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April

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Complete Novels by Top Writers

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Clansmen of Fear

by Henry Hasse

SPAWN of the DEADLY SEA

by Robert Silverberg

Gulliver Planet

by Daniel F. Galouye



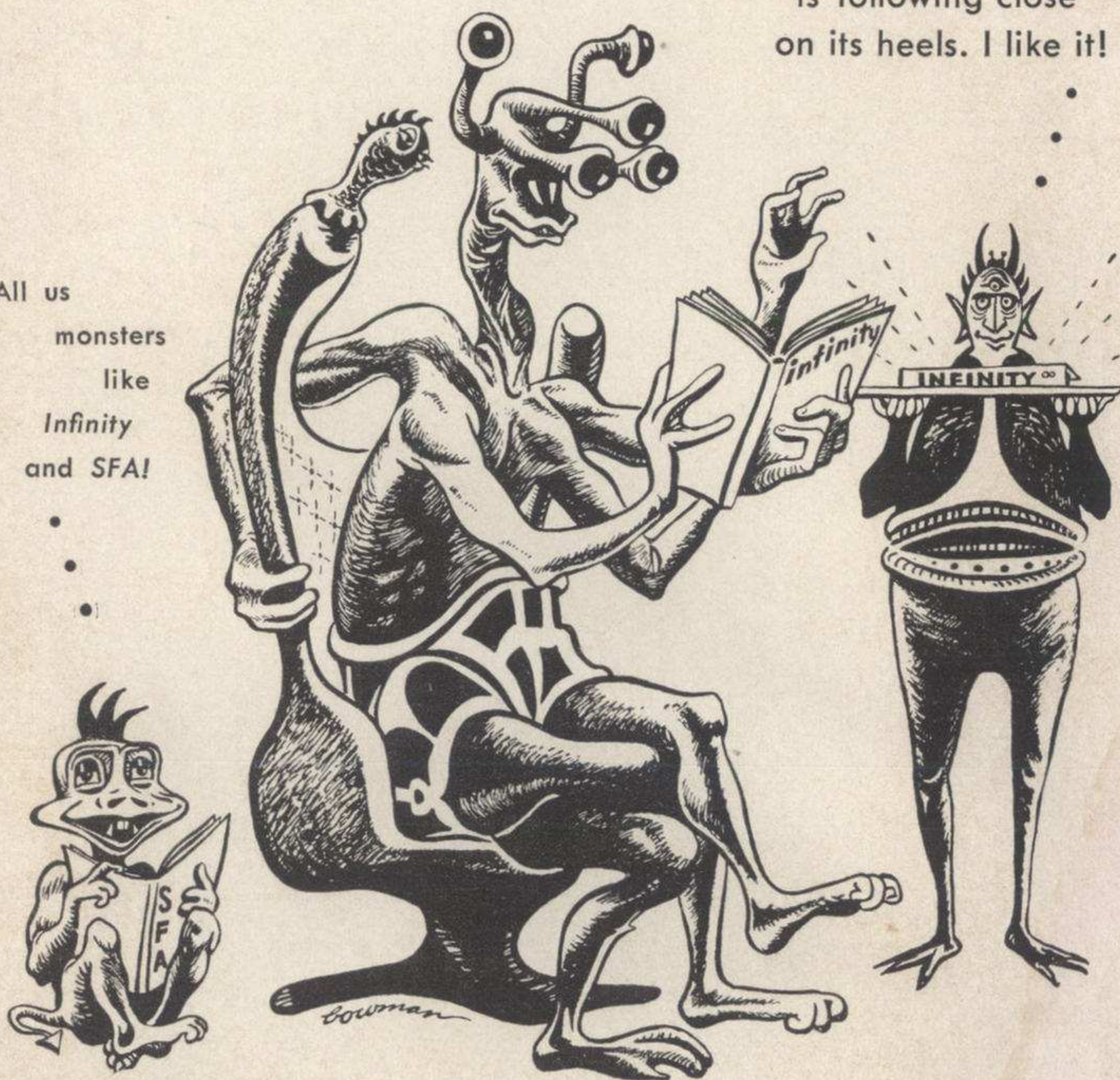
EGAD!!!

... and 'pon my soul, Fortesque!

Did you realize that *Infinity* garnered more
awards and honors in its first year than
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Science Fiction Adventures
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monsters
like
Infinity
and *SFA*!



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DETAILS INSIDE.**

SCIENCE FICTION
ADVENTURES

Vol. 1No. 3

APRIL, 1957

3 Complete New Novels by Top Writers!

Feature Novels:

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Helpless, Donal watched the embers of Terran civilization grow dim—as one by one the women of the zone changed and became oddly alien. . . .

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Mankind was doomed to slavery under microscopic masters, who could live within the bodies of human beings and control their every action!

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The Earth itself had suffered a sea-change at the flick of an alien hand. The Sea-Lords ruled, but now the aliens were returning to take over. . . .

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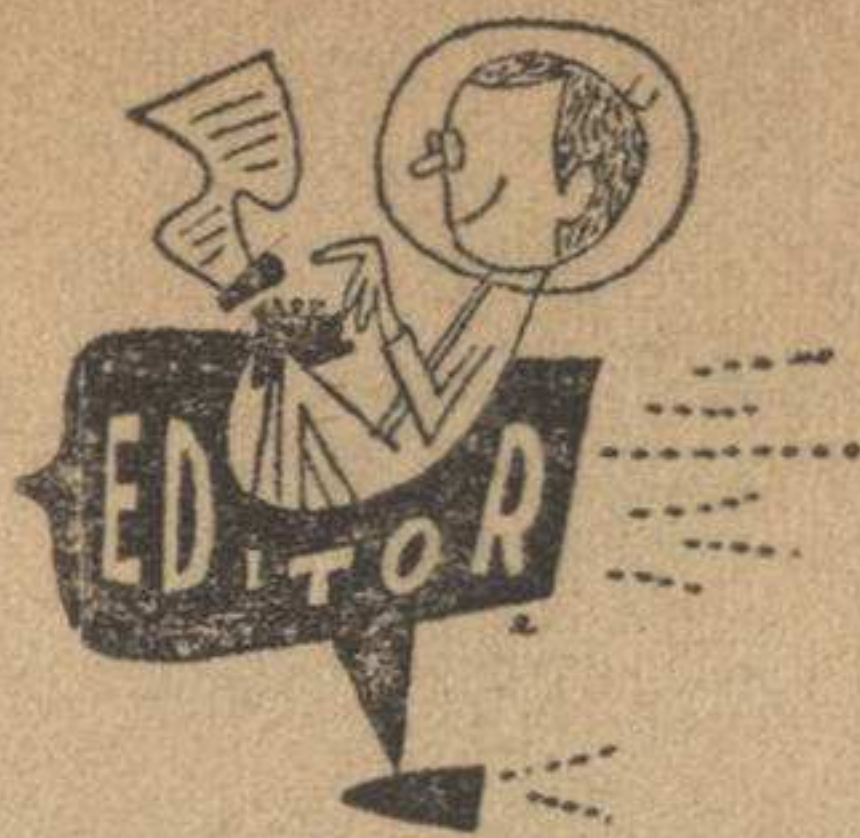
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COVER, illustrating *Clansmen of Fear*, painted by Ed Emsh.
ILLUSTRATIONS by Bowman, Emsh and Engle.

Publisher—IRWIN STEINEditor—LARRY T. SHAW
Production Manager—HELEN SKALETArt Director—ROBERT ENGLE
Assistant Editor—LEE HOFFMANArt Associate—WILLIAM BOWMAN

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, published bi-monthly by Royal Publications, Inc., 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, N. Y. Single copy, 35¢; subscription (12 issues) for the U. S., its territories and possessions, and Canada, \$3.50; elsewhere, \$4.50. Copyright 1957 by Royal Publications, Inc. Application for second-class entry pending at the Post Office at New York, N. Y. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, any similarity between the characters and actual persons is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.



THE EDITOR'S SPACE

I'D LIKE to expand a bit on a point made by an individual calling himself Qrrpt in this issue's "Reader's Space." Qrrpt feels that writing action-adventure science fiction is easy—so easy that anyone (including Qrrpt) can do it—and that the sociological, or more heavily scientific, type is harder.

I feel that he is wrong on practically all counts. On one I'll give him the benefit of the doubt: perhaps he could write good science fiction. Lots of readers have successfully turned to writing!

But good action-adventure science fiction is *not* easy to write. *Bad* a-a s-f is, certainly. But to write an action story that is logical, convincingly motivated, coherent, suspenseful, generally well balanced and at least somewhat original is no simple trick. Ask any professional.

In fact, writing such a story is a lot harder than writing one in which the characters

are stereotypes who only sit around and discuss ideas—no matter how profound.

But what makes the whole argument somewhat silly is the item I mentioned in the letter section: look at the number of writers who produce either type of science fiction at will. In our first issue, Robert Randall. In this one, Daniel F. Galouye. In the next, Algis Budrys. And in every case, the story in question is loaded with sound scientific—yes, even sociological!—ideas, in addition to its action-adventure basis.

We tried an experiment in this issue, by running the type straight across the page, in one column instead of two. The idea was that since we're running novels, this layout might make them *look* more like novels. But we won't use it again unless you tell us to. To be perfectly honest about it, I much prefer the double columns. —LTS



Clansmen of Fear

by Henry Hasse

*Helpless, Donal saw
the embers of Terran
civilization grow dim
—as the Zone's women
turned oddly alien . . .*

Illustrated by Emsh



Clansmen of Fear

by Henry Hasse

CHAPTER I

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON of the second day when Kathri returned to the Village. Donal watched her striding across the south fields, lithe and long-limbed and tan, hair cascading liquidly to strike off coppery glints from the sun. She held her head high, and even from his distance Donal could discern something of stubborn pride and defiance.

He drew in his breath, feeling the quick surge of pulse which had bothered him of late when looking at Kathri; but with an angry shift of the shoulders he put down his emotions. No, he would *not* be lenient! He had been lenient last time. It had been a mistake. As Elder he had his duties, and the Word must be obeyed if his people were to survive for long.

"Gone two days," he muttered, "and without sanction of Council. It's not as if she didn't *know* the danger . . ." Donal frowned, his face like weathered brown stone. *One* day outside the Zone was the usual maximum before cellular dissolution. Could it be that Kathri was becoming—different? Just as Dorthi had become different?

Lips tight with displeasure, Donal strode to the edge of the Village to meet her.

"What am I to do with you, Kathri? Don't look to me for favor this time! You must be punished, you know."

She stood before him, lower lip thrust out a little. Donal sensed defiance there and a hint of something more, some secret beyond his ken.

Her voice came low and sullen. "I know."

"Well then, tell me! Why did you not come to me for permission?"

"'The Zone is our world, and our Law, and our Life,'" she quoted from Coburn's Scripture. "'The Zone is our hope and our salvation. To leave the Zone is the worst blasphemy—'" She halted, looked up suddenly, and her wide gray eyes met Donal's. "I do not believe it! *You* do not believe! And I did

not come for permission because—you would not have granted.”

Strange . . . Only a year ago he would have considered this blasphemy, but now he did not. Donal looked away from her eyes; he stared beyond the low-rolling plains to where the skeletal structures of Chago were just visible. Even in the sunlight the brighter glow of the radiations could be seen, a steady blanketing arc across the dead city.

He faced her angrily. “Whether *I* believe is not important! Coburn’s Scripture is our only guide, and as Elder I shall see that it is obeyed! You cannot deny that you left the Zone, unaccompanied and unsanctioned?”

She was silent.

“Perhaps you felt it necessary to visit the City. You had need of the radiation?” But he knew she had not gone there. She was a member of Group Three, still months away from the Enlivening.

“No,” she answered. “My trek was south, and—you may as well know it. I saw some of the Outlanders.”

Donal was aghast, but he allowed his voice to drip scorn. “So for two days you were in the Outlands! I presume it was Morghan’s Group you saw.”

“Yes!” Defiantly. “And I saw Dorthi!”

Again her thrust told. Donal closed his eyes, remembering that day a year ago when Dorthi had gone. It had taken him a long time to get over the hurt. And it was more than a personal hurt. It had been sacrilege, an affront—and there was something of deeper meaning that he could not fathom. In three generations Dorthi was the first to leave the Zone, the first to have no further need of the life-giving radiations. And now Kathri . . .

He opened his eyes and looked at her, and because of the renewed ache in his heart he tried to speak softly. “Kathri . . .

HENRY HASSE is one of the real old-timers in the adventure science-fiction field. This is his first magazine appearance in several years, but he has lost none of his magic touch. Seldom if ever has any writer succeeded in making his extra-terrestrials at once so alien, and so completely understandable, as Hasse has in *CLANSMEN OF FEAR*!

twice now you have gone to your sister. And you still will not tell me why?"

She shook her head. "I cannot."

"Very well, Kathri. I must prescribe punishment! Or would you prefer that I place the matter before Council?"

Stark alarm leaped to her eyes. "No, Donal! I—I prefer that you prescribe."

It pleased him that she feared the Council. He stood tall and gaunt above her, savoring the pleasure, as his gaze took in her long-limbed contours. She was sixteen now? Seventeen? Again there came the surge of pulse, but he fought against softening. His gaze flicked to the fields where the Villagers moved beneath the harsh sun, laboring against the stubborn soil where things would barely grow.

"You will work in the fields, Kathri. Every day for three months you will work. You are Adult now, and you must learn what the soil means."

"But my duties at the school, Donal—"

"Will continue! You have deciphered the Books—faster than most—and the young ones must learn to decipher. You will work in the fields each day *after* the period of teaching."

She turned and strode away, and Donal watched her go. His shoulders shrugged in remote annoyance: he felt no victory. But overshadowing his thoughts was a feeling of bitterness, a sense of impending loss. *Two days* she had been away from the Zone with no ill effects. There was no denying it—she was becoming different just as her sister, Dorthi, had become different.

He stood there towering and silent and watched Kathri until she entered her father's house. Then frowning, Donal strode back to help the others in the fields.

IT WAS MIDWAY of the second year (*Basic Cygni Time*) when they passed through the edge of the galaxy and entered the new sector. V'Naarik hunched forward to watch the huge astra-lens, the monotonous unfolding of stars. He wasn't worried yet. The photon tapes had registered a flow of .921, which meant the drainage was minor; their auxiliaries alone carried sufficient potential for the time-return.

Still, when repairs were in order it was best not to delay. V'Naarik flicked over to minimum galactic-drive and glanced again at the astra-lens. Surely in all that expanse there must be planet-sustaining systems! Damn these Sector Surveys and damn the quota! In the interests of Empire it was necessary, he supposed, but when he returned this time he was definitely going to press for transfer . . .

He sat musing pleasantly on the possibilities of such a prospect, then was startled as the control-room door burst open. He whirled and saw Faantl standing there.

"Commander! Commander V'Naarik, sir—"

"What is it, Faantl? What's the meaning of this!" His tone lost its sharp edge as he stared at the man. Faantl's face was tight and scared, hands trembling as he gestured. V'Naarik surged to his feet. "Speak up, man! What's wrong?"

"Sir, you'd better come at once. Register is dropping! Even auxiliaries! The techs are checking now, and they think"—Faantl gulped—"they think it might be etheric loss!"

AFTER HIS EVENING MEAL, prepared and eaten alone, Donal felt a restless unease. It was partly Kathri—but there were other matters. Crops would not be good this year. The soil seemed more stubborn than ever. And now that Morghan's Group had returned, as they always did at the time of the crops . . .

Donal clenched his fists in helpless rage. Would they never be rid of these Outlanders who periodically came raiding, the nomadic ones who roamed the lands where the Zone dwellers could not follow? Proficient at thievery, they had neither the art nor inclination to till the soil. And he knew that Morghan's Group was only waiting now, as last year, skulking in the outlying forests until the crops were ready.

"By the ancient Coburn," Donal swore devoutly, "I'll see that the taking comes harder this year!"

He surged up from the chair and left his house and strode the streets of the Village. The night was warm and soft, the sky a comforting blanket.

No, not comforting. He looked up at the stars and then quickly away, as the vision of the void leaped down to smash against his eyes. The Books—some of the Books that were

left spoke of the stars, spoke learnedly in terms that Donal could scarcely grasp. He felt inadequate, looking at the stars. Inadequate and athirst and hopelessly alone.

He found himself at the Village outskirts where the tiny river rolled past. Again he gazed toward Chago, and saw the faint blanket-glow athrust against the darkening sky. *That* he understood. Coburn's records were full of it. Even now, so long after the—*Happening*—Donal thrilled to that ancient one's recounting. But often he felt his mind tumultuous with questions.

True, those radiations of the ruins meant life—or rather a renewing life-force for such as *they*, since without it they would die. That gruesome fact had been proved often enough. What made the Outlanders different, shunning the City as a place of death and horror? Donal would never admit it, but often of late he had found himself envying the Outlanders, their random life, their freedom to come and go. Much as he hated Morghan's Group, he envied them. And Dorthi was still with them; what was there about Dorthi which had enabled her—

He must read Coburn's Scripture again! The answer was there in the ancient Book, if only he could understand—

His thoughts were abruptly shattered, as a burst of rifle fire sent echoes crashing. Across the fields men were shouting. There came another staccato volley, and Donal could see flashes of orange over near the storehouses.

"Morghan's early this year," he grated, and was glad he had posted a guard. He hurried in that direction, then stopped as a footstep came in the street behind him.

"Donal!" He turned and saw Ral Phillips approaching. The man seemed in a terrible state of distress.

"Thank heaven I found you, Donal! I went to your house, but—"

"What is it, Phillips? Speak up, man!"

"My wife, Betha. She— I'm afraid it's pretty bad! We should not have delayed! If only she had come with us three weeks ago—"

Donal seized Phillips' arm. "The signs, man! Is it deterioration? She's not—"

"No. It's not too advanced yet, but I can see the signs! She's in pain and I'm afraid the cells, the tissues—"

"She wasn't with Group Three at the last Enlivening? Why, man, why?"

"If you'll remember, Donal, she was then eight months with child and very ill! She could not make the trip. She thought she might wait—"

Donal groaned. "When will you ever learn? The Enlivening is necessary, it cannot be bypassed!" He paused, listening. The sound of rifle fire was spasmodic now. He was sure Tanner and the guard could handle it. He seized Phillips' arm and hurried back through the street.

"Get your wife to the City at once. We'll leave immediately! I'll see to the wagon and horses, meanwhile you get some of the women."

"They're already waiting."

"Good!" Donal paused. "How long would you say . . ."

"The child? That too, Donal—soon, I'm afraid! Surely before the night is over!" Phillips shivered where he stood.

"Stop worrying," said Donal. "The radiations are strong to-night. I'll get you to the City in two hours. Betha'll survive it, the replenishing comes quickly . . ."

CHAPTER II

THE REPLENISHING WAS IN TIME, but Betha lost her child, after entering the first-stage spasms of cellular dissolution. This was a thing Donal had seen before. He had seen it much worse than first-stages. They waited in agony for the turning, and then barely pulled her through.

Donal was bone tired as they reached the Village well past midnight. He stabled the horses and returned to his house, and found Tanner waiting to report on the raid.

"It was only a scouting party," said Tanner. "They came along the river. We handled them without too much trouble."

"Like thieves in the night," Donal said with heaving anger. "And it'll be worse! Morghan's going to raid in strength this year . . ."

Tanner nodded, plainly worried. "Prepare yourself, Donal. Some of them had rifles— Lord only knows where they got them! I've never seen Outlanders with rifles before!"

Donal stood in shocked silence. "How many?" he said.

"I counted two, possibly three. But who knows how many

more they have?"

Donal was wondering the same thing. He said grimly, "How many rifles in the Village now?"

"Close to thirty. But some of those have ceased to function. It's the ammunition, Donal!"

"I know. We'll have to find more! I'm calling the Council to session tomorrow—our only answer is to forage the City again. Perhaps those places far to the north."

Wearily, he turned away. Few of the weapons they found were workable any longer, even after thorough cleaning. And ammunition was becoming a greater problem! Most of it turned out to be corroded, and it was almost impossible now to find good ammunition in the ruins.

V'NAARIK WAS WORRIED NOW, but he must not let them know. He stood with his technicians gathered around him, the photon tape in his hands. Potential .093! It was worse than bad—it was unbelievable.

He turned to the energonics engineer and said in a whisper: "This includes auxiliaries as well as primary-drive! How can it be, Kyaala?"

"I wish I knew, sir. Until a short time ago the tapes registered a perpetual .921—and we've made our periodic checks! In all my experience—"

"In all your experience, my dear Kyaala, this may well prove to be your last experience unless we can—" Commander V'Naarik caught himself in time, and waved an imperative hand. "We'll run it again. I shall run it."

Carefully, V'Naarik touched the de-energizer. Twice as carefully he released the tape into the actinium chamber. He watched anxiously as the beta rays sped unleashed to send the counter dials dancing. One thing he was sure of: that chamber was absolutely infallible, the latest product of the Empire laboratories. The error could not be there!

Seconds ticked away. A hush fell as the register dropped steadily. V'Naarik leaned forward to look, and there it was—potential .093.

Kyaala was more than miserable. He was frightened. "I've heard of dissipating sub-level energies, sir—but we would have caught that! This has got to be something else. You don't

suppose," he paused sheepishly, "it could be—etheric loss?"

V'Naarik hit him with a scornful glance. Etheric loss was an old wives' tale! V'Naarik hadn't heard of it since—

Wait. Yes, not too long ago. Dar Turibek had brought a tale back, claiming it had happened to him when he emerged from the galaxy fringe into a sub-sector. The astro-physicists were supposed to be studying it now. Theoretically there could be etheric-stress variables between galaxies . . .

He turned to face the techs and tried to keep his voice under control. "As of this moment we're on manual drive. Yes, I said manual! I know it will be tedious, but we shall have to make planetary testings! Rajjo—shield all generators. You, Kyaala, do everything you can to build up auxiliary potential; we'll need every source of power for the search. Braliik! See that all planetary scanners are made ready and then use them! You know what to look for."

V'Naarik brought himself erect and gave them the final truth. "Well? We have perhaps three days. Get to work, all of you—if you ever want to see Cygni again!"

DONAL WATCHED KATHRI in the fields the following day. She worked hard and uncomplainingly, with a certain stubbornness. Perhaps the punishment was just what she needed.

Later that evening he sat alone in his house and stared at the Books.

Now his mood was shattered, the mood he had felt when he watched the soft surging haze of Chago to the north. He hated Chago! He hated the radiation and all that it meant, their bleak existence and their barren little twelve-mile world.

Trapped! Well, weren't they? Why not admit it? "The Zone is our world and our Law and our Life," as the ancient Coburn put it. Donal laughed harshly as he rose to pace the room.

Captives within the Zone. He knew it too well! And the experience of Phillips' wife last night brought it home to him. It made him remember that day two years ago, when he and a small group of the men had ventured too far beyond the Zone while hunting in the forests, and were delayed in returning. He remembered the half of them who had died. He

remembered their pleadings when the realization came, the swift darkening skin and shredding flesh, their screams of agony as cellular tissues broke down for lack of the livening radiation. There had been nothing to do but leave them there; he and half the others had made it back just in time, to lie ill and weakened for days.

Now more than ever he envied the Outlanders who moved free and unencumbered wherever they wished, without need of the replenishing.

Bitter with his thoughts, he strode to his shelf and pulled out the yellowing three-ringed book. Coburn's Scripture. Donal stared at the faded binding, the patched and tattered leaves, then hurled the book from him in a gust of anger. Scripture! He was sick of it! Truth was there, much of actual record—but much nonsense as well. Too much of speculation, fore-visioning, all mixed up with terminology that Donal could never understand.

But Coburn was right about the Zone. He had foreseen that those few who were born and survived within its boundaries would be forever limited to the radiation, bound to it by need of cellular sustenance—something about essential salts in the blood and “hard impregnation” of the genes. Donal understood it only dimly. As for the rest, Coburn's crabbed writing about future generations and something he called “mutations” who might be born endowed with peculiar talents, physical or mental, beyond any previous knowing—Donal had given up trying to decipher it.

He returned to his chair and sat sprawling sullenly. There was so much beyond his ken! In particular, Coburn's ancient terminology continued to bother him. “Mutations”! It was something strange supposed to happen to them later . . . Why had Coburn been so vague? Donal was the future generation, and his life was no different from his father's or his father's before him. He still grubbed in the soil. He was still bound to the Zone. Of course there was the matter of Dorthi, and apparently Kathri was becoming like her . . .

Donal sat bolt upright. *Different*. Could that be what Coburn meant? Was Dorthi the first? Somehow Donal had assumed that the mysterious thing would effect them all . . . or had Coburn mentioned that it would be discriminate and isolated? He couldn't remember . . .

The rap at the door startled him, and he sank back into his chair. "Enter!" he called.

THE DOOR PUSHED OPEN, and Kathri stood there. She paused for a moment and then stepped hesitantly inside. Tall and slim she looked—but not all slimness either. That was another thing Donal had noticed of late. He turned his head away and grumbled in his throat.

"Girl—if you come to ask that I reconsider the punishment, you're wasting your time. The Council would have been more severe—as I should have been!"

She didn't speak. She turned her head about, examining the room as if seeing it for the first time; as if she hadn't been there many times before, to pore through the books. Donal watched her now and said nothing.

She spied Coburn's Scripture lying in the corner where Donal had hurled it. Softly, she walked over and picked it up. She re-arranged the crumpled pages. She stepped to the shelf and placed the book where it belonged, and without a word moved toward the curtained doorway into the kitchen.

Donal heard her moving around out there, doing something with the pans he'd neglected to put away. Presently she returned, bringing a steaming pot of coffee and a cup.

Coffee supplies are low, Donal thought. *We'll be lucky if we find more at the City . . .* But he said nothing.

Turning, Kathri spied his pipe and tobacco-tin on the table. She looked at him questioningly. With an effort of will, Donal shook his head. *Tobacco too*, he thought.

She came and sat on the rug at his feet.

"The punishment was just, Donal. I deserved more! But that's not why I came."

Donal sipped appreciatively at the coffee, and watched her.

"I *had* to leave the Zone, Donal. Don't you see? I find it hard to explain—but I'll try—I know you'll understand."

"I understand, Kathri. You were very close, you and Dorthi. You-felt you had to see your sister again?"

"More than felt. Dorthi *wanted* me to come; she talked to me and asked me to come, because—she had something to tell."

Donal placed his cup on the table, very gently, and leaned

forward to stare at her. "Kathri. I want you to think carefully before you answer. You say Dorthi asked you to come? When was this?"

"Three days ago."

"But Dorthi was not here three days ago. She has been gone for a year!"

She looked up at him with anguished pleading. "I said it would not be easy to explain—I have not dared speak of it before! Oh, Donal, I thought you would understand!"

"I will, Kathri. I'm trying. Tell me—just how did Dorthi talk with you?"

"Well . . . by words that have no sound. But not words either!" She frowned, then touched her forehead. "I just *feel* the thoughts here, and right away I know what Dorthi—"

Donal felt his mind spinning. He got up from his chair and paced away, not daring to look at her. Telepathy! He had learned that much from Coburn's writing, and he understood essentially how it might be. But faced with it now he couldn't believe it. It was just too fantastic! *Mutant*. Coburn's prediction was happening; this must be the beginning. . . .

"You're not angry with me, Donal?"

"Angry? Of course not! You can't help it if you're—" He caught the words abruptly, aware that anger was in his voice. He paced back and stood looking down at her, as an appalling thought occurred. "You—cannot receive other thoughts? Only Dorthi's?"

"Oh, others too, but only faintly as yet." She smiled up at him and her eyes danced knowingly. "But much better than last year! Sometimes when you look at me—like yesterday in the fields—"

He flushed darkly and quickly changed the subject. "You said Dorthi had something to tell! What was it? Something about the Outlanders?"

"No, not that. Just things. Woman things. She has a husband now, and—" Kathri paused, frowning. "Yes. There was something else."

"Then what, girl? It must have been important!"

She looked at him, lower lip thrust out a little. "You won't believe me. You wouldn't believe me last time."

"I'll believe you, Kathri. I'll believe *anything* you tell me now!"

"Well, it's—Dorthi. These *things* come much stronger to her now. And she has seen the lights again, Donal. This time very strong!"

THE LAST TIME! Donal remembered now. It was over a year ago, just before Dorthi had left the Zone. Dorthi had been strangely silent and moody, but she confided in her younger sister. And Kathri had gone to the Council with some garbled story about Dorthi being able to "see lights" that no one else could see. No one had listened, for Kathri was scarcely more than a child. But a week later came the marauding groups from the west, to pillage and rob the fields—*just as Dorthi had said they would come*. Four Village men had died in that battle.

Donal gestured for his pipe. Kathri tamped the tobacco expertly and handed it to him; her gaze was anxious on his face.

For a long minute he smoked in silence. He was beginning to understand Coburn better now; the "mutations" would come in strange and diverse ways! Dorthi and Kathri—and which family would be next?

He leaned forward, took her shoulders gently and felt her shiver beneath his touch. "I believe you, Kathri. Now you must tell me! Do you also see—the lights?"

She shook her head. "No. Not yet. Dorthi says later perhaps I will."

"But when Dorthi sees—these lights—it's not in the way you or I would see? It's—here?" His fingers brushed his forehead.

She nodded solemnly, aware of his concern.

"Good. Now, what about after she sees the lights?"

"It's not after. It all happens at once. She says that she *knows* things—just for an instant! Things that have not yet happened, but are about to happen . . ."

Donal nodded. Precognition! Again he was remembering Coburn's strange terms, which seemed less strange to him now.

"And this time, Kathri. What has Dorthi seen that—that will happen?"

"Men. Many men will come."

"From the west? The south? More marauding groups?"

She shivered, huddling close to Donal's knees. "No. This time it is different. They will come—from a place that Dorthi doesn't know. Very far! Strange men such as none of us have ever seen! They will come to the City, and they have strange machines, and they use the machines—" Her voice broke and she looked up at him, fright in her eyes. "Something will happen to the City. There is danger, Donal—much danger! For us and all the Groups!"

