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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. I

No. 2

1958

3 Complete New Novels by Top Writers !

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The machine was never wrong and it said Demuth had failed his tests. With the entire planet against him, the only way to prove the machine wrong—was to become a murderer !

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THE EDITOR'S SPACE

The true heroes of tomorrow, the futuristic pioneers who blaze trails through space to the stars, will have to be strong men indeed, full of the same dauntless courage as the pioneers who opened up and explored the New World of the Western hemisphere in the golden days of the past . . .

Sound familiar? It should.

Superficially, that sentence may appear to be merely a rather flowery presentation of one of the basic principles of science fiction. But it never hurts to re-examine our basic principles.

So : man will reach the planets ; there can't be much doubt of that. Chances are he'll reach the stars themselves eventually, although the job is on a fantastically larger scale and some pretty immense problems will have to be solved.

But what kind of men will the first space pioneers—and the explorers, fighters, traders and others who will inevitably follow them—be?

One thing is sure : they won't be simple, rugged men with one-track minds.

The heroes of space will have to be highly trained to be able to get spaceships off the ground at all, let alone use the highly complex equipment they'll carry. And they'll have difficult decisions, based on huge numbers of highly complex factors, to make in dealing with any aliens they meet.

Science fiction stories, to be convincing, must take these factors in account. I think you'll find that the stories in this issue of SFA do so very nicely. The heroes are strong men, yes, but they're also intelligent men—and they face some mighty difficult decisions. Read the stories and see if you can decide whether you would have taken the same actions, under the same circumstances ! It may not be easy !

—LTS.



Jerry Sohl is an author whose short stories appear far too infrequently, although he now has three fine novels to his credit—Costigan's Needle, The Haploids, and The Altered Ego. You will find that the excitement and thrills of his novels is portrayed just as well in "One Against Herculum"

ONE AGAINST HERCULUM

by JERRY SOHL

*The planet made him a killer—
then stole his victim from him !*

Illustrated by Richard Kluga

Chapter I

Alan Demuth sat in the Testing Chief's outer office in quiet confidence, his eyes focussed beyond the half dozen file attendants and through the long window, seeing the flyabouts there. They looked like water bugs chasing each other, darting here and there. They might have looked like bees if the sky had been a blue instead of the yellow-green of the dome.

He could imagine what was taking place in Jack Bohannen's office. That was why it was taking so long for Bohannen to call him in. Bohannen would be surprised to see the different score he'd rung up this year—quite a change from the lad who'd taken the tests fresh from Earth a year ago, not caring too much, filled with reckless abandon and certain

he could pass with ease. He'd had a year to sober up in and he'd used it to make sure he'd not only pass but do so well he'd hit one of the higher echelon jobs.

The test hadn't been easy and the machine giving it had been merciless, but Demuth had met every challenge. Sure, he'd missed some—everyone does because everyone isn't perfect—but he'd got more than he'd dreamed he would. In a few minutes one of those clerks would be handed his tape to file away. It wouldn't make any difference which—Altairian, Aquarian, Vegan or Earthman would put it in its correct place. Perhaps the clerk's eyebrows would rise, seeing his score—except that Vegans and Altairians had no eyebrows.

The thin Aquarian, so fragile and anaemic and human-like, looked up from her desk, her pink eyes finding him on the bench. In her shrill voice she said, "You may go in now, Mr. Demuth."

"Thank you, honey," Demuth said, pleased to see the quickening of her life fluid beneath the translucent flesh of her cheeks. He gave her a smile as he walked by, but she had turned away and he only saw the pipestem bones of her neck and the hint of delicate muscles beneath the flesh at the back of her head. They looked so very brittle and weak, he thought. But he knew they were not. They were a race very much like people of Earth, and they, along with the Altairians and Vegans, had been emancipated from their galaxies.

Demuth entered Bohannen's office. The burly Earthman rose, extended his hand and said, "Glad to see you, Alan. Have a chair." From the look on Bohannen's face it seemed to Demuth that Bohannen had been considerably jarred by his score. Unless it was something else that gave him that look, and even as he thought it he became convinced this was so.

And so Demuth sat, uneasiness rising sickeningly from his stomach.

"About your test," Bohannen began ominously, running a hand across his forehead as if to wipe away perspiration, oddly out of place in the perpetually temperate climate of Herculum. "I'm sorry to report you didn't do any better this year."

If the Dome itself had come falling in upon Demuth he could not have been more thunderstruck.

You didn't do any better.

Impossible ! He had studied a whole year, had led an exemplary life, living out his year as a flyabout taximan in accordance with status rules and the results of the previous year's test.

Demuth found his hands gripping the sides of the chair hard, and slipping there because they were suddenly so wet with sweat and strain. He stammered, "I—I don't believe it !"

Bohannen wiped his forehead again where hair was beginning to recede. He managed to give a faint smile. "I'm sorry, Alan, but facts are facts. If it's any comfort to you, the results are even lower than last year. I don't know if I can convince Status you should be kept on as a taximan. You should be downgraded."

"There must be some mistake," Demuth said. "I tell you I can't believe it ! I was so confident, so sure . . ."

Bohannen shrugged. "Your I.Q., endocrine balance and emotional stability are all down ten points." He tapped the tape with his finger. "The machine is never wrong. You know that."

"The machine," Demuth said coldly, "is run by humans, and humans are sometimes wrong."

"Not in this office," Bohannen said stiffly. Then he narrowed his eyes. "Are you suggesting I upgrade you anyway ?"

"All I want is the truth. I think it ought to be investigated. I had a good score at Flagg. I can't understand it."

"The old school tie, eh ?" Bohannen fixed him with a cold eye. "You can't expect me to do for you what I wouldn't do for anybody else, Alan, just because we went to the same training school on Earth."

"All I want is to take the test again. Only I want it monitored this time."

Bohannen got up quickly. "You're wasting your time. You're no different from anybody else. Nobody takes the test except once a year. And nobody can ask for a monitoring but me. What's the matter, don't you like being a taximan ?"

Demuth gripped the sides of the chair even harder to keep from rising and hitting Bohannen square in the mouth. He held himself in, said only, "That's an ugly thing to say, Jack."

"Is it ?" The eyes narrowed. "You never liked me, did you, Alan ?"

"Since this is becoming a breast-baring session, no."

Bohannen laughed. "I can see why you don't, now. I came here two years ago, achieved such a fine score they gave me the job of Chief of Testing. Could that be the reason?"

"Don't be childish. I recall at Flag you didn't do so well."

"I've improved," Bohannen said, giving him a sly look. "Weren't you in the class behind me?"

"You know damn well I was. I happened to beat you at the annual Classic, in case your brain has atrophied. It was bad luck that got me assigned to Herculum with you here."

"Yes, yes," Bohannen said, smiling, "you did manage to come out on top in that little fracas, didn't you? I'd forgotten."

Demuth leaned forward in his chair. "I know you wouldn't forget a thing like that. Why don't you tell me what's behind all this cat and mouse play? I know I didn't do badly on the test—even on the first one, I'm thinking now—but I bided my time, waited out the year. You've had your fun, you've got even. Now what? Why should you engineer my low score the second time?"

A slow smile gathered strength in Bohannen's face until the man was beaming at him. "I'll give you credit, Alan. You are smart. Being so, you will know the answer to what I'm going to offer."

"What are you leading up to?"

Their eyes met and held for a moment. Then Bohannen said coldly, "I want ten percent of your credits if I turn in your true score, which is high enough to get you any job you want. Ten percent for as long as you hold the grade."

Demuth stared incredulously.

"If you refuse . . . Well, let's not talk about that. Let's talk about your accepting. But even if you accept, remember I can demand a re-run on you, Alan. Any time. And you'll be downgraded if I wish. And if you think you can report me to anyone for making this offer to you, you'd better think twice. I could see to your transfer to some bleak outpost to hell and gone. Remember, you have no proof."

The uneasiness Demuth had felt at the beginning had long since turned to cold fury and then to biting, white-hot anger. Unable to contain it any longer, he rose. "I'll never pay you the first credit, Jack," he said in a quiet voice.

Bohannen sighed. "Then I'm sorry. Truly sorry, Alan, to have to downgrade you from flyabout taximan. But you understand my position. Don't worry about it. I'll tell the Status people to try to find *something* for you on Herculum." He chuckled, inspected the tape, shook his head. "You are difficult, Alan. Difficult and unreasonable. So many others have been so quick to agree to my little arrangement. What makes you so reluctant?"

"You admit you've done this to others?"

Bohannen said dryly, "Come now, let's not be naive, Alan. How else can a man accumulate a nest egg during his ten years on Herculum? I succeed a man who made a sizable fortune and I intend to do the same. It happens that the position of Testing Chief is an impregnable one."

Demuth, consumed with rage, turned and walked to the door lest he leap over the desk and throttle Bohannen.

"Sure you won't change your mind?" Bohannen called after him.

Demuth turned and faced him squarely. "It may interest you to know I'm applying for criminal status at once."

Bohannen snorted. "That's the hard way to try upgrading. Why be a pawn in a police exercise? Besides, the games seldom work. We have a good law enforcement department here on Herculum." He rose from behind the desk, walked to the door, and together they went into the outer office. "Why don't you think it over, Alan? I won't enter your downgrading for several days." He reached out a friendly arm for Demuth's shoulders, but Demuth moved away.

"I don't happen to play that way, Jack. I've done all the thinking I need."

"Well then," Bohannen said scornfully, "don't apply for anything trivial. It would hardly lift you up to taximan."

"I'm going to apply for the maximum," Demuth said between his teeth. "Murder."

"Really?" Bohannen tried to look bored. "I presume that I'm your chosen victim?"

"You've guessed it," Demuth said, turning on his heel and walking to the outer office door.

"I'll be waiting," Bohannen called after him. "But if you want to know, you'll never make it."

Chapter II

The clerk in the Status Office was an Altairian. He shuffled papers on his desk with his hairy seven-fingered hands, and when he looked up, Alan Demuth could see that his compound eyes had the greenish tinge they held when Altairians are tired—or bored. The clerk said, in his whistling voice, “Yes?”

Demuth looked back, unblinking. “I want to apply for a change in classification.”

The clerk sighed. “So do I. Who doesn’t? Has it been a year since your last test?” The hairy hand reached for a printed form.

“No,” Demuth said evenly. “It hasn’t even been half a day.”

“Oh.” The hairy hand dropped the form. “Well, you’re not the first to take a test and be disappointed. But you should know the law here. No upgrading in such cases, and you wouldn’t want to be downgraded, would you? The machines are never wrong.”

“Something went wrong.”

The eyes became greener. “Sorry.” The Altairian’s hands returned to the work on his desk. “Better luck next year.”

“No,” Demuth said, taking a firm grip on the hard counter. “Better luck this year. I’m applying for criminal status.”

The green flashed fire. “Criminal status?”

Demuth nodded. “That’s what I said.”

The hexagonal facets of the eyes glowed with a little orange. The hand went into a drawer, withdrew a red printed form. “Have you considered the degree? Simple thievery, robbery—maybe even assault, if you wanted to commit yourself that far.”

“None of those,” Demuth said. “I want the maximum.”

“The maximum?” the clerk repeated, his eyes glowing like red coals. “Did you say the maximum?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s murder!”

“I know,” Demuth said calmly. “Where do I sign?”

The eyes, all the thousands of facets, regarded him for a long moment. Then the Altairian said, “Wait just a moment,” and disappeared through a door bearing the legend CHIEF OF STATUS. He was gone only briefly, and returned to accompany Demuth through his workspace to the inner chamber.

The man behind the desk was an Earthman. He was a little older than the usual run of Herculum men and his blue eyes were even more tired than the Altairian's. He indicated a chair.

"I'm Jeff Branner," he said. His eyes roved over Demuth appraisingly. "Clerk Krenor tells me you want to apply for criminal status. The maximum."

"That's right." Demuth took the chair.

Branner nodded. "Usually people here on Station Herculum are satisfied to try to upgrade themselves by a successful act of petty thievery. I recall only a single case of application for murder and that ended tragically for the applicant. Suppose you tell me why you've chosen that category and whom you wish to murder."

Demuth took a deep breath. "When I applied for station life it wasn't to run a flyabout taxi. I trained four years for life here."

Smiling, Branner said, "Didn't we all? Competition is keen here, Mr. Demuth, and somebody has to fly the taxis."

"I was first in my class at Flag, Mr. Branner."

"This isn't Flag and this isn't Earth."

"When I first arrived exactly one year ago I took the test. I had an abysmally low score. I only missed being sent elsewhere by the smallest margin—according to the test."

Branner nodded. "It sometimes happens to young men in their first days on Herculum."

"Today I took the second test. It was lower than the first."

"Well, at least that doesn't sound right."

"It isn't. Neither result is correct."

"You think your score is really higher, don't you?" He smiled. "Mr. Demuth, you are no different from others. Everyone thinks he is better than his results indicate."

"I not only think so, Mr. Branner, I know so."

Branner's eyebrows lifted ever so slightly. "I suppose you're going to tell me someone altered your score."

"Yes. Jack Bohannen did."

"Jack Bohannen is Chief of Testing, Mr. Demuth."

"I know. I also know he takes a rake-off for upgrading personnel to their actual scores."

Branner's face hardened, the eyes grew cold. "That's a very serious accusation, Mr. Demuth. It hits right at the heart of everything here on Herculum. Do you expect me to believe it?"

"Yes. I happen to know Jack Bohannen rather well. I was with him at Flagg for three years. As a matter of fact, it was a mystery to many of us how he managed to get through school at all."

Branner studied him coldly. "There is a lot of difference between school life and life in a dome on a planet like Herculum. I can hardly believe a man of Bohannen's calibre would risk being thrown off this station for a thing like that. Do you have any proof of your allegations?"

Demuth said dismally, "None except I know my score was higher than he says and that he offered me upgrading if I would turn over to him ten percent of my earnings."

"Really, Mr. Demuth, I can hardly believe—"

"I don't care what you believe," Demuth said harshly; "I happen to be telling the truth."

"It sounds more like the maanderings of a psychopath, if you want a frank opinion."

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you."

Branner shook his head. "I'm sorry, if you really think such a thing happened. You know action can't be initiated on a nebulous thing like that."

"I'm not asking you to initiate action. I came here to apply for criminal status."

"You would be laughed out of any office you'd try to convince that the Testing Chief is unscrupulous."

Demuth set his lips, then said, "So I will rid Herculum of him for you."

Branner sighed, rose, went to the windows, cleared them with a pass of his hand near the activator, looked out on the city. "I think you're making a mistake, applying for criminal status, Demuth. Particularly murder. Even if it's true that Bohannen juggled your score—and I doubt it—you're taking a million to one chance in a category like that. Few people even get by with petty thievery, to say nothing of killing. The authorities will be watching your every move."

"They've got to let me get away at the beginning."

"Yes, but they'll find you." Branner was silent at the window, lost in thought.

Demuth looked at his broad back and, for the first time, thought what failure would mean. But he immediately forced his mind away from it. Bohannen was the real criminal, and his downgrading of Demuth was a challenge Demuth could

not disregard. When he stepped out to murder him he'd actually be doing Herculum a service. History would bear him out after the deed was done, after the facts were brought to light.

Branner at the window was saying, "I suppose it's a good thing, letting those who are dissatisfied resort to criminal status. God knows what the frustrations might bring if the status rules were so rigid under the dome a man didn't have that final recourse."

He turned from the window. "Look out on the city, Demuth. What do you see? Station number one hundred and twenty-seven, known to us as Herculum. Two hundred odd thousand people—Altairians, Earthmen, Aquarians, and Vegans, a potpourri of the cosmos—all living together beneath a dome a mile high on a planet in the 95 Herculis double star system because it happens to be a point equidistant to a number of systems. It never really becomes home to any of them or to us. It is an intergalactic stop for spacers, probably always will be.

"I'll have been here ten years at the end of this year, Demuth. Then I'm retiring, taking my family back home to Earth, to an Earth my son has never seen. When he comes of age he'll have to go through it just as I have, either here or at some other station, way station or outpost on some minor planet, before he earns the privilege of returning to Earth to live, even as others from other systems are on duty here to earn the right to return to their own planets." He smiled. "Living like this you know there's never any place like home."

Demuth had listened patiently. Now he said levelly, "Just what does all that mean, Mr. Branner?"

"It means ten years isn't so long even as a flyabout taxi-man."

Demuth shook his head. "I'm not going home that way."

"You're too ambitious."

"Call it that if you wish. I want to go home with something to be proud of. I know I'm no ignoramus."

"Nobody on Herculum is an ignoramus."

"I'm as good or better than Bohannen."

"Isn't that just common jealousy talking?"

"No. Something deeper than that. Suspicion, perhaps. I lived out the required year, took the test again. Now I'm sure of it, especially since I've seen Bohannen."

Branner shrugged. "And you have thought about failure?"

"If I fail, I will be expelled from the dome." Then Demuth added tightly, "And nobody can live more than two hours out beneath those two suns."

The Status Chief sighed, pushed the red form across the desk. "You know the penalty for failure. There's nothing more I can do for you. Sign here."

As Demuth scrawled his name, Branner said, "You will report at police headquarters at five-thirty tomorrow morning"

On his way out, Demuth heard Branner say softly, "Good luck."

Chapter III

The Vegan strode to the platform, the overhead lights shining on his smooth feathers, his bald head and eagle-like nose. Demuth noted that his wings had been clipped close to his body in accordance with the Herculum rules and wondered how large his wing span would be if they had not been. If Vegans had been allowed to fly here they would have had an unfair advantage over all the others. *Equality*, he thought bitingly, *is the keyword of Herculum*.

"That's about the biggest Vegan I ever saw," a voice at Demuth's side said. "No wonder he's the chief of police."

Demuth turned to see an Earthman like himself staring with a half-open mouth at the figure that was now turning to them, a military figure full of authority.

The man at Demuth's side turned, grinned and said, "I'm sorry to go spouting off like that. Name's Pilson. Frank Pilson. Yours?"

"Demuth. Alan Demuth."

They shook hands gravely and at that moment the police chief started to speak in the rasping voice of the Vegans, a hint of a smile on the hard lips below his beak-like nose. "Only six here? Evidently there is more satisfaction in Station Herculum today. Yesterday there were nine." His round eyes examined the two Earthmen, three Altairians and single Aquarian who stood silently before him. The fragile Aquarian was shaking visibly. Aquarians were highly excitable, and shook at the slightest provocation. The Vegan went on: "I am glad to see there are no Vegans here this morning."

