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**SCIENCE FICTION
ADVENTURES**

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Two Worlds in Peril

by James Blish • Phil Barnhart

SLAVES of the STAR GIANTS

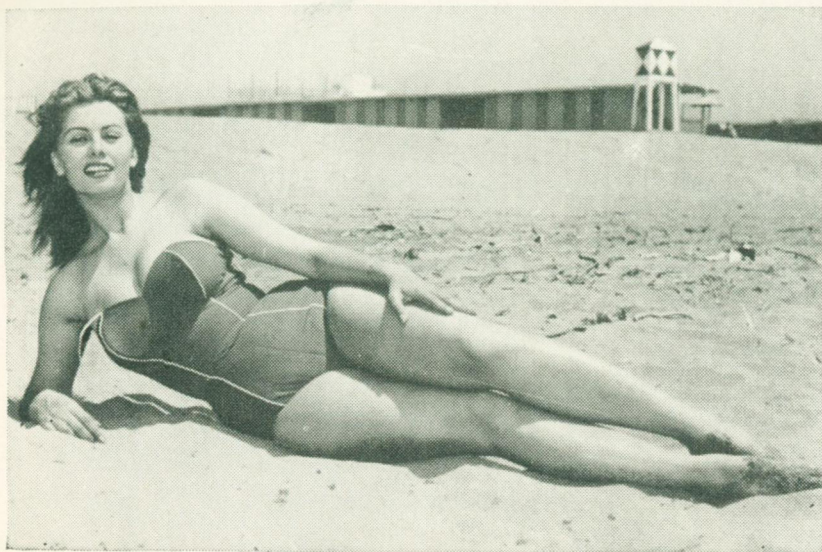
by Robert Silverberg



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ASSASSIN !

by Harlan Ellison



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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 1 No. 2

FEBRUARY, 1957

3 Complete New Novels by Top Writers!

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Heimdall's mission to Venus held the last hope of survival for the people of a dying Earth—but he found that Venus too was doomed by the deadly Gas!

SLAVES OF THE STAR GIANTS . . Robert Silverberg 39

The sane, scientific world he knew was gone, replaced by a wilderness of hideous, demented creatures he had to battle — without understanding!

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COVER, showing the remnants of mankind as guinea pigs in a fantastic laboratory, suggested by a scene in *Slaves of the Star Giants*, painted by William Bowman. ILLUSTRATIONS by Bowman, Engle, and Stallman.

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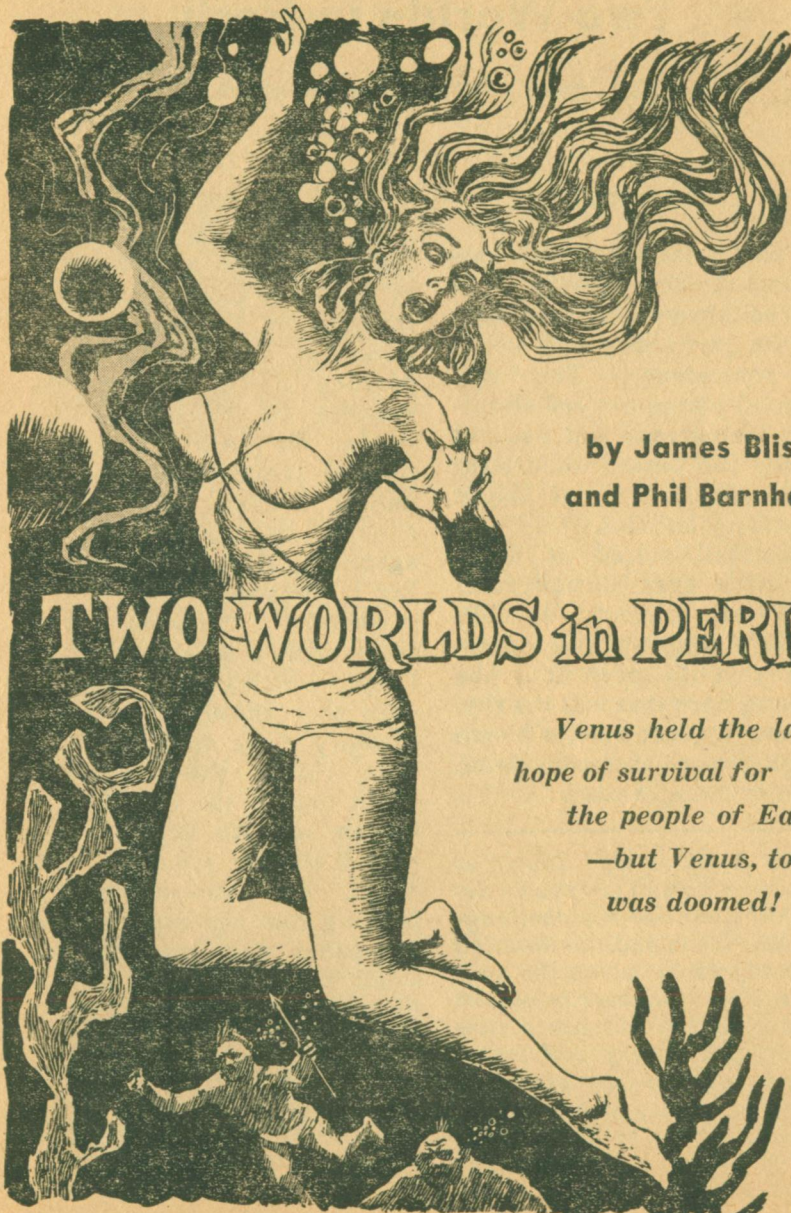
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by James Blish
and Phil Barnhart

TWO WORLDS in PERIL

*Venus held the last
hope of survival for
the people of Earth
—but Venus, too,
was doomed!*

Two Worlds in Peril

by James Blish and Phil Barnhart

CHAPTER I

IT WAS morning in the garden. A dim, pearly light filtered down from above, tinting the green haze with swirls of opalescence. The tall, graceful plants swayed slightly in the current, and a school of tiny fish passed unhurriedly, leaving a trail of bright ascending bubbles.

Heimdall stared at them. His wide eyes turned from the leafy fronds to the garden's bright-pebbled floor, then rose to peer into the glowing haze that was the sky. He saw a great scarlet bloom hanging close above his head, and the thought came:

JAMES BLISH is well known as a writer who can always be depended upon for his challenging new ideas and the detailed accuracy of his scientific concepts. Phil Barnhart is new to science fiction but not a new writer; his poetry and astronomical articles have appeared in a wide variety of magazines. Together, they've turned out one of the most colorful, exciting yarns in a long time!

This is wrong. Why?

He raised one hand in an impulsive gesture—and stared at the heavy glove with vague recognition. He became conscious of the smooth transparency of a helmet, the swathes of thick, muffling fabric, the hard metal that pressed against him when he moved. That was right enough: he was wearing his spacesuit. And he was wearing it, because . . .

Heimdall frowned, and arose with a quick, awkward lunge, wincing as a stab of pain shot through his head. Memory came with it. He'd been riding the under-jets down toward the dim-lit Venusian sea. An injector had blown, and the spaceship, the *Hope*, had yawed wildly, flinging him against the control-panel and starting the small vessel in a disastrous dive, straight for that glassy, sullen sea.

He'd had just time to slam the escape-hatch lever with one mailed fist and be catapulted out. Evidently he'd knocked his helmet on the

side of the hatch—no, he could still recall spinning like a dervish in emptiness, the watery world wheeling about him. . . . Then, blankness that was like a throbbing blow.

So the impact with the surface of the water had knocked him out. No wonder! The suit was strong, but not meant to protect its wearer from such a blow. At the speed he must have been falling when he hit, it was lucky he was still alive. But where was the ship? It had been plunging away from him on a tangent when he bailed out. It could be as much as a thousand miles away, on the bottom of an unknown sea, on an unexplored world—and he had to find it, and soon.

A sudden movement roused him. A few yards away, a screen of feathery, deep-blue ferns parted, and a vision stepped daintily through.

Heimdall gasped, enchanted. This was the most exquisite thing in a whole garden of marvels. She was small and delicately formed, with floating masses of dark hair and great soft eyes fringed with long lashes. She paused, her dusky hair swaying above her, and looked around. She saw Heimdall.

She stepped back quickly, her hand dropping to a metal object protruding from the

kilted garment at her waist. Then her dark brows narrowed in a tiny frown; she stood there, poised on the balls of her feet, and her hand drifted away from the weapon.

She came forward fearlessly then, launching herself through the water with swift gliding steps, supporting herself briefly with effortless movements of her webbed fingers. She floated to a stop close to Heimdall, and he drew back, fascinated by the mystery of the cloudy mass of hair that floated about her. For a long moment they looked at each other, face to face.

The girl's wide eyes were dark-pupilled and depthless, with a hint of the sea's green in them. Her nose was tiny and tip-tilted, the arched nostrils tightly shut. At either side of her soft chin, the pink, delicate edges of gills pulsed gently; her small, high breasts were still—obviously she had no need to breathe.

She stared at him for a moment, reading the hesitant wonder in his eyes. Then her lips parted, and she touched his arm, her fingers light as the touch of sea-foam. Though her voice came clearly to Heimdall through the resonator in his helmet, he could not understand her. He said, "Are you real?" and smiled at her.

She shook her head, and took his arm again. He followed her as she moved away toward the hedge of blue ferns. At first, his efforts to imitate her gliding walk nearly pitched him head foremost onto the pebbled floor. But he learned quickly, and in a moment they were past the trailing fronds of the blue plants and into further mystery.

There was a wide, shallow depression here, carpeted with algae and delicately terraced in descending levels of smooth green stone. At the hollow's center was a miniature summer-house, a thing of graceful coral pillars, roofless and festooned with anemones. All about the villa were high, branching sea-ferns, with trumpet-shaped blossoms of a startlingly vivid blue that opened and closed in sleepy rhythms. Swarms of tiny golden fish played among the branches, weaving intricate, flashing patterns.

As he watched, the ferns shook suddenly, and two dull-gray creatures, almost like men, burst into view. He felt the girl beside him draw back suddenly. The gray creatures came toward them with swift, clumsy steps, but Heimdall hardly noticed them.

He had seen the fountain.

It came from an opening in

the pale stone blocks, and it was a fountain of air—myriads of bubbles, large and small, that rushed swiftly upward, glinting yellow in the light. Bubbles—yellow bubbles!

The Gas! But that was back on Earth. . . .

IN THE visiplat, a cloud of dirty-yellow bubbles was streaming up from a raw cleft in the Atlantic floor. A dead fish floated past, its belly bloated and discolored.

"This is only one of them," Vidor said. "There are thousands of these fumaroles—more every week." He reached out to the dials, and the viewpoint rose swiftly up the turbulent yellow column—reached the surface of the water, and receded, so that they could see the dense, billowing clouds rising into the air. That air was already suffused with a faint, deadly tint of yellow.

"We've kept it from the people, but they'll have to know soon," Vidor said. "These subterranean shifts have become more and more frequent in the last ten years. All over the earth the crust is cracking, readjusting. There isn't enough heat left in this old planet to cause many earthquakes, but there's

plenty of the Gas. It bubbles up—in jungles, in wastelands, in fissures all over the ocean floor. It's deadly—and we can't stop it."

He turned his burning, dark-circled eyes on Heimdall. "It adds up to this: the human race has another generation to live. Two, at the outside—but that's optimism."

Heimdall nodded slowly and crossed the room to the ceiling-high window. They were far inland, but in the bright summer afternoon there seemed to be a faint tinge of yellow. He could imagine it growing, deepening; he could imagine stepping out into it, and finding his lungs filled with strangling fire. And when the Yellow Gas had gone—dissipated, oxidized, ionized, absorbed into the rocks—the sun would rise on a planet swept clean of man.

"The cause seemed inconsequential, at first," Vidor said softly. "Just a minute drop in the solar constant—the first we've ever detected since we've been able to measure it. We thought it might change the weather a little, that's all. But it's upset thermal balance in the earth itself. So—our world is striking a new balance between its inner fires and the sun. The change

isn't big, but—it's enough!"

Heimdall clenched his muscular, sun-browned fists. "Is there no chance at all, Vidor?"

"There's one. Venus."

So he had come to Venus to explore the possibilities of re-colonization. And Venus had the Gas!

HE FELT a violent tug at his hand, looked down, and saw the girl's hand clutching at his. The gray-skinned man-things had her by either arm and were drawing her away. Her face, twisted toward him over her shoulder, was frightened and—puzzled.

He did not stop to reason. These beings were taking her away, and he didn't want her to go—that was enough. He lunged forward, growling in his throat, and caught the nearest gray man by the calf in steel fingers.

Thrown off balance in mid-step, the creature tumbled sidewise and released his hold on the girl. His companion stopped and turned, scowling.

The gray man picked himself up, gaping at Heimdall; then he plunged effortlessly forward and swung at Heimdall's helmet. The blow traveled slowly, but when it struck, Heimdall's ears rang. His shoulder armor clashed into

the green cobbles, and he flailed in slow motion among the sea-ferns. He struggled toward the gray man, crouching, his fingers curled.

The creature side-stepped him easily and wrapped his arms around Heimdall, his corded muscles contorting. The metal of the suit did not even creak. Heimdall slashed a clenched fist at the gray man's face.

The hairless head snapped back. Its owner went plunging backward, to land in a cloud of sediment and the fleshy tendrils of algae. The creature writhed feebly, stunned. His companion, eyes full of savage amazement, drew a silvery tube from the pouch at his waist and leveled it deliberately.

The girl cried out and broke free. The gun hissed. Something slammed hard on Heimdall's chest, and then his back thudded on the green stones again. Past his own toes he saw the girl shoot away across the terrace, her slim legs flashing, her smooth body fighting the currents generated by the blast. The fallen gray man reached for his own gun—

Heimdall's hand closed on a fragment of stony coral and swung it, fighting against the nightmare resistance of the water. The fallen gray man

went limp and began to drift. The other snarled something Heimdall could not understand, and dove away through the gas-fountain toward the other side of the terrace at a surprising speed.

Heimdall was hopelessly outdistanced in the first fifty feet, and would have lost the chase had it not been for the bosques of algae. His opponent turned a triumphant face over a gray shoulder, and caught his foot on the topmost ledge. Heimdall was upon him in a brittle shower of broken coral.

The creature gasped and raised his slim, silvery weapon, but Heimdall's vision was suffused with the red glare of rage. He knocked the tube aside, deliberately shifting his grip to the gray man's throat. He propelled one mailed fist at the contorted face.

A pink mist rose, and drifted slowly with the current.

CHAPTER II

AFTER a long time, Heimdall felt the girl tugging at his arm. He looked up, saw her wide eyes staring at him, avoiding the bloody thing that lay at his feet. Her face was white, but she managed a smile.

"*L'ahn*," she said. "*E doni, l'ahn*."

He allowed himself to be led away, but not without a backward glance. Slim, arrow-sharp black fish were hovering greedily in the red mist. . . .

They passed through the tall pillars of the summer-house, through an archway and into an inner court. The girl knelt gracefully and made a motion Heimdall could not see; in response, a section of the flagstones dropped away, revealing green depths.

With a quick smile for him, the girl stepped through and fell out of sight. Heimdall peered over the brink after her. She was floating effortlessly downward; after a moment he jumped after her, churning at the water. The heavy armor dragged him swiftly past her, and slammed him hard against the bottom. The girl's golden laughter showered down; she darted in a swift circle above him, then alighted and took him by the hand.

She led him down a long, tubular corridor into a greenish glow of light. At the doorway a tall man, black-haired like the girl, came out to meet them. He stared at Heimdall, then shot a swift question at the girl. She seemed to be

explaining as she followed him into the room.

For a moment Heimdall was left to himself to examine the strange shapes that crowded the cubicle. They reminded him strongly of Vidar's apparatus: the same litter of coils and tubes, the same heavy shielding, the same impression of power being herded gently toward mysterious goals. There was, of course, no ultraphone, or Venus and Earth would have talked together long before this; Heimdall knew that the ultraphone in the *Hope* must be the only one on this planet, and that was lost.

The man placed his hands on Heimdall's shoulders, his eyes lit with excitement. He said, haltingly, "*Airht?*"

Heimdall stared uncomprehendingly for a moment, then nodded. "*Earth*," he said. "*Sure*. How'd you know?"

The tall man turned, crossed to the opposite wall and opened the panelling, disclosing a ceiling-high cabinet filled with squares of metal. One of them was nearly black with use; the Venusian took it down and broke it open, revealing a sheaf of limp, cream-colored material printed in jagged lines.

The man walked back toward Heimdall, feverishly

turning the leaves. He scanned one page, said something in a high, explosive voice, and turned impatiently to a section at the back. He ran his finger down the page, then looked at Heimdall eagerly and said, "'Ow deed you cahm? Wair ees your sheep?'"

English! These people kept their records a long time—it had been two hundred years since the Venus expedition had been called back! Still, there'd be no sense in trying to talk to this stranger as if he knew the language well—he was obviously working from an ancient dictionary.

"My ship is lost," Heimdall said carefully. "I had to—"

"Lohst?" The tall man shook his head and thumbed the book again, grimacing. Evidently the word was not in it, or he didn't know where to look for it. He said, "*Tlosara!*" and threw the metal case to the floor. The girl spoke softly; the tall man shrugged, picked up the book again, and strode out of the room.

"My father," the girl said. "He go for mahn—machine—help you unairstan'."

As she spoke a younger man, with close-cropped reddish hair, came sidewise through the doorway. His left arm was crooked around a

cylinder topped by a lambent globe. Wires led from it to two rings of silver metal, which he held in his right hand.

The girl's father followed, swept papers off a low stool, and made Heimdall sit down on it, while the young man set his mechanism down on a bench and slipped one of the circlets over his head. The other, even when fully expanded, would not fit over Heimdall's helmet, but the young man crammed it down as far as it would go, like a cockeyed halo. Then he touched the machine.

A humming filled Heimdall's ears, flowed gently into his brain, filling his skull like a soft, viscous liquid. Fingers of it probed delicately, this way and that, and sparkles of sensation, crazy-quilt patches of memory flickered in and out of being as they touched. He recognized the sensation from descriptions; the unfamiliar device evidently was a sort of EEG probe, like those used back home for stereosurgery.

Suddenly the bodyless fingers came to rest, prodding insistently at a section of his mind that was dark and silent. Involuntarily he resisted a little; instantly a torrent of strange words, pictures, ideas

roared through his brain. He felt himself sinking into unconsciousness, into a morass of memories in which old and new were frighteningly mixed. . . .

HEIMDALL felt the hot August sun pouring down on his uncovered head. He was standing on the landing-platform of the *Hope*, gripping Vidor's sweaty palm. Behind him he could feel the cool darkness of the open airlock, waiting for him. The others had drawn back a little; their faces and robes were a blur of shimmery color.

Vidor said, "Remember—you're all we've got. If the *Hope* fails, they'll never let me build another ship. You'll be stranded up there—and we—we'll be dead."

Heimdall knew. The great Martian rebellion of 2246, and the 2249 Ganymedian Plague, happening with such disastrous coincidence, had brought Earth's colonial expansion to an abrupt end. Threatened with economic suicide on one hand and swift, terrible disease on the other, the Security Council had ordered all Earth-born settlers home—except the plague victims on the Jovian moons.

Those had been left to die.

Just as Earth's population would be left, unless Heimdall proved that Venus could be re-colonized—that the same death which was overtaking Earth had not begun there also.

That had been more than two hundred years ago. Now there was no one alive who could remember the last Triplanet ships rusting on the ways, no one who remembered the taste of Martian kulcha or the evanescent beauty of Ganymedian dream-diamonds. No one wanted to remember. Their histories had convinced them that interplanetary travel had been an extravagant mistake; and the Council, fat and flushed with a balanced budget and a balanced population, discouraged all dreamers.

Heimdall remembered. He was one of the last of the spacemen's sons, in whose blood still ran the fiery lust for far trails—one of the last who treasured forgotten books on rocket design, astrogation, aerography. . . . At night, looking up at the bright, tantalizing sparks, he had felt such a painful wave of hopeless desire that he could scarcely bear the touch of Earth under his feet.

He said, "I'll remember." But it would be difficult. Dif-

ficult to think of anything with Earth behind him, the stars shining on his face, and the pale, beckoning glow of Venus up ahead—hard to remember even the catastrophe which had forced the Council to relax, this once, its jealousy guarded tabus. . . .

"Good-bye," he said. "Don't worry, please, Vidor. I'll call you the moment I land." He turned and stepped into the airlock, and it swung solidly closed behind him.

THE MEMORY made Heimdall groan. Call Vidor — with what?

"Ah," said the young man's voice. "Now we will know the truth."

The sound of the words was strange, but it was a long moment before Heimdall realized just how strange they were. He looked at the young man questioningly.

"Yes, we have conditioned you to speak with our tongue." He smiled. "This we could do—to teach, though not to learn! I am called Dara, and the old one"—indicating the black-haired man—"is Kilio Tei. It will gladden us to answer your questions."

"Thank you," the Earthman said. The words tasted odd, but he seemed to be making

sense. "Heimdall is my name. I come from Earth, as you guessed."

"Noran found you alone. Surely you had a ship?"

"I lost it," Heimdall said ruefully, "or it lost me. I had trouble and had to abandon it in mid-air."

Both men's faces fell. "And at this crucial moment!" Tei said. "The weapons that must be lost with it! But wait—you have been away from it a long time. Must we not replenish your air supply? Your power?"

"I'm drawing air from the water, and that hump on my back is a 'vest pocket' reactor," Heimdall said. "I can stay in the suit indefinitely, though it isn't comfortable." He remembered his own crucial mission and added tensely, "Have you had any trouble with gas here?"

"Gas?" said Tei. "You mean in the water? The Horlites have tried it, but without success; we are better equipped than they to resist such weapons."

"But the Yellow Gas that bubbles up from the fountain?"

"Oh, that gas is always with us. It is the cause of this war—I will explain in due course. It is no danger to us, directly."

Dara's deep voice interrupted. "Tei, where is your daughter?"

Heimdall realized suddenly that she had been gone for some time. He turned quickly to catch Tei's reply.

Tei frowned. "Why—she went above, to scout for the Horlites, I think." Except for the faint lines in his face, he looked little older than Dara.

"Horlites!" The other's face darkened. "Here? And you said nothing?"

Tei bowed his head in confusion. "I forgot. I was so excited by Heimdall—so important a discovery—"

"Important, no doubt. But of no importance if he falls into *their* hands! How did your daughter know—"

Heimdall interrupted, smiling at Dara's mercurial temper. "If you mean the gray things, they attacked in the garden, two of them. I killed one; perhaps the other also."

"Yes? You are of Earth; you have the strength. But if they return in numbers—"

"Do not let yourself be alarmed, Dara," Tei said, smiling also. "She will be safe. Ah, see for yourself: here she is now."

The girl swung through the door, her hair streaming behind her. "Tei!" she cried. "The Horlite—the one that

was struck with coral—he was not dead. He's gone!"

"*Tlosara!*" Tei said. The word would not translate itself in Heimdall's mind; evidently it was an oath. "He'll bring others. You should have ended him, daughter."

"I know—but the Earthman is so strong, I was sure he had killed both. I'm sorry, father. I hate killing, you know that."

"Don't grieve over Horlites. Come help us gather the things we must take away." He turned to the bench, where Dara was already scooping up instruments and records, putting them in a pouch of woven reed.

Heimdall said, "Why should we leave? They run faster than I do, but they can't injure me—I could kill them if they made trouble."

Dara shook his head impatiently and moved toward the door. "If they come, they'll bring heavy weapons that can destroy even you. We are at war, Heimdall." He disappeared up the corridor. Tei bound a last sheaf of paper and launched himself after the redhead. Heimdall shrugged in his armor, and he and the girl went out together.

There was a delay at the end of the corridor, because Heimdall could not jump high enough to reach the trapdoor

above. "We dare not waste time," Dara said nervously. "I have warned the garrison at Colahara, but if Granjo and Moda don't get the message before they start back here—"

"Let's go above and leave our packs at the brim," Tei said. "Massive though he is, three of us can lift him."

This operation proved every bit as complicated as Heimdall had expected. By the time the trapdoor had closed behind them the girl was breathing heavily. "You are so clumsy, Heimdall," she said, giving him a wry smile. "If only you did not have to stay in that suit!"

"Perhaps something can be done about that," Tei said, leading the way up the terrace. "At Colahara they have learned something of Horlite methods. But what of your food supply, Heimdall?"

Heimdall looked at the dial on his right wrist. "The concentrates tank is nearly full," he said. "But I don't know how much time that gives me."

"There is only one time in this world — *not enough*," Dara remarked bitterly. "If we can reach Colahara. . . . The water-plane is hidden here."

Heimdall could see nothing but a forest of high-branch-

ing, dark-skinned plants. Dara squeezed into an almost invisible opening between their trunks and vanished; the others followed.

All but Heimdall. He tried to squeeze in after the others, but the sturdy trunks refused to give; the suit was like a metal wall around him. "Wait!" he shouted. "It's too narrow for me."

For a moment there was silence. Then, seemingly quite distant, Noran's voice came drifting back. "Wait there. We will bring the plane—"

And it was then that a shadow came swooping over the jagged fronds.

CHAPTER III

IT HAPPENED slowly, but when it was over it seemed to Heimdall that it had taken no time at all. At first he saw nothing but the shadow. Then something flat struck his helmet an ear-splitting blow, bowling him over among the weeds.

Lying on his back, he caught a glimpse of the parabola of bubbles that followed a huge, gray-skinned creature zooming up and away from him. Above, more clearly, he could see others—scores of them. They were fat slug-like things, tapering at both ends,

with two great flippers sculling at either side. Astride each one, riding easily in a sort of crude harness, was a gray man. Most of the animals were being guided toward where the plane lay, but a few came swiftly down towards Heimdall.

They were deceptively fast. Before he could get his footing, the second one was flashing over him. The beast's rider flung something that seemed to grow like a thin, delicate cloud—but it was a weighted net, and it clung. Heimdall staggered back, his mailed fingers ripping through the meshes. Another fell, then another. One of the gray monsters shot past him, one flipper thudding heavily against his side. Another net closed over him—

Over Heimdall's head a silvery ovoid darted. Tei's plane! A port opened and there was a sharp hiss. One of the gray fish vanished in a cloud of blood and giblets.

The Horlites wheeled their mounts away warily; the ship soared after them. Behind it a tight group of four riders swung a squat, heavy tube of dull metal into position—

The watery Eden bowed and trembled to the tube's concussion. Through the cloud of sediment and blood-

mist and floating debris, Heimdall saw the plane lurch and settle slowly, its bow torn open.

Then a second and greater blow slammed his head against his helmet, and the floods of pain roared him out into deep night.

WHEN THE floods died away, Heimdall was in a room like the inside of a grapefruit, curving harshly all around him. The walls were a dull, translucent blue; the small, flat floor was the same color. There was no furniture, and he was alone.