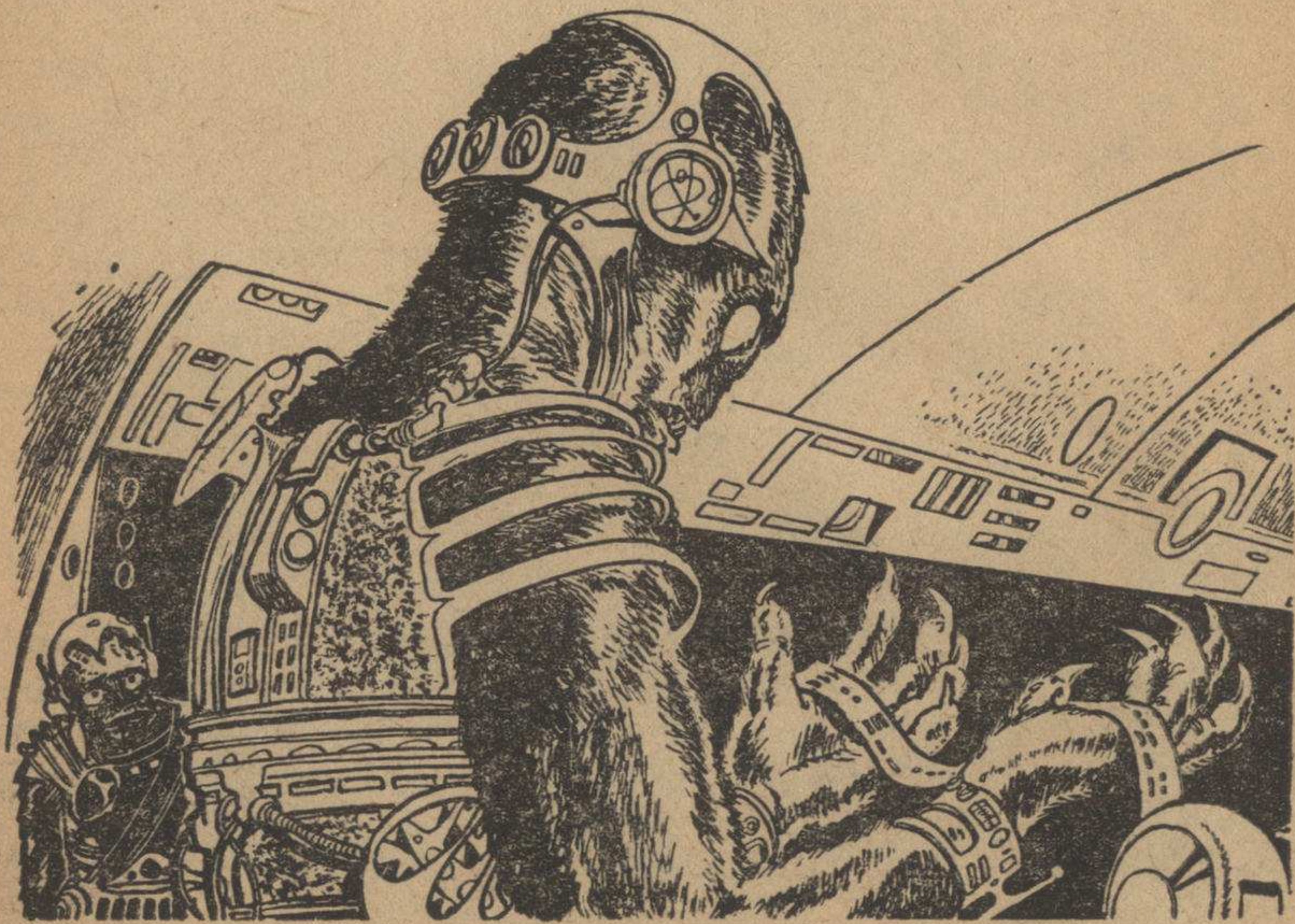
"What else? What else could Dorthi see?"

"I'm not sure. I think there was more, but Dorthi would not tell. She became frightened, and—it made me frightened."

A chill was dragging at Donal's spine, but he must not let Kathri know. He tossed his pipe aside. "Kathri. This thing is important. I must go and talk with your sister! Tomorrow I'll have the wagons made ready, and you must come along to show us where Morghan's encamped. It's not too far?"

"Scarcely half a day. We'll be safe. Morghan bears no enmity, not really, Donal. They are good people."

"Good people! Does Morghan intend to raid our crops again this year? Did you learn that, by any chance?"



Kathri flushed darkly, and for a long moment she was silent.
“Donal . . .”

“Yes, Kathri?”

“I no longer have need of the radiations. I can go away from the Zone! I could go to stay, as Dorthi has gone. We—we have become different.”

He waited, gazing down at her.

“Dorthi has asked me to come.”

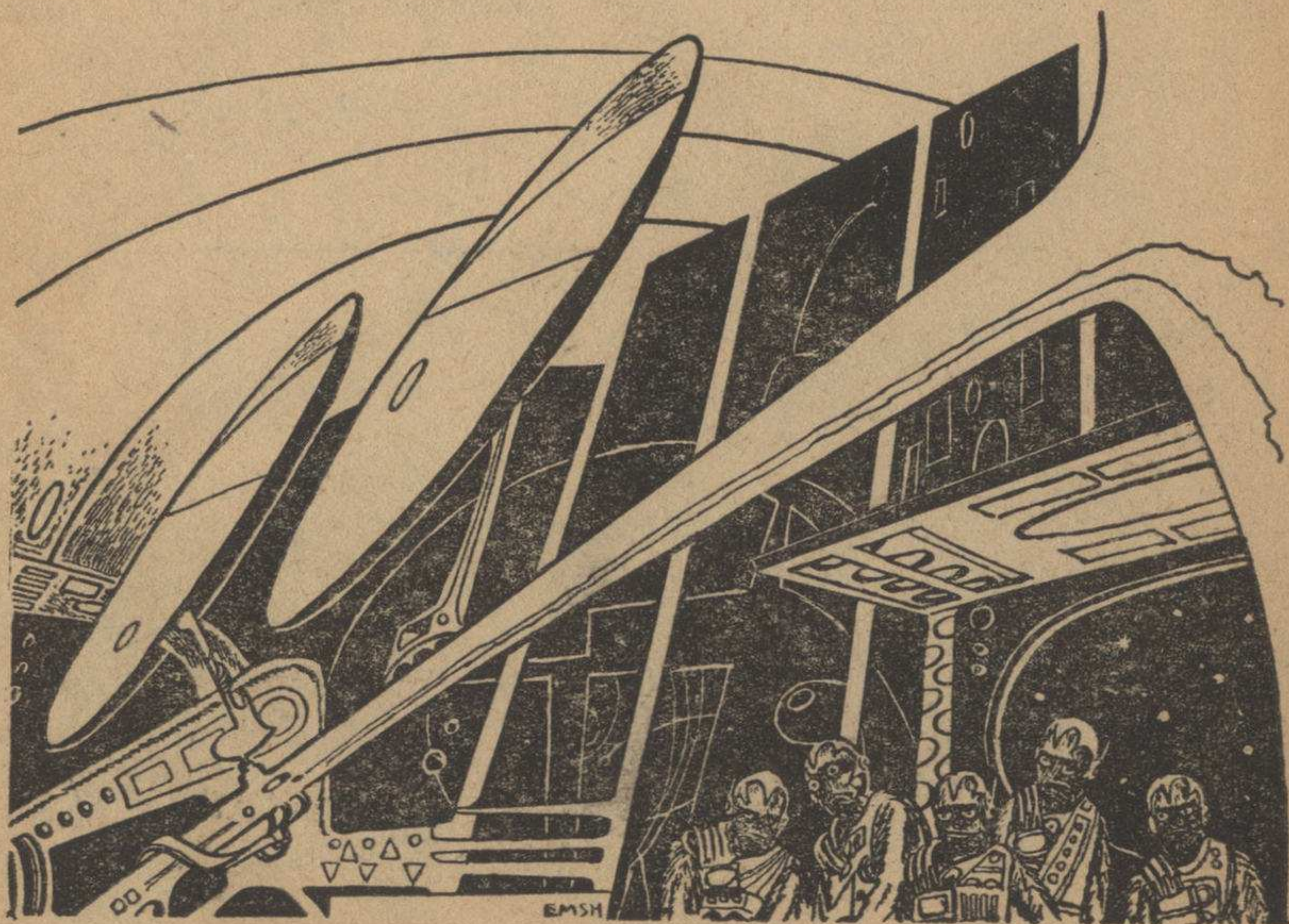
He felt quick panic. A heavy throbbing at his throat. He tried to make his voice calm. “Your father would not like it, Kathri, if you left the Village. He would be sad to lose both daughters—”

She looked up; he was startled to see her eyes moist and glistening. “And you? You, Donal?”

“Yes. I would be very sad. I could not bear it. I— Oh, Kathri, I do not want you to go! Kathri, Kathri . . .”

Suddenly she was weeping, face buried in his knees. “I don’t *wish* to leave the Village, Donal. Not ever, not ever! Not if you . . . if you want me . . .”

He stroked her hair gently, his heart welling with all the



burden of the lonely days. "I do, Kathri. I want you very much. I want you here! Kathri?"

"Yes?"

"I shall speak with your father tomorrow, Kathri."

CHAPTER III

TANNER WAS READY, and Ashley, and the two Loren boys and half a dozen others. Mears alone refused to come. "I don't like leaving the Zone, Donal. It's dangerous, and what's the sense of it? Sure, I know Council has sanctioned the trip, but I remember that time two years ago—"

Donal remembered too. He was trying not to think of it.

"Look. We'll be back in time! Morghan's Group is close, and I've allowed a margin of safety." He smiled wryly at Mears. "Very well, then. One of the others will use your rifle. We may get some game along the way."

That did it. Mears hurried back to his house for his rifle. Forays beyond the Zone were dangerous, but the men were always willing to risk it for fresh provender.

Ashley grinned, fondling his rifle. "We may find more than game, eh, Donal? Maybe some Outlanders? Lord, it's been a long time since I've used this!"

Donal whirled upon him. "None of that, Ashley! Listen, you men! There'll be no warring on Outlanders! We go in peace. If we encounter game, well and good—but our primary purpose is to contact Morghan's Group! Is that understood?"

There were grumblings of assent.

"Very well. Ten hours at the most is our limit. If anything goes wrong—trouble with the wagons, horses going lame—we turn back at once."

Kathri rode in the lead-wagon with Donal, and soon they were on the crumbling concrete road leading south. Donal gazed about with livening interest. According to the books there had once been machines traveling this road, machines that made a full day's travel in one hour. He had seen many of those machines in the City, shattered and rusting, so it must have been true. And he remembered his very first trip to the City with his father. Donal was then about nine, and his father pointed the machines out to him, with some wistful talk about "fuel" to make them go. But nowhere in the City

had they found the "fuel," only the blackened places where it once had been.

He became aware of Kathri beside him. She sat straight and silent, gaze fixed on the rolling lands ahead, but occasionally she glanced at Donal as though wishing to speak.

"What is it, Kathri?"

"The—the thing you said last night. You meant it, Donal? That you would speak with my father—this morning—"

Donal threw back his head, and laughed, and placed an arm about her. "And so I did, Kathri. *Early* this morning. It will be arranged—when we return."

Swift crimson touched her face, but she nestled close to him. The morning sun was gently warm and never before had the skies seemed so clear, with all about them the tang of green growing things. Presently she became worried, glancing at the men's rifles behind her.

Donal said bluntly: "You fear what may happen when we meet Morghan."

"Yes, Donal. When we come armed in this way—"

"It is necessary! I wish them to see that we're prepared. But I have a plan, Kathri; it may end this hostility between our peoples if only Morghan will listen."

But it was Dorthi who occupied his thoughts, not Morghan. Her vision of strange men who would come, with strange machines, worried him more than he cared to admit.

For a long time they proceeded in silence. No game had been sighted, and Donal could hear the disappointed grumblings of his men. The route was becoming tortuous now; foliage sprang high and thick to encroach upon the road, while the forests lay on every side beyond.

Suddenly a shot rang out from the second wagon. Mears leaped into the undergrowth to pull in the deer which he had brought down. Minutes later came another shot, and then another. The men were exultant now.

Donal glanced anxiously overhead. The sun told him that three hours had passed! Had he allowed enough margin for safety? If they should have trouble with Morghan—

He turned quickly to Kathri. "This is the way? You are sure?"

And then, before she could answer, Donal saw the Outlander. The man stood in a tiny clearing just ahead, a startled

look on his dark face as he caught sight of the wagons. Ashley saw him too; he let out a yell and his rifle came up.

Donal acted barely in time. He sprang backward to the bed of the wagon, throwing up an arm. Ashley's shot went wild, clipping off branches above the Outlander's head. The latter whirled and sped away, soon was lost in the tangling shadows.

"You fool! You utter fool!" Livid with anger, Donal whirled upon Ashley. "Do you realize what that might have done? Loren—take his rifle. Don't let the fool touch it again!"

Ashley was contrite, but the damage had been done. Donal drove on in bitter silence. Kathri was peering ahead, and presently she pointed to a place where the road dipped low to cross a stream near a crumbling culvert.

"This is the place! I found Morghan's Group very close to here."

There was no further doubt. A score of men leaped out from the trees to bar the way. They were a ragged lot, dark-skinned and bearded; two of them carried rifles, Donal noticed, but the rest were equipped with clubs and wicked-looking thongs.

Donal turned quickly to his men. "Be careful," he cautioned. "And don't be surprised at what I do!"

He brought the horses to swift rein, climbed down leisurely and walked forward, cradling his rifle. In the brief silence he noticed the difference. The skins of the Outlanders were dark and leathery, coarse-grained; his own skin, while equally tan from working in the fields, was smooth and faintly shimmering, almost translucent.

Again he surveyed the Outlander throng. Only the two rifles were in evidence.

"I would speak with Morghan!" Donal addressed the nearest man. "At once, fellow! We have little time."

THE MAN DIDN'T ANSWER. He was staring past Donal, gaze fixed greedily upon Kathri. Donal saw it and bristled with quick anger. "Take your eyes away, fellow!" He lifted the rifle and strode forward.

The man crouched back sullenly, but Donal did not seem satisfied. This was the moment he wanted. Tossing his rifle aside, he stepped forward and deliberately back-handed the

Outlander across the mouth. It was a provoked insult—and a challenge.

The man's eyes widened, then became delighted. With a roar he launched himself forward. Donal danced lightly away, parrying. The Outlander was approximately his own height, with possibly an advantage in weight. A clubbing fist took Donal in the side, and the breath left his body. He lost his footing, but recovered and drove two blows into the Outlander's face that left the man spinning.

With mutters of approval the others had fallen back to form a circle. Again the Outlander came boring in. The man had weight and knew how to use it! Donal met his rush, parrying and rolling—but a fist crashed through that brought blood from his mouth and left him dazed. A knee caught Donal in the stomach. Another blow to the groin left him doubled over with a burning sickness. Before he could move, another knee caught him beside the head and he was sprawled face downward upon the ground.

More mutters of approval from the Outlanders. Donal shook his head dazedly. He knew the sort of tactics they liked now! Fighting the pain and nausea, he launched himself upward. The man was boring in again. Donal side-stepped, jabbed to carry his opponent off-balance. The man laughed contemptuously. A lashing fist to the mouth erased it, then Donal feinted the man's guard and crashed a right hand that left the Outlander tottering. The next blow brought him to his knees. Donal leaped in. A back-handed smash across the eyes. Another behind the neck. Viciously, Donal brought his knee up full into the man's throat and the Outlander sprawled backward, limp and gasping.

He came up slowly. Contemptuously, Donal put both hands on his shoulders and sent him sprawling again. The man raised his hands feebly in signal of defeat.

There wasn't a murmur from the circle of Outlanders now. Donal stepped back, wiping blood from his mouth.

"I would speak with Morghan!" he said again.

"I am Morghan." A giant of a man, full bearded and tall, much taller than Donal, pushed his way through the throng. He paused to glance at the battered Outlander. "Take this one away," he said to one of his men. "Put him with the women, since he fights like a woman!"

He turned to Donal. "I am Morghan. I think you remember me—Donal?"

Donal surveyed him coolly for a moment. "I remember. From last year, when you came raiding our crops!"

"And perhaps this year as well—Zone-Dweller!"

"That will be interesting—Outlander!"

"Hairless one! You who are bound to the ruins!"

"Bearded one! You who hunt with spears and clubs!" Donal exchanged epithets, knowing it was expected.

Morghan bowed slightly. Now that the exchange was over, he waited.

Donal glanced at the array of rifles behind him. "You come raiding this year, Morghan, and many of your men will die."

Still the man waited, not answering, a glint of amusement in his eyes. And then Donal knew the reason. "Morghan!" One of the Outlanders had circled wide behind the wagons, and raised the canvas, to discover the deer carcasses.

Morghan went to look, and then came striding back to Donal. Mockery was in his tone. "It seems that *you* are proficient in raiding, hairless one!"

Donal gave a tight smile, lifting his rifle. "It was easy—with these. The forests are free!"

"But the City is not free—to us. You know that the City means death to us because of the radiations!"

Donal pondered. There was truth in Morghan's words. He glanced at Tanner and the others who moved restlessly behind him, not liking any of this.

"And you are aware, Morghan, that to stay for long outside the Zone means death for us. It's rarely that we dare come into the forests for game."

"And yet you come today," replied Morghan, a dangerous smile about his lips. "You come with many rifles—and one of my men was fired upon."

Donal had been expecting that. He felt his men pressing closer, and he caught the sullen looks from the Outlander Group. If it came to a showdown, the rifles would win, but many men would die. He spoke quickly:

"It was a stupid accident, Morghan. And I do not condone such accidents! I assure you the man responsible for it will be punished!" He turned to Loren. "Give me Ashley's rifle."

Loren passed it over, and Donal tossed the rifle to Morghan.

"It is yours! A gift from me."

Before Morghan could recover from his surprise, Donal played his ace card. His gaze flicked to the pair of Outlanders who carried rifles. "I see that you already have a few firearms. I seem to recognize them. Perhaps," he added meaningfully, "that is another reason why we prefer to avoid the forests."

Morghan flushed with quick anger. "We do not kill men wantonly, Donal!"

"Did I say it? I merely thought you might care to explain how you came in possession."

"Two months ago we stumbled upon a pair of your men out here. They were already dead, and their flesh—" Morghan's face twisted, he seemed not to want to talk about it. "So we took their rifles," he said sullenly.

Donal remembered. Calkins and Stuart, who had gone off alone and never returned. They hadn't been the first. He dismissed it now, as he looked into Morghan's face and liked what he saw there.

"I believe that you speak truth, Morghan, so I will speak truth. We come here today for two reasons." He paused, aware that every man was intent upon his words. "Morghan, the City is a vast and bewildering place. It is beyond your imagining! I suspect that we still have not scoured it all. There are some great areas outlying to the north, which we have scarcely touched because the passage is so dangerous."

"Keep speaking, Donal," Morghan's voice came in a whisper.

"It is possible that we may find more rifles there, and ammunition. If we provide you with them, will you bring us game? In exchange for that, you may share in our crops without raiding."

Morghan was at once startled and eager. "How many rifles, Donal?"

"Who can say? Whatever we can spare. First you must prove your faith—and if we do provide you, a balance must be maintained!"

Morghan caressed the rifle in his arms, and Donal knew he had won his point. "Come to our camp," said Morghan. "We will talk this matter over."

"No! We'll discuss it another time—perhaps soon. When I have sat with my Council and you have sat with yours. Just

now I must speak with Dorthi! It's very important, Morghan, and we have little time!"

"Dorthi? The strange one who left your Zone?" Morghan nodded. "Come," he said, "I will take you to her."

THEY SAT AT THE EDGE of a stream beyond the camp—Donal and Kathri and Dorthi. From behind them came the shouts and laughter of Donal's and Morghan's men, as they prepared a feast over the fires.

"Dorthi . . . Kathri has told me about your vision of the men who will come. Strange men, she said, such as none of us has ever seen. It's very important that I know! If the City is in danger . . ."

Dorthi was older than Kathri by two years. She took her sister's hand now, with something like motherly affection.

"Can you remember, Dorthi? I believe in your vision! Now I believe! What kind of men are they? And you are sure—they'll come to the Zone?"

"Yes, Donal. I saw them at the City. But that is yet to come!"

Donal said uncertainly, "I think I understand that."

"Men like you, but—but strangely different. Their color—it is like the pans you use for cooking!"

"Silver?"

She nodded.

Donal sat motionless, feeling a cold horror rise in him. "I've never seen Outlanders like that! Where will they come from? The east—the north?"

She leaned forward with hands touching her brow. "I still remember it, Donal. I saw it so clearly! Not east, or north, but—" She straightened and lifted a hand to the sky. "From there! They will come down in machines through the night. Machines that swim in a glow of color. But these are not as frightening as the machines they bring with them—"

Again Donal felt horror. It washed over him in waves, much like that time when he had been far outside the Zone with little time to return. He glanced at Kathri, who huddled close, clinging to her sister. She knew! She knew that her sister spoke the truth—

"Dorthi, listen to me. When? When do they come?"

"I'm not sure. Soon, I think. One day—two. I know it will be at night."

Precognition! Would the ancient Coburn have understood all this, he wondered? And Kathri—would *she* have this frightening talent after a few years?

He thrust the thought away. Again he questioned Dorthi, until she became weary of answering. She could tell him little more. Donal knew he would have to persuade the Council, rouse them to the danger. He called his men and they hurried back to the wagons, where Donal spoke briefly with Morghan.

"I'll return, Morghan. Just as soon as possible. Never fear, our peoples shall have the pact!" But just now Donal felt an urgency and a foreboding, a far greater threat than Outland raiders.

As they pulled out, he saw Dorthi in heated conversation with her husband, a tall youth who had watched suspiciously during their talk. Now he was protesting angrily. He seized her arm, but Dorthi pulled away and came racing after them, to climb into the seat beside Kathri.

Donal hit her with a gauging glance. "You're coming with us? While your husband stays here!"

"I must! I'll return. But now I must come with you. I—I want to be with Kathri."

Her voice was strange, and stranger still was the way she buried her face in Kathri's shoulder. It was almost, Donal thought, as if she *knew* she were going to be with her sister for the last time.

Donal felt a chill at his spine. He wondered—he just wondered if there was something Dorthi hadn't told him?

CHAPTER IV

"**W**AIT!"

Donal thrust out a hand, and the others hugged the shattered stone of the buildings as they came to a halt behind him.

Cradling his rifle, he peered through the darkening streets ahead. This was their usual route into the City, the rubbled terrain familiar to them all; but Donal's eyes were not upon the streets now. He raised his face to the dark sky and glittering stars.

Was it only imagination—or had one of the stars moved? A dozen times this night he thought he had seen it. He waited, face upturned, feeling the quick pulse of excitement.

It hadn't been easy, convincing the Council. Almost to a man they were skeptical of Dorthi's tale; this girl who had run away to become an Outlander was not to be trusted in any event, and who was to say this was not some scheme of Morghan's? But it was Donal's grim concern, more than his eloquence, that finally swayed them, and it was decided the City should be patrolled. But even so, Donal knew that Tanner and the others didn't quite believe.

Again Donal peered, and suddenly went tense as there came a definite movement across the sky. That was no star! It moved in a distinct arc, blossoming slowly out from a pinpoint of light. Then there were two. Swiftly they came and without a sound, dropping through the night, two squarish fluctuating patches of light.

Meteors? No meteor had ever acted like that! The men crouched and waited for concussion. But there was no concussion or sound; uncannily, the lights seemed to hover for a minute and then disappeared behind the skeletal buildings far ahead.

So now his men believed! Donal heard them jabbering excitedly behind him. Still he peered upward; stars glittered, but no more of the patches came.

"Mears," he called. "Take three men and circle to the right! Tanner, your men will go left. You know the streets. Keep out of sight—remember, this is reconnaissance!"

Tanner answered, and his voice was shaken. "If we should sight these—these men? They'll surely be armed—"

"I said it's reconnaissance! You are not to fire." Donal paused, considering. "Unless," he added grimly, "you hear my shots first. That will be the signal to come on the double."

He strode ahead, keeping close to the buildings. Kathri and Dorthi followed, together with three of the men. The girls had insisted on coming despite his protests; they were both good with the rifles. There had been something strangely urgent in Dorthi's insistence . . .

They pressed forward, clambering across rubble and skirting the weakened structures. Danger was here, and not alone from the men out of the sky! Donal had known some of these struc-

tures to come crashing down. Many of the steel girders were exposed, corroded by time and the elements, while in other places only heaps of powdered masonry and fused metal marked the spots where buildings had stood.

He heard Kathri coming behind him, stumbling, just a little frightened. He remembered then—it was her first trip here at night. At night it was not good. He fell back to walk beside her.

Dorthi came too, strangely silent in step and mood.

The City was softly aglow, not appreciable near at hand, but the merest tinge just discernible in the widening distance. Already Donal could feel the Enlivening! Every cell of his body seemed to flourish in response. "*The Zone is our world, and our Law and our Life—*"

Quickly, he put down the vague unease that rose to disturb his mind. He stared across a barren space toward a building whose walls had toppled inward. He would never forget this place! It was the place where his father had died, trying to find access to some books which he knew to be inside. He had been barely twelve years old at the time.

Donal marched on, thinking of those two descending patches of light. There had been something ominous about their soft soundlessness. Men from the stars? He could scarcely believe it, though some of the books did mention the possibility of such things. . . .

They were nearing the huge barren place at the heart of the City where most of the buildings had toppled outward. Donal turned, cautioned the men to silence. He felt sure that the light-patches had descended somewhere close to here. They slipped on softly, avoiding the debris and hugging the shadows.

And then Donal saw it—saw it for a single petrifying instant. He sprang back swiftly, gathering Kathri in one arm as he scurried to the shelter of a shattered doorway. The others followed suit, falling against the stone behind him.

RESTING IN THE CENTER of the rubble-strewn area, some thirty yards away, was something beyond comprehension. It appeared to be a machine of sorts—a platform, glass-enclosed, with six vanes spaced about its

perimeter. From the vanes came a soft surging violet radiance that rose and fell, rose and fell, as if from some internal heart.

But Donal was watching the men. The silver men! There were six of them. They had come down from the platform and were now engaged in manipulating another machine, a thing of towering tubes and reaching antennae and vast spiraling coils.

Kathri pressed forward, whispering at his ear. "The men of silver. Dorthi was right!" She clutched the rifle as she crept forward. "Donal—what are they doing?"

"Whatever it is, it's not good! Wait—" Donal edged out from the doorway, easing his rifle forward.

Those towering tubes had come alive with a strange brilliance—dimming, then rising, dimming and rising to livid color, with a sort of insatiability that was frightening. Donal heard the singing of coils. He saw the pronged metal fingers turning in every direction. And then with a shock he saw a subtle difference in the soft radiation-glow that overlay the area. That glow was concentrating *inward—inward without cessation from all the distance around, to coalesce about the platform.*

Donal could not have said how it was happening, but in that instant he knew! He knew it would continue. This was but a sample. Other machines would be brought, to suck the radiation into the coils until all the City was left a dark and desolate heap.

For some reason these silver men wanted the radiation.

And if that happened, he—the Villagers, the Zone-Dwellers—

Dorthi had been right. These men brought evil!

He felt a quick upsurge of anger. Suddenly the stock of the rifle was familiar against his shoulder, and he was squeezing the trigger again and again.

One of the silver men—the one nearest the coils—dropped without a sound, rolled over and lay still. Donal exulted! Behind him, Loren's rifle cracked in his ear. Another silver man staggered but failed to go down. And suddenly there were no longer any silver men out there! With a speed that left Donal gaping, they had scattered away from the machine to take shelter behind the debris.

Donal cursed softly. Perhaps he had erred in firing so soon.

Surely invaders such as these would be armed!

He peered across the area, searching out the debris. No movement anywhere. He nodded grimly; at this sort of deployment his men were masters.

"Loren," he called softly. "They may try to reach the building over there. You and Brown cover that space. The rest follow me, and keep to the walls! When we get closer, spread out and find cover; fire a few rounds to keep them pinned down."

They moved forward, crouched low, searching out the ruins and doorways. Kathri was close beside him, rifle held ready; Donal wished he hadn't permitted her to come! He thought he saw a bulk, faintly shimmering. Again he fired, and the bulk dropped quickly out of sight.

Still no movement out there. His eyes searched the surrounding streets . . . Had Mears' and Tanner's groups heard the shots? They ought to be arriving soon.

Donal was puzzled now. Why was there no answering fire from these silver men? Five of them left, he thought grimly; he could still see the one lying at the edge of the platform.

The platform! Perhaps their weapons were there! If so, this would be easier—

Then suddenly Dorthi was crouched beside him, whispering urgently:

"Donal, wait! I—I'm getting their thoughts. They are not concerned with us. They are—in contact with someone else—"

"I can feel it too," Kathri whispered. "Their minds are strong!"

Donal gripped Dorthi's arm. "In contact with who?"

"Talking. Talking with someone overhead. A ship, a great ship! Telling what has happened. Asking for more men to come." She paused. "Yes, many more will come."

"These five! Can you tell if they're armed? Quickly!"

It was Kathri who answered. "Yes! *They have weapons, they can harm us—* Donal, wait! We cannot win—"

But he was on his feet, calling to the men on either side: "Cover me!" Then he was sprinting for the platform, rifle thrust forward, eyes searching as he ran. A shot rang out behind him, and he saw a silver man ploughing for cover. More shots covered him. A silver man sprang up, very close, holding a strangely pronged tube; something thin and pale

lashed out and Donal felt heat at his shoulder. He swung the rifle stock up viciously, caught the man solidly below the chin, and his way was clear.

He reached the platform, sprang through a narrow doorway. He turned, and it was then he saw that Kathri had come behind him, stumbling and gasping—but she still clung to her rifle! Donal pulled her in, glanced quickly around. He thrust hard against a protruding lever, and a glassite sheathe closed swiftly across the opening.

Kathri stumbled to her feet, still gasping. "Donal! What do you hope to gain?"

He didn't answer. He was crossing to the center of the dome-enclosed room where a set of controls thrust upward. No time now for selection! If these men were sending more reinforcements— Grasping the central bar, he tugged, and it came free with a soft clicking movement.

The ascent was so abrupt that Donal staggered, pushed the bar away in panic. Nothing happened! The ground was dropping away at a dizzying rate. Desperately, he fumbled at the control. At last it clicked into place, and their ascent halted gently as though against a cushion of air.

Together, they peered through the transparent floor. The City was an awesome sight far below. Kathri shuddered and turned her eyes away. "Donal—"

"No! We can't return now." Excitement was on him, and the dawning of a plan. He surveyed the interior of the shell. It was bare save for the central control and a four-foot screen of glass with panelling beneath. A soft violet aura sprang from their outer perimeter. "I'll learn to control this thing!"

It was very simple after all, merely movements of the bar in the desired direction. The faintly clicking ratchets and delicacy of touch was the secret. Suddenly they were surging upward.

"Donal, our men are down there!"

"And they'll hold their own," he said grimly. "Those we saw were only the vanguard. They must not send more! If there's a ship overhead we may be able to reach it. I want to talk with these men!"

He saw the doubt in her eyes.

"Kathri, they're only human, the same as us!" He was remembering that rifle stock against the silver man's chin, the

way he had toppled back with pain and surprise on his flat face. "Our only chance is to establish an understanding with these people!"

But what was it Dorthi had tried to tell him? That they couldn't win. She was resigned, she had seemed to know. . . . Donal felt a sudden terrible doubt, a tightness at his throat. Suppose he did find the ship? Could he talk to these alien ones? Was it possible to make them understand about the radiations?

Suddenly he remembered the strange pronged instrument which the silver man had aimed at him.

And he remembered something else. A silver man was dead! The other five might be dead too, if Tanner and the others did their work. If this alien race was the vengeful kind—

"We must make them understand! It's our only chance, Kathri."