So much for racial pride, Demuth thought, reflecting on the Vegan penchant for ruffling their feathers to display the brilliant colours of the under-layers. *Let's get on with it.*

The police chief picked up a paper from a table at his side. "You will be interested in yesterday's results. Five cases of thievery—that's worth ten points; two cases of robbery, worth twenty points because it involves another person; one case of assault, worth twenty-five points; and a single case of assault with a deadly weapon, worth thirty points." He looked at the criminal status candidates and added dryly, "Needless to say, none was successful."

He let this sink in, then went on, "During the past month there have been about two hundred contenders, some for the excitement of it, some for honest attempts to upgrade themselves. Of this number, three successfully completed their missions. The others took downgrading or penalties for their failures. The unsuccessful ones now realise the futility of believing the machines are wrong, know their ambitions exceed their abilities. Or perhaps it is simply that their fling at adventure is at an end. Today they are quietly resting in their cells or are busy with penal work groups, depending upon the nature of their violation. Suffice it to say, they have time to think about things here on Herculum now."

The police chief's eyes roved over the group. "Everyone knows life under the dome can be dull. We don't question your motive for choosing criminal status, and be assured we make no attempt to uncover it. But do be assured our department is ready to arrest you as quickly as possible."

The tall Vegan's wings wriggled a little, settled in place again. He went on: "The time is five forty-five. At six you will be released and have until six tomorrow morning to complete your missions. No attempt will be made to interfere with your activities for the first five minutes." He picked up another sheet, faced them rather sternly and said, "The roll call. Senbla Ksank."

"Assault. Proplap Y."

The Aquarian shuddered, moved forward. "Here."

"Robbery. Gadda Kruklik."

"Here."

"Assault. Trenor Karnak."

"Here."

"Thievery. Frank Pilson."

"Here."

"Robbery. Alan Demuth."

"Here."

The Vegan's eyes looked at him squarely. "Murder."

Demuth felt the others stiffen, heard them gasp.

The police chief managed to convey a thin smile. "Murder, gentlemen, is worth fifty points." After a moment he added, "There was one other case of murder three years ago. It was quite unsuccessful. The subject was apprehended within half an hour because he failed to put the department to any great test. The next day he died in the hot sand five miles from the dome. A half-track brought him back. I daresay he wasn't a pretty sight."

The Vegan now shuffled the papers on his desk, withdrew an envelope, held it out to Demuth. "I was instructed to give you this." Then his eyes snapped to the wall clock. "It is now three minutes to six. At the sound of the gong the doors behind you will open and you will have five minutes of freedom—or more, if you're lucky or show considerable aptitude." He strode rapidly from the platform, paused at a side door before going through it, to say, "Good luck, gentlemen."

Demuth tore off the end of the envelope, withdrew the paper and opened it. It read :

I will be in my office until 6 p.m. today for your convenience. Do drop by. I won't be in my office tomorrow after 6 a.m. because I have an appointment to see you through the dome locks to the burning sands outside.

Jack Bohannen.

Demuth crumpled the paper and, rather than throwing it to the floor where it might be found, stuffed it in his pocket. Pilson had been watching him and said, "Bad news?"

"A challenge, that's all."

Pilson looked at the clock. "Two minutes yet. I wonder where I'll be twenty-four hours from now."

"I'm beginning to wonder where I'll be."

"Don't let them get you down."

They moved toward the door, Demuth's heart commencing a rapid beat as he realised in a few minutes he would be trying to elude the police. Pilson didn't seem much worried.

"What are you going to do when you go through that door?"

Demuth looked at him narrowly.

Pilson laughed a little. "Look, I'm in the same boat as you. I'm just wondering how far ahead you've thought. Me, I've got everything planned. I've even got a place to go."

"You'll never commit your robbery holed up somewhere."

"Ah," Pilson said with a mysterious smile, "that's only the beginning, this place I'm going to. They'll never arrest me when I leave it."

"Why?"

"Because," and Pilson drew closer and said guardedly, "I'm not going to be Frank Pilson any more. I'm going to change my face. Make-up. Can't tell it from the real thing. Got the apartment, got the girl who's going to let me use it. Want to come along? Connie might as well make two comfortable."

There was hardly time to think. Demuth had to grudgingly admit he had given little thought to what he was going to do, except go after Bohannen. Somewhere along the line he'd pick up a weapon, get to Bohannen's office and kill him. Of course it wouldn't be easy—he hadn't expected it to be—but he was bound and determined to carry it out. Pilson's idea sounded good, but he didn't like the idea of teaming up with anyone. He wanted to get it over with and then hide out for the remainder of the time. Still . . .

Chapter IV

The gong sounded and its ring reverberated through the room as the doors slid up.

"Coming?" Pilson asked over his shoulder, already starting through the door.

"Coming," Demuth said, dashing to his side, wondering if he would regret his move.

The six ran out to the smooth street, the three Altairians running off to the left, the Aquarian streaking out of sight ahead of Demuth and Pilson on the right. People already in the street jumped aside and some, aware of what was going on, cried out with wishes for luck.

Demuth and Pilson took the first street to the left, then the next to the right, and then, with the next one to the left, slowed down to a walk. Pilson kept glancing at the sky, the barely visible dome far up on the haze, and Demuth asked him why he did this.

"They might have a flyabout up there," he replied.

"They're supposed to give us the first five minutes."

Pilson grinned. "Never trust the police. That's my motto. Take nothing for granted."

"How far is this apartment of yours?"

"Oh, it's not my apartment. It belongs to a girl named Connie Craig. And it's not far. Come on, but keep a look out."

They quickened their pace down the wide street, just two among two hundred thousand people. Several flyabouts taxis stopped nearby and Demuth turned away lest he be recognised. Pilson told the taximen they were walking and would continue to do so, thank you.

Once they rounded a corner, nearly ran into an Altairian in uniform who eyed them hostilely. Pilson said, "I beg your pardon," and proceeded on casually with Demuth at his side. Hearing a sudden stirring behind them, they turned and saw the Altairian coming up fast.

"Let's go," Demuth said, breaking into a run.

"Right with you," Pilson said between his teeth as he caught up.

They ran half a block. Demuth risked a look, saw the policeman was gaining, shouted, "In here," and ducked into a doorway, Pilson at his heels. Luckily, the riser was at street level. The two jumped in, the door slammed shut, and Pilson instructed it to take them to the top floor. The riser shot up the shaft and came to a gentle stop at the top floor, the doors sliding open. They stepped out of a cupola to the roof.

"Here," Pilson said, pulling on Demuth's arm. They headed for a private two-seater. Pilson lifted the rear cover where the mechanism was housed, with flying fingers adjusted wires, came back to squeeze in with Demuth. "We've got wings. Take off."

Demuth activated the starter and gently the flyer purred from the room. He was beginning to have a healthy respect for Pilson. Any man who could rewire a flyer that fast to bypass the lock mechanism was a man worth knowing. He chanced a look back at the roof, and saw the policeman jump out of the cupola with his gun in his hand. It was useless at this distance; the gun's blast would reach the craft, but would be inaccurate at this range. He thought: *So far so good.*

"I know one thing," Pilson said. "They've got out descriptions of us. That Altairian cop will be letting them know we've hooked a flyabout."

Demuth nodded. "I'll set it down. Which way is this apartment you mentioned?"

Pilson took his bearings. "A little to the left and straight ahead for a few blocks."

Demuth kicked in the accelerator. They shot ahead at full throttle, Demuth twisting the wheel to bear left. Suddenly he kicked in the brake. The flyabout stalled and fluttered to the ground, landing in a park area.

Both men jumped from the flyer, and ran through a heavy growth of bushes. On the other side they straightened up and started to walk again. Pilson's eyes went to the sky and he grinned, elbowed Demuth. "Look," he said.

Three police flyers arced overhead, stalled and dropped behind them in the park.

"One more block," Pilson said.

They walked, Demuth trying to do so as nonchalantly as possible, trying to be just anybody out for a walk with a friend, at the same time keeping a wary eye out for uniforms. He wished he could be as cool as Pilson seemed to be. But Pilson was out for assault and not for murder. That would make a difference.

"Turn here," Pilson said.

They rounded a corner and Pilson guided him to twin doors in a tall building Demuth saw at once was an apartment house. Before a door on the fourth floor Pilson confidently activated the viewscreen and beamed at it. Almost at once it lost its opaqueness and a head became visible.

Demuth had been expecting a woman, but he hadn't been expecting to see anyone as pretty as this—and viewscreens were notable for what they lost in detail.

"It's me, honey," Pilson said.

The door opened to reveal a girl not as tall as Demuth, attired in a becoming housedress that failed to hide the fullness of her figure. Her eyes were warm and welcoming, and she said in a soft voice, "I've been expecting you." For a moment Demuth thought he had seen her before, but then he could have seen her without remembering where.

"Come on in," Pilson said, and he closed the door after Demuth who suddenly found himself strangely ill at ease

before this girl. Pilson said to her now, "Everything where I left it?"

"Yes, Mr. Pilson."

Pilson stepped back. "Mr. Pilson? Honey, it's me, Frank." Then he grinned. "Oh, I know. It's because of him, eh? Well, there's nothing to worry about. He's all right. His name is Demuth. Alan Demuth. Alan, meet Connie. Connie Craig."

The touch of the hand she offered was cool and soft. Demuth felt the flush creep over his face and he thought: *I'm behaving like a schoolboy.*

Connie said, "You're one of them, too?"

Pilson said, "Of course he is," and moved toward an adjoining room. "Come on, Alan."

Demuth was puzzled by the odd glint in Connie's eyes. She seemed frankly bewildered and he wondered if Pilson had had good sense in inviting him along. He wasn't sure he'd have tendered the same invitation to Pilson.

"In here," Pilson was saying, "we have an improvised make-up room. Wait till you see the stuff." They entered what must have been Miss Craig's bedroom. On the floor was a large parcel which Pilson now unzipped. Inside were vials of vari-coloured liquids, putty-like substances, assorted powders and small boxes which now fell over the floor in profusion.

Pilson said, "Watch." He picked up a small can, set it on a dresser, stripped down, then pressed the sides of the can. A cloud of dark vapour filled the space before him and he stepped into it, rubbing the particles into his pores, much as if he were lathering himself with soap. Before Demuth's eyes Pilson's complexion darkened considerably, as if he had been under health lamps for weeks. When Pilson looked at him, Demuth was surprised to see how blanched the corners of his eyes were, how white his teeth had become.

Next Pilson picked up a piece of putty, added some dark powder and worked it into a mass the same colour as his skin. This he applied deftly to his chin, his forehead and nose, watching himself in the mirror over the dresser. He wasn't Pilson any more. The substance blended into his features so well it was impossible to guess where the artificial material began.



"I think that ought to do it," he said, drawing on his clothes. "Now it's your turn." He eyed the make-up materials, frowning. "Perhaps we should lighten your skin, change your hair to black. I can change the pigment of your eyes with this dye. Just a drop in each eye. Instead of blue eyes, you'll have brown."

"No thanks," Demuth said.

"It won't last but a day or two."

"Well . . ." It would be helpful, there was no doubt of that. He could walk right in on Bohannen and Bohannen would never know him. He could kill him . . . He wondered if, when the opportunity came, he could actually do it. *No time to think about that*, he told himself. *I've committed myself but good*. "All right," he said.

"Hand me that lighter," Pilson said. "Yes, that's the one. Mmm." He looked at the can and then at Demuth. "I don't think it will be too light. Here goes." He squirted the vapour out before Demuth, but Demuth just stood there.

"Take them off," Pilson said, gesturing at him. "Your clothes."

He slid off his clothes and enveloped himself in the particles, rubbing them in the way he had seen Pilson do. When he looked at his arms afterward they looked like anything but his own, and when he looked at himself in the mirror he thought: *I'm so pale I look like I have one foot in the grave*.

"Your nose," Pilson said, slapping the gooey stuff on his nose and working it around. He gave Demuth a wider, more flaring nose. Demuth thought he looked like a trapped animal. Pilson went on, "Now the eyes. Tilt your head back. Keep your eyes open."

It was difficult, but Demuth managed. The dark drops plunked in, first in the right and then the left, and a world of brown washed in front of him. Pilson gave him a cloth and Demuth dried his eyes. The next look he had in the mirror, he wondered who the man was sitting across from him. But of course it was the new Alan Demuth. He grinned. The effect was startling. It was odd, watching a man you didn't know doing the very same things you were doing.

"There'll be no policeman put a hand on you," Pilson said proudly, beaming at his handiwork. "You'll get to Bohannen easily now."

Demuth jerked around. "Bohannen? How did you know I was trying to get to Bohannen?"

Pilson shrugged. "You told me. Don't you remember?"

At that moment Connie walked in with two cups of coffee. "You'll need these," she said, putting the steaming cups on the dresser. "Are you about ready?"

"Just about," Pilson said, taking a big healthy swallow.

Demuth took a sip, made a wry face because he'd burned his tongue. "Say, this stuff's hot."

"I'll say it is," Pilson said, drinking a little more and smiling at Connie.

"You'll need it, what you fellows are going to have to do," she said. "I don't know how—"

"Sure," Pilson said, suddenly in a hurry. "Come on, Alan. Drink her down. We've got to be moving."

Chapter V

Outside the apartment on the street they commenced walking again and Pilson chuckled. "Nothing to fear now, Alan. Nobody's giving us a second look."

It was true, Demuth was forced to agree. They seemed to have become invisible. All the same, an uneasiness was gnawing at Demuth's mind and try as he might he could not for the life of him ferret out the cause of it.

"Come on," Pilson said, grabbing his arm and quickening his step. It was a cheerful move of a man who has nothing to fear. A confident man. Demuth's uneasiness increased. He wrenched his arm away.

"Wait," he said. "We're both out for different things. You've got your robbery and I have my murder. There's no sense in going together."

Pilson sighed. "You still don't understand. Alone, our senses are halved. Together we are more formidable and more alert. What's more, we can help each other. As far as the robbery is concerned, I can rob somebody at the Testing Centre."

Demuth was adamant. "No. I prefer going alone. The way I see it, if we're together the job of the police is simplified. Apart, they must split up their forces, too."

A strange look came into Pilson's eyes, as if lenses were shifting somewhere deep inside, and in that instant Demuth knew what the fear was he'd been riding.

"You've made up your mind?" Pilson said tightly.

"Yes."

Pilson shrugged. "Very well. However, I'll walk part of the way with you."

Now Demuth shrugged in return and started down the street, keeping a wary eye on Pilson and on everything else, too. It had been too easy so far and now he knew the reason why. Pilson kept in step with him and for once had nothing to say.

They walked to an intersection where flyabouts were parked and where there were many people moving about, Altairians, Aquarians, Vegans and Earthmen, all rubbing shoulders. Music drifted over the area from some source deeply hidden, and it was interrupted by a voice which said the time was eight twenty-five. Two hours and twenty-five minutes. It hadn't seemed that long since six o'clock.

One moment they were walking together, silent and with determined step, brushing by others less bent on going somewhere, though it was the hour when people were going to their offices. The next moment Demuth slipped between two flyabout taxis and scurried across the street, threading his way among people bound for the intersection, going back the way he had come.

"Demuth!"

The shout came from behind him and Demuth hurried his step. He had to get away from Pilson if he were to survive. He quickened his step even more, finally broke into a run.

Rounding a corner, he ducked into the first doorway he saw, ran down its length to where it curved right, then took another passageway left, still another left. This one went down. He stumbled down dark steps, and heard the hiss and whirr of machinery. His eyes became used to the dark and he could make out vague shapes of controls, pipes and masses of machinery for controlling the block.

Quietly he crossed the floor, climbed atop a pipe beneath a window, opened it noiselessly and squeezed through to the outside. He was in an open area, surrounded on all sides by buildings. Fine, he thought. Just fine. There's no escape here except through somebody else's basement window. He decided to rest a minute to catch his breath. but had sat still for only a few minutes before he heard a sound behind him in the room he had just left.

He could not look in the window to see if it was Pilson or not without risking detection, so he moved on tiptoe several windows down, found one that slid open at his touch, slipped inside into a room similiar to the one he had left, and locked the window behind him.

"There," he said to himself. "Pilson doesn't know which window I went through, and won't be able to get through the closed and locked window . . . unless . . ." He didn't want to think about what he feared about Pilson.

Collecting himself, Demuth brushed himself off, went up the stairs to the corridor, took a left, a right, and found himself out on the street again. He started once more in the direction he and Pilson had been pursuing and crossed the intersection to Herculum's large park area, which he would have to cross to get to Bohannen's office.

Here it was quieter, and there were fewer people. He made a beeline for the great mile-high shaft in the centre of the park, for behind it on the opposite side of the park was the Testing Centre. A look behind him showed him he had been successful in eluding Pilson, and he began to feel good.

As he walked across the park his eyes took in the great column at its centre, the pinnacle of it lost in the ever-present mist at the top of the dome. Of course that was as it should be. It was the combination of the mist and the translucent dome that filtered the light from the twin suns and made the floor of the city livable. He had been impressed by the shaft when he had first arrived at Herculum, and one of his first ventures in the flyabout taxi was to fly to the top of it and view the city from the light-bathed platform there. And once he had flown one of the technicians to the top of the column so the technician could take some sort of reading on the outside of the dome, which he had done by going through the lock there to the incredible brilliance beyond it.

The technician could have taken the riser, but said it was slow compared to a flyabout, and Demuth had riveted the technician to his seat the way he thrust upward. The recollection of it made him smile. He'd been a good flyabout taximan, had endured his year of it gracefully, but it wasn't anything he wanted to do for ten years in a row.

"Alan Demuth ! Alan Demuth !"

It was a girl's voice and it made him stop on the grass a few hundred feet from the thick shaft. He looked up to see a

private flyer hovering overhead, with Connie Craig's head appearing out of the cockpit as she sent the flyer fluttering down.

Demuth waited for nothing. He started to run, wishing he were anywhere but in the park. Was the girl in on it, too? She and Pilson together? Was she built the way Pilson was? Might be. No wonder those who ventured into criminal status didn't have a chance with creatures like those allied against them.

Now he was on the firm pavement around the shaft. He started to run around it and came face to face with Frank Pilson.

Demuth stopped, uncertain which way to go.

Pilson was smiling, saying, "Well, Alan, it seems we meet again." It wasn't the friendly tone he'd used before.

Pilson didn't seem to want to stop him as Demuth moved to run away, but he said, "It's useless, Alan. There's no escape. Now that you know, there's no sense in carrying the game on any farther. The police will be here in a moment." He glanced to the edge of the park and Demuth followed his gaze. From several directions police flyers, their red lights blinking, were coming slowly.

