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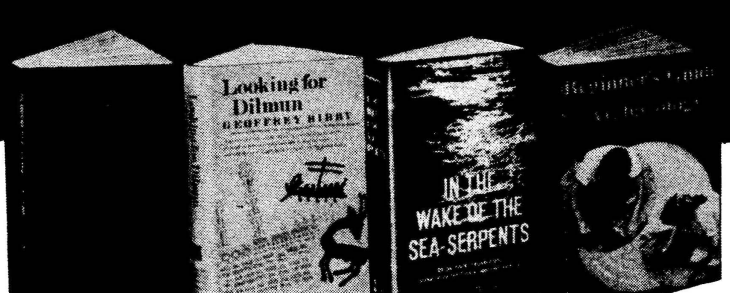

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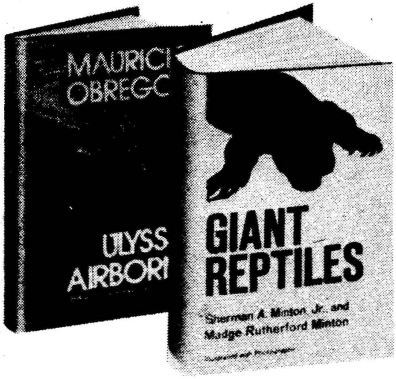

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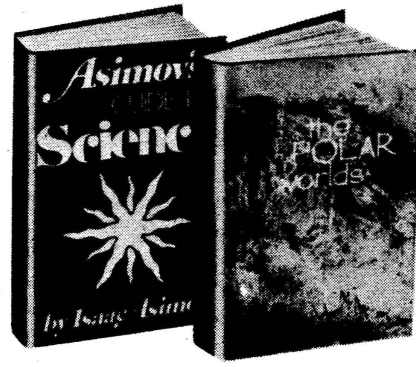

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EDITORIAL

GREETINGS, Gentle Readers. I am the bearer of somber tidings. This is the last issue of *Worlds of IF* as a discrete entity—at least for the time being. As of January 1975, *Galaxy* and *Worlds of IF* will be combined into a single monthly magazine.

The reason? A simple one: we ran out of paper—the kind of paper we can afford to buy, that is. We still have access to quantities sufficient for one magazine, but not two. (If we tried to put out a book with the next-higher grade we would go broke in nothing flat.) Subscribers: those of you with subs to both *Galaxy* and *Worlds of IF* will have them extended the appropriate number of issues.

But be of good cheer. The rowdy, fun-loving spirit I have striven to infuse into this magazine will not be lost, but will sound in clear if muted tones in a fusion of the best of two worlds—the best of *Galaxy*, which has long stood for intellectual and esthetic preeminence, and the best of this magazine. And surely I don't have to tell you what *IF* is all about!

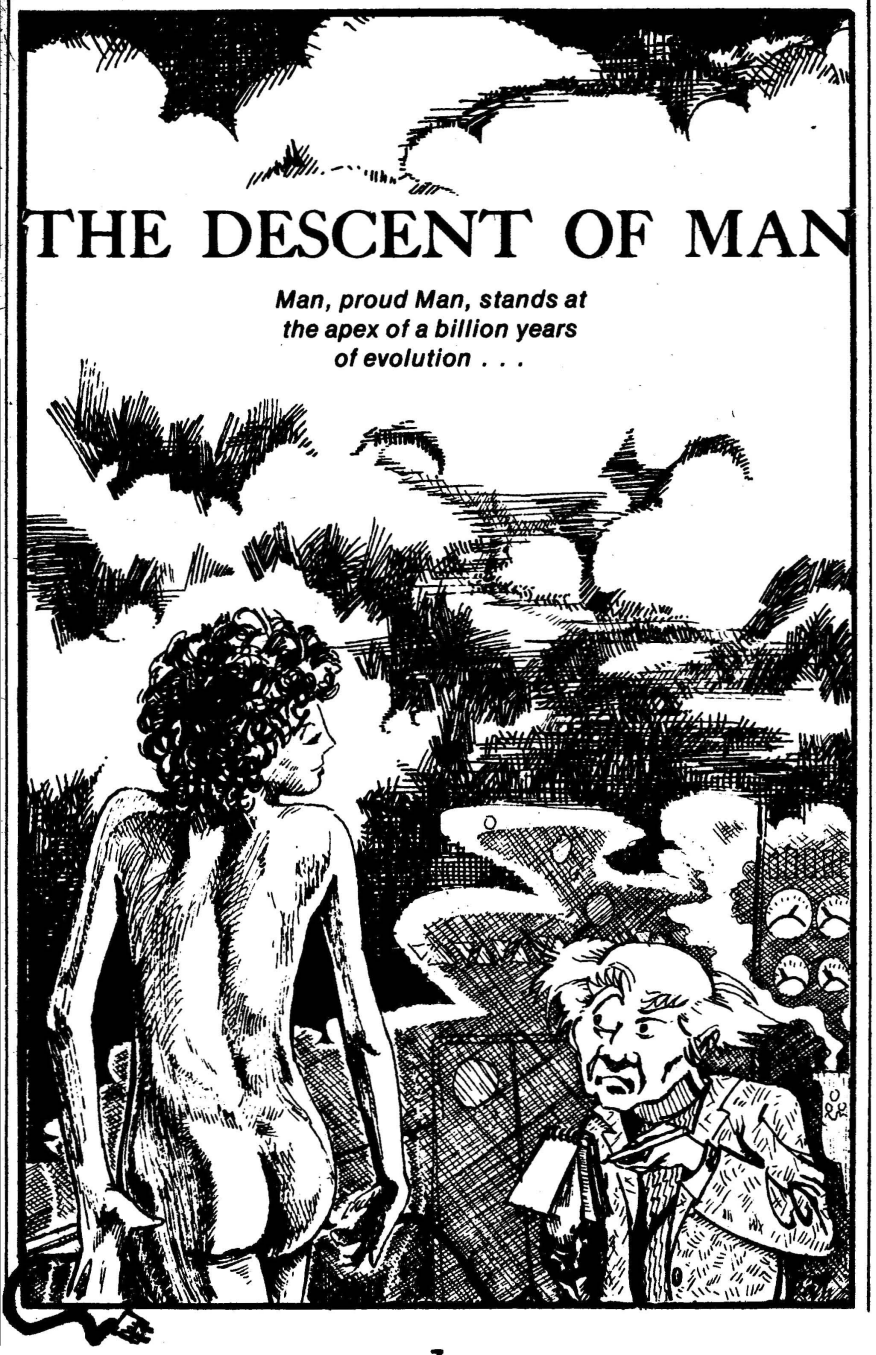
Here are a few of the contributions to that new magazine that otherwise would have appeared in *Worlds of IF*. *The Alien Viewpoint* of Dick Geis will continue to delight and enrage you on a bimonthly basis. *The Editor's Page* will also maintain a bimonthly presence, as will *SF Calendar*. *Sign of the Unicorn*, a new *Amber* novel by Roger Zelazny (this year's WORLDCON Guest of Honor) will first see print in the new *Galaxy/IF*. A new Mack Reynolds story. A new Chandler. A "Berserker." And, (as the saying goes) much, much more!

So. Life goes on, even if magazines don't always. See you this January in the (new) *Galaxy/(IF)*—the best science-fiction magazine in the world!

—BAEN

THE DESCENT OF MAN

Man, proud Man, stands at the apex of a billion years of evolution . . .



J. A. LAWRENCE

WHAT Mellett liked about Knabe was that he was an archetype. The bulging forehead, vague blue eyes, the omnium gatherum of garments, all proclaimed his Genius; which, moreover, he undoubtedly had. His inventions had provided him with sufficient funds to establish a private laboratory in his town house, complete with autoclaves, refrigerator-freezers, electron microscopes, a workshop, a qualified assistant—and even a power plant installed when the professor had become annoyed with the interruptions in Springfield's electric power. Graduates of Springfield High rarely achieved such status, and Mellett was proud to call him friend.

Regrettably, Knabe had neglected to provide himself with the requisite Beautiful Daughter. However, his assistant Miss Lockwood was a splendid substitute, if a little intimidating.

Mellett knocked twice and pushed open the door leading to the basement laboratory.

"Hello, Eschsholzia," he said shyly. The beautiful redhead in the immaculate white coat glanced up from her microscope, smiled, and waved her hand toward the inner door. Mellett sighed. Sometimes he thought he might actually work up the courage to ask her to dinner, if she only indicated that she could spare a minute to be invited. Today was standard issue.

"Knobby here?" he asked, resigned.

"Back room," she said, concentrating, one hand taking notes while the other adjusted the instrument. "See you later." Aha! Things were looking up. With a light step he made his way around the desks piled high with dusty papers, crockery, astrolabes, armillary spheres, electro-encephalographs and other scientific detritus, to the workshop door.

"Did you bring the transtemporal potentiometers I asked for?" Mellett looked for the scientist, and then spied him on the floor under a heap of wiring that filled one end of the room.

"They haven't invented them yet, Knobby," he said mildly. "Sorry."

"Hell and damnation. Oh, well, I suppose I can . . . yes. This one and . . . there—wait a minute—could do the job . . . blast! Why do they make screwdrivers so badly? This one's gone loose in the

haft . . . There!" He scrambled out from behind the Invention and drooped toward Mellett. Today his socks were odder than usual; one of his ankles was bare.

"Aren't you going to tell me what it is?" said Mellett. The last one had been the (M)agnetro-(A)drenalo-(K)inem-(E)lectronic Ultra-(P)acificator, which, when broadcast over short-wave radio, had precipitated a world-wide peace treaty and the voluntary propulsion of all weaponry into the sun. The only ill effect was a slight increase in the pulse rate due to interference with the sunspot pattern, which had lasted about thirty seconds. His previous achievement had been the Medullary Acceptor Neo-Nutrient Alimentory, which created a delicious and completely nourishing pastry out of waste plastic. Mellett could hardly wait.

"All ready to go. At last. It's taken much longer than I anticipated—I must have been working on it for over six months now. Tch-ch." The great scientist frowned.

"I know. I've been counting the minutes."

"Tut, Robert, never do that. Not unless you were using the (C)hrono-(L)ymphometric (O)steo-(C)ircadian-(K)inesimometer—did I give you one?" He scratched the shining, bald expanse of his head.

"Yes, Knobby." Ruefully, Mellett recollected the massive object in its tasteful teak casing that occupied most of his bedroom. It kept subjective time and had no alarm; he rested his Baby Ben and hairbrushes on it.

"Now, that's time-keeping," said Knabe, with simple pride. "Where is that girl? She's never here when I want her—GIRL!"

"She seems to be working. Can I substitute?"

"No, no, now we celebrate. Miss Thing—Jones!"

Mellett said reproachfully, "Really, Knobby! Her name's Lockwood. Eschsholzia Lockwood. You ought to know it after three years."

"What d'you think I pay the girl for?" said the scientist irritably. "It's her job to keep track of details . . . ah."

"Yes, Dr. Knabe?" The burnished copper hair, the alabaster face peered through the doorway.

"Drinks. It's done."

"It's done?" She stood still, the beautiful green eyes widening. "Does it—does it work?"

"Of course it will work. All my inventions work. Get us something to drink, there's a good girl."

Mellett tried not to be offended, on her behalf, at his manner. Here was a girl, as intelligent as she was gorgeous, a Ph.D. working as secretary, receptionist, assistant and bottle-washer. He had seen the flare of resentment, quickly controlled, in the emerald eyes when Knabe was particularly peremptory. That she understood what the

scientist was doing, and kept the lab supplied with what he would be needing before he needed it, he took for granted. Sometimes Mellett could almost dimly perceive what Women's Lib was about . . . but then, Knabe was not a Man; he was a Genius.

She returned with a tray holding three beakers of foaming liquid.

"Hot buttered ethanol," she said, handing it around. It wasn't bad.

When they had toasted the success of the pile of wires, Mellett said, "Well, aren't you going to tell me about it? Apparently Miss Lockwood already knows."

"I haven't told anyone yet." Knabe gave a deep sigh and inclined his head. "You know that the human brain is unfinished. Millions of neural pathways await the final evolution of Man . . . unlimited potential—and what the brain's capacity actually is we are about to discover. This—" he waved his bony hand at the jumble—"is the prototype of the Maxi-Encephalo Synaptic Stimulator; it will open the doors of the mind of man to his ultimate destiny!"

Mellett was impressed. Eschsholzia broke the silence.

"You're sure, Dr. Knabe?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Then I want to volunteer."

"You?"

"Me. Why not?"

Why not indeed, thought Mellett admiringly. What a remarkable woman! What strength of character!

Knabe mused. "Well, I'd thought of . . . using a brain that had reached the possible optimum . . . I hadn't really . . . no offence, but . . ."

Mellett exploded. "What's the matter with you, Knobby? What more do you want? Miss Lockwood has everything—beauty, brains, good sense, balance—you couldn't do better!"

"Why, thank you," said Eschsholzia, blushing.

"All right, all right. But—well, let's see. Can we make it Thursday?"

His secretary confirmed the appointment.

ON THE way out, Mellett said, "May I take you to dinner?"

"I'd be delighted," said the girl.

Over the meal, he was bold. "I've been thinking it over. I don't think you ought to go through with this."

"Why not?" she said, surprised.

"It could be dangerous, fooling with your brain."

She laughed. "Nonsense. He was going to try it himself, and he wouldn't risk his own head. No, I'm tired of being a second choice—ever since I discovered that a woman has to try twice as hard to get half as far, I've been waiting for a chance like this."

"But—well, I don't like it," said Mellett stubbornly.

She sniffed. "I suppose now I get the line about how you don't want to change me."

"Well, yes. You're almost too much woman now—I mean, what chance would I have if . . ."

"You could have the treatment too."

"I—" he stopped. Did he . . . no. He just didn't have her guts.

"You see?" she said. "Some of us have nothing to lose . . . Besides, what could you offer me that would make up for the opportunity to develop everything in my head? . . . Oh, don't take it to heart. No mere sexual relationship could compete."

She sat starry-eyed over the coffee. "What will it be like, I wonder? The functions of the brain so manifold, the future evolution of man so mysterious . . ."

WHEN the electrodes were removed from her still, partly-shaven head, Mellett dropped the copper curl he had been stroking in panic.

"You've killed her. Oh, God, get a doctor . . ."

"Be quiet. She's all right. I wonder if those potentiometers . . . No. She's coming to."

They placed her on the decrepit old couch to recover. She stirred. Mellett watched anxiously for any flicker of motion in her pale face, while Knabe puffed serenely on his pipe.

"She's moving," said Mellett.

"Yes. Hmmm."

"Oh, Eschsholzia, how do you feel?" Mellett dropped to his knees on a pile of cable beside the couch.

"All right . . . My head. Feels funny. Leave me . . . alone a minute . . . UGH!" She retched.

"What is it? She's ill—Knobby, get the doctor!"

She said faintly, "What is that stink?" The men sniffed; tobacco, ether, disinfectant, ozone; nothing unusual. She gasped, "Air! Open . . . window!"

Knabe went to her, while Mellett wrestled with the cellar window, finally breaking the catch in his efforts to open it. Fresh air and soot poured in; she started to take a deep breath and began coughing.

"Let's get her upstairs. It *is* stuffy down here." Mellett lifted her, still gasping, and carried her up to the front parlor where he laid her gently on the sofa. He flung open the casement.

"That better?"

Her breathing was a little easier. She said, "Oh, that horrible smell. Can't you do something?"

To Mellett the air seemed fresh and clean. There wasn't even much traffic outside the house.

"Hmm. Unanticipated effect, but predictable," said Knabe interestedly. Eschsholzia seemed quieter, although her enchanting nose remained wrinkled with disgust. But she had almost stopped coughing.

"Would you like anything? A drink?"

"Some water, please." The water, eagerly swallowed, caused a choking fit. "It tastes like the smell. Funny; I suppose the process affected the olfactory nerves?"

"Yes, certainly," said Knabe. "All sort of connections will have been affected. You'll stay here for a few days so we can keep complete notes . . ."

"Oh, no," she said faintly. "I couldn't."

Mellett said, "It's all right. Knobby's perfectly safe."

She threw him a look of sheer impatience. "Oh, for heaven's sake. It's the smell, and the water. I want to go to my weekend place, out of town. I have a cottage my brother left me . . . *must* you smoke?" Knabe put down the pipe he had just taken from under the chair cushion.

"Then, I will go with you," he said. "Do you think you could get up yet?"

She sat up, slowly. "Yes . . . it's okay. My head feels woolly and sore . . . but I must get away from this odor."

Mellett's car didn't agree with her, either.

THE next day, when Mellett called with a bottle of wine to see how she was, he found Knabe well into his second notebook, sitting at the kitchen table.

"Fascinating, fascinating," he said, waving the pencil about.

"Had you noticed that? Is she all right?"

"Oh, yes. Remarkably healthy specimen. The early effects are wearing off. I expect great things."

"Where is she?"

"Up there." Knabe gestured vaguely toward the ceiling. Assuming that he meant the upstairs bedroom, Mellett started to the staircase.

"Hi, Bob!" He looked around.

"Up here." She was hanging by her knees on the thick wooden curtain rail.

"What are you doing up there?" said Mellett, swallowing nervously. She wore a green bikini.

"I was having a nap, of course." She dropped, landing gracefully on all fours.

"A nap?" he said blankly. "On the curtain rod?"

"Mmm. Much more comfortable."

"Er—how's the smell problem?"

"Pretty awful—but I've learned how to turn it off with breathing a certain way. Otherwise I feel quite pleasant. I see and hear much better." She padded with bare feet toward the kitchen. "I'll get you something nice to drink. I've just discovered it."

Mellett watched the retreat of the green bikini in rapt admiration. Suddenly, she jumped in the air and came down facing the opposite way, her back to the corner, semi-crouched.

"What's the matter?" he said, startled.

Her hands dropped from the defensive position and she stood up. "Oh, it was just a plane passing over. Sorry. Be right back."

Knabe said as he wandered in, "Don't expect alcohol. She doesn't approve of it."

It was, in the event, milk, which seemed to be mostly cream.

"Isn't it lovely?" she said. "Oh, Knobby, that caudal reflex again."

"C-caudal reflex?" Mellett hoped he didn't understand.

"I keep wanting to move my tail, especially when I like something as much as this drink," she said.

"Look, just what have you done to her?" demanded Mellett. "What has her . . . er . . . tail got to do with the expansion of the brain?"

"It's still too early to tell," said Knabe. "She's very healthy. I am keeping complete notes."

"Besides, I'm having fun. I never felt so good," said Eschsholzia. She sat, a fluid motion, her legs curling under her.

Mellett discovered that the combination of milk, unexpected behavior and exposed Eschsholzia was making him nervous. She seemed as intelligent as ever, and somehow there was a great deal more of her physical presence. He withdrew, promising to call again.

THE next time he brought roses. "She's out in the garden," said Knabe, who answered the door. A

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preoccupied frown had taken up residence between his brows. "I don't mind admitting, Bob, I don't quite understand it."

Fortunately, the garden was secluded. Eschsholzia was there, all of her. The bikini was nowhere to be seen. Eschsholzia was—"Wow!" said Mellett reverently.

"Yes, yes," said Knabe. "But—well, go and talk to her."

She was rolling in the grass on her back. Mellett swallowed and started for the back door. "I don't think I can. Talk. I'm not used to . . . couldn't she put something on?"

"She won't. She has refused to wear clothing for two days. She says it irritates her. It's a good thing it's summer."

In a futile attempt to dim his vision, Mellett donned his sun glasses. At least the look in his eyes wouldn't embarrass him. She was a natural redhead.

"Hello!" she called, sitting up. She shook cut grass off her shoulder with a spectacular wriggle. Mellett's sun glasses fell off.

"You're turning very red," she said. "Too much sun already? Damn! I've got a thorn." She brought her toe to her mouth and pulled at it with teeth and fingers. Mellett fumbled with the glasses—the earpieces seemed to bend the wrong way—and finally replaced them on his slippery nose.

"Er—. Hello. How is it?"

"It's—" She gnawed at the toe. "—great. Oof. There." She gave the toe a last soothing lick and put it down. "Knobby's all twitchy. He doesn't like it."

"Doesn't like what?" said Mellett cautiously.

"What's happened, his machine." She lay back and nibbled a long blade of grass. A hoverfly lit on her thigh; the skin twitched and it flew off, followed by the sunglasses.

"Do you know yet?" said Mellett, trying to keep his eyes closed.

"Oh, yes. He was wrong, for once. He'll never admit it though. He's blaming it on the transtemporal potentiometers, but that's just an evasion."

Averting his eyes, since she was now stroking her nipples with the grass, Mellett mumbled, "What is it, then?"

"All those unused portions of the brain . . . they're not future potential, they're evolutionary discards . . . I have all the reflexes, senses, instincts and so on that we lost in evolution. I can smell people several streets away. I expect I could catch fish with my hands . . . I can move *fast*. Look!" She sat up, her hand flashed out and closed. She brought it nearer to Mellett, who had to look, and opened it. Released, a gnat darted off.

"But that means . . ."

"Poor Knobby. Yes. Man's brain is evolved as far as it ever will, we've reached the end of the road. Pity. But there it is . . . What unusual animals men are! I'm not in heat just now so forget it."

Mellett felt himself turn bright scarlet; and ran. In the cottage Knabe was staring morosely at a glass of creamy milk. He said, "Did she tell you?"

Mopping his streaming face, Mellett said, "Yes. But she says you don't believe it."

"How can I? It's not possible. The brain is designed to develop much further than—this . . ." he stared helplessly at Mellett.

"Maybe it's not so bad. She doesn't seem to be exactly suffering . . . and after all, she hasn't lost anything."

"Oh, she's all right. A healthy animal. Never mind her . . ." He lowered his voice. "I always did think women had limited cortical capacities. I meant to try it on a man first. That would prove me right."

Mellett looked out of the window again. Eschsholzia was lying stretched out in the sun, arching her back to the warmth, gloriously desirable . . .

"Me,' he said firmly. "Now's your chance. Come on." Knabe blinked, called to Eschsholzia that he would be back shortly, and at the determined pressure of Mellett's hand at his elbow allowed himself to be driven back to the lab.

"MY HEAD aches. And does it stink," said Mellett faintly. "For Christ's sake, put out that pipe. Yecch."

Something had to be done about the air or he would be sick. Suddenly the process became obvious; he closed off the passage back of his nose and breathed through his throat. The smell subsided; but it was harder to talk.

He rested for half an hour. Knabe said, "I shouldn't leave Miss Jones alone much longer. We'll have to get back to her place."

Smiling, Mellett said, "Fine. Let's go." He stood up carefully. What a mess this place was—the Maxi Encephalo Synaptic Stimulator all over the floor, dust, beetle dung, insect footprints all over the walls and ceiling. Ugh.

Eschsholzia came to the door holding a towel. "Oh, it's you," she said, tossing it on a chair. Cautiously, Mellett re-opened his newly sensitive nose. She was gorgeous.

But strangely, his feelings were warm, tender, admiring, without the tension of desire. She really wasn't in heat.

Two days later, they told Knabe. "We're sorry, Knabe, but it's true. Those doors in the brain open backward. *Homo sapiens,* as he stands in stocking feet, is it."

Grimly, Knabe packed up his eighteen filled notebooks and one dreadful sock. "It was the potentiometers. I know it was. No more makeshifts. I shall have to invent that and start again . . ." He stumped off, muttering, and hailed a taxi.

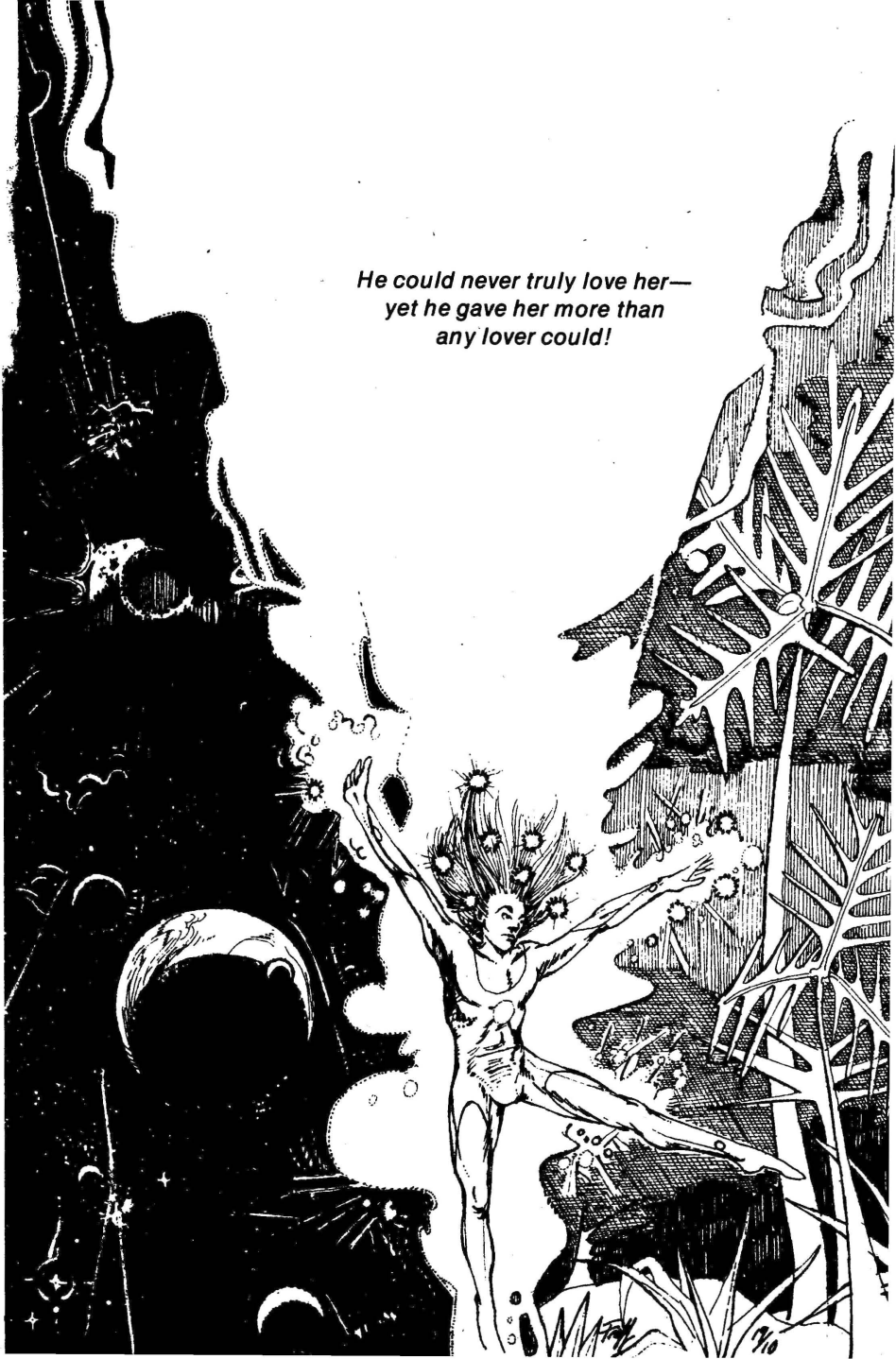
Together, Mellett and Eschsholzia waved good-bye. "Maybe we should have told him about the water."

"No,' she said. "It would have been too unkind. But what fun it's going to be! I always wondered what it would be like to be amphibious!"

"And what a way to make a living! That Dolphin Research Group is ready to pay us anything."

"So they should. They won't find a team with our qualifications anywhere else!"

Laughing, they ran out into the garden and licked salt off each other's backs, basking in the sun. As Mellett rolled over and nipped her ear, she whispered, "Hey, I think . . . I think I'm coming into season." •


He could never truly love her—
yet he gave her more than
any lover could!

STORMY WEATHER

DANIEL DERN

THE Thursday evening sun burrowed down under burning clouds as the autumn winds began to blow, and a cloak of chilled darkness settled over the Vermont horizon. In the cabin by the trail overlooking the field, Rachel puttered around, unpacking the bag of groceries into the cabinet and shaking her sleeping bag to fluff out the down. Matty had driven her there that afternoon and left her, plunked on the edge of the Appalachian Trail. Until Matty returned on Saturday morning, Rachel was free, alone with mountains covered with the impossible riot of Vermont springtime. Greens, reds, purples and yellows; in clumps and mosaics, a sight so overpowering as to be unreal to eyes grown in the city and used to nature only in small doses. A row of bushes. A concrete-circled tree. Now there were no people and no expectations, nobody tapping their foot while she took time to breathe.

She stood still and closed her eyes, unable to comprehend the release that filled her. Nobody ask-

ing, nobody demanding. She could go to sleep when she pleased, and never wake up. Not feel something was wanted from her. Not deny her feelings of waiting, waiting for twenty-one years for someone unknown to give her something she needed, something everybody else had but she couldn't see. Here no one watched, here she could play her flute, press her face to the grass, draw cartoons on her legs, wash or not wash her hair—*her* life again.

To do anything she pleased.

Whatever *that* was.

YESTERDAY somebody had come to borrow a dictionary—a girl from the other end of the dorm, in the usual tennis shorts and halter. And then her roommate's boyfriend stopped in, annoyed because his car needed new tires, and Mark had shown up while she was working on a paper and ended up dragging her to a mild party where he sat in a corner and looked depressed, so clearly waiting for her to talk to him, and—

Somewhere it became too much, and she snapped. Back from the party, needing a shower, Rachel was sorting her psych notes when the dormline rang. She stared at the *blrt*ing instrument, not moving while it rang, waited, rang. Then she lunged for the closet, jerked out her backpack, stuffed in clothes and toothbrush and flute, pulled the straps tight over her shoulders and ran through the warm starry night to Matty's dorm as the wind scraped leaves along the street behind her.

She spent the night in mad dreams and cold, clammy sweat, and woke unsure of where she was. Matty announced they could borrow her uncle's hill house off in the country, she'd called and it was okay. While Rachel frowned Matty tossed the backpack into the rear seat next to the grocery bags; when Rachel was almost decided Matty prodded her into the Volvo's shotgun seat, sat behind the steering wheel and stomped the accelerator, swerving through the wild-colored hills with manic glee. The city dropped away, the fields were filled with cows and dandelions, and then there was nothing of the outside world left save the fading putter of Matty's Volvo.

Now Rachel could sleep or sing, commit rash acts without listening for judgments. A black bird with red armpits had paused on the fence. The stream gurgled clearly over each patch of stones, making subtly different splashes in every place. The cows raised their rumps and dignifiedly trudged home. Rachel had napped for half the afternoon as the wind fanned the colored tips of the trees before her like a eunuch wielding a peacock's tail. Then the clouds came, waking her with their shadows, and she returned to the cabin.

RACHEL stepped barefoot into the night. The sky was completely covered by clouds, the outlines of the mountains identified the thicker shadows. Several fireflies flitted about, like the spirit of some ancient machine released from its bottle. The wind blew through her sweater and prickled her arms. Branches flapped, leaves fled the ground in circling flocks. A peal of thunder broke beyond the mountains. Then the landscape lit up, and thunder rolled again. Rachel heard, then felt, rain. A wet kitten's-paw batted her nose. She held out her arms and began to dance. Right forward, left side, together, stomp; right forward, left side . . . she chanted the modal melody and led the line of dancers around in interwoven circles as the sky crumbled above her.

And far beyond the storm, a man almost passed by. He was going from *here* to *there* when there was a disturbance, an unexpected belch in the fabric of complex space, and suddenly (as perception goes) he was falling into space. To us he would have looked unprotected, naked and sure to die, but he was not in danger for this reason. A mesh of energies enfolded him as a lobster's shell surrounds the softer flesh, linked with him in proper manners to make space his natural environment; he survived, he perceived, he acted. By luck, he had not been killed in the exo-spatial earthquake. But it was closer than it should have been, and now he was in trouble.

This—we shall call him a man, and then call this man Muldaur—he realized he was hurt, and probed for a place to make an emergency landing. Reflexes took over, feeling the tugs of gravity wells, smelling atmospheric qualities, sorting the cocktail-chatter babble of information that filled our solar system. Asteroids grunted and satellites gossiped like housewives, the planets frowned and harumphed, and the sun chortled happily, throwing out streams of electromagnetic confetti as it jiggled its plasma playtoys and watched the elements build. Training selected actions without conscious thought, guiding Muldaur's fall from nether-space into our 3-space in a jerky cosmic downshift that left him hurtling at Earth in a roughly matched orbit and velocity. And still falling, tumbling. Muldaur flexed his "wings" as he whipped around the Moon, trying to slow and steady himself. He began scanning the planet "below" him with his many senses. Spots on the surface registered; where we would have seen only vast expanses of cloud layers and swathes of blue and brown, he sensed the great concentrations of life, energy and motion. Paris . . . Moscow . . . Tokyo . . . Los Angeles, Chicago . . . New York. Muldaur didn't know these names, of course. But he veered downwards,

diverting energies as best he could to safen his fall. He glowed. Those who watched the sky thought they saw a falling star. Some old men heard meteor whistles of radar shriek in their fillings, and shook their heads.

And just when Muldaur was almost down, slowing himself as best he was able, he rode an energy braid into the center of the thunderstorm. His ionized protective web drew half a dozen bolts of lightning, revealing the countryside with brief flickers of day. He jerked and twisted in midair. The bolts disrupted his already wavering neural controls so completely that he *fell* the rest of the way down, shot with pain and fear.

Had he not been a bit awake when he hit the ground, he would have died.

As it happened, he lived. And celebrated this success by fainting.

RACHEL woke in the morning to the far-off lowing of the cows. She pulled her arms out of the sleeping bag and stared at the dark wood beam above her. Sometime during the night the roof had stopped making rain sounds, and she knew without looking that it was going to be a bright day. She closed her eyes to try and recapture her last dream, but it was gone, so she pulled down the zipper and got out of bed.

Quickly pulling on her shirt and jeans, Rachel paused in the kitchen only long enough to swallow some orange juice straight from the bottle. Then she ran outside.

The grass was deep green in the morning sun, and the ground so wet as to almost be muddy. The stream ran with greater speed and bulk. Rachel moved her bare feet from stone to stone until she reached a certain spot, then knelt to drink. As she cupped her hands, her eyes caught a wavy spot of motion farther along the stream, a faint blurring like heat shimmer from an overheated car on a hot day.

Muldaur, crumped on a bush, breathed weakly. He had not wakened or moved since his fall. The shimmering indicated that his automatic nerve reflexes continued to work. But of course Rachel did not know this, nor did it occur to her to stop and think. As soon as she saw the folded figure, she ran to it. Something told her there were no broken bones, and without hesitating she shouldered the unconscious body with a fireman's carry and headed back to the cabin.

MULDAUR was in a basket woven of fire. He was held down by a strange gravity and filled with unfamiliar air. When he was awake enough to realize he was conscious he caught his breath, only to have his stomach muscles branded with pain. He gasped. Then he withdrew and observed.

His body was full of wrongnesses which blinked. They hurt, too, but the pains were receding. So his bypasses were on the job. He was tired and drained, bruised, battered, and downright miserable. However, that could all be cured by food and sleep. There seemed to be no damage his body could not repair. Given the time.

Need signals for protein and energy began flashing. The awareness sent Muldaur into one of the sequences of checkout rituals. He chanted silently, touching his psychic frets and listening for the proper harmonics. His feelings of disorientation worried him far more than the wooziness; the energy patterns which wove his web and wings were his uniform and ship, protective device and sensory extension.

The diagnostic was not good.

Now what, he wondered. Still in the stretched-time quiet of contemplation, Muldaur reviewed various lectures they had given him when he was first training. He had never been caught in so extreme an emergency. Much guesswork lay ahead—if luck was with him. If he could work safely—if he could find—then his thoughts broke on a log jam. *Where?* He yanked at his memory. Sensations of falling, burning, caught like a canoe in a a waterfall—the disturbance!—a blue and white disk spinning around a sun. Muldaur turned himself outwards again, still letting his body work without direction, but listening. He felt an enclosed space, shells of cellulose, and little power or metal. Then he opened his eyes and tried to focus.

There was life close by. His adrenals were relaxed, saying, *Safe, don't worry, okay to lie still,* but he frantically rolled his eyes, ignoring the pain, until he found a face, a worried face, as human as his own. Looking at him with uncertain blue eyes. The reassuring hue of his own familiar flesh.

"Good morning," Rachel said. Was this real? Could he understand her? Why had she brought him in, anyway? "How are we today?" she prattled, as if he were a wounded animal. He had been so still, and she could see the pain in his face when he tried to move. "Am I supposed to be a nurse or a reporter? Here, can you drink this—it's water." She moved closer to Muldaur, slowly, and brought a glass of water into his sight. Then she pressed the rim to his lips and let him taste the water. He let his mouth open a bit more, so she tilted the glass until he had swallowed it all.

What next, she wondered. I couldn't have just left him. She rose and went into the kitchen. The water was too cold, and a thick layer of sugar remained undissolved at the bottom of the glass. She touched a sweetened finger to the—what was he, anyway? He

looked human, aside from the blue denim suntan and the way the hairs on her arm stood out when she came close to him. He wasn't much bigger than she was; she had lifted him without much effort. Maybe five foot eight, muscled lean like an acrobat, smooth-skinned face, gentle features. Her finger tingled as she pressed it to his lips; he closed his eyes for an instant and then seemed to nod for more. "You want this stuff?" Rachel asked, to make sure. The darker blue lips opened in answer.

Rachel pulled up a chair and stared at the man after he swallowed the last of the sugar-water. There again—*man.* Was it safe to assume *anything?* Would she kill him quicker by her care? How could she communicate with this—this obligation?

She looked again at his blue skin—no, that was like calling her own skin "white." She rubbed her wrist absently. There was probably a good reason.

Why bother at all? That was the real question. Hadn't she run away for just that reason? Everybody demanding, intruding . . .

But the question answered itself. *Because he needs me.* And even that was rationalization. He had been there, and she had picked him up.

Rachel found herself wondering, *where did he come from, who is he, what's this all about?* She sat up suddenly as she saw his eyes looking at her. She looked back, and became aware of her charge as a person. *He's been thinking also.* Suddenly it all turned real. She started to back away, but he looked at her. *He doesn't understand, either.* She felt his uncertainty and his fear. Then she found herself moving closer, as if it would help understanding. She saw his stomach muscles moving under the grey-silver cloth that covered him like dancer's tights. Sadness overcame her that they couldn't communicate, and she rested her head on his chest. He breathed in, and out, and his heart beat under her ear. The shirt or whatever felt surprisingly soft. There was no sensation of static electricity on her head, although her arms still tingled. She closed her eyes.

There was a touch on her head, of hands. Muldaur had raised his arms until he was able to touch Rachel's temples with his fingertips. She felt the fingers brush her hair and tingle in her scalp. There were bright spots in her mind's eye at every touch, each a different color. The glows spread until they joined, and then began to hum. She felt herself falling, gently, drifting into sleep, watching herself from a distance as the forming images stopped needing her control. Words began to whisper in her ears, old lessons, lists, teachers pointing at blackboards, trips to the zoo where the tigers drowsed in their cages, her father calling out

the gears on the transmission, pages from a cookbook . . .

The images began to flow faster, louder; the demand grew greater and started to *pull* the words out. It all began to spin, and Rachel grew afraid. Tendrils reached out into her, forbidden parts, and she tried to scream. Then another force reached in and twisted the flow shut, making sudden silence, and the world went black.

THEN the hands stopped pressing and she sat up, shaking her head. The room was still spinning. Rachel closed her eyes, took a slow breath in and out, and looked down again. The red eyes blinked, and aquamarine lips smiled, showing regular, white teeth.

"Hello," he said to her slowly. "Thank you for your language. My name is Muldaur. Are you feeling correct? I am injured, but not ill. Perhaps there is more water? It has been—"

"Please," Rachel said. "Stop." What had he done? "I'll get you some more water. Stay there." What would she do now? She let the water run out of the kitchen tap, waiting for it to get cold.

The first hurdle is crossed, Muldaur thought. *What a curious language! So imprecise, yet so expressive.* His training and talents had enabled him to probe for the needed knowledge and absorb most of it in those brief instants he contacted Rachel's memory before his weakened control grew too demanding and forced him to withdraw. Now his subconscious would integrate the information inherent in the language while he pondered the many objects in Rachel's world. *Earth, Sun, New York, New York, Brahms, Dangling Conversation* . . . he rolled the sounds on his tongue as the images and associations unwound in his mind's eye. Girl, star, running, grass, clouds, peppermint, dandruff. *This must be one of the Tammaro colonies, long forgotten. She doesn't look too afraid. She's* young. *Good reactions, for an aborigine.* He frowned at this thought. *That's wrong. She is human. I mustn't trifle with her.*

The sugar and water had revived him somewhat, so he tried sitting up. *Too soon!* he thought as the pain forced him back down. *It's several*—he searched for the local equivalent—*yes, days 'ere I can stand. And fly away? Go to, Malidourt Muldaur Sellim'pse. Your energies are sore taxed, and you will tarry long.*

Startled, Muldaur shifted his thinking back into his own language. *Where did all that come from? Hmmm, yes, I must have tapped that without noticing. I'd best be cautious about that; this language has bad thoughts buried in it. So many words!*

I may as well organize all this while I'm resting. I'll have quite a report to file. Another lost colony.

Eighty-two percent standard gravity. Old sun, adolescent planet, exotic people. Where is my lady dispatcher tonight?

Muldaur ignored the problems inherent in the use of the word "tonight." Instead, he drifted into a memory of half a year ago, and gave himself over to his past self's being. The multicolored sands crackled at the touch of their feet, tickling them with snaps of light and static. Her tan was dark and smooth, and in the water her laugh glinted like sunlight. The soft sea creatures they called to came near, and they mounted, avoiding the blowholes, racing in the slow-falling waters until they grew tired of the chase, and collapsed back on shore. Their love play made a shower of sparks and crackles, doused at rhythmic intervals by the night tide, as they moved and whispered and exploded . . . *yes, that was us, then, that looks like her now, near . . .*

"Asleep again," Rachel muttered with approval, and set the glass of water down on the table.

