength until they could return to be accepted on Earth.

Like most other writers, however, Heinlein has altered his emphasis

since that time. Older authors often tend to write with special insight about human interrelationships and the difficult problems of cooperation. This generally means that concepts of personal privacy are modified in favor of people’s living more richly together.

It would be totally ridiculous to expect to find this new novel picking up the same old Lazarus Long, unchanged after thirty-two years. The only way Heinlein could have given us essentially the same Lazarus would have been to fake his own attitudes—something he refuses to do.

Besides, in our first meeting with Lazarus, he was 213 years old, as best I can figure it—sort of in the bloom of a feisty, lusty youth. In this novel we meet him when he is 2360 years of age—since this takes place beginning in 4272. He’s old and he’s tired—in fact, he’s trying to end his own life when he is discovered and given rejuvenation treatments against his wishes.

A suicidally tired man isn’t exactly the Lazarus Long we knew before. This is a man who has been all over the galaxy and has seen and done everything for more than two millennia. Nothing has any zest for him—nothing is new any more.

Most of the book is built around two devices arising from that basic situation. The first consists of anec-

dotes from his past which are transcribed into a computer, both to give him something to do and to record the life of the oldest living human being. The second is made up of events growing out of the efforts to re-arouse his desire to live. The book contains enough pages (about 600) to include minor bits, such as extracted cute, telling, or preachy sayings of his.

The first anecdote deals with a man who was too efficient for his own good. The second is a brief account (amidst much other talk) of a time when Lazarus was running a house of prostitution on Mars (rather sentimental in its totality) with girls whose hearts were golden. These are followed by a couple of long novellettes.

One deals with Lazarus as the owner of a spaceship that trades among the stars—Lazarus is here seen as a sharp operator who takes his chances for profit. He buys a couple of slaves. The story evolves around his civilizing them, his troubles with the job until they settle down—more or less—in the restaurant business.

The other is a rather nice frontier story—and perhaps the most natural love story Heinlein has written. Lazarus has been acting as the banker on a world where he's trying to get a new human colony started. He's about to leave when he finds himself adopting a daughter and has to stick

around. She falls in love with him and together they set out as man and wife into the outback of the planet, to face true pioneering. It makes a good tale, all in all, but I'm afraid it would be less than fresh enough for even a Pioneer Tales magazine, if such existed still. The one angle of freshness here, however, is important to Lazarus and to his story. The woman refuses ever to accept the chance for rejuvenation, even though she knows he is semi-immortal and she must die of old age while he is still young. And because of this, for the first time Lazarus learns to love fully. (There are a few science fiction bits in the monsters they face, but the story really isn't science fiction. The nicest part of it all is the way Heinlein handles a mutated mule.)

A number of small bits scattered throughout the first 466 pages of the book sew up most of the threads left over from the previous Future History stories. You can discover what happened to "Slipstick" Libby, Lazarus' best friend, if you are interested—it's a rather nice tale. Also what became of the aliens on the planets met in the earlier Lazarus Long novel and what happened to the survivors of "Universe"—if you don't skip over such details in your reading. Heinlein plays fair about such matters—but barely.

The background for what goes on in the universe of 4272 is sketched

in, but with none of Heinlein's old delight in building a complex but lived-in matrix for his stories. Men have, of course, settled the worlds around other stars. Strangely, they don't seem to have found many worlds or races inimical to them. In the earlier novel the Howard Families visited two other worlds and both were hostile. The inference was that many worlds beyond Earth held dangers like the Jockerai and the Little People—but in this volume we don't hear of them. They don't serve the story here, so they don't appear.

What we now have is a love situation. Long before, Lazarus had led the Howard Families to a new world where he had set up a governing body, following rules he thought might ensure some freedom. The government is in the hands of a chairman *pro tem*, since Lazarus—as oldest or Senior—will always preside when present. When the Families find him dying they grow deeply concerned, feeling that his death may curtail their own longevity. They coddle him with a computer that talks to him and every other sort of life-giving distraction—mostly female. Sex and love—or sexual love or love-you-all sex—are the chief means of rehabilitation. (There seemed no dearth of this before—every woman has always automatically wanted the longest-lived Lazarus to make love to her and give her a child at once.

Their hunger may have been reasonable when longevity was new and uncertain in the Howards—but surely in two millennia of its extension they should have gained assurance.)

So we get oodles of loving talk—everybody joins in. There is such a plethora of “dears” that I had to train my eyes not to read them—after which the conversations read much better. Some endearments proved inescapable. After a girl named Hamadryad (sic) had been Hamadearest and Hamadarling for a while, I settled on Hamadrip in—perhaps unfair—self-defense.

I FOUND the family in *Moon is a Harsh Mistress* a rather good expression of human love and discovered a great deal genuinely loving about the Rolling Stone family. But in this novel, unfortunately, I can only assume that the endearments were meant to show the growth of real affection. They did not work for me as intended—their users struck me as people who knew nothing of real complex human love trying to mimic it.

After a major upheaval occurs on the ruling planet Lazarus and the main characters set up again on another world to carry on. And here was the chance for one splendid example of the fire and *chutzpah* (a marvelous form of hubris) of Lazarus

to take over. We learn that he outfoxed and outbluffed the overpowering female Howard behind all the trouble and got the others away by his old talents. But we are only given this in flashback and some conversation—as if the feat were of no importance.

What seems important from then on is the building of a kind of commune of love around Lazarus. Marvelous things happen—all designed to give him more love or sex or both. He acquires—and makes love to—two clone sisters and a computer converted into a human female—never missing an endearment. (He even “deared” the computer when it was only a machine.)

Finally the gang comes up with a scheme to end Lazarus’ ages-old ennui by giving him something new. (By then he hardly seems to be planning to give up living—he seems generally to be quite pleased with his house, houris, habits and harangues.) A simple way to travel back through time is discovered and he goes back to the past.

He picks 1917, a few years after he was born, and goes back where he can actually see again his original family and review his faded memories of them. He meets his mother and father, his grandfather—whom he remembers best—and even himself, a rather unpleasant little kid.

And he finds himself falling in love

with his own mother in a wild Freudian Oedipus situation. As a result of that, he gets trapped into the dirtiness, ugliness and senselessness of World War I.

This doesn’t read like science fiction, even though it could only happen in science fiction. The story here becomes two-fold. Part deals with a rich paradox of human emotions. Another part is a nostalgic looking back (for the reader) to a time when things were simpler, when the founding values of the country were clearer and the virtues surer than now. I don’t believe in the above as reality from my knowledge of people who lived through those days. But as a reader, I can’t help believing in this dream of the past as something to cherish for a while.

I found the last quarter of the book by far the best. Here I found love and sexual drives that I could accept and see working beyond bedroom endearments.

This part is called *Da Capo*, the title given in the Future History chart to the whole final novel. Interesting, but I don’t think the section was the plot considered on the chart.

