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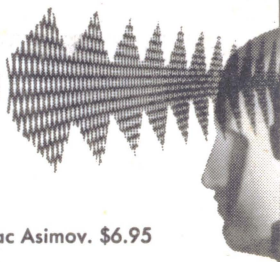
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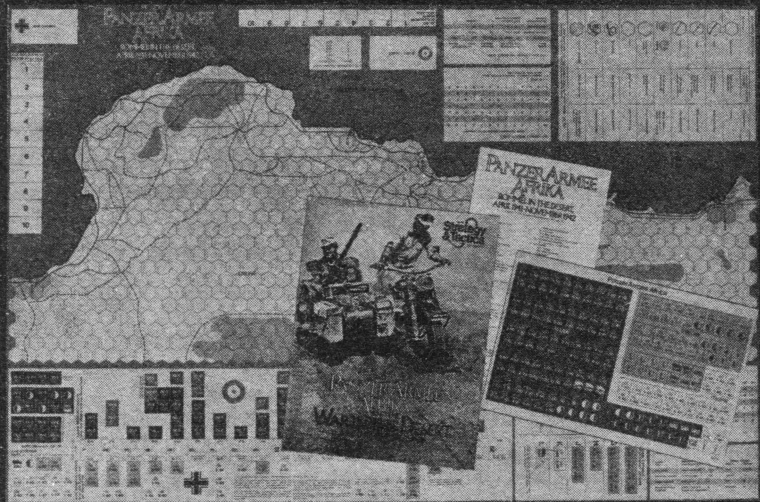
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March-April 1974

Vol. 22, No. 4

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NOVELETTES

ONE STEP AHEAD, James H. Schmitz 6

Even the mighty, protean warriors of Skand knew they could not stand before the programmed onslaught of the Terrestrial League. They didn't give up, though . . .

THE TOUCH OF YOUR HAND, Raymond F. Jones . . . 17

Neither men, nor yet the inexorable mechanisms of space-time itself could keep them apart—and when they met . . .

TAR BABY, Edward Wellen 62

Boyd Moomaw knew he must use all the powers of his human imagination to outwit this planetary intelligence—or face inevitable extinction!

WINGS OUT OF SHADOW, Fred Saberhagen 78

Human gallantry versus the cold, inhuman precision of killer-machines is the theme of this story of aeons-old interstellar war.

SHORT STORIES

TRAINING TWOFoots, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro 44
THE ICEMAN, James A. Roszell 51
PRIDE AND PRIMACY, Randall Garrett 95
TRANSIT, Lynda Isaacs 101

SERIAL (Part II of II)

THE GINGER STAR, Leigh Brackett 111

Continuing the adventures of Eric John Stark, whose savage heritage of animal strength and cunning is pitted against the merciless world of Skaith and its degenerate peoples!

FEATURES

READING ROOM, Lester del Rey 34

While giving us his opinion of several recent novels, the Master discourses on the theme of literary opportunism—a malady, he avers, to which sf is not immune.

SF CALENDAR 59

Cover by Rick Sternbach: "STARBOW,"
from THE TOUCH OF YOUR HAND

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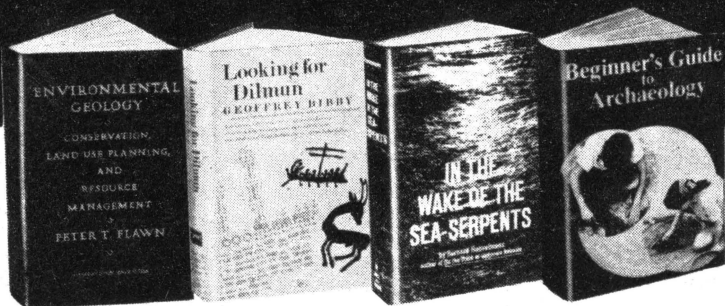
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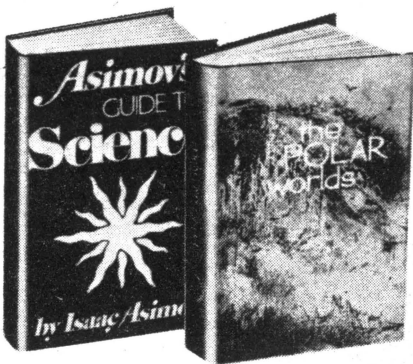
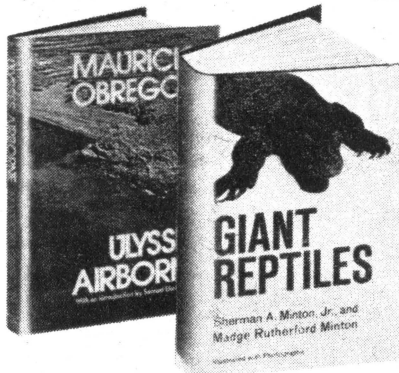
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**If you can't beat them
and you won't join them—
then what?**

ONE STEP AHEAD

JAMES H. SCHMITZ

PROGRAMMED CORPS LEAVING RIDZIN!

the newscast machines roared that morning. Many added grimly: **SKANDER WAR IMMINENT!**

To well-informed citizens of Ridzin it came as no surprise. For fifteen years, the Programmed Corps, the mightiest war-machine ever known, had been developing on their world, lending Ridzin a significance unique in the Terrestrial League. Second-rate in most respects, Ridzin had been a logical base for the formation of the Corps. No one doubted that the League

Central Government on Great Xal would have preferred the Corps to be assembled under its immediate supervision. But the jealousy of other powerful League worlds made it impossible—the Corps simply would not have come into being as a joint effort of the League if Great Xal had insisted on the point. On the other hand, the central government wouldn't have permitted its establishment on worlds like Hannaret or Lorcia, for example, worlds not too inferior to Great Xal in military strength and perennially on the verge of open rebellion. The Programmed Corps—its awesome manpower and appalling technical equipment drawn from all fourteen League worlds—must bring about, it was agreed by those in the know, in one direction or another a decisive shift in the balance of power in the League.

As it would also bring about a decisive shift in the balance of power between the Terrestrial League and that despised, remote, alien race called the Skanders. That, as all League citizens understood—having been told it regularly during the past fifteen years—was the basic and vital reason for the Programmed Corps' existence. And because its personnel were conditioned to absolute unquestioning obedience to whomever knew the commands by which to direct them, the Corps could be brought into being only on a world like Ridzin, a world which by no stretch of the

imagination could be regarded as a menace to anyone else.

And now the Programmed Corps—completed only after fifteen years of sustained effort, armed, trained, single-minded, irresistible—was shipping out!

“THE FELLOW,” visiting Inspector General Mark Treffry of Great Xal remarked in a tone of absorbed interest as he peered through a window into the compound several stories below “is magnificent!”

Dexter Monte, Treffry’s Technical Advisor, standing a prudent dozen steps farther back in the room, cleared his throat.

“You really,” the Inspector General went on, “should come over here and watch him! What incredible reaction speed!”

“I prefer,” Dexter Monte said firmly, “not to expose myself at a window while a Programmed assassin is in the area. If I might suggest—”

Treffry chuckled.

“Don’t you trust your own precautions?” he inquired. “The shields, the fields, the what-not? They’ve functioned perfectly so far.”

“So far!” Monte repeated meaningfully.

Treffry grunted.

“Thinking of poor Ulbrand, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, well,” said Treffry. “Ul-

brand was no doubt a rather better than average Technical Advisor. But let’s face it, Monte . . . he simply was not in your class! I’m not surprised they got him—whoever it is doesn’t want us on Ridzin.” He paused, added smugly, “And we have pretty fair idea of who that is, don’t we?”

“Yes,” Monte said.

“Now as for you,” Treffry went on, “I have complete confidence in your devices. That fellow down there is in a trap. But he’s certainly handling himself well while we close it! On the average how many do we lose in these attacks?”

“Seventeen-point-two men.”

“Well, our present would-be assassin seems to have accounted for at least two dozen by now! And—good heavens!” Treffry went silent a moment, staring down through the window.

“What’s going on?” Dexter Monte inquired in an uneasy tone.

“I’m sure I don’t know!” Treffry told him. “There were some odd glitters of extremely bright light. Almost like the scintillation of a diamond as you turn it.”

“Ah!” Monte said. “The assassin was near it?”

“He was near it! He’s *nowhere* now! What was it?”

Joining Treffry at the window, Monte said in great relief, “An adaptation of the Welban Vortex. I wasn’t sure it would work on a Programmed mind.”

“It worked!” Treffry assured

him. He gave the Advisor a side-long glance full of admiration. "This is the sixteenth or seventeenth such attack we've undergone, isn't it?"

"The twenty-first," Monte said.

"And always by Programmed Soldiery! They're unbelievable! I'll trust your traps while only one of them is involved. But when the entire Programmed Corps goes into action—!" The Inspector General shook his head.

"Yes," Dexter Monte said slowly. "A fearful thought."

"Clearly, somebody else—somebody not at all authorized—knows at least a few of the key commands to their minds," Treffry said. "Well, we'll be rid of these problems soon enough. When is the first carrier scheduled to lift?"

Dexter Monte glanced at his watch. "In sixteen hours, thirty-two minutes and ten seconds."

He looked at Treffry, added, "If you want to hear Governor Vinocur's official announcement of the Programmed Corps' departure from the Planet of Ridzin—he's about to go on the air."

"By all means," said Treffry. "I think I'll really enjoy hearing our good and loyal friend Vinocur explain the situation to the public!"

Planetary Governor Frank Vinocur was an old-time politician; while his speech, to which most of the adult population of Ridzin was tuned that morning, was a review of facts with which his listeners had

been familiar for over a dozen years, he made them sound like news. There were friction points between the Terrestrial League and the alien Skanders. Though widely separated in space, they had overlapping spheres of influence—overlapping only slightly so far; but the situation was bound to become more serious as time went on. Unlike other spacefaring aliens men had encountered, the Skanders did not prudently withdraw when confronted by the mighty race of Terra—had, in fact, been known on occasion to attack first. They were savage and treacherous enemies, and showed, in addition, repulsively amebic physical characteristics.

Space, Governor Vinocur declared, was not large enough for the Terrestrial League and such as the Skanders! An eventual showdown with the creatures was inevitable... and, as all knew, it was for this showdown that the Programmed Corps had been created. Ridzin could proudly say in this hour of parting that it had earned its place in history as the home of the Corps. By the wise planning of the Central Government on Great Xal, the time to strike at the Skander vermin—strike first, strike hard!—had arrived. The Programmed Corps was prepared... and victory was certain!

The speech went over well—since Ridzin clearly would be remote from the battle zones. Throughout

the day patriotic anti-Skander fervors grew in the population, reaching a high pitch when Governor Vinocur's press attaches let it become known that at the official leave-taking banquet that evening the Governor would be publicly appointed a Programmed Corps General by the Inspector General from Great Xal, Mark Treffry, who had been on Ridzin for the past year to arrange for the Corps' transfer. And when the last of the automatic transspace carriers lifted from the planet during the night hours, General Frank Vinocur would leave with it in the company of the Inspector General, to represent Ridzin and its people at the front in this stirring period of history.

That afternoon cheering crowds lined the routes along which the Programmed Corps convoys rolled toward the planet's three Trans-space Stations. They surrounded the stations themselves where giant carriers, all bearing the insignia of Great Xal, lay in dense rows like vast steel sausages. Into them marched the Programmed Corps. Eighteen thousand men with full equipment were assigned to each carrier; the men would lie in rigid, frozen sleep during the long space-flight to Great Xal. One by one, the carriers were loaded and closed their locks . . .

Some of Ridzin's citizens, noting that only the central government appeared to be involved in the oper-

ation, speculated that they might be witnessing a dramatic new turn in the Terrestrial League's internal politics. But no public mention was made of such possibilities and by the time the official banquet began the planet was in a festive mood—almost as if the war against the Skanders were already won. Governor Vinocur was duly appointed a General of the Programmed Corps while Ridzin followed the event on their tri-di screens; laudatory speeches were exchanged between him and the Inspector General; toasts and countertoasts were offered . . . Dexter Monte, the Inspector General's Technical Advisor, created a minor diplomatic flurry when, in full view of the entire planet, he refused to empty his glass in Ridzin's honor, explaining that he was not a drinking man, that alcohol had deleterious effects on his metabolism. However, he was quickly coaxed into it by Mark Treffry and Governor Vinocur, and thereafter drank dutifully, if sourly, to every toast proposed.

THEN the official rituals were over, except for the final scene on the steel loading dock within the maw of the last giant carrier left on the planet, where Governor Vinocur bade Ridzin farewell. Inspector General Treffry stood smiling at his side, Dexter Monte standing a few feet behind the two, belching every few seconds and generally showing the effects of having been forced

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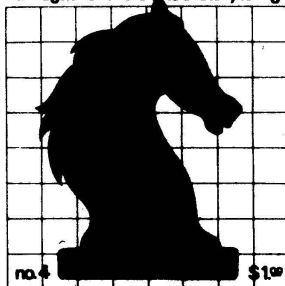
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into participating in the toasts. Vinocur spoke briefly into the tri-di cameras, concluded with a formal salute; then camera crews withdrew, glancing with silent awe at the huge bulkheads to either side of the dock behind which eighteen thousand men lay frozen in sleep. As the last of them left the carrier the loading locks slid shut with a heavy steel boom. The three men standing on the dock were alone. There was a dim humming in the air as the ship computers readied the engines for lift-off and the long flight during which there would be no waking human being to guide them. Treffry looked at his watch.

"Still half an hour," he said. "But we might as well get to our tanks at once. Feeling any better, Monte?"

"No," Dexter Monte muttered. "Worse! I'll be more than happy to settle into that tank. I'm beginning to have some difficulty holding myself together, I can tell you!"

Treffry and Vinocur glanced at each other and laughed, more loudly than the remark called for, almost as if each were enjoying a private joke; Monte blinked in brief, bleary surprise at them as he turned to follow them off to the sleep tanks.

Five minutes later, Inspector General Mark Treffry heard the sharp click with which his sleeping tank sealed itself above him. He switched on the intelcom connecting the three tanks. With no

attendants left awake in the carrier, it was essential that he and his companions monitor one another through the steps required to ensure that they would awaken safely after the trip. Governor Vinocur acknowledged at once, and some seconds later, Dexter Monte also replied. The preparations were carried out, checked, and then Treffry settled back comfortably. He already felt a faint, not unpleasant numbness in legs and arms, which was the anesthetic's first effect. By the time the sleep-cold touched him, he would not feel anything at all. But his mind was still awake and active; and the private joke which had made him laugh aloud a short while ago seemed too good now to keep to himself.

"Vinocur?" he said to the intercom.

"Yes, Treffry?" Vinocur's voice responded.

"Before we drop off," Treffry said, "I thought I'd thank you for a highly enjoyable experience." He could hardly refrain from laughing again.

"You're referring to your stay on Ridzin?" Vinocur asked politely. "We tried to make it as pleasant as possible, of course."

"I'm sure you did!" And now Treffry did laugh, huffing and snorting helplessly for almost a minute before he was able to stop. He dabbed at his eyes, and sensed that the sleep-heaviness had begun

to edge into his hands.

"Why do you laugh, Treffry?" Vinocur's voice asked.

That almost set Treffrey off again. But he choked the laughter down. If he kept giving way to it, he would be asleep before he made sure that whatever dreams came to Frank Vinocur during the long trip would not be pleasant ones. He said, "Let me tell you—"

While the Programmed Corps was being forged into a magnificent, automatically functioning weapon on Ridzin, it became obvious that its completion was awaited with as much anxiety as eagerness by a number of the worlds of the Terrestrial League. The question, of course, was who in the end would control it.

"We didn't try to stop the plotting and bargaining that went on," Treffry said. "And we didn't become involved in it. We merely took measures to ensure that the central government and Great Xal would remain always one step ahead of the conspirators."

"Conspirators?" Vinocur's voice repeated carefully over the intercom.

"Hannaret and Lorcia from the beginning, naturally!" Treffry told him. "Then, during the past two years, the governing body of Ridzin. We did our intelligence work thoroughly. Great Xal held the margin of power, so nothing else was needed. We could let the thing ripen.

"My dear fellow, that was what has made the final stages of this game so amusing! The ingenuity! The intricate patterns of deception! War fleets from Lorcia and Hannaret combining suddenly for 'joint maneuvers' in an open threat to Great Xal—and on Ridzin, in apparent desperation, ineffectual gestures at sabotage, including a series of attempted assassinations by mysteriously malfunctioning Programmed soldiers! They were not intended to succeed, of course; murdering me could not have held up the transfer of the Corps by a day. I imagine poor Ulbrand got killed by accident—or, more correctly, by the ineptness of his defenses.

"And to what end? Why, to divert our attention. Nothing more. To draw us away from the one plan which did, in fact, have a chance to succeed. But that plan has failed, too, Vinocur!"

Treffrey paused a moment. When the intercom remained silent, he went on complacently. "The Hannaret warships which were to intercept and halt our carriers on their way to Great Xal have been allowed to take up position midway on our course. But they will be joined a few days from now by twice their number of central government ships. There will be no interception, Vinocur!"

"And now, with the Programmed Corps to enforce its orders, Great Xal deals once and for all with the

malcontent worlds! The Terrestrial League will be hammered into a unit. That is the corps' only urgent and immediate task. Time enough later to turn to settling our score with the Skanders. Why we owe those obscene aliens some gratitude, as a matter of fact—if they hadn't been such a visible threat to the League it would have been impossible to bring the Corps into existence. So now, as I bid you good-night, 'General' Vinocur, I shall leave it to you to picture for yourself the warm reception awaiting you on Great Xal!"

There was silence again for a moment. Then Vinocur said, "Treffry?"

"Yes?" Treffry said, pleased. He had not really expected Vinocur to reply.

"You omitted mentioning one of our diversion attempts," the intercom told him.

"I did?" Treffry said. "What was that?"

"The interception of the carriers, of course! Too many people knew of that plan. It was almost inevitable that your intelligence would get wind of it."

Treffry started to speak, checked himself, suddenly chilled.

"To stay one step ahead in this game," Vinocur's voice told him blandly, "that, as you've indicated, was the great necessity here. To bedazzle, mislead, confuse with a variety of elaborate schemes and dodges—when, all the time, only

some very simple plan, one known to the fewest possible planners, could be successful. And that plan has succeeded, Treffry! To this moment only four men have known about it. You will now be the fifth.

"The Programmed Corps is not on its way to Great Xal, you see. Instead, the course of the carriers will take them to transspace stations on Hannaret."

Impossible, Treffry thought in instant, scornful relief. What was the fellow attempting to accomplish with such a lie? Only Ulbrand and Monte—

"Ulbrand's death," Vinocur's voice was continuing, "was no accident. He and Dexter Monte controlled the master programs of the carrier fleet's computers. We had to get Ulbrand out of the way."

"Ridiculous!" Treffry realized he had shouted, his voice thick and distorted, wondered briefly whether it was the anesthetic which made his mouth feel numb and stiffened now—or fear. "Monte!" he shouted again at the intercom.

Some seconds passed silently, as Vinocur, too, waited for Dexter Monte to respond.

"MONTE!" Treffry bellowed once more. Slurred, mumbling noises issued from the speaker then, followed by a heavy belch.

"I couldn't answer at once," Dexter Monte explained in a weak, complaining voice. "I had to pull

myself together. I don't feel at all well! If you two hadn't made me swallow those atrocious alcoholic concoctions—" He muttered indistinctly, added, "What is it?"

"You heard what that fool was saying?" Treffry demanded.

"You needn't speak so loudly!" Monte protested. "Yes, I heard him."

"Well?"

"Oh, I agreed almost a year ago to program the carriers to go to Hannaret when the time came. Is that what you want to know? It's true enough. They guaranteed me wealth, power, influence. The usual approach. Including direct blackmail, I must say! Ulbrand, incidentally, wasn't so stupid. I had to loosen his defenses to let the assassin get to him." Dexter Monte belched explosively, groaned in polite dismay. "Excuse me, gentlemen! Your infernal alcohol . . ."

Vinocur was laughing now. Treffry's thoughts seemed to whirl in confusion. Then he remembered something. He snorted.

"Monte, you're a miserable coward and a monstrous liar!" he stated. "I can believe they blackmailed you into agreeing to do what they wanted. But you're safe from them now, so you can give up the pretense! Because of course you didn't go through with it."

Vinocur abruptly stopped laughing. "He went through with it!" he growled.

Treffry chuckled. "He couldn't,

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Vinocur! He simply couldn't! Monte, like every other key man brought to Ridzin, was put through secret security tests once a month—and I supervised that operation—always. So Monte couldn't have harbored any real intentions to betray us. No human mind can deceive the testing machines . . . eh, Monte?"

Monte wearily mumbled a sentence or two.

"What did you say, Monte? Speak up!"

"I said I agree with you." Dexter Monte's voice was distinct again but quite faint. He sighed. "No human mind can deceive the testing machines."

Treffry swallowed with difficulty. The anesthetic definitely was affecting his tongue and throat now. "Are you listening, Vinocur?" he demanded. "So the Programmed Corps isn't going to Hannaret, is it, Monte?"

"No," Monte said. He added peevishly, "But you gentlemen *must* excuse me now! I really can't keep myself together any longer."

"Treffry—" Vinocur's voice had thickened, sounded heavily slurred.

"Yes?"

"Ask him—ask him whether the Programmed Corps is . . . going to Great Xal."

"What?"

"We . . . had him on . . . testing machines, too, Treffry!"

A monstrous thought swam up slowly in Treffry's mind.

"Monte!" he cried. "*Monte!*"

Odd watery whistling noises responded for some seconds from the intercom. Nothing else.

Could it be? Could the most awesome weapon ever devised, the irresistible Programmed Corps, be hurtling now, not toward Great Xal but, out of control, toward some immensely distant point in space? From which it presently would return, under new instructions, to wipe out the race which had created it?

"Monte!" This time, only Treffry's mind formed the word. The sound that came from his mouth was a heavy groan—the cold-sleep process was moving along its irreversible course. Moaning noises in the intercom indicated Vinocur was experiencing similar difficulties. Treffry's thoughts began to swirl in slow and awful confusion, revolving about one fact repeatedly mentioned in the speeches that day: the Skanders' repulsive amebic quality, their ability to force themselves out of their basic shape into another of their choosing and to maintain it for an indefinite period . . .

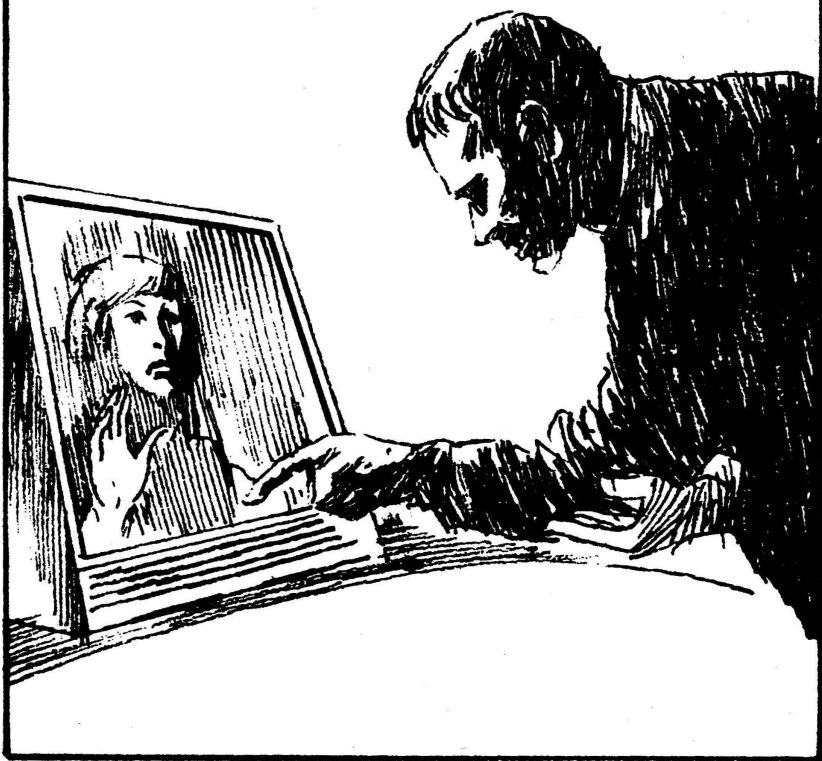
Perhaps for as long as fifteen or twenty years? Long enough to—

That thought, all thought, faded. The moaning in the intercom went on for almost another minute. Then it, too, stopped. In a silence which would remain unbroken for many months the great carrier fleet rushed toward its destination. •

THE TOUCH OF YOUR HAND

It is better to have loved.

RAYMOND F. JONES



AT THE edge of the Galaxy the *Starborn* idled at half \bar{c} , like an impatient beast on tether. At the pilot's station Jaro Mandan once again punched the com controls that should have put him on closed beam to Flight Control at Whittier Dock on Earth, 2142 A.D.

With an oath he reached to switch off the unresponsive controls, wondering how he could report an aborted Jump to Captain Heath and survive the Captain's wrath. But before his hand touched the instruments the screen finally came alive. It showed a face he had never seen before. A woman—a girl.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

She was pale and spoke with compressed lips. "Mara Summers. Controller Third Class, Whittier Dock. Who are you?"

He ignored her question. "I've been trying to raise Whittier for a full eighteen minutes. You realize, of course, this deserve a black-tab report."

"Send the orange copy to my mail station. SC31, Whittier."

She wasn't even going to attempt an excuse for her delay. He really *ought* to black-tab her. "Delays cost money."

"You're costing more. Name and mission, please."

"*Starborn*. We filed intentions

before leaving Earth two days ago."

The girl punched the tabs on her clearance console and scanned the screen. "Your request is for clearance to Sigler IV. Cargo: 30,000 tons miscellaneous instruments and tools."

"Correct. We are now twenty-three minutes late for Jump."

Mara touched another row of keys with long, swift fingers. "Correction inserted. Record flight instructions."

A red light glowed on the panel in front of him, informed Jaro that the clearance data was being fed into his computer. After a moment, the light flicked out. Jaro glanced up at the girl's tense face on the screen. "Thanks," he said curtly.

"Have a good flight, sir," she replied, icy-voiced. "Don't forget my copy of the report." Mara switched off.

The pilot turned away, cursing himself for allowing her insolence to irritate him. He really *would* black-tab her.

Behind him, his three-man pilot crew were intent on their work as the computer control readied the ship for Jump. Jaro watched his own instruments and signaled to Captain Heath on the Bridge. "Clearance inserted, sir. Forty seconds to Jump."

On the screen the Captain nodded. "Proceed."

It took a hundred-man crew to operate a giant cargo ship like the *Starborn*. Not one of them could completely hide the strain that appeared on his face. Awareness of the penalties of flight via Quadra-Space, ever present, became intense as Jump approached. It still happened that now and then a ship entered Quadra-Space and never returned. Speculations about the conditions of such entrapment were not pleasant.

Even more crushing was the recognition that the gulf separating the crews of the Starships from the rest of humanity was to widen a step further. This was the inevitable penalty the crews paid for the lives they led.

The Jump warning signal jangled. Jaro and his men watched the single blazing light in the center of the wall that would shift from red to green. Then it came, the familiar, wrenching, shearing agony that was over almost before it began. Over, but somehow enduring—for the rest of their lives.

The *Starborn's* rate of acceleration slowed and slowed as she edged ever closer to *c*. Her mighty engines whined in a higher and higher key. Then she crossed. That was Jump. The moment the speed of light was exceeded. The moment they entered the unreality of Quadra-Space. And then the ship

continued to accelerate to hundreds of times the velocity of light—insofar as concepts such as 'acceleration' and 'velocity' have meaning outside of time and space as men had always known them. Quadra-Space. A mathematical fiction until men learned to exceed the speed of light.

Crew duties were minor now. The ship was run by its grim computer brains that operated wholly outside time.

Jaro turned his eyes to the control panel after the shock of Jump had passed. There was no requirement for him to recheck with Flight Control, but he regretted having been so severe. The girl was obviously new to her job and his own impatience and anxiety about falling behind schedule had made him behave stupidly. She was probably worried sick about the threatened black-tab report.

He pressed the communication controls, and set the time pattern to Earth normal. In a moment her face appeared. She looked even more pale and drawn than before. "Whittier," she said automatically. Then she recognized him. "Oh—it's you."

Jaro grinned. "Yeah—it's me."

Mara Summers resumed her impassive mask. "*Starborn* acknowledged. What is your request?"

"My request is that we forget our

previous conversation—at least the part about black-tabbing.”

“It was justified. The delay was inexcusable.”

“How many ships did you have on your board?”

“Seventeen.”

“Your delay was justified. Am I holding you up again?”

“No. The board is clear, except for you.” Mara’s voice was tired.

“Please state your request.”

“I already have. Look—I want to apologize for being so stuffy. I’m not ordinarily like that. I was just jittery about getting a takeoff without an abort. My Captain would have exiled me to Quadra-Space for that.”

MARA smiled for the first time; a little of the tiredness left her eyes. “All right. I forgive you—and I thank you. One more black-tab in the division would have put us all back on Apprentice-status.”

Jaro was glad he had called. The girl’s job was tough enough without prima donna pilots adding to her problems.

“Are you in Quadra-Space now?” asked Mara.

Jaro nodded. “Our velocity has passed 200 c and is climbing fast.”

“You know—I’ve studied it, I talk to people like you every day; I still don’t understand it.”

Jaro smiled wryly at her phrase, “people like you.”

“I’m still human,” he said.

Mara flushed. “Oh—I didn’t mean it that way—!”

“It’s all right. Sometimes even we forget we belong.”

“I just can’t imagine what it would be like not to be able to—touch anything—anyone. It *is* that way, isn’t it?”

“It’s that way.” Jaro’s voice was flat. “If I should touch your hand we would both simply detonate—like a small atomic explosion.”

He didn’t know why he had put it that way. He glanced at her hand, her long, slender fingers lying on the desk in front of her. For the first time in the years since he’d first entered Quadra-Space he felt as if it were some unaccountable tragedy that he could not reach out and touch such a hand.

Mara was staring too, as if confronted with some sudden burden. She shook herself and smiled faintly. “We surely wouldn’t want that to happen, would we?”

Jaro smiled in agreement. “No, we certainly wouldn’t.”

“Tell me why it is,” said Mara. “I could never understand the mathematics in the classes. It went right over my head.”

“I’m not sure anyone understands it. When an object moves, its subjective time becomes shorter

with respect to the reference world. When a ship nears the speed of light a short space of ship-time equals centuries on Earth."

"I don't see, then, how the ship can ever get back to Earth at the normal time. How can we even be talking to each other now?"

"The first super-c ships never did get back. They weren't expected to, really. Then, after Quadra-Space was actually penetrated, it was found that the sign of the equations could be reversed; a return trip in both space and time was possible. The scientists aboard the second or third research ship modified their drive and returned. They died as soon as they landed. They flashed out of existence—like atomic explosions."

"Why?"

"It was found that when objects travel backward, so to speak, in Quadra-Space to return to original space and time they experience a deadly compensation. When the sign of the equations is reversed the objects accumulate a 'time-charge'. It might be likened to a charge of static electricity. Discharge takes place when a time-charged object contacts a normal one. The discharge is violent, because the build-up of time charge involves enormous energy."

"They taught us something about time discharge, but how can cargo

be sent through Quadra-Space and utilized on different worlds?"

"Time charge is cumulative and builds up only with negative passage through Quadra-Space, as when a ship returns to normal Earth and time. A single passage through Quadra-Space can be discharged by proper treatment. All cargo is treated to make it usable. But for ships and men who have made hundreds of Jumps—no. They can only be insulated. The accumulated energy of their time-charge is so great that it could not be safely released in a lifetime. So when we return to Earth the ship stays in orbit—not even entering the atmosphere while we take a shuttle down and spend our leave in luxurious—and completely insulated—quarters. We are prisoners of the life we've chosen."

Mara shuddered. "Why did you choose it?"

Jaro's eyes focused on some infinite distance and he smiled with hidden pleasure. "To walk where no other man has walked. To see worlds no other man has seen. There are reasons, Mara. Good reasons."

"If you say so—it sounds kind of horrible from here."

"Not really. I'll tell you more about it another time. I've got to clear the channel now, or I'll get a black-tab myself for holding it. It's

been nice talking with you, Mara."

The girl nodded. "I hope there will be another time."

And then, just before he cut off, while she was still smiling wistfully, he snapped a picture of her with the recorder built into the screen. He pulled the print out of the back of the machine. The holographic image returned his regard. Mara's wistful smile was fixed; unchanging forever.

He slipped the picture into his shirt pocket, glancing self-consciously about. But all the other crewmen had long since left their posts.

HE WALKED down the long corridor, past the crew's quarters toward the recreation area in the center of the ship. Here already had begun the gaiety that marked the days of transition through Quadra-Space—a gaiety that had always seemed forced to Jaro. Now more than ever. The men and women crew-members were already dancing and drinking as if compelled to forget the unreal reality of Quadra-Space.

A woman named Rosilla spied Jaro from across the room. She held out her arms and ran toward him. "Jaro! We've been waiting for you! How can we have a party without Jaro?"

Her husky arms embraced him

fiercely, but he slowly pushed her warm, strong body from him. He inhaled the dense perfume of her black hair and found it stifling.

"You can get along without me this time," he said.

"What you need is a drink! Here's some of that stuff we found on Porteuse on our last Jump. It'll take the ice out of your backbone."

"And the backbone with it. You'd better ease off that stuff."

"Only the Captain can tell Rosilla what to do or not to do!"

"Have it your way, honey. I'm sitting this one out in my quarters."

"I'll come with you."

"No—I'd rather be alone for now."

Rosilla's eyes glared angrily. "You sick, Jaro?"

"Could be," he said. "It just could be."

He shut the door behind him and fell onto the bed, lay staring at the ceiling. His quarters, like everyone else's, were luxurious. The entertainment center could furnish any audio or visual experience he desired.

Except one. He pulled the picture from his shirt pocket and held it up. Mara Summers. No one had ever moved him this way before. He must be losing his damper-bars, he thought. How could he let his interest be caught by such a casual contact?

Casual—and futile. It was no lie that if he ever touched her hand they would both disappear in an actinic glare. He could never even see her directly with his eyes.

He smiled at the image and propped the picture above his bed. Mara, Mara, whom I can never see, never touch. Never really know. Who are you, Mara? What are you like, Mara?

He rolled over and turned his face to the ceiling again. He had chosen this life deliberately and didn't regret it. No other life offered so much. More worlds than a man could explore in a lifetime. More experience than other men could dream of. All creation was his.

For all this he'd had to exchange only one small planet out of an infinity of worlds. It was just that it happened to be called Earth, and he'd once called it home. And it held Mara Summers.

He had seen other men go through periods like this, times when they grew lonely for what they had given up. One guy had been obsessed with wanting to see his old pet dog. Another wanted to see the house he'd lived in as a kid. Others pined for old loves.

It hit the men the worst, and the women comforted them out of their doldrums.

Jaro knew he could ride it out.

1974 may well be remembered as the year of Alan Dean Foster, or so it is beginning to seem here at Ballantine where we have three of his books scheduled within five months. Not bad for a young writer whose very first book was published as recently as 1972. Just off the press is **LUANA**, Alan's adaptation of the jungle extravaganza now playing in movie theaters around and about the country. Luana, something of a female Tarzan, and her family—a lion, a tiger, and a chimp—are vividly brought to life on the cover by the inimitable Frazetta. Watch for **LUANA**; she's a gal you're not likely to forget!

Alan's other books already scheduled include: **ICERIGGER**, a March sf adventure in which he returns to the marvelously imaginative galaxy of his first novel **THE TAR-AIYM kRANG**; and in June **STAR TREK LOG ONE**, first book in a series based on the successful new animated Star Trek series. But much more about those two as they are published.

For his next project Alan has suggested scripting "Deep Throat"—an X-rated Barsoom adventure. Hmmm . . .



So much for a look into our future. Now back to the real world and more February books. ". . . a stunning debut by a new science fiction talent." That's what *Publishers Weekly* says about **WALK TO THE**

END OF THE WORLD, by Suzy McKee Charnas. This unusually powerful first novel will surely be a contender—we think—when awards are voted. “Not only are the prose, atmosphere, and credibility of the post-holocaust story superior,” *PW* continues, “but [the book] boldly advances into the convoluted area of sex, a place where most sf writers are either timid or puerile.” Who could ask for a better review? And, good news, Charnas has a sequel in the type-writer!



Back to the top of our sf list is **NERVES**, Lester del Rey's now-classic tale of disaster in an atomic plant. First written in 1942, this story of a nuclear reaction bursting out of control is even more devastating today. What starts out as an ordinary experiment on an ordinary day turns into a race to prevent atomic holocaust. As fuel supplies evaporate everywhere and we begin to look more to atomic power for our energy, we come closer and closer to the world del Rey wrote about. Now in its fourth big printing, **NERVES** is still a must for every sf reader. “A wholly admirable blend of prophetic thinking, warm human values and powerful narrative suspense,” said the *New York Herald Tribune* reviewer. Need we say more?



LUANA, WALK TO THE END OF THE WORLD and **NERVES**—each \$1.25—are at your bookstore or newsstand now. If you can't find them complain to the dealer and/or send \$1.25 per book, plus 25c per order for handling, to Ballantine Cash Sales, PO Box 505, Westminster, Maryland 21157.

But he was glad his nostalgia had not settled on a pet dog, or an aged grandmother. Far better a girl like Mara Summers.

He smiled at her picture again. She was undoubtedly married or otherwise committed. But that wouldn't bother his dreams—and dreams were all he would ever have of her.

Use of the communication channels for unofficial purposes was forbidden by regulation. All transmissions were recorded. But crewmen of the starships had figured ways of bypassing the spy-circuits.

A ship could have its clearance pulled for such infractions. But it was essential to morale, as Captain Heath recognized; he was a strict disciplinarian but even he closed his eyes to this.

A week later Jaro called again.

“Hello,” Mara said. She seemed shy as she recognized him now.

“Hello—is your board loaded?”

“You timed it just right. I just finished my last contact.”

And now he couldn't think of anything to say. He stared at her image, knowing that it was only a pattern of lines and dots on a silvered glass. Suddenly he longed to know the texture of her hair, the true color of her eyes. “How much longer is your shift?” he said.

“Another hour. I won't have any more traffic.”

"Do you handle only starships?"

"Yes. There are more all the time. It seems that other people think the rest of the universe is better than Earth." Then she flushed. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"I know. We're still human as I said the other day. We get lonesome for what we left behind. One of the guys was climbing the walls from wanting to see the dog he had had as a boy."

"Do you ever wish you could see the old familiar places?"

"Sure. I'd like to see the old house on Edgemont Avenue where my folks lived. I'd like to see old North High where I went to school."

"Where was that? I knew a North High once."

"Every town has one. Mine was in Jefferson, New Cal."

"I went to school in San Marcos! That's only fifty miles away—why we might even have run into each other back then."

Jaro smiled at that pleasant impossibility. "Yeah, we might. When were you there?"

"I graduated in '37."

"I guess we wouldn't have made it. I was there in—well, you were a bit after my time, that's all."

"But just think—" Mara's eyes were shining now. "If we had been there at the same time you might

have bumped into me at a game and we might have gone somewhere to eat and talk. It couldn't have happened, but it's nice to think about." She leaned her cheek against her fist. "Did you always want to be a starjumper?"

Jaro nodded. "Always."

"Don't you ever miss having . . . someone?"

"Ours is a mixed crew."

Mara looked down at her hands. "I should have remembered. They told us about that, too."

"Mara—" Jaro spoke softly. "One of the things that almost makes me wish I'd chosen a different life is that if I had I'd be able to reach out and—and touch your hand."

Mara laughed sadly. "And have us both—what was the word you used—'detonate'?"

"No. Have us walk along some quiet path at night, holding hands, watching the moon through the trees, talking."

"Stop it!" Mara's voice was almost violent. "This isn't going to get us anywhere! We're making fools of ourselves—"

"You're right. I'm sorry. Let's stick to the real world. I'm a star jumper and you're a pretty girl who'll get married and settle down and raise a family to inherit a piece of the Earth. Tell me, are you married now, or is there any one?"