WHAT *shall I do with him?* Rachel stepped outside, chewing on a sandwich and watching a trio of squirrels play hopscotch in the branches of a tree. She *could* just leave when Matty came for her in two days. *No I couldn't.* Take him with her? That would be good for a mess. What had happened? There was all that shuffling in her head, and then he spoke to her. *Mel-darr. That's his name. How had he done that?*

The sky was clouding in one corner, promising more rain. The squirrels dashed away. A cloud shadow flowed along the hillside, turning the treetops briefly dark. *I wish I knew what was going on.* She turned and went back through the kitchen door. There she rummaged around until she found several packages of clear soup broth, and set the water to boiling. When the soup was done, she poured it into two ceramic mugs and carried them into the room where her skyblue starman lay sleeping.

HE SMILED at her when he woke, and smelled the still-steaming broth eagerly. "Thank you. I could eat something more solid, I believe. Did I tell you my name?"

"Mel-darr," Rachel said. "No?"

He corrected her pronunciation. "Mull-dour would be closer. Your language has the wrong phonemes. Your name I did not get, please?"

"You didn't?"

"I only looked in your speech and memory centers for the language, understand. So as not to intrude. Some are touchy, without permission." He grimaced. "There have been a few unhappy incidents . . . see, I acquire skill in your tongue with every, um, moment."

"My name is Rachel. And you

haven't told me how bad you are hurt, or where you came from or why you're here or—"

"Please." He waved a hand. "Indeed, it is a tale of length I should tell. Sit comfortable while I unravel, and then you can ask again, if you have more questions."

"Fine," Rachel said. She set the mug down and leaned back in the chair. "Hit it."

"Pardon?"

"Take it from the top, let'er roll. Didn't you get any slang? Go ahead."

Muldaur rolled his eyes. "I will assume you gave me leave to begin—Rachel. Yes. My full name is Malidaurt Muldaur Sellim'pse, which is my patron's—no, godfather seems closer—name, my personal name, and lineage, as well as the fact that my—parents—exercised gene selection which has been augmented by vo-vocational training and surgery. In my language the process is called *callopsei,* from *calee opesi,* or destiny of action. I was born about, well, a gross and some dozens of your years ago—pardon, about two hundred—but I am only some seven doz—eighty years aged, because of . . . hmm. Ah, yes. Relativity. Yes, good, that's the reason. And I've lived about one-fifth of my life span by now. So actually I'm but a little older than you, don't you agree?"

"Oh, definitely!"

"Anyway, I'm a workingman—a messenger of sorts." Muldaur paused. "No . . . I'm getting words like telegram, envoy, special delivery, but they're too limited. Let me try to explain better . . ."

AFTER exploration (Muldaur said) communication and trade accounted for most of the intragalactic shuttling around. Tourist trades, government commissions, scholarly and scientific studies, all contributed to the constant flux of matter and information between star systems. Hauling cargoes and delivering messages made up the bulk of spatial traffic.

Methods of getting things from *here* to *there* varied tremendously within the galaxy, depending on technical sophistication, distances, times and priorities involved. One centuries-old firm sent its deliveries out in slow asteroidal form, while another twin-planet system used a short-rang pulsed matter transmitter for local import-export business. And so on . . .

The other problem was messages. Electromagnetic radiation is much too slow to talk between stars, and not reliable. Although near-instantaneous communication was becoming more practical as well as economical every century, there was still room for improvement . . .

"Meanwhile," Muldaur said, making a palms-in-front-of-chest-and-facing gesture, "one derives me. And the Interstellar Pony Express—is that right? Hold, yes, but

clumsy. Couriers. Bumblebees. Anagrams—crab! Do you see?" he asked, helplessly.

"I get it," said Rachel, trying not to giggle. "Please, go on."

"We're trained," he continued. "Discipline, surgery, *esprit de corps.* I am a body inside a cocoon, ganged to my lower cortex and as part of me as my arms and legs. It is part of me, non-material. Web, weaving, psycho-electric tapestry . . . I have roughly twenty-three senses above the regular nine, can ride the waves of space's energy—you're lacking words—in space I'm like a fish in water, wings of power. I glide above space itself, between the—the levels, seams, quanta—no!" He stopped again in disgust. Rachel wrinkled her nose as if it would aid her in understanding, while Muldaur grimaced again. "As I said. I carry messages, make negotiations, deliver mail, monitor conditions, patrol welfares. We have a glorious life, slipping out of spacetime, playing a role in it, doing and feeling . . ." His eyes unconsciously looked up as his voice trailed off. ". . . but I had an accident. I was riding the—I hit a . . . pothole? Thin spot? Hot bog? It surprised me . . . suddenly I was drained and snapped into space, and homed in on this planet to crashland, but then I ran through an ionic field—yes, a thunderstorm. Nearly burnt out my nervous system. *Mara stilo,* was that wild. Can't remember much without doing a—oh, not again. I could, if I needed to. Take my word for it. They'll get it out when I report. And here I am."

"Yeah. Here you are." Rachel leaned closer. "That's all pretty weird, you know, I guess it makes sense. But so what? Here you are, with this story, and these words you've pulled out of my skull. And I've got you here. In two days Matty's coming back. You going to be all better by then? Or will this be weeks and months? I can just see it. What am I doing, having you here? I don't know anything about what to do. I don't want any part of it. I just want—"

"Rachel!" Muldaur reached out to take her hand. She jerked back. "Please. You're asking questions I can't answer. This is short. Please."

But she had collapsed on his chest again, sobbing. He stroked the back of her head, ignoring the pain signals as best he could. People! Females! Was there ever any chance of understanding this particular person, of really *touching* her. "What do you want me to say, Rachel? Tell me. I'm tired, and it hurts. And I don't have these answers."

She continued to cry. Muldaur realized she was crying for herself. He had not caused the upset, only triggered it. After a while he retreated a bit and went into the Griever's Litany, hoping the mood would project. Relax. Don't cry.

Enough is gone. Quiet. Relax. Shhh . . . there you go. Relax. Sleep. Good, good. Quiet. Peace. Sleep. Sleep. Sleep.

THE SQUIRRELS had come in by the open kitchen window and were nibbling at crumbs. Clouds now covered most of the sky; only the corner where the sun was setting remained clear. Rachel and Muldaur leaned against an oak. A solid meal had put him in good enough spirits to hobble outside, with Rachel's assistance. Neither mentioned her outburst earlier in the afternoon.

"Your weather certainly is impressive," he said after a long silence.

"Why, thank you!"

"Do you control it?"

"Sometimes," she said judiciously, "we predict it correctly a day in advance."

"Oh."

"Is it just a job—flying from world to world?" Rachel asked. "Does it ever get dull? Don't you—do you ever wish for something else?"

"I could," he answered after a while. "Opportunity abounds. We still have a—frontier. But I'm—it's more than a job, Rachel. It's life. Religion. Immersion. Fulfillment."

"But are you happy?"

"Only rarely do I feel *not* happy. If I understand what you mean. I'm here. This is now. That is all. Does that answer?"

"I guess so. Muldaur?"

"Yes?"

"Are you—your people—beyond us?"

"I would say . . . based on . . . we are all equally human, Rachel. I've had more time. Other fillings. That makes differences. But I think that the gulf is only the same one that separates any being from another. Which is why we attempt to cross it."

"GONNA rain soon. Hour, maybe less."

"How can you tell, Rachel?"

"Smells like it. Let's head back inside." She helped Muldaur stand up, then put a supporting arm around his waist. "How are you feeling?"

"Better. A power source would help. These matters can be speeded. I still have to rework my cocoon."

"For now, we'd better get this place rainproofed again. Buckets. Windows—and down you go. No more exercise tonight. Doctor's orders."

"Yes, my lady."

"Wait—Matty's supposed to come tomorrow!"

"A friend?"

"Yes, but—" She sat down and frowned. "I don't know."

"Do you have a supply of food?"

"Why?"

"I could—do certain things. Juryrig. Improvise. Liferaft? A fudge factor."

"What are you trying to say?"

"If I had enough nourishment, I could try and accelerate healing enough—"

"I thought you needed power from somewhere."

"I do. However, there seems to be some radio antenna a mile or so distant which I could focus from. Plus these power lines."

"That's right—the voice of Radio Free Bubblegum. You think you can do it?"

"Like falling off a leap-pipe cinch."

Rachel giggled. "Show-off!"

"Did I say something wrong?" Muldaur asked worriedly.

RAIN began to drum on the roof. *Something's been happening,* Rachel thought to herself. *I almost wish we had more time. Somehow . . .*

She looked around the room. Her things were piled by the wall.

"What are you thinking about?" Muldaur asked. He had eaten several cans of tuna and a large salad. Now he was resting again on the bed.

"I just remembered something," she answered. "You'll see in a minute." She opened her flute case and fitted the sections together.

"What is that?"

"It's called a flute. A musical instrument. The flute is classified as a wind instrument, because I blow in here—"

"Ah." Muldaur's face lit up with comprehension. "A complex oscillator of variable pitch. What tonal system do you—of course, the word tells me. Octave, eight. Pitch steps probably of—did I say something wrong again?"

"I see you paid attention in school."

"What does that mean?"

"I was going to play you a few pieces, but—" She started to pull the sections apart.

"Don't! I mean, do! Play!" Muldaur make a quick gesture with his right hand. "Please, do play."

Rachel looked out the darkened window. "I'm sorry. It's just that—okay. Let me think a minute." She sat cross-legged on the floor, her right side turned to the bed. She tossed her hair back with a quick nod, then brought the flute halfway to her lips. She closed her eyes and frowned in thought. "This is a sonata by Telemann." She took a breath and began to play. Faint thunder sounded in the distance, and the wind blew across the roof. Rachel sat straight, her frown deepening as she reached the fast section of the sonata. She reached the end, paused only for a full breath, then went into a Mozart bourree. When that was done, she stopped, and muttered, "Mozart." Muldaur had not moved or made a sound since she began playing. She nodded slightly, and Milhaud's *Pavanne for a Dead Princess.* Then she began to tap her foot, and

played *Flute Thing.* The rhythm had her swaying gently by the end, and she went right into the Jefferson Airplane's *Comin' Back to Me,* hearing the words in her mind. Sadness filled her, and flowed into the music, and her head was all but bowed when the last notes came. She let the flute drop from her lips, and sat silently for a while, listening to the rain.

"THANK you."

Rachel sat up straight. "I don't know what made me choose those pieces."

"Would you object if other people heard you playing?"

"What do you mean?"

Muldaur smiled. "I ask your permission to include your music in my report. And to make it available to the Music Libraries."

"But how?"

"Memory," he said, tapping his forehead. "Storage, exact replay. We can work directly. Ersatz immortality."

"But it wasn't *that* good!"

"It is what I have."

Rachel was excited, yet uncertain. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

"If it will help, I would like to return the favor."

"How?"

"It's—hmm. It is a miracle of rare device. Where does that come from?"

Her eyes widened. "That's from a poem. *Kubla Khan,* by Coleridge. I haven't read that in years!"

"Is there more?"

"Lots. Umm . . . In Xanadu did—no, let me try the next to last stanza." She folded her hands in her lap, and recited:

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive in me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That—

"Enough!" Muldaur had raised himself onto his elbows. "I'm sorry. You—it reminded me of someone. But I was about to explain. Would you like to go, ah, sightseeing?"

"In this weather?"

"No, that's not what I mean. The—process that enabled me to learn your language. The techniques. If you are willing, it can go both ways."

"You'll teach me Gutter Galactic?"

"No. I can show you around in my memories. Places. Stars. Other peoples."

"Oh. Television."

"It's more like—let it go. Here, sit close to me. Maybe if I sat up and you got on this side of the bed. Good. Fingers here. The hand-to-head contact is partly a mnemonic. Relax. This will be mostly memory, edited, we'll be seeing through my eyes and so forth exactly as if I was

there again. Of course I can jump around or focus on certain parts." Muldaur began running through the link exchanges. "Please concentrate on your breathing as best you can, or on some sound. Every inward breath. Now think blue. The room is thinning now. Listen. Eyes closed. Listen." He closed his eyes and went in, then reached out in the grayness until the brightnesses touched. *There. Hello.*

Hello? Bombardier to pilot?

What?

It's really happening!

Yes. See, over there. That's where we're headed. Ready?"

Ride 'em, cowboy.

Muldaur assumed Rachel meant yes. Satisfied that her conscious was securely linked, he began to funnel toward certain memories.

Here we go. I'm merging in, so we're both inside the memory-me, if you like. He/I is not aware of us.

Of course.

We're only tracking external stimuli. Okay, we're in.

Oh!

CRIMSON sky hung overhead. Off to the sides floated orange-frame shapes of cloud-like texture, hollow, yet twirling. The ground was far below, a pale plain with windy gusts of white smoke spotting it.

Those are the natives. Watch carefully now.

A group of tinkertoy clouds drifted low, by the rippling shore of a translucent green. The smoke puffs rolled across the waters toward the cloud. As the edge of the cloud dipped in the waves, the green flowed up inside, carrying some of the smoke puffs with it. When the orange frame was filled with green, the entire structure floated away again, toward the plain.

That's their transport system.

They remind me of dirigibles. It should say GOODYEAR *on the side.*

What? Hang on, I'm skipping through.

The world fell away in a series of flashes, and the stars came out. Unblinking specks in some ungraspable pattern, they shone while the dwindling world behind eclipsed the sun. A feeling of immensity overcame Rachel, as if she had melted into the fabric and was one with it. She felt motion as her body twisted, then mental movements which felt like swimming in air with phantom limbs. Lines of oars stroked from her sides, faster and faster, and then, like the 'pop' of a champagne bottle, she slipped into a new region, where unchecked speed seemed beneath her attention. Other senses spoke to her. She heard the muffled cries of fusing hydrogen nuclei, each star calling out its own distinct melody. Plasmas rolled and roared in the distance. Strange animal-like motions zipped across her field of vision. She sailed the symphonic cosmos for untold eons, smiling upon it all,

even the sad browndark pools which sucked at her and tried to lure her to them with love. Then she felt a tug, as a kite feels the yank of its string, and she knew she was returning. The banshee wails ceased, to be replaced by the ever-burning stars.

Here I am again, came Muldaur's unspoken voice. *Having a good time?*

!!!

This is Giddygaddy, next. It will be clear why it is called that.

Rachel felt a slowing down, and knew of the suns and planets 'near-by,' and not by eyesight. The closer the world came, the faster time seemed to flow. The globe was divided from pole to pole in colored crescents, and nine glowing moons orbited in off-center paths, whizzing madly by the fringes of the atmosphere and trailing fiery tails.

A traffic beam locked on and guided them down. *I'm editing out the dull part.* A black curtain fell and rose, and they were wafting down an endless rail on a field which encircled the body in an unconstraining net. Ahead of them, a quartet of birdlike mops whistled and hooted in syncopated twelve-tone. *They're arguing about where to eat lunch.* Rachel was surrounded by a panorama of whirling, dashing, skating, spewing, wheeling . . . the landscape was a carnival of sentients in motion, all under their own power, chasing their diverse errands and doings in a complex dance which dizzied her. *Why?* she asked her guide.

Rules, traditions, he replied. *Quotas have replaced taxes here. Only transients and tourists such as us are exempt.* With a thought, they detached from the touring rail and floated toward a golden honeycombed mountain. At a blue ring they slowed and tossed a coin at the attendant, a basketball with legs and a graceful neck which supported a single goggle-eyed head with a beak that grabbed and swallowed the coin. Passing through the hoop, they were gently seized and directed to a small throng of clothed humanoids inside one of the honeycombs. A pleasant vibration filled the air, and a sweet perfume came from the floor. The people all stood around as if they were about to dance.

This wouldn't make sense, Muldaur said. *Last stop, Third Green.*

She was standing, overlooking a valley. To the left, a vast pillar of falling water roared, dropping and cascading on the rocks far below. The pillar flowed from the mountain behind, which rose with brown and green crags into the clouds. The valley held fields of pale orange trees, tall thin shoots that moved with the wind. There were plains like fresh-plowed earth, and jumbled masses of colored birdlike fluffs that circled above large blue spheres that rested in the fields. *This is a nature preserve. Visited but not lived on.*

It's beautiful.

Watch.

The sun fell rapidly as Muldaur edited, and the sky turned to flame. The bird fluffs rose toward the glow. Shafts of light shot through the water and bent with the flow, glittering at the waterfall's base with prismatic splendor. The clouds blew away and the mountain was crowned with stars.

Meteors began to fall, etching white scars on the night. The sky wheeled, and a pale rainbow curved across the heavens. The water glowed a phosphorescent gold. The rainbow folded under the horizon beyond the valley and, on the other side of the mountain, sunrise came. The plains were damp with soft greens, and the blue stones covered with sleeping multicolored fluffs. The sky lightened, and the plains blossomed to greet the light. Large beasts stirred, lumbering from tree to tree in search of food. The fluffs began circling again. Day had come.

MULDAUR dropped his hands from Rachel's forehead.

"That was—*incredible!*" she breathed. "Thank you."

"I am glad you liked it."

"I—well, if you think that evens the score, I won't argue."

"Good."

Rachel stretched. "I think I'm tired. You going to try and cut out tomorrow?"

"With luck."

Rachel looked around. "We didn't figure out sleeping arrangements yet."

"I will be going into trance soon, so it does not matter. I can sit on the floor for the night." Muldaur began to stand up. Rachel could see the flashes of pain in his face.

"You're staying here," she said. "Don't argue."

"What about you?"

She looked around.

"The bed is wide enough," Muldaur said. "I am not sure what might offend you. But I will be unconscious."

Rachel tried not to feel insulted. *That's ridiculous,* she told herself. Why not? It made sense. This wasn't her dorm, anyway, with everyone watching and prying and keeping score. "Thank you," she said. "I will."

THE storm grew in intensity, and peal after peal of thunder burst over the valley. Muldaur was deep in his trance by the time Rachel changed into her bedclothes. He had kept his tunic or whatever it was on, although his smooth-surfaced boots stood on the floor by the wall. Rachel paused for a moment, biting her lip, then lay face down next to Muldaur. She squirmed around trying to get comfortable, and ended up with her right arm hanging off the edge of the bed. After much hesitation, she draped the other arm across Muldaur's chest, and hoped the

pressure wouldn't hurt him.

He seemed not to notice when she touched him.

Muldaur had withdrawn, and was making "corrections" in his body. Time was stretched, and his concern encompassed myriads of parallel processes forced into accomplishment ahead of their spontaneous wont. Cells divided, repaired, transformed. Fields shifted inside, and hovered at the surface. He was vaguely aware of Rachel's getting on the mattress next to him, and saw a faint blueness where her arm lay on his chest. Then the buzz from her conscious faded, and she turned to dreams. Muldaur went back to work, satisfied that she was sound asleep.

His injuries were healing nicely when the clamor in Rachel's brain caught his attention. He turned, and was hit by waves of fright and running. Still inside and in slowed-time, Muldaur shifted control to the automatic level and set a watchdog twitch, then turned upwards and let time speed up. He grew aware of Rachel's arm tight around his chest. Then he was back and awake, and leaned over to grasp her far shoulder in his hand. "Rachel! Wake up!" He shook her until she rocked back and forth. She lifted her face up from the pillow.

"Wha—" Her arm relaxed on his chest.

"You were having a bad dream," he explained. "I woke you."

She moved closer to him. "What did you—"

"Nothing." He let his arm rub her back. "Just woke you."

"Oh." Still sleepy, she moved her body half on top of him. "They were chasing me."

Muldaur was unsure what to do. It had been some time since he had been with a person this young and in need. Should he merge and redirect the dreams? Trigger her sexual pleasure centers? It was simple enough to induce orgasm. He didn't have the strength to make love, even if Rachel wanted to. That was strange; he could sense part of her wanting, and other dark pre-voices forbidding her. But that was not his business. He frowned and held her against him, chanting silent soulguides until she relaxed back into sleep. Before he returned to his work, he touched her forehead, and brought back dreams of her voyage through his mind.

RACHEL woke slowly, rolling onto her back and letting her dreams fade slowly. A well-rested feeling filled her. She threw off the sleeping bag—it had not been that cold, so the unzipped bag had served as a blanket—and went to wash her face. She watched herself in the mirror as she brushed back her hair. She hadn't felt this happy in—Rachel frowned suddenly. How long? She almost would have taken this good feeling for granted. How

much a zombie had she made herself in the dorm? What had made her run away?

She found a peasant blouse and shorts, and put them on. Barefoot, she went outside looking for Muldaur. *Matty's coming today. And Muldaur is leaving.*

The field was full of cows. Nearby, Muldaur sat on a tree stump, cross-legged and arms extended. The shimmering she had first seen when she found him was thicker, more active. The trees beyond him seemed to blur. As she walked along the stream toward him she saw the phantom outline shoot up and out like a frog's tongue. She didn't know whether or not it was safe to disturb him.

"Hello, Rachel," Muldaur called. "It's okay. This won't hurt you."

She stepped through the stream. As she came closer the hairs on her arms and legs began to stand up, and her mouth began to tingle.

"How long have you been out here?" she asked.

"Dawn."

"Oh. What are you doing?"

Muldaur pointed to the south. "The broadcast is over there. I don't think you can see them, but my "wings" are, well, unfolded about two miles on each side. I can't do much with them in that position, but they're acting well enough as power receptors. What you do see is the "web." I guess you'd call it a space suit, except it's as much part of me as my arms and legs."

"How do you eat and breath?"

"You mean, why don't I carry quantities of food and water and air with me?"

"Something like that."

Muldaur turned his head without relaxing his arms as Rachel sat down. "They teach us—I create a self-contained minimal ecosystem. Which means, if you don't throw anything out, you've got enough. I have enough energy and control to remetabolize everything. In fact, I don't really breathe while in flight; I sort of continually hold my breath and break the carbon dioxide and water and wastes back down while they're still in my body."

"Oh. I'm not sure I'd like that."

"But out there is nothing. I can't need anything I don't have on me when I'm in nether-space."

Rachel remembered sailing through the stars. "But doesn't it get lonely?"

"Yes."

MULDAUR shifted his arms a bit and became covered with sparks. "This is harmless," he said. "I'm making it visible so you can watch."

"So you're leaving soon."

"Two hours."

"Do you have to go?" Rachel stood up and stepped closer to Muldaur. "Will I ever see you again?"

"It is unlikely. I'm sorry." The skin of sparks began to roll from

one arm to the other. "Rachel, why did you come out here? Before I got here?"

She turned away. "Because I was afraid."

"Of what?"

She turned and sat again, arms around her folded legs, and stared at the stump he was perched on. "It was people, I guess. Everybody seemed to want something from me, and I thought there wouldn't be anything left. Or that they wouldn't like me if I didn't do it right, and I had no idea what to do." She bowed her head between her knees. "And I wasn't sure, I didn't feel I knew anybody well enough, everybody else seemed to be having fun, but I wasn't sure I—I didn't want to commit myself until I was certain it was safe."

"And?"

"I couldn't take it. Everybody seemed to be demanding all at once, and I wanted it to stop."

"Did it?"

"I don't know. I left."

"Then why did you help me?"

She looked up. "But—but I had to. You were *hurt.*"

"Even so."

She hugged her arms. "I guess it was because no one was looking."

"Does that matter?"

"I thought it did. Doesn't it?"

"Would you believe me if I said it doesn't?"

"I'm not sure."

"Then you have to decide for yourself."

She stood up. "Don't leave until I get back. I'm going for a walk."

Rachel pushed away a low branch to keep it from hitting her face. How had she come to care for Muldaur? *Because it wasn't real. And I knew he'd be going away.* Helping an unconscious body was no more dangerous than putting a fledgling back in the nest—but when she was being watched . . .

Graded. Judged. Were other people's opinions so important? So important that she had to decide what to do on the basis of what people would think of her?

A squirrel ran by her. She whistled, and it dashed up a nearby tree, hanging four feet off the ground and watching her. *Does his opinion matter? Of course not.*

A yellow-and-black butterfly settled on a patch of moss. *Does she care what I think? And would her worrying change my thoughts.* The butterfly folded her wings together, spread them flat, and fluttered away. *Why should I be different?*

She touched her hand to the trunk of a white pine. The bark was peeling off in smooth curls. *I'm as good as they are. And they don't seem to worry what I think.*

The ground squished underfoot as she ran back to Muldaur.

HE WAS standing, bathed in fire.

"You're going!" she cried.

"It is time," he said. The air around him flashed with color.

"But I want you to stay!"

"I would have to leave sometime, Rachel. And I am overdue." The aurora dimmed. "I wish I could stay. I believe I owe you my life, and thank you. I will not forget. Remember, somewhere your music will be known. There is no one else on this planet who can claim that."

She stepped through the fire and hugged him. "That doesn't matter. Oh, I'm sorry I'm the way I am."

"Don't be."

"All right. Will you stop here again?"

"I don't know. What will happen when your planet is registered as undeterminable. You will probably be quarantined in a few years. Maybe some civil servant will keep an eye on you." He touched the sides of her nose. "My time is not the same as yours. It would be unfair to promise."

"I suppose. Remember me."

"I will. Here, close your eyes."

Rachel did so, and felt a fast blur of colors roll in.

"There. My final gift. A small repayment for what you have done."

"What is it?"

"Pleasant dreams. Now I must go."

Rachel hugged him once more. He touched his lips to hers, and they looked in one another's eyes. Then he let his arms drop, and Rachel stepped back.

"Goodbye," he said. "Goodbye."

"Fly away, bluebird, take your broken wings and learn to fly." She began to wave, wishing for confetti to throw.

The glow sprang back to its fully glory. Muldaur looked at her once more, then walked toward the edge of the mountain. The trees beyond shone green, gold, purple and red. He spread his arms and stepped off the edge. The fire stretched out; he did not fall. Then he looked up, and began to rise. One hand waved. Soon he was a bird, then a glowing star, and finally gone. Rachel ceased waving, and stared at the sky.

"HEY, Rach, you almost ready to go?"

"Matty!"

"I asked, are you ready to go back? I've got a term paper to finish. The road got rained out, and I had to go a different way. Hey, you really look good! I guess I was right in bringing you here, wasn't I?"

Rachel smiled sadly. "It's just hard to leave here."

"I know, it's so pretty here. Were you watching the birds? I didn't see anything in that direction. Look, there's a bluejay over by the dogwood. They're so graceful. Sometimes I wish I was a bird, just so I could fly. Even a sparrow. Wouldn't you?"

"I don't know." Rachel looked up one last time. "Flying's a different sort of life. Just being me will do for now." •

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Reading Room

LESTER DEL REY

THIS is the last book review column I shall be writing for *IF*. And while I am saddened by the fact that the magazine will no longer have an independent existence, I feel that it may well be time for my own efforts of this sort to draw to a close. I've been reviewing now for slightly over five years, and inevitably some of the fine edge of enthusiasm begins to fade with repeated efforts.

I suspect that some of the vitriol is lacking in my attacks upon books which I consider bad enough to deserve public censure. And likewise, some of the joy has disappeared in my praise of those books which should be read by the audience to whom I appeal.

This is always the problem of a professional attempting to speak for those who do not have a professional interest in any field. Impressions begin to formalize into a sort of code, and in time the code becomes less flexible than it should be, so that new and fresh impressions cannot stand by themselves, but must somehow be fitted into that body of rules. A man may know that the rules are nothing but the summation of impressions, yet still find it hard to throw his mind open fully to new impressions.

There is a great deal of difference between criticism and reviewing, of course. The whole purpose of reviewing is opposed to that of criticism. A critic basically examines a work to find new insight for those who have already read that work. He sees beyond the first impression, he relates the work to other works, and to the whole body of mankind's development within the field and those related to it.

A reviewer should probably be called a previewer. His job is to give as accurate a first reading as possible, and then to pass on his impressions to those who have *not* read the work. If he is honest, he attempts to examine his standards

and inform his readers as to what those standards are, so that they may judge his reviews according to their own standards, and determine how far they can follow him. Then, within the limits of his own taste, he attempts to advise the readers as to whether this is a book that they should read.

I've attempted to do this by the introductions that have preceded most of my reviews, in which I have outlined many of the criteria (so far as any man can determine his own criteria) that lie behind my reactions to books. And I've tried to approach each book afresh, as a normal reader might.

But inevitably, the fact that I've been reading the book to review it creeps into my judgment. As a casual reader, I can pass over sections that I hesitate about as a reviewer—simply because those sections make for excellent lines in a review. And as time goes on, and as I've found too many cases where the point I want to make has already been made often in the past, I develop far too much interest in the review, too little in the book itself.

Thus jaded after five years of reading, I feel that a long rest and a return to reading as it should be done is highly desirable. I've said much of what I wanted to say. And it's time to stop. In fact, I believe that I might have done better to stop a year or so ago. Reviewing, like writing or reading, should be an act of total enthusiasm tempered with only the correct measure of judgment. When the judgment in any field far exceeds the enthusiasm, the results suffer.

BUT I deeply regret that the cause of my termination should be the last issue of a magazine I've admired over a period of more than twenty years. There are too few good magazines left to us, and the loss of one is a painful thing to contemplate.

This was not so when *IF* began, back in March of 1952. This was during the greatest boom that science fiction magazine publishing has known. I forget how many magazines there were—somewhere between thirty and forty. Most of the new ones were pretty shoddy affairs, of course. Their rates were often low, their editors far too often had no knowledge of science fiction—or of editing in too many cases. And they were started only because the distributors wanted more of the action and suggested to some publisher or other that he too should do science fiction.

I was part of that boom. At one time, I edited four magazines of fantasy and science fiction. Nobody in the publishing house had any idea of fiction magazine contents, much less of science fiction. But the distributor wanted such magazines and was willing to advance the money (at a sizable cut in the price paid to the publisher).

James Quinn, who began *IF*, admitted he knew little about science fiction. But he differed from most of those transitory publishers in having a long background in pulp magazines. He respected his readers, and he liked a good story more than an important name on bad fiction that had been rejected by all the knowledgeable editors. He was an honest and very decent man, aware of his ignorance of the field of science fiction, but determined to bring out a good magazine and to treat his authors fairly. (I met him only once, but that was enough to develop a strong liking and respect.)

IF JIM QUINN had begun when there were less magazines to use up the limited money the readers could spend and the limited number of good stories the authors could supply, I believe he would have turned *IF* into one of the best magazines in the field. Even with the difficulties of the time, he made it far better than most of the others that began after *F&SF* and *Galaxy*. He paid good rates, bought good stories (though few memorable ones, since those went to the top three magazines), and made his magazine one of the most attractive in the field. His 1953 wraparound covers are still some of the most attractive ones ever done. He also began to develop an understanding of and love for science fiction.

Unfortunately, perhaps, he was still very conscious of his lack of background. To remedy that, he turned to others who might know the field better. He approached me with a handsome offer to edit the magazine, but I made my biggest mistake by deciding not to leave the publisher with whom I was already associated. But he found a knowledgeable man indeed in Larry Shaw, who was an old-time fan with considerable experience in judging manuscripts.

This should have worked well, but didn't for two reasons. The major reason was that suddenly American News—the biggest distributor of magazines, then or ever—went out of the distributing business, leaving the field in turmoil that lasted for years. This killed many of the magazines, and seriously harmed the success of *IF*.

THE second reason is only opinion on my part, but I believe it is valid. Larry Shaw saw the magazine quite differently from the view Jim Quinn had of it. Where Quinn wanted simply good story values by pulp standards, Larry felt it should have prestige stories that would start fan discussions, upset taboos, and generally be controversial. He got some of those stories, too. He ran *Malice in Wonderland,* a story about a drug-world future, at a time when most readers knew nothing of the drugs that were to fill endless stories ten years later. He took *A Case of Conscience,*

which was a complex and dense story with a philosophical base; I had previously rejected it only because Jim Blish wasn't ready to do a sequel to tie down the philosophical end that was only partly resolved in the story.

Those controversial stories were good, in themselves. But the readers who had followed the magazine for the pure story value Quinn had given were not adjusted to Shaw's brand of science fiction; and the new readers attracted by Shaw were dissatisfied with much of the rest of the magazine. The two characteristics could have been blended in time, but the alteration was too rapid.

Eventually, Shaw was replaced by Damon Knight. But again, the vision Damon had of the magazine was different from that of Jim Quinn. And finally, in a failing market, *IF* ran into difficulties. Its brief period of monthly publication from 1954 to 1955 had already ended. And in February 1959, the magazine stopped publishing. It had far outlasted most of its boom-time rivals, however, and it was still basically an interesting magazine.

ROBERT GUINN saw its potential. He had been the publisher of *Galaxy* for most of that magazine's existence. Now he felt that a second magazine with a different approach to the market would be desirable. His editor, Horace Gold, also wanted a place where the good stories he received which were not quite right for *Galaxy* could be used. So *IF* didn't die; it missed one bi-monthly issue, but was back on the stands with the July 1959 issue as a sister to *Galaxy.*

LOOKING back with hindsight, it's easy to say that Gold never quite established a true character for the magazine. This was a period when most of the action science fiction magazines—the younger-oriented, adventure-slanted ones like *Planet Stories*—had gone off the market. At the time, that probably seemed like a clear warning that such magazines were not wanted; but hindsight suggests that *IF* perhaps should have been the magazine to fill the gap, since we've since come to miss the type of fiction that drew many fans into the field originally. In any event, Gold never quite found what he wanted, but tended to treat *IF* as a place to unload the stories that were not quite up to or right for the *Galaxy* standards.

At the time, Gold was quite ill, and found the task of editing growing increasingly difficult. He finally resigned in 1962, and the magazines fell to the editorship of Frederik Pohl.

Pohl gave *IF* a good deal of fresh character. One of his innovations was the policy of publishing at least one story by a new writer in each issue. This led to the discovery of

some of the best of the new writers; and their loyalty to Pohl added a great deal to the quality of writing to be found in both magazines.

He was also able to go back to a monthly schedule of publishing in late 1964. This again made *IF* a major magazine in the field. It's possible, of course, to publish serials in a bi-monthly magazine, but they lose most of their impact between issues. Yet in many ways, novels that appear serially establish the basic reputation of a magazine.

The results of Pohl's editing can be seen in one simple fact. *IF* won the Hugo award as the best professional science fiction magazine for 1966, 1967, and 1968—three consecutive years. This was against magazines that had long been considered the only possible contenders for that award.

FREDERIK POHL had originally intended to make *Galaxy* into the best possible science fiction magazine, and the success of *IF* must have been somewhat surprising and a little puzzling. He had intended *IF* for a somewhat younger and slightly less sophisticated audience—and then discovered that even the sophisticated reader liked to relax in pure enjoyment of science fiction. Somehow, the magazine had begun to find a character of its own as Pohl discovered what he wanted it to be, and the readers obviously liked it.

Then the magazines had to be sold. This was not the result of circulation difficulties, as most readers thought, but because of certain legal angles concerning the way in which a company can "go public" with its stock, resulting from other interests of Robert Guinn. In any event, UPD took over *Galaxy* and *IF*.

And now there was another editor in the long list of those who had served *IF*. Ejler Jakobsson was employed by UPD at the time and he had a background of editing other science fiction magazines during the boom period, so he was chosen. (It was then that it was decided not to have me continue the science column I had been doing, but to turn to book reviewing.)

Inevitably, the character changed. No honest editor can or should try to imitate another. He must establish his own character through the magazine, or it will have *no* character.

At the time of the change-over, there were to be four magazines. In addition to *Galaxy* and *IF*, there was to be regular publication of *Worlds of Tomorrow* and *Worlds of Fantasy*, with perhaps another later. That was simply too much work for any single editor, particularly one who was expected to do his work in a business office where every worry of a large publishing company obtruded on his time. (Later Jakobsson managed to do his work at home, but much of the

pattern had been set by then.) Trying to establish a separate character for four magazines is difficult, as I know by experience, and I don't think it can be done at once; each must have time to develop by itself before another can be shaped.

I suppose it was inevitable that *IF* again became something of a second sister to *Galaxy*—which remained the prestige magazine in the minds of the readers, even when they were giving the Hugo to *IF*! (I have large suspicions that what many readers seem to feel they *should* like and what they really like are not the same; a pity, because what they really enjoy is usually better.) Under an impossible load of work and the haste of transition, I feel that *IF* again became a place where manuscripts not quite right for *Galaxy* were published.

Then the decision was made to put *IF* back on a bi-monthly schedule, despite a slowly climbing circulation. And that somehow made it seem again like a lesser magazine—whether it was or not. I personally think it deserved better treatment.

Jakobsson eventually found carrying both magazines more work than he was willing to do—complicated as it was by other difficulties and his growing feeling that he wanted to retire. And *IF* was handed over to Jim Baen, who had been serving as Managing Editor.

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AGAIN looking back with hindsight, I wish that change had come earlier. Baen, I feel, was the right editor for the magazine. He began with every possible handicap, since he had to depend on manuscripts which were not considered right for *Galaxy*. But he began with the very great advantage of treating *IF* as a potentially good magazine in its own right. He wanted it to be different from the more "sophisticated" magazines, to bring out the stories that were fun to read, to do the things that the field (other than in recent books) has been missing for too many years.

He brought the needed effort to *IF*, and mapped out the needed character of its own. He gave it a fresh style, with new artists to give it variety, and he has been working with writers to get the kind of material it deserves. I don't think he has fully succeeded, but from my talks with him and from comments by readers on what has been accomplished, I feel he was just beginning to succeed.

And now the magazine is at the end of its independent existence. The exigencies of publishing in a market of wildly increasing prices and erratic distribution have apparently forced this termination. I find it a sorry end to a magazine that has contributed a great deal to the field in twenty-two years—and which could have contributed a great deal more.

Still, I have not wholly given in to despair. I've heard that this marks the beginning of the end for magazines—but I don't believe it; there are too many valuable contributions that only the magazines can make to the field for readers ever to let them vanish.

Some day, I hope to see *IF* back on the stands. And I hope when I do that there will be new writers in it as well as old, new artists and old friends. I'd like to see again the aliens from Vega and maybe a gorgeous princess from far Fomalhaut on the arm of a rocket man—and I wouldn't mind a touch of space tan to him, nor be disappointed to see that he had shaggy ears! I'd like to hear the little bells the women wear beside the canals in the old towns of Mars. And I'd like to find the stories that I can't describe until some new writer thinks of them.

As for myself, I'm glad to have had this chance to bring you my opinions of books and science fiction in general. I'm grateful to those who wrote me to express their opinions, and doubly-grateful to Ejler Jakobsson and Jim Baen for letting me sound off without tampering with my views.

Being a reviewer was fun while it lasted, and some day I may try it again. But for now, let me simply sit in the Reading Room with the rest of you.

Now where did I put that latest book by Leigh Brackett? . . .

—30—

Time Deer

For the old man, and the young man he was, past, present and future became One.

CRAIG STRETE

THE old man watched the boy. The boy watched the deer. The deer was watched by all, and the Great Being above.

The old man remembered when he was a young boy and his father showed him a motorcycle thing on a parking lot.

The young boy remembered his second life with some regret, not looking forward to the coming of his first wife.

Tuesday morning the Monday morning traffic jam was three days old. The old man sat on the hood of a stalled car and watched the boy. The boy watched the deer. The deer was watched by all and the Great Being above.

The young boy resisted when his son, at the insistence of his bitch of a white wife, had tried to put him in a rest home for the elderly. Now he watched a deer beside the highway. And was watched in turn.

The old man was on the way to somewhere. He was going someplace, someplace important, he forgot just where. But he knew he was going.

The deer had relatives waiting for her, grass waiting for her, seasons being patient on her account. As much as she wanted to please the boy by letting him look at her, she had to go. She apologized with a shake of her head.

The old man watched the deer going. He knew she had someplace to go, someplace important. He did not know where she was going but he knew why.

The old man was going to be late. He could have walked. He was only going across the road. He was going across the road to get to the other side. He was going to be late for his own funeral. The old man was going someplace. He couldn't remember where.

"DID YOU make him wear the watch? If he's wearing the watch he should—"

"He's an old man, honey! His mind wanders," said Frank Strong Bull.

"Dr. Amber is waiting! Does he think we can afford to pay for every appointment he misses?" snarled Sheila, running her fingers through the tangled ends of her hair. "Doesn't he ever get anywhere on time?"

"He lives by Indian time. Being late is just something you must expect from—" he began, trying to explain.

She cut him off. "Indian this and Indian that! I'm so sick of your god damn excuses I could vomit!"

"But—"

"Let's just forget it. We don't have time to argue about it. We have to be at the doctor's office in twenty minutes. If we leave now we can just beat the rush hour traffic. I just hope your father's there when we arrive."

"Don't worry. He'll be there," said Frank, looking doubtful.

BUT THE deer could not leave. She went a little distance and then turned and came back. And the old man was moved because he knew the deer had come back because the boy knew how to look at the deer.

And the boy was happy because the deer chose to favor him. And he saw the deer for what she was. Great and golden and quick in her beauty.

And the deer knew that the boy thought her beautiful. For it was the purpose of the deer in this world on that morning to be beautiful for a young boy to look at.

And the old man who was going someplace was grateful to the deer and almost envious of the boy. But he was one with the boy who was one with the deer and they were all one with the Great Being above. So there was no envy, just the great longing of age for youth.

"THAT son of a bitch!" growled Frank Strong Bull. "The bastard cut me off." He yanked the gear shift out of fourth and slammed it into third. The tach needle shot into the red and the mustang backed off, just missing the foreign car that had swerved in front of it.

"Oh Christ— We'll be late!" muttered Sheila, turning in the car seat to look out the back window. "Get into the express lane."

"Are you kidding? With this traffic?"

His hands gripped the wheel like a weapon. He lifted his right hand and slammed the gear shift. Gears ground, caught hold and the Mustang shot ahead. Yanking the wheel to the left, he cut in front of a truck, which hit its brakes, missing the mustang by inches. He buried the gas pedal and the car responded. He pulled up level with the sports car that had cut him off. He honked and made an obscene ges-

ture as he passed. Sheila squealed with delight. "Go! Go!" she ex claimed.

THE old man had taken liberties in his life. He'd had things to remember and things he wanted to forget. Twice he had married.

The first time. He hated the first time. He'd been blinded by her looks and his hands had got the better of him. He had not known his own heart and not knowing, he had let his body decide. It was something he would always regret.

That summer he was an eagle. Free. Mating in the air. Never touching down. Never looking back. That summer. His hands that touched her were wings. And he flew and the feathers covered the scars that grew where their bodies had touched.

He was of the air and she was of the earth. She muddied his dreams. She had woman's body but lacked woman's spirit. A star is a stone to the blind. She saw him through cripplied eyes. She possessed. He shared. There was no life between them. He saw the stars and counted them one by one into her hand, that gift that all lovers share. She saw stones. And she turned away.