Demuth turned to Pilson, his mind working furiously, trying to think of some way out of it.

"That little device on your nose keeps sending out those signals," Pilson said, amused. "You could never have escaped. Did you think we were fools?"

"That's not you talking," Demuth said. "Who are you?"

Pilson sighed. "Actually, I'm a Vegan. A sub-lieutenant at the moment. With your capture I might make lieutenant, if they will overlook your discovery. But then, this is only the second time. It was fun while it lasted, as long as I was with you, but of course we couldn't allow you to get near Mr. Bohannen."

"Where are you?"

"At police headquarters. Would you say mine was a rather convincing portrayal?"

Pride, Demuth thought, *goeth before a fall*, and he rushed Pilson in such a frenzy of action that Pilson barely had time to get his hands up to ward off the feet Demuth brought up heavily on his chest. Demuth fell to the pavement but was not hurt, but Pilson smashed up against the gleaming metal

of the shaft and his head hit an outcropping of it a resounding blow.

Beneath Pilson's torn scalp Demuth could see metal.

As I thought, he told himself. *A high order robot. I should have known.*

Pilson came up in a flurry of action, intent on getting Demuth into those arms of his. Demuth, hoping his human responses were as good as those of the Vegan who was operating Pilson from headquarters, jumped aside and, seeing the great number of flyabouts converging on the site, ran for the entrance to the shaft.

Just inside was the riser with its doors open, for which he was thankful—nobody at the top. He jumped in and activated it. As it rose and the doors wooshed shut, Pilson shot through, struggled to get all of him squeezed in beyond the jaws that were the doors. Pilson's leg didn't quite make it. With a shriek of twisting metal, the leg was severed just above the knee.

Chapter VI

Pilson sat on the floor of the cage, the snagged leg useless, trailing battered pieces of metal and wires. But Pilson appeared unconcerned. He grinned at Demuth. "Think you will escape now, Alan?"

Demuth glared. "Why didn't you arrest me five minutes after we left the instructions room? Why all this?"

Pilson didn't lose his grin. "You miss the point of the criminal game. Besides, it's not often we get a chance to capture a murderer—or should I saw a would-be murderer? We wanted to let you go as far as we thought safe."

"That's just this far, isn't it?"

"Yes. No farther."

The riser went up gently, with hardly a sound to mark its passage.

Finally Pilson said, "What tipped you off, Alan? I swear I wasn't expecting you to duck away from me like that."

"Your remark about Bohannen. That was a start."

Pilson nodded soberly. "That was a slip, wasn't it?"

"Then there was the coffee. You drank it down when it was too hot for a human being to stand. I burned my tongue on it. Thanks to Connie Craig for serving it that way."

Pilson was thoughtful. "I should have known. I will have to remember that."

"Is she one of you?"

"What?"

"Is Connie Craig one of you?"

"There are many of us," Pilson said with an inescapable smile.

Demuth forced his thoughts away from Pilson and things that might be (it was difficult, though, trying to wrench his mind away from Connie Craig), and gave himself up to thinking about what he'd do when the riser reached the top of the shaft. He heard the barely perceptible sigh of air as the cage rose, and wondered how far upward they had already come.

"The police will be waiting at the top," Pilson said, "if that's what you're thinking. Some of them are there already."

Demuth said nothing, but he understood why Pilson did not try to hold him physically. What use would it be when the flyabouts would be at the top of the platform, just waiting to haul him in? He glanced at the controls, and Pilson's grin broadened.

"Up or down," Pilson said. "It really makes no difference. You're caught in a cage. It makes my work easier. And don't try stalling the cage. If you do you will regret it."

There was no denying it; Pilson would be the victor in any test of strength. Human muscle was no match for the strength of metal.

The gentle purr of the cage tapered off to complete silence and the riser's doors hissed open. Demuth had expected to see the top platform of the shaft, but the doors opened to a corridor.

"After you," Pilson said, getting up on his one leg and leaning against the cage's wall, taking little jumps toward the door.

Demuth walked out into the bright corridor. It curved to the left and he followed it into ever-increasing whiteness around to the opposite side, where it opened out to a level place that blinded him at first after the subdued light of the car. A dozen feet away it stopped. Beyond that there was nothing—nothing, that is, except hovering police flyers a few yards away from the iridescence of the dome itself. It hurt his eyes to look that way, but he forced himself to, squinting, and saw the flyers start to head in toward the platform.

Something else caught Demuth's eyes. Beyond the flyers he saw Connie's craft, and he wondered what she was still doing there. No doubt watching to make sure he was finally taken into custody.

Well, you couldn't always win, and those suns out there beyond the dome were going to be awfully hot. For a short time, anyway. After that he wouldn't feel the heat any more.

He took a step toward the outside platform, glanced to his left to see Pilson hopping on his one foot, wires and metal dangling from the other, a grotesque figure of a man. And beyond Pilson he saw something he hadn't seen before. The corridor continued around that side and there was a door.

A door to where?

Pilson now hopped a little in front of him, and Demuth, keeping his senses, sauntered reluctantly behind, watching the flyers moving within feet of the platform. He could see the smirking faces of Altairians, Vegans, a few Earthmen and one Aquarian, all uniformed, and all waiting to take him back.

"The whole police department mobilized to capture one man," Demuth said bitterly.

Pilson poised on his one foot. "As I've said, we don't get a chance to do this every day."

"You must be very proud," Demuth said tightly.

Pilson managed a shrug. "You were committed to the act. We were committed to your capture."

"And if I'd done it and managed to escape until tomorrow, I'd have been congratulated. It's ironic."

"No. You'd have proved your point and you would have had your reward, those fifty points upgrading for your superiority." A ghost of a smile flickered on his face. "A superiority, I might add, which existed only in your mind." He sighed. "That's the trouble with you fellows who hope to show us a thing or two."

"Do you always send so many men after one man?"

Pilson hobbled closer to the edge. "It depends upon the nature of the crime contemplated."

In that instant, with Pilson so confident, Demuth summoned up his reserve strength, rushed savagely at Pilson, and hit him hard with his shoulder. Though the blow was softened by his own shoulder muscles, the jar of contact was a shattering one and he winced with the pain of it.

Pilson fell, rolled toward the edge of the platform, trying to scramble to a sitting position, putting out his one good foot to stop himself, his hands spread-eagled. He slid farther, nearly stopped, tottered, then disappeared over the edge.

Demuth did not wait to see what would happen next but ducked back into the corridor the way they had come. He ran around to the riser, hardly able to see in the softer light, and went in. He wrenched off the artificial nose Pilson had attached, felt smarting flesh where it had held so well, and felt too the hard object within it, the signalling device that told the authorities where he was at all times. He threw it to the floor and nimbly leaped from the car just as it started its descent, nearly catching his foot in the doors as they swished closed.

He turned right this time and ran around to where he had spied the door. It opened easily, and he went through it and closed it gently behind him. Before him was a narrow, dimly lighted corridor that curved downward. He grinned. At least he'd hold them off a while this way.

Chapter VII

He hurried down the corridor, knowing the flyers would be at the platform now and police officers would be jumping out and running around to the riser. They'd find it in use and would assume he'd taken it to the ground. Then they'd rush out, get in their flyers and go down to wait for him to emerge at ground level. Unless somebody thought to open the door to the corridor going down. In which case he'd better be quiet in his descent.

He took off his shoes and ran down the corridor in his stockinged feet, hearing only the whistle of the stale air by his ears. If somebody opened the door at the top, he wouldn't know it. He stopped for a few moments to listen, but heard nothing.

No, nobody would be opening that door, nobody would be thinking he went down this way. Why should they when the signal device was in the riser?

After a few minutes he slowed to a walk. There was no sense in rushing to the ground. As soon as they saw he wasn't on the riser they'd start up the sloping floor for him, perhaps send somebody up to the top to start down. No, he told him-

self, my troubles aren't over yet, even though I'm sure Pilson must be dead—or as dead as a robot can get. And that Vegan at police headquarters will be out of a job for a while.

He maintained his slow progress down the slope, noting now that the curve was not nearly so extreme as it had been. The shaft was getting larger. He wondered how far down the shaft he actually was, wished there were windows or doors so that he could look out.

Ultimately he came to a level place where a door opened to the inner wall. He opened it, looked down the dark shaft, saw nothing. Probably an opening used for an emergency exit or repairs. On the other side was a door to the outer wall, and his heart jumped at the sight of it. If he could get outside he might evade searchers on the way up—or down. Except of course, that they would open the door just as he had done and there he'd be.

Or would he?

He opened it to see a ledge only a few feet wide, the air behind him rushing by to get out. He stepped out on the ledge and looked at the ground from a dizzying height. There were specks that looked like flyers down there but he couldn't be sure at this height.

"Alan!"

He nearly toppled from the ledge. He had been so busy looking down he did not see the flyer above him. He looked up now to see Connie Craig wave at him.

He waved back. If she were with them, all was lost. But all seemed lost anyway, so what was the difference? If he could get in her flyer without the police's knowledge, he could take it away from her and escape. It depended on Connie. He'd have to pretend to go along. He forced himself to smile as he saw the hovering flyer inch closer to the ledge.

"For a moment I thought it was you who went over the edge," Connie was saying, manipulating the controls to steady the craft in the winds around the shaft. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

He waited as she manoeuvred the craft within two feet of the edge, surprised at the able way she handled the controls, then leaped to the flyer, which bobbed at this new weight. Connie kept busy trying to compensate for it.

When the craft was steady, he said, "All right, now let me have the controls."

"What?" she said, turning to him in genuine surprise. "Why?"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her from the seat. She fought him with her fists, the flyer dipping and careening.

"You're a fool!" she cried.

But he said nothing as he edged himself into the seat. There was no sense in taking chances. She might guide the craft right into the arms of the law and that would be the end. It simply had to be done this way.

Once in the pilot's seat he turned the craft so he could look down. The flyers at the base of the shaft seemed unmindful of this solitary craft halfway to the dome. Good. He hadn't drawn attention. Next he eased the flyer carefully and slowly away from the shaft.

Connie's lips were shut tight and her eyes were hostile as she said, "A fine one you are. I should never have bothered."

"You were Frank Pilson's girl-friend and Pilson was one of them." He shot her a look. "What does that make you?"

"That makes me hate you because you've jumped to such a conclusion. You must be quite stupid."

"That's easy to say."

"It's also easy to prove."

"How?"

"Yesterday I was asked if I wanted to participate in today's criminal hunt—on the side of the law."

"I thought so."

"Will you let me finish?"

He shrugged. "I suppose there's no way to stop you." Now that the urgency of the action at the shaft was over, he was becoming more conscious of her nearness.

"You're impossible," she said, turning her head away.

"All right. I promise to listen."

She turned back and smoothed her skirt thoughtfully before she said, "As I said, I was asked if I wanted to take part in the game, help the authorities. I have a dull office job and I jumped at the chance for the day off. But before I did I asked what I'd have to do, and they told me all I'd have to do was provide a rendezvous for two police officers who would arrive shortly after six and don disguises. I was to help all I could, that's all. I knew one of the men would be Frank Pilson because he was the one who came to Mr. Bohannen's office to ask me. I thought it was quite excit—"

"Bohannen's office!" Demuth interrupted. So that's where he'd seen her before! Of course. "You work in Bohannen's office!"

"Of course I do," she said stiffly. "Is there anything wrong in that?"

"Only that I must murder him, that's all. Didn't you know that?"

"Not then, I didn't. I've heard it since on the radio and the tridimensional. They've caught everybody but you, did you know that?"

Chapter VIII

The flyabout mingled with the others over the city, sank slowly to the lower levels and ultimately landed atop Connie's apartment house. As casually as two people would ordinarily move from a flyer, they emerged and moved to the riser, taking it to Connie's floor. Demuth waited for a moment in front of the door while Connie went in and came out, saying there was no one inside.

There was no alternative but to trust her. Demuth turned, entered, and found she was not lying.

He locked the door and sprawled wearily in a chair, glad for a chance for respite.

"You need something to eat," she said, glancing at the wall clock. "It's after noon."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I can always eat. What I want to know is about Bohannen."

She took a chair nearby and gazed at him without expression. She said, "I'll do all I can to help, but must you kill him?"

"Yes. If I don't, I'll lose my life outside the dome."

"But why? Why have you set yourself on this course?"

"Because he's getting a percentage of I don't know how many people's weekly credits for upgrading them."

She stared, lips parted. Then she blinked her eyes, closed her mouth firmly and said, "I don't believe it."

He leaned forward. "You mean you work right there in his office and don't know this?"

"Of course. Mr. Bohannen has been nothing but fair to us all in the office. It doesn't make any difference whether we're Altarian, Aquarian, Vegan or of Earth."

Demuth grinned. "You're not only beautiful, you're naive."

A spot of red showed in her cheeks. "I may be naive," she said slowly.

"You saw me there yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Just after I came out of his office?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to know what he said to me just before I came out?"

She said nothing, so he went on. "I went to him because my record was so low—"

"Everybody," she interrupted, "thinks his score—"

"I'm not that stupid. If it was a little lower than what I know it should be, I wouldn't have become suspicious, but it was hardly half that. When I talked to him about it he said everybody has to make a living, he'd be here only ten years, and he had to make all he could during those years. He asked me for ten per cent of what I'd make each year; in return he would upgrade me to the level I wanted."

She shook her head wonderingly. "It's incredible!"

"It's not only incredible," he said, "it's also dishonest."

"I know a lot of people come to see him, but . . ."

"A lot of people are paying him that ten per cent. He's getting rich." He darted her a look. "Are you sure you didn't know anything about this?"

"Of course I'm sure. After all, there are seven of us in the office. The machine handles the tests, and Mr. Bohannen reviews them, adjusts the final grade in each division and affixes the possible statuses. From our office the records go to the status office where the occupational specialities are affixed. Then these are duplicated and the originals returned."

"It could be," Demuth said. "You seven are just clerks."

"We file the records away, and that's no easy job. Filing information on two hundred thousand people is a full time job for just seven people."

"Can you see that it is possible, though?"

"Yes," she said soberly, "I can." She looked up and her eyes held a different kind of look. Demuth wanted to think it was a look of admiration. "Are you sure you won't have something to eat?"

"Yes, I'm sure. What I want to know now is why you got in your flyabout and followed us to the park."

Connie smiled. "So I'm still suspect?" Her teeth were remarkably white and straight. In fact, she was so perfect in every way Demuth had a sudden uneasiness, the same uneasiness he'd had about Pilson. On impulse he got up from his chair, walked over to her, took her in the arm, lifted her from the chair and kissed her.

It was a long kiss and Connie did not protest during it. Quite otherwise. She answered it warmly. Demuth could feel her quickening heart. Or was it his own?

"Satisfied?" she said, stepping away, her face flushed, her eyes mocking. "I'm not like Pilson at all."

He grinned, feeling foolish and pleased at the same time. "I guess not." Then he added, "How did you know about him?"

"Nobody drinks coffee like that. Not my coffee, anyway."

Demuth sank down in the chair again. "That's when I tumbled, too. I found out later he was being operated by a Vegan at headquarters. But you still haven't said—"

"About my flyer? That's easy. As soon as I saw you I knew you weren't a police officer because you'd only taken the test the day before and had words with Mr. Bohannen, though I didn't know you had applied for criminal status. Then here in this room, the way Pilson acted, the way he monopolized the conversation and handled things, made me suspicious. And then it dawned on me that you didn't know."

She stopped and Demuth glanced at her to find her face turned away. "Then what?"

Her eyes came around, slid to his. "Then I decided to help you, decided to tell you my suspicion about him. I couldn't do it when you two were together, and when I saw you in the park alone I tried to contact you, but you only ran away."

He said levelly, "Why did you want to help me?" He was rewarded by the flush that came over her face.

She managed to say, "I thought you were being taken, that's all. I've always been for the underdog."

"Thank you. I'm sorry I said you were naive."

"I guess I was, if what you say about Mr. Bohannen is true."

"I knew him on Earth. He always managed to wriggle out of things, always had half a dozen schemes going."

She said thoughtfully, "He's taking an awful chance with the records. If there should be an investigation—"

"They'd find nothing. Don't you see? He gimmicks the score any way he wishes, waits for the gripe, then puts his proposition to the applicant. Sometimes he waits a year, as he did in my case, knowing I wouldn't want another year of flying taxis. The applicant is always willing to pay for it—or nearly always, I'd guess. All Bohannen has to do in most cases is put down what should have been there in the first place."

"You didn't come across, as you say."

"No, and I suspect there are others who have refused. Possibly many, some of whom have taken to criminal status in an effort to win ungrading without benefit of Bohannen. But how would one go about discovering who these people are when there are two hundred thousand records to go through?"

"I could look at yours. I know how to interpret the tape. I could see if he's done it right."

"When?"

Connie frowned. "I see what you mean. I don't go back to work until tomorrow. By that time you could be dead on the sand."

Chapter IX

At that moment the annunciator sounded and they jumped at the sudden raucous sound. The face of the Vegan was at the doorviewer.

Recovering, Connie rose and went to the door, but motioned Demuth to one side beyond the range of the scanner before she activated it. "Yes?" she said calmly.

"Herculum police, Miss Craig," the high-pitched voice said. "Open up."

Getting just the right note of indignation in her voice, she said, "Am I under arrest?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then why must I open the door? What right have you to ask entry?"

The Vegan was patient. "Criminal Alan Demuth was traced to your apartment, Miss. If you don't open the door immediately, I'm afraid we'll have to come through it."

“Very well,” Connie said, stepping out of range and darting a what-do-we-do-now look at Demuth.

He nodded for her to open the door.

She did.

At once three persons entered—two Vegans and an Altairian—and as Connie stepped to one side, Demuth rushed toward them.

The three police officers lifted their guns, but the presence of Connie and the suddenness of Demuth’s attack tipped the balance in his favour. He collided with them and caroomed out the door, managing to catch the edge of it in his hands and slam it after him.

He heard the door jerk open, heard the steps behind him as he raced down the hall. Then he felt the heat of the blast past his head, saw the hole it made in the wall toward which he was rushing. He turned abruptly just as another blast reached him, nicking his shoulder and spinning him to the floor.

He lunged to his feet in the doorway, still another blast slamming the corridor’s end wall, sending debris into his neck. The odour of burnt wood filled the air. The feet were closer now.

Demuth raced up the stairs three at a time, and by the time he had gone up two flights he was so winded he didn’t think he could make the last one. At the landing to the final flight he spied a large metal barrel. He did not stop to think what it contained or why it was there, but put his shoulder behind it and sent it crashing down the stairs. It bumped down, rolled around on the landing, started to roll down the next flight. He heard a high-pitched warning cry from the Vegan and a moment later a bone-shattering crunch as the barrel smashed into one of them.