"Does it make any difference? Anyway, I'm not, and there's no one. So what?"

"Don't be angry with me, Mara. We dream lonely dreams out here on the starships."

She passed a hand over her forehead. "I'm tired. I've got to clean up my books before I go. I'm glad you called."

"Yeah, sure. Maybe again sometime. Goodnight, Mara."

He cut off sharply. Never again. He was behaving no differently from the man who yearned for his pet dog of long ago. He headed for the recreation area. Maybe Rosilla would be there.

SIGLER IV was an Earth-type world having a climate of perpetual rain, inhabited by a humanoid species that had a curious technological development. They were high in mechanics but almost devoid of knowledge in chemistry and related fields. They had no metallurgy or metal machinery, but could do miracles with wood and stone. In the holds of the *Starborn* were mechanical devices of all kinds and a complete steam-electric plant for trade.

The ship had been here once before and Jaro had made friends with a half dozen of the humorless creatures and looked forward to renewing old acquaintances. But

almost from the moment he stepped off the ramp of the *Starborn* something seemed wrong. It was raining as usual, a steamy, misty rain that choked his lungs and blurred his vision. He wondered how he could ever have liked the place.

Stepping onto an alien world like Sigler involved no hazard to the Earthmen because there was no compensation for the time differential resulting from their trip from Earth, hence, no time-charge. They didn't care what time it was on Sigler IV.

Captain Heath had delegated Jaro to contact the locals. The two of them stood at the foot of the ramp, peering through the rain at the slowly approaching group of natives.

"There they are," said the Captain. "Do you recognize any of them?"

"The dead-heads all look alike."

The Captain looked at him curiously. "I thought you were buddies with this bunch."

Jaro ignored the comment and walked toward the group. He spoke a few words of the local dialect. After a long palaver he found someone who recalled the first visit. When Jaro mentioned the names of others of his former acquaintances there was a long wait in the mushy rain while they were called. It was a long and miserable day. Jaro

wished he had never seen this dank and muddy planet.

During the night he came down with fever; by morning he was delirious. The ship's surgeon, Dr. Pavan, said it was a virus indigenous to Sigler IV. His entire arsenal of antibiotics had little effect. He made Jaro as comfortable as possible in the pilot's quarters and assigned Rosilla to watch over him—since he knew she would do that anyway.

While Rosilla wasn't committed to him, she was closer to Jaro than to anyone else. But Jaro had never asked for her commitment. Others had, and Rosilla had declined them, hoping still that Jaro would someday claim her.

She didn't like the progress of Jaro's illness. Each hour he was more flushed and incoherent. She had seen too many alien diseases to believe the doctor was as sanguine as he pretended to be. She suspected he was baffled, was simply giving up on Jaro.

Then she found the picture of Mara in a cabinet drawer and understood. It was Jaro who had given up.

She saw that Mara was in a Dock Control Center and guessed her to be a new Controller. She checked *Starborn's* clearance-records and deduced Mara's name.

Rosilla had seen men die of long-

ings they could not satisfy away from the planet which gave them birth. Jaro might easily become one of them.

The Captain must know, Rosilla decided. He understood these things.

In his cabin Captain Heath listened to Rosilla as he turned the picture of Mara Summers in his hand. He understood—both Rosilla and Jaro.

"Put the picture back where you got it," he said quietly when Rosilla had finished.

"But you must do something! Jaro is dying. Maybe not from the disease, maybe not from the sickness over this girl. But together they will kill him."

"I'll have a talk with Jaro," the Captain promised.

When Rosilla was gone, the Captain checked with Dr. Pavan, who shook his head. "I've run every kind of test I know; injected him with a broad-spectrum antibiotic." The Doctor gestured to his extensive laboratory equipment. "The virus isn't particularly virulent but Jaro isn't responding."

"Could it be psychosomatic?"

Pavan shrugged. "Who knows? We're all mostly crazy, or we wouldn't be here in the first place. You know that."

Heath smiled. No other comment was necessary.

Two days later Rosilla reported Jaro was feeling better, and Captain Heath visited the patient.

"I hear you're about ready to palaver some more with our friends outside," the Captain said easily, taking a chair beside the bed.

"No, I'm not. I don't care if I never see this miserable planet again."

"Ah, well, no matter. We're making satisfactory cargo exchange. But we miss you."

"Like hell you do!"

"You're getting better, I see. But really we do. Everybody counts in this little world of ours." The Captain leaned back and stared philosophically at the ceiling. "You know, I often wonder how the starships are going to end up. We're like little planets all by ourselves, except nobody can get on and nobody can get off. We can have children here to take our places as we die. But what will happen to them? Will the *Starborn* go on, generation after generation? How will they keep it from wearing out? Its parts can't be replaced by uncharged material. I'll bet you didn't think of that when you signed on."

"No, I didn't."

"But you have to think of it now. There can never be any human contacts outside the world of this ship."

"We all know that." The Cap-

tain's sermonizing irritated Jaro. "Nobody's going to try to get off."

"Sometimes just the wanting can make a man sick. You get attached to something or someone outside."

"Like what?" Jaro demanded.

"Well—like the pretty Controller back at Whittier. That kind of wanting could make a man awfully sick."

Jaro felt a coldness in his belly. "She's nothing to me."

"I hope not. Understand that all the human beings you'll ever know are right here aboard this ship. Now, take Rosilla. She's a nice person. She'd like a permanent commitment. It wouldn't be a bad arrangement. You have no permanent attachments, and that's what makes a man think too much about the outside."

"That's not my trouble."

"Good. To make sure, we'll apply surveillance. We need you, Jaro. You're a fine pilot. We don't want you to get into trouble. We need you to train the next generation of pilots."

Jaro nodded wearily.

Heath nodded and rose to go. "Good. Get some rest now. You'll be back on your feet in no time."

Jaro closed his eyes. He felt a loneliness as immense as all the Universe. He heard the door then, opened his eyes to Rosilla.

He waited until she was by the

bed. "Where's the picture?"

She stood frozen a moment. "In the drawer," she said finally.

"Get it."

She laid the picture of Mara Summers in Jaro's hand. The pilot put it down and looked up at the woman.

"Help me, Rosilla," he said.

"How, Jaro? How can I help you?"

"Have you ever wanted anything so much that nothing else in the entire rest of the Universe mattered at all?"

Rosilla nodded, hoping he could read her heart. "Yes, I have, Jaro," she said softly.

"That's the way it is with me. Will you help me?"

He was suddenly drifting away from her at the speed of light. She felt cold inside but managed to nod. "I'll help you. What can I do?"

"I want to see Mara. I have to see her—not an image on a screen, but her—just once."

"That's impossible! You can never see her."

"There's a way. I can do it if you will help me."

"Whatever you're thinking will probably kill you. What can I do?"

SURVEILLANCE meant a constant watch by another crew member, who would report any suspect

activity on the part of the one under surveillance. It meant severe restrictions when the ship was in port, particularly on Earth. Jaro guessed Rosilla had been assigned surveillance over him. It didn't matter. He had to trust that his appeal would touch her.

Starborn's next stopover was Boro, a minor world about fifty light years from Sigler IV. The remainder of the *Starborn's* cargo was to be cached there for later transfer to more distant points, and the ship was to pick up waiting cargo for Earth. The planet had a communication relay station.

"I've got to make a call," Jaro said to Rosilla. "I can't get off the ship alone, but if Dr. Pavan agrees that I need a walk in the fresh air and you go with me I can do it. Will you talk to Pavan?"

"If the Captain ever finds out—"

"I know. Will you do it?"

"All right. So I'm crazy, too. I'll see."

"Thanks."

Jaro had been on his feet in his quarters and on the main decks for several days. He was weak, but he began to feel as if he would lick the Sigleran bug, after all. On the other hand, he was not likely to survive the obsession to see Mara, but it was something he had to do.

Rosilla obtained approval for Jaro to leave the ship. Together,

they strolled into the murky fog of Boro on the afternoon of the landing. They walked to the compound of buildings that housed the contingent of technicians and cargo handlers that manned the outpost.

Jaro nodded toward a windowless stone cube that huddled below a massive time-shifter antenna. "That must be the communications building."

The operator looked up cordially as Jaro and Rosilla entered. He didn't get many visitors.

"I'd like to send a personal message home," said Jaro.

"Earth?"

"Right."

"That'll cost you a bundle! Use your ship's channel. Nobody can afford a personal message from here."

"We're sticky about things like that on our ship. Can you get me a channel now? I can afford it."

"Whatever you say."

A crewman's pay was enormous and almost impossible to spend. Jaro had allowed his to accumulate in a bank on Earth. He wrote a check which wiped out his assets and made a sizable dent in those of the bank.

Mara should be off duty at this time. He hoped she would be home. Then, as the operator indicated the channel connection, Jaro took his place in the single, seldom-used

booth for private communication.

The screen brightened as a surprised and sleepy Mara appeared. She frowned and shook her head, disbelieving.

"Jaro! Where are you?"

"Boro. A minor planet in—it doesn't matter. Listen. I have to talk to you."

"This is a private channel. It will cost a fortune! Why didn't you call me from the ship?"

"I can't. The tapes are being monitored. Listen, I have only a few seconds. I want to see you, Mara. Not a pattern of phosphor dots, but *you*."

"Jaro, oh, *Jaro* . . ." Tears started in her eyes; declared the impossibility of what he was saying.

"No! Listen to me. There is a way. Stand at the far end of the cargo ramp at noon the day after we strike orbit. You'll be able to learn when the cargo is due. Be there when it is. I'll be on the top of the ramp, and I'll see you from there."

"No, Jaro! You can't! You know that—"

"Mara, I can. I know a way. And I've got to do it. Mara, I've got to look at you just once. Please be there. It's the only time we'll ever really see each other. Just once—"

"Jaro—"

He was cut off as she sobbed his name.

HE KNEW how he could do it. The cargo was brought down from the orbiting *Starborn* by shuttle and transferred to the discharge-chambers. There, the time-charge accumulated during the trip from Sigler IV would be discharged. Jaro intended to pass through the discharging chambers with the cargo.

It would have only a partial effect, a very small percentage, since it would kill him to try to relieve any sizable amount of his time-charge. But it would reduce his charge enough to enable him to breathe normal air without burning up—or at least to burn only slowly—for a few minutes. It would enable him to walk on the substance of Earth for a minute or two.

That's all he asked.

In those minutes he would be looking upon Mara. Not an image of light and shadow. Mara herself.

But without Rosilla's help he could not manage it. On the journey home she moved into his quarters and they published their commitment. There was quite a celebration among the crew but Jaro wasn't sure of Captain Heath's reaction. The Captain stood aside and watched Jaro with quizzical eyes.

As the *Starborn* approached Earth Jaro feigned a relapse. He retreated to his quarters and Pavan

made a cursory examination. The doctor had never understood Jaro's condition, so this new turn engendered no suspicion.

Because of his "illness," Jaro—and Rosilla—remained behind on the *Starborn* as it orbited Earth, with only a skeleton maintenance crew and cargo handlers. All the rest of the crew went down on the personnel shuttle to the insulated palace that would be their home while on Earth.

It was too easy, Jaro thought. Something had to go wrong. He had doubts about Rosilla. Was she planning even now some way to betray him, keep him from seeing Mara? There was no way of knowing. He had to trust her.

But Rosilla cleared the way and stood guard for him and helped him into the insulating suit and into the cargo holds. There, he opened a large transport case of Sigleran artifacts and secreted himself.

Rosilla said, "I won't see you again, will I, Jaro?"

"It's not likely. Thanks, Rosilla, Thanks for everything."

She looked at him tenderly, her eyes wet. "Goodbye, Jaro. You big, damn' fool. I hope your one look at her is worth it."

She secured the side of the case lightly. Then Jaro was alone, isolated in total silence and darkness.

He let his mind scan the sights of his seven subjective years aboard the *Starborn*, the vast galaxies, the whirling suns and endless planets, their weird, alien creatures. Once upon a time—a long time ago—he could not get enough of these things. He wondered how it could ever have been that way. He was tired now. He wanted release from the starways. For his kind there was only one way out.

He thought of Mara, and tried to picture how she would appear, without the intermediation of the picture-screen. What would her flesh and her hair look like? What would it smell like?

He felt the sudden jolting as the belt jerked into motion. He pictured in his mind the conveyor line transferring the huge containers into the shuttle's insulated chambers. He felt the shuttle drop beneath him as it broke away from the *Starborn* and spun away toward the docks below. Then the braking vanes took hold, pressing him fiercely into the corner where he huddled.

The shuttle docked, and the containers were belted out again, this time to the entrance of the discharge-chambers. Jaro had not been sure he would survive this but there was only a momentary sense of vast, flowing energy, and then it was over. He was almost disap-

pointed. He could have stood more, have lasted longer.

There was no time to wonder now, however. He quickly worked himself out of the confining suit, breathed. He was not consumed by the atmosphere of Earth, but it was like inhaling fire. He knew his lungs would soon be burned away.

He pried open the side of the container and forced his way out, bathed in sweat and burning from contact with the sweet, fresh air of Earth. He prayed that Mara would be waiting. If not—but that would not bear thinking about. There was no way to get back to the safety of the shuttle even if he survived.

He was on a conveyor that rumbled along the insulated ramp to the warehouse. He had to stay on the insulated ramp. The air in his lungs and on his skin was consuming him fast enough. To step on uninsulated substance of Earth would bring instant dissolution.

Then he heard her cry out. He saw her.

MARA was at the foot of the ramp, only two hundred feet away.

He jumped off the conveyor and stood beside the track. The cargo moved on, the rumbling quieting now so that he heard her voice. "Jaro!"

They looked at each other.

And this is what it was all for, he thought.

It was worth the price.

She was all the brightest dreams he had ever dreamed on the starways. She was all the wonder and tender glory he had ever imagined.

She was his. Even though they could never touch, she was his. Across a hundred million light years and the unfathomable paradoxes of time he had claimed her.

"Mara," he said softly.

"Jaro—Jaro—"

He wondered what it would have been like to have walked in the night with her hand in his, the wind in their faces. He wondered what it would have been like to hold her fiercely and tenderly in his arms.

And then suddenly she was running toward him.

"No—Mara! Go back! Don't come up here!"

She was laughing and weeping, too, as she called out to him. "I don't care. I love you, Jaro. Nothing else matters—nothing in the whole Universe!"

"Mara—it will kill you up here!"

"I don't care, I don't care!" She wept and held her arms out to him. "Touch my hand, Jaro. Touch me—hold me—for as long as we have."

He stood frozen, watching her come closer. What more was there for either of them? he thought.

This was what it all meant—all the Galaxies, all the wheeling stars meant nothing. This was the only meaning in the Universe.

To touch her. To hold her in his arms and feel the touch of her hair on his face and the warmth of her flesh against him.

Then he was laughing, too, as he flung himself down the ramp, arms outstretched. This was the moment for which their whole lives had been lived.

He had seen it all—the Galaxies, the starpaths—and there was nothing else but this. Mara knew it, too; never having left Earth she knew all that he had learned over billions of light years.

They touched. Miraculously, they touched. For one barely perceptible instant they clung to each other in wild abandon and loved long eons of love in each other's arms.

The burst of light shattered the tunnel and spread a shining fire over the south end of the city. It rocked the insulated palace of the *Starborn's* crew. Captain Heath watched the flare of light in the screens that let the prisoners see the external world. He knew what had happened. He lifted his glass and slowly drank a silent toast.

His eyes softened as he looked across his glass into the far reaches of time. "Maybe it was worth it. Maybe it was really worth it." •



Reading Room

LESTER DEL REY

OPPORTUNISM seems to be on the rise among science fiction and fantasy novels these days. Opportunism is defined as "a taking advantage of opportunities or circumstances, with little regard for principles" and it always seems to follow hard on the heels of any unusually successful novel regardless of the subject-matter. Thus, in fantasy, *Rosemary's Baby* achieved a singular success; on the whole, deservedly so. But now we have a series of such "shockers" as *The Exorcist*, which fails as either legitimate fantasy or honest fiction.

Well, science fiction had its suc-

cess stories, too. Take the case of *The Andromeda Strain*—a novel with large elements of opportunism in its structure, which makes it even greater prey for other writers who care for nothing but a gimmick to get large rewards for little thought. Here, obviously, the trick is to find a menace to the life of mankind, stir in a bit of science (or what can pass as science to the average reader) and never, never let consistency stand in the way of sensation. After all, Hollywood has been using that formula for years in its monster movies. All a writer need do, apparently, is find a some-

what less obviously silly menace, gimmick it in slightly more "adult" ways (probably with some sex), and make a pretense of developing serious characters.

Occasionally, by some happy accident, the result will be fairly good; usually, even in the modern-gothic field, opportunism produces exceptionally bad fiction. In science fiction, the result can be particularly awful. Consistency within its postulates, and logic in development are the essential requirements of this field and when the writer has "little regard for principles" he won't bother with such a minor matter as internal logic.

Unfortunately, such a book often makes more money than many an honest piece of sf. Outside of the regular readers of the field, nobody seems to care for logic.

Thus, *The Haphaestus Plague*, by Thomas Page (Putnam, \$5.95), has had some rave reviews in the newspapers but is a poor novel indeed when judged by science fiction standards. (To give it its due, it isn't called science fiction on the front or back covers; but the featured puff inside says "it's that rare science-fiction work that fascinates with intelligence . . .")

It deals with an invasion of cockroach-like insects that erupt from somewhere inside the Earth. Oh, not giant ones! That's *too* obvious.

These are your average every-day sized roaches. Their threat comes from the fact that they have a sort of double stinger behind that somehow generates fire. Whenever they're near combustibles they proceed to burn everything down. When they reach the cities, they proceed to burn everything in sight.

The reason they do such a stupid thing, you see, is that they live off pure carbon. They set the fires to free it from its organic compounds, one gathers, so that they can eat the ashes—now there's science for you! Apparently Page doesn't know that ashes are what remain after the carbon and hydrogen in flammable material have been burned away.

Anyhow, it develops midway through the book that they aren't such a menace after all. You see, the insects evolved down in the Earth under all that pressure. They now have extremely high pressure inside their hard little bodies and can't operate well when subjected to the internal strain caused by our lower external pressure. In fact, they can't breed, and they'll all be dead in another season or so. No reason is given for their having such gastight bodies; and since they seem to breathe air—and must use oxygen to utilize carbon as fuel—no explanation is given as to why the pressure isn't quickly equalized as the excess gas inside them leaks

away from body to blood and then through their breathing membranes.

Page must have realized at this stage that he was losing the suspense of his story—so he hauled off and started in a new direction. His scientist-hero, Palmiter, decides to breed more of the menacing critters. (We all know that scientists tend to be mad, and Palmiter has always been a bit antisocial.) He rigs up a pressure chamber so his bugs will feel at home. But now, instead of breeding a male and a female Hephaestus bug, he breeds a male to a surface cockroach. Why? Well, probably because he's mad! You can't expect sense from scientists.

First, though, he carefully sets it up so any intelligent reader would know they can't possibly be cross-fertile. Page has our scientist discover that these new insects have seventeen pairs of chromosomes, as opposed to six for a normal cockroach. (He also still believes that humans have twenty-four chromosome pairs, though it has been known for quite a few years that we have only twenty-three.) Now in a world where even a monkey and an ape can't interbreed anything as complex in its structure as a sperm of that Hephaestus roach isn't going to be fertile with the ova of an ordinary cockroach. But the author

has used up all his initial plot and has to find another in a hurry; so to hell with logic. The female lays eggs which are miraculously fertile.

And from there on, we're given a tale where anything can happen, including the fact that the young crossbreed cockroaches soon learn to spell out messages to Palmiter. He's forced to take them back to their beloved underworld home, which feat he manages in the silliest possible manner. And everything ends on a kind of reverse-kitsch attempt at bitterness.

It's an excellent example of what can happen to a story where everything is written for its effect on the reader rather than any purpose in plot. Things that seem important turn out to be mere window-dressing; thus, the scientist's assistant is bitten by a Hephaestus bug, with suggestions that he's now invulnerable to disease; but nothing comes of it—apparently nobody else wants to be immune to all illnesses.

Most completely not recommended!

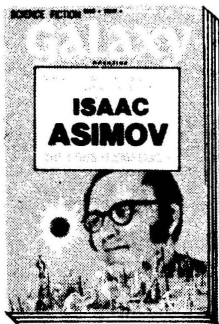
COLIN FREE'S *The Soft Kill* (Berkley, 75¢) is not so obviously opportunistic, except in the material that it takes as its background and theme. It's tailored to seem relevant, apparently, by

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covering such fresh ideas as overpopulation, a world going to the dogs, and the purposelessness of life. And its development seems to seek the sensational use of such material.

But it is definitely opportunistic in its lack of regard for the basic principles of science fiction—and this novel is clearly labeled science fiction.

It all starts when Martin Clay is called down from his work in an orbiting satellite and mysteriously taken to High-Town, where we find all the bigshots who direct America in its struggle against foreign enemies and overpopulation. From there on all kinds of things happen and they all might just as well not have happened.

For one thing, there is never any good reason the reader can see for the bigshots having summoned Clay in the first place; things that pass as reasons are mentioned, but none make sense. He's certainly treated with contempt or disregard most of the time. And it never seems to occur to the author that telling the hero what it was all about might have resulted in his being more useful—though, of course, that might have destroyed what passes as the "plot."

With lots of effort the idea can be pieced together from the novel that the bigshots seem to be trying to

control the population explosion; not very intelligently, however. Their best answer seems to be stirring up some kind of a war—which, of course, they are nominally trying to avoid. Such things as sterilization programs, anti-fertility drugs, taxes on excess children get mentioned, but are not followed up.

Instead of any visible logic, we're treated to a confused development of what seem to be plots and counterplots, most of which indicate that the men in control at High-Town are all insane. Maybe that's the deep message of the novel—that the whole world, including the bosses, is mad and totally irresponsible.

And yet that doesn't fit with what we see. High-Town is an engineering marvel, and was obviously built by someone who knew what he was doing. But it never seems to bother the author that a group capable of building such a city and maintaining it couldn't act the way he makes his characters behave. Again, a total disregard for consistency in background and action.

The decline of our world from overpopulation and pollution may be relevant—even if not exactly fresh material for science fiction; but I can't find anything relevant in this offering of bad fiction for the reader's money.

Pass it by.

As I indicated before, a book that begins opportunistically does not have to be bad; if the writer is honest and competent, if he's willing to think out his ideas and treat his characters seriously, he can take even a publisher's idea of something designed to fit into a market slot and turn it into perfectly acceptable science fiction.

Such seems to be the direction in which the Cap Kennedy series is moving. Generally, most series-character books in which the hero is some kind of a world-saver tend to be imitative of the worst features of all its predecessors, beginning with Doc Savage as an example. These novels generally degenerate into mechanical plot formulae with the hero surrounded by a gang of stick figures whose only purpose is to fill in space between the hero's action scenes.

As I reported, the first of the Cap Kennedy novels seemed to avoid all the faults of this type of story, but while the characters were not cut out of the standard smart-aleck material they still didn't emerge as true characters, and the story was only adequate.

Looking at the third novel, *Monster of Metelaze*, by Gregory Kern (DAW Books, 75¢), there has been considerable development, and the future of the series begins to look interesting.

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By now, Kern is beginning to feel at home with his characters. Kennedy is no superman, though he is given some pretty extreme abilities; but while he's a little larger than life, he is neither invulnerable nor exalted above government control. He has to use his skills—and his brains—without resorting to any sudden miraculous inventions or tricks.

And now the lesser characters around him are beginning to emerge as fairly real people. The old scientist is developing some depth and still shows no dangerous tendency to become a super-genius nor a man who knows everything about every subject. The others are also finding their places, so that Kennedy now has a believable and workable team at his side.

Even the villain in this novel is fairly well developed. He's a dictator, but not quite the megalomaniac he might be; in fact, while he has to be defeated by Kennedy, we can almost feel sorry for him. There also seems to be developing throughout the series a background menace from an Ancient Race which offers good opportunities for greater revelations to come.

The writing is on a good, professional level, and the series looks promising. I found this novel enjoyable enough for casual reading and worth the price. Beyond that,

I'll wait for later development.

STRANGELY, it sometimes seems that a writer can be too careful and honest in his thinking through of a story—or at least, he may develop the total story in such a way that the beginning seems less than it turns out eventually to be. That is the case with *The Orchid Cage*, by Herbert W. Franke (DAW Books, 95¢). Franke has a fine reputation in Germany, and was a Guest of Honor at the World Science Fiction Convention in Heidelberg, 1970. This is the first novel of his I've had a chance to read, and I was curious about how well his reputation might stand up in translation.

The basic idea seemed interesting. A world has been discovered where a highly advanced race once lived, but which now seems to be unpopulated and in ruins. A team of men are sent to explore it, and they run into some strange situations. There are no signs of life, but the city is far from dead. What seem to be the living quarters of the former inhabitants still operate to gratify every wish of anyone inside them—but only if that person knows how to operate them. And near the apparently long-deserted heart of the city, the explorers find activity still going on. A pageant is played out before their eyes, like a play out of Earth's Middle Ages. It

turns out to be a sort of camouflage to conceal the secrets of the city.

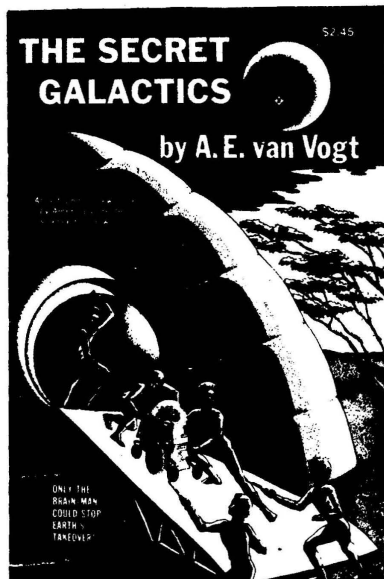
Then we begin to find that there is another team and that it is trying to discover the secret of the city before the first team can. It also is composed of human beings and is headed by one of the two discoverers of the planet—just as our team is headed by the other.

By then, I found myself getting highly impatient with the characters—and the conflict with the other team only increased it. The people all seemed to act like a group of silly children. One girl in particular, though an adult—seemed to have all the warmth and charm of a badly spoiled, selfish

ten-year-old. The two groups meet and battle like a couple of petty street gangs caring for nothing beyond the lowest kind of *machismo*—in fact, they don't even seem to have street-gang ethics, however low those may be.

It gets worse. In the end, after having recklessly tried to use a nuclear bomb to break open what may be the priceless secrets of the city, only two of the characters survive.

However, something strange has been going on all along. So far as we can tell at the end of Book I, our "hero"—if you can call him that—has been killed. When he wakes up next morning I wondered if I'd missed something—and couldn't



The Secret Galactics

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find any missing clue. But then he continues getting killed—apparently—but sticking with us.

It all sounds like a mess. But it isn't. In Book III, everything is accounted for and we find that there is a beautifully logical reason for every seeming fault of characterization and rationality. This whole fracas on the planet also has a meaning and relationship to what goes on back on Earth and everything is illuminated quite nicely. In fact, what looked like faulty handling on the author's part is revealed as excellent characterization and a great deal of hard and logical thinking.

Franke obviously deserves his reputation and I hope we'll have a chance to see more of his work. It isn't a book for the reader who wants to get into a story at once with no need for any thought from there on; but for the reader who will stay to the end and suspend judgment until he finishes it, this is a novel I most heartily recommend.

I CAN also recommend *Traitor to the Living*, by Philip Jose Farmer (Ballantine, \$1.25). As he often does, Farmer has picked a theme that is difficult to handle and handles it well.

Basically, this novel deals with the announcement that a scientist has discovered a way to get in touch

with the "spirits" of the dead. And he's ready to demonstrate to the skeptic, Carfax, that this is no hoax. Carfax is shown what is purported to be a relative who died recently. But this isn't the spirit world of all the mediums of the past. Instead, the souls (?) of the dead seem to be only parts in a complex arrangement. And if they really are souls, the arrangement isn't one to delight them. They seem to be trying to exchange themselves for now-living souls—anything for a chance to be back in the world we know.

Then Carfax discovers proof that the scientist is a fraud and swindler—and that he must be genuine, because there's evidence that some of the dead are being placed in living bodies for reasons that may endanger everything good in society.

Carfax has his troubles cut out for him, and nothing turns out to be simple. Farmer's ending sews things up with fewer words after the final crisis than I've found in almost any other book. To some extent, the ending is more implicit than explicit—but it must become evident to anyone who has read that far, and it *does* sew things up—Farmer is never opportunistic.

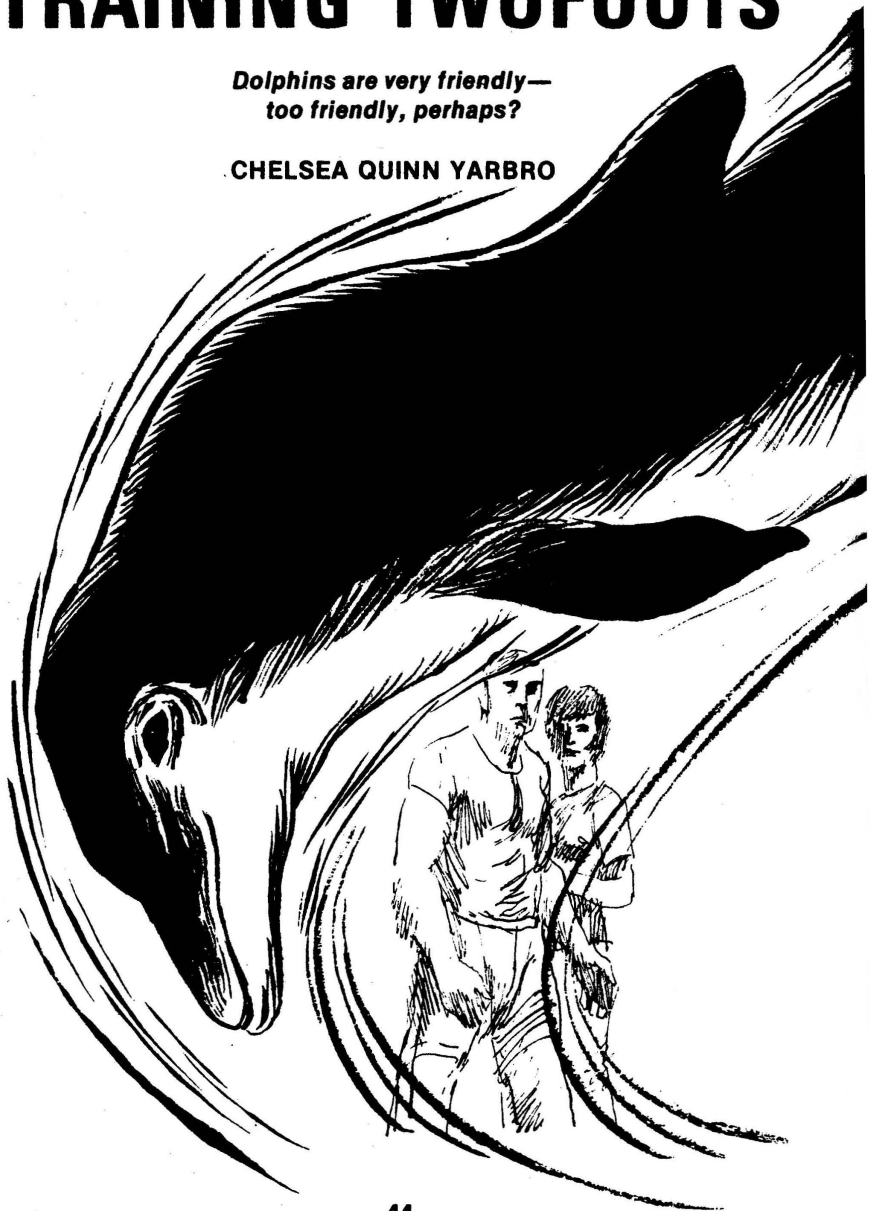
A nice idea—or maybe not so nice, but at least fascinating; and a good adventure thriller on top of it. Recommended. •

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TRAINING TWOFOOTS

*Dolphins are very friendly—
too friendly, perhaps?*

CHELSEA QUINN YARBRO





TODAY I said Daddy. "Daddy," I said. Clear. Just like that, the way I've been trying to for so long. Daddy wasn't around yet, so I rolled over and practiced saying it. It's not an easy thing to say, but it's lots easier than Fingers. I don't think I'll ever get Fingers right. I keep trying but it comes out all funny and shrill. Even so, Fingers knows I mean her when I make that sound. Twofoots are pretty smart.

Daddy thinks Fingers should come in here with me when he does. I think he just wants to see her without that extra skin she usually

wears. But Daddy puts on an extra skin for the tank anyway, so maybe that's not it.

Daddy feels Fingers with his eyes. She pretends Daddy isn't there feeling her but she knows. She tries to stay away from him but she can't except when he's in the tank with me. Then she tries not to look at him. Sometimes when she does she changes color. Daddy hasn't explained. I wish he would.

I can't understand why she stays away from Daddy. After all, they are adults and well made. She has no other mate or offspring and neither does he. He said once she has "hang-ups" and so that might be what's keeping them from mating. I don't have words enough to ask him what she has hung, but when he said it he looked angry so maybe it's a good idea I didn't try.

My mate is in the sea and I'm going back to her soon. The Twofoots are almost finished with me. Daddy says they've found out what they want to know about dolphins, which is what the Twofoots call us.

The Boss thought it would be nice to get some money (?) out of this after all the work they've done. He wanted to sell me because there are a lot of places that would pay good money for a speech-trained dolphin. Daddy said no because they promised to let me go when they brought me here.

A whole bunch of Twofoots that Daddy called The Foundation—a foundation is what holds buildings

up; Daddy didn't tell me what this bunch held up—came in here and talked to me, and then they talked at the Boss. Twofoots talk loud when they want to feel important. They all talked loud. And Boss pushed at one of the Foundation with a balled-up hand. Hands are the tentacled part of their flipper, which they call an arm. I can't push things with my flipper, only with my nose.

When they are speaking Twofoots make many strange noises. There are several I cannot duplicate, although I've tried. It's partly because they breathe through a mouth and the bump just above it, the nose. They grow fine strands of special skin called hair all over their headtops, so they couldn't breathe properly even if they had a blowhole in the right place. The Boss doesn't have hair all over his headtop but he still has a nose. Fingers says the Boss is "bald" so maybe that makes him special. This bald is an ability I haven't figured out yet. I haven't got enough words. There's so much to learn.

I found out something the other day that worries me a bit. Twofoots can't hum in water to find their way. They can only go by sight and feel. This surprised me, because Daddy made such a big thing about my humming. It isn't humming really, but that's the only word Twofoots have for it. Daddy can't say my word for it.

That's another thing. Daddy calls it semantics. It's about what words mean. He says it's very important to know what words mean and that when I have more of his words and he has more of mine then we can really talk. That would be good. I wish I knew what goes on in Twofoots' minds.

The dish on the wall is past right angles. That means Daddy is late. He always gets here just before right angles except on every seventh day. He says that is a rest day. He goes boating on rest days.

Daddy is always here just before right angles. Fingers is usually here by then, too. Maybe they're mating. That might make them late.

No. Fingers just came in. She is shaped like all the Twofoot females. She goes in and out a lot and has some big nursers on her. Daddy thinks this is good. Daddy calls her Felicity, or sometimes Sees. She calls him Dr. Reynard and once in a while Tad.

This business of callings is pretty strange to me. I have my one name which is my name and not like any other. Daddy tells me that many Twofoots have the same names, and sometimes all their names are the same. He has four names. The Doctor part, he says, is added. He calls it a title. Then he is called Simeon. After that he is called Preston. Or Tad. He says that's part of Preston. He calls it a nickname. Nick is a little cut, so I think this means they cut his name. He didn't

tell me how they cut names.

The last of his names confuses me the most. It is Reynard. He told me it is French for Fox. French is another way of speaking. He says that all people don't say the same things the same way. When he says people he means Twofoots, not us. We're dolphins.

Daddy speaks English. But his name is French. But the English word for his French name is Fox and a fox is a kind of wild dog. If I had more words I would ask him why he calls himself by another language when there is a word in his own that would do. These Twofoots are very strange.

FINGERS is working hard. She usually makes friendly sounds in the morning before Daddy comes in. But Daddy is late and she is not making those sounds. Daddy also makes those sounds; he calls it singing. I wonder if his being late has something to do with her not singing? I wish I could ask Daddy.

He better hurry up and get here. I want to show him how I've learned to call him. He'll be happy.

I think I'll splash Fingers. She's all busy with one of the things she touches. It looks like a flat wall of mollusks. Daddy calls it a monitor. He says it watches what we do and makes a record of it. I can't see any eyes on it but Daddy says it sees. It doesn't hum. And it doesn't tell me things. It only tells things to Fingers. Maybe there are things I

can't see in it. Daddy will tell me when we both have more words. We can catch up with each other.

"Good morning, Miss Amaris," Daddy says as he comes in.

"Good morning, Doctor Reynard." I like to hear them talk like that, all crisp. They are communicating information. He says that's what talking is for. That words tell things and explain. He just said good morning, just like that. I guess I was wrong about the trouble between him and Fingers.

"Hi there, Tdeddetch!" calls Daddy, waving. He's got my name down pretty well. He gave me a nickname. He calls me Deech sometimes. I can't tell him that that's my brother's name.

About this waving. They do a lot of weird things with their flippers. But they have hands, and the flipper parts are so long and stringy that they can do things like that easily. It looks wrong.

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" I yell at him. I push up on my tail and slap water at him, still going "Daddy!" happily.

"Deech! Deech! You did it!" He jumps into the water with me, making a lot of noise. I spin him around a couple of times, just to show off, and he pats my side as I slide by.

"Did you hear that, Sees? Deech finally got my name right."

"Very good, Doctor," she says without turning around. She is clicking the things on her feet

against the floor very hard. Her feet aren't made like that. Twofoot females have feet just like the males.

This seems to make Daddy angry, and his face gets that sharp look that he uses to show anger. Twofoots have a whole set of ways to use their faces. It seems to be pretty much the same set for all.

"Miss Amaris, will you please tell me what the monitor indicated when Deech said my name?" He is talking in a way the Twofoots call cold.

"I'm afraid I wasn't watching the panel just then, Doctor. Would you like me to program a check on it?"

"Never mind. I'll see it when we go over the records at noon."

"Yes, Doctor Reynard."

I nudge Daddy for a bit, trying to get him to play. But he isn't really interested. He keeps watching Fingers over his shoulder, feeling her with his eyes, trying to make her turn around and change color.

I pick up a few new words myself but Daddy can't keep his mind on the words I tell him. He tries to say them and then glares at Fingers for a while. I never before saw any creature that makes such a fuss about matings. If any people had told me that the clever Twofoots let matings interfere with their lives so much I wouldn't have believed it.

By the time noon comes, Daddy is breathing hard and it isn't because of our work. He pulls himself out of the tank and slams the door as he leaves. Fingers makes a point

of not watching this. This is very strange, even for Fingers.

I push up out of the water calling to her. I can't say Fingers at all. It comes out "Veegees!" but she knows I mean her and she turns around and asks me, "Well?"

If I had the words I would tell her that she should go find Daddy and get it over with. But I speak as the people speak, and she doesn't understand me. She gets all tight-looking and goes out the door.

There has got to be a way to fix this. Fingers and Daddy are going to ruin themselves. They are acting like crazy tuna who get so frightened they swim into the nets they are trying to avoid.

I swim around and around the tank, thinking. I have watched Daddy do this on his feet. He calls it pacing. If you're around Twofoots enough, you get to be like them.

BY THE time noon is over I have an idea. Usually Fingers comes back and gets some papers ready. Then Daddy comes in wearing the normal kind of Twofoot male second skin and they go over all the things the monitor says. Then Daddy goes and puts on his tank skin and he spends the afternoon in here with me. This time it is going to be different.