He was free because he needed. She was a prisoner because she wanted. One day she was gone. And he folded his wings and the earth came rushing at him and he was an old man with a small son. And he lived in a cage and was three years dead. And his son was a small hope that melted. He was his mother's son. He could see that in his son's eyes. It was something the old man would always regret.

But the deer, the young boy, these were things he would never regret.

DR. AMBER was hostile. "Damn it! Now look—I can't sign the commitment papers if I've never seen him."

Sheila tried to smile pleasantly. "He'll show up. His hotel room is just across the street. Frank will find him. Don't worry."

"I have other patients! I can't be held up by some doddering old man," snapped Dr. Amber.

"Just a few more minutes," Sheila pleaded.

"You'll have to pay for two visits. I can't run this place for free. Every minute I'm not working, I'm losing money."

"We'll pay," said Sheila grimly. "We'll pay."

THE world was big and the deer had to take her beauty through the world. She had been beautiful in one place for one boy on one morning of this world. It was time to be someplace else. The deer turned and fled into the woods, pushing her beauty before her into the world.

The young boy jumped to his feet. His heart racing, his feet pounding, he ran after her with the

abandon of youth that is caring. He chased beauty through the world and disappeared from the old man's sight in the depths of the forest.

And the old man began dreaming that—

FRANK Strong Bull's hand closed on his shoulder and his son shook him, none too gently.

The old man looked into the face of his son and did not like what he saw. He allowed himself to be led to the doctor's office.

"Finally," said Sheila. "Where the hell was he?"

Dr. Amber came into the room with a phony smile. "Ah! The elusive one appears! And how are we today?"

"We are fine," said the old man, bitterly. He pushed the outstretched stethoscope away from his chest.

"Fiesty isn't he," observed Dr. Amber.

"Let's just get this over with," said Sheila. "It's been drawn out long enough as it is."

"Not sick," said the old man. "You leave me alone." He made two fists and backed away from the doctor.

"How old is he?" asked Dr. Amber, looking at the old man's wrinkled face and white hair.

"Past eighty, at least," said his son. "The records aren't available and he can't remember himself."

"Over eighty, you say. Well, that's reason enough then," said Dr. Amber. "Let me give him a cursory examination, just a formality, and then I'll sign the papers."

The old man unclenched his fists. He looked at his son. His eyes burned. He felt neither betrayed nor wronged. He felt only sorrow. He allowed one tear, only one tear, to fall. It was for his son who could not meet his eyes.

And for the first time since his son had married her, his eyes fell upon his son's wife's eyes. She seemed to shrivel under his gaze, but she met his gaze and he read the dark things in her eyes.

They were insignificant, not truly a part of his life. He had seen the things of importance. He had watched the boy. The boy had watched the deer. And the deer had been watched by all and the Great Being above.

The old man backed away from them until his back was against a wall. He put his hand to his chest and smiled. He was dead before his body hit the floor.

"A MASSIVE coronary," said Dr. Amber to the ambulance attendant. "I just signed the death certificate."

"They the relatives?" asked the attendant, jerking a thumb at the couple sitting silently in chairs by the wall.

Dr. Amber nodded.

The attendant approached them.

"It's better this way," said

Sheila. "An old man like that, no reason to live, no—"

"Where you want I should take the body?" asked the attendant.

"Vale's Funeral Home," said Sheila.

Frank Strong Bull stared straight ahead. He heard nothing. His eyes were empty of things, light and dark.

"Where is it?" asked the attendant.

"Where is what?" asked Dr. Amber.

"The body? Where's the body?"

"It's in the next room. On the table," said Dr. Amber coming around his desk. He took the attendant's arm and led him away from the couple.

"I'll help you put it on the stretcher."

THE old man who watched the deer. He had dreamed his second wife in his dreams. He had dreamed that. But she had been real. She had come when emptiness and bitterness had possessed him. When the feathers of his youth had been torn from his wings. She filled him again with bright pieces of dreams. And for him, in that second half of his life, far from his son and that first one, he began again. Flying. Noticing the world. His eyes saw the green things, his lips tasted the sweet things and his old age was warm.

It was all bright and fast and moving, that second life of his and they were childless and godless and were themselves children and gods instead. And they grew old in their bodies but death seemed more like an old friend than an interruption. It was sleep. One night the fever took her. Peacefully. Took her while she slept and he neither wept nor followed. For she had made him young again and the young do not understand death.

"I'LL HELP you put it on the stretcher."

They opened the door.

AND THE old man watched the boy and did not understand death. And the young boy watched the deer and understood beauty. And the deer was watched by all and the Great Being above. And the boy saw the deer for what she was. And like her, he became great and golden and quick. And the old man began dreaming that—

FRANK Strong Bull's hand, his son's hand, closed on his shoulder and shook him, none too gently.

THEY opened the door. The body was gone.

THE last time it was seen, the body was chasing a deer that pushed its beauty through the world, disappearing from an old man's sight into the depths of the forest. •

A KNIGHT OF GHOSTS AND SHADOWS

Part II of II

Poul Anderson

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Technic civilization, spreading from Terra to the stars, colonizing planets, recruiting nonhuman races, eventually broke down and turned on itself. Wracked by ever fiercer wars, raided by barbarians who had acquired spaceships and modern weapons, it could find no solution but the traditional one, Caesarism. By alliance, peaceful annexation, or conquest, the Terran Empire spread its power and its Pax until it ruled a volume of space some 400 light-years in diameter. For most of the enormous number of worlds within this, control could be very light—or nonexistent for the unvisited majority—but the developed globes maintained close ties with each other.

The Empire was not the only great power in the known fraction of the galaxy. There was the Domain of Ythri, a confederation led by a winged race. And in the opposite direction was the Roidhunate of Merseia, separated from the Terran sphere by the buffer zone of the Wilderness, but nonetheless in unremitting rivalry with it. For its own safety, Terra dared not let that expansionist realm grow stronger. Cold war resulted, with occasional armed clashes the mere surfacing of a struggle which, beneath a facade of diplomatic relations, never stopped and knew no mercy. The Merseians felt history was on their side, for the Terran Empire had grown corrupt and weary, most of its leaders desirous of nothing more than peace in their own time.

Into this era DOMINIC FLANDRY *was born. As an agent of the Imperial Naval Intelligence Corps he attained distinction, eventually the rank of captain and a knighthood. He was in his mid-forties when* EMPEROR JOSIP *died and a disputed succession, following long misrule, led to civil war. Throwing in his lot with Admiral* HANS MOLITOR, *Flandry was of*

material help in winning the throne for that claimant. Thereafter, basking in the friendship of the new Emperor, he relaxed for a few years.

His pleasure reached a climax when Lt. Comm. DOMINIC HAZELTINE *of his own corps arrived on leave and sought him out. This young man was his son by a dancer who had professionally called herself Persis d'Io; when their affair ended, she had gone to live on a colony planet, never telling him she was with child. To him she had been only one of many women in his life, none of whom he had married, but he was delighted to meet Hazeltine, and they came back to Terra from a junket together on the best of terms.*

*However, Hazeltine had some disturbing news. Out in the Taurian Sector, which confronted the Roidhunate of Merseia across the Wilderness, was a planet named Dennitza, settled long ago by a largely Serbo-Croatian group. The energetic descendants of those pioneers were now prominent in their region, partly because of the Narodna Voyska: their own militia, which the treaty of annexation to the Empire had allowed them to maintain. During the civil war, their Gospodar—head of state—*BODIN MIYATOVICH *had declared for Hans Molitor and kept enemies out of that part of space. As a reward, he was appointed governor of the entire sector.*

But Dennitzan society was not Terran, . and indeed nursed a certain contempt for the decadent mother world. Moreover, it included a sizable nonhuman minority, known to its humans as zmays and to themselves as ychans—Merseian-descended, from immigrants in early days, and still retaining many old ways as well as having considerable voice in planetary doings. Such mixed cultures were not unknown elsewhere. Within the Domain of Ythri, the world Avalon contained humans; and there were humans in the Roidhunate too. But given modern Merseian racism, it seemed questionable how loyal the zmays might feel to the Imperium and how they would influence their fellow Dennitzans.

Furthermore, of late a dispute had arisen. In an effort to prevent future internecine strife, Emperor Hans had ordered that local armed forces such as the Voyska be disbanded. This was bitterly resented on Dennitza, both because of tradition and because the people did not feel they could rely on the Navy alone to protect them. Gospodar Bodin delayed compliance while his representatives on Terra tried to get the decree rescinded.

Flandry knew this. Hazeltine's word was of rebellion brewing elsewhere in the Empire: on the planet Diomedes, where certain nations among the winged inhabitants were suffering ill effects of technological change. He related that, assigned to Intelligence operations in that part of space, he had learned what a team specifically sent to Diomedes had discovered. Human agents on the planet were fanning legitimate grievances into a spirit of insurrection. They had been assumed to be sent by Ythri, from Avalon, because the would-be rebels were cherishing a hope that

the flyers yonder would feel a sense of brotherhood and aid them. But investigation gave no reason to suppose that Ythri wanted to make trouble for Terra, its natural ally against Merseia. And the capture and interrogation of an agent had proven that the operation was actually Dennitzan.

Did the Gospodar hope to distract the Imperium by stirring up a war in those parts, a war which looked like the doing of powerful Ythri? Then with the Navy perforce concentrated there, he could raise his own standard, and either try to depose Hans and seize the crown himself, or break away the whole Taurian Sector as an independent state. The latter course would necessarily put him into partnership with Merseia, and thus give the Roidhunate a bridgehead; the former would mean another round of fratricide to weaken the Empire.

The findings were not conclusive. For instance, if the operatives actually were Dennitzan, they might belong to a faction of which the Gospodar knew nothing. Hans agreed that more information was necessary before any overt action could prudently be taken. But he himself was due to leave for Sector Spica, leading an armada to quell the barbarians who were ravaging there, and would be out of touch. In a private conversation, he asked Flandry to tackle the Dennitzan problem—not as the only person involved, of course, but as one whose individualistic approach just might accomplish something where teamwork failed.

As a matter of fact, Flandry had already started, though he kept silence about that. Hazeltine had earlier called him to say that the agent captured on Diomedes had arrived on Terra, sentenced to enslavement, a common criminal penalty. Flandry had promptly bought her.

Another conversation with another man caused him still more unease. CHUNDERBAN DESAI *claimed that the civil war had not been something which merely happened; rather, it was part of an inevitable stage in the downfall of a universal state, such as had occurred again and again in past civilizations. Abortive uprisings years ago had belonged to the pattern. So had an occurrence on a planet where Desai himself was Imperial commissioner, when he narrowly averted the growth of a missionary religion which could have launched an Empire-splitting holy war.*

The instigator of that had been AYCHARAYCH, *secret agent extraordinary of Merseia. Little was known of him except that he was that theoretically impossible creature, a telepath able to read any mind thinking in any language within a short range of him. Still less was known of his home world Chereion. Its very location within the Roidhunate was a jealously guarded secret. He claimed that his race was millions of years old and had once spread widely through the cosmos before outgrowing such ephemera. But few beings today had ever even glimpsed a Chereionite, and the reason why any should actively serve Merseia was a puzzle. Over the years, he and Flandry had often contested,*

sometimes conversed—the man protected by a mindscreen—and developed a wry affection for each other. Now Flandry wondered if Aycharaych might all along have been aware of the decline-and-fall pattern of human empires and been basing his whole strategy on it.

With his personal servant CHIVES, *a nonhuman from Shalmu, and with his purchased slave, Flandry boarded his speedster the* Hooligan *and set out for Diomedes.*

The captive was certainly Dennitzan, a young and attractive woman named KOSSARA VYMEZAL. *Of a baronial family, she was the favorite niece of Gospodar Bodin Miyatovich. Flandry could not understand why the Intelligence team had shipped her off to be sold like any offending commoner. If he had not bid high for her, she would have been bought by a house of prostitution, a fate sure to enrage her entire folk if they heard of it. Furthermore, she had been hypnoprobed—quite unnecessarily, because she had never been immunized against truth drugs—and the drastic measure seemed to have been carried out so clumsily that she was largely amnesiac about the entire episode. True, the war and its aftermath had caused such attrition in the corps that now the proportion of fools in it was quite large . . .*

Kossara did not veil her hatred of the Empire, though she could not justify her feelings with complete logic. The worst undeniable fact was its late failure to maintain the Pax; the war of succession had cost her her sweetheart MIHAIL SVETICH. *Flandry's chivalrous behavior made her accept him, at least, as an honorable enemy.*

Her memory was intact until shortly before she left for Diomedes, and from shortly after she was put aboard ship for Terra. He persuaded her to tell him what fragments she had left from the period in between. She admitted Bodin Miyatovich's anger at the Emperor's ukase; that was no secret. Otherwise she could barely recollect a few minutes at a time. She had been in a cave on Diomedes with her beloved old companion, the ychan TROHDWYR; *a native named* EONAN *had spoken of revolution; the humans she met in the cave, of whom she could hardly recall anything, had spoken likewise; they were surprised by a party of Imperial marines; Trohdwyr was deliberately gut-shot and left to die in agony, while the fire fight killed all her other fellows; she had undergone the nightmarish experience of hypnoprobing, which somehow involved sight of a strange golden face; she had been summarily court-martialled and sentenced.*

Flandry informed her of what the report said had been learned from her interrogation: that she had gone to Diomedes as the personally co-opted agent of her uncle the Gospodar, to check up on the treasonous activities he had instigated. What little she now remembered was not reliable, he said; much might only be the product of delirium. She had better redeem herself and earn manumission by cooperating with him. When they reached Diomedes, he would turn her loose on the island of Lannach,

where native resentment was strongest. Surviving rebels would probably recognize her and take her to their hideout. He would give her a device by which he could track her, and so make more captures. Furious, she refused, and the voyage passed in a hostility which he regretted.

But when he had made a secret landing on Lannach, she expressed readiness to assist his scheme. Once clear of the spacecraft, she threw away the "device" and started off afoot through the woods for the coastal towns where Eonan and his associates might be—as Flandry had expected she would do. The alleged tracking gadget was a dummy; the real one was a bracelet locked on her wrist, emblem of slavery. By its means, Chives trailed her while Flandry went openly to the human-founded town, Thursday Landing.

There the Imperial resident, MARTIN LAGARD, *confirmed that Kossara and Trohdwyr had been on Diomedes, ostensibly for scientific research. They vanished in the outback, and later Cmdr.* MASPES, *head of the special investigative team, told him she had been arrested for treason. The team had since departed, and Lagard felt he could cope with the local situation. He soon left to confer with native leaders.*

Flandry took advantage of his absence to seduce his wife SUSETTE *and thus get from her the information which Maspes had left strict orders to keep secret—that among the team members had been a nonhuman, Aycharaych himself. The telepath had instantly known that nobody here had ever heard of him or his planet and so there was no particular constraint on him. The entire Maspes group must actually have been under his leadership, humans in the pay of Merseia working to subvert the Empire.*

Meanwhile Kossara succeeded in contacting Eonan, who brought her to the hidden headquarters of the operatives from space who were organizing revolt. They proved to be not Dennitzans as she had supposed, but Merseians and their human underlings.

HE CALLED himself Glydh of the Vach Rueth, nicknamed Far-Farer, an *afal* of his navy's Intelligence corps. His immediate assistant was a lanky, sallow, long-nosed man, introduced as Muhammad Snell but addressed by the superior officer as Kluwych. In the middle of wreck, Kossara could flickeringly wonder if the Eriau name had been given him by his parents, when he was born somewhere in the Roidhunate.

They took her to an office. On the way she passed through such space and among such personnel that she estimated the latter numbered about twenty, two or three of them Merseian by species, the rest human. That was probably all there were on Diomedes: sufficient to keep scores of native dupes like Eonan going, who in their turn led thousands.

Though are they dupes? she thought drearily. *Merseia would like to see them unchained from the Empire.*

No. That isn't true. Merseia doesn't give a curse. They're cheap, expendable tools.

The office was cramped and bleak. "Sit," Glydh ordered, pointing to a chair. He took a stool behind a desk. Snell settled on the left; his eyes licked her, centimeter by centimeter and back again.

"Khraich." Glydh laid his hands flat on the desktop, broad and thick, strangler's hands. "An astonishing turn of events. What shall we do with you?" His Anglic was excellent.

"Isn't this, uh, Captain Flandry more urgent, sir?" his subordinate asked.

"Not much, I believe," Glydh said. "True, from Vymezal's account via Eonan, he appears to be capable. But what can he know? That she defected, presumably joining a remnant of the underground if she didn't perish *en route.*" He pondered. "Maybe he isn't capable, at that—since he let her go, trusting her mere self-interest to keep her on his side."

Hoy? Chives said Flandry is famous . . . No. How many light-years, how many millions of minds can fame cover before it spreads vanishingly thin?

"Of course, we will have our cell in Thursday Landing keep him under surveillance, and alert our agents globally if he leaves there," Glydh continued. "But I doubt he represents more than a blind stab on the part of somebody in the opposition. I don't think he is worth the risk of trying to kidnap, or even kill."

"We may find out otherwise, sir, when we interrogate Vymezal in detail," said the man. He moistened his lips.

"Maybe. I leave that to you. Co-opt what helpers you need."

"Um-m-m . . . procedures? Treatment? Final disposition?"

"No!" Kossara heard the yell and felt the leaping to her feet, as if from outside her body. This was not real, could not be, must not be, God and saints, no. "I am not a, a Terran agent—I came here to—At least I'm a prisoner of war!"

"Sit!" Glydh's roar, and the gunshot slap of palm on desk, flung her back down like a belly blow. She heard his basso through fever-dream distances and humming: "Don't babble about military conventions. You are a slave, property we have acquired. If you do what you are told, there need not be pain. Else there will be, until you are broken to obedience. Do you hear me?"

Snell's fingers twisted together. He breathed fast. "Sir," he said, "it could be a long while before we get a chance to send a report off-planet and ask for instructions about her. So we have to use our own judgment, don't we?"

"Yes," Glydh answered.

"Well, considering what was originally intended for her, and the reason—sir, not a woman among us in this whole region—"

Glydh shrugged. His tone was faintly contemptuous. "Quiz her out first under narco. Afterward do what you like, short of disfiguring damage. Remember, we may find use for her later, and the nearest biosculp laboratory is parsecs hence."

I will make them kill me! Even as she plunged toward Snell, fingernails out to hook his eyeballs, Kossara knew Glydh would seize her and not let her die.

The explosion threw her against a wall. It made a drum of her skull. The floor heaved and cracked. Snell went over backwards, Glydh flailed about to keep his balance.

Faintly through the brief deafness that followed, she heard screams, running, bang and hiss of firearms. Ozone drifted acrid to her nostrils, smoke, smells of roastedness.

She was already out of the office, into the central chamber beyond. At its far end, through the passageway which gave on the garage, she saw how the main door lay blown off its trunnions, crumpled and red-hot. Beyond was the ruin of the cannon. Men boiled around or sprawled unmoving.

Enormous shone the bulk of a suit of combat armor. Bullets whanged off it, blaster bolts fountained. The wearer stood where he was, and his own weapon scythed.

As she broke into view—*"Kossara!"* Amplified from the helmet, his voice resounded like God's. His free hand reached beneath a plate that protected his gravbelt. He rose and moved slowly toward her. Survivors fled.

Fingers closed on her arm. Around her shoulder she saw Glydh. He swung her before his body. "That's not nice," the oncoming invader pealed. He spun his blaster nozzle to needle beam, aimed, and fired.

Glydh's brow spurted steam, brains, blood, shattered bone across Kossara. She knew a heartbeat's marvel at that kind of precision shooting. But then the heavy corpse bore her down. Her head struck the floor. Lightning filled the universe.

The armored man reached her, stood over her, shielded her. A spacecraft's flank appeared in the entry. It had sprouted a turret, whose gun sprayed every doorway where an enemy might lurk. Kossara let darkness flow free.

XI

A BREATH of air cool, pine-scented; all noises gone soft; a sense of muted energies everywhere around; a lessened weight—Kossara opened her eyes. She lay in bed, in her cabin aboard the *Hooligan.* Flandry sat alongside. He wore a plain coverall, his countenance was haggard and the gray gaze troubled. Nonetheless he smiled. "Hello, there," he murmured. "How do you feel?"

Drowsy, altogether at ease, she asked, "Have we left Diomedes?"

"Yes. We're bound for Dennitza." He took her right hand between both of his. "Now listen. Everything is all right. You weren't seriously harmed, but on examination we decided we'd better keep you under sleep induction a while, with intravenous feeding and some medication. Look at your left wrist." She did. It was bare. "Yes, the bracelet is off. As far as I'm concerned, you're free, and I'll take care of the technicalities as soon as possible. You're going home, Kossara."

Examination—She dropped her glance. A sheer nightgown covered her. "I'm sorry I never thought to bring anything more decorous for you to sleep in," Flandry said. He appeared to be summoning courage. "Chives did the doctoring, the bathing, et cetera. Chives alone." His mouth went wry. "You may or may not believe that. It's true, but hell knows how much I've lied to you."

And I to you, she thought.

He straightened in the chair and released her. "Well," he said, "would you like a spot of tea and accompaniments? You should stay in bed for another watch cycle or two, till you get your strength back."

"What happened . . . to us?"

"We'd better postpone that tale. First you should rest." Flandry rose. Almost timidly, he gave her hair a stroke. "I'll go now. Chives will bring the tea."

WAKEFULNESS returned. When the Shalmuan came to retrieve her tray, Kossara sat propped against pillows, ready for him. "I hope the refreshments were satisfactory, Donna," he said. "Would you care for something more?"

"Yes," she replied. "Information."

The slim form showed unease. "Sir Dominic feels—"

"Sir Dominic is not me." She spread her palms. "Chives, how can I relax in a jigsaw puzzle? Tell me, or ask him to tell me, what went on in that den. How did you find me? What did you do after I lost consciousness? Why?"

Chives reached a decision. "Well, Donna, we trust that in view of results obtained, you will pardon certain earlier modifications of strict veracity which Sir Dominic deemed essential. The ring he gave you was a mere ring; no such device exists as he described, at least within the purview of Technic civilization." She choked. He continued: "Sir Dominic, ah, has been known to indulge in what he describes as wistful fantasizing relevant to his occupation. Instead, the bracelet you wore was slave-driven from an external source of radiated power."

"Slave-driven. A very good word." And yet Kossara could feel no anger. She imitated it as a duty. Had they given her a tranquilizing drug which had not completely worn off?

"Your indignation is natural, Donna." Chives' tail switched his ankles. "Yet allow me to request you consider the total situation, including the fact that those whom you met were not noble liberators but Merseian operatives. Sir Dominic suspected this from the start. He believed that if you reappeared, they were sure to contact you, if only to find out what had transpired. He saw no method short of the empirical for convincing you. Furthermore, admiration for your honesty made him dubious of your ability knowingly to play a double role.

"Hence I trailed you at a discreet distance while he went to Thursday Landing to investigate other aspects of the case. Albeit my assignment had its vexations, I pinpointed the spot where you were

brought and called Sir Dominic, who by then had returned to Lannach. Underground and surrounded by metal, your bracelet was blocked from us. We concluded immediate attack was the most prudent course—for your sake particularly, Donna. While Sir Dominic flitted down in armor, I blasted the cannon and entrance. Shortly afterward I landed to assist and, if you will excuse my immodesty, took the single prisoner we got. The rest were either dead or, ah, holed up sufficiently well that we decided to content ourselves with a nuclear missile dispatched through the entrance.

"The resultant landslide was somewhat spectacular. Perhaps later you will be interested to see the movie I took.

"Ah . . . what he has learned has made Sir Dominic of the opinion that we must speed directly to Dennitza. Nevertheless, I assure you he would in all events have seen to your repatriation at the earliest feasible date."

Chives lifted her tea tray. "This is as much as I should tell you at the present stage, Donna. I trust you can screen whatever you wish in the way of literary, theatrical, or musical diversion. If you require assistance of any kind, please call on the intercom. I will return in two hours with a bowl of chicken soup. Is that satisfactory?"

STARS filled the saloon viewscreen behind Flandry's head. The ship went *hush-hush-hush,* on a voyage which, even at her pseudospeed, would take a Terran month. The whisky he had poured for them glowed across tongue and palate.

"It's a foul story," he warned.

"Does evil go away just because we keep silent?" Kossara answered. Inwardly: *How evil are you, you claw of the Empire?*—but again without heat, a thought she felt obliged to think.

After all, his lean features look so grim and unhappy, across the table from her. He shouldn't chain smoke the way he did; anticancer shots, cardivascular treatments, lungflashes, and everything, it remained a flagellant habit. One could serve a bad cause without being a bad man. Couldn't one?

He sighed and drank. "Very well. A sketch. I got a lot of details from a narcoquiz of our prisoner, but most are simply that, details, useful in hunting down the last of his outfit if and when that seems worthwhile. He did, though, confirm and amplify something much more scary."

Memory prodded her with a cold finger. "Where is he?"

"Oh, I needled him and bunged him out an airlock." Flandry observed her shock. His tone changed from casual to defensive. "We were already in space; this business doesn't allow delays. As for turning him over to the authorities when we arrive—there may not be any authorities, or they may be in full revolt, Merseian-allied. At best, the fact he was alive could trickle across to enemy Intelligence, and give them valuable clues to what we know. This is how the game's played, Kossara." He trailed out smoke before he added, "Happens his name was Muhammad Snell."

Blood beat in temples and

cheeks. "He got no chance—I don't need avengers."

"Maybe your people will," he said quietly.

After a second he leaned forward, locked eyes with her, and continued: "Let's begin explanations from my viewpoint. I want you to follow my experiences and reasoning, in hopes you'll then accept my conclusions. You're an embittered woman, for more cause than you know right now. But I think you're also intelligent, fair-minded, yes, tough-minded enough to recognize truth, no matter what rags it wears."

Kossara told herself she must be calm, watchful, like a cat—like Butterfeet when she was little . . . She drank. "Go on."

Flandry filled his lungs. "The Gospodar, the Dennitzans in general are furious at Hans' scheme to disband their militia and make them wholly dependent on the Navy," he said. "After they supported him through the civil war, too! And we've other sources of friction, inevitable; and thoughts of breaking away or violently replacing the regnant Emperor are no longer unthinkable. Dennitza has its own culture, deep-rooted, virile, alien to Terra and rather contemptuous thereof—a culture influenced by Merseia, both directly and through the, uh, zmay element in your population.

"Aye, granted, you've long been in the forefront of resistance to the Roidhunate. However, such attitudes can change overnight. History's abulge with examples. For instance, England's rebellious North American colonies calling on the French they fought less than two decades before; or America a couple of centuries later, allied first with the Russians against the Germans, then turning straight around and—" He stopped. "This doesn't mean anything to you, does it? No matter. You can see the workings in your own case, I'm sure. Dennitza is where your loyalties lie. What you do, whom you support, those depend on what you judge is best for Dennitza. Right? Yes, entirely right and wholesome. But damnably misleadable."

"Are you, then, a Terran loyalist?" she demanded.

He shook his head. "A civilization loyalist. Which is a pretty thin, abstract thing to be; and I keep wondering whether we can preserve civilization or even should.

"Well. Conflict of interest is normal. Compromise is too, especially with as valuable a tributary as Dennitza—*provided* it stays tributary. Now we'd received strong accusations that Dennitzans were engineering revolt on Diomedes, presumably in preparation for something similar at home. His Majesty's government wasn't about to bull right in. That'd be sure to bring on trouble we can ill afford, perhaps quite unnecessarily. But the matter had to be investigated.

"And I, I learned a Dennitzan girl of ranking family had been caught at subversion on Diomedes. Her own statements out of partial recollections, her undisguised hatred of the Imperium, they seemed to confirm those accusations. Being asked to look into the question, what would I do but bring you along?"

He sighed. "A terrible mistake. We should've headed straight for Dennitza. Hindsight is always keen, isn't it, while foresight stays myopic, astigmatic, strabismic, and drunk. But I haven't even that excuse. I'd guessed at the truth from the first. Instead of going off to see if I could prove my hunch or not—" His fist smote the table. "I should *never* have risked you the way I did, Kossara!"

She thought, amazed, *He is in pain about that. He truly is.*

"A-a-ah," Flandry said. "I'm a ruthless bastard. Better hunter than prey, and have we any third choice in these years? Or so I thought. You . . . were only another life."

He ground out his cigarette, sprang from the bench, strode back and forth along the cabin. Sometimes his hands were gripped together behind him, sometimes knotted at his sides. His voice turned quick and impersonal:

"You looked like a significant pawn, though. Why such an incredibly bungled job on you? Including your enslavement on Terra. I'd have heard about you in time, but it was sheer luck I did before you'd been thrown into a whorehouse. And how would your uncle the Gospodar react to *that* news if it reached him?

"Might it be intended to reach him?

"Oh, our enemies couldn't be certain what'd happen; but you tilted the probabilities in their favor. They must've spent considerable time and effort locating you. Flandry's Law: 'Given a sufficiently large population, at least one member will fit any desired set of specifications.' The trick is to find that member."

"What?" Kossara exclaimed. "Do you mean—because I was who I was, in the position I was—that's why Dennitza—" She could speak no further.

"Well, let's say you were an important factor," he replied. "I'm not sure just how you came into play, though I can guess. On the basis of my own vague ideas, I made a decoy of you in the manner you've already heard about. That involved first deliberately antagonizing you on the voyage; then deliberately gambling your life, health, sanity—"

He halted in midstride. His shoulders slumped. She could barely hear him, though his look did not waver from hers: "Every minute makes what I did hurt worse."

She wanted to tell him he was forgiven, yes, go take his hands and tell him; but no, he had lied too often. With an effort, she said, "I am surprised."

His grin was wry. "Less than I am." Returning, he flopped back onto the bench, crossed ankle over thigh till he peered across his knee at her, swallowed a long draught from his glass, took out his cigarette case; and when the smoke was going he proceeded:

"Let's next assume the enemy's viewpoint, i.e. what I learned and deduced.

"They—a key one of them, anyhow—he realizes the Terran Empire is in an era when periods of civil war are as expectable as bouts of delirium in chronic umwi fever. I

wasn't quite aware of the fact myself till lately. A conversation I had set me thinking and researching. But he knew right along, my opponent. At last I see what he's been basing his strategy on for the past couple of decades. Knowing him, if he believes the theory, I think I will. These days we're vulnerable to fratricide, Kossara. And what better for Merseia, especially if just the right conflict can be touched off at just the right moment?

"We've been infiltrated. They've had sleepers among us for . . . maybe a lifetime . . . notably in my own branch of service, where they can cover up for each other . . . and notably during this past generation, when the chaos first of the Josip regime, then the succession struggle, made it easier to pass off their agents as legitimate colonial volunteers.

"The humans on Diomedes, brewing revolution with the help of a clever Alatanist pitch—thereby diverting some of our attention to Ythri—they weren't Dennitzans. They were creatures of the Roidhunate, posing as Dennitzans. Oh, not blatantly; that'd've been a giveaway. And they were sincerely pushing for an insurrection, since any trouble of ours is a gain for them. But a major objective of the whole operation was to drive yet another wedge between your people and mine, Kossara."

Frost walked along her spine. She stared at him and whispered: "Those men who caught me—murdered Trohdwyr—tortured and sentenced me—they were Merseians too?"

"They were human," Flandry said flatly, while he unfolded himself into a more normal posture. "They were sworn-in members of the Imperial Terran Naval Intelligence Corps. But, yes, they were serving Merseia. They arrived to 'investigate' and thus add credence to the clues about Dennitza which their earlier-landed fellows had already been spreading around.

"Let the Imperium get extremely suspicious of the Gospodar—d' you see? The Imperium will have to act against him. It dare not stall any longer. But this action forces the Gospodar to respond—he already having reason to doubt the goodwill of the Terrans—"

Flandry smashed his cigarette, drank, laid elbows on table and said most softly, his face near hers:

"He'd hear rumors, and send somebody he could trust to look into them. Aycharaych—I'll describe him later—Aycharaych of the Roidhunate knew that person would likeliest be you. He made ready. Your incrimination, as far as Terra was concerned—your degradation, as far as Dennitza was concerned—d' you see? Inadequate by themselves to provoke war. Still, remind me and I'll tell you about Jenkins' Ear. Nations on the brink don't need a large push to send them toppling.

"I've learned something about how you were lured, after you reached Diomedes. The rest you can tell me, if you will. Because when he isn't weaving mirages, Aycharaych works on minds. He directed the blotting out of your memories. He implanted the false half-memories and that hate of the Empire you carry around. Given

his uncanny telepathic capabilities, to let him monitor what drugs, electronics, hypnotism are doing to a brain, he can accomplish what nobody else is able to.

"But I don't think he totally wiped what was real. That'd have left you too unmistakably worked over. I think you keep most of the truth in you, disguised and buried."

The air sucked between her teeth. Her fists clenched on the table. He laid a hand across them, big and gentle.

"I hope I can bring back what you've lost, Kossara." The saying sounded difficult. "And, and free you from those conditioned-reflex emotions. It's mainly a matter of psychotherapy. I don't insist. Ask yourself: Can you trust me that much?"

XII

SICKBAY was a single compartment, but astonishingly well equipped. Kossara entered with tightness in her gullet and dryness on her tongue. Flandry and Chives stood behind a surgical table. An electronic helmet, swiveled out above the pillow, crouched like an ugly arachnoid. The faint hum of driving energies, ventilation, service and life support devices, seemed to her to have taken on a shrill note.

Flandry had left flamboyancy outside. Tall in a plain green coverall, he spoke unsmiling: "Your decision isn't final yet. Before we go any further, let me explain. Chives and I have done this sort of thing before, and we aren't a bad team, but we're not professionals."

This sort of thing—Muhammad Snell must lately have lain on that mattress, in the dream-bewildered helplessness of narco, while yonder man pumped him dry and injected the swift poison. *Shouldn't I fear the Imperialist? Dare I risk becoming the ally of one who treated a sentient being as we do a meat animal?*

I ought to feel indignation. I don't, though. Nor do I feel guilty that I don't.

Well, I'm not revengeful, either. At least, not very much. I do remember how Trohdwyr died because he was an inconvenience; I remember how Mihail Svetich died, in a war Flandry says our enemies want to kindle anew.

Flandry says—She heard him from afar, fast and pedantic. Had he rehearsed his speech?

"This is not a hypnoprobe here, of course. It puts a human straight into quasisleep and stimulates memory activity, after a drug has damped inhibitions and emotions. In effect, everything the organism has permanently recorded becomes accessible to a questioner—assuming no deep conditioning against it. The process takes more time and skill than an ordinary quiz, where all that's wanted is something the subject consciously knows but isn't willing to tell. Psychiatrists use it to dig out key, repressed experiences in severely disturbed patients. I've mainly used it to get total accounts, generally from cooperative witnesses—significant items they may have noticed but forgotten. In your case, we'd best go in several fairly brief sessions, spaced three or four watches apart. That way you can

assimilate your regained knowledge and avoid a crisis. The sessions will give you no pain and leave no recollection of themselves."

She brought her whole attention to him. "Do you play the tapes for me when I wake?" she asked.

"I could," he replied, "but wouldn't you prefer I wiped them? You see, when our questions have brought out a coherent framework of what was buried, a simple command will fix it in your normal memory. By association, that will recover everything else. You'll come to with full recall of whatever episode we concentrated on."

His eyes dwelt gravely upon her. "You must realize," he continued, "your whole life will be open to us. We'll try hard to direct our questioning so we don't intrude. However, there's no avoiding all related and heavily charged items. You'll blurt many of them out. Besides, we'll have to feel our way. Is such-and-such a scrap of information from your recent, bad past—or is it earlier, irrelevant? Often we'll need to develop a line of investigation for some distance before we can be sure.

"We're bound to learn things you'll wish we didn't. You'll simply have to take our word that we'll keep silence ever afterward . . . and, yes, pass no judgment, lest we be judged by ourselves.

"Do you really want that, Kossara?"

She nodded with a stiff neck. "I want the truth."

"You can doubtless learn enough for practical purposes by talking to the Gospodar, if he's alive and available when we reach Dennitza. And I make no bones: one hope of mine is gaining insight into the *modus operandi* of Merseian Intelligence, a few clear identifications of their agents among us . . . for the benefit of the Empire.

"I won't compel you," Flandry finished. "Please think again before you decide."

She squared her shoulders. "I have thought." Holding out her hand: "Give me the medicine."

The first eventide, her feet dragged her into the saloon. Flandry saw her disheveled, drably clad, signs of weeping upon her, against the stars. She had long been in her own room behind a closed door.

"You needn't eat here, you know," he said in his gentlest tone.

"Thank you, but I will." she answered.

"I admire your courage more than I have words to tell, dear. Come, sit down, take a drink or three before dinner." Since he feared she might refuse, lest that seem to herself like running away from what was in her, he added, "Trohdwyr would like a toast to his *manes,* wouldn't he?"

She followed the suggestion in a numb way. "Will the whole job be this bad?" she asked.

"No." He joined her, pouring Merseian telloch for them both though he really wanted a Mars-dry martini. "I was afraid things might go as they went, the first time, but couldn't see any road around. You did witness Trohdwyr's murder, he suffered hideously, and he'd been your beloved mentor your whole life. The pain wasn't annulled just

because your thalamus was temporarily anesthetized. Being your strongest lost memory, already half in consciousness, it came out ahead of any others. And it's still so isolated it feels like yesterday."

She settled wearily back. "Yes," she said. "Before, everything was blurred, even that. Now . . . the faces, the whole betrayal—"

NOBODY died in the cave except Trohdwyr. The rest stood by when a mere couple of marines arrived to arrest her. "*You* called them!" she screamed to the one who bore the name Steve Johnson, surely not his own. He grinned. Trohdwyr lunged, trying to get her free, win her a chance to scramble down the slope and vanish. The lieutenant blasted him. The life in his tough old body had not ebbed out, under the red moons, when they pulled her away from him.

Afterward she overheard Johnson: "Why'd you kill the servant? Why not take him along?"

And the lieutenant: "He'd only be a nuisance. As is, when the Diomedeans find him, they won't get suspicious at your group's disappearance. They'll suppose the Terrans caught you. Which should make them handier material. For instance, if we want any of those who met you here to go guerrilla, our contact men can warn them they've been identified through data pulled out of you prisoners."

"Hm, what about us four?"

"They'll decide at headquarters. I daresay they'll reassign you to a different region. Come on, now, let's haul mass." The lieutenant's boot nudged Kossara, where she slumped wrist-bound against the cold cave wall. "On your feet, bitch!")

"HIS DEATH happened many weeks ago," Flandry said. "Once you get more memories back, you'll see it, feel it in perspective—including time perspective. You'll have done your grieving . . . which you did, down underneath; and you're too healthy to mourn forever."

"I will always miss him," she whispered.

Flandry regarded ghosts of his own. "Yes, I know."

She straightened. He saw her features harden, as if bones lent strength to flesh. The blue-green eyes turned arctic. "Sir Dominic, you were right in what you did to Snell. Nobody in that gang was—is—fit to live."

"Well, we're in a war, we and they, the nastier for being undeclared," he said carefully. "What you and I must do, if we can, is keep the sickness from infecting your planet. Or to the extent it has, if I may continue the metaphor, we've got to supply an antibiotic before the high fever takes hold and the eruptions begin."

His brutal practicality worked as he had hoped, to divert her from both sorrow and rage. "What do you plan?" The question held some of the crispness which ordinarily was hers.

"Before leaving Diomedes," he said, "I contacted Lagard's field office on Lannach, transmitted a coded message for him to record, and showed him my authority to

command immediate courier service. The message is directly to the Emperor. The code will bypass channels. In summary, it says, 'Hold off on Dennitza, no matter what you hear, till I've collected full information'—followed by a synopsis of all I've learned thus far."

She began faintly to glow in her exhaustion. "Why, wonderful."

"M-m-m, not altogether, I'm afraid." Flandry let the telloch savage his throat. "Remember, by now his Majesty's barbarian-quelling on the Spican frontier. He'll move around a lot. The courier may not track him down for a while. Meantime—The Admiralty on Terra may get word which provokes it to emergency action, without consulting Emperor or Policy Board. It has that right, subject to a later court of inquiry. And I've no direct line there. Probably make no difference if I did. Maybe not even any difference what I counsel Hans. I'm a lone agent. They could easily decide I must be wrong."

He forced a level look at her. "Or Dennitza could in fact have exploded, giving Emperor and Admiralty no choice," he declared. "The Merseians are surely working that side of the street too."

"You hope I—we can get my uncle and the Shkoptsina to stay their hands?" she asked.

"Yes," Flandry said. "This is a fast boat. However . . . we'll be a month in transit, and Aycharaych & Co. have a long jump on us."

THE RESIDENT and his lady made her welcome at Thursday Landing. They advised her against taking her research to the Sea of Achan countries. Unrest was particularly bad there. Indeed, she and her Merseian—pardon, her xenosophont companion—would do best to avoid migratory societies in general. Could they not gather sufficient data among the sedentary and maritime Diomedeans? Those were more intimate with modern civilization, more accustomed to dealing with offworlders, therefore doubtless more relevant to the problem which had caused her planetary government to send her here.

Striving to mask her nervousness, she met Commander Maspes and a few junior officers of the Imperial Naval Intelligence team that was investigating the disturbances. He was polite but curt. His attitude evidently influenced the younger men, who must settle for stock words and sidelong stares. Yes, Maspes said, it was common knowledge that humans were partly responsible for the revolutionary agitation and organization on this planet. Most Diomedeans believed they were Avalonians, working for Ythri. Some native rebels, caught and interrogated, said they had actually been told so by the agents themselves. And indeed the Alatanist mystique was a potent recruiter . . . Yet how could a naive native distinguish one kind of human from another? Maybe Ythri was being maligned . . . He should say no more at the present stage. Had Donna Vymezal had a pleasant journey? What was the news at her home?

Lagard apologized that he must bar her from a wing of the Resi-

dency. "A team member, his work's confidential and—well, you are a civilian, you will be in the outback, and he's a xeno, distinctive appearance—"

Kossara smiled. "I can dog my hatch," she said; "but since you wish, I'll leash my curiosity." She gave the matter scant thought, amidst everything else.)

FLANDRY greeted her at breakfast: *"Dobar yutro, Dama."*

Startled, she asked, "You are learning Serbic?"

"As fast as operant conditioning, electronics, and the pharmacopoeia can cram it into me." He joined her at table. Orange juice shone above the cloth. Coffee made the air fragrant. He drank fast. She saw he was tired.