She didn't answer, but stood silent and resigned, the color gone from her lips. She seemed to know, as Dorthi had known. . . .

They were very high now, much higher than he dared guess. The City was a dwindling dot of haze. The sky had taken on a terrible blackness, and a chill was creeping in. Perhaps he should return! They could make a stand at the City—

He glanced at Kathri and knew she was thinking the same. He wavered—and suddenly it was decided for him.

Angling swiftly down from the left was a squarish patch of light, another platform. It was still far away, but growing larger. There came a shrill buzzing sound, and Donal whirled to see the panels aglow beneath the screen. They blinked on and off, insistently. He stood hesitant for a moment, then his hand came down on the protruding knob.

The screen leaped alive abruptly. Reflected there was a silver man, huge-visaged, a look of stark surprise on his face as he stared point-blank at Donal. The merest second—then the screen went blank.

Instantly, Donal knew he had erred. His hand came down on the bar, and with a lurch they slid to the right in a long descent.

The other platform was growing and taking shape, as it slid unerringly toward them. Donal tried to ease off. Upward on the bar, left, right—swiftly downward again. It was no

use. The other came faster, twisting and plunging to follow their every move.

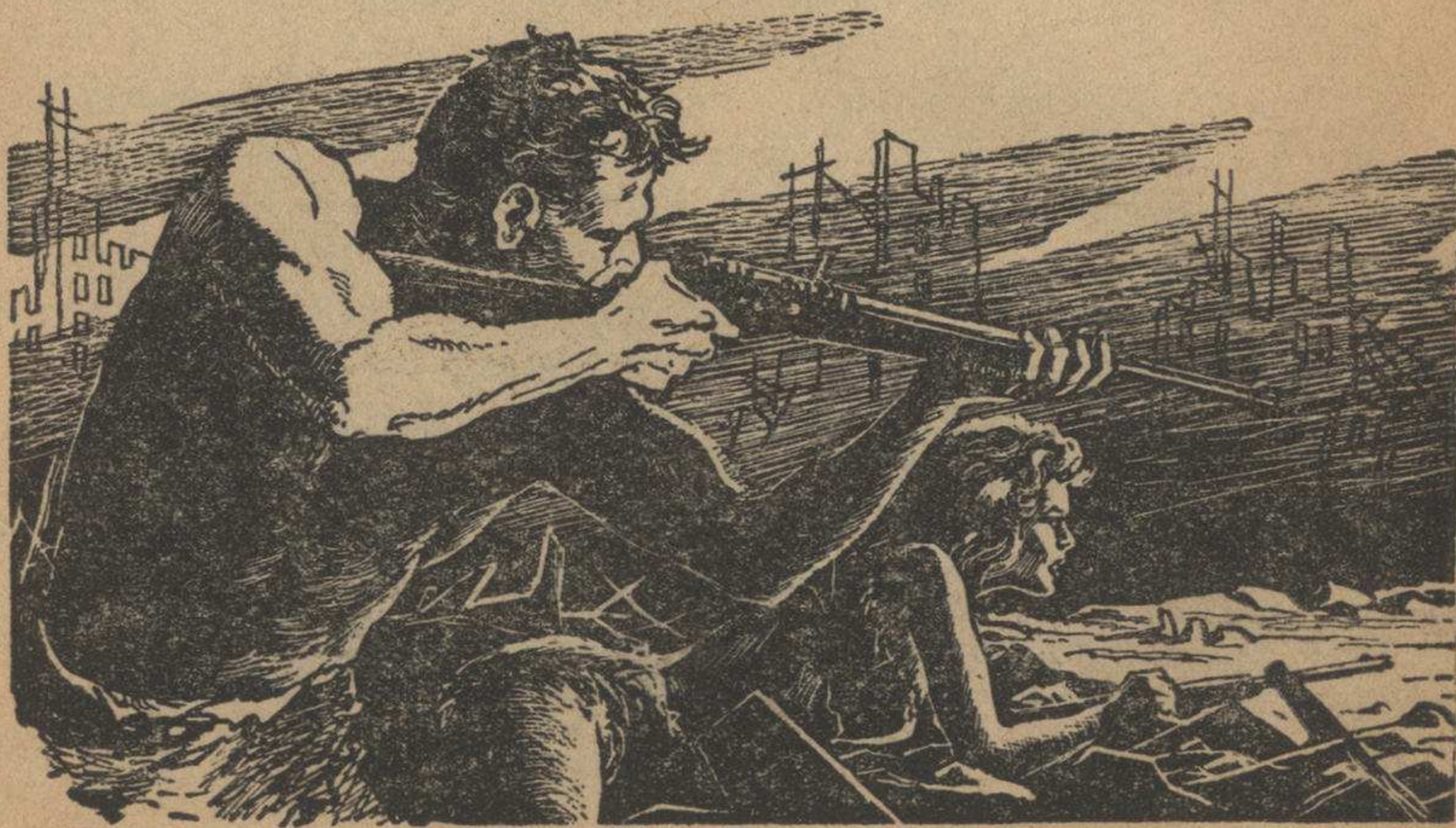
Then he saw the second platform. Two more! And still a third! They were closing in, violet auras slicing the night, keeping a pattern above him. Two beams of light lashed out, crossing just above, and that part of the sky seemed to tear asunder. Their shell went buffeting downward. Again the beams came, spraying the shell with heat and blinding brilliance.

"Only one direction now," Donal yelled. "We're going to take it!" His hand came down on the control bar—hard.

They were twisting and plunging earthward. All power seemed to fail. Donal fought to hold the controls, but the bar was torn from his grasp as he struck the opposite wall with a force that exploded all breath from his body.

Slowly, he tried to rise. His vision seemed blurred. Where was Kathri? He caught a glimpse of earth, then it became a twisting kaleidoscope together with sky and stars. *The controls! He must reach the controls—*

Then he saw the controls—overhead, beyond reach. And he saw Kathri, a huddled motionless heap. Fighting against nausea, he gained his feet, braced himself, leaped and caught the control bar and clung precariously. Slowly he gained leverage. The earth was rushing up fast, a whitish haze, the



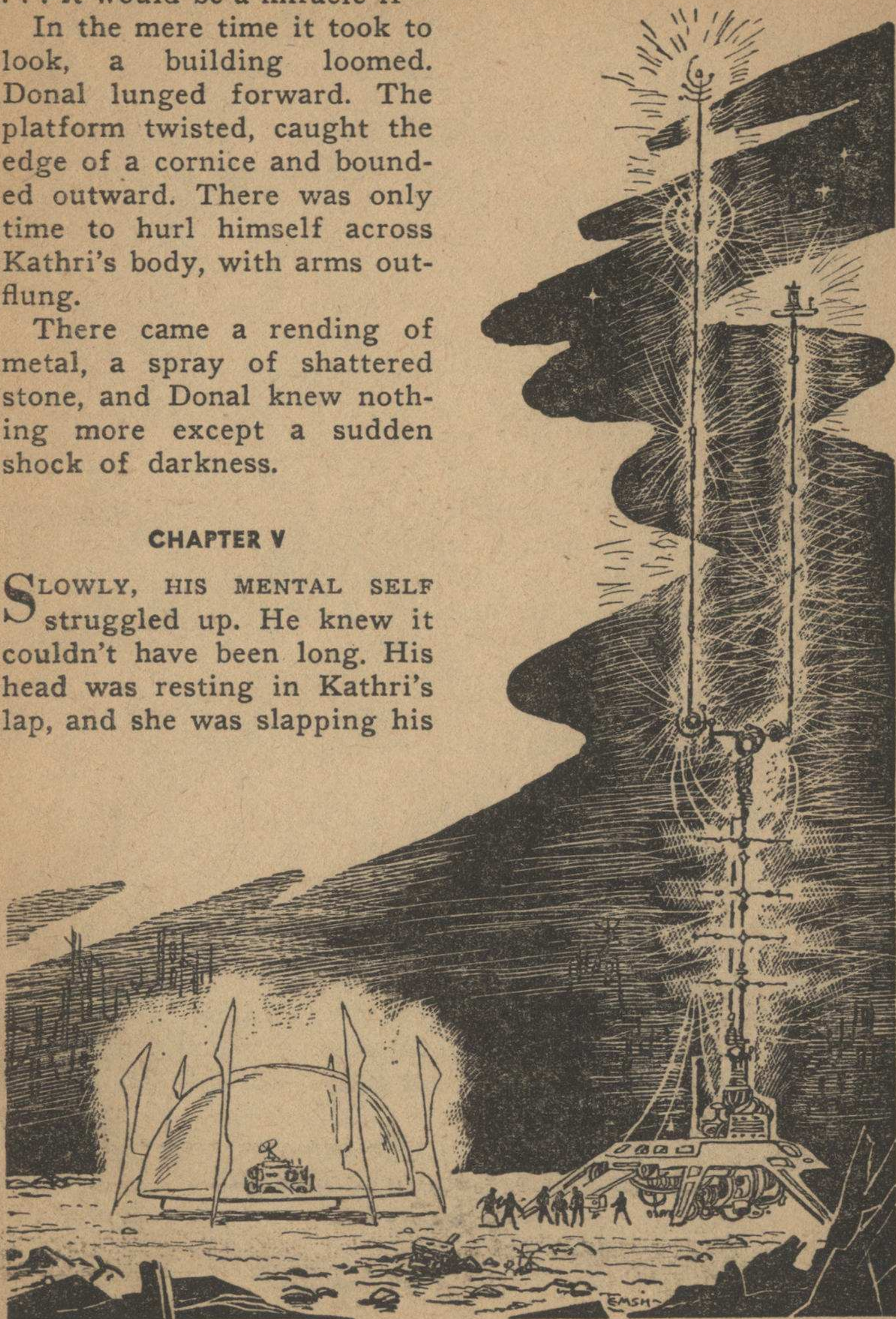
City . . . skeletal buildings
. . . it would be a miracle if—

In the mere time it took to look, a building loomed. Donal lunged forward. The platform twisted, caught the edge of a cornice and bounded outward. There was only time to hurl himself across Kathri's body, with arms outflung.

There came a rending of metal, a spray of shattered stone, and Donal knew nothing more except a sudden shock of darkness.

CHAPTER V

SLOWLY, HIS MENTAL SELF struggled up. He knew it couldn't have been long. His head was resting in Kathri's lap, and she was slapping his



face rhythmically—sharp stinging blows.

"That's enough," he gasped. There were no broken bones, just a mass of bruises, and Kathri also carried a large bruise above the temple. "The miracle did happen," he muttered, and glanced quickly overhead. "No sign of the other platforms?"

"No—but they may have landed!" Kathri was climbing back through the tangled wreckage. She emerged again, with both the rifles. They stood looking around, and after a moment Donal recognized the street.

"Listen!"

The sound of rifle fire reached them. Not isolated shots now, but entire volleys. A moment of silence and again the volleys came—just a few streets away, Donal thought.

"They landed all right," he said grimly. "Tanner's in trouble!"

They raced toward the sound of the battle. The firing came louder now, but more sporadic. "This way!" Donal plunged toward a cross-street which led into the area. Every movement of his bruised limbs was an agony. Now the firing had stopped altogether, as an ominous silence settled over the streets. *They're only digging in*, Donal thought. *Tanner knows how to maneuver*— But a terrible doubt settled on him.

Minutes later they were on the scene. Donal came to a halt, stumbling and gasping, as the havoc met his eyes.

Three of the platforms had landed. From each of them, huge lights threw a ghastly glow about the area. And there were silver men, dozens of them, moving forward grimly as they launched beams from their pronged weapons. Already Donal could see bodies of his men lying in the rubble. Fully a dozen lay there, while the few remaining were dug in behind a shallow barricade.

The rifles opened again, but they seemed ineffectual. Donal saw two more of his men go down against the pale rays. One of the two was Tanner. He heard Kathri sobbing beside him, but it was a sob of rage. She threw up her rifle and pumped a fusillade at a group of raiders who came in a flanking wide movement. Donal joined her, as fury rose to choke him. Three times he fired, and he knew he had not missed. But none of the silver men went down!

His mind was a whirling agony. He knew these men could die, but now bullets seemed ineffectual. He stared around

dazedly, suddenly realized that he and Kathri were open targets.

"Take cover!" He sprang toward the nearest building, beyond range of those glaring lights.

But already they had been seen. One of the invaders was racing toward them, weapon levelled. Donal whirled and wilted. His gaze was fixed on that strange weapon, and he knew there was only one chance now. If he could gain that weapon—just one of them—

The beam lashed out. In the same instant Donal went to his knees, took careful aim and fired. This time he *knew* he had not missed. The silver man hung poised in mid-air, arms out-flung, then ploughed forward at Donal's feet.

Donal seized the pronged weapon, flung his rifle aside. More invaders were coming toward them with long leaping strides, strangely cat-like. Donal sobbed air into his lungs.

"Inside!" He shoved Kathri toward the doorway behind them. He had explored many of these buildings, danger was here too, but inside they might have a chance. If they could reach the upper levels, the roof—

TOTAL DARKNESS assailed them, together with the smell of dust and ancient death. He could hear Kathri stumbling ahead of him.

"Wait!" He fumbled with the weapon, felt a trigger arrangement not unlike a rifle's. There was a warmth beneath his hand as the beam lashed out. He held it only long enough to see the wide stairway off to one side, crumbled and tottering. They must take the chance; already he could hear footsteps outside, a strange garble of voices.

"Follow me. Stay close!" They mounted upward in darkness and reached the first landing. Trailing fingers across the walls, they turned left and continued the climb.

"Stay close to the wall!" Donal warned.

The silver men had entered from below. Donal could see their beams flashings, searching the lower corridor. Once, a beam sliced tentatively upward.

Kathri's hair was soft against his face, and she trembled, but Donal knew it was more from fear of this place than anything else; there had been many tales of the ghastly things

found in these buildings.

"If we can reach the roof, Donal! We can hide out until they go away!"

He gripped her arm fiercely. "When they go away, they'll take all the radiation of the City with them! You've seen the kind of men they are! Tanner dead—and the others."

He clung fast to the pronged weapon. Again he peered. The men were still moving around down there, as if determined to seek them out. Donal hesitated, then flashed his beam upward through the stair-well. Three more flights—the stairs seemed fairly intact, save for one narrow section where the stone balustrade had fallen away—

Then disaster struck. Kathri screamed!

Staring up, she had looked directly into the face of a grinning skeleton which hung over the railing above. She staggered back, struck the weakened balustrade and sent it crashing downward. Donal pulled her back from the abyss just in time.

"I'm sorry, Donal! I—"

"No time for that now! They'll be up here—"

Already beams were lancing upward, searching the walls and landings. And those were more than search beams! Donal heard the deadly crackling sound as they struck and sprayed outward. He sent his own beam down, saw the lightning leap from wall to stair, saw half a dozen men tumbling back out of range. Then came silence and total darkness.

He pulled Kathri up to the next landing. "Let me have the rifle! They don't know our position now. Lord, if they'll only hold off a few minutes—"

He was groping his way toward the stair-well. His hand touched the heavy stone of the balustrade. Using the rifle, he gained leverage against the floor and pried upward. The section moved. Again he tugged as sweat poured into his eyes. Slowly, the entire section began to give way. There came a rending sound, stone tearing against stone—

And suddenly the entire landing came alive with blinding light. He heard Kathri cry out. He caught a glimpse of her, unleashing the weapon against silvery men who came surging up. With a final desperate heave he sent the balustrade crashing down, and leaped back from the yawning brink. There came a cloud of dust, a roar of plummeting stone, the vision

of men hurtling back—then the entire section of stairs below came tearing away, to disappear in a tangle of dust and debris.

He whirled back to Kathri. She had fallen, the weapon flung from her grasp. Somehow the light was still blinding. In a split second Donal realized what had happened, as he saw—

Men on the stairway above him.

They had landed a platform on the roof.

He leaped for the weapon, but never reached it. A beam touched his neck and fastened there and all of him went tight. He felt a moment of horror. He was falling to his knees. He wanted to curse. The beam at his neck held, and tightened, and there was no pain, only a feeling as if he were sinking into waters of a dark sea.

Silvery men were coming forward as the sea engulfed him.

HOW LONG HAD IT BEEN?

Donal struggled, moved sluggishly—then suddenly he remembered. Terror sliced at his mind. He fought to rise above the terror, and the effort left him weak.

He opened his eyes.

Blinding light. He caught a momentary glimpse of a metal-encased room, oddly shaped, a place where he had never been. He pushed himself to a sitting position and kept his eyes closed until the dizziness went away—then he opened his eyes again.

And immediately wished he hadn't.

Silver men stood about him—crouched, rather, peering close, and he really saw them for the first time. There was something oddly cat-like in their appearance; soft fur covered their heads, strangely blue-white and aglow, seeming little more than a nimbus. The faces were flat and blunt, mouths a thin gash, no noses visible—but the eyes were something else again. Twice the normal size, and lidless, those eyes seemed to encompass half the face, and they reminded Donal of colorless liquid pools.

But expression was there, a look of intense curiosity as they stared at him. "Curiosity killed the cat," Donal remembered an elder expression, but just now it seemed ominously inapropos. He laughed bitterly from deep in his throat.

Hearing the laugh, one of the men stepped forward and

extended a hand. Donal took it gingerly; it was soft but somehow metallic, and he felt a sinuous strength as the man helped him to his feet.

He saw the others then, and had a hard time believing his eyes. Kathri was there, and Dorthi, Tanner and Loren and all the others, huddled against the wall of the oddly curving room. Donal moved quickly over to Kathri and put his arms about her.

"What happened? I was sure our men were dead—I saw it!"

Kathri trembled, and her voice was a whisper. "No, Donal. The weapons only paralyzed—but *they can kill*. We're still in danger, be careful—"

A silver man stepped close, staring at him through lidless eyes. Suddenly Donal came taut and alert. There came a tingling at the nape of his neck. He felt a flow of thought. It lapped gently at first, then penetrated sharply.

"*You are a leader,*" said the thought. "*Admirable, your defense—but doomed to failure from the start. Cunning, your strategy on the stairs—but the type of cunning to be found only in fifth-level races. What in the name of the Unholy Triad*"—the thought sharpened—"did you expect to gain?"

"Our existence!" Donal roared. "That which is the right of all races!"

The silver man smiled mentally. Donal felt his faint amusement.

"*Existence? Fifteen million trans-secs of outer survey have proved that the right to racial existence is a variable, not a universal.*" A pause, to give Donal time to grasp it. He failed. "*You are a Leader,*" came the thought again. "*Though I cannot understand why, when you have two such as these among you.*" He gestured at Dorthi and Kathri.

Donal struggled for words. "These two are different," he blurted. "They are the first! It has something to do with—with—" And he found that the ancient Coburn's terms had escaped him.

"*We understand. Much more than you realize. A few of my men are not too well for wear, but fortunately none of us have died; your weapons have the power to stun us, but they cannot penetrate.*"

Donal's mind was awirl. He felt his men stirring restlessly behind him, and he realized they hadn't as yet received the

thoughts. "Didn't have a chance," Loren was muttering. His gaze was fixed on a rack across the room, where a dozen of the pronged weapons nestled. "Lord! If we could only get to those, we might still make a—"

It was Dorthi who whirled upon him. "Be quiet, you fool! Don't you know they can read your minds?"

"She's right," Donal warned sharply. "Don't any of you make a move! I think I can talk with this man." He turned back and noticed a thin smile about the other's lips. "How is it possible that I—that you—"

"The thoughts? We made a slight adjustment in your thalamic-coördinates. It was not necessary with these two," he gestured at Dorthi and Kathri, *"and that amazes me. It also convinces me that with some training in the cerebral sciences, under proper conditions, the rest of you could be brought to their level."* V'Naarik paused, frowning. *"But there is a greater problem! Earthman—we have here a situation in Solarian Ethics which has not been encountered in the Empire in more than twenty thousand years. It must be solved! And I must ask that you help me in the solving!"*

Donal stared at this man. Solarian Ethics . . . Empire . . . the terms were strange to him, and "twenty thousand years" staggered his mind. He knew that Kathri had received the thoughts too, and she was frowning. As for Dorthi, she stood calm and unmoving, as if she knew.

"I do not understand," Donal said.

"Then understand this, Earthman. We need the radiations! All that we can drain from your planet will be just sufficient for our return to Cygni—our home, which is very far away. We need it, and nothing stands in the way of the Empire's needs."

Donal understood that, all right. He took an angry step forward. "And we need the City! Without the radiations we die! We are not like the Outlanders. If you come with your machines, we will fight! Many of my people are left—"

V'NAARIK GAVE SOMETHING like a sigh. The soft fur atop his head took on a bluish glow. Donal fell back; it was as if a smothering hand had clamped across his thoughts.

"I have said I need your aid in the solving. Come, Earthman. I wish to show you something." V'Naarik stepped cat-like across the room, toward a huge glassite screen. Donal watched suspiciously. There came an ascending whine, and the screen swirled alive.

A dark bluish ball lay before Donal, slowly spinning, filling all the heavens. He could see the vast downward curve of its bulk. He could see blackness beyond, tinged with a faint aura of sunlight.

"It is Earth. Your planet," came V'Naarik's thought. *"We lie a thousand miles above. Beautiful? But watch."*

The screen blurred and shifted. Then the vision of the void leaped forward to smash against Donal's eyes, hungry infinity and beseeching stars. There were hundreds of times more stars than he had ever seen on the clearest night!

"Our home lies out there," V'Naarik gestured. *"Much, much farther than you can see. I have said that we have a problem, Earthman. It has become your problem as well, and I must ask that you help!"*

"Help?" Donal muttered. He turned and saw that Dorthi was watching him, silent and uncommunicative. He turned to Kathri, and she pressed her hand tightly into his own. "Help? How can we be of help to such as you?"

"It is against all principles of Empire to wantonly destroy. Particularly among sub-species which show evidences of latent potential—and we are not at all convinced that your kind should remain at mere fifth-level cultural status. I think I have the solution—but I cannot ethically employ it against your wishes! That is where you must help."

He paused, to make sure Donal understood. Then he waved at the screen.

"Out there, near Cygni—in Fourth Sector Temporal as we've charted it—lies a group of planets. It is part of a double sun system. One of those planets is much like Earth in mass and gravity, with mountains and rolling fields. Would you agree to go there, Earthman—you and your kind?"

Donal stood stunned, staring into the astra-lens. It had frightened him at first, that vast expanse, the stars all glittering and icy. But strangely now he felt a softness and warmth, the spaces closing in, the stars beseeching.

Beseeching! To go out there . . . it would be like some of

the stories he had read in the books, those stories which he had thought were for children!

"It will not be easy, Earthman. It is a raw planet, with much work to do—but it will be your planet! There will be no need of the radiations there. It needs a people of your agrarian-technical complex. In a way it would be an experiment of great interest to us—we want to help you—but you will be strictly on your own, our ships visiting you perhaps once in fifty years."

Donal turned away, scarcely daring to speak. So little time for decision! His first thought was: but what of our crops this year? It is almost time for the gathering! And he thought: what of my pact with Morghan's Group? I gave my word to Morghan! Then he laughed aloud. Crops? Morghan's Outlanders? What would any of it matter now? The City and all it contained would belong to Morghan once the radiations were gone.

He turned to V'Naarik. "It is not for me to make the decision! I must consult with my men. They have families, children! There are many of us—"

"We have room for all in your Village. And you shall have the time you need, days if you like, to sit with your Council."

Donal consulted with his men. They came crowding around the astra-lens, peering with awe into the outer spaces. It would be a momentous turning—and peace! When had they ever known peace, or a planet of their own? For four generations their lives had been synchronized to a slow and ceaseless struggle within the Zone; their thoughts obsessed with secret and futile envy of those Groups without. Coburn's Scripture? It was becoming a mockery to them all, as it had become to Donal.

Donal talked. He explained it all, and his words were urgent, as the men hung on his every word. But already he knew—he knew—and his heart leaped exultantly within him.

IT WAS NIGHT, a week later. With Kathri and Dorthi beside him, Donal walked toward the monstrous ship that lay in the fields just outside the Village. All preparations were over. The Villagers were inside, berthed down and waiting. All books had been carried aboard, together

with tools and implements. V'Naarik had aided materially—at Donal's request—selecting and rejecting.

Beyond the rolling plains the City was dark and silent now. It occurred to Donal that soon the Outlanders would be moving in. He and Kathri moved on up the ramp, but Dorthi paused.

"Kathri . . ."

Kathri turned, her face suddenly tragic. She rushed down to clasp her sister in her arms. "No, Dorthi! No . . ."

But she knew. For two days she had known.

"I will not come, Kathri. I prefer to stay. It is best, don't you see? My future is here, with Earth . . . I want my children born—I could never leave! But perhaps someday we—or our children—"

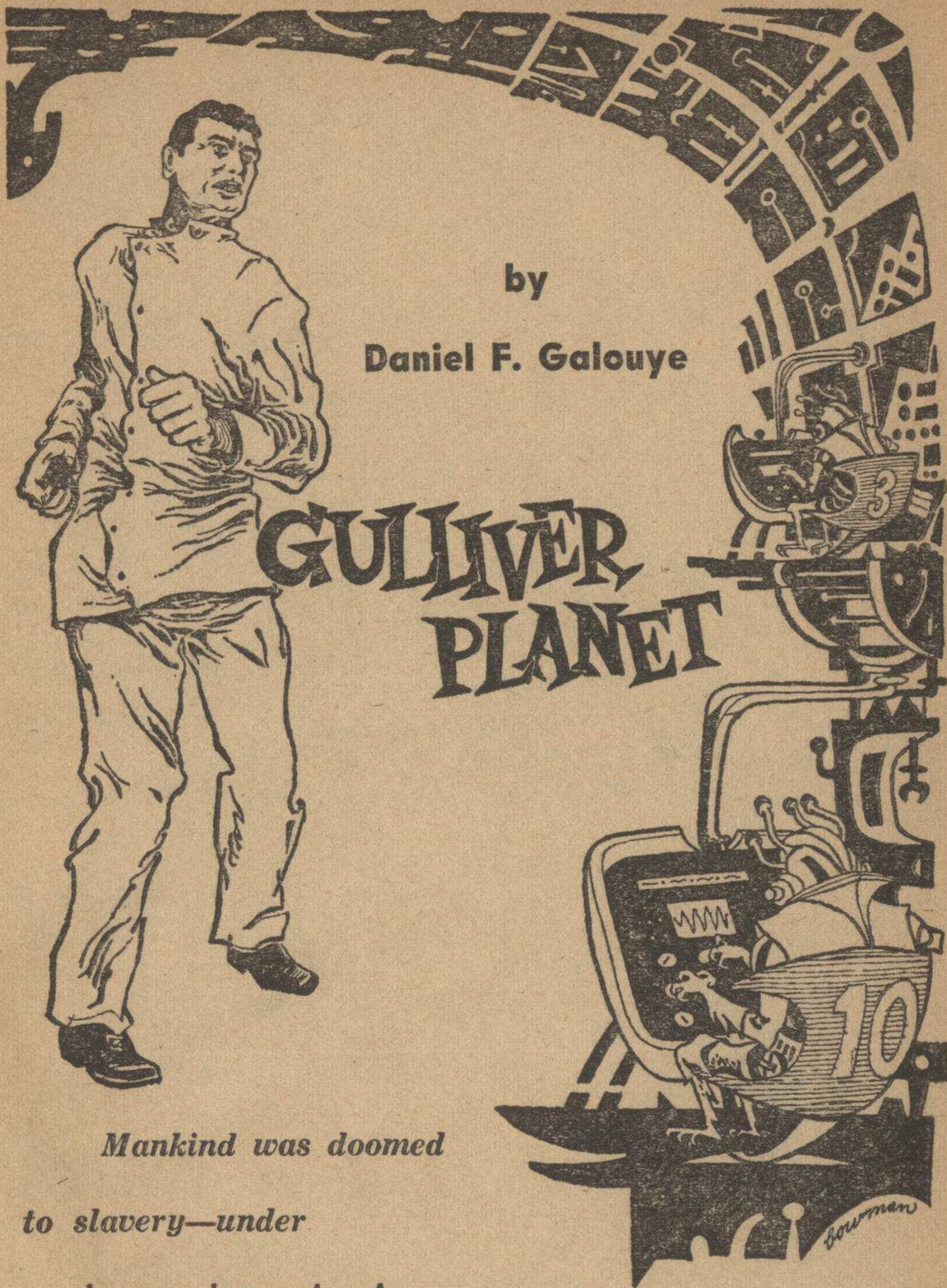
V'Naarik appeared in the doorway above. He watched the scene for a moment. *"I did not advise her, Donal. She told me! She is vastly wise, that one, and she has made a great decision. The future of Earth will need her kind."*

Minutes later, eyes moist, Kathri was hurrying up the ramp. The great door closed behind them, and Donal took her gently in his arms. "She felt it was best, Kathri. V'Naarik thinks so too. She'll be happy here, and the Outlanders will not always be—Outlanders."

Kathri thought of her sister and felt that she should cry. But she also thought of the New Earth beyond the stars, and the green of its fields, with Donal at her side, and there was only a vast singing quiet in her soul that was too deep for tears.



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by

Daniel F. Galouye

GULLIVER PLANET

*Mankind was doomed
to slavery—under
microscopic masters!*

Illustrated by Bowman

Gulliver Planet

by Daniel F. Galouye

CHAPTER I

THRUMP-THUMP . . . *thrum-p-thump* . . . *thrum-p-thump* . . .
“Infernal noise!” Thaul stared exasperatedly at the irregular gray walls.

Kolar displayed a casual indifference consistent with his authority. “You’ll get used to it.”

They went cautiously down the dismal corridor with its crude, pulsating floor.

“Enough to drive a cosmocontrol crewman crazy,” Thaul complained dispiritedly.

They carried two-pronged picks with lines threaded through eyes in the handles and secured around their waists.

Thrum-p-thump . . . *thrum-p-thump* . . .

“I suppose,” Kolar conceded grudgingly, “we could have better located control headquarters here. But no matter how carefully you pick your site, you’ll always run into the cross-pulse factor.”

They entered a large compartment dominated by a huge instrument console. Thaul paused to watch his crew securing leads to terminal posts at the rear of the cabinet, which was suspended on shock-absorbing springs from a tri-axial mount.

But suddenly there was a mighty trembling of the floor and the walls heaved about them.

Shouting, the workmen hurled themselves from the instrument console as it swung around on its axes and danced on its springs.

Thaul brought his pick around in a sweeping arc and buried its blade in the calcified floor. He grasped the lifeline and hung on precariously as the chamber tilted and swayed.

But the convulsions stopped abruptly.

“Thought it was going to be a rough one,” Thaul said, freeing his pick and securing it under his belt.

Kolar brushed himself off. “I’ve seen enough here. Everything seems to be in order. You’ve done a good job on Beach-

head Seven. I've got five more to inspect before I get back to Number One."

"How are the other subjects coming along?"

Kolar headed toward the main vehicular access tunnel. "They're all in various stages of preparation, with Number One almost ready for permanent activation. His name's 'Jami-son,' incidentally."