Here comes Fingers, making those sharp sounds with her feet. She closes the door and goes over to her monitor. Now is when I start.

I push up on my tail and start slapping water at her. She just pretends not to notice at first. So I splash harder. The sea color of her extra skin gets darker. Her face gets that Twofoot sharp look.

"All right, Deech, stop it right now."

I really slap at her this time.

"Damn it." She starts toward the tank, bright and hard-eyed. "I told you to stop it. I know you understand me. You understand well enough when Tad tells you to do something."

A great bright curl of water goes over her. She steps back. I want her to come nearer. I sink down and come close to the edge, calling softly.

This is just what I wanted. She comes back toward me. "I know you don't mean any harm, Dee—"

I rise up on my tail, putting my nose through her legs and tossing her over my back into the tank.

She makes a wonderful singing noise until she hits the water.

I call "Daddy! Daddy!" a few times, and Fingers does too. I keep swimming around her, looking like I'm trying to help her but keeping her from getting to the edge. She doesn't swim very well.

In a short while Daddy bursts through the door, looking to see what is wrong. He sees me trying to help Fingers and her thrashing all around. He comes into the tank head first, heading for Fingers. I shove her gently underwater just to

make it a little more interesting.

Soon Daddy has an arm around Fingers and is pulling her to the edge of the tank. I get behind and give them a push to help.

Daddy gets out first while I hold onto Fingers, who Daddy says has fainted—she's limp. I haven't seen a Twofoot do this before. I don't think it happens very often. Daddy takes her arms and slides her out.

When she is resting on the wet floor, Fingers opens her eyes. "Tad—"

Daddy puts his hand on her mouth, which makes her stop talking. It might mean that he wants her to eat his fingers, but I don't think so. I've said they do a lot of weird things with their arms and hands.

"Oh, Tad, he pushed me in."

"Shush," says Daddy.

"But he did, Tad. Truly. Oh, you don't believe me—"

"You're just frightened. Here," he says, rubbing his hands on her arms. The skin on her is tiny bumps. So is his. I've seen this happen before. There is something in here called air-conditioning. It makes twofoots cold.

"But he did. He did."

"All right, maybe you both got confused. But don't take it out on him. I'm sure he never meant to hurt you. You saw how he tried to help you."

She moves her head up and down. Her big eyes are dark and watery. She looks pretty strange

even for a Twofoot, with her outer skin all tight to her other skin and her headtop hair all flat and drippy. She's leaning more against Daddy, making some little sounds almost like people's talk, very short and hard to understand though. All the water in her eyes has started to run out.

"Oh, Sees," Daddy says, reaching over and drawing her head against his shoulder. He wraps an arm around her and starts talking. He pats her with long sideways motions of his hand. Fingers seems to like this. She goes limp against him, but I don't think this is fainting because her eyes are still open. Limp is not the right word. More kind of soft and slidy.

"Tad—" She turns those great big wet eyes up at him.

This thing that they do next is puzzling. They have got their mouths together tight. I saw Boss do something like that when one of the other Twofoots had been breathing water, so maybe Daddy thinks because she's got water in her eyes she breathed some.

WHEN they are through with that, she keeps close against him, quiet and shivery. Maybe they are going to mate after all. I push up on my tail and watch them, but this time I don't splash them at all. I tell them that it is all right to go on. I don't mind. Really. I'm curious. They have some very strange ways, these Twofoots.

I don't think Daddy has understood what I said, but then one of those looks comes into his eyes, the way he looks when he figures something out. He says a couple of things to Fingers, kind of fast and low so I don't catch them. She makes some answers.

I slip back down into the water, watching them as they get to their feet.

While Fingers goes for another skin, Daddy stands and looks down at me, his mouth pulled back like mine.

"I've got to hand it to you, old boy. You're a genius," he says.

I don't know what he wants to hand to me, but the words sound good.

"Thanks, Deech."

Fingers comes back and they put their mouths together again for a long time.

When they get to the door, Daddy turns and closes one eye at me. He hasn't done that before. I wonder if there is something wrong, or if this is part of their courting ritual. I told you about the set of things they do with their faces. This is one thing I haven't seen before. His face is full of happy wrinkles.

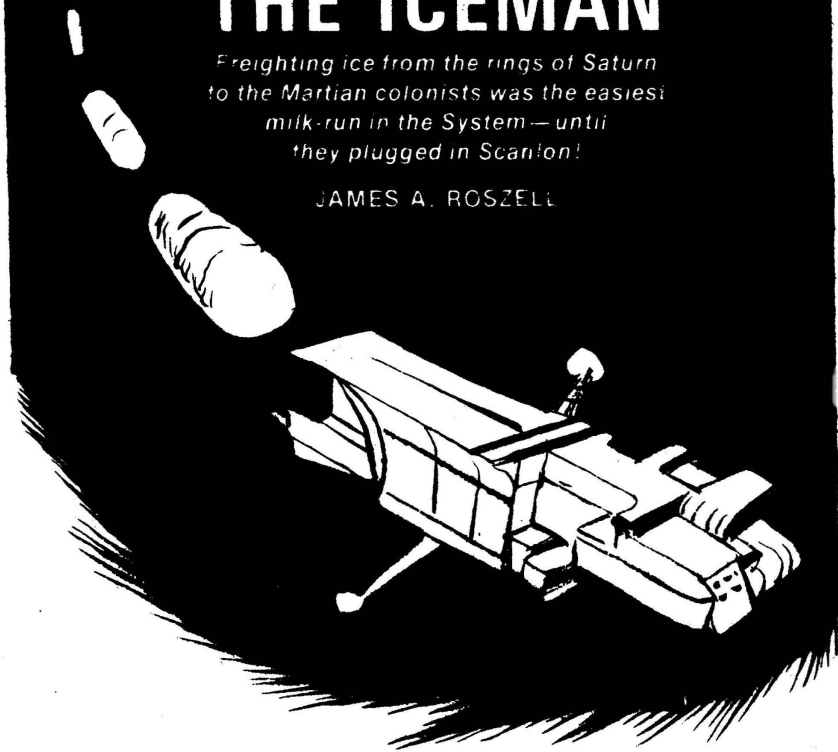
If he's going to be gone the rest of the day, that means that the Boss will be in here. His Fingers is a much better shape; all round and sleek. She doesn't have a mate any more.

I wonder what I can work out between those two. •

THE ICEMAN

Freighting ice from the rings of Saturn to the Martian colonists was the easiest milk-run in the System—until they plugged in Scanlon!

JAMES A. ROSZELL



DALE HUDSON floated near the main port. His lineless freckled face and red hair reflected on the quartz and mingled with Saturn's sunlit disk. The seething ribbons of the planet's surface fascinated him. He could not believe he was more than a billion kilometers from

Earth, lying twenty kilometers off Janus. This was Dale's first berth after graduating from the Academy, and while hauling ice from Saturn's rings to Mars colony was not as exciting as patrol duty, he could hardly wait for the long burn that would send the deep-space tug

drifting toward the port on Phobos. The run, called "the pipeline," was a long way from the family farm in Indiana.

The pilot shuttle crossed the port, clanged against the sturdy tug. Magnetic docking collars engaged. The tugboat creaked in protest as it absorbed the shuttle's momentum. Locks cycled, and there was some loud swearing and laughing. They cycled again. The shuttle drifted back toward Janus station.

Scraping sounds came from the starboard passage as the new crewman floated his duffel to the control room. Then his hundred-kilo G.I. duffel bag sailed through the hatch and slammed into the sleepwebbing. Dale rolled to get a look at the man.

A short husky type glided in behind the duffel. His shoulders were thick and powerful, his waist narrow. Heavy muscles rippled under the skin-tight space suit. Eyeing Dale, the newcomer removed the helmet collar from his neck. Curly hair spilled from the skullcap as he pulled it off, and a smile creased his darkly tanned face. "I'm Julio O'Mally. You're Dale Hudson, right?"

They shook hands. Dale helped Julio stow his gear, then resumed the Saturn-gazing.

"This must be your first run," Julio said, busying himself at the communicator board. Dale nodded vaguely, mesmerized by the great luminous sphere. "Don't look too

long. Makes you feel like you're falling into it. Screws up your equilibrium." Julio popped some switches, ran a quick radio check. "Who's the skipper, Dale? The shuttle mate gave me your name but wasn't sure who commands here—"

Dale turned and fought the momentary dizziness, unable for a moment to focus on the cabin.

"See?" Julio said. "Told you so."

"Whoever the skipper is, he hasn't showed his face yet." Dale checked the nameplate on the captain's console and squinted to read the name. "Conrad Scanlon. Do you know him?"

"Scanlon? I'll be damned! Thought he'd been washed out," Julio said, snapping his head around.

"What's the story on him?" Dale asked, surprised by the venom in Julio's voice.

"Uh, let's see. Seven years back, Scanlon was pushing ice out of Deimos. Pirates got a line on him as he was picking his way through the Belt. When they slammed a minitorp into his bow screen Scanlon panicked. He dumped his ice, sent the crew out in the escape capsules. Then he rammed the pirates. Both ships popped like balloons. All the pirates were killed and his crew died before we could pick them up. Scanlon floated unconscious for a week—the only survivor. They held a general court but

he got off with a bad judgment."

"Is that all—and his two men dead?" Dale asked.

"Well, out here, bad judgment is good enough for murder. It takes pilot error to bust you out of the corp." Julio busied himself at the console. "Still," he said over his shoulder, "I thought he was gone. Didn't think he'd ever space again, even hauling ice."

Dale watched as Mars emerged from behind Saturn's disk. Then he remarked, "I remember that name. I read about a Connie Scanlon. Would that be him?"

"Connie was what he went by," Julio said, finishing the check-out of his board.

"It was five years ago, when I started at the Academy. They told us about the cyborg program. His name was one of the first ones."

"A cyborg," Julio snarled. "So Connie is a damned cyborg. That's how he got back on a ship! I'm beginning to wish I'd stayed drunk on Janus."

"What's wrong with cyborgs?" Dale asked, pulling himself down to his console and beginning his preflight check.

"They're not men any more, that's what's wrong with them. It's like taking orders from machinery. They wire them into computers, you know. This big plug on the chest hooks them into the ship, and they live in a big fishbowl. Creepy, damn things."

Dale's face had reddened during

Julio's outburst. "Shut up. He can probably hear us."

"You're damned right he can hear us. If he's a cyborg, the intercom is plugged into him like everything else. I don't like this, kid. Sometimes things get tough—and that's when I want a skipper who's flesh and blood. You hear me, Connie?"

The ship was silent.

EIGHTEEN hours down the pipe, Dale was still awake. Saturn's shrinking disk in the screens no longer commanded his full attention. Frequently he gazed into the blackness of the space ahead. A brilliant white pinhead marked the sun. Planets were visible as flecks of slowly moving light.

The whole adventure fascinated and thrilled him. Dale knew it was silly but he could not stifle his excitement. Besides, hauling ice to Mars colony was important—the colony would die without the ice shipments. And Julio had mentioned pirates. Dale's heart refused to settle down to normal rhythm.

He wondered about the captain and Julio. Spacers were a superstitious lot and some classed cyborgs with zombies. But Dale felt there had been more behind Julio's outburst than simply that the captain was a cyborg.

Dale had read about the cyborgs, had even considered training to be one when the program recruiter

had come to the Academy. They were the future. They would man deep-space probes and the supply runs to Pluto station. The recruiter had said there were no changes in the men except for attachment of microscopically fine wires to nerves in brain and spine. The impulses carried on these nerves were transferred to the wires and then conducted to transducers. The entire ship was run through the hook-up. Nerves regulating heartbeat, body temperature and respiration regulated life support systems, and the impulses to the muscles ran the engines. The trickiest part was hooking the ship's computer into the higher brain centers. If the link were done properly the computer became an integral part of the cyborg's brain.

Instant calculations of trajectory, pitch and yaw yielded minimum-deviation flight plans that required less fuel and less drain on life support. These were precious commodities so far from Earth. Also, the cyborg had less demanding physiological requirements. His metabolism ran at a minimum since no physical exertion was necessary. Drugs slowed it to the lowest level needed to maintain mental activity. Cyborgs were the perfect space explorers. They would put everyone else out of a job as soon as they had established their reliability.

That was what Dale knew about cyborgs. But he knew nothing

about Scanlon as a man. So far Dale had not even heard Scanlon's voice over the intercom. Julio's insults were ignored. Countdown began, its progress marked solely by signals on the consoles. There was no contact at all with Scanlon. The only indication of his presence was the continued smooth running of the ship and occasional jolts from the steering jets.

Curious and somewhat uneasy, Dale decided to tour the trim tug. Like all vessels constructed to haul, the tug was mostly engines and fuel tanks. Eight fusion engines, each with a billion-kilo thrust, were set out from the ship's frame so the exhaust cleared the cargo in tow. A pair of tanks each held a million liters of liquid hydrogen to feed the vast engines. They easily accelerated the two billion liters of ice to full velocity on the long burn. He could not check the ice. It was contained in twenty dura-plastic sausages linked one behind the other by cables.

Other than tanks and engines, the ship consisted of crew living-quarters and compartments housing the life-support systems, the computer and the reactor that heated the hydrogen to plasma temperatures. There was also the captain's berth—a detachable command-module affixed for reasons of electronic convenience to the underbelly of the vessel, almost an autonomous spaceship in its own right. For some reason the arrange-

ment brought to Dale's mind an image of an ancient dive-bomber, torpedo-slung and deadly . . .

Dale floated down the starboard passage, pulling himself along by handholds. He checked supply, computer and reactor rooms and came back up the port side. Finally he checked the captain's "cabin." Dale knew pretty much what he would find. The hatch slid open silently. There were no lights on so he started to feel around but low-intensity green illumination came up before he could locate the switch.

The module was just about large enough to house a sphere three meters in diameter. Completely filled with an amber liquid, it displayed a man folded in the fetal position floating inside. He wore what looked like an ordinary spacesuit, a mask with a blackened face plate, and an air line that ran from the chest then combined with an umbilical some ten centimeters thick. The cable left the tank and plugged into the computer plate on the far wall. A ladder ran up the side of the sphere.

"Skipper?" Dale asked, just above a whisper.

"Yes, Dale. I'm here," came the voice over the intercom. A metallic voice, like a computer simulation of a human voice. The body in the tank did not move.

"I was looking around and thought . . ." Dale's words trailed off. He could think of no way to

justify invading the captain's cabin.

"That's all right. I know why you're here."

"I'd better get back. Julio may be looking for me."

"He's asleep. Don't feel self-conscious. It's only natural that you should be curious about me. But I assure you that I'm no more a freak than you are. I'm just older." The body still floated motionless in the tank. "I heard you and Julio talking earlier."

"Julio is excitable," Dale said, wishing he were anywhere but in the module.

"It's more than that. I've known Julio a long time. His ship picked me up after I rammed the pirates. His brother was my navigator."

SIXTY-FOUR days down the pipe they came to the Belt. Dale was floating in his webbed bed when the klaxon sounded. That jerked him out of a doze and he tangled one arm in the web. He pulled free, glided over to his console. Julio was already at station. "What's going on?" muttered Dale, rubbing sleep from his eyes so he could read the dials.

"Entering the Belt. Next couple of days we'll be at general quarters. It's S.O.P."

"Why? Any danger?"

Julio snorted a laugh. "Look, kid. This is a milk run. Nothing ever happens when you haul ice. It's three months of boredom. Only

good thing is pay without a place to spend it. Makes for quite a party at Mars port."

Dale blushed. He hated having his inexperience flaunted. "But you said there were pirates."

"Hell—they aren't really pirates. About twenty years ago some convicts from the Titan penal colony knocked over a couple of ore tenders. They hide in the Belt and come out only when they need provisions. Aren't even worth tracking down."

"Why should Scanlon risk his men and lose a ship for such unimportant prey?" Dale asked.

"I told you, sailor! Panic. He lost his head." Julio cursed bitterly. "Oh, there's a standing order with the patrol to take the runaways if possible, but nobody is hunting their ships. Funny, if Scanlon hadn't lost good men, he'd have been a hero. As it is, they cut off his balls and made him a cyborg."

"They don't do that," Dale said, swinging his chair around to face Julio. "Cyborgs are the same as us, except—"

"Look," insisted Julio, "I heard it from a lady who ought to know."

"She's wrong. And maybe it wasn't panic at all. Maybe Scanlon was on a planned attack—"

"All the worse, then. He wanted to win medals, you're saying, so he sacrificed enlisted men like they were dogs. Suppose I told you ore was my own brother? He was worth a thousand pirates. I—"

The klaxon shattered his words with its strident hooting.

"Now what?" blurted Julio. "Damn cyborg—"

The cool metallic voice came over the P.A. "Suit up, misters. A ship is approaching on the starboard quarter. She doesn't answer hailing. Suit up and go to your battle stations."

"Battle stations in this tub?" Julio shouted. The P.A. speakers did not answer.

Dale's heart pounded frantically. His stomach wrenched. His bladder strained to empty. Maybe the stranger was a pirate. Fear gripped him as he recalled the captain's last encounter with the buccaneers. Dragging his outside suit from its compartment, Dale drew on the thin skin-tight garment.

Julio did the same. Dale knew the suit like the palm of his hand but fumbled with the seals from sheer nervousness. He did not marvel at the miracle of thin material being strong as steel yet allowing the freedom of nudity. He just put it on and got a red light at his first integrity-check. He repositioned the seals around gloves, boots and helmet. Green light.

He launched himself across the cabin to the laser control board, overshot the chair and banged into the bulkhead. Floating free in the cabin, he made frantic swimming motions until he got a grip on the chair.

"Battle stations. Ha! One crum-

my set of meteor-screens and a lousy six-centimeter laser," Julio fumed.

Dale turned on his view-screens and went to full magnification. A sleek cruiser with full battle-gear grew large off starboard. As he watched, two puffs of smoke exploded from her bow. White contrails approached in parallel beauty.

The first minitorp exploded on the bow meteor-screening. The second passed astern, hitting one of the ice tanks. A cloud of ice crystals half a kilometer wide spread from the ruptured tank, making tug and tow easy to spot even on a visual scanner.

The skipper made a hard turn to port to position the cargo between them and the enemy. The P.A. clicked and Scanlon's voice came dry and flat as escape capsules, released by his brain, sealed them into their seats.

"Hear this. We're abandoning ship. Stay with the cargo. There's a twenty-one day life-support system in the first bubble, so get in there and stay in."

"Where will you be, sir?" Dale queried, voice cracking, mouth dry.

"Don't you get it, kid? It's just like last time. He's dumping us to go after them," Julio bellowed. "You won't get away with it, Connie. I'll see you hang for this one!"

"Is it true, captain? Is that what

you're going to do?" Dale asked, his stomach sinking.

"Exactly," came the voice.

Sudden acceleration smashed Dale into near blank-out as his blood popped from g-forces. When he regained sensation he discovered himself floating free in space inside his escape capsule. Tug and cargo drifted above him. Julio was to his left. The tow coupling opened and the tug floated free of its massive cargo. Steering jets flared until the tug lay well clear of her erstwhile burden. Then she turned hard to starboard. All eight main engines fired. The ship accelerated like a comet stung by antimatter.

Julio screamed obscenities at the captain and worked his attitude jets frantically, trying to follow the receding ship. "You crazy Connie! Let us back aboard. Help! You're killing us the way you killed my brother—"

"Julio, come back! You can't catch him . . ." But Dale's radio voice was drowned in Julio's raving. His capsule receded and disappeared. Suicide. Poor Julio. Dale sobbed and prayed and cursed, at the same time steering reflexively toward the long sausages of ice.

The towing hawser floated free. Dale opened his capsule and caught the cable in his hand. Floating there he watched the battle.

The cruiser bracketed with five more minitorps but the tug's engines abruptly shut down. So

four shot past harmlessly. Only the fifth detonated—on what was left of the bow screen. A pink glow surrounding the cruiser signified that her own screens were up. The tug fired her main engines in a 25-g acceleration.

Hideous green and yellow lighting played between the ships as their screens interfaced. But the tug had too much momentum for the cruiser. Its screens overloaded after vaporizing the tug's nose. The vessels met head on. Huge shards of metal flew from the collision. A spherical object—Dale could not identify it—rocketed off in a tight trajectory of its own. Air and water formed a dense white cloud spewing out of the locked and gaping hulls like a great amoeba. The mass of wreckage turned slowly end for end as the cloud drifted off on a tangential course.

Dale watched for a long time, hoping to see a suited figure, any sign of life. The ships lay quiet in their death-grip.

He pulled himself along the hawser until he reached the first cargo sausage. Undogging the hatch, he climbed into the narrow room, pressurized it and turned on his space beacon. Then he settled down for a long, lonely wait.

THE pharmacist's mate on the heavy cruiser *Andromeda* was a perky brunette named Tina Janson. She met Dale as he came out of the air lock, steadying him when the

spin-gravity buckled his knees. She introduced herself and led him to the sickbay. There he unsuited. She checked him over.

"Did they find Julio?" was Dale's first question.

"He's dead. His capsule ran out of air. I'm sorry."

"He wouldn't stay with me. He tried to follow the ship—"

"You're all right, sailor," Tina said, firmly changing the subject. "You just need something to eat other than emergency rations. Also some gravity to get you back in shape."

"I guess there'll be a board of inquiry," Dale said, as Tina began pushing him toward a stretcher.

"Just a formality, I hear."

"I guess it's pilot error to drop cargo and crew for a nuisance like those pirates."

"What are you talking about? Those pirates are number-one priority in the patrol. They've been raiding practically everything coming through the Belt—and have begun to raid stations as well. Our flotilla was on a search-and-destroy mission when we got your distress call. You'll probably get a decoration. Now lie down and let the nurse take you to the ward."

Dale allowed himself to be wheeled into the bay, where he was transferred to a bed and given a sleeping pill.

A lean figure in hospital pajamas was propped up in the bed across from him. Middle-aged, the other

patient had gaunt features and hair graying at the temples. The rest of his hair could not be seen because white bandages covered his skull.

The pill clouded Dale's mind and vision. Ripples of warmth eddied over him, and he slid down in the sheets. He felt obliged, though, to

at least nod at the gaunt man.

The man smiled. "Hey, doesn't your skipper rate a salute?"

"You . . . you're Connie Scanlon? My God!"

"In the flesh, and with wires still stuck in my head. Sleep some, Dale. We'll talk later." •



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March 29-31. MARCON at the Holiday Inn East, Columbus, Ohio. GoH: Hal Clement. For info: Larry Smith, 194 E. Tulane Rd., Columbus, Ohio 43202.

April 12-14. EQUICON '74 at the Marriott Hotel, Los Angeles, Calif. GoH: D. C. Fontana, Special Guests: Gene Roddenberry and Majel Barrett. Adv. reg. \$8 to Jan. 1, \$10 to April 1, \$15 thereafter; \$5 supporting. Checks payable to: Equicon '74, c/o Pat Zotti, 18242 Calvert, Reseda, Calif. 91335. For info: P.O. Box 23127, Los Angeles, Calif. 90023.

April 12-15. TYNECON '74 at the Royal Station Hotel, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England. GoH: Bob Shaw, Fan GoH: Peter Weston. Reg. 50p supporting to: Ian Williams, 6 Greta Terrace, Chester Road, Sunderland, County Durham, SR4 7RD, England.

May 24-27 THE CONVENTION WITH NO NAME at the Americana Hotel, Seventh Ave & 53 St., NYC. Adv. reg. to Nov. 30: \$6, Dec. 1-April 30: \$7.50, \$10 thereafter; \$4 nonattending. For info: P.O. Box 561, New York, N.Y. 10022.

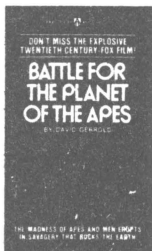
May 24-27. EYECON at the International Hotel, Los Angeles. GoH: Ian & Betty Ballantine. Adv. reg: \$6.50 to April 15, \$10 at door. For info: Eyecon Committee, 10170 Gould St., Apt. C, Riverside, Calif. 92503.

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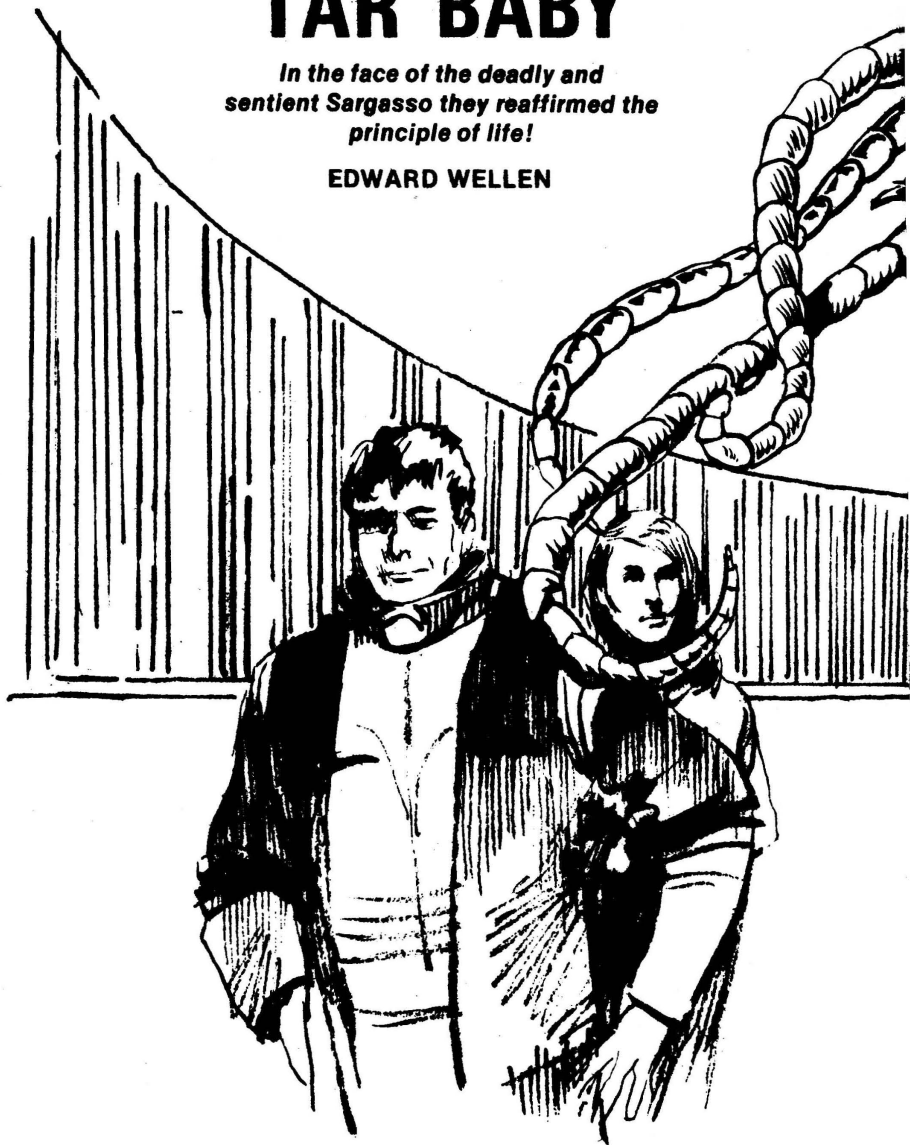
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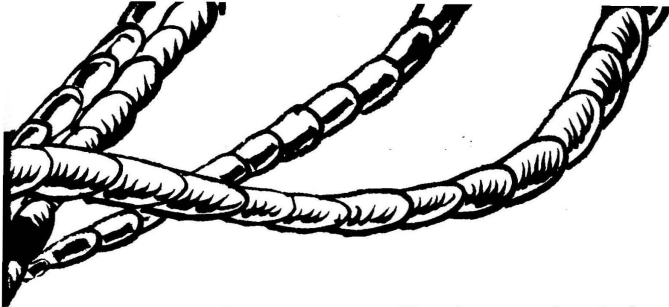
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TAR BABY

*In the face of the deadly and
sentient Sargasso they reaffirmed the
principle of life!*

EDWARD WELLEN





EITHER the spaceworn *Homingbird* had zigged when it should have zagged or the GO-type star and its lone planet loomed where they didn't belong.

Mate Gwyn Vestring grimaced. Just when they were on the home-stretch, getting set for the last jump—the jump to Earth. She fought down the urge to glance at her husband-captain. Maybe Boyd had not seen; he had said nothing yet.

As though making a simple adjustment she swung the astrogate a touch to starboard. This swept the star and its tempting planet off the screen and brought a more familiar-looking array into view for real-time register with *Homingbird's* inertial-guidance log.

Too late. Boyd had spotted the planet. He overrode the astrogate and swung the aperture back.

"Hold it, honey. What have we here?" He centered the planet and zoomed it nearer. "Hmm. The life-potential reading's positive. One point two on the evolutionary scale." He turned to face her with a cool smile. "Now don't tell me you

missed *that* apple."

Gwyn forced an answering smile.

"I wasn't looking for one more juicy prospect. We already have our quota twice over." She rested her hand on his arm. "Boyd, you agreed that we have a good cargo and that it's time we got back home."

Boyd patted her hand but somehow managed to lift it off.

"I know, honey. I did and we have and it is. But how can we pass this up after falling over it like this? I ask you."

He was obviously determined. She sighed, looked down at the roundness of her belly. She slid forward in her contour couch to make room to put her hands to the small of her back. She gave an isometric shove to her back to counter the weight within.

If Boyd saw, it didn't change his mind.

Gwyn said no more and made her face a mask of indifference as Boyd swung *Homingbird* into recon orbit.

The *Homingbird's* sensors took note of the planet's conditions and

under her mask Gwyn felt satisfaction that they would have to suit up if they landed and went out among the natives to trade. The inconvenience would serve him right.

But she felt a pang as she saw the eagerness fade from Boyd's face. After all, it was that eagerness, the light of a free spirit, that had drawn her to him in the first place.

Boyd's face grew longer and more puzzled. Where was the promised life? Was he failing to recognize its form? The planet looked all plain, smooth and dark, the chocolate coating of lava flow. Nothing else was visible. Gwyn could see him shepherding himself toward sheepishness, toward grinning defeat.

Then he spotted a spaceport. There was no mistaking it. He held *Homingbird* above a vast stand of spaceships. Hundreds of ships, all sizes, all shapes. Though most conformed to the cigar shape, some looked so grotesque as to seem incapable of landing or lifting off. But, as bees had proved, with enough power anything is aerodynamic.

This planet out of nowhere had to be a trade center of some importance, though the general barrenness and the forbidding atmosphere would make it uncomfortable for most species.

He switched on the transceiver

and over the intragalactic trade band gave *Homingbird's* call sign.

The answer came almost at once, in an artificial but warm voice.

“WELCOME to Tahrlabi. You may land two ship's lengths primary-ward of the green-and-orange ship.”

Boyd helped Gwyn fasten herself into her contour couch. He patted the roundness.

“Cheer up, you two. We'll zoom in and zoom out.”

Gwyn smiled for two.

Boyd picked out the green-and-orange ship at the far edge and tapped the instructions into the descent-mode coordinator. While it took over he gave himself up to rubbernecking at the monitor. He had decided that the natives of Tahrlabi lived underground and he hoped to catch sight of them as they popped up to greet the *Homingbird*.

They were almost down when Gwyn grasped his arm convulsively.

“Boyd, look!”

He saw. All the spaceships were stumpier than even fore-shortening would have made them appear. There were no launch pads visible beneath the spaceships, there were no flame buckets. All the spaceships were meters deep in Tahrlabi's crust. Colored candles stuck in a chocolate birthday cake.

Boyd's face tightened but his fingers moved swiftly and smoothly to shoot the *Homingbird* back up. The *Homingbird* stopped descending, poised, started to ascend. Boyd and Gwyn heard loud slaps against the hull. The *Homingbird* stopped ascending, poised, started to descend.

The monitor showed them a great spout of lava lipping and lapping at the *Homingbird*. The clinging solidified and in a linear-tug of war the lava overcame the *Homingbird's* thrust and pulled it down and down and down. The poor old *Homingbird* shook as though it would tear itself apart as Boyd refused to ease up on the thrust.

In the end he had to cut it off. The air was stiflingly hot and stank of scorched insulation. The *Homingbird* had sunk three meters into the crust, which had hardened about its base. He was wasting fuel.

With a sinking feeling to match the *Homingbird*, Boyd scanned the trapped spaceships the *Homingbird* had joined. There was a blurred vagueness of outline to them. Were they even spaceships? Perhaps they were mere decoys designed only to lure passing vessels such as the *Homingbird* into range. If so, they had worked.

He grimaced. Time later to worry about that. Time now to put first

things first. To save power, he shut down all of the vessel but essential life-systems.

The cabin air grew even stuffier. Sweat beaded on Gwyn's face.

Boyd unbuckled, got up moving a bit too fast for a man who hadn't yet got his planet-legs, undogged the hatch to the cargo hold. He tore a fingernail on the ring pull of the unsealer in his haste to break open a crate of hibernating gokdrob seedlings. He carried an armful of vacuum cans back into the cabin, opened them, and stood the seedlings strategically about.

For a few minutes he feared the Bordorg trader had diddled him. Then the seedlings came slowly to life, and with them the atmosphere inside the *Homingbird*.

Gwyn breathed deeply and smiled gratefully at Boyd.

"Better."

Boyd nodded, but his face had not lost its tightness. He returned to the console and set himself to make contact with the spaceport—assuming it was a spaceport.

"Interstellar vessel *Homingbird* calling Tahrlabi control. Come in, Tahrlabi control."

The warm artificial voice responded at once.

"This is Tahrlabi. Welcome, *Homingbird*. May you have a happy stay."

"Happy stay, hell. What do you

mean by telling me to land in an area of volcanic activity?"

"You sought permission to land. I welcomed you."

"Some welcome. Some welcome mat." Still, the voice *was* warm and seemed to be genuinely friendly. "Let that pass for the time being. We'll straighten it out later. Meanwhile, as long as I'm here, let's do business. What have you got to trade?"

"Nothing."

Boyd stared openmouthed at the blasphemy. Had he heard right?

"What was that you said?"

"Nothing."

He had heard right and left, in both ears. It was not the cabin heat, which the gokdrob seedlings were dissipating nicely; he was burning up: zero results for all this waste of time.

"Then we'd better straighten it out right now. No use my sticking around. What are you going to do about helping me lift off?"

"Nothing."

"What was that you—?. Never mind." He knew he had heard right the first time the second time. "Now listen here, I know my rights. I demand permission to lift off, and all necessary assistance thereto, under intragalactic law."

"Sorry. No liftoffs."

Well, there *might* be emergency conditions he was unaware of

calling for the temporary grounding of all spacecraft.

"For how long?"

"Forever."

ONCE they got past bluster and standoff, the question had to be why.

Boyd put all the reasonableness he could into his voice.

"Why?"

The answer came back with even more reasonableness.

"I have extended you my hospitality. You have accepted it. It would be ungracious of me to withdraw it. It would be unkind of you to renounce it."

"Hospitality? You mean imprisonment."

"Imprisonment?" The voice sounded shocked. "Did you feel your ship to be a prison when you were in space?"

"Of course not. But—"

"Then why should it be a prison now?"

"Because you're immobilizing it."

"How, immobilizing? Does it not move with me as I move through space?" Editorial we, yes; but planetary I? Local idiom?

"I suppose so. But—"

"There is no profit in talking longer at this point. You will have time to rethink your terms and you will come to see I am right.

Meanwhile I am plugging your ship into my power source. From now on you have all the energy you need. However, I must warn you—it is against my law for you to cut the umbilical once I have patched you in. I will sign off for now.”

“Hold on damnit!”

“It’s no use, friend.” This was a new voice breaking in. “We’ve all argued our cases and lost. Tar Baby has solidified its logic around the basis of its thought. You may as well relax and enjoy.”

“That’s right, *Homingbird*.” Another voice joining in. “Once you touch the sacred surface you can never leave it. Tar Baby can’t understand how anyone could *want* to leave it. In any case, it won’t *let* you leave it. You’ve accepted Tar Baby’s welcome and you’re stuck with it.”

There was sympathy in the voices but there was also welcome-to-the-club satisfaction. Boyd steamed.

“Now you tell us. Why didn’t you warn us while we were still in recon orbit?”

“Couldn’t.” It was the first voice again, apologetic. “Whenever a sucker comes along Tar Baby jams all communications but its own.”

Sucker. It was a long time since anyone had called Boyd Moomaw a sucker. His ears burned and he avoided Gwyn’s eyes.

“Tar Baby. Is that a corruption

of—what is it?—Tahrlabi?”

“Right.”

Boyd scanned the obsidian matrix holding all of them fast.

“I see what you mean. But I don’t see the natives. When do they come out?”

“They don’t. There aren’t any. There’s just Tar Baby.”

Boyd had just absorbed the fact that Tar Baby was the planet itself, and that it was in effect one piezoelectric crystal unit, when the sinking sun suddenly picked out in glow and shadow cobweb strands running from spaceship to spaceship.

The sight nearly drew a hysterical laugh from Boyd and did start him ranging the scope for a monstrous spider before he saw the catenaries were hawsers and lines of breeches buoys. Sighting a monstrous spider would not have turned him paler.

“Tell us, is there a law against setting foot on Tar Baby?”

“Ah, you’ve spotted the web. We were going to warn you of that, *Homingbird*. We’ve learned by unhappy example—the poor fellow—that Tar Baby can’t help embedding anything or anyone that touches its surface. That’s why we’ve rigged this aerial network for paying each other visits. Suit up and open your air lock and I’ll shoot you a line.”

IT WAS Hapyr Atirk who shot the line. He was a fellow Terran but Boyd and Gwyn couldn't place the latitude of Atirk's clothing style in Earth's past. And Boyd wasn't sure he liked Atirk's attitude; Atirk was a young squirt but his smile said he looked on Boyd and Gwyn as younger than himself.

The other member of the welcoming committee was Sizri, a Thubani. As they passed into the *Homingbird's* cabin, Sizri showed embarrassment at seeing a Terran woman, and a pregnant one at that. He remained but closed all his sensors throughout the visit.

Boyd made to introduce Gwyn and himself but Atirk, smiling his knowing smile, stopped him.

"Don't tell me. You're Boyd Moomaw and Gwyn Vestring, the first of the free traders. You became something of a legend. Back on Terra they wrote ballads and plays about the mysterious disappearance of the *Homingbird*. Your exploits as traders—or the legend of your exploits—inspired those of us who came later."

Boyd and Gwyn stared at each other and saw in each other's eyes they shared the feeling of being mired in madness or nightmare. The cords of his neck swelling and straining, Boyd turned back to Atirk.

"For psych's sake, man, what

are you talking about? We just now got here."

"That's right." Atirk's smile faded, changing the reading of his face. It was now a smileless knowing. He sighed. "It'll take some explaining. But one thing you learn here is not to satisfy all your curiosity at once. You have to save some for later. Sitting here we see only the long dry stretches of later. The most immediate thing to talk about is the makeup of Tar Baby. You have to know that in order to survive."

But Atirk was in no hurry to talk. It was as if he had to roll this moment on his tongue. Gwyn filled in by playing hostess. Sizri, of course, was unresponsive but Atirk did not let that stop him from helping himself to handful after handful of dried thagvo berries. He sighed again—or was that the thagvo berries reconstituting themselves explosively in his mouth? He fixed his gaze on Boyd.

"You asked where the natives are and I said there aren't any. That doesn't mean there never were any. There's evidence a life form did evolve here. When Tar Baby trapped the last spaceship—" apologetic correction—"—the last one before *Homingbird*, that is; the orange and green spaceship . . . Let's see, that was about a year-and-a-half Terran ago. Just a

minute; Sizri can tell me the precise date."

Atirk made to shake Sizri open. Boyd stopped him with a gesture just short of curt.

"Never mind. Save it."

"Right. Well, in its heavings when it trapped the orange and green spaceship—Sizri's, by the way—Tar Baby threw up some fossil remains. I caught the fossils on tape before they sank again."

Atirk produced a pocket tape-projector that hologrammed on astonishingly real image in their midst. Boyd and Gwyn watched three slug-shaped creatures boil in slow motion out of a fire-edged rip in the crust.