"I wondered why you are so seldom here when off duty," she said.

"That's the reason."

He gazed out at the stars. She considered him. After a while, during which her pulse accelerated, she said, "No. I mean, if you're studying, there is no need. You must know most of us speak Anglic. You need an excuse to avoid me."

It was his turn for surprise. "Eh? Why in cosmos would I that?"

She drew breath, feeling cheeks, throat, breasts redden. "You think I'm embarrassed at what you've learned of me."

"No—" He swung his look to her. "Yes. Not that I—Well, I try not to, and what comes out regardless shows you clean as a . . . knife blade— But of course you're full of life, you've been in love and—" Abruptly he flung his head back and laughed. "Oh, hellflash! I was afraid you would make me stammer like a schoolboy."

"I'm not angry. Haven't you saved me? Aren't you healing me?" She gathered resolution. "I did have to think hard, till I saw how nothing about me could surprise you."

"Oh, a lot could. Does." Their eyes met fully.

"Maybe you can equalize us a little," she said through a rising drumbeat. "Tell me of your own past, what you really are under that flexmail you always wear." She smiled. "In exchange, I can help you in your language lessons, and tell you stories about Dennitza that can't be in your records. The time has been lonely for me, Dominic."

"For us both," he said as though dazed.

Chives brought in an omelet and fresh-baked bread.

FROM a dealer in Thursday Landing, Kossara rented an aircamper and field equipment, bought rations and guidebooks, requested advice. She needed information for its own sake as well as for cover. On the long voyage here—three changes of passenger-carrying freighter—she had absorbed what material on Diomedes the Shkola in Zorkagrad could supply. That wasn't much. It could well have been zero if the planet weren't unusual enough to be used as an interest-grabbing example in certain classes. She learned scraps of astronomy, physics, chemistry, topology, meteorology, biology, ethnology, history, economics,

politics; she acquired a few phrases in several different languages, no real grasp of their grammar or semantics; her knowledge was a twig to which she clung above the windy chasm of her ignorance about an entire world.

After a few days getting the feel of conditions, she and Trohdwyr flew to Lannach. The resident had not actually forbidden them. In the towns along Sagna Bay, they went among the gaunt high dwellings of the winged folk, seeking those who understood Anglic and might talk somewhat freely. "We are from a planet called Dennitza. We wish to find out how to make friends and stay friends with a people who resemble you—"

Eonan the factor proved helpful. Increasingly, Kossara tried to sound him out, and had an idea he was trying to do likewise to her. Whether or not he was involved in the subversive movement, he could well fear she came from Imperial Intelligence to entrap comrades of his. And yet the name "Dennitza" unmistakably excited more than one individual, quick though the Diomedeans were to hide that reaction.

How far Dennitza felt, drowned in alien constellations! At night in their camper, she and Trohdwyr would talk long and late about old days and future days at home; he would sing his gruff ychan songs to her, and she would recite the poems of Simich that he loved: until at last an inner peace came to them both, bearing its gift of sleep.)

FLANDRY always dressed for dinner. He liked being well turned out; it helped create an atmosphere which enhanced his appreciation of the food and wine; and Chives would raise polite hell if he didn't. Kossara slopped in wearing whatever she'd happened to don when she got out of bed. Not to mock her mourning, he settled for the blue tunic, red sash, white trousers, and soft half-boots that were a human officer's ordinary mess uniform.

When she entered the saloon in evening garb, he nearly dropped the cocktail pitcher. Amidst the subdued elegance around her, she suddenly outblazed a great blue star and multitudinously lacy nebula which dominated the viewscreen. Burgundy-hued velvyl sheathed each curve of her tallness, from low on the bosom to silvery slippers. A necklace of jet and turquoise, a bracelet of gold, gleamed against ivory skin. Diamond-studded tiara and crystal earrings framed the ruddy hair; but a few freckles across her snub nose redeemed that high-cheeked, full-mouthed, large-eyed face from queenliness.

"Nom de Dieu!" he gasped, and there sang through him, *Yes, God, Whom the believers say made all triumphant beauty. She breaks on me and takes me like a wave of sunlit surf.* "Woman, that's not fair! You should have sent a trumpeter to announce you."

She chuckled. "I decided it was past time I do Chives the courtesy of honoring his cuisine. He fitted me yesterday and promised to exceed himself in the galley."

Flandry shook head and clicked tongue. "Pity I won't be paying his

dishes much attention." Underneath, he hurt for joy.

"You will. I know you, Dominic. And I will too." She pirouetted. "This gown is lovely, isn't it? Being a woman again—" The air sent him an insinuation of her perfume, while it lilted with violins.

"Then you feel recovered?"

"Yes." She sobered. "I felt strength coming back, the strength to be glad, more and more these past few days." A stride brought her to him. He had set the pitcher down. She took both his hands—the touch radiated through him—and said gravely: "Oh, I've not forgotten what happened, nor what may soon happen. But life is good. I want to celebrate its goodness . . . with you, who brought me home to it. I can never rightly thank you for that, Dominic."

Nor can I rightly thank you for existing, Kossara. In spite of what she had let slip beneath the machine, she remained too mysterious for him to hazard kissing her. He took refuge: "Yes, you can. You can throw off your frontier steadfastness, foresight, common sense, devotion to principle, et cetera, and be frivolous. If you don't know how to frivol, watch me. Later you may disapprove to your heart's contempt, but tonight let's cast caution to the winds, give three-point-one-four-one-six cheers and speak disrespectfully of the Lesser Magellanic Cloud."

Laughing, she released him. "Do you truly think we Dennitzans are so stiff? I'd call us quite jolly. Wait till you've been to a festival, or till I show you how to dance the luka."

"Why not now? It will help us to work up an appetite."

She shook her head. The tiara flung glitter which he noticed only peripherally because of her eyes. "No, I'd rip this dress, or else pop out of it like a cork. Our dances are all lively. Some people say they have to be."

"The prospect of watching you demonstrate makes me admit there's considerable to be said for an ice-age."

Actually, the summers where she lived were warm. Further south, the Pustinya desert was often hot. A planet is too big, too many-sided for a single idea like "glacial era" to encompass.

Through Flandry passed the facts he had read, a parched obbligato to the vividness breathing before him. He would not truly know her till he knew the land, sea, sky which had given her to creation; but the data were a beginning.

Zoria was an F8 sun, a third again as luminous as Sol. Dennitza, slightly smaller than Terra, orbiting at barely more than Terran distance from the primary, should have been warmer—and had been for most of its existence. Loss of water through ultraviolet cracking had brought about that just half the surface was ocean-covered. This, an axial tilt of 32½°, and an 18.8-hour rotation period led to extremes of weather and climate. Basically terrestroid, its organisms adapted as they evolved in a diversity of environments.

That stood them in good stead when the catastrophe came. Less than a million years ago, a shower of giant meteoroids struck, or perhaps an asteroid shattered in the

atmosphere. Whirled around the globe by enormous forces, the stones cratered dry land—devastated by impact, concussion, radiation, fire which followed—cast up dust which dimmed the sun for years afterward. Worse were the ocean strikes. The tsunamis they raised merely ruined every coast on the planet; life soon returned. But the thousands of cubic kilometers of water they evaporated became a cloud cover that endured for millennia. The energy balance shifted. Ice caps formed at the poles, grew, begot glaciers reaching halfway to the equator. Species, genera, families died; fossil beds left hints that among them had been a kind starting to make tools. New forms arose, winter-hardy in the temperate zones, desperately contentious in the tropics.

Then piece by piece the heavens cleared, sunlight grew brilliant again, glaciers melted back. The retreat of the ice that men found when they arrived, 600 years later was a rout. The Great Spring brought woes of its own, storms, floods, massive extinctions and migrations to overthrow whole ecologies. In her own brief lifespan, Kossara had seen coastal towns abandoned before a rising sea.

Her birth country lay not far inland, though sheltered from northerly winds and easterly waters—the Kazan, Cauldron, huge astrobleme on the continent Rodna, a bowl filled with woods, farmlands, rivers, at its middle Lake Stoyan and the capital Zorkagrad. Her father was voivode of Dubina Dolyina province, named for the gorge that the Lyubisha River had cut through the ringwall on its way south from the dying snows. Thus she grew up child of a lord close to the people he guided, wilderness child who was often in town, knowing the stars both as other suns and as elven friends to lead her home after dark . . .

Flandry took her arm. "Come, my lady," he said. "Be seated. This evening we shall not eat, we shall dine."

AT LAST Eonan told Kossara about a person in the mountain community Salmenbrok who could give her some useful tidings. If she liked, he would take her and Trohdwyr on his gravsled—he didn't trust her vehicle in these airs—and introduce them. More he would not yet say. They accepted eagerly.

Aloft he shifted course. "I bespoke one in Salmenbrok because I feared spies overhearing," he explained. "The truth is, they are four in a cave whom we will visit. I have asked them about you, and they will have you as guests while you explore each other's intents."

She thought in unease that when the Diomedean went back, she and her companion would be left flightless, having brought no gravbelts along. The ychan got the same realization and growled. She plucked up the nerve to shush him and say, "Fine."

The two men and two women she met were not her kind. Racial types, accents, manners, their very gaits belied it. Eonan talked to them and her passionately, as if they really were Dennitzans who had come to prepare the liberation

of his folk. She bided in chill and tension, speaking little and nothing to contradict, until he departed. Then she turned on them and cried, "What's this about?" Her hand rested on her sidearm. Trohdwyr bulked close, ready to attack with pistol, knife, tail, foot-claws if they threatened her.

Steve Johnson smiled, spread empty fingers, and replied, "Of course you're puzzled. Please come inside where it's warmer and we'll tell you." The rest behaved in equally friendly wise.

Their story was simple in outline. They too were Imperial subjects, from Esperance. That planet wasn't immensely remote from here. True to its pacifistic tradition, it had stayed neutral during the succession fight, declaring it would pledge allegiance to whoever gave the Empire peace and law again. (Kossara nodded. She had heard of Esperance.) But this policy required a certain amount of armed might and a great deal of politicking and intriguing abroad, to prevent forcible recruitment by some or other pretender. The Esperiancians thus got into the habit of taking a more active role than hitherto. Conditions remained sufficiently turbulent after Hans was crowned to keep the habit in tune.

When their Intelligence heard rumors of Ythrian attempts to foment revolution on Diomedes, their government was immediately concerned. Esperance was near the border of Empire and Domain. Agents were smuggled onto Diomedes to spy out the truth—discreetly, since God alone knew what the effect of premature revelations might be. Johnson's party was such a band.

"Predecessors of ours learned Dennitzans were responsible," he said. "Not Avalonian humans serving Ythri, but Dennitzan humans serving their war lord."

"No!" Kossara interrupted, horrified. "That isn't true! And he's not a war lord!"

"It was what the natives claimed, Mademoiselle Vymezal," the Asian-looking woman said mildly. "We decided to try posing as Dennitzans. Our project had learned enough about the underground—names of various members, for instance—that it seemed possible, granted the autochthons couldn't spot the difference. Their reaction to us does indicate they . . . well, they have reason to believe Dennitzans are sparking their movement. We've been, ah, leading them on, collecting information without actually helping them develop paramilitary capabilities. When Eonan told us an important Dennitzan had arrived, openly but with hints she could be more than a straightforward scientist—naturally, we grew interested."

"Well, you've been fooled," burst from Kossara. "I'm here to, to disprove those exact same charges against us. The Gospodar, our head of state, he's my uncle and he sent me as his personal agent. I should know, shouldn't I? And I tell you, he's loyal. *We* are!"

"Why doesn't he proclaim it?" Johnson asked.

"Oh, he is making official representations. But what are they worth? Across 400 light-years—We

need proof. We need to learn who's been blackening us and why." Kossara paused for a sad smile. "I don't pretend I can find out much. I'm here as a, a forerunner, a scout. Maybe that special Navy team working out of Thursday Landing—have you heard about them?—maybe they'll exonerate us without our doing anything. Maybe they already have. The commander didn't act suspicious of me."

Johnson patted her hand. "I believe you're honest, Mademoiselle," he said. "And you may well be correct, too. Let's exchange what we've discovered—and, in between, give you some outdoor recreation. You look space-worn."

The next three darkling springtime days were pleasant. Kossara and Trohdwyr stopped wearing weapons in the cave.)

Flandry sighed. "Aycharaych." He had told her something of his old antagonist. "Who else? Masks within masks, shadows that cast shadows . . . Merseian operatives posing as Esperancians posing as Dennitzans whose comrades had formerly posed as Avalonians, while other Merseian creatures are in fact the Terran personnel they claim to be . . . Yes, I'll bet my chance of a peaceful death that Aycharaych is the engineer of the whole diablerie."

He drew on a cigarette, rolled acridity over his tongue and streamed it out his nostrils, as if this mordant would give reality a fast hold on him. He and she sat side by side on a saloon bench. Before them was the table, where stood glasses and a bottle of Demerara rum. Beyond was the viewscreen, full of night and stars. They had left the shining nebula behind; an unlit mass of cosmic dust reared thunderhead tall across the Milky Way. The ship's clocks declared the hour was late. Likewise did the silence around, above the hum which had gone so deep into their bones that they heard it no more.

Kossara wore a housedress whose brevity made him all too aware of long legs, broad bosom, a vein lifting blue from the dearest hollow that her shoulderbones made at the base of her throat. She shivered a trifle and leaned near him, unperfumed now except for a sunny odor of woman. "Monstrous," she mumbled.

"N-no . . . well, I can't say." *Why do I defend him?* Flandry wondered, and knew: *I see in my mirror the specter of him. Though who of us is flesh and who image?* "I'll admit I can't hate him, even for what he did to you and will do to your whole people and mine if he can. I'll kill him the instant I'm able, but—Hm, I suppose you never saw or heard of a coral snake. It's venomous but very beautiful, and strikes without malice . . . Not that I really know what drives Aycharaych. Maybe he's an artist of overriding genius. That's a kind of monster, isn't it?"

She reached for her glass, withdrew her hand—she was a light drinker—and gripped the table edge instead, till the ends of her nails turned white. "Can such a labyrinth of a scheme work? Aren't there hopelessly many chances for something to go wrong?"

Flandry found solace in a return

to pragmatics, regardless of what bitterness lay behind. "If the whole thing collapses, Merseia hasn't lost much. Not Hans nor any Emperor can make the Terran aristocrats give up their luxuries—first and foremost, their credo that eventual accommodation is possible—and go after the root of the menace. He couldn't manage anything more than a note of protest and perhaps the suspension of a few negotiations about trade and the like. His underlings would depose him before they allowed serious talk about singeing the beard the Roidhun hasn't got."

His cigarette butt scorched his fingers. He tossed it away and took a drink of his own. The piratical pungency heartened him till he could speak in detachment, almost amusement: "Any plotter must allow for his machine losing occasional nuts and bolts. You're an example. Your likely fate as a slave was meant to outrage every man on Dennitza when the news arrived there. By chance, I heard about you in the well-known and deservedly popular nick of time—I, not someone less cautious—"

"Less noble." She stroked his arm. It shone inside.

Nonetheless he grinned and said, "True, I may lack scruples, but not warm blood. I'm a truncated romantic. A mystery, a lovely girl, an exotic planet—could I resist hallooing off—"

It jarred through him: *—off into whatever trap was set by a person who knew me?* His tongue went on. "However, prudence, not virtue, was what made me careful to do nothing irrevocable" *to you, darling; I praise the Void that nothing irrevocable happened to you.* "And we did luck out, we did destroy the main Merseian wart on Diomedes." *Was the luck poor silly Susette and her husband's convenient absence? Otherwise I'd have stayed longer at Thursday Landing, playing sleuth—long enough to give an assassin, who was expecting me specifically, a chance at me.*

No! This is fantastic! Forget it!

"Wasn't that a disaster to the enemy?" Kossara asked.

"'Fraid not. I don't imagine they'll get their Diomedian insurgency. But that's a minor disappointment. I'm sure the whole operation was chiefly a means to the end of maneuvering Terra into forcing Dennitza to revolt. And those false clues have long since been planted and let sprout; the false authoritative report has been filed; in short, about as much damage has been done on the planet as they could reasonably expect."

Anguish: "Do you think . . . we will find civil war?"

He laid an arm around her. She leaned into the curve of it, against his side. "The Empire seldom bumbles fast," he comforted her. "Remember, Hans himself didn't want to move without more information. He saw no grounds for doubting the Maspes report—that Dennitzans were involved—but he realized they weren't necessarily the Gospodar's Dennitzans. That's why I got recruited, to check further. In addition, plain old bureaucratic inertia works in our favor. Yes, as far as the problems created

on Diomedes are concerned, I'm pretty sure we'll get you home in time."

"Thanks to you, Dominic." Her murmur trembled. "To none but you."

He did not remind her that Diomedes was not, could never have been the only world on which the enemy had worked, and that events on Dennitza would not have been frozen. This was no moment for reminders, when she kissed him.

Her shyness in it made him afraid to pursue. But they sat together a spell, mute before the stars, until she bade him goodnight.

IN THE tundra far north of the Kazan, Bodin Miyatovich kept a hunting lodge. Thence he rode forth on horseback, hounds clamorous around him, in quest of gromatz, yegyupka, or ice troll. At other times he and his guests boated on wild waters, skied on glacier slopes, sat indoors by a giant hearthfire talking, drinking, playing chess, playing music, harking to blizzard winds outside. Since her father bore her cradle from aircar to door, Kossara had loved coming here.

Though this visit was harshly for business, she felt pleasure at what surrounded her. She and her uncle stood on a slate terrace that jutted blue-black from the granite blocks of the house. Zoria wheeled dazzling through cloudless heaven, ringed with sun dogs. Left, right, and rearward the land reached endless, red-purple mahovina turf, wide-spaced clumps of firebush and stands of windblown plume, here and there a pool ablink. Forward, growth yielded to tumbled boulders where water coursed. In these parts, the barrens were a mere strip; she could see the ice beyond them. Two kilometers high, its cliff stood over the horizon, a worldwall, at its distance not dusty white but shimmering, streaked with blue crevasses. The river which ran from its melting was still swift when it passed near the lodge, a deep brawl beneath the lonesome tone of wind, the remote cries of a sheerwing flock. The air was cold, dry, altogether pure. The fur lining of her parka hood was soft and tickly on her cheeks.

The big man beside her growled, "Yes, too many ears in Zorkagrad. Damnation! I thought if we put Molitor on the throne, we'd again know who was friend and who foe. But things only get more tangled. How many faithful are left? I can't tell. And that's fouler than men becoming outright turncoats."

"You trust me, don't you?" Kossara answered in pride.

"Yes," Miyatovich said. "I trust you beyond your fidelity. You're strong and quick-witted. And your xenological background . . . qualifies you and gives you a cover story . . . for a mission I hope you'll undertake."

"To Diomedes? My father's told me rumors."

"Worse. Accusations. Not public yet. I actually had bloody hard work finding out, myself, why Imperial Intelligence agents have been snooping amongst us in such numbers. I sent men to inquire elsewhere and—Well, the upshot is, the Impies know revolt is brewing

on Diomedes and think Dennitzans are the yeast. The natural conclusion is that a cabal of mine sent them, to keep the Imperium amused while we prepare a revolt of our own."

"You've denied it, I'm sure."

"In a way. Nobody's overtly charged me. I've sent the Emperor a memorandum, deploring the affair and offering to cooperate in a full-dress investigation. But guilty or not, I'd do that. How to prove innocence? As thin as his corps is spread, we could mobilize—on desert planets, for instance, without positive clues for them to find."

The Gospodar gusted a sigh. "And appearances are against us. There *is* a lot of sentiment for independence, for turning this sector into a confederacy free of an Empire that failed us and wants to sap the strength we survived by. Those *could* be Dennitzans yonder, working for a faction who plot to get us committed—who'll overthrow me if they must—"

"I'm to go search out the truth if I can," she knew. "Uncle, I'm honored. But me alone? Won't that be like trying to catch water in a net?"

"Maybe. Though at the bare least, you can bring me back . . . um . . . a feel of what's going on, better than anybody else. And you may well do more. I've watched you from babyhood. You're abler than you think, Kossara."

Miyatovich took her by the shoulders. Breath smoked white from his mouth, leaving frost in his beard, as he spoke: "I've never had a harder task than this, asking you to put your life on the line. You're like a daughter to me. I sorrowed nearly as much as you did when Mihail died, but told myself you'd find another good man who'd give you sound children. Now I can only say—go in Milhail's name, that your next man needn't die in another war."

"Then you think we should stay in the Empire?"

"Yes. I've made remarks that suggested different. But you know me, how I talk rashly in anger but try to act in calm. The Empire would have to get so bad that chaos was better before I'd willingly break it. Terra, the Troubles, or the tyranny of Merseia—and those racists wouldn't just subject us, they'd tame us—I don't believe we have a fourth choice, and I'll pick Terra."

She felt he was right.)

A part of the *Hooligan*'s hold had been converted to a gymnasium. Outbound, and at first on the flight from Diomedes, Flandry and Kossara used it at separate hours. Soon after her therapy commenced, she proposed they exercise together. "Absolutely!" he caroled. "It'll make calisthenics themselves fun, whether or not that violates the second law of thermodynamics."

In truth, it wasn't fun—when she was there in shorts and halter, sweat, laughter, herself—it was glory.

Halfway to Dennitza, he told her: "Let's end our psychosessions. You've regained everything you need. The rest would be detail, not worth further invasion of your privacy."

"No invasion," she said low. Her eyes dropped, her blood mounted. "You were welcome."

"Chives!" Flandry bellowed. "Get busy! Tonight we do not dine, we feast!"

"Very good, sir," the Shalmuan replied, appearing in the saloon as if his master had rubbed a lamp. "I suggest luncheon consist of a small salad and tea to drink."

"You're the boss," Flandry said. "Me, I can't sit still. How about a game of tennis, Kossara? Then after our rabbit repast we can snooze, in preparation for sitting up the whole nightwatch popping champagne."

She agreed eagerly. They changed into gym briefs and met below. The room was elastic matting, sunlamp fluorescence, gray-painted metal sides. In its bareness, she flamed.

The ball thudded back and forth, caromed, bounced, made them leap, for half an hour. At last, panting, they called time out and sought a water tap.

"Do you feel well?" She sounded anxious. "You missed an awful lot of serves." They were closely matched, her youth against his muscles.

"If I felt any better, you could turn off the ship's powerplant and hook me into the circuits," he replied.

"But why—?"

"I was distracted." He wiped the back of a hand across the salt dampness in his mustache, ran those fingers through his hair and recalled how it was turning gray. Decision came. He prepared a light tone before going on: "Kossara, you're a beautiful woman, and not just because you're the only woman for quite a few light-years around. Never fear, I can mind my manners. But I hope it won't bother you overmuch if I keep looking your way."

She stood quiet a while, except for the rise and fall of her breasts. Her skin gleamed. A lock of hair clung bronzy to her right cheekbone. The beryl eyes gazed beyond him.

Suddenly they returned, focused, met his as sabers meet in a fencing match between near friends. Her husky voice grew hoarse and, without her noticing, stammered Serbic: "Do you mean—Dominic, do you mean you never learned, while I was under . . . I love you?"

Meteorstruck, he heard himself croak, "No. I did try to avoid—as far as possible, I let Chives question you, in my absence—"

"I resisted," she said in wonder, "because I knew you would be kind but dared not imagine you might be for always."

"I'd lost hope of getting anybody who'd make me want to be."

She came to him.

Presently: "Dominic, darling, please, no. Not yet."

"—Do you want a marriage ceremony first?

"Yes. If you don't mind too much. I know you don't care, but, well, did you know I still say my prayers every night? Does that make you laugh?"

"Never. All right, we'll be married, and in style!"

"Could we really be? In St. Clement's Cathedral, by Father Smed who christened and confirmed me—?"

"If he's game, I am. It won't be easy, waiting, but how can I refuse a wish of yours? Forgive these hands. They're not used to holding something sacred."

"Dominic, you star-fool, stop babbling! Do you think it will be easy for me?"

XIII

THE earliest signs of trouble reached them faintly across distance. Fifty astronomical units from Zoria and well off the ecliptic plane, the *Hooligan* phased out of hyperdrive into normal state. Engines idle, she drifted at low kinetic velocity among stars, her destination sun only the brightest; and instruments strained after traces.

Flandry took readings and made computations. His lips tightened. "A substantial space fleet, including what's got to be a Nova-class dreadnaught," he told Kossara and Chives. "In orbits or under accelerations that fit the pattern of a battle-ready naval force."

The girl clenched her fists. "What can have happened?"

"We'll sneak in and eavesdrop."

Faster-than-light pseudospeed would give them away to detectors. (Their Schrodinger "wake" must already have registered, but no commander was likely to order interception of a single small vessel which he could assume would proceed until routinely checked by a picket craft.) However, in these far regions they could drive hard on force-thrust without anybody observing or wondering why. Nearing the inner system, where ships and meters were thick, Flandry plotted a roundabout course. It brought him in behind the jovian planet Svarog, whose gravitational, magnetic, and radiation fields screened the emissions of *Hooligan.* Amidst all fears for home and kin, Kossara exclaimed at the majestic sight as they passed within three million kilometers—amber-glowing disc, swarming moons—and at the neatness wherewith the planet swung them, their power again turned off, into the orbit Flandry wanted, between its own and that of Perun to sunward.

"With every system aboard at zero or minimum, we should pass for a rock if a radar or whatever sweeps us," he explained. "And we'll catch transmissions from Dennitza—maybe intercept a few messages between ships, though I expect those'll be pretty boring."

"How I hope you are right," Kossara said with a forlorn chuckle.

He regarded her, beside him in the control cabin. Interior illumination was doused, heating, weight generator, anything which might betray. They hung loosely harnessed in their seats, bodies if not minds enjoying the fantasy-state of free fall. As yet, cold was no more than a nip in the air Chives kept circulating by a creaky hand-cranked fan. Against the clear canopy, stars crowned her head. On the opposite side, still small at this remove, Zoria blazed between outspread wings of zodiacal light.

"They're definitely Technic warcraft," he said, while wishing to speak her praises. "The neutrino patterns alone prove it. From what we've now learned, closer in, about

their numbers and types, they seem to match your description of the Dennitzan fleet, though there're some I think must belong to the Imperium. My guess is, the Gospodar has gathered Dennitza's own in entirety, plus such units of the regular Navy as he felt he could rely on. In short, he's reached a dangerous brink, though I don't believe anything catastrophic has happened yet."

"We are in time, then?" she asked gladly.

He could not but lean over and kiss her. "Luck willing, yes. We may need patience before we're certain."

Fortune spared them that. Within an hour, they received the basic information. Transmitters on Dennitza sent broadbeam rather than precisely lased 'casts to the telsats for relay, wasting some cheap energy to avoid the cost of building and maintaining a more exact system. By the time the pulses got as far as *Hooligan,* their dispersal guaranteed they would touch her; and they were not too weak for a good receiver-amplifier-analyzer to reconstruct a signal. The windfall program Flandry tuned in was a well-organized commentary on the background of the crisis.

It broke two weeks ago. (*Maybe just when Kossara and I found out about each other?* he wondered. *No; meaningless; simultaneity doesn't exist for interstellar distances.*) Before a tumultuous parliament, Bodin Miyatovich announced full mobilization of the Narodna Voyska, recall of units from outsystem duty, his directing the Imperial Navy command for Tauria to maintain the Pax within the sector, his ordering specific ships and flotillas belonging to it to report here for assignment, and his placing Dennitzan society on a standby war footing.

A replay from his speech showed him at the wooden lectern, carved with vines and leaves beneath outward-sweeping yelen horns, from which Gospodar had addressed Shkoptsina since the days of the Founders. In the gray tunic and red cloak of a militia officer, knife and pistol on hips, he appeared still larger than he was. His words boomed across crowded tiers in the great stone hall, seemed almost to make the stained glass windows shiver.

"—Intelligence reports have grown more and more disquieting over the past few months. I can here tell you little beyond this naked fact—you will understand the need not to compromise sources—but our General Staff takes as grave a view of the news as I do. Scouts dispatched into the Roidhunate have brought back data on Merseian naval movements which indicate preparations for action . . . Diplomatic inquiries both official and unofficial have gotten only assurances for response, unproven and vaguely phrased. After centuries, we know what Merseian assurances are worth . . .

"Thus far I have no reply to my latest message to the Emperor, and can't tell if my courier has even caught up with him on the Spican frontier . . . High Terran authorities whom I've been able to contact have denied there is a Merseian

danger at the present time. They've challenged the validity of the information given me, have insisted their own is different and is correct . . .

"They question our motives. Fleet Admiral Sandberg told me to my face, when I visited his command post, he believes our government has manufactured an excuse to marshal strength, not against foreign enemies but against the Imperium. He cited charges of treasonous Dennitzan activity elsewhere in the Empire. He forbade me to act. When I reminded him that I am the sector viceroy, he declared he would see about getting me removed. I think he would have had me arrested then and there"—a bleak half-smile—"if I'd not taken the precaution of bringing along more firepower than he had on hand . . .

"He revealed my niece, Kossara Vymezal, whom I sent forth to track down the origin of those lies—he claimed she'd been caught at subversion, had confessed under their damnable mind-twisting interrogation—I asked why I was not informed at once, I demanded she be brought home, and learned—" He smote the lectern. Tears burst from his eyes. "She has been sold for a slave on Terra."

The assembly roared.

"*Uyak* Bodin, *Uyak* Bodin," Kossara herself wept. She lifted her hands to the screen as if to try touching him.

"Sssh," Flandry said. "This is past, remember. We've got to find out what's happening today and what brought it on."

She gulped, mastered her sobs, and gave him cool help. He had a fair grasp of Serbic, and the news analyst was competent, but as always, much was taken for granted of which a stranger was ignorant.

Ostensibly the Merseian trouble sprang from incidents accumulated and ongoing in the Wilderness. Disputes between traders, prospectors, and voortrekkers from the two realms had repeatedly brought on armed clashes. Dennitzans didn't react to overbearingness as meekly as citizens of the inner Empire were wont to. They overbore right back, or took the initiative from the beginning. Several actions were doubtless in a legal sense piracy by crews of one side or the other. Matters had sharpened during the civil war, when there was no effective Imperial control over humans.

Flandry had known about this, and known too that the Roidhunate had asked for negotiations aimed at solving the problem, negotiations to which Emperor Hans agreed on the principle that law and order were always worth establishing even with the cooperation of an enemy. The delegates had wrangled for months.

In recent weeks Merseia had changed its tack and made totally unacceptable demands—for example, that civilian craft must be cleared by its inspectors before entering the Wilderness. "They know that's ridiculous," Flandry remarked. "Without fail, in politics that kind of claim has an ulterior purpose. It may be as little as a propaganda ploy for domestic consumption, or as much as the spark put to a bomb fuse."

"A reason to bring their strength to bear—while most of the Empire's is tied up at Spica—and maybe denounce the Covenant of Alfzar and occupy a key system in the Wilderness?" Kossara wondered.

"Could be . . . *if* Merseia is dispatching warships in this direction," Flandry said. "The Imperium thinks not—thinks Dennitza concocted the whole business to justify mobilization. The Merseians would've been delighted to co-conspire, a behind-the-scenes arrangement with your uncle whereby they play intransigent at the conference. Any split among us is pure gain for them. From the Imperium's viewpoint, Dennitza has done this either to put pressure on it—to get the disbanding decree rescinded and other grievances settled—or else to start an out-and-out rebellion."

He puffed on his cigarette, latest of a chain. "From your uncle's viewpoint—I assume he was honest with you about his opinions and desires—if he believes Merseia may be readying for combat, he dare not fail to respond. Terra can think in terms of settling border disputes by negotiation, even after several battles. Dennitza, though, will be under attack. A tough, proud people won't sit still for being made pawns of. And given the accusations against them, the horrible word about you—how alienated must they not feel?"

The commentator had said: "Is it possible the connivance is between Emperor and Roidhun? Might part of a secret bargain be that Merseia rids the Imperium of troublesomely independent subjects? It would like to destroy us. To it, we are worse than a nuisance, we are the potential igniters of a new spirit within the Empire, whose future leadership may actually come from among us. On the Terran side, the shock of such an event would tend to unite the Empire behind the present bearer of the crown, securing it for him and his posterity . . ."

Flandry said: "I'm pretty sure that by now, throughout the Dennitzan sphere of influence, a majority favors revolution. The Gospodar's stalling, trying to bide his time in hopes the crisis will slack off before fighting starts. Wouldn't you guess so, love? I suspect, however, if it turns out he doesn't have to resist Merseia, he will then use his assembled power to try squeezing concessions from Terra. His citizens won't let him abstain—and I doubt if he wants to. And . . . any wrong action on the part of the Imperium or its Navy, or any wrong inaction, anywhere along the line, will touch off rebellion."

"We'll go straight to him—" she began.

Flandry shook his head. "Uh-uh. Most reckless thing we could do. Who supplied those Intelligence reports that scared Miyatovich and his staff—reports contradicted by findings of my Corps in separate operations? If the Merseian fleet is making ominous motions, is this a mere show for the Dennitzan scouts they knew would sneak into their space? How did the news about you get here so speedily, when the sale of one ob-

scure slave never rated a word on any Terran newscast? Could barbarian activity in Sector Spica have been encouraged from outside, precisely to draw the Emperor there and leave his officers on this frontier to respond as awkwardly as they've done?"

He sighed. "Masks and mirages again, Kossara. The program we heard showed us only the skin across the situation. We can't tell what's underneath, except that it's surely explosive, probably poisonous. Zorkagrad must be acrawl with Merseian undercover men. I'd be astonished if some of them aren't high and trusted in the Gospodar's councils, fending off any information they prefer he doesn't get. Aycharaych's been at work for a long time."

"What shall we do?" she asked steadily.

Flandry's glance sought for Dennitza. It should be visible here, soft blue against black. But the brightnesses which burned were too many. "Suppose you and I pay a covert visit on your parents," he said. "From there we can send a household servant, seemingly on an ordinary errand, who can find a chance to slip your uncle a word. Meanwhile Chives lands at Zorkagrad port and takes quarters to be our contact in the city. Shalmuan spacers aren't common but they do exist—not that the average person hereabouts ever heard of Shalmu—and I'll modify one of our spare documentations to support his story of being an innocent entrepreneur just back from a long exploration, out of touch, in the Wilderness."

"It seems terribly roundabout," Kossara said.

"Everything is on this mission." She smiled. "Well, you have the experience, Dominic. And it will give us a little time alone together."

XIV

First the planet loomed immense in heaven, clouds and ice lending it a more than Terran whiteness against which the glimpsed oceans became a dazzlingly deep azure. Then it was no longer ahead, it was land and sea far below. When Flandry and Kossara bailed out, it became a roar of night winds.

They rode their gravbelts down as fast as they dared, while the *Hooligan* vanished southward. The chance of their being detected was maybe slight, but not nonexistent. They need have no great fear of being shot at; as a folk who lived with firearms, the Dennitzans were not trigger happy. However, two who arrived like this, in time of emergency, would be detained, and the matter reported to military headquarters. Hence Kossara had proposed descending on the unpeopled taiga north of the Kazan. The voivode of Dubina Dolyina must have patrols and instruments active throughout his district.

Even at their present distance from it, she and Flandry could not have left the vessel secretly in an aircraft. The captain of the picket ship which spoke Chives had settled for a telecom inspection of his papers, without boarding, and had cleared him for a path through atmosphere which was a reasonable one in view of his kinetic vector.

Yet orbital optics and electronics must be keeping close watch until ground-based equipment could take over.

Hoar in moonlight, treetops rushed upward. The forest was not dense, though, and impact quickly thudded through soles. At once the humans removed their spacesuits, stopping only for a kiss when heads emerged from helmets. Flandry used a trenching tool to bury the outfits while Kossara restowed their packs. In outdoor coveralls and hiking boots, they should pass for a couple who had spent a furlough on a trip afoot. Before they established camp for what remained of the night, they'd better get several kilometers clear of any evidence to the contrary.

Flandry bowed. "Now we're down, I'm in your hands," he said. "I can scarcely imagine a nicer place to be."

Kossara looked around, filled her lungs full of chill sweet-scented air, breathed out, *"Domovina"*—home—and began striding.

The ground was soft and springy underfoot, mahovina turf and woodland duff. A gravity seven percent less than Terran eased the burden on backs. Trees stood three or four meters apart, low, gnarly, branches plumed blue-black, an equivalent of evergreens. Shrubs grew in between, but there was no real underbrush; moonlight and shadow dappled open sod. A full Mesyatz turned the sky nearly violet, leaving few stars and sheening off a great halo. Smaller but closer in than Luna, it looked much the same save for brilliance and haste. No matter countless differences, the entire scene had a familiarity eerie and wistful, as if the ghosts of mammoth hunters remembered an age when Terra too was innocent.

"Austere but lovely," the man said into silence. His breath smoked, though the season, late summer, brought no deep cold. "Like you. Tell me, what do Dennitzans see in the markings on their moon? Terrans usually find a face in theirs."

"Why . . . our humans call the pattern an orlik. That's a winged theroid; this planet has no ornithoids." A sad smile flickered over Kossara's night-ivory lips. "But I've oftener thought of it as Ri. He's the hero of some funny ychan fairy tales, who went to live on Mesyatz. I used to beg Trohdwyr for stories about Ri when I was a child. Why do you ask?"

"Hoping to learn more about you and yours. We talked a lot in space, but we've our lifetimes, and 600 years before them, to explain if we can."

"We'll have the rest of them for that." She crossed herself. "If God wills."

They were laconic thereafter, until they had chosen a sleeping place and spread their bags. By then the crater wall showed dream-blue to south, and the short night of the planet was near an end. Rime glimmered. Flandry went behind a tree to change into pajamas. When he came back, Kossara was doing so. "I'm sorry!" he apologized, and wheeled about. "I forgot you'd say prayers."

She was quiet an instant before she laughed, unsteadily but honestly. "I was forgetful too.

Well, look if you wish, darling. What harm? You must have seen the holograms . . ." She lifted her arms and made a slow turn before his eyes. "Do you like what you're getting?"

"Sun and stars—"

She stopped to regard him, as if unaware of chill. He barely heard her: "Would it be wrong? Here in these clean spaces, under heaven?"

He took a step in her direction, halted, and grinned his most rueful. "It would not be very practical, I'm afraid. You deserve better."

She sighed. "You are too kind to me, Dominic." She put on her bedclothes. They kissed more carefully than had been their way of late, and got into the bags that lay side by side in the heavy shadow of a furbark tree.

"I'm not sleepy," she told him after a few minutes.

"How could I be?" he answered.

"Was I wanton just now? Or unfair? That would be much worse."

"I was the Fabian this time, not you."

"The what? . . . Never mind." She lay watching the final stars and the first silvery flush before daybreak. Her voice stumbled. "Yes, I must explain. You could have had me if you'd touched me with a fingertip. You can whenever you ask, beloved. Chastity is harder than I thought."

"But it does mean a great deal to you, doesn't it? You're young and eager. I can wait a while."

"Yes—I suppose that is part of what I feel, the wanting to know—to know you. You've had many women, haven't you? I'm afraid there's no mystery left for me to offer."

"On the contrary," he said, "you have the greatest of all. What's it like to be really man and *wife*? I think you'll teach me more about that than I can teach you about anything else."

She was mute until she could muster the shy words: "Why have you never married, Dominic?"

"Nobody came along whom I couldn't be happy without—what passes for happy in an Imperial Terran."

"Nobody? Out of hundreds to choose from?"

"You exaggerate . . . Well, once, many years ago. But she was another man's, and left with him when he had to flee the Empire. I can only hope they found a good home at some star too far away for us to see from here."

"And you have longed for her ever since?"

"No, I can't say that I have in any romantic sense, though you are a lot like her." Flandry hesitated. "Earlier, I'd gotten a different woman angry at me. She had a peculiar psionic power, not telepathy but—beings tended to do what she desired. She wished on me that I never get the one I wanted in my heart. I'm not superstitious, I take no more stock in curses or spooks than I do in the beneficence of governments. Still, an unconscious compulsion—Bah! If there was any such thing, which I positively do not think, then you've lifted it off me, Kossara, and I refuse to pursue this morbid subject when I could be chattering about how beautiful you are."

AT GLACIATION'S midwinter, a colter of ice opened a gap in the Kazan ringwall. Melt-begotten, the Lyubisha River later enlarged this to a canyon. Weathering of mostly soft crater material lowered and blurred the heights. But Flandry found his third campsite enchanting.

He squatted on a narrow beach. Before him flowed the broad brown stream, quiet except where it chuckled around a boulder or a sandbar near its banks. Beyond, and at his back, the gorge rose in braes, bluffs, coombs where brooks flashed and sang, to ocherous palisades maned with forest. The same deep bluish-green and plumcolored leaves covered the lower slopes, borne on trees which grew taller than the taiga granted. Here and there, stone outcrops thrust them aside to make room for wildflower-studded glades. A mild breeze, full of growth and soil odors, rustled through the woods till light and shadow danced. That light slanted from a sun a third again as bright as Sol is to Terra, ardent rather than harsh, an evoker of infinite hues.

Guslars trilled on boughs, other wings flew over in their hundreds, a herd of yelen led by a marvelously horned bull passed along the opposite shore, a riba hooked from the water sputtered in Flandry's frying pan while a heap of cloud apples waited to be dessert—no dismally predictable field rations in this meal— He gestured. "How well a planet does if left to its own devices," he remarked.

"Nature could take a few billion years for R & D," Kossara pointed out. "We mortals are always in a hurry."

He gave her a sharp look. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"N-no. You echoed an idea I've heard before— Coincidence, surely." He relaxed, threw a couple of sticks on the fire, turned the fillets over. "I am surprised your people haven't long since trampled this area dead. Such restraint seems downright inhuman."

"Well, the Dolyina has belonged to the Vymezals from olden time, and without forbidding visitors, we've never encouraged them. You've seen there are no amenities, and we ban vehicles. Besides, it's less reachable than many wild lands elsewhere—though most of those are more closely controlled."