He did not wait to see and hear but opened the cupola door and ran across the roof to Connie’s flyabout. Thankful she had not objected to his leaving the keys in it, he slid into the seat, kicked it into motion, and was just rising when he saw the figures burst out on the roof, their guns in their hands. He depressed the accelerator all the way, shoved the steering mechanism upward and to the right. Screaming into the air, the flyer shuddered under the demand for sudden power. Then he was weaving among the afternoon flyers, for the moment

safe, but only for a moment. They'd be after him and the flyer before long. He'd have to get rid of it.

He had just had the thought when he saw the flashing red lights of approaching flyers. He dropped the craft like a plummet atop a building, got out and raced to the cupola, down the stairs and out to the street.

He walked with studied leisureliness. It was two o'clock. He wondered if he'd elude them until six the next morning. Not the way things were going. They were after him in earnest, probably had the whole force working on it.

"Alan Demuth," he heard from a radio in a shop he passed, "continues to remain at large. Residents of Herculum are urged to be on the lookout for a light-complexioned Earthman six feet tall, brown eyes, black hair cut short . . ." And he passed out of hearing.

What chance did a man have ?

He walked with unconcern toward the park and the great shaft so recently the scene of police action. There were few people on the greensward, and those who were paid him little notice. He kept to the outer edges so that he could dart across the streets and lose himself in the busier sections if he were spotted.

He was successful all the way across the park, which took him the better part of an hour, only to find a cluster of policemen before the entrance to the Testing Centre. He also saw a number of other people—too many for this time of day—in various casual poses and activities nearby : a gardener, a man sweeping the street, flyabout taxis with nearly dozing drivers, several private flyers, saunterers and groups having conversations.

Well, Alan Demuth, he told himself, there goes your chance to murder Bohannen. How could anyone expect to commit a crime of this nature when Herculum's finest were out en masse to circumvent it ? There would have to be some other way. He lay in the dense foliage near the street looking at the building and the people there for a long time trying to figure it out.

There obviously could be no entry from the ground. The building, however, was only half a dozen stories tall. He could land on the roof. But how ? And what if the roof was as well guarded ? But that would have to be the chance he'd take. He'd simply have to go back, get Connie's flyer and

fly it over the building, somehow drop from it, make them think he'd gone on in the flyabout. The machine would continue on until it crashed into the dome. That would give the ever-vigilant repair crews something to do, plugging the hole it would make.

He retraced his steps back across the park, hiding in bushes several times as pairs of policemen strolled by. If he could find a lone policeman he could waylay him and confiscate his uniform, but in pairs it wasn't worth the chance.

Ultimately he reached the building on top of which he had left the flyabout, and he made it to the roof without incident, torn with uncertainty because there might be somebody there guarding it and hoping he'd return. Then, too, they might have returned it to Connie or impounded it—any number of things might have happened. But he found it untended among several others parked on the rooftop, and clambered inside, resting there for a few minutes to regain his breath and review what he intended to do.

It had been nearly twelve hours ago that he had been instructed by the Vegan police chief in the gathering place at headquarters, twelve hours since he had so innocently accepted the comradeship of Frank Pilsón. In those twelve hours his eagerness to have done with the job had all but evaporated. Now all he had left was dogged determination, and the only reason he was able to hang onto that was the thought of all the people Bohannen had made miserable by his demands for credits in exchange for upgrading. If it has been a simple matter of personal revenge, he doubted that he would have lasted this long, but the thought of the others made him grit his teeth and vow to erase the testing chief.

"If I don't do it," he said to himself silently, "there will be a host of others after me who will be offered upgrading at a price, and they'll work out their years in bondage to him. I've got to succeed. For the good of Herculum, I must."

Thus counselled, Demuth activated the flyabout and rose slowly from the roof, took several deep breaths and turned the flyer toward Bohannen's office. He knew he would be sighted before he got very far, but this time he didn't care. This time it didn't matter. The unexpectedness of it, the boldness—he was counting on these to help him.

For a full minute he glided along in the direction of Bohannen's headquarters without attracting any attention. Then he saw the flash of red a few blocks before him and knew it

was about to begin. Looking behind him, he saw three police flyers moving up fast. He grinned. He hadn't been a flyabout taximan for nothing. The only question was whether or not Connie's flyabout would hold together for what he planned to do with it.

Now there were half a dozen flyers converging on him. Suddenly he jammed the flyer, full throttle, into a long sweep to the right, felt himself pressed hard against the seat as it moved in a sharp arc. Just as quickly he shifted his course to the left, aiming at the top of the shaft, not caring now who or how many were behind him.

He braked suddenly near the top of the dome. In the blinding haze there he turned to meet the many flyers now moving in from all directions. Carefully sighting where he thought the Testing Centre would be below him, he aimed the craft a few blocks short of it, and at full power darted toward it. The wind rose from a dull woosh to a high whine before he came upon the rising flyers who now scattered before his charge. At the calculated distance before the Testing Centre he levelled off, braked shudderingly, opened the door, and with his hands on the controls for the last manoeuvre, shoved them out of phase and jumped lightly from the craft as it went by the roof.

He sprawled there as the flyabout kept on going. He grinned as its receding shape gyrated wildly upward as if out of control. *Let them chase that for a while*, he thought, noting with satisfaction the pack of police flyers in hot pursuit.

On the roof there was nothing—yet. Should there have been? As if in answer, the roof cupola door was opening, and Demuth just managed to sprint behind it before two Altairians in uniform came running out, their guns drawn.

He darted around the door and, hearing a scramble behind him as he entered the doorway, knew he had been sighted. The Altairians exchanged excited cries in their own tongue and came for him. Demuth stepped to one side of the doorway and let them come. The first one came through the door, gave a surprised shout when he saw no one upon the stairs, but had no opportunity for anything else because Demuth stepped from beside the door and sent him bumping down the steps to lie in a crumpled heap at the bottom.

The second Altairian did not come in, having seen what had happened to his companion. Demuth chanced a look through the door, saw him standing out on the roof, his gun

coming up for a shot at him. Demuth ducked back behind the protection of the jamb, looked down the stairs, and wondered if he'd make it.

Still, there was nothing to be gained standing where he was, letting the Altairian give an alarm. He darted out and down the stairs, hearing the scurry of footsteps behind him, expecting any moment to be shot in the back. He jumped over the prostrate Altairian, and made himself as small a target as possible as he lay on the next set of stairs and grasped the fallen Altairian's gun.

Sighting up the stairs, he pressed off a shot that sent his pursuer off his feet and crashing down the stairs to join the other police officer on the landing.

Demuth rose to a sitting position, his gun at the ready, waiting for whatever action this violence would trigger. But all was quiet ; he saw nothing in the corridor at the bottom of the second set of stairs, heard nothing.

Cautiously holding his gun ever at the ready, he stepped lightly down the stairs, poked his head out into the corridor, and saw that it was deserted. But of course it would be, being so near six. Office hours ended at five, but Bohannen had promised to be in his office until six. However, Bohannen's office was on the floor below. The numbers here were in the five hundreds ; Bohannen's office was 401.

He gingerly made his way down the stair well to the floor below uneasy because he saw no one and could not believe this should be his good fortune. His uneasiness grew as he made his way down the hall to Bohannen's office.

Here the door was open and Demuth knew this shouldn't be. It was too easy. He went out into the hall again, saw no one, heard nothing, so he went back in, filled with the wonder of it. Of all places, he expected the office to be overrun with police. Still, it could be that Bohannen had every confidence in the men stationed below and on the roof.

Feeling he was walking on the edge of a precipice, Demuth stepped softly to the inner office door and flung it open.

No one was there. Like an eye looking at him was the empty chair behind the desk where Bohannen should have been.

"Don't move !"

Demuth froze where he was. That was not an Altairian's voice, nor an Aquarian's or a Vegan's. It was the voice of an Earthman.

Where had he been hiding ?

Chapter X

"Behind you, Mr. Demuth," the voice went on, "are a number of police officers. They would enjoy it if you would make some sort of attempt to get out of here. Would you like to try?"

The voice belonged to Bohannen. Since he didn't have eyes in the back of his head, Demuth couldn't tell whether he was telling the truth or not, so he did nothing.

"You may turn around now—slowly."

Demuth turned and saw Bohannen to one side and six police officers—two Vegans, two Aquarians, an Earthman and an Altairian. They didn't look as if they appreciated what he had done up on the stairway to the roof.

"What took you so long?" Bohannen said, coming toward him. "We expected you long ago and I was getting impatient. It's after six, you know, and I was on the point of going home."

Demuth saw his grinning face as Bohannen put out his hand for the gun. He could have killed Bohannen right then and there, but he'd have been killed in the process and he couldn't bring himself to do it as long as there was a chance he might still win.

When Demuth hesitated to hand over the gun, Bohannen chided, "Now, now, Alan, you wouldn't want me to tell the boys to commence firing, would you?"

"You're rotten," Demuth said between his teeth. "I should kill you."

"You'd never press the trigger," Bohannen said.

Demuth sighed, let him take the gun. So this was the way it was going to be : Bohannen victorious, Demuth frying under a double sun in Herculum's dry as dust sand.

Other police officers were coming in now and the room was full of them.

"Sit down, Alan," Bohannen said, indicating a chair, "might as well be comfortable while we're waiting for the police chief. He wants to come over and congratulate you, did you know that? He asked me to let him know when you arrived. He thinks a lot of you, really he does. After all, he expected to capture you early this morning."

"Is he in on this, too? Is he as crooked as you are?"

Bohannen hoisted his rump to a desk and sat, one foot on the floor, the other dangling, saying, "Crooked, Alan? I don't understand you. Are you implying that I'm not honest?"

"You know damn well you're not honest. You're running a game here on Herculum to get all you can while you can."

Bohannen snorted. "Hear that, boys? I think Demuth's suddenly gone out of his head."

"How about all the rest of the guys who're paying you for the upgrading they're entitled to anyway? Are they out of their heads?"

"You're talking nonsense."

"I think an auditing of your records would show how right I am."

"Think so?" Bohannen was amused. "You forget that I'm the Testing Chief, Alan. Nothing can be done without my consent. It just so happens that you're like all the rest of the disgruntled people who feel they're entitled to upgrading simply because they exist. Only in your case it's gone to your brain and you had to apply for criminal status, which shows how far gone you are."

"Not according to what you told me in your office."

Bohannen laughed. "Jeff Branner got in touch with me, told me what you said in his office. Herculum is laughing at you, Alan, did you know that? Everyone knows the machines are never wrong, that those who work in the Testing Centre are above reproach."

"The machines may not be wrong but the human element is."

"My clerks are dependable."

"Even if you're not, is that it?"

Bohannen sighed wearily. "A charge of malfeasance is a serious one. Where you're going it won't be possible for you to make it, unfortunately for you. Not that it would have stood up had you been able to make it."

Demuth said levelly, "I'm not there yet."

"You will be, Alan," Bohannen said with quiet confidence. "You will be."

At that moment the Vegan chief of police walked through the office door, followed by several other important-looking officers.

"Glad to see you," Bohannen said, rising. "Here is your man."

The Vegan's wings shuddered a little, then shifted themselves to lie close to his back as he viewed Demuth with an unwinking eye.

"You gave us quite a time, Demuth."

"My only regret is that I wasn't successful."

The Vegan gave a very human-like shrug. "That's understandable." He seemed in no hurry to take Demuth. "You are aware of the consequences."

Demuth nodded, said dryly, "I'm afraid so. You explained it quite well this morning." For some reason he felt elated, as if this weren't the very end. Something about the Vegan's stance, the way he was looking at him. "When will I be going?"

"I'm not sure," the Vegan said. "But of this you can be sure: Those who break the laws of Herculum must be expelled. Our rigid economy does not permit the survival of those whose actions run counter to the best interests of the station colony."

Demuth's pulse quickened. Why was the Vegan saying this to him?

The police chief now turned to Bohannen. "Isn't that true, sir?"

Bohannen nodded, though his face was blanched. Then it darkened and he said, "I hardly think this is the time for speeches. Will you please take Demuth out of here? It is long past my regular hours."

The Vegan turned and called to someone in the hallway. "Please let Miss Craig in."

Connie came through the door, looking every bit as lovely as Demuth remembered her to be, and her eyes slid around the room until they lighted on Demuth. Her face broke into a smile and she came to him, saying, "Alan," and reaching for his hand.

"One moment, Miss Craig," the Vegan said. "You have the records?"

"Oh, yes." She handed a packet to him. Demuth hadn't noticed it before.

The police chief looked at the packet gravely. "We are very much indebted to Miss Craig," he said. "If she hadn't had the courage to come here this afternoon, things might have gone on the same as they have."

"What are you talking about?" Bohannen said sourly. But Demuth saw the sweat beginning to collect on his forehead.

"I shall be very glad to tell you," the Vegan went on. "In the beginning we asked Miss Craig to co-operate with us for

a day because we needed a place for rendezvous for Frank Pilson, one of our puppet humanoid operatives, who was to befriend Mr. Demuth at the instruction session this morning. Everything worked out fine except that Mr. Demuth proved to be much smarter than his test record would indicate. He discovered that Mr. Pilson was being operated from headquarters. Miss Craig made the discovery about the same time.

"Demuth should have been captured and Miss Craig left with nothing to do for the rest of the day. But neither happened. Demuth outwitted Pilson and his control and Miss Craig sought out Demuth to try to help him. During this time Demuth told her his suspicions and she did a little detective work of her own. She had no difficulty getting in here, of course."

The Vegan patted the packet in his hand. "She found what she was looking for this afternoon, Bohannen, while you were so worried about Demuth. You didn't notice her. The record of Alan Demuth is right here, a record incorrectly graded and bearing the grader's initials—yours, Bohannen."

"There must be some mistake," Bohannen spluttered.

"There was a mistake all right," the Vegan went on relentlessly. "It was yours for ever thinking up the nefarious practice you've been carrying on. You see, Miss Craig, satisfied that Demuth was telling the truth, also picked up the file of men and women who are paying you for the upgrading they deserved in the first place."

"Now look here," Bohannen said, his face white, starting forward after the packet. "I'm the Testing Chief and those are my private records. You have no right to them."

The Vegan said coolly, "You were the Testing Chief. I have as of this moment relieved you of the office. As for these records, we have every right to confiscate them. Furthermore, if anyone's going through the lock to the fiery outside, it's you. I'm sure the judges in the Hall of Justice will concur in this decision. I'm certain, too, the Hall will find Herculum owes Demuth his life for what he has uncovered. I only wonder how many men and women have been forced to assume criminal status because you have refused to upgrade them without benefit of a share of their earnings."

Bohannen, very ugly, said, "That will have to be proved." Before anyone could stop him, he fired the gun he had taken from Demuth point-blank at the Vegan chief, then rushed for the hall.

Demuth sprinted to follow, narrowly escaping being hit by some of the shots made by policemen who had moved far into the room. He reached the door, and saw Bohannen running down the corridor.

Putting everything he had in it, Demuth rushed after him, aided by the knowledge that he could quite lawfully take Bohannen now. He miraculously dodged the shots Bohannen sent back after him, and at last, before they reached the steps, made a flying tackle that crumpled Bohannen at the foot of the stairway Demuth had crept down so carefully a half hour before.

Bohannen tried in vain to bring the gun to bear, but Demuth, in a final wrenching of Bohannen's arm, sent it flying in an arc over the bannister and clattering down the stairs.

They came and picked up Bohannen and led him away. The Vegan, who had suffered only a few singed feathers, came up with Connie and said, "Feel better now, Mr. Demuth?"

"Much better, thank you," Demuth said, still winded.

"Miss Craig has told me your real score," the Vegan said. "I should think it would entitle you to a good job—Bohannen's, perhaps. I will speak to Jeff Branner about it."

Demuth grinned and said, "Thanks." He turned to Connie who had slipped her hand into his. "There's another responsibility I'm thinking of assuming," he said.

The Vegan smiled, as much as a Vegan can smile, and his wings fluttered ever so slightly.

"I'm sure that can be worked out, too, if both parties are willing. However, that is something you will have to find out for yourself."

"I intend to," Demuth said, taking her arm and walking down the corridor. "What do you say, Connie?"

"If you get Mr. Bohannen's job, you'll be in charge of provisional status." She smiled up at him. "I don't think there's much I can do about mine." Then she squeezed his arm, saying, "Not that I would have it otherwise."

—Jerry Sohl

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

TWO WORLDS IN PERIL

by James Blish and Phil Barnhart

Chapter I

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

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

This is wrong. Why ?

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

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

He'd had just time to slam the escape-hatch lever with one mailed fist and be catapulted out. Evidently he'd knocked his helmet on the side of the hatch—no, he could still recall spinning like a dervish in emptiness, the watery world wheeling about him . . . Then, blankness that was like a throbbing blow.

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

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

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

She stepped back quickly, her hand dropping to a metal object protruding from the kilted garment at her waist. Then her dark brows, narrowed in a tiny frown; she stood there, poised on the balls of her feet, and her hand drifted away from the weapon.

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

The girl's wide eyes were dark-pupilled and depthless, with a hint of the sea's green in them. Her nose was tiny and tip-

tilted, the arched nostrils tightly shut. At either side of her soft chin, the pink, delicate edges of gills pulsed gently ; her small, high breasts were still—obviously she had no need to breathe.

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

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

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

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

He had seen the fountain.

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

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

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

"This is only one of them," Vidor said. "There are thousands of these fumaroles—more every week." He reached

out to the dials, and the viewpoint rose swiftly up the turbulent yellow column — reached the surface of the water, and receded, so that they could see the dense, billowing clouds rising into the air. That air was already suffused with a faint, deadly tint of yellow.

"We've kept it from the people, but they'll have to know soon," Vidor said. "These subterranean shifts have become more and more frequent in the last ten years. All over the earth the crust is cracking, readjusting. There isn't enough heat left in this old planet to cause many earthquakes, but there's plenty of the Gas. It bubbles up—in jungles, in wastelands, in fissures all over the ocean floor. It's deadly—and we can't stop it."

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

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

"The cause seemed inconsequential at first," Vidor said softly. "Just a minute drop in the solar constant—the first we've ever detected since we've been able to measure it. We thought it might change the weather a little, that's all. But it's upset thermal balance in the earth itself. So—our world is striking a new balance between its inner fires and the sun. The change isn't big, but—it's enough!"

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

"There's one. Venus."

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

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

He did not stop to reason. These beings were taking her away, and he didn't want her to go—that was enough. He

lunged forward, growling in his throat, and caught the nearest grey man by the calf in steel fingers.