Gwyn frowned.

"How do we know it was native to this planet? They might have come from a spaceship Tar Baby swallowed."

Atirk smiled.

"They might've. But I prefer them native for my guess as to how Tar Baby came to be the thinking thing it is."

He froze the tape a frame before the last of the specimens sank out of sight. He pointed with weary enthusiasm.

"Look at the armored plate. Read the spectroscopic data on the outside of the picture. When we think of armor on a creature we think of horn. But this armored

plate's an assembly of bituminous tubes, each with a spine of anti-monial lead. Lead oxide fills the space between the spine and the tube."

Boyd started.

"Then these things were—"

Atirk wasn't going to let anyone do him out of the telling.

"—living batteries. See, the spine collects electric current. And where did it get electric current? Notice these temporary quartz-outcroppings in the far corner of the picture. Remember; piezoelectric quartz crystals produce a voltage when subjected to mechanical stress and undergo mechanical stress when subjected to voltage. There's a hell of a lot of internal groaning in Tar Baby. The damned things plugged into quartz whenever they needed recharging."

He grinned.

"As for sex life, see here how they could hook up in series or in parallel. As for getting around, look at these rods in the underbelly of the creature; before it got trapped in lava flow it walking on them. Probably had a built-in knee-jerk reflex that kicked each rod backward in its slot as it hit the ground, shoving the whole assembly forward like a stiff-legged centipede.

"This baby was a two-tonner, having, I'd guess, around a thou-

sand amperage per hour capacity and capable of going six years Terran before needing a recharge.”

The picture vanished. Atirk pocketed the player. He shrugged.

“I DON’T know how long the species roamed Tar Baby before evolution took the next step. Willingly or unwillingly—it doesn’t matter now which—the living batteries gave their minds and bodies to Tar Baby. Tar Baby became one great piezoelectric crystal unit. And that unit said unto itself, ‘Let there be power.’”

Atirk smiled.

“And Tar Baby felt the power, and it was good. And Tar Baby got religion. And that religion is Tar Baby.” The smile faded. “And with reason; Tar Baby has power like you wouldn’t believe.”

Boyd raised an eyebrow.

“For instance?”

Atirk looked sulky, as though he had wanted to save that for later. Then his weary enthusiasm took over again.

“For instance, this crystal unit is powerful enough to cavitate space. Tar Baby can create a pseudo black hole and twist itself—and its primary—out of the universe and back in again.”

He smiled his knowing smile again.

“You’re staring at me. You think I’m kidding—or crazy. Then tell me how Tar Baby and its primary got here—” a nod skyward “—where all the star charts show empty space. I won’t press it. You’ll have a chance to see for yourself. One of these nights you’ll find a new star pattern out there. And some other night another pattern. Tar Baby really gets around.”

The smile faded again.

“From our point of view there’s a bad side effect. I won’t get into the relativistics of spatial cavitation, but e over m does give c^2 . Sooner-than-instantaneous travel. Each time Tar Baby pops out of the universe and back in it’s gone further into the past. That’s what I was trying to tell you earlier—you were before my time and yet I got here first.”

Atirk stood up to leave them with that thought.

Boyd shook his head, trying to take it all in and not wanting to take it in. Even if they managed to tear free they could never go home again.

Atirk shook Sizri open and they departed to their respective homes away from home.

THE fleet that had lost its fleet-ness held gams here, just as the ancient sailing ships had allowed

their crews to visit back and forth when two vessels fell in with each other in alien seas in the old whaling days on Terra. *Homingbird* quickly wove itself into the web.

Boyd noticed one spaceship that stood aloof from the web of hawsers and lines.

"What about that one? Why is whoever's in there so stand-offish? Sulking? Dead? Or is he ostracized?"

It was a stag party at Sizri's and Sizri was the life of it. Sizri laughed, flapping the wings of his nose in the manner of his kind.

"No one's in there. It's a fully-automated ship. Friendly enough, though. It was on its shakedown cruise and its hold was empty when Tar Baby trapped it, so naturally it's out of things. Now about that lot of vulnyl you want to trade for my srikvi—"

In a manner of speaking they took in each other's laundry. Out of habit and to have something to do with their time they traded. Aside from trading their various recycled foods for the sake of variety, they traded cargoes for the sake of trading. In fact, trading for trading's sake had become the way of life on Tar Baby.

What with wear and tear, goods in general had grown scarcer, more

precious. *Homingbird's* novelty and its promise of replenishing the total inventory made it Tar Baby's busiest captive for the time being.

Boyd had no time to sit and think, and was glad to have no time to sit and think.

It was when he found himself bartering listlessly the second time the same crate of jila that had come to Tar Baby in the *Homingbird's* hold and had since been in almost all the other holds that he cried silently, *Hold, enough!* It shocked him into awareness.

Boyd upped his asking price with a savage suddenness that drove the Aldebarani he had been haggling with out of the *Homingbird* in a huff and a puff of indignant blue smoke.

Alone now with Gwyn, Boyd braced himself to really look at her for the first time since Tar Baby had trapped them. He saw by the set of her jaw that she had made up her mind not to reproach him, not to show her despair, not to break down. It might have been healthier for her, for both of them, for all three of them, if she had let her feelings out instead of holding in. But that was Gwyn.

Her time was near and he had promised her that their child would be born on Terran soil. She smiled now, meeting his gaze, but he felt that she would never truly forgive

him. And he felt something worse—that she would be right never to forgive him.

He felt guilty too that there were no other Terran women among them. There were females of other species and they were kind to her but they were not the same.

But what could he do to make up for letting her down short of lifting off and escaping?

Escaping from Tar Baby's hold was impossible. They all said so. Many had tried. All had failed.

He slammed the cargo hatch shut on the priceless and useless jila and all the other goods choking the *Homingbird's* hold. He stood looking down at the cargo hatch, now flush with the cabin deck. Below the cargo hold was the engine room housing all *Homingbird's* thrust, locked in Tar Baby's crust.

Maybe, just maybe . . .

HE called the Aldebarani back. The Aldebarani got the jila at less than the original bid price, in exchange for a handful of ghir. The Aldebarani examined the jila suspiciously, then buoyed the crate away quickly before Boyd could change his mind.

It went against Boyd's grain to strike bad bargains but beginning with this trade Boyd took losses and ill-hidden scorn with a wild zest. Always he bartered more for less,

giving ten fat kilos of, say, vulnyl for a microscopic milligram of, say, sriki.

If Gwyn wondered, she said nothing, only set her jaw harder and went on making ready for the third member of the *Homingbird's* crew.

In spite of the tendency of the others to dawdle, to stretch out, to make a Japanese tea ceremony out of a trading session, Boyd made rapid headway. At those prices no one could go wrong and no one dallied over a deal—there was always someone else waiting to snap it up.

But when the cargo hold was one-fourth empty his plan threatened to hit a snag. If the Spican twosome had their way the *Homingbird's* hold seemed doomed to stay three-fourths full, unless Boyd jettisoned his cargo—but that would only alert Tar Baby.

The snag came up at a general meeting. All but the automated spaceship attended in person. The meeting took place inside a Vegan vessel because it was the largest. The Spican twosome had the floor and the wall. They had lately lost a valuable load in transit when a line snapped and the lot plunged to the surface and Tar Baby swallowed it whole.

"We propose eliminating the tedious and dangerous business of

transferring goods from ship to ship. Everyone knows what everyone has. There is no need to unstow stock. We move that there be simply the exchanging of scrip."

Boyd shot to his feet.

"That *sounds* good. But what are we going to do with the time and trouble we save? Isn't the whole rationale for this stupid business to keep us busy?"

There was much more on both sides but the sentiment slowly but surely swung Boyd's way. The Spican held out, then split with itself. At last the recalcitrant half made it unanimous.

Sweating to beat the birth deadline and frightened by the close call, Boyd now made offers no one could refuse. Even so, the hold failed to empty out as swiftly as he had hoped. The others knew they were here forever; he could push them only so fast.

In a flash of inspiration he staked the automated spaceship to much of the bulkiest of his slower-moving stuff. It was pathetically grateful to get into the swim. Boyd had the feeling, though, that if his plan went wrong and he had to stick around he would find it as stiff a competitor as the others.

AT LAST the hold was empty enough. At last he could tell Gwyn what he was up to.

Her jaw loosened and her mouth trembled. She felt light as she ran heavily into his arms. The unborn child that had come between them bound them together with its kick.

Gwyn's suit was a tight fit but they thought it best to suit up. Even if the lava seal about the *Homingbird's* base were perfect some of Tar Baby's atmosphere might be trapped in the space around the rocket motor.

The smile Boyd had let Gwyn see as he climbed down into that trader's nightmare, a nearly empty hold, became a rictus. Careful not to touch the umbilical Tar Baby had fastened to the *Homingbird*, Boyd lowered himself through the service hatchway, then through the inner and outer valves of the emergency hatch.

Careful not to touch Tar Baby's surface, Boyd hung onto the bottom rung and played his lamp around. Blocking the nuclear ticking from his mind, he hung there till he had made sure the *Homingbird's* last burn had kept lava from clogging the tubes. When he climbed back up he could give Gwyn a *smile* smile.

She helped him rig tackles. The service hatch was too narrow to pass the motor through. Boyd lasered a larger hole in the deck-bulkhead between cargo hold and engine compartment and they lifted

the resultant doughnut out and shoved it to one side. Boyd attached the hook to the hoisting eye of the motor and drew the self-locking hoist taut. It would be close. If and when the motor cleared the cargo deck the tackle would be chock-a-block.

Boyd carefully lasered the motor free of its mounting. Gwyn pressed the power button and at the lowest speed hoisted the motor while Boyd took up the slack in the flexible cables and tubing. Boyd welded the motor into the new opening and filled in around it with bites of the doughnut to make the new bottom spacetight. Now the cargo hold was the new engine room.

He cut a new hole in the deck, welded the service hatch—the hole in the doughnut—into it, swung back down into the old engine room, and twisting around on a bosun's chair, used the laser to slice the hull through and through just above the lava line. Now a truncated but spaceworthy *Homingbird* rested freely on the cut rim—ready for liftoff.

He lashed the laser in place beneath the cut, aiming it at the umbilical, and left it waiting for him to switch it on by remote control. He took one last look around, pulled himself back up into the new engine room, dogged down the hatch. He and Gwyn sealed them-

selves inside the cabin.

While *Homingbird* computed its new weight and adjusted itself Boyd carefully webbed Gwyn in, then himself. He patted her hand and smiled. Even if they never got back to the Earth of their own era, what a trading advantage they would have on an earlier Earth!

Homingbird gave the green light. Boyd said a silent goodbye and good riddance to Tar Baby, and a mute farewell to its captives. He switched *Homingbird* over to internal power, fired the laser to cut the umbilical, pressed for liftoff.

Homingbird rose, dripping festoons of hawsers and lines. Boyd looked in the monitor and laughed to see Tar Baby lick up futilely at the *Homingbird*. Then they were shuddering up through Tar Baby's atmosphere into a wonderful free stillness. They had made it!

ALL that remained was the aborted jump to Terra. As Boyd switched on the astrogate and brought a familiar-looking array of stars into view for real-time register with *Homingbird's* inertial-guidance log, the stars vanished.

For less than an eyeblink the stars swam as in a whirlpool, trailing watery streaks of light as in a time exposure. Then there came a blackness beyond that blackness

which is the absence of light. In this blackness Tar Baby's primary remained the only light, not so much accenting the blackness as lost in it.

Boyd stared. He saw now what Hapyr Atirk had meant by spatial cavitation. They were outside the universe.

With nothing to lose, Boyd pressed the jump button anyway. Nothing happened. *Homingbird* was stuck in Tar Baby's local space as it had been stuck in Tar Baby.

There was no way but back. But Boyd was slow in returning the *Homingbird* to recon orbit and even slower in acknowledging Tar Baby's signal.

Tar Baby sounded anxious.

"Are you all right, *Homingbird*?"

Boyd winced to see Gwyn looking pale and sweaty in spite of her reassuring smile. Was this latest shock bringing on premature labor?

"Are you all right, *Homingbird*?"

"Well enough."

"Ah. Then welcome back to Tahrlabi. You may land two ship's lengths primary-ward of your old spot."

Boyd grimaced.

"No, thanks."

They had only this one card to play. By staying in recon orbit *Homingbird* remained a reproach to Tar Baby, stood out as a re-

latively free denial of Tar Baby's sacred hospitality.

It was Tar Baby's turn to take long.

"Why not?"

"Your surface is sacred, right?"

"Right." How smug could a planet get?

"Well, so is our planet's to us."

"Oh? Can that be?"

"It damned well is. So much so, that we were returning to Earth because my mate is with child and I have sworn that my child would be born on Terran soil."

The jealous warmth of Tar Baby's response surprised him.

"Why is your home planet's soil so holy to you?"

"You have no soil, so you wouldn't know."

"Behold!"

Looking down, Boyd watched a pyrotechnical display, a vast pattern of scintillating iridescence on the dark glassy hemisphere.

"Can your home planet's soil perform wonders?"

Boyd frowned. Talc? Mud packs? He shook his head with an angry smile. This was too serious. Aureomycin, streptomycin, terramycin? More like it but still not good enough. The *Homingbird* passed over the field of trapped ships. Of course. *Life*.

"Earth gives rise to life. You swallow life."

Again Tar Baby took long.

"If I fix it so your child is born on Terran soil will you acknowledge my holiness?" A strange note had crept in. "Is it a deal?"

So Tar Baby had been eavesdropping on its captives as they whiled away the time of their captivity! The note, strange to Tar Baby, was familiar to Boyd. It was the sound of a trader convinced of his own trickiness. Boyd ate such traders for breakfast. Quick, before Tar Baby could change its mind. He kept the smile out of his own voice.

"It's a deal."

A SUDDEN light on the panel caught Boyd's eye. The *Homingbird's* inertial-guidance log had gone mad. *Homingbird*, as far as Boyd could tell by eyeball, remained in orbit just as it had been. But it was also moving in directions the log could not handle.

Timelessly a shimmer grew in the middle of the blackness. Now, while *Homingbird* froze in orbit, the shimmer became a ghostly skein. Could that small thing be the universe? Once you were outside the universe you were *everywhere*. You *surrounded* the universe. You could touch it where you willed.

Tar Baby reached out, touched Earth. Tar Baby's local space

followed the thread of a wavicle into the skein.

The Solar System filled the monitor, then Earth alone. Because he saw what he wanted most Boyd was afraid to let himself enjoy the sight too much. Gwyn, Boyd saw, felt the same. She closed her eyes, tears squeezed out.

Boyd brought Earth's surface and Tar Baby's as close as he could in the monitor. The two were one at one point.

Holding itself delicately in a state of masslessness, relative to the rest of the universe, Tar Baby touched one of the rolling hills of Earth.

Boyd's throat swelled with all the emotion he could not express. He longed to land the *Homingbird* right now and open the airlock and breathe the fresh air of Earth. But that gate between two worlds looked a shimmering almost immaterial thing. Besides, *Homingbird* seemed frozen in orbit.

Now the resolution improved, as if Tar Baby had got them in phase. Boyd saw a startled cave bear lumber away.

Again Hapyr Atirk had proved right. Twisting in and out of the universe, Tar Baby moved back through time.

Was marooning *Homingbird* and its crew in Earth's past the trickery Tar Baby's tone had hinted at?

Well, being stuck in Earth's pre-

historic past beat being stuck on Tar Baby any time. This was hardly the Garden of Eden, but it was life, it was freedom. He had the sudden feeling of reliving something. Was this how it had all started on Earth?

Wondering, he awaited Tar Baby's signal freeing the *Homingbird* to land on Earth.

But Tar Baby gave no such signal. Instead Boyd watched an arm of lava reach out and scoop in several hundred cubic yards of earth.

Then Tar Baby broke contact. Earth, then the Solar System, diminished in the monitor. The universe shrank to a ghostly skein out of which Tar Baby's local space had followed the thread of a wavicle. The blackness beyond blackness. Then the watery lights, unwhirling. They were back in the universe, though the star patterns showed them to be in another part of it. They had lost Earth forever.

THEIR child was a girl. Tar Baby had the decency to wait. Only after Sizri opened his sensors and left, the last of their fellow captives to pay a breeches-buoy call on the proud parents, did Tar Baby signal *Homingbird*.

"Remember our deal."

Boyd smiled. He had to admire the tricky bastard. The child had

been born on Terran soil. Tar Baby had packed the several hundred cubic yards of earth down hard with great tamping wallops. And here, two ship's lengths from the buried stump of its old self, the *Homingbird* had landed and stood now and forever on Terran soil.

"I acknowledge your holiness."

"It is good."

BOYD wondered how long Tar Baby would think so. There were more roots than the new umbilical Tar Baby had tied to *Homingbird*. Already bits of green had broken up through the packed earth.

The soil held lichen and molds and insects and bacteria. The lichen would begin the process, the acid in its rootlike fibers dissolving out of the lava rock the minerals the lichen lived on. The lava would grow spongy, hold water. The water would freeze, the rock would crack, the soil would deepen, spread. In time all Tar Baby would live as did this handful of dirt. Many generations from now Tar Baby would teem with life. And see who would own Tar Baby then!

Meanwhile . . .

Boyd signaled his potential son-in-law, Hapyr Atirk.

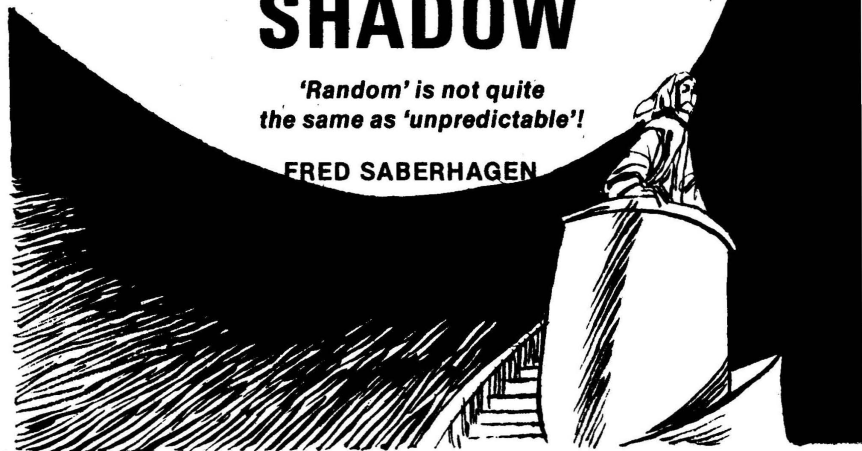
"Be interested in a nulvuv-jila trade?"

"Be right over." •

WINGS OUT OF SHADOW

'Random' is not quite
the same as 'unpredictable'!

FRED SABERHAGEN



IN MALORI's first and only combat mission the berserker came to him in the image of a priest of the sect into which Malori had been born on the planet Yaty. In a dreamlike vision that was the analogue of a very real combat he saw the robed figure standing tall in a deformed pulpit, eyes flaming with malevolence, lowering arms wing-like with the robes they stretched. With their lowering, the lights of the universe were dimming outside the windows of stained glass and Malori was being damned.

Even with his heart pounding under damnation's terror Malori

retained sufficient consciousness to remember the real nature of himself and of his adversary and that he was not powerless against him. His dream-feet walked him timelessly toward the pulpit and its demon-priest while all around him the stained glass windows burst, showering him with fragments of sick fear. He walked a crooked path, avoiding the places in the smooth floor where, with quick gestures, the priest created snarling, snapping stone mouths full of teeth. Malori seemed to have unlimited time to decide where to put his feet. *Weapon*, he thought, a



surgeon instructing some invisible aide. *Here—in my right hand.*

From those who had survived similar battles he had heard how the inhuman enemy appeared to each in different form, how each human must live the combat through in terms of a unique nightmare. To some a berserker came as a ravening beast, to others as devil or god or man. To still others it was some essence of terror that could never be faced or even seen. The combat was a nightmare experienced while the subconscious ruled, while the waking mind was suppressed by careful electrical pres-

ures on the brain. Eyes and ears were padded shut so that the conscious mind might be more easily suppressed, the mouth plugged to save the tongue from being bitten, the nude body held immobile by the defensive fields that kept it whole against the thousands of gravities that came with each movement of the one-man ship while in combat mode. It was a nightmare from which mere terror could never wake one; waking came only when the fight was over, came only with death or victory or disengagement.

Into Malori's dream-hand there now came a meat cleaver keen as a

razor, massive as a guillotine-blade. So huge it was that had it been what it seemed it would have been far too cumbersome to even lift. His uncle's butcher shop on Yaty was gone, with all other human works of that planet. But the cleaver came back to him now, magnified, perfected to suit his need.

He gripped it hard in both hands and advanced. As he drew near the pulpit towered higher. The carved dragon on its front, which should have been an angel, came alive, blasting him with rosy fire. With a shield that came from nowhere he parried the splashing flames.

Outside the remnants of the stained glass windows the lights of the universe were almost dead now. Standing at the base of the pulpit, Malori drew back his cleaver as if to strike overhand at the priest who towered above his reach. Then, without any forethought at all, he switched his aim at the top of his backswing and laid the blow crashing against the pulpit's stem. It shook, but resisted stoutly. Damnation came.

Before the devils reached him, though, the energy was draining from the dream. In less than a second of real time it was no more than a fading visual image, a few seconds after that a dying memory. Malori, coming back to consciousness with eyes and ears still sealed, floated in a soothing limbo. Before post-combat fatigue and sensory

deprivation could combine to send him into psychosis, attachments on his scalp began to feed his brain with bursts of pins-and-needles noise. It was the safest signal to administer to a brain that might be on the verge of any of a dozen different kinds of madness. The noise made a whitish roaring scattering of light and sound that seemed to fill his head and at the same time somehow outlined for him the positions of his limbs.

His first fully conscious thought: he had just fought a berserker and survived. He had won—or had at least achieved a stand-off—or he would not be here. It was no mean achievement.

BERSERKERS were like no other foe that Earth-descended human beings had ever faced. They had cunning and intelligence and yet were not alive. Relics of some interstellar war over long ages since, automated machines, warships for the most part, they carried as their basic programming the command to destroy all life wherever it could be found. Yaty was only the latest of many Earth-colonized planets to suffer a berserker attack, and it was among the luckiest; nearly all its people had been successfully evacuated. Malori and others now fought in deep space to protect the *Hope*, one of the enormous evacuation ships. The *Hope* was a sphere several kilometers in diameters, large enough

to contain a good proportion of the planet's population stored tier on tier in defense-field stasis. A trickle-relaxation of the fields allowed them to breathe and live with slowed metabolism.

The voyage to a safe sector of the galaxy was going to take several months because most of it, in terms of time spent, was going to be occupied in traversing an outlying arm of the great Taynarus nebula. Here gas and dust were much too thick to let a ship duck out of normal space and travel faster than light. Here even the speeds attainable in normal space were greatly restricted. At thousands of kilometers per second, manned ship or berserker machine could alike be smashed flat against a wisp of gas far more tenuous than human breath.

Taynarus was a wilderness of uncharted plumes and tendrils of dispersed matter, laced through by corridors of relatively empty space. Much of the wilderness was completely shaded by interstellar dust from the light of all the suns outside. Through dark shoals and swamps and tides of nebula the *Hope* and her escort *Judith* fled, and a berserker pack pursued. Some berserkers were even larger than the *Hope*, but those that had taken up this chase were much smaller. In regions of space so thick with matter, a race went to the small as well as to the swift; as the impact cross-section of a ship in-

creased, its maximum practical speed went inexorably down.

The *Hope*, ill-adapted for this chase (in the rush to evacuate, there had been no better choice available) could not expect to outrun the smaller and more maneuverable enemy. Hence the escort carrier *Judith*, trying always to keep herself between *Hope* and the pursuing pack. *Judith* mothered the little fighting ships, spawning them out whenever the enemy came too near, welcoming survivors back when the threat had once again been beaten off. There had been fifteen of the one-man ships when the chase began. Now there were nine.

The noise injections from Malori's life support equipment slowed down, then stopped. His conscious mind once more sat steady on its throne. The gradual relaxation of his defense fields he knew to be a certain sign that he would soon rejoin the world of waking men.

As soon as his fighter, Number Four, had docked itself inside the *Judith* Malori hastened to disconnect himself from the tiny ship's systems. He pulled on a loose cover-all and let himself out of the cramped space. A thin man with knobby joints and an awkward step, he hurried along a catwalk through the echoing hangar-like chamber, noting that three or four fighters besides his had already returned and were resting in their cradles. The artificial gravity was

quite steady, but Malori stumbled and almost fell in his haste to get down the short ladder to the operations deck.

Petrovich, commander of the *Judith*, a bulky, iron-faced man of middle height, was on the deck apparently waiting for him.

"Did—did I make my kill?" Malori stuttered eagerly as he came hurrying up. The forms of military address were little observed aboard the *Judith*, as a rule, and Malori was really a civilian anyway. That he had been allowed to take out a fighter at all was a mark of the commander's desperation.

Scowling, Petrovich answered bluntly. "Malori, you're a disaster in one of these ships. Haven't the mind for it at all."

The world turned a little gray in front of Malori. He hadn't understood until this moment just how important to him certain dreams of glory were. He could find only weak and awkward words. "But . . . I thought I did all right." He tried to recall his combat-nightmare. Something about a church.

"Two people had to divert their ships from their original combat objectives to rescue you. I've already seen their gun-camera tapes. You had Number Four just sparing around with that berserker as if you had no intention of doing it any damage at all." Petrovich looked at him more closely, shrugged, and softened his voice somewhat. "I'm not trying to chew

you out, you weren't even aware of what was happening, of course. I'm just stating facts. Thank probability the *Hope* is twenty AU deep in a formaldehyde cloud up ahead. If she'd been in an exposed position just now they would have got her."

"But—" Malori tried to begin an argument but the commander simply walked away. More fighters were coming in. Locks sighed and cradles clanged, and Petrovich had plenty of more important things to do than stand here arguing with him. Malori stood there alone for a few moments, feeling deflated and defeated and diminished. Involuntarily he cast a yearning glance back at Number Four. It was a short, windowless cylinder, not much more than a man's height in diameter, resting in its metal cradle while technicians worked about it. The stubby main laser nozzle, still hot from firing, was sending up a wisp of smoke now that it was back in atmosphere. There was his two-handed cleaver.

No man could direct a ship or a weapon with anything like the competence of a good machine. The creeping slowness of human nerve impulses and of conscious thought disqualified humans from maintaining direct control of their ships in any space fight against berserkers. But the human subconscious was not so limited. Certain of its processes could not be correlated with any specific synaptic activity within the brain, and some

theorists held that these processes took place outside of time. Most physicists stood aghast at this view—but for space combat it made a useful working hypothesis.

In combat, the berserker computers were coupled with sophisticated randomizing devices, to provide the flair, the unpredictability that gained an advantage over an opponent who simply and consistently chose the maneuver statistically most likely to bring success. Men also used computers to drive their ships, but had now gained an edge over the best randomizers by relying once more on their own brains, parts of which were evidently freed of hurry and dwelt outside of time, where even speeding light must be as motionless as carved ice.

There were drawbacks. Some people (including Malori, it now appeared) were simply not suitable for the job, their subconscious minds seemingly uninterested in such temporal matters as life or death. And even in suitable minds the subconscious was subject to great stress. Connection to external computers loaded the mind in some way not yet understood. One after another, human pilots returning from combat were removed from their ships in states of catatonia or hysterical excitement. Sanity might be restored, but the man or woman was worthless thereafter as a combat-computer's teammate. The system was so new that the importance of these drawbacks was just coming

to light aboard the *Judith* now. The trained operators of the fighting ships had been used up, and so had their replacements. Thus it was that Ian Malori, historian, and others were sent out, untrained, to fight. But using their minds had bought a little extra time.

FROM the operations deck Malori went to his small single cabin. He had not eaten for some time, but he was not hungry. He changed clothes and sat in a chair looking at his bunk, looking at his books and tapes and violin, but he did not try to rest or to occupy himself. He expected that he would promptly get a call from Petrovich. Because Petrovich now had nowhere else to turn.

He almost smiled when the communicator chimed, bringing a summons to meet with the commander and other officers at once. Malori acknowledged and set out, taking with him a brown leather-like case about the size of a briefcase but differently shaped, which he selected from several hundred similar cases in a small room adjacent to his cabin. The case he carried was labeled: **CRAZY HORSE**.

Petrovich looked up as Malori entered the small planning room in which the handful of ship's officers were already gathered around a table. The commander glanced at the case Malori was carrying, and nodded. "It seems we have no choice, historian. We are running

the moment Malori was not going to speak that name.

"I want it easy," was all he said, and blinked his eyes and tried to rub his neck against the pain.

The man looked him over in silence a little longer. "All right," he said then. Turning back to the machine, he added in a different, humble voice: "I can easily dominate this injured badlife. There will be no problems if you leave us here alone."

THE machine turned one metal-cased lens toward its servant. "Remember," it vocalized, "the auxiliaries must be made ready. Time grows short. Failure will bring unpleasant stimuli."

"I will remember, sir." The man was humble and sincere. The machine looked at both of them a few moments longer and then departed, metal legs flowing suddenly into a precise and almost graceful walk. Shortly after, Malori heard the familiar sound of an airlock cycling.

"We're alone now," the man said, looking down at him. "If you want a name for me you can call me Greenleaf. Want to try to fight me? If so, let's get it over with." He was not much bigger than Malori but his hands were huge and he looked hard and very capable despite his ragged filthiness. "All right, that's a smart choice. You know, you're actually a lucky man, though you don't realize it yet. Berserkers

aren't like the other masters that men have—not like the governments and parties and corporations and causes that use you up and then just let you drop and drag away. No, when the machines run out of uses for you they'll finish you off quickly and cleanly—if you've served well. I know, I've seen'em do it that way with other humans. No reason why they shouldn't. All they want is for us to die, not suffer."

Malori said nothing. He thought perhaps he would be able to stand up soon.

Greenleaf (the name seemed so inappropriate that Malori thought it probably real) made some adjustment on a small device that he had taken from a pocket and was holding almost concealed in one large hand. He asked: "How many escort carriers besides this one are trying to protect the *Hope*?"

"I don't know," Malori lied. There had been only the *Judith*.

"What is your name?" The bigger man was still looking at the device in his hand.

"Ian Malori."

Greenleaf nodded, and without showing any particular emotion in his face took two steps forward and kicked Malori in the belly, precisely and with brutal power.

"That was for trying to lie to me, Ian Malori," said his captor's voice, heard dimly from somewhere above as Malori groveled on the deck, trying to breathe again. "Understand that I am infallibly

able to tell when you are lying. Now, how many escort carriers are there?"

In time Malori could sit up again, and choke out words. "Only this one." Whether Greenleaf had a real lie detector, or was only trying to make it appear so by asking questions whose answers he already knew, Malori decided that from now on he would speak the literal truth as scrupulously as possible. A few more kicks like that and he would be helpless and useless and the machines would kill him. He discovered that he was by no means ready to abandon his life.

"What was your position on the crew, Malori?"

"I'm a civilian."

"What sort?"

"An historian."

"And why are you here?"

Malori started to try to get to his feet, then decided there was nothing to be gained by the struggle and stayed sitting on the deck. If he ever let himself dwell on his situation for a moment he would be too hideously afraid to think coherently. "There was a project . . . you see, I brought with me from Yaty a number of what we call historical models—blocks of programmed responses we use in historical research."

"I remember hearing about some such things. What was the project you mentioned?"

"Trying to use the personae of military men as randomizers for the

combat computers on the one-man ships."

"Aha." Greenleaf squatted, supple and poised for all his raunchy look. "How do they work in combat? Better than a live pilot's subconscious mind? The machines know all about *that*."

"We never had a chance to try. Are the rest of the crew here all dead?"

Greenleaf nodded casually. "It wasn't a hard boarding. There must have been a failure in your automatic defenses. I'm glad to find one man alive and smart enough to cooperate. It'll help me in my career." He glanced at an expensive chronometer strapped to his dirty wrist. "Stand up, Ian Malori. There's work to do."

Malori got up and followed the other toward the operations deck.

"The machines and I have been looking around, Malori. These nine little fighting ships you still have on board are just too good to be wasted. The machines are sure of catching the *Hope* now, but she'll have automatic defenses, probably a lot tougher than this tub's were. The machines have taken a lot of casualties on this chase so they mean to use these nine little ships as auxiliary troops—no doubt you have some knowledge of military history?"

"Some." The answer was perhaps an understatement, but it seemed to pass as truth. The lie detector, if it was one, had been put

away. But Malori would still take no more chances than he must.

"Then you probably know how some of the generals on old Earth used their auxiliaries. Drove them on ahead of the main force of trusted troops, where they could be killed if they tried to retreat, and were also the first to be used up against the enemy."

Arriving on the operations deck, Malori saw few signs of damage. Nine tough little ships waited in their launching cradles, re-armed and returned and refueled for combat. All that would have been taken care of within minutes of their return from their last mission.

"Malori, from looking at these ships' controls while you were unconscious, I gather that there's no fully automatic mode in which they can be operated."

"Right. There has to be some controlling mind, or randomizer, connected on board."

"You and I are going to get them out as berserker auxiliaries, Ian Malori." Greenleaf glanced at his timepiece again. "We have less than an hour to think of a good way and only a few hours more to complete the job. The faster the better. If we delay we are going to be made to suffer for it." He seemed almost to relish the thought. "What do you suggest we do?"

Malori opened his mouth as if to speak, and then did not.

Greenleaf said: "Installing any of your military personae is of

course out of the question, as they might not submit well to being driven forward like mere cannon-fodder. I assume they are leaders of some kind. But have you perhaps any of these personae from different fields, of a more docile nature?"

Malori, sagging against the operations officer's empty combat chair, forced himself to think very carefully before he spoke. "As it happens, there are some personae aboard in which I have a special personal interest. Come."

With the other following closely, Malori led the way to his small bachelor cabin. Somehow it was astonishing that nothing had been changed inside. There on the bunk was his violin, and on the table were his music tapes and a few books. And here, stacked neatly in their leather-like curved cases, were some of the personae that he liked best to study.

Malori lifted the top case from the stack. "This man was a violinist, as I like to think I am. His name would probably mean nothing to you."

"Musicology was never my field. But tell me more."

"He was an Earthman, who lived in the twentieth century CE—quite a religious man, too, as I understand. We can plug the persona in and ask it what it thinks of fighting, if you are suspicious."

"We had better do that." When Malori had shown him the proper receptacle beside the cabin's small



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computer console. Greenleaf snapped the connections together himself. "How does one communicate with it?"

"Just talk."

Greenleaf spoke sharply toward the leather-like case. "Your name?"

"Albert Ball." The voice that answered from the console speaker sounded more human by far than the berserker's had.

"How does the thought of getting into a fight strike you, Albert?"

"A detestable idea."

"Will you play the violin for us?"

"Gladly." But no music followed.

Malori put in: "More connections are necessary if you want actual music."

"I don't think we'll need that." Greenleaf unplugged the Albert Ball unit and began to look through the stack of others, frowning at unfamiliar names. There were twelve or fifteen cases in all. "Who are these?"

"Albert Ball's contemporaries. Performers who shared his profession." Malori let himself sink down on the bunk for a few moments' rest. He was not far from fainting. Then he went to stand with Greenleaf beside the stack of personae. "This is a model of Edward Mannoek, who was blind in one eye and could never have passed the physical examination necessary to serve in any military force of his time." He pointed to another. "This man served briefly

in the cavalry, as I recall, but he kept getting thrown from his horse and was soon relegated to gathering supplies. And this one was a frail, tubercular youth who died at twenty-three standard years of age."

Greenleaf gave up looking at the cases and turned to size up Malori once again. Malori could feel his battered stomach muscles trying to contract, anticipating another violent impact. It would be too much, it was going to kill him if it came like that again . . .

"ALL right." Greenleaf was frowning, checking his chronometer yet again. Then he looked up with a little smile. Oddly, the smile made him look like the hell of a good fellow. "All right! Musicians, I suppose, are the antithesis of the military. If the machines approve, we'll install them and get the ships sent out. Ian Malori, I may just raise your pay." His pleasant smile broadened. "We may just have bought ourselves another standard year of life if this works out as well as I think it might."

When the machine came aboard again a few minutes later, Greenleaf bowing before it explained the essence of the plan, while Malori in the background, in an agony of terror, found himself bowing too.

"Proceed, then," the machine approved. "If you are not, the ship infected with life may find concealment in the storms that rise ahead

of us." Then it went away again quickly. Probably it had repairs and refitting to accomplish on its own robotic ship.

With two men working, installation went very fast. It was only a matter of opening a fighting ship's cabin, inserting an uncased persona in the installed adapter, snapping together standard connectors and clamps, and closing the cabin hatch again. Since haste was vital to the berserkers' plans, testing was restricted to listening for a live response from each persona as it was activated inside a ship. Most of the responses were utter banalities about nonexistent weather or ancient food or drink, or curious phrases that Malori knew were only phatic social remarks.

All seemed to be going well, but Greenleaf was having some last minute misgivings. "I hope these sensitive gentlemen will stand up under the strain of finding out their true situation. They will be able to grasp that, won't they? The machines won't expect them to fight well, but we don't want them going catatonic, either."

Malori, close to exhaustion, was tugging at the hatch of Number Eight, and nearly fell off the curved hull when it came open suddenly. "They will apprehend their situation within a minute after launching, I should say. At least in a general way. I don't suppose they'll understand it's interstellar space around them. You have been a

military man, I suppose. If they should be reluctant to fight—I leave to you the question of how to deal with recalcitrant auxiliaries."

When they plugged the persona into ship Number Eight, its test response was: "I wish my craft to be painted red."

"At once, sir," said Malori quickly, and slammed down the ship's hatch and started to move on to Number Nine.

"What was that all about?" Greenleaf frowned, but looked at his timepiece and moved along.

"I suppose the maestro is already aware that he is about to embark in some kind of a vehicle. As to why he might like it painted red . . ." Malori grunted, trying to open up Number Nine, and let his answer trail away.

At last all the ships were ready. With his finger on the launching switch, Greenleaf paused. For one last time his eyes probed Malori's. "We've done very well, timewise. We're in for a reward, as long as this idea works at least moderately well." He was speaking now in a solemn near-whisper. "It had better work. Have you ever watched a man being skinned alive?"

Malori was gripping a stanchion to keep erect. "I have done all I can."

Greenleaf operated the launching switch. There was a polyphonic whisper of airlocks. The nine ships were gone, and simultaneously a holographic display came alive

above the operations officer's console. In the center of the display the *Judith* showed as a fat green symbol, with nine smaller green dots moving slowly and uncertainly nearby. Farther off, a steady formation of red dots represented what was left of the berserker pack that had so long and so relentlessly pursued the *Hope* and her escort. There were at least fifteen red berserker dots, Malori noted gloomily.

"The trick," Greenleaf said as if to himself, "is to make them more afraid of their own leaders than they are of the enemy." He keyed the panel switches that would send his voice out to the ships. "Attention, units One through Nine!" he barked. "You are under the guns of a vastly superior force, and any attempt at disobedience or escape will be severely punished . . ."

He went on browbeating them for a minute, while Malori observed in the screen that the dirty weather the berserker had mentioned was coming on. A sleet of atomic particles was driving through this section of the nebula, across the path of the *Judith* and the odd hybrid fleet that moved with her. The *Hope*, not in view on this range scale, might be able to take advantage of the storm to get away entirely unless the berserker pursuit was swift.

Visibility on the operations display was failing fast and Greenleaf cut off his speech as it became apparent that contact was being lost.

Orders in the berserkers' unnatural voices, directed at auxiliary ships One through Nine, came in fragmentarily before the curtain of noise became an opaque white-out. The pursuit of the *Hope* had not yet been resumed.

FOR a while all was silent on the operations deck, except for an occasional crackle of noise from the display. All around them the empty launching cradles waited.

"That's that," Greenleaf said at length. "Nothing to do now but worry." He gave his little transforming smile again, and seemed to be almost enjoying the situation.

Malori was looking at him curiously. "How do you—manage to cope so well?"