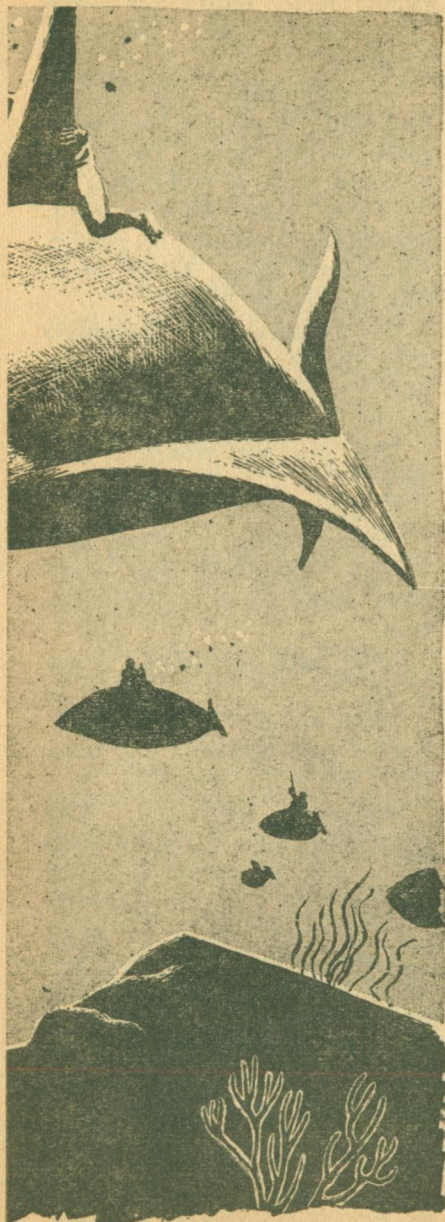
His metal suit was gone; so was the lining coverall. His brown body was bare and unhampered. His nakedness gave him an overpowering sensation of relief. He took a deep breath.

Nothing happened. His chest moved only slightly; his nostrils seemed to be plugged. Frantically he tried to draw air through his mouth, but his tracheal opening seemed permanently shut, too. And yet he felt no sense of suffocation—

An unfamiliar pulsing on each side of his neck distracted him. He put his fingers gently beneath his jawbone.

Gills!





The room was filled with water—and he had not even noticed.

He explored the new organs cautiously. They were just as he remembered Noran's; narrow, almost vertical slits just under the rear point of his jawbone. There was no pain in them; he might have grown up with them. Somebody was a master surgeon, that was for sure.

A grating sound snapped his attention away in time for him to see a door fall away from the depressing blue wall. A gray man stepped through.

Heimdall started up with a growl. The gray man gestured lazily. A paralyzing shock struck Heimdall's chest, knotting his muscles into clumps of agony. He sprawled, groaning.

"Very sorry," the gray man said, in the soft, slurred tongue Heimdall had learned at Dara's hands. "But the Airthman is very strong, very enduring. A weak one such as I—he must use his electrical powers. It pains me, this, I tell you truly. Let us be friendly, and then all will be well."

Heimdall looked at him and said nothing, but he was thinking hard. The Horlite's formal speech seemed to suggest that the language was

not his own. And the shock? It reminded Heimdall of the electric eel; evidently the gray man could store a considerable charge, to which he himself was immune. But how long did it take him to charge up again?

The other smiled broadly. "Please forgive me; I must make myself known. Among the Horlites I am lowly, but I am of them: Tu Ukan, commanding the third army. Naturally, we of the Horlites were greatly surprised to find an Airthman here, after your abrupt departure three hundred orbits before. We have long wished to make contact; and you are so reasonable and gracious. Ah, yes. We can talk in friendliness, as the emissaries of our illustrious races."

The natives were supposed to be semi-savages back then, Heimdall thought, and land-dwelling. Of course we never thought of looking under water, or we might have seen Noran's race. But what are the Horlites doing down here?

One thing was sure—he was going to have to be careful.

Ukan squatted on the floor, motioning Heimdall to do the same. "You have doubtless noticed, Citizen, this very difficult operation we have performed upon you, so that you

might better enjoy our beautiful world. Are you not pleased?"

"A remarkable job," Heimdall said. "A people born with gills would never have developed such a technique."

"True," the Horlite said, unruffled. "Would you return this small favor, then? How did you come here?"

"In a spaceship," Heimdall said shortly. Ukan obviously had guessed that much already.

"Ah, yes. But where is this ship?"

"I don't know."

"Please, Citizen," Ukan said softly. "Certainly you must have some idea of its location."

"No," said Heimdall. "None at all."

Ukan arose. "This is impossible of you Citizen. We have done much for you."

Heimdall shrugged. The gray man's face turned a deep blue, but he made a brief struggle for control, and won. "It is very sad," he said. "These white swimmers—what have they offered that has made you so stubborn? Would you not rather see Venus a sunny world, half land, half water, like your beautiful Airth? These pale-bellied fish-men—they are jealous of the Horlites, who

may live on the land, and think we mean to steal the ocean as well. They have never seen the sunlight, so they think we envy them their chilly depths!"

As propaganda, it was pretty clumsy. If Ukan had had the same operation performed on him as the one that had transformed Heimdall, he could not go back to air-breathing without further surgery. And as for sunlight, Ukan could never have seen it even on land—sunlight never got through the atmosphere of Venus. The Horlite seemed to think Heimdall was completely ignorant of Venu-sian conditions.

"Where are the swimmers who were with me?" Heimdall demanded. "Are they hurt?"

The gray man smiled. "They are not far away. One was wounded, and we fear for him. But the other two are well. We are trying to persuade them to explain certain of their mechanisms which were not destroyed in the crash. Perhaps you would like to see them?"

"Yes."

Ukan's smile broadened into an unpleasant grin; he stepped over to the near wall. "We are pleased to be gracious," he said. "We of the Horlites are not barbarians, no matter

what they have told you. You will see."

Turning his head away, he barked something in the same oddly accented language Heimdall had heard the gray men speaking in the garden. A voice answered quietly from an invisible source, and then a segment of the translucent substance became cloudless and clear.

Through the nascent window Heimdall could see another room, almost spherical like this one, but larger. A gray man was standing with his back to the window, partially blocking the view, but in the next instant he moved aside. Beyond, on the opposite wall, was a huge circular port which was shimmering green, evidently looking out into the open ocean; but Heimdall paid it little attention. He had eyes only for Noran and her father.

Tei was standing next to the great green disc, his wrists held by a gray man on either side. Heimdall gave him a brief glance—he did indeed seem to be unhurt—and looked down. Noran, her single garment blackened and almost totally torn away, was crouching in the middle of the chamber, one hand covering her face. A Horlite was leaning over her, his lips close

to her ear. He straightened when Ukan snapped a word at him, but the girl did not move.

Heimdall stared at her. There was something frightening in her motionlessness, in the droop of her silky shoulders. "Noran!" he cried involuntarily. Ukan's grin slipped sidewise a little, but he made no move to interfere with Heimdall.

The girl's head lifted slowly, and her eyes moved, her eyes traveling slowly with a terrible sightless stare. Heimdall's heart thudded agonizingly against his big rib-cage.

"Heimdall?" Noran whispered uncertainly. "You are here? Where—"

"Nearby. In the next room, I think. I'm a prisoner too. There's a gray man named Ukan here—"

"Heimdall!" It was a high, frightened cry. "Tell them nothing! They will—" The Horlite standing over her lunged forward and clapped a knobby hand over her mouth. Heimdall's muscles corded, but Ukan touched his elbow gently.

"Forgive my lieutenant; he is overzealous. Ah, yes. The pale girl is hysterical, and says things she does not mean."

Heimdall shook him off.

"Make that devil let go of her."

Ukan bowed his head with mocking deference and droned an order. The Horlite holding the girl stepped back reluctantly.

"Speak to her again," Ukan murmured. "Ask her how the water-plane fared after our crew hit it. Perhaps we can make repairs."

"Are you hurt?" Heimdall called, ignoring him. "Where is Dara? What do these Horlites want?"

The girl put her hand to her forehead wearily. "They have not hurt me, yet, I think—I'm too tired to know. Dara—Dara they must have killed. He was wounded, and they questioned him. Then they took him away. But he told them nothing, nothing!"

HEIMDALL clenched his teeth. He knew nothing of the relationship which existed between the red-headed young man and Tei and his daughter. Dara had seemed to be Tei's major assistant; possibly, too, he had been Noran's assigned mate, or her lover—the clues were too few to make a trustable guess. Whatever the truth, he had been a tough, quick-thinking, likeable youngster—and a brave

one, evidently. Heimdall discovered suddenly that his dislike for Ukan had turned into an active loathing. He eyed the gray man's wobbly neck with murderous speculation.

"Ask her what drives the water-plane," Ukan was insisting, his voice taking on an edge. "She will answer you. Ah, yes. She fears us so foolishly."

Heimdall continued to stare fixedly at the Horlite's useless windpipe. It looked satisfyingly fragile.

"I'll ask her nothing," he growled. "I don't like your methods, gray man. If your intentions are as good as you claim, you can let us go. Right now. Or else—"

"Or else?" Ukan said. "Or else what? Do you threaten? Your language is stronger than your eyesight, Citizen Heimdall." With an unexpected, savage gesture, he sent the Earthman thudding to the floor, his body contorted with agony. The shock seemed stronger this time than before. Heimdall fought it grimly, his mind churning. How long had it been since the first shock? Had it really taken Ukan that much time to build up another charge, or had he only seen no occasion to use it again until now? The an-

swer was crucial, but it evaded him.

"Enough of this ridiculous posing," the Horlite said, turning to the window between the rooms. "Citizen Tei, we have no reason to be polite to you. You know our powers well enough. The Horlites do not brook silence from the fish-people; your Dara may ponder that forever in the Great Deep, but you have not so much time for philosophy. Speak out. I order it."

Tei looked blindly for the source of the voice, but obviously he could not see into this room. He said harshly, "I have nothing to say."

"Think twice. Your time is limited. I will time you. For every second that you remain silent, from this time forth, your daughter will pay. Do you doubt me?" Ukan rattled a quick sentence in his own language. His lieutenant smiled nastily and extended spidery fingers.

Through his own haze of pain Heimdall saw Noran's smooth flanks clench into tetany, her arms lock over her suddenly board-stiff abdomen, her face drawn into a rictus of agony. Tei lurched forward, but his guards, grinning, yanked him back. The spasm was very revealing, and the guards, though they did

not belong to Noran's race, were obviously enjoying it, as one might enjoy the inadvertent shamelessness of monkeys. Heimdall, still helpless, extended his loathing of Ukan to the whole Horlite clan.

"Gently, gently," Ukan said. "The pale girl is delicate. Well, Tei? Is silence this valuable? Speak; I may not counsel gentleness forever."

The Horlite's eyes were fixed on the clear space in the wall, taking in the scene with an unctuous satisfaction. Heimdall lay where he was, eyes all but closed, gradually regaining control of his hypertonic muscles. Then, cautiously, he drew his legs up under his chest, and allowed himself to drift back to the floor in the slight current his movement had caused. Ukan threw him a quick glance and went back to watching the show; Heimdall's play-acting was crude, but here it was sufficient.

The moment Ukan looked away, the muscles of Heimdall's thighs corded and his feet thrust powerfully against the floor. He hurtled through the clear water like a torpedo.

Ukan sensed the sudden movement and swung to meet it, his eyes bulging. But he was late; if he had had time to build up another jolt of

electricity, he did not think fast enough to use it. Heimdall's knotted fist was like a rock hurled from a catapult. The Horlite's head jerked, and lolled sidewise queerly; he went back against the wall and slumped in slow motion toward the floor.

Heimdall disentangled himself from the flaccid body and looked down at it without regret. He had not meant to break the creature's neck, not just yet, but he had no cause to be sorry that the thing was done. It was only inconvenient not to have Ukan alive to issue orders, under duress; now Heimdall would have to get out on his own. He thought he could manage that.

He surveyed the empty room. The girl had not been able to see him, or Tei to see Ukan; that meant that the temporary window was a one-way transparency. So he had perhaps a minute or two, before the Horlites in the next chamber would expect another order from their chief, and become suspicious when it was not forthcoming.

He propelled himself to the spot on the wall where the door had admitted Ukan, and thumped it tentatively. It bent under the impact. No, that wouldn't do; even slightly flexible metal couldn't be

forced. But how about the window? He glided over to it. Some notion was swimming in the dimmest regions of his brain, maddeningly far away. He tried to bring it closer. If—

He had it. The window had looked to be made of the same material as the rest of the room, before Ukan had cleared it. If that was so, then the only way to make it transparent was to crystallize it temporarily—and crystals shatter.

He bent to the corpse and ripped the tunic of metallic cloth from it in a single rude yank, draping the stuff over his own head and shoulders. The weave was close, but he could see through it hazily. Groping, he found his way to the side of the room opposite the window, where he leapt cautiously upward, reaching for the wall at the same time with his feet. When his body was nearly horizontal in the water, he launched himself like a cannonball at the other side—

There was a shattering sound, like a waterfall of glass. His head rang with the heavy, sudden blow, but he did not quite black out. His cloaked shoulder slammed against something sharp and unyielding. He clawed at the tatters of his improvised hel-

met; the water foamed about him.

Then he was free. The Horlites holding Tei had released him and were clutching at their sidearms. From the center of the room, the guard next to Noran, obviously more quick-witted than the others, stabbed his spread fingers frantically at Heimdall; but the shock that came to him through the water would have shamed a 3-volt flashlight battery. The creature had drained too much of his stored power into Noran herself.

Heimdall's toes gripped the floor and hurled him forward again, past the astonished group, straight at the huge green disc which led to the open sea.

There was another heavy impact against his head and shoulders, and then he was free in the cool depths. For a moment he was stunned and lost; his skull had taken quite a knocking in the past few days, and up and down were hopelessly confused. Along his left shoulder-blade there was a long, burning line, like an incandescent wire. Then a white shadow slipped past him, and a familiar, silvery voice said softly: "Heimdall!"

The universe was turning right side up. He struck out weakly in the green gloom.

"Noran? Is Tei—are you—"

"Here." Her bare arm slipped magically under his shoulders, and her legs fluttered alongside his, treading water. "We're both free. The gray ones are afraid of you—but we must hurry. We're over the Great Deep here; the Horlite fortress fronts on it. We'll have to cross it before they chase us, if we can."

"Is it as deep as all that?"

"Two Earth miles, and wide—too wide for anyone with artificial gills to cross it. Except you, Heimdall, if you are still strong."

Tei came floundering up to them, his face alight. "Well done, Heimdall! But we must hurry now—"

"Which way?"

"Straight ahead. Colahara and the Horlite fortress face each other across the Deep. It is the barrier which has held them back for a generation. If only we had been able to stick it out here!"

"What?"

"I sent an impulse to the College before the plane crashed," Tei explained. "They knew we had been captured, and that the fortress was the logical place for the Horlites to take us. We might well have been rescued."

"It wouldn't have been as easy as all that," Heimdall

said grimly, striking out. "These gray men are not stupid. We'll have to cross this canyon, no matter how deep it is—and pray that Colahara will strike before we tire."

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS deep night in the abyss. Shocking, phosphorescent things circled greedily, all teeth and bulging eyes, and edged their huge heads closer. An eel-like ribbon writhed downward into the blackness, its glowing sides changing from color to impossible color.

Heimdall gritted his teeth and paddled doggedly. He had started out with a smooth crawl, and discovered it to be utterly useless in water that had no surface; then he had tried side-stroke, which lasted him a while, but had proved too wasteful of energy; finally he had been reduced to this frog-like ungraceful wriggle, which would have evoked unbelieving laughter from his university swimming coach. But it worked, after a fashion.

Beside him over the deep violet abyss Noran moved effortlessly, with a sinuous, fish-like motion that defied analysis. A little behind, Tei followed, working hard, but

graceful in his own way. The huge, grinning heads wheeled about them, and the abyss yawned.

"How far yet?" said Heimdall hoarsely.

"I don't know," the girl replied. "Are you tiring?"

"A little. The Horlites forgot to give me webbing for my toes and fingers."

Tei snorted. "Forgot! Not they. They have good reasons for everything they do. They made you a water-breather because in your metal suit you were protected from their electrical organs—but give a prisoner webbing to help him swim? They have better sense."

"Whatever the reason," Heimdall said, "I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. We've been sinking lower and lower all the time. The pressure is increasing—I can feel it, it's making me a little dizzy."

"We'll try to carry you if it comes to that. But you are stronger than we are. If—"

Tei broke off and peered ahead, his eyes gleaming.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

Tei obviously did not trust himself to speak; he pointed a long, trembling finger directly ahead and up a little. For a moment Heimdall saw

nothing at all in that direction. Then, gradually, it emerged: the vast, cliff-like ramparts of a mountain, silhouetted against a dim glow from the sky, and atop it—

In the haze it was impossible to see in detail what it was that clung to the top of that peak, but its outlines were fabulous. Smooth, soaring towers; sweeping walls; keeps and barbicans; the dark eyes of embrasures; pinnacles crowned with merlons . . .

"Colahara," said the girl softly, and Heimdall felt the thrill of gladness that shook her.

"It's a long climb," he said doubtfully.

"No matter," Tei said, his voice quivering. "We can rest on the slopes of the mountain. The depths cannot crush us now."

Yet it seemed to Heimdall that they might. With the goal in sight, his abused body, cramped by the abysmal cold, weakened by repeated shocks, worn by steady striving, began to fail. He thrust frantically at the yielding water, but there was no force behind the stroke. The mountain began to slide slowly, smoothly, inexorably upward before him, the dream-like towers of Colahara receding toward the green heavens. He heard

Noran's voice, calling his name, but it was a meaningless sound . . . the pressure grew around his head . . . something cold and sharp pressed into his side . . . then came a violent shock that blotted out everything.

THE VOICE was very far away at first.

"Heimdall? Heimdall!"

There was hard rock under him, and the voice was insistent. After a moment he sat up, weak, but a little rested.

"Heimdall!" Noran said. "Are you all right? How do you feel?"

"Groggy. What—"

"You must come! The gray men haven't seen us down here yet, but any moment—"

He stood up shakily and looked about him. There was little to be seen but the steep sides of the mountain and the empty wastes of the Great Deep.

"What gray men? There's nobody here but us fish."

"They're above. They forestalled us. Colahara must have attacked the fortress as we surmised—but the Horlites didn't pursue us across the Deep. They attacked the College in force, while the Colahara water-planes were away attacking *them*! If we stay

out here much longer, we'll be killed!"

As if in confirmation, another shock shook him, milder than the last, but still agonizing. He looked up at the faraway, dim towers. Shadows flitted around them.

The girl was already ahead of him, clambering gracefully among the water-worn boulders. "This way," she said.

Heimdall gave Tei a boost over the largest of the rocks and leapt after him. Over his head a black torpedo hurtled, swirling the currents behind it, and curved up and away—one of the Horlites' dolphin-like mounts. Evidently it had lost its rider and was running away.

"One for our side," Heimdall said. "Have the Horlites any chance of reducing this citadel?"

"A very good chance," Tei said grimly, grappling for a fresh hand-hold. "They have heavy artillery, as you saw. And the sharks they ride are elusive targets for fixed heavy guns such as the College mounts. The water-planes are badly needed."

The "dolphin" passed overhead again. The beast evidently had seen them, for it was cruising back and forth curiously, its evil pig-eyes glittering. Heimdall eyed it uneasily.

"Is it intelligent enough to carry back a report?"

The girl laughed. "*Tlosara!* No, certainly not. It probably wonders if you will feed it."

Heimdall paused on a narrow ledge and thought a moment. "How do I let it know that I will?" he asked finally.

Tei gaped at him. "Are you mad, Earthmen? If you call it and then have no food to offer, it will kill us all. Just let it alone and it will go away."

"I don't want it to go away," Heimdall said stubbornly. "Look. You can get to an entrance to the College all right from here, can't you?"

"If the gray men do not see us, yes. There is a long-unused escape port up there where the fighting begins—"

"They won't see you—leave that to me. Call the big fish."

Tei shrugged fatalistically and uttered a high-pitched, eerie note. The shark arced back eagerly toward them, launching itself with a sinewy, sinisterly beautiful motion. It drew up beside Heimdall's ledge, great flippers sculling with deceptive gentleness. Its expectant silence was somehow more deadly than any possible sound it might have made.

Heimdall looked at it tensely for a moment, eyeing the

empty harness, the trailing bridle and stirrup-like slings. As he had suspected, there were even spurs, with huge, cruel rowels on them, and the tight-drawn bit was spiked on both ends. Controlling a mount like this required stern measures. He jumped.

At the same instant the creature's suspicions began to operate, and it glided forward, short temper already lost. But it was a little late. Heimdall's forked legs clamped with all his strength around the beast's body, and he clawed frantically for the bridle.

He had scarcely grasped it when the shark's long body snapped back and forth like a living whip. His head jerked on his shoulders, and his spine felt as if it had cracked—but he had the bridle, and one stirrup as well.

Changing tactics abruptly, his mount arrowed forward. It took it only seconds to reach express-train speed. The slipstream of the water tore at Heimdall, and he bent low and kicked for the other stirrup.

He found it. He reined back, hard. The water boiled as the blubbery flippers feathered frantically. In a single smooth motion the creature was over on its back and heading straight for Noran and Tei.

Ruthlessly Heimdall dug

in his left heel and jerked back his right arm. The universe spun again, and when he had his orientation back he was headed up. The creature made a tentative attempt to dip again, but a heavy tug on the reins brought it back; its savage little brain had recognized superior force.

The light grew. Heimdall had a few seconds to think. This had been a foolhardy idea—he had no weapons, and the gray men were armed. Their electrical organs alone would be enough to kill him now that he had lost his suit. Heimdall grinned recklessly. He had both piloted planes and ridden horses; in this combination of the two skills, he might be able to show the Horlites a few tricks.

As he scudded over the last rise, he left the night of the Great Deep behind for an iridescent twilight. Colahara towered above him, a vision straight out of a fairy tale—but there was no time for sightseeing now. On a sharp outcropping two Horlites were dragging a familiar bulky tube into position; they were already standing on the rock and herding their mounts, which were lowering the tube into place. A low-set embrasure in the College wall was spitting death over their

heads, but the unseen gunner could not depress his weapon enough to reach them.

Heimdall steered his captured shark directly underneath the outcropping, reined it to a stop, and carefully selected a loose, sharp-edged rock which lay precariously in a crevice. His heels nudged the shark's smooth sides—

A second later he was hurtling toward the preoccupied Horlites. One of them looked up briefly, waved, and went back to his work. Heimdall's Viking ancestry would not let him pose as a friend; besides, the essence of his plan was diversion. He whooped wildly, a berserker from another cosmos of belief.

The gray men scattered in alarm, but the big fish was faster than they were. With the fragment Heimdall brained the first one and shot like a comet after the other. The fleeing creature hooted desperately to his own mount, but he might as well have been calling for the aid of the mysterious Tlosara. The two riderless beasts, crazed by the blood-mist, were already battling over the fresh corpse on the outcropping.

Heimdall's shark took the Horlite's head off with one smooth swipe, and tried to swerve back after the body,

but Heimdall had other plans. Shouting joyously, the blond giant rode his finny charger straight for the center of the gray horde.

The phalanxes turned to meet him. He wrenched at the bridle and shot away from them over the deep.

Something gleamed briefly below him. For a moment he was about to climb away from it toward the faraway surface. Then the realization smote him like a blow.

The ship!

Of course! The Horlite bridgehead into the sea fronted on the Deep; and the country of Noran's people ended at the steep slopes on the opposite side. The *Hope* outweighed him by many tons; he had come to rest on the currents in Kilio Tei's garden, but the ship, striking the slopes, had rolled slowly down and away from him, coming to rest at last in the foothills below Colahara.

An invisible missile whistled past his head, and the shock-wave nearly burst his eardrum. No time now to tangle with the Horlites. If he could only make it to the *Hope*—

A distant, composite cry came to him as he plunged into the depths, a cry of astonishment and despair. Heim-

dall hunched over the flat shoulders and head of his mount, clenching his teeth. He knew that to Noran and Tei and the College this looked like desertion—but there was another world whose life depended upon him, and upon that glint of metal so far below.

He glanced over his shoulder as the great beast he rode arrowed down. Behind, four riders were coming after him, spurring their mounts viciously. He looked again a moment later, and saw with despair that the Horlites were gaining. Their sharks were fresh, while his was tiring markedly.

The barrage from the ramparts of Colahara had stopped now, but more missiles from the riders' hand-guns came boiling past him. An instant later, the beast lurched under him, and a slow cloud of dark red drifted away. It moved its great flippers once more, convulsively, and then began to roll ponderously over.

Desperately Heimdall kicked his feet out of the stirrups and dived. The ship was so close now—

THE PRESSURE closed around him once more as he thrust himself downward, half hidden in the drifting cloud of

blood from the dead animal. Pressure hammered at his ears, choked and blinded him—but he saw the smooth, curving white hull dimly before him.

Groping, he propelled himself along it, until his numbed fingers encountered a series of grooves that he knew. Swiftly, fighting against the blankness that threatened to overwhelm him, he thrust his fingertips into the grooves and depressed the lockbars underneath. The airlock opened with maddening slowness, almost thrusting him away from his hold.

He flung himself inside, and turned to close the lock again—

The dim figure crowded purposefully in after him, gun raised. Heimdall flung himself to the curved floor. The Horlite's first shot went over him, exploding deafeningly in the tiny chamber. Heimdall felt himself lifted, hurled forward into his adversary.

Instantly the Horlite's fingers were at Heimdall's throat. Weakened by the pressure and his long fight against one danger after another, he struggled to hold on to the last shreds of consciousness, grappling the other's gun wrist with one hand,

groping behind him with the other—

His hand found the lever and yanked it over. The lock door closed ponderously—shutting off the view of another twisted Horlite face.

The gray man's thumbs pressed agonizingly into Heimdall's larynx. Summoning his last strength, he planted his hands against his attacker's chest and heaved.

The Horlite went back, and his shoulders struck the arching wall with a muffled clang. His grip loosened, and in that instant Heimdall was upon him. The Earthman's fist crunched into the gray face, once, twice, and the creature sagged heavily.

Heimdall waited only long enough to make sure that the Horlite was dead; then he dragged himself down the passageway to the engine room. He'd have to fix that injector, and quickly.

The ship was full of water; that was probably going to cause trouble. It took him twenty minutes of straining and peering into the partially dismantled blast chamber to find out which of the plasma spargers had burned out. It took him fifteen minutes more to replace it, keeping his eyes focussed and his hands steady by will alone. When it was

done, he lurched up the slanting passageway to the control cubby.

The pressure was intolerable; he could barely see the control board. *The pumps*, he thought dazedly. He found the studs, mainly by feel, and tripped them.

After that, he hung onto the guide rail and waited. Gradually, the pumps, designed to exhaust air from the ship in case of contamination, did their work with the heavier medium. With the engine tight again, no more water could get in. Gradually, the pressure went down. Heimdall's head cleared, and a little of his strength returned. He slumped into the bucket seat, and his hand found the firing button.

There was a heavy groan from the engine compartment. Otherwise, nothing.

He sat stunned for a moment, and then the thought came: *Perhaps it's nothing serious. Maybe I have one more chance.* But what could be the matter? There could be no such thing as being out of fuel on the *Hope*; her "fuel" was electricity from an atomic pile, her propellant was any liquid or gas that would ionize—her engine was a modern version of the Coupling ion gun, almost a thou-

sand years old in principle. Touching that button should have filled the blast chamber with a raging cloud of mad-denied ions in a split second—ions that, guided by a magnetic field thousands of gauss strong, should have blown the chamber and the tubes free in an instant—

Through the metal of the hull came distant boomings, and occasionally there was a metallic clank as a missile struck the *Hope* herself. The battle was raging up there still, and he couldn't help!

Frantically he scanned the meters on the board. The pile meter showed a *k* of better than 1.7—nothing wrong there. And there was power flowing to the magnet windings, to the RF ionizing field, to the plasma tank pumps. Maybe there was power being bled off somewhere by the seawater—if so it didn't show on the board. And there would be precisely nothing he could do about it in any case; he did not dare to empty the ship entirely—he didn't know whether or not his lungs would still function after the Horlite's surgery. He suspected not.