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

The grey man picked himself up, gaping at Heimdall ; then he plunged effortlessly forward and swung at Heimdall's helmet. The blow travelled slowly, but when it struck, Heimdall's ears rang. His shoulder armour clashed into the green cobbles, and he flailed in slow motion among the sea-ferns. He struggled toward the grey man, crouching, his fingers curled.

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

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

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

Heimdall's hand closed on a fragment of stony coral and swung it, fighting against the nightmare resistance of the water. The fallen grey man went limp and began to drift. The other snarled something Heimdall could not understand, and dove away through the gas-fountain toward the other side of the terrace at a surprising speed.

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

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

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

Chapter II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The tall man turned, crossed to the opposite wall and opened the panelling, disclosing a ceiling-high cabinet filled with

squares of metal. One of them was nearly black with use ; the Venusian took it down and broke it open, revealing a sheaf of limp, cream-coloured material printed in jagged lines.

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

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

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

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

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

As she spoke a younger man, with close-cropped reddish hair, came sidewise through the doorway. His left arm was crooked around a cylinder topped by a lambent globe. Wires led from it to two rings of silver metal, which he held in his right hand.

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

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

Suddenly the bodyless fingers came to rest, prodding insistently at a section of his mind that was dark and silent. Involuntarily he resisted a little ; instantly a torrent of strange words, pictures, ideas roared through his brain. He felt himself sinking into unconsciousness, into a morass of memories in which old and new were frighteningly mixed . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

He said, "I'll remember." But it would be difficult. Difficult to think of anything with Earth behind him, the stars shining on his face, and the pale, beckoning glow of Venus up ahead—hard to remember even the catastrophe which had forced the Council to relax, this once, its jealously guarded taboos . . .

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

The memory made Heimdall groan. Call Vidor—with what?

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

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

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

"Thank you," the Earthman said. The words tasted odd, but he seemed to be making sense. "Heimdall is my name. I come from Earth, as you guessed."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The girl swung through the door, her hair streaming behind her. "Tei!" she cried. "The Horlite—the one that was struck with coral—he was not dead. He's gone!"

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

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

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

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

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

There was a delay at the end of the corridor, because Heimdall could not jump high enough to reach the trapdoor above. "We dare not waste time," Dara said nervously. "I have warned the garrison at Colahara, but if Granjo and Moda don't get the message before they start back here—"

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

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

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

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

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

Heimdall could see nothing but a forest of high-branching, dark-skinned plants. Dara squeezed into an almost invisible opening between their trunks and vanished; the others followed.

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

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

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

Chapter III

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

Lying on his back, he caught a glimpse of the parabola of bubbles that followed a huge, grey-skinned creature zooming up and away from him. Above, more clearly, he could see others—scores of them. They were fat slug-like things, tapering at both ends, with two great flippers sculling at either side. Astride each one, riding easily in a sort of crude harness, was a grey man. Most of the animals were being guided toward where the plane lay, but a few came swiftly down toward Heimdall.

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

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

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

The watery Eden bowed and trembled to the tube's concussion. Through the cloud of sediment and blood-mist and floating debris, Heimdall saw the plane lurch and settle slowly, its bow torn open.

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

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

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

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

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

Gills !

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

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

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

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

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

Heimdall looked at him and said nothing, but he was thinking hard. The Horlite's formal speech seemed to suggest that the language was not his own. And the shock ? It reminded Heimdall of the electric eel ; evidently the grey man could store a considerable charge, to which he himself was immune. But how long did it take him to charge up again ?

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

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

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

Ukan squatted on the floor, motioning Heimdall to do the same. "You have doubtless noticed, Citizen, this very difficult operation we have performed upon you, so that you might better enjoy our beautiful world. Are you not pleased?"

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

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

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

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

"I don't know."

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

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

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

Heimdall shrugged. The grey man's face turned a deep blue, but he made a brief struggle for control, and won. "It is very sad," he said. "These white swimmers—what have they offered that has made you so stubborn? Would you not rather see Venus a sunny world, half land, half water, like your beautiful Airth? These pale-bellied fish-men—they are jealous of the Horlites, who may live on the land, and think we mean to steal the ocean as well. They have never seen the sunlight, so they think we envy them their chilly depths!"

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

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

The grey man smiled. "They are not far away. One was wounded, and we fear for him. But the other two are well."

We are trying to persuade them to explain certain of their mechanisms which were not destroyed in the crash. Perhaps you would like to see them?"

"Yes."

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

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

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

Tei was standing next to the great green disc, his wrists held by a grey man on either side. Heimdall gave him a brief glance—he did indeed seem to be unhurt—and looked down. Noran, her single garment blackened and almost totally torn away, was crouching in the middle of the chamber, one hand covering her face. A Horlite was leaning over her, his lips close to her ear. He straightened when Ukan snapped a word at him, but the girl did not move.

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

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

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

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

"Heimdall!" It was a high, frightened cry. "Tell them nothing! They will—" The Horlite standing over her

lunged forward and clapped a knobby hand over her mouth. Heimdall's muscles corded, but Ukan touched his elbow gently.

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

Heimdall shook him off. "Make that devil let go of her."

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

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

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

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

Heimdall clenched his teeth. He knew nothing of the relationship which existed between the red-headed young man and Tei and his daughter. Dara had seemed to be Tei's major assistant ; possibly, too, he had been Noran's assigned mate, or her lover—the clues were too few to make a trustable guess. Whatever the truth, he had been a tough, quick-thinking, likeable youngster—and a brave one, evidently. Heimdall discovered suddenly that his dislike for Ukan had turned into an active loathing. He eyed the grey man's wobbly neck with murderous speculation.

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

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

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

"Or else?" Ukan said. "Or else what? Do you threaten? Your language is stronger than your eyesight, Citizen Heimdall." With an unexpected, savage gesture, he sent the Earth-man thudding to the floor, his body contorted with agony. The shock seemed stronger this time than before. Heimdall

fought it grimly, his mind churning. How long had it been since the first shock? Had it really taken Ukan that much time to build up another charge, or had he only seen no occasion to use it again until now? The answer was crucial, but it evaded him.

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

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

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

Through his own haze of pain Heimdall saw Noran's smooth flanks clench into tetany, her arms lock over her suddenly board-stiff abdomen, her face drawn into a rictus of agony. Tei lurched forward, but his guards, grinning, yanked him back. The spasm was very revealing, and the guards, though they did not belong to Noran's race, were obviously enjoying it, as one might enjoy the inadvertent shamelessness of monkeys. Heimdall, still helpless, extended his loathing of Ukan to the whole Horlite clan.

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

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

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

Ukan sensed the sudden movement and swung to meet it, his eyes bulging. But he was late ; if he had had time to build up another jolt of electricity, he did not think fast enough to use it. Heimdall's knotted fist was like a rock hurled from a catapult. The Horlite's head jerked, and lolled sidewise queerly ; he went back against the wall and slumped in slow motion toward the floor.

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

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

He propelled himself to the spot on the wall where the door had admitted Ukan, and thumped it tentatively. It bent under the impact. No, that wouldn't do ; even slightly flexible metal couldn't be forced. But how about the window? He glided over to it. Some notion was swimming in the dimmest regions of his brain, maddeningly far away. He tried to bring it closer. If—

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

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

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

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

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

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

The universe was turning right side up. He struck out weakly in the green gloom. "Noran ? Is Tei—are you—"

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

"Is it as deep as all that ?"

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

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

"Which way ?"

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

"What?"

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

"It wouldn't have been as easy as all that," Heimdall said grimly, striking out. "These grey men are not stupid. We'll have to cross this canyon, no matter how deep it is—and pray that Colahara will strike before we tire."

Chapter IV

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

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

Beside him over the deep violet abyss Noran moved effortlessly, with a sinuous, fish-like motion that defied analysis. A little behind, Tei followed, working hard, but graceful in his own way. The huge, grinning heads wheeled about them, and the abyss yawned.

"How far yet?" said Heimdall hoarsely.

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

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

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

"Whatever the reason," Heimdall said, "I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. We've been sinking lower

and lower all the time. The pressure is increasing—I can feel it, it's making me a little dizzy."

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

Tei broke off and peered ahead, his eyes gleaming.

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

Tei obviously did not trust himself to speak; he pointed a long, trembling finger directly ahead and up a little. For a moment Heimdall saw nothing at all in that direction. Then, gradually, it emerged: the vast, cliff-like ramparts of a mountain, silhouetted against a dim glow from the sky, and atop it—

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

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

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

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

Yet it seemed to Heimdall that they might. With the goal in sight, his abused body, cramped by the abysmal cold, weakened by repeated shocks, worn by steady striving, began to fail. He thrust frantically at the yielding water, but there was no force behind the stroke. The mountain began to slide slowly, smoothly, inexorably upward before him, the dream-like towers of Colahara receding toward the green heavens. He heard Noran's voice, calling his name, but it was a meaningless sound . . . the pressure grew around his head . . . something cold and sharp pressed into his side . . . then came a violent shock that blotted out everything.

The voice was very far away at first.

"Heimdall? Heimdall!"

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

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

"Groggy. What—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The light grew. Heimdall had a few seconds to think. This had been a foolhardy idea—he had no weapons, and the grey men were armed. Their electrical organs alone would be

enough to kill him now that he had lost his suit. Heimdall grinned recklessly. He had both piloted planes and ridden horses ; in this combination of the two skills, he might be able to show the Horlites a few tricks.

As he scudded over the last rise, he left the night of the Great Deep behind for an iridescent twilight. Colahara towered above him, a vision straight out of a fairy tale— but there was no time for sightseeing now. On a sharp outcropping two Horlites were dragging a familiar bulky tube into position ; they were already standing on the rock and herding their mounts, which were lowering the tube into place. A low-set embrasure in the College wall was spitting death over their heads, but the unseen gunner could not depress his weapon enough to reach them.

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

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

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

Heimdall's shark took the Horlite's head off with one smooth swipe, and tried to swerve back after the body, but Heimdall had other plans. Shouting joyously, the blonde giant rode his finny charger straight for the centre of the grey horde.

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

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

The ship !

Of course ! The Horlite bridgehead into the sea fronted on the Deep ; and the country of Norna's people ended at the

steep slopes on the opposite side. The *Hope* outweighed him by many tons ; he had come to rest on the currents in Kilio Tei's garden, but the ship, striking the slopes, had rolled slowly down and away from him, coming to rest at last in the foothills below Colahara.

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

A distant, composite cry came to him as he plunged into the depths, a cry of astonishment and despair. Heimdall hunched over the flat shoulders and head of his mount, clenching his teeth. He knew that to Noran and Tei and the College this looked like desertion—but there was another world whose life depended upon him, and upon that glint of metal so far below.

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

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

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

The pressure closed around him once more as he thrust himself downward, half hidden in the drifting cloud of blood from the dead animal. Pressure hammered at his ears, choked and blinded him—but he saw the smooth, curving white hull dimly before him.

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

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

The dim figure crowded purposefully in after him, gun raised. Heimdall flung himself to the curved floor. The

Horlite's first shot went over him, exploding deafeningly in the tiny chamber. Heimdall felt himself lifted, hurled forward into his adversary.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sat stunned for a moment, and then the thought came : *Perhaps it's nothing serious. Maybe I have one more chance.* But what could be the matter ? There could be no such thing as being out of fuel on the *Hope* ; her "fuel" was electricity from an atomic pile, her propellant was any liquid or gas that would ionize—her engine was a modern version of the Coupling ion gun, almost a thousand years old in principle. Touching that button should have filled the blast chamber with a raging cloud of maddened ions in a split second—ions that, guided by a magnetic field thousands of gauss strong, should have blown the chamber and the tubes free in an instant—

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

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

Wait a minute. That firing button operated on a timer. It only took a microsecond to trigger the ionization of his present reaction-mass, which was distilled water. Sea-water has a lower dielectric constant. If he could set the timer forward a little, just enough to keep the initial triggering current flowing a little longer—giving the chamber and the tubes a chance to blow out the sea-water and let the plasma start flowing from the tanks . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A small dark blob, silhouetted against the rippling sky, assumed definition as he climbed, separated out into a group of grey men wrestling with a heavy tube. The cover-guard—waiting to hit the returning water-planes of Colahara from above. They were going to get more than they bargained for.

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

And then he was flying free, rocketing toward emptiness on a pillar of flame. The *Hope* was considerably more massive, now that she was filled with water, but she had power to spare ; she would not perform manouvres as tightly as before, that was all. In the rear viewplate, the glassy surface of a sullen sea receded.

Free !

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

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

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

Chapter V

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

"Is anything wrong ?" Noran said.

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

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

"But I may have to go home to do it," Heimdall said grimly. Noran took his elbow involuntarily, then released it. At the same instant, the dials all bobbed abruptly together, like dancers. The device was drawing power ! Heimdall tapped out the coded signal for Vidor, and waited. It was a long way to Earth . . .

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

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

Vidor nodded once, Noran and Tei were watching him with awe. For them it was a historic occasion, just as it was

for Heimdall, but for different reasons. Vidor looked off-screen at something, then said :

“Circuit’s open, Heimdall. For God’s sake, report !”

“All right, listen carefully. The Yellow Gas is here ; it was the first thing I hit when I got here, though I didn’t recognize it at first. The planet is swathed in it. I didn’t make the connection until I saw it coming up from the ocean floor, just like it does on Earth. As far as I’m able to judge, Venus got hit with it just when we did, when the solar constant changed, but it’s worse here because the loss of solar heat is more serious on Venus.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We'll be there," Vidor said, with grim satisfaction. "And we'll bring the whole arsenal. We haven't fought among ourselves for thousands of years for nothing. If your swimmers can give us the gills and a new life, we'll burn the Horlites off the face of the planet for them. Can you hold out six months?"

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

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

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

"Tei says yes, Vidor."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Secret of the Green Invaders

by Robert Randall



*Centuries of alien conquest had made Earth
a slave planet, and only a pitiful handful
of men dared dream of rebellion. But they
had a weapon they didn't even know about !*

Illustrated by Emsh

It is a known fact in the science fiction world that "Robert Randall" is actually two people. Robert Silverberg and Randall Garrett, each a top-ranking writer in his own right, collaborate to turn out the stories that appear under this by-line. With each man giving his best, the resulting stories are entirely different from what either would do alone, and polished to a sparkling perfection.

SECRET OF THE GREEN INVADERS

by Robert Randall

Chapter I

11 May 3035

"This whole situation is very amusing," Terrag Broz said. The Terran Administrator peered across his desk at his chief assistant without showing a trace of the amusement he claimed to feel. "But I think Orvid Kemron has been allowed to go far enough. Bring him here," he snapped.

"At once," said the other, rising to leave.

"It took them a long time to get this far, Gornik," the Administrator said. He permitted himself a twisted smile.

"Don't tell me you're getting sentimental at last," Nacomon Gornik said.

"Hardly. You'd better get moving."

Terrag Broz gestured toward the door, and his assistant left. Broz watched Gornik's green-furred body retreating down the corridor, and heard the deep bass rumble of his voice as he gave orders to a pair of Terran soldiers waiting in the corridor.

The even clumping of four booted feet told him that the soldiers were on their way to fetch Orvid Kemron. Broz knew that the insurrectionist would be brought swiftly and silently to the Khoomish headquarters.

"What happened to the men we caught?" Terrag Broz asked, as Gornik re-entered the office.

"Still being held," Gornik replied.

"And the bombs?"

"They've all been detected and inactivated."

"I hope so," Broz said grimly. "It would be too bad to have this lovely building blown sky-high after the Earthmen were so kind as to build it for us."

The Administrator looked down, turning his attention to the neatly-arranged stacks of papers on his desk. He lifted off the uppermost and scanned it. "A complaint from Liverpool," he said. "Too much precipitation yesterday."

His purple lips split in a broad grin. "A great pity," he said, chuckling. "We'll see how they'll like it when the time comes for us to throw hurricanes at them instead of spring rains. Maybe then Earth will think twice about having invited us to rule them."

Nacomon Gornik glanced at his chief. "How long will that be, Terrag? How long do we have to wait?"

"I don't know," the Administrator said. "I'm afraid that all depends on Orvid Kemron."

"Orvid Kemron!"

Someone was calling his name. He opened his eyes, and squeezed them closed immediately. Someone was shining a light into his face.

"Wake up, Kemron," said the voice again. "Wake up. We don't have all night."

Kemron opened his eyes a little. All he could see was the glare of the light and the muzzle of a stungun held in a pair

of gloved hands. Behind the dazzle of the light, he could barely make out two figures.

It was an effort to move from his bed. Finally, Kemron struggled up to full awareness and lifted himself from the bed.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

He knew good and well what they wanted.

The day had been seven years in coming, but at last it was here. He wondered how long they had known about him. Seven years of hard work, of pretending to be something he was not, of scheming and planning—all shot to ashes. The alien rulers of Earth had nabbed him, and humanity's resistance movement would be left without its leader.

"Where are we going?" he asked as he put on his clothes. "What's the idea of waking a man up in the middle of the night?"

"Don't ask questions," said one of the men.

Or were they men? They were wearing heavy coveralls, gloves, and hoods; they could easily be the Khoomish themselves. Yes, thought Kemron. I'm important enough to have the overlords come after me in person. He wished he knew whether there was green fur underneath the concealing cloth.

He locked the magnetic clasp at his throat with slow deliberation.

"Hurry it up," the taller of the two said. The stungun nudged Kemron's ribs.

"Hold on, will you? Let me wash up a bit first." He walked to the washstand without waiting for any reply and plunged his head under the cold water. He rinsed a moment, then withdrew his head. After drying himself, he glanced up over his shoulder, noting the positions of the two armed men. They were waiting about ten feet away.

I've got to get word through to the others that I'm caught, Kemron thought. But the Khoomish, he decided, had probably picked up his bomblayers just as neatly as they'd snagged him. There wasn't much chance they'd missed anyone.

Damn them!

"Enough stalling. Come now or we'll take you," one guard said.

"A minute. I'm thirsty." Kemron filled his drinking-glass, but instead of draining it he whirled and threw it at the hood of the taller guard, hearing it land with a pleasing *thunk!* In the same motion he jumped at the other guard.

The uniformed figure went over surprisingly easily when Kemron leaped, and before he could regain control of himself Kemron had clubbed him senseless. But when he swung to deal with the other guard, he saw that the drinking-glass had had little effect.

He stared at the stungun in the other's hand for a moment. Through his mind flashed the sudden remembrance of the dizzying pain of a stungun's beam. He could still hear Nella's scream in his memory—she had been shot down six months ago by a Khoomish guard after she had slugged another of the green-furred beings. Her nerves had been raw for three days.