"Why not?" Greenleaf stretched and got up from the now-useless console. "You know, once a man gives up his old ways, badlife ways, admits he's really dead to them, the new ways aren't so bad. There are even women available from time to time, when the machines take prisoners."

"Goodlife," said Malori. Now he had spoken the obscene, provoking epithet. But at the moment he was not afraid.

"Goodlife yourself, little man." Greenleaf was still smiling. "You know, I think you still look down on me. You're in as deep as I am now, remember?"

"I think I pity you."

Greenleaf let out a little snort of

laughter, and shook his own head pityingly. "You know, I may have ahead of me a longer and more pain-free life than most of humanity has even enjoyed—you said one of the models for the personae died at twenty-three. Was that a common age of death in those days?"

Malori, still clinging to his stanchion, began to wear a strange, grim little smile. "Well, in his generation, in the continent of Europe, it was. The First World War was raging at the time."

"But he died of some disease, you said."

"No. I said he *had* a disease, tuberculosis. Doubtless it would have killed him eventually. But he died in battle, in 1917 CE, in a place called Belgium. His body was never found, as I recall, an artillery barrage having destroyed it and his aircraft entirely."

Greenleaf was standing very still. "Aircraft! What are you saying?"

Malori pulled himself erect, somewhat painfully, and let go of his support. "I tell you now that Georges Guynemer—that was his name—shot down fifty-three enemy aircraft before he was killed. Wait!" Malori's voice was suddenly loud and firm, and Greenleaf halted his menacing advance in sheer surprise. "Before you begin to do anything violent to me, you should perhaps consider whether your side or mine is likely to win the fight outside."

"The fight . . ."

"It will be nine ships against fifteen or more machines, but I don't feel too pessimistic. The personae we have sent out are not going to be meekly slaughtered."

GREENLEAF stared at him a moment longer, then spun around and lunged for the operations console. The display was still blank white with noise and there was nothing to be done. He slowly sank into the padded chair. "What have you done to me?" he whispered. "That collection of invalid musicians—you couldn't have been lying about them all."

"Oh, every word I spoke was true. Not all World War One fighter pilots were invalids, of course. Some were in perfect health, indeed fanatical about staying that way. And I did not say they were all musicians, though I certainly meant you to think so. Ball had the most musical ability among the aces, but was still only an amateur. He always said—he loathed his real profession."

Greenleaf, slumped in the chair now, seemed to be aging visibly. "But one was blind . . . it isn't possible."

"So his enemies thought, when they released him from an internment camp early in the war. Edward Mannock, blind in one eye. He had to trick an examiner to get into the army. Of course the

tragedy of these superb men is that they spent themselves killing one another. In those days they had no berserkers to fight, at least none that could be attacked dashingly, with an aircraft and a machine gun. I suppose men have always faced berserkers of some kind."

"Let me make sure I understand." Greenleaf's voice was almost pleading. "We have sent out the personae of nine fighter pilots?"

"Nine of the best. I suppose their total of claimed aerial victories is more than five hundred. Such claims were usually exaggerated, but still . . ."

There was silence again. Greenleaf slowly turned his chair back to face the operations display. After a time the storm of atomic noise began to abate. Malori, who had sat down on the deck to rest, got up again, this time more quickly. In the hologram a single glowing symbol was emerging from the noise, fast approaching the position of the *Judith*.

The approaching symbol was bright red.

"So there we are," said Greenleaf, getting to his feet. From a pocket he produced a stubby little handgun. At first he pointed it toward the shrinking Malori, but then he smiled his nice smile and shook his head. "No, let the machines have you. That will be much worse."

When they heard the airlock

begin to cycle, Greenleaf raised the weapon to point at his own skull. Malori could not tear his eyes away. The inner door clicked and Greenleaf fired.

Malori bounded across the intervening space and pulled the gun from Greenleaf's dead hand almost before the body had completed its fall. He turned to aim the weapon at the airlock as its inner door sighed open. The berserker standing there was the one he had seen earlier, or the same type at least. But it had just been through violent alterations. One metal arm was cut short in a bright bubbly scar, from which the ends of truncated cables flapped. The whole metal body was riddled with small holes, and around its top there played a halo of electrical discharge.

Malori fired, but the machine ignored the impact of the forcepacket. They would not have let Greenleaf keep a gun with which they could be hurt. The battered machine ignored Malori too, for the moment, and lurched forward to bend over Greenleaf's nearly decapitated body.

"Tra-tra-tra-treason," the berserker squeaked. "Ultimate unpleasant ultimate unpleasant stum-stum-stimuli. Badlife badlife bad—"

By then Malori had moved up close behind it and thrust the muzzle of the gun into one of the still-hot holes where Albert Ball or perhaps Frank Luke or Werner

Voss or one of the others had already used a laser to good effect. Two forcepackets beneath its armor and the berserker went down, as still as the man who lay beneath it. The halo of electricity died.

Malori backed off, looking at them both, then spun around to scan the operations display again. The red dot was drifting away from the *Judith*, the vessel it represented now evidently no more than inert machinery.

Out of the receding atomic storm a single green dot was approaching. A minute later, Number Eight came in alone, bumping to a gentle stop against its cradle pads. The laser nozzle at once began smoking heavily in atmosphere. The craft was scarred in several places by enemy fire.

"I claim four more victories," the persona said as soon as Malori opened the hatch. "Today I was given fine support by my wingmen, who made great sacrifices for the Fatherland. Although the enemy outnumbered us by two to one, I think that not a single one of them escaped. But I must protest bitterly that my aircraft still has not been painted red."

"I will see to it at once, *mein herr*," murmured Malori, as he began to disconnect the persona from the fighting ship. He felt a little foolish for trying to reassure a piece of hardware. Still, he handled the persona gently as he carried it to where the little formation of

empty cases were waiting on the operations deck, their labels showing plainly:

ALBERT BALL;
WILLIAM AVERY BISHOP;
RENE PAUL FONCK;
GEORGES MARIE GUYNEMER;
FRANK LUKE;
EDWARD MANNOCK;
CHARLES NUNGESSER;
MANFRED VON RICHTHOFEN;
WERNER VOSS.

They were English, American, German, French. They were Jew, violinist, invalid, Prussian, rebel, hater, bon vivant, Christian. Among the nine of them they were many other things besides. Maybe there was only the one word—man—which could include them all.

Right now the nearest living humans were many millions of kilometers away, but still Malori did not feel quite alone. He put the persona back into its case gently, even knowing that it would be undamaged by ten thousand more gravities than his hands could exert. Maybe it would fit into the cabin of Number Eight with him, when he made his try to reach the *Hope*.

"Looks like it's just you and me now, *Réd Baron*." The human being from which it had been modeled had been not quite twenty-six when he was killed over France, after less than eighteen months of success and fame. Before that, in the cavalry, his horse had thrown him again and again. •

PRIDE AND PRIMACY

*Given that the machinery is not
too complicated,
it's only fair that one of the
gentler sex should make the
first solo flight to the Moon!*

RANDALL GARRETT

SO YOU think you're tough, do
you?

*Doh-dooh-dit-dooh-duh-dooh-de
dooh . . .*

Arlys's imagination transformed
the seemingly random twitterings
of the ship's computer into words.

*As good as those who have gone
before you—maybe better, eh?*

*Dah-dooh-dah-dee-day-die-duh-
dooh-dah-daw-dee-daw-dooh-day-
dee-deh-deh-deh . . .*

The computer ranged up and
down unpredictably over its three
octaves with a strangely melodic
tunelessness.

Space Officer First Class Arlys
was not afraid, merely tense and
uncomfortable. The white, crater-
dented sphere of the Moon lay dead
ahead; the white-mottled blue of
Earth far astern.

*Dit-doh-doh-dooh-dah-dooh-
duh-dat-day-dooh-day . . .*



First solo to the Moon. Does that make you great?

"Great, no; famous, yes," Arlys muttered, and forced himself to ignore the chattering computer. His gaze flicked over the various readout panels, the instruments which showed him what the ship was actually doing—regardless of what his own senses might tell him.

The barely perceptible throbbing of the magnetogravitic-drive engines sending out their inertial pulses made a subliminal rhythm section for the symphonic tweetings of the computer.

First solo flight to the Moon. As a matter of cold fact, the first solo flight anywhere except for a few minor Earth-orbit flights. The final perfection of the magnetogravitic engine had rendered obsolete the bulky, huge, ungainly monsters that had carried the first crews to the Moon sixty years before.

This baby, *Solo One*, was as easy to handle as a helicopter and almost as maneuverable.

Doh-doh-duh-do-do-duh-dooh-doo-dee-dee—

"Solo One, Solo One. Do you read me? This is Space Control. Do you read?"

Definitely *not* the computer. Arlys reached out a gloved hand and touched a switch.

"Solo One here. I read you loud and clear, Space Control."

"Give us a readout check on your position, attitude, velocity and acceleration, Solo One."

"Check readout. Check. Will do." He began going through the routine, carefully, accurately, automatically, keeping his voice neutral. He did not like Space Commander Eldam, but had always taken pains not to let her know it. There was an irritating quality in her manner. Her voice gave him the feeling that someone was pouring little shards of crushed glass on his eardrums.

He was all for equality of the sexes, very strongly so. But that one rubbed him the wrong way. As a matter of fact, so did her assistant, Subcommander Brase, whose good looks were overshadowed by her arrogance. Oh yes, he believed in sexual equality, but Eldam and Brase did not exactly represent the epitome of egalitarianism.

He finished the readout check.

After a moment, Eldam's voice came. *"Readouts all check. Programs synch. Carry on, Mister Arlys."*

"Aye, aye, ma'am." He cut off his mike.

"Blah," he said.

Of course everything checked. This machine was simplicity itself. And at one gee all the way—acceleration and deceleration—he could get to the Moon in less time than it took to fly across the continent. No coasting except at "turnover"—although he hadn't actually turned the ship over, merely reversed the engines. Of course, he'd been weightless all the way; he was being accelerated by the inertial pulses at

the same rate the ship was. It was as though he were falling toward an Earth-mass a short distance in front of the ship—or behind it, when the engines were reversed.

The ship's sensors told him his velocity and acceleration relative to the surface of the Moon, and the distance to that surface.

Anyone who could pilot a transcontinental aircraft could easily handle the *Solo One*.

Doh-duh-day-doo-doh-day . . .

So what makes you so great?

"Because I'm the first!" Arlys snapped. "So shut up!"

THE moon was rushing toward him, seemingly much too fast, but the instruments told him everything was under control. The altimeter should read one thousand when he came to a dead stop relative to the white surface of the broad plain of airless rock and dust toward which he sped.

It did. He so reported to Space Control.

The upward thrust of oh-point-one-seven gees exactly counterbalanced the pull of the Moon below. He eased back on the thrust control and began dropping again. The next phase had begun.

"I am dropping from ten thousand to five hundred," he told Space Control.

"Acknowledged."

When he reached the altitude he wanted, he came to a complete stop again, applied lateral thrust so that

he could survey the area for just the landing area he wanted. All the while, he kept up the steady patter of reporting to Space Control.

Then, suddenly, he saw it. His breath hissed involuntarily.

"Solo One! What happened? What is it?"

"I'm not sure. Hold it a minute."

He reversed his lateral thrust and backed up until he was directly over the thing. "I'm directly over it now," he said, "but I don't recognize it. It looks like a structure of some kind, the size of a small house. It sure as hell isn't natural."

"Probably some geologic formation."

"It's too damn regular to be natural. It's a construct."

"But no one's ever been to that part of the Moon."

"No one from Earth," Arlys corrected mildly.

There was a long pause. Much longer than the transmission-time from Moon to Earth and back.

Arlys made a decision at that moment. He knew what was going on in Space Commander Eldam's mind as surely as if they were telepathically linked. She would get him away from there and later send up a team to investigate the thing.

Like hell she would!

Again applying lateral thrust, he moved away from the strange structure and set the *Solo One* on the surface of the Moon. He was putting on his spacesuit when Eldam's voice came again.

"Solo One, can you get a camera on that thing and send us a picture?"

Ah! She wasn't sure yet!

"I think so, Space Control. Take me a few minutes."

If she wanted an image, she'd get one. So far, he hadn't disobeyed any orders. Eldam had assumed that he would not want to land, and therefore had failed to tell him not to.

There had been a dozen spacefarers on the Moon before him but Arlys would be the first to go it alone. In their crude ships the previous teams had spent considerable time getting in and out of their vessels; Arlys was under no such restrictions. After making certain that all his communication lines were open, he picked up the battery-powered camera and a flashlight, and cycled himself through the airlock. At least, he couldn't hear the damned tweetlings from the computer in his helmet earphones.

He looked across the barren, rock-strewn plain at the strange structure which stood against the space-black sky.

"If that thing is a geological formation," he muttered to himself, "then I am a quadratic equation."

HE STARTED walking toward the thing, leaving footprints behind in the gritty lunar soil.

"Solo One, aren't you ready with that camera yet?"

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"Just about," he replied truthfully. "I'm setting it up now. I'll have it in operation very shortly."

"Very well. Is your ship stabilized so that we can get a clear image?"

"I'm sure the image will come in quite clearly."

Arlys found a fairly flat-topped boulder about chest high, and decided it was just what he wanted. Carefully, he set the portable camera on it, aimed and focused it on the strange structure, set the remote control relay to "ready", and went on toward the whatever-it-was.

He had been moving on sheer determination. He had found something strange, something never before seen by anyone on Earth,

and he was certainly not going to let Space Commander Eldam cheat him out of the credit—and maybe glory—of investigating it.

It was not until he saw the track's that he realized shatteringly that his determination had blinded him to what might be deadly danger.

He stopped and stared at the prints in the soil between himself and the structure, his mind almost numb. Somehow, it had never occurred to him that whoever or whatever had built the thing might still be inside it. Or around somewhere.

Fear.

He got behind a boulder so fast that he was never afterward sure of how he had done it. *Anything* to get a shield between himself and the alien artifact. He crouched with his back to the boulder, staring at his own footprints and those of the alien—aliens?—while perspiration oozed from his pores.

"Solo One, this is Space Control. We're waiting for your transmission."

His mind was comparing the two sets of prints. The alien prints were very like his own. Only the sole pattern was different.

"Solo One! Please report! Solo One! Please report!"

It was then that he saw the essential difference between his own prints and those of the—*others*.

He swallowed, then pitched his voice very carefully. It wouldn't do to show Commander Eldam that he

had momentarily farked.

"Solo One here," he said briskly. "Space Control, if you want a man to get his work done, don't get all hysterical and start yammering in his ears. Transmission of image will begin very shortly."

He stood up confidently, walked around the boulder, and headed directly toward the alien structure.

Space Control did not reply.

When he was within ten paces of the structure he stopped, looked at it carefully for a time, then, satisfied, thumbed the relay that activated the remote camera.

"Space Control, you should be getting your image now. Is it clear?"

A long pause.

"Space Control here. Picture clear. What angle are you taking it from?"

Arlys grinned. The old bat was confused.

Before he could answer—"Solo One! There's something in what looks like a spacesuit standing near the thing!"

"That's me, Commander." Carefully concealing his joy, he went on to report what he had done.

"You landed? But you had no—"

"I have my orders, Commander," Arlys interrupted. "Quote: 'Upon finding a suitable landing site near the target zone, the pilot shall land and survey the nearby area as hereinafter directed.' Close quote. The 'hereinafter directed'

part says—and I quote—”

Commander Eldam cut him short. *“I know your orders, Arlys. You obeyed them. Drop it. But isn't it a little headstrong for you to walk up to the thing like that? What if there's an alien inside, waiting for you?”*

“Commander, I looked at those footprints. Now I've looked at the structure.” He paused. “Commander, they have *weathered*. The footprints are blurred. The surface of the structure looks as if it had been lightly sandblasted. Except, of course, for the underside, where micrometeors couldn't hit it. But the thing is old—*old!* Do you have any idea how long it takes to *weather* something on the surface of the Moon?”

He looked up at the thing. “It's about twice my height, as you can see. It's an octagonal box—not a regular octagon; it has four long sides and four shorter ones, like a square with the corners cut off. You can't see it from there but that's what it looks like from above. There are four braces, as you can see, attached to the shorter sides. They hold that bedroom-sized box up off the ground so that the bottom is a little higher than my head.”

He walked partway around the thing and stepped into its shadow. “There's an entrance on this side with a ladder going up to it.”

“Arlys, don't go into that thing until we've checked it over more. I

don't know how well a fifty-thousand-year-old booby trap might work but I don't want you to find out just yet.”

“I don't either, believe me. Wait a minute; there's some sort of metal plaque here, at just about eye level. Looks like some sort of inscription on it.” He directed his flashlight obliquely across the curious glyphs.

HERE MEN FROM THE PLANET
EARTH FIRST SET FOOT
UPON THE MOON.
JULY 1969 A.D.
WE CAME IN PEACE
FOR ALL MANKIND.

“I'd say it was definitely writing of some kind,” Arlys said, “but God only knows what it means.”

“Get a still camera and photograph it,” Eldam said. *“Continue your investigation. And congratulations, Arlys; you've done well.”*

Arlys looked up at the strange artifact. What was it? Who or what had put it here? Aliens from another planet? From another star? No way of knowing yet.

But scientists would eventually figure it out. And the credit as discoverer would go to Space Officer Arlys.

Another First. He chuckled to himself. First Solo. First finder of an alien artifact.

And another step toward equality. In spite of the teams of women who had come here before him, he was the first *man* on the Moon.

TRANSIT

*For ten years she slept,
and then awoke—
to a nightmare!*

LYNDA ISAACS



Dr. Markowitz noticed a rise in blood pressure and checked over all the instruments he had used.

"I can't figure it out," he said to the nurse. "I've done just about every type of test. Perhaps we'd better try a complete GYN. Bring me the rubber gloves."

He washed his hands and

put on the gloves. She handed him a spectroscope.

"Thank you," he said. The patient remained unconscious.

"**T**OM, I'm pregnant! Can you believe it? I just got back from the Lab Center and the test was affirmative." She sat down happily and the chair came on automatically.

Tom sat down beside her and turned off the mech. "Let's celebrate. We can have a party!"

"A baby party when I'm one month pregnant? No, let's go to the Airship for dinner. I'll have all those outworld confections—you know I'm supposed to have cravings."

"I can't believe it!" Dr. Markowitz exploded. He pushed the intercom and yelled to Nurse Oren. "Madeline, get in here, now!"

Madeline Oren opened the door in time to see Samuel Markowitz ripping off his rubber gloves and starting a urine test. "What is it, Doctor?" She could see that his face was red and he was trembling.

Markowitz yelled savagely, "When was this patient's last GYN; wasn't it a month or two ago?"

Madeline Oren ran to the cabinet and searched through

the files. At last she drew out the most recent file on TREL-
LING, ANN. She read the last
sheet carefully.

"The last one was June
third—a month and a half
ago." She looked anxiously at
Markowitz. "Why, Doctor?

"What is wrong?" She
put down the papers and
went to the lab table. He
worked the test tube and then
spoke.

"I've just completed a
urine test and a physical.
Ann Trelling is one month
pregnant."

"THIS food is fantastic, Tom."
He patted her hand lovingly
and dialed another selection. It
arrived immediately and they ate
some of each kind.

"You know, Arlin is going to be
jealous. She's been trying to get
pregnant for months."

Tom smiled reprovingly, "Now,
Ann—"

Both of them worked on
the last test and when it was
completed they could only
stare at the results in shock.

"How," Markowitz asked
in a small voice, "how could
she be pregnant? She's been
out the whole time, hasn't
she?"

"Of course," Nurse Oren
replied defensively. "But
what I can't figure out is—

who? Who would rape an un-
conscious patient? I can per-
sonally affirm that no man
has been alone with her, ex-
cept you, since I've been on
the case."

"Well, wipe that look off
your face, Madeline. It wasn't
me." He looked at the face of
Ann Trelling. It was a placid
face, as expressionless as it
had been since he had taken
charge of her ten years ear-
lier.

"Her mother will have to
be notified. Damn. How will
I face her? She could sue me
for malpractice, for letting
this happen."

THEY grounded from the "Air-
ship" and then took a helicab
home. The apartment was dark
and silent when Tom flicked on the
illuminator.

Ann danced into the room, then
lay down on the lounge, contem-
plating the dimly glowing walls.
"You know, right now is one of the
times I wish I knew where my
parents were. I don't remember her
that well—but I'd like to tell my
mother and see the look on her
face."

"Now don't start that again."
Tom was lying on the couch. He
turned on the telebank with his foot
and pushed his head down into the
cushions. "You hardly remember
her and you don't even remember
what happened when you were

fourteen that made you forget.”

“Still, I remember that I loved her,” Ann said slowly. “You’ve got to admit that it’s scary to wake up one day when you’re fourteen and not know where you are and where anybody else is.”

Tom smiled condescendingly, “That psychiatrist told you that some bad experience must have blocked it out. Now, if you can’t recall it, you shouldn’t make yourself miserable about it.”

Ann nodded. “I only wish I could tell them—”

Mrs. Doreen Trelling was a big woman with tremendous legs. Her bosom comprised the front half of her body, a fact she had ceased trying to conceal. She was a widow and had worn black since the day of her husband’s funeral five years before. Now her face was troubled.

Dr. Markowitz rose and shook her hand. “Sit down, Mrs. Trelling. I want to discuss Ann’s condition with you.” He motioned to an overstuffed chair and then sat down himself, mopping his face with a handkerchief.

“I don’t understand, Doctor. She isn’t deteriorating, is she?” Mrs. Trelling took out a dainty square of cloth and held it to her nose. The past ten years had been a considerable trial to her, especially

since the death of her husband.

Dr. Markowitz was aware of the delicacy of his mission and tried a more circumspect approach. He folded his hands on the polished mahogany desk and began in his most clinical manner.

“Mrs. Trelling, the machines have been keeping Ann in fine condition—have been since the onset of her disease in 1970. She has been under constant surveillance by either myself or my staff headed by Nurse Oren.” He looked up into Mrs. Trelling’s expectant face.

“She’s in excellent shape, Mrs. Trelling. We were quite fortunate to be able to procure and pay for the special equipment that maintains Ann’s body.”

Doreen Trelling knew that Dr. Markowitz had something more than routine information to give her. She licked her lips and studied the assorted clutter on his desk.

“I thoroughly examined Ann this morning. It didn’t seem necessary to give a thorough gynecological examination so soon. You know we’ve monitored to detect cancer or malignancy and in the past month we never had reason, never thought it necessary to—”

He broke off, searching for some safe way to tell her, some way he could save himself.

"A vaginal examination shows that the hymen has been broken, in fact that—and I'm not sure how—intercourse has taken place."

Mrs. Trelling started. Horror spread over her face.

"My Ann? My Ann has been raped?" She began to choke and fumbled in her purse for a small brown bottle.

"Please, Mrs. Trelling. Please, get a grip on yourself. Ann could not, according to our records and observations, have had anything of the kind happen to her. However . . ."

ANN DEFOREST awoke feeling happy. The sheets, the kind that come coated with miraclepe, were cool and crisp. Tom was still asleep because the day was Saturday. The morning sun twinkled through the mosaic-glass of the window.

She crept out of bed and walked barefoot into the kitchen where she dialed some coffee. The dispenser spilled a little—she'd have to get a repairman.

Today she would call Moila and Arneen. They had all been so close at college—they should be told right away. It was good to savor the

polished cleanliness of the kitchen while she drank her coffee—then, putting down her cup she pirouetted into the living room.

"However—" Dr. Markowitz took a deep breath—"although I'm not sure how this could medically be so, she is pregnant." He watched Doreen Trelling closely.

She didn't understand at first. Or maybe she just didn't believe it. "Pregnant? Is this some kind of joke—*pregnant?*"

Dr. Markowitz stood up and turned to the wall behind the desk which was covered with his framed medical certificates. He did not want to look at Mrs. Trelling.

"We gave her every test possible and even though the condition is only one month in progress, it is definite."

Mrs. Trelling began to cry.

"**Y**OU know what I bought? A crib and some diapers—and you'll never believe the toys. I had a wonderful time buying all this stuff." Her eyes shone and Tom took the packages from the floater.

"You bought enough," he said emphatically, "for a whole room full of babies." He saw the bandage on her hand.

"What happened to your hand?"
"Oh that," she said unwinding

the makeshift bandage. "You know what a klutz I am sometimes. The helicab plate was bent a little and I slashed myself good."

When she finished unwinding, Tom could see the ugly gash, diagonal across the palm.

When Madeline Oren came into the office Dr. Markowitz was sitting at his desk, but still staring at the wall with all his certificates. He had turned off the light and twilight was in the room.

"Doctor—Sam. Please. You've been in here for hours. I've been going crazy rescheduling your appointments." She stepped in and closed the door quietly. "There's something else, Sam—it's happened again. You know—this time it's on the hand. Ann Trelling has slashed her palm—or someone has done it for her." Madeline strode to the window and opened the blinds. Outside the sun had washed the buildings with pink and the trees looked like dark shadows.

"What are we going to do? Have you ever told her about the bruises and cuts?" She turned back to him—he looked older than his fifty years.

"You were afraid she wouldn't believe you, like the others, weren't you?" Made-

line sighed and sat on the sill. She was a dedicated nurse and after all the years on this case, she would not question Markowitz. She had always hoped that her dedication had meant more to him than the raises she had received through the years. Now she wanted to comfort him, and he would not allow it.

Markowitz stood up and gathered his charts from a drawer. "Let's go," he said simply.

They went to examine the strange cut. One for which there was no explanation.

"I'll take care of it, honey," Tom said. He went to the bathroom and hunted around in the cabinet. He came back with a spray jar of Sutural.

She held her hand over some newspapers so as not to mess up the table and he sprayed the cut thoroughly.

"Does that feel better?" he asked kissing her. They had been married for two years and he still cherished each moment with her.

"You silly, it'll be healed in an hour."

They ate dinner and dialed away the dishes. There was nothing on the teletank so they read. Ann began thinking of the time when she was fourteen years old and had suddenly found herself in another world. She had not been feeling

well that day. The blackness had closed in suddenly; spinning flashes of blue fire had seemed to surround her, lift her higher, higher. And higher still, she had seen a bright hole in the darkness—a place through which she must pass.

“It’s happening again. Look.” Madeline Oren held the hand of Ann Trelling under the microscope. Through the glass she could see the knitting of flesh—an almost magical mending of human cells, as if in a time lapse picture.

Markowitz was always fascinated when this happened. The bruises that faded were interesting, it was true. But the superfast healing of cuts was fantastic. He would have taken a film of the process, but he knew Harvard would never believe it. To them he was a glory seeker.

Not only did Markowitz have the strange healing of cuts to deal with but also the inexplicable racing of the nervous system. At times Ann Trelling would breathe heavily as if she had just run a great distance, sometimes irregularly as if she were talking. And her eyes, although they were always closed, moved not only as was normal in sleep, but also during the day as if watching, looking.

At last Markowitz took his eyes from the microscope. “Madeline, I’m going to try to wake her up. The Harvard studies will be conclusive soon.” He took up his charts and started for the office.

“A lot of study has gone into this thing since nineteen-seventy and we may be able to bring her to consciousness. The trick is keeping her there.” Markowitz had reached the door of his office and he turned to Madeline as he put his hand on the knob.

“It’ll be in a few months. It’s dangerous and she may only wake for a few minutes. And now there’s the other consideration. Should we terminate the baby?”

He shut her out with a final click of the door.

THREE months later as Ann DeForest lay in her bed, her hands on her stomach trying to feel the new life, everything blurred. Suddenly she was falling through a blind tunnel down, down. Blue fire flashed and swirled. She thought it was a nightmare, that she must be dreaming, for down in the distance she could see a faroff bed and on the bed she could see herself asleep.

And just as suddenly, with the same flickering spiral, she began to float upward. Far below a sleeping girl, a mirror image of herself, vanished.

Ann DeForest woke up drenched with sweat and her heart was beating loudly in her chest. She shook Tom awake.

Madeline Oren looked up in awe. "Sam, she responded. She almost woke up."

Markowitz smiled. It was the third time they had dosed Ann Trelling with Titral 12 i.v. Now at last there was a response—there was hope. But he couldn't know the end result of his efforts. Would Ann Trelling wake up a fourteen-year-old in her twenty-four-year-old body? Would her brain be damaged? What would Ann Trelling be after all those lost years?

The Trelling case had started out as a news spectacular with Markowitz's name in the headlines of half a dozen newspapers. And it had made him rich—he was in sole charge of Ann Trelling, the sleeping beauty. His collaboration with researchers had not brought back the fading glamor.

Now all those ten years were summed up. If he could wake her, save her, he would be famous again—the disbelief would vanish and the money would flow. If only it weren't for the pregnancy; that was a real embarrass-

ment. He would have to get Doreen Trelling to sign a release.

"IT WAS just a nightmare, honey. Now calm down. Don't excite yourself in your condition." He turned the room on dim.

"It was so real, Tom. I could swear I wasn't asleep when it happened." Ann got up and put on a dry gown. "Maybe I'll go see the doctor tomorrow and make sure everything is all right in there." She patted her stomach.

"Sure, you do that. Now you rest. You'll feel better in the morning."

He turned off the room.

"Shall we give her another dose, Sam? One more really ought to bring her around." Nurse Oren handed him the needle.

"Yes. I think we will." But he waited another fifteen minutes before injecting. He watched anxiously, gripping the table hard with his hands.

Five other men sat in chairs around the bed and watched, too. They noted the condition of the patient and each thought his private thoughts. They were graying men, anxious to see the results of lengthy and unsung research. This could be a great moment for medicine—and for them.

Ann Trelling moaned. She

stirred slightly and then, for the first time in ten years, opened her eyes. Markowitz bent over her, looking down into her eyes—and she screamed. It was a long piercing scream of fright.

She sat up slowly and saw a short blond woman in a white uniform backing toward the door. An older man in white, obviously a doctor, stood looking at her silently, amazed. His mouth hung open as if she were the strangest sight in the world. And five gray men sat like statues in their chairs.

“Who are you?” Ann Trelling screamed. “I know I’m not asleep this time.” She stared around the room, searching for one point of reference, one familiar thing that would explain any of this.

Markowitz spoke. “Ann, you’ve been unconscious for ten years in this building. I’m Samuel Markowitz. I’ve been in charge of you all these years and these machines have kept your body well.”

Ann glanced down at the gadgetry and then looked at Markowitz. “Do you mean to tell me I’ve been here since I was—fourteen? That I have never left this room the whole time?”

Markowitz nodded. “Did you dream you were some-

where else?”

Ann suddenly looked down at her swollen stomach, then to Markowitz. “Doctor, did I dream myself pregnant? I’m twenty-four years old. I graduated from Mohelen State College and have a masters in English Lit. Arlin Dreyer is my best friend and I’m married to Tom DeForest.”

Markowitz did not think he was talking to a fourteen-year-old girl.

“How can that be?”

He had spoken mostly to himself, but if anyone had an answer it was too late for one. Ann Trelling began to drowse and then lay down once more—so still that it was as if she had never woken at all. Markowitz turned to Madeline Oren, who stood at the door gripping the knob until her hand was white, and then to the five gray men.

“Next time,” he said forcefully, “we’ll bring her around for good.”

THE psychiatrist’s office was ultramodern and designed for distraction. Electric paintings covered the walls of the outer office. A green sparklex carpet shimmered under the expensive furniture and there were several transistor teletanks for individual use. By contrast the inner office was a retreat. The doctor’s room

was dark and filled with overstuffed chairs. Ann DeForest relaxed in one and tried to cooperate with Dr. Sacra.

"The mind," he said "is a powerful instrument. Your dream has taken you back to a turning point in your life, one we have discussed previously. You said you were fourteen when you became—lost?" He kept his face calm and noncommittal.

"Well, I wasn't really lost—I just forgot some things. I knew who I was, where I was born, where I lived. It's just that when the police took me back home it wasn't the same. The place is what I'm talking about—it was gone. None of the buildings were the same. The house I grew up in was gone—there was a park there.

"At first I was scared to death. Then I just started to make my life over as best I could. By the time I got to college things were fine. Now I'm married and happy, especially about the baby. It's only now and then that I think about my mother and father—but if I try to remember any specific thing it's like trying to see through a dark fog."

"Mrs. DeForest, as we have discussed, something traumatic must have happened to you to make you forget your past. Something happened that you can't remember. We can try to dig it out again—but for now remember this. If you should have this dream again before our next session, try to find out

what really happened to you. After all, you can't really be asleep on a bed for all these years if you are here. And when you want to return from there, remember, you have a strong personality and your mind is a powerful instrument, more powerful than dreams, reality or solid matter. So don't be afraid—you can always wake yourself up."

When Ann left she was still troubled. Her "dream" had not seemed like a dream at all.

Mrs. Trelling, dressed in her best black dress sat anxiously, watching her daughter. She was embarrassed to notice the girl's figure, but still she had been led to hope that she could speak with her daughter—if only for a few minutes—alone. She did not want the researchers there.

Dr. Markowitz, assisted by Nurse Oren, was about to administer the needle. "When she comes around, Mrs. Trelling, don't upset her with a lot of questions. Just tell her you love her and want her to stay with you."

Mrs. Trelling nodded and suppressed her tears. She had hoped for this moment for ten long years. The death of her husband had left her almost in despair and now, in an instant, she was expecting a pinnacle of happiness.

Markowitz injected and then stepped back, waiting. A few seconds went by before Ann Trelling stirred. She opened her eyes and looked around. Her expression suggested she might be experiencing vertigo. For a moment no one spoke.

Suddenly Doreen Trelling jumped up. "Ann, Ann. I'm your mother. Do you remember me, honey?" She ran to the bed and took Ann's hand.

Ann DeForest looked at them all. She now seemed calm. She looked at Doreen Trelling especially and a flicker of recognition stirred in her. She smiled, "You're my mother? I've found you? Where are we?"

"We're in Dr. Markowitz's offices, darling. You've been asleep for a long time and now I'm going to take you home." She stroked the girl's hand tentatively. "Of course we'll have to be discreet about your pregnancy—perhaps an abortion."

"What are you talking about? I'm married and this is my own baby." Ann considered whether they were all crazy. Or was *she* losing her mind?

"Now, Ann," Doreen Trelling said sweetly, "don't be difficult. You've been here for ten years and there is no hus-

band. You dreamed it. Now I'm going to make arrangements to take you home.

"If you like I'll take you to a home and after the baby's born—it can be given up. Now, sweetheart, I have a lot to catch you up on—your father's death, your cousins' getting married . . ."

Ann did not remember her father or cousins. She was aware only of fear. She had to get back.

I must wake up. I must get back. Tom! Tom! I am more powerful than dreams.

Dr. Markowitz was much more real than any dream. He was reaching for a hypodermic.

I am more powerful than reality. I choose my reality.

Markowitz saw the monitors fluctuating down to zero. He looked at Ann and he could not believe what he saw. The girl who sat on the bed was fading—no, flickering—like a candle. Through her body he could see the frame of the door and the shelves of bottles.

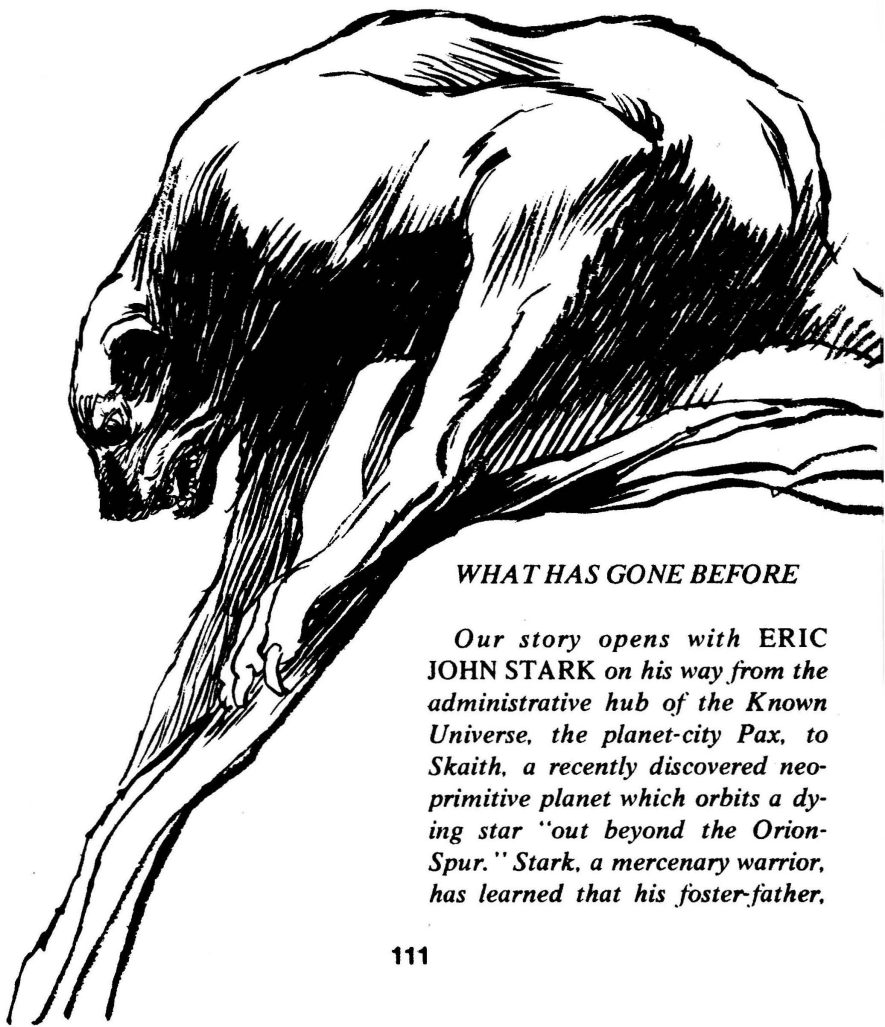
Doreen Trelling screamed and stepped back. Madeline Oren hid behind the doctor.

At last Ann Trelling could not be seen at all. The only evidence that she had ever been there was the bank of gleaming instruments.

THE GINGER STAR

Conclusion

LEIGH BRACKETT



WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Our story opens with ERIC JOHN STARK on his way from the administrative hub of the Known Universe, the planet-city Pax, to Skaith, a recently discovered neo-primitive planet which orbits a dying star "out beyond the Orion-Spur." Stark, a mercenary warrior, has learned that his foster-father,

SIMON ASHTON, the Galactic Union administrator who had saved him from a life of savagery, has disappeared on Skaith.

Within a short time after his arrival at Skeg, only spaceport city on Skaith, Stark learns that the Union's Consular Offices have been burned and that no trace of Ashton, alive or dead, is to be found.

Ashton has, however, left a legacy, a Report which states in part:

The Lords Protector, reputed to be "undying and unchanging," were apparently established long ago by the then ruling powers, as a sort of super-benevolence. The Great Migrations were beginning, the civilizations of the north were breaking up as the people moved away from the increasing cold, and there was certain to be a time of chaos with various groups competing for new lands. Then and later, when some stability was reestablished, the Lords Protector were to prevent total trampling of the weak by the strong. Their law was simple: succor the weak, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, strive always for the greatest good of the greatest number.

It appears that through the centuries that law was carried

far beyond its original intent. The Farers and the many smaller non-productive fragments of this thoroughly fragmented culture are now the greater number, with the result that the Wandsmen, in the name of the Lords Protector, hold a third or more of the population in virtual slavery to supply the rest . . .

He also learns that GELMAR, leader of the Wandsmen and the Farers, is the man responsible for the arson—and by implication, for the disappearance and possible death of Ashton. By asking openly about the whereabouts of Ashton, Stark sets himself up as bait for Gelmar. He meets a Farer-girl who entices him to a lonely cliff overlooking the sea, where he finds Gelmar waiting. Gelmar questions Stark, attempts to enroll him in the ranks of the Farers. Failing in this Gelmar signals, and seemingly from nowhere a mob of Farers appears. But before they can reach him, Stark seizes Gelmar and leaps into the sea.