The style of the book varies widely. Many of the incidents and particularly that final quarter of the book consist of what we might find in some of our favorite Heinlein—straight, direct, with the events and the dialogue moving together so well

that we never notice which is which. But a great deal of the rest of the books is interminably talky, loose and essentially uneventful—that is, events may be discussed, rather than lived. In those sections, the characters all blend together into an amorphous jell of people who seem goody rather than good and strung rather than strong.

I 'VE SPENT a great deal of time trying to evaluate this novel as honestly as I can and it hasn't been easy. It still isn't. I can't honestly recommend it, because it's both too complex and too diverse in its effectiveness for a simple recommendation. Neither can I join, with some of the disappointed who expected to rediscover the pure old-time Heinlein, in condemning the book. I can only try to prepare the readers to expect what I think they will find.

Don't look for much of the Lazarus Long we met in another tale. Some of him is here (albeit partly back-stage), but that lad was long ago and in another tale. This is not the Lazarus Long who took hold of 100,000 aimless people—but the man who was originally named Woodrow Wilson Smith and has been taken over by the souls and lives of many other people.

Don't look for the detailed worlds that Heinlein has built for us in the past—those exterior, consistent, mar-

velous worlds and social structures. The book deals mostly with structured interiors and goes little beyond what we know.

And don't look for marvelous new science and developments in the future more than 2000 years ahead, because they are only incidental to what Heinlein's interests are here.

Do expect to find a lot of "philosophical" talk piled on top of the mere attempt of people in the story to get along with each other—and be prepared not to skip it, because buried in it may well be the details of the Future History you wanted to discover.

I could wish, perhaps, that Heinlein had written a novel called *Da Capo* back sometime around—say—1950, when he was still close enough to the previous novel and the man who wrote it. And that he had now written another story to fit his current interests, without being at all entangled with old bits.

But perhaps my judgment and my wishes don't matter in this case. I suspect that Heinlein remains a man too important to our field for the readers to miss this book. So read it—now or when it appears in soft covers—but please read it without expectations of straight continuity from what happened thirty-two years earlier.

If you want to avoid disappointment. ●



THE MERCHANT

LARRY EISENBERG

The strangers came with gifts—but what did they propose to take away?

I WAS IN THE President's office trying to steady his nerves and dispel his sense of persecution when a phone call was put through directly to his desk. He listened for a while, unusually silent, eyes darting about. Then he barked a few short questions into the phone before handing it over to me.

"What's this all about, Mr. President?" I asked.

His mouth twitched.

"I'm not sure," he said. His brow

was damp with cold sweat. "He claims to be General Mackay."

I took the phone and listened.

It was General Mackay, all right. I recognized the voice. He was calling from the Ice River Air Base in Montana and he swore an extra-terrestrial spaceship had landed.

I began to snicker. "Is this a practical joke?"

The President grabbed hold of my shirt collar. "I won't be laughed at," he muttered into my ear.

Between the President complaining and this Air brass spouting about creatures from outer space I nearly slipped my moorings.

"For God's sake, General, what do they look like?"

"Well, I not only saw one," he said, "I've talked to it. It has a kind of luminescent glow but no body that I can see."

At this point the President snatched the phone from my hand and slammed it back on the cradle.

"What do you make of all this?" he asked, eyes big as silver dollars.

"I think the general's brains have boiled over. The Air Force has been under a terrible strain lately, what with not being able to drop nuclear bombs. The general must have broken under the tension."

"I'm frightened," said the President. "Maybe that was the general calling and maybe it was a Sovcom agent trying to make me

panic. I want you to go to Ice River and find out. Then come right back here and report in person."

Hearing the edge to his voice I didn't wait for further instructions.

Three hours later I reached the Air Force base at Ice River. General Mackay was waiting there for me, creases missing from his trousers, cap awry, eyes numb with excitement.

On our way to the landing site he outlined what had happened.

"At 0300 this morning a fireball was observed about fifty miles from here near Pioneer Falls. The local sheriff, after he'd received a dozen phone calls, decided to investigate. He drove his station wagon all over the terrain for an hour before he sighted this glowing oval disk in a frozen cow pasture."

"How big a disk?"

"About five, maybe six feet high," said the general. "The sheriff approached it warily, sniffing fire and brimstone, he says, and holding on to a small pocket Bible that he keeps in his breast pocket. He keeps it there so it will be over his heart. Bibles have been known to stop bullets, you see—"

"Goddamn it, General," I snapped, "can't you cut out all the details and get down to the raw meat?"

The general flushed and resumed his story.

"The sheriff heard what sounded like a human voice coming from inside the disk and decided that he'd gone as far as he was going to. He hustled back to his car, radioed the State Police. They notified the Air Force at Ice River. I was roused out of bed, pretty damn sore and ready to bust the idiot who had concocted this insane story."

"And then you found out it wasn't insane?"

"Come see for yourself," said the general. "I've got a jeep ready to take you to the landing site."

"What about the spaceship?"

"There's a guard surrounding it. Our visitor is now waiting patiently to talk to you. I got word to him that you're the personal representative of the President." That was all Mackay would tell me. "I want your impressions to be unbiased," he said.

I WAS still annoyed and skeptical when we pulled up to the cow pasture where the alleged space vehicle had landed. There was a peculiar odor in the air and there was something sitting in the pasture. It was barely visible in the moonlight, just an amorphous grayish-white mass. The military guard parted and we drove up slowly, right to the edge of the ship. General Mackay stepped outside and called a greet-

ing. Just ahead of us a flickering glow appeared.

"That's our guest," whispered the general.

"My name is Wade Holcomb," I called out to no one in particular, feeling like an idiot. "I represent our President and I wish to talk to you in his name."

The glow seemed to hover and then moved closer to me. My eye caught a flash of metal; I stepped back. The general dropped his hand reassuringly to my shoulder.

"What the hell is that?" I asked.

"Just a box," said the general. "Don't panic."

"I have come in peace," said a soft voice. "This box harbors a transducer which enables me to communicate with you. By profession I am a Merchant and my four colleagues within the vessel are sales assistants. We have come from a planet of the star which you call Mekta in the constellation Ursa Major. Our sole purpose is commercial in nature. We wish to exchange goods."

I began to laugh. Tension, I guess.

"Maybe they expect to buy America for beads and trinkets," I muttered to General Mackay.

He simply shrugged.

Turning back to the box, I said, "I'm not certain we have anything in our country to interest you, but

I know one thing for sure. You may be the answer to our prayers.”

After more talk we agreed to arrange a meeting with the President and perhaps his Secretary of Commerce. Then I flew right back to the White House.

The President jumped out of his seat when he saw me.

“Are they for real?” he asked.

His fingernails seemed to have edged down to the skin line. I grinned at him.

“I have something to tell you that should please you, sir. It occurs to me that with the help of our outer-space friends we may have the answer to the nuclear stalemate. What a great stroke of luck that they landed on our side of the world and not the other! It puts us in position to leapfrog over the entire balance of power.”

The President’s eyes, normally oyster-like in appearance, gleamed for the first time in months.