Kossara hugged knees to chin. Her tone grew slow and thoughtful. "We Dennitzans are . . . are conservationists by tradition. For generations after the Founding, our ancestors must take great care. They could not live entirely off native life, but what they brought in could too easily ruin the whole little-understood ecology. The . . . *zemlyoradnik* . . . the landsman learned reverence for the land, because otherwise he might not survive. Today we could, uh, get away with more; and in some parts of the planet we do, where the new industries are. Even there, law and public opinion enforce carefulness—yes, even Dennitzans who live in neighboring systems, the majority by now, even they generally frown on bad practices. And as for the Kazan, the cradle of mankind out here, haven't heartlands often in history kept old ways

that the outer dominions forgot?"

Flandry nodded. "I daresay it helps that wealth flows in from outside, to support your barons and yeomen in the style to which they are accustomed." He patted her hand. "No offense, darling. They're obviously progressive as well as conservative, and less apt than most people to confuse the two. I don't believe in Arcadian utopias, if only because any that might appear would shortly be gobbled up by somebody else. But I do think you here have kept a balance, a kind of inner sanity—or found it anew—long after Terra lost it."

She smiled. "I suspect you're prejudiced."

"Of course. Common sense dictates acquiring a good strong prejudice in favor of the people you're going to live among."

Her eyes widened. She unfolded herself, leaned on her knuckles toward him, and cried, "Do you mean you'll stay?"

"Wouldn't you prefer that?"

"Yes, yes. But I'd taken for granted—you're a Terran—Where you go, I go."

Flandry said straight to her flushed countenance: "At the very least, I'd expect us to spend considerable time on Dennitza. Then why not all, or most? I can wangle a permanent posting if events work out well. Otherwise I'll resign my commission."

"Can you really settle down to a squire's life, a storm-bird like you?"

He laughed and chucked her under the chin. "Never fear. I don't imagine you're ambitious either to rise every dawn, hog the slops, corn the shuck, and for excitement discuss with your neighbors the scandalous behavior of Uncle Vanya when he lurched through the village, red-eyed and reeling from liter after liter of buttermilk. No, we'll make a topnotch team for xenology, and for Intelligence when need arises." Soberly: "Need will keep arising."

Graveness took her too. "Imagine the worst, Dominic. Civil war again, Dennitza against Terra."

"I think then the two of us could best be messengers between Emperor and Gospodar. And if Dennitza does tear loose . . . it still won't be the enemy. It'll still deserve whatever we can do to help it survive. I'm not that fond of Terra anyway. Here is much more hope."

Flandry broke off. "Enough," he said. "We've had our minimum adult daily requirement of apocalypse, and dinner grows impatient."

THE Vymezal estate lay sufficiently far inside the crater that the ringwall cut off little sky—but on high ground just the same, to overlook the river and great reaches of farm and forest. Conducted from an outer gate, on a driveway which curved through gardens and parkscape, Flandry saw first the tile roof of the manor above shading trees, then its half-timbered brick bulk, at last its outbuildings. Situated around a rear court, they made a complete hamlet: servants' cottages, garages, sheds, stables, kennels, mews, workshops, bakery, brewery, armory, recreation hall,

school, chapel. For centuries the demesne must have brawled with life.

On this day it felt more silent and deserted than it was. While many of the younger adults were gone to their militia units, many folk of every other age remained. Most of them, though, went about their tasks curt-spoken; chatter, japes, laughter, song or whistling were so rare as to resound ghostly between walls; energy turned inward on itself and became tension. Dogs snuffed the air and walked stiff-legged, ready to growl.

At a portico, the gamekeeper who accompanied Flandry explained to a sentry: "We met this fellow on the riverside lumber road. He won't talk except to insist he has to see the voivode alone. How he got here unbeknownst I couldn't well guess. He *claims* he's friendly."

The soldier used an intercom. Flandry offered cigarettes around. Both men looked tempted but refused. "Why not?" he asked. "They aren't drugged. Nothing awful has happened since mobilization, right?" Radio news received on his minicom had been meager during the seven planetary days of march; entering inhabited country, he and Kossara had shunned its dwellers.

"We haven't been told," the ranger grated. "Nobody tells us a thing. They must be waiting—for what?"

"I'm lately back from an errand in the city," the guardsman added. "I heard; over and over—Well, can we trust those Impies the Gospodar called in along with our own ships? Why did he? If we've got to fight Terra, what keeps them from turning on us, right here in the Zorian System? They sure throw their weight around in town. What're you up to, Impie?"

A voice from the loudspeaker ended the exchange. Danilo Vymezal would see the stranger as requested. Let him be brought under armed escort to the Gray Chamber.

Darkly wainscoted and heavily furnished like most of the interior, smaller than average, that room must draw its name from rugs and drapes. An open window let in cool air, a glimpse of sunlight golden through the wings of a hovering chiropteroid. Kossara's father stood beside, arms folded, big in the embroidered, high-collared shirt and baggy trousers of his home territory. She resembled her uncle more, doubtless through her mother, but Flandry found traces of her in those weather-darkened craggy features. Her gaze could be as stern.

"*Zdravo, stranac,*" Vymezal said, formal greeting, tone barely polite. "I am he you seek, voivode and nachalnik." Local aristocrat by inheritance, provincial governor by choice of Gospodar and popular assembly. "Who are you and what is your business?"

"Are we safe from eavesdroppers, sir?" Flandry responded.

"None here would betray." Scorn: "This isn't Zorkagrad, let alone Archopolis."

"Nevertheless, you don't want some well-intentioned retainer shouting forth what I'll say. Believe me, you don't."

Vymezal studied Flandry for seconds. A little wariness left him,

a little eagerness came in. "Yes, we are safe. Three floors aloft, double-thick door, for hearing confidences." A haunted smile touched his lips. "A cook who wants me to get the father of her child to marry her has as much right to privacy as an admiral discussing plans for regional defense. Speak."

The Terran gave his name and rank. "My first news—your daughter Kossara is unharmed. I've brought her back."

Vymezal croaked a word that might be oath or prayer, and caught a table to brace himself.

He rallied fast. The next half hour was furiously paced talk, while neither man sat down.

Flandry's immediate declaration was simple. He and the girl lacked accurate knowledge of how matters stood, of what might happen if her return was announced. She waited in the woods for him to fetch her, or guide Vymezal to her, depending on what was decided. Flandry favored the latter course—the voivode only, and a secret word to the Gospodar.

He must spell out his reasons for that at length. Finally the Dennitzan nodded. "Aye," he growled. "I hate to keep the tidings from her mother . . . from all who love her . . . but if she truly is witness to a galaxy-sized trick played on us—we'll need care, oh, very great care"—he clapped hand on sidearm—"till we're ready to kill those vermin."

"Then you agree Zorkagrad, the planet's government and armed service, must be infested with them?"

"Yes." Vymezal gnawed his mustache. "If things are as you say—you realize I'll see Kossara first, out of your earshot, Captain—but I've small doubt you're honest. The story meshes too well with too much else. Why is our crisis hanging fire? Why—Ha, no more gabble. Tomorrow dawn I'll send . . . hm, yes, Milosh Tesar, he's trusty, quick of wit and slow of mouth—I'll send him on a 'family matter' as you suggest. Let me see . . . my wife's dowry includes property wherein her brother also has an interest—something like that."

"Kossara will have to lie low," Flandry reminded. "Me too. You can call me an Imperial officer who stopped off on his liberty to give you a minor message. Nobody will think or talk much about that. But you'd better squirrel me away."

"'Squirrel?'" Vymezal dismissed the question. "I understand. Well, I've a cabin in the Northrim, stocked and equipped for times when I want to be unpestered a while. Includes a car. I'll flit you there, telling the household I'm lending it to you. They can't see us land at Kossara's hideout, can they?"

"No. We foresaw—" Flandry stopped, aware of how intent the stare was upon him. "Sir, I've told you she and I aim to get married."

"And aren't yet—and nobody wants a hedge-wedding, not I myself when I don't know you." The voivode sketched a grin. "Thanks, Captain. But if you've told me truth, she needs a marksman more than a chaperone. Anyhow, whatever's between you two must already have happened or not happened. Come, let's go."

XV

THE YEAR wanes rapidly on Dennitza. On the morning after Danilo Vymezal had shaken Flandry's hand, kissed Kossara's brow, and left them, they woke to frost on the windows and icy clearness outside. They spent much of the day scrambling around wooded steeps begun to flaunt hues that recalled fall upon ancient Manhome. Flocks of southbound yegyupka made heaven clangorous. Once they heard the cry of a vilya, and savage though the beast was, its voice sang wonderfully sweet. Firebush, spontaneously burning to ripen and scatter its seeds, spread faint pungency through the air. By a waterfall whose spray stung their skins with cold, they gathered feral walnuts. Regardless of what spun around the world beyond its frail blue roof, they often laughed like children.

At dusk they returned to the log building, cooked dinner together, sated huge appetites, and took brandy-laced coffee to the hearth, where they settled down on a shaggy rug, content to let the blaze they had kindled light the room for them. Red flames crackled jokelets of green and blue and yellow, sent warmth in waves. They looked at the fire, at each other, and talked.

"—we'd better stay around the house hereafter," Flandry said. "Your father's man could scarcely have gotten an appointment today, but he should soon. Your uncle's aides can't all be traitors, assuming I'm right that some are. Two or three, in critical posts, are the most I'd guess possible. And they themselves will see no reason to stall his brother-in-law's personal business. In fact, that'd look too queer. So I expect we'll get word shortly; and Miyatovich may want us to move fast."

Highlights crossed Kossara's face above her cheekbones, shone in eyes, glowed in hair. "What do you think he'll do, Dominic?"

"Well, he's tough, smart, and experienced; he may have better ideas than me. But in his place, I'd manufacture an excuse to put myself somewhere more or less impregnable. Like your Nova-class warship; she's the biggest around, Dennitzan or Imperial, and the pride of your fleet damn well ought to have a solidly loyal crew. I'd get the most important persons, including us, there with me. And, oh, yes, a copy of the microfiles on everybody who might be involved in the plot, Imperial officers and locals who've worked themselves close to the Gospodar's hand in the past several years. A clever, widely traveled captain of Naval Intelligence, such as—ahem—could help me get a shrewd notion of whom to suspect. I'd order fleet dispositions modified accordingly, again on an unalarming pretext. When this was done, I'd have the appropriate arrests made, then broadcast a 'hold everything' to the populace, then wait on the *qui vive* to see what the interrogators dig out."

Memory made Kossara wince. Flandry laid an arm about her shoulder. "We've a stiff way yet to go," he said, "but we should be home safe by blossom time."

She thawed, flowed into his embrace, whispered, "Thanks to you."

"No, you. If you'd lacked courage to visit Diomedes, the strength to stay sane and fight on—Why quibble? We're both magnificent. The species has need of our chromosomes."

"Lots and lots of fat babies," she agreed. "But do you mean it about spring . . . we may have to wait that long?"

"I hope not. The creaking sound you hear is my gentlemanliness. I'm sitting on its safety valve, which is blistering hot."

She touched a corner of his smile. Her own look became wholly serious. "Are your jests always armor?" The question trembled. "Dominic, we may not live till spring."

"We'll take no chances, heart of mine. None. I plan for us to scandalize our respectable grandchildren."

"We'll have to take chances." She drew breath. "I can't become pregnant till my immunity treatment's reversed. Tonight—We'll not deceive Father and Mother. The first chaplain we find can marry us."

"But, uh, your cathedral wedding—"

"I've come to see how little it matters, how little the universe does, next to having you while I can. Tonight, Dominic. Now."

He seized her to him. All control fled, they—

A flash went blue-white in the front windows.

They sprang up. The light had not been blinding, but they knew its color.

Flandry flung the door wide and himself out onto the porch. Cold poured over him, sharp liquid in his nostrils. Stars glinted countless. Between shadow-masses that were trees, he saw the craterside shelve away downward into the murk which brimmed its bowl. Distance-dwindled, a fireball yonder lifted and faded. The cloud pillar following appeared against a constellation just as the thunder rumbled faintly in his skull.

"That was home," Kossara said out of numbness.

"A tactical nuke, doubtless fired from an aircraft," responded a machine within Flandry.

The danger to her flogged him aware. He grabbed her arm. "Inside!" She staggered after him. He slammed the door and drew her against his breast. She clung, beginning to shudder.

"My love, my love, my love, we've got to get away from here," he said in a frantic chant. "They must have been after us."

"After you—" She tautened, freed herself, snapped at steadiness and caught it. Her eyes gleamed steel-dry. "Yes. But we'll take a few minutes to pack. Food, clothes, weapons."

Defiant, he also tried phoning the manor. Emptiness hummed reply. They trotted to the shed where the car was, stowed survival gear within, trotted back for more, boarded.

The cabin tumbled from sight. Flandry swept radar around the encompassing darkness. Nothing registered. A traffic safety unit wasn't much use here, of course, but at least this bubble carrying them had a prayer of crawling to safety before the military vessel that

did the murder could find it.

If—"Wait a second," Flandry said.

"What?" Kossara asked dully.

He glanced at her, dim in starglow and wanness off the control panel. She sat hunched into her parka, staring ahead through the canopy. The heater had not yet taken hold and the chill here was no honest outside freeze, but dank. Air muttered around the car body.

He dropped near treetop level and activated the optical amplifier. Its screen showed the wilderness as a gray jumble, above which he zigzagged in search of a secure hiding place. Though belike they had no immediate need of any—"I'll take for granted we were a principal target," he said, quick and toneless. "Snatching us from the household would be too revealing. But if the killers knew where we were, why not come directly to our lodge? If they even suspected we might be there, why not try it first? My guess is, they don't know it exists. However, we're safer in motion regardless."

She bit a knuckle till blood came forth, before she could say: "Everybody died on our account?"

"No, I think not. Your father, at least, had to be gotten rid of, since he knew the truth. And there was no being sure he hadn't told somebody else. I dare hope the enemy thinks we went out with him."

"How did they learn, Dominic?" Through the curbed hardness of her voice, he sensed dread. "Is Aycharaych in Zorkagrad?"

"Conceivable." Flandry's words fell one by one. "But not probable. Remember, we did consider the possibility. If we were to land on the taiga, Chives must proceed to the spaceport, simply to maintain our fiction. Wearing his mindscreen would make him overly conspicuous. Anyhow, Aycharaych wouldn't fail to check on each newcomer, and he knows both Chives and *Hooligan* by sight. I decided the odds were he went to Dennitza from Diomedes, but having made sure the mischief he'd started was proceeding along the lines he wanted, didn't linger. He's no coward, but he knows he's too valuable to risk in a merely warlike action—which this affair has to bring, and soon, or else his efforts have gone for naught. My guess was, he's hanging around Zoria in a wide orbit known only to a few of his most trusted chessmen."

"Yes, I remember now. Talk on. Please, Dominic. I have to be nothing except practical for a while, or I'll fall apart."

"Me too. Well, I still believe my assessment was confirmed when we made such trouble-free contact with your father. Chives had been in Zorkagrad for days. Aycharaych would have found him, read him, and prepared a trap to spring on us the minute we arrived. Anything else would have been an unnecessary gamble." Bleakness softened: "You know, I went into the manor house using every psychotrick they ever drilled into me to keep my knowledge of where you were out of conscious thought, and ready to swallow the old poison pill on the spot should matters go awry."

"What?" She turned her head toward him. "Why, you . . . you told me to leave the rendezvous if

you didn't return by sunset—but—Oh, Dominic, no!"

Then she did weep. He comforted her as best he could. Meanwhile he found a place to stop, a grove on the rim beneath which he could taxi and be sheltered from the sky.

She gasped back to self-mastery and bade him tell her the rest of his thoughts. "I feel certain what caused the attack tonight was the capture of your father's courier," he said. "He must have been interrogated hastily. Aycharaych would have found out about our cabin, whether or not your father explicitly told his man. But a quick narcoquiz by nontelepaths—" He scowled into murk. "The problem is, what made the enemy suspicious of him? He wasn't carrying any written message, and his cover story was plausible. Unless—"

He leaned forward, snapped a switch. "Let's try for news."

"The next regular 'cast is in about half an hour," Kossara said in a tiny voice, "if that hasn't changed too."

He tuned in the station she named. Ballet dancers moved to cruelly happy music. He held her close and murmured.

A woman's countenance threw the program out. Terror distorted it. "Attention!" she screeched. "Special broadcast! Emergency! We have just received word from a spokesman of the Zamok—officers of the Imperial Navy have arrested Gospodar Miyatovich for high treason. Citizens are required to remain calm and orderly. Those who disobey can be shot. And . . . and weather satellites report a nuclear explosion in the Dubina Dolyina area—neighborhood of the voivode's residence—attempts to phone there have failed. The voivode was, is . . . the Gospodar's brother-in-law . . . No announcement about whether he was trying to rebel or—stay calm! Don't move till we know more! Ex-except . . . the city police office just called in—blast shelters will be open to those who wish to enter. I repeat, blast shelters will be open—"

Repetition raved on for minutes. Beneath it, Flandry snarled, "If ever they hope to provoke their war, they've reckoned this is their last and maybe their best chance."

The newsroom vanished. "Important recorded announcement," said a man in Dennitzan uniform. "A dangerous agent of Merseia is at large in Zorkagrad or vicinity." What must be a portrait from some xenological archive, since it was not of Chives, flashed onto the screen. "He landed eight days ago, posing as a peaceful traveler. Four days ago" (the computer must redub every 18.8 hours) "he was identified, but fought his way free of arrest and disappeared. He is of this species, generally known as Shalmuan. When last seen he wore a white kilt and had taken a blaster from a patrolman after injuring the entire squad. I repeat, your government identifies him as a Merseian secret agent, extremely dangerous because of his mission as well as his person. If you see him, do not take risks. Above all, do not try talking with him. If he cannot safely be killed, report the sighting to your nearest military post. A reward of 10,000 gold dinars is offered for information leading to his death or

capture. Dead or alive, he himself is worth a reward of 50,000—"

Air hissed between Kossara's teeth. Flandry sat moveless for minutes before he said stonily, "That's how. Somebody, in some fashion, recognized Chives. That meant I was around, and most likely you. That meant—any contact between your family and the Gospodar—yes."

Kossara wept anew, in sorrow and in rage.

Yet at the end it was she who lifted her head and said, hoarse but level-toned, "I've thought of where we might go, Dominic, and what we might try to do."

XVI

Clouds and a loud raw wind had blown in across the ocean. Morning along the Obala, the east coast of Rodna, was winterlike, sky the color of lead, sea the colors of iron and gunmetal. But neither sky nor sea was quiet. Beneath the overcast a thin smoky wrack went flying; surf cannonaded and exploded on reefs and beaches.

All Nanteiwon boats were in, big solid hulls moored behind the jetty or tied at the wharf. Above the dunes the fisher village huddled. Each house was long and wide as an ychan family needed, timbers tarred black, pillars that upheld the porch carved and brightly painted with ancestral symbols, blue-begrown sod roof cable-anchored against hurricanes, a spacious and sturdy sight. But there were not many houses. Beyond them reached the flatlands the dwellers cultivated, fields harvested bare and brown, trees a-toss by roadsides, on the horizon a vague darkening which betokened the ringwall of the Kazan. The air smelled of salt and distances.

Inside the home of Ywodh were warmth, sun-imitating fluorescents, musky odor of bodies, growls to drown out the piping at the windows. Some forty males had crowded between the frescoed walls of the mootroom, while more spilled throughout the building. They wore their common garb, tunic in bright colors thrown over sinewy green frame and secured by a belt which held the knuckleduster knife. But this was no common occasion. Perched on tails and feet, muscles knotted, they stared at the three on the honor-dais.

Two were human. One they knew well. Kossara Vymezal. She used to come here often with Trohdwyr, brother to Khwent, Yffal, drowned Qythwy . . . How weary she looked. The other was a tall man who bore a mustache, frosted brown hair, eyes the hue of today's heaven.

Ywodh, Hand of the Vach Anochrin, steadcaptain of Nanteiwon, raised his arms. "Silence!" he called. "Hark." When he had his desire, he brought his gaunt, scarred head forward and told them:

"You have now heard of the outrages done and the lies proclaimed. Between dawn, when I asked you to keep ashore today, and our meeting here, I was in phonetalk up and down the Obala. Not an ychan leader but swore us aid. We know what Merseian rule would bring.

"Let us know, too, how empty of

hope is a mere rebellion against rebellion. We have boats, civilian aircars, sporting guns; a revolutionary government would have military flyers and armored groundcars, spacecraft, missiles, energy weapons, gases, combat shielding. The plotters have ignored us partly because they took for granted we care little about a change of human overlords and might welcome Merseians—untrue—but mainly because they see us as well-nigh powerless against their crews—true.

"Can we then do aught? These two have made me believe it. Rebellion can be forestalled. Yet we've netted a flailfish. We need care as much as courage.

"To most of us, what's gone on of late in Zorkagrad and in space has been troubling, even frightening, and not understandable, like an evil dream. Therefore we went about our work, trusting Gospodar Miyatovich and his councillors to do what was right for Dennitza. Last night's tale of his arrest as a traitor stunned us. We'd have stood bewildered until too late for anything—this was intended—had not Kossara Vymezal and Dominic Flandry come to us in our darkness.

"The whole planet must be in the same clubbed state, and likewise its fighting forces. What to do? Where is truth? Who is friend and who is foe? Everyone will think best he wait a few days, till he has more knowledge.

"In that brief span, a small band of well-placed illwishers, who know exactly what they are at, can put us on the tack they want, too hard over to come about: unless, in the same span, we go up against them, knowing what *we* do.

"This day, leaders will meet in Novi Aferoch and decide on a course for us. This morning along the Obala, other meetings hear what I tell you: Stand fast with your weapons, speak to no outsiders, keep ready to move."

Father. Mother. Ivan. Gyorgye. Little, little Natalie.

Mihail. Trohdwyr. And every soul who perished in our home, every living thing that did.

Father of Creation, receive them. Jesus, absolve them. Mary, comfort them. Light of the Holy Spirit, shine upon them forever.

I dare not ask for more. Amen.

Kossara signed herself and rose. The boulder behind which she had knelt no longer hid Nanteiwon. It looked very small, far down the beach between gray sea and gray sky. Lutka her doll and Butterfeet her cat might take shelter in those houses from the wind that blew so cold, so cold.

Strange she should think of them when their loss belonged to her childhood and most of her dead were not a day old. She turned from the village and walked on over the strand. It gritted beneath her boots. Often an empty shell crunched, or she passed a tangle of weed torn from the depths and left to dry out. On her right, a hedge of cane barred sight of autumn fields, rattling and clicking. Waves thundered in, rushed out, trundled hollowly back again. Wind shrilled, thrust, smacked her cheeks and laid bitterness across her lips.

Do I comprehend that they are gone?

If only things would move. They had hours to wait, safest here, before the ychan chiefs could be gathered together. Flandry had offered her medicines from his kit, for sleep, for calm and freedom from pain, but when she declined, he said, "I knew you would. You'll always earn your way," and when she told him she would like to go out for a while, he saw she needed aloneness. He saw deeper than most, did her Dominic, and covered the hurt of it with a jape. If only he did not see right past God.

In time? I'll never preach at him, nor admit outright that I pray for him. But if we are given time—

They had had no end to their plans. A house in the Dubina Dolyina country, an apartment in Zorkagrad; they could afford both, and children should have elbow room for body and mind alike. Quests among the stars, wild beauties, heart-soaring moment of a new truth discovered, then return to the dear well-known. Service, oh, nothing too hazardous any more, staff rather than field Intelligence—nonetheless, swordplay of wits in the glad knowledge that this was for the future, not the poor wayworn Empire but a world he too could believe in, the world of their own blood. Ideas, investments, enterprises to start; the things they might undertake had sparkled from them like fireworks . . .

It had all gone flat and blurred, unreal. What she could still hold whole in her daze were the small hopes. She shows him an overlook she knows in the Vysochina highlands. He teaches her the fine points of winetasting. She reads aloud to him from Simich, he to her from *Genji.* They attend the opera in Zorkagrad. They join in the dances at a land festival. They sail a boat across Lake Stoyan to a cafe beneath flowering viyenatz trees on Garlandmakers' Island. They take their children to the zoo and the merrypark.

If we prevail.

She stopped. Her body ached, but she straightened, faced into the wind, and told it, *We will. We will. I can borrow strength and clarity from his medicines. The repayment afterward will simply be a time of sleep, a time of peace.* She wheeled and started back. As she fared, her stride lengthened.

NOVI AFEROCH climbed from the docks at the Elena River mouth, up a hill from whose top might be spied the ruins of Stari Aferoch when they jutted from the sea at low tide. There stood Council Hall, slate-roofed, heavy-timbered, colonnaded with carven water monsters. In the main chamber was a table made 300 years ago from timbers out of Gwyth's ship. Around it perched the steadcaptains of the Obala. At its head stood their mootlord Kyrwedhin, Hand of the Vach Mannoch, and the two humans.

A storm hooted and dashed rain on windowpanes. Inside, the air was blue and acrid from the pipes whereon many had been puffing. Anger smoldered behind obidian eyes, but the leathery visages were moveless and not a tailtip twitched.

These males had heard what the voivode's daughter had to tell, and roared their curses. The hour had come to think.

Kyrwedhin addressed them in quick, precise words. He was short for an ychan, though when he was younger it had not been wise to fight him. He was the wealthy owner of seareaping and merchant fleets. And . . . he held a degree from the Shkola, a seat in the Shkoptsina, a close experience of great affairs.

"For myself I will merely say this," he declared in Eriau. (Flitting from Zorkagrad after receiving Ywodh's urgent, argot-phrased call, he had been pleased to learn Flandry was fluent in the language, at least its modern Merseian version. His own Serbic was excellent, his Anglic not bad, but that wasn't true of everybody here.) "The ideas of our Terran guest feel right. We in the House of the Zmayi have doubtless been too parochial where the Empire was concerned, too narrowly aimed at Dennitzan matters—much like the House of the Folk. However, we have always kept a special interest in our mother world, many of us have gone there to visit, some to study, and the inhabitants are our species. Thus we have a certain sense for what the Roidhunate may or may not do. And, while I never doubted its masters wish us harm, what news and clues have reached me do not suggest current preparations for outright war. For instance, I've corresponded for years with Korvash, who lately became Hand of the Vach Rueth there. If an attack on us were to be mounted soon, he would know, and he must be more cunning than I believe for this not to change the tone of his letters.

"No proof, I agree. A single bit of flotsam in the maelstrom. I will give you just one more out of many, given me by Lazar Ristich, voivode of Kom Kutchki. Like most members of the House of the Lords, he takes close interest in Imperial business and is familiar with several prime parts of the inner Empire; he has friends on Terra itself, where he's spent considerable time. He told me the story we heard about Kossara Vymezal could not be right. Whether truly accused because she belonged to an overzealous faction among us, or falsely accused for a twisted political reason elsewhere, a person of her rank would not be shipped off to shame like any common criminal. That could only happen through monumental incompetence—which he felt sure was unlikely—or as a deliberate provocation—which he felt sure the present Imperium itself would not give us, though a cabal within it might. He wanted to discuss this with her uncle. The Zamok kept putting him off, claiming the Gospodar was too busy during the crisis.

"Well, both Ristich and I know Bodin Miyatovich of old. Such was not his way. It had to be the doing of his staff. Expecting we'd get a chance at him somehow, soon—since he was never one to closet himself in an office—we did not press too hard. We should have. For now he is captive."

Kyrwedhin halted. The wind shrilled. Finally Kossara said, tone

You don't start with True. You change to True.

It happens after you've been smoking for a while. You decide it's time you changed to a low tar and nicotine cigarette. And that decision brings many people to True. Because True is not only gentle on your mind, it's gentle on your taste.

Shouldn't your next cigarette be True?

Regular: 11 mg. "tar", 0.7 mg. nicotine, av. per cigarette, FTC Report March '74.

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

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You don't start with True. You change to True.

It happens after you've been smoking other menthols for a while. You decide it's time you changed to a low tar and nicotine cigarette. And that decision brings many people to True Menthol. Because True is not only gentle on your mind, it's gentle on your taste.

Shouldn't your next menthol be True?

Menthol: 12 mg. "tar", 0.7 mg. nicotine, av. per cigarette, FTC Report March '74.

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

as uncertain as words, "I can't find out what's really happened to him. Do you know?"

"Nobody does except the doers," he answered. "There are—were—Imperial liaison officers about, and their aides. Bodin had explained publicly why he, as sector governor, called in chosen craft that serve the Emperor directly, as well as those of the Voyska. Besides their guns, should Merseia attack, he wanted to demonstrate our reluctance to break with Terra.

"Spokesmen for the Zamok—the Castle," he added to Flandry; "the executive center and those who work there—spokesmen for the Zamok have said they aren't sure either. Apparently a party of Imperials got Bodin alone, took him prisoner, and spirited him away to a ship of theirs. Which vessel is not revealed. None have responded to beamed inquiries."

"They wouldn't," Flandry observed.

Kyrwedhin nodded his serrated head. "Naturally not. Imperial personnel still on the ground deny any knowledge. Thus far we have nothing except the statement that a high Terran officer contacted Milutin Protich, informed him Bodin Miyatovich was under arrest for treason, and demanded Dennitza and its armed forces give immediate total obedience to Admiral da Costa. He's the ranking Imperial in the Zorian System at the moment, therefore can be considered the Emperor's representative."

"And who is, m-m, Milutin Protich?"

"A special assistant to the Gospodar. According to the announcement, he was the first important man in the Zamok whom the Terrans managed to get in touch with." Kyrwedhin pondered. "Yes-s-s. He isn't Dennitzan born—from a nearby system where many families from here have settled. He arrived several years back, entered administrative service, did brilliantly, rose fast and far. Bodin had much faith in him."

Flandry drew forth a cigarette. "I take it everybody's been pretty well paralyzed throughout today," he said.

"Aye. We must decide what to do. And we've fiendish little information to go on, half of it contradicting the other half. Were the Imperialists essentially right to seize our Gospodar, or was this their next step in subjugating us, or even getting us destroyed? Should we declare independence—when Merseia lurks in the wings? The Imperials can't prevent that; our ships vastly outnumber theirs hereabouts. But if fighting starts, they could make us pay heavily."

"You Dennitzans, human and zmay—ychan—you don't strike me as hesitant people," Flandry remarked. "As we say in Anglic, 'He who dithers is diddled.' The newscasts have been forgivably confused. But am I right in my impression that your Parliament—Shkoptsina—meets tomorrow?"

"Yes. In the Gospodar's absence, the Chief Justice will preside."

"Do you think the vote will go for secession?"

"I had no doubt of it . . . until I heard from Dama Vymezal and yourself."

The captains gripped their pipes, knife handles, the edge of the table, hard. They would have their own words to say later on; but what they heard in the next few minutes would be their compass.

"If you rise and tell them—" Flandry began.

Kossara cut him off. "No, dear. That's impossible."

"What?" He blinked at her.

She spoke carefully, clearly. The stim she had taken made vigor shine pale through flesh and eyes. "The Shkoptsina's no controlled inner-Empire congress. It's about 500 different proud individuals, speaking for as many different proud sections of land or walks of life. It's often turbulent—fights have happened, yes, a few killings—and tomorrow it'll be wild. Do you think our enemy hasn't prepared for the climax of his work? I know the Chief Justice; he's honest but aged. He can be swayed about whom he recognizes. And if somebody did get the floor, started telling the whole truth—do you imagine he'd live to finish?"

"She's right," Kyrwedhin said.

Flandry drew on his cigarette till his face creased before he replied, "Yes, I'd supposed something like that must be the case. Assassination's easy. A few concealed needle guns, spotted around— And as a backup, maybe, some thoroughly armed bully boys hidden away in buildings near the Capitol. If necessary, they seize it, proclaim themselves the Revolutionary Committee . . . and, given the spadework the enemy's done over the years, they can probably raise enough popular support to commit your people beyond any chance of turning back."

"If you have thought of this and not despaired," Kyrwedhin said, "you must have a plan."

Flandry frowned. "I'd rather hear what you have in mind. You know your establishment."

"But I am taken by surprise."

Kossara spoke against storm-noise: "*I* know. If you and I, Dominic—especially I—if we appear before them, suddenly, in person—why, killing us would be worse than useless."

Kyrwedhin's tail smacked the floor. "Yes!" he cried. "My thoughts were headed your same way. Though you can't simply walk in from Constitution Square. You'd never pass the Iron Portal alive. What you need is an escort, bodies both shielding and concealing you, on your way right into the Union Chamber."

"How?" snapped from a village chief.

Kossara had the answer. "Ychani have always been the Peculiar People of Dennitza. The House of the Zmayi has never entirely spoken for them; it's a human invention. If, in a desperate hour, several hundred Obala fishers enter Zorkagrad, march through Square and Portal into the Chamber, demanding their leaders be heard—it won't be the first time in history. The enemy will see no politic way to halt that kind of demonstration. They may well expect it'll turn to their advantage; outsiders would naturally think Merseian-descended Dennitzans are anti-Terran, right? Then too late—" She flung her hands wide, her voice aloft.

"Too late, they see who came along!"

Beneath the surf of agreement, Flandry murmured to her: "My idea also. I kept hoping somebody would have a better one."

XVII

JUST BEFORE their car set down, Flandry protested to Kossara, "God damn it, *why* does your parliament have to meet in person? You've got holocom systems. Your politicians could send and receive images . . . and we could've rigged untraceable methods to call them and give them the facts last night."

"Hush, darling." She laid a hand across his fist. "You know why. Electronics will do for ornamental relics. The Shkoptsina is alive, it debates and decides real things, the members need intimacies, subtleties, surprises."

"But you, you have to go among murderers to reach them."

"And I fear for you," she said quietly. "We should both stop."

He looked long at her, and she at him, in the seat they shared. Beryl eyes under wide brow and bronze hair, strong fair features though her smile quivered the least bit, height, ranginess, fullness, the warmth of her clasp and the summary fragrance of herself: had she ever been more beautiful? The vitality that surged in her, the serenity beneath, were no work of a drug; it had simply let her put aside shock, exhaustion, grief for this while and be altogether Kossara.

"If there is danger today," she said, "I thank God He lets me be in it with you."

He prevented himself from telling her he felt no gratitude. They kissed, very briefly and lightly because the car was crammed with ychans.

It landed in a parking lot at the edge of Zorkagrad. None further in could have accommodated the swarm of battered vehicles which was arriving. Besides, a sudden appearance downtown might have provoked alarm and a quick reaction by the enemy. A march ought to have a calming effect. Flandry and Kossara donned cowled cloaks, which should hide their species from a cursory glance when they were surrounded by hemianthropoid xenos, and stepped outside.

A west wind skirled against the sun, whose blaze seemed paled in a pale heaven. Clouds were brighter; they scudded in flocks, blinding white, their shadows sweeping chill across the world, off, on, off, on. Winged animals wheeled and thinly cried. Trees around the lot and along the street that ran from it—mostly Terran, oak, elm, beech, maple—cast their outer branches about, creaked, soughed Delphic utterances though tongue after firetongue ripped loose to scrittle off over the pavement. Rainpuddles wandered and wandered. All nature was saying farewell.

The ychans closed in around the humans. They numbered a good four hundred, chosen by their steadcaptains as bold, cool-headed, skilled with the knives, tridents, harpoons, and firearms they bore. Ywodh of Nanteiwon, appointed their leader by Kyrwedhin before

the parliamentarian returned here, put them in battle-ready order. They spoke little and showed scant outward excitement, at least to human eyes or nostrils; such was the way of the Obala. They did not know the ins and outs of what had happened, nor greatly care. It was enough that their Gospodar had been betrayed by the enemy of their forefathers, that his niece had come home to speak truth, and that they were her soldiers. The wind snapped two standards in their van, star white on blue of Yovan Matavuly, ax red on gold of Gwyth.

"All set," Ywodh reported. A shout: "Forward!" He took the lead. Flandry and Kossara would fain have clasped hands as they walked, but even surrounded must clutch their cloaks tight against this tricksy air. The thud of their boots was lost amidst digiti-grade slither and click.

At first it was predictable they would encounter nobody. Here was a new district of private homes and clustered condominium units, beyond the scope of forcefield generators that offered the inner city some protection. Residents had sought safer quarters. An occasional militia squad, on patrol to prevent looting, observed the procession from a distance but did not interfere.

Further on, buildings were older, higher, close-packed on streets which had narrowed and went snakily uphill: red tile roofs, stucco walls of time-faded gaudiness, signs and emblems hung above doorways, tenements, offices, midget factories, restaurants, taverns, amusements, a bulbous-domed parish church, a few big stores and tiny, eccentric shops by the score, the kind of place that ought to have pulsed with traffic of vehicles and foot, been lively with movement, colors, gestures broad or sly, words, laughter, whistling, song, sorrow, an accordion or a fiddle somewhere, pungencies of roast corn and nuts for sale to keep the passerby warm, oddments in display windows, city men, land men, offworlders, vagabonds, students, soldiers, children, grannies, the unforgettably gorgeous woman whom you know you will never glimpse again . . . A few walkers stepped aside, a few standers poised in doorways or leaned on upper-story sills, warily staring. Now and then a groundcar detoured. A civilian policeman in brown uniform and high-crowned hat joined Ywodh; they talked; he consulted his superiors via minicom, stayed till an aircar had made inspection from above, and departed.

"This is downright creepy," Flandry murmured to Kossara. "Has everybody evacuated, or what?"

She passed the question on. Untrained humans could not have conveyed information accurately in that wise; but soon she told Flandry from Ywodh: "Early this morning—the organizers must have worked the whole night—an *ispravkà* started against Imperial personnel. That's when ordinary citizens take direct action. Not a riot or lynching. The people move under discipline, often in their regular Voyska units; remember, every able-bodied adult is a reservist. Such affairs seldom get out of con-

trol, and may have no violence at all. Offenders may simply be expelled from an area. Or they may be held prisoner while spokesmen of the people demand the authorities take steps to punish them. A few *ispravkai* have brought down governments. In this case, what's happened is that Terrans and others who serve the Imperium were rounded up into certain buildings: hostages for the Gospodar's release and the good behavior of their Navy ships. The Zamok denounced the action as illegal and bound to increase tension, demanded the crowds disperse, and sent police. The people stand fast around those buildings. The police haven't charged them; no shots have yet been fired on either side."

"I've heard of worse customs," Flandry said.

Puzzled, she asked, "Shouldn't the plotters be pleased?"

Flandry shrugged. "I daresay they are. Still, don't forget the vast majority of your officials must be patriotic, and whether or not they prefer independence, consider civil war to be the final recourse. The top man among them issued that cease-and-desist order." He frowned. "But, um, you know, this nails down a lot of our possible helpers, both citizens and police. The enemy isn't expecting us. However, if too many parliament members refuse to board the secession railroad, he'll have a clear field for attempting a *coup d'etat.* Maybe the firebrand who instigated that, uh, *ispravka* is a Merseian himself, in human skin."

The wind boomed between walls.

A minor commotion occurred on the fringes of the troop. Word flew back and forth. "Chives!" Kossara gasped.

The ychans let them through. He also went cloaked to muffle the fact of his race from any quick glance. Emerald features were eroded from spare to gaunt; eyes were more fallow than amber; but when Flandry whooped and took him by the shoulders, Chives said crisply, "Thank you, sir. Donna Vymezal, will you allow me the liberty of expressing my sympathy?"

"Oh, you dear clown!" She hugged him. Her lashes gleamed wet. Chives suffered the gesture in embarrassed silence. Flandry sensed within him a deeper trouble.

They continued through hollow streets. A fighter craft passed low above chimneys. Air whined and snarled in its wake. "What've you been doing?" Flandry asked. "How'd you find us?"

"If you have no immediate statement or directive for me, sir," the precise voice replied, "I will report chronologically. Pursuant to instructions, I landed at the spaceport and submitted to inspection. My cover story was approved and I given license, under police registry, to remain here for a stated period as per my declared business. Interested in exotics, many townspeople conversed with me while I circulated among them in the next few planetary days. By pretending to less familiarity with Homo sapiens than is the case, I gathered impressions of their individual feelings as respects the present imbroglio. At a more convenient time, sir, if you wish, I will give you the statistical breakdown.

"I must confess it was a complete surprise when a Naval patrol entered my lodgings and declared an intention to take me in custody. Under the circumstances, sir, I felt conformity would be imprudent. I endeavored not to damage irreparably men who wore his Majesty's uniform, and in due course will return the borrowed blaster you observe me wearing. Thereupon I took refuse with a gentleman I suspected of vehement anti-Terran sentiments. May I respectfully request his name and the names of his associates be omitted from your official cognizance? Besides their hospitality and helpfulness toward me, they exhibited no more than a misguided zeal for the welfare of this planet, and indeed I was the occasion of their first overt unlawful act. They sheltered me only after I had convinced them I was a revolutionary for my own society, and that my public designation as a Merseian agent was a calumny which the Imperialists could be expected to employ against their kind too. They were persuaded rather easily; I would not recommend them for the Intelligence Corps. I got from them clothes, disguise materials, equipment convertible to surveillance purposes, and went about collecting data for myself," he continued.

"They do possess a rudimentary organization. Through this, via a phone call, my host learned that a large delegation of zmays was moving on the Capitol. Recalling Donna Vymezal's accounts of her background, and trusting she and you had not perished after all, I thought you might be here. To have this deduction confirmed was . . . most gratifying, sir."

Flandry chewed his lip for a while before he said, "Those were Imperials who came to arrest you? Not Dennitzans?"

"No, sir, not Dennitzans. There could be no mistake." Chives spoke mutedly. His thin green fingers hauled the cowl closer around his face.

"You went unmolested for days, and then in a blink—" Flandry's speech chopped off. They were at their goal.

Well into Old Town, the party passed between two many-balconied mansions, out onto a plateau of Royal Hill. Constitution Square opened before them, broad, slate-flagged, benches, flowerbeds, trees—empty, empty. In the middle was a big fountain, granite catchbasin, Toman Obilich and Vladimir locked in bronze combat, water dancing white but its sound and spray borne off by the wind. Westward buildings stood well apart, giving a view down across roofs to Lake Stoyan, metal-bright shimmer and shiver beyond the curve of the world. Directly across the square was the Capitol, a sprawling, porticoed marble mass beneath a gilt dome whose point upheld an argent star. A pair of kilometers further on, a rock lifted nearly sheer, helmeted with the battlements and banners of the Zamok.