"Have we learned anything about the macrosurroundings?"

Kolar shrugged indeterminately. "A few things. I've tapped One's visual and auditory system from time to time—enough to determine that One through Seven are bunched together in some kind of institution. I suppose they're being observed. Our operations inside them affect their behavior considerably, you know."

They entered the large tunnel and Kolar drew up next to one of three shuttle cars.

"If they've gathered only seven macrocontrol subjects here," Thaul reasoned, "that leaves thirteen crews unaccounted for."

"They're all in the greater vicinity." Kolar climbed into the vehicle. "Communication is difficult, but I've been in contact with each of the thirteen crews at least once. They'll all deliver their subjects here as soon as they establish complete control over them."

BACK IN THE MAIN COMPARTMENT, Thaul supervised the neuro-electricians as they ran other leads in from various tunnels of Beachhead Seven.

Muted voices welled in one of the corridors and he turned to watch his assistant lead three haggard workmen into the control chamber.

"Nasty time," Boren said wearily. "The anesthetizer burned out and we severed a capillary. That's what caused the convulsion."

DANIEL F. GALOUBE is one of the brightest new stars in the science-fiction galaxy, and in GULLIVER PLANET he proves our contention that action science fiction can be based on new, thought-provoking, scientific concepts. Notable for its fast pacing and suspense, it is nevertheless a story that any magazine—bar none—would have been proud to print!

Thaul surveyed the crew solicitously. "You stopped the flow?"

"Yes. But it hemorrhaged into the corridor before we could throw up a patch. Then, for a while, we had our hands full with a leucocyte attack—until we brought up the cauterizers."

"What about the connection?"

"We'll have to detour to motor fiber forty-six. We'll clean up and get right on it."

"No you won't," Thaul protested. "You'll get yourself some rest first."

Boren shrugged and led his men off toward crew quarters.

Dispiritedly, Thaul strode around the compartment examining neuro-control connections. A hell of an expedition! Something that only Kolar could dream up and justify under the convenient patent phrase, "For the Greater Glory of Valvarez." Valvareziens weren't made to live like burrowing animals! They weren't intended to be the parasites of gigantic hosts on an alien planet!

A neuro-electrician came over. "Locomotion Trunk C hooked into the Central Selector Circuit," he reported.

Thaul went over to the control console and strapped himself in the padded seat.

"Video Circuit connected?" he asked the nearest workman.

"Connected and ready."

"Audio?"

A crewman on his left nodded.

Thaul punched a button and waited for the central screen to flicker to life. As the herringbone pattern became brighter, he threw on the audio switch.

Then he turned a dial labeled "Vocal Associative Counter-Transfer," depressed a stud designated "Interpretative Feedback" and made a final adjustment on the "Duo-Intellectual Correlator" control.

Finally the screen washed itself free of interfering patterns and produced a sharply focused image. . . .

ROD FELTON TENSED at the girl's bedside as her face wrestled with a pained expression.

"Yes?" he asked tentatively.

"Just another ache." She smiled feebly.

A slim brunette, she seemed even smaller in the hospital bed. Her face was pale and her hands flaccid as they lay on top of the sheet.

Dr. Morgan Crockfield, stout and misproportioned with middle age, stared up from the other side of the bed. "That headache still bothering you, Miss Baldwin?"

She nodded. "It's a corker, too," she added lightly.

Crockfield felt her forehead and looked up. "Same syndrome as Jamison, Sellers, the others."

"No fever, then," Rod said.

"None whatsoever. That's the strange part of this whole business, Dr. Felton. Not a one of them has ever run a temperature."

He turned toward the door. "I'm going to check the others."

Rod studied Irene. Her disturbed face was ashen, but not unattractive. He could imagine how she might look with make-up.

"Did I have a bad time last night?"

"Muscular convulsions. Delirium. The usual symptoms . . . Oh, you're following in the footsteps of the other six, all right . . . copycat." He gripped her hand.

She winced and sat up unsteadily. "A million ice-picks—all sharp and pointed." She felt her temples. "Any idea what it is?"

"Some sort of neurosis—maybe." He lit a cigarette. "On the other hand, it could be organic."

A nurse entered. "Sellers is acting up again."

"I'll be right there, Miss Nelson. Have you told Dr. Crockfield?"

She shook her head.

"Report developments to him first," Rod instructed. "He's still in charge."

The nurse nodded dutifully and left.

But Irene caught his arm before he could follow. Her lips moved hesitatingly. "Rod . . . whatever's ahead for us—will it be better or worse?"

He turned and stared out the window at the undulant hills that swept toward the city in the distance.

"Sellers is going through a crisis—one Jamison seems to have already passed. It's logical to assume that the other five, including you, will follow the same course. But we believe

Jamison is now showing some improvement."

"But suppose Jamison—dies?"

He seized her shoulders reassuringly. "If he dies it'll be very unfortunate, but not *all* tragic. We'll at least have a chance for a post mortem."

She cried out suddenly and clamped her hands over her eyes.

"Irene, what's wrong?" he demanded.

"I—I started seeing everything double!"

THAUL SNAPPED OFF the visual and audio switches and swung around. "Anybody disturbing the optical coordination circuit?" he demanded.

"I was," one of the workmen admitted, coming from behind the control console. "Just testing to see whether we were pulling enough psycho-amps. I didn't know you were hooked in."

"Then be more careful the next time." Thaul unbuckled his safety harness. "The mental flux—is it strong enough?"

"It's more than sufficient. Seven has a high-level psycho-output."

Thaul leaned back in the chair and stared abstractedly at the dull gray wall. "High enough to serve the needs of the grand and noble Valvarez?" he asked sarcastically.

The inter-unit speaker on the console erupted gratingly. "I take it you don't approve of our operational plans?"

Lurching, Thaul swung around to stare at the inter-unit screen, where Kolar's face glowered out from the beachhead in the subject called Jamison.

"I've suspected all along," Kolar went on brusquely, "that you weren't fully in sympathy with the project. But I trust you'll be wise enough not to let your personal convictions interfere."

Thaul squirmed. "I had no intentions—"

"What you haven't realized," Kolar interrupted, "are the advantages we stand to gain if our test project is successful. Imagine—microscopic and macroscopic intelligence, going arm in arm in perfect symbiosis . . ."

Perfect symbiosis all right, Thaul thought . . . with only the parasites benefitting, with the hosts serving as machines who would respond to switches and dials in carrying out the

quest for the necessities of the new Valvarezian civilization.

"If it can be proved," the other went on, "that our culture can be transplanted into biological hosts, a new, glorious civilization lies ahead for all Valvarezians!"

Thaul nodded with a forced show of homage.

"Our world is the only one that can support intelligent life the size of ours," Kolar said gravely. "But in just a few thousand generations Valvarez will be lost to the full fury of an exploding sun. We would not last long on any other world—except under the protective mantle of a native life form."

And what, Thaul wondered, lay ahead for the "protective life form"—a hollow, meaningless slave life, with each locked up in the prison of his own mind until insanity gave him release? . . . And, in some respects, these prospective hosts were *so much* like Valvarezians!

He was suddenly aware that Kolar expected a reaction.

"I understand," he said profoundly.

"Very well, then . . . Now, I want you to leave Boren in charge at Beachhead Seven and get over to Number Two. Lako has his directional signal on for you to follow. The subject—name's Sellers, by the way—is ready for permanent control. I'll want you in charge temporarily for post-activation tests. Afterward you will return to Seven."

CHAPTER II

"**A**CTUALLY," CROCKFIELD said disconsolately, "it frightens me. Diagnosis is apparently hopeless in Jamison's case and all the others."

Rod stood thoughtfully by the window, looking across into Jamison's room in the right wing. "It is beginning to seem that the symptoms have leaped from the realm of neurology to God-knows-what."

Crockfield dropped down at his desk. "I think this whole matter is now open to psychopathic investigation."

"An epidemic psychosis?" Rod asked skeptically.

The other shrugged. "All right, then. Let's go back to the theory of an infectious disease."

"An incommunicable infectious disease without fever?"

Crockfield slapped the desk. "Very well, Dr. Felton. I give up. It's your worry anyway."

Rod was still staring into Jamison's room. The patient was seated on his bed now. His body was stiff and his arms extended over his head. He brought his hands down to touch his shoulders. Now he raised them again. Down once more.

"You're wrong, Dr. Crockfield. You're still in charge of your clinic. I'm merely here as a Public Health Service observer.... Isn't Jamison still showing improvement?"

The other elevated his hands. "It's one of those things you can't put your finger on. Physically he's all right, except for a lingering trace of muscular mal-coordination. But—well, there are periods of morbid apathy which you wouldn't hesitate to pin down as schizophrenia."

Rod glanced back out the window at Jamison. The man was still exercising. "And Sellers?" he asked.

"Following the same pattern—but experiencing each symptom a day or two later."

Rod leaned pensively against the window sill and considered it. A patient shows up with symptoms that stump the doctor. Then another. The investigation turns up five more cases. The Public Health Service is consulted and recommends isolating the cases for observation. The agency sends out a representative. But that accounts only for seven cases who were medical-minded enough to seek a doctor's help. How many *unreported* cases were there?

Crockfield sighed and rose. "Guess I'll make the rounds again. Boardman and Walker will be coming through the Jamison crisis soon."

IN ROOM 205, ALEX SELLERS sat motionless in his chair, his arms hanging. He was young and lean, but muscular—as though he might have been an athlete.

The door opened softly and a large man with coarse features entered. He was half bald and wore a clinic robe.

"I'm Jamison—Number One," he said.

"Kolar?" Sellers asked cautiously.

Jamison nodded, crossed the room.

"Thaul coordinating in Number Two," Sellers reported mechanically.

"How is the subject handling?"

Sellers tried to rise, but his legs were wobbly and he fell sitting again. His head dropped to one side and lay at a wry

angle, as though the neck were broken.

"Trouble with muscular control?" Jamison asked.

In jerky motions, the head struggled to erectness. "Just a matter of circuit balance. I'm increasing amperage now. Let's switch over to inter-unit communications."

The other shook his head quite authentically. "We'll use inter-unit as little as possible. We need practice manipulating the subjects. Walk around, Thaul. Let's see how well you can coordinate."

Sellers rose shakily and limped across the room. On the way back, the impediment worked itself out.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Jamison. "However, I observed several basic mistakes. You should have looked in my direction when you heard me enter."

"I considered it, but—"

"You *considered* it! Aren't you using the Supplementary Auto-Reaction Circuit?"

"No. I thought—"

"Confound it, Thaul! That's what the circuit's for—to automatically supply authentic movements and gestures! It lets the subject *help* us control him—just like the Vocal Associative Transfer translated our words into their language. Without the SAR circuit we could never nail down our position here."

Chastened, Thaul made Sellers look up obsequiously. "What does nailing down our position consist of?"

Jamison paced, gesturing enthusiastically. "As soon as all seven beachheads are under positive control and the other thirteen report in, we're going to build macromodels of our weapons. We'll provide personal shields for all our subjects and throw up an ultra shield to seal off the city." He nodded out the window.

Sellers stared at the distant skyline.

"Then," Jamison continued, "we'll conquer the isolated segment and make the population build a macroship so we can take the twenty host units back to Valvarez for experimental colonization. We'll determine just how many of us can subsist in each host and how many thousands of subjects we'll need."

Jamison sat on the bed. "I came here with an assignment for you," he said disappointedly. "But I'll have to carry it out

myself, now that I see you've been practically wasting your time with Sellers."

"What is the assignment, Kolar?"

"The one called Felton—know him?"

"He was in here twice this morning."

"From his conversation with Crockfield," Jamison explained, "I gather he's not with the institution at all. He represents some vast grouping of Earth society. Of all people here, he alone can call down formidable opposition before we're ready for it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Kill him. I can't risk anything that might lead to our premature exposure."

"Kolar!" a frantic voice broke in on the inter-unit circuit. "This is Beachhead Three. My subject's door is open and I can see the one called Crockfield outside Sellers' room. He's listening to what you and Thaul are saying!"

"Very well," Kolar acknowledged calmly. "We'll take the necessary action against him too."

ROD FINISHED THE ROUGH DRAFT of his report, put it in his pocket and stepped into the main corridor.

Down the hall, Crockfield stood rigidly beside Sellers' partly open door, his back pressed to the wall, his face tense with what might have been incredulity or fear.

He saw Rod and started forward. But he stopped, smiled weakly, turned and continued down the hall.

Shrugging indifferently, Rod went on to Irene's room.

Her back was to him as she stood looking out the window. Then he saw she was trembling. Solicitously, he called her name.

She turned and he saw only apprehension on her face.

"I—I . . ." She made a gesture of futility. "I found myself here by the window when just a second ago I was in bed."

She nodded toward the clock. "Only it wasn't a second ago. It was over an hour!"

He brushed a disheveled strand of hair off her forehead. "Just a memory break. All the other cases, from Jamison on down, have experienced them."

Compassionately, he studied her face . . . The other cases—they, too, had experienced the dejection of helplessness and

fear of what lay ahead. But they were all men. She was only a frightened girl.

He led her to the bed.

"When I woke this morning," she said distantly, "I was bending my knees and straightening them, bending them and—"

He laughed lightly. "And you found out you had no control? That's the involuntary muscular activity we were telling you about. It's just a phase."

She lay in bed and stared rigidly at the ceiling.

Watching her, he frowned uncertainly. "Irene—"

She didn't answer.

"Irene!" he called loudly, passing his hand over her eyes. But there was no reflex blink.

He drew up a chair beside the bed and sat watching.

Almost an hour later she turned toward him. "And I'm just starting to go through that phase now?"

He nodded, sidling between her and the clock so she wouldn't notice the time lapse.

But she lurched up suddenly. "Rod! My hands—I can't move them!"

Her arms hung limp. As she whirled frantically to face him, they flew out with centrifugal force and plopped down against her thighs.

Then she brought her hands up in front of her and studied the palms, horrified.

"There," he consoled. "They're all right now."

"But *I'm* not moving them!"

THAUL SAT ATTENTIVELY at the control console in Beachhead Two. For the moment, the large screen that relayed his subject's visual impressions was dead, with Sellers temporarily immobilized.

Rather, Thaul's attention was on the inter-unit screen, which displayed a picture of Boren at the control console in Beachhead Seven, the girl. In the background of the scene was Boren's large visual-interception screen, which showed a pair of slender hands, with palms forward and trembling.

"But *I'm* not moving them!" rasped the speaker on the distant control board.

"Cut her loose, Boren!" Thaul ordered severely.

Boren started, apparently not aware Thaul had established contact. He nimbly assaulted a bevy of switches. The Number Seven visual-interception screen faded to a lifeless gray. The background hum died in the audio-interception speaker. A string of "positive-control" indicator lights blinked out.

Then Boren turned toward the inter-unit screen. "Was I doing something wrong?"

"Kolar's first rule is not to activate any control circuits without first shunting out the subject's perceptive faculties."

Boren guiltily slapped his head. "And I've been doing it off and on for half a work period!"

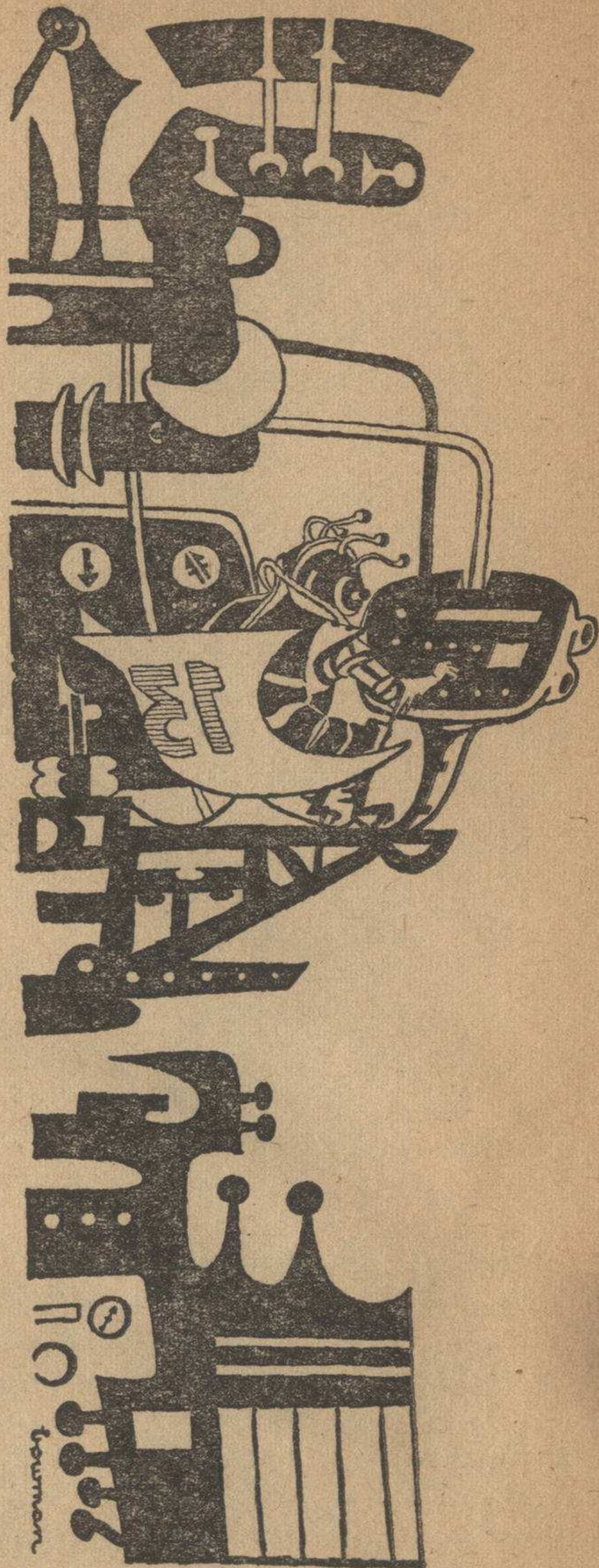
"Don't you see what it does?" Thaul reproved. "It lets the subject *experience* involuntary manipulation."

"And that might tip them off that they're being controlled," the other mused with delayed comprehension.

"To say nothing of scaring the daylights out of them."

"I had trouble hooking up Motor Circuit Sixteen," Boren explained, "and I decided to run field tests."

"Well I hope you know the procedure now. Check visual-



ly first, without over-riding the subject's control. Then wipe out her conscious perception by turning on the Master Sensory Erase switch."

"But I thought they had to be aware of what's going on so their psycho-output would run our equipment."

"True. But we started out with fully charged batteries. That should be enough juice for all tests—until we activate the subject permanently."

"Oh," said Boren. "And by then it's too late for them to resist, even though they're aware of what's happening."

And that, Thaul thought as he nodded, was the hell of it—for the subjects. But he masked his sentiments as he switched off the communicator and turned back to the controls.

He activated the audio-video-kinesthetic system, punched several studs to bring Sellers to his feet, and selected a semi-automatic behavior pattern that sent the subject pacing about the room. From time to time he over-rode the actions with manual control while he practiced ocular-motor coordination.

Eventually, like a subtle whisper almost hidden in the background sibilation of the speaker, Sellers' terrified thought stream spilled over into the audio-interception circuit. It was like the wailing of a thousand ghosts hopelessly lost in the infinite reaches of space.

Thaul turned on the Master Sensory Erase switch, drawing a merciful curtain down over the subject's flow of conscious thought. With enough of a charge built up in the batteries for a while, there was no point in torturing the man needlessly.

He put Sellers on full-automatic pace behavior and sat back, thinking of his first subject—Number Seven—so small and helpless. Then he laughed at the ironic thought, wondering, actually, how many millions of times larger she was than he. But still, in her world, compared with the other macrohumans about her, she was insignificant—just as Meva had always seemed so helpless and inadequate on her own world.

Somehow Seven and Meva were much alike. Of course, there were the Valvareizians' quadrifocal optical and tripedal locomotion systems. And Earthmen had only two arms. But such differences were superficial at the most. The inner qualities of character were really all that counted. And, compared on the broad basis of that fundamental standard, Meva and the Earth girl were indeed similar.

CHAPTER III

WHILE HE WAITED IN THE OFFICE for Crockfield, Rod finished his report to the Surgeon General. He sealed the envelope and dropped it in the outgoing mail basket just as one of the patients entered. It was Jamison.

The large man drew up hesitantly in front of the desk. "You're with the—government, aren't you?"

Rod nodded. "I'm trying to find out if there's any particular bug causing your trouble."

"Bug?" the other repeated densely.

"Micro-organism."

The patient stiffened. His eyes explored the room, darted toward the door and back to the desk, fell on the ivory-handled letter opener.

"You mean sentient but unintelligent microbes, of course—germs, viruses?"

Rod frowned. "What else?"

Jamison picked up the letter opener and absently studied the carvings on its handle. "Is there a furnace here?"

"Of course there is."

Jamison's features were rigid, his eyes steady. And he gripped the letter opener so firmly now that his hand was trembling.

Suddenly apprehensive, Rod brought his arms up.

Jamison sprang. The lunge, however, fell short as he screamed and collapsed.

Confounded, Rod knelt and examined him. Jamison was dead.

When he looked up, Crockfield was there, demanding an explanation. Two of the patients peered inquisitively from the hall behind him.

Rod recounted the incident. He added, "I guess you were right in suspecting Jamison was unstable."

Crockfield dabbed at his brow with a handkerchief.

Rod rose. "You have detention rooms?"

"On the second floor."

"I'd move the other six there until we can find out whether violence is a general symptom."

"Of course," the other agreed readily.

"In the meantime, we've got something we can sink our teeth into—a subject for autopsy. We might find something the X-rays haven't turned up."

"DEAD?" THAUL REPEATED incredulously before the inter-unit screen.

Kolar's face in the kinescopic tube was lined with frustration. "He pitched over when I tried to kill Felton."

"But how could that happen?" Thaul wondered, half amused, whether they had overlooked some basic fallacy in their operational plan.

"We made a vital mistake in theory. At crisis, apparently, the subject's emotional flux was enormously amplified in the converters and discharged back into his neuro-electric system. It blew out every neuron, every synapse in Jamison's body!"

Thaul immobilized Sellers and turned his full attention to the videocom.

"Does that mean we may have to abandon our beachheads?" he asked, concealing his enthusiasm over the prospect of an early return to Valvarez and Meva.

"Not at all. We'll simply install circuit breakers. That'll keep a feedback from building up."

"Oh," said Thaul, with more disappointment than he showed.

"I want all crews to install type-C breakers. We'll cut down on other activity until the modifications are made. We don't want to lose any more subjects."

Thaul turned to summon his crew and relay the order.

But Kolar held up a hand. "I'm going to strip the heavy equipment out of Number One and leave the lighter stuff behind. Since we don't want to chance discovery, you'll destroy Jamison's body as soon as I'm through here."

"But how?"

"There's a heat generator in the basement. It operates on the raw combustion principle."

Kolar smiled. "In the meantime, since I have no subject, I'm going to establish Beachhead Twenty-One."

Thaul looked up sharply.

"The government man," Kolar specified. "I'll want each crew to contribute four workmen to the project so we can complete it on an A-priority basis."

THAUL STARTED AS THE SUBJECT-AUDIO SPEAKER came to life.
"Sellers! Wake up!"

Kolar, still in contact, looked up tentatively from the inter-unit screen.

Concerned over the excitement in the macrovoice, Thaul activated Sellers' optical circuit, set the vernier control for conversational-tracking and lifted the subject's eyelids.

The image of Crockfield flared on Thaul's main screen. The institution director stood anxiously before Sellers, pointing a blunt object with a tubular protuberance at the subject's chest.

Kolar stared apprehensively out of the kinescope at Thaul's visual-interception screen. "That's one of their weapons!"

But even as he said it, a third kinescopic tube on Thaul's control console displayed a shifting montage of conceptual images. The Cross-Index Rectifier was drawing pictorial knowledge from Sellers' mind to illustrate the characteristics of the "revolver."

Crockfield was smiling complacently. "I know I probably can't hurt you, *Thaul*. But I can kill Sellers. I don't think you'd like that."

Thaul cast a worried glance at Kolar. "Is this the one who was listening in the hall?"

Kolar nodded. "I've had him under observation since then. But—"

"I know the setup," Crockfield went on eagerly. "I heard you and Jamison—that was *Kolar*, wasn't it?—talking in this room. Where are you from? How are you controlling Sellers and those other eighteen?"

Kolar swore. "Keep him there! I'll contact Parneiv. His subject should be under positive control by now."

"I won't give you away—I swear it!" Crockfield whispered intently. "I want to be *with you*! I want to help!"

Still, Thaul kept Sellers silent. Of Kolar's image in the videocom, he asked, "What'll I do?"

"Talk it out and see what he wants while I get Parneiv."

"Here . . ." Crockfield extended the handle of the weapon towards Sellers. "You take it. See? I'm sincere!"

Thaul controlled Sellers' hand as it reached out and took the revolver. Anxiously, the clinic director stared at the weapon, then relaxed as Sellers pocketed it.

"Why do you want to help?" Thaul asked soberly.

Crockfield lowered his head humbly, but there was still an insidious excitement on his face. "I concede superiority to the Valvarezians. And I don't want to be one of the mindless ones."

"You heard Kolar say we'd probably need only a few thousand. Why didn't you simply escape to safety among the millions?"

"Because of the shields and the weapons. They'll be like nothing on Earth! I want them. After you take all the hosts you need, there'll be millions of potential ones left—millions *I* can control as easily as you're controlling Sellers—if you give me the power to do it!"

Thaul, tiring of the display of cowardly treachery, sent Sellers' hand back into the pocket for the revolver as he used the Cross-Index Rectifier to cull from the subject's mind a kaleidoscopic montage of instructions on how to use it.

But Kolar stopped him. "Cut me in on remote control."

Thaul threw the Master Relay and leaned back.

"Are you sincere in wanting to serve us?" Kolar asked with Sellers' voice.

"Would I expose myself like this if I weren't?" Crockfield reasoned.

"No. I suppose not. And it'll be more convenient having you gather material for the weapons and shields. In return for that service, they'll be yours after we leave."

Thaul smiled inwardly. . . . Nobody ever came out on top in a deal with Kolar. And, naturally, Kolar wouldn't take the chance of leaving behind macroweapons that might greet him on his return from Valvarez.

LATE THAT NIGHT, Rod was still intently occupied in the clinic's microbiology laboratory, wishing impatiently that Crockfield would get back from town.

Once more, he moved the slide under the microscope. There it was: long and thin and wire-like, piercing the specimen of pons tissue from Jamison's brain like a thread of metal.

He had selected the pons for dissection because it seemed to offer the best hope of explaining all the symptoms, located as it was between the cerebrum and the medulla and between the two halves of the cerebellum.

Moving the slide, he studied the silvery hair as it brilliantly reflected the suffused light. He followed the strand until it terminated at a ganglion.

A giant virus, perhaps? A chain of them, bunched together longitudinally so as to present a visible whole in the field of the instrument?

Perplexed, he leaned back, wondering whether such a structure could offer an explanation. Could it transmit nerve impulses so as to interfere with normal functions? By shorting ganglia, could it immobilize motor trunks, interrupt consciousness, cause memory lapses?

He steered the dissecting needle into the microscope's field and directed its blunt end, mountain-like in comparative size, toward the thin strand.

The object, suddenly exhibiting magnetic properties, sprang from the pons tissue and pasted itself against the needle!

Frowning, Rod ran a hand indecisively through his hair. Perhaps he could determine the extent of the substance in the pons. . . . He straightened abruptly. There was one way to find out—a radioactive tracer!

He uncradled the phone and put in a call to the state university; then asked for the residence of Professor James Haggerty of the physics department.

"Good to hear from you, Doctor," Haggerty said. "I was told you'd be on research out at the Crockfield Clinic. I'm supposed to stand by in case I can give you a hand."

"You can. I need a therapeutic drink. Can you cook up one?"

"Depends. What do you have in mind?"

"Something with not too short a half-life—say about twelve hours or so. And it has to gravitate to magnetized metal."

"Magnetized metal!" the other repeated, surprised.

"Yes. Don't ask me to explain."

Haggerty was thoughtfully silent. "We got the pile going. I suppose we can cook up some Fe-60. That stuff has a half-life of just under nine hours—about the closest we can get."

"Can you prepare it in a colloidal solution of filings small enough for intestinal absorption?"

"I suppose so."

"Good. Get it out as soon as you can."

Rod hung up. But when he turned around, Jamison's body and the mobile table on which it had lain were gone.

HE STOOD THERE CONFUSED for a moment. Then he realized Crockfield must have returned, seen him busy at the phone, and trundled Jamison back to the morgue.

But when he glanced out the window, the clinic director's car was still missing from the parking area.

He went to the morgue. The body wasn't there. Perplexed, he searched the empty rooms on the first floor.

Determined, he went on to the second floor—and discovered that none of the detention room doors was bolted! In the first three rooms on the left, the patients were asleep.

He tried Boardman's room. It was empty!

More puzzled, he went on to Irene's room. Indecisively, he stood staring down at the sleeping girl. Then he continued on to the final room.

Sellers was missing too!

Going back down the hall, he met Sellers coming from the other direction. But when he drew up to speak with the patient, the man continued indifferently past him.

Uncertainly, he watched him enter his room. Then he smiled in sudden relief. Of course! The nurse had probably wheeled Jamison back into surgery.

But Jamison wasn't in the operating room. And Miss Nelson, at her station in the reception room, knew nothing about the incident.

But where was Boardman? And where had Sellers been?

Back in the microbiology lab, he found the mobile table—exactly where it had been before he discovered the body missing!

Iratelty, he started to return upstairs. But an automobile drove up outside and he went to the window and watched Crockfield, in the glare of the spotlight on the corner of the building, begin unloading crates from his car.

Boardman was with him!

Rod hardly noticed the minute speck of dust, caught in the beam of the overhead bulb. Like a mote balanced on a shaft of sunlight, it glistened a second. Then it floated beyond the periphery of his vision.

He watched the director and the patient unload aluminum tubing, coils of wire, two objects that resembled huge transformers, and several cardboard boxes.

But abruptly he brought his hands up to his temples as there

was a sudden pain in his ear. He stiffened as he realized all seven patients had recalled ear-aches only a short while before the other symptoms showed up!

And, even as he stood there, the roaring, shattering pain began. It was a relentless torture that sent him reeling down the hall and into his room where he fell helplessly across the bed. . . .

CHAPTER IV

ROD, STILL DRESSED, stirred and opened his eyes to intense sunlight. His head was afire. He bracketed his temples with shaking hands and rose weakly. . . . There was something he must tell Crockfield. But what?

Squinting, he faced the window that framed the skyline of the city, the less distant factories. But the smokestacks were lifeless—like unlit cigarettes standing on end. It was Sunday—and he had no memory beyond Friday night!

Then he saw the bars on the window and realized he was in one of the upstairs detention rooms!

But why?

He tried the door. It was locked.

He pounded on it. But with each blow a bolt of pain shot through his temples. He gave it up and went back to the window.