It is now Stark's turn to question Gelmar. He learns that Ashton is indeed alive, held prisoner in the far-North in the Citadel of the Lords Protector—the final mysterious masters of Skaith. He also learns that Gerrith, wise-woman of Irnan, has prophesied that an off-

worlder will destroy the Lords Protector for the sake of Ashton.

After a desperate but victorious battle with a mutated, sub-human sea-creature, Stark manages to reach shore some distance away from the mob of Farers. A little ways inland he falls in with a group from Irnan. They are on their way to Skeg where they hope to make contact with the Galactic Union. [The Irnanese want to emigrate—anywhere, as long as it is off Skaith.] When Stark tells them the consulate has been burned they decide to escort him to Irnan, so that Gerrith may examine him. Since Irnan lies in the North, Stark agrees to accompany them—but all are captured by Wandsmen just outside Irnan. Once again Stark confronts Gelmar, who orders that he and his companions be taken inside the city for a festival-execution. Also to be included in the festivities is Gerrith-daughter-of-Gerrith [her mother is already dead]—a seer in her own right. However, Gelmar's plans once again go awry as the hatred of the Irnanese for the Wandsmen and the Farers explodes into open revolt at the prospect of the atrocity before them. The Farers and most of the Wandsmen are killed. The burghers of Irnan, now in open revolt against the power of the Lords Protector, aid Stark and Gerrith [who has decided to accom-

pany him for her own arcane reasons] by assigning them a picked group of Irnanese warriors to escort them across the Barrens on their way to Worldheart, Citadel of the Lords. After many adventures . . .

VIII

STARK walked halfway down the slope so that Hargoth was obliged to follow. Then he stopped.

"I will lead you," he said, "after we have taken the Citadel. Not before."

The wind moaned against the ridge, sending a frozen spindrift of white crystals across it that drifted down on Stark and the Irnanese, on Hargoth and his lesser priests. There was an instinctive movement, each group gathering apart from the other. After that they stood very still.

Hargoth said, "The ships are in the south."

Stark nodded. "Unfortunately that gate is shut. There is war in the south. Others besides yourselves wish to follow those star-roads, and the Wandsmen are saying they cannot. They kill in the name of the Lords Protector. The only way to open that gate is to take the Citadel, destroy the Lords Protector and the Wandsmen along with them. Otherwise you go south only to die."

The wind moaned.

Hargoth turned to Gerrith. "Sun Woman, is all this true?"

"It is true," she answered.

"Besides," said Stark, suddenly weary of trying to cope with people who stubbornly insisted on getting in his way, "if Skaith were an open world certain kinds of ships could land anywhere on the planet instead of being confined to the enclave at Skeg. There would be no need for your people to go south. It would be much easier for ships to come to you."

Hargoth did not answer this. Stark had no idea what he might be thinking. He was only certain of one thing. He would die fighting rather than be taken captive again—by anyone. He shifted his weight slightly, willing life into muscles stiff with cold.

Hargoth spoke at last. "What shall I call you?"

"Stark."

"You are wise in your knowledge, Stark, but I am wise in mine. And I tell you that between us and the Citadel lies Thyra."

"Is there no way around? The land seems broad enough."

"It narrows. Thyra bestrides that narrowness. Thyra is strong and populous. And greedy." He paused, then added harshly, "They have dealings with the Wandsmen. The same word that came to us would

have come even sooner to them."

Stark nodded. He stared at the ground, scowling.

"South," said Hargoth. "That is the only way."

His voice held an inflexible note of triumph. Stark kept his peace, answered with a shrug Hargoth could read any way that pleased him.

Apparently satisfied, he turned and started down the slope. "The fires are warm, the shelters ready. Let us enjoy them. Tomorrow at his rising we will ask a blessing of Old Sun."

Stark perforce followed Hargoth this time. There was nothing of menace in what the man had said yet Stark felt a twinge of unease. He looked at Gerrith walking beside him, her long braid swinging. Sun-colored braid beneath the frost. Sun-colored woman. What did Hargoth want of her?

He started to speak but she gave him a warning look as Hargoth glanced over his shoulder at them with a sharp-edged smile. Blank-faced, they followed him down.

The camp held only young men. Women, children and elderly men, they were told, were already making preparations for the migration, packing the belongings, dismantling the homes in the broken towers, drying meat and making journey-bread, choosing out the

beasts that would be saved from the present slaughter to support them later on.

They were singing, said Hargoth, the ancient hymn preserved from times beyond remembrance, taught once in each lifetime but never sung in earnest until now—The Hymn of Deliverance.

*The Promised One shall lead us
Down the long roads of the stars,
Toward a new beginning . . .*

The men sang it around the fires as Stark and the others came in. Their faces were flushed, their eyes brilliant, fixed upon this stranger from the far places of heaven. Stark felt embarrassed and more than a little annoyed. Ever since he had landed on Skaith people had been forcing shackles on him, shackles of duty that he had not chosen and did not want. Damn these people and their prophecies and legends!

"Our forefathers were men of knowledge," said Hargoth. "They dreamed of star-flight. While the world died around them they continued to dream and to work, but it was too late. They left us the promise that though all could not go, one day you would come for us."

Stark was glad when the hymn ended.

Gerrith refused food and asked to be shown to her shelter. Her face had that remote prophetess look on it. Stark saw the skin flaps of the

tent fall shut behind her with a feeling of chill between his shoulder-blades.

He ate the food that was given him, not because he was especially hungry but because the hunting animal never knows how long it may be until the next meal. They also gave him a strong drink that seemed to be made of fermented milk. The Irnanese sat near him in a close group. He sensed that they wanted to talk but were inhibited by Hargoth and his people, who crouched or moved among the fires like slender ghosts with their high, stooping shoulders and their gray-masked faces, all alike and without expression. Despite the fact that the People of the Towers had rescued them from Amnir's shackles Stark did not like them. There was a touch of madness in them, born of the long dark and the too-long-held faith. It made him feel no easier that their madness was centered on him.

THE flaps of her tent opened and Gerrith stood in the firelight. She had thrown off her outer garments and her head was bare. She held the small ivory skull, still speckled from the slaughter at Irnan, over the campfire.

Hargoth had risen. Gerrith faced him, her eyes meeting his like copper sunrays meeting ice.

She spoke, her voice ringing sweet and clear, as it had that day when Mordach tried to shame her and died for it.

"Hargoth," she said. "You intend to give me to Old Sun to buy his blessing."

Hargoth did not look aside though he must have heard Stark and the Irnanese getting to their feet, clapping hands to weapons.

"Yes," he said to Gerrith, "you are a chosen sacrifice, sent to me for that purpose."

Gerrith shook her head. "It is not my fate to die here—if you try to kill me your people will never walk the star-roads nor see a brighter sun."

Her voice carried such conviction that Hargoth hesitated over whatever words he had been about to say.

"My place is with the Promised One," said Gerrith. "My path lies northward. And I tell you there will be enough blood to feed Old Sun before this is finished."

She held the skull higher over the fire and the flames turned a sullen red, staining them all with the color of death.

Hargoth looked uncertain. But he was proud and obstinate. "I am king," he said. "And high-priest. I know what must be done for my people."

"Do you?" asked Stark quietly.

"Can you be sure? You know only the dream. I am reality. How do you know that I am truly the Promised One?"

"You come from the stars," said Hargoth.

"Yes. But so does the stranger who was brought to the Citadel, and he is the one who tells the ships to come, not I."

Hargoth stared at him for a long moment in the red glare of the fire.

"He has that power?"

"He has," said Stark. "How can you be sure that *he* is not the Promised One?"

Gerrith lowered her hands and stepped back from the fire. The flames returned to their normal color. She said calmly,

"You stand at the crossroads, Hargoth. The path you choose now will determine the fate of your people."

A heavy and sententious statement, Stark thought, but he felt no desire to smile at it. It was the simple truth and involved his own and Ashton's fate as well as that of Hargoth's people.

His hand closed over the hilt of the sword taken from one of Amnir's men. He waited for Hargoth's answer. If the old man persisted in his plan Old Sun was going to have some victims here and now.

Hargoth's eyes flicked uncertainly between Stark and Gerrith with

the chill, flat, shining gaze of madness, of fanatic conviction. The lesser priests who had assisted him at Amnir's camp were gathered nearby, their masked faces immobile, watching. Suddenly Hargoth turned on his heel and joined them. They went apart. Their backs formed a wall that hid whatever they might be doing but the movement of their shoulders indicated that some sort of ritual was being performed. They chanted, a low sonorous murmuring.

"Lacking a live victim," Gerrith said, "They're consulting some other augury."

"It had better be favorable," said Halk as he drew his sword-blade hissing from its sheath.

The silence lengthened. The guttering fire hissed as snow and frost fell into it. The People of the Towers stood in the howling darkness beyond and waited.

The priests gave a long moaning sigh. They bowed to some invisible Presence. Then they returned to the fire.

"Three times we have cast the sacred finger-bones of the Spring Child," said Hargoth. "Three times they pointed north." His eyes showed a desperate, thwarted rage. "Very well. We will go up against the Thyrans. And if we win past them, do you know what waits beyond to keep us from the Citadel?"

"Yes," said Stark. "The Northhounds."

"A shadow crossed Gerrith's face. She shivered.

"What is it?" asked Stark.

"I don't know. It seemed . . . that when you spoke that name, one heard it."

Across the desolate miles to the north a great white shape had paused in its measured padding through blowing snow. It turned and swung a huge, fanged muzzle southward, questing across the wind.

AS HARGOTH had said, the broad land narrowed. It began to rise sharply toward a series of ridges. On either hand were rough hills and deep gullies choked with tumbled ice. The track of Amnir's wagons still followed the ancient road, but the summer thaw was strong enough to cut that road in many places. It had been remade across the beds of wider channels, the narrower ones filled in with stones, a tribute to the hard work and enterprise of Amnir's men. Much good it had done them in the end.

With Hargoth's people the party now numbered thirty-six—two-tens of fighting men and their captain, all armed with slings and javelins, the Corn King and eight priests armed with magic, and the original

six who had come from Irnan.

Stark would just as soon have dispensed with his new allies. The force was too large to move easily in secret and too small to be an effective attack unit. Still, he thought, the Corn King and his priests might be useful in one way. When they came to meet the Northhounds the Breath of the Goddess might at least slow down those legendary demons. In any case he had had no choice.

The narrow men in gray proved to be nearly tireless. Their marching gait was a sort of springy trot that was difficult at first for Stark and the others to match after their long days of captivity. But they fell into the pace, gradually feeling strength and elasticity returning. Halk, who had suffered the worst confinement, stumbled along at the rear, sweating and cursing. He was so vile-tempered that Breca gave up trying to help him and rejoined the others.

"How far to Thyra?" asked Stark.

"Three long marches." Hargoth had not been to Thyra but Kintoth, captain of the fighting men, had. He wore lightning-strokes on the cheeks of his mask and carried an iron sword.

"We go there sometimes to trade for tools and weapons," Kintoth said, slapping his sword-hilt. "The

Thyrans are great smiths. We always go in force. We trade them dried meat as well as hides and cloth. In the old days, before the trader, we were afraid of being added to their foodstocks ourselves. Now that Amnir is dead we shall have to start worrying again. The Thyrans keep beasts and trade knives to the lichen-gatherers for fodder. But there's never enough in the starving times."

"We trade women, too," said Hargoth. "A matter of necessity, though neither we nor the Thyrans like it. Both peoples must have fresh blood to survive. There was a third city once that neighbored us, but its inhabitants kept too fiercely to themselves and finally they died."

He trotted on for some time in silence. Then he added, "Sometimes the Wandsmen bring us women from the south. They don't live long here. Usually we give them to Old Sun." He looked at Gerrith.

"What about the Citadel?" asked Stark, not missing the look.

"We've never seen it. No one has. Not even the Harsenyi. There are the Northhounds to guard against strangers. And there is the mist."

"Mist?"

"Thick mist that boils like steam above a cauldron and never lifts. It is a strong magic. The Citadel is

always protected and hidden.”

“But you know the way there?”

“I know what the Harsenyi have said. Some of their people serve the Wandsmen.”

“But you don’t really know. Do the Thyrans?”

“I have told you. The way is known—and not known.”

“What about the women from the south?”

“The ones they give us are never taken to the Citadel, but brought straight on.” Hargoth’s mouth was a thin line. “The gifts of the Wandsmen! They bring us more than women. Small phials with pretty powders, joy and dreams for all, and perpetual slavery. They tempt our young ones to go south and join the Farers. We are not fond of the Wandsmen.”

Hargoth studied the strangers. Old Sun was above the horizon now, and the old man’s gaze moved from one face to another, not hurrying, seeking in the rusty daylight what he had not seen by starlight or the flickering gleam of the fires.

“You have come a long way to destroy them. Why?”

They told him.

Hargoth listened. When they had finished he said, “You Southrons must be soft indeed to let yourselves be so badly ruled.”

Gerrith held up a hand to fore-

stall Halk’s angry outburst. She stared coldly at Hargoth and said.

“You’ve heard of the Farers. You’ve never seen them. You’ve never seen a mob in action. Perhaps you will before you’re through. Tell me your opinion then.”

Hargoth inclined his head.

“The Lords Protector,” Stark said. “What do you know of them?”

“I think they’re a lie the Wandsmen tell to stay in power. Or if they ever lived, they’ve been dead a thousand years. That’s why I would call this a fool’s errand, except that I know the Wandsmen are real. And if, as you say, they intend to keep us from the stars . . .”

Apparently he was still not quite convinced. He continued to glance sidelong at Gerrith from time to time in a manner that Stark did not care for.

“My lord Darkness, my lady Cold, their daughter Hunger,” he said. “You worship the Goddess and she sends her power through you. Yet you also worship Old Sun?”

“We need him to keep the darker gods at bay. Otherwise we would die. Besides, the Sun Woman was to be a parting-gift.”

Long after Old Sun’s setting they left the road and found a secure hollow in the hills. The warriors

built tiny fires of what dead mosses and lichens they could find among the wind-scoured stones. They had not expected to be so long away from the Towers and rations were short. No one complained. Hunger was an expected part of their lives.

When it was time for sleep, Stark took Gerrith aside and said, "You'll shelter with me. I think Hargoth still has notions."

She accepted without protest. Stark saw Halk watching, wise and sneering, as he followed Gerrith into the tent.

THEIR two bodies crowded the small space, and Stark realized that this was the first time since that bloody day in the square of Irnan that he had been alone with Gerrith. On the way to Izvand there had been the Irnanese, the troop of mercenaries and not a moment's privacy. Halk and Breca pleased themselves as the fancy took them, without embarrassment, but theirs was an old relationship. Stark and Gerrith had had no relationship beyond their roles as Wise Woman and Dark Man—one hardly conducive to intimacy. He was not at all sure that she wanted any other. Her status as prophetess set her apart, surrounding her with a certain aura of untouchability. Besides, it had been most hellishly cold.

Afterward, as Amnir's captives, there had been no opportunity even for conversation, let alone anything else.

Now, with a minuscule lamp for light and themselves for warmth, he felt something totally new. He was conscious that they touched, at thigh and hip and shoulder. Their breath mingled in faint clouds of vapor, animal heat rose from their living flesh. Lying close, he felt her shivering stop. He put his hand on hers.

"Has your gift yet told you why it was you had to journey all this weary way?"

"Let's not talk about it now." She turned her head and looked at him. "Let's not talk about anything now."

He drew her to him. She smiled and did not resist. His fingertips traced the outline of her cheek and jaw; thin, he noticed, with the beautiful structure of the bones clear beneath the wind-browned skin. Her eyes were enormous, her mouth soft and sweet, welcoming.

He kissed her, a tentative touching of lips, and her arms clasped him fiercely. After that nothing was tentative. She was strong and hungry, full of warm life in that place of cold and death, giving and taking without stint.

Stark had known that this was fated from the beginning—from

the moment when Mordach ripped away her robe, left her clothed in nothing but her magnificent and indestructible pride.

Neither of them spoke of love. Love is for those with a future. They slept in each other's arms and were content.

IN THE black morning they broke camp once again, following the green star. They halted briefly for the ritual greeting of Old Sun at his rising. Hargoth looked regretfully at Gerrith, who was surrounded by Stark and the Irnanese. At noon they halted a second time to rest and chew their journey rations, hard chunks of edible lichens pressed into cakes, and a strong-flavored mixture of fat and meat fibres pounded together with bitter herbs.

Stark discussed strategy with Kintoth.

"Here," said the captain, marking out a rough map in the snow with his finger. "This is the road we're on now. It winds about so, and here is Thyra, sitting on a dozen hills. The old city, that is. The new one is dug in and around." His finger made vague marks on the perimeter.

"How old is the new city?" asked Stark.

"Not as old as ours, only a thousand years or so. The People of the

Hammer came out of nowhere, the bards tell us, and took up these ancient cities . . ."

"More than one?"

"There are several tribes. The Thyrans are the only ones we deal with, but it is said that there are more in other places, and that they all have the same god, whom they call Strayer of the Forges."

"They all have the same madness as well," said Hargoth, "and that madness is for iron and the working of it. They mine the bones of the cities, and the metal is more than wealth to them. It is life."

"All right?" Stark looked at the map. "The road. Thyra, old and new. What else?"

Kintoth sketched stylized mountains on the far side of Thyra. "These are called the Witchfires, for a reason you will understand when you see them. They mark the boundary between the darklands and the high north. Here is the pass that we must take to cross them, if we ever reach it."

Thyra stood like a wall before the mouth of the pass.

"Is there no other way across the mountains?"

Kintoth shrugged. "There may be a hundred but this is the one we know. The Citadel lies somewhere beyond it. Now, on the road, here . . ." He drew fortifications across the approach to Thyra.

"This post is strongly held. And all around the city are sentry posts." His finger poked random little holes in the snow. "I don't know the exact locations. The Thyrans live in and around the edges of the ruins so they're more vulnerable than we of the Towers. They take care to guard their wealth and their precious flesh lest both be devoured."

The land seemed totally deserted. Stark asked, "What enemies have they here?"

"This is the northern edge of the darklands," said Hargoth. "We live all our lives in a state of siege. Anyone, anything, may come. Sometimes it's the great snow-dragons, with frost on their wings and their hungry teeth showing. Sometimes a band of Outdwellers run demented across the world and take whatever they can lay claws on. And there are creatures who wait, hidden just out of sight, smelling the warm food that walks, hoping they can snatch it."

"It doesn't do to show weakness or inattention," said Kintoth. "The Harsenyi, for instance, might be tempted to attack if they thought they could gain by it. The other tribes of the Hammer might become greedy. And of course the Thyrans have a bigger worry than most."

He stabbed his finger at the sketched-in range of the Witch-

fires. "They have neighbors here among the mountains. The Children of Skaith-Our-Mother."

Stark stared at him in the brassy twilight of the hollow. The wind blew snow in vagrant clouds.

Halk laughed, a harsh and jarring sound.

"Perhaps you will be lucky a second time, Dark Man!" he said, and laughed again.

IX

SHADOWS lay long across the road, pointing north. Soft-shod, the party moved quietly. Wind scoured their tracks away almost as soon as they were made.

"What are they like, these Children?" Stark asked.

Hargoth shook his narrow head. "The Thyrans say they're monsters. They have many tales of them, all horrible."

"Are they true?"

"Who can say?"

"You have no knowledge yourself? Haven't any of your people gone into the mountains? Through the pass?"

"In the darklands," said Hargoth, "it is difficult enough to hold where one is. One does not travel for any lesser reason than survival."

"The Harsenyi seem to manage it."

"They're nomads, it's their way of life. They're strong enough to fight off the brainless attackers, the hungry mouths, and the rest of us welcome them. They're the only link we have with the outer world. They bring things we haven't got and can't make—and most of all they bring news. Being nomads by choice they don't threaten our holdings. Besides, we're used to them."

"And they cross the Witchfires."

"More. It is even said that they trade with the Hooded Men on the far side of the Bleak Mountains." He paused, considering. "It is *said* that they trade with the Children of Skaith."

Stark kept his voice free of irritation, though with an effort. "And what do the Harsenyi say of the Children?"

"That they are monsters and greater magicians than we. That they have power over stones and all things belonging to the ground, which they can cause to shake whenever they wish. They say . . ."

"They say," Stark interrupted impatiently. "The Harsenyi are doubtless the fount of all wisdom, except that traders have been known to lie before now in order to keep their markets secret. Does anybody *know*?"

"If you mean, can I give you any firm knowledge of the Children—no, I cannot."

"You're trying to talk them away, Dark Man," Halk spoke up. "They will not go so easily."

Stark glanced at him, but did not bother to reply. He wondered if he looked as trail-worn and hollow-eyed as did Halk and the others. The sturdy furs bought at Izvand had turned mangy with use, showing bare spots where the thongs had rubbed. The men had stopped shaving, perforce, since Amnir had allowed them nothing in the way of knives or razors and since their release they had contented themselves with merely hacking hair and beard short enough for comfort. The women covered their faces with wrappings to ward off the cold. Breca walked steadily beside Halk as Gerrith, now, walked beside Stark, her eyes smiling. Gerrith alone seemed alive. The rest walked like automata.

Even Stark felt that. Land and sky lay upon him like a burden. Cold, empty, without promise.

And no one knew what was happening in the south.

The shadows lengthened, the wind skirled down from the high north, with its burden of whirling dry snow.

They came to a turning and Kintoth caught Stark's arm. "There! There! In the sky, Stark. Look up!"

Stark looked and saw a glitter of pale gold.

"The Witchfires."

The peaks disappeared again as the road bent once more.

Two of Kintoth's men who walked ahead as scouts came racing back down the road.

"A party, coming from Thyra!" one of them panted.

"How many?" asked Kintoth.

"Many. We saw them only from a distance."

In a few moments they were off the road, settling themselves among the rocks and hollows. Stark left it to Kintoth to make sure there were no betraying marks while he found a vantage point overlooking the road. Halk lay down beside him. A short distance away Hargoth watched. Presently Kintoth joined them.

The Thyrans were audible a long way off. Drums beat a steady marching pace, accompanied by the intermittent squealing of some shrill-voiced instrument and the clashing of metal on metal. After a while the party came around a bend in the road.

Stark estimated the Thyrans at half a hundred men, including pipers and drummers and cymbal-clashers. All were armed with iron weapons. All wore iron caps and iron-studded back-and-breasts over their furs. Iron-bound targets were slung behind the left shoulder. Banners and pennons lashed in the

wind above them, barred scarlet and black, with the device of a hammer. They were short, broad men with a look of power about them. They marched with a driving purposefulness that had in it something chilling, like the march of army ants. They were not, one felt, accustomed to defeat.

Behind the soldiers came a party of unarmed men hauling iron framed carts loaded with supplies.

"They'll be going to meet the trader," said Halk, low-voiced. "I wish them joy when they find him."

Stark waited until the last clanking cart had vanished along the road, then went to Hargoth.

"Do the Thyrans send out an escort every year for the trader?"

"No. We keep watch for large parties of armed men."

"That is so," said Kintoth. "Once or twice we've watched the trader almost to the gates of Thyra and they've had no more than the usual lookouts. There's no way of telling just when the wagons may come, and anyway, Amnir had a force sufficient for his safety."

"Nevertheless," said Stark, "Halk thinks that's where they're going." He pondered. "Could they rather be going to attack, say, the Towers?"

"Not with fifty men. I'd say Halk's right."

"Yet, as you say, Amnir had a

force sufficient for his safety. This force is large enough to overcome, or at least overawe, Amnir's party. It looks like they have a special interest in the trader this year—perhaps they think he might have something that they consider especially desirable. Something of unusual value. I wonder if the Thyrans have had some tardy word from the Citadel about us."

"We were undoubtedly followed to Izvand," said Gerrith. "Fast messengers could have taken word up the Wandsman's road that Amnir left there in pursuit of us."

"Fast or slow, it makes no difference," said Halk. "We'll never get past Thyra unless we can make a new road."

"We start on that right now," said Stark. The old road had suddenly become menacing. There might be any number of patrols and lookout posts. Stark tried to calculate how long it would take the armed escort to find whatever was left of Amnir and his wagon-train, then get word of the disaster back to Thyra. Presumably they would send a runner. And then? Would the Thyrans start scouring the hills?

He reckoned they had better get through the Witchfires as quickly as possible.

They struck away from the old track. It was not difficult to keep

direction. Old Sun smeared the southwestern sky with dull red-ochre, and when that faded the green star shone hugely, bright as a moon in the northeast. Stark depended on Kintoth to tell them where Thyra ought to be. The going was by turns fairly easy and very rough. Often the way was barred completely by a sheer cliff or an impassable gorge, which made for weary back-tracking. Progress was heartbreakingly slow.

THERE was no love-making that night. They did not stop at all except when weariness forced them, and then only long enough for strength to return to let them go on again. There was no complaint, even from Halk. They all seemed to feel that the hills were too dangerous for peaceful rest and they were anxious to be out of them.

The Lamp of the North climbed higher. The aurora flared white and rose-pink and ice-green. And there was a new presence in the night.

The peaks of the Witchfires stood tall in the north. They caught these delicate colors on their ice-sheathed flanks and sent them gleaming and glimmering back in flashes of many-faceted light, a wonder of cold and purity and death.

"They are sacred to the God-

dess," said Hargoth, "though we see them seldom."

Along toward midnight Stark found a trail.

IT WAS a furtive, cunning sort of trail, a trail such as animals make. It was only because Stark had lived his life in the wild places that he saw it at all. But it led the way he wanted to go and he decided to follow it for the time being. It was very narrow, sliding up and down the slopes, twisting cleverly to avoid the cliffs and canyons. After a while he realized that it was not a single trail but one of a network of footways through the hills.

He asked who might have made them, and Hargoth said, "Out-dwellers, probably, though other things may use it. Cities attract them, as I told you. There is always the hope of food."

It was impossible to tell whether the trail had been recently used. The bare ground was frozen hard and where snow lay there was no sign of prints. If there had been any the wind or some other agency had wiped them out.

Stark went ahead of the party, trusting to no one but himself.

He caught a taint of smoke in the clean air. Going more cautiously, he saw a ridge ahead. Sounds came from beyond the ridge. Unbelievable sounds.

He went back to warn the others, then crept on his belly to the top of the ridge.

He looked down into a shallow bowl between the hills. A fire of dead lichens burned small at one side within a ring of blackened stones. The tiny flickering it made was little more than a pinpoint. The bowl brimmed with the light of the aurora and the green star. The Witchfires sparkled against the north. Snow covering the slopes of the bowl sparkled more faintly, and in that shadowless gleaming a score of figures danced to the wild, thin music of a reedy pipe.

They danced in a wide circle, moving widdershins round the slopes. They leaped and whirled, they laughed and their tatters flew, and they seemed almost to take wing upon outstretched arms. This was because of the height and the lightness of their leaping, the grace and the swift rushing joy of it. Joyousness, Stark thought, was a rare thing anywhere and rarer still on Skaith. But this was a curious place to find it.

There was no set pattern to their dancing except that they kept the circle. Now and again two or more would join together and go skittering hand in hand, with the laughter spilling out of them in long trills like birdsong, to caper about the piper, who leaped and whirled by

himself in the center of the dance. Sometimes he would do a contra step with them and sometimes he would dance clockwise against the circle's turning.

After a while it seemed to Stark that there was something other than joy to their frolicking. A certain quality. What was the word Hargoth had used? Demented.

He turned as someone slid softly up beside him. He could see the twin lightning strokes on the mask as Kintoth peered over the ridge and then drew back.

"Outdwellers," he said.

Stark nodded. "They seem to know every inch of these hills. Perhaps they know of a way around Thyra."

"It's worth a try," said Kintoth, "but they're a chancy lot. Don't turn your back on them, even for a moment." He added, "And remember, the Wandsmen may have spoken to them about you."

"That had occurred to me," Stark said. "Tell the others to come up and stand along here where they can be seen. Weapons ready."

Kintoth hurried away. Stark waited a moment or two, then rose and began to walk down the slope.

He could not say who saw him first. But the piping wavered away, the dancing stilled. The dark figures stood quiet, outlined against the shimmering sky. They watched

him in ghostly silence as their tatters rustled in the wind.

Stark gave them the formal greeting. "May Old Sun bring you warmth and life."

ONE of the Outdwellers came forward. A woman. They were thin, he saw, with wild locks hanging under curious little caps. But their coverings revealed little else. The coverings, he saw now, were made of many small skins sewed together, the tatters were the legs and tails flapping free. The woman's face was narrow and pale, with a pointed chin and enormous eyes that slanted upward. There were no whites to the eyes, only irises of lambent green with hugely expanded pupils that seemed to reflect the night entire.

"Old Sun is well enough," she said carelessly. Her accent was strange, difficult to follow. Her mouth was strange too, filled with sharp, strangely protruding teeth. "We worship the Dark Goddess. May the night bring you joy."

Stark hoped that it would. He did not count on it. "Who is your leader here?"

"Leader?" She cocked her head on one side. "We have all sorts. What's your fancy? A leader for singing the clouds and stars? A leader for catching the wind? One for setting it free again?"

"One for the searching out of trails," said Stark. "I wish to pass by Thyra unseen."

"Ah," she said, and looked past him over his shoulder, to the rim of the bowl. "You alone? Or with these others I see, Gray Warlocks of the Towers and five others unknown."

"All of us."

"Unseen?"

"Yes."

"And unheard?"

"Of course."

"But you are not as fleet as we, nor as light of foot. We can go where a snowflake would be heard as it fell."

"Nonetheless," said Stark, "we must try."

She turned to her people. "The strangers and the Gray Ones would pass by Thyra in secret. Slaifed?" She sang the name.

A man came to her, laughing, kicking the dry snow. "I will lead them." They were a small people, these night-dancers, the tallest of them reaching no higher than Stark's shoulders. Slaifed looked him up and down and across and made a rude sound. "I can do that, but I can't make your great hoofs be silent. That is up to you."

"And their weapons," said the woman. "Don't forget their weapons."

"No one forgets weapons," said

Slaifed, and laughed again, a peculiar, lilting sound that sent a shiver across Stark's nerves. Slaifed himself bore no weapons—at least none that Stark could see—except for a knife such as everyone carried for the necessities of daily life.

"Follow me," said the Outdweller, "if you can."

He went gusting away across the snow, seeming to ride the wind. The others of his tribe returned to their dancing, all but the woman, who came with Stark. The thin voice of the pipe was audible for some time, fading slowly with distance.

Hargoth's people and the Irnanese went very quickly in spite of Slaifed's doubting. And as they traveled their hands never left their weapons nor did their eyes cease their searching.

The scarecrow figure of the Outdweller flitted ever ahead while the Witchfires gleamed and glittered under the quivering aurora.

The woman looked sidelong at Stark. "You are from the south."

"Yes."

"From the south and not from the south." She circled him, her small nose lifted. She walked backward, studying the Irnanese. "They are from the south. They smell of Skaith." She turned to Stark again. "Not you. You smell of the dust of heaven and the sacred

night."

Stark was not aware that he smelled of anything except a lack of soap and water. But he did not miss the significance of the remark . . . unless the Outdwellers were clairvoyant. He said, "You're given to fancies, little sister." His gaze roved constantly, Slaifed, the trail, the ever-shifting hills. The piping had ceased now, or perhaps was now too distant to be heard. "How are you called?"

"Slee," she said. "Slee-e-e . . . like the wind running over a hill."

"Were you always wanderers, Slee?"

"Since the beginning. Our people have never had roofs to prison them. All this is ours." Her wide arms touched everything: hills and sky, the Witchfires, the darklands behind them. "In the time of the Great Wandering we were the free plunderers who fed on the roof-dwellers."

Stark thought that probably she meant that quite literally. She was proud of it. She danced with pride, going a little ahead of him. Slaifed was even farther ahead. This part of the trail was fairly straight, with a steep hillside on the right and a sharp drop-off to the left then tumbled into a ravine with a frozen stream at the bottom. The hillside could be climbed, but not easily.

A hundred feet or so further on

the trail bent around a jutting shoulder of rock. Suddenly Slaifed began to run.

So did Slee.

So did Stark.

SLEE'S hands were at her breast when he caught her and flung her aside with a swinging slash of his hand, never breaking stride. Slaifed looked back, not believing that anyone but an Outdweller could move so swiftly. He reached into the breast of his tunic, still running like the wind.

Stark caught him halfway around the rock. It was like catching a bird. He sank his fingers into the long thin neck that was all cord and muscle, and set his feet, and did a thing that made Slaifed's body snap upward as one snaps a whip.

Stark saw the Outdweller's absolutely incredulous face, saw a double set of iron talons, only half drawn on over thin fingers, drop to the ground. Then he had flung the body against Slee, turning as she came at his back.

Her iron claws were in place and slashing. He felt the metal, still warm from her flesh. Then she fell under Slaifed's dead weight and Stark killed her with a blow. She stared up at him from the white ground, her great dark pupils still reflecting the night, though not so brightly.

The column, headed by the Irnanese, had come to a halt. Weapons were rattling along the line. Stark touched the angle of his jaw where Slee's claws had cut two shallow grooves just above the neck. The blood was already beginning to freeze. He drew his sword and went on around the rock.

The trail led straight on, straight to the walls of a Thyran guardpost. Streaks of light glinted from slitted windows. Armed men strode the walls and the squat watchtower. The small fortress filled the space between hills and ravine.

Stark turned back.

Tattered shadows came streaking down the hillside to leap with outstretched talons onto the marchers. The Outdwellers had decided not to spend the night dancing joyously in the hollow.

The eruption of noise and violence was almost at once joined by the harsh bellowing of iron horns sounding from the guardpost.

X

THE Outdwellers, inferior in numbers and armament, were relying on their speed and agility. They skittered back and forth and up the hillside out of reach. Kintoth's slingers and javelin-throwers were hampered by the close quar-

ters; forced to use their javelins as stabbing weapons, they formed a bristling circle around Hargoth and the priests. Kintoth rallied his rear-guard. The Irnanese closed ranks, more dangerous with their swords and spears. The attackers avoided them.

Some few of the Outdwellers fell or were wounded in that first rush, some few of the gray men of the Towers were slashed or forced over the edge. That was all. The Outdwellers were fighting a nuisance action to disrupt the column and hold them for the Thyrans.

Stark joined the Irnanese.

"What's ahead?" asked Halk.

Stark told him.

"How many?"

"I don't know. But we're in a trap here. We've got to run one way or the other."

"What's behind us but more traps?" said Halk.

"Forward, then," said Stark, and ran back along the line, shouting to Kintoth. The men began to move, slowly at first, then more and more rapidly. By the time Stark got back to the head of the column they were going at a run.

They swept around the shoulder of rock and charged headlong into the Thyran soldiers coming from the guardpost.

The impact scattered the Thyrans, a dozen or so squat thick-

armed warriors. Stark and the tall Irnanese hewed with the strength of desperation, blades ringing on iron. Kintoth's light-armed troop had a bit more room to work in here and javelins were finding unprotected legs and throats. If this dozen, ten soldiers and their officers, had been the whole of it, the guardpost would have fallen.

Stark and the Irnanese were almost at the gate when the second ten came through, a solid wedge of leather and metal. This would be the off shift, the delay just long enough for them to turn out and get their gear on.

Weight of shield and armored bodies bore the swordsmen back. Short blades stabbed, cutting through thick furs. The first lot of Thyrans rallied, the seven or eight who could still fight. They concentrated on the tall Southrons, beating them back into the lines of the gray men.

The brothers fell, almost in the same moment. Halk went to one knee, his hand clutching at his side where blood poured out through a rent in his tunic. Heavy boots kicked him down and trampled over him. Breca screamed like an eagle. Her long blade took the head clean from a Thyran's shoulders and then she went down beneath a wall of shields.

Stark had lost sight of Gerrith.

He was trapped among the gray warriors now, the ones who had formed as a guard around the Corn King and his priests. These were pressed back against the cliff, standing quietly with folded arms. Stark, sweat and blood running down his face, beating aside the short stabbing swords that forced him ever backward, shouted furiously to Hargoth, "Where is your magic, Corn King?"

Hargoth answered, "Where are your stars?" And his eyes shone like bitter ice through the holes of his mask.

The gray men fell, or were driven into the claws of the Oútdwellers, who slashed them from behind, or flung them over the edge of the ravine. Their slings were useless, their javelins spent or broken against the Thyran armor. Stark caught a glimpse of the twin lightning strokes being separated by a blow that split Kintoth's narrow skull to the jawbone. He felt rock against his back. The wall of shields came in against him. He struck up and under, felt the blade go home, lost it as the man fell. The shield-wall battered him with iron bosses, drove the breath from his lungs. He snarled and clawed and bit, all humanity lost in pain and a growing dark. The Thyrans came on, as merciless as time. At last, the darkness was all.

WHEN light returned to him it was the light of Old Sun, running rusty on the stones of a square courtyard enclosed by thick walls. He was inside the guardpost. He was cold and he hurt, and he had bled somewhat onto the stones where he lay. He was not dead, and he thought after a while that he was not dying. A name came into his head.

Gerrith.

A stab of fear contracted his belly. He tried to sit up, and found that this hands were bound.

He could not sit up but managed to achieve a wider view.

Halk leaned against the wall nearby. His eyes were shut and he breathed through his mouth in shallow, careful breaths. His face had a gray pallor; it seemed to have fallen in around the bones. His tunic was open, showing a rough wad of bandage. Beyond him, Hargoth and his priests sat in a group. They appeared soiled and bruised but not wounded, and their masks had been left to them. A guard stood over them, watchful against sorceries. In another place were such of their warriors as had survived, only seven and most of them wounded. All were bound.

He did not see Gerrith.

He called her name, she spoke from behind him. "I'm here, Stark." He floundered about, push-

ing his back up against the wall. She tried to help him but her hands, too, were tied. She did not seem to be hurt, except for bruises, and her hair hung loose around her face.

"Why," he asked her, "in the name of all the starry hells of space did you insist on coming?"

He was furious with her.

There was much activity in the courtyard, almost a holiday air. Thyran soldiers went about various sorts of business. Their dead and wounded were laid out on litters. A cluster of Outdwellers, like ragged crows, stood by a doorway and grabbed for bundles of provisions being handed out to them. Payment, no doubt, for their betrayal.

One of them saw that Stark was conscious. He walked over and stared down with malevolent pleasure. The piper. Stark could see the instrument peeping out from his untidy wrappings.

"Why?" asked Stark.

"They told us to watch for you. They told us how you looked. They promised to pay us. But we would have done it for nothing."

The pupils of his eyes had contracted. They reflected nothing now but hate.

Again Stark asked, "Why?"

"The stars are sacred," said the piper. "They are the eyes of the Goddess. When our souls take

flight the bright eyes see them and the arms of the Goddess reach out to gather them in. You wish to defile the stars and rob us of all bliss."

Stark said wearily, "I don't think you understand." Normally he was tolerant of tribal fancies, but he felt no great tenderness for the Outdwellers. "The stars are already defiled. They're only suns, like that one over your head. They have worlds around them, like this one under your feet. People live on those worlds, people who never heard of Outdwellers or their footling goddess. And the starships ply between them. It's all going on out there this second as you stand here and nothing you can do will stop it."

The piper carried his peculiar weapons as well as his pipe. He thrust one hand in and out of his garments so swiftly that Stark could barely follow the motion. Claws flashed upward in the death-stroke and Stark had just time enough to consider the wisdom of his remarks. Then a hairy fist closed on the piper's broomstick arm and a Thyran officer with an iron torque around his neck said cheerfully,

"Do you drop it or do I break your wrist?"

The piper wriggled his fingers and let the claws go clacking noisily

onto the stone floor.

"This one's worth more alive," said the Thyran, and let go. He wiped his hand on his breeches. "Go along with you, filth."

The piper gathered up his armament and moved away. The Outdwellers began to file out through the gate, glancing back with hateful leers at the captives. Stark suddenly sat up straighter and again looked around the courtyard.

"I see your dead," he said to the Thyran. "I do not see ours."

"Don't worry, friend. The Outdwellers will give them useful burial." The Thyran examined him with interest. "You put us to some pains to keep from killing you."

"Why did you?"

"That was the order. Dead if necessary, alive if possible and double the reward. Same for the woman and for this man. The others . . ." He shrugged. "Dead was good enough."