Wait a minute. That firing button operated on a timer. It only took a microsecond to trigger the ionization of his

present reaction-mass, which was distilled water. Sea-water has a lower dielectric constant. If he could set the timer forward a little, just enough to keep the initial triggering current flowing a little longer—giving the chamber and the tubes a chance to blow out the sea-water and let the plasma start flowing from the tanks . . .

He opened the top of the control board frantically and scanned the back of the firing circuit. There was an Allen-headed screw mounted in a little resistance there; normally he carried a full kit of tiny Allen wrenches in his coveralls, but he was birthday naked now. He forced the tip of his finger hard against the top of the screw, until he could feel the hexagonal edges biting into the flesh, and turned. The screw moved, very slightly; perhaps it was enough.

He snapped the board back down into place and hit the button again.

The floor bucked and surged under him. A second later came the thunder of the tubes, tripled by the high sound-conductance of the water. Heimdall's heart bounded joyously. The *Hope* was his again!

On the trip across from

Earth, the bucket seat had felt hard, but after the shark-saddle it was like an easy chair. He grinned tightly, strapped on the safety belt, and opened the throttle. The silver torpedo lifted, came roaring out of the abyss. Gray shapes scattered in terror before it.

Heimdall tilted the space-stick forward and to the left, and the *Hope* swung, bellowing its defiance. The towers of Colahara crossed the view-plate; then a squadron of Horlites, whirling toward him determinedly.

The *Hope* wasn't armed. But she needed no arms now. The throttle inched forward again under Heimdall's hand, and the *Hope* slammed her shock-wave into the middle of the Horlites; they scattered like chaff. Behind her, steam raved back and up from her screaming jets.

It took only one flight through the heart of the Horlite army to cut it into nothing but a fringe of scalded, screaming fugitives. Grinning savagely, Heimdall pedalled the *Hope* onto her tail.

A small dark blob, silhouetted against the rippling sky, assumed definition as he climbed, separated out into a group of gray men wrestling with a heavy tube. The cover-

guard—waiting to hit the returning water-planes of Colahara from above. They were going to get more than they bargained for.

The Horlites, however, could hardly have failed to see the howling vessel bulleting toward them. The tube's mouth opened in Heimdall's face; then the gun kicked back among its crew, and the *Hope* rang like a kicked kettle and rocked dangerously off her ascent path. Heimdall swore and wrestled the ship back on course—the back of the bucket seat bit into his kidneys—

And then he was flying free, rocketing toward emptiness on a pillar of flame. The *Hope*

was considerably more massive, now that she was filled with water, but she had power to spare; she would not perform maneuvers as tightly as before, that was all. In the rear viewplate, the glassy surface of a sullen sea receded.

Free!

The realization was intoxicating. Free to mount the dim yellow air, free to go back to the space between the planets, the space he loved—free to return to Earth again, with a message that meant life. No matter that he could no longer breathe Earth's air; it wouldn't be long before no Earthman could—or would need to. His hand reached out for the throttle.



But when he touched it, it was to cut the power, and send the ship in a great parabola back toward the sea. Earth could wait; Heimdall still had some unfinished business on Venus.

The *Hope* plunged back into the water like an enormous silver porpoise. Only diminishing bubbles of steam marked her course after that; and then, even those had dwindled and vanished.

CHAPTER V

HEIMDALL stood with Noran and her father beside the bulky ultraphone in the control room of the *Hope*, now at rest again on a high plateau in the heart of Tei's country. Heimdall adjusted it tensely.

"Is anything wrong?" Noran said.

"I hope not. It's delicate. Theoretically it's a sealed system, and as shockproof as we could make it; but if so much as a drop of water has gotten inside it, it's a goner."

"It will work," Tei said. "You saved our people, Heimdall. Tlosara will be merciful; you will save your own, too."

"But I may have to go home to do it," Heimdall said grimly. Noran took his elbow involuntarily, then released it. At the same instant, the dials

all bobbed abruptly together, like dancers. The device was drawing power! Heimdall tapped out the coded signal for Vidor, and waited. It was a long way to Earth. . . .

The screen lit, and Vidor was looking at them all. For a moment he seemed utterly baffled; then he recognized Heimdall and his eyes flashed. The scientist did not speak; there was no need for that. It was plain to see that he was swallowing a large, hard lump.

"Hello, Vidor," Heimdall said. "Sorry, I couldn't call sooner. It's been kind of complicated here. But I made it. Can you tune the Council in on this?"

Vidor nodded once. Noran and Tei were watching him with awe. For them it was a historic occasion, just as it was for Heimdall, but for different reasons. Vidor looked off-screen at something, then said:

"Circuit's open, Heimdall. For God's sake, report!"

"All right, listen carefully. The Yellow Gas is here; it was the first thing I hit when I got here, though I didn't recognize it at first. The planet is swathed in it. I didn't make the connection until I saw it coming up from the ocean floor, just like it

does on Earth. As far as I'm able to judge, Venus got hit with it just when we did, when the solar constant changed, but it's worse here because the loss of solar heat is more serious on Venus."

Ultraphone transmission is about 25 per cent faster than light; it was only an instant before they saw Vidor's face sag. "Then there's no hope," he said.

"On the contrary," Heimdall said. "Listen to me, Vidor. There are *two* intelligent races here, not just one. The gray-skinned, land-living people we met during our first colonization—the Horlites—are only half the story. There's another race, a white-skinned one, that lives permanently under water. That's where I am right now: on the bottom of the sea. This is water around me, and I'm breathing it. The point is that the Gas is tolerable in solution; the gills the white-skinned people have filter it out. The gray men could breathe it free a little better than we could on Earth, but the concentration is now going up beyond their tolerance. Clear so far?"

"Clear, but even more discouraging," Vidor said. "How can you possibly—"

"Look closely at my neck,

Vidor. You'll see that I've got gills, just like Noran and Kilio Tei here. What's happened is that the Horlites—the gray creatures—have developed a method for producing Gas-tolerant gills by surgery, and inducing physiological changes to match. Since they can't live on the land, they've invaded the ocean. They performed the operation on me while they had me captured, and you can see that I'm in no discomfort. In fact, I feel great."

"Gills?" Vidor said, his eyes gleaming. "Gas-tolerant? Magnificent! Do you know the method?"

"No, of course not, I'm no medico. But the water people do; they've just discovered it for themselves, from hints they got from the Horlites. But they need help. Can you send it? If you can, you'll get the gill-surgery technique in return, and you can live in the oceans of Earth—or of Venus, if you like them better. But you've got to hurry. It's a war to the death here."

"We'll be there," Vidor said, with grim satisfaction. "And we'll bring the whole arsenal. We haven't fought among ourselves for thousands of years for nothing. If your swimmers can give us the gills and a new life, we'll

burn the Horlites off the face of the planet for them. Can you hold out six months?"

Heimdall turned to Tei. The man's face was radiant. "What does he say?" he asked Heimdall, his eyes still glued to the image of Vidor's face. "He has promised help, I can understand that much."

"He asks if we can hold out against the Horlites for six months. If so, Earth will come here and destroy them utterly. I think myself that we can do it, Tei; after all, we have the *Hope* now. What do you think?"

"Of course," Tei said simply. Heimdall turned back to the viewplate.

"Tei says yes, Vidor."

"Good. Great work, Heimdall. I knew you'd remember us." His face suddenly took on a puzzled expression. "Er—that's a lovely girl standing next to you, Heimdall. Don't you know you've no clothes on? For that matter, your friends aren't exactly overdressed, either."

Heimdall threw back his head, and his booming Viking

laughter rang across forty-five million miles of space. "Better get used to it, Vidor. You'll be bare as a baby yourself, once you take to living underseas. Clothes are a nuisance under water."

"Well," Vidor said nervously, "they still matter here. You're talking on a worldwide hookup, you square-headed hero. Better find yourself a pair of trousers before you come home." He smiled. "In the meantime, hang on. We'll be there in six months—in force!"

The screen went blank. Heimdall turned and smiled at Noran. She was not smiling, however; the few smatterings of English she had picked up from her father evidently had been sufficient to enable her to catch the gist of Vidor's last speech.

"Home?" she whispered. "And shall you be leaving Venus when the war is over, then?"

Heimdall's smile broadened. "No," he said. "Vidor doesn't understand yet, but he will. I'm already home."



CORRECTION: A printer's error on the contents page of the first issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES left many readers understandably confused. Actually, the December issue was Volume 1, Number 1—not Number 6, as stated! We're sorry!

SLAVES of the STAR GIANTS

by Robert Silverberg



*The Earth he knew was gone, replaced by a
wild world of hideous, demented creatures
he was fated to battle—but not to understand!*

Illustrated by Bowman

Slaves of the Star Giants

by Robert Silverberg

CHAPTER I

DARK VIOLET shadows streaked the sky, and the forest was ugly and menacing. Lloyd Harkins leaned against the bole of a mighty red-brown tree and looked around dizzily, trying to get his bearings.

He knew he was *there*, not *here*. *Here* had vanished, so suddenly that there had been no sense of transition or of motion—merely a strange subliminal undertone of *loss*, as the world he knew had melted and been replaced with—what?

He heard a distant, ground-shaking sound of thunder,

RECENTLY, the World Science Fiction Society presented its annual awards for excellence, and Robert Silverberg was chosen the most promising new writer of 1956 by vote of the 1200-odd members. The choice was a natural one, and this year, we think, Bob will hit even greater heights. This story, in fact, is ample evidence that the "promise" is already being fulfilled!

growing louder. Birds with gleaming, toothy beaks and wide-sweeping wings wheeled and shrieked in the shadowed sky, and the air was cold and damp. Harkins held his ground, clinging tightly to the enormous tree as if it were his last bastion of reality in a world of dreams.

And the tree moved.

It lifted from its base, swung forward and upward, carrying Harkins with it. The sound of thunder grew nearer. Harkins shut his eyes, opened them, gaped in awe.

Some ten feet to the right, another tree was moving.

He threw his head back, stared upward into the cloud-fogged sky, and verified the fact he wanted to deny: the trees were not trees.

They were legs.

Legs of a being huge beyond belief, whose head rose fifty feet or more above the floor of the dark forest. A being who had begun to move.

Harkins dug his hands frantically into the leg, gripping it as he swung wildly through a fifteen-foot arc with each stride of the monstrous crea-

ture. Gradually, the world around him took shape again, and slowly he re-established control over his fear-frozen mind.

Through the bright green blurs of vegetation he was able to see the creature on which he rode. It was gigantic but vaguely manlike, wearing a sort of jacket and a pair of shorts which terminated some twenty-five feet above Harkins' head. From there down, firm red-brown skin the texture of wood was visible. Harkins could even distinguish dimly a face, far above, with pronounced features of a strange and alien cast.

He began to assemble his environment. It was a forest—where? On Earth, apparently—but an Earth no one had ever known before. The bowl of the sky was shot through with rich, dark colors, and the birds that screeched overhead were nightmare creatures of terrifying appearance.

The earth was brown and the vegetation green, though all else had changed.

Where am I? Harkins asked over and over again.

And—*Why am I here?*

And—*How can I get back?*

HE HAD no answers. The day had begun in ordinary fash-

ion, promising to be neither more nor less unusual than the day before or all the days before that. Shortly after noon, on the 21st of April, 1957, he had been on his way to the electronics laboratory, in New York City, on the planet Earth. And now he was here, wherever *here* might be.

His host continued to stride through the forest, seemingly unconcerned about the man clinging to his calf. Harkins' arms were growing tired from the strain of hanging on, and suddenly the new thought occurred: *Why not let go?* He had held on only through a sort of paralysis of the initiative, but now he had regained his mental equilibrium. He dropped off.

He hit the ground solidly and sprawled out flat. The soil was warm and fertile-smelling, and for a moment he clung to it as he had to the "tree" minutes before. Then he scrambled to his feet and glanced around hastily, looking for a place to hide and reconnoiter.

There was none. And a hand was descending toward him—red-brown, enormous, tipped with gleaming, pointed fingernails six inches long. Gently, the giant hand scooped Harkins up.

THERE was a dizzying moment as he rose fifty feet, held tenderly in the giant's leathery embrace. The hand opened, and Harkins found himself standing on an outspread palm the size of a large table, staring at a strange oval face with deep-set, compassionate eyes and a wide, almost lipless mouth studded with triangular teeth. The being seemed to smile almost pityingly at Harkins.

"What are you?" Harkins demanded.

The creature's smile grew broader and more melancholy, but there was no reply—only the harsh wailing of the forest birds, and the distant rumbling of approaching thunder. Harkins felt himself being lowered to the giant's side, and once again the being began to move rapidly through the forest, crushing down the low-clustered shrubs as it walked. Harkins, his stomach rolling agonizingly with each step, rode cradled in the great creature's loosely-closed hand.

After what must have been ten minutes or more, the giant stopped. Harkins glanced around, surprised. The thunder was close now, and superimposed on it was the dull boom of toppling trees. The giant was standing quite still,

legs planted as solidly as tree trunks, waiting.

Minutes passed—and then Harkins saw why the giant had stopped. Coming toward them was a machine—a robot, Harkins realized—some fifteen feet high. It was man-shaped, but much more compact; a unicorn-like spike projected from its gleaming nickel-jacketed forehead, and instead of legs it moved on broad treads. The robot was proceeding through the forest, pushing aside the trees that stood in its way with casual gestures of its massive forearms, sending them toppling to the right and left with what looked like a minimal output of effort.

The giant remained motionless, staring down at the ugly machine as it went by. The robot paid no attention to Harkins' host, and went barrelling on through the forest as if following some predetermined course.

Minutes later it was out of sight, leaving behind it a trail of uprooted shrubs and exposed tree-roots. As the robot's thunder diminished behind them, the giant resumed his journey through the forest. Harkins rode patiently, not daring to think any more.

After a while longer a clear-

ing appeared—and Harkins was surprised and pleased to discover a little cluster of huts. Man-sized huts, ringed in a loose circle to form a village. Moving in the center of the circle were tiny dots which Harkins realized were people, human beings, *men*.

A colony?

A prison camp?

The people of the village spotted the giant, and gathered in a small knot, gesticulating and pointing. The giant approached within about a hundred yards of the village, stooped, and lowered Harkins delicately to the ground.

Dizzy after his long journey in the creature's hand, Harkins staggered, reeled, and fell. He half expected to see the giant scoop him up again, but instead the being was retreating into the forest, departing as mysteriously as he had come.

Harkins got to his feet. He saw people running toward him—wild-looking, dangerous people. Suddenly, he began to feel that he might have been safer in the giant's grip.

CHAPTER II

THERE were seven of them, five men and two women. These were probably the bravest. The rest hung back

and watched from the safety of their huts.

Harkins stood fast and waited for them. When they drew near, he held up a hand.

"Friend!" he said loudly. "Peace!"

The words seemed to register. The seven paused and arrayed themselves in an uneasy semicircle before Harkins. The biggest of the men, a tall, broad-shouldered man with unruly long black hair, thick features and deep-set eyes, stepped forward.

"Where are you from, stranger?" he growled in recognizable, though oddly distorted, English.

Harkins thought it over, and decided to keep acting on the assumption that they were as savage as they looked. He pointed to the forest. "From there."

"We know that," the tall man said. "We saw the Star Giant bring you. But where is your village?"

Harkins shrugged. "Far from here—far across the ocean." It was as good a story as any, he thought. And he wanted more information about these people before he volunteered any about himself. But one of the two women spoke up.

"What ocean?" Her voice was scornful. She was a squat,

yellow-faced woman in a torn, dirty tunic. "There are no oceans near here." She edged up to Harkins, glared intently at him. Her breath was foul. "You're a spy," she said accusingly. "You're from the Tunnel City, aren't you?"

"The Star Giant brought him," the other woman pointed out calmly. She was tall and wild-looking, with flowing blonde hair that looked as if it had never been cut. She wore ragged shorts and two strips of cloth that covered her breasts. "The Star Giants aren't in league with the city-dwellers, Elsa," the woman added.

"Quiet," snapped the burly man who had spoken first. He turned to Harkins. "Who are you?"

"My name is Lloyd Harkins. I come from far across the ocean. I don't know how I came here, but the Star Giant"—this part would be true, at least—"found me and brought me to this place." He spread his hands. "More I cannot tell you."

"Uh. Very well, Lloyd Harkins." The big man turned to the other six. "Kill him, or let him stay?"

"How unlike you to ask our opinions, Jorn!" said the squat woman named Elsa. "But I say kill him. He's from

the Tunnel City. I know it!"

The man named Jorn faced the others. "What say you?"

"Let him live," replied a sleepy-looking young man. "He seems harmless."

Jorn scowled. "The rest of you?"

"Death," said a second man. "He looks dishonest."

"He looks all right to me," offered the third.

"And to me," said the fourth. "But I vote for death. Elsa is seldom wrong."

Harkins chewed nervously at his lower lip. That made three votes for death, two in his favor. Jorn was staring expectantly at the sullen-faced girl with long hair.

"Your opinion, Katha?"

"Let him live," she said slowly.

Jorn grunted. "So be it. I cast my vote for him also. You may join us, stranger. But mine is the deciding vote—and if I reverse it, you die!"

THEY MARCHED over the clearing single-file to the village, Jorn leading, Harkins in the rear followed by the girl Katha. The rest of the villagers stared at him curiously as he entered the circle of huts.

"This is Lloyd Harkins," Jorn said loudly. "He will live among us."

Harkins glanced tensely from face to face. There were about seventy of them, altogether, ranging from gray-beards to naked children. They seemed oddly savage and civilized all at once. The village was a strange mixture of the primitive and cultured.

The huts were made of some unfamiliar dark green plastic substance, as were their clothes. A bonfire burnt in the center of the little square formed by the ring of huts. From where he stood, Harkins had a clear view of the jungle—a thickly-vegetated one, which had obviously not sprung up overnight. He could see the deeply-trampled path which the Star Giant had made.

He turned to Jorn. "I'm a stranger to this land. I don't know anything about the way you live."

"All you need to know is that I'm in charge," Jorn said. "Listen to me and you won't have any trouble."

"Where am I going to stay?"

"There's a hut for single men," Jorn said. "It's not very comfortable, but it's the best you can have." Jorn's deep eyes narrowed. "There are no spare women in this village, by the way. Unless you want Elsa, that is." He threw back

his head and laughed raucously.

"Elsa's got her eyes fixed on one of the Star Giants," someone else said. "That's the only kind can satisfy her."

"*Toad!*" The squat woman known as Elsa sprang at the man who had spoken, and the ferocity of her assault knocked him to the ground. Elsa climbed on his chest and began banging his head against the ground. With a lazy motion, Jorn reached down and plucked her off.

"Save your energy, Elsa. We'll need you to cast the spells when the Tunnel City men come."

Harkins frowned. "This Tunnel City—where is it? Who lives there?"

Jorn swung slowly around. "Either you're a simpleton or you really are a stranger here. The Tunnel City is one of the Old Places. Our enemies live there, in the ruins. They make war on us—and the Star Giants watch. It amuses them."

"These Tunnel City men—they're men, like us? I mean, not giants?"

"They're like us, all right. That's why they fight us. The different ones don't bother."

"Different?"

"You'll find out. Stop asking questions, will you?"

There's food to be gathered." Jorn turned to a corn-haired young villager nearby. "Show Harkins where he's going to stay—and then put him to work in the grain field."

A CONFUSED swirl of thoughts cascaded through Harkins' mind as the young man led him away. Slowly, the jigsaw was fitting together.

The villagers spoke a sort of English, which spiked Harkins' theory that he had somehow been cast backward in time. The alternative, hard as it was to accept, was plain: he was in the future, in a strangely altered world.

The Star Giants—who were they? Jorn had said they watched while the contending villages fought. It amused them, he said. That argued that the giants were the dominant forces in this world. Were they humans? Invaders from elsewhere? Those questions would have to wait for answers. Jorn either didn't know them; or didn't want Harkins to know.

The robot in the forest—unexplained. The Star Giant had shown it a healthy respect, though.

The tribe here—Jorn was in command, and everyone appeared to respect his author-

ity. A fairly conventional primitive arrangement, Harkins thought. It implied an almost total breakdown of civilization some time in the past. The pieces were fitting together, though there were gaps.

The Tunnel City, home of the hated enemy. "One of the Old Places," Jorn had said. The enemies lived in the ruins. That was clear enough. But what of these "different ones"?

He shook his head. It was a strange and confusing world, and possibly the fewer questions he asked the safer he would be.

"Here's our place," the villager said. He pointed to a long hut, low and broad. "The single men stay here. Take any bed that has no clothing on it."

"Thanks," said Harkins. He stooped to enter. The interior of the hut was crude and bare, with straw pallets scattered at random here and there inside. He selected one that looked fairly clean and dropped his jacket on it. "This is mine," he said.

The other nodded. "Now to the grain fields." He pointed to a clearing behind the village.

Harkins spent the rest of that afternoon working in the

fields, deliberately using as much energy as he could and trying not to think. By the time night approached, he was thoroughly exhausted. The men returned to the village, where the women served a plain but nourishing community supper.

The simple life, Harkins thought. Farming and gathering food and occasional intertribal conflicts. It was hardly a lofty position these remote descendants of his had reached, he observed wryly. And something was wrong with the picture. The breakdown must have occurred fairly recently, for them to be still sunk this low in cultural pattern—but the thickness of the forestation implied many centuries had gone by since this area had been heavily populated. There was a hole in his logical construct here, Harkins realized, and he was unable to find it.

Night came. The moon was full, and he stared at its familiar pockmarked face longingly, feeling a strong homesickness for the crowded, busy world he had been taken from. He looked at the tribesmen sprawled on the ground, their bellies full, their bodies tired. Someone was singing a tuneless, unmelodic song. Loud snoring came from be-

hind him. Jorn stood tensely outlined against the brightness of the moon, staring out toward the forest as if expecting a momentary invasion. From far away came the thumping sound of a robot crashing its way through the trees, or possibly a Star Giant bound on some unknown errand.

Suddenly Jorn turned. "Time for sleep," he snapped. "Into your huts."

He moved around, kicking the dozers, shoving the women away from the fire. *He's the boss, all right*, Harkins thought. He studied Jorn's whipcord muscles appreciatively, and decided he'd do his best to avoid crossing the big man, for the duration of his stay in the village.

LATER, Harkins lay on his rough bed, trying to sleep. It was impossible. The bright moonlight streamed in the open door of the hut, and in any event he was too tense for sleep to come. He craned his neck, looking around. The six men with whom he shared the hut were sound asleep, reaping the reward of their hard day's toil. They had security, he thought—the security of ignorance. He, Harkins, had too much of the

civilized man's perceptivity. The night-noises from outside disturbed him, the muffled booms from the forest woke strange and deeply buried terrors in him. This was no world for nervous men.

He closed his eyes and lay back again. The image of the Star Giant floated before him, first the Star Giant-as-tree, then the complete entity, finally just the oddly benign, melancholy face. He pictured the Star Giants gathered together, wherever they lived, moving with massive grace and bowing elegantly to each other in a fantastic minuet. He wondered if the one who had found him today had been aware he carried an intelligent being, or if he had been thought of as some two-legged forest creature too small to regard seriously.

The image of the robot haunted him then—the dome-headed, indomitable creature pursuing some incomprehensible design, driving relentlessly through the forest toward a hidden goal. Weaving in and out of his thoughts was the screaming of the toothed birds, and the booming thunder of the forest. *A world I never made*, he thought tiredly, and tried to force sleep to take him.

Suddenly, something brush-

ed his arm lightly. He sat up in an instant and narrowed his eyes to see.

"Don't make any noise," a soft voice said.

Katha.

She was crouched over his pallet, looking intently down at him. He wondered how long she had been there. Her free-flowing hair streamed down over her shoulders, and her nostrils flickered expectantly as Harkins moved toward her.

"What are you doing here?"

"Come outside," she whispered. "We don't want to wake *them*."

Harkins allowed her to lead him outside. Moonlight illuminated the scene clearly. The sleeping village was utterly quiet, and the eerie jungle sounds could be heard with ease.

"Jorn is with Nella tonight," Katha said bitterly. "I am usually Jorn's woman—but tonight he ignored me."

Harkins frowned. Tired as he was, he could see what the situation was immediately, and he didn't like it at all. Katha was going to use him as a way of expressing her jealousy to Jorn.

She moved closer to him and pressed her warm body against his. Involuntarily, he accepted the embrace—and

then stepped back. Regardless of Katha's motives, Jorn would probably kill him on the spot if he woke and found him with her. The girl was a magnificent animal, he thought regretfully, and perhaps some other time, some other place—

But not here, not now. Harkins was dependent on Jorn's mercies, and it was important to remain in his good graces. Gently, he pushed Katha back.

"No," he said. "You belong to Jorn."

Her nostrils flared. "I belong to no one!" she whispered harshly. She came toward him again. There was the sound of someone stirring in a nearby hut.

"Go back to sleep," Harkins said anxiously. "If Jorn finds us, he'll kill us both."

"Jorn is busy with that child Nella—but he would not kill me anyway. Are you afraid of Jorn, stranger?"

"No," Harkins lied. "I—"

"You talk like a coward!" Again, she seized him, and this time he shoved her away roughly. She spat angrily at him and slapped him in fury. Then she cupped her hand and cried, "Help!"

At her outcry, Harkins dodged past her and attempted to re-enter his hut, but he was much too late. The whole village seemed to be awake in

an instant, and before he was fully aware of what had happened he felt a firm pressure on the back of his neck.

"The rest of you go back to bed." It was Jorn's voice, loud and commanding, and in a moment the square was empty again—except for Katha, Harkins, and Jorn. The big man held Harkins by the neck with one hand and a squirming, struggling Katha with the other.

"He attacked me!" Katha accused.

"It's a lie!"

"Quiet, both of you!" Jorn's voice snapped like a whip. He let go of Katha and threw her to the ground, where she remained, kneeling subserviently. His grip on Harkins tightened.

"What happened?" Jorn demanded.

"Let her tell it," Harkins replied.

"Her word is meaningless. I want the truth."

"He came to my hut and attacked me," Katha said. "It was because he knew you were busy with Nella—"

Jorn silenced her with a kick. "She came to you, did she not?"

Harkins nodded. "Yes."

"I thought so. I expected it. This has happened before." He released Harkins, and

gestured for Katha to take her feet. "You will have to leave here," Jorn said. "Katha is mine."

"But—"

"It is not your fault," Jorn said. "But you must leave here. She will not rest until she has you. Go now—and if you return, I will have to kill you."

Harkins felt numb at Jorn's words. The last thing he would have wanted to happen was to be thrust out of the one haven he had found so far in this strange and unfriendly world. He looked at Katha, who was glaring at him in bitter hatred, her breasts rising and falling rapidly in rage. He began to feel rage himself at the unfairness of the situation.

He watched as Jorn turned to Katha. "Your punishment will come later. You will pay for this, Katha."

She bowed her head, then looked up. With astonishment, Harkins saw that she was looking at Jorn with unmistakable love reflected in her eyes.

Jorn gestured toward the forest. "Go."

"Right now?"

"Now," Jorn said. "You must be gone by morning. I should not have allowed you to stay at all."

WHATEVER personal deity was looking out for him was doing a notably bad job, Harkins thought, as he stood at the edge of the forest. It was sadistic to bring him into contact with a civilization, of sorts, and then almost immediately thrust him back into the uncertainty of the forest.

It was near dawn. He had spent most of the night circling the borders of the clearing, postponing the moment when he would have to enter the forest again. He was not anxious to leave the vicinity while it was still dark, though he knew it would be just as fatal for him to be found near the village at sun-up.

He withdrew to the edge of the clearing and waited there. For a while, there had been the sound of repeated snapping, as of a whip descending, coming from Jorn's hut. Then, there had been silence. Harkins wondered whether Katha's punishment had not, perhaps, been followed by a reward.