Crockfield was in the parking area again, unloading more equipment. Sellers, Boardman and Walker were helping. But what were the *patients* doing down there?

Rod noticed that the fingers on his right hand were twitching nervously. He tried to steady them, but the motion only became more pronounced. Then he saw that it wasn't a nervous reflex. The hand was opening and closing—and he couldn't stop it. Then the disease was communicable!

The bolt slid back and Crockfield's fifth case entered stiffly, carrying a tray of food. Elrich, who was a foreman at one of the assembly plants, seemed to be all shoulders, supported by inordinately thin legs and hips. He put the tray on the table.

"What am I doing in here?" Rod demanded.

But the man, who was supposed to have gone through the Jamison crisis Saturday, gave no answer as he backed toward the hall.

Rod started for the door.

The pretense of sluggishness fell away from Elrich as he flashed a shiny cylindrical device hardly larger than a pen.

And a river of icy pain erupted along Rod's arm. Myriad needles stabbed into his biceps. Each finger seemed frozen brittle in the grip of incredible, stinging cold.

Elrich continued backing toward the door, but misjudged his position. His shoulder struck the jamb and the jolt was transmitted through his body, temporarily unbalancing him.

Rod lunged forward and brought his arm swinging around in a backhanded blow that toppled the patient. Then he sprang through the door and rammed the bolt home.

For a moment, he only stood there, desperately alert as he cast apprehensive glances down the corridor. His head was aching and his arm throbbed with returning sensation.

The door boomed and shuddered and Rod wondered how long the panel could hold up under the onslaught of the man's stout shoulder. Long enough for him to get to the phone?

HE PAUSED AT THE FOOT of the stairs. Someone was coming!

Lunging into the shadows beneath the staircase, he watched the sixth patient enter the hall from the main corridor.

Morrel, small and stocky, was carrying Miss Nelson's limp form across his shoulder. The nurse was obviously dead.

Shifting his burden, Morrel opened the cellar door and started down the steps. Ahead of him, the gloom of the basement was lessened by a fitful light—the furnace was open.

And suddenly the disappearance of Jamison's body didn't seem to Rod like very much of a mystery any longer.

Bewildered, he considered easing down the hall. But Morrel dropped the nurse and whirled around, his expressionless face offering no explanation for the action. He sprinted into the main corridor.

From the second floor came the sound of the door splintering off its hinges. Elrich lunged downstairs, following Morrel outside.

Most of the numbness had left Rod's arm as he went cautiously down the hall toward the reception room. Through the glass door of the clinic's main entrance, he saw Elrich, weapon in hand, sprinting up the shell road, a pace or two behind Sellers.

Morrel was thrashing the dense shrubbery inside the iron fence while Boardman and Walker raced up to join in the search.

But how, Rod wondered, could they have all sprung into action spontaneously?

He slipped into the reception room and crossed toward the phone on the desk. The door opened from Crockfield's office and a slightly proportioned nurse entered. Her uniform, much too large, bore the embroidered name "Miss Nelson" on the left lapel.

If the woman was surprised on finding him there, she gave no outward indication as she stood in the doorway, her bony face unnaturally motionless.

Apprehensively, he cast a glance through the front window. The trio who had been thrashing the hedges stopped abruptly and whirled toward the building. They were all armed with tubular weapons now. Morrel and Boardman raced for the main entrance while Walker swept toward the rear of the clinic. Elrich and Sellers spun around on the road and spurted back.

Desperately, Rod turned to the phone. But the dead-pan





nurse was fumbling through one of the desk drawers. Her hand came out with a paralyzer tube!

Rod whirled and raced back upstairs.

The first door on the left was open and he could see Irene lying across the bed.

Heavy steps sounded at the bottom of the stairs and he lunged into the room, slamming the door.

Irene lurched up. "Rod!" There was confusion and fright in her eyes.

He seized a heavy metal chair and wedged its back under the knob. Then he leaned exhausted against the door, his head throbbing relentlessly.

She started to rise. "Rod, where were you? They wouldn't tell me what—"

Her face tensed and her eyes darted wildly about the room. Eventually, though, they became steady and calm.

Rod backed off fearfully.

BUT NOW THERE WAS THE SOUND of many feet racing about in the corridor and doors were slamming throughout the clinic.

The commotion stopped, as though on signal. The footsteps moved more lightly, more cautiously toward Irene's room.

"There's no sense in resisting, Felton," she said. "We are too many, too strongly established. Believe me, it's useless."

He stared confounded at the girl. . . . It was she who had spoken, and yet it wasn't!

"Open up, Felton!" Elrich's deep voice thundered through the door.

Then his weight crashed against the panel and it bulged as the restraining chair skittered back an inch.

Irene staggered toward the door and Rod started to lunge for her. But he couldn't move. It was as though his legs were ponderous weights.

She pulled the chair back and all the patients filed in, together with a man and woman Rod hadn't seen before. Their faces were puppet-like and each one was armed with a paralyzing tube.

Crockfield pushed his way through and turned toward Elrich. "Is Kolar listening?"

The other nodded with an erratic, unsure motion. "He's already established vocal and visual control."

Crockfield faced Rod. "Shall I give him another shot?"

Rod started, wondering why the man was addressing him.

"What will he do about nourishment?" Rod asked. "If he isn't free to eat, he won't be worth anything to us when we're ready for him."

Dismayed at the sound of his own words falling involuntarily from his mouth, Rod tried to shout. But he had no control over his voice!

The clinic director held up a hypodermic syringe. "This will keep him subdued, but semi-conscious, until you bring him under permanent control."

"Very well—we'll try it," Rod agreed. Then, "Thaul, have you finished with Number Seven yet?"

Irene nodded. "Positive control effected."

"Excellent!" Rod heard himself exclaim. "While you're adjusting coordination, you'll be assigned the job of watching Twenty-One until I establish permanent control."

Morrel and Elrich seized Rod's arms. Crockfield rolled up his sleeve and administered the injection.

In less than a minute his vision blurred and the sound of the voices around him became remote and barely distinct.

The out-of-focus outline of Crockfield's florid, grinning face hovered over him.

"Felton!" the director said melodramatically. "You've encountered the Valvarezzians! Listen—I'll tell you about them, how they operate, what they can do, what they mean to me. . . ."

CHAPTER V

"**O**UR HOSTS ARE INORDINATELY stupid," Kolar was saying. "I thought their macroscopic size was their only disadvantage. But I find they're considerably behind us in scientific knowledge too."

It was his image speaking out of the inter-unit communication screen in Number Seven. Thaul listened wearily.

"Lako, in Number Two," Kolar went on, "has been probing Sellers' knowledge. He finds only one branch of science that we've apparently overlooked—something about sub-molecular building blocks of matter and some sort of weird forces enveloping them."

Thaul presented the appearance of attention, but he was watching the visual-interception screen on his control board. He had directed Irene to the window and had left her standing there several minutes earlier, with her eyes focused on the main gates. Thaul hadn't had a chance to move her since Kolar had established contact from his post in Twenty-One.

"How are you managing with Felton?" he asked.

"Splendidly! We're hooking up in record time, despite the disadvantage of a subject who's aware of what's happening."

"Didn't that injection subdue him?"

"To a certain extent. But he's still conscious enough to be obstinate when he experiences involuntary movement. His resistance has blown out a dozen circuits. But we're taming him now—whenever he balks or tries to wrest a limb free, we shoot a few psychovolts into a pain receptor ganglion."

Thaul looked away. Somehow it wasn't fair. Felton didn't stand a chance. None of them did.

"When will this operation be over?" he asked.

"We're well along," Kolar said elatedly. "Six of the subjects are assembling weapons. Four more are constructing individual shield generators. Five are working on the ultra shield generator."

"Are we past the vulnerable stage?"

"Not quite. A mass attack could still wreck us. But as soon as we provide personal shields and weapons for the subjects and isolate the city within the ultra shield, we'll be invincible."

"Have all of the other thirteen crews brought their subjects here yet?"

"All except two."

"I think I see your missing pair." Thaul altered the focus of Irene's eyes and watched the man and woman talking with Sellers at the gate.

"You're right. I'm getting a contact from Lako in Beach-head Two now." Kolar turned to another screen out of Thaul's range of vision.

Please, Thaul! I know you can hear me. Free me!

It was the girl. Her thoughts, mostly subconscious, were seeping into the audio-interceptor speaker from the Vocal-Associative Rectifier. They were calm, though. Despite everything, she was still rational. Made of good stuff, Thaul thought—just like Meva.

He turned the volume lower so Kolar wouldn't hear, wishing at the same time that they had refined the rectifier and eliminated the subvocal pickup. But, as Kolar had once put it, "That lets us know they're psychically alive and kicking."

Thaul! Please listen to me!

Kolar completed his contact with Lako and faced Thaul again. "I'm leaving my control panel unattended to supervise some motor connections. If you need me, just hit the alarm signal."

Thaul watched the other's image disappear out of the side of the communication kinescope.

Free me, Thaul! Just for a while! What harm can I do!

Deception? It was hardly possible under the cosmocontrol system. But he decided to see for himself. He hooked the Vocal-Associative Transfer in series with the Cross-Index Rectifier.

Her concepts of intentions, poignantly and desperately longing, flared pictorially in the smaller kinescope. Witnessing the sequence of imagined action, Thaul watched as she pictured herself burying her face against Felton's chest, touching his cheek, speaking his name—voluntarily, fervently.

There was a background symbolism of resignation and fatalistic submission, of servile pleading. But there was no evidence of deceit.

He freed her.

IRENE WAS WHISPERING his name desperately and the brush of her fingers against his forehead was cool and reassuring. She was evidently herself again.

The effects of the opiate had been wearing off for some time. But Rod had realized there was nothing to gain by displaying his return to normalcy.

He laid his hand over her head and felt the soft touch of her hair.

She looked up, startled. "Rod?"

When he smiled she cried softly.

He rose, realizing that the pain in his head wasn't quite as severe as it had been. At least, the opiate was having its beneficial effects too. He held her against him until her desperation had almost played itself out.

"Now," he said firmly, "is Kolar the leader?"

She brushed at her cheeks. "I—I think so."

"Is he—here?" Rod pointed to himself.

She nodded. "Jamison was his subject, until the emotional shock killed the man."

He looked up hopefully. "Then maybe emotional shock's the solution!"

"That was an accident," she explained disconsolately. "It can't happen again."

He paced, paused at the window, gripped the bars. "Are they watching, listening now?"

"Not through me."

"How do you know?"

"It makes everything look a little dimmer. Voices sound farther off."

Her severe self-control wavered and she lowered her face into her hands.

He seized her shoulders. "We'll find a way, Irene," he promised. Then, "Crockfield said control would be total and permanent—why are you free now?"

"I don't know."

He glanced challengingly at the door. But his determination sagged as he realized how weak he still was from the injection.

THAUL, DEEP IN THOUGHT at his control console, started, instantly concerned over the chance he was taking by letting his subject range free.

He cut in the visual-interception circuit and watched the field of the girl's sight duplicate itself on his main screen.

"No! No, Thaul! Let them!"

Thaul spun around. Kolar stared out, amused, from the videocom tube. Displayed on his cosmocontrol screen, visible in the background, was Felton's visual range. Kolar had returned to his control panel and tapped into Twenty-One's receptory system!

Flustered, Thaul tried to summon an explanation for having released his subject.

But then, Kolar didn't seem to be disturbed about it.

"Ingenious idea!" he commended. "Why didn't I think of it?"

Thaul smiled effusively, masking his confusion.

"Until Felton is under complete control," the other elaborated, "we'll let him and Seven have free movement occasionally. It will do nothing but endear them to each other. Then, should it be necessary to have him perform before he's ready, he will voluntarily do as we direct—provided he's convinced we'll take it out on the girl if he doesn't."

CHAPTER VI

TO ROD, THE FIRST MEMORY LAPSE was quite startling. It had been almost dawn. On the bed and still fully dressed, he had awakened with the headache more severe than ever. Irene had turned on the light a second later.

But it wasn't Irene . . . not then, as she stood by the wall switch and stared coldly at him.

"What is it you want to test, Kolar?" she asked.

"Irene! I . . . The Master Sensory Erase Circuit."

The sudden usurpation of his voice jolted him. "We're over-charging." The words continued to fall out. "If we don't cut off his stream of consciousness, we might get an overload of psychoamps—"

A sudden, subtle shock tingled through his body at that point. When it subsided, he looked around, astonished. . . . He was in the basement, and daylight was visible through the high windows.

Sellers, gripping his arm, said, "You're free for the time being—while Kolar hooks up another circuit. But it wouldn't be smart to try anything."

Rod looked around and hopelessly admitted the wisdom of the other's advice. Elrich was on his left; Boardman and Walker a short distance behind. Close by, Irene's slim figure was cast in statue-like immobility as she stared at the large workbench.

He counted nine men and women assembling various tubular devices. Two other men and a woman were busy at one of the transformers. Crockfield anxiously watched the activity.

One of the women straightened with a compact device in her hand. She clamped it to her blouse, as one would a pin. And immediately Rod imagined there was an indiscernible aura about her.

Sellers stepped forward. "There it is, Crockfield. Watch."

He aimed the director's gun at the woman and fired three shots. Three fiercely glowing lumps of metal materialized a foot away from her and dropped to the floor.

Crockfield drew back, amazed. "It will stop—anything?"

"Anything *you* call a weapon."

"That's marvelous!"

It would be easy to kill the man, Rod thought—if ever he got the chance.

But Crockfield's face sobered. "When will the ultra shield be ready?"

"Everything will be complete by this time tomorrow."

Rod watched Sellers select a long aluminum tube and balance it on his shoulder as a soldier would a bazooka. A multitude of coils was twisted so crazily around the cylinder that it was impossible to trace them visually.

He pointed the thing out the cellar window. The garage, a tractor and a sizable portion of the forest beyond disappeared, leaving only wisps of smoke.

Interested, the others crowded around to watch as he aimed the tube at a distant hilltop.

Rod counted them again. Not considering Crockfield, there were eighteen in the basement besides himself. One of the twenty subjects was missing. . . . Of course—the nurse who had replaced Miss Nelson in the reception room to present an authentic front!

Could he escape—now? What tolerance did the controllers and their instruments have against physical shock? Could he shake them up enough to nullify control? Could he take Irene with him?

The answer to the last question was obvious. She was in their midst. If he tried to reach her, he would have no chance.

Shaking his head furiously, he turned and bolted up the stairs. He raced through the clinic and out the main entrance—across the yard and through the gate.

"HE'S GONE!" SELLERS CRIED.

Thaul spun Irene around and focused her vision on the cellar stairs.

Then the others exploded into action, erupting from the basement.

"Come on!" Elrich shouted to Irene. "We'll need you especially!"

Hesitantly, Thaul sent his subject up the stairs and directed her through the clinic. He tried to put through a contact to Kolar in the escaping subject. But there was no response from Twenty-One.

Sending Irene into the yard, he trained her eyes on Felton, who was sprinting through the gate. But the others weren't racing after him!

Elrich, standing on the porch, cupped his hands around his mouth. "Come back! Or we'll kill the girl!"

As Felton faltered and looked around, Sellers pointed the destructor at Irene.

"We don't need her," Elrich shouted. "We can destroy her without damaging the equipment."

Meekly, Felton turned and walked slowly back to the clinic. And Thaul felt a surge of sympathetic approval and admiration. It was exactly what he would have done had he and Meva been the principals in the tense drama.

Kolar came through weakly. "All units send disaster crews!" "Are you all right, Kolar?" Thaul heard one of the others ask over the inter-unit system.

"A lot of our equipment got banged up." Kolar's voice was coming through stronger now. "But we can make repairs in a few hours. Meanwhile, I want all console suspensions doubly reinforced and the amperage increased fifty per cent in all control circuits!"

EARLY EVENING. Outside, the last glimmer of day retreated in the west, sinking behind the skyline of the city and losing itself in the intensifying glare of street lights.

It was a peaceful city now, Rod reflected as he stood before the barred window. Late workers were scurrying home; suppers were being spread on linen-covered tables while the glow of family conversation brightened thousands of dining rooms; children at play were watching the street lights go on and wondering whether they could hazard another ten minutes' freedom.

But how would it be tomorrow—when terrified people dis-

covered an invisible wall around them, through which nothing, not even the force and heat of the most powerful bombs—could pass?

He turned to stare at Irene. She hadn't stirred for an hour. Only her eyes moved. They were like the eyes of an animated billboard cartoon, following him relentlessly.

Dismally, he conjured up a kaleidoscopic procession of imagined, but inevitable, incidents. . . . The twenty subjects, invulnerable as no beings on Earth had ever been invulnerable before, ranging into the city. . . . Twenty Achilleses seizing control, conscripting labor with the lash of their tubes, requisitioning assembly plants, forcing slaves to build the ship that would take their hosts back to Valvarez.

Eventually, they would return to seize as many subjects as they needed. But those millions of Earthmen who were not required as hosts, Rod wondered—would they ever be free of the Valvarezians? Wasn't it only logical that the masters would transport their parasitic culture to the planet to which the hosts were already adapted?

Headlights pierced the darkness of the road and Rod's gaze followed the car in through the gate and around toward the building's entrance.

Fifteen minutes later the door opened and Elrich entered with Crockfield and Sellers. The latter carried a weapon of a type that was new to Rod.

Rod waited for one of them to speak, but it was he, himself, who did the talking, as Kolar took control of his voice.

"Man by the name of Haggerty insists on seeing you, Felton. So we're going down. But I'll handle the conversation."

Kolar was rapidly repairing the damage, Rod realized dismally.

"We'll get rid of him as fast as we can without arousing suspicion," he added. "If we don't, the girl won't be here when you come back."

Sellers shifted the weapon and took up his post beside Irene.

HAGGERTY WAS AN EXCEEDINGLY small man whose shoulders slouched off toward a moderate paunch. But his patience, it seemed, was in inverse proportion to his size as Rod entered the reception room, followed by Crockfield and Elrich.

"You Felton?" the professor demanded.

Rod nodded.

The nurse at Miss Nelson's desk, presenting an authentic appearance, rose and began filing papers.

"I don't like the run-around I've been getting," Haggerty complained, eying Elrich and Crockfield. "I'm doing business with you and nobody else, Dr. Felton."

"I'm sorry," Rod heard himself say. "But we've had a rough time these past few days."

Haggerty squinted suspiciously at Rod's retinue. "Is there anything wrong, Doctor?"

"Of course not," he answered mechanically. "Really, professor, I've got to get back to my work."

Indignation squared Haggerty's thin shoulders and he roughly handed over a vial in a regulation sheath.

"Here's your therapeutic drink—Fe-60; half-life of eight-point-seven hours," he said stiffly. "If you'll sign this receipt I won't *bother* you any longer."

Rod took the slip and bent across the desk, his back toward the others. He rapidly wrote across the bottom of the form:

"Neurotic patients in revolt! Send police!"

Quickly, he folded the sheet twice.

But he heard himself say, "I'm sorry, Professor Haggerty. But this receipt has to be countersigned by my superior. It'll be mailed to you."

Haggerty stormed out.

A thousand ice picks dug into Rod's brain and the agony staggered him. He remembered now that just before he entered the room his vision had seemed to dim.

Elrich took the receipt, crumpled it in an ash tray and put a match to it. Then he snatched the vial from Rod and deposited it on a table next to a vase of wilted flowers.

The nurse came over and helped Elrich half-carry him back upstairs.

SUPPER WASN'T BROUGHT AROUND until almost midnight. Rod was vaguely aware of being seated on the bed as the door opened. His eyes swung erratically toward the sound of the sliding bolt. His head pivoted around jerkily. He rose like an animated toy that was almost run down . . . but none of the movements was his own.

Crockfield followed Walker in, each carrying a tray of food. The latter set his down on the table near Irene while the clinic director put the other on the bed.

Walker turned toward Rod. "How is the subject handling?"

"Nicely." Rod tried to keep his tongue from moving as the words came out, but he couldn't. "As a matter of fact, I'm glad we had that trouble. Gave us a chance to put in some modifications."

"Will we have a sleep period tonight?"

"I think not. I want the ultra shield up as soon as possible tomorrow morning. Then the city can begin accustoming itself to the idea of isolation."

Like a Gulliver, Rod struggled against the invisible chains. But his efforts were futile.

He used the blurred peripheral area of his vision to watch Crockfield. Like a fawning vassal, the director stood there grinning, seemingly waiting for a command so he could demonstrate his eagerness to serve.

"Will you be down shortly?" Walker asked.

"Not until we are almost ready to activate the shield." Rod stopped resisting the flow of words. "I'll need the time for coordination exercises. I'm going to cut Felton loose for a few seconds so we can hook in Concept Sub-Section C."

Freedom came instantly and unexpectedly—just at the moment that a surge of resentment and hate for Crockfield was reaching a decisive crest. Thus, Rod's reaction was almost instinctive.

He whirled around, squeezed his fury into his fist, and hurled it vehemently at the director's face. The man's head snapped back; he flailed against the wall and went down groggily on a knee.

Rod closed in on him.

"Felton!" Crockfield pleaded frantically. "No! Wait! You don't understand!"

Before Rod could pull the director to his feet, he felt Walker seize his arm and pull him away. The other's intervention, however, was wasted. For Rod had already drawn rigidly erect.

"It's all right, Parneiv," he said calmly. "I have him under control again."

Walker turned toward the door. Crockfield, dabbing at the

blood on his chin, followed him out.

Irene, who had started eating mechanically when the tray was placed before her, had ignored the burst of action.

Rod felt himself being forced back to the bed where his food waited. He knelt beside it and began feeding himself, powerless to halt the relentless procession of spoonfuls of soup to his mouth, the involuntary process of swallowing.

CHAPTER VII

SICKENED WITH THE REALIZATION there was nothing he could do in the hour that remained before terror descended on the city, Rod walked stiffly down the corridor behind Irene.

Columns of sunlight, thrusting in through the windows, limned the erratic dance of the floating dust motes which their feet stirred up from the unswept floor.

Dismayed, he stared at the girl, wondering what emotions were being experienced by the thing that was sharing his field of vision—sharing it and controlling it.

He wondered wildly whether he could break the bonds that held him. He'd done it before, hadn't he, when Kolar had first started connecting the circuits? But that, he realized hopelessly, had been before the control current was increased.

He found himself drawing to a halt at the head of the stairs and watching Irene disappear into the basement. Then, as though unsure of the steps, Kolar sent him treading down cautiously.

With a fierce desperation, he tried to twist an arm free—spring his head loose—wrest a leg from Kolar's control—

The leg had moved of his own accord!

Then he felt himself going off balance. He plunged helplessly down the stairs and a knife of pain stabbed into his ankle.

But the other leg was free!

The others came and stood around him.

"You all right, Kolar?" Sellers asked.

Rod listened to his own false laughter, which came despite the torture in his ankle. "Of course. I told you we were totally shock-proof. But it looks like I need more coordination experience."

Boardman and Elrich helped him up. The pain in his leg

became a torrent of agony—but he had to ignore it! He had to concentrate on following through with his left leg whatever motions were suggested by the right one, or Kolar would know his control wasn't complete.

"Sure you're all right?" Elrich asked.

"Stop worrying about me and let's get on with the work," Rod said automatically. "We were shaken up a bit, of course. But we were well protected this time."

Rod walked on into the cellar with the others, each step sending a bolt of torture through the sprained joint.

"You're limping, Kolar," Sellers observed.

"It's nothing," Rod assured. "Probably disturbed the adjustment on one of the pedal circuits. I'll take care of it later."

THE SOUND OF A ONE-CYLINDER auxiliary engine was a muffled *putt-putt* in the musty cellar. Its exhaust was directed out a window on Rod's left; it operated a generator that fed one of the transformers. This much he could see out of the corner of his eye.

With Crockfield and Irene following, he drew up close to the engine and watched the other subjects soldering coils in a seemingly meaningless array around the transformer.

One of the workmen backed off and brushed against Rod as he set his blowtorch on the floor. Then Boardman came around distributing the personal shield devices.

Rod took his and felt himself slipping it into his pocket. "Don't use them unless you need them," he relayed Kolar's instructions automatically.

The pain in his ankle mounted and he saw, at the lower limit of his vision, that the blowtorch had been placed too close and the heat of its stream was aggravating the agony of the torn ligament. If only he could shift his weight!

Three of the men began carrying destructors and heavier weapons out to a pickup truck in the yard.

Again Rod's attention was drawn to the torch as the throbbing pain became even more severe.

Suddenly he realized the stream of the flame was directed past his leg—almost at the gas engine! If he could nudge it an inch or two, the fire would be playing *on the tank*!

With his weight on his heel, he pivoted the left foot sharp-

ly. His toe, however, fell short of the torch's handle. He'd have to kick out. But when he did, it would be without having shifted his weight. And he couldn't expect to maintain his balance.

He kicked.

And, as he fell, he saw the flame begin to bathe the tank.

They lifted him erect again.

"I think we'd better hold off," Elrich proposed disappointedly, "until you get your subject functioning properly."

"Nonsense," Rod protested. "That fall may have been my fault. I guess I *don't* feel too well. We probably need rest as much as the subjects. But we're going to get the ultra shield up first."

Rod was hardly conscious of the words Kolar was putting in his mouth. Instead, he was trying to watch Crockfield on the periphery of his vision. The clinic director had seen him kick the torch!

And even now Crockfield was stealing an occasional glance at the gas tank.

Smiling, the director turned toward him. "You act like you had a drink, Kolar," he said obsequiously.

But he had put a veiled emphasis on the word "drink!"

THAUL'S REACTIONS were confused as he watched the others complete the final connections on the big shield generator.

Naturally, it would be a tremendous achievement for the expedition—and for Valvarez. But was it justified? Was it morally acceptable for one independent culture to impose itself on another?

As he sat at the control board in Number Seven, his eyes stared only absently at the visual-interception screen. Why should the subject Irene remind him so much of Meva when, actually, there was so little physical similarity? And why should he try to draw a parallel between himself and Felton?

Suddenly annoyed, he cast out the emotional thoughts. There was much to do.

Thaul! Listen, Thaul! Irene's subvocal impulses were sifting through the Vocal-Associative Transfer again—confound it! *There's something wrong with Rod; he's hurt—I know!*

Why didn't she shut up? Why did she have to make it so difficult?

He turned down the audio-interception volume until he could scarcely hear the voices of the other subjects. But still her desperate thoughts came through.

I know he's hurt! But—don't you see?—he can't show it! And he can't get through to Kolar, like I can to you!

He tried to ignore the insistent whisper. But somehow he couldn't. And then he realized it was because he didn't want to.

On his visual-interception screen, he watched the subjects who had been loading the truck return. Then he saw Morrel turn finally from the shield generator.

"It's finished, Kolar," the man reported.

When Rod didn't answer, he repeated, "The generator's hooked up."

Thaul's inter-unit screen flicked on, displaying a picture of Kolar in Twenty-One. But his features were sallow and contorted with pain and he was swaying weakly in his chair!

"Thaul!" His voice was barely audible. "There is something wrong! We're sick—all of us in Twenty-One are sick!"

"I'll have the other crews send rescue details."

"No! We might be running into some sort of natural biological defense." He retched again. "We can't expose any of the other crews until we're sure!"

Morrel, visible on both Thaul's and Kolar's visual-interception screen, demanded, "Kolar—are you controlling?"

Thaul watched the expedition leader manipulate the vocal circuit in Twenty-One. "Turn on the shield generator," Rod directed.

In the inter-unit screen, Thaul saw one of Kolar's crewmen stagger up to the Twenty-One control console.

"We—we found something else!" he reported, dismayed. "Metal! Large masses of metal in the macrosystem! Our trunk leads are attracting them through the tissue!"

The crewman retched and staggered, holding on to the control board.

Two more of Kolar's squad reeled in from a tunnel in the background of the screen and collapsed. The one hanging on the console lost his grip and sank from sight.

Kolar folded forward in his chair, but managed to stagger upright again. He stared helplessly into the inter-unit screen.

"Take over Twenty-One on remote, Thaul. Send a trouble-shooting crew—quick!"

He depressed the "control-transfer" stud and slumped across the keyboard.

Thaul reached out to throw the "control-accept" switch. But he hesitated and his hand slowly fell away from the toggle. He wouldn't take control of Twenty-One—couldn't! What had befallen Kolar had been justly deserved providence.

Calmly, he began turning off the switches on his own control board.

JUST AS ROD REALIZED he was free, two other things happened simultaneously:

Irene started, glanced around in fright, and screamed.

Crockfield stared frantically at the blowtorch, lowered his shoulder, and drove a block into Rod and the girl.

"Watch out!" the clinic director shouted. "The tank's going to blow!"

It did. As Rod fell with the other two, he saw the cap fly off and the pressurized gasoline gush out, bursting into flame as it sprayed the room.

On the floor, their nearness to the engine saved them from the bath of fire that had arched out and engulfed the others.

Crockfield crawled toward the stairs, drawing the girl along. Hardly conscious now of the pain in his ankle, Rod limped after them.

He caught the other's arm. "But—but I thought—"

"That I had sold out?" The director's grim expression gave way to a weak smile. "Who do you think slipped you Haggerty's therapeutic solution last night? Or had you noticed it?"

They started up the stairs leading outside, Rod dully trying to connect the Fe-60 with what was happening now.

"Give me credit," Crockfield went on, "for realizing that a radioactive tracer might have an effect. I wanted to slip some in everybody's food. But they were watching too closely. I was lucky enough to swipe the stuff from under Elrich's nose in the reception room and get it in *your* soup."

They reached the yard. The cellar behind them was an inferno, with great clouds of smoke and flame billowing from

the windows. Even at a distance, they felt the heat.

Rod limped toward the weapons in the truck.

"You mean," Irene asked incredulously, "that you were against them all the time?"

The director stiffened at her skepticism. "I overheard Sellers and Jamison talking. That's how I found out about them. But Boardman, across the hall, saw me listening. I had to pretend to play along and wait for a break. Or they might have killed me then."

At the truck, Rod seized one of the destructors and raised it to his shoulder. He faced the clinic.

"I tried to tell you all I could about them," Crockfield continued, "by bragging egotistically when I gave you that watered-down sedative. That was so you would know what it was all about while you might still manage something. But, God! They didn't trust me! Didn't let me alone for a minute! Even on those trips to town—"

Irene screamed.

The subjects were streaming out of the raging cellar, their clothes burning furiously, their faces and arms charred, their hair singed and smoking.

"Oh, God!" the clinic director moaned. "They're *still* under control!"

Rod aimed the weapon at the charging horde. Then he tensed, dismayed. "I don't know how to fire it!"

Irene's face lost its expression and her eyes became dull. She turned toward him.

"The large knob near the end of the barrel," she offered mechanically. "It controls the spread. Turn it full clockwise."

Seeing her suddenly under control again, he realized belatedly that she *had been* free for several minutes—and for no understandable reason!

Nevertheless, he twisted the dial.

"Now push that button by your left hand," she instructed.

He depressed the stud and the weapon began vibrating subtly. He played the invisible charge full on the advancing subjects. It was just as well; grotesquely burned as they were, they couldn't live.