“Maybe,” he said softly, his throat muscles working as though a savory dinner were being heaped in front of him. “But before I raise my hopes let me eyeball this planetary freak.”

“He may be freaklike in aspect,” I warned, “but he makes a lot of sense. We’d better proceed cautiously in our dealings with him. In my opinion he and his buddies really have come for purposes of trade.

I’m just wondering what we can offer them in return.”

“I’m on my toes,” said the President. “Whatever they try, I won’t lower my guard.”

THE arrival of the space visitors was kept absolutely secret. Rumors did float about the country and all were denied vigorously by authoritative spokesmen. One persistent newspaper columnist found himself in protective custody, unable to draw bail, which seemed to have a salutary effect on other journalists.

In the meantime I was grappling with the problem of how to smuggle the Merchant of Mekta into the White House. After much discussion it was finally decided, instead, to take the President to the spaceship in Pioneer Falls. He was in knots all through the flight and required constant reassurance that the Merchant would not be a threat to his life. As he repeated the same questions over and over again my good humor wore thin.

But when we landed the President seemed to pull himself together. He said nothing at all as we drove to the cow pasture and when the spaceship finally materialized before his eyes he nodded confidently as though all his preconceptions had been confirmed.

“I want Wade, General Mackay

and myself, nobody else, to talk to this creature," he said. "But see that we're closely guarded."

There was some grumbling among the military staff members but no one was willing to buck the President on the issue. The introduction to the Merchant went off well. The President flashed all of his city-lawyer charm, even forcing his dewlaps back into a semblance of a smile. He welcomed the Merchant and his aides with a flowery speech filled with brilliant phrases like "our hearts brim over" and "it is a rare pleasure indeed."

"And now," he concluded, "we must come down to the mundane matters that concern our little world. What did you have in mind when you talked about trading?"

"It is somewhat difficult to say," answered the Merchant. "We are an advanced people. We can fabricate objects and machinery of the greatest complexity. Our community has no material needs. What we are looking for is that which is unique—one-of-a-kind art objects, animals or even handmade jewelry. In other words, we seek what we cannot duplicate. We are most inquisitive, always thirsting for novelties."

"So are we," said the President. "We're pretty clever ourselves and I'm sure we make some unusual gadgets that you'd want to take

home with you. But what can you give us in return?"

"As an example," said the Merchant, "let me show you a unique material."

A long glistening tube seemed to emerge from nowhere and flowed toward us.

"Pick it up, Mr. Holcomb," said the Merchant.

I did. It was a transparent material, hard to the touch and light as a feather. I passed it over to the President, who seemed quite unimpressed.

"We can supply you with unlimited quantities of this material in any desired shape," said the Merchant. "It has some quite desirable properties. It resists impact well, is chemically nonreactive and absolutely leakproof. You may find it ideal for construction purposes."

"Don't you have any weapons?" asked the President.

There was a pronounced silence from the Merchant. Then:

"We will not deal in weapons under any circumstances."

"Why not?" asked the President.

I tugged at his sleeve. "Mr. President, let me talk to you a minute."

"Not just yet," he said. "I want to pursue this weapons question."

I ignored protocol and whispered into his ear. "Don't you see? This material he's showing us may be bomb-resistant. Suppose it's imper-

vious to nuclear weapons? It would break the nuclear deadlock!"

"Too iffy," said the President. "Let's try it my way first."

"Please," I begged. "Give it a chance."

The President pondered a moment and then, though reluctantly, he acceded.

I turned to the Merchant. "Would you object if we suspended our talks for a few days? We'd like to conduct some engineering tests on this material you've shown us."

"By all means," said the Merchant, and after some formal expressions of good will we parted.

THE test results were exciting beyond belief. The material was impervious even to nuclear explosions. When I brought this information to the President he finally got my point.

"If we build above-ground shelters of this stuff," he mused, "we would be on the verge of permanent peace for the first time in the history of mankind. I could go on the air and issue an ultimatum to our enemies without fear of retaliation. By God, Wade, you were absolutely right! This stuff may be better than any weapon he could have given us."

"I don't like to be a wet blanket, Mr. President," I said, "but we've got to handle this point with great

delicacy. If the Merchant gets wind of what we plan to do, he may not go along with us."

"None of that," said the President peevishly. "Either he'll go along with us or his ship will never leave the ground. I'll make sure of that."

"I don't see how," I started to say, but knowing the President I kept my mouth shut.

When I returned to the cow pasture to tell the Merchant of Mekta that we were delighted with his material, I brought along plans for an above-ground structure capable of housing ventilating machinery and a large population.

The Merchant seemed to be giving considerable thought to the plans. I had to wait fifteen minutes for a response.

"What do you plan to do with these structures?"

"Alleviate our severe housing shortage," I said. "Much of our population is still inadequately housed."

"What you say is probably true," said the Merchant. "And yet I know enough about your society to suspect that what you seek from these structures is some military advantage."

I sighed. "Such advantage would be purely coincidental."

"We are a pacific people," said the Merchant. "Even in self-defense

we never resort to violence. Perhaps that makes us unduly suspicious of you. What is needed is a gesture of trust in one another. Therefore if you solemnly promise that your application will be solely peaceful, our bargain can be completed."

"A sacred promise," I said, knowing full well that the ends we sought were peaceful.

THE President was elated at the news and rubbed his hands joyfully.

"Time is the important factor here," he said. "We've got to get one of these shelters fully equipped. We must find out for sure if people can live in it."

Which was exactly what we did. The Merchant furnished us with a nearly weightless, translucent tunnel section capable of housing twenty thousand people. He even provided an ingenious, atomically fueled pump mechanism to circulate and at the same time purify the atmosphere within the chamber. We gathered up four hundred volunteers to stay in the structure for a two-week period. The test proved a smashing success.

We placed an order with the Merchant for ten thousand units, in return giving him credits for an equivalent value in American goods. He and his assistants set to work at once. Week after week, fifty fully

equipped units issued from his vessel and were immediately towed by plane to different parts of the country. Our entire administrative machinery was put into high gear, and food, clothing, recreational supplies, everything we could think of, went into the shelters.

Apparently this flurry of activity went unnoticed by our enemies—a tribute to the effectiveness of our superlative counterespionage services. From time to time, a vehicle would "lose" itself in the vicinity of one of our new installations, but always an alert guard would direct it out of the neighborhood.

At the end of eight months, each of the new units was fully operational and a full session of the National Security Council was called. After more than three days of discussion the Council decided to publicize our new posture. Both the national and international press were alerted. All diplomats of the United Nations and all accredited ambassadors were sent engraved invitations to the unusual dedication ceremony to be held at Pioneer Falls.

Just before the ceremony, the President flew out to thank the Merchant and give him a list of items from which repayment would be made. I started to tell the Merchant, in terms as diplomatic as I could muster, what was now afoot.

But the President brushed me aside. He detailed exactly what he now planned to do and then waited for the Merchant's reply. It was not long in coming.

"As I feared," said the Merchant. "You never meant to keep your promise."