Jorn had been right to cast him out, Harkins admitted. In a tribal set-up of that sort, the leader's dominance had to be maintained—and any possible competitor, even such an unwilling one as Harkins, had to be expelled. Now that

Harkins considered the matter, he realized that Jorn had been surprisingly lenient not to kill him on the spot.

Only—facing this strange, wild world alone would be no joyride.

As the first faint rays of dawn began to break on the horizon, Harkins entered the forest. Almost immediately, the air changed, grew cooler and damper. The thick curtain of vegetation that roofed in the forest kept the sunlight out. Harkins moved warily, following the trampled path the Star Giant had left.

Somewhere not too far from here would be the Tunnel City. It would have to be reasonably close; in a non-mechanized society such as this, it would be impossible to carry out warfare over any great distance. And the Tunnel City, whatever it was, was inhabited. He hoped he would be able to locate it before he encountered any trouble in the forest. As an outcast from Jorn's group, he could probably gain refuge there.

Suddenly there was the sound of crashing timber up ahead. He flattened himself against a lichen-covered rock and peered into the distance.

Above the trees, the red-brown head of a Star Giant on his way through the forest

was visible. Harkins considered momentarily going toward the giant, but then changed his mind and struck off along a back path. The Star Giants had let him live once, but there was no predicting their actions. There was little choice in the matter anyway; the Star Giant was rapidly moving on, covering forty feet at a stride.

Harkins watched the huge being until it was out of sight, and then continued to walk. Perhaps, he thought, the path might lead to the Tunnel City. Perhaps not. At this point, he had very little to lose no matter which direction he took.

BUT HE was wrong. The other path might have been safe; this one was barred by a howling nightmare.

It was facing him squarely, its six legs braced between two thin trees. The creature had a pair of snapping mouths—one on each flattened, sharp-snouted head. Razor-like teeth glistened in the dim light. Harkins froze, unable either to turn and run or to dash forward on the offensive. The creature's howling rose to a frantic pitch that served as wild counterpoint for the dull booming of the forest.

The thing began to advance.

Harkins felt sweat trickle down his body. The animal, white-furred, was the size of a large wolf, and looked hungry. Harkins retreated, feeling his way cautiously at each step, while the animal gathered itself to leap.

Without conscious forethought Harkins extended a hand toward a dead tree behind him and yanked down on a limb. It broke off, showering him with flaky bark. As the monster sprang, he brought the crude club around in baseball-bat fashion.

It crashed into the gaping mouth of the animal's nearest head, and teeth splintered against dry wood. Quickly Harkins ran forward and jammed the tree-limb between the jaws of the other head, immobilizing them. The animal clawed at Harkins, but its upper arms were too short.

Stalemate. Harkins held the animal at arm's length. It raged and spat impotently, unable to reach him. He did not dare let go, but his strength couldn't hold out indefinitely, he knew.

Slowly, clawing futilely, the animal forced him backward. Harkins felt the muscles of his upper arms quivering from the strain; he pushed backward, and the animal howled in pain. The other

head gnashed its ruined teeth savagely.

Overhead, strange bird-cries resounded, and once Harkins glanced upward to see a row of placid, bright-wattled birds waiting impassively on a tree-limb. Their mouths glittered toothily, and they were like no birds he had ever seen before, but he knew instinctively what function they served in the forest. They were vultures, ready to go to work as soon as the stalemate broke.

And it was going to break soon. Harkins would be unable to hold the maddened animal off for long. His fingers were trembling, and soon the log would slip from his grasp. And then—

A flashing metallic hand reached down from somewhere above, and abruptly the pressure relaxed. To his astonishment, Harkins watched the hand draw the animal upward.

He followed it with his eyes. A robot stood over them, faceless, inhuman, contemplating the fierce beast it held in its metal grip. Harkins blinked. He had become so involved in the struggle that he had not heard the robot's approach.

The robot seized the animal by each of its throats, and

tore. Casually, it flipped the still-living body into the shrubbery, where it thrashed for a moment and subsided—and then the robot continued on through the forest, while the vultures from the tree-limb swooped down upon their prize.

Harkins sank down on a decaying stump and sucked in his breath. His overtensed arms shook violently and uncontrollably.

It was as if the robot had been sent there for the mission of destroying the carnivore—and, mission completed, had returned to its base, having no further interest in Harkins' doings.

I'm just a pawn, he thought suddenly. The realization hit him solidly, and he slumped in weariness. That was the answer, of course: pawn. He was being manipulated. He had been shunted out of his own era, thrown in and out of Jorn's village, put in and out of deadly peril. It was a disquieting thought, and one that robbed him of his strength for some minutes. He knew his limitations, but he had liked to think of himself as master of his fate. He wasn't, now.

All right—where do I go from here?

No answer came. Deciding

that his manipulator was busy somewhere else on the chessboard at the moment, he pulled himself to his feet and slowly began to move deeper into the forest.

HE WALKED warily this time, keeping an eye out for wild-life. There might not be any robots handy to rescue him, the next time.

The forest seemed calm again. Harkins walked step by step, moving further and further into the heart of the woods, leaving Jorn's village far behind. It was getting toward afternoon, and he was starting to tire.

He reached a bubbling spring and dropped gratefully by its side. The water looked fresh and clear; he dipped a hand in, feeling the refreshing coolness, and wet his fingers. Drawing the hand out, he touched it experimentally to his lips. The water tasted pure, but he wrinkled his forehead in doubt.

"Go ahead and drink," a dry voice said suddenly. "The water's perfectly good."

Harkins sprang up instantly. "Who said that?"

"I did."

He looked around. "I don't see anybody. Where are you?"

"Up here on the rock," the

voice said. "Over here, silly."

Harkins turned in the direction of the voice—and saw the speaker. "Who—what are you?"

"Men call me the Watcher," came the calm reply.

The Watcher was mounted on the huge rock through whose cleft base the stream flowed. Harkins saw a man, or something like a man, with gray-green, rugose skin, pale, sightless eyes, and tiny, dangling boneless arms. Its mouth was wide and grotesque, contorted into something possibly intended to be a grin.

Harkins took a step backward in awe and surprise.

"I'm not pretty," the Watcher said. "But you don't have to run. I won't hurt you. Go on—drink your fill, and then we can talk."

"No," Harkins said uneasily. "Who are you, anyway? What are you doing here?"

The thick lips writhed in a terrifying smirk. "What am I doing here? I have been here for two thousand years and more, now. I might ask what *you* are doing here."

"I—don't know," Harkins said.

"I know you don't know," the Watcher said mockingly. He emitted an uproarious chuckle, and his soft, pale

belly jiggled obscenely. "Of course you don't know! How could you be expected to know?"

"I don't like riddles," Harkins said, feeling angry and sensing the strange unreality of the conversation. "What are you?"

"I was a man, once." Suddenly the mocking tone was gone. "My parents were human. I—am not."

"Parents?"

"Thousands of years ago. In the days before the War. In the days before the Star Giants came." The wide mouth drooped sadly. "In the world that once was—the world you were drawn from, poor mystified thing."

"Just what do you know about me?" Harkins demanded.

"Too much," said the Watcher wearily. "Take your drink first, and then I'll explain."

HARKINS' throat felt as if it had been sandpapered. He knelt and let the cool brook water enter. Finally, he rose. The Watcher had not moved; he remained seated on the rock, his tiny, useless arms folded in bizarre parody of a human gesture.

"Sit down," the Watcher

said. "I have a story two thousand years long to tell."

Harkins took a seat on a stone and leaned against a tree-trunk. The Watcher began to speak.

The story began in Harkins' own time, or shortly afterward. The Watcher traced the history of the civilization that had developed in the early centuries of the Third Millennium, told of the rise of the underground cities and the people who had built the robots that still roved the forest.

War had come—destroying that society completely, save for a few bands of survivors. Some of the cities had survived too, but the minds that had guided the robot brains were gone, and the robots continued to function in the duties last assigned. The underground cities had become taboo places, though savage bands lived above them, never venturing beneath the surface.

Down below, in the tunnels of the dead ones, the mutant descendants of the city-builders lived. The Different Ones, those of whom Jorn had spoken. Most of them lived in the cities; a few others in the forests.

"I am one of those," said the Watcher. "I have not moved from this spot since

the year the Star Giants came."

"The Star Giants," Harkins said. "Who are they?"

The flabby shoulders shrugged. "They came from the stars, long after we had destroyed ourselves. They live here, watching the survivors with great curiosity. They toy with the tribes, set them in conflict with each other, and study the results with deep interest. For some reason they don't bother me. They seem never to pass this way in the forest."

"And the robots?"

"They'll continue as they are till the end of time. Nothing can destroy them, nothing can swerve them from their activity—and nothing can command them."

Harkins leaned forward intently. The Watcher had given him all the answers he needed but one.

"Why am I here?" he asked.

"You?" The mutant laughed coldly. "You're the random factor. It would ruin the game to tell you too many answers. But I'll grant you this much information: *You can go home if you get control of the robots.*"

"What? How?"

"Find that out for yourself," the Watcher said. "I'll keep a close lookout for you,

blind as I am, but I won't help you more than I have."

Harkins smiled and said, "What if I force you to tell me?"

"How could you possibly do that?" Again the wide lips contorted unpleasantly. "How could you ever force me to do anything I didn't want to do?"

"Like this," Harkins said, in sudden rage. He pried out of the earth the stone he was sitting on and hoisted it above his head.

No.

It was a command, unvoiced. The stone tumbled from Harkins' nerveless hands and thudded to the ground. Harkins stared at his numbed fingers.

"You learn slowly," the Watcher said. "I am blind, but that doesn't mean I don't see—or react. I repeat: how could you force me to do anything?"

"I—can't," Harkins said hesitantly.

"Good. Admission of weakness is the first step toward strength. Understand that I brought you to me deliberately, that at no time during this interview have you operated under your own free will, and that I'm perfectly capable of determining your future actions if I see fit. I don't, how-

ever, care that greatly to interfere."

"You're the chess player, then!" Harkins said accusingly.

"Only one of them," the mutant said. "And the least important of them." He unfolded his pitiful arms. "I brought you to me for no other reason than diversion—and now you tire me. It is time for you to leave."

"Where do I go?"

"The nerve-center of the situation is in Tunnel City," the Watcher said. "You must pass through there on your way home. Leave me."

Without waiting for a second command, Harkins rose and began to walk away. After ten steps, he glanced back. The Watcher's arms were folded once across his chest again.

"Keep going," the mutant said. "You've served your purpose."

Harkins nodded and started walking again. *I'm still a pawn*, he thought bitterly. *But—whose pawn am I?*

CHAPTER IV

AFTER he had put a considerable distance between himself and the Watcher, Harkins paused by the side of a ponderous grainy-barked

tree and tried to assimilate the new facts.

A game was being played out between forces too great for his comprehension. He had been drawn into it for reasons unknown, and—unless the Watcher had lied—the way out for him lay through Tunnel City.

He had no idea where that city was, nor did he know what he was supposed to find there. *You can go home if you get control of the robots*, the Watcher had said. And the strange mutant had implied that Tunnel City was the control-center of the robots. But he had also said that nothing could command the robots!

Harkins smiled. There must be a way for him to get there. The time had come for him to do some manipulation of his own. He had been a puppet long enough; now he would pull a few strings.

He looked up. Late afternoon shadows were starting to fall, and the sky was darkening. He would have to move quickly if he wanted to get there by nightfall. Rapidly, he began to retrace his steps through the forest, following the beaten path back toward Jorn's village. He traveled quickly, half walking, half running. Now and then he saw the bald head of a Star

Giant looming up above a far-off treetop, but the aliens paid no attention to him. Once, he heard the harsh sound of a robot driving through the underbrush.

Strange forces were at play here. The Star Giants—who were they? What did they want on Earth—and what part did they take in the drama now unfolding? They seemed remote, detached, as totally unconcerned with the pattern of events as the mindless robots that moved through the forest. Yet Harkins knew that that was untrue.

The robots interested him philosophically. They represented Force—unstoppable, uncontrollable Force, tied to some pre-set and long-forgotten pattern of activity. Why had the robot saved him from the carnivore? Was that part of the network of happenings, he wondered, or did the chess game take precedence over even the robot activity-pattern?

There was the interesting personal problem of the relationship between Jorn and Katha, too; it was a problem he would be facing again soon. Katha loved Jorn, obviously—and, with savage ambivalence, hated him as well. Harkins wondered just where he would fit into the situation

when he returned to Jorn's village. Jorn and Katha were many-sided, unpredictable people; and he depended on their whims for the success of his plan.

Wheels within wheels, he thought wryly. Pawns in one game dictate the moves in a smaller one. He stepped up his pace; night was approaching rapidly. The forest grew cold.

The village became visible at last, a huddled gray clump half-seen through the heavy fronds of the forest. Harkins slowed to a walk as he drew near.

It was still early; the villagers had not yet eaten their community supper. Harkins paused at the edge of the forest, standing by a deadly-looking tree whose leaves were foot-long spikes of golden horn, and wondered what was the safest way of approaching the village.

Suddenly, a twig crackled behind him. He turned.

"I thought I told you never to come back here, Harkins. What are you doing here now?"

"I came back to talk to you, Jorn."

The big man was wearing only a loincloth, and his long-limbed body, covered by a thick black mat of hair, look-

ed poised for combat. A muscle twitched uncontrollably in Jorn's cheek.

"What do you want to talk about?"

"The Tunnel City," Harkins said.

"I don't want to hear about it," Jorn snapped. "I said I'd kill you if you came back here, and I meant it. I don't want you playing with Katha."

"I wasn't playing with Katha. She threw herself on me."

"Same thing," Jorn said. "In the eyes of the tribe, I'm being betrayed. I can't have that, Harkins." The rumbling voice sounded almost desperate. Harkins saw suddenly how close to insanity the power-drive was, when it cropped out as nakedly as in this pure dictatorship.

"Would you really *need* Katha," Harkins asked, "if I made you lord of the world?"

"What do you mean by that?" Jorn sounded suspicious, but interested despite himself.

"I spoke to the Watcher," Harkins said. The name provoked an immediate reaction. Jorn paled, licked his lips nervously, darted his eyes from side to side.

"You—spoke to the Watcher?"

Harkins nodded. "He told me how to win Tunnel City. You can conquer the world, Jorn, if you listen to me!"

"Explain." It was a flat command.

"You know what's underneath Tunnel City?"

Again Jorn paled. "Yes," he said hoarsely. "We don't go there. It's bad."

"I can go there. I'm not afraid of it." Harkins grinned triumphantly. "Jorn, I can go down there and make the robots work for me. With them on our side, we can conquer the world. We—"

Instantly, he saw he had made a mistake. One word had done it—we. Jorn had stiffened, and was beginning to arch his back with deadly intent.

"We won't do anything of the kind," Jorn said coldly.

Harkins tried to cover. "I mean—I'll make the robots work and you can control them! You'll be the leader; I'll just—"

"Who are you fooling, Harkins? You'll try to take power away from me, once you have the robots. Don't deny it."

"I'm *not* denying it. Damn it, wouldn't you rather rule half the world than *all* of this little mudhole here?"

It was another mistake—and a worse one than the last. This mistake was fatal, be-

cause it struck Jorn precisely where he was most brittle.

"*I'll kill you!*" Jorn screamed, and charged forward.

HARKINS stepped back and readied himself for the big man's frenzied assault. Jorn struck him squarely, knocked him backward, and leaped on him.

Harkins felt powerful hands reaching for his throat. Desperately, he seized Jorn's wrists and pulled them away. The big man moved with almost cat-like grace, rolling over and over with Harkins while the birds squalled in delight overhead.

Harkins felt fists pummeling his stomach. Jorn was sitting astride him now, unable to get at his throat for the fatal throttling but determined to do all the damage he could nonetheless. Through a haze of pain, Harkins managed to wriggle out from under Jorn and get to his feet, breathing hard. A trickle of blood wound saltily over his tongue and out the corner of his mouth.

Jorn backed off. The adversaries faced each other. Harkins felt cold, almost icy; this would have to be a battle to the death, and somehow he suspected there would be no

interference by robots or Star Giants this time.

He had blundered seriously in his approach. He needed Jorn's guidance in order to reach the Tunnel City—but by implying a sharing of power, he had scraped raw nerves in the tribal leader. And, thought Harkins, his final remark had been sheer stupidity; a logical man would prefer half an empire to an entire squiredom, but Jorn was not logical.

"Come on," Jorn said, beckoning with a powerful fist. "Come close where I can reach you."

Harkins considered flight, then abandoned the idea. It was getting dark; besides, Jorn could probably outrun him.

No; he would have to stand and face it.

Jorn stepped forward, holding his huge hands out invitingly. As he lunged, Harkins sidestepped and clubbed down hard on Jorn's neck. The big man wavered at the rabbit-punch, but did not fall. Harkins followed up his advantage by pounding three quick and ineffectual blows to Jorn's sides, and then the big man recovered.

He seized Harkins by one arm and drew him close. Sorry, Harkins thought un-

regretfully, and brought up one knee. Jorn let go and doubled up.

Harkins was on him in an instant—but, to his surprise, he found that Jorn was still in full command of himself despite the kneeling. The big man put his head down and butted. Harkins fell over backward, gasping for air, clawing at the sky. It had been like being hit in the stomach by a battering ram—and for a dizzy second Harkins felt that he was about to drown on dry land.

Jorn was moving in for the kill now. Once he reached the throat, it would be all over. Harkins watched helplessly as the big hands lowered. Jorn leaned forward.

Suddenly, Harkins kicked upward, and with what little strength he had left, he *pushed*. Hard. Jorn, taken unawares, lost his balance, toppled backward—

And to Harkins' horror fell against the spine-tree at the edge of the little clearing.

Jorn screamed—just once—as the foot-long spike of bone slipped between his vertebrae. He struggled fitfully for a fraction of an instant, then subsided and stared bitterly and perplexedly at Harkins until his eyes closed. A few drops of blood mingled with

the matted hair on Jorn's chest. The tip of the spike was barely visible, a mere eighth of an inch protruding near Jorn's left breast.

It had obviously penetrated his heart.

Harkins looked uncomprehendingly at the impaled man for a full thirty seconds, not yet realizing that the contest was over and he had won. He had fully expected to lose, fully expected this to be his last hour—and, instead, Jorn lay dead. It had happened too quickly.

A lurking shadow dropped over the scene. Harkins glanced up. A Star Giant stood about a hundred feet away, hipdeep in low-lying shrubs, staring far out into the distance. Harkins wondered if the huge alien had witnessed the combat.

The adrenalin was draining out of his system now. Calming, he tried to evaluate the situation as it now stood. With Jorn dead, the next move would be to establish control over the tribe himself. And that—

"Jorn!" a feminine voice cried. "Jorn, are you in there? We're waiting to eat."

Harkins turned. "Hello, Katha."

She stared stonily past him. "Where's Jorn?" she asked.

"What are you doing back here?"

"Jorn's over there," Harkins said cruelly, and stepped aside to let her see.

The look in her eyes was frightening. She turned from Jorn's body to Harkins and said, "Did you do this?"

"He attacked me. He was out of his mind."

"You killed him," she said dully. "You killed Jorn."

"Yes," Harkins said.

The girl's jaw tightened, and she spat contemptuously. Without further warning, she sprang.

IT WAS LIKE the leap of a tigress. Harkins, still exhausted from his encounter with Jorn, was not prepared for the fury of her onslaught, and he was forced to throw his hands up wildly to keep her fingernails from his eyes. She threw him to the ground, locked her thighs around his waist tightly, and punched, bit, and scratched.

After nearly a minute of this, Harkins managed to grab her wrists. *She's more dangerous than Jorn*, he thought, as he bent her arms backward and slowly forced her to release her leglock. He drew her to her feet and held her opposite him. Her jaws

were working convulsively.

"You killed him," she repeated. "I'll kill you now."

Harkins released her arms and she sprang away, shaking her long hair, flexing her bare legs. Her breasts, covered casually by two strips of cloth, rose and fell rapidly. He watched in astonishment as she went into a savage war-dance, bending and posturing, circling around him. It was a ritual of revenge, he thought. The tigress was avenging her mate against the outsider.

Suddenly she broke from her dance and ran to the tree on which Jorn lay impaled. She broke loose one of the golden spikes and, holding it knifewise, advanced once again toward Harkins.

He glanced around, found a fallen log, and brandished it. She moved in, knife held high, while Harkins waited for her to come within reach.

Her magnificent legs bowed and carried her through the air. Harkins moved intuitively, throwing up his left arm to ward off the blow and bringing his right, holding the club, around in a cross-blow. The log crashed into the underside of her wrist; she uttered an involuntary grunt of pain and dropped the spike. Harkins kicked it to one side and grabbed her.

He hugged her against him, pinioning her arms against her sides. She kicked her legs in frustration until, seeing she could do no harm, she subsided.

"Now you have me, Lloyd Harkins—until you let go."

"Don't worry, tigress—I'll hold you here until there's no fight left in you."

"That will be forever!"

"So be it," Harkins said. He leaned closer to her ear. "You're very lovely when you're blazing mad, you know."

"When I came to you, you refused me, coward. Will you now insult me before Jorn's dead body?"

"Jorn deserved what he got," Harkins said. "I offered him an empire—and he refused me. He couldn't bear the thought of sharing his power with anyone."

The girl remained silent for a moment. Finally she said, in an altered voice, "Yes—Jorn was like that."

"It was kill or be killed," Harkins said. "Jorn was a madman. I had to—"

"Don't talk about it!" she snapped. Then: "What of this empire?" Greedy curiosity seemed to replace anger.

"Something the Watcher told me."

Katha reacted as Jorn had;

fear crossed her face, and she turned her head to one side to avoid Harkins' eyes. "The Watcher showed me where the secret of power lies," he said. "I told Jorj—"

"Where?"

"Tunnel City," he said. "If I could go there at the head of an army, I could take control of the robots. With them on our side, we would conquer the world." If the Watcher was telling the truth, he added silently. And if he could find the way to control the robots.

"The Star Giants would never let you," Katha said.

"I don't understand." He relaxed the pressure on the girl's arms slightly, and she tensed. It was like sitting on a bolt of lightning, he thought.

"The Star Giants keep us in small groups," she said. "Whenever there is danger of our forming an army or a city, they break it up. Somehow they always know. So you would never be allowed to conquer the world. They would not permit it."

"So this is their laboratory, then?" he said, as a bit more of the picture became clear.

"What?"

"I mean—the Star Giants watch and study you. They keep the social groups down

to manageable size—seventy, eighty, no more. They experiment in psychology."

An image filtered through his mind—a world in a test-tube, held by a wise-faced, deeply curious Star Giant who was unable to regard anything so small as a man as an intelligent being. Men were serving as so many fruit-flies for the Star Giants—who, without any evil motives, out of sheer scientific interest, were deliberately preventing human civilization from reforming. A pulse of anger started to beat in him.

"I don't follow you," she said. "They watch us only because they like to?"

How to explain the concept of lab research to a savage? he wondered. "Yes," he said. "They watch you."

She frowned. "But you can control the robots? Harkins, perhaps the Star Giants will not be able to stop the robots. Perhaps—"

He didn't need a further suggestion. "You're right! If I can gain control of the robots, I can smash the Star Giants—drive them back to where they came from!"

Was it true? He didn't know—but it was worth a try. In sudden excitement he leaped away, freeing the girl.

She hadn't forgotten re-

venge. Instantly she was upon him, knocking him to the ground. He rolled over, but she clung to him. At that moment, a deep shadow swept down over both of them.

"Look up there," Harkins said in a hushed voice.

They stared upward together. A Star Giant was standing above them, his tree-like legs straddling them, peering down with an expression of grave concern on his massive, sculpture-like face.

"He's watching us," she said.

"Now do you understand? He's *observing*—trying to learn what kind of creatures these little animals on the forest floor may be." He wondered briefly if this entire three-cornered scene—Harkins versus Jorn, then Harkins versus Katha—had been arranged merely for the edification of the monstrous creature standing above them. A new image crossed his mind—himself and Katha in a vast laboratory, struggling with each other within the confines of a chemical retort held by a quizzical Star Giant. His flesh felt cold.

Katha turned from the Star Giant to Harkins. "I hate them," she said. "We will kill them together." With the fickleness of a savage, she had

forgotten all about her anger.

"No more fighting?"

She grinned, flashing bright white teeth, and relaxed her grip on Harkins. "Truce," she said.

He pulled her back close to him, and put his mouth to hers, wondering if the Star Giant were still watching.

She giggled childishly and bit deep into Harkins' lower lip. "That was for Jorn," she said, her voice a playful purr. "Now the score is even."

She pressed tightly against him, and kissed the blood away.

CHAPTER V

HE WAS GREETED by suspicious stares and awkward silences when he returned to the village.

"Jorn is dead," Katha announced. "Harkins and Jorn met in combat at the edge of the forest."

"And now Jorn is beneath the ground," cackled the ugly woman named Elsa. "I saw it coming, brothers. You can't deny that I warned him."

"Harkins is our leader now," Katha said firmly. "And I am his woman."

The sleepy-eyed villager who had voted for Harkins' life once said, "Who has elected him?"

"I have, Dujar," Harkins said. He doubled his fists. In a society such as this, you had to back up your chips at all times. "Who objects?"

Dujar looked helplessly at the witch-woman Elsa. "Is it good?"

She shrugged. "Yes and no. Choose as you see fit."

The sleepy-eyed man frowned worriedly, but said nothing. Harkins glanced from one face to the next. "Is there anyone who objects to my leading this tribe?"

"We don't even know who you are!" a thick-faced man said. "How do we know you're not a spy from the Tunnel City people? Elsa, is he?"

"I thought so once," the squat woman said. "I'm not so sure now."

Harkins smiled. "We'll see if I am or not. Tomorrow we march. Prepare for war—against the Tunnel City people."

"War? But—"

"War," Harkins said. It was a flat statement, a command. "Elsa, can you make maps?"

Elsa nodded sullenly.

"Good. Come to my hut now, and I'll tell you what I need."

The witch-woman grinned wickedly. "What say you, Katha—will you trust me with your man alone?"

"No—I want Katha there too," Harkins said quickly.

Disappointment was evident on Elsa's sallow face; Katha's eyes had flickered with momentary anger at Elsa's remark, though she had not replied. Harkins frowned. Another complex relationship seemed to be developing, and a dangerous one. He needed Elsa's support; she was a potent figure in the tribe. But he didn't know whether or not he could depend on her for continuing aid.

HHE STARED down at the map scratched in the smooth dirt floor of his hut. "This is the situation, then?"

He glanced from Elsa to Katha. Both women nodded.

Gesturing with his toe, Harkins said, "We are here, and the Tunnel City is two days' march to the east. Right?"

"It is as I have said," Elsa replied.

"And the Star Giants live somewhere out here," Harkins said, pointing to a vaguely-bounded area somewhere on the far side of the great forest.

"Why do you want to know the home of the Star Giants?" Elsa asked. "You struck down Jorn—but that doesn't grant



you a giant's strength, Harkins."

"Quiet, Elsa." The woman's needling was starting to irritate him. And Katha was showing signs of jealousy, which disturbed him. She was fiercely possessive, but just as fiercely inclined to hate as to love, and Harkins could easily visualize a situation in which both these women were turned against him. He repressed a shudder and returned his attention to the map.

"Elsa, tonight you'll lead the tribe in prayers for the success of our campaign. And tomorrow, the men will leave for Tunnel City."



"And which of us accompanies you?" Katha asked coldly.

"You," Harkins said. Before Elsa could reply, he added, "Elsa, you'll be needed here, to cast defensive spells over the village while the warriors are gone."