The alien's finger pressed the trigger and the darkness exploded into a brilliant flare of green.

It was hard to tell one Khoomish from another, but there was no doubt in Kemron's mind that the steely-eyed, green-furred being who confronted him was Terran Administrator Terrag Borz. Kemron felt a sudden wave of fear wash over him, leaving him chilled and weak.

The Administrator smiled grimly from behind his huge desk, showing the surprisingly human teeth back of his purple lips. But the expression in his eyes remained cold and forbidding.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you, Mr. Kemron," he said, in an oddly soft voice. "Do sit down." He gestured with one hand, signalling the guards.

One of them pulled up a chair for Kemron and the other pushed him down into it. Kemron saw now that his two captors were Earthmen, members of the loyal army maintained by the Khoomish overlords.

No doubt the guards thought he was the worst sort of traitor, since certainly they were aware he had been scheming to destroy the Khoomish—the beloved Khoomish, the green-furred saviours from the stars who had rescued Earth from anarchical chaos. Kemron saw the undisguised hatred in the eyes of both of them.

He wanted to tell them that they were the real traitors, not he. But he knew they would only laugh and remind him of the provisional government. It had been Earth's only attempt at self-government in a thousand years, and a complete, miserable failure.

It's not easy to overthrow a conqueror when the conquered welcome him with open arms, Orvid Kemron thought.

The guards stepped back, their stunguns held ready. Terrag Broz reached out a thick forearm and flipped a switch on his desk. A sparkling array of lights brightened one wall. Kemron knew what they were: thousands of little electronic eyes, every one watching him. One wrong move, and a stunner would beam him down before he could do anything.

One stunning was enough; Kemron had no craving for more. He still had a prodigious headache from the first.

Terrag Broz looked at the guards. "You can go now. I don't think he'll do anything foolish."

Kemron heard the door open and close softly behind him as the guards left. The Terran Administrator waited a long few minutes before speaking.

"I might as well tell you," Broz said levelly, "that we've known about your underground for a long time, Mr. Kemron. It has been a source of constant amusement to us. It was only when you took the—ah—unkind action of attempting to destroy our headquarters that we were forced to take you into custody."

Kemron said nothing. He found it almost impossible to bring his head up to meet the Khoomish's fiery eyes, and his own weakness irked him.

Abruptly Broz punched out a question. "How many are there in your organisation?" he asked.

"I won't tell you," Kemron said stolidly.

"Ah, well. There is no need to," the Administrator said. His smile widened. "There are exactly four hundred and sixty-eight men, including yourself."

Kemron blinked. The fear inside him melted into dull despair. They hadn't missed a man.

Terrag Broz stretched up out of his seat, giving Kemron a view of his awe-inspiring bulk, and came to rest leaning on his knuckles. "Don't you think that's a rather small number of people to man a resistance movement?" the Khoomish asked. "Out of nearly four billion human beings, you have an underground which consists of something like one one-hundred thousandth of one percent of the total population. Not exactly what I would call a popular uprising."

"We could have done it, though," Kemron said. "We could have done it."

"Certainly," Broz agreed. "If you had blown up this building, our control over Earth would have snapped. Then mankind would have had to try governing herself, presumably with your party in control—and with the same disastrous results that occurred seven years ago, before we came."

Kemron's eyes blazed angrily. "That's just it!" he protested. "At least mankind would be *free*! Even if we failed, it would be through our own faults, on our own shoulders—we'd be responsible *ourselves*. Suppose civilization did collapse? So what? We pulled ourselves out of barbarism once; we can do it again!"

"I don't deny it," said the Khoomish. "But it seems to me an awful waste of time."

"Waste of time!" The Earthman's voice was thick with anger. "We've wasted a thousand years already! First the Sslesor, then the Velks, and now you. One alien ruler after another! We're tired of being pawns in a galactic chess game, being shuttled back and forth from one set of interstellar aliens to another."

"I see," Terrag Borz said smoothly. He folded his arms, and Kemron watched his fingers digging into the furry skin over his biceps. "You're tired of being ruled. You want another chance for yourselves. But the rest of the people on Earth don't seem to be tired of it—do they, Mr. Kemron?"

The Khoomish smiled again. "No comment?" He paused, and his gleaming eyes narrowed. "The word describing your rebellion, Mr. Kemron, is—*premature*. A revolution now, with Earth solidly behind the Khoomish, would only lead you into the same futile trap that the earlier underground fell into."

"Earlier underground?"

"Of course. The same patterns of action recur over and over in humanity. Many other men have tried to overthrow their rulers. There have been others in the past ten centuries, all right. And during the rule of our predecessors, the Sslesor, the most nearly successful against them was a man you might have known. His name was Joslyn Carter."

Kemron was amazed. *Joslyn Carter? The head of the Provisional Government had also been a leader of the underground?*

"Joslyn Carter it was," the Khoomish said. "I had thought you might have been more well-informed about other members of your trade. Particularly Joslyn Carter . . ."

Chapter II

3 July 3027

Joslyn Carter leaned across his desk and pressed the phone stud before the sound of the attention chime had died from the air.

"Carter here," he said, looking squarely into the pickup.

"Priority call from Staten Island, sir," said the operator.

"Viceroy Johnson is on the line."

"Put His Munificence on," said Carter. *Viceroy Johnson*, he thought darkly. *They took on Terrestrial names because we can't pronounce half the sibilances of their language. I wonder what the Johnsons think of that.*

He knew good and well what they thought of it. They loved it. The Sslesor had ruled nearly a thousand years, and most of the time had inspired nothing but affection from their Terran subjects—with occasional exceptions, such as Joslyn Carter.

The Sslesor Viceroy's face faded into the screen. Carter dipped his head quickly in a half-polite gesture, then looked expectantly at the reflected image of the lizardlike being. The unblinking eyes stared back out of a grey-green face topped with a fantastic crest of bone.

"Misster Josslyun Carter?" the overlord asked mildly.

"Yes, sir," Carter acknowledged. He had to suppress a grin every time he heard a Sslesor speak. Even after a thousand years, they hadn't mastered English. And they never would; their mouths simply weren't constructed for it.

"You will please reserve time on the intercontinental circuit at ten-thirty hours tomorrow for a sspessial announsement. And you will please advertisse that the Government will speak."

"Yess, ssir," said Carter, with a straight face. "Is there anything else the people should know?"

The Sslesor appeared to consider Carter's statement for a moment. "I believe not," he said finally. "That iss all."

"Thank you, Your Munificence," Carter said.

"Not at all," said the alien. The leathery, dry skin crinkled slightly around the corners of his mouth as though he were attempting a smile, but it didn't quite come off. Then the image collapsed from view, and Carter was left looking at a blank screen.

"Goodbye, Misster Johnson," he barked viciously into the dead instrument.

He punched a couple of buttons and then dialled. Another face came on the screen. This time, it was human, female, and pretty—a direct contrast to the Sslesor who had occupied the screen previously.

“News Release Division,” she said politely. “Yes, sir?”

“This is Joslyn Carter. I want a release prepared immediately. Mark it *Special*. The Sslesor Administration has announced that a representative of the Sslesor will address the people of Earth at ten-thirty hours tomorrow. No other news has been released.”

“I have it, sir,” said the girl, smiling.

“Good enough, sweetheart. Now get it out. Distribution to all classifications.” Carter cut the connection.

He glanced at the wall clock. Fifteen hundred hours. Time to get moving, he thought. No sense hanging around the office any longer. If the rest of the Terran Intercontinental Communications Corporation couldn’t get along without their president for the rest of the day, then Joslyn Carter hadn’t trained them right. And that was the last thing that would worry Carter.

He slid the desk closed and flipped the radioseal. Then he walked over to the wall opened the hidden compartment and took out a highly illegal blaster, which he shoved into a hip holster. At any time the Sslesor might find out exactly what Carter was up to, and he didn’t intend to make it easy for them to get him to their interrogation chambers.

The thought of dying at the age of thirty-two was not particularly appealing but he wasn’t exactly afraid of it either. Actually, he didn’t believe it would ever come to that. If a man is big enough, he can quit worrying about all the things that worry the little man.

Carter was not only big financially and politically, he was big physically. He stood six feet three and carried a two hundred and ten pound load of hard muscle on a skeleton built for the job. His head sat firmly on a heavy-muscled neck and was topped by smoothly-brushed brown hair. His face looked as though it had been chiselled from hard basalt.

The only thing on Earth bigger than Joslyn Carter was the thousand-year-old Sslesor government of the Terran Protectorate. And that was an entity of which Carter was not exactly fond.

He pushed through the door and strode through the outer office.

"I'm leaving for the day, Cindy," he told his secretary.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Carter," she said, smiling.

He blew her a kiss and headed for the elevator. When he reached street level, he entered an express tubeway, and ten minutes later he was in Passaic, New Jersey.

The apartment house looked like any other apartment house. It differed from others in only two ways: its tenants, and its basement—or rather, its sub-basement.

The sub-basement was much bigger than it should have been, and the tenants were all members of that curiously archaic but very exclusive social organization known as the United States Marines.

Joslyn Carter walked through the lobby, stepped into the elevator, and went down to the basement. There he took a special key out of his pocket and punched it into a hole in the wall near the elevator doors. The elevator started up toward the top floor, the doors to the shaft sliding open. Carter climbed down the shaft below the elevator and thumbed a button on the wall. He gave the pick-up a chance to take a good look at him. The door slid open and Carter walked inside.

"Is General Onomodze here yet?" he asked the spectrally thin young man who stood guard at the door.

"Not yet, sir," the man said, saluting.

"Send him in as soon as he reports, Lieutenant. I'll be in my office."

"Yes, sir."

Carter walked down a hallway to an office which was labelled *Gen. J. L. Carter, Commandant, USMC*. He unlocked the door and went in.

Tomorrow's the day, he thought. He looked around the empty office. *Tomorrow's the day we give it to them.*

Carter felt a shiver of anticipation. He had waited a quarter of a century for this day, ever since he had been old enough to realise that Earth was not free, that the Sslesor had been keeping the planet bound in velvet chains.

The Sslesor held men down to Earth. Above all, they held Joslyn Carter down to Earth. He wanted the moon, the planets, the stars, and because he was Joslyn Carter he felt he had a right to have them. The Sslesor stood in the way.

Tomorrow's the day, he thought.

The first thing he did was to put on his uniform. He cared hardly at all for the thing, but it was as much a part of the job as the title—and the title was important.

When he was fully dressed, resplendent in his ribbons and decorations, he turned to look at himself in the mirror. He found himself unashamedly approving his appearance. He had to admit that the uniform looked good on him. It gave some of the men the appearance of having just stepped out of a comic opera or a historical novel, depending on the individual. Carter, on the other hand, looked as if he thoroughly belonged in the red, white, blue, and gold outfit.

Actually, he hadn't the foggiest notion of what the medals were for ; they went with the uniform. But, what the hell—they looked pretty.

He transferred the blaster to the dress holster and pulled up his chair to the desk. Then he opened the radio seal and activated the controls.

He began to study once more his plans for blasting the Sslesor off the face of the Earth. He'd checked them forty times before, but now Onomodze had finally reduced them to Keslian calculus formulas, and he could run them through the computer for their last check. Not that he was worried about them ; he trusted his own judgment a lot farther than he trusted a machine.

The tape slid into the computer, and the tiny relays in the brain began rustling like dry leaves being stepped on. In his own mind, Carter could see the implications of the equations clearly. For the first time in ten centuries, the United States Marines were ready to attack.

After the violent atomic destruction of the middle of the Twenty-first century, Earth was in no condition to fight off any alien invader ; Earthmen couldn't even fight each other. So, when the Sslesor landed their ships all over the planet one bright July day in 2076, they had no trouble in assuming control.

But the United States Marine Corps, or at least a small core of them, led by Major General Jonathan Redmond, had not chosen to disband. Nearly ten thousand officers and men had dedicated themselves to keeping the flame of Terran independence alive. But the original ideals of General Redmond's group had been all but forgotten during the thousand years of Sslesor occupation. After all, the Sslesor, in their long centuries of benevolent rule, had ended war and

other frictions. They had brought peace and security to Earth for the first time.

Gradually, the Corps had become merely a pleasant hobby; its members grew bound up in its pageantry, its rituals, and its uniforms without ever thinking seriously of the motive for its organization. Even the ringing slogan, *Down With the Sslesor*, was all but forgotten.

To most of its members, the Corps had become an ancient and honourable brotherhood—a secret social society that was joined partly because of the little-boy-stealing-apples feeling that grown men got from being members of such an organization.

That is, until Joslyn Carter came along.

A rap came at the door.

“Come in !” Carter said.

A tall, lean, dark-faced man stepped in through the door and snapped to attention. “Lieutenant General Onomodze reporting for duty, sir.”

“Close the door and relax, Kelvin,” Carter said, pleased to see his second-in-command. “There’s no one watching.”

Onomodze grinned and slid the door shut. “The place will be full of men pretty soon,” he said. “I wouldn’t want them to think I had no respect for the ancient traditions.”

Carter waved him to a chair. “I’m running those equations of yours through the calculator.”

Onomodze blinked. “You mean you haven’t done it before this? Great Snell, Joslyn, we’re supposed to go into action tomorrow !”

Tomorrow, Carter thought, picking up the word and rolling it through his mind. *Tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow*. For a fraction of a second he allowed himself to daydream about the consummation of his long campaign, but he snapped himself rigidly back.

“I beat my brains out to get those plans reduced to Keslian equations,” Onomodze was saying, “so we’d know there’d be no slip-ups, and—”

Carter cut him off. “If those plans don’t work, none of them will. All the machine can do is assure us of maximum probability. Whether the thing actually works or not will depend on how the men react, not on our timing. The weak point in the whole affair is co-ordination and co-operation on an interpersonal level.”

"They'll follow your orders," Onomodze said.

"I know that. That's not the point. Mankind has been saying 'yes sir' and 'no sir' to the Sslesor for so long that I'm not sure how people are going to react once the Sslesor are gone. Perhaps, with the control taken off—"

Onomodze spread his hands. "If you can't handle them, no one can."

Carter ignored that. He looked up at the wall clock. "I think you said you didn't want to make a bad impression on the men. You'd better get your uniform on; we can't have an unfrocked lieutenant general running around tonight."

As Kelvin Onomodze dressed, Carter watched the answer tape slide out of the calculator. The printer clucked animatedly as it stamped the symbols out.

As his eyes scanned the sliding tape, Joslyn Carter's grim smile broadened. Finally, the printer gave one last *snick-snick* and stopped.

Carter jerked the tape out. "This is it," he said triumphantly. "We've got maximum probability of success. Taking all the factors into account, there won't be a Sslesor left alive on Earth within two days."

Onomodze took the tape and looked at it. "It looks good, Joslyn. We long-suffering Earthmen may whip the baddies yet."

"Very funny," said Carter dryly. "It simply means that, after being stagnant for a thousand years, the human race is going to start moving again."

"Yeah," said Onomodze. "We've become so stagnant we stink."

Another rap sounded at the door. Carter grinned lightly. The ancient ritual of door-knocking was but one of the many that had held over in the millenium-old organization of the United States Marines.

Carter said softly: "When we get rid of the Sslesor, I'm going to have an announcer put on that door." Then he called, "Come in."

Onomodze's dark face twisted into a quick grin, which faded as the door opened and the tall, twig-thin figure of Major Hollister walked in.

The Major snapped to attention. "Major Hollister reporting for duty, sir."

"At ease," said Carter. "Any word on the Staten Island pickup, Major?"

"Yes, sir. It's been installed. You can watch everything, either from here or from your Manhattan office."

"Good. Are the men all here yet?"

"No, sir, but they will be within ten minutes."

"Fine, Major," said Carter. "I'll want to talk to them as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir." Hollister did an about-face and disappeared through the door.

"Good man," said Onomodze as soon as the door closed.

"But he's so stiff I'm afraid he'll crack every time he moves."

Carter looked at the tape again. "We won't know until noon tomorrow."

Five hundred men stood silently at rigid attention in the vast assembly room. Their uniforms glittered with the ancient pageantry of the twenty-first century; gold braid, medals, various brightly-coloured insignia and the bars, leaves, and eagles on their shoulders all vied with each other to dazzle the eye. The uniforms were anything but conservative, but the men wearing them gave them a hard, determined solidity that took away the stigma of gaudiness.

"Gentlemen," Carter said, addressing them from a raised dais at the end of the room: "As the New York Division of the Corps, you will have the most important job on Earth tomorrow." He smiled, and a touch of irony crept into his voice. "Tomorrow, the Fourth of July rolls around again."

A special tomorrow, he said silently.

A sardonic smile flickered across Onomodze's face. The Corps had planned their first uprising on 4 July 2088, eleven years after the landing of the Sslesor. It had failed miserably. Since then, a ritual "revolution" had been planned every July Fourth, generally a private affair of which the Sslesor never heard. A ritual failure went with each one. But this time, Joslyn Carter was going to change the last half of the formula.

"You've all been instructed on what is to be done, and I want you to keep in mind that every man jack of you has a job to do, from the rawest lieutenant right on up to the General Staff. If you do your job and do it well, there won't be any chance of failure.

"The Sslesor have grown lax in the past few centuries. They don't think we have the ability to revolt. And, thanks to that, we've managed to do something that has never been done before—we've stolen a nuclear bomb and planted it

under the Government buildings on Staten Island. And our timing will be almost perfect. Tomorrow, for some reason, most of the Sslesor bigwigs are going to be concentrated on the Island. At high noon exactly, the bomb will be detonated. And that will be our signal to move in.

"I would like to have the General Staff meet in my office immediately. Dismissed."

When the Staff arranged themselves around the conference table, Carter wasted no time with preliminaries.

"All right," he said. "Let's go through this once more." He flicked a switch. A map of the world appeared on the big wall screen. Several points were outlined in red. Carter pressed a stud, and an arrow appeared beside one of the circles.

"Arizona," he said. "North American spaceport. All mined and ready to blast." He looked at one of the generals, a tall, lean man with a thin moustache. "Jaxin, what do you do?"

"The port goes at 1000 hours," Jaxin said. "We go in immediately afterwards and mop up."

"Check," Carter said. He touched the controls and the arrow moved to another spot.

"Eisenhowergrad, Russia. Chung?"

General Chung stood up. "2230 hours. Almost the same as the Arizona deal, with one exception. We blast and then go in for mop-up. But at the same time we release dorma gas into the air intake of the Sslesor ship *Swiziss*, which will be in the repair docks. That will give us a usable interstellar ship."