"But that's not true," said the President. "You, sir, seem to have missed my point. We don't seek a nuclear war. We want a peaceful world for all of us. And now we're in a position to enforce that peace."

"On what terms?"

"Let me say something," I blurted. "Our neighbors across the sea are unreliable, untrustworthy. They understand only the force of arms. We, on the other hand, are good people. We are not malicious or vindictive. We covet no territory, we threaten no lives. In fact we want everyone to have a full life, a free life. Our hands and our hearts are clean. Would you give the Sovcoms the advantage over us?"

"We never intended to change a balance of power," said the Merchant. "It is completely foreign to our code of ethics. And I am seriously disturbed that you should have used us in this way."

"I don't mean to be cynical or crassly commercial," I said, "but you still have a considerable payment coming from us. Do you remember?"

"I haven't forgotten," said the Merchant.

THE President was now in his dress rehearsal. The preliminary reading of his speech was delivered with earnestness and in a room chilled to forty degrees Fahrenheit to slow down his continual facial sweating. The room itself was in our new shelter, the one to be dedicated to peace.

One by one our military men marched in, resplendent in full dress uniform with all battle ribbons neatly displayed. A chaplain of each religion including Islam was also present. At the hand signal of the communications director, the breathtaking ceremony began. Before the entire nation and the rest of the world the President acknowledged the presence of extraterrestrial visitors. There was a good deal of agitation outside the shelter where the diplomatic corps was gathered.

The President then described in measured words the nature of the shelters the Merchant had built for us. When the President was finished he accepted a bottle of chilled champagne from one of his aides and smashed it against a wall. A ribbon was cut, and then the President, at the head of a beaming array of military figures and cabinet members, led them on a tour of the

shelter. He pointed out every detail of the living quarters, the library that included all the current best-sellers, the immaculate wash-rooms . . .

When the tour was completed, the presidential party turned to leave—and found the outer doors could not be opened.

I heard nervous chuckles as I approached the doors myself and activated each of the electrical fail-safe interlocks. None responded. There was a scuffling outside and a flurry of shots, then silence. At that point, over the community speakers in the shelter came the soothing voice of the Merchant.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “There is no danger to anyone.”

Three of the military aides began to batter at the doors.

General Mackay stopped them, yelling, “The shelter is in motion!”

“General Mackay is right,” confirmed the Merchant’s voice. “You are now being towed by my vessel. Rest assured that when we reach Mekta you will enjoy unending ease and comfort.”

There was a last desperate chance and the President took it.

“What about fair play?” he cried. “You say you don’t want us to have a military advantage over the other side. But now you strip our country of its President and military leaders.”

A hush followed. It was as if the Merchant were marshaling his thoughts.

“The self-deception of your culture is absolutely staggering,” said the Merchant. “At the very moment we landed in your nation our sister ship came down in the icy wastes of the other hemisphere. The measures taken there to keep our landing secret were apparently as effective as your own. And of course, the leaders of that region claimed to be eager for housing, as you did. It should come as no surprise to you, then, to learn that they now have an equal number of shelters and that at this very moment a good-sized contingent of their own military leaders, and their Premier, are also en route to Mekta.”

General Mackay took off his braided cap and wiped his forehead.

“God help us, we’re his prisoners.”

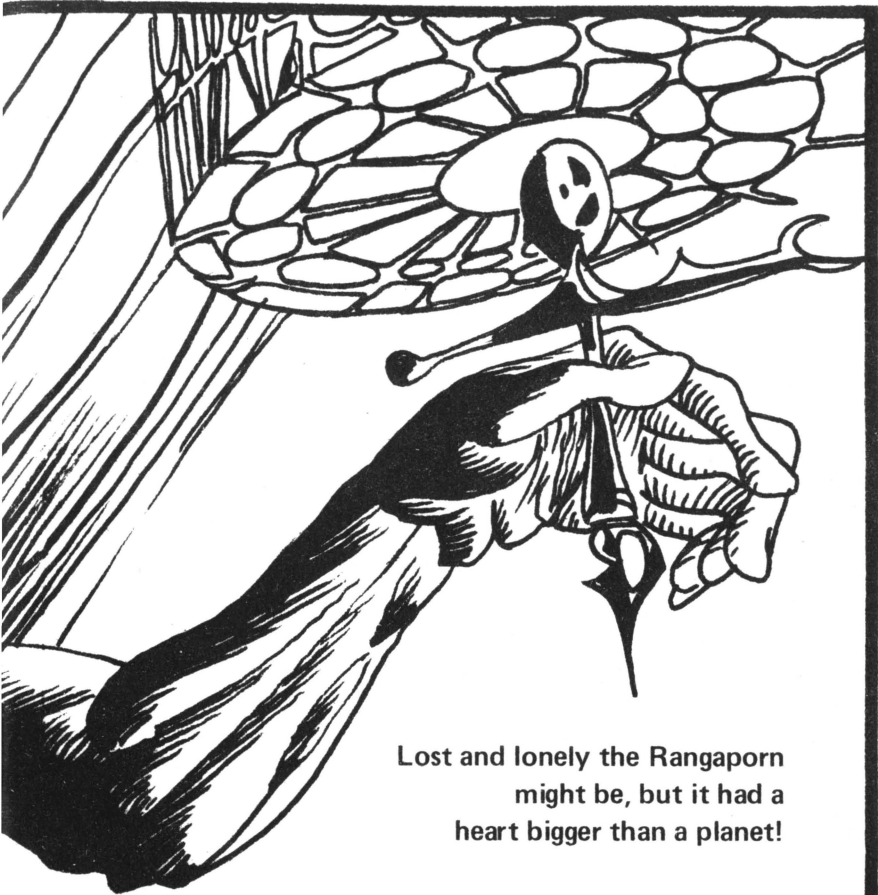
“Prisoners?” said the Merchant. “None of you are prisoners. You will live in habitats as much like your own as possible. And your freedom to roam those habitats will be unlimited. Our acquisitions are always treated in this way.”

“Acquisitions?” I yelped. “For what?”

“For the Mekta Zoo,” said the Merchant softly.

I would not care to repeat what the president said. ●





Lost and lonely the Rangaporn
might be, but it had a
heart bigger than a planet!

SPACE BOUNCE

STEPHEN TALL

THE Rangaporn of Czambozat would have been a spectacular, even an awe-inspiring sight to anyone who ever actually saw it clearly. Of course, that seems a paradox, and somewhat ridiculous in the bargain: the Rangaporn was easily nine feet tall, vast and wide as well. It should have loomed conspicuously even in a pea-soup fog.

But people see what they expect to see, and naturally nobody ever expected to see anything remotely like the Rangaporn. Yet it did walk the roads and was often visible to hunters and fishermen in the area of the Weltang Woods. The point was, it always happened to be far enough away for its size not to seem exceptional. And it always appeared to be just turning away or walking in the opposite direction, so that its face could not actually be seen even when its body was glimpsed.