When it was over, he aimed the weapon at the clinic and swept it back and forth until not even the foundation remained.

"Thanks, Thaul," he heard Irene whisper.

THAUL STEERED the equipment carrier clear of the last obstacle and tuned in on the directional beam. He engaged the collision shield and put the vehicle on auto-control.

Like an indiscernible mote, it headed toward the center of the city—toward the tallest building—toward a cornice of the structure, a particular cavernous pore in the concrete surface where the interstellar ship waited, unmanned.

Boren, beside him, stretched. "I'll be glad to head for home."

Thaul, too, was impatient—for Valvarez, for Meva. "We should have left long ago. But we had to wait until the level of radioactivity fell in Twenty-One."

Thoughtfully, Boren asked, "If the expedition was a failure—if all the other control crews died because of this radioactivity stuff—why did we have to remove the equipment from Twenty-One and Seven?"

Thaul lied with a shrug. "Kolar wanted it that way. He wanted every bit of equipment in one of the disastrous beach-heads taken back to Valvarez for comparison with the equipment in our own unit."

The other nodded.

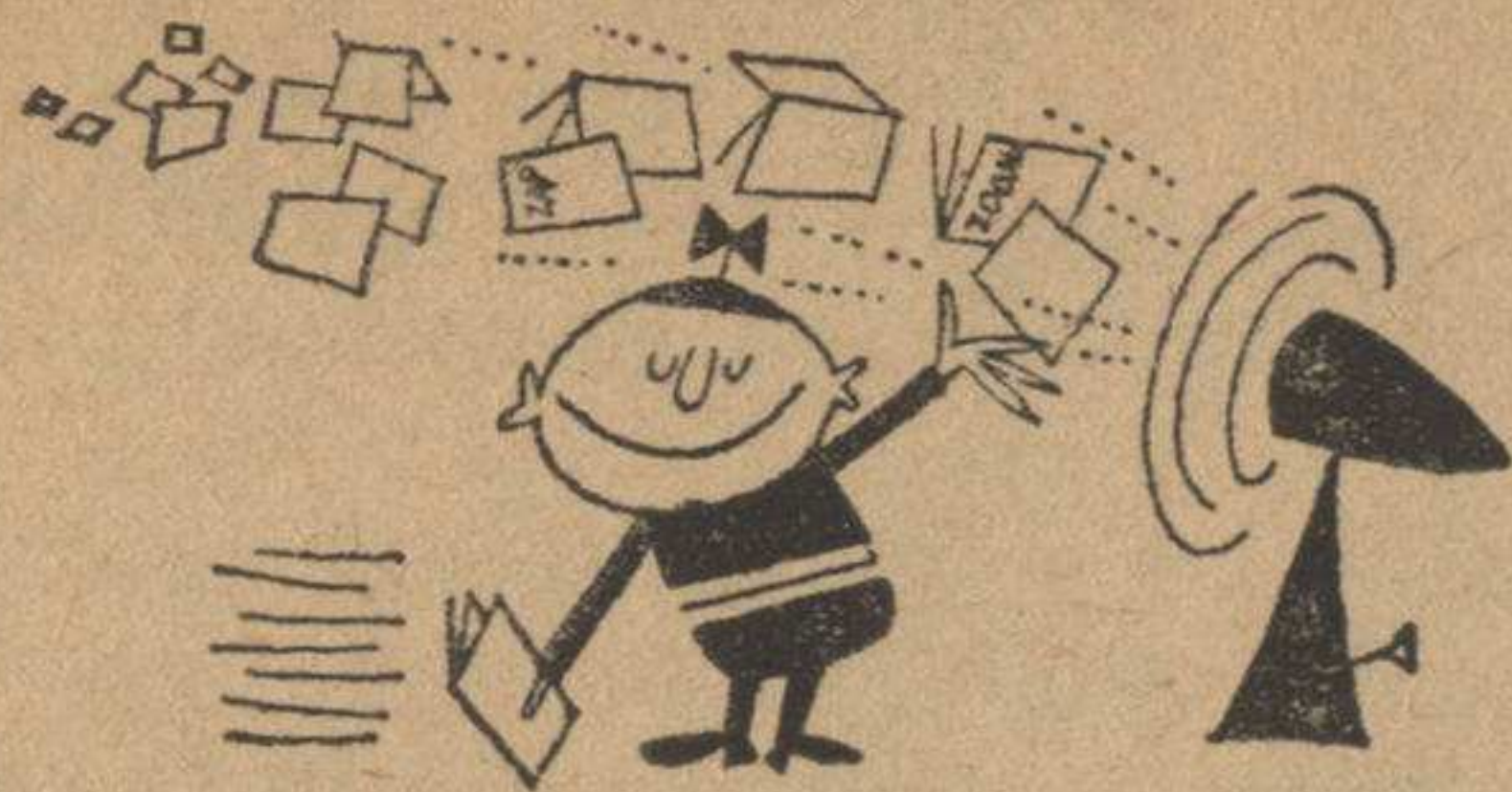
"Helpless as we were," Thaul went on, "it was fortunate that I could learn enough about the radioactivity effect from Seven's mind to recover the equipment in Twenty-One too."

He had to watch his words; make certain one lie didn't contradict another. He couldn't tell them he had established contact with Irene and Felton and had assured them he would remove all the equipment; that Felton had explained about half-life and radioactivity level so the microcontrol crews wouldn't be exposed.

Boren looked at him suddenly. "Why weren't we affected in Number Seven?"

"We may never know. The expedition was a failure, anyway, so why bother with a post mortem? Anyway, Valvarez will be busy finding another, more sensible means of survival. There won't be time for looking backward."





THE FAN-SPACE

Conducted by Archibald Destiny

LONDON sounds good, like a convention should! Unlike the perpetrators of the cigarette commercial I'm paraphrasing, I'll apologize for the bad grammar—but the sentiment stands. From all appearance, the 15th Annual World Science Fiction Convention—to be held at the Royal Hotel, London, England, September 6, 7, 8 and 9, 1957—will be one of the best so far.

At this writing, I don't know any specific details of the program, because the committee hasn't announced them yet. I do know, though, that the committee includes some exceptionally talented and hard-working people, who are taking an unusually sensible attitude towards the tremendous task that faces them. John Wyndham, who vies with Arthur C. Clarke for the mantle of England's top science fiction writer, is presi-

dent; and Harry Turner, pretty much unchallenged as the country's leading illustrator, will edit the program booklet and progress reports, with the popular Ken Bulmer assisting. Secretary, who will handle correspondence and receive registration fees, is Bobbie Wild, 204 Wellmeadow Rd., Catford, London S.E. 6.

One pleasant touch is that the committee has realized that a lot of people who won't actually be able to attend the convention will want to support it anyway. Therefore, you can join the sponsoring World Science Fiction Association for only \$1.00, instead of the usual \$2.00. Those who do put in an appearance at the affair will be asked to cough up the extra buck; but I intend to go anyway—hang the expense!

More later. But there's a very good chance that the first

progress report will be out by the time you read this, so it would make sense for you to send your dollar to Bobbie Wild now.



The above information, incidentally, was lifted from *Contact*, a new fanzine which seems to be just what fandom has needed for a long time. It is designed to carry news about fans and fandom, including a complete listing of all fanzines appearing, and will appear twice a month. The format is attractive, the mimeographing very legible, and the entire approach literate and lively.

It's true that the same description could have applied as well to other news-sheets which have been launched in the past. There's a critical difference, though. Most of the earlier projects were strictly one-man affairs; and inevitably, when the one man in question got tired of fandom or too busy with more mundane affairs, the news-sheet disappeared. *Contact*, however, is backed by four of the most energetic and reliable fans on the current scene. This "Contact Group" consists of Ron Bennet (England), John Hitchcock (U.S.A.), Jan Jansen (Bel-

gium), and Ellis Mills (a member of the U. S. Air Force who keeps popping up everywhere and anywhere there is anything going on). The actual publication office is in Antwerp, Belgium, and the only possible drawback to the whole thing is the time it takes for mail from there to reach — for instance — New York. In spite of this, most of the material in the first two issues of *Contact* has been hot news when it reached me. Also, you can have your copies sent air mail by paying extra.

The central idea behind the project is that present-day fandom lacks unity. This is obviously true for at least two reasons: fandom is no longer exclusively confined to the United States and England, but scattered through almost every country you can name; and many small groups have grown up around interests not strictly germane to science fiction. *Contact* will not be aimed at any one group, but will provide everyone with a central source for news and information. As such, it may well hold fandom together where more grandiose attempts to do so have failed miserably.

U. S. fans can subscribe by sending \$1.00 for a year's

supply to Dick Ellington, 299 Riverside Drive, Apt. 11A, New York 25, N. Y. If you want the air mail edition, make it \$2.50. *Contact* deserves the support of all fans—and should be particularly valuable to “neos” who are just taking the plunge and learning what it’s all about.



Brief notes: The United Fan Federation of Texas is a new organization for Texas fans only, with the purpose of promoting new clubs in the state. It costs \$1 to join, and all members get a monthly fanzine, *V. V. Cephei*. The Federation may put on a convention in Dallas in the near future. Prospective members should write to Richard A. Koogler, President, 5916 Revere Place, Dallas 6, Texas.... The first club to join the Federation was Dal-fen Productions, which plans to make movies and tapes to rent to cons and clubs. For further information, write to Foy Campbell, 219 N. Clinton, Dallas, Texas.

Robin Wood (a boy, 16 years old), Box 154, Amador City, Calif., desires communication with “anybody who wishes to do so, male, female, or whatever.” . . . Franklin Bergquist, General Delivery,

Eddyville, Iowa, is starting a science fiction and chess club, and wants to hear from anyone who likes to play chess, wants to learn chess, or just wants to join a club. . . . Eddie Kisch, 4873 Cochran St., Santa Susana, Calif., has a large collection of old science fiction comic magazines that he would like to trade for other magazines or Tarzan books. . . . A twelve-year-old boy wants material (500 words or less) for a fanzine. This is only a second try, he says, so don’t expect too much. Contact John W. Thiel, 14901 Hamlin Ave., Midlothian, Ill.



And so I sink slowly in the West—but don’t forget that this department will also serve as a sort of fan questions and answers service. Is there anything you want to know? Like: how many separate fanzine titles have been used, what is the FAPA, where is blog manufactured, and who is Robert Bloch? Being somewhat of a fannish upstart myself, I may not always know the answers, but I’ll try my best to find out for you. So remember the address: Archibald Destiny, c/o Royal Publications, 47 E. 44th St., New York 17, N. Y.



*The Earth itself
had suffered a
sea-change—at
the flick of
an alien hand!*

Spawn of the Deadly Sea

by Robert Silverberg

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CHAPTER I

THE SEA-LORD SHIP was but a blurred dot on the horizon, a tiny squib of color against the endless roiling green of the mighty sea. It would be a long time before the men of the sea would draw into the harbor of Vythain—yet the people of the floating city were already congealed with terror.

The whisper shuddered through the city: "*The Sea-Lords come!*" Old Lackthan in the spy-tower saw the black sails first, and relayed the word down to those below. "*The Sea-Lords come!*"

In the streets of the city, life froze suddenly. The purchasing of fish and the scraping of scales ceased, the writing of books and the making of songs. The Sea-Lords were making their way across the panthalassa, the great sea that covered the world, heading for Vythain to collect their annual tribute.

The hundred thousand people of Vythain awaited their coming with fear. One—one—stood on the concrete pier, down where the oily slick of the sea licked angrily against the base of the floating city, and stared outward with open, unashamed curiosity.

For Dovirr Stargan, this was a long-awaited day. He was eighteen, now; tall and broad and with the strength of a young shark. Looking out across the darkness of the sea, he scowled impatiently as the Sea-Lord vessel slowly crawled toward Vythain.

From somewhere above came three shrill trumpet-blasts. Dovirr glanced up. At the parapet atop the sweeping flat face of the Council House, Councilman Morgrun was giving the warning.

"The Sea-Lords approach! Remain in your houses, make no attempt at resistance while the tribute is being delivered. They will not harm us if we do not give them cause."

Morgrun's words rolled out over the amplifiers left behind by the *Dhuchay'y*, the long-forgotten, long-departed conquer-

ors of abandoned Terra. And down by the pier, Dovirr spat angrily. *Craven!* he thought.

"The piers are to be cleared!" Morgrun ordered, and the amplifiers roared out his voice. Dovirr realized that the Councilman's words were aimed directly at him; all the sensible citizens of the floating city were long since snug in their cozy nests, huddling till the men of the sea had snatched their loot and gone on.

Dovirr turned, saw a swarthy red-clad officer come running toward him. He recognized the man: young Lackresh, son of Vythain's lookout.

"Dovirr, you madman! Get off the pier before the Sea-Lords arrive!"

"I'm staying here, Lackresh. I want to see what they're like."

"They'll kill you, idiot! Come on—I have my orders." Lackresh brandished a neuron-whip—another legacy from the *Dhuchay*'s conquerors of old. "Get up to your place, fast!"

"Suppose I don't go?"

Sweat poured down Lackresh's face. Life was peaceful, here in Vythain; a policeman really had little to do amid the everlasting calm—the calm Dovirr hated so violently. "If you don't go—if you don't go—"

"Yes?"

The Sea-Lord ship was near the harbor now, and drawing nearer rapidly. Lackresh's wavering hand unsteadily grasped the compact neuron-whip. Looking at Dovirr with blank lack of comprehension on his face, he said: "Why don't you act like a normal person, Dovirr?"

Dovirr laughed harshly. "You'll never get anywhere *reasoning* with me, you know. You'd better use force."

Lackresh's lower lip trembled. He raised the neuron-whip and said uneasily, "All right. I'm ordering you to return to

ROBERT SILVERBERG is the only writer to appear in all three issues so far of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES—and for good reasons! Here again, he paints a picture of an Earth that has changed completely from the one we know—but a picture so convincingly detailed you'll forget the present-day Earth until you've finished the very last word of the story!

your dwelling. I've wasted too much time as it is and—"

Dovirr leaped forward, grinning, and clamped one powerful hand on Lackresh's wrist. Twisting downward, he forced the officer to release the neuron-whip. He grabbed the weapon and shoved Lackresh back a few feet.

"Go," Dovirr ordered hoarsely. "Get moving, Lackresh—or I'll whip you right into the water!"

"You're—crazy!" Lackresh whispered.

"Maybe so—but that's not your affair. Go!" He tuned the aperture of the neuron-whip down to *Low Intensity* and flashed a stinging force-beam at the officer. Lackresh quivered under the blow, seemed almost ready to burst into tears—and then, recovering himself, he stared evenly at Dovirr.

"You've beaten me," he said. "I'll leave you here—and may the Seaborn pick your bones!"

"I'll worry about that," Dovirr called laughingly, as Lackresh retreated. The officer scrambled without much dignity up the carven stone stairs that led from the piers to the city proper, and vanished into the tumult of winding streets that was Vythain.

Dovirr turned and planted one foot on the very rim of the sea-wall. The sea rolled on—the endless sea, the sea that covered all of Earth save where the floating cities of the conquering *Dhuchay'y* broke the pathless waves.

The Sea-Lord ship made for the harbor. Dovirr could almost hear the raucous chanting as the rough kings of the sea hove to, drawing back the oars. He narrowed his eyes. The black sail billowed, and the ship was close enough to count the banks of oars.

There were four. It was a quadrireme—that meant the Thalassarch himself was coming to collect the gold! Almost sick with impatience, Dovirr waited for the ship to arrive.

GOWYN, THALASSARCH of the Western Sea, was a tall, heavy man with the thick, brutal jaw of a ruthless leader. He wore a tunic of green wool—wool, the precious product of the floating city of Hicanthro—and affected a curling black beard that extended from his thin, hard lips to the middle of his chest.

The Thalassarch stood six-feet-six; around him were his

underlings, buskin-clad, all of them over six feet. They were a proud group. The Sea-Lord vessel lay at anchor in the suddenly quiet harbor at Vythain, while tethered to the side of the pier was Gowyn's richly-carved dinghy. Dovirr, squatting down out of sight, squinted at the letters inscribed on the black ship's prow: *Garyun*.

He smiled. *Dovirr Stargan, Master of the Ship Garyun*. It was a worthy title, a noble ambition.

The rulers of Vythain now came in solemn procession to greet the waiting Gowyn. Dovirr watched them scornfully; eight doddering oldsters, led by Councilman Morgrun. They advanced, bearing the coffers.

Gold—gold laboriously dredged from the sea by the painstaking hydride process. A year's work to reclaim a few handfuls of the precious metals—and the Thalassarch claimed what was his due, in payment for guarding the seas.

Some said there were no pirates, that the Sea-Lords had created them as a convenient fiction for the purpose of keeping the floating cities subservient. That was as may be; it yet remained that ships *did* disappear, whether at pirate hand or Sea-Lord. And the inter-city commerce was vital to the existence of the floating cities.

Vythain produced vegetables; Korduna, meat. From Hicanthro came treasured wool, from Dimnon rubber, from Lanobul machined goods. No city was self-sufficient; each of the floating communities that drifted on the great panthalassa, anchored securely to the sunken ancient world of lost Terra beneath the sea, required the aid of the Sea-Lords' ships to survive.

"The tribute, sire," Councilman Morgrun said unctuously. He knelt, soiling his costly robes in the dirt before Gowyn the Thalassarch. His seven confreres came forward, set the coffers of gold before the Sea-Lords.

"Take it," Gowyn growled to his underlings. Each of the subordinates stooped, easily lifted a heavy coffer, and deposited it in the dinghy. Gowyn struck a demoniac pose, one foot athwart Morgrun's debased body.

"For another year," the Thalassarch rumbled, "I, Gowyn of the Western Sea, declare the city of Vythain under my protection. The gold is solid weight, is it not?"

"Of course," Morgrun mumbled.

"It had better be." Gowyn kicked the Councilman away from him contemptuously. "Back to your shelter, guppy! Run! Hide! The Sea-Lord will eat you unless you can flee!"

With undignified haste Morgrun scrambled to his feet. He gathered his robes about him, made a perfunctory bow and muttered thanks, turned, and, flanked by the other seven Councilmen, retreated swiftly toward the carven stairs. Gowyn's sardonic laughter echoed through the silent city as they ran.

The Thalassarch turned to his waiting comrades. "This city has no fight," he remarked. "Each year they hand over the tribute like so many frightened fleas. Damn, but I'd love a good fight some year from one of them!"

A heavily-tanned, red-bearded man in jeweled helmet said: "Never, sire. They need your protection too desperately for that!"

Gowyn roared in laughter. "Protection! Imagine—they pay us for what we most dearly love to do!" He looked up at the massed bulk of the floating city, and chuckled scornfully.

The Sea-Lords turned to enter their dinghy. Suddenly Dovirr rose from his hiding-place.

"Wait, Thalassarch!" he shouted.

Gowyn had one foot already in the dinghy. He drew it back in utter astonishment and looked up to see who it was had spoken.

Dovirr faced him squarely. "The tribute is yours, mighty Gowyn—but you leave too soon."

"What want you, boy?"

Dovirr bristled at the offhand, impatient "*boy*." "Boy no more than any of you, Sea-Lords. I seek to leave Vythain. Will ye take me with you?"

Gowyn roared in amusement and nudged one of his companions. "Ho! A sucker-fish wishes to run with the sharks! Into the water with him, Levrod, and then let's be off for the ship."

The Sea-Lord named Levrod smiled eagerly. "The work of a moment, sire." He stepped toward Dovirr, who backed away half a step and then held his ground. "Come to me, landman," Levrod crooned. "Come and taste the sea-water!"

"You come to me," Dovirr snarled back. "I'll stand my ground."

Angrily Levrod charged. Dovirr waited for the enraged

Sea-Lord to cover the concrete pier and draw close. Levrod was wiry and strong, Dovirr saw. Levrod was planning on a running charge, a quick flip—and a dunking for the rash townsman who delayed the Sea-Lords. Dovirr had other ideas.

Levrod reached him; the Sea-Lord's strong fingers clutched for his arm and leg. Deftly, Dovirr stood to one side, stooped, caught the astonished Levrod by the crotch and shoulder. In one swift motion he straightened and catapulted the Sea-Lord into the water. Brine splashed on the pier as Levrod went under.

Dovirr whirled, expecting the other Sea-Lords to retaliate. But they were holding fast. Levrod swam rapidly to shore—there was never any telling what lurked in the offshore waters—and clambered up, cursing and spitting salt-water. Red-faced, he groped for his sword.

Dovirr stiffened. Unarmed, he could hardly hope to defend himself. Levrod whipped forth his weapon—

And Gowyn the Thalassarch drew his, crashing it down ringingly on Levrod's blade. Stunned, the Sea-Lord let the sword drop from his numbed fingers.

Gowyn glanced at Dovirr. "Pick it up," he commanded.

Silently, Dovirr obeyed. He gripped the jeweled hilt firmly and looked at the Thalassarch.

Gowyn was smiling. "Run this carrion through," he said, indicating the dripping, shivering, utterly miserable Levrod.

Dovirr tightened his grip. *Strike an unarmed man? Why—*

He banished the thought. Levrod would have killed him unhesitatingly; besides, Gowyn's orders were orders. He lunged; the stroke was true. Levrod crumpled. Gowyn kicked the corpse over the side of the pier. Slowly, a red stain seeped out over the oily harbor water.

Instantly there was a flutter of fins, and the body disappeared. *The Seaborn*, Dovirr thought moodily. *Feeding on their landborn brother.*

"We now have one vacancy aboard the *Garyun*. Your name, youngster?"

"Dovirr Stargan," he stammered. Could it be possible? Was it really happening?

"Welcome to the *Garyun*, Dovirr Stargan. You're young, but I like your spirit. Besides, I long suspected Levrod's loyalty."

THE WIDE, UNEASY SWEEP of the sea spread out before Dovirr as he stood near the prow of the *Garyun*, feeling the salty tang blow sharply against him. The sky was dark; overburdened clouds hung low, threatening cold rain, and the golden-brown fins of the Seaborn broke the surface here, there, cleaving the sea at random.

Looking outward, Dovirr thought of the Seaborn—those strange once-human things man had created centuries ago in a fruitless attempt to halt the onslaught of the unstoppable *Dhuchay'y*.

"Thinking, Dovirr?" a deep voice said.

He turned. Gowyn stood beside him. In the six months he had been aboard the ship, Dovirr had won a firm place in the grizzled Thalassarch's affections. Gowyn was near middle age; he had held dominance on the Western Sea more than twenty years. Time ran against him. He sought a successor—and, Dovirr hoped, he had found one at last.

"Thinking, sire. Of the Seaborn."

Gowyn squinted at the flashing fins. "Our brethren of the deep? Someday you'll taste their teeth, young one."

"Is it true, sire? That they eat humans who fall below?"

Gowyn shrugged heavy shoulders. "You will find that out the day you topple overboard. I've never had cause to know—but a dying seaman will draw their fins within an instant."

"Strange," Dovirr said, "that they should prey on us. They were men once themselves, weren't they?"

"The sons of men only." Shadows swept the Thalassarch's face. "Years past—when the Earth was dry land, when the *Dhuchay'y* first came—man created the Seaborn to fight the alien conquerors." He chuckled sardonically. "It was hopeless. The *Dhuchay'y* defeated the Seaborn legions with ease, set a mighty rod in the ocean—and the spreading seas covered the land."

"What were they like, the *Dhuchay'y*?"

"Amphibians! They lived on sea, on land. They flooded our world to provide breeding ground for their spawn, who live in the sea until grown—and also to rid themselves of the troublesome beings who lived on the land. It was the *Dhu-*

chay'y that built the floating cities, and kept a few of us alive to serve them." Moodily, Gowyn clenched his fists. "Oh, had I been alive then, when they trampled us! But there was no stopping them. The sea covered all of Earth, save only for the cities they built. The world of our fathers lies a thousand fathoms down. The Seaborn sport in the drowned cities."

"And they left," said Dovirr. "Every *Dhuchay'y* on Earth suddenly left one day. They gave no reason?"

"None."

Harsh clouds seemed to bunch on the horizon. Dovirr shivered as the chill, moisture-laden wind filled the sails. The rhythmical grunting of the oarsmen on the four decks below formed a regular pattern of sound that blended with the beating of the sea against the *Garyun's* hull.

"Some day the *Dhuchay'y* will return," Gowyn said suddenly. "Some day—as unexpected as their first coming, and as unexpectedly as they departed, they will come back."

Fierce salt spray shot up the bows. In a lowered voice, Gowyn said, "Dovirr—should I die before they come—"

"Sire?"

"Should I die—and my time is long since overdue—will you swear to destroy them in my place?"

Dovirr nervously fingered his sprouting black beard. "I swear, sire," he said huskily.

Gowyn was silent for a moment, his thick fingers digging into Dovirr's shoulders. Then he pointed toward the lee.

"From there, this afternoon, will come a ship of *Thalassarch Harald*. Fight you at my side, Dovirr."

"Thank you, sire." Dovirr bowed his head. To fight at the *Thalassarch's* side was a deep honor—a sign that the mantle had been confirmed. Gowyn had named his eventual successor.

The *Thalassarch* strode away. Dovirr remained looking outward. Somewhere far to the east was the island city of *Vythain*. *Work and slave, ye landbound lubbers!* Dovirr thought defiantly. *You'll pay tribute to Dovirr yet!*

AS GOWYN FORETOLD, Harald's ship did indeed come from the leeward that afternoon, sailing into the wind. The cry resounded from aloft shortly after midday mess, and the *Garyun* prepared for war.

There were nine Thalassarchs, each boasting a roughly-hewn section of the globe. Gowyn called his domain the Western Sea; Harald was lord of the Black Ocean, a vague territory lying to the west of Gowyn's waters, and including the floating cities of Dimnon, Lanobul, and Ariod, among others. But there were no borders in the ocean, and each Thalassarch disputed hotly the extent of his neighbor's sphere of dominance.

Harald's ship approached. Aboard the *Garyun*, the uppermost bank of oarsmen docked their oars; with the wind blowing strongly, the vessel could maneuver with only three banks, thus freeing twenty men for bearing arms. All of the women of the *Garyun*, wives and daughters of the Sea-Lords, were safe in their quarters below-decks.



The *Garyun* ran up a war-flag. Gowyn strode to the deck, armed and ready, and Dovirr took his place at the Thalassarch's right hand. He saw several of the ship's officers staring at him enviously, but ignored them. He was Gowyn's man, and they would honor Gowyn's choice—or else!

The enemy ship called itself the *Brehtwol*. It, too, ran up its war-flag. Swords bristled aboard the *Garyun*; the grappling-iron crew readied itself.

Steadily, the two ships approached each other. Dovirr could see the men on the opposite deck now. There was short, grim-faced Harald, surrounded by his minions, waiting, waiting.

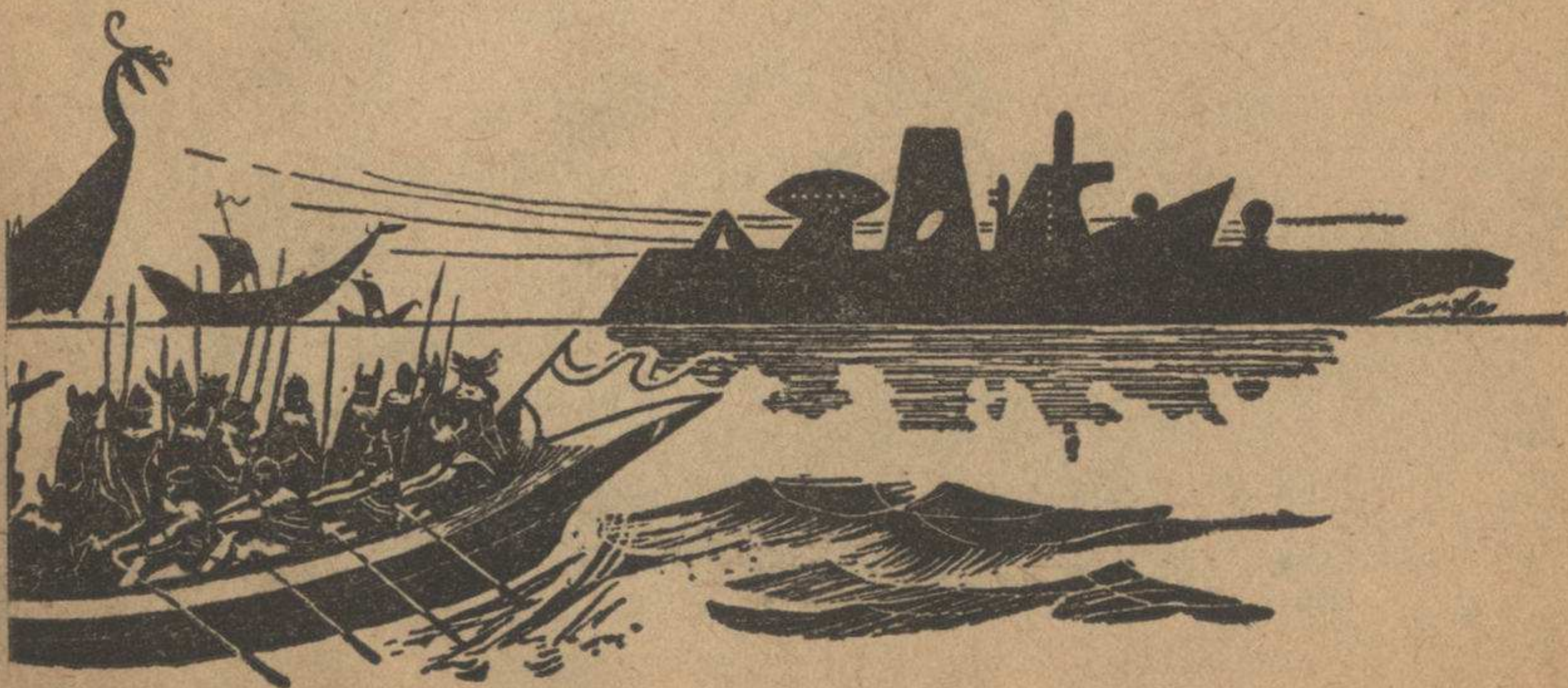
There was the thud of wood against wood, and grappling irons fell to. Moving automatically, Dovirr followed Gowyn over the side. The *Brehtwol* had been breached first!

"Swords! Swords!" roared Gowyn. "Follow on, men!"

The *Garyun* had seized the initial advantage. Its men swooped down on the dark-clad defenders, swords flashing brightly. Dovirr gripped the weapon he had won from Levrod long before and drove it through the heart of the first Black Oceanier he encountered.

The men of Harald's ship had deployed themselves for defense; Gowyn's sudden charge had left them no alternative. Dovirr and the Thalassarch moved forward.

"Ah, the pigs!" Gowyn exclaimed suddenly. He gestured



to the windward, where four of Harald's men were hacking at the grapples. They were trying to cut loose, to end the contest and gain freedom while Gowyn was still aboard the enemy ship, where he could be brought down at ease.

"Cover for me," Dovirr said.