Halk's eyes had opened. "Breca was my shield-mate. The men were my comrades. You killed them. That was fair enough, since we came against you. But to give them to those vermin for . . ." He could not finish the sentence. Rage choked him. Incredibly, he came to his feet and was reaching for the Thyran's throat with his bound hands. His wound betrayed him and he fell again, to stare half-

blind at Stark with such hatred as might kill a man where he sat.

"Prophecies!" Halk cried, and sobbed once, a racking sound that shook his whole body. Then he fainted.

Stark wished that he had left Halk and the others in Amnir's wagons, sleeping the sleep of the Goddess.

Hargoth and the priests were watching him and he could not bear their gaze either, even though he had never asked for their faith. He asked the Thyran, "Who are 'they' who gave you the orders, and what are we waiting for?"

The Thyran smiled. "As to who 'they' are, you'll meet them soon enough. And we're waiting for men to come from the city to take over the post while we go down with you and our wounded. You left us short-handed."

There was a second gate, set in the wall opposite the one through which the Outdwellers had gone. A couple of soldiers were up above, keeping an eye out over whatever country lay beyond. The Thyran glanced at them, laughed.

"You wanted the Outdwellers to show you a way around Thyra. There isn't any way around. We guard every trail, every approach. Not a puff of wind can get past us. Otherwise, anyone could creep in and nibble away our wealth."

He kicked Stark experimentally, studied the dried blood that showed on him, cocking his head from side to side. He stepped back, turning to Hargoth.

"I DON'T believe he's from the stars at all. He's just meat like the rest of us. And none too bright either, to take up with the Gray Maggots. A fine lot altogether to make big talk about flying up to heaven!"

His broad face beamed with the scornful smugness of sublime stupidity. Stark hated him.

"Aren't you even curious?" he asked. "A million worlds out there with more wonders than I could tell you in a million years and you don't even want to ask a question?"

The Thyran shrugged, heaving his weight of iron bosses up and down. "Why should I care what's out there? What more could I find anywhere than I already have here in Thyra?"

He walked away. "Well," said Stark, "and there's no answer to that." He leaned back against the wall, infinitely tired. "What do you say now, wise woman?"

Hargoth gave her no chance to speak. "The only way was south. South! South where the ships are."

"The Spring Child told you otherwise," said Stark.

"A false augury. A punishment. Because of your lust for that woman, you cheated Old Sun of his gift. He sent us a curse instead of a blessing."

The eight heads of the priests nodded solemnly. Nine pairs of eyes pierced him with malevolence.

"You are not the Promised One."

"I never claimed to be," said Stark. "Was it because of your anger that you didn't use your magic to help us?"

"The Goddess does not send us power like a lightning bolt. It is a slow magic. We had no time."

"You have time now."

Impatiently Hargoth said, "How can we perform the ritual? How stand as we must, think as we must? You know little of sorcery."

Stark knew enough of it not to depend on it. He gave up the conversation.

"Have faith," said Gerrith softly.

"Faith?" said Stark. "Will it give us another miracle that leads nowhere?"

The guards above the gate sang out and soon Stark heard a drumbeat in the distance. Presently the gate was opened and the replacements tramped in. There was a period of ordered chaos as the change-over was made. The outgoing force formed ranks, the litters were picked up, the captives

forced to stand on weak legs.

Halk was conscious again and trying to get to his feet. He fell twice, with a Thyran boot to help him. Stark swung his hands in a short vicious arc and knocked the soldier clanging against the wall.

"He needs a litter," said Stark, "and don't draw that blade. I'm worth double alive and your officers won't thank you for robbing them."

The sword hesitated, halfway out of the sheath. The officer with the iron torque came up.

"Put that away," he said to the soldier, and then he hit Stark backhanded across the face. "You trade overmuch on your value."

"He needs a litter," Stark said.

Halk swore that he did not and tried once more to rise. He fell a third time. The officer shouted for litter-bearers.

"Now, then," he said, "move!" He shoved Stark into line.

The drummers began to thump out a steady beat and the company marched through the gate.

The path on the only side of the guardpost that Stark had yet seen ran for a time under the flank of a ridge that shut off any view of what lay beyond. Then it swung around a curve and the prospect opened up, suddenly and with spectacular effect.

The Witchfires thrust sharply into the sky, throwing back Old

Sun's sullen glower. At their feet, covering a portion of the foothills and spreading out across a broad valley, was the ruin of a city.

It had probably begun, Stark thought, as a strong fortress in the days when fighting men and caravans moved back and forth through the pass of the Witchfires, which was like a wide notch between the peaks. Later it had become a city, and then a metropolis, and then a dead and silent corpse, sinking in upon itself with the weight of wind and frost and endless time, until all its original form was lost and it was only a great dark many-humped mound beneath the mountains.

Then from somewhere the Thyrans had come, Strayer's men, the People of the Hammer, and the city had taken on a strange new life. Now, in the dim coppery glare of day, the guardian of the pass appeared more like a doorkeeper at the gate of hell. All around the base of the city and into its ugly flanks gaped fumaroles from which came plumes of smoke and red glarings that pulsed and shook.

"The forges are never cold," said the Thyran officer. "We are all smiths, even as we are all soldiers. We work and we guard. This is how Strayer taught us."

It sounded a dull life, but Stark forebore to say so. His mouth was still bleeding.

Some two hours of marching brought them into the new city.

It lacked beauty. Some of the dwellings were underground, some protruded partly. Others, built of stone from the hills and debris quarried from the old city, were above-ground but squat and low, with few windows to let in the cold.

A vast straggle of frozen lanes ran between the dwellings. There were places for pens and livestock. A band of hairy folk leading a string of animals made way for the soldiers while staring out from filth-encrusted faces at the prisoners. The animals bore great stacks of dried lichens.

There was a constant billowing of smoke and a steady muffled sound of hammering that beat like giant heartbeats. Huge piles of rusty scrap metal bulked here and there, and over all was the old city, a tangled mountain blotting out part of the Witchfires. Over the centuries the Thyrans had chewed and tunneled the mountain ragged. Cave-like dwellings were dug into this raggedness and dark mouths opened into the deeper bowels of the ruin. Stark thought of a community of rats living in the biggest junkyard in all the worlds. If the Thyrans were able to reclaim even a small fraction of the countless tons of metal buried in that junkyard they would keep themselves busy

for another two thousand years.

The company swung into what was evidently the street that led up from the main gate. It was much wider than the lanes and ran almost straight.

The thudding of the drums became sharper, the pace of the men smarter. People were swarming out to watch them go by. These were chiefly of the same heavy build as the soldiers, though occasionally there were individuals of a different shape and coloring to attest to outside blood. The women were as ugly as the men. Stark had no idea what the women of the Towers looked like but he was sure they could only be an improvement on these travesties.

Men and women both shouted to the soldiers, crowded in to stare and push at the captives. The furl-clad children threw insults and more tangible evidences of their malevolence.

The soldiers shoved the people back with bone-breaking good nature; while the crisp beat of the drums never faltered. The company marched up the straight street, straight to the Iron House.

THE dark walls of the Iron House were burnished like a shield, the metal sheathing of the roof gleaming with a dull and sullen lustre in the light of the ginger star.

A guard of twelve men was drawn up before massive iron doors which bore the hammer device. The House was rectangular. It stretched some eighty feet from north to south, half that east to west. The doors were in the southern front. At the northern end, close against the ruins, there were crumbled wings of stone and rubble.

The drums sounded a long roll. The heavy doors swung open. The company marched into a great hall.

Flaming pits, giving out as much smoke as heat, were set at intervals in the walls. At the far end of the hall was a dais with a high seat and several places of honor. The high seat was made of iron—strong, square, without grace or ornamentation. A man wearing an iron collar and pectoral sat in it; he, too, was strong, square, without grace. The pectoral on his barrel chest was in the form of a hammer.

The seats of honor were also occupied, and Stark saw without surprise that the man at the right hand of the high seat was Gelmar of Skeg.

A GREAT crowd pressed into the hall behind the soldiers. The chief men beat and shouldered their way through the mob to crowd up onto the dais or take their places below it, according to their rank while lesser men filled the body of

the hall. Women remained outside and the small boys who darted in were pitched out bodily. The iron doors clanged shut. As though that were a signal the men began shouting, "Strayer! Strayer and the forges!" They stamped their feet and slapped their weapons. "Strayer!"

After that ritual shout the hall settled gradually to a breathy silence, undertoned with rustlings and coughings. The smoky air became charged with a smell of heat and sweat, wool and fur and leather.

A clear space had been left around the soldiers. The officer drew his sword and lifted the hilt in salute.

"These are the captives, Ironmaster."

The Ironmaster wore a fine purple robe whose cloth must have come from the south in Amnir's wagons; the local weave was coarse and undyed. He nodded his grizzled head and the officer put away his sword.

The Ironmaster turned to Gelmar. "Are these the ones you wanted?"

Gelmar rose and stepped down from the dais. He wore a tunic of the somber red Stark remembered from Skeg and he carried his wand of office. He walked without haste, around Stark and studied him with

cool deliberation.

On the dais were three other green-clad Wandsmen. One of them had a face deep-scarred and half blinded by a sword-cut that had left an ugly groove from forehead to jaw. The wound had healed but still showed an angry red. This man leaned forward in his chair with the hunched quiver of an animal about to spring.

Gelmar looked into Stark's eyes. His own were dark and veiled, lacking the fire of triumph Stark had expected. Yet they contained a cold ferocity that was frightening.

"I know this man," said Gelmar. "Yes. Concerning the others . . ." He beckoned to the scarred man. "Vasth?"

Vasth came quickly to peer into Gerrith's face.

"There were two women," said the Thyran officer. "One of them fought like a man. A shield-bearer. These Southrons defy all morality, allowing women to handle swords. We were forced to kill her."

"No matter," said Vasth. "This one is Gerrith, daughter of Gerrith. And this—" He turned to Halk on his litter. "This one is Halk, a ring-leader, a killer of Wandsmen. I have cause to remember him." He traced the groove of the scar. "He gave me this."

"A pity my hand was weak in that moment," said Halk weakly.

He had not stood the journey well. He looked past the lesser Wandsmen to Gelmar. "What has happened at Irnan?"

"Irnan has fallen," said Gelmar, and his mouth was cruel. "So much for all your trouble."

"And Ashton?" asked Stark.

"Ashton," said Gelmar, and smiled, a small twisting of the lips as one might twist a knife-blade in the yielding flesh. "The Lords Protector were discussing what should be done with him when I left the Citadel. That decision will have been made by now. Perhaps he lives, perhaps he is already dead. I can't tell you. But you'll know soon enough." He turned from Stark to face the Corn King and his priests.

Stark gave a violent jerk and was instantly quelled.

Gelmar took no notice of him.

"You were with these rebels, Hargoth, coming to attack us at the Citadel. Why did you do this folly?"

"For freedom. The freedom of the stars."

Hargoth still had his pride. His narrow head was as erect as ever, his eyes met Gelmar's defiantly. "Stark and the Sun Woman told us that you Wandsmen forbade this and so must be destroyed. We believed them but they were false prophets, they would not go south where the ships are. They cheated

Old Sun because of the lust of their bodies. And because we believed them we have been punished."

Gelmar nodded. He said, "The ships are gone from the south, Hargoth. Do you understand that?"

"I understand."

"The ships are gone. The star-men and their foreign ways are gone with them. The star-roads are closed. Our way lies as it always has, with Skaith and Old Sun. Do you understand that?"

Hargoth said, "I understand." His voice carried the deadness of that understanding.

"Then go tell your people, Hargoth."

Hargoth bent his head.

Gelmar spoke to the man in purple who watched smiling from the high-seat, pleased by the humbling of the gray men of the Towers.

"Open your doors, Ironmaster. Let them go."

"I had rather seen them slain," said the Ironmaster. "But—" He shrugged and ordered the doors to be opened.

The priests and warriors formed their meager ranks; beaten men, acquiescing not with patience but with anger—anger for their erstwhile allies.

And Hargoth said, "Wait."

He faced Gerrith. "You prophesied for me, Sun Woman. Now

I prophesy for you. Your body will yet feed Old Sun, though not as a parting-gift."

Gerrith's expression had changed. All the way from the guardpost she had looked tired to exhaustion, merely enduring. Now she seemed to be listening intently to some inner voice. Yet she heard Hargoth and answered him.

"That may be. But your people must find themselves a new Corn King, for you lead them badly. You cast the finger-bones and you prophesy, but you do not know truth from falsehood."

Her head came erect and her voice rang out strongly.

"Irnan has not fallen. The ships remain at Skaith. The star-roads are open. Times change and the Wandsmen are afraid. In the end . . ."

Vasth struck her viciously. Blood sprang from her mouth and she fell past Stark's bound hands into the arms of a Thyran soldier, who caught her roughly.

"We have had enough of wise women," said Vasth.

THE hall had become suddenly still. In that stillness Gelmar spoke softly to Hargoth.

"Will you go?"

Hargoth turned and stumbled out, his priests and the remnant of his warriors following after.

Gelmar clapped his hands.

Men came in through a leather-curtained doorway at the side of the hall. They wore saffron-colored tunics and richly-ornamented collars of some bright metal. They were of a breed that Stark had not seen before; beautiful men, with beautifully proportioned bodies and aquiline faces almost too perfect—and so much alike that it was difficult to tell one from another except for the color of the hair. This ranged from black to a reddish blond. But all had copper-colored eyes. The eyes were too wide apart and there was something else odd about them. As they came closer Stark saw what it was. They were like the inlaid eyes of statues, startlingly lifelike but without life, showing brilliance but no depth.

As though they understood without orders two of them picked up Halk's litter and another helped Gerrith to her feet. Two more replaced the Thyran soldiers beside Stark. All had daggers at their belts and smooth muscles showed powerfully beneath their tunics. A sixth man stood by and it was to him that Gelmar spoke.

"Take them away. Guard them."

Stark saw Gelmar's face clearly, very clearly. The lines, the tautness, the weariness. Some of that proud high confidence that he remembered from their first meet-

ing had been left forever in the sea where Stark had taken him.

Stark said, "Gerrith is right. You are afraid."

Gelmar's men had them moving almost before the words were said and Gelmar ignored him. No one beyond their small group had even heard his words. But Stark knew that they were true.

New things had come, things the Wandsmen could neither control nor comprehend and they felt their ancient power slipping away from them. They must grasp it now and hold it firmly, regardless of the cost, else it would be gone.

And grasp it they would, with all their strength, in whatever ways seemed best to them. The fear and the uncertainty would only make them more dangerous, might already have cost Ashton his life.

The captives were taken into one of the adjoining wings to a room rudely furnished with sleeping mats and a few random articles. The Thyrans seemed not to indulge in luxury, but the mats offered at least some comfort.

All six stayed to guard them, a woman and two men, and one of those wounded. It was a measure of the prisoner's importance.

Gerrith was making a dazed and fumbling attempt to wipe some of the blood from her face.

Halk said, "Gerrith, what you

said about Irnan—was it true?"

Answering for her, Stark said harshly, "Of course it's true. Why else would they want us alive? If the revolt were really over dead would be good enough."

In a curiously gentle voice one of the bright-eyed men said, "Do not talk."

Halk ignored him. He seemed to have recovered a measure of strength, even of eagerness. "Yes, I see. If Irnan still stands, and perhaps other city-states have joined her . . ."

He broke off with a gasp of pain as the guard nearest him kicked the frame of his litter.

If that were so, thought Stark, it would not be enough for the Wandsmen to tell it in the streets that the wise woman and the Dark Man and the ringleaders of the revolt were all dead, the prophecy came to nothing. They would have to produce real evidence and present it to people who could attest to its authenticity. Gerrith alive, the Dark Man alive, one undoubted ringleader alive, all captives of the Wandsmen—proof enough that the prophecy lied and the power of the Lords Protector remained unshaken. Gelmar and his aides might keep the three of them in cages for the rest of their lives, dragging them up and down the roads of Skaith. Or a fitting end

could be devised for them, a public end, with recantings and repentance; an end to remain vivid for generations in the minds of the people.

If hope of the fulfillment of the prophecy kept the revolt alive, then that revolt would collapse very quickly. Irnan would fall, and that would be the end of it. For the present, at least.

The Wandsmen obviously believed that that hope was all that was keeping the revolt alive. Stark believed it too. Not because the Irnanese were childishly superstitious, but because if the Citadel and the Lords Protector were not destroyed the folk of Irnan could not hold out alone against the mobs of Farers and the mercenary troops the Wandsmen would send against them and their present or potential allies among the other city-states would fall away. Jerann himself had said that the others would wait to see Irnan's fate.

The Citadel and the Lords Protector. It all came back to them. They were the symbol of permanence. The unchanging, holy, the unseen and forever inviolate power.

The power that would by now have pronounced judgment on Ash-ton.

Was it, after all, a power that a man could fight? Even if he were free?

Stark looked at his bound wrists. The thongs were wet with his blood. The six men crowded the small room, watching. That they had orders not to kill him he didn't doubt—but there are worse things to do to a man than killing him.

Six men between him and the door. Beyond the door, the Iron House. Beyond that, Thyra, with every gate and every path guarded. Not a puff of wind could get through.

Halk had had second thoughts. "Why would Gelmar lie to Har-goth?"

Again the litter was kicked.

Again Stark answered, speaking rapidly, eye on the nearest guard.

"Does he want the People of the Towers marching south . . ."

He dodged the first blow, stiffened fingers aimed at his throat.

". . . singing the Hymn of Deliverance?"

The second blow he could not dodge and he didn't try. Instead he caught the vicious fingers between his teeth.

HE learned one thing. These too-perfect creatures were not automatons. They bled.

So did he.

After a time a healer came, a Thyran in a tunic both undyed and unwashed. He wore a chain of

office around his neck and was followed by two boys bearing pots of ointment and bundles of rags. The healer tended their hurts, spending long minutes over Halk, grumbling at wasting his time and talents on a non-Thyran who would probably die anyway. When he was finished servants came and fed him and they were told to rest in preparation for a journey. Gelmar seemed in great haste.

The room was stifflingly close. The powerful bodies of the men in the saffron tunics were oppressive in the confined space, the smell of them repulsive. To Stark they smelled like snakes. Nevertheless, he managed to sleep until men came in with new manacles, fresh from Strayer's forges. Gelmar's man with the bitten hand held his sword-point against Stark's groin while the irons were fastened on; his face had still shown no expression, not even pain.

Gerrith seemed to have awakened from a dream, and not a pleasant one. She was careful not to look at Stark.

When the Lamp of the North was above the peaks they were taken out of the room and marched along a corridor to a yard beside the Iron House where men and beasts were waiting. The beasts were small with shaggy hair that swept the ground, their sharp horns tipped with metal

balls to prevent them hooking. The men who led them wore bulky skin garments with the fur inside. Only their eyes showed between heavy caps and thick tangled beards. The beards were flocked with white as though the snow had got into them; it did not seem to be a sign of age. Stark guessed that these were Harsenyi in the service of the Wandsmen.

For a moment the prisoners were close together and Gerrith managed to touch Stark's hand and smile at him. A strange smile.

It was as if she said goodbye.

XI

THE beasts shuffled and blew, breath puffing white on the icy air. Stark and Gerrith were made to mount, with a guard on either side, afoot. Halk was transferred to a traveling litter slung between two of the animals. He appeared to be unconscious or asleep most of the time. Even so, he had been manacled like the others and a guard stood at the head of his litter.

Gelmar, cloaked and hooded for the journey, came and bent over him, feeling Halk's throat where the life beat in it.

"Cover him well," he said to Halk's guard. "If he reaches the Citadel alive, we can heal him."

The beautiful man, sword and dagger now belted over rich outer tunic, covered Halk carefully with furs.

Gelmar and the lesser Wandsmen mounted. The twelve retainers portioned themselves out along the line, walking with the Harsenyi but obviously disdainful of them.

An escort of Thyran troops tramped up, banging the inevitable drum. The cavalcade started.

They passed through the gate and turned north toward the night-sparkle of the Witchfires. The Thyrans escorted them past the outer guardpost, saluted and drummed and clanked their way back into the city.

The path lay ahead, climbing a long gradient to the summit. Somewhere on the other side of the mountains was the Citadel. In a way, Stark thought, getting there was going to be easier than he had thought. At least he would not have to worry about the Northhounds.

No wagons had come this way in centuries and the track was narrow. The hard little hoofs of the beasts clattered steadily on the frozen ground. The sky was a glory of shifting color.

It was bright enough to see quite clearly the shapes that thronged the pass.

For geological ages the forces of wind and water, thaw and freeze,

had worked at the rock walls, scouring, carving, polishing, wearing away. Sheathed in ice, the sculptures seemed almost alive in the shaking light of the aurora. Great faces watched with deep-gouged eyes. Towering pinnacles soared and tottered, gargoyle wings spread out to shadow the little humans passing beneath. In the wider places where softer strata had been carried off whole crowds of cowed and hooded forms seemed to whisper together. The wind from the high north blew down the pass, chuckling, singing, talking to the shining creatures it had helped to create.

Stark's human reason told him that these monsters were no more than lumps of eroded stone. His mind knew that. His primitive gut said otherwise. And his animal senses told him that other beings not of stone were close by.

The Children of Skaith-Our-Mother?

He could not see anything, but a regiment might have hidden itself in the eccentricities of the rock. Still, the Wandsmen and their retainers moved on confidently. If there was something here, they were accustomed to it and not afraid. Even their beasts seemed unconcerned.

The manacles weighed heavily on Stark's wrists. The sky flared a

white as pure as the veils of angels. Pale green, delicate as shoal water. Red like fire, like roses. From time to time the shimmering, eldritch curtains drew apart to show the velvet darkness beyond, the green star glowing.

Gerrith rode ahead of him sitting her little beast quietly, her head bowed. He wished he knew what she had dreamed.

At length, just below the summit, at the right-hand side of the pass, he saw a tall pinnacle that canted forward so that it seemed that it must fall of its own weight. It had the form of an elongated man in an attitude of prayer. About its base irregular groups and lines of hooded figures stood as though they listened.

In the shifting light and shadow of the aurora, three of the figures moved, detached themselves from the stone, came into the center of the pass and stood barring the way.

And now the little beasts snorted and danced. The cavalcade came to a halt beneath the leaning, looming figure.

Gelmar rode forward. "Kell a Marg," he said. "Skaith-Daughter." His voice had a flat quality, as though he were holding it in rigid check. "Fenn. Ferdic."

The figures were cloaked against the wind but their heads were bare except for diadems of wrought

gold. The diadem of the foremost figure was set with a great smoky jewel. There was something peculiar about the three faces, pale in the aurora-light.

Kell a Marg said, "Gelmar." The voice was like chiming bells. It was a woman's voice, imperious in spite of its music, with the arrogance of unquestioned power. A match for Gelmar, Stark thought. He had made out the peculiarity of the faces. They were covered in fine white fur, and the features, while not unpleasing, were distorted subtly from the human, the noses blunted, the jaws prominent. The woman had eyes as huge and dark and glowing as the jewel she wore. Night-creature's eyes.

SHE said to Gelmar: "Did you think to pass through our mountains without pause?"

"Skaith-Daughter," said Gelmar, and now there was just the faintest edge of irritation in his voice, "we have an urgent mission and time is short. I thank you for this honor, but—"

"No honor," said Kell a Marg. She looked past him at the captives. "These are the wicked ones you were seeking?"

"Kell a Marg—"

"You've been setting the whole of the north by its ears, it's small wonder we know of you. Even in

our deep caverns we're not deaf."

The edge of irritation had sharpened. "Kell a Marg, I told you—"

"You told me that there was a threat to Skaith, something new and strange, something that only you of the Citadel could deal with. You told me only because I asked you—because the Harsenyi had brought us tales we could not understand."

"There was no need to concern yourself—"

"You take too much on your shoulders, Gelmar. You intend to settle the entire future of Skaith-Our-Mother without consulting her Children."

"There is no time, Kell a Marg! I must take these people south as soon as possible."

"You will make time," said Kell a Marg.

A silence. The wind from the high north whined and chuckled. The hooded figures listened dutifully to the endless prayer of the leaning man. The cloaks of the Children fluttered.

Gelmar said, "I beg you not to interfere." Irritation had become desperation. He knew this woman, Stark thought. Knew her and feared her, disliked her intensely. "I understand these people, I've dealt with them. I know what must be done. Please, let us pass."

The ground shook, ever so

slightly. Above their heads the leaning man seemed to sway.

"Kell a Marg!"

"Yes, Wandsman?"

A second small quivering. Pebbles rattled down. The leaning man bowed. The Harsenyi began hastily to move themselves and their beasts out from under these tons of rock.

"Very well!" said Gelmar furiously. "I will make time."

Kell a Marg said briskly, "The Harsenyi may enter and wait in the usual place."

She turned and walked with a lithe, undulant stride toward the cliff. There was a sort of lane between the stone figures. She went along it with Fenn and Ferdic, the cavalcade following meekly. Gelmar's stiff back was eloquent of stifled rage.

Gerrith had straightened up. Her head was high. High and proud. Stark felt a qualm of alarm not connected with the Children or the threatening quality of the cliff-face about to swallow them. This was a different kind of alarm. He wondered again what Kell a Marg knew and damned all prophetic visions for the thousandth time.

Halk's voice came from the litter, weak but still jeering. "I told you you could not talk the Children away."

A great slab of stone opened in

the cliff face, moving easily on its pivots. The cavalcade passed through.

The door swung shut. Kell a Marg flung back her cloak. "I do so hate the wind!" she said, and looked at Gelmar, smiling.

They were in a large cavern, evidently the place where the Harseny customarily came to trade with the Children. Lamps burned dimly in the quiet air, giving off a scent of sweet oil. The walls were rough, the floor uneven. At its inner side there was a second door.

"The lesser Wandsmen are not needed," said Kell a Marg. "I think we'll get little good from the wounded one so he will stay here as well. Those two—" She pointed to Stark and Gerrith. "The wise-woman, and the one called, I believe, the Dark Man. I want them. And, of course, Gelmar, I shall require your counsel."

The green Wandsmen accepted their dismissal with bad grace; Vasth looked poisonous but held his tongue. Gelmar's jaw was tightly set. He could barely control his rage.

"I shall need guards," he said, cutting the words very short. "This man is dangerous."

"Even in irons?"

"Even in irons."

"Four of your creatures, then. Though I fail to see how he could

hope to escape from the House of the Mother."

There was a shuffle of dismounting. Kell a Marg stood easily, waiting with her courtiers. Stark knew without being told that she did not often stand in this outer cavern with nomads. This was a special occasion, one of sufficient urgency to make her break precedent. She was looking at him with frank curiosity.

He looked at her. The cloak tossed back over slender shoulders revealed a lean body as arrogant as her voice, clad in its own sleek white fur and ornamented with a light harness of the same wrought gold as the diadem. A beautiful animal, a voluptuous woman. A great royal ermine with wicked eyes. Stark felt no stirrings of excitement.

She lifted a shoulder daintily. "This one may or may not be as dangerous as you say but it's bold enough." She turned and led the way to the inner door. It swung silently open.

Kell a Marg strode through. Gelmar, his two captives, and his guards followed after, the wiry white-furred courtiers bringing up the rear.

Attendants who had opened the door swung it shut behind them and they were closed into a strange and beautiful world.

Stark shivered, a shallow animal rippling of the skin.

The House of the Mother smelled of sweet oil, of dust and deep caverns.

It smelled of death.

THEY were in a corridor, wide and high, lit only by flickering lamps. A group of people with the pale fur, the close-set ears and golden diadems that varied in size and splendor according to rank were waiting there with bowed heads. A murmur of voices repeated reverently, "Skaith-Daughter. You have returned."

Stark thought they looked as if they had been waiting a long time and were tired of standing. At one side he noticed four of the Children gathered together apart from the others, bearing themselves with disdainful pride. They were clad in skull-caps and tabards of some black material, close-belted with golden chains. They did not bow. Their collective gaze went immediately to the strangers.

Courtiers and officials, when they straightened up, also fixed Stark and Gerrith with cold and hostile eyes. Wandsmen they were apparently used to for they spared Gelmar only a single unwelcoming glance. But the strangers seemed to disturb them deeply.

"I will speak with the Diviners,"

said Kell a Marg and gestured the courtiers out of the way.

The four black-clad ones gathered around her and the five walked ahead, speaking in low voices. The courtiers and officials had now to be content with their less favored places in the procession.

They walked for what seemed like a long while in a corridor whose walls and roof were covered with carvings, some in high relief, others almost in the round. All were done with great artistry and appeared to have something to do with the history or the religion of the Children. Some of that history, Stark judged, might have been stormy. There were places where the carvings had been damaged and repaired. He counted six doors in the first stretch that could be closed against invaders.

Chambers with magnificently carved doorways opened off the corridor and what he could see of the interiors gave an impression of astonishing richness. Lamps of pierced silver picked out gleams of color, of inlays and mosaics, touched the outer shapes of things that Stark could only guess at. One thing was certain; these Children of Skaith-Our-Mother had little in common with their cousins of the Sea. Far from being animals, they had an obviously complex and highly-developed society working away here

beneath the glittering peaks of the Witchfires.

Or ought he to say "had once had?"

Some of the chambers were unlighted. Others had only one lamp, or two, to fill their large darkness. There was that subtle odor of dust and death, a feeling that the comings and goings glimpsed in the branching corridors and the work, whatever it might be, that was going on, were all less than was called for by the size and elaborateness of the Home of the Mother.

The corridor ended in an enormous cavern, a natural one where the fantastic rock formations had been left untouched. There were lamps enough here and a royal path of marble blocks set into the floor. Beyond was a series of jewel-box anterooms, and then the vaulted chamber that must belong to Kell a Marg, Skaith-Daughter.

It was perfectly plain. Walls and floor were faced with some luminous white stone, without carving or ornamentation, completely bare. Nothing was allowed to distract the eye from the focal-point of the room—the high seat.

Kell a Marg climbed the broad steps to the dais, seated herself.

The high seat was carved from rich brown rock the color of soil, in the shape of a robed woman seated to hold Skaith-Daughter on her

knees, arms curved around protectively, head bent forward in an attitude of affection. Kell a Marg sat with her hands on the hands of Skaith-Mother. Her slim arrogant white body gleamed against the dark stone.

The Diviners stood in a little group at her right. Fenn and Ferdic at her left. The others were scattered around the spacious emptiness. Gelmar, Stark, Gerrith and the guards were clustered at the foot of the steps.

"Now," said Kell a Marg, "tell me again of this danger that has come to Skaith."

Gelmar had taken firm hold of himself. His voice was almost pleasant.

"Certainly. But I would prefer to do it more privately, Skaith-Daughter."

"These, Gelmar, are the Keepers of the House, the Clan Mothers; the men and women who are responsible for the well-being of my people. I wish them to hear."

Gelmar nodded. He looked at Stark and Gerrith. "Only let these two be taken out."

"Ah," said Kell a Marg. "The captives. No, Gelmar. They stay."

Gelmar began an angry protest, smothered it, inclined his head and began to tell the story of the ships.

Kell a Marg listened attentively. So did Fenn and Ferdic, the Clan

Mothers and the counselors. Under the attentiveness was fear. And something else—anger, hate, the instinctive rejection of an intolerable truth.

“Let me be clear about what you say,” said Kell a Marg. “These ships. They come from outside, from far away?”

“FROM the stars.”
“The stars. We had almost forgotten them. And the men who fly in these ships, they also come from outside? They are not born of Skaith-Mother?”

The glowing eyes of the Clan Mothers and the counselors looked at Stark, looked at blasphemy incarnate.

“That is so,” said Gelmar. “They are utterly alien to us. We let them stay because they brought us things we need, such as metals. But they brought us other and worse things—off-world ways, foreign ideas that have corrupted some of our people.”

“They corrupted us with hope,” said Gerrith. “Skaith-Daughter, let me tell you how we live under the rule of the Lords Protector and their Wandsmen.”

Gelmar would have liked to stop her but Kell a Marg silenced him. She listened while Gerrith spoke. When she had finished, Kell a Marg said.

“You and your people wished to get into these ships and fly to another world, away from Skaith? You wished to live on alien soil which never gave you breath?”

“Yes, Skaith-Daughter. It may be difficult for you to understand. We looked upon it as salvation.”

It was the wrong thing to say. She knew it. Stark knew it. Yet it had to be said.

“We found a different salvation,” said Kell a Marg. “We returned to the womb of the Mother, and while your people starved and clawed and died under Old Sun, we lived warm and fed and comfortable, secure in the Mother’s love. Do not expect me to weep for you, nor to care about what the Wandsmen do in their own place. I have a larger concern than that.”

She turned to Gelmar. “The revolt continues?”

Reluctantly, he said, “It does.”

“Well,” said Stark, “and we knew that.”

Kell a Marg continued. “You intend to take these people south. Why?”

“There was a prophecy—”

“Yes,” said Kell a Marg. “The Harsenyi brought us some gossip about that. It concerned this man, did it not?” She looked at Stark.

Gelmar appeared anxious to hurry by this point. “It sparked the revolt. If I prove to them that the

prophecy was false—”

Kell a Marg interrupted him, speaking to Gerrith. “Was this your prophecy, wise woman?”

“My mother’s.”

“And what did it say about this man?”

“That he would come from the stars,” said Gerrith, “to destroy the Lords Protector.”

Kell a Marg laughed, silvery spiteful laughter that touched Gelmar’s cheekbones with a dull flush.

“I can see your concern, Gelmar! Too bad if he destroyed them before you had your turn.”

“Skaith-Daughter!”

“But surely they know?” She turned to the strangers, wicked eyes alight. “Surely you know by now? The Lords Protector are only Wandsmen grown older.”

Stark’s heart gave a great leap. “They’re human?”

“As Gelmar. That’s the great reason they must remain invisible, here in the hidden north, behind their mists and their myths and their demon Northhounds. Invisibility is a condition of godhead. If folk could see them, they would know the truth, and the Lords Protector would cease to be divine. Or immortal. They would be only Wandsmen, clever enough and ambitious enough to put on white robes and spend their declining years at the Citadel, wrapped in all

the rewards that faithful service to their God of Goodness can bring. And they are many.”

Stark laughed. “Human,” he said, and looked at Gelmar.

Gelmar’s expression was filled with veiled venom. “You need not mock, Skaith-Daughter. We serve the needy, which is more than the Children do, who serve only themselves. In the time of the Great Wandering you were asked repeatedly to give sanctuary here in the House of the Mother to folk who were dying for the lack of it, and you turned them all away.”

“And so we have survived,” said Kell a Marg. “Tell me, how many sufferers were taken past the Northhounds into the Citadel, to save their precious lives?”

“The Citadel is sacred—”

“So is the House of the Mother. The Children were here before the Citadel was built—”

“That is only your tradition.”

“—and we intend to be here still when it is gone. Let us return to the subject in hand. There is surely a simple way to end your revolution. Send the ships away.”

Gelmar said between his teeth, “Give me credit for some wisdom, Skaith-Daughter. Sending the ships away would solve nothing, because—”

“Because,” said Stark, overriding him, “he could not make

them stay away. Isn't that so, Gelmar? Isn't that why, as the wise woman said, the ships are still there, in the south?"

Again Kell a Marg held up her hand to silence Gelmar. Her hand was slender, with curving nails. There were no rings on it. The palm was pink and naked. The hand beckoned Stark up the steps. The guards came with him.

"You are truly from another world?"

"Yes, Skaith-Daughter."

She reached out and touched his cheek. Her whole body seemed to recoil from that touch. She shivered and said, "Tell me why Gelmar could not keep the ships away."

"He has not the power. The ships come into Skeg because that is where the first ones landed, that is where the port is, and the foreign enclave, and the market where trading is done. It's easier and more convenient. And the Wandsmen have the appearance of control there. At least they can see what's going on."

She seemed to understand. She nodded, and said sharply to Gelmar, "Let him speak."

"If Skeg is closed the ships will go elsewhere—anywhere else their captains think they might pick up a profit. All but the largest vessels can land where they will. The Wandsmen couldn't keep track of

them, they couldn't have their mob of Farers everywhere."

"They might land even here?"

"Not in the mountains, Skaith-Daughter. But close enough."

"And they would do this for profit. For money."

"You know about these things?"

"We are students of the past," she said. "Historians. We know. It is only one of the things we left behind us, that need for money."

"It's still a powerful need among men, no matter where they come from. I think what Gelmar fears most is that these ships will provide a means of escape for those who wish to leave Skaith and can pay for it."

Stark was watching Gelmar's face. It was closed—closed tight—and he thought that his guess was close to the truth.

"They couldn't evacuate whole populations, as the Galactic Union could, but it would be a start. Gelmar's got his fist in the dam and he's trying to hold it there, hoping that the first little drop never gets through. That's why he's so desperate to put down the uprising at Irnan before it sparks a wider revolution. If the whole south falls into civil war it will be the off-worlders who gain, not the Wandsmen."

Or the Lords Protector, who were only Wandsmen grown older, thought Stark. An unbroken chain

since the first founders, renewing themselves with each generation. In that sense they were eternal and unchanging, just as Baya had said. As eternal and unchanging as the human race.

And as vulnerable.

The room was like the inside of a great pearl, glowing softly white. Kell a Marg sat at the center of it, on the brown knees of Skaith-Mother, between the encircling arms. Her eyes were on Stark, huge, sweating, uncouth in his chains and heavy furs. The man was not born of Skaith-Mother.

He said brutally, "The thing is done, Kell a Marg. Your world has been discovered, it cannot be undiscovered. New things are here and will not go away. The Wandsmen will lose this battle in the end. Why should you help them fight it?"

Kell a Marg turned to her diviners. "Let us ask help from the Mother."

XII

THE Hall of the Diviners lay at the end of a long corridor in a section of the Mother's House given over to their exclusive use. The chambers Stark could see as they passed were austere and dim, occupied by students and acolytes and lesser Diviners. The chambers had been designed for much larger

numbers. Branching corridors led only to silence.

The Hall itself was round, with a vaulted roof from which a single great lamp hung, gleaming silver, intricately pierced. Beneath the lamp was a circular object, waist-high and about three feet across, covered with a finely-worked cloth. The walls, instead of being carved or faced, were covered by tapestries, apparently of a great age and holiness. A woman's face, benign and gigantic, looked out of them, many times repeated, made wraithlike by the fading of time but disturbing nonetheless, with eyes that seemed to follow every movement of the people in the Hall. The great lamp was not lighted. Smaller ones on pedestals burned feebly around the circumference of the room.

No one spoke.

Acolytes entered. Reverently they lighted the silver lamp and removed the worked cloth from the object beneath it, chanting all the while.

"The Eye of the Mother," murmured the Diviners, "sees only truth."

The Eye of the Mother was an enormous crystal set in a massive golden frame. It was clear and lucid as a raindrop, and the light from the lamp went sparkling down into it. The Diviners ranged themselves beside it, heads bowed.

There was no high seat here.

Even Kell a Marg stood. Fenn and Ferdic stood behind her. Gelmar, Stark and Gerrith and the four guards formed a separate group, close inside the door.

Kell a Marg spoke. The hatred in her voice was distributed equally among the outsiders.

"You are all strangers in this House. I trust one no more than another. All of you speak of things I do not understand and cannot judge since they are not within my experience."

"I would not lie to you, Skaith-Daughter." Gelmar asserted.

"When did the Wandsman ever live who would not lie if it suited him?" Her gaze went to Gerrith, then settled on Stark. "Gelmar I know. The woman does not pretend to be other than Skaith-born, nor does she claim to have seen these ships. The man does both. Search his mind for me, Diviners."

The imperious hand gestured to Fenn and Ferdic, who approached Stark. The two guards who flanked him did not move. Ferdic glanced at Gelmar, who snapped something to the guards. They moved aside but followed as Stark was led to stand beside the crystal.

"Look," said the Diviners, "into the Eye of the Mother."

Light from the pierced lamp came and went within those lucid depths, now shallow, now deep,

ever shifting, drawing the gaze down and down. "The crystal is like water," Feric intoned, "let the mind float upon it, let the mind float free . . ."