Just a big, roughly dressed fellow, probably old, shuffling along with his head down. Oh, the Rangaporn was good at creating illusions like these. They furnished amusement and helped a small bit to keep back the loneliness. For the Rangaporn was lonely. It was tempted, often, to show itself to an intelligent-appearing woods prowler and try to establish communication. But it knew that it had never had a poorer idea. The Rangaporn could peek into minds and saw how irrational, how violent-

ly reactive this species that called itself man could be.

Forty times this planet had made the trip around its primary since the Rangaporn had sought haven on it. Not exactly by choice. The Rangaporn had been a victim of one of the rarest phenomena in galactic travel—a space bounce. To be sure, it knew what had happened. It suspected that somewhere—and with certain data it would not be too difficult to calculate where—another citizen of Czambozat was sitting on an alien world, bounced out of its travel channel by its brush with the Rangaporn's sub-space vehicle. And, like the Rangaporn, there it would sit until some solution occurred to it—or to the Rangaporn. If one of them could get back into the travel channel the bounce could be calculated, and the other readily discovered. The Rangaporn hoped that the other castaway was busy. At least as busy as the Rangaporn itself.

The plant was compatible. The oxygen atmosphere was pleasant. The Rangaporn could, in an emergency, live without it, but this place was homelike. The Rangaporn's own planet had an oxygen atmosphere.

Over the years the Rangaporn had made itself comfortable. To have built an extensive shelter would have been no great task but it would have been conspicuous, and sooner or later men would have discovered it.

However, in the depths of the Weltang Woods the Rangaporn had found what it wanted. There were caverns under the highest wooded hill. These the Rangaporn had detected by resonator. Then with its energy bar it had carefully cut entrances into either side of the hill. A great boulder blocked the living cavern that even if the outer entrances were found the cave would seem to end at the boulder.

In this cavern the Rangaporn had set up and reconditioned the sub-space vehicle. It had reorganized everything that the space bounce had disturbed. It did itself well in the matter of food, utilizing the local biomass and acquiring its own special stores for the time when it would leave this planet and resume its journey homeward.

The Rangaporn left no evidence of its feeding. Its matter converter made good use of fallen tree branches and leaf piles and the myriad small animals that lived in and on them. These the converter resolved into basic carbohydrates, lipids and proteins, then reassembled into tasty complexes that the Rangaporn particularly enjoyed. Indeed, the Rangaporn spent much time devising and compounding new ways to prepare foods, subjecting them to low heat after the manner of the local inhabitants. In effect, with time on its great gnarled hands, it became a gourmet cook.

It often wondered how its efforts compared with the concoctions that the natives made and seemed to prize and thrive on. It had sampled some of these when they had come to hand. During the warmer times of the year, during the plant growth seasons, people often picnicked in the Weltang Woods. Food was one of the great concerns on these occasions. The Rangaporn, watching from concealment, had no great difficulty in collecting samples of various comestibles, which it tried later in the privacy of the home cavern.

SO it was familiar with pumpkin pie (it approved), roasts of beef (excellent!), chocolate cake (somewhat cloying), and baked ham (perhaps its choice of anything it had tasted). Still, it felt that its own creations were probably superior and rather chafed at the fact that there was no opportunity to have people test them.

Concealment continued to be a necessity, if its life were to remain peaceful. And the best way to remain concealed was to give no evidence that anything alien existed in the depths of the Weltang Woods. But as it improvised one tasty dish after another, the need for appreciation of its growing skill became almost greater than the need for concealment. Almost, but not quite.

Finally it devised a small strata-

gem. Onto a platter that it had borrowed from a family outing some years before—long enough before, it presumed, that the platter would not be recognized—the Rangaporn placed a generous portion of one of its favorite concoctions, delicately scented, an appetizing green in color. The Rangaporn was partial to green.

It waited in the vicinity of a favored picnicking spot on a day particularly conducive to these outdoor eating parties. Hypersensitive ears, reinforced with a special amplifier of the Rangaporn's own design, could readily keep track of every party in the Weltang Woods. And when a family—father, mother, and three noisy children—could be heard approaching its location, the Rangaporn left the platter on a large flat rock and retired to observe their reactions. Its great broad nose twitched in anticipation. It had no doubt that its contribution to the feast would be received with delight and appreciation.

The screaming children, racing on ahead of their parents' more sedate pace, saw the platter first.

"Shucks," the older boy said. "Somebody's already here! This is my extra special favorite place, too. Shucks!"

"I don't see nobody," said his smaller brother. "Somebody just left a plate. See, the stuff looks all moldy."

"Yeah," his brother agreed. "I bet it's been there a couple of weeks—maybe a month, even."

"It's still warm." Their sister felt the platter with a pudgy, practical hand. She wrinkled her nose. "It's got a funny smell."

The Rangaporn, watching from cover, was disappointed. Still, in all honesty, it knew what the problem was. These beings, even the small ones, responded favorably only to what they knew. Give them something different and they would reject it. Of course the Rangaporn was aware that human food did not resemble the mass on the platter. Yet the odor had received special care and the creation was even better than baked ham. But this, the Rangaporn realized, was its own point of view which the family evidently didn't share.

So the Rangaporn watched without dismay when the mother scraped its offering from the platter, the better to examine the dish itself.

"This looks like Molly Pickens' old china pattern," the woman said with interest. "She must have gone off and left it. Don't know how she could have, though. Since her kids are grown up she and Ed don't go picnicking no more."

"Take it by their house," the man suggested. "Likely somebody found it and has been using it."

"I will." The woman scrubbed the

dish with a paper towel and set it aside. "Wish I had dumped that stuff farther away. It smells terrible."

The Rangaporn looked on while they ate, memorizing the appearance and especially the odors of the food. Apparently this species associated the color green in protein masses with decay. Still, it noted, they ate green leaves with avidity. They called these a salad. The ham, of course, was the flesh of a native creature, treated with various seasonings and subjected to heat.

The Rangaporn was undiscouraged, but its mettle was up. It was challenged. It knew that in nutritive value the foods it prepared were far superior to anything these beings ate. So it threw precaution to the winds. It would introduce members of the human race to some genuinely fine eating, no matter what would be required to persuade them to sample. Which showed that the Rangaporn had some traits that were closer to human than it would have cared to admit. No one particularly wishes to be equated with primitives.

It put new biomass through the matter converter, sorted the nutritive elements into categories, isolated and balanced the thirty-two vitamin complexes it had determined to be vital to human well-being. These included seven that men apparently had never discovered. Then the difficult part began. The stuff had to be attractive

to human eyes and titillating to human palates.

SO, IN addition to cook and nutritionist the Rangaporn became an artist. With a pilfered baked ham before it, it built a duplicate from carefully compounded ingredients. It imitated the very grain of the meat. The properly placed bone was a masterpiece. And when the ham was baked and glazed with a carbohydrate far tastier than sugar, stippled with cloves that smelled like cloves but were subtly different, the Rangaporn knew that it had produced a creation that no human could turn from. It would be irresistible. It was familiar, and yet blended into it were delicate flavors no ham had ever had before.