"Check." Again the control was moved. The arrow appeared in the middle of the Australian subcontinent. "Miklowd?"

General Miklowd said: "That's Main Base. We blow up only the administrative building; we don't destroy the field itself. Gas will be sprayed all over the place, so we won't go in for the mop-up until an hour after the attack." He stopped.

Carter raised an eyebrow and glared at the General. "Fine. Is there any special hour you plan to do all this?"

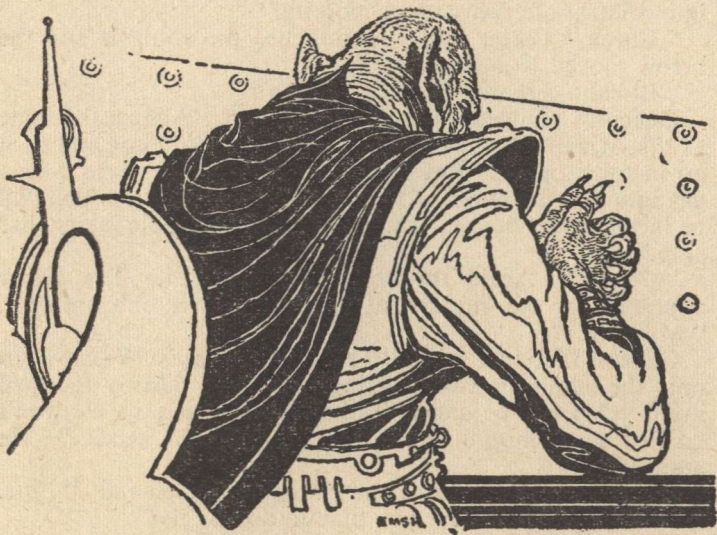
The General flushed and looked sheepish. "That will be at exactly 0200 on the morning of the fifth of July," he replied crisply.

Carter nodded. "All right. That takes care of the space-ports. Now let's get a check on the rest of the Sslesor concentrations. And I want all of you to keep in mind that we must—*must* strike simultaneously all over the planet. That will be at twelve noon here in New York City."

When everything was perfectly clear to every man there, Joslyn Carter snapped off the map. He put his knuckles on the desk and leaned forward.

"Remember, gentlemen, this is not only the chance of a lifetime, but the chance of a millennium. Never before in the history of the Sslesor Occupation have so many important Sslesor occupied one building. If we mess this one up, we'll never get another chance. Perhaps even our descendants never will. All right. Let's get going. You've only got a little over sixteen hours to get to your posts!"

"What about human casualties?" General Miklowd asked. "When we jump the Sslesor, we're going to—"



"Forget it, Miklowd," Carter snapped, silently cursing the General for a fool. "We can't worry about things like that. If there happen to be some humans in the way of our bombs, we'll just have to call them martyrs and put up a great big monument." He smiled coldly. "We're wasting time, gentlemen. Tomorrow is almost here."

They filed out slowly. Carter watched the retreating figures until the last had gone and the door slid shut.

He was right and Miklowd was wrong, he thought. The people in the way didn't matter. If they were stupid enough to get in the way, they merited what they got. It was cruel—even Carter admitted that to himself. But it was necessary. The first goal was driving the Sslesor off Earth, and any means would do to accomplish that end.

He looked at his watch. In fifteen hours plus, Earth would be free, and it was going to be up to him to keep the show moving from there on. Well, Carter thought, it's what I've dreamed of for years, and there's no point getting worried about it now.

He wondered if the Sslesor *enjoyed* ruling Earth.



Chapter III

4 July 3027

Carter sat before an imposing array of television screens, keeping check on the progress in each of the cities where a major uprising was scheduled. He had passed an uneasy night since the last staff meeting ; it was 1020 the next morning.

Chung was complaining from Eisenhowergrad that there might be difficulties in taking over the Sslesor ship, but Carter refused to listen.

"There's no bug so big you can't step on it, Chung. I'll expect a report from you at 1205 telling me you've got the ship." He clicked the screen off and turned to the next, where Jaxin's face was visible.

"How does it look in Arizona, Jaxin?" Carter barked.

"Fine, sir. Men are deployed all around the outside of the invasion ring. We'll move in just as soon as the port blows. But I'm worried about the radiation, sir—"

"Damn the radiation !" said Carter. "Your suits are going to be adequate for the job. I checked the specifications myself."

"Yes, sir," Jaxin said weakly.

As Carter turned to the third screen, the door to his office opened and his secretary entered. In a quick motion he shut off his communicators, blanking out the puzzled face of Miklowd from Australia.

"What is it, Cindy?"

"That Sslesor hookup, sir. The one Viceroy Johnson arranged for yesterday. They're ready to go, Mr. Carter."

Carter looked at his watch. "Blast it, yes. It's time, isn't it? All right, let it go through."

"Yes, sir."

He turned on the local screen. *Let's hear what the reptiles have to say*, he thought. *It'll be the last time I'll be hearing them hissing at me.*

The features of Viceroy Johnson appeared on the screen. The Sslesor leader cleared his throat and began abruptly to speak, in the dry, high-pitched whine that was so familiar to Earth. Carter heard the door open and close as Onomodze entered.

"People of Earth," the Sslesor began pompously, "People of the Sslesor Protectorate of Earth : thiss day iss indeed a ssad one."

"What the hell is this?" Onomodze whispered.

"Quiet," Carter said.

"It iss a ssad day both for you and for ourselves," the Sslesor went on. "A day which bringss an unhappy parting, a day which terminates a thoussand yearss of joyful co-existence."

Carter shot an amazed glance at Onomodze.

"In the ten centuries that we have administered your planet, we have allowed you to remain ignorant of the exisistence of other galactic races. But," continued the Sslesor, "there *are* such races. One of them is the Velks, a warlike, imperialisstic people with which the Sslesor have conended for almost two thousand of your yearss. Thiss sstruggle hass at lasst been terminated."

The Sslesor paused. It was easy to see that what he had to say was difficult for him, and not only linguistically. His grey-green reptilian face reflected deep humiliation.

"The ssettlement, unfortunately, iss in favour of the Velks," he went on sadly. "In sshort, we have been defeated. I have, therefore, the unpleasant duty of reporting that, as a part of the peace ssettlement we have been compelled to make, it has become necesssary to transsfer many of our planetary hold ingss to the Velkan Empire. Earth, I am deeply ssorrowed to reveal, iss among that group."

Carter felt his face go white. He stared at the screen almost unseeingly for a moment, experiencing a sensation completely unfamiliar to him, that of absolute bewilderment.

"The Sslesor withdrawal has already been largely effected," said the Viceroy. "Most of our property hass by now been removed. The final withdrawal," the Sslesor said, "will be completed thiss evening, at which time none of our people will remain on Earth."

"In clossing, I wish to ssay, on behalf of my fellow Sslesor, that we are truly ssorry that thiss ssad parting of the wayss musst come. We wissh you joy under your new masterss."

The screen went blank.

Kelvin Onomodze leaned back in his chair and began to laugh. It started deep in his chest as a sort of rich rumbling chuckle and then grew in volume until it seemed to shake the room.

"Brother !" he said, when he was able to talk again. "This is the funniest thing I've ever heard of ! Big deal ! Ten thousand men work like fiends to rid the Earth of the Sslesor."

Fierce determination ! Boldness ! The master stroke is ready ! Ready—aim—*fffft* ! The Sslesor are ready to go—good-bye !”

He started laughing again, tears streaming down his brown face.

Carter jumped to his feet, quivering. “Shut up, Kelvin ! This is no time to knock yourself silly laughing. There’s plenty to do yet !”

He flipped on the multiple-channel communicator. The screens around him flashed into life, and the generals mirrored in them all tried to talk at once.

“Quiet !” snapped Carter. “You’ve all heard what the Viceroy said. Now we know why there were so many big-shot Sslesor on Staten Island.

“But if you think this thing is over, you’re wrong. If anything, it just makes the job tougher.”

He paused for a moment to outline his new plan to himself. Then, reassured, he plunged ahead.

“Here are your orders : The explosives, naturally, will not be detonated. Seal all the detonators to make sure they don’t go off prematurely. *But don’t de-fuse the mines !* We’ll leave them there for the Velks—whoever they are.”

“What if the Velks look for them ?” Chung asked. “Might they not suspect the Sslesor of pulling a trick like that ?”

“I doubt it,” Carter said. “This seems to be an honorable withdrawal. And even if the Velks do find the mines and think the Sslesor did it—so what ?”

Chung nodded, but said nothing.

“Meanwhile,” Carter continued, “keep your men ready. As soon as the Sslesor leave, take over. Grab control of everything, lock, stock, and barrel. When the Velks come, we want to be in complete charge of everything. Got that ? All right, I’ll leave it up to you individually to figure out the best way of getting your men into the Sslesor’s various headquarters. At the same time, you’ll have to make sure that there aren’t any demonstrations from the citizens. I’ll try to take care of that from this end. Got it ? Fine. Clear.”

He snapped off the transmitter and flipped on an intercom. “Cindy ! Get me all the tape recordings of every speech made by the Sslesor in the past fifty years or so. I want full vision and audio stuff. Get a call to Production and send Fless up here. Snap !”

"Yes, sir," said the girl.

After she left, Onomodze, who had finally stopped laughing said, "I don't get it."

"Simple. There's only one way we can legally take over," Carter said. "And that's to have the Sslesor tell Earth that they're leaving us in charge. And that's exactly what they're going to have done, once we get through doctoring the tapes."

Onomodze grinned again. "I might have expected something like that. But what about the Velks?" he wanted to know.

"We'll figure that out later. Right now, we don't have enough data. We don't know a thing about the Velks except their name, and you can bet your sweet life that the Sslesor won't say anything about them that we can depend on. We probably won't get anything out of them at all. *But we must be in charge when they get here.*"

The door slid open, and a small, elderly man with a fringe of grey hair around his balding head, came in.

"Fless, I've got a job for you," Carter said. "We've got some plain and fancy splicing to do, and we have to make it look as natural as possible. As soon as Cindy brings in the tapes, I'll show you what we want. It'll take a lot of hard work between now and then, but the future of mankind depends on its working."

"I understand, sir," Fless said blandly.

"Good." Carter turned around to Onomodze. "Kelvin, you hop down to the Battery and take over there. Send General Preskit over to take full charge of the Brooklyn force. I want all five hundred men on Staten Island within ten minutes after the last Sslesor ship leaves."

Onomodze stood up, white teeth flashing behind his grin. "All right, Joslyn. We'll have fun. We can at least *pretend* we're chasing them off the planet."

Carter took no notice. "Get moving. I've got other things to do," he said.

As Onomodze left, Carter's secretary pushed a cart in through the door, bearing roll after roll of microtape. "Here's the tapes you asked for, Mr. Carter."

Carter surveyed the cart and nodded. "Good. Let's get started, Fless. What we have to do is put together a speech."

The speech went out over the airwaves just as the last Sslesor ship lifted toward the sky. It had taken careful cut-

ting and judicious blending of hundreds of tapes, but the result was good.

As far as anyone who heard and believed it was concerned, Viceroy Johnson, leader of the retiring Sslesor, gave the whole government of Earth over to Joslyn Carter. And by the time the synthetic speech was over, the Marines had landed on Staten Island and were in command of the vast empty buildings that the retreating Sslesor had left behind.

Thus, on 4 July 3027, human beings were in control of Earth for the first time in nearly a thousand years.

"Now what?" Onomodze asked.

Joslyn Carter looked out the window at the darkening sky. "Now we've got to prove that human beings are capable of standing on their own two feet. I think they are. If our ancestors hadn't bombed themselves almost out of existence a thousand years ago, I don't think the Sslesor would have had a chance of taking over. But they came in at just the right time, and by the time we were on our feet again, nearly everyone had grown used to being ruled by them."

"One thing I never did figure out," Onomodze said. "Just why did they want control of Earth, anyway? They let us go on about our business, for the most part. They didn't want to colonize, and they didn't want to trade. They didn't want slaves. What *did* they want?"

Carter shrugged. "If you'll tell me how an alien mind works, I'll answer your question. Until then, we'll just have to let the question ride."

He looked at his watch. "I want these buildings searched tonight—searched thoroughly. If the Sslesor left anything important behind, I want to see it. They couldn't possibly have taken everything with them."

Onomodze nodded. "Will do."

Carter paced anxiously up and down. "Now, the Velks. We'll have to concentrate on them. We don't know what they're like, except that they are harder to deal with than the Sslesor—since they beat the Sslesor—but you can bet your life that no new race is going to take over Earth if I can help it. Not now while we've got a moment of freedom."

"Yes, I—" Onomodze was cut off by the frantic chiming of a communicator.

Carter switched on the screen, and General Chung's face appeared. His leathery face looked flushed, and a grin was spread all across it.

"General Carter," he said excitedly, "we got the *Swiziss* after all!"

"What?"

"Yes! Evidently the thing wasn't in condition to take off, so the Sslesor just left it here. Maybe we can eventually figure out how their interstellar drive works, and—"

"Unlikely," Carter said, frowning. "What does it look like inside?"

Chung lost his grin. "I'm afraid it looks pretty empty. There do seem to be some sort of engines inside, but there are whole sections missing, too. But I thought maybe—"

"I'm glad we got it, Chung," Carter agreed. "But I don't think the Sslesor would have left it behind if it were any good. And what's more, I—"

Suddenly, Chung's image wavered and vanished. It was replaced by a wavering pattern of meaningless lights.

A voice came out of the speaker, a gentle, *wet* sort of voice.

"Your pardon, please. As this was the only channel available, we were forced to—ah—break in. This is Fulf Quish speaking for the Velkan government. We should like to have a word with the Earth government."

Carter glanced at Onomodze quizzically, and said, "You are addressing Joslyn Carter, present head of the Terran Provisional Government."

"Ah, so. We are happy to make contact. Our ship is at this moment orbiting above your atmosphere. We will land tomorrow morning if you would be so kind as to meet with our representatives."

"Very well," said Carter, trying to peer behind the shifting pattern of lights to see what the new aliens looked like.

He told them exactly how to spot Staten Island and where to land. There was a long pause, and then Fulf Quish's voice came again.

"We have photographed the spot you describe. We will be there tomorrow. Goodbye."

Carter stared at the blank screen for a moment. He felt a burst of irrational anger because Earth, and more specifically Joslyn Carter, should be subjected to non-human overlords from somewhere out in the galaxy; it seemed virtually a direct insult to him.

He looked at Onomodze, who was waiting patiently for some reaction from Carter. "That was short and to the point. We'll have to be ready for them, Kelvin."

"Why not simply set off the bomb as soon as they land?"

Carter shook his head. "Strategically unsound. We have only one nuclear bomb; we don't know how many more ships they may have out there. I don't like the tone of that guy's voice. He sounded too—"

"Polite?"

"Yes," said Carter. "Something like that. I wonder what the Velks are going to be like."

Chapter IV

5 July 3027

They were nothing like the Sslesor. The Velks were squat, four-legged, multi-tentacled beings with soft, mushy voices. They wore breathing masks which effectively concealed their faces from view.

One of the five who faced Joslyn Carter and his General Staff across the conference table waved a tentacle in the air and said:

"As I understand you, then, Earthman, your group represents the human race?"

Carter nodded.

Fulf Quish burred something to his companions, who waved their tentacles frenziedly and burred back. Then the Velk said, "You must pardon my poor control of your language. I am only a translator; the rest of our mission did not have the time to learn any of your native tongues."

"You speak very well," Carter said carefully.

"I presume you have questions to ask?" the Velk asked, in its wet-sounding voice.

"We do," agreed Carter. "What sort of government do you intend to set up? I assume you will be using the buildings evacuated by the Sslesor, won't you?"

Fulf Quish waved a tentacle in negation. "Oh, not at all. Not at all. I'm afraid you misunderstand us."

"How so?"

"We do not come here for the purpose of governing at all."

"I'm afraid I don't quite see your point," said Carter.

The alien paused as if considering his next phrases very carefully. "I fear that, isolated as you are from the main stream of galactic culture, you don't appreciate your position. The Sslesor held your planet for a thousand of your years because it was a strategic military base. That situation no

longer prevails, since you are now well within the boundaries of the Velkan Commonwealth. In the settlement with the Sslesor, we acquired some two thousand additional planets, of which—excuse me—Earth is one of the least important strategically. I hope you'll pardon me when I speak so bluntly?"

Carter nodded. He sat perfectly still, wondering what new surprise was going to descend on him.

"In addition," went on the Velk, "we are a very democratic people. We believe in allowing each planet within the Commonwealth to have its own government. It is very difficult for us to exercise direct control over all our planets. Our outposts are too widely spread as it is. Therefore, we must reluctantly decline to place representatives on all of our possessions. We simply do not have enough men. You see our position?"

Carter folded his hands and tried not to look at the uniformed men around him. "And so?" he asked cautiously.

"And so," continued the being, "we have not come here to govern, but merely to inform you that you are now wards of the Velkan Commonwealth, with the same privileges tendered to other members." He paused. "We will be unable to keep a representative on your planet at present. It is possible—*possible*, mind you, not probable—that we will be able to spare someone to act as proconsul a little later. But that must wait. Ten year, no. Twenty, no. But we might be able to provide a representative for you in, perhaps, fifty years. Not before. Frankly, we cannot spare a single man now."

"You're simply going to leave us alone, is that it?" Carter asked, trying to keep the shock out of his voice.

"Exactly so," said Fulf Quish. "We must leave for Quange—a planet in one of our other new systems—immediately, and so I must bid you farewell."

Carter stared, amazed. He felt a sense of deep frustration at the way action was continually being snatched from his hands. First the Sslesor had obligingly pulled out an hour before Carter was to have blasted them; now the Velks refused to exercise their rights over Earth. The ends were satisfactory, but the means irked him.

"But who is to govern Earth?" Carter asked.

"That is for you to decide. This planet is now in the hands of its natives. From this moment on, my friend, the planet is yours—you Earthmen shall act as our custodians as of now. Govern yourselves well."

The five Velks rose and left the building. Through the window, Carter watched them move back to the spaceship on their oddly-jointed legs, their tentacles waving gently.

Onomodze rubbed the tip of his nose with a long forefinger. "Well, may I be eternally cursed," he said softly.

20 July 3027

President Joslyn Carter scribbled his signature on another paper and shoved it into the outgoing slot.

"I don't get you," said Onomodze.

"I said that we don't seem to be getting anywhere, and we have to," Carter said. "It's unfortunate that you're the only one around here I trust sufficient enough to talk to, because you don't seem to understand what I tell you any more."