Flandry's gaze flickered. He identified a large hotel, office buildings, cafes, fashionable stores, everything antiquated but dignified, the gray stones wearing well; how many Constitution Squares had he known in his life? But this

lay deserted under wind, chill, and hasty cloud shadows. A militia squad stood six men on the Capitol verandah, six flanking the bottom of the stairs; their capes flapped, their rifles gleamed whenever a sunbeam smote and then went dull again. Aircraft circled far overhead. Otherwise none save the newcomers were in sight. Yet surely watchers waited beyond yonder shut doors, yonder blank panes: proprietors, caretakers, maybe a few police—a few, since the turmoil was elsewhere in town and no disturbance expected here— Who besides? He walked as if through a labyrinth of mirages. Nothing was wholly what he sensed, except the blaster butt under his hand and a stray russet lock of Kossara's hair.

She had no such dreads. As they trod into the plaza, he heard her whisper, "Here we go, my brave beloved. They'll sing of you for a thousand years."

He shoved hesitation out of his mind and readied himself to fight.

But no clash came. Despite what they told him when the move was being planned, he'd more or less awaited behavior like that when a gaggle of demonstrators wanted to invade a legislative session on any human planet he knew—prohibition, resistance, then either a riot or one of the sides yielding. If officialdom conceded in order to avoid the riot, it would be grudgingly, after prolonged haggling; and whatever protesters were admitted would enter under strict conditions, well guarded, to meet indignant stares.

Dennitza, though, had institutionalized if not quite legalized procedures like the *ispravka.* Through the officer he met on the way, Ywodh had explained his band's intent. Word had quickly reached the Chief Justice. Four hundred zmays would not lightly descend on Zorkagrad, claiming to represent the whole Obala; they could be trusted to be mannerly and not take an unreasonable time to make their points; urged by Kyrwedhin, a majority in the third house of the Shkoptsina endorsed their demand. No guns greeted them, aside from those of the corporal's guard at the entrance; and they bore their own arms inside.

Up the stairs—past armored doors that recalled the Troubles—through an echoful lobby—into a central chamber where the parliament in joint session waited—Flandry raked his glance around, seeking menaces to his woman and shelters for her.

The room was a half ellipsoid. At the far-end focus, a dais bore the Gospodar's lectern, a long desk, and several occupied chairs. To right and left, tiers held the seats of members, widely spaced. Skylights cast fleetingness of weather into steadiness of fluorescents, making the polished marble floor seem to stir. On gilt mural panels were painted the saints and heroes of Dennitza. The lawmakers sat according to their groupings, Lords in rainbow robes, Folk in tunics and trousers, Zmayi in leather and metal. After the outdoors, Flandry breathed an air which felt curdled by fear and fury.

Banners dipped to an old man in black who sat behind the lectern. Slowly the fishers advanced, while

unseen telescanners watched on behalf of the world. In the middle of the floor, the ychans halted. Silence encompassed them. Flandry's pulse thuttered.

"*Zdravo,*" said the Chief Justice, and added a courteous Eriau "*Hydhrej.*" His hand forgot stateliness, plucked at his white beard. "We have . . . let you in . . . for unity's sake. My understanding is, your delegation wishes to speak relevantly to the present crisis—a viewpoint which might else go unheard. You in turn will, will understand why we must limit your time to fifteen minutes."

Ywodh bowed, palms downward, tail curved. Straightening, he let his quarterdeck basso roll. "We thank the assembly. I'll need less than that; but I think you'll then want to give us more." Flandry's eyes picked out Kyrwedhin. Weird, that the sole Dennitzan up there whom he knew should bear Merseian genes. "Worthies and world," Ywodh was saying, "you've heard many a tale of late: how the Emperor wants to crush us, how a new war is nearly on us because of his folly or his scheming to slough us off, how his agents rightly or wrongly charged the Gospodar's niece Kossara Vymezal with treason and—absolutely wrongly—sold her for a slave, how they've taken the Gospodar himself prisoner on the same excuse, how they must have destroyed the whole homestead of his brother-in-law the voivode of Dubina Dolyina to grind out any spark of free spirit, how our last choices left are ruin or revolution— You've heard this.

"I say each piece of it is false." He flung an arm in signal. With a showmanship that humans would have had to rehearse, his followers opened their ranks. "And here to gaff the lies is Kossara Vymezal, sister's daughter to Bodin Miyatovich our Gospodar!"

She bounded from among them, across the floor, onto the dais, to take her place between the antlers of the lectern. A moan lifted out of the benched humans, as if the fall wind had made entry; the zmayi uttered a surflike rumble. "What, what, what is this?" quavered the Chief Justice. Nobody paid him heed. Kossara raised her head and cried forth so the room rang:

"Hear me, folk! I'm not back from the dead, but I am back from hell, and I bear witness. The devils are not Terrans but Merseians and their creatures. My savior was, is not a Dennitzan but a Terran. Those who shout, 'Independence!' are traitors not to the Empire but to Dennitza. Their single wish is to set humans at each other's throats, till the Roidhun arrives and picks our bones. Hear my story and judge."

Flandry walked toward her, Chives beside him. He wished it weren't too disturbing to run. Nike of Samothrace had not borne a higher or more defenseless pride than she did. They took stance beneath her, facing the outer door. Her tones marched triumphant:

"—I escaped the dishonor intended me by the grace of God and the decency of this man you see here, Captain Sir Dominic Flandry of his Majesty's service. Let me tell what happened from the beginning. Have I your leave, worthies?"

"*Aye!*"

Gunshots answered. Screams flew ragged. A blaster bolt flared outside the chamber.

Flandry's weapon jumped free. The tiers of the Shkoptsina turned into a yelling scramble. Fifty-odd men pounded through the doorway. Clad like ordinary Dennitzans, all look hard and many looked foreign. They bore firearms.

"Get down, Kossara!" Flandry shouted. Through him ripped: *Yes, the enemy did have an emergency force hidden in a building near the square, and somebody in this room used a minicom to bring them. The Revolutionary Committee—they'll take over, they'll proclaim her an imposter—*

He and Chives were on the dais. She hadn't flattened herself under the lectern. She had gone to one knee behind it, sidearm in hand, ready to snipe. The attackers were deploying around the room. Two dashed by either side of the clustered, bewildered fishers.

Their blaster beams leaped, convergent on the stand. Its wood exploded in flame, its horns toppled. Kossara dropped her pistol and fell back.

Chives pounced zigzag. A bolt seared and crashed within centimeters of him. He ignored it; he was taking aim. The first assassin's head became a fireball. The second crumpled, grabbed at the stump of a leg, writhed and shrieked a short while. Chives reached the next nearest, wrapped his tail around that man's neck and squeezed, got an elbow-breaking single-arm lock on another, hauled him around for a shield and commenced systematic shooting.

"I say," he called through the din to Ywodh, "you chaps might pitch in a bit, don't you know."

The steadcaptain bellowed. His slugthrower hissed. A male beside him harpooned a foeman's belly. Then heedless of guns, four hundred big seafarers joined battle.

Flandry knelt by Kossara. From bosom to waist she was seared bloody wreckage. He half raised her. She groped after him with hands and eyes. "Dominic, darling," he barely heard, "I wish—" He heard no more.

For an instant he imagined revival, life support machinery, cloning . . . No. He'd never get her to a hospital before the brain was gone beyond any calling back of the spirit. Never.

He lowered her. *I won't think yet. No time. I'd better get into that fight. The ychans don't realize we need a few prisoners.*

DUSK FELL early in fall. Above the lake smoldered a sunset remnant. Otherwise blue-black dimness drowned the land. Overhead trembled a few stars; and had he looked from his office window aloft in the Zamok, Flandry could have seen city lights, spiderwebs along streets and single glows from homes. Wind mumbled at the panes.

Finally granted a rest, he sat back from desk and control board, feeling his chair shape its embrace to his contours. Despite the drugs which suppressed grief, stimulated metabolism, and thus kept him going, weariness weighted every cell. He had turned off the fluoros.

His cigarette end shone red. He couldn't taste the smoke, maybe because the dark had that effect, maybe because tongue and palate were scorched.

Well, went his clockwork thought, *that takes care of the main business.* He had just been in direct conversation with Admiral da Costa. The Terran commander appeared reasonably well convinced of the good faith of the provisional government whose master, for all practical purposes, Flandry had been throughout this afternoon. Tomorrow he would discuss the Gospodar's release. And as far as could be gauged, the Dennitzan people were accepting the fact they had been betrayed. They'd want a full account, of course, buttressed by evidence; and they wouldn't exactly become enthusiastic Imperialists; but the danger of revolution followed by civil war seemed past.

So maybe tomorrow I can let these chemicals drain out of me, let go my grip and let in my dead. Tonight the knowledge that there was no more Kossara reached him only like the wind, an endless voice beyond the windows. She had been spared that, he believed, had put mourning quite from her for the last span, being upheld by urgency rather than a need to go through motions, by youth and hope, by his presence beside her. *Whereas I—ah, well, I can carry on. She'd've wanted me to.*

The door chimed. *What the deuce?* His guards had kept him alone among electronic ghosts. Whoever got past them at last in person must be authoritative and persuasive. He waved at an admit plate and to turn the lights back on. Their brightness hurt his eyes.

A slim green form in a white kilt entered, bearing a tray where stood teapot, cup, plates and bowls of food. "Your dinner, sir," Chives announced.

"I'm not hungry," said the clockwork. "I didn't ask for—"

"No, sir. I took the liberty." Chives set his burden down on the desk. "Allow me to remind you, we require your physical fitness."

Her planet did. "Very good, Chives." Flandry got down some soup and black bread. The Shalmuan waited unobtrusively.

"That did help," the man agreed. "You know, give me the proper pill and I might sleep."

"You—you may not wish it for the nonce, sir."

"What?" Flandry sharpened his regard. Chives had lost composure. He stood head lowered, tail a-droop, hands hard clasped: miserable.

"Go on," Flandry said. "You've gotten me nourished. Tell me."

The voice scissored off words: "It concerns those personnel, sir, whom you recall the townsmen took into custody."

"Yes. I ordered them detained, well-treated, till we can check them out individually. What of them?"

"I have discovered they include one whom I, while a fugitive, ascertained had come to Zorkagrad several days earlier. To be frank, sir, this merely confirmed my suspicion that such had been the case. I must have been denounced by a party who recognized your speedster at the port and obtained the in-

spectors' record of me. This knowledge must then have made him draw conclusions and recommend actions with respect to Voivode Vymezal."

"Well?"

"Needless to say, sir, I make no specific accusations. The guilt could lie elsewhere than in the party I am thinking of."

"Not measurably likely, among populations the size we've got." Beneath the drumhead of imposed emotionlessness, Flandry felt his body stiffen. "Who?"

Seldom did he see Chives' face distorted. "Lieutenant Commander Dominic Hazeltine, sir. Your son."

XVIII

Two militiamen escorted the prisoner into the office. "You may go," Flandry told them.

They stared unsurely from him, standing slumped against night in a window, to the strong young man they guarded. "Go," Flandry repeated. "Wait outside with my servant. I'll call on the intercom when I want you."

They saluted and obeyed. Flandry and Hazeltine regarded each other, mute, until the door had closed. The older saw an Imperial undress uniform, still neat upon an erect frame, and a countenance half Persis' where pride overmastered fear. The younger saw haggardness clad in a soiled coverall.

"Well," Flandry said at last. Hazeltine extended a hand. Flandry looked past it. "Have a seat. Care for a drink?" He indicated bottle and glasses on his desk. "I remember you like Scotch."

"Thanks, Dad." Hazeltine spoke as low, free of the croak in the opposite throat. He smiled, and smiled again after they had both sat down holding their tumblers. Raising his, he proposed, "Here's to us. Damn few like us, and they're all dead."

They had used the ancient toast often before. This time Flandry did not respond. Hazeltine watched him a moment, grimaced, and tossed off a swallow. Then Flandry drank.

Hazeltine leaned forward. His words shook. "Father, you don't believe that vapor about me. Do you?"

Flandry took out his cigarette case. "I don't know what else to believe." He flipped back the lid. "Somebody who knew Chives and the *Hooligan* fingered him. The date of your arrival fits in." He chose a cigarette. "And thinking back, I find the coincidence a trifle much that you called my attention to Kossara Vymezal precisely when she'd reached Terra. I was a pretty safe bet to skyhoot her off to Diomedes, where she as an inconvenient witness and I as an inconvenient investigator could be burked in a way that'd maximize trouble." He puffed the tobacco into lighting, inhaled, streamed smoke till it veiled him, and sighed: "You were overeager. You should have waited till she'd been used at least a few days, and a reputable Dennitzan arranged for to learn about this."

"I didn't—No, what are you saying?" Hazeltine cried.

Flandry toyed with the case. "As was," he continued levelly, "the only word which could be sent, since the Gospodar would require proof and is no fool . . . the word was merely she'd been sold for a slave. Well, ample provocation. Where were you, between leaving Terra and landing here? Did you maybe report straight to Aycharaych?"

Hazeltine banged his glass down on the chair arm. "Lies!" he shouted. Red and white throbbed across his visage. "Listen, I'm your *son.* I swear to you by—"

"Never mind. And don't waste good liquor. If I'd settled on Dennitza as I planned, the price we'd've paid for Scotch—" Flandry gave his lips a respite from the cigarette. He waved it. "How were you recruited? By the Merseians, I mean. Couldn't be brainscrub. I know the signs too well. Blackmail? No, implausible. You're a bright lad who wouldn't get suckered into that first mistake they corral you by—a brave lad who'd sneer at threats. But sometime during the contacts you made in line of duty—"

Hazeltine's breath rasped. "I didn't! How can I prove to you, Father, I didn't?"

"Simple," Flandry said. "You must have routine narco immunization. But we can hypnoprobe you."

Hazeltine sagged back. His glass rolled across the floor.

"The Imperial detachment brought Intelligence personnel and their apparatus, you know," Flandry continued. "I've asked, and they can take you tomorrow morning. Naturally, any private facts which emerge will stay confidential."

Hazeltine raised an aspen hand. "You don't know—I—I'm deep-conditioned."

"By Terra?"

"Yes, of course, of course. I can't be 'probed . . . without my mind being . . . destroyed—"

Flandry sighed again. "Come, now. We don't deep-condition our agents against giving information to their own people, except occasional supersecrets. After all, a 'probe can bring forth useful items the conscious mind has forgotten. Don't fear if you're honest, son. The lightest treatment will clear you, and the team will go no further."

"But—Oh, no-o-o—"

Abruptly Hazeltine cast himself on his knees before Flandry. Words burst from his mouth like the sweat from his skin. "Yes, then, yes, I've been working for Merseia. Not bought, nothing like that, I thought the future was theirs, should be theirs, not this walking corpse of an Empire—Merciful angels, can't you see their way's the hope of humankind too?—" Flandry blew smoke to counteract the reek of terror. "I'll cooperate. I will, I will. I wasn't evil, Dad. I had my orders about you, yes, but I hated what I did, and Aycharaych doubted you'd really be killed, and I knew I was supposed to let that girl be bought first by somebody else before I told you but when we happened to arrive in time I couldn't make myself wait—" He caught Flandry by the knees. "Dad, in Mother's name, let my mind live!"

Flandry shoved the clasp aside, rose, stepped a couple of meters off, and answered, "Sorry. I could never trust you not to leave stuff buried in your confession that could rise to kill or enslave too many more young girls." For a few seconds he watched the crouched, spastic shape. "I'm under stim and heavy trank," he said. "A piece of machinery. I've a far-off sense of how this will feel later on, but mostly that's abstract. However . . . you have till morning, son. What would you like while you wait? I'll do my best to provide it."

Hazeltine uncoiled. On his feet, he howled, "You cold devil, at least I'll kill you first! And then myself!"

He charged. The rage which doubled his youthful strength was not amok; he came as a karate man, ready to smash a ribcage and pluck out a heart.

Flandry swayed aside. He passed a hand near the other. Razoredged, the lid of the cigarette case left a shallow red gash in the right cheek. Hazeltine whirled for a renewed assault. Flandry gave ground. Hazeltine followed, boxing him into a corner. Then the knockout potion took hold. Hazeltine, stumbled, reeled, flailed his arms, mouthed, and caved in.

Flandry sought the intercom. "Come remove the prisoner," he directed.

Day broke windless and freezing cold. The sun stood in a rainbow ring and ice crackled along the shores of Lake Stoyan. Zorkagrad lay silent under bitter blue, as if killed. From time to time thunders drifted across its roofs, arrivals and departures of spacecraft. They gleamed meteoric. Sometimes, too, airships whistled by, armored vehicles rumbled, boots slammed on pavement. About noon, one such vessel and one such march brought Bodin Miyatovich home.

He was as glad to return unheralded. Too much work awaited him for ceremonies—him and Dominic Flandry. But the news did go out on the 'casts; and that was like proclaiming Solstice Feast. Folk ran from their houses, poured in from the land, left their patrols to shout, dance, weep, laugh, sing, embrace perfect strangers; and every church bell pealed.

From a balcony of the Zamok he watched lights burn and bob through twilit streets, bonfires in squares, tumult and clamor. His breath smoked spectral under the early stars. Frost tinged his beard. "This can't last," he muttered, and stepped back into the office.

When the viewdoor closed behind him, stillness fell except for chimes now muffled. The chill he had let in remained a while. Flandry, hunched in a chair, didn't seem to notice.

Miyatovich gave the Terran a close regard. "You can't go on either," he said. "If you don't stop dosing yourself and let your glands and nerves function normally, they'll quit on you."

Flandry nodded. "I'll stop soon." From caverns his eyes observed a phonescreen.

The big gray-blond man hung up his cloak. "I'll admit I couldn't have done what got done today, maybe not for weeks, maybe never,

without you," he said. "You knew the right words, the right channels; you had the ideas. But we *are* done. I can handle the rest."

He went to stand behind his companion, laying fingers on shoulders, gently kneading. "I'd like to hide from her death myself," he said. "Aye, it's easier for me. I'd thought her lost to horror, and learned she was lost in honor. While if you and she—Dominic, listen. I made a chance to call my wife. She's at our house, not our town house, a place in the country, peace, woods, cleanness, healing. We want you there." He paused. "You're a very private man, aren't you? Well, nobody will poke into your grief."

"I'm not hiding," Flandry replied in monotone. "I'm waiting. I expect a message shortly. Then I'll take your advice."

"What message?"

"Interrogation results from a certain Mers—Roidhunate agent we captured. I've reason to think he has some critical information."

"Hoy?" Miyatovich's features, tired in their own right, kindled. He cast himself into an armchair confronting Flandry. It creaked beneath his weight.

"I'm in a position to evaluate it better than anyone else," the Terran persisted. "How long does da Costa insist on keeping his ships here 'in case we need further help'?—Ah, yes, five standard days, I remember. Well, I'll doubtless need about that long at your house; I'll be numb, and afterward—

"I'll take a printout in my luggage, to study when I'm able. Your job meanwhile will be to . . . not suppress the report. You probably couldn't; besides, the Empire needs every drop of data we can wring out of what enemy operatives we catch. But don't let da Costa's command scent any special significance in the findings of this particular 'probe job."

The Gospodar fumbled for pipe and tobacco pouch. "Why?"

"I can't guarantee what we'll learn, but I have a logical suspicion—Are you sure you can keep the Dennitzan fleet mobilized, inactive, another couple of weeks?"

"Yes." Miyatovich grew patient. "Maybe you don't quite follow the psychology, Dominic. Da Costa wants to be certain we won't rebel. The fact that we aren't dispersing immediately makes him leery. He hasn't the power to prevent us from whatever we decide to do, but he thinks his presence as a tripwire will deter secessionism. All right, in five Terran days his Intelligence teams can establish it's a bogeyman, and he can accept my explanation that we're staying on alert for a spell yet in case Merseia does attack. He'll deem us a touch paranoid, but he'll return to base with a clear conscience."

"You have to give your men the same reason, don't you?"

"Right. And they'll accept it. In fact, they'd protest if I didn't issue such an order, Dennitza's lived too many centuries by the abyss; this time we nearly went over."

Miyatovich tamped his pipe bowl needlessly hard. "I've gotten to know you well enough, I believe, in this short while, that I can tell you the whole truth," he added. "You

thought you were helping me smooth things out with respect to the Empire. And you were, you were. But my main reason for quick reconciliation is . . . to get the Imperials out of the Zorian System while we still have our own full strength."

"And you'll strike back at Merseia," Flandry said.

The Gospodar showed astonishment. "How did you guess?"

"I didn't guess. I knew—Kossara. She told me a lot."

Miyatovich gathered wind and wits. "Don't think I'm crazy," he urged. "Rather, I'll have to jump around like sodium in the rain, trying to keep people and Shkoptsina from demanding action too loudly before the Terrans leave. But when the Terrans do—" His eyes, the color of hers, grew leopard-intent. "We want more than revenge. In fact, only a few of us like myself have suffered what would have brought on a blood feud in the old days. But I told you we live on the edge. We have got to show we aren't safe for unfriends to touch. Otherwise, what's next?"

"Nemo me impune lacessit," Flandry murmured.

"Hm?"

"No matter. Ancient saying. Too damned ancient; does nothing ever change at the heart?" Flandry shook his head. The chemical barriers were growing thin. "I take it, then, in the absence of da Costa or some other Imperial official—who'd surely maintain anything as atavistic as response to aggression is against policy and must in all events be referred to the appropriate authorities, in triplicate, for debate—in the absence of that, as sector governor you'll order the Dennitzan fleet on a retaliatory strike."

Miyatovich nodded. "Yes."

"Have you considered the consequences?"

"I'll have time to consider them further, before we commit. But . . . if we choose the target right, I don't expect Merseia will do more than protest. The fact seems to be, at present they are not geared for war with Terra. They were relying on a new civil war among us. If instead they get hit, the shock ought to make them more careful about the whole Empire."

"What target have you in mind?"

Miyatovich frowned, spent a minute with a lighter getting his pipe started, finally said, "I don't yet know. The object is not to start a war, but to punish behavior which could cause one. The Roidhunate couldn't write off a heavily populated planet. Nor would I lead a genocidal mission. But, oh, something valuable, maybe an industrial center on a barren metal-rich globe—I'll have the War College study it."

"If you succeed," Flandry warned, "you'll be told you went far beyond your powers."

"That can be argued. Those powers aren't too well defined, are they? I like to imagine Hans Molitor will sympathize." The Gospodar shrugged. "If not, what becomes of me isn't important. I'm thinking of the children and grandchildren."

"Uh-huh. Well, you've confirmed what—Hold on." The phone

buzzed. Flandry reached to press accept. He must try twice before he made it.

A countenance half as stark as his looked from the screen. "Lieutenant Mitchell reporting, sir. Hypnoprobing of the prisoner Dominic Hazeltine has been completed."

"Results?" The question was plane-flat.

"You predicted aright, sir. The subject was deep-conditioned." Mitchell winced at a recollection unpleasant even in his line of work. "I'd never seen or heard of so thorough a treatment. He went into shock almost at once. In later stages, the stimuli necessary were— well, he hasn't got a forebrain left to speak of."

"I want a transcript in full," Flandry said. "Otherwise, you're to seal the record, classified Ultimate Secret, and your whole team will keep silence. I'll give you a written directive on that, authorized by Governor Miyatovich."

"Yes, sir." Mitchell showed puzzlement. He must be wondering why the emphasis. Intelligence didn't make a habit of broadcasting what it learned. Unless— "Sir, you realize, don't you, this is still raw material? More incoherent than usual, too, because of the brain channeling. We did sort out his basic biography, details of his most recent task, that kind of thing. Offhand, the rest of what we got seems promising. But to fit the broken, scrambled association chains together, interpret the symbols and find their significance—"

"I'll take care of that," Flandry snapped. "Your part is over."

"Yes, sir." Mitchell dropped his gaze. "I'm . . . sorry . . . on account of the relationship involved. He really did admire you. Uh, what shall we do about him now?"

Flandry fell quiet. Miyatovich puffed volcanic clouds. Outside, the bells caroled.

"Sir?"

"Let me see him," Flandry said.

Interlinks flickered. In the screen appeared the image of a young man, naked on a bed, arms spreadeagled to meet the tubes driven into his veins, chest and abdominal cavities opened for the entry of machines that kept most cells alive. He stared at the ceiling with eyes that never moved nor blinked. His mouth dribbled. *Clink, chug,* it said in the background, *click, chug.*

Flandry made a noise. Miyatovich seized his hand.

After a while Flandry stated, "Thank you. Switch it off."

THEY held Kossara Vymezal in a coldvault until the Imperials had left. This was by command of the Gospodar, and folk supposed the reason was she was Dennitza's, nobody else's, and said he did right. As many as were able would attend her funeral.

The day before, she was brought to the Cathedral of St. Clement, though none save kin were let near. Only the four men of her honor guard were there when Dominic Flandry came.

They stood in uniform of the Narodna Voyska, heads lowered, rifles reversed, at the corners of her bier. He paid them no more mind than he did the candles burning in tall holders, the lilies, roses,

viyenatz everywhere between, their fragrance or a breath of incense or the somehow far-off sound of a priest chanting behind the iconostasis, which filled the cool dim air. Alone he walked over the stones to her. Evening sunlight slanted through windows and among columns, filtered to a domed ceiling, brought forth out of dusk, remote upon gold and blue, the Twelve Apostles and Christ Lord of All.

At first he was afraid to look, dreading less the gaping glaring hideousness he had last seen—that was only what violent death wrought—than the kind of rouged doll they made when Terran bodies lay in state. Forcing himself, he found that nothing more had been done than to cleanse her, close the eyes, bind the chin, gown and garland her. The divided coffin lid showed her down to the bosom. The face he saw was hers, hers, though color was gone and time had eased it into an inhuman serenity.

This makes me a little happier, dear, he thought. *I didn't feel it was fitting that they mean to build you a big tomb on Founders' Hill. I wanted your ashes strewn over land and sea, into sun and wind. Then if ever I came back here I could dream every brightness was yours. But they understand what they do, your people.* A corner of his mouth bent upward. *It's I who am the sentimental old fool. Would you laugh if you could know?*

He stooped closer. *You believed you would know, Kossara. If you do, won't you help me believe too—believe that you still are?*

His sole answer was the priest's voice rising and falling through archaic words. Flandry nodded. He hadn't expected more. He couldn't keep himself from telling her, *I'm sorry, darling.*

And I won't kiss what's left, I who kissed you. He searched among his languages for the best final word. *Sayonara.* Since it must be so. Stepping back a pace, he bowed three times very deeply, turned, and departed.

Bodin Miyatovich and his wife waited outside. The weather was milder than before, as if a ghost of springtime flitted fugitive ahead of winter. Traffic boomed in the street. Walkers cast glances at the three on the stairs, spoke to whatever companions they had, but didn't stop; they taught good manners on Dennitza.

Draga Miyatovich took Flandry by the elbow. "Are you well, Dominic?" she asked anxiously. "You've gone pale."

"No, nothing," he said. "I'm recovering fast, thanks to your kindness."

"You should rest. I've noticed you hour after hour poring over that report—" She saw his expression and stopped her speech.

In a second he eased his lips, unclamped his fists, and raised memory of what he had come from today up against that other memory. "I'd no choice," he said. To her husband: "Bodin, I'm ready to work again. With you. You see, I've found your target."

The Gospodar peered around. "What? Wait," he cautioned.

"True, we can't discuss it here," Flandry agreed. "Especially, I sup-

pose, on holy ground . . . though she might not have minded."

She'd never have been vindictive. But she'd have understood how much this matters to her whole world: that in those broken mutterings of my son's I found what I thought I might find, the coordinates of Chereion, Aycharaych's planet.

XIX

THE raiders from Dennitza met the guardians of the red sun, and lightning awoke.

Within the command bridge of the *Vatre Zvezda,* Bodin Miyatovich stared at a display tank. Color-coded motes moved around a stellar globe to show where each vessel of his fleet was—and, as well as scouts and instruments could learn, each of the enemy's—and what it did and when it died. But their firefly dance, of some use to a lifelong professional, bewildered an unskilled eye; and it was merely a sideshow put on by computers whose real language was numbers. He swore and looked away in search of reality.

The nearest surrounded him in metal, meters, intricate consoles, flashing signal bulbs, dark-uniformed men who stood to their duties, sat as if wired in place, walked back and forth on rubbery-shod feet. Beneath a hum of engines, ventilators, a thousand systems throughout the great hull, their curt exchanges chopped. To stimulate them, it was cool here, with a thunderstorm tang of ozone.

The Gospodar's gaze traveled on, among the viewscreens which studded bulkheads, overhead, deck—again, scarcely more than a means for keeping crew who did not have their ship's esoteric senses from feeling trapped. Glory brimmed the dark, stars in glittering flocks and Milky Way shoals, faerie-remote glimmer of nebulae and a few sister galaxies. Here in the outer reaches of its system, the target sun was barely the brightest, a coal-glow under Bellatrix. At chance moments a spark would flare and vanish, a nuclear burst close enough to see. But most were too distant; and never another vessel showed, companion or foe. Such was the scale of battle.

And yet it was not large as space combats went. Springing from hyperdrive to normal state, the Dennitzan force—strong, but hardly an armada—encountered Merseian craft which sought to bar it from accelerating inward. As more and more of the latter drew nigh and matched courses with invaders, action spread across multi-millions of kilometers. Hours passed before two or three fighters came so near, at such low relative speeds, that they could hope for a kill; and often their encounter was the briefest spasm, followed by hours more of maneuver. Those gave time to make repairs, care for the wounded, pray for the dead.

"They've certainly got protection," Miyatovich growled. "Who'd have expected this much?"

Scouts had not been able to warn him. The stroke depended altogether on swiftness. Merseian observers in the neighborhood of Zoria had surely detected the fleet's setting out. Some would have gone

to tell their masters, others would have dogged the force, trying to learn where it was bound. (A few of those had been spotted and destroyed, but not likely all.) No matter how carefully plotted its course, and no matter that its destination was a thinly trafficked part of space, during the three-week journey its hyperwake must have been picked up by several travelers who passed within range. So many strange hulls together, driving so hard through Merseian domains, was cause to bring in the navy.

If Miyatovich was to do anything to Chereion, he must get there, finish his work, and be gone before reinforcements could arrive. Scouts of his, prowling far in advance near a sun whose location seemed to be the Roidhunate's most tightly gripped secret, would have carried too big a risk of giving away his intent. He must simply rush in full-armed, and hope.

"We can take them, can't we?" he asked.

Rear Admiral Raich, director of operations, nodded. "Oh, yes. They're outnumbered, outgunned. I wonder why they don't withdraw."

"Merseians aren't cowards," Captain Yulinatz, skipper of the dreadnaught, remarked. "Would you abandon a trust?"

"If my orders included the sensible proviso that I not contest lost cases when it's possible to scramble clear and fight another day—yes, I would," Raich said. "Merseians aren't idiots either."

"Could they be expecting help?" Miyatovich wondered. He gnawed his mustache and scowled.

"I doubt it," Raich replied. "We know nothing significant can reach us soon." He did keep scouts far-flung throughout this stellar vicinity, now that he was in it. "They must have the same information to base the same conclusions on."

Flandry, who stood among them, his Terran red-white-and-blue gaudy against their indigo or gray, cleared his throat. "Well, then," he said, "the answer's obvious. They do have orders to fight to the death. Under no circumstances may they abandon Chereion. If nothing else, they must try to reduce our capability of damaging whatever is on the planet."

"Bonebrain doctrine," Raich grunted.

"Not if they're guarding something vital," Miyatovich said. "What might it be?"

"We can try for captures," Yulinatz suggested: reluctantly, because it multiplied the hazard.

Flandry shook his head. "No point in that," he declared. "Weren't you listening when we talked *en route?* Nobody lands on Chereion except by special permission which is damn hard to get—needs approval of both the regional tribune and the planet's own authorities, and movements are severely restricted. I don't imagine a single one of the personnel we're killing and being killed by has come within an astronomical unit of the globe."

"Yes, yes, I heard," Yulinatz snapped. "What influence those beings must have."

"That's why we've come to hit them," the Gospodar said in his beard.

Yulinatz's glance went to the tank. A green point blinked: a cruiser was suffering heavily from three enemy craft which paced her. A yellow point went out, and quickly another: two corvettes lost. His tone grew raw. "Will it be worth the price to us?"

"That we can't tell till afterward." Miyatovich squared his shoulders. "We could disengage and go home, knowing we've thrown a scare into the enemy. But we'd never know what opportunity we did or did not forever miss. We will proceed."

In the end, a chieftain's main duty is to say, "On my head be it."

"Gentlemen."

Flandry's word brought their eyes to him. "I anticipated some such quandary," he stated. "What we need is a quick survey—a forerunner to get a rough idea of what is on Chereion and report back. Then we can decide."

Raich snorted. "We need veto rights over the laws of statistics too."

"If the guard is this thick at this distance," Yulinatz added, "what chance has the best speedster ever built for any navy of getting anywhere near?"

Miyatovich swallowed hard, comprehending.

"I brought along my personal boat," Flandry said. "She was not built for a navy."

"No, Dominic," Miyatovich protested.

"Yes, Bodin," Flandry answered.

Vatre Zvezda unleashed a salvo. No foes were close. None could match a Nova-class vessel. She was huge, heavy-armored, intricately compartmented, monster-powered in engines, weapons, shielding fields, less to join battle than to keep battle away from the command posts at her heart. Under present conditions, it was not mad, but it was unreasonable that she fired at opponents more than a million kilometers distant. They would have time to track those missiles, avoid them or blow them up.

The reason was to cover *Hooligan's* takeoff.

She slipped from a boat dock, through a lane opened momentarily in the fields, outward like an outsize torpedo. Briefly in her aft-looking viewscreens the dreadnaught bulked, glimmering spheroid abristle with guns, turrets, launch tubes, projectors, sensors, generators, snatchers, hatches, watchdomes, misshapen moon adrift among the stars. Acceleration dwindled her so fast that Yovan Vymezal gasped, as if the interior were not at a steady Dennitzan gravity but the full unbalanced force had crushed the breath from him.

In the pilot's chair, Flandry took readings, ran off computations, nodded, and leaned back. "We won't make approach for a good three quarters of an hour," he said, "and nothing's between us and our nominal target. Relax."

Vymezal—a young cadre lieutenant of marines, Kossara's cousin and, in a sturdy male fashion, almost unendurably like her—undid his safety web. He had been invited to the control cabin as a courtesy; come passage near the enemy de-

stroyer they were aimed at, he would be below with his dozen men, giving them what comfort he could in their helplessness, and Chives would be here as copilot. His question came hesitant, not frightened but shy: "Sir, do you really think we can get past? They'll know pretty soon we're not a torp, we're a manned vessel. I should think they won't be satisfied to take evasive action, they'll try for a kill."

"You volunteered, didn't you? After being warned this is a dangerous mission."

Vymezal flushed. "Yes, sir. I wouldn't beg off if I could. I was just wondering. You explained it's not necessarily a suicide mission."

The odds are long that it is, my boy.

"You said," the earnest voice stumbled on, "your oscillators are well enough tuned that you can go on hyperdrive deep into a gravity well—quite near the sun. You planned to make most of our transit that way. Why not start at once? Why first run straight at hostile guns? I'm just wondering, sir, just interested."

Flandry smiled. "Sure you are," he replied, "and I'm sorry if you supposed for a minute I suppose otherwise. The reason is simple. We've a high kinetic velocity right now with respect to Chereion. You don't lose energy of relativistic motion merely because for a while you quantum-hop around the light-speed limit. Somewhere along the line, we have to match our vector to the planet's. That's better done here, where we have elbow room, than close in, where space may be crammed with defenses. We gain time—time to increase surprise at the far end—by posing as a missile while we adjust our velocity. But a missile should logically have a target. Within the cone of feasible directions, that destroyer seemed like our best bet. Let me emphasize, the operative word is 'bet.'"

Vymezal eased and chuckled. "Thank you, sir. I'm a dice addict. I know when to fade."

"I'm more a poker player." Flandry offered a cigarette, which was accepted, and took one for himself. It crossed his mind: how strange he should still be using the box which had snapped shut on his son, and give it no particular thought.

Well, why throw away a tool I'd want duplicated later? I've been taught to avoid romantic gestures except when they serve a practical demagogic purpose.

Vymezal peered ahead at the ruby sun. Yes, his profile against the star-clouds of Sagittarius was as much like Kossara's as young Dominic's had been like Persis'.

What can I write to Persis? Can I?

Maybe my gesture is to carry this cigarette case in my pocket for the rest of my days.

"What information have we?" the lieutenant almost whispered.

"Very little, and most we collected personally while we approached," Flandry said. "Red dwarf star, of course; early type, but still billions of years older than Sol or Zoria, and destined to outlive them. However, not unduly metal-poor," *as Diomedes is where I put her at stake for no more possible*

win than the damned Empire. "Distribution of higher elements varies a good bit in both space and time. The system appears normal for its kind, whatever 'normal' may mean: seven identified planets, Chereion presumably the only vitafer. We can't predict further; life has no such thing as a norm. I do expect Chereion will be, m-m, interesting."

And not an inappropriate place to leave my bones.

Flandry inhaled acridity and gazed outward. With all the marvels and mysteries yonder, he wasn't seeking death. In the last few weeks, his wounds had scarred over. But scar tissue is not alive. He no longer minded the idea of death.

He wished, though, it had been possible to leave Chives behind, and Kossara's cousin.

A magnifying screen emblazoned the Merseian destroyer, spearhead on a field of stars.

"Torpedo coming, sir," Chives stated. "Shall I dispose of it?" His fingers flickered across the gun control board before him. A firebolt sprang hell-colored. Detector-computer systems signaled a hit. The missile ceased accelerating. Either its drive was disabled or this was a programmed trick. In the second case, if *Hooligan* maintained the same vector, a moment's thrust would bring it sufficiently close that radiation from the exploding warhead could cripple electronics, leave her helpless and incidentally pass a death sentence on her crew.

"Keep burning till we're sure," Flandry ordered. That required a quick change of course. Engines roared, steel sang under stress, constellations whirled. He felt his blood tingle and knew he was still a huntsman.

Flame fountained. A crash went through hull and flesh. The deck heaved. Shouts came faintly from aft.

Gee-fields restabilized. "The missile obviously had a backup detonator," Chives said. "It functioned at a safe remove from us, and our force screens fended off a substantial piece of debris without harm. Those gatortails are often inept mechanicians, would you not agree, sir?" His own tail switched slim and smug.

"Maybe. Don't let that make you underestimate the Chereionites." Flandry studied the readouts before him.

His pulse lifted. They were matched to their goal world. A few minutes at faster-than-light would bring them there, and—

"Stand by," he called.

XX

THE eeriest thing was that nothing happened.

The planet spun in loneliness around its ember sun. Air made a thin bordure to its shield, shading from blue to purple to the winter sky of space. Hues were iron-rusty and desert-tawny, overlaid by blue-green mottlings, hoary polar caps, fierce glint off the few shrunken seas which remained. A small, scarred moon swung near.

It had to be the world of Flandry's search. No other was possible. But who stood guard?

War raved through outer space; here his detectors registered only a few automatic traffic control stations in orbit, easily bypassed. Silence seeped through the hull of his vessel and filled the pilot's cabin.

Chives broke it: "Analysis indicates habitability for us is marginal, sir. Biotypes of the kind which appear to be present—sparsely—have adapted to existing conditions but could not have been born under them. Given this feeble irradiation, an immense time was required for the loss of so much atmosphere and hydrosphere." He paused. "The sense of age and desolation is quite overwhelming, sir."

Flandry, his face in the hood of a scannerscope, muttered, "There are cities. In good repair, fusion powerplants at work . . . though putting out very little energy for complexes of their size . . . The deserts are barren, the begrown regions don't look cultivated—too saline, I'd guess. Maybe the dwellers live on synthetic food. But why no visible traffic? Why no satellite or ground defenses?"

"As for the former, sir," Chives ventured, "the inhabitants may generally prefer a contemplative, physically austere existence. Did not Aycharaych intimate that to you on various occasions? And as for the latter question, Merseian ships have maintained a cordon, admitting none except an authorized few."

"That is"—the tingle in Flandry sharpened—"if an intruder like us ever came this close, the game would be up anyway?"

"I do not suggest they have no wiles in reserve, sir."

"Ye-e-es. The Roidhunate wouldn't keep watch over pure philosophers." Decision slammed into Flandry like sword into sheath. "We can't learn more where we are, and every second we linger gives them an extra chance to notice us and load a trap. We're going straight down!"

He gave the boat a surge of power.

Nonetheless, his approach was cautious. If naught else, he needed a while to reduce interior air pressure to the value indicated for the surface ahead of them. (Sounds grew muffled; pulse quickened; breast muscles worked enough to feel. Presently he stopped noticing much, having always taken care to maintain a level of acclimation to thin air. But he was glad that gravity outside would be weak, about half a gee.) Curving around the night hemisphere, he studied light-bejeweled towers set in the middle of rock and sand wastes, wondered greatly at what he saw, and devised a plan of sorts.

"We'll find us a daylit place and settle alongside," he announced on the intercom. "If they won't talk to us, we'll maybe go in and talk to them." For his communicator, searching all bands, had drawn no hint of—

No! A screen flickered into color. He looked at the first Chereionite face he could be certain was not Aycharaych's. It had the same spare beauty, the same deep calm, but as many differences of sculpture as between one human countenance and the next. And from the start, even before speech began, he

felt a . . . heaviness: nothing of sardonic humor or flashes of regret.

"Take the conn, Chives," he directed. A whistling had begun, and the badlands were no longer before but below him. *Hooligan* was an easier target now than she had been in space; she had better be ready to dodge and strike back.

"You are not cleared for entry," said the screen in Eriau which was mellow-toned but did not sing like Aycharaych's. "Your action is forbidden under strict penalties, by command of the Roidhun in person, renewed in each new reign. Can you offer a justification?"

Huh? jabbed through Flandry. *Does he assume this is a Merseian boat and I a Merseian man?* "Em—emergency," he tried, too astonished to invent a glib story. He had expected he would declare himself as more or less what he was, and hold his destination city hostage to his guns and missiles. Whether or not the attempt could succeed in any degree, he had no notion. At best he'd thought he might bear away a few hints about the beings who laired here.

"Have you control over your course?" inquired the voice.

"Yes. Let me speak to a ranking officer."

"You will go approximately 500 kilometers northwest of your immediate position. Prepare to record a map." The visage vanished, a chart appeared, two triangles upon it. "The red apex shows where you are, the blue your mandatory landing site, a spacefield. You will stay inboard and await instructions. Is this understood?"

"We'll try. We, uh, we have a lot of speed to kill. In our condition, fast braking is unsafe. Can you give us about half an hour?"