Rather than be obvious the Rangaporn chose another picnic spot on another day of the week. When a family finally approached, the Rangaporn remained until the last moment and with a tiny energy unit made sure that the offering was fragrant and piping hot.

As usual the children came first. There were only two boys this time, somewhat older than the last had been. Indeed, the voice of the larger boy frequently broke from treble to bass as was apparently customary with the male of the species as it approached maturity.

"Hey, look at this!" the big child rumbled, though the last word rose to a squeak.

The ham sat on a great blue platter, surrounded by a delicate green garnish and giving off waves of delicious odor. The Rangaporn had taken no chances that the platter would be recognized. It had constructed the platter itself. It had even made the garnish.

"Smells good." The smaller boy sniffed hungrily. "Hey Ma, look what somebody done left out here in the woods!"

"Don't touch it!" The woman and the man came bustling up. The man carried a big picnic basket. The woman had wildflowers she had picked along the way. She always liked to have flowers on the picnic table.

"What do you think, Henry?" They all stood around the flat rock, looking at that beautiful, delicious-smelling ham.

"Meant for us all right," the man said. "Only thing is, do they mean us good or bad? Lot of people we know always use this old flat rock for a table."

"Somebody's telling us something," the woman said.

The man sniffed.

"Sure smells wonderful," he said. "Never figured any ham could smell better'n yours, Bessie, but this'n comes close."

They stood for another minute,

then a grin creased the man's weather-beaten face.

"Reckon that's it," he said. "Who bakes the best ham in this end of the county? Whose ham takes the blue ribbon at the fair every year?"

"Ma's!" the boys said in unison.

The man heaved the picnic basket up beside the ham.

"That's what somebody's tellin' you, Bessie. She's givin' you fair warning that you ain't champion no more."

He waved an arm.

"Spread out, boys, and beat the bushes. This ham's still nice and hot. Whoever left it ain't far away."

The boys obeyed with enthusiasm, but they had been assigned an impossible task. Huge and gnarled and broad though it was, the Rangaporn simply turned itself sideways, delicately adjusted the attention of the busy searchers, and somehow they overlooked it. In a few minutes they returned, panting and hungry, to the picnic spread out on the flat rock. The ham sat in the center.

"They got away, Pa. Ain't nobody out there now. Are we going to eat the ham?"

"Might as well," their father decided. "They left it for us. And Ma better know what she's up against at the fair, come fall."

The Rangaporn had no fault to find with the reception its creation got this time. Everyone had sec-

onds—and thirds. The mound of crisp fried chicken that was to have been the feature of the feast went almost untouched. And the spoken compliments were as gratifying as the hearty eating.

"I can't study out," the woman said, "just what makes it different. Some new herbs, most likely. The flavor isn't just from the way the meat's prepared. Never tasted anything exactly like it."

"Tastes like I want more," the older boy said. He held out his paper plate.

"Just one slice, Hank." He was Henry Junior, of course. "No sense making yourself sick. There'll be some with your eggs in the morning."

Hank filled his mouth. "If I could find out who fixed this it'd help you out, wouldn't it, Ma?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full, son. 'Course I'd like to know who baked the ham."

"I'm a pretty good tracker," the boy boasted. "I can run'em down if anybody can."

"Glad you think so well of yourself," his father said dryly. "Just let us know. Any time'll do."

THE Rangaporn looked on with tolerant interest as the two boys ranged the woods after the bounteous meal. The younger one soon tired. He returned to the picnic site,

where his mother sat nodding in her canvas chair and his father snored in the string hammock he had slung between two trees.

"Hank thinks he's a Injun," the little boy said. "He ain't going to find nobody to track."

He seated himself at the foot of a tree and began to practice mumbly-peg-with his new pocketknife. Presently he too slept, as people do on fine summer afternoons.

The Rangaporn's hypersensitive hearing recorded the little boy's remark, though it was watching Hank's dogged search. It admired the persistence of the gangling, stringy redhead who probably should have been taking an afternoon nap himself. It seemed a shame that he shouldn't find anything at all.

The Rangaporn acted on whim. It drifted like a shadow to a little glade in the path of the searching boy. In a bare spot it spread some dust smoothly, and then carefully planted one foot in the middle of it. As he crossed the glade Hank somehow did not notice the Rangaporn standing behind a tree. But the dust patch caught the boy's eye. In a moment he was looking down at the fresh track, vast and broad, each of the seven toes perfectly outlined.

It pleased the Rangaporn that there was no panic in Hank's active mind. Instead, there was a steady, shrewd fitting together of facts. And

receptiveness that the Rangaporn had not encountered before in all the human minds it had peeked into. This boy was different. He was curious. He would believe the truth. And he would understand why other people would not believe.

The boy searched carefully around the big track, but the Rangaporn could sense that he expected to find nothing more. He stared intently into the woods in all directions. He looked almost directly at the Rangaporn but saw nothing, for his vision was clouded by a shield that the human race would not be able to understand for millenia. If ever.

"Pa wouldn't believe this," the redhead muttered aloud. And deeply—for once his voice did not break. "Like as not, if I brought him to see, wouldn't be nothin' here anyhow. Don't nothin' leave just one track."

He walked slowly back to the picnic spot, lost in thought, and the Rangaporn's mind followed him approvingly. The Rangaporn had decided. Its loneliness and its need to share thoughts with another intelligent being finally justified the risk. The boy had connected the ham and the track. And he had known that to his father this would all be nonsense.

"If he returns," mused the Rangaporn, "we'll talk. He will learn, and I will be less lonely. I'll give some thought to the food he'd like."

It had never heard the human adage that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach, but the Rangaporn knew the place of food in the concerns of a growing boy. The matter converter processed more biomass, the Rangaporn improvised busily and happily, and the air in the cavern under the highest Weltang hill was laden with strange and delicious aromas.

The boy did return. He came alone, and he headed straight for the picnic spot. It was vacation time from school. He often wandered far and wide. His parents thought nothing of it. Besides, more and more he was being allowed to be responsible for himself. He was fourteen, and daily his voice broke less often.

THE Rangaporn was prepared for him. As a final test it left several of its broad footprints in dusty patches in the picnic glade. Hank found them and studied them carefully. The Rangaporn could detect neither fear nor apprehension in the boy's mind. Just interest and curiosity.

"Whatever it is, it's big." He looked from the tracks to the surrounding woods but there was nothing to see. "It's got sense. That was the best ham we ever had." He sat on the large flat rock. "It don't mean me no harm." Then he raised his head and sniffed; another mouth-watering

odor came drifting on the breeze.

The Rangaporn was convinced, now, that it was making no mistake. It emerged from the trees across the glade from the boy, striding forward slowly, a steaming dish in one tremendous hand, a cool and fresh-smelling salad in the other. Anxiously its mind scanned that of the boy for panic reactions, for signs of revulsion. It had shown itself at a distance to allow Hank time to adjust.