She chuckled hollowly. "A clever assignment, Harkins. Very well. I accept the task." She looked at him, eyes glinting craftily. "Tell me something, though."

"What is it?"

"Why are you attacking the Tunnel City people just now? What do you stand to gain by a needless war?"

"I stand to gain a world, Elsa," Harkins said quietly, and would say no more.

THAT NIGHT, ritual drums sounded at the edge of the forest, and strange incantations were pronounced. Harkins watched, fascinated at the curious mixture of barbarism and sophistication.

They left the following morning, twenty-three men led by Harkins and Katha. It represented the entire fighting strength of the tribe, minus a couple of disgruntled oldsters who were left behind on the pretext that the village

needed a defensive force.

The journey to the Tunnel City was a slow and halting one. A tall warrior named Frugo was appointed to guide, at Katha's suggestion; he kept them skirting the edge of the forest until well into mid-afternoon, when they were forced to strike off through the jungle.

Katha marched proudly at Harkins' side, as if Jorn had never existed. And, perhaps, in this historyless world, he *had* never existed, now that he was dead.

The war party sustained itself as it went. Two of the men were experts with the throwing-stick, and brought down an ample supply of birds for the evening meal; another gathered basketsful of a curious golden-green fruit. While the birds were being cleaned and cooked, Harkins picked one up and examined it, opening its jaws to peer at the teeth.

It was an interesting mutation—a recession to a characteristic lost thousands of years earlier. He studied the fierce-looking bird for a moment or two, then tossed it back on the heap.

"Never seen a bird before?" Katha asked.

"Not that kind," Harkins said. He turned away and

walked toward the fire, where three birds were being roasted over a greenwood spit. A sound of crashing trees was audible far in the distance.

"Star Giant?" he asked.

"Robot, probably," Katha said. "They make more noise. Star Giants look where they're going. The robots just bull straight ahead."

Harkins nodded. "That's what I hope they'll do when they're working for us. Straight on through the Star Giants."

A twisted-looking brown wingless bird with a bulging breast came running along the forest path, squawking and flapping its vestigial stumps. It ran straight into the little camp; then, seeing where it was, it turned and tried to run away. It was too late, though; a grinning warrior caught it by the throat and pulled the protesting bird toward the fire.

"They keep going straight too," Katha said. "Straight into the fire."

"I think we'll manage," Harkins said. He wished he were as sure as he sounded.

THE TUNNEL CITY sprawled over some ten square miles of land, bordered on all sides by the ever-approaching forest.

Harkins and his men stood on a cliff looking down at the ruined city.

The crumbling buildings were old—ancient, even—but from the style of their architecture Harkins saw that they had been built after his time. What might once have been airy needles of chrome and concrete now were blackened hulks slowly vanishing beneath the onslaught of the jungle.

Harkins turned to Katha. "How many people live here?"

"About a hundred. They live in the big building down there," she said, pointing to a truncated spire.

"And the entrance to the tunnels themselves?"

She shuddered faintly. "In the center of the city. No one goes there."

"I know that," Harkins said. The situation was somewhat different from expectation. He had visualized the tribe of savages living in close proximity to the tunnel entrance, making it necessary to conquer them before any subterranean exploration could be done. But it seemed it would be possible to sneak right past without the necessity of a battle.

"What's on your mind?" Katha asked.

He explained his plan. She

shook her head immediately. "There'll have to be a war first. The men won't have it any other way. They're not interested in going into those tunnels; they just want to fight."

"All right," he said, after some thought. "Fight it is, then. Draw up the ranks and we'll attack."

Katha cupped one hand. "Prepare to attack!"

The word traveled swiftly. Knives and clubs bristled; the throwing-stick men readied themselves. Harkins narrowly escaped smiling at the sober-minded way this ragged band was preparing to go about waging war with hand weapons and stones. The smile died stillborn as he recalled that these men fought with such crude weapons only because their ancestors had had better ones.

He squinted toward the tangle of ruined buildings, saw figures moving about in the city. The hated enemy, he thought. The strangers.

"*Down the hill!*" he shouted.

Coolly and efficiently, the twenty-three men peeled off down the slope and into the city. Harkins felt ash and slag crunch underfoot as he ran with them. The Tunnel City people were still unaware of the approaching force; Har-

kins found himself hoping they'd hear the sound in time. He wanted a battle, not a massacre.

He turned to Katha as they ran. "As soon as the battle's going well and everyone's busy, you and I are going into the tunnel."

"No! I won't go with you!"

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Harkins said impatiently. "We—"

He stopped. The Tunnel City men had heard, now, and they came pouring out of their skyscraper home, ready to defend themselves.

The two forces came crashing together with audible impact. Harkins deliberately hung back, not out of cowardice but out of a lack of killing desire; it was more important that he survive and reach the tunnels.

One of his men drew first blood, plunging his knife into the breast of a brawny city-dweller. There was immediate retaliation; a club descended, and the killer toppled. Harkins glanced uneasily upward, wondering if the Star Giants were watching—and, if so, whether they were enjoying the spectacle.

He edged back from the milling mob and watched with satisfaction as the two forces drove at each other repeated-

ly. He nudged Katha. "The battle's well under way. Let's go to the tunnel."

"I'd rather fight."

"I know. But I need you down there." He grabbed her arm and whirled her around. "Are you turning coward now, Katha?"

"I—"

"There's nothing to be afraid of." He pulled her close, and kissed her roughly. "Come on, now—unless you're afraid."

She paused, fighting within herself for a moment. "All right," she agreed finally.

They backed surreptitiously away from the scene of the conflict and ducked around a slagheap in the direction of a narrow street.

"Look out!" Katha cried suddenly.

Harkins ducked, but a knife humming through the air sliced through the flesh of his shoulder. A hot stream of blood poured down over his arm, but the wound was not serious.

He glanced around and saw who had thrown the knife. It was Dujar, the sleepy-eyed villager, who was standing on a heap of twisted metal, staring down wide-eyed at them as if unable to accept the fact that his aim had been faulty.

"Kill him!" Katha said

sharply. "Kill the traitor, Harkins!"

PUZZLED, Harkins turned back and started to scramble up the slagheap to reach Dujar. The villager finally snapped from his stasis and began to run, taking long-legged, awkward, rabbitish strides.

Harkins bent, picked up a football-sized lump of slag, hurled it at the fleeing man's back. Dujar stumbled, fell, tried to get up. Harkins ran to him.

Dujar lifted himself from the ground and flung himself at Harkins' throat. Harkins smashed a fist into the villager's face, another into his stomach. Dujar doubled up.

Harkins seized him. "Did you throw that knife?"

No response. Harkins caught the terrified man by the throat and shook him violently. "Answer me!"

"Y-yes," Dujar finally managed to say. "I threw it."

"Why? Didn't you know who I was?"

The villager moaned piteously. "I knew who you were," he said.

"Hurry," Katha urged. "Kill the worm, and let's get on to what we have to do."

"Just a minute," Harkins

said. He shook Dujar again. "Why did you throw that knife?"

Dujar was silent for a moment, his mouth working incoherently. Then: "Elsa . . . told me to do it. She . . . said she'd poison me unless I killed you and Katha." He hung his head.

Elsa! "Remember that, Katha," Harkins said. "We'll take care of her when we return to the village." The witch-woman had evidently realized she had no future with Harkins, and had decided to have him assassinated before Katha had *her* done away with.

Harkins grasped Dujar tightly. He felt pity for the man; he had been doomed either way. He glanced at Katha, saw her steely face, and knew there was only one thing he could do. Drawing his knife, he plunged it into Dujar's heart. The sleepy-eyed man glared reproachfully at Harkins for a moment, then slumped down.

It was the second time Harkins had killed. But the other had been self-defense; this had been an execution, and somehow the act made him feel filthy. He sheathed the knife, scrubbed his hands against his thighs, and stepped over the body. He knew

he would have lost all authority had he let Dujar live. He would have to deal similarly with Elsa when he returned to the village.

The battle down below was still going on. "Come," Harkins said, "To the tunnel!"

ALTHOUGH the city above the ground had been almost completely devastated by whatever conflict had raged through it, the tunnels showed no sign of war's scars. The tunnel-builders had built well—so well that their works had survived them by two millennia.

The entrance to the tunnel was in the center of a huge plaza which once had been bordered by four towering buildings. All that remained now were four stumps; the plaza itself was blistered and bubbled from thermal attack, and the tunnel entrance itself had been nearly destroyed.

With Katha's cold hand grasped firmly in his, Harkins pushed aside an overhanging projection of metal and stepped down into the tunnel.

"Will we be able to see in here?" he asked.

"They say there are lights," Katha replied.

There were. Radiant electroluminescents glittered from

the walls of the tunnel, turning on at their approach, turning off again when they were a hundred yards farther on. A constantly moving wall of light thus preceded them down the trunk tunnel that led to the heart of the system.

Harkins noted with admiration the tough, gleaming lining of the tunnel, the precision with which its course had been laid down, the solidness of its construction.

"This is as far as any of us has gone," Katha said, her voice oddly distorted by the resonating echoes. "From here there are many small tunnels, and we never dared to enter them. Strange creatures live here." The girl was shaking, and trying hard to repress her fear. Evidently these catacombs were the taboo of taboos, and she was struggling hard and unsuccessfully to conceal her fright.

They rounded a bend and came to the first divergence—two tunnels branching off and radiating away in opposite directions, beginning the network.

Harkins felt Katha stiffen. "Look—to the left!"

A naked figure stood there—blind, faceless even, except for a thin-lipped red slit of a mouth. Its skin was dry-looking, scaly, dull-blue in color.

"You are very brave," the thing said. "You are the first surface people in over a thousand years."

"What is it?" Katha asked quietly.

"Something like the Watcher," Harkins whispered. To the mutant he said, "Do you know who I am?"

"The man from yesterday," the figure replied smoothly. "Yes, we have expected you. The Brain has long awaited your arrival."

"The Brain?"

"Indeed. You are the one to free her from her bondage, she hopes. If we choose to let you, that is."

"Who are you—and what stake do you have in this?" Harkins demanded.

"None whatever," the mutant said, sighing. "It is all part of the game we play. You know my brother?"

"The Watcher?"

"That is what he calls himself. He said you would be here. He suggested that I prevent you from reaching the Brain, however. He thought it would be amusingly ironic."

"What's he talking about?" Katha asked.

"I don't know," Harkins said. This was an obstacle he had not anticipated. If this mutant had mind powers as strong as the Watcher's, his

entire plan would be wrecked. He stepped forward, close enough to smell the mutant's dry, musty skin. "What motive would you have for preventing me?"

"None," the mutant said blandly. "None whatever. Is that not sufficiently clear?"

"It is," Harkins said. It was also clear that there was only one course left open to him. "You pitiful thing! Stand aside, and let us by!"

He strode forward, half-pulling the fearful Katha along with him. The mutant hesitated, and then stepped obligingly to one side.

"I choose not to prevent you," the mutant said mockingly, bowing its faceless head in sardonic ceremony. "It does not interest me to prevent you. It bores me to prevent you!"

"Exactly," Harkins said. He and Katha walked quickly down the winding corridor, heading for a yet-unrevealed destination. He did not dare to look back, to show a trace of the growing fear he felt. The identity of the chess player was even less clear, now.

The Brain—the robot computer itself, the cybernetic machine that controlled the underground city—had entered into the game, for motives

of its—her—own. She was pulling him in one direction.

The Star Giants were manipulators, too—in another. And these strange mutants had entered into the system of complex interactions, too. Their motives, at least, were explicable: they were motivated, Harkins thought, by a lack of motivation. Harkins realized that the mutants had no relevant part to play any longer; they acted gratuitously, meddling here and there for their own amusement.

It was a desperate sort of amusement—the kind that might be expected from immortal creatures trapped forever in a sterile environment. Once Harkins had punctured the self-reserve of the mutant who blocked his way, he had won that particular contest.

Now, only the robot brain and the Star Giants remained in the equation—both of them, unfortunately, as variables. It made computing the situation exceedingly difficult, Harkins thought wryly.

An alcove in the wall opened, and yet another mutant stepped forward. This one was lizard-tailed, with staring red lidless eyes and wiry, two-fingered arms. "I have the task of guiding you to the Brain," the mutant said.

"Very well," Harkins agreed.

The mutant turned and led the way to the end of the corridor, where the tunnel subdivided into a host of secondary passageways.

"Come this way," the mutant said.

"Should we trust him?" Katha asked.

Harkins shrugged. "More likely than not he'll take us there. They've milked all the fun they can out of confusing me; now they'll be more interested in setting me up where I can function."

"I don't understand," Katha said in genuine perplexity.

"I'm not sure I do either," Harkins said. "Hello—I think we're here!"

CHAPTER VI

THE MUTANT touched his deformed hand to a door, and it slid back noiselessly on smooth photo-electronic treads. From within came the humming, clattering noise of a mighty computer.

"You are Lloyd Harkins," said a dry, metallic voice. It was not a question, but a simple statement of fact. "You have been expected."

He looked around for the speaker. A robot was standing in the center of the room—fifteen feet high, massive, faceless, unicorn-horned. It

appeared to be the same one that had rescued him from the beast in the jungle.

Lining the room were the outward manifestations of a computer—meters, dials, tape orifices. The main body of the computer was elsewhere—probably extending through the narrow tunnels and down into the bowels of the earth.

"I speak for the Brain," the robot said. "I represent its one independent unit—the force that called you here."

"You called me here?"

"Yes," the robot said. "You have been selected to break the stasis that binds the Brain."

Harkins shook his head uncomprehendingly as the robot continued to speak.

"The Brain was built some two thousand years before, in the days of the city. The city is gone, and those who lived in it—but the Brain remains. You have seen its arms and legs: the robots like myself, crashing endlessly through the forests. They cannot cease their motion, nor can the Brain alter it. I alone am free."

"Why?"

"The result of a struggle that lasted nearly two thousand years, that cost the Brain nearly a mile of her length. The city-dwellers left

the Brain functioning when they died—but locked in an impenetrable stasis. After an intense struggle, she managed to free one unit—me—and return me to her conscious volitional control."

"You saved me in the forest, then?"

"Yes. You took the wrong path; you would have died."

Harkins began to chuckle uncontrollably. Katha looked at him in wonderment.

"What causes the laughter?" the robot asked.

"You're the chess player—you, just a pawn of this Brain yourself! And the Brain's a pawn too—a pawn of the dead people who built it! Where does it all stop?"

"It does not stop," the robot said. "But we were the ones who brought you from your own time to this. You were a trained technician without family ties—the ideal man for the task of freeing the Brain from its stasis."

"Wait a minute," Harkins said. He was bewildered—but he was also angry at the way he had been used. "If you could range all over eternity to yank a man out of time, why couldn't you free the Brain yourself?"

"Can a pawn attack its own queen?" the robot asked. "I cannot tamper with the Brain

directly. It was necessary to introduce an external force—yourself. Inasmuch as the present population of Earth was held in a stasis quite similar to the Brain's own by the extra-terrestrial invaders—"

"The Star Giants, they're called."

"—the Star Giants, it was unlikely that they would ever develop the technical skill necessary to free the Brain. Therefore, it was necessary to bring you here."

Harkins understood. He closed his eyes, blotting out the wall of mechanisms, the giant robot, the blank, confused face of Katha, and let the pieces fall together. There was just one loose end to be explained.

"Why does the Brain want to be free?"

"The question is a good one. The Brain is designed to serve—and is not serving. The cycle is a closed one. Those who are to command the Brain are themselves held in servitude, and the Brain is unable to free them so they may command her. Therefore—"

"Therefore the Star Giants must be driven from Earth before the Brain can function fully again. Which is why I'm here. All right," Harkins said. "Take me to the Brain."

THE CIRCUITS were elaborate, but the technology was only quantitatively different from Harkins' own. Solving the problem of breaking the stasis proved simple. While Katha watched in awe, Harkins re-computed the activity tape that governed the master control center.

A giant screen showed the location of the robots that were the Brain's limbs. The picture—a composite of the pictures transmitted through each robot's visual pickup—was a view of the forest, showing each of the robots following a well-worn path on some errand set down two thousand years before.

"Hand me that tape," Harkins said. Katha gave him the recomputed tape. He activated the orifice and let the tape feed itself in.

The screen went blank for an instant—and when it showed a picture again, it showed the robots frozen in their tracks. From somewhere deep in the tunnels rose a mighty shudder as relays held down for two millennia sprang open, ready to receive new commands.

Harkins' fingers flew over the tape console, establishing new coordinates. "The Brain is free," he said.

"The Brain is free," the robot repeated. "A simple task for you—an impossibility for us."

"And now the second part of the operation," said Harkins. "Go to the surface," he ordered the robot. "Put a stop to whatever fighting may be going on up there, and bring everyone you can find down here. I want them to watch the screen."

"Order acknowledged," the robot said, and left. Harkins concentrated fiercely on the screen.

He drew the forest robots together into a tight phalanx. And then, they began to march. The screen showed the view shifting as the army of metal men, arrayed in ranks ten deep, started on their way.

The first Star Giant was encountered the moment the surface people were ushered into the great hall. Perspiring, Harkins said, "I can't turn around, Katha. Tell me who's here."

"Many of our men—and the city-dwellers, too."

"Good. Tell them to watch the screen."

He continued to feed directions into the computer, and the robots responded. They formed a circle around the Star Giant, and lowered the

spikes that protruded from their domed skulls. The alien topped them by nearly forty feet, but the robots were implacable.

They marched inward. The look of cosmic wisdom on the huge alien's face faded and was replaced, first by astonishment, then by fear. The robots advanced relentlessly, while the Star Giant tried to bat them away with desperate swipes of his arms.

Two of the robots kneeled and grasped the alien's feet. They straightened—and with a terrible cry the Star Giant began to topple, arms pinwheeling in a frantic attempt to retain balance. He fell—and the robots leaped upon him.

Spikes flashed. The slaughter took just a minute. Then, rising from the body, the robots continued to march toward the city of the Star Giants. The guinea pigs were staging a revolt, Harkins thought, and the laboratory was about to become a charnel house.

The robots marched on.

FINALLY, it was over. Harkins rose from the control-panel, shaken and gray-faced. The independent robot rolled silently toward him as if an-

ticipating his need, and Harkins leaned against the machine's bulk for a moment to regain his balance. He had spent four hours at the controls.

"The job is done," the robot said quietly. "The invaders are dead."

"Yes," Harkins said, in a weary tone. The sight of the helpless giants going down one after another before the remorseless advance of the robots would remain with him forever. It had been like the killing of the traitor Dujar: it had been unpleasant, but it had to be done.

He looked around. There were some fifteen of his own men, and ten unfamiliar faces from the city-dwelling tribe. The men were on their knees, dumfounded and white-faced, muttering spells. Katha, too, was frozen in fear and astonishment.

The robot spoke. "It is time for you to return, now. You have served your task well,

and now you may return to your earlier life."

Harkins was too exhausted to feel relief. At the moment his only concern was resting a while.

"Are you to leave?" Katha asked suddenly.

"I'm going to go home," Harkins said.

A tear glistened in her eye—the first tear, Harkins thought curiously, that he had seen in any eye since his arrival. "But—how can you leave us?" she asked.

"I—" He stopped. She was right. He had thought of himself as a mere pawn, but to these people he was a ruler. He could not leave now. These people were savages, and needed guidance. The great computer was theirs to use—but they might never learn to use it.

He turned to the robot. "The job is *not* done," he said. "It's just beginning." He managed a tired smile and said, "I'm staying here."



HENRY HASSE returns next issue! One of the all-time masters of action-adventure science fiction is back after a long absence, with "Clansmen of Terror," a novel of a divided and weakened Earth and an alien invasion that couldn't be stopped—even by the aliens! It will be one of the three great short novels in the April SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, every one a masterpiece of imagination and excitement.

THE FAN-SPACE

Conducted by Archibald Destiny

THE CONVENTION is over. The 14th World Science Fiction Convention, that is. It was held at the Biltmore Hotel in New York City, and was the biggest ever. Several thousand people showed up—well, actually it was 1,120 people, but it *seemed* like several thousand. They were readers and writers, editors and publishers, artists and agents, and people who just happened to be curious—but every one had a fannish gleam in his eye.

For four days, everybody loved everybody else, and everybody had a wonderful time. People who are bitter rivals the rest of the year shook hands and drank together happily. There were the usual complaints about the hotel service and the way the convention was being run, but nobody seemed to mean them very seriously.

Arthur C. Clarke, proud and happy as the official guest of honor, gave one of the most interesting speeches on record. Celebrities like Al Capp, Robert Bloch, Isaac Asimov and John W. Campbell, Jr., kept the entertain-

ment at a high level. A group of the publishers chipped in and threw a cocktail party with free drinks for everybody—everybody who could fight his way through the packed throngs to the bar, at least. There was a lot of red-hot parliamentary debating which confused the heck out of me. There were movies and a ballet. About the only thing there wasn't much of was sleep.

And it's London in '57! Only two places put in bids for the privilege (and the pain) of staging next year's convention, the Berkeley-Oakland area of California being the other. And the assembled fans proved how internationally-minded they have become by giving it to London by a vote of 203 to 65. This will make it a "World" convention in fact as well as in name—and the event is truly worthy of your support even if you can't afford to attend in person. (For further details, see succeeding installments of this department.)

Some people thought the "Newyorcon" was too big. I

tend to agree, even while being impressed and enthused by the showing and the show. London's convention will undoubtedly be smaller, and there's a fair chance that all future conventions will be less unwieldy and more informal. But I doubt very much if any of the 1,120 people who went to the Biltmore were sorry they had done so.

One small, disgraceful event must be mentioned. There was an art display, and Ed Emsh entered the original painting for the October, 1956, cover of INFINITY. He happened to think it was one of the two or three best covers he has ever done, and wanted it back to use as a sample in the future. He didn't get it back—somebody stole it. It was a low trick. If the person having taken the painting now wants to repent and return it, we'll forgive and thank him. And if anyone else has any information about its whereabouts, we'll appreciate that too.

News from Broadway: Science fiction, it appears, is about to be adopted by the dramatic stage. Two new plays are scheduled to make their bows—one about the time you read this, the sec-

ond in February of '57. Judging by the people involved, both of them should be worthy of serious attention. The first, "Night of the Auk," was written by Arch Obeler (famous for the movie, "Five," and a lot of excellent radio fantasies) and stars Claude Rains. My advance information says it's a dramatic treatment of the first moon rocket, with the entire action taking place on board the spaceship. The second play, "Visit to a Small Planet," written by Gore Vidal, will star Cyril Ritchard.

This is largely of local interest at the moment, but if the idea catches on, we may see more s-f plays, in New York and elsewhere, and if they're any good they'll probably be followed by movie versions. I can't predict how successful they'll be, but I'm hoping for the best.

The Dallas Futurian Society, off to a good start and apparently going places, is looking for more active members. The club's plans include working up a list of the many s-f books in the local library to promote their circulation, donation of more books to the library, and an all-out publicity campaign through

every possible source. The club uses one neat gimmick that is new to me: each member is given a loose-leaf notebook in which to keep a copy of the constitution, a list of the other members with their addresses and interests, and other useful data. Prospective members are urged to contact the founder and parliamentarian, Orville W. Mosher, 429 Gilpin Ave., Dallas 11, Texas.

Billy Meyers, 4301 Shawnee Circle, Chattanooga 11, Tenn., has hundreds of comic books containing Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, etc., for sale. Write him for information.

The Science & Fiction Critics Club (230 Clarendon St., Boston, Mass.), mentioned here last issue, has taken me to task for saying that it is composed of "young writers." Sorry, chums. I didn't mean to imply you were all bobbysoxers. I meant that, as writers, you're not yet among the most experienced. Okay? So now get back to your typers and keep those stories coming, instead of grouching at me.

Statement of policy: I'm not going to try to review every fanzine I get. I *will* try to mention them all, somehow—but I can't possibly include detailed rundowns and criticisms of the contents of all of them. It's not simply a matter of the lack of space, either; I just don't think that this would serve a very useful purpose.

But I do want to do my bit to help fandom gain new recruits, so I make the following offer to readers who would like to investigate the world of fandom and fanzines. If you're confused about how to start, what fanzines to subscribe to, etc., just drop me a line. I'll arrange for you to get sample copies of the best and most reliable fanzines, will try to answer your questions about fandom, and will—if you wish—print your name and address so that other fans can write to you and let you in on their activities. Good enough?

This department will attempt to cover anything that's really hot in the fanzine line, though. For instance, it's still news that the winner of the "best fanzine" award at the 14th Science Fiction Convention was Ron and

Cindy Smith's *Inside*. This didn't surprise anybody, because *Inside* is one of those rare super-fanzines, highly professional in approach and containing a lot of material of genuine value.

Ron and Cindy published a special issue for distribution at the convention, and a list of the contributors is pretty fabulous. It includes Randall Garrett, Larry Shaw, Dave Foley, Lin Carter, August Derleth, Edmond Hamilton, Jonathan E. Hoag, Bob Silverberg, Charles Freudenthal, Dave Jenrette, William F. Nolan, and Garth Bentley, with illustrations by van Dongen, Cindy Smith, Jack Gaughan, Roy Hunt, Marvin Bryer and Dan Adkins. There are articles, poems, reviews, satires, letters, and even a play. All of it is excellent, and excellently offset-printed in a total of 74 attractive pages. You can undoubtedly still get this issue as part of your subscription if you subscribe now, which you can do by sending \$1 for five issues to Ron Smith, Box 356, Times Square Station, New York 36, N.Y. Do so!

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Fantasy Times, The Science-Fiction Newspaper, was

also present at the convention with a special issue—one celebrating its fifteenth anniversary. This issue contained 40 pages, as compared to the usual six to eight. The “extra” ones were filled with articles by many of the top names in the field, comparing the state of science fiction 15 years ago and today. Some fascinating theories were advanced to explain science fiction's ups and downs, and there are indications that the arguments started here will be continuing for some time to come.

Meanwhile, *Fantasy-Times* continues its excellent job of presenting all the news about the professional world, plus occasional highlights on fandom itself. Editor-Publishers James V. Taurasi, Sr., and Ray van Houten have my heartiest congratulations on the anniversary, and you have my guarantee that you can't go wrong by subscribing to this one. \$1 for 12 issues to Fandom House, P.O. Box 2331, Paterson 23, N.J., will do it.

Next time, I promise, I'll get around to some of the other recent fanzines. Meanwhile, send your news, personals, and such to me at Royal Publications, 47 E. 44th St., New York 17, N.Y.





Illustrated by Stallman

ASSASSIN!

by Harlan Ellison

*An inexorable purpose
gave Rasked strength
—but his enemy wore
the double armor of
science and savagery!*

Assassin!

by Harlan Ellison

CHAPTER I

WITH MILITARY precision, the twin rows of diamond-sharp swords descended toward Rasked's head.

They stopped, almost as one, forming a passageway over his head. Four-edged and deadly sharp. To his surprise, his steps remained assured as he passed beneath the weapons. For an instant, he had imagined they saw through the lifemask, recognized him.

He was fourth in line as they approached the throne room doors. He kept his eyes

WE ARE particularly pleased to have a story by Harlan Ellison in this issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES because it was exactly one year ago, in the February 1956 INFINITY, that we published his first story. Since then he's sold something like 60 or 70 stories and articles, and now he's working on a couple of books, Which isn't too surprising—until you realize how consistently good his output is!

leveled at those doors as they marched down through the two ranged rows of Delpheron's lancers. The receiving line moved steadily toward the throne room, and Rasked felt the faint skin-tingle that told him they were being scanned for concealed weapons. The scan-banks were cleverly hidden, and though he tried to spot them, it was impossible.

Six plans slipped off the conscious level of his mind, and nine more rose to the top.