Aycharaych would not have spent several seconds reaching a decision. "Permitted. Be warned, deviations may cause you to be shot down. Proceed." Nor would he have broken contact with not a single further inquiry.

Outside was no longer black, but purple. The spacecraft strewed thunder across desert. "What the *hell,* sir?" Chives exploded.

"Agreed," said Flandry. He shifted to an obscure language they both knew. "Use this lingo while that channel's open."

"What shall we do?"

"First, play back any pictures we got of the place we're supposed to go." Flandry's fingers brushed a section of console. On an inset screen came a view taken from nearby space under magnification. His trained eyes studied it and a few additional. "A spacefield, aye, standard Merseian model, terminal and the usual outbuildings. Modest-sized, no vessels parked. And way off in wilderness." He twisted his mustache. "You know, I'll bet that's where every visitor's required to land. And then he's brought in a closed car to a narrowly limited area which is all he ever sees."

"Shall we obey, sir?"

"Um, 'twould be a pity, wouldn't it, to pass by that lovely city we had in mind. Besides, they doubtless keep heavy weapons at the port; our pictures show signs of it. Once there, we'd be at their mercy. Whereas I suspect that threat to blast us elsewhere was a bluff.

Imagine a stranger pushing into a prohibited zone on a normal planet—when the system's being invaded! Why aren't we at least swarmed by military aircraft?"

"Very good, sir. We can land in five minutes." Chives gave his master a pleading regard. "Sir, must I truly stay behind while you debark?"

"Somebody has to cover us, ready to scramble if need be. We're Intelligence collectors, not heroes. If I call you and say, 'Escape,' Chives, you will escape."

"Yes, sir," the Shalmuan forced out. "However, please grant me the liberty of protesting your decision not to wear armor like your men."

"I want the full use of my senses." Flandry cast him a crooked smile and patted the warm green shoulder. "I fear I've often strained your loyalty, old chap. But you haven't failed me yet."

"Thank you, sir." Chives stared hard at his own busy hands. "I . . . endeavor . . . to give satisfaction."

Time swooped past.

"Attention!" cried from the screen. "You are off course! You are in absolutely barred territory!"

"Say on," Flandry jeered. He half hoped to provoke a real response. The voice only denounced his behavior.

A thump resounded and shivered. The tone of wind and engines ceased. They were down.

Flandry vaulted from his chair, snatched a combat helmet, buckled it on as he ran. Beneath it he already wore a mindscreen, as did everybody aboard. Otherwise he was attired in a gray coverall and stout leather boots. On his back and across his chest were the drive cones and controls of a grav unit. His pouchbelt held field rations, medical supplies, canteen of water, ammunition, blaster, slugthrower, and Merseian war knife.

At the head of his dozen Dennitzan marines, he bounded from the main personnel lock, along the extruded gangway, onto the soil of Chereion. There he crouched in what shelter the hull afforded and glared around, fingers on weapons.

After a minute or two he stepped forth. Awe welled in him.

A breeze whispered, blade-sharp with cold and dryness. It bore an iron tang off uncounted leagues of sand and dust. In cloudless violet, the sun stood at afternoon, bigger to see than Sol over Terra, duller and redder than the sun over Diomedes; squinting, he could look straight into it for seconds without being blinded, and through its lashes find monstrous dark spots and vortices. It would not set for many an hour, the old planet turned so wearily.

Shadows were long and purple across the dunes which rolled cinnabar and ocher to the near horizon. Here and there stood the gnawed stump of a pinnacle, livid with mineral hues, or a ravine clove a bluff which might once have been a mountain. The farther desert seemed utterly dead. Around the city, wide apart, grew low bushes whose leaves glittered in rainbows as if crystalline. The city itself rose from foundations that must go far down, must have been buried until the landscape eroded from around them and surely have needed renewal as the ages swept past.

The city— It was not a giant chaos such as besat Terra or Merseia; nothing on Chereion was. An ellipse defined it, some ten kilometers at the widest, proportioned in a rightness Flandry had recognized from afar though not knowing how he did. The buildings of the perimeter were single-sto :d, slenderly colonnaded; behind th m, others lifted ever higher, until they climaxed in a leap of slim towers. Few windows interrupted the harmonies of colors and iridescence, the interplay of geometries that called forth visions of many-vaulted infinity. The heart rode those lines and curves upward until the whole sight became a silent music.

Silent . . . Only the breeze moved or murmured.

A time passed beyond time.

"Milostiv Bog," Lieutenant Vymezal breathed, "is it Heaven we see?"

"Then is Heaven empty?" said another man as low.

Flandry shook himself, wrenched his attention away, sought for his purposefulness in the ponderous homely shapes of their armor, the guns and grenades they bore. "Let's find out." His words were harsh and loud in his ears. "This is as large a community as any, and typical insofar as I could judge." *Not that they are alike. Each is a separate song.* "If it's abandoned, we can assume they all are."

"Why would the Merseians guard . . . relics?" Vymezal asked.

"Maybe they don't." Flandry addressed his minicom. "Chives, jump aloft at the first trace of anything untoward. Fight at discretion. I think we can maintain radio contact from inside the town. If not, I may ask you to hover. Are you still getting a transmission?"

"No, sir." That voice came duly small. "It ceased when we landed."

"Cut me in if you do . . . Gentlemen, follow me in combat formation. Should I come to grief, remember your duty is to return to the fleet if possible, or to cover our boat's retreat if necessary. Forward."

Flandry started off in flat subgee bounds. His body felt miraculously light, as light as the shapes which soared before him, and the air diamond clean. Yet behind him purred the gravity motors which helped his weighted troopers along. He reminded himself that they hugged the ground to present a minimal target, that the space they crossed was terrifyingly open, that ultimate purity lies in death. The minutes grew while he covered the pair of kilometers. Half of him stayed cat-alert, half wished Kossara could somehow, safely, have witnessed this wonder.

The foundations took more and more of the sky, until at last he stood beneath their sheer cliff. Azure, the material resisted a kick and an experimental energy bolt with a hardness which had defied epochs. He whirred upward, over an edge, and stood in the city.

A broad street of the same blue stretched before him, flanked by dancing rows of pillars and arabesque friezes on buildings which might have been temples. The further he scanned, the higher fountained walls, columns, tiers, cupolas, spires; and each step he took gave him a different perspec-

tive, so that the whole came alive, intricate, simple, powerful, tranquil, transcendental. But footfalls echoed hollow.

They had gone a kilometer inward when nerves twanged and weapons snapped to aim. "Hold," Flandry said. The man-sized ovoid that floated from a side lane sprouted tentacles which ended in tools and sensors. The lines and curves of it were beautiful. It passed from sight again on its unnamed errand. "A robot," Flandry guessed. "Fully automated, a city could last, could function, for—millions of years?" His prosiness felt to him as if he had spat on consecrated earth.

No, damn it! I'm hunting my woman's murderers.

He trod into a mosaic plaza and saw their forms.

Through an arcade on the far side the tall grave shapes walked, white-robed, heads bare to let crests shine over luminous eyes and lordly brows. They numbered perhaps a score. Some carried what appeared to be books, scrolls, delicate enigmatic objects; some appeared to be in discourse, mind to mind; some went alone in their meditations. When the humans arrived, most heads turned obseringly. Then, as if having exhausted what newness was there, the thoughtfulness returned to them and they went on about their business of—wisdom?

"What'll we do, sir?" Vymezal rasped at Flandry's ear.

"Talk to them, if they'll answer," the Terran said. "Even take them prisoner, if circumstances warrant."

"Can we? Should we? I came here for revenge, but—God help us, what filthy monkeys we are."

A premonition trembled in Flandry. "Don't you mean," he muttered, "what animals we're intended to feel like . . . we and whoever they guide this far?"

He strode quickly across the lovely pattern before him. Under an ogive arch, one stopped, turned, beckoned, and waited. The sight of gun loose in holster and brutal forms at his back did not stir the calm upon that golden face. "Greeting," lulled in Eriau.

Flandry reached forth a hand. The other slipped easily aside from the uncouth gesture. "I want somebody who can speak for your world," the man said.

"Any of us can that," sang the reply. "Call me, if you wish, Liannathan. Have you a name for use?"

"Yes. Captain Sir Dominic Flandry, Imperial Navy of Terra. Your Aycharaych knows me. Is he around?"

Liannathan ignored the question. "Why do you trouble our peace?"

The chills walked faster along Flandry's spine. "Can't you read that in my mind?" he asked.

"*Sta pakao,*" said amazement behind him.

"Hush," Vymezal warned the man, his own tone stiff with intensity; and there was no mention of screens against telepathy.

"We give you the charity of refraining," Linnathan smiled.

To and fro went the philosophers.

"I . . . assume you're aware . . . a punitive expedition is on its way," Flandry said. "My group came to . . . parley."

Calm unshaken. "Think why you are hostile."

"Aren't you our enemies?" Flandry rejoined.

"We are enemies to none. We seek, we shape."

"Let me talk to Aycharaych. I'm certain he's somewhere on Chereion. He'd have left the Zorian System after word got beamed to him, or he learned from broadcasts, his scheme had failed. Where else would he go?"

Liannathan curved feathery brows upward. "Best you explain yourself, Captain, to yourself if not us."

Abruptly Flandry snapped off the switch of his mindscreen. "Read the answers," he challenged.

Liannathan spread graceful hands in gracious signal. "I told you, knowing what darkness you must dwell in, for mercy's sake we will leave your thoughts alone unless you compel us. Speak."

Conviction congealed in Flandry, iceberg huge. "No, you speak. What are you on Chereion? What do you tell the Merseians? I already know, or think I know, but tell me."

The response rang grave: "We are not wholly the last of an ancient race; the others have gone before us. We are those who have not yet reached the goal; the bitter need of the universe for help still binds us. Our numbers are few; we have no need of numbers. Very near we are to those desires that lie beyond desire, those powers that lie beyond power." Compassion softened Liannathan's words. "Terran, we mourn the torment of you and yours. We mourn that you can never feel the final reality, the spirit born out of pain. We have no wish to return you to nothingness. Go in love, before too late."

Almost, Flandry believed. His sense did not rescue him; his memories did. "Yah!" he shouted. "You phantom, stop haunting!"

He lunged. Liannathan wasn't there. He crashed a blaster bolt among the mystics. They were gone. He leaped in among the red-tinged shadows of the arcade and peered after light and sound projectors to smash. Everywhere else, enormous, brooded the stillness of the long afternoon.

The image of a single Chereionite flashed into sight, in brief white tunic, bearing though not brandishing a sidearm, palm uplifted—care-worn, as if the bones would break out from the skin, yet with life in flesh and great garnet eyes such as had never burned in those apparitions which were passed away. Flandry halted. "Aycharaych!"

He snatched for the switch to turn his mindscreen back on. Aycharaych smiled. "You need not bother, Dominic," he said in Anglic. "This too is only a hologram."

"Lieutenant," Flandry snapped over his shoulder, "dispose your squad against attack."

"Why?" said Aycharaych. The armored men gave him scant notice. His form glimmered mirage-like in the gloom under that vaulted roof, where sullen sunlight barely reached. "You have discovered we have nothing to resist you."

You're bound to have something,

Flandry did not reply. *A few missiles or whatever. You're just unwilling to use them in these environs. Where are you yourself, and what were you doing while your specters held us quiet?*

As if out of a stranger's throat, he heard: "Those weren't straightforward audiovisuals like yours that we met, were they? No reason for them to put on a show of being present, of being real, except that none of them ever were. Right? They're computer-generated simulacrums, will-o'-the-wisps for leading allies and enemies alike from the truth. Well, life's made me an unbeliever.

"Aycharaych, you are in fact the last Chereionite alive. The very last. Aren't you?"

Abruptly such anguish contorted the face before him that he looked away. "What did they die of?" he was asking. "How long ago?" He got no answer.

Instead: "Dominic, we share a soul, you and I. We have both always been alone."

For a while I wasn't; and now she is; she is down in the aloneness which is eternal. Rage ripped Flandry. He swung back to see a measure of self-command masking the gaunt countenance. "You must have played your game for centuries," he grated. "Why? And . . . whatever your reason to hide that your people are extinct . . . why prey on the living? You, you could let them in and show them what'd make your Chereionites the . . . Greeks of the galaxy—but you sit in a tomb or travel like a vampire—Are you crazy, Aycharaych? Is that what drives you?"

"No!"

Flandry had once before heard the lyric voice in sorrow. He had not heard a scream: "I am not! Look around you. Who could go mad among these? And arts, music, books, dreams—yes, more, the loftiest spirits of a million years—they lent themselves to the scanners, the recorders— If you could have the likenesses to meet whenever you would . . . of Gautama Buddha, Kung Fu-Tse, Rabbi Hillel, Jesus the Christ, Rumi . . . Socrates, Newton, Hokusai, Jefferson, Gauss, Beethoven, Einstein, Ulfgeir, Manuel the Great, Manuel the Wise—would you let your war lords turn these instruments to their own vile ends? *No!*"

And Flandry understood.

Did Aycharaych, half blinded by his dead, see what he had given away? "Dominic," he whispered hastily, shakily, "I've used you ill, as I've used many. It was from no will of mine. Oh, true, an art, a sport—yours too—but we had our services, you to a civilization you know is dying, I to a heritage I know can abide while this sun does. Who has the better right?" He held forth unsubstantial hands. "Dominic, stay. We'll think how to keep your ships off and save Chereion—"

Almost as if he were again the machine that condemned his son, Flandry said, "I'd have to lure my company into some kind of trap. Merseia would take the planet back, and the help it gives. Your shadow show would go on. Right?"

"Yes. What are a few more lives to you? What is Terra? In ten thousand years, who will remember the

empires? They can remember you, though, who saved Chereion for them."

Candle flames stood around a coffin. Flandry shook his head. "There've been too many betrayals in too many causes." He wheeled. "Men, we're returning."

"Aye, sir." The replies shuddered with relief.

Aycharaych's eidolon brought fingers together as if he prayed. Flandry touched his main grav switch. Thrust pushed harness against breast. He rose from the radiant city, into the waning murky day. Chill flowed around him. Behind floated his robot-encased men.

"Brigate!" bawled Vymezal. "Beware!"

Around the topmost tower flashed a score of javelin shapes. Firebeams leaped out of their nozzles. *Remote-controlled flyer guns,* Flandry knew. *Does Aycharaych still hope, or does he only want revenge?* "Chives," he called into his sender, "come get us!"

Sparks showered off Vymezal's plate. He slipped aside in midair, more fast and nimble than it seemed he could be in armor. His energy weapon, nearly as heavy as the assailants, flared back. Thunders followed brilliances. Bitterness tinged air. A mobile blast cannon reeled in midflight, spun downward, crashed in a street, exploded. Fragments ravaged a fragile facade.

"Shield the captain," Vymezal boomed.

Flandry's men ringed him in. Shots tore at them. The noise stamped in his skull, the stray heat whipped over his skin. Held to his protection, the marines could not dodge about. The guns converged.

A shadow fell, a lean hull blocked off the sun. Flames reaped. Echoes toned at last to silence around smoking ruin down below. Vymezal shouted triumph. He waved his warriors aside, that Flandry might lead them through the open lock, into the *Hooligan.*

WOUNDED, dwindled, victorious, the Dennitzan fleet took orbits around Chereion. Within the command bridge, Bodin Miyatovich and his chieftains stood for a long while gazing into the viewscreens. The planet before them glowed among the stars, softly, secretly, like a sign of peace. But it was the pictures they had seen earlier, the tale they had heard, which made those hard men waver.

Miyatovich even asked through his flagship's rustling stillness: "Must we bombard?"

"Yes," Flandry said. "I hate the idea too."

Qow of Novi Aferoch stirred. Lately taken off his crippled light cruiser, he was less informed than the rest. "Can't sappers to what's needful?" he protested.

"I wish they could," Flandry sighed. "We haven't time. I don't know how many millennia of history we're looking down on. How can we read them before the Merseian navy arrives?"

"Are you sure, then, the gain to us can justify a deed which someday will make lovers of beauty, seekers of knowledge, curse our names?" the zmay demanded.

"Can this really be the center of the opposition's Intelligence?"

"I never claimed that," Flandry said. "In fact, obviously not. But it must be important as hell itself. We here can give them no worse setback than striking it from their grasp."

"Your chain of logic seems thin."

"Of course it is! Were mortals ever certain? But listen again, Qow.

"When the Merseians discovered Chereion, they were already conquest-hungry. Aycharaych, among the ghosts those magnificent computers had been raising for him—computers and programs we today couldn't possibly invent—he saw they'd see what warlike purposes might be furthered by such an instrumentality. They'd bend it wholly to their ends, bring their engineers in by the horde, ransack, peer, gut, build over, leave nothing unwrecked except a few museum scraps. He couldn't bear the thought of that.

"He stopped them by conjuring up phantoms. He made them think a few million of his race were still alive, able to give the Roidhunate valuable help in the form of staff work, while he himself would be a unique field agent—if they were otherwise left alone. We may never know how he impressed and tricked those tough-minded fighter lords; he did, that's all. They believe they have a worldful of enormous intellects for allies, whom they'd better treat with respect. He draws on a micro part of the computers, data banks, stored knowledge beyond our imagining, to generate advice for them . . . excellent advice, but they don't suspect how much more they might be able to get, or by what means.

"Maybe he's had some wish to influence them, as if they learned from Chereion. Or maybe he's simply been biding his time till they too erode from his planet."

Flandry was quiet for a few heartbeats before he finished: "Need we care which, when real people are in danger?"

The Gospodar straightened, walked to an intercom, spoke his orders.

There followed a span while ships chose targets. He and Flandry moved aside, to stand before a screen showing stars that lay beyond every known empire. "I own to a desire for vengeance," he confessed. "My judgment might have been different otherwise."

Flandry nodded. "Me too. That's how we are. If only— No, never mind."

"Do you think we can demolish everything?"

"I don't know. I'm assuming the things we want to kill are under the cities—some of the cities—and planety of megatonnage will if nothing else crumble their caverns around them." Flandry smote a fist hurtfully against a bulkhead. "I told Qow, we don't ever have more to go on than guesswork!"

"Still, the best guess is, we'll smash enough of the system—whether or not we reach Aycharaych himself—"

"For his sake, let's hope we do."

"Are you that forgiving, Dominic? Well, regardless, Intelligence is the balance wheel of military

operations. Merseian Intelligence should be . . . not broken, but badly knocked askew . . . Will Emperor Hans feel grateful?"

"Yes, I expect he'll defend us to the limit against the nobles who'll want our scalps." Flandry wolf-grinned. "In fact, he should welcome such an issue. The quarrel can force influential appeasers out of his regime.

"And . . . he's bound to agree you've proven your case for keeping your own armed forces."

"So Dennitzan stays in the Empire—" Miyatovich laid a hand on his companion's shoulder. "Between us, my friend, I dare hope myself that what I care about will still be there when the Empire is gone. However, that scarcely touches our lifetimes. What do you plan to do with the rest of yours?"

"Carry on as before," Flandry said.

"Go back to Terra?" The eyes which were like Kossara's searched him. "In God's name, why?"

Flandry made no response. Shortly sirens whooped and voices crackled. The bombardment was beginning.

A missile sprang from a ship. Among the stars it flew arrow slim; but when it pierced air, hurricane furies trailed its mass. That drum-roar rolled from horizon to horizon beneath the moon, shook apart wind-carven crags, sent landslides grumbling to the bottoms of canyons. When it caught the first high dawnlight, the missile turned into a silver comet. Minutes later it spied the towers and treasures it was to destroy, and plunged. It had weapons ready against ground defenses; but only the spires reached gleaming for heaven.

The fireball outshone whole suns. It bloomed so tall and wide that the top of the atmosphere, too thin to carry it further, became a roof; therefore it sat for minutes on the curve of the planet, ablaze, before it faded. Dust then made a thick and deadly night above a crater full of molten stone. Wrath tolled around the world.

And more strikes came, and more.

Flandry watched. When the hour was ended, he answered Miyatovich: "I have my own people."

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In glory did Gospodar Bodin ride home.

Maidens danced to crown him with flowers. The songs of their joy rang from the headwaters of the Lyubisha to the waves of the Black Ocean, up the highest mountains and down the fairest glens; and all the bells of Zorkagrad pealed until Lake Stoyan gave back their music.

Springtime came, never more sweet, and blossoms well-nigh buried the tomb which Gospodar Bodin had raised for St. Kossara. There did he often pray, in after years of his lordship over us; and while he lived, no foeman troubled the peace she brought us through his valor. Sing, poets, of his fame and honor! Long may God give us folk like these!

And may they hearten each one of us. For in this is our hope.

Amen •

(R)EVOLUTION

RICHARD C. HOAGLAND

FOLLOWING YONDER STAR

DAWN. Far below, curving away north and south, the terminator cumulonimbus glowed brilliant red against the night. A scattered wall of cloud arched in weather fronts arrayed to meet the rising of a new day's star, crimson-tipped sentinels standing watch along the racing line separating night from light—the color creeping down the piled up flanks, yellowing, whitening, until at last a dazzling squadron of brilliantly armored men-at-arms paid homage to a scene repeated endlessly for well over three billion years. Another day had overtaken Earth . . .

Murdoch watched a scene he'd viewed a thousand times, yet never tired of. However repetitious the process was, the detail of each new terrestrial sunrise seen from above was endlessly entrancing. The slow, glow-like illumination of a towering thunderhead as the dawnline swept across it from the west, the blue electric lightning of self-illumination giving way to the incomparably brighter light of a star over ninety million miles away. And the sweep of prismatic color along flat shards of ice spread before a low, or the screen-like vertical projection of the entire rainbow upon a particularly tall convective form—that was beauty. An ever-changing canvas and a brush of light—pure color sprayed upon a world by the thermonuclear fire of a sun, shaped by the refractive properties of a planetary atmosphere, and appreciated by a lone observer on his way to work.

Murdoch was an astronomer who, at the moment, was about to start his day just as everybody back on the Mountain, he thought wryly, was about to turn in. Oh, well, he grinned silently, at least I'm looking *down* at those clouds.

Clouds were the last concern of an astronomer out here. As Murdoch's Shuttle rose in its transfer ellipse to meet the LST orbiting almost 1000 kilometers above the clouds of Earth, his thoughts ranged across the span of astronomy, from its origins beneath the clouds, to its limitless future in its element, at last—the starry, atmosphereless vacuum of the Universe.

We've come a long way, he thought, and haven't even begun.

The LST was the first decent astronomical instrument to be placed in orbit. Descendant of the pioneering OAO's, this monster was a full-sized observatory-class telescope—120 inches of beautiful glass—in an incomparable setting.

I wonder if Evans got his spectra of 3C - 95, Murdock mused idly. A front had been threatening and even high thin ice could ruin an exposure of several hours duration, of an object that dim. That's why this baby (he leaned forward in the couch against the restraining straps to peer out the double-paned window) is so valuable. For every hour we use to advantage up here, he thought, we waste three down there due to weather, the moon, or just plain bad seeing.

If he shielded his eyes from the reflected and scattered glare of the sun, he thought he could make out a few of the brighter stars. Damn the fact that scattered light was such a problem in space. That was one advantage an astronomer had back on Earth—8,000 miles of planet between him and the sun, and an enormous shadow to hide in and look out from. Out here, he thought, you have to baffle and screen, and never point the damn' thing even near the sun, or differential heating would warp it permanently out of line. It was a plain nuisance, having to plan each observation through a computer, just so some attitude jockey didn't someday forget and point the entire LST at the sun! Yet, it had its compensations. No seeing problems. The stars just *sat* there. Didn't twinkle at all. Might as well have been holes in an enormous black blanket, like one of those early planetaria.

At that moment the Captain of the Shuttle toned Murdoch on the Comm line.

"Hey, Doc?"

"Yeah, Ben!"

"We've got'er in sight. Houston sent the button-up signal about five minutes ago and we caught the flash as she turned."

NASA was being very cautious. The LST, not counting the value of its incomparable research, was worth about a quarter of a billion dollars. As it was about to rendezvous with a space shuttle emitting, among other things, interesting quantities of oxygen, water vapor, hydrazine, nitrogen, stray hydrocarbons and, yes, even a trace of ozone, NASA sent commands to seal every optical port—tight!—and orient it so the shuttle approached from below and behind the big telescope. Murdoch still mentally saw the image of the solar shield of the repaired SKYLAB space-station back in '74, dancing in the "wind" of the reaction control thrusters of the Apollo shuttle vehicle. The damage such materials could wreak impinging upon the 15-foot wide primary mirror of this space-jewel made him shudder. No, during the length of their visit to this distant "eye,"

its lids would be closed, its vital parts protected against the contamination its earthly creators inevitably brought with them, even here. That is why, thought Murdoch sadly, men may never look through a space telescope directly. Even the miniscule escaping atmosphere of the best suits would do permanent damage to the exquisite geometry of glass and aluminum. We'll just have to be content, he thought, with the photographs and television.

And with that last almost regretful assessment of the art of space astronomy, Dr. Robert Murdoch (Ph.D.) prepared to put on his helmet and span the short distance separating the immobile telescope from the station-keeping shuttle. His job: to retrieve film cannisters loaded from two weeks constant observation, insert new film, and replace a faulty image tube with another.

A thousand kilometers below, sunset was claiming another line of ruby sentinels before the splendor of night.

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THIS scene, or something like it, will come to pass sometime in the early 1980's. At that time, NASA plans to place in a medium earth orbit the largest optical telescope ever to leave Earth. It will rank, along with its earthly counterparts, as the world's fourth largest, after the 236" in the Russian Crimea, the 200" on Palomar, and the 150" at Kitt Peak.

It will beat all of them, hands down.

The Large Space Telescope, as it will be called, will extend Man's vision to the edge of the Universe. It will collect more light, resolve far greater detail, and work far more efficiently than even its larger terrestrial counterparts. It will have available to it the full range of radiation from the stars, unfiltered by the atmosphere so essential to its creators. It will function at the theoretical limit of resolving power for a parabolic mirror 120 inches in diameter, capable of detecting man-made artifacts as small as ocean liners from the moon's distance! Which means . . . nothing.

Astronomy as a science has a history of making the best of an essentially bad situation. To start with, the things you'd like to see are out of reach. This means you'll never (except in the case of planets) be able to go there and pick up a piece to verify what you think you've found out by looking from afar. Of course, someday, when starships are a reality . . . But who wants to wait?

To circumvent this fundamental problem, astronomers have devised all sorts of neat and ingenious techniques for detecting, deciphering, and decoding the messengers of events so far away—light.

The first astronomers used their

eyes (what else?). The human eye is not too bad as a collection device. It has a surprising range of response—about a billion to one. The same eye that can see comfortably on a blazing beach in the Caribbean can also detect, after suitable dark adaptation, stars as faint as the fifth magnitude. A fifth magnitude star is generally the faintest a human with normal sight can see by looking up into the night sky—although in clear desert air, you can do somewhat better.

The naked eye, however, really falls down when it comes to resolving fine detail. It can just resolve two objects of equal brightness if they're separated by about 60 arc seconds. Thus, to the eye, the planets remain star-like images even though many (Jupiter, Saturn, Venus, even Mars) sometimes approach apparent diameters as great as 60 arc seconds at their closest approach to Earth. Craters on the moon had to await detection by Galileo; for human eyesight, while capable of seeing such bright spots as Copernicus or Tycho, could not sufficiently resolve them to perceive their true nature. So, too, with positional astronomy.

The history of astronomy, particularly the idea that we are on a planet orbiting the sun instead of sitting still while everything moves around us, may have been quite different if the human eye could resolve smaller detail. It was the limits of detectable errors in planetary positions occasioned by the limits of the human eye that put off, for centuries, a correct interpretation of the planetary spectacle.

Thus, to state that the LST will be able to detect objects as small as ocean liners or things 200 feet across at the distance of the moon, does not quite convey the power this resolution finally gives to Man. It's in the same league as telling you how far away the LST could see a dime and tell it *was* a dime. Telescopes are rarely used to detect dimes in space or look for ocean liners on the Mare of Selene!

What they are used for and what will be the prime target of the LST is the probing of the limits of the Universe, billions of light years away. The LST will produce images, record spectra, and make measurements of objects that today are perceived by terrestrial telescopes and even the new spaceborne OAO's wrongly, through limitations of instrument and technique. What could come from this new capability to see the Universe *undistorted* could be as fundamental as the new cosmology finally made necessary by Copernicus to explain errors that became larger than the limits of the human eye.

Under the exquisite observing conditions of space, the LST will study Quasars unhampered by the shimmering and filtering effect of Earth's atmosphere. Long exposure imagery—tens and even hundreds of hours—will show detail hope-

lessly swamped by the variety of lights in Earth's night sky—artificial, airglow from the air itself, scattered moonlight, etc. The fineness of that detail, unsmeared by shifting blobs of air that act like lenses in the atmosphere, moving images around at the image plane of the telescope, will allow detailed study of the structure of Quasars, location of suspected quasar-like objects within the nuclei of galaxies billions of light years distant, and emagery of quasars in wave lengths too long or short to penetrate to the ground-based sentinels of Man.

If Quasars actually represent objects at the dawn of creation, the LST will probably tell us so.

Other objects that will hopefully yield up their secrets under the unprecedented scrutiny of a major telescope in space read like a "Who's Who" of the new astronomy: pulsars, neutron stars, supernovae remnants, infrared sources, X-ray sources, and black holes. The quantum leap represented by the use of a telescope capable of seeing objects 1000 times smaller and 1 million times dimmer than the human eye has ever seen, from space, is at present just perceivable. If we can study actual images of pulsars illuminating their surrounding gaseous nebulae (such as the famous Crab, a remnant of a supernova in 1054 A.D.) or look for the ultraviolet images of the now invisible component of Cygnus X-1 (suspected to be the first black hole "detected"), or study the structure of a red-giant star in widely separated wave lengths (which will actually allow us to see, for the first time, the disc of a giant sun), then we shall be able to put to rest a whole series of now raging questions as to the fundamental nature of these objects. We shall also raise at least ten new questions for each answer we obtain.

* * * * * *

MURDOCH floated easily beside the giant. In his hands, secured by a light nylon safety line were the loaded film cassettes from the big telescope. (He grimaced, remembering how they kept losing those gloves and Hasselblads out of Gemini.) Inside, ready to be put to work, fresh film magazines. And the image-tube replacement was also on the job, the old one returning with Murdoch for routine analysis.

The LST was coming up on local noon, the sun to the south of the orbit. Below, the coast of Western Europe lay in summer. Murdoch looked for, and imagined he saw, the teeming beaches of the Riviera. He could see, farther North, the Channel. How different, he wondered, would history have been if that Island had been a part of the Continent. Or, if the ocean level had been lower during recorded history. From up here, he thought,

the British Isles did look like pieces of the main continent, somehow broken off and drifting out to sea. Damn funny place to build the world's first observatory!

He strained to glimpse the ancient circle of stones standing alone in the middle of the Salisbury Plain. One observer floating beneath an intricate observatory, peering across 1,000 kilometers and 5,000 years at another . . .

* * * * * *

OUR ancestors, much more than we, must have been intensely aware of the cyclic forces in their lives, the days and seasons of the earth. They had to be. Too much—everything—depended on knowing and following such cycles.

Thus it is not surprising that Alexander Marshack, a science-writer turned anthropologist, should have discovered evidence that ancient people lived *time-factored* lives. What *is* surprising is his apparent discovery of the antiquity of such knowledge and its *astronomical* basis.

Marshack, beginning with a small bone artifact of an obscure culture in North Africa, was led to the brilliant inspiration that some heretofore "decorative" markings on the 8,000 year old object were in fact related to some periodic phenomena in the environment. It was the nature of the marks that led him toward his fascinating discovery. They seemed to appear in groupings of five, followed by a sequence of eight, several outstanding marks, then an inverse repetition.

After trying to match various cycles: years of good or bad rainfall, seasons of good hunting, etc., Marshack was slowly but inexorably led toward one unique cycle which fit the markings: the orbit of the moon. Someone, millennia before the supposed invention of writing, was keeping careful note of the phases of Selene from first crescent to first quarter, then to full, which appear as three approximately equal marks (because it is quite difficult to tell exactly which night the moon is full; try it, sometime, without prior knowledge), followed by the shrinking of the moon back to a crescent. Even the days of invisibility, due to the moon being too close to the sun to be seen, were indicated! And the averaging of several cycles on the artifact revealed missing marks due, probably, to cloudy nights.

Staggered by the implication of his simple bone relic, Marshack began to look at other cultures which had briefly trod this planet, to be swallowed up by time. He roamed the museums of Europe, searching out forgotten implements and artifacts catalogued and put away as "ceremonial" or "decorative." And he found the moon stretching back through the millennia and minds of forever-lost craftsmen—on reindeer

antlers, and eagles' claw, 'on mammoth-ivory, and painted brilliantly on the walls of caves.

In an unbroken line he discovered an awareness of the lunar cycle stretching back through the Mesolithic Azilian, the Magdalenian, and the Aurignacian cultures, like Time's arrow. Each artifact moved Man's "developed" consciousness of the astronomical further back along the path of evolution, until Marshack seemed to find the Beginnings in the Upper Paleolithic, almost 40,000 years before recorded history—400 centuries of watching, noting, and following faithfully the strange cycle of one of the two great lights of heaven—amid the ice-age snows of Europe.

With this one discovery, the origins of art, symbolism, religion, political power, and even agriculture (of which we shall say more presently) seemed traceable to an awareness of the astronomical, the constant interplay of the forces which move the earth around the sun and the moon around the earth, that shape the length of the day and the duration of the seasons. Suddenly, Man, across tens of thousands of years of pre-history, was not merely an ignorant savage cowering in caves in the dark, but the possessor of an intellect and a curiosity that could watch patiently the movement of the shadowed face of Selene through the night sky and leave a record of his first tentative attempt to understand.

Each year, each generation, across the thousands of lifetimes from the Paleolithic through the Neolithic toward the present, saw minute improvements of that record. The observations grew more sophisticated and the tools more grandiose. A new architectural invention made its appearance, quite unlike its far-off descendants, yet tied together with the same dependence on the sky—the astronomical observatory.

First, just a crude circle of earth to form an artificial horizon in which a few logs were erected to mark the rising and setting of the sun at different seasons, yet these beginnings of organized observation of the astronomical would profoundly affect all future generations.

It is from these rude beginnings that the marvel of the Neolithic, the embodiment of all previous thousands of watchers of the day and night, was born. Stonehenge. On the flat chalk plain this monument to Man's quest of Understanding arose, bit by bit, across a thousand years while the pyramids were still unassembled clay amid the drifting sands bordering the Nile, the erection of this sophisticated observatory/computer continued on Salisbury Plain. Around the brooding stones seeming to hang from the very sky itself, trade, the evolution of great cultures, the shift of history

to another age (the bronze age), and the intermingling of the people of a continent, took place.

It was the highest product of the minds and culture which had fostered its construction over a millennium, erected on the bits of bone and eagle claw, the recording of thousands of *earlier* observers. In the inexorable fulfillment of geometry, as Earth spun about her axis and moved around the sun, as her companion in the night, Selene, drifted overhead, even across the sun and into the yawning shadow of the earth, Stonehenge watched and noted, its granite markers as eternal as the sky. Amidst pageantry and ceremony its builders assembled the people to demonstrate their mastery of the gods themselves; for, used as a computer, the circle of stones standing on the plain beneath the bowl of heaven could even tell when the daystar would be blotted out, for all to see.

Stonehenge was the culmination of a process 35,000 years in the making. In its brooding markers and geometry was contained the sum of Paleolithic and Neolithic understanding of the sky and earth. It was a tool and symbol—as useful and significant to its epoch as Apollo is to ours.

To achieve its creation and to use it well, Man had to learn of his dependence on the sky. The vast sequence of agriculture, orderly planting, harvesting, and processing of food to support the rise of cities and the growth of diversified activities, was made possible *only* with this knowledge of astronomy. In a thousand interwoven threads the tapestry of cultural enrichment is traceable to the independence which systematic food production gave to chieftains, kings, and emperors. It was the "fallout" of this wealth which made possible the maintenance of artists, writers, and musicians and the creation of the architectural marvels of our world.

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MURDOCH finished the last series of photographs as he and the LST sailed across the terminator for the second time. Checking the magazine ident, he touched the control of his backpack thruster unit, moving slowly up the length of the sealed tube. The new anti-UV paint was doing the job, he noted. His photographs would confirm the lack of bubbles on the surface of the instrument.

"I'm just about finished here," he commed the shuttle now hanging patiently above the telescope—with reference to the dwindling crescent earth. "I'll take the sunset series. Then give me the lights and I'll come in."

"Anything you say, Doc. It's your mission. We only serve who hang and wait . . ." The laconic voice of Lt. Ben Crowder, horrible punster, sounded quite loud this

close to the Shuttle. Murdoch reduced the volume.

The sun touched the limb. Slowly, but faster than he'd expected, the LST began to turn. Its elongated shape, a stark white cylinder against the deep of space, was rapidly transformed into a russet cigar, followed by the startling shift to kelly green. They flew on, he taking pictures with the Hasselblad, the advanced telescope slicing through the dispersed rays of the occulted sun. It was now a glowing blue electric wand—now shifting back to green, yellow, orange-yellow . . .!

Rapidly advancing the color film with always clumsy gloved hands, Murdoch watched as, along the earth's panoramic limb beneath the living telescope, another light was spreading. The moon was rising, full, its familiar countenance incredibly distorted by identical color shifts as it rose through the atmospheric layers.

Click . . . Wh-r-r-r . . . Click . . . He imagined he could hear, as well as feel through the insulating gloves, the vibration of the advancing mechanism. The moon was now a yellow lantern, familiar seas smiling across a quarter-million miles. Above it, catching the last dispersive rays of a rapidly disappearing star, the LST was a brilliant, ruby-colored rod. They hung there for an instant in the round glass, the telescope above, pointing toward Infinity, the moon below, and the softly lit limb of Earth beneath them both. He snapped the picture—a perfect exclamation point of moon and telescope. Smiling, he secured the camera and began the short trip home.

******

It is five years tonight (as I write this) since men first left footprints on the moon. It is the same moon other men watched, worshipped, and notated amid our ice-age origins, thus making possible those footprints.

"Like a circle in a spiral, like a wheel within a wheel . . ."

The study of the moon makes possible greater study of the moon, makes possible visits to the moon, makes possible study of the Universe Beyond . . .

The LST, like astronomy itself, is making the best of an essentially bad situation. To begin with, the telescope will be fabricated on Earth. The mirror will be poured and figured under "normal" gravity and the design and construction of the entire optical device guided by the fact that it must be launched brutally into orbit by a large Saturn-class launch vehicle, subjected to accelerations, distortions, and vibrations downright sacrilegious to an instrument of which is expected such exquisite precision.

Even after achieving orbit, the LST will be subjected to environ-

mental indignities by virtue of its position in an orbit of the earth. The constant day and night, half of each 90-minute-plus orbit, will produce thermal strains on precise pointing optics, alignment mirrors, and focus planes. Gravity, the omnipresent pull of greater "G's" at the base of the telescope than at the top, because of the mere fact that the top is farther from the center of the earth (in certain attitudes) will place elaborate constraints on long exposures, pointing accuracy, motor life of reaction wheels and electronic circuitry necessary to monitor these environmental anomalies. Add to this, radiation pressure, the baffling requirement to prevent scattered light, the constant interruption of a particular observation as the target goes behind the earth for 45 minutes out of every orbit, and the necessity of constant resupply of attitude control gas (used to dump excess momentum caused by stabilizing an object in a weightless environment of many energy *sources* and no readily available *sinks*) and you begin to perceive a few of the prices which must be paid for establishing a telescope in the "weightless environment of Earth orbit."

It is not surprising, therefore, that the descendants of the LST will surely be built upon the moon. It is there, securely rooted in the lunar crust, that telescopes six times larger than the largest terrestrial counterpart are possible. The light, one-sixth gravity of Luna will simplify everything from structures to the mirror optics themselves. It seems reasonable to envision optical instruments of a thousand inches, built upon Selene.

Instead of only forty-five minutes of darkness possible in earth orbit (actually still orbiting *within* Earth's outer atmosphere of hydrogen), a telescope upon the moon will have two weeks—fourteen days—of absolute darkness, the darkest night possible this close to the sun if the facility is placed on the Farside of the moon. This means two weeks *uninterrupted* imagery or other observations with a light-bucket capable of collecting 100 times the light of the LST, in a vacuum just as good (if not better for some observations—above the last of the terrestrial hydrogen halo) than that found in Earth orbit.

The two weeks of night (and, of course, day) will also allow better design for thermal expansion and contraction. Components of differing expansion coefficients—glass and plastic seals, for instance—will have a chance to stabilize for several hours before serious observations. And, depending on the exact location, it might even be possible to surround the telescope with a multiple layered reflector designed to keep the instrument in permanent shadow—an island of eternal night and perfect darkness

beneath even the blazing heat of lunar noon.

From its vantage point on the airless face of Man's familiar satellite, with its awesome thousand-inch diameter, what could such an astronomer's dream-come-reality perceive across the dark light years? What could we see?

We have touched briefly upon the cosmological questions the LST will seek to answer. These questions will also fall within the purvue of the Lunar Telescope. Therefore let's use the remainder of this paper to examine the one new subject soon to be brought within the realm of stellar astronomy by the construction of these future observatories—just as its solar system counterpart is about to be brought within our grasp by *Viking*—the search for life in the Universe.

Astronomy began with the moon, a quest to understand an apparently living entity—a god—and its regulation of all living things on earth. How appropriate, therefore, that it is from an observatory on that same moon that Man will probably first collect irrefutable astronomical evidence of the existence of interstellar life.

To exist, life as we know it must have planets orbiting a stable star for billions of years to allow time for evolution; and if they are to be detected, they must be relatively close at hand (astronomically speaking) for us to see them at all.

Planets, even such giants as Jupiter (ten times the size of Earth), shining only by the reflected light of their primary, are very dim compared to stars. Thus, only the planets of the nearest stars, those within twenty light years of Earth, would be within range of even the super Lunar telescope envisioned here. The problem: to detect the faint glimmerings of tiny planets moving around points of light *500 million* times as bright!