It needn't have worried. The boy watched it approach, his curiosity burning steadily, his nose appreciating the fragrances that wafted to him from the food. The Rangaporn halted several yards away so that Hank might study the towering nine feet of burly gnarled body, the great flat feet, the broad-nosed, wide-mouthed face, the three strange oval eyes strung across the lowering forehead.

"Since you were interested enough to return I felt that I should provide the refreshment." The Rangaporn's soft, singing voice was in complete contrast to its terrifying appearance.

The boy stared at it in silence for a moment. Then: "That was a plumb good ham," he said.

"I am pleased that you enjoyed it." The beautiful sounds rolled from the wide, thin-lipped mouth. "It was a challenge to prepare."

The boy grinned.

"Ma'd like to know how you fixed

it, I bet. She figgers one of the neighbors has got a better recipe than hers."

"That might be arranged." The Rangaporn walked gingerly over to the rock and set down the dishes. But the boy showed no fear. He didn't shrink away from the bulk of this alien creature, now almost beside him. The Rangaporn was gratified.

"You will have to take the information to your mother," it said. "I'm sure she wouldn't care to interview me."

"Where would I tell her I got it?"

"A point," the Rangaporn admitted. "A very good point. We'll give the matter some thought."

From the baggy, voluminous travesty of human garments it wore the Rangaporn produced two plates and two sets of silverware, each rolled in a snowy napkin, followed by two goblets and a carafe of clear, sparkling liquid.

"Spring water," it explained. "For the growing young, there is nothing better with food."

Somehow the Rangaporn made itself comfortable on the ground beside the flat rock. Deftly it heaped the two plates with what appeared to be meat from the steaming dish—meat covered with a pungent green sauce and accompanied by plenty of salad. It passed a plate to the boy.

"See if this is palatable. The flavor is a conceit of mine."

Hank sniffed. "Smells good. I could smell it all the way across the clearin'." He took a bite and chewed. A beatific expression grew on his freckled face.

"Man, this is eatin'!"

"I am pleased that you like it," the Rangaporn said. "I had hoped that you would." It tucked a portion into its own wide mouth, revolved its dentures briefly in the fashion of its kind, and swallowed. The boy watched with fascination.

"You don't belong here," he said bluntly. "I never seen any—" he hesitated, "—body that looked like you. Not anywhere. But," he added, "you sure can cook!"

The Rangaporn's wide mouth grew wider and the three strange eyes gleamed.

"It is good to be appreciated," it sighed. "It has been so long."

HANK ate hungrily. The Rangaporn marveled at the peace in the boy's mind, at the faith that, in spite of its size and appearance, the Rangaporn meant no harm. Hank seemed completely at ease.

"You ain't been around here long," he said when his plate was empty. "Big as you are, somebody would have seen you sure."

"Unfortunately, neither statement is correct," said the Rangaporn. "I have been here many years. It has

not been too difficult to remain unseen. But it has been lonely."

"How come you're hidin' out? But I guess that's a silly question, ain't it? You don't look much like folks."

The Rangaporn nodded.

"Correct. Suppose anyone you know, your father or his friends or neighbors, were suddenly to meet me in these woods. What would they do?"

"Run like anything, I reckon," Hank admitted. "Or else take a shot at you if they had a gun along."

"And then come later in force to search for me. It has seemed wiser to make no contacts. More peaceful, anyway. And I have no love of turmoil or excitement. My life has always been gracious and tranquil, as befits a Rangaporn."

"A what?"

"I am the Rangaporn of Czambotat." There was an almost regal pride in the dulcet, musical tones. "Somewhere, at a distance into the galaxy that you would find hard to comprehend, it is a name with meaning. Somewhere, many beings are concerned about the fortunes—or the fate—of the Rangaporn, of me."

The boy studied the huge form reflectively.

"If you was able to get here, they oughta be able to find you."

"A good point," said the Rangaporn approvingly. "Without doubt they are trying. My subspace traverse

was a standard one, but there is no way to determine at what point I deviated from it. Therefore search is futile."

"Are you tryin' to tell me you come here from somewhere else than this earth? From out in space, farther than Mars? Farther than the astronauts have been? Don't nobody believe stuff like that."

"You can believe it," the Rangaporn said. "That is why I have shown myself to you and to no other. Your mind is freer, a bit more open, even though you are only a boy. You have said that I do not appear human, and of course I am not. You will believe that. You may not understand, but you will believe."

"You ain't from around here, that's sure," Hank said. "But if you're stuck here you might as well get to know people. I could help you with that."

"You are idealistic." The Rangaporn's broad face projected a sort of weary sadness. "Unfortunately I know your species. I would be regarded as strange—a freak. Many kinds of evil would be attributed to me by the less intelligent. I prefer to wait. There is still one chance that I may, eventually, leave for home."

The Rangaporn had speculated much on that one chance. A remote possibility, but valid, The subspace vehicle whose collision course with the Rangaporn's had caused the

space bounce had also been deflected. It would have sought the nearest compatible solid mass, the nearest planet. Such safety features were built into every vehicle. Perhaps the other victim of the space bounce had found haven in this same system. The Rangaporn had noted that there were nine planets here. Few systems had so many.

It tried to convey these things to the boy and could feel Hank's belief grow, though the details themselves meant little to him.

"My angle of bounce from the subspace channel was recorded by my computer," the Rangaporn explained. "However, my distance and direction are unknown. Were it possible to contact the other member of my species, whose vehicle collided with mine and whose angle of bounce would also be known, we could then relocate the subspace channel. Only in the channel can our vehicles take us home."

HANK eyed the big form thoughtfully, while his mind chewed on the problem.

"What are you doin' about it?" he inquired.

"The direct approach," the Rangaporn said wryly. "Regretfully, very little. I project distress signals at a given time each day, but these do not have subspace potential. The only possible listener would be my fellow

in distress, from the other vehicle. If his capacity to communicate were damaged by the bounce he may not hear or, hearing, may not be able to reply."

"What could he do, if he could hear you but couldn't answer?"

"Within this system, he might come to me. But from even the nearest star system the distance is great."

"If you got a spaceship, like you say," Hank's doubt was obvious, "couldn't you look for him?"

"I could, within the system," the Rangaporn admitted, "but it would entail physical search of eight uncomfortable planets despite the short-range detection devices I have. And the probability of his being on any of them at all is relatively low."

"So you figger your best bet is just to wait. S'pose nobody never comes?"

"Eventually I would certainly look for him," said the Rangaporn. "But I am young yet. I have been here only forty of your years. And I know that the concern for me is great."

Still, the Rangaporn was thinking with regret of those forty years. Its life span would be in the thousands of such units, but this time of life was special. And for a reason that Hank would have found hard to believe.

The boy came often that summer. Always the Rangaporn had food,

strange, savory and different, and Hank thrived on it as no human young had thrived since the beginning of his race—never before had nutrition been so perfect. The Rangaporn reveled in his company after those years of solitude and became almost content.

One day Hank took home a page of white paper covered with beautiful flowing green script, a careful detailing of the preparation of the ham. The only difference between this recipe and the Rangaporn's was that this recipe started with a real ham.