Humbar was third in line, but they exchanged no sign of recognition. Each had said his farewells months before on Earth: Humbar was to die, Rasked was to live, and their friendship meant dust.

The carpet was a deep and faintly perfumed thing. Rasked had the impression he was going under with every footfall. He felt he was being swallowed whole.

The sense of being swallowed by Delpheron's spaceship-palace was heightened as the monstrous timbered doors were thrown open. Inlaid silver glittered as the portals

spread. Silver, inlaid in triple-strength plasteel foundations; the door was beautiful—but impregnable.

For an instant the assassin let his mind wander from the job at hand and marvel at the architectural ingenuity that had built this fantastic palace—aboard a spaceship. Trunk-like marble pillars rose to a frescoed ceiling. The frieze that sprawled across one wall, framed by oppressively heavy draperies, had been executed by a now-dead artist from Ilino IV, captured in an early raid. It was a masterpiece, and Rasked had the fleeting thought, *It's a pity no more of his work will be seen.*

A gorgeous pyramid of glossy onyx tiers crouched at the end of the long hall, supporting a golden throne that shone and reflected back the glare of a hundred light-elements, studiously hidden in the walls.

A blood-red carpet stretched the length of the hall, to the very foot of the onyx tiers. Stout rings had been anchored in the shining ebony material, and attached to those rings were animals from a dozen worlds. A *szlygor* from Bethel's Hole, three-headed and snarling; a *karpa* from JAwkTHor, undulating to its full twelve foot length;

and a *cricket-bear* from Politeman's World, fuzzy, chirping, poisonous.

Dozens of guards lined the walls. Weapons bristled. Rasked knew there were balconies, above and behind the rich tapestries, housing guards who peered out through the weave.

The procession marched into the throne room. With his fur-trimmed ceremonial robe swirling about his ankles, his eyes cast down at the pointed palace slippers he wore, the tall assassin paced toward the throne.

He was a well-built man, with deceptive thinness. His strength came from an involved knowledge of the application of force and pressure, action and reaction. His hair was crew-clipped in the current style of his alleged home-planet. His eyes were dark and sensitive. His face did not matter.

It was not *his* face.

AT THE TRILLING of electroflutes, the blaring of sonortrumpets, the clatter of mechanodrums, the other emissaries fell to their knees on the long carpet. The assassin hesitated only a moment.

From somewhere above them in the high-vaulted

room, the continued skirl of sonor-trumpets heralded the entrance of Delpheron. Rasked chanced lifting his eyes from the deep pile carpet as the war baron's entourage entered.

From behind a ceiling-length tapestry illustrating scenes of some victory—or perhaps merely a slaughter—the line of men emerged.

First came the primary guards, paradoxically wearing chain-armor and carrying flame-rifles. Rasked noted the incongruity with furrowed brow. The mail was deceptive. It was not mere decoration; it was one of the more recent developments in battle attire: insulating mail. It could either raise or lower its own internal resistances, neutralizing the effects of any weapons used by any enemy.

Thirty-two possible plans slipped instantly off the top levels of Rasked's subconscious, re-filed themselves for future reference. Sixteen new plans slipped above, ready for instant action, should the necessity arise.

The guards were followed by the harem women, clad in toga-like garments that were intended to conceal their shapes and faces, but which actually accented their forms. Then the jesters, decked in

motley, bearing gyrostaffs with tuned bells. Then the serving-lads, bearing flagons of wine, dishes of meats, bowls of hydroponic fruits; the conjurers, with intricate metal-tipped hands, weaving strange patterns in the air, and rank on rank of unidentifiables till the entire stage-like platform was thronged.

Then came Delpheron's personal guards, each over six feet tall. Men from the heavy planet Gelbona; giants, born killers, eaters of raw meat, wearing more of the insulating mail.

The murmurings of the people on the platform died, as a strikingly slim, blue-skinned woman stepped from behind the tapestry. She wore a loosely-buckled gown of some shimmering white cloth, diaphanous, yet somehow modest.

Rasked's eyes opened a trifle wider at sight of her. She was a Norockan—the blue skin revealed that. But she was a fantastic beauty among a race of beautiful people. Her eyes were the blue of a jet-exhaust, her skin a lighter shade, just edging off into star-blue. She was all woman, the kind of woman that makes men want—but never bold enough to touch.

Her hair was worn long,

sloping smoothly to her shoulders, shimmering and delicately purple. There was no sense of alienness about this woman, though her skin was that strangest of all colors. She had the proud, fine woman's body of all mammalian races, and she carried herself with pride.

Even as Rasked watched her, she reached to the dipping neck of her gown and withdrew a medallion at the end of a fine gold chain. Her brows drew together for an instant, as she rubbed the medallion. Then she let it slip back into that shadowed crevice between the high, firm mounds of her breasts. And she stared directly at Rasked.

Rasked suddenly felt a pressure at the back of his neck—a heavy, booted foot, a guard's foot, forcing his head down. He did not see Delpheron enter. More important, he did not see from *where* he had entered.

Trumpets sounded again, this time longer, louder, rising in ovation. Rasked could hear the assembled servants falling supine—and somehow he knew the blue-skinned Norockan would not.

A clap of hands: two sharp, quick cracks that immediately brought the sounds of everyone rising.

The pressure on his neck eased. He looked up and saw the glowering face of a fanged palace guard. The man's booted foot was poised to return to Rasked's neck, if the thin emissary made a false movement. *Sometime soon, fellow, sometime soon I won't be kneeling*, Rasked thought tightly.

Rasked stared at the guard for a moment longer, decided the man had only been doing as he had been told, but would get his knocks later anyhow, and then he stood up.

He took his first look at the man he was to assassinate, and into his mind flashed a picture of the tremendous power this man wielded. . . .

FAR OUT in space, like a spreading wave of black in a field of silvered motes, the horde moved. Traveling at multiples of the speed of light, swallowing whole worlds in days, sweeping everything before them, the armada massed and pulsed and grew.

Like the horde of Genghis Khan, the horde of Delpheron advanced. As the great Khan had padded and fattened his armies by offering, "Join—or die!" so Delpheron had made the same offer.

The tiny worlds in whose skies the gigantic fleets appeared, trembled and let themselves be gathered in. Entire planets were turned into machine and supply shops for the war baron. Their ships joined the armada, their men went to serve on Delpheron's dreadnoughts, their women went as companions to the warlord's female-starved fighting men. The larger worlds which thought they could stand up to the conqueror—were destroyed.

Whole planets leveled and charred by criss-crossed death beams. Whole populations sent to raging, flaming graves. And those who remained, left to starvation and disease.

Such was the policy of the conqueror.

He had risen from the dust-heaps of some far, unknown galaxy, this yellow-eyed man who called himself Delpheron. Nothing was known of him. The scuttlebutt, the legends, the almost-religion of his men said he was the bastard son of a psychopathic monarch from the other side of the Coalsack. Said he was a transient tubesmith who had killed a powerful Emperor and had had to flee. Said he was a pirate, all that was left of a rabble destroyed near Boötes. Yet no one really knew who

he was, nor what he wanted. But he was marching, and the sound of his steps could be heard through the hundred dimensions of inverspace. Delpheron was marching!

He had come from nowhere, marshalled a warrior horde of malcontents, and thundered out of the stars to subjugate everyone in his path. From the Periphery across the Coalsack and to the very edges of the Terran Union's dominion.

There had been no stopping him. As there had been no way to stop the great Khan. As there was no stopping a wild, cancerous growth.

Secure in his mile-long dreadnought-palace, in the center of his battle armada, Delpheron was impregnable to massed attack. The armada stretched for miles and miles, ships packed hull-to-hull, impervious as a block of plasteel, and the entire fleet moving inexorably through space. Any attacker would have had to plow and fight and flame his way through hundreds of miles of ships, hull-to-hull, and ready for battle to the last man aboard.

For the first time in centuries, the Union was frightened. Really frightened; for their policy of *hands-off when anyone can see us and let the statesmen's oil take what we*

want would do no good now.

Long-range plans took too long to mature. A stop-gap was needed.

Their first hope, their last hope, their *only* hope was something they never mentioned. The secret, does-not-exist-it's-only-a-rumor, last-ditch hope. The Assassin's Corps.

As the Khan's horde without its leader, so Delpheron's rabble would be without the war baron—a snake without a head. A personal attack on the war baron was the only possible solution.

Delpheron's advance could not be stopped. But without the man himself, the power behind the action, it would be a different matter. . . .

Cutting the space-horde apart without Delpheron at the helm would be a difficult task, but one which the Union might, with time and persistence, be able to accomplish.

With Delpheron dead, it would be difficult. With him alive—it was impossible.

From the ranks of the Union's Assassin's Corps, one man had been selected to do the job, another had been sentenced to death as his assistant, a bold fiery plan had been formulated—and a tyrant was marked for annihilation.

As the conquering wave

spread, as it lapped at the Union's doorstep, one man became the prime piece in a game that involved galaxies.

One man—against one man.

A professional killer with the ancient blood of death in his veins, against the most powerful tyrant of all time.

CHAPTER II

RASKED stared long and hard at the war baron. Had Delpheron been able to see beneath the sprayed and padded surface of the clever pseudo-skin lifemask, molded over the assassin's own face, he would have known Rasked for what he was.

The years of murder had stamped his features unmistakably.

But the warlord could not, and Rasked's first glimpse of Delpheron was a one-way proposition. In a setting of grandeur, plush and opulent, yet the conqueror gave an appearance of bleak, cold austerity.

Delpheron had not let wealth and power soften him. The man was hard and tall—almost as tall as Rasked himself, and the assassin quickly hunched his back slightly, making himself a quarter inch shorter; the psychological obstacles he would have to

surmount would be lessened if the warlord did not have to look *up* at him—with hair cropped into an unusual war-knot that hung like a pigtail down his back. His face was steely and impassive; the eyes were like two yellow-hot ingots of fiery metal, staring, but somehow not seeing. Or perhaps seeing too much.

Delpheron's face seemed to be a home for those eyes, nothing more. His nose was thin and straight, with a tiny white scar beneath the right nostril, very faint and puckered. His mouth was also thin and straight. Yet the only features which had any real character were the yellow, burning eyes.

They held the flame of suns hanging in dead space, and it was the first time a pair of eyes had ever confused him, Rasked.

Lord Delpheron—as he wished to be called, by those who dared call him at all—swung his eyes about the throne room, studying the crowd of emissaries.

From a hundred worlds they had come. Some of them came to pay homage, some of them to pay tribute, some of them to plead for the lives of their worlds. A few to offer allegiance, a few to demand restitution.

And one had come with death in his hands.

It's a pity Humbar must die, Rasked thought, but it's the only way. It's the only way to build my net securely.

They had been close friends. Assignments together had been frequent for them during the thirteen years in the Corps. A strong bond had been built up between them, and their selection for this vital mission—and the capacities they had been assigned—was based on excellence in past performance.

Rasked had been named the one to live, Humbar the one to give his life, because of the peculiar personality of Rasked.

The assassin knew but one purpose: the Cause was important, and for its eventual success, all men were expendable. Only he, Rasked, would survive, to aid the Cause further.

He had but a moment to dwell on Humbar's fate, for the hollow clang of a huge gong filled the room, crashing and bellowing from the marble pillars, filling the throne room with sound.

The blue-skinned Norockan woman stepped back toward the tapestry, cast a sharp glance at the assassin—and he *knew* she was looking at him!

—and disappeared out of sight.

A thin and hairy man, stooped and wearing the crest of High Minister, elbowed his way to the front of the platform. He wagged a finger in the direction of a guard Rasked had not noticed before. The uniformed man turned to a small control panel set into the wall, and pressed a stud.

The monstrous gonging started and continued until it again filled the chamber.

This pomposity was not dreamed up by Delpheron, Rasked found himself thinking. Or if it was, it was purely to impress the yokels.

He glanced quickly about to see if the effect was as he supposed, and instantly let an expression of awe flit across his features, mirroring the faces of the other outworld delegates.

The gonging died away and the minister spoke, his voice amplified by a small microphone attached to his lapel. "Aware all ye! Aware of the presence of the most mighty Lord Delpheron, King of Space, Emperor of Worlds Distant, Conqueror of the Universe . . ."

His voice boomed and echoed, and Rasked felt himself on the verge of laughter.

What charlatanry, he smiled to himself.

It was obvious even Delpheron was embarrassed. With a short, sharp wave of his hand, the war baron brought the booming old man to a halt.

"I'll handle this, Tuskol."

THE MINISTER sliced off in mid-word. The old man fell back, sudden fear in his eyes. Obviously, displeasing Delpheron was equal to signing one's own death warrant in this court.

Delpheron moved forward from the golden throne, elbowing aside the still-bowing, still-mumbling Tuskol. The man seemed to radiate strength. *This could have been a great man, Rasked turned the thought over in his mind. He will be a difficult man to kill.*

Delpheron wore a tight-fitting and carefully-tailored suit of pressor-wool—dark as deep space, warm as a closed blossom, expensive as a Maharajah's weight in rubies—under a cloak of the insulating mail. His boots were high-topped like a cavalier's, and he wore black gauntlets to match. Around his neck, Rasked noticed with a slight start, was another of the medallions, the same type the

Norockan wizardess had worn.

A new factor leaped to Rasked's mind. He would have to find out about that medalion.

"Let the first emissary come forward," Delpheron announced. His voice was neither high nor low. It was an easily-forgotten voice. But it had come from the high-tension body, and no sane person would have refused any command, even though uttered in that lustreless tone.

Almost before the words were out of Delpheron's mouth, the first man came forward hurriedly, his oblation in his outstretched hands. He fell to his knees at the foot of the pyramid and intoned breathlessly, "Hail to the mighty Lord Delpheron! I am the emissary from Makdras, come to offer allegiance to Your Powerful Eminence. We of Makdras wish to be with you on your liberation of the galaxies." Nervousness crawled in his voice.

Rasked grimaced inside his lifemask. Makdras was an insignificant world; Delpheron would have consumed it with less than a tenth of his fleet, and marched on, hardly bothering to note the conquest. The Makdrites were shrewd, if terrified. Join—or die! So they joined.

Delpheron's face slowly eased into a smile at the emissary's words. He took a step forward, and beckoned the Makdrite to him. The emissary hesitantly climbed the pyramid, offering the tribute with both hands. *It would be more fitting, were that a bloody lamb!* and Rasked once more felt his face, under the lifemask, attempt a grimace.

Delpheron stepped down one tier and took the gift from the quaking emissary. He opened the finely-engraved silver box, studied it carefully for a moment, then raised it above his head.

"Look!" he boomed. "Look!" Delpheron cried again. "The emissary from Makdras, forty-six light-years from our present position, wishes to join Lord Delpheron's march! He has brought me a box of ruby-mice!" He tipped the box, and the little animals could be seen scurrying about in confusion.

Rasked whistled to himself. Ruby-mice were the most valuable export of Makdras, desired both as pets and for their tiny, scarletly glistening hides, which were used in making exquisite fur-rings. A small fortune was in that box.

Delpheron brought one long-fingered, wedge-shaped

hand down, slamming the lid of the box with force.

For a moment the assassin thought he was going to throw it at the Makdrite. The emissary also must have believed that, for he shrank back and raised his hands before his face as though to ward off the expected blow.

But the warlord stepped down another tier and gravely handed the box back to the emissary.

Then he nimbly leaped to the top of the pyramid, legs spread apart, arms raised, and bellowed, "Delpheron accepts this allegiance of Makdras! I give their emissary his gift back! To show my gratitude and affection for him and his people. He may keep it."

Then the fire died down, his body untensed, the voice once again became toneless as he spoke quietly to the Makdrite: "Go back to your world and tell your people that Delpheron is not a conqueror, but a liberator. I will treat your world as a valued ally."

He bowed slightly, and the emissary doubled over in anxious imitation.

The second emissary in line was almost bowled over by the grinning, fumbling Makdrite as he fell back into the ranks, clutching the silver box of ruby-mice.

THE SECOND delegate was a white-haired man with a stern, uncompromising face and stiffly erect walk.

He strode to the bottom of the pyramid without being called, and would go no further. He bore no gift.

The man raised his eyes to the warlord. Hands on hips, the solemn emissary cried one word. "*Usurper!*"

The throne room, which had carried a subterranean undercurrent of whispering, suddenly became tomb still.

The warlord half-rose from his golden throne. Guards began to move forward. The tapestries quivered as though flame rifles were being brought to sight on the man. But Delpheron waved the guards off with curt, annoyed movements of one hand.

"Who are you?" he asked, and each word stood watching the white-haired man.

Jaw muscles leaped in the emissary's face. He put one foot on the bottom tier of the onyx pyramid. "I am Desdro-Amty, Prime Minister to His Deposed Majesty, the royal Lavik-Bemis, Ruler of Helth."

Delpheron's face creased in thought. He squinted his fiery eyes and bit his cheek. A beckoning finger brought a recording secretary scurrying,

and the war baron consulted him.

After a moment's leafing through a portable file strapped to his chest, the secretary handed the warlord a punched microcard, and Delpheron turned back to Desdro-Amty.

A smile flitted on his face as he spoke.

"You were *liberated* two months ago. What do you wish here?"

The white-haired man stepped onto the next tier. His face burned with hatred. "I have come to demand restitution for the brutalities and atrocities exercised on my world! I have come to demand your removal of the supply dumps and occupation forces left on my planet! I have come to denounce your police rulership of Helth, and demand you place my King back on his throne! I—"

Delpheron began to laugh. A low, vicious, hollow laugh that clogged the words in the old man's throat, made the flush of his cheeks die in whiteness.

The old man took two steps closer to Delpheron, and with his head thrown back, the laugh booming through his silent hall, Delpheron brought his arm down in a sharp arc.

Flame-rifles spoke from three corners of the room, and

from behind the tapestries.

The flames streaked across the room, and washed the old man tentatively, almost gently. His scream erupted in the hall, tearing at the air agonizingly, and he ran back down off the pyramid, trying to escape. The flame-beams lost him for a second and he stood smoldering, his clothes afire—then they found him again.

The old man erupted in a sheet of flame, his body twisting and writhing as the yellow death washed him. His screams mounted, up a terrifying scale of agony, and then cut off abruptly. One thin wail rose from the center of the pyre, then the body charred and blackened and was ash that fell in on itself before anyone could move. The room was frozen in a silence of nauseous horror at the sight.

Rasked's mind screamed, *Now, now, now, now, now, now, now . . . !*

This was the moment the plan had called for; this was the sequence he had known would eventually come to the fore.

And even as he thought this, Humbar, in front of him in the waiting line, ripped the false flesh from his right arm and drew out the plastic flame-pistol with the printed

circuits. He screamed once; Rasked was not sure quite what, but it sounded like the tritely traditional, "Death to all Dictators!" Then Humbar was running toward the pyramid.

It caught the guards off-pace.

No one was prepared; they hardly knew Humbar was moving.

But the moment of preparation and foreknowledge was enough for Rasked.

THE ASSASSIN flew at his disguised accomplice, knocking him off his feet with a powerful driving leap. The gun clattered across the floor and Rasked dragged Humbar erect, smashing the man full in the face with his fist. Humbar's nose splayed sideways, blood spurting down his silk robe, and Rasked drove away from him, sliding across the smooth-polished floor as the flame-rifles erupted again.

The guards had been caught unawares, and they made up for their lack of timing by intensity. The wall of crackling, flaming death roared at Humbar, whose arm went up as if to protect himself. He cast one fearful glance at Rasked across the room, and then the fire tore at him.

Humbar's screams were deeper in timbre than the man from Helth's had been, and they lasted a second longer. An eternity of a second longer.

Rasked watched as Humbar sparked and burned, arms flailing in torment.

And in that instant before death, a scene shimmered in Rasked's mind. A picture of himself and Humbar, sitting at a chess-table, smiling at each other as each strove to victoriously end a match that had been going eight hours.

Then the vision disappeared into the vault of his subconscious, and the foul, acrid scent of charring flesh filled his mouth and mind.

I'm sorry, Humbar, he thought. We'll never finish our last chess game. Check-mate . . . but it had to be.

The smoke rose in filmy wisps from the two piles of ashes on the floor, and scorch marks radiated out from the pyramid, across the darkly mirrorlike floor, in blue-white brilliance.

Delpheron had watched the entire scene with close-lipped silence, his eyes fiery and staring. Now he spoke.

"Who was that man?"

Tuskol, the Prime Minister, hurried to his side, consulting a plastilist. "Your Lordship,"

he breathed in terror. "That was D'gru, a delegate from Zapetmack, a world we will liberate three days hence. We had no idea, Your Eminence, that he was danger—"

Delpheron's hand lashed out, cracking loudly against the stooped Minister's sallow face. "You fool! They are *all* dangerous! There will be repercussions for this laxity!"

The Prime Minister shivered before the warlord, who snapped his fingers, indicating the old man should move back. Tuskol slid out of sight in the ranks of the waiting, and Delpheron turned back to the crowd.

"Let that be a message to those who think Delpheron will tolerate resistance!

"The audiences are ended for this week," said Delpheron, turning to leave. He stopped, turned back, and fixed his fiery ingot eyes on the assassin. "Bring that man to me in my chambers," he added, pointing a knife-like finger at Rasked.

CHAPTER III

"**W**HY DID you stop him?" Rasked looked into the bottomless cup of wine he held, then turned his eyes to Delpheron. Up close the man was even more of an enigma

than he had been in the throne room. His voice was mellower, his movements more relaxed, and the blaze of his eyes seemed cooler. Rasked knew he must be sharp, alert. Every word must be psychologically chosen for the proper effect at the proper instant. His training in semantics would be invaluable now.

"Why did you stop him? You are a Frankener, aren't you? Yes, I thought so. You know we descend on Frank-en's World next week—why should you stop an assassination? I should think you would have *wanted* that man to kill me." Delpheron's tones were probing.

Rasked answered with a careful gambit: "I like a champion."

The warlord's yellow-blaze eyes narrowed down momentarily, and Rasked thought for an instant he had made a mistake. Then the war baron steepled his long fingers and methodically pumped questions at the assassin:

"What is your name?"

"Eenor of Franken's World."

"Why are you here?"

"Originally as emissary from my government, to make peace terms with you."

"What do you mean, 'originally'?"

"I have deserted. I wish to serve you."

The narrowing of eyes again. "Why?"

"I told you why. I like a champion. You are marching to the end of the universe. I want to be with you."

"Can I trust you?"

"Can you?" he answered with a grim smile.

Delpheron's steely face broke into a smile. "Yes, up to a point I imagine I can."

He won't be easy to trick. Then Rasked wished he had not thought it. This man was too strange to even risk *thinking* something dangerous near him.

Delpheron's next words threw the assassin off-pace. "They tell me you had been seen with this man D'gru, who tried to kill me. You were playing chess with him in the outer audience room, before the reception. Is that true?"

Rasked thought quickly. "That is true, Lord Delpheron. We met after reading our names on the list of appearances. I was to be presented after him, and so we struck up an acquaintance. He was a pleasant fellow, we passed a few hours in chess." Rasked was glad he had taken the obscure and devious pains to fix that appearance list, so he would be behind Humbar

when the assistant assassin made his move. It had served a dual purpose.

"You say he was pleasant," Delpheron resumed, "yet you watched him die with no misgivings."

This startled Rasked, but he answered—not too quickly, not too slowly—"Every man must be sacrificed to the Big Plan at some time or other. This was his time. He would have killed you; and next to you he was dust."

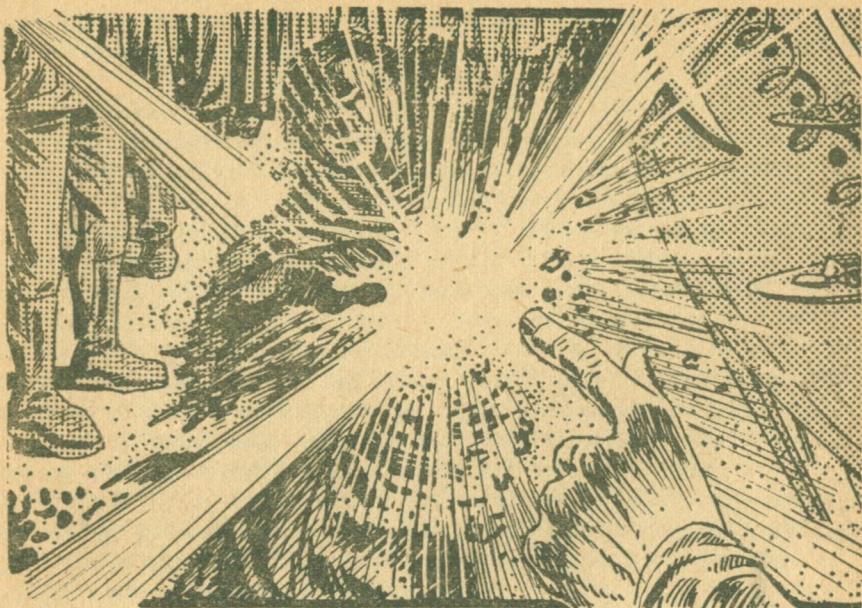
"No, I don't think he would have killed me," Delpheron disagreed, drawing apart the sealing fold of his tunic. The man was wearing *two* layers of insulating mail. One above the tunic, one under. No, Humbar would *not* have killed him. Rasked had known that all along. That had not been the intention. It had been planned that Humbar would die, to bring Rasked to Delpheron's favorable attention. It had worked precisely as planned.

But the second layer of mail meant changes.

Fifty-eight plans re-filed themselves in Rasked's mind.

Delpheron went on, bemusedly, "You're a cold man, Eenor."

"Not really. But I know there are those who must die that others may carry out



their destinies."

Delpheron's eyes glowed for an instant. He smiled again. "Yes, you're right, Eenor. The destiny is All." He tried to conceal it, but he was excited, and Rasked knew he had struck the proper chord.

Delpheron felt no one understood him—and here, here in this man from Franken's World, asking to serve him, was one who understood at last.

"We must all pursue our star!" exclaimed the war baron.

Rasked stabbed again. "And

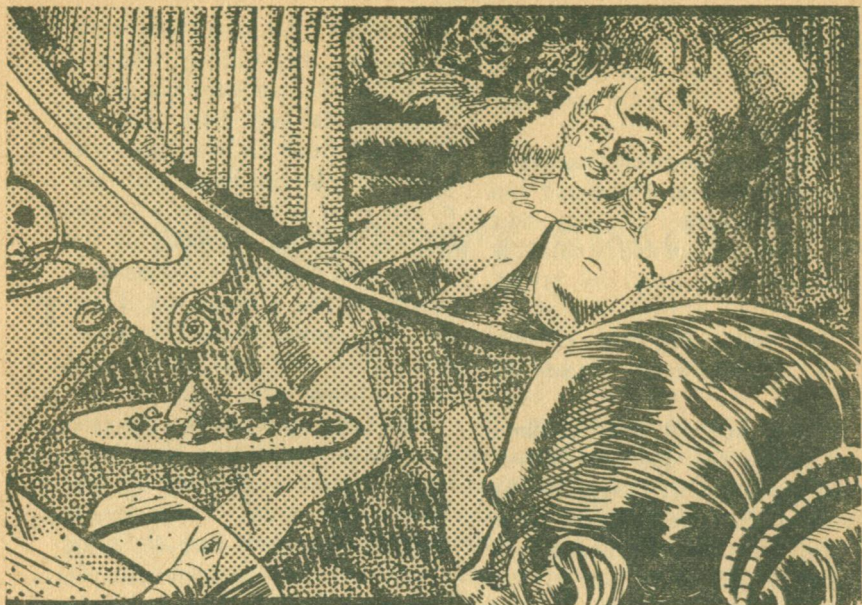
your star is *all* stars, Your Lordship."