Gowyn raised a fearful barrage of swordplay; his heavy weapon flashed in the air, driving the Black Oceaners back, as Dovirr made his way along the pitching deck to the grapples.

"Away from there, cowards!" he shouted.

The four who hacked at the grapples looked up, and Dovirr swept into their midst. His sword felled two of them before they could defend themselves; a third ranged himself along the bow, but as he began to strike, a bolt from a *Garyun* archer felled him, and he toppled headlong between the linked ships.

The fourth rose to the defense. His sword rang against Dovirr's. A quick thrust penetrated almost to Dovirr's flesh, but he sidestepped and brought the blade down crushingly. The man staggered away, nearly cut in two, and fell.

"To me," Gowyn roared, and Dovirr, his work done, raced back to the *Thalassarch's* side.

Gowyn was hard pressed. Dovirr's sword moved rapidly through enemy ranks, and together they cut back the opposition—until, suddenly, the victorious duo found themselves facing a squat, burly, black-bearded man with close-trimmed hair and a dark patch over one eye.

Harald himself!

Impetuously Dovirr leaped forward, anxious to be the one to strike down a *Thalassarch*, but Gowyn growled, "Not you," and pulled him back.

Dovirr started to protest. Then he realized Gowyn was right; the honor of smiting a *Thalassarch* belonged rightfully to Gowyn, not to him.

Swords rang. Harald was a formidable opponent, but he was tired and sick at heart at the utter failure of his assault on the *Garyun*. He put up a fearsome defense, but Gowyn finally beat down his sword and spitted him.

"Harald lies dead!" Gowyn bellowed, and instantly all action ceased. Fighters of both ships put down their swords, standing as in a tableau, frozen. The battle was over.

Dovirr found himself trembling unaccountably. A *Thalas-*

sarch lay dead; Gowyn now was ruler of two seas. Hardly ever had this happened before.

Harald's men were kneeling to Gowyn now.

VICTORY WAS CELEBRATED aboard the *Garyun* that night. Opinion was unanimous that Harald's bold move, while it had brought him ignominious death, was nobly conceived. It was rare for one Thalassarch ever to attack another's ship.

Now, Gowyn found himself master of two seas. He allowed the crippled *Brehtwol* to depart, placing aboard it Kebolon, the *Garyun*'s second officer, as its captain. Kebolon was charged with the task of spreading the word to Harald's other ships that they now vowed fealty to Gowyn.

In the hearts of the men of the *Garyun* there was rejoicing—but none leaped higher than that of Dovirr, landman turned Sea-Lord, whose blade had known blood for the first time at sea.

He stood alone on the deck, his body warmed by the fiery rum in his stomach. At night, the sea hammered the keel of the *Garyun*, splattering the sides, booming dully. Far in the distance, the flickering light of a laden merchantship bound from Dimnon to Hicanthro with a cargo of rubber broke the darkness. The coded light flashed red; should it become suddenly green, the lookout would call, and the *Garyun*'s crewmen would heave to, as the Thalassarch came to the merchantman's rescue.

That was part of the contract. The cities paid tribute to the Sea-Lords—and the Sea-Lords guarded against the pirates.

Twice, now, the *Garyun* had been called upon to save a vessel in trouble. Once, it had been a tub out of Lanobul, heading north to Vostrok. Gowyn and his ship had saved it from flagless pirates operating out of a rooted island.

There were a few such—islands which had once been the highest mountain-tops, before the *Dhuchay'y* came. Scattered bands of pirates lurked there, preying on merchant vessels.

The pirates had fled at Gowyn's approach; he had decided not to give chase.

The second time, it had been a ship bound for Vythain, out of Hicanthro. They were badly plagued by a school of playful

whales, and the *Garyun*, vastly amused by the difficulties encountered by the nervous merchantmen, answered the distress call and drove the whales off.

Now, Dovirr watched the steady progress of the Dimnon vessel in the distance. The vast bulk of the sea separated them.

Thalassa. Sea. It was an ancient word, a word that came from a language long drowned with the rest of Terra, but it conveyed the majesty and the awesomeness of the sea. *Thalassarch*—sea-king. The word rolled well on the tongue. *Dovirr Stargan, Thalassarch of the Nine Seas*. . . .

Already Gowyn had mastered two empires. Someday Gowyn would lie with the Seaborn, and Dovirr would rule. It was this he had dreamed of—this, all the long landlocked years in Vythain while he watched the far-off dots of ships against the blue curtain of the sky, and waited to grow to manhood.

He turned to go below-decks. Dovirr enjoyed brooding over the vastness of the sea, but on a celebration-night such as this his place was below, with the gay throng of roisterers.

Making his way over the rolling deck, he found the hatch and ducked through. The lights glowed brightly; rum flowed with free abandon. It was hardly every night that a *Thalassarch* fell.

Dovirr entered the big cabin. Gowyn was there, downing cup after cup of rum. The crew were roaring, laughing with a violence that threatened to shake the ship to shivers. The women, too, joined in the gaiety, joking and laughing as ribaldly as the men. They were strong and bold, these women of the sea—completely unlike the timid, gentle girls of the floating cities.

Dovirr stiffened as he realized why they were so mirthful. A knot of seamen around Gowyn parted to show something wet and dark lying on the deck, wriggling, beating its great fins against the wood in agony and uttering hoarse barks.

Gowyn was laughing. "Ho, Dovirr! We've brought up another prize! Two catches in one day! First Harald, now this!"

Dovirr made his way to the *Thalassarch's* side. "What may that be?"

"I sometimes forget you were a landman but months ago," Gowyn rumbled. "Know not the Seaborn when you see one beached? Marghuin the cook was trawling to supplement our stores—and netted this!"

Of course, Dovirr thought. With naked curiosity he studied the writhing creature lying in a pool of moisture on the deck.

It was about the size of a man, but its unclothed body terminated in flukes rather than legs—though where legs had once been was still apparent. It was a golden brown in color, covered with a thick, matted, scaly hide.

The face—the face was that of a man, Dovirr saw bleakly. A man in death-agonies. The eyes were shielded by transparent lids, the nose a mere dotted pair of nostrils—but the mouth was a man's mouth, with human pain expressed in the tortured appearance of the lips. Slitted gills flickered rapidly where ears might have been.

The transparent lids peeled back momentarily, and Dovirr saw the eyes—the eyes of a man. Flukes thumped the deck.

"How long can it live out of water?" Dovirr asked.

"They're pretty sturdy. Five minutes, maybe ten."

"And you're just going to let it die like that?"

Gowyn shrugged. "It amuses me. I have little love for the Seaborn—or they for me."

"But—they were once *men*," Dovirr said.

The Thalassarch looked curiously at him. "The creatures you were killing this afternoon still were men. Yet I noticed little hesitance in your sword-strokes."

"That was different. I was giving them a man's death. This is something I wouldn't do to a beast."

Gowyn scowled; Dovirr wondered if his harsh criticism had offended the Thalassarch. But to his surprise, Gowyn rose from his seat and planted his thick legs astride the deck.

"A sword!" he commanded, and a sword was brought to him.

Approaching the writhing Seaborn, Gowyn said: "Dovirr claims you are a man—and a man's death you shall get."

He plunged the sword downward. Almost instantly, the agonies of the sea-creature ceased.

"Overboard with him," Gowyn cried. "Let his brothers pick at his flesh."

He returned to his seat, and Dovirr saw that the Thalassarch's face was pale.

"You've had your wish," Gowyn said. He bent over a platter sitting before him on the wooden bench—a fish, hot from the kettle. Angrily, he bit into it.

Dovirr watched the Thalassarch fiercely attack his meal.

Suddenly Gowyn paused, lowered the fish to the platter, grabbed desperately for the cup that stood nearby.

Choking and gasping, he drained it—and continued to gag. In the general merriment, no one seemed to be noticing. Dovirr pounded on Gowyn's back, but to no avail. The Thalassarch was unable to speak; he clawed at his throat, reddened, emitted little strangled gasps.

It was over in less than a minute. Stunned, cold with horror, Dovirr was yet able to appreciate the irony of it: mighty Gowyn, Thalassarch for two decades, now ruler of two kingdoms, choking to death on a fishbone. *A fishbone!*

His numbed mind took in the information his eyes conveyed: the powerful form of Gowyn sprawled forward over the table, face blue, open eyes bulging. Then—just as the others around were realizing what had happened—Dovirr leaped to the tabletop.

"Silence!" he roared.

When there was quiet, he pointed to the fallen form of Gowyn. "Not one but *two* Thalassarchs have died today," he said loudly. "Gowyn, whose sword smote all, has succumbed to the bone of a fish."

His eyes scanned the shocked faces of the crew and the women. He saw three of the other mates staring at him.

"This morning," Dovirr said, "as if foretelling his death, Gowyn named his successor. I call upon you now to offer allegiance to your new Thalassarch—Dovirr of Vythain!"

CHAPTER III

IN THE DAYS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING Gowyn's death, Dovirr established firm control over the crew of the *Garyun*. He had learned a valuable lesson during the battle with Harald's ship: act quickly, seize the initiative, and let the slower thinkers take second-best.

The excitement caused by the sudden snuffing-out of the Thalassarch's life was a fit frame for the young ex-landman's ascension. By the time anyone thought of questioning Dovirr's right to claim rule, he held the *Garyun* in tight thrall.

It was Lysigon, one of Gowyn's mates, who laid down the challenge that settled the problem of leadership aboard the *Garyun*. Dovirr had seen the quarrel coming long before, even

while Gowyn yet lived; Lysigon, a handsome, broad-shouldered Sea-Lord and son of a Sea-Lord, was openly resentful of the newcomer. Obviously he had once been high in Gowyn's esteem, and hated Dovirr for having usurped his place.

The *Garyun* was lying becalmed not far off Korduna, where the Sea-Lords had paid their annual tribute call. Korduna was one of the largest of the floating cities, and the *Dhuchay'y* had taken care to stock it with many of sunken Terra's fauna; the Kordunans were meat-purveyors to the world. It had been Gowyn's practice to exact tribute in meat, rather than gold, and Dovirr had seen the wisdom of that; a year's supply of barrelled pork and other meats was brought aboard and stored in the capacious hold of the *Garyun*.

Dovirr spent much of his time studying maps, familiarizing himself with the location of the floating cities, marking off the domains of his rival Thalassarchs, planning, thinking. It was while he thus occupied himself, with his charts spread out on a broad table on the bridge deck, that Lysigon came to him. The Sea-Lord stood before him, in full battle dress.

"What means the dress, Lysigon?" Dovirr asked casually, glancing up at the Sea-Lord and quickly back down at his charts. "Surely no trouble beckons—or do you know of battle before my lookout?"

"Look out for yourself, landworm!" Lysigon crashed an armored fist down on the table, disturbing the charts. Dovirr rose instantly.

"What want you, Lysigon?"

"*Lord* Lysigon. *Thalassarch* Lysigon. I've stood your usurpation long enough, man of Vythain."

Dovirr fingered the edge of the table. Flicking a quick glance back of the angry Sea-Lord, he saw a handful of others—all, like Lysigon, full-blooded Sea-Lords—skulking in the background near the rigging. His flesh grew cold; was this a carefully-nurtured assassination plot?

Evenly, he said: "I order you to get out of armor, Lysigon. The *Garyun* is not threatened at the moment. And I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue, or I'll have you flayed with a micro-knife and rubbed in salt!"

"Strong words, boy. Worthy of Gowyn—but for the strength that does not back them! Tonight the Seaborn feast on you; tomorrow, *I* captain the *Garyun*."

Lysigon unsheathed his sword. It hung shimmering in the air for an instant; then he lunged. At the same moment Dovirr smoothly up-ended the work-table.

The keen sword splintered wood. Cursing, Lysigon struggled to extricate it from the table—and, as he fought to free his weapon, Dovirr laughingly dashed his ink-pot into the Sea-Lord's face. Sepia squid-extract stained the proud seaman's fiery beard. He bellowed with rage, abandoned his blade, and charged blindly forward.

Dovirr deftly sidestepped around the table as the maddened Lysigon clanged against it. The Sea-Lord rebounded; Dovirr was waiting for him. Unarmed, unarmored, Dovirr paused in readiness by the bowsprit.

"Here I am, Lysigon," he sang softly.

Lysigon charged. Dovirr absorbed the impact, stepped back, bent, seized one of Lysigon's legs. The Sea-Lord toppled heavily to the deck, landing with a crash that brought some twenty men and a few women topside to see what was going on.

The humiliated Sea-Lord crawled toward Dovirr. With a mocking laugh the Thalassarch trampled Lysigon's outstretched hand. Dovirr was biding his time, waiting for word to travel that a fight was taking place on top deck. The crew was gathering. Lysigon's four cohorts held back.

"What do you ask of me, Lysigon? That I appoint you Thalassarch in my place?" His foot thumped ringingly against the Sea-Lord's armor. Lysigon responded with a strangled roar and leaped to his feet.

Dovirr met the charge evenly, took Lysigon's weight with a smooth roll of his body, and smashed his fist into the Sea-Lord's face. Lysigon stumbled backward; Dovirr hit him again, knocking him up against the bow. "To your kingdom, Lysigon!" he yelled, seizing the Sea-Lord's feet. A quick upward flip and the hapless mate vanished over the side.

There was a howl, a splash—and silence. In full armor, Lysigon sank like an anchor. Dovirr, unscratched, nodded to his audience.

"Lysigon desired to rule the sea. He now has the opportunity—at close range."

The onlookers responded with silence. It was the complete hush of utter awe—and from that moment, Dovirr Stargan was unquestioned Thalassarch of the Western Sea.

THE CYCLE OF DAYS ROLLED ON, filling out the year. Dovirr had taken over Gowyn's logbooks, and spent odd hours reading of the late Thalassarch's many triumphs. Gowyn had filled a long row of books; the last of them was only barely begun, and already a new hand had entered much: the death of Gowyn, the conquest of Lysigon, visits to many ports.

It was difficult for Dovirr to convince himself that not yet a year had passed since the day he had waited hesitantly at the Vythain pier. A year—and three of the mocking Sea-Lords who had called on Vythain that day lay at the seabottom, two sent there by Dovirr's own hand.

He who had never left Vythain once in his eighteen years now roamed two seas, with nine ships of his own and eight of Harald's claiming allegiance. Dovirr felt his body growing hard, his muscles quickening to split-second tone and his skin toughening. Occasionally, he took a hand in the galleys, tugging at his oar next to some sweating knave for whom a life at sea was constant hardship. Dovirr drank in the days; *this* was the life.

He wondered occasionally about the days before the *Dhuchay'y* had come. What was Terra like, with its proud cities now slimy with sea-things? He envisioned a race of giants, each man with the strength of a Sea-Lord.

And then he saw that he was wrong. The *Dhuchay'y* could never have conquered such a race. No; the Terrans must have been meek landworms of the sort that spawned in Vythain, else the aliens from the stars would have been thrown back.

Anger rose fiercely in him, and he strode to the bridge at nightfall to stare upward and shake his fist at the unblinking stars.

Somewhere among those dots of white and red and blue dwelt the *Dhuchay'y*. Dovirr, wearing the mantle of the dead Gowyn, would scowl at the stars with bitter hatred. *Come back, star-things! Come back—and give me a chance to destroy you!*

But the stars made no reply. Dovirr would turn away wearily, and return to his charts. He was learning the way of the sea. Later, perhaps, the *Dhuchay'y* would come. Dovirr was used to waiting long for what he most desired.

CHAPTER IV

AT YEAR'S END, a pleasant task arrived. According to Gowyn's logbook, time had come to return to Vythain to demand tribute. This would be sweet, Dovirr thought.

He studied Gowyn's log-entry for this date a year earlier:

"Fifth of Eighthmonth, 3261. Today we return to Vythain for the gold. The wind is good; course holds true. Below-decks, I fear, Levrod has been murmuring against me. . . ."

"Sixth of Eighthmonth, 3261. Collection of tribute without difficulty at Vythain, as usual. Upon departure, we were accosted by a good-looking Vythainan boy. He humiliated Levrod in hand-to-hand combat, and killed him at my orders. I took the Vythainan aboard ship. I like him. . . ."

Smiling, Dovirr looked up from the dead Thalassarch's log. Ahead, on the horizon, he could see the growing dot that was Vythain. Even now, perhaps, old Lackthan was calling out the news that the Sea-Lords approached; even now, terror would be sweeping through the city as the poor landworms awaited the Garyun's approach. How they dreaded it! How they feared that the Sea-Lords would, for sport, sack the city while they were in harbor!

THEY DREW INTO VYTHAIN HARBOR early next day. Dovirr ordered the dinghy put over the side, and, picking six men to accompany him, set out for shore.

He stood, one foot on the seat, in the prow of the little craft, peering intently at the city of his birth. He could see tiny figures moving on the pier—police officers clearing away the passersby, no doubt.

The sea was calm; tiny wavelets licked at the dinghy's sides as it slid through the water to the pier. They drew up slowly. Dovirr grinned at the sight of the familiar carven steps, the pile of buildings set back from the shore and rising to the bright stone of Lackthan's spy-tower.

He was the first one over the side and onto the pier when the dinghy docked. His six men arrayed themselves at his sides, and they waited regally for the tribute.

A few tense moments passed. Then, with faltering step, the eight old men began their procession down the rough-hewn

steps of Vythain, groaning under the weight of coffer as they came.

Dovirr folded his arms and waited.

In the lead was Councilman Morgrun, looking even more old and shrunken than before. His eyes, deep-set in a baggy network of wrinkles, were filmed over with rheum; he was staggering under the heavy coffer, barely able to manage it.

"Ho there, Morgrun," Dovirr cried suddenly. "Scuttle forward and greet your new Thalassarch!"

He laughed. Morgrun lifted his head.

The Councilman emitted a tiny gasp and nearly dropped the coffer. "*Dovirr!*"

"Your memory has not failed you yet, I see, old one. Yes, Dovirr!"

The eight Councilmen drew near, lowered their coffer to the concrete, and huddled together in a puzzled clump. Finally Morgrun said, "This is some joke of Gowyn's. He seeks to humble us by sending this runaway boy."

Dovirr spat. "I should have you hurled to the sea for that, Morgrun. Gowyn lies dead off the edge of Harald's sea; Harald lies beside him. *I* rule both Thalassarchies!"

The Councilman stared at him, sneering at first, then, seeing the unquestionable authority in his eyes, sinking to their knees, jaws working without producing speech. Dovirr smiled broadly, relishing the moment. "Into the dinghy with the money," he ordered. "No—wait. Open the nearest coffer."

A coffer was opened. Dovirr snatched an ingot, looked at it, sardonically sniffed it. "Morgrun, is the gold pure?"

"Of course, Dov—sire."

"Good." Dovirr stepped forward and lifted Morgrun's bowed head gently with the tip of his boot. "Tell me, Councilman—how goes it in Vythain? I have been somewhat out of touch, this past year. What of old Lackthan, the spyman?"

"Dead, sire."

"Dead, at last? Too bad; I would have enjoyed watching him discover who had succeeded Gowyn. Has the dredging gone well this year?"

"Poorly. You have taken nearly all our gold in the tribute, sire."

"A pity. You'll have to squeeze some unfortunate neighborhood of yours to make up the loss, won't you?"

A chill wind swept over the pier suddenly. Dovirr gathered his cloak about him. It was time to return to the ship, he thought; the fun here had been about wrung dry.

Morgrun glanced up. "Sire?"

"What is it, Morgrun?"

"Sire, have you heard aught out of Vostrok?"

Dovirr frowned. Vostrok was a northern city, one of the largest on the sea's surface. Vythain depended on it for its wood; Vostrok had Terra's finest forest, and from its trees had come most of the planet's ships.

"We were expecting wood from Vostrok," Morgrun continued. "It has not come. We pay our tribute, sire, and—"

"We do our job," Dovirr said coldly. "But there have been no distress signals coming from Vostroki vessels. Have you called them?"

"We have." Alien sub-radio channels still were in operation between the floating cities. "Sire, there is no answer. *There is no answer!*"

Dovirr glanced at Kubril, his first officer. "This is strange. Perhaps Vostrok is planning rebellion, Kubril. It might bear investigation."

To Morgrun, he said: "We will go to Vostrok, old one. Don't fear for your wood."

VOSTROK WAS THE NORTHERNMOST city of those Dovirr had inherited from Gowyn; it floated in high, choppy seas almost a week's journey from Vythain.

The course called for the *Garyun* to make another tribute call, but Dovirr decided to make for Vostrok at once, and ordered the *Ithamil*, one of his second-line ships which he encountered en route, to make the tribute pickup instead. The *Garyun* proceeded steadily northward, through increasingly rough waters. Crowds of the Seaborn attended the ship; moodily, Dovirr watched the flukes of the once-men churning in the dark waters.

On the fourth day an off-duty deckhand harpooned a Seaborn. Dovirr angrily ordered the man microflayed, then relented and merely put him on half-rations for a week. There was, it seemed, an instinctive hatred alive between the men of the *Garyun* and the Seaborn.

Dovirr felt none of it himself; he had been unable to share in the merriment over the predicament of the tortured creature on the deck, feeling only sympathy. He realized that, for all his dominion, he was actually still a landman at heart. By sheer strength, he had bulled his way to the eminence of a Sea-Lord's standing, but yet the men of the *Garyun* sometimes seemed as alien to him in way and thought as the flashing creatures of the deep.

The sea grew steadily rougher, and cold squalls began to blow; heavy clouds lay like sagging balloons over the water, dark and gray-shot. Dovirr bided his time, as the *Garyun* sailed northward. Vostrok had broken off contact with Vythain, eh?

Strange, he thought. That could mean many things.

AT THE END OF THE WEEK, the *Garyun* entered Vostrok harbor. The city was much like all the others, only larger. According to Gowyn's notes, Vostrok had been the central base of the *Dhuchay'y* during the occupation of Terra centuries ago.

Dovirr ordered the anchor dropped half a league off-shore. Calling his officers about him, he stared uneasily toward the waiting city.

"Well?" Kubril asked. "Do we go ashore?"

Dovirr frowned. He wore his finest cuirass and a bold red-plumed helmet; his men likewise were armored. "I like not the looks of this city. I see no men on the pier. Hand me the glass, Liggyal."

The seaman handed the glass to Dovirr, who focussed it on the distant shore. Tensely, he studied the area about the pier.

"No one is there."

"Perhaps they don't recognize us," Kubril suggested. "The tribute isn't due for another month."

"Still, when the *Garyun* casts anchor in their harbor they should flock to! Come—let us land three boatloads of warriors on their pier, and seek the source of these people's reticence."

Dovirr strode away from the gathering and gave orders for three boats to be unshipped. Thirty of his best men, sparkling in their burnished armor, manned them; the sturdy boats groaned under the weight, and the sea-water licked high near the gunwales, but the boats held fast.

Oars bit water. Standing in the prow of the leading boat,

Dovirr peered landward, feeling premonitions of danger.

The pier was still empty of men when the three boats pulled up. Dovirr sprinted to shore, followed by a brace of his men. Cautiously, they advanced as the other boats unloaded. The Vostrok pier was a long, broad expanse of concrete, an apron extending out from the city proper into the sea.

"Should we enter the city?" Kubril asked. "This may be a trap."

"Wait." Dovirr pointed. "Someone comes."

A figure was approaching them, a graybeard. "Know you him?" Dovirr asked.

"One of the city fathers, no doubt. They all look alike at tribute time."

The old man drew near. Strain was evident on his face; his thin lips trembled uncontrollably, and harsh lines creased his forehead.

"The tribute is not yet due," he said in a small voice. "We did not expect you for another month. We—"

"On your knees," Dovirr said. "We are not here for tribute. The city of Vythain reports you have been remiss in your shipments of wood, and that you refuse contact. Can you explain this?"

The oldster tugged at Dovirr's cloak. "There are reasons.... Please, go away. Leave!"

Surprised, Dovirr drew back from the man's grasp. But then, a curious stale odor drifted to his nostrils, the odor of dried, rotting fish spread out on a wharf in the sun. He glanced up toward the city. The oldster turned too, and uttered a groan of despair.

"They come, they come!"

Dovirr stiffened. The old man broke away and dashed out of sight. Advancing across the bare pier toward the little group of Sea-Lords were eight *things*. For an instant, horror grasped Dovirr as his eyes took in the image. Eight feet tall, with bony scaled skulls and gleaming talons, they advanced, each sweeping a thick, lengthy tail behind. Dovirr remained transfixed.

He recalled what Gowyn had told him once—about green-fleshed, evil-smelling hell-creatures, their bright eyes yellow beacons of hatred, their jaws burgeoning with knife-like teeth, their naked hides rugose, scaly. Eight of them, moving in solemn phalanx.

A sudden surge of mingled fear and joy shivered through him. Cupping his hands, Dovirr faced his men, who stood numbed with astonishment.

"Forward!" he shouted. "The *Dhuchay'y* have come back!"

I NDEED, IT WAS SO.

The gruesome creatures slinking from the depths of Vostrook could only be *Dhuchay'y*, come to reclaim the world they had transformed into a globe of water and then abandoned.

They walked erect; including tail, they measured twice a man's length. Their hind feet were thick and fleshy, terminating in webbed claws; the hands, curiously man-like, were poised for combat, holding wedge-shaped knives. They advanced at an accelerating pace. Dovirr led his men forward to meet them with desperate haste.

As he drew near, he saw the delicate fringe of gills near the blunt snout; the creatures were equipped for action on land or sea. A chilling thought gripped Dovirr; what if a swarm of the *Dhuchay'y* were to force him and his men into the water, then follow after and slay them as they swam?

He closed with them, Kubril at his side. His voice rose to a piercing shriek. "Kill them! Kill!"

Leather-webbed feet flashed around him as he drove into the midst of the alien horde. His sword flickered overhead, chopped downward, and sliced through a *Dhuchay'y* arm. The member fell; the knife it had held clinked against the concrete. The alien uttered a whistling scream of pain; golden blood spurted.

In fear-maddened rage, Dovirr's men charged the aliens. Dovirr smiled at the sight of the javelin of giant Zhoncoru humming into a scaly bosom; his own sword bit deep into a meaty flank. Once again, the teachings of Gowyn had stood him in good stead; taken by surprise, the aliens were dropping back. Already one bloody form lay sprawled on the pier, pierced by thirty Sea-Lord thrusts while another mighty bulk was toppling. At Dovirr's side, Kubril thrust his spear into the falling creature and aided it in its descent.

Holding the spear like a lance. Kubril thrust it into another alien that menaced Dovirr. A torrent of blood issued from the torn belly.

"Thanks," Dovirr murmured, and sliced into an alien eye with a tiptoe thrust. The pier was covered now with mingled golden and red blood; it was slippery, treacherous, and Dovirr within his armor was bathed in sweat.

The aliens were yielding, though. Three now lay dead; a fourth was staggering from its wounds, while of the remaining four, not one had escaped damage. Dovirr himself weaved in and out of the struggling group, and had so far evaded harm; Kubril had been struck by raking talons but seemed little the worse for it, while the javelin-man Zhoncoru bore a ragged cut down his tanned cheek.

Glancing quickly to one side, Dovirr saw three of his men dead in a welter of blood. There was little time for sorrow. His sword slashed through an alien gill, eliciting a shriek of pain that brought momentary near-pity to Dovirr's eyes. Then the wounded alien sliced the plume from Dovirr's helmet; laughing, the Sea-Lord thrust through the creature's throat.

Dovirr drew back, gasping for breath; the stink of the dying monsters was overpowering. Rivers of sweat poured into his eyes. Writhing aliens lay everywhere.

"No," Dovirr said out loud with sudden hoarseness. He caught Kubril's arms; the first officer had been striking a vicious blow at a dying *Dhuchay'y*.

He pointed toward the distant city. Coming toward them, talons thundering over the stone, were reinforcements—

Hundreds of them!

"TO THE SHIP!" DOVIRR CALLED. It was the only possible step; twenty-five Terrans could never hold off against an uncountable multitude of the alien invaders. He led the retreat; the surviving swordsmen dragged dead and dying into the boats, and they struck out for the waiting *Garyun*.

Dovirr saw the ship heave anchor and begin moving rapidly toward them. Obviously Dwayorn, the seaman left in command, had seen the melee on shore and was coming in to pick the fleeing Sea-Lords up.

But there was some doubt that the move would succeed. Dovirr goaded his oarsmen on, and the mother ship made full speed toward them—but with cold horror he saw the swarm of *Dhuchay'y* reaching the end of the pier, marching over the hacked bodies of their fallen comrades, and plunging into the

water! They were swimming toward the retreating boats!

Around them in the water, the flukes of the Seaborn were becoming visible; they would eat well tonight, Dovirr thought grimly.

"Pull!" he urged. "They're gaining!"

But it was useless. The *Dhuchay'y*, amphibians, were converging on the fleeing boats in a milky rush of foam. Dovirr glanced back and saw the blunt heads ominously breaking the waves in their swift advance.

Suddenly a taloned claw appeared at the edge of the boat. Dovirr instantly hacked downward with his sword; the severed claw dropped into the boat, the arm withdrew. But at once four more appeared. The *Dhuchay'y* had caught up—and the mother ship was still a good distance away.

He knew what had to be done. Stripping off his breastplate, he hurled the costly polished cuirass at the naked skull of a leering alien grasping the gunwale. "Out of your armor! They're going to capsize us!"

There was no way to prevent it; the only hope now was—impossibly—to outswim the creatures. The boat rocked dizzyingly as Dovirr and his men stripped down to their kilts. They hurled the useless armor at the bobbing aliens, beat at them with oars, slashed with swords—to no avail.

Already, Dovirr saw, Kubril's boat was overturned and his men splashing in a wild tangle of aliens. A moment later, their turn came.

The boat went over; its eight occupants leaped free. As Dovirr sprang he caught sight of the *Garyun* looming above, its decks lined with arbalestiers ready to fire if only they could be sure of hitting none but aliens. Already they had loosed a few hesitant bolts, and the shrieks of dying *Dhuchay'y* resounded.

The water was icy. Dovirr opened his eyes, peered ahead as if looking through badly-blown green glass, and saw aliens swimming all about. Choking, he broke the surface, sucked in a lungful of air, and submerged again, swimming toward the ship. The *Garyun*, he hoped, was going to lower lines to pick up the survivors.

He swam on. Suddenly claws ripped his back; he wriggled away, gripping his dirk. A *Dhuchay'y* swam between him and the ship.

He twisted the dirk upward into the creature's bowels, but tenacious arms gripped him and drew him under. Gasping, he sliced downward and across with his knife; the squirming alien refused to let go, keeping him beneath the surface. He thought his lungs were going to burst.

He groped for the creature's throat. His hands closed on something smooth—an amulet of some sort, it seemed. Blindly, he ripped it away and thrust the dirk upward.

The alien abruptly relented. Dovirr's head bobbed above the surface; still somehow clutching the amulet, he stabbed down into the bloodying water furiously.

Suddenly he was alone in the water. He looked up; the ship was next to him, and a line dangled invitingly a few feet away. He saw a few of his men, bloody and torn, climbing other such lines—one with an alien still clinging to his body.