"Found it stuck on a tree," he told his mother. "Meant for you. Ain't no doubt about that. They left it for me to find."

"Hank," the woman said seriously. "do you know who fixed that ham?"

"Maybe," the boy evaded. "Anyhow, I got my s'picions." He grinned mysteriously and his mother relaxed. Hank was a good boy. She trusted him. He was enjoying himself, and sooner or later she'd find out who her competitor was.

When the Rangaporn was convinced that Hank was dependable, that the security of its home under the Weltang hill would not be in jeopardy, it took the boy to see the cavern. The Rangaporn enjoyed his awe and wonder. But there was something solid and sturdy about this boy that allowed him to adjust and accept.

"Nobody'd believe this," Hank said, "but it makes sense that such things could be."

HE examined the deceptively small metallic capsule that was the subspace vehicle. His eyes widened at the operation of the matter converter. He admired the multi-colored draperies, rich and strangely soothing, with which the Rangaporn had hung the cavern walls. Soft lights flooded the cavern from hidden sources. On a small pedestal, a compact unit of metal plates and glowing strips and rows of glistening buttons hummed softly.

"My communicator," the Rangaporn explained.

"What's this little thing that just started wiggling?"

The boy was amazed and startled as the great form of the Rangaporn suddenly loomed over him.

"It is contact!"

Gently the Rangaporn touched buttons and passed spatulate fingers delicately along the glowing strips. The little metronome-like pendulum ticked and paused and ticked again. The big fingers made other patterns. The pendulum ticked in response. And finally the Rangaporn straightened slowly. The three strange eyes were luminous.

"I have been located!" The musical voice had never been more beautiful. "In only a few of your minutes a

subspace vehicle will appear at the cavern entrance. It is the one with which my vehicle bounced. It contains another of my species, one whose communicator has not until this time been functional. He was not skilled in repair and found it necessary to duplicate the entire device, beginning with the philosophy of communication. It has been time-consuming."

Hank brushed details aside. Boylike, he was concerned with the immediate, the now.

"Oh, boy—another one like you! I'll get to see another Rangaporn, huh?"

The three glowing eyes of the Rangaporn exuded a strange excitement, and the beautiful voice seemed to ring with muted laughter. For a moment it almost reminded Hank of his mother's voice—when she was happy; when she sang.

"No, Hank, not another like me. Another of my species, but not a Rangaporn."

"Different from you? How?"

Again that impression of lilting laughter.

"You will see. Go to the cavern entrance and wait. You will find it interesting to see the vehicle appear. I will join you in moments."

There was a happy urgency to the Rangaporn's gentle voice. Hank obeyed it without thinking.

Outside, the woods were quiet

with the sleepy stillness of a late summer afternoon. Nothing stirred. There were no sounds. And the spaceship, shimmering mistily, materialized, a small metallic capsule resting full length on the forest floor. A hatch opened. A creature emerged. It was not a Rangaporn.

It strode toward the boy on short crooked legs, but its feet were large and flat and seven-toed. Its blocky body was gnarled and misshapen. Still, the wide mouth and three strange oval eyes looked familiar. It was no more than four feet tall.

THE Rangaporn watched quietly from behind the boy, monitoring his thoughts, feeling his reaction to what was to him a grotesque and ridiculous little figure strutting toward him. The Rangaporn's responses were far different. The impression of masculinity which Hank had picked up from the Rangaporn—and which no human being would have doubted for a moment—was not confirmed by the reaction of the Rangaporn. Warm and feminine and all-enveloping, her admiration flooded out toward the handsomest little male she had ever seen.

She moved from the cavern entrance, slowly and with an alien grace, and stood with Hank. Her fellow citizen stopped and stared, his three eyes gleaming. He extended his oversized, big-knuckled hands palms

up, and bowed his bullet head.

"I am Czal of Czambozat." It was a harsh, rasping, uncouth voice, but it had vigor and more than a touch of arrogance. And there was awe in it, too, and astonishment, as he added: "And you—you are the Rangaporn!"

The Rangaporn's soft voice had never been more musical.

"Czal. Our meeting is fortune-determined. Predestined. Do you believe such thoughts?"

"I believe anything you believe," the little male said gallantly.

She laid her huge splayed hand lightly on Hank's shoulder. The boy's eyes widened at the shimmering robe that had replaced her humanlike, nondescript clothing.

"This is Hank," said the Rangaporn. "His species rules this planet." She sensed the immediate surge of jealousy from the intense little Czal and her voice laughed as she added, "He is only a juvenile—and my friend. Be gracious!"

"You are fortunate, Hank," said the little male of Czambozat. "On all our home planet there is no more beautiful, no more kindly, no more wonderful being than the Rangaporn. She has no peer, and she calls you her friend. Be grateful!"

"Golly." Hank found his voice, but it broke and peaked into a treble, "I thought she was a he!"

"We respond to what we know," the Rangaporn said soothingly, be-

fore Czal's indignation could flare. "Even the smells of the food I prepared to my own taste were not pleasing to human nostrils. Only after I conformed to familiar appearance and odor patterns were my offerings enjoyed."

"Yeah." The boy looked from one to the other, then nodded his head. "You don't look like us, and I don't know what you think is pretty." Then he grinned at Czal, with a look older than his years. "I can tell you this, though. She's sure some wonderful cook!"

The little male's wide mouth grew wider; his rolling dentures showed.

"Important information," Czal said. "I am most grateful to you!"

Hank hesitated. His grin faded.

"Gee," he said. "you'll be leaving, won't you? Putting together what you both know, you can get back on the track, can't you?"

"Yes, Hank," the Rangaporn said gently. "We have the coordinates we need. We can go home." Her voice softened. "I'll miss you."

The boy looked up at the vast kindly form in the shimmering robe. He knew now why he had been reminded of his mother.

"I don't know," Hank said, "why I ever thought you was a he."

"If you had known our tongue, there would have been no doubt."

She was right, of course.

For in the graceful language of Czambozat, *Rangaporn* means *Lady*.

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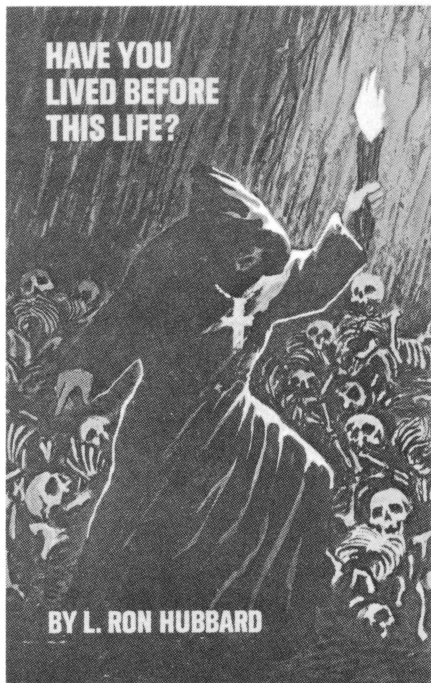
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