Stark smiled and shook his head. "I can't be caught that easily."

The Diviners stared at him, startled, angry.

"Do you want my memories, the things that cannot lie?" he asked them. "You may have them, freely."

Every world had its methods. He had seen many techniques of mind-touch and had mastered a few; he knew a little. Telepathy and mind-touch he had encountered often and did not fear. The important thing was never to lose control.

He shared his memories with them, the ones that were impersonal enough for sharing.

They stood with their heads bent, but they were only pretending to look into the crystal now. That was for later. Now they were absorbed in listening to what his mind had to tell them. The truth, for Kell a Marg. Remembering.

Remembering, briefly, the worlds of his youth, and Sol, his parent star, a warm burst of brilliant gold. Stark's mind sifted swiftly through its past.

Remembering space as it had first burst upon him through the simulators in the passenger quar-

ters of a starship outbound for Altair. The stunning magnificence of myriad suns ablaze in the black sea of infinity where they swam forever on their appointed ways. The clusters, cosmic hives of burning bees. Bright nebulae sprawled across the parsecs, piled in clouds of glorious fire. Dark nebulae, where smothered suns glimmered pale as candles. The island universes, unthinkably distant. The deep, wide universe with no rock roof to close it in.

Remembering finally that incredible world-city, Pax, and her incredible moon, symbols of the power of the Union.

The Diviners cried out, between agony and terror. "He has seen! He has seen, Skaith-Daughter! Black gulfs and burning suns, the skies of foreign worlds." They looked at Stark as at a demon.

Kell a Marg nodded, very slightly. "So much we are sure of, then. Now I wish to know why this man came here."

"To search for a friend, Skaith-Daughter. Someone he loved. The Wandsmen took him, the Wandsmen may have killed him. He has a great hatred for the Wandsmen and the Lords Protector."

"I see. And the prophecy. Where is the truth of that?"

"He does not know."

"That prophecy," said Stark,

"and all the other trappings of a fated man were put upon me through no will of my own."

"Yet they were put upon you. Why you alone of all the strangers?"

"I don't know. But I mean you no harm, Skaith-Daughter. Neither does Gerrith. The Wandsmen are a danger to you and the whole planet because they don't understand at all what they're dealing with."

Gelmar said, "He lies. There is no danger to you if you will only let us go!"

Kell a Marg stood for a long time, silent, brooding. The great royal ermine pondered over its prey. At last she said,

"You mistake me, Gelmar. I am not afraid. I am not interested in your Southrons and their revolt. I care nothing for your assurances. This man is part of a new force in the world. He may, or he may not, be important to the future of the Children, and that is all I care about. When I know, then I shall decide who goes and who does not."

She turned to the Diviners. "What does the Eye of the Mother see?"

Now they looked in earnest, deep into the heart of the crystal.

The hall became silent, so still

that Stark could hear every breath that was drawn. A great uneasiness took him. This mad she-thing had complete power here, and that was not a pleasant thought.

Nor did the many faces of Skaith-Mother watching dimly from around the walls comfort him.

The waiting had become intolerable yet no one moved. The Diviners might have been carved from wood. The weight of the mountain pressed down on Stark. He was hot, his manacles heavy. He turned his head but could not see Gerrith, still behind him, somewhere near the door.

One of the Diviners drew in a sudden breath and let it out again. Something was happening to the Eye of the Mother.

Stark thought at first that it was the lamp but that glowed as brightly as ever. It was the crystal out of which the light was draining its lustre dimming, dulling, darkening, going from pellucid clarity to an ugly curdled red. Stark remembered another time, another cave; Gerrith's Water of Vision.

"Blood," said the Diviners to Kell a Marg. "Much blood will be spilled if this man lives. Death will come to the House of the Mother."

"Then," said Kell a Marg quietly, "he must die."

Stark began gathering the chain into his hands, carefully, so that it

might not make even a sound.

Gelmar stepped forward. "And he shall die. I shall see to it myself, Skaith-Daughter."

"I shall see to it," said Kell a Marg. "Fenn! Ferdic!"

Both had jewelled daggers at their belts. They drew them and went light-footed to Gelmar. Kell a Marg said,

"Tell your creatures to kill him, Wandsman."

Desperately, furiously, Gelmar cried, "No, wait—"

For a moment, the beautiful men of the Citadel did not know what to do. They all watched Gelmar and waited.

Stark did not wait.

He spun around, swinging his clenched hands with the iron weight of the manacles and the chain into the body of the guard who was a little behind him to his right. He felt the flesh break. The man's breath went out in a harsh scream. He dropped and Stark hurdled him, charging for the door. There were sudden shouts behind him.

The two guards who were with Gerrith ran forward to intercept him. Gerrith, forgotten for the moment, moved swiftly, snatched one of the small lamps from its pedestal and flung it at the wall.

Flaming oil splashed, spread, caught. The hangings, centuries

dry, exploded into smoke and flame.

One of the guards turned back and struck Gerrith aside, much too late. Stark saw her fall, then lost her. Smoke choked, blinded him. Voices were rising in terror and urgent cries. The many faces of the Mother twisted, blackened, vanished. Two of the Diviners threw themselves upon the crystal, shielding it with their bodies. Others ran to beat futilely at the flames. One of the beautiful men had caught fire. Another, rushing to Gelmar's voice, blundered into Stark and went on without pausing.

Stark called Gerrith's name, there was no answer. Then he stumbled over her. He caught her tunic and dragged her through the doorway into the hall. A great gout of smoke came with them.

He thought for a moment she was dead. But she coughed and then said distinctly, "If you don't go now, this will be the end of it."

The tumult in the Hall grew louder as those inside fought their way toward the door. Students and acolytes came out of their chambers along the corridor. Stark bent over Gerrith.

She struck at him. "Go, damn you! I gave you this chance—will you throw it away?"

Stark hesitated. Alone he might make it. Burdened with Gerrith, he

could not. He touched her briefly, helplessly. "If I live—!" he said. He ran.

He went down the corridor, huge, murderous, his iron shackles swinging. White-furred bodies scattered before him or were swept aside. They were young, these student Diviners, and their teachers were old. All were unused to combat. Stark went through them like a gale.

Behind him he heard fresh shouts and cries. Gelmar and Kell a Marg, at least, were free of the burning Hall. Looking back, he saw two of the guards running after him. Those he could not fight—their swords against his irons.

He plunged into a branching corridor, running hard. A flight of rock-cut steps led him downward into another corridor, one dustier, more dimly lighted. He followed it into a maze of rooms, tunnels and stairways. The rooms were crowded with objects, the passages deserted, lighted by fewer and fewer lamps.

He stopped at last and listened. All he could hear now was the hammering of his own heart. For the moment he had lost them. He took one of the lamps from a wall niche and went on, deeper and deeper into the House of the Mother.

THE CHILDREN must have spent innumerable generations gnawing away here in the bowels of the

Witchfires. They must have once been vastly more numerous than now. Stark remembered Hargoth's comments on the necessity of fresh breeding stock. The Children would have cut themselves off from that—by choice certainly and probably by the alteration of their genes as well. Artificial mutants, they might be unable to cross-breed with humans. Perhaps the Children of the Sea-Our-Mother had undergone the same deprivation. He had no way of judging that.

The silence of centuries hung here, thick as dust. Yet the air was breathable. The Children had seen to it that ventilation was adequate. Their engineering instincts had been sound, probably bred into them. They seemed to have a feeling for stone and how to use it. Their warren of caverns and passages looked capable of enduring as long as the Witchfires.

Outside the pale circle of light from his lamp it was now totally dark. Stark moved on with no idea of where he was going, fighting down a growing panic. The House of the Mother would make a handsome tomb. Probably they would never even find his body.

In spite of that, curiosity as well as necessity compelled him to stop and examine some of the vast proliferation of objects that crammed these forgotten chambers.

He was in a museum.

What had Kell a Marg said? *We are students of the past. Historians.* They must have looted the dead and dying cities of the north, perhaps even before they were abandoned in the Great Wandering the Children had begun their collecting. Art objects, statuary, paintings, jewelry, musical instruments, fabrics, pots and pans, machines, toys, tools, books, constructions of wood and metal and plastic, anything of a size to be handled through the corridors, whole or piecemeal, and stored away in the caverns. The history and technology, art and ideas, of a dead civilization survived here in these buried vaults, the pleasure and mania of a dying race.

Stark thought that whether he himself lived or died, the Children of Skaith-Our-Mother were going to have much trouble as time went by trying to guard their incredible hoard.

He was looking for two things: a weapon and some tools to get the shackles off. There were plenty of weapons, most of them useless, lacking the technology that had made them deadly. Constant temperature and humidity had preserved most things remarkably well, but there was inevitable deterioration. He finally found a knife that did not come apart at the tang, and

thrust that into his belt.

The tools were easier. Mallet and chisel could endure a bit of punishment. But there was no way that he could use them by himself. He stuck the chisel in his belt beside the knife and carried the mallet. It made a serviceable weapon.

There was no one to use it on.

Nor was there water or food. Thirst began to be a problem, with hunger lurking not far behind. He was used to both and knew his potential. It would take him some time to die. He ceased to reproach himself about Gerrith.

He had hoped to find another lamp, but they had all been neglected too long and the oil had dried away. The level of the one he carried went slowly, steadily down. He did not stop longer than he had to. He wanted to keep going as long as he had light.

Suddenly as he passed the mouth of a narrow tunnel a strong draught of air blew it out.

The air was fresh and cold. Stark felt his way into the tunnel and, after a little time, saw light ahead—daylight!

It came through an arched opening at the end of the tunnel. A wild surge of hope sent Stark running toward it.

Once lookouts might have been stationed here, keeping watch over the turbulent north. Or the Chil-

dren might have taken the air, after their work in the museum rooms, to see again the sun and the stars they had left behind. Now there was nothing but a high solitude. The tiny balcony was no more than a niche in the northern face of the Witchfires. Far too high, and that northern face too sheer, for any thought of climbing down it.

Stark saw an immense white landscape, infinitely forbidding. From the feet of the Witchfires a naked plain tilted upward, gashed with the scars of old erosions. The wind blew fiercely across it, raising snow-devils that danced and whirled. Some of them had a peculiar look; these were not snow-devils at all, but pillars of steam rising out of the ground, to be shredded and torn away.

A thermal area. Stark became excited, remembering Hargoth's words about the magic mists that hid the Citadel. He looked up across the plain, to a distant range of mountains much higher and more cruel than the Witchfires. And he saw, to the northeast, low against the mountain's flank, a great boiling of white cloud.

He stood on his high lonely perch, and looked, and swore.

And saw, when he turned his head, a string of tiny figures moving across the vast whiteness of the plain.

Gelmar, going to the Citadel.

A driven man, Stark left the small niche, turned his back on the light, went again into the darkness of the corridors.

Now he prayed for steps to lead him down. He had been trying from the first to work his way back to ground level and he was appalled to find himself still so high. The devil of it was that, feeling his way along in the pitch blackness, he might be passing any number of steps to one side or the other without knowing it.

Hunger and thirst became more insistent. He was forced to stop now and again to sleep—as an animal sleeps, briefly but totally relaxed. Then he would get up and go on again, every nerve and every sense stretched fine to catch the slightest hint of anything that might guide him back to life.

He had slid and stumbled along what seemed like miles of passages, blundered through crowded rooms that tried to swallow him in a tangle of relics, stumbled down infinite numbers of steps, when the faintest of faint sounds touched his ears.

HE THOUGHT at first that it was only weariness or the whisper of his own blood in his veins. Then it went away and he knew its reality by its absence. He had just come

down a flight of steps that was now at his back. He could feel the carvings of a wall on both sides, so the corridor went ahead. That must be where the sound had come from. He began padding along it, stopping frequently to hold his breath and listen.

The sound came again, unmistakable. It was music. Someone in this catacomb of dust and age and darkness was making music. Very peculiar music, atonal, twanging, quavering—the most beautiful sound Stark had ever heard.

Twice more it stopped, as though whoever was playing the instrument had halted in annoyance over a wrong note. Then it would begin again. Stark saw a gleam of light just ahead and approached on silent feet.

There was a carved doorway. Beyond it was a small chamber well lighted by several lamps. One of the Children, an old man with slack skin and prominent bones, bent over an oddly-shaped instrument with numerous strings. Beside him was an antique table strewn with ancient books and parchments. There was also an untouched plate of food and a stone jug. The old man's fingers caressed the strings as though they were stroking a child.

Stark went in.

The old man looked up. Stark

watched the slow advance of shock across his face.

"The Outside has come into the House of the Mother," he said. "It is the end of the world." And he set the instrument carefully aside.

"Not quite," said Stark. "All I want of the House of the Mother is to leave it. Is there a northern gate?"

He waited while the old man stared at him, great luminous eyes in a motheaten face, the fur of his crown rubbed up untidily, his whole being wrenched cruelly away from where it had been. Finally Stark made a threatening movement.

"Is there a northern gate?"

"Yes. But I can't take you there."

"Why not?"

"Because I remember now. I was told—we were all told—an enemy, an outsider, was in the Mother's House and we were to watch. We were to give the alarm if we should see him."

"Old man," said Stark, "you will not give the alarm and you will take me to the northern gate." He placed his powerful hands on the frail instrument.

The old man stood up. In a soft and very desperate voice he said, "I am trying to recreate the music of Tlavia, Queen City of the High North before the Wandering. It is

my life's work. That is the only Tlavian instrument known. The others are lost somewhere in the caverns. If it should be destroyed—"

"Consider yourself the guarantee of its safety," Stark said. "If you do exactly as I tell you—" He took his hands away.

The old man was thinking. His thoughts were almost visible. "Very well," he said. "For the sake of the instrument."

Stark gave him the mallet and chisel. "Here." He laid his wrists on the antique table, which had a fine marble top and seemed sturdy. He regretted the sacrilege, but there was no other choice. "Get these things off me."

The old man was clumsy and the table was considerably damaged, but in the end the manacles came off. Stark rubbed his wrists. Hunger and thirst had become painful. He drank from the stone bottle. It was some sort of dusty-tasting wine; he wished it had been water, but it was better than nothing. The food he thrust into his pockets, to be eaten along the way. The old man waited patiently. His acquiescence had been too quick, too unemotional. Stark wondered what mischief lurked in his murky psyche.

"Let us go," he said, and picked up the instrument.

The old man took a lamp and led the way into the corridor.

"Are there many like you?" Stark asked. "Solitary scholars?"

"Many. Skaith-Mother encourages scholars. She gives us peace and plenty so that we may spend our whole lives at our work. There are not so many of us as there used to be. Once there were a thousand at the study of music alone, thousands more at history, the ancient books, art and laws. And of course, the cataloguing." He sighed. "But it is a good life."

In a short time they were back in the inhabited areas. The old man did not have far to go to find his solitude. Stark took a firm hold on his worn harness with one hand, holding the instrument precariously in the other.

"If anyone sees us, old man," he said, "the music of *Travia* dies."

The old man led him cunningly enough, skirting the edges of the busy levels, the caverns of the lapidaries and goldsmiths, sculptors and stonemasons, the nurseries and schools for the young, the strange deep-buried farms where fungoid crops flourished in perpetual musty dampness. These lower levels, Stark noticed, were noticeably warmer. The old man explained that the thermal area extended beneath part of the Mother's House, giving them many gifts, such as hot water

for the baths.

He also told Stark other things.

THE nomad trail used by the Harsenyi ran between the pass of the Witchfires and the passes of the Bleak Mountains, the big range that Stark had seen. It was at the western side of the Plain of Worldheart; Stark remembered the little black dots of Gelmar's party moving along it. The trail was safe for the Harsenyi as long as they did not wander from it, and they had a permanent village in the foothills, which was as close as any of them ever approached the Citadel. The plain was called Worldheart because the Citadel was built on it, or above it. The old man had never seen the Citadel. He had never seen a Northhound. He thought that they did not range too far from the Citadel unless they were attracted by an intruder. They were said to be telepaths.

"They hunt as a pack," the old man said. "The king-dog's name is Flay. At least, it used to be— Perhaps it is always Flay. Or perhaps the Northhounds live forever."

Like the Lords Protector, Stark thought.

They were in a broad passageway, not very well lighted, obviously not much frequented. Ahead he could see the opening of another

passage to the right.

The old man said innocently, "The northern gate is there, along that corridor. It's seldom used now. The Wandsmen used to come here from the Citadel more often. Now they come to the western gate, when they come at all." He held out his hands for the instrument.

Stark smiled. "Wait here, old man. No noise, not a word." Still carrying the frail instrument, Stark went noiselessly to the branching corridor and looked along it.

There was a great stone slab at the end of it, where it widened out into a guard chamber. And there was a guard there. Half a dozen of the Children, young, armed, patiently bored. Four of them were occupied with some game they were playing on a stone table. The other two watched.

The old man had begun to run. He did not even pause to see what became of his precious instrument. Stark set it down unharmed.

He took the knife from his belt and went down the corridor, moving fast, shoulders forward, all his attention fixed on the slab of rock that stood between him and freedom.

The Children probably had not had to fight in their own defense since the last of the Wandering. They were out of practice, babes comfortable and soft in the womb

of the Mother. He was on top of them before they knew he was there. They sprang up to face him, eyes large with sudden fear, pawing for their weapons. They had not really believed he would come. They had not really believed that if he did come he would try to fight them. Surely their six against his one—

They had not *really* understood what killing is.

Stark slashed one of the players across the throat. He fell across the table, tangling his mates with his thrashings, making dreadful noises. While they still sat in shock, Stark struck down another with his fist, caught up the light wiry body and threw it against the others. He bulled past them, reached the slab of stone, pushed against it. It moved. Two of them came at his back. He turned and fended them off, his knife-blade and heavy furs turning most of their sword cuts; their blades were like their bodies, made more for beauty than for killing. He kept pressing his shoulder against the slab and it kept turning and in a moment they were hitting stone and he was through the opening. He slammed the stone shut on their screaming faces, and began to run.

They would spread the word through Kell a Marg's great House but he did not think that anyone

would come after him—at least not very far.

Not here on the Plain of World-heart, where the Northhounds prowled.

XIII

Old Sun was below the peaks and the northern face of the Witchfires was gray and ugly, a sheer frowning wall at his back. The mountain shadow made a long darkness across the plain. The wind was a knife, a scream, a madness bewailing eternal winter. The flogged snow-devils danced in desperation to appease it.

The region of boiling cloud that hid the Citadel was small and bright against the flank of the Bleak Mountains, catching the last of the westering light.

The Citadel.

He did not know exactly how long he had been wandering in the House of the Mother, and the old man had not been able to tell him in terms he could understand. They had their own view of time in those dark catacombs. But it was long enough for many things to have happened.

There was no point in asking himself questions for which there could be no answers until he reached the Citadel. If he reached it.

Stark fixed the bright patch of

cloud as a mark in his mind's eye, northeast across the plain. He set out toward it.

The shadow of the Witchfires stretched longer and darker ahead of him. He would not outrun it. It would soon be night and the Children were staying safe, as he had thought they would, in their Mother's House. Why venture their lives when the Northhounds would certainly deal with him? The Bleak Mountains burned with a bloody glow that dimmed quickly to ashen dullness. The first stars showed.

Stark lost his view of the Citadel-clouds and took his bearing from a star. The whole landscape faded into that insubstantial bluish-gray that comes over snowlands at twilight, when everything slides away at the edges of sight. The sky turned darker, turned black. The Lamp of the North rose up in it, a huge green lantern, and the plain became white again, a diminished, green-hued white, but one more clearly visible now that the glimmery grayness had gone. The first twitching of the aurora appeared overhead.

Stark moved forward on as steady a course as he could, watching for the plumes of steam marking the thermal areas he had seen from the balcony. The wind tore at him, beating him with hammer blows. It sent the snow-devils

against him and at these times he dropped face down on the ground until the blinding, buffeting whirl of snow-dust passed over him. At other times the wind picked up lower clouds of snow and mixed them cunningly with the thermal plumes so that all was a formless whiteness. Several times he stopped short, sensing a bareness and a tremor beneath his feet, to find a gaping blow-hole lying just ahead, ready to swallow him.

The ravines, those ancient gashes of erosion he had seen, were less dangerous. The bedrock of the plain was hard and had not scoured out too deeply. Wind and snow had worn the edges down. Nevertheless, Stark went carefully when he had to cross one. A fall here in the darkness of Worldheart could mean cheating the Northhounds of their pleasure.

He was happy in a strange sort of way. The end of his journey was in sight and he was free, unencumbered. His body and his skills were his to use to the limit, without regard for others. The battle against cold and wind and cruel terrain was a clean one, uncluttered by ideas, ideals, beliefs or human spite. For the moment he was less Eric John Stark than he was N'Chaka, wild thing in a wild place, perfectly at home.

Perfectly at home, perfectly func-

tional, wary and watchful. His gaze roved constantly, never straining against the night, never looking straight at an object but always past it, never trying to hold it steady, merely sensing its shape and whether or not it moved.

Twice the wind brought him a hint of something other than the cold smells of snow and frozen ground.

The banners of the aurora snapped and quivered. The heads of the snow-devils seemed to touch him. Colors shifted, green, white, rose-fire. Plumes of steam shot high out of the rock, now to his right, now to his left, glimmering, shredding, vanishing.

Sometimes he thought that dim white shapes stalked him between snow and steam. For a long while he could not be sure. There came a time when there was no longer any doubt.

HE HAD come delicately treading his way out of a cloud of mingled steam and snow when he looked up along the tilt of the plain and saw a great white beast-shape, motionless, watching.

Stark stopped. The thing continued to gaze at him. A cold beast thought touched his mind:

I am Flay.

He was big. The ridge of his spine would have reached Stark's

shoulder. His withers were high and powerful. The thick neck drooped with the weight of the massive head. Stark saw the eyes, large, unnaturally brilliant; the broad heavy muzzle, the fangs, sharp as knives.

Flay stretched out a foreleg like a tree-trunk, unsheathed tiger-claws. He tore five furrows in the frozen ground, and smiled a beast-smile, lolling a red tongue.

I am Flay.

The eyes were bright, bright. Hell-hound eyes.

Suddenly panic overcame Stark, loosened his muscles, weakened his joints, dropped him helpless on the ground, cold nausea in his belly and a silent scream in his brain.

I am Flay.

This is how they kill, Stark thought, with the fleeting remnants of his sanity. Fear, a bolt of fear as deadly as any missile. The size, the fangs, the claws are only camouflage. They do it with their minds.

He could not draw his knife.

Flay sauntered toward him as other shapes became visible on the rising plain. The pack; six, ten, a dozen, he couldn't count them, bounding, leaping, running.

Fear.

Fear was a sickness.

Fear was a dark wave rolling over him, taking sight and hearing, crushing mind and will.

He would never reach the Citadel, never see Gerrith. Flay would give him to the pack and they would play with him until he died.

I am Flay, said the cold beast mind while the red jaws laughed. Huge paws padded silently in the blowing snow.

Far down beneath the dark mass of fear that destroyed all human courage, another mind spoke. Cold beast mind, not thinking or reasoning, a mind alive and desperate to live, a mind feeling self as bone and muscle, cold and pain, a hunger to be fed, a fear to be endured. Fear is life, fear is survival. The only end of fear is death.

The beast mind said, *I am N'Chaka.*

The blood beats, hot with living, hot with hate. Hate is a fire in the blood, a taste in the mouth of bitter salt.

I am N'Chaka.

I do not die.

I kill.

Flay paused, one tentative fore-foot lifted. He swung his head from side to side, puzzled.

The human thing ought now to be inert and helpless. Instead it spoke to him, it groped and tottered and rose from the ground, rose to its hands and knees and faced him.

I am N'Chaka.

The pack halted their playful

rush. They formed a semi-circle behind Flay, growling.

They sent fear, deadly killing fear.

Cold beast mind let the fear slide over it. Cold beast eyes saw Flay, coarse-furred Flay looming bit in the night-gleaming.

I have seen the great rock lizard open his jaws to take me, and he has not taken me. Why should I fear you?

The pack growled, looking side-long. *Flay, Flay! This is not a human!*

The N'Chaka thing got to its hind legs, crouching. It circled, making beast sounds. It sprang at Flay.

Flay struck it sprawling with one sweep of his paw.

The thing rolled over twice. Blood came out of rents in its fur. It bounded up and drew the knife from its belt. It came again at Flay.

The pack could not understand. Human victims did not fight. They did not challenge the king-dog, only a member of the pack did that. This thing was not a member of the pack, but neither was it human. They did not know what it was.

HEY sat down to watch, while

N'Chaka fought the king-dog for his life.

They would not send more fear. This was up to Flay.

Flay had realized, not believing it, that fear was useless. He tried once more, but the N'Chaka thing came at him without pause, slashing at him, dodging, circling, darting in and out, wary now of the claws. It was fighting, there was nothing left in its mind but fight—fight and kill.

It enjoyed the fighting. It meant to kill.

Now Flay knew fear.

In all his long life he had never failed to take his prey cleanly. No single victim had ever fought back.

Now this N'Chaka thing defied him. And the pack was watching and he had no weapons but his claws and teeth.

And those he was not used to using, except in play. None of the young dogs had yet dared to challenge him.

Fear! he said to the pack. *Send fear!*

They only watched, moving restlessly, the wind tearing at their fur.

In a fury Flay struck at the N'Chaka thing with his terrible claws.

The thing was ready this time. It leaped back and slashed with the knife. It slashed so that Flay howled and went on three legs.

The pack smelled his blood and whined.

A measure of humanity was creeping back into Stark's mind

now that he had mastered the fear. Along with it came a savage sense of triumph.

The Northhounds were not invincible.

Perhaps the Citadel would not be invincible either.

He knew now that he was going to reach it.

He knew that he was going to kill Flay.

Flay knew it too.

The wounded paw had slowed him. But he was still formidable. He bared his fangs and rushed. His jaws would crush a man's thigh-bone like a dry stick. But they snapped on empty air. Stark circled him, making him turn against that bad foot, and twice he darted in and slashed at the face. His eyes held Flay's eyes, the hell-hound eyes that were bred for terror, and he thought, *How close the knife comes, Flay! How it flashes! Soon . . .*

The heavy head dropped lower. The terrible eyes wanted to look away. The paw bled and the pack whined, red tongues hanging.

Stark fainted, ceased to hold Flay's eyes, the big head turned aside. Stark flung himself onto Flay's high bony back.

He was only there for a second or two before he was thrown off, but that was long enough for the knife to go in. Flay whirled, snapping at

the hilt standing out behind his shoulder, then staggered and went down as blood gushed out of his mouth.

Stark pulled the knife out, then let the pack have the body. He stood apart, waiting. Their shallow minds had already told him what they would do.

He waited until they were finished.

They gathered then, keeping their eyes carefully averted lest they should seem to challenge him. The largest of the young dogs came belly down and licked Stark's hand.

You will follow me?

You killed Flay. We follow.

But I am human.

Not human. You are N'Chaka.

You guard the Citadel.

Against humans.

And how many lost and hungry wayfarers have those jaws snapped up, Stark wondered. The Lords Protector defended their privacy too well. *You defend against humans, but not against N'Chaka?*

We could not kill N'Chaka.

Will you kill Wandsmen?

No.

They had neither love nor loyalty, but their breeding held them true. Fair enough.

The other men—those who serve the Wandsmen?

They are nothing to us.

Good.

He considered their well-fleshed bodies. There were certainly not enough human victims to keep the fat, and there was little game on the Plain of Worldheart where they ranged. Someone must feed them.

Where do you kennel?

At the Citadel.

Come then.

With the pack at his heels Stark set off toward the mountains.

THE boiling clouds turned copper with the rising of Old Sun. The Northhounds trotted unconcerned through a wilderness of humped rock and gaping blow-holes. Stark went with them while the ground boomed and shook and the steam spurted.

He had not planned it this way. He had not thought that a direct attack on the Citadel would be possible. But this unexpected and highly uncertain weapon had been put into his hand and he had decided to use it.

Now.

As swiftly and brutally as possible.

The thermal area seemed to go on forever, and then suddenly they had passed through it and the mountains were there, and the Citadel.

Dark and strong and solid, clinging to the mountain flank, the compact shape of its walls and towers

looking almost like an outcrop of the native rock. The fortress and fountainhead from which a handful of men ruled over a planet.

He could understand why it had been built here, hidden behind its perpetual curtain. In the days of the Wandering, when everything was chaos, this place would have been isolated from the main streams of migration and therefore relatively safe. Tall crags protected the Citadel at back and side, the thermal pits guarded its front. With all that, and the Northhounds, the Lords Protector need not have worried overmuch about bands of plunderers coming south over the passes. From the size of the Citadel, they had garrisoned fewer than a hundred men, and they would not have needed more.

How many men would be there now after all these centuries of peace? He did not know. He looked at the Northhounds, hoped that they would be adequate. Otherwise any number would be too many against one man with a knife.

There were sentries on the walls, bright-eyed men with blank faces. They saw Stark at the edge of the cloud with the pack behind him. Even over the roaring of the vent-holes Stark could hear their sudden clamor.

Hurry! he told the Northhounds.

No hurry, said the young dog,

whose name was Gerd.

The Northhounds trotted on toward the base of the Citadel, courses of stone laid in upon the rock.

They will kill you, Stark told them, and ran, dodging this way and that.

Arrows began to fly from the walls. In the roiling copper shadow they flew. None hit Stark, though he felt the wind of one. Some stuck in the ground. Two hit Northhounds.

I said they would kill you.

He was under the base of the Citadel now, where the arrows could not reach him.

Why, N'Chaka?—a cry of puzzled anguish. The Northhounds began to run.

They believe you have come to attack them.

We have always been faithful.

A third hound rolled over screaming, an arrow through his flanks.

They doubt you now.

And small wonder. For the first time since the first whelp of them was born, they had let in an intruder. They had *brought* in an intruder.

The Northhounds bayed.

There was a hole in the rock. They ran into it. The cave was large and dry, sheltered from the wind. It smelled of kennel and there were troughs where the hounds were fed.

At the back was a door of thick iron bars with heavy bolts on the inner side.

Stark went to the door. He could sense the bewilderment and rage in their beast minds.

They tried to kill you. Why did you not send fear to them?

Gerd growled and whimpered. He was one of the first two hit. The arrow had gashed his rump painfully. *We never sent fear to those. We will now.*

Stark reached through to the bolts and began to draw them.

Are there other humans in the Citadel?

Gerd answered irritably, *With Wandsmen.*

If they were with the Wandsmen, or the Lords Protector, it was no concern of Gerd's.

But there are humans? You can touch their minds?

Human. One mind. Touch.

One mind. One human.

Gerrith?

Halk?

Ashton?

Stark opened the door. *Come and kill for N'Chaka.*

They came.

There was a hall with storerooms on either side, and then a rough stair that went up into darkness. Stark climbed as fast as he dared, much faster than was wise, knife in hand. The men of the Citadel were

surprised, shocked, off guard and he wanted to use that advantage. At the top was a massive iron door to be shut if anyone managed to pass through the Northhound kennel, and a windlass arrangement to drop a section of the stair. Beyond was a chamber cluttered with the debris of long occupancy. A barred slit let in the amber daylight, only a little better than no light at all.

A BROADER stair led up from this room into a long, low hall lighted at intervals by lamps. There were no windows. Row upon row of wooden racks crammed the space, leaning and sagging under the weight of endless rolls of parchment.

The records, Stark guessed, of generations of Wandsmen who had come to the Citadel to report and confer concerning their work in the world.

They looked as though they would burn well. So did the enormous timbers that sustained the roof.

There was a stair on the opposite side of the hall. He was halfway to it when a body of men came plunging down. They might have been on their way to close that iron door.

They stopped dead when they saw the Northhounds. The hounds never came inside the Citadel. They could not conceive of such a thing

happening—yet it had happened.

Their faces and their bright eyes remained expressionless even after the Northhounds had sent fear.

Kill, said Stark, and the pack killed. They were very angry, very swift. When they had finished he picked up a sword, leaving belt and scabbard untouched. The sword would wipe clean.

He started up the stair.

Gerd spoke in his mind.
N'Chaka. Wandsmen—

He saw *white* in his mind and knew that Gerd meant the Lords Protector. The hounds did not distinguish between Wandsmen.

Wandsmen say kill you.

He had expected this. The hounds were loyal to the Wandsmen. How strong was his own hold over them? If their hold were stronger he would finish here as the blank-faced men had finished.

He turned to Gerd, looking straight into the hell-hound eyes.

You cannot kill N'Chaka.

Gerd stared at him steadily. The bristled lips pulled back to show the rows of fangs. They were still bloody. The pack whined and whimpered, clawing the stones.

Whom do you follow? Stark asked.

We follow the strongest. But Flay obeyed Wandsmen—

I am not Flay. I am N'Chaka. Shall I kill you as I killed Flay?

He would have done it. The sword point was aimed straight for Gerd's throat. Stark was almost as hungry for blood as they were and Gerd knew it. The fiery gaze slid aside. The head flung down. The pack became quiet.

Send fear, Stark said. Drive away all but the Wandsmen and the human. Drive away the servants who kill you. Then we will talk to the Wandsmen.

Not kill?

Not the Wandsmen, not the human. Talk.

But Stark's hand gripped the sword.

The Northhounds obeyed him. He felt the air vibrate with their sending.

He led them up the stair.

There were some men at the top. Terror was on them, an agony in the gut. The Northhounds tore them almost leisurely. Gerd picked up the leader and carried him in his jaws like a kitten.

No one else stood against them. All the others had had strength enough to run.

Stark came at length into another hall, higher than the one that held the records and not so long, with windows open onto the eternal mist. It was sparsely furnished, ascetic, a place for meditation. Kell a Marg, spiteful daughter of Skaith, had been wrong. There was no hint

here of secret sin and luxury, either in the hall or in the faces of the seven white-robed men who stood there in attitudes of arrested motion, overwhelmed by the swiftness with which this thing had happened.

There was an eighth man, one not wearing a white robe.

Simon Ashton.

Gerd dropped what he was carrying. Stark put his left hand on the hound's great head and said, "Let the Earthman come to me."

Ashton came and stood at Stark's right hand. He was thinner than Stark remembered and he showed the strain of long captivity. Otherwise he seemed unhurt.

Stark said to the Lords Protector, "Where is Gerrith?"

The foremost of them answered. Like the others, he was an old man. Not aged or infirm, but old in work and dedication as well as years. His thin hard jaw and fierce eyes reflected an uncompromising and inflexible toughness.

"We questioned her and the wounded man, then sent them south with Gelmar. It was not believed that you could escape the Children in the House of the Mother."

He looked at the Northhounds. "This, too, would not have been believed."

"Nevertheless," said Stark, "I

am here. Believe it."

And now that he was here, he wondered what he was going to do with them. They were old men. Unyielding old men, devoted to their principles, ruling with the iron rod of righteousness, cruel only to be kind. He hated them. If they had killed Ashton he could have killed them without compunction. But Ashton was alive and safe and he could not slaughter them in cold blood.

Another factor: the Northhounds. They felt his thoughts and growled. Gerd leaned his massive shoulder against Stark's side to hold him.

The man in white smiled briefly. "That instinct, at least, is too strong for you. They will not let you kill us."

"Go then," said Stark. "Take your servants and go. Let the people of Skaith see the Lords Protector for what they are, not gods or immortals but only seven old men cast adrift in the world. I will pull down this Citadel."

"You may destroy it. You cannot destroy what it stands for. It will remain a symbol. You cannot destroy us, for the work we do is greater than our physical bodies. The prophecy is false, man from the stars. You will not prevail. We shall continue to serve our people."

He paused. "My name is Ferdias. Remember it."

Stark nodded. "I'll remember. And prophecy or not, Ferdias, you have served too long."

"And what do you serve? The littleness of one man. For one man you set our world in turmoil." He looked at Ashton.

"He, too, is only a symbol," said Stark softly. "The symbol of reality. That is what you're fighting, not one man, or two. Go and fight it, Ferdias. Wait for the stars to crash in on you. Because they will."

They turned and left him. He stared after their proud and stubborn backs, and the Northhounds held him, whimpering.

FREE at last to speak, Ashton said, shaking his head, "As Ferdias said, it does seem a lot for one man. But," he added, "by the stars I'm glad you're here!"

"Well," said Stark, "before we're done, you may wish I'd left you with the Lords Protector. What made them decide against killing you?"

"I convinced them I'd be more valuable to them alive. They're very worried men, Eric. They know they're threatened by something big but they don't know how big, they don't really understand. The whole concept of spaceflight and the Galactic Union is too new and strange. Shattering. They don't know how to deal with it and they

thought I might be of some help to them since I'm part of it. I pointed out that they could always kill me later on."

He looked at the Northhounds and shivered. "I won't ask you how you did that. I'm afraid I know."

"Of all men you ought to," said Stark, and smiled. Then he asked, "How long ago did Gelmar leave, with Gerrith?"

"Yesterday."

"They won't be far ahead of us, then. Not with Halk slowing them down. Simon, I know that the Ministry cannot condone the vandalism I am about to commit, but you won't try to stop me, will you?"

Again Ashton looked at the pack. "Not likely. Your friends might be annoyed."

Stark set about destroying the Citadel as well as he could, and it was well enough. The furnishings, the hall of records, the great timber beams burned hotly. Most of the outer walls would be left, but the interior would be gutted—and in any case the sacred isolation of the Citadel was ended for all time, and the superstitious awe that went with it.

He had hoped that the destruction of the Lords Protector might be as complete, though he was glad, when he considered it, that he had not been able to kill them. They would have remained forever

a potent and holy legend. The truth, when the people saw it, would kill them more certainly than any sword.

The Northhounds did not attempt to interfere with his burning of the Citadel. Their guardianship seemed to have been associated only with the pleasurable aspects of keeping intruders away from it.

Stark stood with Ashton on the road outside the Citadel, watching the flames lick at the window-places, and he said,

"So far, so good. There is still Gerrith, and a long walk south. Then we'll see what we can do about Irnan and the freedom of the stars, not to speak of getting ourselves safely away from Skaith."

"It's a large order," said Ashton.

"We have allies." Stark turned to the Northhounds, to Gerd. *What will you do now that there is nothing left for you to guard?*

We will follow the strongest, said Gerd, and licked his hand.

And so you will, thought Stark, until I fall sick or wounded, and then you will do to me as you did to Flay. Or try to.

He bore them no ill-will for that. It was their nature. He laid his hand on Gerd's head.

Come, then.

With Ashton at his side, Stark set his face southward to the passes of the Bleak Mountains. •



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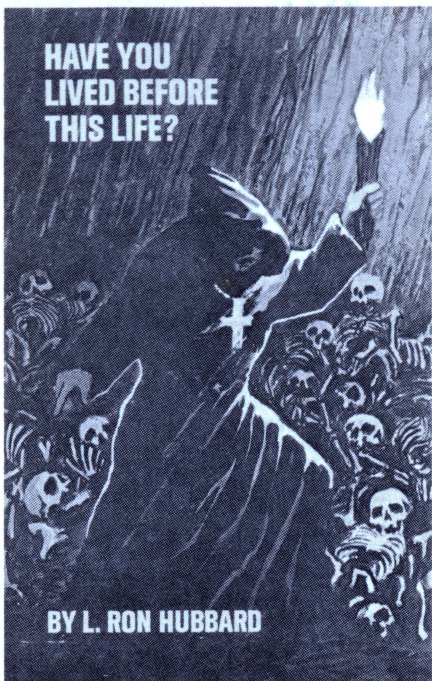
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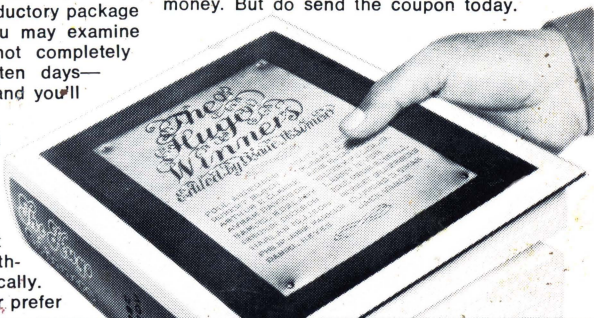
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