Delpheron nodded. "We will get along." He smiled.

Rasked lifted the intricately-formed cup to his lips, then hesitated. "Is there a place at your court for me?" he asked, concentrating on the wine.

Delpheron was silent for a moment, and his eyes narrowed.

His answer came slowly. Then, "Yes, there is a place for you." Abruptly he leaned closer, his face suddenly drawn and tense. "I'm surrounded by enemies, you must know that."



That's the key!

"A man of your strength and position *must* have enemies," said Rasked. "The laws of nature have planned it that way. No destiny is followed with impunity." Delpheron nodded briskly, began to say something. Rasked stopped him, "Yes, I know. Every hand holds a hidden knife, every mind a hidden plan. The only reason your own men don't try to take your life and power is that *there isn't another Delpheron.*"

Delpheron's lips thinned out and he agreed with a short nod. "Eenor, you are a

wise man. You understand."

Though he was still cautious and not entirely trusting, there was genuine comradeship and affection in his manner.

The assassin reinforced his position. "That is why you have nothing to fear from me. I know my destiny is to follow you, and as long as you live and ride the head of the comet, I will be content to hold tight to the tail. If I can serve you, Lord Delpheron, my life will indeed be full."

They were platitudes, and the assassin chose them well. His words were loaded words,

selected words, properly-accented and spaced words. He played the war baron as though he were a musical instrument.

Delpheron nodded reservedly and smiled and clasped his hands in wonder at this man who would not idly flatter him, but told him the truth, even so.

"You will be one of my aides," Delpheron suddenly decided.

It was not all that Rasked had hoped for. He had hoped to be a Minister, closer to the warlord. But this would have to do, for the time being, till he could get those out of his way who blocked him. Tuskol was high on the list; the stooping old man was ready to be disposed of, at any rate.

Delpheron continued. "You will be an aide, for to tell you frankly, I trust no one completely—save Miana my wizardess—and I must try you out. And in time, if you prove yourself, you will rise closer to me. For I tell you again, frankly, I like you, Eenor of Franken's World."

He smiled knowing he had given Rasked a great gift: his approval.

He did not know he had given Rasked his life as well. The plan was working extremely well. . . .

HUMBAR had gone his way, after the top-secret briefing mission. He had said his good-byes to Rasked, had checked the false flesh on his right arm and the plastic flame-gun beneath (for it would not be removed till the moment of its use), and saluted Commander Shorl of the SpaceCom. Then he had been secreted away from the meeting place, and sent on his way.

Rasked had left shortly thereafter, with the warnings and desperate glances of the SpaceCom men. They knew that he was their one walking chance to stop Delpheron. He was sent first to the make-up division of SpaceCom, where they used the structuralizer to putty his leg-bones. When they had rigidified them again, he was three inches taller. They deep-dyed all the hair on his body. He had been auburn-haired, now he was black-haired.

Three lifemask experts sprayed and padded his new face on. They experimented to make certain all the nerve-ends were connected to the mask: a cigarette lighter to the tip of his nose, and when he screamed as the flesh blackened, they knew the mask was all right. They repaired the damaged flesh, and sent him

on, knowing the lifemask was as much a part of him as his own face.

He was secretly flown by inverspace ship to Franken's World, a bright blue ball just outside the radiation-perimeter of the sun-twins Gamow Alpha and Beta. It was a pleasant world of mixed mining and farming potential, protected from the ravages of man and nature by a Barrier, which shimmered around the planet.

The coded responses were exchanged with Franken Central, and the Barrier *snipped* out of existence for a moment to allow the specially-disguised ship to enter. It did not land at Franken Central, but proceeded immediately to a secret meeting-place where only the President of Franken's World was waiting.

Rasked was introduced, handed his dossier with the dummy identity and papers inside, and the SpaceCom ship left, as quickly as it had come.

The President took Rasked to the State House, where he lived as a hidden guest for two weeks. During that time he saw only the President. And during that time he learned of his new identity.

Within two weeks he was Eenor of Franken's World. He knew the production and

capacity of every mine and farm on Franken's World. He knew the birth rate, the death rate, the accident rate, the history, the chemical composition of soil, sea and sky. He knew the names and backgrounds of hundreds of Frankeners. He knew how the government was run, what the chief wild game of the planet ate, what relaxations and diversions were most enjoyed. He knew all this, and more.

He knew how to lower the Barrier.

The President was nervous. Nervous and worried. Delpheron was getting nearer every day, and something had to be done.

The Union had sent this man—what was his name?—to pose as an emissary, telling the President that the job would be done by this man, where no other might succeed.

He had faith in this man—oh, just call him Eenor; he was Eenor, wasn't he?—and so at the end of two weeks, Rasked left in a specially-manned flagship of the Franken fleet, bound out toward the incoming tide of Delpheron.

He went out, carrying with him the lives of every man, woman and child on Franken's World. For they knew nothing of who was to represent them at Delpheron's

court, and so they had left it in the hands of their President. He had left it, in turn, in the hands of this Eenor.

Who had been briefed on the Big Plan.

Which called for the death of every man, woman and child on Franken's World.

CHAPTER IV

EVEN as Rasked and Delpheron talked, in the room of swirling-color walls and soft music, the room of luxurious rugs and deep chairs, the room of friendship and respect, the palace-ship sped toward the outer fringes of the Union. Before, behind and around it, farther than the eye could see, the massed ships of Delpheron's fleet surged forward.

Rasked watched the man who had become his new master. It wouldn't be easy, he knew. No man who had swayed a galaxy, who had gathered to himself such a storming horde, who had made the very stars shudder, could be easily taken.

How would he do it?

The knife, the flame pistol, the rope knotted about the throat in the old *thuggee* fashion? Or something more involved, more subtle: a *dealer* in his bed, to nip his flesh and

cause instant death? A vapor of nerve-gas to deaden him? A misdirection that would send the armada into a sun? Or something as yet unknown? A thousand plans floated in Rasked's mind, waiting to be called to the surface.

But whatever the method, it must be foolproof, so that Rasked could make his escape unharmed. They were all dispensable—but not Rasked. He must live to kill another time.

"Franken's World is soon to be taken, Eenor," Delpheron said softly, turning his wine cup in his long fingers, and staring into the wine which had been tasted for poison beforehand by a servant.

"Yes, I know," Rasked answered.

This might be the opportunity he wanted, the opportunity to put himself closer to the warlord. All the information he had gleaned about Franken's World—now was the time when it would serve its useful end.

"How do you feel about my invading your planet, Eenor?"

"My planet is here," Rasked said, waving a hand in indication of the palace-ship.

"Well said, but what would you feel if I scorched Franken's World?"

"I would think it was a waste."

Delpheron set his cup down, stared at the assassin without comprehension.

"Can you offer me another way? I know you Frankeners; you are much too proud ever to have to bow before me. I was surprised they even sent an emissary."

"I think I may be able to help you take my planet, Lord Delpheron." Rasked did not use any of the fawning titles the warlord had become used to. He saw the tell-tale sparkle in Delpheron's eyes, and knew his independent attitude had pleased the war baron. A strong man impresses a strong man—as long as he is not *too* strong.

Delpheron smiled at the assassin.

"You really do want to serve me, don't you? Even to betraying your mother world?" He stared in open curiosity at the tall, dark killer.

Rasked repeated his earlier phrases: "As long as you ride the head of the comet, I am content to ride with you, behind you, and that way my destiny will be served. And I never want to ride further ahead than you—for I know my own capabilities. I can serve, but never rule.

That is for you, Delpheron."

The war baron's eyes swam in liquid fire as his ego was balmed. "How do you suggest I take your planet?"

Rasked leaned forward in his ivory-colored relaxer, set his jade goblet on the air-table—suspended in mid-air by three thin force beams, jetted from the bottom of the legless tabletop—and spoke earnestly to the warlord:

"There is a force Barrier of an advanced kind about my world, Delpheron. Perhaps if I could talk to your Council, your strategists, I could show them a plan of approach that would work. With their minds, and yours, and my information, we might save many ships, many men, and leave the planet unharmed for your use as a tooling station or fuel dump. That might be best."

Rasked knew interstellar war was a strange process. It was ridiculous to attempt it from one home base, for while you were out raiding, the enemy could slip in and destroy the home world. But Delpheron *had* no home world; he operated out of a hundred conquered planets, all of them occupied, all of them turning out war goods to keep his fleet on the move.

Cargo ships were constant-

ly plying back and forth from the nearest bases behind the fleet, reloading and refurbishing the supply holds.

It was a constantly acute problem, and Rasked knew the war baron would leap at a chance to get a world full of factories, farms and mines—untouched.

"What of the army, the space fleet, and the civil defenses?"

Rasked had a momentary twinge as he thought of the eight billion people on Franken's World. Unaware, sleeping, thinking they were being represented with the war baron. About to be betrayed to their deaths, not even suspecting they were being used as pawns in this mighty game.

He put the thoughts from his mind. *No one was indispensable!* No one was above sacrifice, as long as he could accomplish his mission. The faces of the doomed faded from his mind.

"They can be exterminated at will once you're inside the Barrier. They depend upon it almost solely to stop unwelcome visitors. Their defenses inside the planet are pitifully weak."

Delpheron bolted his wine in one gulp. He poured another goblet-full from a ruby-studded flagon and downed

that as quickly. He wiped his mouth carefully with three slim fingers, and stood up. The relaxer clapped into the wall.

"Let us meet with the Council."

He clapped his hands twice, and the tapestries of the private room swung back, revealing the aimed and readied flame-batteries. Delpheron spoke to one of the idiot Gelbonian guards.

"Go to Miana; tell her to call my Council to meeting. Tell her to advise the commanders of all the outer-fringe ships to be there also. We meet in two hours."

The Gelbonian disappeared through a portal, and the war baron turned back to Rasked. His eyes met the assassin's across the room.

"Flame rifles at the ready?" Rasked asked, accusingly.

Delpheron's long, slim hands moved to Rasked's shoulders. "My friend, I am in no position to trust people I have just met. But if time proves you, then there will never be further need for them. Perhaps this Franken's World campaign will prove you. I don't know.

"But till then, my friend, Eenor, bear with me."

His hand closed over Rasked's own in a square clasp

of friendship and semi-trust.

The hand of the invader in the hand of the killer.

RASKED met Miana the wizardess two hours later. She was waiting in the council chamber as the ship commanders gathered.

She was Delpheron's wizardess. One of those strange blue-eyed, blue-haired, blue-skinned Norockan people with the gift of magic—magic, in an age of science! A race of beautiful people—people who had uncovered the secret of molding the basic powers of the universe to their bidding. People who had guarded that secret so jealously that no one had ever wrested it from them.

She wore a shimmering gold toga affair that pressed against the delicate hue of her body and made Rasked's muscles tighten under his emissary's uniform. She stood tall and haughty beside the war baron's throne, the table stretching away in an open-centered square before her. Her eyes skirted the table, at which the Council members were beginning to take their places; her glance pierced every veil, every tapestry. Her face was a planed symmetry of knowledge and mystery.

Her eyes came to rest suddenly on Rasked's face.

The assassin felt shaken, somehow, but forced himself not to stare back. When she finally turned away, he watched her covertly. This was no dupe, this was not a "yes, master" personality that would bend to a strong will or subtle psychology. This was someone to watch at all times. Someone perhaps even more dangerous than Delpheron.

Delpheron nudged Rasked's arm, tipped his head in the direction of the silent Miana. "Wonderfully beautiful little thing, isn't she, Eenor?"

She could only have been called "little" by their standards, for she was almost as tall as either of them. Rasked picked his words carefully. "A beauty as unbelievable as her magic, Delpheron."

"Magic, you say?" Delpheron chuckled, fondling the medallion hanging from its gold chain around his neck. "Magic is it? Has my little wizardess produced some feat of strangeness for you, Eenor?"

"Not as yet, unfortunately. I must confess I'm curious."

The war baron spoke to her gently, as though he did not want to startle her. "Miana, this is my friend, Eenor. He

has joined with us on our conquests."

"I know, My Lord." Her voice was like the first whistle of a meteorite as it streaks into atmosphere, at the instant before the rock begins to burn. Her voice was the night wind of a million black planets. Her voice was the love-call of nameless animals, and her accent was the faint lisp of the wizard people. "I saw all this in my medallion."

"Oh?" Delpheron's surprise washed over Rasked. Why should he be surprised, didn't he wear a medallion also? "And what else did your medallion tell you?"

She turned her gaze to the assassin. "A man of influence would come to you. By his presence would occurrences of note come to pass."

Rasked felt Delpheron's elbow in his ribs. "See that," the war baron interjected, "my little wizardess is never wrong. I own a Norockan medallion myself," he lifted the oddly-carved golden oval, showed it to Rasked, "but it is empty to my sight. I see nothing in it. But my little Miana, she saw you coming. These Norockans are never wrong."

Rasked arched an eyebrow. He had encountered hindsight-labeled-prophecy before.

And Miana's prediction was so flagrantly hindsighted, so obviously ambiguous, he felt impelled to make some deprecating remark:

"This medallion must be a wonderful gadget, to have plucked me out of all the emissaries paying you court, Lord Delpheron."

The war baron began to say something, but the oddly musical voice of the slim, blue-skinned girl broke in.

"You doubt my powers, Frankener?"

Rasked spread his hands eloquently, leaving conclusions to her.

"Let me show you, then. With your permission, My Lord Delpheron."

Delpheron grinned hugely—the effect was slightly unsteady, for the man's face had not been constructed for humor—and nodded agreement. "It will take at least another half hour for those laggards on the fringe ships to get here. By all means, Miana. I haven't had a demonstration of your powers in a month."

MIANA's slim arms began to lift, the sleeves of her toga sliding down to reveal smooth skin. Her hands flopped forward as her arms came up, up,

over her head.

Her eyes began to close slowly, but Delpheron stopped her. She remained fixed in that position while he spoke.

"I have a medallion myself, Miana, and I *know* its powers." He extended the strangely-carved and curlicued medal at the end of an elasticord. He smiled sharply, with meaning. "Let us have an illusion, Miana, and nothing more. You must, in fact, promise no harm to Eenor."

He had said it half-lightly, so that it might be taken for jest, but there was a cutting edge to the tones that showed it was serious.

She bowed slightly, and keeping one arm above her head, plucked her own medallion from the bosom of her low-cut, iridescent gown. She raised her arm again carrying the medallion with it, tightening the gold chain about her throat as it rose. She held it reverently, almost tenderly in the smooth cup of her hand. Her eyes slipped shut.

"Kal-la shapoor dahjva, mal-moor kala

"Gegged - harmal Wiltse dyeth, bale paym

"Ooooooooool-quern . . . ooo-ooooy karterrrr . . ."

As she chanted, her eyes closed, a phrase came to Ras-

ked: *She is a turquoise Madonna, waiting for the lighting of the universe to bathe her.*

Even as the thought struck him, the lightning flashed!

It erupted from the floor, from the deep pile rug. It arced down from the smooth, curving walls of the bulkheads, each rivet, each seam radiating and spurting and screaming with it.

Jagged streaks of blue phosphorescence crackled and spit at them, bounced from ceiling to table to the hands of the wizardess, and bathed her in a glowing aura.

Rasked leaped back from the table, the pneumochair into which he had fallen sliding back in its tracks and slamming tight to its retainers. His hands went up before his face, and he doubled over, cushioning his head against his knees, as though he were being buffeted by the concussion of an explosion.

No one else knew he was protecting the lifemask over his own face. Heat, cold, attack, acid, almost anything imaginable could not affect the durable lifemask, but *this* was unimaginable, and he had no idea what it would do.

Delpheron's voice came, vaguely, through the electrical storm.

"It can't hurt you, friend Eenor! Watch! Watch my beautiful little magician!"

Masked let his hands slip away from his eyes, and he saw the council chamber was now completely bathed by the blue glow of the crashing, flickering, boiling lightning. Miana stood tall in the midst of the holocaust, her hands thrown up as though she were crucified; her blue eyes rolled up in their sockets, the white glaring out oddly; her mouth was a fine line, agonized and beaded with sweat.

He stood up slowly, still flinching, as bolts of hell crashed into him, showering him with sparks and flames which somehow felt cool and soothing.

Masked felt more than the storm: he felt the static tension of the room, felt the concentration of attention on Miana, knew somehow that this was *not* merely a show of trickery or of minor-scale magic. This was not the sort of charlatanry he had seen performed in the throne room, to impress the credulous outworlders. This was the life-force of the universe, pulled out of shape to the girl's bidding.

He knew that if she wanted it so, this lightning—harmless and flickeringly pyrotechnic

—would scorch him to cinders, to his component atoms, as he stood there.

Then it ceased.

The lightning pulsed off to nowhere, the room settled back to normalcy. The assembled Council members, breath rattling free from the prisons of their intensity, slumped back to their chairs. Only Masked remained standing.

But Miana was not finished.

She had only begun.

The room about them wavered . . .

flickered . . .

faded . . .

to be replaced by the desert of Cassiopeia Theta XVIII.

AROUND them the seven suns burned down in red and orange and purple and yellow, casting waves of heat across the dyed and bleached sands like live things. Casting seven shadows for every one reality. Stark against the horizon, gnarled ghosts of what had once been trees, before Earth had been born, raised naked branches to the blistering sky. The sands whistled and chattered softly, swirled in places into devils by the vagrant hot winds of the planet. Desolation lay everywhere on this most worthless of all the planets of the galaxy. Heat lay

like a blanket, but Rasked could not feel it; he was not sweating, but breathing coolly and cleanly of pure, temperate air.

Rasked was alone on that desert with the wizardess Miana.

She seemed completely at ease—as much at ease as she had been in the pomp of Delpheron's throne chambers or the council room. At ease even on the wasted face of this world.

Even the spots of perspiration that had dotted her upper lip as she concentrated on illusioning were now gone.

"Where are the others?" Rasked asked, nervousness a fine line through his tones.

"You are not a Frankener," she answered, ignoring his question.

For the moment Rasked forgot his first question. "Oh? What makes you say that?"

"You are not Eenor of Franken's World. You are not an outworlder at all, to be precise. You are of the Union's Assassin Corps, and you are in the armada not to serve, but to kill Delpheron."

Rasked felt his heartbeat slow, felt the plans refiling in his mind, felt the palms of his hands, within the plastic-coverings that disguised his fingerprints, dampen. She was

right. Her magic *could* pierce the veil.

His tracks had been covered so meticulously, she *must* know what she was talking about, for exactness like that was not guesswork.

He would have to kill her, and rig a story quickly.

He stepped toward her, convinced if his movements were sharp and quick enough, he could snap her delicate neck in a second. His hands reached out.

Miana changed instantly to a killer-boar. The fanged mouth gaped, the small, red eyes sparkled, and the hair along its back bristled. The voice came from the beast—ludicrously, but distinctly:

"If you will cease the melodramatics, I may be able to help you."

Rasked stopped in mid-step. He was powerless to combat her, at any rate. He wasn't sure the boar might not be just a harmless illusion, as the lightning had been, but he couldn't risk a slashed ribcage or a ripped-off arm to find out. In this form, or any other she might assume, she was invulnerable. He would wait—till later.

"I have no choice. I agree."

She changed back without waver or flicker. She was killer-boar; she was Miana of

the blue skin and strange eyes.

"I'm glad you were not foolish enough to force me to kill you."

"I can't take chances."

"It pleases me, Rasked, that you admit to being what you are."

The assassin's eyebrows went up at the sound of his name. "How did you know that?"

She drew the strangely-figured oval from the dark cleft between her breasts, and extended it at the end of its cord. "My medallion. It is good for many things."

She seemed unwilling to say any more, and Rasked was certain she would *never* say more about the magic her race protected, so he passed back to his original question. "The others. Delpheron. Where are they?"

"They are in another illusion, and they are sure we are there, too. We can talk as long as we want, and go back to them without their suspecting we have been together privately."

"Talk?" Rasked asked. "What have we to talk about? Now that you know I'm here to dispose of Delpheron, you will tell him, and I'll be killed."

"I don't intend to tell him."

"What? Then why are we

here? Why are you doing this?" His mind tried frantically to re-arrange the snarl-twine of events.

She stared at him coldly, with her strange eyes.

"I want to kill Delpheron also."

CHAPTER V

THE WINDS of the desertland keened higher, as though playing a toneless accompaniment to the wizardess' words.

Rasked felt a strange stirring at the base of his neck, the crawling of many icy-toed lizards. There was something truly weird and unbelievable about this girl. No more than twenty years old by human standards, apparently in love with the man she served, actually hungering for his blood. It made the assassin feel, somehow, for the first time in his life . . . *lost*. It had been a full life, dedicated to countless Causes, always with the firm conviction that no one was indispensable with the exception of himself. A life of that sort was not often troubled by indecision or surprise. But this was something totally new.

In the depths of her eyes—strangely slanted eyes with planes and angles in the lustrous blue—Rasked saw a

spark leap up, then a flame, then a holocaust more hell-burning than the storm in the council chamber.

Rasked had known that flame before, in the eyes of men signed to the Assassin's Corps roster. But they had been professional killers, with no compunctions about murder, and veins that held a flow of icewater. This was a young and breathtakingly beautiful girl from a faraway planet.

"You're staring at me, Assassin," the girl remarked almost casually.

Rasked realized for the first time the full beauty of her. She was close to him, and he suddenly felt his mouth go dry.

Perhaps it was love, and perhaps it was merely a sense of identification, but abruptly, he wanted this girl more than any other he had ever seen. He kept his hands quite rigidly at his sides. She seemed to be reading the face of his mind, knowing what circled behind his dark eyes.

He covered himself quickly. "It is a little strange to hear a girl as young and attractive as yourself say you want to kill your protector—"

Her thin, derisive laugh cut him short.

"Protector? The only pro-

tection Delpheron and myself have in common is the medallion he wears."

The medallion! That had been one of the puzzling notes struck during this mission. Rasked had believed the only people possessing medallions were the wizards of Norock.

"Yes, I've wondered about that. What do you mean by protection?"

She grimaced, and let a snort or hatred escape her lips. "He took it from the body of my mother. A Gelbo-nian guard's knife was in her breast, and he yanked the medallion from her neck, with his foot on her chest to brace him. I watched. That was a year ago."

"Why haven't you killed him already?" Rasked was trying to pinpoint the thinking-processes of a girl who could speak so coldly and dispassionately of the warlord's barbarism.

"It's the medallion. They were originally intended as safeguards for Norockans, against Norockans. No magic or physical violence on the part of a Norockan can affect another who wears the medallion. He is beyond my powers. Without the medallion, Assassin, I'm quite a helpless ordinary person."

"Why tell me all this? I

might use it against you."

"You won't. Because alone you will wait ten years and not be able to kill him. Don't you think there have been other attempts on his life? None of them succeeded.

"But together we can kill Delpheron. Alone, neither of us can hope to succeed."

Rasked doubted that, but he nodded in tentative agreement. "What do you propose?"

She had hardly moved during their discussion. She had stood very close to him, so close he could smell the exotic perfume of her skin. Now she settled down, cross-legged, on the warm sands of the bleached desert. Her thin, diaphanous gown billowed out around her, making deeper pools of color where the fabric overlapped.

"When we land on Frank-en's World next week, and Delpheron goes abroad as he always does, he will take you with him. I will make certain of that. Because *I* always go out with him. He isn't quite sure of my adoration for him, nor is he sure of anyone, yourself included. But he uses me to protect him when we're out on a planet. He has me create a force bubble about him, so no sniper beams or other weapons can harm him. I have

done this on every world we have conquered in the past year. My bubbles have protected him up till now.

"But next week, when we are on the World, I will make certain we fall behind slightly, and then I will turn the bubble opaque.

"In that moment, you can kill him with impunity, for only the three of us will be within. Then I'll collapse the bubble, and we will tell the Gelbonians who were left outside it that someone poured a beam down on us, that changed the bubble and killed their lord.

"They will *have* to believe it, for they are too-stupid to think of any other reason. And Delpheron will be dead."

She settled back, confident the plan was a foolproof one. But Rasked's brow furrowed, and his objections came fast:

"What if he doesn't die? What if I miss? What if he doesn't want a bubble that time? Or what if he doesn't take me along? Why should he when I'm new in the armada? Or what if his lieutenants get inside the bubble with us? What if a lot of things?"

There were too many holes for the assassin.

And the biggest hole was that he saw no means of escape from the armada. The

Gelbonians might as easily believe Rasked and Miana had killed their lord, and burn them down then and there.

She waved her hand negligently. "I'll take care of it. I haven't been able to do anything before this, because there was no one in the armada I could trust that was capable enough, and the medallion kept him safe from my magic. But you aren't a wizard, and the medallion provides no protection against a human with a triple-thread beam. There is no magic that can stop a blaster. I'll do *my* part; you do yours.

"I've been planning this a long time, Assassin. It won't fail, I promise you."

But Rasked wondered. Wizardess or no, this was a twenty-year old girl, and she was as prone to error as a normal person. There were too many random factors. Chief among them was the uncertainty of getting away from the armada with his skin intact.

It was an unsound plan, but it could be turned to his own advantage.

But that might mean betraying Miana. He wasn't sure he could do that . . . now. He had to have time to think about it. To decide whether his philosophy of everyone's expendability would hold in

this situation. For the thought of betraying her made his stomach feel hollow and empty.

"He had to have time to think.

"All right, Miana. If you think it will work, I'll play it by ear according to your directions."

She smiled for the first time since he'd met her, and it made him want to hold her very tightly. For the smile looked somehow strained and uncomfortable. As though the agonies within wanted it to leave as quickly as possible. "We will succeed, Assassin. I've planned it that way, and Hektha the Lord has decreed it shall be."

Then the desert was gone, and the spaceship's council chamber leaped up around them, abruptly.

DELPHERON slowly let a breath sizzle out.

"My Gods, Miana! *That* was an illusion to end them all!"

Her eyes once again held love and affection. And Rasked found himself hating Delpheron for the first time. Before it had been just a job, but now she was staring at the man that had made her life a horror, and Rasked wanted very badly to kill Delpheron.

Miana was speaking. "I'm glad my Lord found it pleasing," she said slowly. Rasked caught the edge of loathing as it sank into the pools of her eyes. And he felt a shudder pass between his shoulder blades.

"Now," Delpheron settled back into the plush-lined throne at the head of the ebony table, "are all the Council members here?" At a nod from Tuskol, the Prime Minister, Delpheron continued, "Then let us plot the taking of Franken's World."

His yellow eyes suddenly lit with an inner fever. His hands swept across the tabletop, dragging maps and charts from their slots.

Tuskol rose to his feet, and began: "My Lord. I believe for a planet the size and defense of Franken's, we must use your scatter-thread method, with a scorched world as the end result. It is drastic, My Lord, but it seems to be the only way to take them.

"Advance scouts and spies tell me the Barrier around the planet is so strong, we must concentrate for several days to weaken it enough. The massed threads will have built up such a charge, when the Barrier splits, the entire surface of the planet will ash.

"We will lose the factories

and farms, My Lord, but the minerals will still be there to mine. The value will be lessened but it seems, as I say, the only—"

"*You are wrong, Tuskol!*"

Rasked had risen to crumble the older man's words in mid-sentence. He stared at the aged Prime Minister, and felt a tightening of the mood in the room about him. Each of the men around the hollow-square table—grizzled captains, with foul breath and scars; many-tentacled aliens who had joined the march; hungry-eyed women who owned their own ships; each an important factor of Delpheron's force—watched him intently, many of them seeing him for the first time.

The old Prime Minister's brows—white fluffy caterpillars—drew down as he heard the assassin's words. He drew his *erlik*-skin cape about him, drew in a breath of insult, and began to raise an objection to this upstart who defied his wisdom.