Choking, gasping, Dovirr pulled himself up past the banks of oars, felt hands clutch at him and ease him onto the deck. He swayed weakly. Blood poured from a dozen wounds, fiery with salt sea-water.

Disdaining support, he strode to the bow and looked down. A blood-slick covered the sea, and the preying creatures of the deep were beginning to gather. The battle was over. Wounded aliens drifted in the water; he saw none of his own men except those few already aboard.

Numbly, his voice a harsh croak, he shouted: "Full speed out to sea! Let's get out of here!"

Wind caught the sails. The *Garyun* fled the scene of slaughter, putting leagues between itself and alien-infested Vostrok.

CHAPTER V

THERE CAME A TIME FOR LICKING of wounds, of drawing back into the open sea and drifting broodingly. For the next few days Dovirr kept to himself, alone in his cabin, going over and over the rout in his mind.

The *Dhuchay'y* had returned. They had silently slipped down from the sky and retaken Vostrok; countless aliens now again abounded in the one-time alien capital.

Thirty Terrans had gone ashore at Vostrok. Six had returned alive, and those six badly wounded, every man. Three boats sunk; twenty-four lives lost, thirty suits of armor. Do-

virr scowled. Armor could be forged, new boats built—but men were irreplaceable. And, now that the *Dhuchay'y* again gripped Terra in their clammy grasp, he would need every man he had.

Hatred surged through him—hatred for the vicious alien overlords. For the thousandth time he relived that struggle beneath the sea, where, tangled in wreathing kelp and choking for breath, he had drawn the life of a *Dhuchay'y* and saved his own.

He still had souvenirs of that encounter, eight of them: seven scabbing claw-marks down his back—and one amulet. He looked down at the amulet now.

It was small, made of polished onyx; a lambent flame glowed in its heart, a tiny worm of fire that danced dizzily without tiring.

"Come in, Kubril," he said suddenly, hearing a knock.

The first officer entered, limping from his wounds. He took a seat heavily opposite Dovirr. "Aye," he said, seeing the amulet. "Fondling your pretty toy again, Dovirr."

The Thalassarch rolled the amulet idly over the table. "Do we dare attack Vostrok, do you think?" he asked.

Kubril stared at him. A raw, livid wound ran down one side of his face; a thick lock of his beard had been ripped away. "Attack Vostrok?" Kubril chuckled. "I'd sooner attack the sea itself."

"How do you mean?"

"Sire, we have seventeen ships to our fleet. We might gather them all for the attack—but who knows how many of the aliens there be? We can count on no more than five hundred swords."

"And if the other Thalassarchs cooperate?"

"Four thousand, then. Four thousand men—but even so, we couldn't get near the city."

"Why?"

"The *Dhuchay'y* are on the alert now. They'll guard Vostrok. They live in the sea, as well as on the land; the seas will be thick with them as our boats approach. Recall what happened the other week?"

Dovirr scowled. "Aye." He tugged at his beard angrily. "They would tip our boats as soon as we drew near. And the harbor is too shallow to bring the *Garyun* near enough."

"If we could ever land our men—" Kubril said.

"The *Dhuchay'y* will have a cordon of swimmers surrounding Vostrok the instant our ships appear on the horizon. We could neither get boats through to shore nor land men."

Walking to the port, he stared out in the general direction of Vostrok. "The aliens live smugly there—and, when they see we are powerless, they will take the rest of their cities back, and put us to death."

"I see now why the men of old created the Seaborn," said Kubril. "The only possible way to attack the *Dhuchay'y* is in the sea. Strike at their main line of defenses; then march to the city!"

"The Seaborn failed," Dovirr pointed out. "Else mankind would not have fallen."

"The Seaborn failed because they came too little and too late! The world was already in alien grasp when the Seaborn were loosed upon the *Dhuchay'y*. If—"

"Enough," Dovirr said wearily. This had been his first taste of defeat. Heretofore, his progress had been rapid; now it seemed blocked utterly. He was not used to defeat; it rankled within him, leaving him harsh and sour. "You talk of miracles, Kubril. Leave me."

"Very well," Kubril said quietly. The hulking first mate rose, looked pityingly at his captain, and left.

Dovirr watched the door close. He gripped the alien amulet in his hand tightly, in a paroxysm of frustration.

He raised the amulet on high as if to dash it to powder against the cabin wall—as if destroying the trinket would crush the race that had forged it.

Suddenly, the amulet burned coolly in his palm. Dovirr gasped.

He saw the bottom of the sea.

HE SAW TOTAL BLACKNESS begin to give way to faint light. Strange creatures moved with stately grace through the deep; it was as if he himself were below the waters.

In the distance were towers springing from the ocean floor—towers grotesquely festooned with clinging sea-vegetation, enwrapped with streamers of brown kelp and crusted over

with anemone and budding coral, bright with glaring reds and greens and astonishing iodine-purples that no human eye would behold.

None but Dovirr's. He stared at the towers, then approached them.

It was a city. Disinterested fish flitted through the smashed windows of the dead buildings, gaping open-mouthed, goggle-eyed, in pseudo-surprise. Coiling moray eels wound around what had been television antennas and yawned, baring their myriad tiny, razor-sharp teeth. Dovirr peered in a window. An enormous turtle sprawled on a sagging floor, its soft green flippers scuttling idly, disturbing the layer of silt that had formed through the ages.

This was a dead world. Looking up, Dovirr saw the black curtain of the water's top cutting off the sea from the sky, and fancied he could see the glimmering sun penetrating the depths. He moved on, stalking silently.

Sea-spiders twice the height of a man crawled over the faces of the buildings. Here, there was merely a mound where a building had been; the sea was reclaiming, concealing, reshaping. Strange new forms were emerging; in a thousand years more, no one would ever know there had been a city here at the bottom of the sea.

And the endless sea would roll on.

Dovirr shot forward through the water, moving with the easy grace of disembodiment. Startled fish turned as he went past—and, seeing nothing, continued on their way.

He came to an anchor—a mighty titanium chain, each link feet-thick, stretching upward to a cloudy bulk far above. It was a city-anchor—one of the guy-wires that held a floating city in place. He rose along it, headed toward the surface.

Then he was thirty feet beneath the surface of the sea, and saw the *Dhuchay'y*. There were ten of them, in the shallow artificial sand shelf just off Vostrok—burying things. White things.

His blood chilled. They were eggs.

The *Dhuchay'y* were breeding. Soon, their numbers would increase.

Hastily he shot away, struck out for mid-sea. His mind, guided by the amulet, slid smoothly through the waters. He spied another sunken city, dipped to observe it.

Fingers brushed his mind.

Thoughts came:

Who are you, intruder?

DOVIRR FROZE, LET HIS MIND RANGE in all directions until he found what he wanted to see.

A friend, he replied. I am a friend.

What seek you down here?

I'll explain. Come to me, Dovirr's mind said. And the Seaborn came. Dovirr watched the lithe creature heading toward the point from which Dovirr's thoughts emanated.

Suddenly the Seaborn stopped; its mind radiated perplexity. *Where are you, stranger?*

Tensely, Dovirr thought: *Above the sea. Only my mind roves below the sea.*

How?

I use an amulet stolen from the alien invaders, Dovirr said. *I know not how it functions, but it sends my mind down to the deeps.*

There was the equivalent of a chuckle. *The aliens, then, must manufacture what we have of nature,* the Seaborn said.

What mean you?

There is no way to speak beneath the sea. My people . . . communicate with the mind. The aliens need toys to focus their mind-powers beneath the seas, it seems.

Dovirr understood now the nature of the amulet he had snatched from the dying *Dhuchay'y*. The alien young lived in the sea, and spoke the language of the sea; when the amphibious creatures grew older, they left the sea to dwell on land. When returning to the sea they needed the amulets to communicate with one another, having lost the ability through maturing.

He studied the Seaborn before him. In his natural element, the mutant man was the epitome of grace; the feathery gills flickered in and out with dizzying speed, while the Seaborn's heavy flukes kept him serenely stabilized in the water.

Your people have killed many of mine, the Seaborn said. *If you yourself were here, perhaps I would kill you.*

We have fought long and for the wrong reasons, said Dovirr. *We are both men.*

Yes. But your people hate my people.

Not I. Vividly, Dovirr transmitted the image of the long-ago scene when Gowyn had uproariously watched the agonizing death of a captive Seaborn. Dovirr's own land-nurtured emotions came through: his feeling of sharp horror, his insistence that Gowyn put a stop to the atrocity.

You are not like the others, the Seaborn said. I am called Halgar. I see you are different.

Dovirr replied: I have common cause with you.

Yes, land-brother?

Dovirr smiled. Long ago, men from the skies came to our world. My people—the land-people—created yours then, to help in the struggle against the invaders.

We failed, Halgar said. There were but a hundred of us. It was not enough.

How many are you now?

Many millions, Halgar replied. We cover the seas thickly, land-brother.

Dovirr felt his mind growing weary under the strain of communicating. Gathering all his strength, he projected a final thought: Know, then, that the aliens have come again! Will you give your help—and end the misunderstanding between our peoples?

He hovered, mind suspended in the sea, awaiting Halgar's response. There was silence for a moment, the deafening silence of the depths. Then:

We will help you, Dovirr of the land-world!

CHAPTER VI

THE SHIPS GATHERED.

Slowly, the Sea-Lords of forgotten Terra gathered their might, massed their armada in the heart of the roiling ocean. United for the first time in ten centuries, the Thalassarchs mustered their power.

They met in the Western Sea, at Dovirr's call, in Dovirr's territory. Suspiciously at first, then open-heartedly as they learned of the *Dhuchay's* return, they came, thirsting for battle, longing to bury their rusting swords in alien hide, hungry for the spurt of alien golden blood.

And at their head, acclaimed by all, the youngest of the eight leaders:

Dovirr Stargan, Thalassarch of the Western Sea, Lord of the Black Ocean—

Dovirr Stargan, Thalassarch of the Nine Seas!

They massed in mid-ocean, seventy ships, nearly four thousand swords, and readied themselves for the assault on Vostrok. The ships swung into battle position, raised their war-flags.

In Vythain, in Dimnon, in the fifty floating cities of the sea-world, the landmen cowered, wondering what strange compulsion had brought the Eight Thalassarchs together in one sea, why the Sea-Lords had gathered, what awesome battle was to be fought. Snug in their landbound homes, they little dreamed that the aliens from the stars had come again, had taken back the proudest of the cities they had built.

Terra had been forgotten by the stars, and during the time of its forgetting the Sea-Lords had grown strong. Now, the aliens had remembered. They had come to reclaim their captive world—

But now, things would be different.

THE SEA BOILED. Flukes broke the waves, sank down again, rose, flashed brightly in the sunlight, slipped beneath the white crests. The war-fleet watched; the Seaborn were on the march!

From the corners of the world they came, thousands upon thousands of them. Dovirr stood at the prow of the *Garyun*, the Sea-Lords' flagship, and looked down on a sea thick with the mutant once-men.

They had bred—and they had had an entire world of water in which to breed. Just as once the landmen had numbered in the billions, now the Seaborn, beginning with the mere hundred created by long-dead Terran geneticists, had proliferated, had been fruitful and multiplied.

Now they disported themselves in the sea before the Terran armada. Dovirr waited, while they assembled. Clutching the precious amulet in his hand, he let his mind rove out among theirs to share in the joy of the sea. He spoke with Halgar the Seaborn, who led the legions of the sea as Dovirr did his fleet.

We come, Halgar said. The aliens shall not live!

Earth will be free, said Dovirr. They will never come a third time. How many are you, now?

Millions. Ready yourself, land-brother. At your word, we make for Vostrok!

Tenseness swept the gathered armada. Dovirr beckoned to Kubril; the first officer was staring down at the tight-packed phalanxes of Seaborn with mingled disgust and awe. Like the other Sea-Lords, he had not fully overcome his hatred of the mutant water-breathers, even now when he was locked in alliance with them.

"Send the word," Dovirr ordered. "To Duvenal, to the left, and Murduien at my right. We sail in an hour; be ready to lift anchor."

"Aye." Kubril swiftly set to the task.

Dovirr grasped the amulet. *Halgar?*

I hear you, land-brother.

We sail in an hour. The time has come for you to begin the journey to Vostrok.

I hear, Halgar said.

Flukes glistened in the sunlight. The Seaborn swept their mighty arms forward; the army of swimmers began to draw away from the anchored ships.

The attack on Vostrok had begun.

THE GARYUN STRUCK ANCHOR about a league off Vostrok, and the other Sea-Lords filled in the formation circling the island-city. Dovirr shouted to his men as they dropped the mighty anchor over the side.

Then he turned toward the city—and he saw the clustering Seaborn.

"Look at them," he whispered. Pride choked his voice—pride in the sleek men of the sea, even pride in the ancients who had somehow altered Man so he could breathe the ocean.

The sea bubbled with their numbers.

Through his glass, Dovirr watched the encounter. Massed Seaborn swarmed the island on all sides, forming a ring almost a mile thick, a brown carpet threshing in the water. Dovirr's heart rose as he saw the young *Dhuchay'y* being hauled from their subaquatic nests, being ripped to pieces on the surface of the water. Eggs, golden blood, upturned bodies.

A dull boom—the *Dhuchay'y* shore installations gunning the Seaborn. A shower of blue spume went up as the cannons

barked—but as the alien shells landed, as the ranks were thinned, other of the Seaborn fought their way up from the depths to take the place of the casualties.

“Down boats!” Dovirr shouted.

The cry resounded from ship to ship. “Down boats!”

The sound of boats thumping the water was heard. Dovirr headed one; at his left was Kubril, and farther along he could see the boats of the other Thalassarchs. Oars dug the waves. Fifty, a hundred, two hundred Terran boats sped forward to the scene of battle.

They reached the edge of the Seaborn ring. Dovirr, despite himself, was astonished by the way the sea-creatures had arrayed themselves, shoulder to shoulder, completely clogging the water a few inches below the surface.

And now the strategy Dovirr and Halgar the Seaborn had devised went into effect.

Four thousand Terrans, in full armor, left their boats at the edge of the Seaborn ring. They were barefoot. Led by Dovirr they advanced over the massed Seaborn, walking on their shoulders, running and leaping over the shifting floor of once-human bodies.

The Seaborn maintained steady support. Here, there, Dovirr saw one of his men lose his footing and slip, and saw webbed hands reach up to steady the fallen one.

The *Dhuchay*'s shore-battery barked, and ten square feet of Seaborn vanished, cutting a gaping hole in the bridge. But instantly from below surged a hundred more, filling the gap. Countless reinforcements lurked beneath the sea.

Now, Dovirr could see the aliens standing on the shore of their captured city. Some of them were venturing out into the water—and being dragged under instantly, to be ripped apart by the waiting hordes. Others, more cautious, hung indecisively back on land.

Dovirr reached the shore first. He sprang up, drawing his sword, and ripped upward into an alien belly. A steaming torrent of golden blood poured forth.

“Onward!” he yelled. “Onward!”

He cut a swath through the aliens and looked back, saw the Terran swordsmen advancing grimly over the packed sea. The *Dhuchay*'s defense had been negated completely; their hopes of keeping the Terrans away by means of an under-

water network of defenders had vanished under the vast counter-attack by the Seaborn.

The Terrans were packed shoulder to shoulder now, just as the Seaborn had been, advancing in a solid mass, wielding their swords before them. The aliens, ill prepared for such an assault by a foe hitherto held in contempt, gave ground.

Dovirr and his men isolated a pocket of perhaps fifty *Dhuchay'y*, fencing them in with a wall of flashing steel.

"To the sea with them!" Kubril shouted suddenly, and Dovirr joined the shout. It was a fitting doom.

"Aye, to the sea!" he shouted.

THEY DROVE THE PANIC-STRICKEN aliens before them to the edge of the sea-wall—and the Seaborn, realizing what was being done, leaped from the water in delight to seize the huge amphibians and drag them down into the element of their birth—and the element that would bring them death. Onward, onward, the Earthmen forced the aliens, who one by one dropped into the arms of the waiting, jubilant Seaborn.

From the heart of Vostrok now poured reinforcements—the rest of the *Dhuchay'y* enclave, no doubt. Dovirr smiled grimly. The aliens had returned to their abandoned province expecting to find crushed serfs; instead, they were getting a most unexpected welcome.

The aliens who advanced now bristled with weapons; hand-cannons sent thermal vibrations skimming toward the Earthmen. Heat rose; the Terrans in their armor poured sweat. Around him, Dovirr saw men falling. He dropped back, crouched behind a dead *Dhuchay'y*, sliced upward at the sickening bulk of an alien.

Suddenly, a shout went up.

The city-people! The people of Vostrok were joining the battle!

They came thundering down out of the city by the hundreds, carrying kitchen-knives, benches, any improvised weapon at all. They fell upon the doomed aliens with murderous anger.

Dovirr was like a demon, fighting everywhere at once on the blood-soaked pier. Once, venom-laden *Dhuchay'y* talons

raked his shoulder; he retaliated with a swift, vicious thrust.

"On! On! They fall before us!"

The *Dhuchay'y* reinforcements were being driven into the sea as remorselessly as had the first wave. The thunder of cannon came less frequently; suicide battalions of Seaborn swarmed everywhere, climbing up on land to engage in combat until, gasping, they were forced to slip back into their own medium.

Golden blood stained the water. Scaly bodies lay strewn like pebbles.

Red-maned Duvenal, the Thalassarch of the Northland Sea, appeared suddenly at Dovirr's side, his mail hanging rent and his chest visible, bloody, within. Still, Duvenal grinned at the sight of Dovirr.

"Ho, young Sea-Lord! *This* is battle!"

"Indeed, Duvenal. And guard your left!"

The Northerner whirled and sank his mace deep within a *Dhuchay'y* skull; at the same moment, another alien appeared from nowhere and sent the Thalassarch reeling with a back-hand swipe of a taloned arm. Dovirr sprang to Duvenal's aid, felling the alien with a thrust through its beady eye.

"Duvenal?"

The red giant staggered to his feet. "Fear not for me; attend to yourself."

Dovirr ducked as an alien scimitar whistled over his head. A javelin hummed past and buried itself in the thick scales of the creature's throat; it tottered, and Dovirr applied the coup-de-grace with a two-handed swipe.

He looked around. The *Dhuchay'y* ranks were thinning. His muscles throbbed with excitement, and he urged his men on with a roar that could have been heard clear to Vythain.

Warm blood trickled over the ground, tickling his bare feet. The sea heaved in tumult. Overhead, sea-birds wheeled and screamed, spun in the air, shouted raucous commentary on the frenzy beneath them.

Everywhere, aliens died.

THE FRIGHTFUL CARNAGE CONTINUED more than an hour. At last, hanging on his sword, gasping for breath, covered from head to foot with sticky, slimy alien gore, Dovirr paused, for there was no enemy left to smite.

Dovirr groped inside his tunic for the *Dhuchay'y* amulet. *Halgar?*

As if from a great distance came the weary voice of the Seaborn leader. *I hear you, Dovirr.*

The battle has ended. How is it with you?

We are still searching the sea-floor for eggs of the alien, Halgar reported.

Excellent. Have your men bring our boats to shore.

The Seaborn towed to the pier the flotilla of boats the Sea-Lords had left at the edge of the battle-zone. Those who had survived carried bodies of dead and wounded into the boats, seized the oars, rowed out to the waiting mother-ships a league away.

Dovirr was the last to leave the pier. He stood ankle-deep in alien blood, looking around, feeling sorrow that Gowyn had not been with him to share in Terra's greatest triumph.

Night was settling over the now-peaceful scene; the moon hung glistening in the sky, and faint sprinklings of stars appeared against the black bowl of the heavens. Leaning on his sword, Dovirr looked upward.

Somewhere out there was the home world of the *Dhuchay'y*. Somewhere, deep in the blackness.

Dovirr smiled. Perhaps it was not for him, nor for his children, nor for his children's children—but the ultimate battle was yet to be fought. Up there—out on the homeland of the star-marauders.

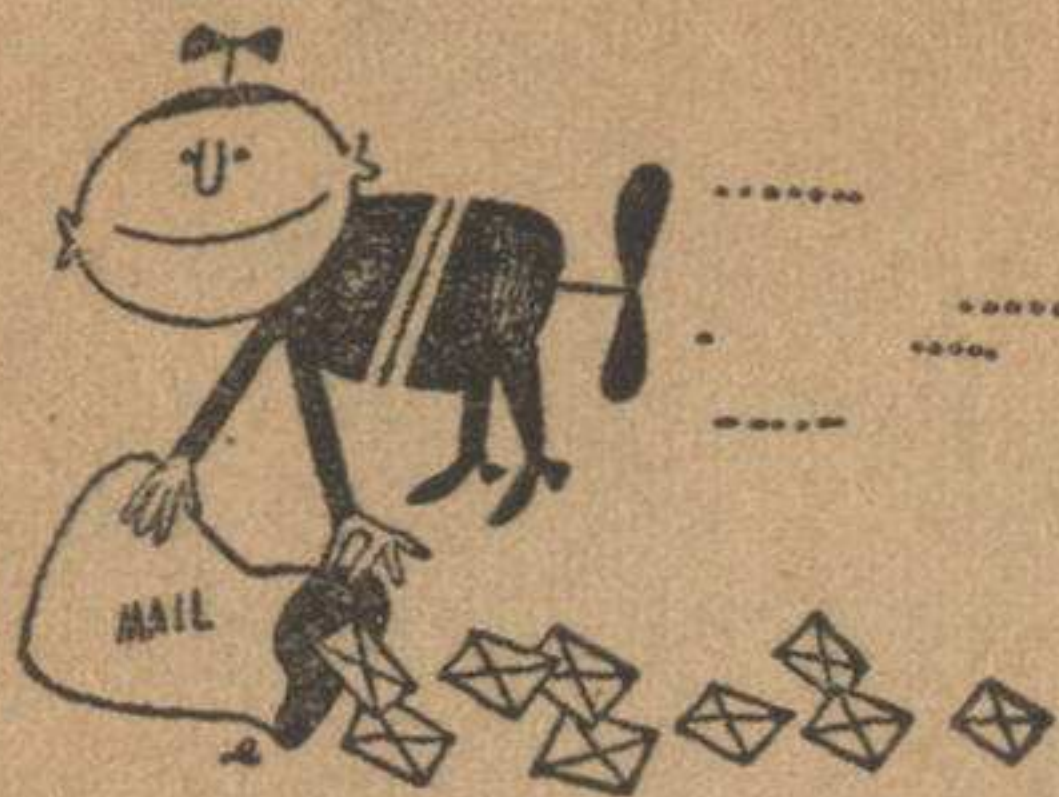
In the meanwhile, he knew the alliance between Seaborn and land-man would have to be strengthened. Neither could have thrown back the alien horde without the other; together, they had been triumphant.

Kubril stood at his side. The First Officer smiled. "The boat is waiting," he said.

"Very well." Limping, for an alien spear had dug into the flesh of his calf, Dovirr walked toward the boat, dreaming of a bright world of tomorrow.

He cupped his hands. "Row to the *Garyun* for all you're worth! The battle's over; there's tribute to be collected!"





THE READERS' SPACE

THIS is it, readers—the corner of space reserved for your use. In these pages, you can criticize SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, suggest new ideas, or sound off on any topic that interests you as long as it's connected with science fiction. And if you want to start a hot argument, so much the better! Send your letters to the Editor, c/o Royal Publications, 47 E. 44th St., New York 17, N. Y.

●

I read the new SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES with interest and thought Edmond Hamilton's "The Starcomb-ers" was very good. It seems to me that if there can be historical fiction and current fiction, there should also be a place for futuristic fiction, which would not necessarily be pure science fiction with the whole plot based on scientific concepts. Of course, the usual criticism of such stories

is that they are Westerns in disguise; but, if that is to be the basis of criticism, probably most any story, from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Gone with the Wind*, can be shown to be a Western in disguise. —Robert E. Gilbert, 509 W. Main St., Jonesboro, Tenn.

(This is a point on which we'd like to see lots of discussion, so we won't inject our opinion until we've heard some others. What do the rest of you think?—Ed.)

●

I bought my first issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES (December) and though I haven't read any of the stories as yet, I can imagine what they would be like. Most of the old stories consisted of action, especially the Kim Randall, Captain Future type. What I did read, however, was your "Editor's Space." I must tell you I disagree, partially, with what you say.

It is true that SF has changed. It used to be action-packed with no deliberate end or moral, along the line of Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. It was fast-moving with fighting, spying and intrigue. Today it is slow-moving, consisting of scientific, philosophic and sophisticated literature. I consider the second to be best because it sets you reflecting and pondering and also because *not everybody can write it*. Such masterpieces as *City, 1984*, *War of the Worlds*, etc., cannot be written by just anybody, whereas ordinary "Mike Hammer" mysteries are a dime a dozen. At times, I'll admit, the modern SF can be boring. *Sands of Mars* and *Mission of Gravity* are two examples. There is either too much fact or too many details. But I believe to write good SF, one should know something of science and be able to speculate and elaborate with the insight for possible future happenings. I believe it took great pains to write *City* and *1984*.

You see, I—yes, even I—can picture myself writing ordinary action stories, but when it comes to A. E. Van Vogt types, I'd be stumped.

If we're to accept good SF on the strength of action and

not on the strength of at least a little knowledge of science or imagination, well then *anybody* and *his grandmother* will be able to write superb (?) fiction—SF. If one knows something about a certain thing, he can write a good yarn, long or short, and apply this as a basis. Taking off in a spaceship and fighting those evil, little Martians will bring our frame of mind to the child's Tom Corbett, Space Cadet, type or John Carter of Mars. This type is more fanciful than scientific.

But now, having shot off my mouth, I will say I like both types—one for action, the other for its morals—and agree with you for a certain extent. I think, however, that some pocket novels still hold adventure. Ones that do not (besides those I've mentioned) are *Brain Wave*, *Presidential Year*, *Tomorrow*, *Man from Tomorrow*.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow I will be waiting for your forthcoming issues. Don't disappoint me. Jovian pennies burn radioactive holes in my Venusian pouch.—Qrrpt.

(We could answer you at great length, Qrrpt, but we think when you've read some of our stories you'll agree that they contain sound scien-

tific and imaginative ideas as well as fast action. After all, look at the large number of authors who write both types of science fiction! Our main idea is simply that either type can be good and worthwhile, but that the action type was being neglected by the other magazines.—Ed.)



I have just finished reading your first issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, and I felt that I must write and tell you what a great little mag I think it is. Many times I have thought of writing, and even intended writing, to various of the other publications, but until now have just never done so. This time, however, I was really "moved out of myself"!

I not only read science fiction . . . I read every issue of every magazine that is science fiction—not fantasy, which leaves me cold—that hits the stands in Toronto, and I don't believe that there have been many of the pocket books on the subject published that I haven't read either. Therefore I guess I can be classed as a "fan" . . . though heretofore inactive. I want to go on record right here, however, as

saying that this new magazine is indeed the antidote that science fiction needed and I hope that nothing but bigger and better stories will be forthcoming and that your subscriptions will roll in in ever greater numbers. If your next issue is the equal of this first one my subscription will be in the mails for the third.

All of your stories were great . . . even the bonus short . . . and I find it hard to try to decide which is best and why. However, one of my greatest thrills in reading, and certainly the most well-remembered of them all is Edmond Hamilton's "Star Kings" and so I guess his "Starcombers" will get my vote for this issue. I would have hated to have missed any one of the four, though!

This has proven to be quite a missive so I will cut it off right now. Do hope that it will be only a question of a very short time before you are publishing monthly . . . a mag like this makes two months an eternity.

All the best luck that can attend your new venture, and keep those adventures coming!—Mrs. Virginia E. Harrell, 23 Treverton Drive, Scarboro, Ont.



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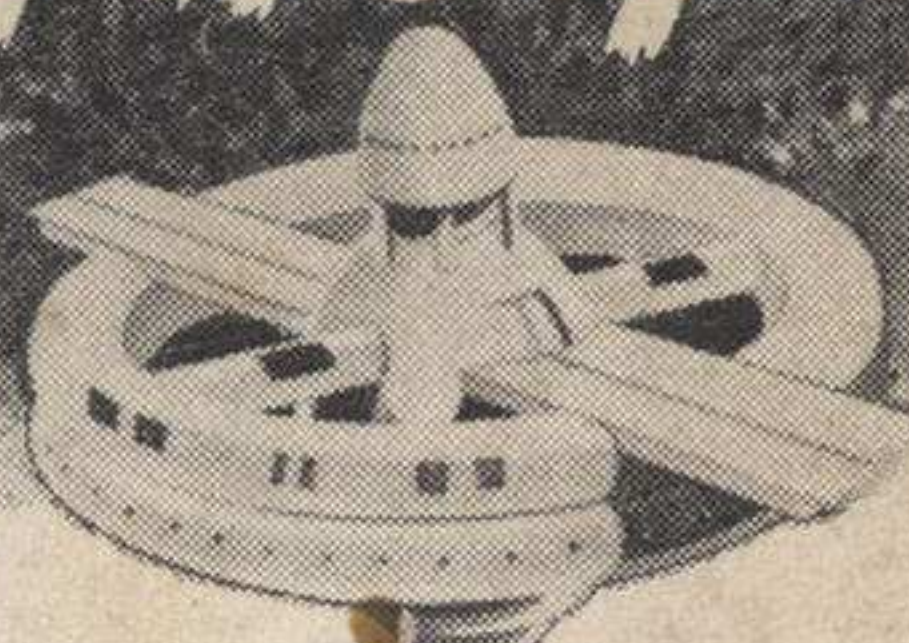
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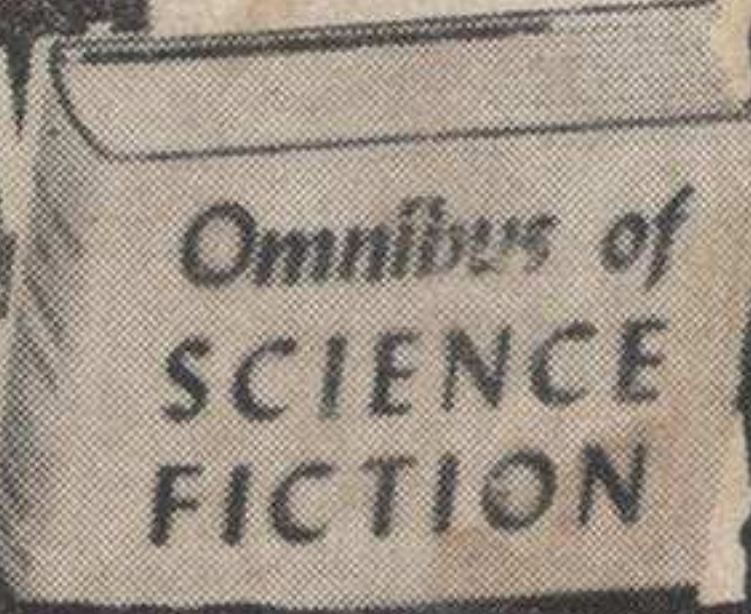
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