"Hold it, Joslyn. I heard what you said. Now explain it in words of not more than three syllables so that a stupid blot like me can understand what goes on inside that great mind of yours."

Carter tapped his finger on the desktop. "Listen : potentially, humanity is the most powerful and most vital of the three races that we know to exist in the galaxy."

"How do you figure that?" Onomodze asked.

"The way they act !" Carter waved a hand in the general direction of the sky. "Kelvin, until this happened I didn't realize how utterly insipid the Sslesor and the Velks are. We put up with the Sslesor so long that we got used to them ; we never questioned their orders because they had tamed that out of us—almost. But the only reason they could take over Earth was because we were so weak a thousand years ago. A thousand years is a long time—plenty of time for the Sslesor to become a pushover for the Velks, or any other younger and stronger race.

"Then come our friends the Velks. Can you imagine the idiocy level required for them to leave any race so potentially dangerous as humanity alone and unwatched for another fifty years ?

"The Sslesor kept the status quo just where they wanted it. They haven't changed themselves in ten centuries that we know of—and probably a lot longer than that. That proves

just one thing—they're decadent. As for the Velks, they just don't seem very bright. And, both sides are conducting an interstellar war as if it were a chess game.

"If we can get started again, we'll have them both beaten in a thousand years—less than that, perhaps. We'll eventually figure out the secret of the drive on that spaceship. There were plenty of clues scattered about. We just can't recognize them yet, that's all. When we do, we'll be on a par with both of them, and I'm betting we get a long way ahead of them. But—"

"But right now, we can't get anybody to move," Onomodze finished for him.

Carter nodded. "I can't get any co-operation from anyone! They all seem to want to go along their own way. We might just as well be dumping our executive orders into a wastebasket chute as releasing them. And since the United States Marine Corps is no longer a secret society, a lot of people aren't interested in it any more. They don't get any thrill out of it."

Onomodze's face was unusually grim. "It isn't often I've heard you talk this way, Joslyn."

"I know. But for the first time I'm starting to have a few worries. What the hell are we going to do?"

12 October 3027

The regional governor of the British Isles announced that, since the United States Marine Corps had shown how well old-fashioned things work in government, he was restoring the monarchy, and had taken the title of King Pedro the First.

The news reached Staten Island late in the afternoon of 12 October, and was immediately forwarded to Major Hollister. Major Hollister took the report to Lieutenant General Onomodze, who waited nearly a day before he dared show it to Carter.

By that time Scotland had seceded from the new United Kingdom. The Duke of Ireland remained coldly aloof.

4 January 3028

"I have here," said Onomodze, "a petition from the Pretender of the Governorship of Mexico City. He insists that the Earth Government restore him to his rightful position"

Joslyn Carter grabbed the paper and tore it to shreds. "What did you say to him?" he demanded.

"I told him that if the two Lieutenant Governors could get together long enough to throw out the new Governor, we would send down troops, provided the troops would go."

"Stop grinning like a blithering jackass, Kelvin!" said Carter. "Don't you realize that the whole Earth is falling to pieces in front of us? Politically, we're about where Europe was in 900 A.D."

"I can't help it," Onomodze said, still grinning. "It's funny, even if it is tragic. No one will take orders from anyone else. 'Who are you to tell me what to do? You're just another Earthman.' I've just about reached the point where I'm ready to toss in the towel myself. I think I'll become an Emperor—that's a nice title. The Emporor of South Staten Island. You can have the north half."

"Aaaahh! Shut up!" snapped Carter.

7 March 3028

"It's not that we're not capable of governing them," Carter said gloomily, as the Terran Provisional Government rolled into its eighth and probably final month. "We know how to do it. It's that they are incapable of being governed by us."

"We should have known it, Joslyn," Onomodze said. "We should have called in all the Regional Governors and—"

"Don't bother," Carter said. "It's too late to start telling me how it should have been done. Even if we'd done it that way, it wouldn't have worked."

He glanced up as Hollister entered the room. "What now?"

"We've lost Chicago," Hollister said. "Our men just got chased out by Duke Richard."

"Duke Richard," Carter repeated, almost grinning a little despite himself. "Duke Richard of Chicago. I like that," Carter said. "This whole blasted planet is splitting up into dukedoms and earldoms and squirearchies and everything else. And we're no better; what we laughingly call the Provisional Government is nothing more than a noisier dukedom than the rest."

Onomodze unrolled the map that lay on the desk. "Here," he said. "Look at the checkerboard here." He pointed to the dots of colour spotting the map, each indicating a township or country where some tiny independent kingdom had been set up, in defiance of the Carter government. "As long as it's all over, we can laugh about it," Onomodze said.

"No!" roared Carter. "No. Don't ever treat it as a joke. It's a tragedy, Kelvin, even more tragic than the original conquest by the Sslesor. Because here we're on our own again, and we're flubbing it completely."

"I'm sorry," Onomodze said. "I didn't mean to joke about it."

Carter got up and walked to the window. "We didn't go wrong anywhere," he said. "We did everything the right way. When the Velks pulled out on us, we took over and announced that we were the new government of Earth. We had the administrative machinery all set up."

"Right here," said Hollister. He pointed to the bound copy of the constitution Carter had promulgated. "A government rules by consent of the governed. And we couldn't get consent."

"It wasn't our fault," Onomodze said. "We have a natural leader here, in Joslyn. He knows exactly what to do and how to do it. But it was like a poker game in which one man had a royal flush, and having everyone else drop out before he can bet. Our royal flush is Joslyn, but he has to have someone else in the game with him for the royal flush to mean anything. We can't *force* people to accept our rule."

"It's not our fault at all," Carter said. "All those little dukes are going to find out the same thing I did."

"What's that?"

"Look: for a thousand years the Sslesor ruled us, telling us what to do at every step of our way," Carter said. "We grew terribly dependent on them—so dependent that now every Earthman is firmly convinced that he can be ruled properly only by benevolent lizards from the stars. The Sslesor did such a good job of ruling that the people just won't *believe* we can do as well ourselves. Those dukes are finding it out, too. Just as they refused to accept our authority so their own subjects are refusing to accept theirs. As fast as a duchy gets going, it subdivides. Our friend Duke Richard of Chicago is going to find himself the Duke of eight or nine square blocks in a month's time, and then maybe one block."

"That means anarchy coming," Onomodze said.

"Exactly," said Carter. "We'd just better be ready to get out of the way when the roof blows off."

Chapter V

20 March 3028

Things grew steadily worse during the next weeks. New York became the scene of a pitched battle between the Earl of Manhattan and the Overlord of West Brooklyn, with Staten Island as the prize. Carter and his government, cooped up in the old Sslesor Administration Building on the Island, waited uneasily and wondered which ruler would get to them first.

All pretence at governing was dropped now. The Provisional Government had been dead almost from the start, with Earthmen unable to accept the fact that other Earthmen could successfully take the place of the Sslesor. Carter had had no control over the local governments at all.

"We might just as well call the Sslesor back," Carter said. "Because we're heading for a glorious war now, with everybody fighting everybody else and no one quite sure what the shooting's all about."

"We can't *get* the Sslesor back," Onomodze pointed out. "And the Velks won't be bothered with us. That means we're on our own."

"At last," said Carter. "And rapidly heading toward the junkpile. But we can't give up," he said, suddenly fierce again.

"Why not?" the other demanded. "It's all over for us now. We've had our chance and botched it. Now we can sit back and watch the fireworks."

"That's exactly what we can't do," Carter snapped. "We're the only men capable of putting Earth together, you and I and a handful of top Marine Corps men. We've known that since before the Sslesor left. We're still able to do the job."

"But they won't listen to us," Onomodze protested.

"I think I have an idea." Carter sat quietly for a long time. "Let's start from the beginning once more," he said. "Let's analyze the whole situation all over again."

1 April 3028

The Carter government made its formal resignation a week later. It was, of course, an empty gesture, but at least the thing had been carried out according to protocol. The hundreds and thousands of local rulers reacted jubilantly to the news.

Earth was, therefore, in an official state of anarchy when the Khoomish arrived.

Their huge, gleaming ship put down without advance warning on Staten Island, in the great plaza that lay before the ruins of the Sslesor Administration Building. A well-placed bomb had levelled the former headquarters both of the Sslesor and of the Provisional Government but the Provisional Government had prudently foreseen this and had been elsewhere at the time.

Thus, only a handful of Terrans were on hand to witness the landing of the Khoomish, attracted by the sight of the ship hovering over the Island and sinking down to land.

The Khoomish were tall, powerful, green-furred aliens with thin purple lips and magnificent blazing eyes. They were far more imposing to the war-weary Terrans than either the reptilian Sslesor or the nondescript Velks.

They emerged from their ship and, taking no notice of the curious knot of Terrans around them, calmly went about the business of setting up a complex, involuted piece of machinery about eight feet high. Then, the biggest and most majestic-looking of the aliens approached the machine that had been set up and spoke incomprehensible syllables into it.

The machine translated his speech to what was by now a fairly large and interested gathering of Earthmen as :

“People of Earth : Your time of troubles is over. We have come from the stars to aid you.”

The bald announcement caused a ripple of conversation to wash through the crowd. Then the Khoomish leader went on to explain that the machine before them was a thought-translator which converted English into the Khoomish tongue and vice versa, and went on to request that the leaders of the local governments be brought to see them at once.

When the news reached them, the Duke of Lower Manhattan and the Emperor of Astoria were engaged in treaty negotiation. They held a hurried conference and decided to speak to the alien leader together.

“My name is Terrag Borz,” the huge green-furred creature said when the two rulers approached. “While waiting for you, I have had the opportunity of learning your language—a singularly clumsy one, may I add.”

The Emperor introduced the Duke, and then himself.

“You are the rulers of this area, I take it,” Broz said.

They nodded.

“Might I inquire, how many subjects does each of you possess ?”

The two rulers exchanged worried glances. In the past weeks, their domains had been shrinking at an exponential rate. When the Emperor of Astoria had seceded from the Dominion of Queens, he had boasted some four thousand loyal subjects. But since the establishment of the Free State of Long Island City, that number had diminished somewhat, and a threatened Republic of Inner Astoria would make further inroads. The Duke of Lower Manhattan had undergone similar experience.

"I take it from your silence," the Khoomish said, "that you have seen difficult times lately. In short, that the condition of your planet has been degenerating rapidly into utter anarchy since Earth's abrupt and, may I say, unwanted liberation."

"That's not true at all!" the Duke began, but the Emperor nudged him to be quiet.

"It is true," he admitted. He was a short, grey-haired man with close-clipped hair, who had been a provincial administrator under the Sslesor. "I would venture to predict, sir, that within a year's time I'll have no more than one subject—if that many. And that one will be myself. Everyone wants to be a king," he said, sighing.

The Khoomish grinned broadly. "Precisely. And that is why we have come. We offer you a strong, efficient government, a centralised administration, a unified planet. Throw in your lot with us and we will see that you are placed high in the ranks of the ruling echelon—as high, of course, as it will be possible for a Terran to rise."

After a whispered consultation, the two rulers agreed to submit to the authority of the Khoomish.

By nightfall, the Khoomish had all of New York except a recalcitrant section of the Bronx.

In a week's time, they were being acclaimed as saviours throughout the United States of America, as duke after duke willingly resigned his uneasy throne to them.

Within two months, the Earthmen had completely yielded their battered planet to the Khoomish. Even the most stubborn conceded that it was better to be ruled benevolently by aliens than badly by one's self. In fact, most Earthmen had believed that all along.

Work proceeded apace on an immense central headquarters to house Earth's new rulers.

And sanity had returned to the Earth for the first time since the Sslesor had unexpectedly departed.

11 May 3035

Orvid Kemron glared across the desk at Terrag Broz.

"All right," he said. "You took advantage of the right moment to come down and take possession of Earth. You waited until the Provincial Government had failed miserably and Earth was in complete chaos. And those sheep—" he waved in an all-inclusive gesture, "—were wildly enthusiastic about it. They thought that the only way any of us would survive would be to be ruled by a set of galactic overlords. Any set at all would do."

"And you rebelled," Broz said. "Just as Joslyn Carter rebelled—or tried to—against the Sslesor. But even if Carter had actually managed to blast the Sslesor government, the same thing would have happened. Earth was—and is—not ready to govern itself on such short notice. It's not that Earthmen have had any of the vigour and fire bred out of them; it's simply that they have been relying on exterior government for so long that they don't know how to handle themselves without it.

"Like any energetic, potentially brilliant child who is suddenly deprived of parental care and told to shift for himself, the human race went hogwild," he said.

"And what if our rebellion had gone through?" Kemron asked.

"The same thing would have happened," said the Khoomish leader. "Earth would have fallen into anarchy again.

"I will certainly agree that humanity would, in time, pull itself back together for another try at the stars, but by that time it would perhaps be too late. Why spend another thousand years regaining what Earth has right now?"

Kemron closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. "I suppose that means that Earth will never again govern herself," he said slowly. "And I suppose it means that I will be shot."

"Wrong on both counts," Broz smiled. "Earth will govern herself again. And we're certainly not going to harm you. We need you, and more like you. But you were as I said, a little premature."

"Premature?" Kemron looked blank.

The Khoomish nodded. "That's what I said. Like Joslyn Carter, you rebelled at a time when you didn't have a united planet behind you. No one hated the Sslesor but Carter and his Marines. No one hates us but you and your underground.

You're making the same mistakes that Carter did, and that's why we had to drag you out of bed in the middle of the night. It wouldn't have done for you to drive us off the Earth tomorrow. Wait until you are ready—then strike."

"I don't understand," said Kemron. His confused mind felt as though it were spinning in silly little circles.

"It's very simple," Broz continued. "If we can make the rest of the human race hate us enough, they'll drive us off and be ready to follow wholeheartedly the leader of the group that drives us off. Do you follow me?"

"Yes," Kemron said hesitantly, "yes, I think I understand, but *why*? Don't you want to rule Earth? I don't think I'd be very intelligent if I trusted the word of a Khoomish that his race was as altruistic as all that."

At that Broz grinned. "I'm glad I didn't underestimate you. I—" He stopped as the door to the office opened.

Behind him, Kemron heard footsteps. Another Khoomish walked over to Broz's desk and put a sheaf of papers on the hard, shiny top.

"What's this about our race being altruistic?" the newcomer asked, grinning.

Broz looked back at Kemron. "You know our Vice Administrator, Nacomon Gornik, I think?"

Kemron nodded blankly, looking from one to the other.

"I assure you," Broz said, "that the race to which we belong is the least altruistic—in that sense—of any of the three races we know to exist in the galaxy. And yet, in another manner of speaking, we—"

He didn't get a chance to finish. Kemron leaped to his feet, and strangely enough, the automatics did not shoot him down.

"*Three races!* You! I get it! I get it!" He slapped a hand against his forehead. "My God! Why didn't I see it before? Why didn't anyone else see it?"

"Because they weren't looking for it," said Broz.

"They weren't in any condition to," Gornik added. "They couldn't even bring themselves to admit that the possibility might exist."

"*Who are you?*" Kemron asked sharply.

"I am Joslyn Carter," said the green-furred being. "And this is Kelvin Onomodze."

Kemron nodded. "But why? Why this insane masquerade?"

"Not insane," Broz-Carter said. "It's the most terribly sane thing we've done yet. All my earlier actions were based on the faulty premise that one determined, capable group of men could, if properly led, take over Earth.

"It wasn't. A thousand years of Sslesor rule had seen to that. What we are trying to do now will take thirty years or more of re-education. The answer to the anarchistic tendencies of Earth was obvious: we would have to turn into a set of galactics ourselves. We would have to provide Earth with what it wanted in order to rule it properly."

"I see," said Kemron. "Very neat. But if Earthmen are, as you say, too stagnant to rule themselves now, what makes you think we can ever do it? Isn't it just possible that we'll simply sink lower into stagnation?"

Broz-Carter shook his head. "Not at all. The very fact that anarchy nearly got us was proof of that. If we really were a stagnating race, we would have ruled ourselves without any difficulty. As it is, there is enough difference, even now, between various groups to allow them to quarrel with each other. And that's a very hopeful sign."

"But why tell me? How do I fit in?" Kemron asked.

"We told you for the purpose of self-preservation, for one thing," Carter admitted. "We have no desire to get killed when the rebellion finally does come. For another thing, this is the sort of rebellion that requires close co-operation in the upper echelons of both factions if it is to be successful.

"Things are running very smoothly under the Khoomish now. We've picked up all the pieces and put them back together, but we need help to keep them together.

"You're the only one who knows we're only Earthmen wearing green fur. But we don't want to keep the job for a thousand years. We want to be overthrown—desperately.

"But not yet. We want to be overthrown by a united movement of Earthmen, not a little hole-in-the-ground movement like yours.

"We've been waiting for you, Orvid. We deliberately made it easy; we set a trap to catch an underground movement. You'll have to expand—form a real Earth faction to overthrow us. Drive us out! Send us packing! But not yet. Not until you're strong enough. And that's going to be a long time."

"I feel as if the roof's caved in on me," Kemron said.

"That's the way I felt," said Carter. "First when the Sslesor pulled out, then when the Velks crossed us up, and finally when the provisional government turned out to be such a complete failure. And I hope I feel it one more time—in a slightly different way—the day Orvid Kemron comes blasting into this building with an army of Earthmen at his back and tells us he's taking over."

Kemron's eyes glowed. "How long? When?"

"According to my calculations, thirty years. We don't dare take much longer."

"Why the rush?" Kemron asked, frowning suddenly.

Carter's green-furred face became grim. "The Velks," he said. "They said they'd come back. And then too, there's the chance that the Sslesor might regain this section of the galaxy. Or there may be another race out there somewhere. Human beings have never been to the stars, and it looks as though we're going to have to have a hell of a lot of fight in us to get our share when we do. I don't think the others have a chance, if we're united and working together towards that goal. If we have the tools to fight with, we'll win."

He jabbed a forefinger at Kemron to emphasize his point: "But God helps us if they find us in the same condition of helplessness that we were in when the Sslesor found us a thousand years ago."

"What do I do now?" Kemron asked.

"Go home and get some sleep," Carter told him. "We'll get in touch with you later to begin making complete plans for the first phase. Now get out of here fast. The guards will take you home."

"All right—Joslyn." Kemron stood up. "I'll wait until I can talk to you before making any further plans."

He turned and headed toward the door. Carter watched him go.

"I think he'll do," he said after the door shut.

"I hope so," said Onomodze. "It'll be a pleasure to take these getups off again."

Onomodze looked down at the fur on his arm. "That won't be too soon for me."

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