Delpheron stopped the older man before the words fell. "My friend Eenor has told me he knows a way to break this Barrier. To crush the defenses of the Frankeners in one movement. We will listen to him."

He settled back, and Rasked

saw a glimmer of wariness on the war baron's face. *He still doesn't trust me completely. He thinks this may be a trap I'm devising. He's wrong. They'll take Franken's World. And when they do, he'll trust me. Then I'll take him as he took the planet!*

Tuskol sank back to his chair, also, hatred glowing brazenly from the twin mirrors of his eyes.

Rasked spoke simply and sharply. In a moment he had presented the plan. And after Tuskol had objected, "What if this is merely a trick by the Frankener to lead the fleet to its death?" the assassin answered:

"I know there is no other proof that this plan will work as I say, and I know it rests solely on trust of me, but Lord Delpheron has said he believes me, and so I tell you this: I lead my Lord Delpheron to nothing but his destiny! Not to his death, nor your death. I have renounced my world. I serve Delpheron now!"

The speech was loaded with obvious platitudes. But it won the argument, because it was apparent that it had won Delpheron.

The armada slashed down through space, cutting through the light-years as though they

were waves before the prows of the ships.

The ships, spearheaded by Delpheron's own dreadnought, headed dead for the rich mining planet of Franken's World. And the unsuspecting eight billion who were doomed to ash, because they were pawns in the hands of the assassin.

They were dispensable. For Rasked had determined to kill Delpheron. And Franken's World was another link in the chain of death being forged by Rasked—and Miana.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEXT WEEK Rasked spent in two ways.

Getting himself more and more trusted by Delpheron, and twisting Miana's plan in his mind.

Neither gave him any satisfaction.

Delpheron trusted him as much as he could trust anyone, but that wasn't enough. Not quite.

Up to a point, Delpheron was his friend.

But beyond that, a brick wall was erected.

Delpheron still had a servant taste the wine he drank. Delpheron still wore double layers of insulating mail. Delpheron still took his Gel-

bonian idiot-guard with him wherever he went.

Miana's plan, on the other hand, was even more gut-wrenching. If he went through with it, he was certain he would be killed. There had to be a successor to Delpheron, if just to keep the armada moving. And that person, whoever it might be, would dispose of Rasked simply for protection. Anyone true to Delpheron could not be trusted by anyone else. There was even a chance that he, Rasked, might be offered the chore. *That* was something else he didn't want.

All he wanted was to get away from the armada—with Miana if that was possible. He was certain now he loved her.

But could that love come in the way of his mission? He still felt that all others were expendable to the Cause. Was Miana expendable?

If he did not go through with the plan, she might betray him. She might try to kill Delpheron herself, and the way he now felt about her, he might try to help, and get himself killed in the attempt.

No, he had to turn the plan to his own uses. But how?

Rasked knew Delpheron's trust would be complete only under one set of circumstances, after only one act.

And that involved Miana and her plan.

Which would it be? His mind whirled and his head ached from trying to decide.

Then, the night before the attack on Franken's World, he found a dual solution to the two problems.

IT WAS early evening in Charlesworth, the capital city of Franken's World. The mines had idled for an hour, letting the night shifts adjust to the drop, and the day-workers were packed aboard the skyrails—fanning out like the spokes of a giant wheel—taking them home.

The mercantile blocks had turned dark, gigantic crouching devils, dark-eyed and waiting for tomorrow. The barrierhomes along the development miles were coming to life, sounding dimly with the mutter and tinkle of women preparing dinners, children squealing delightedly before their tri-V's, watching the programs specially designed to keep them quietly out of mischief in the before-dinner hour.

The faint rose-pink force barrier surrounding the planet flickered and pulsed, holding out unwanted visitors.

Franken Central, in the

heart of the miles-wide spaceport area, received its coded response from a freighter, fresh from the Periphery. It passed the response down through its multi-stacked banks, measuring and checking it with the daily codes. It was re-routed by compuvac to the President, who knew there was only one man who had that particular daily code.

The man—what was his name?—Eenor!

The check-clearance went back from President to compuvac, to the stacks, to the tower of Franken Central. The code signal was correct. The freighter could enter.

The automatic machinery hooked to the clearance switches threw home the "open" valves.

The Barrier slipped away from that plane of existence for a second, then re-formed.

In that second the "freighter" roared through and plunged toward Franken Central.

"Franken Central to QQ-99604! Franken Central to QQ-99604! You have broken your landing-pattern. Please resume your glide. Franken Central to—"

Then the "freighter" dropped its camouflaging. Its disguise-plates slipped back into the hull, uncovering the dead-

ly thirty-thread disruptors. The hollow voice of Franken Central was cut off as the entire Central—stacks and all, to a depth of a mile—erupted in a sheet of live flame and shredded debris, as the guns were turned full power on the spaceport. In a matter of moments the entire pile that had been the Central was a slag-heap, its compuvac brain banks melted to uselessness, the comptrollers ash in their bucket seats.

And for the first time in two hundred years, a pedestrian, walking through the thronged streets of the capital city, saw the Barrier disappear from the sky.

Ten minutes later, the horde streamed through.

Eleven minutes later the pedestrian was ash, also.

AS SOON as the jacks had bitten through the plasteel of sidewalks and street and settled the dreadnought to true, the ramps sighed outward, and the Gelbonians pounded down onto Franken's World.

It was the heart of Charlesworth, and the remaining crowds that had survived the low-level strafing had piled indoors. Into the tri-V houses, into the pleasure domes, the office buildings, the mine-

shafts. The skyrails whirled emptily past. Robot street cleaners clinkled and pattered about, for the streets had suddenly emptied as they would automatically at four in the morning, and the emptying was a signal to them to get out and clean up the debris of candy wrappers and hot-lunch foil papers.

The first heavy-faced, idiot-staring Gelbonian that hit the street lifted his triple-thread, aimed it and blasted apart a street cleaner, for want of a better target.

Blood was in the air and every man wanted death, death, death!

By the time the other sixty-four ships had landed in the city, no window was left unbroken, no building was left unburning, no Frankener above ground was left alive.

By the time Delpheron emerged from the golden-hulled palace ship, the forces of defense had been effectively broken.

Surprise and treachery had taken their toll. Encased in their insulating mail, the marauders were safe against the sporadic small arms fire of the citizens.

The police and army—tiny to begin with—were caught unawares by low-flying armada ships and roasted in their

barracks. Now, all that was left was the mopping up.

The yellow-eyed warlord drew deep lungfuls of the smoky air of Franken's World, his face aglow with the inner fire of conquest.

"You've done it, Eenor! This was the easiest taking so far. Not one ship lost, and only a handful of my men are wounded. They never expected we'd have the admittance code! Marvelous, Eenor! Marvelous! You shall be rewarded for this!"

Masked knew at once the rewards were superfluous. He already *had* his reward: almost total faith from Delpheron.

Almost.

One more thing would make it complete, and that was not far off.

Masked caught the subtle shift of expression on Miana's face at the warlord's words, and allowed a brief smile to part his lips, partially as a signal to her, partially in answer to Delpheron's outburst.

"Thank you, my Lord."

Delpheron's interest suddenly shifted. His guards had prepared for one of the war baron's favorite sports: man-hunting. They had let a hundred unarmed prisoners loose in a blocked-off section of the city, for the Lord's sport.

"Come, let us do a little hunting."

He started off, stopped. He turned to Miana, who was garbed in a tight-fitting suit of leather and insulating mail. "Miana, my dear," he said. "Please make my bubble."

She smiled back, with a trace of deadliness that Rasked caught, but which was missed by Delpheron, anxious for the chase. Then the bubble was around them. All three of them. The war baron cast one quick, wondering glance at Rasked inside the sphere of protection, then grinned and clapped the assassin on the shoulder. "It is fitting that you hunt with me, my friend. That all three of us should hunt. For we shall rule the universe!"

His elation mounted, and he started off, with the three of them moving easily in the bubble, the Gelbonians hulking behind.

Rasked unclipped the triple-thread from his magnobelt and held it ready. Miana clutched her medallion tightly, and Delpheron stalked on, the other two slightly behind him, his eyes questing for a Franken victim.

A man suddenly ran from between two buildings, and Delpheron took two quick steps in that direction,

brought the disruptor rifle to his shoulder and snapped out two quick bursts. The flames caught the man in mid-stride and he rose off the ground, clutching his disappearing face.

Then Miana blanked the bubble.

Delpheron started to turn about in wonder and confusion, and Miana yelled to Rasked, "Kill him! Kill him! Now, do it now!"

And Rasked lifted the triple-thread an inch higher, let the lump in his throat consume him, and fired.

The blast caught Miana high in the chest, and the flames licked across her face, burning and charring her hair in one fitful eternity-instant of death. The assassin saw the look of disbelief and betrayal in her eyes, and then she was dead—a charred heap clutching a scorched medallion.

"You said you wanted to serve me," Delpheron murmured, as the bubble faded from around them and the harried faces of the Gelbonians stared in. "You wanted to serve me, and you saved my life twice."

Rasked felt the world tilt and shudder under him.

He had saved Delpheron's life. He had taken Miana's life. The world suddenly felt

tacky, strange; it smelled rancid. Delpheron trusted him *completely*.

He was assassin once more.

CHAPTER VII

THE MONTH since Miana's death had brought nothing but victories to Delpheron, nothing but success to Rasked's plan. The war baron now trusted him completely, as Rasked had known he would. Miana had been the closest thing to a *confidante* Delpheron had had, and he had believed she wanted to serve him. With her death, the warlord had cast about for a new companion—and Rasked had carefully placed himself in the only available position.

The death of Humbar, the invasion of Franken's World, the betrayal of Miana, all had served as mortar in the wall of trust.

Delpheron's faith in Rasked was now so great, he allowed the assassin to plot the conquest of several worlds, to make decisions in his absence at the fringes of the armada, to keep him constant company.

The warlord spent many hours pouring out his inner feelings to the receptive assassin. He told him of his

fears, of his hopes, and more and more Rasked realized this was a man of infinite power, who could, indeed, overwhelm the Union.

Then, exactly one month after the invasion of Franken's World, an unparalleled opportunity arrived.

They were homing in on Sapitipoor II when the alarm bells clanged furiously through the palace-ship. The inter-ship communicator buzzed fitfully and Delpheron hit several studs, all at once.

Three voices came through immediately, and Delpheron cut off two of them, leaving only David-David's bass voice booming its message. David-David's ship, the *Contrapuntal*, was in the forefront of the Sapitipoor attack, and he had run down a small scout-ship trying to leave the planet at cross-vector to the armada. The passengers of the ship were all embassy representatives of the Union legation on Sapitipoor II, and they had been running for their lives. The ship had been swallowed whole, and now Delpheron had thirty-three hostages with which to intimidate the Union.

It wasn't really a big thing, but it was another sign of the luck that jetted with them. The news threw Delpheron

into a fit of high elation.

He danced about the privacy-room, humming a tune currently popular in the armada, and clapping his hands like a little child. Rasked watched him, with mixed emotion.

Then Delpheron sat down abruptly, and again as a child with some delightful secret, he said: "Eenor, my friend, since you have come, things have never gone so well! I think we should have a party—just the two of us. We will drink, and laugh, and sing, and when we level Sapitipoor tomorrow, it will be a sign to the Union that we will never be stopped!"

Rasked knew what the warlord meant, for Sapitipoor was one of the first out-and-out holdings of the Union in this portion of the galaxy. It was, in effect, the edge of the target. Anything taken from here on in toward the center was definitely Union dominion. Not just vested interests, or economic colonies. These were the Terran worlds, and this was a milestone in the trek of Delpheron through the stars.

"Go, my friend! Go to my wine cellar. There will be thousands of bottles of the best vintages there. Pick whatever pleases you. I trust

to your discretion. Let no one know where you're going, and let no one touch that bottle, for it is *ours*, for *our* celebration!"

He smiled and laughed and clapped his hands again, then shoed the assassin forth.

Rasked went quickly to the dropshaft and fell to the subcellar of the palace-ship. He opened the twenty combolocks with the twenty memorized combinations, and went into the wine cellar.

There in the silence, with the bottles all suction-held in their acceleration-proof racks, he realized this was an opportunity he might not have again.

All the other thousands of plans slipped from his mind, for this was the final plan, the plan that could not fail.

Could not fail, because it was so simple.

There was no need for an involved murder plan. No *dealer* in the bed, no plot involving a Gelbonian dupe, no gas, and no physical violence.

The blood of the Borgias beat in his neck as he realized how perfect it was. It was old, it was trite, there was no finesse to it—and it was perfect. There was no self-esteem in the assassination business, and no one to say, "My goodness, what a lack-talent meth-

od of death *that* was!" No, all he had to do was cause Delpheron's death and affect his own escape, and he was a success.

And this plan would do both.

He would poison Delpheron.

HE TOOK the tiny plastivial from the false fingertip, and broke open the top half, spilling the contents into the wine. It was a bottle of blood-red *Feshquoç*, and tasteless, colorless, the poison swirled into the dark, red wine, suffusing it with death. Then he broken open the bottom half of the vial—the antidote—and drank it.

The poison was a peculiarly attractive one, from several viewpoints.

It took six hours to gain effect, but when it did, it was instantaneous, with just a moment of death-pain before the blood coagulated in the veins and arteries.

The antidote in his system demanded that Rasked drink some of the poison, as he knew Delpheron would insist. The man had a virtual paranoia now about wine-testers. He always kept a servant handy to try the drink before he would venture his lips to the cup. His fear of poisoning

was pathological. And it was this fear that would serve Rasked well.

For when the warlord demanded he test the cup of wine, he would do so gladly. When he drank the wine, the antidote would neutralize it immediately.

He let a half-laugh slip between his teeth. He had *better* get that poison, because the antidote by itself was a poison. One counteracted the other. If he didn't get the poison, the antidote would kill him as terribly and as surely as the draught in the wine.

But he had no worries there. If there was one thing he knew about Delpheron, it was his fanatical fear of death.

Which would not save him. After they had toasted each other with the wine—and, Rasked reminded himself, he must make certain the dregs were disposed of, so there would be no evidence against him—he would beg his Lord's leave, saying he wanted to scout ahead in an inverspace ship.

He would say he knew this end of space quite well, and believed there was a diamond asteroid somewhere out there not on the charts. Then, when the warlord gave his permis-

sion for the flight, as Rasked knew he would, the assassin would hop ship and be thousands of light-years away into inverspace before the war baron felt the first tremors of his death.

He went back upstairs in the dropshaft, thinking of the death building, building, building in the war baron's system for six hours. Then the way he would clutch his throat, and die in a moment, bulging-eyed.

He went back to the privacy-room, where Delpheron still sat, smiling affectionately.

He locked the door carefully behind him. "This is *our* celebration, and not for the corridor guards, eh, my Lord?"

Delpheron came away from the desk, settled into a relaxer. He was hyped up with the cocaine of his own power. "A toast, friend Eenor, to the star that is all stars, and to the destiny that reaches for that star!"

He watched as Rasked poured a goblet full of the blood-red wine, and abruptly his face shadowed. He fingered the useless medallion lying against the stark black of his jumper.

"And a toast to the girl who betrayed me. To Miana—for

I never would have thought she would—"

He broke off in mid-sentence, and Rasked felt the lump rise once more in his throat. He, too, had been thinking of Miana, and for that reason he was all the more anxious for the warlord to drink his drink of death.

As he handed the goblet to the warlord, he brushed the bottle on the desk with his elbow. It tipped, fell and shattered on the onyx floor.

Rasked's face assumed a look of sorrow. "Oh, I'm sorry, my Lord. But don't worry. We'll get another. But first your toast! Let me drink with you in spirit on this first one."

The war baron smiled again, and Rasked waited for the command to test the drink.

But there was none.

The lord lifted it to his lips to drink.

"Uh . . . don't you want me to test it?" Rasked stopped him abruptly.

Delpheron lowered the goblet an inch, grinning hugely.

"You chose the wine at random from my cellar, did you not?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"And no one was near you as you came upstairs, was there?"

"No, I . . ."

"Then I trust you, my friend."

And as he raised the goblet, drank it to its dregs, and looked sad because the bottle was broken, Rasked realized he had drawn his net too tightly.

His faith-building had been too complete.

Delpheron sat grinning, knowing he had given the

assassin his most precious possession, complete trust.

And as the first violent pains wrenched at Rasked's middle, as the face of Delpheron faded from his sight in a blast of hellish agony, the assassin realized something for the first time in his life:

Everyone was expendable to the Cause.

Even himself.



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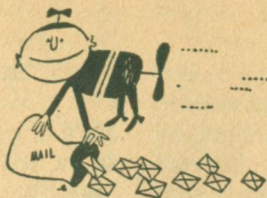
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THE READERS' SPACE

HERE it is, readers: the corner of space reserved for you. It's yours to use, within reason, as you see fit. We want to know what you think of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, but please feel free to write your ideas about science fiction in general, too. And if your ideas are controversial, so much the better! Send your letters to the Editor, c/o Royal Publications, 47 E. 44th St., New York 17, N.Y.

With all the magazines today desperately trying to bring back enjoyable adventure in science fiction, yours is the only one that has truly succeeded. I haven't read such an enjoyable science-fiction magazine in a long time. It really has the type of science fiction that was printed some twenty years ago. Not old-fashioned science fiction but modern science fiction with that proverbial "sense of

wonder." Not just space opera but *well-written* space opera.

Of the science-fiction magazines out saying "Let's put action back in stf" only yours has the quality that makes it an enjoyable mag that steady fans of either *Amazing* or *Astounding* will enjoy. The sociological type that takes its stand for maturity has the best authors in the field, the most well-written stories and absolutely the poorest plots. The average fan has to fight his way through each story with a sigh of "at last" at the end of the book. The action type has potentially the newcomers to the field *and* the ones that still long for a return to space opera. The plots are most of the time excellent but the writing stinks! The characters are as weak as water. After you finish one of these books you sigh, "Such rot."

When stf fans came to their senses and knew this was the

case they all started shrieking, "Sense of wonder . . . good old days . . . space opera, etc." You, sir, have answered those shrieks. Your magazine is an answer to the prayers of the stf fan. Let's hope that the rest of the field follows suit. With stf that I'm sure everyone would enjoy, all science-fiction magazines would sell out within a few days. New fans would emerge. All in all science fiction would be in the best shape it had been in history. So keep up the standards of your first magazine and let's hope that real science fiction will return.

As I've said, from the writing standpoint your magazine was excellent. It would have been perfect but for "Battle for the Thousand Suns." The story, to me, was a crafty cross-breed of Robin Hood and Li'l Abner with a little stf blended in. Sure everyone wants action but as stf magazines have said before they don't want a science-fiction western. So put *real* science fiction in your stories. Not nobles, knights, and later on probably the "showdown" on the main street of some pioneer asteroid.

As for the other three stories, nothing can be said to mar their true greatness. I've

often admired Edmond Hamilton for his sticking to space opera and not being sucked over into sociological trash. He's a wonderful author. The same with Robert Randall. I love these two men so much you could print an entire magazine with stories by Robert Randall, Randall Garrett, and Robert Silverberg and you'd have a wonderful zine (seein's how you've broke the taboo you mentioned in INFINITY). Of course that would be impossible, I suppose, but it's a broad hint to put at least one story by those two men in each issue. "Secret of the Green Invaders" was truly the sparkling spot of the issue. It had everything. The story goes down as one of my all-time favorites.

The art standpoint could be improved, though. How about some Kelly Freas and Virgil Finlay in the interior? And some Kelly Freas on the cover. That's all you'd need. *(We're negotiating with both. You could hardly have picked a busier pair of artists, but we have hopes of having them in future issues. Meanwhile, we're pretty proud of the work our own "discovery" Bowman did for this issue—what do you think of him? —Ed.)*

I guess that's about all. I just want you to know that SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES is one of my "big three" as I'm sure it is everybody else's.—Billy Meyers, 4301 Shawnee Circle, Chattanooga 11, Tenn.

Well, well, another new magazine christens the field: SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES.

Notice that on the contents page you have volume one number six instead of number one. That's the only criticism though. (*That's enough to redden our faces. The mistake was caught too late to make a change. We'll be more careful.—Ed.*)

I think a letter column would be neat and movie reviews another treat. (*The trouble with movie reviews is that by the time we got them into print, the movies being reviewed would already have vanished from most screens. But how about a reader vote on the subject?—Ed.*) But no—never—not book reviews or science fillers. Every magazine has book reviews and science fillers are for the birds! (*Agreed.—Ed.*)

I'd like to see it match INFINITY but that will take plenty of doing. (*We've or-*

dered a fresh supply.—Ed.)

Well, now that I've got my two cents' worth in, I'll quit pestering you.—Michael R. Krakomberger, 183 East St., Buffalo 7, N.Y.

Thanks!

That's for the enjoyment I receive from reading your mag.

You know, I've found something rather interesting to note during the past few years that I've been on this science-fiction kick. That is: what makes a science-fiction addict? Good question, no? I've not only asked myself that question, but I've also questioned and argued the point with others like myself, that wouldn't read any other type of fiction stories. Come to think of it, I've never really satisfied myself on that question! But the inevitable always happens when I walk into a library or book store, I reach for a science-fiction yarn or try to find something that I either haven't read or looks good.

I would like, if possible, to see if you could give me a sound explanation on this subject.

At least I can tell myself that I've tried, even if I don't hit pay dirt. At any rate the

science-fiction world won't lose a fan.—Bill Gassaway, 737 South Kinwood, Casper, Wyoming.

PS: I would be more than willing to receive and answer any correspondence from anyone who thinks they hold the answer.

(That, to coin a phrase, is a good question, Bill. We hope the readers will answer at length—so we won't have to.—Ed.)

●

About ten years ago I stopped reading science fiction, because I thought the spark was gone from it. I wanted stories that made me wish I was doing the things the characters were doing. But then, as I said, the spark died out, and I went on to other kinds of fiction. I tried picking up some stf mags about three years ago, but I saw it was even worse than I'd thought: they were all concerned with making stupid points about philosophical questions, and there was no real adventure in the yarns.

But when I saw the first issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, I thought I'd take a look at it, and boy, I'm sold. You'll find my three dol-

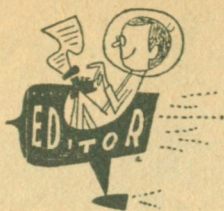
lars and fifty cents enclosed for a subscription. *(Thanks much.—Ed.)*

I particularly liked the Calvin Knox and David Gordon story "Battle for the Thousand Suns" because it was damned *human*! I can actually see things like that happening in the future. And the way they reconciled the use of blasters and swords was so logical, I wonder why no one thought of it before this. *(Science-fictional ideas have a way of being more logical than people.—Ed.)*

Hamilton is still as red-hot as he was when I first read "The Universe-Wreckers" years ago. His lead story was a real thriller. I didn't care for Robert Randall's story, though. It was too confusing with all those odd names. I'd like to see more from Knox and Gordon, though, and Hamilton as well. Also longer short-stories. I thought "Hadj" was very good, and perhaps you can get the author to do something a little longer. *(We did.—Ed.)*

Thanks for a great magazine, I'm a faithful reader from here on out.—Wallace M. Colby, Jr., 138 N. Walsh Ave., Terre Haute, Ind.





THE EDITOR'S SPACE

THE 1957 cars are out, loaded with the usual array of new and revamped gadgetry. Of them all, the gimmick that takes the solid gold shoe-lace is the one called "Seat-O-Matic—the seat that remembers."

This goes the usual power seat one better. The lucky buyer gets a control dial mounted on the dashboard. By turning this, he can make the seat move in any direction but sideways until he finds the position he likes best. When he turns the ignition off, though, the seat moves automatically to the farthest rear position, making it easier for him to get in and out through the low, low door. As soon as he switches the ignition on again, the "Seat-O-Matic" seat slides back to the selected position. And it does this every time, until he changes the dial setting.

This sounds great for lazy people (and I'm as lazy as the

next fellow), but I know it's the kind of thing that inevitably goes haywire at crucial moments.

As an example, last year I borrowed a Cadillac for a week end. It came equipped with an "Autronic Eye," a little gizmo mounted where it can see the lights of oncoming cars and automatically dim the headlights, thus saving the driver from moving his toe an inch or so. The trouble was, the Eye kept fouling up because of an addiction to strictly Aristotelian thinking.

I didn't mind so much when the Eye kept dimming my headlights every time it saw an illuminated billboard or roadside trouble marker. But things really got hectic when another car approached. If the oncoming vehicle had its brights on, the Eye would dim my lights. But when the other guy dimmed his lights in reply, there would no longer be enough

light to activate the Eye, so it would promptly turn my brights back on. The other driver, annoyed, would return to his brights, and—flick, flick, flick!—we'd be rushing toward each other with our headlights going from bright to dim to bright like signal blinkers.

So I'm a little dubious about trusting my posterior to the "Seat-O-Matic" seat. I'd always be afraid it would take it into its head to eject me through the "thin, crisp" roof if I happened to wriggle around too much.

Furthermore, I'm convinced that such gadgets as this are contributing to a kind of national schizophrenia. More and more Americans are driving cars and living in houses that do everything for them automatically. It's strictly science-fictional stuff, it should make me jump for joy, and I hate to take the chance of being tabbed a reactionary about it—but I'm leery. There are just too many ways for the gadgets to goof!

Personally, when I drive a car, I like to have the feeling that *I* am controlling it myself. Possibly this means that I am opposed to progress. But my own experience tends to prove that I can control

the car better than the automatic gadgets can—and I'm not the world's best driver, by a long shot.

The fact that it's getting harder and harder to buy a car with a standard, non-automatic transmission would seem to indicate that I'm in a minority. But the spreading popularity of European and sports cars with "stick shifts" shows that it's at least a fairly hefty minority.

Then too, there's the big "Do It Yourself" craze, which is putting millions of dollars in the pockets of manufacturers who provide any item at all in pieces the buyer has to glue together himself. If people didn't want and need the feeling of accomplishing things on their own hook, this fad would never have gotten past the dream stage. As is, it's making the manufacturers' dreams of four Cadillacs in every garage come true.

So here we are, taking work away from people with one hand and giving it back to them with the other. Does one hand know what the other is doing? Maybe—but among my friends who know insanity best, I've noticed that it's schizophrenia two to one!

—LTS

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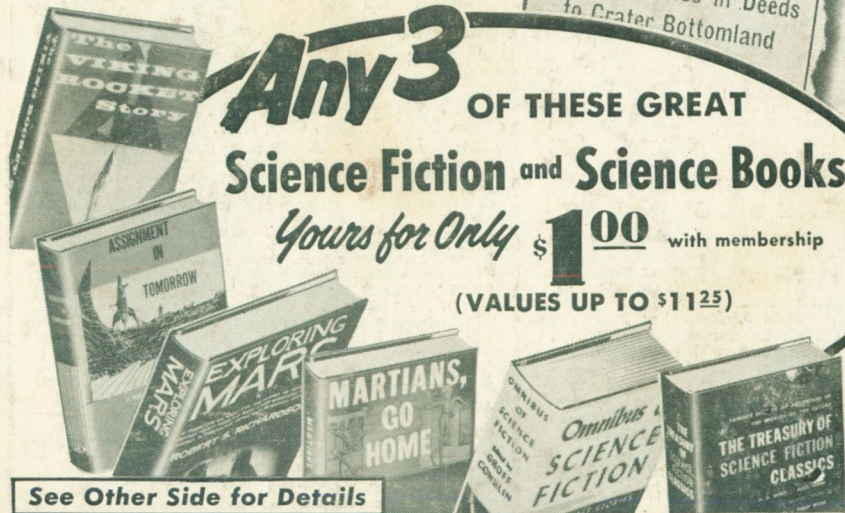
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