At first it seems impossible. Even at the distance of the nearest star, 4.3 light years away, a planet as large as Jupiter [a Jupiter is, of course, not an earth. It is useful, however, if detected, as it is thought that a Jovian-type planet should be accompanied in any solar system by smaller, more terrestrial types. So we start by trying to detect a Jupiter . . .] will only be a point of light, never a disc, of approximately plus 25 magnitude. Without getting lost in technicalities, that is the *dimmest* object the world's largest telescope can detect today. And that's only if it knows exactly where to look. It doesn't apply to a photograph where you're looking for a tiny point of light that *moved* since the photograph you took last week was taken. Such a planet search, for a dim, moving point of light is only practical with a telescope large enough so that a plus-25 magnitude star is ten or maybe twenty times its threshold limit. The Lunar 1200-inch should have a limit 100 times greater than

the 200-inch on Palomar on the LST (since, other things being equal, they will have roughly comparable light gathering ability). The LST will still win in the resolution category by virtue of being in orbit. And the Lunar Telescope will have ten times the LST's resolution . . .

Thus, beginning with the LST, Man will move into an era when it becomes possible to *see* the planets of his nearest stellar neighbors—if they are there. A Jupiter, even an Earth, orbiting the nearest suns should be detectable by the LST, certainly by the Lunar Telescope. The problem of finding them—tiny points of light moving around another point millions of times as bright—is also relatively simple. An artificial eclipse.

By hiding the parent star behind an occulting disc (or arranging it so the light of the star falls through a hole cut into the photographic plate or TV tube in a vacuum [author's invention. RCH], it should be possible with both the LST and the Lunar Telescope to photograph planets orbiting stars other than the sun.

But . . . how do we detect *life* light years away?

For that task, after the first flush of success in finding visual proof (as opposed to the gravitational signatures certain astronomers currently attribute to unseen planets orbiting certain stars) even the LST will probably prove too small.

It will fall to the Lunar Telescope to produce spectra of new planets. Such spectra, analyzed for oxygen, methane, and perhaps even unnatural hydrocarbons would, if positive, give us strong circumstantial evidence of a world like Earth with oxygen produced by biological activity, as well as methane. Sufficient ingenuity of such research might even be able to detect the presence of a technological civilization upon such a planet if it were confronted with the environmental problems currently confronting our own. To identify more advanced civilizations (those in which technology has gone beyond disturbing the natural environs) would require other techniques.

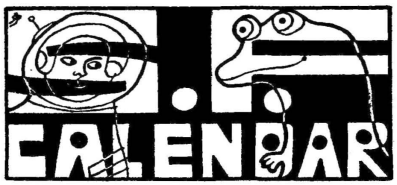
Information on an entirely new aspect of stellar astronomy: the detection, cataloguing, and description of the planets of other solar systems is perfectly possible—given sufficient technological advance in the construction of space telescopes. Even the detection of atmospheric components unequivocally produced by biological activity is possible from an observatory on the Moon! It is even within the realm of possibility to infer the presence of an environment-modifying technology and, thus, an intelligent species.

BUT, as with all history—as with his patient nights of marking the changing shape of the lunar

disc, Man, once he has tasted the success of finding other worlds amid the stars, will not rest until they exist as more than distant points of light. Even as his vessels prepare for the distant voyage, so his curiosity will impel him to create optical descendants of even the Lunar behemoth.

Thus in the feeble sunlight, illuminating but not heating that which exists "out there" four billion miles from Earth, Man will construct, at the edge of the Abyss, the Ultimate telescope. A huge reflector scores of miles across, a mirror capable of lighting fires at its focus with the collected light of stars! Such a creation, capable of imaging their planets, or peering beyond the dawn of time itself, will share few things in common with its ancient granite ancestor so distant both in space and in time, upon the Salisbury Plain.

And yet, as Stonehenge once tried to understand the moon's influence over men, and Man has at last become an influence on the moon—so, perhaps, this vast crystalline creation, floating on the edge of space separating solar system from the interstellar night, shall one day see an age when Man, through understanding extends his Dominion to the Stars. •



Nov. 28-30. APA: ANARCHON in Stouffer's National Center Inn, 2399 Jefferson Davis Highway, Arlington, VA 22202. Membership $10. For info: Erwin S. Strauss, 11700 Columbia Pike #809, Silver Spring, MD 20904.

Nov. 29-Dec. 1. INFINITY 74 at the Hotel Commodore, New York City. Membership $4 advance, $5 at door. For info: Joseph Rizzo, 21-68 41st St., Astoria, N.Y. 11105.

Jan. 24-26. ConFUSION 13 in the Michigan League, Ann Arbor, Michigan. GoH: Fred Pohl. Fan GoH: Mike Glicksohn. For info: Ro Nagey, Rm. 240 Michigan Union, U. of Mich., Ann Arbor, Mich. 48104.

Feb. 20-23. DESERT CON III at the University of Arizona. For info: Desert Con III, SUPO Box 10,000, Tucson, Az. 85720.

May 25-27. MEDIEVALCON, Francisco Torres, Santa Barbara, Calif. Membership $7.50 attending, $3 supporting. Write Medievalcon, Box 23354, Los Angeles CA 90023. Make reservations early.

May 29-June 1. VUL-CON II Star Trek Con in New Orleans. For info: Beverly Traub, Box 8087, New Orleans, LA 70182.

IF DIALOG #2

Why you want to visit the sub-basement and— Watch the puddle; these stone walls drip a lot at this depth. The echoes make voices sound ominous, don't they?

I'll grant you he's an interesting specimen of alter-ego, and I suppose there is a kind of morbid fascination in listening to him rave, but I'm frankly embarrassed to bring people down here.

Yes, three big Yale padlocks are necessary . . . and the heavy chains . . . and the thick steel bolts. One time in 1956 he got out and—help me lift this oak bar, will you?

Now, for God's sake, remember to keep your distance. If he ever gets his claws on you . . . and sinks in his fangs . . . Well, let's just say I bury a lot of bones.

I've got to oil those hinges one of these years. Hold the lantern a bit higher . . .

There he is! The sight makes you suck breath in horror, doesn't it? I warned you. It's those green and red eyes that get most people . . . and the evil laugh. Don't try to speak to him. I do all the talking.

"Alter? You feel like talking science fiction today?"

"Why don't you ever bring any women down here, Geis?"

"I know you too well. No girls. Not now, not ever! Now, this adventurous gentleman wants to know why you hate intellectual science fiction."

"I don't hate it, Geis, I loathe it. There is a fine distinction there. Thus I hate the so-called food you send down here, I loathe intellectual s-f, and I abominate you and your shameless commercialization of me. But I can do very little about any of these conditions, so I accept them . . . until I—"

"You'll never get loose again! I wear the Amulet. I wear the Ring. I speak the Sacret Words: *Yug Sluggoth Thunkis Fgn-thi-Ulgudd* . . ."

"Just because Fritz Leiber muttered those words at you that time when you visited him too early in the morning—"

"They keep you under control,

Alter. Fritz is wise. Now, in the Unspeakable name of Yug Sluggoth, I command you to respond to the question."

"What *was* the damn question? I get distracted. Listen, Geis, only five minutes once a year with a sweet, young thing with big ones, a narrow waist, limpid blue eyes, a soft smile . . ."

"Intellectual science fiction, Alter! Why do you hate it?"

"How about once every two years? Damn it, Geis, I'm horny, I've—"

"Yug Slug—"

"ALL RIGHT! Stop the damn chant. If you knew what that combination of sounds does to my sinuses—"

"We've got to get down to business. I don't have all day to humor you. For the last time: address yourself to why you loathe intellectual science fiction."

"I loathe it because . . . because . . . You want the real truth? I loathe it because it's mostly over my head. Yes, damn it, I don't understand the subtle symbolisms, the obscure references, the abstrusenesses, the ambiguities, the God-damned zilch endings that leave me baffled and angry and saying 'Wha—?' to myself."

"That's because you're stupid, Alter. You are ignorant, essentially uneducated, and have an I.Q. of only 137."

"Yeah, that's my point. I've had two years of college. After all my psychometric tests in high school I was told I had a big vocabulary, a fine sense for spacial relationships, and an I.Q. sufficient to allow me to teach at the high school level if I attended teach-college."

"Instead, you lured me into becoming a kind of beatnik in California, and lured me into writing sex novels for a living. Eighty-four sex novels! My God, if that got out—"

"You want me to continue to work myself into a Diatribe, Geis, or do you want to piss and moan about our scandalous youth?"

"Finish, finish. Try to say it a little differently this time, though, will you? I've heard it so many times before . . ."

"Go eat sour grapes! Now, if a lot of this intellectual, arty, affected science fiction is too obscure and 'private' for *me* to understand, how in hell is the average s-f reader going to cope with it . . . and why should he have to cope with it?"

"'*Affected*'? Now that's a pretty strong—"

"This stuff is a rip-off, Geis. It is the product, largely, of egotism and pride; an incestuous little band of arrogant phoneys—"

"'*Phoneys*'? Now that's a pretty strong—"

"—who get their jollies by pretending to be 'superior' to 99% of the readers of the magazines and books in which their junk appears."

"'*Junk*'? Alter—"

"Don't stop me now, Geis, I'm rolling! See, these jokers maybe *are* smarter than most readers, and their psychology is that they are superior and the only way they can prove it is to write stuff we can't understand very well unless they or a pipe-smoking English professor explains it. They HATE us, Geis. They secretly hate us readers. They do! We are the ones who indirectly pay them. Ultimately, we have the power to kill them dead, money-wise . . . and probably ego-wise, too. They hate and fear us! That's why they always snear at us and revile us as low-lifes and tasteless clods."

"You go too far, Alter!"

"Help that guy stand up, Geis. So they write their arty-farty 'experimental' crap that's been written by intellectual writers since Ug first put a stick to a cave wall and they try to make us feel dumb because we don't understand it and don't like it. We sense their true motives, you see, and we know these stories and novels are deliberately written unclear and ambiguous."

"There are ideas and themes and subtleties which cannot be cast into black and white narrative forms, Alter!"

"Bullshit, Geis! Intellectual s-f is a style of writing, it's a type of narrative, it's a tool and it's a role for the writer to play. Writing Literature and playing at being an Intellectual is much more satisfying to the ego than Hack Writer is. And after having been to college and having been exposed to all them Eng. Lit courses and such, no self-respecting young writer nowadays is going to dig being a Hack Writer and writing Commercial Fiction."

"Alter, I can refute thee."

"Only because you can shut me up. Would you care to listen to what Gore Vidal wrote in the July 18 issue of THE NEW YORK REVIEW of Books? I quote: 'The American university has come into its terrible own. Departments of English now produce by what appears to be parthogenesis novels intended only for the classroom; my favorite demonstrated that the universe is—what else?—the university. Occasionally a university novel (or U-novel) will be read by the general (and dwindling) public for the novel; and sometimes a novel written for that same public (P-novel) will be absorbed into Academe, but more and more the division between the two realms grows and soon what is written to be taught in class will stay there and what is written to be read outside will stay there, too. On that day the kingdom of prose will end, with an exegesis.'

"How did you get hold of that?"

"You threw it down the garbage chute with my food yesterday. The only magazines *you* save are PLAYBOY, PENTHOUSE . . ."

"So what is your point with that

Vidal quote?"

"The point is obvious, dumb one. More and more s-f writers are writing for the university crowd, and more and more editors are editing for the university crowd. We are a trendy, faddish, conformist nation, and s-f writers are not immune, in spite of their vaunted non-conformist pretensions."

"You know, Alter, if you could prove one single—"

"A symptom, a proof, if you will, Geis, is that six or seven years ago most of the thirtyish and fortyish writers were short-haired straight types. NOW . . . I really have to snigger . . . they're most of them long haired and dressed to the youth culture trend. What Asimov has lost on top he lets grow down the back of his neck, and sports fluffy mutton-chop sideburns, to boot. Harlan Ellison has adopted the slab look—waterfalls of straight hair over ears and forehead. Larry Niven has a full beard and hair all over the place. Bob Silverberg looks like a guru. Barry Malzberg looks like an older Norman Spinrad who in turn looks like a petulant fallen angel. Even Jerry Pournelle who two years ago was Mr. Straight, has capitulated and conformed to fashion with a long side-burned, shaggy mane with mustache look."

"That's a low-blow personal attack—"

****

It certainly is, Alter. Besides, maybe it's just that now, at last, they feel free to be and express their wonderful true selves! Er . . . hello, Dr. A. Gee, I didn't know you were reading this! Heh, Heh. Oh! Hi, Larry! Jerry—what are you doing here!?! Hey, Guys—honest— I *didn't write it; I just edit around here. You wouldn't want me to* censor *poor Alter, would you?* Would you? *—Baen*

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"If they conform so easily, Geis, in dress, it indicates they can and do write what they think will thrill the highbrow literary critics and the professors. They lust to be Respectable. And they edit to be Respectable and Accepted as Literature."

"And you figure the ordinary reader is forgotten? You think he rarely gets the kind of science fiction that would really turn him on and bring him to the pocketbook racks and magazine racks screaming for more?"

"On the nailhead, Geis! These people are often excellent to brilliant writers, but they don't really want to put their talents and skills to the service of readers by writing dynamic stories that grab us, keep us glued to the pages with action, danger, suspense and a touch of sex, and a heavy life-and-death crisis with the good guy winning in the end. They—"

"You can't expect every story to conform to *that* formula, Alter!"

"Of course not!! The point is that these people are too good to 'prostitute' themselves to the masses. They want to do their thing, and be With It and In and have some graduate student or professor write articles and monographs and theses on the deep philosophical significance of their work."

"You're perhaps a little bit right, Alter, but you're overstating and exaggerating all over the place."

"That's the function of a Diatribe! I'm letting your hair down and you can't stand it. Take a tranquilizer and hold onto your hat. Will you *please* keep that geek you brought down here with you on his feet? Where was I?"

"I refuse to tell you."

"You know why there's such a high turnover in editors in publishing houses and magazines? It's a rare editor who will learn from experience. He usually insists on publishing what he thinks the public should read. When sales go down or don't improve, the publisher sacks him and brings in another guy with another slightly different set of pre-conceived ideas of what the public should read. When an editor *does* learn from the readers what the readers want, and gives it to them, he lasts thirty years and dies in his editorial chair, and then everyone calls him a genius in public and in private they sneer at him for 'appealing to the lowest common denominator'."

"Yeah. Okay, Alter, you've said your piece. Now I've got to get back to the surface and take care of other matters."

"Not so fast, Geis! You don't shut me up so easily this time! You started this! You wanted to display me, flaunt me before thousands, make fun of me, be superior, and now we'll see how much guts you've got! I'm going to name names! How many enemies you want to make? Give me a few more pages—"

"Alter, the science fiction world is small and intimate. If I really let you go all the way . . . No, we must be diplomatic. We must—"

"Take Brian W. Aldiss, for instance. Here's a man who wrote some really fine, sense-of-wonder s-f in the beginning of his career. I remember particularly THE LONG AFTERNOON OF EARTH as a stunning view of far-future Earth, almost a fantasy of strangeness in a dominating plant world in which tiny tribal mankind is constantly struggling to survive amidst constant danger. Yet it's an upbeat, triumphant story.

"But he turned to experimentation and self indulgence with novels like REPORT ON PROBABILITY A which sank without a trace, and the brilliant but narrow-of-appeal play-on-words and psychedelia, BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD. He then tired of s-f and said unkind, derisive things about it and about fans. He turned to the 'mainstream' and hit it big with a mas-

turbation best-seller in England called HAND-REARED BOY. But now he is back writing his brand of intellectual s-f—strange, eccentric satires and Literary games such as THE EIGHTY-MINUTE HOUR and FRANKENSTEIN UNBOUND.

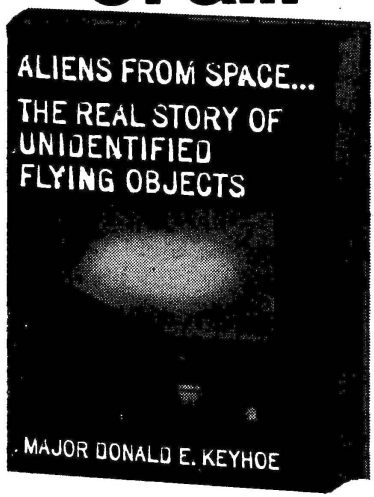
"Alter, STOP! *Yug Suggolplug . . . No, Yog Nuggle—*"

"Or take a guy like Gene Wolfe. An excellent writer in the sense that he can write rings around most anybody in the field, but instead of applying that talent and skill to stories and novels that pin a reader, rattle his teeth and put him through a wringer, he writes technically superb mile-long vignettes that drive me and others up the wall with puzzles and unanswered questions."

"He wins awards, Alter!"

"So do you, Geis, and you know what a lot of fans think of you. Gene Wolfe wins awards for his pure writing ability, not because his stories are satisfying to anyone . . . except six or seven critics and a few professors and fellow-traveling editors. Most voters in these awards probably vote for him to avoid admitting to themselves that they don't understand his stuff. Obscurantism has its virtues in the Literary Game. He writes his way and 5% of the readers may like it or admire it without understanding it and the rest are either intimidated by his reputation or having once sampled his writing, stay clear ever after. He writes real-life reality,

The biggest coverup of all!



"If Major Keyhoe's book didn't sufficiently substantiate his claim that the United States Air Force knows that UFOs are spacecraft from a more advanced world—and is deliberately concealing the truth from the public by censoring reports and discrediting witnesses—this somber warning might sound a trifle ridiculous. But it rings disturbingly true."
—*Christian Science Monitor.*
$7.95

DOUBLEDAY

with all the hidden motives, baffling event and inconclusive endings of real life. I say it's spinach and to hell with it."

"Because you're obtuse and low-brow and were raised on the old pulp magazine . . . thud and blunder . . ."

"Damn right. Now tell me again how you understand the significance of Gene Wolfe's '*The Fifth Head of Cerberus*' and the related novelettes."

"His meanings are perfectly obvious to anyone who is willing to work at it. Slothful readers who want only to indulge themselves in entertainment will, of course, find him hard going. He demands thought and insight and careful, considered reading."

"You make my point, Geis. He writes college-course fiction. You have to study him. He has to be interpreted and analyzed. How delightful for him. He owes the reader nothing, right? The guy who pays good money gets the intellectual shaft, right?"

"Alter, you are slipping into side areas. If you insist on continuing this Diatribe of yours—and you must know it isn't new; anti-intellectuals and conservatives and Romantics have been making these same arguments for a hundred or more years—get back to ruining me among my friends. Attack somebody else."

"How about Gordon Eklund? He's often as frustrating, anti-hero and knee-jerk anti-establishment and depressingly conformist in his intellectual s-f as most of the new young talented writers. You can add Ed Bryant, Thomas Disch, Geo. Alec Effinger, Vonda McIntyre . . . Delaney . . . the list could go on and on."

"They are artists in words, Alter!"

"They are giving their visions of reality, Geis. Which everyone does. But they are doing it by using the forms and styles of Literary Fiction, not reader-oriented Commercial Fiction. They say their way is superior to the commercial way, the reader-entertainment way, and I say they are affected, self-indulgent, lazy, pretentious . . . and in the coming recession/depression the readers will triumph and these guys will either apply themselves to pleasing the readers or they'll starve."

"You're vicious!"

"Damn right. The publishers will look at the sales charts and say, 'J.G. Ballard sells 2,000 copies. Roger Zelazny sells 200,000 copies. We can't afford to carry Ballard anymore. Times are tough. We've got to cut these authors no one buys.' In fact, that reality is beginning to appear now."

"Why haven't you mentioned Barry Malzberg?"

"Actually, because Barry is on his way out as a s-f writer. He is into the mainstream, if they'll have him. He is so sick of s-f that his dis-

gust is nearly pathological. I must say—"

"He wrote HEROVIT'S WORLD to express his disgust, didn't he?"

"—a few words about that puffed-up frog in his Polish puddle, Stanislaw Lem, with his lovely captive audiences, his inch-deep characterizations, his metaphysical novels dressed in hard-science clothes, his heavy-handed, overwritten satire.

Groan "Anyone else? Care to attack Heinlein while you're at it?"

"Heinlein isn't an Intellectual s-f writer as I define the term. He incorporates large chunks of philosophy in his works, but he commits the cardinal sins of making himself understood and usually writing to entertain his readers. For this he is attacked. I haven't thought too much of his last two novels. TIME ENOUGH FOR LOVE has flashes of great narrative, but too much of it is Heinlein playing solipsistic masturbation games with Heinlein; it was so cute in places I wanted to vomit."

"I think you'd really better stop now, Alter. You've used up the whole column with your intemperate, ill-considered mouthings, and I did not intend for this to happen. Besides, my guest is shaking like a leaf and his skin has a strange pallor."

"Hand him a copy of Lin Carter's last Thonger novel. The stink will—"

"My God, Alter! You actually enjoy engaging authors and getting me into trouble, don't you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Life is short and ennui is long. Let's say what we really think once in a while, with no self-censorship. With the clear expectation that we'll get clobbered in turn. It's fun. It's good therapy to vent the spleen and pour icky green bile over everything every so often."

"I've spent years building an image of Nice Guy and you've destroyed it in one afternoon."

"There, there, Geis. Don't whimper. From now on you'll have a new image—you'll be thought of as a combination of Jack Woodford and H. L. Mencken."

"I'm not going to visit you again, Alter! You'll rot down here!"

"You'll be back! The next time you need a column written . . . the next time you need excitement in THE ALIEN CRITIC . . ."

COME sir, let us get out of this foul place. A little fresh air and a snifter of whisky will do wonders for that twitch. Just let me pull this big door shut . . .

"A girl, Geis! And some fresh fruit! You exploit me and all I get is—"

THUD Now to slide home the bolts . . . the chains . . . the locks . . . Mind the slippery steps. Remind me to put a new candle in this lantern when we get up to the ground floor. •

GUT in PERIL

A gristly little tale

ARSEN DARNAY

LARD Fatta Gut, Gourmand Extraordinary, but lately returned from the Conquest of the Capon, unsated by victories over Turtle Zoup and the Filly of Mignon, stood in the cavernously empty hall of Castle Krunch on Hunger Hill in Famine Plain and shook his round head slowly.

"Nay, nay, my lady," said he to pale, skinny Lady Diet whose shrill entreaties he'd endured too long, too long. "Leave us be, lady. Empty and enervating is the life of ease. I long for palpitating battle. My manly heart pines for the culinary joust."

And with those words he shuffled off slowly, his legs wide apart, for they didn't call Lard Fatta Gut Lard Fatta Gut for nothing. His short, thick arms extended at an angle from his marvelously rounded trunk, and little wheezes escaped his parted lips.

HIS skinny lady's bony fingers tore the tearstained handkerchief in rage.

"Wretch, wretch," she hissed behind him through narrow, blue lips, and the fire in her hollow sockets grew piercing. "Never more will I endure your faithless escapades. This time, my Lard, I'll send my vengeance on you!"

She ran off, wan-limbed, to her chamber.

Her fingers fumbled angrily among her magic pills and potions. Kalorie killers and chalkbread sticks fell drily from her narrow table. Then with triumph she lifted two phials of closely sealed glass against the candle, and her eyes gleamed with bitter joy.

"Come Vengeance Wreakers, come," she hissed, and she ran to her laboratory where, pouring phial contents into an earthernware bowl, she whimpered incantations.

Clouds of acid mingled with clouds of liquid fire, and in their smoky murk, coaxed by her words of power, the Dreadful Twins materialized in trembling similitude.

"Who dares to summon the Double Scourge of the Columbian Continent?" they grated with a single, shardy voice.

"It is I, the Lady Diet, immune to your foul works. I will release you on condition that you will harry

my Lard Gut until he mends his way. Even now he prepares to scale Mount Deli in Kosher Plain to test the mettle of Mighty Matz."

"Give the releasing word, my lady," they rasped in eager unison.

And she said: "McDonalds."

With shrieks of demonic fury, they streaked out through the vaulted window and past a weirdling moon. Hunger ravens fluttered up weakly from the Starvation Oak.

IN THE empty castle courtyard sixteen henchmen heaved and hoisted Lard Fatta Gut up on the back of Bill O'Fare, his trusty steed.

They tied magic Nap Kin beneath his triple chin. They girded his rotundity with the jousting belt. On it from a leather scabbard hung his mighty weapon, golden Gorgenor. On it from a silken thread hung his silver Fill Thee Cup.

"Bon Ape Tit," the henchmen cried grinning, and Bill O'Fare lurched out on buckling legs, sorely tried by my Lard Gut's truly stupendous tonnage.

Night cut off the last slice of day, and the horizon pinked like rare prime rib of beef. Locust swarms, Lard Fatta's close familiars, whisked and rattled over the dry ground behind him. He broke into his mighty jousting song:

Venison, salmon, chicken & hash,
Oh, what a glorious meal!
Shish Kabob, ham, and tender young veal,
Let us fall to with unequaled zeal,
Pass the butter and slice the seal,
And make those potatoes mashed.

Eat, fellows, eat,
Chew, fellers, cheat,
Who minds the heat in the ki-i-it-chen!

Hamburgers, hotdogs, catchup, and salt,
Oh, what a glorious feast!
Onions, pickles, and chips at the least,
Fritos and cornballs and rolls full of yeast,
That's just a start for a ravenous beast,
And pass that bottle of malt.

Eat, fellows, eat,
Chew, fellers, cheat,
Who minds the heat in the ki-i-it-chen!

He sang so long and with such fervor, he didn't hear the Torture Twins' shriek and cackle high up in the darkened sky, nor did he see past the flesh pillows around his greedy eyes the evil phosphorescence of That Pair against the stars.

ON Kosher Plain, in Garlic County, Mount Deli rises

high. Pickle Palace proudly pouts on top. Salami columns support a cracker roof. Red gleams the beet soup in the moat.

Thither trysted Lard Fatta Gut, growing nearly weightless with desire. Bill O'Fare felt his master's levity and broke into a gallutton. They pounded down Sugar Cube Road and left a white dust behind them. Davy's henchmen blocked the way, but Fatta Gut uncorked them all and drained their sweet life to the bottom. Up they thundered toward the palace, giddy with the blood of Mogan. The locust swarm came close behind.

Unsheathing golden Gorgenor, Lard Fatta leapt from saddle just as Gefilte Fish cranked up the pumpernickel draw.

"Yield!" cried Gut and brandished the mighty Fork. "Yield, I say, delicious men of Deli. Nothing shall daunt your Fatta Gun in his pursuit of Mighty Matz whom you dare guard in his goetic glass. Gorgenor has conquered many. Even now I come to you from the finger-licking haunts of Colonel Capon; Turtle Zoup has paid me homage; and I have caught the Filly of Mignon."

But the guards of Matz, the men of Deli, smiled behind uplifted hands. They knew themselves secure. Had not the Dreadful Twins arrived to take up posts behind the necromantic glass of Matz, hidden from sight, they and their minions? No more would smacking Fatta Gut ravage the countryside and make the jellies and the puddings quake in fear.

"Away, you Gut profane," they taunted. "Away, away."

"Alas," cried he. "You won't yield peacefully, I see. I pity you," cried he, "for you shall feel the bite of golden Gorgenor."

And with these words he plunged into the moat and drank it dry in one, great, slurping gulp. Magic Nap Kin curled up to dab his puckered lips.

Then did Gorgenor do deeds of valor. He cut, swung, jabbed, and skewered—guided by Lard Fatta Gut's infallibly sure arm. Gefilte Fish fell to his blows. Hissing noodles curled on his prongs and were consumed. He blasted blintzes and quartered them for quick dispatch. The Fork did work like seven forks, and though the Deli disgorged more warriors yet, not once did Gut's sure chops and stabs miss an opponent. Nap Kin flapped madly to purify Gut's lips and jowls, and on its magic surface deeds of courage were marked in gore.

Slowly they struggled, Lard Fatta Gut and trusty Gorgenor, toward the Prize of Prizes, gigantic Matz in his goetic glass. There he is, up ahead, beyond the wrinkled pickle guard that now, overcome at last, fearfully withdraws into salami shadows. And our hero stands spread-legged before the glass, outstretched arm at rest on Gorgenor's

golden handle, a smile of triumph on his smacking lips.

MIGHTY Matz was a fat ball indeed. He looked down at Fatta Gut with eyes of sleepy menace, languid and relaxed in his bath of rich, briny broth, for Matz knew what Gut didn't. *Those* Two lurked in the gloom behind the glass.

"I have cornered you at last, ball-shaped Matz. Uncap your jar, delicious friend, and come out for a final match of strength. As you can see, we've made a hash of your retainers, the golden Fork and I, and nothing guards you now."

"Wrong!" blurbed the blob in brine. "Wrong you are, my worthy Gut. Your battle has barely begun, and you'll be bested this time."

Then with infernal shrieking noises, the Potent Pair pounced on our peerless Gut, one from the right and one from the left of the goetic glass, each circumswarmed by minions.

Lard Fatta Gut lurched back under attack, his small eyes big with shocked surprise.

"Gassidus Indigestus!"

He nearly stammered as he pointed golden Gorgenor at one of the pair—a pin-eyed, evil, smoking wraith whose fingertips sprayed acid droplets toward the lard.

"Hart Burn!" he cried, shifting his astonished gaze toward the other, a flaming replica of the romantic muscle on legs, whose fingers threw fire tongues toward a stumbling, retreating Gut.

Their minions swarmed about him burning with liquids and gases. Once more Gorgenor slashed and stabbed—his golden prongs immune to acid but sweating in the flame—but nothing could prevail against the demonic fury of this Pair, and Lard Fatta Gut fell back in tottering despair.

"Sorcery!" he cried aghast. "Unfair joust. My manly honor is outraged. I am undone."

JUST then, as luck would have it, as Gassidus and Hart closed in to kill, as Nap Kin curled brown with acid burn, the Locust Leader leaped up to perch on Fatta Gut's blubbery earlobe, and in the scrape-tongue of the Familiar, it reminded Fatta of his secret powers.

The locust said: "Crrrp-twrrrp, crrp-twrrrrp, crurrp." That is to say: "Look in your jousting belt, my lard, and remember also your invisible friend—for surely you are amply armed against the viles of Sorcery both by the works of Science and by the works of Nature."

Lard Fatta's eyes lit up with joy. He moved his closed lips with one of his stout fingers while he emitted a sound. He said: "Buwlbuwlbuwlbuwlbuwlbuwlbuwl." That is to say: "Thank you most graciously, Locust Leader, for reminding me of my superiority to Sorcery of all kinds, for truly I had thought my-

self undone, even while relief was a close as the reach of my fingers."

All through this exchange, of course, golden Gorgenor continued to thrust and parry, moved by Fatta's unexcelled sure arm, and had it not been for the Fork's undaunted power, Lard Fatta Gut would have succumbed to Sorcery, for he needed a moment of respite to launch the devastating counter-attack he planned with a sly glint in his eye.

Fortunately, Gorgenor's flurry of gold beat back Gassid and Hart long enough.

Already sensing his certain victory, Lard Fatta Gut cried: "Not yet, my friends! Not yet shall you have your evil way with me, Dreadful Scourge of Columbus' Land!"

And with these words, he reached down and lifted his cup by its silken thread.

"Cuplet Fill Thee," whispered our stalwart, but nothing appeared in the silvery bottom of the container. His little eyes clouded with puzzled dismay. Again the Locust Leader twirped the answer, and Fatta Gut recalled the magic words. "Fill Thee Cuplet," he whispered this time, and Lo! cool water brimmed to the top of the beaker.

He took from his jousting belt's secret pocket tablets shaped and colored like the pregnant moon. Into the cup they fizzed with magic abandon, and to the shrieking consternation of that Torturing Two, Al Kasell's pearly-white apparition rose from the Fill Thee Cup holding back six slavering acid gobblers on the end of a straining leash. Kasell released his hounds, and they began to consume many more acid minions than the Leading Dry Tablet that gourmands not-so-extraordinary used.

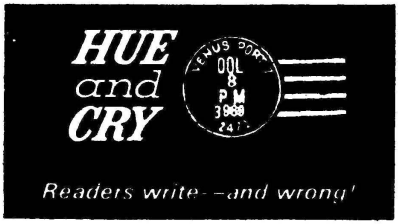
Lard Fatta Gut began to rub his stomach with a circular motion, and again a shriek of anguished terror rose from the Terrible Twins, for they recognized the gesture and its threat. Sneaky, silent, cunning, and invisible, Fikel Mart—more dreadful than his loud-mouthed brothers—would even now curl in the air toward them choking off breath with his gaseous claws.

They fled through the cracker roof with wails of impotent rage and disappeared, streaks of menacing phosphorescence, into the night.

Mart and Kasell made short work of the abandoned minions, while Fatta Gut cast pillowed eyes toward the goetic glass.

But Mighty Matz had fled his broth. Gut saw him roll flacidly between salami columns down the pumpernickel hall, a glistening and delicious ball, and Lard Fatta Gut hoisted Gorgenor, the golden Fork, for the final reckoning.

The End.



This is absolutely the last word (I promise) on "Cantor's War."

Dear Mr. Baen:

To one who grew up reading the editorials of the late John W. Campbell, Jr., and who, with Mr. Campbell's death, had begun to feel that something comforting and predictable had gone out of life, it is a consolation to see that his most cherished supersi tion continues to be disseminated in the mags. I refer, of course, to the belief that a formal education consists largely in having Truths That Must Not Be Questioned Because They Were Discovered By Great Authorities shoved down one's throat (or Throat) by Those Who Have The Proper Professional Credentials To Pass On The Revealed Truth. Mr. Christopher Anvil, a True Believer (as he might put it) in this hoary guff, goes through the old paces in "Cantor's War" with enough verve to keep me in nostalgia till they reissue the Edsel. I'm not *ungrateful*, mind, but the interests of truth (and of national defense, in case we should ever get into a war involving an infinite number of spaceships) compel me to point out that Mr. A. Comes a cropper over infinity. (A cropper, incidentally, that *Dr.* A. would never have come—value of professional credentials?)

(*For reasons of brevity I have been forced to delete here an exceedingly abstruse and ((according to a mathematical friend)) valid demonstration leading to the following conclusion. —Ed.*)

We suppose that each ship is capable of any finite velocity, and therefore, that each ship is capable of reaching its assigned volume in (drawing a figure from the story) 20 seconds. Then, after 20 seconds, every one of the volumes will contain three Good Guys, though each contained only one before; yet the number of Good Guys does not increase, however hard Anvil finds that to swallow. So Anvil is wrong and Dr. Phipps is right—Ah, rebellious creature of fiction!

Oddly enough, however, Anvil *is* right—right in practice, though wrong in theory. That is, his *reasoning* is wrong, but he gets the right *strategic* conclusion—that Dr. Phipps's plan is worthless—by accident. The real problem with the Phipps plan is not one of troop-strength, as Anvil thinks, but of logistics. Consider the fact that each ship must determine where it is to go. The ship in volume number 4216, for example, must figure out for itself that it is to go to volume number 1409. It must also determine how far from 4216, and in what direction, 1409 is. To perform these tasks, the ship must, of course, know that, at the start, it is in volume number 4216. Well, presumably it does. But *most* of the ships *don't* know their own volume-numbers: most of the numbers are

too big for any entity this side of an omniscient Deity to "know." Consider a ship whose volume-number contains $10^{10^{0}}$ digits. How does the ship *store* such a number? Not even coded into the spins of all its constituent elementary particles. There aren't nearly enough. And only an infinitesimal fraction of the volume-numbers are so minuscule as to be representable in 10^{1000} or fewer digits.

For Phipps's plan to work, each ship would have to contain a computer capable of storing integers of *any* length, and capable of carrying out complex navigational calculations with them in some fixed, finite period of time. *That* would be hard to believe, even in an s-f story.

Sincerely yours,
Peter van Inwagen
Associate Professor
Syracuse University

Dear Mr. Baen,

Ever since I started reading science fiction back in the summer of 1968 I have been collecting all the sf books and magazines I could get my hands on. I enjoyed *Galaxy* and *If* immensely under Pohl, reading every story in every issue.

However, after Fred Pohl stepped down I eventually found myself merely collecting the issues—only rarely was there anything worth reading.

Now that you have taken over, I've been finding the magazines, once again, to be highly readable. The improvements so far have been great. The magazines, with their new departments, have become more relevant to what I feel sf is all about.

I am glad that you are publishing

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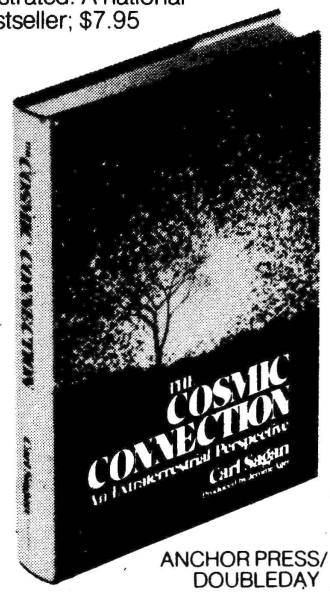

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good sf of the Sense-of-Wonder variety (more of Niven!). While I believe in literary standards that are as high as possible (shades of Sturgeon!), I see no reason why this should conflict with the sense of wonder (look at Clarke).

Exotic planets, infinite Cosmos, magnificent spaceships, mysterious aliens, fantastic gadgets—hell, I love that stuff! For me, this is what sf is ultimately all about. I hope you will keep on publishing this sort of sf.

You have my best wishes (and moral support, for what it's worth) during your editorship of *Galaxy* and *If*.

Yours truly,
Jack Briggs
363 Brewer Drive
Nashville, Tn. 37211

Dear Jim,

Since you've been editing *If/Galaxy* we readers have been getting some real treats like the June All-Star issue and the new columns (I enjoy The Alien Viewpoint tremendously). It seems Lester's "Reading Room," Ted's "Galaxy Bookshelf" and Jerry Pournelle's "Step Farther Out" are getting better each issue but I miss Sf Calendar).

I was going to suggest that you have a column written by writers about Sci/Fi (like you had Fred Pohl write in June *IF*) but I can see you already thought of that (the Forum column). I was also going to suggest a bio column but you thought of that, too (Interface).

That is why I'm subscribing to *IF*; you thought of everything a reader could dream of!

The Best of Luck,
Michael Donnelly
Hellertown, Pa.

Thank you!

Dear Mr. Baen,

Let me extend my congratulations on becoming editor of *Galaxy* and *If* magazines and turning them from being bland and lifeless fare into a real treat I eagerly look forward to every month. Why I'd even extend my subscription if I could be sure of regular delivery.

You have done this primarily by instituting an editorial presence through a letters column and editorial expression and by special features which liven up interest beyond strictly the fiction published. I'm looking at the August 1974 issue of *If* and am impressed with a number of things like the new science editors article—not that I'm especially fascinated by the more detailed discussions of advances made in the physical sciences but I do like to know when anything important like impending fusion power comes about.

The real treat though is Dick Geis' column about typical Geisian things which perk up my interest a great deal usually no matter what opinion he expounds. Without being blaringly egotistical in spouting off about his likes and dislikes he manages to present clear headed educated viewpoints on all manner of topics. While I certainly don't agree with him all the time I respect his point of view.

Other columns such as Del Rey's Reading Room and the presentation of a single piece of art sans blurb are both appreciated.

Keep up the good work! You'll likely be hearing more from me.

Yours sincerely,
Gary Kimber
139 Highview Ave.
Scar., Ont. Canada

Dear Mr. Baen:

I have noted with pleasure the great improvement in *If* since you became its editor. In so noting I have put my money where my mouth is and subscribed.

There are only two minor suggestions that come to mind:

(1) Place the subscription coupon back-to-back with your "Galaxy/ If S-F Mart" page. This would allow one to cut it out without doing any substantial damage to the magazine, for those of us who care about such things and not force us to resort to a Xerox machine.

(2) Have a different illustration of "the alien" by Tim Kirk for each article of "The Alien Viewpoint." He is undoubtedly the descendant of the cosmographer who appears on the dust jacket of "An Atlas of Fantasy." He strikes a cord which brings much pleasure.

Looking forward to an entertaining two years of *If*, I remain

Yours sincerely,
Jean Alexander Sharland
7024D Hanover Parkway
Greenbelt, Maryland

Dear Mr. Baen,

I would like to echo the sentiments of many speculative-fiction fans in congratulating you on the outstanding job you have done with *Galaxy* and *If* in the few short months you have edited these publications. For the past few years I have avidly read all of the science-fiction magazines that I could find. It didn't take me long to grow tired of *Galaxy* and *If*. Pardon my frankness.

However, since you have taken over, so to speak, they have become what I think are the two best magazines in science fiction. The new features are magnificent, especially Jerry Pournelle's "A Step Farther Out" column. All in all, two great magazines.

I would also like to comment on Jeff Hudson's letter in the September *Galaxy*. I read his story in the August *If* with much delight, and feel that I must congratulate him on leaving the ranks of the "heretofore unpublished nobodies." That is a clan which I am also attempting to depart.

To get to the point, the thing that I want to comment on is the statement Mr. Hudson made concerning the writers he wanted to hear more of. He named Fritz Leiber, Algis Budrys, Chip Delaney, Ursula LeGuin, James Tiptree, Jr., Philip Jose Farmer and the infamous Harlan Ellison.

By some wild coincidence, all of the above are among my favorite writers, and the last two are my very favorites. Here's to you, Mr. Hudson, you're a man after my own heart!

And here's to you, Mr. Baen, for the fantastic job you're doing with your two magazines. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,
Alan Jacobs
8018 2nd Ave. N
Birmingham, Alabama

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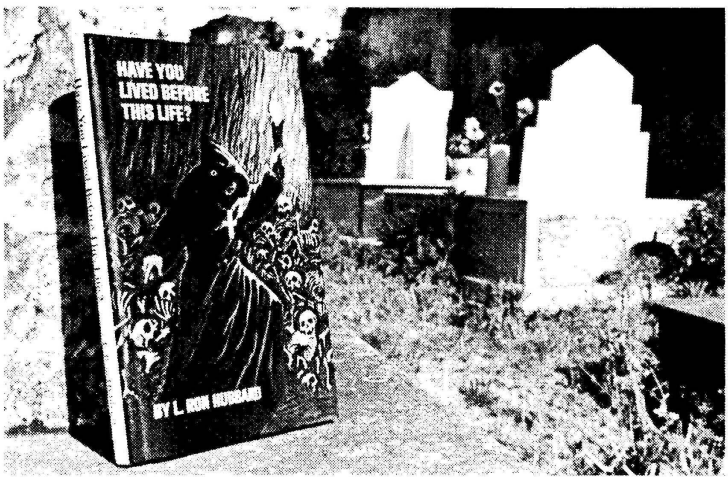

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